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Michelangelo Pistoletto interviewed by Alex Coles

The Minus Man

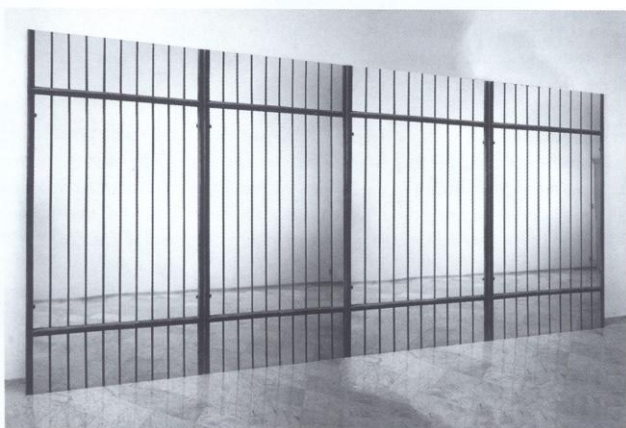
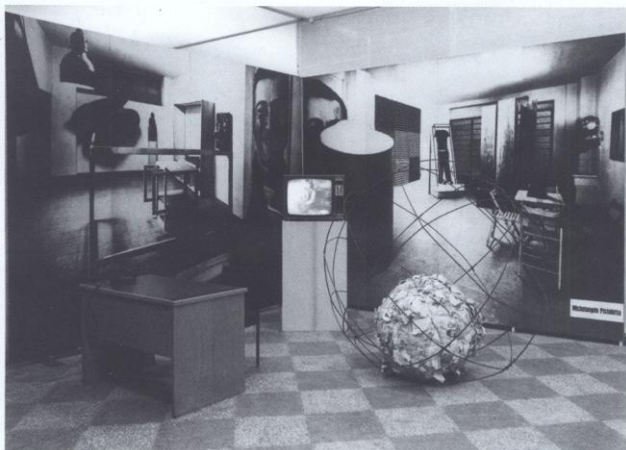
Michelangelo Pistoletto
Red Flag
(Demonstration 1) 1966

I was born in Biella in 1933. I live in Turin. I have experience in making dentures, cultivating fields, designing ads, restoring paintings, marriage, painting, cinema, theatre and literature. Michelangelo Pistoletto, *The Minus Man, the Unbearable Side*, 1970.

Alex Coles: I'm interested in how your studio has developed over the past six decades – both literally and conceptually. In the early 1950s you worked in your father's restoration studio in Turin, moving to your own studio in the city in 1956 and to a new one in 1958 where you began developing what became the 'Mirror Paintings'. In 1965 came a move to a typesetting workshop studio in Turin while working on the 'Minus Objects'. This was followed by the dispersal of the studio during the period of *The Zoo*, 1968 to 1970.

Michelangelo Pistoletto: The studio is an individual place where you work and develop your activity. It is a kind of institution for me because it is in the studio that the activity is created and things are made. But at the same time it can also be a public place, a place the artist looks to the outside from. Let's say that the studio is a passage – from the work itself to the outside. For example, working with my father I had the opportunity to learn about the art of the past because he restored paintings. The process of restoration gave me the opportunity to witness how the world was changing immediately after the Second World War. During this period, with Italy transitioning from having an aristocratic economy to an industrial one, the wealthy people were selling their art collections to the new rich. Many of their paintings went through restorers' studios. The studio became witness to the transformation of the balance of the Italian economy. Observing this shift was very meaningful for me at the time.

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still from Ugo Nespolo's 1968 film *Buongiorno Michelangelo* depicting Michelangelo Pistoletto's 1967 performance of *Walking Sculpture*

The Office of the Minus Man 1970

The Trap 1967-74

After the period of working with my father I moved to the advertising industry and began to understand how broader forms of contemporary creativity could also be transformed by these societal changes. At that time, advertising was an attempt to create a future for a particular place at a specific moment in time. Following this experience, I founded my own personal atelier and began working on paintings, including the 1960 *Silver Self-Portrait* and *Man Seen from the Back-The Present* of 1961 – eventually leading to the 'Mirror Paintings'. The 'Mirror Paintings' were a reflection of not only what was happening in my studio but also what was happening outside in the street. The mirror was a device that allowed me to open the door of the atelier. This had significant repercussions, some of them political, especially in works such as *The Trap*, made between 1967 and 1974, in which viewers found themselves in a gallery transformed into a prison. While to begin with people would come into the studio to experience the work, eventually the work took place outside on the street. From this time onwards I have not had a real studio, so to speak. I activate the space where I am.

Looking at archive pictures, it seems that from the time you moved into the typesetting workshop studio in 1965 in Turin, when you were generating works such as No To The Rise of the Tram Fare of 1965 and Two People Passing By the following year, you selected your space and operated in it in a very particular way.

At this point in time I used the studio as a place for an activity that encompassed both the fabrication and the reception of the work. This way the traditional system of the art world was probed and the place the gallery had previously assumed in it was usurped. The new work could be seen in the studio at the same time as it was being made. In this sense the studio was activated; it was a live, open social space – not a closed private one.

Though prefigured by the performative dynamic that Walking Sculpture of 1966 triggers, when the activities of The Zoo started in 1968 with performances such as The Trained Man, did you find that the studio became completely obsolete?

Yes, definitely. The Zoo could only take place on the street: the street was the place where music, theatre, dance and performance could come together in my work. The reciprocity between the different languages taking place on the street generated the capacity for a recreation of the rapport between the different languages of the arts in my work. The Zoo, in name and function, was also a reaction to many societal pressures. In 1969 I wrote of how 'so-called civilisation had relegated every animal to its cage. The less dangerous, more docile and submissive had been placed in large fenced-in areas: factories, housing projects, sports stadiums. Artists were isolated in the Venice Biennale, in theatres, museums and organised events.'

Because your concern to open up the studio as an interior happens so early on it is interesting to note how, as your studio is turned inside out as a real interior at the end of the 1960s, you begin to create fictive interiors in the form of installations – The Office of the Minus Man of 1970 comes to mind.

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Office of the Minus Man was an attempt to metaphorically open up another space that is usually closed: the office – to open it up, like my studio, to exchange. Years later this led to Cittadellarte: Fondazione Pistoletto, an attempt to create an open institution. Instead of continuing to try and operate outside the institution like *The Zoo* did – for there really is no outside, I realised – I wanted to create a new, more dynamic institution of my own.

Following the radical experiments of The Zoo, did you return to an earlier, more traditional studio model, for the remainder of the 1970s? I maintained what we could call a studio throughout this period but its role in my work changed significantly. Between 1972 and 1978 I had a studio in the countryside in San Sicario, in Val di Susa, as well as maintaining my studio in Turin. But no longer was the studio the primary place where the work was made. Instead the studio became a place where I both literally and metaphorically stored past works. The studio became a meditative space, an archive that could be accessed through memory.

Due to the scale and labour-intensive feel of many of your works from the 1980s, especially the polychrome series, the role of the studio must have changed again.

1981 to 1985, while I was making the black polychrome series, the studio did indeed become important again in a more literal way. The matt black surfaces of works like *Black Polychromy* and *Polychrome Volume* of 1985 seemed to suck the studio space in. So the studio was activated again but in a completely different way to the 1960s and 1970s.

With the development of Cittadellarte in the 1990s, the role of my studio moved on again. I try to keep my activities at Cittadellarte distinct from my personal work as an artist. But since it has all my files and books, the offices of Cittadellarte – which are connected to my private house – became the place where I often conceive of my work. Both their fabrication and reception happen elsewhere.

In one reading, Cittadellarte replaced your studio by coordinating your broad interests – performance, object making, installation, photography etc – together under one umbrella. Did you begin thinking about Cittadellarte early on in the 1960s?

Not really. It only began to gain true momentum at the beginning of the 1990s when I was working with the students at the Viennese Academy of Fine Arts where I was a professor from 1990 until 1999. I was always telling the students that art is not just something you produce in order to make money, art can be used in a more thoughtful way and make a broader societal impact. It was only while at the academy that I began to develop Cittadellarte, a place that could be simultaneously independent and yet still dependent upon it. I chose the name Cittadellarte precisely because it incorporates two meanings: the citadel, where art is protected, and the city, with its openness.

I bought the old factory here in 1991 and soon I began to reactivate it. My plan was not only to join together the different artistic languages and creative disciplines, but also to bring different sectors of society together. So politics, economics and sustainability all became key elements in our collective research.

Your teaching in Vienna was obviously very important to those who witnessed it – particularly someone like the furniture designer Martino Gamper, whose project One Hundred Chairs in One Hundred Days brings to mind your Mobile (Furniture) of 1965 to 1966, and his series of 'Total Trattoria' events your Painting for Eating of 1965.

Yes, Martino is a good example of where these ideas can lead in a different field.

In relation to this, the transformation of the artwork at the end of the 1960s found a parallel in the worlds of design and architecture – with so-called radical design, especially in the work of Alessandro Mendini and his 1975 performance Little Monument for the Home, where a chair is set alight, and Carlos Calzini's Space Electronic nightclub in Milan. Were you in dialogue with these figures at the time?

Not so much. Only with Ettore Sottsass Jnr.

There was a small essay by Sottsass on your show at Gio Ponti's Sala Espressioni-Ideal Standard in 1965.

Yes, but that was the extent of my dialogue with designers at the time. There was never any direct rapport with any of the other figures.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s your works that were associated with Arte Povera such as Orchestra of Rags of 1968 and Little Monument, also of 1968, use objects of design – found everyday objects like kettles and shoes. So design, or the appropriation of design, does play a role in your practice even if you weren't in dialogue with your contemporaries from design.

But when my works use design elements – tables, sofas, doors and windows – they do so as extensions of the human body. I use them in a way that is fundamentally different from the designer. In design you adapt your ideas to a necessity. What I do is the exact opposite. In *Double Ladder Leaning Against the Wall* of 1964 and *Green Pyramid* of 1965 – or even *Upside Down Furniture* of 1976 – I use design as a conceptual extension of the human body by transforming these practical objects through their appropriation.

With your return to the mirror in the mid 1970s in Division and Multiplication of the Mirror of 1976, and in lesser-known works from the late 1970s and early 1980s such as Wedding-Trees and The Etruscan, you incorporate reproductions of classical sculptures into your work. There is a further correspondence here with the leaders of radical design as they moved into a fully matured Postmodernism. How do you feel in relation to the Alchimia and Memphis groups?

Their work lacked any poetic dimension. Of course, by definition it included the viewer, because the viewer used the objects – be it a chair or sofa – and thereby became a user. But never was this reflected on in the work in a deeper way. Never were these objects and their uses transformed.

But in his Monument to the Home Mendini saw himself as doing precisely that ... Leaving designers aside then, I'm also interested in another area of dialogue of the period: between yourself and theoreticians such as Umberto Eco with The Absent Structure of 1968, and also an activist and theorist such as Antonio Negri and his articles for Quaderni Rossi.

Eco? No. There was no special relationship, but it was interesting later to read what he wrote about the mirror.

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The Zoo
 Canopy Theatre 1968 performance

Michelangelo Pistoletto
 Peacock 1968-74

Wedding-Trees 1977

So his *'The Mirror as a Prosthesis and a Channel'* in Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language of 1984 was more important to you than *The Absent Structure*?

Yes. I knew Eco was interested in my work but the essay on the mirror was the only thing that felt relevant to me. To be honest, I was not so interested in the theoretical positions of the time and nor was I interested in more aggressive political positions like Negri's. In many ways, the aggressive politics of the time were as suffocating as the continuing onslaught of capitalism. As I said in 1969, 'art is dead because it is crushed on the one side by the superstructures and on the other by the war against the superstructures ... But creativity has nothing to do with these things, it is essential in the same way as food or shelter. The only political action open to artists today is to unshackle themselves from this pincer movement.'

To bring us up to date, following on from the travelling retrospective *'Michelangelo Pistoletto: From One to Many, 1956-1974'*, first in Rome and then in Philadelphia, can you tell me about the current exhibition at the Louvre – will it be an extension of this travelling exhibition or will your earlier works be brought into focus through a different optic?

There will be two parts. The first part is a retrospective of sorts, from the early 1960s up to the present. The second consists of a series of interventions in the Louvre spread out between its various galleries. I spent a good deal of time considering which works to place where and in what departments.

Could you give me some examples?

Some of the 'Mirror Paintings' will be placed in the rooms devoted to Italian art – the *Mona Lisa* will be paired with *Red Flag (Demonstration 1)* of 1966, for instance. There will also be a presentation of Cittadellarte and a related work attached to IM Pei's pyramid. Further works will be mixed up with the Roman sculptures.

My interventions will be a mirror of the Louvre's collection – a mirror of the past but also a mirror of the present because the viewer will be included in the work through their reflection. The museum will become a place of live interaction.

This is interesting in relation to what you said at the beginning about the many historical paintings passing through your father's studio in the 1950s and how this passage reflected a societal shift in Italy. Now with the Louvre again there is a change in the relationship between the paintings and their audience.

Yes, we are in a time of large transformations. The exhibition at the Louvre is in many ways premised on the idea of transformation: the reflection of the past and the projection of the future through the mirror of the present. ■

Michelangelo Pistoletto is at Luxembourg & Dayan, London until 12 April and at the Louvre, Paris 24 April to 3 September.

ALEX COLES is professor of transdisciplinary studies, School of Art, Design and Architecture, University of Huddersfield, and co-editor of EP Vol 1, *The Italian Avant-Garde: 1968-1976*, published this month by Sternberg Press.