

FEBRUARY 2011

Michelangelo Pistoletto

PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART
Romy Golan

View of “Michelangelo Pistoletto: From One to Many, 1956–1974,” 2010, Philadelphia Museum of Art. From left: *Biennale 66*, 1966; *No all’aumento del tram* (No to the Raise of the Tram Fare), 1965.

IN 1962, the young Italian artist Michelangelo Pistoletto began his “*Quadri specchianti*,” or “Mirror Paintings,” affixing silhouettes of friends, colleagues, and mundane objects onto highly polished stainless steel. These were works structurally devised to be completed by viewers, in accordance with Umberto Eco’s contemporaneous definition of the “open work.” Virtually everything about them confounds pictorial and viewing space: the diminutive nature of the tissue-paper cutouts (which need to be smaller than life-size to be of more or less the same proportions as us, as we stand back from them); the disturbance introduced by the slight undulation and opacity of the steel surfaces; the bleached-out colors of the silhouettes; the withdrawn body language of the figures, whose slouched shoulders and passive demeanor remind one of the politically disaffected Italian intellectuals in the films of Michelangelo Antonioni. Most perplexing is how elusive Pistoletto’s figures themselves tend to be, offering us, the reflected cohabitants of the space, only a *profil perdu*. Indeed, the difficulty of bringing about a meeting or an event, the tension between isolation and community, individual and mass, emerged as a recurrent theme in the exhibition “Michelangelo Pistoletto: From One to Many, 1956–1974,” beautifully installed by Carlos Basualdo at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

The pièce de résistance of the show, however, was the room devoted to “*Oggetti in meno*” (Minus Objects), 1965–68. These ambiguous and abstracted works, midway between sculpture and mock furniture, will not let us decide whether they belong to the simulacra of Pop, Minimalism’s “specific objects,” the artisanal, or the manufactured. Among the examples here, *Paesaggio* (Landscape), 1966, is a crèche with clay and cardboard figures; *Quadro da pranzo* (Lunch Painting), 1965, a frame table and chairs; and *Pozzo* (Well), 1965, a cardboard cylinder. Like the “Mirror Paintings,” these objects—as their title suggests—were structured by a strategy of subtraction, but that approach had turned, by the mid-1960s, into something closer to a refusal: Pistoletto’s refusal to tie himself to a signature style, his refusal to

move to New York to join Leo Castelli's stable of artists, and his refusal, the year Gian Enzo Sperone—his dealer in his hometown of Turin—opened a gallery in nearby Milan, to give in to that city's obsession with industrial design.

A short time after having taken one of the "Minus Objects"—a large sphere made of newspaper (*Sfera di giornali* [Newspaper Ball], 1966)—and sent it rolling down Turin's famed arcades, Pistoletto began, in 1968, performing fanciful street-theater pieces around Italy as part of a troupe he named Lo Zoo. Photographs of these performances make clear that several objects that would establish Pistoletto's association with Arte Povera, and indeed his best-known works in the US, such as *Venere degli stracci* (Venus of the Rags), 1967, also functioned as theatrical props. It is a pity that they were exhibited quite separately from the documentation of Lo Zoo, as it dampened the impact of that raucous sortie, leaving almost all the gallery space overcome by a poetic but slightly depressing neometaphysical silence.

The exhibition ended as it began, with mirror works. Many of those shown in the final room register the tense political climate of Italy in the '70s, when the country was rocked by the bitter struggle between the extraparliamentary Right and Left. In *Deposizione* (Deposition), 1973, made with the silk-screen technique Pistoletto began using around this time, a young man is dragged off what one assumes is a street by his female companion. Unlike the earlier mirror pieces, the work seems to convey a desire—in the wake of Lo Zoo—to connect, above all, with the here and now. Several of these later works— even more than the depictions of rallies on the streets of Turin in the "*Comizi*" (Demonstrations), 1965–66—run the risk of devolving into mere chronicling of current events, as if the mirror were a photojournalist's camera.

Yet such an *effet du réel* may simply be another aspect of what critic Tommaso Trini noted about the "Mirror Paintings" in 1964: "Paintings that one doesn't see at first, this is how Pistoletto captures us, he operates by transparency." This gift of invisibility may explain, too, why Pistoletto slipped, as the sole Italian artist, into Sperone's 1965 exhibition of American Pop art. It might also explain why he was one of the first European artists of his generation to be given a solo exhibition in the US, at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, in 1966. *Art News* illustrated John Ashbery's review of that show with an installation view of *Persona appoggiata* (Person Leaning), 1964, in which Pistoletto's own silhouette appears to stand in the reflected Castelli Gallery in New York, contemplating a silk screen by Robert Rauschenberg. The photograph won't let one shake the idea that the "Mirror Paintings" might have been conceived partly as a strategic device to enter into an oblique dialogue with a media-saturated transatlantic counterpart.

"Michelangelo Pistoletto: From One to Many, 1956–1974" travels to the Museo Nazionale Delle Arti del XXI Secolo (MAXXI), Rome, Mar. 4–Aug. 15.

Romy Golan is a professor of art history at the Graduate Center and Lehman College, City University of New York. She is the author of Muralnomad: The Paradox of Wall Painting, Europe 1927–1957 (Yale University Press, 2009).