





A pair of landmark exhibitions survey the early career of the Italian avant-gardist and update viewers on his recent, socially directed endeavors.

BY STEPHEN WESTFALL

TWO DISTINCT BUT COORDINATED exhibitions of the seminal post-World War II Italian artist Michelangelo Pistoletto, recently on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, gave a generous overview of the astonishing range, beauty and importance of his art. Yet the shows, traveling to Rome this spring, do not constitute a retrospective as such. A gap of more than 30 years lies between the end of the survey exhibition, "Michelangelo Pistoletto: From One to Many, 1966-1974," and "Michelangelo Pistoletto: Cittadellarte," which represents the artist's current concerns. Odd—because while Pistoletto retreated somewhat

View of Michelangelo Pistoletto's *Three Girls on a Balcony* (left) and *Four People on a Balcony* (right), both 1964, painted tissue paper on polished stainless steel. Courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art.

from the public eye after 1974, he continued to develop his series and to create discrete works throughout the three decades that followed.

Carlos Basualdo, curator of contemporary art at the PMA, has chosen to focus on the crucial first 18 years of Pistoletto's life as an artist, a period in which he invented enough for two or three careers. "From One to Many" traces Pistoletto's practice from his beginnings as a solitary painter at work in his studio through his quickly evolving collaborations with others. The exhibition, along with its richly illustrated and exhaustively researched catalogue, which

OPENING SOON

"Michelangelo Pistoletto: From One to Many, 1966-1974" and "Michelangelo Pistoletto: Cittadellarte," at MAXXI, Museo Nazionale delle Arti del XXI Secolo, Rome (both Mar. 3-June 26, 2011).

includes newly published interviews and archival materials (but unfortunately lacks an index), demonstrates how, at a feverish pace, he confounded categories of art-making and crossed formal boundaries. The changes came so fast as to be effectively simultaneous: at a certain point linear chronology seems to break down altogether.

Pistoletto was essentially born into painting. His father, Ettore Olivero Pistoletto, was a painter and restorer in Turin. By the time he was 14, in 1947, Michelangelo was working in Ettore's studio, absorbing the techniques and esthetic precepts of classical painting. As far as Ettore was concerned, a conservative home schooling

ORATIVE

MIRROR



would shield his son from the corrupting influences of modernity espoused in art schools. Yet in 1953, Michelangelo's mother enrolled him in an advertising school founded in Turin by the eminent modernist graphic designer, Armando Testa. There Pistoletto learned to streamline and clarify his art.

At the same time, Turin was becoming the center of postwar Italy's industrial and cultural resurgence. Work by major American Abstract Expressionists and by French and Italian painters associated with Art Informel could be seen in galleries and even storefront windows. Pistoletto held to the figure in scabrously expressionistic paintings influenced by, among others, Dubuffet, which featured a self-portrait Everyman as a kind of burnt effigy. Many of his early paintings are self-portraits, although the second work in the show, a 6½-foot-tall vertical canvas titled *La Folla* (The Crowd), 1959, is filled with anonymous, milling, bust-length figures bathed in an amber light.



**PISTOLETTO'S EARLY PAINTINGS OCCUPY AN AMBIGUOUS POSITION BETWEEN THE HEAT OF EXPRESSIONISM AND THE DETACHMENT OF POP.**

Sometime in 1959 Pistoletto's handling of the human visage settled down a bit, though there was still a caricatural quality to the features. This tendency was to persist in a group of self-portraits, begun in 1960, in which Pistoletto presents himself in a suit, standing with confident nonchalance. Rendered in cursive brushstrokes and illuminated from the side, this stylish new Everyman is presented as the European Company Man, a member of the first generation to feel the vigorous prosperity but risk losing its soul to the free market. Though the artist assumes a pose of casual self-regard

in such paintings as *Autoritratto argento* (Silver Self-Portrait), 1960, or *Il presente—Autoritratto in camicia* (The Present—Self-Portrait in Shirt), 1961, he also isolates himself against a solid ground, thereby emblemizing an existential condition. These paintings occupy an ambiguous position between the heat of expressionism and the detachment of Pop, though with an eye cast critically toward ambient social anxieties.

The backgrounds, sometimes rendered in metallic gold and silver, recall the medieval icons that Pistoletto had assisted his father in restoring. As Pistoletto told Suzanne Penn, conservator of paintings at the PMA, in 2009, "The icon was the place of the fascination and the problem at the same time. I had to find the solution to the problem through something that came from the past, the icon." Penn's catalogue essay, with its revealing conversations and source photos, helps us understand the complexities of Pistoletto's painting techniques, the historical, social and formal breadth of his content, and his increasing engagement with collaborators in the fabrication of his work.

APPEARING IN GROUP SHOWS, and buoyed by growing interest in his paintings, Pistoletto left a career in advertising in 1958 to devote himself to painting. That year he was taken on and paid a stipend by Galleria Galatea in Turin, which also represented Francis Bacon and Alberto Giacometti, and which gave him his first solo exhibition in 1960. This was a crucial boost for Pistoletto, who acknowledges Bacon's influence in his own expressionist brushwork, the flesh tones of his figures and their placement in spatial isolation.



Right, view of  
*Cage* (left)  
and *Deposition*  
(right), both 1973,  
silkscreen on  
polished stainless  
steel. Courtesy  
Philadelphia  
Museum of Art.

Far left, *Silver  
Self-Portrait*, 1960,  
oil, acrylic and silver  
on wood, 78 3/4  
inches square.  
Collector: the artist.

Bottom, *The Crowd*,  
1959, oil and acrylic  
on canvas, 78 3/4  
by 47 1/4 inches.  
Private collection.



In 1962, while completing a painting that set the figure within a black, varnished field, Pistoletto noticed his own reflection in the surface. The apparition of a living person moving about in real time in the otherwise still composition was startling to him. Resolving to make paintings on mirrored surfaces, he quickly settled on sheets of highly polished steel to provide the reflection, and developed a method for tracing life-size photographs of figures on tissue, hand-coloring the tracings, cutting them out and applying them like metallic leaf to the surface of the polished steel.

These became the Mirror Paintings, arguably Pistoletto's best-known works, which he has continued to make through the present day. They filled several early rooms in the PMA installation and resumed in the final galleries. Pistoletto started out with blowups of family members, friends and associates that he posed in his studio. The composition for *Quattro persone alla balconata* (*Four People on a Balcony*), 1964, for instance, was assembled from separate source photographs of various individuals; a wooden folding chair is present in the originals, rather than a balcony rail. In the painting, all the figures are glancing downward. The woman at the left faces us, while the three figures on the right turn away from us to peer over the balcony. The man in a light overcoat at the far right turns sideways, arms folded, his gaze following that of his companion. His backside just touches the side of the painting.

Pistoletto's sense of the spatial intervals between figures is acute, a meeting between Piero della Francesca and Godard or Antonioni. About Piero's paintings, Pistoletto says:

The perspective is phenomenological, it is not invented, it is true. It is scientific. The mirror is scientific, too. But the perspective in the Piero painting [*The Flagellation of Christ*] was going from the window to the street, while the mirror goes from the window to the street and back again.<sup>2</sup>

The matte coloration and texture of the tissue echo the light in fresco painting, while the photographic rendering of the life-size subjects against the active voids of mirrored steel surfaces

invokes the scale and manipulative clarity of cinema.

The Mirror Paintings are an elegant synthesis of photography and painting, and a profound meditation on the relationship between the two mediums. Gerhard Richter treats the photographic image and its surface emulsion as simultaneous phenomena to be understood via the material surface of the paint. The polished steel grounds of the Mirror Paintings, seductively gorgeous in their own right, and in conjunction with painted and reflected figures, opens an illusionistic space that exists in real time rather than a commemorative past. Catching our reflections in the work prompts us to recall the lineage of the mirror in art as a pre-photographic referent for mimesis and as the great poetic metaphor for the doubling of consciousness. When we stand at the optimal distance required to view a Mirror Painting as a whole, the scale of the photographic figures is our own, yet they are shown obliquely or from behind, turning away from us toward our reflections. If they address us at all, it's indirectly, as they regard us from deep within the mirror.

Pistoletto's intellectually exacting paintings were often associated with the cool attitude of Pop art, particularly in the U.S., but they really have more to do with Conceptual and performance art than with Pop. This is due not only to the investiture of the surface with real time and space, but also to the participatory nature of their creation. Pistoletto enlisted his father's photographer, Paolo Bressano, to take the pictures and recruited his friends to pose, and the collaborative process of the Mirror Paintings fed his growing interest in theater and actions. As student and worker discontent expanded in Italy in the mid-'60s, Pistoletto engaged the photographer Renato Rinaldi, whom he had met in Testa's advertising school, to shoot pictures of demonstrations and political rallies in Turin. Pistoletto would select figures and recompose them in the Mirror Paintings. In a work of 1965, Pistoletto changed the name of a political candidate on a banner held by a man and a woman to the word "Vietnam."



Right: installation view of the Minus Objects, 1965-66. Courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Below: *Small Table with Record and Newspaper*, 1964, photographs and print on Plexiglas, 13 3/4 by 23 3/4 by 23 3/4 inches. Cittadellarte-Fondazione Pistoletto, Biella, Italy.

Opposite: *Orchestra of Rags—Quartet*, 1968, rags, glass, teakettles, steam and electric circuit, dimensions variable. MART—Museo per l'Arte Contemporanea di Trento e Rovereto, Rovereto, Italy.



example the spaces between the black legs of a coffee table, in *Tavolino con disco e giornale* (*Small Table with Record and Newspaper*), 1964, which bears, on its Plexiglas top, an LP that projects over the edge into real space. (Tables are a recurring motif throughout Pistoletto's career, a place where people come together to eat, talk, rest. They are a site for both the ceremonial and the impromptu.)

Pistoletto turned a crucial corner with the Plexiglas work, ceasing to identify solely with the practice of painting, or at least the two-dimensional image. Between December 1965 and January 1966 he rapidly generated a series of diverse three-dimensional works, the so-called *Oggetti in meno* (*Minus Objects*), using a wide variety of materials: spheres of pressed newspaper; a small painting of the phrase *ti amo* (*I love you*) in block letters and another of a multicolored and nocturnally lit water fountain; a wooden folding table with four folding chairs surrounding it and an elongated, green wooden pyramid resting on its surface.

Any viewer—even, say, an industrialist collector—might find himself placed in the midst of an antiwar demonstration.

Eventually, the trace of the hand lost its importance altogether. In 1969 Pistoletto began using silkscreen in his *Mirror Paintings*, rather than the hand-painted tissue, which allowed greater precision and richer color contrasts. The move to screenprinting also represented a final break with the hand-painted tradition passed down from his father.

IN 1964, PISTOLETTO BEGAN to use clear Plexiglas. Seemingly afloat in the optical "void" of the Plexi are photographic prints of objects: a power cord, a stepladder, LPs. And yet the material presence of the ground is hinted at in a shadowed edge, a slight dimming of light passing through, a faint reflectivity in the surface. At the same time, Pistoletto realized a series of sculptures in which Plexiglas fills in voids—for

Each of these sculptures and paintings could be a prop extracted from a play or a performance, though Pistoletto did not begin his theatrical activities until 1967. Many of the pieces carry a distinct Surrealist flavor, partly because of their mute clarity, and partly because of their toying with scale. Still, a cardboard rose is gigantic and a schematically painted wooden house is miniature because they're both roughly human-size. Pistoletto had struck up a friendship in late 1965 with Pino Pascali, a conceptual sculptor with a background in stage design, as well as television and advertising. The younger Pascali (who was to die in a motorcycle accident only three years later, at the age of 32) is credited with mounting one of the first performance/actions in Italy in July of that year. Pascali profoundly influenced Pistoletto's thinking about objects as theatrical props and as vehicles for increased audience interaction.

I thought the PMA's installation of the *Minus Objects* was a little crowded until I saw a picture of them in the catalogue

clustered together in Pistoletto's studio like actors milling about backstage. Things opened up a bit, however, in two rooms presenting work from the brief period in which he was being included in Arte Povera exhibitions (the pieces here are from 1967-68), including objects in which the artist played with Mylar and low-level sources of illumination such as lightbulbs and candles. One quiet piece, *Riflessi sul muro* (Reflections on the Wall), 1967, is just a rolled-out sheet of mirrored Mylar resting on the floor and against the wall, onto which it reflects light from the rest of the room in looping sprays.

Two of the works on view here have become classics of Arte Povera. In *Veneri degli stracci* (Venus of the Rags), 1967, a white marble copy of an ancient statue of Venus disrobing faces a grotto of colored rags that she appears to be entering—or preparing to rummage through. In *Orchestra di stracci—quartetto* (Orchestra of Rags—Quartet), 1968, steaming electric teakettles are arranged under glass tabletops supported by knee-high rings of multicolored bundles of rags. In true Arte Povera fashion, these works seem both gay and sad. Venus turns her back to us, and the teakettles emit a feeble whistle as vapor collects underneath the glass panels.



**MANY OF THE MINUS OBJECTS CARRY A DISTINCT SURREALIST FLAVOR, PARTLY BECAUSE OF THEIR MUTE CLARITY, AND PARTLY BECAUSE OF THEIR TOYING WITH SCALE.**

EVEN AS HE WAS MAKING OBJECTS in 1967, Pistoletto witnessed a performance by Julian Beck's experimental theater collective, the Living Theater, which regularly toured Italy during the late '60s. The Living Theater was dedicated to Artaud's principles of a confrontational performance that would spontaneously and directly engage the audience. Pistoletto was enthralled, seeing such "actions" as directly related to his own ongoing desire to enlist the viewer. He invited members of the Living Theater to stay at his studio that year, and went on to perform, with others, actions with props recalling his Minus Objects. At the exhibition



"Con-temp-l'azione" in Turin in 1967, participants rolled Pistoletto's large ball of pressed newspaper—which would have many incarnations—through the streets between the show's three venues. A month later, he repeated the action, and it was filmed by Ugo Nespolo (*Buongiorno Michelangelo*, 1968). The sphere is rolled around like a giant soccer ball and held aloft like a celebratory effigy of the moon.



His imagination fired by the possibilities of collaborative theater, Pistoletto in 1968 founded—with Maria Pioppi (who was to become his life partner), Carlo Colnaghi and Gianni Milano, among others—Lo Zoo, an experimental company that staged and filmed various actions. The group remained together until 1970. One large room in the Philadelphia exhibition screened films and displayed various artifacts from the period, including posters, photographs and props. Three enormous trumpet bells, the length of Alpenhorns, but much wider, were included; these were played by Pistoletto and Pioppi in the 1968 performance *Le trombe del guidizio* (The Trumpets of Judgment) in Turin in 1968. The props were more interesting than the films documenting the various performances of Lo Zoo, which felt caught in a specific time and place. By contrast, one can imagine the trumpets being played in different contexts and periods, from now to hundreds of years ago.

As the political and economic situation in Italy darkened in the late '60s and early '70s, Pistoletto grew ever more socially minded. Where Lo Zoo's actions were playful and enigmatic, by 1973 many of the Mirror Paintings suggested preludes to or aftermaths of violence, as in *Cappio* (Noose), 1973, *Deposizione* (Deposition), 1973, and *Uomo che spara* (Man Shooting), 1974. One of the last Mirror Paintings in the show, *Pericolo di morte* (Danger of Death), 1974, shows a skull-and-crossbones warning sign posted on a chain-link fence. Reflected viewers see themselves caught behind it. It's impossible not to see these works as responses to the increasing violence in Italy's political life, but Pistoletto is less interested in editorializing than he is in letting the mirror draw us into the threat.

Compared to the sobriety of the close of "From One to Many," "Cittadellarte" (a contraction of "City of Art" and

"Citadel"), on the other side of the museum, was filled with a renewed optimism and commitment to community. The installation takes its title from the artist's Cittadellarte-Fondazione Pistoletto, which the artist founded in Biella (his birthplace) in 1998. More than a repository for his work and its documentation, the foundation is also an outgrowth of Pistoletto's long developing interest in audience participation and global awareness, a direction that has roots in the collaborative nature of his Mirror Paintings and theater work, and that was further stimulated by his teaching at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna from 1992 to 1999.

Located in a spacious gallery, "Cittadellarte" featured two very large mirror-top tables, one in the shape of the Mediterranean and the other the Caribbean, surrounded by chairs and stools in styles from around the world. (Pistoletto sees the Caribbean and Mediterranean as "mirroring" each other.) The tables were separated

by a tall, room-dividing, narrowly boxed-out wooden building frame. Wooden letters attached to the lintels spelled out various "Offices"—actual functioning arms of the foundation, which offer their own programming—corresponding to categories of culture and society: Art, Education, Ecology, Politics, Economics, Spirituality, Production, Nutrition, Communication, Architecture and Fashion. Visitors had to pass through the framing structure to go from one table to the other, where they could sit and converse. Various performances and discussions pertaining to Pistoletto's work took place at the installation over the course of the exhibition.

With the Cittadellarte foundation, Pistoletto is challenging artists to consider ethics and esthetics in relation to the political, economic and ecological crises that are today testing the limits of meaning. The foundation sponsors symposia, competitions, residencies and scholar-

Pistoletto and Maria Pioppi performing *The Trumpets of Judgment* at the artist's studio on via Reymond, Turin, 1968. Photo Paolo Bressano. Courtesy Cittadellarte-Fondazione Pistoletto.

Opposite, view of the installation "Cittadellarte," 2010. Courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art.

1 Suzanne Penn, "The Complicity of the Materials" in Pistoletto's Paintings and Mirror Paintings," in Carlos Basualdo, *Michelangelo Pistoletto: From One to Many, 1956-1974*, exh. cat., Philadelphia Museum of Art and Rome, MAXXI—Museo Nazionale delle Arti del XXI Secolo, 2010, p. 143.  
2 *Ibid.*, p. 181.

The exhibits "Michelangelo Pistoletto: From One to Many, 1956-1974" and "Michelangelo Pistoletto: Cittadellarte" premiered at the Philadelphia Museum of Art [Nov. 2, 2010-Jan. 17, 2011]. The accompanying 403-page catalogue contains essays by Carlos Basualdo, Angela Vertese, Jean-François Chevrier, Claire Gilman and Suzanne Penn, as well as texts by Pistoletto.

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ships. Artists are asked to explore the imaginative terrain of the individual in relation to state and corporate power, and to provide positive alternatives to various looming dystopian scenarios through collaborative projects that emphasize a community embracing sociological sustainability and cultural diversity.

It's hard to be critical of the artist's good nature though one may doubt his political efficacy. But good nature draws people, and one sees a real possibility for Cittadellarte to "sponsor thought," as Pistoletto puts it. So the participatory flow chart replaces the object altogether. And who will dream the mirrored seas when Pistoletto is gone? ◻

