

Art Conversations

The rich legacy of arte povera

Michelangelo Pistoletto will discuss the enduring influence of the movement at one of this year's highlight eventsPistoletto with his sculpture *Temp(h) Cambiano*, 2009—which is made out of recycled washing machine parts—in Rome last year

The influence of arte povera (literally “poor art”) runs deep, and this year’s Art Basel Conversations programme starts tomorrow with one of the 1960s movement’s main proponents, Michelangelo Pistoletto. Key curators and artists are quick to acknowledge the legacy of a group that ushered in a school of art stripped back to its basics. “Last summer I conducted an Art Conversation with Paul McCarthy at Art Basel,” says Massimiliano Gioni, associate director of the New Museum in New York. “He said that in 1969, when the book *Arte Povera* by Germano Celant [the Italian critic who coined the name] came out, he couldn’t afford it, so he bought it with a friend. They cut it in half, and were supposed eventually to exchange their halves. But he never got around to exchanging his part and so only knew the first half.”

Even the Young British Artists owe arte povera a debt. “It’s not just the way ‘poor’ materials have become commonplace in art—beds, tents, foodstuffs,” says Frances Morris, head of collections (international art) at Tate Modern. “These were all brought into the gallery by arte povera artists. But they also rejected the need to develop a personal style, approaching each work as a separate project. That’s why they tended to work across genres and media. We are used to this now but at the time it was radical.”

Tony Cragg, Mona Hatoum, Cornelia Parker and Jana Sterbak have all been cited as children of arte povera. Gioni emphasises that the movement was an important reference point for the “Unmonumental” exhibition at the New Museum (2007-08), while veteran UK artist Richard Wentworth, head of the sculpture department at London’s Royal College of Art, argues that the work of Antony Gormley and Anish Kapoor has its roots in the movement. “Along with early Nauman and Serra, arte povera caused tectonic plate shifts. Today’s students subsequently see everything as a huge palette,” he says. Meanwhile, at most major art fairs today arte povera-inspired works are a dominant feature.

Its characteristics are now a staple of 20th-century art history: the movement was experimental and conceptual, moving beyond minimalism by drawing on mundane, everyday materials (coal, wool, vegetables, even live animals) and referencing history, the natural world, politics and science. Pioneered by Pistoletto, Mario Merz and Pino Pascali, arte povera erased the boundaries between the exhibition space and the outside world, addressing fundamentals such as: what does it mean to make art? “Pistoletto was really keen to connect his work with the world outside the studio,” says Morris. “So the work of art could

be seen as the site of experimentation and connection with other parts of life, be they social, political, scientific, historical and cultural.” This all-encompassing, art-meets-life “laboratory” ethos is at the heart of Cittadellarte, Pistoletto’s sprawling, non-profit foundation housed in a 19th-century former wool mill in Biella, the artist’s birthplace around 80km north-west of Milan. Founded in 1998, the centre aims to “inspire and produce a responsible change in society and ideas through creative projects”, according to its project statement. The terms “sustainability” and “responsibility” are a mantra among the labyrinthine corridors of Cittadellarte, where staff treat Pistoletto with due reverence (one employee called him a “prophet”).

“Cittadellarte is a great laboratory, a generator of creative energy that generates unedited processes of development in diverse fields of culture, production, economics and politics,” continues the statement. To that end, the centre is divided into operational nuclei called “uffici” (“offices”) which oversee art, education, ecology, economy, politics, architecture and spirituality, among other areas (even the site cafeteria, which “uses local products that respect the environment and the micro-economy of the territory”, goes under the moniker of the “nourishment office”).

Pistoletto is nothing if not committed to his cause. “The purpose of Cittadellarte is to bring the aesthetic and ethical together,” he says. “We have to re-create a path and a new perspective. I created Cittadellarte as a laboratory of research—as a way of discovering how to value differences—and our original aims are shared by more and more institutions today.” Pistoletto continually

reiterates how arte povera, with its liberating interdisciplinary approach, underpins the philosophy behind Cittadellarte. “It is the evolution of that basic moment, to see how that experience could be useful for art and society.”

He ruminates on the modernity espoused by the Italian Futurists. These machine-mad artists may well have embraced the motor car but now “there are too many cars in the world”. The futurists were always in search of the new, but

much more self-referential.” But this new-found freedom also brought “a sense of responsibility”, he admits. Consumerism became a prime concern but pop art of the early 1960s at least allowed artists to maintain the “necessity of objectivity”.

But there was a flip side. “Artists became slaves—just commercial trademarks,” says Pistoletto about arte povera’s anti-market stance. “We were anti-commercial not because we were against the economy but because it felt like art was a prisoner of the economy,” he adds. His “Minus Objects” series (1965-66) consisted of wildly disparate works that appeared to be by different artists, thereby undermining the commercial ideal that an artist should have a signature style.

In addition, Pistoletto argues that his “Mirror Paintings” represent a strictly aesthetic continuum: “Each fragment [of the mirrors] reflects a part of my reality. It’s not a commercial repetition, it has meaning.” So how does he square his ideals with the cut-throat commodification of art? “We spend money and don’t make money [at Cittadellarte]. My participation in the commercial sphere gives me the means to sustain and research the transformation I’m seeking in society.” Art Basel Miami Beach is, for him, evidently another opportunity to spread the message.

But Pistoletto has not eschewed the commercial art world. Celant highlights that the artist initiated a dialogue among dealers such as Illeana Sonnabend and Gian Enzo Sperone that “started the circulation of pop art in Italy and of arte povera abroad”. Being a collector is “healthy”, adds Pistoletto, maintaining that art needs to be “protected” by curators, writers and galleries in a “fluid” ecosystem. “Industry and banks do not need to be protected. Art needs something to protect it, such as museums which, by the way, must develop a new dynamic so they don’t crystallise. They must interact more.”

Pistoletto highlights the appeal of his “Walking Sculpture” piece, a sphere made of

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arte povera honed in on the “basis” of existence. Pistoletto stresses that the phenomenological aspect of his approach was first evident in his “Mirror Paintings” (begun in 1961), which are considered the foundation of his theoretical thought. These silk-screened figures superimposed on polished sheets of stainless steel prompted fresh thinking on perspective, representation of the self and others, and how the mirrored surface could reflect real time. “The past and the present live together [in the “Mirror Paintings”]. The viewer is inside [them]. The futurists talked about putting the spectator in the centre of the painting but they never achieved this. I did with the ‘Mirror Paintings,’” he says.

But it would be a mistake to assume that the liberating ethos of arte povera provided Pistoletto with his first defining moment of emancipation. “Modern art of the 1950s was a way of developing total autonomy without any religious or civil allegiances. Post-war art was

bound newspapers, that recently drew large crowds when it was rolled through the streets of Philadelphia, where the first survey of the artist’s works in the US in two decades is now being held (“Michelangelo Pistoletto: From One to Many, 1956-74”, until 17 January, Philadelphia Museum of Art).

This collaborative act was first performed in Turin in 1967, heralding the foundation of “Le Zoo”, 1968-70. Pistoletto’s performance art collective. It’s clear from his emotional response that bringing people together is his aim, and the fate of humanity his ambitious priority: “We are raised believing that tomorrow we will have more; but tomorrow we’ll actually have less. There will be fewer natural resources because of the sheer quantity of humanity that needs to be saved.” So what is Pistoletto’s answer to the ills of society? His “third paradise” thesis, a doctrine tinged with idealism that “consists of leading the artificial, that is to say, science, technology, art, culture and politics, and restoring life to the earth”.

Walking around the gallery of Pistoletto’s works at Cittadellarte, the artist points out his *Venus of the Rags*, 1967, a kitsch, glittering statue of a goddess enveloped by a dishevelled bundle of cloths. “It is the most representative work of arte povera as it brings together the beauty of the past and the disaster of the present,” says Pistoletto, who elaborates on the multiple messages inherent in the piece, alluding to the need to “follow nature, because nature is able to recycle everything. The work presents a practical solution for the future”.

It sounds implausible but then the original working title of Tate Modern’s 2001 show “Zero to Infinity” springs to mind: “Arte Povera: the Beginning of Now”. ■

Gareth Harris
At tomorrow’s first Art Basel Conversation, Michelangelo Pistoletto will talk with Hans Ulrich Obrist, co-director of exhibitions and programmes at the Serpentine Gallery, London. Convention Centre, auditorium next to Gate D, 10-11am

Pistoletto’s installation *Twenty-Two Less Two*, 2009, at last year’s Venice Biennale