



MICHELANGELO  
PISTOLETTO

Can  
Art still  
Save  
Our Souls?

One of the leading figures in the Arte Povera movement  
discusses the mind, the spirit, the artistic ego and why producing  
coffee cups for Illy can be a good thing

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interview PAOLA NOE

## FEATURE MICHELANGELO PISTOLETTO

**FOR MICHELANGELO PISTOLETTO**, 2007 ended with a flurry of exhibitions, both in his native Italy and abroad. There were solo shows at Simon Lee Gallery in London, at the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in La Spezia, at MADRE in Naples (with a traditional intervention in the Piazza del Plebiscito), as well as his inclusion in *The Painting of Modern Life* at London's Hayward Gallery (the show will move on to the Castello di Rivoli in Turin this spring). You could say that this was a demonstration both of his inexorable energy and of the fact that even at seventy-four, one of the leading lights of the Arte Povera movement (a term coined by the critic Germano Celant in 1967 to describe a group of artists based in Turin, Milan, Genoa and Rome who used common, everyday, valueless materials in their works) still has a lot left to say. But even discussing the man, his works and his exhibitions doesn't provide a true picture of who Michelangelo Pistoletto is today. Behind him lurks a creative energy linked not simply to the artist as a singular entity, but to an extraordinary force capable of changing society as we know it.

In 1998 Pistoletto founded Cittadellarte, an art and creativity laboratory located in a disused textile mill by the river Cervo in Biella, Italy. The lab is the physical embodiment of the 'Progetto Arte' manifesto (1994), in which Pistoletto proposed a new role for the artist, dedicated to creating an interaction between all the spheres of human activity that make up society. Cittadellarte is a large and organically structured generator of artistic creativity that enters in direct interaction with communication, economy, teaching, nutrition, politics, production, spirituality and work. Pistoletto himself describes this sort of art as heterodox, in opposition to the more orthodox structure embodied by the traditional museum. Behind all this is a drive towards what the artist terms 'responsible social transformation'. In conjunction with this, Cittadellarte also encompasses UNIDEE—University for Ideas (an international residency for young creatives from all over the world), Love Difference (an art movement that aims to create a network for figures from the Mediterranean cultural world) and lots more besides.

**ArtReview:**

Let's start from the beginning. After working on a series of increasingly large-scale self-portraits during the 1950s you had a turning point in 1961, which you have described as follows: 'In 1961, on a black background that had been varnished to the point that it reflected, I began to paint my face. I saw it come toward me, detaching itself from the space of an environment in which all things moved, and I was astonished... The figure of a man seemed to come forward, as if alive, in the space of the gallery; but the true protagonist was the relationship of instantaneousness that was created between the spectator, his own reflection and the painted figure, in an ever-present movement that concentrated the past and the figure in itself to such an extent as to cause one to call their very existence into doubt: it was the dimension of time itself.' That episode led to your 'mirror paintings', to which we'll come in a moment. But for now, what does it mean to represent the human figure?

**Michelangelo Pistoletto**

The representation of the human figure is the core of identity. A person wants to identify themselves, or more accurately, to recognise themselves. But identity is a complex concept: it encompasses identity in relation to the universe, to a before- and after-life, or all those things we gather up within the term spirituality. People have a deep spiritual need, and I chose to pursue that through the practice of art, rather than through religion or philosophy. So I think the human figure is the artistic element of personal identity, which is also, for me, a motif for research

into the objective identity of existence. That's why the figure, as primary element, stands in relation to the space that surrounds it, as a universal element. This is the relationship between the individual and the universe. And between the individual and the universe are society, the world, life – dynamics of existence that I now interpret through the activities of Cittadellarte: 'Progetto Arte' was born as a search for human identity, therefore the spiritual, and the practice of everyday life.

On the subject of Cittadellarte: where does it stand in relation to the existing public and private institutions that manage contemporary art?

Mine is not an Italian system. Cittadellarte is an international system and is absolutely not in contrast with any other form of traditional artistic institution. But it is looking to create situations that do not emerge from museum systems. And this goes not only for Italy but also for the rest of the world. Museum systems everywhere are based on artistic individuality. And therefore, on the part of Cittadellarte, there's a desire to develop something fundamental (like a heterodox art) rather than merely to explore new horizons.

Going back to your works... In *Due visitatori al museo* (1968) the public sees reflected in the mirror both the present of today and, in the representation of the two visitors, the past – figures from a time that is no more. What does this double time signify?

The photographic image, already immediately after the click, is memory, the past. The images fixed in the mirror reinforce, with time, the idea of memory. A photograph, however, is always taken in the present. So within my mirror paintings there are two different presents: that of the photograph and that of the reflected image. There's a temporal dimension composed of a past, a present and a future continually accommodated in the present, in which there is also the past. It creates ever-new combinations, always different, not just from the continual change that occurs in the mirror, but in the relationship between the present and something that is really changed, and is visible today.

What is the 'virtual' today? And what is 'real'?

The virtual is all that is real, all that represents the real: a word can represent the real, just like an image. Pictorial representation and verbal description are the virtual elements, just like cinema, TV, photography. In the mirror paintings the virtual coincides immediately with physical reality, is identical to three-dimensional time, even four-dimensional time: that which we see in the mirror is mutation, change, the real present. There's a relationship between the real and the virtual, in a nontraditional way.

You are one of the leading figures of Arte Povera. Forty years have gone by since then. Why do you think that people today are so attracted to that period?

Because I think that Arte Povera was the last true art movement of the postwar period. Later attempts to create movements didn't have the same success. Moreover, personal interpretations of art have become more successful. Of course there was the Transavanguardia in Italy, but I don't see that as a real movement. I see it as a way of looking backwards; a true movement goes forwards.



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*'The productions of an artist are indistinguishable  
from the artist. I am the product'*

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Your *Oggetti in meno* [*Minus Objects*] of the mid-1960s presaged the French theorist Nicolas Bourriaud's 'relational aesthetics' of the 1990s. I'm thinking of works like *Grande sfera di giornali* [*Ball of Newspapers, 1966*] and the topicality of *Metro cubo di infinito* [*Infinite Cubic Metre, 1966*]...

Relational aesthetics, if you want to tie it to my work, is born out of the *Oggetti in meno*, with which I moved from the diversity of objects to the diversity of people, from different ways of confronting art and therefore positioning it in relation to language and to vision. I made a sphere of newspapers, took it round the streets and involved the public by inviting them to play with it. It symbolised openness, escape from the doors of museums and galleries, a testament to the unorthodox, even heterodox, aspects of art. So the *Grande sfera dei giornali* can be representative of a heterodox system, of something that grows but remains immobilised in the interior of the space: it's the growth of the objective phenomenon as far as the point where it paralyses itself in the interior of the space. *Metro cubo di infinito* is one cubic metre of space, and at the same time, the space is infinite. It makes the singular and everything an indivisible system. The connection between these two extremes occurs in the imagination, but at the same time it's verifiable: all you need to do is open the cube and look at its extension.

Even your rag aesthetic predicted a certain type of art. I'm thinking of the category of the shapeless...

The rags are consumerism consumed, the end of consumerism, the beginning of the ridiculous. They are recycled, representing the fashions that are continually consumed. *Venere degli stracci* [*Venus of Rags, 1967*] is memory, the immanent thing that sustains changes in fashion.

You have accepted a new identity, moving from subjective individual to a collective subject born from artistic creation. Why?

I think that to transform society you need collaboration, cooperation extended to the highest levels. The rest of human creativity shows it has produced extraordinary results (science, technology, economics, philosophies) and recently has even developed destructive, iniquitous, dangerous realities. I think that those who make art should feel responsible for progress and its consequences. Art is fundamentally a representation of human creative capacity and therefore needs to become the centre of a transformation of this use of creativity.

You have often maintained that the artist is a sponsor of thought. Can you explain your relationship with a sponsor such as Illy?

With Illy it was clear from the start that our espresso cups would be different from what preceded them. They would contain ethical as well as aesthetic messages. For example, those by Rufus Willis (an English architect that did his residency project with us) in 2004 represent metropolitan buildings near to shanty towns. Or even the 2002 'no water, no coffee' series by Maria João Calisto, and many others. In this way, art promotes thought.

You have said that the artist needs to be everywhere. Perhaps today there is the risk of an art that confuses itself with other forms of expression, such as design and fashion...

For me, today, the message of responsible social transformation is the artistic concept. Wherever there is this concept, there is art.

I am thinking of your interdenominational place of meditation and prayer at the Institut Paoli-Calmettes, a hospital specialising in the treatment of cancer in Marseilles. How is it possible to make art of this kind?

In Marseilles, a multiethnic, multireligious, multicultural city, in a hospital, which can be just as much a place of illness and pain as it is a place of cure, I didn't want to make an artwork that eliminated the social – in this case the religious – but an art that might play an active role in its reinterpretation. In my work, the transcendent always arrives at the edge of the immanent, always returns to the immanent and brings it towards an imagination of what can be done in a universe in which man is the vital part.

You have frequently spoken of 'the freedom of art'. What do you mean by that?

I discovered the freedom of art when, as a youth, I had my first experience with the artworld. Art was not subdued, and the artists threw themselves in and out of it. This was the freedom that I had the fortune then to find. Today art is subjected to the economy.

Finally, in your research a phrase stands out: 'You need to prepare to be.' What does this mean?

As an artist I am intersected by the relationship between art and the products of an artist. The productions of an artist are indistinguishable from the artist. I am the product. It is not possible to consider the phenomenon of the creator outside of his or her productions. If one considers the universe to be a work, then whoever created the universe is the work. You could call this 'being'. One therefore has to prepare to be the subject and the work. Because if the work is the universe, each one of us is the work, the universe, art – if we manage to transport that which is the religious-political-social phenomenology into the artistic experience. ■

*Translated from the Italian by Laura Allsop. The Painting of Modern Life, with work by Michelangelo Pistoletto, will be on view at Castello di Rivoli, Rivoli (Turin), through 4 May. See listings for further details*

WORKS  
(IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

Installation views from *Michelangelo Pistoletto*,  
Simon Lee Gallery, London, 22 November – 26 January

All images  
Courtesy Simon Lee Gallery, London