

EXHIBITION:

MICHELANGELO PISTOLETTO

Inauguration: Wednesday, January 26, 2000, at 7:30 p.m.

Dates of the exhibition: From January 27 to March 29, 2000.

Curators: Manuel J. Borja -Vilhel, Michael Tarantino, Glòria Picazo.

Exhibition produced and organised by the Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona in collaboration with the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford and the Henry Moore Foundation.

This Exhibition is travelling after to the Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Torino, Italy (Autumn 2000) and to the Musée d'Art Contemporain, Lyon, France (Spring 2001).

This is a retrospective exhibition which ranges in content from a pair of self-portraits painted in 1960, in which the images are framed inside a gold and a silver surface, respectively, through to the artist's most recent interventions, grouped under the title *Progetto Arte*, an initiative designed to provoke reflection on the state of art today. In other words, the exhibition traces a narrative thread which runs from the image of the artist, and the initial pictorial representation of this, to the figure of the artist as the advocate of a different way of thinking and living in the world today.

Pistoletto believes that now, at the start of the third millennium, the time has come for artists to take the responsibility for establishing links between the different branches of human activity, from politics to economics, from science to religion, in order to "eliminate distances while preserving differences", to quote the artist himself.



Throughout the course of this exhibition itinerary the spectator will find the most significant moments in the artist's career, with works that established his reputation during the sixties and seventies as one of the most important exponents of Italian *Arte Povera*, although his subsequent evolution towards other, more theoretical concerns has since taken him a long way from that movement. In this respect, series such as *Minus objects*, *Plexiglas*, *Mirrors*, *Cubes* and *Rugs* are well represented here; at the same time, Pistoletto's experiences in the fields of theater and music — deriving from his interest in the late sixties in action and audience participation — are also reflected in this section of the exhibition.

Part of the show — the one which analyzes the theme of the mirror and its relations with painting and sculpture — has been produced in conjunction with the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford and the Henry Moore Foundation. In addition, it is intended that the exhibition in its entirety will be shown in various other museums (the Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Torino, Italy (Autumn 2000) and to the Musée d'Art Contemporain, Lyon, France (Spring 2001).

Catalogue: Edited by MACBA and ACTAR. With texts from Véronique Goudinoux, Remo Guidieri, Robert Hopper, Juan Antonio Ramírez, Robert Hopper and Michael Tarantino, and with a selection of texts from the artist.

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MICHELANGELO PISTOLETTO

CATALOGUE TEXTES:

OGGETTI IN MENO: REDEFINING THE WORK

Véronique Goudinoux

ON THIS SIDE OF THE MIRROR

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HARDER THAN DREAMING:

AN IMAGINARY DIALOGUE WITH MICHELANGELO PISTOLETTO

Michael Tarantino

OGGETTI IN MENO: REDEFINING THE WORK

Véronique Goudinoux

In Pistoletto's praxis there is a particularly powerful moment during which a number of his gestures or future pieces encounter their origin: such a moment is the production and exhibition, in 1965 and 1966 in Turin, of the collected *Oggetti in meno* (Minus Objects). This group of works has aroused great interest: it was one of the levers of *Arte Povera*; we are still confronting it today (cf. the most recent Documenta in Kassel). At the time of its appearance, two specific features particularly struck spectators of the *Oggetti in meno*. The first is Pistoletto's decision to present them in his own studio, in hangings that vary with the realization of the pieces. The second feature is their sheer diversity, since objects coexist there whose media, forms, materials, techniques of realization and ways of hanging relate to each other in ways that are far from being fixed in advance (paintings, sculptures, objects, installations, photographs, etc.).

Three words, become title

Oggetti in meno: the phrase is seductive. Perhaps this seduction comes from the particular type of contradiction observable between the noun 'object' (this *objectum*, this thing placed before me) and its potential and frustrating denial by the *in meno* ('subtracted'). Being enigmatic, it has given rise to a lot of questions and interpretations, some of which are very astute. While each piece in the group has itself a title, it is the generic title, the phrase *oggetti in meno*, that the critics were to be exclusively interested in. Attempts at interpretation were to bear on what, in relation to the content, the form and the genre, it appears to mean: how must the word 'object' be understood? What does this 'in meno' signify? To what do they refer, these 'objects'? To the *Specific Objects* of Donald Judd? To the object as it begins to be defined by the New Realists and the Pop artists? Remember that during the 60s the word 'object' is much in evidence. The Italians introduce it into what they call the *Tendenza oggettuale*, the objectual tendency, one specified not by the object's medium, but by its 'content', understood as a volumetric construction or even as a representation of common objects. What does it mean for Pistoletto?

In order to address what this word 'object' embraces, our first option is to concern ourselves with the exact circumstances of the appearance, not of the objects themselves, but of the phrase *oggetti in meno*. Never, we might add, have the conditions been analysed of the appearance of the phrase *oggetti in meno*, nor of its transformation into a *title*, into the generic title of works that seem, indeed, to escape any conventional generic relationship. There is nothing to indicate that, at the time of the earliest presentations of these pieces in the artist's studio, at the beginning of 1966, this title already existed. A close reading of the texts devoted to Pistoletto dating from this period proves it: none of the articles published in 1966 ever mentions it. In fact, the expression *oggetti in meno* appears in a text written by Pistoletto himself. In this text, and not as its title, contrary to what will be systematically repeated in bibliographies of the artist. This text appears in a catalog produced on the occasion of a one-man show at the La Bertesca Gallery (Genoa, December 1966-January 1967; a year, then, after the creation of the first objects). Let us add that this text does not discuss only the *Oggetti in meno*, far from it, and that we have to get to the last third of the text before the expression itself appears; the latter is encountered in the course of a sentence that gives an account of the attitude accompanying the realization of his most recent works: "I don't consider them as 'added objects' but as 'minus objects' (*oggetti in meno*)."¹ In this extract Pistoletto comments on his own

methodology; he is not explicitly titling a group of works. The nuance is far from being negligible. An important part of this text bears on the relationship between what the artist calls his “language” and the context within which the artist creates things, his *hic et nunc*:

“Once up-to-date, a language becomes out-of-date — if an artist perpetuates it, if, instead of being the creator of a language, he becomes its executant, and that with this language he absents himself from the present time. But there is no right moment to renew the language: it is always too late, if one accepts a general evolutionary structure. Artistic action must contain within it an individual dynamic system. My idea of actuality is contrary to the sense of opportunity. By this I mean that which makes an action, even an original and absolutely new one, satisfy the expectations of a society that craves the constant renewal of the artistic scene [...].”²

In these lines Pistoletto proposes, so as to repudiate it, a construction that sets two notions at its core: that of opportunity, a sort of perversion of the notion of actuality, and that of evolution. It must be emphasized here that according to Pistoletto society does not enjoin the artist to be ‘modern’, but ‘of the now’ [*actuel*]. The notion of modernity is based on a disjunction between past and present: a modern work abandons an inherited past, an unchosen tradition, in order to partake of the present that founds it. The notion of actuality itself overlooks this disjunction in order to situate itself in a concentrated and fleeting temporality that is assigned no term, but which nevertheless demands incessant renewal: to be actual means to be forever different and yet always the same, in that, in the guise of novelty, the actual precisely follows on from itself. Pistoletto’s conception of newness is opposed to the one Walter Benjamin credits Baudelaire with — yet it is to be understood within the identical framework of a reflection on the consequences of the capitalist process. While for Baudelaire newness becomes art’s latest bastion, the exigency of the new is, according to Pistoletto, but one of the forms of submission of the world of art and of artists to the world of merchandising, which only subsists by constantly renewing itself.

Pistoletto shares this view with many artists of his generation. Yet it would be imprecise to only relate this to the singular context of cultural contestation that, at the end of the sixties, is common to artistic and intellectual circles in Europe and the United States. If the problem of the subjugation of artistic practices to ‘actuality’ affects Pistoletto thus, it is also by dint of a profound modification of the characteristics of the Italian art scene. In Italy the year 1963 is judged to be a turning-point in that it variously marks the unanimous recognition of the exhaustion of the different practices designated by the term *Informale* (Informel).³ According to Giulio Carlo Argan, who in 1959 revives Michel Tapié’s already ancient definition, the Informel does not aspire to be an avant-garde movement but an art autre, “one indifferent to any schema inherited from the past and to any programmatic engagement *vis-à-vis* the future.”⁴ Curiously, the modernity of the Informel implies, then, a timelessness and a complete lack of debate with the society in which this art is practised. This flawless construction wrought by criticism, however, finds itself in difficulty at the beginning of the 60s, due to a completely different conception of the relationship between art and society: contrary to the recommended isolation of the one, the adequation of the two is insisted upon. Italian art magazines and galleries quickly give space to movements as varied as *Arte Programmata* (Programmed Art) and Pop Art — to cite only these —, movements that are nevertheless conjoined in that they make their link with the evolution of society and its techniques into something that essentially distinguishes them from the Informel. The relative stability of the art scene, instaurated by criticism through a defence of the Informel, is followed by a tremendous effervescence due to the huge increase in new movements. This is the moment that the reign begins of what Pistoletto calls “actuality”, the effects of which he describes thus:

“The individual who accepts this automatic structure of evolutionary inquiry risks binding himself to only one moment of actuality. Although he may wish his idea to gain strength, to give it weight and to disseminate it, he is constrained, in order to satisfy his desire to be identifiable and to conform

to the mystificatory tendency of society, to repeat himself and to leave the ensuing actuality to someone else. If a person does not integrate the dynamic idea of transformation into his own individual system and does not strictly forbid himself to repeat an action, he is inevitably led to live the dramatic moments that follow in seeing actuality pass into the hands of others. I myself have been able to observe the occurrence in actuality of many interesting artistic situations and, even if their historic quality remains, I cannot avoid thinking of the inevitable situation of anguish of the artist engaged for a time in actuality and who is henceforth excluded from it.”⁵

Pistoletto refuses all repetition and is addressing, with these words, the authorities — galleries and art critics, in the main — who recognize these artistic practices, show them and ensure their dissemination. Galleries and art critics urge the endless repetition of a discourse that, rapidly transforming the work into an ‘historic’ object, strengthens the exclusion of the artist and his practice from the historical debate. It can be seen that it is within the framework of this thinking that Pistoletto introduces a description of the methodology he is setting up with the *Oggetti in meno*:

“I want the result, instead of dramatizing it, to tranquilize my relationship to the outside world. The works I am making do not seek to be constructions or fabrications of new ideas, no more than they seek to be objects that represent me, and that I would impose or by which I would impose myself on others: through them I liberate myself of something — these are not constructions but liberations. I don’t consider them as added objects but as subtracted objects, in that they contain a definitively expressed perceptual experiment.”⁶

Pistoletto enjoys himself

It is this “tranquilization of (his) relationship to the outside world” that Pistoletto pursues at the end of 1965. The gallery system has its own exigencies? No problem, the artist uses his own studio to show his new works, thus strictly controlling the way in which they become known. Are we expecting him to define his work with a few easily identifiable tics, to tirelessly push the *Quadri specchianti*, those ‘mirroring paintings’ he was making earlier on and which show both a figure and the spectator reflected on the polished steel ground? He decides not to forgo this practice but to create things according to his lights, whence the great diversity of these ‘Minus Objects’.

Yet this diversity shouldn’t fool us: to be sure, Pistoletto is having fun, experimenting with materials, techniques and processes, allowing himself enormous latitude as to forms, objects, the images used or produced, but in a more controlled way that is generally thought. It will be observed, for example, that nothing refers to an aesthetic or to sources associable with consumer society. Added to which, it is possible to discern several broad groupings within these thirty or so hastily created objects. One, for instance, would be constituted by a variation of the problem of the painting, as the artist poses it at the time: *Pozzo*, *Mobile*, *Teletorte*, and others besides, would be belong here. Through its broken stretchers *Pozzo* (Well) mimes the abandonment, dramatic as well as ironic, of the picture and of painting at the bottom of a well; while *Teletorte* (meaning ‘distorted canvases’) considers the painting as the outcome of an operation of deformation (the fine cotton-duck canvases are distorted, due to their warping under the effect of the drying of a pliable and tacky mélange of pigments spread on insufficiently strong supports); *Mobile*, on the other hand, converts the picture into a table, thus proposing a kind of stable, or a modest piece of furniture, as its title suggests...

These are only some examples: each piece making up *Oggetti in meno* as a whole can be described thus, and can be referred back, more often than not, to the preoccupations that were exercising not only Pistoletto but many other artists at the time. As well as the issue of redefining the ‘picture’ and ‘painting’, the broadening of the notion of ‘sculpture’ also interests him: the pieces *Letto* (Bed) and *Bagno* (Bath), to cite only these, are utilized for this, given the twin expedients of technique and procedure, plus their singular relationship to domestic furniture. This relationship

to furniture suggests a further one, the relationship to the body: hence *Casa a misura d'uomo*, which presents this paradox: here is a 'man-sized house', which is what it is; and which, being so, is not at all. *Casa a misura d'uomo* is, in effect, the aggrandizement, to the precise measurements of the artist who conceived it, of a reduced model, of a little house for a child. The play here is on what we understand by 'human size', 'human dimension' or 'human scale'. At the same time *Casa a misura d'uomo* is the actualization, playful to be sure, of a problem addressed by the generation of artists to which Pistoletto belongs: that of electing the dimensions of an object and its scale (think, among many others, of Jannis Kounellis or Robert Morris). The piece *Sarcofago* suggests a completely different kind of relationship to the human body. Made of wood and cement, this closed 'sarcophagus' clearly evokes a body, but a body absorbed, consumed, already absent: etymologically, a sarcophagus is a coffin initially carved out of a lime-based stone which has the property of consuming dead bodies at a very fast rate. Yet this sepulchral register is contradicted by facing the object with mica, which makes it gleam when exposed to light and keeps the observer's attention fixed on the object's surface. While the sarcophagus, understood as a commemorative object, always alludes, even though pure appearance, to its interiority, in the case of *Sarcofago* itself is all surface: "a festive sarcophagus," the artist will claim during one of our interviews.

The diversity of the *Oggetti in meno* allows Pistoletto to foreground other issues, such as that of the artist's presence, via the pieces themselves. *Vetrina* is a window display designed by Pistoletto in which, each evening at the beginning of 1966, he places his own work clothes. In the 1950s the artist's presence in his works was, for instance, largely analysed in terms of his gestures, a gesture being thought to allow something of his interiority to be grasped. All that remains here of this hotly debated issue is what clothed the artist during the actual circumstances of his work: an imprint, a second skin we could say, that displays the artist's stature, his corpulence, his size; facts which, in any event, make no appeal to his 'self' or to his intimacy. Note, too, that the *Oggetti in meno*, contrary to what has sometimes been said, do not break, far from it, with earlier pieces made by the artist, in particular with the "mirroring paintings". The designation of the spectator, clearly displayed in the "mirroring paintings", likewise appears to be one of the functions of the piece called *Struttura per parlare in piedi* (Structure For Talking Standing Up). While the artist relates its genesis as being that of an object suggested to him by the sight, during an opening, of the dirty marks made by the feet of visitors negligently propping themselves against the gallery walls, the piece will be repeatedly recorded by the camera of the photographer Paolo Bressano as a sort of *balcon* on which, immobile and silent, the spectators lean. This is indeed the experience this piece suggests, and which in its presence we instantly grasp: it invites us to lean on the upper bar, to put a foot on the lower bar and, comfortably installed, to observe the surrounding works and spectators. Here is how Pistoletto recounts its advent to Germano Celant: "We were chatting one evening in an art gallery during an opening; when the people left, I noticed that on the wall there were two dirty black lines; one at the height where folk put their hands, the other where they put their feet [...]. This gallery, in Paris, was dirty all over. I said to myself that people obviously need these two levels for supporting themselves on. I then constructed a sort of balcony with a bar at arm-height and another at foot-height. I called it *struttura per parlare in piedi*." A *specie di balconata*, says the artist, a kind of *balcony*, and not a *balustrade*, as the look of the object insinuates. Both words, however, clearly evoke, in relation to landscape and to painting, the idea of viewpoints, of 'points' of 'viewing'...⁷

When, on the other hand, we note that this photographic record is executed by Paolo Bressano in the reflection of a *Quadro Specchiante* (a Mirroring Painting), this designation, now *twin*, of the spectator — not the work's main intention, though one of its possible usages — becomes no less evident for all that. In this idea, not without irony or nonchalance, of 'wall-soiler', the spectator, rendered inoffensive on that score, finds himself designated in the reflection of the

Quadro specchiante as a functional onlooker, even when this style of balcony transforms him into an attentive observer.⁸

New formulations of 'painting' or sculpture, the relationship to the body, the artist's presence, the designation of the spectator: many issues, including these, are addressed by the *Oggetti in meno*. If it impossible to look at all of them here, let us now try and grasp what basically impels the creation of this group of works.

Minus objects, transient works

One year later, in December 1967, an exhibition opens at the Sperone Gallery in Turin about which Pistoletto expresses himself in a way that is not without recalling the emergence of the *Oggetti in meno*. In fact he elects to announce this 1967 exhibition with an invitation card that, while its form remains conventional, bears — in addition to the date, venue and other habitual information — the following declaration: "With this exhibition, I have liberated my studio, which is open to receive young people who wish to show their work, do things, meet each other."

"I have liberated my studio," says the artist. What are we to understand by this? Is it that the objects that filled it have been transferred to the Sperone Gallery? No: with the exception of the piece *Pietra miliare* (Milestone), the Sperone space remains practically empty throughout almost all the exhibition, and when on the last day Pistoletto installs other objects there, these are pieces that in no sense can have 'liberated' his studio since they have all been newly created, not only for, but during, the exhibition. Pistoletto's declaration touches on something else... In opening up his studio for the 'Minus Objects', Pistoletto was seeking not to make the work blend totally with the artefact, the created tangible object, but was seeking to extend the boundaries of the notion of a work: what is a work? What does it consist of? These questions, which subtend those of the definition of the artwork, are investigated further at the Sperone exhibition a year later, in the showing of a piece that, if we think of the function of a milestone, relates many spaces together; in this instance the closed space of the presentation of the object and the external space of the world.

To relate interior space and exterior space this way via the object is to already consider that the object alone cannot entirely contain what we call the work; that the latter, to put it another way, can exceed the physical limitations of an object in different ways. During the presentation of the *Oggetti in meno*, the piece *Lampada a mercurio* (Mercury Lamp) addressed this problem in its own way. Set up at the entrance to his studio, this lamp caught the spectator in the strangeness of its pencil of colored beams.⁹ A particular instant was marked by the artist thereby: that of the spectator's crossing the threshold of the exhibition. We can understand this work as a way of defining the conditions necessary to the visualizing of his works by the spectator: the latter is clearly shown a way in; he is therefore encouraged to adapt his behavior, his attention, to a specific situation. It would be possible, then, to analyse many of the 'Minus Objects' as, on the one hand, a way of redefining the limits of the work, and on the other, as a way of rethinking the aesthetic relationship as a whole: where the visualization of the work by the spectator takes place, under what conditions, by means of what kinds of objects, in what relationship to the artist, etc.

The 'liberation' the artist refers to in 1967 in the invitation card of the Sperone Gallery therefore appears to be a development of what he had previously instaurated with the *Oggetti in meno*. It has to be said that in 1966 the artist was already speaking of 'liberation'. "Through them," the artist claimed, "I liberate myself (*io mi libero*) of something — these are not constructions, but liberations (*liberazioni*). I don't consider them as added objects but as subtracted objects."¹⁰ In our opinion the '*in meno*' of the '*Oggetti*' has indeed to do, then, with the object — the material object, the artefact —, and we understand this as the artist's wish to establish a relationship to the work that does not take the object to be its exclusive and dominant pole. And this is what Pistoletto's December 1967 invitation also suggests: what his studio is 'opened

up' to extends, in fact, way beyond the exhibition of artefacts alone, even if they are created by people other than him. After having been the exhibition space for the *Oggetti in meno*, Pistoletto's studio becomes, all through 1968, a sort of polyvalent space where one can hear music or poetry, encounter artists' works, see films: so many facilities that, depending on neither painting nor sculpture in the strict sense, share something of that 'dematerialization' on which Pistoletto's practice also relies.

Could it be that Pistoletto subsequently abandons the production of objects in order to devote himself to other kinds of practice? Far from it: the nature of his attitude is to be complex, to refuse to abandon one practice for another, to mix together all: when in 1968 the artist sets up, on the model of the Living Theater, his own group, this does not come about to the detriment of creating exhibitable works. We could say that the artist questions himself about the different forms of existence that, according to him, the work can adopt. Within this perspective, the *Oggetti in meno*, transient works, will have played their part to the full.

1. Michelangelo Pistoletto. *Michelangelo Pistoletto*. Genoa: Galleria de Bertesca, 1966, p. 15.
2. Ibidem.
3. For an in-depth study on the subject of the Informel, covering a whole range of practices, see Hubert Damisch. "L'Informel", in *Fenêtre jaune cadmium ou les dessous de la peinture*. Paris: Seuil, 1984.
4. Giulio Carlo Argan. "Materia, tecnica e storia dell'Informale", in *Biennale*, 1959, p. 3.
5. Michelangelo Pistoletto. Op. cit. Pistoletto's words must be set against those of Daniel Buren, who in 1973 wrote: "The art dealer raises to the 'historic' rank what he was showing the day before as being avant-garde. And, where art is concerned, what is historic is worth more. On top of that, becoming historic opens the way to a new *clientèle*. Dealers in the avant-garde, collectors of the avant-garde, avant-garde artists all know this. But it mustn't be spoken of, that would be bad taste." And also: "The ones from the day before who can't be 'raised' to the historic rank are destined to disappear." See "Fonction de l'exposition", (1973), in *Les Écrits (1965-1990)*. Bordeaux: capcMusée d'art contemporain, 1991, tome 1: 1965-1976, p. 330 and p. 332 (texts collected and presented by J.M. Poinot).
6. Michelangelo Pistoletto. Op. cit.
7. *Michelangelo Pistoletto*. Florence: Forte di Belvedere, 1984, p. 52.
8. On one of the photographs taken by Paolo Bressano for the catalogue of the La Bertesca Gallery (1966) one of the reflecting pictures in which *Struttura per parlare in piedi* is reflected is titled, in fact, *Uomo e ragazza alla balconata* (Man and girl at the balcony).
9. "I set the lamp at head-height, in such a way that, passing beneath it, a person could be seen, even from outside, as a presence momentarily bathed in light," the artist explains in 1971 to Germano Celant, in Michelangelo Pistoletto. *Michelangelo Pistoletto*. Florence, 1994, p. 52.
10. Michelangelo Pistoletto. Ibidem.

ON THIS SIDE OF THE MIRROR

Juan Antonio Ramírez

Entering the picture (from slightly above)

There are many wonderful moments in Lewis Carroll's Alice novels, but perhaps none more intense (despite the naturalness with which everything happens) than the famous passage in which the girl discovers that she can pass through the mirror:

"'Let's pretend' – the girl says to her kitten – 'the glass has got all soft like gauze, so that we can get through. Why, it's turning into a sort of mist now, I declare! It'll be easy enough to get through.' She was up on the chimney-piece while she said this, though she hardly knew how she had got there. And certainly the glass was beginning to melt away, just like a bright silvery mist.

In another moment Alice was through the glass, and had jumped lightly down into the mirror room. The very first thing she did was to look whether there was a fire in the fireplace, and she was quite pleased that there was a real one, blazing away as brightly as the one she had left behind."

What follows, as we all know, is the description of a symmetrical, albeit reversed, world filled with fascinating new things, like the fact that "the pictures on the wall next the fire seemed to be all alive, and the very clock on the chimney-piece (you know you can only see the back of it in the mirror) had got the face of a little old man, and grinned at her."¹ This is very strange, since in principle nobody would expect that on the other side of the mirror there might be more life than in 'reality', to the extent that inert pictorial representations can take on movement. Is this masterpiece of literary *nonsense* a direct precedent, then, of what Pistoletto has been doing? Ought we to consider Alice's adventure a source of inspiration for the Italian artist's many specular works? The question has meaning, given his many statements about how the spectator *enters the picture* via his own reflection, rendering the distinction irrelevant between the fictitiousness of the static image (elaborated at some previous moment) and the real nature of the instantaneous reflection. A short text by the artist, dating from 1962, gives us a curious variation on this attitude, evoking what appears to be the traditional behavior of the painter who is creating his self-portrait:

*"On the one hand the canvas, on the other the mirror, in the middle me. One eye directed towards the canvas, the other towards the mirror. By intensely fixing on the two objects, they are gradually superimposed. My reflected image is transferred to the canvas, although remaining in the mirror, and the canvas is transferred to the mirror, being changed along with it into a single entity."*²

At the time of writing that the experience of his first reflective works, painted on canvas in a more or less conventional way, was still fresh in his mind. Pistoletto's career began, in fact, with two images of the artist himself, both from 1960: *Autoritratto oro* (Gold Self-portrait) and *Autoritratto argento* (Silver Self-portrait). What they share is the pose of the standing figure, hands in his pockets, his facial features blurred, with a slight movement towards the area where the spectator is. It is apparent in the visual treatment of the figures that Pistoletto was an admirer of Francis Bacon, with his vigorous, sumptuous brushwork and his figures isolated inside imaginary boxes, like odd spatial cages. I wish to point to this genealogy with the past because it's possible that an echo had reached Pistoletto, via Bacon, of Velázquez (of whom we will speak later), the traditional artist with whom Pistoletto and his play of mirrors appears to have most affinity. Going back to the self-portraits: in both cases the shiny background intensified the light, converting the canvas into a territory populated by all kinds of reflections. The direction Pistoletto would take soon after was already implicit, although I don't want to overlook a couple

of things that commentators on the artist seem to have missed: I'm referring to the framing and to the grounds made of precious metal.

As to the first, it seems surprising that the feet are cut off at the ankles, while there's a lot of space above the head; it's as if we found ourselves before a fleeting image, a negation of the basic principles of composition specific to academic painting, principles that call for a certain 'stability' in the figures or framings similar to those codified in the shots of classical cinema. Yet those Pistoletto figures didn't, I repeat, appear in medium shots, or even in the so-called 'American shot' that cuts the body off at the waist. This ploy of suppressing the end of the lower limbs of, in this instance, life-size standing figures that appear as doubles of the author, immediately raises the question of where they are ideally situated and what kind of spatial metaphors such pictures construct.

They are not, of course, windows, because if they were they wouldn't be standing on the ground. Pistoletto has been consistently aware of this, and when asked if his mirrors were a modern version of the window visualized in the Renaissance by Leo Battista Alberti replied, "No, they're a door". After bitterly criticizing the defective hanging of some of his works in certain exhibitions, where they've been wrongly hung at mid-height, as if they were windows, he has stated that "when painting the human figure I'm at natural height; I remain, in fact, with my feet on the ground. This change may appear small but it's fundamental, since all painting from the Renaissance on is no more than the act of looking through the window... [but] when the picture conceived as a window is an image of the body, it can no longer be a window from which one launches oneself into the void: it becomes a door that one may pass through."³

This would explain the positioning of the figures in many of Pistoletto's pictures: *Uomo di schiena-Il presente* (Man From the Back-The Present; 1961), self-portraits like the one from 1962 that shows him crouching, the *Attesa* series (Wait series; from c. 1973), *L'uomo che pensa* (Thinking Man; 1962-1993), *Cane* (Dog; 1965), *Due donne nude che ballano (da una foto di Muybridge)* (Two Naked Women Who Are Dancing [based on a Muybridge photo]; 1964), *Due ragazzi nudi-Von Gloeden (da una foto di Von Gloeden)* (Two Naked Boys-Von Gloeden [based on a Van Gloeden photo]; 1978), and including the *Sacra conversazione* (Sacred conversation, 1973), in which we see three major figures of Arte Povera – Anselmo, Zorio and Penone – deep in conversation: in these and other examples, then, the idea is seemingly being affirmed that the window of classical perspective has been supplanted by the door. But let's look more closely: no real door would show us the feet of a figure standing in the middle of it as absent or cut off, in the way we see them here, unless there were, the other side of the door jamb, a kind of lower step, in which case we'd have the impression of such a figure being situated a bit below us; the opposite, in fact, of the higher level in which things appear to be situated according to the Renaissance metaphor of the spatial window. The implications of this modest ploy are more important than it appears: Pistoletto situates the spectator, as reflected, higher than the static image affixed to the reflecting surface; this isn't a dialog 'between equals', then, but a falsely equitable conversation in which the spectator is granted a subtle superiority over the images (painted or photographed) previously set out by the artist. Life over art. Or life as art (the reflected) as a transcending of art as art.

Correcting the fiction (the mirror and the photograph)

With their uniform metal background, the two self-portraits from 1960 involved a negation of the spatial depth specific to Renaissance painting. It's as if the artist were returning to the Byzantine tradition of icons, or to Italian medieval art before Giotto. The next year Pistoletto painted his: *Uomo di schiena*, subtitled, significantly, *Il presente*. This was a large canvas, two meters high, in which a figure similar to the one in the two self-portraits mentioned above appeared from behind, as if this were another view of the same person, yet now become a spectator, his body completely hiding the image hypothetically painted on the canvas he is

looking at. The background here was completely black, and Pistoletto discovered that the thick coat of varnish he'd applied turned the work into a kind of mirror in which the image of any person who stood in front of it was reflected. The initial pictorial strategy was enriched in an unexpected way: the figure painted from the back could be hiding, with his body, an image of himself whose outline he coincided with, and which he would be looking at face to face; we as spectators repeat his gesture (we are in front of the picture) and see our own image reflected in the glistening, unfathomable blackness of the canvas.

Let's compare the latter with Velázquez's *Las meninas*, taking as correct Palomina's interpretation of the figures in the scene. The painter (and all the other people who are with him) looks at the king and queen, situated more or less in the place where we, the spectators, are, and it is they who are presumably being represented in the picture on which he is working; the image of the monarchs is reflected in the mirror in the background, and this is the way that Velázquez, in an extremely indirect manner, formulates the portrait of the majestic couple.⁴ I've already pointed out elsewhere that this is a wonderful way of extolling the painting to the spectator: we, the voyeurs, have been installed in the monarchs' place; we are the king and queen.⁵ Yet the fact is that we aren't in the Velázquez canvas, since the image reflected in the painted mirror isn't of us; the representation is frozen for all time and we may only enter into the game proposed by the painter in an illusory way.

It isn't like this in Pistoletto's case: the spectator's position duplicates the painted figure's, of which it is something of a replica or an echo. Yet by being reflected in the varnish we form an effective part of the representation. What the man from the back sees (what we ourselves see) is our own image, vivid and evanescent. The picture has made itself evident. The creative emphasis as a whole has shifted from the realm of frozen imagery to that of an unforeseeable and changing reality. We spectators are not only the 'king and queen': we also determine, in functioning or existing right there, the content and rules of the representation. The game is ours, one might say. The complete awareness the artist has of all these implications is displayed in some of his writings, such as this fragment from February 1994: "As to my activity since 1960-1961, when I transformed the painting, namely the metaphorical mirror, into a true reflective surface, the images of my art have become objective and returned to life."⁶

We know, in fact, that Pistoletto immediately drew certain decisive conclusions from his *Uomo di schiena* and undertook, beginning in 1962, an extensive series of works on reflective surfaces (usually polished steel), often with photos screen-printed onto the metal. These works have been related to Pop Art, and although the artist has been somewhat reticent to admit such a link (above all in reference to the more widely-known North-American version of the movement), it appears that the desire for 'objectivity' or sharpness in the execution, common to both Pistoletto and the main representatives of Pop, is more than a mere coincidence.⁷ I am thinking of the chronological simultaneity, but also of the iconography: his self-portraits, and other works like *Giovane donna che disegna* (Young woman drawing; 1962-1975), *La fecondazione* (The fecondation; 1973-1975) or the personages in the *Attesa* series (1962-1973), remind us, while not being exactly the same, of G. Segal's figures. The Pop connection of *Le orecchie di Jasper Johns* (Jasper John's ears; 1965-1966) is, of course, much less debatable. And neither do certain *Oggetti in meno* (Minus Objects) – such as *Sfera di giornali* (The Sphere of Newspapers; 1966) – appear to be all that far from the European version of Pop, New Realism.

It is, however, in the recuperation of photography that the common desire for *objectivity* linking Pistoletto's work to the typical output of Pop gets its meaning. To many people the camera appeared, in the 60s, to be the perfect antidote to the exacerbated subjectivity of Abstract Expressionism, and there's little doubt that this medium provides the nearest thing possible to that 'identical double' of reality that, we believe, the mirror gives back to us. That's why Pistoletto would have obliquely admitted, as we've seen, a certain possibility of being assimilated to Pop Art. Not everything has been said, however, about the curious juxtaposition of photographic

and reflected images contained in his works. Photography is always a deferred representation: even a polaroid provides us with a dilated (or, as Duchamp would have said, a temporally 'delayed') version of the visual configuration that has existed in front of the lens. We see what there was in another moment and in another place. For that reason all photography involves a transference, a spatio-temporal grafting that strives to implant itself in the course of the spectator's real life, eluding the vigilance and possible rejection of his cultural antibodies. This isn't the case with the mirror, which always shows us what is located within its 'demarcation' of space at the actual moment the reflected entity enters *that same* territory. This is the domain of absolute instantaneousness without any transference of place. What is reflected is what is in front of the mirror, and the image disappears as soon as the entity causing it moves away. Mirrors show life itself, the framing of this being the only limit.

Yet there's something more. The mirror represents things in a bilaterally inverted manner; that's to say, left is right (or vice versa), which is why Lewis Carroll, among others, could play with the peculiar contradictions of a world 'in reverse'. For its part, photography is the outcome of a series of successive manipulations involving the effects of mirroring: the negative is produced as a consequence of the upside-down projection (double inversion) of the image of the external world on the rear plane of the camera, and is turned into a positive when, by inverting the image, the correct relation between representation and reality is restituted (right is right and nothing is upside-down). Stick that on the mirror, as Pistoletto has done, and see what's there: our reflection; namely, our instantaneous reality, but in reverse, coexists with a *non*-inverted spatio-temporal transposition.

We find ourselves, then, before two complementary levels of fiction. Put another way: the presence of photography in the mirror wouldn't have the mission of configuring pictures in which certain variable elements (the reflections) coexist with other permanent ones, so much as that of correcting, by means of its bilateral veracity, the particular 'inverting' artifice of the specular medium. Pistoletto does not seem to have been aware of this, but in his works photography gains the movement and instantaneity of the reflected image, while the mirror images seem to acquire the bilateral correction specific to the photographic positive. As in a biological symbiosis, both species of images benefit from their respective vampirization. The work thereby acquires its own life, a kind of perfection which is not found in the complex real life of the spectators, considered in its totality, and largely alien to the field delimited ('framed', we could say) by the edges of the mirror, or even in the mere photographic image, the inert corpse of a reality that no longer exists in the here and now. That's the miracle of the artist: to intensify life on the terrain of art and, like some new Doctor Frankenstein, to create fresh life and real movement with body parts that have ceased to palpitate.

Windows and doors (the texture of the reflection)

Let's take a look at the texture of his works, at the physical consistency and the space in which Pistoletto's creations unfold. The canvases of his first pictures with specular implications were substituted, as we've said, by other supports such as burnished steel and glass. This wasn't a casual development, nor was the choice of the materials employed in each case lacking in repercussions. Here's a significant declaration: "The mirror isn't a wall, it's always in the future, all that is to happen tomorrow is already in it."⁸ The allusion to the wall is related to what we've already said about the dialectic between the window and the door: the mid-height aperture appears as an exclusively optical interruption in the inert wall surface; the window-picture serves for looking through, unlike the door which one can (or must) pass through. "And [man], remaining forever at the center," Pistoletto has said, "has created the perspectives, viewpoints and vanishing points of the world at eye-level, approximately one meter seventy above the earth's crust, and has created the high and the low in relation to that point."⁹ All painting from the Renaissance onwards, then, has revolved around different ways of understanding the rigid surface of the wall and the visual aperture of the window.

The fresco of the Italian artists of the Renaissance could be considered the quintessence of an ideal mix of the mural structure (which the work of the artist physically forms part of) and the illusory aperture (optical empty space) suggested by pictorial fiction. Another key instance of that kind of mix grew out of certain experiments deriving from Cubism: around 1909-1910 Picasso and Braque fragmented the image into a mass of irregular planes, muted in tone, as if the hypothetical glass of the Albertian window were splitting up and refracting (or 'reflecting') dispersed bits of a visual configuration that could only be reconstructed as a totality by the organizing mind of the spectator. A little later Delaunay's *windows* revealed this tacit identification between the illusory pane of glass covering the aperture in the wall and the realm of representation. The Cubist still lifes before a window that Juan Gris specialized in could also be situated in this line (a well-known example is the 1915 still life looking onto the Place Ravignan, conserved in the Philadelphia Museum).

Is Marcel Duchamp's *Grand Verre* (Large Glass) an authentic materialization of the metaphor of the window giving onto an infinite illusory depth that Renaissance theorists related painting in perspective to? Its transparency, size, collocation at a particular height, the importance perspective has for all the ingredients of the lower half, and the fact that its creator placed the work in front of a large window in the Philadelphia Museum would suggest we respond in the affirmative. Having said that, *La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even) is looked at from in front and from behind, and viewers of it are integrated into it in two complementary ways: given the transparency of the glass they form part of the work for the people who are opposite them, but on their own behalf, too, on account of the reflections from their own side. This ambivalence or multiplicity in the ways of integrating spectator and work already foreshadows the concepts of the Italian artist.

Oriented towards the impossible, a number of experiments in the subsequent history of art are deviations or explorations of this same theme. Pistoletto himself has mentioned the cases of Pollock and Yves Klein. It's paradoxical that the first of these artists needs the resistance of the floor to create canvases that are later hung on the wall like classic windows. Yet this way of lifting the floor surface onto the wall is, we may assume, another form of the 'illusionism' that puts us in mind of the enormous importance of the tiled floor depicted on Renaissance perspectival wall paintings. As to Yves Klein, Pistoletto has wisely observed: "The drama was that he was seeking something behind space, he was dissatisfied and didn't want to stop at the sublimation of the background wall of perspective, he wanted to pass to the other side. What is Yves Klein's famous 'leap into the void'? It's a leap through the window because one cannot hurl oneself through a door."¹⁰

And here we get back to one of the great innovations put forward by Pistoletto: the suppression of the window and of its essential corollary, optical illusionism. In his own words: "I caused this man and the whole picture to descend to floor level, and as a consequence I converted the space surrounding him into a reflecting surface: the picture, which was a window, became a door. A door opening onto the visual objectivity of things in the world."¹¹ Such an elimination of the window, however, did not inexorably involve the suppression of the wall. On the contrary, Pistoletto has found new ways of valorizing the latter, as can be seen, for example, in his plexiglass pieces, transparent works through which one sees (and that affirm) the wall they are leaning against. Many of the schemes from *Cento mostre nel mese di ottobre* (One Hundred Exhibitions in the Month of October) also have the wall as their main feature or basic attribute, beginning with the first of these: "At ten centimeters distance from the wall construct a false wall with a window opening onto the real wall. From the front, a real window opens onto the false wall, outwardly constructed at a distance of ten centimeters from the true wall: the room moves ten centimeters away." And consider (and in order not to make this interminable we will end with this example) number five: "A transfer onto canvas of part of the plaster surface or color lifted from a gallery wall. Hang this canvas on another gallery wall. A transfer of the

plaster surface or color lifted from the wall of a second gallery, facing the previous canvas, and hang this other canvas facing the wall from which the plaster surface or color has been lifted in the first gallery.”¹²

The previous proposals also bear witness to Pistoletto's abiding preoccupation with texture. As was bound to happen, the artist has reflected on different kinds of reflection in relation to where they are produced. The crystal mirror presents the image on the other side of the plate glass, beyond its own thickness, in such a way that there is an intermediary region that pertains to neither real nor reflected space, a kind of optical *infra-slim* (to use the Duchampian term,¹³) separating two extremely well-defined domains: reality and its reflection. For that reason Pistoletto has used glass mirrors in various works that allude to the nature of abstract thinking, or to eternity, as happens in *I tavoli del giudizio* (The Tables of the Law; 1979), whose two symmetrical mirrors refer, with *lucidity*, to what, within the divine order, reflects our human reality.

Using glass mirrors Pistoletto has contrived two other superb works, and it's worth pointing out that both exclude the possibility of a human reflection. *Raggieri di specchi* (Mirror corona; 1973) is a kind of eight-pointed star, each point of which has been made with two square mirrors whose reflecting faces touch each other; yet in one of the angles the mirrors are facing outwards and their successive reflections reproduce, in a luminous 'positive', the star we read as dark and opaque with the facing section of the other mirrors. We should note that the Italian word *raggiere* is used for the star of the monstrance, and also for the aureola or nimbus of sanctity. I would argue that we are faced with a development (almost a variation) of what is perhaps Pistoletto's best-known work, *Metrocubo d'infinito* (A Cubic Meter of Infinity; 1966). Paraphrasing another Duchamp term, we might speak, not of "canned chance" (a term he used for the box that held his readymade Three Standard Stoppages), but of "canned infinity" when referring to that one-meter cube constructed from six mirrors with their reflective surfaces facing inwards: we can't see it, but we *grasp* the infinite nature of their reciprocal reflections in the interior darkness. It goes without saying that this cubic blackness appears as the authentic development, the supreme culmination, of the *Black Square on a White Ground* created in 1915 by Kasimir Malevich.

Observe that these two highly metaphysical Pistoletto creations obviate our existential presence, we are not reflected in them, and they only require us to be spectators of their outer wrapping or as co-participant intellectual agencies of the scheme. What may come to pass is definitively on the other side of their crystalline mirrors. On the other hand, Pistoletto's truly 'participatory' works constructed of polished metal do not produce their reflection on the other side, as would occur if they were made of glass, but on the very surface; in a sense the support is one with the specular representation. There's no distance between the (eventually photographic) silk-screened fixed images and the mobile, changing ones in the reflection. The outcome is obvious: what we see and what happens forms part of our lives, it isn't in the beyond, in another, symmetrical world, pure and inaccessible. This place and this time is all that counts; Pistoletto's burnished metal mirrors are on this, our side.

Let's pause here and say something about the *wells* (from around 1966), circular mirrors that must be placed on the ground, defining a space that belongs to neither the imaginary realm of the window or to that of the door. Some are simple glass circles without a delimiting frame, but others are at the bottom of glass-fiber vats resting on the floor, which makes it possible for us to lean over them by holding on to a kind of parapet. These are *abysses*, rather, elementary devices for producing vertigo. Let's remember that the saga of Alice began with her falling down a rabbit-hole so deep that the girl had time to imagine the possibility of passing through the earth and arriving at the antipodes.¹⁴

Pistoletto didn't start from scratch when conceiving these works: we know that our eye is spherical and that the famous pyramid of vision in perspective is, in fact, a cone (the elimination of the circular segments at the edges is a result of their projection onto an imaginary square

window); this is the reason, in effect, that there are so many tondi in Italian Renaissance painting; magic lanterns, so popular in the 19th century, also projected round images; the camera lens is circular, and so would the images exposed on the dark rear surface be if it weren't for the elimination of their edges in a way not unlike the Renaissance window. Is it necessary, furthermore, to recall that Cubism's initial stressing of the crystalline went hand in hand with an unwonted preference for oval formats?

It could be argued, then, that the discovery of the wells was inevitable for someone like Pistoletto, a person who has reflected deeply on perspective and on its historical overcoming. Where representation is concerned it's important to observe that, once the slight feeling of initial vertigo is overcome, one arrives, as Alice sensed during her fall, at the miracle of the opposite side: our worldly image appears projected on the sky. And thus it is that Pistoletto removes us from the earth's crust and has us live in an 'angelical' realm. Once again, it's our life, the one he looks out from, the one that has importance and the one that's exalted.

It's also fitting to read *Venere degli stracci* (The Rag Venus) as a three-dimensional metaphor of his mirror works. As Jorge Molder has said: "Our nature, like the reflected image, is temporal, akin to the veils placed around the eternal figure conventionally seen as the ideal of beauty."¹⁵ This sculptural nude who, given her perfection, we would situate in some remote beyond, is nevertheless found on *this* side, and is faced with an excess of formless veils that appear to function in physical space as if they were the reflection of our own flimsy, evanescent reality. It could be said that Pistoletto has repeated, on an effective physical scale, the compositional format of his first self-portraits, albeit with one important difference: the threshold of the door has been crossed and we didn't encounter the physical obstacle, *vis-à-vis* the *voyeur*, that Duchamp introduced in his *Étant donnés*; representational artifice has given way to the actual materiality of things; the reflection has gone on to be a concrete arrangement in our real ambit.

Life (literally)

Life is characterized by its unstoppable tendency towards excess, by its proteiform multiplicity. In that sense it is different from art, which is often excessively subject to the constraints imposed by language, be it personal or that of a school, and to the normalizing pressures arising from commerce and from cultural institutions. How can a system accustomed to recognizing each artist for his or her specific mode of expression assimilate a Pistoletto? Do visual works like *Venere degli stracci* and the *Metrocubo d'infinito* possess the same visual 'style'?

The second of these, moreover, forms part of the *Oggetti in meno* series, a heterogeneous group of works unconnected with each other. No functional, formal or thematic pretext links these creations, conceived by Pistoletto as one-off products that "are born of an immediate stimulating of the intellect."¹⁶ If we adopt a formalist rule of thumb or look for similarities with the typical works of recognized trends within contemporary art, we may encounter among the *Oggetti in meno* things close to Pop, minimalist constructions, photographs, conceptual schemes and, of course, the inevitable links with *arte povera*. Such heterogeneity is seemingly the consequence of a desire to avoid an impoverishing pigeonholing (or pigeonholing). "A preestablished direction," Pistoletto has said, "is contrary to human freedom; to preestablish means to limit the future, means that the future will not be free, and to abide by a preestablished idea means to be reflected in the past and to be deprived of free will. The univocality of language requires one to abide by a preestablished existence."¹⁷ This is why this artist has insisted so strongly on taking the parallel path; on not making forward steps, but sideways ones. Put simply: "Stepping to one side upsets the linear system. I need to permanently create new spaces in order to get my thinking going, make it move forward."¹⁸

The coherence of Pistoletto's overall work is located, then, beyond form. His *Oggetti in meno* are intended as discharges of plastic energy in a paradoxical operation which seems like the subtle parodying of that supposed 'liberation' of tormented subjectivity by which the artistic gestures

of Abstract Expressionism were justified. “A thing ‘less’,” Pistoletto has said, “means that I don’t have to make it again; it isn’t essential to go on doing that, it’s finished, done with... When I make a thing, that thing has essentially grown out of my own need. It’s a subtraction within the sum total of needs, it’s one need less.”¹⁹ The *Oggetti in meno* do not occupy a position within a series, since they cannot be explained within the sequence of their creator’s differing states of mind, nor do they participate, strategically, in the development of hypothetical plastic researches. For that reason they’re untemporal elements that refuse to enter into the linear, mummifying discourse of the history of art. Their vocation is to remain in the eternal present that they impose by their very materiality. Here and now, one more time.

After all that’s been said above it’s logical to end by recognizing the importance that action, theater and teaching have in Pistoletto’s overall artistic thinking. This doesn’t mean him accepting those genres or processes in their customary sense: “I am not appealing here to theatrical specificity, but to that quality peculiar to theater, which is to present itself within the artistic context as an active link with life.”²⁰ This would be his way of preventing the objectualization typical of the visual arts from reorienting the sources of transformation in the direction of immobility. But neither does Pistoletto accept the assimilation of his work to other recent non-objectual practices: “The word performance is improper when applied to me, since my work doesn’t depend on individual expression but on notions of encounter, of dialog with other creative actors, in places that are not specific to the concerns of art. I’m not going to create a theatrical work in the strict sense, but to set up an intervention that’s somewhere between an exhibition and an action.”²¹

An essential part of his *artistic* activity has been, then, his work with the street theater group Lo Zoo. We must also mention his important theoretical work: Pistoletto’s texts and declarations display a penetrating and coherent intelligence. His extraordinary fecundity in this area (and the possibility of detecting contradictions or delirious shifts in certain ideas) puts us in mind of what we call *theorrhea*, one of the peculiar passions – almost an infirmity – of many contemporary creators. Is this a form of cultural terrorism for Pistoletto? Let’s not forget that justifying, re-explaining, writing and discoursing endlessly about what one does is something typical of pedagogues and social reformers. It seems logical, then, that Pistoletto’s last few years should have been largely given over to the *Progetto Arte*, from whose ‘manifesto’ there proceeds an exhortation as significant as this one: “It’s time for the artist to take on the responsibility of putting all other human activities in contact with each other, from economy to politics, from science to religion, from education to behavior, in short all instances of the social fabric.”²² Among other things, this explains the need to “rediscover the ancient connection between art and power,” that of establishing “a spiritual link between the past and the future,” and that of “cherishing differences.”²³

The program of the project proceeds from the theater, taking this to be a public space within a city context, a practice in which many experiments in creativity and in living are brought together. The static and formless installation (as was *Venere degli stracci*) acquires movement. The reflection is now reality itself. Doesn’t Alice find at the end of the book that her passage through the mirror has only been a dream? For Pistoletto the *Progetto Arte* could be a kind of final affirmation, or a mere variation, of his stubborn and constant desire to play, here and now, with the transcendental aspect of art, without ceasing to invite us to our own realization as human beings on this side of the mirror.

1. “Through the Mirror”, in *The Complete Illustrated Works of Lewis Carroll*. London: Chancellor Press, 1982, pp. 127-128.

2. In *Michelangelo Pistoletto. Un artista in meno*. Florence: Hopeful Monster, 1989, p. 9.

3. Cfr. Michelangelo Pistoletto. “La phénoménologie du reflet”. An interview with Giovanni Lista. *Ligeia. Dossiers sur l’art*, n. 25-28, October 1998 - June 1999, pp. 131-132.

4. For different readings and interpretations of Velázquez’s famous painting see the compilation of essays edited by Fernando

Marías. *Otras meninas*. Madrid: Ediciones Siruela, 1995.

5. Cf. Juan Antonio Ramírez. "La arquitectura como paisaje. El espacio perspectívico y la posición del espectador", in *Los paisajes del Prado*. Madrid: Ed. Nerea, 1993, pp. 204-205.

6. Cf. Pistoletto. "Responsabilité de l'art", in *Mots*. Clermont-Ferrand: Centres d'art contemporain de Thiers et de Vassivière, Musée de Rochechouard, 1994.

7. "So let's set American Pop Art and my work alongside each other, - Pistoletto suggests - I say American because there's a sharpness (the cleanness is in the execution, the sharpness in the end result) in American Pop Art in the same way that there's a sharpness in my work... But I wasn't in the Pop line, for all that." In Giovanni Lista. "La phénoménologie du reflet". Op. cit., p. 132.

8. In "Michelangelo Pistoletto, effets de miroir. Interview par Maiten Bouisset", *Art Press*, n. 189, March 1994, p. 35.

9. Pistoletto. *Le ultime parole famose*. Turin: Tipolito Piana, 1967, n. p.10. "La phénoménologie du reflet". Op. cit., p. 132.

11. Pistoletto. "Livre", in *Mots*. Op. cit., p. 152.

12. Cf. "Cento mostre nel mese di ottobre", in *Michelangelo Pistoletto. Un artista in meno*. Op. cit., p. 191.

13. For a discussion of the word *inframince* [infra-slim], cf. Ramírez. *Duchamp. El amor y la muerte, incluso*. Madrid: Ediciones Siruela, 1993, p. 193.

14. Cf. *The Complete Illustrated Works of Lewis Carroll*. Op. cit., p. 18.

15. Jorge Molder. "Duplex", in *Michelangelo Pistoletto e la fotografia*. Oporto: Fundação de Serralves, 1993, p. 46.

16. Pistoletto. *Le ultime parole famose*. Op. cit., n. p.

17. *Ibidem*, n. p.

18. Interview with Maiten Bouisset. Op. cit., p. 35.

19. "La phénoménologie du reflet". Op. cit., p. 138.

20. Pistoletto. "Lettre ouverte", in *Mots*. Op. cit., p. 145.

21. Interview with Maiten Bouisset. Op. cit., p. 37.

22. Pistoletto. "Progetto Arte", in *Michelangelo Pistoletto. Le porte di Palazzo Fabroni*. Milan: Ed. Charta, 1995, pp. 114-115.

23. *Ibidem*, pp. 116, 117.

HARDER THAN DREAMING: AN IMAGINARY DIALOGUE WITH MICHELANGELO PISTOLETTO

Michael Tarantino

I. What You See is What You Get

“I am interested in the passage between objects more than in the objects themselves.”

“I am interested in the perceptive faculty, in the sensitisation of the individual.”

“Objects, the state of things, human movements accepted in their conventional appearance, do not contribute in any way to the profound stimulus of man, the full use of his cerebral capacities.”¹

II. Mirror Man 1

X was walking across a room, a huge white room, with industrial furnishings which gave its origin away as dating from the 1930's. It had been impeccably restored (or maintained) and was sparsely decorated: two brown leather chairs, a glass table with some books piled in the centre and a television. The latter was sitting on the floor, in a corner of the room, its remote control device leaning against the front of the screen. The walls were empty, save for a mirror with an ornate gold frame which hung between the two chairs. Behind the chairs stood a glass wall, which gave on to another room, a gallery in which a number of paintings and photographs could be seen.

On the way to the television to pick up the remote, he passed by the mirror, seeing, out of the corner of his eye, an out-of-focus shape whiz past. He grabbed the remote and went back to one of the chairs, this time avoiding looking into the mirror. He clicked on the TV. Orson Welles' *The Lady From Shanghai* was on.

III. Shifting Perspectives

“We are talking about a work in the new dimension, the dimension of time: we may be deceived by space, but not by time; time makes us change, we realize that every moment is different, every move makes perspectives change, a physical transformation takes place in time, etc. So there is a difference. To me, the dimension of time is fundamental in contemporary art.”²

Shifting gears in an automobile is a function of speed. As we drift between first and third gears in the city, accelerate to fourth and fifth on the highway, our “shifting” is a measure of the limits of that vehicle in that space at that time. And, of course, it is progressively structured. We cannot go from first to fourth gear in one movement. We must build to it.

To shift perspectives, to shift a point of view involves the same progressive movements, in this case both mental and physical. Whether it is a matter of our head turning 180 degrees or our suddenly realizing that another interpretation (of a work of art, of a person, of a political situation, etc.) is possible, these shifts make us conscious of time, of time moving, of time that refuses to stand still, of time that makes the past less solid than it may have seemed (when it was the present).

IV. Dreaming is Easy

“We have a dream and that's all right, but then if we liked the dream a lot, we've been charmed by it and try to make it come true, that's when the real work begins and the trouble starts, to make a dream come true is hard work, it's much harder than dreaming.”³

In order to animate an object, we need to dream it, to elevate it beyond its inert status. This is what Pistoletto has done with his *Oggetti in meno* (Minus Objects). Wood, rags, cardboard, paint, mirror, glass, clothing, steam, etc. All of these elements are put into play, are given a form that activates them, that engages the spectator, that celebrates their negativity in a positive way. Dreaming is easy. Describing the dream the next morning is much more difficult.

“Writing is good for accomplishing all those things that for some reason can’t be accomplished... It’s good for fixing thought, an active or creative need (there is no light without something for it to fall on or to put it another way light suffers if there is no place for it to fall and make itself manifest). The dream was of a book, at least the part I’m able to remember... I broke it off because I had direct dealings with the waiter who brought me bread and salami...”⁴

In fact, writing is not good for accomplishing what can’t be done by other means. It’s a diversion. It’s not good for fixing thought. It’s good for dispersing it, for breaking it up, for multiplying it. Like the sound of a tree falling in a forest two thousand miles away, we only recognise what is manifest. We can do that through language, through writing, but we can’t fix it. We can only approximate. For me, either I “saw” or “heard” the tree fall or it never happened.

V. Mirror Man 2

X didn’t want to look in the mirror because he didn’t like the way he looked. Neither did he like how his face was physically reflected (no, that wasn’t his real face, it was distorted) nor did he like the kind of glance he gave. He always looked distrustful, caught off guard, as if he were trying to surprise the mirror into a positive reflection, into the reflection that he knew was accurate. But, of course, he did look into the mirror, after all. To ignore it, to assume that one was ignoring it, would have been disingenuous.

VI. The Artist and the Madman

“When a person realises he has two lives — an abstract one for his mind and a concrete one, also for his mind — he ends up either as a madman, who, out of fear, hides one of his lives and plays the other as a role, or as an artist, who has no fear and who is willing to risk both lives.”⁵ Whether he is describing the madman or the artist, Pistoletto has drawn a portrait of the person who acknowledges the other in him/herself. We are talking about the ability/the misfortune of being able to slide between the use of the first and third person singular. I am the other. The distinction between madman and artist doesn’t really hold. Who is to say that the madman has no fear or the artist is fearless? Is the madman not risking both lives and is the artist not taking comfort in the security of his/her role, i.e. society tolerates, even encourages, the “mad” artist. Unlike his “public”, the artist is seen as a figure who never hesitates to look into the mirror.

When a person realises he has two lives — an abstract one for his mind and a concrete one, also for his mind — he ends up either as an artist who, out of fear, hides one of his lives and plays the other as a role, or as a madman, who has no fear and who is willing to risk both lives.

VII. An Objective Mobility

“In 1965-1966, I was known for my *Quadri specchianti* (Mirroring paintings). The *Oggetti in meno* came about as a consequence of the *quadri specchianti*.”

“The *quadri specchianti* are the perpetual dynamic of the image.”

“When I eliminated, emptied and removed painting, and the static figure that in the past had defined space, the bare surface of the mirror remained (in which I used to stare, seeking myself, to do my self-portrait.) On this bare surface every possible image appeared, each in its objective mobility.”⁶

A few years ago, in Dublin, Michelangelo Pistoletto was asked to give a talk on his work organised by a local sculpture society. After agreeing, he asked, “But why is a sculpture society asking

me to talk about my work. I'm a painter." And, of course, he still is, even if he no longer works with the traditional materials associated with that medium. A series of self-portraits lead to another series, painted on reflective surfaces, such as gold and silver. In the last work, the artist/subject has his back turned to the viewer, towards the mirrored surface in front of him. From here, it is as if Pistoletto steps into the mirror (and out of painting). The interest/obsession with light and surface will remain, but the canvasses will be replaced by the mirror. Looking at the mirror as a device to assist in the formation of a painting (a self-portrait), the artist is the subject and the mirror is an object. Moving beyond painting, the mirror itself is freed (to reflect the world) and so is the artist. He can get up from his chair and move away from his canvas. An objective mobility.

VIII. Time and Difference

"Well, in 1965-1966 I created a series of pieces which I called *Oggetti in meno* which reflected a fundamental concept of difference (which I had developed on the basis of the *Quadri specchianti* which date from the very early Sixties).

Every *Oggetti in meno* is different from the previous and subsequent ones, because it is conceived as a separate work, unique and autonomous in time. The main feature of this aggregate of works is the difference. Time determines the contingency of every object, defining it in the exclusive present in which it is created, rescuing and removing it from the totalizing, standardizing mass."⁷

Three canvases that are so warped that their bottom edges lift away from the wall; a photo of Jasper Johns in which the middle has been cut out to leave only his ears visible and slivers of the sides of his head; eight mirrors assembled into a cube and tied with rope; a sphere made of crumpled newspapers; a "man-sized" house, painted yellow and black. These are some of Pistoletto's *Oggetti in meno*, each, as he says, as different from the previous one as can be imagined. And yet, we see them under the totalizing category of *Oggetti in meno*. While the use of the term "minus objects" certainly may refer to the materials used in constructing these works, it also has a reverse effect on the spectator. It assembles these disparate works together and asks us "why?". We are expected to make the connections between works, all the while respecting their difference. The more we subtract the obvious interpretations, the closer we are to starting at zero.

"The *Oggetti in meno* triggered an overturning of thought at a time when the concept of art represented a unitary formula. An artist expressed himself through a unifying concept of his work, in a self-referential manner, furthermore excluding, in most cases, any interaction with others."⁸

IX. Mirror Man 3

X wasn't watching the television. The Welles film continued to unfold towards the inevitable climax in the house of mirrors, where the entire narrative would be flipped around. He knew that and waited for it. It was a pity that the film was being broadcast and he didn't have the tape to fast forward. So he looked at the white walls, at the blank space. He listened to the sounds of the film echoing in the room. He grew restless. He stood up and looked in the mirror. The film, looked at in this way, seemed an integral part of the room. The mirror functioned as a kind of projector, putting all of the elements within its view into motion. The paintings and photographs in the next room seemed static by comparison. The movement let loose by the mirror was dizzying. He sat down again.

X. To Be Able to See Forward and Backward at the Same Time

"This basic dichotomy is the *Quadri specchianti*. Everything in front of us, that is, inside the mirroring surface (the self-same idea of progress, advancement) is rediscovered thanks to a

perspective that directs the glance backwards, because that which I face in the mirror is really behind my back. The mirror is therefore the end of objectivity. As objectivity comes to an end, a mirror gives rise to virtuality..."

"I do not create any personal impression when I make a mirror painting; on the contrary, I develop a phenomenological structure in which all opposites are united. I create a place for something which is proposed, which is automatically created beyond my position; thus my work is the other, which speaks to me."⁹

To see everything at once has always been a dream. Dziga Vertov had it and thought that the cinema could realize it. His *Man With a Movie Camera* (1928) was an attempt to realize shifting and multiple perspectives within the confines of a movie screen. Cézanne and, eventually, Braque and Picasso, had the same dream. to totalize and to fracture landscape and portraiture simultaneously. And Pistoletto seems to have had it as well, in his use of the mirror to dynamize our point of view, to make us conscious of what we can and cannot see. In so doing, he manages to speak to us from both the first and third person, conscious of his position as an artist and as a figure in a changing landscape.

"I have also conceived a work entitled *I am the other* as I believe that just the fact of saying I am the other creates the condition of the ego facing its responsibility. I am not just myself, I am the other, this is a reality on which to reflect and work."¹⁰

XI. When the Lights Come Up

"After all the atmosphere that's created in a movie theatre, usually a real out-of-the-way one, when a film breaks and the theatre is suddenly filled with bright light, is kind of exciting. The shouts of protest and immediately afterwards a dense conversation based on wisecracks and giggles, maybe because there's not enough time to start a more serious discussion."¹¹

They were watching *Citizen Kane*, newly remastered for the end of the millennium, back in the cinemas again. It was extraordinary. However, just as the camera started to swoop over all of Charles Foster Kane's possessions, the climactic shot of the film which would end in revealing the secret of "rosebud", the image froze. It then started to burn out from the centre of the frame. This time it was real, not like Ingmar Bergman had done in *Persona* (1966). He had wanted to take the viewer out of the narrative, even before it started. With *Citizen Kane* we were firmly ensconced and didn't want to leave. The shock of the film burning and the lights coming up were just too much. Everyone looked at the people surrounding them as if they were monsters. For the last hour and forty five minutes, everyone in the theatre was alone, enjoying their personalised relationship with the image. Now reality broke in with a vengeance. Many arguments and fights broke out. By the time the film was repaired and the lights went down, not a soul was left.

XII. In the Realm of the Senses

"I'm not writing for tired, lazy people, without a future, without desires, without ambitions. I'm not writing for them. Writing is not doing a good deed. It's not music for the deaf. I'm writing for people in good health, strong, sanguine people. I'm writing for Parma hams, I'm writing for sausage and sauerkraut. I'm writing Russian salad and spaghetti and tomato sauce in the same dish. I'm writing for the Italian well-to-do, labourers or peasants who love hot sauce with their boiled meat.

These lines smell of garlic a mile away. they smell of *grappa*."¹²

There is a film by Georges Franju called *Eyes Without a Face* (1960). What a title! Just the thought of a pair of eyes, floating through space, without being tied down by sockets and their position in the configuration of a face. But what did they see? No longer restricted by the human frame, they must have been mobile like the lightest of cameras. Looking up, looking down, turning around. All of these movements in the wink of an eye (sic). The ultimate freedom

of seeing. Free not only in the sense of what and how to see, but also in the sense that the eyes are not betrayed by the face into revealing what they think of what they see. All that is seen is equal. The entire world is “reduced” to the visual. The grotesque and the beautiful are the same. The possibilities are endless. Except for lunch, followed by grappa.

XIII. Infinite Space

“The work should not be understood as representation but as ‘being’. because representation refers to something else while every ‘minus object’ is itself and nothing else. So too the concept of things on things is absorbed into the intimate and integral existence of the work. Moving on from one work to the next implies change. ‘Change’ makes clear the dimension of ‘time’ since every moment is different from the next. Everything is continually dying and being reborn. “There is neither pessimism nor optimism in all this. The observer who walks among the works moves through different moments — he is part of space become time.”¹³

Michelangelo Pistoletto’s *Metrocubo d’infinito* (A Cubic Meter of Infinity; 1966) is both more and less than its title implies. It is composed of six mirrors, forming four sides, a top and a bottom, attached with string. The latter forms an X on each of the four sides. The viewer recognises the materials as mirrors through those parts that extend above the top and beyond the sides. We take the artist on faith that the empty space inside the structure amounts to one cubic metre. But why “of infinity”. Because that metre is multiplied indefinitely by the very walls that try to enclose it. Inside this cube space is becoming time. Inside the cube one finds the artist, the viewer and the madman, with plenty of space for everyone.

1. *A minus artist/Michelangelo Pistoletto*. Florence: Hopeful Monster, 1988.
2. Pistoletto. Conference on "Alterity" held in Biella on July 17, 1999.
3. *A minus artist/Michelangelo Pistoletto*. Op. cit.
4. *A minus artist/Michelangelo Pistoletto*. Op. cit.
5. *A minus artist/Michelangelo Pistoletto*. Op. cit.6. Pistoletto. *Threshold*. Oslo: National Museum of Contemporary Art, 1991.
7. Pistoletto. Biella conference.
8. Pistoletto. Biella conference.
9. Pistoletto. Biella conference.
10. Pistoletto. Biella conference.
11. *A minus artist/Michelangelo Pistoletto*. Op. cit.
12. *A minus artist/Michelangelo Pistoletto*. Op. cit.
13. Pistoletto. *Threshold*. Op. cit.