

Reflections on Art, Poverty and Time: An Interview with Michelangelo Pistoletto

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Take a sphere, about waist-height, and today's newspapers. Stick the newspapers to the sphere until the entire surface is covered. Then take a walk in a public place, rolling the sphere as you go.

In 1966 and 1967, Michelangelo Pistoletto did this in the streets of Turin, calling the work *Mappamondo*, and it is typical of both his output and of Arte Povera as a whole. The work is made from readily available, mundane materials. It is always up-to-the-minute. It has a tinge of humour which leavens a serious point, here about the news as a public plaything and endlessly rolling spectacle. It can be shown in the gallery (a much-enlarged version of *Mappamondo* was seen at the Venice Biennale of 1976) but is not confined to it.

Given its name by the art critic Germano Celant, Arte Povera emerged in Italy as a loose, geographically scattered group of artists in the mid 1960s, following the North's very rapid industrialisation. The effects of such drastic changes were registered with great subtlety and poignancy in Calvino's 'Marcovaldo' stories in which the often luckless hero wanders an alien industrial city in a forlorn search for the comforts of nature and comradeship (despite the annihilating environment of the city, he finds them occasionally in unlikely places).

Arte Povera flourished in the late 1960s, as Italy was energised by the radical movements that swept so many nations at that time. The increasing activism of workers and students confronted the alliance of the technocratic state and big business, with its murderous neo-colonial adventures. Using old cans and bits of metal Pino Pascali made remarkably accurate full-scale renditions of modern weapons that acted as clear symbols of the link between the global exercise of military might and mass consumerism. He wrote 'What I do is the opposite of technology as inquiry, the opposite of logic and science.' At a time when insurgent armies had won power in Cuba and were successfully battling the world's most powerful military power in Vietnam, Celant wrote of Arte Povera as guerrilla warfare.

The Pistoletto Foundation in the old industrial town of Biella has a feeling of calm retreat. The Alps can be seen clearly from its upper floors, and a mountain stream flows swiftly at the back of its buildings. Once a textile factory, its large rooms are now given over to exhibition and discussion spaces, and a lecture theatre. Here in his 'Cittadellarte', Pistoletto assembles his programme which is designed to bring the arts into productive synthesis with academic disciplines and business. Art should be no less than 'the sponsor of thought', he says. It is a grand ambition, at odds with the guerrilla tactics of the past, though Pistoletto still espouses them. Yet its intention, to humanise technology, administration and business with culture, has a continuity with elements of Arte Povera.

If Arte Povera, after a period of appearing antique, has recently come to look contemporary, it is because this tendency stood on the brink of postmodernism, its

avant-garde bravura sitting strangely alongside its relativism and its 'poverty'. With the beginnings of a revival of political radicalism (after long hibernation in the West) and of a strangely modernistic technological romanticism associated with computing, an art that combines fragments of modernism and postmodernism, that (like Pistoletto's mirror paintings) looks backwards and forwards at once, suddenly steps forward once again into relevance.

Let's talk first about the word 'poverty'.

You were saying earlier that contemporary Italian art is not much taught on university art history courses in England. Perhaps there is still a division between powerful and less powerful countries in Europe – and England is among the more powerful because of the power of the English language. Italy was on the losing side in the War, and it's from that period that many of our problems originate. For fifty years Italy existed in a very difficult situation because the Americans invaded with the help of the Mafia. It is very well known that the Mafia helped the Americans to enter Sicily, and they were allied with another power in Italy, the Vatican. On the other side we had Communism, and many Communists wanted to follow the Soviet model. The conflict between these two forces did not allow Italian culture to make calm, strong progress. Consequently we artists found our situation quite difficult, and in that way we felt very poor.

The period of the late 1950s and early 1960s was a time of extraordinary transformation for Italy, in terms of building its industrial strength, particularly in the North. In Britain at the same time, faced with the same task of reconstruction, there was much romantic, anti-industrial, back-to-nature art, alongside some future-oriented, technological art but there was nothing that quite had the attitude towards industry of Arte Povera.

There were two different types of development. The first was something that was barely connected with Italy. That kind of power was centralised in America. It was a system of production and consumption that was strongly defined in the United States and was imposed upon the rest of the world, so that we couldn't really say that this was our territory. The second was the tradition of survival in Italian industry, having survived the crises of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. We always had a double economy, urban and rural, so the people could survive by working on the land in moments of crisis, and industrial production was cheaper as a result. Also Fiat, for example, was able to give work in Turin to many who came from the South, an internal immigration which stopped the previous external emigration. Before the War, many people would go to France and Germany for work. Poverty was so severe that people used to have to emigrate, and since industry improved things a little, there was no real aggression against it.

But this development allowed us to recognise there was an essential problem that was not solely Italian but international. Arte Povera was closely connected with Italy, even small places and the countryside, but it was local and international at the same time because we saw that a large part of the world existed in poverty, just as it does today. This identification with poverty is still very important. This is why I say poverty is an enormous thing. It is not just a little corner, it is (in both senses) in the capital. There is an enormous capital of poverty that is much greater than the capital of richness in humanity.

In this way, I accept the work of Arte Povera, but I don't think that it is only related to the idea of poverty. It is also about not representing: not being representative of a system, not being representative of any religious, political or social power or system. To present the simple material of life and to show how this material reacts in itself. In my mirror paintings, for example, I don't produce any effect, any sign or any form that is personal, or is a personal affirmation. There is no affirmation in the mirror paintings, they are just phenomenological works in which time shows itself. All Arte Povera follows that principle: to allow the chemical and physical reactions of nature show themselves.

So, in one way, to make work like that is to take a stand: to say that this work is not associated with either of the two polarities in Italian politics and culture which you were talking about, neither the Communist side nor the Vatican-Mafia side. Was the concentration on raw matter also a reaction to the way in which everyday life was becoming increasingly affected by the mass media?

For me, when I started work in the 1950s, the media were not the problem. I was confronted with a precise formal and phenomenological situation: it was really the last moment of the Renaissance perspective. The Renaissance perspective is a point on the wall where everything connects. For me, Piero della Francesca's *Flagellation* was the realisation and the completion of the project that was science, technology and the modern world. What could the artist do at that point? Could the artist make a new perspective or not? That was the problem of the 1950s.

Following Mondrian, action painting was a way to consider the wall on which the painting hangs as the final perspective point. Action painting was the last gesture that left the distance from wall to canvas as the last remnant of perspective – the last few centimetres. Fontana was trying to find one more centimetre behind that final wall. Yves Klein was making the monochromes which were a sublimation of the end. So that was my problem. For me it was necessary after these individualistic solutions – the gesture, the cut, the sublimation of the end—to find something that was more objective. So my mirror paintings traced photographs onto very shiny, polished metal. At that point my work was accepted enthusiastically by the Americans because Pop Art appeared at the same time. I was very well accepted in the States by the art world, collectors and so on. I became associated with Pop Art.

But the big difference between most Pop Art—by Warhol, say, or Richard Hamilton—and yours is that while your work is about the presence of reality, theirs is much more to do with representations in the mass media.

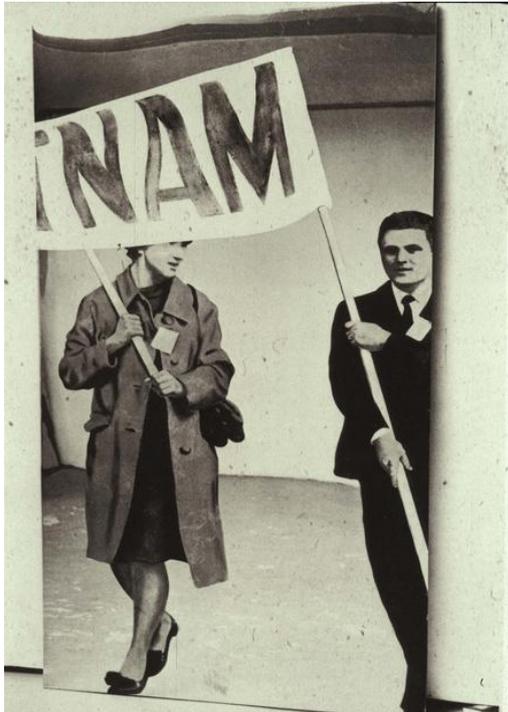
Yes, when I recognised that the goal of Pop art was to ponder the American consumer system, I felt it was not my concern, and I took some distance from it. My solution of

mirror painting was not confined to one limited social system. Of course, it was recognisable within that system but it was related to a universal objectivity, not just a partial objectivity. For me it was also the answer to the spiritual search, and the search for perspective, for art and life in a total, not specific way. I used the high-tech material of stainless steel but it is intended as a mirror, as water, as glass. It is not intended to register industrial production. The concept of polished metal is, after all, antique: mirrors did not begin as glass but as polished metal. I had to find images that would work with the objective reflection of the mirror. I began to realise that only photography could work at the level of the mirror. So automatically there was no choice – I didn't want to make anything with my own hand – I couldn't paint anymore because the way I painted could have been understood as my imposition, my decision. So it was not the emphatic nature of photography that attracted me – you know, 'photography wow!'— it was simply the necessary tool to use.

Your first mirror painting was called *The Present*. So much of the mirror paintings seem to be about time, especially the use of the photographs which are a memory of something past juxtaposed with the present. One of the curiosities for me about Arte Povera, as well as these works of yours, is the fixation on the present: the worry that somehow artists could –as Germano Celant says – 'remove themselves from the present'. Again, there's a contrast with Pop Art in which the present is oppressively inescapable. For you, though, to slip out of the present was a danger you had to be constantly guarding against.

With the mirror paintings you cannot escape the present. I think they are the point of connection between memory and the future. In the mirror painting you know you are there, you see yourself there, you know that tomorrow somebody else could also be present there. It is not only the present of today, but the present of the future, so you know that someone who does not exist today will be born one day and be reflected in the mirror painting. There is a memory of the future inside the mirror, and memory from the past, everything meeting in the present in each moment of time. It's the present as a phenomenon of existence, and also the acceptance of life as it is. It offers a 360 degree perspective – looking at the past, at the future, up and down and round yourself,

knowing that you are, in a very relativistic way, the centre. Not the absolute centre, but the centre of yourself. I have worked with images of the universe, inventing a way to show that each point of the universe is the centre. Each human being, each particle of the world is the centre. So Arte Povera is always pushing this concept of the present and the centre, away from where we usually look for it: in the Vatican of culture, the Vatican of religion, the Vatican of the economy.



One mirror painting called *Vietnam* made in 1965 seems to make a much more specific point, placing the viewer's reflection alongside anti-war demonstrators.

That was a very strong problem in the world. Today we have other Vietnams going on everywhere. It is not finished. I wanted to show this political situation was relative to a dimension of the mind that we should think about, coming out of mirror painting. The Vietnam painting is an immediate memory, like

a day-old newspaper. In other wars today, Vietnam is still present. In mirror painting, memory is always confronted with something much bigger—the phenomenology of the universe and life—so it becomes very, very small, is reduced to a fact, one miserable fact of time and space.

You've talked about these opposing polarities and ways of negotiating between them. One of the extraordinary things that happened in Italy after the fall of Communism in the East was the explosion of its formerly polarised political system, especially over the whole issue of *tangentopoli*—institutionalised corruption. Was that a matter of some satisfaction to you, to see those polarities falling away?

No, because formerly there wasn't a real balance. The Left did have an influence in Italy by improving social structures and, of course, helping the workers. But the winners were the famous Vatican trio (which I spoke of before) who were really directing the situation. They were using the Communist system to make people scared, to reinforce their own position. Communism just gave more power to the trio so there was no way to change the system. It was not an enjoyable situation for art. In some way, artists were aware of that and we found a free space between these things. No public institution assisted us, and it's very strange that art still went on regardless, without depending on power. Depending only on private galleries and very sincere, very open collectors.

These were Italian collectors?

Yes, small Italian collectors. They provided the means for the artists to exist and work. There were very heroic gallery owners, for example Sperone, who allowed us to do things that were not going to make him any money. He was using the money from more saleable art to give space to Arte Povera. We also had collectors, especially in Turin, who were sustaining us. For a while, they created spaces called *deposito de arte presente*, and so we had 1000 square metres of space in which to show our work.

It was an unusual situation when you think about state support for the arts in other European countries.

There was no exchange with foreign art institutions: the contemporary work we saw from abroad was shown only in private galleries. But not officially. The system of power was really afraid of anything that would disturb the political structure.

And do you think it is easier for the artists now in Italy, following 1989, your *Anno Bianco*, since that system is no longer quite in place?

The problem is on what terms an Italian artist who has gained recognition and acceptance in Italy pursues success abroad. The myth of the market is American. I don't want to name names, but I know artists who have been successful in Italy, but to go

further they have had in a certain way to change their nationality. They accept the offer of another culture. I didn't accept that offer. Of course, I offer my culture to others, but I won't renounce my roots. I come from my roots, I come from the Byzantine icons, I don't come from the system of consumerism.



Aside from your ruminations on time, in some of your work there seems to be a more contentious, or mocking relationship with elements of the past, particularly Italy's classical tradition, in the way you contrast classical sculpture with rags, for instance, or overturn a sculpture on its pedestal, or have it face a mirror.

My work breaks with the modernist view of time which only looks straight into the future, along one line. Looking back is one of the messages of the mirror paintings and so, in this way, it is very different from American Pop Art which does not look back at all. The mirror paintings look back, and also show the present and the future. It's an indication of a possible pact. That's why, for example, in *Venus of Rags*, I used a cast of an antique statue, because the statue takes the place of the memory, just as photography

does in the mirror paintings. Of course, the statue stands for a much longer memory – photography only has a short memory.

So the statue stands in for the past as a whole, not as any specific comment on Italy's classical heritage?

No, no, it's memory, something that never changes. The photography on the mirror doesn't change, neither does Venus: it's something that is memory but at the same time the concept of the absolute. The rags are as changeable as reflections in mirrors – the daily death of fashion. Consumerism being consumed. So works like this are another way to make mirror paintings in three dimensions. Also you have two opposites: elegance juxtaposed with poverty.

Sometimes Arte Povera is talked about as if it had a relationship to Futurism, something that would fix you in the present and dispose of the past. You say this isn't so, but it seems to me in some of your work there is a feeling that architectural structures, for example, that persist through time bear down literally on the heads of people – that there are constructions we make which end up imprisoning us.

Yes, this theatre piece that I have made, called *Anno Uno—Anno Bianco*, uses a group of people from the Ligurian village of Corniglia – who are not actors, just villagers. They reconstruct the village in grand architectural forms that sit on their heads. They can't move because they have to keep the roof up, like the caryatids in antique buildings. The people are the city, they are the architecture, they are the society. But they speak, they sing. They still have a lot of freedom because they speak about history. With such works, including a group I created in the 1960s called *The Zoo*, you don't really know who is the viewer: is it the caged animal, the prisoner, or the people on the other side of the barricade, or yourself? There is always the *other*. The last show I did in Turin was called 'I am the Other'. I don't believe that I am alone and am king of the world. I am also the poor man before the king. So I have two responsibilities, not just one. I have two

perspectives, not just one. Not just going forwards but also going back. This is my vision – the multiplicity of perspectives, not just one fixed view.

In some ways, Arte Povera, particularly in its insistence that there are many voices, appears to anticipate postmodernism. But there's another strand to it – the phenomenological strand which you talked about earlier, the idea that (as Celant puts it) the sea is water, a room is a perimeter of air, and cotton is cotton. This concentration on materiality seems quite alien to a strong element of postmodernism which says that there is no getting behind representation – so the only sense in which cotton is cotton is to say that the word 'cotton' is 'cotton'. How close do you feel to the current productions of postmodern art in that sense?

First of all, the problem of angst – the pain of the existential problem that was so sharply felt in the 1950s is over. But what was also finished was the individualistic act, the subjective. There is a subjective element, of course – artists make their own propositions, but it does not represent their ego. There is no ego anymore in the art of today or in postmodernism. We're not living with the necessity of finding a new passage, but rather we live in a large dimension, a round space, where everything can emerge and exist. We have no direction anymore, which is why you can represent yet not be representative, not be beholden to some power.

Nevertheless, it's very difficult to escape being representative of power because we cannot but be involved in the economy of art, and that affects all art, even when it doesn't represent directly. This is another problem that Arte Povera examined, but could not solve just by making objects, because any objects can be taken as representative of a certain system.

How do you feel about the historicisation of Arte Povera? Perhaps there is an attempt in big museum shows, like the one coming up at Tate Modern, to celebrate but also to fix and deaden a moment of the past. Are you happy for your work to be seen in that way?

Yes I'm very happy. We are wise to realise there is not only one solution, one way to see things – there's always more than one, but we always have to be very critical. So I'm very happy and very critical at the same time.

It's something you do yourself – in the sense that you continually re-present the objects you make.

Re-present, yes, not represent: to re-show. I like to do that very much. It's my DNA, my memory, my identity. Showing in that fashion is a way of offering my hand to others. So this is very interesting and important for me. Also I haven't had a personal studio for over ten years, because my interests lie elsewhere. For me the studio means a system of production, and I am not only in that system of production.

Arte Povera is still presented as an object, as a prefabricated object. It is good to see what message this object bears at a certain historical moment. There is the possibility that Arte Povera will raise its market value as a result of such an exhibition. For me, it's good if I can sell my objects because it helps me develop something which is not imprisoned in the Arte Povera system – my Cittadellarte, the work I do in this laboratory of research. We examine the responsibilities and role of art today. We collaborate with a broad range of people, from philosophers to entrepreneurs. We make projects with young people – for instance, to design a city where we want to live, the world where we want to live, together. It's not something I can do alone anymore. So this is a way in which this poverty of imposing my own point of view is moving on in a different dynamic – and not just through objects.

This new activity comes out of your earlier 'Project Art'?

Yes, 'Project Art' was a kind of manifesto that I published in 1994, in which I say (to put it briefly) that it is time for artists to consider the necessity of creating a relation between many other fields, to create a new structure of which art is a part – a socially responsible part. There are so many indications today that responsible change is necessary. I think

that art can find an alternative to just being postmodern, and looking for more money and success.

What is striking about this is that you have a clear idea of the depth of the problems that contemporary society faces, and you talk, for instance, about the very damaging split between technology, science and the humanities...

I like science a lot. I think technology is extraordinary. What scares me is the way we use it. It is the economy that drives politics and uses science and technology. Yet it is possible to use technology and science in a completely different, truly civilised way.

It appears that the colonial time has finished but today there is a new, even worse and stronger colonial system that does not allow people to produce their own food, or lead their own lives. They have to pass through the technological use of the economy which is monopolistic, and as absolutist as any Communist or Nazi state. It is a Nazi power, this super-economy.

This was Theodor Adorno's nightmare – that the Nazis' vision had survived. Although they'd lost the war, some of the worst aspects of their methods – propaganda, mass politics as spectacle, the brutality with which they sacrificed people to power— had been adopted by the victors.

What doesn't exist today in the art that is accepted by the powerful is ethics – there is no ethic, only the aesthetic. Art cannot exist if there is not a perfect balance between both. So I think that art today is evaporating.

Which is what I was about to come to: your very striking vision of what art should be, and indeed it has a very strong ethical and didactic dimension. You have a very positive faith in art's ability to be able to mediate between the fragments of modern society and culture.

I don't know how much success such a programme will have, but you can't renounce responsibility. It doesn't matter if people say, 'oh, you lose because the world has not changed'. It doesn't matter: you have to always think that the world is changeable.

Some contemporary British artists, the so called "Young British Artists" have a particular relation to Arte Povera. There is a similar impulse to get back to reality, just to present things, and not be caught up so much in representation. But most of those artists have very little faith in the power of art to achieve any kind of transformation.

So they accept the idea that transformation is not something for art, it lies elsewhere. Industry, the economy, politics – they transform humanity yet art has no power of transformation, except over aesthetics. I worry that art is in a very, very limited position. It's almost ridiculous, and it makes me think it is an excuse for power, and nothing else. Even when you deny power, when you make something very aggressive, this is just what power has been waiting for: to say, 'You see? This is the freedom of art.'

But when you think you are *really* free, you are really responsible. Because if you accept that there is a system in which you are inescapably sunk as an artist, you are in the same position of the Nazis in the Nuremberg trials after the war, when they disclaimed responsibility: somebody else is responsible for my actions – I just do what Hitler decides – Hitler is free, not me. Who is free in this system? Is the artist free? That is my question. The Nuremberg trials for the art system is in myself – I am the judge of my own actions. I learnt freedom from modern art. I cannot renounce that now.

The point you made a minute ago was very powerful – that your freedom can serve as a pretext for the powers that be. How do you escape from that?

I am not so sure about the power of art itself. In alliance with other activities, operating in a wider dimension, then perhaps it can do something positive. Today an artist is freer if he works for television or in other businesses. I am interested in *systems* much more than in objects.

But you would still see one of the roles of art as breeding opposition to power.

My role, yes; for others it could be completely different. I think that art should believe in harmony, and harmony for me is always the balance between two opposite poles. If you just think about money, you forget the opposite of money and you go into a monstrous dimension. At the other extreme, if you think there is only fragmentation without any possibility of synthesis, this is another monster. Money, and no money are two opposites that have to fit together in some way.

Today the world is divided into thousands and thousands of individual cultures. If we have a confrontation today, it is between all these different cultures that ask for recognition, and the world market of the corporations that want everything to follow one system.

You made a work in 1980 called *The Tail of Arte Povera*.

I like to play with humour in my work sometimes, and it was a time when I thought that Arte Povera was finished, so I made a work that looked like the tail of a fish, yet the tail was becoming a head. So it's an ending, but with the possibility of resuscitation. I don't believe in static situations, even when you get a successful result.

When I say something, never accept it. Or believe it absolutely – because I say something but at the same time I react to what I am saying. I always put together black and white, negative and positive, critical and acquiescent. I always put these things together. That's why it is very difficult to find the place to wait for me. I am always somewhere else, always moving somewhere else. If you expect me to be somewhere, you will be deceived because you have to follow the diversity, the movement, the transformation. You have to follow all these things. If you move in this way, we move in the same way. If you are static and you wait for me, you suppose me to be somewhere outside contingency, then you will miss me.

Guerrilla tactics, then?

Guerrilla tactics. I also adhere to the theory of the stab in the side that is the same thing. It's the movement of *torrero*. The *torrero* is playing with the *torro*. The *torro* represents power that always goes straight ahead. It looks at something but it cannot look to the sides so the *torrero* is able to move away. He attracts the bull but he moves away – attracts the power and moves away. This is my tactic.

For the activities of the Citadellarte, see www.cittadellarte.it