
CURATORIAL TEXT

Michelangelo Pistoletto

Real Academia de España en Roma · 2023–2024



Michelangelo Pistoletto's art is an art of relation, participation and sharing, as well as a search for identity. It is an inquiry in constant evolution which, from the very beginning, has sought to overcome the separation between artwork and viewer, between art and life.

It was June 2023 when, on the occasion of an interview, I invited Michelangelo Pistoletto to the Real Academia de España en Roma. It was the first time he had visited the Academy, and the encounter was deeply moving for both of us. I remember that Pistoletto was particularly fascinated by Bramante's Tempietto and its history.

Bramante was commissioned by the Kings of Spain, in fulfilment of a vow, to build a small commemorative temple marking the martyrdom of Saint Peter who, according to tradition, was crucified upside down on the hill where the complex of the Spanish Academy now stands. Bramante chose the form of a circular temple, a symbol of divine perfection, surrounded by sixteen columns — sixteen being the number Vitruvius regarded as perfect. The building was intended to stand at the centre of an equally circular colonnaded courtyard, which was never constructed. Bramante drew on the tradition of small circular temples, known as sacella, which the Romans built to commemorate important figures and heroes: Peter was indeed regarded as a Christian hero, as the first pontiff and the founding stone of the Roman Church. According to tradition, the crypt of the Tempietto contains the hole in which Saint Peter's cross was placed.

The Renaissance and Humanism represent a fundamental historical moment for Italy and the world: rebirth after a "dark" period, humankind at the centre of the world and the universe, and faith in scientific progress, powerfully embodied by perspective. On closer examination, all these elements are also present in Michelangelo Pistoletto's artistic practice. With his Mirror Paintings, he overturns the Renaissance perspective based on progress, advancement and moving forward. The mirror becomes a doorway that breaks through the wall, including the viewer and the real dimension of time, opening and expanding perspective until it also becomes "retrospective": what we are able to do before us is

the responsibility of the past, because it reveals what lies behind us. A double direction of perspective thus emerges, one that in the second half of the twentieth century was also defined as postmodern.

Equally central is the concept of responsibility and the centrality of the individual, fully expressed in the so-called Formula of Creation, which becomes the expression of a third stage of humanity in which nature and artifice find a new equilibrium. This is not, however, merely a matter of theory: through the creation of Cittadellarte, Pistoletto demonstrates the fundamental passage from theory to practice.

All these elements and suggestions led Pistoletto to install Pozzo Specchio in the crypt of the Tempietto, inaugurated on 9 October 2023. First created in 1966, the work highlights both differences and continuities between the most celebrated Humanist architect and one of Italy's best-known contemporary artists. The work belongs to a series produced and exhibited by Pistoletto between late 1965 and early 1966 in his Turin studio. Known as the Oggetti in meno (Minus Objects), these works differ radically from one another and were presented almost as though they constituted a group exhibition, thereby breaking with the dogma that an artist's works should be stylistically recognisable, like a standardised commercial brand.

"It seems to me that, with my recent works, I have entered the mirror, actively entered that dimension of time which was represented in the mirror paintings. My recent works testify to the need to live and act according to this dimension, that is, according to the unrepeatability of every moment, every place and therefore every present situation (...). The works I make do not wish to be constructions or fabrications of new ideas, nor do they wish to be objects that represent me, to be imposed or through which I impose myself on others; rather, they are objects through which I free myself of something — they are not constructions but liberations — I do not consider them additional objects but minus objects, in the sense that they carry with them a perceptual experience that has been definitively externalised."

Michelangelo Pistoletto, Oggetti in meno

The installation, particularly evocative, thus reminds us of art's inclusive power, inviting us not to feel excluded from society, its culture, its art or its history, but to recognise ourselves as active participants in the process.

From the outset, Pistoletto has been a global ambassador for an artistic practice centred on participation and responsibility. We might think, for example, of the manifesto created for his participation in the 1968 Venice Biennale:

"With this manifesto I invite those who wish to collaborate with me at the XXXIV Venice Biennale [...] By collaboration I mean a relationship that is not competitive, but one of sensitive and perceptive understanding. Giving a part of myself to someone who wishes to give a part of themselves is the work that interests me."

Michelangelo Pistoletto, 1968

An art based on limiting the ego and on valuing and promoting the 'we'; on overturning the ideology of multiplication and division of capital into an ideology of sharing and multiplication: we multiply everything we share. Art thus ceases to be a beautiful object to collect and instead becomes a project capable of encouraging individuals to participate in change and responsible social transformation.

The relationship between Michelangelo Pistoletto and the Spanish Academy consequently grew closer as their mutual understanding developed. At the conclusion of the year marking the 150th anniversary of its foundation — which also coincided with the end of Spain's semester holding the Presidency of the European Union — the Real Academia de España, sharing the artist's values, chose to dedicate a section of its anniversary exhibition to Michelangelo Pistoletto.

Love Difference – Tavolo del Mediterraneo is a large mirrored table in the shape of the Mediterranean basin, surrounded by chairs, each originating from one of the countries bordering the sea. What these countries share is the sea itself, rendered as a mirror: around it, recognising the Mediterranean as an element of affinity and communion, different people from different cultures sit together to reach agreement and create a small inter-Mediterranean parliament. The work is the symbol of Love Difference – Movimento Artistico per una Politica InterMediterranea, presented in 2003 on the occasion of Pistoletto receiving the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the Venice Biennale.

“Love Difference is a name, a slogan, a programmatic announcement. The movement combines the universality of art with the idea of political transnationality and focuses its activity on the Mediterranean area because the problems of global society are reflected within it. On the one hand, differences between ethnic groups, religions and cultures are today the cause of terrible conflicts; on the other, there is a dramatic situation produced by the supremacy of powers that generate uniformity and the levelling of differences [...] A politics that leads us to ‘love differences’ is vital to the development of new perspectives throughout society.”

Michelangelo Pistoletto, Manifesto Love Difference, 2002, in Journal 7, Cittadellarte, Biella 2002, p.

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The final work in the exhibition is *Venere degli stracci* (Venus of the Rags). The first version consisted of a cement sculpture, polished with mica powder, based on Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen’s *Venus with Apple*, placed against a mountain of rags. Over time, numerous versions have followed and have been exhibited in museums around the world; the conceptual basis of the work, however, has remained unchanged.

It is a work founded on opposites, with a precise cathartic action: a white, immaculate Venus turns her back to the public and places her face into a heap of coloured rags that towers above her and almost contains her. The rags represent the “consumption of consumed consumerism”: they are waste, discarded matter, continuous degradation, chaos. Venus, by contrast, represents the equilibrium of proportions — an art that must not be self-referential but must face contemporary reality and society directly, regenerating those discarded materials which, by becoming a work of art, return to live a different life.

In July 2023, a large-scale version of the work was set on fire in Naples, once again demonstrating its relevance because, as Pistoletto himself stated, it “confronts us with a dramatic situation of our time. A time in which every proposal of beauty, peace and harmony continues to be answered with fire and war.”

Raffaele Quattrone