

Michelangelo Pistoletto

The Minus Objects

1966

In March 1962 at the Promotrice in Turin I exhibited my first mirror-painting, entitled *Il presente (The Present)*. The figure of a man seemed to come forward, as if alive, in the space of the gallery; but the true protagonist was the relationship of instantaneousness which was created between the spectator, his own reflection, and the painted figure, in an ever-present movement which concentrated the past and the future in itself to such an extent as to cause one to call their very existence into doubt: it was the dimension of time itself. I feel that in my recent works I have entered the mirror and actively penetrated that dimension of time which was merely represented in the mirror-paintings. These recent works bear witness to the need to live and act in accordance with this dimension, i.e. in the light of the unrepeatable quality of each instant of time, each place, and thus of each "present" action.

In the introduction I wrote for the exhibition of plexiglass works at Galleria Sperone in Turin in 1964, I spoke of my intention to bring the meaning of the mirror out into the inhabited space around it. The new dimension of the mirror-paintings is revealed by virtue of the simultaneous representation of the three traditional dimensions and of reality in movement, reproduced literally.

All the elements in the picture are of such a degree of reality that the result cannot be a mere hypothesis. The result is real. One has to seek out the point where the three dimensions, and stability and movement, converge it is to be found in the contour which marks the interface between the silhouettes and the mirror surface. This line is at once immobile, like the silhouette, and mobile, like the background: it is drawn on a planer surface which includes the silhouettes and the background, and is thus the real outline of the two-dimensional figures, given that the background is also tipped up onto a planer surface. The third dimension is revealed in this very line, through the sense of distance which we feel between ourselves, the silhouette, and our own reflected image: all is focused on this line, in fact.

The line, which is partly mobile and partly static, and which is not only one-dimensional but also two- and three-dimensional, is contemporaneity, and is represented in my picture.

What interests me today is the possibility of introducing myself physically into this line of convergence of the four dimensions - as if I could inhabit the space between the silhouette and the mirror background.

One must bear in mind that every piece is created by virtue of a movement: to put it another way, every distance is measurable in relation to the speed at which it is covered. In my mirror-paintings the dynamic reflection does not create a place, because it only reflects a place which already exists - the static silhouette does no more than re-propose an already existing place. But I can create a place by bringing about a passage between the photograph and the mirror: this place is whole time.

If the film frame could carry out another movement in addition to its interrupted gesture, there would be a new time between the two movements; but this does not come about, so the film frame represents a maximum of slowness. The reflection is simultaneous with the real image -there is no time between a body and its

reflection in a mirror: if the reflection occurred an instant before or after the presence of the body, it would be possible to measure the velocity of the image in becoming a reflection, but this does not happen. In the case of a mirror the image is so fast as to be body and reflection simultaneously, thus representing a maximum of speed.

In the distance-in-time between the film frame (minimum velocity) and the reflection (maximum velocity), all possible places and all possible times exist. But because the two extremes coincide in the picture, we perceive, simultaneously, the cancelling of all created places and times at the moment of their creation. Past and future simply do not come into this process.

All that remains of my action in any given moment are the materials and the language; but if I limit myself to repeating the same action in time, I do not succeed in realizing that meaning of a conclusive instant which is always new and always somehow upset, totally open and yet fixed, as in the action of the mirror-paintings; while their meaning suggests actions which are free to manifest themselves in any time and any space. Indeed, my works are not intended to occupy space of time: they begin and end their story in contingency. Just as no space is occupied by the relationship between the silhouette and the mirror (although the entirety of existing time is suggested) so each new work comes about as though it were inside the space between the paper of the film frame and the mirror of the previous pictures.

The artistic act must contain an individual dynamic system.

My idea of "actuality" is at the opposite pole from a mere sense of timing, by which in this context I mean an action (even an original, absolutely new action) which is intended to meet society's need for the continuous renewal of the artistic panorama, especially when such a need, otherwise perfectly legitimate, becomes as automatic as a bad habit. The individual who accepts this automatic mechanism of the social desire for evolution runs the risk of binding himself inextricably to a single moment in time. For whether he reinforces and builds consensus around his idea, or fulfils his desire to be recognizable (and at the same time society's desire to transform every-thing into a myth), he is forced to repeat himself and to leave topicality to others. If the individual does not encourage in his own system the dynamic side of the transformation and the non repeatability of each action, he will have to witness topicality working itself out in other hands than his. I have myself seen the actuality of a good number of interesting artistic situations pass, and even if they now have a residual historic value, I cannot help thinking of the grim position of those who at the time were fully involved in the current situation and are now excluded from topicality.

I do not feel able to subscribe to any pre-determined concept of topicality: in the best of cases, any such pre-determination dramatizes the present in the tension of breaking with the past and the hope of a fuller realization in the future. What I am interested in is situating my own action outside of time as conventionally defined.

It is of no importance to me whether or not a work of mine answers the current general need: what I strive for in each work is the expression of a real contingent perception: if my action is perpetually authentic, it will not need to be repeated, for its very accomplishment will have effectively exhausted the possibilities it contains.

The relationship with external, social topicality should however be implicit, in that it is the combination of the experience of my previous actions and those supplied by external awareness which determines each new perception. I should like the result to tranquillize rather than dramatize my relationship with the outside world.

My works are not constructions or fabrications of new ideas, any more than they are objects which represent me, intended to be imposed and to impose me on others. Rather, they are objects through whose agency I free myself from something - not constructions, then, but liberations. I do not consider them more but less, not pluses but minuses, in that they bring with them a sense of a perceptual experience which has been definitively manifested once and for all. According to my idea of time, one must learn how to free oneself from a position even while one is engaged in conquering it. It is perhaps more consistent with reality that others should change it - instead of evolving an opinion on me. I believe that if I act according to the dimension of time, it will be difficult for others to catch me in the exact spot where they are lying in wait.

My idea of evolution is also anti-evolutionary (like walking forward on a moving sidewalk that is going backward). Unlike the mirror-paintings, my new objects do not represent: they are. Each individual work is a single word in a discussion which could last a lifetime and which is also a language closed in upon itself. In this sense I tend to consider the duration of my life as a picture which is free for any place.

Every object, from the moment of its creation, can enter into and partake of the inertia of consumed energy without dragging me with it - provided I am already active in another place. The materials are chosen separately each time according to this or that particular perceptual need - for me all materials are suitable, and the idea of modern or less modern does not exist: an object which is extremely complicated from the point of view of materials and ideas can have a primary sense exactly as a very simple object which fulfils an elementary need, as it must be considered as an isolated self-contained unit. One element - such as the mirror in many of my recent works - can be kept constant in a number of objects, provided it is always linked to a diversity of situations, thus taking on a new meaning with each new combination. Other objects may even be determined by a purely practical consumer need, such as the *Structure for Chatting while Standing Up*, etc.

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