

Michelangelo Pistoletto

Year One

1981

Introduction

Year One is acted out by twenty inhabitants of Corniglia, a Ligurian village, and by a few members of my family. It's a moment of work that moves from the village square, where it is usually staged, to the stage of an official theater. So while it appears as a work complete in itself, it is also a fragment of an artistic experience that extends outside the canons of theatrical practice. It is part of a cooperation involving all kinds of people and integrating various expressive forms: visual art, theater, music, dance, etc. This activity, which began in 1967 when the group *The Zoo* took to the street, today includes the direct participation of groups of city dwellers and villagers.

The play can be considered a talking painting, a living sculpture, and at the same time it can be listened to like a composition in which the literary phrases glide along on a musical score.

It is the representation of a city where the people are the architecture. It is the civilization that immobilizes people under its heavy structures. It is the eternal city or "the eternal city" inside of which one hears time beat to the point of petrification.

The fixity and immobility of the mythical principles is covered by the steps that echo the march of history. The common people of today appear on the scene as at the goal of a march that ends before the mirror. The mirror that reflects, in the sudden light of a flash, that which stands at our shoulders, transforming us into statues of salt. But it is this very mirror that can dissolve a soul capable of turning around and "piercing with the glance the crust of a thousand-year-old nape".

YEAR ONE

A: We've come a long way, let's stop here. (1) This looks to me like a very good place. It might be the land we were looking for. Let's put down our things and rest. (2)

(From 1 to 2 everyone makes boiling noises with their mouths)

Tomorrow we'll have a look around and start to build our dwellings with stones. Now let's light fires to keep the wolves away. And let's place at the center of the field the torch that lighted our way and brought us this far. (3)

(From 2 to 3 everyone repeats three of the following names: Bale, Patapun, Baban, Siesa, Munkin, Ciccio, Magana, Papa, Mancin, Bagiun, Garibba, Fera, Mumella, Peci, Calan, Gagin, Manan, Magin, Curo, Cincella, Frisua, Balala, Lalottu. These names until the cry of an assassin is heard)

(sharp cry of an assassin)

(all cry in horror)

(loud shouting: "I didn't see anything... but where were you... come here... watch out..." etc.)

(some: "What happened, what happened?")

B: A man has been killed.

(the loud shouting continues excitedly)

C: Who killed him?

(the shouting continues)

D: I killed him. *(loudly)*

I killed my brother.

Chorus: Catch him! Tie him up, let him be put to death.

Death *(loud shouting)*

D: No, just a moment, let me speak.

All: Death, death, death!

E: Quiet, let him talk.

D: We followed him too long, trusting, on the difficult journey.

(All cover their faces with their hands, moving them slowly in tension)

You see now? This is the land he had promised us, it is nothing more than a desolate plain strewn with fruitless trees. Our dreams were much different, different also were the rewards we expected for our labors. Here is nothing of what had been promised.

Is this perhaps the wonderful land that awaited us?

I don't see here the swollen, generous breast of a marvelous mother, I don't see the shine of the precious metal that satisfies our eyes and our desires, nothing but fear and fatigue awaits us. Yes, I killed him.

Yes.

Only with death could he pay for his deceit.

(shouted: It's true, it's true...)

D: Alright, that's enough, no power will be given from now on to people like him. They gave us illusions. But I won't disillusion you. Let this gesture of mine be the symbol of true power, forever.

(soft shouting)

D: I'm now your leader. And I know I can count on all of those in whose veins anger and hate have lurked

(moaning of a person)

On all of those who have suffered thirst and hunger. I know I can count on all those who have dreamt of silencing the tiresome, irritating, unbearable voices of the presumptuous and impertinent, weak and impotent.

These impostors must pay. Let them be put in chains and let them pay with the hard labor of slaves the price of our bitterness and our rancour. They! will have to build for us the city they promised us.

(sharp and fast)

And let every rebellion and every revolt be suffocated at the price of blood. I am Cain, the true prophet, I represent the victory of the strong over the weak. Forever.

(acclamation/cheer)

D: Good. Tomorrow a furrow will be dug all around and here our city will rise. And those who will want to show their loyalty to me will have to give proof of that loyalty.

They will have to act without hesitation on my order and go among the people to gather up every gold object or jewel.

And we shall find an artist capable of erecting a statue with this gold, a large statue in honor of the god, for his and our power. And let all live in the fear of his strength and strive to earn his magnanimity.

(all hold for two minutes the earlier positions in absolute immobility interrupted only by the movement of an arm of three people in succession)

(all lower their arms beginning to repeat "Boh" mixed with a few "Tah"s. Duration one minute. All make a sharp noise, like the breaking of ice, with their mouths)

(the next phrase is sung very slowly in a sharp but not strong voice without the words being clear, with Oriental-like vibrations of the voice)

F: We've come a long way to get here.

Chorus *(softly)*: We've come a long way to get here.

A woman: We saw our mothers, fathers, and brothers disappear swallowed up by the mud. Our children born in the dirt were devoured by the earth, greedy ravenous insatiable stepmother.

(these same lines must be repeated in unison by three men in a loud, rhythmic voice)

Chorus: *(in crescendo)* Yes, yes, yes!

Two women: *(in a high, shrill voice)* Your people were sacrificed to the earth. You will save yourselves by sacrificing to the heavens that which you hold dearest.

A woman : *(in a low, loud voice)* Take yourselves to the temple and make sacrifice that will be your oath. Then descend into the quarry and pick up the largest stone you can find and bring it to the top of the hill.

Three women: *(beating their fist against their stomach to make a vibrating voice)*

These are the stones that will colonize the world.

(the same phrase is repeated by one of the three women at the top of her-voice)

(some repeat this phrase butting in, pronouncing the words as they draw breath, for thirty seconds.

For thirty more seconds some imitate the voice of deaf-mutes)

(the men for a few seconds a loud rhythmic painting with marked rasping of the throat)

G: We came a long way to get here.

All: We came a long way.

H: The city appears dead.

I: It's deserted, everyone is sleeping.

(light stamping of the feet of seven people, alternating, for thirty seconds, on the floor)

L: This city must have been beautiful.

M: Yes, it was.

(faint sound of a woman singing in the background)

N: Since the far-off day in which a man killed his brother, and gave his name to this city, it became so powerful that it conquered the world.

(the background song rises and comes into resonance with the singing of a note rhythmically repeated by another person)

O: *(when the song is over)* The laws were created here and enforced everywhere.

P: Here came treasures from all over the world as spoils of conquest.

O: The architects have designed for the monumental majesty of the imperial city for the work of slaves.

Q: But we will never again be slaves. Right?

R: Certainly were it not so what value would the dead that were given to the example of redemption from unjust power have had?

G: Be quiet, don't make noise. Don't wake those mangy dogs who are sleeping.

(again beating of feet on the floor for a few seconds)

G: But look instead what a disaster, what desolation.

N: Yes, it hurts to look at this city, reduced to such conditionsss.

S: Look!

G: What?

S: This rock, so big and long, that lies on the ground.

Oh, now I see, it's a toppled obelisk.

(the background song resumes)

T: This obelisk was never erected on this soil. It was brought here from faraway Egypt as a sign of strength, as a symbol of power.

R: Yes, of power and persecution.

G: It's a masterpiece of art and intellect.

N: It was Egyptian art for the glory of the Pharaohs. Brought here by the Romans for the glory of the Emperors.

S: On the backs of slaves.

G: But that's enough of that. Now we are here. And frankly it's painful to see so much desolation, so many devastated wonders, so much foulness, look at the temples, they're abandoned and destroyed.

(end of the background song)

Here, we'll rebuild them for our faith.

(the following phrases must be pronounced drowsily, yawning, while all strike with their arms poses like an Egyptian sarcophagus)

N: We will show the strength of our faith by rebuilding this city and making it grander than before.

U: And one day even this obelisk will again stand erect. And all around this obelisk will rise the columns of our renaissance. *(again yawning)* Yes, truly. And around this rock all the peoples of the world will gather.

(hold for a minute in silence the Egyptian poses of all)

(all stand with folded arms, beginning, with mouths half open, to pronounce a V as though imitating the wind)

(after a minute, while the wind continues, the following lines begin)

V: We journeyed at length to arrive here. Rest now, Maestro. We'll talk about it more tomorrow.

W: Tomorrow, the last judgment awaits me.

I have the sketches for the large fresco with me. The walls of the Sistine await me. Early tomorrow morning I'll already be on the scaffolding of the chapel. But we should discuss instead the plans that I prepared for the dome of the basilica.

V: Of course, of course, it's the greatest, most ambitious project in the world. But we're in good hands, Maestro. *(the wind ends on the word "hands")*

(the women do a dance with their arms and the men bring a hand to their chin. After forty seconds a woman recites the days of the week in Persian. The dance ends)

(the following lines are pronounced in Cornigliese dialect and translated simultaneously into Italian by the person who spoke in Persian)

K: We came a long way to get here.

J: Think, when I was a child my father showed me the moon and told me: "Do you see the moon: who knows if one day men will go up there, too."

K: Isn't it incredible? Now we're there, we're up here on the moon, we ourselves.

J: But it's strange, now I'm unable to feel the pleasure of the dream of then.

K: Look at the Earth in the darkness of space. The Earth is so far away it seems like a memory.

J: Think though that all together humanity down there, in what you call a memory, holds up the structures that have pushed us so far away.

K: The people down there are like the caryatids of the ancient temples, they're like the pillars that support arches and domes. There are more technicians today than slaves in ancient Rome.

(pause)

J: Have you ever been to Rome?

K: I have, have you, John?

J: No, but I'd like to take a trip after I get back.

K: In Rome the dome of Saint Peter's was once the highest achievement of human intellect. And I also saw *The Last Judgment* on the wall of a chapel. A big fresco.

J: Old stuff.

K: Yes, it's true, today the dome that represents human intellect extends among the planets and occupies the real space between the stars.

I wonder how a modern artist could imagine, in proportion, a fresco of the last judgment.

J: What do you mean?

K: If I think of the people on the planet Earth as living pillars of this mathematical and technological dome, then I see us up here as figures in a fresco that lies on the cosmic vault.

(pause)

J: Keep an eye on the oxygen - okay - everything's alright.

K: Well, now I want to tell you something. While we were traveling I had for a moment the clear sensation that I would end up against a mirror, a big, huge mirror.

Where did I see for the first time... you know what?

J: What?

K: My image. Just my image in space.

J: What are you talking about?

K: It's as though at the end of the trip there were a mirror like a naked, burning eye that doesn't see.
A blind eye.

Into which I can see, and I see everything that's behind my back in space and time.

The eye that lies at the origin of things and awaits the last judgment on things is a mirror. It's a mirror that sees with my eyes and thinks with my mind.

J: When I'll look at myself in the mirror I'll think of what you told me up here. I won't be able to do without thinking of it.

(all open their mouths wide)

A woman: Una larga serpiente entra en la dimension real / del mural / del juicio universal. La obra tiene la forma / de una serpiente de las mil y una vidas. El recuerdo esta vivo / y presente como el hoy / es ya recuerdo del mañana.

All: (each person recites the verse of the following poem out loud, in parade time, but in unison, for three minutes)

The little house

hidden by the fig tree

the flowers

miniscule grapevine

the field comes in through the door ajar

the stairs

a rose the hydrangea the ivy on the wall lighter in the sun the windows look in the stone house they wave colors like secrets of the houses nearby valley of sounds that fill the house.

(the voices are lowered and become a gentle rhythm. After a few seconds each person repeats his phrase or part of it alternating in a free musical phrasing maintained on the constant rhythm of the soft phrasing)

A woman: We came a long way to get here.

Another woman: But if we never moved.

Chorus : We never made a move from here.

A third woman: Ninna nanna, ninna nanna...

A man: What are you doing?

The third woman: It's a doll I made with my hands, for my daughter. But she never played. She went away. She was three years old. First nursery school, then school, then specialization. What could I do? I never saw her again. And some people still talk about the family. What's the family good for? Now there's somebody who takes care of everything. So I'm free, free to work. Excuse

me, I can't move, I have so much to do. And please, don't tell anyone that you saw me play. Ninna nanna, ninna nanna...

(on this lullaby the woman begins to move her hands in front of her mouth and face as though to blow away flying feathers that tickle her)

(all, beginning one at a time, gesture with their hands as though to chase away the tickling of the imaginary feathers finally stopping with their elbows behind their backs and arms open)

AB: We came a long way to get here.

Chorus: We came a long way.

AB: But who are these people, where do they come from?

AB: Hey, look! New people, what do you know! Stick with them and we'll steal everything they've got. *(loudly)* Who are you?

AC: I'm a citizen of Athens.

AB: And you?

AD: I come from Jerusalem.

AB: And you?

AE: I'm from Detroit.

AB: And you?

AF: I come from Cornelia, an ancient Roman residence, on the Ligurian sea.

AG: I come from the Black Sea.

AH: I come from... *(loudly)*

AA: *(declaimed)* In the echoless cavern of our open mouths there comes no sound.

AI: I came to see the wonders of the city. What buildings, what heights, all of steel and crystal.

AL: Watch out!

AM: Help! They've stolen my purse. Run!

Some: Stop, thief! Thief, thief!

AA: *(declaimed)* In the echoless cavern of our open mouths there comes no sound.

AN: Have a look at this newspaper, read this, it's crazy.

AO: Wait, don't run so fast, wait!

AP: Let's sit down a moment.

AQ: Two coffees, please.

AR: Hurrah!

Don't go away...

AS : Look what beautiful fabric, feel it, what do you think about a necklace for Sandra.

AT: Let's go in.

AU: Stupid, can't you see it's for tomorrow.

AG: We have to get in line.

AV: Hi.

AZ: Oh, hi, how's it going, you're here too, huh?

AV: Yes, I come once a month.

AZ : For work?

AV: Yes, for work.

AZ: Lucky you.

AV: Yes, I can't complain, staying long?

AZ: No, we have our return flight tomorrow.

AK: Taxi (*loudly*)

AZ: Time has flown,

AK: Taxi (*loudly*)

AZ: And we're dead tired.

AK: Taxi (*loudly*)

AJ: No, wait, I'll give you a lift.

AW: Hey, we're still great, eh? Yeah, we're fantastic.

AX: Don't keep stopping to look in the mirror, you know you're handsome, take my word for it.

AY: (*spoken over the following line*) Wait for me to tie my shoe.

AA: (*declaimed*) In the echoless cavern of our open mouths there comes no sound. Our lips move and no one hears a noise, neither of joy nor of sorrow.

AA: (*continuing*) The representation of our time disappears like a dream, in the echoless cavern. This tragedy of victims and survivors, without winners or losers, has no more audience.

We're here to represent an inferno without flames carrying on our heads the huge simulacrum of the golden calf with the straw tail. How can we represent the labor pains of a mechanical birth?

How can we save from the last stake the sacred voice of art?

While even the smallest blades of straw, woven by the game, whirl in the wind ripped out by a referee who doesn't follow the rules!

Here is the representation frozen to death.

The fixed image. The blocked voice.

The flash of a constant echo that bounces from body to body in remote space.

An image hard as rock.

This is the moment at which the word "end" expresses a single feeling, a single memory the same for all.

Only statues of salt remain blind to look ahead, to stare into the mirror, while inside a soul melts, a spirit that turns on its axis and penetrates with its intense gaze the crust of a thousand-year-old nape. Eyes in the back of the head.

Here in front of the mirror stand the salt statues to represent the symbolic inferno of the bodies that cannot turn around because they do not know how to explain that which has been done. Here will rest this tombstone, to give testimony of the past hour of judgment.

(Everyone had lowered their arms on the word "end" and now stand still in silence for fifty seconds. After a few punctuation marks — voices, soft songs barely audible, minimal gestures like a rubbing of wrists on one hand, a rapid lateral extension of the arms with joined fists, on the other, and the clapping of a hand - silence returns and all bend over and turn around raising their hands to hold up the structures that are placed on their heads)

At the beginning of the play the curtain opens and all the actors are lined up at the edge of the stage. They take a step forward and a step back. The curtain closes and opens again on the scene in which all standing hold on their heads large structures resembling a city.

This stage image remains fixed for the whole show. The curtain closes at the end on the twisting of the actors and opens again when all return to the edge of the stage with the same movement as at the beginning.