

Michelangelo Pistoletto

The Peasant

This work is part of a series that develops the theme of a phrase I wrote in *The Minus Man* (1970). The phrase is as follows: "Light doesn't know of its own existence or better yet, suffers if it doesn't find a body on which to rest and hence recognize itself".

The problem is that of energy which continuously seeks the means to have the tangibility of its own existence and the knowledge of its own image. Art responds to this organic need or I'd say almost biological need of universal nature to invent or to use any technique whatever to know that which exists up to the verification of verification itself. Art presumes a continuous series of removals, detachments or withdrawals of a body with respect to itself in such a way that the image, the action, or the fragment that this body leaves ahead of itself, can be an element of observation and recognition. The development of the techniques in general sets down the elements useful for this recognition, but these techniques and these elements are in themselves blind. It is art that gathers them up and uses them giving them its own sight. Speaking of figurative art, the artist feels like the eye of that body which is society.

The methods for placing one's own image in front of oneself are numberless and date back to the beginnings, that is to the primitive vision of one's own image in the pool of water. The camera is a reproduction of the eye-brain-memory system. In fact the photograph is not the only object that reproduces nature, giving us a flat image of it. The camera itself is an object that reproduces nature, because it reconstructs the functioning of a part of the human organism.

For me the system of photography is a means of putting my eye and a part of my brain behind an eye and a part of a brain to try to resolve the possibilities of knowledge that I can find in this operation. There should be no misunderstanding between the use of photography that an artist can make of it and that of a photographer in general.

The photographer sees, chooses and remembers with the camera, as if the camera were now incorporated into his normal life system. He does not perform his action by moving away from it, but by approaching it. The relationship between the intervention performed in other times by the painter who reproduced images directly and the intervention of the photographer who ends up providing very similar results, actually creates the misunderstanding. Instead, one must bear in mind that the photographer is doing today what the painter was doing yesterday, when painting was still the tool that offered the greatest possibility of detachment for the purpose of knowledge.

There are many means that the artist can use today even if they are less close to depiction, for example, he could use the car to represent the extension of the human motor phenomenon instead of the optical phenomenon. A problem in this regard could for example be posed in these terms: is it man who uses the automobile to move or is it the automobile that uses man to move? Of course the motorist, as we have already said for the photographer, is incorporated in the car and does not ask the question at all, the artist does.

In fact as an artist I have concentrated my work precisely on the phenomenology and the organic structure of the facts and not just on their formal aspect. I tend constantly to place the whole man, understood in his action and in his tools, in a light that reflects the phenomena in which he himself is an instrument.

The Peasant deals with eight panels that divide and at the same time connect eight actions of photographic reproduction to different types of physical interaction with the photograph.

The choice of the peasant holding his shovel has its reason: he represents an old phenomenon the traces of which are still evident, even if countless new developments have

changed farming.

That is, the peasant is the residue of a culture that sees the spade as an extension of the arm and hand, like the painter saw the painting as an extension of his own eye, but today civilization offers the tractor and the camera.

My action centers on the hand that holds the shovel because it's the meeting point between the body of the man, his action, and his tool.

A knife held by my hand, as an extension of violence, remains fixed on the image of the hand that holds the spade. This action becomes a photo-memoir in the following panel on which my hand, holding a brush, carries out a real cancellation of the preceding hand adding brushstrokes of paint, which is in turn reproduced. The succession of events takes place both at the moment the photo is taken, and during the enlargement and printing. In the last photograph the act of burning, again in the place where the hand had been, eliminates both the object and the memoir, leaving only fragments of a difficult testimony.

In this parable of images the thing that we can physically establish is the systematic weakening of the memorizing capacities of the photographic process. Every reproduction of a new event bears reproductions of the preceding ones. Thus we can see the slow distancing and destruction of the less recent images followed by the more recent ones. And the actions that on one hand seem to add on to each other end up showing a clear and continuous subtraction.

Hence in this work the concept of withdrawal corresponding to my work of investigation can be verified by the public as a continuous and inexorable distancing of every image with respect to the one that follows. This work is also exemplary with respect to the broader operation that I had begun in 1966 with the exhibition in my studio, entitled "the minus objects". On this occasion I had theorized the concept that every work of art I made must be understood as a subtraction, that is as action disclosed, as energy at this point expressed, which goes to diminish the probability that that same action represents. I don't understand a work of mine as an addition of new images to preexisting ones, but as the passage of an image through the conscious state of memory which holds it within its limits and within the limits of whatever instruments of memorization man may fabricate. For example: *The peasant* reproduced in a catalogue, while it seems to increase its memorising possibilities with the intervention of multiplication and dissemination (like a magnifying glass) in fact can only continue the process of estrangement already accomplished in every other reproductive intervention within the work itself.

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