

Michelangelo Pistoletto
Famous Last Words

1967

Speculation

When a person realizes he has two lives - an abstract one for his mind and a concrete one, also for his mind - he ends up either has a madman, who, out of fear, hides one of his lives and plays the other as a role, or as an artist, who has no fear and who is willing to risk both lives.

Man has always attempted to double himself as a means of attaining self-knowledge. The recognition of one's own image in a pool of water - like recognizing oneself in a mirror - was perhaps one of the first real hallucinations that man experienced. Part of man's mind has always remained attached to that reproduction of himself. With the passage of time, this doubling, this process of duplication, came to be used in ways that were ever more systematic and convincing. The mind created representation on the basis of the reflection of the self; and art has become one form of this representation.

Man began to use reflection as a strategic point for measuring of the universe. No longer content with the first hallucination of himself, he convinced himself that he could double the whole universe. This was his way of trying to understand it. Mathematics was constructed out of the realization that oneself plus another could make two and that oneself minus another was one. In the beginning the lesson was rather brutal. It wasn't simply a matter of what happens today when we hide one of two apples behind our backs to show baby that there is only one. At the beginning "minus one" meant that one of the two was dead - that the beloved mother or father or brother, who when added to the self had made two, was no longer among the living.

Thus the experience of life and death was made abstract; addition became a positive sign and subtraction became a negative sign. The complicating intelligence elaborated these signs into multiplications and divisions, creating an increasingly majestic series of hallucinations; and everything in life ordered itself in the mind in terms of two extreme and contrary, positive and negative possibilities. It seems paradoxical that drugs today should be prohibited when one stops to think that our civilization itself is the fruit of one mammoth mind-shaking hallucination. But perhaps it is feared that drugs constitute a kind of inverse reflection that could dismantle the whole set-up.

Man began to measure the universe in terms of his own direct experience of life and death, then went on to the great task of creating good and evil. In the light of the day he said "white" and in the darkness of the night he said "black". And always remaining at the center of things he created perspective. The world was seen in terms of vanishing points and points of view with respect to the position of man's eye at about five feet above ground level, and from that point he created high and low.

Past and future, near and distant, profound and superficial, true and false, single and multiple, subjective and objective, static and dynamic. These are a few examples of the complex of antinomies that has grown up around the human being as the fruit of his mind. In constant expansion, the process began with the first man who walked the earth, and it has continued until today. The world that we daily inhabit both physically and mentally is made up of the conflict between the two extreme halves of every proposition and every judgment.

When my need to understand things came to include the consideration of life itself, I instinctively understood all of the conflicts in the system of doubling all things of the universe. Looking at works of art, I felt the force with which I was compelled to oscillate between one dimension of experience that was abstract and mental and another dimension of experience that was concrete and physical. And it was in the fact of representation that I discovered the poles that were in simultaneous attraction and repulsion - my literal presence as proposed by the mirror, and my intellectual presence as proposed by my painting. These two presences of myself were the two lives that were simultaneously tearing me in two and calling me with urgency to the task of their unification.

When I first began to paint, the art of the avant-garde was abstract. It was directing its attention only to the second life - the reflected life. This reflected life seemed to have become so true as to convince us that it was now the only life that was livable. And Pollock had truly attempted to live it. In every moment and with all of the will of living, his every gesture violently transferred itself to the canvas - and to such an extent that he no longer knew what to do with physical life. Not even madness could save him, since, as an artist, he was incapable of play-acting. There was nothing left but death.

My way of risking both of my two lives has been to superimpose my painted image upon my reflected image. By becoming one single thing, my two "characters" have ceased acting out the drama of the death of one of them for the benefit of the other. And thus, being and non-being, question and answer, doubt and certainty, and all of the other antinomies have unified their terms into one single element. The culture projected by the mirror is thrown back upon the mirror and we stand in front of a new hallucination - the hallucination of reflection in reverse. The entire system of representation has been flipped over - like turning a sleeve inside out. By means of the arc of reverberations that is literally pertinent to these paintings (the abstract reflected by life, and life reflected by the abstract), the system has arrived at a reflection of itself, like a dog that chases its own tail. The experience that these paintings offer is that of finding oneself in a vehicle of extraordinary speed that is capable in a single instant of making a round trip from today to the remotest past and back again.

Being

The purpose and result of my mirror paintings was to carry art to the edges of life in order to verify the entire system in which both of them function. After this, there remains only one choice. On one hand there is the possibility of a monstrous involution and a return into the system of doubling and conflict; on the other hand

there is the possibility of revolution and leaving the system altogether. One can bring life to art, as Pollock did, or one can choose to bring art into life - but no longer in terms of metaphor.

I don't want to talk, now, about my new works one at a time. Because they are each different from the other, that would require numerous descriptions of the various contingent factors and motivations that went into their making. I want to talk about the vision that I have had as a result of the mirror paintings since 1964. Some time ago, I wrote this sentence on the wall of my studio: "One must prepare oneself for being". My every action is in this direction. Nothing is more opposed to being than the beloved ambiguity of art. The ambiguity of art is simply a matter of putting two things in relationship in order to observe the representation of their conflict; it's what the Romans were doing when they put the lions and the Christians in the arena so as to be able to enjoy the spectacle. The discovery that flint can make fire is a very primitive hallucination, and a new civilization cannot be organized by using the two halves of man's mind like two pieces of flint. There must be no spark between the two things - no spark between us and ourselves. If we remain suspended between ourselves and our representation, we ourselves are the spark and the conflict.

The error was all a matter of giving two functions to the intellect. The intellect is capable of raising questions, but it can't give answers. Nonetheless, we have always attempted to make it give answers, as if the middle of the day could create the heart of night, or vice versa. The day and the night follow upon one another, but they are two separate things with two different natures. We believed that day and night, life and death, were a single thing with two possibilities, that the intellect was a single thing with two possibilities. Yes, the intellect is a single thing, but it has only one possibility. If the intellect raises the questions, we must outflank it, step to one side, and use another mechanism for the answers. The intellect now is frustrated since it has continuously failed to do two tasks, and the other mechanisms have atrophied.

In my new work, every piece grows out of an immediate stimulus of the intellect, but the pieces in no way function as definitions, justifications, or answers. They do not represent me. Each successive work or action is the product of the contingent and isolated intellectual or perceptual stimulus that belongs to one moment only. After every action, I step to one side, and proceed in a direction different from the direction formulated by my object, since I refuse to accept it as an answer. Predetermined directions are contrary to man's liberty. To predetermine something means to make a commitment for tomorrow; it means that tomorrow I will no longer be free. To adhere to a predetermined idea means to reflect oneself in the past and to deprive oneself of free will. Unity of language must be predetermined and it demands that we adhere to it. To believe in one's own language means to play one's own role. Languages are posited as fictions between us and the others in the midst of a mass of individuals who play-act themselves and who are always ready to be manipulated by the directors. There are certain people of extraordinary intelligence who are frustrated by some kind of a personal complex or another, and they have turned themselves into theatrical characters on the basis of it, they believe in the character so thoroughly that they presume to make even

the others play it. These are society's directors - the ones who send the actors to kill and be killed by the evil that they, they directors, have perceived in themselves. And all of this happens when it would have been sufficient to take a little step to one side, proceed on one's own way and abandon the complexes without instrumentalizing them.

The way I move now is by stepping to one side. Every piece I make is a liberation and not a construction that is intended to represent me. I am not reflected in them, and the others cannot reflect upon me by means of them. Every piece I make is destined to proceed on its own way by itself without dragging me along behind it, since I am already somewhere else and doing something different. There is no longer any sense in the problem of being up to date in form. The problem is not to change the forms and leave the system intact, but rather to take the forms intact out of the system. In order to do this it's necessary to be absolutely free. And worrying about whether or not the forms are up to date means not being free to consider the forms of the past. And as we do not yet possess the forms of the future, liberty within the system means liberty to do only one thing.

As far as I am concerned, there are no such things as forms that are more or less up to date. All forms, materials, ideas, and means are available and to be used. Walking by means of stepping to one side takes us out of the system that goes straight ahead. There is no goal before us with laurels for the first to arrive and ashes for the last. The wild race for this abstract point structures itself into a system of battles between both individuals and masses. When we move ahead by stepping to one side, the race between individuals becomes a series of parallels, as every individual proceeds individually, without projecting himself out of himself onto abstract points or onto other individuals. When we move in this way there are no such things as the better and the worse, as everybody is what he is and does what he does. Nobody has a need to pretend in order to prove that he is the better, and communication becomes very easy without the structures of language, as it is easy to understand who everybody is and what he is like. By communication and understanding, we will finally be able to develop all of the possibilities of the mechanism of perception.

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