

**Michelangelo  
Pistoletto**  
Self-Portraits,  
Mirrors,  
Minus-Objects

02.06.-14.10.2012

Neue Galerie Graz, Universalmuseum Joanneum,  
Joanneum Quarter, 8010 Graz,  
T +43-699/1780-9500, Tuesday-Sunday 10am-5pm,  
[neuegalerie@museum-joanneum.at](mailto:neuegalerie@museum-joanneum.at), [www.museum-joanneum.at](http://www.museum-joanneum.at)

This text is published on the occasion of the exhibition

**Michelangelo Pistoletto**

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Minus-Objects

**Neue Galerie Graz**

**Joanneum Quarter**

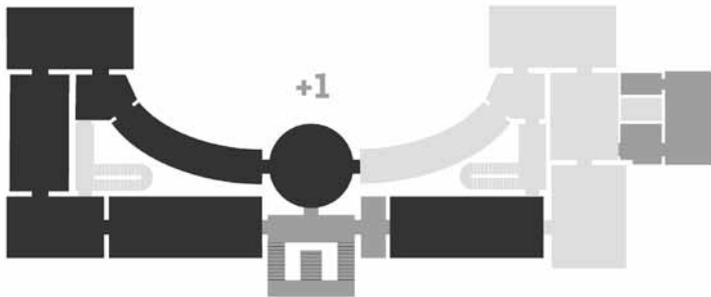
**Universalmuseum Joanneum**

June 2 until

October 14, 2012

Michelangelo Pistoletto is regarded as one of Europe's most influential contemporary artists. His work from 1956 to 1974 gives an insight into how the art of this time reflected on socio-cultural and aesthetic changes in Italy and other parts of the world. Pistoletto's practice must always be seen in connection with concomitant phenomena such as pop art, minimalism, process or conceptual art.

The retrospective on show at Neue Galerie Graz illustrates the artist's development from his intensive self-observation in the 1950s to the extension of the picture space by means of his mirror objects and his actions in the sixties and seventies, that laid the foundations for his participative conception of art today. His conceptual notion of art, made him an important exponent of Arte Povera.



# Michelangelo Pistoletto

## Self-Portraits, Mirrors, Minus-Objects

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### Beginnings

Michelangelo Pistoletto (\*1933, Biella) has been interested in art since he was fourteen. At that time he was working as a painting restorer in his father's workshop and also began painting himself. He became increasingly interested in the material, the structure and the nature of paintings, fascinated by the different surfaces and their effects. At the age of twenty, at the beginning of the fifties, he was already well versed in current developments in European and American art and – thanks to the vibrant gallery scene in his home town Turin – became familiar with the art of Lucio Fontana, Alberto Burri, Alberto Giacometti and Francis Bacon, that had a profound influence on him. He began to combine painting techniques which he had learned from his father with modern methods of Informel or abstract expressionism, testing them in a series of self-portraits (*Autoritratto*). Inspired by an exhibition at the Galleria Galatea in Turin in 1958, he came to study Francis Bacon, which ultimately induced him to objectify the content of the picture, focusing on the relationship between figure

and ground. Detached in terms of time and space, the figure portrayed is usually isolated, and the artist's self-portrait – completely depersonalised – creates a sense of eternal presence (*Il presente*). The self-portraits demonstrate Pistoletto's intensive occupation with the picture surface as he experiments with solid and reflective paint structures such as spar varnish, gold or silver. The aura that this creates around the life-sized figure portrayed in a frontal, compact stance not only opens up the picture into the viewer's space, but also lends it an iconic effect.

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### Mirror-Paintings

Pistoletto understood the creative possibilities afforded by reflective surfaces even in his early self-portraits. As of 1962 he began to experiment with polished steel plates and mirrors as supports, realising that it was also possible to create pictures solely for mirrors. He engaged the photographer Paolo Bressano, who had already been working for his father, to take photos of his family, friends and colleagues in the photo studio. The objectified mode of photography in Bressano's studio allowed Pistoletto to stage the models the way he wanted and then to isolate them from the contexts of their photographs. With painterly meticulousness, he enlarged the portraits in theatrical pose on tissue paper, collaging them on the glossy base. He worked constantly on improving the mirror-paintings, that gained him international fame. Pistoletto refused to be represented by Leo Castelli so as not to be monopolised by American pop art. Instead, he put colour into the mirrors, bringing them to life in vast tableaux vivants and playing with dramatic effects and the aspect of

active participation of the viewer. Around 1970, he began to reconsider the techniques once more, finding the ideal solution in screen printing, that allowed him to capture the pictures very directly on the support without the need for tedious painting processes. One year later, finally, he abandoned painting completely, now transferring the photos directly onto the mirrors. Despite this use of printing technique, he only produced unique images. The viewers are increasingly involved in the image, becoming not only embarrassing intruders, but equally witnesses, victims or prisoners; entering not only Pistoletto's image spaces, but also the mirror, as it were, of Italian society in the 1970s.

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### Acrylic glass

In 1964, Pistoletto created a series of seven acrylic glass works, that he first exhibited at the Galleria Sperone in Turin that same year. These transparent objects continue his occupation with space, representation, and the subject of image and deception. Pistoletto fuses several levels of reality into one, cancelling the boundary between material and concept and linking it to the real space which pervades the image. With these works, Pistoletto successfully continues the discussion of the shifts in the meaning from the object to its depiction, a discussion that began with Marcel Duchamp's ready-made, observing that: *"A 'thing' is not art: but the idea expressed by the same 'thing' may be"*.

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### Minus-Objects

Michelangelo Pistoletto's art cannot be subordinated or attached to a specific style, the alternation of his forms of expression is intentional and, in terms of its heterogeneity, post-modern – particularly in the sense of a critical mode of thought. The minus objects illustrate this artistically inhomogeneous approach, that is devoid of any individual style and may even be conceptually contradictory. Pistoletto arranges different objects, be they found, collected or built, in different materials such as concrete, metal, wood, cardboard or textiles, even integrating mirrors. Reduced to their essence, they create references and a propinquity to minimal art, corresponding to this art form in terms of their striving for objectivity, clarity, logic and depersonalisation. Pistoletto does not see the minus objects as constructions, but rather as objects with the aid of which he can free himself of something. He draws certain possibilities from an infinite fund, turning this game of art theory into a backdrop of life. The minus in the pool of possible objects becomes a plus for the subject, that acts as a trigger

of this difference of possibilities. The viewers enter the space of the minus objects and become part of a narrative which is constantly re-forming from the interplay of arranged objects.

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## Videos, actions

On 22 December 1967, Pistoletto – once again at the Galleria Sperone in Turin – took a step which explored the boundaries between art and life. The exhibition centred on a typical milestone found along roads to indicate distances. The year 1967 was engraved on top. In accord with the gallery, Pistoletto published a manifesto not only announcing the exhibition, but also declaring his studio to have been freed of all art in order to make it available to all young artists wishing to present their art. This “Open Studio” offered young artists a forum and led to the formation of *Lo Zoo*, his street theatre company that began performing in 1968. His studio became a meeting-place for creative thinkers, musicians, writers and artists, who also carried out a variety of actions together. This interdisciplinary mode of working was continued in his work project *Cittadellarte*, that he founded in his native town Biella in 1998. A special exhibition at Kunsthaus Graz will be dedicated to this project at the 2012 *steirischer herbst*.

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## Venus of the Rags

The rags series and performative actions evolved around the same time as the three-day exhibition *Arte povera + Azioni povere* held by Germano Celant at an old dock-yard in Amalfi near Naples in October 1968. The rags with which he had previously polished his mirrors now became the material of art, that he used in a variety of arranged scenes, including a steaming orchestra of rags. *Venus of the Rags*, that would become an icon of Arte Povera, exists in different materials (plaster, concrete, polystyrene) and sizes. This is the goddess of love, whose white marble effigy is found in many places throughout Italy. The replica of the ancient goddess looks demurely at a giant heap of sorted-out clothes that have fallen to the ground, no longer needed. The rags act as a social mirror into which the disrobed woman, seen only from behind, looks, evoking a dialogue of history that concerns not only Italy. “The rubbish-heap of consumed consumption has buried the perspective of Western progress”, Pistoletto observed as early as 1967, pessimistically expounding

a critique of civilisation that is not only still topical, but indeed appears more accurate than ever.

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## Arte Povera

The term Arte Povera goes back to the art critic Germano Celant, who brought together a number of artists – including Michelangelo Pistoletto, Alighiero Boetti, Giulio Paolini, and others – at an exhibition in Genoa in 1967. These artists often used simple, “poor” materials, formulating responses to the American minimalists, pop art or the French Nouveau Réalistes in their works. Arte Povera rejected the representative aspect of an art work and pushed for a marriage of art and life, as expressed in numerous actions or process-based art works. The course of time becomes an integral part of art, be it as a changing reference to space or as intentionally demonstrated transience.

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### **Michelangelo Pistoletto**

Born in Biella in 1933, lives in Turin, worked in his father's restoration workshop until 1958, began working as a self-taught painter, was long-standing professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, and is regarded as a key figure in the beginnings of Arte Povera.

He opened his studio with a presentation of the minus objects in 1966. Frequent, sometimes baffling changes of position make his work astonishing. His co-operation with the audience, with students, artists and scientists began with the formation of the theatre company *Lo Zoo* in 1968, continuing with the foundation of the interdisciplinary art town Cittadellarte as of 1998. The mirror is a constant in his work, already gaining him international fame in the sixties. He is a prolific international exhibitor, taking part in the Venice Biennale eleven times and in the Kassel documenta four times. His works feature in the collections of renowned museums all over the world.

### **Events:**

#### **Symposium Pistoletto**

20.09., 5pm,  
Joanneum Quarter, Auditorium  
Admission free!

#### **Curator's tour**

(in German)  
03.07., 3.30pm  
21.08., 3.30pm  
20.09., 3.30pm  
Meeting Point:  
Foyer  
2,50 € (excl. admission)

#### **Guided Tours**

##### **Michelangelo Pistoletto**

(in German)  
03.06., 3.30pm  
01.07., 3.30pm  
05.08., 3.30pm  
02.09., 3.30pm  
07.10., 3.30pm  
Meeting Point:  
Foyer  
2,50 € (excl. admission)

### **Preview:**

#### **Cittadellarte**

##### **Sharing Transformation**

30.09.2012–03.02.2013,  
10am–5pm  
Cittadellarte  
Fondazione Pistoletto  
steirischer herbst  
Kunsthau Graz, Space01  
Opening: 29.09.2012, 1pm

Inspired by the works of Michelangelo Pistoletto, to whom the Neue Galerie will be devoting a solo exhibition showing a large portion of his work, the exhibition at the Kunsthau Graz will follow the ideals of dialogue and participation as the starting point for an investigation into the conditions and aspirations of a model of participatory civil society.

A co-production of Kunsthau Graz and Cittadellarte, in co-operation with *steirischer herbst*.

Curator  
Peter Pakesch

Text  
Monika Holzer-Kernbichler

Translation  
Y`plus

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Andrea Weishaupt

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