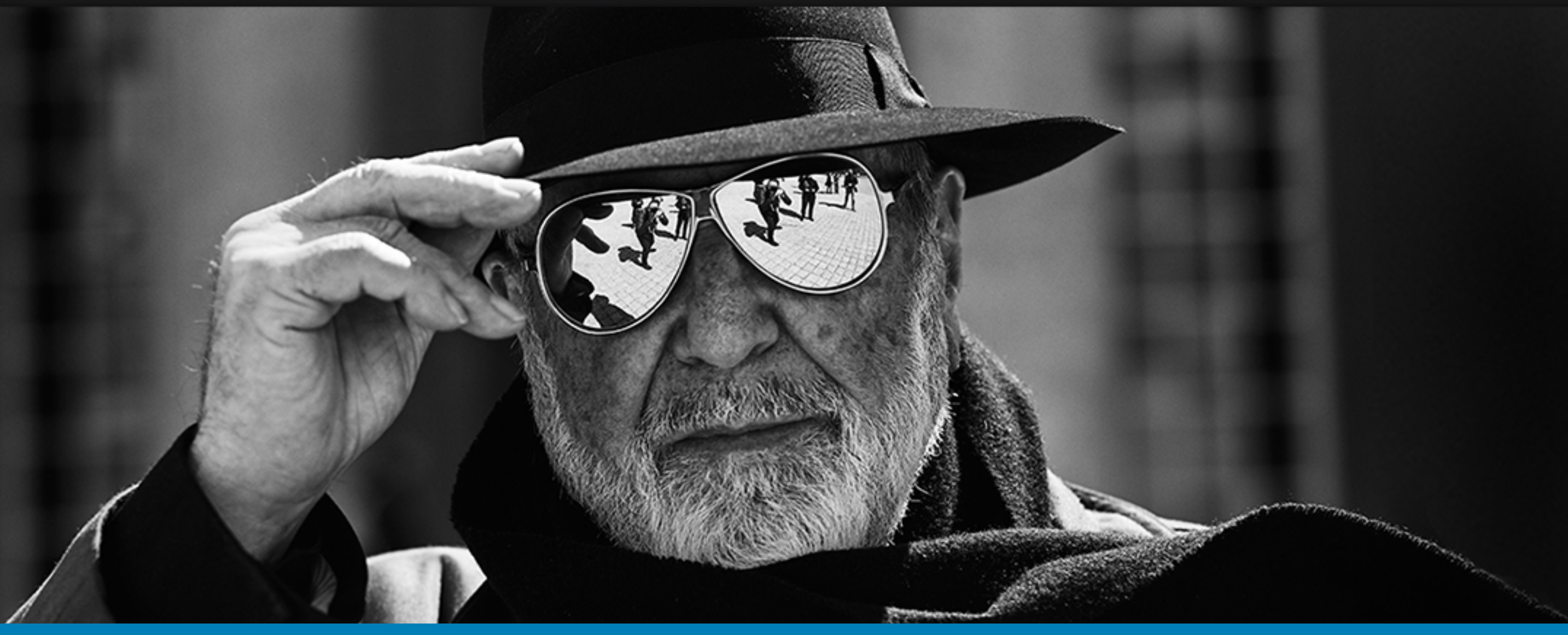




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INTERVIEW

MICHELANGELO PISTOLETTO

Michele Robecchi gets reflective with a giant of Italian art

Michelangelo Pistoletto, the grand old man of Italian art, shows no signs of slowing down. As a major new show of his work opens in Blenheim Palace, he talks about the place for public art, smashing mirrors and Winston Churchill.

Michelangelo Pistoletto, one of the key figures in postwar Italian art, was central to the development of the renowned Arte Povera. He is best known for his Mirror Paintings, which often turn viewers into the subjects of portraits. In 1994 he founded Cittadelarte, a sort of cross-disciplinary research lab, in Biella in northern Italy. Now eighty-three, Pistoletto is busier than ever, exhibiting all around the world from Havana to Geneva and Brussels. We spoke to him on the eve of his new exhibition at Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire.

How did the Blenheim Palace exhibition come about?

Michael Frahm, the director of the Blenheim Art Foundation, came to see me and asked me if I was interested in doing an exhibition there. When I visited the site, my initial response was that it is a brilliant meeting point between nature and culture. The architecture is very imposing, but once you get inside the building it's fascinating to see how the majority of the rooms have been preserved exactly the way they were. Winston Churchill used to live there, and you can almost feel his presence. As someone who grew up during World War II, I couldn't remain indifferent to that history.

The relationship between nature and culture is also the principal element of your ongoing project The Third Paradise.

Exactly. The word "paradise" is an ancient Persian word meaning "protected garden". It referred to the necessity of entering the desert and managing to survive. By building a series of small circular walls, people were able to condense humidity from the air, turn it into water and create vegetation. It was possibly the first example of an artificially created environment in history. The concept was later co-opted for religious purposes, and transferred to the idea of the First Paradise, a place where humans lived in nature. Today we can create a third position by reconciling these two aspects, the artificial and the natural. *The Third Paradise* will be the centrepiece of the show. It will welcome the visitors in the main hall. In order to represent it, I decided to use the sign of infinity used in maths. By having the two circles of infinity interacting, you get a third one – and that third circle becomes the symbol of the Third Paradise.



Venus of the Rags, 1967. Credit: Philadelphia Museum of Art



Love Difference – Mar Mediterraneo, 2003–2005. Credit: P. Terzi

At the 2009 Venice Biennale you made a performance where you smashed your mirrors – an action that you repeated at the Louvre about a year later. Was it a cathartic moment, or were you trying to bring a new energy into the work?

That action was driven by rational rather than emotional reasons. The idea of using mirrors in my work started with self-portraits. After ten or eleven years, I wondered about incorporating mirrors as part of the process: painters can depict everything in front of them but they need a mirror if they want to portray themselves. When we look into a mirror, we are seeing an image that didn't exist before and won't exist afterwards. It's a place where birth and death happen almost simultaneously. The mirror sees everything but it cannot see itself. It doesn't have its own identity, so I figured that it must represent the number zero. My idea was that, if I break a mirror in two and put the two pieces in front of each other, I can activate a process where the mirror can represent itself. That's the same principle with cells in science: you divide to multiply. I felt that the regularity of this process had to be defined by a casual cut, and that's what brought me to the destruction of the mirror. It was about destroying the infinite.

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Stroking the Trees, 2005–2010. Credit: C. Abate

The theatre as a place where different creative disciplines converge seems to be the founding principle of Cittadelarte, the creative centre you founded in Biella.

Yes. When you organise street events, you end up meeting the real world, and the real world is made up of people and of political and social encounters. That's why I felt the necessity of putting these things together and using different aspects of life as primary forms designed to interact with creative disciplines. It's a bit like a Renaissance workshop. There are different workshops, each having a relationship with a specific area of society.

The Reintegrated Apple, your recent public sculpture in Milan, has been the subject of much debate in the press. What do you think is the role of public art? How do you make sure that it resonates without coming across as an imposition on casual viewers?

Originally they offered put it in a park and I refused. I didn't want it to be together with other sculptures. I felt it has to be in the city, right there with the people. Freedom comes with responsibility – you need to know how to govern it.

But given that your art normally relies on mirrors, which make for a very inclusive and participatory experience, why did you decide not to use them in this piece?

I'm not interested in representing what people want from me. I'm interested in representing what I want from people. In a mirror there is an event but there is no practical reason for it. You can take a picture of you in it and then walk away. But I am not happy with that. I want people to be aware of certain issues. I want them to become more conscious.

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Arte Povera had a strong impact in the 1960s as it resonated deeply with the political and social climate of the day. Almost fifty years later, do you think it still has the same role? Or has it evolved?

There have been a few key passages. When we started in the 1960s, we were right in the middle of the hippie era. Then in the 1970s came the Red Brigades, and suddenly the dream turned into a nightmare. Then there was the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Capitalism has been declared the winner, but the problems that generated communism haven't been resolved – and that's why I'm still fighting.

A few months ago, after stating at a conference in Brussels that I want to change the world, a couple of students came over and asked me if I was happy. Of course I am. I don't know if I will be able to change the world, but just the idea of trying makes me feel good. Art needs to have a social utility, and I'll be out of here only when it doesn't have that anymore.

Michelangelo Pistoletto at Blenheim Palace, supported by Barclays, will open on Saturday 1 October and run until the end of December.

Main image credit: The Blenheim Art Foundation