

Michelangelo Pistoletto
Full-scale Last Judgment

1980

The problem can be reduced to minimal terms.

The problem becomes clear, crystal clear: the artist's canvas becomes a mirror.

Thus in 1961 began the work of the Judgment, which is no longer just a judgment of the artist, but a judgment of history. Renaissance perspective opened a new road to artists, both in an optical sense and as a project of the age of technology. In the fifteenth century the perspective of Piero della Francesca, drawn with mathematical precision, practically led into scientific space, that is, it became the forward march of modern progress.

Various events carried the internal and external facts of art along the thread of a common perspective, up to the beginning of the twentieth century. At that time techno-scientific progress enjoyed such a margin of independence that it became a formidable obstacle in the path of art. And art, like a bursting projectile that strikes its target, exploded in its own autonomy: it was the new exalting dimension of freedom. But it was a dull freedom, flattened against a wall. Mondrian's paintings provide one of the clearest examples: his paintings are flat like walls, there's no more perspective in them (only the length of the painter's arm remained to mark depth).

Duchamp transformed Renaissance perspective into the presence of a current reality, but crushed the viewer's nose against a pane of glass. The path beyond the glass was precluded by the univocal direction of painting. The big glass, even if cracked, could not be penetrated. It was transparent like an idea, but it fell heavily like a wall.

Francis Bacon later painted a man with his nose crushed and voice suffocated against the glass, in the prison of a transparent cage.

During the fifties the problem of the canvas remained that of an insurmountable wall: Fontana cut and punched holes in his canvases in a dramatic attempt to gain a few extra inches of space, and Pollock put the canvas beneath his feet to obtain the momentary illusion of removing the frontal obstacle.

Even I found myself, during the fifties, running toward the canvas to break through it with my head.

In 1961 the man painted on my first reflecting canvas represented myself at the zero point of space; at the same time all the space around man again became permeable.

Truly permeable. The event consisted in the reversal of perspective: the world that we see in the mirror stands behind us, all we have to do is turn around and go our way in that direction. Moving away from the mirror we see ourselves enter into the mirror: so we go our way in the painting, without obstacles and without barriers, as we become immersed in life.

The mirror is history's answer to a question that I posed to art in the search for myself.

Turning one's back on the negation of art one passes to the affirmation of art. The reversal is complete, that is practical and mental. Naturally the implications are enormous, because it means going not only into an area that's already been explored, but also toward a time that has already passed. At any rate it is in this direction that art has found room to take its first steps along a new path: the things of life no longer pile up on the wall of art, but art enters into life, while one by one all the things that are not art arrive on the threshold of the mirror. But the freedom in this course reversal becomes very exacting. We go into the past as though to assert the predications, that is as though we were the missing half of a preexistent body that is waiting for us in order to become whole.

So in front of the mirror starts the path of that *Last Judgment* that goes toward the prophecies and the illustrations of the past acquiring the dimension of reality. Art, science, and religion were all one thing for Michelangelo Buonarroti when he painted the *Last Judgment* and designed the dome of St. Peter's. But his *Last Judgment* was contained on the small space of the wall of a chapel and the dome of St. Peter's was the highest achievement of human intelligence in its time. Today the dome that represents the highest level of human intelligence stretches out into space among the stars, hence the *Last Judgment* of art must now exist in the dimension of reality.

Art re-assumes its prerogatives which consist not only of its own concentration, but also of the use of all materials, all languages, and of the various disciplines, which it introduces into its own autonomy (acquired, aesthetically, in the twentieth century with the avant-gardes). In the depths of this autonomy art finds its own radicalism. It, like the mirror, absorbs every existing thing and gives it back to the world under the form of revelation. The metaphorical mirror of life has become the real mirror: it is the great eye that lies behind every mask and is surrounded by every body. The radicalism of art is this eye which now appears in all its burning nudity. For me the eye is the mirror.

At the center now there is no longer a point but a mirror. There is no longer a distant point represented by the god of religions, but a mirror that gives us back our image from nearby. And it is no longer a perspective point of view that indicates the attainment of techno-scientific progress, but it is a mirror that immediately opens all space.

The mirror is not a point, but a territory that can take on any dimension and escape any constraint. And it is on this terrain that I recognize the fundamental and real power of art. The mirror becomes a territory replacing the point, line, and whatever material produces a mark.

The mirror has the form of your cut, this form is the drawing, around the drawing of the mirror arise the marks, the volumes, the walls and the decorations, the domes rise up and the interstellar missiles take off.

The fortress has been built around the mirror, on the design of the mirror, to hide the mirror. The fortress of faith hides the fortress of another faith that hides the fortress of still another faith, but all hide the mirror of faith in art. The mirror that comes into the light reflects the faith in the faith in the faith in the faith until it mirrors all faiths.

The first thing to fall into place is the art that divides that which is inside from that which is outside. It is determined to which form of power a work (be it creative or critical) refers, if and in what limits this tends to erect/set up that wall which covers the mirror.

In *Famous Last Words* of 1967, I expressed the concept of Being, indicating side stepping a recognized power as the maximum tension of conflictuality. Side stepping brought together the various groups of people who, pushed to the margins of society by an excessive autonomy of power, began the march toward their own autonomy. The ritual of patriotic extermination has been transformed into “sacrifice for justice” administered by the group. We have arrived at the point in time which everyone conquers the right to administer his own “sacrifice for justice”; therefore power no longer resides in the sacrifice of others and is no longer supported by the sacrificial-symbolic example of one for all. The structures that primarily organize the thought of society have become sterile. And even though emptied of functional principles of life they remain standing, heavily, to crush the roots that nourish peoples’ fundamental qualities. Nothing can come forth from a dead tree, except its seed. I place the mirror as seed, as the baptism of a faith that gives spiritual power back to creativity. The answers to the first questions on existence can no longer be those answers petrified by thousands of years of history; art now creates methods that give answers much closer to each of us.

In the individual demand is the creativity that offers acknowledgment to whomever it has been denied for centuries and always promised beyond death. The act of justice lies in creativity, hence the territory of art must be open to allow the creative possibilities of each person to proceed toward the capacity to express them.

I’m working now to keep the passage of the mirror open at all costs. Without this specular hole art is pushed to the edges of every other form of power and becomes the decoration of that power, what’s more, responsible for its errors. As in a shattered mirror every piece preserves the properties of the large mirror, so every one of us is a particular property of the total energy.

This energy has shattered in order to recognize itself, as one mirror is reflected in another. And let’s not forget that the eyes are mirrors that reflect things, that the mind is the mirror of the eyes and that actions are the mirror of our mind. The spirit is formed and expresses itself in this cycle. The creativity of each individual is a specular fragment of the creation as a whole.

Art must take its place drilling through the thousand-year-old crust that stands in front of the stomach of people, a crust formed by dogmatic approaches to existence, to demonstrate that it, art, lies beneath that crust and is like an unexplored mine on which everyone can draw.

I as an artist must be, in addition to the producer of my work, the master of a creative ritual that will replace the dogmatic one. One must be active in art, it’s not enough just to believe in it.

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