Venus of Rags, 1968
A Firmament of Rags

Pistoletto's use of rags dates back to 1968, a year in which world culture began the process of questioning its values. It was a time when the repressive social structures that dictated every artistic "image" were nullified and the corpses of appearance were revealed: the phantoms of an imperial doctrine, both in the East and the West, the aim of which was to universalize the world under a single word or figure. Such a univocal aesthetic rendered everything equivalent in the name of reduction and succession (you, the artist, must repeat yourself infinitely, as the worker or the student, in order to become with your emblem or chosen imagery--the cartoon, the cube, the fluorescent light, etc.--the metaphor of production).

This univocality is in direct opposition to the confusion and polyvalence of the "Emarginati," the casual and desperate communities of the world that are often identified as the dregs of society; the perverse, the corrupted, the third world people, women, prisoners, etc. that is "the rags" of society.

We are not dealing anymore with an ideal unity, but with a multiplicity of people or actors who see their own subjectivity materialize through their desire for continuous covering or disguise (again, the rags, as residue of a spectacular masking). Pistoletto has a consensual attitude toward the outcast elements of society.

After the libidinal reading of his Minus Objects, 1966 (a diverse range of formally unrelated sculptural and pictorial objects) and the theatrical breakout of The Zoo, 1967-70 (a small community based on artistic collaboration), Pistoletto further establishes a firmament of multiplied images in his Mirror paintings (which reflect the different environments in which they’re placed) as well as with his galaxy of rags.

In his rag pieces constellations arise (there is Venus) where desires (Venus as love) emerge from craters of art. The rags become a volcano of eruption: The Orchestra of Rags, 1968, is formed by a crown of multi-colored rags in the center of which pressure cookers are boiling and whistling. The crown is the symbol of head and the water of regeneration: a mental and visual system in continuous variation.

The transpositional character of Pistoletto's work allow for infinite interpretive possibilities: any single interpretation is equivalent to choosing one rag from the mass. Pistoletto's use of rags is depository of a process of coagulation/desegregation that adapts itself to all contexts. Like the Mirror paintings, they are sensible pellicles that become animated in each circumstance, they reflect the museum as gallery and arsenal, changing its experience, allowing it to be amusing. Rags are reflected in the world and pour out it's figures. They displace them and transport them in a polyhedral system, where the walls become the scenarios of a 'theatricum polyticticum.'

As a growing body, the micro and macrocosm of rags draw pleasure and joy, so much that Venus plunges her face into them. Her body, contaminated by their phantasmagoria (and coated with mica particles) is covered with stars and reflections so that her skin multiplies and nourishes her lovers, "those who surround her."

Mutability and unrepeatability of expression in the absence of something mechanical appear as prodigy of immediate, sensual reproduction. If the mirror is the metaphor of immediate knowledge, the rags are the metaphor of pleasure tied to the continuous modification of existence: signs and particles which desire wear.

Germano Celant (Translated by Giovanni Tempesta)

Works in MATRIX:

Arrow of Rags, 1980, wooden arrow and Museum balcony covered with rags.

Venus of Rags, 1968, cement copy of Venus covered with mica and rags, dimensions variable.

Orchestra of Rags, 1968, rags, glass, hot plates, tea kettles, dimensions variable.

Column of Rags, 1968, wooden columns covered with rags, dimensions variable.

Reclining Woman, 1967, collage on stainless steel, 47" x 59". Lent by Diana Fuller.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Galleria Galatea, Turin '60 & '63; Galerie Ileana Sonnabend, Paris, '64;
Galleria Sperone, Turin '64;
Galleria del Leone, Venice '64; Galerie Heiner Friedrich, Munich '65; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis '66; Galleria la Bertesca, Genoa '66; Palais des Beaux-Arts, Brussels '67; Galerie Ileana Sonnabend, Paris '67; Kornblue Gallery, NY '67; Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam '67;
Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe, West Germany '67; Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY '67; Galleria dell'Arte, Milan '70 & '72; Galleria Sperone, Turin '70; Kunstverein, Frankfurt '72; Galleria Toninelli, Rome '72; Galleria Sperone, Turin '73; Galleria Marlborough, Rome '73; Gallerie Kestner-Gesellschaft, Hanover '73 & '74; Sidney Janis Gallery, NY '74;
Galleria Sperone, Rome '75; Castelli Graphics Gallery, NY '75; Galleria Salvatore Ala, Milan '76; Galerie Saman, Genoa '76; Palazzo Grassi, Venice '76; Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art '79.

Selected group exhibitions:
2nd Biennale di San Marino '59 & '61; Nieuwe Realisten, Gemeentemuseum, The Hague '64; The Object Transformed, Museum of Modern Art, NY '66; Documenta 4, Kassel, West Germany '68; Land Art---Arte Povera---Conceptual Art, Museo di Torino, Turin '70; Kunst van de 20 Eeuw, Museum Boymans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam '72; Realismus und Realitat, Kunsthalle, Darmstadt, West Germany '75.


Schmied, Wieland. "Interview Texts" in Michelangelo Pistoletto (Hanover: Kestner Gesellschaft Gallery '73).

Krimmel, Bernd. Michelangelo Pistoletto (Darmstadt: Mathildenhoehe Gallery '74).

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