

Michelangelo Pistoletto: "Amare - Salvagente"
curated by Bruno Corà

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This new cycle of eight mirror pictures by Michelangelo Pistoletto could be defined as an "allegorical sequence of salvation". And he could now rightly be awarded the eponym he has earned in the field, of Master of Mirrors. It is almost half a century since the invention of the "quadri specchianti" ("mirror pictures") (1961) and Pistoletto, having developed all his other creations through the phenomenology which those works introduced into twentieth century art, now frequently introduces new aspects into this successful device of using mirrors in his work. Nevertheless, what he emphasises in each new formulation of the original conception of the mirror picture is always a value based on the dimension of time. The new, visual manifestation of this is the work "Amare salvagente" ("Love-lifebelt") (2007), composed of eight mirror surfaces where the same icon – a young woman holding a lifebelt with the words "amare" – each time occupies a different area of the picture due to the progressive rotating surface movements imposed by Pistoletto; here, the space-time dimension takes on an exponential value that could be called "squared" (not only because of the shape of the works) - and the reasons for this are obvious. Each of the eight mirror pictures of the cycle is, in fact, independently equipped with characteristic and technical devices that distinguish it from the others and yet make it similar to the others. Each one is therefore able to embody the processes of a dialectic of integration between reality and virtuality and, with its language, make "real" the reality shown by the reflection on the mirror surface, which is naturally observable – since it is a reflection – but which is entirely impalpable! This is the first degree of temporality that each of the eight mirror pictures in this cycle has. The last degree of the time dimension is that symbolised by the sequence of the eight works. The rotating movement of each mirror surface on the vertical axis, as represented by the image painted on the surfaces, expresses, in its own way, a "duration" of movement that is equivalent to that of a sequence - and this is exactly what I would define as exponentially squared temporality. It is interesting to consider, however, that while the female figure with the lifebelt is always at right-angles to the horizon, the mirrored shape "rotates" on it by a certain number of degrees, so that none of the eight works lies horizontally and so that the fifth position which one of these occupies within the sequence is seen as a perfect diamond shape. It is also interesting to look further back in time (which for Pistoletto, starting from mirrored elements, always means looking forwards as well), at a similar dynamic that he has already searched for and obtained in his work, albeit in different ways. I am thinking primarily, for example, of the two-part mirror picture "Uomo di schiena" ("Man from behind") (1962), of "Stereo" (1972), of "Il contadino" ("The countryman") (1975) or of works such as "Raggiera di specchi" ("Mirror rays") (1973-76), "Divisione e moltiplicazione dello specchio" ("Mirror division and multiplication") (1975-78), but also of "Albero" ("Tree") (1993) and "Gabbia-specchio" ("Cage-mirror") (1991-93). Time and "duration" are the invisible foundations in each of these works, as against visual Space, that is perceived and distinguished in sequences, with which it creates the essential unity of the image, both on the mirror surface and inside it. When we look at these works, we realise that Pistoletto has brought a different principle to bear in each of them. In "Il contadino" (1975), with the eight photographic images (shot with the collaboration of the photographer Paolo Bressano), the artist encountered "the problem of energy that continually seeks the means to have the tangibility of its own existence and the knowledge of its own image". So also in those eight works with a photographic basis, the image is fixed while the moving of events and actions on it and on its reproductions leads to the image itself inevitably being consumed and disintegrating. "Eight panels separating and at the same time connecting eight actions of photographic reproduction to eight different types of physical interventions on the photograph ... the series of interventions unfolds both at the moment when the scene is filmed and during enlarging and printing ..." It is otherwise with "Stereo" (1972), a work composed of four mirror pictures with the images of two loudspeakers placed only on one of the surfaces located at the opposite ends of the work; this gives an effect of space that is occupied at times by the image and at other times by its absence. Finally, with "Divisione e moltiplicazione dello specchio" (1975-78), in order to give the mirror its double, he cuts it in two, along with the frame surrounding it, thus showing that when the mirror unit is broken in two, its reflective properties remain entirely unchanged. With "Raggiera di specchi" (1973-75), "Gabbia-specchio" (1991-93) and "Albero" (1993), Pistoletto shows the potential of spatial multiplication by means of the mutual reflection of two or more mirror surfaces placed so that they form corners with graduated apertures. Of all the experiments that Pistoletto has carried out to emphasise the principles of mirroring and rotation, as in the

cases quoted, we must mention two "demonstrations" carried out in Pescara in 1980. In one of these, by turning a radio upside down, he made it clear that the voice coming from it did not suffer any variation. In the other, by representing an upturned mirror, he showed that the image in it remained unchanged. In this case, the Time-Space element seen in the duration-sequence of "Amare salvagente" is connected both with his own previous works and with the historical photographic experiments of "figures in motion" by Edward Muybridge Human, to whom Pistoletto had already dedicated some works in homage, such as "Due donne nude che ballano" ("Two nude women dancing") (1964) and "Due ragazzi nudi (blu)" ("Two (blue) nude boys") (1978) from a photo by Wilhelm von Gloeden. Nevertheless, looking more deeply into the "Salvagente" work, since the bodies photographed by Muybridge are seen in consecutively different poses, some further considerations may be made. In some ways, the screen-printed image on the mirror surface seems to be identical in each of the eight pictures, even though it is in fact only relatively so because of some small differences that contribute to make each picture absolutely unique. But apart from this, two considerations immediately come to mind: the first is symbolic and suggests the connection between the object and the writing. If the lifebelt has the function of ensuring the safety from harm of a person who might be in danger, the writing suggests even more clearly that the rescuing value contained in it is love. We could even state that through the action suggested by the infinitive of the verb "amare" (to love), we can obtain salvation, symbolically expressed through the instrument of the "salvagente", or lifebelt. The second consideration concerns the rotation of the square mirror surface which leaves the image untouched so that, like a centre of gravity, it does not suffer any movement. Like the bubble in a spirit level - but unlike it - it always shows the vertical plane. And so, although they are apparently similar, nobody could say that the eight mirror pictures are the same. Furthermore their succession, like that of the hours on a clock face, gives an effect of space that suggests a "duration" whose temporal value we can perceive. However, more than to the circular spatial effect of a clock-face, the succession of eight mirror pictures corresponds in reality to the development of a linearity which is that of the writing (it is moreover well known that this is connected to time) and this makes it possible to identify what makes each work different, by simply comparing it to the previous one and the one following. We have already noted that this difference lies mainly in the rotation of the mirror support with respect to the image with the lifebelt. The time within each image we have before us is always a present-past that lasts, unchanged. However, there is another time, the one that moves spatially between each picture - a sort of interval - which is the further total time of the work: I have defined this as "time squared". Deleuze states that "The present is the current image and its simultaneous past is the virtual image, the image in the mirror". If, like ancient philosophers having to define time from movement - for example the movement of rotation imposed by Pistoletto on the eight mirror pictures - it was defined as "movement number" (Deleuze), we would have to conclude, in relation to number 8, which presides over the creation of this work, that it evokes the number of infinity, which is well suited both to the Space-Time dimension, and to that of a partial cyclic effect caught in the act of developing, as well as to that of the mirror which, in spite of the various shapes that lead to a love of the equivalence of differences, has the same reflective quality and an ideal infinite size everywhere.