

Venus of the Rags: Poverty, Power, and Reconciliation

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May 2016

Postwar Italy was a period of contradiction for the country. Ending the war on the losing end, the nation was devastated by the destruction of war and still haunted by the remnants of Fascism. Even though aid from the Marshall Plan provided the preconditions for *il miracolo economico* -- a period of great economic growth and quick industrialization -- the rapid development of the country also led to the rise of cultural degradation and labor inequality.ⁱ A consumerist culture was on the rise as the spending power of the population increased, leading to what was seen as an increasingly materialistic society. Companies such as FIAT grew to become major players in the global economy as they exploited the cheap local labor of the rural migrants who came to urban centers such as Turin to find work. The lack of social support led to a period of widespread political unrest.ⁱⁱ

It was during this period of social and political unrest that the movement known as *Arte Povera* developed. The movement was given its name by the art critic Germano Celant.ⁱⁱⁱ The artists in the loosely grouped movement were all socially hyper-conscious, and works from the movement were heavily left leaning. While the term *Arte Povera* (literally translating to “poor art”) signifies a clear leftist or populist political agenda, not all artists in the movement were as aggressive and critical as Piero Manzoni (1933-1963), whose famous and controversial piece *Merda d'artista* (1961) (Fig. 1) sharply criticized and satirized consumerist culture,^{iv} or Mario Merz (1925-2003), whose *Che Fare?* (1968-1973) (Fig. 2) used decidedly “poor” art materials such as beeswax and featured a revolutionary slogan that was historically associated with Vladimir Lenin.^v

Michelangelo Pistoletto is considered one of the most important artists of the movement, yet many of his works and ideas lie at the periphery of the movement's stated political and social purpose. The two series of works he is most known for, the Mirror paintings (in which images are superimposed or painted on a reflective background (Fig. 3)) and Minus Objects (in which the art "objects" encourage the viewers in participation (Fig. 4)), strike a more reconciliatory tone of inclusion and dialogue instead of a combative ideology. The work under examination in this paper, *Venus of the Rags* (1967, 1974, 2120 x 3400 x 1100 mm) (Fig. 5), belongs to neither of those two series. Instead, *Venus of the Rags* is an installation that made up part of his *Stracci* series of works, which featured heavily the motif of rags.^{vi} Critical interpretations of this series have placed it more firmly within the general narrative of *Arte Povera*, as a reflection of societal and cultural degradation, inequality and unrest.^{vii} However, in actuality, *Venus of the Rags* acts as more than just a critique of society. The juxtaposition of two oppositional motifs invites us to engage their socio-political associations -- that of aristocratic upper class values versus the struggles of the working class. In considering the mythological background and concepts behind the central figure of Venus, this engagement steers away from the trap of conflict -- a problem endemic to the socio-political climate of the time. Instead, through ideas of *mixis* ("mingling") and *pandēmos* ("all the people") embodied by Venus, the installation encourages constructive and reconciliatory engagement. Michelangelo Pistoletto, through this work, reveals the inclusivity of dialogue within his practice that may have gone against the aggressive and iconoclastic thrust of his contemporaries.

Venus is the namesake and central figure of the installation. The goddess has her roots in both Greek and Roman mythology, in which Venus -- originally a deity specific to the people of the Italian peninsula -- integrated and superseded the Greek Aphrodite due to a mix of both

Roman reverence for the Greek pantheon and their growing regional dominance during the Punic Wars.^{viii} Pistoletto's use of Venus thus carries along the historical and iconographical baggage of both the Greek and Roman mythological goddess. In Greek mythology, the figure of Aphrodite is identified as the goddess of love and beauty. Yet the ways and forms in which love and beauty manifest in the deity are complex. Aphrodite's embodiment of love is expressed through the concepts of *mixis* and *pandēmos*, while her beauty can be expressed both through nudity and exuberant adornment.^{ix} Pistoletto's juxtaposition of the figure beside a pile of rags invites the viewer to engage in a comprehensive consideration of the depicted goddess that takes into account all facets of her mythological existence.

Venus of the Rags is an installation that consists of a pile of multicolored rags seemingly dumped against a wall. Taking the wall as the back of the installation, a classically styled statue of a female mythological goddess—Venus^x—is placed in front of the rags facing towards the wall at the rear. The installation has been implemented slightly differently in many different locations. The one used in this analysis is from the Tate collection in London. In the Tate Venus, the Venus figure is made with marble and is larger than life. The pile of rags has a height that corresponds roughly to the height of the Venus figure. However, in other manifestations, the Venus figure has appeared to be below life-size at times and also made out of concrete. In the original installation, Pistoletto found the Venus statue in a garden center and appropriated it for use in his work.^{xi} In future versions, the general shape of the statue has stayed more or less faithful to this original piece despite the fluctuations in size.

The Venus statue in the installation strikes a well-proportioned and slim figure, similar to conventional depictions of Venus and Aphrodite as a sexually mature and attractive woman. In fact, the nudity of Venus is rendered with a high level of detail, with a well-defined musculature

of her back and buttocks. Her desirability is further enhanced by the presence of the *fossette di Venere* “dimples of Venus”) -- dimples on the back hip area, above the buttocks and below the back. This characteristic is a well-known and widely used marker of physical desirability in art. Thus, Pistoletto shows an understanding of Venus in her mythical state, that of divine and exceptional nudity and beauty. Venus’ left arm is extended downward and a bundle of cloth dangles from her left hand, visually echoing the rags in front of her. The front of the Venus figure is visually inaccessible as the statue is placed frontally pressed up against the pile of rags (Fig 5.1). This placement in effect eliminates the original physical front of the figure. As a result, the Venus figure discards her means of frontal identification and instead subsumes the motif of rags to replace them. By placing the Venus figure in such clear relation with the motif of clothes and rags, Pistoletto alludes to the mythological associations Venus has with the act of dressing and adornment. Through visual cues and associations, *Venus of the Rags* shows off an understanding of the mythological figure of Venus by directly alluding to mythological concepts that the goddess embodies. The goddess is also depicted as walking toward the pile of rags, with her left leg slightly lifted in mid-stride.^{xii} The direction of her movement implies an intentional engagement with the rags. This engagement hints at Pistoletto’s allusions to interpretative concepts of Venus that concern her relation to other figures. Apart from physical associations of nudity and adornment, the mythological figure of Venus also embodies concepts that relate to her rule over the domain of love. It is through these other concepts that *Venus of the Rags* engages in the reconciliation of its oppositional motifs.

Despite the literal centrality of the Venus figure, mythologically grounded interpretations of this installation are lacking. Instead, interpretations have largely centered on the general classical character of the sculpture. As knowledge of antiquity was once associated with the

European aristocracy, a classically styled statue can be read as representative of the conservative rigidity, history, and value that is associated with the aristocracy's members. Some critical readings of the installation, for example Sanger's catalogue entry on the Tate website, identify the iconographical content of the Venus figure as such.^{xiii} This approach is not a mistake and opens the installation up to a number of interesting readings. Sanger has used Venus' aristocratic associations and the rags' more humble associations as the basis for an interpretation centered on the concept of oppositions:

Pistoletto's use of a sculpture of Venus in these works, as an iconic motif of the canon of Western art, invokes Italy's cultural past in an ironic way. By combining the classically-inspired statue with piled-up rags the artist announces a series of oppositions: hard/soft, formed/unformed, monochrome/coloured, fixed/movable, precious/disregarded, historical/contemporary, unique/common and the cultural/the everyday. In their 'poorness' the rags demonstrate a willingness to deploy any and all aspects of life in art.^{xiv}

However, to stop at this oppositional reading ignores the rich functional significance a depiction of a Venus figure reveals to us. In fact, in his other works in the *Stracci* series, Pistoletto achieves this elite association more directly and aggressively with more pertinent and relevant forms of the time. For example, in the work *Orchestra di stracci – Quartetto* (1968) (Fig. 6), he addresses both the aloofness of modernism and the elitism of abstraction with rectangular glass forms. The references made by *Quartetto* are thus self-contained and self-referential, inherent in the forms themselves, without the need for figuration, which inadvertently draws clearer and more immediate external comparisons. For this reason, it is fair to suggest that *Venus of the Rags* is specifically about the external comparisons the Venus figure alludes to and the relation of these comparisons to the pile of rags in front of the figure. According to this interpretation, the Venus figure retains immediate associations with aristocratic culture without diminishing its own mythological and cultural meaning -- that of *Mixis*, *Pandēmos*, nudity, and

adornment -- that have not been deeply explored in critical interpretations of the work. In fact, a reading that keeps in mind the mythological concepts inherent in a Venus figure will elucidate the reasons for the existence of its oppositional tensions.

The element of *mixis* is particularly salient in *Venus of the Rags*. External to the statue, the concept *mixis*—meaning mingling and mixing in a typically physical manner^{xv}— can be seen projected onto the pile of rags the Venus statue faces. Dumped seemingly haphazardly into a pile, the rags are individually distinct with different colors and different contortions to their forms. Yet, it is the very discreteness granted by the rags' difference that makes the process of *Mixis* visually legible in this pile. Clothes are contorted and crumpled as if they have just been used in a vigorous physical activity - - their damp writhing forms strewn on top of each other in what is almost a sexual manner. The sexuality of the work is then made salient by the well-proportioned female figure facing it. This latent sexuality vulgarizes the rags, which makes the pile appeal clammy and visually uncouth -- reminiscent of labor sweatshops and urban squalor. Finally, the pile of rags, and all of its destitute associations, threatens to envelop the pristinely rendered female figure through its immensity. In effect, Pistoletto achieves the *mixis* of Aphrodite at two different levels, one where the separate rags are engaged in aggressive physical intermingling, and another where the resultant entity integrates the separate Venus figure into its form.

The installation's allusions to the concept of *mixis* serves a function that is particular to Aphrodite's abilities. While the literal meaning of *mixis* is a physical mingling of bodies, the context in which this mingling occurs can be more freely interpreted. Cyrino has even interpreted the concept to refer to Aphrodite's associations with war, where bodies physically mingle in battle.^{xvi} While this association may be tenuous, as Aphrodite is seldom linked to war outside of

her affair with Ares/Mars, a liberal approach to the interpretation of *mixis* can divulge meanings inherent in the work, especially in the context of the other available visual motifs. Inherent in the concept of *mixis* is the idea that entities mingle and mix across boundaries that are usually strictly defined. For the Greeks, Aphrodite manifested this characteristic in her ability to make immortal gods fall in love with mortal human beings.^{xvii} In the context of the installation, this characteristic is instead depicted in the mingling of what Sanger describes as “oppositions,” where the “hard/soft...cultural/everyday” as well as the higher class and the lower class mixed.

In some critical readings, Pistoletto’s use of rags symbolizes ideas of detritus, cultural degradation, and waste.^{xviii} Even Pistoletto has stated in interviews that the “rag aesthetic” represents the harmful effects of consumerism.^{xix} However, in earlier versions of Pistoletto’s *Venus* (and his other *Stracci* works), he made use of rags that were previously used to clean and polish his other metallic works.^{xx} For this reason, the process of transformation -- of what was previously patterned cloth into what we know as rags -- is a subject of scrutiny by Pistoletto. In effect, the works in the *Stracci* series can be construed as an ontological study of rags. This bestows upon the rags symbolic meaning that goes beyond the immediate associations with waste and detritus. As the action of cleaning and polishing is closely related to manual labor, the rags can thus be seen as a representation of the Italian laborers at the time, and by proxy, a representation of the underprivileged and exploited masses. In *Venus of the Rags*, and likewise in the series, the contorted, damp and haphazardly strewn look of the pile of rags conveys and reflects their previous life as being associated, used, and finally discarded in the process of manual labor. During the creation of the *Stracci* series, poor labor conditions and wages, as well as unhappiness with inequality were issues particularly pertinent to Italian society. Furthermore,

members of *Arte Povera* were socially hyperaware and made works in response to their changing social environment.

As such, the *mixis* of the Venus figure with the rags does not only serve to characterize and elucidate the mythological allusions that Pistoletto is clearly making, but also to place these allusions within the social context of the time. In “the Third Paradise,” a treatise he published on his ideas and art in 2010, Pistoletto said this about Venus of the Rags:

In 1967 I created a work called the Venus of the Rags which has become an icon of recycling, in that she transfuses her own incorruptible beauty into an indistinct mass of garbage and like King Midas, who turned everything he touched into gold, gives it a new splendor.^{xxi}

Thus, the artist sees Venus as a figure that has the potential to elevate and bestow renewed value to objects that are discarded and badly regarded. To achieve this potential, Pistoletto has to make use of the aspect of Venus that is Aphrodite *Pandēmos*, which relates the goddess to “all the people”^{xxii} and speaks of Aphrodite’s ability to persuade, seduce and charm (*Pēitho*). *Pandēmos* and *Pēitho* are frequently linked to the power of Aphrodite to incite the sexual desire of others,^{xxiii} in other words, to the universality of sexual persuasion. However, in the context of *Arte Povera*, the socio-political environment in which *Venus of the Rags* was created, and the rest of Pistoletto’s practice, a civic reading^{xxiv} of Aphrodite *Pandēmos* and *Pēithos* is more relevant. This civic reading characterizes *Pandēmos* and *Pēithos* as applicable to concepts of political unity and resolutions. The recognition that Aphrodite is applicable to everyone, and her ability to unify and resolve is important for the Venus figure in *Venus of the Rags* to have the ability to exert her elevating power on the rags she approaches. However, in order for Aphrodite to achieve such a “populist” endeavor, she requires substantial power that

nevertheless still distinguishes the goddess from the general population. In myths about Aphrodite, her wide-ranging and totalizing powers -- she claims control over not just mortal men, but gods and animals as well -- are intimidating even to the other gods in the Greek pantheon (Homer, *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, 1-37).^{xxv} Thus, the figure represents the separate and aloof elite as a potentially unifying figure. *Venus of the Rags* both symbolizes the power these elites have and encourages them to use that power to engage and find commonality and help the disadvantaged masses.

The dynamics of benevolent yet aloof power visually win out in the installation. As previously mentioned, Pistoletto's positioning of a nude Venus seemingly approaching a pile of rags while simultaneously holding on to the folds of cloth alludes to the notion of the goddess' strong associations with adornment.^{xxvi} In the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, after being manipulated by Zeus into falling in love with the mortal, Anchises, the goddess undergoes an elaborate ritual of bathing and dressing (*Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*, 60-65). In the myth, her accouterments are luxurious and beautiful, and she is attended by her numerous graces. However, unlike Homer's myth, Pistoletto subverts the notion of adornment by associating the Venus figure with the dirty abandoned rags in front of her, stripping her of all luxuries other than her over-life-sized and divine body. The fact that the Venus figure retains the divinity of her body is significant. Her exceptional nudity and beauty, despite being threatened by the overwhelming mass of rags, still asserts itself and pushes back against the pile, retaining visual significance in the installation by both its centrality and its distinctive whiteness. The power of the goddess is also emphasized by how the statue seems to be in no way distressed by its interactions with the pile of rags. In what is still visually accessible of the figure's face (Fig. 5.2), the smooth and gentle rendering of the face suggests a neutral and serene expression. By re-associating

Venus with accouterments not fit for divinity, Pistoletto may have risked removing Venus from the divine pantheon altogether, but he avoids this by his use clever positioning and exposure. As a result, the Venus figure associates itself with the squalor of the rags while still retaining its divine and powerful presence. This narrative plays out similarly in the Homeric hymn, where Aphrodite, after deliberately removing herself from divine association in order to make love with a mortal man, reasserts her divinity to grant power and status to Anchises. Pistoletto merely makes use of this narrative element to create an avenue of dialogue between two conventionally separated social groups, while recognizing the inherent ability of one group to come to the aid of the more disadvantaged one.

When the Romans assimilated Aphrodite to their native goddess of Venus, the resulting deity eventually held great significance in the Italian psyche. The assimilation of Aphrodite included the associations she has with Anchises and their son Aeneas, who was seen as making possible the origin of the Roman state. Thus, in Roman antiquity, the goddess Venus held an elevated political role and was directly associated with the rulers of the ancient state.^{xxvii} With the specter of Mussolini's imperial Roman pretensions not far behind post-war Italy, the use of classical motifs, especially ones so intrinsically linked to Italian politics, could have been problematic. However, through a deep understanding of the mythological functions and concepts at work in the Greek and Roman deity, Michelangelo Pistoletto took the classical motif of Venus and rehabilitated it. By using the concepts of *mixis* and *pandēmos*, Pistoletto transformed the Venus figure into a persuasive mediator between the aristocratic elites and the downtrodden masses, encouraging social engagement and collaborative action between the different populations.

Notes

- ⁱ Carolyn Christovè-Bakargiev. "Thrust into the Whirlwind: Italian Art before Arte Povera." *In Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1962 - 1972*, 25. Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2001.
- ⁱⁱ Christiane Meyer-Stoll. "Che fare? What is to be Done?" In *Che Fare? Arte Povera: The Historic Years*. 13. Heidelberg: Kehrer. 2010
- ⁱⁱⁱ Meyer-Stoll, "Che fare?", 13.
- ^{iv} Sophie Howarth. "Piero Manzoni, 'Artist's Shit' 1961." Tate. November 2000. Accessed May 11, 2016. <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/manzoni-artists-shit-t07667/text-summary>.
- ^v Burgon, Ruth. "Mario Merz, 'Che Fare?' 1968–73." Tate. May 2014. Accessed May 11, 2016. <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/merz-che-fare-ar00598/text-summary>.
- ^{vi} Erica F. Battle. "Michelangelo Pistoletto: Artist of Disquiet" In *Che Fare? Arte Povera: The Historic Years*. 253. Heidelberg: Kehrer. 2010
- ^{vii} For an example of such an interpretation see: Mike Watson, "Michelangelo Pistoletto: Da Uno a Molti, 1956-1974.," *Art Review*, no. 50 (May 2011): 133.
- ^{viii} John Scheid. "Venus." In *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, by Simon Hornblower, Antony Spawforth, and Esther Eidinow. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- ^{ix} Monica Silveira Cyrino. *Aphrodite*. Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2010.
- ^x Unless otherwise specified, in this paper, Venus and Aphrodite shall be used interchangeably to explain their significance.
- ^{xi} Alice Sanger. "Michelangelo Pistoletto, 'Venus of the Rags' 1967, 1974." Tate. Accessed April 19, 2016. <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/pistoletto-venus-of-the-rags-t12200/text-summary>.
- ^{xii} The presence of an orb-like object (Fig 3.2), likely a fruit of some sort, may also reference to the myth of the Judgement of Paris, however I interpret this orb to be only a form of identification for the goddess figure.
- ^{xiii} Sanger, "Michelangelo Pistoletto."
- ^{xiv} Sanger, "Michelangelo Pistoletto."
- ^{xv} Monica Silveira Cyrino. "Love, Sex and War," *Aphrodite*. 32 Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2010.
- ^{xvi} Cyrino, "Love," 32.
- ^{xvii} Cyrino, "Love," 34.
- ^{xviii} Catherine Schelbert. "Michelangelo Pistoletto Muro di stracci" In *Che Fare? Arte Povera: The Historic Years*. 264. Heidelberg: Kehrer. 2010
- ^{xix} Noe, Paola, and Laura Allsop tr.. "Michelangelo Pistoletto: Can Art Still Save Our Souls?" *Interview*, no. 21 (April): 67. 2008.
- ^{xx} Battle, "Michelangelo Pistoletto", 253.
- ^{xxi} Michelangelo Pistolett, and Huw Evans. *The Third Paradise*. 18. Venice: Marsilio, 2010.
- ^{xxii} Cyrino, "Love," 35.
- ^{xxiii} Cyrino, "Love," 35.
- ^{xxiv} Characterized by scholars to mean Aphrodite *Pandēmos* was a "sponsor of synoecism and political cohesion." see: eg. Scholtz, Andrew. "Aphrodite Pandemos at Naukratis." *Greek, Roman And Byzantine Studies* 43, no. (3)3 (n.d.): 231-242.
- ^{xxv} Using the Gregory Nagy translation.
- ^{xxvi} Monica Silveira Cyrino. "Beauty, Adornment, Nudity," *Aphrodite*. 56 Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2010.
- ^{xxvii} Monica Silveira Cyrino. "After Greek Antiquity," *Aphrodite*. 129 Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2010.



Fig 1: Piero Manzoni, *Merde d'Artiste*, Tin can, printed paper and excrement, 1961



Fig 2: Mario Merz, *Che Fare?*, Aluminum, wax and neon lights, 1968–73

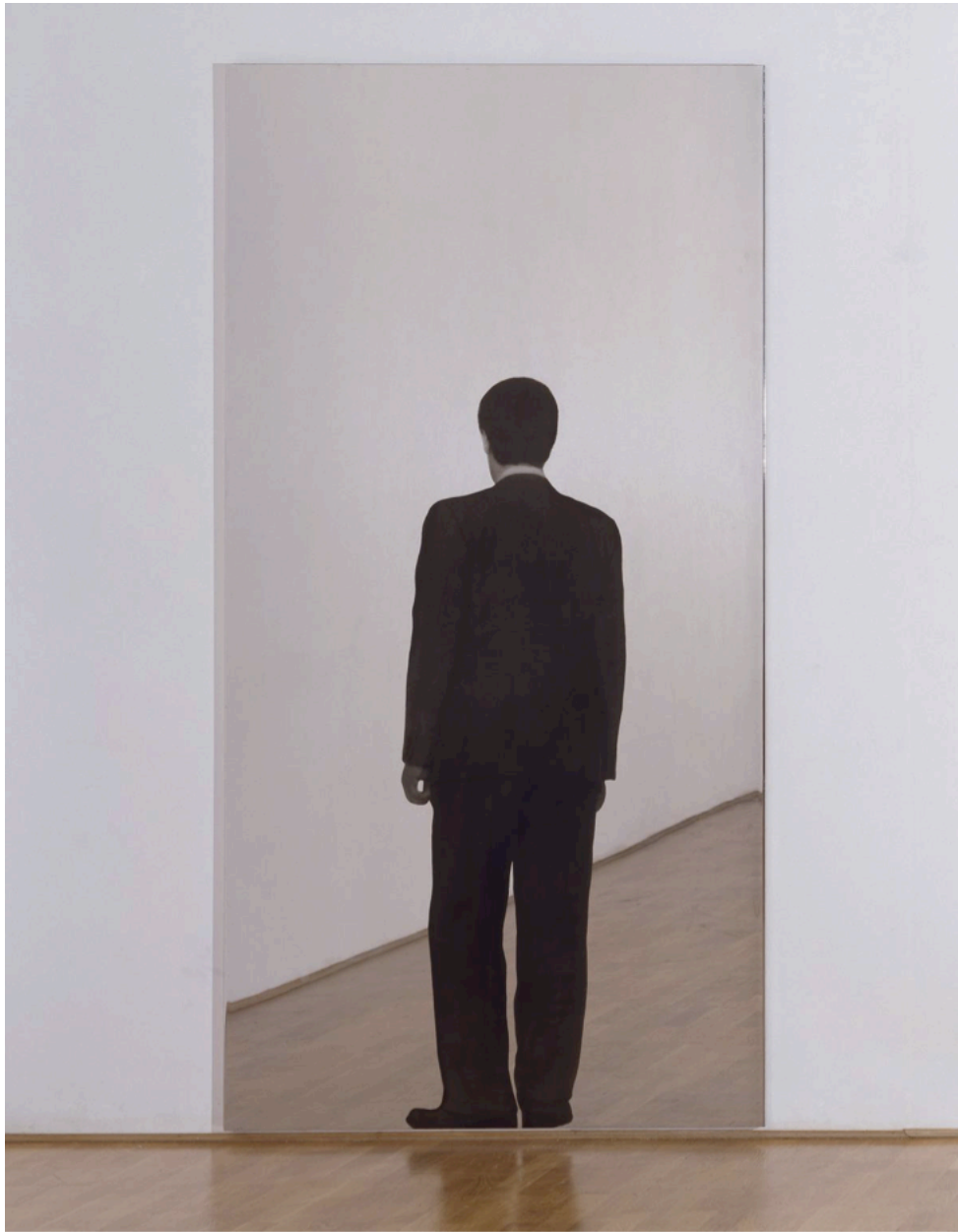


Fig. 3: Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Standing Man*, Silkscreen on Steel, 1962/1982, Retrieved from www.tate.org.uk



Fig. 4 (Exhibition of Michelangelo Pistoletto's *Minus Objects* at The Philadelphia Museum of Art)

Fig. 5: Michelangelo Pistoletto, *Venus of the Rags*, Marble and Textiles, 1967/1974, Retrieved



from www.tate.org.uk



Fig. 5.1: Michelangelo Pistoletto, *'Venus of the Rags'*, Detail



Fig. 5.2: Michelangelo Pistoletto, *'Venus of the Rags'*, Detail



Fig. 6: Michelangelo Pistoletto, *'Orchestra di stracci – Quartetto'*, Textiles and Glass and found objects, 1968

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