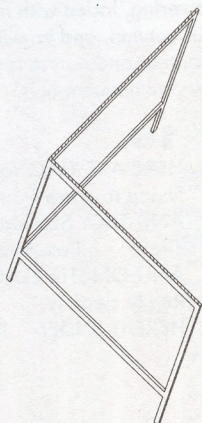


SURPLUS TO REQUIREMENTS

by Francesco Manacorda



In the entrance hall of the ICA in London last summer, I came across a framed print edition of the above image accompanied by the following caption:

Will Stuart, 'Strutturare per parla de piedi' (trans. "Structure for talking while standing") (Michelangelo Pistoletto, 1965-66), 2009.

Being familiar with Pistoletto's original work, a sturdy minimalist 2 x 2 meter grey-painted iron frame, I spent some time trying to decode the various intertextual implications stemming from this apparently new work and its title. Mostly I was perplexed by the Italian part—a title within a title—which did not quite correspond to Pistoletto's original *Struttura per parlare in piedi*. Being (like the majority of the contemporary art community) hypersensitive to all forms of ambiguity, multi-layered meanings, meta-self-reflexivity and so forth, but (unlike the majority) fluent in Italian, I was uncertain whether this was a deliberate mistranslation or simply a couple of unfortunate typos. I could easily imagine that this sort of confusion and indecision on my part was precisely the effect intended.

The "new" clause *Strutturare per parla de piedi* could in fact be more accurately translated—

with some oscillation of meaning—as, "Covering with lard in order to talk about feet." However, the syntax (not to mention the semantics!) of this translation is immediately suspect for two reasons. First, you won't find the verb *strutturare* in any Italian dictionary. *Strutto* is pig fat (lard); although *strutturare* can be reasonably understood, particularly in this context, as a neologism coined to describe the typically Beuysian activity of spreading something with fat. Second, a dialectologist would consider the expression *per parla de piedi* a Tuscan or Roman vernacular variation on the official Italian *per parlare di piedi* ("in order to talk about feet"). As the non-Italian-speaking reader can now appreciate, my response to the discrepancies between the original Italian, its English translation, and the resultant "augmented" Italian version fluctuated between some mildly complex art-historical cross-referencing, and plain hilarity. I had some difficulty attributing all this merely to a well-rehearsed typography of chance.

In "Tuesday," one of the daily "Editorials" that made up the Winter 2009 issue of art writing journal *F.R. David* [see pp. 33-41 here], Dieter Roelstraete denounces contemporary art's "irresponsible overrating of ambivalence and ambiguity" as a danger that generates an equally irresponsible "fear of knowledge." This, he adds, is used to conceal indecision, weakness and neutrality—an unhappy state of affairs which amounts to sophistry. Roelstraete's condemnation would appear to circumscribe my enthusiasm for the kinds of multiple meanings and recursion activated by such as the mistranslation of Pistoletto's title (whether deliberate or not). In opposition to the paralysis of thought generated by such idolatry of ambiguity, Roelstraete proceeds to argue for a return to passionate, concerted *truth-seeking*.

Is Roelstraete's moral argument applicable to all forms of polyphonic organization of unstable meaning? Does Theodor Adorno's definition of art's core as *enigmaticalness* merely disguise an absence of content, or a refusal of Sartrean engagement? In the early 1960s, around the same time (and in the same city) that Pistoletto made the *Struttura*, Umberto Eco described and promoted deliberately incomplete, indeterminate and otherwise ambiguous art in a number of essays eventually collected as *Opera Aperta* ("The Open Work"). Is Eco's term so enduringly attractive because so-called "open" work is, in actual fact, "empty"?

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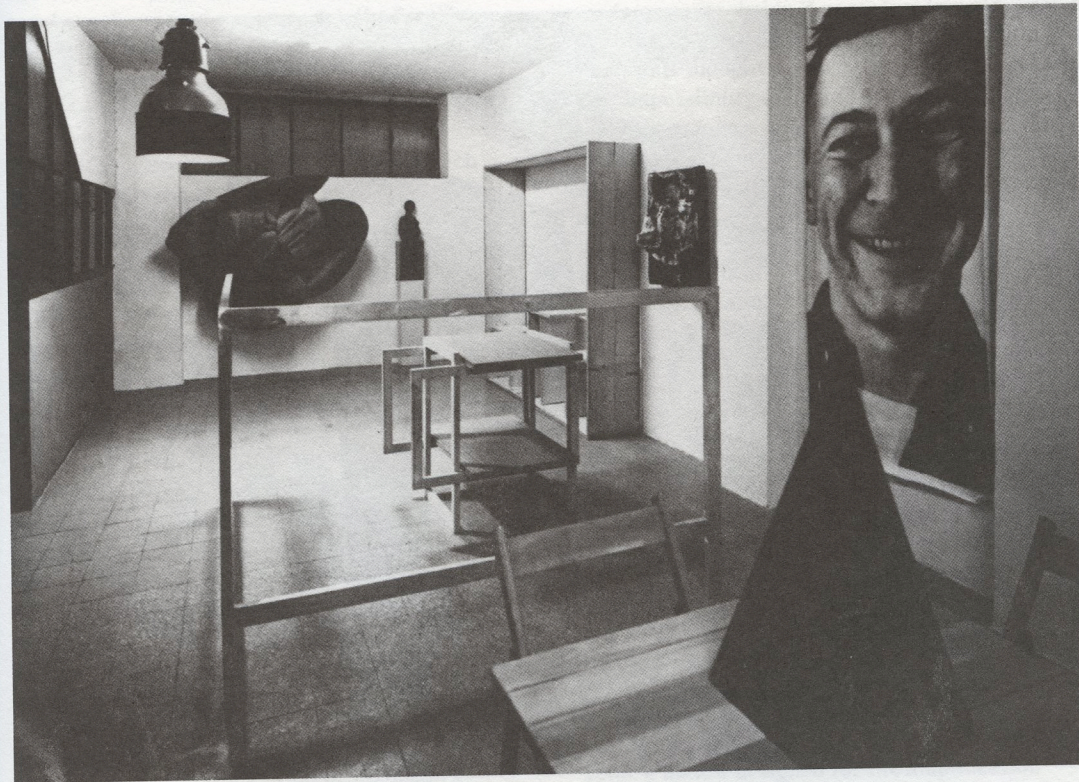
This line of thinking brought me back
full circle to the origin of my anecdote, and to
the larger series to which *Struttura per parlare*
in piedi belongs—*Oggetti in meno* (“Minus
objects”). These are among Pistoletto’s most
mysterious works. Alongside the pseudo-func-
tional *Struttura*, they include articles as diverse
as the green-projecting *Lampada a Mercurio*
 (“Mercury Lamp”); a medieval sculpture half
encased in orange Plexiglas, *Scultura Ligne*
 (“Ligneous sculpture”); and a wooden painting
frame turned into a piece of furniture incor-
porating two chairs and a table, *Quadro da*
Pranzo (“Lunch Painting”). Nearly all of the
objects deliberately oscillate between furniture
and sculpture, and Pistoletto deliberately
referred to them ambiguously as “objects.”

While the forty or so “Minus objects” are
radically different from one another in terms
of material and scale, all are nudged towards
poetic transfiguration by their individual titles.
And in the Italian version of a short but dense
essay from 1966 also titled “*Oggetti in meno*,”
Pistoletto’s writing is similarly hard to pin down,
perhaps best described as a kind of overcharged
mystical-philosophical sermon.

My works are not constructions or fabrications
of new ideas, any more than they are objects
which represent me, intended to be imposed
and to impose me on others. Rather, they are
objects through whose agency I free myself from
something—not constructions, then, but liber-
ations. I do not consider them more but less,
not pluses but minuses, in that they bring with
them a sense of a perceptual experience which
has been definitively manifested once and for
all. According to my idea of time, one must learn
how to free oneself from a position even while
one is engaged in conquering it. It is perhaps
more consistent with reality that others should
change it—instead of evolving an opinion on
me. I believe that if I act according to the
dimension of time, it will be difficult for others
to catch me in the exact spot where they are
lying in wait.

My idea of evolution is also anti-evolution-
ary (like walking forward on a moving sidewalk
that is going backward). Unlike the mirror-
paintings, my new objects do not represent:
they are. Each individual work is a single
word in a discussion which could last a lifetime
and which is also a language closed in upon
itself. In this sense I tend to consider the
duration of my life as a picture which is free
for any place.

Every object, from the moment of its crea-
tion, can enter into and partake of the inertia



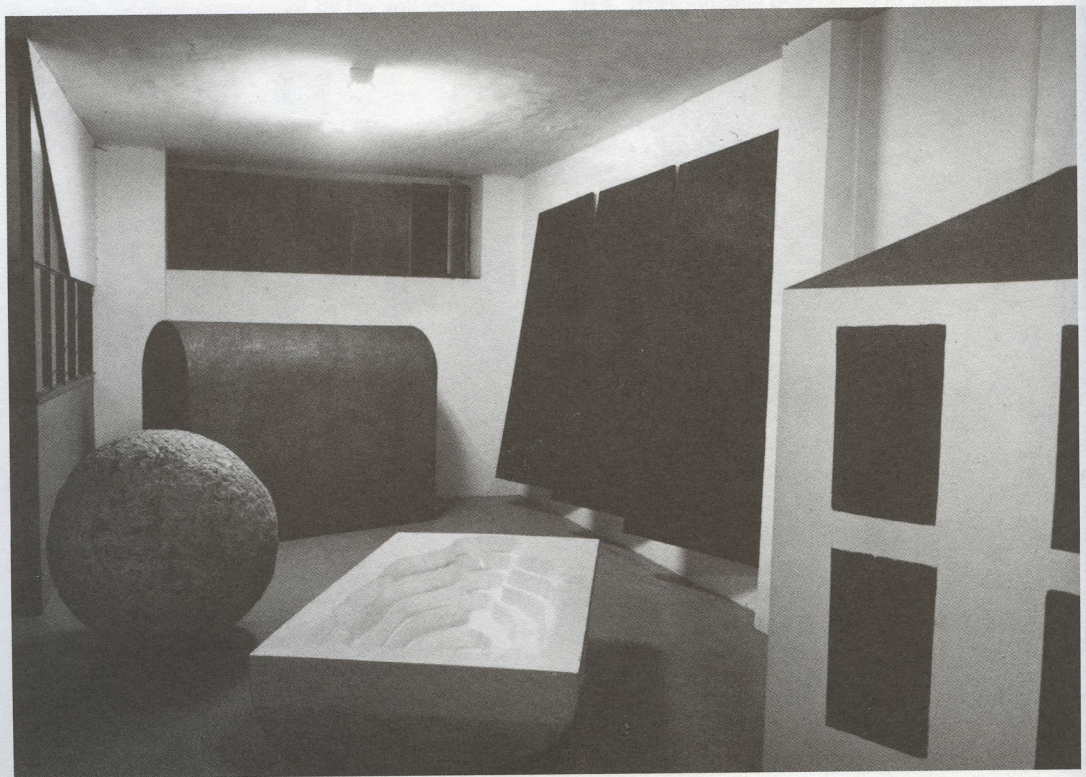
Oggetti in meno (“Minus objects”) in Michelangelo Pistoletto’s studio, Torino, 1965–66

of consumed energy without dragging me with it—provided I am already active in another place. The materials are chosen separately each time according to this or that particular perceptual need—for me all materials are suitable, and the idea of modern or less modern does not exist: an object which is extremely complicated from the point of view of materials and ideas can have a primary sense exactly as a very simple object which fulfils an elementary need, as it must be considered as an isolated self-contained unit. One element—such as the mirror in many of my recent works—can be kept constant in a number of objects, provided it is always linked to a diversity of situations, thus taking on a new meaning with each new combination. Other objects may even be determined by a purely practical consumer need, such as the *Structure for chatting while standing up*, etc.

This corollary text is clearly a built-in component of the series rather than a supplementary caption, which both describes and advances the trajectory of Pistoletto's broader investigation into the notion of time begun with his well-known mirror paintings some years earlier. Various painting and collaging figures (or silhouettes) directly onto mirror rather than canvas, Pistoletto attempted to converge past/

present and stasis/movement in order to inhabit the fourth-dimensional threshold—the very line between depiction and reflection (literally the edge of the flat figure on the mirrored background). This he considered a necessary passage out of linear time, freeing him from the tyranny of the art world's obsession with *attualità* ("timeliness" or "contemporaneity") and allowing him to follow instead the rhythm of his inner perceptions. In the case of the "Minus objects," these perceptions are parachuted into the physical world like a set of religious revelations. Pistoletto describes the objects as "liberations rather than constructions." In other words, rather than the *addition* of 3D sculptures in synchronic relation to other works of art, these sculptures mark the *removal* of perceptions (in the form of objects) from the flux of consciousness (that most *untimely* inner time).

The "Minus objects" then function as some kind of "inverted sculpture"—objects that leave behind, or presuppose, an empty space determined by their 3D shape. Imagine them in negative, as molds, in which the "real" sculpture is the void left elsewhere (the imprint on



Oggetti in meno ("Minus objects") in Michelangelo Pistoletto's studio, Torino, 1965–66

the artist's perceptive continuum?) by their displacement into the world. Rather than mere linguistic signifiers (symbols or metaphors) they are declared by Pistoletto as analogical negative representations of their subtraction, ∴ "Minus objects."

Absence as sculpture is a mirrored, inverted version of Leonardo da Vinci's traditional definition of sculpture as an activity operating *per via di levare*. This expression, which can be translated as "by way of subtracting" from marble the unnecessary surplus, was opposed to Leonardo's definition of painting as operating *per via di porre* ("by way of adding") and was infamously adopted by Freud to equate sculptural and psychoanalytical practices. In the "Minus objects," the operations of removal and addition are reversed and the parallel between Leonardo and Freud combined. Sculpture is conceived not as the liberation of an object trapped inside a block of marble, but rather that produced via the gesture of removal from the inner self. If we embrace this hypothesis of reversal, following Leonardo's metaphor, the "Minus objects" are less sculptures than surplus—the carved-out material, the "real" sculpture, being the empty, matching shape remaindered in the sculptor's intellectual life.

This identification of art as surplus could be extended to any translation—linguistic, interdisciplinary, or between codes—in which the original is the locus of the *idea of truth*. Etymologically, "translation" originates from the Latin *traslare* ("carrying across"), which can be meta-translated as the transposition of an object from one place to another. This act presupposes a primary habitat "truer" to the object moved than the secondary habitat where it ends up.

But in order to exorcise the Platonic metaphysics of the unattainable, authentic idea, consider the translation of an "original" score through its musical performance. Where is that music's true home? Like musical interpretation, translation can perform a text in many ways, ranging from philological rigor to deliberate reinvention. Re-enacting, -making and -visiting could then be included as so-much translation—a practice which adequately describes the caption that started this text.

According to Roman Jakobson, as quoted in a footnote in *The Open Work*, translated here from Eco's Italian translation of Jakobson's original English:

Ambiguity is an intrinsic, inalienable property of any self-referential message; in brief, it is a mandatory corollary of poetry.

When Roelstraete condemns the fetishism for paradox, ambivalence and ambiguity in contemporary art, he exposes the canonization of a method and its empty application. As we know from the Eleusinian Mysteries, the ceremonial worship of a secret can create a *vacuum* ("emptiness") at the core of the mystery—a signifying machine without an inner engine.

But there is a key difference between speaking (or writing) obscurely in order to leave the referent deliberately undetermined, and doing away with signification *per se* in order to restrict access to a few initiates of the "empty mystery." For this reason, I can't agree with Roelstraete's conclusion that "All of the mind's great strides are made in black and white." While assertion of the "idea of truth" and necessity of "taking a position" are both urgent and convincing, it doesn't follow that ambiguity and complexity (or to be fair what Roelstraete identifies as their current overrating) should be called to answer for the lazy thinking that leaves only an empty shell. Zeros and negatives are less reproachable if considered as potentials, like the void generated by the "Minus objects." Their anti-thought doesn't merely disguise the "impossibility of saying yes or no" or the inability to take a position. Consider them rather as a mathematical subtraction, a depression in the linguistic field that functions as a *reductio ad absurdum*—the mathematical proof by which a truth is demonstrated "negatively" by showing the absurdity of its falseness.

Obscurity and uncertainty can be too easily worshipped, and their abuse has both alienated a general public and created several self-appointed priests of the empty signifier. Nonetheless, I believe that it is precisely that nucleus of *enigmaticalness* that continues to afford art, like poetry, its status as the most accomplished form of inexact expression and linguistic experimentation, able to generate richer knowledge *because* of its indeterminacy. As such, precise, straightforward linguistic exactitude is not the sort of *savoir* that art can deliver, nor what we should ask of it. The empty space left behind by the "Minus objects," like the more general void generated by art's enigma, is more akin to the resonance box of a violin or cello: a hollow designed for the amplification of meaning.