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Sensitive to Art & its Discontents

The Kind of Art That Gives You Life: Michelangelo Pistoletto in Bushwick

by [Jillian Steinbauer](#) on May 7, 2014



Installation view, 'Michelangelo Pistoletto: The Minus Objects 1965–1966' at Luhring Augustine Bushwick (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

Part of the problem with making and seeing art today is that it feels like everything has been done. Making work out of everyday objects or junk on the street? Check. Defecating publicly or cutting oneself during a performance? Check. Nudity? Check. It's not limited to art, either; there's a culture-wide crisis regarding the lack of the new and (perhaps as compensation) our [obsession with digging up the past](#).

Yet every once in a while, a show comes along that offers a reminder of what it must have been like to see something new — old artwork that still brims with the energy and promise of revelation. Luhring Augustine's exhibition of [Michelangelo Pistoletto's *The Minus Objects*](#) is one those shows.

Pistoletto made *The Minus Objects* in 1965–66, reacting at the time to pressure from his dealers to produce more of his famous, red-hot *Mirror Paintings* series (the pieces for which he's still best known). "This is just to say how I returned to Italy to make the *Minus Objects* and how I reacted to an idea of the market that rained power on a cultural and practical control that forced you to feel you were part of a clan or alone," the artist [once said](#). Pistoletto wanted to be alone, and *The Minus Objects* were a big group of "fuck you."

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It worked. The artist showed the uncanny objects in his studio (see archival photos [on his website](#)), people didn't know what the hell to make of them, and, according to Pistoletto, the market for his *Mirror Paintings* froze. A year later, the [Arte Povera](#) movement, which “attempted to break down the ‘dichotomy between art and life’” was officially born. The fact that 28 pieces comprising *The Minus Objects* are now being shown at the first blue-chip gallery in Bushwick is ... well, a different story. But even there, generously scattered between the polished white walls, they retain much of their magic.



Installation view, 'Michelangelo Pistoletto: The Minus Objects 1965-1966' at Luhring Augustine Bushwick (photo courtesy the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York)

The Minus Objects are, essentially, a series of toys and tests. They are puns and one-liners and inquiries. A wedged iron structure that consists of two horizontal bars is called, simply, “Struttura per parlare in piedi” (Structure for Talking while Standing). A wooden frame that gives way to two seats and a table, “Quadro da pranzo” (Lunch Painting), extends a foot and a half from the wall, placing it somewhere between a painting and a sculpture. “Bagno” (Bath), a fiberglass tub containing a shrinking, person-sized depression nods morbidly at a bulky wood, cement, and mica sarcophagus across the room, “Sarcofago” (Sarcophagus). One of my favorite pieces, “Sfera sotto il letto” (Sphere Under the Bed), features the most basic cot imaginable with a ball of newspapers spotlighted underneath. When I saw it, I loved it immediately, both because it was completely logical and because it made no sense.

In description, *The Minus Objects* run the risk of sounding like a couple dozen bad jokes. But what they hold in person is the feeling of a grand experiment, in which Pistoletto is tinkering with multiple factors. First, as mentioned above, logic and illogic. Second, size and scale: whereas an appealing red, yellow, and green structure is a “Casa a misura d'uomo (House on a Human Scale),” a cardboard rose across the way, “Rosa bruciata (Burnt Rose),” is comically oversized. Third, shape: the human form suggested by the dirty work clothes in “Vetrina” (Display Case) contrasts with the geometric base — an iron rectangle and wooden triangle — used to display them. Fourth, authorship: these pieces share a sensibility, but not a style. One can easily believe they were all made by a single artist, but only because they're displayed as such, together in single room.

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(photo courtesy the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York)

That display is crucial. At Luhring Augustine, surrounded by *The Minus Objects*, one starts to feel like a ball inside a pinball machine: bounced back and forth, from one piece to another, a frame here, a form there, a discovery. The works have an uncanny magnetism that invites you to play, engage, maybe try your hand at a construction or a contraption. They are art that radiates life, and in doing so inspires you to make art a part of your own.

[Michelangelo Pistoletto: The Minus Objects 1965-1966](#) continues at Luhring Augustine
Bushwick (25 Knickerbocker Ave, Bushwick, Brooklyn) through May 11.