

Exhibition October 11, 2019 – August 30, 2020

Parque del Retiro, Palacio de Velázquez

Mario Merz

Time Is Mute



Rinoceronte [Rhinceros], 1979. Private collection, Madrid. (Photo Paolo Mussat Sartor)

Associated with the *arte povera* movement that favored the use of “poor” materials from nature and from the waste of the consumer society, Mario Merz (Milan, 1925–2003) is a key figure for understanding the evolution of European art in the second half of the twentieth century. Merz created a conceptually rigorous oeuvre of great poetic and iconographic power that was also a radical critique of industrial and consumerist modernity. He believed that the zeal to accumulate drove human beings away from nature and into an alienated life from which consciousness of communal life had been banished, along with the possibility of establishing emotional rather than merely instrumental connections with the environment.

Like other *povera* artists, Merz used recycled objects and materials of organic origin (sand, clay, wax, branches, coal . . .) and from the industrial world and consumer culture (tiles, glass, neon lights, wire, newspapers) to create his paintings, sculptures, and installations.

Merz embraced a certain anachronistic perspective that is key to his work. To express this, he used a range of symbolic and iconographic strategies, from the idea of nomadism, which runs through his oeuvre, to the use of premodern and protoindustrial references that evoke prehistoric times, as in *Rinoceronte* (Rhinceros, 1979) and *Piccolo caimano* (Small alligator, 1979). Merz sought to invoke a kind of mythical time and space, free from the shackles of historicity and productivity, an aspiration admirably encapsulated in a metaphor he often used when he spoke about his work: the “prehistoric wind from the frozen mountains.” This invocation was not a mere rhetorical device or a melancholic appeal to an idealized past but a powerful means of critique: it allowed him to express his rejection of the increasing consumerism of contemporary society and highlight the need to (re)connect with fundamental human experiences such as building and dwelling, to bring (back) to the center our relationship with nature.

Although he had started working as an artist in the 1950s, it was in the late 1960s, against the backdrop of political and artistic upheaval in Italy and around the world, that Merz laid the foundations of his artistic vocabulary. It was then that he made his first installations with igloos, a motif he saw as a metaphor capable of invoking the primordial and ontological sense of dwelling. Merz (like the situationists, to whom he was close) believed that this idea—which is expressed in works such as *Noi giriamo intorno alle case o le case girano intorno a noi?* (Do we go around houses, or do houses go around us? 1982), and *Casa sulla foresta* (House in the forest, 1989)—had been distorted by modernity, when dwellings became an extension of factories.



Che fare? [What is to be done?], 1968–1973. ARTIST ROOMS Tate and National Galleries of Scotland. Acquired jointly through the d’Offay Donation with assistance from the National Heritage Memorial Fund and the Art Fund 2008.

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Another key element in Merz’s work is the table, which interested him because of its polysemy: a table is an everyday object and also an altar, a space for working and for intimacy, a place for meeting and celebration. A simple board to which legs are added sums up Merz’s “*povera*” methodology, in which the humblest materials in our ordinary surroundings become art and are endowed with aesthetic value by a poeticizing gaze. The paintings and installations Merz created using tables arranged or portrayed in the form of a spiral, such as *Per i tavoli* (For the tables, 1974) and *Tavolo a spirale* (Spiral table, 1989), are one variation of his prolific artistic research and creation around the Fibonacci progression, an infinite series of integers introduced by the Italian mathematician Leonardo de Pisa (1170–1241), in which each number is the sum of the two that precede it: 0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34... This mathematical formula, which describes a recurring pattern of growth in the biological world (seashells, tree branches and leaves, plants, etc.), has been used extensively in the fields of science and art since its discovery in the thirteenth century. Merz’s almost obsessive fascination with the series is due to its ability to explain and represent highly complex biological, physical, political, and social phenomena. Transcending the limits of Cartesian mathematics, the Fibonacci series shows that there is an organic connection between numbers and the natural world: that the human and the natural worlds are part of a continuum. This numerical progression from the individual to the group in a social context can be seen in *Fibonacci Napoli* (*Fabbrica a San Giovanni a Teduccio*) (Fibonacci Naples [Factory in San Giovanni a Teduccio], 1971). Works such as this, which Merz made with the workers in a Neapolitan factory in southern Italy, help to establish the political dimension of his art, which was influenced by the pressing needs of his historical context in the industrialized city of Turin and northern Italy in the 1960s and 1970s. In this transition from Fordism to post-Fordism, with its intensification of the workers’ struggle, Merz expressed his visceral rejection of the consumerist world, which he considered the main instrument of domination and alienation in advanced capitalist societies.

Merz’s artistic practice was an exercise in resistance against the predatory designs of capitalist modernity. An exercise that he believed could be carried out only by exploding the rationalist and productivist paradigm on which it is based. This led him to generate a hybrid artistic practice in which the political combined with the poetic to form an indivisible whole, as can perhaps most clearly be seen in some of the works he made with neon lights (a material he often used). *Che fare?* (What is to be done? 1968), which is a direct reference to the text in which Vladimir Lenin outlined his strategic and organizational proposals for revolutionary parties; *Iglloo di Giap* (Giap’s igloo, 1968), on which he placed the motto of North Vietnamese general and strategist Võ Nguyên Giáp; *Città irreale* (Unreal City, 1968); and *Sciopero generale azione politica relativa proclamata relativamente all’arte* (General strike political action relative proclaimed relatively to art, 1970), are emblematic examples of this strategy at a time marked by the consequences of May 1968, the youth protests against the Vietnam War, the student and workers’ struggles in Italy in 1968 and 1969, and the strikes in Poland in 1970.

Mario Merz: Time Is Mute explores the various aspects of Merz’s work through a selection of more than sixty pieces. The exhibition revisits the artistic artifacts and motifs that made him famous, as well as lesser-known projects that he made at the start and in the final years of his career. While it invites us to engage with an intense and complex visual universe, the exhibition also seeks to contribute to reverting the depoliticized and unsituated reading of his oeuvre, emphasizing its unwavering and indisputable critical intent. In a sense, the growing political, social, and environmental crisis we are facing, which calls into question the future of our world, allows us now more than ever to conceive of the symbolic nature and the relevance of Merz’s work as a critical manifesto for a new era.