

TRIPLO IGLOO • MARIO MERZ

THE PERMANENT COLLECTION • FROM SEPTEMBER 6 TO OCTOBER 25, 1987



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Best known as a designer of spaces and a builder of igloos, Mario Merz is one of the founders of Arte Povera, an outstanding art movement that arose in Turin, Italy, in the mid 1960s. Anselmo, Boetti, Calzolari, Fabro, Kounellis, Merz, Penone, Pistoletto and Zorio, all supporters of Arte Povera, were instrumental in bringing about a profound change in the form, indeed in the very nature of works of art, which henceforth became more open to new investigations. Their energized regroupments of unusual materials have resulted in the emergence of the concept of regeneration, a point of view that can be described as both sensory and naturalistic. The attraction that exists between very different materials and a disruption in usual habits of perception further contribute to shaping new metaphors of reality.

According to Germano Celant, spokesman and theoretician for Arte Povera¹, one must live and relive in ephemeral otherness. Challenging the values and methods of artistic practice, this contempor-

ary art movement ties in with the world of nature and individuality through a perception all its own. Arte Povera rejects rationalism and often turns its attention to materials which, because of their fragility, concretize ephemeral practice. As such, the material claims its own dimension with the intention of bringing about a complete social transformation.

Arte Povera introduced new freedom to the world of art, confronting the dominant artistic trends at the time. The works of Mario Merz contribute to this freedom-seeking movement. In Merz's view, a living culture is only possible through perpetual metamorphosis. He methodically employs a process that emphasizes the contrast between materials and the manner in which these materials are transformed. The precarious appearance of the dome on his igloos is submitted to an inventiveness that rejects pre-established systems. Disconcerting in its diversity and produced by a hybrid and poetic process, the igloo focusses on a spiritual dialogue with the material itself.

Merz's first paintings date back to the early 1950s, but his work did not reach full maturity until the 1960s. It was then that he began to concentrate on the igloo and the spiral, "both because of their structural appropriateness to the Fibonacci series, and their great symbolism."² Despite the diversity of their forms, Merz's igloos are no less indissociable from his deliberations, as reflected in his earlier works.

An essential feature of Merz's work is his use, in works composed of neon, sticks, tables and fruit, of the principle of numerical progression formulated by Leonardo Fibonacci, a 12th-century monk mathematician. This type of progression, in which each term is equal to the sum of the two previous terms (1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, etc.) gives Merz the opportunity to initiate a spiritual dialogue, using an inexhaustible material. The artist sees art as a process of transition; he uses this numerical series as a metaphor on which to base his constructions and images.

It was in 1968 that Merz built one of his first igloos, *L'igloo de Giap*: a spiral accumulation of earthen bricks directly on a metal framework. On the top glows a political slogan in neon lights. As an archetype of the nomadic habitat, the spiral igloo suggests the resurgence of organic forces, while the neon sign refers to the commercial and ideological quintessence of our era.

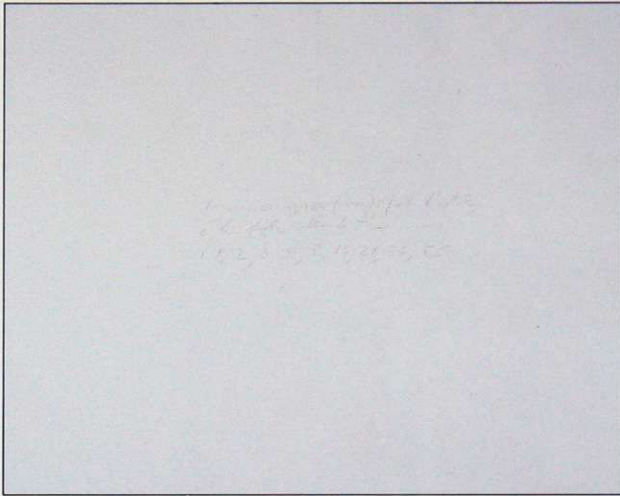
In terms of colour, the ambivalence of Merz the painter and Merz the sculptor is manifested in works such as *Quando le Piante Invaderanaoil Mando* (1975), *Animali Notturni* (1981) and *La casa del Giardineire* (1983-85). Polychromy, more intense, is established in these works through a greater complexity of use. Emphasized by the use of fragments or elements of the installation such as ceramics and stone, this colour potential remains a tributary of the shaped materials, while the accent placed on these

materials suggests the notion of temporality. An immediate reading of the work must be followed by another and yet another, progressively stepping aside, as the content reveals itself. The captive space of the igloo becomes a place of writing, a precarious drawing with unexpected lightness brought into play by the sculptural mass. Indeed, Mario Merz pays special attention to the interaction between the materials in the sculptural process. Although thematic disparity, a striking characteristic of Arte Povera, is present within each of Merz's works, the dynamics and tensions of the spirals still remain a distinctive sign of the artist's work in other respects.

One can also observe in this work certain practices inherent to primitive cultures, notably in the development of complex symbolics of objects, raised by Merz to the level of archetype. The image proposed swings between past and present: the solid form of *Triplo Igloo* is transfigured into what can be called a solid imbalance. Sheets of aligned glass, their broken lines like a collapsing house of cards, shape the walls of the igloo. The transparent glass walls reflect the metal framework and confront one another as the light plays on the smooth surfaces. The earth, glass and metal all produce completely opposite effects. The most modern of materials stands beside the most traditional, everything is freely arranged, with no apparent concern for order, as if the artist was attempting to produce an

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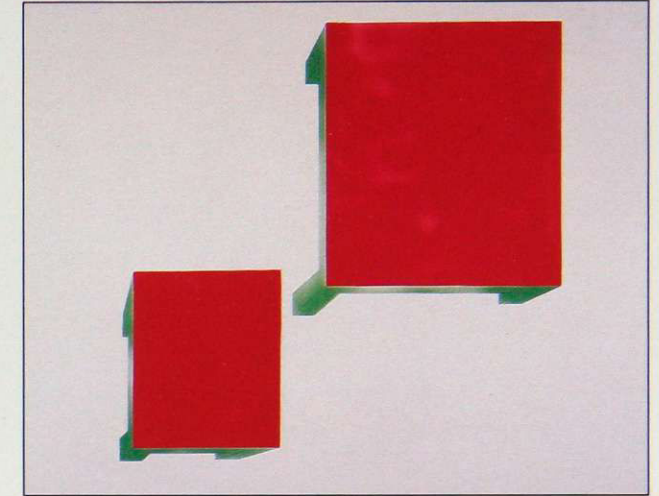
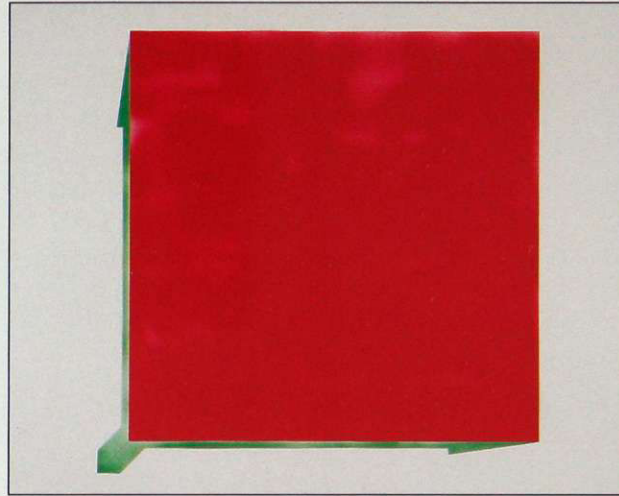


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unstable volume. Standing on a metal base, the mass of glass hurls itself in conquest of space, in which construction and architecture, materials and installation, space and time, are all subjugated to the very form of the work.

This disproportionate construction in space forces us to set aside our day-to-day concerns and contemplate the space defined – almost subjugated – by the igloo. Because of the extreme simplicity of its structure, the igloo represents, for Merz, the ideal housing model. Concave or convex, replete with controlled dynamics, the dome fascinates because of the reflection of the dualism between the interior and the exterior. It is precisely this dimension of the transformed and adapted half-sphere that Merz's work allows us to discover. He combines these aspects, creating multiple situations. The very transparency of the glass forms an energy force field that appears nearly invisible. Dense and intrusive, this force emanates from the work itself and gives off an energy of paradox and ambiguity. Glass, a flat surface, inert but transparent, contrasts with the curve of the half-sphere. This is not a formal contrast, but rather the play of opposites within the space occupied by the work, since the flat assembled panes create curved domes. This transmutation of forms and the very nature of the art work is at the heart of Arte Povera. Between the materials and the space, the balancing of a dichotomy creates an appearance of precariousness.

The evocative and sustained force that emanates from *Triplo Igloo* is determined by the form of the work and the impact of the architectural space that it defines. By introducing these materials inside the Museum, the artist brings about a change in our way of seeing as spectators and contributes to broadening our conception of art. Merz's work is certainly rather disconcerting; but isn't that precisely its role, to question our values and subvert them? The identifiable referents in *Triplo Igloo* are an integral part of our collective daily lives. If we set



ourselves the task of finding a specific solution for each of the value problems with which the work confronts us, we will deprive ourselves of the experience it offers. Designed to add a poetic dimension to our perception of things, Merz's art constantly refers to these shifting values: the only effective reaction is in fact one on a purely emotional or intuitive level. Merz's work, of exceptional magnitude, constructed as a fundamentally symbolic design, today confirms its growing ascendancy over time and the very experience of art.

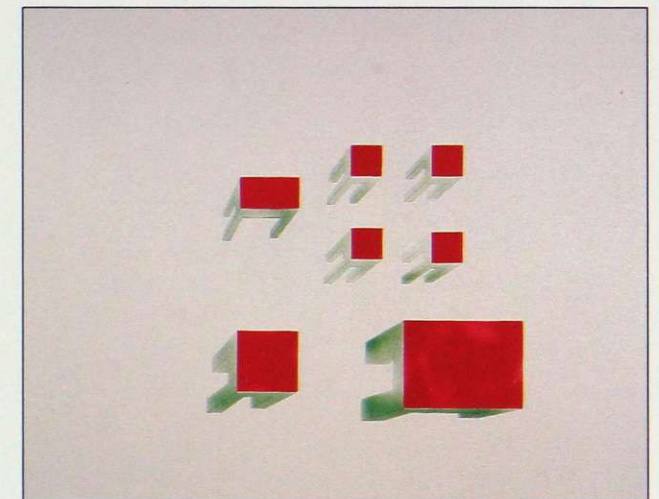
Paulette Gagnon

Curator

The Permanent Collection

(1) Germano Celant, "Une histoire de l'art contemporain en Italie", *Art Press*, May 1980, no. 37, p. 8.

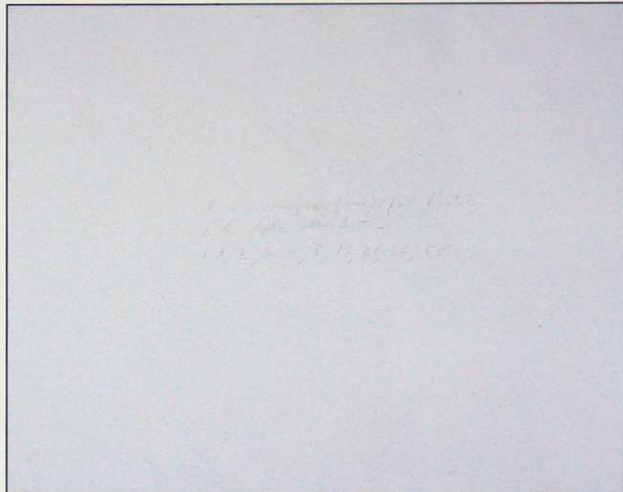
(2) Bernard Lamarche-Vadel, "L'oeuvre de Mario Merz," *Artistes*, October-November 1979, no.1, p. 8.



1. **Triplo Igloo**, 1984
aluminum, glass, earth and clay
595 cm (diameter)
Photo: Paolo M. Sartor

2. **Tavolo**, 1978
Table – metal structure with glass and stone surface
Photo: Paolo M. Sartor

3. **Macerata**, 1974
Four lithographs 74/125
70 x 90 cm (each)
Photo: Denis Farley



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MARIO MERZ

- 1925 Born in Milan on January 1st, but spends his childhood in Turin.
- 1945 Imprisoned at the end of WWII for political reasons.
- 1950-1960 Begins painting in the early 50s and is a full-time artist by 1960.
- 1954 First one-man show at the Galleria Bussola in Turin.
- 1960-1966 Executes works in which simple objects, such as umbrellas and bottles, are confronted. Begins to use neon in his structures in 1966. Builds a reputation as the founder of what will be called Arte Povera.
- 1967 First appearance of the igloo, a major theme in his work.
First exhibition at Gian Enzo Sperone's in Turin, where he becomes a regular exhibitor.
- 1968 Travels frequently for on-site creations of his structures.
- 1970 Exhibits at Kunstverein in Hanover.
- 1970-1971 Introduces the Fibonacci series of numbers in his work.
- 1972 First appearance of newspapers, animals (crocodile and rhinoceros) and plants in his work.
Exhibition at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota.
Participates in the Documenta de Kassel.
- 1973 Introduces the theme of the table.
- 1974 Returns to painting in combination with his structures.
Growing importance of the spiral in his works. Begins variations on themes introduced since 1967.
- 1975-1987 Major exhibitions:
One-man shows at the *Kunsthalle de Bâle Museum* and the *Institute of Contemporary Art* in London in 1975, the *Fokwang Museum* in Essen in 1979, the *Whitechapel Art Gallery* in London and the *Stedelijk Museum* in Eindhoven in 1980, the *ARC Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris* and the *Kunsthalle de Bâle* in 1981, the *Kester-Gesellschaft* in Hanover in 1982, the *Moderna Museet* in Stockholm, the *Israel Museum* in Jerusalem and the *Galleria Nazionale d'arte moderna* in San Marino in 1983, the *Albright Knox Art Gallery* in Buffalo in 1984, the *Kunsthau*s in Zurich in 1985, and the *Capc Musée d'art contemporain* in Bordeaux in 1987.
Exhibits regularly in galleries in Italy, Europe and the United States.
Participates in many group shows, notably the *Bienalle* in Venice in 1976, the "Coerenza in Coerenza" in Turin in 1984, "Dal Arte Povera a 1985" in Madrid, "The European Iceberg" in Toronto, "The Knot Arte Povera at P.S.1." New York in 1985, and "Qu'est-ce que la sculpture moderne?" at the Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris in 1986.

Mario Merz lives and works in Turin.





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Denys Zacharopoulos, "Mario Merz, Solitaire/Solidaire", **Artstudio**, winter 1986-87, vol. 3, pp. 84-85.

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