

# MARIO MERZ | CITTÀ IRREALE

08.05 - 20.09.2015  
VENEZIA, GALLERIE DELL'ACCADEMIA

"our every city is unreal and suspended in the void".

Mario Merz

Under the joint auspices of the Veneto Regional Secretary of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Activities and Tourism, Eriide Terenzoni, and the Veneto [Regional] Director of Museums, Daniel Ferrara, the Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice are launching a new exhibition: "**Mario Merz – Città irreale [Unreal City]**". **This exhibition inaugurates the new spaces designed to house temporary exhibitions at the Gallerie dell'Accademia in Venice, marking the first occasion on which they will open their doors to the public.** After major restoration work lasting some ten years, **the newly extended Gallerie dell'Accademia have now doubled their exhibition space** and added to the great wealth of culture they have to offer with a significant increase in the number of works on display in the permanent collection – visitors will in fact soon be able to navigate through a selection of over 500 works – and with the ability to host events and exhibitions of ancient and contemporary art.

**Mario Merz – Città Irreale [Unreal City] takes place from 8<sup>th</sup> May until 20<sup>th</sup> September, 2015, in conjunction with the 56<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale and with Milan Expo 2015.** The exhibition has been sponsored by Giovanna Damiani, former Superintendent for the Historic and Artistic Heritage of Venice and for the Museums of the city of Venice and the municipalities of the *Gronda lagunare* (the area between the lagoon and the mainland), during her tenure in Venice, and it is curated by **Bartholomew Pietromarchi, in collaboration with the Merz Foundation and organized by MondoMostre.** It is the first exhibition of Merz's work to be held in any public institution in Italy since the artist's death and since the major retrospective of his work organised in 2005 by Castello di Rivoli, GAM and the Merz Foundation (Turin), and it brings contemporary art to the new spaces of the great **Gallerie dell'Accademia** for the first time.

***Città irreale [Unreal City]*** pays tribute to the work of Mario Merz, one of the most important figures of the international art scene of the late twentieth century, as evidenced by his numerous appearances at the Venice Biennale, at Documenta on several occasions and at the great 1989 exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum in New York – the first Italian artist ever to have a solo show in that venue. The present exhibition traces the career of an artist of the Arte Povera movement who was distinguished from the first for his critical depth and extraordinary poetic scope, and its very title confirms it as the master's ideal homage to Venice – the unreal city par excellence, and a surreal, metaphysical place where nature and culture come together in perfect synthesis.

The exhibition will have a particular focus on exploring the issue of space in relation to Merz's artistic research, as it has developed over time: from individual everyday objects to the dimensions of the space one inhabits and so to the idea of habitats, from our collective and urban space up to space on a cosmic and cosmological scale. The individual perspective expands and broadens out in his work to become a collective one, both natural and artificial, and Merz's works become a symbol of the negotiation [constantly in play] between our living experience and our natural and architectural context. The works on display reveal an ethical and poetic tension, suggesting the idea of a shared and participatory society in which the balance between nature and culture, tradition and innovation, finds its synthesis in the energy of these constantly clashing elements.

In Merz's installations, the artist goes beyond traditional categories to occupy an environment and make use of objects taken from everyday reality, combining natural and ephemeral materials with urban and industrial elements, integrating references to a contemporary context and welcoming the demands of the natural landscape and the dynamics of organic growth. There are strong similarities between the issues Merz explores and those raised at EXPO Milano 2015: "Feeding the planet - Energy for Life". This is an ideal context in which to revisit and reintroduce the extraordinary contemporary relevance of Merz's poetic message.

**Neon** – which the artist began using in the mid-sixties – is at the heart of some of his most iconic works, often commissioned as urban interventions to be inserted into the fabric of a number of European cities. They range from permanent installations, such as the Fibonacci series on the dome of the Mole Antonelliana [Antonelli Monument] and the *Igloo Fontana* in Turin, to the great spiral in the Naples underground or the light installations in Zurich Main Station and Schiphol Airport in Amsterdam.

Described as "solitary, nomadic and visionary" by the critic Harald Szeemann, Mario Merz was born in Milan in 1925 and moved to Turin at a young age. A medical student during the Second World War, he left his studies to join the anti-fascist movement "Freedom and Justice". In 1945 he was imprisoned for a year in the Carceri Nuove [New Prisons] in Turin, where he executed drawings in which he explored the use of continuous line, never lifting the pencil from the paper. As soon as he was released from prison, "the next day I took a piece of paper and a pencil and went and sat out on the grass, away from home, away from everyone, to make and draw – because I thought to myself: art has to become a new message." Self-taught, Merz's first solo exhibition was held in 1954 at the La Bussola gallery in Turin where he presented images whose subjects make reference to the organic world and which revealed an emerging knowledge of Informal Art and American Abstract Expressionism. From the mid-sixties, he frequented the company of artists in Turin whom the critic Germano Celant was later to group together under the name of "Arte Povera" or Poor Art, a movement that was to bring Italian art to critical attention on the international scene. In conjunction with the spread of Anglo-American Pop Art, this group shared a preference for the use of humble everyday materials in order to question the ideological tenets of the dominant culture. The works are freely structured in space, generated by a creative process that does not seek to "represent" reality but to "be" in it. In a historical context dominated by mass production and the proliferation of technological inventions, Mario Merz, like the others, practiced an art focused instead on "man (sic) freely inventing and reinventing himself."

The exhibition is laid out chronologically so as to guide the visitor through the development of the artist's poetic vision, starting from his first explorations of object and architecture and moving through his ventures deep into graphic creation to culminate in his large scale environmental installations.

This selection of Merz's work also reveals a number of parallels with some of the works of the great masters of Venetian painting which are held in the collections of the Gallerie dell'Accademia upstairs. From Titian to Giorgione and Tintoretto, Merz engages in a dialogue with a number of masterpieces in which the conceptualisation of nature, light, movement, architectural space and places lends itself to a possible theoretical and formal comparison, permitting a unique and original reading of both.

The exhibition opens with *Città irreal* [*Unreal City*] (1968), the work from which it takes its title. This welcomes the visitor into a room devoted to an important core group of historical works from the sixties and seventies, which marked Merz's "conquest" of three-dimensional space and his definitive move beyond the confines of the two-dimensional plane. *Impermeabile* [*Impermeable*] (1966) is one of the first examples of this: Merz uses neon tubes to transfix everyday objects such that, traversed by this luminous sign, they become part of the dynamics of spatial energy symbolized by the vectorial thrust of *Lancia* [*Lance*] (1966). "All this is not *assemblage* of objects, but a grouping-together of elements already present in the landscape of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one in which we actually do find everything that you might see in the street," Merz said, in speaking about this group of pieces and about how they completely go beyond traditional categories in order to occupy the environment and make use of the stimuli of everyday reality. Such is the case of the slogans related to political upheavals of the period which can be seen at the the centre of *Sitin* [*Sit-In*] (1968). *Igloo (di Marisa)* [*(Marissa's) Igloo*] (1972) introduces one of the distinctive themes

of Merz's exploration which he was constantly to revisit and rework over the years. The **igloo** refers to a habitable structure common to both eastern and western cultures – primordial, archetypal and in perfect balance between expansion and convergence to the centre. With this further departure from traditional media, Merz finally conquered the architectural plane and presented a concrete intervention inserted into the landscape.

Set out in two rooms whose size lends them a very personal intimacy, a selection of works on paper introduces the viewer to Merz's exploration of drawing and design – a solid cornerstone of his work that has often been compared to the Renaissance tradition in which this is seen as the intellectual planning that underlies composition.

In the next room we come to **Senza titolo (Luoghi senza strada) [Untitled (Places Without Roads)]** (1994), a slate igloo that testifies to Merz's conquest of space on a larger scale and a new repertoire of materials. Here too is **Spirale di cera [Wax Spiral]** (1970-1981), in which Merz returns to the fundamental theme of the Fibonacci series – a mathematical sequence based on the laws of natural reproduction, in which each number is the sum of the previous two – as applied to the expansive dynamics of organic space and artistic creation. Conceived initially for the Haus Lange Museum building in Krefeld, designed by Mies van der Rohe, this work was in fact executed over a decade later at the Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein in Vaduz (who have loaned the work to the present exhibition). The same principles also underlie **Spirale verso lo Zenith [Spiral Towards the Zenith]** (1985) and **Senza titolo (Una somma reale è una somma di gente) [Untitled (A real sum is a sum of people)]**, in which we see Merz's interest in **the table**, a recurring element on which he focused as a key structure in social relations, nourishment and exchange.

The visitor goes on to encounter **Fulmine in tazza [Lightning in a Coffee Cup]** (1990), **La natura è l'equilibrio della spirale [Nature is the balance of the spiral]** (1976) and **Un albero occupa soprattutto tempo, due alberi occupano il medesimo tempo ma uno spazio maggiore [A tree takes up time above all, two trees occupy the same time but a bigger space]** (1976) – large-scale works that express the fundamental, central role of nature and the physical and biological universe in the framework of Merz's poetic vision. Finally the exhibition concludes in the courtyard of the Gallerie dell'Accademia with the eight large igloos of his **74 gradini riappaiono in una crescita di geometria concentrica [74 steps reappearing in concentric, geometrical increasing order of size]** (1992).