

## Mario Merz

Milan, 1925-2003

Mario Merz was born on 1 January 1925 in Milan and moved with his family, of Swiss origin, to Turin as a child. During the Second World War, he abandoned his university studies in medicine and played an active part in the partisan struggle against the fascists. Arrested in 1945 while distributing leaflets, he began to draw in prison. After his release from jail, encouraged by his friend Luciano Pistoï, he decided to devote himself entirely to painting and in 1954 he opened his first solo exhibition at the Galleria La Bussola in Turin, where he presented a series of works painted in an expressionist style.

In the mid-1960s, Merz's work evolved towards a form of experimentation that led him to create his so-called "volumetric paintings" (Mila Pistoï): constructions of canvases incorporating *objets trouvés* and organic or industrial materials, whose incorporation into the work helped position the artist among the new exponents of Arte Povera. Everyday objects and consumables – a basket, a saucepan, a mackintosh – organic items – a bundle of twigs, beeswax, clay – technical materials – metal rods, wire mesh, glass, neon – and quotations of literary and other origin, manifested themselves as energies hitherto neglected by artists and which Merz unleashed in "a sum of interior projections onto objects", sometimes translating them "directly in the objects" (Germano Celant), reinterpreting them by repositioning them in a panorama of new forms and statements. The igloo (1969) and the table (1973) made their appearance as regular items: one is an "ideal organic form, at once a world and a small house" that the artist claimed could be lived in, an absolute space that is not modelled but is "a hemisphere resting on the ground"; the other is "the first thing to determine space, a piece of raised earth, like a rock in the landscape". Igloos and tables are not just primary and archetypal structures but also aesthetic and socio-political statements at the same time, in their representing the definitive breaking through the notion of picture and the artist's solipsism. From the 1970s, the Fibonacci sequence – one in which each step in the series defined in 1202 by the Pisan mathematician Leonardo Fibonacci is the sum of the previous two (0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21...) – was a fixed presence in Merz's work. The artist interpreted it as an emblem of the dynamics relating to the processes of growth in the organic world, and placed part of the series made from neon in his works. The earliest example was in *Fibonacci Santa Giulia*, hanging in the kitchen of his Turin home (1968), and include the *Suite* buried along tram line 1 in Strasbourg (1994), the *proliferating* tables designed for John Weber (1973) and the crowd of igloos at the Kunsthaus in Zurich (1985) and at the Salpêtrière in Paris (1987). Other examples are the interpenetration of tables and igloos (from the Capc in Bordeaux, 1987, to the Stedelijk in Amsterdam, 1994).

The recurrence of certain shapes that can all be traced to the spiral, such as the triangle, the cone, the vortex, all artistically visualised, deduced or glimpsed in an infinite series of mostly organic elements, such

as snails, branches, leaves, pine cones, horns, harks back to the Fibonacci sequence, a numerical transcription of a figure that, starting from zero, expands to infinity in a spiral pattern.

The major exhibitions of the 1980s (Palazzo delle Esposizioni in San Marino, 1983; Guggenheim in New York, 1989; Castello di Rivoli and Museo Pecci in Prato, 1990) were characterised by the re-emergence of a pictorial practice that had become increasingly important, becoming “long and fast”, a natural habitat for wild and “prehistoric” animals such as rhinoceros, crocodile, tiger, bison, owl and snail, themselves bearers of a naive primary characteristic. The portraits of the animals are “religiously symbolic but also organic”, and were flanked and assembled with the above-mentioned forms (the igloo and the table, and their transfer on to canvas) and objects (neon, bottle, mackintosh, newspaper, Merz’s “shaman” tree), with a proliferating and spiralling rhythm based on the Fibonacci sequence. But they were also subject to a process of metamorphosis (technically procured by abolishing frame and primer, and letting the colour soak into the canvas, “so that it takes on the priming of the picture, rather than being its support”) that makes the painted canvas grow legs, so that it can become the animal it portrays.

This intense period, during which the artist also published a ponderous and programmatic collection of writings (*Voglio fare subito un libro*, 1985), was followed by a phase characterised by a return to the essentiality of matter and sign (presented in a solo exhibition at the Fundação de Serralves, Porto, 1999). Drawing had always been given great prominence in his work, and became the protagonist of a series of large-scale installations. Merz exhibited them in Nîmes, at the Carré d'Art - Musée d'Art Contemporain (2000), and made his debut in Latin America with a solo exhibition at Fundación Proa in Buenos Aires (2002). He took part in *Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1962-1972* (2001), the first anthological exhibition of Arte Povera in the United Kingdom, organised by the Tate Modern in London and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Of the many honours awarded to him, particularly significant are the Laurea Honoris Causa from the Dams of Bologna (2001) and the Praemium Imperiale from the Japan Art Association (2003). Among the solo exhibitions held after the artist's death, in addition to those presented by the Fondazione Merz, it is worth mentioning the major retrospective in Turin hosted in three venues: the Galleria d'Arte Moderna, the Castello di Rivoli and the Fondazione Merz itself (2005). Others include the monographic *Disegni* exhibition at the Kunstmuseum in Winterthur and then at the Fondazione (2007); *What Is to Be Done?* (Henry Moore Institute, Leeds; Bildmuseet, Umeå, in 2011-12); *Mario Merz Arnulf Rainer. Tiefe weite (Fragmente)* at the Arnulf Rainer Museum, Baden (2013); Pace Gallery, London (2014); *Città Irreale*, in Venice at the Gallerie dell'Accademia; *Numbers are prehistoric*, at the Museum of Cycladic Art, Athens (2015); *Igloos*, with over thirty igloos on show at the Pirelli Hangar Bicocca, Milan (2018); the extensive *El tiempo es mudo* anthology at Reina Sofía, Madrid (2019); and a long-term installation at the Dia Art Foundation, New York (2020).