

Marisa Merz

Turin, 1926-2019

Marisa Merz was born on 23 May 1926 in Turin, where from her adolescence she frequented the cultural scene rich in the various legacies of the Casorati school. She made her debut in the artistic field in the 1960s with her *Living Sculptures*, aluminium foil artefacts made up of several spiral elements, so mobile and irregular as to deserve the name of *living*. Linked to research into materials and essential design, these early works – presented by Sperone in Turin in June 1967 – anticipated and laid the groundwork for the artist's participation in the Arte Povera movement. With some of her actions – including the famous one with the rolled-up blankets placed on the shoreline of Fregene in 1970, on the occasion of her first solo exhibition at the L'Attico gallery in Rome – Merz introduced traditional techniques and handicrafts, or those belonging to women's work, into the language of contemporary sculpture, attributing full artistic dignity to everyday procedures and materials. In this way, she distanced herself both from the poetics of the primary structures of Minimalism, which were rational and self-referential, and from the Arte Povera group, with respect to which she was already displaying an eccentric sensitivity. Combined with the temporal component already present in her knitted works, this led her at an early age to collect, combine and redefine her earlier works, as in the assertive *Ad occhi chiusi gli occhi sono straordinariamente aperti* (1975), which provided the title for her second solo exhibition at the Attico, juxtaposing her copper wire sculptures, the *Scodella di sale* (1967), *Bea* and *Scarpette* (1968).

From the mid-1970s Merz's interventions took on a fully environmental character, first with the series of *stanze* – rooms – that the artist set up in complementary spaces: the open and public one of the gallery or the underground and secret one of a cellar, with a continuous movement from the private to the public dimension, offering an uninterrupted metamorphosis of graffiti traces into sculptural forms and of material physicality into painted colours. It was at this point that his interest in the human face began to emerge, rendered in two or three dimensions in drawings and paintings, or in clay, plaster and wax sculptures. Moreover, the heads that would accompany the artist for more than forty years were also 'living sculptures' and "like visions exhumed from the depths of chaos, where the figure of womanhood and the countenance of the artist intertwined, bound inextricably as one" (Catherine Grenier). Or, better, they were like "prefigures" (Tommaso Trini), whose autonomy developed in an unprecedented chiaroscuro in the round that postpones

or defers any final form (Rudi Fuchs). "Thinking of things 'without form'," writes Trini, "allows them to be freed from both the real and the unreal. In the circularity between light and dark, a final form can be located, reborn, at the beginning of everything".

In the 1980s, the different media in which his creativity had always been expressed found their perfect synthesis and their full maturity in the heavy and impalpable little heads, in the highly refined papers, in the multi-material altarpieces: this work was documented in personal exhibitions at the Bernier (Athens), Fischer (Düsseldorf) and Tucci Russo (Turin) galleries, and recognised with invitations to the Biennale and Documenta. Merz also participated in important group exhibitions: after the 1980 Venice Biennale, she was in Paris for *Identité italienne. L'art en Italie depuis 1959*, curated for the Centre Pompidou by Germano Celant in 1981; then at Palazzo delle Esposizioni in Rome for *Avanguardia. Transavanguardia*, curated by Achille Bonito Oliva in 1982, the year in which she also exhibited at Documenta.

The artist subsequently limited her already rare public presence even further: among her museum solo shows, the following are worthy of note: Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1994; Kunstmuseum Winterthur, 1995 and 2003; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1996; Galleria d'Arte Moderna Villa delle Rose, Bologna, 1998; Museo MADRE, Naples, 2007; Centre international d'art et du paysage, Ile de Vassivière, 2010; Fondazione Querini Stampalia, Venice, 2011; Fondazione Merz, Turin, 2012; Serpentine Gallery, London, 2013, Macro Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rome, 2016. *The Sky Is a Great Space*, the first major American retrospective exhibition, was held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, in 2017, and then presented in Europe at the Serralves Museum of Contemporary Art, Porto, and the Museum der Moderne, Salzburg, in 2018.

After taking part in several editions of the Venice Biennale since 1972, the artist was awarded the Special Jury Prize in 2001, and in 2013 she was awarded the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement. Marisa Merz passed away in Turin on 19 July 2019, and her last solo exhibition, *Geometrie sconnesse palpiti geometrici*, opened two months later at the Masi in Lugano.

In 2021, the Fondazione Merz organizes a double solo exhibition entitled *A pencil point can surpass consciousness*, with works by Marisa and Mario Merz mostly never exhibited before. The following year, the Musée Rath in Geneva hosted the couple in a very selected retrospective. The MAXXI of L'Aquila, in 2023, joins Marisa Merz with the Indian Shilpa Gupta, in a dialogue for two voices entitled *visibileinvisibile*. In 2024, thirty years after the 'French' solo show organized by the Center Pompidou, the Musée LaM in Lille is staging a refined retrospective entitled *Ecouter l'espace* (Listening to Space), with unpublished works and a special section dedicated to the artist's archive.