Marisa Merz

MET BREUER

"Marisa Merz has always been careful to do very little," writes Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev in the catalogue to the artist's first American retrospective, curated by Connie Butler, chief curator of the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (where the show travels, June 4–August 20), and Ian Alteveer, associate curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. But the show, titled "The Sky Is a Great Space," proves that doing very little for a long time is a good way to accomplish a great deal.

View of "Marisa Merz," 2017.

After seeing this retrospective, one will find Merz's accomplishment as hard to define as it ever was, and that might be its curators' signal accomplishment: They have avoided imposing an interpretive grid. The artist is unwilling to submit her works to thematic, narrative, or developmental construal, as is reflected in the fact that most of her works are untitled, and many of them undated. The origins of her art remain additionally obscure: Merz's first works, dubbed "Living Sculptures"—massive hanging bodies or floor-based objects formed of overlapping sheets of cut aluminum—started out as an installation in the artist's home around 1966, when she was forty; little explanation is given as to what if any artistic endeavors she'd undertaken before then. It's as if they were simply an inexplicable manifestation of an overwhelming life energy. The exhibition opens with these impressive entities, but no discernable chronological or thematic arrangement follows; everything goes together simply by virtue of its relation to the otherwise inexpressible creative dynamism the works all embody.

This discursive elusiveness has at times marginalized Merz, even among her Arte Povera colleagues; Piero Gilardi once admitted that, at least at first, he and other (male) *poveristi* lacked a "real understanding" of her work; he attributed this to "a feminine specificity that we were unable to grasp; we did not know that this could be organized around a significant theoretical core." Actually, her work shows the very demand for a "theoretical core" to be misguided. It's Merz's willingness to keep "following my intuition toward intuition" that we can intuit in turn as her fidelity to art's calling.

If Merz's oeuvre lacks a theoretical core, it certainly has a central image or metaphor: the head or face—always female. Over and over again, she paints heads, draws them, sculpts them in unfired clay or paraffin, in endless variations. Commentators describe her subjects as "Madonnas, angels, and queens," and this is undoubtedly justified by their artistic lineage—echoes of Constantin Brancusi and Medardo Rosso, of Marie Laurencin and Alexej von Jawlensky, of Futurism and Art Nouveau, but also (as Leslie Cozzi shows in the catalogue) of early Christian and Renaissance art are legion. But their meaning is elusive. They are as far from allegory as they are from formalism, embodying instead the obstinate communicative or signifying capacity of images as such.

Sometimes a more specific allusion teases us with a hint of possibly determinate meaning, for instance a collaged newspaper photo of Renée Maria Falconetti as Joan of Arc, or a metallic paint, pastel, and graphite drawing of a figure with wide-open eyes, gaping mouth, and upraised hands, evidently modeled on Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*,

1920—Walter Benjamin's famous "angel of history" desiring unrequitedly to "awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed." And yet I don't think Merz cares to make anything whole. Imbued as it may be with art's past, hers does not look back. In each of her many marvelous drawings on paper or canvas, crisscrossing lines divide the surface into countless facets that seem to keep reinventing the face as something new, never seen before, and yet recognizable and reassuring of manifold possibilities. The subdivision of the surface is the piecing together of the face as an apparition, always on the verge of appearing.

—*Barry Schwabsky*