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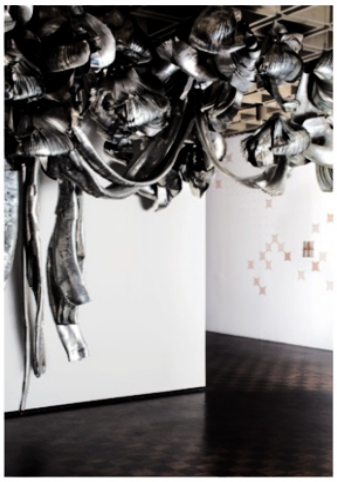
MARISA MERZ'S FACTORY OF DREAMS

A retrospective at the Met Breuer reveals that the least-known and only female member of Arte Povera is also among the best.

By Peter Schjeldahl



Merz's "Living Sculpture" (1966) and "Untitled" (1976), at the Met Breuer.

Photograph by Frances F. Denny for The New Yorker

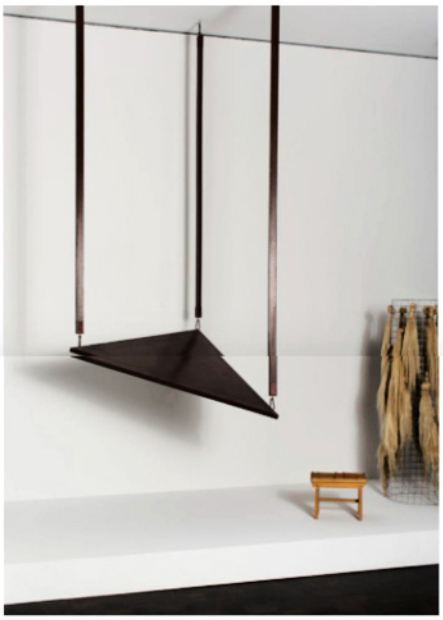
The Met Breuer is not yet a year old, but it has already distinguished itself as a site of beguiling and serious surprises: a huge survey of unfinished works by masters of Western art, a provocatively ingenious installation of Diane Arbus photographs, and a terrific retrospective (soon to close) of the African-American painter Kerry James Marshall. The latest is "Marisa Merz: The Sky Is a Great Space," the first major retrospective of the Italian artist in the United States. Merz is the least-known and, perhaps not incidentally, the only female member of Arte Povera, a movement shepherded into existence, in 1967, by the art critic Germano Celant, as Italy's ambitious riposte to American Pop and minimalism. About a dozen artists participated, creating large, often sprawling abstract sculptures in humble materials—dirt, rocks, tree branches, used clothes, rope, burlap, industrial detritus—putatively to counter the sterility of consumer culture, but also, more practically, to master the capacious exhibition spaces that were becoming an international norm.

Marisa Merz was routinely identified as the wife and, since 2003, the widow of one of Arte Povera's leading figures, Mario Merz; for years her own work was exhibited sporadically and afforded only glancing consideration. But at the Met Breuer she emerges as the liveliest artist in a movement that was often marred by intellectual and poetic pretensions, and whose abstracted themes of nature and metaphysics rarely appealed to American sensibilities, and still don't very much. (Minimalism, which never took hold in Italy, had pretty well cauterized symbolic content for the art world here.) Merz is still at work, in her home town of Turin, at ninety. That's a late age for a début retrospective, but this show will be revelatory to many people, as it is to me. An occasion that might have seemed a revisionist historical footnote turns out to be more like the best saved for last.

It all started in her kitchen. The show opens with immense hanging sculptures of clustered ductlike forms in shiny aluminum sheeting, homemade with shears and staples. Cutout swaths loop and overlap, like snake-skin scales, to gorgeous, looming, somewhat sinister effect. The earliest piece dates from 1966, when Merz was spending most of her time at home, bringing up Beatrice, the daughter who was born to Marisa and Mario in 1960, the year they married. The pieces thronged the kitchen walls and extended into the living room and around the furniture, encasing the TV set. Beatrice, who is now the president of the Merz Foundation, which manages her father's estate and her mother's career, remembers being scared of the sculptures as a child. Here and there, the gleaming surfaces are faintly yellowed by cigarette smoke and the residue of cooking oil.

Merz has said that the series' English title, "Living Sculpture," paid homage to the Living Theatre, a New York troupe of Dionysian performers that was popular with young European artists. Soon after the first work's creation, it starred in "The Green Monster," an underground horror film made by some of Merz's friends, in which it was seen to digest writhing, naked actors. In 1967, it was briefly installed in Turin's Piper Pluri Club, one of a number of related performance-and-party venues around the country that were frequented by the Italian counterculturati.

The show proceeds with other sculptural works, many of them made of hand-knitted copper wire or nylon filament. Some are prepossessingly large. An untitled installation from 1976, spanning an entire wall, comprises irregularly spaced wire squares the size of pot holders, stretched at their corners by brass-head nails. Some bare nails suggest squares that are missing or invisible. A floor piece, dated 1990-2003, is composed of a low steel trough, into which melted candle wax was poured; there, the wax hardened around the bases of nine tiny sculptures, in unfired clay, of indistinct figures and faces that are reminiscent of the sorts of prehistoric totem that archeologists, in despair, assign to "ceremonial use." Other works are small, including *scarpette* ("little shoes"): dainty slippers that Merz made from copper wire or nylon thread, for herself and for Beatrice. The child's nickname, Bea, is spelled out on a wall in clumps of nylon mesh, bristling with the knitting needles that were used to create them.



VIEW FULL SCREEN

From left to right: "Altalena (Swing)" (1968), "Untitled" (1979), and "Untitled" (1966).

Photograph by Frances F. Denny for The New Yorker

Merz's work, no less than that of her Arte Povera peers, advanced an avant-garde shibboleth of the era: proposing to close what Robert Rauschenberg had called "the gap" and which Germano Celant, with more starch, termed "the dichotomy" between art and life—as if art is ever meaningfully separate from life. The idea has always struck me as a fancy way of exalting a simple rejection of conventional display—frames, pedestals—and of working with found objects, defined spaces, and elements of performance. If there was a more political aspect to the Italians' works, it was ambiguous, assumed rather than expressed. The *povera* (impoverished) element counted less as activism than as a sentimental gesture of virtue on the biennial circuit and in the deluxe galleries where their careers unfolded.

But the art/life conceit acquires special pith in Merz's case, beginning with her marginal standing in the Arte Povera group and the way that she navigated it: by making it the keynote of a personal, untrammelled originality. Both the ferocious "Living Sculpture" and the more ingratiating pictures and little sculptures that followed it made positive content out of being consigned to domesticity. Merz refuses to call herself or her art feminist, to the extent that she banished the word from the title of one of several fine essays in the Met Breuer show's catalogue. I'm reminded of some strong-willed women artists I knew, in the early years of the women's movement, who also resisted having their solitary struggles described in ideological terms. But Merz's very independence makes her an ideal avatar for feminist analysis. She pushed against limits in ways that revealed what and where the limits were, and she turned the friction to shrewd and stirring account. ♦

Peter Schjeldahl has been a staff writer at The New Yorker since 1998 and is the magazine's art critic. **More**

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