

THOMAS DANE GALLERY

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ARTSEEN

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MARISA MERZ

The Sky Is a Great Space

by Tom McGlynn

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The blatant poetry and phenomenological politics of the Arte Povera group in post-World War II Italy offered a corrective to what art historian Jaleh Mansoor has termed “Marshall Plan Modernism 1” or the encroachment of hyper-realized American financial and cultural capital into war-torn Europe. It is important to view the work of the group’s sole female associate, Marisa Merz, in this larger historical context if only to understand how her own brand of private, quietist poetics can hold sway against more worldly cultural ambition, both then and now. As the United States is currently yoked to a perverse, crepuscular form of American exceptionalism, and while the rest of the world seems drifting toward its own version of neo-nationalism, Marisa Merz’s contributions to an idea of post-World War transnationalism can be instructive. The resilience of her artistic vision, and its self-tendered, organic ontology, is well-suited to undermine abstract, idealist politics. These politics yet infiltrate the art world. They reproduce hegemonic stereotypes, such as the heroic gesture or the Apollonian male genius, through restrictive narratives of formal determinism rather than through informal, emergent poetics of interiority, as evident in this retrospective of Merz’s work. The artist seems to eschew the rationalistic structures and ideal forms that undergird the formalism of her male compatriots’ gestures—Jannis Kounellis’s metal grid arrangements, Gilberto Zorio’s javelin-suspended stars, Giulio Paolini’s repetitive rectangles, and her husband Mario Merz’s igloo structures—more often opting for a randomized structuring of form. This orchestration of unintended consequence in her work actively invites you to step outside of pre-conceived master narratives of aesthetic unity to explore the messy reality of the real.

Immediately confronting the viewer upon entering the show are large, hanging tubular structures fabricated of aluminum scales. Collectively titled *Living Sculptures* (all 1966), these works were originally shown in the context of the Piper Pluri Club in Turin in 1967. There, Merz was inspired by performances of Julian Beck and Judith Molina’s *The Living Theater*, and wound up lending these works to be used in a film, *Il Monstro Verde* (1966 – 67) in which naked performers (including Taylor Mead) enact the Adam and Eve, and other myths of transformation. The performative use of these sculptures is not incidental but integral to their conception: work to be felt and not just considered objectively. Indeed much of Arte Povera’s historical influence in general, and Merz’s more specifically, has to do with the amiable reduction of *l’oggetto d’arte* (work of art) to a prop in an actualized situation. Merz continued such an exploration in works such as *Altalena (Swing)* (1968), originally conceived as a plaything for the artist’s daughter, Bea. This sculpture—a large wood triangle, suspended on hooks by wooden balusters—also signals a point in Merz’s career where she begins to consider the synecdoche (or parallel rhetorical objects) of the domestic as appropriate subject matter.

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In one of the many excellent essays in the show's accompanying catalogue, Lucia Re clarifies this move by the artist as one based in metonymy rather than in metaphor. Re explains:

In the metonymic process signs and their figural sense do not replace things as their real meaning (as does metaphor), but instead there is solidarity between them...elements of Merz's work, as well as individual works, over time become connected, related and articulated with one another in different ways and also disconnected, loosened, and dispersed to make way for other configurations."²

Further examples of domestic synecdoche in Merz's work include knit copper shoes in *Untitled* (1975) and a child's chair strung, guitar-like, with copper wire in *Sedia (Chair)* (n.d.). Both refer to a partial recognition of the entirety of worlds that can be contained within the sphere of the domestic. This of course brings up implications of to whom that sphere has traditionally been ascribed (women). Merz's implicit feminism is in using the domestic as the perfectly under-considered point of departure for her radical rearrangement of ideological "furniture" in the institutional "housing" of culture.

The exhibition progresses into the artist's increased involvement with traditional media such as ceramics, painting and drawing, which seem to materialize and then dematerialize before one's eyes. Merz's drawing technique, especially in portraits such as those in an untitled series of large heads (1995 – 96), might be described stylistically as an amalgam of Stanley William Hayter, John Graham, and Paul Klee. In galleries posterior to the main space of the museum's second floor, a large collection of the artist's testini, or little heads, are displayed in a wide variety of painted, glazed and unfired ceramics. Though sometimes presented individually, more often these works are distributed in ensembles forming chora of personages, seemingly straining upwards and outwards to make contact with museum goers. One large installation situates these on a floor-oriented bed of cracked paraffin, as if skating on the thin ice of the soul, or straining figures in a Dante allegory. In many of these later works, including her expressionist angel and saint paintings, Merz invokes the spiritual plane. The explicit spirituality in these works, however, is at times overstated, having the effect of burdening the artist's otherwise blithe gestures with too much iconicity, too much "religion." The crudity with which the testini are crafted, mouths and eyes sometimes barely indicated by a slash or a mound, and the ephemeral and vibratory forms of her drawings, seem indicative of a much more interesting overall tendency in Merz's work: to slightly articulate the inarticulable in order to generously allow the viewer to finish her sentences.



Installation view: *Marisa Merz: The Sky Is a Great Space*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, January 24 – May 7, 2017.

Endnotes

1. Jaleh Mansoor, *Marshall Plan Modernism: Italian Postwar Abstraction and the Beginnings of Autonomia* (Durham and London: Duke University Press 2016).
2. Lucia Re, "The Mark on the Wall, Marisa Merz and a History of Women in Post-War Italy," *Marisa Merz, The Sky is a Great Space* (Prestel, Munich, London, New York: Prestel Books, 2016), 48.

<http://brooklynrail.org/2017/05/artseen/Marisa-Merz-The-Sky-Is-a-Great-Space>