

## PRESS KIT

MARISA & MARIO MERZ

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### Marisa et Mario Merz

The MAH is pleased to launch its new programme at the Rath Museum with this first exhibition, on view from June 2 to September 25. It brings together major works by Marisa Merz (1926-2019) and Mario Merz (1925-2003), including a major piece from the museum's collection and others that have never before been exhibited in Switzerland. Developed with the collaboration of the Merz Foundation, this exhibition opens an understanding of the great intellectual and artistic proximity that united the two artists throughout their lives. In accordance with its mission, MAH would like to present viewers with sizable groups of works because most often artists are known solely through loans of a single or small number of pieces.

In keeping with the MAH programme, Musée Rath exhibitions are conceived in close connection with its collection. This new presentation, which pays homage to two giants of Arte Povera, Marisa Merz (1926-2019) and her spouse Mario Merz (1925-2003), was therefore developed around a major work, *Sans titre* (Untitled) by Mario Merz, created in Geneva in 1985 and donated by the artist to the MAH the following year.

Made up of nine installations, the exhibition uniquely emphasizes the strong connection between the two artists. For the first time, the public will discover a series of installations that they conceived together. More than collaborations, these can be seen as a four-handed self-portrait. Moreover, a work such as *Igloo*, which Mario dedicated to Marisa and exhibited in 1972 at Documenta, also constitutes a sign of their unwavering and protective bond.

Mario Merz, an anti-fascist resistance fighter of Swiss descent, developed work throughout his life that was marked by reflections on what unites us. While for Marisa, art was a means of bringing down the barrier between reality and our intimate imagination, Mario continuously recalled the fragility of our integration into nature. Together they incited us to imagine that art allows us to perceive the contours of the mirrors we too often set up between ourselves and the world. This message continues to have a poetic range rendered brutal by current events.



### Work from the MAH



**Mario Merz**

*Untitled, 1985*

Mixed media on paper, stones, bundles of sticks, neon  
Approximately 1400 x 700 x 200 cm

© Musée d'art et d'histoire de Genève, photo: J.-M. Yersin

In 1985, Mario Merz received the Prix de la Banque Hypothécaire du Canton de Genève (BCG), receiving a monetary sum and an exhibition at the MAH, in return for which he donated a work to the museum. As a result, the work became part of the MAH collection.

This monumental installation is representative of the work the artist developed in the 1960s, and it very clearly expresses the tension between nature and culture that traverses his entire career. This connection between natural geometry and human construction makes him one of the central figures of Arte Povera.

A large portion of the installation is made up of bundles of vine shoots placed directly on the floor, side by side, forming a 7x14-meter rectangle, their movement evoking a turbulent sea. The artist uses these elements, considered timeless, to illustrate the dialectic between nature and culture. The horizon of the work is "closed" by some granite slabs sitting atop a large charcoal drawing. Neon numbers originating from the Fibonacci mathematical series are positioned on a diagonal over the bundles. These numbers, which Merz often uses, symbolize the connections between nature, science and art. The Fibonacci series also illustrates the idea of process, which the artist prefers to the finished object. Finally, the use of neon, the lighting, reveals the hidden structure regulating both natural and artistic geometries.



### Selection of three pieces

a.



Marisa et Mario Merz  
*Untitled*, 2002

Metal structure, glass, unfired clay, bronze, aluminium, paraffin, pigments  
750 x 780 x 100 cm

© Collezione Merz, photo: S. d'Exéa

The artistic process that Marisa and Mario Merz built without interruption over a half century of exhibitions and creative work had no limits. It affected all spaces of their life.

This structure illustrates the fusion: Mario's transparent tables naturally support Marisa's sculptures. "I follow the curve of this mountain that I see reflected in this lake of glass, At the *Tavolo di Mario*", the artist would say of herself.

This spiral table was created in 2002 on the occasion of a personal exhibition of Marisa the Marian Goodman Gallery in Paris. The natural geometric development of Mario's structure is emphasized by some fifteen small sculptures of Marisa that follow one another, as in a traditional farandole.

b.



Marisa Merz  
*Untitled*, not dated

Unfired clay, gold leaf, paint, lead, copper wire, paraffin, wooden base

© Collezione Merz, photo: F. Bevilacqua  
Exhibition, Musée Rath, Geneva

Whether this is a "unique and expanded self-portrait" (Richard Flood), or a multitude of "prefigurations" that free the sculpture from reality so as to "locate a form at the beginning of everything", for Marisa Merz, the heads became daily companions from



the time she invented them in the early 1980s. Shaped in unfired clay, then infused with pigments, veiled in paraffin, paint or gold leaf and improbable plastics, clothed in canvas and copper lattice, they produce a magical link between Cycladic sculpture and the wax pieces of Medardo Rosso. The heads were first exhibited individually, on slender tripods, wax plates, marble pedestals, and blocks of clay; then they were shown in increasingly numerous groups, supported by wooden bases, squat beams or logs. The installation shown at the MAH evokes the room that the artist wanted to install at the 1988 Biennale.

c.



Mario Merz

*Igloo di Marisa*, 1972

Metal structure, fabric, neon, Plexiglas

300 x 150 cm

© Private collection / Kunstmuseum Liechtenstein, Vaduz; photo: G. Persano

*Igloo de Marisa* is distinguished by its surface made of fabric cushions. Its prototype was exhibited in Düsseldorf for *Prospect 1968*, recreated for Documenta 5, the first time Mario Merz was invited to participate in that major exhibition. The artist worked there while designing a matching igloo, meant to be exhibited at the 36th Venice Biennale, held that same year, 1972. A sequence of neon Fibonacci numbers in neon are installed on the surfaces of the two igloos. This industrial element is superimposed on the manual work evoked by the upholstery. This major work by Mario Merz reveals the intimate complicity of the two artists.

### Mario Merz (1925-2003)

Of Swiss descent, Mario Merz was born on January 1, 1925, in Milan. During the Second World War he played an active role in the anti-fascist struggle. Arrested in 1945, he began drawing in prison. At the end of the war, he decided to focus on painting. His work took a new direction in the mid-1960s. Creating canvas constructions including found objects and organic or industrial materials, he became one of the protagonists of Arte Povera. Two forms, the *Igloo* (1969) and the *Table* (1973), became central to his consideration of volume. Both are primary and archetypal structures, aesthetic and socio-political declarations. Beginning in the 1970s, the Fibonacci mathematical series (0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21 ...) became an emblematic element of his work; the artist saw in them the dynamic of the growth processes of the organic world, deriving the motif of the spiral, to which a series of elements and materials seemed to him to be naturally connected. His works from the 1980s are marked by the increasing presence of his pictorial practice, with a clear focus on drawing. He died in Milan in 2003.



### Marisa Merz (1926-2019)

Born on May 23, 1926, in Turin, Marisa Merz began working as an artist in the 1960s with the production of movable pieces in aluminium foil, *Living Sculpture*. Her investigations into the essence of materials heralded her participation in the Arte Povera movement.

She integrated traditional craft techniques as well as techniques associated with women's work into the language of contemporary sculpture. Granting artistic visibility to ordinary materials and practices, she attempted to distance herself from the rational thinking of minimalist structures and also differentiated herself from Arte Povera. Beginning in the 1970s, she moved away from the "art world" to work with the idea of poetic disappearance, and her interventions interrogated boundaries between private and public spaces. During the 1980s, the artist synthesized her poetic ideas in very refined works on paper, series of small sculptures and altarpieces. Marisa Merz notably focused the sharpness of her feelings about humanity by reducing her sculpture to small heads of raw clay. Here, she paradoxically almost discovered the permanence of a motif that is the essential reflection of each of us. Similarly, in her drawing practice she took suspended forms, placing them in direct connection to what could be a universal perception of art. She moreover began to reduce her public presence, which was already rare.

Marisa Merz received the special jury prize at the 2001 Venice Biennale and, in 2013, the Gold Lion award for Lifetime Achievement. Moreover, recent exhibitions of her work, notably *The Sky Is a Great Space*, have underscored the importance of her presence in the history of European art. She died in Turin on July 19, 2019.

### Arte povera

This movement, which emerged in Italy in the 1960s, like American minimalism, aimed to overturn the scale of values of consumer society by diminishing our fascination with products. In this way, the artists gathered in this orbit would move toward the use of increasingly raw materials and the affirmation of minimal artistic gestures. Marisa and Mario Merz are central figures in this movement. Turinese artists engaged in a post-war Italian climate that called into question the values of materialist contemporary society, they worked together, constructing art that plays on a poetic statement about nature and diversity. Germano Celant felt that Arte Povera erased the boundary between art and life, embracing the incoherence and instability of reality in the making. It is precisely that critical space that Marisa and Mario Merz inhabited throughout their lives.

### Merz Foundation

Based in Turin, the Merz Foundation alternates exhibitions devoted to Mario and Marisa Merz, offering numerous opportunities to consider and study their work, with other major projects by artists invited to interact in its spaces and participate in special exhibitions. The Foundation also encourages dialogue between disciplines connected to contemporary culture. Rather than an immutable guardian or custodian of the memory of the two artists, the Merz Foundation aims to be the artists' home and acts as a driving force for art.



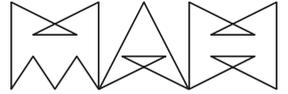
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**Practical Information** Musée Rath  
Place de Neuve – 1204 Genève  
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Saturday and Sunday, 11am.-6pm  
Closed Monday and Tuesday

Admission fee: CHF 10.-/5.-  
Free up to age 18 and the 1st Sunday of every month

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CH-1206 Genève



**Marisa et Mario Merz**  
*Untitled, 2002*

Metal structure, glass, unfired clay, bronze, aluminium,  
paraffin, pigments  
750 x 780 x 100 cm  
© Collezione Merz, photo: S. d'Exéa



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**Mario Merz**

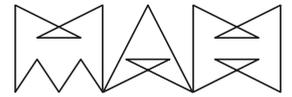
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**Mario Merz**

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**Marisa Merz**  
*Untitled*, not dated

Unfired clay, gold leaf, paint, lead, copper wire,  
paraffin; wooden base  
© Collezione Merz, photo: F. Bevilacqua

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**Mario Merz**  
*Tavolo per Marisa* (Table for Marisa), 2003

Structure, verre, bois, plexiglas, argile crue, marbre,  
feuille d'or, plastique  
450 x 270 x 280 cm  
© Collezione Merz, photo : S. d'Exéa



**Mario Merz**  
*Nuvola rossa con il tramonto* (Red Cloud  
with Sunset), 1983

Mixed media on canvas; metal structure  
140 x 1000 cm  
© Collezione Merz, photo: F. Bevilacqua

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