

MARIO MERZ**NUMBERS ARE PREHISTORIC**

Museum of Cycladic Art, Athens

22 OCTOBER 2015 – 31 JANUARY 2016

Curatorial Text

The title of this exhibition is a phrase taken from Mario Merz's book *I Want to Make a Book Right Now* (1989): "*I numeri sono preistorici.*" The statement reflects the urgency that animated the artist and his total dedication to and engagement with art, politics, and life.

"Numbers are prehistoric" means that numbers have existed since before history and have progressed infinitely along with the evolution of the earth and the universe. Merz's work explores the notion of nature as a powerful, generous, and ever-expanding force that grows in the rational succession conceived by Italian mathematician Leonardo Fibonacci (c.1175–c.1240). Born in Pisa, he studied mathematics in North Africa and introduced the decimal system in Europe. He also studied the patterns of growth in nature and solved a rabbit population growth problem with what has become known in the Western world as the Fibonacci sequence—1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89, 144, 233—in which each number is the sum of the two preceding numbers. Visually it is best illustrated by the development of a spiral, a recurring image in Merz's work, often culled directly from nature in the form of a snail shell. The artist's work centers on his belief that nature is an overriding presence and that its laws, at once brutal and sublime, regulate human activity all the way from issues of survival (as in the igloo) to social interaction and political action.

Numbers Are Prehistoric addresses various key aspects of Merz's oeuvre. A large section of the show is dedicated to his writings, which are introduced as a full-fledged artistic proposition. Part poetry and part manifesto, Merz's texts—in which he elaborated his theories about art, nature, and politics in a free-flowing stream of consciousness—are a significant part of his work. A number of his writings have appeared in the seminal *I Want to Make a Book Right Now*. In this exhibition, we present some material never before exhibited, treading the thin line between visual and written expression. Always encompassing different levels of consciousness with a powerful accent, Merz addresses the issues central to his art in his own way, employing lines, numbers, and the power of words.

The exhibition is introduced, on the ground floor, by *Igloo con albero* ("Igloo with Tree") (1969), an iconic form that recurs in the artist's work and stands for his preoccupation with basic human needs: shelter, food, and the essential relationship with nature. For Merz the encounter with nature is a confrontation with the sublime, beyond the realm of the beautiful. In the words of Edmund Burke: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger..., Whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror" (*A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 1757). It is not terror that is embodied by Merz's work but rather a sentiment of physical and spiritual exaltation.

In the next room, *Foresta con video sul sentiero* ("Forest with Video on a Path") (1995) evokes for me the conflict between nature and an archaic society in rural Piedmont. I still remember, as a child in 1950s Turin, seeing men and women bearing huge bundles of branches on their shoulders and calling out "*Fasce!*" to sell what they had foraged in the woods as kindling for stoves and fireplaces. Their loads seemed unbearable, as did the journey to town for the elderly people who carried them, while the youth stayed behind working in the fields. This installation is a powerful reminder of how politics are interwoven into the very cycles of existence and nature. Its video (dating from 1970) shows Merz drawing a spiral, alluding to the patient growth of the humble creature (still a significant source of protein in rural postwar Italy) and suggesting a metaphor for growth in nature, mathematics, and the social realm.

On the first floor, the painting *Senza Titolo* ("Untitled") (1981), representing a lion and a cone, and the neon work *Pittore in Africa* ("Painter in Africa,") are reminders of the closeness of art to primal forms, specifically in Africa, the birthplace of the human species and a continent that invokes an image of raw, unbridled nature. The neon script of *Sciopero Generale* ("General Strike") (1970) evokes an "unbridled" social revolt, one that connects art making with political activism: *Sciopero generale azione politica relativa proclamata relativamente all'arte* ("General strike relative political action proclaimed relatively to art"). The exhibition ends with *Una somma reale è una somma di gente* ("A Real Sum Is a Sum of People") (1972), a work executed in a factory canteen that connects issues of survival (food), social considerations (the indefinite infinite growth of the proletarian state), and the sequence of numbers that maps out organic growth in nature.

Works on paper accompanying the installations on both floors, along with original manuscripts of a number of texts and drawings in vitrines, witness Merz's mastery as both painter and writer. Spanning from 1973 to 1990, they are a testament to the artist's relentless search for the right and immediate response to his river of thoughts as well as to the flux that characterized Italy in the latter part of the twentieth century.

AN ANECDOTE.

T. S. Eliot wrote: "*Gentile or Jew / O you who turn the wheel and look windward, / Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you*" ("The Waste Land," Section IV: "Death by Water").

About forty years ago an art dealer from Torino, Mario T., told me that in the early 1950s he had invited a very young Merz, then in his twenties, to do an exhibition in his gallery. The artist responded positively but insisted that no one (including the dealer) could visit his studio in the months before the show. One week before the opening, Merz showed up in the gallery, on Via Viotti, with only one canvas, almost as large as the towering artist, with a thickly textured surface. When Mario T. asked him why he only had one painting for the exhibition, Merz responded that in fact the canvas contained seven paintings, one over another. The exhibition never came to be; in fact the dealer still seemed irritated when he told me the story. (Most likely so was Merz, who in his words was an "irritated irritable" person).

This brings to mind two thoughts: The first is that in the early 1950s Merz had embraced the notion of the generative power of art—a painting would beget the next, and the next, and so on; the second is that in his mind the growth of a work of art was already subconsciously in the Fibonacci sequence: $1+1+2+3=7$.

Mario Merz (1925–2003) was born and died in Milan. He lived most of his life in Turin.

Paolo Colombo
Curator

Exhibition Details

Museum of Cycladic Art
Stathatos Mansion
Vasilissis Sofias ave. & 1, Irodotou str., Athens 10674

Duration: 22 October 2015 – 31 January 2016

Opening hours:
Monday – Wednesday – Friday – Saturday 10:00 – 17:00
Thursday 10:00 – 20:00
Sunday 11:00 – 17:00
Tuesday closed