

**NEON and Fondazione Merz present:
*MARIO MERZ: NUMBERS ARE PREHISTORIC***

Museum of Cycladic Art, Athens
22 October 2015 – 31 January 2016

NEON in collaboration with the Fondazione Merz are proud to present the first museum exhibition in Greece of Mario Merz (b. 1925), a major figure of the Arte Povera movement. This survey exhibition, *Mario Merz: Numbers are prehistoric*, will shed light on the late Italian artist's multi-faceted practice, treading the thin line between visual and written expression. The exhibition features previously unseen material, and will be displayed in the Stathatos Mansion at the Museum of Cycladic Art, Athens.

Numbers are prehistoric takes its title from a phrase in Mario Merz's seminal 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. With this phrase, Merz maintained that numbers existed 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 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. 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 fully-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. 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 comes at a crucial moment in Greece when notions of necessity and primary needs are being re-evaluated, giving the opportunity to re-examine ones' ideas through varied examples of his oeuvre. With seminal works spanning from his famous igloos, to neon writings, painting and drawing, each highlights the artist's preoccupation with the concept of basic human needs, the beauty and magic of natural growth, and at the same time acting as a powerful reminder of how politics are interwoven into the very cycles of existence and nature.

According to the curator of the exhibition, **Paolo Colombo**: *“It is my privilege to work with an artist I knew but with whom I never had the opportunity to work with in the past, especially to do so in Athens, where we met. Athens has had a deep resonance for both. It feels like coming back home after our first encounter in the late 70s”.*

As the President of Museum of Cycladic Art, **Mrs Sandra Marinopoulos** says: *“It is the second time that the Museum of Cycladic Art collaborates with the cultural organization NEON- after the exhibition of the German artist Martin Kippenberger two years ago- and we really feel that we have firmly laid the foundations for an extremely creative cooperation. It is also a great honor for us at the Museum of Cycladic Art that we are the first museum in Greece to host the work of Mario Merz, one of the most important artists of the Arte Povera movement. The exhibition Mario Merz: Numbers are prehistoric combines art with science, maths, numbers and nature. The exhibition is part of this year’s contemporary art program, which focuses on the presentation of important modern and contemporary artists”.*

According to **Elina Kountouri**, the Director of NEON: *“It is a unique opportunity to see in Athens for the first time in a museum, a survey show of the work of Mario Merz. Our collaboration with the Museum of Cycladic Art, Fondazione Merz and Paolo Colombo is a vivid example of partnership that can raise insightful discussions about the relevance of arte povera and Merz’s work in Greece today. Colombo invoked a fresh outlook to the work of a historical figure”.*

The exhibition is curated by Paolo Colombo.

Exhibition Details

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

Duration: 22 October 2015 – 31 January 2016

Opening: 21 October 2015, 8pm

Opening hours:

Monday – Wednesday – Friday – Saturday 10:00 – 17:00

Thursday 10:00 – 20:00

Sunday 11:00 – 17:00

Tuesday closed

Parallel Program

In the context of the exhibition an educational program is implemented in cooperation with the organization Thales + Friends. The program, leveraging on the life and oeuvre of Merz, focuses on the relation between mathematics and life, weighing on the fact that mathematics are met in every aspect of society and therefore in art. The program addresses young people 12 – 15 years old. Participation is free.

About the Artist

MARIO MERZ (1925-2003)

Mario Merz is one of the most celebrated artists to come out of the Arte Povera scene. His first one-man show took place in 1954 at the Galleria La Bussola in Turin, and presented some expressionist-style oils on canvas. By the middle of the 1960s, Merz' research had developed towards an artistic experimentation that led to "volumetric paintings" (Mila Pistoia): canvas constructions enveloping objets trouvés, organic or industrial materials, whose appearance in the work contributed to place the artist amongst the protagonists of Arte Povera. 1970 saw the start of the numbered Fibonacci series, a progression in which each number is the sum of the two before (0, 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21...). Merz interpreted the numerical sequence as the emblem of the dynamics associated with the growth processes in the organic world. The major exhibitions of the 1980s (Palazzo delle Esposizioni di San Marino, 1983 and Guggenheim in New York, 1989) were characterised by a pictorial practice that took on increasing significance, becoming "long and fast", a natural habitat for wild, "prehistoric" animals such as the rhinoceros, crocodile, tiger, bison, owl, all of which were also bearers of a clear primacy. This intense period, during which the artist also published a sizeable sylloge of writings (*Ich will Sofort ein Buch machen/Voglio fare subito un libro*, Sauerländer, Aarau-Frankfurt and Hopefulmonster, Florence), was followed by a phase characterised by a return to the essential nature of matter and line (one-man show at the Fundação de Serralves, Porto, 1999).

Considerable importance was given to drawing which became the protagonist of a series of large installations. The artist exhibited at the Carré d'Art – Musée d'Art Contemporain, Nîmes (2000) and for the first time in Latin America with a one-man show at the Fundación Proa, Buenos Aires (2002). He took part in *Zero to Infinity: Arte Povera 1962-1972* (2001), the first anthological exhibition on Arte Povera in the United Kingdom, organised by Tate Modern in London and the Walker Art Center of Minneapolis. The 6th November 2002 saw the inauguration of the permanent installation, *Igloo fontana*, for the railway bypass in the city of Turin. Amongst the many honours received were an Honorary Degree from the Dams in Bologna (2001) and the Praemium Imperiale of the Japan Art Association (2003).

Among the personal exhibitions set up after his death, remarkable is the retrospective organized by Fondazione Merz, Galleria d'Arte Moderna and Castello di Rivoli, in Turin (2005); the thematic show *Drawings* at Kunstmuseum Winterthur and Fondazione Merz (2007); *Pageantry of painting* at Fondazione Merz (2010); *What Is to Be Done?* (Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, and Bildmuseet, Umeå (2011-12); *Mario Merz Arnulf Rainer. Tiefe weite (Fragmente)* at Arnulf Rainer Museum, Baden (2013); Pace Gallery, London (2014); and *Mario Merz. Città Irreale*, Galleria dell'Accademia, Venezia (2015).

About NEON

NEON is a non-profit organization, which works to bring contemporary culture in Greece closer to everyone. It is committed to broadening the appreciation, understanding, and creation of contemporary art in Greece in the firm belief that this is a key tool for growth and development.

NEON, founded by Dimitris Daskalopoulos, breaks with the convention that limits the contemporary art foundation of a collector and enthusiast to a single place. It acts on a multitude of initiatives, spaces, civic and social contexts. It seeks to expose the ability contemporary art has to stimulate, inspire and affect the individual and society at large.

NEON constructively collaborates with cultural institutions and supports the program of public and private institutions to enhance increased access and inventive interaction with contemporary art.

About Fondazione Merz

Founded and directed by Beatrice Merz and chaired by Willy Merz, the Fondazione celebrates its 10th anniversary this year. It was established in 2005 as a centre for Contemporary Art with the intent to host exhibitions, events, education-related activities, and to further research and explore art.

The Foundation alternates shows dedicated to Mario and Marisa Merz, to discover and contemplate their work, with other major site-specific projects by national and international artists, who are invited to interact with the space of the Fondazione and its collections. It also cultivates research, exploring the new generations of artists with regular temporary shows.

It organizes art events, such as the Meteorite in Giardino Festival: an annual summer program of visual arts and contemporary music bringing together different disciplines related to contemporary culture. It offers a variety of initiatives for different audiences to advance appreciation for contemporary art: guided tours, workshops for students, training for educators, and mediation service to the visiting public. Its Library is specialized in Modern and Contemporary Art History and Criticism and is complemented by the Merz Archives, which encompass a complete collection of the artist's work. Both engage specialized audiences of art scholars and students. A biennial Mario Merz Prize aims to recognize talents in the fields of contemporary art and music composition.

Press Information

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