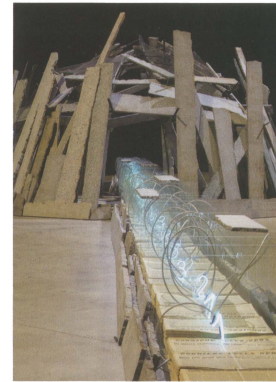


GLADSTONE GALLERY

Elizabeth Mangini, "Mario Merz at Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan," *Artforum*, January 2019

ARTFORUM

Below: Mario Merz, *Chiaro oscuro/oscuro chiaro*, 1983, metal structure, clamps, glass, bundles of sticks, neon, clay, cement. Installation view. Photo: Renato Ghiazza.
Right: Mario Merz, *Sentiero per qui* (The Path Here), 1986, metal structure, clamps, stones, glass, newspapers, neon. Installation view. Photo: Renato Ghiazza.



Mario Merz

PIRELLI HANGARBICOCCA, MILAN

Elizabeth Mangini

HOW DO WE RECONCILE our own desires with those of others? Mario Merz (1925–2003) persistently used his art to probe the counterpoint between individuals and society that is at the heart of modern democracy. The Italian artist's decades-long engagement with constructions that simultaneously recall shelters and the globe is the clearest manifestation of this concern. Since last fall, more than thirty of what Merz called his "igloos" have been assembled in the cavernous industrial space of Milan's Pirelli HangarBicocca. On a scale never achieved in his lifetime, this installation maps his vision of a *città irreal* (unreal city)—a concept he invoked in titling at least two works and one exhibition—and offers viewers a rare opportunity to grasp the delicate sociality of these impromptu structures.

Merz's earliest igloos, dating from 1968, might accommodate a single seated adult, whereas the largest of his later structures could accommodate several standing. Most feature a framework of welded steel or aluminum poles, to which might be fastened materials such as canvas, beeswax, sulfur, or broken glass. The artist's affinity for improvisational methods shines in such works as *La pianta della vite nella sfera occidentale* (The Vine in the Western Sphere), 1991/2018, which is built anew with each installation from bundles of locally collected twigs. Elsewhere, industrial clamps temporarily fix stones in place, recently applied clay cracks as it dries, and fingerprints cloud glass panes joined with putty. The insistent visibility of process heightens the seeming precariousness of each form.

These igloos are shelters in appearance only; rather, they are axiomatic structures to be viewed from outside. Few have openings through which one could enter, and some have coverings—like the heavy tar of *Luoghi senza strada* (Places Without Streets), 1979, or the ethereal wax

and nylon of *Senza titolo* (*Foglie d'oro*) (Untitled [Gold Leaf]), 1997—that conceal their interiors from view. The artist did occasionally activate the igloos as frames for human activity, penetrating a dome with a wedge-shaped table or introducing stacks of newspapers to connote the vitality of bodies and ideas. During an opening at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 1981, he was photographed inside the painted-canvas *Tenda di Gheddafi* (Qaddafi's Tent), 1981. The glass-and-steel *Is space bent or straight?*, 1973, was the site of a rare performance during which Merz and fellow artist Emilio Prini sat inside reading, speaking, and writing poetry on a beige Olivetti typewriter that still remains within, the event's only trace. But these interventions were exceptions that proved the rule. Merz's uninhabitable homes are best understood as ideas communicated through their evocative materials, referential titles, and archaic forms.

Still, the anthropomorphism inherent to Merz's architectural idiom frequently invites discourse on nomadism, such as Germano Celant's essay in the pages of this magazine in 1979. The semitransient nature of the igloos reflects the 1960s counterculture—particularly the romanticization of alternatives to the strictures of postwar European society—in which Merz was working. Indeed, the artist's first structure of this kind, *Igloo di Giap* (Giap's Igloo), 1968, is emblazoned with a phrase, in neon, that he attributed to the North Vietnamese Army commander Vo Nguyen Giap: "If the enemy masses his forces, he loses ground; if he scatters, he loses strength." The words betray an anti-imperialist sentiment native to the work's late-'60s Cold War context, and they recall the artist's antifascist activities of the '40s. At the same time, the phrase proposes an enduring rumination on the irresolvable dialectic between the mobility of individuals and their strength in assembly.

All of Merz's igloos are similarly multivalent: They bridge industrial and natural materials, merge inside and outside, and—as in *Chiaro oscuro/oscuro chiaro*, 1983—grapple with the practical and philosophical oscillation between light and dark. By embracing such oppositional positions, these igloos connect to the more theoretical nomadism elaborated on by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in several texts from the '70s and '80s. The pair's

conceptualization of an *intermezzo* positions the nomad as one who benefits the community by transgressing its borders, not unlike the artist who must be paradoxically both participant and outsider to adequately reflect society.

To further elaborate this artistic dilemma between solitude and solidarity, Merz frequently turned to a medieval counting system, the Fibonacci sequence—in which each number equals the sum of the two numbers preceding it (1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, etc.)—which is represented in neon on several of the igloos in Milan and which subtly runs along the entire ceiling of the gallery. Merz was interested in the historical use of the infinite series as a way of apprehending order in nature (the arrangements of petals

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on a flower, the proportions of the spiral of a pine cone). He also appreciated the way each number forms the foundation for the subsequent ones, meaning that the largest number relies on the smallest. Merz called this the biological aspect of the Fibonacci system, and in addition to providing an understated rhythm to this impromptu village of igloos, it demonstrates that any group depends on individuals.

Rising out of the challenges of being an engaged artist in the late '60s, Merz's igloos model a poetic opposition between domesticity and universality that continues to be socially relevant. With so many people living in improvised refugee camps and precarious tent cities around the world, an assembly of Merz's igloos reminds us that the project of global community requires continued individual work toward human solidarity. □

"Mario Merz: Igloos" is on view through February 24.

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