

GLADSTONE GALLERY

“Marisa Merz (1926-2019)” *Artforum*, July 21st, 2019

ARTFORUM



Marisa Merz, untitled, undated, unfired clay, paraffin, copper.

MARISA MERZ (1926–2019)

Marisa Merz, whose intimate art defies category but consistently challenges ideas of femininity in its fragile evocations of the body, has died at age ninety-three. The sculptor was the only woman artist associated with what critic-curator Germano Celant dubbed *Arte Povera*, or “poor art”—a radical association of avant-gardists in postwar Italy who created

meaning using mundane materials and questioned the role of art itself.

“Merz condenses forms and meanings and at the same time makes them seem to float free and evaporate,” wrote Ida Panicelli in a review for *Artforum*’s summer 2007 issue.

Merz was Born in Turin, Italy, in 1926. While her early life appears largely unrecorded, it is known that her father worked at a Fiat car factory, and it is possible that she studied dance. In 1960, Marisa married Mario Merz, another key poveristi. Their daughter, Beatrice, was born that same year. Merz first exhibited art at around age forty, when she began stapling together aluminum strips in her kitchen to fashion mobiles she called

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“Living Sculptures.” She continued creating art with common materials such as copper wire, tin, lead, clay, glass, and wood. Merz usually left her work untitled and undated, as if to make explicit her distrust in the conventions of art history. “I do not respect the masters,” she wrote in “Come una dichiarazione,” a small declaration published in Italy’s *Bit* magazine in 1968. “I’m not available anymore because I want to start from scratch. I could still be available to a child, but not to a man, no. If a man asks me to do something, I do it the way I want to.” Around that time, she appeared in multiple landmark exhibitions organized by Celant that introduced viewers to the Italian conceptualists’ retort to American Pop.

Merz’s versatility with materials and forms associated with domestic labor set her apart from her male Arte Povera affiliates. She made swings, slippers, and bowls; a few knitted works spell out “BEA,” in reference to her daughter. Merz continued to work in later life, taking on immersive, elusive drawings and paintings. Although she spent much of her career in the shadow of her supportive husband, who died in 2003, the artist recently experienced a surge in recognition following her first retrospective in the United States, held at the Met Breuer in New York and titled “The Sky Is a Great Space” (2017). “Everything goes together simply by virtue of its relation to the otherwise inexpressible creative dynamism the works all embody,” Barry Schwabsky wrote of the exhibition in a review for *Artforum*’s April 2017 issue. In 2013, Merz was awarded a Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the Venice Biennale. In 2005, Beatrice Merz opened the Fondazione Merz, a contemporary arts center in Turin.