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Beyond the Igloo: Mario Merz in London

by [Francesco Dama](#) on October 30, 2014

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Mario Merz, "Spostamenti della Terra e della Luna su un asse" ("Movements of the Earth and the moon on a axis") (2003), metal tubes, glass, stone, neon, clamps, clay, 1000 cm x 600 cm x 300 cm (all photos © Mario Merz by SIAE, Courtesy Fondazione Merz unless otherwise indicated)

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LONDON — Among the few Italian contemporary art movements that made a mark on the international scene in 20th century, [Arte Povera](#) is probably the most interesting. The term (literally “poor art”) was coined by art critic and curator [Germano Celant](#) in 1967 to define the poetics of the movement, which focused on the exploration of a wide range of common materials rather than employing the traditional bronze and marble. Wood, paper, wool, rags, twigs, soil, and sand are just some of the unconventional materials used by Arte Povera artists. As the Italian “economic miracle” of the 1950s was fading and the turmoils of the year 1968 were in the air, the movement gathered a dense group of artists that wanted to challenge the commercial system by putting an emphasis on the process of making art.

It comes as no surprise that most of those artists were included in the landmark exhibition [When Attitudes Become Form](#), curated by [Harald Szeemann](#) at [Kunsthalle Bern](#) (Switzerland), in 1969. The aim of that exhibition perfectly suited Arte Povera’s intent. Szeemann wanted to elevate the artistic process over its final product, changing the space of the museum into a sort of artist’s studio. Among the incredible group of artists featured in the show — including Joseph Kosuth, [Sol LeWitt](#), Robert Morris, and Bruce Nauman — there was Arte Povera affiliate Mario Merz.

[Pace London](#), in collaboration with the [Fondazione Merz](#) in Turin, has recently inaugurated a significant exhibition of the Italian artist’s works from the 1960s to 2003, the year he died. The show has the great merit of displaying iconic works next to lesser-known pieces.



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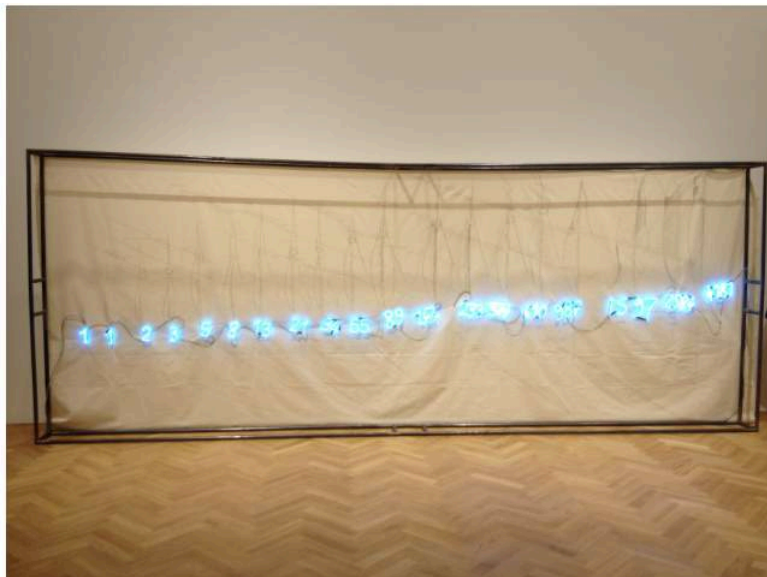
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Merz's passion for simple and natural materials is exemplified in the exhibition's centerpiece, "Spostamenti della Terra e della Luna su un Asse" ("Movements of the Earth and the Moon on an Axis") (2003), a three-dome installation and the last of its kind the artist made before his death. Merz began constructing such igloo structures, probably his most renowned works, in the late '60s using a variety of materials. "Spostamenti..." features plates of stone and glass covering two intersecting dome structures that represent the relationship between the Earth and the Moon. The installation features all of the hallmarks of Merz's work. The free-standing structure's plates of glass and stone rest on structures of metal rods and are kept together using clamps and blocks of clay that create tensions and connections between the materials.

The practice of changing materials' properties by placing them in contact with other forces and energies was Merz's central interest. As he once put it:

I work from the emotions I get from the archetypal structure that cancels the material. Then, once I have procured the object I try to take possession of its structure with my hands, arranging it in various positions till I feel it is in unison with me physically...

One of his preferred materials for achieving this effect, neon tubes, are another characteristic Merz medium. They are well represented throughout the exhibition.



Mario Merz, "Linea" ("Line") (1991), metal frame, charcoal on canvas, neon, 520 x 200 cm (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

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"Linea" ("Line"), from 1991, depicts in blue neon the first 19 numbers in the Fibonacci sequence — in which each term is determined by the sum of the two previous values. Resonating with universal growth patterns and the form of the spiral, the Fibonacci sequence has become one of Merz's trademark motifs. In 1971, he made a towering neon version of the sequence at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, and subsequently recreated it on top of several Italian landmarks.



Mario Merz, "Doppia spirale (Double spiral)" (1985) iron, 230 cm x 125 cm diameter

The exhibition also includes a series of works on paper and sculptures made of iron that depict spirals and organic forms. They are essential to gaining a fuller appreciation of the artist's practice and help to explain why, half a century later, Arte Povera is perhaps more popular than it's ever been.

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There is a whole group of young artists in Italy who, captivated by the Art Povera's emphasis on process, still look to it for inspiration. This exhibition helps make clear why the movement remains fresh to this day, and showcases Merz as one its most enduring figures.



Mario Merz, Exhibition view at Pace London (photo by the author for Hyperallergic)

[Mario Merz continues at Pace London](#) (6 Burlington Gardens, Mayfair) through November 8.