

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

Neil Genzlinger, "Marisa Merz, Bold Explorer When Art Was a Man's World, Dies at 93,"  
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## The New York Times

### ***Marisa Merz, Bold Explorer When Art Was a Man's World, Dies at 93***

She was the lone and often overshadowed woman among the central figures of the avant-garde movement in Italy known as Arte Povera. But her day did come



Marisa Merz in an undated photo. She was an artistic explorer, working in clay, paint and ink as well as in nontraditional materials. She also ventured into performance and installation art and the written word.  
Gianfranco Gorgoni

Marisa Merz, an artist who was identified early in her career with the Italian avant-garde movement [Arte Povera](#) — the only woman among its main members — before branching out into a wide range of mediums across more than a half-century, died on July 19 in Turin, Italy. She was 93.

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The [Fondazione Merz](#), which is devoted to work by her and her husband, the artist Mario Merz, announced her death.'



Testa, 1984–1995, a sculpture by Ms. Merz made of clay, wax, tin, and lead on a steel table. Fondazione Merz and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

Ms. Merz was an artistic explorer, working in clay, paint and ink as well as in nontraditional materials. She also ventured into performance and installation art and the written word.

In the 1960s she made large aluminum hangings and other striking sculptures. In the 1970s she turned to creating small heads of clay, as well as drawings and paintings of female faces. Her first solo New York show, at the Barbara Gladstone Gallery in 1994, included about 50 crocheted squares of copper wire.

Early on Ms. Merz was largely overshadowed by her husband, [who died in 2003](#), and the other men of Arte Povera, a movement that started in Italy as a reaction to establishment institutions and whose members liked to use found objects and other nontraditional materials.

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Marisa Merz's first retrospective in the United States, "Marisa Merz: The Sky Is a Great Space," was at the Met Breuer in Manhattan in 2017.

Fondazione Merz and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels; David Regen

But she came to be recognized as an important figure in the movement, garnering solo exhibitions in Italy and, in 1994, a solo show at the Pompidou Center in Paris. Defying conventional art practices, she often declined to date or title her pieces.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art gave Ms. Merz her first retrospective in the United States, in 2017 at the Met Breuer in Manhattan. The New Yorker critic [Peter Schjeldahl described the show, "Marisa Merz: The Sky Is a Great Space,"](#) as "revelatory."

"She proved to have been the most appealing artist in an otherwise all-male movement," he wrote.

Ms. Merz was born in Turin on May 23, 1926. Her early life is something of a mystery, as critics learned when the New York retrospective opened.

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Untitled Merz works in the Met Breuer retrospective. Agaton Strom for The New York Times

“Her father worked at the Fiat plant,” Mr. Schjeldahl [wrote](#). “She may have studied dance. At some point in the nineteen-forties, she modeled for the neoclassical painter Felice Casorati. I have now conveyed all that is publicly known of Merz’s life before 1960.”

The critic [Germano Celant](#) coined the term Arte Povera (literally, poor art) in 1967 to describe the radical, often minimalist art emerging in Italy in the tumultuous late '60s. That same year, Ms. Merz had a solo exhibition at the Gallery Gian Enzo Sperone in Turin, an important champion of innovative art. She participated in group shows as well, although, as the curator Ian Alteveer [noted in a video](#) made for the Met Breuer exhibition, her importance was not clear at first.

“Throughout those first few years in the later '60s and into the early '70s,” he said, “there were many instances where Marisa was not necessarily credited for being part of a show — maybe she decided herself not to participate in an exhibition — and so there was a bit of ambiguity about how involved she was with that movement.”

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The art she did make, though, brought a singular sensibility to the movement, incorporating domestic elements and techniques drawn from the women's craft world, like knitting.

“In her powerful early work, Merz creates from an entirely different place than her male contemporaries: that of a mother,” [Anna Tome wrote](#) on the art site hyperallergic.com in 2017. “Her uniquely female experience is mined and celebrated in enigmatic works such as ‘BEA’ (1968), a fragile construction of nylon thread shaped into the name of her daughter.”



Ms. Merz's "BEA" (1968), a fragile construction of nylon thread shaped into the name of her daughter, Beatrice. Agaton Strom for The New York Times

If her work had a feminine touch, it could also have a feminist one, as Roberta Smith [noted in The New York Times](#) in 2015, when she reviewed a group show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York that included a work that Ms. Merz had made a half-century earlier.

“An untitled work from 1966 by the Italian artist Marisa Merz consists of a column of reinforcing wire hung with fat bunches of synthetic blond hair, like so many scalps,” Ms. Smith wrote. “It is a stark yet restrained comment on male domination.”

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Ms. Merz also wrote poetry and journals and delved into performance art. In the Met Breuer video, Mr. Alteveer talks about a Merz piece from 1970 that consisted of her being flown in a small airplane; while aloft, he said, she was “reciting a series of numbers and counting the altitude.”



Ms. Merz at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 1989.  
Fondazione Merz and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

Ms. Merz’s survivors include her daughter, [Beatrice Merz](#), who heads the Merz foundation. Complete information on survivors was not immediately available.

Ms. Merz was somewhat reclusive and gave few interviews. The curator and art historian Hans Ulrich Obrist [managed to get one](#) in 2009 for Mousse Magazine. Touring her home and studio, he asked about some clay heads that seemed to have been cast aside.

“Oh, junk,” she told him. “Things that don’t have anything to say. But I hold onto them, because every once in a while — voilà! You see them, they become visible, they talk, I see them.”