Mario Merz by Marlis Grüterich

Merz is very well known in the art world, but people are not so familiar with his continuous strategy of avoiding intellectualism in art aimed at self-repetition for self-preservation. Merz belongs to the Beuys and Broodthaers generation and, like them, he is developing a perceptive method of his own, with his own critical phenomenology of culture. Beuys' « State of the sun » and Merz's « Casa di Fibonacci » are concrete utopias but they cannot be achieved either with art or with technocracy.

Merz's work is specifically situated within European and Italian thought and in the kind of Italian art which continues in the speculative dimension of Giotto. Giotto linked the metaphysics of the Middle Ages with the idealistic realism of the Renaissance. Merz contributes an ideo/biological verification to anti-idealism, which allows reality to be known directly. Merz's artistic models fit into reality itself as impelling guides for an organic intelligence of this reality. His work has never been separated from political perspectives and accords with what Ernst Block says: « Thought can-not venture into reality if reality does not venture into thought ».

Natural processes: the spiral, the igloo The « fifties for him were years of art reflected in politics (reading Gramsci) and of isolation from the art and aesthetic movements of that period. He did go to Paris, but showed no interest in tachisme or other styles. Right from that time he never recognized « the great reality » (Kandinsky) in what were introverted modes of moving away from the world of perception; he couldn't use formalist aesthetics as a « representation » of his way of seeing the whole surrounding reality. Conversely, to his mind the forms in which the natural processes are depicted were always directly comprehensible. From then on his visual method has been simple. It may be compared with that of nature's organic growth.

He began then to draw his own portrait in the form of a spiral, getting his inspiration from the kinky curls of the beard he had seen growing on the face of a cell-mate during a period of political imprisonment. Those curls suggested to him the natural directions of physical and organic growth. When he came out of prison, he thought he could use art to retrace that growth which no prison walls could keep back. This episode in Merz's art is situated among Fontana's wounding of his canvas, Klein's monochrome blue, Manzoni's upside-down inscription on the stone plinth of his « world's base », and other space/temporal gestures endowed with an absolute vital impulse.

In the 'sixties, Merz squeezed straight out of the tube the masses of coloured spirals which he imprinted on the canvas; until the time came when he felt that the formal processes of nature itself were available, with the use of work materials like asphalt, neon, wax, earth, glass and tar, that's to say, energies that not previously included among art media. He sensed however that his work had still not achieved that «figurative» or representative quality which, according to the concept of drawing in the Italian

Renaissance (drawing as intentional imagination), is intended to be a way of imitating and at the same time transforming reality.

The exhibition of « poor art » at Amalfi in 1968 had created among the artists there a climate of stimuli which allowed them to realize their mental images directly on the spot and with the natural media offered by that spot. Of those artists, Merz was the one who, using a method derived from nature, reversed the classical theory of the history of Italian art, its principles of perspective and its metaphysical rules of proportion. Merz recalls:

I saw a tree with two trunks. I wondered whether the space between the two trunks was definable or not... How could the measurements of that tree be pondered upon so as to gain an idea of its reality? I wrapped the two trunks in some canvases and poured molten wax into the empty space between them. When it had hardened, I gently lifted out the wax which had in this way become a function of space.

Later, Merz found in his first igloo of 1969 an organic space/temporal and at the same time a cultural function. The igloo is a house in a still almost natural state.

The igloo goes back to the beginnings of culture, to an image of the idea of human habitation — an arched architecture, balanced in its weight and support, and somehow not unlike a piece of lifted ground. Merz believes that this ideal image of the house, like the stone arch, has « the right form to withstand the thrust of reality itself » (1970). The igloo seemed to him to be the most concrete image of a culture that serves man instead of harming him. In time, he built numerous different igloos and also small huts made out of metal tubes covered with broken glass from which bundles of dry shrubs could spring up. They were models of houses containing internal and external space, enhancing circulation and expanding according to the needs of organic life. A house, in short, with its own creative economy.

One igloo was made out of large chunks of half-dried earth and on it was a neon sign saying cache toi objet. Another earth-made igloo carried another neon writing (the neon contains very little material and with its wires represents the very image of energy) which was not a metaphor of nature but a hard speculation on the ground of living space; it was general Giap's motto in the Vietnam war: « If the enemy concentrates it loses ground, if the enemy disperses it loses force ». An effective maxim because it was a logical and elastic, straight and curved at the same time, in fact just like the structure of an igloo. The igloo maintains the static/ energetic balance of this ambivalence of rational and irrational which includes man in his intuitive and rational entirety. The Fibonacci series: the house, the table

Towards 1968 Merz came to know about Leonardo Fibonacci, a medieval scholar of natural sciences, and about his numerical series based on the observation of nature. In 1200 Fibonacci had introduced the Arabian and Indian systems of numbers into Europe. His series of proliferating numbers is very visual because it is orientated towards the golden section. The tenth element in this series rises to a very much higher

potential than does the normal numbering from one to ten. Fibonacci's series begins thus:

1 1 2 3 5 8 13 21 34 55 etc. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

The self-reproducing principle of proportional growth in Fibonacci's series opened up a wide field of enquiry and work for Merz. It indicates the active dialectic forces in a natural process, and Merz has represented it as an expandable spiral by means of an outline something like this:

The common energy substance of every digit and of its generating pair is reproduced dialectically in the spacetime intervals of the numeric series. That Fibonacci's numbers, compared to ordinary numbers, represent a self-reproducing principle, is already demonstrated in the ratio of the first ten positions in the two series.

Merz recognized in the energy formation of the sums a symbolic system capable of showing that the initial energies are preserved for growth, which they stimulate. The logic of this numeric series is the generating principle of natural cycles: « reproduction » (« repeated production or new production ») or « proliferation » (multiplication, procreation). Merz realized that with this non-hierarchical but proportional numeric series, he could understand and prove the natural, almost bio-logical, growth of existing things.

The series does not begin with zero but with the value one. Each successive element is given by the sum of the two previous elements which are thus its generators. It is in itself a logical system which has in common with the mythical imagination of time and space the manner of considering unknown dimensions as new members of an already known body.

In Merz's view, this mathematical prototype from the Middle Ages can be said to express the human logic which is most in accordance with human nature. and which might therefore serve to reorientate today's society to make it different from the existing one. For years Merz took the trouble to indicate all the possible resting-points of society upon natural principles. He did some photographic works on the public, showing middle-class people in a bar and then a proletarian scene in a « trattoria », to illustrate the Fibonacci influx of people in a given place. Merz says: « A real sum is a sum of people ». He did a number of works simply using the numbers in the Fibonacci series, carried out with neon tubes, which can be installed in any architectonic situation to underline its proportional structures in the most visible way.

Merz then moved on to make models of the enormous strength of these biological numbers, by applying them to growth structures of use to society and directed at wiping out the capitalist principle of individualism. Out of the spatial nucleus of the igloo he developed the idea of houses in expansion according to the measure of men's needs. At this point he asked himself these questions:

Is space straight or curved? Do houses

move round you, or do you move round the houses? What does making a house mean? To get big (to grow): this is the house. Making a house means taking into account proportion which is part of biological life. He answered with the curve that expands in relation to the spiral — the mythical spatial formula introduced by Einstein into the calculation of probability in spatial physics.

This is an attempt to reconsider the mythical way. And this is how Ernst Cassirer has defined the mythological way of thinking referred to the origins

of human thought:

While the myth sets out to include an organically structured totality and to « understand » it with the means of thought, it is in the habit of looking at this totality as the image of the human body and its organization. Often the form of this representation actually has to include the answer to the question on the mythical origins and thus dominates the entire mythical cosmography and cosmology.

The Architect

Mario Merz's greatest wish is to build a Fibonacci house. Such a house would not be constructed by starting from delimiting external numbers — but rather from the space requirements of those who would use it, expressed through the need to eat, sleep, work and, last but not least, the need for company. To satisfy these necessities the earth must be lifted towards the table and the bed. The reason for which the tables must be as large as possible is also represented by Fibonacci's numeric series whose parts - proportioned according to the golden section — connect space from certain points. One person needs one table for himself; two persons have sufficient space in one table, and so do three; but for a group of five people the table suddenly has to be much bigger. The sequel to the numeric series is directed, at big intervals, towards comprehensive facts. The growth symmetry of a leaf — 1.1.2.3... — is proportionate to the growth of the whole tree. Merz says: « In order to grow, a tree first of all needs time. Two trees need the same length of time but more

Merz has also depicted spatial relations in human action in watercolours connected to each other: starting from the centre of the palm of the hand, he drew the five fingers as bundles of rays spreading rapidly into the external space. This is one of the possible ways of representing the growth spiral that develops proportionally from its centre. Merz's application of the first mathematical series in the symbology of spirals and bundles of rays corresponding to vital phenomena, corresponds to the modern theoretic knowledge of nature which resolves space and time in correlations of pure numbers.

Included among Paul Klee's manuscripts — under the heading « Progressions » — are numerous drawings of constructions in conformity with his maxim of 1924: « From the model image to the primitive image ». Klee says:

... Even the most destitute mind can grasp that the apparent possibility of calculating the relations between different parts and in respect to the totality corresponds to the most occult numeric relations which reside in other artificial and natural organisms. It is equally clear that these numbers have nothing cold about them; they breathe life.

Merz's explanatory installations objectify these indications by Klee, which are bio-logical and make it possible to perceive the proportions of change in existing space. Of these installations only the records, the igloos, the drawings and the paintings remain. Merz considers this disappearance at another level: « The world is a continuum of things and phenomena whose structure appears and disappears ». This is where the axiomatic beauty of his works springs from.

Merz has devoted himself to the theme of tables as the basis of a house ever since his stay in Berlin, in 1972. At the Akademie der Künste in Berlin and at the John Weber Gallery in New York, in 1973, he showed low rectangular tables on the basis of a spiral adapted to the shape of the table and of the room. In the exhibition prior to his departure from Berlin, at the Haus am Lützowplatz in 1974, Merz carried out the addition of rooms that were too small and separated into one large connected room. In the initial problem of not being able to exhibit plastic objects or large paintings in the separate rooms of that old private house, Merz perceived the possibility of showing how the habitation should expand if a large company of 55 persons wished to gather round a table. At the end of a flight of three rooms a little igloo, covered in bits of glass, was constructed; from its centre exploded a triangular table which grew at intervals and reached the room at the opposite end. Seen from the broad end of the table, the little glass igloo looked like a space capable of expanding in contrast with the house. The design drawing of the exhibition showed the potential further development of this installation in the overall space.

Merz believes that the table is the plain and simple portrait of human needs and relations. It brings the earth within reach for eating, drinking and working. The bed, too, is similar. These are anthropological, ethnographic representations, in that « since I am a social being, the table must have sufficiently large measurements for my company ». The most recent formulation of this idea is represented in his paintings of tables. On the huge canvas, 20 m. long and 6 m. high, painted in a farmhouse in Lombardy, the tables are in a proliferation on an imaginary, expanding spiral. The proliferation is related to the perspective of centralized rays, open in the lower part of the painting. This method reverses the vanishing point of the perspective from the centre and opens up the perspective towards the limits of the image. Moving in front of the painting, one gets the impression that the receding lines of the perspective of each table meet in the position of the person looking at them.

Used in a non-orthodox way, the historical media of art make the relations between different realities visual, and visible. Mario Merz shrinks from the idea of reforming the details of the existing social system. Like Beuys, he tends to think in terms of overall dimensions and to take into consideration man's potential in its entirety and of the whole of mankind. Both Merz and Beuys impregnate with materialism and socialism the neo-Platonic notion of drawing which throughout the Renaissance was

understood to mean the ideal image and spiritual sum of empirical experiences. This humanism considers the whole world with its components of political, industrial and scientific power. In Merz's piece written in 1970 in New York, we read:

Genesis: Original space was not saturated with science / Abstract space is not saturated with science / The space we live in is saturated with science.

Utopia / Remove the space we live in from the saturation of science / Talk about space

and the quality of future space.

So Merz decided to be an architect and to build his own house, to fit his own reality. The house must fit into reality. The artist Merz contents himself with defining that reality of the house as necessary now. Its necessity today does not need to be proved — for it is in practice. The poetry of art has to be practically concrete in order to enable us to think, imagine and conceive the condition in which one lives and does not die during life.

Marlis Grüterich

Translation: Rodney Stringer

Bill Beckley

by Barbara Radice

« The death of Satan was a tragedy for the imagination. A capital negation destroyed him in his tenement and, with him, many blue phenomena ».

Wallace Stevens

In Beckley's words, the problem since 1968 was in these terms: « Everybody has been washed clean of content, so now it's time to ask: what happens after the bath? ».

The bath had begun with Frank Stella. People were washed clean not only of the passions of abstract expressionism. but also of the tradition of all European geometric painting. « The European geometric painters really strive for what I call relational painting. The basis of their whole idea is balance. You do something in one corner and you balance it with something in the other corner. Now the "new painting" is being characterized as symmetrical... but we use symmetry in a different way. It's non-relational ». And to quote Judd: « All that art (European) is based on systems built beforehand, a priori systems; they express a certain type of thinking and logic ... » (1). With Frank Stella the work is almost completely conceptualized before it is done; one-shot decision is taken before starting symmetry and all the rest follows through. His painting refers to the surface, not only physically but primarily inasmuch as it seeks to abolish any reference to anything but what you see.

After Stella others went ahead in different ways. But in all minimal art a single decision is made beforehand, after which everything goes ahead along fixed tracks, with no adjustments based on taste or chance, until the idea is carried out to its logical conclusion.

This was the structure of a certain period. It is not true, of course, that Frank Stella's painting or minimal art lacked content. Nothing is without content. What was washed away in the bath mentioned by Bill Beckley is the direct reference to intuitive connotations, the reflection of an attitude of