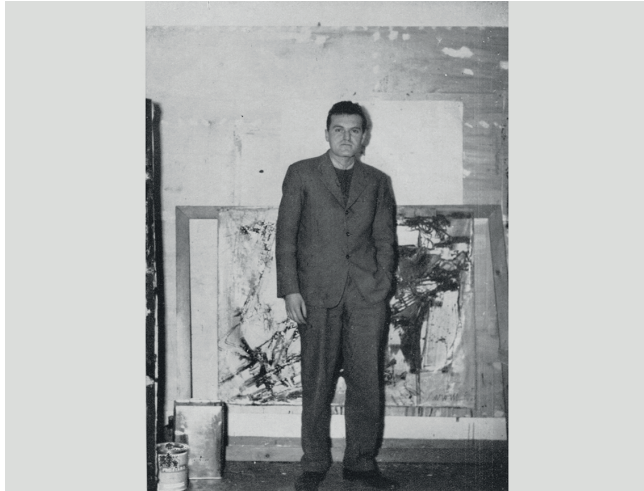


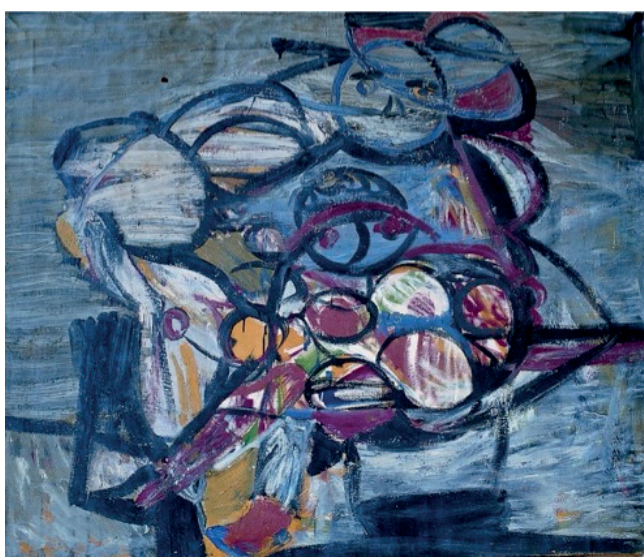
February 2025

Mario Merz

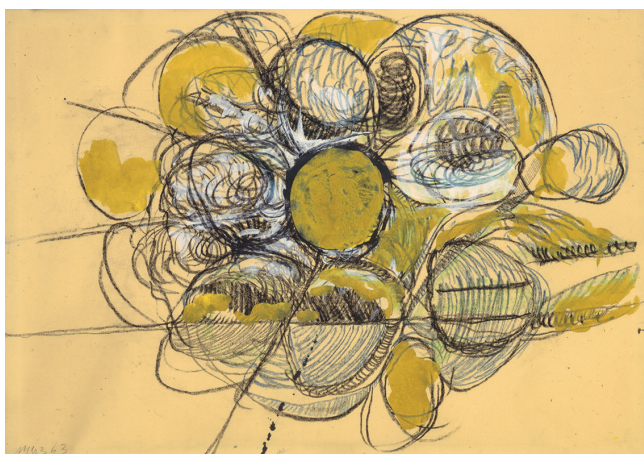
This year, the centenary of Mario Merz's birth is being celebrated. To mark this anniversary, Fondazione Merz in Turin held a symposium on January 14 and 15. Numerous former and current museum directors and curators took part who had worked with Mario Merz and are familiar with his work.



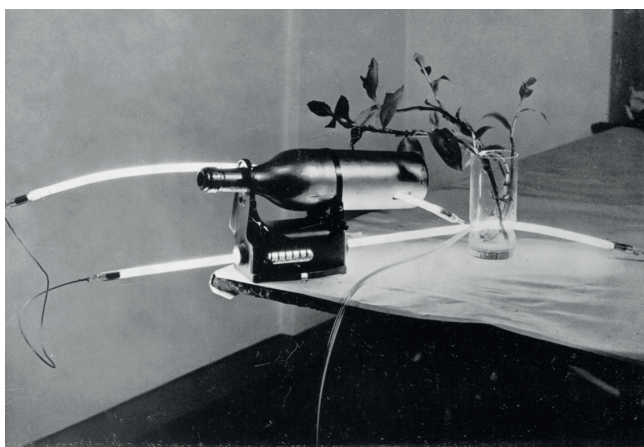
My contribution was devoted to the early work of Mario Merz, thus referring to the years between his first exhibition in 1954 at the gallery La Bussola in Turin and the exhibition that secured his breakthrough to novel types of works at Galleria Sperone in 1968. In contrast to the other artists of Arte povera, Merz already had a lengthy career as a painter behind him, and he returned to drawing and painting time and again. At the beginning of his work, Merz put the idea of drawing as a "fatto totale", a drawing that would capture the inner life and external reality as a continuum: not a drawing as a depiction of things, but as a mode of being.



The question of how such a drawing could be realized was always on Merz's mind, not only in the 1950s as a painter, but also later, when he wrote the question "Che fare?" (What to do?) on his igloo. During the period when Merz was trying to establish himself as a painter, he was beset with doubts about conventional means of expression; he rejected the trends that had taken shape in post-war Italy, namely the Realism and epigonism that proliferated in the wake of Picasso's work, but also the Abstraction and Art Informel imported by some artists to Turin from Paris. Merz's friend and patron, the art critic Luciano Pisto, who went on to found the gallery Notizie in Turin, presented Merz in a category of "aformal" in contrast to painters such as Pollock, de Kooning, Bacon, Appel and Jorn. Yet this term did not really hit the mark, as the drawings and paintings realized by Merz revealed his strongly formal approach. In his depictions of trees and leaves, Merz was less concerned with the individual object, but instead, aimed to capture and transcribe the overarching structure of the organic world with graphic means. If reminiscences are to be found in his work, then in association with the conceptual world of Futurism and Symbolism, recalling Giacomo Balla's diagrammatic formulations of phenomena, for example, in which this artist endeavoured to reproduce their inner rhythm.



In 1961, Merz withdrew to the Bernese Oberland with his wife Marisa for a year and a half in order to paint undisturbed. When he returned to Turin, the art critic Carla Lonzi welcomed him with a catalogue essay in which she lauded his sensitive transcription of nature through his thoroughly individual style of painting. But Merz was still far from fulfilling his aspirations as regards his own vision. He sequestered himself in his studio for a while, only to return to the public eye in 1966 with brand new works. These were no longer paintings, but wall objects in which a luminescent neon line penetrated the canvas, replacing brushstroke and paint. In his exhibition at Sperone's in 1968, Merz showed objects such as bottle and tumbler pierced by a neon line – the drawn line became a light beam, which not only passed through the object like a lightning bolt, but transformed it symbolically. The objects thus gave up their material quality to become metaphorical demonstration. Merz had left painting on canvas behind him; the big step from drawing in space to drawing the space in which one's existence unfolds was just ahead: the igloo made of simple metal supports that Merz exhibited for the first time in Rome in Spring 1968.



Dieter Schwarz