



Marisa Merz (1926–2019) was one of the leading figures in the post-war Italian art scene. In 2013, she was awarded the Golden Lion for her life’s work at the 55th Venice Biennale. Today she is considered the only woman among the main representatives of *Arte Povera*. Her subtle, powerful works contain numerous references to European art history, as well as many everyday materials and techniques. Between 31 January and 1 June 2025 the Kunstmuseum Bern is showing the artist’s most comprehensive retrospective in Switzerland for 30 years.

The only woman in the circle of *Arte Povera*

From aluminium to clay, from copper to nylon, from wax to fabric – Marisa Merz’s works are characterized by their ‘poor’ materials. They reflect her close relationship with the group of the radical *Arte Povera* art movement around the Italian artists Alighiero Boetti, Luciano Fabro, Jannis Kounellis, Pino Pascali, Giulio Paolini, Emilio Prini and her husband Mario Merz, which developed in a turbulent post-industrial Italy in the late 1960s. Marisa Merz shared with her colleagues her interest in raw materials, in the relationship of sculpture – in her case the body, specifically the body read as female – with space, as well as the relationship between art and life. This led her to develop an autonomous artistic position: her work stands out for its silence, poetry and search for the fragility of art and life. In this way a resolutely open body of work was created over fifty years.

“The artist already has an established role, like that of a wife or a son. But I do not identify with these roles, separating roles, lists...”

Marisa Merz, 1985

Faces of gold and earth

Marisa Merz worked in series, making ephemeral works that constantly changed. She repeatedly returned to the same motifs, materials and techniques, to get as close as possible to their essence. She explored her themes with constant delicate variations from one work to the next, experimenting with scales, forms, material, colours and surface effects. The many faces that the artist moulded in wax, clay and plaster, covered with pigments, gold leaf or copper wire and tirelessly drew and painted on all kinds of supporting materials – from wooden boards to sheets of paper – have a dynamic and appeal similar to those made by artists like Medardo Rosso and Amedeo Modigliani. As often in Marisa Merz's works the raw and the precious appear close together.

Merz moved expertly between art history and the everyday. In her studio she used drawing, painting, sculpture and installations to turn space and time into a big collage. Along with the interrogation and overcoming of a traditional sense of material, the imaginary power of so-called 'poor' materials occupied the foreground. These often everyday raw materials developed a surprising poetry, and retain a strong associative power even today. Merz drew inspiration from the history of European painting, from Byzantine icons to the religious paintings of Fra Angelico and Antonello da Messina, as well as works such as the Flemish painting of the early Renaissance. Her treatment of different materials is sophisticated and radically personal, and forges an inseparable connection between high and popular culture.

"I am not interested in power or career. Only the world and me interest me."

Marisa Merz, 1985

Icons und new discoveries: Marisa Merz in Bern

The exhibition in the Kunstmuseum Bern includes some 80 works in five cross-gallery chapters, including drawings, paintings, sculptures and installations. There are also documentations of her earlier actions such as the photographs of Claudio Abate, who was present at an action by Merz on the beach at Fregene near Rome in 1970, in which the artist placed small works made of nylon threads in the sand, which were subsequently carried away by the waves.

Opening

The opening of the exhibition will take place on

Thursday, 30 January 2025 from 18:00.

Admission to the exhibition is free on this evening.

Curator

Livia Wermuth

Cooperation

The exhibition is a cooperation with the LaM – Lille Métropole, musée d'art moderne, d'art contemporain et d'art brut, the Fridericianum, where it will be on display from 30 August 2025 until 18 January 2026, and the Fondazione Merz.

With the support of

Kanton Bern, Burgergemeinde Bern, Stiftung GegenwART | Dr. h. c. Hansjörg Wyss, die Mobiliar

Media preview

We cordially invite you to the media preview with curator Livia Wermuth on **Wednesday, 29 January 2025 at 10:00 at the Kunstmuseum Bern.**

Please register via press@kunstmuseumbern.ch.



Catalogue

Marisa Merz

Published by LaM – Lille Métropole, musée d'art moderne, d'art contemporain et d'art brut. With contributions by Chiara Bertola, Connie Butler, Sébastien Delot, Danilo Eccher, Catherine Grenier, Marisa Merz, Chiara Parisi, Grégoire Prangé, Marianna Vecellio and Andrea Viliani

240 pages, 21 × 28 cm, Softcover
Publication in French

Éditions Mercatorfonds: ISBN 9-789-462-303-744
CHF 39

Digital Guide

There is a freely accessible Digital Guide to accompany the exhibition. It can be accessed from Wednesday, 29 January 2025 via QR code or guide.kunstmuseumbern.ch.



Biography

1926

Marisa Merz is born in Turin, Italy, on 23 May.

1940er-Jahre

During her teenage years, Marisa Merz explores Turin's art scene and becomes one of Felice Casorati's sitters. She also is a dancer.

1950er-Jahre

She is interested in ancient art as well as being a frequent visitor to the Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea. She is marked in particular by the early 20th century's futurist movement. She meets the artist Mario Merz.

1960

Marisa and Mario Merz marry in Switzerland. The same year, their daughter Beatrice is born.

1965

Although she has been making art since the 1950s, it is only with the *Living Sculptures* that she creates her first known works. The following year, she exhibits them in her apartment / studio.

1967

First solo exhibition, at the Sperone Gallery in Turin, which she fills with her *Living Sculptures*. The same sculptures are also hung in the Piper Pluri Club, an experimental nightclub, and play a central role in a short film by Tonino De Bernardi and Paolo Menzio. The same year, Merz presents an installation at the Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna in Turin, composed of blankets rolled up in copper wire, a cylindrical mesh, pieces of wool, and salt.

Publication of a text by Germano Celant in the magazine *Flash Art*, which lays the foundations for a new art movement he calls *Arte Povera*. Marisa Merz is not mentioned in the text.

1968

Merz starts her work on the basis of copper wire and nylon thread meshes, introducing traditional knowhow into the field of contemporary art and asserting the dignity of such everyday materials and techniques. She creates *Altalena per Bea*, which she hangs in their home, in order to illustrate the inspiration that her daughter and domestic space provide her with.

1969

Marisa Merz takes part in a major international exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam alongside artists associated with the minimalist movement.

1970

On the occasion of her exhibition at the L'Attico gallery in Rome, Marisa Merz organizes an action at Roma Urbe Airport, in which she uses a radio to communicate the various altitudes of an aircraft in flight, in which she is standing. The figures are plotted on a graph which is then exhibited at the gallery.

On the same occasion, she exhibits several objects laid directly on the sands of Fregene Beach and destined to be washed away by the waves. The event is documented by photographer Claudio Abate.

1974

Merz participates in a collective exhibition at L'Attico gallery. The same year, she starts working with paraffin.

1975

Emergence of a new direction in her work: she starts modelling little heads (*testine*) in unbaked clay or wax.

1976

Merz takes part in the Venice Biennale once again, presenting a large mural installation mainly composed of squares of copper mesh, held taut by metal needles and arranged on a geometric grid. A system she reproduces on numerous occasions, adapting it to each exhibition.

1982

As she wishes to present her works in conjunction with other artists, Marisa Merz prefers to take part in collective exhibitions and starts turning down opportunities to mount solo exhibitions, with a few exceptions.

1985

She participates in the exhibition *The Knot: Arte Povera* organized by Germano Celant at PS1 in New York. In the catalogue, Celant presents her as the only woman in the *Arte Povera* group.

1990

Marisa Merz continues with her work on the connections between visual arts and music, creating violins fashioned from paraffin and wax and set on metal bases.

1994

First monographic exhibition in a public institution, at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, organized by Catherine Grenier. In the same year, it is followed by her first solo exhibition in the United States, at the Barbara Gladstone Gallery in New York.

1996

For her solo exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, Marisa Merz only presents a series of drawings, evidencing the growing importance of that particular medium in her work.

1998

After museum exhibitions in France, Switzerland and the Netherlands, Merz holds her first solo exhibition in an Italian institution, at the Galleria d'Arte Moderna in Bologna, curated by Danilo Eccher and Pier Giovanni Castagnoli.

2003

Mario Merz dies in November.

2005

Creation of the Merz Foundation in Turin.

2012

She holds a monographic exhibition at the Fondazione Querini Stampalia in Venice and then at Fondazione Merz in Turin, curated by Chiara Bertola.

2013

Merz is awarded the Golden Lion for Lifetime Achievement at the Venice Biennale. The same year, she holds a monographic exhibition at the Serpentine Gallery, her first solo exhibition in London.

2017

Opening of the major retrospective *The Sky is a Great Space* at the Metropolitan Museum, New York, and the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, in the United States, curated by Connie Butler and Ian Alteveer.

2018

The exhibition *The Sky is a Great Space* is presented in Europe, at the Museu de Arte Contemporânea da Fundação de Serralves in Porto and then at the Museum der Moderne in Salzburg.

2019

Solo exhibitions at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the MASI Lugano – the last to be followed by the artist, at least in part. Marisa Merz dies in Turin on 19 July.

Press images

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01

Marisa Merz

Untitled, 1982

Raw clay, copper wire, tacks

17 × 16 × 22 cm

Merz Collection

Photo: Renato Ghiazza

© 2025, ProLitteris, Zurich



02

Marisa Merz

Untitled, n. d.

Mixed media and paraffin on Japanese paper, on carpet

151 × 110 × 5 cm

Merz Collection

Photo: Renato Ghiazza

© 2025, ProLitteris, Zurich



03

Marisa Merz

Untitled, n. d.

Raw clay, paint

17,5 × 16 × 8 cm

Merz Collection

Photo: Renato Ghiazza

© 2025, ProLitteris, Zurich



04

Marisa Merz

Untitled, n. d.

Mixed media on plywood

125,5 × 115 × 0,8 cm

Merz Collection

Photo: Renato Ghiazza

© 2025, ProLitteris, Zurich



05

Marisa Merz

Untitled, n. d.

Raw clay, paint

13 × 14 × 14 cm

Merz Collection

Photo: Renato Ghiazza

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06

Marisa Merz

Madonna di marte, o. J.
Mixed media on paper
48,5 x 45 x 0,6 cm
Bernier Eliades Gallery, Athens
Photo: Boris Kirpotin
© 2025, ProLitteris, Zurich



07

Marisa Merz

Untitled, 2010
Mixed media on paper mounted on wood
250 x 145 cm
Merz Collection
Photo: Renato Ghiazza
© 2025, ProLitteris, Zurich



08

Marisa Merz

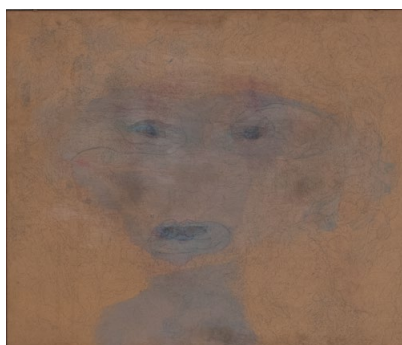
Untitled, o. J.
Mixed media on grey pressed cardboard
101 x 705 x 0,3 cm
Merz Collection
Photo: Renato Ghiazza
© 2025, ProLitteris, Zurich



09

Marisa Merz

Scarpetta, 1968
Nylon wire
21 x 8 x 6 cm
Merz Collection
Photo: Renato Ghiazza
© 2025, ProLitteris, Zurich



10

Marisa Merz

Untitled, 1979
Mixed media on chipboard in metal frame
110 x 140 cm
Merz Collection
Photo: Brian Forrest
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11

Marisa Merz

Untitled, 2002–2003

Mixed media on paper

100 × 71 cm

Merz collection

Photo: Renato Ghiazza

Courtesy Fondazione Merz – Gladstone
Gallery, New York – Thomas Dane

Gallery, London

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12

Marisa Merz in Florence, 1996

Photo: Gianfranco Gorgoni

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Current and upcoming exhibitions at the Kunstmuseum Bern

Amy Sillman. Oh, Clock!
until 2 February 2025

Kahnweiler & Rupf. A Friendship between Paris and Bern
until 23 March 2025

Kunstmuseum Bern of the Future. The Architectural Competition
until 28 September 2025

Carol Rama. Rebel of Modernism
7.3.-13.7.2025

Kirchner x Kirchner
12.9.2025-11.1.2026

Opening hours

Tuesday
10:00-20:00

Wednesday-Sunday
10:00-17:00

Monday closed

Contact

Martina Witschi
Communication & Media relations
press@kunstmuseumbern.ch
+41 31 328 09 93

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