

From: *Mario Merz. Terra elevata o la storia del disegno*, curated by R. Fuchs, J. Gachnang and C. Mundici, exhibition catalog (Rivoli-Torino, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 16 May - 23 September 1990), Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte contemporanea, Rivoli-Torino 1990, n. p.

## **Beatrice Merz and Mario Merz**

**Beatrice** - One of art's first and primary horizons is to rediscover the rebirth of a way of life and, from this point of view, the «table» perhaps tries to teach us the need to address the question of space. The need to create a space. Berlin is a closed city which engendered a feeling of restriction, a lack of communication. The space one occupied was that of one's own thoughts. Therefore you tackled this need by underlining something that was already present in your earlier works, for example the numeric sequence of people going to eat out at a restaurant or those going into a pub in London or... Perhaps the tables may be likened to maps which, instead of demarcating territories, are moments of expansion, of dilatation, expressing freedom of movement and of thought.

**Mario** - I made the first table in Berlin when I had no studio and was therefore in a precarious artistic situation, but was nonetheless pleased to have no studio and pleased to be in a precarious artistic situation. I was given the idea of forming a triangle by the fact that there were three rooms, one leading into the other; the triangle, an isosceles triangle, was raised up on three paws, with its point like a bow facing the horizon of those three rooms; then, I asked people to sit in Eastern fashion on the floor along the three sides of the table which stood only forty centimetres off the ground. The feeling of this way of being presupposes a way of presenting oneself not as an artist but as a producer of ideas in a cultural context and, in particular, in an artistic context. I had a strong feeling that we should not isolate ourselves, also because Berlin was the city of winners and losers. The Wall was still there, and there was a tendency to abandon ourselves to cocktails in order to react to the general feeling of sadness which imbued the city, but it was the winners who drank the cocktails. Everyone was always in a hurry, looking for a bar, looking for company, for entertainment; in particular, everyone was always in doubt, perhaps because of being so far from one's native lands. We realized that life was not easy and in this way perhaps the idea was to make the table as large as possible, as opposed to the little tables in the bars, like a sort of plain on which one could put everything: our note-books, railway and air tickets, bread and salame, eggs and glasses of wine, glasses of whisky; there was room for everything on that table. So I made the table as big as possible and raised it up like a pavement. There was also the pleasure of other people's company. If anyone arrived, they did not see one of my paintings or one of my sculptures, they saw a table and were immediately happy, instead of having to say «how beautiful» or «how ugly», instead of having to repress their feelings of jealousy, or... So I am pleased to have put on an exhibition of tables: one table is in a bookshop, one has gone to the «Salone del Libro», one is in a gallery where I put some fruit on top of it; I use another table for the telephone and all the thousands of scraps of paper that I have in the house; one table is built, the triangular table of Berlin has been rebuilt, one table is completely transparent, one has a picture on top of it, and in the title I have given it, «tavole con le zampe diventano tavoli» [boards with paws become tables], the presence of the paw means that the board is like a back which can carry things. Then I saw that all this had created space, in other words the «table» is the floor raised from the ground. The table is a

single plane, and in this it is reminiscent of the earth's surface, a part of the earth's surface. Paddy-fields, for example, are extraordinary shapes: as the dykes must be opened to allow the water to flow in, the walls which are opened and closed make the water create lakes, and the lake makes a drawing which is very organic and very beautiful. In Japan I have even seen paddy-fields on rocks almost on the edge of the sea and the ways of enclosing the water are also extraordinarily elegant. They are marvellous water gardens. So as time went on, I thought that I could make a table with a drawing, and instead of making a table with corners, draw one without any. The drawing goes from a spiral to a drawing which is even more absurd, but it is a table in spite of the absurd drawing and the absurdity of the drawing. One might even think that Magritte's cloud is my table, like something which may have a very odd drawing but may also be a strange object with an extremely high concentration of curves.

**Beatrice** - The table is something of a nucleus at the heart of the house, and an instrument of observation and reasoning in a static and quiet dimension in the intermediate space between heaven and earth. And what about the physical relationship between a person and a table? The extensions of the sides of the table are the sign of a more intrinsic form of communication. The table is an extension of one's own body, since it is a means of transmission. We can establish a relationship with tables as we can with architecture. In fact, in my opinion, it seems that there may also be an echo of very simple ceremonials, not in a religious sense but in terms of the stimulus to communicate; the sounds and smells of nature in these tables are like steps in rituals within a single whole. They involve the participants, and stimulate intense aspirations.

**Mario** - The table is deeply rooted in ancient culture and has become a sort of habitual life companion. From this we can also arrive at the idea of the hemisphere: in one work, the table enters the igloo and comes out the other side, so that the igloo becomes the house and the table becomes larger than the house. The table is an object which stimulates affection in that, perhaps to a lesser degree than the bed, it is an object through which the house is always seen in very human terms. In the Far East, the table is held in high esteem since it is an object, as you said earlier, which is almost ritual. I was fascinated there by these small plains, and the way in which they rose up from the floor between paper walls with great beauty. I recreated a table like this in an art gallery in New York, but I increased the number of people from one to fifty-five; I must say that this increase also reflects our way of life, since we live according to mass models and I have no intention of opposing these as I accept them in my everyday life. I have tried squatting beside a table for fifty-five persons and I felt fine: instead of being dilated, the size goes to show that the most archaic sort of person is a person who lives off common thoughts and not only exclusively private thoughts.

**Beatrice** - The first impact of these installations is one of apparent disorder, a chaos in which all things are mixed together and become responsible for their reciprocal and autonomous transformation so as to reappear in harmonious unity. The noise of the people who are taking part in their own «spectacle», the spaces for the succession of fruit, all the senses dance in the air releasing energy. Whether they are made of stone, of metal sheets, of wax or transparent crystal, or of a vacuum or of persons, or whether they are for fruit or for igloos, these tables are always places of lay sacrality and places of life. Here the philosopher, the poet, the politician and the artist can understand each other since there are no more barriers, and discussions take place using different outlooks according to the originality of the various subject-matters, but always refer back to a single object, or rather, a common experience, like a symposium which radiates matter.

**Mario** - It is important to explain that all this has nothing to do with the idea of design. Instead of drawing a leaf, the leaf may be the table, and the table itself may become a leaf, a large leaf with glass and legs. At another moment of my life, when I was in Pescara, I visited prisons. The gallerist had asked me to put on an exhibition there. I saw long corridors and rooms with vaulted ceilings. So I made a table which ran out of the cells and along the corridors, back into the cells and out into the corridors: it was like an enormous unending grass snake. Since it was the middle of autumn and that year the fruits of the earth were particularly abundant, I had the idea of offering a vast mass of fruit and vegetables abandoned on the back of the running table.

**Beatrice** - Mario, you are an enchanter. You guide the flow of people, fruit and newspapers; you promote the growth of the «weight-bearing structure», you create, and I really mean create, things as they are, while all the time doing your best to confuse them. You are like a conductor of excesses, of violations. Is reality capable of being deformed? Should we perhaps imagine a developing «body» as the area in which quantity meets its structure? It is quantity that induces discontinuity, supposing that whatever leads to the need for the next change will always be present when the tension caused by quantity becomes the extreme quality. Is it perhaps the anti-vacuum?

**Mario** - There was a moment, which although relative was quite strong, when I thought that drawing a table and having a real table is similar to a way of dialoguing with modern architecture with its problems caused by the crowding of people. For example, I often think of the spiral table as a model for the architecture, that is to say the construction of an ideal city whose centre is linked to the periphery by a continuum and not as a purely casual fact. In this sense the spiral, which forms part of the organic nature of both the cosmic world and the most primitive animal world, is one of those drawings which creates a linked centre and periphery, whose external and internal spaces are joined together by the spiral drawing. Wherever you are, you are always linked to both the outside and the inside, and it therefore represents a way of modelling architecture, as does the table which enters the «igloo house» like a road.

**Beatrice** - What criteria of interpretation should be used for these works then, given that sculpture, painting and architecture often infringe their borders, and those works which discuss their most natural and simple features also speak of you and me, of others and of light, the earth and all that keeps us alive? The changing shapes of the tables follow the hand that drew like ideas, and the neons which penetrate them, the wood which hides them, the numbers which run along them, all combine to witness the harvest of the dynamic nature of art.

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