

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.

Allegories

Rudi Fuchs

Curved and bended the landscape fits exactly in the frame of the wide painting - a shallow plate of mainly green and yellow carrying trees and ornaments and flowers and fruit and naked men and women, in groups of two and three and five, making music and drinking wine. The opulent painting, with gods and mortals, is by a Dutch Mannerist. Among dark green trees in the background under a red baldachin and *putti* hovering like pale butterflies, is a large table where people are eating lunch. It is the marriage feast of Peleus and Thetis. Before King Peleus could catch the goddess she eluded him in various metamorphoses; like the art of Mario Merz, she became fire, water, wind, a tree, a bird, a tiger, a lion, a snake and a fish.

We wanted to see the transformations of a single theme in Mario Merz's work, the table, slowly unfold like a river winding from bend to bend. That form of continuity seems an important motive in the work of the artist: to show that enchanting flow of variations, couplets of a moving poem, is the objective of the exhibition.

The tables move horizontally through space, slightly above the floor. Their form is mostly triangular or spiral - expanding forms that start at the smallest possible point and then can grow until the confines of a room stop the expansion. But in principle the size of a table is limitless. The spiral and the triangle can grow without losing the precise character of their shape. On their surface which may be glass or stone or wood or wax or any other material, they may carry other materials like fruits, vegetables, glasses, rock, and branches; often they represent just their own slender form. I like the idea that the tables are also drawings, drawn with a sharp, precise line and floating in space like flat banners. They are light. Unlike the igloo which tends to suck up the space into its dome, the expanding shape of the table allows space to unfold (along with the table's movement). But when the clear drawing of the table is covered with other materials, they become opulent with colour and ravishing texture and even smell. The table is then like a horizontal painting: patterns of form and colour filling up the light, transparent space of the drawing, making the table a grand image of vibrant life.

Is it possible that the generous and humane art of Mario Merz is a denial of the Fall of Man, of original sin, and thus an attempt at the allegorical recreation of Paradise? It was, in any case, our idea to make a very festive exhibition - abundant and full of innocent beauty as in that Dutch Mannerist picture. Or as the poet Catullus described the party of Peleus and Thetis:

But in the royal halls wherever you look
As room unfolds into room silver and gold gleam
An effulgence of ivory, carved thrones
Glittering cups on the long tables
The whole building thrums with the splendour

of royal goods
And there, in the middle, inlaid with Indian tooth
And quilted with arras
The divan of the small goddess
The arras ochred with rock-lichen
And tintured with stain of rose shell-fish¹

The art of Mario Merz is the modern version of Beauty.

¹ Catullus, *Poems*, ed. by Peter Whigham, Penguin Classics, London 1966, n. 64.