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## ***The drop of water: Berlin by the sea?***

**Johannes Gachnang**

Entendons-nous. Il sait chaque fois que ça y est, à la façon d'un poisson de haute mer qui s'arrête à la bonne profondeur, mais les raisons lui en sont épargnées.

Samuel Beckett

For well-nigh six months now Berlin has been once more at the centre of world opinion. For many years not much was said about the city, despite the Wall, that ugly edifice which cut across it, a sad emblem of a nation divided, and hence of Europe as a whole. «Beuys suggests raising the Berlin Wall by about 5 cm (better proportion!)». Intellectuals who thought in a European perspective, especially those of Italian origin, must have seen the situation in 1961 as dramatic, if not unbearable. In the early Sixties figurative artists such as Vedova and Dorazio, then ten years later, Merz and Kounellis came to Berlin.

It was a sad period. The finest homegrown talents were already emigrating westwards to the Rhineland, Düsseldorf and Cologne. Lüpertz stayed in West Berlin to paint German subjects, like the three 1974 pictures entitled *Schwarz-Rot-Gold* [Black-red-gold], a fact which German critics viewed with extreme suspicion. In East Berlin it was possible to meet Penck, who worked in Dresden until the summer of 1980, outside official circles, producing and exhibiting *Mike Hammer's Vermächtnis* [Mike Hammer's will]. After rare visits «over» into the East, specialists were somewhat puzzled and spoke in justificatory tones of a «Provinz-Warhol». The architect Hans Scharoun (1883-1972), designer of the «Philharmonie», the grandiose building in the Kemperplatz in which the Berliner Philharmoniker is based, had recently died, and, two years later, Willy Brandt was to resign as Chancellor following a spy scandal involving his staff. His attempts at conciliation with the East appeared foiled by the conservative forces which succeeded one another in West Germany - the same forces which now claim their right to a newly unified Germany.

This is the specific situation in which artists who had arrived in Berlin in the early Seventies, such as Broun, Kawara, Buren, Kounellis or Broodthaers and Merz, worked. Were they better off in Berlin than the Russians fifty years before them? If in the meantime the «Romanische Café» had closed down and its place in intellectual life had been taken by «Exil», the restaurant of the mother of poet Oswald Wiener, there were, nonetheless, parallels with the previous situation. Geographically speaking, Berlin is without doubt at the heart of the European network comprising Paris to the west and Moscow to the east, Copenhagen to the north and Rome to the south.

Like the Russians, Lissitsky, Tatlin and Malevich before them, Merz, Broodthaers or Kounellis brought with them to Berlin news of a new art, innovations which previously could be discussed and divulged among a chosen few, within a restricted circle. Starting with the enthusiastic reception offered to Kennedy in Berlin and with the subsequent pop art, the Germans looked with eyes wide-open to Washington and New York (just as rabbits confronted by a snake). As critics saw it, if a young German artist wished to be classified as progressive, his reference-points had to be Duchamp and Warhol. Only in 1982, at the «Documenta 7» exhibition, it was possible to view this tense encounter between Europe and America on the one hand, and contenders such as Beuys and Byars, Kounellis and Baselitz or Merz and Rainer on the other, as a temporarily unexpected proposal, the apotheosis of such aspirations taking place with «Bilderstreit» in Cologne last year.

Yet who was it, in Berlin, that seventy years previously spoke in Russian and twenty years previously in Italian? In the Seventies wine was still bad, Turkish immigrants were introducing the fruit and vegetables of the south of Europe and the German palate was gradually getting used to the taste of garlic again. Only ten years later did Berliners - at least in the west of the city - begin to eat and drink better. As the Dadaist Richter ably described in the catalogue *Avantgarde Osteuropa 1910-1930* to an exhibition held at the Academy of Fine Arts of West Berlin, when the Russian Malevich he used to meet him in Berlin in 1922 he would greet him with the term «Umland», which he meant as a synonym of «Dichter» [poet] and which he often used to start conversations with German colleagues on the right foot. There were numerous linguistic difficulties and even then interpreters encountered problems because the Russians, then as now, had a lot to talk about. And Gabo, who had long held American citizenship, recited Pushkin in Russian for evenings on end without a slip, guided by his uncontrollable enthusiasm: to inflame the hearts of Berliners who had not yet been conquered by the Russian language.

By the end of the second world war things had changed profoundly. Most German artists of Baselitz's generation had been born in the east of the country, attending the socialist-oriented schools of East Germany before moving West in around 1960. Here they soon forgot their first foreign language, Russian, the language of the *other* victors. In the meantime, it had become necessary to have a knowledge of English to communicate, as mentioned above, with the Americans. The latter, however, were not immediately forthcoming, and Europeans were forced to travel if they wanted to display the changes that had taken place in Europe and, above all, the growing self-awareness of European artists.

In this remarkable situation we find in Berlin an artist such as Mario Merz, a guest of the Berliner Künstler-programm (the Berlin programme for artists) organized by the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD). Thanks to this institution, Merz was able to stage an exhibition in the Lützowplatz in the spring of 1974, which enabled him, in this city which was foreign to him but of which he was fond, to give shape to his visions. In the catalogue, Merz addresses to those who are about to visit the exhibition a wonderful concept which might also guide them around the streets of Berlin. Here are no longer the streets of Walter Benjamin, because what stands out now are the bomb-sites and the safety-walls: «Do the houses turn around you / or do you turn around the houses?».

I too had the opportunity to see this exhibition. I had no difficulty in imagining the atmosphere in which it had been organized - as a city and political form, Berlin was very familiar to me thanks to a long stay in the city in the Sixties. Less familiar at that time were the work and thought of Mario Merz. There were, nonetheless, sufficient points of contact - at least following my first encounter with his work and his exhibition «Che fare?» organized in early 1969 in Rome in the underground garage beneath the *Galleria L'Attico*, not far from piazza del Popolo - for me to realize that here the aesthetics of the breakaway were being developed with radical means precisely within the furrow of

the twentieth century avant-garde tradition. And a work such as *Città irreale* [Unreal city] (1969) had long accompanied this ex architect - author of this text - in the evolution of his thought and we, with our doubts about order and where it should be organized - in life or in work - are condemned to youth just as towers are condemned to keep watch!

In the old apartment in Berlin, restructured into an exhibition gallery with its high well-proportioned spaces, there is, in the three rooms which look out onto the garden, a low table in the form of a long triangle, form which is in some ways analogous to the progression 1 1 2 3 5 8 13 21 34 up to 139583861555, developed by Fibonacci (1180-1240) and often exploited by Mario Merz. The skeleton and legs which support the table, divided into numerous sectors, are made of tubular steel while the top is made up of plywood sections. From the last illustration in the catalogue I learn that the artist assembled the first nine of Fibonacci's numbers along one of the two long sides of the table, shaping them in neon tubing and turning them on when necessary. In another illustration I can count ten people sitting five by five on either side of the table or on the floor. One cannot be sure of the artist's position at the table, but one can imagine it. Another two illustrations show the expository situation from two different viewpoints, the one in opposition to the other: if we consider it length-wise, the table starts in the first room, crosses the second and, with its tip, enters the third. The illustrations of another catalogue reveal a more recent development: that is, the tip of the table is supported by a transparent semisphere consisting of a simple, light-weight tubular steel construction covered with small glass plates. The German title of the work, *Auf dem Tisch, der hineinstösst in das Herz des Iglu*, with the date of composition - 1974 - serves as an occasional autograph of these works.

Strange to say, I no longer remember the various details of this work created for Berlin in Berlin. The illustrations in the various catalogues of the works of Mario Merz are of no great help to me today. One thing I know for sure, and that is that I visited the exhibition alone and, apart from the view from the windows, there was no one else in those rooms. Finding such a table in Berlin, on display in such a special light, impressed me profoundly. Some days in Berlin, when the sky is clear and blue, there is a light reminiscent of that of a diamond, as if the city were by the sea.

I am not sure how that exhibition was received in Berlin. I am sure that Mario Merz's offering, fragile, yet at the same time generous, was incapable of inflaming the hearts of Berliners. Then there was much talk of conceptual art and minimal art, no doubt in the certainty that once more the modern would hold sway - according to the Enlightenment principle of progress - over the extant, the mediocre extant. Yet this aesthetic theory, conceived by the Russian constructivists and by Bauhaus - as history teaches us - was once more queried by the stronger personalities of those years, even if specialists believed, well into the Sixties, that they had found the presumed paradigm. Italian artists, with their history so rich in contradictions, have, nonetheless, learned here in the north - thanks to the images they themselves have created - to understand once more the development that has taken place since then and the complexity of this world as grandiose creative energy.

As his 1974 exhibition catalogue predicted, Mario Merz returned to Berlin in the summer of 1988 to exhibit in the very heart of the Nationalgalerie, in the Mies van der Rohe pavilion, his first project for this city, further developed in the years intervening, to challenge architecture and art in his own inimitable fashion, again and with great respect. Merz was no longer seeking to inflame the hearts of Berliners, for with his colleagues (Kounellis, Paik, Serra, Stella, Twombly) who accompanied him in the exhibition, he brought with him to Berlin an international public. The very title, significant yet at the same time modest, of this clear work of 1987, *La goccia d'acqua* [The drop of water] was enough to reawaken the memories described above. It seems to me important to freeze them, for we currently forget things too fast. We even forget important things, bonds which

previously supplied us with support and orientation.

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