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In recent years, there has been a renewed interest in the contributions of the Italian postwar avant-garde movement Arte Povera. Although the movement is primarily characterized by the experimental use of non-traditional art materials, there is also a revolutionary side to the group declared in its anti-capitalist 1967 manifesto “Arte Povera: Notes for a guerrilla war.”¹ On September 24, 2011 the exhibition *Arte Povera 1968* opened at the Museo d’Arte Moderna Bologna (MaMBo). *Arte Povera 1968* was the first of eight commemorative exhibitions that opened across Italy as part of the larger event of *Arte Povera 2011*. This event continued for several months and was accompanied by a number of publications that celebrated and reappraised the achievements of the movement and its members, both locally and internationally, including its sole female artist Marisa Merz.

This paper is part of a larger project, which reexamines the artworks of Marisa Merz unstable relationship to Arte Povera. Since the 1980s, Merz’s association and contributions to Arte Povera have been included in several exhibitions and her participation has become more prominent in the last few years. However, during the height of the movement, between 1967 to 1971, the only acknowledged members of the group were male.² It was not until the 1980s that Merz’s participation in the group was officially recognized for the first time.³ Although socio-cultural factors played a considerable role in Merz’s exclusion from the group’s own initial publications, scholarly literature since the 1980s has continued to marginalize Merz by way of ‘feminized’ interpretations of her artworks. For instance, Richard Flood’s essay, published in the catalog for *Arte Povera 2011*, opens with a long description of Merz’s ‘feminine’ personality and

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physical characteristics. In the first passage he describes Merz as “minute and fragile” in comparison to artist and husband, Mario Merz. To rationalize his description of her appearance, he concludes with the following:

I have discussed this topic [of her physical appearance] that appears incongruous about her clothing and hairstyle because I consider them important elements to understanding Marisa Merz’s personality. This uniform, simple but feminine, denotes an artist that isolates herself, in her own space and manifests her own presence in a discreet and neutral manner. I am convinced that setting herself aside, her modesty, are key elements to the art of Marisa Merz.

Rather than reading her work as spare and modest in relation to the conceptual and stylistic tenets of the Arte Povera manifesto and other minimalist movements at the time, Flood reads Merz’s work in relation to her body. To emphasize his connection of her physical appearance and gender with her art, Flood describes several photographs, including an image where Merz is standing amongst her first important work, Untitled (Living Sculpture, 1966). Flood’s ability to interpret Merz’s work in such a gendered manner is a direct result of the understudying of Merz’s work.

Merz’s exclusion and inclusion in Arte Povera’s history is a significant example of how women artists have been underrepresented in visual culture movements. As noted in Flood’s quote, the focus on female subjectivity contributes to perpetuate ‘biological’ stereotypes that plague women artists. Nevertheless, the category women artists has been one that has legitimized the subordination of women in art historical inquiry. In Women Making Art, Marsha Meskimmon suggests:

If we ask ‘what is a woman artist’ or ‘what is women’s art’ we fall back into the logic of objectification and marginality, but if we take the lead and enquire into how women’s art comes to articulate sexual difference in its material specificity and at

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5 Ibid, 356-357.
its particular historical locus, the potential to generate new answers, ideas and concepts is endless.⁶

My goal is to propose an alternative interpretation to Merz’s art within the historical context of postwar Italy. Specifically, I will focus on Bea, a work from 1968, rather than offer an overview of her entire body of work because Bea is an example that embodies Merz’s intentional resolve to remain outside capitalism by purposefully positioning herself in the margins and using this space to reflect the anti-capitalist aims of Arte Povera.

Arte Povera, despite claiming to be “anti-system” in order to eliminate the distinctions between art and life, failed to do so because of their hypocritical presentation and publicized exhibition Arte povera piú azioni povere, which took place in Amalfi, October 1968. This exhibition exemplifies Arte Povera’s desire to be a part of the very system it sought to critique. In Merz’s, “Like a Declaration,”⁷ published March 1968, not only aligns her to the anti-capitalistic aims of Arte Povera’s manifesto, but also expresses her desire to challenge the dominant patriarchal structure:

I do not respect Johnson, I do not respect masters.
I am not available any more because I want to start from scratch.
I could still be available to a child, but not to a man, no.
If a man asks me to do something, I do it the way I want to.
I no longer believe in catalysts because they are the beggars of slaves.
At present the world is peopled? By slaves, and catalysts are still around.
I’m not interested in power or in career; only myself and the world interest me.
I can do little, very little.
I am battling against malice and competition. I cannot escape the reality I see.
All performance is anaesthetic, which is why with films I don’t do performance.⁸

Unsurprisingly, Merz chose to call this text a “declaration,” which by definition is an explicit type of statement. Merz’s declaration is a confirmation of her socio-political convictions

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which is in direct conversation with the historical period. Italy in the 1960s and 70s is a period characterized by its social and political upheaval. Merz lived and worked in Turin, a major epicenter of worker class struggle and student movements. The language used in both her declaration and in the Arte Povera manifesto reflect circulating ideas, in particular that of the left extra-parliamentary Italian Autonomy groups that sought to subvert capitalist exploitation of the worker classes.

The opening lines of the declaration’s text situate her historical context and establish her political position. She refers to President Lyndon Johnson as a master, immediately establishing that she does not support the United States’ involvement in the Vietnam War. In the third line, her “unavailability” refers to the two year period she chose to stay at home to be with her daughter Beatrice. In a later interview, she expressed that her goal during this time was to focus on discovering and listening to her entire nervous system.9 This time that she took for reflection is not only indicative of her acknowledgement that the body is the first locus of subjectivity but also demonstrates her search for an identity. Merz’s language is not that of a passive woman, but rather one that declares her autonomy because she will not take orders from a man. The language of this statement is similar to circulating feminist ideas that proclaimed to refuse doctrine and expressed the desire to communicate only with women.10 Merz indicates in her declaration that she is available to a child, possibly referring to her daughter. This brief interpretation of Merz’s declaration demonstrates her as a woman that has established her agency and is aware of the performative quality of gender subjectivity.

A description of Merz’s piece L’eta del rame (The Age of Copper) in an essay by Luigia Lonardelli, suggests that Merz’s work is “a metaphor for being a woman [whose] primary

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9 Rachele Ferrario, Le Signore dell’Arte: quattro artiste italiane che hanno cambiato il nostro modo di raffigurare il mondo. (Milan: Mondadori, 2011), 129
10 Ferrario, 66.
intention is that of feminine care” and concludes that “[in Merz’s] work the feminine never needs to become feminist in order to impose itself.”¹¹ Many more evaluative judgments on the ‘feminine’ aspect of Merz’s work are revealed throughout the text of the essay. Lonardelli’s limited interpretation of “feminist” reinforces negative stereotypes that surround the word and demonstrate her unfamiliarity with feminist theory and research.

Even though Flood and Lonardelli represent and provide interpretations of Merz’s body of work, their examinations also embody traditional modes of art historical analysis that subordinate women artists. However, the feminist language in Merz's declaration challenges Lonardelli’s belief that a feminist approach is not applicable to Merz. According to feminist art critic Katy Deepwell, a feminist theory is applicable to any form of art historical inquiry and is not limited to the identity of the artist or the stylistic categorization of artworks. Likewise, an artist does not need to identify as feminist to produce “feminist artworks” because one of the many goals of feminist art is to challenge the dominant cultural hegemony that subordinates cultural production by woman.¹² However, merely recognizing that there have been women artists is not enough.¹³ Instead, one must engage directly with the works within their historical specificity in order for a provocative analysis to be possible. At the exhibition Arte povera più azioni povere at Amalfi, Merz’s works not only embody the anti-capitalist language of her declaration but also principles of feminist thought.

According to Germano Celant, the primary curator of Arte Povera, the main intention of the events at Amalfi in 1968 was to legitimize the anti-capitalistic aims of the group’s manifesto. The primary location of the events were executed inside a Romanesque-Gothic building,

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¹³ Katy Deepwell, “n.paradoxa’s 12 Step Guide to Feminist Art, Art History and Criticism” in n.paradoxa, online issue 21 (September 2010), 10.
however, there were also several secondary, exterior locations within the town and coast.

Although this is the only major exhibition Merz participates with Arte Povera at the height of the movement, it is significant in that it aligned her with its anti-capitalist ideals. Unlike the other artists that participated at the event, Merz’s works best encapsulate these ideals because she was not invited to, nor included in the program of, the events at Amalfi. Furthermore, she presented her works on the beach, away from the main interior space. Since her works were not officially considered part of the exhibition, they were not subject to critique or theory in the publication following the event. Her intentional resolve to use her exclusion as an opportunity to personify the main aims of the event prevented the commodification and consumption of her works. Her intentional resolve to stay in a marginal space was in direct conversation with the historical period and the theories of the political actualization of the worker within the factory.

According to the Italian Autonomist Mario Tronti, the emancipation of the oppressive forces of capitalism upon the worker within the factory came from the workers' realization of their political subjectivity and their refusal to work. The autonomy of the worker is achieved through the reappropriation and reinvention of the very system of capitalism. In Merz’s case, she achieved her artistic autonomy through her social status as a woman. Like the worker, she self-actualizes her own political subjectivity through oppression. Rather than producing in the traditional artistic space of the atelier, she reinvents the home as a space of production and reappropriates artistic labor through craft. The use of 'feminine' craft, which she translated into ‘high art,’ is her battle against competition. The reinvention of domestic space and the reappropriation of artistic labor within the already established system of the exhibition embodies

14 The critics Vittorio Boarini and Pietro Bonfiglioli suggest that the exhibition was a failure at legitimizing the Arte Povera’s intentions because in order to resist absorption into capitalistic production, artists should strive to remain outside of theory and critique. Spaces of artistic consumption should not be spaces of art exhibition because they symbolize institutionalized systems that places them in competition with other artistic trends. For more information see Vittorio Boarini and Pietro Bonfiglioli, “Ritorno del Rimesso” in Arte Povera più Azioni Povere, ed. Germano Celant (Salerno: Rumma Editore, 1969), 67; and Piero Gilardi, “L’esperienza di Amalfi” in Arte Povera più Azioni Povere, ed. Germano Celant (Salerno: Rumma Editore, 1969), 80.
a challenge to capitalistic forms of artistic production. An example of this process is *Bea*, one of the four works she showed at Amalfi.\(^{15}\)

The title of the work *Bea* refers to Merz’s daughter, Beatrice—a reoccurring theme in her body of work. The work consists of three main layers: the production of the piece in domestic space using craft, the performance of the object placed on the beach, and the vulnerability of the object to the sea waves. The work *Bea* is composed of letters B-E-A formed by pliable knitted nylon with the knitting needles still attached, exposing the origin of their labor. It is useful to consider the process of knitting, which consists of the production of converting thread into a series of patterns by pulling loops into other loops. It is a repetitive process that echoes the motion of factory labor. The tubular and translucent letters create the sensation of encapsulating her daughter’s existence. Through the process of knitting, *Bea*, both the artwork and the child, became a symbol for a new beginning.

As previously noted, in her declaration, Merz addressed her desire to only be available to a child. *Bea* not only represents Merz’s desire to start from scratch but also represents labor, “So there was *Bea*, a little girl. She’d ask me things, I’d get up and I’d do them. Everything was on the same level, *Bea* and the things I was sewing. I was equally open to all these things.”\(^{16}\) In this quote domesticity is not only related to labor but also to creating. It is a type of labor that is not competitive but rather of love. If the exterior world was a world of “malice and competition” to Merz, the home represented a safe haven where labor was uncommodified. Domestic labor was a catalyst, it was a new frame that did not rely on exploitation or consumption. *Bea* and labor were “on the same level” because the distinction between artistic labor and domesticity were

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\(^{15}\) It is unclear whether the artworks of Marisa Merz that have been claimed to have happened at Amalfi actually occurred. In Merz’s solo show in 1994 at the Centre di Pompideu, Paris, it was published that it was difficult to construct a linear chronology of Merz’s artworks because she rarely disclose dates. In many respects, the unavailability of an accurate linear chronology of her artworks is one way she disrupts originality, a bourgeois fetishization, that occurs within gallery and museum spaces.

\(^{16}\) Dieter Schwarz, “Marisa Merz,” in *Che Fare?: Arte Povera, the Historic Years*, ed. Friedemann Malsch, et al. (Heidelberg: Kehrer Verlag, 2010) 188.
removed. The domestic space associated with life was transformed into art, thus eliminating the
distinction between art and life. The results were objects that came from a different ontological
experience of labor, one that carried with it possibilities contrary to the capitalistic public sphere.

Merz’s resolve to take this alternative mode of labor into the public sphere at the Amalfi
exhibition, played with the tensions between the public and private. Her works came from the
margins of production, the interior domestic space, and were performed in the margins, away
from the central locus of the exhibition. The works were further rendered uncommodifiable by
their ephemeral existence on the beach. The ephemeral qualities of Merz’s actions deny
individualism, a trademark of capitalist modes of artistic production that glorify the individual
‘genius’ of the artist. She did not photograph herself with her works because she sought their
autonomy choosing to merely echo the origins of their labor from the knitting needles and the
use of her daughter’s nickname. Ultimately, because her works were not published nor theorized
by the art critics at the event, her art was marginalized, outside of the system of theory and
critique—an art outside consumption, outside of capitalism.

Unlike Flood and Lonardelli, who emphasize Merz’s ‘feminine sensibility’, it is more
appropriate to frame her artworks within the historical context of Italy in the late 1960s and 70s,
with a focus on labor. In Bea, labor manifests Merz’s anti-capitalistic aims, as they were
expressed in her 1968 declaration, through the unification of the public and private. It is through
domestic labor and the ephemeral qualities of the work that render it uncommdifiable. In Merz’s
work, the feminine is not so much a sensibility but rather a recognition of her historical
specificity. Through her feminine craft and her marginalization at Amalfi, Merz’s work was able
to embody the political theories of Italian Autonomy and Arte Povera’s resolve to challenge
capitalistic modes of production. Although Merz’s early artworks are not explicitly feminist, nor
has she identified herself as a feminist, *Bea* exemplifies elements of feminist art because it embodies elements of her declaration that challenge bourgeois cultural hegemony.
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