

Mario Merz

Kewenig

Cologne

The very idea of a gallery show dedicated to the memory of Mario Merz is almost as paradoxical as the works themselves. The *arte povera* artist's installations and mixed-media objects were largely created in situ, and those that found no permanent home were often dismantled or cannibalized. Such a procedure was true to the *arte povera* principle of an alternative, anticapitalist culture. The fact that Kewenig could mount such a retrospective reflects the long collaboration between the artist and the gallerist.

The centerpiece of this show was a brushwood-and-glass igloo from 1995. Merz first explored this form in the politically charged year of 1968 and he continued to create fuguelike variations on the theme until shortly before his death, last November. In addition to suggesting shelter and repose, the igloo served as a metaphor for life as a nomadic journey and as a reminder of the finiteness of all material things.

The crocodile also played a central role in Merz's personal iconography, a symbol of the untamable, unconquerable forces of nature. Adapted from Egyptian mythology, the crocodile is "wedded" to the Fibonacci chain, the arithmetic sequence developed by a medieval Italian mathematician as a demonstration of the speed of natural growth. Small crocodile sculptures dotted the walls, and in glowing neon, the formula offered further "proof" of the endless generative power of nature.

In addition to these major works, the gallery presented the pioneering film *Lumaca*, a portrait of Merz at work that Düsseldorf artist and video gallerist Gerry Schum produced in 1970. A suite of abstracted animal drawings, often reminiscent of Joseph Beuys, lent further depth (and sometimes a contagious playfulness) to this small but intense reprise of the Merzian themes of the mortal and the primordial, of mystery and authenticity.

—David Galloway



Mario Merz, *Albero grande solitario* (*Great Tree Hermit*), 1995, steel, glass, stone, and brushwood, approx. 13'1½" diameter, installation view. Kewenig.

Alighiero e Boetti

Caratsch de Pury & Luxembourg

Zurich

The art-world prominence of Italian conceptual artist Alighiero e Boetti has consistently risen since he died of a brain tumor in 1994. For those now playing catch-up with his oeuvre, this show provided an excellent opportunity, uniting two monumental museum pieces.

Poesie con il Sufi Barang (1988–89), from the Pompidou Center's legendary 1989 group show "Les Magiciens de la Terre," covered three long walls. Immediately recognizable as Boetti's creation, the work's 51 tapestry panels form a sort of visual mantra, each containing the same series of phrases in French, Italian, and Arabic, albeit individually woven in different combinations of vivid colors by women in Boetti's Afghan workshop.

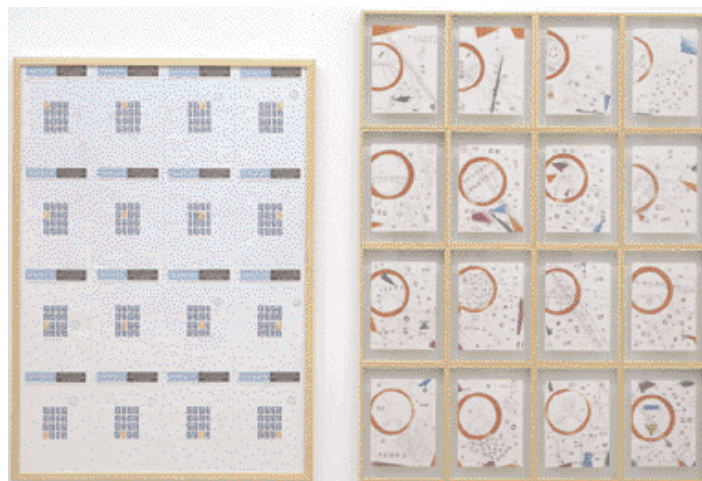
Permutation also played a major role in the work in the gallery's towering second exhibition room. Commissioned in 1993 by Le Magasin, a contemporary-art cen-

ter in Grenoble, *Lavoro postale* (*Postal Work*) consists of eleven diptychs based on myriad items that Boetti sent to the museum through the French mail system, each from a different post office.

The first diptych consists of a single envelope and letter. The second has four envelopes and letters. Following the rule of progressive square numbers, the succeeding diptychs have 16, 25, 36, 49, 64, 81, 100, and, finally, 121 envelopes. The contents of the letters vary widely, with a strong tension between mechanical and organic production: graph

paper filled with geometric spirals; photocopies of documents; near-Constructivist permutations of geometric shapes; and inkblots composing abstract scenes, for instance.

Most impressive was *Lavoro postale*'s final diptych, which dominated the towering back wall of the space with its 121 envelopes, each with 121 stamps, beside 121 penciled fragments copied from newspaper pages with stories on everything from the Dalai Lama and Fellini to soccer games, accidents, and boxing matches.



Alighiero e Boetti, *Lavoro postale* (detail), 1993, mixed media, dimensions variable. Caratsch de Pury & Luxembourg.

The effect was fantastic: an artwork drawing on the deluge of information and imagery constantly engulfing us, with elements that at one moment floated like water drops within the tidal wave of an entire country's daily post, then coalesced in a museum mail room.

—Marc Spiegler