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The Body in the Net: Gianni Colombo's Spazio elastico

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Alert and still, a woman stands in a semi-dark environment. A dense grid of luminous lines looms overhead and contains her figure, in a visual play that seems to unite photographic positive and negative in a single image. Shot in 1967 by photographer Eckart Schuster¹ on the occasion of the group exhibition *Trigon 67*, this is one of the earliest known photographs of *Spazio elastico* (*Elastic Space*) – a valuable historical document that might have caused an eyebrow or two to be raised by early feminists at that time. And yet, while the image can be read as one of a woman caught in a net, a prey enthralled in a cage of light, it is important to separate the photographic view from Colombo's artistic intention. If the photographer has left us with a tangible image, characterized by a specific viewpoint, the discourse regarding Colombo's *Spazio elastico* is more complex. In the programmatic statement that accompanies the work, the artist writes: "the organization of this environment tends to identify a habitable space-dynamic situation and as such is not meant to be presented exclusively as a plastic work, but as an experimental test-construction to research the optical and psychical behavior of the users, who will supply the variables, due to their physical and psychical reactions: choice of position, reaction to optical and environmental stimuli, and who thus themselves will end up self-determining, in part, the image they perceive, open to associations of the possible space-dynamic relationships."² Colombo's words are clear: *Spazio elastico* is both a work of art and an experiment through which one can study the reactions of those who accept the invitation to participate in it.

The artist lays down the conditions for stimulating the eye, mind and body and he wants each person to compose his or her own final image. The range of possibilities is as broad as the potential number of visitors. Stressing their active role and the idea of a relationship of use, Colombo chooses the term "users". Accordingly, in the reviews that followed the first appearance of *Spazio elastico* in Italy in 1968, the press did not fail to mention that the work "is consumed on site" and that "when the exhibition is over, the space-environment is disassembled and literally no longer exists. And so this is something that ceases with use, something that can be enjoyed but not preserved, like a theater performance"³. If, through *Spazio elastico*, one can recognize the idea of producing an

¹ After studying architecture, Eckart Schuster (Elmen, Tyrol 1919–Graz, 2006) devoted himself to photography, collaborating with groups of artists and photographers such as TVN-Fotogruppe Graz. Schuster is the author of numerous images related to *Spazio elastico* in Graz, including some in which Colombo is photographed while he manipulates the elastic cords inside the work. Schuster's activity is analyzed in P. Peer, ed., *Eckart Schuster 1919-2006. Fotografie zwischen Experiment und Dokument* (Graz: Neue Galerie, 2008).

² G. Colombo, *Spazio elastico. Ambiente visuo-cine-estetico programmato* (progetti: Milano 1964-67), typescript in the Archivio Gianni Colombo in Milan, published in C. Steinle, ed., *Gianni Colombo. Ambienti* (Graz: Neue Galerie, 2007), 50.

³ V. Rubiu, "Nello spazio si vive meglio", [publication unknown] (Rome, 1968); [n.a.], "Gianni Colombo. Roma Galleria L'Attico," in *L'Espresso* (Milan, January 1968), 23.

architecture for observing and examining behaviors, it is also true that Colombo accepted the risk of placing the final result outside his control, bringing to extreme consequences what Umberto Eco theorized during that same period, in his essay *Opera aperta*.⁴ In the dialectical encounter between work and interpreter, the latter not only has the ability to develop innumerable readings, as Eco states, but is called upon by Colombo to “self-determine the final image”. A place of participation, without its users, *Spazio elastico* has no *raison d’être*.

But if the work is above all the experiment experienced, what are the fixed elements that make it possible? Colombo stipulated precise instructions, calling for the construction of a cubic space, four meters on each side, divided internally by an orthogonal grid of elastic strings, which in turn define volumes of one-meter cubes. The strings are treated so that they react to the black light of Wood lamps installed in the space, allowing the ceiling, walls and floor to disappear into the darkness. From this point on, experience is the protagonist of the work. Large enough to be walked through, *Spazio elastico* offers a contrast between the apparent familiarity proposed by its constituent module and the estrangement provoked by what happens within it. In addition to the action of the black light, four small electric motors animate the weave of the grid, both vertically and horizontally, altering the precise and reassuring geometry of the cubes in a dissonant choreography of mobile and unexpected formations. Finding oneself inside *Spazio elastico* means searching for one’s balance in a universe without respite, expanded, flattened, and then restricted and distorted, according to a rhythm of carefully prepared technological slowness, so absorbing that it becomes almost organic. As experience teaches, when closing one’s eyes to simulate darkness, it becomes more difficult to maintain one’s balance. One suddenly perceives the vertigo of the void, the instability of the surrounding space and the disruptive force of the breath that noisily passes through and shakes one’s body. And so it is with *Spazio elastico*. In the darkness, unable to further perceive the secure support of architectural boundaries, one experiences the movement of an aerial void that unexpectedly takes shape, to then become lost, according to the action of the motors that pull the strings, the noise of which, while slight, is perceived as amplified. *Spazio elastico* becomes like a body that envelops each body that visits it.

In keeping with its experimental nature, *Spazio elastico* has existed in various forms, developed around the constants of a grid of cubes made up of elastic cords animated by motors and by the action of Black Light. As noted above, Colombo presented the first version of the work in 1967, accepting an invitation to participate in an exhibition that focused on the new form of environmental art, organized by Wilfried Skreiner at the Künstlerhaus in Graz, Austria.⁵ The project is documented in numerous drawings, some of which are now in the Graz museum.⁶ The aforementioned typescript by Colombo from the same year indicates the peculiarities of this first version, identifiable in the use of pulsating light and in variations worked on the floor of the interior space. Both are described in the same paragraph: “On the interior walls of the space,” the artist writes, “projections of light occur in flash-like movements that generate after-images in the eye of

⁴ The first edition of *Opera aperta* (translated into English as *The Open Work*) dates back to 1962. Colombo’s familiarity with Eco’s theories dates to the same period, concomitant with the artist’s activity in the Gruppo T circle. Eco wrote the introductory text for the traveling exhibition *Arte programmata. Arte cinetica. Opere moltiplicate. Opera Aperta* at Olivetti shops, 1962, in which Colombo and the other Gruppo T members participated. The text is republished in this catalog on pp. 213-215.

⁵ Considering them as the most innovative artistic research of that period, Skreiner brought together works of environmental art for Trigon 67. Also called “Dreiländer Biennale” (Biennale of three regions), the exhibition concentrated on artists from Austria and the neighboring countries, Italy and Yugoslavia.

⁶ In this regard, see the catalogue *Gianni Colombo. Ambienti*, op. cit. Other drawings are in the Archivio Gianni Colombo in Milan.

the viewer, and thus come to constitute an evanescent structure that interferes with the movements of the elastic structure, in the optical fruition of the viewer who, moving about, will encounter gradual differences in the slope of the floor, successively presenting him with different states of equilibrium, parallel to the unfolding of the kinetic action of the elastic structure of the luminous projections.”⁷ The presence of the luminous projections links *Spazio elastico* to *After-Structures*, an environment exhibited in 1966 and structured, precisely, as intermittent luminous projections devised to produce effects of optical persistence.⁸ According to the description, once again in the typescript text, the artist’s thoughts on this project began even earlier, probably as early as 1964, the same year that Colombo created his first environment, *Strutturazione cine-visuale abitabile (Habitable Kine-visual Structuralization)*.⁹ Here too, electric light is employed to stimulate the organs of sight, according to the artist’s clear interest in Gestalt theories, which can also be detected in the terminology he uses in his writings. Regarding the other peculiarity of the *Elastic Space* exhibited in Graz – the modifications to the slope of the floor – while there is also documentation for one version of *Strutturazione cine-visuale* with this characteristic,¹⁰ it is true that Colombo would develop this aspect of his work in subsequent pieces, before he came to concentrate on only one portion of traversable architecture in the environment *Bariestesia (Bariesthesia)*, where the floor rises up in a series of stairs, developed in contradiction to the predictability of the morphology of the step.¹¹

While Colombo had to wait several years between conceiving the idea in 1964 and actually building his first *Spazio elastico* in 1967, the work underwent major variations in 1968 and became the central element in numerous exhibition installations. A few months after the experience in Graz, in January 1968 the artist had a solo exhibition in Rome, at Fabio Sargentini’s Galleria L’Attico. On this occasion he installed *Spazio elastico* with an intentional reduction and separation of the elements that were in the *Trigon* 1967 version: it seems that in Rome the floor was flat and there was no pulsating light. The pulsating light was instead, in *After-Structures*, that Colombo installed in another room of the gallery. The small catalogue published for the occasion contains the project created for Graz, but it is enclosed, on the front and back covers, by another drawing, which can be associated with this new version of the project.¹² Published in “negative”, in keeping with the artist’s instructions, the drawing emphasizes the temporal development that characterizes the experience of the work, summarizing it in two essential moments of stasis and movement of the elastic grid. In the initial stage, the grid of cords is orderly and one can clearly see the idea of a subdivision into cubic modules, repeated until the space is filled (to allow the environment to be

⁷ Gianni Colombo. *Ambienti*, cit.

⁸ The environment was initially installed on the occasion of the exhibition *Tendenze confrontate. Figurazione oggettuale*. *Arte visuale*, Galleria Il Centro, Naples, 1966.

⁹ Colombo installed the environment for the first time at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs for the exhibition, *Nouvelle Tendence. Propositions visuelles du mouvement international*, Paris, 1964.

¹⁰ In the catalog for the exhibition *Nova tendencija*, Galerija Suvremene Umjetnosti, Zagreb, 1965, the work is titled *Strutturazione cinevisuale ambientale (Habitable Kine-visual Structuralization)* and is described as follows: “Space without light divided into zones with a floor with a different slope to which the viewer, who walks through it, must adapt while successive illuminations of very brief duration present the viewer with systems of orthogonal lines on the walls, which persist in the eye’s retina until the subsequent illumination, which presents the same lines rotated at 60 degrees and so on.”

¹¹ The first presentation of *Bariestesia* occurred on the occasion of the solo exhibition *Gianni Colombo. Intermutabili 1959-1974*, Studio Marconi, Milan, 1975.

¹² *Gianni Colombo* (Rome: Galleria L’Attico, 1968). The drawing is reproduced on pp. 160-161.

accessible to visitors, the first two meters from the floor up are defined only in terms of their vertical axis, as in the Graz project). In the subsequent phase, the internal subdivisions of the space become more complicated, to the point where it is difficult to read them. Stasis is replaced by movement, order by entropy, and rigor by disorder. Inside the space, the various poses of a male and a female figure suggest consequent actions and hint at the totality of physical and psychical reactions that the work is meant to arouse. The time ideally enclosed between the two drawings coincides with the reality of an experience and the more chaotic second drawing depicts a complex second state where the interaction between work and visitors occurs, consequently generating meaning.

As with the earlier experience in Graz,¹³ the work was favorably received by critics. Among the reviews, one that stands out is by Maurizio Fagiolo, who during that period was organizing a series of exhibitions on Giacomo Balla.¹⁴ In accordance with his own research, Fagiolo interprets Colombo's work within a historical perspective, linking the use of light to early Futurist research and to the Russian avant-garde. Analyzing the intentional reduction of means employed by the artist, Fagiolo also refers to the Futurist statement: "We declare that movement and light destroy the materiality of bodies," linking it to the following statement by Colombo: "I decided to use artificial light since this is the most measurable and direct means for intervening in the optical-perceptual process of the viewer and it moreover allows the attainment of movements and mutations with the greatest economy of means in relation to the attainable optical effect."¹⁵ While he calls *Spazio elastico* an "optical machine", recognizing it as an homage to Fontana and also underlining the kinetic aspect of the work, Fagiolo emphasizes its rich cultural legacy. "He [Colombo] recognized Boccioni's and Balla's intuitions," he writes, "he saw the playful movement of Duchamp and the natural movement of Calder, he studied the cellular movement of Bury and the infernal mechanism of Tinguely, always seeking to return to a controllable 'programmed' realm."¹⁶

Fagiolo's interpretation serves as a stimulus to research sources for *Spazio elastico*, both distant and near. Beside the reference to Lucio Fontana and his environmental researches¹⁷, an analysis of the work cannot avoid the fact that Colombo chose the grid structure, the place of modernism *par excellence*. As Rosalind Krauss has written, in her extensive analysis of the grid's preeminence in the language of twentieth-century art, from Malevich on, "Waves of abstract artists discover 'the grid'; parts of its structure one could say is that in its revelatory character it is always a new, a unique discovery." But she adds, "And just as the grid is a stereotype that is constantly being paradoxically rediscovered, it is, as a further paradox, a prison in which the caged artist feels at

¹³ Local press, while reacting for the most part negatively to the exhibition Trigon 67, was positively impressed by Spazio elastico. See K. Barnick-Braun "Gianni Colombo in Graz", in C. Steinle, ed., *Gianni Colombo. Ambienti*, op. cit., 59. An excerpt from the essay is reprinted in this catalog on pp. 292-5.

¹⁴ Over the course of 1968, Fagiolo curated five shows devoted to Balla for Galleria L'Obelisco in Rome: *Balla pre-futurista, Luce e Movimento, Gli stati d'animo, Sculture 1913-15, Il Giardino Futurista and Ricostruzione futurista dell'universo*.

¹⁵ M. Fagiolo, "Colombo: uno spazio per gli occhi e per la psiche," in Cartabianca (Rome, March 1968), 8.

¹⁶ Idem: 8.

¹⁷ For an analysis of the relation between Fontana's environments and the Spazio elastico, see the essay by Scotini in M. Scotini, ed., *Gianni Colombo. Il dispositivo dello spazio* (Milan: Rotonda di via Besana; Skira, 2006). An excerpt of this essay is here republished on pp. 291-2.

liberty.”¹⁸ This is true in the case of *Spazio elastico*, where the geometric cage is assumed by the artist as a pivotal element to be broken up with the complicity of whoever passes through the space of the work. If the grid, according to Krauss, blocks discourse, its dismantling produces it. The creative irrational bursts into the work. Colombo’s animated grid, distorted and distortable (it is difficult to resist the temptation to touch it) becomes, instead, a spider’s web with innumerable possibilities. And so its references multiply, beginning with Marcel Duchamp’s celebrated installation for the exhibition *First Papers of Surrealism*, in New York in 1942, when the artist unrolled a mile of rope among the installed works, complicating visitors’ passage but transforming the exhibition itself into a work.¹⁹ And so, projecting forward in time, even despite geographic boundaries, if one were to interpret *Spazio elastico* according to another line of thought, interesting ideas for analysis can be found when looking at Colombo’s work in relation to the work of artists such as the Venezuelan Gego, or, remaining in Europe, Eva Hesse. The vitality of Gego’s *Reticulárea (Net Formations)* or the going to extremes of Hesse’s *Right After* – both works dated 1969 and thus subsequent to the first appearance of Colombo’s piece – can be interpreted in light of a new awareness that the body, in its more physical acceptation, acquires during that period.²⁰ These are the years of the sexual revolution, and the body at the center of the discourse.

It was on the occasion of the stormy political climate of the XXXIV Venice Biennale in June 1968 that Colombo included *Spazio elastico* as part of a broader installation of his works, almost as part of a path, thus clarifying its function as a place to be traversed with the body. A drawing, now in the Archivio Gianni Colombo in Milan, shows the project for Venice as a succession of four distinct but connecting spaces. Developing a zigzag path, Colombo welcomes visitors with works from the series *Strutturazioni ritmiche (Rhythmic Structuralizations)* – Plexiglas sculptures with pulsating light – to then lead them into *After-Structures*. *Spazio elastico* follows, installed in a version corresponding to the one shown in Rome in 1968. The path culminates with *Ambiente visuo-cinestetico: ambiente a struttura e colore permutabili verde-rosso-blu (progetto 1964/68) (Visual-kinesthetic Environment: Environment with Interchangeable Green-Red-Blue Structure and Color, project 1964-68)*, where the action of red and blue lamps on a wall painted in a red and blue grid against a green background is conceived to provide a concluding crescendo to the proposed experience.²¹ The exchange between visitor and work, while certainly optical, is above all physical, as in a play of seduction that, beginning with the glance, ends up shaking the entire body. In an impassioned account of the Biennale, published immediately after the opening, Germano Celant conveyed the context of ideological contrast between the reality of the student protests that were igniting the political climate of the period and a Biennale that, despite the historic moment, “continues its integration of the object, blocks experimentation and reinforces the alienation to and

¹⁸ R. E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1986), 159-160.

¹⁹ Also known as Sixteen Miles of String, the work was made by Duchamp using only one mile of the sixteen miles of rope he acquired. For an analysis of the relation between Duchamp and the *Spazio elastico* see F. Poli, “Gianni Colombo e l’arte degli ambienti tra Europa e America,” in V. Fagone, ed., *I Colombo. Joe Colombo 1930-1971. Gianni Colombo 1937-1993* (Bergamo: Galleria d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea Bergamo; Milan: Mazzotta, 1995), 273.

²⁰ For an analysis of Gego’s work, see N. Rottner and P. Weibel, eds., *Gego 1957- 1988. Thinking the Line* (Karlsruhe: ZKM Center for Art and Media; Graz: Neue Galerie am Landesmuseum Joanneum; Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2003). For Eva Hesse, see E. Esse, *Marcel Duchamp, Sixteen Miles of String, First Papers of Surrealism*, Whitelaw Reid Mansion, New York 1942. Installation view courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art, *Alexina and Marcel Duchamp Papers*, curated by E. Sussman (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Art; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002).

²¹ This is how the environment is described in the catalog for the Biennale. See U. Apollonio, ed., *XXXIV Biennale Internazionale d’Arte Venezia* (Venice: Edizioni La Biennale di Venezia, 1964), 12.

of the object, intensifies its repressive and reformist action and increasingly demonstrates its reactionary thrust.”²² While not concurring with the overall exhibition, however, Celant does reserve positive judgment for Colombo’s work. Taking *Spazio elastico* as a fundamental concept for the artist’s entire poetics, he emphasizes the way in which the work overcomes the art-commodity dichotomy: “Colombo (along with the other members of Gruppo T) – Celant writes – is the only ‘arte programmata’ artist (programmed artist)²³ who continues his ‘expansive’ action, who believes in the production of ‘useless’ and unproductive objects, who exhibits through his environments an ‘elastic space’ in which the interest in transitoriness and the flow of time prevents any possible commodification of a conservative nature. Careful analysis shows that Colombo’s entire production from 1959 to today demonstrates the artist’s attention, not so much to the defined and productive object, but rather to the event, to the action that is developed upon contact or in relation to the objective tool that is created.”²⁴ Despite possible contrasts with the conservative spirit of the Biennale as described by Celant, the strength of Colombo’s art earned him the first prize. With a clear disconnect between his artistic research and the institutional categories, the prize was awarded in the category of painting.

Again in 1968, for the auspicious occasion of *documenta* in Kassel, Colombo developed another traversable environment, one that can be seen as a mutation of the *Spazio elastico*. In a drawing dated March 1968, which can be related to the Kassel project, the artist delineates an L-shaped environment, developed as a succession of corridors.²⁵ Two parallel corridors, characterized by sloping walls, culminate in a third corridor, where the cords run parallel to the walls. This further transformation of the *Spazio elastico* in the form of corridors that seem to anticipate the architecture of the *Topoesthesie (Topoesthesias)* – environments with sloping walls and floors²⁶– was also explored by Colombo on the occasion of his project for the exhibition organized by Achille Bonito Oliva, *Vitalità del negativo nell’arte italiana 1960–70*, installed in 1970 in Rome at Palazzo delle Esposizioni. In an image shot by Ugo Mulas,²⁷ the grid of elastic strings presents itself for an exchange with the visitor, who grabs it almost as if it were an appendage of another body to be clasped.

While throughout his exhibition career Colombo continued to repropose *Spazio elastico*, presenting it for the most part in the intentionally concise version of the 1968 show at L’Attico, one should not forget that the concept of this piece was also explored in a series of works developed parallel to the environment. In the late 1960s, the artist had already created light metal structures in the form of cubes defined only by their sides. Hung from the ceiling by simple nylon threads that disappear from sight, these aerial sculptures are animated by motors. The action of the latter create a sort of dance, capable of separating and defining the volume of each cube from the indistinct surrounding

²² G. Celant, “Una Biennale in grigio-verde,” in Casabella, no. 327 (Milan, June 1968), 52.

²³ *Arte programmata* (or programmed art) was a term first used in the 1960s by Bruno Munari and Umberto Eco, amongst others, to define non-expressionist Italian art created according to repeatable plans.

²⁴ *Idem*: 53.

²⁵ The drawing is reproduced on p. 26.

²⁶ Colombo installed the first *Topoesthesia* at Studio Marconi in Milan. The exhibition was held in 1977.

²⁷ Beginning in the 1950s, when he began to spend time with numerous artists and intellectuals in Milan, Ugo Mulas (Pozzolengo, Brescia, 1928 – Milan, 1973) was one of the photographers most in tune with new artistic developments, both in Italy and abroad. See P. G. Castagnoli, ed., *Ugo Mulas. La scena dell’arte. Photocolors* (Turin: GAM – Galleria Civica d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea; Milan: Electa 2008).

space, imbuing the sculptures with optical and kinetic characteristics analogous to those of the environment. Other works with the same title were developed as mobile cubes projecting from a background plane. The active role of the “user” is further emphasized in another series of works developed from 1974. In this series, Colombo started again from the traditional plane of the painting, transforming it, however, into a table on which the visitor could intervene, manually shifting elastic strings. The designs that can be obtained in these works involve visitors in a relationship that has the apparent levity of a game.²⁸

However, it was on the occasion of the exhibition *Amore Mio* in Montepulciano in 1970 that the environment appeared in one of its most peculiar forms.²⁹ In collaboration with Gabriele De Vecchi, Colombo presented a series of slide projections obtained by intervening, with ironic subtlety, in famous works by artists, from Giotto to Duchamp. In one image of the series, taken from *Le Stimmate di San Francesco (The Stigmata of Saint Francis, 1320 ca)*, the fresco dedicated to the saint that Giotto painted in the Church of Santa Croce in Florence, the *Spazio elastico* occupies the uncertain perspective that characterizes the architectural structure decorated by the Italian Trecento master. It is notable that Colombo chose a work that was still free from the codification of the perspectival view that Leon Battista Alberti would develop about a century later, again in Florence, beginning with the assumption of a single immobile eye, virtually detached from the body.³⁰ From inside the *Spazio elastico*, as inserted by Colombo into Giotto’s fresco, a figure appears, perhaps Colombo himself; from this point of view, he observes the miraculous conferring of the stigmata, a mystical experience but also one of the most physical and carnal described by Christian scripture. Once again, the body is the protagonist.

²⁸ Some of the works discussed in this paragraph are reproduced on pp.162-7.

²⁹ The exhibition, installed in the Palazzo Ricci in Montepulciano in 1970, brought to get her the creative energies of sixteen artists who, with the intention of responsibly asserting their roles, organized the exhibition with Achille Bonito Oliva.

³⁰ The first edition of *De pictura* by Leon Battista Alberti was published in Florence in 1436.