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Colombo's Kinetics

Guy Brett

As a tendency in twentieth-century art, kineticism has a number of interesting and unusual features – one of which is its relative obscurity. It was never accorded the centrality and influence given, for example, to Minimalism, Conceptual art or even to Pop art. Indeed, it was treated as something of a side-show: entertaining, novel, but short-lived, never attracting the gravitas that accompanied art-historical or critical treatment of other tendencies. There have been signs recently of a challenge to history of kineticism historical marginalisation. However, if the challenge is made in verbal arguments it runs into a difficulty: the very fact that the work moves. Photographic reproductions, which would normally illustrate such texts, convey nothing of the kinetic work's qualities, the language or the poetics of movement, which can only be experienced live. Nevertheless, perhaps one can evoke in the imagination what comes into existence with movement, the transformation when movement begins, and the extraordinary range of form and feeling it is capable of, by comparing works that come from opposite ends of the kinetic spectrum: for example, a Gerhard von Graevenitz motorized relief – so systematic, repetitive and formal – and a Jean Tinguely *Baluba*, in Pontus Hulten's words, "the wildest and most extravagant works Tinguely ever produced".

"At rest", Hultén goes on, "[the *Balubas*] are rather disappointing – a few feathers, some scraps of cloth, some pieces of iron – so the electric motor plays a decisive role ... the melancholy engendered by the assorted junk is transformed into gaiety as it suddenly springs into life."[1] While the motor in the *Baluba* is hilariously visible and swept up in the contortions it brings about, in von Graevenitz's relief it is hidden. It causes the small, evenly spaced, identical visible tabs to do no more than revolve. But since the relationships of these movements are random, their interconnections become extremely complex. Poverty of information, predictability, banal calculation, is all transformed into the incalculable.

Another striking feature of the tendency loosely called "kinetic art" in the 1950s and 60s, was its internationalism. Any list of major or minor figures in the movement would consist of people born at all points of the compass, with considerable emphasis on countries of the third world. In relation to this phenomenon, it would be absurd to claim for North America the dominance that it is usually given in postwar art. Kinetic work expressed the notion that there is no one center. It was a focus for the aspirations of diverse peoples to be absolutely modern, to speak in universal terms, and to evolve further the contemporary perceptions of space and time. This process often involved artists in a critical dialog with both the dominant culture and their own intellectual, ethical and spiritual inheritance, in terms of ways of conceiving of a human relationship to the universe.

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[1] P. Hultén, *Museum Jean Tinguely – The Collection* (Basel: Museum Jean Tinguely, 1996), 156.

In fact, it was from Latin America, rather than North America, that a great portion of the innovatory energy of kineticism came. The influx of Latin Americans to Paris in the 1950s and 60s, to live, to work and to visit studios, actually altered the evolutionary history of twentieth-century art in a way that has not been sufficiently recognized. It injected into the postwar *angst* of Europe an optimism and a hope, forging a link with the utopianism of the prewar avant-garde, which was no longer fashionable in the Europe of the 1950s. The Venezuelans Jesús Rafael Soto and Alejandro Otero made visits to Holland to see Piet Mondrian's work. "At that time [1950] no one in France was talking about Mondrian, still less might one see any of his work", Otero wrote.[2] The Brazilian Sergio Camargo visited Constantin Brancusi. Many Latin Americans, especially the Argentinians Gyula Kosice and Tomás Maldonado, called on Georges Vantongerloo – then working on his cosmological Plexiglass and prism objects and his wire nuclei – visits that greatly cheered the Belgian pioneer, ignored as he was by the French and Belgian art worlds and living in Paris in poverty.

The origins of kinetic art were broad, not only geographically but also conceptually. The names that become adopted for artistic movements are always provisional, and usually disguise links with other phenomena more difficult to name. In Europe, kinetic experiments had important links with the work and thought of artists who were not concerned with movement in a mechanical or literal sense, notably Yves Klein, Lucio Fontana and Piero Manzoni. The practice of the monochrome and its connection with the philosophical notion of the void forms another vector that unites artists of different geographical-cultural origins, practices and sensibilities. Besides Klein, Fontana and Manzoni, one could mention Camargo, John Cage, Haroldo and Augusto de Campos (indicating the strong link between kineticism and concrete poetry), Gianni Colombo, Lygia Clark, Dom Sylvester Houédard, Li Yuan-chia, David Medalla, Barnett Newman, Hélio Oiticica, Ad Reinhardt, Mira Schendel, Soto, Takis, Mark Tobey and others. Zero was the name of the group formed by German artists Otto Piene, Heinz Mack and Günther Uecker, and *Nul=0* the title of the review edited by Henk Peters and Herman de Vries in Holland, which nurtured the sort of connections I have been describing. Clark's paradoxical characterization of the void as the "full emptiness" is perhaps one that most clearly unites the thinking of so many artists at that period, including the specific research of Colombo.

From the plane

Any discussion of kinetic art today has to reckon with the effects of the passage of time. Often, what seemed back then a radical rejection of the traditional material formats of art, can be seen now to have emerged from those traditions in ways that deepen one's appreciation of what was achieved. Indeed, the brilliance of some of the innovations made, say, within the discourse of painting, become even clearer and have the effect of making much that is produced in painting today look obsolete and retrogressive. Colombo, Clark and Soto can be cited as three artists whose kinetic work emerged from a transformation of the historical "plane" as a sensory experience and a philosophical notion.

The process can be seen with exceptional clarity in the early work (1954–60) of Lygia Clark. Starting with geometric abstraction akin to Mondrian's, and taking further Mondrian's attention to the problem of the painting's edges – where the fictive space of "art" meets the rest of the world – Clark experimented with incorporating the frame as part of the painted surface. She then began to explore – within the strictest black/white geometric schema – modulations of the surface with

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[2] Quoted in J. Balza, *Alejandro Otero* (Milan: Edizioni di Comunità, 1977), 48.

incised lines and raised sections, tending to create a space within the thickness of the panel itself. A superb transitional work, *Casulo* (*Cocoon*, 1959), wraps together in a concise unity the broken surface plane and the inner three-dimensional space that the title characterizes as organic and of latent potential. In the 1960s followed the *Bichos* (*Animals*), structures of hinged aluminium planes to be manipulated and changed by the viewer according to a "living" rhythm. With this participatory object, Clark was launched on the path that eventually led to her unique hybrid of the esthetic and the psycho-therapeutic, which threw into question the relationship of art and life and for which an adequate name has yet to be found. Clark's break with the convention of the plane is announced in philosophical, even cosmological, terms in her powerful text of 1960, "The Death of the Plane":

The plane is a concept created by man with a practical aim: to satisfy his need for balance ... Arbitrarily marking out limits in space, the plane gives man a totally false and rational idea of his own reality. Thus appear opposing concepts such as high and low, the right and the inverse, which contribute towards a destroying within man of the sense of totality. This is also the reason for which man has projected his transcendental side and given it the name of God. Thus he then posed the problem of his own existence – inventing the mirror of his own spirituality. [...] In becoming aware of the fact that this is a question of the poetics of himself projected onto the outside, he understood at the same time that there was a need to reintegrate his poetics as an indivisible part of himself.
It was this interjection which made the rectangle explode from the painting. We swallow this shattered rectangle, we absorb it.
[...] We dive into the totality of the cosmos: we are part of this cosmos, vulnerable on all sides: above and below, right and left, in short, good and evil – all concepts which are transformed.
[...][Contemporary man] learns to float in the cosmic reality as in his own inner reality.[3]

A world away, in Caracas, Soto was also inspired by Mondrian, believing that, in his *Boogie-Woogie* paintings, the latter was on the verge of "a purely dynamic painting, realised through optical means".[4] With this inspiration, Soto experimented with the repetition of identical elements and their possible permutations, and then discovered that by superimposing a transparent painted surface over the base, at a slight distance and a slight displacement, an indeterminate vibratory space was created, detached from both surfaces. Refining this structure to a lined screen as the base-board, with wire, metallic squares, bars and other objects suspended in front of it, he produced subtly different visual experiences of the dissolution of solid matter into immaterial pulses. He had thus created a modern formulation of pictorial artifice, an *illusion* that says something about the *actual* nature of reality.

It becomes impossible to say which is more real: solid object or immaterial vibration. With irony and poise, however, Soto does not allow the energy to upset a pictorial equilibrium, a kinetic play that both respects and destabilizes painting's traditionally iconic stasis. We may see this as an expression of Soto's particular search for harmony in conditions of uncertainty and instability that we now ascribe to the universe.

At the same time, he realized that he did not need the surface or plane to create his vibratory medium. His brilliant *Penetrables*, areas of densely hanging plastic cords into which one can plunge, made from non-precious and renewable materials, open on all sides, extend the contraction

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[3] L. Clark, "The Death of the Plane," 1960. Reprinted in Lygia Clark (Barcelona: Fundació Antoni Tàpies, 1997), 117.

[4] J. R. Soto, "Interview with Guy Brett," in *Signals* (London, November – December 1965), 13.

between the pictorial space and the world out into the public arena. Viewers can pass bodily from a state of solidity to a state of visual indeterminacy and dissolution and back again. The optical play sets up an easy communication between people both inside and outside the work, and so it becomes a social experience. I wrote at the time:

Brushing through, there is an extraordinary feeling that one's physicality is diffused, and other people's also, so that people no longer abut upon one another like objects as they do in the street. In the modern street we are all eyes, staring, and our tightly defined bodies move along mechanically. In Soto's *Penetrable* the eyesight is scattered with all the delicacy of an object in one of his kinetic paintings. It is with our whole bodies that we experience the "climate" of the work and welcome the illusion.[5]

Gianni Colombo's kinetic work clearly begins with a deformation of the surface (*Superficie in variazione* (*Surface in Variation)*, 1959; *Superficie in divenire* (*Surface in Becoming),* 1959), where bumps and depressions erupt its planar integrity. His belief in public participation is announced too, since in some works the spectator can change the surface by pulling on small tabs at the bottom edge of the canvas. In fact, both these tendencies are present even earlier: when Colombo was working with ceramics, and made a piece consisting of three elements of terracotta that the viewer could move to form a common surface, or to break it.

Colombo's first motorized work, *Strutturazione pulsante* (*Pulsating Structuralization*), 1959, both retains and disrupts the pictorial plane, and even the whole geometric tradition, in a way that is both poignant and witty. The movement of the massed polystyrene blocks is slow, intermittent, and curiously subversive, as fissures are opened up in the surface and then closed again. *Stutturazione fluida* (*Fluid Structuralization*), 1960, is also a work conceived within but going beyond pictorial/ graphic conventions. The fluid movements occur within a virtual plane, compressing the energy as a continuous steel band passes through the machine, creating one large cycle and several smaller ones.

Later, when he was working directly with environmental and architectural space, manipulating it in ways that affected the visitor's entire body and sense of self, he still liked to return to the wall-hung work and invite the intervention of the hand. With elegant economy of means, in his *Spazio elastico* (*Elastic Space*) works begun in 1968, a grid network of white elastic cords over black could be altered to read quite differently by stretching the cords in various directions and anchoring them to sets of pins at the periphery of the picture. It was Lucio Fontana, Colombo's teacher, who expressed most succinctly an ambition shared between himself and the three artists discussed here: "As a painter ... I do not wish to make a painting; I want to open up the space, to create a new dimension for Art, to tie it to the cosmos as if it was expanding beyond the restricted plane of the painting".[6] Perhaps ironically, one thing that resulted from this ambition, this cosmological supersession of the plane in the years around 1960, was a wholesale enrichment of the physical surface of the work, of the most diverse kinds, beyond paint and brush.

Structure and fluidity

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[5] G. Brett, "Introduction," in exh. cat. *Soto* (London: Marlborough Fine Art, 1969), 16.

[6] Lucio Fontana, 1955, quoted in M. Pedrosa, "Da dissolução do objeto ao vanguardismo brasileiro." Reprinted in M. Pedrosa, *Mundo, homen, arte em crise* (São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1975), 165.

It was a strong tendency among many artists associated with kineticism, especially those who formed themselves into groups, to speak of their work in impersonal, "scientific" terms. Thus Colombo, who was a founder-member of Gruppo T in Milan, would say that "the visual elements in my work are stripped of any kind of analogical or evocative function; their role is that of an indicator of rhythm". "Forms intended to seduce the imagination" of the spectator were to be resolutely avoided and replaced by a capacity to "stimulate [in the viewer] psychological reflexes".[7] Materials were chosen as the "most measurable means for affecting the optical-perceptive apparatus of the observer".[8] François Morellet, a member of the GRAV (Groupe de reserche d'art visual – Group for the Visual Art Research) in Paris, spoke of the "unfailing affection" he had for "systems and precision, in sum for everything that limited my subjective decisions"[9] (one may wonder if his "unfailing affection" was not already a "subjective decision"). Soto, who was not himself a member of any group, described his art as a matter of "pure relations". His words are very similar to Colombo's: "I use anonymous elements to emphasize the purity and sufficiency of the rhythm that may be revealed between them."[10] Soto, however, advised artists against an involvement in science. A field of scientific knowledge that is as complex as art is may "swallow him up in its depths", he wrote.[11]

Whatever the case, I believe there is a tension in the work of Colombo that reaches deep into philosophy and cultural history. From the very beginning of his career, one feels a dialectical movement in his objects between rational structure and free-flowing fluidity. The rectilinear grid of the many versions of *Spazio elastico*, and the endless unwinding band of *Strutturazione fluida* can serve as an example of the two opposed principles at work – with the proviso that in fact they interpenetrate one another. The elastic material distorts the rigidity and uniformity of the grid structure, while in the other work the word "strutturazione" is deliberately inserted to accompany the "fluida".

A succinct way of evoking the two realms would be to place side-by-side two notable books that deal with the subject of art and the physical world: William M. Ivins Jr's *On the rationalisation of sight: with an examination of three Renaissance texts on perspective*, and Theodor Schwenck's *Sensitive chaos: the creation of flowing forms in water and air*.[12] "Rationalisation" in Ivins's book designates the Renaissance re-discovery of linear perspective, the geometric formulae for rendering vision in graphic terms. Sightlines and the conventions of perspectival space are now deeply ingrained in our psyches, and it is exactly on these habits that Colombo draws to destabilize perceptions and engineer his elasticization of space. In this way, he works with, and critically assesses, his own Italian legacy, so that it is particularly poignant when he rigs up his elegant and minimal spatial networks in an ornate and vaulted marble church interior (Cesano Maderno, 1975).

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[7] G. Colombo, "Statement" (Milan: 1963–65), quoted in exh. cat. G. Brett, *In motion: an Arts Council exhibition of kinetic art* (London:1966).

[8] G. Colombo, "After-Structures," projects, 1964.

[9] François Morellet, quoted in Lynn Zelevansky, "Grids: François Morellet at the crossroads," in exh. cat. *François Morellet: 60 random years of systems* (London: Annely Juda Fine Art, 2008).

[10] J. R. Soto, "Interview with Guy Brett," op. cit.

[11] Jesús Rafael Soto, in M. Joray and J. R. Soto, eds., Soto(Neuchâtel: Editions du Griffon 1984), 46.

[12] William M. Ivins Jr, *On the Rationalization of Sight: with an examination of three Renaissance text son perspective* (New York: Da Capo Press,1973). Theodor Schwenk, *Sensitive Chaos: the creation of flowing forms in water and air* (London: Rudolf Steiner Press, 1965).

Theodor Schwenck's book is essentially an exposition of Rudolph Steiner's views on matter, on energy and form. The book contains many startling images of flows, currents, vortices, ripples, meanderings and suchlike. Colombo was interested in Steiner's ideas of space, and paid a visit to the Goetheanum in Dornach in Germany, designed by Steiner. The comparison of these two books, especially in their visual material, poses a stark contrast between the cerebral and the sensuous or organic, but we know that Colombo was concerned to go beyond this dichotomy.

Eye and body

A notion shared by Colombo and Clark is elasticity – a challenge to the rigid. Both actually used elastic materials in their work. For both, elastic was a means of involving the body in the experience of the work. But the ways in which they did this were very different, the elastic serving two distinct visions.

Colombo's *Spazio elastico*, 1967, is exactly what its title implies. The perceptual experiment is accomplished with the elegance of pure abstraction. A grid structure of fine thread is set up within a dark cube that can be entered by the viewer, who sees only the lines, picked out by black light. Motors mounted in the walls gently pull the grid into certain deformations, instantly changing our co-ordinates for reading the space we are in. Effectively, Colombo leads us back to an awareness of the body through an exclusive concentration on the visual sense and its ingrained habits, dependent on the conventions of linear perspective and sight-lines. By contrast, many of Clark's works make us aware of our other senses and the totality of our bodies by blocking the visual sense, or by turning it inward and submerging it in the sensorium as a whole. Thus her *Masques Sensoriels* (*Sensorial Hoods*), 1967, made of cloth and other materials, hold a cluster of sensations close to the eyes, ears and nose, and her *Máscaras abismo* (*Abyss Masks*), 1968, which hang from the head and cover part of the body, incorporate a blindfold, so that the participant feels a powerful sense of volume, space, weight, etc, not distanced by sight, but in close contact with, or even "inside" the body.

When Lygia Clark did concentrate on the eye it was again to look inward, as in her work *Diálogo: Oculos* (*Dialogue: Goggles*, 1968). These goggles, adapted from rubber masks made for underwater swimmers, were extended by a system of hinged mirrors. The wearer could manipulate these to give a patchwork of partial views. By turning them flat, one looked past them to the "real" world; by twisting them, one could produce reflected views up, down, or behind, or look back into one's own eyes. A double set of goggles allowed the heads of two people to be brought into intimate proximity producing complex modulations of the experience of looking away or into the other's eyes. According to the way the mirrors were positioned, there could be a disturbing ambivalence between the experience of one's left and right eyes: one eye looking into the other person's and the other reflecting one's own eye.

A third artist whose work can be related to this theme of the relationship of eye and body, is Cildo Meireles, and especially his installation *Através* (*Through*),1983–89. With this work, we move on twenty years from the 1960s propositions of Colombo and Clark, with a corresponding change in cultural attitudes. Whereas artists in the 1950s and 60s – if this is not too much of a generalization – pursued energy, contemplated space/time in a spirit of clearing away, starting from zero, from a *tabula rasa* (corresponding to the "void" evoked by Klein and Clark, among others), Meireles presents such a search as enmeshed in culture, as inescapably mediated. *Através* is a penetrable maze made up of short, discreet sections of barriers of all kinds: garden fences, iron grilles, shower

curtains, museum cordons, barbed-wire tangles, blinds, and even two aquaria (these last, obstacles even if made of glass, accommodated shoals of minute transparent fish). The barriers range from the benign to the aggressive, from forceful obstruction to delicate veiling, a combination of the minutiae of social experience with the generality of abstraction.

Beguiling in its visual densities when seen from outside, *Através* becomes a very different experience when entered, since the whole floor is covered with broken glass. It demands care to be walked upon. Multiple questions arise. Can we see through? Can we go through? Can we reconcile the eye-pleasure with prohibitions on our bodily movement? Is the eye and the body's experience divisible? *Através* is a double metaphor, cast in its labyrinthine form, posing the right-angled and perspectival "order" of the screens against the nucleic energy and chaotic form of a great ball of crumpled cellophane that lies at its center, lit by a single lamp. The great ball may be taken as an indication of infinity, which is found at the heart of all these devices of limitation.

The actor

In many ways, artists like Colombo adopted the language of physics and cosmology to get closer to the universe – the "all". They called themselves "technicians" and "researchers" and were prepared to sink their individuality in a group identity (at least temporally). This position defined their attachment to and understanding of abstraction. They had a horror of anything figurative. Yet the figurative and the individual survive in Colombo's legacy in the most surprising way. Leafing through images and documents in the Archivio Gianni Colombo in Milan, under the kind supervision of Marco Scotini, I was amazed by the sheer number of portrait photographs of Colombo to be found among his things. In every photograph, with or without his work, he is dressed differently, and fashionably – a matter not only of clothes but of hair and moustache as well. He invited some of the foremost photographers of Italy to take the pictures: hence their sophisticated lighting and effective poses. Warming to the theme, Scotini suggested to me that Colombo was an actor and his work his stage. Certainly this fascinating cast of photographic characters – all, however, careful to project the *bella figura* – prove that the "social" entered into Gianni Colombo's work in its own fashion.

This somewhat eccentric reference to the social, brings us back to a distinct characteristic of Colombo's kinetics, and to the kinetic conception of art in general, that is, the close relationship between material transformation and the invitation to the spectator to participate actively in the work. The nature of authorship was profoundly questioned, and expanded, on two fronts. On the one hand artists opened their work to the physical world, allowing sources of energy in one form or another to take the work beyond the artist's absolute control; and on the other hand they opened it to the social world by providing models, moulds or templates that came to life through the input of each participant's subjectivity. The pervasive influence of both innovations needs to be fully recognized.