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Participated Space

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev

Gianni Colombo is among the most important voices in kinetic art, which developed internationally in the 1950s and 1960s.[1]
And yet, he would not have liked such a sentence.
For Colombo, art was a catalyst for personal and collective emancipation, in antithesis to the seriousness typical of so-called 'high' culture. He experimented in creating environments that the public could enter, and he supported the idea of knowledge as something that one exchanges and shares through participation and collaboration. In this belief, he anticipated the discourses that characterize today's era of the Internet, of Wikipedia and of social networks. Simultaneously, his art celebrates the physical, the embodied and the tactile dimensions of knowledge, far from the dualist disarticulation between mind and body, which also defines our digital era.
This retrospective at Castello di Rivoli presents a wide selection of artworks. These include the first gouaches and ceramics, his kinetic works *Strutturazioni pulsanti* (*Pulsating Structuralizations*) of 1959, as well as works that engage the audience through light, such as the *Cromostrutture* (*Chromostructures*, 1961-70) and *0↔ 220 Volt* (1973-77), and his spatial environments, among which *Strutturazione cinevisuale abitabile* (*Habitable Kine-Visual Structuralization*), the first installation realized by the artist in 1964. The exhibition also includes other important environments: *After-Structures* (1966), *Zoom Squares (Quadri deformati)* (*Zoom Squares – Distorted Squares*, 1970), and the celebrated *Spazio elastico* (*Elastic Space*, 1967-68) for which Colombo won the first prize at the Biennale di Venezia in 1968. Inside this artwork, the movement of elastics is illuminated by a 'blacklight'[2], inducing unexpected disorientation effects in the spectator's self-perception. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Colombo created more complex spaces that were devoid of electromechanic animation, such as *Bariestesie* (*Bariesthesias*, 1974-1975) and the *Topoestesie* (*Topoesthesias*, 1977), included in the exhibition. In these environments, elementary structures characterized by the use of inclined planes, arches, stairs, boards, columns and cylinders are manipulated and deformed, revealing the transitory movement of the visitor as an essential condition for, and component of, the artwork.
A playful lighthearted dimension were Colombo's preferred communicative forms. Finding their origins in Dada, these expressions of anti-intellectualism defined the standpoint of those very

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[1] The first 'kinetic' artwork - in the sense of a work in movement - is thought to be Marcel Duchamp's ready- made *Roue de Bicyclette* (Bicycle Wheel) of 1913, followed by the experiments with light and movement of the 1920s by Aleksandr Rodchenko, Naum Gabo and László Moholy-Nagy, and subsequently by Alexander Calder and Jean Tinguely. In the 1950s and 1960s, kineticism developed in relation to Optical art into a world wide movement, from Jesús Rafael Soto in Latin America to Len Lye in New Zealand and AtsukoTanaka in Japan.

[2] In 1935, William Byler developed the 'black light', which only emits ultraviolet rays (ca. 400 nanometers max.), furthering the research of Robert Williams Wood of 1903, whose dark 'Wood's glass' allows only UV light to traverse it. UV light is not visible to the human eye, but it provokes the fluorescence and phosphorescence of certain materials.

individuals who, during the Twentieth century, were the most aware of the disasters caused by modernity's excess of 'seriousness'. Colombo was passionate about Jazz music and he often visited the cinema. His friends remember him as a cordial man who enjoyed comedy and pleasantries. In the numerous photographs of him, his theatrical poses reveal a personality that was both histrionic and self-ironic, that of an actor who places himself singularly in the world. In the same way, Colombo wanted us to be able to place ourselves alongside – and *inside* – his works, without being afraid of losing our balance, of staggering, almost of collapsing – in an experimental articulation of the Self at the threshold between conscious and unconscious, in which all rational control is lost, and all that remains is the experimental intentionality of one's actions. The articulation investigated by Colombo was not that of dreaming itself, nor of being awake, but of the ambiguous and uncertain liminal space between these two, a form of nocturnal universe at dawn, when the dream continues while we are already partially awake. In 1968, Colombo described this semi-oniric state when speaking of the *Spazio elastico*, as a space "that undergoes continuous dimensional osmoses, in which diverse and simultaneous kinetic events, that superimpose and interfere with one another while expanding in every direction, tend to eliminate an observationally rooted center of attention..."[3]

In this world, observed through an oblique and fluid gaze, we may be surprised by a perception that is only apparently false, but that after more careful observation is instead revealed to be corresponding more precisely to the way in which the world is really experienced – a universe in which walls are not stable, nor still, but are instead in constant change and mutation while we move along them with our eyes, in a way so tactile as to resemble the hands of the blind. The *Pulsating Structuralizations*, for example, enact a rhythmical movement, but they are not directly manipulable. These paintings composed of small white polystyrene blocks pulsate, animated through an electro-magnetic force, creating visual and spatial displacements. The tactile sensuality of the *Strutturazioni pulsanti* (the 'walls', as indeed the artist familiarly called these works), express the joy of being able to truly make a painting *live* – to make it move and penetrate the space of the spectator, slowly and rhythmically, without spectacle. These works suggest instead that the world can only be *lived* and never possessed (Colombo spoke of "momentary optical attractions... determined by an unpredictable sequence, to induce continuous rectifications in the reading of the structure".)[4]

In the second half of the 1950s, Colombo studied at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Brera. He quickly expressed a desire in his research to experiment with diverse materials and techniques, from ceramics to graphic design, to works in felt and wadding (1958-59). Colombo was interested in Surrealism, and he wrote a thesis on Max Ernst. In a 1958 joint declaration with Carlo Berta, Davide Boriani and Gabriele De Vecchi, Colombo cited Paul Klee, Vasilij Kandinsky and Hans Arp as foundational influences in his cultural formation.[5] In those years, Milan was enjoying a time of economic rebirth and the artistic environment was characterized by a strong interaction between local and international artists. Colombo's research became closer to those of the 'Nuclearists',[6] to

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[3] G. Colombo, "Spazio elastico (progetti:1964-67)," in *Gianni Colombo* (Rome: L'Attico, 1968), n.p.

[4] G. Colombo, in *Ricerche a Milano agli inizi degli anni '60*, edited by G. Dorfles (Milan: Studio Luca Palazzoli, 1975), n.p.

[5] 'The experiences of artists such as Klee, Kandinsky and Arp, and in general all those movements born around these artists, were also influential in our cultural formation. Therefore our works are born out of a Surrealist experience...' Statement in Berta, Boriani, Colombo e Devecchi, Bellinzona, 1958.

[6] The Nuclear art movement was founded in 1951 by Enrico Baj, Sergio Dangelo and Gianni Bertini, explicitly referring to art in the time of nuclear energy, and in opposition to geometrical abstraction. Their artworks suggest sub-atomic universes of radiation, microbes and embryos, an imagery that can be identified in Colombo's early gouaches.

the humor and the playfulness of Bruno Munari,[7] and to the Spatialism of Lucio Fontana,[8] who was one of his first supporters. Following Futurist ideas of the early Twentieth century, Fontana advocated the necessity to transcend painting and the sculptural forms of traditional art, in favor of an interpenetration of artwork and real space through the observer's gaze and his/her spatial-temporal experience. In 1949, Fontana began to pierce his canvasses, creating the first series of the *Concetti spaziali* (*Spatial Concepts*, the *Buchi*). Following a series of collaborations with architects from as early as the 1930s, Fontana developed his first *Ambiente spaziale* (*Spatial Environment*) in 1949 at the Galleria Il Naviglio in Milan – in a dark room illuminated only by ultraviolet light, an abstract form, made fluorescent, hung from the ceiling. This was followed by the fluorescent *Arabesco* (*Arabesque*) of 1951, an installation of neon tubes, exhibited at the IX Milano Triennale, which Fontana defined as the trail of a flashlight moving in space.

If Fontana was the artist who defined the very *space* and environment of the artwork as an integral part of the artwork itself, Colombo developed these premises and investigated art as *participated* space. Colombo's interest in a real relationship of participation with the artwork was indeed already manifest in his first ceramic sculptures, a number of which were composites of elements that could be individually manipulated. This becomes more evident in a series of later works, among which the *Rilievi intermutabili* (*Intermutable Reliefs*, 1959), composed of moving spheres or cylinders that mutate the surfaces of rubber sheets placed above them; or *InOut* (1959-63) and the *Superfici in variazione* (*Surfaces in Variation*, 1959). In all cases, the formal appearance of the artwork is altered, owing to a manipulation by the spectator, who has now become an agent.[9]

In 1959, Colombo founded Gruppo T with Giovanni Anceschi, Davide Boriani and Gabriele De Vecchi (later, Grazia Varisco would also join the group). Almost contemporaneously, 1960 sees the creation of the Centre de Recherce d'Art Visuel, later called GRAV (Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel), by the French François Morellet – who would remain one of Colombo's best friends – and by the Argentines Horacio Garcia Rossi, Julio Le Parc, Francisco Sobrino, as well as Joël Stein and Jean-Pierre Yvaral, from France. The artists from GRAV shared with Gruppo T an interest for the systematic analysis of perception carried out through artworks 'programmed' in advance of their execution (these experiments therefore predated Conceptual Art of the late 1960s). In 1957, building on the premises of the Bauhaus movement, Otto Piene and Heinz Mack founded the ZERO group in Düsseldorf, which Günther Uecker joined in 1961. ZERO developed relationships with the Milan avant-garde, especially through Piero Manzoni, Enrico Castellani and Azimuth. Constituted as an international, expanded and variable network – to the point of also comprising Shiraga in Japan – ZERO first proposed, as did the artists of the Milan avant-garde, repositioning of the artwork from an anti-expressionist standpoint, to allow for the development of a new sense of the concreteness of the object. This led to kinetic art, and to the monochrome and Minimalism.

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[7] The artist, inventor, designer and writer Bruno Munari (1907-1998), an heir of futurism, founded the MAC (Movimento Arte Concreta - Movement for Concrete Art) with Gillo Dorfles, Atanasio Soldati and Gianni Monetin 1948. Munari was interested in the universe of the child. In addition to establishing the foundations of Italian design, Munari devoted him self to the invention of toys and games.

[8] The *Manifiesto Blanco* (White Manifesto), drafted in Buenos Aires in 1946, was not signed by Fontana, but was inspired by his work. This manifesto marks the birth of the Spatialist movement, which explores the relationship between the artwork and space. Fontana signed, instead, the *Primo Manifesto dello Spazialismo* (First Manifesto of Spatialism) in 1947 in Milan, and this was followed by other manifestos until 1952. These establish a number of themes, among which the fact that "the Spatialist Artist no longer imposes a figurative theme upon the spectator. Instead, he places him in the condition of creating one for himself, through his imagination and the emotion that he perceives."– This establishes the fundamental principles of interactive and participatory art.

[9] Art as a participatory experience would then become one of the main thematics in later environmental art, such as the gigantic fluid space *Wrapped Coast – One Million Square Feet, Little Bay, Sydney, Australia*, 1968-69 by Christo and Jeanne-Claude.

Similarly to Colombo and Gruppo T, these artists displaced the focus from the field of representation to that of perceptual experience.
Colombo and Gruppo T distinguished themselves by dedicating particular attention to the temporal dimension (the first letter of the word 'time' giving the group its name). They proposed a form of kinetic art aimed at producing temporal perceptual experiments capable of abolishing the static boundary between painting, sculpture and architecture, through the creation of mobile spaces and participatory environments. Colombo pursued his exploration of the themes he shared with other members of the group, by creating truly kinetic objects. Such machines or devices[10] established a direct relationship with the spectator who was called to activate, even manually, the mechanisms constitutive of his artworks. He also devoted himself to the production of multiples in order to explore the democratic dimension of a multipliable artwork, useable by many. Most of all, from 1965 onwards, Colombo concentrated on the creation of 'environments' that spectators could enter.
His interest for architectural space and its primary structural elements led the artist to experiment with new perceptual configurations, up to the creation of the habitable environment *Strutturazione cinevisuale abitabile* in 1964, which was followed by numerous other environments in the following years.
Gruppo T was influenced by a wide variety of sources, from early Constructivism and the Abstract-Concrete thinking of Max Bill (who, together with Tomás Maldonado, taught at the Hochschule für Gestaltung in Ulm, Germany) to Early-Twentieth century research on the theories of optical perception and the psychology of the Gestalt (by Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler and Kurt Koffka), developed throughout the 1950s and 1960s by Rudolf Arnheim, Ernst Gombrich and Gaetano Kanizsa and contemporaneous to the structuralist research on the open artwork and programmed art (by John Cage, Bruno Munari and Umberto Eco). The influence of the latter can be found in the language used by Colombo in describing his artworks as 'optical structures', as if they were true experiments on perception. For Colombo, the artist is not alone in accomplishing technical experiments – it is the spectator him/herself who, in becoming conscious of the effects provoked by the artworks, comes to be an agent, no longer passive, of his/her own knowledge – at once the guinea pig and the scientist. ("to construct the visual artwork in the same way as one would construct a test... represents a possibility... The widest possible transformation of a public of spectators into a public of technicians, is one of the goals that we aspire to in our work.")[11]
Yet in observing his works, from the early, poetic gouaches to the late, playful *Topoestesie* and *Bariestesie,* and in observing ourselves while we experience his work, a less analytical strand emerges more vividly, one that is less scientific than his writings would appear to indicate.
At various times, foregoing the creation of tests in perception, Colombo appears to have devoted himself to literal explorations of what had been indicated by artists before him, who had however not reached the effective and concrete application of their theories in their executions. This is true in the relationship between Colombo and the Futurists (who spoke of movement, of electrical light and

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[10] See the relations between Michel Foucault's concept of the 'device/apparatus' [dispositif] as a network of systems that organize the mechanisms of control of singular subjects, and the 'pedagogical' and emancipating character of Colombo's devices. Marco Scotini investigates the question in this catalog (pp. 29-41).

[11] G. Colombo, 'After-Structures (disegno: 1964)' in *Bollettino del gruppo cooperative di Boccadasse*, vol. V, no. 1 (Genoa, Jan 1967), n.p.

so on),[12] as well as in his ties with Spatialism Fontana theorized the spatial environment as artwork, but he often still created artworks that remained autonomous from the spectator – 'holes' and 'slashes'. If it is true that Fontana had already produced a small number of environments, Colombo placed more and more emphasis on this space, which became his principal and most important field of research.

This particular way in which Colombo realized practically that which remained at the level of poetic intention in so many other artists' practices, is also true in the case of Colombo's relationship with Klee's poetics. Colombo's first delicate drawings and gouaches often included nearly abstract landscapes, populated and inhabited by small figures that recall Klee's art. Colombo shared Klee's apparently childish style and light-hearted humor, as well as an attention to the rhythmical structuring of space (the musical space, in Klee's case), and the importance conferred to drawings and the line. The lines in Klee's graphics, reminiscent of staves, become the elastic lines in Colombo's *Elastic Space*, a space measured and 'charted' by vertical and horizontal vectors, but, as in Klee's work, no longer orthogonal and rigid. In the numerous photographic portraits depicting Colombo interacting with his elastic spaces, we often see Colombo pulling on the cords with his hands, as if he were playing a string instrument. Klee's writings such as his *Creative Credo* of 1920, if interpreted literally, could read as a description of the *Spazio elastico*: "Art does not reproduce the visible; rather it makes visible... The formal elements of graphic art are dot, line, plane, and space. A simple plane, for instance – that is, a plane not made up for more elementary units – would result if I were to draw a blunt crayon across the paper, thus transferring an energy-charge with or without modulations. An example of a spatial element would be a cloudlike vaporous spot, usually of varying intensity, made with a full brush... lines of the most various kinds, spots, dabs, smooth planes, dotted planes, lined planes, wavy lines, obstructed and articulated movement, counter-movement, plaitings, weavings, bricklike elements, scalelike elements, simple and polyphonic motifs, lines that fade and lines that gain strength (dynamism), the joyful harmony of the first stretch, followed by inhibitions, nervousness! Repressed anxieties, alternating with moments of optimism caused by a breath of air. Before the storm, sudden assault by horseflies! The fury, the killing. The happy ending serves as a guiding thread even in the dark woods. The flashes of lightning made us think of a fever chart, of a sick child long ago... Movement is the source of all change. In Lessing's *Laocoön*, on which we squandered study time when we were young, much fuss is made about the difference between temporal and spatial art. Yet looking into the matter more closely, we find that all this is but a scholastic delusion. For space, too, is a temporal concept.

When a dot begins to move and becomes a line, this requires time. Likewise, when a moving line produces a plane, and when moving planes produces spaces."[13]

More than in movement in and of itself, Colombo was interested in the articulation between time and space in life's flow and in the engaged consciousness. His phenomenological – rather than cognitive – interest for experience distances him from the contemporaneous experimentation of out-and-out Optical and kinetic art.

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[12] The 1910 *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting* reads: 'The gesture which we would reproduce on canvas shall no longer be a fixed moment in universal dynamism. It shall simply be the dynamic sensation itself. Indeed, all things move, all things run, all things are rapidly changing. A profile is never motionless before our eyes, but it constantly appears and disappears.On account of the persistency of an image upon the retina, moving objects constantly multiply themselves; their form changes like rapid vibrations, in their mad career…The construction of pictures has hither to been foolishly traditional. Painters have shown us the objects and the people placed before us. We shall hence forward put the spectator in the center of the picture.

[13] P. Klee, *The Inward Vision: Watercolors, Drawings and Writings by Paul Klee*, trans. Norbert Guterman (New York: H. N. Abrams, 1959), 5-10.

This is a dimension of embodiment that we understand, firstly, in the experience of seeing while we touch, and – perhaps even more precisely, in the universe of the caress.[14] In this interest for tactility, we understand yet again Colombo's affinities with surrealist techniques – from Man Ray's rayograms which are but photographs without a camera – letting the objects and photographic paper 'touch' each other – to Max Ernst's *frottages*.

The visible element in the experience of art is matched in Colombo's work with an investigation of the relation between this visibility and the tangible world. The body is a necessary condition of experience, it is both subject (that touches) and object of the perception of things, and it is through touch that the relation between these two positions is made manifest – to touch something is always a little to touch oneself, and to touch others, and therefore to be touched. The articulation between touching and seeing, the relationship between visible and invisible, is at the root of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's thought in his text *The Visible and the Invisible*: "The gaze... envelops, palpates, espouses the visible things. As though it were in a relation of pre-established harmony with them... Between my movements and what I touch, there must exist some relationship by principle, some kinship... the initiation to and the opening upon a tactile world. This can happen only if my hand, while it is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself tangible, for my other, if it takes its place among the things it touches, is in a sense one of them... We must habituate ourselves to think that every visible is cut out in the tangible, every tactile being in some manner promised to visibility."[15]

If Colombo's early works were manipulable, 'touchable', those that involve the use of light suggest touch through the synesthetic processing of movements determined by motors and projectors (we perceive the eye that 'touches' the light while this turns on and off, caressing our eye). Finally, in the large-scale installations of environments from the later period, such as the *Baresthesias* or the *Topoesthesias*, we end up touching the world, our entire body rendered naked and out of balance – and how beautiful it is to find again, in them, the sweeping dizziness of our first steps as children, when, with unexpected success, we become able to stand up and walk.

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[14] Emmanuel Lévinas writes: 'The caress transcends the sensible... The caress consists in seizing upon nothing... It is not an intentionality of disclosure but of search: a movement unto the invisible .' *In Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (1961), trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht/Boston/London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 257-8.

[15] M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible: Followed by Working Notes* (1964), ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 133-4.