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Gianni Colombo. The Abstract Machine

Marco Scotini

The nightingale and the gate

In Graz, in 1967, Gianni Colombo created *Spazio elastico*, a cube as a abstract, unstable environment: a perceptual trap with oniric meaning. Completely darkened on the inside, the cube reveals only the elementary stereometry of which the geometric solid is made: its ideal, *a priori*, yielding model. It reveals this, however, as if in a photographic negative, where the luminosity of the image – the relationship between black and white – ends up being inverted in terms of the original, and presence is transformed into absence, void into solid.

It is as if the negative allows one to see that which, in full light (or in the positive of the representation), would otherwise remain invisible. The volumetric bonds of the cube – the six planes that define it – are annulled in a black background, limitless and without depth, while an aerial structure of white lines in a three-dimensional grid appears suspended in the empty space of the volume.

Nothing would be more reassuring than rediscovering in the cube the evidence of this rational matrix of our organization of space, if it were not for the fact that, having crossed the threshold of the environment, our Cartesian certainty of the spatial coordinates begins to founder. Impermeable to change, anti-naturalistic and perfectly regular by statute, the grid gives rise to an asymmetrical network of surprises within the cube. Obeying a hidden “program”, an unpredictable rhythm of tensions and contractions that develop vertically and horizontally alters the orthogonal nature of the structural webs. The silence is broken by the noise of the electromechanical action of small motors that create distortion, slowly and with discontinuity. The space is theatricalized: it is a machine that moves. It alternately contracts and expands. It “breathes”, as early commentators on the work wrote.¹

In addition to the various tensions, the device also activates successive flashes of light that project on the walls an evanescent structure, still white and reticular but rotated forty-five degrees in relation to the preceding structure. The dual grid (the real one and the projected or virtual one) is gradually transformed into a sort of spider’s web that, like a device for ensnarement, traps the viewer – physically and psychologically – within a luminous weave of strings. Spatial continuity is reduced to a psychically fragmented space. But it is also materially jagged: the altered slope of the floor is revealed as another surprise and the apparatus’ final gear. Modular planes, projecting at a different inclination, interrupt the flat surface of the cube’s base and, creating a form of uneasiness, stimulate the viewer’s entire corporeal schema: physical equilibrium, perceptual orientation, psychological structure, cognitive process. “I chose,” Colombo stated, “a practicable cubic

¹ T. Trini wrote, “The space breathes, and we with it, are free and active,” in *Domus*, no. 460 (Milan, March 1968), 45.

container as a field of presentation: one of the habitable forms most usual for us, in which permutations of forms and dimensions unfold: a habitable condition most unusual for us.”²

In *Spazio elastico* the negative is not only the reversible element of the representation or the complementary side of the positive or, even, the “gestaltically” ambiguous result of the figure/ground inversion according to criteria of perceptual abstraction. The negative of *Spazio elastico* is, literally, the reverse of the positive, the other face of transparency and total visibility. It is the space of an estrangement: it is the obstacle that perturbs and interrupts the regular development of miniscule and ordinary practices. It is the unexpected that is introduced surreptitiously behind the mechanisms of the habitual and which deconstructs ways of functioning and schemas of behavior, allowing their totally arbitrary and conventional character to emerge. What the estrangement reveals is how techniques function on the level of the process of subjugation, how gestures are directed, how perceptual and mental schemas are shaped, how subjects are constituted as effects of anonymous conditionings that anchor dominion to the space. As Colombo would later say, the goal is to “concentrate on the opposite end of technology, which is the result of its effect on man’s behavior”.³

And so *Spazio elastico* is not so much, nor only, a mechanical marvel to be observed, as it is a device to make one see, to reveal. The viewer, becoming part of a constellation of multiple and constantly mutable relationships, activates a process of perceptual “self-determination”⁴ through rules that are neither codified nor deterministic, but variable and optional, thus participating in the artist’s destabilizing and lyrical game. *Spazio elastico* added another exemplar to the artistic phenomenology of the cube of the 1960s: from Hans Haacke’s *Condensation Cube* to Sol LeWitt’s *Open Modular Cube*, from Larry Bell’s *Cube* to Michelangelo Pistoletto’s *Metro cubo di infinito*, from Luciano Fabro’s *In cubo* to Giulio Paolini’s *Lo spazio* to mention just a few. And it did so in a crucial year for the transformation of the object-related work in environmental space that European and international artistic research was pursuing during this period. One only need think of exhibitions such as *KunstLichtKunst* in Eindhoven in 1966, *Lo Spazio dell’immagine* in Foligno and *Trigon 67* in Graz, both in 1967, as platforms for the proposal and maturation of the environmental tendency that was taking place.

While Colombo’s work appeared in all these exhibitions, it was specifically in Graz that he created the first example of *Spazio elastico*, as the maximum outcome of his prior development and as a prototype for an entire series of environmental creations to come. Elaborated as an organic itinerary that traversed the Künstlerhaus in Graz and was articulated in the open spaces of the Burggarten, the exhibition plan for *Trigon 67* was entrusted by Wilfried Skreiner to the brutalist and radical architecture team of Günther Domenig and Eilfried Huth, who designed an open, mobile, temporary structure with a three-dimensional grid and paths on different levels, influenced by Yona Friedman’s spatial grid city. The message of “architecture and freedom” that emerged from much of the exhibition also informed *Spazio elastico*. Indeed, it turned it into a key work.

² Gianni Colombo wrote this in the catalog for the Galleria L’Attico (Rome: 1968). The text is dated Milan 1967.

³ M. N. Varga, “L’ arte senza programma. Intervista con Colombo,” in *Terzo Occhio*, no. 30 (Bologna, March 1984), 46.

⁴ It was Colombo himself who spoke of “self-determination”. “In other words one can also define it as an experimental construction with which one carries out surveys of optical and psychical behavior of its user, who will supply the variables due to his physical and psychical reactions, coming to self-determine, himself, the image that he perceives.” The phrase, part of the text published in the afore mentioned L’Attico gallery catalog, appeared earlier in the type script that accompanied the *Spazio elastico* project for Graz, now reproduced in C. Steinle, ed., *Gianni Colombo. Ambienti* (Graz: Neue Galerie, 2007), 50.

Positioned at the center of the Künstlerhaus, between Luciano Fabro's *Concetto spaziale [Trigon]*, *Tautologia*, Enzo Mari's *13 Variazioni*, a sequence of suspended cells, and Jorrit Tornquist's *Ausblick*, *Spazio elastico* was the only work that presented the space as a field of forces that assail the viewer's body from every side, calling into question the idea of rigid, static and geometrically organized space. In *Spazio elastico* there is the same desire to playfully force the limits of the physical space that was already present – from the beginning of Colombo's activity – in his *Strutturazioni pulsanti* from 1959. A primal and inseparable association between the wall and the modular white polystyrene surface of the *Strutturazione pulsante* (rendered explicit in the large formats) transformed the delimited and delimiting planes of the spatial envelope into fluctuating limits, obtained by using electromechanical means to create alternating and discontinuous rifts on the monochrome and homogeneous surface of the work. These were “walls coming into being” according to Adachiara Zevi's definition,⁵ or simply “walls,” as Colombo himself familiarly called the *Strutturazioni pulsanti*. In any case, they were material surfaces that were transformed into three-dimensional modules of immaterial volume within the Graz environment.

It is no accident that the first example of *Spazio elastico* was the synthesis of numerous environments by Colombo that interacted inside (from the previous 1964 *After-Structures* to the subsequent 1977 *Topoestesia*), and which, the year after the *Trigon 67* exhibition, already tended to be separated, despite the different declinations with which the work would continue to be presented during the fateful year of 1968: from the XXXIV Venice Biennale to the L'Attico gallery in Rome, from the *Räume und Environments* exhibition in Leverkusen to *documenta 4*. Without the wall projections and the inclined floor planes, reduced solely to the darkened, cubic environment with a grid of elastic strings in fluorescent colors, black lights and electric motors, the work lost nothing of the disorienting and unreal quality that it had possessed in Graz. Indeed, it acquired such a representational force that it immediately became Colombo's best-known work.

What remained constant and unaltered about this work, in all its versions, was its function of disrupting the classic paradigm of the space in its characteristics of neutrality, uniqueness and stability. *Spazio elastico*, in other words, had the function of removing the physical space from geometric captivity (and from the process of regulation that it established) through real, experiential time.

Where our behaviors continually enclose space in a normative distribution (or are its effect), Colombo does nothing but establish lines of flight and instability, irregularity and discontinuity, events and surprises. His space is saturated with emergences, intermittent processes, variable velocities and unexpected changes in level. It is a space that rejects its statute as an original *a priori* condition in that it ends up being inseparable from processes of appropriation, and from the operations with which we enter into a relationship with it. In essence it is a space that is indiscernible from the field of the procedures – not so much from actions and gestures, as such, but rather from schemas, conventions and regimes of behavior.

There is one observation that, more than others, seems to me to summarize the subversive nature of this concept of space, and it is not attributable to Max Bense or Naum Gabo or György Kepes. Strangely, the statement is not made by a constructivist, a rationalist nor an analytical theoretician. It is the definition for “space” taken from the “Dictionary” in the well-known Surrealist magazine *Documents*, and the author of the entry is Georges Bataille: “Philosophers, being the masters of ceremony of the abstract universe, have pointed out how space should behave under all circumstances. Unfortunately space remains a lout, and it is difficult to enumerate what it

⁵ A. Zevi, “L'opera di Gianni Colombo: una stasi apparente,” in *Temporale*, no. 23 (Lugano 1990), 11–17.

engenders. It is as discontinuous as it is devious.”⁶

A subterranean process of permanent sabotage of architectural spatiality is central to Colombo’s work, which cannot be fully identified with the formal organization of the perceptual field and with the provocation of indeterminacy, ambiguity and relativity that are typical of optical, kinetic, programmed and “new tendency” aesthetic research in the 1960s. In addition to Marcel Duchamp – whose relationship with Colombo I have addressed on another occasion⁷ – there is an entire area that is more generally Dadaist and Surrealist that interested the artist early on, during his formative period. It is a core of interests that, along with his original abstract practice, seems decisive for shifting the matrices of Colombo’s work from an analytical and idealistic concept of space, which for a long time hampered his reception, linking it to that of a proponent of design practice.

As I have emphasized in the past, the inherent relationship between Colombo’s work and that of Duchamp goes well beyond the *Rotative plaques-verre (Optique de précision)* of 1920, the *Rotoreliefs* of 1935 and his essays on stereoscopic photography. Schematically it is possible to identify the diastolic repetitiousness of the spirals of *Anémic Cinéma* behind the bio-kinetic aspect of *Strutturazione pulsante*, the web of *Sixteen Miles of String* behind the mobile grid of *Spazio elastico*, the mechanical motion of *Nu Descendant un Escalier* behind the gears of *Bariestesia*. In 1970 it was Colombo who portrayed himself, along with Gabriele De Vecchi, in a photo collage with the door of *Rue Larrey II*. But now it is a question of delving further and assuming as a point of departure certain principles of Surrealist strategy that Colombo would have assimilated and practiced in completely personal fashion: *estrangement* as an unexpected situation that intercedes in the fabric of real space; the privilege accorded the *effect* on the composition; the anonymous and depersonalized making of the object; the rejection of art as a sublimatory activity that separates the subject who perceives from his body; the experience of play and the “marvelous”, finally, the group dimension. Within this context there emerges as a key source, along with Hans Arp, the figure of Max Ernst, to whom Colombo dedicated his thesis at the Accademia di Brera in 1959, in a sort of artistic tribute. After previous research into Surrealism, carried out in 1957 for a course on decoration,⁸ in 1959 (which is also the year that Gruppo T was founded), for his thesis, he presented a kit on Max Ernst, consisting of a short film, slides for a slideshow, a typewritten text and a pop-up book – all contained in “a gigantic Swedish matchbox”,⁹ as Giovanni Anceschi described it – which can again be read as a reference to Duchamp’s *Boîte-en-valise*. The pop-up book, which juxtaposes white and black pages, in accordance with an idea of the positive and negative that would then accompany Colombo through the development of all his work, opens with a portrait-photomontage of Ernst from 1920 and ends with a frame from Hans Richter’s *Dreams that Money Can Buy*. A double page dedicated to “Dada” brings together fundamental drawings and illustrations of mechanical devices by Francis Picabia, Max Ernst and Duchamp, as well as photomontages by

⁶ G. Bataille, *Documents* (Bari: Dedalo, 1974), 185. For the interpretation of Surrealism as a referent for Colombo’s work, I have made use of the fundamental studies by Rosalind Krauss, as well as her valuable contribution, *L’informe*, written with Y.A. Bois. Significantly, I found in Colombo’s library a booklet on Max Ernst published by Editions d’Art Gonthier-Seghers, Paris, 1959, with an introduction, “Max Ernst Philosophe!” by Georges Bataille. This is one of the few books on which Colombo based his thesis.

⁷ M. Scotini, “Spettatore che scende le scale. Gianni Colombo e lo spazio della rappresentazione,” in C. Cerritelli, ed., *Gianni Colombo. Lo spazio come campo attivo* (Morterone: Associazione Culturale Amici di Morterone, 1998), 92-104; also M. Scotini, “Gianni Colombo, Il dispositivo dello spazio,” in M. Scotini, ed., *Gianni Colombo*, (Milan: Skira, 2006), 11-21.

⁸ G. Colombo, *Il Movimento Surrealista*, a type script text, 14 pages long, dated June 1957, in the Archivio Gianni Colombo, Milan.

⁹ G. Anceschi, “Esatte Estesie,” 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), 264.

Johannes Baargeld and John Heartfield and reliefs by Ernst and Arp.

For Colombo, Ernst was not an exponent of the “formal revolution”, but rather the master of “mental subversion”: someone who violates the common laws of logic and morality and unleashes the drama of the “irritating mix” of elements of the known world. It is no accident that he immediately focused his attention on the fourth plate of *Fiat Modes* (1919) and the image of *Dada in usum delphini* (1920) in the first pages of the pop-up book, where, reviving De Chirico-like theatrical perspectives, Ernst develops that technique of estrangement that would be central to his pictorial story, *La femme 100 têtes* (1929), and which would have great importance for Colombo. “The isolation of the object in a landscape that is extraneous to it confers upon the object a new, different, unforeseen physiognomy,” Colombo wrote, adding that Ernst “reveals the value of disorientation as a means suitable for introducing into an extra natural dimension precisely the psychical states of the dream and of hallucination”. But the choice of a key work such as *Two Children are Threatened by a Nightingale*, to which Colombo dedicated a long comment, seems strongly emblematic: When in 1924 Breton published the Surrealism manifesto and founded the movement, Max Ernst, who had supported the new group from the beginning, opened a real gate onto the image of two children threatened by a nightingale. This work remains one of the most valid, not only by Ernst but by the entire Surrealist movement. In it the results of the Dada experience are present (the “disorientation” of objects, the shock created by the insertion of real objects onto painted portions), but subversive irony regarding the art gives way to oneiric association, the collage of real reliefs loses the value of paradoxical gesture to assume the status of revealing another universe. The title, once again a veritable verbal collage, does not contrast ironically with the image but introduces to it humor as a means to penetrate the “marvelous”, in perfect adherence to Breton’s intentions. Breton states that the work of art must record, to the greatest extent possible, the real unfolding of thought, in all its twists and turns, without compositional preoccupations, which Breton in substance says end up crystallizing the thought itself into something closed, limited, in an affirmation that signals the syncope of an unfolding: the static representation of the world is replaced by one of universal mutability.¹⁰

The correlation with the final part of the Gruppo T statement from that same year could not be more perfect: “Therefore considering the work as a *reality* made with the same elements that constitute that *reality that surrounds us* it is necessary that the work itself be in continuous variation.” But the manner in which Colombo ties Bergson to Breton in the previous text is completely personal. A strange short-circuit reconnects Colombo’s esthetic research to the language and the subject of Ernst’s emblematic work in which the small wooden gate opens onto the surface of the painting and the nightingale painted on it refers to the cliché of domesticated animality against which Surrealism rebels. And if we were to try to think of the image of the grid of *Spazio elastico* like that of the cubic volume of a cage, of the framing of an enclosure that blocks, what does it entrap? Is it not the space of habitation itself – gathered up metaphorically between the domestic walls – that Colombo, through the mechanisms of play, has sought to ensnare, to disturb – that completely internalized space of the *habitus*, of the familiar, of the anonymous domain of procedures to which each of us is subjected? Doesn’t Colombo’s work have something to do with the casting of great doubt upon the science of the ordinary?

The final phrase with which Bataille concludes his dictionary definition of “space” in *Documents* is again exemplary: “Evidently it would not come to mind to anyone to lock up professors in prison to

¹⁰ G. Colombo, *Max Ernst*, typescript in 3 files, 8 ⁵/₈ x 8 ⁵/₈ in. with yellow cover. The quotation is taken from pp. 8–9 of the first file. The typescript is in the Archivio Gianni Colombo, Milan.

make them learn what space is (for example, the day when the walls were to collapse before the iron bars of their secret).”¹¹

The device and the rules of the game¹²

Dadaist mechanic, Rousselian Martial Canterel, dramatist of space, master of artifice, ordinary man “without qualities,” Colombo is the author of devices. The model of the “device” defines the matrix of his entire body of work as background, always inherent to the different phenomenologies that it has assumed in time. It defines it, in other words, to the extent to which, facing each of his projects, we do not wonder so much what it represents or which regime of signs he is staging, but how it functions or, rather, what modalities of use it requires, how it acts on the viewer and what relationships it establishes between public, work and author.

In fact, Colombo’s work does not present us – as Jean Louis Schefer has stated – with “a catalog of forms, or, as in the case of painting and classical art, where, effectively, we have learned to look, with an alignment of the visible”¹³, and even less with a collection of objects. Instead, there is the production of devices: perceptual structuralizations, interchangeable apparatuses, *évènement* fields, permutable itineraries, habitable situations, space-dynamics, projections with programmed alterations and poly-sensory environments.

But what is a device?

Along with Michel Foucault, we might say that a device “is a totality of strategies of relationships of force that condition certain types of knowledge and are conditioned by it”¹⁴. And, more generally, that it is a network of practices and concrete mechanisms aimed at obtaining a more or less immediate effect, handling a diversity of necessities and objectives. To summarize, it is a system of gears that catch hold of bodies and behaviors instead of theories and ideologies: orienting, modeling, organizing, controlling, correcting and disciplining.

Whether we take one of Colombo’s first manipulable objects, such as *Rotoplastik* or *In-Out*, or a *Topoestesia* – an environmental space from the 1970s – or an architectural deconstruction from the 1980s from the *Architettura cacogoniometrica* series, we are always dealing with devices that operate autonomously and, to a certain degree, anonymously. To explain the way they function, while it is necessary, it is not sufficient to resort to the incompleteness of the “open work” theorized by Umberto Eco or the idea of programmed art as an initial theoretical frame of reference. Colombo’s works, on the one hand, predispose an operational scheme and rules to be followed, and on the other hand also demand the direct participation of the viewer: both physical and psychological involvement. Parallel to a viewer who, time and again, wonders “What do I do?” there is always a totality of variables upon which he is called to intervene, but which is programmed in advance by the artist. The mechanism that is established between the process of subjectivization and the person who submits to it is not only a condition, a way of being, in Colombo’s work, but – as now becomes clear – it is the material itself, the subject of his entire research.

The questions that now need to be asked are: what type of devices are these? What is their purpose? First of all, Colombo’s device is an abstract machine This is not because it is opposed to reality and

¹¹ G. Bataille, *Documents*, op. cit., p. 186.

¹² This section is, in part, a reworking of my essay, “Gianni Colombo. Il dispositivo dello spazio,” in M. Scotini, ed., *Gianni Colombo*, op. cit.

¹³ J. L. Schefer, “C’est un corps,” in *Gianni Colombo* (Milan: PAC Padiglione d’Arte Contemporanea, 1984).

¹⁴ I refer in this essay to numerous texts by Michel Foucault, including *Dits et écrits* - from which the quote about the device is taken - as well as *Raymond Roussel, The Will to Knowledge, Archaeology of Knowledge, Discipline and Punish and Of Other Spaces*. Foucault is a sort of guide to an interpretation of Colombo’s work.

works with universal, ideal or transcendent conditions, like much of the modernist tradition. On the contrary, it has something to do with concrete gears and with strictly immanent criteria. But it is an abstract apparatus because it more directly has the possibility of intervening in the perceptual process of the subject with the creation of purely physical, sensory stimuli. In this sense, Colombo resorts to a process of dematerialization and to tricks of visual economy, removing perception from the disturbance of the material, from the interference of a semantic condition that can repropose “analogical or evocative interpretations with regard to the preexisting reality”, from choices of individual forms and stylistic variation imposed by the author: from substantially everything that can deflect the viewer’s attention through recourse to discursive, analogical, rational mediation. The device should not be other than a mechanism in action, in order to make its own procedure visible. As Colombo wrote: “It ends up being extremely important for this totality, that is, the project’s *rule of the game*, to be constantly present (legible) in the experience that the project-object brings about at every level of its consumption.” And again: “If *the rule of the game* has to be made manifest and interacting in the project, it follows that in the project there is no room for all that which tends to be superimposed upon it to hide it or camouflage it and to provide more information.”¹⁵

More directly than the works and the environments, there are two images of a meta-textual nature that announce the abstract mechanism put into action by the artist. These are two black and white photomontages from the early 1960s, which present the designs (or the simulations) of his first environments – *Strutturazione cine-visuale abitabile* and *After-Structures*. Both images show groups of unposed people, photographed in a contingent moment, outdoors, on the street, their bodies and glances directed toward a fulcrum of interest that one assumes to be surprising in one case, worthy of witnessing in the other. The images accurately inform us about the bourgeois clothing of the subjects portrayed, about the presence of a *carabiniere* in uniform and about a man with a movie camera who is shooting. But what are they all looking at? In one image we see some luminous lines that, arranged diagonally, emerge from a homogeneous black background and come together in a corner. In the other image two oval revolving screens trace a series of parallel lines of light in the empty space. Following a Surrealist-like procedure, Colombo has altered the homogeneity of the photographs, taken from illustrated magazines from the 1960s, with the insertion of decontextualized, abstract elements, completely extraneous to the nature of photographic documentation. But these are really luminous structures that act as visual shocks and as optical stimuli in Colombo’s environments, and which leave the observer in a state of perceptual ambiguity and indeterminacy such that he does not arrive at a single and unique possible interpretation. In fact, he is removed from the process of interpretation, as such, being exposed to a plurality of reactions, adjustments of reading, verifications of the action to which he finds himself subjected. “Not forms suitable for encouraging the imagination of the viewer,” Colombo wrote, “but stimulating psychological reflections within him.”¹⁶

In this sense, these machines are presented as a sort of self-test with which to carry out “surveys of optical and psychical behavior” in the user, as Colombo says. And, in staging perception, in bringing it to full awareness, the apparatus deconstructs the structural mechanisms of subjugation, the mute techniques of receptive passivity and convention, promoting – and this is no accident – the emancipation of the “viewer into a technician” – a transformation where the social implication is clear.

In addition to stimulations that assail the ear, assaulting the glance with a plurality of devices – to which Colombo dedicated many works and environments in the late 1960s – there is an entire series

¹⁵ G. Colombo, “Trasformazione degli spettatori in tecnici,” in V. Fagone, ed., *I Colombo*, op. cit., p.405.

¹⁶ G. Colombo, “Strutturazione Acentrica,” from the catalog *Nouvelle Tendence* (Paris, 1964), 14.

of additional sensory solicitations that assail other organs: hands, feet and the body itself. But we should not confuse this liberating potential with a phenomenological reappropriation of the body, as in the work of Lygia Clark.¹⁷ In Colombo's work, phenomenology is converted into an epistemology of behavioral schemes and conducts.

As early as the tactile paintings from the late 1950s, viewers could effect alterations and manipulations in the work: they could intervene by pressing their fingers on the rubber surface of the painting, moving the spheres in *Rilievi Intermutabili* (1959); they could press their hands down on a relief, changing the projection level of modular aluminum elements that were free to run orthogonally in relation to the plane that contained them (*Espansione modulare*, 1959–63 and *In-Out*, 1959–60); they could rotate a sculpture-object on its axis to combine wooden shapes (*Rotoplastik*, 1960); or they could activate a keyboard or work a handle fixed to the object to create introflexions or extroflexions on predetermined points or lines *Superficie in divenire* and *Superficie pulsante* (both 1959). This early production already gives the impression of research into zones of contact between the body and the object that it manipulates. In other words, the problem lies precisely in the definition of that space that links both, when elements (gestures) of the body enter into relationship with elements (modules) of the object that is manipulated. In the case of the *Topoestesia*, the *Bariestesia* and the various versions of *Architettura cacogoniometrica*, other functions come into play, other zones of contact: those that directly involve the kineticism of the body, states of equilibrium and reflexes of posture. The behavior of the viewer is forced into veritable performative uneasiness through discontinuous and aimless itineraries, strongly sloping planes, labyrinths, varyingly inclined pillars. Here, the devices intervene directly on the exercise of walking as a repetitive agreed-upon task, as the assignation of duration to a movement, as a prescription of a direction to the body and as a regulated concatenation of gestures. And they playfully deconstruct stability, ways of functioning and habit.

It is no accident that *Bariestesia*, disjointing the repetitive, consistently sloped order of steps, expresses a form of tactile apprehension and kinesthetic reaction that is developed through the series of steps, through their succession and their organization of the space. The step, in fact, is none other than a way of adapting the body to temporal imperatives and to spatial ordering.¹⁸ "I specifically chose stairs," Colombo said, "because this construction is connoted as a particular environmental condition also of an emotional type. We find it under all environmental conditions because it is one of those things we normally experience. We even have rules, memorized from time immemorial, regarding the predictability of the morphology of the step: we are sure that one step will be equal to the one that follows because this is what has been agreed."¹⁹ In this sense, Colombo's group of stairs, subjecting the very conditions of equilibrium to verification, tend to sensitize "the vestibular zone (bariesthesia), the perceptiveness of space (topoesthesia) and the behavior of the viewer (reflections of posture)"²⁰. Colombo increasingly saw architecture as a generator of transformation of individuals, a structure that exercises an internal, detailed, articulated control that is only apparently anonymous. This led to the paradoxical and comical reduction of architectural elements in his environments during the 1980s: arches, columns, beams, ramps, stairs, pillars and architraves.

¹⁷ I can credit Guy Brett and many of his writings for suggesting this relationship between Gianni Colombo and Lygia Clark.

¹⁸ See the chapter "Docile Bodies", in M. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Random House, 1977).

¹⁹ J. De Sanna, "Storia come filtro della qualità. Intervista a Gianni Colombo," in V. Fagone, ed., *I Colombo*, op. cit., 299.

²⁰ G. Colombo, "Topoestesia," in V. Fagone ed., *I Colombo*, op. cit., 403.

The burlesque body

Corridors that lead unexpectedly to cubic environments of reduced dimensions but rotated 45 degrees in relation to the normal horizontal plane. Distorted corridors that open – in turn – onto other corridors, alternately changing spatial and color coordinates. A row of identical doors that registers increasingly large changes in level of the plane to be traversed, putting to a harsh test the progressive attainment of each threshold. Luminous walls that rapidly revolve around themselves or that, slowly, move away from or toward to the viewer, or that reciprocally transform their intensity. Walls that breathe through a combinatory rhythm of slits that open and close successively. Aerial outlines that tighten, twist and recompose, to then change again, beginning to tighten, to expand once more and to once again contract. Colombo's space is transformable, subject to continuous metamorphoses that pullulate with emergences, with changes in level, with long trajectories, with unexpected passages, bends and collapses. Every environment is only the introduction to another environment, each fitting into the previous one. It is always a question of a space that is revealed only at a later time. Just as everything seems under control there is an element that causes a given and known situation to precipitate into an unexpected comical circumstance. What is familiar ends up proving to be paradoxical: an opaque, extraneous body that intercedes into the weave of the ordinary.

The *Bariestesia* modules that Colombo created in 1975, in their monolithic and uniformly black and impenetrable being, at first glance have the appearance of normal stairs, but negotiating all the steps becomes an unexpected and acrobatic experience. (For this reason, the comparison with the *Staircase Environment* by GRAV from 1968 is inappropriate.) Thus *Topoestesia*, created at Studio Marconi in Milan in 1977, is an anomalous practicable polyhedron resulting from the "fortuitous" encounter of three parallelepipeds on an inclined plane. It is a "forced" space whose passage – proceeding from structure to structure – increases the sense of unease, precariousness and uncertainty. Users find themselves permanently unprepared to negotiate these sorts of spaces, where any action at all is only an uncertainty in the destination of the body that proceeds, advances and steps back in these permutable and aimless itineraries. Within these environments the user never ends up adjusting to the function that must be performed, or to even the most elementary task that must be confronted. It is no accident that as early as 1966 Paolo Bonaiuto, introducing Colombo's work for the wellknown issue of *Il Verri* dedicated to Programmed Art, resorted to the idea of a user/guinea-pig and to kinesthetic experiments conducted in a laboratory. Bonaiuto was inspired by the reactions of unease and by the neuro-vegetative type of disturbances (vomiting, spinning head, disorientation, etc.) provoked by having blindfolded subjects experience an inclined plane. He recorded that what could be deemed unfair and illicit inside a laboratory, in causing effects of disorientation and instability in unwitting subjects, could be considered – in contrast – fair and legitimate under the conditions of an amusement park, "on the hairpin curves of the switchback or in the corridors of the ghost-trains." He added:

"What, then, can the ordinary observer say when, in another setting, the same or analogous experiences (as in the visual-kinesthetic labyrinth with an inclined floor by Gianni Colombo) are reposed as possible sources of veritable esthetic experience? It is evident that, faced with such multiple requests for the restructuring of the phenomenal field, many preformed schemes are put to a harsh test: as happens in these cases, they can, placed in a state of crisis, themselves disintegrate or undergo substantial changes, or they can, on the contrary, hold up and lead to rejection and shutdown when faced with proposals that, between the walls of an art gallery, come to constitute not the more customary "good forms", but rather singular conditions of ambiguity, situations of

attraction and at the same time of perceptual unease, specific commixtures of pleasure and displeasure.”²¹

Instead of in laboratories of psychology of synesthesia – or in architecture pavilions – it is in this hinterland of fair booths, of amusement park artifices, that Colombo’s abstract machines or the environment-devices find their most natural filiation, their imagined belonging and derivation. And here again, Colombo encounters the catastrophic space and the nonsense trajectories of Buster Keaton, as well as, more generally, that space of the robot and of movement that early cinema inaugurates. There is a photographic montage that Colombo created, with De Vecchi, for the exhibition *Amore mio* in 1970, where, as if in an ideal collection, there are frames from films by Buster Keaton, Mack Sennet, Georges Méliès, Robert Wiene, Luis Buñuel, Fritz Lang, Joseph von Sternberg and James Whale. But it was in the work of Keaton that Colombo managed to rediscover his own idea of the transformability of space, where, resting against a wall, one discovers that it is not a stable surface but a sliding door. And, along with this, Colombo shares with Keaton a deconstructionist attitude, indicated by a 1977 work – *Studio goniometrico* – where the artist redesigns the prefabricated house from Keaton’s *One Week* (1920) with methodical precision, placing it alongside a frame from the film and exhibiting it with *Topoestesia*. In the film, all the pieces of the house are assembled by hand, following an instruction manual, but after someone has secretly changed the reference codes. The result is an incongruous and precarious assemblage, an illogical structure that, after various metamorphoses that put it to the test, would be definitively destroyed by another machine (the arrival of a train). Thus it also shatters the dream of domesticity, as such. But as Gilles Deleuze states, “do not these machine-houses make Keaton the Dadaist architect *par excellence*?”²²

Within these devices the environments are equivalent to the bodies of the people that inhabit them: the more these are transformable, the more they are malleable. There is an identical fate that unites bodies and environments: that transforms them, stretches them, disassembles them and reassembles them, momentarily removes them and, unexpectedly, makes them appear. Both are the first place of metamorphosis and action, of experimentation and variation. The slapstick genre of early cinema assigned a name to this shared space: the *burlesque* body. And it is precisely this body that is the element that Colombo produces: support and – simultaneously – active subject of his devices.

As Schefer has acutely stated, “This body does not lead and does not guide actions; it absorbs them, it is the catastrophic place, unleashed by their return.”²³ No idealization makes these bodies progress in a story, no deity reigns over their lives. Instead, there is a continuous recommencement of conducts, manners, behaviors: a beginning that is repeated. The only thing to be reported is a condition of adolescence at every age: in this task all Colombo’s work reveals itself to be none other than a continuous pedagogy of the self (the famous “didactic task” of the work)²⁴ and a constant exercise of liberation. In a wonderful black and white photograph by Maria Mulas a mob of young boys runs, amused and amazed, up the steps of an unpredictable staircase by Colombo: it could be a

²¹ P. Bonaiuto, “Lineamenti d’indagine fenomenologia sperimentale in rapporto con problemi ed esperienze della progettazione visuale,” in *Il Verri*, no. 22 (Milan, October 1966), 25.

²² G. Deleuze, *The Movement-Image*, (London: Athlone Press, 1986), 175.

²³ J. L. Schefer, *L’uomo comune del cinema*, (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2008), 52–53, 65. “L’Homme ordinaire du cinema” appeared in 1980, published by Cahiers du cinema, and Schefer’s essay on Gianni Colombo, was published on the occasion of the exhibition at PAC in Milan, 1984.

²⁴ G. Colombo, “Sulle ricerche plastiche cinevisuali 1964–1965,” text sent to the exhibition *Nuova tendencija 3*, Zagreb. Published in *Il Verri* 2, no. 22, op. cit.

frame of a film by Jean Vigo, the return of a lost image, the rediscovered memory of the collegial rebels in *Zero for Conduite*: their gestures, their doubts, their bodies.