

Gianni Colombo at Castello di Rivoli curated by Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and Marco Scotini

Gianni Colombo (Milan, 1937 – Melzo, 1993) was one of the leading figures in the field of international kinetic art that developed over the course of the 1950s and 1960s. Interested in the Surrealism of Max Ernst and in the poetic world of Paul Klee, he attended the Accademia di Belle Arti in Brera. His artistic research was soon characterized by experiments with materials and their perception, from ceramics to graphics, from works with an emphasis on material consistency to the creation of multiples and, above all, of ‘environments’ accessible to viewers. In the 1950s, during a period of intense economic recovery and within Milanese art circles characterized by a lively international debate, he was drawn to developments by the “nuclearists” and to the Spatialism of Lucio Fontana.

If Fontana was the artist who defined the space of the work as the work of art itself, Colombo investigated art as *participatory* space, thus anticipating many current interests. In 1959 he founded Gruppo T along with Giovanni Anceschi, Davide Boriani and Gabriele De Vecchi, later joined by Grazia Varisco. The group proposed that art abolish all static boundaries between painting, sculpture and architecture, through the attention to time and through the creation of mobile and participatory spaces. Colombo delved into themes that were shared by other members of the group, creating veritable kinetic objects that were meant to establish a direct relationship with the viewer, who was invited to manually activate the works’ constituent mechanisms. His interest in architectural space and its primary constructive elements led the artist to experiment with new perceptual structures, resulting in his first environment, *Strutturazione cinevisuale abitabile (Habitable Kine-Visual Structuralization, 1964)*, reconstructed on the occasion of this exhibition. Also included are other important historical environments: *After-Structures (1966)* and *Zoom Squares (Quadrati deformati) (Zoom Squares – Distorted Squares, 1970)*, characterized by movements of light, and the wellknown *Spazio elastico (Elastic Space)* – for which Colombo received First Prize at the 1968 Venice Biennale. In the *Elastic Space*, the movement of the fluorescent elastic strings illuminated by Black light creates surprising effects that lead to the public’s spatial disorientation. During the 1970s and 1980s, Colombo created more complex practicable spaces without the earlier works’ electronic element. This was the genesis for the *Bariestesie (Baresthesias, 1974-75)* and *Topoestesie (Topoesthesias, 1975-77)* elementary structures characterized by the use of manipulated and distorted inclined planes, arches, stairs, columns, planks and cylinders, where the visitor’s passage is an essential component of the work.

A strong interest in industrially-derived techniques and materials which Colombo shared with his brother, designer Joe Colombo – goes hand in hand with attention to perceptual and specifically tactile dynamics. The works he created call for the active involvement of the viewer, invited to manipulate them in accordance with procedures that are not only tactile and optical, but also encourage a sensory relationship and experience that is almost nocturnal – suspended between ordinary existence and dream.

The retrospective at Castello di Rivoli includes a wide-ranging selection of works that retrace the artist’s entire career. The exhibition in the Manica Lunga begins with Colombo’s early *gouaches* and ceramics and with some of his hanging mobile works: slender geometric structures in metal that define space as something fluid and changing. The subsequent, darkened environment contains works that surprise and involve the visitor through effects of light. In *0↔220 Volt (1977-91)* the intermittent lighting sources convey a continuous transformation, while in the *Cromostrutture (Chromostructures, 1961-70)* an analogous task is entrusted to mutations in color. Colombo’s interest in the user-work relationship can

already be seen in his ceramic sculptures, some of which are composed of manipulable elements; but this interest becomes more evident in mature works, including the *Rilievi intermutabili* (*Intermutable Reliefs*, 1959), composed of rubber surfaces that change when underlying spheres or cylinders are pushed; *In-Out* (1959-63) and the *Superfici in variazione* (*Surfaces in Variation*, 1959) – all works where the formal appearance is modified as a result of the user's manipulation. Works that move also include the *Strutturazioni pulsanti* (*Pulsating Structuralizations*, 1959) which are 'paintings' formed by small standard pieces of polystyrene foam core where a pulsating electromechanical animation creates a disorientation. The exhibition ends with an extensive selection of architectural models which demonstrate the artist's interest in the design and conceptual phase of his work, although always intended with a sense of play and levity.