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The interaction is deliberate; it's done by manipulating the work ***Interview with Giovanni Anceschi***

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev: *For artists who are using light and movement today, Gianni Colombo is a key reference point, as he also is for relational artists who consider the viewer's participation in the work to be important. Why do you think that there's currently such strong renewed interest in the work of Colombo?*

Giovanni Anceschi: He's being rediscovered now because we artists in Gruppo T were the forerunners of immersive and interactive art. We were making this type of work well before the digital era.

CCB: *In this period of digital culture, dominated by You Tube and by social networking on the Web, our experience is perceived as disjointed. A reaction emerges that's expressed as a desire for sensuality, a desire for a phenomenological approach to real experience. This explains the impulse to anchor the body in real space. What happens to us, for instance, when we're truly there inside a work like Spazio elastico (Elastic Space) 1967-68, compared to the liquid space of the Internet?*

GA: I now understand what our works were proposing: our works were presented as a return to the body instead of its abandonment.

CCB: *Exactly. At the time when you began working, there was something utopian about communication, tied to the desire to rebuild society and its relationships, in antithesis to the society of spectacle, as Guy Debord would say. Now, however, if someone equivalent to Debord were writing, he'd speak of communication as a space of alienation. Today, communication itself is communicated. The rediscovery of Gruppo T and participatory and immersive art, often kinetic, from the 1960s changes the sign of those experiences in the way one can interpret them today. At the time, you defined a path from an idea of the autonomy of the work to an idea of participation. But now this participation has become a cage. Right now, we're going through a time similar to how people felt when faced with machines in factories in the nineteenth century. We're alienated in our obsession with uploading images and videos, updating digital contact lists. Consequently, going back in time to revisit the activities of Gruppo T represents, for us now, an inverse path. It's a path outside an absolute, hyperactive participation that no longer concedes space to the body, towards a resumption of contact with the physicality of intervening in a tactile manner. Young people today sense a sort of anxiety about the loss of corporeality and, in reaction, they manifest a form of hyper-relationship. Thinking about Colombo helps us to understand these mechanisms. In Spazio Elastico there's less possibility of relationship than on Facebook or You Tube, because there are at most two or three people, but it's a corporeal relationship.*

GA: The powerful invention in our environments, the fundamental thing about our environments, is that the viewer truly ended up being an executor and a co-author.

CCB: *An actor.*

GA: There's an environment that Davide Boriani and I made in Eindhoven. A floor was divided into squares with many pedestals that functioned electro-mechanically. And from above, a stroboscopic light entered a mirrored environment that multiplied this effect. It was recently re-installed at ZKM in Karlsruhe, replacing the part with the mechanical pedestals with electronic material. With this situation, less mechanical than the original, viewers entered and understood that they could dance – this is the interactive dimension. I was surprised by this fluidity and by this recognition.

CCB: *How did you get to know Colombo and the others in the group?*

GA: Colombo was the brother of Joe Colombo, a member of the Gruppo Nucleare, already “inside” the avant-garde. Basically a lot ensued from that. Lucio Fontana is also a connection. First, Colombo moved on from the Spatialists, from the Gruppo Nucleare, from interplanetary art. Then Davide Boriani and Gabriele De Vecchi attended the Liceo artistico di Brera, to study with Achille Funi. Colombo took the final exam as an outside student. And so the three of them met in 1957. Funi had a Futurist background and was a man with an extraordinary sense of humor. In the meantime, I'd got to know Enrico Baj, Enrico Castellani, Piero Manzoni and others, through my father, Luciano Anceschi, who was a phenomenologist of the same school as a great but not very well-known Italian philosopher, Antonio Banfi. At the time, I was considered the theoretician of the group because I'd studied philosophy and phenomenology with Enzo Paci and Cesare Musatti – psychoanalysis and perceptology. It wasn't my life's ambition to become a philosopher; I did it more as a courtesy to my father. Baj arranged for me to have a show in Paris at the Le soleil dans la tête gallery. I didn't enroll at the Brera, but my father took me to see Funi and I attended classes at the Academy for at least two years, where I learned to do fresco. Boriani was really talented at fresco. Grazia Varisco was also in Funi's class, but being fine male chauvinists, we didn't invite her to be in 1958.

CCB: *If you studied fresco with Funi, why did Colombo do ceramics as a young artist?*

GA: Boriani also did ceramics. At the Brera they took various courses, including ceramics. Colombo also did engravings. His early works used a variety of materials. In fact, we were also looking at Tàpies. Like the entire historic avant-garde, we were driven by a desire for reality. We were taking samples of street paving – I have wonderful memories of paving samples. The Futurists also had this impulse. Prampolini was in the air.

CCB: *The entire twentieth century has remained fascinated by reality. Reality became a strong concept in that century. There was a desire for reality in Brecht's work, in everyone's. Even the most abstract painting is a real, concrete object, in the avant-garde.*

GA: The concrete is a desire for reality. In the 1940s, Tomás Maldonado wrote some interesting things against illusionism, against the notion of abstraction, as abstraction from reality.

CCB: *Colombo's first exhibitions with ceramics weren't part of the conversation among artists at the time. He participated only to receive recognition, to win some prizes. Colombo wasn't part of the system that was producing culture. He had nothing to do with you, with the system of culture and the exchange of ideas in Milan.*

GA: Precisely. What we did have in common was our view of the avant-garde. But Gianni was also a humorist. He was making moving things even in ceramics. He was the first of us to make moving, kinetic things.

CCB: *This idea of working collectively as Gruppo T – autonomous but also together – how did this come about?*

GA: At first Boriani, Colombo, De Vecchi and Carlo Berta worked together. Then I replaced Berta in the group, when those three decided to have a show in Milan; they wanted a fourth participant and Berta didn't seem good enough to them. We used to see each other at a bar, but not at the Jamaica; ours was the one across the way. You'd be in trouble if you went to the Jamaica. We were the opposition!

CCB: *Why?*

GA: We were young and against the ones over there, who were – not like fathers – but cousins, a bit older – Manzoni, Castellani, etc. We were a bit *Blouson Noir* [French rockers]. The others were a little afraid of us.

So in 1959, Boriani, Colombo, De Vecchi, Varisco and I did our first show together. The name Gruppo T comes from the word Tempo, or Time. T is time. Our manifesto, *Miriorama I*, dated 1959, indicated a spatial-temporal condition. And we sold everything at that show.

CCB: *That was at the Pater Gallery?*

GA: It was really just the landlord ...

CCB: *You rented the gallery?*

GA: Everyone did their shows this way, renting the space. This was how Manzoni had his first shows. But when the gallery owner saw that we'd sold everything, he said that the following year we'd each have a solo show. In this way, four rents were guaranteed, and he took a percentage of sales.

CCB: *What did Colombo show at the Pater Gallery?*

GA: He exhibited felt works with cuts. Few people understood what we wanted to do. The only one who had the conceptual tools to be in tune with us was Umberto Eco.

CCB: *Eco's love and knowledge of John Cage also gave him a mental opening to the idea of participation, and a work that's never finished. He wrote "La forma del disordine", in Almanacco Bompiani, which is his most philosophical text.*

GA: We were good friends with Bruno Munari and Piero Manzoni. Munari asked us to do programmed graphics for an issue of *Almanacco Bompiani* on programmed art.

CCB: *In Colombo's early ceramic works, one sees the influence of Fontana and Paul Klee.*

GA: They were his great loves.

CCB: *Quadrante mutabile (Mutable Quadrant) of 1958 seems almost like a cut by Fontana, but mobile. And it's from 1958. That's very early. It was also very innovative for Colombo to use felt. What other artist had done this previously? Beuys used felt, but that was later, and Burri used burlap rather than felt. How did Colombo think of using felt?*

GA: Felt is tactile ...

CCB: *Blunt, soft, opaque...*

GA: These cuts are pockets where your mind visualizes putting your hand inside.

CCB: *The glance sinks down into the felt. They're works that are meant to be touched, but in a different way from velvet, because it has a density.*

GA: Felt's more sensual than velvet.

CCB: *It's less visual and more tactile. This is very important, because if he was one of the first to utilize felt in a preponderant manner (that is, not only as a fragment in a collage), he anticipates not only Beuys, but also Bob Morris, and so many others, like Reinhard Mucha.*

GA: His other works are also very prescient. In some, you place your hand inside and move the materials, such as marbles.

CCB: *In the 1959 show at the Premio San Fedele in Milan, Colombo exhibited some felt pieces; were they the same works that had been at the Pater Gallery a month earlier?*

GA: I think so.

CCB: *Later, you had a group show at the Azimut gallery.*

GA: The Azimut gallery is important. It's important that we came into contact with the artists who created it. I was already in touch with Manzoni through my father's world. It might even have been through me that Manzoni found the space, near the Brera, which would become Azimut. A problem arose about installing the show. Boriani, De Vecchi and I worked hard to install the space.

CCB: *With lights, I've been told ...*

GA: We also used floor lamps, with the lighting system, including the wiring.

CCB: *Did this practical and functional work of interior architecture lead to the idea to include light in the works? Because the works with light come after this moment.*

GA: No.

CCB: *So where does it come from? Fontana also made a lamp, a work with light, but perhaps it was really lighting, not a work.*

GA: The interest in light comes from the Futurists. At that time, we were studying their texts.

CCB: *However, light was metaphorical in the Futurists' work. You, instead, physically created some ideas according to the Futurist project.*

GA: I think many things we did took the Futurist writings at their word. They wrote "We will place the viewer at the center of the painting", and we did it. The Constructivist or geometricizing component came later. It came into the work, however, without there ever being an intention for it to be a theme, but rather, always in the service of time, of movement, of experience. Colombo made the "Wall" (Strutturazione pulsante / Pulsating Structuralization), composed of little squares, like a Constructivist would make them.

CCB: *However, it's not a modernist grid.*

GA: No. It's not meant as a hymn to the little square. I remember that in the Azimut show I had a

completely black painting. And then a second work that was a gray piece with a pocket – not sensuous like Gianni's; my work was drier.

CCB: *Why was your second show at the Pater Gallery in 1960 called Miriorama 1?*

GA: We were given the name by the painter Enrico Bordini, a very cultivated person who, when he heard we were doing shows with works that moved, recalled the existence of *Miriorama* cards in the nineteenth century.

CCB: *You did a collaborative, "collective" work.*

GA: Yes. I'll tell you a story: Colombo and Boriani went to Monza to see the car race and there was an enormous zeppelin in the sky and they decided that we should make one. Together, we made a balloon inside the exhibition space. There's a certificate on tissue paper on which the title is written, *Ambiente a volume variabile* (*Environment at Variable Volume*), but then Bruno Munari renamed it *Grande oggetto pneumatico* (*Large Pneumatic Object*). The fact that we were already using the word "environment" is very important in the history of the 1960s. When we did this show, we presented not only the environment with the inflatable volume, but also a first, fundamental section, where we'd installed works by other artists, and photographs of works by artists we considered significant, earlier than our work. There were photographs of works by Brancusi, we asked Baj for a mirror, etc.

CCB: *Were the historical works only shown in the form of photographs?*

GA: Almost all of them. But there was a real work by Fontana, and also one by Tinguely. It was a black and white Tinguely. But our ideal friends were the Fluxus group. We didn't know them, but we're much closer to Fluxus than to "those of the little square" – those doing programmed art. To get back to our *Miriorama 1* show: there were photographs and pieces and there were texts. There were some boards on which a fragment of Kandinsky's text *Point Ligne Surface* [1926] was reproduced, where he spoke about time, and there was a fragment of some writings by Klee, taken from his Bauhaus lectures, *Theory of Form and Figuration* [1956]. Then there was part of the Futurist movement's 1910 *Technical Manifesto*, where they talk about electric light.

CCB: *Were the texts printed by you?*

GA: By me and Colombo, the night before.

CCB: *Who curated the first section of the show? Who made the choice to say: "These are our historical references"?*

GA: It was curated by us. This makes the event very special. Then, in the part with our works, they were all collaborations. We did everything together. The works in the show were collective works.

CCB: *In which of these works do you most see Colombo's personality?*

GA: In the balloons, because it was interactive. The large balloons drove the viewer away!

CCB: When *Ambiente a volume variabile* – *Grande oggetto pneumatico* was inflated, you had to leave the room. It filled up, then deflated ... back and forth.

GA: Yes. "The balloons" is the informal title. We'd say: "Did you bring 'The balloons?'" They seemed like inflatable condoms; they were phallic.

CCB: *This seems to be one of the first inflatable works in the history of art.*

GA: There's still some discussion about this with Gruppo Zero, because they did exactly the same thing. But we did it before everyone else.

CCB: *But what you didn't do before everyone else is kinetic art: if you think about the exhibition Le Mouvement at the Denise René gallery in 1955, you see that you're second generation; in fact, you count Tinguely as one of the great precursors.*

GA: It was Boriani who came to the bar one day and said: "We have to do works in movement." But for Gruppo T, the central idea wasn't movement. For us, the body, not movement, was central. Time – temporality in the sense of Edmund Husserl – that was important. This happened when we were preparing the Miriorama 1 show. Colombo's works with electro-mechanical animation still weren't in that show. With Miriorama 1 there starts to be movement, but not yet the electro-mechanical sort. Pittura in fumo (Painting in Smoke), which moved, was in Miriorama 1, and the balloons, as well as Superficie in combustione (Surface in Combustion) and the Ossidazioni (Oxidations). These were collective works that moved. There was the pump that inflated the balloons, a vacuum cleaner, an air distributor, and a heat source, which was an electric stove, and then there was the gallery exhaust fan that sucked up the smoke. So there was electricity but no little motors.

CCB: *In his debut solo exhibition, Miriorama 4, in 1960, Colombo exhibited the first participatory works with electromechanical movement, the little motors, but at the same time he also exhibited other works that used manual movement. He was making these works in late 1959. Do you remember if the Strutture pulsanti were in this first solo show he had?*

GA: Yes. At the time, they went by an informal name: "Walls".

CCB: *So he exhibited the works with a manual interactive mechanism at the same time as those with the little motor?*

GA: Yes. This is important because in the case of the works with manual interaction, it was intentional that they should be interactive. The interaction is deliberate; it's done by manipulating the work.

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