From: *E luce fu*, exhibition catalog (Rivoli-Torino, Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 23 October 2020 – 20 June 2021) (Rivoli-Torino: Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, 2021), pp. 22-23.

Shimmering

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev

The *shimmering*—a luminous vibration—is how the Aboriginal Australians describe the pictorial quality that gives rise to the visionary experience of imagining the invisible in the visible, the ability to see many levels of reality syncretically, so that different temporalities (past, present, and future) and different states of consciousness (wakefulness, semi-sleep, and dream) intersect and overlap—co-present as in a palimpsest. The shimmering is represented pictorially by a specific Indigenous dot-painting technique, a form of pointillism, in which dots are combined in chromatic variations that stimulate, through retinal perception and therefore in the mind, the experience of a luminous vibration. This is caused not by the perception of an atmospheric phenomenon outside our body (such as lightning in the sky) but by intense neuronal activity, not very different from what happens under LSD or after the consumption of hallucinogenic mushrooms. Experiments to investigate such activity were carried out during the postwar years in scientific laboratories as well as in the contexts of rock music and Optical painting in the 1970s, not to mention the initiation rites still alive in many parts of the world today. "Expanded consciousness" was and is pursued as a form of freedom from rational life, a form of pleasure connected to a more intense experience of the world. The question of "consciousness," be it expanded or not, and of whether artificial intelligence and machine learning can create entities capable of experiencing consciousness in the near future, is among the most debated issues in these days. Can algorithmic systems, machines, and robots experience the pleasure and freedom of shimmering? If so, they have not yet been able to tell us. And therefore, it remains an experience that is profoundly characteristic of sentient biological organisms, including —and above all—human beings.

In our Western culture, light has always been a symbol of clarity and pure knowledge, that supreme refinement of thought to which every follower of Plato should aspire (to get out of the shadows of the cave and to know reality directly in the sunlight). But something similar to the Aboriginal Australians' shimmering can be found in the blinding experience of ecstasy, which is a characteristic of our culture as well and was described in detail by Dante in the last Canto of the *Divine Comedy* (c. 1300) and later by visionary saints, most notably by Saint Theresa of Avila (1515–1582) in her diaries. In the last Canto of "Paradise," the poet, having almost reached his goal, cannot look at God directly because he would be dazzled by the view, but can instead see his own shape reflected in the eyes of the Virgin, who can penetrate into the light and clarity of God and at the same time contain the effigy of the poet, who fixes his gaze onto the image reflected from her eyes. In this ricochet, a sort of shimmering takes place, expressed in the triangulation of the gaze, which is transformed poetically into an image of three rings of light containing the mystery of the Trinity. It is this text that inspired our exhibition:

Within the Lofty Light's profound and clear

subsistence there appeared to me three Rings,
of threefold color and of one content;

and one, as Rainbow is by Rainbow, seemed
reflected by the other, while the third
seemed like a Fire breathed equally from both.

Oh, how, to my conception, short and weak
is speech! And this, to what I saw, is such,
that it is not enough to call it small.

O Light Eternal, that alone dost dwell
within Thyself, alone dost understand
Thyself, and love and smile upon Thyself,

That Circle which appeared to be conceived
within Thyself as a Reflected Light,
when somewhat contemplated by mine eyes,

within Itself, of Its own very color,
to me seemed painted with our Human Form;
whence wholly set upon It was my gaze.[1]

A similar ecstatic experience—from the Greek ἔκστασις *ek-* (outside) and *histanai* (to place)—has been the subject of important works of art since the dawn of time, and in particular works where natural light has been harnessed in the materials of the artwork. From the gold-leaf backgrounds of fourteenth-century paintings that shine in the light to the polished marble of neoclassical sculptures, to the *Quadri specchianti* (Mirror paintings) by Michelangelo Pistoletto made from 1962 onwards, and beyond, natural light has been incorporated into the works of art as a reflection. In Impressionism and in Divisionism, as in the Op art of the 1960s, the vibration caused by the combination of differently colored particles creates in the viewer a similar experience of natural light and reflection.

In *The Ecstasy of St. Theresa* (1647–52) for the Cornaro Chapel in Rome, the Baroque artist Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680) represented almost literally what the saint herself wrote in her diary about the visionary experience of ecstasy. He also layered the natural light that descends from the window placed high above the marble statue with the rays of light represented by the the gilded stucco behind the figure of the saint.

Although used by sculptors in this way, natural light is not controllable by artists. Reflection is light that refracts off an object and was the basis of the birth of photography in the nineteenth century through the use of light-sensitive silver salts.

After electric light replaced gas lamps and became common in cities in the second half of the nineteenth century, artists measured themselves with the much more controllable artificial light, thus overcoming the Divisionist pictorial representation of light (or sculptural, as in Bernini's work). In 1909–10, Giacomo Balla (1871–1958) painted the *Lampada ad arco* (Street light), a

masterpiece on the theme of artificial light now part of the MoMA collections in New York. In the painting, an electric streetlamp, represented with a pointillist technique, shines more intensely than the moon behind it. This dazzling light is a symbol of the modern city, now illuminated by electrically activated incandescent filaments in glass bulbs. Balla divides and splits light into a series of colors, as in a Newtonian experiment on light composed of a myriad of different wavelengths. For him, electric light represented a new and modern form of energy that he would soon use directly in his *Feu d'artifice* (Fireworks, 1917), in which electric lights rhythmically illuminate portions of wood and colored papers in a Futurist theater. It is one of the earliest examples of the use of artificial light by a modern artist, followed shortly afterwards by the sculptures producing patterns of light and shadow created by the Hungarian photographer and artist László Moholy-Nagy (1895–1946), who first suggested the use of technological devices such as the telescope or the X-ray machine as veritable artistic techniques. From 1922–26, he created the sculpturemachine *Licht-Raum-Modulator* (Lightspace modulator) with which he shot the film *Ein Lichtspiel: schwarz weiss grau* (A light play: black white gray).

In 1948–49, the Italian and Argentine artist Lucio Fontana (1899–1968) created the first light environment into which visitors could enter, the *Ambiente spaziale a luce nera* (Spatial environment with black light). A Wood's lamp (a light source that emits rays in the ultraviolet range, not visible to the naked eye but which induce fluorescent effects on some materials) brings out the colors and shapes in the space. The work was first presented in 1949 at the Galleria del Naviglio in Milan and was followed by several other *Spatial environments* over the years. This artwork, which places the viewer at the center, as if she or he could really be part of the work of art, opened the way to all subsequent light environments. Notable amongst these is the *Electric Dress* (1956), an actual dress composed of about 200 colored light bulbs that the Japanese Gutai artist Atsuko Tanaka (1932–2005) created as a costume for one of her performances. Other spatial and luminous works were produced by the Italian Gruppo T (with Gianni Colombo), the German Zero group and the Venezuelan artist Carlos Cruz Diez (1923–2019), whose *Chromosaturation* works have since 1965 explored the perception of color through light installations. The sculptures of the American Minimalist Dan Flavin (1933–1996) are based on the use of simple neon tubes to sculpt and mark spaces. From 1966, Mario Merz (1925–2003) also created works using neon tubes, in his case twisted into texts. In the 1970s, major light works were made by the US West coast Light and Space movement (Robert Irwin, James Turrell, Nancy Holt, among others). Today, the Danish and Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson (1967) has made many works with light, including *The weather project* (2003) in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall and *The sun has no money* (2008) at Castello di Rivoli.

Combining a subtly ironic attitude with a sense of melancholy, since 2019 the Piedmontese artist of Sicilian origin Renato Leotta (1982) has been illuminating everything referring to the heritage of Piedmont with FIAT car headlights, creating strange and discreet luminous incursions into the spaces devoted to art. Though certainly made of light, and in particular of artificial light, Leotta's site-specific work not only focuses on the viewer's experience of light, but also meditates in an elegiac way on the end of modernity's industrial age, on the end of the era that began when artificial light illuminated the world. In highlighting certain elements, he thus by contrast focuses on the shadows, offering glimpses of the darkness imposed by the environmental crisis, health crisis, economic and financial crisis in a world in which we are all increasingly led by the light of our cell phones: *homo cellularis* with antennas everywhere, remote-controlled by artificial intelligence like insects, and soon to be propelled by self-driving cars that will have no need of headlights.

[1] Translated by Courtney Langdon (Cambridge MA: The Harvard University Press, 1921), p. 395.