

# MUSÉE CANTONAL DES BEAUX-ARTS LAUSANNE Immersion. The Origins: 1949-1969



4.11.2023 – 3.3.2024

## Press Kit

Musée cantonal  
des Beaux-Arts  
Plateforme 10

Place de la Gare 16  
1003 Lausanne  
Suisse

[mcba.ch](http://mcba.ch)



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# 1. Press release

The exhibition organized this autumn by the Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts is the first to trace the emergence of immersive art between the years 1949 and 1969, a period stamped by spatial expansion and the urge to go beyond the traditional categories of the work of art. Introducing a clear break with daily life, environments on the scale of an entire room offered an alternative reality in which the audience found themselves immersed in a 360° view.

*Immersion. The Origins: 1949-1969* highlights the pioneering figures of immersive art. In 1949 the Argentine-Italian artist Lucio Fontana exhibited the first truly immersive work of art, acting on a dual urge to go beyond the traditional categories of art (painting, sculpture, architecture) and to negate earthly space for a spatial art. With his *Caverne de l'antimatière* (1958-1959), Pinot Gallizio broadened the pictorial practice by immersing viewers in a cave meant to suggest antimatter, while Fabio Mauri created *Luna* (1968) to give viewers the chance to experience the moon's surface one year before Apollo 11.

The exhibition also shows how artists were able to suggest the effect of spatial expansion. The Swiss artist Christian Megert used mirror reflections to infinitely multiply visitors' images, while a moving cubic grid suggests an elastic space in Gianni Colombo's piece. Judy Chicago gives us a bright space filled with feathers in *Feather Room* (1966). James Turrell liked to work with light to modify our perception of space; his display of *Raemar Pink White* (1969) constitutes another high point of the exhibition, as does *Film Ambiente* (1968-1969) by Marinella Pirelli, which offers a film screening that is on the scale of a total immersion.

Some of the immersive environments use a limited, constricted space, like Robert Morris's *Passageway* (1961), while in Bruce Nauman's work, a haunted space becomes threatening. On the other hand, *Fanflashtic* (1968) by the group USCO presents a total immersive experience that is festive and fun thanks to its combination of psychedelic music, floating balloons, and strobe lights in a multidirectional multisensory bombardment.

Full of contrasting emotions, the exhibition cannot fail to engage our senses and stimulate our imagination.

## Curators of the exhibition:

Camille Lévêque-Claudet

Curator, ancient and modern art, MCBA

Choghakate Kazarian

Art historian and freelance curator, New York

## Exhibition partner:



## 2. The exhibition

With an exceptional display of fourteen immersive installations – some of which are recreated here for the first time – this event reaffirms the bodily and multisensory experience of art in the Virtual Age.

### 1<sup>st</sup> floor

Christian Megert  
born in Bern (Switzerland) in 1936

#### *Environment* 1968

In 1959, Christian Megert began using glass and mirror shards which reflected the surrounding space in a fragmentary way, causing the composition to breakup. In 1962, as part of the “Nul” exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum of Amsterdam, he created his first environment, which was made up of stationary and mobile reflecting walls. But it was for Documenta 4 in Kassel (1968) that the artist employed the immersive and expansive features of mirrors. In the section of the exhibition called “Ambiente–Environment” and dedicated specifically to more or less immersive installations, Megert renewed his experiment in more ambitious dimensions, presenting his first “infinity space,” where the ceiling and floor were fitted with mirrors to virtually extend the space. Entering the piece, visitors faced an intense perceptual experience, a doubling and redoubling of what they saw, dizzying and without end. The piece was the outcome of thoughts Megert published in the manifesto titled *A New Space* (1961), in which he speaks of an undefined space, a physical and mental world that is devoid of restrictions and categories, and rendered here through the infinite reflectivity of mirrors.

Ferdinand Spindel  
Essen (Germany), 1913 – Neuenkirchen (Germany), 1980

#### *hole in home* 1966

After working in Berlin as a graphic designer and later taking up painting, Ferdinand Spindel discovered synthetic foam in 1963 and made it his preferred art material. The artist constructed works in accordance with the “laws” imposed by foam, which has, like living creatures, its own anatomy, different thicknesses and densities, and particular reaction to pressure. In 1966, the artist’s experiments had been limited to the format of easel painting up to that point; that year Spindel pushed them in the direction of the monumental. He created inhabitable three-dimensional spaces out of pink foam as part of a Zwirner Gallery exhibition in Cologne. This was at the invitation of an artist couple, Ursula and Günter Tollmann, who had turned their Gelsenkirchen house into a venue promoting contemporary art. In their dining room, Spindel installed a pink foam cave called *hole in home*. The soft synthetic material, usually used as filler, became, in the hands of the artist, both an art object and a reassuring envelop in which visitors were invited to relax and recharge their batteries.

Fabio Mauri  
Rome (Italy), 1926-2009

*Luna*  
1968

*Luna* (Lune) was shown for the first time from 4 to 8pm on 25 May 1968 as part of the “Teatro delle mostre” (Theater of Exhibitions) that Plinio De Martiis conceived and mounted at his Galleria La Tartaruga in Rome. The project heralded a new concept of the art exhibition as a short-lived event lasting just a few hours. Each evening a different artist would present an installation that involved visitors’ physical participation. In *Luna*, Fabio Mauri’s contribution, visitors entered a lunar space and walked through, sat or stretched out on, even swam in the Styrofoam beads of the artist’s moon dust, which produced a soft rustle when rubbed. The moon was both the promise and objective of a space race that was to culminate the following year in the Apollo 11 mission and its moon landing, an event broadcast live on television screens around the world. *Luna* the immersive artwork was a sensory experience that redid the darkness of space, the silence of the cosmos, and zero gravity. Breaking down the limits between the real and the virtual, *Luna* projects audience-actors into an artificial world, making them experience an unknown and unpredictable terrain.

Marinella Pirelli  
Verona (Italy), 1925 – Varese (Italy), 2009

*Film Ambiente*  
1968-1969  
Sound recreation by Pietro Pirelli, 2022

In 1968, Marinella Pirelli was working on a three-dimensional installation in which images were to materialize in depth. With *Film Ambiente* (Film Environment), the artist offered visitors an immersive film experience that went beyond the typical straight-on experience. To do this, she built a grid-like structure which visitors could walk around in. The different modules of the grid were marked off by transparent panels; on these she projected images from her film *Nuovo Paradiso*, which featured a series of sculptures by the artist Gino Marotta. With *Film Ambiente*, film is lent an additional temporality that goes beyond filming and editing, thanks to the audience’s own actions. Visitors are both in the screen and screens themselves. They refract the film being projected, extending the classic image-surface relationship, canceling the camera’s sole and unique point of view, and transcending the traditional cinema experience.

Laura Grisi  
Rhodes (Greece), 1939 – Rome (Italy), 2017

*Vento di s. e. velocità 40 nodi*  
1968

*Vento di s. e. velocità 40 nodi* (Wind from the SE Speed 40 Knots) was shown at the Galleria La Tartaruga in Rome, 27 May 1968, as part of “Teatro delle mostre” (Theater of Exhibitions), a series of events/installations that were on view for about one day each over the course of three weeks. In a closed environment, Grisi recreated what a strong wind (74 km/h) feels like and thus modified the structure and perception of the surrounding space. The idea behind this work sprang from the artist’s experience of storms during her travels, weather events whose effects she filmed and measured using various electronic devices. With a heightened clarity in terms of perceptual phenomena, Grisi studied the elusive character of natural elements like fog, air, rain, and wind, artificially reproducing them in the weather environments she began mounting in the late 1960s. By recreating natural phenomena in the artificial space of the gallery, the artist wanted to spur the public to forge a new connection with nature and rediscover the enchantment of the world.

Jesús Rafael Soto  
Ciudad Bolívar (Venezuela), 1923 – Paris (France), 2005

*Penetrable blanco y amarillo*  
1968

“When you enter a penetrable, you get the feeling you are in a whirl of light, a total comprehensiveness of vibrations. The penetrable is a kind of materialization of this comprehensiveness, which I get people to move around in, get them to feel the ‘body’ of the space,” as the kinetic artist Jesús Rafael Soto explains. Soto exhibited his first *Pénétrable* in 1967 at the Galerie Denise René in Paris. The following year, he created *Penetrable blanco y amarillo* (White and Yellow Penetrable) which enfolded viewers. The very act of entering the artwork made viewers perceive the object and the space surrounding it with all their body, both visually and tactually. The apprehension is also on a psychological level. As Soto points out, “We are living in the sensation of a work of art... that calls into question and disrupts our system for perceiving the physical world. Inside the *Pénétrable*, we experience a world without proportions whose center is everywhere and the circumference nowhere, a world without forms, without enclosures, without plastic relationships, that is a world by itself.”



## USCO

*Fanflashtic*  
1968

USCO, which also went by the name of the Company of Us or the Us Company, was a collective of artists, poets, filmmakers, engineers, and composers that was cofounded in 1963 by the engineer Michael Callahan, the painter Stephen Durkee, and the poet Gerd Stern. Bringing together recycled objects and new technologies, their immersive installations combined lights, moving images, and sound. The members of USCO sought to change the mental and physical experience of viewers, who were placed at the center of the piece, and by a synesthetic mix of visual and sound mediums, to achieve total stimulation. *Fanflashtic*, which was described by the press as a “sensory disorientation,” a “heightened awareness corresponding to an LSD experience,” or “fun art,” was part of the eleven installations and happenings (created by artists like Allan Kaprow and Nam June Paik) that were presented as part of “Intermedia ’68,” a festival celebrating experimental and multidisciplinary forms of art organized in February and March of 1968.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> floor

Lucio Fontana  
Rosario (Argentina), 1899 – Comabbio (Italy), 1968

*Ambiente spaziale*  
1967

For his solo show at Milan’s Galleria del Naviglio in February 1949, Lucio Fontana exhibited *Ambiente spaziale a luce nera* (Spatial Environment with Black Light). This *Ambiente* is the first immersive work of art strictly speaking and the materialization of ideas laid out in the manifestos elaborated by the spatialist group that had starting forming around Fontana in 1947. These young artists and writers in Milan advocated the need to transcend painting and sculpture in favor of a spatial art, likened to a “pure image, airy, universal, floating,” or to “artificial forms, wonderful rainbows, luminous writing.” For his retrospective at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven in 1967, Fontana mounted the *Ambiente spaziale* shown here, which he considered an ideal reworking of the 1949 *Ambiente spaziale a luce nera*, the key work in the development of his art. He replaced the shape molded in papier-mâché that he had hung in the Galleria del Naviglio in 1949 with a flat wooden comma shape coated in fluorescent paint. Fontana was to create some twenty *Ambienti spaziali* from 1949 until his death in 1968.

Pinot Gallizio

(Giuseppe Gallizio) [Alba (Italy), 1902-1964], assisted by Giors Melanotte (Piergiorgio Gallizio) [Alba, (Italy), 1935-2003]

*Une caverne de l'anti-matière*

1958-1959

In 1957, Gallizio began developing his “industrial painting.” Drawing on his earlier studies of botany and pharmacology, the artist carried out experiments with combinations of oil paint and resin on bolts of canvas, some of which measured up to seventy meters. His idea was to sell these paintings by the meter, like cloth, in the street and at department stores in order to make art available to all. In May of 1959, Gallizio completely covered the walls, floor, and ceiling of René Drouin’s gallery in Paris with “industrial painting,” the strong smell of which mixed with the odors of burned natural resins. Called “the anti-world” while it was being worked on, the piece was renamed *Une caverne de l'anti-matière* (An Antimatter Cave) at the last minute. This was precisely the year that Emilio Segrè and Owen Chamberlain were awarded the Nobel Prize in Physics for the discovery of the antiproton. While the artist referred to the work by a number of names in turn, “anti-world,” “rudimentary and imperfect cathedral” for the future, and “antimatter,” the “cave” always was a prehistoric cavern and a fallout shelter at one and the same time.

James Turrell

born in Los Angeles (USA) in 1943

*Raemar Pink White*

1969

The dematerializing effects of light and how we perceive it go directly to the heart of the experiments carried out by the Light and Space movement, an artists’ group active in California in the late 1960s and early 1970s that comprised James Turrell, Helen Pashgian Robert Irwin, and Douglas Wheeler. In 1968 and 1969, Turrell created his first immersive artworks, the nine configurations of *Shallow Space Construction*, including *Raemar Pink White*. In the nine, light was used to shake up viewers’ perception of the venue’s space, the limits of which were hard to make out. Immersed in the piece, visitors had the feeling that the walls, the space, and the colors had been abolished, melted into thin air. A moment of inattention was enough for the limit of the artwork to vanish once again, bewildering sensation and perception. Turrell used light not to reveal the observable structures of the world but to demonstrate the presence and power of light itself, playing with its ability to conjure a diffuse sublime.



Judy Chicago

(Judy Gerowitz, born Judith Cohen) [born in Chicago (USA) in 1939], in collaboration with Lloyd Hamrol (born in San Francisco (USA) in 1937) and Eric Orr (Covington, Kentucky (USA), 1939 – Los Angeles (USA), 1998)

*Feather Room*

1966

*Feather Room* was created by Judy Chicago with Lloyd Hamrol and Eric Orr. The three loosely formed “The Rooms Company,” the group’s name being a nod to the artists’ wish to create room-sized environments. After the geometrical structures and smooth surfaces of Chicago’s earlier output, *Feather Room* proves a key work in the artist’s career and represents a transition towards a series of pieces that are environmental in the strict sense of the term. She called them *Atmospheres* and the new pieces offered experiences that were more for the senses and less concrete. By modifying the atmosphere of an artwork, Chicago hoped to feminize a patriarchal world. *Feather Room* presents a diffuse, shifting esthetic with a light organic art material that presents a clear contrast with the hard materials and sharp-cornered shapes of minimalist sculpture she had focused on to that point. Angles no longer jut out and pictorial planes are no longer neatly arranged. The lines of the architecture are softened and blurred, offering the space a dilated look, an effect that is reinforced by the uniform diffuse lighting. For the artist, the immersive scale is important for its strong impact on visitors, who find themselves enveloped in light and feathers.

Robert Morris

Kansas City (USA), 1931 – Kingston, New York (USA), 2018

*Passageway*

1961

From June 3 to 7, 1961 as part of a series of performances organized by La Monte Young in Yoko Ono’s loft on 112 Chambers Street in Manhattan, the public was invited to experience *Passageway*. The oppressive and disturbing effect of being immersed in a constricting space, the end of which remained out of sight, caused such frustration that certain visitors covered the walls with insults and graffiti, like the dancer Yvonne Rainer, who wrote “FUCK YOU BOB MORRIS.” With *Passageway*, Robert Morris sought to render palpable the physical limits of the body and the psychological consequences of the ensuing claustrophobia. The artist came up with this piece at a time when his creativity, soaring to new heights, was accompanied by personal problems that weighed heavily on him. “This goes along with an increasing negativity toward and incapacity for personal relations. I move further into a kind of semi-autistic space which excludes the other... I am suspended, embraced and held by my world,” the artist would later explain looking back on the period.

Gianni Colombo  
Milan (Italy), 1937-1993

*Spazio elastico*  
1967

Gianni Colombo had created optico-geometric and kinetic works as a member of Gruppo T, which he had cofounded in 1959 in Milan. In the summer of 1967, he took part in “trigon 67,” the Graz Biennial, and for the event created *Spazio elastico* (Elastic Space), a space plunged in darkness in which lengths of elastic string covered in a phosphorescent paint were illuminated with ultraviolet light. These strings formed a grid pattern whose right-angled shapes were regularly distorted by two motors. For anyone experiencing *Spazio elastico*, the geometric regularity of the grid became a kind of spiderweb. Like a trap, it imprisoned viewers' bodies and minds in a network of light whose lines were endlessly rearticulated and elastically reshaped. Crossing these cubic cells formed by elastic strings, visitors experienced a network that turned out to be a confusing device that made them lose their bearings. The piece was such a success that it was exhibited once again at the Galleria L'Attico in Rome in 1968 and earned the artist a first prize in painting at the 34<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale.

Bruce Nauman  
born in Fort Wayne, Indiana (USA), in 1941

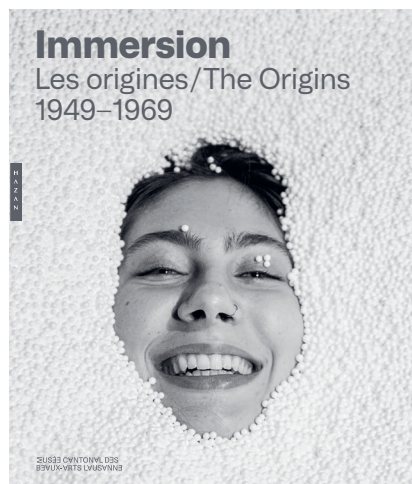
*Sound Breaking Wall*  
1969

In *Sound Breaking Wall*, loud speakers hidden in walls generate ambivalent human sounds. While one wall exhales, the other alternately produces laughter and a heartbeat, putting visitors ill at ease, because of the spatial ambiguity of the sound, whose point or points of origin are hard to identify, but also because of the anthropomorphic character of this haunted space. The difficulty visitors have trying to detect and anticipate the source of the sounds, due to their spatial transmission, creates a feeling of threatening uncertainty. This is reinforced by the impression of being in a space harboring spirits, the walls inhabited by one or more living beings that have been enclosed there. The intention to create discomforting spaces and forms is a recurrent strategy in Bruce Nauman's art. *Sound Breaking Wall* is of a piece with the first works produced by the artist, who used his body and its movements to interact with the space in a performative approach. Reduced visibility is replaced by situations that disturb and unsettle us physically and psychologically.

### 3. Publication

*Immersion. The Origins: 1949-1969* is the first book to trace the rise of immersive art, an approach that addresses all the visitor's senses in a 360° experience. Featuring pioneering works by twenty-three artists, from Lucio Fontana to Judy Chicago, the present catalogue explores the beginnings of a major form of artistic expression that heralded augmented reality. Essays by Giuliana Bruno, Choghakate Kazarian, and Camille Lévêque-Claudet examine immersion, its history, strategies for involving the public in the work of art itself, and questioning of the exhibition space. The book includes both period documents and an exceptional selection of photo illustrations.

Choghakate Kazarian and Camille Lévêque-Claudet (ed.),  
*Immersion. Les origines / The Origins: 1949-1969*,  
Lausanne, Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts, Paris, Hazan,  
2023, 152 p., 106 ill. (Fr./Eng.)  
CHF 60.90 in bookshops / CHF 38.– at the MCBA Book- and Gift  
Shop during the exhibition → [shop.mcba@plateforme10.ch](mailto:shop.mcba@plateforme10.ch)



## 4. Press Images

To download → [mcba.ch/presse](http://mcba.ch/presse)

The images are free of rights for the duration of the exhibition. All reproductions must be accompanied by the following information: author, title of the work, date, name of the lender, name of the photographer and copyright. Other indications (dimensions, duration, techniques, etc.) are welcome but not obligatory. After publication, we would be grateful if you could send a copy of the publication to the press service of the Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts de Lausanne.

The views of the exhibition will be available from 12 noon on 3 November.



*Anais sulla Luna (Fabio Mauri, Luna, Hauser & Wirth, New York), 2015*  
© The Estate of Fabio Mauri and Hauser & Wirth  
Photo: Yuma Martellanz

## 5. Events

### Reservations required for all events

→ [mcba.ch/agenda](https://mcba.ch/agenda)

### Guided tours (in French)

Thursday 16 November 2023 at 6:30pm

With Camille Lévêque-Claudet

Thursday 14 December 2023, 11 January 2024 and

15 February 2024 at 6:30pm

Sundays at 11am (except for 24 and 31 December)

These guided tours are offered with the support of Vaudoise Assurances

### Guided tour (in English)

Sunday 10 December at 2pm

### Guided tours for Les Amis-e-s du MCBA (in French)

Tuesday 14 November at 12:30pm

Thursday 30 November at 6pm

With Camille Lévêque-Claudet

### Final guided tour with the exhibition curator (in French)

Sunday 3 March at 3pm

With Camille Lévêque-Claudet

### Extramural: Screenings of films by Jordan Belson

Thursday 8 February 2024 at 8pm

Cinéma Bellevaux, Lausanne, [www.cinemabellevaux.ch](https://www.cinemabellevaux.ch)

In conjunction with some of the exhibition's immersive artworks, MCBA is pleased to offer an evening screening of short films by the American artist and filmmaker Jordan Belson. Sometimes called 'cosmic', Belson's films are influenced by cosmological imagery and tinged with Eastern mysticism. With their arrangements of lights, colours and, sounds, they explore human consciousness.

Admission free

### Workshop for adults (in French)

Saturday 24 February 2024, 2pm–5pm

*Faire vibrer le visible*

This workshop explores how the classic loudspeaker works. Through a few theoretical elements and practical experiments, each participant will create a sound diffuser and have a go at discovering sensory and sound immersion.

With Rudy Decelière, a Franco-Swiss artist who lives and works in Geneva. He explores the art of sound through installations.

CHF 50.–

### Creative workshops for children (in French)

Saturday 11 November 2023 and 13 January 2024, 2pm–5pm

*Roman-photo de la terre à la lune*

Kids explore the exhibition's immersive installations, then create a photo-story that relates what they've seen, felt, or heard. Featuring photography, printmaking, and collage.

8–12 years old / CHF 15.–

A free intergenerational workshop (in French)

Saturday 3 February 2024, 11am–6pm, non-stop

*Vivre le monde autrement*

With your family, all alone, or with friends, come out and make a pair of glasses – with mirrors, metal, string and cardboard – that will plunge you into the world in a way you've never experienced before!

Free / no reservation required

Program for schools and private tours → [mcba.ch](https://mcba.ch)



## 6. Information and contact

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All our press releases and press kits are available under:  
→ [mcba.ch/presse/](https://mcba.ch/presse/)



Press conference:  
3 November at 10.30 am  
Presentation of the exhibition by the curators  
Camille Lévêque-Claudet, curator, MCBA  
Choghakate Kazarian, art historian and freelance curator  
Upon registration: → [presse.mcba@plateforme10.ch](mailto:presse.mcba@plateforme10.ch)

Hours:  
Tuesday – Sunday: 10am–6pm  
Thursday: 10am–8pm  
Monday: closed  
25 December 2023: closed  
1<sup>st</sup> January 2024: closed

Admission and Online Tickets:  
→ [mcba.ch/billetterie](https://mcba.ch/billetterie)  
First Saturday of the month: free

Access:  
SBB Lausanne train station, 3 minutes on foot  
Bus: 1, 3, 20, 21, 60, Gare stop  
Bus: 6, Cecil stop  
Metro: m2, Gare stop  
Car: Montbenon parking, Reduced fee

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## 7. Partners and sponsors

The MCBA building was inaugurated on 5 April 2019. The museum's new premises were built by the canton of Vaud with the generous support of the City of Lausanne and the following private partnerships:

Fondation  
Les Mûrons



Fondation  
Art et Vie

Fondation  
Anita et Werner Damm-Etienne



Abakanowicz Arts and  
Culture Charitable Foundation

AUDEMARS PIGUET  
*Le Brassus*



Madame  
Alice Pauli

Association rétrospective  
Pierrette Gonseth-Favre

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