

Immersion.

The Origins:
1949-1969

4.11.2023 –
3.3.2024

Exhibition
Guide

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The exhibition organized 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 gallery offered an alternative reality in which the audience found themselves immersed in a 360° view.

The term “immersion,” which conveys the idea of being (literally) in the artwork rather than in front of it, characterizes all of the pieces brought together for this project. From the Latin *immersio* meaning “dipping,” immersion is defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “dipping or plunging into water or other liquid,” and more figuratively as “absorption in some condition, action, interest, etc.” Immersion is the result then of crossing over a threshold, the passing from one milieu – or state – to another.

Beyond their esthetic and conceptual differences, these immersive works are independent enveloping spaces, artificial or unusual, that heighten and confuse the viewer’s senses.

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.

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 [Moon] was shown for the first time from 4 to 8 pm 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.

Film Ambiente

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.

Vento di s. e. velocità 40 nodi

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.

Penetrable blanco y amarillo

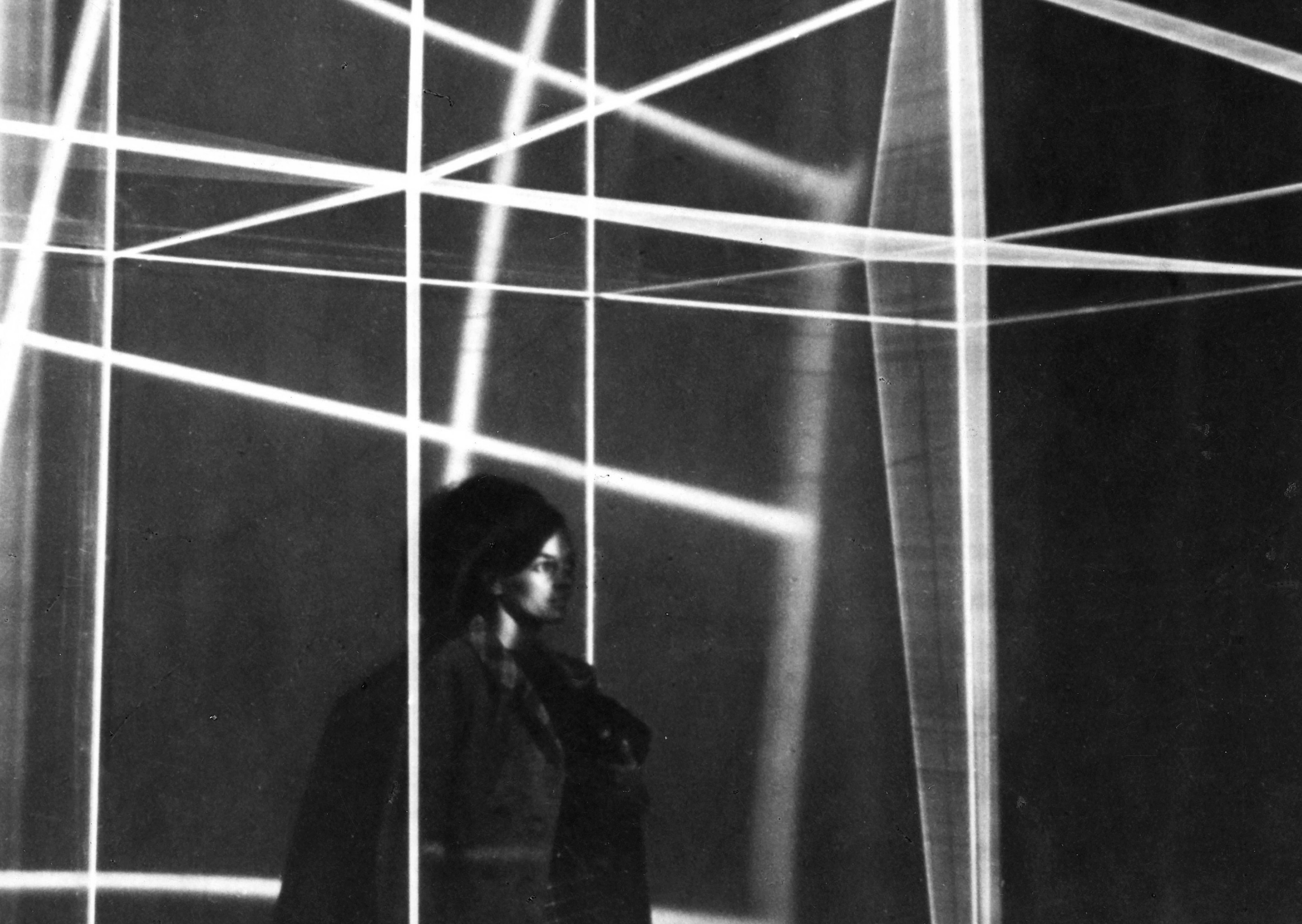
Jesús Rafael Soto
Ciudad Bolívar (Venezuela), 1923 –
Paris (France), 2005
Penetrable blanco y amarillo
1968

“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.”

Fanflashtic

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.



Ambiente spaziale

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*, a 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.

Une caverne de l'anti-matière

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.

Raemar Pink White

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.

Feather Room

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.

Passageway

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.

Spazio elastico

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 34th Venice Biennale.

Sound Breaking Wall

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.

Events

Reservations required
for all events
→ 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
Insurance

Guided tour (in English)
Sunday 10 December 2023
at 2pm

Guided tours for Les Amis·es
du MCBA (in French)
Tuesday 14 November 2023
at 12:30pm
Thursday 30 November 2023
at 6pm
With Camille Lévêque-Claudet

Final guided tour with the
exhibition curator (in French)
Sunday 3 March 2024 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
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 film-
maker Jordan Belson. Some-
times called 'cosmic', Belson's
films are influenced by cosmo-
logical 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 ele-
ments and practical experi-
ments, each participant will cre-
ate 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 im-
mersive installations, then create
a photo-story that relates what
they've seen, felt, or heard.
Featuring photography, print-
making, 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 experi-
enced before!
Free / no reservation required

Program for schools and
private tours → mcba.ch

Organisation and Publication

Curated by:
Camille Lévêque-Claudet,
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Choghakate Kazarian,
art historian and freelance
curator

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(Fr./Eng.)
CHF 60.90 in bookshops /
CHF 38.– at the MCBA Book- and
Gift Shop during the exhibition
→ shop.mcba@plateforme10.ch

Information



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

Admission and Online Tickets:
→ 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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Other shows on view this
winter at MCBA:

Espace Focus
Steinlen. Swipe of the Paws
and Velvet Claws
22.9.2023 – 18.2.2024
Free admission

Espace Projet
Mirage. The BCV Art Collection
invites Natacha Donzé,
Gina Proenza, Jean-Luc Manz,
and Denis Savary
29.9.2023 – 7.1.2024
Free admission

The Collection
Free admission

Exhibition partner



Main partner
Plateforme 10

AUDEMARS PIGUET
Le Brassus

Main partners
MCBA construction



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