

Gianni Colombo *The Body and the Space*

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In the best of his work, Gianni Colombo makes the viewer feel like a cross between drug taker, space explorer and laboratory test rat. Such is the case here when you enter his *Topoestesia – Tre Zone Contigue (Itinerario Programmato)* (1965–70). It's a large black box containing a darkened three-corridor tunnel lined on every face with a seemingly rational grid of luminous green elastic. It's like you're in an early videogame or on the set of *Tron* (1982). And then it changes. As motors pull the elastic, distorting the grid, surfaces seem to slope, your perception of the space's carefully articulated and apparently fixed geometry and your position within it becomes unhinged, and you're somewhere else entirely: given the presence of flashing blue and red lights, a giddy disco perhaps. More importantly, a space you thought was fixed and measured now seems to be anything but that. And it's a weirdly liberating experience.

That experience continues via several wall works from Colombo's *Spazio Elastico* series

of the 1960s and 70s, elastic geometries that are either mutated by motors or by viewers rearranging them (almost as if to animate the artist's drawings), but in these examples in a less all-over and more educational way, where you're more fully conscious of the mechanics Colombo deploys or of the ways in which the artwork is merely a cipher for a dialogue between their creator and their viewer (although with Colombo's work you feel a bit more a part of it than that word implies). Meanwhile works like *Cromostruttura* (1970) and *Sismostruttura* (1962) focus on the transformational effects of light and colour. Intriguingly, in the midst of this an early (and static) ceramic work (*Vocale con Accento*, 1957), which in another context (particularly with the current craze for ceramics in art) might have been an art-historical curio or treasure, seems lumpen and inert.

There's little doubt on the evidence here that Colombo (who died in 1993) was a pioneer, both in the way in which he moved kinetic art into the realm of kinetic installations and for

the crucial manner in which perceptual psychology and audience participation (way before vogueish theories such as relational aesthetics) lay at the heart of his research. It's bizarre to think that this is Colombo's first one-man show in Britain. And yet it's hard not to see some of the artist's output as stranded between the precise yet fluid concepts behind them and art history's (and art collecting's) obsession with preservation. Most notably when witnessing the gallery's paranoia when some of the works – with their fragile and cranky original motors – are turned on, however briefly. And perhaps there's a sense that Colombo's often noisy motors and mechanical pulleys have been somewhat surpassed in a digital, virtual age. But one look at the videowork (a collaboration with Vincenzo Agnetti) *Vobulazione e Bieloquenza Neg* (*Wobulation and Bieloquence Neg*, 1970), with its floating, morphing, flickering geometries, and you're reminded that in many ways Colombo's work anticipates that as well.

Mark Rappolt



Topoestesia – tre zone contigue (itinerario programmato), 1965–70
(installation view). Courtesy Robilant+Voena, London