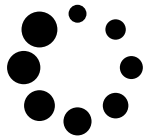


AN-ICON



From Inside
to Outside

(and Vice Versa)

by Francesco Tedeschi

Outside-inside

Light

Grazia Varisco

Gruppo T

Lucio Fontana

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From Inside to Outside (and Vice Versa)¹



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Abstract

This contribution will focus on some aspects of the roots of environmental art in Italy, with reference to works created between the 1950s and 1960s by Lucio Fontana, to environments designed by members of Gruppo T and other artists (Giulio Paolini, Luciano Fabro) in the 1960s, and through reflections on the different uses of space that were defined with the exhibition *Lo spazio dell'immagine* held in Foligno in 1967. The approach is not, however, that of a historical review of well-known events, but of an investigation into the way to understand the relationship between outside and inside, the sense and value of the “passage,” the conception of the modifying factors, starting with light, which have acted on the definition of space as an element to be perceived, rather than a place to be in, emphasising the dynamics that define a dialectical, if not antithetical, relationship with respect to architectural and design qualities in the proper sense, leading to reading the environmental art intervention as an invitation to follow a path.

Keywords

[Outside-inside](#)

[Light](#)

[Grazia Varisco](#)

[Gruppo T](#)

[Lucio Fontana](#)

¹ The title of this contribute takes up the one elaborated for my essay in the catalogue of the exhibition M. Meneguzzo, ed., *Grazia Varisco: Percorsi contemporanei 1957-2022* (Milan: Skira, 2022, exhibition catalogue), having at its end a reflection on a work by the same Grazia Varisco.

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My paper addresses the question of the environment, a practice implemented in the art of the 1960s and 1970s, focusing on the relationship between the position of the “observer” and the structural elements of the artworks, as well as the role reversal between subject and object in the work of art and its perceptual process.

A few of the contents I will present are derived from a course I held recently at Università Cattolica in Milan, focused on the relationship between the idea and realization of a certain type of “sites” in several forms of visual art that have moved from the representative dimension to that of an active participation in space, meant as the articulation of relationship between different fields and subjects. Sites implying a “passage,” such as the window and, the door, the threshold, the labyrinth and finally the mirror. All of these sites could be defined as “transitional.”² Among them, one with a peculiar symbolic (as well as practical) relevance is the “corridor:” an architectural space which essentially connects different rooms in an apartment and tends to be perceived merely as a service space, in some way devoid of a function of its own. In the royal palaces from past eras, it was often used to measure the distance from the outside – the realm of common people – to the inside – the place of power. So, it owns a strongly temporal dimension, as demonstrated by Aleksandr Sokurov in the film *Russian Ark* (2002), along which the author relives Russian history as a journey through the corridors (and halls) of the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg.

In such sense, the corridor is the form with which the purpose of a form of art qualified as “environmental” is best identified, through artworks addressing space as actual matter, and not an inert dimension; more specifically, the matter of a presentation both objective and subjective. As critics have consistently pointed out, most of the projects of this environmental kind tend to be perceived

² And so I defined them in the book derived by that course: F. Tedeschi, *Luoghi di transizione: forme e immagini di “passaggio,” fra arte e architettura* (Brescia: Scholé-Morcelliana, 2020). I would like to thank Andrea Pinotti and Elisabetta Modena, who asked me to take part in this publication on the basis of the topics I dealt with there.

as “paths” and not as static or stable sites to contemplate. The corridor, as in the most crucial artistic proposals, is what lies in the middle, giving substance, sometimes in an impalpable and invisible way, to a space kept in continuity between two conditions. It has to be considered – to borrow a term from the psychology of perception – as an “in-between.” It’s the “space between,” the subject matter for a distracted attention; an intermediate nature which can nonetheless constitute the very reason for its legitimization.

Let me begin with an emblematic image, an extremely suggestive painting by 17th Century Dutch painter Samuel van Hoogstraten, a follower of Rembrandt. It is known as *View of a corridor* (oil on canvas, 1662; Dyrham Park, Gloucestershire). It could be considered as the junction between two cultural inheritances, that of perspective as a system for processing represented space, and that of the analytical investigation of the interiors of bourgeois houses in 17th Century Holland. What might catch the eye of today’s viewer is the sense of emptiness in the central part of the painting, immersed in a peculiar light, that could be considered as the actual subject of the work. Of course, the “void” is not absolute, given the presence of many decorative elements, as well as some humans and animals placed at the margins, qualifying the combination between anthropic and architectural dimensions. Yet, the void “fills up” the central part of the painting, infused as it is with light, reflections, shadows. With all of these elements taking the viewers on a visual journey through the represented space, this uncluttered area holds the function of questioning them, of bringing them inside, into the silence of an intimate place.³ Of course, this place attracts and intrigues the viewer precisely because of its domestic character, starting with the juxtaposition between the dog and the mop in the foreground. The most important feature of the painting, here, is that it is based on emptiness as a

3 This painting is considered in several moments of V.I. Stoichita, *L’instauration du tableau* (Paris: Méridiens Klincksieck, 1993). See also, for the concept of a space overturned from outside to inside, G. Bruno, *Public Intimacy: Architecture and the Visual Arts* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2007).

way to deny any subject matter: at the same time, it can be considered as an anecdotal exercise, which goes beyond any narrative logic. For that, it is a very “modern” painting.

Looking at the opposite end of this elaboration of the theme of the “void,” we can immediately move to one of the light installations that reveal the sense of a “corridor” characterized by light as the medium of the artwork. An absolute zeroing, if not for the effect produced by the substance of the light, is the specific object of Dan Flavin’s attention: for instance, in his project for a wing of the Litta Menafoglio Panza di Biumo villa in Varese, following the commission by Giuseppe Panza. The transition through the different connotations of light coming from the side rooms – as well as that produced by the lighting of the very corridor defining the space of the architecture in its depth – articulates a visual and physical “path” determined by the variability of its solutions, due to the effect of the design of the color-lights, generating a truly modern and apparently claustrophobic perception of space as pure architecture, measurement, time.

Thinking of a form of art based on space as a medium, however, we must mention the example of Lucio Fontana and his environments, possibly the most striking instance of an artwork progressively dematerialized by its tangible, material state. With Fontana, we are at the crossroads of multiple impulses, such as the tension to overcome the distinction between different techniques, to imagine a proposal for an autonomous space, embodied by light itself and in its relationship with the architectural context.

In these three types of artworks – the van Hoogstraten’s painting and the environments by Flavin and Fontana – we encounter three different articulations of an ongoing journey through space, either literal or delegated to an imaginary subject, with his or her body and gaze. A space that is both objective and subjective, meant as it is to host a projection of the self in the place, and, at the same time, to constitute a manifestation of its own, a reason for the actions of a simultaneously active “I/you,” as

a kind of relationship between the inside and the outside that involves the subject in a shared perception.⁴

In his 1949 *Ambiente spaziale a luce nera*, Fontana equipped the space of Galleria del Naviglio with a particular light, which could appear futuristic at the time: a Wood's lamp, surrounded by mobile fluorescent shapes cut out of papier-mâché, almost as if to justify the existence of an object to look at and perceive in a newly-configured space. Some of his subsequent structures would be even more radical, such as the one created in Amsterdam in 1967, consisting of an intersection between five narrow corridors placed side by side, and completed by a perpendicular one: a T-shaped transit space bathed in red light. This installation was reenacted, with updated technological means, in the striking, accurate reconstruction of Lucio Fontana's environments at Hangar Bicocca a few years ago. Even with this installation – one of the least celebrated among Fontana's spaces, which explains why it was not reenacted until the 2017 exhibition, and then again as the only "environment" displayed in the 2019 retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum in New York – Fontana appears to anticipate some of the effects produced by a few American artists, who reduced the investigation of space to a matter of perception. A practice exemplified by the work of Bruce Nauman, and particularly by his "corridors" and their constrictive, delocalizing effects. By shifting the focus from structure to perception (which is what distinguishes Nauman's works from Flavin's), we actually question the very nature of space, at the same time introducing the notion of a somehow objectified ego. The observer is observed, and thus turned into a visual object, particularly in installations featuring TV screens and cameras that reproduce – in alienated fashion – the actions performed by the viewers

4 In this sense, this concept is close to the use of the definition of "avatarization" by Andrea Pinotti; see A. Pinotti, "Procuratori del sé. Avatar e avatarizzazione," in T. Gatti, D. Maini, eds., *Visual studies: l'avvento di nuovi paradigmi* (Milan: Mimesis, 2019): 27-40.

themselves. The screen thus becomes a spying device or a “magic mirror.”

A center of such investigation of the inside-outside relationship could be found in the questions on the origin of forms outlining space itself. These are extended, then, to the relationship between internal and external space in a specific instance, and also to the questions about the subject and the object of the experience. For this reason, we shall address how Fontana approaches an important phase in the development of his *Spatial Concepts*, concerned with the practical manifestation of an idea of space revealed in the apparent two-dimensional nature of the picture format.

In 1952 several canvases from the more specifically “cosmogonic” series⁵ were used by the artist to demonstrate how they could be conceived as “fragments of space” or space generators, in the sense that their entity is manifested in a twofold way: as works to be looked at frontally or to be “pierced” by light, thus creating a new space modified by the luminous projection of the holes, and at the same time canceling out the pictorial surface on which they are actually located. This exploration – presented through a series of photographs, one of which was chosen to illustrate the catalogue of the exhibition at Galleria del Naviglio that year – was followed up in the experiments carried out by Fontana with television, in the tests carried out at the RAI studios in Milan. In this case, as far as we can see, Fontana was even more focused on the “hidden” side of his works, foregrounding the light trails that occupied that “other space” represented by the projection screen. Conceptually, this exploration can also be considered one of the roots of the recent elaborations of “VR” or immersive reality in the creation of virtual spaces, both from a technological philosophical perspective.

We can certainly trace this evolution from the light-pierced *Spatial Concepts* to the actual environment

5 As they were categorized by Enrico Crispolti in his analysis of Fontana’s work. See E. Crispolti, *Fontana: catalogo generale* (Milan: Electa, 1986); see also E. Crispolti, *Omaggio a Lucio Fontana* (Rome: Carocci, 1971).

in a few works created by the artist in the following years, such as that for the 1964 Triennale, the one displayed in Minneapolis in 1966, or the one included in the exhibit *Spazio dell'immagine* in Foligno, in 1967. It may be useful to elaborate briefly on the latter exhibition, due to its historical relevance, as it established two very different directions in exploring the relationship with space.

On the one hand, as in Fontana's works, space is conceived as the very material of the work, an environment to inhabit, in which those who pass through or linger become part of a perceptive condition (of a field).⁶ On the other hand, space is seen as the environment for an "image" or an "object," either complete in itself or combined, according to specific forms of installation. Such distinction cannot be too rigid, as the two tendencies were intersected on several occasions. However, proposals such as that by Enrico Castellani can be recognized as deriving directly from Fontana's example. Castellani's *White environment* applies principles of design and architecture the artist had already identified in a singular "Albertian" derivation the previous year, in his room at the Venice Biennale. Again, *Intercamera plastica* by Paolo Scheggi, *Blu abitabile* by Agostino Bonalumi, *Interpretazione speculare* by Getulio Alviani, up to *After Structures* by Gianni Colombo, one of the environments with the decisive presence of light that varies the perception, are all to be considered as products of Fontana's influence. At the crossroads with the condition of the object are the instances of a "space within space," which can be exemplified by Mario Ceroli's *Gabbia* or by Luciano Fabro's *In-cubo (to Carla Lonzi)*. On the other hand, leaving aside works of singular importance, such as the *Pozzi-specchio* by Pistoletto or *Tube* by Eliseo Mattiacci, one could mention the staging by Tano Festa, *Subito dopo il cielo* (dedicated to Francesco Lo Savio), for its poetic quality. This brief list serves to illustrate the different practices showcased in a project that explored both the

6 An important presence in psychological, sociological and planning studies in that time is the so-called "theory of field," proposed in Italy by Attilio Marcolli. See A. Marcolli, *Teoria del campo* (Florence: Sansoni, 1971).

aforementioned directions, from the tributes to Lucio Fontana and Ettore Colla, which provided the respective points of departure, and somehow emerged clearly in the various texts in the exhibition catalogue.⁷ In some of them, we find an echo of the ideas put forward, on the occasion of the earlier exhibition *Fuoco Immagine Acqua Terra* (L'Attico, Rome, June 1967), by Maurizio Calvesi and Alberto Boatto, and the origin of the definition of “Im-Space” which, a few months later, would be linked to the first appearance of “Arte Povera,” in the exhibition *Arte Povera – Im Spazio*, curated by Germano Celant at the La Bertesca gallery in Genoa (September-October 1967).

What I have said so far may provide a useful background for a work that I perceive as emblematic of an idea of space as a “path,” but with peculiar attention to light as substitute of gaze. This environment appears like a closed room; however, it produces, from the inside, a sense of passage, an immediate relationship between the physical eye and the virtual eye of a source of light that pushes on space as if to open it up. I am referring to the environment created by Grazia Varisco for the Schwarz gallery in Milan in October 1969 (Fig.1). The installation has been recreated on several occasions in recent years (Fig. 2).⁸ The room, conceived by the artist as an environment designed in an extremely articulated way, covers an overall perimeter significantly larger than its actual size, expanding the sensation or perception of time, besides that of space. To make this sensation tangible, the author darkened the space, a frequent solution among the artists

7 See the catalogue of the exhibition which took place in 1967 at Palazzo Trinci in Foligno: U. Apollonio, G.C., Argan, P. Bucarelli, eds., *Lo spazio dell'immagine* (Venice: Alfieri Editori d'Arte, 1967).

8 See the catalogue of the exhibition which took place at Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome from December 14, 2005 to May 21, 2006: M. Margozzi, L. Meloni, F. Lardera, eds., *Gli ambienti del Gruppo T. Le origini dell'arte interattiva* (Roma: Silvana, 2006, exhibition catalogue): 54-55, 32-35. For further information about this and other environments of the group see L. Meloni, *Gli ambienti del Gruppo T* (Roma: Silvana, 2004). More recently, Varisco's environment has been exhibited in *Vertigo: Op Art and a History of Deception 1520-1970*, MUMOK, Wien, 25 May - 26 October, 2019 (the exhibition also travelled to Kunstmuseum, Stuttgart, November 23, 2019 - April 20, 2020), before the retrospective hosted at Palazzo Reale in Milan from June 2 to September 16, 2022; see the catalogue: M. Meneguzzo, ed., *Grazia Varisco: Percorsi Contemporanei 1957-2022* (Milan: Skira, 2022, exhibition catalogue); F. Tedeschi, “Dall'interno all'esterno (e viceversa). Il concetto di spazio 'percorribile' nell'opera di Grazia Varisco,” *ibidem*: 26-29.

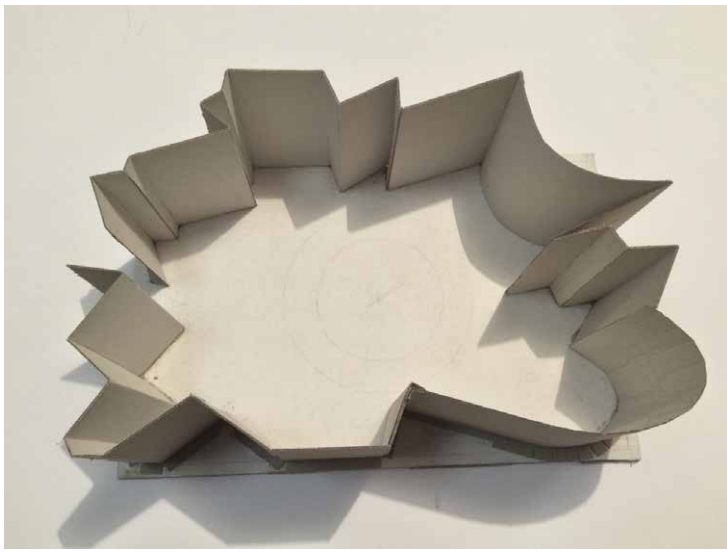


Fig. 1. G. Varisco, model of the *Dilatazione spaziotemporale di un percorso / Spatiotemporal dilatation of a path*, 1969, reconstruction of the environment for the solo exhibition at Galleria Schwarz, Milan, 1969.

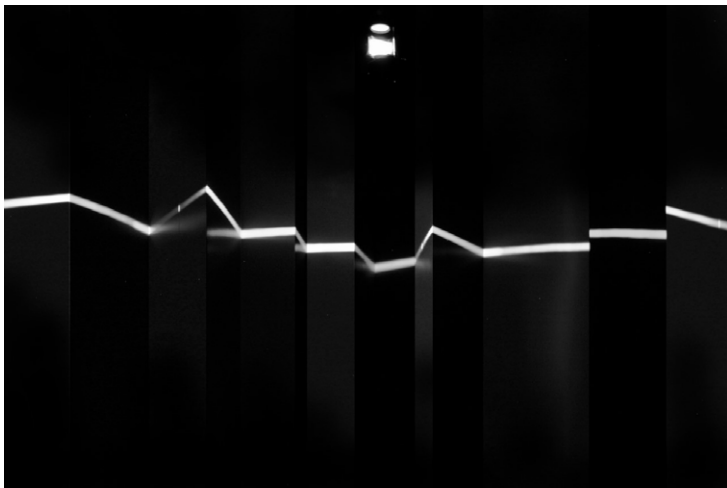


Fig. 2. G. Varisco, reconstruction of the environment *Dilatazione spaziotemporale di un percorso / Spatiotemporal dilatation of a path*, 1969, at the exhibition “Gli ambienti del gruppo T,” Galleria Nazionale d’Arte Moderna, Rome, 2006.

who, following the Fontana’s example, used light as a creative and descriptive element of space. As a matter of fact, Varisco placed a “luminous eye” at the center, which, by means of a mechanical process, rotates progressively, indicating the trajectory of a path that pushed from the inside outwards, generating a visual and physical sensation at the same time. The light replaces, rather than following it, the gaze of the person undertaking the role of “bystander,” to quote Brandi:⁹ i.e. a presence experiencing space as a relationship between being and existing. This, as the artist observes, increases the complexity of an active participation, as well as physical relationship, with the site, plunged as it is into the interiority of darkness: the viewer actually experiences two alternative spaces, that of the eye-line of

⁹ See C. Brandi, *Struttura e architettura* (Turin: Einaudi, 1967) and *Teoria generale della critica* (Turin: Einaudi, 1974).

light and that of the eye-physical presence of the viewer's own body.

Perhaps, the very essence of the work lies precisely in its drive to overcome the constraints of the structure, without actually doing more than absorbing the enchantment of a suspended, outstretched time. The underlying character of the work is then a condition of “path” to be completed according to the twofold participation of an active movement and a virtual one. It should be noted that, about ten days before the inauguration of her solo show at the Schwarz gallery – on which occasion this environment, *Dilatazione spaziotemporale di un percorso / Spatiotemporal dilatation of a path*, was proposed – Grazia Varisco had participated to *Campo Urbano*, an event promoted by Luciano Caramel in Como. Here, she made an intervention in a public space, immortalized by the photographs by Ugo Mulas, who followed and documented the events of that memorable day. On that occasion, Varisco had appropriated a street in the town center, involving a large group of people to help here create a series of walls arranged in a meander, made up of cardboard boxes. By cluttering up the road, the work extended the time necessary to walk through it. This operation was also called *Dilatazione spaziotemporale di un percorso / Spatiotemporal dilatation of a path*, and in this case the perception of the “urban field,” experienced alternatively with amusement or annoyance, resulted in an immediate application of a principle of modification of reality, due to the presence of a structure that affects movement and, as a consequence, the psychological perception of the entire environment. As the artist writes in the short note later published in the catalogue of the Schwarz gallery exhibition, “I see and feel longer. The reactions of impatience or satisfaction change if I try the route again.”¹⁰

10 G. Varisco, “Dilatazione spazio temporale di un percorso” in G. Accame, *Grazia Varisco* (Bergamo: Maredarte, 2001): 102.

As in other environmental works from a time imbued with a strong imagination of the future, the labyrinth condition produced by these two operations can be seen as an experiment on a way of thinking and feeling in relation to objects and space. The echo of this attitude is evident in a series of works produced by the artist in the following years, titled *Random walks by random numbers*. In these screen-printed compositions, the combination of chance and design produce a virtual direction into which the viewers are supposed to get lost, and then rediscover themselves, as Varisco states: “And I play with imagination: I imagine moving robotically, in a defined space with unpredictable steps – or with a pencil on squared paper – letting myself be guided exclusively by the sequence of numbers to which I have previously associated a direction. Chance and design. Not being able to predict my path, I don’t know if my movements will be contained in the space, on the sheet.”¹¹

From the virtual space of painting to the real space of the built environment, from the virtual space of a projection that includes the viewer as a participant and an object, to that of a sheet that records movements, either made or imagined, the creation of an interior from the exterior and the reworking of an outside from the inside are exemplified here through a practice rooted in the drive to explore space, which has guided, up to this point, the experiments of several generations of artists.

11 G. Varisco, “Random Walks – 1972,” in G. Accame, *Grazia Varisco*: 108.

AN-ICONOLOGY
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