

At The Dawn of Light Installations

by Luca Panaro

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The greatness of an artist is recognizable when his work turns into a premonition of what will happen in the future. Many authors worked during the twentieth century, many left a mark for their abilities but only a few proved to be real pioneers. Among these Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol are frequently and rightly cited as the most influential and imitated by new generations. The former for introducing a revolutionary object (ready-made), the latter for extending this perspective to the technological images spread by mass media. However, if today many artists create visual environments where the audience members can immerse themselves or mingle with the light, Bruno Munari has undoubtedly the merit for it. He is well-known as a designer but little known as an artist. It sounds almost unbelievable that some of his prophetic works have fallen into oblivion for such a long time, superficially investigated by many art critics and scholars especially in Italy, his home town.



polarized projections on the facade of the ducal palace



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Simple works ahead of their time that place Munari among the most relevant artists of the last century. In the US the significance of his research has been appreciated since 1954 when the MoMA of New York hosted the Direct Projections. Italy was immune from the appeal of these materials, except for some rare exhibitions where they appeared as an appendix to the more popular production of objects and to the educational activities of the author.

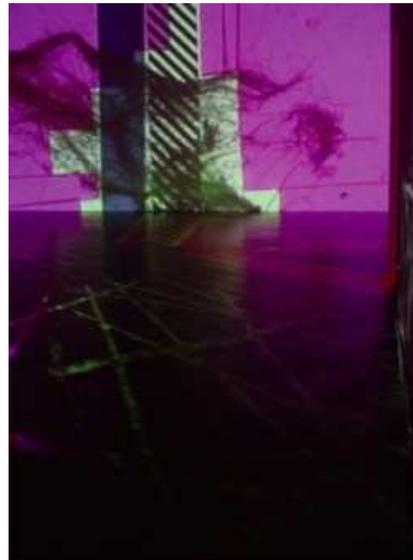
If we think about the fifties, the idea of realizing hundreds of "painting" to project, by placing a dragonfly wing, a feather, some cotton, coloured nets, dried leaves, filaments and plastic material inside common slide frames, is quite unusual. And in those days it is even more atypical for an artist to "paint" space using only a normal projector light which enlarges, deforms and dematerializes a small handmade composition. In addition to that the third dimension is rendered with a polarized filter showing countless three-dimensional shapes included into the image through a simple frontal rotation to the projection slide. Another step forward for that time, perhaps the most revolutionary, is the inclusion of the audience into the work as an integral part of the creative process. This important turning point anticipates the mental and physical experience granted to the observer of any installation today as long as he can move about in interactive spaces.

In 1951 Lucio Fontana also realized a light setting composed of a single neon light, a winding concentric tube, at the Milan Triennial but this work, in spite of its importance, was still bound to a traditional concept of vision. On the contrary in Munari's Projections the viewer passes from the contemplation of an object to action turning into a participant as he is not only asked to observe but also to act, moving in a light environment that, despite its visual peculiarity, encompasses a direct involvement of the body. The audience becomes integral part of the work as it happens at the end of the sixties in James Turrell and Franco Vaccari's environments, two artists very different from each

other but, like Munari, both capable to face without problems the essence of technology because their experience makes them aware of changes occurring in sensorial perception.

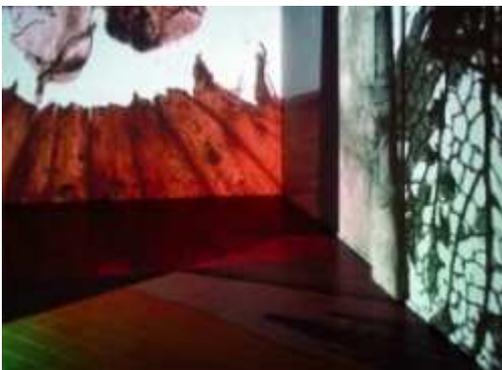


lucio fontana 1951 at the triennale



bruno munari direct projection 1950

In 1966 Turrell exhibited the first Cross Corner Projections: perforated metal sheets as large as a slide that were projected with a specific point of view giving the impression of a bright solid which the audience can go through. In 1969 Vaccari started his Real-time Exposures that led him to realize Codemondo in 1980: an anamorphic environment based on the distortion of a projected image and on the aberration of sounds produced by the visitors themselves. These authors' works tend to originate a sublime experience where the viewer is overcome by apparitions in space and time.



bruno munari direct projection 1950

Thanks to Munari, from that time onwards the projected image becomes a common format in contemporary art and other artists open the door to include the conditions of both the environment and the subject who watches. Video art and installation carry on with this attitude towards the audience as an active element in time and space, continuously moving inside the limits of the work. Encouraged by progress in projection instruments, artists like Bill Viola and Gary Hill immerse the audience in dark spaces interrupted by light projections that fill the entire display architecture where acoustic effects and moving images can combine to involve the viewers from a physical, psychological and emotional point of view. Through their fascinating brightness these huge projections turn from the "minimal" or "formless" sign of previous years to the spectacular image already tested by film industry.

For his innovative use of contemporary means together with a scientific approach, open to the general public too, and for his particular attention to shapes and colours, Olafur Eliasson is probably

the present-day artist closer to Bruno Munari's research in Polarized Light Projections. All Eliasson's works have to do with light but also with other natural elements like lava, fire, ice and wind. In 1993 he created a rainbow inside an art gallery projecting rays of light through fine water vapour (Beauty). Ten years later in the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern in London he exhibited an installation visited by 2 million people consisting of a massive fusion of vapour, mirrors and 200 light bulbs that create the illusion of a shining sun (The Weather Project).

As the art of today is almost impalpable, many artists deprive their works of that materiality typical of painting, sculpture and objects; we see an increasing amount of dematerialized images, light based, such as those produced by photography, cinema, tv, video, computer or simply by light. Sometimes it all is mixed together to originate stunning environments, kaleidoscopic and multimedia installations including the viewer whose skin is part of the work and whose mind is surprised by a credible apparition. This scenario was prefigured in the fifties by Bruno Munari; today the Direct Projections and Polarized Light Projections rebuilt on the original version prove the importance of an artist in some respects still underestimated.

[Luca Panaro 2008]