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ANCIENT BUILDINGS AS CONTEMPORARINESS
VENUES THANKS TO LIGHT ART: **GISELLA GELLINI**
TELLS ABOUT HER KNOWLEDGE WITH EXAMPLES
OF RECENT EVENTS AND INSTALLATIONS
THAT INVOLVED HISTORICAL ARCHITECTURES

by Clara Lovisetti

As curator, among the others, of the *Light Art from Italy* and *JETZ Archäologische Schatten* exhibitions, both held at the Frankfurt' Archaeological Museum, Gisella Gellini may boast a great experience in the field of Light Art in ancient buildings. These two exhibitions exemplify two different approaches to the contemporary alongside antique, such as is the case of the same location where they took place, since the building housing the museum is a former Gothic church with the addition of a modern style wing.

At the first exhibition nine artists offered through their light's works different interpretations of the Gothic building and the displayed antique findings. As emblematic examples that summarises the exhibition's concept, I may quote Paolo

Calafiore' *Anulus* made with LEDs and Pietro Pirelli' *Arpa Laser*, that crossed the central nave with light and sound. To the other event only one artist was called, Fabrizio Corneli, that used the architecture's surfaces and spaces for creating his plays of shadows and lights, by means of aluminium shapes and halogen bulbs.
(Images of both exhibition can be viewed on the website www.luces.it)

After all, the love of Gisella Gellini for Light Art derives from her visit to Villa Panza di Biumo, whose owner, the great collector Giuseppe Panza, commissioned site specific works to a group of American artists, thus turning the wing of his Villa known as Rustici into a permanent exhibition of environmental art of light art installations by Dan Flavin, Robert Irwin, James Turrell, Maria Nordman.

Compared to other historical mansions turned museums, what makes Villa Panza so special?

As once told me Giuseppina Panza, daughter of the late collector, "... the one through the Rustici wing is a journey that is to be experienced and calmly savoured, giving free reins to feelings and emotions. It is not suited to a haste view, with no lingering, everything must be lived. But emotions don't stop there, they go on through the monochromes my father lately added, since light is colour and colour is light, thus one is the consequence of the other."

Overleaf: Doug Wheeler, *D-N SF 12 PG VI 14*, 2012 ganzfeld, site specific version for *The Illusion of Light*, Palazzo Grassi, Venice, 2014. Reinforced glass fibres structure, titanium dioxide paint, LED lights, DMX control system.

Photo: Fulvio Orsenigo ©2014 Doug Wheeler; courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London.

1 James Turrell: *Shanta (Blue)*, 1967, installation showed at *AISTHESIS - At the Origins of Sensations*, Villa Panza, Varese, 2013-2014.

Photo: courtesy of the Artist/FAI Villa Panza.

Add the fact that, according to an apparently random scheme, it expresses the wish to explain how it is possible not only to mix different forms of art, but also to live in places where contemporary art is a path for a personal research of spirituality and giving ear to oneself. And this is true for both the permanent setting up and the temporary shows, such as the one currently on view, *AISTHESIS - At the Origins of Sensations*, that I visited recently.

Could you tell us something about it?

First of all, the extraordinary fact that, after forty years, Robert Irwin and James Turrell, great artists who are leading figures of the spatial and perception art, have





- 2 James Turrell: *Sight Unseen*, 2013, the new ganzfeld for *AISTHESIS - At the Origins of Sensations*, Villa Panza, 2013-2014.

Photo: courtesy of the Artist/FAI Villa Panza.

designed new installations for such an extraordinary place, the unique Italian museum to hold already site specific works of both artists, made with natural light, such as *Varese Portal Room*, *Varese Scrim*, *Varese Window Room* (1973) by Robert Irwin and *Lunette*, *Sky Space 1* and *Virga* (1974) by James Turrell.

They are all works that marked permanently the relationship between the use of architecture and the creations of new visual experiences, deriving from the technical and scientific knowledge of these two artists, of the effects that certain phenomena have on our brain.

As one may guess yet from the headline, but above all from the sub-headline, it's an exhibition not only to be

viewed but also to be "felt" since it offers a unique perceptive experience, where the boundaries between space and light blur and cancel each other...

Giuseppe Panza told me once, for an interview issued on the Flare magazine, *"For me, it was always very important to understand the quality of the space in full, because it's important to understand what a light work needs. It's a work that "dialogues" with space, that needs a void around it (this is especially true of Flavin and all of these works), because space integrates and complements the work of art. If this does not happen, the work cannot even be seen; because the light must radiate and be reflected by the walls. It must create an environment for itself and influence the psychology and sensitivity of the spectator: if this does not happen, the fundamental value of this art is lost."*

The exhibition path features nineteen works including projections, installations and sensorial spaces at the first floor of the Villa. In addition to these, there are two new huge installations at the ground floor, within the stables area.

- 3 Robert Irwin: *Varese Scrim*, 2013,
site specific installation for
AISTHESIS - At the Origins of Sensations,
Villa Panza, Varese, 2013-2014.

Photo: © Philipp Scholz Rittermann/
FAI Villa Panza.

Robert Irwin offers a new versions of *Varese Scrim*, a space shaped by natural light and a thin veil of white fabric, that draws geometrically and rhythmically a maze-like route, devised to evoke the endless man's quest for a path and inner search.

On the other hand, *Sight Unseen* is the new ganzfeld by James Turrell, achieved by means of LED lights controlled by a sophisticated software and a special surface finishing. As landscape with no horizon, a "total field" where the





- 4 Doug Wheeler: *D-N SF 12 PG VI*, ganzfeld for *The Illusion of Light* exhibition, Palazzo Grassi, Venice, 2014.

Photo: Fulvio Orsenigo ©2014 Doug Wheeler; courtesy David Zwirner, New York/London.

viewer, enveloped by a sort of mist that continually changes its colour, loses all the reference points and plunges into a multisensorial experience that almost alienates him from the physical dimension, reaching the limits of the mental dematerialisation. Both installations require rather the active involvement of the viewer's senses, more than a mere action of the physical body, thus allowing an experience "at the origin of sensations".

Coming back to our topics concerning historical architectures, what about the current exhibition at Venice's Palazzo Grassi?

That's another example of how contemporary art, Light Art in our case, is at ease in historical palaces, such as Palazzo

Grassi. Here too, the current exhibition *The Illusion of Light* starts right away to deal with that topics by means of another ganzfeld, , *D-N SF 12 PG VI* by Doug Wheeler, this one too made with LED lights, that welcomes the visitor with a white luminous area for entering him into a space with no temporal-spatial references, almost in a sunyata dimension where the "I" doesn't exist anymore and one is only "present".

The arcade that border the inner courtyard housing the installation turns into an enigmatic architectural feature that doesn't define the space but acts almost as a door towards other dimensions. An installation that exemplifies quite well the title of the exhibition that deals with light as creator of illusory spaces and perceptions.

One could say that it looks like what Alessandro Lupi has done for his *Light Curve* installation at Palazzo Bembo, that derives from the artist's experiments based on from his reflection about "what is the perspective and how much within perception we are continually facing illusions linked to prospectical flattening and spatial distortions".



- 5 Daniel Buren: *4 Colours at 3 Metres High*, outdoor installation, for *Genius Loci* exhibition, Palazzo Cavalli Franchetti, Venice, collateral event of the Biennale of Architecture 2014.
Wood stand with transparent acrylic sheets, colour adhesive filters, white paint, black self-adhesive vinyl.

Photo: Ken Adlar.

- 6 Alessandro Lupi: *Light Curve*, site specific installation for the *Light Space Existence* exhibition, Palazzo Bembo, Venice, collateral event of the Biennale of Architecture 2014.

Photo: courtesy of the Artist.



As the same Alessandro Lupi explained me, when I met him at the opening of the exhibition, *"... I was given a predetermined location: corridor and a theme: Time, Space, Existence. In this case the corridor was irregular in addition, with protruding corners and walls. The work is made with cheap materials - fluorescent polyester threads, Wood lamps - all devised to create a luminous, immersive, subjective rhythm. At first sight the work, due to the reply of the frames,*

looks like a mirror where one is not able to enter. Then the viewer's eye becomes accustomed and he realises that he can step in. All the threads are perfectly aligned, but the way they are placed creates, by means of the perspective flattening, the illusion of a spatial deformation, the perception of a curve that increases during the experience and let us understand how many are the prefabricated elements linked to the reality's perception experience."

- 7 Julio Le Parc: *Continuel Lumière Cylindre*, 1962-2012, showed at *The Illusion of Light*, Palazzo Grassi, Venice, 2014, courtesy of the Artist and Bugada & Cargnel, Paris. Pinault Collection.

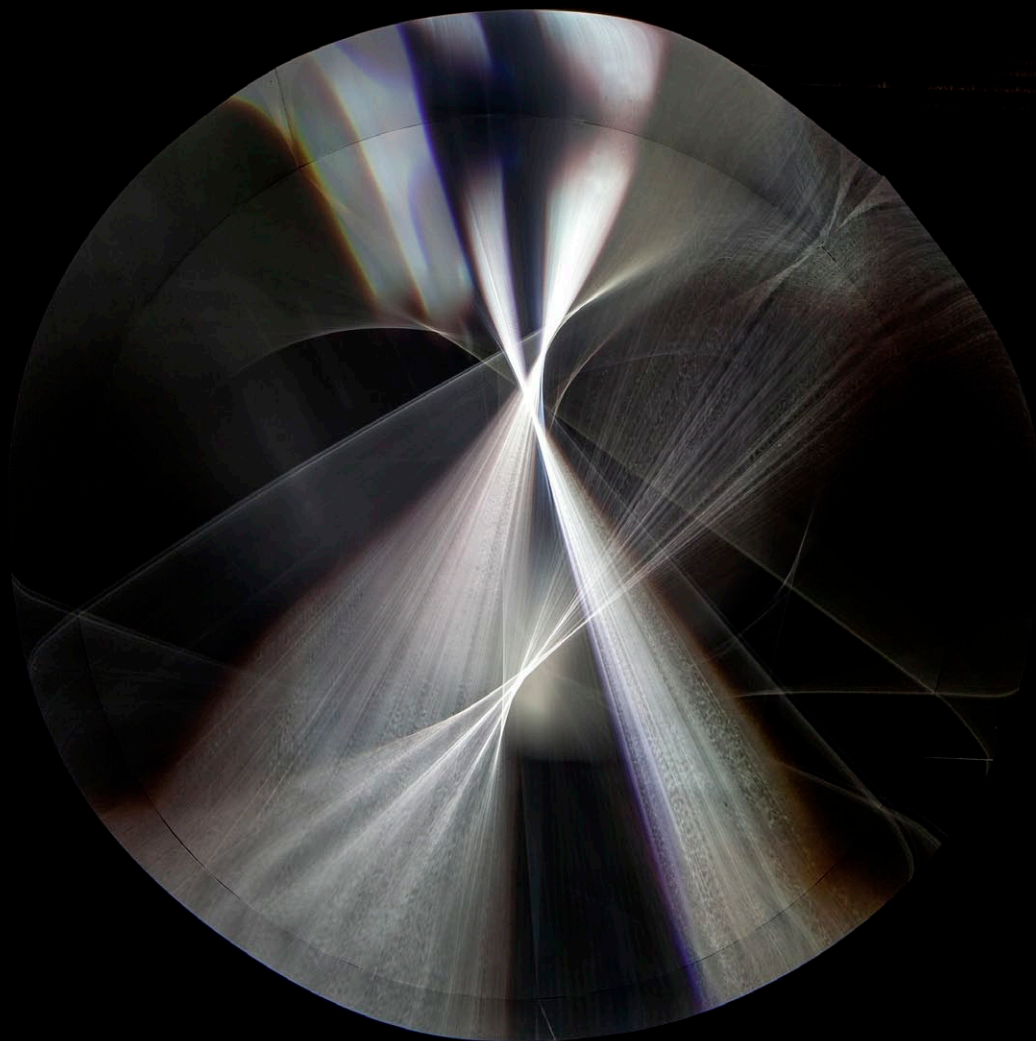
Photo: ©Palazzo Grassi, ORCH orsenigo_chemollo,
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GISELLA GELLINI:

Gisella Gellini, Architect, is researcher in the field of the light's culture, with a particular reference to Light Art, she obtained the co-operation and consultancy of the great art collector Giuseppe Panza di Biumo. In 2009 she was curator of the exhibition *Dan Flavin in the Panza Collection*, set up at the Berardo Museum, Lisboa and of the Nicola Evangelisti' installation *Light Blade*, Villa Reale, Milan. In 2010 she was the curator of *Luces. Light Art from Italy*, a collective exhibition of Italian light's artists and in 2012 of the exhibition *JETZT Archäologische Schatten* by Fabrizio Corneli, both set up at the Archaeological Museum of Frankfurt. She is currently holding a Light Art and Design of Light course at the School of Design - Milan's Polytechnic.

In all of these installations, the artist resorts to light in order to offer us a new perceived dimension of an indoor space. What other ways of interacting with architecture have you seen recently, especially when you visited the Biennale of Architecture and its collateral events?

Among the other works on view at Palazzo Grassi, I'd like to quote *Continuel Lumière Cylindre* by Julio Le Parc, an artist from Argentina and one of the outstanding figures of the kinetic and optical art during the Sixties. In this case as well it is provided a full-immersion aesthetic experience, through the huge walled disc of the installation, placed in a pitch-black room. The visitor is grabbed by the luminous rays that cross the metal disc surface according to a random order and with an ever changing sequence. As a result, two viewers standing in front of the same play of light will never perceive the work





- 8 Philippe Parreno: *Marquee*, 2013, outdoor installation for *Prima Materia*, Punta della Dogana, Venice, 2013-2014. Stainless steel frame, plexiglas®, incandescence lamps, pyrex glass.

Photo: ©Palazzo Grassi,
ORCH orsenigo_chemollo

in the same manner. It is a continually evolving work that creates unpredictable plays of light.

Then one could compare the two approaches, with regards to the concept, of the French artists Philippe Parreno and Daniel Buren. Parreno draws his inspiration from many different sources, going from internet to philosophy, from fairy tales to science fiction, from radio to the occult. His *Marquee*, especially made for the *Prima Materia* exhibition, is overhanging the entrance of the Punta della Dogana museum. Ironic canopy, it evokes a night-club or disco atmosphere and means to be a

reference for the increasing showbiz character of the art.

4 Colours at 3 Metres High is the work by Daniel Buren, a stained acrylic sheet pergola placed outside Palazzo Franchetti for the Genius Loci exhibition.

By entering it and walking, the viewer is plunged into a colour-filled atmosphere. Staying outside, one may enjoy the chromatic effects on the facade of the palace behind, when the sun rays fall on it at a certain angle. Here again a work that involves the viewer into a sensorial experience, which is where the fascination of Light Art lies.

On one hand, Buren plays with natural light, the sun motion and the visual changing effects for providing a new perception of the built object, of the surrounding world. Other artists, instead, interact with the “skin” of the buildings turning it into a canvas or, better, a giant screen for their projections.

An approach more linked to the stage setting...

- 9 Sebastiano Romano: *Il Castello di carta e la Bella Epoque*, light, video and sound installation, Cortile della Rocchetta, Castello Sforzesco, Milan, June 2014.
Projections of images of Milan in the present day.

Photo: Piero Gatti.



Let's take for example the latest installation by Sebastiano Romano, *Il Castello di carta e la Bella Epoque* (*The Paper Castle and the Belle Epoque*), at the Milan's Castello Sforzesco. Seemingly easy to understand and enjoy, in reality this installation bears a meaning that goes beyond the spectacular display of a projection and help us to discover the culture concealed by the Castello walls. First of all, I have to say that the installation was devised for promoting the Expo, due to be held in Milan next year. Thus the special effects, such as the coloured beams of light and the sponsor logos on the main facade were a must. Inside, a luminous carpet in Piazza delle Armi marked the route towards Cortile della Rocchetta, the heart of this installation-performance, which consisted of a sequence of projections on the walls and arcade of the Cortile that illustrated the history of Milan backwards from our days to 1906, when the first Expo took place in Milan.

As iconographic source the artist drew from the Civica Raccolta di Stampe Bertarelli, a collection of prints whose seat is located within the same Castello Sforzesco. A collection which is one the greatest of its kind but in spite of that almost unknown by the general public. One of the many hidden treasures of Milan.

CLARA LOVISETTI:

Clara Lovisetti, journalist, boasts a twenty year experience in the lighting sector as deputy editor of a series of lighting magazines with international circulation.

Together with Gisella Gellini, curator, she organised the exhibitions *Luces - Light Art from Italy* (2010) and *JETZT Archäologische Schatten* (2012), both held at the Archaeological Museum of Frankfurt within the Luminale light's festival.