ANOTHER VISION

GROUPE DE RECHERCHE D’ART VISUEL 1960 - 1968

HORACIO GARCIA ROSSI
JULIO LE PARC
FRANÇOIS MORELLET
FRANCISCO SOBRINO
JÔEL STEIN
JEAN-PIERRE YVARAL
The Visual Art Research Group (GRAV) emerged in Paris in 1960, adding itself to a series of movements at the time that were seeking art’s autonomy based on a closer relationship between the artist and society. GRAV’s peculiarity was that its point of departure was not only sociological but also visual. As its name indicates, the group undertook a series of experiments, practical investigations and collective activities in order to understand art as a phenomenon that transcends the established system and whose principal agent is the ordinary spectator.

From the first show GRAV hosted in their own studio to the many happenings they staged in the street, the group demystified the role of artists and always tried to open up the work in order to bridge the gap between art and public. Light, movement and space—key elements in the development of kinetic art—were the elements that allowed perception to be the first step in generating this connection.

The exhibition Another Vision: Groupe de Recherche d’Art Visuel, 1960-1968 is a reinterpretation of the Museo Tamayo collection, which contains works by three members of GRAV: Julio Le Parc, Francisco Sobrino and Jean-Pierre Yvaral. By displaying the six pieces in the collection and reconstructing historic pieces and archival material, the show tries to chronicle the methods and strategies this group used.

Some of the experiments that GRAV did in the streets of Paris and at various institutions—specifically the works Une journée dans la rue (A Day in the Street, 1966) and Salle de Jeux (Playroom, 1963-1968)—are transposed to the space of the Tamayo’s sculpture patio so that their transcendence can be re-experienced.

It is prohibited not to participate.
It is prohibited not to touch.
Another Vision: Instability

I think we are on the verge of a revolution in the arts that is as great as the revolution that has been taking place in the sciences. That is why it seems to me that reason and the spirit of systematic research have to replace individualistic intuition and expression.

François Morellet, *Nouvelle Tendance* catalogue, 1961

In the late 1950s, Julio Le Parc, Francisco Sobrino and Horacio Garcia Rossi traveled from Argentina to Paris hoping to broaden their knowledge of the art of their time. Upon their arrival, they met Hungarian artist Victor Vasarely, who in turn introduced them to François Morellet, Jöel Stein and Jean-Pierre Yvaral (Vasarely’s son) in his studio. After meeting several times, the six young artists decided to rent a unit on Beautreillis Street and work together, forming the Groupe de Recherche d’Art Visuel (GRAV). In their first exhibition at the studio, they presented the charter legally founding the collective (1960); later, in texts and manifestos, they stated the importance of “demystifying” art through visual phenomena and by encouraging viewers’ participation.

During this time, the GRAV’s members found other collectives that had the same interests, especially in Italy—Grupo N in Padua and Grupo T in Milan—and in Yugoslavia, with art critic Matko Meštrović. With them, they formed the international movement *Nouvelle Tendance*, exchanging ideas about art and processes based on movement, light and mechanics. Moreover, GRAV members turned to gallerist Denise René, one of the few promoters of the then-incipient kinetic art movement; she had earlier presented the historic exhibition *Le Mouvement* (1955) and

soon came to represent the group, showing them at her gallery for the first time in 1961.

In addition to the experience of working collectively, each GRAV artist developed an individual body of work based on a system using different materials like Plexiglas, fluorescent and incandescent lights, plastic and motors, with three-dimensional structures that made the viewer perceive a kind of visual and physical instability. The works were based on the repetition of forms and structures with certain predetermined variables: the goal was to eliminate the idea that art was unique or original, replacing it with the notion of art as something repeatable, and reproducible.

With the passing of time, the more the discourses of the group’s members became controversial as they spoke out against art that they considered exhausted, the more they got invited to participate in official or institutional events; the idea of collectivity and autonomy was gradually dissolved as the individual artists became better known. After eight years of activity, the GRAV members signed a document to dissolve their collective (1968).
The life of big cities could be massively bombarded—not with bombs, but rather with new situations, requiring the participation of and a response from their inhabitants.

We do not think our attempt suffices to break with the routine of a weekday in Paris. It can only be considered a mere shift of situation. But in spite of its limited scope, it will help us come into contact with an unprepared public. We see it as an attempt to overcome the traditional relationship between the artwork and the public.

On April 19, 1966, GRAV members went out to the streets of Paris to create various artistic situations that surprised passersby. An itinerary had been drawn out and activities were listed on a program: they included everything from distributing balloons and needles to walking on unstable structures, moving through kinetic artworks and looking through a kaleidoscope. Moreover, the artists distributed questionnaires that compiled public opinions about the current role of modern art as opposed to participative art.

That day of events was very important to the group’s later work: on the one hand, they had put into practice the notion of art as a social collectivity, and on the other, they had experimented with the way in which spectators related to art outside of the institutional framework. The public, which was unprepared to see art, was confronted with the idea of instability that Julio Le Parc later defined in relation to the unstable idea of reality.
Salle de Jeux (Playroom)

This site can have the character and appearance of an experimental art gallery, a stage, a television set, a conference room, a studio, a school, etc., but it will not have any of these specific characteristics. Here there will be no pictures hung on the walls or actors or passive spectators, or teachers and students, only one or two things and people with time to spare.

Proposal for a Site of Activation
Groupe de Recherche d’Art Visuel, 1963

From the outset, GRAV expressed its interest in demystifying art and undertaking activities that emphasized the relationship between the artist and society. In 1963, the group published the text Proposal for a Site of Activation, in which they argued that traditional art was subject to the condition that work be taken in passively by spectators. Instead of this, the artists proposed activities and processes that entailed a “climate of communication and interaction.”

Later in 1963, GRAV presented its first Labyrinth at the 3rd Paris Biennale under the topic of “Instability.” It was an enclosed rectangle divided into various rooms containing moving, light-emitting objects, which were designed to be modified, manipulated and activated by the public.

The Labyrinth was the point of departure for other collective experiments like the Playroom, which was shown at the following Paris Biennale in 1965. Each artist designed mechanisms that had to be activated by the public; here, the goal was not to have any pre-established rules, so the experience would be different each time.

With motors that generated unexpected effects, mechanical structures with unstable movements and manual contraptions to play with, each spectator had a different experience of the work, without being conditioned by instructions.

The artists of GRAV

According to Frank Popper, French art historian and specialist in Kinetic Art:

We could retrace the evolution of Horacio Garcia Rossi’s working methods though his exploration of all the technical, scientific, perceptual and material possibilities provided by luminous and chromatic phenomena… His propositions have always testified to his fundamental concern with instability and immaterial realism.

Francisco Sobrino began by giving priority to the surface, before producing his Plexiglas cubes and other deconstructible transparent objects, his later concern to incorporate instability helped him find ways of using moving light.

[François] Morellet began experimenting with the rhythmic possibilities of direct light as early as 1961. His superpositions and rhythmic arrangements of light bulbs and neon tubes created a powerful impression, a real visual shock effect that roused the viewer from his traditional apathy.

The logical progression of his work took him to “sequence-surfaces” to reliefs, from the random movement of his mobiles-continuels to his continues-lumière, from reliefs which required the spectator to move to elements to be manipulated… This point that Le Parc never abandoned was collective creation. Indeed, apart from its purely aesthetic applications, [the artwork] was extended and adapted to a variety of situations, most of them political and social.

Joël Stein, after working and “permutations” of forms and colours in three-dimensional combinations and layerings, he began to explore the relations between different elements in movement, suspended objects and the reflection of light. The dimension of play was perhaps more important for Stein than for other members of the Group.

The works of Jean-Pierre Yvaral are above all the result of his investigation of visual phenomena. Yvaral plays on layering, displacement and acceleration as well as ludic elements, not to mention the visual effects of transparency, structure, and volume. [Yvaral] had taken an interest in optical research and science as a model for artistic creation.


Biographies

Horacio Garcia Rossi
(Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1929 - Paris, France, 2012)

Garcia Rossi studied at the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes of Buenos Aires from 1950 to 1957, where he met Julio Le Parc and Francisco Sobrino. In his early work, he experimented with two-dimensional compositions in black and white. In 1959, he traveled to Paris where he began working with multiplying the number of shapes in his compositions and juxtaposing colors and light; this eventually led him to make a series of light installations known as Boîtes à Lumière Instable (Unstable Light Boxes). As a member of GRAV, Garcia Rossi was responsible for pieces that could be manipulated by the spectator, including the Cylindres en Rotation (Rotating Cylinders) series. After GRAV broke up, he became interested in semiotics while he continued his research into the interaction between light and color.

Julio Le Parc
(Mendoza, Argentina, 1928)

Le Parc studied at the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires where he met Francisco Sobrino, with whom he traveled to Paris in 1958. In 1959 he began working on abstract geometric paintings based on predetermined systems, first in black and white and then in color. As a member of GRAV he examined movement and light in three-dimensional space, which led to his first Continuel Mobiles (Continual Mobiles). He then worked with moving, projected or reflected lights and with the movement of spectators involving their active participation in pieces inside play-rooms and mazes.

In 1966 he was awarded the International First Prize for Painting at the Venice Biennale, which garnered him greater international renown. He was thrown out of France for five months in 1968 for having participated in political movements. Beginning in the mid-1970s, he worked on his Modulations in gray-scale and later in color. His work has been featured in numerous shows at important museums in Havana, Düsseldorf, Montevideo, Caracas, Asunción, Mexico City, Stockholm, Berlin, Madrid, Barcelona, Santiago de Chile, and Porto Alegre. He lives and works in Paris.
Joël Stein  
(Saint Martin Boulogne, 1925 - Paris, France, 2012)

Stein studied at the École des Beaux-Arts de Paris and at the Atelier Fernand Léger as of 1946. In 1956 he began working on pieces based on geometric principles, and by 1959, he presented his first reliefs that were meant to be manipulated by viewers. As a GRAV member, he experimented with the chromatic polarization of light, beginning in 1962, which led him to make a series of light boxes entitled Polascopes.

With Pierre Schaeffer he published Jeux de Trames (Play of Screens) about the transition that the object undergoes in the visual field from virtual movement to real, interactive movement. Based on this research he created the series Kaléidoscopes, Trièdres, Tourne-disques (Turntable), and, for the GRAV's Labyrinthe of 1963, lamps that could be manipulated. In 1968, he started using colored lasers. His most recent pieces are sundial-shaped installations that play with the interaction of lights and shadows in movement.

Jean-Pierre Vasarely - Yvaral  
(Paris, France 1934 - 2002)

The son of Hungarian painter Victor Vasarely, Yvaral studied graphic design and advertising at the École des Arts Appliqués in Paris. In 1954 he began experimenting with geometric abstractions depicting ways in which the world is organized visually, playing with disturbances in physiological and cognitive phenomena. As a member of GRAV, Yvaral encouraged viewers to manipulate objects, such as his Disques à Manipuler (Discs to Be Manipulated), in order to introduce the notion of space and time through the viewers' movement. In 1966 he had his first solo show at the Howard Wise Gallery in New York. As of 1968 he began to work on paintings and silkscreens juxtaposing bright colors and geometric compositions that suggest movement, while he also worked in industrial design and decoration.

François Morellet  
(Cholet, France, 1926)

The self-taught Morellet began painting in 1946 while studying at the École des Langues Orientales. As of 1950 he focused largely on abstraction, reaching a maximum complexity of style between 1956 and 1960. As a member of GRAV, he was interested in eliminating any trace of the artist’s individuality from the artwork. Beginning in 1961, he created a series of silkscreens, each composed of 40,000 squares and two randomly distributed colors. This was followed in 1962 by his first aluminum spheres. Beginning in 1963 he worked on a series of pieces with neon lights that turned on and off rhythmically, and that could in some cases be activated by spectators. As of 1968, Morellet made various series such as Désintégrations architecturales (Architectural Disintegrations), which played with space through geometric shapes and structures, and Tableaux destabilisés (Destabilized Canvases), which examined the line and its interaction with the space in which it exists. Morellet lives and works in Paris and Cholet.

Francisco Sobrino  
(Guadalajara, Spain, 1932)

Sobrino attended the Escuela de Artes de Madrid in 1946 and then traveled to Argentina. At the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires he met Julio Le Parc and Horacio Garcia Rossi. In 1958 he settled in Paris with Le Parc. There, he began to work on reliefs made of superimposed, two-dimensional geometric shapes, organized systematically and progressively, made of black, white or colored Plexiglas. Beginning in 1961, as a member of GRAV, he produced the series Espaces Indéfinis (Indefinite Spaces) and Structures permutationnelles (Permutational Structures), which were pieces in Plexiglas and aluminum that incorporated the use of light. Sobrino’s first solo show took place at the Galerie Ad Libitum in Antwerp in 1964. He then continued to examine the use of movement in his works, and by the 1980s, he began a series of large-format pieces in public spaces that established a dialogue with the architecture in their surroundings. He lives and works in Paris.

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