



# LUCIO FONTANA

Origins and Imagination

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## Origins and Imagination

Edited by

Silvia Ardemagni, Luca Massimo Barbero, Maria Villa

Proceedings of the International Study Conference

*Lucio Fontana. Origins and Imagination*

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Fondazione Giorgio Cini

With this publication the Institute of Art History of the Fondazione Giorgio Cini renews its vocation, which I would define karstic, to accompany the central role of Venetian art and the historical fonds that preserve its memory with research into the contemporary, capable of reading the twentieth century on the basis of precise philological tools, archives, documents, and intergenerational discussions that have always belonged to its tradition.

As early as 1954, with the conference *Arte figurativa e arte astratta*, the nascent Institute placed contemporary art at the heart of its debate, turning it into a living workshop where art historians and artists—Severini, Venturi, Argan, Prampolini, Vedova, among others—exchanged ideas and points of view. In 2014, sixty years after that founding episode, the Institute reopened that same worksite by holding the study days *Arte figurativa e arte astratta 1954-2014*. The event offered a critical rereading of the topic, thanks also to the acute vision of Enrico Crispolti, whom I wish to pay tribute to as the first, fundamental, and crucial point of reference in the study of Fontana's oeuvre.

Between these two events, in 1972 the *Mostra di disegni e opere grafiche di Lucio Fontana* held on the island of San Giorgio had transferred the critics' attention to the contemporary into a first organic gaze on the laboratory of the artist's sign within the context of the Cini foundation. More recently, in 2022, the inception of the *Lucio Fontana. Periodo argentino: monumenti, progetti e opere* scholarship, in synergy with the eponymous foundation, confirmed the continuity of a solid commitment to support research.

Following this trend is the meeting whose proceedings are published here, born in collaboration with the Fondazione Lucio Fontana and with the support of Intesa Sanpaolo. Scholars from different generations were invited not for the purpose of composing an inventory, but rather in order to design, with a plurality of voices, a legible map of the artist's work and reception, from the years he spent in the Rio de la Plata region to the manifestation of the myth in exhibition form.

The meeting began with an important verification of the imaginary and context of the Fontanian avant-garde. Ester Coen returned to the Futurist roots of the artist's thinking; Nico Stringa compared Arturo

Martini's workshop with Fontana's sculpture, within and beyond tradition; Francesco Tedeschi honed the category of creative abstraction by examining the projects and sculptures from the 1930s; Valerio Terraroli reinterpreted Italian ceramics between the 1930s and 1940s, during which time the material made a leap forward in terms of language; lastly, Giovanni Bianchi, reconstructed Venetian Spatialism, from the "call of the shadow" in Deluigi to the dialogue with the creator of *Concetti spaziali*.

This was followed by a section dedicated to "Fontanian places," an interweaving of artistic biography and cultural geography. Daniela Alejandra Sbaraglia shed new light on the artist's beginnings, from Rosario to Milan; Lorena Mouguelar recounted the "new sensibility" in Argentine art; Luca Bochicchio transformed the kiln in Albisola into a creative forge and a poetic motif; Sileno Salvagnini traced back over the artist's presence at the Biennales; Giorgina Bertolino—who did not attend the meeting, but whose contribution is published here nonetheless—observed and described the Turin *devenir* in the 1960s.

The third section of the meeting gauged the artist's international success in the 1950s and 1960s. Paolo Campiglio cast light on the role of the mediator played by Charles Damiano between the United Kingdom and the United States; Silvia Bignami reread Paris's "cold shower" between exhibition and criticism; Stefano Turina followed the Japanese thread of a "quiet and fervent revolutionary"; Francesca Pola, whose essay is not included in this publication, reopened the ZERO dossier starting from Leverkusen.

Lastly, an explicitly curatorial session considered the exhibition criteria as fully-fledged critical readings. Luca Pietro Nicoletti rethought *Omaggio a Fontana* in a Crispoltian reading; Francesco Guzzetti discussed the year 1966 and the artist's season in the United States; Choghakate Kazarian analyzed the workshop of a major retrospective at the MAM in Paris; Marina Pugliese examined the reasons for *Ambienti/Environments*, held at HangarBicocca between 2017 and 2018; Cristina Beltrami reread *Lucio Fontana: Sculpture*, the artist's first show in the United States devoted to the sculptures. Concluding these last two sessions were interventions by Barbara Ferriani who took the discussion back to the matter itself—practices, techniques, conservation—where the mental act is expressed in the materials, while Gianni Caravaggio called into play the idea of *Concetto spaziale* as a device used to perform prime images.

Not simply a mosaic of special fields, but a choral tale that brings together method, history, and the practices of exhibiting. Not a celebratory homage, but a worksite that assembles archive research, historical-critical

reconstructions, questions about conservation and curatorial takes, thus allowing Fontana's oeuvre to converse with interlocutors, documents, and memories, which the Institute of Art History was also able to launch thanks to funding and documents linked to the galleries of Carlo Cardazzo and the constellation of Spatialism.

Providing a shape to the design was a scientific community that accepted the challenge posed by discussions. The plurality of voices does not eradicate the heart of the discourse, i.e., a contemporary artist who has by now become a "classical" one, but is still capable of generating questions, and of inspiring interest in the techniques and the timing of the materials, in the imaginary and in its *mise-en-scène*.

These pages are born from listening and discussion, they garner temporary outcomes and openings, threads to be pulled and maps to be completed, from the philological verification of the contexts to the international junctures still to be charted. I am grateful to the Fondazione Lucio Fontana for the scientific dialogue, Intesa Sanpaolo for its support, and to all those who made these days and their sedimentation into proceedings possible, thus also restoring the connection between the Fondazione Giorgio Cini and Lucio Fontana.

Naturally, I am grateful to the staff at the Institute of Art History for the meticulous organization of the meeting, and to Caterina Vettore, for her patient and painstaking work in editing the volume.

I also wish to express my personal gratitude to Silvia Ardemagni, Maria Villa, and Valeria Morandi.

If the meeting of 1954 taught us that an event such as this one can leave its mark in time, my hope is that this volume serves to treasure it—without ending this story, but, rather, opening up new ones. An indication of the relevance of Lucio Fontana's work, which continues to raise questions for those who study, curate, conserve, and, most importantly, observe.

**Luca Massimo Barbero**  
Director  
Fondazione Giorgio Cini  
Institute of Art History

Nearly sixty years have passed since the death of Lucio Fontana and, in consequence, the birth of the institution that, several years later, would take on the current shape of the Fondazione Lucio Fontana. More than half a century of activities and relationships that, over the course of time, evolved while at the same time taking into account the new generations of audiences and scholars who approached the artist, as well as the expansion of geographical boundaries within an art system that is increasingly vital and challenging.

In light of this history, the many studies that have since become sedimented, the different interpretive lines that have emerged, as well as the new objectives that the Foundation has set for itself in recent years—aimed at strengthening and setting apart its own cultural activity—, a collective debate between art historians, curators, technicians, and artists from different generations and with different approaches, this task seemed to be both necessary and the most suitable way to celebrate this journey. A complex and ambitious project, aiming, on the one hand, to portray the state of the art of Fontana studies, and, on the other, to pave the way for new and unprecedented lines of research from which to observe this artist's oeuvre.

A partner of the project, once again, was the Institute of Art History of the Fondazione Giorgio Cini, with which, already in 2022, the Fondazione Lucio Fontana collaborated for the promotion of a scholarship dedicated to research into and a closer look at the artist's presence in Argentina, his homeland. The meeting, which was also supported by Intesa Sanpaolo's contribution, thus consolidated an institutional and synergic relationship that, for the first time in such an extensive and analytical way, made it possible to reflect on the figure of Fontana. We thus wish to express our heartfelt gratitude to the staff at the Institute, as well as to its director, Professor Luca Massimo Barbero, for many years our Foundation's scientific consultant.

The pages that follow, in a bilingual edition, deliberately not for sale, and with open access, available to as many people as possible with respect for the principle of accessibility, are the result of this commitment. A commitment that has benefited from the indispensable collaboration of the many authors who generously and enthusiastically

chose to accept our invitation. Our gratitude goes to them as well. *Lucio Fontana: Origins and Imagination* is the title we have chosen for this initiative, seeking to set some boundaries to research that is complex, articulated, and hard to circumscribe. The *origins*, from this point of view, refer not only to Fontana's biographical and cultural roots—his training between Italy and Argentina, his relationship with the tradition of sculpture, the legacy of Symbolism, the Baroque, and the historical avant-gardes—but also the generative seeds of his artistic thinking. Exploring the origins—and today's new studies have made a great contribution in this direction—signifies posing questions about the processes that led Fontana to transcend the disciplinary borders between painting, sculpture, and architecture, eventually leading to the elaboration of Spatialism. A retrospective gaze of this kind is not merely chronological, but critical as well: It is an analysis of the theoretical, visual, and material inspirations that made such radical innovation possible. The term *imagination* instead opens a broader and more stratified dimension: that of the images and the visions that nurtured Fontana's creativity within his relationship with specific contexts and subjects as well, in Italy and the world, in Europe, in the United States and, lastly, in Japan. From spaces as infinity, to light, gesture, matter, and the imagination, Fontana is situated in a territory in which science, philosophy, spirituality, and poetic insight are interwoven. This imaginary is not just the result of a formal and revolutionary language, but rather the place in which visions of the world, metaphysical dynamics, and reflections on the future of art in the modern and technological age are condensed.

Room has been allocated, in this deliberately “open” container, to more specific interventions as well as to what may seem like “lateral” contributions, which are necessary and functional today if we are to compose an articulated and living approach to the study of Fontana's oeuvre. Suffice it to recall, for instance, the aspects that concern the material used and the conservation of the works themselves, but also the reflections of almost poetic breadth capable of transforming the enjoyment of the work into a creative act that is continually being discovered. Moreover, one section is dedicated to the exhibitions—selected among the many and viewed as a fully-fledged critical act—that contributed to renewing the perception of the artist, his figure, his role, the specific aspects of his research, to be read in continuity with the oeuvre as a whole. We thus considered “historic” and emblematic cases such as the seminal exhibitions of 1963 and 1971 that affirmed Enrico Crispolti

as the artist's principal and most attentive critic; the first major exhibition held in 1966 in a US museum, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis; but more recent instances as well. Among them: the major retrospective at the MAM in Paris, which deserves undisputed credit in recent times for having renewed that attention to and interest in the centrality of the artist's terracotta production; the exhibition at HangarBicocca, which made it possible to experience for the first time a large group of *Ambienti spaziali*; and, lastly, the exhibition *Lucio Fontana: Sculpture*, the first exhibition in the United States dedicated to Fontana's sculpture and to its significance.

We have clearly proceeded by emblems, fully aware of how impossible it is to reconstruct and recall the creative path of Lucio Fontana, selecting instead moments and themes that would allow for the reassessment of the chronologies and geographic realms in which the artist worked. The result of this is a set of different paths whose direction it is still possible to determine today.

**Silvia Ardemagni**  
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**Maria Villa**  
Vice-President  
Fondazione Lucio Fontana

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## KEY TO THE ABBREVIATIONS

**CRSDA** – Enrico Crispolti, ed.,  
*Lucio Fontana. Catalogo ragionato  
di sculture, dipinti, ambientazioni*,  
2 vols. (Skira, 2006)

**CROC** – Luca Massimo Barbero, ed.,  
*Lucio Fontana. Catalogo ragionato  
delle opere su carta*, 3 vols.  
(Skira, 2013)

**CRSC** – Luca Massimo Barbero, ed.,  
*Lucio Fontana. Catalogo ragionato  
delle sculture ceramiche*, 2 vols.  
(Skira, 2022)

**FLFA** – Fondazione Lucio Fontana  
Archive

## PLEASE NOTE

As concerns the ceramic sculptures  
that are already present in the  
*Catalogo ragionato di sculture, dipinti,  
ambientazioni* (2006), the reference here  
is to the *Catalogo ragionato delle sculture  
ceramiche* (2022), where they have been  
republished with updated entries.

IMAGINATION  
AND CONTEXT OF  
FONTANA'S  
AVANT-GARDE

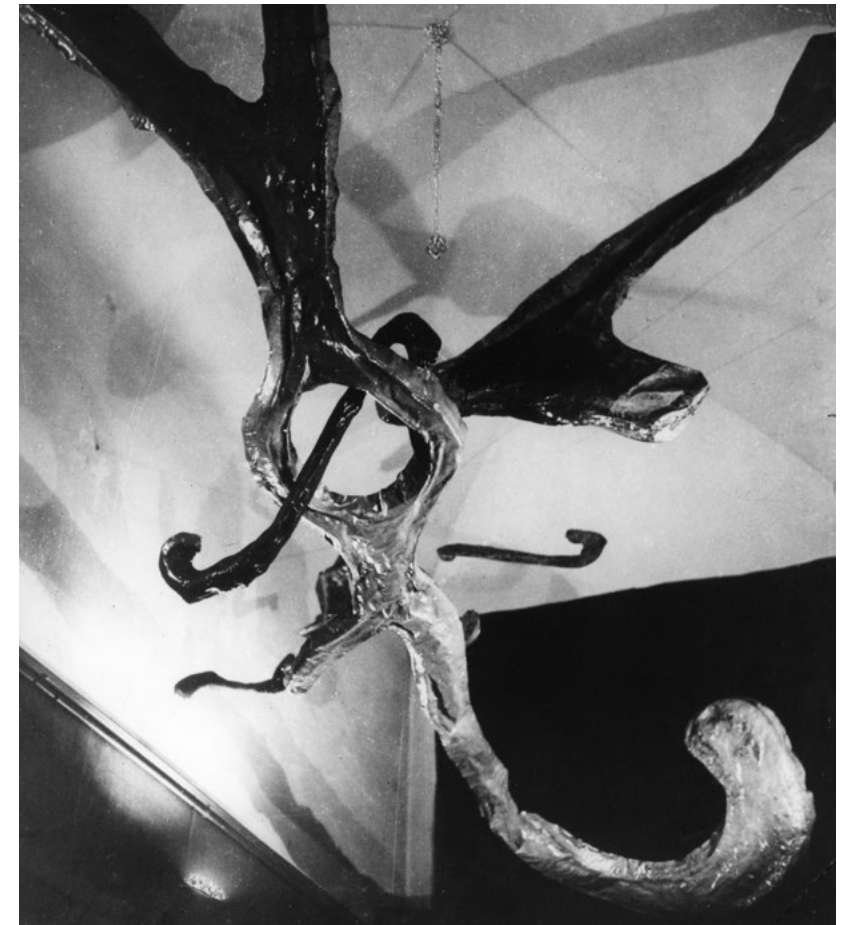
Ester Coen  
Nico Stringa  
Francesco Tedeschi  
Valerio Terraroli  
Giovanni Bianchi

# LUCIO FONTANA. FUTURIST ROOTS

Ester Coen

First and foremost, this study will try to understand and analyze how one of the most penetrating and aggressive artistic avant-gardes, both verbally and stylistically, crept into the imaginary of the young Lucio Fontana to re-emerge transformed in an extraordinarily revolutionary speculative vision. A veritable short circuit, that of the Futurist theories, which broke the logic of the wholeness in the work of an artist who was inclined, from the outset, to experiment with and research changes in form and essence, in parallel with the new scientific truths and discoveries. The time-space cosmos, the fundamentals for the linguistic construction of the Futurist avant-garde, are realities that resurface in Fontana in the new dimension of the void and of the “death of matter” [FIG. 1]. By forcing the concept beyond the concept itself, eventually identifying an intersection between art and philosophy, synergy and formal reduction toward the void—imagined by the Futurists and specifically by Umberto Boccioni—, Fontana set in motion that surprising gesture of shifting from the trade, from the sensitive experience, to pure thought.

FIG. 1  
*Ambiente spaziale a luce  
nera, 1949, Milan, Galleria  
del Naviglio.*



## VISIBLE AND VISIONARY

In an environment in the penumbra, I made a unique luminous element of abstract and evocative form, so that the spatial polemic gets right to the heart of its realization . . . the critics often use the word “spatialist” and, referring to a Picasso show here in Milan,<sup>1</sup> they describe luminous and spatial painting; but the Spatialists have surpassed it: we contribute to the evolution in matter, and Picasso remains the last and romantic painter.<sup>2</sup>

By curious coincidence, the same day that Fontana presented his first *Ambiente spaziale a luce nera*<sup>3</sup> at the Galleria del Naviglio in Milan, three decades of Picasso's works were displayed just a stone's throw away in the same city. And during the same summer a photographer of Albanian origin, Gjon Mili, in the aftermath of his own studies on movement, challenged the famous Spanish artist, in his residence in Provence, in Vallauris, tempting him with encouragement to measure up to a curious experiment with light. By placing two cameras in the dark, one to the side and one in front of the subject, with both shutters open, capable of capturing clear strips of light freely milling around in space, Mili put Picasso to the test. The experience so fascinated Picasso that just fifteen minutes of trial became five whole sessions during which the Spanish artist, using a flashlight and thanks to his untiring energy, created around thirty drawings on a mostly mythological theme. His indomitable curiosity was the impetus he had always had to verify and try out new languages. His encounter with Mili thus took place at the confluence of the boundless vitality they shared. And those photographs, which might seem to have some kind of analogy with what Fontana was doing in those years, are proof that even in similarity, intentions can diverge, if not germinate in the sign of an opposite sensibility. Fontana himself indeed affirmed that “Picasso remains the last and romantic painter.”

That gesture that draws in the atmosphere the profile of a mythological figure, one of the artist's most beloved subjects, is still a pictorial gesture. A free act, but still one strictly linked to the idea of painting [FIG. 2]. Continually in search of new expressions, he deconstructs, fragments, takes apart, subdivides, dismantles, returns to the classical form; he moves away from it, but with the definite idea of working around a subject. A subject to be repre-

1 Pablo Picasso (1910-1939), Milan, Galleria del Milione, February 5-11, 1949.  
2 From a letter written by Lucio Fontana to the pupil sculptor and friend Pablo Edelstein, Albisola, dated March 12,

1949, in Paolo Campiglio, ed., *Lucio Fontana. Lettere 1919-1968* (Skira, 1999), 105-07, letter 97.  
3 CRSDA, cf. no. 48-49 A 2.

FIG. 2  
Gjon Mili, Pablo Picasso  
draws a centaur in the air  
with light, 1949.



sented following cuts, perspectives, angles, approaches, different impressions, but in any case, always around the “subject.”

As Fontana would instead write to Gio Ponti<sup>4</sup> along the lines of short but specific biographical indications:

in January 1949 Galleria del Naviglio hosts the I° Ambiente Spaziale in the world, neither painting nor sculpture, luminous form in space – emotional freedom to the viewer: Art must overcome the crisis in research, Fauvism and Cubism remain schools. The manifesto and Boccioni's development of a bottle in space revolutionize the concept of art: plastic dynamism in space–

4 Campiglio, *Lucio Fontana*, 217-19, letter 261.

It is in Futurism, but above all in Boccioni, that Fontana found the theoretical and visual connection to what he had been seeking for some time. A fragile crack, the one that in the ideation separates the visible from the visionary. Whereas Picasso clung to the world of reality, dissecting and reassembling the specific categories of painting and sculpture—from the figure to the landscape to the still life—Fontana sought to break that logic, to go beyond, to conquer a depth that he imagined in the plastic dimension of Boccioni's sculpture. He imagined the start of a revolutionary thought, the pure desire to represent the energy that joins in a single image all the forces of the universe in a permanent and dynamic motion. A motion that projects it in a dimension that is not only material, but that belongs to a universe which transcends matter itself.

#### ANOTHER UNIVERSE

For his education, at the crossroads between two Latin cultures, between Argentina and Italy, Fontana began his apprenticeship with his father. Shaping, modelling, composing in the manner of a “restless soul,”<sup>5</sup> as he referred to himself, became a practice to be overcome; however, this extraordinary manual skill would always remain a true exercise in the transformation of the material into something aerial, volatile. Matter in which to establish one's own mark, the sign of an identity, and at the same time the virtuoso handing down of impalpable perforations, dilations that are at times too mannered, clumped in a glazed substance, reflecting colors, passages of transparency that the artist would increasingly perfect along with Tullio d'Albisola and his manufactory of “Ceramiche Futuriste.” All the way to the gigantic *Nature*, earth tones and earthy materials, torn as if to seek a fissure toward yet other natures, inaccessible and mysterious galaxies of a universe to be discovered. With his gaze and his mind always turned in the direction of the same Italian avant-garde thanks to which the artist glimpses a truth not contemplated by other innovative and progressive trends. In his interesting conversation with Carla Lonzi, Fontana said:

also from 1931–1932, I was already into sculptures with thread, not volume, I had a discussion with Brancusi and Tristan Tzara . . . I admire Brancusi enormously, but he's always about form, and I told him that there were stupendous things within an epoch, but there was already Boc-

5 Campiglio, *Lucio Fontana*, 54, letter 23, letter written to Giuseppina Campiglio from Paris.

cioni with *Muscoli in movimento* (“Muscles in Motion”), [FIG. 3] which I considered a more important discovery than his own, while he valued material in the sculptural and spatial sense, in Boccioni the matter was secondary, light entered into the material, so no more worrying that it had to be made of marble . . . Because people, maybe today, one day, understand that they are doing these things because Boccioni said “Material is no longer important,” the matter of gathering light inside . . . while on the other hand, before, the material was polished, it was the base for everything, in marble . . . it was all about this obsession with research . . . painting, the colour, the all-black statues, all blue, to actually destroy this material, not in the sense of destruction, but to create a new form . . .<sup>6</sup>



FIG. 3  
Umberto Boccioni, *Muscoli in velocità*, 1912–13.

6 Carla Lonzi, *Self-Portrait*, trans. Allison Grimaldi Donahue (Divided Publishing, 2022), 150–51.

Brancusi and Boccioni, a comparison between sculptors from the same generation focused on imagining and conceiving an anti-monumental, modern glossary, far-removed from the rhetoric, the eloquence of an era. Brancusi was intent on smoothing the stone enough to discover its “minimal” dimension, the imperceptible boundary between being and not being; the sculpture in its more spiritual, ascetic, intellectual, and moral extension, in overturning masses and volumes, compressing and turning onto the ground the concept of infinity, in search of the transcendent, the prime principle of the universe. Whereas Brancusi invaded space with the manifestation of a pure and perfect form, a veritable epiphany of the visible, Boccioni's research progressed at a different level. In tune with the frenetic sequence of the scientific discoveries in those days, his first attempt was to harmonize the dynamism and rigidity of the material in the logic of the emotions and their reverberation. The formal pattern of the swirling lines, the diagonals and the verticals in the tryptich *Stati d'animo*, a diagram of sorts, in sculpture becomes the chance to measure via extensions and adherences a line of continuity between the subject and the environment. Boccioni counterbalances the transcendency of Brancusi's form with the coming apart of the volume and mass under the pressure of the universe's superior physical force.

#### WILDT, FONTANA, MELOTTI

When he returned from Argentina in 1927, Fontana enrolled at the Brera Fine Arts Academy, in Milan, and attended the sculpture course taught by Adolfo Wildt. Wildt's lessons had a profound influence on the young artist, not only from a technical point of view, but above all by making him aware of how light removes weight from the material—whether marble or bronze. Wildt taught him how to carve and refine the concreteness of the figure, how to create contrasts with the whites and the darks, excluding and surpassing subsequent chiaroscuro passages. Crude, consumed, tormented, Wildt's work reflected the bivalent and Janus-faced reality of an Italy whose politics in those years paved the way for new ideals, while at the same time trawling the times of a crisis that was violently reflected on culture. An extraordinary artist, Wildt studies and delves into the past in search of the most sophisticated, most precious, and rarest techniques, particularly ancient ones, of that same past to grasp the remotest secrets of plastic art. This resulted in his mastering the innermost secrets of sculpture [FIGS. 4–5]. To this surprising ability he joined a marked sensibility that brought him closer to the attenuated and rarefied vision of Symbolism and the Mitteleuropean Secession; this can be observed in the exasperated representation of figures who reflect their author's tormented soul. Fontana was particularly affected by this encounter.

FIG. 4  
Adolfo Wildt, *Maschera dell'idiota*, 1918.  
Private collection.

FIG. 5  
Adolfo Wildt, *L'orecchio*, 1919. Private collection.



If not from a theoretical point of view, which he would instead glean from the words and works of Boccioni, in Wildt he captured that dramatic conflict between cold substance and leaden, profound abyss of darkness, between matter and antimatter. In the clash between solids and voids so emphasized, in the roundness of the profiles of the limbs, ones so accurately pondered and shaped, Fontana may have found the suggestion to turn toward those paths and those trajectories in order to move away from the tradition of an idea of sculpture that was by then broken—by Medardo Rosso, even before Boccioni.

Beyond any attempt at Verismo, Wildt's teaching in Brera was of fundamental importance not only for Fontana, but for another great artist as well, Fausto Melotti. Melotti was Fontana's fellow student who at the same exact time developed a sensibility that was conveyed by the master; in it we can see the same original mark, which the artist then developed in pursuit of his own ideals. Both artists appeared on the art scene at the same time: in 1935 at the Galleria del Milione in Milan, first Fontana then Melotti [FIGS. 6–7]. On the cover of each of the exhibition newsletters, the works revealed a true dissimilitude in concreteness as well as in emotivity. Whereas Fontana's small-scale sculptures alluded to abstract and open schematic lines, waving free in the air, or to shaped weightless profiles in the contrasting balancing of whites and blacks, for Melotti a subtle game of wires as if on a musical staff was reminiscent of the close-knit relationship between musical chords and compositions.

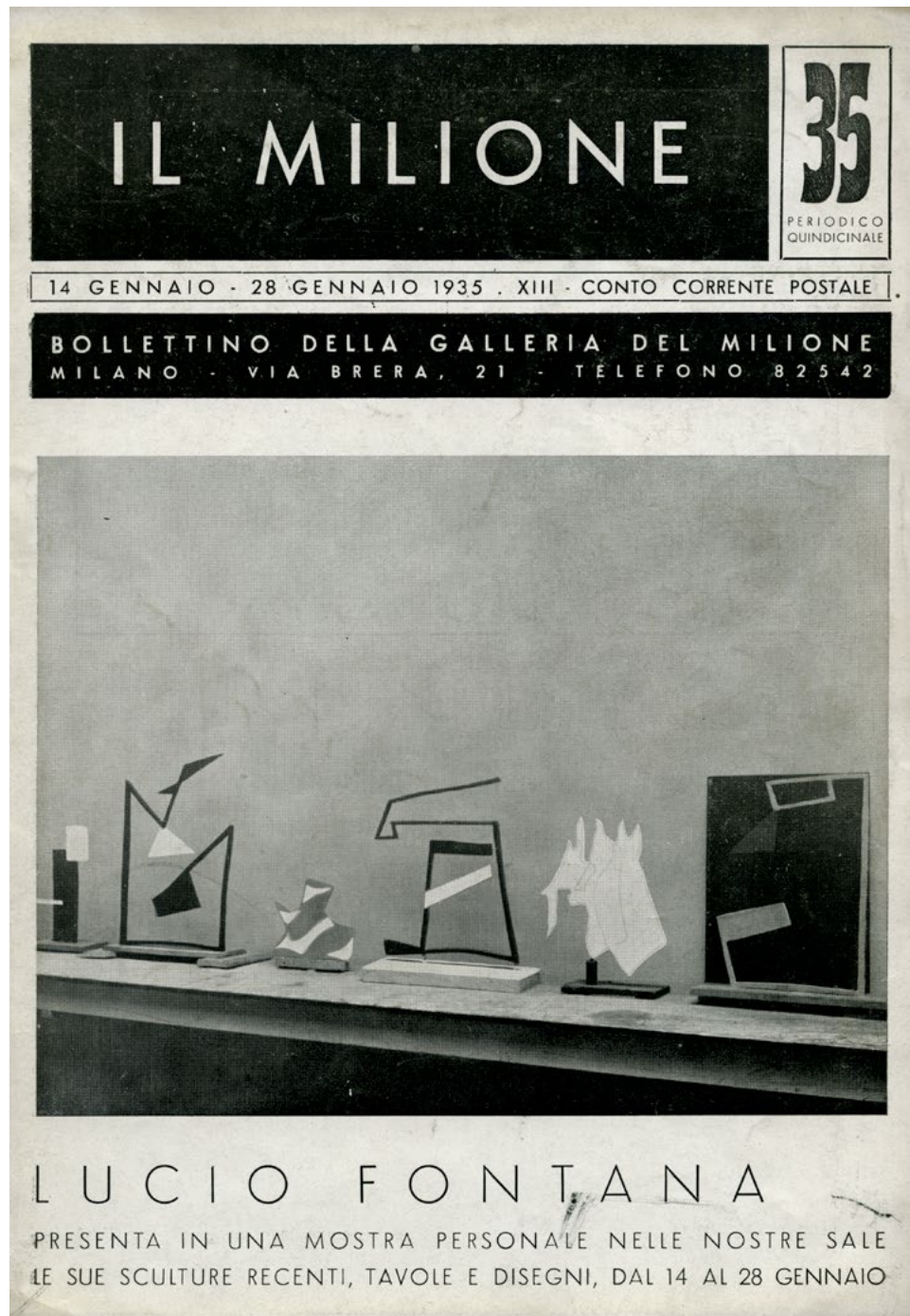


FIG. 6  
Cover of *Il Milione*, no. 35,  
for the Lucio Fontana  
exhibition, Milan 1935.



FIG. 7  
Cover of *Il Milione*, no. 40,  
for the Fausto Melotti  
exhibition, Milan 1935.

A cipher that was not figurative, that was private, in a period of time that called for chorality, a large dimension, the propagandistic narrative. It was the era of great works made for the regime, of the transposition into figured images of Mussolini's speeches, the exaltation of concepts and of great doctrines linked to the homeland and to its ancient people of noble descendancy. It was a time of commissions that involved all the most important artists, invited to sensitize the people, to make them participate and come together in the common ideal of nationalist and corporatist politics. Gathered closely around the new causes and principles of the artists, at a time when the economic crisis suffocated the activity of art galleries, they participated in these exploits with the enthusiasm and energy of those who were contributing to the rebirth of the arts and culture.

#### THE SALONE DELLA VITTORIA

Invited to participate in the *salone d'onore* of the 6th Milan Triennale, designed by Edoardo Persico—who died a few months before the opening—with the participation of Marcello Nizzoli, Fontana created what was one of the most remarkable works in perfect harmony with the architecture that contained it. And he composed it in a structure that was designed in parallel with the walls of the room, where white canvas septa separate this space from the rest of the building. It was almost a secret and other-worldly place even though it was open to the public, built with simplicity and surprising wisdom enough to define visual cuts of great effect to the rhythm of the elements that simulated the beats of a tempo divided by imaginary columns [FIG. 8]. In this space, Gio Ponti noted as follows:

this Salon wishes to initiate an understanding, in addition to the intimate conceptual purity, of artistic meaning. The atmosphere that it creates, not interfered with by color or by dynamic masses, with its precise and delicate rhythms, is, in poetic language, an abstract lyricism, or “magic.” We could say, more comprehensively, that it is as if an “enchanted” space, the “apparition” of a thought that has become reality. It renders “sensitive” a conception that is as if purified, for having removed the intervention of the senses: a fantastic conception. This serious, delicate, and fantastic purity can belong to an innocence of imaginative instincts that with a purification based on mature thoughts, causes this space to be classified and loved as a youthful work.<sup>7</sup>

7 “La Sala della Vittoria,” *Domus XIV*, no. 103 (July 1936): 3.

FIG. 8  
Edoardo Persico, *Salone della Vittoria*, 1936, Milan, 6th Triennale.



In this architecture, where beams of light brighten the ceiling creating a fascinating luminous texture, to celebrate the Empire Fontana places on a plinth the embodiment of the *Vittoria*<sup>8</sup> [FIG. 9]. Advancing is a simple female figure with arms outstretched; she is thinly veiled almost as if to hide on her same visual axis two horses that in the form envelop the classicism of an ancient statue, the pure whiteness of a metaphysical vision, and the powerful energy of a Futurist drive [FIG. 10]. Wildt is still on Fontana's horizon, but we already glimpse the aspiration to render the form more evanescent, to dematerialize it. The face is still naturalistic, while the rest of the body, schematic and

8 CRSDA, cf. no. 36 A 1.

fluid at the same time, seems to tend toward a superior dimension, a symbolic figurative idealism. Gio Ponti's remarks are ambivalent:

Lucio Fontana has worked wonderfully; however, the absolute lyricism that brings to life the horses and the body of victory collapses in her head, featuring almost portraitist, unexpected, and disturbing realism: Her hands, albeit vibrant, seductive, very beautiful, are, to my mind, dangerously related to the head. Fontana must always be praised. Understandable, then, in the climate in which the work acts, is the presence of the effigies of Roman emperors, beautifully made by Nizzoli; but we must also add that the lyrical purity of the environment repels that presence, both artistically and rhetorically. It would have been clearer, less literary, to include the effigy of the Duce.<sup>9</sup>

#### BETWEEN ART AND RHETORIC

Interesting and significant is the comparison with Melotti at this specific time in history. The sketches Melotti made for the staircase

FIGS. 9-10  
Group for the Salone  
della Vittoria, 1936, Milan,  
6th Triennale.



9 "La Sala della Vittoria."

of the Palazzo delle Corporazioni in Rome's new Esposizione Universale district express the transparent levity of a material that is worked with great refinement by a very sensitive hand. However, in the following phases, which preceded the final version, there was a gradual stiffening of the model to the extent that the vital sensitivity of the ductile material became lost. The more Melotti moved away from the classical sources and the archaic Etruscan models that he was imbued with, the more we see in his work the effect of a soulless atemporal plasticism.

If a Mediterranean breeze was blowing in the great decorations for the E42 it was certainly not a wind of renewal. Rather, it was the cold air of classicism that rounded out the lines, smoothed the surfaces, flattened all individual tension. Melotti as well was forced to bow his head to the breeze. "It's not the modelling that's important," he had remarked a few years earlier in the catalog of the show at Il Milione, "it's the modulation."<sup>10</sup> However, in these gigantic groups it was not the harmonious lyrical and poetic modulation that was being evoked; it was, rather, the choral intonation of the white marble forms of an entire extended white neighborhood. An intonation that, in the tragic atmosphere of fear and dismay that people were beginning to breathe, remained blocked, suspended [FIG. 11].

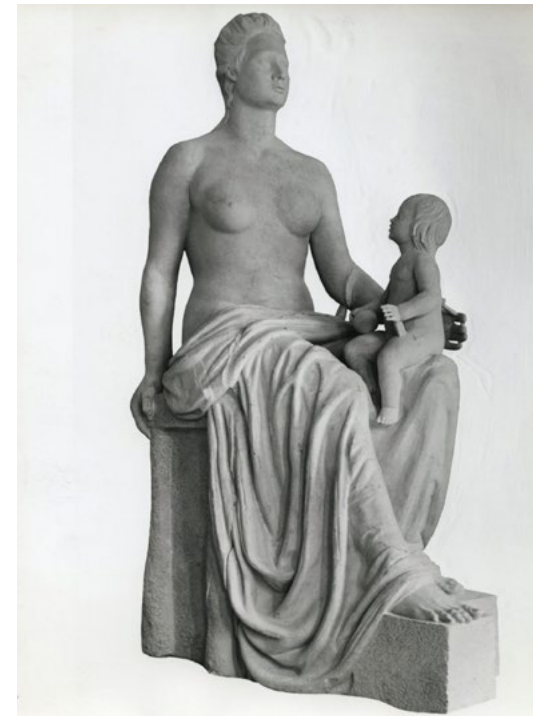


FIG. 11  
Fausto Melotti, *Si redimono i campi - Progetto per l'E42* (Project no. 3, group A, variant no. 4, detail of *Maternità*), 1942. Carrara, Laboratori Artistici Nicoli.

10 Fausto Melotti, "Presentazione della mostra personale di opere del 1934 e 1935," *Bollettino della Galleria del Milione* 40 (May 1935): 6.

Three years separated the presence of the two great artists in the sphere of public interventions, three years that witnessed the new imperial dominance of the city of Rome headed for an inexorable decline. You can feel it in Melotti, forced to comply with the logic of an ever more rigid power, who becomes, in the homologation of his work, indistinguishable in terms of style and technique.

Nonetheless, it is in the gravity of the volume—almost weightless in Fontana, by necessity imposing in Melotti—that the distance between two personalities who were trained in the same school, very close to each other as concerns their ideals, is played out.

#### UNTIL THE MANIFESTO . . .

and then *Manifesto* was theoretical . . . to find something that could correspond to the thought without resorting, maybe to tricks. And so, given that the painting is in three dimensions: the foreground, the second and third, ideals, from Paolo Uccello, about perspective . . . beyond perspective . . . the discovery of the cosmos is a new dimension, it's infinity, so I put a hole in this canvas, which was at the base of all of the arts and I created an infinite dimension, and x that, for me, is the basis of . . . of . . . all the . . . the . . . sorry uh, of all contemporary art, whoever wants to understand it. Otherwise, they'll keep saying it's a hole, and whatever.<sup>11</sup>

The manifesto . . . a literary form, a genre that is identified with the impetuousness of the Futurist word. The principal vehicle for the transmission of new ideas, an expression of defiance before artistic individualism, a means to disseminate the new ideology, an early form of advertising—pure ideology diffused via an accelerated network of a simple, elementary means of communication.

“Time and Space died yesterday. We are already living in the absolute, because we have already created eternal, omnipresent speed.” Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's words in the *Manifesto del Futurismo* (Manifesto of Futurism), dated February 1909,<sup>12</sup> once more echo Albert Einstein's explosive, pathbreaking theories of relativity in which concepts that were no longer understood as abstract or aprioristic entities excluded the idea of an empty space. The scientist instead hypothesized a space that interacted with matter. In the wake of these discoveries, how then can the frenetic and ungraspable rhythm of a universe in movement, in which light is propagated at constant speed, be represented? How can we harmonize the

feeling of movement with the static resistance of the canvas? How can the illusory diaphragm lying between the infinity of a mental universe and physics, the still vision of an image, be pictured?

The fragmented, broken, radiated, and expanded realistic element was the first step toward the idea of simultaneousness that echoed in the new scientific theories: “We thus somehow create an emotional environment, seeking sympathies via flashes of insight and the attachments that exist between the outer scene (concrete) and inner emotion (abstract). Those lines, those stains, those apparently illogical and inexplicable areas of color are indeed the mysterious keys to our paintings.”<sup>13</sup> The space of the vision is enriched by a further and immeasurable space. And the perspectival lines accelerate a feeling of movement that is not exclusively linked to the subject. “We will place the viewer at the center of the painting”: a resolute statement with which the formal rules of the new image are established. “Hence, we will restore sculpture to volume,” wrote Boccioni in 1914, “to the bodily, to horizontal values, to the substances that were completely lost after impressionism due to the traditional and excessive worship of appearances.”<sup>14</sup> The force lines of what is represented constitute the framework of a space in its becoming. Concreteness in the lines and not the outlines, thus did Boccioni identify the energy inside what surrounds the object that continues to exist in the exterior reality, that undergoes the tensions, the tractions, the resistances, but, at the same time, gives these elements back to the surrounding space in a reciprocal exchange of dynamic impulses. In the rhythms of solids and voids on which are intertwined and co-penetrated the planes between the thing and the space around it. An ever-growing intensity is concentrated in the center of gravity from which the forces necessary for it to have repercussions in the atmosphere are released. The “style of the dynamism” thus takes shape in the crystallization of luminous and chromatic vibrations of volumes, in painting as in sculpture.

#### TIME AND SPACE

I'm not the one who invented, I was spoon-fed by the Futurists—time, space, etc. —I won't deny it. Even the “plafoni” (ceilings), in the end, were a luminous sculpture, not light. Now they say: I made a ceiling lamp, but why? If I decided to call it “spatial concept” then why do I have to use the words ceiling lamp, or hole, etc. Who knows why, it's a phenomenon that I have a hard time understanding,

11 Lonzi, *Self-Portrait*, 151.

12 It appeared on the front page of the French newspaper *Le Figaro*.

13 “Les exposants au public,” in *Les Peintres futuristes italiens*, exh. cat. (Bernheim-Jeune, 1912), 12.

14 Umberto Boccioni, *Pittura scultura futurista* (Ed. futurista di Poesia, 1914), 108.

and to think that I provided some exact terms: spatial concept. Who at the time even dreamed of calling a painting a "spatial concept"? [FIG. 12<sup>15</sup>] It was an object, and after all, it came before today's objects . . . Today, all these things have matured in a perfect form, but also in a decadent one . . . My relationship with the Baroque, there as well is another accusation. In 1932 I subscribed to abstract *Art et Création*, and my abstraction was free, not geometric; after that came the golden figure, slightly baroque, . . . Yes, but Baroque in the sense of a form that broke with the Classical. I was trying to use color to break the material, because what bothered me was the enslavement of the material, something that Boccioni had already suggested to me . . . for Boccioni the material was a pretext to receive light. In art—as in Futurism etc.—the revolution is social, it is not only figurative, it is a revolution in thinking . . . The evolution of art is an interior, philosophical fact, it is not a figurative one. Therein lies the validity of the Futurists, the Cubists . . .<sup>16</sup>



FIG. 12  
*Concetto spaziale*, 1951.  
Milan, Fondazione Lucio  
Fontana.

*Manifesto Blanco*, 1946,<sup>17</sup> marked the real transition toward Fontana's full recognition of himself and of his own work. Programmatic in the footsteps of the Futurist intentions and enunciations, evocative of those ideas and propositions, he returned to those concepts and accelerated the pace even more, going beyond the limit of the material and of knowledge.

The discovery of new physical forces, of the dominance over matter and space, gradually imposed on man conditions that had never existed in all of history. An application of these discoveries in all the forms of life produces a change in the nature of man. Man assumes a different psychic structure. We are living in the age of mechanics.<sup>18</sup>

#### ANTIMATTER

The superseding, therefore, of all the traditional forms of art, from painting to sculpture, from music to poetry. The eruption with increasing vehemence and other manifestos in the territories of the unknowable.

We intend to separate art from matter, to free the sense of the eternal from concern with the immortal. And it is of no importance to us if a gesture, once carried out, lives for a moment or a millennium, for we are truly convinced that, having made it, it is eternal. . . . It is impossible for humanity not to pass from canvas, bronze, plaster, and plasticine to the pure insubstantial, universal, suspended image as it was impossible for it not to pass from graphite to canvas, bronze, plaster, and plasticine without in any way negating the eternal validity of the images created through graphite, canvas, plaster, and plasticine.<sup>19</sup>

And the transition comes with neon, light that replaces the brushstroke, that transforms the brushstroke into an extraordinary visual design in space [FIG. 13]. Fontana grasps the importance of Boccioni's work through his sculpture, through his words. But he certainly could not have known—perhaps he could only imagine—

16 Tommaso Trini, "Colloquio con Fontana," *Domus* 466 (1968), n. p., now published in Angela Sanna, ed., *Lucio Fontana. Manifesti, scritti, interviste* (Abscondita, 2015), pp. 139-143; <<http://www.artslab.com/wordpress/?p=1>>.

17 Published in Argentina in the form of a flyer and drafted by Bernardo Arias, Horacio Cazenueve, Marcos Fridman it was also signed by Pablo Arias,

Rodolfo Burgos, Enrique Benito, César Bernal, Luis Coll, Alfredo Hansen, and Jorge Rocamonte.

18 *Manifesto Blanco*, in CRSDA, I, 112.  
19 "Spatialists [First Spatial Manifesto]," in *Lucio Fontana and the Spatialists*, ed. Luca Massimo Barbero, trans. Huw Evans (Marsilio 2020), signed together with Beniamino Joppolo, Giorgio Kaiserlian, and Milena Milani.



the Futurist artist's capacity for foresight; nor could he know the extent to which his thinking was extraordinarily in line with the theories that had not as yet been published:

There will come a time when the painting will no longer suffice. Its immobility will be an archaicism with the dizzying movement of human life. Man's eye will perceive colors like sentiments in themselves. Multiplied colors will not need forms to be able to be understood, and pictorial works will be spiraling musical compositions of huge colored gases, which on the scene of a free horizon will move and electrify the complex soul of a crowd that we as yet cannot conceive.<sup>20</sup>

Boccioni expressed in his impetuous language a thought that transcended his own work, an idea that in modernity surpassed every form of avant-garde language. If painting and sculpture were still linked to the constraints of the material, his poetics whizzed across a much more elevated universe, the conceptual one. He continued:

FIG. 13  
*Struttura al neon*, 1951,  
Milan, 9th Triennale.

It is therefore this new condition of scientific relativity that gives us a new sensitivity for the study of the absolute. We painters (as I will speak of painting) feel that this sensitivity is a psychic divining force that affords the senses the power to perceive what had never been perceived before. We believe that if everything is inclined toward Unity, what man has up until now tried to perceive in unity is still a miserable blind childish decomposition of things! We believe that science has propelled us back to a marvelous superior barbarity! An exponent of this barbarity is the art of today that, starting from the French Impressionists, true scientific temperaments, threw itself with a cry and an ardor that have the spasm to search for synthesis, that is, for the last reason of the infinite new elements that science has given us.<sup>21</sup>

#### THE INFINITE

"I make holes, the infinite passes there, light passes, there is no need to paint . . . instead, they all thought I wanted to destroy: but it isn't true, I constructed, I didn't destroy."<sup>22</sup>

To touch the measure of infinity through spatial concepts. Hence, already from 1946 to 1948, with *Manifesto Blanco* and the first *Concetti spaziali*, Fontana dealt with the new dimension. The idea was now what imposed itself and dominated matter. Time and space, the two entities in which the principles had been subverted by Einstein, for Fontana, as well as for the Futurists, were the new coordinates with which to be able to imagine a representation of the contemporary [FIG. 15].

It was a rapid, quick, impetuous gesture, but at the same time one that had been meditated for a long time. It was the gesture of a truly great artist. Immediate, a term that Fontana himself used, aware that "only the creative spirit of man is eternal before time."<sup>23</sup> Neither a provocative act of rebellion, nor a cunning invention, nor the desire to lacerate, destroy the canvas, in the celerity of the process they are what guide the artist's hand. Revealing how through the new ideas on Spatialism one can subvert the traditional aesthetics transcending the limit of the painting, sculpture, support, and all the correlated materials.

*Forme uniche della continuità nello spazio* [FIG. 14] is the title of Boccioni's revolutionary sculpture where the lines of the body, in the virtual trajectory, extend beyond its contours; continuity of space in matter, for Fontana, in the absolute overlapping of idea and form.

20 Umberto Boccioni, *Altri inediti e apparati critici*, ed. Zeno Birolli (Feltrinelli, 1972), 11.

21 Boccioni, *Altri inediti*, 14.  
22 Lonzi, *Self-Portrait*, 153.

23 From a draft letter to Giampiero Giani in 1949, Campiglio, *Lucio Fontana*, 244.

The new era, the new means, allow for a further projection in space and in the future: "spatial art, for the moment, neon, Wood's lamp, television, the ideal 4th dimension of architecture."<sup>24</sup> The slash, the hole, the tear, which makes it possible to glimpse a new possibility of action and thinking, becomes the first dimension of the void. A further step in the wake of Futurism toward those energies that are constantly being transformed, toward a universe where, Fontana imagines: "The work of art is not eternal. The man and his creation exist in time; when man finishes the infinite continues."<sup>25</sup>



FIG. 14  
Umberto Boccioni, *Forme uniche della continuità nello spazio*, 1913, Paris, Galerie La Boétie.

24 Lucio Fontana, "We Are Continuing the Evolution of the Medium in Art. Technical manifesto," in Barbero,

*Lucio Fontana and the Spatialists*, 38.  
25 Fontana, "We Are Continuing the Evolution," 39.



FIG. 15  
Ugo Mulas, *Lucio Fontana*, *L'attesa*, 1964.

# MARTINI AND FONTANA, PARALLEL DIVERGENCES

Nico Stringa

The story that is yet to be written about the relationship between two artists like Arturo Martini (born in 1889) and Lucio Fontana (born in 1899) began with the latter artist's return to Italy in the fall of 1927, after spending six years in Argentina, some of them with his father and some in his own personal studio in the city where he was born, Rosario di Santa Fe. Fontana re-established the Italian relationships he had interrupted in 1921, signed up for the sculpture course taught by Adolfo Wildt at Brera, and began twelve years of intense and original activity, an obstacle course that earned him his first important acknowledgments. Martini was not in Milan. He was still busy in Rome collaborating with the US artist Maurice Sterne on an American monument for which he would not be credited; but he did have an exhibition at the Gallery owned by Lino Pesaro, which Fontana may have visited in November 1927 when, having arrived a few days before, he started attending the art scene (museums and especially art galleries). It was the first time that Treviso-born Martini, who was well-known in the artistic milieu but still in search of decisive affirmation, presented a solo show entirely dedicated to his activity as a "ceramicist." After participating in the *Prima Mostra del Novecento Italiano* (1926) in a classicist vein, the following year Martini had two events in Milan, the above-mentioned solo show, and his participation in the Ligurian stand at the 3rd Biennial of

\* The works mentioned in the text can be traced back to the general catalogs of the works of Martini and of Fontana. Lucio Fontana's letters were curated by Paolo Campiglio (Milan 1999), to whom I am grateful; it has also recently been published the artist's biography by the same author: Lucio Fontana. La possibilità di un'oltre (Johan & Levi editore, 2025).

Enrico Crispolti, who way back in 1958 published a key essay titled "Memoria per Arturo Martini," in *La Biennale di Venezia 31* (1958), 14–24, analyzed Martini's Venetian season in "Frammenti su una stagione all'inferno," in *Arturo Martini. Opere degli anni Quaranta, exh. cat., ed. Nico Stringa (Electa, 1989), 25–43*; on that occasion I suggested an expression that I believe is still suited to describe Martini's inclination in those years: "to sculpt space." To this regard, also deserving mention is the exhibition catalog edited by Luciano Caramel, *La scultura lingua viva. Arturo Martini e il rinnovamento della scultura in Italia nella seconda metà del Novecento* (Mazzotta, 2002).

Generally speaking, I try to avoid quoting from my own previous contributions, but this time I am forced to because in the seminal *Dizionario Lucio Fontana*, edited by Luca Pietro Nicoletti (Quodlibet, 2023), in the *Riferimenti bibliografici* (p. 610) a typo changed the meaning of the following

contribution: "Appunti su Leoncillo, Fontana, Martini," in *Leoncillo. Natura ed espressione*, edited by Anna Leonardi and Stefania Petrillo (Electa, 2021), 136–45. The reference to the syntagma "concetto spaziale" (spatial concept) is in the entry by Giorgio Zanchetti in the *Dizionario Lucio Fontana and in the bibliography cited therein*. The essay by Benedetta Casini, "Lucio Fontana fra Rosario e Buenos Aires: gli anni venti e gli anni quaranta" is published in *Saggi e Memorie di storia dell'arte 47* (December 2024): 196–221. The book *Lucio Fontana in Argentina. From the early years to the Manifesto Blanco*, by Daniela Alejandra Sbaraglia, was published in 2025 by *Electa* in collaboration with the *Fondazione Lucio Fontana*.

I wish to thank the President Silvia Ardemagni and the Vice-President Maria Villa of the *Fondazione Lucio Fontana*, so very helpful and full of understanding, as well as Luca Massimo Barbero, the curator, among other things, of the *Catalogo ragionato delle sculture ceramiche of Lucio Fontana. My exchanges with my colleague Luca Bochicchio* were extremely helpful; he invited me to give a talk on these topics in *Pozzo Garitta*, titled: *Arturo Martini / Lucio Fontana: una lontananza vicinissima; equally invaluable were my exchanges with the passionate and highly skilled restorer from Albisola Barbara Checcucci*.

Decorative Arts in Monza, again with ceramic works. For the Lino Pesaro show, Martini's works on display were reproduced in majolica in a small series of plaster molds, and painted by Manlio Trucco in his workshop, La Fenice, in Albisola; they had been commissioned by the Genoese architect Mario Labò. It is likely that the first "encounter" (in a one-way direction) between the two artists took place before Martini's ceramics, with Lucio Fontana perplexed but drawn to the formal looseness of those "fantastic" majolicas (in Milan) and, on the contrary, to the agitated disarray in a Cubist-like key of the *Via Crucis* (in Monza).

It was again in the realm of ceramics, at the 1930 Triennale in Monza, that Fontana could verify the development of Martini's poetics, which overall had become more specific in the majolicas, this time with one-off items—real animals and imaginary ones—where the direct handling of the clay and personal application of light-hued colors led Martini to modify his commitment as a ceramicist, reverting, in part, to the work he had done in Treviso two decades before, with his direct and immersive experience, now, in Nervi's workshop.

However, from 1927 to 1930, there were other important moments for the two artists: in 1929, at the *Seconda Mostra del Novecento Italiano*, Martini displayed the unique bronze ensemble *Il figliuol prodigo*, while in 1930–31 Fontana twice showed *Uomo nero*<sup>1</sup> at the Galleria del Milione, which was located opposite the entrance to Brera Academy. One should look at the two works together and compare them: While Martini, in order to embrace a modern synthesis in a severe and sharp manner, felt forced to go back to the sacred medieval sculpture of Tivoli and Lucca, Fontana instead brought into play, almost repeating the structure as a whole, the modern sculpture of Zadkine, accentuating to an extreme—by pouring tar on the white plaster—the obliterating features of black paint on modern, Cubist sculpture as well. It was almost as if the artist wanted to indicate, at that early date, the need to start all over again from scratch (he would indeed do so ten years later) the unprecedented history of sculpture-painting/painting-sculpture, even beyond Cubism itself. *Uomo nero* was incompatible with the poetics of the "creature" that Martini was developing at that same time in Monza, at the ISIA, but 1930 was nonetheless an important year for both artists. Whereas Fontana, still distant from the world of ceramics, starting with *Uomo nero* took a position of rupture (with his mentor Wildt, with the Novecento milieu, and even with contemporary European sculpture), Martini, who had been asked to teach for a year at the ISIA in Monza surrounded by a group of students who were destined to play important roles, opened many fronts: on the one hand, he ended in style his work with majolica in a one-off piece and paved the way

1 CRSDA, cf. no. 30 SC 1.

for refractory large-scale terracottas; on the other, he disrupted the immobilism of the Novecento artists with *single* works that, anticipated by the press, would finally take him to the limelight in the first Quadriennale in Rome: *Pisana*, *Sposa felice*, *Tomba di Ippolito Nievo*; which the following year in Rome were accompanied by: *Madre folle*, *Donna al sole*, *Ragazzo seduto* [FIG. 1](#), *Pastore*.

These are sculptures that can be taken for granted, necessarily known to the Argentine-Italian artist, with which he would soon need to come to terms; but at that moment in time, Fontana's "responses" (if this is the path we want to take), which were in part direct, in part not referred to Martini, were provided by way of adhesion and detachment from the concretist poetics of Italy and beyond the Alps. In short, the young sculptor seemed to be saying that it was no longer sufficient, in that situation, to be "anti-Novecento style" (a contrast that disappears by itself, with the evident crisis of Sarfatti's Novecento) but that for modern artists was essential to position themselves as anti-Novecento! That is what Fontana's works expressed, which, at least according to hearsay, Martini was forced to be familiar with, even though he did not attend the Galleria del Milione on a regular basis. (Elsewhere I discussed the "karstic" relationship between the two.)

FIG. 1  
Arturo Martini, *Ragazzo seduto*, 1930. Turin, Galleria d'Arte Moderna.



That Fontanian process suggests the pouring of color onto a statue, much before knowing and experimenting with the use of ceramic enamels. On the one hand, *Uomo nero*, where it is almost impossible to visualize the work under the tar that covers it, thus annulling the rhythm of the composition; on the other, *Campione olimpionico* (*Atleta in attesa*) [FIG. 2]<sup>2</sup> who appears to emerge from the pool he has dived into, bringing with him all the blue of the water he has immersed himself in. In these operations bordering on the performance, the artist was not only oriented toward a rather polemic anti-naturalism vis-à-vis the festering Italian figuration at the time, but also toward a sort of proto-Spatialism; the latter seemed to suggest the non-neutral role of space, in a banal sense as a container, but to be seen instead as an active principle, a protagonist and thus even an antagonist of the third dimension. I am not



FIG. 2  
*Campione olimpionico*  
(*Atleta in attesa*), 1932.  
Bologna, Fondazione Cassa  
di Risparmio.

aware of any similar suggestions before these insights on Fontana's part (these remained at an embryonic state at the time, and later become central to his work), that of space-in-a-fluid-state, which the glazed ceramics would bring to completion on the subsequent majolicas. If this was the case, then Fontana was rather distant from the ideas that Martini would put forth with his two large refractory terracottas, some of them exhibited in Rome, from January 1931, and others the following year in his solo room at the 18. Venice Biennale. For this cycle as well we might say that space became a *problem*; to the extent that whereas in the sculpture dedicated to the protagonist of Nievo's novel *La Pisana* (1928) Argan was able to speak of a form "contrasted by space," the same could not be said after *La veglia*, *Aviatore*, *Il sogno*, *Chiaro di luna*, which in different ways call into question the central role of traditionalist sculpture (that of Maraini, Ojetti and many others who did not hesitate to call the large-scale terracottas, and rightly so given their reactionary point of view, "polemic works").

The distance between the two of them—after factoring in the different importance of the individual works—could not have been greater. However, there are three terracottas by Martini that, although not among the largest in terms of size and effective visibility, shift the question greatly and—this too is of interest—do not find specific responses on Fontana's part: they are *La moglie del marinaio* and *Donna alla finestra* [FIGS. 3-4], two one-off terracottas that were also on display in Milan at the exhibitions held by Martini, for which he had underwritten a contract, at the Galleria Milano

FIG. 3  
Arturo Martini, *La moglie del marinaio*, c. 1930.  
Private collection, formerly  
Contini Bonacossi.

FIG. 4  
Arturo Martini, *Donna alla finestra*, c. 1931. Rome,  
Galleria Nazionale d'Arte  
Moderna e Contemporanea.



between 1932 and 1933. In these works, and in numerous other similar ones but smaller in size, which brought the ensemble to a conspicuous constellation on the fundamental Martinian theme of the *expectation*, Fontana was able to know an arrangement that modified the layout of the sculpture, valorizing the role of the void and superseding the role of the shadow; hence, the “hole” in the window led to new points of view and other thoughts on the relationship between architecture (space) and figure (volume); not to mention the immediate, “sentimental,” Leopardian effect that emanated from works like *Chiaro di luna*, with the two female figures projecting almost beyond the balustrade; or a counter-space like the one sensitively evoked by the *Aviatore* intent on piercing the sky (perhaps in a distant dialogue with Vincenzo Gemito's *Acrobata cinese*).

During those years, Fontana was making works featuring an abstract structure (his famous concrete and plaster panels) and he did not see the gashes that Martini was opening up on the dead wall of rhetoric. This can be deduced from the important terracotta *Figura alla finestra* [FIG. 5]<sup>3</sup> whose date should perhaps be moved forward with respect to 1931, the date that has hitherto been suggested. We do not know, and perhaps never will, whether it was made in reaction to Martini's “expectations.” In any case, the structure of Fontana's composition is evident and eloquent. Fontana places the figure at the window as though she were before a mirror, thus resorting to a pictorial intervention, the color white, to brighten it with a light coming from outside.

Martini's aim being pure sculpture, devoid of hues (“terracotta,” the artist is said to have declared, “was already a color”), he could not embrace Fontana's commitment to stripping fascist sculpture of redundancies and inaccuracies, valorizing the silhouette figures that are almost projected onto the plane, thus establishing a substantial equivalence in values between profiles and geometries. However, there was a situation in which their poetics could be likened not in a figurative key, when Martini reprinted in Milan—in 1937—the *liber mutus Contemplazioni*, its first edition published in 1918 in Faenza. A very short volume, devoid of words and of figurative images, built up on an irregular sequence of geometric black marks against a white background, almost like primitive musical notes, seemed to want to tell the abstract Italian artists that he, Martini, had already gone down that road long before it became an issue. (It is also of interest to note, to this regard, that the Fondazione Lucio Fontana holds the copy of *Contemplazioni* reprinted in 1967 by Scheiwiller; however, we do not know whether

FIG. 5  
*Figura alla finestra*, 1931.  
Private collection.



Fontana was familiar with the second edition, printed in 1937—as it was very hard for everyone to dispose of the few copies of the first edition.) That possible closeness between the two risked persisting, however, in the absence of other elements of information, like one of the many, reciprocal, missed opportunities.

A dialogue could not be initiated on the grounds of parallel divergences, albeit at a distance, between the two, although it was not lacking in different fields. Here are some examples.

In January 1931, among the sculptures showcased at the 1st Quadriennale in Rome there was also *La sposa felice*, a subject typical of nineteenth-century genre painting, made of plaster and large in scale, featuring the virtuosity of a baroque master. Among the other qualities of the work, the fact that the figure is jumping for joy (as required by the subject) causes the two meters plus of plaster to be suspended from the ground: one of the many inventions—perhaps the most impressive—in which the human figure is arranged beyond the force of gravity. Some of Fontana's sculptures

lead us to believe that he may have meditated on *La sposa felice* on at least two occasions: with *La Vittoria dell'aria*,<sup>4</sup> 1934, in colored concrete (gold or blue) which was never displayed but illustrated by both Persico, and Baumbach; the dimensions remain unknown (the fact that concrete was used suggests the work was not small, as we can also glean from the illustration published by Baumbach, unless, of course, it was a photomontage). However, we do know something about the work that can be coordinated with the association we are interested in: The work portrays Teresita Rasini (Fontana's future wife!).

Another back and forth: *Nudo al sole*, then generally *Donna al sole*, is the most famous of Martini's terracottas (1930), exhibited at the 1st Quadriennale in Rome, and then quickly joining the Contini Bonacossi collection. It then entered other collections in Milan, and was recently acquired by the State, destined to be held at Palazzo Citterio (Brera). At the 5th Milan Triennale, in 1933, Fontana displayed the *Bagnante* in colored concrete (since lost)<sup>5</sup> in which the artist counterposed to the fluidity of an eroticism bestowed on the innocence of Martini's terracotta (you might say, a sand body "baked" on the shore in the heat of the sun), a hieratic expression of the body structure at the limit of the figurative possibilities in contrast with the geometry of the building's rational architecture, a barren swimming pool, and the almost disturbing rendering of the figure of the bather, oversized, discordant, and not naked.

The Argentinian hiatus from 1940 to the spring of 1947 speaks volumes about the subtly conflictual relationship with Martini, if it is true, and it is, that as soon as Fontana arrived in his native country, he hastened to find a kiln and to make a large-scale model in terracotta of *La mujer del marinero* (1940 [FIG. 6]),<sup>6</sup> inspired, and not just for its title, by some of Martini's terracottas, such as *La moglie del marinaio* and *La Venere dei porti* [FIG. 7], both from 1931–32 and well known to Fontana, who gave the wide-open eyes a look of bright expressiveness that contrasts with the fluid position of the nude. Featuring a similar intonation is the terracotta *Donna al balcone*,<sup>7</sup> it too from 1940, and related to the Martinian sphere of the expectation, albeit isolated in the void, deprived of that "spatialist" potential that was instead implicit in the works of the Treviso artist. As can be observed from these and other clues, the distance from Milan and from Albisola, forced Fontana to explicitly come to terms with some of his Italian sources, as if the 5,000 kilometers of distance from Europe made him freer and thus more reactive to the ideas suggested by the climate of Milanese art at the time. It is also rather singular that Martini as well, his long period of monumental

4 CRSDA, cf. no. 34 SC 2.  
5 CRSDA, cf. no. 33 A 2.

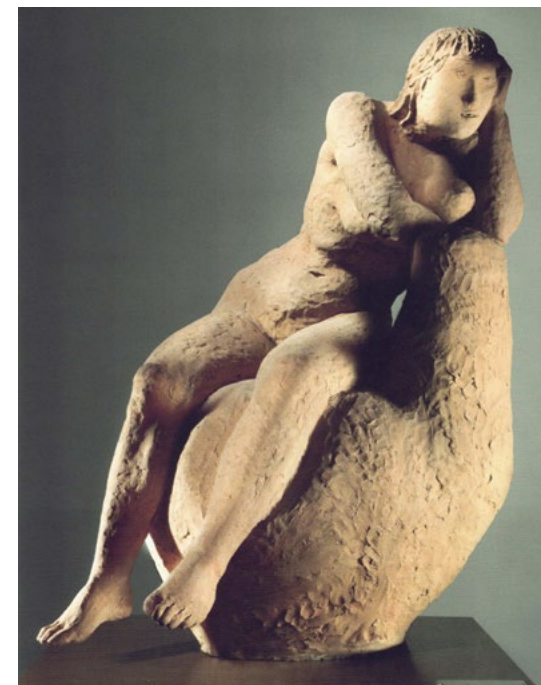
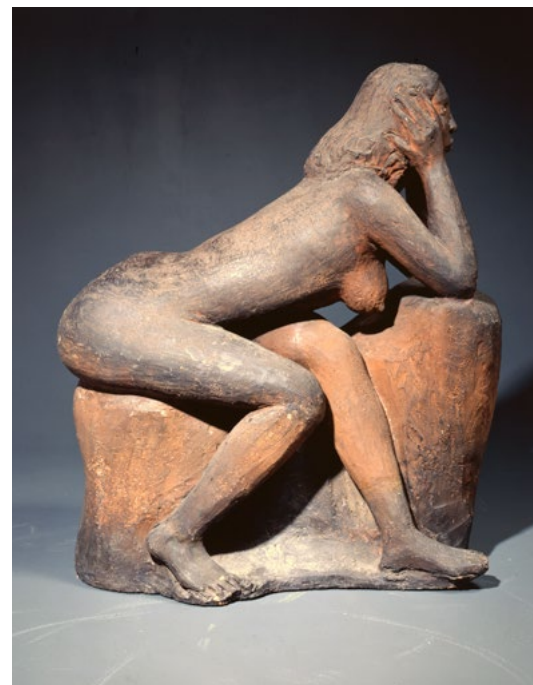
6 CRSC, cf. no. 40 SC 9.  
7 CRSC, cf. no. 40 SC 20.

works having come to an end, from 1941 onwards was encouraged to re-examine his position and felt able to recover, in a short amount of time, most of the modern tradition he had failed to take into consideration. Just when they were furthest apart, as the years passed, the positions of the two artists grew closer, without either of them actually being in contact. While in Argentina, Fontana did not so much reach the "redskins," the "primitives" that were so precious for the historic avant-gardes, which he had evoked, in opposition to Martini's monumental work, in a letter he wrote to Carlo Belli in 1934 (included in the volume edited by Paolo Campiglio mentioned at the start of the notes here); instead, he reached a group of young artists who would encourage him to contemplate new possibilities, technological ones as well, offered by contemporaneity—I am referring to an environment that was crucial to Fontana's turnaround, that of the Accademia di Altamira. But one has the impression that in the works Fontana made while in Argentina between 1940 and 1947, he was not much interested in gathering all those ideas that he instead was the first to be enriched by, and that we will find once more in Italy between Albisola and Milano ready to burst onto the scene between 1947 and 1949. (For a complete and updated rereading of Fontana's "Argentine period," see the texts by Benedetta Casini and especially Daniela Alajandra Sbaraglia, both listed in the notes here.)

Without having to move from one continent to another, Martini found in Venice, from 1941 to 1945, an environment rich in stimuli

FIG. 6  
*La mujer del marinero*, 1940.  
Private collection.

FIG. 7  
Arturo Martini,  
*La Venere dei porti*, 1932.  
Treviso, Musei Civici -  
Museo Luigi Bailo.



and friendships, albeit contrasting: Carlo Scarpa, Mario Deluigi, Anton Giulio Ambrosini, Gino Scarpa, the young Mirko and Afro Basaldella, Roberto Nonveiller, Carlo Cardazzo, Alberto Viani, Silvio Branzi, Leone Traverso, Giuseppe Mazzariol. Encouraged by the issues that were dealt with in the lessons at the Venice Academy of Fine Arts, accentuated by the fall of fascism and the catastrophe of the war, and having worked as a painter as well in the past few years, Martini was ready to make art that offered an alternative to the monumental works he himself had been making since 1933, not always with the excellent results of his previous terracottas. He shaped, photographed, and destroyed experimental works, and finally had a publication of his most recent drawings; he held a solo show at the Venice Biennale in 1942, and he initiated the publication of a monographic book on his most important marble work *Donna che nuota sott'acqua* (a work that Fontana was able to see illustrated in an article published by Gio Ponti in *Stile* in the spring of 1947, alongside long passages from *La scultura lingua morta*, and then in person at the Biennale in 1948). In short, it was in the first half of the 1940s that Martini was able to rid himself of his image as an artist of the regime, beginning with the marble reliefs for the Arengario in Milan, Cubist-like in style, and soon after (1942) finding the innovative solution for the monument to Titus Livius at the Liviano in Padua.

These were the themes that Fontana dealt with as soon as he returned to Albisola and to Milan, where he learned that Martini had recently died, on March 22, the very same day that he, Fontana, had left Argentina.

Fontana read and reread Martini's *La scultura lingua morta* (Venice, May 1945) and finally left us his thoughts on his fellow artist's position. In the unpublished note, titled "Perché sono spaziale," dated to 1948 and now in the Archive of the Fondazione Lucio Fontana, Fontana's interest in Martini's statements is clear: he replies to the artist with his own opinion, a fitting and pertinent one: "Martini claims that 'Scultura lingua morta,' he recognizes as great statuary the impotence of the sculpture of our day and age, and he does not find a solution for it, that is, *it is not part of the current climate* (c. n.)." In short, Fontana definitely shares Martini's goal to put sculpture on a kind of trial, but he realizes that, in fact, his colleague's objections do not come to a definitive conclusion, and he does not pronounce the decisive word (just as Martini did not pronounce it—except generically—in *La scultura lingua morta*, or in *Colloqui*, nor in his letters) which is summed up in a generic form: *abstraction*. Now, for us it is easy to understand Fontana's perplexity, due in part to the fact that the Argentine Italian artist was reading a text without images, he was not familiar, that is, with some of the fundamental works that could easily have "illus-

FIG. 8  
Arturo Martini,  
*Autoritratto cavo*, 1943.



trated" Martini's boldest statements: *Autoritratto cavo* [FIG. 8], *Donna che esce dall'acqua*, *Pegaso caduto*, and especially *Atmosfera di una testa*. But these are substantially objections that are coherent with the solution that Fontana had available, the beliefs that evolved in Argentina, and that were confirmed by the relations that he established in Milan: On the one hand, sculpture and painting are one thing, and on the other, the problem of shadow will be solved, we say, with a death-defying leap, a leap into the "void" entrusted to Spatialism.

#### ON SOME OF LUCIO FONTANA'S "ENVIRONMENTAL" SOURCES

Fontana's state of mind and his explorations during his creative years in Liguria indicate a way of thinking and behaving that distance him from everyone else.

For instance, we can observe from a group of very original works that his attention was addressed—more than to cultural precedents having to do with primitivism or to the modern artistic tradition (no doubt visible)—to capturing situations, environments, places. Since the environment, broadly speaking, plays a primary role in Fontana's activity, in this paper I would like to look

at several sources, or better yet, seeing that we are in Liguria (the land of poets), the “visual occasions” that meant a lot to the artist. The first indication concerns the sea bed, a source of inspiration for many of the best majolicas in the 1930s: the underwater world, buried in the light and the silence of the most fascinating still life in existence, where the colors are brighter and the shimmering forms effects of unprecedented ephemeral disguises, where iconographic precedents of “terrestrial” culture obliterated by the magmatic and the shapeless are the norm. At this point I cannot help but mention Salvatore Fancello, who was also active during the same period between Milan and Albisola, to suggest the strong analogy that runs between the Ligurian sea, on one hand, and Sardinia on the other, in the ceramics of those years (but between them there are other numerous signs of continuity and affinity in terms of graphics).

Continuing with the theme of the natural environment, I feel I have glimpsed a reference to a certain relevance between the cycle of the *Nature* (starting in 1959) and an Argentine landscape that I discovered during a long (imaginary!) trip I took online. I am referring the incredible Ischigualasto Provincial Park, in northwestern Argentina, where the visitor feels they are in some Fontanian geological environment [FIG. 9]. There, spherical stones also featuring horizontal cuts, well apart from each other, expect, they too, to see



FIG. 9  
Spherical stones in the  
Ischigualasto Provincial  
Park, Argentina.



FIG. 10  
*Concetti spaziali, Nature*,  
1959–60. Otterlo,  
Kröller-Müller Museum.

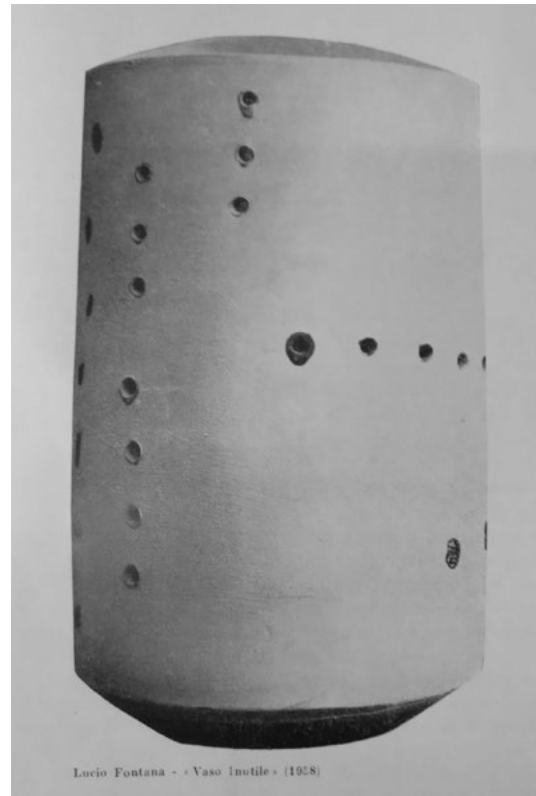
once more the Demiurge who arranged them that way in the mists of time, before moving away forever. A comparison with the artist's famous exhibitions or, for instance, with the works in the Kröller-Müller collection will save any further comment [FIG. 10].

Another aspect: The holes, made with an awl first on paper and then on canvas and after that on plane surfaces and on ceramic vases, named from 1949 “spatial concept,” emanating the most original terminology of contemporary art, where do they come from? From Fontana's statements we seem to be able to connect the idea of the holes to the points of light in the starry sky, seeing that the birth of Spatialism is rather indebted to the technological issues related to the space conquest and to the images coming from astronomical studies (taking into account, by direct experience, the visual potential of the celestial vault observed at night during ocean voyages). I would like to take the risk here of offering a different hypothesis, one that is not incompatible with the one mentioned before and well-motivated by the scholars who suggested it, relative to another environment, in this case the physical one as opposed to the starry sky. I wish to refer to the *closed space* of the ceramicists, thinking that it might be of use to turn to the ideas (technical ones, why not?) that surface in his working of the ceramic material, which Fontana never ceased to do, once he arrived in Genoa in April 1947; actually, that he immediately began practicing again in Albisola, postponing his trip to Milan. And exactly what is the closed (and open) space of ceramicists if not the kiln where, in the darkness of the unseen fire, the clays and the enamels are again shaped with color that reaches 1,000 degrees and even higher when the works are in grès?



FIG. 11  
Wood-fired kiln for ceramics,  
early 20th century. Private  
collection.

FIG. 12  
*Vaso inutile*, 1958 (in Toni  
Toniato, "Lucio Fontana,"  
*Evento. Critica e cronaca  
delle arti*, 6 [1958]).



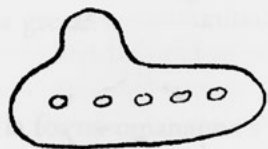
Lucio Fontana - *Vaso inutile* (1958)

There is one work tool that Fontana used and saw being used before it was completely replaced by *muffole*, i.e., refractory chambers for the purpose of protecting the objects placed inside the kiln (second firing); this old, antique tool, so to speak, was and is still referred to as a *casella* in Liguria, *casone* in the Veneto [FIG. 11]. It is a refractory container shaped like a vase, pierced with holes to allow the threading of clay ropes used to support the shelves; this makes it possible to place inside a certain number of dishes or objects without their touching each other and without their being touched by the fire and smoke (wood stoves). These *caselle* can also be found in the Albisole, in the numerous small and large museums present there, not to mention in other old manufactories, like the Antica Manifattura Antonibon in Nove. It is striking to see the resemblance between Fontana's vases with holes and these objects that had an important function, their own doubtless "utility." I do not refer to this utility by chance, because one of these ceramics, published by Toni Toniato in the important magazine on Venetian Spatialism, *Evento*, in an article dedicated to Fontana, added the caption, clearly indicated by the artist himself (the year was 1963), "*Vaso inutile*" (useless vase [FIG. 12]).<sup>8</sup> I mention this title, a rather rare one it seems, not only because of the ironic relevance of the choice and the reference to Bruno Munari's "useless machines," but also because of the huge distance that, in an apparently secondary work, Fontana established with the tradition of the everyday object, focusing attention on the true aesthetic utility, not on the function of a form that becomes worn through use. (We will never know whether the artist had come across the formula that Plato mentions offhandedly in the dialogue in *The Republic*, in which he comes out with the unexpected "what is beneficial is beautiful, what is harmful ugly," to then turn it around!) Needless to add that the "uselessness" of the perforated vase is precisely what frees it from instrumental fruition, and places it in an aesthetic area, making tangible the reversal achieved through perforation, a radical change introduced for the first time by the artist (a transformation that is perceivable even more evidently than in a canvas with a hole or a slash, in that the latter are works that already from the start are made outside of a strictly utilitarian realm). But there are also other interesting elements to this regard, which in this case see an objective communality of intents between the two artists. Over the course of the *Colloqui* with Gino Scarpa (in Martini's home in Venice, near the Basilica of the Salute), the Treviso artist insisted on a very particular sculpture of a wind instrument, hence, with small holes, known as the *ocarina* [FIG. 13], which had recently been invented (late nineteenth century). A swollen terracotta, more or less similar to a small submarine or a cetacean, it fascinated Martini during a period

<sup>8</sup> CRSC, cf. no. 57 SPC 77.

Arturo Martini

visto che l'essenza è la ocarina (dice: lucarina). I buchetti. Orizzontale con la verticale dello zufolo.



Che plastica, che plastica, che lirica! La lucarina mi vien sempre in mente: quando vedo un frammento antico, darne l'equivalente con la lucarina. Quella levigatezza, che xe el tempo: proviene dal consumo del tempo. Vedi che c'è l'Etruria. Con niente. E c'è la persona seduta. Se lo intitolassimo "nudo", quella sarebbe una stravaganza.

when he was re-evaluating the "void" inside sculptures, a space that he had always felt was rather meaningful, ever since back in 1920 in Milan he had made a sort of declaration relative to sculpture, to be interpreted as a "plastic womb." In this selection of reasons for differences and exchanges between Martini and Fontana I will not linger on this point which is, however, akin to the one relative to the *atmosphere* that is typical of sculpture, says Martini, and not of painting. Hence, a positive factor in a polemic context inside/against sculpture itself, which must be considered with the results that the sculptor gathered along the way as he traveled through an artistic genre that he had been practicing all his life.

Lastly, what emerges in the fundamental passage from "holes" to "slashes" is also perhaps a heartfelt homage to the Martini of the *expectation/expectancy* when Fontana modified-integrated the innovative syntagma "spatial concept" with expansion, "spatial concept, expectation," or, depending on the number of slashes, "spatial concept, expectations," thus intensifying with an existential tone the message of the following works, involving, you might say, even the previous ones in a single gnoseological system. At that moment (1958–59), Martini, forgotten and repressed in the season of Art Informel, was brought back to the attention of the more refined art specialists, indeed by a Fontana who was by then well aware that the antagonism with his colleague no longer made any sense.

In the title *Concetto spaziale*, already envisaged by insights the artists had in Argentina, what was unbearable was not so much the combination between "concept" and "spatial," but, rather, that

corresponding to such a "philosophical" title and in any case one with an elevated tone were works made with techniques (perforations, slashes) and ends (the "destruction" of the canvas support, a sacred object over the centuries), typical only of childish, Dadaist, or Luddite actions.

I believe that today there is no one left, if not from a historiographic point of view, who accepts the reading that Fontana was the first to suggest for his *Concetti spaziali*, seen as openings toward infinity, the hereafter, in a secular key but still fideistic and metaphysical, or utopian of a space "other."

Behind holes, slashes, tears, there is the void. Accepting this affirmation does not at all signify removing substance from the artist's epic invention. Rather, it leads us to valorize even more the open challenge as the most extreme, because it is addressed to the indeterminate and the indefinite. Suffice it to consider, then, that the thirty-eight variations of the large-scale cycle *Fine di Dio* (from 1963), about which the artist himself specified that the canvases that were disturbing, elusive for many critics, were to be seen as "the principle of the void" (Foscolo's "eternal void"? Nietzsche's death of God?).

All those who dealt with the symbolic works of the second half of the past century, in Italy, agree in seeing if not a link, a deep connection between two works, respectively by Martini and Fontana: *Atmosfera di una testa* (1944, bronze [FIG. 14]) and *Scultura spaziale* (1947, black plaster [FIG. 15]).<sup>9</sup> The first observation concerns the two artists. Martini was unable to recognize Fontana's black plaster (restarting, eighteen years later, from *Uomo nero*), made after his colleague's death, with clumps of material juxtaposed to form an empty circle. Could Fontana, on his part, been aware of Martini's bronze? We don't think so because, exhibited in 1944 at the Piccola Galleria in Venice for just a few days without a catalog and then joining the collection of Egle Rosmini, it was published for the first time by Enrico Crispolti in 1958 and seen for the first time in 1967 at the major anthological exhibition in Treviso. Of his work, however, Martini had also made a large gouache (now in a private collection), also showcased in Venice in 1944 and illustrated in the exhibition catalog *Martini. 30 disegni*, published in just a few copies by Roberto Nonveiller's Piccola Galleria. The catalog, for which there is a sole copy in Italian libraries, specifically at the Nazionale in Florence, is very rare, and for this reason has never been taken into consideration by the critics. But it is not only an image isolated from the context, as can be verified by those who read the complicated but fulfilling *Colloqui sulla scultura* (1944–45); it is believed that this was unknown to Fontana (the first edition is dated to 1968; the second, revised and annotated, 1997), but of use to us to qualify what

FIG. 13  
Arturo Martini, *Ocarina*  
(in Arturo Martini, *Colloqui sulla scultura. 1944-1945. Raccolti da Gino Scarpa, Canova, 1997*).

might otherwise seem to be something amusing by Martini, but is instead the outcome of thoughts very close (albeit geographically distant) to/from the ones that the Argentine-Italian artist brought with him in 1947 in Italy.

It is sufficient to arrive at “colloqui” XVI and XVII, the latter titled *Ricerca di un’atmosfera* to find not just two drawings of the work, outlined before Gino Scarpa, but thoughts formulated in these terms: “spatial harmony”; “form is never a solid but a void that contains it”; “content and form are two things, the one excluding the other”; “form is nothing but chaos that is composed each time like a maternal womb”; “form is a void, not a full: it is a womb, not the contents.” These are all approximations, research studies, projects, projections of thinking in movement that Fontana would have been able to subscribe to if they had not remained unpublished for over twenty years. They were not lost with the death of the sculptor from Treviso. It is as if Fontana had been familiar with them, that is how much the two artists in that period were close to a “very distant closeness” or a “very close distance.”



FIG. 14  
Arturo Martini, *Atmosfera di una testa*, 1944 (in Martini, *30 disegni*, exh. cat., Piccola Galleria, 1944).



FIG. 15  
*Scultura spaziale*, 1947.  
Private collection.

# LUCIO FONTANA'S “CREATIVE ABSTRACTION” IN THE PROJECTS AND SCULPTURES OF THE MID-1930S

Francesco Tedeschi

I chose to dedicate this paper to some of the reflections on the “abstract” sculptures that Lucio Fontana made around 1934, and that were exhibited in early 1935 at the Galleria del Milione as part of a short yet intense cycle dedicated by the Milanese gallery to Italian artists who were approaching non-figuration. My contribution here also focuses on a form of “creative abstraction,” by which I mean the possible Italian translation of the concept promoted by the Paris-based *Abstraction-Création* journal, one of the official organs for the dissemination of European and world abstract art in the 1930s. The choice of this angle concerns the various meanings with which the overcoming of, or detachment from, the representation of an image or of the presence of an objective referent was manifested in those years, as well as the need to situate this well-defined nucleus of works by the artist in a particular area of the positions expressed during that period and within that context. This has also been done by critical historiography,<sup>1</sup> to which we refer, seeking to provide, as much as possible, further emphasis also as concerns possible points of contact that can be determined in different directions.

Lucio Fontana's 1934 “abstract” sculptures constitute a group of works that act as the fulcrum of a season of analysis in which the artist pondered the potential of abstract or “non-figurative” art. Manifested in a peremptory and original way in these works by Fontana are features of inventiveness and experimentalism, distinguishing every stage in his research that, beyond the labels that, at times for the sake of brevity of inquiry, we have to face.

Precisely as concerns the possible definitions attributed to a current that included various artistic experiences occurring in those years, we can consider “non-figurative art” as a median and complementary term capable of combining two different directions in interpretation as concerns the origin of abstract forms, either derived from nature by “abstraction,” or immediately “created” by the artist. Thus it is added to the header of the yearbook-magazine *Abstraction-Création* (which indeed presents itself as “abstraction-cr ation art non-figuratif”) and is made more explicit in the opening declaration of its first edition, in 1932, as follows: “We do not judge, we do not compare, we do not distinguish those works made according to abstract evolution or according to direct creation. We force ourselves to assemble a document of non-figurative art.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In addition to the numerous interventions by Enrico Crispolti, the most important of which are quoted hereafter, see Paolo Campiglio, *Lucio Fontana. La scultura architettonica negli anni Trenta* (Ilisso, 1995) (esp. “Fontana e il Razionalismo,” 35–87) and Filippo

Trevisani, ed., *Lucio Fontana. Sculture*, exh. cat. (Electa, 2007) (in particular the texts by Enrico Crispolti and Paolo Campiglio).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *Abstraction-Création* 1 (1932): 1. Among the comments to the intentions that were exposed at the time, also

These words are meant to introduce a publication that gathers the forces of an “abstract” art genre open to the different angles of the creative origin of the formal models (we cannot overlook the fact that the advisory board included such names as Hans Arp, Albert Gleizes, Jean Hélion, Auguste Herbin, Frantisek Kupka, Leon Tutundjian, George Valmier, Georges Vantongerloo, all of them coming from different educational experiences and different generations; nor can we forget that the seat of the editorial department was located in the studio of Herbin, one of the artists who would most characterize the initiative that lasted five years).<sup>3</sup> The value of the term “création” indicates the individual and original (both initial and inventive) meaning of the works collected there, some of them a nod to Surrealism, especially in the Paris context, or that see its fulcrum as being in the French capital. As concerns this poetic theory open to various ideas, it can also be said that Fontana's peculiar position easily related to it, more than to a genre of “rationalist” abstraction.<sup>4</sup> The terminological definition and the qualification of the area are not, however, to be considered something that can be taken for granted and defined once and for all; moreover, speaking about Fontana's “creative abstraction” is an attempt to acknowledge his originality and at the same time his pertinence to that European context in the mid-1930s.

Going back to the specificity of the works that interest us, the questions that we can still ask ourselves about the sculptures Fontana made in 1934–35 concern the consistency of this group

in relation to the terminology adopted, cf. Georges Roque, *Che cos'è l'arte astratta?*, trans. Lucia Schettino (Donzelli, 2004), 120–26.

3 In this sense the universality of the operation is underscored, which is addressed to understanding authors who move in disparate directions in which the forms of abstraction found substance, in those years, especially in the Parisian context, as the center of internationality.

4 Although the definition of “rationalism” as well cannot be rigidly considered a clearly delineated hypothesis, as part of the artistic expressions of that period in time, which also include the same attempts made by the Italian artists working in the sphere of the Galleria del Milione. To this regard mention should be made of the final part of the declaration contained in the exhibition catalog that occurred in the studio of Casorati and Paulucci in Turin in 1935, which is indicated as *Prima mostra collettiva di arte astratta italiana—“Geometry, which has always been*

the highest human aspiration, is the key to our modernity. With its inflexible and endless laws, it excludes all arbitrary spillover of the creative imagination.

It is the common denominator of all of modern civilization, it is the axis of our everyday activity in every place. That is how we intend to proceed with order above every visual, apparent, and recreative reality—to understand how Fontana could only partially share this vision, subject to a redefinition in terms of “creation” outside of order. On the perspectives opened by the different active components in that situation, also in relation to the recourse to “rationalism” as a possible point of convergence, cf. Luciano Caramel, ed., *L'Europa dei razionalisti. Pittura scultura architettura negli anni trenta*, exh. cat. (Electa, 1989). As concerns Fontana's position with respect to the same declarations by the Italian abstract artists, cf. Enrico Crispolti, *Omaggio a Fontana* (B. Carucci, 1971), 43–48; Enrico Crispolti, “Fontana's Creative Path in Twentieth-century Art,” in CRSDA, I, 49–51.

of works, their reason for being made, and their role within the context in which they appear. Furthermore, their place in Fontana's creative output as a whole can be the object of further reflection.

Lucio Fontana showed a group of sculptures (at least nine, as can be deduced from the numbering adopted by Duilio Morosini in his spot-on review)<sup>5</sup> in January 1935 in the rooms of the Galleria Il Milione, some of which can be found in the images published in issue number 35 of the gallery's *Bollettino*<sup>6</sup> [FIG. 1].

FIG. 1  
Cover of *Il Milione*, no. 35,  
for the Lucio Fontana  
exhibition, Milan 1935.



5 Cf. Mor. [Duilio Morosini], “Mostre milanesi. Sculture di Lucio Fontana,” *Libro e Moschetto* (January 19, 1935).

6 Cf. *Il Milione. Bollettino della Galleria del Milione* 35 (January 14–28, 1935). Published on the cover is the image with six of these sculptures, placed on a shelf before a neutral wall, on which their shadow is not reflected (CRSDA, cf. nos. 34 SC 23, 34 SC 14, 34 SC 19, 34 SC 12, 34 SC 10, 34 SC 21), and three images inside

the publication: one with the *Scultura astratte* (CRSDA, cf. nos. 34 SC 7, 34 SC 5) placed side by side, their shadows projected on the wall behind them, and, in two other pictures, the almost frontal vision of *Profilo (Scultura astratta)* and *Scultura astratta* (CRSDA, cf. nos. 34 SC 10, 34 SC 12). For the remaining works 34 SC 23, 34 SC 14, 34 SC 19, 34 SC 21. All of them feature the caption “Scultura in cemento e ferro.”

A group of works that grew slightly, in the few illustrations at the time, starting from the photograph published in *Case d'oggi*, November 1934<sup>7</sup> [FIG. 2], where we can visualize another work, *Scultura astratta*,<sup>8</sup> composed of two two-dimensional walls, a white one and a black one, joined together, but with a crack in the upper portion so that they are divided [FIG. 3]. Above all, in this photograph we can see the effect of the almost two-dimensional or “frontal” forms in their relationship with the environment, due to the presence of a shadow on the wall behind it. This effect can be considered part of Fontana's expressive intention (it is also visible, featuring a slanted light, in the *Scultura astratta*,<sup>9</sup> published in the Galleria del Milione's *Bollettino*). Later, the 1935 issue of *Abstraction-Création* published two sculptures in this series. One of them<sup>10</sup> had already been illustrated in the Milione's *Bollettino*, with a variation, already present in the full-page image in the same *Bollettino*, in the color of the central bar, black with respect to how it appears in the photograph where the sculptures are aligned. The other<sup>11</sup> (which is not present in the images in the *Bollettino*) is based on the symbiosis between the

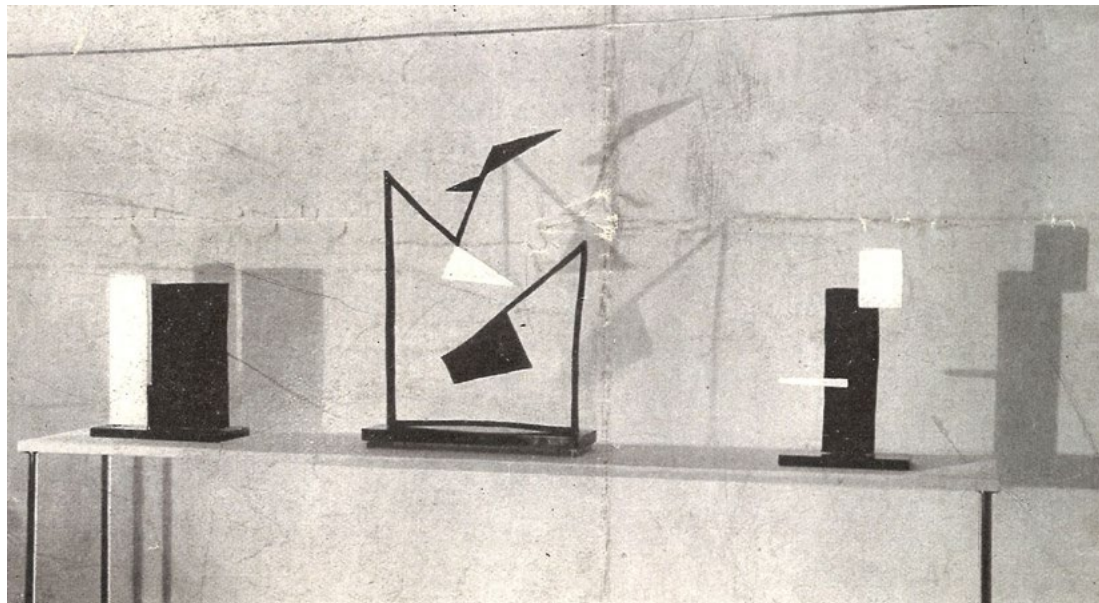


FIG. 2  
Abstract sculptures by  
Lucio Fontana (in *Case d'oggi*  
[November 1935]).

7 Cf. *Case d'oggi* XII (November 1934): 679, with the caption “Che cosa fanno i nostri scultori? Lucio Fontana di prima, e di ora” (What do our sculptors do? Lucio Fontana then, and now) (the image is accompanied by the reproduction of the 1933 terracotta sculpture *Le ospiti* [CRSDA, cf. no. 33 SC 3]). The image, published from a stereoplate from the

*Quadrante*, would later be reproduced in Raffaele Carrieri's *Pittura e scultura d'avanguardia in Italia; 1890-1950* (Edizioni della Conchiglia, 1950), 287, plate 358, with a caption that clearly includes an error in the date and reads “Lucio Fontana: Sculture astratte colorate, 1929-30” (Lucio Fontana: Colored abstract sculptures, 1929-30).

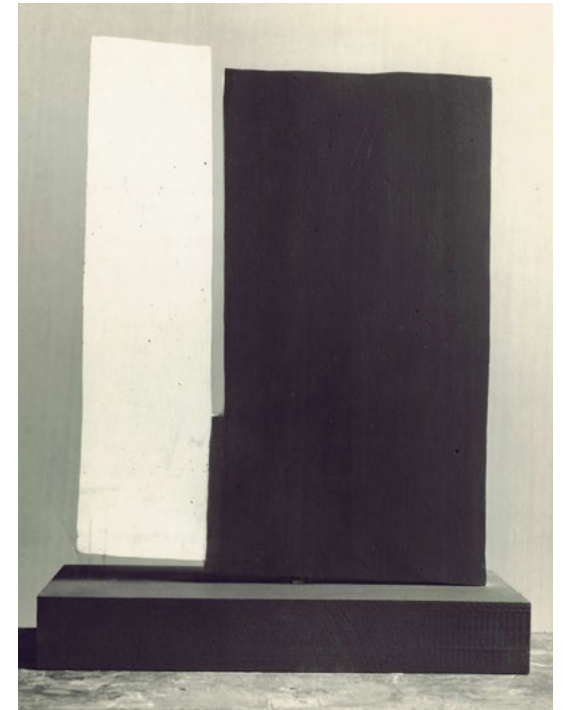


FIG. 3  
*Scultura astratta*, 1934/1960s.  
Private collection.

filiform structure of the wire that unwinds like a sign in space, and that of the biochromatic mass (clearly the elaboration of a motif that corresponds to one of the most published drawings from that period).<sup>12</sup> As a marginal note, it is worthwhile pointing out that the imprecise shape, of an almost organic nature, with the chromatic difference that Fontana adopted as an independent expressive element in *Scultura astratta*,<sup>13</sup> is very likely derived from the swimsuit of the *Bagnante* created for the Villa-studio of an artist, presented by Luigi Figini and Gino Pollini at the 1933 Triennale. This thought can help us to grasp how some aspects of simplification in an abstract direction in Fontana's sculptures from the mid-1930s were closely related to his specifically more “figurative” activity.

Lastly, it is important to recall the well-known reproduction of the sculpture, since lost, that was placed in the Ghiringhelli home, built in Piazzale Lagosta in Milan to a project by the architects Pietro Lingeri and Giuseppe Terragni.<sup>14</sup>

8 CRSDA, cf. no. 34 SC 25.

9 CRSDA, cf. no. 34 SC 5.

10 CRSDA, cf. no. 34 SC 12.

11 CRSDA, cf. no. 34 SC 16.

12 Cf. “Studi per Sculture astratte,” 1934 (CROC, cf. no. 34 DA 13r).

13 CRSDA, cf. no. 34 SC 19.

14 Cf. “Case d'abitazione a Milano. Arch. Lingeri e Terragni,” *Architettura* (September 1936): 438. CRSDA, cf. no. 35 A 3.

If we go back over the chapter that concerns these sculptures, in the reconstruction made possible by the studies that were channeled into the different editions of the *catalogues raisonnés* of the artist's works, we find that almost all the sculptures published in these images were destroyed or lost during the Second World War, and were then faithfully and completely reconstructed by the artist himself between the 1950s and 1960s. For two of the works documented in the images from the 1930s<sup>15</sup> and later lost, no reproduction after the war is known of.

To date only two sculptures that are known of were undoubtedly produced in 1934. There is the one currently at the IVAM in Valencia [FIG. 4], which until the 1990s was in the home of Luigi Veronesi; and then there is another, which is different from the works exhibited at the Galleria del Milione in that it consists of a wire inserted in a clay mass, now at the Fondazione Lucio Fontana.<sup>16</sup> We can safely say, therefore, that of the type of works exhibited at Il Milione, as much as the ones reconstructed by the artist after the war are all exactly the same as the ones that were lost during the war, the only one that has survived is the one that Luigi Veronesi owned. Some of the ones that were lost (three, to be precise) were listed in the catalog drafted by Enrico Crispolti starting from the 1970s based on the archive records, as belonging—the last owner that we know of—to Giulia Veronesi, Luigi's sister. They may have come to her from Edoardo Persico, who died in 1936,<sup>17</sup> soon after completing his monograph on Lucio Fontana, which was published posthumously. The latter, according to a published series limited to three exemplary volumes—dedicated to a painter, Atanasio Soldati; an architect, Alberto Sartoris; and a sculptor, Lucio Fontana—was preannounced as being in the works already in the publicity communication located at the end of the comments to the Fontana exhibition in the *Bollettino della Galleria del Milione*, January 30–February 15, 1935, presenting the Kurt Seligmann show, held right after the one of Fontana's sculptures. The series that included the project was published by *Campo Grafico*, a magazine that played an important role in disseminating, via the attention toward a technique somewhere between creation and communication, the autonomous potential of the semiotic composition. In some ways *Campo Grafico's* activity was complementary to that of the Galleria Il Milione, with which it had numerous points of contact. Leafing through the pages of *Campo Grafico*, moreover, the importance of a direct and indirect attention to Fontana's work is revealed.<sup>18</sup>

15 CRSDA, cf. nos. 34 SC 18, 34 SC 21.

16 CRSDA, cf. nos. 34 SC 22, 34 SC 29.

17 It is important to recall that the archive of Giulia Veronesi, as determined

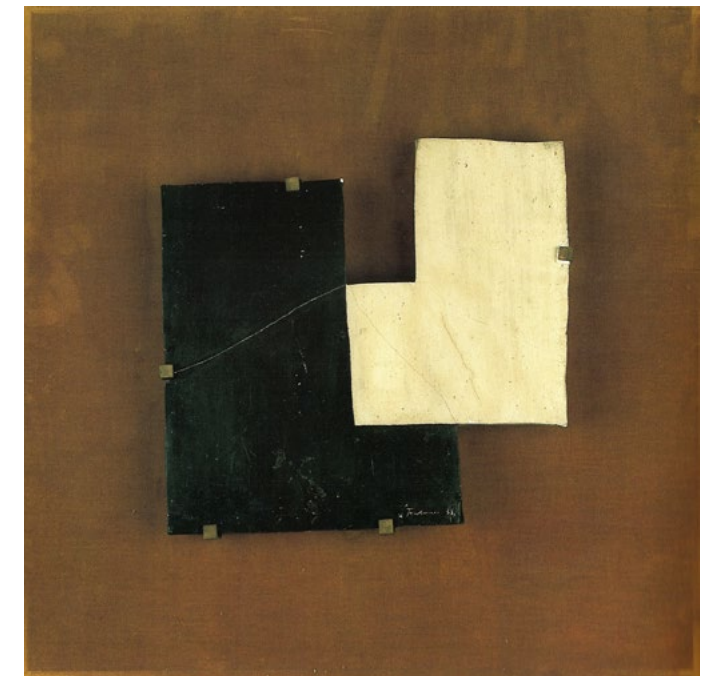
by the scholar herself, was destroyed upon her death, in 1970.

18 In addition to publishing some of her works, as we shall say further on, the

The trace of the relations between Fontana and Luigi and Giulia Veronesi, which can be linked to the esteem between the two artists and to the relationship they shared with Edoardo Persico, with whom Giulia Veronesi had collaborated closely, is of use to providing an overall picture of the relationships that Fontana's sculptures had within the Milanese, national, and international avant-garde during that period of time. We might, therefore, consider that the attraction between Fontana and Veronesi, something that has up until now not been given much importance, can be very helpful in determining several elements of comparison to be able to understand the pathway of formal elaboration that Fontana showed with his 1934 works.

Among the first indications of a creative conception in an abstract sense at the time, alongside the shows held at Il Milione, are the pages in *Campo Grafico* where authors like Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart and Willi Baumeister, due to their activity in the sector and to the "graphic" quality of their painting research, attracted attention that paralleled the interest they were shown by the Galleria Il Milione.<sup>19</sup>

FIG. 4  
Scultura astratta, 1934.  
Valencia, IVAM Centre  
Julio Gonzales; formerly  
Milan, Luigi Veronesi.



cover designed by Battista Pallavera for *Campo Grafico* I, no. 11 (November 1933) can appear to be a singular reproduction of Lucio Fontana's project for a monument to Giuseppe Grandi (CRSDA, cf. no. 31 A 1); this can

be considered an early example of constructive abstraction in Fontana's oeuvre.

19 Vordemberge-Gildewart showed his work at the Milione from October 15 to November 2, 1934, and it was

Luigi Veronesi actively collaborated with *Campo Grafico*, which was directed by Attilio Rossi<sup>20</sup> who was assisted by Carlo Dradi, as the author of a series of covers and interventions in the magazine itself. Veronesi's graphic and pictorial activity at the time was part of an evolution from the image to abstraction: This was visible on the cover (the first of seven) and in one of the woodcuts published in the July 1933 issue. The subject of the *silografia* (woodcut) was a "power station," but its composition was abstract, combining constructive elements and organic forms. Issue no. 6, June 1934, also featured a cover by Veronesi, and included an article by Alfredo De Simone valorizing the artist's innovative position [FIG. 5].<sup>21</sup> Among other things, the author observed as follows: "The modern woodcut



FIG. 5  
Luigi Veronesi, ART 177,  
1934 (published as  
a cover for *Campo Grafico*  
[June 1934]).

used for the cover of *Campo Grafico* II, no. 11 (November 1934). The publication devoted some five pages to the artist in an article written by Guido Modiano. Willi Baumeister held his exhibition at

Il Milione from May 25 to June 10, 1935, and his work took up three pages in issue no. 5, May 1935, of *Campo Grafico*.  
20 He then moved to Argentina, contributing to implementing, among

must, therefore, have a uniquely abstract value: lyrical; and with the content and the form of the book its sole relationship must be one of an equal level of sensibility." The same issue of *Campo Grafico* also included a second intervention by Veronesi concerning the techniques and features of the woodcut,<sup>22</sup> and other works of this genre are illustrated as well, clearly abstract ones. In these we find some affinities with Fontana's sculptures: in the essential geometry, in the part that is negated by the black and white shapes that offer a spatial scan of depth, in the overlapping of different textures, completed by those applications of color ("very little color" Veronesi suggests, based on a concern about the technique and the taste in the work) that spill over from the outlines of the two-dimensional shapes of the single forms; sharply geometric and other more irregular, biomorphic, amoeboid shapes alternate and combine. Although we cannot safely say that the latter may have offered immediate inspiration for the creative evolution that Fontana was pursuing in parallel (see works like Fontana's *Figura alla finestra*,<sup>23</sup> a colored terracotta from 1931), we can envision several affinities in the motifs that Fontana, akin to Veronesi, lingered on over the course of 1934. At the same time, in Milan an abstract trend was developing, which was sanctioned by the first abstract exhibition at Il Milione, foreshadowed by the publication of three color panels by Ghiringhelli, Reggiani, and Bogliardi, respectively, who would be the protagonists of the show, in the pages of *Campo Grafico* (issues nos. 3, 4, and 5 of 1934).

In particular, the essentially linear value of the outline in Fontana's sculptures, which achieved both evident two-dimensionality and frontality, may correspond to the sense of an accentuation of the graphic outline, with the slight presence of colors generating the idea of planes that are wedged and overlapping, in Veronesi's woodcut compositions. This determines the strongly "anti-plastic" origin of Fontana's sculptural work. As early as 1931 this was expressed in the incised panels and in the creation of rough contours in the colored terracotta sculptures.

The January 1935 exhibition of Fontana's work was preceded by that of the *Silografie recenti di Josef Albers e Luigi Veronesi*, whose role was to reconnect the position that was exposed by Veronesi, in particular via the interventions in *Campo Grafico*, with the experience of the Bauhaus, of which the Milanese artist was and would remain an admirer. The woodcut by Veronesi published in the

his first interventions in Fontana's native country, the exhibition of abstract Italian artists in the Moody Gallery held in December 1936; the event opened with his presentation.  
21 Cf. Alfonso De Simone, "Luigi

Veronesi silografo," *Campo Grafico* II, no. 6 (1934): 126-27.  
22 Cf. Luigi Veronesi, "Della silografia n. 2," *Campo Grafico* II, no. 6 (1934): 130-31.  
23 CRSC, cf. no. 31 SC 4.

*Bollettino* that accompanied the show is perhaps the work closest to the architectural-two-dimensional constructions of irregular geometries that constitute one of the two areas in which the peculiarity of Fontana's sculptural creations in those months were constituted [FIG. 6]. As was already acknowledged by Crispolti, in the first place, and can be shared if we examine these works by the artist, two "imaginative polarities" define them; one "of vaguely geometric character, in a certain greater straightness of profiles, though still all curvilinear and precarious"; "The other vaguely phytomorphic or organic, at times amoeboid, with an internal automatic scratched writing." Crispolti acknowledged as well among the factors common to the two subgroups the "process of ideological renewal of sculpture in the direction weightless and almost graphic spatial articulation."<sup>24</sup>

The two directions of Fontana's plastic research in an abstract sense can be considered the symptom of a personal interpretation, beyond the response to external stimuli, of the two macro-areas

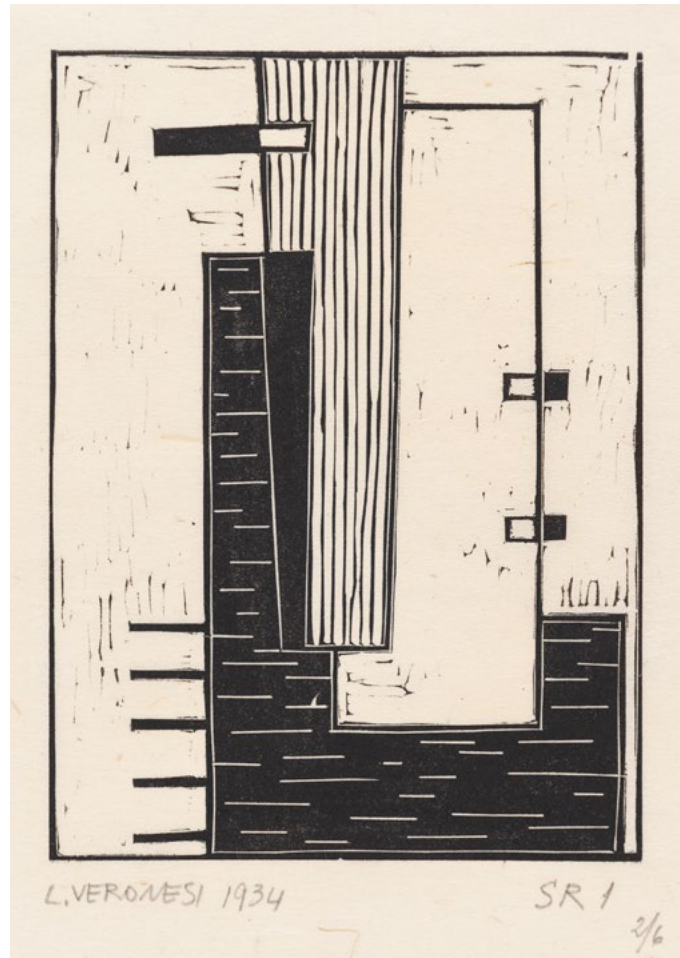


FIG. 6  
Luigi Veronesi, *Silografia*,  
1934 (back cover of *Il Milione*,  
no. 34 [December 1934 –  
January 1935]).

of non-figurative creation that were visible at the peak of the mid-1930s. One was more oriented toward the plastic values founded on the relevance of a geometric structuring of forms and space; the other was more open to receiving figural stimuli, and biomorphic and naturalistic inclinations, in a vein that at an international level manifested relations that in the previous years had been at the center of the contrapositions expressed by the critical debate in Paris in the early 1930s; this entailed a comparison between the more radically "concretist" positions of *Art Concret* and particularly of Theo van Doesburg, and the compromises with elements of Surrealism, which could be recognized in the initiatives of *Cercle et Carré* and returned to in an area that was defined as the manifestation of an "art of synthesis," by Gladys Fabre and Tomás Llorens Serra.<sup>25</sup> A kind of art, Fabre observes, that is not founded on opposite dialectical relations, but rather becomes a connecting point between various positions, where rational and irrational, conscious and subconscious, spirit and nature, all come together. This is one of the directions in which we recognize the horizon toward which the panorama hosted by the magazine *Abstraction-Création* opened up, the one that best represents the extent of the research in a "non-figurative" direction of those years. In 1935 the yearbook-magazine presented, along with Fontana's, the positions expressed on the one hand by some of the Italian authors who had recently offered proof of adhering to abstract canons, albeit very free ones. They were: Bogliardi, Ghiringhelli, Reggiani, Licini, Melotti, and Veronesi [FIG. 7], besides Fontana (hence, all those who had shown their works in the previous

24 Enrico Crispolti, "Primitivism, Abstraction, and Expressionism. The Twenties and Thirties," in *Lucio Fontana*, exh. cat., ed. Enrico Crispolti and Rosella Siligato (Electa, 1998), 39–40; however, substantially the same words are in CRSDA, I, 49. In Crispolti, *Omaggio a Lucio Fontana*, 43, the author remarked: "the sculptures made in '34 deny . . . any tendency toward elementary syllabifications of geometric forms and straight lines at orthogonal encounters. Actually, where the geometric indication is understood, it is almost explicitly a digressive pretext, and accepted almost in an ironic key, to be eliminated immediately, in fact, in its puristic aspect of manual—rather than ideal—sensibility of the contours, the lines, one might say deliberately uncertain and cursive. There is also the color that survives to free the plastic absoluteness of the warp, and it is to be reconstituted immediately to the excited sensibility, relative, hypothetical,

temporary, and open, rather than closed and peremptory in its own absoluteness as in classic concretist abstraction. And these are sculptures ideally consisting of a few planes, then arranged according to two faces, pure spatial graphism, in short, pure eventuality of plastic and formal pattern, clearly material, also due to the explicit chromatic adjectivizing—in space."

25 Cf. Gladys Fabre, ed., *Arte Abstracto, Arte Concreto. Paris 1930. Cercle et Carré*, exh. cat. (Institu Valencia d'Art Modern, 1990), and "Un art de synthèse. Du géométrique au biomorphisme," in *Années Trente en Europe. Le temps menaçant 1929-1939*, exh. cat. (Flammarion, 1997), 251–311 (see also Tomás Llorens Serra, "Le mouvement moderne au moment de la synthèse," in *Années Trente en Europe*, 26–29 and Gladys Fabre, "L'art abstrait-concret à la recherche d'une synthèse," in *Années Trente en Europe*, 71–75).



FIG. 7  
Luigi Veronesi, SR3, 1934  
(in *Abstraction-Création*,  
4 [1935]).

months at the Milione, except for Soldati, who would be afforded the space to do so the following year). This international encounter confirms the acceptance of Milione artists within a context, like that of Paris, that grew to become the center of creative energies synthesized on models that were rather open of the “abstract” conception of painting and of sculpture; for the sake of example, in that very same issue published in 1935, a work by Kandinsky and one by Picasso were published on the same page.

In previous years, only one Italian artist had been listed, in the first three issues, among the artists who bore witness to the relationships with the international European currents preceding the activities of the Galleria del Milione (and of *Campo Grafico*), that is to say, Enrico Prampolini, represented by works like his 1930 *Intervista con la materia*, published in the first issue of the magazine, or *Forme-forze nello spazio*, 1933, published in the third one,<sup>26</sup> in which poly-materialism, graphism, and the combinations

of forms within a cosmic spatial dimension, together with the material components, indicate the relationship between Futurist roots and the international language of a moment of crisis in “form” and “rationality.” This position was particularly aligned with that of the authors who had previously introduced those elements of the “synthesis” of language, from Joan Miró (who was not a part of the initiatives of *Abstraction-Création*, but whose paintings-collages can find a resonance with this context), to Hans Arp, Alexander Calder, and all the way to Louis Marcoussis, Serge Charchoune, Josef Jelinek and Herbin himself, albeit settling on a dimension of abstract, linear, fluid abstraction with biomorphic accents.

It might be asserted, based on these examples—albeit different from each other still able to reveal the plurality of positions that in the middle of the decade contributed to delineating the panorama of expressions of international abstraction—that Fontana, with his works, was the bearer of a further, personal way of interpreting this crisis of rationality and rationalism, which saw him adhering dialogically in the positions of contemporary European abstraction. A way in which geometry constitutes a castle to be built so that it can be dismantled, undermined from inside with its own devices. Where, however, the organic nature is equally the ephemeral result of strongly individual spatial graphics, a path toward overcoming the plastic form.

The position Fontana stated through these works, and via a broader openness in an abstract or non-figurative direction expressed in the incised plaster panels of 1931–32, with which he had already begun an exploration of irregular, imprecise/rough forms, that were already almost “Surrealist,” as Persico pointed out, as well as through a coming to terms with the architectural dimension, was included in that context precisely because the overcoming of the boundaries between excessively rigid poetics was part of his style. Dialogue and comparison were activated foremost through the multifariousness of his language; this was revealed in the small monograph curated by Edoardo Persico for *Campo Grafico* publications<sup>27</sup> in the pages that offered a comparison between drawings and abstract sculptures. A dialogue, that between these signs/drawings, or signs/anti-drawings,<sup>28</sup> turned the abstract season of

26 The two works are now respectively in the collections of the Galleria d'Arte Moderna in Turin and in the Giancarlo and Danna Olgiati collection, in Lugano; cf. Gabriella Belli and Bruno Corà, eds., *Prampolini Burri. Della Materia*, exh. cat. (Mousse, 2025), respectively 70 and 74, for updated entries.

27 Edoardo Persico, *Lucio Fontana* (Edizioni di Campo grafico, 1936).

28 De Bartolomeis remarks as follows: “With these panels Fontana experiments with the risky operation of taking himself to point zero and then beginning from the end of art. This is a constant: that is, he has always produced in the position of beginnings after the end. On this side of the end there is the figurative, there are traditional forms, useless repetition,

the 1930s into a foreshadowing of subsequent developments. This is confirmed in a couple of clues found in two drawings from the notebooks of 1948 concerning the continuity between the artist's works from the 1930s and his new spatial season.

In the former, the project idea of a "first spatial exhibition in the world," Fontana arranged on a table the model for the monument to Giuseppe Grandi next to a "Veronesi sculpture," in which we can hypothesize that Fontana indicated, albeit in a simplified manner, the black and white plaster panel now at the IVAM in Valencia; to be positioned alongside some of the drawings of 1934.<sup>29</sup>

In the other, an initial layout of the itinerary, in addition to the cone of the monument to Grandi, which was, however, identified as a "project for a monument to Boccioni" (declaring perhaps the inspirational origin of his particular conception) and a reference to the "Futurist theory," we find some of the abstract sculptures from 1934. Under the last of these are the words from the article that Carrà dedicated to his show at the Milione: "Where will we end up with this abandonment to purity?" followed by Fontana's reply: "With spatial art. A unique art in a single technique." The return to the shape of one of the most effective abstract sculptures of 1934<sup>30</sup>

[FIG. 8] in the flyer in which the *Manifesto Blanco* is presented thus serves as a bridge between the works of the mid-1930s and the new Spatialist projection, aimed at transcending the distinctions between the materials, techniques, and absolute stylistic models, a goal that Fontana seemed to consciously cultivate as early as in his abstract sculptures, the indication of a gaze that manifests his independence and originality within the broader perspective that these works foreshadowed.

an equivocally committed realism or an evasive surrealism: hence, something that cannot be compared with the borrowed vision of life, with the pressure within it of science and technology. From this perspective, it is not hard to understand that the elementariness of the solutions (starting

from the incised panels) is born from the awareness of the essential, from a creative intervention of abstraction," Francesco De Bartolomeis, *Segno antidisegno di Lucio Fontana* (Edizioni d'arte Fratelli Pozzo, 1967), n. p.  
 29 CROC, cf. nos. 48 DBL 26, 48 DBL 35r/v.  
 30 CRSDA, cf. no. 34 SC 10.

FIG. 8  
*Profilo* (silhouette of *Scultura astratta*, 1934, reproduced on the brochure-invitation to the exhibition *L'ambiente spaziale di Lucio Fontana*, 1949, Milan, Galleria del Naviglio).



# FONTANA, TULLIO MAZZOTTI (AND THE OTHERS): THE CERAMIC OBJECT FROM 1936 TO 1940

Valerio Terraroli

*Lucio Fontana's first encounter with the ceramicist Tullio (Spartaco) Mazzotti took place in Palazzo Ducale in Genoa, probably through Edoardo Persico, on November 14, 1934, on the occasion of the opening of the *Prima Mostra Nazionale di Plastica Murale per l'Edilizia Fascista*. The evening saw the attendance, besides Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, of the leaders of the so-called Second Futurist movement, namely, Nikolay Diulgheroff, Fillia, Enrico Prampolini, Fortunato Depero, among many others. We do not know exactly what they said to each other, nor did they agree to meet again, but it was no doubt an opportunity to exchange ideas: Tullio was intrigued by the idea that Fontana, like others at the time, designed and shaped sculptural works at the family-run manufactory in Albisola; Fontana, on his part, was drawn to the idea of experimenting with his own explicitly anti-classical and anti-Novecento sculptural language,<sup>1</sup> using the medium of ceramics to do so. The experiments began when he was still young, as the artist himself recalled in 1939 describing his own poetics around ceramics:*

I'm a sculptor, not a ceramicist. I've never used a lathe on a plate, nor have I ever painted a vase. I dislike lace and nuances. The delicacies and the exquisite firings of the "Copenhagen" bore me. And the same can be said for all the sets of Sèvres, porcelain biscuit ceramic majolica. I abhor the mystics of technique. With the prodigious technology of Sèvres and Copenhagen, we satisfy the tastes of ladies and collectors. It's a kind of ecstasy for fragile things and mid-tone. I want something else. During my long stay at the Sèvres workshops, I sought and studied form, the expression of form. I kept crafting, just as in my studio, figures and metamorphoses weighing tones. And I painted these with bold colors. My flowing form from the first to final models is never separate from color. My sculptures have always been multicolored. I painted plaster, and I painted terracotta. Inseparable color and form, born from an identical need. . . . I made my first ceramic in Argentina in 1926: the "Charleston Dancer," bought by the Modern Art Gallery in Rosario Santa Fe. It was only in 1936 when I began to work in the Mazzotti factory in Albisola, a true activity in this field with around fifty pieces: alga, butterflies, flowers, crocodiles, lobsters, an entire petrified, shiny aquarium. The substance was attractive. I could craft a seabed, a statue, or some hair and impress it with a virgin,

<sup>1</sup> Enrico Crispolti, "Fontana's Creative Path in Twentieth-century Art," in CRSDA, I, 13.

compact color that fire would later amalgamate. Fire was a kind of intermediary: It perpetuated form and color. After the aquarium and mineral flowers I made busts, masks, metamorphoses. My women with golden faces toured Italian galleries. My works were called primordial ceramics. The substance was struck by an earthquake, but static. Critics called them ceramics. I called them sculptures. The sculptural repertoire was enriched with botanical and marine motifs, but the form followed its course and the shifts of the rhythm that were taking shape inside me so quickly wasted no time.<sup>2</sup>

By declaring himself to be a sculptor and not a ceramicist, what Fontana intended, on the one hand, was to evoke his early approach to making ceramic sculptures, but, on the other, to underscore his own detachment from any artisanal skill, having given up compromises between form and matter, bestowing on the latter a formal and expressive prevalence. Having returned to Milan in 1927 and completed his training at Brera Academy, specifically briefly attending the course taught by Adolfo Wildt, as early as 1932–33 Fontana began using concrete and iron, plaster and terracotta to make shapes. Terracotta turned out to be the medium most suited to translating creative tension aimed at reducing, if not canceling, by way of a direct sculptural manipulation and, at times, the anti-naturalistic use of color, the traditional distinction between painting and sculpture. Moreover, the first signs of overcoming a classical language, albeit toned down in the sought-after simplification of the volumes, and in the substantial abstraction of Wildtian inspiration, are clear to see in the anti-Novecento-style *Campione olimpionico*,<sup>3</sup> 1932—made from blue-painted incised plaster, showcased that same year at the at the third art exhibition of the Sindacato Regionale Fascista di Belle Arti in the Permanente in Milan, and later, in 1935, at the second Rome Quadriennale—and in the Erba War Memorial,<sup>4</sup> commissioned from the artist by Giuseppe Terragni in 1928, whose red and gold colored model was presented at the artist's second solo show at the Galleria del Milione in late 1931. Edoardo Persico remembered it to be a disconcerting work, proof of the artist's desire to transcend Novecento-style sculptural techniques. Dated to that same period are the colored terracotta reliefs and some plaster, or concrete, panels featuring incised surfaces outlining natural forms expressed in abstract

2 Lucio Fontana, "My Ceramics," *Tempo* (September 21, 1939) (in CRSC, I, 151).

3 CRSDA, cf. no. 32 SC 8.

4 CRSDA, cf. no. 30 A 5. On Lucio

Fontana's ceramic output, see also the recently published Sharon Hecker, ed., *Mani-Fattura. Le ceramiche di Lucio Fontana*, exh. cat. (Marsilio arte, 2025).

ones. It is likely, therefore, that besides the plaster and the cement, incised and painted black or white, or featuring bronze insertions or mosaic finishes, Fontana started working with ceramics between 1931–32, at the studio of Fausto Melotti, his friend besides being someone he had studied with at the Academy. Melotti had studied with Wildt as well and was oriented toward an abstract formulation of sculpture not in a material-metamorphic key, free and non-geometric like that of Fontana, but, rather, mathematical and rational and strictly related to contemporary musical language with neo-metaphysical results.

Thus, Fontana and Tullio Mazzotti's encounter in Genoa was not immediately followed by the sculptor's engagement at the Manifattura Giuseppe Mazzotti (MGA) in Albisola, which did not take place until 1936. Tullio recalled as follows: "I enthusiastically accepted the idea of a ceramic edition of one-off pieces modeled directly by the sculptor of the mad horses. But Fontana did not come to our kilns until after his and my great friend departed, in 1936,"<sup>5</sup> referring to Persico's passing, in February 1936. Already in 1920 Arturo Martini had begun working in Liguria—in Vado Ligure, then in Savona at the Savona Nuova, in Nervi at Ilca, and, lastly, in Albisola, at SPICA—and from the 1930s Albisola became one of the major producers of artists' ceramic works, success that Lucio Fontana contributed to as well. In 1938, after a brief period at the national manufactory of Sèvres, the artist's ceramic work grew more intense, and he began impressing in the material the poetic revolution of his language. He went beyond the surfaces featuring incisions and cuts, the first of these produced with the terracotta that would be exalted in his works in the late 1950s. He understood, made his own, and applied the intentions expressed in the *Manifesto futurista della Ceramica e Aereoceramica* (Futurist manifesto of ceramics and aereoceramics) published in 1938,<sup>6</sup> when he decided to combine technical skill and conceptual research: The free gesture and his amused and engaged boldness, his experimenting without holding back and devoid of formal preconceptions, became a stimulus and a model for many who measured up to the experience of working with ceramics, laying the foundations for a new idea of sculpture and plastic ornament that could exist side by side with architectural design needs and religious patronage. Fontana, thanks to the critical and collecting success of his ceramic works, on display in some of the major international events, such as the Venice Biennale, spurred on and inspired new life in the affirmation of ceramic sculpture and

5 Luca Bochicchio, "Commento critico al carteggio," in Lucio Fontana, *Lettere a Tullio d'Albisola 1936-1964*, ed. Luca Bochicchio (Abscondita,

2023), 110, note 3.  
6 "Manifesto futurista della Ceramica e Aereoceramica," *Gazzetta del Popolo* (September 7, 1938).

ceramics as the artistic language of contemporary art.<sup>7</sup> Whereas in his first works (still lifes and animals) a “traditional” Mediterranean drive was still visible, the works he made in the 1950s were more experimental; it is in these works—where the gesture defines matter as a living presence, escaping the contour and perceiving the instant, highlighting the preciousness of the enamels, reflections, and iridescence—that we can grasp the innovation of the plasticist syntax. Besides Fontana (or perhaps precisely thanks to Fontana) many artists approached ceramics in the 1950s in Albisola. Some of them moved there in a substantial way, while others only passed through to work there in the summers, taking advantage of the seaside. The town became a hotbed of ideas, exchanges, and experiences thanks to Baj, Capogrossi, Cherchi, Corneille, Crippa, Dangelo, Jorn, Lam, Manzoni, Matta, Scanavino, to name only a few of the most famous artists who spent time there.<sup>8</sup> Precisely in the name of a total superseding of the measure of the accessory and purely illustrative purpose of the ceramic piece, Fontana soon began working on the realization of large-scale sculptures that he made with refractory clay and whose subjects were exotic animals, like *Cocodrillo e serpente*,<sup>9</sup> which he crafted in 1936 [FIG. 1]. Four meters in length, the work was then situated in the garden of the Mazzotti home, recalled in a letter sent to Tullio on September 20 that year: “The architect Palanti, Via Panizza 4, wishes to know the exact dimensions and the final price for the ceramic crocodile, if you can, send him a few pictures. I am certain that if we manage to make large-scales ceramics for this winter’s exhibition we shall be very successful. . . . I think two turtles were forgotten, paint them black.”<sup>10</sup>

The Futurist poet and writer Luigi Pennone deserves credit for one of the very first critical interventions dedicated to the expressive elements in Fontana’s first ceramic period:

devourer of clay, scratched, shaped, and completed as clear expression in the short time it takes to smoke a “Lucky.” He began unnoticed last summer with horses and crocodiles that new enamels caused to vibrate, producing for him that painting-sculpture solution dreamed of repeatedly: and instantly he wanted them to be big, huge, in contrast with the shiny trinkets for a sitting room with one-meter turtles and five-meter caimans. . . . the plastic telling of a fantastic underwater voyage: lobsters, octopi, corals, crystallized clusters of algae, phosphorescent corollas and bunches of

7 CRSC.

8 Fontana, *Lettere a Tullio d’Albisola*, 123–31.

9 CRSC, cf. no. 36–37 SC 8.

10 Fontana, *Lettere a Tullio d’Albisola*, 17.

asparaguses. He totally destroyed all the ancient symbols of majolica and porcelain, to invent new forms and sun-drenched colors.<sup>11</sup>



FIG. 1  
Giuseppe Mazzotti and Lucio Fontana in the MGA workshop in Albisola, while making *Cocodrillo e serpente*, 1936. Albisola, Manifattura Giuseppe Mazzotti Archive.

The use of color, with enamels followed by metallic lustre, produced on Fontana’s material and broken shapes a new relationship with space, as the colors are not merely simple coatings of the surfaces, they do not have an illustrative function, they do not serve to underscore tonal variations to achieve chiaroscuro values; they are per se, and fully so, a plastic principle, and therefore a spatial one of the sculpture, as enamels and lustre are the concrete form of a space without depth in that they do not so much respond to the external reverberation of light in a naturalistic sense, contributing instead to the liberation of the form.

11 Luigi Pennone, “Il ‘fenomeno’ Fontana,” *Il Secolo XIX* (February 21, 1937).

Brothers Tullio and Torido Mazzotti were not the only ones in those years to be involved in the focus on and application of Second Futurist and aeropainting poetics in ceramic production; at the MGA—reconstructed between 1932 and 1934 to a project by Nikolay Diulgheroff in Bauhaus forms economically supported by the rich production of artistic and popular ceramics—they also hosted numerous artists who were moving in that direction: from Fillia to Diulgheroff, from Bruno Munari to Mino Rosso, from Alf Gaudenzi to Farfa. Contacts, relations, common experiences that led to the drafting of the *Manifesto futurista della Ceramica e Aereoceramica*—published in 1938 and signed by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and, of course, Tullio d'Albisola. The text theorized the transposition into ceramics of “ceramic simultaneities of contrasting and harmonized states of mind . . . using force-lines, tones devoid of *verismo*, forms and colors neither narrative nor descriptive, but suggestive instead.” Diulgheroff's aeroceramics coherently fulfilled these goals, even before they were codified in the *Manifesto*, featuring asymmetric shapes and kinetic geometric decorations, in line with the principles of the Bauhaus where he had done his training. There were Fillia's spherical vases anchored to spatial planes, Torido Mazzotti's “motorized” vases, and Tullio d'Albisola's “anti-imitative” pitchers. In Tullio the bright chromatism combined with passwords and slogans transcended the decoration, and the objects aspired, besides to their function, to being sculpture. The collaboration with Fabbri, Fancello, and, above all, with Fontana promoted the transcending of the canonical idea of ceramics as something linked to the practical object in favor of the idea of ceramics as sculpture, in the same way that the presupposition of the decoration found new meaning in the pictorial dimension. The group of artists, assembled by Tullio and Torido Mazzotti, who brought the Second Futurist movement to life in Albisola, Savona, and Genoa, with the frequent presence of Marinetti, were joined, around 1934–35, by two young artists: Agenore Fabbri, from Tuscany, and Salvatore Fancello, a Sardinian. The latter was one of the most promising artists of the 1930s, with a repertoire that drew from the natural elements of his native land, reworked with accents that looked to the greatest names in international sculpture, but also to the expressive pictorial specifics of the Roman school, and to the still lives that Fontana was making in Albisola. Fancello had a remarkable imaginative and fantastic strength that he applied wisely in an organic interaction between sculpture and painting. This would be the key to interpretation for many artists in the 1950s, characterized by expressive tensions that drew force from matter. This was also the case for both Fontana and Leoncillo Leonardi, with whom Fancello showed his work in 1940 at the 7th Milan Triennale, where he was awarded the Diploma of Honor.

At the MGA the Sardinian artist made plastic compositions in terracotta, partially incised and on which he intervened with enamel, inspired by nature and in which animals—wild boars, horses, bulls, lions, at times fighting each other—express a primitive force, an archaic energy made explicit by the exaltation of the material that seems to come apart and then be recomposed continually. Lucio Fontana, during the same period, was elaborating his own *animalier* production, at first in painted terracotta, and later in majolica, adding to it the more abstract line that he had already begun in Milan. What is evident is that the use of ceramic represents the logical consequence and an enrichment in a naturalistic key of the experience of the first decade. The objective was to create art that aspired to be intuitive, primitive, and that found in the use of terracotta its own ideal medium, archaic, but not in the Martinian sense of the return of Etruscan coroplastic art; rather, for the form-not-form that solidified the power of the gesture of the modeling and of the scratch or deep incision, in turn highlighted by brilliant enamels and third firing metallic lusters that eradicated any descriptive and realistic temptation of the subjects:

These skills at coloring were brought to the factory by both Tullio and his brother Torido (thanks to the lessons they had learned in Faenza) and were later developed masterfully by Mariano (Giuseppe Baldantoni, Tullio's brother-in-law and Esa's father), who became so skilled at the use of reflections and “nuances” that they became Mazzotti's production of excellence. With those shiny objects, both Fontana and Fancello breathed life into a fanciful and strongly surreal-expressionistic universe of flora and fauna.<sup>12</sup>

In *Cinghiali*, 1936, *Due tigri* and *La grotta dei cinghiali rossi*, 1936–37, *Lotta tra cavallo e toro*, *Leone con la criniera rossa e preda*, and in the enameled decorative plate *Leone e cinghiali*, all of which were made in 1938, Salvatore Fancello fully expressed the sense of a constant reference to popular Sardinian culture, to its artisanal tradition, but revealed in forms and colors that were markedly expressionist, immersed in surreal atmospheres; in a similar way, Lucio Fontana, in *Vongola e corallo* and *Granchio*, 1936, *Seppia* [FIG. 2], *Due coccodrilli*, *Polpo e corallo*, 1937, and in *Cavalli marini*,<sup>13</sup> 1938, explored and experimented with the expressive qualities of ceramics, and, above, the extraordinary and anti-plastic effects of the sheens and iridescence of the colors: The marine background, the faun

12 Fontana, *Lettere a Tullio d'Albisola*, 112–13.

13 CRSC, cf. nos. 36 SC 6, 36 SC 9, 37 SC 23, 36–37 SC 5, 37 SC 3, 38 SC 24.

on the rocks, became one with the material that was in constant metamorphosis. This same lesson was taken up in the early postwar years by Federico Quattrini, who arrived in Albisola and approached the ceramic material, which would lead him to sculpture, baking his clay works in the kilns of Pozzo Garitta. Quattrini started out as a ceramicist in 1949, presenting some of his works, one-off pieces such as the two sculptural works *Lotta di draghi* [FIGS. 3–4] in which the force of the “Fontanian” modeling [FIG. 5] was dissolved in the captivating beauty of the iridescent polychrome enamel. At the same time his work demonstrated the extent to which Lucio Fontana’s linguistic innovations influenced the production of ceramic sculpture in Albisola in the 1940s and 1950s.



FIG. 2  
*Seppia*, 1937.  
Private collection.

FIGS. 3-4  
Federico Quattrini,  
*Lotta di draghi*, 1949.  
Private collection.



Fontana’s abandoning of incised, painted terracotta, the use of majolicas, his attempts with grès in Sèvres, all these things encouraged Fontana to accentuate the fusion between material, form, color, and space, for a sort of elaboration of the idea of the “Baroque” interpreted not a stylistic key<sup>14</sup> but from a conceptual point of view, with the goal of going beyond any distinction between sculpture, painting, and architecture, in terms of a recovery of that metamorphic plasticity that is the essential characteristic of ceramic sculpture:

The root of this component was clearly not of cultural-istic (and hence programmatic) origin, but was entirely a matter of instinct, or sympathy. The plausibility of the reference lies, in fact, in the instinctual recognition of the plastic phenomenology of the Baroque as an archetype of imaginative vitalism, in relation both to the dynamism of the form and to the expansion of this dynamism in space.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> CRSDA, I, 19–23.

<sup>15</sup> CRSDA, I, 19–20.



FIG. 5  
*Drago*, 1949–51.  
 Private collection.

Having returned to Milan, after the time he spent in Sèvres, Lucio Fontana wrote to Tullio d'Albisola as follows:

I have a few more things to do here in Milan, and next week I'll be in Albisola, where in all likelihood I will remain until the end of September. As you know, there is a lot of work to be done, and especially as concerns the preparation of several large-scale pieces for the exhibition in New York. Yesterday, I received an invitation to show 10 ceramic works at the Quadriennale; if I were to accept, I would like to send some important pieces to be displayed there. . . . If I don't mess things up, by October the Albisola kilns will be awarding me the laurels of a consecrated ceramicist. Ceramicist! Splendid! The aristocracy of the art of sculpture.<sup>16</sup>

In fact, the sculptor was soon distracted by a series of other commitments, to the extent that in a letter to Tullio dated February 22, 1940, he wrote this:

You're right to say that I'm (sort of) disgusting, I'm working on some free-standing mosaic sculptures, two por-

16 Letter dated June 21, 1938, in Fontana, *Lettere a Tullio d'Albisola*, 45.

traits have come out right. Right now, I'm making a medusa 3 meters in diameter for the Triennale. The collector Simonotti ordered from me a mosaic statue, of course the material is a bitch but fascinating at the same time. Don't cry because I betrayed ceramics, I will return to your friendship in sunny Albisola.<sup>17</sup>

The advent of the war and the artist's quick relocation to Argentina interrupted his relations with the MGA, which he would resume between 1946 and 1947, the years of the writing of the *Manifesto Blanco* and of the beginning of Spatialism and the first *Buchi* that Tullio d'Albisola did not approve of, as Lucio Fontana remarked in a letter he wrote on May 12, 1953: "Whatever it is you say about the holes, it is from the holes that the orientation of the new art will be filtered purified (so I was told by Giotto in Padua, which Donatello confirmed)."<sup>18</sup>

17 Fontana, *Lettere a Tullio d'Albisola*, 53.

18 Fontana, *Lettere a Tullio d'Albisola*, 71.

# VENETIAN SPATIALISM: THE ALLURE OF SHADOW IN MARIO DELUIGI AND LUCIO FONTANA

Giovanni Bianchi

Mario Deluigi and Lucio Fontana first met in Milan in the late 1940s, through Carlo Cardazzo. The relationship between the two artists was one of mutual esteem,<sup>1</sup> attested to by the fact that Fontana's private collection also included a work by Deluigi<sup>2</sup> [FIG. 1].

Cardazzo had first come across Fontana in the late 1930s when, through Giuseppe Cesetti, he acquired two of the artist's works: the colored ceramic *Cervo* (displayed at the 1938–39 ceramics exhibition hosted by the Galleria del Milione) and the small bronze *Desnudandose*.<sup>3</sup>

FIG. 1  
Brochure-invitation to the exhibition *18 opere della collezione privata di Lucio Fontana 18 opere della collezione privata di Bruno Munari*, 1957, Milan, Galleria Blu.



- 1 In an interview he gave in 1976, Deluigi recalled: "As a person Lucio was genuine, kind, always willing, pure." Cf. Marzio Breda, "Deluigi: il segno della luce. Incontri con i protagonisti della cultura veneta," *L'Arena*, Verona (January 3, 1976).
- 2 Deluigi's work in the Fontana collection is one of his *grattages*, presented in a solo show hosted by the Naviglio in 1955 (May 31–June 9). In a letter from Carlo Cardazzo to Deluigi dated June 10, 1955, there is a reference to a work destined to Fontana, Archivio Mario Deluigi (hereafter AMD), fasc. *Lettere di Carlo Cardazzo*. Deluigi's words regarding this were: "Fontana had great esteem for me. When I made my first paintings of this kind, that is, the ones involving

my research into light, twice Fontana came to the gallery and bought one of my works." Cf. Breda, "Deluigi: il segno della luce." The work was exhibited in May 1957 at the Galleria Blu in Milan which had just opened, for the exhibition of some works from the private collections of Lucio Fontana and Bruno Munari, referred to in the catalog-invitation as "the spatial" and "the very perfect." On this, see Gaspare Luigi Marcone, *Lucio Fontana. Mecenate Collezionista Militante* (Electa-Fondazione Lucio Fontana, 2025).

- 3 CRSC cfr. no. 36 SC 8 and CRSDA cfr. no. 36 SC 1. On the relationship between Cardazzo and Fontana, see: Luca Massimo Barbero, "Carlo Cardazzo e Lucio Fontana," in *Carlo Cardazzo*.

The latter was showcased in 1941 at the Galleria di Roma, at the presentation of the Cardazzo collection<sup>4</sup> (next to *Gaby*, a 1930 work by Marino Marini [FIG. 2]). However, they would not really meet until 1947, after Fontana's return from Argentina, when together they would fund Spatialism, one of the most significant post-Second World War movements, whose launching pad would be the Galleria del Naviglio, opened by Cardazzo in 1946.

The first meeting between Cardazzo and Deluigi (both of whom active in Venice), on the other hand, dates back to the late 1930s, when the artist frequented the Cavallino circle and visited Cardazzo's collection.<sup>5</sup> Their relationship intensified in the early 1940s on the occasion of the artist's first solo show, held in 1944 at the Galleria del Cavallino<sup>6</sup> (which had opened in 1942), where various monotypes were presented, documenting his physiological research. Subsequently, Deluigi designed the cover for *I canti di Maldoror* (by Isidore Ducasse Comte de Lautréamont), a book published in 1945 by Edizioni del Cavallino for the "Letteratura Straniera" series (begun in 1943 [FIG. 3])<sup>7</sup>.

*Una nuova visione dell'arte*, exh. cat., ed. Luca Massimo Barbero (Electa, 2008), 229–55..

4 XLIII. *Mostra della Galleria di Roma con opere della raccolta di Carlo Cardazzo, Venezia, Rome, Galleria di Roma, April 3–15, 1941.*

5 Cf. typewritten text, initialed C. [Carlo] C. [Cardazzo], dated to 1940, published in Giovanni Bianchi, *Un Cavallino come logo. Storia delle Edizioni del Cavallino* (Edizioni del Cavallino, 2006 [2007]), 259: "Since 1933, hundreds of people have come to visit my collection. My list includes only those who have a specific relationship with art: Giuseppe Bottai, Massimo Bontempelli, Gianfrancesco Malipiero, Carlo Carrà, Massimo Campigli, R. Augustinich, Filippo De Pisis, Ardengo Soffici, Antonio Delfini, Francesco Flora, Massimo Leij, Nicola Lisi, Marino Marini, V.E. Barbaroux, Giulio Carlo Argan, Manlio Dazzi, Alberto Della Ragione, Giorgio Morandi, Marino Lazzari, Oreste Meroni, Leonardo Sinisgalli, Orazio Napoli, Giuseppe de Robertis, Piero Bigongiari, Alfredo Giarratana, Gianandrea Gavazzeni, Francesco Messina, Giuseppe Mersica, Leone Minassian, Giuseppe

Cesetti, Renato Mucci, Michelangelo Masciotta, Gastone Breddo, Raffaele Carrieri, Domenico Cantatore, Annamaria Brizio, Agostino Bretoni, Piero Romanelli, Italo Cremona, E.I. Dujntier, Domenico De Paoli, Ferdinando Previtali, Goffredo Patrassi, Virgilio Mortari, Nino Sanzogno, Gio Ponti, F.T. Roffarè, Bruno Romani, Aligi Sassu, Gastone Toschi, Giulio Rossi, Umbro Apollonio, Gino Severini, Gualtieri di San Lazzaro, Sebastiano Timpanaro, Fiorenzo Tomea, Ottone Rosai, Pio Semeghini, Antonio Santangelo, Alessandro Parronchi, Antonio Gelmetti, Vittorio Maraffi, Lamberto Ramenzoni, Umberto Saba, Gerolamo Valli, Diego Valeri, Alberto Viani, Pietro Ferodi, Ferdinando Lion, Enzo Madrau, Aldo Bergamini, Luigi Berti, Mario Deluigi, Matteo Pedrali, Enrico Somarè, Rodolfo Pallucchini, Galeazzo Biadene, Werther Marini, Luigi Tito, Fioravante Seibezzi, Piero Mentasti. Etc. Etc."

6 See: Giovanni Bianchi, "Il Cavallino, 'vibrante centro d'arte moderna,'" in Barbero, *Carlo Cardazzo*, 119–63.

7 The Edizioni del Cavallino were founded in 1934. See Bianchi, *Un Cavallino come logo.*



FIG. 2  
View of the XLIII. *Mostra della Galleria di Roma con opere della raccolta di Carlo Cardazzo, Venezia, 1941, Rome.*

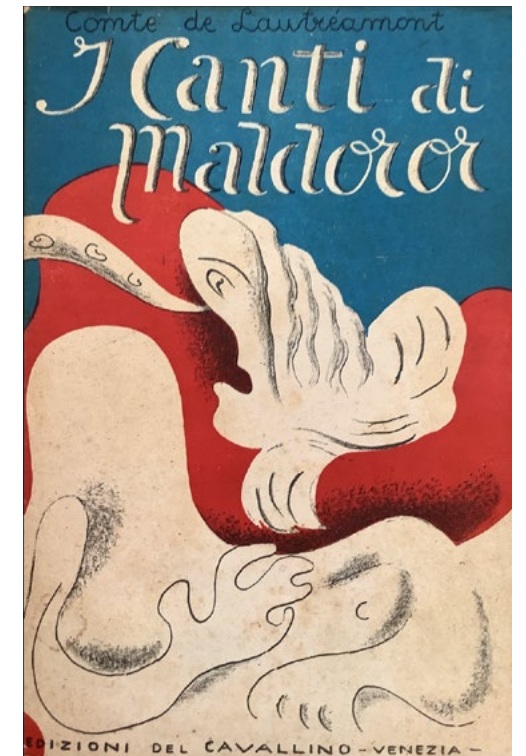


FIG. 3  
Mario Deluigi, *I canti di Maldoror* (cover for comte de Lautréamont, *I canti di Maldoror*, Edizioni del Cavallino, 1945).

Thanks to the time he spent with Cardazzo, and especially to the solo exhibition held at the Naviglio in Milan in March 1947, Deluigi came into direct contact with the Milan art scene that gravitated around the Galleria where, that very year, under Fontana's direction, the fundamental principles of the spatial movement were being defined.<sup>8</sup>

Deluigi, then, was able to keep abreast of Fontana's ideas, and was particularly struck by the question of the relationship between art and time, as well as the new concept of space as a universal place where the spirit could disseminate "its light, in the freedom that has been given us" (the concluding words of the manifesto *Spaziali*, drafted in Milan and dated March 18, 1948).<sup>9</sup>

The concept was reworked by the artist who had well in mind the Venetian pictorial tradition, Virgilio Guidi's lesson on light-color space, and his conception of "physiological space."<sup>10</sup>

Thus, in the artist's pictorial research, space and form coincided, or rather, space became form.

At the 24. Venice Biennale in 1948, the edition that marked the return of the Biennale after the pause imposed by the Second World War, Deluigi presented four paintings:<sup>11</sup> *Omaggio a Luisella*, *Gli amori*, *Adamo ed Eva*, *Olgivanna*. These works testified to Deluigi's transition from his physiological period, in which the artist was particularly interested in plastic forms close to sculptural ideas, to his new spatial research, which the artist would later refer to as *Amori*.

8 On Spatialism see in particular: Giampiero Giani, *Spazialismo, origini e sviluppi di una tendenza artistica* (Conchiglia, 1956); Fontana e lo *Spazialismo*, exh. cat. (Edizioni Città di Lugano, 1987); Toni Toniato, ed., *Spazialismo a Venezia*, exh. cat. (Mazzotta, 1987); Dino Marangon, *Spazialismo: Protagonisti, idee, iniziative* (Pagus, 1993); Luca Massimo Barbero, ed., *Spazialismo: Arte astratta a Venezia 1950-1960*, exh. cat. (Il Cardo, 1996); Giovanni Granzotto, ed., *Spazialisti a Venezia*, exh. cat. (Il Cardo, 2018); Luca Massimo Barbero, ed., *Lucio Fontana and the Spatialists: Sources and Documents for the Gallerie Cardazzo*, trans. Huw Evans (Marsilio, 2020).

9 See "Spatialists," in Barbero, *Lucio Fontana and the Spatialists*, 35.

10 In the artist's poetics, physiological forms, thanks to which reality can be represented, are imagined, modern, and organic forms, which express the spiritual and artistic needs of contemporary life. To understand this concept more clearly, a text Deluigi wrote dated November 27, 1945, sheds some light: "One day they will say (because it is always that way,

whether or not something is worth it) that my physiological forms are caused by morbid and erotic sensations (this is already being said), and, instead, I am quick to say that they are not expressive forms but simply plastic ones, (in a spatial function) suggested by an obvious physiological anatomy instead of a physical one. And what exactly is this physiological anatomy? The determination and concretization of the forms in the act of imagination always connected to the real principle that suggested them. It is the form of what by feeling I wanted to make you feel." Manuscript autograph document held in AMD.

11 Fontana was invited to the same Biennale, where he presented five works: *Scultura spaziale* (1947; CRSDA, cf. no. 47 SC 1) in colored chalk, the ceramic sculptures *Crocifisso* (1948; CRSC, cf. no. 48 FCR 8)—acquired by the Richard Ginori company—, *Maschera* and *Maschera* (both from 1948; CRSC, cf. nos. 48 SC 11, 48 SC 12,) and the mosaic sculpture *Gallo* (1948), acquired by the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea in Rome (CRSDA, cf. no. 48 SC 1).

De Luigi's words in 1949 are emblematic: "Space, like love, when aroused by emotional incident, creates concrete form."<sup>12</sup>

The artist aimed to represent the art-life binomial that, although its origin was in intense physical emotion, transcended the material for the spiritual.

The words of Anton Giulio Ambrosini, which accompanied Deluigi's solo show (*omaggio in rosso a S*), hosted by the Galleria del Naviglio (from November 24 to December 7, 1951), recorded this change in the artist's expressive research:

A freer interpretation of physiological spatial needs resulted in a new chromatic and luministic solution, where atonal color, by way of chiaroscuro, arrives at a mere hint of the stain. Forms are oriented toward a naturalistic precision in which elements of the Liberty style are decanted in the Venetian tradition.<sup>13</sup>

The painter was thus freeing himself from the "plastic problem" of three-dimensional volumes, to instead express a freer "spatial need" that, using solutions determined by color and light, led him to transform the plastic form into "stain."

In this important moment of transition, we cannot overlook the encounter between Fontana and the Spatial movement.

It was at the height of this research that Deluigi "officially" adhered to the movement, signing both the *Manifesto dell'arte spaziale* (Manifesto of Spatial Art) (1951) and the *Manifesto del movimento spaziale per la televisione* (Manifesto of the Spatialist movement for television) (1952).

The artist himself, when interviewed for the episode dedicated to Lucio Fontana in the documentary series *Chi, dove, quando* that aired in 1974, remembered Fontana as being a "volcano of ideas," and also recounted that moment of animated discussion:

Fontana, together with Carlo Cardazzo, invented this marvelous current, which did not exist, and from that moment onwards he invited us in as well. We all banded together and started developing this idea of space, Spatialism. To be honest, each of us interpreted this concept of space in their own way: some saw an environmental space, others saw an architectural space; there were also those who saw a pictorial space. In short, you know, the concept was slightly vague, but in the end the idea was on the level of

12 Manuscript autograph document held in AMD.

13 A.G.A. [Ambrosini], *omaggio in rosso*

a S., exh. cat., ed. Carlo Cardazzo (Edizioni del Cavallino, 1951).

contemporary thinking. This was very important and that is how the movement was born.<sup>14</sup>

Deluigi also said this: "Fontana was truly a volcano of ideas, which always stemmed from this concept, but he then inserted those ideas into other solutions."<sup>15</sup>

The short interview with Deluigi clearly showed the lively debate that characterized the birth and the drafting of the first manifestos of spatial art.

In an interview he gave in 1976, Deluigi once again spoke about his relationship with Fontana, revealing a fundamental element that is of considerable use to defining the positions of the two artists within the movement: "As concerns Spatialism, we were at opposite ends from each other. For him, space was a dimensional fact. I would tell him that for me space was a condition, not a dimension."<sup>16</sup>

As is well known, the research and experimentation Fontana started carrying out in the late 1940s with his *Concetti spaziali* was aimed at redefining the idea of "dimension." Among the numerous quotes we can refer to, this one, from an interview he gave to Bruno Rossi in 1963, seems particularly clear:

*For years you sought a new dimension. How do you think you achieved it?*

I believe that I created a new dimension by shattering and splintering the canvases with these holes and these slashes. Not a pictorial dimension, rather, a philosophical one. On a plane there existed the dimensions of the base, height, and depth. But today man is conquering space, and the artist, who more than anyone else lives and feels the spirit of his time, cannot remain insensitive, extraneous to this human event of such great importance. He realizes among other things that those dimensions no longer make sense in space. In short, the fourth dimension that I always tried to bring into my works is time-space, that is, nothing, the infinite, the discovery of the void.<sup>17</sup>

If for Fontana it is dimension that characterizes space, what does Deluigi instead mean by space as a condition?

When Deluigi's interest in form wanes, he strives to find ways to express the "condition of human beings in time."

14 *Chi, dove, quando*. Lucio Fontana, show curated by Claudio Barbati (1974).

15 *Chi, dove, quando*.

16 Breda, "Deluigi: il segno della luce."

17 Bruno Rossi, "Dialogo con Fontana,

l'astronauta dell'arte," *Settimo*

*Giorno*, Milan (January 22, 1963).

In Angela Sanna, ed., *Lucio Fontana*.

*Manifesti, scritti, interviste*

(Abscondita, 2015), 92–97.

In a note from 1953 the artist wrote: "Space: The condition of man in time; but all the condition and in every sense—less condition, less space—less space, less art, in short the decanting of the spirit—Anyone who opposes this law fools himself into thinking that he exists."<sup>18</sup>

For Deluigi, this idea of space is closely related to the modulation between light and shadow.

In some of his teaching notes for the Istituto Universitario di Architettura in Venice<sup>19</sup> (he taught there from 1946 to 1971), in order to visually express this concept Deluigi referred to a recurring image (borrowed directly from Leonardo da Vinci)<sup>20</sup>: the sphere.

For the artist, the sphere represented volume in all its possible perceptions, from greater light to greater shade; thus it expressed the sensitivity of every historical era: "Just as you illuminate a sphere, so you will also be able to establish the time and the state of mind of the human being"<sup>21</sup> [FIGS. 4–5].

For the sake of simplicity, he defined three manifestations of the sphere:

- One-dimensional [without shadow]
- Two-dimensional [internal shadow]
- Three-dimensional—spatial three-dimensional—airial three-dimensional [internal shadow and projected shadow]

In turn, these three manifestations determined three different eras:

- Primitive era
- Middle era
- Full era

This reflection on shadow was closely connected to a particular attention to light.

Within the structure of Venetian Spatialism, in line with Guidi's thinking,<sup>22</sup> Deluigi distinguished himself for his research and experimentation with light, considered to be a fundamental element in the definition of pictorial space.

Theorized space is universal space; it is cosmic space ready to receive and generate light—that is, the human soul—and therefore, to receive that which survives its fleeting material existence in time.

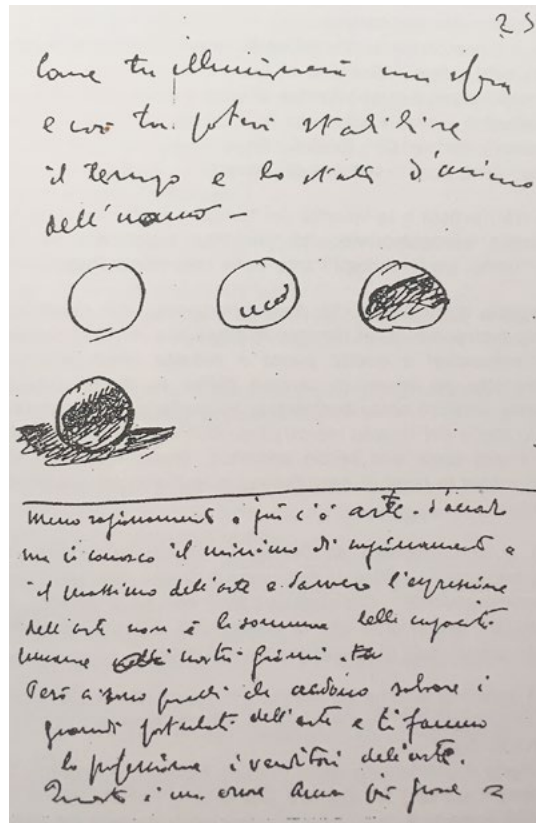
18 Manuscript autograph document held in AMD.

19 See: Giovanni Bianchi, *L'attività didattica di Mario Deluigi. Imparare a vedere l'arte* (Edizioni del Cavallino, 2010).

20 Leonardo dedicated a great deal of attention to the observation and representation of shadows on spheres, as can be seen in many of his drawings and notes.

21 Bianchi, *L'attività didattica di Mario Deluigi*, 136.

22 "Besides everyone knows by now what I think; that the idea of space is the same as the idea of light, and that light is the active element of space," cf. Virgilio Guidi, *Presentazione*, in *Artisti Spaziali Veneziani. Bacci, Deluigi, De Toffoli, Guidi, Morandi Gino, Salvatore, Tancredi, Vinicio (247<sup>o</sup> Mostra del Cavallino)*, exh. cat. (Edizioni del Cavallino, 1952). Now published as Virgilio Guidi, "Artisti Spaziali Veneziani," in Barbero, *Lucio Fontana and the Spatialists*, 78–79.



FIGS. 4-5  
Notes from Mario Deluigi's  
lesson notebook, early  
1950s.

It is a space that must be grasped with the spirit: "The spirit seeks light and lightens the universe," wrote the artist.<sup>23</sup>

His vision was not far from Fontana's, who had expressed himself in a similar way: "Abstract spatial art will be the art that more easily enters into the concept of humanity . . . it will be a spiritual art."<sup>24</sup>

To achieve this goal, in the early 1950s Deluigi honed a new technique known as *grattage*. This technique allowed him to "build" light through "luminous" marks carved or scored into the painting's surface. In this technique, we cannot help but consider the influence of Fontana, and the research and experimentation he began in the late 1940s.

"Marks and marks, as long as they have light," De Luigi jotted down enthusiastically in his notebooks.<sup>25</sup>

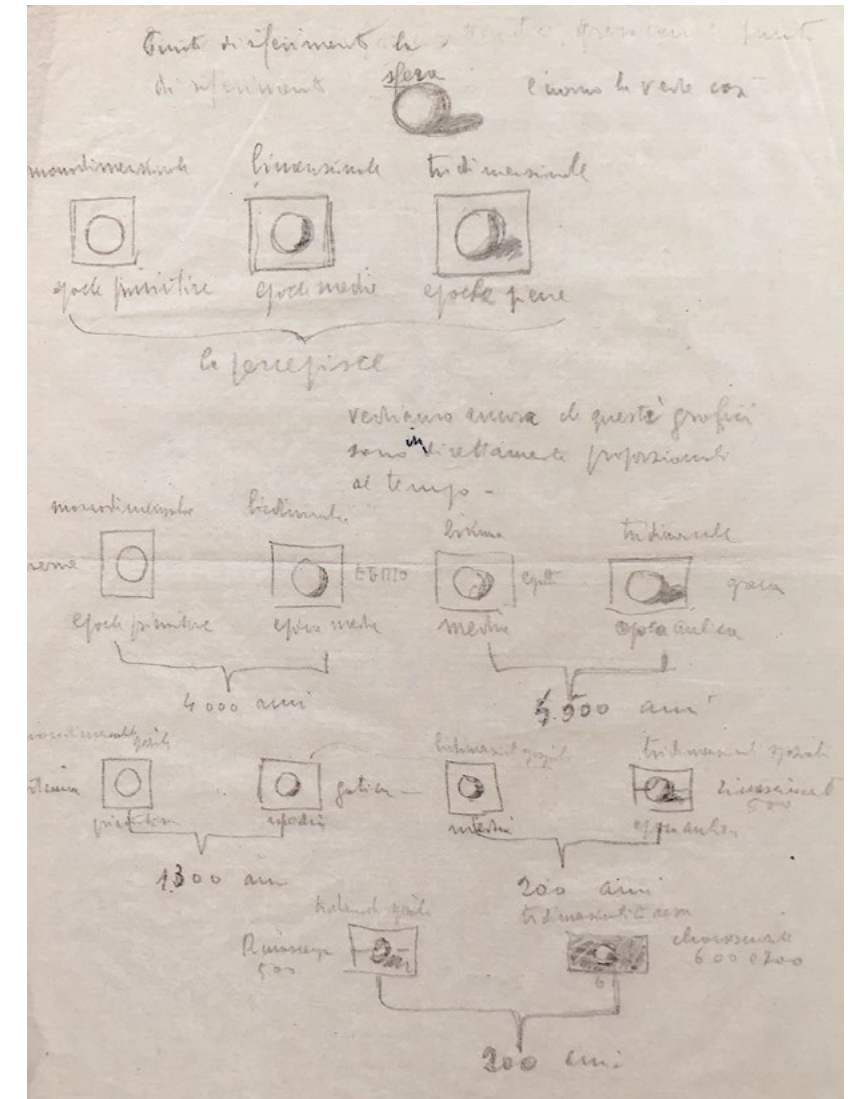
According to Deluigi, technique, which is tightly connected to the creative needs of art, is what makes possible the manifestation of

23 Manuscript autograph document held in AMD.

24 Lucio Fontana, "La prima tavolozza del mondo l'arcobaleno," published in Roberto Sanesi, *Lucio Fontana* (Galleria Il

mappamondo, 1980), 126, now published in Sanna, *Lucio Fontana. Manifesti, scritti, interviste*, 55.

25 Manuscript autograph document held in AMD.



those needs of the spirit that are directly connected to the condition of time, which is the only rationale that justifies the work of the artist.

In fact, Deluigi was always concerned with the definition of artist, not as a genius, but as someone who, delegated by the community, must represent the spirituality of their time.

The same idea was often expressed by Fontana, and it can also be found in the 1946 *Manifesto Blanco*: "We require a *greater art*, which will be consistent with the demands of the new spirit."<sup>26</sup>

26 See *Manifesto Blanco* (1946), now published in Sanna, *Lucio Fontana. Manifesti, scritti, interviste*, 15.

In Deluigi's *grattages* (like in Fontana's *Concetti spaziali*), the mark/gesture is controlled in its freedom, sought after in its variations. Nothing is left to chance. Light is conceived as a structural value that must be created within the painting, seen as a veritable "source" of light [FIG. 6].

In his works, pure light is manifested and is perceived in a dialectic relationship with shadow, an essential component if one wants to obtain greater depth. For Deluigi, the relationship between light and shadow is an existential and spiritual condition:

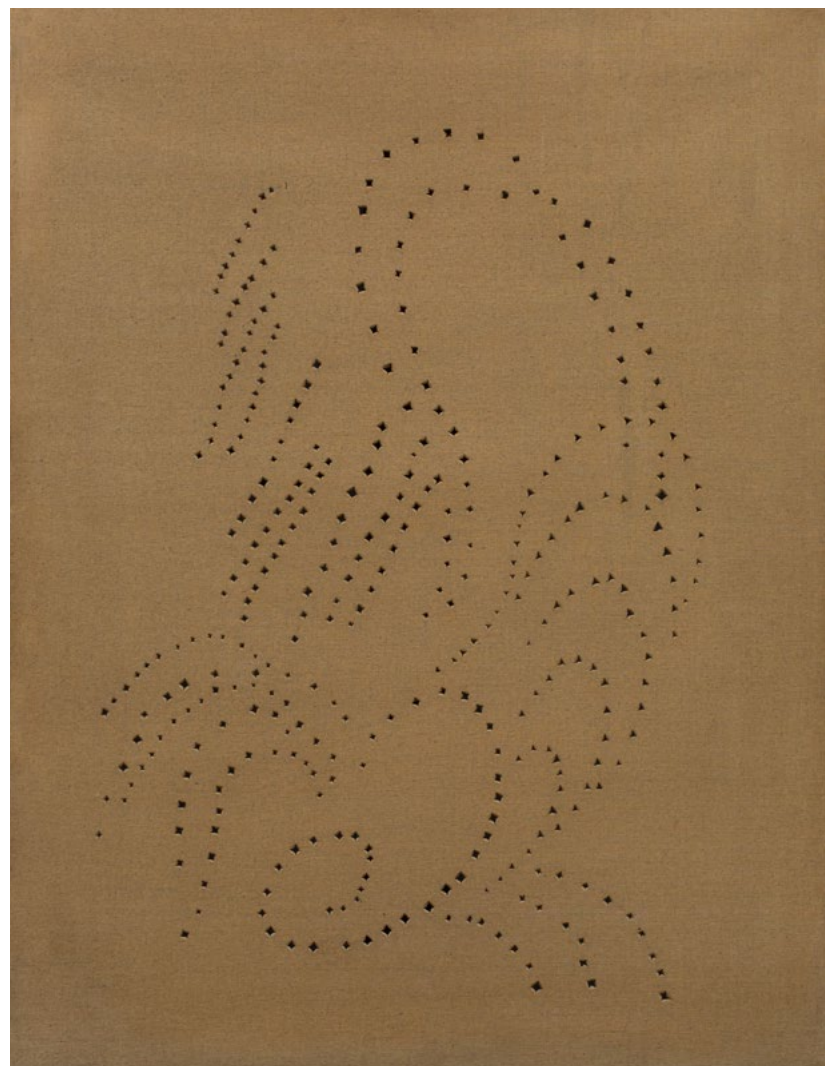


FIG. 6  
*Concetto spaziale*, 1951.  
Milan, Comune di Milano,  
Boschi-Di Stefano collection.

"At times I am so afraid to take everything out of a painting that I leave the shadows, whose sole purpose is to clarify the concept of my light. They are the shadows of my fear. The fear that remains nothing if not the desert."<sup>27</sup>

Deluigi acted and thought like a painter in the way he dealt with his research and experimentation with light.

Starting from the late 1940s, Fontana began exploring the "pictorial" relationship between space and material, working holes and then slashes into the canvas, inviting the viewer to reflect upon the three-dimensional space. The *Manifesto tecnico dello Spazialismo* (Technical manifesto of Spatialism) from 1951 (written by Fontana) provides a revealing definition of sculpture and painting: "SCULPTURE is volume, base, height, depth. PAINTING is description."<sup>28</sup> Fontana the "painter" did not describe; rather, he worked and reasoned like a sculptor.

As far as I am personally concerned, I wish to underscore the fact that my work is no longer exactly painting; it is, rather, a manifestation of plastic art. Slashes and holes? Ah yes, here is my research beyond the usual plane of the painting, toward a new dimension. Space.<sup>29</sup>

When pondering a problem of a plastic nature, Fontana, of course, is not indifferent to the unknown of shadow that has always hounded sculptors. In this regard, for the sake of example, the words of Arturo Martini come to mind: In *Colloqui sulla scultura*, with Gino Scarpa, the sculptor declares that he is in search of a "plastic shadow," a shadow that can be a part of the image as a "constructive fact," a shadow "imprisoned" in the work, aware that "our shadow [that of the sculptor] does not exist because it is roaming and incapable of any constructive use."<sup>30</sup>

Martini underscores that in sculpture "shadow is at the mercy of a light outside of our dominion; therefore we must halt shadow. And then find construction."<sup>31</sup>

Martini's words again:

Only when the complementary element of shadow has become a substance that the artist can control like a solid capable of fecundating the complementary element of

27 Manuscript autograph document held in AMD.

28 Lucio Fontana, "We Are Continuing the Evolution of the Medium in Art. Technical manifesto," in Barbero, *Lucio Fontana and the Spatialists*, 37–39.

29 Lucio Fontana, "Difendo i miei tagli,"

*La Nazione*, Florence (June 24, 1966), now in Sanna, *Lucio Fontana. Manifesti, scritti, interviste*, 72–73.

30 Arturo Martini, *Colloqui sulla scultura*, 1944–45. *Raccolti da Gino Scarpa*, ed. Nico Stringa (Canova, 1997), 125.

31 Martini, *Colloqui sulla scultura*, 187.

light through creative free will, only then from those two centripetal forces, as if from two opposite poles, will that resulting sculpture emerge: it is to sculpture what tone is to painting. Sculpture will go from being centrifugal to centripetal, so that by composing itself in the center it will complete its expressive absolute.<sup>32</sup>

The idea of a “constructive shadow” in a centripetal dimension can be found in Fontana’s “manifestation of plastic art.” Fontana turned shadow into a reality, not a reflection.

Shadow, in this context, reveals itself to be an aspect crucial to manifesting the concept of spatial dimension. The “real” shadows created by the holes and the slashes add a further level of meaning and perception. Shadow thus becomes a key component in the visual experience, reflecting and amplifying the artist’s intentions. In this way, Fontana does not work with light and color alone, but with shadow as well, making it an integral part of his artistic research and his spatial vision.

Fontana was interested in transcending the two-dimensional space of the canvas in search of the third (and fourth) dimension, and shadow played a crucial role in this concept.

The presence of shadow on surfaces leads us to also consider a concept of void, of the procured absence of material that ideally brings Fontana and Deluigi closer together.

In the summer of 1953 (June, 9–12), Deluigi exhibited his *gratages* at the Cavallino. Outside the Venetian gallery, he put up a poster setting out his spatial poetics: “Space can still be nature and life, for our third dimension is the plastic value of voids.”<sup>33</sup> A definition that can well be associated with a reading of Fontana’s *Concetti spaziali*.

Deluigi returned to this idea in a hand-written text that referred to his works titled *Motivi sui vuoti* (from 1953–54), displayed at the 27. Venice Biennale in 1954:

I titled the works that I am presenting at the next Venice Biennale *Motivo sui vuoti* because that is how I decided to sum up my long and laborious research and experimentation aimed at finding a way out of the arid Post-Cubist and Abstract two-dimensionality. To my mind, in fact, the only legitimate foundation for a current figurative interpretation lies in the rediscovery of the value of a-dimensional space, conceived as a plastic void, that is, a modulation of light and shadow<sup>34</sup> [FIG. 7].

32 Martini, *Colloqui sulla scultura*, 248.  
33 f. [Federico] c. [Castellani], “Deluigi:

Terza dimensione e valore plastico dei vuoti,” *Il Gazzettino* (June 11, 1953).

The idea of “a-dimensional space” and of “plastic void” is one fully shared with Lucio Fontana who on more than one occasion emphasized, referring to his own research and experimentation, that he wanted to represent the void.

When Mario Pancera asked the question: “What do you seek, Fontana, with your way of making art?,” the artist replied: “I seek nothing, the void.”<sup>35</sup>

If in Deluigi’s works the void is suggested by the presence of shadow (color saved from the signs of light), in Fontana the real shadow ends up representing that *limen*, that threshold, that faint boundary between the material and immaterial worlds [FIGS. 8–9].

In conclusion, an analysis of the relationship between Deluigi and Fontana reveals how, albeit starting from similar premises and sharing some fundamental principles of Spatialism, the two artists developed two distinct yet complementary artistic visions.



FIG. 7  
Mario Deluigi, *Motivo sui vuoti*, 1953–54.  
Private collection.

34 Manuscript autograph document held in AMD. Deluigi returned to this concept: “Only the act of love, as the perfect symbiosis and thus a living act, creates via the transmutation of the being always according to the laws of nature with death implicit. The rest is nothing. But it is precisely on this nothing that invention proceeds.

I flung myself on this path as well, considering reality as not evident to be determined in an evocative form made up of the void where time lowers its physiognomy,” *Evento* 3 (1956): 25.  
35 Mario Pancera, “Lucio Fontana e l’infinito (1962-1963).” Interview now published in Sanna, *Lucio Fontana. Manifesti, scritti, interviste*, 85–89.

Deluigi, loyal to the Venetian painting tradition, explored space as the human condition in time, using light and shadow to evoke a spiritual and transcendent dimension. Fontana, on the other hand, pursued a more “plastic” conception of space, working on the canvas as if it were a three-dimensional volume, and using shadow as a constructive element to express his idea of “spatial dimension.”

Despite these differences, both artists made major contributions to the debate on spatial art, emphasizing the importance of the void and of the immaterial as paths to transcend the limits of traditional painting. Their research and experimentation paved the way for new expressive perspectives, laying the groundwork for further developments in contemporary art.



FIG. 8  
*Concetto spaziale, Attese*,  
1964. Private collection.

The comparison between Deluigi and Fontana constitutes an eloquent example of how Spatialism, albeit presenting itself as a cohesive movement, was able to welcome and valorize the differing sensibilities of its protagonists, breathing life into a fertile dialogue between complementary yet distinct artistic conceptions.

FIG. 9  
Mario Deluigi, *Grattage*  
G.A. 92, 1973–75.  
Private collection.



# “FONTANIAN PLACES” BETWEEN ARGENTINA AND ITALY

Daniela Alejandra Sbaraglia  
Lorena Mouguelar  
Luca Bochicchio  
Sileno Salvagnini  
Giorgina Bertolino

# ENTRE DOS TIERRAS. LUCIO FONTANA'S CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Daniela Alejandra Sbaraglia

I was born in Rosario in the province of Santa Fè, on the Paraná River, my father was a good sculptor, it was my desire to be one. I would have liked to be a good painter, too, like my grandfather, but I realized that those specific terminologies of art were not for me, and I felt like a Spatial artist.

Lucio Fontana<sup>1</sup>

In recognizing his own artistic origins, Lucio Fontana underscored the crucial role played by his family's tradition. An evocation that, nonetheless, is a prelude to its transcendence: no longer a sculptor or a painter, he superseded these "specific terminologies of art" to soar like a butterfly into space. However, both his mental flight and his imaginative vitalism were made possible by his mastery of the trade: Draftsman, sculptor, painter, decorator, designer, Fontana sank his roots in solid technical know-how that was handed down from generation to generation. A concrete legacy, made up of tools, materials, and a design-oriented vision.

His apprenticeship with his father, Luigi Fontana, and his encounter with Adolfo Wildt, whom he studied under at Brera Academy, further convinced him that what one intends to overcome must first be assimilated and dominated. An example of this is *El auriga*<sup>2</sup> [FIG. 1], one of his youthful masterpieces in full Wildtian style, the emblem of that technical and ideal subjugation of material and form aimed to elevate it to a higher level that he learned from the master. Equally, it is perhaps no accident that the *Manifiesto Blanco*—a founding act of Spatialism—was drafted up in 1946, the year of his father Luigi's death. The loss of his father, a man who was solid and productive, seems to have symbolically opened up a space for a new conception of art, one that was more mental and experimental, but never unrelated to the technical and material dimension that it derived from.

While it is true that Fontana's training, which took place in the 1920s between Rosario and Milan, was permeated by a familial original substance that was reflected in a vision of art as a programmatic and disciplined action, it is also true that—from the earliest years of his activity—the artist developed an openness that was receptive to the visual-aesthetic stimuli stemming from his dual culture, instantly turning him into an "artist of two worlds." Equally important, in Fontana's trajectory, was the dialogue between different cultural components—"between Europe and South America. Indeed, the axis of a direct thread linking Italy and Argentina"—which, as underscored by Crispolti, greatly influenced the "most personal roots of his imagination."<sup>3</sup>

1 Leonardo Sinisgalli, ed., *Pittori che scrivono. Antologia di scritti e disegni* (Campografico, 1954), 115.

2 CRSDA, cf. no. 28 SC 12.

3 Enrico Crispolti, "Fontana's Creative Path in Twentieth-century Art," in CRSDA I, 17–19.



FIG. 1  
*El auriga*, 1928. Location  
unknown.

#### FAMILY AND ARTISTIC ROOTS

Lucio Emilio Fontana was born in Rosario de Santa Fe, Argentina, on February 19, 1899.<sup>4</sup>

His mother, Lucia Rosario Bottini (1874–1925), was the daughter of Laura Fontana, a Lombard, and Jean Bottini, a Swiss Italian painter and engraver. When Lucia was an adolescent, she became orphaned and was subsequently raised by her aunt and uncle on her mother's side. She mingled with Rosario's bohemian milieu, and likely posed as a model for various artists, including the sculptor Luigi Fontana (1865–1946). From their short-lived relationship Lucio was born; he lived with his mother until he was seven, when his father legally recognized him as his child and took him to Italy where he could get a proper education. Regardless, the relationship between the mother

4 For the biography of Lucio Fontana and of his family, see Daniela Alejandra Sbaraglia, Ricardo Miranda, "Lucio

Fontana, su familia y trayectoria," *Centro de Estudios Genealógicos e Históricos de Rosario XXI*, no. 12 (2023): 167–220.

and her child was never interrupted: Although she remained in Rosario, Lucia was kept informed about her son's health thanks to her Milanese relatives and, most importantly, she continued to have a direct relationship with him through letters and drawings, as witnessed by postcards and the *Autoritratto in veste da ufficiale*.<sup>5</sup> From the very beginning, for Fontana drawing was the means of expression that kept him connected to the memory of his grandfather, the painter Juan Bottini, and, through him, to his mother.

Luigi Fontana instead came from a family of Lombard decorators with a long tradition of making wrought iron artworks, stucco work, and architectural sculptures.<sup>6</sup> An enterprising, ambitious figure, Luigi had trained in Brera, where he frequented the studios of Pietro Calvi and Francesco Barzaghi, and developed a sculptural sensibility linked to the Romantic-Verist Lombard school. In parallel he approached the movement known as Scapigliatura that was developing Milan in the late nineteenth century, drawn to a climate of renewal that also involved the classrooms at Brera Academy. Luigi was, in fact, one of the signatories to the famous petition promoted by Medardo Rosso for the introduction of living models at the Academy, an idea that revealed unconventional artistic orientation. His closeness to the epigones of the Lombard school of Impressionism (Medardo Rosso, Ernesto Bazzaro, and Giuseppe Grandi) enriched his plastic-visual culture with formal abbreviations and luminist ideas in material deriving from the Scapigliatura. Emblematic of his strong temperament was the decision to report to the local press the fact that he and several of his fellow students (including the young Adolfo Wildt) had "unfairly" failed their exams. Luigi ended up being expelled from the Academy.<sup>7</sup>

Luigi Fontana avoided mentioning any of these events when he finally settled in Argentina, where he emigrated in search of a professional comeback. After choosing to live in Rosario in 1891, he opened the city's first sculpture studio, which soon became one of the most accredited commemorative and funerary sculpture businesses in the area [FIG. 2]. After buying several marble quarries in the areas of Córdoba, Sierra Chica, and Tandil,<sup>8</sup> in 1906 he became an associate of Giovanni Scarabelli (1874–1942), with whom

5 Drawing currently not archived at the Fondazione Lucio Fontana, from the Suaya di Rosario collections, heirs of Lucia Bottini.

6 For a profile on Luigi Fontana, see Daniela Sbaraglia, "Cavalier Luigi Fontana. Scultore -1865-1946," *L'uomo nero XII*, nos. 11–12 (May 2015): 180–204; Daniela Sbaraglia, "Luigi Fontana: pionero de la escultura en Rosario," in *Entresiglos. El impulso cosmopolita en Rosario*, ed. Laura Malosetti

Costa (Ediciones Castagnino/Macro, 2017), 67–78.

7 For the relationship between Fontana and Adolfo Wildt, see D.A. Sbaraglia, "Al lume di Wildt. Lucio Fontana ai tempi della formazione tra Argentina e Italia," *Valori Tattili 21/22* (2023): 31–67.

8 For information on the marble quarries, boycotted in 1926 by striking marble workers, see *Democracia* (April 7, 21); (May 27); (July 21, 27); (August 18); (September 9); (October 4, 14, 25), 1926.

he established Fontana y Scarabelli. The company is due, among other works, the monument to Agricultura Nacional de Esperanza de Santa Fe, made in 1910 in the climate of the national monumentality campaign related to the Argentine centennial.

Having become a major figure in Rosario's Italian community—where he held several public roles and gave work to dozens of fellow Italians—in 1915 Luigi Fontana was named Knight of the Order of the Italian Crown, laying the foundations for his "triumphant" return to Italy where his son Lucio awaited him.

Despite its being swept under the carpet, his father's bohemian past clearly influenced Lucio. A few days after his father's passing, Lucio wrote to his brother Zino to ask him for a photograph, "the one of him as a young man with a beard,"<sup>9</sup> a reminder of his "heroic" Milanese years. Luigi Fontana's fiery temperament, as well as his closeness to the Lombard school of Impressionism, helped Lucio feel a specific cultural belonging, as well as inherit a trade—consisting of faith and the battle for art—which he acquired in the early years of his artistic apprenticeship working alongside his father.



FIG. 2  
Studio of Luigi Fontana  
and Giovanni Scarabelli,  
c. 1910, Rosario. Buenos  
Aires, Archivo General  
de la Nación.

9 Letter to Zino Fontana dated October 8, 1946, in Paolo Campiglio, ed., *Lucio Fontana. Lettere 1919-1968* (Skira, 1999), 93, letter 79.

### TRAINING WITH HIS FATHER (1923–24)

As Mouguelar has suggested, in all likelihood Fontana returned to Argentina in late 1921.<sup>10</sup> He was travelling with his father, who had organized in Rosario an exhibition of Italian sculpture for commercial purposes that was hosted by the gallery run by Livio Castellani. The exhibition included works by sculptors who frequented Luigi's circle, works he hoped to use as ornaments for the shrines his company produced, in attempt to relaunch his business activity, which had been affected by the postwar crisis. And indeed, between 1924 and 1927, the El Salvador monumental cemetery of Rosario was enriched with works like *Pensatore* by Ernesto Bazzaro (Sanguineti shrine), the marble group *La vita e la morte* by Leonardo Bistolfi (Recagno shrine), and the colossal bronze work *Il simbolo della Croce* by Michele Vedani (Astengo shrine).<sup>11</sup> An ensemble of works that, albeit heterogeneous in terms of genre, introduced to Rosario Modernism of Symbolist inspiration, and of Italian origin, featuring the use of neo-sixteenth-century forms brought to life by an elegant spatial dynamism.

After a period spent working in the *pampa gringa* where he managed a business activity,<sup>12</sup> at least from 1923—the year he discovered his vocation as a sculptor—Fontana began collaborating with his father. In 1926 Lucio's name replaced that of his parent, in Fontana, Scarabelli y Cautero.<sup>13</sup> It was the start of his training, working alongside his father, supporting him in the many roles that his activity called for: from funerary design to restoration work to tasks having a broader architectural scope, which included managing the family marble quarries.<sup>14</sup> Records for the Fontana y Scarabelli company in the mid-1920s show the restoration of marble blocks for the first monument to the Flag,<sup>15</sup> originally sculpted by Lola Mora, and its participation in the execution of architectural structures for the monument to Alvear di Antoine Bourdelle,<sup>16</sup> inaugurated in 1926 in Buenos Aires.

Lucio Fontana's experience in the field of funerary design was crucial: Working next to his father, Fontana developed a full awareness of the versatility of architectural sculpture, experimenting with heterogeneous materials and various working methods that were used to complete funeral chapels consisting of decorative objects, inlaid marble floors, glass panes, and mosaic vaults. This synergy

10 Cf. Lorena Mouguelar, "Figuras en los márgenes: Lucio Fontana y la escultura en Rosario a comienzos de los años veinte," *Tarea X*, no. 10 (2023): 220–21.

11 Cf. Daniela Alejandra Sbaraglia, "Luigi y Lucio Fontana escultores. Confluencias italo-argentinas en la plástica de principios del siglo XX," *Tarea V*, no. 5 (2018): 136–38.

12 Enzo Fabiani, "Un gaucha della Pampa ha fondato lo Spazialismo," *Gente* (November 10, 1961): 56–58.

13 FLFA, document dated October 1926.

14 See note 8.

15 The task was assigned to Luigi Fontana by the town superintendent Alfredo Rouillon, cf. "De Rosario," *Caras y Caretas* 1304 (September 29, 1923).

16 Buenos Aires, Centro de Documentación e Investigación de la Arquitectura Pública – CEDIAP, Fondo MOP – Dirección General de vías y comunicaciones y arquitectura, cod. id. 0174.

between the arts and the environment was especially evident in the complexes that hosted the works of Bistolfi and Vedani, in whose projects we can speculate Fontana himself was artistically involved<sup>17</sup> [FIGS. 3–4]. But it was above all in contact with his father's sculptural works—the cemetery in El Salvador numbers at least 300 of them, including burial niches, shrines, and mausoleums, of which those of Ortiz (1891), Zubezu (1893), Pinasco (1902), and Bussaglia (1910) especially stand out—that Lucio Fontana discovered his own calling as a sculptor. From his father he inherited his technical virtuosity, especially in the art of the portrait, this would lead to his winning a tender for a commemorative plaque dedicated to the chemist Louis Pasteur.<sup>18</sup> It also marked the beginning of his activity as a sculptor.<sup>19</sup>

#### THE ARTIST'S DEBUT AND HIS PROMOTION OF ITALIANNESS (1924–25)

Fontana had volunteered as a soldier in the First World War. At the end of the war, disappointed by the outcome of the so-called mutilated victory, he was, like many other veterans, attracted to the figure of Mussolini. His embrace of fascism, proof of which can be seen in the *Auto-ritratto in camicia nera*,<sup>20</sup> was shared by his father Luigi, who founded the "fascio" (league) of Comabbio, his wife Anita Campiglio's birthplace, where he would become mayor in 1929. This was the context of Luigi's project to export Italian sculptural works to Argentina: it was clearly a business initiative that nonetheless ended up finding a place in the broader framework of fascist policies aimed to "promote Italianness" abroad.<sup>21</sup> The project was facilitated by the climate of renewed relations between Argentina and Italy, incentivized by the diplomatic missions starting in 1922, soon after Mussolini came to power, which paved the way for numerous "cultural" initiatives. As an act of reciprocity due to the participation of Argentine artists in the 13. Venice Biennale in 1922, the following year Buenos Aires hosted an "Italian Exposition of Fine Arts."<sup>22</sup> Fontana likely visited it, and was able to come into contact with the Deco expressions of contemporary Italian sculpture represented by artists like Adolfo Wildt, Attilio Selva, Libero Andreotti, and Antonio Maraini. Further stimuli of Italian inspiration came from the *Crociera della Regia Nave "Italia,"* which in South America promoted a travelling exhibition of Italian art and industry products, curated by Leonardo Bistolfi and the painter Giulio Aristide Sartorio. At the time, Sartorio was the Government Commissioner of Fine Arts for the fascist government. The works displayed included *Le tre Marie* by Gaetano Previati, six monochrome panels by Sartorio, works by Plinio Nomellini, Boccioni, Casorati and—for sculpture, among others—pieces by Bistolfi, Attilio Selva, Silvio Tofanari, Arturo Dazzi, and Ercole Drei<sup>23</sup>: a heterogeneous ensemble that aimed to express the image of a renewed national art, between Symbolist and Spiritualist tradition, modernized classicism, the avant-garde, and a new monumental idealism.

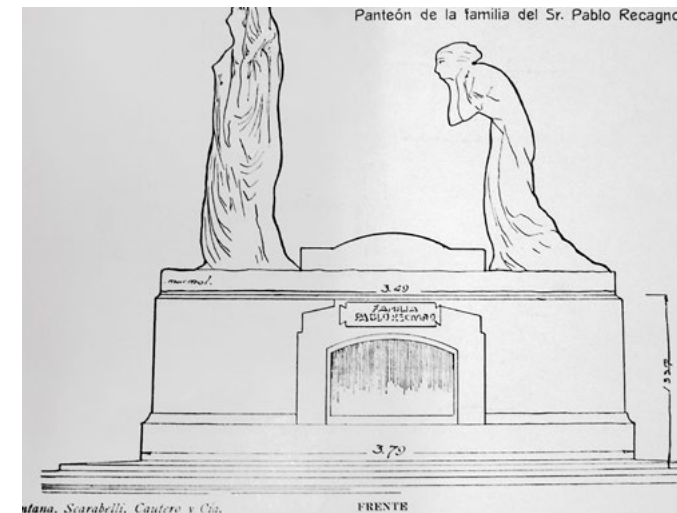
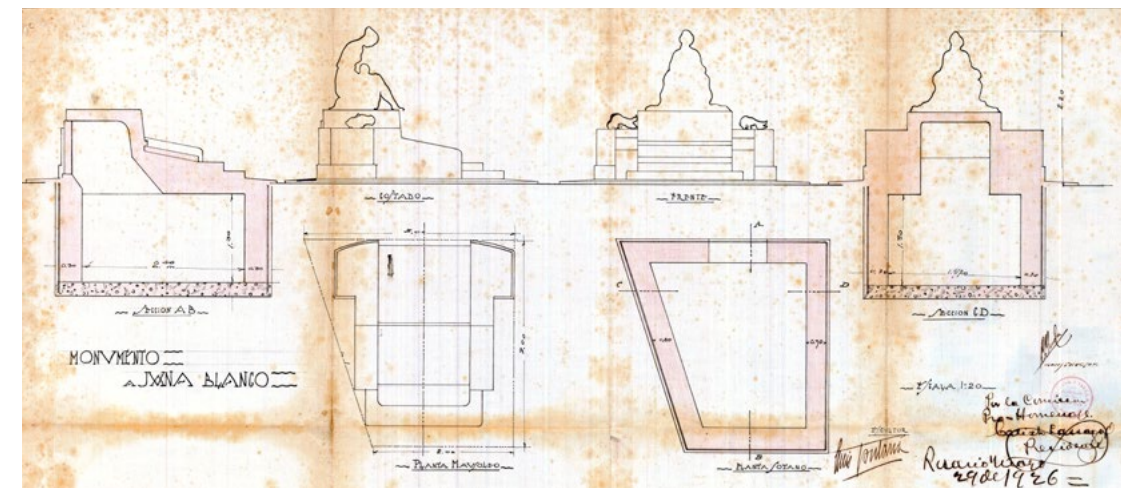


FIG. 3  
Fontana, Scarabelli, Cautero and Cia, *Edicola Recagno*, photo of the project (in *El constructor rosarino* [August 1927]).

FIG. 4  
Project for the monument to Juana Elena Blanco, 1925. Rosario, Archive of the monumental cemetery El Salvador.



17 The comparison between the projects of Fontana y Scarabelli, preserved at the Archive of the monumental cemetery El Salvador, and the autograph drawing for the mausoleum commemorating Juana Elena Blanco made it possible to identify similar plates in terms of layout and lettering, including that of the Recagno shrine, published in "Mausoleo Pablo Recagno. Fontana, Scarabelli, Cautero y Cia. Cementerio del Salvador," *El constructor rosarino* III, no. 46 (August 1, 1927): 21–33.

18 FLFA, cf. no. 4544/1.

19 Cf. Daniela Sbaraglia, "I Fontana

e il ritratto: innovazione e tradizione di un genere tra XIX e XX secolo," in *Intorno al ritratto. Origini, sviluppi e trasformazioni*, ed. Fabrizio Crivello and Laura Zamparo, with the collaboration of Federica Boràgina (aAccademia University Press, 2019), 257–64.

20 FLFA, cf. no. 1785/194r.

21 Cf. Sbaraglia, "Luigi y Lucio Fontana," 134–48.

22 Cf. Sbaraglia, "Al lume di Wildt," 34–35.

23 Buenos Aires, Archivo Payró, "Pintura, grabado y escultura," *La Nación* (May 1924).

The activity of some of the press outlets for the Italian community in Argentina responded to that climate: Influenced by the regime, on the one hand, they served as a link between two "sister" cultures; on the other, they aimed to reawaken in the migrant a feeling of "Italianness," meaning a sense of belonging to a civilization to be promoted and defended. Among these was the monthly publication of the Rosario chapter of the Società Dante Alighieri *Italia*, whose editorial department Lucio Fontana joined in late 1924.<sup>24</sup> The January and February 1925 issues, of which he was the sole illustrator, presented the "contemporary values" of Italian art: the sculpture of Adolfo Wildt, the "Te-teatro" of Alberto Martini, and the fledgling Novecento group. At the same time, the illustrations conceived for the monthly offered a view of the cultural sources that were influencing Fontana in that period.

For the cover, Fontana elaborated his first personification of Vittoria [FIG. 5]: a sleek, slender figure riding a winged horse, the synthesis of a floral line, synthetic constructions, and vitalistic afflatus, reminiscent of the drawings of Adolfo Wildt or of Publio Morbiducci for the magazine *L'Eroica*.



FIG. 5  
Vittoria/Italia che cavalca Pegaso (cover of *Italia* [February 1925]). Bologna, University Library.

24 On *Italia* see Sbaraglia, "Luigi y Lucio Fontana," 135–47; Daniela Alejandra Sbaraglia, "Lucio Fontana in Argentina

(1922–1928): le origini," *Valori Tattili* 17 (January–June 2021): 73–75.

The section "I nostri valori contemporanei" was instead dominated by the figure of a winged genius that resembled Mussolini, whose flaming hands produced sensuous female personifications that overlooked and crushed senile-looking virile figures [FIG. 6]: an image that seemed to allude to the deprecation and thus transcending of cultural "passéisms" under the Duce's leadership. This type of ideological tension was fueled, in Rosario, by the figure of the Roman sculptor Guglielmo Gianninazzi (1880–1930), a member of the Italian community, and the author of works such as the Frutos and Grimaldi mausoleums (both in the El Salvador cemetery), as well as of the monument to Alem, inaugurated in 1922. These were works of a Dannunzian, rhetorical, and aestheticizing nature, pervaded by marked vitalism. A tribute to Gianninazzi—arrested in Milan in March 1925 for having destroyed, to the cry of "Viva il Futurismo! Viva Mussolini!"<sup>25</sup> the "passéist" models for a tender for the monument to the fallen soldiers—might exist in one of the lithographs made by Fontana for *Italia*: that of *Grazia*<sup>26</sup> [FIG. 7]; in the background there appears to be a citation of the Frutos' mausoleum's *marcha funebre*, reworked in an Expressionist key.

It is equally significant to note how an iconographic precedent of the winged genius surrounded by sensual nymphs—a key element in the illustration for the section "I nostri valori contemporanei"—had already appeared in Argentina, in the lithograph *El Sueño*, made in 1913 by Alfredo Guido<sup>27</sup> [FIG. 8]. The influence of this artist, one of the most affirmed in Rosario, has yet to be adequately acknowledged



FIG. 6  
*I nostri valori contemporanei* (in *Italia* [February 1925]). Rosario, Società Dante Alighieri.

25 "Glorifichiamo il gesto futurista di Pizzi e Gianninazzi," *L'Antenna. Giornale Universale d'arte del Duemila* I, no. 1

(March 25–April 9, 1925).

26 *Italia* 2 (February 1925): 8.

27 *El Magazine* III, no. 20 (February 1913).

by the critics. All the same, its Symbolist cipher, both "enigmatic and spiritualist,"<sup>28</sup> which from the 1920s became more bitter and synthetic due to the opening of primitivism in an *eurindico* sense,<sup>29</sup> would appear to be close to the "neo-sixteenth century- as well as Secessionist" components<sup>30</sup> that filled *Italia*'s illustrated plates.

#### 1925: BETWEEN TRADITION AND INNOVATION

For Fontana, the year 1925 coincided with his debut in the local exhibition milieu. *Melodías*<sup>31</sup> [FIG. 10], presented at the 8th Salón de Rosario [FIG. 9], is coherently part of his debut output: a work suspended between Bistolfian ideas and an eye to Argentine sculpture. The reference, in this case, is to the *Dolorosa*<sup>32</sup> [FIG. 11] by Alberto Lagos (1885–1960). It is important to remember that, from the early twentieth century, Argentine sculpture, which was strongly influenced by the French school, found Rodin to be its principal model, elaborated at a local level by the sculptural work of artists like Rogelio Yrurtia and Alberto Lagos.



FIG. 7  
*La Grazia* (in *Italia* [February 1925]). Rosario, Società Dante Alighieri.

28 Adriana Beatriz Armando, "Alfredo Guido y el americanismo en los años veinte," in *La hora americana. 1910-1950*, exh. cat., ed. Roberto Amigo and Alberto Petrino (Asociación Amigos del Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, 2014), 189–203, in particular, 190.

29 Aesthetic doctrine that sought to reconcile the search for Pre-Hispanic local identity with the opening up to aesthetic internationalism, inspired by the nationalist R. Rojas and his essay titled *Eurindia*, 1924, promoted

in Rosario by the brothers Alfredo and Ángel Guido, cf. Daniela Alejandra Sbaraglia, *Lucio Fontana in Argentina. Dagli esordi al Manifesto Blanco* (Electa–Fondazione Lucio Fontana, 2025).

30 Rossana Bossaglia, "Scoperte: Il Fontana senza tagli," *Arte. Rivista mensile di arte, cultura, informazione* XIV, no. 164 (June 1986): 77.

31 CRSDA, cf. no. 25 SC 1.

32 Published in *Fray Mocho* XIII, no. 633 (June 10, 1924).



FIG. 8  
Alfredo Guido, *El sueño* (in *El Magazine* [February 1913]). Buenos Aires, antiquarian market.

FIG. 9  
Alfredo Guido, catalog cover of the VIII Salon Rosario, 1925. Rosario, Museo Municipal de Bellas Artes Juan B. Castagnino.



Nonetheless, as the second decade began, thanks to government scholarships, the new generations—prevalently trained in the Paris ateliers of Aristide Maillol and Antoine Bourdelle—introduced new ideas that went in an archaic-Expressionist direction (including the international influence of Meštrović) as well as the languages of the return to order. Among these artists was Alfredo Bigatti, a student of Bourdelle, who at the Salón de Rosario of 1925, presented the funerary bas-relief *Piedad*,<sup>33</sup> clearly revealing the influence of the French master's "barbaric" Expressionism.

The same influence can be found in Lucio Fontana's early works, the winner that year of several local tenders: the one for the plaque honoring the Rosario soccer player Ernesto Celli,<sup>34</sup> and another for the commemorative mausoleum honoring the educator Juana Elena Blanco. As was already true for the illustrations for *Italia*, different aesthetic components were combined, with results that were at times dissonant but, precisely for this reason, strongly expressive. Known of only in a photograph,<sup>35</sup> the Celli plaque reveals the use of naturalistic forms in the free-standing sculpture of the deceased figure, inspired by Luigi Fontana's portraiture, while

33 *VIII Salón Rosario*, exhibition catalog, edited by the Comisión Municipal de Bellas Artes, Rosario 1925.

34 Cf. FLFA.

35 Reproduced in "En memoria de Ernesto Celli," *La Capital* (June 18, 1925).

the mournful angels to the sides demonstrate the use of simplified and expressive forms.

The monument to Juana Elena Blanco,<sup>36</sup> with its plastic elegance and synthesis of form, is instead related to the climate of the return to order. Nonetheless, along with the lesson of Maillol and the "Novecento," the work—characterized by wavy lines and spiral motifs carved into the material—features the influence of archaistic drives and Deco style from both sides of the Atlantic ocean.

Some of the lithographs published in *Italia* are signed "Lucio F.," a signature the artist began using in 1925 for his debut funerary works for the cemetery of El Salvador; it was a way of distinguishing it from the more common signature "L. Fontana" which could also be attributed to his father. Compare, for instance, the funerary plaque for the Piovella grave representing the 5th Station of the Cross<sup>37</sup> [FIG. 12]. The work conveys a moment of transition in Fontana's oeuvre: converging therein, in fact, is aestheticizing classicism (in the figure of Simon of Cyrene), the use of primitivist simplifications (in the face of Jesus who has lost his senses as well as in that of the Virgin), refined Deco stylizations (in the angels to the sides), and the "barbaric" treatment of the material, contributing to the overall effect of powerful expressiveness. The whole of these hybrid components in an avant-garde key dates this work to between 1925 and 1926, a time that coincides with



36 CRSDA, cf. no. 27 A 1.

37 FLFA, cf. no. 4545/1, mentioned for the first time in Daniela Sbaraglia,

"Inedito di Lucio Fontana ai tempi della formazione in Argentina," *Contemporart* 84 (October–December 2015): 39–41.

FIG. 12  
Loculo Piovella,  
1925–26. Rosario,  
monumental cemetery  
El Salvador.



FIG. 10  
*Melodías*, 1924–25.  
Private collection.

FIG. 11  
Alberto Lagos,  
*Dolorosa* (in *Fray Mocho*  
[June 10, 1924]).

Fontana's participation in the 3rd Salón Anual de Santa Fe and in the Exposición de Higiene, Arte e Industria de Rosario where, respectively, he showed *Cristo*<sup>38</sup> and *Aurora*.<sup>39</sup> Clearly visible in both sculptures is a gradual synthesis between the Italian Renaissance tradition, from Piero della Francesca to Michelangelo, and modern formal solutions harkening back to the lesson of Wildt and to Archipenko, characterized by a synthetic treatment and an abstract aesthetic.

Fontana's interest in Archipenko, at the time, is especially explained by his entrance into Rosario's avant-garde circle that gravitated around the figure of the painter Julio Vanzo, broadening the young man's sculptural horizon. The group, which included figures like the critic Juan Zocchi and the poet Fausto Hernández, actively promoted in Rosario a "new sensibility"<sup>40</sup> inspired by the European avant-gardes: a climate that would be echoed by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's arrival in the city as a guest of the El Circulo association in July 1926. Fontana himself participated in the evening on Integral Futurism—held at the Biblioteca Argentina—as attested to by a photograph published in *Fray Mocho*, which pictures him next to Marinetti and his wife, the artist Benedetta Cappa.<sup>41</sup>

38 The *Cristo* identified as being the plaster visible in a photograph that belonged to Lucia Bottini was suggested in Sbaraglia, "Al lume di Wildt," 36–39.

39 *Aurora*, instead, could correspond to CRSDA, cf. no. 26 SC 1. We might in fact read in the title a homage to the

Michelangelo of the New Sacristy, cf. Sbaraglia, "Al lume di Wildt," 36–39.

40 See Mouguelar's contribution in these proceedings.

41 "Fray Mocho en Rosario de Santa Fe," *Fray Mocho* XV, no. 742 (July 13, 1926).

In light of these elements, Fontana's sculptural language during this period was a complex interweaving of cultural references: on the one hand, the Symbolist and melodic legacy of Bistolfi and Alfredo Guido; on the other, an Expressionist tension, analyzed through the lessons of Wildt and Bourdelle, to which was added a first interest toward the experiments of the Futurist and Cubist avant-garde. It was with this rich experiential and cultural baggage that Fontana arrived at the school of Adolfo Wildt, where it did not take long for him to become one of his foremost students.

#### WILDT: THE HERESY OF FORM

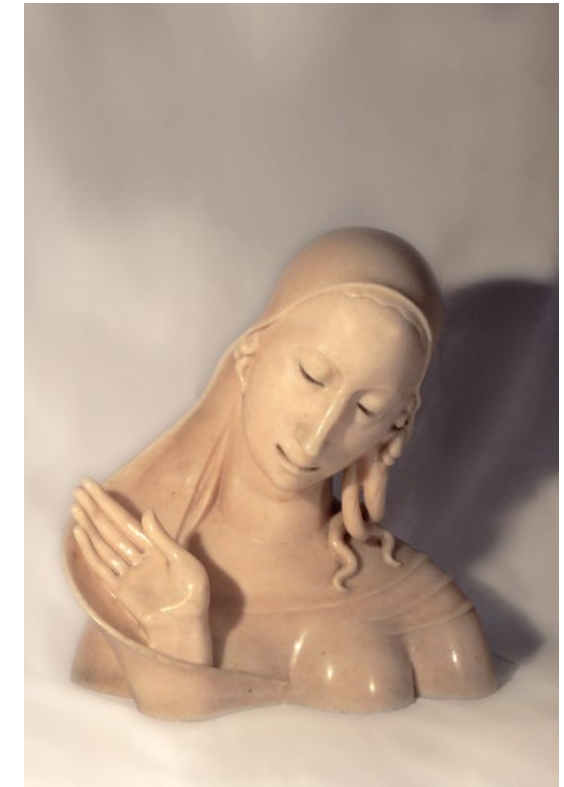
When Fontana arrived in Milan in November 1927, at first he frequented Wildt's studio, and later attended his courses at the Brera Academy—first the School of Marble, a night school, and then the Special School of Sculpture, where he was accepted in March 1928.<sup>42</sup> Thanks to his mentor Fontana was able to delve deeper into the programmatic use of heterogeneous figurative components that had already distinguished—intuitively—his early Argentine production. Wildt encouraged his students to expand their visual knowledge, drawing from classical, Gothic, Baroque, and contemporary models, supported by photography, casts, and the presence of a living model in the room, often required to verify poses inspired by sculptures or paintings.

The visual risk deriving from the combination of formal languages, the exasperated dominion of the material, and the conception of form as plastic becoming, based on the interweaving between "the void as significant form" and the full as "container, limit," were the poetic vehicles of a mental and "heretical" conception of art.<sup>43</sup>

This approach clearly emerged in the works Fontana made in 1928. Among them: the refined *Madonna* carved into pink Zandobbio marble for the Mapelli shrine, in Gothic-like style [FIG. 13]; the relief of *San Sebastiano*,<sup>44</sup> Expressionist and Baroque; *Auriga*, which reworked Attic, Phidian, and fifteenth-century models.

The use of classical and Renaissance casts at Wildt's school is witnessed by the marble face, signed and dated 1928, which is a Deco-style reworking of the *Cristo* in the *Pietà vaticana*.<sup>45</sup>

FIG. 13  
*Madonna*, 1927–28.  
Private collection.



Fontana added this "scholastic exercise"—reminiscent of certain Wildtian masks—to the decoration of a small funeral chapel,<sup>46</sup> initially commissioned from his father and then passed down to him and to his architect cousin, Bruno Fontana. In this project the artist exploited his professional experience at Fontana y Scarabelli, curating the interior decoration of the chapel, conceived—a nod to Masaccio's trinitarian iconography—as a tripartite space: In the lower part, more in shadow and allusive to the human dimension, he placed a *Cristo crocifisso* in patinated bronze;<sup>47</sup> at the center, illuminated by a glass pane, a marble face of *Christ* that, thanks to the addition of the bronze flame representing the Holy Spirit, assumes the symbolic function of *Dio padre*; at the top, a geometric design in gold and copper mosaic tiles that, thanks to the reverberation of the light, evokes the metaphysical space of the celestial vault [FIGS. 14–15].

The whole, thanks to the various materials used and the formal languages—not in a decorative key but as true expressive tools, activated by a luminist component—is configured as an early example

42 For artistic training under Wildt cf. Paola Mola, "Wildt e Brera, breve storia di un'utopia," *Arte Lombarda* 104 (1993): 69–77; Paola Mola, "Miscellanea wildtiana," *Arte Lombarda* 113/114/115 (1995): 160–61; Luca Massimo Barbero, "Wildt un magistero ideale: Fausto Melotti e Lucio Fontana," in *Adolfo*

*Wildt (1868-1931). L'ultimo simbolista*, exh. cat., ed. Paola Zatti (Skira, 2015), 103–12; Sbaraglia, "Al lume di Wildt," 31–67.

43 Cf. Sbaraglia, "Al lume di Wildt," 45–59.

44 Respectively, FLFA, cf. no. 3879/2; CRSDA, cf. no. 28 SC 11.

45 Cf. Sbaraglia, "Al lume di Wildt," 45–59.

46 Complex archived at FLFA, cf. no. 4490/1.

47 The clay model is also visible in the

photograph of the studio on Via G. Govone, taken by Gianni Mari toward the end of 1928 (FLFA).

of integrated environmental design: A "space"<sup>48</sup> ante litteram, in which sculptural, architectural, and ornamental elements converse in a deliberately dissonant way, generating a disquieting effect on the viewer. An expressive and conceptual hazard, which perhaps is the most important lesson that Fontana learned at the school of Wildt, destined to re-emerge in his entire oeuvre.



FIG. 14  
*Testa virile (Cristo/Dio padre e la fiammella dello Spirito Santo)*, 1928.  
Private collection.

48 Along this line, cf. Maria Villa, "Die Ambienti spaziali: Genese und Ergebnisse einer radikalen Erkundung," in *Lucio Fontana. Erwartung (Attesa)*,

exh. cat., ed. Roland Mönig and Beate Eickhoff (Von der Heydt-Museum Wuppertal-Fondazione Lucio Fontana, 2024), 52.

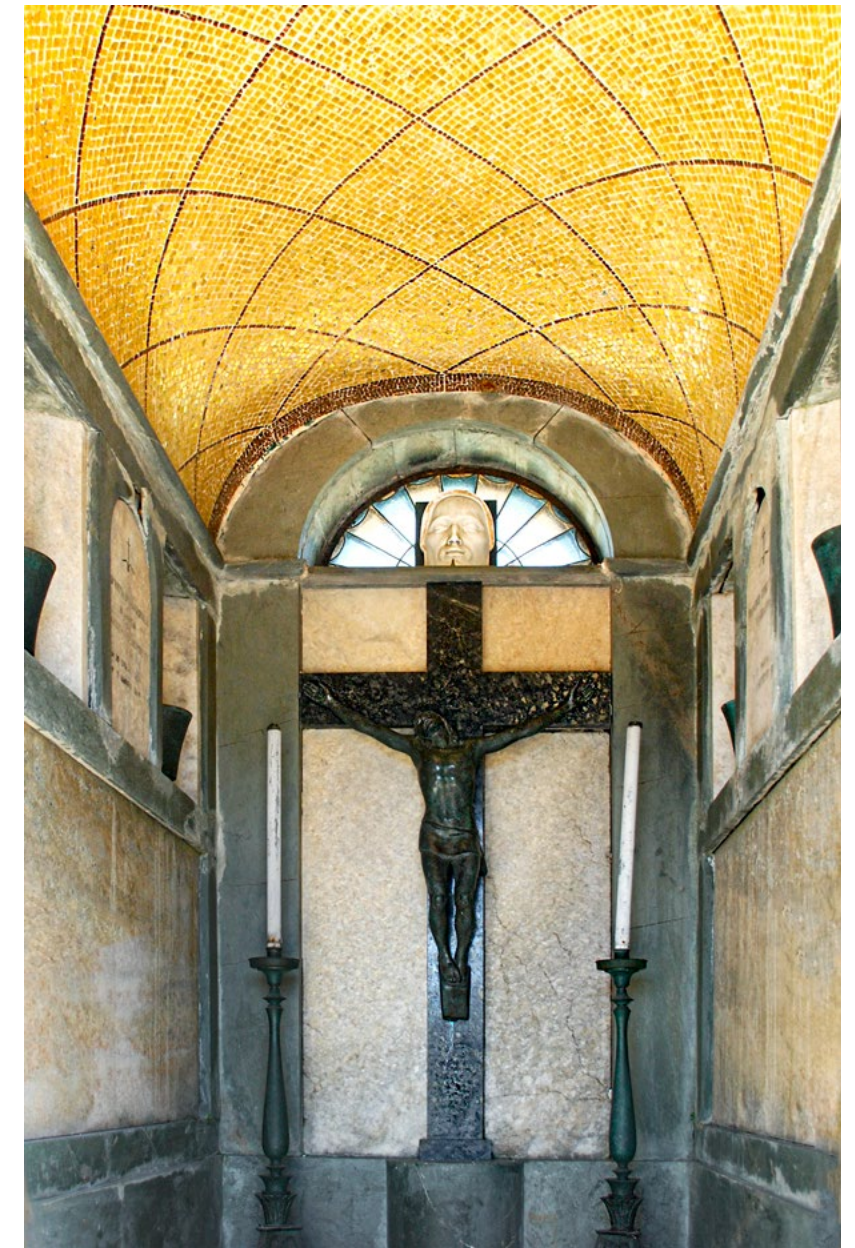


FIG. 15  
Bruno Fontana, Lucio Fontana, Funeral chapel, 1928–29. Private collection.

# LUCIO FONTANA AND THE “NEW SENSIBILITY” IN ARGENTINIAN ART

Lorena Mouguelar

## FRIENDSHIPS, TEXTS, AND IMAGES

Lucio Fontana is a key name in modern art history, especially as concerns his role in the areas of Spatialism, Conceptualism, and Art Informel, movements that swept the European scenario in the post-Second World War period. Nevertheless, the origins of the disruptive and nonconformist approach that characterized Fontana's entire artistic pathway go much further back. Soon after he joined his father's studio, some of his relationships and experiences encouraged him to radically change his way of making art, and this change would be vital to his career.

It was in Rosario that Lucio Fontana decided to be a sculptor, precisely while the creative explosion of the aesthetic avant-gardes was unfolding in Argentina. The return to their homeland by paradigmatic figures of the new art like Emilio Pettoruti, Xul Solar and Norah Borges came about in a favorable context from various points of view. In the 1920s, the economic prosperity that accompanied the early period of the government of Marcelo Torcuato de Alvear (1922–28) stimulated the growth of collecting that was oriented toward what was produced in the country. The gradual entrance into the market of Argentinian modern art, which was initially favored by the interruption in the commercial exchanges after the First World War, coincided with the opening up of new spaces to be used for exhibitions and the sale of artworks.<sup>1</sup> Although the epicenter of this process was in the capital, the interior of the country's major cities, like Córdoba and Rosario, were also involved.

The aim of this essay is to briefly present some of Lucio Fontana's youthful friendships during his stay in Rosario, as well as several programmatic texts and images that were circulating in Argentina at the time, to explain the conditions that made the artist's initial experiments with the avant-garde possible. The sculptures that he exhibited in the salons organized by the Nexus Group, and the reproductions of his works in the cultural magazines published in Rosario reveal his early assimilation of “primitivist” and synthetist ideas. An analysis of these works allows us to recognize Fontana's gaze toward radicalized aesthetic references and his strong desire for differentiation, even within the open panorama of the innovative currents of Argentine art.

1 In the 1920s there was a new kind of collecting taking shape in Buenos Aires, most of which promoted by the well-off middle class. In addition to nineteenth-century Modern European Art and that of the interwar years, it included variants specific to a national modernity. In this process,

of essential importance was the work done by institutions such as the Asociación Amigos del Arte, which began its activity in July 1924. Cf. Marcelo E. Pacheco, *Coleccionismo de Arte en Buenos Aires 1924-1942* (Editorial El Ateneo, 2013).

### THE MARTINFIERRISTA PHENOMENON

Lucio Fontana likely returned to Rosario in December 1921, when his father organized an Italian sculpture exhibition at the Castellani salon.<sup>2</sup> Living near Luigi Fontana's studio was Julio Vanzo, a journalist and illustrator, who had also returned to his city after working for several months in editorial departments in Buenos Aires. During his stay in the capital city, Vanzo came to know artists and writers connected to the mural journal *Prisma*, an avant-garde publication—along with the magazines *Proa* and *Martín Fierro*—that began the cultural movement known as "Martinfierrismo."<sup>3</sup> The publishers of the magazine carried out the important task of distributing copies not only to the cities inside the country, but also to the neighboring States.<sup>4</sup> These publishers included the poet Francisco Piñero, who, along with Julio Vanzo, hung on the walls of Rosario the original sheet featuring Ultraistic poems, accompanied by images made by Norah Borges.

After returning from a long period of time spent in Europe, Jorge Luis Borges, and his sister Norah put their experiences with Cubism, German Expressionism, and Spanish Ultraism into Buenos Aires' publications, thus promoting, for the first time in Argentina, a program of renewal that articulated literary and plastic elements. Norah Borges' woodcuts in *Prisma*, as well as the exhibitions held in Buenos Aires, in 1921, by the painters Pedro Figari and Ramón Gómez Cornet, marked the initial phases in a process of aesthetic change that was consolidated over the course of the decade. Norah Borges' woodcuts reappeared in the "first era" of the magazine *Proa*, published between 1922 and 1923 [FIG. 1]. Some of those images, featuring sharp faces and distorted expressions, were proof of the artist's interest in the primitivist revisitation of African masks.<sup>5</sup>

Although such stylistic references were not continuous in Norah Borges' output, primitivism took up a considerable amount of space in Argentinean periodical publications.<sup>6</sup> In the pages of the magazine *Martín Fierro* the references to urban and technological modernity conversed with ancient elements that went back thousands of years, while at a visual level the works of European or American artists were

2 Lorena Mouguelar, "Figuras en los márgenes: Lucio Fontana y la escultura en Rosario a comienzos de los años veinte," *Anuario TAREA 10* (2023): 216–49.

3 Beatriz Sarlo, *Una modernidad periférica: Buenos Aires 1920 y 1930* (Ediciones Nueva Visión, 2020).

4 Jerónimo Ledesma, "Rupturas de vanguardia en la década del 20. Ultraísmo, martinfierrismo," in *Historia crítica de la literatura argentina*, vol. 7, *Rupturas*, ed. Celina Manzoni (Emecé Editores, 2009), 167–99.

5 Patricia Artundo, *Norah Borges: obra gráfica 1920-1930* (Fondo Nacional de las Artes, 1994).

6 On the concept of primitivism and its relationship with currents in Western art between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, cf. the chapter by Gill Perry, "El primitivismo y 'lo moderno,'" in Charles Harrison, Francis Frascina, and Gill Perry, *Primitivismo, cubismo y abstracción. Los primeros años del siglo XX*, trans. Juan José Usabiaga Urkola (Tapa blanda, 1998), 7–89.

FIG. 1  
Norah Borges, *Ajedrez*,  
c. 1922 (in *Proa*  
[December 1922]).



compared with Pre-Hispanic sculptures or ceramic work. In the opinion of Armando and Fantoni: "*Martín Fierro* selected and valorized examples of 'primitive' art capable of reaffirming the abstract and conceptual qualities of the type of art that, in a militant manner, the magazine was attempting to diffuse and promote."<sup>7</sup>

With the manifesto written by Oliverio Gironde, the Martinfierrista group distinguished itself from other cultural projects, defined its own aesthetic program, and sought allies among the potential collaborators and readers, summoning "all those who are capable of perceiving that we are in the presence of a NEW sensibility and a NEW understanding, which, in getting us to agree with each other, unveils unsuspected panoramas and new means and new forms of expression."<sup>8</sup> Through critical texts and images, the magazine insisted on those characteristics that distinguished the new art from representative convention: structural force, plastic efficacy, and a lack of interest in the narrative dimension.<sup>9</sup>

One of the sculptors promoted by the magazine was Pablo Curatella Manes, who, in those years, frequented the Paris studio

7 Adriana Armando and Guillermo Fantoni, "El 'primitivismo' martinfierrista: de Gironde a Xul Solar," in *Oliverio Gironde. Obra completa*, ed. Raúl Antelo (Colección Archivos, 1999), 479.

8 "Manifiesto de 'Martín Fierro,'" *Martín Fierro I*, no. 4 (May 1924): 1–2. The

9 For an analysis of the aesthetic program promoted by the group, cf. Diana Wechsler, "Frente a la solemnidad . . . Arte y crítica en *Martín Fierro*," in *El periódico Martín Fierro en las artes y en las letras 1924-1927*, exh. cat.

of Antoine Bourdelle. In the review of his solo show at Witcomb Gallery in Buenos Aires in 1924, Alberto Prebisch stated that in Curatella Manes' work, nature is a pretext for "reaching a system of pure forms, of an intense life of its own."<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, this new sense of the sculptural, architectural, and constructive form was rooted in ancient times, such as in the Egyptian Age and in Ancient Greece. By so doing, the Argentine avant-garde affirmed the double game played by historical avant-garde which involved crossing one's gaze toward the past with tension toward the future.<sup>11</sup>

Among the reproductions that accompanied the article was the bronze version of *La femme au gros manteau* (c. 1921–1923 [FIG. 2]). This work with its intersected planes and combination of straight and curved lines was also showcased at the Salón Nacional de Bellas Artes in 1923, and, although it did not receive an official acknowledgment, it immediately entered the collection of Marcelo T. de Alvear.<sup>12</sup> It is a modern woman depicted in a synthetic manner,



FIG. 2  
Pablo Curatella Manes,  
*La femme au gros manteau*,  
c. 1921–23. Buenos Aires,  
Museo Nacional de  
Bellas Artes.

ed. Sergio Baur (Asociación de los Amigos del Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, 2010), 35–42.

10 Alberto Prebisch, "Pablo Curatella Manes," *Martín Fierro* I, no. 12/13 (November 1924): 6.

11 Adriana Armando and Guillermo Fantoni, "Arte 'primitivo' y

búsquedas nacionales: pequeñas historias de escultores argentinos," *Studi latinoamericani* 2 (2006): 373–93.

12 Patricia Artundo, in Roberto Amigo, *Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes: 1910-2010* (Arte Gráfico Editorial Argentina, 2011), 769–71.

solid and weighty in volume, and devoid of ornamentation. While Curatella Manes' sculpture was exceptional at the 1923 salon, one year later it found itself in conversation with the other works in the artist's aforementioned solo show. In that occasion, "by moving away from the real," the artist "arrives at what is almost the abstraction of pure forms."<sup>13</sup>

#### THE CIRCLE OF MODERN FRIENDS

Within this cultural context and after having won the tender for a commemorative plaque in the name of Louis Pasteur<sup>14</sup> [FIG. 3], which was unveiled to the public in the month of June 1923, Lucio Fontana decided to devote himself to sculpture.<sup>15</sup> The hours he spent working alongside his father, a well-known figure in the city, and constantly in contact with Italian art, constituted a solid foundation for Lucio's career.<sup>16</sup> It was thanks to his experience working for his father that he was commissioned to make a monument in

FIG. 3  
*Louis Pasteur*, 1923. Rosario,  
Escuela Superior de  
Comercio "Libertador Gral.  
San Martín."



13 Artundo, in Amigo, *Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes*.

14 FLFA, cf. no. 4544/1.

15 Before its final destination, the work was displayed in the window of the gallery owned by Livio Castellani, in the same venue that had hosted the exhibition organized by Luigi Fontana a few years earlier.

16 The importance of this phase was indicated early by Emilio Ghilioni, "Fontana, Rosario: tres momentos," in *Lucio Fontana: un seminario*.

*Argentina: tres trabajos invitados. Arestizabal / Ghilioni / Giunta* (scuela de Arte de al Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 1998), 23–94. With reference to the work of the young Lucio for the Fontana & Scarabelli company, and the support of the Italian community, see Daniela Sbaraglia, "Luigi y Lucio Fontana escultores: confluencias ítalo-argentinas en la plástica de principios del siglo XX," *Anuario TAREA* 5 (2018): 118–55.

honor of Juana Elena Blanco (1926);<sup>17</sup> he also took part in competitions for commemorative plaques such as the ones for Ernesto Celli (1925)<sup>18</sup> and Enrique Marc (1926).<sup>19</sup>

Nonetheless, Luigi and Lucio Fontana had different expectations and the tension between them was not long in coming. It was perhaps for this reason that, toward 1925, Lucio began sharing a studio with Julio Vanzo, which soon became a venue for artists and intellectuals who were open to the debate on new ideas. There, as early as the 1920s, they discussed modern art shows organized in the major cities in the country, they shared books that arrived from the metropolises and, most importantly, the national and foreign magazines that the group managed to procure for itself in a way that was exceptional for those days. From the Latin American ones like *Martín Fierro* from Buenos Aires and *La Sierra* from Lima, all the way to the European ones like *Les Nouvelles littéraires, artistiques et scientifiques* from Paris or *La Fiera Letteraria* from Milan, these periodical publications allowed for an almost instant updating with respect to the ideas and images that were circulating in far-away contexts. With the desire to participate in the process of cultural change that was crossing most of the Western world, strategies were developed in the studio for the promotion of the "new sensibility" and production that was constantly in dialogue with modern and avant-garde trends. The creative synergy between Vanzo and Fontana led to the creation of disruptive works in which their reciprocal thematic and formal influences were ongoing.<sup>20</sup>

Julio Vanzo was a self-taught painter who had been working since he was young in the editorial departments of magazines and newspapers, where he came into contact with journalists, writers, and artists from different generations.<sup>21</sup> He began drawing caricatures and illustrations for different graphic media, and at the same

17 CRSDA, cf. no. 27 A 1. The bronze work was displayed in the studio of Fontana and Scarabelli in September 1926, before its final destination. Nonetheless, the official inauguration was delayed for nearly a year.

18 Cf. FLFA.

19 An analysis of the monument to Juana Elena Blanco and of the model for the plaque in memory of Ernesto Celli is in Mouguelar, "Figuras en los márgenes." In 1926 Fontana also made a model for a plaque honoring Enrique Marc—whose present whereabouts are unknown—, in response to a call for proposals sent to various sculptors of the city by the Commission in charge of the homage.

20 The thematic, stylistic, and ideological closeness that favored the life of the studio, as well as the stimulus that

was offered by the frequent presence of intellectuals and writers like Juan Zocchi, are analyzed in Lorena Mouguelar, "De la vanguardia estética al antifascismo. Coincidencias en las trayectorias de Julio Vanzo y Lucio Fontana," in *Travesías de la imagen: historias de las artes visuales en la Argentina*, ed. María Baldasarre and Silvia Dolinko (Eduntref / CAIA - Centro argentino de investigadores de arte, 2012), 275–302.

21 On his beginnings in the world of graphic art and the role played by Eugenio Fornells, artist and master of Catalan origin, see Lorena Mouguelar, "Pintores, ilustradores y caricaturistas. El arte como profesión en Rosario a comienzos del siglo XX," *Caiana* 6 (2015): 119–32.

time he produced a series of plastic "experiences," which he only showed to a small number of fellow artists. Some of these images, which the artist jealously looked after until his death, underscore the radical nature of that early research. From *Autorretrato* (1919 [FIG. 4]), built up with brightly lit faceted planes, all the way to his series of ink nudes from 1921, where the artist's moral nonchalance was combined with the geometric synthesis typical of some of the movements between the two wars, these small works on paper do not have an immediate horizon of expectations.<sup>22</sup>

On his part, Lucio Fontana was a restless man with a likeable personality, and this led him to become friends with other young people from Rosario who were of the same generation as him, and who were also attracted to modern art. These included the sculptor Antonio Palau, who had trained in Spain, and was an assistant in

FIG. 4  
Julio Vanzo, *Autorretrato*,  
1919. Rosario, Museo  
Castagnino+macro.



22 Lorena Mouguelar, "1919: Cubismo y Futurismo en Rosario," *Separata* V, no. 10, (2005): 13–27.

Luigi's studio, and the painter Domingo Candia, who in 1923 returned from his first trip to Italy. In 1914 Candia had begun studying in Florence, the scene of a vibrant cultural atmosphere brought to life by the representative figures in the movement that embraced a "return to order," by the Futurist group that had reunited around the magazine *Lacerba*, and by artists who were also natives of Argentina, like Pablo Curatella Manes and Emilio Pettoruti.

Domingo Candia took lessons from Giovanni Costetti and in his studio he met some of Rosario's painters: Augusto Schiavoni, Manuel Musto, and César Caggiano. At different times, each of them returned to Rosario and presented to the local public their own personal poetics, all figurative representations in modern style which were admitted to the official salons. Their European journey was not just an educational opportunity, it was also a way to validate their aesthetic choices, which limited their entrance into the market. Domingo Candia, as soon as he got back to Argentina, participated in the *VI Salón de Otoño* of 1923 with a considerable number of works, including *Autorretrato* [FIG. 5]. In this oil work, featuring marked brushwork and a solid construction to portray the artist in his studio, what draws the viewer's attention is the fragment of the painting visible behind the protagonist. A representation in the representation where the painter approaches



FIG. 5  
Domingo Candia, *Autorretrato*,  
1923. Rosario, Museo  
Castagnino+macro.

abstraction and geometry, even though he never abandons his relationship with reality. A connoisseur of avant-garde trends, Candia was oriented—like all his fellow artists who had lived in Italy—toward the restorative currents of the interwar period. Nonetheless, leaving aside his preferences, he was a knowledgeable interlocutor with whom Lucio Fontana and Julio Vanzo could talk about modern art.

An indication of this friendship appeared in *Italia*, a periodical that Fontana contributed to as an illustrator and member of the editorial board. In these roles he spent much of his time working on the covers and the images inside, with drawings linked to the world of Symbolism.<sup>23</sup> In the November 1925 issue, the greetings from Paris come from Domenico Candia, introduced in the role of painting critic for the magazine and a "very dear friend."<sup>24</sup> Indeed, during that period Candia had begun a training period in France under the guidance of André Lhote, leaving behind in Rosario friendships that would last in spite of the distances.

In 1926, *Italia* was given a new cover, with a different image and font [FIG. 6]. Although the drawing was not signed, the extreme



FIG. 6  
Julio Vanzo (?), cover of  
*Italia*, (February–March  
1926). Rosario, Museo  
de la Ciudad Wladimir  
Mikielievich.

23 For a complete analysis of these illustrations, see Daniela Sbaraglia, "Lucio Fontana in Argentina (1922-1928): le origini," *Valori tattili* 17 (2021): 65–97.

24 *Italia* VII, 8 (November 1925): 29. Published on the same page are condolences for Lucio Fontana's loss.

synthesis and the geometric lines, as well as the stylistic closeness to the other illustrations made by Julio Vanzo that same year, make it possible to affirm that the work is his. Fontana's, Candia's and Vanzo's participation in the same magazine confirms that the connection grew in subsequent initiatives, like *La Gaceta del Sur*, an innovative cultural periodical published in Rosario in 1928, in which they met once again via their artworks.

#### COLLECTIVE ACTIONS IN ROSARIO

In 1925 Lucio Fontana's professional career achieved a great deal of visibility: For the first time he sent works to the official salons in the province, and he participated, together with twenty artists who were active in Rosario, in the formal constitution of the Nexus Group. Almost two decades earlier, another group called Nexus (1907–11) had consolidated, in Buenos Aires, the process of institutionalizing the artistic space, and had occupied a central role in the national salon, in the Fine Arts Academy, and, as a result, in the market as well.<sup>25</sup> By choosing the same name, the Rosario artists aspired to imitate the role that had been played by that first Nexus, albeit from within the country. Indeed, they promoted constant exhibition activity as well as a space for training; they took a stance as concerned public policies vis-à-vis culture, and they also organized a salon that was exclusively meant to serve the city's artists.<sup>26</sup>

In the two salons organized by the Nexus Group, Lucio Fontana decided to present works that were very different from the ones that he sent for the official shows, and for which he would soon be well known in the region. At the time of the second edition, which opened in September 1927, Fontana was planning to return to Milan soon, both to consolidate his training as a sculptor, and to seek scenarios that he felt were more favorable to modern art. Perhaps the imminent journey encouraged him to expose his most radicalized artistic production: a medal, two plaster figures and a ceramic one that led one journalist to describe him as "avanguardista rosarino."<sup>27</sup> The term, in Italian in the local periodical, stemmed from the way the artist spoke, often mixing Spanish with his father's language, as well as from Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's recent visit to Argentina and its repercussions on the means of mass communication.

25 Laura Malosetti Costa, "Las instituciones y el arte en el Centenario," in *Las artes en torno al Centenario: estado de la cuestión (1905-1915)*, ed. Rosa María Ravera and Ricardo Blanco (Academia Nacional de Bellas Artes, 2010), 49–59.

26 I develop these issues in Lorena Mouguelar, "Espacios, recursos e imágenes en disputa: el arte en Rosario en la década de 1920," *Culturas. Debates y perspectivas de un mundo en cambio* 19 (2025): 144–164.

As part of a tour in Latin America, Marinetti's speaking activity stirred controversies that preceded, accompanied, and followed the talks he gave in Buenos Aires, Córdoba, and Rosario, where he arrived in June 1926. One week after Marinetti's fleeting sojourn, the opening of the *Primer Salón de Artistas Rosarinos*, organized by the Nexus Group, took place. In those days, communiqués about the event could be read in the same pages of the local press with articles dedicated to Futurism. Even the forthcoming exhibition in Rosario of the works of Emilio Pettoruti, a native of La Plata—who, according to the critics, was the representative of the movement within the Argentinean context—, was announced. All the same, his exhibition was not held until October 1927.

A few months earlier, on the occasion of the Nexus Group's *Segunda Exposición de Artistas Rosarinos*, Lucio Fontana had shown *Charleston*, a majolica piece, according to the exhibition catalog. With this work, the artist paved the way for his experiments with material that in his hands assumed unpredictable shapes.<sup>28</sup> As he was about to leave for Italy, he entrusted some of his works to his friend Vanzo and he soon asked him for some photographs, of this work in particular.<sup>29</sup> Years later, in the essay he wrote in 1939 titled "My Ceramics" he underscored the importance of that first work insofar as it was the initial stage of a long run that would develop systematically starting from the periods he spent in the Sèvres and Albisola workshops over the course of the 1930s.<sup>30</sup>

The only sculpture that is known of and was similar in terms of the subject to what was on display at the Salón was *Ballerina di Charleston* [FIG. 7],<sup>31</sup> depicting a young woman who projects herself

27 "Salón Nexus. El avanguardista rosarino Lucio Fontana," *La Capital* (Rosario, September 16, 1927): 5.

28 CRSC.

29 At the end of the letter, it reads: "Oh, do me a big favor, see if you can take more pictures of my things and send them to me, I need them, especially a picture of *Charleston*." Paolo Campiglio, ed., *Lucio Fontana. Lettere 1919-1968* (Skira, 1999), 199–201, letter 240 (dated November 7, 1927).

30 Lucio Fontana, "Le mie ceramiche," *Tempo* (September 21, 1939) (reproduced as "My Ceramics," in CRSC, I, 151). In the article, Fontana mentions a male figure: "the 'Ballerino [male dancer] di Charleston' acquired by the Modern Art Gallery in Rosario di Santa Fe." Nonetheless, the reference to a gallery presumed to be specialized in modern art in Rosario, around 1926, leaves doubts as to the accuracy of his recollection. [Fontana, "My Ceramics," 151].

31 CRSDA, cf. no. 26 SC 4. Starting from

the rediscovery of the catalog of the *Segunda Exposición de Artistas Rosarinos*, organized by the Nexus Group, which includes a list of the works presented—including a ceramic work titled *Charleston* by Lucio Fontana—I hypothesized that the *Ballerina di Charleston*, held in a private collection in Milan (previously owned by Julio Vanzo and subsequently by Juan Zocchi), was actually the ceramic work on display in 1927. I formulated this theory in Lorena Mouguelar, "Los comienzos de Fontana en el arte. Primer acercamiento al 'primitivismo,'" *Avances* 14 (2009): 161–75, where I analyzed this work, enameled in black, as it relates to the primitivist currents, the myths surrounding the eroticism of Blacks, and, in particular, to the impact of the sensual dancing of Joséphine Baker. Nonetheless, recent analyses on the materiality, mentioned in Sharon Hecker, ed., *Mani-Fattura. Le ceramiche di Lucio Fontana*, exh. cat. (Marsilio Arte, 2025), 18, note 14, confirm



into various directions, underscoring the artist's interest in the dynamism that was so dear to the members of the Futurist movement. It is likely that the initial idea for the work was inspired by the new dances that were all the rage in the 1920s, and in particular the images of Joséphine Baker, who arrived in Paris in 1925 and became the protagonist of films, posters, and photographs circulating throughout Europe and America [FIG. 8]. The Art Déco language pervaded both the advertising graphics of the "Black Pearl" and Fontana's figure enameled in black, which combined a torso viewed from the front with a head seen in profile. Equally suggestive was

FIG. 7  
*Ballerina di Charleston*, 1926.  
Private collection.

FIG. 8  
Paul Colin, *Bal Nègre*, 1927.

that it is a plaster work according to what is indicated in the CRSDA. The question does remain open as concerns Lucio Fontana's first ceramic work, as well as on the possibility of his having presented, in 1927, a version of the *Ballerina di Charleston* or a different work but on the same theme. This is the direction embraced by Daniela Sbaraglia, whose research was yet to be published while I was writing this article (cf. Daniela Alejandra Sbaraglia, *Lucio Fontana in Argentina. Dalle origini al Manifiesto Blanco* [Electa-Fondazione Lucio Fontana, 2025]). I wish to express my gratitude to Maria

Villa, Vice-President of the Fondazione Lucio Fontana in Milan, for her precious suggestions.

- 32 Marthe Donas had a personal relationship with Archipenko, who introduced her to several avant-garde environments under a male pseudonym, presenting her as his "disciple." Regarding her early years in the world of art and her quick affirmation at an international level, see Marcel Daloze, ed., *Marthe Donas à Genève, surgissement d'une artiste . . .*, exh. cat. (Musée Marthe Donas, 2023).
- 33 CRSDA, cf. no. 26 A 2.

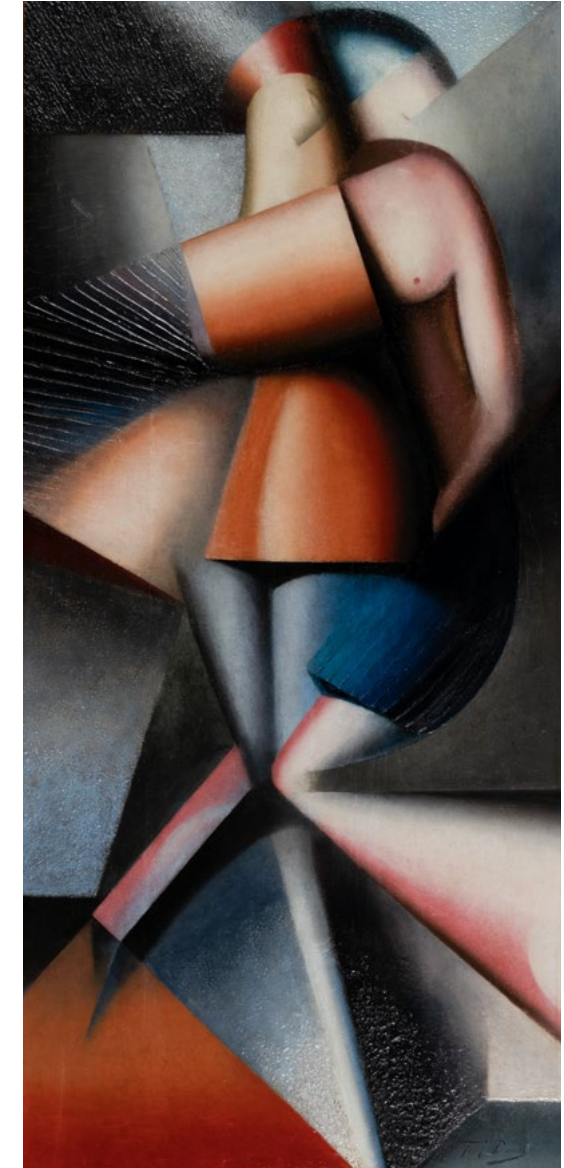


FIG. 9  
Marthe Donas, *Danse*, 1919.  
Izu, Ikeda Museum of 20th  
Century Art.

its closeness in terms of theme and structure to *Danse* [FIG. 9] by the Belgian painter Tour Donas (the pseudonym for Marthe Donas), whose oeuvre linked to Post-Cubism and abstraction had spread during the first postwar period thanks to avant-garde magazines like the Italian *Noi* and the German *Der Sturm*.<sup>32</sup> Hence, Fontana's sculpture offered clues of the various stimuli that acted upon a sensitivity that was intimately connected to contemporary life.

At Salón Nexus in 1927 Lucio Fontana also showed *Maternidad* [FIG. 10],<sup>33</sup> a theme he had already dealt with in the previous edition and that in this case was resolved starting from the iconography of

FIG. 10  
*Maternità*, 1926.  
 Private collection.



FIG. 11  
 Julio Vanzo, *Toilette*,  
 1927. Rosario, Museo  
 Castagnino+macro.

the Madonna of Humility, in a more synthetic and compact version. The woman's large body, featuring curvilinear rhythms and solidly anchored to the ground, holds and embraces the child. The figure—devoid of facial features, with prismatic hands and distorted volumes that heighten the expressiveness of the representation—clearly shows the interests Fontana shared with Julio Vanzo. And indeed, a few weeks later, in an Argentine art exhibition organized by the Guido brothers at the Salón Witcomb in Rosario, Vanzo exhibited a watercolor characterized by a high degree of abstraction, titled *Toilette* (1927 [FIG. 11]). This representation of a dressing room with naked actresses, featuring sharp contours and flat colors, also found no space in the official salons.

#### AN ANTENNA OF NEW ART

In Rosario in 1927 the most recent works by Lucio Fontana and Julio Vanzo could only be displayed in events that the artists themselves organized. Fully aware of the distance between their research and the public's taste, they began to elaborate—together with writers who were their fellow countrymen, like Fausto Hernández, Armando Cascella, Juan Zocchi, and Miguel La Rosa—projects aimed to disseminate the "new sensibility" in literature and in the

FIG. 12  
 Julio Vanzo, cover of *Ahora*  
 (January 1928).



arts. The first result of these alliances was *Ahora*, a periodical that was aimed to promote radical changes in the cultural context.<sup>34</sup>

Julio Vanzo, in addition to writing artistic editorials, also oversaw the graphic design. The same image he designed for the advertising poster was part of the periodical's header: a naked man leaping into the void, a figure divested of all social constraints, advancing toward an unknown future [FIG. 12]. The print, with its marked features and sharp contours, clearly reminiscent of primitivism, can be related to German Expressionism and in particular the dancers of Ernst Kirchner and Maria Uhden.<sup>35</sup>

In the first issue of *Ahora*, the only Argentinian artists present with their works were Julio Vanzo and Lucio Fontana. One of the plasterworks reproduced was Fontana's *La mujer y el balde* [FIG. 13],<sup>36</sup> previously showcased at the already mentioned Salón Nexus. This extremely synthetic nude was characterized by rounded forms and sharp contrasts between dense volumes and empty spaces. The posture was that of an ancient deity, featuring emphasis on the curved hip and raised arms unveiling a nude torso; this was the structural axis from which Fontana generated a "primitivist" representation, devoid of all naturalism by virtue of the formal simplifications and the roughness of the materiality.

A distant relative of the head bent inside the arm is the *Sleeping Ariadne*, a classical reference borrowed from Alexander Archipenko, a contemporary artist whose work greatly influenced Fontana's early inventions. I am thinking specifically of *Le Repos* (1911), or to *Femme se coiffant* (1913 [FIG. 14]), works shown in Berlin around 1921 and soon made known through *Der Sturm*. The same posture appears in the early figures of Milly Steger—an artist operating in the circle of Herwalth Walden—whose sculpture of a naked woman standing and stretching was in turn published in *Ahora* under the title *Despertar*. The decision to use specific European references that were manifested in the visual component of the periodical was a way to legitimize the personal poetics of the collaborators from Rosario.<sup>37</sup>

34 Within the circle of small magazines or cultural periodicals close friendships were made and professional relationships were fostered, as well as alliances and stances toward the outside. These were fluid groups that did not last long, "formations" to use a term coined by Raymond Williams, whose study allows for a vivid approach to the cultural change at the very moment that it was taking place. Cf. Raymond Williams, *Sociología de la cultura*, trans. Graziella Baravalle (Ediciones Paidós, 2015).

35 In the 1920s and in the following decade, the output of women artists occupied a considerable place in the

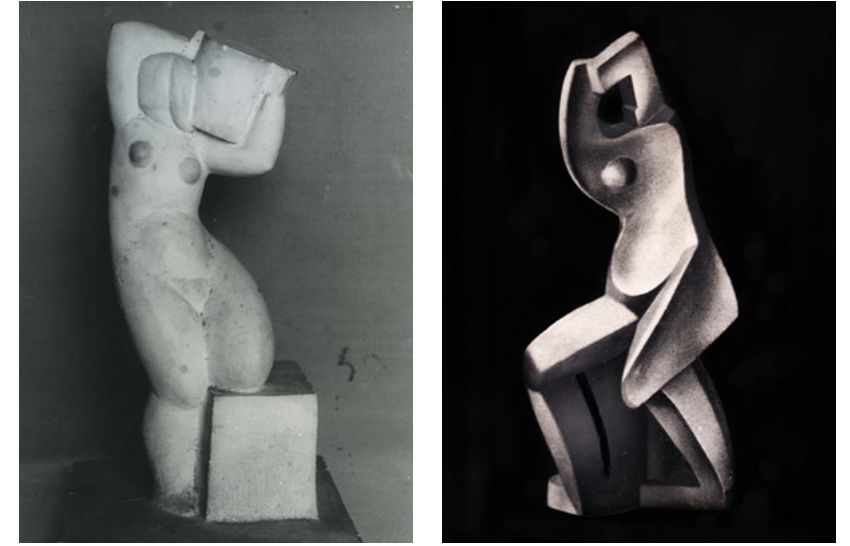
initiatives directed by Herwalth Walden, mostly thanks to the drive of his partner, Nell Roslund. Their works and their paths have been appeared in recent shows and publications that revisit the Expressionist movement.

36 CRSDA; cf. no. 26-27 SC 2.

37 On the selection of images made simultaneously in cities distant from each other, like Berlin, Paris, Florence, Buenos Aires, and Rosario, see Lorena Mouguelar, "Alianzas y estrategias para la difusión del modernismo estético en Rosario: *Ahora* y *La Gaceta del Sur*," *Separata XVIII*, no. 26 (Rosario, 2020): 39–67.

FIG. 13  
*La mujer y el balde*,  
1926–27. Private  
collection.

FIG. 14  
Alexander Archipenko,  
*Femme se coiffant*  
(in *Der Sturm*  
(September 1921)).



Lucio Fontana's sculptures framed a programmatic text signed by Juan Zocchi, with whom the writer announced Rosario's entrance into the movement that renewed the national literature: "Rosario is virgin land for the 'new sensibility' . . . But it is more than virgin, it is propitious. Thirsty concavity, exterior opulence of the hip calls the audacious youngster. . . . Rosario is work, production, technique, technique!, modern primitivism with a deep groove ready for literature that begins 'now.'"<sup>38</sup> The intersection between several aspects of contemporary life and references to a primordial and sensual world crossed both Zocchi's text and Fontana's and Vanzo's images. Primitivism—as a modern art current that seeks to bring to life Western culture starting from its gaze on distant times and spaces, a return to the origins—is an aesthetic choice that can be observed in the simplified nudes with rounded shapes and heavy volumes reproduced in *Ahora*.

From its manifesto, printed on the advertising poster as well as in the first issue, *Ahora* presents itself as "an antenna of Rosario," and indeed it did disseminate the most recent events going on in the city in the literary and artistic circles, at the same time receiving and welcoming different ideas from other big cities.<sup>39</sup> In this sense, it was significant that the aesthetic references invoked by the group did not come from Buenos Aires; rather, they came directly from the European scene. From within the broad artistic scene of the interwar years, the editors chose absolutely personal and radicalized images, such as the lyrical abstraction of Expressionist

38 Juan Zocchi, "Ahora Rosario," *Ahora I*, no. 1 (February 4, 1928): 5.

39 *Ahora I*, no. 1 (February 4, 1928): 1.

inspiration of the German artist Rudolf Bauer, or the intersection between Cubism and Expressionism of the Russian Marc Chagall [FIG. 15]. The latter artist's works—and many of the others mentioned in this article—were also reproduced in *Der Sturm*, thus confirming Vanzo's recollections as concerned the magazine's impact on his youthful years.

The politics of exchanges and connections with other centers of cultural production was a constant on the part of Herwarth Walden, the director of the magazine, who sent a special collaboration piece for the *Gaceta del Sur* in which he defended a "living art" based on a sensitivity towards colors and forms.<sup>40</sup> Not too long before, for the second issue of *Ahora*, some of the poems from Walden's 1925 book *Im Geschweig der Liebe* were published.<sup>41</sup> It would not be surprising to discover that the German writer and gallerist had also provided the plates for the reproductions of the works, just as he had done in 1921 to fulfill Jorge Luis Borges' request.

In conclusion, the availability of works and printed materials linked to the "new sensibility" to these young avant-garde artists, as well as their direct contact with modern artists returning from Europe, and with active cultural promoters from other parts of the world, explains the emergence in Rosario of images considered groundbreaking for Argentine art in the 1920s. In the specific case of Lucio Fontana, this circumstances favored his first approach to primitivism. At the same time, it was the seed of a particular way of generating cultural change based on collective practices, which at times aspired to diffuse and validate modern art; whereas at other times, these collective practices were responsible for rupture instead. These are the characteristics of Fontana's artistic trajectory that, albeit conceived in Rosario, found Milan to be a favorable space for the development of his art.

40 Herwarth Walden, "El arte viviente," *La Gaceta del Sur* 1, no. 4/5 (June/July 1928): 3.

41 Herwarth Walden, "En el silencio del amor," *Ahora* 1, no. 2 (February 25, 1928): 1. The magazine

published poems from the Walden's book, translated by Nany B. di Zocchi, who might be Juan Zocchi's wife, although the sources to confirm this have not yet been found.



FIG. 15  
Marc Chagall, *Interieur*,  
1912 (in *Der Sturm*  
[June 1920]).

# THE SPATIALISM OF THE POTTER. *LA RUOTA NELL'ANTRO*: NOTES ON A SUCCESSFUL DRAWING BY LUCIO FONTANA

Luca Bochicchio

This contribution is a reflection to the side on Lucio Fontana's experience with the medium of ceramics, within the manufactory known as Mazzotti Giuseppe Albisola (MGA).<sup>1</sup> Methodologically, it relates to the recent historical and critical reconsideration of Fontana's ceramic works, which, among the most representative exhibitions, features the retrospective at the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris in 2014, curated by Choghakate Kazarian and Sébastien Gokalp, followed by the 2019 exhibition at the Met Breuer in New York, and, lastly, the sculpture exhibition in 2022 at Hauser & Wirth Gallery in New York, curated by Luca Massimo Barbero.<sup>2</sup> The three exhibitions were characterized by the significant presence of ceramic works, in a close dialogue with those in other materials, eventually leading to the first exhibitions dedicated exclusively to ceramics: the 2018 show at the MuDA Exhibition Centre in Albisola, curated by the author, and the 2025 exhibition at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, curated by Sharon Hecker.

This series of exhibitions took place within the realm of a more general critical reevaluation of ceramics in the history of modern and contemporary art, but above all in parallel with the drafting of a *catalogue raisonné* of Lucio Fontana's ceramic works by the eponymous Foundation, edited by Barbero and published in 2022, continuing from the previous studies and *catalogues raisonnés* in the series curated by Enrico Crispolti.<sup>3</sup>

It was within this context that I began dealing with Fontana's ceramics, with a particular eye to the events that connected the artist to the creative, productive, and cultural sphere in Albisola, between 1936 and the early 1960s. The two main contributions in this sense were the mapping of the manufactories in Albisola where Fontana worked, which included an accurate survey of the relationships that the artist established in that context, and a new

1 This was the manufactory founded by Giuseppe Mazzotti, nicknamed Bausin, in 1903 in Albissola Marina. Around 1934 the factory moved from Pozzo Garitta to the mouth of the Sansobbia stream, into a new Futurist-style building designed by Nikolay Diulgheroff. It was a family-run artisanal firm. When its operations were in full swing, working there were its founders Giuseppe Mazzotti and Celestina Gerbino Promis, together with their three children, Torido, Tullio (registered at birth as Spartaco), and Vittoria. Thanks to the artistic and organizational activity of Tullio, known as Tullio d'Albisola from the time of his adherence to the Futurist movement in 1928, the factory became a destination for artists from various Italian cities, mainly, though not exclusively, representatives of Futurism.

For a general overview of Tullio's activity, at least up to the mid-20th century, see Enrico Crispolti, ed., *La ceramica futurista da Balla a Tullio d'Albisola* (Centro Di, 1982).

2 In chronological order, see Choghakate Kazarian and Sébastien Gokalp, eds., *Lucio Fontana. Rétrospective*, exh. cat. (Paris Musées, 2014); Iria Candela, ed., *Lucio Fontana. On the Threshold*, exh. cat. (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2019); Luca Massimo Barbero, ed., *Lucio Fontana: Sculpture*, exh. cat. (Hauser & Wirth, 2022). It is worth noting, for the purposes of this study, that all three of the exhibitions were planned with the collaboration of the Fondazione Lucio Fontana, an indication of a specific scientific intent aimed at giving the proper weight to the artist's ceramic sculptures.

3 CROC and CRSDA.

critical edition of his letters to Tullio d'Albisola.<sup>4</sup> Both studies were based on an accurate analysis of the works, including a review of the secondary sources, such as correspondence, newspaper articles, flyers, brochures, and photographs, preserved in both the archives of Tullio d'Albisola and those of the Fondazione Lucio Fontana, but also in the private collections of ceramicists or figures gravitating around the culture of Albisola. Moreover, casting light on Tullio's psychological, biographical, and artistic sides, as well as on the characteristics and roles of the various artisans working in Giuseppe Mazzotti's factory, proved to be indispensable to offering a clear picture of the spheres where Lucio Fontana spent his time during such an important phase in his career.<sup>5</sup>

The decision to write about this very subject might appear marginal seeing that the object of analysis is not the artist's ceramic output per se, but a drawing that Fontana made in 1938, as part of a larger series, in which the reference to ceramics is threefold: First, the work is the result of the artist's privileged relationship with Tullio d'Albisola and the Mazzotti manufactory; second, the subject that offers him a title for the work is the ceramicist's lathe; lastly, this constitutes perhaps the most important historical precedent in a whole series of specifically Spatialist creations by Fontana, hence, after 1946, implicitly recalling therein the seminal significance of the sculptural work in ceramics.

The drawing is titled *La ruota nell'antro*<sup>6</sup> and I should specify that the *ruota* (wheel) is that which serves to activate the lathe, while the *antro* (cavern) is the potter's workshop.

4 The first contribution was conceived in 2018 in parallel with the exhibition project *Nascita della materia. Lucio Fontana e Albisola*, on the occasion of the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of Fontana's death, which I curated in collaboration with Enrico Crispolti and Paola Valenti, and realized by the Museo Diffuso of Albissola Marina in collaboration with the Fondazione Lucio Fontana: Luca Bochicchio, "Lucio Fontana e Albisola: appunti per una 'biografia spregiudicata,'" in *Lucio Fontana e Albisola*, exh. cat., ed. Luca Bochicchio, Enrico Crispolti, and Paola Valenti (Vanilla, 2018). For the letters between Fontana and Tullio, see Lucio Fontana, *Lettere a Tullio d'Albisola 1936-1964*, ed. Luca Bochicchio (Abscondita, 2023).

5 The most in-depth reconstruction of part of the activity and biography of Tullio d'Albisola can be found in L. Bochicchio, "Tullio d'Albisola between Futurism and Fascism," in G. Berghaus, ed., *The International Yearbook of*

*Futurism Studies X* (De Gruyter, 2020), 149–71. The exhibition *Nascita della materia* from 2018 (cf. previous note) led to a first in-depth analysis—Luca Bochicchio, "Lucio Fontana tra tecnica e media: dalla ceramica riflessata alla macchina da presa," *Faenza. Bollettino Internazionale del Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche in Faenza CIV*, no. 2 (2018): 78–93—which was further examined in L. Bochicchio, "Lucio Fontana nel laboratorio Mazzotti di Albisola: relazioni e processi, tecniche e materiali," in *Mani-Fattura. Le ceramiche di Lucio Fontana*, exh. cat., ed. Sharon Hecker (Marsilio Arte 2025), 41–51. Also on Fontana's relationship with the creative milieu of Albissola, see Luca Bochicchio, "Picasso est Picasso, mais Fontana avait commencé avant lui," in *Un futuro c'è stato / Il y a bien eu un futur*, exh. cat., ed. Paolo Campiglio, Benoit Decron, and Amandine Meunier (Gallimard–Musée Soulages, 2024), 47–53.

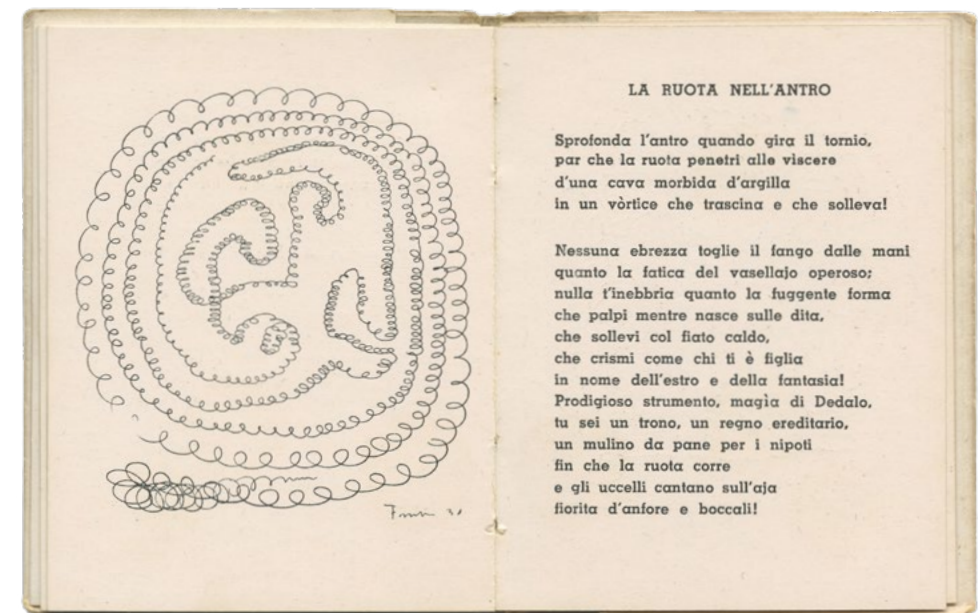
6 CROC, cf. no. 38 DTA 10.

It also needs to be said that the drawing would not be so significant, so important if it weren't a totally abstract work, an informal one, far-removed from any descriptive or literal reproduction of the subject portrayed, even if it were the figuration of Surrealist and Futurist inspiration that characterized Fontana's graphic language during that period.

The second preliminary consideration is the rather good critical success of this single drawing. It was in fact chosen to illustrate the cover of the first volume of Fontana's *Catalogo ragionato delle opere su carta*, and it was given a leading position at the Met Breuer exhibition, in the opening section, opposite the first *ouverture* on ceramic production. And as we shall see at the end of this essay, the drawing also attracted the interest of Bruno Munari, who made a sketch of it in a private letter. Having acknowledged the transversal interest on the part of the contemporaries and the posthumous criticism, our task is to try to understand why this work on paper was able to attract different levels of meaning within Lucio Fontana's multifarious and extensive artist output.

The work is part of a collection of seventeen drawings, identified in the *catalogue raisonné* of the works on paper from 38 DTA 1 to 17.<sup>7</sup> Fontana made the drawings upon Tullio d'Albisola's request in 1938. They were meant to accompany the latter artist's poem in five parts, published by Giovanni Scheiwiller in 1943 with the title *Racconto* and included in the "Insegna del Pesce d'Oro" series [FIG. 1].

FIG. 1  
*La ruota nell'antro*, 1938  
(in Tullio d'Albisola,  
*Racconto*, [Esperia, 1943]).



7 CROC, cf. nos. 38 DTA 1-38 DTA 17.

As I said at the beginning of this essay, the drawing was a peculiar one for that period, foreshadowing future drawings and projects that were declaredly Spatialist. The identification of the artisan's workshop as a magical place in which free forms are generated starting from the soft clay, converges in this work from two directions: The title, a poetic and evocative one—hence, as we shall see, in line with the poetry by Tullio that inspired it—alludes to the symbolic and mythological value of the ceramics workshop, envisioned as a cavern; the visual phenomenology of the drawing expresses a self-generative, continuous and dynamic flow, based on the spiraling and arabesque pattern, akin to what happens when amorphous clay is handled on the lathe as it turns.

A letter that Fontana wrote to Tullio on January 12, 1938, tells us that the artist was already planning to reach out to Scheiwiller about publishing with Hoepli an unspecified "script" written by his ceramicist friend and poet. He may or may not have been referring to the poem in question, as still today there is uncertainty in regard to a script that Tullio wrote for the cinema that has remained unpublished.

A subsequent clue, a much more solid one of the evolution of the publishing project, can be found in a draft letter sent by Tullio to Giovanni Scheiwiller on January 22, 1942:<sup>8</sup>

In response to your much appreciated request,  
I am sending you my artisanal short poem  
and the pen illustrations by Lucio Fontana  
for you to read and examine.  
The title, on the cover, might simply be *Racconto*.  
The 5 parts were followed by Fontana you might say line  
by line, as indicated by the 21 numbers in pencil.  
Drawing no. 1 is a sketch for my sculptural portrait  
that should be published separately from the text.  
A note by Marinetti ends and gives credit to the small  
book which contains all the joy and suffering  
of my life as a potter and our little art.  
There is no need to tell you that the text and  
the drawings are of a sincerity that is beyond dispute.  
My hope is that you will deem them to be  
worthy of publication among the *pesci d'oro*  
most cordially  
Tullio Mazzotti

PS

Should the book be printed, I am asking  
that the drawings be returned to me  
in the best condition possible;

moreover, even if the print run is limited,  
which is customary for this type of collection,  
how many copies am I allowed to reserve?

This document tells us something about the nature of Fontana's intervention (which accompanied the poem "line by line") and says a great deal more about the poem's author: In these few lines Tullio offers a sort of identikit for his dual poetic and artisanal vocation, almost a counterweight of the portrait made for him by Fontana, which, in the end, would not be published by Scheiwiller.

The portrait of Tullio d'Albisola assumes the characteristics of an artistic micro-genre on its own, there being so many of them made regularly by the many artists who passed through factory. The one made by Fontana in 1938 can be placed, for the sake of comparison, alongside those of Bruno Munari and Enrico Prampolini, both from 1929. Clearly, Prampolini's portrait is the one that resembles the subject the most; the spatial layout is similar, featuring segments that cut and define the space of the page; however, it differs as concerns the expressiveness of the graphic line, which is more nervous and organic in Fontana's portrayal. For this very reason, it may be of interest to look at Munari's drawing: illustrative and brazenly ironic, Tullio morphs into a cactus wearing a pair of glasses. The latter element became the constant attribute in almost all the portraits made of Tullio d'Albisola, who in real life did in fact wear round thick-rimmed glasses<sup>9</sup> [FIGS. 2–3].

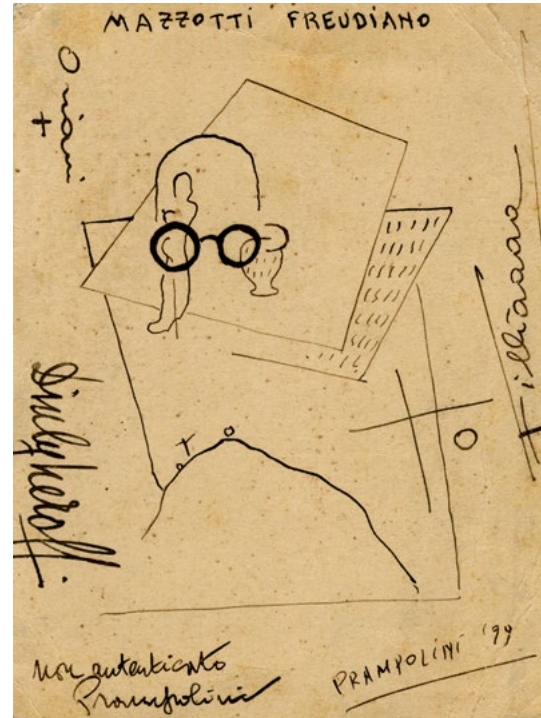
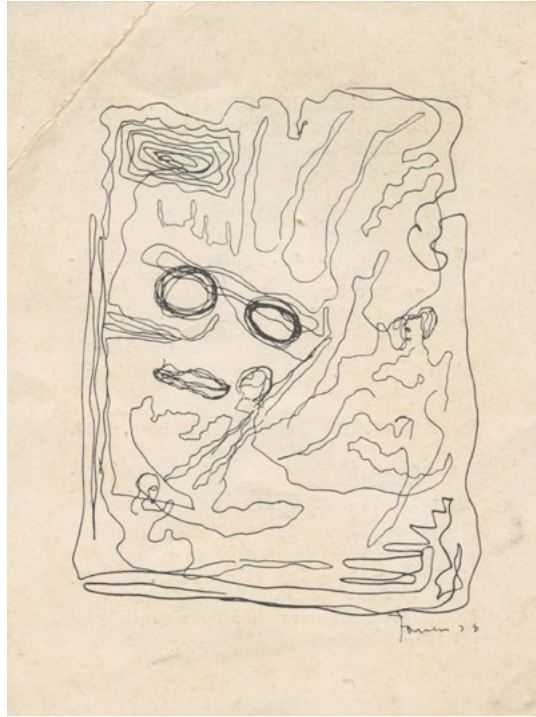
Of the seventeen drawings that Fontana made for Tullio's poetry, only fourteen were published in the 1943 edition (as I stated previously, the portrait was also excluded)<sup>10</sup>. *Racconto* is about the places of the soul that are dear to the poet: a ceramicist who grew up in a family of ceramicists, the bard of an everyday micro-story consisting of toil at the lathes, kilns, and the workbench where the vases and plates were decorated. An absolute protagonist, besides the kiln itself, was the courtyard of Pozzo Garitta on the western side of the village of what today is Albissola Marina, where, until 1934, Giuseppe Mazzotti's workshop, founded in 1903, was located, and where, among the many artists who studied there in the past century, there was Fontana, between around 1947 and 1959.<sup>11</sup> Pozzo

8 An examination of the holdings at the Apice records center did not result in our finding Tullio d'Albisola's letter in the Giovanni Scheiwiller fond. The draft is held in the Archivio Tullio d'Albisola.  
9 The portraits of Tullio d'Albisola by Enrico Prampolini (1929), Bruno Munari (1929), Nikolay Diulgheroff (1929), Fillia (1932), Felice Vellan (1933), Gifio (1933), Lucio Fontana (1938), and Agenore Fabbri (1967)

are published in the section "Attività culturali" of Tullio d'Albisola's ufficiale website: <[https://www.tulliodalbisola.it/attivita\\_culturali.html](https://www.tulliodalbisola.it/attivita_culturali.html)>.

10 CROC, cf. nos. 38 DTA 1-14. For the portrait CROC, cf. no. 38 DTA 15.

11 In Pozzo Garitta, in addition to the first seat of the Mazzotti Giuseppe company, there were for example the workshops of the ceramicists Bartolomeo Tortarolo,



Garitta is a seventeenth-century courtyard made up of a group of vernacular industrial structures (wood-fired kilns to bake the ceramics) seemingly thrown together and filling the cobblestoned area with the typical stone staircases that joined the workshops to the rooms on the upper floors of the houses. Tullio's poetry sheds light on the men and women workers, the kiln, the alleyway, even the fig tree growing in the courtyard with both meaning and lyrical and erotic passion.

The drawings with which Fontana accompanied the poems were also referred to by Enrico Crispolti as evidence of that "dimension of conceptuality" that is increasingly "spatial," visible in the artist's drawing activity as he gradually moves from the first architectural works to the "cosmic" visions, by way of a closeness to the "cosmic idealism" of Prampolini<sup>12</sup> that those drawings are a clear example of.

FIG. 2  
*Ritratto di Tullio d'Albisola*,  
1938. Private collection.

FIG. 3  
Enrico Prampolini,  
*Mazzotti freudiano (Ritratto  
di Tullio d'Albisola)*, 1929.  
Private collection.

called il Bianco (already employed by Mazzotti and often mentioned in Fontana's first letters to Tullio) and Umberto Gheri, with whom Fontana collaborated as well after 1947, and those of artists like Emanuele Luzzati and, of course, Lucio Fontana. Between 1959 and 1960 Fontana left the studio (a ground-floor venue next to the historic *trattoria* La Garitta, which hosted singers and cabaret performers like the duo Paolo Villaggio and Fabrizio

De André) to the younger artist Mario Rossello, who in turn handed it over to the artist Adriano Bocca. Bocca still owns it today and he gave the architectural firm of Gianluca Pluffo permission to use it. See also my entries "Albisola, Tullio d'Albisola" and "Studio di Pozzo Garitta" in Luca Pietro Nicoletti, ed., *Dizionario Lucio Fontana* (Quodlibet, 2023).

<sup>12</sup> Enrico Crispolti, "A Structurally Founding Role," in CROC, I, 24. Crispolti

As evidenced by Barbero, Fontana's drawings "constitute a unique whole," a sort of "correspondence and dedication" vis-à-vis his relationship with Tullio. Unlike the actual exchange of letters, which was born between the two in a private and confidential dimension (which the critical historiography thinks nothing of violating for the love of science), Fontana ventured into this illustrated "dedication" "well aware from the outset that these sheet of paper were destined for publication and public knowledge." Hence, "the desire is clearly evident to demonstrate and illustrate his ability to develop these richly and deliberated diversified typologies of his sign."<sup>13</sup>

In this range of linguistic possibilities Fontana offered in the folder of drawings, according to Barbero, *La ruota nell'antro* constitutes the proof "in which Fontana's drawing deals with, constructs, no longer as a mere description or translation of a sculptural idea, but by taking full possession of his own expressive, conceptual values, thus entering into a new form or representative spatial symbology toward which the future graphic research will converge."<sup>14</sup>

To grasp the moment and the context, both private and social, in which this specific drawing is born as part of an equally significant series, we must consider what Fontana found upon arriving at the Mazzotti manufactory. First, there was Tullio, an artist of his same age, the two of them born the very same year, with similar cultural references and desires.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, Tullio was very close to his family, with whom he shared the work that was done in his father's factory; the dimension was similar to that experienced by Fontana in Rosario de Santa Fe, in his father's *marmoleria*, from which he was now far away from due to the life choices he had had to make, ones that were not easy and that had caused sorrow. The constant references, in the letters he wrote to Tullio, to his family's hospitality and the affection and esteem he felt for Giuseppe Mazzotti can be explained, in my opinion, by the familiar and productive dimension that Fontana discovered at the MGA.

What does this have to do with *La ruota nell'antro*? The poem *Racconto* focuses completely on the popular theme of the dignity and effort that go into a trade, that of the potter, who can ennoble splendid objects from wet, dirty earth; hence, a metaphor for the life

also mentions Paolo Campiglio's major discovery in 1996 of almost two hundred drawings coinciding in terms of their date with the ones Fontana made for Tullio. Cf. Paolo Campiglio, ed., *Lucio Fontana. I disegni della raccolta Crippa in Varese*, exh. cat., (Edizioni Lativa, 1996).

<sup>13</sup> Luca Massimo Barbero, "The Drawings of the Companionship with Tullio d'Albisola: a Tale of 1938 and Thereabouts," in CROC, I, 72.

<sup>14</sup> Barbero, "The Drawings of the Companionship."

<sup>15</sup> This can be deduced not just from the tone of the letters that the two men exchanged, but also from the discovery of the sculpture *Ballerina di Charleston* (CRSDA, cf. no. 26 SC 4) which Fontana made before leaving Argentina for Italy in 1927. In the 1929 exhibition *Trentatre futuristi* at the Galleria Pesaro in Milano, Fontana may have appreciated the

of the humble and simple people of the alleyway of Pozzo Garitta, where Tullio and his family came from as well.<sup>16</sup>

Fontana adhered to this spirit fully. This is evident in the drawings that illustrate *Il forno da vasi*, one of the poems in *Racconto*, where vases, pitchers, and floral shapes come to life in the chambers of the kiln, "unraveling the thread of the Fontanian *inventio*."<sup>17</sup> This is even more evident in the well-known exclamation in the letter the artist wrote to Tullio on June 21, 1938, euphoric, yes, but not at all ironic: "If I don't act foolishly in October the Albissola kilns will have to award me with the laurel wreath for my consecration as a ceramicist. A ceramicist! Splendid! the aristocracy of the art of sculpture."<sup>18</sup>

There is also a more distinctly professional and historical sphere: Entering and visiting the Mazzotti workshops together with Tullio, Fontana could see the state of the art. Against the backdrop of the commercial decorative production, he saw the results of many artistic synergies. Among them, the ones that are representative of two polarities stand out. Fontana as well would be involved in them in his initial ceramic creations: the novel *animalier* Salvatore Fancello and the aero-Futurist abstraction of Fillia.<sup>19</sup> It is not by chance that Fontana is mentioned as an abstract sculptor together with Fillia in the *Manifesto futurista della Ceramica e Aereoceramica* (Futurist manifesto of ceramics and aereoceramics), published in the *Gazzetta del Popolo* on September 7, 1938, by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in collaboration with Tullio d'Albisola.

We can certainly imagine that in 1938 (or perhaps before), when asking Fontana to illustrate his new poem, Tullio showed his friend his previous publications, starting from the more recent A.A.A. *500.000 Urganmi*, published by Morreale in 1937. But above all, he must have shown him books of poetry illustrated by other Futurist artists, like Nino Strada (*L'incidente*, Edizione Chiattoni, 1935) and Bruno Munari (*L'anguria lirica*, Edizione Lito-Latta, 1934).<sup>20</sup>

Clearly, Fontana saw and looked at everything, taking it into account for what would seem to be a personal *catalog of possible forms*. We can almost imagine him enjoying himself by dedicating to Marinetti the most Prampolinian and Futurist drawing in the collection: *Vicolo Pozzo della Garitta*<sup>21</sup> [FIG. 4] (in the reproduction

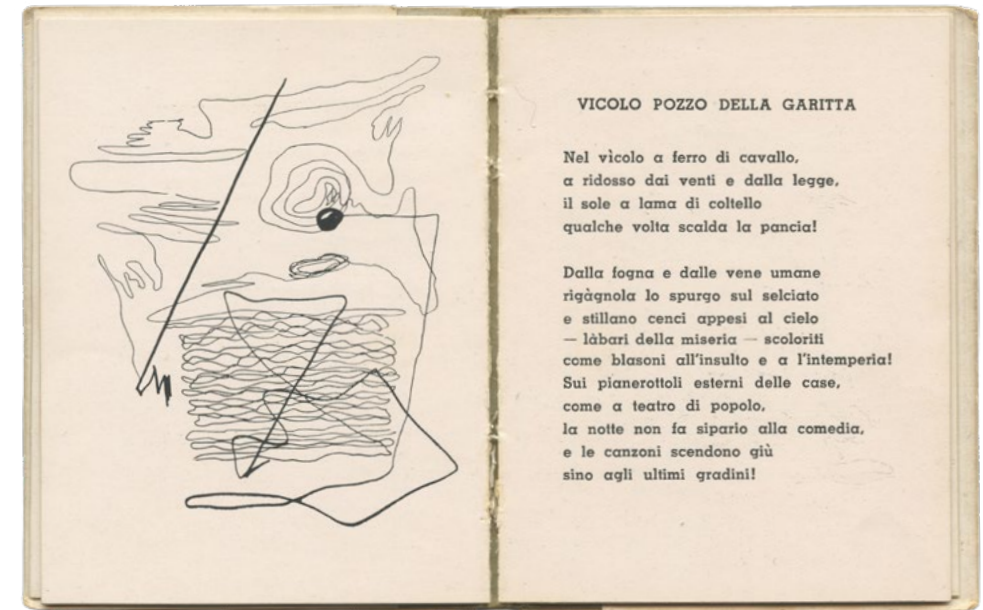


FIG. 4  
*Vicolo Pozzo della Garitta*,  
1938 (in Tullio d'Albisola,  
*Racconto* [Esperia, 1943]).

published by Scheiwiller the dedication was removed, however); or a re-doing of Munari, almost literally reproducing and reinterpreting, in the second drawing that accompanies *La gente del vicolo*,<sup>22</sup> his illustration for the page *L'una Le due Silenzio* in *L'anguria lirica* [FIGS. 5–6].

Lastly, having listened to Tullio's stories and perhaps also been acquainted with his Milanese friend Ferruccio Frumento, "the aviator" in the unadulterated dedication in the final drawing for *Vicolo Pozzo della Garitta* (*Frumento aviatore*),<sup>23</sup> creates a dream-like imagine and an irresistible psychic automatism with whom he represents in his own way the dimension of flying that was so cherished by the Futurists [FIG. 7].

The truth of the matter is that Frumento's presence in Tullio's biography has an entirely different value, as he was forced to help his Albisola friend on several occasions, threatened by the Savona leaders of the Fascist government.<sup>24</sup>

Brocca Baker (Baker Carafe) made by Tullio d'Albisola, inspired by the exotic movements of the dancer Joséphine Baker, who was likely also the subject of *Ballerina di Charleston*.

16 As mentioned in a previous note (cf. footnote 11), this poetic perspective is similar to the one adopted thirty years later by singer-songwriters like Fabrizio De André in nearby Genoa.

17 Flaminio Gualdoni, ed., *Lucio Fontana: il disegno*, exh. cat. (Nuova Alfa, 1990), 9.

18 Fontana, *Lettere a Tullio*, 45.

19 Luca Bochicchio, "Commento critico al carteggio," in Fontana, *Lettere a Tullio*, 112.

20 On *L'anguria lirica* (*Lungo poema passionale*), the second tin-litho created by Tullio d'Albisola after curating the first one with poetry by Marinetti, I wish to mention the recent, weighty, monographic study by Dalila Colucci, *Italian Futurism and the Poetry of Materiality. The Tin-Litho Book L'Anguria Lirica* (Brill, 2024).

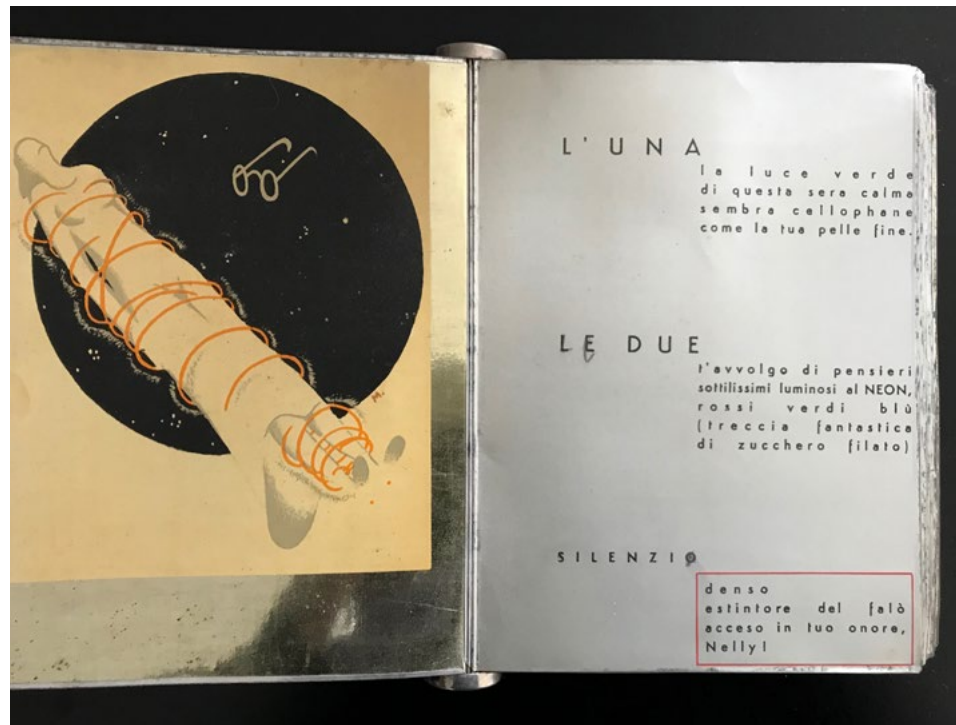
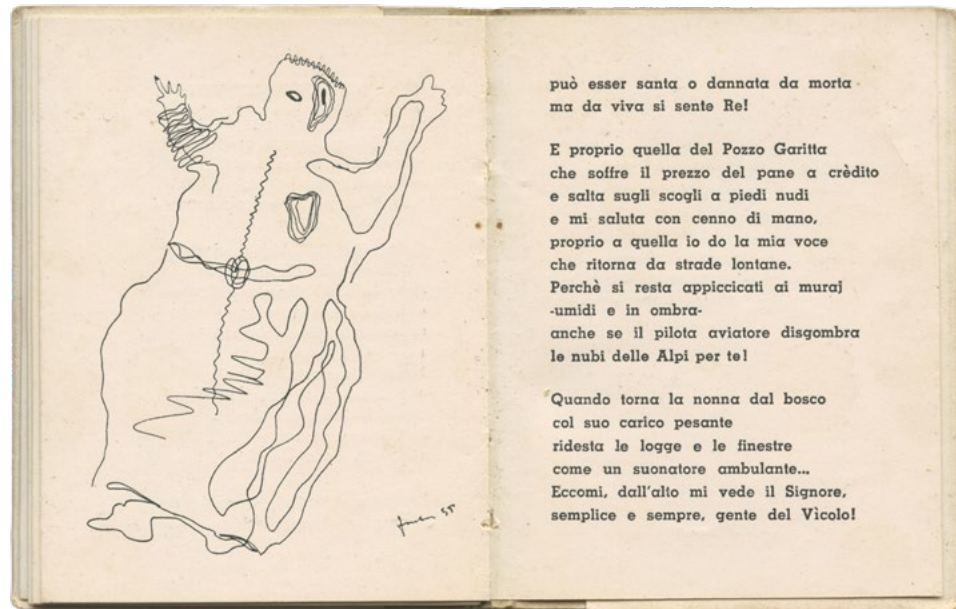
21 CROC, cf. no. 38 DTA 7.

22 CROC, cf. no. 38 DTA 14.

23 CROC, cf. no. 38 DTA 9.

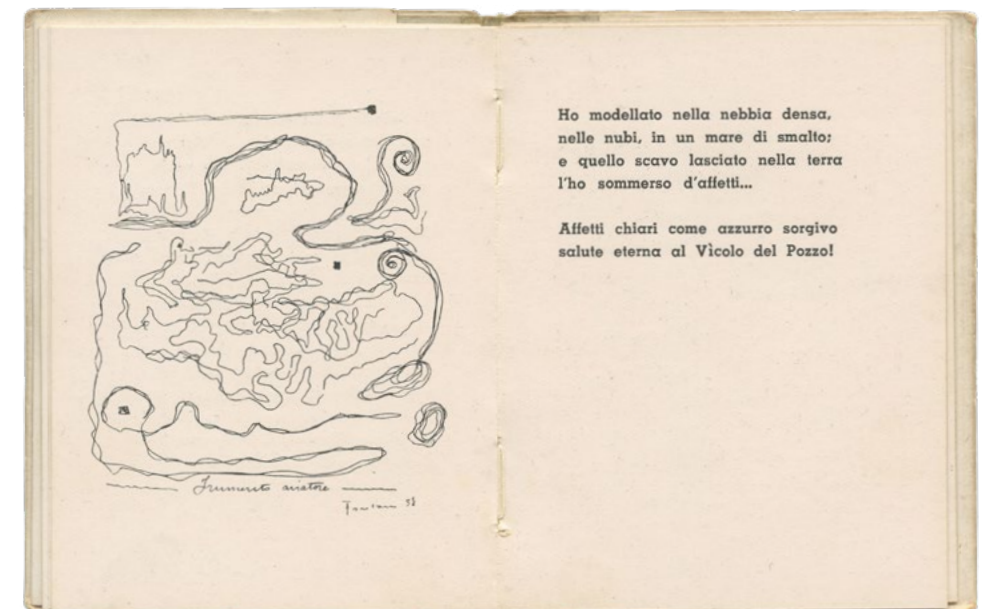
24 From the little that we were able to reconstruct until the present time, based on the documents found in Tullio d'Albisola's archive, Frumento was the husband of Margherita Carosio, a Genoese soprano with whom Tullio shared a friendship as well as cultural and worldly interests. The twenty years under the regime pass for the

young ceramicist amid ups and downs, politically speaking. His often-complicated relations with local Fascist officials periodically pose a threat to his personal safety, especially when tensions with the internal resistance in the Savona area flare up, tensions that were never truly defused. The relationship of friendship and mutual esteem that binds him to Marinetti is not enough to protect Tullio from the dangers posed by these threats,



and so Frumento steps in. Having excellent connections within the government, Frumento on two occasions aids his friend's temporary expatriation to Spain. Frumento is an aviator,

and of Tullio we also have a photograph in a pilot's uniform, probably taken during one of these journeys. See Bochicchio, "Tullio d'Albisola between Futurism and Fascism."



Perhaps the lines from *La gente del vicolo* might refer to Frumento: "For we remain stuck to the walls / – damp and in shadow – / even if the pilot aviator clears / the clouds of the Alps for you!" [FIG. 8].

By examining the fourteen drawings in *Racconto* we can clearly identify and group together the principal expressive variants that the author shows off, which Barbero has summed up well.<sup>25</sup>

Among them, apparently one among many, without a strategic positioning in the small book, the opening composition for the poem *La ruota nell'antro* stands out and emerges as an eccentric novelty, a formal and expressive unicum that is distinguished from all the other drawings. A composition that Barbero correctly sees as "a sort of incunabulum of his graphic art as a whole."<sup>26</sup>

Tullio's poem is heartrending and rich with images, perhaps so rich that Fontana chose to dedicate to it a score of pure visual musicality, a completely abstract one. The fact is that for the first time it was a non-geometric abstraction of "automatic dynamism"<sup>27</sup>: "There it is that the ink becomes agitated and transcends calligraphy in a sort of spiral that seeks to open out in a space engendered by the sign and its automatic dynamism."<sup>28</sup>

FIG. 5

*La gente del vicolo*, 1938  
(in Tullio d'Albisola,  
*Racconto* [Esperia, 1943]).

FIG. 6

Tullio d'Albisola, *L'anguria lirica* (n.p., 1934), detail of the illustration by Bruno Munari.

FIG. 7

*Vicolo Pozzo della Garitta* (Frumento aviatore), 1938 (in Tullio d'Albisola, *Racconto* [Esperia, 1943]).

25 Luca Massimo Barbero ("The Drawings of the Companionship," 75) identifies the "sign like a sharp claw," the "architectural and spatial structure" of Futurist memory, the classical figures obtained by generating fantastic forms not without elements of irony.

26 Barbero, "The Drawings of the Companionship."

27 Barbero, "The Drawings of the Companionship."

28 Barbero, "The Drawings of the Companionship."



FIG. 8  
Tullio d'Albisola aviator,  
1930s. Private collection.

Indeed, the spiraling line, generates indirect spatialities between one swirl of the sign and another, at the same time expressing a sense of dynamism, and therefore movement, accompanying the poem not in a descriptive and figurative sense but as rhythm and intertextual counterpoint: "The cavern sinks when the lathe turns, / at is as if the wheel penetrated the bowels of a soft cavern of clay / in a vortex that pulls and uplifts! / . . .; nothing is as inebriating as the fleeting form / that you palpate as it is born on the fingers."<sup>29</sup>

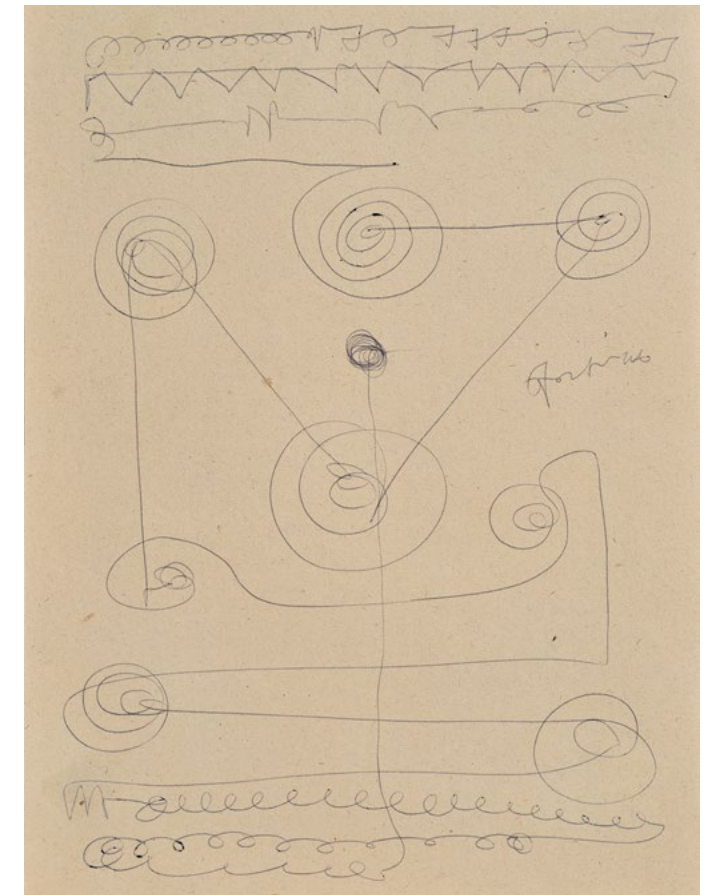
We find ourselves before an intertextual circuit with three integrated rings. The first is the drawing, the second is the poem, the third is the subject of both: the wheel in the cavern. Starting from the end, through the circular motion of the lathe, from the shapeless

29 Tullio d'Albisola, "La ruota nell'antro," in Tullio d'Albisola, *Racconto* (Esperia, 1943), n. p.

material caressed by fingers, forms grow that were not there before (ending up filling the illustrated kilns of the other drawings in *Racconto*). Similarly, the poet chisels the words, inventing concatenations, and thus creates new images. Lastly, with just the line made by the pen, Fontana causes a dynamic *energeia* to grow, in a circular, spiraling motion, which restores the free creation of a new image.

Just as it is possible, for the other drawings as well, to identify similes in analogous works on paper by Fontana, but from subsequent years<sup>30</sup> [FIG. 9], for *La ruota nell'antro* as well the comparisons can prove to be of use to showing how precocious it was, in this drawing from 1938, the conceptual and spatial turnaround.

FIG. 9  
*Concetto spaziale*, 1946.  
Milan, Fondazione  
Lucio Fontana.



30 The drawing dedicated to "Frumento aviator" reveals interesting analogies with the spatial construction of the drawings for the *Teatrini* of 1964, for the sake of example, CROC, cf. no. 64-65 DSP 342 r. But I think the clearest case of what Crispolti says concerning the need to compare Prampolini's cosmic idealism

to arrive at the definition of the subsequent *Concetti spaziali* can be found in the drawings in the series of *Concetti* from 1946, like CROC, cf. nos. 46 DSP 42-46 DSP 44, which seem to find a clear precedent in the drawing dedicated to Marinetti that illustrates *Vicolo Pozzo della Garitta* inside *Racconto*.

First of all, in the series of illustrations for *Six contes de La Fontaine*, 1963,<sup>31</sup> we find a sort of synthesis of the solutions that had already been experimented with in 1938 in the drawings for *Racconto*. In particular, in the *Six contes* the movement of the continuous linear sign, generating at the same time articulated spatiality and sketches of figures not as yet developed<sup>32</sup> [FIG. 10], seems to return, on the one hand, to *La ruota nell'antro* due to the vorticity having a dynamic trend; on the other hand, however, we also find a subdivision of the page present in the representations of *Il forno da vasi*<sup>33</sup> or in the second drawing for *La ruota nell'antro*<sup>34</sup> [FIG. 11].

The entire series of drawings for the first *Concetti spaziali* in 1946 was based on different experiments on the use of the spiraling and swirling movement of the sign (by so doing, clearly also laying the groundwork for Enrico Baj's first "nuclearist" phase in 1951–55 [FIG. 12]).

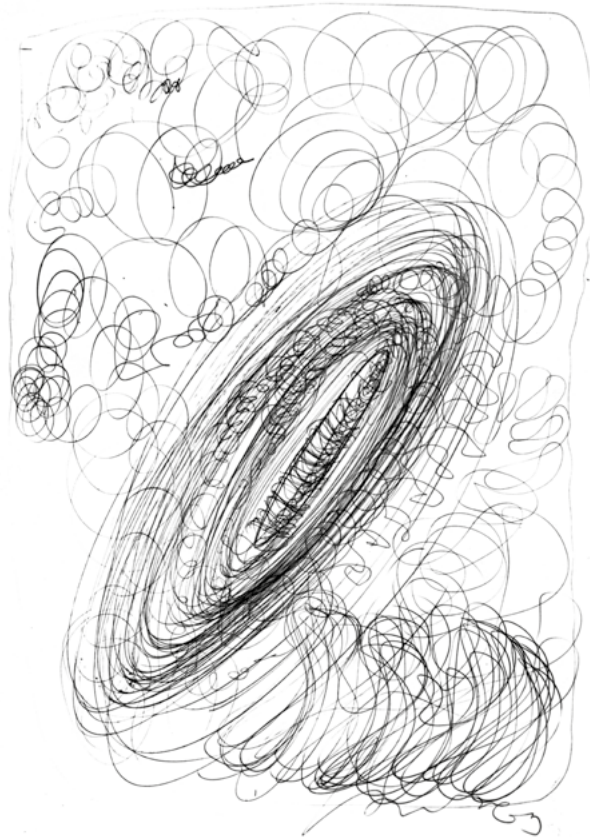


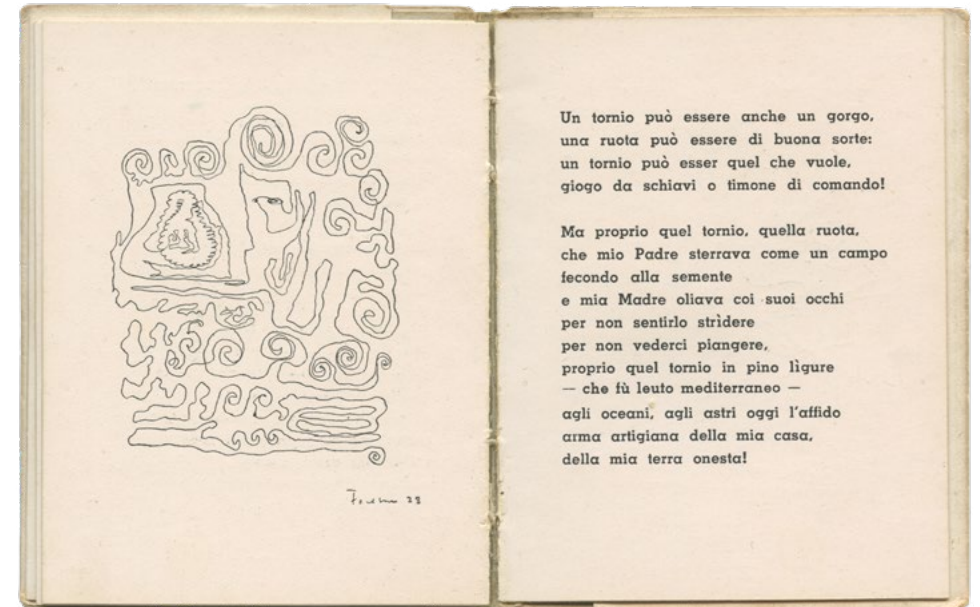
FIG. 10  
Illustration for *Six contes de La Fontaine*, 1963.  
Private collection.

31 CROC, cf. nos. 63 DVA 3, 63 DVA 4, 63 DVA 5, 63 DVA 6.

32 CROC, cf. nos. 63 DVA 10, 63 DVA 11.

33 CROC, cf. no. 38 DTA 5.

34 CROC, cf. no. 38 DTA 11.



Un tornio può essere anche un gorgo,  
una ruota può essere di buona sorte:  
un tornio può esser quel che vuole,  
giogo da schiavi o timone di comando!

Ma proprio quel tornio, quella ruota,  
che mio Padre sterrava come un campo  
fecondo alla semente  
e mia Madre oliava coi suoi occhi  
per non sentirlo stridere  
per non vederci piangere,  
proprio quel tornio in pino ligure  
— che fù leuto mediterraneo —  
agli oceani, agli astri oggi l'affido  
arma artigiana della mia casa,  
della mia terra onesta!

Fontana 22

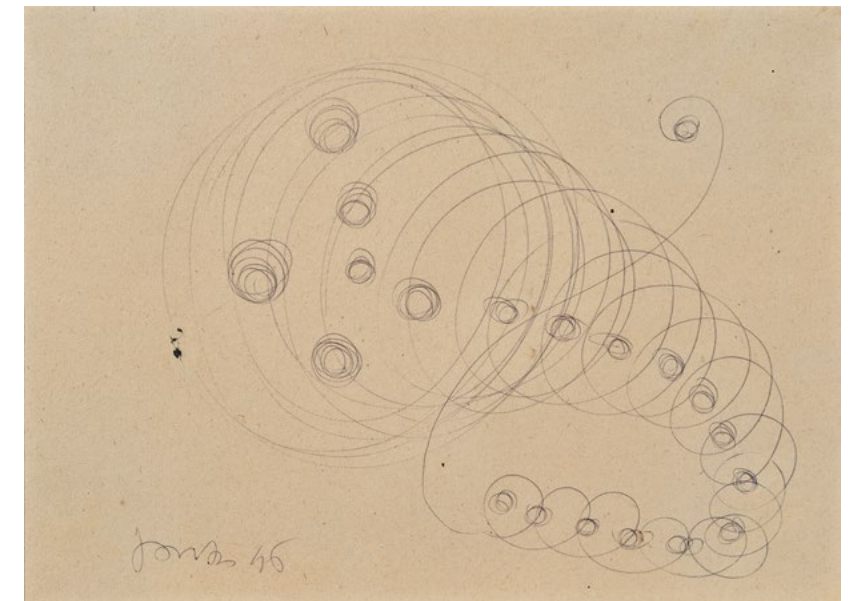


FIG. 11  
*La ruota nell'antro*, 1938 (in  
Tullio d'Albisola, *Racconto*,  
Esperia 1943).

FIG. 12  
*Concetto spaziale*, 1946.  
Private collection.

Observing the totally spiraled *Concetti spaziali*,<sup>35</sup> then, seems to offer proof of the founding and pioneering aspect of the drawing *La ruota nell'antro*, made some thirteen years earlier [FIG. 13].

35 CROC, cf. no. 51 DSP 16.

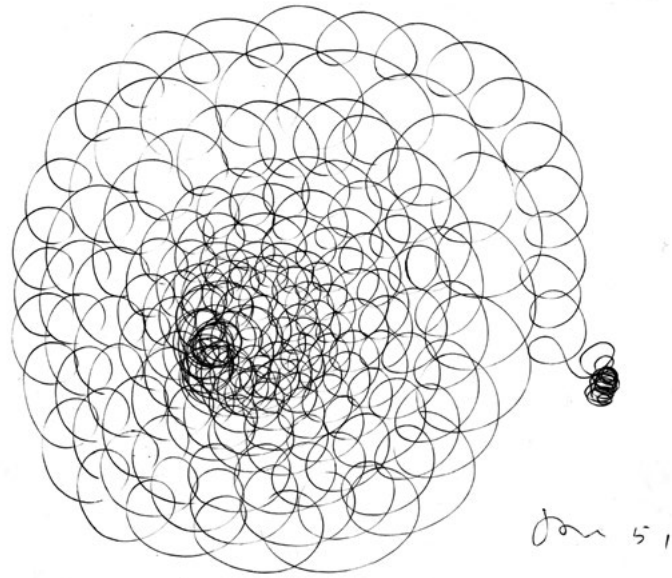


FIG. 13  
Concetto spaziale, 1951.  
Turin, Galleria d'Arte  
Moderna.

Nonetheless, despite the apparent resemblance between *La ruota nell'antro* and the different typologies of "spatial drawings" from the late 1940s and early 1950s, I find it interesting that the former is still distinguished, with respect to the latter, for its well-defined construction of space available on the page. Albeit masked by the originality and eccentricity of the general and double spiral (perhaps simulating with a singular foreshadowing of the spatial themes, the double motion of revolution and orbit of the celestial bodies around the sun), the framework underlying *La ruota nell'antro* is again fueled by a strong architectural tension, which rises from the spaces generated in negative on the page by the ink mark. The type of spatiality that is also created in the *Teatrini*, as pointed out by Crispolti himself, which is perhaps none other than the materialization of the void via the movement of the sign, which will become essential for Fontana in the subsequent developments of Spatialism.

At this point, the last act of the short history of the drawing *La ruota nell'antro* concerns a very particular case of reception and citation on the part of the contemporaries.

A letter from Bruno Munari to Tullio d'Albisola, already known of,<sup>36</sup> acquires a unique meaning if we read it in light of the analysis advanced in this short contribution [FIG. 14].

36 The letter was published in volume two of Danilo Presotto, ed., *Quaderni di Tullio D'Albisola* (Liguria, 1981).

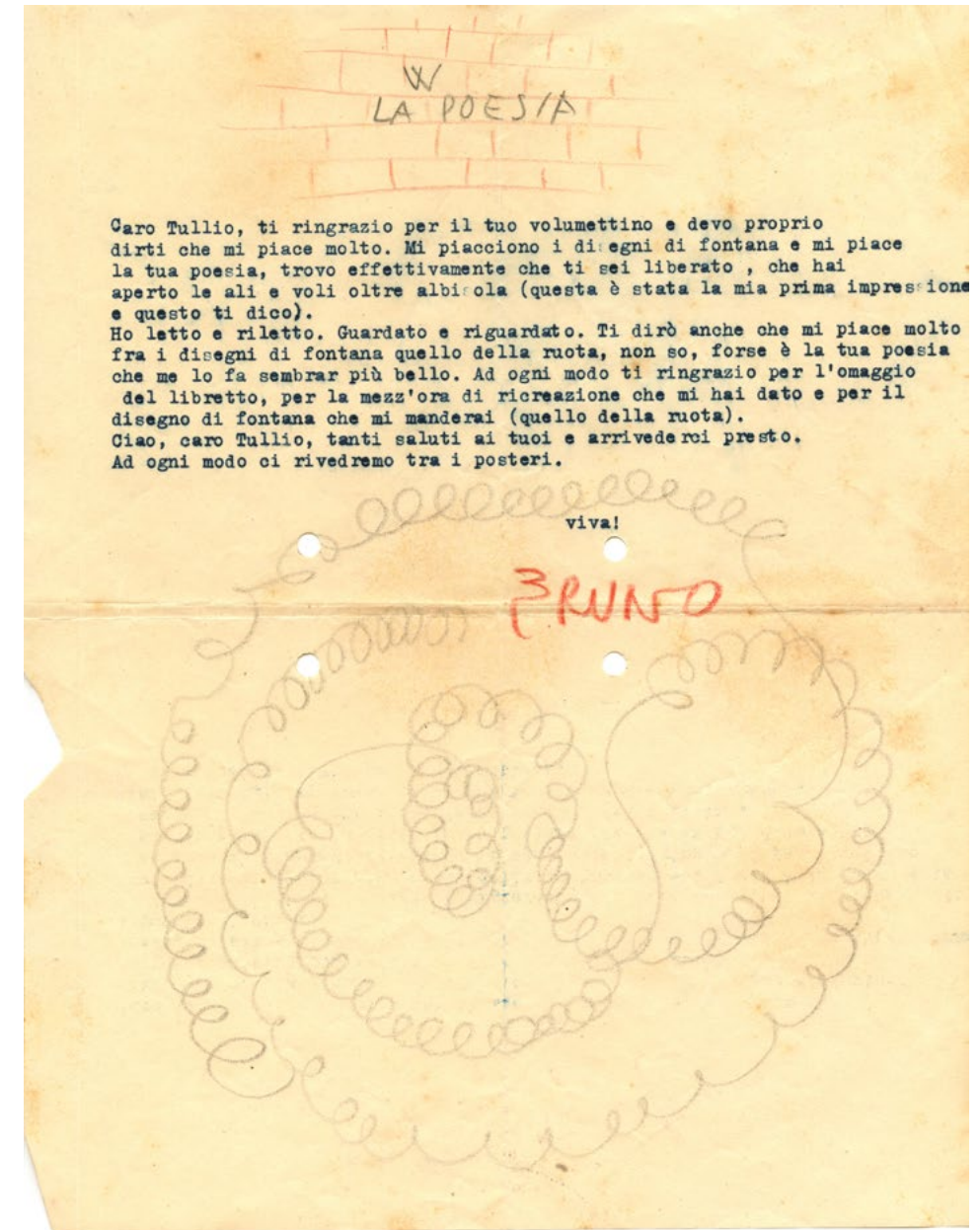


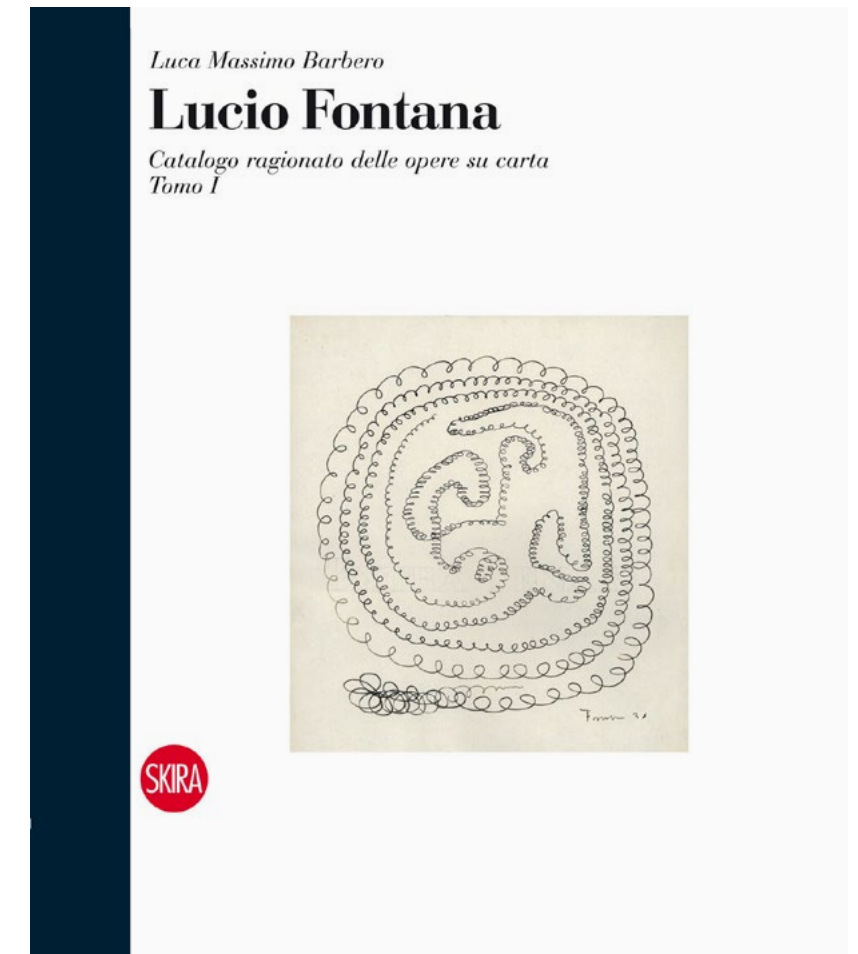
FIG. 14  
Letter from Bruno Munari  
to Tullio d'Albisola, 1943.  
Private collection.

## LONG LIVE POETRY [Drawing]

Dear Tullio, thank you for your little book  
and I have to say I really like it. I like fontana's drawings  
and I like your poetry, I find that you have in fact  
been freed, you have spread your wings and now  
fly beyond albisola (I am telling you this because  
it was my first impression). I read it over and over again.  
I looked at it over and over again. I must tell you that  
among fontana's drawings I very much like the one  
with the wheel, I'm not sure, but perhaps it's your  
poem that makes it seem more beautiful. In any case,  
I wish to thank you for the gift of this book,  
for the half hour of recreation that it gave me,  
and for the drawing by fontana (the one with  
the wheel) that you are going to send me.  
Goodbye, dear Tullio, please give my regards  
to your family, we will meet again soon.  
We shall in any case meet again in posterity.  
viva!  
Bruno

After receiving Tullio's poetic work, Munari sends him the customary thank you note, and, in the case in point, his appreciation. In expressing a brief but coherent opinion on his friend's poetic style ("I like your poetry, I find that you have in fact been freed, you have spread your wings and now fly beyond albisola"), Munari quickly intercepts the novelty of one drawing in particular: *La ruota nell'antro*. At that point, the artist adds an ironic yet significant note. He thanks Tullio in advance for having given him the drawing of the object and, above all, he improvises a gesture of appropriation that is not at all suited to the Futurists (for whom, like for all Modernists, originality and anti-imitation was a vital matter): On the second half of the sheet, in pencil, Munari reproduces, copies, or interprets his own version of *La ruota nell'antro*, thus paving the way, unwittingly, for the drawing's critical success [FIG. 15].

FIG. 15  
Cover of Luca Massimo  
Barbero, ed., *Lucio Fontana*.  
*Catalogo ragionato delle*  
*opere su carta*, vol. 1,  
Skira, 2013.



# FONTANA AND THE VENICE BIENNALES

## Sileno Salvagnini

Lucio Fontana's relationship with the Venice Biennale, especially in the decade spanning from 1948 to 1958, was undoubtedly a problematic one. It is for this reason that in this paper I focus more on that period, only briefly mentioning the artist's participation in other Biennales during his lifetime, i.e., up until 1968.

If we read the documents from that period, we have the distinct impression that Fontana's greatness was misunderstood, that it was at times even snubbed, and unquestionably looked upon with a cold eye. A clear example of this lies in the fact that of the two anthological exhibitions—the word “comprehensive,” meaning comprehensive, was used at the time—in 1954 and in 1958, the Biennale took no pictures of the installations: a rather rare omission for the overwhelming majority of the artists who created them.

Fontana debuted for the first time at the Venice Biennale in 1930 with two sculptural works, *Eva* and *Vittoria fascista*.<sup>1</sup> Having just been awarded a diploma at Brera, hence, still practically an unknown, he was invited to show his work without having to submit it to the jury's opinion. Nonetheless, although Fontana had put them up for sale at very low prices, as a letter dated “Milan June 20, VIII” reveals, there were no buyers.<sup>2</sup>

For many years after that Fontana did not participate in the Biennale, reserving his presence for the Milan art scene, especially among the Rationalist architects—who were also his very first collectors—and displaying, especially at the Triennali and at the 1937 Exposition Universelle in Paris, large-scale sculptural works as well: like his 1936 *Vittoria*<sup>3</sup> [FIG. 1], a plaster sculpture measuring 5 meters that ended up being destroyed because it was not purchased by the Ministry of National Education. Inspector Giulio Carlo Argan had been granted 30,000 lire to make purchases, but in his opinion, there was nothing of interest at the 1936 Triennale.<sup>4</sup>

In 1940 Fontana went to Argentina and did not return to Italy until after the war.

In 1948 he participated in the 24. Venice Biennale as a sculptor, displaying five works. In this case as well he did not have to submit his works to the jury's opinion, but was invited directly instead.<sup>5</sup> The “Notification form”<sup>6</sup> tells us that he showed *Gallo*, a mosaic from 1948<sup>7</sup> [FIG. 2] that was acquired by GNAM; two *Maschere*<sup>8</sup>

1 CRSDA, cf. nos. 28 SC 8; 29 SC 1.

2 Venice, Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee (hereafter ASAC), *Scatole nere*, b. 60, *Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte, 1930. Corrispondenza varia 1929 - 31*, fasc. F, *Corrispondenza alfabetica*.

3 CRSDA, cf. no. 36 A 1.

4 See Sileno Salvagnini, *Il sistema delle arti in Italia, 1919-1943* (Minerva, 2000), 58.

5 See the catalog of the XXIV. *Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d'Arte di Venezia*, exh. cat. (Edizioni Serenissima, 1948), 173, nos. 29-33.

6 See ASAC, *Arti visive*, b. 15, XXIV *Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte, 1948, Schede di Notificazione delle opere*.

7 CRSDA, cf. no. 48 SC 1. In the “notification form” Fontana had written “1947.”

8 CRSDA, cf. nos. 48 SC 11, 48 SC 12.



FIG. 1  
Group for the Salone della Vittoria, 1936, Milan, 6th Triennale.

FIG. 2  
Gallo, 1948.



[FIGS. 3–4]; the famous *Scultura spaziale*;<sup>9</sup> and, lastly, a *Crocifisso*, now in the Galerie Karsten Greve in St. Moritz.<sup>10</sup>

Rather more interesting was his participation in the Biennale of 1950. As recorded in the seminal volume containing Fontana's correspondence, published in 1999 by Paolo Campiglio,<sup>11</sup> on November 19, 1949, Fontana wrote to the Secretary General of the Institute Rodolfo Pallucchini as follows:

Sir,  
I would like to introduce myself at the Venice Biennale with *Ambiente Spaziale* . . . If you, or the Commission, find it opportune, I could send you my intentions and the reasons for the Spatial controversy in greater detail.<sup>12</sup>

In February that same year, Fontana had produced for Carlo Cardazzo's Galleria del Naviglio in Milan his first *Ambiente spaziale a luce nera*:<sup>13</sup> a pioneering if not almost prehistoric "installation"—as it indeed came many years before those of the kinetic

9 CRSDA, cf. no. 47 SC 1. In the notification form" Fontana had written "1948."

10 CRSC, cf. no. 48 FCR 8.

11 Cf. Paolo Campiglio, ed., *Lucio Fontana. Lettere 1919-1968* (Skira, 1999), 150, letter 146.

12 See ASAC, *Arti visive*, b. 27, XXV. *Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte del 1950. Corrispondenza F - M 1949-1950*, fasc. F 1949-1950, handwritten letter, dated "Albissola,

19 - 11 - 1949"; transcribed in Campiglio, *Lucio Fontana*, 150, letter 146. Underlining in the original.

13 CRSDA, cf. no. 48-49 A 2.



conceptual groups of the 1950s and 1960s, those of Beuys, and the "ambiente azzurro" (blue environment) of Yves Klein at the Paris Iris Clert gallery.<sup>14</sup>

As Campiglio explains in an annotation in the *Lettere*, Pallucchini replied by saying that unfortunately the under-commission had met a few days earlier and had already decided in which rooms to install the works, and which artists to invite.<sup>15</sup> It was a rather terse way to avoid complicating the tangled mess of that first postwar Biennale. Although the under-commission had in fact recently met, it was an exploratory meeting, as the two discussions where actual decisions would be made were scheduled for the early months of 1950. Although in 1949 it was not easy to understand (not only in Italy) the type of operations that Fontana suggested, we cannot help but underscore Pallucchini's duplicity.

14 For a modern reconstruction of the Argentine Italian spatial environments, see Marina Pugliese, Barbara Ferriani and Vicente Todoli, eds., *Lucio Fontana. Ambienti/Environments*, exh. cat. (Mousse, 2018).

15 See the copy of the handwritten letter

in which Pallucchini replied to Lucio Fontana on November 26, 1949; ASAC, *Arti visive*, b. 27, *XV Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte del 1950. Corrispondenza F - M 1949-1950, fasc. F 1949-1950*, cit.; transcribed in Campiglio, *Lucio Fontana*, 150, letter 146, note 1.

FIG. 3  
*Maschera*, 1948.

FIG. 4  
*Maschera*, 1948.  
Private collection.

Fontana ended up participating in that edition all the same, but in a rather casual way. It was Gio Ponti who suggested, on January 8, 1950, to the secretary of the Istituto Veneto per il Lavoro (a sort of forerunner to today's Confartigianato – Confederation of Italian Craftsmen) Giuseppe Dell'Oro that he organize a major exhibition of ceramic works by painters and sculptors that could serve as a corollary to some of Picasso's own works, owned at the time by Vittorio Emanuele Barbaroux. Ponti added a list of some of the artists who might be invited, which included Lucio Fontana, Fausto Melotti, Leoncillo Leonardi, Pietro Consagra, and Aligi Sassu. Dell'Oro immediately told Pallucchini about it, and on January 24 the latter replied to Ponti that he found the project to be "pleasant":<sup>16</sup> The adjective speaks volumes about how little ceramics were appreciated at the time. Months later, on April 27, Gio Ponti sent a rather caustic letter to Dell'Oro, part of which is well worth quoting here:

I see that the artists were told to send their pieces right away (rather ingenuous of you, as if these people who never dreamt of being invited were ready with their work) and to send small-scale works, which indicates a lack of familiarity with the works of Leoncillo, Fontana, Melotti, Cascella, Consagner [sic] etc. that are anything but small. What you should immediately tell them is to send their largest and most important works, otherwise you will end up with your usual show of small ceramic pieces, and a guaranteed fiasco.<sup>17</sup>

Clearly, the founder of *Domus* had rather open-minded views that differed from those of the art historians who led the helm of the Biennale. Having worked in Padua on the design of Palazzo Liviano and on that of the Rectorate in Palazzo del Bo, as well as on the creation of the relative decor,<sup>18</sup> he tended not to form opinions beforehand on the artists of the so-called "minor" arts with respect to those of the "major" arts, on the condition that the ceramicists, enamellists, glassmakers and so on did not slavishly imitate the latter, but aimed instead at valorizing their own techniques and relative materials, using them as independent arts.

16 Copy of the typewritten letter from Pallucchini to Dall'Oro, January 24, 1950; ASAC, *Arti visive*, b. 24, *XXV Esposizione Internazionale d'arte. Mostre personali [...]*, fasc. *Mostra delle ceramiche pittori e scultori*.

17 ASAC, *Arti visive*, b. 24, *XXV Esposizione Internazionale d'arte. Mostre personali [...]*, fasc. *Mostra delle ceramiche pittori e scultori*, copy of the letter on letterhead "Gio Ponti Architetto,"

dated "Milano, 27 aprile 1950," underlining in the original text.

18 See Marta Nezzo, ed., *Il miraggio della concordia. Documenti sull'architettura e la decorazione del Bo e del Liviano: Padova 1933-1943* (Canova, 2008), 258ff. and 280ff.; and as concerns the autonomy of the decorative arts, see also Gio Ponti, *De Poli. Smalti. Enamels. Émaux. Emales. Esmaltes* (De Poli, 1958), n. p.

It is no accident, then, that Fontana, in a famous article published in *Tempo* in 1939, resolutely referred to himself as "a sculptor, not a ceramicist."<sup>19</sup> Indeed, he was aware of how the critics tended to underappreciate this art. His approach to art was in fact rather similar to that of Arturo Martini: that is to say, to that of a "modeller." As Martini himself stated, "A true sculptor can make sculptures simply by squeezing the clay between his hands."<sup>20</sup>

But the analogies ended there: Martini wanted to almost "idealize" frivolity, the non-aulic theme of the subject (actually, "licentiousness," as he put it) via the intrinsic qualities of the sculptor's gesture—that of a manipulator who, out of the arrogance of his creative qualities, overcame every possible kitsch tendency; on the contrary, Fontana did not perceive this original sin. He appreciated the form *per se*, and the action itself, in no way blameworthy, as well as the typical subjects of modernity: for this reason, he could be considered a pop artist *ante litteram*.

The Biennale commission decided in the first place not to display ceramic works by Picasso, so as not to undermine the works of the Italians, and to disperse the various pieces around the different rooms. Fontana's objects were shown under the title "Sculpture" in room 39, including, among other things, paintings by Toti Scialoja, Titina Maselli, Remo Brindisi, and Giovanni Stradone.<sup>21</sup>

The three works sent by Fontana were *Crocifisso*,<sup>22</sup> and two *Battaglie*<sup>23</sup> all made from lusterware. The latter two are currently in private Venetian collections [FIGS. 5–6].

On September 14, 1951, Fontana came back fighting, proposing to Pallucchini, for the 1952 show, the *Ambiente spaziale* that he had been unable to present previously because the request had been made late. He also reminded Pallucchini that the Groupe Espace had been founded in France, where "the concepts were the same as the ones expressed by the Italian Group in the Spatialist manifestos of 1947 and 1948."<sup>24</sup> But he never got an answer, and his work was not showcased at the 1952 Biennale.

Instead, Fontana's work was on display at the 1954 edition of the Biennale in a solo exhibit. This begs the question: If his work was not well regarded, then why was he allowed to have a solo exhibit?

As I have no other information, I would like to suggest that this may have been a way to make up for what had happened at the 1st Bienal de São Paulo in 1951, an exhibition that was organized with

19 See Lucio Fontana, "Le mie ceramiche," *Tempo* (September 21, 1939) (now translated as "My Ceramics," in CRSC, I, 151).

20 See Arturo Martini, *La scultura lingua morta e altri scritti*, ed. Elena Pontiggia (Abscondita, 2001), 53.

21 See *XXV. Biennale di Venezia. Catalogo*,

exh. cat. (Alfieri Editore, 1950), 170, nos. 19–21.

22 CRSC, cf. no. 49 SC 18.

23 CRSC, cf. nos. 50 FPS 29, 50 FPS 30, with color reproductions.

24 See Campiglio, *Lucio Fontana*, 150–51, letter 147.



FIG. 5  
*Battaglia*, 1950.

FIG. 6  
*Battaglia*, 1950.  
Private collection.

the vital support of its Venetian counterpart, where Fontana had sent two of his works. One of the two, *Vescovo*,<sup>25</sup> was damaged, so on January 11, 1952, the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art, represented by its President Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho, suggested acquiring it for 100,000 lire. Although Sobrinho knew that the amount was small, he was counting on the fact that the artist would accept since it meant having a work in a museum.<sup>26</sup> Fontana probably did not accept because, as Ana Gonçalves Magalhães, Director of the University of São Paul Museum, confirmed to me the work is not currently in any of the city's museums. Another letter from the President of the Bienal de São Paulo dated March 13, 1952<sup>27</sup> [FIG. 7], says that *Vescovo* was in fact sold to an anonymous buyer for 100,000 lire, minus 5% for administrative fees that went to the Bienal. In the entry for *Vescovo*<sup>28</sup> Crispolti asserted that it was

25 CRSC, cf. no. 48 SC 24.

26 See two-sheet typewritten letter from Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho, on letterhead "Museu de Arte Moderna de S. Paulo," dated "San Paolo, 11 gennaio 1952"; ASAC, *Mostre all'Estero, Biennali di San Paolo del Brasile 1950–1974*, b. 1, fasc. 4, *Corrispondenza col Museo di San Paolo e avv. Pacileo*.

27 See three-sheet typewritten letter, the first two sheets on letterhead "I Bienal

Museu de Arte Moderna de S. Paulo"; ASAC, *Mostre all'Estero, Biennali di San Paolo del Brasile 1950–1974*, b. 1, fasc. 5, *Corrispondenza relativa ai premi ottenuti dagli artisti italiani*.

28 CRSC, cf. no. 48 SC 24. The same entry reads "n. 127," probably referring to the general catalog of the exhibition, available online at <https://issuu.com/bienal/docs/namec311d4>; instead, in the specific exhibition catalog it was indicated as 122,

re 35  
20491  
163  
5

Il Museo di Rio de Janeiro ci ha pagato direttamente le 400.000 ~~mla~~ lire dal quadro di Campigli "Le due attrici" senza beneficiare del 20% concesso dall'artista.

Nelle 164.500 di diritti conteggiatici da Profili sono comprese le 20.000 di percentuale di Segreteria sul quadro predetto.

Dai 4.010.000 di cui parla la lettera di Profili, come somma finale da rimettere a Venezia, vengono detratte le 400.000 lire predette e le 320.000 del quadro "Diabolo" di Campigli, che ci verrà pagato col tramite ufficiale.

Detratta anche la percentuale della Segreteria, rimangono £. 3.125.500 = che costituiscono l'effettiva rimessa che sarà fatta a Venezia.

VENDITE			
Pirandello "Bagnanti"	200.000	netto	190.000 ✓
Afro "Passeggiata archeol." e "Nuovo test."	230.000	"	218.500 ✓
Paulucci "Vele" e "Rada"	240.000	"	228.000 ✓
Morandi "Paese"	25.000	"	23.750 ✓
De Pisis "Il turco" "La Cout" e "Case a Br." (a Geiger ne vanno consegnate, per conto 480.000)	510.000	"	484.500 ✓
Campigli "Giucco a carte" (Gall.Domus)	" (450.000)	"	
sc. 20%	" 360.000	"	342.000 ✓
"-" "Busto" (Sig.ra Pinto)	" (250.000)	"	
sconto 20%	" 200.000	"	180.000 ✓
"-" "Nudo" (Museo di Rio de Jan.)	" (250.000)	"	
sconto 20%	" 200.000	"	160.000 ✓
( sul "Nudo" la Seg.di San Paolo ha rinunciato alla percentuale di £. 10.000)			
Carra' "Il fiume"	" 200.000	"	190.000 ✓
Fontana "Il vescovo"	" 100.000	"	95.000 ✓
Bartolini "Poeta lungo il fiume" e "Fonte San Gennaro"	" 40.000	"	38.000 ✓
Maccari "Rit.di Morandi" e "Champagne"	" 25.000	"	23.750 ✓
Viviani "8 pezzi"	" 230.000	"	218.500 ✓
Vespignani "Mietitura" e "Scalo I"	" 120.000	"	114.000 ✓
Ciarrocchi "Gli am.di Via Valle" "Gli amanti alla pass.archeologica"	" 40.000	"	38.000 ✓
	£. 3.125.500	Fazzini "Gatto"	£. 2.604.000
	" 3.679.000	su £. 500.000 al netto	475.000 ✓
	0.046.500		3.079.000

3.079.000  
2.870.000  
209.000

FIG. 7  
Letter from the President of the São Paulo Art Biennial, Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho, March 13, 1952.

FIG. 8  
Vescovo, 1948.



exhibited in São Paulo in 1951 and, coming from the same city as that of Franco Gerodetti, it was owned by a collector in Tokyo. If we examine the picture in the Biental Archive and the page from the São Paulo exhibition catalog where it is pictured, we can see that the two works are the same [FIG. 8].<sup>29</sup>

I will end this short discussion about São Paulo by recalling that Fontana would be invited a second time to the 1959 edition, where he presented twelve works: the largest number among all the Italian artists who participated.

For the Venice Biennale in 1954 Fontana had offered eighteen works which included several abstract sculptures from the

1930s, but also many *Concetti spaziali*. After a first proposal to have Berto Morucchio write the foreword, Giampiero Giani was eventually chosen instead. His was one of the most extraordinary texts ever written about Fontana, making him an absolute forerunner in the critique of the Argentine Italian artist. To sum up, Giani spoke of Fontana as a sort of prophet, forever going against the grain, pervaded with strength but also with an almost existential melancholia. He concluded with the famous words of Juvenal *propter vita, vivendi perdere causas* (for the sake of life, to lose the reasons for living).<sup>30</sup>

This time Fontana was hopeful, so he sent a whole series of letters inquiring about what space was available, suggesting what

see *Artistas Italianos de Hoje na Iª Bienal do Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo* (Brazil outubro-dezembro 1951, Italian translation Laura Marchiori

(Venice, 1951), 48.  
<sup>29</sup> CRSC, cf. no. 48 SC 24; this work is confirmed in a private collection in Tokyo.

<sup>30</sup> See Giampiero Giani, "Lucio Fontana," in *XXVII. Esposizione Biennale*

*Internazionale d'Arte*, exh. cat. (Alfieri Editore, 1954), 113-15.

color should be used as a backdrop in the room,<sup>31</sup> providing information about the collectors,<sup>32</sup> especially of the works from the 1930s, who were mostly architects and engineers. Here again is one of the many small philological problems: Regarding *Le ospiti*<sup>33</sup> [FIG. 9], Ludovico Barbiano di Belgiojoso indicated that it was made in 1936/1937, while Fontana said it was made in 1934. It is common knowledge that for a variety of reasons artists aren't always accurate, and Fontana was no exception. All the same, we need to emphasize that Crispolti dates this work in colored plaster to the year 1933 with a "?," hypothesizing that it was on display that year at Barbaroux's Galleria Milano. Nonetheless, Fontana's hopes were soon dashed. First, Pallucchini told him that he could not arrange works at the center of the room, only off to the sides. Moreover, the linear surface was not around 38 meters as he had thought,

FIG. 9  
*Le ospiti*, 1933.



31 See handwritten letter "Milano, 16 - 5 - 54," which included a piece of green paper to indicate what the color of the room should be; ASAC, *Arti Visive*, b. 53, *Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte del 1954*, fasc. Fontana Lucio - Studio: via Monforte, 23 - Milano. *Mostra ciclica di scultura*; reproduced in Campiglio, *Lucio Fontana*, 154, letter 156.

32 ASAC, *Arti Visive*, b. 53, *Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte del 1954*, fasc. Fontana Lucio - Studio: via Monforte, 23 - Milano. *Abitazione Via Porpora 12 - Milano. Mostra ciclica di scultura*, handwritten letter, dated "Milano, 15 - 2 - 54"; reproduced in Campiglio, *Lucio Fontana*, 154, letter 156.

but only 28, as the doors had to be considered, wrote the director of the Secretariat. Fontana was in any case assigned a small room, number XIV, to share with other artists, but above all with Leoncillo's solo show. Among the works that Fontana displayed was the famous 1934 *Scultura astratta* [FIG. 10], damaged or perhaps destroyed in that Biennale, and other famous *Concetti spaziali*.<sup>34</sup>

Fontana was truly disappointed. At the end of the show, on November 30, 1954, the sculptor sent Pallucchini a heartfelt letter, saying, among other things:



FIG. 10  
*Scultura astratta*, 1934.

33 CRSDA, cf. no. 33 SC 3.

34 See, for example, *Concetto spaziale*, CRSDA, cf. no. 51 B 13. As concerns *Scultura astratta*, neither of the two mentioned by Crispolti in the catalog is reported as having been displayed at the 1954 Biennale (CRSDA, cf. nos. 34 SC 12, 34 SC 13). The Fondazione Lucio

Fontana informs us that recent photos allow us to indicate the one on display at the 1954 Biennale—and damaged, as we can infer from the letter written by the sculptor *infra* and note 35—with 34 SC 13, evidently made by Fontana after the one that was destroyed in 1934, but before the Biennale in 1954.

Unfortunately, 2 abstract tablets from "1932" were returned to me broken, and one of them is not mine. Moreover, the iron sculpture is broken in two. The spatial paintings were clumsily manhandled. I certainly don't blame the Biennale for this, but I do believe that my room was lacking in the necessary security. Some of the holes are torn and otherwise damaged. Did those responsible for the return shipment not notice, or did they think that the works were of no artistic value? Why was I not forewarned about this damage?<sup>35</sup>

Pallucchini's reply on December 4, 1954, albeit apparently very cordial, was rather scathing, as he seemed to imply that Fontana was the one responsible for the damage:

Dear Fontana [I have been informed that] the two abstract tablets of 1932, which arrived in Venice intact, were damaged during their arrangement, which you yourself oversaw: In fact, one of the two tablets, which you attached to the wall with a strip of adhesive paper, fell due to the insufficient adhesiveness of the support; the other one, momentarily set down on a base that was perhaps too narrow, and in any case not attached to the foot because it was being tested, fell to the ground before the opening.<sup>36</sup>

Pallucchini thus concluded that there had been security in the room, but that no one could have expected it to prevent every mishap from occurring.

What a difference, in style and consideration of these works, with respect, for instance, to Piero Bottoni, the owner of a *Tavoletta graffita* by Fontana from 1939, who, on offering the loan, wrote to Pallucchini on March 15, 1954 to say "that the gesso work must especially be insured in relation to its fragility and the exceptional rarity of a work by the sculptor Fontana!"<sup>37</sup>

The perplexities of the Secretary of the Biennale regarding Fontana's art were the same as that of much of the press at the time, which fiercely attacked the artist. This was especially true of the

35 Handwritten letter, dated "Milano, 30 - 11 - 54"; ASAC, *Arti Visive*, b. 53, *Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte del 1954*, fasc. *Fontana Lucio*; reproduced in Campiglio, *Lucio Fontana*, 157–58, letter 163.

36 Copy of the typewritten letter, dated "Venezia, 4 dicembre 1954," ASAC, *Arti Visive*, b. 53, *Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte del 1954*,

fasc. *Fontana Lucio*; reproduced in Campiglio, *Lucio Fontana*, 157–58, letter 163, note 1.

37 Letter on letterhead "prof. dott. Arch. Piero Bottoni – Via Rugabella 9 – tel 876 . 503 – Milano," dated "Milano 15 marzo 1954 pr. N. 1147//C.B." ASAC, *Arti Visive*, b. 53, *Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte del 1954*, fasc. *Fontana Lucio*.

major newspapers, the *Corriere della Sera* and its weekly supplement, *La Domenica del Corriere*. Leonardo Borgese had this to say:

You and I were friends, Lucio, in the days when our hair was black and you were a sprightly Lombard Impressionist sculptor [?!]. But now? Now Fontana is a desperado. He tells us so himself with his honest bricklayer's smile. He is desperate about art. He too. . . . And what if we were to do some "spatialism"? and [sic] what if we were to make a series of holes in a row in paper or in canvas? . . . Fontana, in fact, does just that, literally, and he shows this—that is, holes and pieces of anthracite—at the 27. Venice Biennale. Tomorrow, art will live on. Today's let's kill it, today it is dead. The problem is that it's unlikely that something dead can ever be born from something that's alive.<sup>38</sup>

The scathing criticism in the *Corriere* paved the way, especially in the north of Italy, for a plethora of similar opinions, which went, in a mostly ironic tone, from Giampiero Giani's foreword to Fontana's room.<sup>39</sup> These opinions were also reflected in the foreign press. For instance, two Dutch periodicals, which spoke of his "whims" and described him as the prince of "charlatans," while also publishing a reproduction—one of the best in all the press at the time—of a *Concetto spaziale* from 1951<sup>40</sup> [FIG. 11].

One little-known fact is that a certain number of southern publications, albeit not "clearing" Fontana entirely, were not wholly negative about his work.<sup>41</sup>

38 These are the words of L. Borgese, "Domani l'arte vivrà," *Corriere della Sera* (Milan, June 19, 1954). The author wrote a similarly scathing review for the July 11, 1954, issue of *Domenica del Corriere*, in which he stated that Fontana's "holes" had been invented by Arp and Moore, and in which he criticized all contemporary art, starting with Capogrossi.

39 For instance, Giannetto Valzelli, "Gli italiani alla XXVII Biennale di Venezia," *Il Giornale di Brescia* (June 17, 1954), stated as follows: "About Lucio Fontana—alas—the presenter Gianpiero Giani [sic] said all there was to say: 'A Hole in a stretched canvas is the limit of his journey.'" Egidio Bonfante, instead, in "La scultura alla XXVII Biennale. Troppe galline covano le uova di Arp," *La sentinella del canavese* (July 9, 1954), wrote as follows: "If with Arp we are witnessing the Michelangesque slaughter of the painters (and the more recent one at the hands of Picasso), as concerns the slaughter of the sculptors, our dear friend

Lucio Fontana, the talented and eccentric ceramicist we all know, brings this event to a close by placing us before the void: 'A hole, in a stretched canvas, is the limit of his journey' (G. Giani), but, we confide, it will not be the last threshold that sculpture holds for itself." I conclude with a third article by the editorial board of the *Messaggero Veneto* of Udine published on September 10, 1954, which beginning with Giani rambled on about Fontana's "whims," clearly putting him after Leoncillo.

40 See the editorial *Het zijn zware benen die de kunst doorwaden* [It takes strong legs to wade through art], *Dagblad voor Noord-Limburg*, August 5, 1954—from which the reproduction is taken—and the article by F.W. Vissernell "Eindhovens Dagblad," July 17, 1954, showing the same image.

41 For instance, Enotrio Mastrodonardo, "Le correnti di punta nella scultura italiana alla Biennale," *Idea* (December 5, 1954); U. Ferroni, "Cinque personali e poca scultura a Venezia," *Giornale dell'Isola* (September 11, 1954); but above all



FIG. 11  
Reproduction of a  
*Concetto spaziale* (in *Dagblad  
voor Noord-Limburg*  
[August 5, 1954]).

Obviously, some periodicals from northern Italy spoke kindly of the Argentine Italian artist.<sup>42</sup>

Fontana did not show his work at the 1956 Venice Biennale, but he was present at the one in 1958 with another solo exhibit. Many things had happened in the meantime. First, Pallucchini's position as Secretary General had been handed over to Gian Alberto Dell'Acqua; second, a Consulting Committee had been established, officially an aid to the president, but really a way to control the activity of the under-commission. Proof of this lies in the fact that two members of the latter—Felice Casorati and Sergio Bettini—had also become members of the same Committee.

Carlo Barbieri, "La scultura italiana alla XXVII Biennale di Venezia," *Il Mattino* (September 10, 1954): definitely one of the most positive reviews of Fontana's work.

42. Raffaele Carrieri ("Gli scultori spaziali stanno bene all'aperto," July 4, 1954 issue of *Epoca*) wrote: "With or without holes Fontana is always someone!"; or Leonardo Sinisgalli ("Sempre inventando," *Civiltà delle macchine* II, 5 [September 1954]: 37 – room which FIG. 12 is taken), who likened him to Picasso and to Calder: "Fontana has a wonderful mind, but the phosphorus of a cyclop would not suffice to fabricate his statues, his jewelry, his metal contraptions and his holes. Fontana is an artisan who is

closer to the creator of figurines, to upholsterers, to architects, closer to Picasso, in short, than to intellectuals like Dalí. We know where intellectuals like Dalí end up. We also know how far those like Picasso and Calder can get"; or Agnoldomenico Pica, who in "Lucio Fontana" (*La Biennale di Venezia* 19-20 [April–June 1954]: 80) stigmatized how though the "continuous, implacable, restless, and even violent tension of the inventive spirit, of the creative, demiurgic urge, of the primordial commitment (in the sense of absolutely new forms, ones for which no previous examples exist) that all of this artist's work must be approached and evaluated."

According to the records, the discussions especially focused on the opportunity to prepare a major exhibition of sacred art. Bettini even threatened to quit if it had been produced. In early January, moreover, there were rumors that the Biennale would especially be interested in "abstract art"—a term that encompassed all of Modernism—with a related press campaign that saw, like Orazi and Curiazi, Venturi in favor and Longhi against. Longhi, in fact, stood down. But as far as we are concerned here, in one of the meetings of the under-commission, which met on December 29 and 30, and on January 4 and 5—the records do not specify during which of these meetings—when suggestions were made as to which artists to invite, one of the members of the group, Renato



FIG. 12  
Lucio Fontana in the studio  
on Corso Monforte in Milan  
(in *Civiltà delle Macchine*,  
5 [September 1954]).

Birolli (the others were, in addition to Casorati and Bettini, Pericle Fazzini, Bruno Saetti, Pietro Zampetti—director of the Fine Arts Department for the City of Venice—, and Gian Alberto Dell'Acqua), stated the following. These are his statements in full; the words should be accurate seeing that the minutes were transcribed:

I would like to make a suggestion, and I can explain why if need be: Fontana. These are my reasons: I have grown aware for some time now, actually for several years, that many minor "nieces and nephews," when they are not entirely inappropriate, of Fontana are constantly defrauding him, including the critics, of a value that he has had. Here are their names: Bertagnin, Paganin, Broggin, the most recent Tavernari, deemed to be the creators of a situation that was already taken for granted and documented by Fontana. I believe that it is not only a question of justice, but also restoring history to its true focus, its true original center. These are the reasons why I suggest Fontana.<sup>43</sup>

Dell'Acqua answered by saying that he "absolutely agreed," observing, nonetheless, that he had already had a solo show. Birolli commented: "A poorly organized exhibition, filled with 'holes,' made a 'hole' in him as well. Fontana is a very talented man, but we must not allow him to organize his own show." Everyone agreed, warning, however, together with Casorati, that "he must not be allowed to have a large show."

Clearly, Birolli did not appreciate the "holes" either, or at least he did not understand them. But at the time the critics who did understand them were few and far between: among them was Guido Ballo, who wrote the foreword for the artist in the catalog.<sup>44</sup> Among the few exceptions was the very young Toni Toniato who, in his review of this Biennale for the magazine *Evento*, likened Fontana to Wols, Tobey, Tàpies, Pollock, stigmatizing above all the search for "spazio agito" (spaced that was acted upon) and space that was "vuoto" (void).<sup>45</sup>

If we take a quick look at the Notification forms for the 27 works presented,<sup>46</sup> all of them were owned by the artist, with one single, important exception, a "baroque," Crispolti would say, a mixture

43 ASAC, *Arti visive*, b. 83, *XXIX Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte 1958. Presidenza – Sottocommissione 1957-58*, fasc. XXIX Biennale – Sottocommissione per l'Arte Figurativa.

44 See Guido Ballo, *Lucio Fontana*, in *XXIX. Biennale Internazionale d'Arte*, exh. cat. (Ente Autonomo La Biennale di Venezia, 1958), 19-21.

45 See Toni Toniato, "XXIX Biennale," *Evento. Critica e cronaca delle Arti* (July 1958): 11-12 and *passim*.

46 ASAC, *Arti visive*, b. 84, *Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte del 1958. Inaugurazione, ospitalità, varie 1957-58*, fasc. XXIX Biennale Internazionale d'Arte 1958 – *Schede di notificazione Italia*.

of oil and other materials as an allusion to the continuity between material and space: *Concetto spaziale*, *Crocifissione*, *Golgotha* [FIGS. 13-14] property of the engineer Boschi, now in the Boschi-Di Stefano collection in Milan, which the owner insured for 2 millions (in liras), insisting that it should not be exposed to the sun to avoid damage.<sup>47</sup>

One of the works on display was the 1934 *Scultura astratta*<sup>48</sup>—rather similar to the one on display in 1954 and likely destroyed—which would also be presented at the Biennale in 1966 and acquired by the GAM in Turin; *Concetto spaziale*, *Forma*,<sup>49</sup> now at the Pinakothek der Moderne in Munich; but in particular the aforementioned *Golgotha*.

A few words about the press, which this time as well gave a scathing review of the Biennale: Emblematic, as always, was the case of Leonardo Borgese, who described Fontana as being the author of "black canvases with lots of holes in them";<sup>50</sup> but also, in the Left-wing press, Dario Micacchi, who criticized the mercantile

FIG. 13  
*Concetto spaziale*,  
*Crocifissione*, *Golgotha*, 1956.

FIG. 14  
*Concetto spaziale*,  
*Crocifissione*, *Golgotha*, 1956.  
Milan, Comune di Milano,  
Boschi-Di Stefano collection.



47 ASAC, *Arti visive*, b. 84, *Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte del 1958. Inaugurazione, ospitalità, varie 1957-58*, fasc. XXIX Biennale Internazionale d'Arte 1958 – *Schede di notificazione Italia*. CRSDA, cf. no. 56 BA 10.

48 CRSDA, cf. no. 34 SC 13; see also *supra*, note 34.

49 CRSDA, cf. no. 58 I 7.

50 See Leonardo Borgese, "Il 'nulla' alla Biennale," *Domenica del Corriere* (July 6, 1958).

vocation of the "shrewd abstracts and spatialists of international renown like the French artist Manessier, or like Fontana, who even tried his hand at the *Tavole di Mosè* or *Il Golgota*."<sup>51</sup>

I will quickly come to the epilog, recalling Fontana's participation in the 32. Venice Biennale in 1964 in the Exhibition of Museums.<sup>52</sup> In addition to the *Concetto spaziale* from the GNAM,<sup>53</sup> the artist presented one from the Kunstmuseen Krefeld, alongside works by Tàpies, Burri, and Yves Klein from the same museum, and valued in Deutschmarks at nearly two million liras at the time.<sup>54</sup>

Finally, at the 1966 Biennale the Venetian institution produced a series of photographs of the installation of his solo show with *Concetti spaziali*, *Attese* [FIG. 15],<sup>55</sup> executed by Carlo Scarpa. For his last participation, in 1968, he displayed an *Ambiente spaziale*.<sup>56</sup>

51 See Dario Micacchi, "L'astrattismo mercantile sommerge la XXIX edizione della Biennale d'arte," *L'Unità* (June 14, 1958).

52 See *Catalogo della XXXII. Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d'Arte*, exh. cat. (Ente Autonomo La Biennale di Venezia, 1964), 26 and 44 respectively, *Concetti spaziali* at the Kaiser Wilhelm Museum of Krefeld and of the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea in Rome.

53 CRSDA, cf. no. 59-60 B 1.

54 ASAC, *Arti visive*, b. 112, *Esposizioni biennali, mostre storiche e speciali, retrospettive e personali*, fasc. IV, XXXII Biennale 1964 – *Schede di notifica Mostra dei Musei*.

55 CRSDA, cf. no. 66 A 2. ASAC, *Fototeca artisti*, b. 48, *Biennale del 1966*. See also the related *Catalogo della XXXIII. Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d'Arte*, exh. cat. (Ente Autonomo La Biennale di Venezia, 1966), which includes Nello Ponente's introduction to *Aspetti del primo astrattismo italiano, Milano-Como 1930-1940*, and that of Gillo Dorfles specifically on Lucio Fontana's *Attese*, 15-18, and 43-44.

56 CRSDA, cf. no. 68 A 1. ASAC, *Fototeca*, b. *Fontana Lucio*, inv. 4472. See also, in *Catalogo della XXXIV. Esposizione Biennale Internazionale d'Arte, Venezia*, exh. cat. (Fantoni Artegrafica, 1968), *Ambiente nero*, LV, no. 35.



FIG. 15  
View of the Lucio Fontana solo show at the 33. Venice Biennale in 1966, design by Carlo Scarpa.

# DEVENIR DE FONTANA. TURIN 1959–62

Giorgina Bertolino

## TURIN 61

In introducing this essay—an overview of the relationship between Lucio Fontana, Turin and its art system in the early 1960s<sup>1</sup>—I refer to the title of a book, *Devenir de Fontana*, and to an *Ambiente*, *Fonti di energia, soffitto di neon per “Italia 61.”*<sup>2</sup> Both are dated to 1961, a crucial year for the history of the city, which organized the major exhibitions of *Italia 61* celebrating the centennial of the Italian Unification. The book and the *Ambiente*, their titles, reveal a fertile imagination, and I believe they can sum up and describe the role that Fontana played in Turin’s cultural context, that of a developing artist, *in divenire* (becoming or in progress) in addition to the age and his renown, the source and model of an inexhaustible energy in his research and work.

“We thus see a Fontana who has now become Fontana, or rather a Fontana in endless evolution,” Michel Tapié exhorts in the essay he wrote for the monograph *Devenir de Fontana*.<sup>3</sup> His “physiognomy,” the author explains, is that of the “pioneer, animator, creator,” with the mindset of the master but “in the ‘oriental’ sense of the term.”<sup>4</sup> The publication, a prestige edition, was created in Turin, in the spaces of the International Center of Aesthetic Research (ICAR) run by Michel Tapié and Fratelli Pozzo, a printing firm and at the same time an art publisher, the creator of the “Collana di studi per una nuova estetica,” directed by the artist Ezio Gribaudo.<sup>5</sup> The hardcover book was finished in black cloth, wrapped in a silver die-cut jacket with holes in it, and had a constellation of thirty-five “holes” set against the dark background<sup>6</sup> [FIG. 1].

Fontana, wrote Tapié, was little concerned with “anecdotes, biographies, history and stories,” and nourished “a deep dismay” vis-à-vis the “term ‘retrospective.’”<sup>7</sup> As Luca Massimo Barbero has observed, “the Fontana who gradually arrived in Turin, with various

1 This is the theme I was assigned for my talk at the conference *Lucio Fontana. Origini e immaginario*, which I could not attend. I wish to thank the curators for inviting me to contribute to this publication with this essay, which gave me an opportunity to reread Luca Massimo Barbero’s essays, “Scandalo a Torino. Lucio Fontana: una cronaca 1959-1969” and “Lucio Fontana per Italia 61. ‘Fonti di energia,’” respectively on pp. 19–71 and pp. 187–217 of the book he edited *Torino sperimentale 1959-1969. Una storia della cronaca: il sistema delle arti come avanguardia* (Allemandi, 2010), whose research I contributed to, and for which I am the author, along with Alessandro Botta, Giovanni Franchino, and Francesca Pola, of two essays.

2 CRSDA, cf. no. 61 A 2.

3 Michel Tapié, *Devenir de Fontana* (Edizioni d’Arte Fratelli Pozzo, 1961), n. p.

4 Tapié, *Devenir de Fontana*.

5 The series is announced in Michel Tapié, *Morphologie autre* (Edizioni d’Arte Fratelli Pozzo, 1960). In the 1961 monograph it is instead recorded as “Collezione” of the ICAR. On the relationship between Gribaudo and Fontana, cf. Alessandro Botta, “Ezio Gribaudo,” in *Dizionario Lucio Fontana*, ed. Luca Pietro Nicoletti (Quodlibet, 2023), 287–88.

6 There is a variant of the dust jacket with a slash in the middle, against a silver background. The volume was published in Italian, English, and French editions (Guy Le Prat Éditeurs).

7 Tapié, *Devenir de Fontana*, n. p.

shows and public moments, was filled with the energy of crisis."<sup>8</sup> Crisis, in its active and extroverted tonality, and a hostility toward the historiographic dimension are the antidotes that contrast the risk of stasis, in favor of *devenir*, a mobile and vital condition of the artist's conceptual and creative practice. Emphasized by the title of the book, the term harkens back to *Structures en devenir*, the group show at the Galerie Stadler in Paris, directed by Tapié, who in 1956 had invited Fontana to show his work along with that of Accardi, Capogrossi, Mathieu, and Tobey, among others.<sup>9</sup> For the French critic, who preferred to refer to himself as an *amateur*, *devenir* was an existential and morphological principle, a quality of life and art, almost an honor, always focused as he was on certifying for himself as well and for his own writing a *status* on a journey, as proven by the signature and ending of the text: "Michel Tapié / Turin-Tokyo, August 1961."<sup>10</sup> Fontana's works would be of use to him in those years to adopt the labels *Art Informel* and *Art autre*, words that Tapié himself coined, shifting them toward the domains of *morphologie* and *Baroque* and the notions of *ensembles* and *ordre*. "The adventure is elsewhere, very highly extended toward the conscious exploration



FIG. 1  
Cover of Michel Tapié,  
*Devenir de Fontana*,  
Edizioni d'Arte Fratelli  
Pozzo, 1961.

8 Barbero, "Scandalo a Torino," 32.

9 For the relationship between Fontana and Stadler, cf. Silvia Bignami, "Stadler, Rodolphe," in Nicoletti, *Dizionario Lucio*

*Fontana*, 495–96. See also the author's contribution in these proceedings.

10 Tapié, *Devenir de Fontana*, n. p.

11 Tapié, *Devenir de Fontana*, n. p.

of another fantastic work that was revealed to us by the discovery of *cantoriennes* structures and abstract spaces."<sup>11</sup>

After centuries of using materials and bodily energies . . . , after the prodigious and simultaneous extension toward seeing, hearing, and knowing also beyond the sensible, now opening up before man is an astral breach over infinite dimensions, hitherto conceivable only in poetry and later in scientific calculation.<sup>12</sup>

The voice is that of Gio Ponti, focused on summing up the principles that he followed in his design of the *Esposizione Internazionale del Lavoro* at Italia 61, as managing architect. Ponti as well, like Tapié, spoke of adventure, the "unlimited adventure" of "the advent of a civilization," in which scientists, architects, and artists were called upon to cooperate.<sup>13</sup>

Gio Ponti and Lucio Fontana knew each other, had been seeing each other from the 1930s, and esteemed each other greatly. The architect must no doubt have appreciated the presence at the great *Esposizione Internazionale del Lavoro* of the artist's *Ambiente*, a space with an octagonal plan grooved by a thick weave of neon lights.<sup>14</sup> *Fonti di energia* was the luminous nucleus of the Italian section, in turn situated at the center of the Palazzo del Lavoro [FIG. 2]. Designed by Pier Luigi and Antonio Nervi and built in just a few months' time, the building was the "Crystal Palace" of the Turin Expo, a "cube of iron and crystal,"<sup>15</sup> supported by sixteen strong reinforced concrete columns, destined to endure after the event and now a symbol in ruin of Turin's out-of-scale ambitions at the time. A form made from light in the pictures taken at night [FIG. 3], it was the apex of the fair district and part of a complex urban plan, conceived to upgrade the area along the river, in continuity with the Parco del Valentino. The Nervis' architecture and the exhibition it hosted constituted the fulcrum of the theoretical and ideological device of the entire operation, conceived to celebrate the centennial, certifying Turin's contribution as an "an industrial city that gave to the nation the face of a modern nation."<sup>16</sup>

12 Gio Ponti, "L'ordinamento interno dell'esposizione," in *La Celebrazione del Primo Centenario dell'Unità d'Italia*, ed. Comitato Nazionale per la Celebrazione del Primo Centenario dell'Unità d'Italia (Comitato Nazionale per la Celebrazione del Primo Centenario dell'Unità d'Italia, 1961), 531–32.

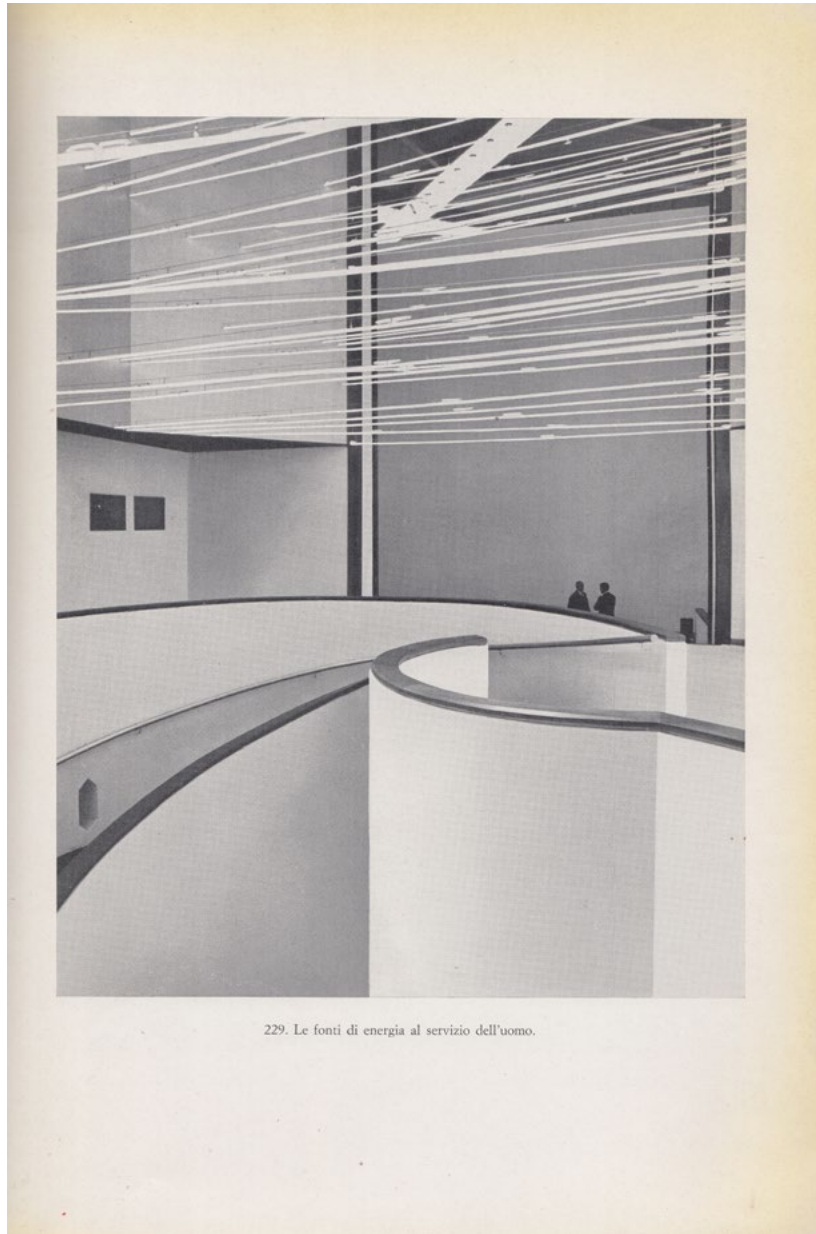
13 Ponti, "L'ordinamento interno dell'esposizione," 532.

14 On this *Ambiente*, cf. Stefano Setti, "Fonti di energia," in Nicoletti, *Dizionario*

*Lucio Fontana*, 252–53 and Marina Pugliese, Barbara Ferriani, and Vicente Todolí, eds., *Lucio Fontana. Ambienti/Environments*, exh. cat., ed. (Mousse, 2018).

15 Luigi Carluccio, "Stamane l'inaugurazione di Italia '61. Carattere architettonico delle mostre," *Gazzetta del Popolo* (May 6, 1961).

16 Mario Motta, "Un consuntivo della Esposizione," in Comitato Nazionale, *La Celebrazione del Primo Centenario*, 484.



229. Le fonti di energia al servizio dell'uomo.

FIG. 2  
*Fonti di energia*, 1961  
 (in *La Celebrazione del Primo Centenario dell'Unità d'Italia*, curated and published by the Comitato Nazionale per la Celebrazione del Primo Centenario dell'Unità d'Italia, 1961).

FIG. 3  
*Una visione notturna*  
 (in *La Celebrazione del Primo Centenario dell'Unità d'Italia* curated and published by the Comitato Nazionale per la Celebrazione del Primo Centenario dell'Unità d'Italia, 1961).



175. Una visione notturna.

In the factory-city, which had just reached a population of one million and was marked by a significant migratory phenomenon, the centennial risked becoming—Saverio Vertone warned the day of the opening—the combination of “a kind of gigantic ‘Risorgimento Show’” and “an advertising parade of FIAT’s neo-capitalism.”<sup>17</sup>

For six months the Crystal Palace in Turin was transformed into a veritable science center, based on a faith in progress (but still underscoring questions and complexities) and organized around the theme of *L'uomo al lavoro. 100 anni di sviluppo tecnico e sociale: conquiste e prospettive* (Man at work: 100 years of technical and social development: achievements and prospects). While the foreign section (with twenty-one international organizations and foreign states) had a “more specialized and scientific nature,” the goal of the Italian section was “to offer a spectacular synthesis of all the technological and social conquests of the past century.”<sup>18</sup> Divided into chapters, they were dedicated to reassessing private and public companies, including Olivetti, Fiat, and Rai. The Italian

17 Saverio Vertone, “Il festival del ‘miracolo,’” *l'Unità* (May 6, 1961).

18 Andrea Rossi, Enzo Tavallini, “Il

contenuto culturale dell'esposizione,” in Comitato Nazionale, *La Celebrazione del Primo Centenario*, 497.

section was a full-fledged workshop that saw the collaboration of architects (Franco Albini, Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni, Ettore Sottsass Jr.), graphic artists, artists, and designers (Franco Grignani, Max Huber, Bruno Munari), the painter Renato Guttuso, and the sculptors Fausto Melotti and Lucio Fontana.

The title of Fontana's "spectacular" environment coincided with the theme of the chapter, dedicated to illustrating "the *mechanical energy* phase and the *atomic energy* phase," up to studies on new sources, "the sun and the tides."<sup>19</sup> The creation of the pavilion, designed by the architects Gianemilio and Piero Monti and Anna Bertarini, including a graphic concept by Albe Steiner, was supported by a consortium of companies that included the Associazione Nazionale Imprese Produttrici e Distributrici di Energia Elettrica (ANIDEL), ENI, Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi, and the Italian branches of BP, Esso, Gulf, Mobil, and Shell.<sup>20</sup>

The environment that Fontana created to interpret the backers (from the standpoint of nuclear power and its civilian applications) consisted in a volume that was accessed by a helicoidal ramp-stairway leading toward a span of neon tubes with fluorescent light, arranged on seven levels, at irregular distances. The light structure modified the perception of space, and the feeling of verticality was intensified by the relationship between the weaving of neon lights and the glass cuts in Nervi's ceiling, deliberately left visible by Ponti's overall design. The environment seemed to materialize that "luminous and malleable substance" evoked by Fontana, as well as pupils and friends, in the *Manifiesto Blanco*, 1946, the instrument of a future "four-dimensional art."<sup>21</sup> As Barbero has emphasized, *Fonti di energia* is among the artist's "most mature" environments, "no doubt the largest and most demanding"; it is a "storm of energies."<sup>22</sup> An astral gateway.

#### A CONVERGENCE OF ENERGY LINES

Two years before *Italia 61*, Fontana had participated with *Concetto spaziale, Attese* (1959)<sup>23</sup> in *Arte Nuova. Esposizione Internazionale di pittura e scultura*, which opened on May 4, 1959 in the rooms of the Circolo degli Artisti in Palazzo Graneri. The level of the exhibition, Luciano Pistoï noted in the catalog, was that of an event in a capital city (Paris, New York, Tokyo, or Barcelona); the fact that it is in Turin, he writes, is due to "a particular convergence of energy lines."<sup>24</sup>

19 Rossi, Tavallini, "Il contenuto culturale dell'esposizione," 502–03.

20 Andrea Rossi, Enzo Tavallini, "Il settore italiano," in Comitato Nazionale, *La Celebrazione del Primo Centenario*, 577.

21 I quote this from the text reprinted in *Lucio Fontana*, exh. cat., ed. Aldo Passoni (Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna, 1970), 33.

22 Barbero, "Lucio Fontana per Italia 61," 189 and 206.

23 CRSDA, cf. no. 59 T 64.

24 Luciano Pistoï, introductory text, in *Arte Nuova. Esposizione internazionale di pittura e scultura. Ikebana di Sofu Teshigahara*, exh. cat., ed. Andrea Dragone (Circolo degli Artisti, 1959), n.p.

Pistoï was part of the organizing committee, together with Angelo Dragone and Soichi Tominaga, alongside Michel Tapié, who created the exhibition format structured like a *confrontation internationale*, based on the model he had tried out starting with *Véhémences confrontées*. The Turin show brought together multiple forces: it was born from the collaboration between the Circolo degli Artisti and the Associazione Arti Figurative and it was the result of an unprecedented collaboration between public institutions, companies, and private parties, who participated in funding the project.<sup>25</sup> The seventy-one artists invited, each with a single work (except for the four by Fautrier), came from America, Europe, and Japan, the areas within which Tapié built up his own expertise as an *amateur* and wandering critic, extending the territory of the Informel and of *Art autre* to a transcontinental geography. In the catalog the title *Arte Nuova* was translated into English, Japanese, and French, and the artists were brought together from three "cultural zones,"<sup>26</sup> an expression that denoted a different approach with respect to the traditional national borders and to the diplomacies of art.

Luciano Fontana's *Concetto spaziale, Attese* [FIG. 4], exhibited in the rooms of the seventeenth-century palazzo, was part of the very recent cycle *Tagli*, in this case slashed horizontally on the surface of the canvas, concentrated and cadenced in the chromatic strip at the center, brightened by the use of gold, the "color/material" that, as Barbero has noted, "foreshadowed his interest in the potential of 'metal.'"<sup>27</sup> Under the decorated and frescoed ceilings, the *Concetto spaziale* slit by six cuts shared the space and walls with Burri's *Ferro T*, Capogrossi's *Superficie n. 27*, de Kooning's *Woman Standing*, Mathieu's *Clodoveo*, Pollock's *Arrossage*, Tobey's *Sun and Ink* and the "paintings" (so written in the catalog) of Domoto, Imai, Onishi, and Shiraga [FIG. 5]. Significant, at least for that time, was the representation of women artists (which included Accardi, Falkenstein, Krasner, Tanaka), and also relevant was the presence of Turin artists, from Luigi Spazzapan, who had recently passed away and was honored on the cover of the catalog, to Franco Assetto and Franco Garelli, both of whom were involved in the preparation of the exhibition.<sup>28</sup> The three names explain in part the reason for Tapié having recently moved to Turin.

25 Overall, the exhibition costed eight million liras, cf. Juliette Evezard, "Un Art Autre". *Le rêve de Michel Tapié* (les presses du réel, 2023), 263.

26 In the catalog the *Indice degli espositori per zone culturali* (*Indice degli espositori per aree di cultura*, in the general index) preceded the alphabetical list, Dragone, *Arte Nuova*, 112.

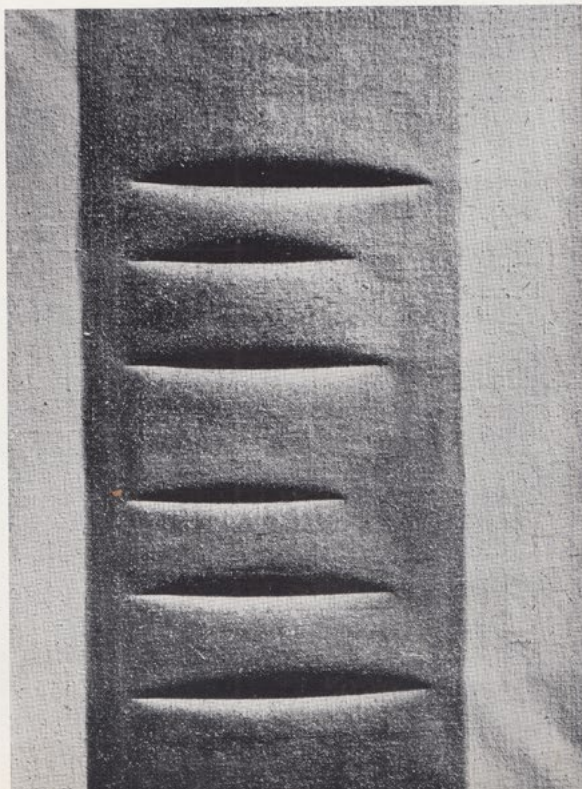
27 Barbero, "Scandalo a Torino," 39.

28 Their names are among those of the "promoters," along with Tapié, Pistoï, and Dragone, in mar. ber. (Marziano Bernardi), "Quadri astratti e squisitezze floreali," *La Stampa* (May 5, 1959). On the preparations for the exhibition, cf. Evezard, "Un Art Autre," 262.

Nato a Rosario di Santa Fè (Argentina), da genitori italiani, il 19 febbraio 1899, dall'età di sei anni vive a Milano. Ha studiato scultura a Brera, con Wildt, e dal 1930 milita nell'avanguardia. La sua prima personale di scultura astratta si è tenuta infatti a Milano in quell'anno nella *Galleria del Milione*. Nel '34 aderì al gruppo « Abstraction-Création » di Parigi; si dedicò poi alla ceramica eseguendo per la fabbrica di Sèvres alcune sculture a gran fuoco. Nel '46 a Buenos Aires pubblicò il « Manifesto blanco » anticipazione di quello sull'« Arte spaziale » da lui ideato ed edito a Milano nel 1947. Muovendo dalla lezione di avanguardia di Boccioni e del Futurismo e legando al movimento artisti, letterati ed architetti, nel marzo del '48 pubblicò il Secondo manifesto degli « Spaziali » firmato anche da altri esponenti della cultura milanese. Nella *Galleria del Naviglio*, a Milano, nel febbraio del '49 allestì per la prima volta un « ambiente spaziale, con forme spaziali ed illuminazione a luce nera ». Numerosissime esposizioni l'hanno annoverato tra gli esponenti d'ogni avanguardia, in Italia e all'estero in ogni continente.



## Lucio FONTANA



\* Concetto spaziale:  
attese - 1959.  
(120 x 165)

43

FIG. 4  
Concetto spaziale, Attese,  
1959 (in *Arte Nuova*.  
*Esposizione internazionale  
di pittura e scultura. Ikebana  
di Sofu Teshigahara*, exh. cat.,  
ed. Andrea Dragone, [Circolo  
degli Artisti, 1959]).



Capogrossi Domoto Appel Goldberg

Damian Boille Mathieu



Riopelle

Tobey

Riopelle Wessel Et. Martin



FIG. 5  
an. dra. (Andrea Dragone),  
"Cronaca iconografica della  
mostra" (in *Arte Nuova*.  
*Esposizione internazionale  
di pittura e scultura. Ikebana  
di Sofu Teshigahara*, exh. cat.,  
ed. Andrea Dragone, [Circolo  
degli Artisti, 1959]).

The Eastern master of *Arte Nuova* was Sofu Teshigahara, the author of a monumental ikebana, made so that it was site-specific with trunks, flowers, and metal in the palazzo courtyard (in a ceremony-performance reserved for very few witnesses),<sup>29</sup> and of the "roots-sculptures" group presented at the exhibition, after "crossing the Oceans," stored inside crates used "for 'farming tools.'"<sup>30</sup>

The convergence of energy lines produced a *rencontre* of international significance, unveiling the skills of a small work group, a new circle. Founded on the Tapié-Pistoi alliance, *Arte Nuova* modified the equilibriums of the Turin scene, reconfiguring the reception of art and its recent stories, according to unprecedented trajectories. The impact was not without some friction: this was clear from the reviews, the deliberate misunderstanding around the title, interpreted as the phantasmatic return of Art Nouveau ("Modern-style," "Jugendstil," "Liberty")<sup>31</sup>; it was also clear from Luigi Carluccio's tone, who was irked before a proposal that was radically alternative to the *École de Paris*, the key inclination in the Turin cycle *Pittori d'oggi. Francia - Italia*, that he had curated in the decade from 1951–61. Fontana had participated in the second edition in 1952.

Fontana's presence in the city was a long-standing one: It first started in 1935, when he participated in the *Prima mostra collettiva di arte astratta italiana*, installed in the studio of Felice Casorati and Enrico Paulucci (FIG. 6); it grew more intense after the war, with a solo show in 1953 at the Galleria Il Prisma and, that same year, with the appearance of a canvas in *Arte in vetrina*, a traveling show organized for the shops in the city center. Fontana's work was also present, later, in several group shows, as well as in *Quattro artisti spaziali: Capogrossi, Crippa, Fontana, Scanavino*, at the Galleria Il Grifo in 1959. An exemplary interpreter of abstraction and the protagonist of Spatialism, between the late 1950s and the early 1960s, Fontana *en devenir* entered the theoretical and operative sphere of Tapié the Turinese, which was open to a circuit of international exhibitions and galleries, also by way of a fruitful encounter with the Japanese avant-garde. As early as 1957, Tapié had chosen *Concetto spaziale* (1949),<sup>32</sup> the photographic version with the light slanting, for the cover of his *L'Aventure informelle*, a special issue of *Gutai* journal. The first European group show of the works of the Japanese avant-garde artists opened at the same time as *Arte Nuova*, at Notizie, the gallery that Luciano Pistoi had founded the year before, the latest endowment of a multifarious cultural activity, promoted

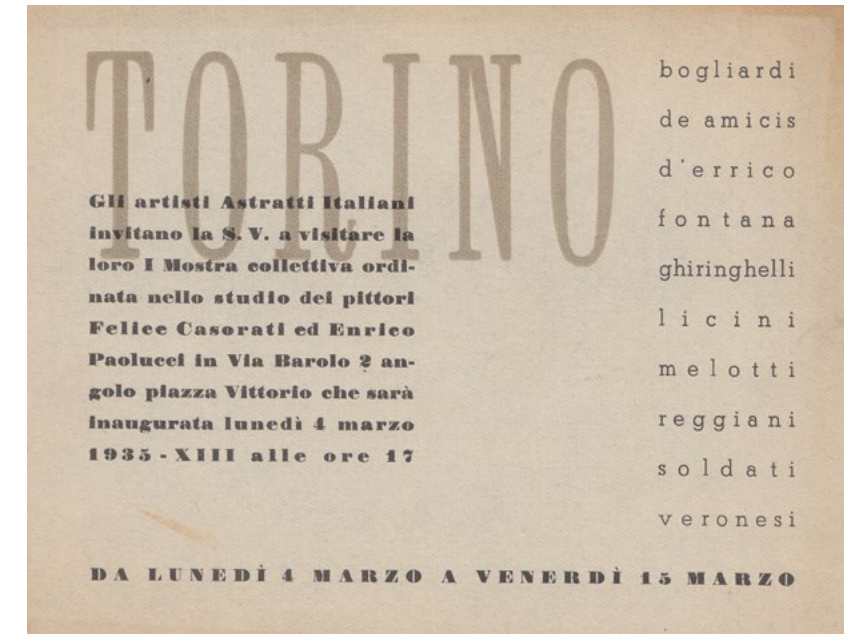
29 The action is documented in several photos taken by the Agenzia Publifoto of Milan, now in Bertolino, "Mostre autres e musei-manifesto," in Barbero, *Torino sperimentale*, 93.

30 an. dra. (Andrea Dragone), "Cronaca iconografica della Mostra," in Dragone, *Arte Nuova*, 108.

31 ber. (Bernardi), "Quadri astratti."

32 CRSDA, cf. no. 49 B 1.

FIG. 6  
Invitation to the *Prima mostra collettiva di arte astratta italiana*, March 4–15, 1935, Turin, studio of Felice Casorati and Enrico Paulucci. Turin, Bella and Erika Hutter Archive.



through the Associazione Arti Figurative and the magazine *Notizie – Associazione Arti Figurative*.<sup>33</sup> The relationship between the two shows was captured by Carla Lonzi in a long article, in which she reconstructed Tapié's commitment in favor of Gutai (the exhibition at the Martha Jackson in New York and the *International Art of a New Era: Informel and Gutai*, in Osaka) and he acknowledged that the Turin venture deserved credit for offering an alternative to the "antiquarian or philological" interest in Japanese art that was predominant in Italy, introducing the research of contemporaries, with their features of "intense concentration, analytical introspection, improvised lyricisms."<sup>34</sup>

The circle continued to grow, including some of the voices of the emerging generation of critics, which were given a platform in the rooms of the *Notizie* and in the pages of its newsletter. In November–December 1959 Enrico Crispolti moved to the gallery's new location, in Piazza Cesare Augusto 1, the Fontana solo show that he had recently curated at L'Attico in Rome. Turin is generally not a city of *premières*; rarely has an artist asked the city to present a new cycle of works, granting this role to Milan and its key galleries.

33 On the complete activity, cf. Mirella Bandini, Maria Cristina Mundici, Maria Teresa Roberto, Luciano Pistoi "inseguo un mio disegno" (hopefulmonster editore, 2008).

34 Carla Lonzi, "Arte Nuova e arte

giapponese," *L'Approdo Letterario* V, no. 7 (July–September 1959), now in Lara Conte, Laura Iamurri, and Vanessa Martini, eds., *Carla Lonzi. Scritti sull'arte* (et al., 2012), 126 and 128.

However, Turin knows how to be receptive terrain, a space of resonance through books, exhibitions, solo shows, and posthumous ones later. The quick re-proposal of the first exhibition dedicated to Fontana curated by Crispolti (the biographical and methodological beginning of his future and exemplary critical and historiographical work)<sup>35</sup> acquired weight and importance within the broader exhibition design, also thanks to the reprinting of the accompanying essay. In the *Notizie's* newsletter, added to the text now was a title: *Lucio Fontana (opere dal 1931 al 1959)* [FIG. 7]. The exhibition, "of a historical and thus retrospective nature," dealt with the "caso Fontana," decried the "inertia of the critics" and their attempts to "block" the work. He instead identified the exact opposite in the acknowledgment of the artist by the "young European avant-garde."<sup>36</sup> The selection of works, from the *Quanta* [FIG. 8] backwards as far as the sculptures of the 1930s, examined together with Fontana and taken from the basement of the studio on Corso Monforte in Milan, challenged the relationship between what was contemporary and what was past, a relationship that was recomposed for Crispolti in the "value of the ephemeral and artificiality" and thanks to the "constant 'inventiveness' of the mean," actually, to the "relativity of the means themselves."<sup>37</sup> Together with other texts signed by Crispolti in that period, the essay can be included in the category that Luca Pietro Nicoletti recognizes as the birth of "a new genre of militant criticism: the essay on the history of contemporary art."<sup>38</sup> Pistoï's gallery, together with the one he would open in the future, would play an important role in this story, "gymnasiums for artistic experimentation," as Maria Teresa Roberto wrote, "but also the places of the most combative historiography of the contemporary."<sup>39</sup>

35 Crispolti said the same as to the generative and methodological function of the exhibition in "Dall'antologica all'Attico nel 1959 al *Catalogo generale* del 1974 e del 1986," *L'uomo nero* I, no. 1 (2003): 51–67. More in general, on the relationship between Fontana and Crispolti see the contribution by Luca Pietro Nicoletti in these proceedings.

36 Enrico Crispolti, *Fontana*, exh. cat. (Editore L'Attico, 1959), then in Enrico Crispolti, "Lucio Fontana (opere dal

1931 al 1959)," in *Lucio Fontana*, exh. cat. (Associazione arti figurative, 1959), 1–2, 4–5.

37 Crispolti, "Lucio Fontana," 2, 4.

38 Luca Pietro Nicoletti, "Critica d'arte in Italia. Anni Cinquanta-Settanta," in Nicoletti, *Dizionario Lucio Fontana*, 188.

39 Maria Teresa Roberto, "Le due città. Luciano Pistoï tra Torino e Roma, 1962-88," in Bandini, Mundici, Roberto, *Luciano Pistoï*, 37.

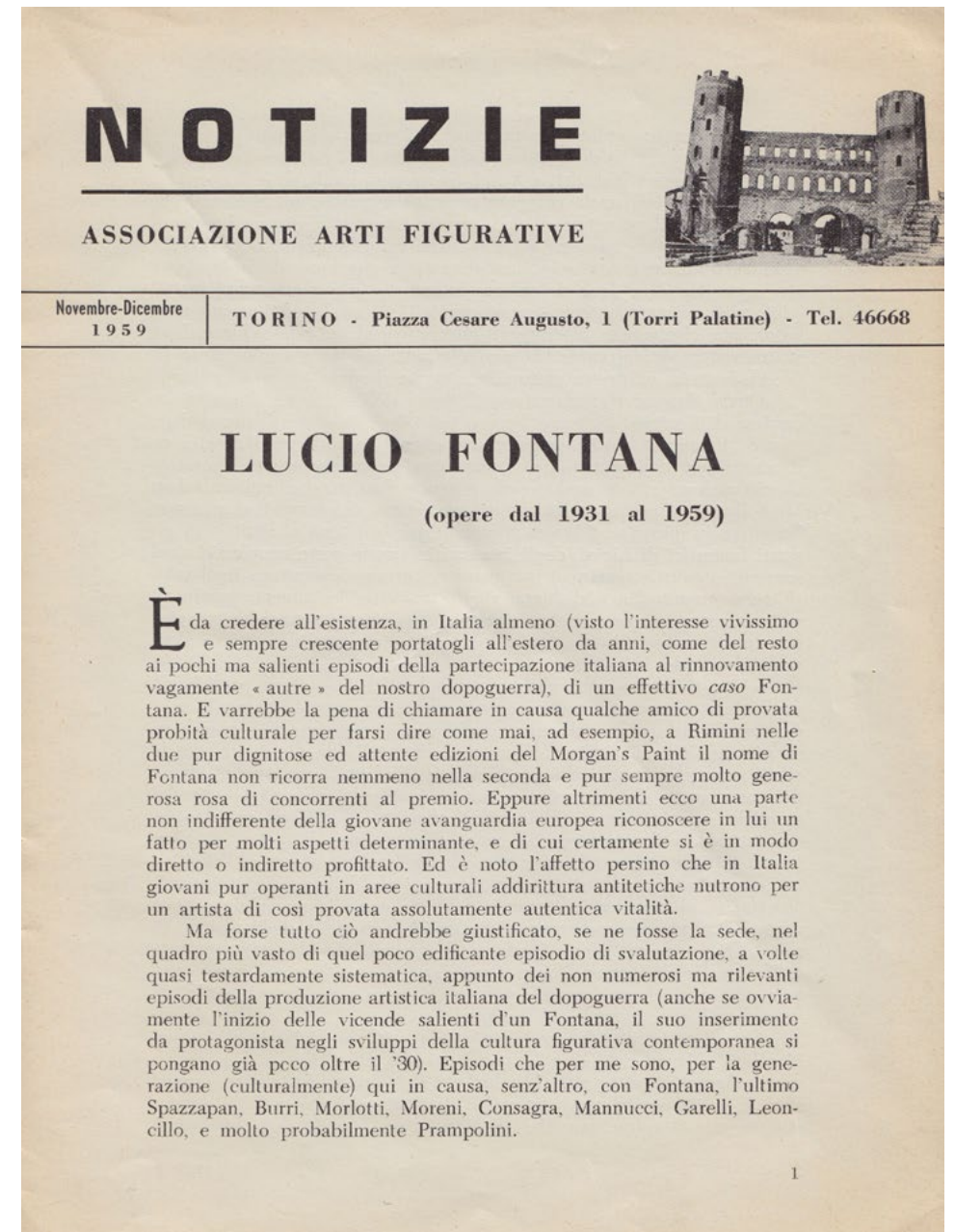


FIG. 7 Enrico Crispolti, "Lucio Fontana (opere dal 1931 al 1959)" (in *Notizie - Arti Figurative* [November–December 1959]).

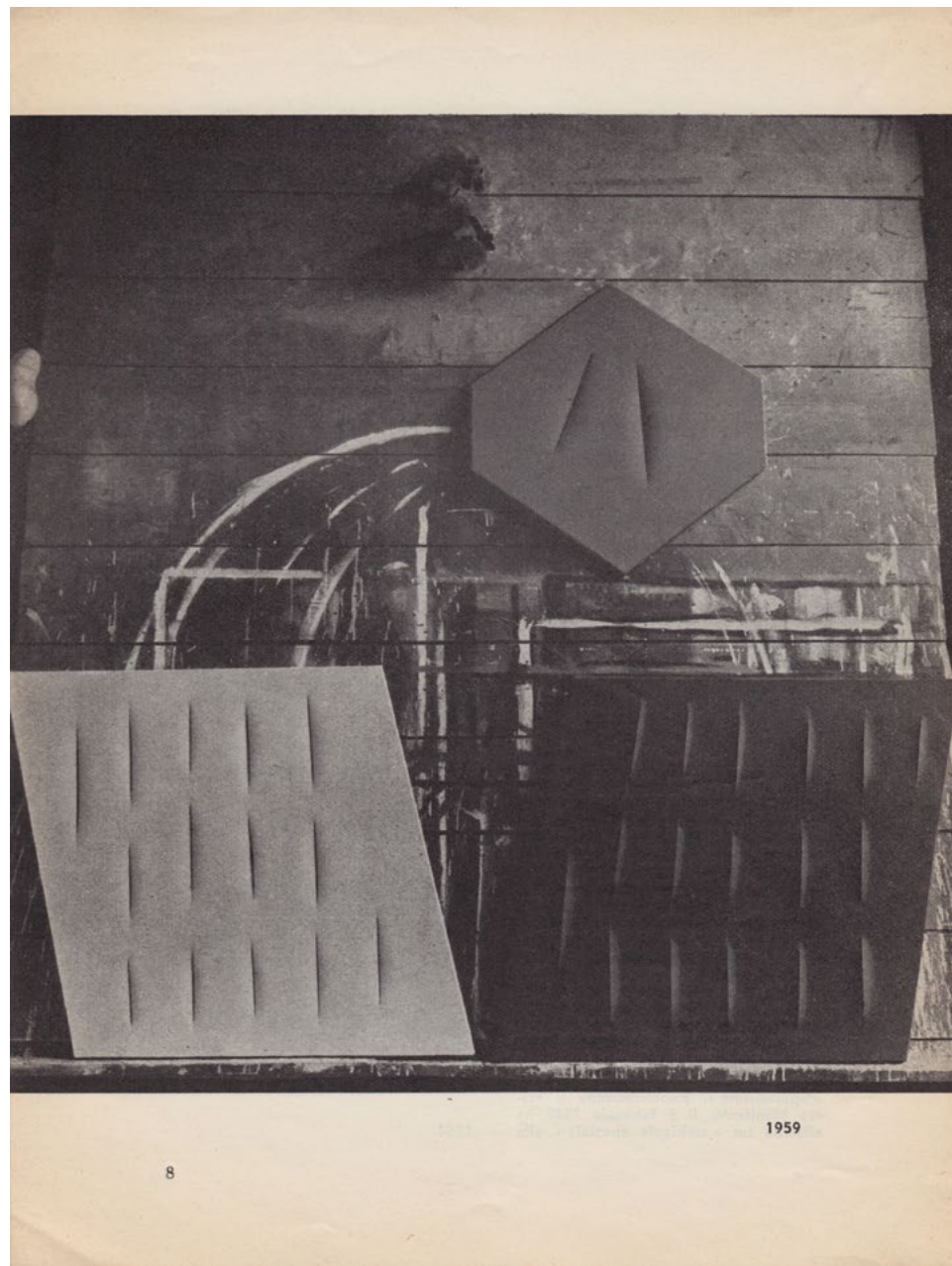


FIG. 8  
Page from *Lucio Fontana*,  
exh. cat. (Edizioni della  
Conchiglia, 1959).

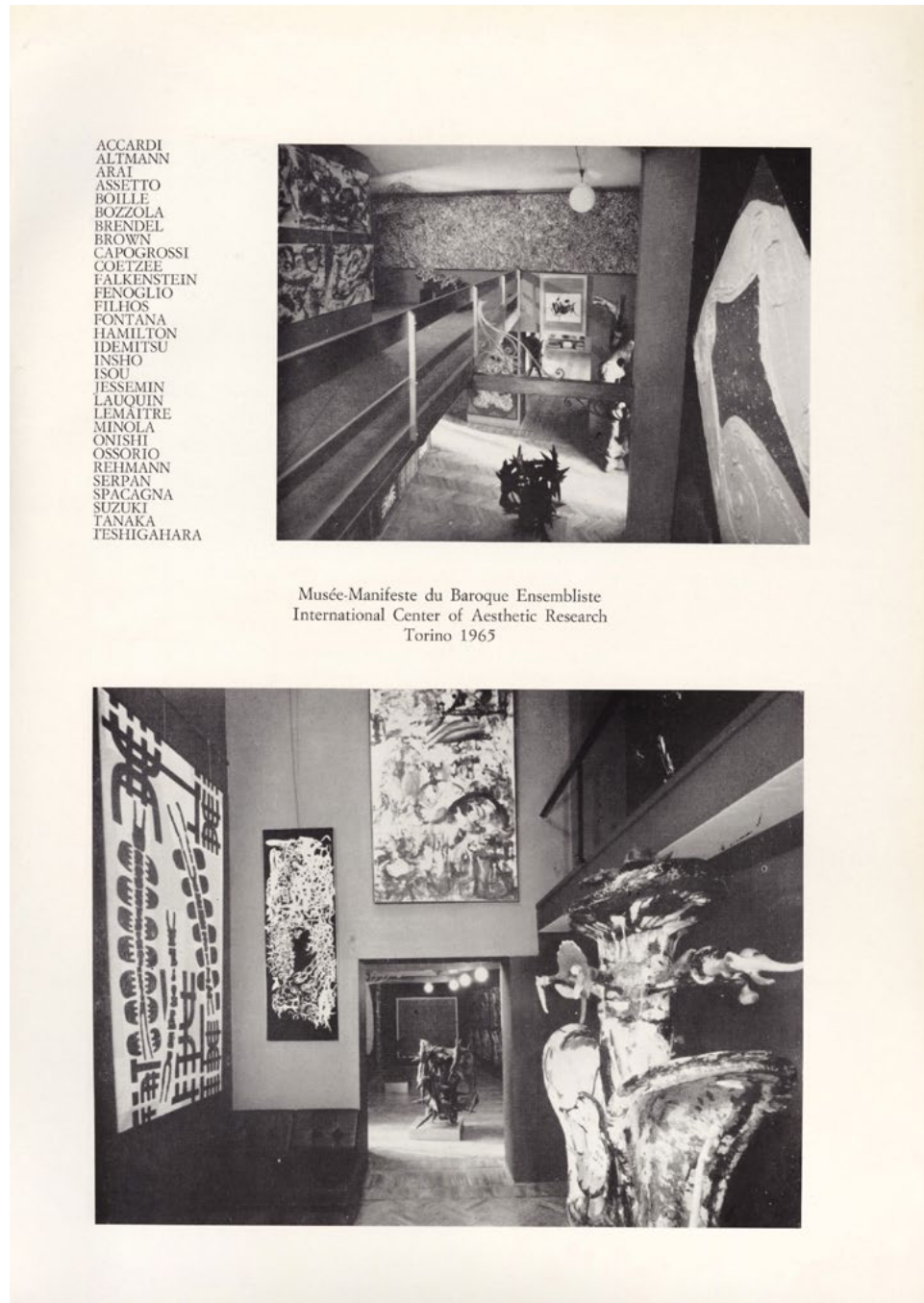
### MUSÉE-MANIFESTE

What is a museum-manifesto? Judging from the cover of volume number five of the International Center of Aesthetic Research (ICAR), published in 1962, it is rather like an art storage area<sup>40</sup> [FIG. 9]. The color image, positioned under the title *Musée-Manifeste*, shows a crowded group of canvases, inserted one by one, obliquely, between the pillars of wooden shelving up against the wall. In his decision to show his work in a space that was well-equipped and functional (it could be a museum or gallery storage area, or that of a large and precious private collection), Tapié brought the behind-the-scenes out in the open. When placed on the cover, however, the storage area changed and reappeared like a potential space, a place filled with traces and meanings. The figure of a non-inert latency, it was an archive capable of generating multiple exhibition assemblages for the future, and of activating, at the same time, theories and programs, according to the tradition of the artistic manifesto. The storage area was that of the International Center and the canvases were part of its collection.

FIG. 9  
Cover of Luigi Moretti,  
Michel Tapié, Friedrich Bayl,  
*Musée-Manifeste. Structures  
et Styles Autres* (Fratelli  
Pozzo Editori, 1962).



<sup>40</sup> Luigi Moretti, Michel Tapié, Friedrich Bayl, *Musée-Manifeste. Structures et Styles Autres* (Fratelli Pozzo Editori, 1962).



ACCARDI  
ALTMANN  
ARAI  
ASSETTO  
BOILLE  
BOZZOLA  
BRENDEL  
BROWN  
CAPOGROSSI  
COETZEE  
FALKENSTEIN  
FENOGLIO  
FILHOS  
FONTANA  
HAMILTON  
IDEMITSU  
INSHO  
ISOU  
JESSEMIN  
LAUQUIN  
LEMAITRE  
MINOLA  
ONISHI  
OSSORIO  
REHMANN  
SERPAN  
SPACAGNA  
SUZUKI  
TANAKA  
TESHIGAHARA

Musée-Manifeste du Baroque Ensembliste  
International Center of Aesthetic Research  
Torino 1965

FIG. 10  
Interiors of the International  
Center of Aesthetic Research  
(in Luigi Moretti, Michel  
Tapié, *Le Baroque Généralisé. Manifeste du Baroque Ensembliste* [Edizioni del Dioscuro, 1965]).

In the photograph, the fifth canvas from the left is a work by Lucio Fontana, *Concetto spaziale*<sup>41</sup> from 1961, which would be on display again on the walls of the ICAR, in 1965, when it became the *Musée-Manifeste du Baroque Ensembliste* [FIG. 10].<sup>42</sup> Although we can only see one side of it, we can recognize it from the relief scroll motifs on a white background and by the gold slice at the top. This *Concetto*, featuring a square format, is part of the cycle of the *Venezie*.

Lucio Fontana had been invited to the opening at the ICAR, on March 3, 1960. Seated in the first row, he had listened to the opening talks delivered by Michel Tapié, "La structure de l'abstraction et de l'art," and by Luigi Moretti, "Strutture e forme."<sup>43</sup> The artist was one of the illustrious guests in the *parterre* of well-known figures who had come together for the occasion, a numerous group as attested by the names written on a photo-postcard [FIG. 11]. The new space, on Via della Basilica, was a large apartment on two levels, inside Palazzo Isnardi di Caraglio. Located on the top floor of the building was Franco Assetto's studio, and outside, close by, was the Galleria Notizie: the proximity of the two buildings marked the perimeter of a sort of hub, an eccentric pole with respect to the topography of Turinese art [FIG. 12]. In Turin, Tapié, in addition to continuing his activity as a theorist and a curator, became an inventor of spaces, experimenting with a hybrid format, somewhere between an institution and a private organization, a museum and a gallery.

FIG. 11  
Opening of the International  
Center of Aesthetic Research,  
Turin, March 3, 1960. Turin,  
Gribaudo Archive.



41 CRSDA, cf. no. 61 O 58.

42 The photographs are published in Luigi Moretti, Michel Tapié, *Le Baroque Généralisé. Manifeste du Baroque*

*Ensembliste* (Edizioni del Dioscuro, 1965), n. p.

43 Evezard, "Un Art Autre," 265.

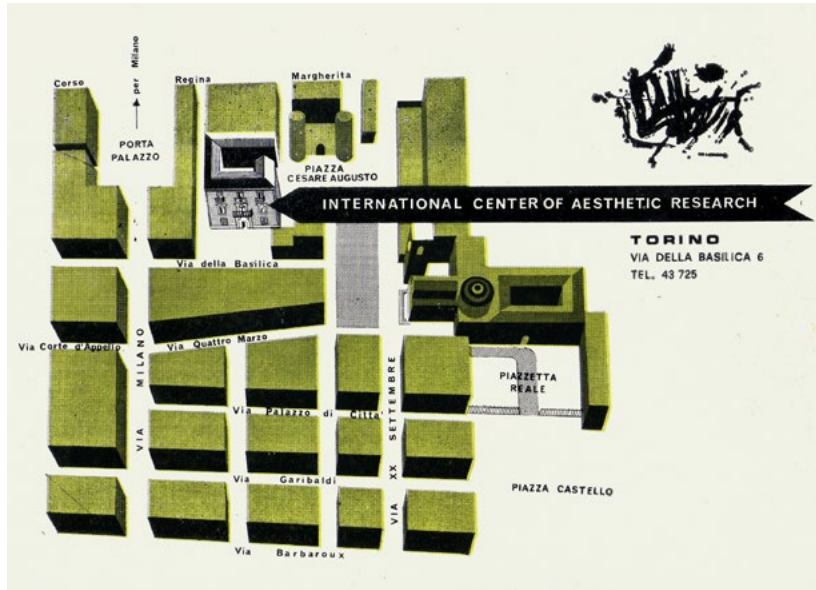


FIG. 12  
Map with the location  
of the International Center,  
published on an invitation  
from 1964.

Germano Celant would later define it a "free zone," a "container of ideas and drives," with the physiognomy of a "theatrical 'camp,' irreverent and physicalized, where art becomes 'event.'"<sup>44</sup> Referred to as a research center, actually a center for researches in the plural, it welcomed many interests (aesthetics, mathematics, experimental music, calligraphy), bestowing on art the dignity of a sector of transdisciplinary study. The exploration and testing of new ways to present works and discourses took place in parallel within those walls and in the pages of books. The books were like exhibitions on paper, with the works reproduced individually, full-page, in distinct blacks and whites and, when in color, on plates printed separately and then glued. In *Morphologie autre*, the first issue in the series, published in 1960, the critic organized the research program: before the Informel, which had become a convenient expedient, it was necessary to explore the territory of *Art autre*, "in light of the concepts of continuity, limit, closeness," drawing from Cantor's set theory, questioning the Baroque complexes and the works deriving from Zen Buddhism.<sup>45</sup> The iconographic section was introduced by the heading "Documents," in alphabetical order by author: Accardi, Appel, Araï, Assetto . . . an absurd criterion, one reads in a brief caveat, but something that can be reclassified at will, as one hopes "that the works of tomorrow will not reserve unpredictable surprises for us (as we hope they do)."<sup>46</sup>

44 Germano Celant, "Una storia," in *Un'avventura internazionale. Torino e le arti 1950-1970*, exh. cat., ed. Germano

Celant, Paolo Fossati, and Ida Gianelli (Charta, 1993), 21.  
45 Tapié, *Morphologie autre*, n. p.

"Documenti" also opens and defines the succession of works chosen for *Devenir de Fontana*, the 1961 monograph. It starts with a black and white photograph, the famous image of the artist holding an awl in the act of punching a hole in the canvas, and it ends with the execution of a "slash." Fontana's evolution is a chronology that unfolds work after work, year after year, each work (painting, sculpture, environment) accompanied by a date, from 1931 to 1961. There are no titles, captions, indications as to techniques and collections. Inside the spacious format (30 centimeters for the base, 28 for the height), the attention is focused on the illustrations, with plates printed in "flat rotogravure printing," as Ezio Gribaudo, director of the ICAR book series, recalled, witness to Fontana's work which he followed personally, for months, spending hours on the plates with the chromists Fratelli Pozzo.<sup>47</sup> Already included in these pages is the photograph of *Fonti di energia* at *Italia 61*; included are *Tagli*, two of which die-cut on metal tin, in gold. *Devenir de Fontana* is also an artist's book.

Turin, in those years, was also a workshop for Lucio Fontana, a place in which to try out techniques alongside the artisans, and plan installations and environments alongside architects and designers. The experiences came about in productive contexts that were both organized and efficient: the Taylorist work site of Palazzo del Lavoro at *Italia 61*, where, during the installation, the professionalism of the different specialists converged; Pozzo's high-tech laboratories. These were the emblems of the industrial city, its identity and its legends. Even in Giorgio Conterio's metal carpentry workshop in the outskirts of the city the atmosphere was "geometric and aseptic."<sup>48</sup> In January 1962, the workplace was turned into a temporary studio for Fontana, busy working on some of the *Metalli* that he would exhibit in February for a solo show at ICAR. The "objects that the artist did not as yet know whether to call paintings or sculptures, had to be created on the spot," Luigi Carluccio remarked at the end of his visit to the site, part of an invaluable description.<sup>49</sup> The artist worked on metal sheets, copper or steel, mirror polished, hammering the tip of an iron rod into the sheet metal: "another blow made the gap wider, another made the gash longer."<sup>50</sup> Illustrated in a picture of Fontana at work,<sup>51</sup> the article described the effects produced while working that helped

46 Tapié, *Morphologie autre*.

47 Giordina Bertolino, Francesca Pola, "Intervista a Ezio Gribaudo," in Barbero, *Torino sperimentale*, 81, 83.

48 Luigi Carluccio, "Nello studio di Lucio Fontana pittura e scultura non hanno confini. Un artista geniale che lavora con martello e tondino su lamiera di

rame," *Gazzetta del Popolo* (January 28, 1962).

49 Carluccio, "Nello studio di Lucio Fontana."

50 Carluccio, "Nello studio di Lucio Fontana."

51 The photograph, preserved in the Archivio Storico della Città di Torino, *Fondo della "Gazzetta del Popolo"*, is published in Barbero, "Scandalo a Torino," 48.

to imagine the physical side of the artworks even when they were hanging on the walls at ICAR, where they preserved their reactivity to vibrations and to the light, their ability to dazzle the viewer, to reflect and distort figures, bodies, and the surrounding space.

The solo show opened on February 3, 1962, and it was the first Turin exhibition to present the works from a cycle that had not been published yet. Fontana had initiated it in January, transferring to metal the impression that he recorded in an album during a trip to New York in November 1961 (with Tapié, Gribaudo, and the photographer Francesco Aschieri), on the occasion of the solo show at Martha Jackson Gallery.<sup>52</sup> Produced in the Milan studio and then in part in the Turin workshop, the *Metalli* re-elaborated in the *Concetti spaziali* the phantasmagorias of reflections that the artist pursued with his gaze on the crystal and steel cladding of New York's skyscrapers.

The installation at ICAR is known to us thanks to the photographic reportage for *Casali-Domus*, published in the June 1962 issue of the magazine, featuring the detail of one of the *Concetti spaziali* displayed in Turin on the cover; the exhibition design, it reads inside, was by Nanda Vigo.<sup>53</sup> The indication of authorship leads back to a precise decision made by the artist: the emphasis on the ideational and operative sphere as an integral part of the exhibition design, the resorting to a specific profession, in a collaboration that was destined to continue. Today we would describe that design as immersive installation, achieved by the calibrated insertion of seven pieces inside an environment, made unitary by the jute, chosen by the young designer to cover the floor, walls, and ceiling featuring a cross-vault. In the photographs, the "all-over" sensation is intensified by the color of the expanding fabric, spreading like liquid on the metal surfaces. In truth the room, which resembled a "cavern,"<sup>54</sup> was built upon the contrasting values of hot and cold, fabric and metal, soft, hard, and sharp, in a masterful rhythmical division that alternated parts in shadow and in light, generated by the works themselves, by their reflecting or opaque quality, and by the illumination. The structure is particularly evident in a reproduction published in the catalog of the exhibition *Fontana+Vigo*, hosted by the Galleria la Polena in Genoa in June 1968<sup>55</sup> [FIG. 13]. Here we can better understand the function of the central septum: in reserving

52 Lucio Fontana: *Ten Paintings of Venice*, New York, Martha Jackson Gallery, November 21–December 16, 1961.

53 Nanda Vigo is erroneously indicated as "Fiamma" Vigo. The reportage, published in *Domus* no. 391, is held at the Università IUAV in Venice, Archivio Progetti, *Fondo Casali*.

54 According to Vigo, Barbero reported

in 2006, Fontana wanted "space to become like a great cave," to "make space curved," which he then achieved with a structure that modified the wall box. Barbero, "Scandalo a Torino," 52.

55 This is a *Casali-Domus* image, but with a different exposition. Cf. *Fontana+Vigo*, exh. cat. (Galleria la Polena, 1968), n. p.

an area in shadow, it divided the space of presentation of the three new *Concetti spaziali*, to the left the one hanging on the wall, to the right the ones just leaned up against it, in a relationship that seems to support and exploit the curvature of the walls.<sup>56</sup> Acting as a counterweight to the iridescent volatility of the *Metalli*, Fontana positioned the sculptures on the floor: the two *Nature*<sup>57</sup> tied together with the organic physicality of the material, balanced by the aerial and plant-like conformation of the two plates on the stem.<sup>58</sup>



FIG. 13  
View of the solo show of the works of Lucio Fontana at the International Center of Aesthetic Research, Turin, 1962 (in *Fontana+Vigo*, exh. cat. [Galleria la Polena, 1968]).

56 CRSDA, cf. nos. 62 ME 34, 62 ME 35, 62 ME 36.

57 Presumably identifiable in CRSC,

cf. no. 59-60 N 14, and FLFA, cf. no. 4505/1.

58 CRSDA, cf. nos. 57 SC 1, 58 SC 1.

"1962. Exhibition at the international center of aesthetic research in Turin," Tommaso Trini annotated in the exhibition catalog; "Fontana displays his metal sheets. The exhibition space is made uniform in its different values. Floor, walls, and ceiling are covered with fabric in a continuity that transforms their functional and semantic values into a unitary expressive value."<sup>59</sup>

In the meantime, the canvases photographed in the storage space of the *Musée-Manifeste* were ready to be transferred to another museum, the Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna in Turin, where they would be rearranged (together with numerous works on loan) for the exhibition *Strutture e Stile. Pitture e sculture di 42 artisti d'Europa, America e Giappone*, opening on June 18, 1962 [FIG. 14]. The publications that accompanied it, the Galleria catalog and the volume published by ICAR are proof of its importance, reflecting moreover the specific pertinences of the two realities, a public museum and a private center. For Michel Tapié the exhibition was an opportunity to institutionalize a long-lasting militant practice; for Vittorio Viale, the director of the Galleria, it gave the museum an active role in the relevance of art. *Strutture e Stile*, he wrote, is

an exhibition that rather moves away from the customary format of the museum's exhibitions; but the truth of the matter is that if a modern art gallery must be . . . besides a way to document and a school, a gymnasium and a guide, then it is good and just that all ideas be considered therein, all problems be dealt with and debated.<sup>60</sup>

The critic and the director met at the start of the year, and after the meeting Tapié sent them the plan for the exhibition, based on four "idées directrices."<sup>61</sup> The *autres styles*, the catalog explains, were produced via "various veins," the bearers of "unexpected riches and strange homogeneities"<sup>62</sup> and could be gathered in subsets, ordered in the categories of the "metaphysics of matter and space" / "structures of repetition" / "set of structures" / "Baroque sets."<sup>63</sup> Lucio Fontana was part of the "structures of repetition," a grouping that in the initial concept Tapié had extended "de Fontana et Capogrossi aux Recherches électronique."<sup>64</sup> The annotation that was later omitted, but it suggested an opening up toward the

59 Tommaso Trini, caption, in *Fontana+Vigo*, n. p.

60 Vittorio Viale, introduction, in *Strutture e Stile. Pitture e sculture di 42 artisti d'Europa, America e Giappone*, exh. cat. (Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna, 1962), n. p.

61 Letter from M. Tapié to V. Viale, March 6, 1962. Turin, Archivio

dei Musei Civici, Fondazione Torino Musei, SMO (Mostre) 583, "Structures et Style Autres-Musée-Manifeste."

62 Luigi Moretti, "Strutture di insiemi," in *Strutture e Stile*, n. p.

63 Cfr. the exhibition poster at [FIG. 14].

64 Letter from M. Tapié to V. Viale, see note 61.

fields of mathematics, cybernetics, and music, and their possible intersections with contemporary artistic research.

For the exhibition, in between the canvases of Yukihisa Isobé and Giuseppe Capogrossi, Fontana exhibited three *Concetti spaziali*, including *Venezia* (glimpsed in a shelving unit at ICAR) and the great oil painting *Concetto spaziale* (1960),<sup>65</sup> characterized by a green sphere set against a dark background, pervaded by a dense pathway of holes that almost seem to reproduce tiny drops of water.



FIG. 14  
Poster for *Strutture e Stile*  
at the Galleria Civica d'Arte  
Moderna, Turin, 1962.

In this case as well, the presence of the *Nature*<sup>66</sup> (four, arranged on low bases of different heights), bestowed a solidity on the whole, creating a rhythm, a *repetition*, that brought to the exhibition space the latent organic vitality that was encompassed in the seeds, the shells, their cracks, and their hatchings.

In September, the transatlantic summit continued with *L'incontro di Torino. Pittori d'America, Europa e Giappone*. Tapié's *confrontation* was significantly reconfigured as an *encounter*, organized by Carla Lonzi, Luciano Pisto, and Alberto Ulrich in the rooms of the Palazzo della Promotrice di Belle Arti. The exhibition was the "last balance of *Art autre*," Lara Conte observed, "an homage to Tapié," as well as an attempt "to ferry the Turin art scene, and not just that, toward new scenarios besides the *Informel*."<sup>67</sup> At this turning point, the decision to devote a solo show to Fontana (with fifteen works from 1946 to 1962) sounds not so much like a retrospective acknowledgment as an indication concerning the full and operative generative capacity of this trajectory. In the introductory essay, Carla Lonzi calls into question interests, sensibilities, words, and concepts that interpret the artist's work from a different angle: his works "escape . . . a pre-determined category of artistic operativity"; "The graffiti, holes, slashes are not signs *sensu stricto* . . . ; they are events, concrete structures, realities that are of value due to their efficiency, not their transposition."<sup>68</sup> "Hence, time," she emphasizes "is no longer constituted in the mental category of history, but instead becomes so closely connected to the experience of the events that they transform the world, so that the transformation is received purely as a never-ending dynamism of life."<sup>69</sup>

*L'incontro* and *15 opere* brought the season to a close. The following one would still see Fontana as a regular figure on the Turin art scene and in the galleries: during those years solo shows would be dedicated to his work (Notizie in 1965, La Bussola in 1967) or else his research would be drawn from to reread stories and trends and renew perspectives (what comes to mind, for instance, is *Aspetti dell'avanguardia in Italia*, at Notizie in 1966, and *Alternative*, at Il Punto in 1967). In 1965, two works joined the permanent collection of the Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna in Turin. The first of these was *Concetto spaziale, Fiore* (1952),<sup>70</sup> acquired after being on display, one year before, in the exhibition *Sculture in metallo*: a "variable

66 CRSC, cf. no. 59-60 N 44; in addition to this and a *Natura* that cannot be identified in the photographs presumably displayed were CRSC, cf. no. 59-60 N 15 and FLFA, cf. no. 4505/1.

67 Lara Conte, "Tempi e spazi di una relazione. Lucio Fontana e Carla Lonzi," in *Lucio Fontana*.

*Autoritratto. Opere 1931-1967*, exh. cat., ed. Walter Guadagnini, Gaspare Luigi Marcone, and Stefano Roffi (Silvana Editoriale, 2022), 50.

68 Carla Lonzi, "15 opere di Lucio Fontana dal 1946 al 1962," in *L'incontro di Torino. Pittori d'America, Europa e Giappone*, exh. cat. (Tip. S. Aste, 1962), n. p.

69 Lonzi, "15 opere di Lucio Fontana."

and open composition," "a sort of prelude to international minimalist research," as Alessandro Botta has written.<sup>71</sup> The second work, *Concetto spaziale, Attese* (1959),<sup>72</sup> joined the museum as part of an important donation. It was in fact one of the first works of the Museo d'arte contemporanea conceived by Eugenio Battisti inside the Istituto di Storia dell'Arte at the University of Genoa and donated by him to the City of Turin and to its Gallery. Here, starting from the initial core of around a hundred works, it would expand to become the Museo sperimentale, presented in 1967, in an exhibition curated by Germano Celant and Aldo Passoni.<sup>73</sup> Fontana was one of the first to believe in that visionary project, proof of the confidence that he always demonstrated in the younger generations of artists and critics. At the end of the decade, after his passing, the intense relationship that linked Fontana to Turin would find a coherent outcome in the posthumous exhibitions, at the Galleria Martano in 1969 [FIG. 15], and in the major retrospective at the Galleria d'Arte Moderna in 1970.<sup>74</sup>

70 CRSDA, cf. no. 52 SC 15.

71 Alessandro Botta, "Lucio Fontana, Concetto spaziale (Fiore)," in *Arte italiana. Un percorso in cinquanta opere dal Romanticismo alla video performance*, ed. Alessandro Del Puppo (Carrocci editore, 2024), 174 and 176.

72 CRSDA, cf. no. 59 T 139.

73 The original record for the donation, dated December 6, 1965, is held in Turin, Archivi dei Musei civici, Fondazione Torino Musei, CAP (Carte Amministrative Pluriennali) 242,

"Museo sperimentale arte contemporanea." On the donation and the Experimental Museum see my "Discipline e dissidenze. Progetti, discorsi e scritture sull'arte: un intreccio fra anni Sessanta e Settanta," in *Quadriennale d'arte 2020. Fuori*, exh. cat., ed. Sarah Cosulich and Stefano Collicelli Cagol (Treccani, 2020).

74 *Lucio Fontana. Opere 1931-1968*, exh. cat. (Galleria d'arte Martano, 1969); Passoni, *Lucio Fontana*.



FIG. 15  
View of the solo show  
*Lucio Fontana. Opere 1931-  
1968, 1969*, Turin, Galleria  
Martano/Due. Turin,  
Martano Archive.

# INTERNATIONAL SUCCESS: THE 1950S AND 1960S

Paolo Campiglio  
Silvia Bignami  
Stefano Turina  
Barbara Ferriani

# THE RELATIONSHIP WITH CHARLES DAMIANO AND HIS ROLE IN THE INTERNATIONAL PROMOTION OF FONTANA BETWEEN ENGLAND AND THE UNITED STATES

Paolo Campiglio

Lucio Fontana's reply in July 1965 to the Tate Gallery in London, which had asked him to provide clarifications on the work *Concetto spaziale, Attesa*<sup>1</sup> (1960 [FIG. 1]), recently acquired as a gift from his friend Charles Damiano (1895–1969), is a clear statement of his poetics:

FIG. 1  
*Concetto spaziale, Attesa*,  
1960. London, Tate Modern.



In response to your kind letter dated the 29th of this month, The painting "Concetto Spaziale" ATTESA was conceived as part of my research that began with the "MANIFIESTO BLANCO" published in Buenos Aires in 1946, and specifically a new dimension beyond the painting itself, time and space, the freedom to produce a work of art freeing myself

\* This essay updates and goes deeper into my previous Paolo Campiglio, "Lucio Fontana internazionale: nuove prospettive anni Sessanta, il rapporto con Charles Damiano," in *Arte Italiana 1960-1964*.

Identità culturale, confronti internazionali, modelli americani, ed. Flavio Fergonzi and Francesco Tedeschi (Scalpendi, 2017), 13–23.  
1 CRSDA cf. no. 60 T 13.

from the traditional canons of painting and sculpture. The painting you own was made in 1960. I offer you my warmest gratitude, Sincerely Lucio Fontana.<sup>2</sup>

The gift to the museum of an iconic “slash” on natural canvas, a formidable piece that Damiano had chosen in Fontana’s studio for his own collection, was not simply an act of generosity toward the prestigious contemporary art institution: It was the height of a process of promotion, support, and international diffusion that was initiated personally by his friend and manager in London. To better understand Damiano’s role in this process we need to take a step back and examine the most important stages in this fruitful partnership.

It is a well-known fact that Lucio Fontana’s international success in both Europe and the United States, from a critical and collecting point of view, as well as concerning the general penetration of his work, was the result of a process that did not begin until the end of the 1950s and was especially consolidated between 1960 and 1965.<sup>3</sup>

Whereas at the end of 1957 Fontana occupied a central role in the debate on culture as it related to Art Informel, thanks also to the Parisian connections of his principal Italian merchant, Carlo Cardazzo, in the English-speaking world, particularly London, the artist’s name was not yet known. His relationship with Charles, or Carlo, Damiano, the historian who oversaw the Central Buying Office at Pirelli and later became a member of the Board of Administration of the same holding, was thus of considerable importance.<sup>4</sup>

2 Held in the archives of the Tate Gallery in London, Fontana’s letter of July 9, 1965, was in part published as the entry for the work in the catalog by Ronald Alley, *Catalogue of the Tate Gallery’s Collection of Modern Art other than Works by British Artists* (Tate Gallery in association with Sotheby Parke Bernet, 1981), 222, no. T 694.

3 Luca Massimo Barbero, the curator of the exhibition *Lucio Fontana: Venice/New York*, shed light on the incisive promotion of Fontana’s work that took place internationally in 1961, via a sort of triangulation between Venice, Paris, and New York. Luca Massimo Barbero, “Lucio Fontana: Venice/New York,” in *Lucio Fontana: Venice/New York*, exh. cat., ed. Luca Massimo Barbero (Guggenheim Museum, 2006), 19–50. Francesco Tedeschi has in part corrected the perspective thanks to papers that have emerged since in the private archive of Charles (Carlo) Damiano, which the critic gave a first account of in the essay Francesco

Tedeschi, “Fontana’s Work in the Fifties and Sixties and the Reaction to it in British Circles,” in *Lucio Fontana. Beyond Space*, exh. cat. (Skira, 2008), 17–29.

4 Giancarlo Gaggiotti, *La visione verticale. Carlo Damiano fotografo astratto* (Morlacchi, 2019), 323. The Damiano-Fontana correspondence is held in the original version in the Damiano family archive in Perugia, with his relatives Daniela Grilli and Giancarlo Gaggiotti, and in copy at the Fondazione Lucio Fontana. In 2019 it was in part transcribed and published in Gaggiotti, *La visione verticale*, 101–232. The epistolary as a whole (for Fontana, the correspondence goes from 1958 to 1965, as the letter published therein on p. 228 as the last communication that took place between them on November 30, 1966, actually took place on November 30, 1960) also includes the letters of Gianni Dova, Roberto Crippa, Jack Clemente starting from 1956. I wish to take this opportunity to point out the need for a complete edition, not just a partial

Damiano, like Fontana a native of Argentina and just four years his senior, over the course of the 1950s had developed a passion for collecting Spatialist works, one that he shared with his wife Annamaria Cambiaghi, establishing a privileged relationship directly with the artists: in particular, with Fontana, Gianni Dova, Roberto Crippa, Jack Clemente, who were gravitating around the movement at the time [FIG. 2].

The manager had met Fontana in 1951 on one of his frequent trips to Milan thanks to the Boschi husband and wife team, with whom he shared the habit of spending time in the artists’ studio. Damiano’s relationship with Antonio Boschi, director of Pirelli in Milan, was a close one of work and friendship, and we cannot exclude the idea that it was the engineer-collector himself who played a primary role in introducing his colleague from London to contemporary art, influencing his choices. In fact, Damiano began buying the works of Crippa and Dova from Boschi’s own large collection of works.

However, Damiano had a multifarious personality, and his sensibility as concerned art and the natural world had led him to nurture, alongside his collecting interests, an unconfessed creative vein in photography. He had honed an approach to the details and particulars of the natural elements that, when enlarged, became surfaces and textures, comparable, in an informal way, to the abstract and material images of the Spatialist painters.<sup>5</sup>



FIG. 2  
Charles Damiano explains  
Lucio Fontana, *Concetto  
spaziale*, 1957. Perugia,  
Daniela Grilli Archive.

one, of the letters, which should also be annotated historically and critically, and include some of the letters written by Damiano currently held at the

Fondazione Lucio Fontana.

5 Giancarlo Gaggiotti, “La ‘visione verticale’, una filosofia d’arte e di vita,” in Gaggiotti, *La visione verticale*, 43–87.

The first sign of Damiano and his wife Annamaria Cambiagli's activity as patrons in London was the early donation, in 1956, to the Tate Gallery of three works from their own collection with the explicit intent of promoting and making known the Fontanian movement. Damiano, who had an excellent relationship with the director Sir John Rothenstein, donated Roberto Crippa's spiraling composition *Aurora Borealis* (1952) (of Boschi provenance) along with Gianni Dova's *Esplosione* (1953) and *Aggressione improvvisa* (1955): It was the movement's first group of works to enter such a prestigious public collection.

Among the Tate's trustees, the manager had at the same time gotten in touch with Lawrence Alloway, at the time the young assistant of Herbert Read at the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), where he planned to organize several events personally, convinced that there was a need for a fully-fledged large-scale cultural promotion of the new poetics.

In 1957, thanks to Damiano's relationship with the renowned collector Eric Estorick, curator of the initiative at the time, the first actual presence, albeit in an exhibition in a private gallery, of a group of works by Lucio Fontana occurred in London, together with Crippa, Dova, Capogrossi, and Morandis: the occasion was the exhibition *Between Space and Earth. Trends in Modern Italian Art*, held at the Marlborough Gallery, from June 4 to July 31, 1957, presented by a young Alloway, who was the first to write about the Spatialist works that had arrived in the United Kingdom.<sup>6</sup>

To emphasize Damiano's preference for his friend Fontana, whose work was pictured on the cover of the catalog, the collective presented as many as nine *Concetti spaziali*, while only one work was reproduced in the text.

After a general interpretation of the Spatialist avant-garde as in some ways emanating from Futurism, Alloway had this to say about Fontana:

Fontana is the only artist in the group to have realised the technical programme of Spazialismo—namely, the use of materials newer than oil paint or bronze, as in his perforated reliefs and the reliefs studied with mineral forms, somewhere between constructivism and costume jewellery. In these works he constructs on the surface of his reliefs so that space may be defined as the distance between points on a plane rather than as an illusion of recession.<sup>7</sup>

6 *Between Space and Earth. Trends in Modern Italian Art*, exh. cat. (Marlborough Fine Art, 1957). Organized on the initiative of Eric Estorick and Carlo Damiano at the Marlborough

Gallery in London, with an essay by Lawrence Alloway, it assembled the works of Ajmone, Bacci, Birolli, Brunori, Capogrossi, Chighine, Corpora, Morandis, Moreni, Morlotti, Negri.

Meanwhile, the artist had gradually turned to other formal solutions, in a sort of reaction to the Baroque effect of the previous cycle, *Pietre*, interpreted immaturely by Alloway as a popular reference to “costume jewelry.” Solutions linked to a biomorphous “form,” vaguely inspired by the artist's own abstract sculptures from the 1930s, in new spatial concepts that explicitly dealt with the poetics of the “wall,” viewed as a painting-surface. In the artist's solo room at the 29. Venice Biennale in 1958, designed by Carlo Scarpa, but conceived by Fontana as a sort of *ambiente* (environment), in the constant interplay of connections between the works, on display were the recent cycles of the *Gessi* and the *Inchiodati*, some of considerable size, in conversation with the so-called stem sculptures.<sup>8</sup>

At that event in Venice Damiano acquired two works of great impact from the series of the *Gessi*, *Concetto spaziale*<sup>9</sup> (1958) soon afterwards donated to the Tate Gallery, in 1959, and *Concetto spaziale*<sup>10</sup> (1957), as well as an emblematic work from the series of *Inchiodati*, the *Concetto spaziale*, *Forma*<sup>11</sup> (1958). His collection grew considerably that year, thanks also to his frequent visits to Fontana's studio: at that moment he owned some twenty-five works by the artist, five of which from the *Pietre* series, ten *Gessi*, three *Barocchi*, and seven *Inchiodati* [FIGS. 3–4].

Hence, the manager was the first collector to import Fontana's new works to London, and to guarantee, with his donation to the Tate, the first addition of the artist's work to the famous international museum's permanent collection. In an exemplary way, he thus interpreted all the roles that could have been those of a gallerist—the acquisition of works, their promotion via exhibitions, and the donation to London's most important museum. Thus, was born during this period the project for an exhibition of his own art collection for the purpose of publicizing it. Damiano put forward the idea to the Institute of Contemporary Art. The exhibition would end up travelling around the United Kingdom, thanks to the support of the Arts Council of Great Britain. A communiqué dated August 26, 1958, that was sent to Alloway expressed the intention to bring together Spatialist works and a selection of Damiano's own informal and naturalistic pictures, for a juxtaposition between the imaginary sidereal world and the natural world of his visual textures.

7 Lawrence Alloway, “Preface,” in *Between Space and Earth*, 5.

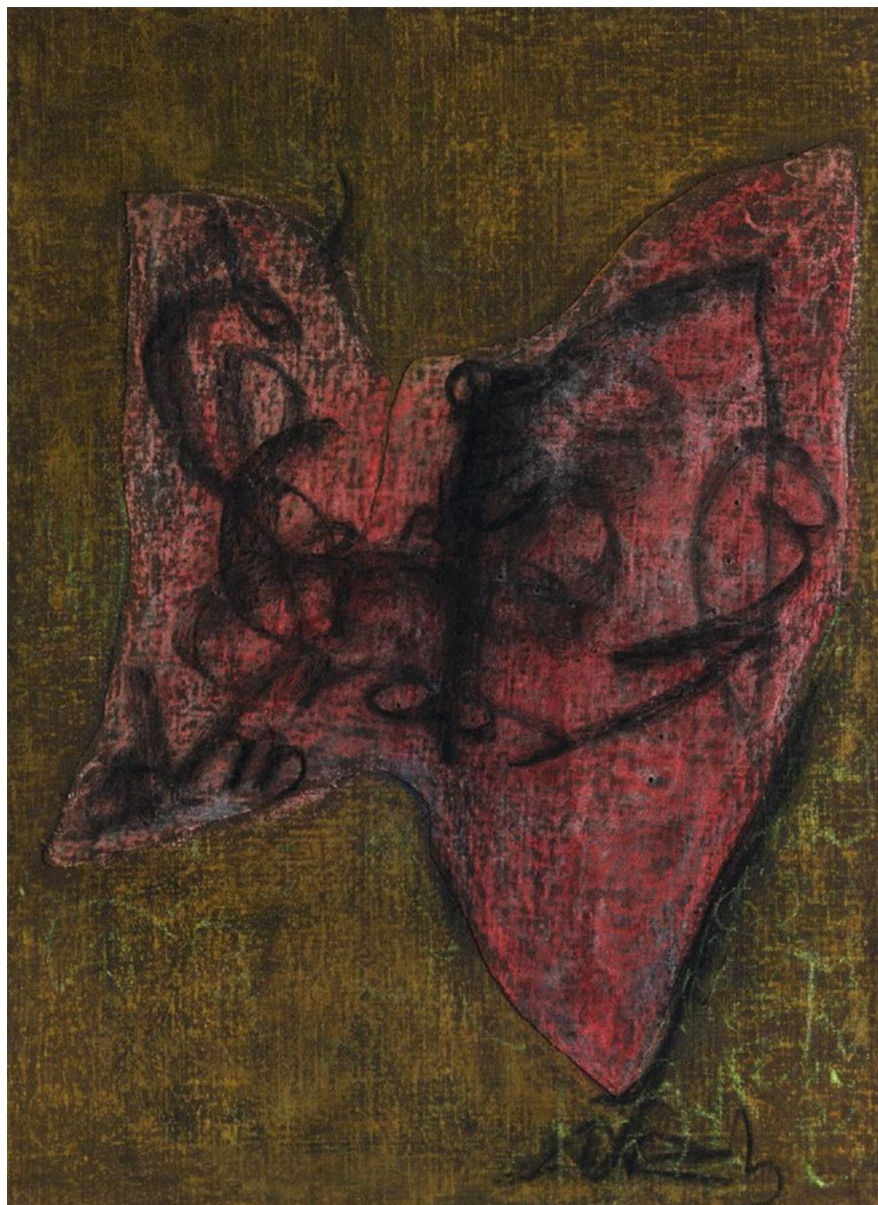
8 Giorgio Zanchetti, ed., “Lucio Fontana, *Concetto spaziale*, 1957,” in *Esercizi di lettura*, ed. Antonello Negri

(Skira, 2002), 191–98.

9 CRSDA, cf. no. 58 G 1.

10 CRSDA, cf. no. 57 G 29.

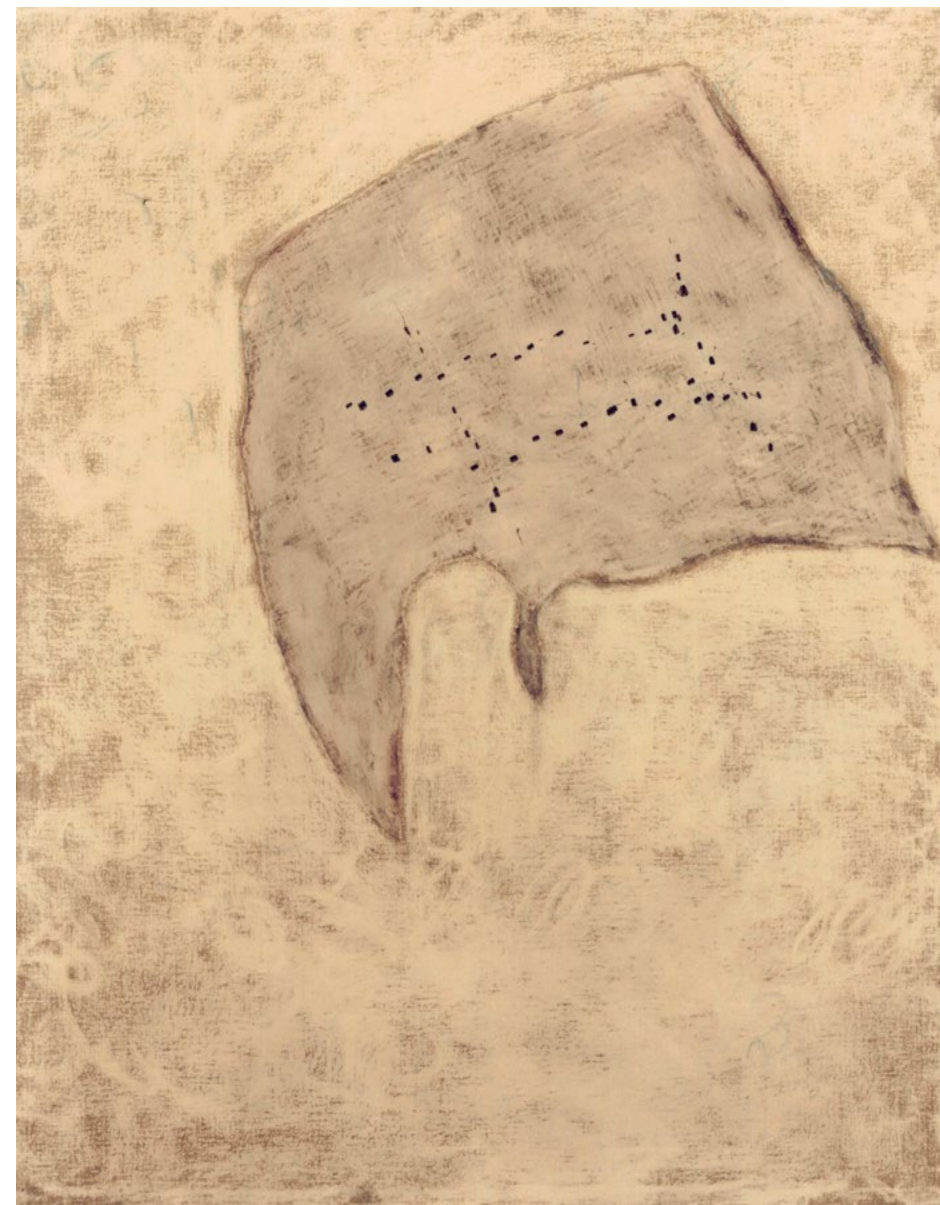
11 CRSDA, cf. no. 58 I 2.



While Damiano had at first imagined a collective show including seven artists who, more or less, embraced the movement (Bergolli, Chighine, Clemente, Crippa, Dova, Fontana, and Peverelli), he ended up limiting the focus to just Fontana, Crippa, Dova, and Clemente.<sup>12</sup> As the exhibition *Paintings from the Damiano*

12 Letter from Damiano to Alloway dated August 26, 1958, in Gaggiotti, *La visione verticale*, 55.

FIG. 3  
*Concetto spaziale*, 1958.  
London, Tate Modern.



*Collection. Fontana, Dova, Crippa, Clemente* to be held at the ICA in London (January 7–February 7, 1959) was taking shape, Damiano acquired new works by Fontana, including a *Concetto spaziale*<sup>13</sup> (1958 [FIG. 5]) facetiously nicknamed the “cannonata” (cannonball shot), because it clearly alluded to a sort of explosion issuing from a rectangular element.

FIG. 4  
*Concetto spaziale*, 1957.  
Private collection.

13 CRSDA, cf. no. 58 I 39.

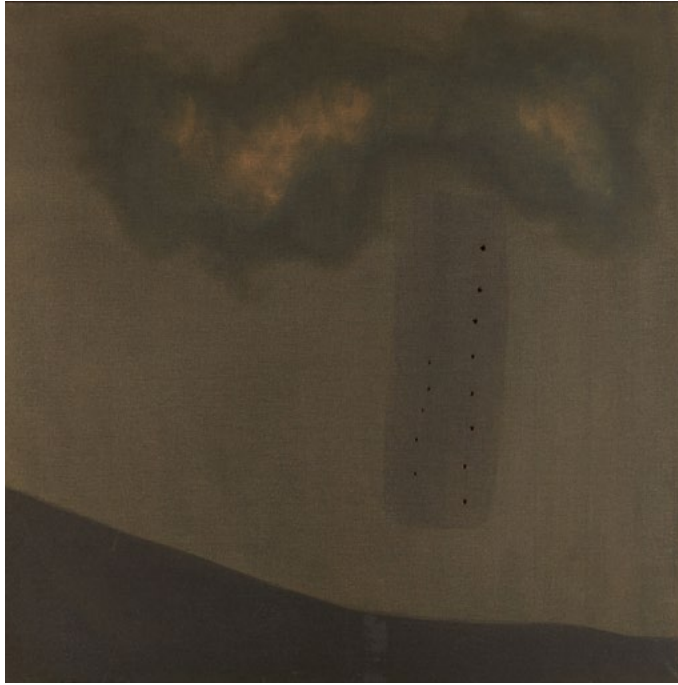


FIG. 5  
Concetto spaziale, 1958.  
Private collection.

In the first letter to Damiano that we came across, Fontana warned his friend, on November 27, 1958, as follows:

As soon as the 'cannonata' arrives I will send it to you. I hope that the exhibition is successful, for your satisfaction and our glory!! I am certain that your kind-hearted wife will find a painting to her liking in my studio. I am working (not too much) with great doubt and difficulty, how hard it is to make the holes!! They are extremely demanding and to think that everyone believes I have fun making them.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, Fontana, after the success of the Biennale, was again changing course, moving beyond the meaning of the "holes," defined as "esigentissimi" (extremely demanding) and introducing the first, multiple *Tagli* on canvas in the cycle of the *Inchiostri*, tears similar to what he had tried out in *Carte*.

Of Fontana's eight *Concetti spaziali* on display at *Paintings from the Damiano Collection*, in a general group of thirty-six works, Damiano offered, we learn from the catalog, two *Concetti spaziali* from the *Pietre* series, which comprised the reproduction

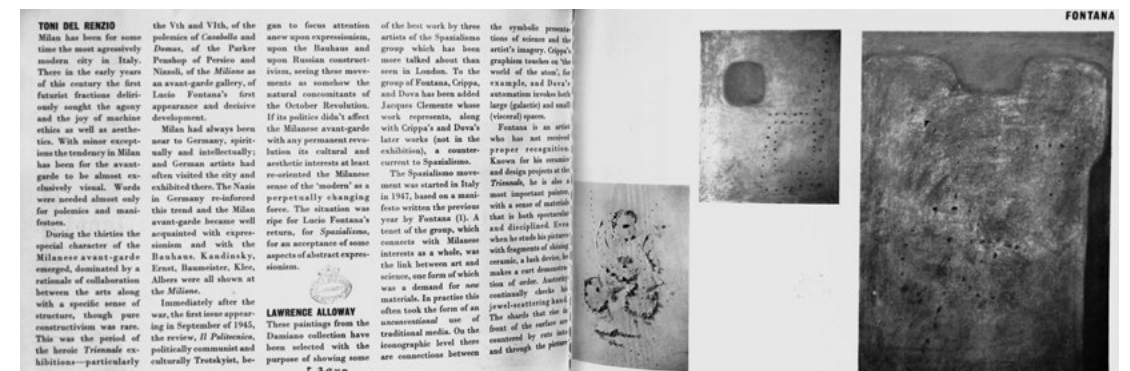
14 Gaggiotti, *La visione verticale*, 93.

15 CRSDA, cf. no. 56 P 27.

of a *Concetto spaziale*<sup>15</sup> (1956) and a *Concetto spaziale*<sup>16</sup> (1954, but indicated in the catalog with the date 1956); two *Gessi*,<sup>17</sup> defined, as Fontana had at first determined, reproduced from the series of the *Muri*, and a piece from the artist's more recent output: *Concetto spaziale, Attese*<sup>18</sup> (1959) [FIGS. 6–9]. The new cycle of *Tagli*, conceived by Fontana at the same time as preparations were being made for the London show, albeit in a single edition, was thus presented for the first time in London, ahead of its actual debut at the Galleria del Naviglio in Milan (February 9, 1959). In a more in-depth reading of Fontana's work Lawrence Alloway regretted the artist's scarce renown abroad, an artist above all known for his ceramics and for his ephemeral works at the Triennali of the 1950s. He also noted that Fontana had

a sense of materials that is both spectacular and disciplined. Even when he studs his pictures with fragments of shining ceramic, a lush device, he makes a curt demonstration of order. . . . Holes in pictures are usually a sign of ruin, but the patterns of holes in Fontana's are formally purposeful, like a code, with a casual but not to be ignored connection with the punched cards and tapes of popular cybernetics iconography. The format of his paintings is resolutely simple which works for him because of his razor-fine feeling for the siting of forms and their edge relations.<sup>19</sup>

FIG. 6  
Pages from *Paintings from the Damiano Collection*.  
Fontana, Dova, Crippa, Clemente, exh. cat. (Arts Council of Great Britain, 1959).



16 CRSDA, cf. no. 54 P 12.

17 CRSDA, cf. nos. 57 G 13, 57 G 7.

18 CRSDA, cf. no. 59 T 8. List of works respectively at nos. 1, 2, 17, 18, 19 in *Paintings from the Damiano Collection*,

exh. cat., texts by Toni del Renzio and Lawrence Alloway (Arts Council of Great Britain, 1959), n. p.

19 Lawrence Alloway, in *Paintings from the Damiano Collection*, n. p.

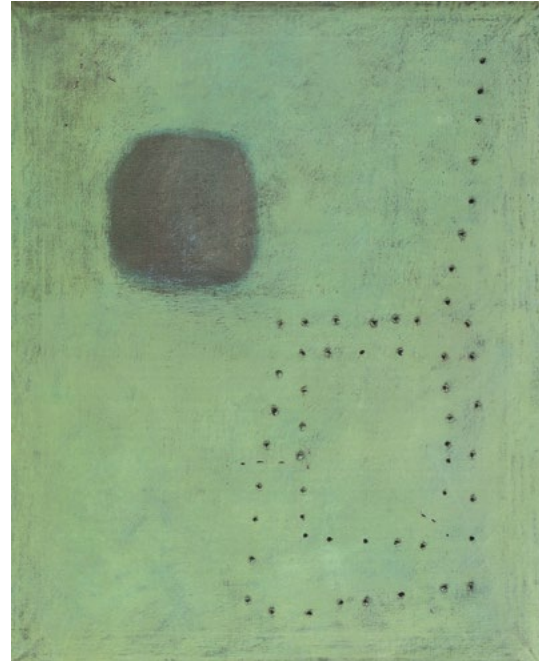


FIG. 7  
*Concetto spaziale, I muri*,  
1957. Private collection.



FIG. 8  
*Concetto spaziale*, 1956.  
Private collection.

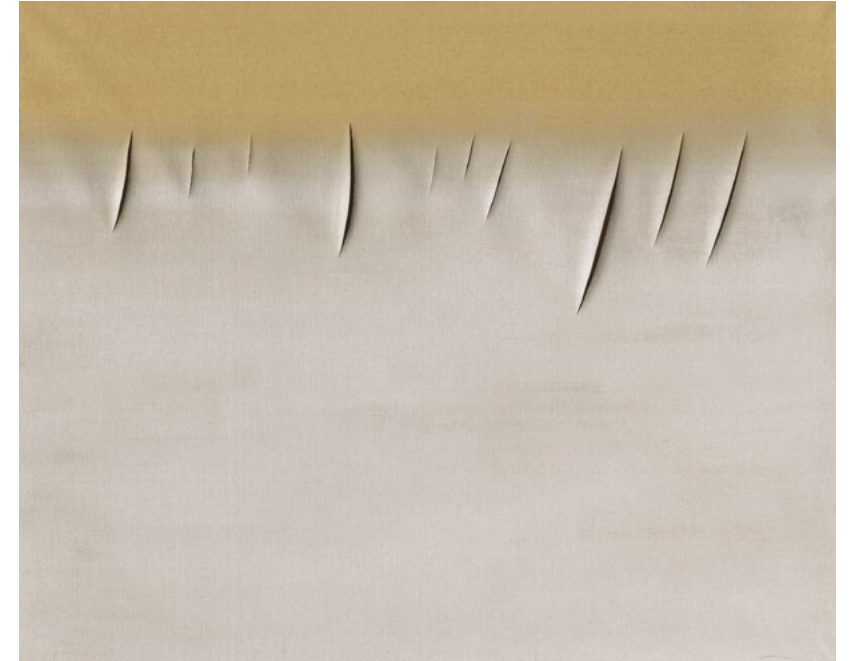


FIG. 9  
*Concetto spaziale, Attese*,  
1959. Private collection.

We are struck by the young critic's interpretation of the gesture and in particular of the "holes." Alloway was destined to later become the most significant interpreter of the new languages linked to the means that were used, in an unprecedented manner, uninfluenced by previous interpretations: Fontana's creative imaginary was seen as the fruit of a specific notion of order, not pertaining to the causality of the gesture, in a Neo-Romantic sense. The visual reference to the "holes" that did not have to do with galactic immensities but, rather, with the popular image of cards punched by the first electronic calculators, seemed to shift the point of view from a naturalistic angle to a reading that viewed the "perforation" as a sort of message in code within the painting surface, placing on a secondary level the allusions underlying the infinite spatiality in the background. This interpretation in a constructive sense of the hole as a design in negative, as Francesco Tedeschi has stressed, contradicted Greenberg's theories on the coincidence between form and surface, painting and space.<sup>20</sup>

In late 1959, after acquiring several spatial concepts from the *Tagli* series, Damiano personally translated into English the *Technical Manifesto of Spatialism*, publishing it in the magazine *ARK*, with a foreword by Alloway and accompanying reproductions from his own collection<sup>21</sup> [FIG. 10].

20 Tedeschi, "Fontana's Work in the Fifties", 20.

21 Lawrence Alloway, "Technical Manifesto given at the 1st International Congress of

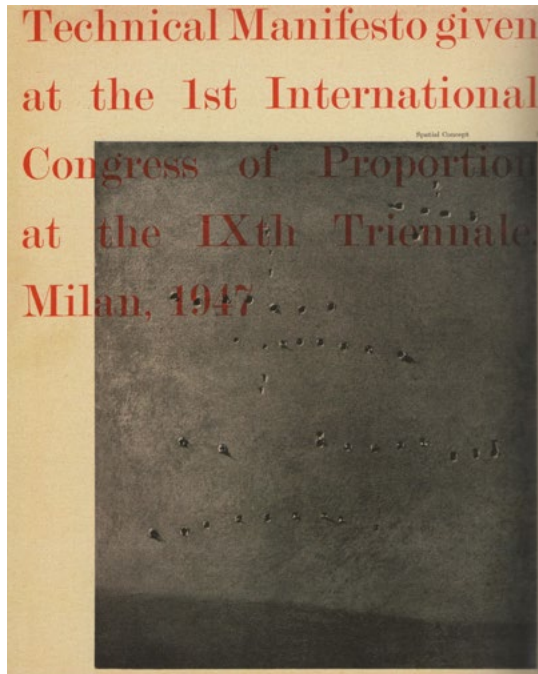


FIG. 10  
Lawrence Alloway,  
"Technical Manifesto Given  
at the 1st International  
Congress of Proportions  
at the IXth Triennale,  
Milan, 1947" (in Ark  
[December 1959]).

From the fruitful exchange of letters with Fontana, which grew more intense between 1960 and 1965, it clearly emerges how Damiano's role was one of genuine moral support for the artist, the kind of support that only a true friend could provide. He was the only one capable of spurring him on in difficult times, as can be inferred from this short extract from their reciprocal correspondence, in which, on January 15, 1960, Fontana confessed to his friend: "For some time now I've been down—down in spirits, when you passed by you were like a meteor, encouraging me with your great and generous enthusiasm for my work; but I'm down to zero again, with a few glimmers here and there! But it takes more than that!!" His friend wasted no time informing him of the news regarding the second part of the exhibition of his collection, which he was eager to produce:

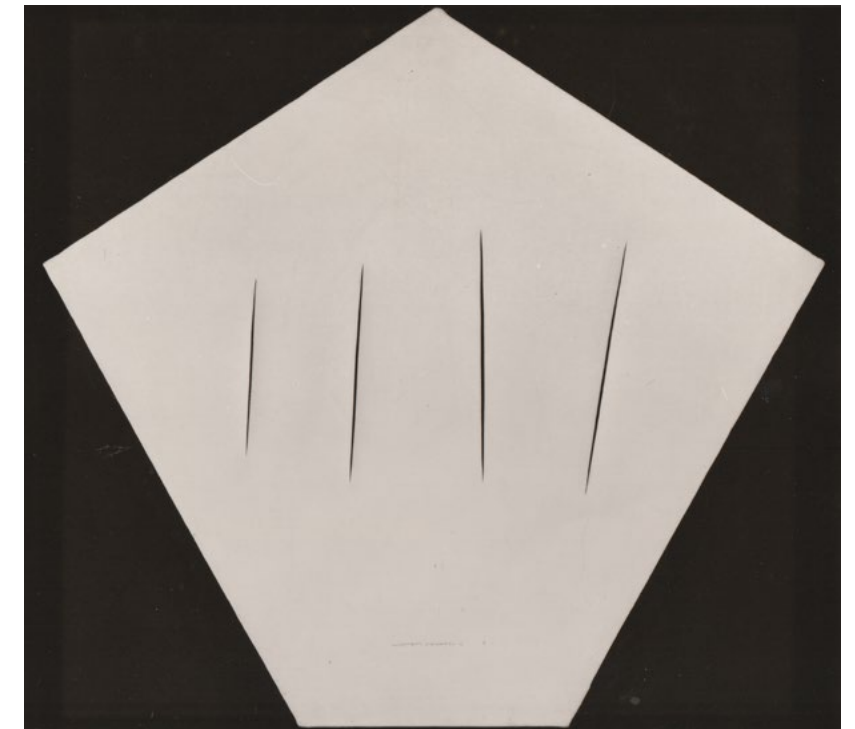
for you I propose adding a rectangular painting with one or two slashes, perhaps the light blue one and then the very last pentagonal one applied to the rectangular gray background. Do you approve? . . . we have arrived at this point of logical deduction: Fontana is the simplest because he is the

Proportions at the IXth Triennale, Milan, 1947" [1951], *Ark* (December 1, 1959): 4–7, translated by Charles Damiano.

most abstract, actually, he is the only abstract artist here; that is what most of the people who saw the exhibition are saying. So up with your spirits, not down.<sup>22</sup>

For the second edition of his collection to be shown at Cambridge University starting in February 1960, and after that traveling to various universities in the UK, in a separate section with respect to the group, Damiano chose to present a selection of Fontana's *Tagli*, exhibiting his polygon-shaped *Concetto spaziale, Attese*<sup>23</sup> (1959 [FIG. 11]). It was a kind of first solo show of the last cycle of the artist, who, in the month of February, joined his friend in London accompanied by Teresita. The couple were guests of Damiano and his wife. Lucio and Carlo became even closer, as did Annamaria and Teresita. In actual fact, the trip to London had a second goal, a much more important one: among the questions on the table, besides forecasting the new exhibition venues for the collection, increasingly enriched by the new works acquired from Fontana's studio, was the formulation of a contract of international exclusiveness with the art dealers McRoberts & Tunard. Damiano himself worked on consolidating the agreement

FIG. 11  
*Concetto spaziale, Attese*,  
1959. Private collection.



22 Gaggiotti, *La visione verticale*, 121.

23 CRSDA, cf. no. 59 T 110.

over the course of the year, personally overseeing the terms of the contract. At the same time, other important events situated Fontana in an international scenario, starting from the scandalous exhibition focused on his *Attese* in January 1960 hosted by the Galerie Schmela in Düsseldorf, all the way to his participation as the master of the new Zero generations at *Monochrome Malerei* held at the Städtisches Museum in Leverkusen in March: Fontana's European renown was increasingly linked to the new dimension of re-setting that was represented by the *Tagli*, which were cleaner, against a monochrome background, and in geometrically shaped canvases.

However, Fontana was eager to communicate to Damiano alone the true “philosophical” meaning of his *Attese*—his comments ranging from self-irony to apocalyptic vision—on the day of the artist's birthday:

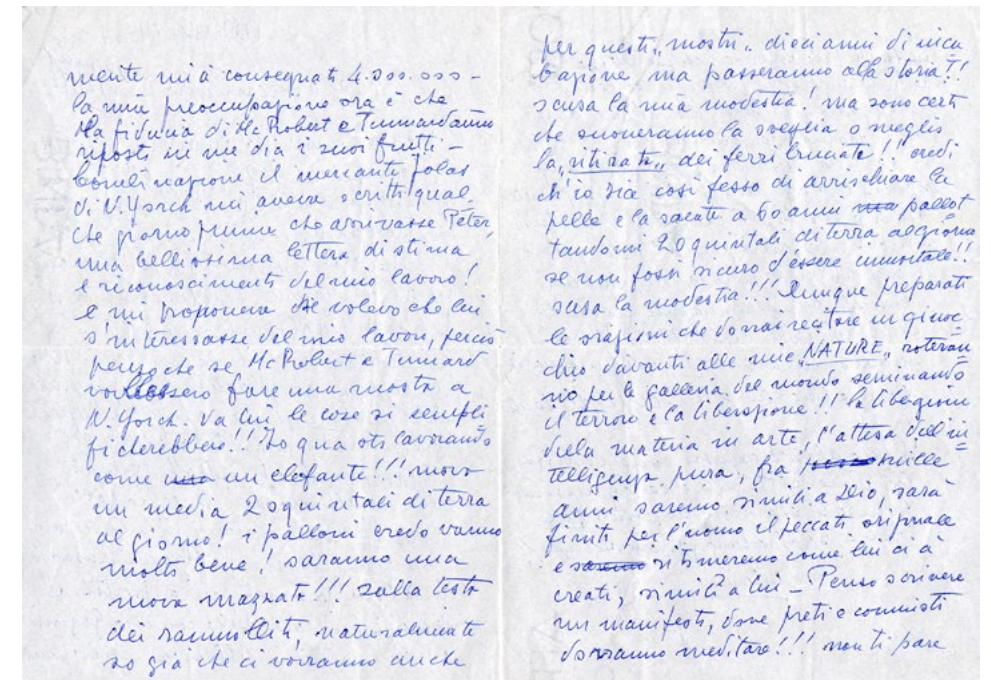
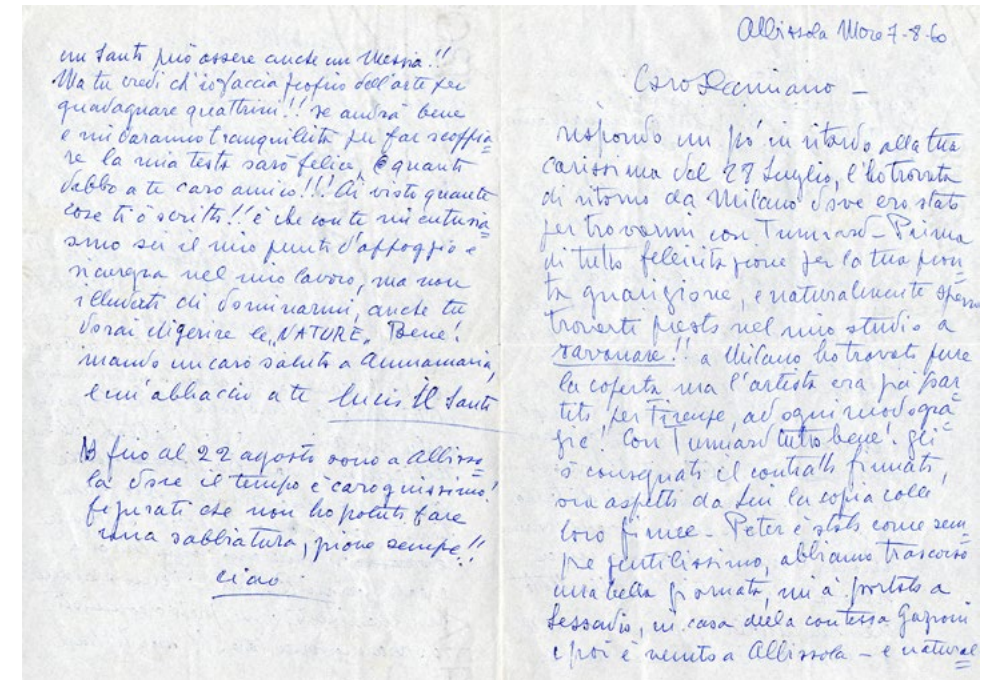
Milan 19–2–60 A very important date! Today I turn 100! Dear Damiano—thank you for your letter—did you not feel the earth shake these past few days? I made a series of paintings in which the sense of nothing and of everything is almost perfect, silence that is grafted onto the universe, neither material nor rhetoric, pure intelligence, the mystery that upholds the universe that we belong to as pure material—once we are freed of it we will continue in the infinitude of nothing and everything.<sup>24</sup>

And just a few months later the artist confessed to that sole English interlocutor the great happiness he felt at the contemporaneous invention of his *Nature*:

Here in Albissola I so enjoy shaping huge balls of earthenware, tons of earth every day, but I am over the moon!!! I think of the general failure of iron that is burnt, welded, and so on! You must forgive me but I am a lion!!! In one year's time these balls will be a symbol, I believe in these “Natures” just as I believed in the holes and the slashes—You'll soon be getting some great news!!! From space to the material, the simplest; earth and fire!!! they are almost like the moon and the sun, they are as beautiful as the universe and as terrible as the unknown!! Here, of course, they chuckle and say: Fontana made holes . . . then he made slashes . . . but now he's breaking “balls.”<sup>25</sup>

24 Letter from Fontana to Damiano dated February 19, 1960, in Gaggiotti, *La visione verticale*, 123.

25 Letter from Fontana to Damiano dated July 22, 1960, in Gaggiotti, *La visione verticale*, 131.



FIGS. 12-13  
Letter from Lucio Fontana  
to Charles Damiano, August  
7, 1960. Perugia, Daniela  
Grilli Archive.

In a letter he wrote soon afterwards, on August 7, he cynically repeated to his friend:

get ready for the orations you will have to recite on your knees before my "NATURE," they will roll around the galleries of the world sowing terror and liberation!! The liberation of the material in art!! the expectation of pure intelligence.<sup>26</sup>

The installation of the *Nature* at the exhibition *Dalla natura all'arte* held in Venice that same July, as part of the exhibitions organized by Paolo Marinotti at Palazzo Grassi, with a soil and black pedestal setting, presented once again to the international public during the months of the Biennale the question of volume, in the dialectic that was always alive in the master between anti-matter and matter. The critics were offered the chance for a new interpretation of Fontana's "nulla" (void), alternative, but complementary to the abstraction and resetting of the *Tagli*. What emerged was a more intimate relationship with the natural world, in a universal sense.<sup>27</sup>

In just a few months' time, Damiano, who in the meantime had purchased around eleven editions of the *Tagli*, was able to get for his friend the contract he had promised him with the McRoberts & Tunnard Gallery. This led to the first official presentation of the *Attese* in London, from October 12 to November 5, 1960, presented by Alloway this time as well.

What stood out in the *Concetti spaziali* showcased on that occasion was a blue monochrome<sup>28</sup> (142 × 93 cm) with three slashes, marked in the right-hand corner on the front by the artist's fingerprint. It was a sort of "signature" impressed to certify the authenticity of the work; a wonderful dark green with three slashes;<sup>29</sup> a *Concetto spaziale, Attese* (100 × 125 cm) with four purplish pink slashes;<sup>30</sup> a single pink slash with a unique canvas shaped around the sides, thus creating a false illusion of convexity [FIG. 14].<sup>31</sup> These works as well were signed with a fingerprint,<sup>32</sup> perhaps inspired by Piero Manzoni's fingerprints on eggs at his Milan performance *Consumazione dell'arte, dinamica del pubblico, divorare l'arte* held at Azimut on June 21 of the same year.

26 Letter from Fontana to Damiano dated August 7, 1960, Gaggiotti, *La visione verticale*, 132 [FIGS. 12–13].

27 *Dalla natura all'arte*, exh. cat. (Arti grafiche Fantoni, 1960). The exhibition was conceived with the critics Willem Sandberg and Michel Tapié and installed with the collaboration of Robert Dahlmann-Olsen, Lucio Fontana,

Enzo Mari, Bruno Munari, and Sôfû Teshigahara.

28 CRSDA, cf. no. 60 T 31.

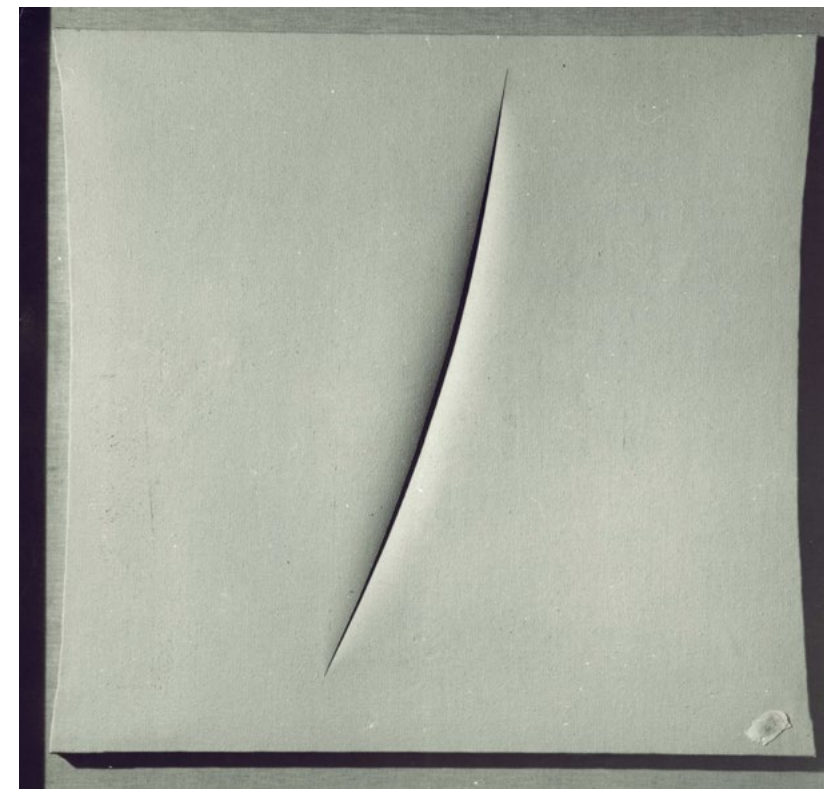
29 CRSDA, cf. no. 60 T 33.

30 CRSDA, cf. no. 60 T 34.

31 CRSDA, cf. no. 60 T 38.

32 It is plausible that the *Attese* featuring a fingerprint on the front are to be related to the London show, where they were seen for the first time.

FIG. 14  
*Concetto spaziale, Attese*,  
1960. Private collection.



In his introductory essay to the exhibition, Alloway diverged from Tapié's interpretation in the first presentation of the *Tagli* at the Galerie Stadler in Paris, in the spring of that year, with a different hypothesis: Whereas the *Art autre* critic situated the "slash" in a perspective that was still informal, characterized by symbolism linked to the void, in an existential sense, the English critic's interpretation, inspired by the evolution of the *Attese* that had taken place over the course of 1960, paused on the value of a resetting, of essentialness, and of the simplicity of the gesture, rejecting any analogy with the "wound":

Immediately afterwards he cancelled their rich aesthetic with his first cuts, in which he slit the throats of simply dyed canvasses. . . . Speed of execution, related to freshness of appearance, is precious to Fontana. He is opposed to the idea of the work of art as a place in which anguished creation leaves its traces, as in Giacometti or De Kooning. He likes the clear, incisive sign. . . . In Fontana's creative act delay is not the sign of meditation but forgetfulness and failure. Centred patches of crusty material, scattered trails of ceramic chips, calligraphic streaks and flicks, neat

perforations—directional as a code, or stark as a wound, all are made with a maximum vigour and simplicity.<sup>33</sup>

That December, Damiano purchased in his friend's studio the *Concetto spaziale, Attesa*<sup>34</sup> (1960) that would be donated, only four years later, in October 1964, to the Tate Gallery. From the increasingly intense correspondence between the manager and the artist another fact that cannot be overlooked emerges: Starting in February 1961, Damiano and Fontana planned, together with the gallerists McRoberts & Tunnard, a second stop for the exhibition of the *Attese* in New York at Martha Jackson Gallery. Fontana's official arrival in the United States did not take place until November of that year, but with a substantial change in perspective with respect to his initial plans.

The events that succeeded each other throughout the year 1961—from the conception, in the spring, of the cycle of the *Venezie*, attesting to the arrival of a new iconic symbolism and an “oriental” material preciousness, to their presentation in June at Palazzo Grassi in Venice at the exhibition *Arte e contemplazione* created by Marinotti and followed by the stop in New York at Martha Jackson Gallery—were the object of study by Luca Massimo Barbero on the occasion of the exhibition *Lucio Fontana: Venice/New York* in 2006. The new element emerging from the correspondence between Damiano and Fontana was the central role played by the gallerists McRoberts & Tunnard, stimulated by Damiano, who, from what can be gleaned from the letters, made a date to meet with the New York gallerist in Venice in June 1961, arriving there specifically to visit the show at Palazzo Grassi. Jackson's enthusiasm for the *Venezie* cycle arose from this first encounter with Fontana, Damiano, and the two gallerists. Once they had made the necessary arrangements, in July a list of works was drawn up that included that last exemplary cycle with the addition of fourteen *Concetti spaziali*, including *Olii*, *Buchi*, and *Tagli* from McRoberts & Tunnard and two *Nature*. Hence, Fontana presented himself in New York in November with a very different output with respect to the pure *Concetti spaziali* on display in London. The artist gave the impression he did not entirely approve of Jackson's initial choice of showing only the *Venezie*, as we can discern from a confidential confession to Damiano dated to June 21, 1961:

The paintings at the moment are around ten *Contemplazioni di Venezia*. Martha was pleased. To the extent that, to my displeasure, she chose them for New York, although

33 Fontana, exh. cat. (Garner, 1960), n. p.

34 CRSDA, cf. no. 60 T 13.

I would have preferred slashes and holes as well! But she aims for success, for the hit! She must know what she wants! This means she must like them because Tapiè [sic] was also an enthusiast.<sup>35</sup>

From November 18 to December 3, 1961, Fontana experienced days of great excitement in New York, where he had gone for the opening of the event (November 21–December 16, 1961) with Tapié and Ezio Gribaudo, respectively the author and the publisher of the monograph *Devenir de Fontana* presented on that occasion. The *10 paintings of Venice* cycle occupied the rooms of the main gallery, while on display in the spaces of the David Anderson Gallery was the new series of *Olii* and *Tagli*. The American art scene's reception was lukewarm, at the time decidedly critical of the Informel European atmosphere: The *Venezie* series, albeit spectacular, might have confused the critics in relation to the more rigorous production of the monochrome *Attese*, leading back to an interpretation that was still material and Baroque. Probably, if the exhibition had been orchestrated the way Fontana and Damiano had initially planned, the idea being to exclusively present the purest production of the *Attese*, with the most limpid pieces, the misunderstanding of an interpretation of Fontana as an epigone of the informal season might have been avoided and perhaps the artist would have received a better reception in New York. The carousel of shows in 1961, from Parigi to New York, took its toll on the sixty-year-old Fontana, who on December 14, 1961, after returning to the States, confessed to his friend:

Now I'm here somewhat dim-witted! I think it's going to take a while for me to recover, all these consecutive shows, the traveling, now there's the one in Leverkusen etc. have truly disoriented me. All I really want now is some peace and quiet, I need to spend some time by myself, to get back my life as a genuine artist—how often I regret no longer being the “unknown” Fontana! every now and then a certain Mr Charles would arrive from London . . . and then peace . . . allow me to confess that I am somewhat concerned, will I ever manage to keep up with this pace of life?<sup>36</sup>

Nevertheless, while Fontana was in New York, Damiano, truly a genius, had made headway in other European museums: he had offered his own collection of Fontana's works, by that time

35 Letter from Fontana to Damiano, June 21, 1961, in Gaggiotti, *La visione verticale*, 180.

36 Letter from Fontana to Damiano,

December 14, 1961, in Gaggiotti, *La visione verticale*, 200.

numbering around fifty-five pieces, to the museum in Leverkusen. As early as July 1961 the director, Udo Kultermann, had gone to see the collector in London to view the works that would be displayed for the major monographic show of the artist's work, made possible also thanks to the manager's collection—it may have been the largest collection of Fontana's works at the time—to which other loans were added. The show opened on February 12, 1962. Damiano personally dealt with making contacts for the texts to be included in the catalog, in particular as concerned the young critic, Paul Oliver.

However, the manager's action, as proven by the many letters he wrote and received, continued to be watchful and purposeful in time: one fruit of his direction, thanks to the gallerists McRoberts & Tunnard, was the show in Brussels at the Galerie le Zodiaque (October 27–November 21, 1962), again introduced by Alloway, including the new cycle of pink *Olii*. The show was held a second time in December in London, introduced this time by Pierre Rouve.

Two years later, in 1964, Damiano, satisfied with the fame that Fontana had by then achieved around the world, thanks also to his own untiring efforts, joked with his friend, hoping that in England there would not be

the usual sole flute playing an aria for Fontana . . . : we want to create a whole orchestra of excellent musical instruments—not my sad “flute” (remember the song: *Bartolo tenia una flauta con un “agujerito” solo; Bartolo toca la flauta . . .* and so on: *Bartolo je va a mori*). Well, I'm Bartolo, but I have no intention of dying. All the same, I wish my successor to be a whole army.<sup>37</sup>

And the renown that the artist had achieved at that moment, with the help, not least, of the above-mentioned donation to the Tate Gallery that we began with in this discussion, was the springboard that was needed to achieve the goal that Damiano had aimed for from the very beginning of his work: Fontana's arrival at the Marlborough-Gerson Gallery, with branches in New York and in London, at the time among the most powerful galleries in the world. Indeed, in 1964 the manager strongly advised his friend to break off his contract with the two London gallerists McRoberts & Tunnard to begin a new more advantageous relationship with the director of the Marlborough Mr. Francis K. Lloyd, with whom he had personally established a productive and sincere friendship.

37 FLFA, letter from Charles Damiano to Lucio Fontana, London, February 20, 1964. Currently held at the Fondazione

Lucio Fontana Archive are two letters from Damiano to Fontana, dated February 20 and June 24, 1964.

At that point Fontana's process of internationalization—thanks to his exclusive contract with the Marlborough gallery that began in 1965, and to the direction, also involving Lloyd, of an exemplary exhibition entrusted to Jan van der Marck titled *Lucio Fontana: The Spatial Concept of Art*,<sup>38</sup> traveling through the United States and Europe between 1966 and 1967—would be destined to grow year after year even without the explicit action of his friend from London, who would limit himself to expanding and preserving until his death, one year after his friend's, his own collection of as many as sixty of Fontana's works.

38 Jan van der Marck, ed., *Lucio Fontana: The Spatial Concept of Art*, exh. cat. (Walker Art Center, 1966); the exhibition then traveled as follows: Austin, University of Texas Art Museum (February 27–March 27); Buenos Aires, Instituto Torcuato di Tella (July 8–August 7, 1966); New York,

Marlborough-Gerson Gallery (January 20–February 18, 1967); Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum (March 23–May 7, 1967); Eindhoven, Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum (May 12–June 18, 1967). On this topic see also the essay by Francesco Guzzetti in these proceedings.

# “COLD SHOWER IN PARIS.” A LUCIO FONTANA SHOW AT GALERIE STADLER, 1959

Silvia Bignami

“It’s been a while since Stadler reserved us such a cold shower”:<sup>1</sup> thus began Pierre Restany’s review of the exhibition *Fontana et Coetzee* which opened on March 17, 1959, at the Galerie Stadler. The expression “cold shower” refers to the unlikely and strident “closeness” between Lucio Fontana, “the father of Spatialism” at his first major Paris exhibition,<sup>2</sup> and the thirty-year-old South African artist Christo Coetzee: “The sad thing is that Fontana was forced to accept this combination for his first major show in Paris. Here, Fontana’s personality is little known. . . . The stature of the figure, his past, what his research paved the way for, all this deserved a better or at least a different kind of introduction.”<sup>3</sup> According to the critic, Fontana’s search for absolute purity through gesture loses “its meaning” inside the “aggressively baroque” context of Coetzee’s material assemblages and reliefs.

In the gallery of Swiss-born Rodolphe Stadler—which opened in October 1955 at 51 rue de Seine, in the heart of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, and the future center from which *Art autre* would be disseminated—Fontana’s works were displayed in two rooms, as can be read in a letter written by Carlo Cardazzo, the owner of the Galleria del Naviglio, to the French critic Michel Tapié: “Two rooms for Fontana, one for Coetzee, and two different catalogs.”<sup>4</sup> The texts are by Tapié, curator of the artistic direction: These are two distinct *plaquettes*, paged front and back with two black and white images (on the verso the stylization of a sculpture by Claire Falkenstein, a sort of logo present on all the invitations, on the retro a work for each of the artists), which were also used as an invitation to the opening of the show. They can both be seen in the hands of Milena Milani, a writer and the gallerist Cardazzo’s partner—perhaps she was in Paris in his place—immortalized between Tapié and Georges Mathieu in a photograph taken of the opening<sup>5</sup> [FIG. 2]. For Fontana, reproduced on the back of the card is a yellow *Concetto spaziale*, *Attese* upside down with respect to

1 Cf. P.R. [Pierre Restany], “Fontana, Coetzee, Tapiés,” *Cimaise. Revue de l’art actuel* VI, no. 5, June–July–August 1959, 46. The review is in “L’actualité par Georges Boudaille, Michel Ragon, Pierre Restany, Herta Wescher.”  
2 More generally, on the exhibition, the criticism, and the artist’s encounters in Paris, see Silvia Bignami and Jacopo Galimberti, eds., *Lucio Fontana e l’artventure parigina*, (Scalpendi, 2014), and Silvia Bignami and Giorgio Zanchetti, eds., *Klein Fontana. Milano Parigi 1957-1962*, exh. cat. (Electa, 2014). Present in the two volumes is a first reconnaissance of the Stadler show, which is further analyzed in this text thank to my ability to consult new

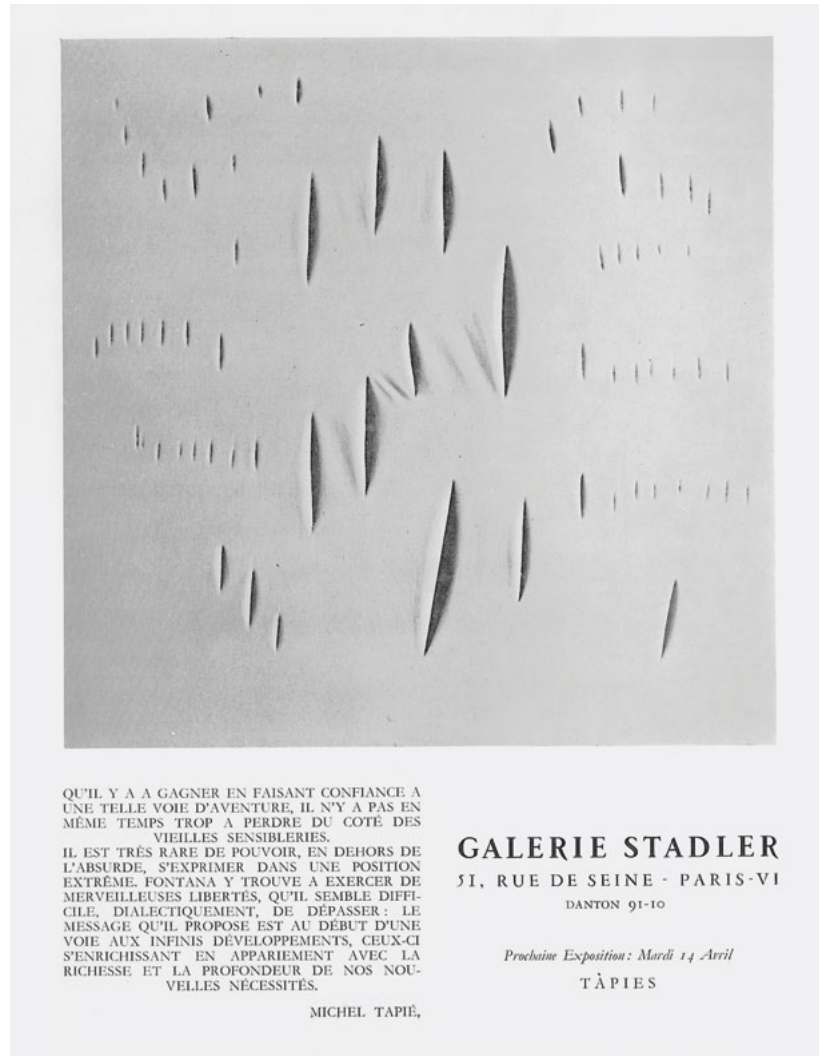
documents and photographs held at the Archives galerie Rodolphe Stadler, les Abattoirs Musée – Frac Occitanie Toulouse France (hereafter AgRS). I am grateful to Guillaume Blanc (Pôle collections et valorisation) for his precious help.

3 Cf. R. [Restany], “Fontana,” 46.

4 AgRS, letter written by C. Cardazzo to M. Tapié, Milan, February 12, 1959.

5 On the exhibition see the photographs of the opening in AgRS, *Carnet Vernissages Novembre 1958 - Avril 1959*, B4, FonSta. The archives hold numbered photographic contact sheets: this text is illustrated by their enlargements, keeping the reference number at the top.

the catalogue raisonné<sup>6</sup> [FIG. 1]. In his text Tapié interprets the slash in a direction that is still informal, as a symbol linked to the void, in an existential sense, and the artist's "spatialist adventure" is only mentioned: "Fontana arrived without mediation at the most extreme option, choosing as an element this spatial void that is the hole made on a surface of any kind. . . . No artistic approach has ever attempted in this way to qualitatively influence a work by *abstraction* alone; no trajectory has ever been so indifferently non-classical."<sup>7</sup>



6 CRSDA, cf. no. 59 T 16.  
7 Michel Tapié, *Fontana*, text for the

presentation of the *plaquette Fontana*, Paris, Galerie Stadler, March–April 1959.

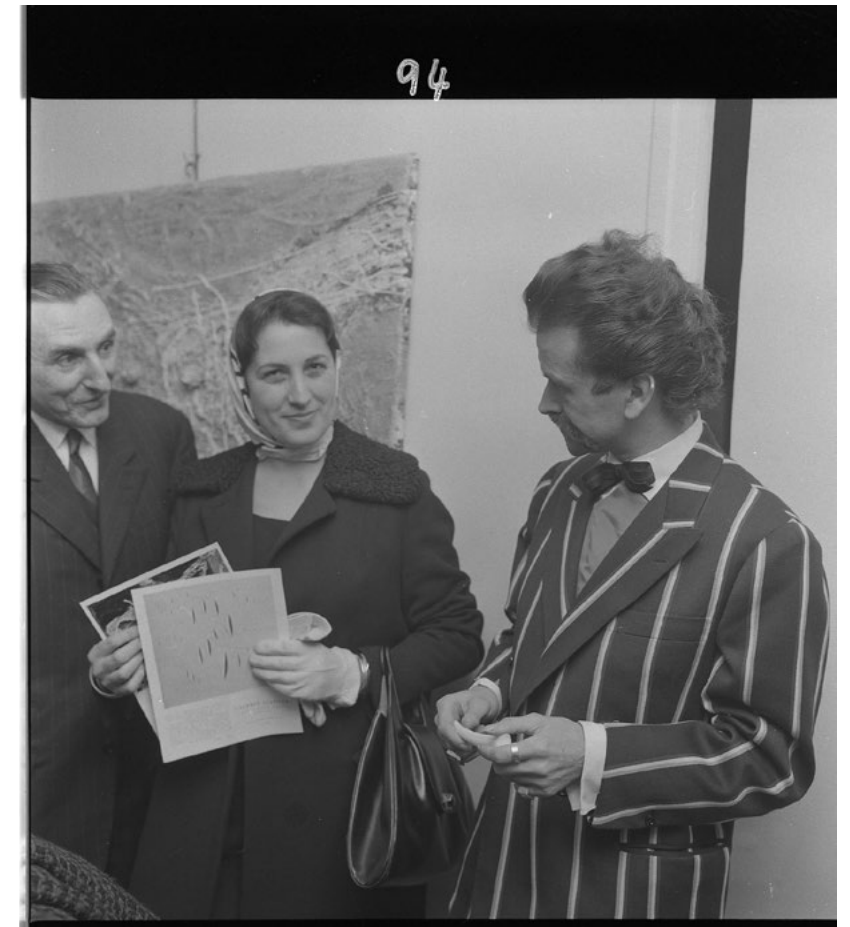


FIG. 2  
Opening of the exhibition *Fontana et Coetzee*, March 7, 1959, Paris, Galerie Stadler. From left to right Michel Tapié, Milena Milani and Georges Mathieu.

The text harkens back to some of the concepts previously expressed in the 1958 article published in the issue of *Notizie*<sup>8</sup> dedicated to the 29. Venice Biennale where Fontana had his own room, almost a first anthological show. Tapié says that Fontana is "one of the stars of this Biennale," someone who, "as a pioneer" used new means to explore space that is *autre*, introducing the problem of communication on a level in parallel with that of cybernetic languages. The critic also indicated how the "empty point" (the hole) represented "in the most subversive manner the concept of space that is 'other.'"<sup>9</sup>

Fontana had already shown his work at the Galerie Stadler in 1956—with Carla Accardi, Giuseppe Capogrossi, Horia Damian, Enard, Claire Falkenstein, Gerdur, Georges Mathieu, Jaroslav

8 Michel Tapié, "Œuvres vives de la Biennale de 1958," *Notizie. Arti figurative* II, no. 6 (July 1958): 31–34.

9 Tapié, "Œuvres vives de la Biennale de 1958," 33.

Serpan, and Mark Tobey—for the group show *Structures en devenir*,<sup>10</sup> also curated by Tapié. Included in the invitation to the exhibition was Fontana's statement in Italian, a sort of extemporaneous summary of the concepts in the *Manifesto tecnico dello Spazialismo* (Technical manifesto of Spatialism) of 1951: "I am not interested in making a painting or a sculpture. I am interested in the search for a new dimension, the quest for the medium, time-space-light."<sup>11</sup> The exhibition is not included in Fontana's bibliography, nor can it be found in the *catalogue raisonné*; several photographs held in the Archives Galerie Rodolphe Stadler tell us that three of his works were on display: two *Concetti spaziali*,<sup>12</sup> one of which turned 45 degrees next to a work by Carla Accardi, and a ceramic work that has as yet to be identified [FIGS. 3–4].

A further piece in the previously analyzed relationship with Tapié<sup>13</sup> is a letter Fontana sent him from Milan on December 27, 1957: "Dear Tapié, what you suggest about Fautrier is fine, but you will have to bring it in January when you come to Milan. Why don't you bring a Du-Buffet [sic] and a Mathieu as well,<sup>14</sup> as we had agreed. I think I will get a reduction. Thank you for wishing me happy holidays, a Merry Christmas to you, too, cordially, yours, Fontana / Let me know when you come to Milan."<sup>15</sup> The message was short, but it does prove Fontana's interest in the *autre* artists who were gravitating around Tapié, and the desire to continue to buy works for his collection. That same year, on May 15, Peppino Palazzoli's Galleria Blu held a show of Fontana's and Bruno Munari's private collection:<sup>16</sup> the former had collected works by Baj, Burri, Capogrossi, Crippa, Dangelo, De Luigi, Dova, Licini, and Scanavino. Also on display was the Yves Klein blue monochrome that Fontana had purchased four months earlier at the Galleria Apollinaire run by Guido Le Noci.<sup>17</sup>

10 *Structures en devenir*, Paris, Galerie Stadler, October 16–November 15, 1956. The exhibition is not indicated in either Fontana's bibliography or in CRSDA.

11 The invitation card is held in the Archives galerie Rodolphe Stadler.

12 CRSDA, cf. nos. 50 B 10, 51 B 18.

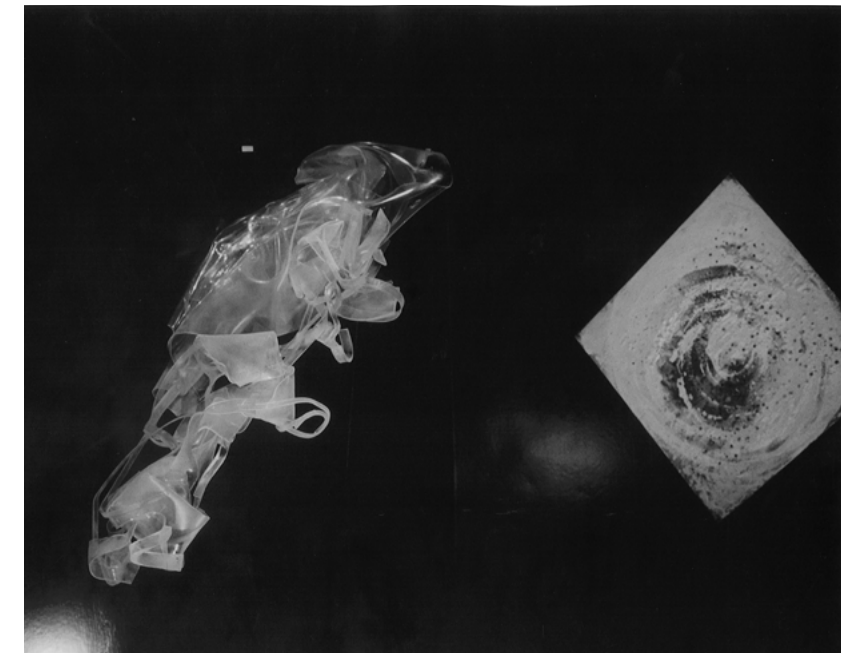
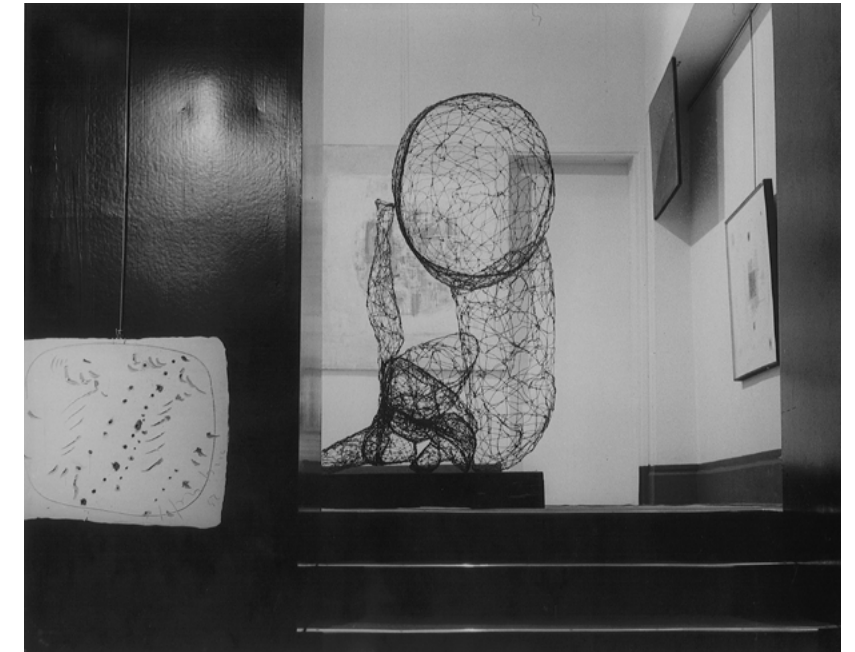
13 On Tapié see the recently published and detailed book by Juliette Evezard "Un Art Autre." *Le rêve de Michel Tapié* (Les presses du réel, 2023). On the relationship between Tapié and Fontana see also Jacopo Galimberti, "Michel Tapié e Lucio Fontana. Parigi e il rischio dell'informale," in Bignami, Galimberti, *Lucio Fontana e l'avventure parigina*, 76–93, and Silvia Bignami, "Lucio Fontana and Michel Tapié. The geography of a 'devenir,'" in *Lucio Fontana. Un futuro c'è stato / Il y a bien eu un futur*, exh. cat., ed. Paolo Campiglio and Benoît Decron (Gallimard-Musée Soulages, 2024), 38–45.

14 A first verification with the Fondazione Lucio Fontana reveals that the collection includes: Georges Mathieu, *Senza titolo*, 1950, oil on paper, with canvas backing, 91 × 61.5 cm, signed and dated on the front at the lower right (CLF 20); Georges Mathieu, *Senza titolo*, 1959, felt-tip marker on paper, 51 × 65 cm, signature, date, and dedication: "Pour Fontana / avec / l'amitié et l'admiration de / Mathieu / Paris le 19 Mars 59;" copy no. 251 (CLF 24); I am grateful to Valeria Morandi for the information. For a first study on the collection and the relationship between Fontana and his artists and peers see Gaspare Luigi Marcone, *Lucio Fontana. Mecenate Collezionista Militante* (Electa-Fondazione Lucio Fontana, 2025).

15 AgRS, letter written by M. Tapié to L. Fontana, Milan, December 27, 1957.

16 *18 opere della collezione privata di Lucio Fontana, 18 opere della collezione privata*

FIGS. 3-4  
Views of the exhibition  
*Structures en devenir*,  
October 1956, Paris,  
Galerie Stadler.



di Bruno Munari, Milan, Galleria Blu, May 1957.

17 "Up to now two buyers: a renowned tailor and collector of abstract art and the painter-sculptor Lucio

Fontana, the one who makes holes, to be clear" (Dino Buzzati, "Un fenomeno alla Galleria Apollinaire. Blu Blu Blu," *Corriere d'informazione* [January 9–10, 1957]).

## BEHIND THE EXHIBITION

To get a better understanding of the “odd couple”<sup>18</sup> Fontana–Coetzee—so described by Restany with the remorse, after a visit to the artist’s studio in Milan, that Fontana hadn’t faced Paris for the first time “alone”<sup>19</sup>—we must also keep in mind the tried and tested system of promotion, circulation, and exchange that Tapié had honed with many of the galleries where he was the artistic consultant, in Europe, the United States, and Japan, as well as with the artists in his “stable.”<sup>20</sup>

For the 1959 exhibition we can hypothesize a sort of triangulation between Stadler, Cardazzo, and Tapié.<sup>21</sup> A letter dated April 14, 1959 from Cardazzo to Stadler<sup>22</sup> also leads us to assume there were likely other exchanges and rotations between the different exhibitions curated by Tapié in the two galleries: between the Fontana exhibition at the Naviglio in Milan and then in Paris at the Stadler gallery and the one at the Galleria del Naviglio from April 11 to 21, 1959, of the works of the Japanese artist Imai; the latter had already shown his work at the Stadler from February 23 to March 16, 1957, and from November 25 to December 20, 1958. In 1961, after spending time in Japan, Coetzee would have his first solo show in Italy at the Naviglio, from April 8 to 18.

The Stadler exhibition opened just one month after the Milanese presentation at the Galleria del Naviglio of Fontana’s most recent works, with almost entirely monochrome canvases featuring vertical slashes.<sup>23</sup>

In late 1958 the artist must have already been informed about the rapid succession of the two exhibitions, seeing that he answered Enrico Crispolti, who was requesting several works for the group show *Burri, Fontana, Mannucci* at the Galleria Notizie in Turin, as follows: “Unfortunately, it will be a problem getting you the paintings, since I have a solo show in Milan in mid-February, and then another one right after that at Stadler’s in Paris in March. And since there’s no fooling around when Burri is involved!! I wish to make a good impression and hope to succeed.”<sup>24</sup>

18 R. [Restany], “Fontana,” 46.

19 R. [Restany], “Fontana,” 46.

20 Cf. Stefano Turina, “Una Torino autre. Torino, Michel Tapié e l’arte internazionale tra Europa, Stati Uniti e Giappone (1954-1965),” in *Torino anni ’50. La grande stagione dell’informale*, exh. cat., ed. Francesco Poli (Silvana Editoriale, 2024), 47–69.

21 Traces of these first proposals for exchanges can be found in a letter dated January 15, 1958: Cardazzo asks Tapié whether the Mark Tobey show at the Stadler gallery (January 17–31)

can continue to his galleries in Milan,

Turin, and Venice, offering him

“the percentage you wish on sales”

(AgRS, letter written by C. Cardazzo to M. Tapié, Milan, January 15, 1958).

22 AgRS, letter written by C. Cardazzo to R. Stadler, Milan, April 14, 1959.

23 Fontana, Milan, Galleria del Naviglio, February 10–23, 1959.

24 Letter written by L. Fontana to E. Crispolti, Milan, December 13, 1958, in Paolo Campiglio, ed., *Lucio Fontana. Lettere 1919-1968* (Skira, 1999), 161–62, letter 170. In the letter, Fontana is still thinking about a solo show at the Stadler

The organization of the Paris show took place between Tapié’s trip to Fontana’s studio in Milan in January 1959, and the subsequent letters between Cardazzo and Stadler.<sup>25</sup> Among others, of particular interest is the one that Cardazzo wrote to Stadler on January 24, in which the gallerist asked whether the idea that Tapié had broached with Fontana to show his work with that of another artist was “a misunderstanding”; as far as he was concerned he should show his work by himself “because his figure as an artist is very important.”<sup>26</sup>

There is still no mention of Coetzee, whom Tapié had met in the London home of Anthony Denney, a fashion photographer, interior designer, and collector.

From a subsequent letter dated February 12, we can infer that Cardazzo accepted the double exhibition on the condition that two of the three rooms in the gallery would be reserved to Fontana. The chips were down: on February 25—the Naviglio show had ended two days before—he wrote to Stadler’s assistant, Edith Zerlaut-Rauscher, that he had sent some photos and that he was working on sending twenty-two paintings by March 15.<sup>27</sup> Although a list of the paintings for both exhibitions does not exist, it would seem likely that they were in part the same works, shared between Milan and Paris.

## THE GALLERY

As the photographs and reviews from that period show, Stadler’s “ultramodern”<sup>28</sup> gallery consisted of three spaces with different perimeters on three levels, each as if inserted one inside the other and connected by several steps. “Stadler’s walls are lacquered”:<sup>29</sup> the room at the entrance and the one at the top were painted red, while the one in the middle was black and generally used for sculptures hanging from the ceiling: “the true heart of a pagoda.”<sup>30</sup> The room on the ground floor featured two columns and overlooked a street through a window, where two works by the artists being presented were on display.

If we follow the flow of the news and of the pictures taken at the opening, Coetzee’s works are on display on the ground floor that overlooks rue de Seine, while Fontana’s are in the other two rooms. In *Le Monde* Michel Conil Lacoste speaks of new canvases “just

in Paris; the news of the association with Coetzee is dated to January 1959.

25 For the transcription of the letters see Silvia Bignami, “Le plus parisien des artistes italiens,” in Bignami, Galimberti, *Lucio Fontana e l’artventure parigina*, 10–37.

26 AgRS, letter written by C. Cardazzo to R. Stadler, Paris, January 29, 1959.

27 AgRS, letter written by C. Cardazzo to E. Zerlaut-Rauscher, Paris, February 25, 1959.

28 Cf. Iris Clert, *Iris-Time. L’Artventure* (Denoël, 1978; repr. Editions Denoël, 2003), 126. On the gallery see Jean-Pierre Moulin, “Galerie Stadler,” *Cimaise. Art et architecture actuels* XIII, no. 77 (August–October 1966): 30–42, *Galerie Stadler: 30 ans de rencontres, de recherches, de partis pris 1955-1985* (Le Galerie, 1985).

29 Cf. Georges Limbour “Tout autre,” *Les lettres nouvelles*, April 8, 1959, 30–31.

30 Limbour “Tout autre.”

brushed with solid blue, gray, or vermillion,<sup>31</sup> scratched by three or four slashes with a razor in diagonal (comparing them to the *capote* of a Citroën 2CV after a thief has come through) through which the red and the black of the gallery's lacquered walls are visible.

The colors of the walls are also mentioned in an article by Georges Limbour in *Les lettres nouvelles*, in which he suggests analogies between Fontana's slashes and the sexual organs: "Fontana is happy about the red walls, a vulva opened wide reveals the wall as though it were the purple secret of its fruit."<sup>32</sup>

### THE WORKS

In the March issue of *Taccuino delle arti*, Crispolti (in June 1959 the critic would implement a first clear-sighted and careful reconnaissance of the artist's entire trajectory, even overseeing, at the end of October, the first complete retrospective at L'Attico in Rome) reviewed Stadler's Fontana show focused on "very recent and totally unpublished canvases, alongside a few others from the past years, until 1950."<sup>33</sup>

But which of the artist's works are on display, seeing that there is no list and only a few paintings are marked as "Parigi 1959" or "Galerie Stadler"<sup>34</sup> in the *catalogue raisonné*?

We can try to identify them in a sort of exercise between philology, chronicle, and weekly puzzle, starting from the intersection between two articles<sup>35</sup> and the partial visual documentation of the exhibition design, made up of a numbered series of proofs: the *Carnet Vernissages Novembre 1958 - Avril 1959* B4, FonSta. Indicated in the present text in parentheses is the reference number that can be found at the top of each individual photograph: these are images that were taken the day of the opening, where most of the works, and not all of them photographed, are partially hidden behind the public. The picture otherwise reveals the worldly, cosmopolitan, and "avant-garde" côté of the gallery.<sup>36</sup> In addition to Fontana and Coetzee, we can identify artists who lived in Paris or gravitated around Tapié: Georges Mathieu, the Japanese Hisao Domoto and his wife Mami, the Parisian painter and sculptor Jacques Brown [FIG. 5], the Prague artist Ruth Francken, a US citizen from 1942,

31 Michel Conil-Lacoste, "À travers les galeries," *Le Monde* (April 10, 1959): 9.

32 Limbour, "Tout autre."

33 Enrico Crispolti, "Fontana e Consagra a Parigi," *Il taccuino delle arti* 40 (March 1959): 1.

34 The paintings are: *Concetto spaziale* (CRSDA, cf. no. 49-50 B 12), whose provenance from the Galerie Sadler and the 1959 Paris exhibition is indicated; *Concetto spaziale, Attese* (CRSDA,

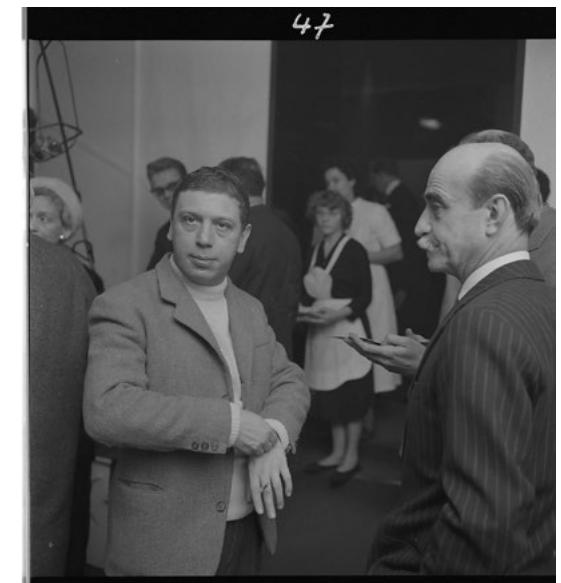
cf. no. 59 T 16), indicated as Paris 1959; *Concetto spaziale, Attese* (CRSDA, cf. no. 59 T 32), whose provenance from the Galerie Stadler is indicated.

35 "Fontana," *Il Giornale degli Italiani* (March 28, 1959): 4. The clipping is glued to the large spiral notebook held at the Archives galerie Rodolphe Stadler; G.D. [G. Dorfles], "Lucio Fontana: tagli nelle tele," *Domus* 356 (July 1959): 27-30.

36 "L'art abstrait," *Combat* (March 30, 1959): 7.

the Spanish-born Antonio Saura, Fontana's Italian friends Cesare Peverelli [FIG. 6], and Beniamino Joppolo, the collector Anthony Denney, Fontana's future gallerists Iris Clert<sup>37</sup> [FIG. 7], and the German Alfred Schmela.

FIGS. 5-6  
Opening of the exhibition *Fontana et Coetzee*, March 7, 1959, Paris, Galerie Stadler. In FIG. 5 left Hisao Domoto, center Christo Coetzee, right Mami Domoto and Jacques Brown. In FIG. 6 Cesare Peverelli and Lucio Fontana.



37 On the relationship between Fontana and Iris Clert see the essays by Silvia Bignami in *Lucio Fontana e l'avventura parigina*: "Les plus parisiens des artistes

italiens," and "Me gustaria ir a Paris'. Nota sulle lettere di Lucio Fontana a Iris Clert," 50-75.



FIG. 7  
Opening of the exhibition  
*Fontana et Coetzee*, March 7,  
1959, Paris, Galerie Stadler.  
To the right Iris Clert.

The first review, released on March 28, 1959, was published in the *Giornale degli Italiani*, addressed to Italian residents in France: an anonymous article lists the works on display with no explanations or comments—except for a single blunt annotation in parentheses (“obscene”)<sup>38</sup>—, following the thread of the color and the number of holes or slashes:

A light purple canvas with holes, a purple canvas with three transverse slashes, another light purple one with holes, another red one with seven slashes. A white painting with holes, blue crystals and yellow crystals, a canvas with two yellow stripes and a central stripe in gold: five horizontal slashes. A gray canvas with slashes and an olivegreen one (Roowney brand) with ten holes and some light squiggles. A large gold canvas with a silver silhouette with a vertical slash (obscene), a black canvas with six slashes, a red canvas with fifteen slashes. There was also a white canvas with nine vertical slashes—one with three slashes and the other with two transverse slashes. Final *Galop* with two old paintings under glass and featuring a gilded frame (the artist’s archaic time), a yellow one and a gray one with Lucio Fontana’s first “holes” on view at the Stadler gallery.<sup>39</sup>

38 This is *Concetto spaziale*, *Forma* (CRSDA, cf. no. 59 T 73). The work was also reproduced in black and white in the

aforementioned article by Dorflies in *Domus*, 27.  
39 *Fontana*.

In addition to helping to identify the works, the unusual description provides the black and white pictures with a chromatic dimension.

The second article, by Gillo Dorfles, was published in the architecture magazine *Domus* in July 1959: a short text, almost a caption, it is accompanied by fourteen illustrations, arranged across several pages, of works in black and white or color (for the latter, the colors were added when printed and may not have corresponded exactly to the original colors of the paintings). Under the title *Lucio Fontana: tagli nelle tele*, Dorfles brought together the exhibitions in Milan and in Paris, at the Naviglio and at Stadler’s: “Present in these subtle fissures that slice the canvas is a compositional rhythm for which—in their transience—the chiaroscuros and the short plastic extroflexions that they create have the rigor of the artist’s most demanding works.”<sup>40</sup>

With different formats, the paintings, most of which frameless, are arranged at different heights and fastened to cables that descend from tracks located at the top of the wall. In the first place, there is a sort of dyscrasia between the works on display and their reproduction in the *catalogue raisonné*: some of them are hung upside down, others are vertical instead of horizontal, while others are at an angle. One wonders if this was due to the space available or if it was a way of showing more works or livening up the rooms; or whether if in this arrangement one can glimpse the idea for the series *Quanta*, conceived by Fontana toward the end of 1959 and characterized by a group of canvases traversed by slashes freely arranged in space.

To delve more deeply into the matter, we can begin with the above-cited article by Limbour: “Fontana’s pictorial gesture is the incision, and his painting is the razor. This artist’s first exercise: three thin horizontal cuts, parallel to each other, on a rather uniform gray canvas.”<sup>41</sup>

The description could correspond to the gray canvas “with three cuts,” the painting hung vertically at an angle in the top room of the gallery [FIG. 8]. The work can partially be viewed to the left of Michelin Stadler, “Mic,” Rodolphe’s sister, and Gaby Sylvia (69, 70): it is *Concetto spaziale*, *Attese* (1959).<sup>42</sup>

Next to it is the canvas “with two transverse slashes,” displayed at the center at the top of the stairs (69, 70, and 80), in a sort of scenic visual cone for those entering the gallery from the street: the work is *Concetto spaziale*, *Attese*<sup>43</sup> (1959 [FIG. 9]). The painting can also be recognized in a series of shots (19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24) taken behind a

40 D. [Dorfles], “Lucio Fontana,” 28.

41 Cf. Limbour, “Tout autre.”

42 CRSDA, cf. no. 59 T 32.

43 CRSDA, cf. no. 59 T 34. In Limbour, “Tout autre,” 27, reproduced in black and white.



group of friends sitting rather naturally on the steps: Mic and Rodolphe Stadler are at the top, and Roland Penrose is to the left [FIG. 10].

As one climbs down the first steps, in the middle of the gallery (31, 72, 87) other works come into view. On display next to Penrose is the “canvas with two yellow stripes and a central stripe in gold: five horizontal slashes,” *Concetto spaziale, Attese*<sup>44</sup> (1959 [FIG. 11]). Once again, we cannot overlook a curious difference: in the catalogue raisonné the work is reproduced with vertical slashes, while for the exhibition it hangs with horizontal slashes, almost as if to mimic the appearance of the steps next to it. This fact raises the same questions that we had asked before. Fontana’s slashes are always vertical or slightly slanted: that is how they appear in the *catalogue raisonné* and in other reproductions, reflecting their execution—documented in the famous photographs taken by Ugo Mulas—characterized by a clean cut from top to bottom, that is, vertical.

The idea of the decision being the gallerist’s alone can be eliminated: Fontana attended the opening, as we can see from other photographs in the same series (11, 28, 42, 43, 47, 60, 63, 64). We can hypothesize a decision that was shared by the artist and the gallerist or made by Fontana alone: the indication of the idea of a “setting” for the work that takes into consideration the surrounding space, in this case perhaps corroborated by a possible dialogue between the

FIGS. 8-10  
Opening of the exhibition  
*Fontana et Coetzee*, March 7,  
1959, Paris, Galerie Stadler.  
In FIG. 8 left Michelin  
(Mic) Stadler, right Gaby  
Sylvia. In FIG. 9 right  
Rodolphe Stadler. In FIG. 10  
left Roland Penrose in  
profile, above Michelin  
and Rodolphe Stadler.



horizontal slashes and the nearby steps. At the same time, we can imagine the extreme freedom in the way the artist treated his work, whose “confines”—in harmony with his poetics—are not simply those of the painting, the frame, but, rather, seek a relationship with the space and an arrangement that in that space “works” according to the “environmental” dimension that is always a constant in his work.

Next to it (37, 72, 81) perhaps is the “white painting with holes, blue crystals and yellow crystals,” *Concetto spaziale*<sup>45</sup> (1952 [FIG. 12]).

In the same room (62, 80, 82), right behind Tapié (55), is the “purple canvas with three transverse slashes” again arranged vertically: it is *Concetto spaziale, Attese* (1959 [FIG. 13]).<sup>46</sup> To the side (62, 80, 81, 82) there might be (the images are not clear) the ochre *Concetto spaziale* (1952),<sup>47</sup> hanging upside down [FIG. 14].

44 CRSDA, cf. no. 59 T 60, in Limbour,  
“Tout autre,” 28, reproduced in

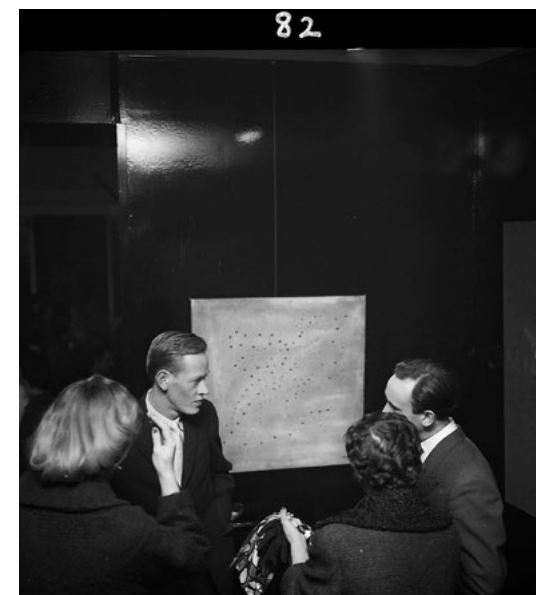
black and white.  
45 CRSDA, cf. no. 52 P 8.

46 CRSDA, cf. no. 59 T 36, where it is brown.  
The work is reproduced upside down in

D. [Dorfles], “Lucio Fontana,” 29.  
47 CRSDA, cf. no. 52 B 12.



FIGS. 11-14  
Opening of the exhibition  
*Fontana et Coetzee*, March  
7, 1959, Paris, Galerie  
Stadler. In FIG. 11 left Roland  
Penrose. In FIG. 13 center  
Michel Tapié. In FIG. 14  
left Christo Coetzee.



Among the other works identified we find “a gray canvas with ten slashes,” *Concetto spaziale, Attese* (1959),<sup>48</sup> indicated as coming from the Galleria del Naviglio and on display there; a “white canvas with nine vertical slashes,” *Concetto spaziale, Attese* which is actually blue (1959),<sup>49</sup> published in a long and detailed article in the Spanish magazine *Goya* (not present in the Fontana bibliography).<sup>50</sup> Instead, what we didn’t find were specific correspondences for some of the works, such as the “olivegreen (Rooney brand) canvas with ten holes and some slight squiggles.”

As concerns “the final *Galop* with two old paintings under glass and featuring a gilded frame (the artist’s archaic time), a yellow one and a gray one with the first ‘holes,’” we might with some hesitation identify the yellow canvas as one of the three works all published in color in *Domus*: oil on canvas, dark signs against an ochre yellow background, *Concetto spaziale* (1952);<sup>51</sup> an oil, a mixed media on canvas, red glass on a yellow, white, and black background, *Concetto spaziale* (1951),<sup>52</sup> and an oil on canvas, mixed media, and sequins on canvas, yellow shapes set against a black background, *Concetto spaziale* (1957).<sup>53</sup> Lastly, two *Concetti spaziali*, both from the “Galleria Naviglio, Milan,” illustrate an article by Pierre Guéguen in *XX<sup>e</sup> Siècle*:<sup>54</sup> one, reproduced in vertical, is *Concetto spaziale, Attese* (1959).<sup>55</sup>

But beyond these incomplete micro-reconstructions of the works exhibited by Stadler and/or at the Naviglio, it is important to note that just a few months after the exhibition in Paris Fontana was no longer “an unknown here”;<sup>56</sup> and Guéguen could present him as “the innovator,” starting his text with an almost photographic and already legendary description: “Lucio Fontana, around sixty years of age, his head dome-shaped, a dreamy look in his eyes, holds his cigarette with two fingers like a sugar cube clamp, resembles Paul Valéry, a French poet who was a bit Genoese, and very Latin”<sup>57</sup> [FIG. 15].

48 CRSDA, cf. no. 59 T 30.

49 CRSDA, cf. no. 59 T 31. In D. [Dorfles], “Lucio Fontana,” 29, reproduced in black and white and in vertical.

50 Cf. Julián Gállego, “Las sorpresas de Lucio Fontana,” *Goya* (June 5, 1959).

51 CRSDA, cf. no. 52 B 18.

52 CRSDA, cf. no. 51 P 2.

53 CRSDA, cf. no. 57 BA 34. D. [Dorfles], “Lucio Fontana,” 30. Instead, the reference to the article in *Domus* is not indicated in the *catalogue raisonné*.

Published in *Domus*, moreover, is *Concetto spaziale, Attese* (CRSDA, cf. no. 59 T 29), provenance Galleria del Naviglio.

54 Cf. Pierre Guéguen, “Fontana l’innovateur,” *XX<sup>e</sup> Siècle*, monographic issue, XXI, no. 12 (May–June 1959): 75–77.

55 CRSDA, cf. no. 59 T 28, where the exhibition at the Galleria del Naviglio is not mentioned, however.

56 Cf. R. [Restany], “Fontana,” 46.

57 Guéguen, “Fontana l’innovateur,” 75.

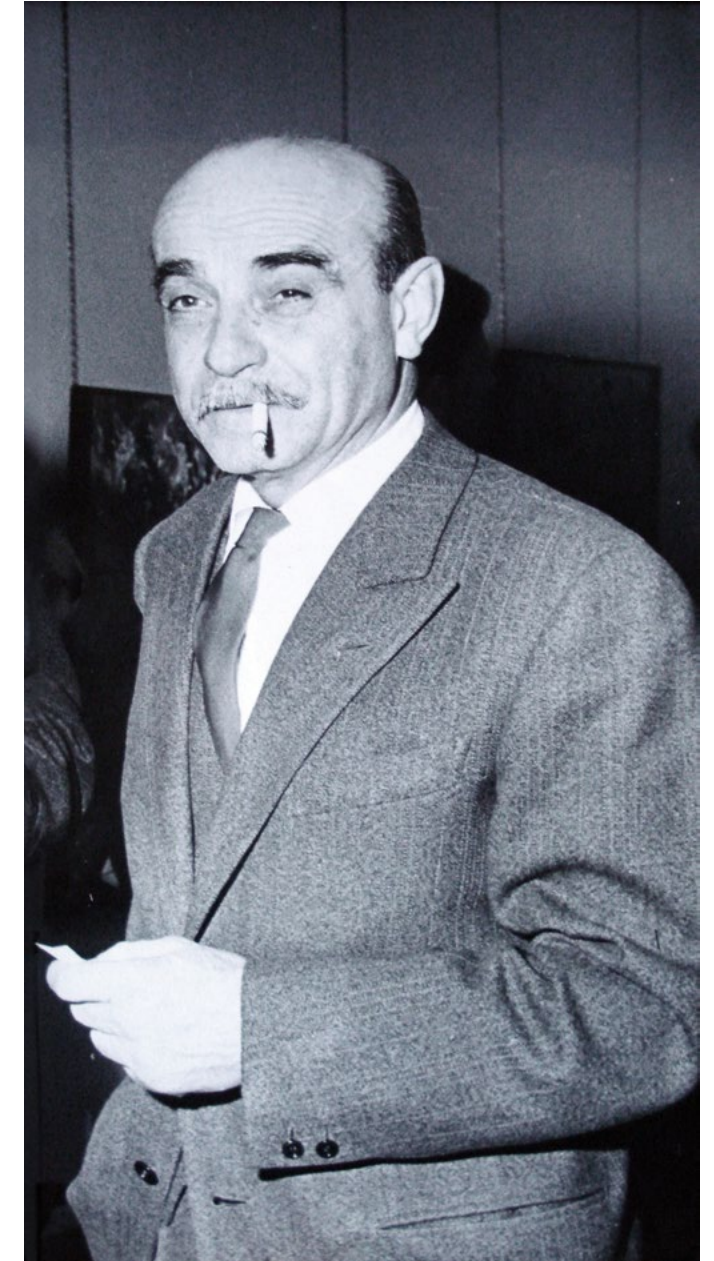


FIG. 15  
Lucio Fontana at the opening of the exhibition *Fontana et Coetzee*, March 7, 1959, Paris, Galerie Stadler.

# A “QUIET AND FERVENT REVOLUTIONARY”: LUCIO FONTANA AND JAPAN

Stefano Turina

## LUCIO FONTANA'S SUCCESS IN JAPAN (1953–67)

The relationship between Lucio Fontana and Japan has generally remained under the radar in Italian and international literature, receiving attention especially in Japan. All the same, it is an emblematic case of the expansion of the art circuit capable of revealing further evidence of the international interest in the work of the Argentine Italian artist.<sup>1</sup>

Fontana's work was discovered early in Japan, and its success was gradual. The first contribution dedicated to the Spatialists was published in *Mizue* in August 1953 by the painter Okamoto Tarō, who had just visited Milan on the occasion of the Fiera Campionaria (Trade Fair).<sup>2</sup> The artist and prolific publicist felt that art should open up to new possibilities: Fontana, the Spatialists, and their manifestos must have aroused his curiosity. He had been invited by Carlo Cardazzo, the orchestrator and promoter of the Spatialist galaxy abroad as well,<sup>3</sup> and while in Milan, Okamoto was also acquainted with Gianni Dova, Cesare Peverelli, and Roberto Crippa, although he was not able to meet with Fontana. The 1953 contribution offered a portrait of Fontana and a photograph featuring a *Concetto spaziale*<sup>4</sup> from 1949 illuminated with grazing light, taken from the leaflet for the solo show at the Naviglio in 1952; Fontana's works at the Fiera Campionaria were mentioned as well.<sup>5</sup>

When Okamoto returned to Japan, he founded the Japanese chapter of the International Art Club, an artists' club that was presided over by Enrico Prampolini, and headquartered in Rome.<sup>6</sup>

\* This essay is the result of the doctoral research conducted by the author at the University of Turin. The thesis is titled *Oltre lo Zen. Rapporti artistici tra Italia e Giappone (1952-1968)*, and was enriched by a period of study promoted by the Fondo Cardazzo at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini (2022), a period of time spent in Japan supported by the Japan Foundation (2022–23), as well as participation in the project Ishibashi Foundation Digital Futures Scholars: Archives of Postwar Japanese Art in Europe of the Sainsbury Institute for the Study of Japanese Arts and Cultures, for which I am grateful.

\*\* If an official English, Italian or French translation of titles from Japanese it is not available in the original source, a service one will be listed in brackets. All Japanese names in text are given in the Japanese order, with the family name first followed by the given name.

1 Cf. Fumihiko Tanifuji, *Rucio Fontana to Itaria 20 seiki bijutsu* [Lucio Fontana and Italian Art in the Twentieth Century] (Chūō-kōron bijutsu shuppan, 2016); the entries “Giappone,” “Gutai,” and “Takahashi Hisachika” by Stefano Turina in *Dizionario Lucio Fontana*,

ed. Luca Pietro Nicoletti (Quodlibet, 2023); *Itaria to Nihon no zen'ei: 20 seiki no nichiiikōryū-ten / Avant-garde in Japan and Italy. Intercultural Dialogue of Artists in the 20th Century*, exh. cat. (Suiseisha 2024), in part. Mitsuki Iwaya, “Italy and Japan. Perspectives Centering on Lucio Fontana and Takiguchi Shuzo”, *Itaria to Nihon*, 96–102.

2 On Okamoto cf. *Tenrankai Okamoto Tarō / Taro Okamoto: A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (NHK, 2022).

3 Cf. Taro Okamoto, “Itari no atarashii hataraki / Nouveau mouvement de la peinture italienne,” *Mizue* 576 (August 1953): 37. On Carlo Cardazzo cf. Luca Massimo Barbero, ed., *Carlo Cardazzo. Una nuova visione dell'arte*, exh. cat. (Electa, 2008); on the Galleria del Cavallino Giovanni Bianchi, *Un cavallino come logo. Storia delle Edizioni del Cavallino* (Edizioni del Cavallino, 2006 [2007]).

4 CRSDA, cf. no. 49 B 1.

5 CRSDA, cf. nos. 53 A 1, 53 A 3. Okamoto, “Itari no atarashii,” 38, 45. Cf. *Lucio Fontana*, Milan, Galleria del Naviglio, May 26–June 6, 1952.

6 On the Japanese section of the Art Club

It was thanks to this new association and to Carlo Cardazzo's connections with Japan that, in the fall of 1956, the Spatialists' works were shipped to Tokyo for the exhibition *Sekai konnichi no bijutsu-ten / Exposition Internationale de l'art actuel*. Presented for the first time to the Japanese public were works by Capogrossi, Crippa, and Fontana; for the latter artist a yellow *Concetto spaziale* [FIG. 1] as well as a black one, both from the series *Pietre*,<sup>7</sup> were displayed. Participating in the exhibition were artists from the United States, Europe, and Japan, with works from the collection of the Paris critic Michel Tapié as well: Tapié had become interested in Capogrossi first, and Fontana later.<sup>8</sup> It was the start of what the critics have referred to as the "Informel whirlwind" in Japan,<sup>9</sup> although those who were the most knowledgeable differentiated Tapié's *Art autre* from Fontana's and Capogrossi's research, assigning the latter to Spatialism: besides Okamoto, Takiguchi Shūzō also underscored this distinction.<sup>10</sup>

A critic and a polyglot poet, the promoter of Surrealism in Japan, and mentor for Tokyo's young experimental artists even when they were living abroad, Takiguchi had the opportunity to meet Fontana at the 29. Venice Biennale in 1958, where Takiguchi was in charge of the Japan Pavilion, and also in Milan thanks to Cardazzo. Takiguchi is due credit for the first critical Japanese study on Fontana published in *Sansai* in 1959.<sup>11</sup> In his essay, he discussed

cf. Yuri Mitsuda, "The Formation and Evolution of Japanese Contemporary Art [Gendai Bijutsu]: 1945 to Early 1970s," in Noriaki Kitazawa, Takemi Kuresawa, and Yuri Mitsuda, *History of Japanese Art after 1945. Institutions, Discourse, Practice* (Leuven University Press, 2023), 47, and Thomas R.H. Havens, *Radical and Realists in the Japanese Nonverbal Arts* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), 80–81. For the Italian context cf. Gabriele Simongini, ed., *Art Club 1945-1964*, exh. cat. (Franche Tirature, 2014); Gabriele Simongini and Gisella Conte, eds., *Art Club 1945-1964. La linea astratta*, exh. cat. (Galleria d'arte Niccoli, 1998); Rosella Siligato, "Prampolini promotore culturale. L'Art Club," in *Prampolini. Dal Futurismo all'Informale*, exh. cat. (Edizioni Carte segrete, 1992), 374–95; Michelangelo Conte, "Prampolini e l'Art Club," in *Prampolini*, 396–99.

7 Cf. *Sekai konnichi no bijutsu-ten / Exposition Internationale de l'Art Actuel*, exh. cat. (Takashimaya dept. store, 1956), n. p., cats. 26–27; Shinichi Segi, "Naifu o motsu gaka Fontana" [Fontana, Painter with a Knife], *Geijutsu shinchō* 12, no. 12 (1962), 34. Respectively FLFA, cf. no. 4249/1; CRSDA, cf. no. 55 P 10.

8 On Okamoto's organization cf. Sasaki Hidenori, ed., *Kuruto Seriguman to Okamoto Tarō. Art is magic / Kurt Seligmann and Taro Okamoto. Art is magic*, exh. cat. (Okamoto Taro Museum of Art, 2020).

9 Mitsuda, "The Formation and Evolution," 84.

10 Cf. Tarō Okamoto, "Kūkan-ha tanjō" [The Birth of Spatialism], *Geijutsu shinchō* 8, no. 2 (1957): 55–63; Shūzō Takiguchi, "Sekai konnichi no bijutsu-ten" [The Exposition Internationale de l'Art Actuel], *Geijutsu shinchō* 12, (1956): 53–72.

11 On Takiguchi in Europe, cf. *Takiguchi Shūzō 1958: Tabisuru manazashi / Shuzo Takiguchi 1958*, 2 vols. (Keio University Press, 2009). For the photographs he took of works by Fontana at the Biennale cf. *Takiguchi Shūzō 1958*, vol. 1, 13–14. Cf. Shūzō Takiguchi, "Fontana hōmonki" [Chronicle of a Visit to Fontana], *Sansai* 113 (April 1959): 30–45. For the photographs he took in Fontana's studio cf. *Takiguchi Shūzō 1958*, vol. 1, 32. I am grateful to the Tokyo Keio University Art Center which hosts the archive of the Japanese artist. On Fontana and his relationship with the Biennale see the contribution by Sileno Salvagnini in these proceedings.

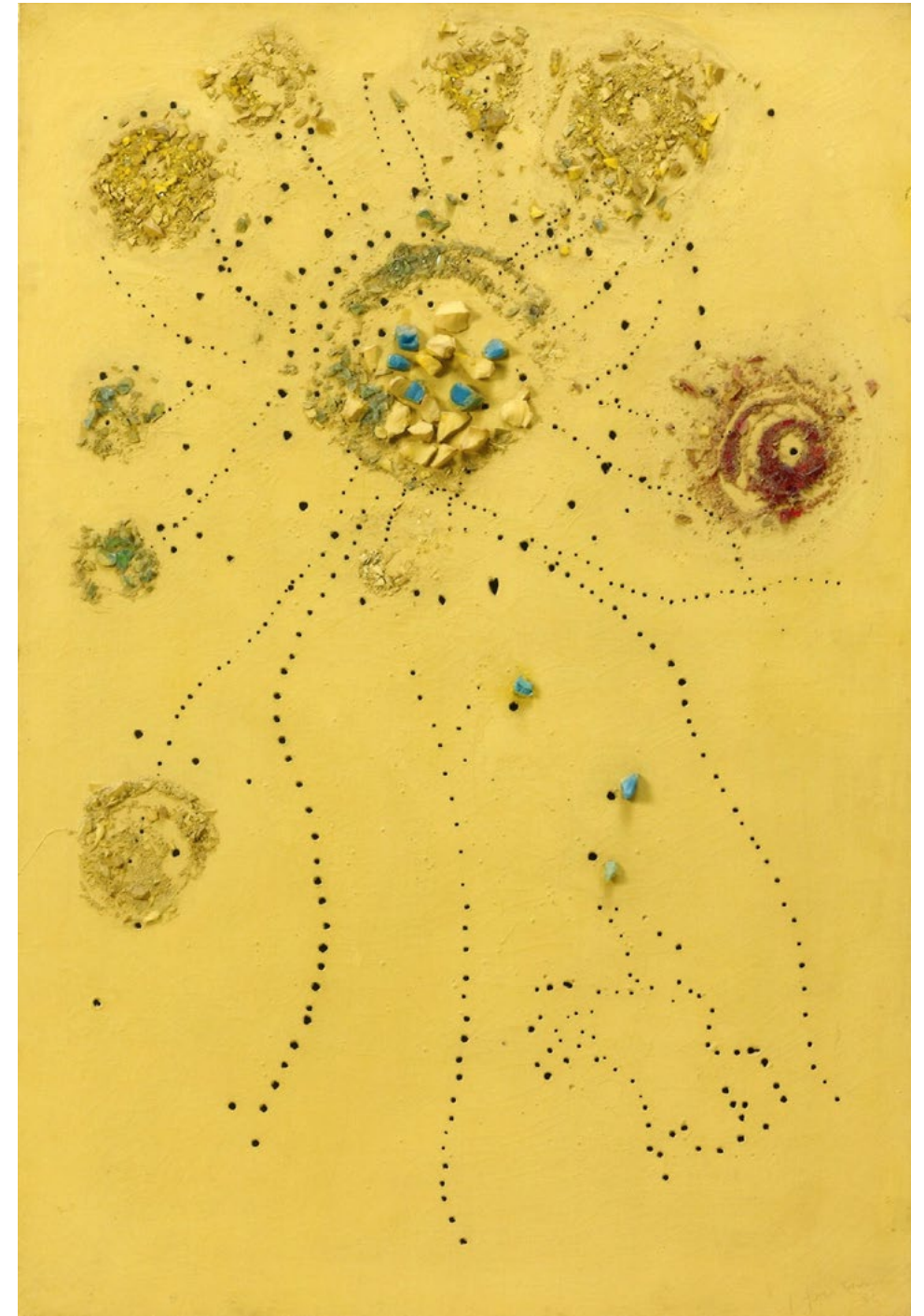


FIG. 1  
*Concetto spaziale*, 1956.  
Private collection.

how Fontana's research escaped all attempts at classification, and he recalled the three bronze sculptures that, in 1958, had been installed in a designated space inside the fountain of the International Book Pavilion managed by the Galleria del Cavallino: every edition of the Biennale one work by one selected artist was exhibited in this peculiar space. Fontana's fountain,<sup>12</sup> which was documented photographically, evoked lotus leaves according to the critic [FIG. 2].<sup>13</sup> In the same article, the critic described his encounter in the Milan studio of the author of the difficult and controversial gesture—elementary yet powerful—of slashing the canvas; he also described seeing Fontana's works. The critic's visit was documented by photographs.<sup>14</sup> Takiguchi's esteem led to the publication in 1964 of the first Japanese monograph dedicated to Fontana, which dealt with the artist's career from the 1930s to his most recent works.<sup>15</sup>



FIG. 2  
Sculptures by Lucio Fontana arranged in the fountain of the Padiglione Internazionale del Libro for the 29. Venice Biennale, 1958, documented in the photos taken by Takiguchi Shūzō.

12 CRSDA, cf. nos. 57 SC 2, 57 SC 4, 57 SC 5.

13 Takiguchi, "Fontana hōmonki," 30. For photographs of the International Book Pavilion cf. Takiguchi Shūzō 1958, vol. 1, 18. On the Pavilion cf. Orietta Lanzarini, "Carlo Cardazzo committente di Carlo Scarpa. La Galleria del Cavallino (1942, 1949) e il Padiglione del Libro d'Arte

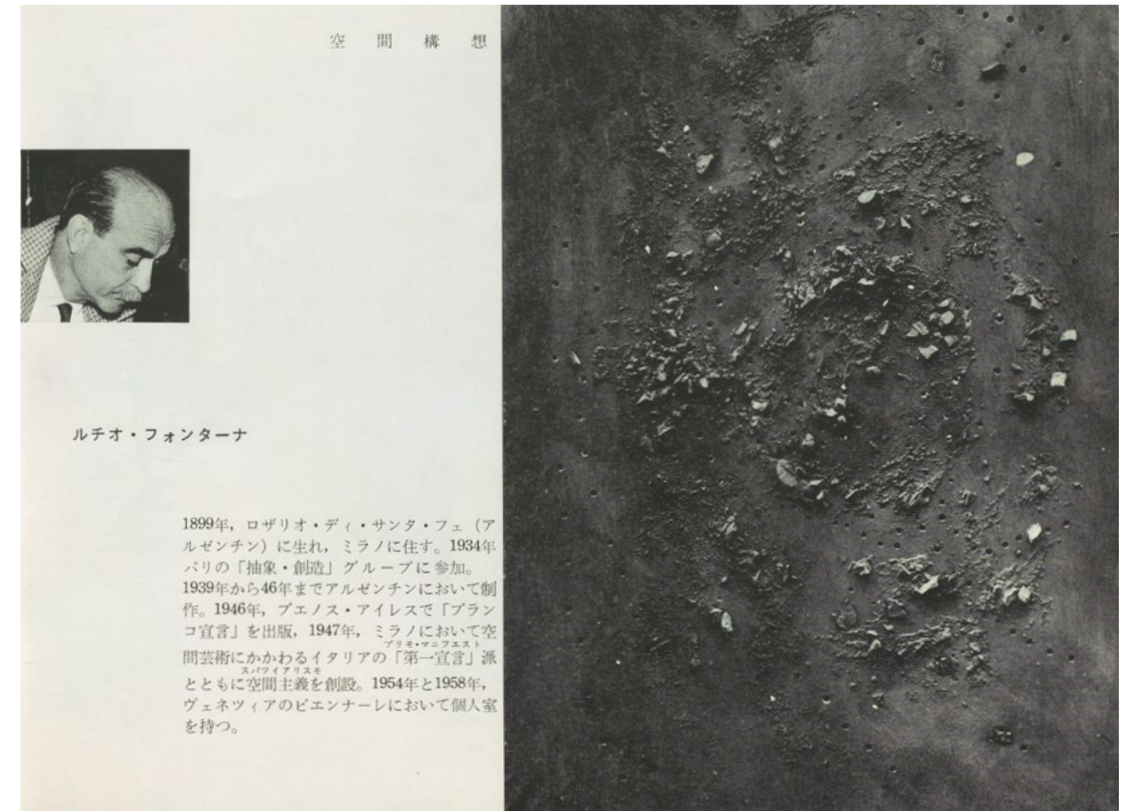
(1950)," in Barbero, Carlo Cardazzo. *Una nuova visione*, 93–105.

14 Takiguchi, "Fontana hōmonki."

15 Shūzō Takiguchi, *Fontana* (Misuzu Shobo, 1964). On the relationship between Fontana and the critic cf. Iwaya, *Italy and Japan*.

The Italian situation contributed as well to making Fontana's work increasingly famous in Japan. In 1959 the Galleria La Salita in Rome organized for the Shirokiya department store in Tokyo the exhibition *Pittori italiani d'oggi* where the works by Accardi, Burri, Capogrossi, and Fontana were especially appreciated. There to praise the works were Giulio Carlo Argan and Palma Bucarelli, as well the Italian ambassador to Japan, whilst in Rome was raging on a controversy surrounding a painting by Burri exhibited at the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna. Fontana was among the participants mentioned the most, standing out in a more innovative selection of Italian artists with respect to those put forward in parallel at the 5th International Art Exhibition in Tokyo [FIG. 3].<sup>16</sup> Also on display were

FIG. 3  
*Concetto spaziale*, 1955  
(in *Sekai no naka no chūshō. Itaria Nihon bijutsuten / Pittori italiani d'oggi*, exh. cat. [1959]).



16 *Sekai no naka no chūshō. Itaria Nihon bijutsuten* [Abstract Art in the World: Exhibition of Italian and Japanese Art] / *Pittori italiani d'oggi*, exh. cat. (1959). Cf. Ichirō Fukuzawa, "Kokusai bijutsuten de mirarenakatta sekai no shin'ei / [New Talents of the World Not Seen at the

International Art Exhibition]," *Geijutsu shinchō* 10, no. 7 (1959), 57–63. On the theme cf. Stefano Turina, *Da Utamaro a Imai. Artisti giapponesi a Roma e artisti italiani in Giappone e le gallerie romane del secondo dopoguerra (1950-1960)*, forthcoming.

artworks by nine Japanese members of the Nihon Abusutorakuto Āto Kurabu (Japan Abstract Art Club) who turned the event into a debate on abstract research.<sup>17</sup>

Another emblematic selection occurred for the exhibition *Itaria gendai chōkokuten / Italian Contemporary Sculpture* organized by the Venice Biennale for the Musée Rodin and then transferred to Tokyo:<sup>18</sup> the covers of the catalogs featured two sculptures by Arturo Martini, but for the *Mizue* special issue dedicated to the event it was again one of Fontana's works to be selected [FIG. 4]. A solitary and very recent *Natura*<sup>19</sup> became the emblem of contemporary sculpture in Italy. That same year, again thanks to Bucarelli, the *Tagli* were seen for the first time at the Tokyo Biennale, which hosted a selection of sculptures from the same exhibition.<sup>20</sup>

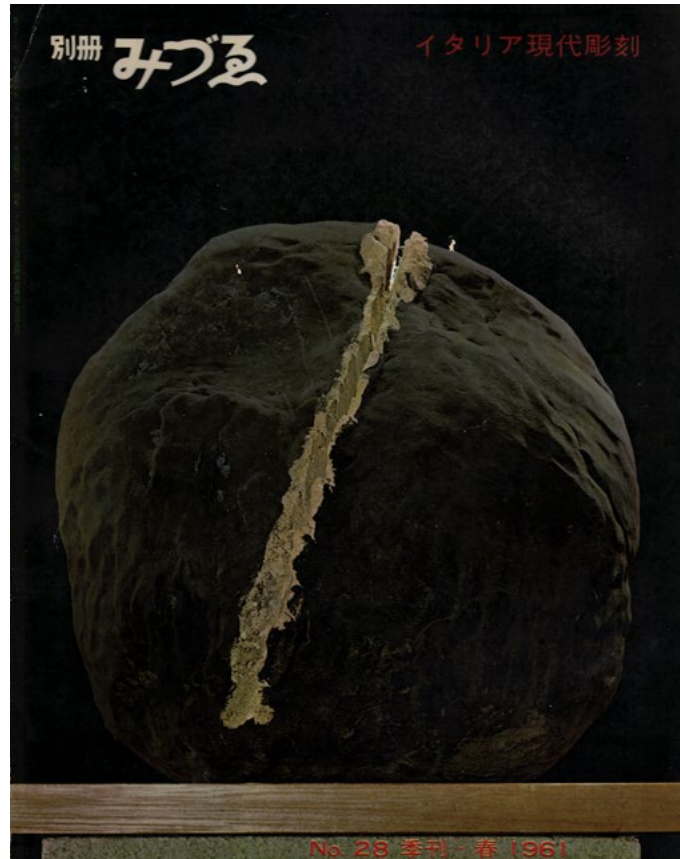


FIG. 4  
*Concetto spaziale, Natura*, 1959–60 (cover of *Bessatsu Mizue*, special issue of “Mizue” published in 1961 dedicated to the exhibition *Scultura Italiana contemporanea*).

17 *Sekai no naka*, 18–26.

18 *Itaria gendai chōkokuten / Italian Contemporary Sculpture*, exh. cat. (Mainichi Shinbunsha, 1961).

19 CRSC, cf. no. 59–60 N 17.

20 *Dai 6-kai Nihon kokusai bijutsuten / The Sixth International Art Exhibition, Japan*, exh. cat. (Mainichi Shinbunsha and Nihon kokusai Bijutsu Shinkōkai, 1961).

In 1962 these recent works were the only ones exhibited at the first monographic show organized by a private gallery, the Tokyo Gallery. On that occasion Segi described his encounter with Fontana in Milan, the admiration that the younger artists felt for him and for the research of this “quiet and fervent revolutionary.”<sup>21</sup>

During those same years, a lithograph by Fontana was awarded a prize at the *4th International Biennial Exhibition of Prints* in Tokyo in 1964<sup>22</sup> and, on the occasion of an exhibition dedicated to international contemporary ceramic work, the scholar and ceramicist Koyama Fujio included a ceramic work from 1950<sup>23</sup> using it for the cover of the catalog and for the exhibition poster. It is currently held at the Kyoto National Museum of Modern Art.<sup>24</sup>

Three events definitively sanctioned Fontana's apotheosis in Japan from the mid-1960s. Bucarelli's shipment of four recent works to the *Exhibition of Contemporary Italian Art* in Tokyo in 1967, the addition of a *Concetto spaziale, Attese*<sup>25</sup> to the collection of Nagaoka Gendai Bijutsukan (Nagaoka Museum of Contemporary Art) and the acquisition of a work from the series *La fine di Dio*<sup>26</sup> for the Italian Embassy in Tokyo.<sup>27</sup>

#### JAPANESE FRIENDSHIPS IN ITALY

Fontana crossed paths with many Japanese artists. Most of them were in some way associated with Cardazzo's galleries, which actively supported contemporary Japanese art in Italy, starting from the Imai Toshimitsu exhibition organized at the Naviglio in exchange for the Fontana show at the Galerie Stadler in Paris in 1959 thanks to Michel Tapié.<sup>28</sup>

The sculptor Azuma Kenjirō studied in Brera with Marino Marini from the mid-1950s, and became his assistant, choosing Milan as his city. Although he had started out doing figurative research, he had found his voice in a series titled *Mu*, “void,” which was also

21 Shinichi Segi, n. t., in *Lucio Fontana exhibition*, exh. cat. (Tokyo Gallery, 1962).

22 Cf. Harry Ruhé and Camillo Rigo, *Lucio Fontana. Graphics, multiples and more...* (Tuja Books, 2006), 44, no. E-22.

23 CRSC, cf. no. 50 SFO 10.

24 *Tōkyō kokusai hanga biennāre-ten dai 4-kai / The 4th International Biennial Exhibition of Prints in Tokyo*, exh. cat. (National Museum of Modern Art, Yomiuri Shinbun, 1964), n. p.; Motoko Hanai and Kiyoshi Okada, eds. 1964: *Shōgen - gendai kokusai tōgei ten no shōgeki / 1964 Testimonies: the Impact of the International Exhibition of Contemporary Ceramic Art*, exh. cat. (Museum of Modern Ceramic Art, 2017). On Fontana's ceramics and Japan see also Raffaele Bedarida, Yasuko Tsuchikane, “Una materia malleabile:

le ceramiche di Fontana in Italia, negli Stati Uniti, in Giappone,” in *Mani-Fattura. Le ceramiche di Lucio Fontana*, exh. cat., ed. Sharon Hecker (Marsilio Arte, 2025), 89–103.

25 CRSDA, cf. no. 61 T 54.

26 CRSDA, cf. no. 63-64 FD 1.

27 *Gendai Itaria bijutsuten / Exhibition of Contemporary Italian Art*, exh. cat. (National Museum of Modern Art, 1967), 66; *Nagaoka gendai bijutsukan / Nagaoka Museum of Contemporary Art* (Nagaoka Museum of Contemporary Art, 1968); Germano Celant, “Il patrimonio artistico,” in *Tōkyō no Itaria taishikan / L'ambasciata d'Italia a Tokyo* (Sangensha, 2016), 68–81.

28 On the Paris show see the essay by Silvia Bignami in these proceedings.

on display at the Cavallino, and a reference in Fontana.<sup>29</sup> The sculptor Toyofuku Tomonori as well, who had arrived in Italy with the Venice Biennale in 1960 and was promoted in Japan by the Tokyo Gallery, decided to settle in Milan, finding support at the Galleria del Naviglio. There he abandoned his previous figurative style, completely changing direction once he encountered the Milanese artistic milieu.<sup>30</sup>

Also of interest is the presence in Italy at the time of the painter Abe Nobuya. He too was promoted by Renato Cardazzo, a fundamental connection for critics, collectors, and artists. Abe Nobuya visited Fontana in the spring of 1959 and continued to see him even after the artist settled in Rome.<sup>31</sup>

Another artist who had debuted at the Cavallino was Takahashi Hisachika, whom Crippa had met in Tokyo in 1961. Takahashi firstly became Crippa's assistant and then, from 1964 onwards, he was Fontana's. The Argentine Italian promoted the research by the younger artist, and together they realized a *Taglio*—now in the Consolandi collection—on a canvas on which the Japanese artist used fluorescent paint [FIG. 5].<sup>32</sup>

There were other artists, both men and women, who stopped over in Milan more briefly, but whose work was profoundly inspired by Fontana's research. Two significant examples of support for young Japanese women are represented by Miyawaki Aiko and Kusama Yayoi. The former, who had debuted internationally in Milan with her materic paintings, described her meeting with Fontana in a text written in 1961. In the subsequent phase of her research as well, an assonance with Fontana's work can be clearly perceived.<sup>33</sup> Kusama had instead been invited to participate in the Venetian edition of the exhibition *Zero Avantgarde* that was held at the Cavallino after the Milanese presentation in Fontana's studio in which Abe had participated as well. Kusama had met Fontana and Nanda Vigo at the exhibition *Nul 65* in Amsterdam and, thanks to the support of both Renato Cardazzo and Fontana, had a solo show at the Naviglio later on, in January 1966. Kusama used the spaces on Corso Monforte to create the works that she then showcased in the gallery, as documented in a photograph she sent to Fontana [FIG. 6].<sup>34</sup>

29 On Azuma cf. Giuseppe Appella, ed., *Kengiro Azuma. Opere dal 1948 al 2010* (Edizioni della Cometa, 2010).

30 On Toyofuku cf. *Toyofuku Tomonori kizō kinen ten hikari no tankyū / Tomonori Toyofuku: ricerca di luce*, exh. cat., Rui Okabe, ed. (Fukuoka Prefectural Museum of Art, 2022).

31 On Abe cf. Junichi Shioda, ed., *Abe Nobuya: Akunaki ekkyōsha / Nobuya Abe. 1913-1971. Insatiable Quest beyond*

*Borders*, exh. cat. (Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art–Niigata City Art Museum–The Museum of Modern Art, Saitama–The Japan Association of Art Museums, 2018).

32 CRSDA, cf. no. 66 OC 1. On Takashi cf. the entry by Stefano Turina, "Takahashi Hisachika" in Nicoletti, *Dizionario Lucio Fontana*, 509–10.

33 On Miyawaki and Fontana cf. Stefano Turina, "Aiko Miyawaki. The poetry



FIG. 5  
Lucio Fontana, Takahashi Hisachika, *Concetto spaziale, Attesa*, 1966. Private collection.

of the intangible," in *Aiko Miyawaki. Sculpture 1965-1975*, exh. cat. (Magonza, 2024).

34 On Kusama cf. in part. Midori Yamamura, *Yayoi Kusama. Inventing*

*the Singular* (The MIT Press, 2015); Stephanie Rosenthal, ed., *Yayoi Kusama. A Retrospective*, exh. cat. (Prestel, 2021); Tijs Visser, ed., *Kusama: with Love from Holland* (O-INSTITUTE, 2022).



To Fontana  
Kusama  
di Milano

FIG. 6  
Lucio Fontana and Kusama  
Yayoi in the studio on Corso  
Monforte, January 1966.

Later, thanks to Fontana's and Renato Cardazzo's support, in the space in front of the Book Pavilion of the Giardini at the Biennale, Kusama displayed *Narcissus Garden*. Consisting of plastic spheres, it was in part funded by Fontana himself. The spheres materialized the expansion on an environmental scale of the Pavilion fountain, inside which *Pagoda*, a sculpture by Remo Bianco had been installed, in the same exact site where Fontana had displayed his sculptures eight years earlier [FIG. 7].<sup>35</sup>

FIG. 7  
The Padiglione  
Internazionale del Libro at  
the 33. Venice Biennale in  
1966 with a *Pagoda* by Remo  
Bianco and the *Narcissus  
Garden* by Kusama Yayoi (in  
*Le Arti* [July–August 1966]).



Il padiglione del libro della Galleria del Cavallino alla XXXIII Biennale di Venezia, all'ingresso del padiglione italiano.

35 Cf. Yamamura, *Yayoi Kusama*, 125–29; Marin R. Sullivan, *Sculptural Materiality in the Age of Conceptualism International Experiments in Italy* (Routledge, 2017), 39–41; Stefania Portinari, "Narcissus

Garden for Sale: 'one piece 2 dollars.' Yayoi Kusama alla Biennale di Venezia nel 1966," in *Storie della Biennale di Venezia*, ed. Stefania Portinari and Nico Stringa (Ca' Foscari University Press, 2019), 183–99.

## LUCIO FONTANA AND GUTAI

Another crucial relationship had to do with Fontana's interest in the Gutai group, an association of artists working in Osaka and led by Yoshihara Jirō.<sup>36</sup> This mutual interest was certainly also fueled by Tapié's appreciation of the artist: not only did the cover of the eighth issue of the magazine *Gutai*, designed by Tapié and Yoshihara, feature the 1949 work by Fontana,<sup>37</sup> which had previously been published in *Mizue* [FIG. 8], but in 1957 the critic had also brought a 1950 *Concetto spaziale*<sup>38</sup> to Tokyo, specifically to the *Sekai gendai geijutsuten* [International contemporary art exhibition] at the Bridgestone Museum of Art. Present there were artists from the United States, Europe, and Japan, all of whom were part of Tapié's circle.<sup>39</sup>



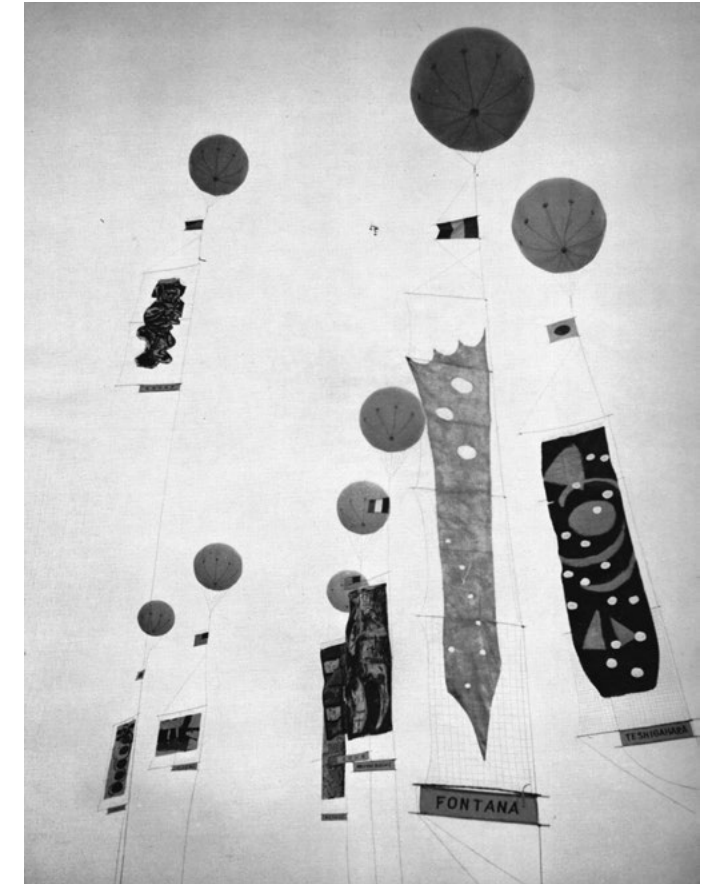
FIG. 8  
*Concetto spaziale*, 1949  
(cover of *Gutai*, 8 [1958]).

36 On Gutai cf. *Subete michi no sekai e: Gutai: bunka to tōgō / Into the Unknown World: Gutai. Differentiation and Integration*, exh. cat. (Nakanoshima Museum of Art, 2022); Ming Tiampo, *Gutai. Decentering Modernism* (The University of Chicago Press, 2011); Ming Tiampo and Alexandra Munroe, eds., *Gutai. Splendid Playground*, exh. cat. (Guggenheim, 2013); Marco Francioli, Bettina Della Casa, Fuyumi Namioka, and Tijs Visser, eds., *Gutai. Dipingere con il tempo e lo spazio / Painting with Time and Space*, exh. cat. (Silvana Editoriale, 2010). On Gutai and

the Italian context cf. Stefano Turina, "Una Torino autre. Torino, Michel Tapié e l'arte internazionale tra Europa, Stati Uniti e Giappone (1954-1965)," in *Torino anni '50. La grande stagione dell'Informale*, exh. cat., ed. Francesco Poli (Silvana Editoriale, 2024), 47–69. On the magazine cf. *Fukkokuban Gutai / Gutai Facsimile Edition* (Geika Shoin, 2010).  
37 CRSDA, cf. no. 49 B 1.  
38 CRSDA, cf. no. 50 B 10.  
39 *Gutai* 8, 1957, and *Fukkokuban Gutai*, 84. On Italy's participation cf. Turina, "Una Torino autre," 51–52.

In 1958 as well, for the exhibition *International Art of a New Era Informel and Gutai*, the critic exhibited a work by Fontana for which no photographs have yet been found; it is significant all the same that Yoshihara remembered how on that occasion Tapié brought to Osaka a project by Fontana which was then realized by Gutai artists: a black panel filled with holes and backlit.<sup>40</sup> Thanks to Tapié American and European artists were included in the *International Sky Festival* in April 1960. For a week, huge banners designed by the artists and made by Gutai hung from aerostatic balloons according to the practice of advertising communication in Japan at the time. Fontana's design refused the rectangular shape, and it was crossed by holes and strips of paper [FIG. 9].<sup>41</sup>

FIG. 9  
Photograph of the  
*International Sky Festival*,  
April 19–24, 1960,  
Osaka (in Francesc  
Vicenc, *Prolégomènes à  
une esthétique autre de  
Michel Tapié* [Centre  
international de recherches  
esthétiques, 1960]).



40 Cf. Jirō Yoshihara, "Fontana Kapogurosshi / Fontana and Capogrossi," in *Fontana to Kapogurosshi / Lucio Fontana Giuseppe Capogrossi*, exh. cat. (Gutai Pinacotheca, 1964), n. p.

41 For the Italian artworks exhibited cf. *Gutai* 9, 1958 and cf. Turina, "Una Torino autre," 51–52. On the event cf. Tiampo, *Gutai*, 1–2, 64–66.

Fontana's appreciation of Gutai was not limited to the contributions he sent to Japan. In the fall of 1958 the artist welcomed Yoshihara to his studio in Milan, and a photograph that was taken not long after pictures the artist together with Jef Verheyen as they examine the eighth issue of *Gutai*.<sup>42</sup> The most significant proof of this relationship can be found in the telegram published for the exhibition at the Gutai Pinacotheca in 1964, in which Fontana wrote: "I take the opportunity to say that your group has been frequently and important inspiration source for my work."<sup>43</sup> At a time when young artists like Yves Klein and Allan Kaprow denied being indebted to Gutai's research which was well known both in Europe and in the United States, Fontana acknowledged its importance,<sup>44</sup> clearly praising the creative dialogue underway.

It has recently been highlighted how Fontana's *Ambienti spaziali* at the time may have been inspired by the group's site-specific works and theatrical actions, documented in the magazine *Gutai* and by Tapié, but also in the issue of *Notizie* published on the occasion of the Gutai show in Turin in 1959. *Esaltazione di una forma*,<sup>45</sup> created for the exhibition *Dalla natura all'arte* in 1960 in Venice, is one example.<sup>46</sup> Later, in 1965, in *Gutai* 14 on the same page is documented not just a new version of these environmental works made by the members of the group for *Nul65* in Amsterdam, but also the *Nature* by Fontana, who had been able to meet Yoshihara a second time at the same exhibition.<sup>47</sup>

An opportunity to definitively crown this bond was *Fontana Capogrossi* in 1964 at the Gutai Pinacotheca, the exhibition venue in Osaka which the group opened in 1962 [FIG. 10]. Fontana's works were mostly *Tagli* from the Tokyo Gallery, but there were ceramic works and prints as well. Also on display were works that had joined the collections of Yoshihara and the Pinacotheca: a *Concetto spaziale* from 1960,<sup>48</sup> a *Natura*<sup>49</sup> previously exhibited at *Strutture e stile* in Turin in 1962, and a *Concetto spaziale* from 1961.<sup>50</sup>

The latter was identified as *Omaggio a Gagarin* [FIG. 11]: a tribute to the Russian cosmonaut that consisted of a slash across black surface leading to new and unexplored spaces.<sup>51</sup>

42 On the photograph of Verheyen cf. Francioli, Della Casa, Namioka, Visser, *Gutai. Dipingere*, 155, fig. 5.

43 Lucio Fontana, n. t., in Fontana *Kapogurosshi*, n. p.

44 On the theme cf. Tiampo, *Gutai*, 88–92 and 127–36; Tijs Visser, "Mal communication," in Francioli, Della Casa, Namioka, Visser, *Gutai. Dipingere*, 14–23.

45 CRSDA, cf. no. 60 A 1.

46 Anne Rana, "Spirit and Space Material: the experiments of Gutai and

Fontana," in *Lucio Fontana Ambienti/ Environments*, exh. cat., ed. Marina Pugliese, Barbara Ferriani, and Vicente Todolí (Mousse, 2018), 75–81. On the participation of the Gutai artists in Turin cf. Turina, "Una Torino autre," 53.

47 *Gutai* 14, 1965.

48 CRSDA, cf. no. 60 O 27.

49 CRSC, cf. no. 59–60 N 26. I believe that with respect to what is indicated in CRSC, the work in Osaka could be identified as 59-60 N 44.

50 CRSDA, cf. no. 61 O 59.

FIG. 10  
View of the exhibition  
*Fontana to Kapogurosshi*  
/ *Lucio Fontana Giuseppe*  
*Capogrossi*, June 1–20, 1964,  
Osaka, Gutai Pinacotheca.



FIG. 11  
*Concetto spaziale*, 1961.  
Private collection.



51 Cf. "Gagārin ni sasagu" in Takiguchi, *Fontana*, 76, where it is indicated as part of the collection of the Gutai Pinacotheca.

## LUCIO FONTANA AND ZEN

The vividness of this *Taglio* harkens back to a Zen theme as well. If in 1963 on the pages of *Quadrum* Pierre Rouve had defined Fontana's work with his *Tagli* "the rigid austerity of a ritual movement," at the Venice Biennale in 1966 Gillo Dorfles described Fontana's room as "almost monastic (a sort of 'Zen' monasticism where the void and the asymmetric are dominant)." Likewise, Palma Bucarelli, when she introduced Fontana in Japan in 1967, wrote that "it certainly cannot be denied that the immediacy with which Fontana reacts to the stimulus of the exterior world is in some ways similar to the swiftness and lightness of the image in Zen art."<sup>52</sup>

The Fondazione Lucio Fontana holds a work by a Zen master, the monk and painter named Tōrei Enji (1721–1792), who portrayed a rod that he made with a single stroke of the brush accompanied by a calligraphy [FIG. 12]. It remains unknown when this work entered Fontana's collection, perhaps as a gift he received from a Japanese visitor, or from Tapié.<sup>53</sup> Undoubtedly, the artist was able to observe the works of Tōrei and of other monks in Milan in December 1959 at the exhibition dedicated to Zen painting, which included pieces conceived to disseminate the teachings of the doctrine.<sup>54</sup> Tapié had also added to his *Continuité et avant-garde au Japon* the rod of Zen master Nakahara Nantembō (1839–1925), who was also esteemed by Yoshihara.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, at the same 1958 Biennale where Fontana met Takiguchi, Mark Tobey was awarded the "Premio Comune di Venezia per un pittore" also introducing his very recent *Space Rituals*, which had already been seen by the Stadler, the gallery directed by Tapié where Fontana had shown his work in 1959.<sup>56</sup>

- 52 Pierre Rouve, "Lucio Fontana," *Quadrum* 14 (1963): 50. Gillo Dorfles, "L'indefinito inconoscibile: Lucio Fontana" in Gillo Dorfles, *Inviato alla Biennale*, ed. Anna Luigia De Simone (Libri Scheiwiller, 2010), 335; Palma Bucarelli, "Introduction," in *Gendai Itaria*, 7. Cf. also Helen Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties. Interaction between East and West* (Waanders Publishers, 1996); Alexandra Munroe, ed., *The Third Mind. American Artists Contemplate Asia 1860-1989*, exh. cat. (Guggenheim, 2009); Gregory P.A. Levine, *Long Strange Journey. On Modern Zen, Zen Art and Other Predicaments* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2017).
- 53 The inscription reads: "Those who fear this thing, go to Heaven. Tōrei." I wish to thank Muto Tamayo for their help in deciphering the characters. For a similar inscription cf. Stephen Addiss, *The Art of Zen* (H.N. Abrams, 1989), 150, fig. 82. Cf. also Gaspare Luigi Marccone, *Lucio Fontana. Mecenate Collezionista Militante*

- (Electa-Fondazione Lucio Fontana, 2025), 27–28, 81.
- 54 *Pittura Zen dal secolo XVII al secolo XIX*, exh. cat. (Del Turco, 1959). The exhibition had continued on to the Centro San Fedele, Milan from December 3 to 20, 1959. The works of Tōrei cf. *Pittura Zen*, 40–42, cats. 54–59; *Il bastone del maestro Tê-shan* (*Pittura Zen*, 41, cat. 56, and fig. 30) is similar to the work at the Fondazione Lucio Fontana. On Zen painting and US collecting cf. Yūji Yamashita, ed., *Kaette kita zenga: Amerika Gittā Ieren fusai Korekushon kara / Zenga: The Return from America. Zenga from the Gitter-Yelen Collection*, exh. cat. (Asano Kenkyūjo, 2000).
- 55 Cf. Michel Tapié and Tore Haga *Continuité et avant-garde au Japon* (Edizioni d'arte Fratelli Pozzo, 1961), n. p. On Yoshihara and Nantembō cf. Westgeest, *Zen in the Fifties*, 197–99.
- 56 On Tobey at the Stadler (January 17–31, 1958) cf. C. Delloye, "Tobey, Appel,"

Fontana's *Tagli* conversed with this cultural climate facilitating a "ritual" and spiritual interpretation of these results: as Crispolti noted later, one can perhaps identify therein a "peremptoriness that is wholly irreversible in the concentration of an act almost of 'zen' rarefaction."<sup>57</sup>



FIG. 12  
Work by Tōrei Enji, 18th  
century. Milan, Fondazione  
Lucio Fontana.

- Aujourd'hui. Art et architecture* 16 (March 1958): 37. Cf. also Phyllis Hanyang Zong, "Learning from 'The East': Mark Tobey's 'White Writing' and the Shaping of American Abstract Expressionism," *Venezia Arti* 33 (2024): 89–105; C. Di Stefano, "Biennale 1958: Il Leone d'Oro a Mark Tobey e la consacrazione dell'arte di tipo americano," *Venezia Arti* 24 (2014): 47–51.
- 57 "Oltre l'Informale. Anni Sessanta," in *Lucio Fontana*, exh. cat., ed. Enrico Crispolti and Rosella Siligato (Electa, 1998), 241.

Another one of Tōrei's calligraphies was published in *D'Ars Agency* in 1965 in an essay on Zen painting by Takemoto Tadao: The author affirmed that "in spite of its apparent simplicity, [it was] endowed with strength as disconcerting as that of modern art." Contiguously there was an inscription by Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1769) representing the sinogram *mu*, as "all Zen art consists in attempting to arouse consciousness of the Void." A 1957 tempera by Tobey was present, but also appearing above the sinogram was *Le chiese di Venezia*,<sup>58</sup> with no mention of Fontana in the text. Yet the comparison with a work by the master Zen Bankei Yōtaku (1622–1693) depicting a circle, the *ensō*, resulted to be visually stringent [FIG. 13].<sup>59</sup>

This element had been defined during the exhibition on Zen painting as "a symbol of identity of the void and the universe of the being and of supreme wisdom." The *ensō* was also visible on the cover of the text by Alan Watts *The Way of Zen* published in Italian by Feltrinelli in 1960 and illustrated with Zen paintings seen

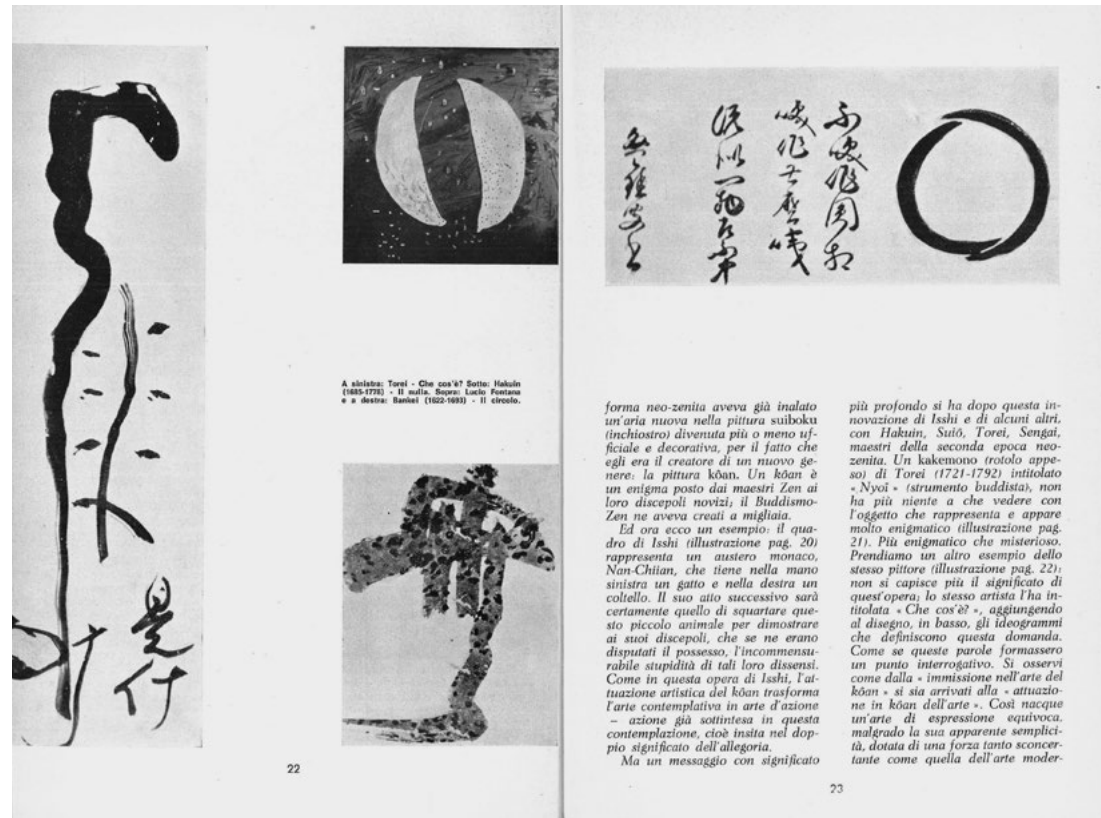


FIG. 13

Works by Tōrei Enji, Lucio Fontana, Hakuin Ekaku and Bankei Yōtaku (in Tadao Takemoto, "Un'arte sconosciuta. Lo Zen," *D'Ars Agency*, VI, 1 [January–April 1965]).

58 CRSDA, cf. no. 61 O 48.

59 Tadao Takemoto, "Un'arte sconosciuta.

Lo Zen," *D'Ars Agency* VI, 1 (January–April 1965): 20–25.

in Milan in 1959, as well as at the exhibition of another Zen master, Sengai Gibon (1750–1837), held at the Poldi Pezzoli museum in Milan in 1962.<sup>60</sup> These observations recall the words that Fontana said to Lonzi at a later date: "And my art is also carried towards this purity, towards this philosophy of nothingness, which isn't a nothing of destruction, but a nothing of creation."<sup>61</sup>

The motif of the circle also appeared in Fontana's oeuvre during these years: A white circle against a black background had also been published on the August 1962 cover of *Mizue*, a lithograph<sup>62</sup> that was later on display in Osaka in 1964 (see the work in the foreground in [FIG. 10])<sup>63</sup>, and its affinity with the circles of Yoshihara, for example with the painting that became the logo for the Gutai Pinacotheca [FIG. 14], a motif that the artist systematically explored since 1965, is especially intriguing.<sup>64</sup>

FIG. 14

View of the Gutai Pinacotheca: to the left a work by Yoshihara Jirō, *Untitled*, 1962 (in "Groupe Goutai, Osaka," *Aujourd'hui Art et Architecture*, 44 [January 1964]).

60 *Pittura Zen dal secolo XVII*, 26, cat. 4; Allan Watts, *La via dello Zen* (Feltrinelli, 1960); Daisetz T. Suzuki, ed., *Mostra di Gibon Sengai (Maestro Zen, sec. XVIII-XIX)*, exh. cat. (Del Turco, 1961).61 Carla Lonzi, *Self-Portrait*, trans. Allison Grimaldi Donahue (Divided Publishing, 2021), 282.62 Cf. Ruhé, Rigo, *Lucio Fontana. Graphics*,

44, no. L-22.

63 *Mizue* 689 (August 1962).64 On Yoshihara and Zen cf. Levine, *Long Strange Journey*, 148–50 and Masahito Haito, "Circles' and afterward: 1963-1972," in *Yoshihara Jirō-ten / Jiro Yoshihara. A Centenary Retrospective*, exh. cat. (The Asahi Shinbun, 2005), 186–87.

It does not seem farfetched to liken the canvas that is a homage to Gagarin, the first man in space [FIG. 11], to the iconic slash that crosses the black matter, *La luna a Venezia*<sup>65</sup> at the Gallerie d'Italia in Milan, and to the work of the Zen master Sengai, *La Luna*, exhibited at the Poldi Pezzoli in 1962. The latter bore an inscription that at the time was translated: "When I see (Reality's) shadow / Thrown into the emptiness of space, / How boldly defined / The moon / Of the autumnal night!" [FIG. 15]<sup>66</sup> Just as the Zen monk's cane leads to *satori*, Fontana's slash revealed new spaces: numerous artists from around the world recognized and continue to recognize in his practice a new vision of the world, that of an unavoidable twentieth-century master.

65 CRSDA, cf. no. 61 O 45.

66 Suzuki, *Mostra di Gibon Sengai*, 36, cat. 41, fig. 17. The English translation is from

*Travelling exhibition of Sengai in Europe, 1961—1963*, exh. cat. (Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai, 1961), n. p., cat. 42.

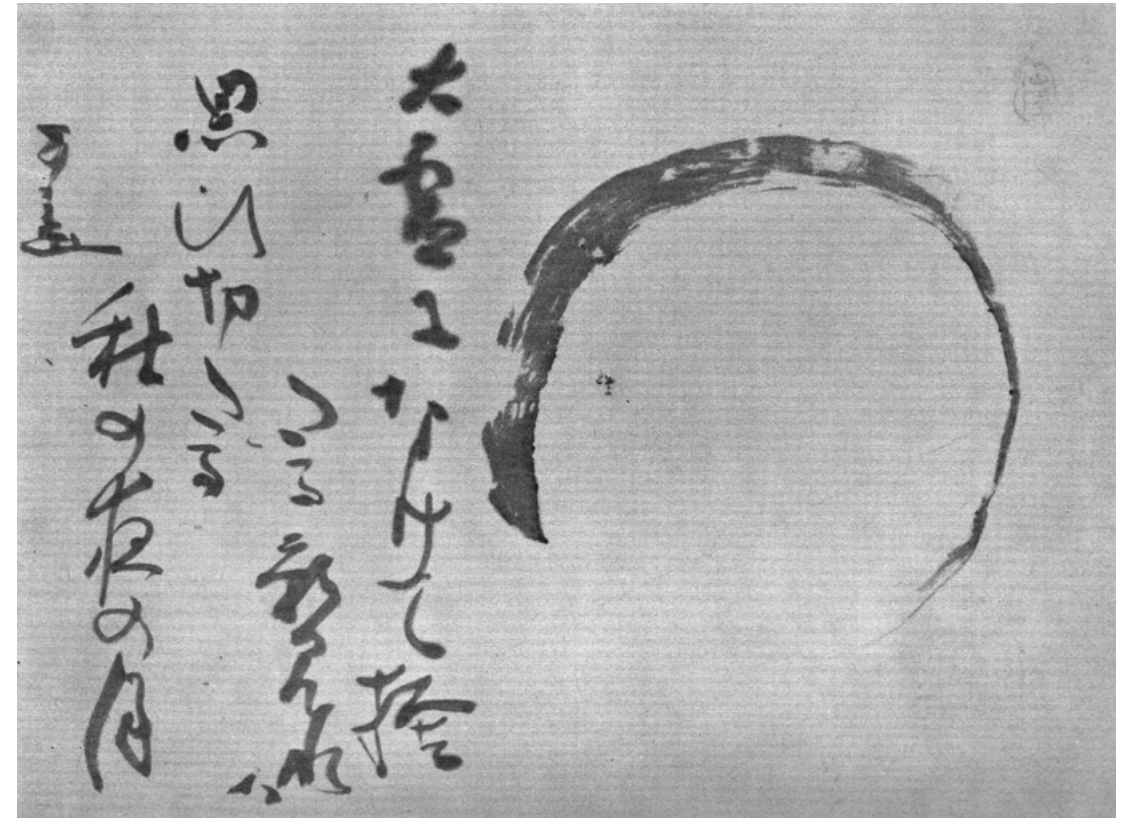


FIG. 15  
Sengai Gibon, *La Luna*  
(in *Mostra di Gibon Sengai*  
[*Maestro Zen, SEC. XVIII - XIX*], exh. cat., ed. Daisetz  
T. Suzuki [Lorenzo  
Del Turco, 1961]).

# LUCIO FONTANA AND MATERIALS, 1949–68. CONCETTI SPAZIALI

Barbara Ferriani

Although this contribution strays from the theme of reference, it has been included at the end of the section “International Success: The 1950s and 1960s” just as it was presented during the international study conference and in keeping with how it was organized.

Lucio Fontana's apprenticeship in his father's workshop and his academic training gave him a large amount of knowledge about materials and technique. It was also thanks to this “familiarity” with the materials that Fontana was able, over the course of his career, to carry out several lines of research that were all rather far-removed from each other. Ceramics, terracotta, mosaic, wood, metal, concrete, and plaster: as early as the 1930s the Argentine Italian master's work distinguished itself for its versatility, within a sphere that, at a formal level, ranged from figuration to abstraction. In the 1940s, with Spatialism, Fontana's research reached a turning point that would once again be emphasized by experimentalism at a technical level as well. One of the first expressions representing this research was *Ambiente spaziale a luce nera*<sup>1</sup> which Fontana made in 1949 for the Galleria del Naviglio in Milan. As the artist himself wrote: “The spatial environment was the first attempt to liberate the viewer from a static plastic form, the environment was completely black, with Black light. Upon entering, you were absolutely alone, each visitor reacted with their exact mood of the moment.”<sup>2</sup> Not only was it a wholly unprecedented artistic form; it also involved the use of media, Black light and the fluorescent colors, which were still not on the market in Italy. Fontana, as reported in an article published in February 1949,<sup>3</sup> had seen them used in Argentina for the costumes of a “fluorescent ballet” and had tried them out the previous year at the Cinema Arlecchino.<sup>4</sup> Below the screen the artist had painted several elements of the ceramic frieze portraying a *Battaglia*<sup>5</sup> with fluorescent colors. When the lights in the theater were dimmed, the ceramic element acquired a new appearance, and the fluorescent layers became visible thanks to the Black lights. The light itself became a medium, as a sign in space in *Struttura al neon per la IX Triennale di Milano*<sup>6</sup>, over 100 meters of white neon crystal tubes anchored to the ceiling of the Stairway of Honor of Palazzo dell'Arte under a “Giotto blue” velarium. Likewise, this was the backlighting for ceilings he began making in 1949 for private homes, shops, and exhibition pavilions in collaboration with architects and, last but not least, in some *Concetti spaziali*. We know that in 1956 the artist placed incandescent lights on the back of his *Concetto spaziale*,

1 CRSDA, cf. no. 48–49 A 2.

2 Letter to Enrico Crispolti, dated March 16, 1961 in Paolo Campiglio, ed., *Lucio Fontana. Lettere 1919-1968* (Skira, 1999), 167, letter 180.

3 *Il Nuovo Corriere* (Florence, February 5, 1949).

4 Paolo Campiglio, ed., *Itinerari di Lucio Fontana a Milano e dintorni*

(Charta, 1999); Paolo Campiglio, *Lucio Fontana. L'Arlecchino* (Charta, 2010).

5 CRSDA, cf. no. 48 A 3.

6 CRSDA, cf. no. 51 A 1.

7 CRSDA, cf. no. 56 BA 10. See also Barbara Ferriani, “Lucio Fontana. *Concetto spaziale (Crocifissione-Golgotha)*,” in Marina Pugliese, *Tecnica Mista. Materiali e procedimenti nell'arte del XX secolo*

*Crocifissione, Golgotha*,<sup>7</sup> while in 1958 he attached small neon lights on the back of some *Concetti spaziali*, both in the *Buchi*<sup>8</sup> and in the *Teatrini* series, so that the light would not only modulate the surfaces by exploiting the reflecting properties of the material, but also emanate from the back of the painting.<sup>9</sup> And he again used light to achieve pioneering “spatial” effects. He did so in May 1952, on the occasion of the solo show at the Galleria del Naviglio in Milan, when the first *Concetto spaziale* was photographed using a slanted light source, and, a few months later, on the occasion of an experimental broadcast by the State broadcaster RAI, during which the light sources were projected through the “screens with holes” of some *Concetti spaziali*.<sup>10</sup>

Also dated to the late 1940s are the first works in which the artist expressed Spatialism in a pictorial dimension; this research would result in the series of the *Concetti spaziali*, that is, *Buchi*, *Pietre*, *Barocchi*, *Gessi*, *Inchiostri*, *Tagli*, *Olii*, and *Teatrini*.

But although these cycles were studied in depth, little was known about the nature of the materials that Fontana used.

Except for the series of the *Gessi* and the *Inchiostri*, it was believed that the artist had mainly used oil colors throughout the 1950s, and that only with the new *Tagli* series did he begin using cementite and water-based paint.

As a matter of fact, having had the opportunity to restore a significant number of works, I have come to the realization that among them there were layers that greatly differed and that were hard to trace back to oil. Moreover, present within the series of *Olii* were anomalies whose extent could not be overlooked. In accordance with the Fondazione Lucio Fontana, in 2012, thanks to Oscar Chiantore and his research team, a campaign to analyze twenty-eight works from different series was begun, whose results were previewed in 2009,<sup>11</sup> and published in 2012 in *Studies in Conservation*.<sup>12</sup> The studies continued over the years, and highly relevant among them were those carried out by Francesca Izzo of the Università Ca' Foscari in Venice, later published in the *Journal*

(Bruno Mondadori, 2006), 156–59.

8 CRSDA, cf. no. 58 B 1.

9 Ferriani, “Lucio Fontana. Concetto spaziale.”

10 RAI began broadcasting on January 3, 1954, however in previous years experimental programs were produced but never broadcasted.

11 Barbara Ferriani, Oscar Chiantore, Tommaso Poli, and Rebecca Ploegge “Lucio Fontana Between Tradition and Innovation,” in *Art d'aujourd'hui patrimoine de demain - Conservation et restauration des oeuvres contemporaines. 13es Journées d'études*

*de la SFIIC, Section française de l'Institut international de conservation*, ed. Marcel Stefanaggi and Régine Hocquette (INP, 2009): 179–85.

12 Oscar Chiantore et al., “Materials and Techniques in the Pictorial Oeuvre of Lucio Fontana,” *Studies in Conservation* 57, 2 (2012): 92–105.

13 Francesca Caterina Izzo, Barbara Ferriani, Klaas Jan Van den Berg, Henk Van Keulen, and Elizabetta Zendri, “20th Century Artists' Oil Paints: The Case of the *Olii* by Lucio Fontana,” *Journal of Cultural Heritage* 15, no. 5 (2014): 557–63.

of *Cultural Heritage* in 2014,<sup>13</sup> and, lastly, the article published in 2020, together with Luca Massimo Barbero, in *Science and Art*, edited by the Royal Society of Chemistry.<sup>14</sup> While it is relatively easy to identify the material used in a piece of ancient art, when we analyze works from the 1950s and 1960s the task is way more trickier one. Added to traditional oils and temperas are new formulations that cannot always be identified to the naked eye, also because they can change considerably depending on the way they were applied.

In the first *Concetti spaziali*, that is, in the first series of *Buchi*, Fontana punctures the surface of the paper and of the canvas, from which color is at first absent. He penetrates it from the front and the back using differently shaped awls. The canvas no longer demarcates the space, rather, it introduces a new dimension. In the cycle *Pietre* (1951–58), the artist applies fragments of colored glass to monochrome backgrounds with “holes” in them. Gradually, he elaborates these compositions, he overlaps colored layers, of different consistency and material yield, at times filling some of the “holes,” touching or partially covering the underlying layers, stones, and the transparent adhesive itself. In the *Barocchi* (1954–57) the material thickens, becoming almost sculptural. It embeds stones, glass, sequins, marble dust, and fragments of other reflecting materials.

While in the first works in the *Pietre* cycle, as described in the *catalogue raisonné*, the artist used oil,<sup>15</sup> [FIG. 1] as early as the following year he had replaced oil with alkyd paints<sup>16</sup> [FIG. 2]. This new type of paints was introduced on the market, for civil and military use, from the 1930s, but it did not enter the field of the arts until the late 1940s. How did alkyd color differ from oil? Alkyd paint consists of an oil-based formulation modified with alkyd resin which dried faster and had greater resistance. Alkyd had a glossy finish that was very similar to oil, but it provided better coverage, often requiring only a single application to achieve the desired results, whereas oil typically required multiple layers and longer drying times. However, totally unexpectedly, we found that, besides alkyd colors, Fontana also applied polyvinyl acetate-based paints, i.e., water-based paints. These at the time were still being experimented with and had just been introduced onto the market<sup>17</sup> [FIGS. 3–4]. Although industrial experiments with

14 Barbara Ferriani, Luca Massimo Barbero, and Francesca Caterina Izzo, 1949–1968. “*Concetti spaziali* by Lucio Fontana: A Historical-artistic and Technical Study,” in *Science and Art: The Contemporary Painted Surface*, ed. Antonio Sgamellotti, Brunetto

Giovanni Brunetti, and Costanza Miliani (The Royal Society of Chemistry, 2020): 39–66.

15 CRSDA, cf. no. 51 B 26 [FIG. 1].

16 CRSDA, cf. no. 52 P 5 [FIG. 2].

17 CRSDA, cf. nos. 52 P 7 [FIG. 3], 53 P 6 [FIG. 4].

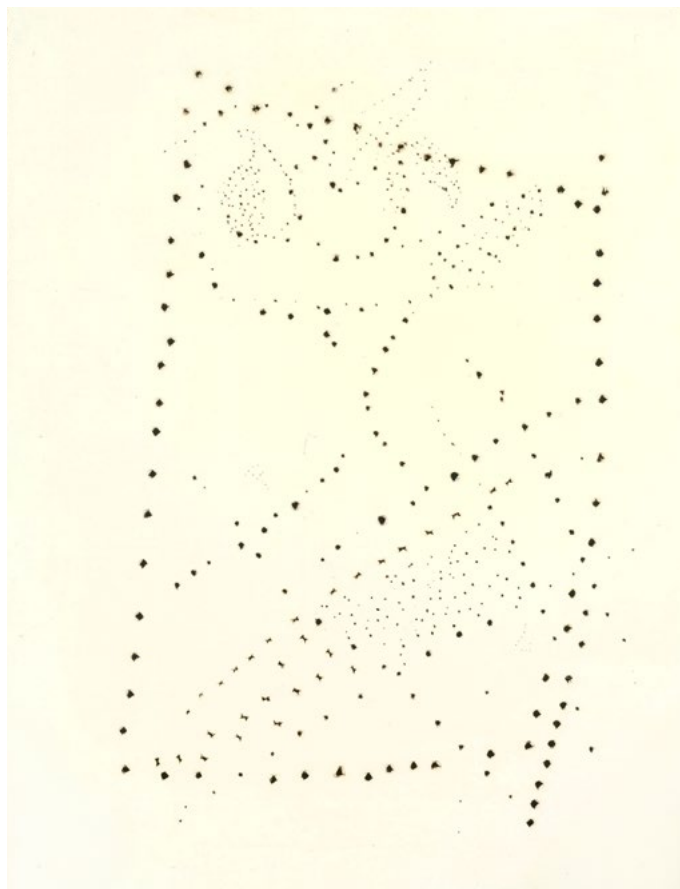


FIG. 1  
*Concetto spaziale*, 1951.  
 Private collection.

polyvinyl acetate had begun in the 1940s, it was not until the early 1950s that Rhodiatocce, a company founded by Montecatini and Rhône Poulenc, began the industrial production of emulsion of polyvinyl acetate. The well-known adhesive Vinavil, still widely used today, was introduced in 1952. Its name is an acronym for VINilAcetato and VILladossola, the name of the place in the province of Verbano–Cusio–Ossola where it was first manufactured. This new resin did not come in a solution; it instead came in the form of emulsion that could thus be diluted in water rather than in the usual organic, and rather toxic, solvents. It could be used both as an adhesive and as a medium to dissolve pigments and dyes. Dated to those same years, in fact, is the introduction of the first water-based paints, made with a polyvinyl acetate base, which were sold by Montedison, under the name Ducotone, and by the Colorificio Italiano Max Meyer, under the name Tintal.

Conceived as paint to be used both indoors and outdoors, Fontana anticipated by several years their widespread use in the arts. These were paints with totally innovative prerogatives, which the

FIG. 2  
*Concetto spaziale*, 1952.  
 Milan, Fondazione  
 Lucio Fontana.



artist exploited skillfully: They could be dissolved in water—hence, were not toxic—, they dried fast, and, once dry, they could not be dissolved in water anymore, thus allowing for the overlapping of several layers in a short period of time. Their consistency, which was already rather fluid, could vary, and they also had good adhesive properties, enabling them to embed stones, sequins, sand, and while remaining highly flexible over time.

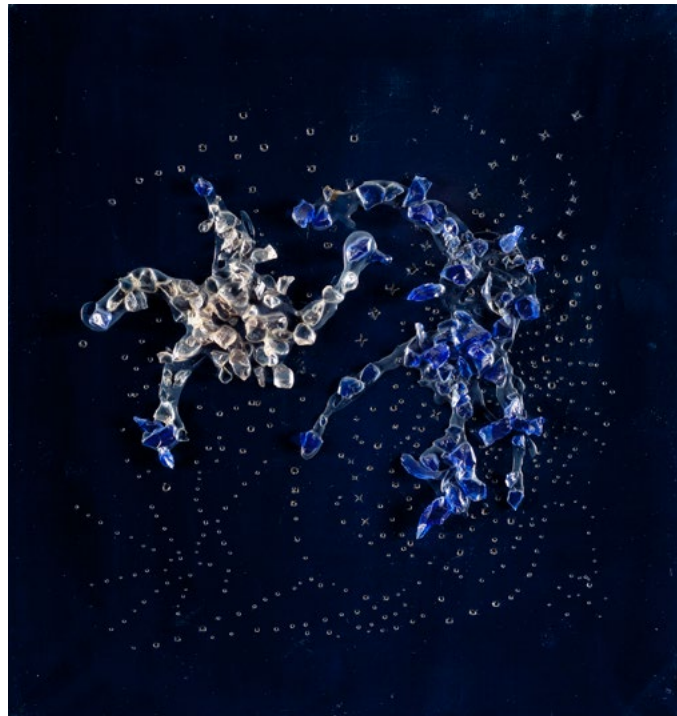
If we take as an example the work *Concetto spaziale* (1953 [FIG. 4]), the analysis carried out on it have allowed us to show that Fontana used an alkyd blue color for the background while experimenting with polyvinyl acetate in its formulation as a transparent adhesive to apply fragments of colored glass. Exploiting its transparency, the artist did not just use it as an adhesive, but also as an actual layer of paint. In the *Pietre* and *Barocchi* series, in which the artist built up surfaces that were increasingly complex and involved the overlapping of different layers, analysis reveal not only evidence of alkyd colors (glossy) and of the transparent adhesive, but also of water-based paints as well, which differ from the alkyd ones for their opacity<sup>18</sup> [FIG. 5].

18 CRSDA, cf. no. 53 P 7 [FIG. 5].



FIG. 3  
*Concetto spaziale*, 1952.  
 Milan, Fondazione  
 Lucio Fontana.

FIG. 4  
*Concetto spaziale*, 1953.  
 Private collection.



As stratigraphic analysis has also shown, the artist reworked some of the compositions in search of formal solutions but also of material effects linked to the use of different media. A case in point is *Concetto spaziale* (1952 [FIG. 3]), in which the presence underneath the alkyd blue superficial layer of a green water-based one bears witness to the search of a glossier finish with respect to the opaque one of the green water-based paint.

FIG. 5  
*Concetto spaziale*, 1953,  
 detail. Private collection.



Experiments with this new color continued over the years, and Fontana also applied it directly to the canvas, an approach traditionally avoided with oil since its acid components required a preliminary preparatory ground<sup>19</sup> [FIG. 6].

Exploiting this property, the artist used it in the series of *Tagli*, where he obtained matte surfaces without any signs of the brushwork, that revealed the underlying canvas weave. This paint enabled the artist to make slashes that had clean, sharp margins, devoid of craquelure.

Although all the paintings in this series were made with water-based paints, as the years passed, small percentages of acrylic colors, more widespread on the market from the mid-1960s, also appeared in the formulations, making the color slightly shinier. However, we do not know whether it was Fontana himself who added acrylic colors to the water-based paints, or whether he purchased paints already containing percentages of acrylic, added to improve their performance.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> CRSDA, cf. nos. 56 BA 12, 56 BA 13 [FIG. 6].

<sup>20</sup> CRSDA, cf. nos. 64 T 149, 64-65 T 79, 65 T 12.



FIG. 6  
*Concetto spaziale, L'inferno*.  
 1956. Private collection.

Fontana returned to oil in the late 1950s and began a new series of works referred to in the artist's *catalogue raisonné* as *Olii*. In a letter he wrote in 1961, Fontana stated as follows: "At the moment I am working a lot with oil, it is a novel, interesting experience, but I need to work much more to obtain results."<sup>21</sup>

Oil, the medium par excellence used by artists since the fifteenth century, and by Fontana from the beginning of his activity, became a new area for the artist's research. The oil colors were traditionally produced by mixing ground pigments with linseed oil, walnut oil, or poppy seeds oil, drying oils that made it possible to create a pictorial *impasto* that could be worked with over very long periods. Depending on the oils and pigments, oil paint can take from several weeks to several months to become dry to the touch, while the complete drying and polymerization process can

21 Letter to Jef Verheyen dated January 15, 1961 in Campiglio, Lucio Fontana, 180, letter 198.

take from several years to decades. Once again Fontana tried new methods of application. The color was applied with thick *impasto*, using not just a paintbrush but his fingers and spatulas of differently and varying sizes that allowed him to shape the material. Depending on how dry the paint was, completely different plastic effects could be achieved. When the color was still very fluid, the edges of the incisions were sinuous, and the pictorial *impasto* moved along the edges of the holes and gashes. As the *impasto* gradually began to dry, the material tended to be less and less malleable, and more uneven and sharper. The paint tubes found in the artist's studio and visible in historical photographs tell us that the artist used oil colors manufactured by the most famous brands of the era: *Colori ad Olio* by Maimeri, *Mussini* by Schmincke, *Rembrandt* by Talens, *Académie* by Bodson & Nelis, *Viktoria* by Schutzman, and also by local, less known manufacturers, such as Longo oil colors. In some of his works the artist added gold and silver gilding, at times incorporated into the painting itself and at other times applied in successive layers, exploiting the color underneath the way the ancient masters did, who generally applied the gold- or silverleaf to the colored bolo. These were not just oils or alkyd enamels but water-based colors as well. To increase the light effects on the surfaces, in particular in the series *Fine di Dio*, the artist applied sequins, embedding them in the oil painting or, at a later stage, mixing them into a transparent polyvinyl acetate adhesive, i.e. Vinavil.<sup>22</sup>

Thanks to the historical photographs [FIG. 8], it was possible to determine that *Concetto spaziale, La fine di Dio*<sup>23</sup> (1963 [FIG. 7]) was initially finished and signed by the artist in its green oil version, and that only later was it covered with golden sequins [FIG. 9]. These in fact also flows over onto the metal gold band that Fontana customarily applied to the width of the stretcher in these works. However, in the series of *Olii* and *Fine di Dio*, painted with oil colors, some peculiarities were observed. In the subseries of the *Venezie*, some of the paint application revealed mechanical and textural behavior that differed from that of the other *Olii*. In addition to the unusual rigidity of the paint itself, the emergence of whitish patinas was visible on the surface. Further analysis allowed us to determine that to shorten the drying time of the works, the artist had used polyester-based paints, containing the same resin that is present in alkyd colors, but with much lower percentages of oil<sup>24</sup> [FIGS. 10–11], if any. Specifically, these were paints that were mainly used at the time in the nautical and construction sectors, as they resisted

22 CRSDA, cf. nos. 63 FD 23, 63 FD 30 [FIG. 7], 64 FD 5.

23 CRSDA, cf. no. 63 FD 30 [FIGS. 7–9].

24 CRSDA, cf. nos. 61 O 39, 61 O 47 [FIG. 10], 61 O 48, 61 O 53 [FIG. 11], 61 O 58.



extreme weather conditions. But why use polyester instead of oil? In the fall of 1960 Fontana had been asked to prepare a series of works that were to be exhibited in a few months' time, in the summer of 1961 at Palazzo Grassi for the *Arte e contemplazione* show, and then in New York, at Martha Jackson Gallery. This meant that he didn't have time for the oil to dry, which, as we know, can take months if not years. After the short period of the *Venezie*, Fontana returned to oil, having clearly determined that this medium more than any other allowed him to achieve the desired results. In the series of *Olii*, the paint, even decades after it was made, shows an excellent state of conservation. In time, there is evidence of the craquelure due to the polymerization and natural aging of the paint layers, rather than their deterioration. That said, *Concetto spaziale*<sup>25</sup> (1960 [FIG. 12]) was an exception. Large and widespread craquelure tended to detach from the textile support; its color did not seem to be completely dried, and there was widespread wrinkling. What could have caused this? Gas chromatography and mass spectrometry has shown, in a wholly unexpected way, the presence of castor oil, a vegetable oil that, unlike traditional

25 CRSDA, cf. no. 60 O 81 [FIG. 12].

FIGS. 7-9  
*Concetto spaziale*,  
*La fine di Dio*, 1963, total,  
historical photo and detail.  
Private collection.



linseed, walnut, and poppy seed oil, is considered to be a non-drying oil.<sup>26</sup> That is why, after fifty years, the color had still not completely dried and there were signs of wrinkling. The castor oil must have been added by the manufacturers to the formulations of the oil colors to lower prices or simply to save money. Unfortunately, these adulterations have also been observed in the works of other artists, who clearly could not have predicted tampering of this kind. Another interesting case concerns a remarkable number of *Olii* made with pink impastos that in time have revealed changes in or a loss of the intensity of the colors. The first analyses showed how the fading could be due to the presence in the formulations of photo-sensitive organic dyes<sup>27</sup> that, depending on the combinations and the uniformity of the impasto, had more or less changed. On the other hand, it was more difficult to interpret some of the more localized light-hued stains that had initially been explained as accidental damage. Their presence in numerous works has however suggested further investigation that proved, again, that these alterations were due to the actual composition of the colors<sup>28</sup>

26 Izzo, Ferriani, Van den Berg, Van Keulen, Zendri, "20th Century Artists' Oil Paints."  
27 Antinolo Red B, also known as

Thioindigo Red.  
28 CRSDA, cf. no. 62 O 61 [FIGS. 13-14], and FLFA, cf. no. 1737/92.



FIG. 10  
 Concetto spaziale, Festa  
 sul canal Grande, 1961.  
 Private collection.



FIG. 11  
 Concetto spaziale,  
 Venice Moon, 1961. Milan,  
 Fondazione Lucio Fontana.



FIG. 12  
 Concetto spaziale, 1960.  
 Private collection.

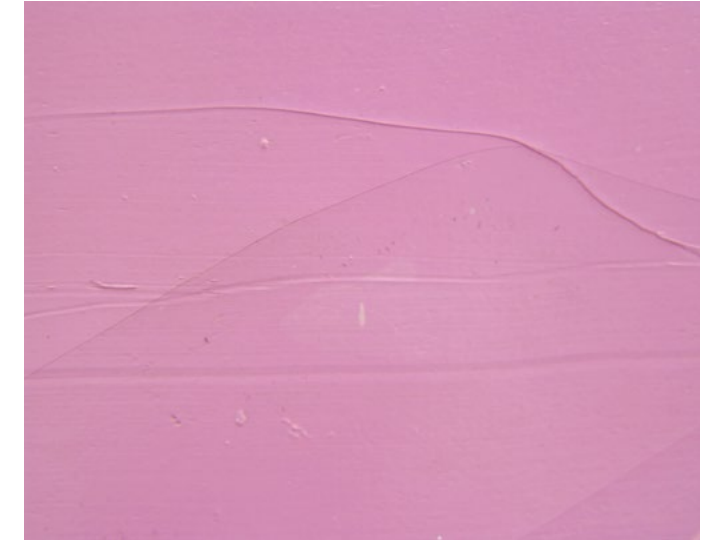
[FIGS. 13–14]. In particular, we determined the presence of high percentages of oleic acid, a feature of immature oils and, in these films as well, of a slow-drying oil, like rapeseed oil, as well as zinc oxide and metallic soaps. Also, in these cases the alterations were linked to the formulation of the colors that Fontana could not have known about. Of a different nature instead were the anomalies observed in some of the *Fine di Dio*. In this series of works, despite the prominence of voids, the paint layers are compact and well preserved, as are the edges of the holes and gashes.

On the contrary, in *Concetto spaziale, La fine di Dio*<sup>29</sup> (1963 [FIG. 15]) the edge of the holes and the gashes were not protruding only on the verso, as they usually are, but on the recto as well. What could have caused this peculiar physical-mechanical behavior? We asked ourselves this question and advanced several hypotheses. It might have been the presence of a non-drying oil, a color of a different nature, or the presence of sequins applied to the surface with a polyvinyl acetate adhesive. Analyses have shown that it was a drying oil, probably linseed oil, hence compatible with the other *Olii*. Furthermore, this behavior could not have been caused by the application of the sequins, as the same deformities were found in another black *Fine di Dio*, which did not have any sequins. It was

29 CRSDA, cf. no. 63 FD 23 [FIG. 15].



FIGS. 13-14  
 Concetto spaziale, 1962,  
 total and detail.  
 Private collection.



therefore hypothesized that the cause could be related to the way in which the oil was applied, in this case, to the extreme thinness of the paint layer.

But just as Fontana was experimenting with oil in all its possible manifestations, demonstrating his great skill at handling the most varied of materials, in the series of the *Teatrini* the artist delegated part of the execution to others. The shaped and lacquered frames of the *Teatrini* were carved, assembled, and spray-painted, with nitrocellulose varnish, by woodworkers and industrial painters, starting from Fontana's preparatory drafts. If we analyze the different finishings on the frames it would seem that they were made by more than one artisan. Some of them are very thin, allowing the veins of the wood to show through, while in others the veins are hidden by the preparatory layers. Similarly, the *Ellissi* were conceived for industrial, serial production, while uniqueness through the arrangement of the holes.

This new chapter in the artist's oeuvre concerning serial production, multiples, and collaborations—with Tosi, Squatriti, and Danese, among others—has yet to be explored, especially because, as Martha Buskirk states in *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art*, “the removal of the artist's hand, rather than lessening the importance of artistic authorship, makes the sure connection between work and artist that much more significant.”<sup>30</sup>

30 Martha Buskirk, “Introduction,” in *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (MIT Press, 2003), 3.

Absent from my presentation is an examination of the series of *Gessi* and *Inchiostri*. The determination of the materials and executive techniques related to these two series of works represents a considerable challenge, since the layers are often so thick that to isolate individual components is impossible. Although analyses were carried out on the ink bottles in Fontana's studio,<sup>31</sup> to this day we have been unable to identify the real composition of the layers applied by artist, which involve the coexistence of several materials. Thanks to increasingly sophisticated analytical techniques, and to the invaluable collaboration of university research centers, I hope we will be able to acquire elements that will further our understanding of this series of works.

31 Chiara Zaffino et al., "A Multi-technique Approach to the Chemical Characterization of Colored Inks in

Contemporary Art: The Materials of Lucio Fontana," *Journal of Cultural Heritage* 23 (2017): 87–97.

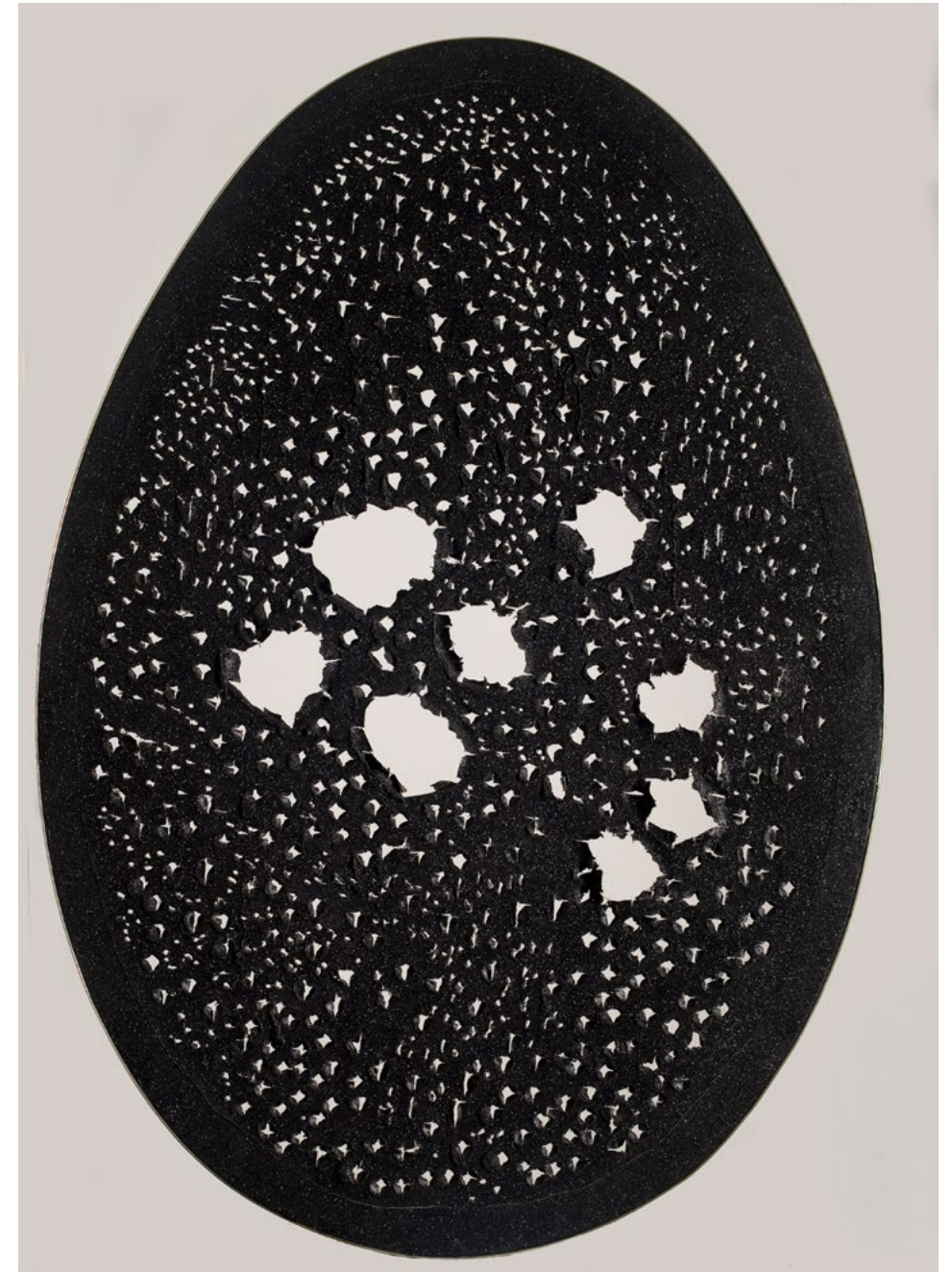


FIG. 15  
*Concetto spaziale, La fine di Dio*, 1963. Private collection.

EXHIBITING  
LUCIO FONTANA:  
EXHIBITION CRITERIA  
AS CRITICAL  
READINGS

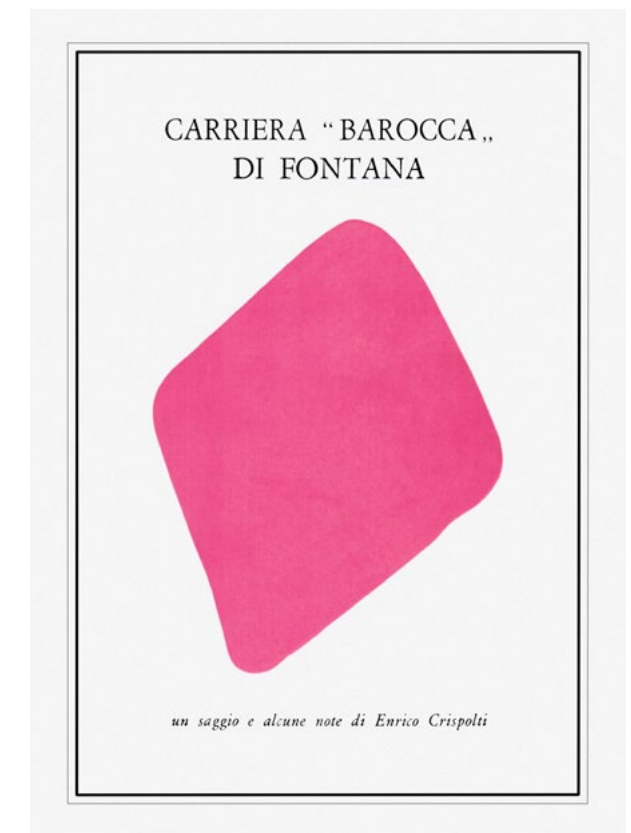
Luca Pietro Nicoletti  
Francesco Guzzetti  
Choghakate Kazarian  
Marina Pugliese  
Cristina Beltrami  
Gianni Caravaggio

# HOMAGE TO FONTANA 1963–71. ENRICO CRISPOLTI INTERPRETER OF FONTANA, BEFORE AND AFTER

Luca Pietro Nicoletti

The year 1963, in the sign of Lucio Fontana, is a pivotal year in the career of Enrico Crispolti (Rome, 1933–2018).<sup>1</sup> The two had met, and began corresponding as early as 1958, and from the following year the young Roman critic had started writing about the artist's work, compiling notes, comments, reconstructions, all the way to the first historiographic essay, in 1959, titled *Carriera "barocca" di Fontana*. The aim of the text was to reposition the artist in his long-term development and in the international movement of Art Informel. This first phase was completed in five years' time, allowing the young militant critic to sum things up by collecting all these texts in a book published by Vanni Scheiwiller as part of a series of notebooks of *Il Verri*, taking advantage of the pages of the magazine that were still at the printer's, with the same title as the aforementioned essay **FIG. 1**. However, Crispolti had more ambitious plans, as he had written to Fontana himself as early as October 22, 1960, when the idea of

**FIG. 1**  
Cover of Enrico Crispolti,  
*Carriera "barocca" di Fontana*  
(All'Insegna del Pesce  
d'Oro, 1963).



<sup>1</sup> For a profile on the scholar: Luca Pietro Nicoletti, "Crispoltian Workshop. Memo for an Intellectual Biography,"

in Luca Pietro Nicoletti, *Enrico Crispolti. Bibliografia ragionata 1951-2018* (Silvana Editoriale, 2024), 93–123.

a “critical notebook” was taking shape. “One of my dreams is to produce a large book on your work. This short one could be a foretaste of what is to come, within the more concrete field of the things that are now possible.”<sup>2</sup> Crispolti did not go into detail, and his intention perhaps did not yet reveal a clear and organic project in his plans, nor do we have an answer on this point. It is easy to imagine, however, that he had in mind something similar to the monumental volumes promoted by Ezio Gribaudo for the Turin publisher Fratelli Pozzo, for which Crispolti was writing a seminal book on *Il secondo Futurismo*, published in 1961,<sup>3</sup> and was working on an equally important monograph on Giacomo Balla—whose gestation dragged on for over a decade to eventually fizzle out—and with whom he would also produce, in 1964, the scandalous book on *Il “Concilio” di Vacchi*<sup>4</sup> and the bulky monograph on Corrado Cagli.<sup>5</sup> At the time, however, Crispolti still did not have a publishing house that would welcome a demanding project like the one outlined in his letter: The Turin publishing house, in fact, was already planning to publish Michel Tapié’s *Devenir de Fontana*, a prelude to the artist’s first solo show in New York, which would be released in 1961.

And yet, in 1963 Crispolti had succeeded in publishing a long and engaging text about the artist, published on several occasions with partial or substantial changes that are proof of its centrality for the subsequent exegetic elaboration. As he had previously done with Alberto Burri, in the summer of that year Crispolti organized the first major retrospective titled *Omaggio a Lucio Fontana* in the spaces of the sixteenth-century castle in L’Aquila, within the larger framework of *Aspetti dell’arte contemporanea*,<sup>6</sup> the exhibition organized as a diptych to *Alternative Attuali*, in 1962, as it would once again be named in 1965 and in 1968<sup>7</sup> [FIG. 2]. In an exhibition that was meant to serve as a moment of critical and historiographical reflection on a series of problems in the art of that particular moment—at the same time offering the chance to include in the catalog a series of documentary dossiers of fundamental importance to an

2 Enrico Crispolti, *Carriera “barocca” di Fontana. Taccuino critico 1959-2004 e Carteggio 1958-1967*, ed. Paolo Campiglio (Skira, 2004), 337.

3 Enrico Crispolti, *Il secondo Futurismo. Torino 1923-1938* (Edizioni d’Arte Fratelli Pozzo, 1961).

4 Enrico Crispolti, *Il “Concilio” di Vacchi* (Edizioni d’Arte Fratelli Pozzo, 1964).

5 Enrico Crispolti and Giuseppe Marchiori, eds., *Corrado Cagli* (Edizioni d’Arte Fratelli Pozzo, 1964).

6 Enrico Crispolti, “Omaggio a Fontana,” in *Aspetti dell’arte contemporanea*, exh. cat., ed. Antonio Bandera, Sandro Benedetti, Enrico Crispolti,

and Paolo Portoghesi (Edizioni dell’Ateneo, 1963), 55–95.

7 On the genesis of these exhibitions: Luca Pietro Nicoletti, “L’Aquila 1962. ‘Alternative Attuali’ e l’idea di ‘mostra-saggio,’” *Ricerche di S/Confine* VI, no. 1 (2015): 105–19; Luca Pietro Nicoletti, “La mostra come critica in atto. *Alternative Attuali* 1965,” in *Esposizioni*, ed. Francesca Castellani, Francesca Gallo, Vanja Strukelj, Francesca Zanella, and Stefania Zuliani, *Ricerche di S/Confine*, dossier no. 4 (2018): 42–49; Giuseppe Di Natale, ed., *Alternative Attuali. L’esperienza di Enrico Crispolti all’Aquila. 1962-1968*, (Quodlibet, 2024).

FIG. 2  
Cover of Enrico Crispolti and Antonio Bandera, eds., *Aspetti dell’arte contemporanea*, exh. cat. (Edizioni dell’Ateneo, 1963).



understanding of the individual artists and their stories—Fontana, along with Corrado Cagli, the recipient of the other “tribute” in that edition, played the role of pioneer on whom the fate of the most exciting research at that moment in time was to be based.<sup>8</sup> Whereas in 1962 Burri was a pillar for a generation of younger artists, in 1963 Crispolti had insistently turned his gaze toward the substantial continuity of the research that had unfolded between the 1930s and the 1960s, crossing the watershed of the war and allowing the energy of that situation to emerge. At a time when Crispolti was working tirelessly on a project that would see the light in 1971 as *L’informale. Storia e poetica*—and the imminent publication as *Poetica dell’Informale* having already been announced in 1961 [FIG. 3]—thinking about Fontana was thus a crucial turning point to be able to understand the roots of the most vital movement of

8 On these two parallel exhibitions see: Denis Viva, “Retrospective attuali: omaggio a Fontana e altri pionieri dell’arte attuale (1963),” in Di Natale, *Alternative*

*Attuali*, 77–83; Raffaele Bedarida, *La mostra Omaggio a Cagli (1963) e la formazione del metodo Crispolti*, in Di Natale, *Alternative Attuali*, 84–90.

the postwar years, and which historical and formal foundations had laid the groundwork for that explosive new state of research, helping to verify on the body of the works his own critical reading: Therein lay not only the decoding of the style and of the individual artistic reasoning, but also the understanding of an overall picture that was explained in terms of dialectical comparison.

For this reason, Crispolti seemed to always have this text with him, rewriting and republishing it with cuts and additions before and above all after Fontana's death in the fall of 1968. It could be found for the first time that very year, some of the longer quotations cut out, titled "L'avventura di Fontana" in the pages of *Arte Illustrata*, which also reserved for the artist an intense cover featuring the

FIG. 3  
Advertising for Enrico Crispolti, *Poetica dell'Informale* (in *Alternative Attuali*, exh. cat., ed. A. Bandera and Enrico Crispolti [Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1962]).



crater of a bright green *Olio* in the foreground.<sup>9</sup> On that occasion, the critic had replaced the original introduction with a new paragraph titled "Coerenza di Fontana"—later published again independently with considerable additions as *Una incessante avventura creativa* to introduce the monographic supplement dedicated to the artist by NAC<sup>10</sup>—and two final sections that discussed Fontana's research after 1963: "*I teatrini*" and *Ultimissime sculture e tavole*. The article published in NAC would go on to have another life of its own, reappearing at the end of the same year as "La tristezza dell'esaltazione" in the pages of *Pan*,<sup>11</sup> and slightly abridged in *Il Margutta*.<sup>12</sup>

Hence, from one publication to another, Crispolti had laid the groundwork for the last and definitive revisitation of that text, transformed in 1971 into *Omaggio a Lucio Fontana*, published by Beniamino Carucci<sup>13</sup>—who was also publishing *L'informale*—dedicated to his students at the Fine Arts Academy in Rome. At this point, the scholar turned that original text into a fully-fledged work of montage: He went back to the text he had written in 1963, proposing once again the two new sections from 1968, nonetheless keeping the 1970s article in NAC as a foreword, and adding a further appendix and comment on the monographs by Paolo Fossati and Guido Ballo published after the artist's death. Still not content, Crispolti then enriched the book by dividing his treatise with a large group of illustrations and documents, thus creating a veritable updated visual discourse on the reflections that the critic had matured in the meantime, and using extensively for the first time the letters the artist had written to him, reproduced in facsimile as a holograph document as proof of the ideas, reflections, and memories that Fontana had put down on paper as requested by the young historian of contemporary art. Crispolti, in short, was trying to assemble a veritable canon of sources using the archive papers that he himself had produced, not for narcissistic reasons, but as a firsthand document of a self-narrative of Fontana himself [FIG. 4].

The 1963 essay, at the same time, was presented as an *Elenco commentato delle opere* (Annotated list of works), an understatement in fact; it almost resembled a long note accompanying the works on display, of which the captions are disseminated throughout the text, thus guaranteeing a direct correspondence, and providing a rhythm to the reading. This fragmentation would eventually disappear, but it is worthwhile glancing at the scale of values

9 CRSDA, cf. no. 62 O 32. Enrico Crispolti, "L'avventura di Fontana," *Arte Illustrata* I, 7/12 (July–December 1968): 58–85.

10 Enrico Crispolti, "Una incessante avventura creativa," NAC 31 (February 15, 1970): 4–6.

11 Enrico Crispolti, "La tristezza

dell'esaltazione," *Pan* (December 1970): 99–102.

12 Enrico Crispolti, "Lucio Fontana: sfida all'immagine," *Il Margutta* V, 4 (April 1972): 2–7.

13 Enrico Crispolti, *Omaggio a Lucio Fontana* (B. Carucci, 1971).

16-3-61

Caro Crispolti

Grazie per la tua lettera domandata? con un po' di confusione come il solito ti rispondo, tu cerca di sbrigliare un po' la matassa - I primi "buchi", volgarmente chiamati "buchi", ma il termine tecnico sono "Concetti spaziali", sono dell'anno, 1949.

L' "Ambiente Spaziale", è pure del 1949 - L'ambiente spaziale è stato il primo tentativo di liberarsi da una forma plastica statica, l'ambiente era completamente nero, con luce nera di Wood, entrambi trovandosi completamente isolati con te stesso, ogni spettatore reagiva col suo stato d'animo del momento, precisamente, non influenzati l'uno con oggetti o forme impostati come merce in vendita, l'uno era con se stesso, colla sua coscienza, colla sua ignoranza, colla sua materia, ect ect. L'importante era non fare la solita mostra di quadri e sculture, ed entrare nella potenza spaziale - subito dopo feci i "buchi" la rottura di una dimensione! il motto, ect. ect. -

Prima del '50 lavoravo molto per gli architetti per decorazioni però avevo già eseguito alcune sculture, come la prima del '1947, chiamati, concetti spaziali, insomma sempre alla ricerca di una forma o di un "concetto" che rendesse piacevole il "Manifesto Spaziale".

Do sto lavorando effettivamente molto, naturalmente sempre coi miei maldesti "dubbi", se mi fanno continuamente fare grosse acrobazie non certe adatte alla mia età, verrà il giorno se mi deciderò a fare un "buco", giovedì maliero!!! Spero di vederti presto a Milano con oscuri

tuo Fontana

FIG. 4  
Letter from Lucio Fontana  
to Enrico Crispolti,  
March 16, 1961.

with which the scholar had proportioned the space and depth of analysis reserved for each period and for the individual cycles. Of course, there was a basic limit constituted by the works he had managed to take to L'Aquila, and that at times did not correspond to his and the artist's own wishes. Unlike Burri in 1962, Fontana had personally been engaged in different ways in helping Crispolti, acting as an intermediary with Fausto Melotti to ensure his participation in the exhibition on the pioneers of abstract art,<sup>14</sup> and, above all, in indicating the most important pieces in order to offer an overall picture of his work. It would not be possible, for instance, to have for the show *Golgotha*<sup>15</sup> from the Boschi-Di Stefano collection, which the Milanese engineer believed was too fragile; he would, in fact, limit himself to sending a large-scale plaster work titled *La bara del marinaio*.<sup>16</sup> Nor could they have *Le vergini*, a loan that was hoped would come from the architect Luigi Figini, but that did not.<sup>17</sup> In spite of this, it was possible to put together around eighty pieces including drawings, paintings, and sculptures, dated from 1930 to the more recent works, as well as the first "eggs" of the *Fine di Dio* series, the paint practically still wet.<sup>18</sup> And it was equally immediate, at first glance, to be aware of the junctures that the scholar had at that specific moment in time given the most importance to: In addition to underscoring the continuity between the season of the 1930s and the developments subsequent to his return to Italy in 1947, elements that were not at all taken for granted in the criticism of those years, there was a veritable reflection of the first season in the second, which made Fontana a fully-fledged forerunner of Art Informel. Some of the assumptions were not new. As concerned the "beginnings," a topic that Crispolti had contemplated with regard to Cagli in 1963, he had already written an essay in 1959, for example. Just as there was nothing new, for anyone who had already read the text, about the comparison with Arturo Martini, returned to here with a new look in light of later readings: In addition to once again drawing

14 "Dear Dottor Crispolti, my friend Fontana informs me that you wish to include a few works of mine from the 'heroic' period in the exhibition that you are organizing in Rome [sic] documenting abstract art. I have managed to rescue very little from those years (my studio was destroyed), but the very few works that have survived are at Your disposal. I wish to thank you for remembering me. Yours, Melotti" (Fausto Melotti to Enrico Crispolti, February 9, 1963, Rome, Archivio Enrico Crispolti, "Aspetti dell'arte contemporanea").

15 CRSDA, cf. no. 56 BA 10.  
16 CRSDA, cf. no. 57 G 23. Antonio Boschi to Enrico Crispolti, June 11, 1963, Rome, Archivio Enrico Crispolti, "Aspetti dell'arte contemporanea."  
17 CRSDA, cf. no. 31 SC 1 Adele Figini to Enrico Crispolti, May 2, 1963, Rome, Archivio Enrico Crispolti, "Aspetti dell'arte contemporanea."  
18 Cf. Luca Pietro Nicoletti, "The Story of the *Fine di Dio* in Art Criticism of the Sixties and Seventies / Cronaca della *Fine di Dio* nella critica fra anni Sessanta e Settanta," in Lucio Fontana. *Fine di Dio*, ed. Enrico Crispolti (Forma Edizioni, 2017), 136-89.

from Edoardo Persico and Duilio Morosini, in this case Crispolti had used some of Giulio Carlo Argan's reflections on Martini of 1939. From Argan's work, for instance, he had gotten the definition of "plastic impromptu" to interpret Fontana's sculpture from the 1930s and subsequent repercussions, while taking into account the contribution of the "primordial practice" that brought with a sort of "mud of the origins."<sup>19</sup> This also meant, for the young Roman scholar, returning to and again discussing the dichotomy that offset the lesson of Adolfo Wildt to that, proposed by Persico, of Archipenko. For Crispolti, fresh from his intense studies devoted to Futurism in the meantime, that comparison no longer seem so suited to understanding the generation that went from Boccioni<sup>20</sup> to Arturo Martini and Mino Rosso; conversely, it was crucial for the Argentine Italian artist. On the contrary, Crispolti instead underscored the central role of the *Uomo nero* as the juncture of Fontana's definitive emancipation from Wildt [FIG. 5], with forms of "unequivocal gravity (today we would say in the manner of Wotruba)."<sup>21</sup> And however much he agreed with Persico that it was a question of "primitivism that was slightly ingenuous and arbitrary," Crispolti emphasized that it was still different from the "culturalist archaicism" of the time emblematically represented by Martini. However, for him primitivism went from being "ingenuous" to "instinctive" and read in terms halfway between the Informel and the language of sculpture: "massive in a concrete sense, physically and not ideally, as primeval as original magma, and not as protohistorical."<sup>22</sup>

The most original point of this collation, however, could be found in the long piece dedicated to the *Scultura spaziale* of 1947,<sup>23</sup> [FIG. 6] that is, the "anular sculpture" presented at the 24. Venice Biennale in 1948; made up of tiny plaster balls placed one atop the other in small heaps, then painted with black cementite and arranged in a crown. A work, along with *Uomo atomico*<sup>24</sup> from the same year, that Crispolti would always assign great importance to. To the former, for instance, he would attribute a central position on various exhibition occasions, eventually arranging it in conversation with some of the *Nature* on the occasion of the room he was given together with Mino Rosso at *Volterra '73*. There, the two artists indicated the start of another discourse that would be

19 Enrico Crispolti, "Omaggio a Fontana," now in Crispolti, *Carriera "barocca" di Fontana*, 44; the same passage is in Crispolti, *L'avventura di Fontana*, 61.

20 On this theme: Ilaria Cicali, "Umberto Boccioni e Alexander Archipenko: un dialogo in contrappunto," *L'Uomo Nero* 14–15 (2018): 152–67.

21 CRSDA, cf. no. 30 SC 1. Enrico Crispolti, "Omaggio a Fontana," now in Crispolti, *Carriera "barocca" di Fontana*, 44.

22 Crispolti, *Carriera "barocca" di Fontana*, 43.

23 CRSDA, cf. no. 47 SC 1.

24 CRSDA, cf. no. 47 SC 2.

FIG. 5  
*Uomo nero*, 1930.  
Location unknown.



essential to Crispolti's future reflections. Even before then, in the essay he wrote in 1959 and especially in the preface to the Italian edition of the book by Werner Hofmann on twentieth-century sculpture, he had likened Fontana's work to Martini's *Atmosfera di una testa* (1944),<sup>25</sup> returning to a comparison that had been proposed in the meantime by Maurizio Calvesi as well, on the occasion of the exhibition in Livorno in 1963. For the latter he would instead reserve a full-page reproduction of the 1968 article, almost as if to give an even more explicit direction to the reading: Fontana's lesson, in that situation, also had something to say about the heated debate on New Figuration, situated at the roots of the question along with other masters of the European Informel [FIG. 7].

25 Enrico Crispolti, "Introduzione," in Werner Hofmann, *La scultura del XX secolo* (Universale Cappelli, 1962), 5–32.

That photograph taken against the light and slightly from below did in fact make the *Uomo atomico* appear ominous and daunting; it could cause a short circuit with some of the images by César or Germaine Richier that Crispolti had already wondered about, and that he would return to writing about later.<sup>26</sup> In the essay he wrote in 1963, expanding his reflections from 1959, the term of dialectical comparison remained Dubuffet:

Sculpture is articulated in space with absolute freedom, objectively included in a spatio-temporal condition that is empirical and objective, a-perspectival. Sculpture is

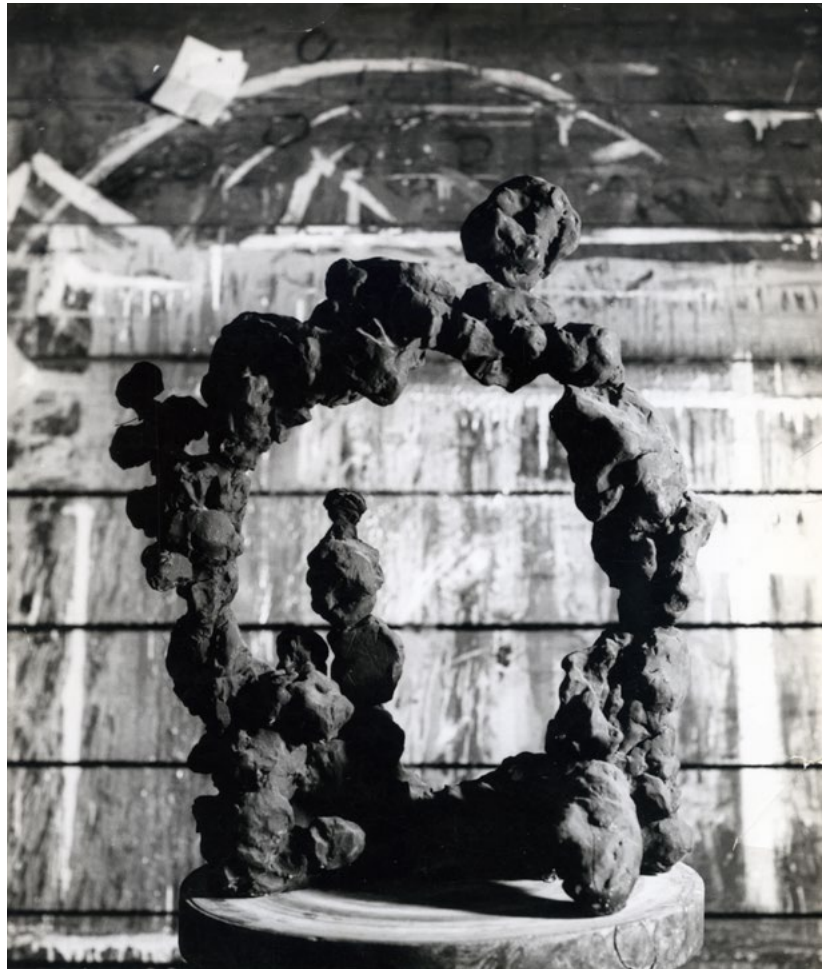


FIG. 6  
*Scultura spaziale*, 1947.  
Private collection.

26 Cf. Enrico Crispolti, "Una personale di César a Parigi," *Il Verri* III, no. 5 (October 1959): 96–97, reproduced in Enrico Crispolti, "Fenomenologia di 'nuova

figurazione," I, *Sociologia e iconologia del "Pop Art" e altri studi* (F. Fiorentino, 1975), 181–84; Enrico Crispolti, *Richier* (Fabbri, 1966) ("I Maestri della Scultura," 65).

FIG. 7  
*Uomo atomico*, 1947.  
Private collection.



concretely present, and it aspires to be entirely tangible, to not be a surrogate, in its material concreteness, in the ideality of the image. But, at the same time, it tends to avoid the purely material and empirical designation in a Dubuffetian sense. Hence, material as tangible object, implementing, however, in the use of a concrete means, a fantastic invention, a direct allusion to an energetic, telluric-cosmological power.

To grasp the material reference in Fontana's work, for this proof (but we have already said the same for the panels, in the years right after 1930, and for the other sculptures of that time) we need to consider the fact that for him the material is indeed energetic charge, virtual potential in an action-based sense, and it is therefore the entire more artificial side, the one most directly allusive to such a condition of instability and virtuality, on the verge of being realized, which prevails over the materialism, in a consideration of the existential spatio-temporal situation. Whereas, for instance, in Dubuffet the material is no doubt that which is most pertinent to a notional patrimony of the most common everyday experience, an experience that in fact refuses, or that completely ignores the effects and the

world of modern technology, an experience filled not with energetic virtualities but with impressions, humors, deposits, memories, sedimented in the long existential wear. And while Fontana's *imagerie* is entirely articulated in new hypotheses, in the discovery of means of expression that allude to further future possibilities, even technological conquests, revealed at the level of an actual unprecedented mythicization, Dubuffet's *imagerie* is instead born from a narrow circle of mere *empiria*, the most prosaic and banal, and from the discovery of one in its own way tonifying potential for imaginative metamorphic game on those effects. The idea can now appear to be premature, but no doubt it can immediately—at least for our purposes here—further introduce to the dimension most suited to Fontana's figural intervention. Moreover, also valid in this sense are the numerous observations already advanced as concerns Fontana's work in the 1930s, with which this show, which is being inaugurated now during the post-war period, was closely tied, and has remarkable aspects of coherence. After all, it is also true that in the anular sculpture of 1947 as well as in that other sculpture from the same period, perhaps less famous, but presented again this exhibition, and that once Fontana told me was like "a sort of atomic man" (the other could be an atomic mushroom), the material density also gives way to an exhibition of primary and heavy "magmaticity," that reminds one of that *Uomo nero* of 1930.<sup>27</sup>

Clearly, the theme of matter, in this reflection, supersedes an interpretation of Fontana alone: It is one piece in the large fresco that the scholar was putting together on Art Informel, and who was at that very moment at the peak of his most intense writing. It would not be long before a preview of his hard work, on Reich<sup>28</sup> and above all on the "themes" of the Art Informel, would be published in the magazines,<sup>29</sup> texts that were meant for the third volume of the work that was never published.

At the same time, however, in this and in other parts of the essay, what was beginning to emerge were two terms as a result of Crispolti's reflections on Futurism. These would become of key importance to an interpretation of Fontana, connecting him, according

27 Enrico Crispolti, "Omaggio a Fontana," now in Crispolti, *Carriera "barocca" di Fontana*, 56–57; the same passage is reproduced in Crispolti, *L'avventura di Fontana*, 73–74.

28 Enrico Crispolti, "La Teoria

dell'orgasmo' di W. Reich e 'l'Action painting,'" *Marcatré II*, no. 2 (January 1964): 18–22.

29 Enrico Crispolti, "Alcuni temi dell'Informale," *Op. Cit.* 3 (May 1965): 22–45.

to the scholar, not only to a load-bearing axis of art history, but also to a fundamental dialectical polarity in this discussion, which, like a tilted plane, lead to a direct comparison with Giacomo Balla:

[a]taste for the ephemeral and the artificial that maintains the very guise of an image of "contemporary life": Here, therefore, is an essential image, at the heart of a question that nonetheless also touches . . . the reliefs and even the "figurative" sculptures, an intimate key, as it has remained for me from the start, of Fontana's poetics. And so the unexhausted inventistic creationism, the faith in a correlative guise of intimate artificiality of the world and of contemporary man (artificiality as a radically new and original invention), already join Fontana to the heart of the Futurist question, and precisely to the polarity represented by Balla's formal inventistic creationism.<sup>30</sup>

Quite often, during Crispolti's career, the names Balla and Fontana were interwoven, and they were the object of major exhibition and publishing projects that were practically contemporary. In this case, besides the great monograph published by Pozzo, still in 1969 announced as forthcoming more than once, a few months before *Aspetti dell'arte contemporanea* Crispolti had inaugurated the first major Balla retrospective at the Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna in Turin,<sup>31</sup> and he had ventured to ask Fontana for his opinion after the show, so as to definitively make clear the connection between the two artists. Fontana, to be honest, gave an answer that was evasive, and yet sufficient to prove that there had been an interest on his part, to the extent that a facsimile was published in the *NAC* supplement in 1970. The intention was clear: Fontana was not influenced by Boccioni's teachings—even though he was mentioned several times in the artist's writings and repeatedly used as a term of paragon by the Milanese critics (the portrait of the Futurist master at the start of Giampiero Giani's book about *Spazialismo* published in 1956 is emblematic)—but rather by those of Balla and by the Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe, which, in his view, is steeped in crucial conceptual elements for a deeper understanding of Fontana's work.

In Crispolti's texts, in other words, Fontana's name appears where least we would expect to find it, just as in texts about the artists there are some deliberate omissions: Absent from this text, for example, is any reference to Spatialism, which was even one of

30 Crispolti, "Omaggio a Fontana," now in Crispolti, *Carriera "barocca" di Fontana*, 51.

31 Enrico Crispolti, ed., *Giacomo Balla*, exh. cat. (Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna, 1963).

the strong points in the promotion of the artist advanced by Cardazzo and by others. The scholar's intention was to detach Fontana from a codified reading and discuss the work within coordinates that were above history and of greater breadth.

Beyond the texts explicitly devoted to the artist, in this sense, we cannot overlook the occasions in which he appears amidst the terms of reference in discussions of a general nature. He can be found, for instance, in the papers of the small book on *Pop Art* commissioned from Crispolti by Fratelli Fabbri editori for the "Elite" series and published in 1966. For the former project, later drastically reduced owing to the publisher's needs (the original text would not be released in book form until 1975), he had planned a wealth of images—he would be able to save those of the works of Titina Maselli, Enrico Baj, and Mimmo Rotella, and have to forgo not just Valerio Adami and Lucio Del Pezzo—in which he was thinking about reproducing "Lucio Fontana (color photos of his most recent works) ask the artist."<sup>32</sup> It is hard to say what Crispolti had in mind, whether it was a painting in the *Olii* series, a *Teatrino* or a glazed sculpture with bright colors. However, underlying each of these options was the idea of a "pop" color and imaginary that sank its roots in a "mass *imagerie*" already expressed by some Futurist works and in particular by Balla, placed right at the start of the Fabbri book with a painting on a patriotic theme from 1915.

In short, there was the idea of Fontana in dialogue with young people, the father of the New Figuration situation that Crispolti was following closely, and a sort of short circuit that resulted from a free gaze, determined to call back into question a reading that was too canonical and codified, and therefore a return to reading the language divested of bias. It was precisely for this reason, the same year that *Il mito della macchina e altri temi del Futurismo* was released, that Crispolti published in *Opus* the reflection "Pour une phénoménologie de l'érotisme dans l'art abstrait," including a full-page reproduction without borders at the beginning of the publication: a detail from *Fine di Dio* photographed by Harry Shunk and János Kender in 1964 at the Iris Clert solo show in Paris. The small cut seemed to spew matter and, when viewed at such close range and within that context, became charged with a forceful erotic allusion.<sup>33</sup> It was a sort of taxonomy of the erotic imaginary filtered by abstract art, traces of which would also be found in the

32 List of illustrations for "Pop art," Rome, Archivio Enrico Crispolti, box labeled "Pop art," undergoing inventory.

33 Enrico Crispolti, "Pour une phénoménologie de l'érotisme dans l'art abstrait," *Opus International* 13/14 (November 1969): 41–45. The Italian

version of this essay, which is more extensive than the one in the magazine, was published in Enrico Crispolti, *Erotismo nell'arte astratta (e altre schede per una iconologia dell'arte astratta)* (Celebes, 1976), 13–26.

critic's later texts, eventually even finding allusions in Agostino Bonalumi's extroflexions,<sup>34</sup> Fontana became a member of the milieu that conducted experiments on the theme of the *Translated sexual symbol (or archetype)*:

Clearly evident is the sexual allusion in the mouths-female sex organs of Lee Bontecou's constructions, where they are a constant sculptural theme. More translated is the relationship between Fontana's "slashes" in his paintings titled *Attese* (produced from 1958) and the female sex. At a more allusive level with pieces with graphically indicated profiles, Gino Marotta, as well, made sculptures with erotic references.<sup>35</sup>

Nonetheless, this will not be the backbone of Crispolti's interpretation of Fontana, although we cannot exclude the fact that in these first years after the artist's death the critic's ever more intense relationship with Francesco Somaini had played a role, almost a passing of the baton between "formative" artists due to his critical method and above all his historiographic reading of the present. Alongside the increasingly explicit eroticism in the works of the Como sculptor, it would be the co-authored *Urgenza nella città* to shift Crispolti's attention to the theme of art in the public space. Dated to the period of discussion around that book is a project presented by the critic in the fall of 1970 to the publisher De Donato [FIG. 8], with whom he would publish, in 1977, the first volume of *Arti visive e partecipazione sociale*. For the "Documenti" series—the same one that had included Carla Lonzi's *Autoritratto* in 1969—he had imagined a book around 200 pages long with a temporary title, *Lucio Fontana e l'architettura*. Nothing has remained of this project, except for the letter in which he illustrated his idea for the publisher, having in mind a fully-fledged architecture book, with lots of entries, projects, models, and plans:

- an introductory text around 20 pp. long on the manner and meaning of Fontana's relationship with architects, and the role of his "spatial" environments;
- entries for the individual works, in chronological order (I think): each "entry" should include a description, 1 or 2 pp., possibly with extracts from descriptions or original reports (and specific bibliographical indications) and from 1 to 4 pp. of reproductions, almost all of them

34 Enrico Crispolti, *Bonalumi* [1970], in Crispolti, *Erotismo nell'arte*

astratta, 186–88.  
35 Crispolti, *Erotismo nell'arte astratta*, 21.

CRISPOLTI PIAZZA NICOSIA 25 - 00186 ROMA - TEL. 563313

R., 11/IX/'70

Caro De Donato,

posso darti dei dati abbastanza precisi relativi al nostro progetto di libro nella collana "Documenti" su "Lucio Fontana e l'architettura" (titolo provvisorio).

Sto raccogliendo il materiale sistematicamente, e ho già degli ottimi esempi fotografici e documentari.

Come ti ho detto nel nostro incontro a Milano in giugno articolerei il volume in questo modo :

un testo introduttivo di circa 20 pp. sul modo e il significato del rapporto di Fontana con gli architetti, e il ruolo dei suoi "ambienti spaziali" ;

schede delle singole opere, in ordine cronologico (penso) : ogni "scheda" dovrebbe comprendere una descrizione, di 1 o 2 pp., con eventuali stralci di descrizioni o relazioni originarie, e da 1 a 4 pp. di riproduzioni, (e indicazioni bibliografiche specifiche) quasi tutte diverse a pag.: riproduzioni di disegni esecutivi, schizzi, e foto dell'opera ultimata, come di eventuali bozzetti.

Calcolando che le opere di rilievo sono circa una ventina (cioè quelle che richiedono 2 pp. di testo e 4 di illustrazioni, e che le opere minori (e che vanno ben distinte come tali) saranno 40/50, avremmo un totale per la parte schede di 160/180 pp.

Quindi l'intero volume sarebbe di circa <sup>180/</sup>200 pp.

Se sei d'accordo, mandami un contrattino, restando intesa la formula da te proposta "a percentuale"; vorrei soltanto che le foto restassero di mia proprietà, e mi ritornassero dopo l'uso.

Per i tempi penso che si potrebbe uscire per primavera. Non ho notizie della progettata mostra a Roma, ma non credo sia imminente.

Se capiti a Roma, fatti vivo, Con molti cordiali saluti,

*Enrico Crispolti*  
(Enrico Crispolti)

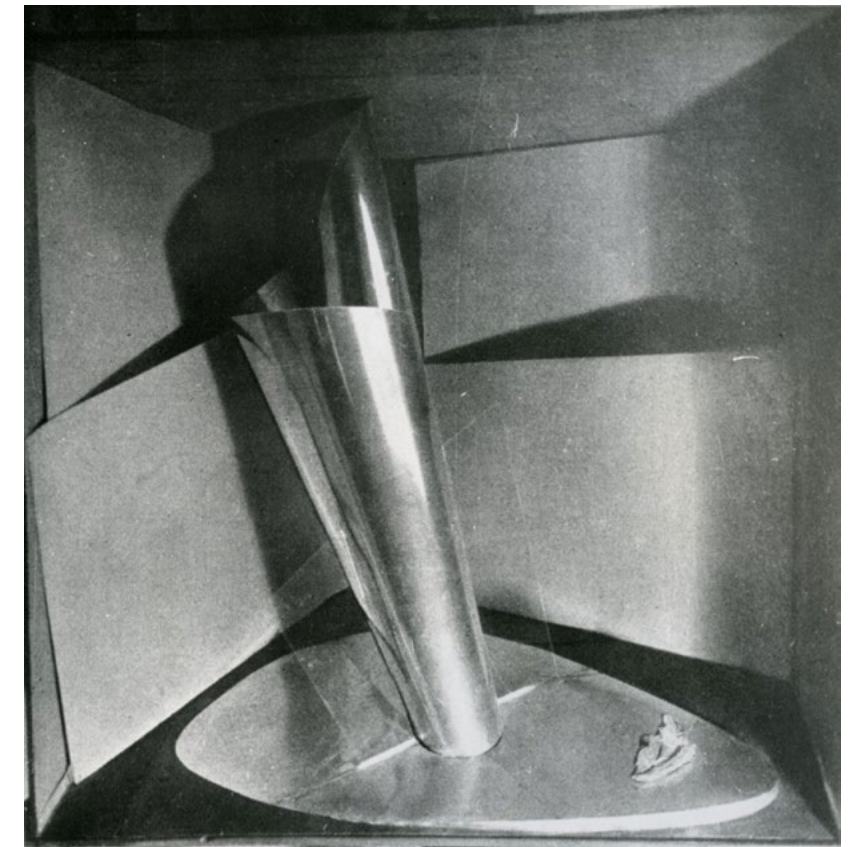
84

FIG. 8  
Letter from Enrico Crispolti to the publisher De Donato, September 11, 1970.

different on page: reproductions of executive drawings, sketches, and photos of the finished work, as well as of any models.<sup>36</sup>

We should not be surprised, at this point, to find at the start of the monograph of 1971 a full bleed reproduction of a model presented in 1931 for the competition for the monument to Giuseppe Grandi<sup>37</sup> [FIG. 9], at the peak of the Second Futurism movement, identifying in this project a seminal idea destined to revolutionary developments that would even go beyond Fontana's own work: There, somehow, was the beginning of a "spatialist" reconstruction of the universe.

FIG. 9  
Lucio Fontana, Bruno Fontana, Alcide Rizzardi, Model for the Monumento a Giuseppe Grandi, 1931.



36 Letter from Enrico Crispolti to the publisher De Donato, September 11, 1970, Rome, Fondazione Antonio

Gramsci, *Fondo De Donato*, b. 2, 13. Corrispondenza 1970 (C).  
37 CRSDA, cf. no. 31 A 1.

# LUCIO FONTANA IN THE UNITED STATES: THE EXHIBITION AT THE WALKER ART CENTER IN MINNEAPOLIS (1966) AND ITS RECEPTION

Francesco Guzzetti

The exhibition *Lucio Fontana: The Spatial Concept of Art*, hosted by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis from January 6 to February 13, 1966, is an important case study in the reception of Fontana's art abroad. Organized by Jan van der Marck, curator of the museum from 1963 to 1967, it was the first and only institutional retrospective held in the United States before the artist's death.

## THE EXHIBITION

The project was conceived with rather lofty ambitions, also guaranteed by the support offered by the Marlborough Gallery, with which Fontana had an exclusive relationship from 1964.<sup>1</sup> The curator was thus able to imagine from the very start the idea of a travelling show, which, after Minneapolis, went to the University of Texas Art Museum in Austin (February 27–March 27, 1966) and then to the Centro de Artes Visuales dell' Instituto Torcuato di Tella in Buenos Aires (July 9–August 7, 1966).<sup>2</sup> At the end of the year, the exhibition arrived at the Marlborough-Gerson Gallery, from which it had a second life in Europe the following year, when Ad Petersen, head conservator of the department of painting and sculpture at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam from 1964, redeveloped Van der Marck's project for a retrospective held from March 23 to May 7, 1967,<sup>3</sup> and then moved to the museum in Eindhoven from May 12 to June 18.

The exhibition exclusively focused on the more recent phases of Fontana's activity, that of the *Concetti spaziali*. It included eighty works arranged in the catalog starting from the distinction made between the "perforations" (with a subgroup of "lacerations") and the "incisions," respectively, "holes," and "slashes." The first group of works consisted of seven "perforations," including three of the first experiments on paper and canvas dated to 1949, the same number made between 1950 and 1959, and, above all, the *Ambiente spaziale* that Fontana conceived specifically for the event. The latter was the biggest novelty of the exhibition. Executed by the architect Duane Thorbeck based on the indications sent by the artist, it consisted of a rectangular room with two hallways used to enter and exit, completely lined with black fabric, with a soft floor and a series of side holes back-lit with green neon.<sup>4</sup>

1 Stefano Setti, "Galleria d'Arte Marlborough, Roma," in *Dizionario Lucio Fontana*, ed. Luca Pietro Nicoletti (Quodlibet, 2023), 266–68.

2 F.K. Lloyd, typewritten letter to J. van der Marck, December 4, 1964, Minneapolis, Walker Art Center Archives (hereafter: WACA). Initially, the museum in Pasadena also planned to host the exhibition, cf. J. van der Marck, typewritten letter to

J. Romero Brest, April 14, 1965, Minneapolis, WACA.

3 Petersen himself declared that the American exhibition served as a base for the European project, cf. Ad Petersen, introduction to *Lucio Fontana. Concetti spaziali*, exh. cat., ed. Ad Petersen (Stedelijk Museum, 1967), n. p.

4 CRSDA, cf. no. 66 A 1. For an analysis of the work and its genesis, see the entry in *Lucio Fontana. Ambienti/*

The initial section also included informative materials and photographic blow ups of other spaces. The second group of works contained fourteen “variations on the theme of perforation,” dated to between 1951 and 1959, and corresponding to several of the series Fontana made in that decade, including *Pietre*, *Barocchi*, and *Inchiostri*. The same number of *Attese* against a white background, dated from 1962 to 1965, made up the backbone of the third group—“Incisions”—which also included a red *Concetto spaziale*, *Attesa* with just one slash in the middle [FIG. 1] and a *Quanta*, made up of twelve gilded elements.<sup>5</sup> Under the title “Variations on the themes of perforation and incision” there were four works from the *Venezie* cycle 1961, while the same number of *Nature* in bronze from the same year [FIG. 2], three ceramic works, and four oil paintings from the series *Olii*, 1962, six *Fine di Dio* works, 1963–64 [FIG. 3], and eight works on blotting paper, 1965, made up the large group indicated as “lacerations,” to describe the more dramatic quality of the slashes



FIGS. 1-3  
Views of the exhibition  
Lucio Fontana: *The Spatial  
Concept of Art*, 1966,  
Minneapolis, Walker  
Art Center.

made on the surface. Four *Metalli* (1965) and six ceramic works from 1964–65 were offered as “variations on the themes of incision and laceration,” while four *Teatrini* (1965) exclusively played out on white and black motifs constituted the final section, dedicated to “recent variations on the theme of perforation.”

Photographs of the event offer us the view of the exhibition design that was concentrated between the rooms and the landing on the first floor of the old Walker Art Center building, destroyed in 1969 [FIG. 4].





FIG. 4  
View of the exhibition  
*Lucio Fontana: The Spatial  
Concept of Art*, 1966,  
Minneapolis, Walker  
Art Center.

Most of the works came directly from the studio of the artist, who had made several of them in the time since his first contact with the curator. The Albright-Knox Art Gallery of Buffalo was the only American institution involved, for the loan of a *Natura* that had recently entered the museum's permanent collection.<sup>6</sup> Martha Jackson, the New York gallerist who had presented the first solo show of Fontana's work in the United States in 1961—dedicated to the *Venezie* cycle—loaned one painting in a series, *Concetto spaziale, La luna a Venezia* [FIG. 5], as well as another *Natura*.<sup>7</sup> The latter may have been one of the two sculptures on display in the gallery run by Jackson's son, David Anderson, who had set up an anthological exhibition of the artist's recent works at the same time as the *Venezie* exhibition.<sup>8</sup> Loaning *Natura* was an emergency measure adopted by Van der Marck, as the artist was originally supposed to cast four bronze sculptures. It was not until the end of 1965 that it became clear the works would not be ready on time.<sup>9</sup> Due to the lack of evidence, we can only assume that Fontana did not want to go back to a series he had finished years earlier, and that was by that time far from his more recent interests. In similar circumstances, Charles Damiano also became involved in the loans: one of the sculptures in the series came from his London collection.<sup>10</sup> Eight other works came from the McRoberts & Tunnard Gallery, also in London: among other things, the British gallery had had the international exclusive on Fontana's works until 1963.<sup>11</sup>

The genesis of the exhibition dates to 1964. In August of the same year, Van der Marck introduced himself to Fontana as someone who had long been an admirer of his, recalling their common friendship with Pierre Restany, and requesting an appointment for the end of September.<sup>12</sup> The curator's life can be of help to our understanding of the reasons behind the exhibition. Dutch-born, Van der Marck carried out his studies up to and including his doctorate in the Low Countries and then went to New York in the late 1950s with a scholarship from the Rockefeller Foundation. He remained there until 1963, when he was called to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis,

6 CRSC, cf. no. 59–60 N 1.

7 CRSDA, cf. no. 61 O 45, and CRSC, cf. no. 59–60 N 21.

8 On the dual solo exhibition in the United States in 1961, see Caterina Toschi, "Jackson, Martha," in Nicoletti, *Dizionario Lucio Fontana*, 311–12, and Luca Massimo Barbero, "Lucio Fontana: Venice/New York," in *Lucio Fontana. Venice/New York*, exh. cat., ed. Luca Massimo Barbero (Guggenheim Museum, 2006), 37–42.

9 J. van der Marck, typewritten letter to B. Herlitzka, November 2, 1965, Minneapolis, WACA.

10 Van der Marck met Damiano as suggested by Fontana himself, after his meeting with the artist, cf. J. van der Marck, typewritten letter to L. Fontana, October 23, 1964, Minneapolis, WACA. Cf. Paolo Campiglio, "Damiano, Charles," in Nicoletti, *Dizionario Lucio Fontana*, 205–07. See also the essay by Paolo Campiglio published in these proceedings.

11 Paolo Campiglio, "McRoberts & Tunnard Gallery," in Nicoletti, *Dizionario Lucio Fontana*, 348–49.

12 J. van der Marck, typewritten letter to L. Fontana, August 11, 1964, Minneapolis, WACA.

FIG. 5  
*Concetto spaziale, La luna a Venezia*, 1961.  
Milan, Intesa Sanpaolo Gallerie d'Italia collection.



a museum he would leave in 1967 to become director of the newly founded Museum of Contemporary Art of Chicago. Driven by his European background, Van der Marck was substantially committed to disseminating knowledge across the ocean of the contemporary art of the Old Continent. This vision had already been manifested in the organization of the first American monographic show of Arman in Minneapolis in 1964, soon embracing Italy, as is witnessed, by the exhibition that same year at the Walker of the first American retrospective of Alberto Burri, organized by James Johnson Sweeney, and presented in Houston, Buffalo, and San Francisco as well.<sup>13</sup>

Encouraged by Burri's success in America, and perhaps remembering his own visits to exhibitions in New York in 1961, Van der Marck at first considered holding a retrospective of Fontana's entire career, starting from the 1930s.<sup>14</sup> He was probably also inspired by the small anthology of historical works published in a volume as crucial as *Devenir de Fontana*, edited by Michel Tapié in

13 The exhibition opened at the Walker on February 13, 1964.

14 J. van der Marck, typewritten

letter to L. Fontana, November 19, 1964, Minneapolis, WACA.

1961; however, that idea was eventually set aside, to focus only on the most recent season, which was believed to be more in synergy with the contemporary. From the first time they met, in September 1964, the artist and the curator corresponded regularly. Fontana would update Van der Marck on how the work was going and on the works gradually released over the course of the months.<sup>15</sup> From the beginning, the artist informed Van der Marck about the project for a show with other Italian artists, organized by the Museum of Modern Art and planned for 1965;<sup>16</sup> the initiative turned into a Burri-Fontana show, promoted by the New York museum, but destined to circulate from October 1966 to February 1968 in various secondary institutions in the United States. This project was never a real obstacle for Van der Marck, who could count on Fontana's esteem. An important sign of the artist's appreciation of the curator was when he sent him a drawing of a *Concetto spaziale* that also contained a handwritten declaration about Spatialism,<sup>17</sup> reproduced in the catalog: "Art has terminated its social function, human thinking is evolving toward other dimensions, the logical consequence of man's conquest of space. The Space Age."<sup>18</sup> The phrase soon became one of Fontana's most emblematic, also reproduced on the cover of the brochure for his solo show that same year at the Galleria Il Punto in Turin.<sup>19</sup>

The presence of the artist that had been planned for the opening—called off at the last minute due to health issues and to his commitment to organizing a room at the Venice Biennale that year<sup>20</sup>—had encouraged Van der Marck to plan several programs around the exhibition, aimed at bringing Fontana's art closer to a public that was discovering it for the first time. A case in point was a workshop planned for December 8, 1965, in collaboration with the class of Professor Ellen Molberg—who taught fashion at the Minneapolis School of Art—on the occasion of which the ladies were invited to have tea at the museum, during which they could watch a fashion show of clothes inspired by Fontana's works and, if interested, the making of the outfits inspired by those same works.<sup>21</sup> Spatialist fashion must have been familiar to the curator thanks to the exhibition *L'Objet* that had been held at the Musée des Arts

15 See the letter in which the artist informs the curator that he has finished the white and metallic works, L. Fontana, typewritten letter to J. van der Marck, October 12, 1965, Minneapolis, WACA.

16 L. Fontana, typewritten letter to Jan van der Marck, November 27, 1964, Minneapolis, WACA.

17 J. van der Marck, typewritten letter to L. Fontana, November 16, 1965, Minneapolis, WACA.

18 Jan van der Marck, ed., *Lucio Fontana: The Spatial Concept of Art*, exh. cat. (Walker Art Center, 1966), n. p.

19 Fontana, exh. cat. (Il Punto Sette, 1966), n. p. See also the essay by Fagiolo dell'Arco upon the deaths of Fontana and Pascoli, Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco, "Fontana, Pascoli: la vita è gesto," *Metro*, series II, VIII, no. 15 (1968): 75.

20 J. van der Marck, typewritten letter to L. Fontana, December 20, 1965, Minneapolis, WACA.

Décoratifs in Paris in 1962, where an outfit produced by the Bini-Telese dressmaking company of Milan had been presented the year before, a tight and straight silver dress with a horizontal row of large circular holes around the waist.<sup>22</sup> The meeting must have had a certain impact if, as is likely, the outfit worn by a woman caught in the act of entering *Ambiente spaziale* in a photograph taken at the opening seems to be in line with that fashion [FIG. 6].

To celebrate the exhibition, the performance of a Spatialist dance was produced, conceived by the choreographer Joan Skinner, the Walker's choreography consultant, in collaboration with the sculptor Richard Randall, a sculpture professor at the University of Minnesota, and the composer Thomas Nee, director of the Center Opera Company and the Minneapolis Civic Orchestras association. Lasting about ten minutes, it involved six dancers—three men and three women—moving on the steps leading to the upper floor of

FIG. 6  
View of the *Ambiente spaziale* at the opening of the exhibition *Lucio Fontana: The Spatial Concept of Art*, January 6, 1966, Minneapolis, Walker Art Center.



21 News Release #220, November 26, 1965, Minneapolis, WACA.

22 François Mathey and Yolande Amic, eds., *Antagonismes 2 – L'Objet*, exh. cat. (Musée des Arts Décoratifs, 1962), 48–49, cat. no. 186. Also on display at

the exhibition was some of the artist's jewelry. In the Minneapolis catalog, it is mentioned in the restricted list of events of the artist's chronological biography, cf. *Lucio Fontana. The Spatial Concept of Art*, n. p.

the museum building, where the exhibition was located<sup>23</sup> [FIG. 7]. The costumes, conceived by Randall, consisted of transparent or silver-toned containers, according to the Space Age taste that seemed to be coherent with Fontana's research. A video has survived from the performance. Unfortunately, it is a silent one, but the records tell us that the soundtrack by Thomas Nee consisted of an electronic sampling of certain sounds. The choreography of Joan Skinner, who had danced in the Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham companies in New York, combined movements that were repeated in a regular pattern and with more syncopated rhythms, in line with the sound and the use of force, spotlights, flashes of light, and jets of steam that aimed to modify the perceptions: almost a dynamic and performative version of *Ambiente spaziale* [FIG. 8].

#### THE RECEPTION OF THE EXHIBITION

Leaving aside coverage by the local press, a certain amount of attention was paid to the performance by Hilton Kramer, *The New York Times* art critic, who, nonetheless, could not help but consider it to be conventional.<sup>24</sup> The comment was not an isolated one and it may help us to understand how the exhibition was critically received. Van der Marck clearly aspired to placing Fontana among the masters of the new international avant-garde, as he wrote in an exhaustive article conceived for *Artforum*. In it he upheld the artist's

FIGS. 7-8  
Homage to Lucio Fontana created by the choreographer Joan Skinner for the opening of the exhibition *Lucio Fontana: The Spatial Concept of Art*, January 6, 1966, Minneapolis, Walker Art Center.



23 News Release #224, December 3, 1965, Minneapolis, WACA.

24 Hilton Kramer, "Spatialist' Synthesis;

Walker Center in Minneapolis Displays Works of Lucio Fontana, Italian Artist," *The New York Times* (January 8, 1966): 22.

otherness from certain dogmas of American art—the separation between major and minor arts, in favor instead of an authentically “baroque” sensibility. The critic framed a work that was so distant from the linguistic gravitas of the contemporary US research within the terms, not of a practice, but of an absolute philosophy of contemporary life, expressed via the constant verification and awareness of space as a concrete measure of the infinite. The article was never published in *Artforum*. Indeed, much of the sectoral press tended to overlook the exhibition at the Walker.<sup>25</sup>

The catalog essay thus remains the greatest public witness to Van der Marck's support for Fontana's art at the time. The curator suggested a reading founded on the consideration of the radicalness of the gestures made by the artist on the surface of his works, but also on the equally unequivocal preciousness and sensuality of the color and the design. For Van der Marck, Fontana harmoniously resolves such a divergent dichotomy, proving to be focused on the balance between real space and illusionistic space, starting from the belief that “excessive emphasis on real space (too many holes and gashes) destroys illusionistic space and ultimately abolishes the picture, and that excessive emphasis on illusionistic space (a complexity of color and texture) invalidates the picture's reason for existence, because it negates the spatial concept of art.”<sup>26</sup> The analysis put forward by Van der Marck was based on two substantial elements: the refusal of the distinctions between painting and sculpture in favor of a broader conception of the relationship between the work of art and the space that crosses or occupies it (running counter to the “medium specificity” that Clement Greenberg had articulated in his studies on Modernism);<sup>27</sup> the importance of the relationship with technology and science, as distinctive features of contemporariness, in the elaboration of this conception. The interpretation was influenced by the words of Lawrence Alloway about the Martha Jackson exhibition in 1961, and began over again from the notion of “ambiguous medium” with which the English critic had defined the overcoming of genres and distinctions—including that between the major and the minor arts—a characteristic of the artist's work, translating it in a reading that was based on the relationship with technical-scientific progress.<sup>28</sup>

25 What remains is the typewritten text, in Jan van der Marck Papers, Box 3, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

26 Jan van der Marck, “Lucio Fontana: The Spatial Concept of Art,” in Van der Marck, *Lucio Fontana: The Spatial Concept of Art*, n. p.

27 Clement Greenberg, “Avant-garde and Kitsch,” *The Partisan Review* VI, 5 (1939):

36–39; reprinted in Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture* (Beacon Press, 1961), 5–9. The notion was further developed in the meeting on Modernism published in *Arts Yearbook* in 1961, and later in Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” *Art and Literature* 4 (1965): 193–201.

28 Lawrence Alloway, “Man on the Border,” in *Lucio Fontana. Ten Paintings of Venice*, exh. cat. (Industrie Grafiche Fratelli

The latter point is particularly interesting. Van der Marck was well aware of the rather lukewarm critical reaction to the exhibition—unlike that of the artists and some collectors<sup>29</sup>—already at the time of the New York solo shows in 1961. The effort made was therefore meant to free the artist from definitions that could turn out to be counterproductive. Hence, Fontana was presented as a precursor of the artistic trends that, in the mid-1960s, were more closely related to contemporary civilization:

Fontana's contribution to the realm of visual ideas has helped set the scene for many of today's experiments. For more intransigent artists, such as Yves Klein and Piero Manzoni, or for the technically more ingenious "Group Zero" and "Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel," Fontana has been a direct inspiration and a generous supporter. Fontana characterizes our era because he values the "idea" more than its execution, research more than accomplishment, speculation about the nature of things more than the rendering of actual appearances.<sup>30</sup>

The insight of the primacy of the idea in Fontana's art—a sort of conceptual art *avant la lettre*—melded with the emphasis of the relationship with the Group Zero artists, guaranteed by important precedents such as the retrospective arranged by Udo Kultermann for the museum in Leverkusen in 1962.<sup>31</sup> The inclusion of four *Concetti spaziali* on canvas in the first American exhibition dedicated to Group Zero, curated by Otto Piene and presented in Philadelphia and Washington between 1964 and 1965, must have confirmed, in Van der Marck's eyes, the importance of such an interpretation. In the catalog of the latter exhibition, the name Fontana was evoked as that of a pioneer, while the small amount of biographical information above all valorized the creation of environments and the collaboration with architects.<sup>32</sup> This critical picture explains the decision to publish, in the Minneapolis catalog, two statements about Fontana, signed by Arman and more importantly by Otto Piene, who underscored the radical nature and the contemporariness of the artist's physical and mental opening

Pozzo, 1961), n. p. The text included the essay that had been drafted the year before for the artist's solo exhibition at McRoberts & Tunnard in London.

29 See Barbero, "Lucio Fontana: Venice/New York."

30 Van der Marck, "Lucio Fontana: The Spatial Concept of Art."

31 The catalog included contributions by the artists Rupprecht Geiger,

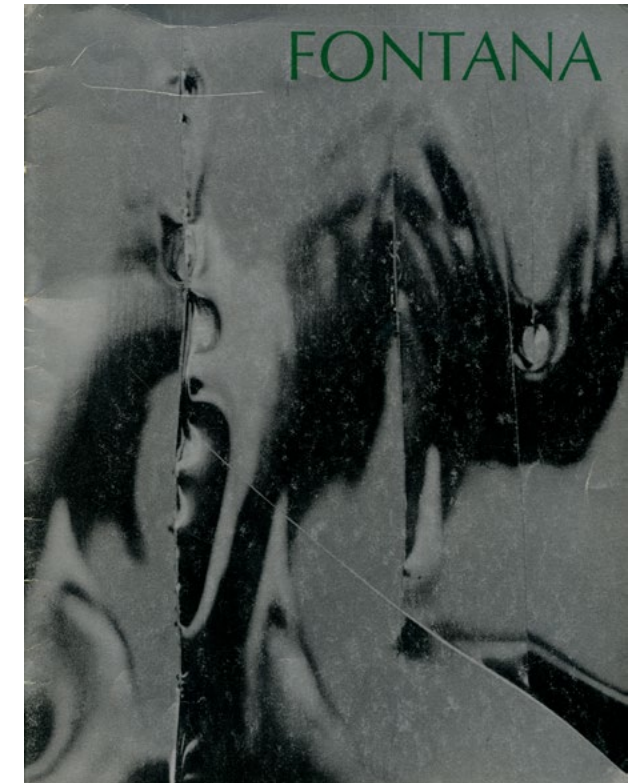
Heinz Mack, Otto Piene, William Turnbull, and Jef Verheyen, cf. Udo Kultermann, ed., *Lucio Fontana*, exh. cat., (Städtisches Museum Leverkusen, 1962), n. p.

32 Samuel Adams Green, "Foreword," in *Group Zero*, exh. cat., ed. Otto Piene (University of Pennsylvania, 1964), n. p.

33 Otto Piene, "A Hole in the Sky," in Van der Marck, *Lucio Fontana: The Spatial Concept of Art*.

up of the surface to space.<sup>33</sup> The catalog cover itself, featuring a detail from the reflecting surface of one of Fontana's *Metalli* can be viewed as a further symptom of this critical direction [FIG. 9]. Despite this commitment, the fact that *Artforum* rejected Van der Marck's essay was symptomatic of the resistance that persisted in the United States against Fontana.<sup>34</sup>

FIG. 9  
Cover of Jan van der Marck, ed., *Lucio Fontana: The Spatial Concept of Art*, exh. cat. (Walker Art Center, 1966).



Hilton Kramer's reaction was lukewarm, liquidating Fontana's works as "another one of those 'daring' ideas that turn into something chic before they can menace a single one of our esthetic assumptions."<sup>35</sup> Beyond the specific contents of the criticism—Kramer would also in a few months' time have raised some doubts about a crucial exhibition like *Systemic Painting*<sup>36</sup>—this observation is important if we are to understand the reasons for that refusal.

34 As such, the resistance was a part of a broader treatment accorded in the United States to Italian art at that time, see Raffaele Bedarida, *Exhibiting Italian Art in the United States from Futurism to Arte Povera*. "Like a Giant Screen"

(Routledge, 2022), 172–75.

35 Kramer, "Spatialist' Synthesis," 22.

36 Hilton Kramer, "Systemic Painting: An Art for Critics," *The New York Times* (September 18, 1966): D33.

With respect to the formulae of monochrome painting, “primary structures,” or “post-painterly abstraction” (which were definitively celebrated right in 1966), but also the rigor of kinetic art or that of Group Zero evoked by Van der Marck, the corpus of Fontana’s works could not in substance seem unresolved in the eyes of the critics, who were disoriented between the peremptoriness of the perforation and the good taste and decorative elegance of the colors and the compositions, which appeared to defuse the tension. Kramer was willing to make a partial exception for the *Nature* series, connoted by forms so organically primary and dense of matter that the dramatic power of the gashes was striking. This appreciation was already widespread at the start of the decade, and it would be confirmed the following year, when Fontana was included in the list of artists for the *Guggenheim International Exhibition*, dedicated to sculpture. Celebrated in the catalog as a predecessor of European sculpture,<sup>37</sup> the artist was present with five *Nature*, published as a single *Concetto spaziale* made up of five elements<sup>38</sup> [FIG. 10].

Fundamentally, Fontana’s impasse, suspended between decoration and innovation, had to do with that notion of the “baroque” that, expressed based on various meanings, had been accompanying his exegesis since the late 1950s.<sup>39</sup> Since then, and starting from the merging—so dear to the artist himself—between Baroque and Futurism, this concept was used repeatedly to define the artificiality and the vitalism of his work, his effort toward the fusion of the arts, or, once more, the dynamic sense of space. In the latter sense Van der Marck cautiously used the term to introduce Fontana in *Art in America*—the only presentation of the exhibition on a national scale, perhaps due to the mediation of Nan Rosenthal, a journalist and the editor of the magazine, as well as Otto Piene’s wife at the time—underscoring the importance of his *Ambienti* for the purpose of emphasizing the spatiotemporal short circuit of the *Concetti spaziali*<sup>40</sup> [FIG. 11].

This was the knot in which the “Fontana problem” resided in the eyes of the Americans. The quote comes from the title of an article in which Sidney Simon, a professor of art history and the director of the University of Minnesota Museum in Minneapolis, made an attempt in *Art International* to frame Fontana’s difficult reception in the United States, beginning with the show at the

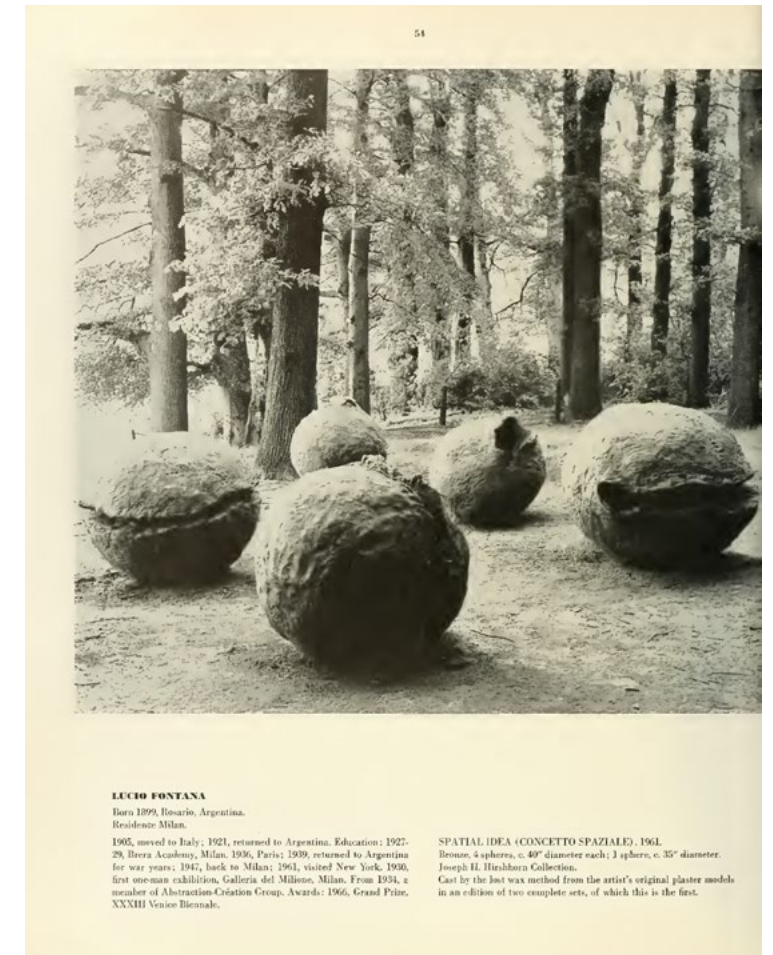
37 Edward F. Fry, “Introduction,” in *Guggenheim International Exhibition 1967. Sculpture from Twenty Nations*, exh. cat., ed. Thomas Messer (The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1967), 15.

38 Messer, *Guggenheim International Exhibition 1967*, 54; CRSC, cf. nos. 59-60 N 18, 59-60 N 28, 59-60 N 29, 59-60 N 30, 59-60 N 33.

39 Luca Pietro Nicoletti, “Barocco,” in Nicoletti, *Dizionario Lucio Fontana*, 96–98.

40 Jan van der Marck, “Exhibition Preview: Lucio Fontana,” *Art in America* LIV, no. 1 (1966): 60–61. The article is illustrated by a 1953 work from the *Pietre* series and by a 1958 *Concetto spaziale*, *Attese*; CRSDA, cf. nos. 53 P 23, 59 T 5.

FIG. 10  
Page dedicated to Fontana in *Guggenheim International Exhibition 1967. Sculpture from Twenty Nations*, exh. cat., ed. Thomas Messer (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1967).



Walker and in light of the recent room devoted to his work at the Venice Biennale. Starting from the ambiguity noted by Lawrence Alloway, Simon underscored the substantial ambivalence of Fontana’s work; driven by a totally materialistic vision of space as a physical entity—“the reality of space as a form of matter”<sup>41</sup>—that he determined in the sense of becoming, evolution, the very form of the work of art. Hence, the point was not that of positioning himself at the boundary between painting and sculpture, but, rather, between art and non-art, in research that moved in parallel with progress in technology and the promise of the future of science. In *Attese*, according to Simon, Fontana reached the peak of his own efforts: “Surface and incision retain their individual identities and are linked by non-clearly defined formal structure. The incision

41 Sidney Simon, “The Fontana Problem,” *Art International* X, no. 6 (1966): 59.



Lucio Fontana: *Concetto Spaziale*, oil and stones on canvas, 1953. Marlborough Galleria d'Arte, Rome.

On February 5, 1949, the Galleria del Naviglio in Milan presented an environmental exhibition described as an “ambiente spaziale con forme spaziali e illuminazioni a luce nera” that has made history as the first incarnation of Fontana’s spatialist ideas. In a room of modest proportions sculptural forms coated with phosphorescent paint and illuminated by hidden light sources hung suspended from the ceiling and filled the space with their mysterious presence. In retrospect it is safe to say that not until Yves Klein “le Monochrome” exhibited pure space within a setting of four uncluttered walls had a statement of such daring spatial simplicity ever been made.

A sense of crisis in the visual language of our time led Fontana to search for new ways to integrate pictorial and extra-pictorial space. Fascinated with the scientists’ conquest of matter and space and the new perspectives thus opened to the artist, Fontana rejected the traditional concepts of two-dimensionality and representation. Yet history offered him at least two major inspirations. Fontana admires the baroque, an era of spatial innovation that gave birth

to a style in which form is inseparable from the notion of time and in which the images appear to abandon the plane and continue into space the movements they suggest. In our time, futurism strikes Fontana as the only pictorial revolution of profound consequence since it proposed that movement—a continuity of forms in space—is the essential condition of matter, and its rendering, plastic dynamism, the serious artist’s true objective. Fontana amalgamates the basic notions of both styles and dreams of producing “forms, color and sound through space.”

Space for Fontana no longer functions as the context of the image (like the space enveloping sculpture or the *trompe l’oeil* space of painting), but it becomes the very arena in which images take shape. Space, in Fontana’s evaluation, is a tangible entity that can be met head-on. He is like the poet who walks through the mirror, not fatalistically and on a deathbound course, but with an optimistic expectancy (hence his use of the term *attesa*) and a considerable amount of naïveté. One might contend that Fontana treats space,

FIG. 11  
Jan van der Marck  
“Exhibition Preview:  
Lucio Fontana” (in *Art in  
America* [1966]).

seems to refer to time, split-second, precise; the surface of pure color seems to allude to extension, unstructured and indeterminate.<sup>42</sup> In this apparent dichotomy between the surface and the gesture lies the reason for Fontana’s distance from the American tradition of contemporary art: “If the great contribution of New York School painting was to demonstrate the value of a total configuration as a fully self-sustaining and inviolable surface without beginning, middle or end, it was Fontana’s inclination to move in the opposite direction: toward a maximum of surface indeterminacy and toward an absolute nadir of real content.”<sup>43</sup> The categories themselves of decorative, chic, kitsch, or vulgar, each time evoked by some American critics, were superseded by a vision of Fontana’s work as a whole, in which the manifest sensuality of the surfaces constituted the call for the concreteness of the here and now, which led to the search for a space-time that was as physical as it was indeterminate, carried out by the blows of an awl or a blade.

Many years later, Van der Marck acknowledged the at least partial failure of his plan to introduce Fontana into the American critical debate, on the occasion of the publication of the first *catalogue raisonné*, edited by Enrico Crispolti in 1974. In his essay he took his cue by acknowledging the resistance to Fontana by the “sternest of all arbiters, i.e., the New York art establishment.”<sup>44</sup> In recalling how the sensuality and pleasantness of many of Fontana’s works were what made them extraneous to the interests of the critics, Van der Marck described the artist’s own resignation to the fact that across the ocean he was misunderstood.<sup>45</sup> The recollection is in fact indirectly confirmed by the claims of a European leadership—not just personal, but also extended to figures like Yves Klein or Piero Manzoni—with respect to the dominance of American art. This can be found in some of Fontana’s last statements, such as the interview conducted by Tommaso Trini on July 19, 1968.<sup>46</sup>

Nonetheless, although the artist may not have experienced immediate acknowledgment on the part of the US critics while he was still alive, we need to in part reconsider the vision according to which Fontana was substantially misconstrued in America, at least until the article published in late 1989 by Yves-Alain Bois.<sup>47</sup> The attempt to define him as a forerunner to Zero, an idea that was promoted by Van der Marck, was not entirely without fruits, if, in 1968,

42 Simon, “The Fontana Problem,” 60.

43 Simon, “The Fontana Problem,” 60.

44 Jan van der Marck, “Lucio Fontana: From Tradition to Utopia,” in *Lucio Fontana*, texts by Jan van der Marck and Enrico Crispolti, vol. 1 (La Connaissance, 1974), 10.

45 Van der Marck, “Lucio Fontana: From Tradition to Utopia,” 8–9.

46 Tommaso Trini, “Colloquio con Fontana,” *Domus* 466 (1968), n. p., now published in Angela Sanna, ed., *Lucio Fontana. Manifesti, scritti, interviste* (Abscondita, 2015), 139–143, <<http://www.artslab.com/wordpress/?p=1>>.

47 Yves-Alain Bois, “Fontana’s Base Materialism,” *Art in America* LXXVII, no. 4 (1989): 238–48.

Jack Burnham, born in 1931, one of the most relevant and interesting voices to emerge in those years, extraneous to the mainstream criticism, with a past as an artist himself and a strong interest in the relations between art and technology, elevated Fontana to the status of pioneer of kinetic art. This was the opinion he expressed in a book dedicated to the new contemporary sculpture [FIG. 12], thus correcting some of the reductive interpretations of Fontana's work:

Since he lacked the desire to produce meaningful Kinetic Art, much of Fontana's subsequent work hinged on an uncovering of primeval sensation to which he refers. The dry, earthlike surfaces, punched holes in pattern, mixture of raised and reflected surfaces all attest to his desire to reveal the origins of phenomenal perception—beyond the canvas with its techniques of symbolic differentiation. The primitive handling of Fontana's canvases is still generally mistaken for a variety of Tachism. . . . He is the precursor of a Kineticism not constrained by studied mechanical relationships, but as natural as the changing patterns of sunlight filtering through the leaves of a tree to the ground beneath.<sup>48</sup>

Burnham's contribution was of twofold value: On the one hand, it served to redeem Fontana's works on canvas and paper, at times downsized in favor of the primacy that Van der Marck himself seemed to assign to the *Ambienti spaziali*; on the other, the attention toward the artist by a major representative of a new generation of critics, uninterested in "medium specificity" as well as in the existentialist implications of art, and involved in a discussion around the most recent evolutions in the practices of life and thinking, contributed at least in part to bringing Fontana back into view between the 1960s and the 1970s, when the dialogue between art and science and technology increasingly assumed the appearance of a conceptual research around the very statute of the work of art.

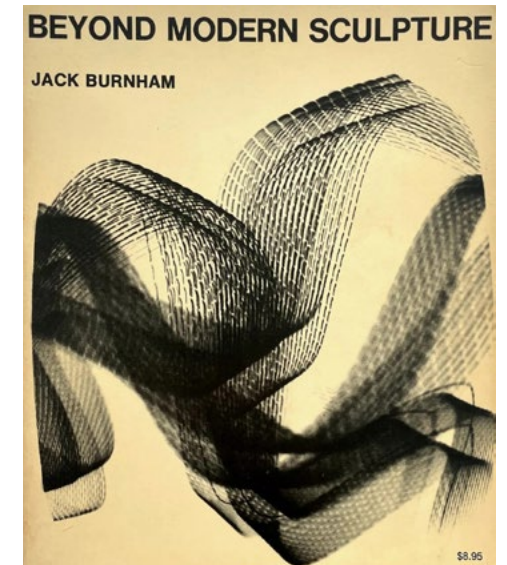
Of course, Burnham's pages alone are not enough to speak of a fully-fledged compensation. Nonetheless, the discussion of the Italian artist in a book that was so broadly debated and so seminal triggered a revival of interest, if it is true that Albert Elsen, in his review for *Artforum* recognized in the words dedicated to Fontana one of the greatest merits of Burnham's studies, "which will come as a surprise to an American readership accustomed to a post-war critical bias that has focused almost exclusively on American

48 Jack Burnham, *Beyond Modern Sculpture. The Effects of Science and Technology on the Sculpture of*

*This Century* (New York, 1968), 240.  
49 Albert Elsen, "Books. Jack Burnham, 'Beyond Modern Sculpture: The Effects

artists."<sup>49</sup> Starting from this episode, what began was a rethinking of the various moments in Fontana's work, whose name commenced penetrating the pages of the criticism as a reference not only to Europe, but also to some of the names in American art, at least according to the words that Robert Pincus-Witten, an editor for *Artforum*, used to position the *Concetti spaziali* as a paragon with the surfaces of Richard Tuttle's sculptures<sup>50</sup> and even suggested that Eva Hesse might have been acquainted with the artist's *Nature* and been inspired by them for her treatment of the surface and the organic modularity of some of her works.<sup>51</sup> An analysis of Fontana's name occurring in the American critical debate of the 1970s, at a time when Post-Minimalist and Conceptual Art were being systematized, and before the retrospective of his work at the Guggenheim in New York in 1977, could offer some highly significant results for our appreciation of the evolution in the understanding of his work in the United States: This goal lies beyond this contribution, starting from which it is nonetheless possible to reassess the Minneapolis exhibition of 1966 and the strategy adopted by Jan van der Marck as the start of a change in direction in the history of Fontana's critical reception in the United States.

FIG. 12  
Cover of Jack Burnham,  
*Beyond Modern Sculpture. The Effects of Science and Technology on the Sculpture of This Century* (G. Braziller, 1968).



of Science and Technology on the Sculpture of This Century," *Artforum* VII, no. 9 (1969): 69.

50 Robert Pincus-Witten, "Richard Tuttle,"

*Artforum* VIII, no. 6 (1970): 67.  
51 Robert Pincus-Witten, "Eva Hesse: Post-Minimalism into Sublime," *Artforum* X, no. 3 (1971), 44.

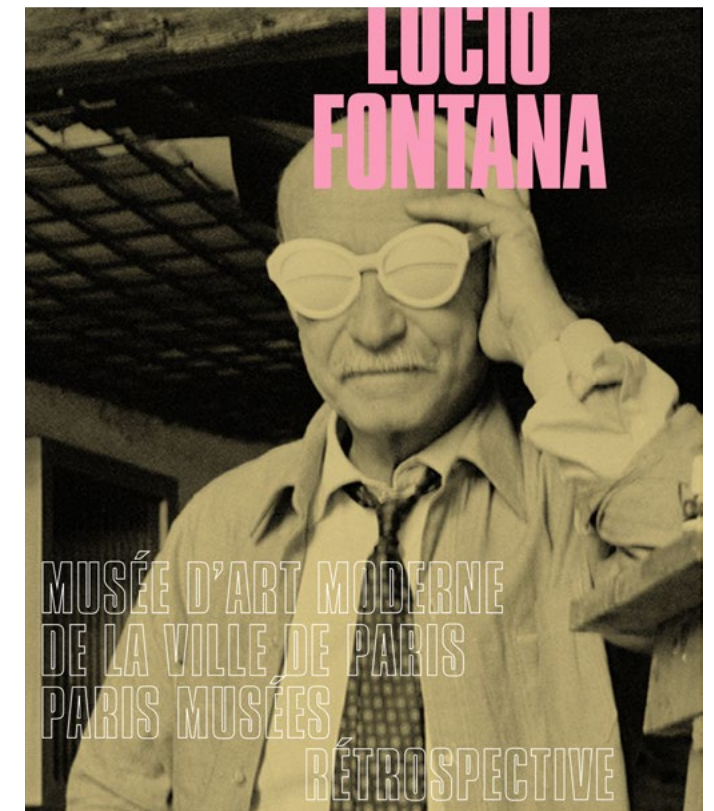
# CURATING LUCIO FONTANA. RÉTROSPECTIVE (2014) AT THE MUSÉE D'ART MODERNE DE PARIS

Choghakate Kazarian

As a young curator, I never imagined that my first museum exhibition would be on one of my favorite artists. So, when Fabrice Hergott, director of the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris, proposed a show dedicated to Lucio Fontana (1899–1968), I was thrilled, and terrified.<sup>1</sup>

Before our exhibition, the Musée d'Art Moderne had last presented a survey of Fontana's work in 1970, which focused on his postwar production. That project was initiated by Pierre Gaudibert and organized by Gilbert Brownstone. Despite his significance, Fontana remained largely absent from the French institutional landscape and had not been the subject of a major exhibition in France since Bernard Blistène's 1987 retrospective at the Centre Pompidou. That show was not only ambitious in scale but also groundbreaking in its inclusion of Fontana's lesser-known figurative works, as was Sarah Whitfield's 1999 exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery. While these shows marked an important step in acknowledging this part of Fontana's output, his public image

FIG. 1  
Cover of Chokaghate  
Kazarian and Sébastien  
Gokalp, eds., *Lucio Fontana.  
Rétrospective*, exh. cat.  
(Paris Musées, 2014).



1 *Lucio Fontana. Rétrospective*, Paris, Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris, April 25–

August 24, 2014, curated by Choghakate Kazarian and Sébastien Gokalp [FIG. 1].

remained dominated by the iconic slashed canvases. Therefore, our project at the Musée d'Art Moderne sought to fill a critical historiographical gap. Though this made the research process more complex, it offered the perfect conditions for a true rediscovery of Fontana's oeuvre.

My early fascination with Fontana was shaped less by direct exposure than by a vague, inherited narrative. This was partly due to the limited presence of his work in French museums and his ambiguous position within art historical discourse. Having studied in Paris, I never encountered Fontana in my formal academic training. I primarily associated him with the European monochrome tradition of the 1950s and 1960s, alongside artists like Yves Klein and Piero Manzoni, both personal favorites of mine. This Fontana–Klein–Manzoni triangle reflected not only my own inclinations but also the dominant historiography that emerged after the 1960s, in which Fontana was positioned as a member of the Zero group despite being nearly three decades older than those artists (who, in fact, admired him). That perspective was reinforced by collecting trends in West Germany and by the frequent appearance of his slashed canvases on the covers of auction catalogs. These iconic works came to define Fontana's image, often eclipsing the breadth of his artistic practice. Within that reception, he appeared as a forerunner of Minimalism and Conceptual Art, largely because of his monochrome canvases—all invariably titled *Concetto spaziale*, a title that, as I came to understand, speaks more to Fontana's philosophical and artistic ambitions than to the genetic and material reality of the works themselves.

My journey throughout the project was a process of both learning and unlearning, moving beyond my initial perception of Fontana's work as clean, minimal, and conceptual. This dominant impression was reinforced by Ugo Mulas's famous photographs of the artist "at work," capturing him as he sliced through a canvas with clinical precision. These iconic images suggest a kind of effortless gesture, where the artist's hands never get dirty, alluded to by the extremely elegant and immaculate suit and tie worn by Fontana in these shots. However, I quickly moved away from that interpretation because of my immediate attraction to the sensual and tactile qualities of much of his work.

The retrospective format provided a natural framework for repositioning Fontana's multifaceted body of work, offering a way to contextualize his famous slashed canvases within the broader arc of his career. As a critical curatorial tool, the retrospective made it possible to challenge canonical narratives and invite fresh interpretations of bodies of work that had long been oversimplified. The Musée d'Art Moderne had effectively employed

this strategy in earlier retrospectives of Giorgio de Chirico (2007) and Francis Picabia (2002), both of which reexamined dominant art historical narratives. For Fontana, I preferred a chronological layout that emphasized simultaneity rather than strict linearity. This approach allowed us to resituate the iconic slashed canvases not as the rebellious gesture of a young avant-gardist but as the culmination of decades of exploration by a seasoned sculptor who was nearly sixty when he began the series in 1958. Although these works had been my introduction to Fontana's practice, I came to understand them not as a point of departure but as a point of arrival.

Central to my research was the *catalogue raisonné* edited by Enrico Crispolti in collaboration with the Fondazione Lucio Fontana. I spent countless hours poring over its tiny black-and-white vignettes, training my eye to detect subtle variations between seemingly similar slashed canvases. This close looking gradually revealed the complexity and heterogeneity of Fontana's oeuvre. I began to recognize how existing interpretations—often framed as a linear progression from figuration to abstraction, from sculpture to painting, from Baroque exuberance to Minimalist austerity—were reductive. Fontana's work resists such neat chronology; many of his series overlap, with figurative and abstract works created simultaneously.

A research grant from the Fondation Carnot enabled me to do three months of fieldwork in Italy, during which I conducted interviews, consulted archives, visited private collections, and worked closely with the Fondazione Lucio Fontana, the main partner for the project. A curator's work is often akin to that of a detective, especially in this case. I began with little idea of where many of the works were located, the majority being held in private hands.

What emerged from this research was a deeper understanding of Fontana as, above all, a sculptor—an artisan with philosophical and artistic ambitions who never shied away from seductive or even seemingly frivolous embellishments. He employed sequins, rhinestones, and intensely saturated colors with unapologetic boldness. I wanted the exhibition to reflect this lesser-known side of Fontana: the playful, sensuous, and experimental creator. Ceramics, often dismissed as decorative or commercial, were central to this vision. While the distinction between "fine" and "applied" or "commercial" and "independent" art may be legitimate, it is not always clear-cut for Fontana's output, and in the exhibition, ceramics were treated with the same critical seriousness as canvases and installations.

Designed by Cécile Degos, the display featured over two hundred works, spanning from Fontana's early sculptures to his later immersive installations, with a particular emphasis on sculpture

throughout [FIGS. 2-11](#). It opened with key pieces from the late 1920s and 1930s, including *Campione olimpionico (Atleta in attesa)* (1932), *Il fiocinatore* (1933–34), *Signorina seduta* (1934), and *Torso Italico* (1938).<sup>2</sup> A pivotal moment in the show emerged in the juxtaposition of four seminal works—*Uomo atomico* (1947), *Scultura spaziale* (1947), *Ceramica spaziale* (1949), and *Ambiente spaziale a luce nera* (1949)<sup>3</sup>—which emphasized Spatialism as an intermedia project realized across diverse materials, from ethereal floating forms to malleable clay. This approach reasserted Fontana as a materially grounded, Baroque artisan whose futuristic optimism simultaneously embraced the technological innovations and utopian aspirations of his time, most notably those associated with the emerging Space Age. Fontana's art thus responded to popular imaginaries of the postwar period while remaining rooted in the tactile and expressive vocabulary of sculpture.

Subsequent galleries further destabilized the conventional opposition of figuration and abstraction/Spatialism in Fontana's work. One gallery in particular juxtaposed early *Buchi* (punctured canvases) from the late 1940s and early 1950s with figurative sculptures such as the nearly life-sized *Figura femminile con fiori* (1948).<sup>4</sup> We displayed these alongside a range of other works, such as vases, crucifixions, warriors, and battle scenes, to complicate the prevailing perception of Fontana's practice as exclusively spatialist after the Second World War. This inclusive display intentionally resisted the reductive logic of modernist purity. Instead, it



FIGS. 2-4  
Views of the exhibition  
*Lucio Fontana. Rétrospective*,  
2014, Paris, Musée d'Art  
moderne de Paris.

2 CRSDA, cf. nos. 32 SC 8, 33-34 SC 1, 34 SC 1, and CRSC, cf. no. 38 SC 34. 3 CRSDA, cf. nos. 47 SC 3, 47 SC 1, 48-49 A 2, and CRSC, cf. no. 49 SC 6.



embraced the heterogeneity of Fontana's practice, foregrounding the simultaneity of his seemingly contradictory modes—figuration and abstraction, gestural and conceptual, and so forth. By weaving together diverse typologies and iconographies, the display invited viewers to experience Fontana as a figure who not only transitioned from one aesthetic mode to another but also as an artist who persistently navigated the porous boundaries between them.

4 CRSC, cf. no. 48 SC 21.



5 Published in CRSC, I, 151.  
6 Bernard Blistène, ed., *Lucio Fontana*, exh. cat., (Editions du Centre Pompidou, 1987).

7 Yve-Alain Bois, "Fontana's Base Materialism," *Art in America* 77, no. 4 (1989): 238–48.

The intellectual framework of the exhibition was shaped by key texts, notably Fontana's essay "My Ceramics" (1939),<sup>5</sup> in which he emphasized the sculptural essence of his work. I was particularly moved by Richard Tuttle's "love letter" to Fontana, published in Blistène's 1987 retrospective catalog.<sup>6</sup> Equally compelling was Yve-Alain Bois's critical review of the 1987 Centre Pompidou exhibition, in which he challenged Fontana's frequent association with kitsch.<sup>7</sup> Bois argued that Fontana could not be considered kitsch because he lacked the necessary ironic distance. I found this insight deeply persuasive. Fontana's work reveals a sincere fascination with colors and decorative elements rather than an ironic stance.

FIGS. 5-8  
Views of the exhibition  
*Lucio Fontana. Rétrospective*,  
2014, Paris, Musée d'Art  
moderne de Paris.





FIG. 9  
View of the exhibition  
*Lucio Fontana. Rétrospective*,  
2014, Paris, Musée d'Art  
moderne de Paris.



The last contribution to Fontana scholarship at that time was made by Bois's student Anthony White, whose 2011 book *Lucio Fontana: Between Utopia and Kitsch*<sup>8</sup> situates Fontana within a broader context, notably his relationship with commodity.

I have always believed that curatorial and scholarly work must encompass not only intellectual research but also physical, tactile engagement. Early in the project, I undertook an experiment in reverse engineering by slashing a canvas myself—a hum-

8 Anthony White, *Lucio Fontana: Between Utopia and Kitsch* (MIT Press, 2012).

FIGS. 10-11  
Views of the exhibition  
*Lucio Fontana. Rétrospective*,  
2014, Paris, Musée d'Art  
moderne de Paris.

bling experience that produced poor aesthetic results but offered profound insight. I realized that the tension of Fontana's slashes emerges only when executed on a properly prepared canvas; mine was too thin and lacked internal support. This hands-on experiment deepened my understanding of his challenges during the early years of the *Tagli* series (1958–60), particularly his quest for suitable materials and techniques. The exhibition consequently featured a gallery devoted to this phase of experimentation, illustrating how Fontana tested various canvases and patterns before ultimately committing to monochrome and covering the backs of the slashes with black *teletta* (fabric) to achieve the desired tension and direct the viewer's gaze into a more abstract, black space.

One of the more conceptually challenging curatorial decisions involved the display of *Quanta* (1960),<sup>9</sup> a series of shaped canvases intended to be arranged randomly. Achieving true randomness proved more difficult than anticipated, as every configuration I devised suggested deliberate forms. Ultimately, I loosely based the installation on historical photographs by Giancolombo, embracing the idea that even randomness can be historically grounded.

We chose not to overwhelm the exhibition with archival documents, preferring instead to let the works speak through their physical presence. The goal was to emphasize direct sensory engagement rather than readable documents. One notable exception was a gallery that served as the setting for Fontana's architectural projects. Although they could not be physically reconstructed, they were represented through models accompanied by archival photographs. While functioning as "documents," the models retained a distinctly sculptural quality. The room also featured architectural drawings and two rare films: one by Jean Ferrero showing Fontana working on a canvas from the *Olii* series in his Comabbio home (1965 footage uncovered during my research) and another documenting his collaboration with Jef Verheyen for Belgian television. This space successfully balanced documentary function with aesthetic presence, underscoring the tactile dimension of Fontana's work.

A corridor-shaped gallery presented Fontana's late drawings of nudes alongside Mulas's photographs capturing the artist slashing canvases. Fontana once remarked that he drew nudes on Sundays and suggested with humor that these studies inspired his slashed canvases. This juxtaposition revealed a continuum between seemingly disparate bodies of work, demonstrating how private and public works coexist.

9 CRSDA, cf. no 60 Q 1.

Three iconic *Ambienti spaziali* were included: *Ambiente spaziale a luce nera* (1949), the 1951 neon installation made for the Milan Triennale (although not initially conceived as an *ambiente per se*, it became associated with the series over time),<sup>10</sup> and the white room with a slashed wall from documenta 4<sup>11</sup> (1968). Initially, I was reluctant to include these installations, given that they were reconstructions and might have seemed at odds with the rest of the exhibition's emphasis on handcrafted work. I came to see their inclusion, however, as essential to presenting a comprehensive portrait of Fontana. Though they challenged traditional notions of authenticity and artistic gesture in this context, the works embody Fontana's ambition to transcend materiality and propose new forms of viewer engagement. At the time, little was known about the pieces, and they had rarely been exhibited.<sup>12</sup> Years later, I would return to *Ambiente spaziale a luce nera* as the starting point for another exhibition exploring the origins of immersive installation art, thereby rightly positioning Fontana as a pioneer of that genre [FIG. 12].<sup>13</sup>

The exhibition catalog, designed by Philippe Millot, featured a triple cover that reflected the aesthetics and playfulness of Fontana's work and his fearless use of colors such as gold and pink. It included essays by leading scholars alongside my own contribution, which was inspired by a quote from Fontana: "A butterfly in space excites my imagination: Having freed myself from rhetoric, I lose myself in time and begin my holes."<sup>14</sup> My essay examined the paratextual dimension of the *Concetto spaziale*, exploring how seemingly trivial words and settings—evident in the ways Fontana casually referred to his works or in the way he allowed his works to be photographed—reveal that his lofty spatialist ambitions are not mere metaphysical abstractions, as is often conveyed in spatialist manifestos mostly authored by Fontana's followers. They are instead grounded in real space and everyday experience, channeling bodily engagement. This could be described as a form of "naturalist Spatialism."

The retrospective contributed significantly to a reevaluation of Fontana's practice, particularly in sculpture and ceramics. One tangible and immediate sign of this paradigm shift was the increased visibility of his ceramic works on the art market, reflecting the vision advocated by the exhibition.

10 CRSDA, cf. no. 51 A 1.

11 CRSDA, cf. no. 68 A 2.

12 The intensive research of Marina Pugliese that would lead to the game-changing 2017 exhibition at Pirelli HangarBicocca was not yet public.

13 *Immersion. Les origines: 1949–1969*, Losanna, Musée Cantonal des

Beaux-Arts de Lausanne, 4 novembre 2023 - 3 marzo 2024, a cura di Camille Lévêque-Claudet e Choghakate Kazarian.

14 Lucio Fontana, "I miei buchi," in *Pittori che scrivono*, ed. Leonardo Sinisgalli (Campografico, 1954), 113–15.

FIG. 12  
Poster for *Immersion*.  
*Les origines: 1949–1969*,  
exhibition curated by  
Camille Lévêque-Claudet  
and Choghakate Kazarian  
at the Musée Cantonal  
des Beaux-Arts in Lausanne.



Following the show, the Musée d'Art Moderne acquired *Conchiglie (Mare)*<sup>15</sup> from 1935–36, a rare, unglazed ceramic piece originally exhibited at *Dalla natura all'arte* at Palazzo Grassi in 1960 [FIG. 13].<sup>16</sup> Its earthy materiality resonates strongly with works like Jean Dubuffet's *Chaussée boiseuse* (1959), also featured in that historic exhibition and part of the museum's collection.

15 CRSC, cf. no. 35-36 SC 1.

16 *Dalla natura all'arte*, Venice, Palazzo Grassi - Centro Internazionale delle

Arti e del Costume, July–October, 1960, curated by Paolo Marinotti.

Ultimately, I curated the exhibition I wanted to see, one that I needed to truly grasp the full scope of Lucio Fontana's vision. In retrospect, the exhibition can be understood as part of a broader generational trend: a renewed interest in materiality and craft, coupled with a resistance to the dominant modernist narratives of previous decades. Although I was unaware of this alignment at the time, it seems my curatorial instinct intersected with—or perhaps helped catalyze—a larger cultural shift. It is gratifying to recognize that this exhibition marked the beginning of a sustained reevaluation of Fontana's work that has continued over the past decade through rigorous scholarship, particularly by the Fondazione Lucio Fontana and the publication of additional *catalogues raisonnés* and other important exhibitions.

Looking back, I realize that I was able to curate this show not despite my initial ignorance but perhaps because of it, engaging with existing voices while also seeking to discover and give shape to new perspectives relevant to that specific moment.



FIG. 13  
*Conchiglie (Mare)*, 1935–36.  
Paris, Musée d'Art Moderne  
de Paris.

# LUCIO FONTANA. AMBIENTI/ENVIRONMENTS. THE “LONG REACH” OF AN EXHIBITION

Marina Pugliese

As was described in the catalog, the exhibition held from September 21, 2017, to February 25, 2018, in the spaces of Pirelli HangarBicocca was “an attempt to redress the balance on the significance of Fontana’s environmental research.”<sup>1</sup> Now that eight years have passed, it is interesting to see whether the aim was, at least in part, achieved.<sup>2</sup>

It seems useful to share some of the data concerning the immediate reception of the exhibition, marked by its exceptional results in terms of attendance, which numbered 250,000 visitors.<sup>3</sup> The images show visitors immersed in the vastness of the exhibition spaces at Pirelli HangarBicocca, standing in very long lines as they wait patiently for their turn to see the *Ambienti* [FIGS. 1–2].

The great impact and relative media echo were also justified by the fact that it was only by experiencing these immersive works personally that their meaning could be perceived and, in Fontana’s case, by relating them to the date of their original creation, appreciate their innovative bearing. Here we need to first recognize the far-sightedness of Vicente Todolí, artistic director of Pirelli HangarBicocca and co-curator of the event, for having understood the value of the research and the potential of an exhibition dedicated solely to the *Ambienti*, and the Fondazione Lucio Fontana for having supported the project.



FIG. 1  
View of the exhibition  
Lucio Fontana. *Ambienti/*  
*Environments*, 2017, Milan,  
Pirelli HangarBicocca.

- 1 M. Pugliese, “Lucio Fontana. *Ambienti/*  
*Environments*,” in *Lucio Fontana. Ambienti/*  
*Environments*, exh. cat., ed. Marina Pugliese, Barbara Ferriani, and Vicente Todolí (Mousse, 2018), 20.
- 2 We are grateful to the Fondazione Lucio Fontana and Pirelli HangarBicocca for the information and materials

- provided to us on the reception of the exhibition.
- 3 “The 250,000 visitors registered during the opening period were able to see and enjoy Fontana’s lesser-known works for the first time, learning about their historical importance, while also appreciating their contemporary



The other element that no doubt determined the event's success is that it almost doubled the number of Fontana's *Ambienti* that had been reconstructed up until then.

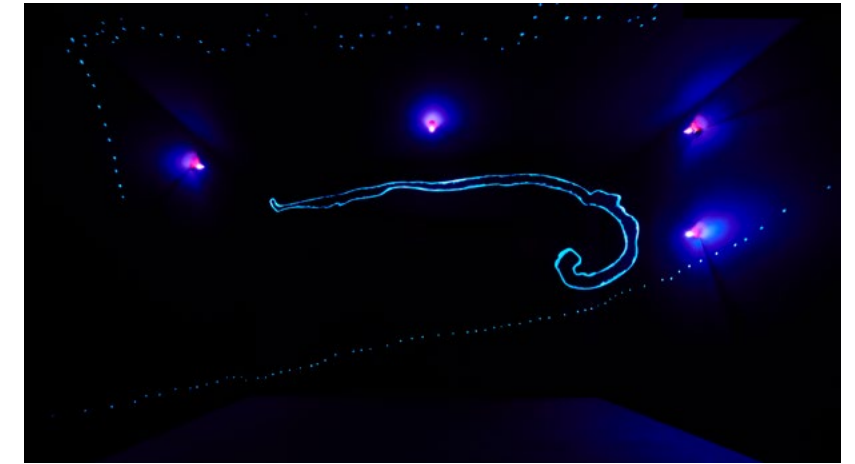
This was so thanks to the presence of five *Ambienti* reproduced for the first time since the artist's death,<sup>4</sup> as well as two structural environments (*Struttura al Neon per la IX Triennale di Milano* and *Fonti di energia, soffitto di neon per "Italia 61"*) and four *Ambienti*, already known to the public and for the occasion reproduced with some substantial changes thanks to newly discovered documents.<sup>5</sup>

relevance, which was highlighted by a display installation that created a dialogue with the former industrial structure of Pirelli HangarBicocca" <<https://pirellihangarbicocca.org/mostra/lucio-fontana-ambienti/>>.

4 The works reconstructed for the first time since the artist's passing on the occasion of the exhibition are *Ambiente spaziale: "Utopie," nella XIII Triennale di Milano* (produced with Nanda Vigo), *Ambiente spaziale* made in 1966 for the exhibition at the Walker Art Center, and the three environments that Fontana made for the Dutch

retrospective in 1967, that is, *Ambiente spaziale, Ambiente spaziale con neon, Ambiente spaziale a luce rossa*. CRSDA, cfr. nos. 64 A 3, 66 A 1, 67 A 2 [FIG. 3], 67 A 5, 67 A 6.

5 The works reconstructed with changes with respect to the previous occasions are: *Struttura al Neon per la IX Triennale di Milano, Fonti di energia, soffitto di neon per "Italia 61," Ambiente spaziale a luce nera* (made in 1949 at the Galleria del Naviglio), *Ambiente spaziale: "Utopie," nella XIII Triennale di Milano* (produced with Nanda Vigo), *Ambiente spaziale*, made in 1967 for



FIGS. 2-3  
View of the exhibition  
Lucio Fontana. *Ambienti/*  
*Environments*, 2017, Milan,  
Pirelli HangarBicocca.  
In FIG. 2 *Ambiente spaziale*  
*con neon*, 1967/2017;  
in FIG. 3 *Ambiente spaziale*,  
1967/2017.

The public success was corroborated by the very notable international coverage in the press that described both the great effort made in studies and archive research, and the fact that the exhibition was an opportunity for a strong visual impact [FIG. 4].

As Elizabeth Mangini remarked in *ArtForum*: "Groping and shimmying one's way through this exhibition was fun, but also something more: Thanks to the thorough documentation of the curators' archival research, as well as their notes on the decisions made in reconstructing each environment, the exhibition opened the door to a more comprehensive understanding of Fontana's theoretical and material radicalism."<sup>6</sup>

The critics also emphasized the astonishing contemporariness of Fontana's *Ambienti* and how the exhibition, beyond the rigor of the research, had a strong visual impact. This was noted by Caroline Roux in her article for the *Financial Times*: "But it's the experiential, and contemporary, nature of this show that prevails, rather than the scholarship. The final flourish is an immense work constructed of hundreds of green and blue neon tubes to create a dazzling latticed ceiling of colored light."<sup>7</sup> [FIG. 5].

Many other articles described the Milanese exhibition as a "historical," "revolutionary," "stupefying" occasion.<sup>8</sup> Charlotte Jansen

the exhibition *Lo spazio dell'immagine a Foligno, Ambiente spaziale in Documenta 4*, a Kassel. CRSDA, cf. nos. 51 A 1, 61 A 2, 48-49 A 2, 64 A 2, 67 A 1, 68 A 2.

6 Elizabeth Mangini, "Reviews. Milan. Lucio Fontana," *ArtForum* 56, no. 7 (2018).  
7 Caroline Roux, "Lucio Fontana in Milan: Immersed in a Realm of Light and Space," *Financial Times*, <<https://www.ft.com/content/9197059c-b57d-11e7-8007-554f9eaa90ba>>.

8 Quoted here are some particularly significant passages from a selection of the press reviews: "The groundbreaking show 'Ambienti/Environments' at Pirelli HangarBicocca positions Fontana as a pioneer of installations and immersive environments, demonstrating how he expanded the boundaries of art

FIG. 4  
Press conference at the exhibition *Lucio Fontana. Ambienti/Environments*, 2017, Milan, Pirelli HangarBicocca.



FIG. 5  
View of the exhibition *Lucio Fontana. Ambienti/Environments*, 2017, Milan, Pirelli HangarBicocca. *Fonti di energia, soffitto di neon per "Italia 61," 1961/2017.*



through his use of light and space. With painstaking precision, art historian Marina Pugliese and conservator Barbara Ferriani, who co-curated the show with Pirelli HangarBicocca's artistic director, Vicente Todolí, have re-created nine of the sixteen 'Ambienti spaziali' Fontana made between 1949 and 1968," Elizabeth Fullerton, "Lucio Fontana," *Art in America* (April 12, 2017). "Hence the importance of the exhibition at Hangar Bicocca. The art center that Pirelli owns in Milan is showcasing a dozen environments created in the 1950s and '60s, some of which are being re-released for the

first time based on formal instructions (structures, measurements, colors) left by the artist," Ángela Molina, "Otra idea del tránsito. Milán recupera las habitaciones, laberintos y corredores de Lucio Fontana," *El País* (November 7, 2017). "An unexpected, amazing, revealing exhibition. An exhibition that is no doubt historic, that can be probed by way of two *Interventi ambientali* placed at the start and at the end, and nine *Ambienti spaziali*, reintroducing them along a chronological path that truly seems to be an alienating journey through time: the anticipatory and visionary power of the works makes

wrote in *Wallpaper* how expanding the corpus of Fontana's environments allowed for the further repeatability and therefore enjoyability on the part of the public over time: "Created around the time Fontana founded the Spatialism movement, these neon-lit, rainbow-colored and transcendental environments are undoubtedly his most engaging works. Thanks to this new research, they are now reproducible for posterity."<sup>9</sup>

In March 2019, *Lucio Fontana. Ambienti/Environments* won the award for the Best Impressionist and Modern category at the Global Fine Art Awards in New York, confirming the exhibition's international success. The press release of the former emphasized that

the exhibition also proved to be of great value for researchers, curators, and art historians. For example, two Spatial Environments currently on display in the exhibition *Lucio Fontana: On The Threshold* at the Metropolitan Museum in New York, in collaboration with Fondazione Lucio Fontana, which runs until 14 April 2019, were reconstructed internally, based on Pirelli HangarBicocca's reconstruction project for the exhibition in Milan.<sup>10</sup>

Before the Milan exhibition, opportunities for research and exposition dedicated to the *Ambienti* had been rare.<sup>11</sup> The very fate of the original *Ambienti* had contributed to creating this void

them seem incredibly topical," Gianluigi Colin, "Sette anni di archeologia per rifare le Stanze di Fontana," *La Lettura* (September 24, 2017). "This is why this exhibition will echo across the world: because here, finally and directly, is the book of Genesis of the new aesthetic created by Fontana," Francesca Bonazzoli, "La luce su Fontana," *Corriere della Sera* (September 20, 2017). "The importance of Fontana's environments is signified by the fact that their influence has persisted even as they've vanished. Though few of us have seen the *Ambienti* before, they seem deeply familiar," Jonathon Keats, "Lucio Fontana's Architectural Spaces Changed Art Forever—But This Is Your First Chance To See Them," *Forbes* (December 14, 2017).

9 Charlotte Jansen, "Lucio Fontana's Environments Shed Light on a Lesser-known Side of His Oeuvre," *Wallpaper* (October 4, 2017).

10 See <<http://globalfineartawards.org/index.php/art-daily-pirelli/>>.

11 The only previous exhibition specifically dedicated to the environments was *Lucio Fontana. Ambienti spaziali. Architecture, Art, Environments*

curated by Germano Celant in 2012, hosted by the Gagosian in New York. In addition to three spatial decorations and the re-installation of the original *Ambiente spaziale* from 1967, which had been produced for the Galleria del Deposito in Genoa, three environments that had been reproduced before were reconstructed: *Ambiente spaziale a luce nera, 1948-1949* (1948-49); *Ambiente spaziale* made for the exhibition *Lo spazio dell'immagine* in Foligno in 1967; *Ambiente spaziale in Documenta 4, a Kassel, 1968* (CRSDA, cf. nos. 48-49 A 2, 67 A 1, 68 A 2, 2a). As concerns research prior to the Milan exhibitions see: Luca Quattrocchi, "Gli 'ambienti spaziali' e i rapporti con l'architettura nel secondo dopoguerra," in *Lucio Fontana*, exh. cat., ed. Enrico Crispolti and Rosella Siligato (Electa, 1998), 162-73; Luciano Caramel, Anty Pansera, and Giorgio Zanchetti, "La Triennale, la luce," in *Centenario di Lucio Fontana*, exh. cat., ed. Enrico Crispolti (Charta, 1999), 146-99; Paola Valenti, *Lucio Fontana in dialogo con lo spazio: opere ambientali e collaborazioni architettoniche, 1946-1968* (ADAC, 2009); Marinella Venanzi, *Fontana e lo spazio: aspetti innovativi dalle opere ambientali*

in the research. Except for *Ambiente spaziale*, 1967,<sup>12</sup> made for the Galleria del Deposito in Genoa, all of Fontana's other environments were dismantled at the end of their respective exhibitions, as they were experimental works and therefore not marketable. Moreover, the marginalization of Fontana's contribution to the history of the environments was also due to the interest on the part of the American art system, which in the 1960s had identified the environment as the natural evolution of a national language born out of the immersive dimensions of Abstract Expressionist paintings.<sup>13</sup>

In 1976 Germano Celant curated the exhibition *Ambiente/Arte* for the 37. Venice Biennale, delineating a first, pioneering, history of the environments, which included Fontana as one of the precursors with the *Ambiente spaziale* of Foligno, 1967, reconstructed for the occasion by Gino Marotta and erroneously attributed in the catalog to the year 1960.<sup>14</sup>

Contrariwise, the following year, for the Fontana retrospective curated by Erika Billeter at the Guggenheim Museum in New York that ran from October to December 1977, no *Ambienti* were included, and Jan van der Marck, curator of the Fontana retrospective at the Walker Art Center in 1966 and a champion of the importance of the artist's environmental works, underscored how

di Lucio Fontana, doctoral thesis, Università IUAV, Venice, 2012; Marina Pugliese, "Pour la première fois en Italie et dans le monde." *L'Ambiente Spaziale a luce nera et des rééditions*, in *Lucio Fontana, rétrospective*, exh. cat., ed. Choghakate Kazarian and Sebastien Gokalp (Paris Musées, 2014), 165–73; Marina Pugliese, "Il cielo in una stanza. La Struttura al Neon di Fontana e Pigment Pur di Klein al Museo del Novecento," in *Klein Fontana. Milano Parigi 1957-1962*, exh. cat., ed. Silvia Bignami and Giorgio Zanchetti (Electa, 2014), 135–43; Marina Pugliese, *Per la prima volta in Italia e nel mondo. Gli ambienti di Lucio Fontana. Ricognizione storica documentaria*, doctoral thesis, Università degli studi di Udine, 2013–14, Udine.

12 CRSDA, cf. no. 67 A 3.

13 A. Kaprow, *Assemblage, Environments and Happenings* (H.N. Abrams 1966). "In November 1958 at the Hansa Gallery in New York, almost ten years after *Ambiente spaziale a luce nera*, Allan Kaprow created immersive spaces designed to host performative actions, which he called happenings. The environments created by Kaprow and other artists of the New York scene—such as Jim Dine, Claes Oldenburg, and Robert Whitman—were made of discarded materials

and often activated through such happenings. In a series of articles published in *Art News* and later brought together in the book *Environments, Assemblages & Happenings* [sic] published in 1966, Kaprow outlined a genealogy of environments, starting with the paintings of Jackson Pollock, making a connection between expanded painting, *assemblage* and environments. The environment thus indicated a new type of immersive work, to be interpreted as an expansion of Jackson Pollock's iconic 'all over.' Hence, with the crucial contribution of Allan Kaprow, the environment became the focus of a new and autonomous genealogy, one that finally uncoupled American art from the long train of the European artistic tradition," Marina Pugliese and Andrea Lissoni, eds., *Inside Other Spaces: Environments by Women Artists 1956–1976*, exh. cat. (Hatje Cantz 2024), 28.

14 The exhibition was preceded by an article published in *Studio International*, in which Celant, tracing back over a first history of the *Ambienti*, dedicated a few lines to Fontana, citing *Ambiente nero*, and illustrating it with an image of the black *Ambiente spaziale*: "Utopie" from 1964: Germano Celant, "Artspace," *Studio International* 190, no. 977 (September–October, 1975): 119–20.

the absence of such works in New York was detrimental to the artist's international reception.<sup>15</sup>

So how can we challenge ideas that have by now become historicized regarding the reception of the artist, and how can an exhibition contribute to this goal? Considering the artist's exhibition history, it is evident how after *Lucio Fontana Ambienti/Environments* at Pirelli HangarBicocca many monographic shows devoted to him included at least one *Ambiente*, something that had previously occurred only exceptionally.<sup>16</sup> Among these, one, *Lucio Fontana. Walking the Space: Spatial Environments 1948–1968*, installed in 2020 in the spaces of the Hauser&Wirth gallery in Los Angeles and curated by Luca Massimo Barbero, was monographically dedicated to the theme also by virtue of the research conducted for the Milan show.<sup>17</sup>

Another significant fact concerns the online presence, especially on social media, of images of Fontana's *Ambienti*. While in the past iconographic research about Lucio Fontana conducted online essentially referred to just the holes, slashes, and ceramic

15 Jan van der Marck, "Lucio Fontana at the Guggenheim," *Art in America* LXVI, no. 2 (1978): 134.

16 List of exhibitions with *Ambienti* post-2017 generously shared with me by the Fondazione Lucio Fontana: *Welt ohne Außen. Immersive Spaces since the 1960s*, Berlin, Walter Gropius Bauhaus, June 8–August 5, 2018, curated by T. Sehgal, T. Oberender; *Peindre la nuit*, Metz, Centre Pompidou–Metz, October 1, 2018–April 15, 2019, curated by Jean-Marie Gallais, Michaël Foessel; *Lucio Fontana: On the Threshold*, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, January 23–April 14, 2019; Bilbao, Guggenheim Museum, May 17–September 29, 2019, curated by I. Candela; *Lucio Fontana. Walking the Space: Spatial Environments 1948-1968*, Los Angeles, Hauser&Wirth, February 13–September 13, 2020, curated by L.M. Barbero; *Light upon Light: Light Art Since the 1960s*, Riyadh, Noor Riyadh, March 18–June 12, 2021, curated by S. Davidson and R. Zaki Farsi; *Lucio Fontana: De Verovering Van De Ruimte*, s-Hertogenbosch, Design Museum Den Bosch, October 3, 2021–January 23, 2022, curated by C. Huizing; *CRAZY. La follia nell'arte contemporanea*, Rome, Chiostro del Bramante, February 19, 2022–January 8, 2023, curated by D. Eccher; *Nanda Vigo, l'espace intérieur*, Bordeaux, Madd–Musée des Arts décoratifs et du Design, July 7, 2022–January 8, 2023, curated by V. Brun; *Inside Other Spaces. Environments by Women Artists. 1956-1976*, Munich, Haus

der Kunst, September 8, 2023–March 10, 2024, curated by M. Pugliese, A. Lissoni; *Inside Other Spaces. Environments by Women Artists II. 1956-2010*, Rome, MAXXI, September 24, 2024–November 3, 2024, curated by F. Stocchi, M. Pugliese, A. Lissoni; Immersion. Les origines: 1949-1969, Lausanne, Musée Cantonal des Beaux-Arts, November 4, 2023–March 3, 2024, curated by C. Kazarian, C. Lévêque-Claudet; *Lucio Fontana. Spatial concept*, Gangneung City, Sorol Art Museum, February 14, 2024–April 14, 2024, curated by Korean Research Institute of Contemporary Art in collaboration with Fondazione Lucio Fontana; *Lucio Fontana. Un futuro c'è stato / Il y a bien eu un futur*, Rodez, Musée Soulages, June 22–November 3, 2024, curated by P. Campiglio, B. Decron; *Lucio Fontana. Erwartung*, Wuppertal, Von der Heydt Museum, October 5, 2024–January 12, 2025, curated by R. Mönig, B. Eickhoff in collaboration with Fondazione Lucio Fontana; *Il Genio di Milano. Crocevia delle arti della Fabbrica del Duomo al Novecento*, Milan, Gallerie d'Italia, November 23, 2024–March 16, 2025, curated by M. Carminati, F. Mazzocca, A. Morandotti, P. Zatti.

17 "The fundamental research undertaken for the exhibition *Lucio Fontana Ambienti/Environments* held at Pirelli HangarBicocca in Milan in 2017–18 and curated by Marina Pugliese, Barbara Ferriani and Vicente Todolí together with the findings of the catalogues raisonnés, restituted [sic] the plurality,

works, after the Milanese exhibition the online presence of the environments spiraled, making this segment of Fontana's research visually pervasive as well.<sup>18</sup>

In fact, the perceptive discrepancy with respect to the Fontanian imaginary is perhaps the focal point of the matter. It was in fact an exhibition that, thanks to new data and the reconstruction of the lost environments, brought back to the center the corpus of works that Fontana himself believed to be the most important results of his research.<sup>19</sup>

The extensive research campaign conducted with Barbara Ferriani in over twenty national and international archives brought forth multiple sources of a compositional nature that made it possible to modify, with the approval of the Fondazione Lucio Fontana, the environments that had been reproduced previously, and to reconstruct some others; these included the *Ambiente spaziale* that was made for the Walker Art Center, or the *Ambiente spaziale a luce rossa* for the Stedelijk Museum, works that unequivocally showed the visionary value of Fontana's research by revealing aspects that were hitherto unknown about the artist's approach to space. The allusion here is to the weird perceptive elements for the viewer, such as the rubber floor of the environment for the Walker Art, which aimed to make the viewer experience instability and imbalance<sup>20</sup> [FIG. 6].

the originality and the richness of Fontana's spatial environments," Luca Massimo Barbero, ed., *Lucio Fontana. Walking the Space: Spatial Environments*, exh. cat. (Hauser & Wirth publishers, 2021), 20. See also Marina Pugliese and Babara Ferriani, "Lucio Fontana at Pirelli HangarBicocca, 2017-2018: The Story of a Philological Exhibition," in Barbero, *Lucio Fontana. Walking the Space*, 154-60.

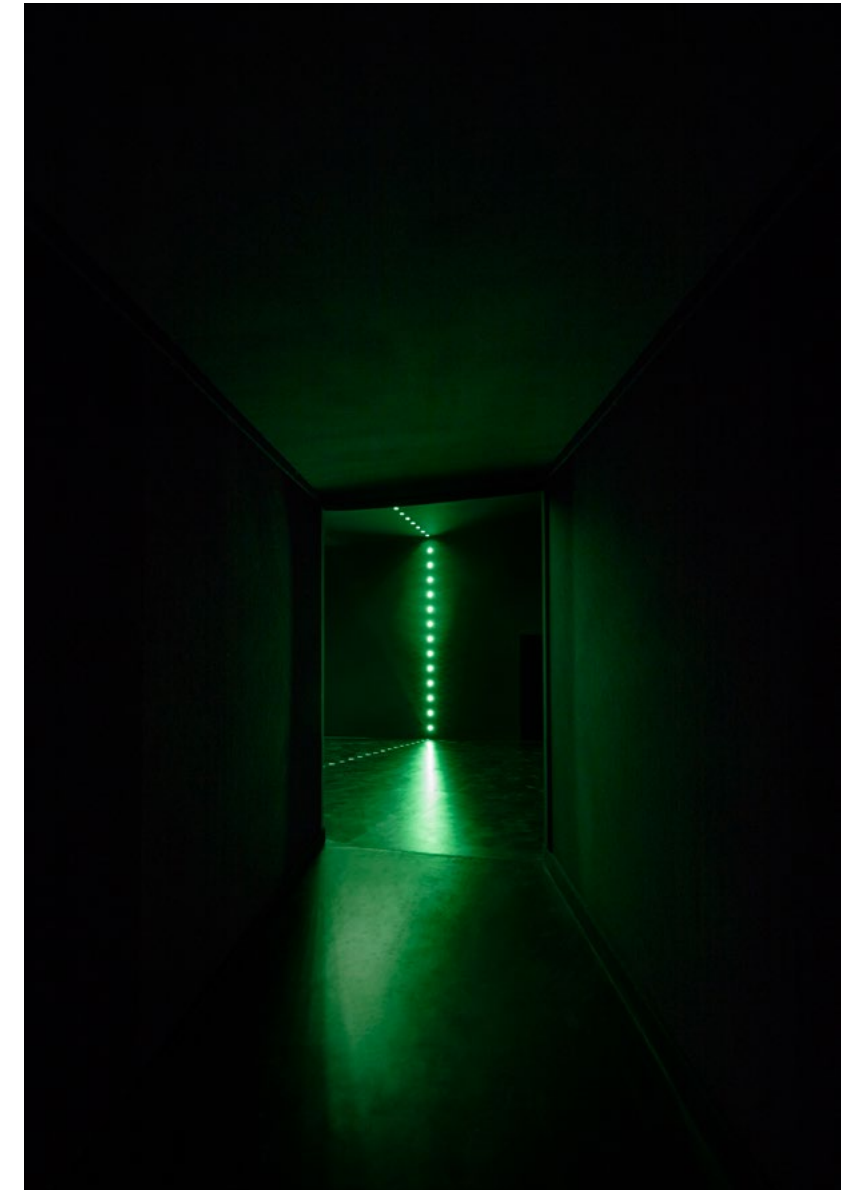
18 For the sake of example, see Instagram #luciofontanaenvironments with over 5,000 images most of which referring to the exhibition at Pirelli HangarBicocca.

19 Pugliese, *Per la prima volta in Italia e nel mondo*, 32-33 and 106-07.

20 See the section titled "Instability and imbalance" in the text by Pugliese, in *Lucio Fontana. Ambienti/Environments*, 30-34. Enrico Crispolti, the PhD referee of Pugliese noted the contribution by her research in proposing a new reading of Fontana's work: "The result of this is not just a considerable and highly appreciated increase in the documentary knowledge concerning the individual events, resulting in a better understanding in particular

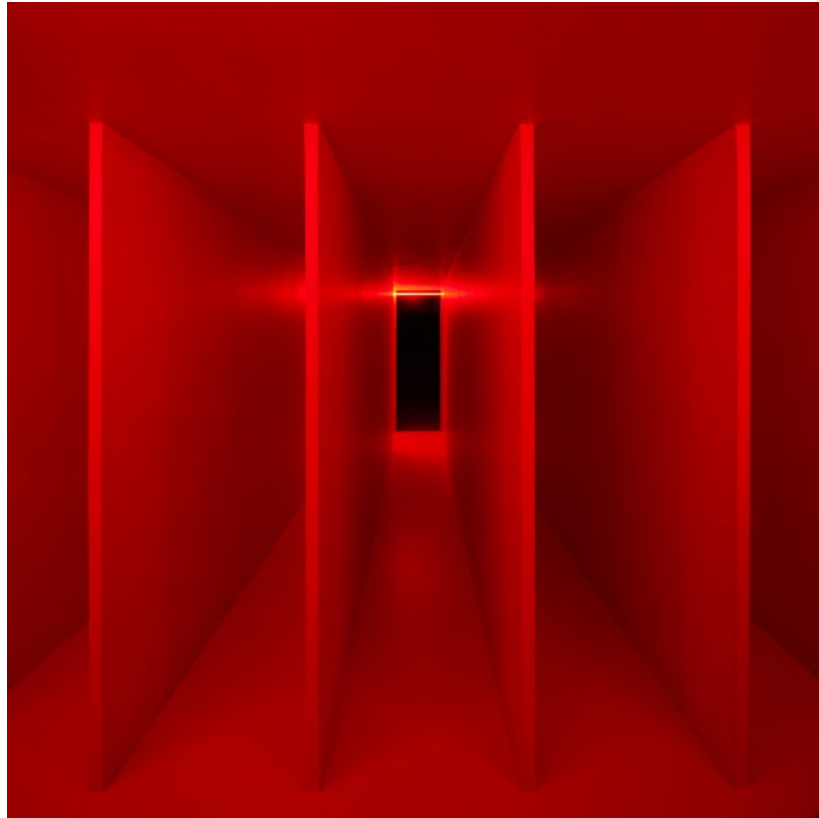
of the most recent proposals (for the Stedelijk in Amsterdam, and for the Van Abben in Eindhoven, 1967); and with the consideration of a final *Ambiente* hitherto forgotten, connected to a display in tandem with Nanda Vigo (1968, Galleria Polena, Genoa). But in particular a consistent stimulus for an interpretative growth of their actual phenomenology, characterizing their different declinations of a psychological-perceptive nature. From those already evident in the *Ambiente* of 1949 to those, hitherto unidentified, of imbalance and perceptive instability in the relative floor: from the rubber floor of the *Ambiente* in Minneapolis, 1966, to the slightly tilted one of the *Ambiente* in Foligno, 1967 (clearly connected in particular with the intentions of the young artists of Gruppo T, Milanese, and among other things very much appreciated by Fontana himself)." E. Crispolti, *Osservazione quale Referee su tesi di Dottorato di ricerca, Università degli Studi di Udine, della dr. Marina Pugliese, su "Gli ambienti di Lucio Fontana. Ricognizione storico documentaria,"* Rome, January, 26, 2014.

FIG. 6  
View of the exhibition  
*Lucio Fontana. Ambienti/*  
*Environments*, 2017, Milan,  
Pirelli HangarBicocca.  
*Ambiente spaziale*,  
1966/2017.



Or the monochromatic immersion and the innovative subdivision into the corridors of the *Ambiente spaziale a luce rossa* made in 1967 [FIG. 7], which was very similar, as Constance Leewallen also noted, to the Bruce Nauman's later *Corridor Installation* (*Nick Wilder Installation*)<sup>21</sup> (1970).

Perhaps a further step needs to be taken: make sure that Fontana's unequivocal contribution to the global history of environments is acknowledged, thus undermining the North American version that still prevails in the literature today.



FIGS. 7-8  
Views of the exhibition  
Lucio Fontana. *Ambienti/  
Environments*, 2017, Milan,  
Pirelli HangarBicocca.  
In FIG. 7 *Ambiente spaziale  
a luce rossa*, 1967/2017;  
in FIG. 8 Lucio Fontana  
and Nanda Vigo, *Ambiente  
spaziale: "Utopie" per la  
XIII Triennale*, 1964/2017.

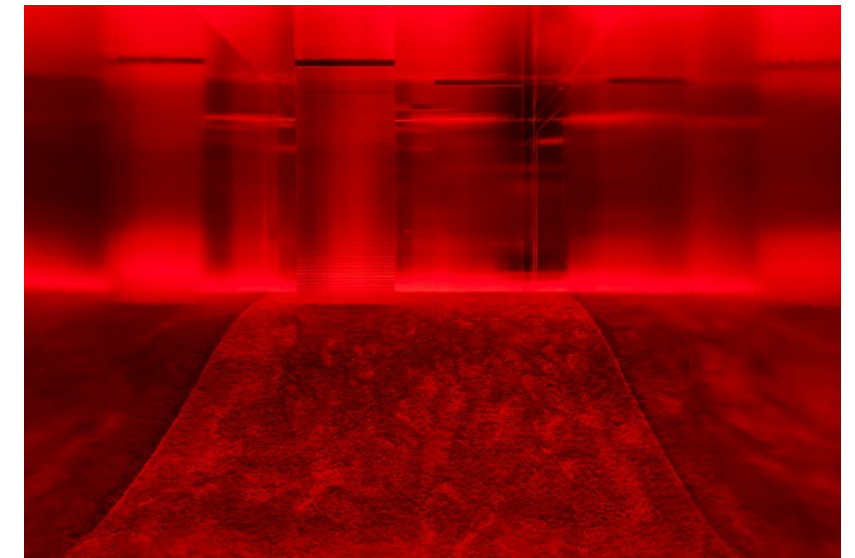
21 "Starting in 1949 Lucio Fontana in Italy experimented with installations he termed *Ambienti Spaziali* or 'spatial environments' which were almost always destroyed after being exhibited. One environment in particular, *Ambiente spaziale a luce rossa* (1967), is relevant to this discussion. Consisting of a series of narrow corridors painted red and illuminated by red light, it created a mandatory path for the spectator and was designed to alter

perceptions through chromatic effects. While you can find other such isolated examples, no other artist conducted as sustained an investigation into corridor and related installations as Nauman. Although they form a distinct body of work, on an experiential level they are intimately related to his work as a whole," Constance M. Lewallen, "Full Circle," in Constance M. Lewallen and Dore Bowen, *Bruce Nauman. Spatial Encounters* (University of California Press, 2019), 9–11.

On the occasion of the show in Milan, Barbara Casavecchia wrote in *ArtReview* how *Lucio Fontana Ambienti/Environments* could have led to a rethinking of the approach to the history of environments: "Reconstructing Fontana's forgotten research in the fields of environments, light and space implies also expanding the chronologies of art and redefining its lineages. Some of his works predate those of Dan Flavin, Allan Kaprow and Bruce Nauman. It's not a matter of establishing who 'invented' what, but to relocate the birth of an artform on a broader scale: to move it not from margin to centre, as Julie H. Reiss's famous book about installation art once had it, but from centre to margin."<sup>22</sup>

Indeed, after the exhibition at Pirelli HangarBicocca, two other events—*Inside Other Spaces: Environments by Women Artists 1956-1976*, co-curated in 2023 by me with Andrea Lissoni, and *Immersion. Les origines: 1949-1969*, co-curated in 2024 by Choghakate Kazarian and Camille Lévêque-Claudet—were dedicated to the environments and their story, recognizing Fontana's central role in both cases.<sup>23</sup>

The exhibition held in the spaces of Haus der Kunst in Munich harkened back to the studies carried out for *Lucio Fontana. Ambienti/Environments*, broadening the horizon thanks to a visual map of the works made at an international level for major exhibition events and/or published in the sector magazines between 1956 and 1976.<sup>24</sup>



22 Barbara Casavecchia, "Lucio Fontana Ambienti / Environments," *ArtReview* (December 6, 2017).  
23 See in particular C. Lévêque, "Theaters of Immersion: Immersive Art

Exhibitions between 1949 and 1969," in *Immersion. Les origines*, exh. cat., ed. Choghakate Kazarian and Camille Lévêque-Claudet (Hazan, 2023), 26–27.  
24 Giovanni Rubino, "Visual Timeline



The research and the catalog essays confirm Fontana's pivotal role and the long reach of his contribution in the work of Nanda Vigo, Yayoi Kusama, and more in general in the environmental research carried out in Argentina in the 1960s [FIG. 8].

The artist himself had tried to uphold his primacy, insisting on exhibiting several *Ambienti* on the occasion of the 1967 retrospective held first at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and then at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, and it will be the stratification of comparative international studies and exhibitions to prove, in the long term, the central role in Fontana's environmental research within a global context [FIGS. 9–10].<sup>25</sup>

FIG. 9  
View of the exhibition  
Lucio Fontana. *Ambienti/*  
*Environments*, 2017, Milan,  
Pirelli HangarBicocca.  
*Ambiente spaziale con*  
*neon*, 1967/2017.

1956–1976 *Environments*,” in Pugliese and Lissoni, *Inside Other Spaces*, 9–24.

25 “In an unpublished letter dated January 25 to Ad Petersen, preserved in the archives of the Stedelijk Museum, Lucio Fontana listed in broken French the works he wanted to be displayed in the museum. The list indicates his attention to the *Ambienti*, and the

installation of works that emphasized their importance,” Pugliese, “Lucio Fontana. *Ambienti/Environments*,” 209, note 113. While the Dutch exhibition showed three *Ambienti*, Fontana had originally planned that there be four (Pugliese, “Lucio Fontana. *Ambienti/Environments*,” 34–35).

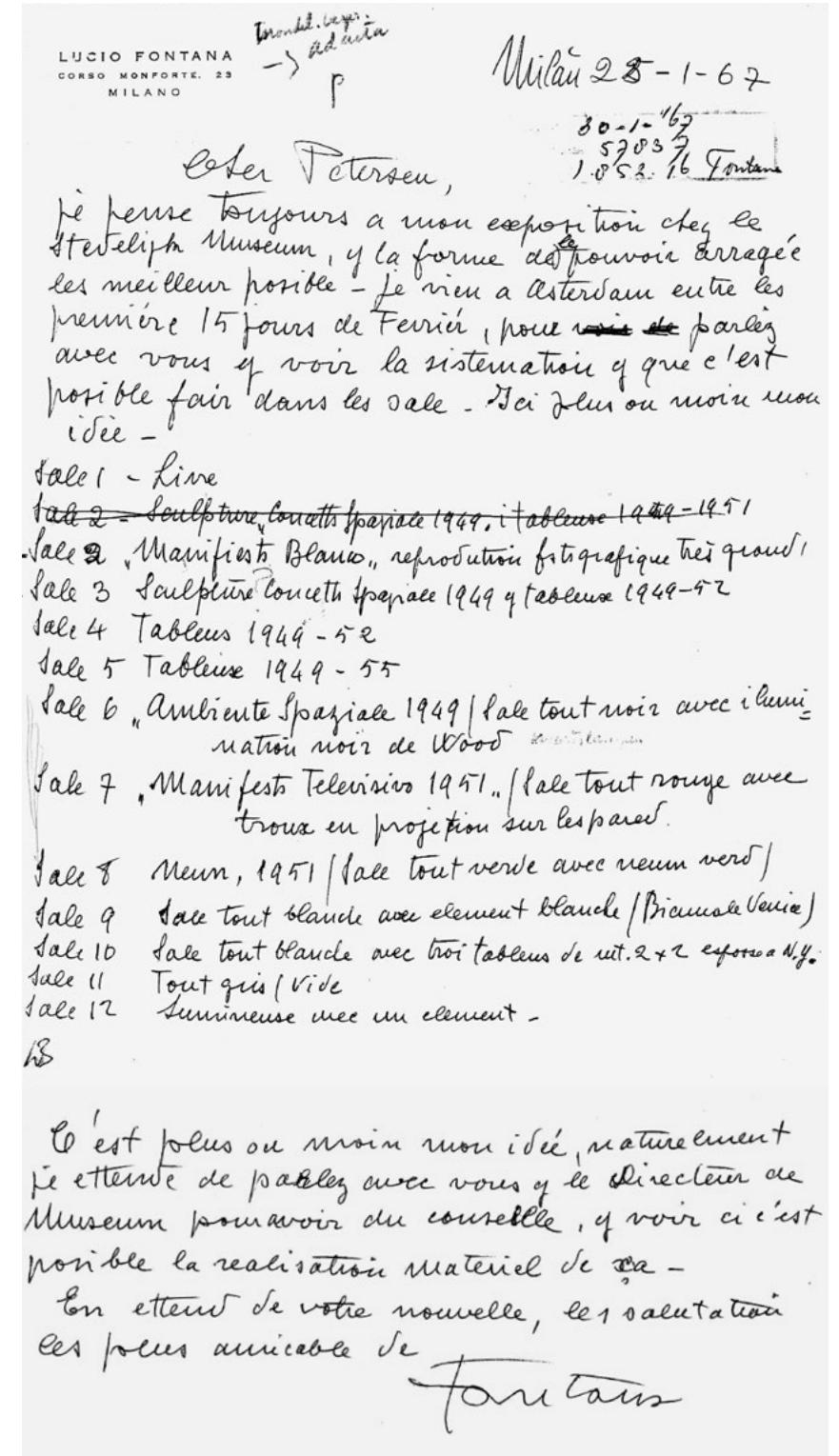


FIG. 10  
Letter from Lucio  
Fontana to Ad Petersen,  
January 25, 1967.

# LUCIO FONTANA: SCULPTURE AT HAUSER & WIRTH GALLERY IN NEW YORK: THE ARTIST'S FIRST SCULPTURE SHOW IN THE UNITED STATES

Cristina Beltrami

*Lucio Fontana: Sculpture*, which opened in the fall of 2022 at Hauser & Wirth's New York branch, curated by Luca Massimo Barbero in collaboration with the Fondazione Lucio Fontana, was destined to be a success from the moment of its conception: By felicitous coincidence, in fact, the exhibition that for the first time introduced Lucio Fontana to the American public, in all his complexity and profound nature as a sculptor, was being held at the very same address as his first solo show in the US presented at Martha Jackson Gallery in 1961.<sup>1</sup>

*Lucio Fontana: Sculpture* thus brought the Argentine Italian sculptor back to the same sites with a display of around eighty works to be read in the light of his entire career. The idea was to prove how Lucio Fontana, despite his being famous for having invented the “slash” (1958), had long been engaged in sculpture, not viewed in a traditional sense, but, rather, as a reflection on the relationship between form and space.

By curatorial choice, and despite the awareness of the constant ebbs and flows in Fontana's career, the exhibition was based on chronology, the only exception being the first room that, in tribute to the city and to the coincidence with the solo show of 1961, opened with the spectacular *Concetto spaziale, La luna a Venezia*<sup>2</sup> and with several sketches—*Cateratte a New York, Cateratte a New York, New York a mezzogiorno, New York di notte dal grattacielo, Pianta di New York di notte*.<sup>3</sup> Fontana outlined these images in impromptu fashion, ones that were absolute masterpieces of immediacy in the way the lines were scratched out, almost in reaction to his startling contact with New York. The works were also a first study of what was to become a highly intense series titled *New York*, whose slashes made in metal sheets seek answers to the question that struck the artist as soon as he arrived in the United States: “How was I to paint this terrible New York?”<sup>4</sup>

The Archive of the Fondazione Lucio Fontana in Milan holds a splendid photograph of the opening in 1961: In the reflection of the window, we get a glimpse of Fontana's profile, *La luna a Venezia*, and the hustle and bustle on 69<sup>th</sup> Street [FIG. 1](#). While presented to the New York immortalized in that image was Lucio Fontana as pioneer of European artistic experimentation, providing an indispensable tool

1 *Lucio Fontana: Ten Paintings of Venice*, New York, Martha Jackson Gallery, November 21–December 16, 1961. The 1961 solo show consisted of two different shows: On the ground floor Martha Jackson displayed the series of paintings the artist had made on the theme of Venice (1960–61), while on the upper floor, her son, David Anderson,

showed several *Concetti spaziali* including Fontana's *Nature* (1959–60).

2 CRSDA, cf. no. 61 O 45.

3 Respectively, CROC, cf. nos. 60-61 DSP 105, 60-61 DSP 112, 60-61 DSP 110, 60-61 DSP 113, 60-61 DSP 111.

4 Grazia Livi, “Incontro con Lucio Fontana,” *Vanità VI*, no. 13 (Fall 1962): 52.



for an interpretation of his work, that is, *Devenir de Fontana*—the book that Michel Tapié published in 1961 and that Lawrence Alloway<sup>5</sup> quickly translated so that it would be available to the American public on the occasion of the solo show in New York—, the 2022 show focused on the artist's sculptures. The public discovered that Lucio Fontana was born into a family of sculptors and that he developed his art in Milan, a vibrant city, in which the concept of sculpture became extremely articulated and variable.

From the second room onwards, the exhibition proceeded in a chronological and narrative sense, starting from the early works, such as *Nudo*<sup>6</sup> (1926), that cast light on Fontana's twofold roots: on the one hand, his more canonical apprenticeship linked to his father's workshop in Argentina and his studies at the Brera Academy of Fine Arts—specifically under Adolfo Wildt—, on the other, his early desire for his own training with respect to all the influences from beyond the Alps, starting with Auguste Rodin, but with Medardo Rosso and the Futurist lesson as well.

Almost a viaticum to be used by the visitor who was about to enter the density of Fontana's creative mechanism and the inter-

**FIG. 1**  
Opening of the exhibition  
*Lucio Fontana: Ten Paintings  
of Venice*, 1961, New York,  
Martha Jackson Gallery.

5 Lawrence Alloway (1926–1990), who in 1962 would become the director of Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, had previously curated Lucio Fontana's solo show in London at McRoberts & Tunnard in 1960 and translated into

English the *Technical Manifesto of Spatialism* in 1961. On the relationship between Alloway and Fontana see also the essay by Paolo Campiglio in these proceedings.  
6 CRSDA, cf. no. 26 SC 1.

weaving of his artistic trajectory, the curator added to this crucial passage of the exhibition some of the pages from the artist's *Cronologie*,<sup>7</sup> that is, plates, sketched by the artist himself, to be viewed as a visual diary of his work from 1931 to 1960. These works were not meant to be read according to a “Darwinian-like” kind of evolution, but, rather, as a constant game of intersections and cross-references.

This first step was necessary for the visitor to be able to enter the complexity of the room, dedicated to the 1930s, a moment when Fontanian “syncretism” was defined, i.e., the artist's ability to hold opposites together: figurative and abstract, traditional and avant-garde, color and light . . . often disorienting the criticism of that period.

The artist's terracotta busts, like *Testa di ragazza*,<sup>8</sup> as well as the figures he shaped, carved, and painted on terracotta blocks—*Figura alla finestra* and *Figure nere*<sup>9</sup>—or the abstract panels—the three *Tavolette graffite*<sup>10</sup>—are unique accomplishments and always to be read in a sort of continuity because they were “born from an identical need.”<sup>11</sup> The same can be said for the slightly later works, like *Tavoletta graffita (Madonna)*<sup>12</sup> in which the *taches* of color that are visually detached from the support define these accomplishments as sculptures, and, more importantly, locate them completely outside of the constrictive dominion of the decorative arts.

The mechanism was reiterated on the opposite wall which included the extremely radical *Scultura astratta*<sup>13</sup> of 1934—whose inclusion of wire already foreshadowed the neon for the 1951 Milan Triennale<sup>14</sup>—with several terracotta works made in Albisola starting in 1936 [FIG. 2].

Indeed, in 1936, Fontana, who had become totally enthralled by ceramic's potential, breathed life into “alga, butterflies, flowers, crocodiles, lobsters, an entire petrified, shiny aquarium. The substance was attractive: I could craft a seabed, a statue, or some hair and impress it with a virgin, compact color that fire would later amalgamate.”<sup>15</sup>

Those were the years when Fontana defined the anti-naturalistic, bright color palette that became a distinctive element of his entire career, and that the New York show well represented with the pinks, yellows, and blues of his *Cavalli marini*.<sup>16</sup> The color black even went so far as to assume reflected tones in two *Vasetti con fiori*<sup>17</sup> from 1937 and seemed to be liquefied in *Figura sdraiata*<sup>18</sup> from the Museo Novecento in Florence. Fontana also had a special regard for gold,

7 CROC, cf. nos. 60-61 DSP 151, 60-61 DSP 152, 60-61 DSP 153.

8 CRSC, cf. no. 31 SC 12.

9 CRSC, cf. nos. 31 SC 4, 31 SC 7.

10 CRSDA, cf. nos. 31 SC 15, 31 SC 16, 32 SC 10.

11 Lucio Fontana, “Le mie ceramiche,”

*Tempo* (September 21, 1939)

(now translated as “My Ceramics,”

in CRSC, I, 151).

12 CRSDA, cf. no. 34 SC 4.

13 CRSDA, cf. no. 34 SC 29.

14 CRSDA, cf. no. 51 A 1.

15 Fontana, “My Ceramics.”

16 CRSC, cf. nos. 36 SC 7, 38 SC 24.

17 CRSC, cf. nos. 37 SC 11, 37 SC 12.

18 CRSC, cf. no. 38 SC 31.

which he treated as an instrument that could be used to analyze the relationship between light and form, even before being a pure color.

Marking the passage between the experience with ceramics in the 1930s and the results of his postwar sculptures, the room ended with *Medusa*,<sup>19</sup> an extremely dramatic head of monumental size that foreshadowed the revolutionary use of matter that was typical of the 1940s (and that would be the centerpiece of the last room on the ground floor, Room 4 – The Chapel).

In 1947, in fact, Lucio Fontana returned to Italy after spending seven years in Argentina. With him he had the *Manifiesto Blanco*, that is to say, a programmatic text concerning the innovation of the arts and belief in technology: “We are continuing the evolution of art. . . . we call on all those in the world of science . . . that they may direct part of their research towards discovering that malleable substance full of light, and instruments that will produce sounds which will enable the development of four-dimensional art.”<sup>20</sup> Hence, Fontana drafted a text that would underlie the spatial movement in the very same phase in which he coined the definition of *Concetto spaziale*, a title that would identify his future output independently of the medium of expression.

FIG. 2  
View of the exhibition  
*Lucio Fontana: Sculpture*,  
2022, New York, Hauser  
& Wirth Gallery. From the  
left *Figura sdraiata*, 1938;  
*Cavalli marini*, 1936; *Cavalli  
marini*, 1938; *Fondo marino*,  
*Conchiglie*, 1944–46.



19 CRSC, cf. no. 36 SC 5.

20 CRSDA, I, 111.

When Fontana returned to Milan, which had been heavily bombed during the war, he immediately reconnected with the major architects of the time who were hard at work rebuilding a city that was ready to rise again from its own ashes.

Symbolizing this regenerative force is the amazing *Scultura spaziale* (1947)<sup>21</sup> shown at the Venice Biennale in 1948, the first to be held after the war, and literally built around the void. The work was a bronze that resembled a ring of magmatic matter that expressed all the awareness of a post-atomic age, indeed, starting all over again from the informal nature of the previous sculptures.

Proof of the artist's inexhaustible energy in shaping terracotta, the following year Fontana made *Figura femminile con fiori*:<sup>22</sup> a figurative sculpture that is at the same time anti-naturalistic, made of material that is tormented and that, in spite of its imposing dimensions, remains far-removed from the canonical concept of “monumental” as it was intended in the European sculpture of the last decade.

Two works present in this room traced a bridge between the discoveries of the 1930s and what would come to symbolize Fontana's work: the “slash.”

The *Nascita del Sole*<sup>23</sup> is a canopic jar in which color becomes the element that disintegrates the mass—reminiscent of the torpid and magmatic surfaces of the 1930s—, while *Concetto spaziale*, *Iris Clert*<sup>24</sup> is a canvas on which Fontana implements the extreme use of gold, sublimating the portrait of the undaunted Greek-French art dealer in a mystical image, transmuting it, in fact, into an icon that is made more precious by polychrome and shiny shapeless blocks of glass (*cotissi*). The trace of a sign so clearly marked on the thickness of the pictorial matter referred to the great invention of the slash that the same brilliant gallerist had contributed to making known across Europe, presenting the artist's *Nature* in her Paris gallery in 1961. Moreover, her portrait was a prelude to what would take place on the floor above [FIG. 3].

This exhibition focused on the oeuvre of a more mature Fontana, starting from the years 1946 and 1947, when the artist adopted the term *Concetto spaziale*, allowing him to separate the work of art from the need to be classified within a specific category, that of painting or sculpture. Resorting to a scientific metaphor, with respect to art history, what Fontana revealed had the same value as an Einsteinian invention: The work discovered the fourth dimension.

The next step was the invention of the “hole” (1949) as a gesture that could be made upon the most disparate of materials. The New

21 CRSDA, cf. no. 47 SC 1.

22 CRSC, cf. no. 48 SC 21.

23 CRSC, cf. no. 38 SC 36.

York exhibition specifically delved into this aspect of Fontana's research, starting with a highly emblematic work: *Concetto spaziale, Il pane*.<sup>25</sup> A thick, irregular terracotta panel with an apparently ductile surface into which Fontana sank his awl uniquely following the instinct of the gesture and even abandoning that minimum attempt to control the positioning of the holes that had been observed in the *anilina* from just before (*Concetto spaziale, 1949–50*),<sup>26</sup> and exhibited on the next wall.

The following room was a repertoire of potential surfaces on which to make a hole: canvas, terracotta, or paper, as in the two *Concetti spaziali* (1949),<sup>27</sup> besides individually representing cosmic galaxies, were also used by the artist as an instrument of investigation for some of his experiments with the televised medium. From the late 1940s, Fontana was drawn to this new communication tool. He explored its artistic potential and even drafted a *Manifesto del movimento spaziale per la televisione* (Manifesto of the Spatialist movement for television) (1952).

So the tiles in this room, like the *Concetti spaziali*,<sup>28</sup> were once again “spatial screens” on which the artist acted by tracing lines of well-calibrated holes. He took apart the surface; he created differences in levels to better receive the shade and to reveal the ideal passage of space. It was precisely their nature as a plane that allowed Fontana to finally also manifest his sensibility regarding color.

This aspect was also clearly visible in the *Concetto spaziale*<sup>29</sup> of 1957 and in the *Piatti* of the 1950s. Fontana's *Piatti spaziali* are in fact terracotta disks, reworked with holes and color (five *Concetti spaziali*),<sup>30</sup> made between 1957 and 1958 and that the exhibition deliberately chose to display the same way that the artist had done in Carlo Cardazzo's galleries—in Venice and in Milan, that is to say, placing them on the wall according to a cosmic order [FIG. 4]. If we take an even closer look at Fontana's research into the hole, the room also hosted two rare *Concetti spaziali*<sup>31</sup> in polychrome glass: Two spherical sculptures in which the artist attempted the artifice of making a hole in material that was unusual for him, incandescent while being worked on, and transparent in its final state.

To further demonstrate the parallel paths of Fontana's research, in the 1950s the criticism also spoke of a “Fontana Baroque,” described here by several pieces on display in the last room, visually held at the center of a monumental *Arlecchino* made

24 CRSDA, cf. no. 61 O 36.

25 CRSC, cf. no. 50 SC 3.

26 CRSDA, cf. no. 49-50 B 5.

27 CRSDA, cf. nos. 49 B 1, 49 B 2.

28 CRSC, cf. nos. 52 SC 24, 54 SC 20, 57 SC 10.

29 CRSC, cf. no. 57 SPC 70.

30 CRSC, cf. nos. 57 SPC 28, 57 SPC 29, 57

SPC 36, 57 SPC 14, 57 SPC 12.

31 FLFA, cf. nos. 1785/191 and 2963/3.

FIGS. 3-4

View of the exhibition *Lucio Fontana: Sculpture*, 2022, New York, Hauser & Wirth Gallery. In FIG. 3 from the left *Figura femminile con fiori*, 1948; *Scultura spaziale*, 1947; *Nascita del Sole*, 1938; *Concetto spaziale, Iris Clert*, 1961. In FIG. 4 from the left *Piatti spaziali*, 1957; *Vaso spaziale*, 1957.



between 1948 and 1949<sup>32</sup> and naturally linked to the commission from the eponymous movie theater in Milan. The theme was also very relevant in post-Second World War Italy, where theater was making a full comeback, including popular theater like *commedia dell'arte* in which Harlequin (*Arlecchino*) was undoubtedly the

32 CRSC, cf. no. 48-49 SC 3.

key character. Fontana turned him into a restless creature in a crooked pose, as if shaped by the wind. The material of this sculpture seemed to be liquefied, Harlequin's arms became chromatic filaments and, once again, in keeping with the curator's decision, the art was deliberately shown from behind, visualizing how the torment involved in working with ceramics also continued in the inner hollow of the figure [FIG. 5].

The walls of the room were instead inhabited by several ceramic *Battaglie*<sup>33</sup>—made between 1947 and 1950—where knights fight with explosive force, literally invading the space as proof of how the concept of the Baroque for the artist signified the abandonment of closed volumes and exact perimeters. These sculptures, once again, underscored the Fontanian syncretism that was capable of reconciling the unreconcilable, and that was well-represented in the room by a very rare work as well: the study for the Fifth Door of Milan Cathedral,<sup>34</sup> emblematic of the coexistence between narrative and abstraction, and pertinent to the ambitious project carried out for the contest held by the Veneranda Fabbrica del Duomo in 1950.

FIG. 5

View of the exhibition *Lucio Fontana: Sculpture*, 2022, New York, Hauser & Wirth Gallery. At the center *Arlecchino* 1948–49; from the left *Piatti Vecchia Savona*, 1950–55; *Battaglie*, 1947–50; model for the 5th Door of Milan Cathedral, 1952.



33 CRSC, cf. nos. 47 FBA 29, 47 FBA 26, 47-48 FBA 9, 49-50 FSV 2.

34 CRSDA, cf. no. 52 SC 1.

The opposite wall completed the floor with a series of “Vecchia Savona” plates<sup>35</sup> from the 1950s, the umpteenth Fontanian subversion of the Albisola ceramic tradition. In that center for traditional ceramic production the artist had discovered the so-called Vecchia Savona plate molds. By using them he once again carried out a conceptual operation. Based on a mechanism that was similar to that of a ready-made, Fontana took the classical eighteenth-century multilobed mold—traditionally painted with bucolic scenes—and revolutionized it: He marked the surface with furrows, he cut it, he tossed onto it a clump of soil that he quickly and cleverly transformed into figures, knights, small portrait-busts or still lifes tormented by unnatural hues or tempestuous tones. Once again, he fused painting and sculpture in these screens furrowed by Baroque bas-reliefs: objects in which the game between light and shadow caused the scene to constantly be moving.

On display on the third and last floor were Lucio Fontana's monumental *Nature* arranged in the very same spaces as in 1961: Fontana was always attracted to the themes of the universe, which he viewed as a place of the existential and the unknown, and between 1959 and 1961 he created some fully-fledged celestial forms, first in terracotta and later in bronze, on which he intervened with a deep furrow, a fissure where the void is like an explosion that generates the mouth of a crater.

These are archetypical forms, similar to meteorites, that Nico Stringa's contribution to this meeting<sup>36</sup> relates to the artist's likely familiarity with the Ischigualasto Provincial Park, north-west of Argentina, close to the border with Chile. The landscape there is also characterized by spherical geological formations that could have been the source of inspiration for Fontana's *Nature*. Hence, they are to be seen as forms on which to make “slashes”: This is true of the three standing monumental spheres made between 1959 and 1960—*Concetto spaziale, Natura* (1959–60)<sup>37</sup>—or the four versions protruding from the wall—*Concetto spaziale, Natura* (1959)<sup>38</sup>—which appeared to be sections of the former, but instead preceded them in time [FIG. 6].

Almost in opposition to the idea of forms born out of volcanic landscapes, the last room described Fontana as an artist who embraced surgical precision. *Concetto spaziale, Teatrino*<sup>39</sup> placed in perspective at the center of the visual telescope between the two

35 CRSC, cf. no. 55 FPS 2 and, FLFA, cf. nos. 4366/2, 4366/3.

36 See the essay by Nico Stringa in these proceedings.

37 CRSC, cf. nos. 59-60 N 3, 59-60

N 20, 59-60 N 32.

38 CRSC, cf. nos. 59 N 4, 59 N 5, 59 N 25, 59 N 33.

39 CRSDA, cf. no. 65 TE 24.

rooms recalled profiles that were similar to those of the *Nature* but produced here with a mechanical cut. It was an exercise in control, both in terms of the forms and in the positions of the holes. The backdrop of the *Teatrini* was once again confirmed as a screen on which the artist could act; this time, however, the hole-making was traced, and the direction of the holes interwove a dialogue with the shapes and with their own shadows projected onto the canvas. Fontana himself described his *Teatrini* as “figurations of man in space . . . these would be the forms of inhabitants of other worlds,”<sup>40</sup> thus relating this last invention to the news itself from the 1960s, related to the first space missions.

This last room ended with works characterized by a Futuristic aesthetic, like *Concetti spaziali*, *Ellissi*,<sup>41</sup> a new series in lacquered wood, essentially made in 1967 and with the almost mechanical modalities, fatally representing the conclusive phase of the artist’s research. They are a synthesis between painting and sculpture, and, together with some rare sculptures also on display—two *Concetti spaziali* from 1968<sup>42</sup>—, they conclude Fontana’s entire trajectory in a surprising way, projecting it towards a modernity that is still relevant today [FIG. 7].

The exhibition was accompanied by a catalog—with an updated biography penned by Maria Villa—whose graphic design was entrusted to Leonardo Sonnoli, who was able to trace an explanatory visual path. Moreover, as specifically requested by the curator, Barbero, the catalog included Erich E. Baumbach’s unabridged *Fontana*, with restored images.<sup>43</sup> This was the first bilingual (French English) monographic text that, published in 1938, discussed Lucio Fontana’s career as a sculptor, offering proof of how all his work arose from sculpture.

40 Luigi Grassi, “Lucio Fontana,” *Caffè Club* II, no. 5 (January–February 1968): 12–17.

41 CRSDA, cf. nos. 67 EL 1, 67 EL 6.

42 CRSDA, cf. no. 67 SC 3, and FLFA,

cf. no. 814/1.

43 Erich E. Baumbach, *Le Sculpteur Lucio Fontana: Un essai analytique* (Campografico, 1938).

FIGS. 6-7  
Views of the exhibition  
*Lucio Fontana: Sculpture*,  
2022, New York, Hauser  
& Wirth Gallery. In FIG. 6  
from the left *Nature*, 1959;  
*Concetto spaziale*, 1956;  
center *Nature*, 1959–60.  
In FIG. 7 from the left  
*Concetto spaziale*, *Teatrino*,  
1965; *Concetti spaziali*,  
*Ellissi*, 1967.



# CONCETTO SPAZIALE – A DEVICE TO PERFORM PRIME IMAGES

## Gianni Caravaggio

Although this contribution strays from the theme of reference, it has been included at the end of the section “Exhibiting Lucio Fontana: Exhibition Criteria as Critical Readings” just as it was presented during the international study conference and in keeping with how it was organized.

FIG. 1  
Ma Yuan, *Walking on Path in Spring*, 13th century. Taipei, National Palace Museum.

I admit that the proposition I used for the title of my paper may seem rather enigmatic. I will thus try to unpack it as though it were a folded blanket in order to reveal the entire view.

In a painting by Ma Yuan [FIG. 1], a Chinese artist from the thirteenth-century Song period, on the left we see the partial view of a mountain landscape where a monk contemplates the space stretching out before him. That space is empty, but what is it that he sees? The monk imagines the landscape, or do we conjure up invisible landscape scenarios through his eyes?

Lucio Fontana's *Scultura spaziale* (1947 [FIG. 2])<sup>1</sup> consists of fistfuls of plaster dyed black. Their uncertain shape recalls the idea of a primordial nature, in which a figure seen from behind seems to stand out as it contemplates the enclosed void of the sculpture. A portion of void in which the surrounding environment can manifest itself.

Both works frame and look to the void, an indefinite and mysterious phenomenon but one that precisely for this reason has the ability to trigger the imagination.



<sup>1</sup> CRSDA, cf. no. 47 SC 1.

<sup>2</sup> Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694) was a Japanese poet in the Edo Period. He was

probably the greatest Japanese writer of haiku poetry.

To further clarify this vision of the void, consider one of the most beautiful haikus ever written by the seventeenth-century Japanese poet Bashō:<sup>2</sup>

*The old pond  
a frog jumps into  
the sound of water*

The lines do not follow a logical or consequential connection. They resemble three stone islands, one next to the other, and yet they stimulate a mental connection that is translated in the imagination of a solid landscape generated by the sound of the water. This creation of space starting from an initial surprising and unexpected perception is the event that Roland Barthes discusses in *Camera Lucida*,<sup>3</sup> referring to the analysis of a photograph. Barthes identifies it as “punctum,” distinguishing it from “studium,” where indicated in the same picture is what we recognize and know through the cultural superstructure, that is, the cultural historical memory as well as the memory of the everyday. This void, in the potential perceptive space of Zen thinking is known as “Mu.”

It is thanks to this dimension of the Mu that there developed, in spite of the geographical and cultural distances, a profound familiarity between certain Italian and Japanese expressions, such as Spatialism and the Gutai group, and later between Mono-ha and Arte povera.

What encourages a young artist today, or, as in my case, in the early 1990s, to take Lucio Fontana's *Concetti spaziali* as a point of reference to develop and evolve one's own artistic vision? Likely it is the sense of mystery, a consciousness of the uncertain that involves human beings in their deepest essence.

This motivation is in contrast with a cultural context in which art is increasingly summoned to play an illustrative role within a simplistic social function.

Contextual art, relational art, participatory art, and public art are just some examples of the ideologizations accommodating the functional pretense of art, which re-emerged in the 1990s, and continues to dominate the cultural and artistic scene.

My attempt, from the outset, has always been that of suggesting an enigmatic vision of the world, as opposed to a mechanistic vision in which everything, signifier and signified, cause and effect, is pre-determined.

<sup>3</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida. Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (Hill and Wang, 1981).



FIG. 2  
*Scultura spaziale*, 1947.  
Milan, Fondazione  
Lucio Fontana.

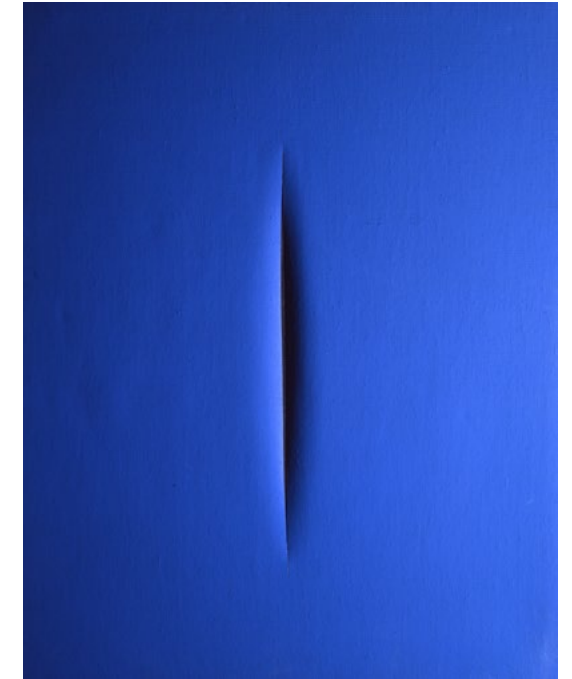


FIG. 3  
*Concetto spaziale*, Attesa,  
1967. Private collection.

In a mechanically determined approach our main concern is that there should be a definite conclusion, like Descartes' conception of the *deus ex machina*, while I suggest opening up the space of mystery, which stimulates the imagination toward dimensions that have not yet been defined.

We can agree that mystery is not projected, that, rather, it is perceived through sensitive listening. In this sensible predisposition a perceptive insight can take place that makes the “prime images” sedimented in our deep memory resound, around which the container known as the human being was constituted.

At first, prime images could be the Platonic substratum viewed in the hyperuranion, but, unlike Plato's idealism, they represent images that have aroused wonder since the dawn of human existence on earth.

In the text *Per la scoperta di una zona di immagini* (For the discovery of a zone of images), which he wrote in 1958, Piero Manzoni used the term “prime images,” attributing to their perception, individual and subjective, a universal nature, because they constitute the images of our natural memory:

The work of art draws its opportunity from an unconscious impulse that is triggered by a collective substrate of universal value that is common to all human beings and from which they draw their gestures, and from which the artist gets the “archai,” the origins, of organic existence. . . . Thanks to the discovery of the psychological substratum that is common to all humans, the author-work-viewer relationship becomes possible. . . . We can thus say that subjective invention is the only means of discovery of objective realities, the only one that gives us the chance to communicate with other humans. . . . We absolutely cannot consider the painting a space on which to project our mental scenes, but, rather, an area of freedom in which we look for the discovery of our prime images.<sup>4</sup>

I believe that this text by Manzoni indicates a profound understanding of Fontana’s *Concetti spaziali*, which the following year took shape in his (Manzoni’s) *Achromes*. In this text Manzoni seems to delve deeper into and further clarify Fontana’s indications in the *Manifesto tecnico dello Spazialismo* (Technical manifesto of Spatialism), 1951 in which he wrote as follows, “The subconscious, in which lurk all the images that the intelligence perceives, adopts the essence and forms of these images, accepts the notions that shape human nature. The subconscious molds the individual, completing and transforming him.”<sup>5</sup> In his own text, Manzoni develops Fontana’s idea featuring tones that are typical of the avant-garde manifestos, in a reflection of an ontological and existential nature.

Like Fontana, Manzoni lets the naturalness of a gesture fall onto the space of the canvas; these canvases are folded, crumpled, stitched, and stretched like Fontana’s slashes on canvas that create concrete and sensual flexions and even a natural variation of light and shadow on the surface [FIG. 4].

Manzoni called these works *Achromes*, “colorless,” meaning “before color,” indicating an initial condition, a “zero” that stimulates the imagination of a possible reality. The imagination’s ability to begin

4 Piero Manzoni, “Per la scoperta di una zona di immagini,” in *Piero Manzoni*, exh. cat., ed. Germano Celant (Electa, 1992).

5 Lucio Fontana, “We Are Continuing the Evolution of the Medium in Art. Technical manifesto,” in *Lucio Fontana and the Spatialists: Sources and*



FIG. 4  
Piero Manzoni, *Achrome*,  
1958–59. Private collection.

and be set in motion is also shared with Fontana’s *Concetti spaziali*. Akin to the *Concetti spaziali*, in the *Achromes* the identity defined by the title indicates a dimension that transcends pure objectivity.

In Fontana and Manzoni what seems to be echoed is the “Reine Empfindung” (pure feeling) described by Kazimir Malevich in his text on Suprematism, *Die gegenstandslose Welt*, published in the *Bauhausbücher* series in Munich in 1927.

In Manzoni’s *Achromes* as well as in *Concetti spaziali*, the naturalness of the gesture, which makes the physical concreteness of the canvas sensitive, seems to constitute the starting point for the prime images, the seminal point that creates the sensitive perception, evoking the prime images of human memory to which the artist attributes universal value.

At this point as well, in his text Manzoni seems to formulate in an in-depth way what Fontana suggests in the *Manifesto tecnico dello Spazialismo* when he concludes that: “A new conception of life in the subconscious of everyday man; creators are slowly but inexorably beginning the conquest of every-day man.”<sup>6</sup> The synergy between the individual and the universal, which commonly presents itself as a paradox, in Manzoni’s clarifying text only apparently reveals itself. The fact that it is difficult to perceive this synergy between singular perception and universal dimension is explained by way of its open and uncertain nature that is hard to adapt to the informative functions that are often requested of art.

*Documents for the Gallerie Cardazzo*, ed. Luca Massimo Barbero, trans. Huw Evans (Marsilio, 2020), 38.

6 Fontana, “We Are Continuing the Evolution,” 39.

This synergy does not have a spectacular character, for it is essentially intimate in nature. And yet, the revelation of prime images is of vital importance: their revelation alleviates the modern alienation of human beings and their inability to have a profound experience, as denounced by Walter Benjamin, Martin Heidegger and, before them, Karl Marx in *Das Kapital*.

This primary relation, when it occurs, manifests in us with an emotional feeling, and, at the same time, with a feeling of uncertainty that, substantially, both characterize the poetic aperture.

As I reflect on the poetic aperture that, when it appears, often gives us a feeling of the uncertainty of the subjective perception, I find it intriguing to make an analogy with Werner Heisenberg's indeterminacy principle. This core quantum physics concept, formulated around a century ago, affirms that the way subatomic particles behave is influenced by the viewer, who thus contributes to the definition of the physical world. This is a more intrinsically probabilistic vision of nature, which is in stark contrast with the closed system of Newtonian physics, in which dynamics, laws, cause and effect are predetermined.

Fontana expresses his agreement with this vision by dedicating his *Quanta* series to it, from 1959 onwards [FIG. 5]. The individual shapes of the canvases are not predetermined, and the constellation of the whole can be redefined in each presentation. Each time, whoever installs the *Quanta* will decide how they are arranged.

The lack of understanding of this primary and open dimension makes it so that the *Concetti spaziali*, with their holes and slashes, are often interpreted as acts of destruction, as mere acts aimed at going beyond the canvas in their crossing of the space outside of the painting, or even as theatrical performances.

To my mind, these interpretations are substantially wrong, because they reduce an intimist and imaginary work to a mere provocation; they circumscribe it to a literal, tautological, and simplistic reading, as well as falling into one of the most deviant interpretations of modern and contemporary art, i.e., that of the provocation.

If we take the first canvas with a hole in it, *Concetto spaziale*, 1949 [FIG. 6],<sup>7</sup> we observe that that ensemble of holes can suggest both a sidereal dimension and a flock of birds, without, however, objectively representing anything at all, as it subtracts itself from the representation. The work is neither literal nor tautological, it is not included in the definition of "What you see is what you see,"<sup>8</sup>

FIG. 5  
Lucio Fontana standing in front of *Concetto spaziale, Quanta*, 1959–60, in the studio on Corso Monforte.

FIG. 6  
*Concetto spaziale*, 1949.  
Rome, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea.



<sup>7</sup> CRSDA, cf. no. 49 B 1.

<sup>8</sup> "New Nihilism or New Art?," Radio program with Bruce Glaser (moderator), Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, and Frank Stella. February 15, 1964.

an exclamation taken from an interview with Frank Stella and Donald Judd, in which the work is considered a perception circumscribed to the specific concreteness of the object in a given space that is subsequently defined by Donald Judd as a “specific object”<sup>9</sup> [FIG. 7].

On the one hand, it is true that canvases with holes or that are slashed become objects, calling into play their objecthood by way of the “breaking” of the canvas. Nonetheless, Fontana himself asserted, in his interview for *Self-Portrait*<sup>10</sup> with Carla Lonzi in 1967, that he called his works *Concetti spaziali* because they represented a mental fact. By using the expression “spatial concept” Fontana is not indicating the object per se, but, rather, the memory and the image that it triggers in the mind.

In this sense, we could say that the canvas with a hole or a slash, acts as a “spatial object” capable of evoking the “spatial concept.” Similarly, the meaning of Manzoni’s *Socle du Monde* [FIG. 8] does not lie in the metal cube with writing on it, but in its being a device that invites us to imagine the entire globe held up by it, including ourselves.

Fontana’s *Concetti spaziali* can be considered “devices” that prepare us to imagine prime images; they get us ready to come to terms with that void of certainty.

The essential difference between the “concept” used by Fontana as a sophisticated act of the imagination, as the heir to a particular Mediterranean vision of a founding philosophical reflection, with respect to its use in the objectifying pragmatism of American culture, is noteworthy. Here, in fact, the term is linked to the



FIG. 7  
Donald Judd, *Untitled*,  
1966. Marfa, Judd  
Foundation.

FIG. 8  
Piero Manzoni, *Socle du  
Monde*, 1961. Herning,  
HEART Herning Museum  
of Contemporary Art.

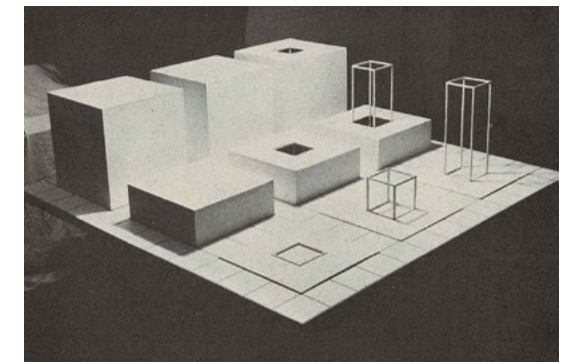
iconoclastic vision stemming from the Puritanism of the Pilgrims and the pragmatic “projectual” vision with which the American settlers, via the construction of the railroad system, conquered vast territories as far as the West Coast.

We find this “projectual” aspect in Sol LeWitt’s 1967 *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*. The modular nature of the forms of “Primary structures” (the original definition of Minimalism) prepares us for a pre-vision of an additional space.

When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art. . . . What the work of art looks like isn’t too important. . . . No matter what form it may finally have it must begin with an idea. . . . Art that is meant for the sensation of the eye primarily would be called perceptual rather than conceptual. . . . When an artist uses a multiple modular method he usually chooses a simple and readily available form. . . . Space can be thought of as the cubic area occupied by a three-dimensional volume. Any volume would occupy space. It is air and cannot be seen<sup>11</sup>[FIG. 9].

In the 1970s, this “projectual” approach led to the replacement of the signifier object with the signified object. While Joseph Kosuth explored semiotically the interchangeability and ambiguity between signified, signifier, and sign, in Lawrence Weiner’s work things or specific, concrete facts are reduced to a universal linguistic proposition. In 1978 Lawrence Weiner declared that:

FIG. 9  
Sol LeWitt, *Serial Project,  
I (ABCD) Set C*, 1967. Otterlo,  
Kröller-Müller Museum.



9 Donald Judd “Specific Objects,” in *Art in Theory 1900-1990*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Blackwell, 1996), 809–12.

10 Carla Lonzi, *Self-Portrait*, trans. Allison Grimaldi Donahue (Divided Publishing, 2021).

11 Sol LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” in Harrison, Wood, *Art in Theory*, 834–37.

1. THE ARTIST MAY CONSTRUCT THE WORK
2. THE WORK MAY BE FABRICATED
3. THE WORK NEED NOT BE BUILT<sup>12</sup>

The linguistic indication of the concept becomes the visual possibility of a concrete work.

This division between perception and concept could not exist for Fontana's vision, because the concept is the evocation that can only start from a perceptive stimulus, i.e., the sensitive perception is the evocative vehicle of the mental dimension and, as such, it is necessary for an original experience to begin. Fontana's vision is founded on the essence of Greek philosophical thinking: this is what Aristotle says in *Metaphysics*:

All men by nature (φύσει) tend to know (εἰδέναι). An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses (αἰσθήσεων): for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves, and above all others the sense of sight. For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer seeing (one might say) to everything else. The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light (γνωρίζειν) many differences (διαφοράς) between things.<sup>13</sup>

The visual stimulus invests the subject who perceives, and consequently Fontana's conceptual dimension is subjective; however, as we specified previously, it is precisely in this profound subjectivity that both Manzoni and Fontana see the potential for collective objectivity. Instead, the rejection of any form of subjective perception on the part of Donald Judd's *Specific Objects* and Sol LeWitt's "projectual" conceptualism is a reaction to the expressive nature of Abstract Expressionism.

Our reflection on "spatial concepts" now requires two clarifications: what is meant by "space" and what is meant by "image"? The two questions are closely interconnected.

Space in the *Concetti spaziali* is not understood as a simple container and even less as a surface to be filled, hence, not as a quantitative dimension. This is particularly true of the *Ambienti*

12 Lawrence Weiner, "Statements," in Harrison, Wood, *Art in Theory*, 881–83.

13 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. William David Ross (public domain)

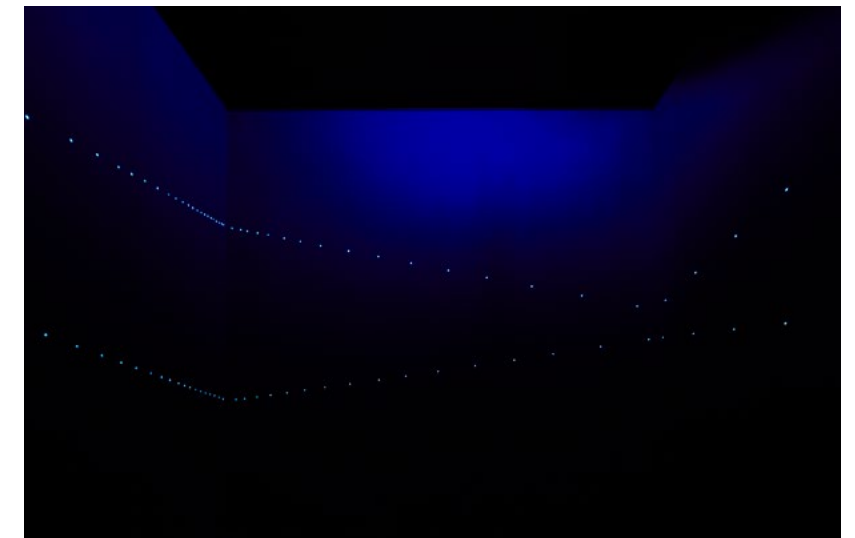
[https://people.bu.edu/wwildman/WeirdWildWeb/courses/wphil/readings/wphil\\_rdg05\\_metaphysics\\_entire.htm](https://people.bu.edu/wwildman/WeirdWildWeb/courses/wphil/readings/wphil_rdg05_metaphysics_entire.htm) (last accessed on January 2, 2026).

*spaziali* that Fontana made from 1949 onwards, such as the one he created in 1967, which was reconstructed for the Pirelli HangarBicocca exhibition in 2017 [FIG. 10].<sup>14</sup> What is meant by "space" here is that mental and imaginative spillover that transcends any form of quantification, unfolding beyond the measurable and scientific dimension. In the same interview with Carla Lonzi, Fontana remarks: "See, now, the infinite...in the Milky Way, by now, there are billions, billions . . . The sense of measurement, of time, is over."<sup>15</sup> In another passage from the same interview, Fontana clarifies the nature of the concept of space, describing a conversation with an American critic, who polemically says to him:

"well yes, but you say . . . space, what do you, an Italian, want as concerns space . . . we Americans, the Arizona deserts, there" . . . "Ah," I say "so that's what you mean by space? Well then, look, I'm not Italian, I'm Argentine and I have the pampas which is ten times bigger than the deserts of Arizona . . . but space is not the pampas, space is something else, in the mind, do you see? You simply don't understand!"<sup>16</sup>

In short, for Fontana the question of space is relevant as a phenomenon that is formed in the pure imagination, that is, as a "concept."

FIG. 10  
*Ambiente spaziale*,  
1967/2017. View of the  
installation at the exhibition  
Lucio Fontana. *Ambienti/*  
*Environments*, Milan, Pirelli  
HangarBicocca, 2017.



14 CRSDA, cf. no. 67 A 1.

15 Lonzi, *Self-Portrait*, 280.

16 From the conversation with Carla Lonzi published unabridged in Walter

Guadagnini, Gaspare Luigi Marcone, and Stefano Roffi, *Lucio Fontana. Autoritratto. Opere 1931-1967*, exh. cat. (Silvana Editoriale, 2022), 124.

The question of the image instead does not concern a fixed and two-dimensional representation. It is not an advertising billboard ready for consumption as described in the medium theory that seems to embrace the lesson of Pop Art. It is worth emphasizing that this contemplative process that activates profound images in the subconscious, to which both Fontana and Manzoni attribute a universal value, is diametrically opposed to that idea of universality that was spreading in American Pop Art. In the latter, universality is induced by the spread of products of mass consumerism, for instance, Coca-Cola, that, thanks to the United States' economic and cultural dominance, managed to form a sort of collective memory in the everyday. In *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B & Back Again)*, published in 1975, Warhol wrote that:

What's great about this country is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest. You can be watching TV and see Coca Cola, and you know that the President drinks Coca Cola, Liz Taylor drinks Coca Cola, and just think, you can drink Coca Cola, too. A coke is a coke and no amount of money can get you a better coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking. All the cokes are the same and all the cokes are good. Liz Taylor knows it, the President knows it, the bum knows it, and you know it.<sup>17</sup>

The image in relation to the *Concetti spaziali* is defined by the act itself of the imagination, revealing itself to be an image-imagination. In this process of consumption, the image is created in the beholder's imagination, and it is not yet ready, that is, it is "performed" by the imagination of the individual via their attention, in empathy with the concrete sensitivity of the work.

The imaginative act that belongs to us more intimately, often without our even being aware, is the one in which we are stimulated to "perform" the prime images.

Over the course of time and the sequence of visions and artistic reflections, the images that are embedded in our subconscious have become "the prime images" to then be rethought as "natural image" and, lastly, imagined as an *Immagine seme* (a seminal, generative image).

In the late 1990s, Luciano Fabro began a cycle of lessons at Brera Academy titled *Immagine naturale*, in which he reflected on

17 Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)* (Harvest Book-Harcourt, 1977).

the image that is intrinsically natural to us, that is, an image that, unlike the mediated image, is a part of us. "The natural image is the one that comes out from the thing directly toward us, as well as from us toward the thing."<sup>18</sup> The thought of a "natural image" thus frames the intimacy of the relationship between the human being and its cosmic dimension.

In the work *Attaccapanni di Napoli* from the late 1970s [FIGS. 11–12], the objective concreteness and the naturalness of the wavy fabric are matched with the chromatic game of painting, in which the darker color is applied to the deep part in shadow and the lighter color to the part in relief, thus creating a physical imagination similar to what we experience when we ponder a sunset. The *Attaccapanni* can be defined as "the being in action" of the experience of the sunset and as such requiring that the user performs this experience via their own attention, perception, and imagination.

In 2009, while I was working on the sculpture *Immagine seme* (Seed-image) [FIGS. 13–14], at the same time I annotated a brief reflection with the same title. This reflection on Fontana, as well as on Manzoni and Fabro, represents a raising of awareness developed over time.

This is what I wrote at the time:

When the seed of the image germinates, it creates the imagination within us. Indeed, this germination is an intimate act by the user, it occurs inside them, with them, and through them. Not every image, which we conventionally refer to as image, germinates. This potential germination depends on its essentialness. I believe that we have always had this germinating essentialness inside us; in other words: the image I am attempting to approach is inside us as a cosmic principle on which the container known as "human-being" has been built. This image is evocative. It actuates an evoked fruition. The germination is evocation, the evocation of a mystery—germination in me is the mystery of myself.

18 Luciano Fabro, *Lezioni 1996-2002*, ed. Silvia Fabro (Accademia di Brera; Libri Scheiwiller, 2023), 165.



FIGS. 11-12  
Luciano Fabro, *Attaccapanni (di Napoli)*, 1976–77. Turin, Fondazione per l'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea CRT, on permanent loan at Castello di Rivoli - Museo d'Arte Contemporanea.



*The generative image is what I have in the past referred to as the “device for demiurgic acts.”*<sup>19</sup>

My sculpture *Immagine seme* (Seed-image) is a veritable device for prime images.

The first creation, in the form of a thin slab of Belgian black marble, whose contours allude to the silhouettes of mountains designed in the past, is propped up against a white wall. The slab prepares itself and waits, the way camera film waits to be impressed. Then I use sandpaper to sand in circular movements the wall above the sheet, and the dust from the white plaster falls onto the black surface piling up and accumulating in several points. This ephemeral act could evoke snowfall during the night, a starry sky, or a waterfall, and it opens evocatively to the memory of prime images or natural images that in our fruition we perform in all their ephemeral revealing of themselves. Like the imagination of prime images, which never exists in a fixed and permanent way, and thus asks us

FIGS. 13-14  
Gianni Caravaggio, *Immagine seme* (Seed image), 2010, detail and total. Reggio Emilia, Maramotti collection.



<sup>19</sup> Gianni Caravaggio, “Immagine seme,” in *Arte essenziale*, exh. cat., ed. Federico Ferrari (Silvana Editoriale, 2011), 41.

to be rediscovered, that is, always re-enacted by the imagination, similarly, the wall above the black slab must be scraped so that the “generative image” can appear before our amazement, germinating in our memory. As if the Ancient Greek term ἀλήθεια (“alethéia,” which is commonly translated as “truth,” but whose correct translation is “unhidden,” “unveiled”) were leading us by the hand so that we can delve into a further clarification. The correct translation indicates that what appears, by nature, is at first hidden.

*Lo stupore è nuovo ogni giorno* (Wonder is new every day) [FIG. 15], 2008, visualizes this act of “disascondere” (unhiding). The phrase I used for the title of the work is a modification of that of Heraclitus’s “The sun is new each day.” After placing the aluminum sheet on the ground, it is sprinkled with talc like a newborn child, that is, like an idea that was just born and that is about to reveal itself. The gesture of lifting and blocking the sheet with holes produced by an aluminum rod, like the position of a closed oyster, literally discloses what it was hiding. This gesture discovers the birth of the image—the imagination of the person who watches carefully and that seems to initiate in the cosmic evocation. The suggested stellar constellation is that of the moment of the artist’s birth and serves here as the presence of the idea revealed.

The condition of revelation is that it must first be unveiled and therefore is not always accessible; it occurs only during specific moments of attention and listening.

Our attention and our listening predispose us to wonder, that is, θαυμάζειν (“thaumázein”) which for the Greek philosophers was the start of philosophical thinking. “Thaumázein” reveals “alethéia,” that is, it reveals “prime images,” or “the natural image,” or “the generative image,” which we are invited to perform each time in our imagination, for they like to hide.



FIG. 15  
Gianni Caravaggio,  
*Lo stupore è nuovo ogni  
giorno* (Wonder is new every  
day), 2008. Reggio Emilia,  
Maramotti collection.

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INTESA  SANPAOLO

Lucio Fontana (1899–1968) was a central figure of twentieth-century art, an artist who, from the 1920s to the 1960s, developed research that was characterized by constant experimentation and rigorous coherence, sanctioning his role as a pioneer of contemporary art. Over the past few decades, studies, exhibitions, and publications have contributed to renewing and delving deeper into a critical reading of the artist's oeuvre, portraying all its breadth and complexity. This book is a collection of the contributions to the international study conference *Lucio Fontana. Origins and Imagination*, promoted by the Institute of Art History of the Fondazione Giorgio Cini and by the Fondazione Lucio Fontana. It presents the results of the encounters between the scholars who attended it. From his origins in Argentina to the exhibitions that consolidated his international success, the essays trace the artist's entire creative arc, offering a snapshot of the state of the art of Fontana studies, as well as new interpretive perspectives and unprecedented areas for further research.