

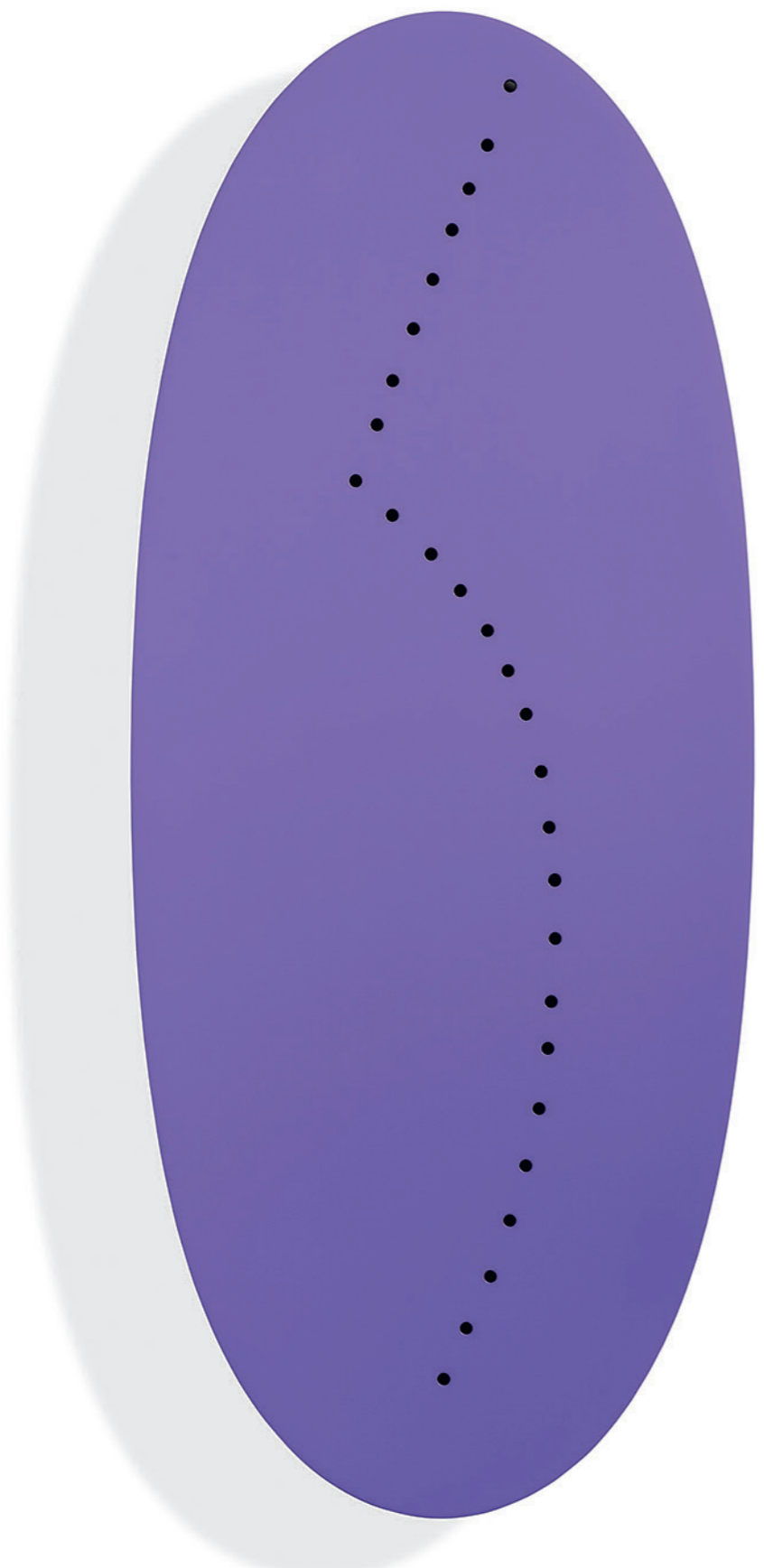
Environnement spatial, installation présentée à la Galleria del Deposito, Gênes, 1967
Tempera noire sur toile, peinture fluorescente, lumière noire, 235 × 345 × 235 cm
Lyon, musée d'Art contemporain, inv. 984.1.1



« L'environnement est le signe du vide, la fin
des galeries avec le cadre accroché, la petite sculpture
et la grande sculpture à vendre. »



Concept spatial. Ellipse, 1967
Bois laqué et perforations, 173 × 72 cm
Milan, Fondazione Lucio Fontana



Concept spatial. Ellipse, 1967
Bois laqué, 173 × 72 cm
Collection Sergio Casoli

Torpille (rose), 1968
Métal laqué avec entaille, 22 × 57 × 5 cm
Venise, collection particulière



Pilule (violet-bleu), 1967
Métal laqué avec entaille, 30 × 41 × 14 cm
Italie, collection particulière



Biographie

1899-1930

Comme tous les enfants de migrants, Lucio Fontana (Rosario, 1899 – Comabbio, 1968) a deux âmes : une âme argentine et une âme italienne. La première lui vient de sa naissance ; la seconde, de sa culture et de sa formation.

Dans les années 1890, son père, Luigi (Varèse, 1865 – Rosario, 1946) [fig. 64], suit le flux migratoire de l'Italie vers l'Amérique du Sud. Sculpteur formé à l'Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, il est l'héritier d'une tradition plastique impressionniste. Après son installation à Rosario, dans la province de Santa Fe, il y fait fortune grâce à ses portraits funéraires : au bout de quelques années, il fonde avec succès l'entreprise Fontana y Scarabelli, dont il est le propriétaire.

Lucio Emilio Fontana naît le 19 février 1899 d'une liaison de Luigi avec sa jeune modèle Lucia Bottini (1874-1925) [fig. 65], fille du graveur suisse Jean Bottini et de Laura Fontana. Mais les préjugés de ce même Luigi envers l'émancipation des femmes ne tardent pas à provoquer leur rupture. La jeune mère élève donc Lucio jusqu'en 1906, l'année où Luigi, sous prétexte de l'emmener poursuivre sa scolarité en Italie, revendique l'exercice de l'autorité parentale. Lucia en souffre beaucoup. Elle épousera plus tard Juan Pablo Moroni, avec qui elle aura trois enfants. De son côté, Luigi s'est marié en 1903 avec Anita Campiglio [fig. 66], avec qui il aura trois enfants lui aussi, et mène une vie aisée à Rosario.

À partir de 1906, le jeune Lucio séjourne en Italie. Confié aux soins de membres de sa famille, il continue ses études au Collegio Torquato Tasso de Biumo (Varèse), puis au Collegio Ballerini de Seregno [fig. 68]. En 1914, son père décide de l'inscrire en même temps à l'Istituto Tecnico Carlo Cattaneo de Milan et à la Scuola degli Artefici de l'Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera, afin qu'il puisse à la fois bénéficier d'une formation professionnelle dans le domaine de l'industrie du bâtiment et développer son talent artistique.

En 1917, Lucio participe à la Première Guerre mondiale comme volontaire, en qualité de citoyen argentin [fig. 67]. Résultat d'une éducation empreinte du culte de l'excellence et du courage, cette décision est en outre la manifestation de tourments juvéniles qui l'amènent à conférer une dignité particulière à la signification de son engagement dans les combats : en première ligne sur le plateau du Karst et promu

sous-lieutenant d'infanterie à Villa Lagarina, il finit par recevoir la médaille militaire de bronze.

De 1918 à 1921, il fréquente la Scuola ufficiali de Turin, où il obtient son diplôme d'expert en construction. En 1921, épuisé par son expérience militaire, il séjourne brièvement à Milan et rentre ensuite à Rosario avec sa famille. Il reste cependant sourd aux exhortations de son père à travailler dans l'industrie du bâtiment et quitte la maison familiale pour vivre comme un *gaucho* nomade dans la Pampa Humeda, au contact de la nature.

Revenu à la vie civilisée en 1923, il décide de se consacrer à l'art et mène ses premières expériences de sculpteur dans le cadre de l'entreprise paternelle. Il renoue par ailleurs des relations avec sa mère Lucia, qui meurt en 1925, et se lie d'affection avec sa sœur Ofelia et son frère Juan Pablo.

En 1924, il ouvre un atelier au 565 de la calle España, à Rosario, avec son ami Julio Vanzo. Leur association, née sous le signe de la défense de l'avant-garde, s'oriente dans une direction opposée à l'esthétique de Luigi Fontana. Le jeune homme aime en effet la sculpture cubiste d'Alexandre Archipenko, connue à travers l'enseignement du sculpteur argentin Antonio Sibellino ; il admire l'artiste futuriste Umberto Boccioni ; il s'intéresse au style du peintre cubo-futuriste Emilio Pettoruti, comme le montrent à l'évidence des œuvres telles que le *Nu* de 1926 et la *Femme avec un seau* (1927) [fig. 71].

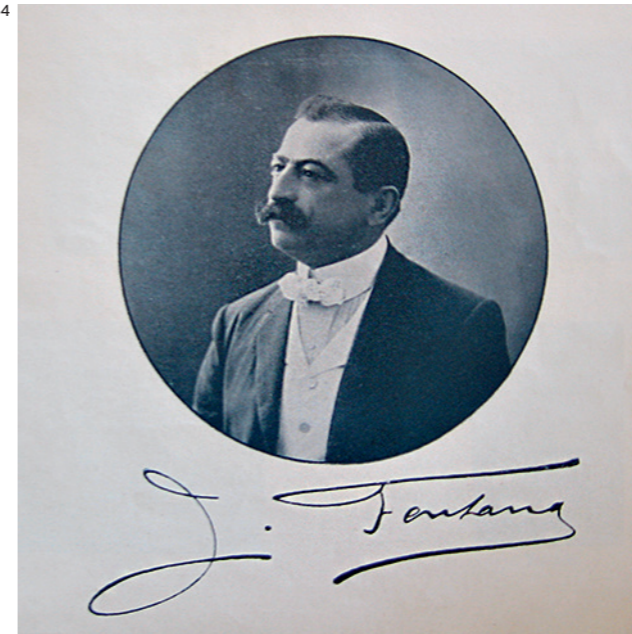
De retour à Milan en 1927 [fig. 72], Lucio Fontana s'inscrit à l'Accademia di Brera. Il a le coup de foudre pour la sculpture symboliste de son professeur Adolfo Wildt, qu'il juge « merveilleuse », adhère avec quelque réticence au « rappel à l'ordre » promu par le groupe Novecento et manifeste sa prédilection pour les lignes abstraites et la transfiguration de la matière. Malgré sa brièveté, la leçon de Wildt laissera des traces chez Fontana dans sa fascination pour l'or, sa recherche spatiale du vide et sa propension à la transcendance.

1930-1940

« Dès ma sortie de l'Accademia, j'ai pris un tas de plâtre, je lui ai donné la structure approximative d'un homme assis et j'ai jeté du goudron dessus. Comme ça, par une sorte de réaction violente. Wildt [...] s'est plaint [...] et que pouvais-je bien lui répondre ? J'avais beaucoup d'estime et de reconnaissance pour lui, mais ce qui m'intéressait, c'était de trouver une voie nouvelle, entièrement à moi¹. »

1. B. Rossi, « Dialogo con Lucio Fontana », *Settimo giorno*, 22 janvier 1963.

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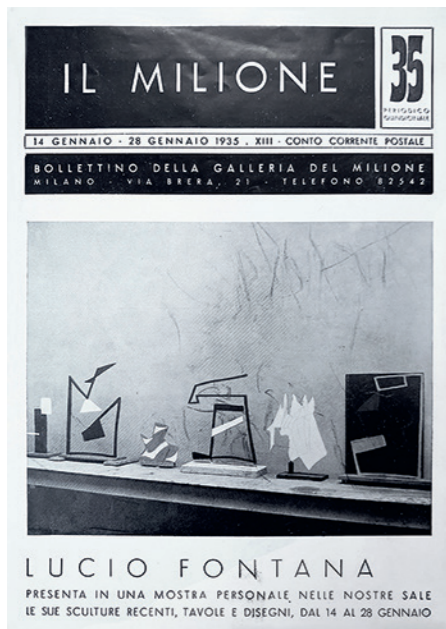
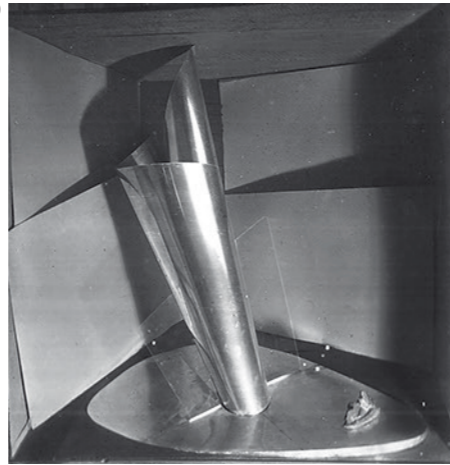
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64. Luigi Fontana (1865-1946), dans *L. Fontana. Monumentos y esculturas*, Rosario de Santa Fe, 1910 65. Lucia Bottini (1874-1925) vers 1895 66. Compte rendu du mariage de Luigi Fontana et Anita Campiglio (1882-1965) dans *El Cronista* (Rosario de Santa Fe), n° 66, 1903 67. Lucio Fontana en uniforme militaire à Comabbio, vers 1919 68. La famille Fontana à Seregno : Lucio porte l'uniforme du collège Ballerini, 1911



69. Lucio Fontana, *Homme noir*, 1930 70. Lucio Fontana, Maquette pour le monument à Giuseppe Grandi, 1931
71. Lucio Fontana, *Femme avec un seau*, 1926-1927
72. Lucio Fontana sur le bateau de croisière qui le ramène d'Argentine en Italie, 1927 73. *Il Milione*, bulletin de la Galleria del Milione (Milan), n° 35, janvier 1935

L'élaboration de l'*Homme noir* (1930) [fig. 69] est le manifeste d'un nouvel art, le début d'un parcours menant aux origines de la forme. Fontana revient à Zadkine et Archipenko avec une sculpture primitiviste faite de matériaux pauvres, ductiles et malléables, tels le plâtre ou la terre cuite monochrome (noire, bleue ou rouge). Aux côtés de Renato Birolli et Aligi Sassu, tous deux plus jeunes que lui, il est le principal porte-parole d'un groupe d'artistes «révoltés» qui actualisent l'expressionnisme comme solution de remplacement à la «mode» d'un art fondé sur l'histoire.

En février et en décembre 1931, à l'occasion de deux expositions personnelles à la Galleria del Milione, à Milan, Fontana présente sa production plastique novatrice et noue des relations avec les représentants du rationalisme architectural: Giuseppe Terragni, Luigi Figini, Gino Pollini, Luciano Baldesari, le groupe BBPR (Belgiojoso Banfi Peressutti Rogers). Toujours en 1931, son projet expérimental pour un *Monument au sculpteur Giuseppe Grandi* [fig. 70], jamais réalisé, trahit l'influence du constructivisme russe. Il ouvre un atelier sur la via De Amicis et fait la connaissance de Teresita Rasini, qu'il épousera en 1952.

Dans les années 1930, son travail de sculpteur obéit à une polarité dialectique entre matière, couleur, lumière et anti-matière. D'un côté, il privilégie la terre et le volume, sur lesquels il imprime des graffiti ou une couleur uniforme; de l'autre, il est séduit par la pureté bidimensionnelle et abstraite du signe, associée à une composante d'automatisme surréaliste. En 1934 et 1935, il crée une série de sculptures filiformes en ciment coloré et se lie ainsi au mouvement international Abstraction-Création. À l'occasion, une nouvelle fois, d'une exposition personnelle à la Galleria del Milione [fig. 73], il expose ce cycle en janvier 1935, sans succès. Quelques années plus tard, il placera la recherche de l'abstraction à l'origine de sa réflexion sur l'art spatial, tout en reconnaissant qu'en Italie les esprits n'étaient pas encore mûrs.

En 1936, le critique d'art Edoardo Persico publie une première monographie sur son travail aux éditions Campografico [fig. 75]. La même année, l'attrait de Fontana pour la matière prend le dessus lorsqu'il réalise ses premières sculptures en céramique à la Fabbrica Mazzotti de Tullio Mazzotti, à Albisola (Savone). Il ne tarde d'ailleurs pas à devenir le principal représentant du renouvellement de la majolique contemporaine. Son habileté innée dans le maniement de la terre et la couleur lumineuse, presque abstraite, de ses sculptures se conjuguent avec une dimension méditerranéenne organique, quasi magmatique [fig. 76]. En 1939, il explicitera plusieurs principes de sa poétique: «Je suis un sculpteur, pas un céramiste. [...] Ma forme plastique [...] n'est jamais dissociée de la couleur, [...] couleur et forme indissolubles, nées d'une même nécessité. [...] La matière était attirante; je pouvais modeler un

fond sous-marin, une statue ou une touffe de cheveux et leur imprimer une couleur vierge compacte que le feu amalgamait. Le feu était une sorte d'intermédiaire: il perpétuait la forme et la couleur².»

En 1937, à l'Exposition universelle de Paris, il expose quelques pièces dans le pavillon de la céramique. Entre septembre et décembre, il effectue un stage dans les ateliers de céramique de la Manufacture de Sèvres, où il se spécialise dans l'émailage du grès [fig. 74] et réalise de nouvelles œuvres, présentées dans le cadre d'une exposition personnelle inaugurée le 16 décembre à la galerie Jeanne Bucher-Myrbor. Il fait la connaissance de Constantin Brancusi et de Tristan Tzara, et projette de s'installer dans la capitale française.

De retour à Milan en 1938, il montre ses œuvres les plus récentes à la Galleria del Milione [fig. 77] en avril et en décembre, toujours à l'occasion d'expositions personnelles, et devient une référence magistrale pour des jeunes artistes comme Salvatore Fancello et Leoncillo Leonardi. Attiré par d'anciennes techniques de mosaïque, il mène jusqu'à leurs conséquences les plus extrêmes ses recherches chromatiques et luministes, en collaboration étroite avec des artisans, dans des œuvres comme le hiératique buste féminin *Portrait de Teresita* (1939).

1940-1947

Invité par son père à participer au concours pour le Monument au Drapeau de la ville de Rosario, Lucio Fontana rentre en Argentine en avril 1940. Le déclenchement de la Seconde Guerre mondiale l'oblige ensuite à prolonger son séjour outre-Atlantique jusqu'en 1947. Sa production, privée de toute possibilité de confrontation sur la scène artistique internationale, traverse alors une phase critique.

Un différend avec son ami Vanzo l'amène à quitter Rosario pour Buenos Aires. En 1943, il y est nommé professeur de sculpture à l'Escuela Superior de Educación Artística Manuel Belgrano. Il travaille par ailleurs comme céramiste. La même année, son atelier de Milan, et avec lui une grande partie de ses créations abstraites, est détruit lors d'un bombardement [fig. 81]. Dans les milieux les plus dynamiques de Buenos Aires, Fontana se met à fréquenter Margherita Sarfatti, l'animatrice du mouvement Novecento, réfugiée en Argentine. Après 1944, malgré de nombreux prix et marques de reconnaissance officielle [fig. 78], il reste proche de toute une génération de jeunes artistes confiants en un renouvellement de leurs disciplines et assiste à la formation de groupes d'avant-garde

concrétistes comme l'Asociación Arte Concreto-Invencción ou encore le Movimiento Madi (Gyula Košice, Carmelo Arden Quin, Tomás Maldonado).

En 1946, à la mort de son père, sa belle-mère Anita et son demi-frère Geronzio décident de rester à Rosario. Ils ne s'installent en Italie, dans le village de Comabbio (Varèse), que dans les années 1950.

À partir de 1946, Lucio Fontana compte, aux côtés de Jorge Romero Brest, parmi les enseignants de l'Escuela de Altamira, l'académie artistique privée financée par l'éditeur Gonzalo Losada dans le but de fonder un laboratoire d'idées et de projets. En collaboration avec plusieurs élèves sympathisants, il rédige le célèbre *Manifiesto Blanco* [fig. 80], signé uniquement par les étudiants: ce texte constitue la première somme de sa pensée sur l'art. Son approche intuitive de la forme, ajoutée à un recours au subconscient et aux principes d'origine futuriste sur la synthèse de la lumière, de la couleur, du son et du mouvement, entend proposer des principes contraires aux présupposés rationalistes du concrétisme. Et il va jusqu'à affirmer, de manière provocatrice: «*La razón no crea*» («La raison ne crée rien»). Un autre point fondamental du *Manifiesto* est la conscience que les innovations scientifiques consécutives à la théorie de la relativité développée par Albert Einstein marquent un changement d'époque. En conséquence, l'art doit désormais exprimer l'espace-temps, à sa manière et en se référant au cosmos.

1947-1958

Au printemps 1947, Fontana quitte définitivement l'Argentine pour Milan [fig. 79]. Outre le *Manifiesto*, il emporte dans ses bagages un carton d'études et de dessins gestuels ayant pour thèmes récurrents le noyau et le tourbillon, en une sorte de recherche anxieuse d'une nouvelle dimension expressive; une de ces feuilles porte l'inscription *concepto espacial*, qu'il adoptera désormais comme titre de ses œuvres.

À Milan, il s'établit d'abord dans le magasin de chapeaux de sa compagne Teresita; il ouvre ensuite un atelier via Prina. En peu de temps, il se retrouve à la tête du mouvement spatia- liste, soutenu, entre autres, par le galeriste Carlo Cardazzo (Galleria del Naviglio) et par Milena Milani. Dans le *Primo Manifiesto dello Spazialismo* (1947) [fig. 82], signé par un groupe d'artistes et d'intellectuels, il exprime les concepts d'antimatière et de «geste», tout en appelant de ses vœux l'union de l'art et de la science pour dépasser les genres traditionnels de la peinture et de la sculpture. Sur ce point, le *Secondo Manifiesto* (1948) est encore plus explicite: ces

mêmes genres étant dorénavant inconcevables, il convient de les remplacer par de nouveaux modes d'expression exploitant les ressources de la technologie (y compris la télévision). Fontana se rattache ainsi à Boccioni et au futurisme, dont il entend perpétuer l'héritage avant-gardiste.

À Milan et à Albisola, il crée, à partir de 1947, un extraordinaire ensemble de sculptures en céramique dont la figuration baroque suscite l'admiration d'architectes comme Marco Zanuso, le groupe BBPR et Gio Ponti; il leur offrira en outre, tout au long des années 1950, d'importantes occasions de collaboration.

Invité à la XXIV^e Biennale de Venise (1948), Fontana y expose quelques œuvres en céramique et, surtout, ses recherches les plus expérimentales et les plus récentes: *Sculpture spatale* (1947), un anneau de matière autour d'un vide central, et *Concept spatial (homme atomique)* (1948) [fig. 84], interprétation de l'homme à l'ère atomique, constituent deux étapes du parcours qui mènera l'artiste aux célèbres surfaces trouées. Mais c'est avec *l'Environnement spatial à la lumière noire* (1949) qu'il précise le mieux, aux yeux du public, les concepts énoncés dans les manifestes. Inauguré à la Galleria del Naviglio le 5 février 1949, cet *Environnement* se compose de formes organiques fluorescentes suspendues et mises en lumière par la nouvelle technologie d'éclairage qu'offrent les lampes de Wood: la couleur devient espace et les formes fluctuantes brouillent les coordonnées spatiotemporelles traditionnelles.

En 1949, les recherches de Fontana aboutissent aux *Concepts spatiaux perforés*, appelés aussi «Trous». Quelques mots suffisent à résumer leur signification: «La découverte du cosmos est une nouvelle dimension, elle est l'infini: alors, j'ai percé cette toile qui était au fondement de tous les arts, et j'ai créé une dimension infinie, un X qui est, pour moi, l'assise de tout l'art contemporain³.»

Fontana utilise un ou plusieurs poinçons différents, d'abord sur de grandes surfaces de papier, puis sur une toile brute ou monochrome. Parfois, les trous sont créés à partir de l'envers du support, afin d'en accentuer sa plasticité, et la surface monochrome est réduite à l'essentiel; dans d'autres cas, l'artiste mêle du sable et des paillettes à la matière picturale, de manière à accentuer l'évocation de matériaux de type cosmique. D'emblée, il conçoit les «Trous» comme une expérimentation liée à des flux de lumière artificielle. Des documents attestent la projection de lumière rasante ou à travers des trous à l'occasion de l'exposition personnelle organisée à la Galleria del Naviglio en mai 1952 [fig. 83], où il présente le cycle pour la première fois. Quelques jours plus tard, il organise un happening collectif à la Fiera de Milan: il projette des lumières mobiles à travers des surfaces perforées lors d'une

3. Carla Lonzi, *Autoritratto*, Bari, Laterza, 1969, p. 169.



74. Lucio Fontana, *Torse italiani*, 1938 75. Edoardo Persico, *Lucio Fontana*, Milan, Edizioni di Campo Grafico, 1936 76. Couverture de la revue *Natura* avec *Fond marin* de Lucio Fontana (1936), août 1938 77. Lucio Fontana à la Galleria del Milione, à Milan, à l'occasion de l'exposition «Lucio Fontana ceramista d'eccezione», avril 1938

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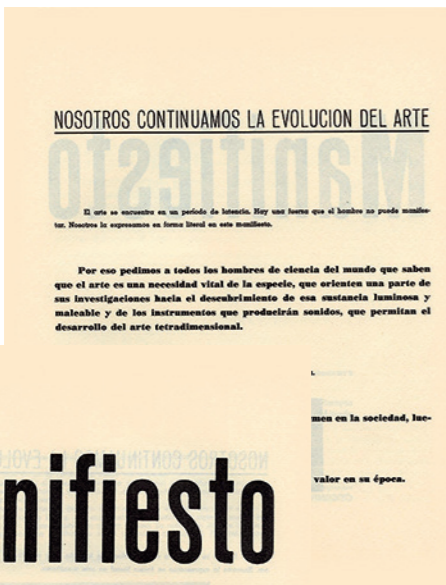


L. LUCIO FONTANA. Medusa. 1941. Colección Raúl Soldi, Buenos Aires.

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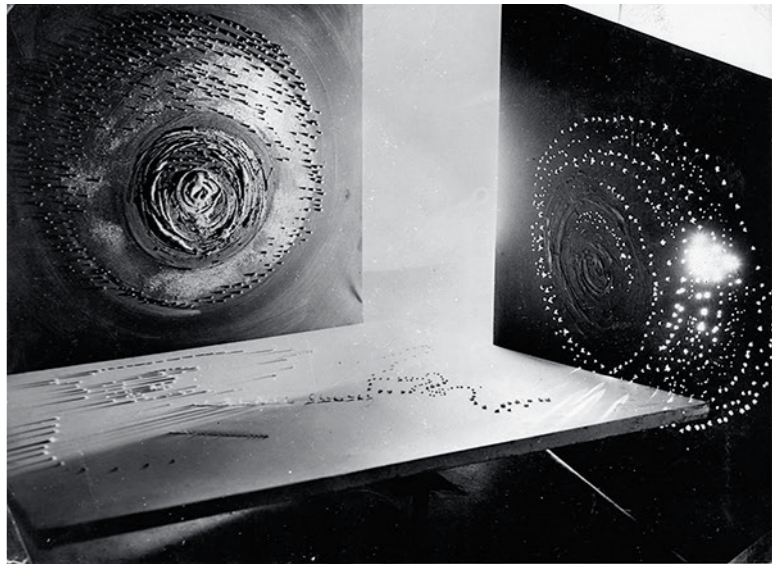


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78. Frontispice de Lucio Fontana, monographie de Juan Zocchi, Buenos Aires, Editorial Poseidón, 1946
 79. Lucio Fontana avec Pablo Edelstein et Susana Merediz Funes à l'embarquement du bateau *Argentina* qui le ramènera en Italie, 1947
 80. Lucio Fontana, *Manifiesto Blanco*, Buenos Aires, 1946
 81. Lucio Fontana visitant les décombres de son atelier détruit par les bombardements de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, Milan, 1947
 82. Invitation pour *l'Environnement spatial à lumière noire* avec le manifeste «Spaziali», Milan, Galleria del Naviglio, 1949
 83. Les *Concepts spatiaux* de Lucio Fontana avec des jeux de lumière artificielle, 1952, photographie d'Attilio Bacci
 84. Lucio Fontana avec le concept spatial *Homme atomique* (1947) dans sa salle personnelle de la XXVII^e Biennale de Venise, 1954, photographie d'Ugo Mulas

émission de télévision expérimentale de la RAI (*Manifesto del movimento spaziale per la televisione*, 1952) [fig. 85].

Parmi les « Environnements » des années 1950, on retiendra surtout le *Concept spatial* au néon créé pour la IX^e Triennale de Milan (1951), un signe qui s'enroule et s'enchevêtre, à une hauteur considérable, contre un plafond bleu.

En 1952, Fontana installe son atelier dans un immeuble du Corso Monforte. Il remporte le concours pour la V^e Porte de la cathédrale de Milan, mais son projet, jugé trop novateur, ne verra jamais le jour. Il conçoit par ailleurs des motifs « floraux » pour le plafond du Piccolo Teatro et multiplie les travaux partagés avec des architectes, notamment pour des installations éphémères dotées d'une dimension expérimentale, ou encore des environnements d'appartement conçus en collaboration avec, entre autres, Baldessari et Borsani. Il applique ensuite le concept spatial à « trous » à sa production de céramiques, avec l'invention de véritables « céramiques spatiales » visant à diffuser sa « formule » jusqu'à un niveau populaire.

À son exposition personnelle d'avril 1953 à la Galleria del Naviglio, il présente des « Trous » de différentes tailles sur des toiles naturelles ou sur une base monochrome: des motifs et des géométries plus linéaires y sont dessinés par des poinçons de diamètres variables et de section cylindrique, ainsi que par des limes à section triangulaire ou rectangulaire.

Dans la salle de « sculpture » mise à sa seule disposition lors de la XXVII^e Biennale de Venise, en 1954, outre un ensemble de sculptures abstraites des années 1930 et de céramiques, il présente par surprise, et pour la première fois dans le cadre d'une manifestation internationale, neuf « Concepts spatiaux » perforés. La critique crie au scandale et certaines œuvres sont même vandalisées.

En 1954, Fontana compte parmi les promoteurs de l'Incontro Internazionale della ceramica, organisé à Albisola, où il renforce par ailleurs ses liens avec les principaux représentants de l'art informel: Karel Appel, Asger Jorn, Roberto Matta et Wifredo Lam.

Au cours des années 1950, le cycle des « Trous » est décliné en plusieurs variations matiéristes: d'abord avec l'apposition sur la toile de fragments de verre de Murano (que l'artiste appelle « Pierres »), destinés à imiter l'effet des lumières artificielles sur la surface du tableau; puis avec des empâtements de matière picturale plus épaisse et l'utilisation de paillettes pour le cycle des « Baroques », présentés en 1957 dans le cadre de l'exposition « Between Space and Earth. Trends in Modern Italian Art » [fig. 86], organisée à la galerie Marlborough Fine Arts, à Londres, qui marque les débuts de Fontana en Angleterre.

Il noue aussi ses premiers contacts avec la galeriste parisienne Iris Clert et rencontre Yves Klein, qui l'admire beaucoup. De son côté, Fontana lui montre son estime en achetant un de ses monochromes à l'exposition « Proposte monocrome Epoca blu », qui se tient à la Galleria Apollinaire, à Milan, en janvier 1957. Enthousiasmé par les « architectures de l'air » de Klein et Werner Ruhnau, il les invitera à présenter leurs projets à la Triennale de Milan de 1960, dont il sera le commissaire; sa proposition ne sera cependant pas acceptée.

En 1958, il dispose d'une importante salle personnelle à la XXIX^e Biennale de Venise. Il y expose sa production la plus récente de *Plâtres*, des œuvres sur toile réalisées avec des pastels colorés, et surtout ses toutes dernières *Encres*. Inspiré de la calligraphie japonaise, ce cycle propose une manière de sortir de l'informel matiériste; il est réalisé à partir de couleurs à l'aniline et de collages où une certaine détente lyrique inspirée par le « vide » apparaît évidente.

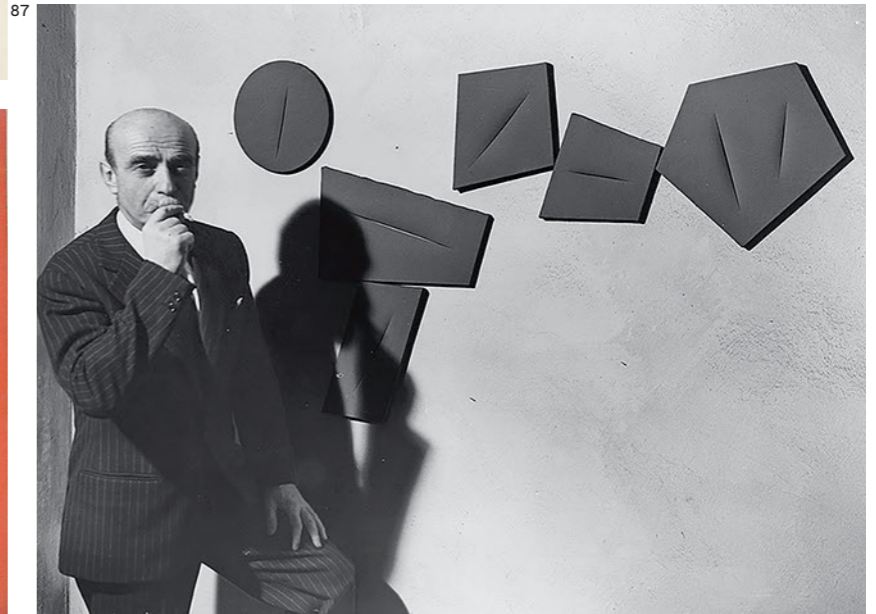
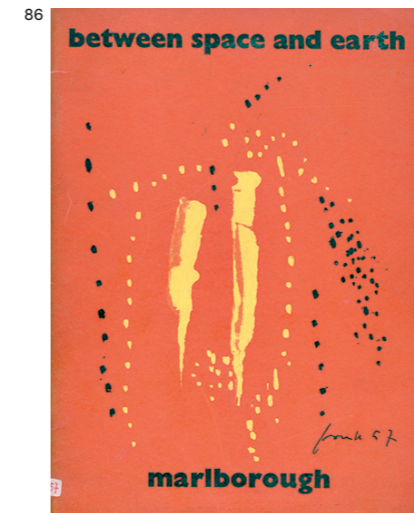
Le travail de Fontana commence à intéresser des critiques comme Michel Tapié, Pierre Restany, Enrico Crispolti, Gillo Dorfles et Juan Eduardo Cirlot. À partir de ce moment, il est reconnu comme un maître même par les jeunes artistes de l'avant-garde Zero: Piero Manzoni le considère comme un chef d'école en raison de « sa leçon de vie exemplaire, sa volonté, la force de sa pratique artistique et sa liberté d'invention⁴ ».

1958-1968

À la fin de l'année 1958, au terme d'un processus de réduction à la monochromie, Fontana parachève le cycle des « Fentes », peut-être le plus connu, l'icône qui, aujourd'hui encore, l'identifie dans le monde entier. Il écrit à son ami Mario Bardini: « Mon cher Mario, soit je suis un *saint*, soit je suis un *fou*!! Mais peut-être que je suis plutôt un saint; j'ai enduré tant de vexations qu'à l'heure actuelle, je devrais être dans un asile; et au lieu de cela, ces *Attentes* m'apaisent!! Depuis toutes ces années de travail, le moment que je traverse est le plus heureux pour moi⁵! »

Fontana désigne donc ses « Fentes » sous le nom d'« Attentes », un terme qui souligne leur signification de suspension temporelle: la déchirure de la toile est en apparence un acte destructeur, et en réalité une ouverture sur de nouvelles potentialités, sur des réalités futures inconnues. L'artiste fait ainsi allusion à un « autre » espace, absolu, conçu comme anticipation d'une utopique condition immatérielle de l'être humain. Il révèle en outre que les « Fentes » sont avant tout

4. Piero Manzoni, « Da Milano », *Il Pensiero nazionale*, 1^{er} novembre 1959.
5. Lettre de Lucio Fontana à Mario Bardini, Milan, 22 janvier 1959, dans Lucio Fontana, *Lettere 1919-1968*, Paolo Campiglio (éd.), Milan, Skira, 1999, p. 148.



85. Manifesto del Movimento spaziale per la televisione, 1952 86. Catalogue de l'exposition «Between Space and Earth. Trends in Modern Italian Art», Londres, Marlborough Fine Arts, 1957 87. Lucio Fontana avec la série des *Quanta*, 1959, photographie d'Attilio Bacci 88. Lucio Fontana à Albisola avec la série des *Natures*, 1959

une expression philosophique, un acte de foi en l'infini, une affirmation de spiritualité: «Quand je m'assieds devant une de mes "Fentes" et que je la contemple, je ressens soudain une immense détente spirituelle, j'éprouve la sensation d'être un homme affranchi de l'esclavage de la matière, un homme qui appartient à l'immensité du présent et de l'avenir⁶.» Le cycle remporte un succès critique immédiat: montré pour la première fois à la Galleria del Naviglio en février 1959, il est ensuite présenté à la galerie Stadler, à Paris, où il est introduit par Michel Tapié, puis à la documenta II de Cassel, à la V^e Biennale de São Paulo et enfin à Rome, lors de la première véritable exposition rétrospective de l'artiste, organisée par Enrico Crispolti à la Galleria L'Attico en 1959 [fig. 87].

Dans le même temps, selon une polarité récurrente dans son travail, Fontana revient à la sculpture: durant l'été 1959, il crée le cycle des «Natures», de grandes sphères en terre cuite noire couvertes de lacérations ou de perforations qu'il décrit comme la démonstration du dépassement de la matière, à la limite de la représentation du néant.

En 1959, il expose à Londres, à Anvers et à Tokyo grâce aux bons offices du marchand britannique McRobert & Tunnard, avec qui il signe un contrat d'exclusivité mondiale valable jusqu'en 1964. Son ami le collectionneur Carlo Damiano, qui vit à Londres, lui sert d'agent et l'aide à obtenir des contrats avec des galeries anglaises. Tandis que Lawrence Alloway publie la traduction anglaise du *Manifesto tecnico dello spazialismo* dans l'*Ark Journal of the Royal College of Art*, les «Natures» sont exposées au Palazzo Grassi de Venise dans le cadre de l'exposition «Dalla natura all'arte» en 1960 [fig. 88]. Personnalité de premier plan des poétiques de l'annulation, Fontana participe, toujours en 1960, à l'importante exposition «Monochrome Malerei», qui se tient au Städtisches Museum Leverkusen et qui a pour commissaire Udo Kultermann.

En parallèle, il travaille à un nouveau cycle appelé «Huiles», composé d'œuvres monochromes caractérisées par des empâtements vinyliques mélangés à de la peinture à l'huile, par de légères traces de graffiti et par des lacérations sous forme de grands trous ou de déchirures enfoncées en profondeur dans la couche picturale. À partir de cette expérience, il élabore, en 1961, le court cycle des «Venises», hommage à la cité lagunaire présenté à New York à l'occasion de l'exposition «Ten Paintings of Venice», organisée à la Martha Jackson Gallery en décembre 1961. C'est le début de son succès international.

La ville de New York l'impressionne à tel point que, pour rendre la lueur brillante des gratte-ciel, il invente le nouveau cycle des «Métaux», de grandes plaques de cuivre réfléchissantes qu'il couvre de griffures et de lacérations [fig. 90].

En 1963, dans le prolongement des «Huiles», Fontana exécute la série des «Fins de Dieu», de grandes toiles ovales aux surfaces monochromes perforées, déchirées et enrichies de paillettes. Il les expose, en mai, à la Gimpel Hanover Galerie, à Zurich, puis, en juin, à la Galleria dell'Ariete, à Milan. Impressionné par les progrès de la génétique et de la biologie moléculaire, il est convaincu qu'à l'avenir les êtres humains pourront être engendrés en laboratoire. L'humanité n'aura plus besoin de recourir à un dieu quelconque pour expliquer la genèse de la vie. La forme particulière de ces œuvres, analogue à celle d'un œuf, est donc à la fois une métaphore de la vie et une allusion à la mandorle traditionnelle dans l'histoire de l'art entourant certaines images de la divinité.

Mené jusqu'en 1966, le cycle des «Petits Théâtres» est une réponse originale au pop art, avec lequel l'artiste était entré en contact à la XXXII^e Biennale de Venise, en 1964: entourées d'un cadre laqué coloré, ces toiles sont percées des trous caractéristiques de l'artiste, en une sorte de «mise en scène» du concept spatial.

En 1964, Fontana signe un contrat avec la Marlborough Gerson Gallery. Dès lors, son succès international connaît un accroissement décisif, qui culmine en 1966. En février, cette galerie organise l'importante rétrospective itinérante «Lucio Fontana: the Spatial Concept of Art», qui a Jan Van der Marck pour commissaire au Walker Art Center de Minneapolis et qui voyage entre les États-Unis et l'Europe. À la XXXIII^e Biennale de Venise, Fontana remporte le grand prix de peinture grâce à l'*Environnement ovale blanc*, un espace en forme d'œuf où des toiles blanches lacérées d'une seule fente chacune sont disposées le long d'un parcours aménagé au sein d'un labyrinthe imaginaire.

De 1961 à 1968, ses «Environnements» instaurent un dialogue avec les jeunes générations d'artistes dans des espaces immersifs caractérisés par les motifs des trous ou de la fente; par ailleurs, il recourt de nouveau à l'éclairage au néon, doté cette fois d'une fonction émotionnelle et fantastique.

Après l'obtention du grand prix à la Biennale de Venise, il s'accorde une période de repos, entre autres pour raisons de santé. Il déménage son atelier à Comabbio (Varèse), le village de ses origines familiales, où il rénove sa villa.

Au printemps 1967, il inaugure au Stedelijk Museum d'Amsterdam l'exposition personnelle «Lucio Fontana, concetti spaziali», qui lui offre la possibilité de présenter de nouveaux «Environnements». Ses ultimes productions se caractérisent par la prédominance d'un critère d'intervention régulière sur la toile, visant à seconder la forme, et d'un nouveau rationalisme à la fois visuel et conceptuel: sur les toiles de la période 1966-1968, les trous sont tracés régulièrement au moyen de ciselets ou de gabarits de formes elliptiques et les fentes, souvent uniques, prennent un caractère d'essentialité.



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En 1967, Fontana inaugure son dernier cycle d'œuvres, les «Ellipses»: de forme elliptique, comme l'indique leur titre, elles sont fabriquées en bois laqué perforé mécaniquement dans l'atelier milanais de Sergio Tosi. Toutes de taille identique, elles se différencient les unes des autres par leur coloration monochrome industrielle et par la disposition des trous «percés à la machine»; elles se prêtent en outre à une éventuelle installation sur un piédestal. Fontana les expose en décembre à la Marlborough Gallery de Rome, à côté d'une série de sculptures en métal laqué appelées *Pilules*, en référence au contraceptif féminin récemment introduit sur le marché pharmaceutique.

À l'été 1967, une crise cardiaque empêche l'artiste d'assister au vernissage de sa rétrospective au musée de Stockholm. De novembre 1967 à février 1968, sa santé se détériore. En 1968, malgré son état physique défaillant, il continue de travailler à des «Fentes», à des «Huiles» et à des «Trous»; il crée même en une seule journée un *Environnement spatial* destiné à la Galleria del Deposito, à Gênes. Il meurt à Varèse le 7 septembre 1968, d'une nouvelle attaque cardiaque. Après son décès, sa veuve, Teresita Rasini Fontana [fig. 89], crée la Fondazione Lucio Fontana afin de sauvegarder sa mémoire et son œuvre.



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Lucio Fontana: "There once was a future"

Paolo Campiglio

This exhibition took its inspiration from a seemingly ambiguous and contradictory remark made by Lucio Fontana in 1967 while talking to Carla Lonzi about the idea of the future that had characterised his forty years of creative activity: "We could talk about the future thirty years ago, even today we cannot say what the future will be ... but in these forty years of my activity ... I see that a future existed."¹

The artist was alluding to a conceptual renewal underway in art, a process in which he had strongly believed, and which his own work had anticipated. His predictions seemed to have come true in the work of the latest generations of artists, the protagonists of the neo-avant-garde no longer tethered to the preconceptions of previous genres of painting and sculpture, now drawn to the emerging technologies and industrial materials offered by contemporary society. As demonstrated by Yves Klein and Piero Manzoni – two of Fontana's young travelling companions who had died prematurely – art could now ignore any material implications, becoming a purely cerebral or spiritual act.

For his part, in 1967 Fontana witnessed the actual conquest of space being accomplished by the international exploration programmes, with the first launches of astronauts followed by the real images sent back to Earth depicting a spatial infinity, which until then had only been imagined or pondered through telescope lenses. Like a child, Fontana was enthralled by the "heroic" space exploits of his time, from the launch of the first artificial satellite in 1965 and the United States orbital rendezvous, to the first probe that landed on Venus in 1966.

Born in 1899, Fontana's childhood was steeped in novels such as Jules Verne's *From the Earth to the Moon* (first published in 1865), and he cultivated his own fantastic vision of cosmic space as the realm of the "beyond". During the gruelling post-war years, Fontana promoted an avant-garde movement that rewrote not only the concept of space itself, but "gesture" and "sign"

as expressions of a primordial essence intrinsic to every possible future action: faced with the technological and scientific milestones of contemporary society, Fontana naïvely sought confirmation of his premonitions, remaining confident in the future. He was gratified to have intuited the eternal contradictions between material and immaterial, by have considered at length the idea of infinity, foreseeing that one day humankind would truly find itself faced with the infinity of the cosmos, and would have to come to terms with its own physical limits in relation to the immeasurable immensity. Hence, Fontana had reached, inevitably a real future from an imagined one.

Unfolding in stages, this exhibition sheds light on aspects of Fontana's unflinching creative vitality, in which his projections of the future – in the broadest sense of an attention to the methods of the avant-garde – coexist in a dialectical relationship with the present and the past.

Fontana began as a sculptor in Argentina in the second half of the 1920s, gifted with an extraordinary ability to model material. Self-taught, Fontana was the son of an Italian funerary sculpture entrepreneur, and it is only now – thanks to the scholarly studies of Lorena Moguelar, Andrea Giunta and Daniela Sbaraglia, among others – that we can unravel his early creative activity. From 1926 he worked mostly in Rosario de Santa Fé, thanks to a partnership with his painter friend Julio Vanzo, with whom he shared a studio on Calle España. The young Fontana had already founded the Nexus group, which set itself the objective of an international avant-garde aesthetic spanning Purism, Expressionism, Cubism and the legacy of Futurism, in reaction to the Impressionist tradition of their predecessors and to the realism in vogue in the 1920s. As Sbaraglia has underscored in her contribution to this catalogue, after Fontana's early sculptural explorations, which evinced a certain aversion to conventions, together with his friends Juan Zocchi and Vanzo, the Argentinian was the driving force behind a manifesto published in February 1928 in the magazine *Ahora*, when Fontana had already left Argentina for Italy. In fact, between the lines some signature traits can already be seen that would remain throughout his creative approach: artistic freedom as an act of liberating one's instincts and involving the subconscious; art as a "barbaric" concept – of expressionist origin – in defiance of the perfection of "style"; the appeal to a cosmic dimension as a metaphor for human outreach towards the transcendent, the "spiritual".

It is therefore easy to understand how the young Fontana, having returned to Milan, was thus led to transcend the material – marble in particular – from 1928 to 1930 at the Brera Academy, as the pupil of Adolfo Wildt. This unconventional master of form seduced Fontana through the sheer seriousness and consistency of his craft, for his ability to embellish surfaces with gold, creating abstract luminescent effects, and his capacity to transform marble itself into a liquid, a transpa-

rent and diaphanous material. Fontana now took command of his art in order to reach beyond it, as he would admit years later: "Precisely because I seriously felt the desire to find a radically new path, I wanted to give my research a classical basis."²

The next step in the "barbaric" direction – which opened the decade of the 1930s – is considered by art historians, and the artist himself, as the starting point of Fontana's unbroken line of research into the dialectical relationship between matter, light, colour, sculpture and anti-sculpture, figure and anti-figure.

Created in one go, as a gesture of revolt against style, Fontana's lost sculpture *Uomo nero* (Black man, 1930) marks his first decisive act of rebellion against the work of his contemporaries that referenced the past, evoked at the 1930 Venice Biennale by the art critic Waldemar George's *Appels d'Italie*, a past which for Fontana must instead draw from an "elsewhere" that he identified as a ground zero of sorts, a prehistoric or ahistorical instinctive dimension that is completely imagined.

The coloured terracotta pieces *Donna alla finestra* (Woman at the window, 1931) and in particular *Venere* (Venus, 1931), exhibited at the artist's first solo show at Galleria il Milione in Milan in February 1931, bear traces of his "expressionist primitivism", a phase of discovering the essence: material such as earth, along with graffiti and colour that does not follow form. This was not a cynical renunciation of sculpture with a Dadaist twist, but a recourse to instinct to re-evaluate the principle of life in art. The man-woman pairing – in the anthropological sense – is slotted into an imaginary era (as featured in the drawings *Figure* [1932], *Due figure* [Two figures, 1932]), and is interpreted as "origin", meaning the condition in which humans have not yet acquired an awareness of time. If this "elsewhere" were instead seen as some future existential dimension, the artist could be alluding to an apocalyptic era, in which the human being "awaits" a supernatural event, by now devoid of any ideal of progress. Manipulation of earth is the first or last possible gesture in an era that he imagined before or after the one in which all gestures have been performed.

The artist's scepticism towards the traditional craft of the sculptor implies a certain confidence in the languages of modernity, in a conscious continuity of trust in the future – a legacy of Futurism – as offering an "evolution" or "revolution" in the contemporary era. With this in mind, Fontana made graffiti signs in the plastic mass, transgressing the accepted rules, using pure "fauve" colours – sometimes described as "electric" by contemporary critics – to cancel the sense of volume or to confuse the figure, and instead introduce – even in the drawing – the element of artificial light,

which often covers the entire work, as if a patch of coloured light illuminated an inert material and brought it to life. From the outset, his work was already a composition between painting and sculpture, something detached from any genre.

The combination of form, colour, and light, in a pagan interpretation of the natural world – therefore in a conscious “abstract” rereading of the emphasis on nature itself – found an inexhaustible source of inspiration in Fontana’s subsequent ceramic exploits in Albisola (from 1936), at the Mazzotti factory of his friend Tullio d’Albisola. Ceramics was the popular technique that he aimed to ennoble as sculpture’s “aristocracy”. So as to avoid misunderstandings, in an article written in 1939 (which I discovered in 1994) in which Fontana vehemently clarified his position, despite the Italian criticism (after the two personal shows of his ceramics held at the Galleria il Milione in April and December 1938), speaking of a Fontana “phenomenon” in contemporary ceramics: “I am a sculptor, not a ceramist.”³ His artistic research was not the mere replication of vases and plates: it delved into ontological questions and the issues of form in relation to colour and light, along with the figure itself and its own crisis.

Some emblematic works exhibited here – such as *Cavalli* (Horses, 1936), pink and black, *Natura morta* (Still life, 1938), up to the “baroque” re-reading of portraiture epitomised in the black-and-gold contrasts of *Ritratto femminile* (Female portrait, 1938) – attest to his commitment to what is given by nature, within it and beyond, simultaneously accepting and opposing the historicised form, between figurative and abstract, between matter and its annihilation.

First the art historian Yve-Alain Bois, and more recently Anthony White, re-interpreted Fontana’s entire body of work – including his ceramic sculptures – as a deliberate dialectical oscillation between avant-garde and kitsch, in line with the categories Clement Greenberg proposed in 1939, which made a distinction between high and low language.⁴ Taking this fundamental reading into account, however, we cannot overlook how the insistence of artificial or electric colours – which would also return in the post-war Spatialist phase – are a consequence of the Italian absorption of the international legend of Abstractionism: they are the tones of a modernity expressed in emotion, which Fontana assimilated from the “sculpture-painting” of Alexander Archipenko, from the work of Alexander Calder, or which he finds in Wassily Kandinsky’s watercolours, to mention the masters he most admired. In fact, *Lila-violet* (1932) was one of the watercolours exhibited by the master of abstract art in his first solo exhibition in Milan, at the Galleria il Milione in 1934, a work that left a strong impression on Fontana.

The gold that artificially illuminates faces or the details of a shape and above all the spectacular iridescent reflections that, on their third firing, cover the ceramics like a second skin – colours that for some offer a wry nod to Secessionist culture, to bourgeois luxury or the typical lustre of Gallé vases – attest to the illusion of space-light in matter caught in its magmatic state, the introduction of an unreal “fourth” dimension (supernatural, meaning gold as the undying metaphor for sunlight), which will later allude to cosmic light; the contradiction of the form led the artist to the exaltation of an artificial condition inspired by nature itself (the iridescence of dragonfly wings, the lustrous carapace of a beetle, the magical shimmer of minerals in their pure state, the abstract gleam of coral).

The subsequent adventure demonstrates how the investigation of light on forms, and the iridescent effects trialled in his ceramics coalesce in *Ambiente spaziale a luce nera* (Spatial environment with black light, 1949), in which the use of ultraviolet illumination lends a cosmic twist to draw attention to the fluorescence of the suspended abstract motifs. From 1939 Fontana expressed a strong aversion to the “bad taste” of popular ceramics created as ornaments: “I abhor the mystics of technique,” he opined. “The prodigious techniques of Sèvres and Copenhagen wares may satisfy the taste of ladies and collectors, with their ecstatic penchant for fragility and half-tones. But I’m looking for something else.”

As I have demonstrated elsewhere, Fontana’s internship at the Sèvres works over the summer-autumn season of 1937 – which was followed by his first personal exhibition of ceramics in Paris, inaugurated on 16 December of that year at Galerie Jeanne Bucher-Myrbor – was centred on an experimental technique of colouring stoneware with glaze, a practice aimed at transforming the refractory earth into light, making it incandescent, so to speak, and one deemed heretical by the “mystics of technique.”⁵

The emphasis on luminosity and the concept of “aura” are taken to extremes in Fontana’s mosaic sculptures, completed in collaboration with artisans, as seen in the famous *Ritratto di Teresita* (Portrait of Teresita, 1940), in which Fontana uses the magical effect of abstraction in the figuration: the reference to early Christian iconology in a reinterpretation very popular in the Italian Fascist culture of the time, is artfully employed to explore the ideal disappearance of form in a three-dimensional representation.⁶

Over fifty years ago the art historian and critic Enrico Crispolti emphasised how the artist’s baroque undercurrent manifests in his ceramic works, by which he meant the assimilation of an “archetype of imaginative vitalism, both in relation to the dynamism of the form, and to the expansive connections of this in space.”⁷ *Mujer Desnudandose* (*El Viento en Catamarca*, 1947) is the only work in the exhibition that attests to the wrenching exasperation of the figure from Fontana’s second period in Argentina. His refer-

ence to colonial baroque – filtered through popular expressionist vein – is merely the starting point for a disquieting manipulation of material, and the intentional emphasis on manual skill is symptomatic of uncertain existential conditions the artist was experiencing at the time.

In contrast, the more “Mediterranean” works produced in Albisola in the subsequent, fertile season, starting from the spring of 1947 – such as *Battaglia* (1948), *Crocifisso* (1951) and *Guerriero* (1953) – while articulating an almost neurotic exasperation of the figure and verging on extremes of human representation, become expressions of “formlessness” born from a sudden gesture, by which energy in its pure state is translated into matter, occasionally figurative.

Meanwhile, as a complement to his research on material, the act of resetting / reducing to zero, while seen as pure heresy, from the outset manifests his faith in utopia, as he forces the limits imposed by the conventions of the day. The avant-garde utopia as seen in Umberto Boccioni’s work involved the quest for an ideal formula, the characteristics of which remain undefined, though they relate to the question of dematerialisation. The myth of the reinvention of visual codes – typical of modernity – had conditioned Fontana’s mental approach since the “graffiti tablets” of 1931 and 1932, of which we have two examples here (*Tavoletta graffita*, 1931; and *Tavoletta graffita*, 1932), both of which offer rare testimonies of the artist’s early pre-informal organic abstractionism. The idea of a form born from a drawing and transposed into a graffiti sign – meaning the first or last gesture applied to a monochrome concrete surface – in some cases becomes an uninterrupted line, an expression of the space-time that Fontana would identify a decade later in his “spatial concept”. Fontana had probably assimilated the work of Jean Arp and Willy Baumeister, Alexander Calder – or that of lesser artists such as Harry Jelinek and Enrico Prampolini – which were reproduced in the first issue of *Abstraction Création art non figuratif* (1932), but he opted for a more individual quest linked to the unconscious.

In the subsequent suite of abstract sculptures (originally in reinforced concrete) conceived in 1934 (*Scultura astratta*, 1934; and *Scultura astratta*, 1934) and exhibited at the solo show at Galleria il Milione in January 1935. Marking the height of the early Italian Abstract movement, Fontana’s “concetti plastici” hint at a geometric structure that is always approximate, with an ironic touch of pink or pea green. These works are what one might call “anti-sculptures” of sign, surface, colour and space, in which the non-geometric line becomes a three-dimensional element that generates a dialogue with its surroundings and is criss-crossed by new graffiti signs within.

Thanks to contacts the gallery owners had established with the Parisian circuit, in June 1935 Fontana had the opportunity to present some of his abstract sculptures in the French capital at the first Salon de l’Art Mural held in rue de La Boétie,

together with the Abstraction-Création group and other Italian artists: two of Fontana’s “rhythms” were also published in the magazine’s fourth issue, but the artist found himself diverting his production for a few years toward an alternative form of expression linked to naturalism.

The recent news of several abstract ceramic sculptures Fontana completed in Albisola in 1936, (unfortunately now lost), contemporary with his naturalistic ones, sheds light on his early tendency to explore a “high” sculptural concept in an undoubtedly more popular pseudo-artisan context; that said, these pieces were also linked to Futurist experimentation, with the aim of creating an “aristocracy of sculpture.”⁸ This undertaking would be completed after the war, coinciding with Pablo Picasso’s growing legend as ceramist – a development explored by Luca Boichicchio in this catalogue – and following the “democratisation” of the genre of artists’ ceramic works: in this context, as for Picasso, the medium offered Fontana the chance to allow the “act” of the “spatial concept” to enter people’s homes at an affordable price.

Fontana’s quest for dematerialisation – an urge also evident in his ceramic – seems to be a singularly personal reaction to the “heavy” materialist direction contemporary society was moving in, and was typical of the art of its time. While abstraction had already tuned in to an imaginary utopian vision of a future society, one in which human beings would distance themselves, in one way or another, from the constraints of matter and from the dependence of basic needs, in the 1946 *Manifesto Blanco*, drawn up in Buenos Aires with his students from the Altamira academy, “white” alludes to a weightless absolute: it strives for a radical renewal and an art without colour, neither figurative nor abstract. Toward the end of his problematic Argentine experience of the 1940s, Fontana found new inspiration in the young generations who utopically believed not only in revitalising traditions, but also in a new society. Aware of the breakthrough of Einstein’s theories that were widely discussed, the artist began to devise a form of artistic expression that would explore the fourth dimension, namely space-time, by means of the new mediums offered through science and technology, an expression of the emerging atomic age. Moreover, for Fontana art had to consist of a synthesis of form, movement, colour and sound, while embracing the subconscious and nature as sources of inspiration.

In this way Fontana arrived at the idea of the primary nucleus of matter and life, which he articulated in numerous sketches and drawings made while still in Argentina, and through a series of crucial steps that led him to the atom, a new metaphor for reaching zero, but with energy itself as its vital meaning.

On his return to Italy in 1947 he attempted to follow through on his theories, and created the work exhibited here *Scultura spaziale* (1947), a circular form, originally in gesso coloured black, resembling the slow dissipation of an atomic

mushroom cloud, a hypothetical vision of man in space, the canyon of some unknown planet from which mysterious gaseous elements emanated. Conceived in conjunction with the first discussions in Milan for the Spaziale movement at Carlo Cardazzo’s Galleria del Naviglio, this piece is neither abstract nor figurative, but addresses the problem of activating space, in the central void, through a ring of matter. In other versions, however, he emphasises the consistency of matter to negate its specific connotations, pursuing an identical goal. Over the period 1948–1949, which saw a revival of the Albisola experience, Fontana’s “spatial” ceramics – now almost corroded and burnt, and exhibited like fragments of dead planets resting on the ground – embody the vortex motif. Among these new creations were the black cube titled *Ceramica spaziale* (1949, also dubbed *El quadrado* in some earlier drawings), in reference to the previous *Uomo nero*, embodying the “ground zero” of creation itself. The spiral-shaped gestures, evident in the whirlpools of ceramics, like those underlying the first *Concetti spaziali* (Holes) on paper, are a primary gesture of energy, referring as much to the phenomenology of the galaxy as to marks etched into the sand at the dawning of the world.⁹

Some studies for the *Ambiente spaziale a luce nera*, the first environment, created for just five days in February 1949, at Galleria del Naviglio in Milan (*Ambiente spaziale*, 1948; and *Ambiente spaziale, Etude*, 1949) return to the motif of the nucleus-cell, a theme Fontana initially imagined suspended in the void, illuminated by a Wood’s lamp and transmitted elsewhere, via television, in another city, with the intention of alluding to a germinal moment of time through this completely fantastic form. These *Ambiente* pieces and the apparently abstract nuclear drawings exhibited at Galleria Salto in Milan in 1949 represent, to all intents and purposes, Fontana’s first “concetti spaziali”, which he himself chose to call pure “concepts” of space, well in advance of the characteristic definitions of Conceptual art that were to come.¹⁰

A few months later, while devising a new environment, Fontana arrived at the formula of the “Buco” (Hole), using the white, neutral surface of large sections of paper mounted on canvas and pierced with an awl to generate nuclei or spiral motifs, like screens traversed by artificial lighting. At the age of fifty, Fontana had found a definitive solution, the expression of space-time synthesised in a single gesture, representing his personal concept of space. As he himself noted in 1967: “The first *Buchi* did not [represent] the destruction of the painting, the informal gesture, [but] precisely a dimension beyond the painting ... the discovery of the cosmos is a new dimension, it is the infinite, then I made a hole in that canvas itself – which was the basis of all the arts – and created an infinite dimension”¹¹

The first paper creations of 1950 were followed by plain canvases directly perforated, either blank or prepared in monochrome black or

white, as can be seen here in *Concetto spaziale* (1950) and *Concetto spaziale* (1951), both of which were exhibited at the solo show in April 1952 at Galleria del Naviglio, and later at the 1954 Venice Biennale; the linear motifs of the holes reference Fontana’s early abstract themes from the 1930s, which occasionally evoked coalescing galactic masses. For these *Concetti spaziali* the artist procured canvases of various sizes on which he repeated the gesture in parallel, or in intertwined rows of holes created with awls of varying diameters and shapes.

After his radical “resetting” of the early canvases, other works presented here such as *Concetto spaziale* (1951–1952) and *Concetto spaziale* (1952) reveal the dialectic between a surface colour, reduced to small *taches* that allude to the purest of pictorial gestures, and also the infinite space-time metaphor represented by the reiterated act of drilling, forming a continuous exchange between matter-light and anti-matter space, which in Fontana’s ideal aims to underline the existential contrast between our finite and sensory condition and that infinite, spiritual or unknown state. An ambiguous condition that also emerges in the *Concetto spaziale Il pane* (1950), one of the first terracottas that bring the *Holes* back to the high-artisan context of ceramics, as had already happened with the abstract sculptures of the 1930s.

Over the course of the 1950s, the cycle took on certain variations, with more explicit material references, parallel to ceramic experimentation: at first this took the form of fragments of Murano glass on the canvas (the *Stones* cycle) referencing his holes technique, or freely scattered over the surface, an example of which is *Concetto spaziale* (1953), which imitates the effect of artificial light on the painting: this expedient is translated via small drops of enamel paint even in the terracotta tablets (*Concetto spaziale*, 1954). At times – as in the sidereal and silvery *Concetto spaziale* (1955) and in *Concetto spaziale* (1956), with red and yellow shapes – in an apparently more realist approach, Fontana brings shapes back to the canvas, suggesting imaginary space capsules or future orbital stations; later he takes the theme of the physical presence of matter to extremes, using thicker pastes with the addition of sequins of mineral origin (the cycle he called *Baroque*), to once again introduce an unreal reflection in a cosmic magma, with more direct references to the international Informal movement, as in the yellow *Concetto spaziale* (1955) and in the more disquieting *Concetto spaziale* (1957), one of the most significant examples of the problematics involved.

In *Concetto spaziale. L'inferno* (1956) – which is traditionally paired with *Il Paradiso*, a similar composition of identical format but with lighter, earthier tones – the hexagonal format alluding to the divine and cosmic absolute is associated with the idea of threshold, the Christian image of the afterlife, with apocalyptic overtones. The “beyond” of the earthly imagination on the one hand, and on the other the unalloyed idea of infinity in its manifestation as an act, are matched against each other in a perpetual oscillation of vitality.

As explored in Valérie Da Costa’s contribution to this catalogue, despite the age difference Fontana’s productive contact with young people – in particular with Yves Klein in 1957, and with Piero Manzoni, who began his *Achrome* works in 1958 – influenced and seems to have stimulated him to take a new radical step, in the direction of monochrome works.

At the time of his personal room at the 1958 Venice Biennale, Fontana was still torn between the old recourse to organic forms, and the temptation to empty the canvas of every emotional accessory: he confessed his doubts to his friend Mario Bardini: “Sequins or no sequins? Spatial or realist?” Or surfaces characterised by the use of stones and materials or neutral and monochrome?

The *Gessi* (Impastos) series, characterised by the use of pastels on canvas, is represented here by the evocative *Concetto spaziale* (1957), which has taken its cue from the poetics of the “wall”, and the *Inchiostri* (Inks) series inspired by calligraphy Japanese, with aniline colours and collaged canvas shapes superimposed on canvas – are the first signs of a further lyrical distension triggered by the concept of void. The next stage was the *Tagli* (Slashes) cycle, dating from late 1958. Encouraged by the idea of a potentially infinite space to work on, Fontana positioned himself before his canvas in a state of “waiting” with Zen-like focus, and sliced into it with repeated gestures to make that infinite, illusory space burst into the present with a different and new meaning. In *Concetto spaziale* (1959), among the early solutions of this kind, while the multiple cuts still have a meaning similar to that of the holes, here they are conceived as openings onto the void, and in time they acquire a value of their own, an alternative to the canvas’s perforation: they are distinct lacerations that are in contrast to the previous dramatic scarring of the surface; instead they become rhythmic windows onto the “other” space, revealing traces of an infinite energy.

The fissures applied to the monochrome canvas, coated with water-based paint in such a way that the rigid surface shows no traces of the brushwork, become for Fontana a sort of quotidian ritual, celebrated day after day until 1968, as can be seen in *Concetto spaziale. Attese* (1962) on a red background, the white *Concetto spaziale. Attese*

(1965), and the blue *Concetto spaziale. Attese* (1966), in which the lacerations are increasingly sharper and peremptory: “attese” (waitings) is the name Fontana gave these sequences of cuts, alluding to the momentary pause taken before their execution, but also refers to his expectation of the “pure intelligence” of the future. The artist believed that this series best embodied the philosophical expression he sought, an act of faith in the infinite, an affirmation of spirituality. As he said in an interview with Grazia Livi: “When I sit in front of one of my cuts, contemplating it, I suddenly feel a great relaxation of the spirit, I feel like a man freed from the slavery of matter, a man who belongs to the vastness of the present and the future.”¹²

The almost hypnotic effect of the ritual is evident in *Concetto spaziale. Attesa* (1965), consisting of a single slash on a white background, part of a series created for the ambient installation at the 1966 Venice Biennale, in which each *Slash* was placed within structures resembling confessionals, and visible only from a certain distance, suggesting an act of contemplation.

As pointed out by Crispolti, Fontana’s work contains not only an intimate allusion to life – inherent in his every gesture and constant throughout his production in all its forms – but also the consequent reference to the mystery of genesis. From the original love of man and woman, to the imagination of a molecular or atomic nucleus and the genesis of life, and in his secular world he attempts to address this question without resorting to religion or to philosophical systems of the past, but in an optimistic and almost pragmatic future projection, in a world finally emancipated – as he imagines it, thanks to genetic science and new technologies – from the need to resort to the transcendent to explain the origin of life. At the time, science (popularised through the media) intimated the imminent breakthrough of creating human life in the laboratory, thanks to genetic engineering, a possibility that subsequently became a reality.

Fontana alluded to this belief in 1960 in a letter to his friend Carlo Damiano, in which he speaks of his *Natures* (*Concetto spaziale Natura*, 1959; and *Concetto spaziale Natura*, 1959–1960), the large black terracotta spheres created in Albisola in 1959, with embossed lacerations or deep grooves, large masses that appeared to contradict the purity of the *Slashes*, such as his cyclical and recurring return to “low” materialism. Instead, for the artist they represented an act of fertilisation, in the sense of emancipation from matter, and at the same time the “expectation of pure intelligence” similarly to spatial concepts on canvas. “So prepare yourselves for the prayers that you will have to recite on your knees before my NATURES, as they roam the world’s art galleries, sowing terror and the liberation of matter in Art! Wait for pure intelligence, in a thousand years we will be similar to God, original sin will have ended for mankind, and we will return as he created us, in his semblance.”¹³

Only apparently antithetical, the *Natures* and the *Slashes* represent that imaginary and utopian

future human condition, which in the 1960s the artist perceived – with increasing urgency – as an obligatory path, as the counterbalance to contemporary materialist society.

The physical emphasis of the *Natures* and the iconography of the circle are paralleled by the 1960 works on canvas, in which, attracted by new techniques offered by emerging technologies, Fontana experimented with a new mixture of oil paint and vinyl pastes (actual plastic substances), two seemingly incompatible ingredients that he combined with a heretical spirit to form the basis of the new *Olii* (Oils) cycle. In this way he generated unreal surfaces of a kind he considered particularly suitable for contemplation, marked by one or more continuous thin lines, graffitied (with a nail) in a circular pattern and then violently sundered by large holes or gashes scored into the still fresh pictorial layer. *Concetto spaziale* (1960), now in the collection of the Musée National d’Art Moderne in Paris, was one of the first works of the cycle, dating to December of that year, when Fontana began to apply his gestural devices to square canvases (measuring 150 × 150 cm), some of considerable size (more than two metres), which he submitted to the 1961 International Exhibition of Contemporary Painting and Sculpture at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh, the coveted international prize to which he was invited. The work in question hinted at a lunar landscape, an idea that the artist confided to Grazia Livi, suggesting it conveyed the sense of dismay facing any future astronaut launched into space: “The background colour of these canvases ... is a somewhat strident and unruly colour that indicates the restlessness of contemporary man. The subtle trace, however, is the journey of man in space, his dismay and the terror of getting lost: the tear, finally, is a sudden cry of pain, the final gesture of the anguish that has now become unbearable.”¹⁴

The *Oils* of 1961 will flow into the small, precious, sequence of the so-called *Venezie* (dedicated to the lagoon city) conceived for the exhibition *Arte e Contemplazione* at Palazzo Grassi in Venice in June, and then submitted to the *Ten Paintings of Venice* show in November at Martha Jackson Gallery in New York, curated by the French critic Michel Tapié: a fertile relationship was born between Tapié and the artist, which has as its main outcome the important monograph *Devenir de Fontana* (1961), explored here in the essay by Silvia Bignami.

Running parallel to works for Venice, *Concetto spaziale* (1961) pays homage to the golds and greens typical of the lagoon, with surfaces modulated by hand to imitate the surface of water: in this way, the work’s shimmering supernatural appearance references the infinite, arousing sensations of light that are almost artificial and tactile. Meanwhile, the searing glare of sunlight glancing off the skyscrapers of New York, which Fontana toured with Tapié between November and December 1961, so impressed the artist that he began experimenting with his spatial concept

on large copper sheets, which he treated with scratches and lacerations, thus initiating the *Metalli* cycle represented here by the two works *Concetto spaziale New York Grattacielo* (1962) and *Concetto spaziale* (1965).

The artist’s optimistic faith in some future palingenesis of humanity is the thread that unites the large “seeds” of the *Nature* series to the ensuing *Fine di Dio* (End of God) cycle (1963), whose renowned oval canvases are exemplified here in pink and apple green, both from 1963: while apparently childlike in their palette, in truth their impact is a shocking and vulgar application of the artist’s gesture. The singular oval shape alludes to the “mandorla” aureole in which God is often represented in Christian tradition, and at the same time it refers to the concept of the egg – also recurring in ceramics – as a metaphor for genesis. Although the artist himself has offered contradictory and discordant interpretations, according to which the end of God would signify not only the exhaustion of the idea of classical representation of divinity, but the demise of the divine act to explain the origin of life. In short, the theme of the end of God signals the “end of the world”:

Here is the end of the world and the liberation of man from matter. ... Then, man will become a simple being, like a flower and will live only on his intelligence, on the beauty of Nature and will purify himself of the blood, because he lives among the blood continuously. He will perhaps no longer kill animals, he will create pills, he will live artificially. ... Men will no longer kill each other, wars will end. It will take hundreds and maybe thousands of years, but science will get us there.¹⁵

The intellectual and material boundaries of physical space form the other frontier the artist challenged through his work. For Fontana, space must always be understood in a dialectical sense, with its opposite: it is physical space as a void around matter, it is the cosmos in relation to the Earth, it is mental space as an extreme act of freedom of thought, in relation to narrowness of social conventions, is the fourth dimension. As Giorgio Zanchetti explores in this catalogue, the concept of active space, which attests to the extreme vitality, density and fullness of space, has its boldest embodiment in the form Fontana terms “Ambiente spaziale” (Spatial Environment). It is an apparently scenographic and theatrical creation intended to emotionally convey to the spectator the artist’s concept of space-time, based on the new tenets of contemporary physics that were being widely disseminated at the time, as an expression of another, an *autre* space and time.

After the first *Ambiente spaziale a luce nera* (1949), which Fontana considered a kind of demonstration, although still a fundamental creation offering the spectator the emotional/psychological illusion of a zero-gravity and alienating state of being, his “ambient” forays enter a stasis of sorts. Today we can recognise Fontana’s exploration of the idea of environments throughout the 1950s, in fertile collaboration with architects for

ephemeral and temporary installations, especially in cinemas (exploiting the theatre’s darkness), or in the attempt to renew his perception of “ceiling” and “wall” as no longer posing limits or surfaces, but as zones of illusion, where the interplay of artificial lighting (neon or a Wood’s lamp) – at the time new technologies – and, together, abstract forms, introduces the psychological notion of infinity as part of the daily dimension of living.

The exhibition presents a faithful reconstruction of the *Struttura al neon per la IX Triennale di Milano* (1951), curated by the Clod company, originally titled *Luce spaziale*. It is a single luminous path of curved lines that overlap at different levels, anchored to a lapis-lazuli blue false ceiling, which the architect Luciano Baldessari originally intended to situate as an ideal sky to enhance the brightness of the work at the top of the palace’s ceremonial staircase. The space-time of the path as a continuous line is underscored by the neon light tubes, a somewhat pioneering application for an artistic installation. Fontana brings to fruition the principle theorised by Boccioni of the “unique form in the continuity of space”, in a new meaning of light-space, active and aimed at establishing an emotional connection with the spectator.

Now recognised by young people as a pioneer in this genre, from 1964 to 1968 Fontana was inspired by artists connected to kinetic art troupes and interested in a concept of installation art – including his collaborator Nanda Vigo – to resume his spatial experiments and produce new, completely autonomous works. This is how the environments created for collective events solo shows were born, including the one for *Lucio Fontana: The Spatial Concept of Art* held at the Walker Center of Art in Minneapolis in January 1966, and the subsequent one created on 3 October 1967 at Galleria del Deposito, Genoa, exhibited here as the only original example preserved at the Musée d’Art Contemporain in Lyon: both environments consisted of a compact, completely blackened room that was accessed either via a narrow tunnel with a lowered ceiling (in Minneapolis), or through a narrow opening (in Genoa): in the space a Wood’s lamp highlighted rectilinear trajectories of painted and regular fluorescent points that drew the perimeter of a rectangle (in Minneapolis), so that the geometric shape appeared suspended; or horizontal and vertical paths that fit into a trapezoidal element on the ceiling (in Genoa). Visitors were immersed in a physical and psychological situation that required them to be alone with themselves, losing the notion of three-dimensional space, whereby they reached a non-place in which forms of light seem to float in the void, figures of immeasurable space, and subsequently returning to reality as they exited through the narrow passage. Fontana imagined a path in which everyone can experience, in sequence, a series of sensations and visions similar to those encountered by astronauts launched into the cosmos: the angst of physical deprivation and, in a certain sense, of suffering; the aerial contemplation of a sort of

“appearance” of the immeasurable, undergoing therefore a locus of emotion and surprise in the face of the phenomenon of the infinite, the exit representing their return to Earth.

As the artist himself stated, the series called *Teatrini* (Little theatres) also deals – albeit in a more “realistic” way, using evident Pop colours – the theme of staging the *Spatial Concept*: here in an abstract form, we see the return of the idea of a cosmic landscape imagined in a fantastic and unreal way.

Franco Russoli interprets them as an evolution of the early “eccentricities” of Chinese shadow art, of eighteenth-century theatre, of optical cameras: however, here the image is current and corresponds to the “impression left on the retina of the astronaut, torn from one space to another, which superimposes the terrestrial images, now enormous in memory, on the universe that swallows it”. However, it is the artist himself who warns Russoli of the dangers of an overly realistic reading, commenting: “But ultimately it is too realistic, too flat.” The solution is to create images, allusive objects: “It is not a question of metamorphosis but of equivalence, of discovery of the unity of being, image, object, matter, feeling, idea. This is how Fontana wants to proceed: creating forms and things that are immediately many other things.”¹⁶

This anthological exhibition ends with Fontana’s last cycle, inaugurated by surprise in 1967, a riposte to the emerging Minimal Art movement, and an extreme act of faith in contemporary science. Based on algebraic formulas, the *Ellipses* (*Concetto spaziale Ellisse*, 1967; and *Concetto spaziale Ellisse*, 1967) are mechanically perforated works in nitrocellulose lacquered wood, created in Sergio Tosi’s Milanese workshop. Of the same size, they differ in their monochrome, vibrant Pop hues, and in the arrangement of the holes: some may be placed on a pedestal, making them midway between sculpture and painting. They are parallel to a series of sculpture-objects in nitro-lacquered metal, with uniform and flaming colours like automobile bodywork, marked by a single slash: as Crispolti underlined, these are oval, missile-like sculptures that “truly represent a hypothesis of mechanical art”.¹⁷ The ovoid ones (*Siluro*, 1967; and *Pillola*, 1967), in particular, might represent an ironic allusion to the female contraceptive pill, which had recently come onto the market, a socially revolutionary and epochal event on a par with recent missions in the aerospace field. An achievement that Fontana intended to celebrate as a sign of the future in the present.

Lucio Fontana, "Spatial Concepts: there are, for example, the spatial ceilings from that of the ninth Triennale of 1951, featured in a photograph mounted by Giancolombo, to those of the cinema in the Padiglione Breda by Baldessari at the 31st Fiera di Milano of 1953 and for the Italia '61 exhibition in Turin; also the two enigmatic ink drawings that accompanied Spatial Environment with Black Light of 1949 at Galleria del Naviglio.

Notes

- ↑ *Entretien avec Carla Lonzi*, original version transcribed by Paolo Campiglio in 2007, reprinted in Valerie Da Costa, *Écrits de Lucio Fontana (Manifestes, textes, entretiens)* (Dijon: Presses du Réel, 2013), p. 320.
- ↑ Bruno Rossi, "Dialogo con Lucio Fontana", *Settimo giorno*, 22 January 1963, in Angela Sanna, *Lucio Fontana, manifesti, scritti, interviste* (Milan: Abscondita, 2015), p. 92.
- ↑ Paolo Campiglio, "'Io sono uno scultore e non un ceramista', La ceramica di Lucio Fontana nella seconda metà degli anni trenta: uno scritto e alcune ceramiche inedite", *Faenza* 80, nos. 1–2 (1994): pp. 34–41.
- ↑ Yve-Alain Bois, "Fontana scatologue", *Critique*, no. 502 (March 1989): pp. 154–168; Anthony White, *Lucio Fontana: Between Utopia and Kitsch* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011).
- ↑ Campiglio, "Io sono uno scultore e non un ceramista", p. 37; Paolo Campiglio, *Lucio Fontana. Torso italico* (Milan: Scalpendi, 2014), p. 26.
- ↑ White, *Lucio Fontana: Between Utopia and Kistch*, p. 119.
- ↑ Enrico Crispolti, "L'avventura creativa di Fontana nell'arte del XX secolo", in *Fontana, catalogo ragionato di sculture, dipinti, ambientazioni* (Milan: Skira, 2006), p. 20.
- ↑ Luca Bochicchio, *Lettere a Tullio d'Albisola 1936-1964* (Milan: Abscondita, 2023), p. 20.
- ↑ The work – originally placed in the garden of the collector Adriano Pallini’s villa in Ospedaletti, together with a green sphere – entered the Musée National d’Art Moderne collection in Paris in the 1980s and was the subject of an analysis by Yve-Alain Bois in 1989. It is considered one of the most significant examples of "low materialism", the term he coined for Fontana, and became one of the main ideas underpinning the exhibition *L'informe. Mode d'emploi* curated by Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss at the Centre Pompidou in 1996. Bois, *Fontana scatologue*; Yve-A. Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *The Inform. Mode d'emploi* (exh. cat. Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1996).
- ↑ Giorgio Zanchetti, "Concetto spaziale", in *Dizionario Lucio Fontana*, ed. Luca Pietro Nicoletti (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2023), p. 161.
- ↑ *Entretien avec Carla Lonzi*, p. 327.
- ↑ Grazia Livi, "Incontro con Lucio Fontana", *Vanità* 6, no. 13 (Autumn 1962): p. 54.
- ↑ Letter from Lucio Fontana to Charles Damiano dated 7 August 1960, in Giancarlo Gaggiotti, *La visione verticale* (Perugia: Morlacchi editore, 2019), pp. 132–133.
- ↑ Livi, "Incontro con Lucio Fontana", p. 57.
- ↑ *Entretien avec Carla Lonzi*, p. 327.
- ↑ Franco Russoli, "Fontana e il giuoco dell'arte", *Pirelli* 17, nos. 5–6 (October-November-December 1965).
- ↑ Crispolti, "L'avventura creativa di Fontana", p. 37.

Fontana

Lucio Fontana and Michel Tapié: The Geography of a “devenir”

Silvia Bignami

Fontana

The relationship between Lucio Fontana and Michel Tapié de Celeyran — one of the leading French art critics in the years following the Second World War, who was associated with Art Informel and who had a significant impact on the international art market — spanned the cities of Milan, Venice, Paris, Turin and New York. It involved some of the leading figures of contemporary art, including the Swiss gallerist Rodolphe Stadler, the Turinese publisher and artist Ezio Gribaudo and the American gallerist Martha Jackson. If the definition of “a useful and reciprocal misunderstanding” is appropriate,¹ it is equally true that, in the second half of the 1950s, in the debate on the dissolution of the form and the questions of physical substance, Tapié compensated for the absence of Italian art critics and contributed to freeing Fontana from the interpretations of marginal figures, above all from “cultural journalists in search of a scandal”.²

A result of the rapport was the monograph *Devenir de Fontana* (The future of Fontana), written between March and November 1961, the fourth volume in the ICAR series edited by Gribaudo and published by Edizioni d’Arte Fratelli Pozzo in Turin:³ this refined volume opened up other prospects of “evolution” and formed the first visual recognition of Fontana’s work and was a major advance in its legitimation. Aware of this, the artist proposed that Domenico Canonica, chairman of the publishing firm, should personally contribute to the cost of its production, shouldering part of the expense for the colour reproductions and with a commitment to producing drawings or original dust jackets for the deluxe editions:

Although this is the first time such an important book about my work has been published, in view of the high international value of Tapié and all his colleagues, I am certain that it will be successful and will enter the aura of my current favourable situation on the international scale of values of contemporary art.⁴

The year 1961 was particular favourable. It was marked by the creation in spring of the cycle

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Tapié

of *Venezie*, which were displayed at Palazzo Grassi in Venice on the occasion of the exhibition *Arte e contemplazione* and, subsequently, on 21 November, in his first solo show in New York at Martha Jackson Gallery;⁵ the encounter, thanks to Charles Damiano — manager of Pirelli House in London and, like Fontana, Argentinian — with the owners of the new McRoberts & Tunnard Gallery, who introduced him to the London market;⁶ the two exhibitions opening at the same time in Paris, on 9 November, *Concetti spaziali de Fontana: peintures 1949-1961* at Galerie Rive Droite, and *Concetti spaziali de Fontana : sculptures “nature” 1959-1961* at Galerie Iris Clert; lastly his departure for New York on 18 November with Gribaudo and the photographer Francesco Aschieri for the exhibition at Martha Jackson and the presentation of the English edition of his monograph. Shortly before his arrival, Fontana wrote to Lisa Ponti, the daughter of architect and designer Gio Ponti, that he was “roaming freely in the world”.⁷

Tapié, accompanied by Jean Larcade, owner of Galerie Rive Droite, met Fontana for the first time in his studio on 21 February 1955. He had heard about him from Carlo Cardazzo, who founded Galleria del Cavallino in Venice and then Galleria del Naviglio in Milan, and saw his works at the Venice Biennale, first in 1952 and then in 1954, when he mentioned him in an article in *Cimaise*.⁸

Through Tapié’s diary we can follow his movements accurately: eight months later they went together to the foundry where the artist made his bronzes (20 October: 4 pm foundry with Fontana... 6 pm Les Dana at Fontana’s) and they also met the following day (21 October: 2 pm for lunch, 6 pm in his gallery).⁹ The relationship was consolidated with the critic’s many visits to Turin, strategically placed between Switzerland, Milan and Paris, which allowed him to present Art Informel and his theories on a transnational stage. In October 1956, Fontana was invited to participate in the group show *Structures en devenir* with Carla Accardi, Giuseppe Capogrossi, Horia Damian, Colette Enard, Claire Falkenstein, Gerdur Helgadóttir, Georges Mathieu, Jaroslav Serpan and Mark Tobey, staged in the “ultra-modern” Galerie Stadler,¹⁰ where Tapié collaborated as an artistic advisor.¹¹ The invitation included a statement by Fontana in Italian, a sort of impromptu summary of the concepts of the Manifesto tecnico dello Spatialisimo: “I am not interested in making pictures or sculptures. What interests me is the quest for a new dimension, the quest for a medium: time – space – light.” On 17 March 1959, just a month after he exhibited his “slashes” in Milan, at Galleria del Naviglio,¹² Fontana had another show at Galerie Stadler (together with the South African artist Christo Coetzee) with a catalogue essay by Tapié. His works were displayed in two rooms: “Two rooms for Fontana, one for Coetzee, and separate catalogues.”¹³

The silver dust-jacket of *Devenir de Fontana* represents two Spatial Concepts that reproduce a slash and an array of real holes: this is a path that

is reasserted at the beginning and end of the book with two photographs by Giancolombo symbolizing the artist’s gestures when he was working, from the holes to the slashes. This was followed by an essay by Tapié written in August 1961, during his inter-continental journey from “Turin to Tokyo”,¹⁴ while the most substantial part is the section devoted to documentation, with black and white photographs of the works in chronological order — only the date is given at the top, with some variations with regard to those usually accepted — without any captions, but with more works from certain years.

There is only one photograph per page, with juxtapositions that still cause surprise. Halfway through the book, the sequence is interrupted by Michel Fougères’s poem, “Fontana: un coup de foudre prophétique” (Fontana: a prophetic thunderbolt), previously published in the second issue of 1961 of the magazine *Lettre Ouverte*. In his poetic imagery, the canvas, prophetically “wounded” by Fontana, no longer has anything to do with painting: the gesture of slashing the canvas paves the way to the astral space of the Milky Way: Michel Fougères was the pseudonym of Michel Camus, chosen by Tapié because he was close to the “transdisciplinary spirit” that combined artistic experimentation, logic, cybernetics and mathematics, as is demonstrated by his interest in the theories of the mathematician Maurice Fréchet. Starting with *Esthétique en devenir* (1956), in his writings there were frequent references — sometimes rapid, often obscure — to scholars such as Georg Cantor, Werner Heisenberg and Stephane Lupasco, quoted in *Devenir*, for the “particularly suitable terms used of the logic of contradiction”.

The book’s construction, as may be deduced from the interweaving correspondence and spoken testimonies, may be limited to the encounter in Turin between Gribaudo and Fontana, who supervised the printing process and “organized the translations” of Tapié’s text — it was also published in English and French — and corrected a number of errors, which he described as “technical adjustments”: “He says that in 1949 I exhibited a totally black painting at Cardazzo’s gallery, but in that year I made the Spatial Environment, totally dark and black with black Wood’s lamps, which I believe was both theoretically and spatially more important.”¹⁵ Gribaudo described how Fontana followed *Devenir*’s progress with enthusiasm: “He came to the Fratelli Pozzo printing works and spent hours poring over the plates ... he spent months supervising the work on his monograph. *Devenir*, in other words, came into being slowly but surely, with words, projects and hard work. Both elegant and generous, he was a remarkable man.”¹⁶ On various occasions Fontana tried to speed up its publication: “At this point I’m resigned, and I expect the book to be published in 2000; we’ll launch it on Venus’s bottom — the only thing that really counts is that it turns out well. That’s what really counts!!!!”¹⁷

It was Fontana’s task to look for and supply the photographs of his works from start to finish.

He wrote to Gribaudo: “Here is my selection! I can come later for the final version and to insert the dates.”¹⁸ The order of the photographs, which does not reflect Tapié’s text, follows the evolution and variations of the series of Fontana’s images linked to the Spatial Concepts: there are, for example, the spatial ceilings from that of the ninth Triennale of 1951, featured in a photograph mounted by Giancolombo, to those of the cinema in the Padiglione Breda by Baldessari at the 31st Fiera di Milano of 1953 and for the Italia ’61 exhibition in Turin; also the two enigmatic ink drawings that accompanied *Spatial Environment with Black Light* of 1949 at Galleria del Naviglio.

Fontana asked for images from his friends, collectors and gallerists: for example, from Iris Clert, the *Ritratto oro e nero* (*Portrait in Gold and Black*), the first of four dedicated to her;¹⁹ the painting “rosso con le pietre” (red with stones) from his friend Mario Bardini;²⁰ and some pictures from Charles Damiano’s collection, such as *La Cotta, I tagli celesti* (*The Crush, the Sky-Blue Slashes*) or the “battered tin, rusty, troublesome and in disgrace, forget the potato, it will be too late”²¹

The publication’s innovation and refinement extended to its graphic design. The plates, around a hundred and seventy, are printed using the flat rotogravure process, some are pink-toned — for example, the *Spatial Concept. The Bread* (1950) and *Natures* (1959) — the gold tones are on special metallic paper and a number of reproductions are glued to the pages: two of these have real slashes in order to faithfully reproduce an *attesa* (waiting).

In retrospect, an interview given by Gribaudo adds some details that permit us to reconstruct the genesis of the book, which has come to be surrounded by an aura of legend:

I asked Tapié for a copy of the text; it was a rather enigmatic piece of writing, like those in fashion in that period. Tapié was a prophet of Art Informel. Fontana was able to arouse the enthusiasm of everybody: something of a boaster, he talked about the spatial concepts in a rather bizarre manner. However, he helped me in preparing the book and, as a result, I often went to see him in Milan. His philosophy was simple — Fontana was no theoretician — it was based on the *Manifesto Blanco*, written in Argentina. Fontana was a simple person and found Michel Tapié to be an interpreter of his work who captivated him. Tapié was a hidden persuader, a fascinating Nietzschean figure, a dandy who went round Turin wearing a monocle (in Turin only Lucio Ardeni wore a monocle); he had an aquiline face that reminded me of our architect [Carlo] Molino; his style was aristocratic.²²

Tapié’s “enigmatic” text celebrated Fontana as “one of the most audacious pioneers” and “one of the most revolutionary leaders of present-day art”. The text deals concisely with his career from his abstract beginning to his first Spatialist Manifesto and the Spatial Environment at the Galleria del Naviglio in 1949, until the more recent outcome of the quest for the “beauty of the substance of

painting”, which never failed to fascinate him. As he wrote:

The beauty of the substance of painting perhaps gives the work a more definitive and absolute quality; its contents gain profundity, in mysterious ambiguity, in exalted spatial metaphysics and the use of gold and silver in the sector of sculptural materials aroused Fontana’s euphoric humourism to the level of the Hautes Fêtes.

Regarding the first post-war works, after having evoked “Nietzschean spells”, the critic refers to “essential gestures”, asserting that from then on Fontana became Fontana or, rather, Fontana in continuous evolution: “Voyons donc maintenant Fontana devenu Fontana, plutôt Fontana en incessant devenir” (Thus we see Fontana becoming Fontana, or rather Fontana in unceasing evolution). In the expression “devenir”, also used in the book’s title, one senses the memory of the idea, of vital importance in Surrealist poetics, of nature ceaselessly changing, which evolves in a continuous metamorphosis. Fontana’s art evolves: in other words, it develops according to its own inner logic, but, at the same time contains the concept of evolution, of metamorphosis as a sort of basso continuo. Fontana is at the centre “of a multiple verification” that Tapié tackles in “a geography of slashes and holes designed for ‘another’ dimension”.²³

The text repeats a number of concepts already included in the 1958 article published in the issue of *Notizie* featuring the 24th Venice Biennale,²⁴ where a room was devoted to Fontana, constituting what was effectively his first retrospective. For Tapié, Fontana was “one of the most outstanding artists in this biennale ... a pioneer” exploring “other” space with new means, introducing the question of communication on a plane parallel with that of the cybernetic languages. The critic stressed that the “the hole” (in French, *point vide*, emphasising the notion of emptiness), represented “the most subversive notion of “other’ space”. This was a *vide spatial* (spatial hole) that is also to be found in the short essay published on the invitation to the Galerie Stadler exhibition in 1959, where Tapié interpreted the slash from a point of view that was still abstract, with the use of symbols linked to the void, in an existential sense.

The series of photographs, which are independent of the text, range from the more recent spatial achievements of the 1950s up to 1961, tracing the problem of the form — as in the room at the Venice Biennale of 1954, and even more so that of 1958, and in the retrospective at Galleria dell’Attico in Rome in Rome, curated by the critic Enrico Crispolti in October 1959 — back to the abstract art of the 1930s, with the precise aim of “linking its final attainments to the atmosphere of rigorous experimentation existing in the early

period of abstract art”.²⁵ Starting from the first graphic-sculptural experiments, the graffitied tablets of 1931, some abstract drawings and the abstract sculptures displayed at Galleria del Milione, we arrive, with a leap forward that ignores the figurative works of the 1930s, at the *Silla barocca* “made in Altamira, a very important work for me”;²⁶ displayed at the Salón Nacional de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires in 1946, the *Manifiesto Blanco* of the same year, transcribed and reproduced from the original, and the *Spatial Sculpture* and *Spatial Concept. Atomic Man*, both dating from 1947.

In a letter to Gribaudo, dated 14 October 1961, Fontana recounts that he dreamt “that you and two nymphets distributed my book at my exhibition in Paris — what a beautiful dream!”²⁷ In fact, the book was presented a couple of weeks later at the Martha Jackson Gallery and, when he returned from New York, Fontana decided to stop off in Paris in order to celebrate his most recent successes, organizing a legendary dinner at the La Coupole restaurant, at which Yves Klein was also present: “Il avait en outre une préférence pour les huîtres de La Coupole. Cet homme si généreux, dès qu’il avait touché un ‘mijon’ invitait tous les jeunes peintres à déguster des huîtres en sa compagnie” (He had a preference for La Coupole’s oysters. As soon as he was handed a “mijon, this very generous man would invite all the young painters to eat oysters with him).²⁸

A year later, in the magazine *Vanità*, the journalist and writer Grazia Livi reasserted Fontana’s fame in France, stressing that the favourable opinions now largely outweighed the adverse, changing the itineraries of many critics and journalists now arriving in Milan:

Today Lucio Fontana’s slashes are in great demand on the world market; the collectors who mocked the first cut canvases now compete for them offering a million and half [lire] for each one; critics boasting a high and snobbish level of culture, like the famous Tapié, go to Paris to admire Fontana’s liberating gestures at close quarters: the correspondents of *Oeil* and *Connaissance des Arts* knock on the door of Palazzo Cicogna.²⁹

Notes

- ↑ This is what Luca Massimo Barbero had to say: “Fontana participated regularly and was sometimes the centre of the debate concerning ‘space and material’ in Tapié’s exhibitions and publications ... a protagonist by choice of Art Informel, or Art Autre, but certainly not an adherent.” See *Scandalo a Torino. Lucio Fontana: una cronaca 1959-1969*, in *Torino sperimentale 1959–1969. Una storia della cronaca. Il sistema delle arti come avanguardia*, ed. L. M. Barbero, pp. 18–72 (exh. cat. Turin: Allemandi, 2010). For Tapié, see for example, *Tapié: Un art autre, Torino, Parigi, New York, Osaka* (Moncalieri: Edizioni

d’arte Fratelli Pozzo, 1997); *Un art autre e altri scritti di estetica: 1946-1969 /di Michel Tapié de Celeyran*, ed. Mirella Bandini (Segrate: Nike, 2000); Ada Minola, “Michel Tapié a Torino”, in *Figure dell’arte. Artisti a Torino dagli anni ’50*, eds Andrea Balzola, Riccardo Cavallo, Ettore Ghinassi and Pino Mantovani (Pescara: Edizione Alberti, 1991).

- ↑ Flavio Fergonzi, “Definire un artista: Fontana prima dei tagli”, in *Brera mai vista. Due quadri di Lucio Fontana: Concetti spaziali. Forme, 1957*, eds Flavio Fergonzi and Giorgio Zanchetti, pp. 9–13 (exh. cat. Milan: Electa, 2005).
- ↑ The International Center of Aesthetic Research (ICAR) opened on 3 March 1960; this was “Tapié’s new objective utopia, founded in collaboration with Luigi Moretti, Ada Minola and Franco Assetto.
- ↑ Letter from Lucio Fontana to Domenico Canonica, Albissola Mare, Archivio Gribaudo, Turin. The letter is not dated, but, on the back of the sheet, the date “4 August 1961” is stamped, referring to the cheque for “a million [lire]” sent by Fontana: “Of the sum of two million, please find enclosed a cheque for one million; I will cover the balance with my works.” The letter is reproduced, partially transcribed, but without these figures, in Stefano Cecchetto, *Ezio Gribaudo e Lucio Fontana. Cronaca di un viaggio americano* (Milan: Skira, 2012), pp. 27–28.
- ↑ For a detailed account, see Luca Massimo Barbero, “Lucio Fontana: Venice/New York”, in *Lucio Fontana: Venezia/New York* (New York: The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2006).
- ↑ 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* (Milan: Scalpendi, 2017), pp. 13–25.
- ↑ Undated letter from Lucio Fontana to Lisa Licitra Ponti, Archivio Domus, Milan.
- ↑ Michel Tapié, “La biennale de Venise”, *Cimaise. Revue de l’art actuel* (September–October 1954).
- ↑ The diary is held by the Archives Michel Tapié in the Bibliothèque Kandinsky at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris. For a precise analysis of Tapié, see the detailed book Juliette Evezard, *“Un Art Autre.” Le rêve de Michel Tapié* (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2003). For the relationship between Tapié and Fontana, see J. Galimberti, “Michel Tapié e Lucio Fontana. Parigi e il rischio dell’informale”, in *Lucio Fontana e l’artventure parigina*, eds Silvia Bignami and Jacopo Galimberti, pp. 76–93 (Milan: Scalpendi, 2014).
- ↑ Iris Clert, *Iris-Time : L’Artventure* (Paris: Éditions Denoël, 2003), p. 127.
- ↑ *Structures en devenir*, Galerie Stadler, Paris, 16 October–15 November 1956.
- ↑ *Fontana*, Galleria del Naviglio, Milan, 10–23 February 1959.
- ↑ Letter from Carlo Cardazzo to Michel Tapié, Milan, 12 February 1959, Archives Stadler, Paris. See Silvia Bignami, “Le plus parisien des artistes italiens”, in *Lucio Fontana e l’artventure parigina*, pp. 10–37. For the reception of the exhibition, see Galimberti’s essay on Lucio Fontana’s reception in France in this catalogue, p. XXX.
- ↑ The Archivio Gribaudo holds the typescript with corrections in ink on headed notepaper from the Nikkusts Hotel in Tokyo.
- ↑ See a letter from Fontana to Ezio Gribaudo, Milan 16 October 1961, in Cecchetto, *Ezio Gribaudo e Lucio Fontana*, p. 17.
- ↑ Giorgina Bertolino, Francesca Pola, “Intervista a Ezio Gribaudo”, in Barbero, ed., *Torino sperimentale*, p. 83.
- ↑ See a letter from Fontana to Gribaudo, Milan, 16 October 1961 in Cecchetto, *Ezio Gribaudo e Lucio Fontana*.
- ↑ Undated page held by the Archivio Gribaudo in Turin. I would like to thank Paola Gribaudo and Lilou Vidal for their invaluable help.
- ↑ See a letter from Fontana to Iris Clert, 7 March 1961, in *Lucio Fontana e l’artventure parigina*, pp. 58–59.
- ↑ See a letter from Fontana to Mario Bardini, Milan, 7 March 1961, in *Lucio Fontana. Lettere 1919-1968*, ed. Paolo Campiglio (Milan: Skira, 1999), p. 131.
- ↑ The correspondence with Charles Damiano is published in Giancarlo Gagiotti, *La visione verticale. Carlo Damiano fotografo astratto* (Perugia: Morlacchi editore, 2019).
- ↑ “Intervista a Ezio Gribaudo”, 22 April 2006, Milan, by Paolo

Campiglio, subsequently published in Cecchetto, *Ezio Gribaudo e Lucio Fontana*.

- ↑ Cecchetto, *Ezio Gribaudo e Lucio Fontana*, p. 16
- ↑ Michel Tapié, “(Euvres vives de la Biennale de 1958”, *Notizie. Arti figurative* 2, no. 6 (July 1958): pp. 31–34.
- ↑ See Giorgio Zanchetti, ed., *Lucio Fontana. Concetto Spaziale 1957* (Milan: Skira, 2000), p. 15.
- ↑ Letter from Fontana to Pablo Edelstein, Milan, 10 October 1959, in *Lucio Fontana. Lettere 1919-1968*, p. 131
- ↑ Letter from Fontana to Ezio Gribaudo, Milan, 14 October 1961.
- ↑ See Clert, *Iris-Time: L’Artventure*, p. 254.

A New Concept of Environment Art Twenty Years of Ambienti spaziali and other Installations (1949–1968)

Giorgio Zanchetti

Lucio Fontana's "Spatial Environment with Black Light" (1949), at the Palazzo Grassi, Venice

The concept of the *ambiente* (environment) as an original and independent form of artistic expression – different from and unrelated to the volumes of sculpture and the spatiality of architecture – and as a summation of the drive to overcome the limits of materials and typologies of the traditional arts that inspired the avant-gardes of the twentieth century. It was, perhaps, the greatest achievement – anticipatory and, seen a posteriori, decisive – of all of Lucio Fontana’s work.¹

And as often happens in the most radical changes in thought and creative revolutions, it was a well-considered expressive solution, carefully planned in its construction and closely linked to earlier artistic tradition. The environment art that Fontana conceived and practised during the first half of the twentieth century is the aesthetic and conceptual turning-point that remains, seventy-five years later, the crucial interpretative key of that adventurous journey through and beyond the picture plane, as well as beyond the very distinction between painting and sculpture, that the artist embarked on in parallel with his “holes” and, ten years later, with “slashes”.² Underlying all these experiences – completely experimental, but, it should be noted, immediately taking concrete form in works that were totally self-sufficient and finished — was the will to replace the concept and practice of space inherited from the artistic tradition of modernism with a new possibility of visual and multisensorial perception that, as an alternative to the static, centralized and monocular vision of Renaissance perspective, did not propose

the adoption of a different system that was equally closed and dogmatic, but that, on the contrary, rejected every mechanical rule to transform and shift the very act of the spectator experiencing the surrounding space to an aesthetic plane.

The long gestation of Fontana’s environment art had already begun in the 1930s through experimentation with abstract polychrome sculpture that was sometimes two-dimensional,³ but also in certain major sculptural works in architectural settings:⁴ in particular, the last monumental work completed in Milan in 1939, before he set sail for Argentina at the beginning of 1940. This is the splendid ceiling with the *Voło di Vittorie* (*Flying Victories*) for the Shrine of Fascist Martyrs, designed by Marco Zanuso, Mario Tevarotto and Gianni Albricci. And, in parallel with a number of graphic compositions created while he was in Argentina, which can be considered the very first Spatialist experiments⁵ – it is possible to find the earliest sign, not yet mature or fully self-aware, of this environmental attitude in the commission combining both stage design and exhibition setting for the display of two windows for the Harrods store in Buenos Aires in the mid-1940s.⁶ The recollections of the Milan Triennale exhibitions and, perhaps also of Futurist stagecraft and interior design, seemed to have been revived thanks to the interlinking of theatrical and paratheatrical experiments, and also with exhibition design and, in a literal sense, installations devised by Surrealists artists in the second half of the 1930s and in early 1940s. It was the latter that seemed to directly influence Fontana’s investigation of abstraction and his rarefaction of the figure, as in the concept of the outlines of the bold gilded high-relief plaques thrust skywards, nearly weightless, at the top of the masts of the floating pavilion of the Compagnie di navigazione Italiana, designed by the architects of the BBPR group, with Paolo Zappa and the engineer Michele Russo, for the 1937 Paris Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne.⁷

In the first environment conceived and explicitly offered to the public as such, the so-called *Ambiente spaziale a luce nera* (*Spatial Environment with Black Light*) installed in the Galleria del Naviglio from 5 to 11 February 1949,⁸ Fontana’s project was presented as an already mature independent form of expression. The last vestige of sculptural form, a group of abstract amoeboid elements in papier-mâché painted in fluorescent colours, shone in the almost total darkness, reflecting the ultraviolet radiation emitted by a series of Wood’s lamps. As Fontana said years later, in a letter to the critic Enrico Crispolti, by implementing a sort of reversal of the traditional form of expression proceeding from the creator of the work to the public, it is the individual psychological dimension of the single spectator that becomes central and decisive in the new perceptual space, where every compositional structure, every construction is completely transformed into a subjectivity that is abstract or, to a certain extent, “informel”.⁹

From the outset, Fontana’s artistic tenets relating to his environments contained all the constituent elements that allowed him to evolve well beyond the milieu of Art Informel: his curiosity and experimentation regarding new technological developments, including neon lighting and television broadcasts, an emotional impetus and a neo-constructivist and, more generally, neo-avant-gardist proactivity, the existential adhesion to a renewed myth of progress, typical of the 1950s and 1960s, in the innumerable variations of the mass consumer society, of ideology or of the new frontier of the conquest of sidereal space. What in fact effectively distinguishes the practice of sculpture, also in its use as an ornament, especially in an architectural setting, from environment experimentations, is that, in the former, the means of expression is always the sculptural material – whether this be clay, plaster, stone, bronze or even a simple piece of wire – while, in the latter, the principal, or, at times, only medium, for creating the work is light, which allows us to perceive a space that would otherwise be indistinct. This is an evocative power to be found in Fontana’s work from the design of the Sala della Vittoria at the sixth Triennale of 1936. Created with Edoardo Persico, Giancarlo Palanti and Marcello Nizzoli, where the architectural space, which evokes in a spectacular manner the rhythm of a classical peristyle, and the sculptural representations of two horses and the Fascist *Vittoria* (*Victory*), appear to be dematerialized by the dazzling light projected into the space by “144 spotlights ... with an overall power of 14,000 watts”.¹⁰

It was not a coincidence that after the war, when invited by the architect and designer Luciano Baldessari to return to the spaces of the Muzio’s Palazzo dell’Arte, to design two ceilings for the ninth Triennale of 1951, Fontana resolved to free himself both from the traditional limits of architectural sculptural decoration and the dialectical comparison – apparently insoluble, but, for him, simply irrelevant – between figurative and abstract art, designing installations based on the sculptural possibilities of neon lights: *Soffitto a luce riflessa* (*Ceiling with Reflected Light*) and especially, *Luce spaziale* (*Spatial Light*), located above the grand staircase, with, as a background, a vast monochrome ceiling, painted an intense lapis lazuli blue.¹¹

In the many *Spatial Environments* Fontana designed, the majority of which were produced, in Italy and elsewhere, over the last twenty years of his career, the perceptual disorientation eliminated any possibility of creating a physically defined

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The 1967 installation of the Fontana Pavilion in Genoa, designed by Piero Manzoni and Gianemilio Piro.

work recognizable as such, varying between the contrasting limits of visual perception: the almost total darkness, the dazzling effect of the excessively strong light, and the dissolution of contrasts in brightly coloured monochromatic lights. In these suspended arabesque forms, sometimes made with sections of neon lights or else painted on shaped panels, alternated with rows of holes that allow the light to penetrate from the exterior, or dots applied to the dark walls using fluorescent paints, reflecting the ultraviolet light emitted by Wood's lamps, as was the case in the only original *Spatial Environmental* that has survived, the one installed on 3 October 1967 at the Galleria del Deposito in Genoa, now held by the Musée d'Art Contemporain de Lyon.^[2] The most outstanding of these works by Fontana was the immense ceiling decorated with green and blue neon lights made in 1961 for the *Fonti di energia* pavilion designed by the architects Gianemilio, Piero and Anna Montì for the Italia '61 exhibition in Turin.^[3]

As is clear from the tribute to the artist in the first exhibition devoted to the history of Environment Art, *Lo spazio dell'immagine*, held in Foligno in the summer of 1967,^[4] and the success – also at an international level – of the last two white environments exhibited as his personal room at the 33rd Venice Biennale in 1966 and at Documenta 4 in Kassel in 1968,^[5] in the second half of the 1960s, as he approached the end of his career and life, Fontana's role as an initiator was fnally recognized. This was thanks not only to Enrico Crispolti's invaluable studies, but also to the charisma exerted on a new generation of artists interested in his spatial works and installations, including Enrico Castellani, Piero Manzoni, Gruppo T, Dadamaino and Nanda Vigo, as well as Giulio Paolini and Luciano Fabro, who were capable of fully comprehending the metaphysical essence of his Environment Art and its remarkable capacity for projection into the future.^[6]

	
Notes	

- ↑ For Fontana's environments, see (at least): Luca Quattrocchi, "Gli 'ambienti spaziali' e i rapporti con l'architettura nel secondo dopoguerra", in *Lucio Fontana*, eds Enrico Crispolti and Rossella Siligato (exh. cat. Milan: Electa, 1998), pp. 162–173; Luciano Caramel, Anti Pansera and Giorgio Zanchetti, "La Triennale, la luce", in *Lucio Fontana*, ed. Enrico Crispolti (exh. cat. Milan: Charta, 1999), pp. 146–199; Germano Celant, *Lucio Fontana. Ambienti spaziali. Architecture, Art, Environments* (exh. cat. Milan: Skira, 2012); Paola Valenti, *Lucio Fontana in dialogo con lo spazio: opere ambientali e collaborazioni architettoniche, 1964-1968* (Genoa: De Ferrari, 2009), pp. 82–88, 143–148, 158–181; Marina Pugliese, Barbara Ferriani, Vicente Todolí, eds, *Lucio Fontana. Ambienti / Environments* (exh. cat. Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2018); Luca Massimo Barbero, *Lucio Fontana. Walking the space. Spatial Environments, 1948–1968* (exh.

cat. Zurich: Hauser & Wirth, 2021); Luca P. Nicoletti, *Ambiente*, B. Ferriani, *Ambiente. Materiali, Ambiente. Ricostruzione*, Orietta Lanzarini, *Ambiente spaziale* (Venice Biennale, 1966), Giovanni Rubino, *Ambiente spaziale* (Documenta, 1968), *Ambiente spaziale* (Stedelijk, 1967), *Ambiente spaziale. "Utopie"* (Triennale, Milan 1964), Marina Pugliese, *Ambiente spaziale* (Walker Art Center, 1966), *Ambiente spaziale a luce nera, Ambiente spaziale. Esaltazione di una forma* (Palazzo Grassi, Venice, 1960), in L. P. Nicoletti, ed., *Dizionario Lucio Fontana* (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2023), pp. 30–49; Choghakate Kazarian and Camille Lévêque-Claudet, eds, *Immersion. Les origines / The Origins: 1949–1969* (exh. cat. Paris: Hazan, 2023), pp. 68–73.

- ↑ Giorgio Zanchetti, "“Non vi sono ragioni di pittura e scultura... ‘ Estro, sperimentazioni e avventure di Lucio Fontana, 1957–1960”, in Giorgio Zanchetti, ed., *Lucio Fontana. Concetto spaziale, 1957* (exh. Cat. Milan: Museo della Permanente / Skira, 2000), pp. 5–29; republished in Antonello Negri, ed., *Esercizi di lettura* (Milan: Skira, 2002), pp. 180–205.
- ↑ See Silvia Bignami, "Arte estratta? Gli scheletri di Lucio Fontana", pp. 19–22, and Luciano Caramel, "L'astrazione irrituale di Fontana negli anni Trenta dell'astrattismo geometrico", 23–32, in *Intorno a Fontana*, proceedings of the study days at the Università degli studi and Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, March–May 2002, L'uomo nero. Materiali per una storia delle arti della modernità, year I, no. 1, June 2003.
- ↑ Particularly important for the first period of Fontana's work in collaboration with architects, is Paolo Campiglio, *Lucio Fontana. La scultura architettonica negli anni Trenta* (Nuoro: Ilisso, 1995).
- ↑ See Giorgio Zanchetti, 'Concetto spaziale', in *Dizionario Lucio Fontana*, pp. 161–164.
- ↑ For the new dating of the first of these windows to 1944, see Silvia Bignami, "Lucio Fontana. Profeta del arte espacial", in *Argentina. Quel che la notte racconta al giorno*, eds Andrés Duprat and Diego Sileo (exh. cat. Milan: PAC – Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea / Silvana Editoriale, Cinisello Balsamo, forthcoming), n. 13.
- ↑ See Campiglio, *Lucio Fontana. La scultura architettonica negli anni Trenta*, p. 94; Antonello Negri, Silvia Bignami, Paolo Rusconi and Giorgio Zanchetti, *Anni '30. Arti in Italia oltre il fascismo* (exh. cat. Florence: Giunti, 2012), p. 211; Davide Colombo, *Lucio Fontana e Leonardo da Vinci. Un confronto possibile* (Milan: Scalpendi, 2017), pp. 20–21.
- ↑ See Pugliese, Ferriani, Todolí, *Lucio Fontana. Ambienti / Environments*, entry I, pp. 164–166.
- ↑ See Giorgio Zanchetti, "Fontana e la luce. Una 'nuova evoluzione del mezzo per l'arte'", in *Centenario di Lucio Fontana*, ed. Enrico Crispolti (Milan: Charta, 1999), pp. 165–168; Fontana's letter to Crispolti dated 16 March 1961: *Lucio Fontana, Lettere 1919–1968*, ed. Paolo Campiglio (Milan: Skira, 1999), p. 167; Enrico Crispolti, "Dall'antologica all'Attico nel 1959 al Catalogo generale del 1974 e 1986", in *Intorno a Fontana*, p. 65, fig. 3.
- ↑ "VI Triennale. Concorso per il Salone d'Onore", *Casabella*, no. 98 (February 1936), p. 9.
- ↑ "Giotto blue" as Baldessarri himself called it; see Silvia Bignami and Giorgio Zanchetti, eds, "Universi paralleli. Yves Klein e Lucio Fontana", pp. 21–57, and Marina Pugliese, "Il cielo in una stanza. La Struttura al Neon di Fontana e Pigment bleu pur di Klein al Museo del Novecento" 136–143, in *Yves Klein Lucio Fontana. Milano Parigi, 1957-1962* (exh. cat. Milan: Electa, 2014); Pugliese, Ferriani and Todolí, *Lucio Fontana. Ambienti/ Environments*, entry II, pp. 167–169.
- ↑ Pugliese, Ferriani, Todolí, *Lucio Fontana. Ambienti/ Environments*, entry XIII, pp. 196–197.
- ↑ Ibid., entry IV, pp. 172–174.
- ↑ *Lo spazio dell'immagine* (exh. cat. Venice: Alferi Edizioni d'Arte, 1967); see also *Lo spazio dell'immagine e il suo tempo*, ed. Italo Tomassoni (exh. cat. Milan: Skira, 2009). More problematic, but nevertheless interesting from a historical perspective, was the critic Germano Celant's attempt to include Fontana's *Spatial Evironments* in the works exploring the notion of "environment" he selected for the exhibition *Ambiente/Arte (Environment/Art)* held in the central pavilion of Giardini del Castello during the 37th Venice Biennale; see Germano Celant, "Ambiente–Arte",

in *La Biennale di Venezia. 1976. Ambiente, partecipazione, strutture culturali. Catalogo generale*, vol. 1 (Venice: Edizioni La Biennale di Venezia – Alferi Edizioni d'Arte, 1976), pp. 187–200; *Ambiente/Arte. Dal Futurismo alla Body Art* (Venice: Edizioni La Biennale di Venezia – Alferi Edizioni d'Arte, 1977).

15. Pugliese, Ferriani, Todolí, *Lucio Fontana. Ambienti/ Environments*, entries VIII and XV, pp. 184–185 and 200–202.

16. Fabro, who referred to Fontana on various occasions in his work, had this to say in 2001: "I have always felt that Fontana, even when making a witty remark, always managed to maintain an extremely high standard. I remember, for example, that, at the opening of the exhibition of his 'Nature' (Natures), it was interesting to see how he treated the various interlocutors differently. Mine is, of course, the impression of a twenty-year old and, for example, I recall that he was much clearer regarding the gesture than was stated later. This is demonstrated by the coherent way in which he was able to date the various *Spatial Environments*, which, step by step, take the question much further than we have hitherto been aware." "A proposito degli ambienti di Lucio Fontana", in *Intorno a Fontana*, p. 32.

Picasso Is Picasso, but Fontana Had Already Begun

Luca Bochicchio

The 1967 installation of the Fontana Pavilion in Genoa, designed by Piero Manzoni and Gianemilio Piro.

“The thing that I want to insist upon is that Picasso’s gift is completely the gift of a painter and a draughtsman.”

Gertrude Stein¹

The 1967 installation of the Fontana Pavilion in Genoa, designed by Piero Manzoni and Gianemilio Piro.

“And what if he had only been a sculptor?”

Enrico Crispolti²

On 22 March 1947 Lucio Fontana boarded the ocean liner *SS Argentina* to return to Italy after seven years spent in Rosario de Santa Fé and Buenos Aires. Behind him was a career spanning thirty years, punctuated by major awards in Italy and France, as well as a series of first and successes on the official Argentine art circuit. Not without some understandable apprehension, at the age of forty-eight he was abandoning the comforts that his South American acclaim afforded him, in order to step back onto the European avant-garde stage. He disembarked in Genoa and, instead of going to Milan, near the area his father came from, he headed directly for Albisola, where, in the Giuseppe Mazzotti ceramics factory, his friend Tullio d’Albisola awaited him.³ Their intense, fruitful collaboration had begun in 1936 and produced a considerable quantity of sculptures in coloured ceramics.⁴

It was also in 1947 that Pablo Picasso moved to Vallauris, a traditional centre for the production of ceramics on the Côte d’Azur, in order to devote himself to decorating and, to a lesser extent, modelling, terracotta produced by the Madoura pottery workshop, which had been taken over in 1938 by Suzanne and George Ramié. Picasso met this ceramicist couple in 1946 and an excellent relationship was established between them, like many of the collaborations between artists and artisans typical of the modern and post-modern periods in the Mediterranean area.⁵ There are less than two hundred kilometres between Vallauris and Albisola, following the coastline. In 1947 Picasso was sixty-six years old — almost two decades older than Fontana — and had already been at the centre of the international art scene

for half a century and his influence on his contemporaries was not only still considerable, but was increasing with renewed energy, especially in Italy, strengthened by this country’s particular cultural and political climate.⁶ Here Picasso was a reference point, the object of secular devotion, a necessary symbol for at least two generations of anti-fascist artists who were seeking intellectual support and resources to reconstruct their figurative language, combining civil and political commitment.⁷

It would be interesting to examine the different approaches and the impact of two contrasting influences on contemporaries: that of Picasso, which has only been briefly outlined here, and that of Fontana, which, not only in the vibrant Milan of the post-war reconstruction, but also outside Italy, in particular in the Americas — in perhaps a more covert and considered way — developed, increasingly attracting the attention of the new generations of avant-garde artists in the 1950s and 1960s.

These two very distinct, albeit intersecting, influences on the artistic aspirations of their day — and also of the future — justify the interest of critics and art historians in comparisons between Fontana and Picasso, which have discreetly and successively appeared in the last few years.⁸ The origin of all the reasons for the magnetic attraction between the two great artists may be found within the perimeter outlined here: in the critical years after 1947, in a limited geographical area between Vallauris, Albisola, Milan and Paris, both these artists put ceramics at the centre of their investigation of form.

In a period that was decisive for the reaffirmation and reconstruction of a transnational artistic identity, perhaps European, updated and competitive on an international level, Picasso received a lot of publicity for his isolation in the Mediterranean location of Vallauris,⁹ while, in Fontana’s case, attention was focused on work on continuous cycles in the kilns in Albisola — and, around him, there was a group of some of the most promising sculptors of the day, including Agenore Fabbri, Franco Garelli, Fausto Melotti, Giacomo Manzù, Marino Marini and Leoncillo Leonardi.

Hence a sort of intellectual confrontation was initiated, strongly inclined towards the Italian front and consequently the perception Fontana and his circle had of Picasso as a ceramist.¹⁰ As we shall see, it was not only ceramics that caused Fontana to raise doubts and express criticism of Picasso’s work and thought: the Argentine-Italian sculptor was cut to the quick when, a few years later, he learnt from the Italian press that the Spanish artist was acknowledged for achievements in the area of Spatialism.

Returning to late 1947, we can see, in the cultural orbit of Albisola, the increased tension resulting from the competition with Picasso. The cause may be found in the media build-up regarding his activity as a ceramicist and the geographic and cultural proximity of Vallauris.

Initially the controversy had only a marginal impact on Fontana, who appeared to be a reader and commentator on an equal footing with all the others, as is shown by a number of brief references made in his private correspondence with Tullio Albisola.¹¹ Soon, however, it was Fontana who became the main protagonist of a bitter controversy with Picasso (mostly indirect) that was destined to be settled many years later, in line with the tendance for things to naturally reach a detente with the passage of time.

Everything seems to stem from the visit Tullio d’Albisola and Agenore Fabbri made to Picasso in his Vallauris studio in early December 1947. There are two versions of the reasons for the trip: according to the first, Tullio d’Albisola, having heard that Picasso was interested in the ceramics produced in Albisola, collected photographs of a certain number of works produced in his family firm, Giuseppe Mazzotti, and went to see the Spanish artist.¹² The second version adds an anecdote that has only been passed down orally: it seems that Tullio d’Albisola, after reading in the news about Picasso’s fresh venture into ceramics, told his friends: “It’s better that we show him what has already been made, otherwise one day people will say Albisola has copied Vallauris.”¹³ The fact that the competition between Albisola and Vallauris was an important theme for the Italian town is evident from a number of articles that appeared in the local press years after these first reports.¹⁴

Gio Ponti was about to give further media attention to Tullio d’Albisola’s visit to Picasso: he was about to publish an article in *Domus*, of which had just become editor, for the first issue of 1948. Titled “Picasso convertirà alla ceramica ma noi, dice Lucio Fontana, s’era già cominciato” (Picasso is switching to ceramics, but Lucio Fontana says we had already begun).¹⁵ Ponti reproduced Tullio d’Albisola’s detailed account of his visit and included a series of pictures of works by Italian sculptor-ceramicists close to him. Lucio Fontana referred to this when he wrote to Tullio d’Albisola:

Your visit to Picasso had repercussions in Milan and I’m sorry I wasn’t there: I explained why to Fabbri ... Ponti asked me to take a number of photographs, to be published in *Domus*, he said, of Picasso, Fabbri, Leoncillo, Melotti, Marino, etc., etc. — in other words, artists who have devoted themselves to ceramics.¹⁶

As we shall see, the positions of the actors in this comedy are clearly defined. What interested Ponti was using the “Picasso case” in a positive manner in order to bolster his cultural battle in favour of ceramic as a noble material, a front on which he could deploy the leading names of Italian sculpture. Tullio d’Albisola supported Ponti’s position, although he tended to regard the case of Picasso’s relationship with Vallauris from a utilitarian point of view in order to confirm that Albisola

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