

Fontana's work-cum-manifesto Guernica, 1966, showing the artist's admiration for Picasso's work

was the centre of the renewal of artistic ceramics. Fontana, too, in his essays and letters revealed a genuine belief that ceramic was a sculptural material, revealing that he was a surprising ally of Tullio d’Albisola also in the international organizations (which he found irremediably boring), such as the International Academy of Ceramics;<sup>17</sup> he was, however, the only one who did not regard Picasso as an ally in this battle, but rather as a shrewd profiteer, while recognizing his talent and a capacity for productivity. In effect, unlike Ponti and Tullio d’Albisola, Fontana confronted Picasso on the specific terrain of artistic expression, and this was enough for him to start a discussion in order to lay claim to his superiority as a ceramicist and Spatialist sculptor over his rival.

On 4 January 1948, after having finally launched, with a certain degree of difficulty, the Spatialist movement and its first manifesto, Fontana expressed his first opinion regarding Picasso, describing him as a *piattaio* (plate-maker) and downplaying his genius and influence in comparison to Umberto Boccioni. We must remember that this is private opinion, expressed in the discretion of a personal letter:

I am increasingly convinced of Boccioni’s genius as the ultimate precursor of modern Spatialist art, more so than the *piattaio* Picasso! Boccioni! Dear Tullio, wake up! You have a collection of ceramic works and writings that is too precious for you not to be the leading figure in the Spatialist movement; leave Picasso to lick pussy and let’s think about Boccioni.<sup>18</sup>

This metaphor is strong, but effective: for Fontana, Picasso just painted plates, without influencing contemporary art, as Boccioni did and as, implicitly, his successor Fontana was doing with Spatialism.

After a room was devoted to Picasso at the 24th Venice Biennale in 1948, in February 1949, Galleria del Milione in Milan presented a solo exhibition of his work. This encroachment on Fontana’s territory — the Milione had played an important role in his artistic career — was worsened by the Italian journalists who acclaimed the “Spatialist” features of Picasso’s works. Fontana’s reaction is to be found in a letter to a younger friend and student, the Argentine Pablo Edelstein:

The critics make great use of the word “Spatialist” and, referring to an exhibition here in Milan, speak about bright, spatial painting; however, the Spatialists have surpassed him, we contribute to the evolution of the material and Picasso has become the last copycat Romantic painter and the most sought-after ceramist of the day: the sad thing is that the whole world shouts “Heil Picasso”, but until when? What has Picasso created in the way of ceramics? Copy, copy and mimic all American art.<sup>19</sup>

Again, on 6 September 1949, at the end of another summer of intense work in the kilns in Albisola,

Fontana wrote to Edelstein: “This winter I’ll have another exhibition of ceramics, and, as a response to Picasso, I’ll use precious and well-finished materials.”<sup>20</sup> Fontana was referring to the enamel, lustre and reflected colours that the Giuseppe Mazzotti ceramics factory excelled at and of which he had been an excellent and unconventional exponent since he first stated to frequent it in 1936.<sup>21</sup> Fontana compared these “special effects” — as described by Tullio d’Albisola—with the relatively simple engobe and majolica decoration used by Picasso in the Madoura workshop.

Finally, around 10 July 1950, Fontana had an opportunity to go to Villauris with Tullio d’Albisola, Agenore Fabbri and Franco Garelli in order to meet Picasso and, above all, see his ceramics at close quarters. An anecdote, recounted by Fontana in an interview many years later, may be linked to this visit and, if it is to be believed, is certainly enlightening:

Picasso was taking some pots he had made and decorated out of the kiln. Then someone working behind me commented. “Picasso is a genius, what form, what beauty!” So in Spanish, in a loud voice so that Picasso could hear, I replied: “They’re splendid, they’re ‘Picasso’ all right, but they’re not creative works because he has just painted some pots.” And so Picasso turned round and said: “You’re right, Fontana. I wasn’t worried about inventing forms because the person who did this” — and, as he said this, he picked up a magnificent authentic Greek vase— “had already reached the highest level of beauty and perfection. That’s why I paint pots and make plates by hand and paint them.”<sup>22</sup>

In the wake of the inquiry that started with the 1948 *Domus* article, in 1950 Ponti attempted to realize his plan to display Picasso’s ceramics together with those of contemporary Italian artists. For the 1950 Venice Biennale, of which he was special commissioner, he envisaged a large exhibition of Italian ceramics, centring on a show of Picasso’s terracottas, which had not been seen in Italy previously. These would be the focal point of gigantic pieces by Fontana and [Tommaso] Cascella (they’re very impressive and I published them in *Domus*) and large, refined pieces by Leoncillo [Leonardi], and special pieces by [Luigi] Brogгинi, [Giuseppe] Santomaso, [Aligi] Sassu, [Agenore] Fabbri, [Pietro] Melandri and [Guido] Gambone ... . With this group of works in a large room, we would have also shown that certain of our artists are not afraid of Picasso, that Lucio Fontana began first and that ceramics isn’t an applied art, but a combined expression of painting and sculpture that must be accepted in the space of pure arts.<sup>23</sup>

Ponti’s intelligent proposal was rejected, and it was the Venetian gallery owner Carlo Cardazzo whowas able to stage the first show of Picasso’s ceramics in Italy, in September 1951, taking advantage of the programme of exhibitions that he organized in the Ala Napoleonica of the Museo Correr in Venice in alternate years to the Biennale. This show then travelled to Galleria del Naviglio

in Milan (22 December 1951–4 January 1952), rather than at the Galleria del Milione, with which Fontana continued to have close links.<sup>24</sup> By a twist of fate — although this was, in a way, predictable — Cardazzo asked his friend Fontana to write the catalogue essay: who in Italy could endorse Picasso’s first show devoted to ceramics better than him? On a number of occasions, it has been written that, with this essay, Fontana started his personal rehabilitation of his Spanish colleague. This is true, at least in part. Already, in a letter to Edelstein dated 26 July 1950, Fontana admitted that being able to spend more than three hours with Picasso in Vallauris was a stroke of luck.<sup>25</sup> However, the exhibition text for Galleria del Naviglio was, all things considered, lukewarm yet artful. Intentionally rhetorical, the opening words may appear to be misleading: “It is with great pleasure that I recall my visit to Pablo Picasso.”<sup>26</sup> In actual fact, Fontana did not ever really discuss the merits of the work of his older and more famous Spanish colleague, mainly dealing with related questions, for example of method, useful, above all, for the elaboration of his own thoughts on the art of ceramics. Indeed, as has already been pointed out,<sup>27</sup> Fontana was using Picasso to talk about himself in a sort of psychological transference. In particular, it seems that he found in the artist authoritative confirmation of the value of intense, prolific and continuous research into the use of materials. A glimmer of awareness — which certainly contributed to reducing the bitterness he had felt until then for Picasso — is to be found in the already mentioned July 1950 letter to Edelstein:

[Picasso] has shown me his entire production of sculptures, paintings and ceramics. Say what you will about this great artist, but that the quantity of his artistic output is admirable — hundreds of works — and you will understand that that it is only like this that one manages to complete a work of art.<sup>28</sup>

Having put the encounter with Picasso and his exhibition at the Galleria del Naviglio behind him, in a 1952 essay focusing on Spatialism, whose title in English translated as “Why I am Spatial”<sup>29</sup> Fontana returned to questions linked to the Spatialist definitions that the cultural press attributed to the works of Picasso and Jean Cocteau. Gjon Mili’s photographs Picasso’s light drawings were still fresh in his memory. These photos, taken in his Villauris studio in 1949, were published in *Life* (30 January 1950) and, subsequently, reproduced together with a number of Spatialist statements by Cocteau in *Tempo* (no. 13, 1–8 April, 1950), a magazine that Fontana was familiar with.<sup>30</sup> Thus, in the essay “Perché sono spaziale”, Fontana claimed authorship of the previous manifestos and responsibility for Spatialism, pointing out that the Italian Spatialist group had existed for many years, in contrast with the journalistic simplifications favouring the statements and Spatialist ambitions of the very famous Picasso and Cocteau.<sup>31</sup>

The proof that the catalogue essay for Galleria del Naviglio had not resolved his personalconflict with Picasso is to be found in two further letters

to Tullio d’Albisola, dating from 1953 and 1955. In the first, Fontana, refers to Chagall and Picasso, describing them as “two sycophantic bourgeois painters, with respect to their talent, the Camorra and the international cabal”<sup>,32</sup> while in the second he tells his friend: “There is no hope for contemporary visual arts! Let the last dromedaries — Picasso, Léger, the immortal Cocteau, etc., etc., organize the ultimate brawls, the hole = Einstein = Boccioni = genius.”<sup>33</sup>

It was only ten years later, in 1966, that Fontana was finally able to express his great esteem for Picasso, without any demands or recriminations. The reason is probably to be found in history, in personal maturation, and in the recognition he had received for his highly experimental artistic research. Fontana was then sixty-seven years old, a respectable age that, at the time, was certainly considered to be well into a person’s mature years. On 20 January 1960, in a letter to the Belgian artist Jef Verheyen, Fontana paradoxically defended Picasso from the criticism of his younger friend: “Picasso is a great artist; he, too, has changed many things.”<sup>34</sup>

It was, however, in an interview with the art historian Luigi Grassi in 1968 that Fontana, explained and set the record straight regarding his opinion of Picasso. It was now eighteen years since their meeting in the summer of 1950 in Vallauris. Asked about his relationship with the Spanish artist, Fontana replied:

Picasso is Picasso. A great master. I have been in touch with him in his role as a ceramicist. He was very kind to me when I visited him. He allowed me to stay for hours and made ceramics with me and others. We never had disagreements. ... Picasso is familiar with my concept of art, and also with my pictures with slashes, because one day he sent me a book of his as a present ... and he dedicated it to me with three slashes dawn in pencil ... “To Lucio Fontana” and his signature. I consider Picasso to be the most outstanding figure in contemporary art. We cannot forget his contribution to Cubism with the disintegration of the body. Wasn’t he, perhaps, responsible for the disintegration of the atom? By breaking up the human form, he preceded by twenty or thirty years what was to become a major achievement of science.<sup>35</sup>

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<b><span>Notes</span></b>	
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- ↑ *Gertrude Stein on Picasso* (New York: Liveright, 1970), p. 11.
- ↑ Quoted in, *Lucio Fontana: Sculpture* (New York: Hauser & Wirth, 2022).
- ↑ Tullio d’Albisola, nom de plume of Spartaco Mazzotti, known as Tullio (Albissola Marina, 1899–1971), was an important Italian poet, sculptor, painter, ceramist and ceramologist, a leading exponent of the Futurist movement and active in the family firm, known as Giuseppe Mazzotti, founded in Albissola Marina in 1903. For a historical overview of his life, see Luca Bochicchio, “Tullio d’Albisola between Futurism and Fascism”, *International Yearbook of Futurism Studies*, ed. Günter Berghaus, pp. 149–171 (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2020); Enrico Crispolti, *La ceramica futurista da Balla a Tullio d’Albisola* (Florence: Centro Di, Florence, 1982).

- ↑ From the moment he arrived Italy, Fontana was to dedicate the entirety of 1947 to catching up on lost time, in Albisola for the production of vigorously modelled terracottas, decorated with iridescent glazes and enamels, and in Milan defining the theoretical-experimental programme of the Spatialist movement, allowing it to be launched at the end of that same year.
- ↑ In addition to the previously mentioned relationship between Fontana and Giuseppe Mazzotti, other examples include Joan Miró and Josep Llorens i Artigas, Asger Jorn and the Ceramiche San Giorgio, and, more recently, Luigi Ontani, Mimmo Paladino and Enzo Cucchi with the Bottega Gatti in Faenza.
- ↑ For the artistic context in Italy in the period immediately after the Second World War, see Adachiara Zevi, *Peripezie del dopoguerra nell’arte italiana* (Turin: Einaudi, 2005); Luciano Caramel, ed., *Arte in Italia (1945-1960)* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2013).
- ↑ Picasso’s work-cum-manifesto *Guernica* – exhibited in Milan in 1953 as the result of the strong impression the photographs of the burnt and bombed Sala degli Cariatidi in the Palazzo Reale made on the artist – was even used by the young artists of the Fronte Nuovo delle Arti as their programmatic title for the manifesto of New Realism: “Oltre Guernica” (Beyond Guernica).
- ↑ A preliminary survey of the relationship between Fontana and Picasso is contained in Paolo Campiglio’s introduction to the book *Lucio Fontana, Lettere 1919–1968*, ed. Paolo Campiglio (Milan: Skira, 1999), pp. 28–29. A description of the encounter between Picasso and the Italian ceramic artists in the post-war period is contained in the section on Picasso and artistic ceramics in 1950s Italy, in Francesca Pola’s essay, “Una stagione internazionale: Carlo Cardazzo e Albisola”, in the exhibition catalogue *Carlo Cardazzo. Una nuova visione dell’arte*, ed. Luca Massimo Barbero (exh. cat. Milan: Electa, 2008), pp. 339–349. The essay by Valérie Da Costa, “Picasso dans l’atelier du feu”, in the exhibition catalogue *Artifères Instables. Histoires des céramiques*, ed. Cristiano Raimondi (Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2020), pp. 259–269, is more detailed. Then there is Duccio Nobili’s entry “Picasso” in *Dizionario Lucio Fontana*, ed. Luca Pietro Nicoletti (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2023), pp. 417–418. Lastly, some aspects of Fontana’s encounter with Picasso in 1950 are mentioned in Lucio Fontana, *Lettere a Tullio d’Albisola*, ed. Luca Bochicchio (Milan: Abscondita, 2023), pp. 124–126. Long before these passages of historiographic literature, the architect Gio Ponti had initiated a critical interpretation of the comparison between Picasso and Fontana in his article “Picasso convertirà alla ceramica ma noi, dice Lucio Fontana, s’era già cominciato”, in *Domus* 226, no. 1 (1948): pp. 24–41.
- ↑ In 1948 Picasso even ignored the opening of the 24th Venice Biennale, the first to devote a room to him. Despite the confirmation announced by the various specialized Italian journals (such as *Emporium* and *Illustrazione italiana*), Picasso told the newspaper *La Stampa* that he did not have time to accept all the invitations to openings, as he had to concentrate on his work in the studio. The article, Antonio Aniante, “A colloquio con Picasso”, *La Stampa*, 6 July 1948, was kept in one of Tullio d’Albisola’s books in his personal archive. For an overview of Picasso’s exhibitions in Italy, see Elena Scquizzato’s master’s thesis, “Picasso e l’Italia. Un itinerario attraverso le mostre (1905-1970)”, Università Cà Foscari, Venice, 2014–2015.
- ↑ After all, this was the direction that the dispute took: from Fontana and Italy towards Picasso’s studio in Vallauris, and not the contrary, as far as we know today.
- ↑ In two letters to Tullio d’Albisola, the first dated 25 November 1947, the second 10 December of the same year, Fontana wrote: “Venturino mentioned a challenge to Picasso: I don’t think this is the case – he is far too intelligent”; “Your visit to Picasso had repercussions in Milan and I’m sorry I wasn’t there”. See Fontana, *Lettere a Tullio d’Albisola*, pp. 60–61.
- ↑ Mario Lepore, “La ceramica s’addice a Picasso”, *Corriere Lombardo – Quotidiano della Sera*, 31 December 1947–1 January 1948.
- ↑ The quotation is from Luciano and Margherita Gallo Pecca, *L’avventura artistica di Albisola (1920-1990)* (Savona: Editrice Liguria, 1993), p. 94.

- ↑ For example, this is what the art journalist Nalda Mura wrote in July 1955: “I read in a magazine that ‘Albisola is the Italian Vallauris’. However, in my opinion, the comparison is also valid from the opposite point of view... this is without wishing to detract from Picasso’s adoptive country or even adding to Fontana’s equally adoptive one and that of Sassu, Fabbri and a hundred others. “Lettera di N. Mura da Albisola”, *Liguria* 8, 22 (July 1955): p. 7. In 1956 an informal twinning of the towns resulted in an exchange of ceramic gifts between the two municipalities: Albisola gave a large vase decorated by Emanuele Luzzati, while Vallauris sent a small table with a top consisting of numerous tiles decorated with the names of the local ceramic factories, among which stood out four decorated and signed by Picasso, now owned by the municipality of Albissola Marina, MuDA -Museo Diffuso Albisola.
- ↑ Ponti, “Picasso convertirà alla ceramica ma noi, dice Lucio Fontana”.
- ↑ Letter from Lucio Fontana to Tullio d’Albisola, dated 10 December 1947, in Fontana, *Lettere a Tullio d’Albisola*, p. 61.
- ↑ At the beginning of 1954 Lucio Fontana became a member of the International Academy of Ceramics in Geneva. For the internal and political dynamics of this appointment, see Fontana, *Lettere a Tullio d’Albisola*; for the article Fontana published on the occasion of his appointment, see Da Costa, *Écrits de Lucio Fontana*, pp. 217–222.
- ↑ Letter from Lucio Fontana to Tullio d’Albisola, dated 4 January 1948, in Fontana, *Lettere a Tullio d’Albisola*, p. 63.
- ↑ Letter from Lucio Fontana to Pablo Edelstein, dated 12 March 1949, in Fontana, *Lettere 1919-1968*, p. 107.
- ↑ Letter from Lucio Fontana to Pablo Edelstein, dated 6 September 1949, in Fontana, *Lettere 1919-1968*, p. 114.
- ↑ For Lucio Fontana’s ceramic production, see, in particular, Luca Massimo Barbero, ed., *Lucio Fontana Catalogo ragionato delle sculture ceramiche*, 2 vols (Milan: Skira, 2023); Luca Bochicchio, “Lucio Fontana fra tecnica e media: dalla ceramica riflessata alla macchina da presa”, *Faenza. Bollettino Internazionale del MIC Faenza*, 2 (Florence: Polistampa, 2018), pp. 78–93; Paolo Campiglio; *Lucio Fontana. Torso italico* (Milan: Scalpedit Editore, 2014).
- ↑ Luigi Grassi, “L’ospite d’onore di Caffè Club. Lucio Fontana”, *Caffè Club* 5, no. 2, (January–February 1968): pp. 12–16. Grassi’s interview with Fontana is reproduced in full in Angela Sanna, ed., *Lucio Fontana, Manifesti, scritti, interviste* (Milan: Abscondita, 2015), pp. 133–34.
- ↑ Gio Ponti’s letter, addressed to Rodolfo Pallucchini and Giuseppe Dell’Oro (respectively general secretary and secretary of the Decorative Arts Section of the Venice Biennale), is held by the Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee (ASAC) in Venice (unit 12) and published by Pola, “Una stagione internazionale: Carlo Cardazzo e Albisola”, pp. 324–343.
- ↑ Galleria del Naviglio played an important role in disseminating Spatialist art and ideas.
- ↑ Letter from Lucio Fontana to Pablo Edelstein, dated 12 March 1949, in Fontana, *Lettere 1919-1968*, p. 109.
- ↑ The complete essay is quoted in Da Costa, *Écrits de Lucio Fontana*, p. 197. That the opening words follow a stock phrase in Fontana’s rhetoric is evident when comparing it with the beginning of the article quoted previously that Fontana wrote following his appointment to the Interational Ceramics Academy: “It is with great pleasure that I learn of my appointment.” See Da Costa, *Écrits de Lucio Fontana*, p. 217.
- ↑ Luca Pietro Nicoletti, “Picasso e la ceramica. Attraverso la mostra del MIC”, *Ceramica e Arte Decorative del 900* 6 (2020): pp. 133–135. The review refers to the exhibition *Picasso. La sfida della ceramica*, curated by Haro González and Harald Theil, with Claudia Casali at the Museo Internazionale della Ceramiche, Faenza, 1 November 2019–12 April 1920.

Lucio Fontana's 1968 work "The comet in our sky" is a variation on his 1965 work "The comet in our sky"

28. Letter from Lucio Fontana to Pablo Edelstein dated 12 March 1949, in Fontana, *Lettere 1919-1968*, p. 109.

29. See Da Costa, *Écrits de Lucio Fontana*, pp. 204–209.

30. For example, it was where Lucio Fontana published his article “La mia ceramica”, *Tempo* (21 September 1939).

31. Angela Sanna recalls the occasion when the editorial staff of *Tempo* apologized to Fontana by publishing a short correction titled “A Lucio la luce” (To Lucio the Light), because in the previous edition they had not mentioned the Spatialist manifestos and movement Fontana created in 1946–1947 in the article, “Scrivono con la luce” (They write with light), *Tempo* 13 (1–8 April 1950). See Sanna, *Lucio Fontana, Manifesti, scritti, interviste*, p. 51.

32. Letter from Lucio Fontana to Tullio d’Albisola, dated 12 May 1953, in Fontana, *Lettere a Tullio d’Albisola*, p. 71.

33. Letter from Lucio Fontana to Tullio d’Albisola, dated 13 May 1955, in Fontana, *Lettere a Tullio d’Albisola*, p. 75.

34. Letter from Lucio Fontana to Jef Verheyen, dated 20 January 1966, in Fontana, *Lettere 1919-1968*, p. 194.

35. Sanna, *Lucio Fontana, Manifesti, scritti, interviste*, pp. 133–134.

Lucio Fontana's 1968 work "The comet in our sky" is a variation on his 1965 work "The comet in our sky"

## Lucio Fontana: “The comet in our sky”<sup>1</sup>

### Valérie Da Costa

Lucio Fontana's 1968 work "The comet in our sky" is a variation on his 1965 work "The comet in our sky"

Lucio Fontana’s intense artistic activity has rather overshadowed the importance of his support for young artists and his commitment to building a collection.<sup>2</sup> In May 1957, having acquired his reputation as the father of spatialism, he showed a selection of works from the early days of his collection at Galleria Blu in Milan, in a joint exhibition with his friend Bruno Munari, an artist, designer and teacher who, like him, was a collector: *18 opere della collezione privata di Lucio Fontana e Bruno Munari*. From Fontana’s collection were works by spatialist, nuclearist and abstract artists: Enrico Baj, Alberto Burri, Aldo Bergolli, Claude Bellegarde, Franco Bemporad, Alexander Calder, Aldo Cerchiari, Giuseppe Capogrossi, Roberto Crippa, Sergio Dangelo, Ludovico De Luigi, Gianni Dova, Yves Klein, Osvaldo Licini, Nando, Cesare Peverelli, Emilio Scanavino and Ellenia Zagni. Note that he was the owner of one of Klein’s blue monochromes, acquired from the artist’s solo exhibition *Yves Klein. Proposte monochrome, epoca blu* at Galleria Apollinaire in Milan in January 1957; it was the only work sold.

Throughout the 1960s Fontana’s collection continued to expand, coming to include representatives of Nouveau Réalisme (Arman, Martial Raysse, Jean Tinguely), kinetic art (Julio Le Parc, Horacio Garcia Rossi, Francisco Sobrino, Jesús Rafael Soto), the flourishing young Italian scene (Gianni Colombo, Dadamaino, Luciano Fabro, Piero Gilardi, Piero Manzoni, Giulio Paolini, Pino Pascali, Paolo Scheggi, Titta Buzzi), American pop art (Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg),and the ZERO group (Heinz Mack, Otto Piene), as well as Belgian artist Jef Verheyen.<sup>3</sup> At a time when they were selling little or nothing, he would buy one one work from their debut exhibitions. He explained his position and his choices to the critic Carla Lonzi in 1967:

I have a collection that’s worth diddly squat, they’re all tiny pieces, because ten years ago I didn’t have enough money to even eat, and I didn’t buy clothes, a pair of shoes and I bought a piece for ten or twenty thousand lire. So, from Yves Klein, Arman, Tinguely, Soto, they’re all in my collection ...

from Burri himself, the first painting he sold at the Venice Biennale, I bought it from him, from Fabro ... And also from Pascali: the cannon is not the matter, however, even that cannon it’s realised in a way that demonstrates the brilliance of the artist.<sup>4</sup>

His support was constant and loyal, as many of artists could vouch for:

“We met again in 1959 in Paris,” explained Julio Le Parc, who had studied under Lucio Fontana at the Buenos Aires School of Fine Arts. “I had arrived from Argentina the previous year. Fontana had an exhibition at Galerie Stadler [Paris]. He then came to visit me and other Argentine artists [Horacio Garcia Rossi and Francisco Sobrino], and bought a small gouache from us to support us in our work.”<sup>5</sup>

Fontana came to every exhibition, he was present, therefore it was a meeting of personal friendship. We were fascinated by this person who was much older than us showing interest for what we did. Fontana was the person who was most interested in young people. Manzoni said that it was ... the youngsters who gave to Fontana and not vice versa! Although Manzoni also said that Fontana felt himself supported in his work by youngsters.<sup>6</sup>

These young artists admired Fontana, and his spatialist theories on infinity, space, emptiness and light – those “new means of creation”<sup>7</sup> – set a trend and influenced many of them, who followed in his footsteps and developed these questions in their own right. Art historian Enrico Crispolti has no hesitation in describing him as living his artistic career “as ‘prophetic protagonist’, never sated by success or fame.”<sup>8</sup> His support came in the form of purchases, but also through the short texts that he wrote as a sign of friendship, as in the case of Jef Verheyen, Piero Manzoni, Paolo Scheggi and the artists of Gruppo T. He sometimes read these texts at exhibition openings, which explains their rather oral style.

For Paolo Scheggi, who had been working on monochrome and three-dimensional painting since the early 1960s, Fontana wrote “Paolo Scheggi. Intersuperfici curve a zone riflese” in the catalogue for the exhibition at Galleria Il Cancellò in Bologna in 1962:

Your work is very intelligent, in terms of its logic, even if there may be differences between us, which are in your favour. You are a man of your time. ... I love your preoccupations, your research and your paintings, which are so deeply black, red and white, revealing your thoughts and your fears. I can only wish you a “happy” career and remind you to remain humble, very humble. In the face of time, we are “nothing”.<sup>9</sup>

He wrote several texts about Jef Verheyen, whose pictorial work was essentially focused on the search for chromatic and luminous effects. The first was on the occasion of his debut solo exhibition in Italy, at Galleria Pagani del Grattaciolo in Legnano in 1959. After meeting in 1957, they maintained a prolific correspondence and produced paintings together.

I met Jef Verheyen last year at his solo show at Galerie Pater. I really liked his paintings; I bought

one and we became friends. Verheyen often comes to my studio, he has great aspirations and clear ideas. In the paintings I have seen for his exhibition in Legnano, you can feel the evolution of a year of intense work. Their concept is well defined. This is what Verheyen thinks and what he wrote to me: TO BE FREE. This is my presentation of esteem for the painter Jef Verheyen.<sup>10</sup>

In the catalogue-brochure for Piero Manzoni’s exhibition with Ettore Sordini and Angelo Verga at Galleria Pater in Milan in 1957, at the same time as Manzoni was distributing the collective manifesto *L’arte non è vera creazione* he noted:

I’ve been following the activities, research and concerns of these three young artists for some time now, and some of their work is now part of my small collection of modern art.

I am convinced of the place occupied by their recent works in the field of painting. And it is therefore with all my esteem and enthusiasm that I wish to sponsor their exhibition.<sup>11</sup>

Fontana also supported Yayoi Kusama’s plans for a “wild” intervention at the 33rd Venice Biennale in 1966, the year in which he himself won the painting prize, while his young disciple Julio Le Parc won the grand prize. The Japanese artist designed the *Narcissus Garden* installation in the Giardini, made up of fifteen hundred silver plastic balls that she sold individually for two dollars each.

The painter’s studio on Corso Monforte in Milan was used for meetings and exhibitions. In March 1965, for example, it hosted the *ZERO Avantgarde* exhibition, organised on Nanda Vigo’s initiative and bringing together twenty-eight artists, including Vigo herself, Jesús Rafael Soto, Heinz Mack, Henk Peeters and Yayoi Kusama.

In turn, these young disciples wrote about Fontana’s work, both during his lifetime and after his death, as a way of asserting his artistic legacy. On the occasion of the Italian artist’s first exhibition in an American institution, the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 1966, Otto Piene discussed the radical nature of his action, beginning his text with this beautiful phrase: “When shall we make a hole in the sky, Lucio Fontana?”<sup>12</sup>

For her part, Dadamaino, whose early *Volumi* (1958–1960) were indebted to Fontana’s work, paid him an illuminating tribute a decade after his death:

As well as being an exceptional artist Fontana was a unique figure who single-handedly animated the place in which he decided to live and who expressed himself with a vocabulary that was all his own. What escaped most people, from the masters of cryptic and overly partisan criticism, to the superficial and vulgar culture-vultures who considered his discourses to be paradoxical nonsense, lame eccentricities, was the disarmingly simple fact that these discourses were not evocative exhibitionism but limpid, logical and real prophecies.

The artist was (always had been and perhaps still is) producing work so new and unheard of that specific concepts capable of decoding their genius had yet to be established.<sup>13</sup>

Lucio Fontana's 1968 work "The comet in our sky" is a variation on his 1965 work "The comet in our sky"

A few years later, in 1988, Giulio Paolini wrote: I’m not going to say anything about Lucio Fontana. I’m here to talk about the work, without dimensions or date, that Fontana was always “waiting for” (as he often and insistently said in many of his last paintings, aptly titled *Attese* [*Waiting*]). So I’m not going to say anything about Lucio Fontana. On the contrary, I’m going to say everything about his work and works that are not by him, but certainly always his own, which, under other names, preceded and will follow them for centuries.<sup>14</sup>

Fontana’s universality is reflected in the visual homage paid to him by Heinz Mack, Otto Piene and Günther Uecker’s luminous and kinetic environment, *ZERO-Lichtraum (Hommage à Fontana)*, which they presented at Documenta 3 in Kassel in 1964; Fontana was, in their view, the first artist to use light within a space as a means of heralding the advent of the space age. A year later, at the *Nul 1965* exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, a family photograph showed Lucio Fontana and his wife Teresita surrounded by, among others, Gianni Colombo, Hans Haacke, Yayoi Kusama, Heinz Mack, Otto Piene, George Rickey, Günther Uecker and Nanda Vigo. His work functioned as a rhizome, producing a genealogy of artists from the same generation (born in the 1930s and 1940s) who were all influenced by his research. In 1969, a year after his death, a tribute exhibition was held at the Von der Heydt Museum in Wuppertal. It brought together works by Agostino Bonalumi, Enrico Castellani, Gotthard Graubner, Jochen Hiltmann, Yves Klein, Francesco Lo Savio, Heinz Mack, Piero Manzoni, Otto Piene, Günther Uecker and Jef Verheyen, all belonging to the Fontanian constellation.<sup>15</sup>

Lucio Fontana's 1968 work "The comet in our sky" is a variation on his 1965 work "The comet in our sky"

##### Notes

- I have borrowed this phrase from the artist Ettore Sordini. See his interview in Piero Manzoni, *Contre rien* (Paris: Allia, 2002), p. 50.
- For a more extensive analysis of this question, refer to the chapters “Piero Manzoni, Jef Verheyen et les autres” and “Yves le monochrome” in my book *Écrits de Lucio Fontana. Manifestes, textes, entretiens* (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2013), pp. 76–96, as well as to my essay, “Notre famille, la famille des ‘Spatios’. Yves Klein et Lucio Fontana”, in *Le Ciel comme atelier. Yves Klein et ses contemporains*, ed. Emma Lavigne (exh. cat. Metz: Centre Pompidou-Metz, 2020), pp. 61–62.
- The Fondazione Fontana in Milan does not give the exact number of works owned by the artist, so it is impossible to know how many he had in his collection. Some, such as those by Yves Klein and Piero Manzoni, are still owned by the foundation, while others, such as those by Piero Gilardi and Jef Verheyen, were sold after Fontana’s death in 1968.
- Carla Lonzi, *Self-Portrait*, trans. Allison Grimaldi Donahue (Brussels: Divided Publishing, 2021), p. 258. First published in Italian as *Autonitratto* in 1969.
- Interview by the author with Julio Le Parc on 5 November 2011 in his studio in Cachan, in *Écrits de Lucio Fontana*, pp. 77–78.
- Bruno Corà, “Conversation with Enrico Castellani regarding Burri and Fontana”, in *Burri-Fontana 1949-1968* (exh. cat. Milan: Skira, 1996), p. 74.
- Écrits de Lucio Fontana*, p. 12.

- Enrico Crispolti, “The Originality of a Master of Anticipation”, in *Lucio Fontana, Venice/New York* (exh. cat. London: Thames & Hudson, 2006), p. 21.
- The original manuscript of this text is kept at the Archivio Paolo Scheggi, Galleria d’Arte Niccoli in Parma.
- Document held in the Jef Verheyen Archives in Belgium.
- Document held in the Archivio Piero Manzoni, Milan.
- Otto Piene, “A Hole in the Sky”, in *Lucio Fontana* (exh. cat. Minneapolis, MN: Walker Art Center, 1966), n.p.
- Dadamaino, “Lucio Fontana: The Master of Spatialism Ten Years on from His Death”, in *Burri-Fontana*, p. 77.
- Giulio Paolini, “Non dirò nulla su Lucio Fontana...” conversation about Lucio Fontana, Galleria d’Arte Moderna, Bologna, 28 April 1988, quoted in Maddalena Disch, ed., *Giulio Paolini, la voce del pittore (scritti e interviste 1965-1995)* (Lugano: ADV Publishing House, 1995), pp. 14–15.
- I drew what I called the “Fontanian nebula” in *Écrits de Lucio Fontana*, p. 130.

# “I like Paris more and more”: Lucio Fontana’s Reception in France

Jacopo Galimberti

In the summer of 1937, sculptures by Lucio Fontana were shown at the Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne in Paris. For the artist, this was a unique opportunity, not only to visit Paris, but also to organize his first exhibition in France, which was held at Galerie Jeanne Bucher-Myrbor in Paris in late autumn. While staying in the city, Fontana became aware of the gap between the fame he was beginning to enjoy in Milan and his status in France: “Here ... I am simply Monsieur Fontana, who has to sweep up, get the clay, dilute the paint, etc.”<sup>1</sup> This was far from being an exaggeration: his first solo, exhibition, where he showed sculptures and ceramics, the latter made by the Manufacture Nationale de Sèvres, was totally ignored.<sup>2</sup> There were no reviews, not even of the group exhibition at Galerie Zak a few weeks later, which included several works by Fontana displayed several works a few weeks later.

Until the mid-1950s, there was little noticeable shift in Fontana’s reception in France. His works did not attract the attention of any major collectors, and the few references to his work in French journals were mainly from people directly linked to the artist, such as the Spatialist painter Sergio Dangelo and Mario Luz for the journal *xx<sup>e</sup> siècle*, founded by Fontana’s friend Gualtieri di San Lazzaro.<sup>3</sup> In 1952 the artist was not even mentioned in any of the articles in the issue of *Art d’aujourd’hui* dedicated to Italy.<sup>4</sup> The critic Michel Tapié referred to the room devoted to him at the 1954 Venice Biennale, but Fontana’s name did not appear in the *Dictionnaire de la peinture abstraite* that the painter and writer Michel Seuphor published in 1957.<sup>5</sup> When another room was dedicated to Fontana at the 1958 Venice Biennale, *Elle* was the only French magazine to document the exhibition in colour photographs.<sup>6</sup> As early as 1957, however, a change was already taking place and, in a letter to San Lazzaro, Fontana seemed optimistic: “I am beginning to like Paris and I shall come here more often!”<sup>7</sup>

This shift coincided with the strengthening of relations between Fontana and two French critics, Michel Tapié and Pierre Restany, whose positions were, however, diametrically opposed. This meant that the reception of his work was, in some respects, contradictory, which did not, however, prevent it from rapidly becoming widely appreciated in the early 1960s, as will see.

Fontana first came into contact with Tapié in Turin, where the critic created a strong network of cultural exchanges centred on Galerie Stadler in Paris, of which he was the artistic director, and Turin’s International Center of Aesthetic Research (ICAR) in Turin. Within this context, Tapié tended to incorporate Fontana’s work into his own aesthetic reflections, which were often focused on non-geometric abstraction, although the critic was unwilling to confine the significance of the “Other Kind of Art” that he had advocated since 1952. The first important result of this collaboration was Fontana’s show at Galerie Stadler in 1959. Here Fontana exhibited recent works, the famous “slashes”, where the almost monochrome canvases were crossed by deep vertical cuts. Underlining the continuity of the experimentation he had begun in the 1940s with the *buchi* (holes), the title of the works was invariably *Concetto spaziale* (*Spatial Concept*). However, in the case of the “slashes”, the word *attese* (waits) — or its singular form, *attesa*, in the case of just one slash — was added to the usual title, though in English the verb “waiting” is generally used.

The opening of the exhibition was a moderately successful society event: there were many gallery owners such as Iris Clert and Alfred Schmela, collectors like Anthony Denney and artists including Ruth Francken, Antonio Saura and Georges Mathieu. In the catalogue essay written for the occasion, Tapié described Fontana as an artist who made stubbornly unconventional choices:

It has been more than ten years since Fontana set off on his “spatialist” adventure: despite numerous manifestos, a wide-ranging pictorial output, and an extraordinarily vibrant interest in ceramics, as well as major architectural projects, his oeuvre seems to be one of the most difficult to accept for a public that is, however, hard to astonish ... . Fontana is an extraordinary source of inspiration and could be a great leader, but he remains standing alone as he refuses to make any concessions.<sup>8</sup>

Although he knew that in Italy Fontana was far from isolated, Tapié sought to create an air of mystery that was useful for promoting an artist whose first major exhibition in Paris opened when he was sixty years old.

Most critics reviewing the event interpreted the works in terms recalling the typical rhetoric of Art Informel, the name Tapié gave to the movement. Rather than considering them from a Spatialist point of view, preference was given to an existentialist interpretation, according to which the slashes should be regarded as traces of dramatic gestures. In an article in *Le Monde*, Michel Conil-Lacoste described the *Spatial Concepts*, *Waiting*

as slashes bearing witness to a violent action or “mutilations”.<sup>9</sup> According to Conil-Lacoste, the comments left by the public in the visitors’ book were just as violent. In *Les Annales* the journalist referred to pages covered with abuse and, similarly to *L’Information*, reduced the artist’s work to a pathological form of expression.<sup>10</sup> Along the same lines as the critic in *Le Monde*, in *Les Lettres Nouvelles* Georges Limbour referred to lacerations and holes like those left by pistol shots.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, Luce Hocin noted the ambiguity of a “destructive, naïve gesture”.<sup>12</sup> A less subjective interpretation was provided by the Socialist daily *Combat*. Referring to the public’s reservations, this newspaper stressed that Fontana’s “fentes” did not suggest a conflictual relationship with the picture; on the contrary, they “hollowed out spaces”, creating volume.<sup>13</sup> During the exhibition, only two works were sold.

Two years later, sealing his friendship with Fontana, Tapié published *Devenir de Fontana* (The future of Fontana). This book, containing over 170 reproductions, represented a pivotal moment for the artist in terms of his recognition in France and the rest of the world. Although the majority of the works dated from the second half of the 1950s, considerable space was devoted to a large group of works produced in the 1930s. The book was published just in time to be taken to the United States, where Tapié accompanied Fontana on the occasion of his first exhibition in North America. In the case of Fontana, Paris preceded New York, and not just from a chronological point of view. Without his relationship with the French capital, in particular with Tapié, Fontana’s arrival in the American metropolis — where often more attention was paid to the artistic scene in Rome — would have taken considerably longer.

In *Devenir de Fontana*, Tapié did not hesitate to denigrate his adversaries. Referring to Arman’s *Garbage Cans*, Tapié wrote about the “very official trash bin of Neo-Dada” and described the movement as ephemeral and academic.<sup>14</sup> Critic Pierre Restany, who had just launched the Nouveaux Réalistes group and published the manifesto *à 40° au dessus de dada* (Forty Degrees Above Dada), was undoubtedly the main target of these barbs. Nevertheless, Restany and Tapié agreed that Fontana was a particularly interesting artist. Restany had visited Fontana’s exhibition at Galerie Stadler and he regretted that the artist was so little known in Paris.<sup>15</sup> Personally, Restany knew the artist very well. In his case it was not in Turin but rather Milan, in particular Galleria Apollinaire, that the two met. Here, in 1957, under the aegis of Restany, Yves Klein staged his first show of blue monochrome paintings, each identical to the other. One of the few buyers was Fontana. In his book *Lyrisme et Abstraction*, published in 1960, but written two years earlier, Restany described him as a real “jack of all trades”, and artist who had “notions to sell”.<sup>16</sup> So perhaps it was the critic himself who explained to Klein who Fontana was and his role not only as an artist, but also as a res-

pected collector. The artist Piero Manzoni wrote to François Morellet (an abstract painter who, like Klein, sold a work to Fontana during his first exhibition in Milan): “Selling to Fontana is a great introduction to the market in Milan.”<sup>17</sup>

It was certainly on the advice of Klein or Restany that in November 1958 Iris Clert — then Klein’s gallerist — asked Manzoni to lend her a number of Fontana’s works for a group show in her gallery.<sup>18</sup> It was not until 1959, however, that a more significant bond, characterized by friendship and collaboration, was born between Fontana and Klein, as it was between Fontana and Clert. The outcome of this new network of contacts was an unusual double exhibition held in November 1961. Meanwhile, Fontana had two solo shows open at the same time on opposite sides of the same street.

*Concetti spaziali de Fontana: peintures 1949-1961* was held at Jean Larcade’s Galerie Rive Gauche. In 1961 the French gallery owner signed an exclusive contract with Yves Klein; his exhibition space was one of Restany’s favourites; in July of that same year he organized the *Le Nouveau Réalisme à Paris et à New York* there. On the other side of the street it was possible to find the artist’s more recent production. *Concetti spaziali de Fontana: sculptures “nature” 1959-1961* was on show at Galerie Iris Clert, which had recently rented spacious premises on the right bank of the Seine. It was, in fact, the second time that Fontana exhibited some of his *Natures* in France, but it was the first time that the Paris art world, from Klein to critics such as Claude Rivière and Luce Hocin, was able to appreciate them, thanks also to Clert’s staging, which created an ethereal atmosphere in which the nine clay balls bathed in a blue light, with a recording of Iannis Xenakis’s *Metastaseis* playing in the background, appeared to be mysterious wandering meteorites.<sup>19</sup> Unlike what happened in the case of the “slashes” in 1959, the two exhibitions were reasonably successful commercially.

Fontana’s last significant solo exhibition in Paris before his death in 1968 was held at Galerie Jonas in 1966, where the artist displayed a number of *Concetti spaziali*. *Teatrini* (*Spatial Concepts*, *Little Theatres*), works in which the Baroque theme of the theatre merged with a visual language typical of Pop Art. In his review in *Combat*, François Pluchart wrote that Fontana was “the most renowned Italian painter in our country”.<sup>20</sup> This somewhat surprising observation revealed that, after the crucial period from 1959 to 1961, Fontana’s work had quickly become well-known in France. His fame continued to grow in the following months, thanks in part to the 1966 Venice Biennale, where he was awarded the Grand Prize for painting. Although Fontana distanced himself from Art Informel and the Nouveaux Réalistes on a number of occasions, stressing Spatialism’s specific nature and believing his association with these groups was reductive, there is no doubt that it was thanks to Restany and Tapié that his work entered

the Paris art world.<sup>21</sup> A few years after the artist’s death, an article published in the magazine *Robho* reported that Georges Pompidou, “who is fond of posing in front of a Fontana, is a master of the ‘humanist’ connotation. ... Questioned about the arbitrary detention of 150 militants of the far left, he replied with a phrase from Chateaubriand.”<sup>22</sup>

The slashes no longer caused public outrage. Just over ten years since his first real exhibition in Paris, Fontana’s work was so highly regarded as to allow the president of the French Republic to pose in front of a “Fontana”, thus demonstrating a restrained nonconformity certain in his aesthetic tastes.

The duality of existentialist “destructive” Fontana and the more disenchanting Fontana, fused, through Baroque and Futurism, to cosmic and futuristic imagery, continued to be fundamental to the reception of his work in France until at least the late 1980s. It was not until 1989 that the art historian Yve-Alain Bois produced a new critical interpretation of his work. Bois first referred to concepts deriving from the philosopher Georges Bataille in an essay for *Critique* and then in *L’informe : mode d’emploi*, the exhibition he co-curated with Rosalind Krauss in 1996 at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. These mentions were made to promote another Fontana, the scatological artist who had made disturbing black ceramics in the 1940s and the kitsch one who experimented with fuchsia and gold canvases.<sup>23</sup> What emerged was a profoundly different artist to the one active between 1959 and 1961, capable of taking a sarcastic view of commercial sculpture and in a constant conflict between a utopian dimension and precipitation towards amorphism and the dissolution of the matter that was both mocking and regretful. Bois’s analysis was one of the readings offered by the retrospective devoted to Fontana in 2014 by the Musée d’Art Moderne de Paris, where, together with the slashes and *Natures*, ample space was devoted to the ceramics of the 1930s and the “formlessness” that Bois observed in much of the artist’s sculptural output.

The complexity of this eclectic artist, who, despite his charisma, was never arrogant; on the contrary, always ready to take an interest in the work of younger generations, has long fascinated the French public and local critics, whose interpretations of the work are now essential for fully understanding Fontana’s work, whether in Italy, the English-speaking world or Argentina.

## Notes

1. Letter from Fontana to Tullio d’Albisola, 10 October 1937, in *Lettere di Lucio Fontana a Tullio d’Albisola (1936-1962)*, ed. Danilo Presotto (Savona: Editrice Liguria, 1987), p. 63.
2. I would like to thank Paolo Campiglio for providing me with this information.
3. Sergio Dangelo, “L’expérience spatiale en Italie”, *Phases* no. 2 (March 1955): pp. 45–48; see also Silvia Bignami, “Parigi”, in *Dizionario Lucio Fontana*, ed. Luca Pietro Nicoletti (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2023), p. 410; Maria Luz, “Chroniques du Jour – Lucio Fontana explore le monde”, *xx<sup>e</sup> Siècle*, no. 9 (May–June 1957), n.p.
4. *Art d’aujourd’hui* 3, 2 (January 1952): pp. 23–27.
5. Michel Tapié, “La Biennale de Venise”, *Cimaise* 2, no. 1 (1954): p. 6.
6. “Elle à Venise”, *Elle*, 13–20 October 1958, pp. 73–76.
7. Letter from Fontana to San Lazzaro, 27 April 1957, in *Lucio Fontana e l’artventura parigina*, eds Silvia Bignami and Jacopo Galimberti (Milan: Scalpendi, 2014), p. 151.
8. Catalogue of the exhibition *Fontana*, Galerie Stadler, Paris, opening 17 March 1959, n.p.
9. Michel Conil-Lacoste, ‘À travers les galeries’, *Le Monde*, 10 April 1959, p. 9.
10. These two press cuttings are held in the archives of Galerie Stadler, Paris.
11. Georges Limbour, in *Les Lettres Nouvelles*, no. 6 (8 April 1959).
12. Luce Hocin, “Pour vous guider dans les galeries de Paris”, *Arts Spectacles*, no. 715, March 1959, p. 13.
13. “L’art abstrait”, *Combat*, 30 March 1959, p. 7.
14. Michel Tapié, *Devenir de Fontana* (Turin: Edizioni d’Arte Fratelli Pozzo, 1961), n.p.
15. Pierre Restany, “Fontana, Coetzee, Tapiés”, *Cimaise*, no. 5 (June–August 1959): p. 46.
16. Pierre Restany, *Lyrisme et Abstraction* (Milan: Edizioni Apollinaire, 1960), pp. 96–97.
17. Freddy Battino and Luca Palazzoli, eds, *Piero Manzoni. Catalogue raisonné* (Milan: Vanni Scheiwiller, 1991), p. 82.
18. For the relationship between Yves Klein and Lucio Fontana, see Jacopo Galimberti, “Nella ‘famiglia degli spazialisti’. L’amicizia e la collaborazione tra Lucio Fontana e Yves Klein”, in *Lucio Fontana e l’artventura parigina*, pp. 95–125.
19. For the reception of this exhibition, see Silvia Bignami, “‘Me gustaria ir a Paris’. Nota sulle lettere di Lucio Fontana a Iris Clert”, in *ibid.*, pp. 55–76.
20. François Pluchart, “Avec Fontana, le cri est devenu un signe de pureté”, *Combat*, 28 March 1966, p. 7.
21. Marco Valsecchi, “L’uomo ora è nello spazio e l’arte viaggia con lui”, *Tempo*, no. 19 (1964): p. 49.
22. “Quelques aspects de l’art bourgeois. La non intervention”, *Robho*, nos. 5–6 (1971): n.p.
23. Yve-Alain Bois, “Fontana scatologue”, in *Critique* 45, no. 502 (1989): pp. 154–168. For Bois and Fontana, see Jacopo Galimberti, ‘Sfavilli escrementizi. Lucio Fontana in *October*, *Predella*, no. 37 (2015): pp. 191–202.

# Lucio Fontana in Argentina: The Boundless Horizon of Modernity<sup>1</sup>

Daniela Sbaraglia

On 4 February 1928 *Ahora. Quincenario. Arte – crítica* was launched in Rosario di Santa Fe by a handful of intellectuals engaged in redefining local art and culture.<sup>2</sup> To the group which included the poet Fausto Hernandez, the artist Julio Vanzo and the art critic Juan Zocchi,<sup>3</sup> we could add Lucio Fontana, who until the day of his departure from Rosario, shortly before the periodical’s publication, had shared the militant stance in pursuit of instinct’s liberation in the language of modernity. And this first issue set the seal on this community of ideas: two of Fontana’s works were published with an article written by Zocchi:

And Rosario begins “now”. ... We, the barbarians of the new culture ... which once again re-engaging the whole spiritual body... Cosmogonic. Ours follows the Milky Way. And it directly controls the subconscious. ... Because innovation in Argentina means riding the present moment free of all impulses bareback towards the boundless horizon.<sup>4</sup>

The text takes a provocative tone in its advocacy for a break with the past in favour of a cosmogonic refoundation of society, revealing the influence of Futurism and Fontana. Thus, in the notion of a creative act in contact with the primitive, barbarian subconscious capable of freeing its impulses towards new horizons as boundless as the sky of the Pampa, one of the underlying themes of the artist’s poetics, which took concrete form a few years later in Milan in works such as *L’uomo nero* (The black man, 1930). This was “here” and “now” expressed through the reconnection to a primitive creative dimension, as instinctive as it is free, allowing projection towards the future.

Hence Fontana’s first artistic output should be reinterpreted in the light of the vitalistic aspiration contained in Zocchi’s “manifiesto”, which stated: “We are not in the age of style. Style begins after the vital battle. After ‘living!’”<sup>5</sup>

Although drawing on a large variety of cultural elements, the artist’s practice — which began in the mid-1920s thanks to the support of his friend

Julio Vanzo, with whom he shared his studio — continued to be free of rigid stylistic preconceptions, ranging from a quest for archaizing purity (with pure volumes based on the constituents of balance, static or dynamic), or in an expressionist sense, acting on material with the artist’s gesture or opening up forms evoked by fluid lines, as in *Cristo alla Colonna* (Christ at the column), a work known only through a photograph of the artist in his studio about 1925 (fig. 1).<sup>6</sup>

In an interesting symmetry of events, just before leaving Argentina once again, Fontana produced a second, unsigned, statement of his programmatic intentions, the *Manifiesto Blanco* (1946). It was almost as if “the Argentine plain”, which “restored tranquillity” to him,<sup>7</sup> in its boundless pristine spaces, were the indispensable premise for the gestation of the most daring creative act.

After returning to Argentina in April 1940, Fontana sought to re-establish his ties with Vanzo and Zocchi, who were once again decisive in his artistic career. The former was of vital importance in the first part of his stay, spent in Rosario from 1940 to 1942, while Zocchi played a major role following Fontana’s move to Buenos Aires, from 1943 to 1946. This physical distancing reveals an estrangement between Vanzo and Zocchi that was not only due to geographical factors (because they were now working in different cultural contexts), but was also of an ideological nature. While Vanzo, now the secretary of the Museo Municipal de Bellas Artes Juan B. Castagnino in Rosario, continued to give importance to progressive politics, focusing on the democratization and modernization of local culture — promoted by both the architect Hilarión Hernández Larguía, the museum’s director, and Manuel A. Castagnino, head of the DMC<sup>8</sup> — Zocchi became an important institutional figure at a national level, especially in the Peronist period.<sup>9</sup>

This polarity, first and foremost political in nature, was also present at a local level in the province of Santa Fe, in particular in the Agrupación de Artistas Plásticos Independientes of Rosario (of which Vanzo was secretary) and the Rosario branch of the Sociedad Argentina de Artistas Plásticos (managed by administrative bodies of the city of Santa Fe).<sup>10</sup> Significantly, Fontana took part in both organizations, just as he maintained his relationship with his old friends, at least until 1942, the year when he fell out with Julio Vanzo. Nevertheless, the artist had previously been able to take advantage of the favourable cultural climate in Rosario and the support of an old friend who had first paved the way for him to collaborate with the two main architectural firms in the city and participate in the competitions for the design of monuments announced in 1940: the one for the National Flag Memorial, in which Fontana took part with Hilarión Hernández Larguía and his partner Juan Manuel Newton,<sup>11</sup> and that for the General José de San Martín Memorial, shared with the architects Ermete De Lorenzi, Julio V. Otaola and Aníbal Rocca.<sup>12</sup>

Despite the favourable prospects, in September the competition entries for the National Flag Memorial were rejected, thereby increasing Fontana’s sense of unease in the wake of Italy’s entry in the war.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, material needs spurred him towards a growing desire for success: thus, after moving into his father’s former studio, at Calle Rioja 2070 and availing himself of the kilns at the Alberdi factory, he began producing sculptures at a frenzied pace. Part of these were displayed in the exhibition he held with Vanzo in the gallery belonging to Rómulo Renom — another old acquaintance from Rosario — which opened on 2 December 1940.<sup>14</sup> Even though the only works displayed in the exhibition that have been identified are *Mujer peinándose* (Woman brushing her hair),<sup>15</sup> a patinated plaster figure that the DMC purchased for the Museo Castagnino, and *Busto de señora* (Bust of a woman), a coloured ceramic work, never shown, with strongly gestural modelling, it is likely that there were also a variety of terracottas, coloured plaster works and ceramics *a gran fuoco* (fired at a high temperature) datable to 1940.<sup>16</sup> These included a series of tortoises, fish, octopuses and shells animated by bright enamels that played on the contrast between black and white, as in the unpublished *Pesce* (Fish), with its proto-spatial plasticism (fig. 3).<sup>17</sup> On the whole these works were similar to the ceramics he produced in Albissola Marina in Liguria, before he left for Argentina, varying between works that were more or less figurative, polished or with an expressive finish (stressing both material and colour), which fully justified the disconcerting impression Fontana’s “colourful, terrible and more or less anthropomorphic dolls” made on the public, as mentioned by the local historian Isidoro Slullitel.<sup>18</sup>

In 1941 Fontana, in order to make up for the poor sales from the exhibition at Renom’s gallery, concentrated on winning prizes at official shows and on an exhibition at the Galería Müller in Buenos Aires.<sup>19</sup> This show, shared on this occasion with Attilio Rossi and with a catalogue edited by Zocchi, opened in July, permitting Fontana to expand his output of vitalistic ceramics with a series of works tackling the theme of the human figure. In these, primordiality is resolved either in a synthetic and archaic manner,<sup>20</sup> or in its “panic” dimension: “I have returned to the human form, but the marble and bronze is dematerialized as much as possible.”<sup>21</sup>

Fontana thus appears to have started a new poetic inquiry, centred around human frailty and expressed through finely modelled figures, brightened by colour that dematerialized the forms, gently immersing them in their atmospheric medium.<sup>22</sup> These works were particularly appreciated in official salons, where the artist began to gain attention,<sup>23</sup> leading to the Museo Provincial de Bellas Artes Rosa Galisteo de Rodríguez in Santa Fe devoting a major exhibition to him in 1942. Fewer works were shown than in the Buenos Aires exhibition,<sup>24</sup> but once again they varied greatly in style and the approach to materials, with exper-

imental works such as *Batalla* (Battle),<sup>25</sup> which introduced the integrated use of colour, the graffiti and negative relief impressed on the wax. With the apparent nonchalance of its style, the work is the outcome of a stylistic approach that began with *Ecuador*,<sup>26</sup> a drawing dated 1940, with which it can be associated.

Also in 1942, Fontana’s successes at the Salón Nacional de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires with *Muchacho del Paraná* (Boy of the Paraná River),<sup>27</sup> and at the 1st Salón de Artistas Locales de Rosario,<sup>28</sup> contributed to his appointment — “thanks to his great renown” — to the chair of modelling at the new Escuela de Artes Plásticas de Rosario,<sup>29</sup> under the auspices of Santa Fe’s Sociedad Argentina de Artistas Plásticos.<sup>30</sup> However, this situation did not last: the delicate balance that Fontana maintained between the polarities of the Santa Fe organization and the group in Rosario was disturbed by his participation as a jury member in the 21st Salón in Rosario, where the artist condemned the favouritism shown by representatives of the DMC and the Museo Castagnino, in other words Manuel Castagnino and Julio Vanzo. Not only did this cause a rift between Fontana and his old friend, but it also led to his leaving this hostile environment for Buenos Aires, where he was offered the chair of decoration at the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes Prilidiano Pueyrredón: “Certainly, there will be a lot to fight for ... but, at least, it will be more rewarding.”<sup>31</sup>

Here, while waiting for the result of the competition for the Monumento al Libertador San Martín, he worked with an eye on the Salón Nacional,<sup>32</sup> sculpting *Hombre del Delta* (Man of the delta), a visual expression of the time, a period of hope mixed with disappointment, as well as bitterness due to the situation in Italy in the wake of Mussolini’s surrender and his own sense of existential insecurity, which even led him to postpone the decision to rent his own studio. The pause in Fontana’s artistic activity in Argentina lasted a few months, ending thanks to his winning the coveted first prize at the Salón Nacional and the beginning of a new period of creativity. As was the case in Rosario, however, he had to reckon with an intellectual milieu that was divided between opposing factions in a climate worsened by the military coup in June 1943, in which it seemed that Fontana wished to avoid taking sides. If, on the one hand, his association with Attilio Rossi and Margherita Sarfatti bringing him closer to the anti-fascist circles of the literary magazine *Sur* and then get in touch with the intelligentsia of Buenos Aires,<sup>33</sup> on the other he continued to be supported by Juan Zocchi, who, after becoming director of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires, supported him with purchases and did everything in his power to allow his appointment to the chair of modelling at the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes Manuel Belgrano,<sup>34</sup> and started writing the first Argentine monograph devoted to him, which was published in 1946.<sup>35</sup> With regard to state commissions, Fontana also collaborated

on the commemoration of the anniversary of the military revolution, creating a colossal statue of *Minerva*. This figure, 3.5 metres high, built around an iron framework, presented here for the first time (fig. 4), with its slender forms, its clinging drapery and colour contrasts, appears as an arcane variation of the *Vittoria* (Victory), executed for the Salon at the Milan Triennale of 1936, recalling its strongly expressive modelling.<sup>36</sup>

Around the same time, Fontana participated in the exhibition *El arte en la calle* (Art in the street), hosted by Harrods, which commissioned renowned artists to dress its store windows along Calle Florida in central Buenos Aires. For the window “Trajes de fiesta” (Holiday clothes),<sup>37</sup> Fontana designed a kind of futuristic theatre: the elegant evening dress on display was suspended from undulating wires that, like signs floating space, became entangled at certain points, in an original dynamic relationship between space, materials and the artist’s gesture. These opportunities allowed Fontana to begin distancing himself from the emerging group of abstractionists connected to the journal *Arturo*, who extolled rationality at the expense of the subconscious expression.<sup>38</sup> This boundary was repeated by Fontana in his solo show at the Galería Impulso in Buenos Aires in July 1945, where he presented very recent works along with pieces he had sent specially from Rosario, in which the colouristic and “baroque” aspects of his sculpture were clear.<sup>39</sup>

As part of this desire to defend the freedom of the creative act, along with publishers Gonzalo Losada, Jorge Romero Brest and Jorge Larco, Fontana developed the idea of the Academia Altamira, a free school based on the primacy of the inventive and intuitive skills of artists.<sup>40</sup> These are elements that emerge in vitalistic and gestural works such as *La mujer de Lot* (Lot’s wife),<sup>41</sup> shown at the Salón Independiente, which was staged as a protest against the official Salón that was entangled with government organizations,<sup>42</sup> and in Aquiles (Achilles) of 1946,<sup>43</sup> with which he confounded the jury of the official Salón: “If storms are breaking in B. Aires, they are caused by yours truly — a lot of young people believe in me and my work is dedicated to creating a true artistic sensibility in them.”<sup>44</sup>

It was not long before Fontana became the reference point for young people interested in finding new figurative styles, such as those in the Grupo Madí, which held its first shows at the school. In his turn, Fontana, in contact with his pupils,<sup>45</sup> created works in which the material — regarded as dynamic energy — expanded according to the space, as in *Silla Barocca* (Baroque chair),<sup>46</sup> and *Viento en Catamarca* (Wind in Catamarca),<sup>47</sup> the last work he produced in Argentina. He also designed his first *Concetti spaziali* (Spatial concepts),<sup>48</sup> increasingly automatic drawings, with a Surrealist undercurrent, and the second Harrods window “Pielés” (Furs),<sup>49</sup> which, continuing his work of 1944, was a forerunner of his spatial environments. The design, which included a device that caused the windows to vibrate continuously,<sup>50</sup> should be seen

in relation to two preparatory plans for the floating arabesque in the space of the window, supporting the silhouette dressed in a fur coat, with a taxidermied animal in the centre of the floor and a large abstract form on the right side acting as counterpoint (figs 5–7).

This is the factual premise to the *Manifiesto Blanco*, written in October and November 1946 by Bernardo Arias, Horacio Cazeneuve and Marcos Fridman, and promoted by Fontana with an urban happening that was immediately stopped by the police. The text — interpreted by the design theorist Tomás Maldonado as a provocative reply to his *Manifiesto Invencionista* — came out shortly after the publication of the *Manifiesto Madí*. Despite the fact that its fundamental principles lay in Umberto Boccioni’s dynamism and renewal of the artistic medium, perhaps it is not so far from the cosmogonic vision of modernity — already foreseen by Fontana in his youth — regarding the need to reconnect to the primordial energy that is the only thing that allows “riding the present moment of all free impulses bareback towards the boundless horizon”.<sup>51</sup>

## Notes

- For the works and exhibitions mentioned, see *Lucio Fontana. Catalogo Ragionato di sculture, dipinti, ambientazioni*, ed. Enrico Crispolti, vols 1–2 (Milan: Skira, 2006).
- For the artistic situation in Argentina, see Dominique Liqueois, “Fontana, l’Argentine et la modernité”, in *Lucio Fontana* (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 1987), pp. 50–53.
- For more on Vanzo and Zocchi, see D. A. Sbaraglia in *Dizionario Lucio Fontana*, ed. L. P. Nicoletti (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2022).
- Juan Zocchi, “Ahora Rosario”, *Ahora. Quincenario. Arte – crítica* 1, no. 1 (4 February 1928): sec. 5. The works published are *Mary* and *Mujer y el balde* (Woman with a bucket).
- Ibid.
- Archive of the heirs of Lucia Bottini. For Fontana in the 1920s, see D. A. Sbaraglia, “Lucio Fontana in Argentina – 1922–1928: le origini”, *Valori Tattili. Rivista di storia delle arti*, no. 17 (January–June 2021): pp. 64–97.
- “El temperamento en el arte argentino. Lucio Fontana”, *La Nación*, 6 June 1943.
- Known as the DMC, the Dirección Municipal de Cultura. For more on this subject, see Lorena Mouguelar, “Una amistad en tensión. Formaciones e instituciones culturales en Rosaio hacia 1942”, in *La autonomía del arte. Debates en la teoría en la praxis*, eds Silvia Dolinko et al, pp. 379–389 (Buenos Aires, XIV Jornadas CAIA, 2011).
- Sbaraglia, “Juan Zocchi”, *Dizionario Lucio Fontana*.
- Mouguelar, “Una amistad en tensión”, pp. 2–3.
- See the letter dated 4 April 1941, in Lucio Fontana, *Lettere a Tullio d’Albisola (1936–1964)*, ed. Luca Bochicchio (Milan, Abscondita, 2023), p. 54.
- The design for the motto “Heroicus” reached the competition second level but did not win.
- See the letter dated 27 July 1943, in Lucio Fontana, *Lettere 1919–1968*, ed. Paolo Campiglio (Milan: Skira, 1999), n. 51, p. 80.

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Lucio Fontana's 1943 work, "El juicio de Salomón" (The Judgement of Solomon) (41 SC 5)

Lucio Fontana's 1943 work, "El rapto de las Sabinas" (The Rape of the Sabines) (41 SC 3)

- The exhibition, *Lucio Fontana—Julio Vanzo. Terre-cuits, Ceramics, Tempera y Dibujos*, was reviewed in the Rosario newspaper: "Exposición Lucio Fontana y Julio Vanzo", *Democracia*, 6 December 1940, p. 2.
- 40 SC 6.
- These include *Medusa* (40 SC 19), *La hospitalidad* (Hospitality) (40 SC 12).
- This work, in a private collection, is similar, including in size, to *Pesce* (Fish) (40 SC 17).
- Stullitel's text is reproduced in Lorena Mouguelar, "Lucio Fontana en Argentina: relecturas", in *Seperata* 10, no. 15 (2010): pp. 38–55. The article also underlines the continuity of the *modus operandi* Fontana had implemented in Argentina.
- Letter dated 4 April 1941, in Fontana, *Lettere a Tullio d'Albisola*.
- La mujer del Marinero* (The sailor's wife) (40 SC 9).
- "El temperamento", *La Nación*, 6 June 1943.
- See *Mujer con Mascara* (Woman with mask) (40 SC 3); *San Juanino* (Infant Saint John) (40 SC 16); *Desnudo* (Nude) (41 SC 17, sculpture prize at the First Salón Santafesino) and *Descanso* (40 SC 7, honourable mention at the Salón de Pergamino).
- El Monaguillo* (Altar boy) (41 SC 10), won second prize for sculpture at the Salón Nacional de Bellas Artes in Buenos Aires, while *La bella italiana* (The beautiful Italian woman) (41 SC 9) was awarded the Comisión Provincial de Cultura at the 8th Salón de Santa Fe. In addition, he won the competition held by the Asociación de Comerciantes and the municipality of Rosario for the Monumento de El Sembrador, which he designed with Osvaldo Palacios.
- Thirty works – only nineteen of which are known – compared with seventy-two at Galería Müller.
- 41 SC 31.
- 40–47 DDV 23.
- 42 SC S.
- Intermezzo* (42 SC 1) won the municipal prize.
- Here he met Ricardo Ernesto Montes i Bradley, editor of *Revista Paraná*, who dedicated an article to the artist in nos. 4–7 (1943), which, besides comprising a list of the prizes Fontana had won up to that point, mentioned *L'uomo nero* being in a museum in Moscow, the last possible location of the sculpture, now lost.
- Mouguelar, "Una amistad en tension", pp. 6–9.
- Letter to his father dated 17 April 1943, in Fontana, *Lettere 1919–1968*, n. 44, pp. 78–77.
- Letters to his brother dated 9 July and 26 August 1943, nos. 49 and 55, in *ibid.*, pp. 79–81.
- Letter to Luciano Baldessari dated 4 April 1944, no. 256, in *ibid.*, pp. 210–211.
- Zocchi was the owner of *Medusa* (41 SC 16) to which Fontana may have been referring in a letter to his brother dated 31 August 1941, in Fontana, *Lettere 1919–1968*, no. 56, p. 82.
- Juan Zocchi, *Lucio Fontana* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Poseidón, 1946).
- The architect Jorge Sabaté was charged with the plan for the event, which envisaged four colossal allegorical statues in the entrance colonnade at Avenida 9 de Julio, where the military parades marched. See Clara Hendlin and Carola Herr, "Arquitecturas efimeras: primeras exposiciones del Arquitecto Jorge Sabaté en la Av. 9 de Julio", in *Seminario de Critica de instituto de Arte Americano*, n. 184, 31 May 2013.
- 46 A1: "Vidrieras artísticas", *Saber Vivir* 4, no. 44 (1944): p. 63.
- Liquois, "Fontana, l'Argentine et la modernité", in *Lucio Fontana*, 1987, pp. 54–55.
- He displayed works such as *Delfines* (Dolphins) (44–46 FBE 1), *Caballo negro* (Black horse) (44–46 FBE 3), *Aragosta* (Lobster) (44 SC 8), *Caracol y pulpo* (Shell and octopus) (44 SC 12), *Nudo* (Nude) (44 SC 9), *La novia triste* (The sad bride) (44–45 SC 1), *Donna seduta* (Seated woman) (44–45 SC 3); besides the aforementioned *Batalla*, acquired J. L. Pagano for his collection, the works from Rosario included *El rapto del las*

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- Sbaraglia, "Altamira", *Dizionario Lucio Fontana*.
- 45 SC 2.
- Andrea Giunta, "Fontana in Argentina", in Lucio Fontana: On the Threshold, ed. Iria Candela, pp. 41–49 (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2019).
- 46 SC 1.
- Letter dated 24 November 1946, in Fontana, *Lettere a Tullio d'Albisola*.
- Fontana's most receptive students included Pablo Edelstein and Jorge Amelio Roccamonte, one of the signatories of the Manifiesto Blanco.
- 46 SC 16.
- 47 SC 5.
- 46 DSP 35, 46 DSP 36.
- See "El arte en la calle", *Lyra* 4, no. 34 (May 1946).
- Jorge Roccamonte, "Su Fontana e Manifiesto Blanco a Buenos Aires", in *Lucio Fontana*, eds Enrico Crispolti and Rosella Siligato (exh. cat. Milan: Electa, 1998), p. 104.
- Zocchi, "Ahora Rosario".

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# Biography of Lucio Fontana

## Paolo Campiglio

Lucio Fontana's 1943 work, "El juicio de Salomón" (The Judgement of Solomon) (41 SC 5)

**1899–1930**
Like all children of migrants, Lucio Fontana (Rosario di Santa Fé, 1899—Comabbio, 1968) had a soul at once Argentinian and Italian: the former by birth, the latter by culture and education.

In the 1890s his father. Luigi Fontana (Varese, 1865—Rosario di Santa Fé, 1946) [9.1] was part of the flow of Italian migrants to South America. A sculptor trained at the Brera Academy, he was heir to an Impressionist sculptural tradition. He settled in Rosario where he made a fortune in funerary portraiture: in a few years he was able to found his own successful company, Fontana y Scarabelli.

Lucio Emilio Fontana was born 19 February 1899 to Luigi and a young model, Lucia Bottini (1874–1925) [9.2], daughter of Swiss engraver and Laura Fontana: the young couple's relationship was not destined to last long, thanks to Luigi's attitude to emancipated women.

Lucio was cared for by his mother until 1906 when his father, on the pretext of taking him to Italy for school, asserted his paternal rights. Lucia was heartbroken. She later married Juan Pablo Moroni (with whom she had three children) and in 1903 Luigi married Anita Campiglio [9.3] – they also had three children – and enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle in Rosario.

From 1906 young Lucio lived in Italy. Entrusted to the care of relatives, he began his studies at the Collegio Torquato Tasso di Biumo (Varese), before moving on to the Collegio Ballerini di Seregno [9.4]. In 1914, his father enrolled him in the Tecnico Carlo Cattaneo di Milano and in fine arts at the Brera Academy, for professional training in the building trade and to develop his artistic talent.

Lucio volunteered for the First World War in 1917, as an Argentine citizen [fig. 9.5]. This was a consequence of an upbringing steeped in excellence and courage, but also a demonstration of a youthful restlessness that led him to exalt the meaning of battle: on the front line in Karst then as an infantry second lieutenant at Villa Lagarina, he was awarded the bronze medal for valour.

From 1918 to 1921 he attended the military school in Turin, where he graduated as a building expert. Wearing by his military experience, he returned to Rosario and his family in 1921, after

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a short visit to Milan. However, he refused his father's entreaties to join the building profession, and so left home to live like a “gaucho”, a nomad on the Humid Pampas, in contact with nature.

Returning to civilian life in 1923, he decided to devote himself to art, making his first experiments in sculpture in his father's company. He reconnected with his mother Lucia, who died in 1925, and grew close to his sister Ofelia and brother Juan Pablo.

In 1924 he set up his own studio at 565 Calle Espana with his friend Julio Vanzo. Their avant-garde solidarity was in direct opposition to his father's aesthetic. The young man loved the Cubist sculpture of Alexander Archipenko, admired the Futurist Umberto Boccioni, and followed the style of the Cubist-Futurist painter Emilio Pettoruti, as can be seen in works such as *Nudo* (1926) and *Mujer y balde* (1927) [9.6].

On returning to Milan in 1927[9.7] he enrolled at the Brera Academy. He fell instantly for the Symbolist sculpture of his teacher Adolfo Wildt, which he considered “marvellous”, was mixed with a certain diffidence towards the “call to order” of the Novecento group. He preferred abstracted line, the transfiguration of matter. The master's lessons, although short-lived, left their mark, in his fascination with gold, the spatial search for void and the inclination towards the transcendent.

Lucio Fontana's 1943 work, "El juicio de Salomón" (The Judgement of Solomon) (41 SC 5)

**1930–1940**
“As soon as I left the Academy, I took a lump of plaster and gave it a roughly figurative shape of a seated man and flung tar over it. Just like that, a violent reaction. Wildt ... he complained ... but what could I say to him? I held him in greatest esteem, and I was thankful, but I wanted to find a new path, one that was my own.”<sup>1</sup>

The creation of *Uomo nero* (1930) [9.8] was the manifesto of a new art, the beginning of a journey to the very origin of form. Fontana turned to Ossip Zadkine and Archipenko with a primitivist sculpture, in poor, ductile, malleable material, such as plaster or monochrome terracotta (black, blue or red). Along with the younger Renato Birolli and Aligi Sassu he was part of a generation of artists “in revolt”, who modernised expressionism as an alternative to the “fashion” of art based on history.

In 1931 he showed his innovative plastic production in Milan, in two solo shows at Galleria del Milione (in February and in December), and established a relationship with architectural rationalism through Giuseppe Terragni, Luigi Figini and Gino Pollini, Luciano Baldessari, the BBPR group (Belgioioso Banfi Peressutti Rogers g). The experimental 1931project for an unrealised monument to the sculptor Giuseppe Grandi [9.9], reveals the influence of Russian constructivism. He opened a studio on Via De Amicis, and met Teresita Rasini, whom he would marry in 1952.

In the 1930s his work as a sculptor adhered to a dialectical polarity between matter, colour, light and anti-matter. On the one hand he preferred earth

and volume on which he imprinted graffiti or a uniform colour, and on the other he was enamoured by the two-dimensional abstract purity of the sign, with a Surrealist streak of automatism. In 1934 and 1935 he created a series of threadlike abstract sculptures in coloured cement [9.11], connecting himself to the international Abstracción-Création movement. He exhibited the cycle in January 1935 in a solo show at Galleria del Milione [9.10], without success: many years later, he would identify abstract research as the origin of his reflections on spatial art, recognising that the time was not yet right in Italy.

In 1936 the first monograph on Fontana's work, edited by Edoardo Persico, was published by Campografico [9.12]. That same year, his fascination with materials took over, when he made his first ceramic sculptures at Tullio Massotti's Fabbrica Mazzotti in Albisola (Savona): he soon became the leading proponent of the renewal of contemporary majolica. His innate skill in modelling clay and the luminous, almost abstract colour of his sculptures combined with the organic, almost magmatic Mediterranean appeal [9.13]. In 1939 he explained certain principles of his poetics: “I am a sculptor not a ceramicist ... my plastic form ... is never dissociated from colour ... colour and form cannot be disassociated; they are born of an identical necessity ... the material is alluring; I could model the seabed, a statue a bunch of hair and imprint a virgin, compact colour to be amalgamated by fire. Fire is a kind of intermediary: it perpetuates form and colour.”<sup>2</sup>

He was in Paris in 1937 for the Universal Exposition, where he showed a few pieces in the ceramics pavilion, and between September and December he undertook an internship in the ceramics workshops of the Manufacture de Sèvres , specialising in glazing stoneware [9.14] and producing new works, which were shown in a solo exhibition that opened on 16 December at Galerie Jeanne Bucher Myrbor; in the French capital, where he planned to settle, he met Constantin Brancusi and Tristan Zara.

Returning to Milan in 1938 he showed his most recent works in two solo shows at Galleria del Milione [9.15], in April and December, becoming a master for younger artists such as Salvatore Fancello and Leoncillo. He took his chromatic and luminist research to extremes: he was drawn to ancient mosaic techniques and worked closely with craftsmen on a series of mosaic sculptures, including the hieratic female bust *Ritratto di Teresita* (1939).

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Lucio Fontana's 1943 work, "El rapto de las Sabinas" (The Rape of the Sabines) (41 SC 3)

**1940–1947**
Invited by his father to take part in the competition for the Flag Monumento alla Bandiera in Rosario, he returned to Argentina in April 1940. The spread of the Second World War forced him to stay overseas until 1947, the beginning of a key phase in his creation, which until then had not appeared on the international stage.

After a period spent in Rosario, he was forced to move to Buenos Aires in the wake of a falling out with his friend Vanzo. In 1943 he was appointed professor of sculpture at the Scuola di Belle Arti “Manuel Belgrano” and he worked as a ceramicist. That same year, his Milan studio was destroyed by bombing and much of his abstract work lost [fig. 9.19]. In the capital's vibrant atmosphere, he got to know Margherita Sarfatti, leader of the Novecento movement, who had taken refuge in Argentina. Despite awards and official recognition [9.16], after 1944 Fontana became close to the younger generation of artists, those who believed in a revival in Buenos Aires: he was witness to the formation of the Concretist avant-garde groups such as the Asociación Arte Concreto e Invención and the Movimiento Madi (Guyla Kosice, Carmelo Arden Quin, Tomàs Maldonado).

Following the death of his father in 1946, his stepmother Anita and his half-brother Geronzio decided to remain in Rosario: they later moved to Italy in the 1950s, to the village of Comabbio (Varese).

In 1946 Fontaine, along with Jorge Romero Brest, began teaching at the Scuola d'Altamira, the private art academy financed by the publisher Gonzalo Losada with the intention of creating a workshop of ideas and projects. Here, with a group of sympathetic students, he drafted what would become the *Manifiesto Blanco* [9.17], signed solely by the students: it is the first synthesis of his thinking on art. In his intuitive approach to form, his reliance on the subconscious and futurist principles of the synthesis of light, colour, sound and movement, the artist intended to express an alternative to the rationalist assumptions of concretism: “la razón no crea” (reason does not create), as he provocatively asserted. Another of the manifesto's fundamental assumptions was the awareness of a new era afforded by scientific innovations, in the wake of Albert Einstein's discovery of relativity: art must henceforth express space-time in its own way, referencing the cosmos.

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**1947–1958**
In the spring of 1947 Fontana left Argentina for good, to return to Milan [9.18]: along with the manifesto, he took with him a folder of studies and gestural drawings in which the theme of the nucleus and vortex recurs, in an almost anxious search for a new expressive dimension: one of these bears the inscription “concepto espacial”, a title that the artist would use for his work from that time on.

He initially lived in the hat shop of his partner Teresita, before opening a studio on Via Prina. He quickly became a leader of the Spatialist movement in Milan, supported by the gallerist Carlo Cardazzo (Galleria del Naviglio) and Milena

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Milani, among others. In the *Primo Manifesto dello Spazialismo* (1947) [figs 9.20–21], signed by a group of artists and intellectuals, he expressed the concepts of anti-matter and “gesture”, calling for the unity of art and science in overcoming the traditional genres of painting and sculpture. In the *Secondo manifesto* (1948) he is more explicit: he no longer thinks in such genres, but in new ways of expression through technological resources (including television). Fontana connects to Boccioni and Futurism, whose avant-garde legacy he wants to continue.

From 1947, in Milan and Albisola he produced an extraordinary series of ceramic sculpture, whose baroque figuration that drew the admiration of architects such as Marco Zanuso, the BBPR group and Gio Ponti, and would lead to major collaboration opportunities throughout the 1950s.

Invited to the 1948 Venice Biennale he exhibited ceramics, but above all, he also shared his experimental research: *Scultura spaziale* (1947), a ring of matter around a central void and *Concetto spaziale (uomo atomico)* (1948) [fig. 9.24], an interpretation of humanity in the atomic age, two stages in a path that would guide the artist to his famous perforated surfaces. It was the subsequent *Ambiente spaziale a luce nera* (Spatial environment with black light, 1949) that publicly clarified the concept first presented in the manifestos. The environment was realised at Galleria del Naviglio on 5 February 1949 with suspended fluorescent organic forms, illuminated by a new technology, Wood’s lamps: colour became space, forms fluctuated, challenging the traditional space-time continuum.

In 1949 Fontana arrived at the perforated *Concetti spaziali* (Spatial concepts), called *Buchi (Holes)*. Their meaning can be summed up in just a few words: “The discovery of the cosmos is a new dimension, it’s infinity, so I put a hole in this canvas, which was at the base of all of the arts and I created an infinite dimension, an x that, for me, is the basis of ... of ... all the ... the ... sorry uh, of all of contemporary art.”<sup>3</sup>

Fontana used one or more punches, first on large sheets of papers, and then on the raw or monochrome canvas: at times the holes he created from the back of the support accentuate its plasticity; the monochrome surface is reduced to the essential. In other cases the artist mixed sand and sequins with the paint to accentuate the evocation of celestial material. From the beginning, he conceived the *Holes* as experiments with artificial light sources. Light projections grazing or passing through the holes was documented during his solo exhibition at Galleria del Naviglio in May 1952 [9.22], the first time he showed the cycle. A few days later he organised a collective happening at Fiera di Milano in which he projected moving light

through the perforated surfaces during an experimental RAI TV television broadcast (*Manifesto del movimento spaziale per la televisione*, 1952) [9.23].

Among the environments of the 1950s, *Concetto spaziale*, a neon created for the 9th Triennale di Milano (1951) stands apart, a sign that wraps itself in itself, at a considerable height, against a blue ceiling.

In 1952 he moved his studio to Corso Monforte. He won the competition for the fifth door of the Milan Cathedral, but his design, considered too innovative was not realised. He designed “floral” motifs for the ceiling of the Piccolo Teatro di Milano and intensified his collaborations with architects and for experimental ephemeral installations, as well as creating flat interiors with Baldessari and Borsani, among others. Thus the spatial concept in the *Holes* is extended to ceramic production, with the invention of genuine “spatial ceramics”, with the intention of popularising his “formula”.

His solo exhibition of April 1953 at Galleria del Naviglio he presented *Holes* on unprimed canvases or on a monochrome grounds, with holes of different sizes drawing more linear motifs and geometries with awls of varying diameters, cylindrical cross-sections, and rows of triangular or rectangular cross-sections.

Invited to present a solo room of “sculpture” during the 27th Venice Biennale in 1954, he surprisingly presented, after an introduction of abstract sculptures from the 1930s and ceramics, nine perforated spatial concepts, the first time they were shown in an international exhibition. Critics were outraged and some works were vandalised during the exhibition.

In 1954 Fontana was one of the promoters of the International Ceramics Meeting / Incontro Internazionale della ceramica in Albisola where he met the protagonists of Art Informel (Karel Appel, Asger Jorn, Robert Matta and Wifredo Lam).

During the 1950s the *Holes* series utilised various materials: first, affixing fragments of Murano glass onto the canvas (which the artist called “Pietre” Stones) to imitate the effect of artificial lighten the surface of the painting, then with thicker material pastes and sequins (the “Barocchi” Baroque cycle): he exhibited the latter in 1957 in the exhibition *Between Space and Earth: Trends in Modern Italian Art* [9.25], at London’s Marlborough Fine Arts, Fontana’s first show in England.

Fontana made first contact with the Parisian art dealer Iris Clerf and met Yves Klein, who greatly admired him. The older artist reciprocated the esteem, purchasing a monochrome by Klein from the exhibition *Proposte monocrome Epoca blu* at Galleria Apollinaire in Milan in January 1957. He was enthusiastic about the “architectures of air” created by Klein and Walter Runhau, and invited them to present their projects at the 1960 Triennale di Milano, which he was curating, but his proposal wasn’t selected. In 1958 he had a major solo space

at the 24th Venice Biennale, where he showed his most recent work, *Gessi*, works on canvas made with coloured pastels, alongside *Inchiostri*, a series exploring a departure from Informel material, inspired by Japanese calligraphy, with aniline colours and collage forms, where a lyrical detachment inspired by “emptiness” is clear. His work began to attract the interest of critics such as Michel Tapié, Pierre Restany, Enrico Crispolti, Gillo Dorfles and Juan Eduardo Cirlot. From that time on, Fontana was also recognised as a master by younger artists of the Zero group: Piero Manzoni considered him a leader for his “lesson on an attitude towards life, the force to make art, the freedom to invent”.<sup>4</sup>

#### 1958–1968

At the end of 1958 Fontana, following the process of reduction to monochrome, arrives at the series of *Slashes*, perhaps his best-known work, the emblematic practice that still identifies him all over the world. He wrote to his friend Mario Bardini: “Dear Mario, either I’m a ‘saint’ or I’m a ‘madman’!!! But perhaps I am a saint; I’ve endured too much anguish that at this hour I should be shut in an asylum, instead these “attese” give me peace!!! In so many years of work, this is my happiest moment!”<sup>5</sup>

The *Slashes* are called “attesee” (waitings) a term that emphasises the meaning of temporal suspension: the tearing of the canvas is an apparent destructive act – in fact, it is an opening up to new possibilities, to unknown realities of the future. Thus the artist alludes to an “other” absolute space, an anticipation of a utopian immaterial condition of humanity. He reveals that the *Slashes* “are above all a philosophical expression, an act of faith in the infinite, an affirmation of spirituality. “When I sit in front of one my slashes, contemplating it, I’m overcome by a sense of 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.”<sup>6</sup> The series met with immediate critical success: exhibited for the first time at the Galleria del Naviglio (February 1959), in Paris at Galerie Stadler (presented by Michel Tapié) then at Documenta 2 in Kassel, the 5th Biennial of San Paolo, and finally in Rome, in the first true retrospective, curated by Crispolti at Galleria L’Attico in 1959 [fig. 9.27].

At the same time, in line with the recurring polarity found in his work, the artist returned to sculpture and in the summer of 1959 created the *Nature* cycle: large black terracotta spheres marked by lacerations and perforations, which he described as the manifestation of the transcendence of matter, almost the representations of nothingness. In 1959 he showed in London, Antwerp and Tokyo, thanks to the English dealers McRobert & Tunnard, with whom he had signed an exclusive worldwide contract until 1964. His collector friend, Carlo Damiano, who was once again living in London, was his personal manager, and helped him finalise contracts with English galleries.

While Lawrence Alloway published the *Manifesto Tecnico dello Spazialismo* in English, in the *Ark Journal of the Royal College of Art*, the *Nature* series was exhibited in Venice, in the exhibition *Dalla natura all’arte* in 1960 at the Palazzo Grassi [fig. 9.28]. A leader in the poetics of resetting, in 1960 he also took part in the major exhibition *Monochrome Malerei* at the Städtisches Museum in Leverkusen, curated by Udo Kultermann.

At the same he completed a new series called *Olii*, monochrome works characterised by an impasto of vinyl paste mixed with oil paint, leaving a graffiti-like trace and lacerations in the form large holes or tears rent through the layer of paint. From this 1961 experiment, the artist matured the short cycle *Venezie*, a tribute to the lagoon city presented in New York at the exhibition *Ten Paintings of Venice* at Martha Jackson Gallery in December 1961. It was the beginning of international success. The city of New York impressed him so much that with the intention of rendering the skyscrapers’ luminous glow, he launched a new series, “Metalli”, large reflective copper sheets that he covered with scratches and lacerations [fig. 9.30].

In 1963, as a further development of the *Olii*, Fontana created the series *Fine di Dio*, large oval canvases with perforated and torn monochrome surfaces, embellished with sequins. He exhibited them in Zurich at Gimpel Hanover Galerie in May, then at Galleria dell’Ariete in Milan in June. Impressed by the progress of genetics and molecular biology, Fontana was convinced that in the future the human being would be generated in the laboratory. Humanity would no longer need to imagine a god to explain the genesis of life. The particular egg-like shape is therefore a metaphor for life and alludes to the traditional “almond”, the mandorla in which the divine image is historically inscribed. The subsequent cycle *Teatrini*, which he continued until 1966, was an original response to Pop Art, with which the artist first came into contact at the 1964 Venice Biennale: these works are composed of a lacquered, coloured frame that surrounds a canvas marked by characteristic holes, a staging of the spatial concept.

In 1964 he signed a contract with the Marlborough Gerson Gallery and from that time on, his international fortunes increased, culminating in 1966: in February, the Marlborough organised a major retrospective *Lucio Fontana: The Spatial Concept of Art*, curated by Van der Marck at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, which travelled throughout the United States and Europe. He won the grand prize for painting at the 33rd Venice Biennale in 1966, with his *Ambiente Ovale Bianco*, an oval space where a number of white canvases with a single slash are arranged along the path of an imaginary labyrinth. From 1961 to 1968 he returned to the environments, in dialogue with a younger generation of artists in immersive spaces characterised by the motifs of holes or “slashes”. He also resumed using neon, now imbued with an emotional and fantastic function.

After being awarded the prize at the Venice Biennale, he took time off, in part for health reasons. He moved his studio to Comabbio (Varese), the town where he had ancient family roots and where he renovated his own villa.

In the spring of 1967 the solo exhibition *Lucio Fontana, concetti spaziali* opened at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, which gave him the chance to show new environments. His final works are characterised by a prevailing criterion of regular intervention on the canvas, in order to support the form, and by a new visual and conceptual rationalism: the holes of the 1966–1968 canvases were regularly traced according to profiles or elliptical shapes and the slashes, often singular become essential.

In 1967 Fontana launched his last cycle of works, “Ellissi”, characterised by an elliptical shape in lacquered wood, mechanically pierced, executed in Sergio Tosi’s Milanese workshop. The identically sized ellipses differ in their industrial monochrome hues and the arrangement of the “machine-made” holes; the were intended to be shown on a plinth. He exhibited them in December at the Marlborough Gallery in Rome along with a series of lacquered metal sculptures also called “pillole” (pills), in reference to the female contraceptive pill that had then recently become available. The artist was unable to attend the opening of his retrospective at the Stockholm Museum in the summer of 1967 because of a heart attack, and between November 1967 and February 1968 his health deteriorated. In spite of his condition, in 1968 he continued to work on the *Slashes*, *Oils* and *Holes*, and he even created a spatial environment for Galleria del Deposito di Genova in just one day. He died in Varese on 7 September 1968 from another heart attack. After his death, his wife Teresita Rasini Fontana [9.29] established the Fondazione Lucio Fontana, to protect her husband’s memory and work.

#### Notes

1. B. Rossi, “Settimo giorno”, *Dialogo con Lucio Fontana*, 22 January 1963.
2. Lucio Fontana, “Le mie ceramiche”, *Tempo*, 21 September 1939.
3. Fontana in Carla Lonzi, *Self-Portrait*, trans. Allison Grimaldi Donahue (Brussels: Divided Publishing, [1969] 2021), p. 151.
4. Piero Manzoni, “Da Milano”, *Il Pensiero Nazionale*, 1 November 1959.
5. Letter to Mario Bardini, Milan, 22 January 1959, in Piero Campiglio, ed., *Lucio Fontana. Lettere 1919-1968* (Milan: Skira, 1999), p. 148, n. 138.
6. Grazia Livi, “Incontro con Lucio Fontana”, *Vanità* 6, no. 13 (Autumn 1962): pp. 52–57.







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*Lucio Fontana. Ambienti Spaziali*, Germano Celant (dir.), New York, Gagosian Gallery (3 mai-30 juin 2012), Milan, Skira/New York, Gagosian Gallery, 2012.

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*Lucio Fontana. Scultura/Sculpture. « Io sono uno scultore e non un ceramista »*, Paris, galerie Karsten Grève (31 mars-23 juin 2012), Cologne, galerie Karsten Greve, 2012.

*Lucio Fontana. Rétrospective*, Choghakate Kazarian et Sébastien Gökalp (dir.), Paris, musée d’Art moderne de la Ville de Paris (25 avril-24 août 2014), Paris, Paris-Musées, 2014.

*Yves Klein/Lucio Fontana, Milano Parigi, 1957-1962*, Giorgio Zanchetti et Silvia Bignami (dir.), Milan, Museo del Novecento (17 octobre 2014-15 mars 2015), Milan, Electa, 2014.

*Lucio Fontana*, Enrico Crispolti (dir.), Londres, Tornabuoni Art (8 octobre-5 décembre 2015), Londres, Forma Edizioni, 2015.

*The Fontana I Love*, Luca Massimo Barbero (dir.), Milan, Galleria Tonelli (27 avril-31 juillet 2015), Milan, Galleria Tonelli/Vérone, Studio La Città, 2015.

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*Fontana-Leoncillo. Forma della Materia*, Francesco Stocchi (dir.), Milan, Fondazione Carriero (6 avril-9 juillet 2016), Milan, Fondazione Carriero, 2016.

*Lucio Fontana Sculptor. From the Earth to the Cosmo*, Londres, ML Fine Art (7 mars-12 mai 2017), Milan, Scalpendi Editore, 2017.

*Lucio Fontana. Ambienti/Environments*, Marina Pugliese, Barbara Ferriani et Vicente Todolí (dir.), Milan, Pirelli HangarBicocca (21 septembre 2017-25 février 2018), Milan, Mousse Edizioni, 2017.

*Lucio Fontana e Albisola*, Luca Bochicchio, Enrico Crispolti et Paola Valenti (dir.), Albisola, MuDA, Savone, Museo d’Arte di Palazzo Gavotti (collectione Milani-Cardazzo), Museo della Ceramica (2 août-2 décembre 2018), Albissola Marina, Vanillaedizioni/MuDA Books, 2018.

*Lucio Fontana: En el Umbral*, Iria Candela et Manuel Cirauqui (dir.), Bilbao, Guggenheim Museum (17 mai-29 septembre 2019), Bilbao, Guggenheim, 2019.

*Lucio Fontana. Omaggio a Leonardo. A Tribute to Leonardo*, Davide Colombo (dir.), Milan, Museo del Novecento (15 juin-12 septembre 2019), Milan, Scalpendi Editore, 2019.

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##### CRÉDITS PHOTOGRAPHIQUES

**Couverture :**

Lucio Fontana, *Concept spatial. Attentes*, 1966 Paris, Tornabuoni Art

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