

Elena Geuna  
**Lucio Fontana. Era Spaziale**

*My making of a hole was a radical gesture that ruptured the space of the painting and that said: after this we are free to do whatever we want.*

Lucio Fontana

On 15 May 1958, the USSR launches the satellite Sputnik 3 into orbit from the Baikonur Cosmodrome, in present-day Kazakhstan. The launch is part of the intense Soviet space programme, which one year before had sent into orbit around the Earth Sputnik 1, the first artificial satellite that is said to inaugurate the ‘Space Age.’

In the same year, in his Corso Monforte studio in Milan, Lucio Fontana performs one of the simplest and yet most radical gestures of the twentieth century. The artist cuts the canvas, establishing his famous pictorial cycle: the *Tagli* (Slahes). The series was conceived in 1958, being intensely developed throughout the following decade and lasting until the end of the artist’s life. Fontana came to the *Tagli* (Slahes) at the age of 59, at height of a long and multifaceted research process which had been undertaken since the 1920s with the intention of tracing a new art — both in sculpture and in painting — that would express pure artistic freedom.

Fontana’s ‘Spatial’ age precedes the conquest of space itself. It was formally established in 1947 with the publication of the *Primo Manifesto dello Spazialismo* (First Manifesto of Spatialism), following his return to Italy after a period spent in Argentina, the country in which he was born. In the manifesto — which gathers ideas developed in Argentina, previously elaborated in the *Manifesto Blanco* (White Manifesto) — the artist proposes a clear and radical progression of art, refuting the understanding of art and science as two distinct fields. According to him, ‘artists anticipate scientific developments, scientific developments always stimulate artistic gestures.’<sup>1</sup> Driven by the optimistic atmosphere of post-war Italy and a great confidence in progress, Fontana is influenced by the movement towards new frontiers in science and technology. The artist is interested in the first television transmissions, which were then in their infancy, and in the possibility of exploring tools offered by technological discoveries as creative stimuli<sup>2</sup>, such as the enormous potential of luminous media. Convinced that traditional artistic language has become outdated, Fontana’s research is in constant transformation. He experiments with material, form and language, overcoming academicism and distinctions, transforming and merging painting and sculpture — genres which, for the artist, must dialogue with an environmental dimension and be integrated in architecture, in a total synthesis of creativity, modernity and technological employment.

Bearing witness to a century of unprecedented change, Fontana identifies with his time, with the society of the Atomic Age that rushes towards modernity, driven by a desire for novelty and for going ‘beyond,’ to reach ever more distant galaxies, as it is demonstrated by the international preoccupation with outer space. Exemplary of this period is the extraordinary painting *Concetto spaziale, Attesa* (Spatial Concept, Waiting / Expectation), 1965, held in the collection of Florence’s Musei Civici. A single, precise cut stands at the centre of the white monochrome canvas; on the reverse, as is customary in later works, the artist fixes a layer of thin black gauze close to the slit, and writes *Allunaggio / morbido / dei Russi sulla Luna... / Era Spaziale* (Soft / landing / of the Russians on the Moon ... / Space Age). Fontana

seems to refer to Soviet probes launched into orbit in 1965 with the aim of attempting a soft descent on lunar soil.

Sixteen years before, in 1949, Fontana had pierced the canvas for the first time by employing an awl: his *Buchi* (Holes) — groupings of perforations drilled directly onto the material — burst into the art scene at the time with the urgency of an innovative pictorial practice, through which it was possible to re-think space, surface and matter. The inception of the *Buchi* (Holes) series must be contextualised in relation to the employment and experimentation of new technologies, and to the conception of space as a both a mental and physical category. As Fontana himself states, ‘Einstein’s discovery of the cosmos is the infinite dimension, without end.’ Piercing the canvas, the foundation of all art, means the breaking of the screen, the dissolution of distinctions between genres and the creation of an infinite dimension: ‘I make holes, infinity passes through them, there is no need to paint.’<sup>3</sup>

The rare employment of colour in the first works of the *Buchi* (Holes) series, executed between 1949 and 1950, amplifies the dematerialising effect of light when it traverses the perforations on the canvas-screen, which is painted white or kept in its natural state. The encounter between light and the pierced surface thus produces patterns of relief and depth, which, forming vortices and unpredictable constellations of holes, act as the main compositional elements in the work.

By understanding the pictorial space as a field of experimentation, Fontana overcomes the objective limits of the material not through a destructive act, but through a creative gesture that is as quick as it is calculated. The resulting precision of the incision expands space beyond the confines of matter, in an interruption of the two-dimensional field that opens itself towards three-dimensionality. ‘The *buchi*, the first *buchi*, were not about the destruction of painting,’ Fontana later explains, ‘but about a dimension beyond the picture, the freedom to conceive art through any media, through any form.’<sup>4</sup> In the artist’s *concetti spaziali* (spatial concepts) — a title which distinguishes his body of work — various typologies and expressive results converge. (These are gathered here in Fontana’s first exhibition in a public institution in Moscow.) The overcoming of traditional art forms corresponds to an untiring creative drive, which is manifested in various pictorial and sculptural series, such as *nature* (natures), each marked by a profound conceptual meaning, despite formal and technical differences.

1949 is also the year of *Ambiente Spaziale a luce nera* (Spatial Environment in Black Light), Fontana’s first ‘spatial environment’ presented at Galleria del Naviglio in Milan. The artist transformed the gallery into a dark and disorienting space, in which unknown forms — executed in papier-mâché and painted in fluorescent colours — descend from the ceiling to be rendered dynamic by ultraviolet light. These three-dimensional shapes are undefinable, unexpected figures, alien forms suspended in a cosmic space: the visitor’s disorientation, which suddenly passes from observer to actor, is total. The first photographs of the Earth and the Moon taken from space, which offered the possibility to clearly see the desert surface of the Lunar soil characterised by craters and depressions, had a strong impact on the period’s collective imaginary. On a visual level, they also influenced the spatialist artists. In 1952, they stated in the *Secondo Manifesto dello Spazialismo* (Second Spatialist Manifesto): ‘we have looked at ourselves from above, photographing the Earth from rockets in flights.’

Fontana ‘was thinking of those worlds, of the moon with these [...] holes, this atrocious unnerving silence, and the astronauts in a new world.’ Immensity, silence, darkness and

emptiness are the characteristics which seem to compose the cosmos, ‘these immense things billions of years old [...] Man arrives, in this deathly silence, in this anguish, and leaves a living sign of his presence.’<sup>5</sup> The artist’s words lead us to think of the infinite space beyond the perspective plane of the canvas, of the *attesa* (waiting) contained in space-time and of the duality of Fontana’s language — fullness and emptiness, finitude and infinity, presence and absence. This conception of a vast, potentially infinite space finds its highest point in the series *Fine di Dio* (End of God), of which the works are suspended between the cosmic and the divine, a suspension held by the balance of the oval form.

The first ‘spatial environment’ of 1949 would be followed by others throughout the artist’s career, particularly in his last years, with the last one being executed in 1968 and exhibited at Documenta 4 in Kassel.<sup>6</sup> This series of works allows us to understand the total dimension that Fontana wants to give his art, as well as his wish to involve the viewer in a confrontation with a space that is not only physical but also the unlimited space perceived by the mind. Since 1949 Fontana wished to exhibit a ‘spatial environment’ at the Biennale di Venezia. It is with an environment that is entirely white and of ovoid form — echoing *Fine di Dio* (End of God) and *Ellissi* (Ellipses), a cycle in which he was working at the time — that Fontana comes to the 33rd Biennale di Venezia in 1966, the same year in which he is awarded the Grand Prize for Painting. In this minimal space, Fontana hangs in wooden niches designed by the architect Carlo Scarpa five white monochrome canvases — four with the same dimensions and one slightly larger, each bearing a single vertical cut — thus creating a maze punctuated by his *concetti spaziali*. As in the following *Ambiente Spaziale* (Spatial Environments) executed two years later in Kassel, light is evenly distributed, departing from the darkness of the first 1949 work towards the purity of white, which heightens emotional and perceptive participation, the search for the essential, the end of every representation. In stark contrast to the ‘spatial environment’ conceived for the retrospective in the same year at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis,<sup>7</sup> Venice’s *Ambiente Spaziale* (Spatial Environments) attempts to erase the physicality of space to create one of pure thought, infinitely expandable. The spectator physically enters a closed place but, at the same time, mentally wonders as an astronaut in the cosmos.

In 1966, following the conclusion of a long spacewalk, astronaut Buzz Aldrin is selected to take part in Apollo 11. The mission would see Aldrin, alongside Neil Armstrong, set foot on the moon exactly fifty years ago. Fontana, who was born in the last year of the nineteenth century, would not come to see the televised worldwide broadcasting of this historic landmark. Fontana’s moon remains that of his canvases, a silver surface that is reflected in the Venetian lagoon.

<sup>1</sup> Lucio Fontana, Beniamino Joppolo, Giorgio Kaiserlian, Milena Milani, ‘Primo Manifesto dello Spazialismo’ in E. Crispolti, Lucio Fontana. Catalogo Ragionato, Skira, Milan 2006, vol. I, pp. 115–114 (p. 115).

<sup>2</sup> ‘Neither radio nor television could have sprung from the human mind without a pressing need that goes from science to art.’ (Ibid., p.115).

<sup>3</sup> E. Crispolti, p. 65.

<sup>4</sup> C. Lonzi, Autoritratto, De Donato Editore, Bari, 1969, p. 322.

<sup>5</sup> Cit. in Sarah Whitfield, Lucio Fontana, Hayward Gallery, London, 1999, p. 194.

<sup>6</sup> C.f. Lucio Fontana. Environments, Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan; Mousse Publishing, Milan 2018.

<sup>7</sup> This *Ambiente Spaziale* was comprised of a dark rectangular room with two corridors, one of entry and one of exit, marked by lines of holes illuminated by neon green light.