

Luca Massimo Barbero
‘A Butterfly in Space Excites My Imagination’. Notes on Lucio Fontana

‘I was born in Rosario, Santa Fe province, on the banks of the Paraná River. My father was a superb sculptor, as I wanted to be. I could have been a superb painter, too, like my grandfather, but realised that such specific art terms are not for me: I felt I was a Spatial artist, and nothing else. A butterfly in space excites my imagination; having freed myself from rhetoric, I lose myself in time and begin my holes.’¹

Lucio Fontana

The extensive selection of first-rate works brought together in this exhibition enables us to fully appreciate the extraordinary energy and distinctive polymorphism of Lucio Fontana. In the collective consciousness his work is sometimes superficially identified almost exclusively with the gesture of the ‘slashes’, and also with the monochrome nature of some of his works. But in fact Fontana’s work would be more correctly imagined as a crystal of artistic creation with many facets, each one saturated with original content, testimony to his place among pioneers of the modern art since the 1930s. His findings played a crucial role in the development of Italian and European art during those years: even then the most perspicacious and progressive critics called him a ‘legend.’² Those years were marked by the onset of avant-garde experiments and a departure from the canons of sculpture, which was largely associated with Neoclassicism inspired by important masters of the early 20th century such as Maillol.

His works are indisputable evidence of unorthodox thinking and the unwillingness to connect with any movement or direction by inertia, as evidenced by his extensive contribution to the international context of investigation into the possibilities of abstract art. He exhibited at the Galleria Il Milione in Milan and participated in the *Abstraction-Création* association in Paris, thereby keeping far removed from the ‘orthodox’, rigorous understanding of non-figurative art. In Fontana’s work the figurative organically coexists and combines with the abstract; his art is extremely sensitive to the spirit of the times and does not tolerate formal distinctions and labels – it strives towards the ‘life in art’, as Edoardo Persico noted in the mid-1930s.³ This is demonstrated by *Uomini a cavallo* (Horseback Riders), a cement panel from 1932 using the ‘sgraffito’ technique, the fruit of singular experiments with colour and technique. Signs scratched on the surface are devoid of substantive content, they merely trace a contour around figures endowed with primitive power, almost as if these represented the cyclops of the new era. Unnatural, harsh colours are used to emphasise blocks, masses and profiles together with silhouettes to create an illusion of spatiality, thereby echoing the abstract sculptures of that period.

Duilio Morosini commented that the appearance of colour in the sculpture signified a ‘sharp turn in Fontana’s work, a new connection between sensory experience and fantasy.’⁴ Colour begins to play an especially important role in the ceramics that captivated the artist from 1935 to 1936. In parallel he experimented with the ancient technique of mosaics. We read in a letter to the poet and

ceramicist Tullio d'Albisola written in 1940: 'I am now making a jellyfish with a diameter of three metres for the Triennale. The collector Simonetti has ordered a mosaic statue from me. Matter is a bitch, but a charming one! Don't be upset if I cheat on ceramics!'⁵ *Ritratto di Teresita* (Portrait of Teresita) from the same year uses original expressive methods: the form loses its materiality due to light shining on the smalto fragments. This piece already contains all Fontana's personal searches for the interaction of plastic forms, space, colour and light. The second half of the decade, when the artist returned in 1947 to Italy after spending the war years in Argentina, brought an entirely new chapter to his work.

In 1946 Fontana and his students from the Altamira Academy issued the *Manifesto Blanco* (White Manifesto), which became a starting point for development of the avant-garde in postwar art and laid the foundations for the emergence of Spatialism, which made its debut in Milan in 1947. This and all the subsequent Spatialist manifestos were deeply involved in Futurism and imbued with an innovatory interest in scientific and technological discoveries. It stresses the conceptual, incorporeal value of artistic gesture. This direction of pursuit is not reduced to stylistic devices, but refers to a new vision of art associated with the new era that confronts humankind. 'Artists anticipate the achievements of science, and scientific achievements always entail the achievements of art. The human spirit could not have produced either radio or television without the urgent need transmitted from science to art. It is impossible to imagine that man would not progress from canvas, bronze, gypsum and plasticine to a pure, ethereal, universal, soaring art.'⁶

During those years Fontana was busy reviewing his own ideas from the 1930s in the quest for abstraction of a new kind. It was then that he produced the first 'Spatial Concepts': their roots can be traced back to sketches made in 1946, also entitled 'Spatial Concepts' but in Spanish, *Concepto espacial* (46 DSP 23 – 46 DSP 25). 'Already in 1946 I no longer called my works 'pictures', calling them from the very start *concetti spaziali*, since for me painting amounts wholly to an idea. The canvas is required to capture this idea. What I am doing now is just a variation on the theme of my two fundamental techniques: holes and slashes. This was the period when they talked about "planes": "surface plane", "deep plane" etc. And when I made the hole, this was a radical gesture to break through the space of the picture. My way of saying: after this, we are free to do whatever we please.'⁷

The *Scultura spaziale* (Spatial Sculpture) of 1947 presented a year later at the first postwar Biennale in Venice marked one of the highest points in Fontana's creative career, as so far the best achievement of a sculptor nearly 50 years old that young people revered as a great master and teacher, and unbiased critics rated among the most interesting artists of his epoch. From that moment on, as the exhibition brilliantly demonstrates, his work would develop in two directions: on the one hand Fontana moved towards pure abstraction, looking for the ideal matter, while on the other he was exploring the sphere of sculpture and ceramics that was entirely figurative in concept, yet violated all canons and boundaries – a vivid example of this would be the *Gallo* (Cock) of 1948. His figures seem to arise as the result of tectonic shifts that transform matter. Fontana does

not sculpt, carve or grind: under his sensitive fingers the inert mass springs to life and changes the shape of space, the idea of emptiness assumes a plastic form.

In 1949 the first *Concetti spaziali* (Spatial Concepts) appeared with perforations on the surface of the canvas: 'Into the holes I make, infinity seeps from the other side,' declared Fontana in an interview with critic Carla Lonzi during which he emphasised the ideological and spatial potential of the technique. 'I make a hole in the very canvas that lay at the basis of all the arts, and create a new, infinite dimension. This is precisely the idea, a new dimension corresponding to the cosmos.'⁸ Making holes in the canvas means perforating space and time, creating spatial screens where the surface dematerialises under the influence of light. This is exactly what happens in his first legendary experiments with moving light objects, shown on a trail-blazing Italian television broadcast in 1952. These investigations took place in parallel with the development and expansion of Spatialism, which today is considered one of the most influential and significant tendencies of the postwar period.

In the *Concetti spaziali* of the 1950s we can trace how Fontana's inventions took diverse forms, with constellations turning into bizarre baroque compositions or fantastic sea creatures, as in the work *Concetto spaziale, Forma* (Spatial Concept, Form) of 1957, with its expressive aniline colouring. In another *Concetto spaziale* (57 G 26) of the same year an organic floating form materialises from the surface of the canvas, and from this amazing sculptures on legs develop (*Concetto spaziale*, 1958), fantastic spatial flowers or suspended screens, speaking of celestial bodies and the infinity of the cosmos.

The term *Concetto spaziale* (Spatial Concept) finds a new interpretation with profound meaning: *Concetto spaziale, Attese* (Spatial Concept. Expectations). That is how, after 1958, Fontana's most famous cycle *Tagli* (Slashes), was designated. That is what Fontana's most famous cycle 'Cuts' was called after 1958. As the artist himself explained, 'cuts are primarily a philosophical thesis, evidence of faith in infinity, indicative of a desire for the spiritual. When I sit down in front of the slashed canvas and begin to examine it my spirit is quickly restored, I feel liberated from the slavery of matter and belong from that moment to the absolutely infinite expanse of the present and future.'⁹ The 'Expectations' series was first shown to the public at the Milan Galleria del Naviglio in February 1959 before being exhibited in Paris at the Galerie Stadler in March. It symbolically denotes the motivational yet at the same time narrative essence of art. *Attesa* (Waiting, Expectation) invites many different critical interpretations, but above all this is a synthesis, and in contrast to the *buco* (hole), the passage of time reflected in a mysterious narrative; the holes with their rhythm and transience offered nothing of the kind. The cut summarises and unites many decades of reflections and agonising searches linked to the phenomenon of space, its infinity, and most importantly, to the vast semantic significance of the gesture and the intention that complicates the work itself.

Another series in the *Concetti spaziali* (Spatial Concepts) that the author affectionately calls his *Teatrini* (Little Theatres) forms a parallel polarity to the comprehensive completion and clarity

of *Tagli* (Slashes). Work on this cycle proceeded from 1964 to 1966: here the canvas is treated as a backdrop on which bright, varnished frames are superimposed like theatre scenery. Against the background of the canvas emerge wavy silhouettes resembling now a landscape and now irregular spheres clearly related to the sculptures from the 'Natura' cycle: they were first presented in Venice in 1960, at a large-scale exhibition entitled 'From Nature To Art', and then at the Galerie Iris Clert in Paris. The artist himself called his sculptures 'cosmic': 'these are frozen forms, but you feel in them a desire to breathe life into inert matter.'¹⁰

In 'Expectations' the boundaries of the picture are called into question, and in parallel the series *I Quanta* (*Quanta*, 1959–1960) appears in Fontana's work – these are polygonal fragments of canvas that take very different and sometimes even rhomboid forms that can sometimes be arranged in space in arbitrary combinations. *Quanta* anticipated painting on *shaped canvases* and marked the next breakthrough, a new dimension of painting.

Fontana's work from the 1960s is characterised by a rich simultaneity of exploration, as well as versatile and imaginative inventions. An illustrative example is the cycle deservedly hailed by contemporary critics and entitled *Fine di Dio* 'End of God' (1963–1964).¹¹ 'For Fontana the avant-garde was a natural vocation,' wrote Enrico Crispolti, 'the profound need to adapt to the rhythm of the continuous inventions and innovations of our century [...]. For him the avant-garde was not a superficial influence, but [...] a process of continuous creative development.'¹² Even today Fontana's adventurousness and unfailing imagination represent a priceless and inexhaustible treasury, full of unexpected revelations.

¹ Lucio Fontana's manifesto is quoted from: *Pittori che scrivono. Antologia di scritti e disegni*, a cura di L. Sinisgalli, Edizioni della Meridiana, Milano 1954, p. 115, reprinted in: *Lucio Fontana. Manifesti, scritti, interviste*, a cura di A. Sanna, Abscondita, Milano 2015, p. 59.

² See E. Persico, *Verso uno stile europeo*, in 'L'Italia letteraria', a. X, n. 31, 4 agosto 1934.

³ Ibid.

⁴ D. Morosini, *Fontana*, in *Lucio Fontana. 20 disegni*, Edizioni di Corrente, Milano 1940, p. 15.

⁵ Lucio Fontana's letter to Tullio d'Albisola from Milan, 22 February 1940. See *Lettere di Lucio Fontana a Tullio d'Albisola*, a cura di D. Presotto, Liguria, Savona 1987, p. 102.

⁶ *Spaziali [First Spatial Manifesto]*, Milan, 1947. The authors of the manifesto were Lucio Fontana, Beniamino Joppolo, Giorgio Kaiserlian and Milena Milani.

⁷ D. Palazzoli, *Intervista con Lucio Fontana*, in 'bit', n. 5, Milano, ottobre-novembre 1967.

⁸ L. Fontana in C. Lonzi, *Autoritratto*, De Donato, Bari 1969.

⁹ G. Livi, *Incontro con Lucio Fontana*, 'Vanità', VI, 13, autunno 1962.

¹⁰ L. Fontana in C. Lonzi, *Autoritratto*, De Donato, Bari 1969.

¹¹ Cfr. *Lucio Fontana: Fine di Dio*, a cura di E. Crispolti, Forma, Firenze 2017.

¹² E. Crispolti, *Un'avventura creativa*, in *Lucio Fontana*, Fidia edizioni d'arte, Lugano 1991, p. 12.