

## GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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#### Space Man | Lucio Fontana at Gagosian

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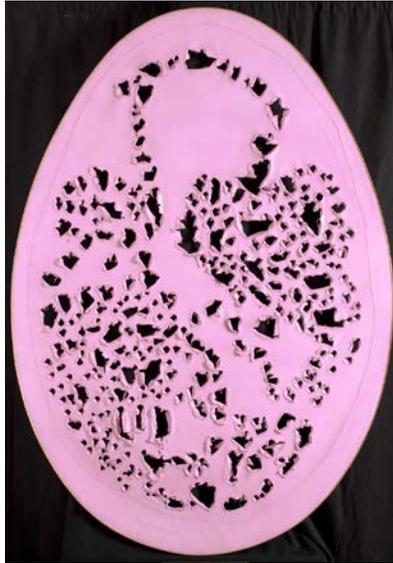
“Concetto spaziale, Notte d’ Amore a Venezia,” 1961. Courtesy of the Fondazione Lucio Fontana and Gagosian Gallery. Photograph by Robert McKeever

“Lucio Fontana: Ambienti Spaziali” is the latest blockbuster survey show at the Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea. Curated by Germano Celant, who was assisted by Valentina Castellani, a Gagosian director, and in collaboration with the Fondazione Lucio Fontana in Milan, the exhibition includes more than 100 works by the Argentine-born Italian avant-garde artist (1899-1968), including six of the installations that are known as “ambienti spaziali,” or “spatial environments.”

Fontana, who was trained in classical sculpture, is best known for his slash paintings, in which he took a sharp knife to a painted canvas, violating the supremacy of the painting’s surface to suggest a spatial element beyond the two-dimensional confines of the medium. (In early examples of these paintings, you can see through the slash to the wall behind the painting, but in later works Fontana created a black gauze backdrop behind the slashes for a more literal implication of deep space.) But in 1949, as he explored the space behind the canvas, Fontana also began to create his installations, the first of which, “Spatial Environment in Black Light,” consists of a darkened room in which sculptural papier-mâché forms covered with fluorescent paint are illuminated by black light. He saw these environments, as a quote on one of the gallery walls proclaims, as “Neither painting nor sculpture, luminous forms in space — emotional freedom to the viewer.”

The exhibition, which was skillfully designed by the architect Annabelle Selldorf, intersperses Fontana’s paintings and environments, including the lyrical “Spatial Light,” a reproduction of a 1951 neon sculpture

that hung above the monumental staircase of the Triennale di Milano. It looks like an enormous light drawing and must have seemed startling for its time. There are also examples of the paintings known as Buchi (Italian for holes), in which the artist evoked the spatial by poking holes in his canvases, some of which are also encrusted with jagged pieces of colored glass whose richness is at odds with the violent quality of the perforations. The element of incongruity is even more pronounced in “La Fine di Dio” (“The End of God”), a series of large, egg-shaped canvases whose shiny surfaces, covered with oil paint in Easter-egg colors, are similarly punctured.



“Concetto spaziale, La fine di Dio,” 1963. Fondazione Lucio Fontana. Courtesy Gagosian Gallery. Photograph by Robert McKeever

The place where these currents come together is in the installation that Fontana made in 1968 for the art exhibition Documenta 4. A tiny, cramped labyrinth with an illuminated scrim ceiling leads to a space with a single, slashed white panel. There’s something almost shocking about the slash, which is both violent and liberating, a relief from the labyrinth’s claustrophobic confines. But this installation is also the most overt example of what the exhibition’s curators see as Fontana’s anticipation of the work of the Light and Space artists — like Doug Wheeler, James Turrell and Robert Irwin — of the 1970s.