Final Cut: At Gagosian, Lucio Fontana, Beyond the Slash

Germano Celant shows the Italian master’s environmental side

By Andrew Russeth

On Monday morning, Italian curator Germano Celant, a compact man with a mane of white hair, was using a flashlight to navigate a series of cavernous spaces in the Gagosian Gallery on West 24th Street, which he and a team of assistants were gradually transforming into “environments,” ethereal, room-filling installations by the late Italian artist Lucio Fontana.

“This is a very small environment that I saw him do in Genoa, my town,” he said, gesturing around a narrow passageway blocked off by a black curtain. The space inside was dark, and eerily sublime, containing just a few dabs of fluorescent paint lit with a black light. The piece was originally made in 1967, the year before Fontana died at age 69. “It was in a shop,” Mr. Celant recalled. “On the beach.”

Mr. Celant was a young writer when he met Fontana in Italy in the early ’60s. “I was 22, 23—doing a magazine and collecting news. Like how you are!” He made a scribbling motion on his palm with a finger. “I went to see his studio, and he showed me work. I was so enthusiastic. He told me, he said, ‘Take a piece.’ But I was shy. You know, you can’t take one.”

Today, Mr. Celant is an éminence grise, arguably Italy’s greatest living art critic—he coined the term *arte povera* in 1967 to describe then-new sculptures made from humble materials like burlap and straw by artists like Mario Merz, Alighiero Boetti and Giuseppe Penone—and Fontana is inscribed in the art history books for his iconic slashed-canvas paintings, which regularly fetch hefty sums at auction.
The Gagosian exhibition, which opens this week, is a survey of Fontana’s career—there is a whole room dedicated to the slashes and another to his series of ovular canvases punctured with holes that are subtitled La fine di dio (“The End of God”)—but the environments, seldom seen, are the stars of the show.

Mr. Celant stood in a room full of slash paintings, recalling his dismay upon visiting Fontana’s first museum retrospective, at the Guggenheim in 1977. “My problem was that, when I went to the Guggenheim, this was all there was,” he said, motioning toward a typical slash. “I said, ‘Lucio, I knew him, but that’s not him, only.’ But in America you try to make a logo of the art—you know, Dan Flavin is the neon, Ryman is white ... It’s just a way of communicating facts. So that’s how he was stylized.”

He indicated a wall near the entrance of the gallery, not far from the artwork that will greet visitors to the show, a nine-foot-wide copper painting with seven deep gashes. “The Ugo Mulas photos will be here,” he said. Mulas is another reason for Fontana’s reputation as the Zorro of painting. He was to Fontana what Hans Namuth, photographer of the famous drip technique, was to Pollock: a mythmaker. A shot from 1964 shows Fontana in his sunlit studio facing a blank canvas with a knife in his hand. In another he presses it against the canvas. Slash! And the work is done. In fact, the process of making these sumptuous, sloping cuts was quite a bit more involved.

Fontana titled many of his later paintings Concetto Spaziale—Spatial Concept, which conveyed his desire to expand the traditional parameters of painting. Lately, collectors have been snapping them up at increasingly high prices: The auction record for a slash was set just before the 2008 market crash when a pristine red one from 1965 sold for $13.2 million, according to the Artnet price database. Other prized Fontanas have gone for as much as $20.5 million. Gagosian has sourced more than 150 works for the present show, in close collaboration with Fontana’s Milan–based foundation.

But it is his environments, of which there are a whopping six at Gagosian—“Normally, in any Fontana show there is only one, just to give a kind of example,” Mr. Celant said—that would seem to best exemplify Fontana’s aspiration to create “artificial forms, rainbows of wonder, luminous writing,” as he put it in a 1948 manifesto. He wanted, he wrote earlier, to effect a “synthesis of physical elements: color, sound, movement time and space—synthesis as the completion of psycho-physical unity.”

“The idea is to prove that he’s not only a producer of objects, but also that he was always involved with architecture and space,” Mr. Celant said, comparing the environments to earlier experiments by Futurists and Constructivists, but also to churches of the Baroque period—soaring admixtures of painting, architecture and design. But they also looked forward, seeming to prefigure everything from California Light and Space art of the 1960s to the hallucinogenic rooms of Yayoi Kusama and Tetsumi Kudo.

The earliest of Fontana’s environments at Gagosian was originally made in 1949. “We cannot enter here,” Mr. Celant said, pausing at a taped-off entryway. He then pondered his own words for a moment, ducked under the tape, clicked on his flashlight and led the way inside. A black light cast a large papier-mâché sculpture that was waiting to be raised to the ceiling in faint purple light. One critic at the time compared it to a “cabalistic grotto,” and likened the sculpture, that “large, tentacular and incomplete form” to “a fossilized dinosaur” and “the spine of a mammoth.” Another critic likened the experience of walking inside to attending the “mysterious and macabre booths at the carnival.” It’s serene, but also disquieting. (Fontana called the work “the sign of the void.”)
Fontana began conceiving of the environments in Italy in the late 1940s, after spending some time in Argentina, where he was born. He was already in his late forties by then. He had fought in World War I and had been making figurative and abstract sculptures for decades, having learned the trade from his sculptor father. But it was his abstractions—headlined by that famous slash—that would define his career in the following 20 years.

Another room at Gagosian is bathed in cool white light from a swirl of neon lines that span more than 30 feet across the gallery’s ceiling, an environment that Fontana conceived for the 1951 Triennale in Milan. “It was destroyed long ago,” Mr. Celant said. But here it is, constructed anew from sketches and documentation. “That’s exactly the size and the scale,” he added, gazing up in approval.

Later, after walking through rooms of paintings, he slipped into another environment, this one a cozy square room, perfectly comfortable for just two people (though it was difficult to gauge its precise dimensions in the dark), and pointed out another black light and what he referred to as “two lines.” Sure enough, a line of faint white dots slowly grows brighter and brighter as your eyes adjust. “Here it comes,” he said quietly, as if issuing a warning.

Like the massive, rusted steel labyrinths by Richard Serra that took over this same space last fall, the Fontana environments are pleasant places to get lost in for an afternoon. The final one in the show was originally made for the Documenta exhibition in 1968. It is composed of a short hallway that leads into a rabbits’ warren of spaces with crisp white walls. Mr. Celant guided us along the narrow passage, explaining that it will be brightly lit, and that gauze will block the skylights above.

He ducked around a corner, crouched down to examine a vertical strip of tape that stretched almost the entire length of the tall wall, where the path will reach its end, then peeled the tape from the bottom to expose a deep gash that had been carefully worked into the dry wall. “And here,” he said, “you’ll have a cut.”