

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

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Slashes, Scribbles and Delirium

‘Lucio Fontana: Ambienti Spaziali’ at Gagosian in Chelsea

By Roberta Smith



Robert McKeever/Gagosian Gallery, Fondazione Lucio Fontana, Milan

Lucio Fontana: Ambienti Spaziali at the Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea thwarts a simple reading of Fontana as a purist of dematerialized art. Above, “Neon Structure.”

Photographs of the peripatetic Italian Modernist Lucio Fontana (1899-1968) often show a neat, slightly imperious man who resembles a successful banker relaxing after work in his starched white shirt, black vest and dark tie. He is outfitted thus in a series of images taken by the Italian photographer Ugo Mulas in 1964. Showing the artist in his studio calmly cutting one of his long signature slashes in a pristine canvas, they give a restrained, dignified start to the extraordinary exhibition of Fontana’s work at the Gagosian Gallery in Chelsea. But look out.

The show immerses the visitor in a kind of delirium of agitated, decidedly unbanker-ish artistic thought, providing a freewheeling, profoundly experiential account of the most radical phase of Fontana’s innovative, slightly daft efforts. Motivated by his desire to get beyond mere art objects to what he called “spatialist art,” Fontana began in the late 1940s to gouge small holes and cut slashes in stretched canvases, making works that he uniformly titled “Concetto Spaziale,” or “Spatial Concept.”

Then he began experimenting with “Ambienti Spaziali,” or “Spatial Environments,” that merged architecture, painting and sculpture, and used new materials. “There cannot be an evolution in art with stone and paint,” he wrote.

Gagosian’s “Lucio Fontana: Ambienti Spaziali” is the most comprehensive survey of Fontana’s work to be staged in the United States. Inspiring if also flawed, it is just the kind of show that the product-driven art world needs. It covers the final two decades of the artist’s career, wending through some dozen rooms with nearly 70 “Spatial Concept” paintings — wonderful gouged works and a few too many of his relatively slick slashed ones — and a handful of bronze orb-shaped sculptures.

But the primary revelations here are six walk-in environments and an immense scribble of neon suspended from the ceiling. Works of this kind have never been exhibited in this country; they are accompanied here by lively, rarely seen drawings and studies.

The exhibition has been organized by the Italian art critic and curator Germano Celant and Valentina Castellani, a director at Gagosian, in collaboration with the Fondazione Lucio Fontana in Milan, where the artist spent most of his career. It presents Fontana as a visionary and risk taker, who, like many of his ilk, was slightly ahead of his time (and, often, his materials) and did not always achieve his goals.

But it is part of this show’s wisdom and relevance to remind us that art-making is a process of research and striving, not only polished fait accompli. The earliest environment is a mildly funky grottolike black-light affair that Fontana exhibited in Milan in 1949. It consists of a flotilla of distended, amoeboid papier-mâché forms and accompanying curlicues hanging from the ceiling and highlighted by fluorescent paints so new that Fontana had to import them from Britain. In a kind of past-future time warp that is often characteristic of Fontana, it suggests both docking spaceships and levitating fossils, as well as, oddly enough, one of Frank Stella’s mid-1970s Exotic Bird reliefs, disassembled.

Born in Argentina in 1899 to Italian parents, Fontana was raised in Italy and fought in its army in World War I. Returning to Argentina in 1922, he trained with his father, a sculptor, in stone, ceramics and metal before going back to Milan six years later. He had his first gallery exhibition there in 1930 and progressed ecumenically through the decade, working in a range of styles and mediums, in both fine and applied art. On the one hand, he made geometric paintings and planar sculptures that earned him membership in the Abstraction-Creation group in Paris, where he spent time. On the other, in Italy he executed public commissions for the Fascist government, reiterating Classically inspired figures, horses and chariots in flamboyantly modeled forms worked up from his clay maquettes.

In yet another vein, around 1940 he also made streamlined female portrait busts, tiled in polychrome glass, that point deliciously toward Pop by way of Byzantine mosaics and Art Deco. Then, while Fontana was sitting out World War II in Argentina, where he started an art school, his environmental-art ideas began to percolate. By 1947 he was back in Milan. Allied bombs had destroyed his studio, giving him, in a sense, a clean start.

The works at Gagosian concentrate on the relatively pure, abstract side of Fontana’s final phase, which is not exactly the whole story; his ecumenical approach continued. The exhibition’s lavish

catalog not only reproduces other environments, but it also contains images of suave ceiling decorations and vaguely figurative ceramic pieces. Yet this show posits his environmental art as his ticket to history.

It begins by showing him pushing literally through his canvas and burlap surfaces. The early gouged paintings compete with Pollock in their physical forthrightness. Some feature woolly stained forms; most are embellished with chunks of colored Murano glass. Their swirling compositions are at once earthy and cosmic, garishly decorative and atmospheric.

Since the show's curators persuaded many lenders to allow their loans to be exhibited without their usual glass-fronted frames, the early paintings' colors sing and their eccentric assortments of lumps and holes can be closely scrutinized. (Note for example the different "marks" achieved by using square or round punches, or gouging from the back of the canvas instead of the front.)

As befits someone trained as a sculptor, Fontana approached painting with inspired, literal-minded impatience, as a door to another realm. Soon he was through it and moving fast.

In 1951, two years after his first papier-mâché environment, he made one of modern art's first neon sculptures, creating an immense looping spiral that caroms and curves across the ceiling of the show's largest gallery with the vivacity of an intimate doodle. Similarly advanced is an environment from 1959-60 that consists of a big hanging cube defined by parallel strips of white and blue neon, as if made from "Spatial Concept" slices liberated from canvas.

But even as his environments pointed beyond painting, Fontana never gave it up. He rejiggered and reconstituted its components in space and on the wall for the rest of his life.

Two black-light environments from the mid-'60s spread painting thin with wraparound constellations of glowing dots reminiscent of Miró. Back on canvas, he experimented with motifs, stretcher shape and paint densities and, always, various forms of penetration. Three paintings inspired by Venice are implacably muscular, including "Spatial Concept: Venetian Lagoon," which evokes moonlit waves with an almost ham-handed combination of thick silver paint, horizontal slices and scratches, and a big black circular outline.

And then there's "Spatial Concept (Trinity)," from 1966, executed here for the first time from plans recently discovered among Fontana's drawings. Splitting the difference between painting and environment, it features three large canvases lathered with white paint: two gouged with parallel lines flanking one punctured with a big spiral. They are loosely framed by three large curved elements made of plywood wrapped in blue cloth and attached directly to the wall. A long one, placed along the bottom of the wall, swells gently upward, suggesting the earth's ocean-covered curve; two shorter ones, dipping down from the wall's upper corners, might be clouds, but also hint at a proscenium arch and curtains. The work is a joyous, slightly comedic Ascension: painting, pure and white, in something like its own puppet show, rising to heaven.

Fontana was great, but he was also all over the place — a theorist, an artist and a hands-on artisan making it up as he went along. This magnanimous exhibition presents him more fully to an American audience than anything before, and it is varied enough to thwart a simple reading of him as a purist whose efforts pointed in only one direction, toward the heady ether of dematerialized art. A more complete account of his career in all its sprawling, contradictory,

polymorphousness would present an immense curatorial challenge, but would be an even greater gift.