

The New York Times
January 24, 2019

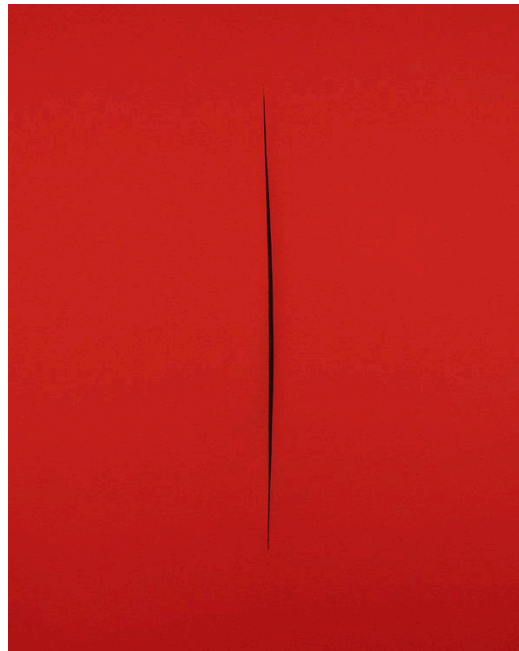
GAGOSIAN

The New York Times

Slashing His Way to the Sublime

Lucio Fontana made abstraction dangerous by breaking through the surface of a painting. His innovations astound at New York museums.

Holland Cotter



At the Met Breuer, a detail of Lucio Fontana's "Spatial Concept, Expectation," from 1967. He was a pioneer of things we take for granted: installation and new technologies. ©Fondazione Lucio Fontana/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome; Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

The art of the Argentine-Italian modernist Lucio Fontana looks like it comes from another planet, and it might as well, given how seldom we see it in New York. The exhibition “Lucio Fontana: On the Threshold,” at the Met Breuer, with spillovers at the Met Fifth Avenue and El Museo del Barrio, is the artist’s first museum survey here in more than 40 years.

This wouldn’t be especially notable — plenty of his Latin American peers never get seen at all — were Fontana, who died in 1968, not so influential a figure. The “threshold” of the title refers not only to the early phase of his career, which the show highlights, but also to his position as a forebear of contemporary art as we know it. Things we take for granted — installation, new media and the poly-disciplinary impulse that defines so many 21st-century careers — Fontana pioneered in the 1950s.

Part of the reception problem lies precisely in his breadth. When an artist toggles between figurative sculpture and television art, where do you land? Then there's the pretty-ugly look of the work. Some of it is just weird as hell. Painting surfaces are punched or slashed through, or ooze as if with eruptive disease. Some of his ceramic sculptures suggest fecal deposits; others, pods swollen with alien life. His colors can be crazy: screaming pink, bruised blue. Pictures in one series are all starchy white; those in another glint with chunks of colored glass, embedded like jewels on reliquaries.



"The Baroque Chair," 1946, plaster. © Fondazione Lucio Fontana/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome; Vincent Tullo for The New York Times. "Olympic Champion (Waiting Athlete)," 1932, painted plaster. © Fondazione Lucio Fontana/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome; Vincent Tullo for The New York Times.



"Portrait of Teresita," 1940. Covered with gilded mosaic chips, it's part Byzantine, part Art Deco and a lot Bette Davis. © Fondazione Lucio Fontana/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome; Vincent Tullo for The New York Times. "The Warrior," 1949, glazed ceramic. © Fondazione Lucio Fontana/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome; Vincent Tullo for The New York Times.

Fontana started out professionally as a maker of commemorative and devotional art. He was born in Rosario, Argentina. His parents were Italian immigrants, his father a sculptor who specialized in funerary monuments for a largely Roman Catholic clientele. Fontana spent much of his early life with relatives in Italy, where he studied art in Milan, got caught up in the militant aesthetics of Futurism and fought in World War I.

In 1922, his father called him back to Argentina to join the family firm, by which time Fontana had begun to make art of his own. He kept dual professional tracks active — commercial religious sculpture and avant-garde modernism — for years. By 1927, he was in Italy again, where he stayed through the long lead-up to World War II. Hungry for commissions, he took jobs producing sculpture for the fascist government. In 1936, he produced a giant figure, “Victory,” for an architectural installation commemorating Mussolini’s brutal conquest of Ethiopia, and a ceiling frieze for a Shrine of Fascist Martyrs in Milan.

This early political association may be another factor in the artist’s muffled visibility over the years. And while Fontana’s Fascist connection now tends to be explained as a product of professional expediency, the art historian Emily Braun, in an essay for the exhibition’s catalog, suggests that it may have been more than neutrally strategic.

Whatever the reality, after the war, Fontana disavowed political and ideological agendas across the board: “My art was never polemical but contemporary,” he wrote in 1947. And a lot of his early work supports his statement. Among the earliest pieces in the show are two 1931 female heads modeled in terra cotta, one with a post-flapper bob. There’s nothing remotely imperial-looking about them, or about a 1940 portrait bust of his future wife, Teresita. Covered with gilded mosaic chips, it’s part Byzantine, part Art Deco and a lot Bette Davis.

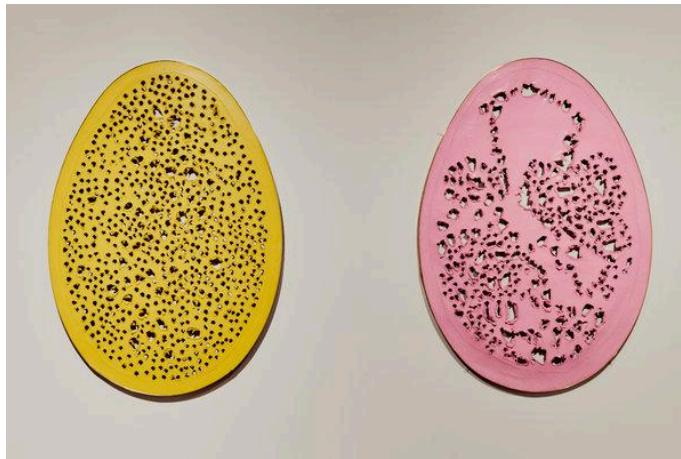
At this point, Fontana was also tackling abstraction. Another 1931 piece, “Incised Panel,” is little more than a block of plaster painted with a dark soft-edged square and marked with scratched lines. Is it a painting or a sculpture? It’s both. And simultaneous with the completion of his “Victory” commission, he was producing semiabstract, bizarrely decorative ceramic objects. Based on marine forms — shells, starfish, squids — these pieces, with their oozy, light-reflective glazes, look to be squeezed from ocean-bed muck and tinted with primal slime.



“Spatial Concept, The Moon in Venice,” 1961. By attaching chunks of colored, light-catching Murano glass to the canvas, Fontana turned paintings into reliefs. © Fondazione Lucio Fontana/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome; Vincent Tullo for The New York Times



Fontana created sculpture-painting hybrids like “Spatial Concept,” 1955, oil and glass on canvas with holes.© Fondazione Lucio Fontana/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome; Vincent Tullo for The New York Times.



Paintings in sculptural form resemble giant Easter eggs blasted by shotguns. Left, “Spatial Concept, The End of God,” 1964. Right, “ Spatial Concept, The End of God,” 1963.© Fondazione Lucio Fontana/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome; Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

Then in 1940, at the very beginning of the war, Fontana headed to Argentina, apparently under paternal pressure. The stay was meant to be brief but lasted seven years. It was a fruitful interlude. It brought Fontana into contact with radical new art being produced in his homeland. He found artists who shared and encouraged his experimental, increasingly utopian thinking about a new kind of art that incorporated science and technology and took physical components of real life — space, movement, light — as primary material.

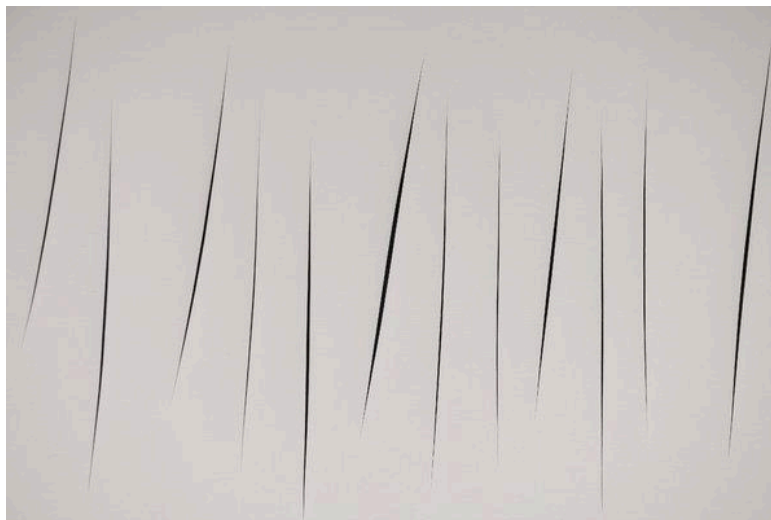
During these years, he taught at the School of Fine Arts in Buenos Aires, passing his ideas on to students of a brilliant younger generation. (One of them, Julio Le Parc, who is 90 and also has a solo show at the Met Breuer.)

Fontana returned to Italy permanently in 1948. He brought with him his long-developed ideas about the way new art should go, formulated under the term Spatialism, and put them into practice. Although he always considered himself a sculptor, at the age of 51 he started to produce paintings on canvas, abstract, monochromatic, and marked with dot-like patterns. Crucially, the dots — he called them “Buchi” (“Holes”) — weren’t made with a brush or pen; they were punched through the canvas. Where once painting merely depicted air, space and light, it now incorporated the real, physical elements.

In such work, Fontana was elaborating on the sculpture-painting hybrid he'd first proposed in "Incised Panel" in 1931. And he continued in this direction. By attaching chunks of colored, light-catching Murano glass to the canvas, he turned paintings into reliefs. And by conceiving paintings in unorthodox forms, he gave them a sculptural presence. A series of large oval pictures he titled "Spatial Concept: The End of God" have the shape and color of giant Easter eggs, but they're so riddled with punctures they look blasted with shotguns.



"Spatial Concept, Expectation," 1968, canvas with slash. Credit Fondazione Lucio Fontana/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome; Vincent Tullo for The New York Times



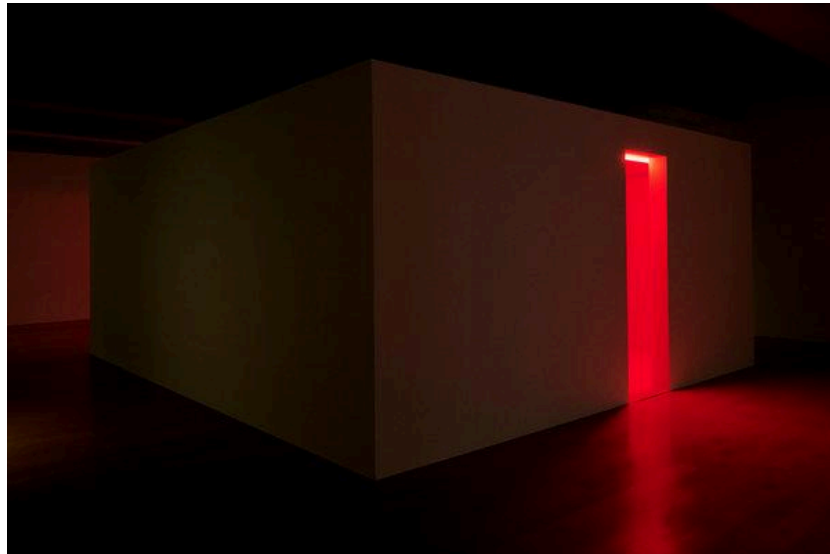
"Spatial Concept, Expectations," 1965, water-based paint on canvas with slashes, originally with wood frame. © Fondazione Lucio Fontana/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome; Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

The element of violence in Fontana's art — as films document, he really did stab pictures hard, in sharp downward blows, with the point of a knife — is real. You can ignore it or theorize your way through it, but it's disturbingly there, and nowhere more dramatically than a series of paintings known as "Tagli" ("Cuts") from the late 1950s and '60s.

For these, the artist stood in front of a stretched and painted canvas and carefully made one or more linear incisions with a blade. In early examples, he left the painting in a see-through state. Later, he began to back the canvas with black fabric, so the incisions could be read as entries to

dark, intimate interiors (some observers have likened the cuts to vulvas and stigmata) or as portals to outer space, the cosmic Void.

For Fontana, who was equally enthralled by mid-20th century images of obliteration and exploration — the mushroom cloud, Sputnik — the Void was a state of positive potential, a vision he attempted to convey through immersive installations. Four of these have been reconstructed for the exhibition, which has been organized by Iria Candela, the curator of Latin American art at the Met, and a research associate Aimé Iglesias Lukin, in cooperation with the Fondazione Lucio Fontana in Milan. Two installations are at the Met Breuer, another at the Met Fifth Avenue, and the fourth at El Museo del Barrio.



“Spatial Environment in Red Light,” 1967/2019, painted wood, glass tubes, neon and mixed media. Credit Fondazione Lucio Fontana/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome; Vincent Tullo for The New York Times

Light is an active ingredient in all of them. At the Met Fifth Avenue, it takes the form of an immense suspended tangle of neon tubing; at the Breuer, of lines of pinpoint lights, picked out in darkness like stars. In the second example at the Breuer and the one at El Museo, architectural space comes into play: Both environments are essentially color-coded labyrinths — walk-in paintings, if you will — one glowing red, the other white.

Light-based installation has had a long, rich, technically sophisticated history since the 1950s and '60s. And compared to many later specimens, these prototypes look pretty tame. It was Fontana's students, Mr. Le Parc among them, who fully tapped the possibilities of the medium. As for Fontana, he understood that his own most important contribution remained the “Holes” and “Cuts,” which both brutalized tradition and preserved it. He made abstraction look dangerous.

And, monument-maker that he was to the end, late in his career he memorialized his innovation in permanent form as metal sculptures. There are two made from copper in the show. Hanging on the wall like paintings, they're as big and heavy as mausoleum doors. Their surfaces are a mess of slashes, punctures, dents and scars, but they reflect the gallery's ambient light, which washes over the walls and spills across the black stone floors. Like so much of what Fontana did, the work is in your face, and far out.



"Spatial Concept, New York 10," 1962, copper with cuts and scratches, reflects the Met Breuer's ambient light. © Fondazione Lucio Fontana/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome; Vincent Tullo for The New York Times