

GAGOSIAN

HYPERALLERGIC

The Politics Behind the Massacred Canvases of Lucio Fontana
Will audiences ignore the Argentine-Italian's fascist past to celebrate his first US museum survey in more than 40 years?

Zachary Small



Lucio Fontana, "Spatial Concept, New York 10 (Concetto spaziale, New York 10)" (1962), copper with slashes and scratches (all photos by author)

Lucio Fontana could have spent the rest of his natural-born life building colossal tombs and funerary statues for his father's sculpture workshop in Argentina. Instead, he traveled the world in search of immortality.

Participant and witness to the world wars that rocked early 20th-century Europe, the Argentine-Italian artist harnessed the existential dread of a battle-worn generation and slashed through his monochrome canvases with the precision of a surgeon's scalpel starting in 1958. Fontana buried his hands into these paintings' wounds, widening their lacerations by force before stuffing black gauze into them to give the impression of a measureless void. Emancipating himself from two-dimensional space, Fontana became known as a radical obscurant of the boundaries between painting and sculpture.



“Spatial Concept, Expectations (Concetto Spaziale, Attese)” (1959), oil on canvas

Lucio Fontana: On the Threshold is the first major survey of the artist in the United States in almost 40 years. Curated by Iria Candela at the Met Breuer, the exhibition is one of the last gasps of creative breaths the museum will have before its cyclopean building of granite rock becomes home to the Frick Collection next year. Currently, Candela is responsible for all three floors of programming at the Breuer: two for Fontana and one for his under-appreciated acolyte, Julio Le Parc. Her work at the museum aligns with a strong shift in modernist scholarship to consider artists overshadowed by the field’s emphasis on Euro-American lineages.

Born in 1899 in Rosario, Argentina to Italian immigrants, Fontana was schooled in Italy from 1906 until 1922 when he returned home to work with his father sculpting funerary monuments. (Inspired by the belligerency of Futurism, he enlisted with the Italian army during World War I, from 1916 to 1918.) He later returned to Italy in 1927 to study with the prominent Milanese sculptor, Adolfo Wildt, who instructed him in marble work. Much to the consternation of his teacher, Fontana decided to focus on exploring less permanent mediums like plaster, terracotta, and ceramics. But despite his preference for more malleable materials, he never shied away from bidding to make public art commissions.



Installation view of Lucio Fontana: On the Threshold

He created print propaganda for the Italian fascist government, won a competition to construct a bust of dictator Benito Mussolini, and entered another to build a triumphal arch celebrating Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia. In 1939, he completed a bombastically classicist ceiling relief of flying female nudes for the Shrine of the Fascist Martyrs in the Milan headquarters of the Federation of Fascists. Upon his father’s request, Fontana returned to Argentina in 1940 where he remained “an inveterate Germanophile,” as he would call himself during the war. When Mussolini was deposed in July 1943, Fontana attacked reactions from the “Anglo-Saxon press”

and sided with editorials from anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi publications like *El Pampero*. “I hope that [Mussolini’s] sacrifice will calm the anger,” he wrote in a letter to his family, “of nations without history, which will dominate the world, barbarically civilized.” Despite his avid support of European fascism, Fontana chose to align himself with the intellectuals and artists who opposed the authoritarian rule of Juan Perón during his seven-year stay in Buenos Aires. And despite regarding Argentina as a cultural hinterland, it was there that Fontana began perforating his canvases and ultimately founded the Spatialism movement, which was devoted to the development of abstraction into an installation art.



Installation view of Lucio Fontana: On the Threshold

Engaging with *On the Threshold* is to engage in a performance of cognitive dissonance. Outside the exquisitely designed catalogue, there is little evidence of Fontana’s longstanding complicity and support of the Italian Fascist regime. The curator devotes no space to a discussion of how the artist’s violent modernist caesurae derived from his rooting for the wrong side during World War II. The average museumgoer is unlikely to read art historian Emily Braun’s definitive catalogue essay on how Fontana flourished under fascism, but will likely catch the wall text, which oddly claims that the artist’s eclecticism “allowed him to maintain creative independence during the Italian Fascist regime.”

This line about Fontana is not unique. In an effort to salvage Fontana’s reputation, critics and curators have consistently portrayed the artist as an “arch-opportunist” rather than a full-blown fascist. Others claim that his work — even when commissioned by Mussolini’s government — was too aesthetically radical to be considered a product of the far-right regime. Given the evidence provided by historians like Braun, these protestations fail to pass muster. Perhaps this is why Fontana has stayed on the periphery of art history for the last four decades: his ideology makes him unfit to join a modernist narrative that almost exclusively appraises the work of artists who lived in WWII Allied powers such as America, France, and the United Kingdom.



“Spatial Concept, Expectations (Concetto Spaziale, Attese)” (1965), water-based paint on canvas with slashes

There’s also an open question of how revolutionary Fontana’s work actually was in the development of postwar art. Why sing a torch song for him when others like Lee Bontecou were experimenting with the same materials and themes at nearly the same time? Why expend effort trying to reframe Fontana as an Argentine artist when his professional tenure in Buenos Aires extended only as long as WWII? Fontana permanently returned to his Milan studio in 1947, two years after the war ended.

Biographical gripes aside, *On the Threshold* succeeds as an intimate documentation of Fontana’s aesthetic evolution from sculptor to experimenter extraordinaire. The first work seen in the exhibition is the artist’s bronze “Seated Young Lady” (1934), which strikes a delicate image of repose even if the figure is somewhat drowning in the puddle of her molasses-colored gown. Nearby are five busts of women, each demonstrating how the artist explored sculpted figuration with different materials. Figures include a 1946 painted terracotta woman and a 1952 glazed ceramic portrait of fascist-futurist writer Milena Milani. The best of this quintet is undoubtedly the artist’s glittering 1940 mosaic of his wife, “Portrait of Teresita.” Pulling on inspirations as diverse as the Etruscans, Baroque sculpture, and Futurism, Fontana’s early sculptures celebrate an archaic realism informed by revived interest in ancient art thanks to the nationalist Italianate movement.



“Seated Young Lady (Signorina Seduta)” (1934), painted bronze

Throughout the exhibition, Candela does an excellent job of telegraphing developments in Fontana's style before they occur. *On the Threshold's* first room hosts "Olympic Champion (Waiting Athlete)" (1932), a blue-painted plaster sculpture of a man whose sternum is punctured by a long vertical slash. A precursor to Fontana's modernist signature, the slash in context represents casual violence. Compositionally, the cut succeeds as a way to center and balance a sculpture whose subject is the male athlete's perfected body; however, it also deals a deathblow to the figure, rifling deep within his chest cavity.



"Olympic Champion (Waiting Athlete) (Campione Olimpionico [Atleta in Attesa])" (1932), painted plaster

Subsequent galleries that display Fontana's moves through punctured canvases, ceramics, and pottery are insightful as historical footnotes. In particular, "Spatial Concept, the Bread" (1950) should be celebrated for its grotesque verisimilitude; it looks like something that a young Jean Dubuffet wished he had made. This transition period in the exhibition is brief, and concludes with an expansive showcase of the artist's trademark slashed canvases.



"Spatial Concept, The Bread (Concetto Spaziale, Il Pane)" (1954), painted terracotta

If Kazimir Malevich's "Black Square" (1915) pushed the canvas toward its endgame, then Fontana's punctured paintings provide entryway into that apocalyptic void. *The Cuts* series developed in 1958, more than a decade after Fontana began encouraging his students in Buenos Aires to experiment with projections, lights, and mirrors under the doctrine of Spatialism. A signatory to the 1946 White Manifesto, he advocated for art's integration with science to develop what he called "the fourth-dimension." This search for a higher order underwrites the importance of *Cuts*, which resonates as a pseudoscientific exploration of space-time as a new frontier of art.

Each puncture, slash, and stab of the artist's knife into the canvas accounts for a brushstroke in the portrait of an artist fighting against the popular trends of his time. French artist Yves Klein became both friend and foe to the elder Fontana. "Klein is the one who understands the problem of space with his blue dimension," remarked Fontana after seeing the artist's work in 1957. "He is really abstract, one of the young artists who have done something important."

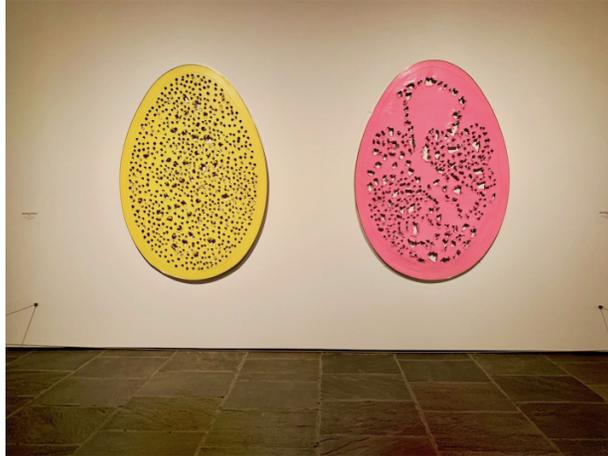


"Spatial Concept, Iris Clert (Concetto Spaziale, Iris Clert)" (1961), oil and glass on canvas with scratch

Still, something about Klein's work irked the artist. The blanket uniformity of the monochrome canvas seemed to him oddly very capitalist; Fontana would never be so eager to relinquish evidence of his own artistic intervention. The slash was developed as a critique, a reformulation of the concept of repetition in art that harkened back to the strategies of Russian Constructivists. The connection between Fontana and the Russians is most obvious in the artist's triumphant white monochromes, which Candela has allotted their own room. Whereas Malevich's "White on White" (1918) may have disintegrated painting's presence, Fontana always maintained that his abrasions "constructed, not destroyed" the work of art. Nevertheless, he worked with the white monochrome from the beginning of his *Cuts* series to the end. There is a special rhythm to these wounds that may not be immediately apparent in his other works. Slashes metered into neat rows and columns, this is as close to poetry as the artist ever gets. Here, the violence of his cuts are an act of creation against the void of the picture plane.

But the perceived purity of the *Cuts* series is something of a lark. As *On the Threshold* makes clear, Fontana continued to experiment and evolve as he went — often with middling success. I find the artist's spatial environments exceedingly boring and outpaced by other light and space practitioners like Julio Le Parc and James Turrell. Likewise, his attempts at slashing bronze also

seem off the mark and oddly figurative: One includes New York skyscrapers and the other is a defaced portrait of Greek socialite and gallerist Iris Clert. Fontana also created two glossy, egg-shaped works both called “Spatial Concept: The End of God” (1963/64). Trypophobics beware, these canvases are punctures with hundreds of tiny holes that spread like a disease over their sickly yellow and pink surfaces.



“Spatial Concept, The End of God (Concetto Spaziale, La Fine di Dio)” (left to right: 1964 & 1963), oil on canvas, cuts, holes

Critics of Fontana have sometimes remarked that he loved modeling more than sculpting. I would go further and argue that the artist was more a model than a sculptor. And 50 years after his death, *On the Threshold* clarifies why Fontana has slipped into obscurity. His work fails to challenge either his Constructivist forbearers or his minimalist contemporaries. Whatever transgressive reputation Fontana gained for violating his canvases has been sapped by his success in the commercial art market, which consumes anything monochromatic for regurgitation upon a hotel lobby’s wall. Outmaneuvered and overshadowed by an ugly wartime history, one can only imagine how Fontana would have recuperated his reputation had he lived past 69. Instead of serving as a model for artists to come, maybe he would have created something stunning enough to actually stand above their ranks rather than below.

