

GUGGENHEIM BILBAO

On the Threshold

Lucio Fontana

On the Threshold

- Dates: May 17–September 29, 2019
 - Curators: Iria Candela, “Estrellita B. Brodsky” Curator of Latin American Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and Manuel Cirauqui, Curator, Guggenheim Museum Bilbao.
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- Fontana’s early works from the 1930s and 1940s mark a path towards increased abstraction, sensitive to the influence of the aesthetic currents that marked those complex years. At the same time, these works point towards the transgressive nature of the slashed canvases that dominated his later oeuvre.
 - The exhibition includes some extraordinary examples from his iconic *Cuts (Tagli)* series and from his earlier punctured *Holes (Buchi)* canvases, locating the radicalism of these works in a terrain that bridges painting, sculpture and action art.
 - Through his *Spatial Environments (Ambienti spaziali)* and experiments with light and space, and with neon tubes, Fontana laid the foundations for later developments in installation and immersive art.
 - *On the Threshold* offers a broad and transversal vision of a figure who voiced the conflicts and anguish that defined most of the twentieth century, from the avant-gardes’ reassessments of classicism to the aesthetics espoused by the totalitarian movements in Europe, from World War II to the international reorganization of post-war art movements, and rise of technology during the so-called “space age”.

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao presents *Lucio Fontana. On the Threshold*, a new look at the legacy of one of the seminal artists of the twentieth century. In a careful selection of close to a hundred works, including sculptures, ceramics, paintings, works on paper and environments created between 1931 and 1968, this exhibition ushers visitors through the fundamental periods of one of the most influential artists of the post-war period.

Organized by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in collaboration with the Fondazione Lucio Fontana, Milan, and the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, the exhibition presents extraordinary examples from this artist’s career, and explores it from his beginnings as a sculptor through his pioneering work with environments and colored artificial light. Unfolding a complex, panoramic view, *On the Threshold* situates the radicalism of Fontana’s most iconic series, including the *Cuts* and *The End of God (La fine di Dio)* series, within a context of a career that had a global impact and is still present nowadays.

Lucio Fontana (1899–1968) is famous primarily for his slashed canvases, but it was not until 1949, after two decades of complete dedication to art, that he used canvas for the first time. The radical gesture he uses to slash his monochrome painting and open it to the absoluteness of space became systematic as of 1958, turning the knife into an instrument to unblock the two-dimensional plane of the painting and imbue it with an almost mystical depth. *On the Threshold* traces the origins of these essential forms and gestures to Fontana's periods of training and experimentation, and observes how a number of important art movements in Italy and Argentina, such as Futurism, Neoclassicism and the *Madí* movement, influenced his practice.

Early sculpture

Lucio Fontana began his career as a sculptor in Rosario (Argentina) in the mid-1920s, working in his father's business, Fontana y Scarabelli, on funerary sculptures for cemeteries in a city that had a large Italian immigrant population. The young artist then moved to Milan to train as a classical sculptor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Brera. He soon showed signs of anti-academic irreverence, preferring to model his sculpture instead of working with the chisel. During the 1930s he developed his career in Italy, focusing on sculpture and relief in plaster, terracotta and ceramic. Fontana adopted a highly expressive, realist and material-based approach, inspired by the Antique sculptures of Etruscan sarcophagi, as can be seen in some of his female portraits, which were sometimes polychromed or gilt. Nevertheless, Fontana was an eclectic artist who absorbed tradition and assimilated avant-garde movements such as Futurism, which helped him maintain a certain aesthetic singularity under the Fascist regime in Italy. In his work with clay, Fontana was able to merge historic genres, subjects and references, while challenging the limits of sculptural practice.

Material

In the mid-1950s, Fontana began to use light-reflecting materials such as glitter and fragments of glass in his perforated paintings. To that end, he had large amounts of glass from Murano sent to his studio in Milan, where he shattered it into bits. In the *Stones (Pietre)* series, Fontana exploited the qualities of glass to project the surface of the painting into the viewer's space. And the *Oils (Oli)* series, which the artist started in 1957, present thick areas of impasto which he created by applying broad bands of oil painting directly from the tube with a spatula in order to obtain a brilliant finish. The *Holes*, *Stones* and *Oils* series and other pictorial cycles of the 1950s are very close to Art Informel, with semi-pictorial and semi-sculptural processes that parallel the ones in his work with modelled clay. In fact, while in Albissola in 1959 Fontana began a series of colored sculptures entitled *Nature (Natura)*. The artist described those large, rough terracotta balls with holes and slashes as "nothingness or the beginning of everything". Fontana's fingerprints, still visible in some of the works from these series, shed light on his physical bond with material.

Slashes

It was in the context of the rebirth of the Italian economy after the War, the Space Race and the growing nuclear threat of the Cold War that Fontana created his most iconic works: the *Cuts*. Breaking the pictorial plane, the radical gesture of the slashes constitutes an act of sabotage to the discipline of painting. Fontana presents the viewer with a form made literally of space. He made his first slashed painting in 1958 and soon refined his technique: he would apply the paint evenly and generously over the canvas, and while

it was still humid, slash it with a knife. Once the paint had dried, he would shape the opening with his hands. The last step was to set the opening with a piece of black gauze that he glued to the reverse of the canvas. In 1959, he began a series of paintings in the shape of hexagons, pentagons, circles and other irregular forms. The dynamic surfaces broadened the monochrome field of color of the surrounding space, as in *The Quanta*, small irregularly shaped paintings arranged together on a wall. In *The End of God* series, the “astral eggs” in synthetic colors suggest the idea of an enormous cosmos in an infinite space.

Reflective elements

Throughout his career, Fontana experimented with reflective surfaces. In his ceramic works of the 1930s, he had exploited the luminous effects of varnish, gold leaf and mosaic, and in his paintings he used fragments of glass, glossy paint, gold and silver. The artist was fascinated by gilding, which had been used throughout the history of art in some of the most refined objects, and whose enigmatic metallic sheen was associated with the divine and the afterlife. Gilding had proliferated during the Baroque period, and became an ever-present element in architectural and ornamental motifs in churches and cathedrals as a result of the Counter-Reformation. After his first trip to New York in 1961, Fontana was inspired by the skyscrapers of Manhattan and began to use materials such as copper, brass and aluminum in the *Metal Sheets (Metalli)* series. The light that falls directly upon these shiny surfaces bounces back towards the observer, flooding the surrounding architecture, while the mirror effect distorts the reflection of the viewer in the work itself. These materials allowed the artist to continue his exploration of the enveloping possibilities of painting, and its depth and physical relationship to the viewer.

Spatial environments

Through the movement, he called Spatialism—and as author of its *White Manifesto (Manifesto bianco)*—Fontana sought a synthesis of the arts, and its multi-disciplinary focus broadened the notion of artistic experience to include space in its totality. He was a pioneer of immersive installations, which he called *Spatial Environments (Ambienti spaziali)*, and of experiments with electric light and space, including the use of neon tubes. *On the Threshold* includes a reconstruction of the monumental neon arabesque called *Neon Structure for the Ninth Milan Triennial (Struttura al neon per la IX Triennale di Milano, 1951)*, as well as two immersive installations exhibited for the first time in Spain: the *Spatial Environment: “Utopias,” at the Thirteenth Milan Triennial (Ambiente spaziale: “Utopie”, nella XIII Triennale di Milano 1964)* and *Spatial Environment in Red Light (Ambiente spaziale a luce rossa, 1967)*. These three pieces, conceived through more than fifteen years, demonstrate the pioneering nature of Fontana’s experimentations in search of the total work of art. Fontana stands as a pioneer of later immersive developments in contemporary art, where the union of sculpture, light and architectonic space will transcend the traditional division of artistic disciplines.

Catalog

The exhibition is accompanied by an illustrated catalog with essays by international experts on the artist’s work, its origins in relation to Argentina and Italy, the diversity of his practice and the international development of his career up to his death in 1968. In addition to offering a detailed iconography of the exhibition, the catalog includes archive photographs of his environments, public commissions and studio over four decades, providing a new understanding of an oeuvre that places us *on the threshold* of the large questions that defined the central years of the twentieth century.

Cover image

Lucio Fontana (1899–1968)

Spatial Concept, Expectation (Concetto spaziale, Attesa), 1959

Water-based paint on canvas with slash

118 × 88 cm

Collezione Prada, Milan

© Fondazione Lucio Fontana, Bilbao, 2019

For more information:

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Lucio Fontana (1899–1968)

Spatial Concept, Expectations (Concetto spaziale, Attese), 1959

Oil on canvas with slashes

90.8 × 90.8 cm

Olnick Spanu Collection, New York

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Lucio Fontana (1899–1968)

Portrait of Teresita (Ritratto di Teresita), 1940

Mosaic

34 x 33 x 15 cm

Fondazione Lucio Fontana, Milan

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Lucio Fontana (1899–1968)

Neon Structure for the Ninth Milan Triennial (Struttura al neon per la IX Triennale di Milano), 1951

Glass tube and neon

280 × 1000 × 1200 cm

Dimensions variable overall

Destroyed

On show: reconstruction 2019, authorized by Fondazione Lucio Fontana, Milan

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Lucio Fontana (1899–1968).

Spatial Concept, The Quanta (Concetto spaziale, I Quanta), 1959

Water-based paint on canvas with slashes, 6 parts,

dimensions variable

Private collection, Italy

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Lucio Fontana (1899–1968)

Spatial Environment in Red Light (Ambiente spaziale a luce rossa), 1967

Painted wood, glass tubes, neon, and mixed media

220 × 600 × 490 cm

Destroyed

Reconstruction authorized by Fondazione Lucio Fontana – project Pirelli HangarBicocca 2017

On show: reconstruction 2019, authorized by Fondazione Lucio Fontana – project Pirelli HangarBicocca 2017

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Lucio Fontana (1899–1968)

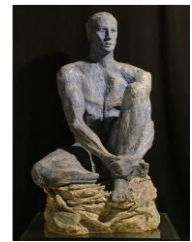
Olympic Champion (Waiting Athlete) [Campione olimpionico (Atleta in attesa)], 1932

Painted plaster

121 × 92 × 70 cm

Collezione d'Arte e di Storia della Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio, Bologna, Italy

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Lucio Fontana (1899–1968)

Spatial Concept (Concetto spaziale), 1950

Oil on canvas with holes

85 × 65 cm

Fondazione Lucio Fontana, Milan

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Lucio Fontana (1899–1968)

Spatial Concept, The Bread (Concetto spaziale, il pane), 1950

Painted terracotta

42 × 33 × 3.5 cm

Fondazione Lucio Fontana, Milan

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Lucio Fontana (1899–1968)

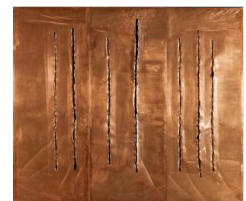
Spatial Concept, New York 10 (Concetto spaziale, New York 10), 1962

Copper with slashes and scratches

3 panels, 94 × 234 cm each

Fondazione Lucio Fontana, Milan

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Lucio Fontana (1899–1968)
Spatial Concept, Expectation (Concetto spaziale, Attesa), 1959
Water-based paint on canvas with slash
118 × 88 cm
Collezione Prada, Milan
© Fondazione Lucio Fontana, Bilbao, 2019



Lucio Fontana (1899–1968)
Battle (Battaglia), 1947
Glazed ceramic
18 × 30 × 12 cm
Private collection
© Fondazione Lucio Fontana, Bilbao, 2019



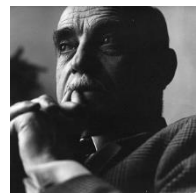
Lucio Fontana (1899–1968)
Spatial Concept (Concetto spaziale), 1954
Oil, ink and glass on canvas
70 × 49.5 cm
Private collection, Italy
© Fondazione Lucio Fontana, Bilbao, 2019



Lucio Fontana (1899–1968)
Spatial Concept, Expectation (Concetto spaziale, Attesa), 1968
Canvas with slash
61.4 × 50.3 cm
Vitart, Switzerland
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Portrait of the artist
© Fondazione Lucio Fontana, Bilbao, 2019



Portrait of the artist
© Fondazione Lucio Fontana, Bilbao, 2019

