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Lucio Fontana, who considered himself a sculptor above all, explored the subject of space by defining its relationship to the viewer through the three-dimensional properties of a vast range of materials. His inventiveness in this endeavor is matched by that of only a few other artists in the modern canon. Fontana approached every object to be modeled, whether a clay sculpture or a painting, with a uniquely rich repertoire of designs, from traditional colored glazes to sparkling surfaces with glass fragments to smooth, monochrome expanses of paint (fig. 52). The immense variety of interfaces encountered in his work—various substrates, spatial openings, superimposed layers, and adornments—engages the viewer with the artist’s ultimate goal: a dilation of mental space. His gift for modern alchemy, that is, his ability to transform humble materials such as glass into potent modes of intellectual transport, moved the art historian Lóránd Hegyi to state: “Fontana spiritualizes his art not by dematerialization, but—on the contrary—by the almost magical intensification of materiality.”

Fontana’s trajectory oscillated between Argentina, his native country, and Italy, his adoptive country; between figuration and abstraction. Before he finally settled in Milan in 1947, having just published his groundbreaking White Manifesto in Buenos Aires, he worked predominantly in a figurative style and perfected his mastery of the traditional technique of sculpting gesso, clay, and bronze. A little-known wall relief in his hometown of Rosario, Santa Fe, provides a new, instructive link between his work with glass in Europe and that in Latin America (fig. 53). Realized in 1941 with Osvaldo Raúl Palacios and Manuel Nuche, the imposing The Sower builds on Fontana’s considerable experience with funereal monuments and architectural commissions. Its substrate, which is divided into thirty individual panels, is a reddish mixture of what appears to be cement and crushed brick particles. The relief depicts a sower in half profile, his right arm outstretched in the act of distributing seeds, with birds and silos visible in the far distance. The monumental work is set into a preexisting arched niche in a brick structure from 1883, situated on an incline of Avenida Belgrano between...
Urquiza Park and the Paraná River. Even from street level, a number of feet below the niche, the viewer can discern whitish, semitransparent fragments distributed uniformly on the relief’s surface. The amorphously shaped shards of glass were pressed into the cement mixture so gently that the facets protrude far enough for sunlight to sparkle off them (fig. 54). *The Sower* is likely the first instance in which Fontana exploited the kinetic capacity of light to traverse colored-glass ornaments. Although glass is a humble material in its own right, it can create a precious-looking surface texture that in turn imparts dignity to humble subjects, such as this sower. Fontana would come to highly prize the reflective power of glass.

Once Fontana discovered a new method, material, or visual strategy, he circled it tirelessly and fearlessly from numerous angles for maximum aesthetic gain. As early as 1940, he had already explored the effects of enlivening sculptural surfaces with reflective adornment, using the same kind of flat, square glass tesserae that appear in mural mosaics from antiquity to the medieval period (pl. 8). However, by the late 1940s Fontana seems to have given up on the laborious mosaic process, perhaps prompted by the limited ability to form the organic shapes of busts with square fragments. Instead, he adopted multicolored glazes that he could brush directly onto the substrate. These ceramic glazes are essentially transformed into thin veils of glass when the silica-containing layers are fired in a kiln (pl. 15).

In the 1950s, by the time Fontana returned to glass, first in the *Stones* and later in the *Baroque* series, he was already deeply immersed
in sounding out the import of his main contribution to the language of art, the *buco* (hole). The radical gesture of his Spatial Concepts, the physical and metaphorical opening of the pictorial surface to what lies beyond—which Fontana variously called the new, the void, the infinite, and the fourth dimension—necessitated an equally committed exploration of the role of the space in front of the work. Stretched canvas had by then become his support of choice. In these works Fontana usually aligned colored transparent and opaque glass fragments with holes or clustered them in several places on the surface, like centers of energetic, condensed matter. Although the glass pieces project forward into the viewer’s space more actively here than in earlier works, their absorption and reflection of light also reduce the visibility and therefore the impact of the canvas perforations. This is especially the case in the Baroques, where the artist embedded fragments amid heavily impastoed paint sections that often incorporate sand and *lustrini* (glitter particles). He integrated these somewhat extraneous materials into the surface with the help of a polyvinyl acetate (PVAc)–based adhesive called Vinavil, a water-based glue popular in Italy with laypeople and artists alike, even today.\(^3\) Subsequently applied paint layers, occasionally mixed from diluted Vinavil and dry pigments, cover excess amounts of adhesive around the fragments. In some works, paint also partially hides the fragments themselves, either because Fontana sought to simplify the overall color scheme of a work or, as in a *Spatial Concept* from 1955, because it creates a more coherent surface (p. 66). Here the artist brushed several layers of matte green paint onto the unprimed side of
the canvas. The energetically applied upper light-green layer both adds a compositional element and partially covers glass fragments and glue. In this instance the glass pieces are so large and heavy that one fell off, revealing the beige canvas underneath.

The glass pieces arrived in his studio directly from Murano as rather large lumps, which he then shattered with a hammer into more manageable pieces. Research has shown that the lumps were leftovers from the glassblowing process at the foundries associated with Fucina degli Angeli and Venini, two well-known companies that collaborated with artists and designers. Fontana had strong connections to the founders of both companies, Egidio Constantinini and Paolo Venini, respectively. For example, in 1957 Venini collaborated with Fontana and the furniture designers Achille and Pier Giacomo Castiglioni on a wall decoration with disc-shaped glass elements for the Eleventh Milan Triennial.²

Fontana’s unfettered willingness to experiment with combinations of suitable (and less suitable) materials extended most significantly to the paint binders he used. As more scientific research is carried out into his choice of paints, a picture of him acting at the forefront of innovations in paint technology emerges ever more crisply: he experimented with mixing media in his own studio, had paints prepared for him by an artists’ supply store, and bought newly available, ready-made house paints (fig. 55). Depending on the particular tactile quality he sought, Fontana adroitly switched back and forth between different classes of paint. For example, in the appropriately named Oils, from 1957 onward, he spread oil paints from tubes with a palette knife in broad swaths to a glossy finish.³ By contrast, for the Stones he applied inexpensive, matte house paints (based on PVAc, sometimes in combination with alkyd-based paints) with broad housepainters’ brushes in multiple, thin layers.⁴ Research has revealed a wide array of paint materials, such as cans of commercial paint, tubes of artists’ oil paints, varnishes, heat-bodied oil, and dry pigments, in the basement of his former studio spaces in Milan; at his country home in Comabbio, Italy; and at the Fondazione Lucio Fontana in Milan. Especially during the final, highly productive years of his career, Fontana was drawn to the properties of house paints, such as their tendency to dry quickly and to a smooth surface devoid of any brushstrokes. The acrylic house paints identified in many of the Cuts share some of these characteristics, while being more intensely pigmented.

In 1957 Fontana experienced his perhaps most prolific phase, in which he pursued several strands of research simultaneously, working on the Holes, Stones, Baroques, Papers, Oils, Gessos, and Inks, among others. Compared with the exuberant Baroques, the Gessos are more somber and brooding in tone, owing to the dark, muted colors of their ink and pastel layers, which the artist often superimposed thinly and rubbed onto the surface to give the appearance of greater spatial depth. Fontana usually turned the yellowish-white priming of the canvas
support toward the reverse to twofold effect: he avoided having to treat the front with another preparatory layer to prevent excessive seepage of the ink, and the openings in the support maintained their intended shape more accurately and without too much fraying at the edges. In the Inks, named for their diaphanous washes of aniline, Fontana essentially stained the absorbent fibers of the unprimed canvas surface by applying the inks with large brushes or sponges. The reduced material presence of the Inks took the artist to the limits of what remains after such drastic acts of minimization.

If the preceding series can be read as experiments to define the point at which “decadent” painterly and sculptural means compromised the visual expression of the spatial concept, then the Cuts represent the last, most radical step toward the elimination of spatial encumbrances. The ontological potency of the sign—one or several slashes made with a knife—transforms the mostly monochromatic fields into membranes. “Technique is important for the bravura of an artist,” Fontana stated in 1967, “but the artist is first and foremost a creative human being and creates with no matter which material, and only afterward comes the moment of perfecting the technique.” Precisely how much trial and error—embodied in his experimentation with different types of canvas, preparations, paint layers, and colors as well as the important timing

fig. 55 Shelves in Lucio Fontana’s studio on Corso Monforte, Milan, holding different brands of commercial housepaint, ca. 1965
of each step—led to the perfection of the process of making a Cut has been extensively described elsewhere. Once Fontana had settled on the ideal method, he ordered his canvases preprimed and on wood stretchers, sometimes in unusual shapes such as parallelograms, from a number of supply stores in Milan such as Calcaterra, Colorificio Nord, and Crespi. The canvas, usually half-basket or plain-weave Belgian linen, was nailed and stapled to the sides of the stretcher and cut flush with the rear edges of the bars. Given that the Cuts are generally unframed, the visibility of their painted sides, usually about an inch deep, emphasizes the objecthood of the works and expands the color field that the viewer perceives.

Fontana’s greatest challenge in his dialogue with materials became how to slash a stretched canvas without its losing so much tension that it deformed in undesired ways. When parallel forces in a picture plane are disrupted, either deliberately or by accident, the edges of a slash almost inevitably begin to bulge convexly or concavely. A presumably early photograph of a taglio (cut) demonstrates the main difficulties Fontana initially faced (fig. 56): the openings of the cuts are uneven and inconsistently concave; some edges are frayed; and there are planar deformations throughout. (Another photograph taken at the time shows that the stretcher had a vertical cross member, which was in the way when Fontana was making the cuts and which was therefore omitted from later works.) Over time, Fontana found that he could control the direction of the curvature through extensive preparation of the front and back of the canvas, which created a fine equilibrium of tension. In order to guide the mind of the viewer beyond the picture plane, the slashes should curve inward, toward the back, and this required, Fontana found, a stiff preparation of the reverse with an off-white alkyd-based primer such as Cementite, a commercial product. The priming also prevented fraying of the canvas and allowed better control

![Fig. 56 Lucio Fontana, *Spatial Concept*, 1959. Ink on canvas, 30 5/16 × 38 3/16 in. (77 × 97 cm). Private collection](image-url)
of the width of a slash opening. This factor led Fontana to switch from
the dilute aniline inks of the Ink series to bulkier synthetic house paints,
generally based on PVAc and acrylic vinyl, which he applied with a broad
brush in several smooth campaigns and often on top of a white ground.

After finishing the painting steps, Fontana stood in front of his
easel and surveyed the expanse of the canvas. With utmost concentra-
tion, he placed the tip of a very sharp Stanley knife on the surface and
then moved his hand downward relatively quickly. This action requires
great surety of hand, as there is no possibility for correction and all
previous efforts could be spoiled in a moment. Proper spacing of the
slashes was as crucial as keeping an equal distance between blade and
surface throughout the cutting motion to avoid accidental burnishing
of the paint with the knife handle. Fontana then had only a narrow
window of time, before the water-based paint layers had fully dried, to
shape the edges of the slashes with his hands. Next, he cut strips of stiff
black gauze, typically used as facing in tailored suits, and adhered them
with a generous amount of Vinavil glue over the protruding edges on
the reverse. He made little tents with the fabric, which he called telletta
(the diminutive of tela, or canvas), to create a certain distance from the
openings. While the gauze and the glue both contribute some stiffness
and strength to the overall structure, their primary purpose is to allow
the eye and mind to roam, rather than being stopped abruptly by a
white wall behind the painting. “When I sit down in front of one of my
Tagli [Cuts], to contemplate it, I suddenly feel a great expansion of the
spirit,” he explained in 1961. “I feel like a man liberated from the slavery
of the material, like a man who belongs to the vastness of the present
and the future.”

At the very end of this lengthy process, the artist added a number
of inscriptions to the reverse, using paint and a brush or a felt-tip pen.
Only very rarely did he date his Cuts, perhaps because he thought of
them as being outside of time. The inscription attesa (or the plural
attese in the case of several slashes), which translates to “expectation” or
“anticipation,” draws attention to the importance Fontana accorded the
time spent preparing for the right moment to make the cut. It records the
conceptual anticipation of breaking through the limits of consciousness
in the search for what lies beyond form. But in order for Fontana to reach
the immaterial, he had to first work patiently through the material in a
constant process of refining his choices. His basic premise, the spatial
concept, suggested to him a nearly infinite range of artistic expressions,
the richness of which continues to unfold in time.
pl. 7 Portrait of a Girl, 1931
pl. 8 Portrait of Teresita, 1940
pl. 15 *Squid*, 1937
pl. 16 *Bottom of the Sea*, 1939
The Latin Axis in the Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde, pp. 61–65

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by Frederika Randall.


2. For the subsequent monograph, see Enrico Crispolti, Omaggio a Lucio Fontana (Rome: B. Carucci, 1971).


Looking through the Glass, and What Fontana Found There, pp. 67–73

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author.


2. The work was officially inaugurated on July 20, 1943.


6. Recent medium analysis of six works from the Oils and End of God series identified castor and rapeseed oil, in addition to the traditional linseed oil. It is unknown whether the paint manufacturer or Fontana admixed the former two oils. See Francesca Caterina Izzo et al., “20th Century Artists’ Oil Paints: The Case of the Olii by Lucio Fontana,” Journal of Cultural Heritage 15, no. 5 (2014), pp. 557–63.
