

Lucio Fontana between Venice and Milan: *Spatial Concept, Venice Was All in Gold*

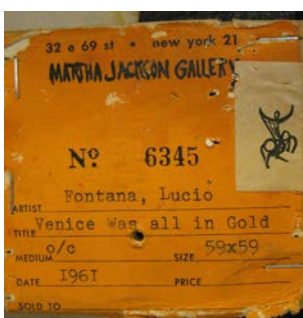
Carolina Olmedo



Fig. 1
Lucio Fontana
Spatial Concept. Venice was All in Gold, 1961
Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid
[\[+ info\]](#)

In 1961, the year it was executed, *Spatial Concept, Venice was All in Gold* [fig. 1] was featured in two of the most important exhibitions in the career of the Italian-born Argentine artist Lucio Fontana (1899–1968). As the “highlight” of the shows held in Venice¹ and New York² [fig. 2 and 3] – both important cultural capitals in the post-war period – this piece displays the technical and intellectual complexity of the mature work of Fontana, whose international acclaim among critics and fellow artists was then growing. His tireless ground-breaking attitude was visible in three main aspects: a shift away from pictorial tradition through monochrome colours, the creation of a new concept of artistic space by slashing the painting, and the practice of destruction as a creative process. His art, which combines these three strategies to varying degrees, is thus one of the most representative examples of the defiance of post-war “ugly art”.³ This tendency towards experimentation with material led Lawrence Alloway to dub him a “man on the border” in the catalogue of the abovementioned exhibition at the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York.⁴ Through this description, Fontana earned international renown at his first solo exhibition in the United States as an artist comparable to American figures such as Allan Kaprow and George Brecht: the value of his output lay in its blurring of the boundaries between painting, sculpture and the applied arts to the extent that in some respects it came close to kitsch and pop art,⁵ and also in the underlying intellectual work that urged the spectator to rebel against disciplinary divisions.

Owing perhaps to this critical attitude, the exhibitions of the *Venice* series were not properly understood until several years later when Fontana’s name went down in history, facilitating a careful analysis of the layers of operations at play in his mature work.⁶ The 22 pieces that make up the series were never reunited once they left the artist’s studio,⁷ and their formal appearance intimidated critics of the day with the precious display of gleaming gold and silver incrustated with Murano glass.⁸ These attractive features partially diverted spectators’ attention away from the gash in the canvas and the presentation of the slashed picture space open to the incorporation of real space as a compositional material. On account of the difference between the title of this work and the more abstract titles of earlier works, it was not until several years later that the presence of a narrative in *Venice* was interpreted by many as a change of direction from a cryptic to an openly critical stance verging on parody. To cite Luca Massimo Barbero, “To many Fontana seemed to suddenly veer, with the ease of a bird, in the opposite direction in order to take an antithetical stance: Venetian baroque and the fascinating decadence of the Serenissima.”⁹ Through the artist’s gaze, two Venices are contrasted and brought face to face: the commercial and cultural jewel of the Adriatic, with its byzantine and baroque universe; and



Figs. 2-3
Labels on the reverse:
Arte e Contemplazione
(Venice) and Lucio
Fontana: *Ten Paintings of Venice* (New York)
exhibitions, 1961

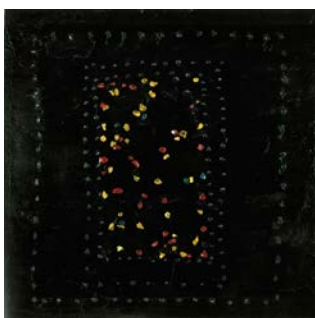


Fig. 4
Lucio Fontana
*Spatial Concept.
In St Mark's Square
at Night with
Teresita, 1961*
Private collection



Fig. 5
Lucio Fontana
*Spatial Concept.
Night of Love
in Venice, 1961*
Fine Arts
Unternehmen AG,
Switzerland

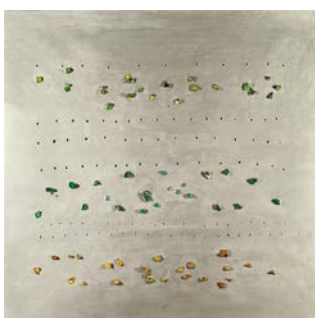


Fig. 6
Lucio Fontana
*Spatial Concept.
At Dawn Venice
was All Silver, 1961*
Private collection



Fig. 7
Lucio Fontana in Venice, 1961. Photograph reproduced
in the catalogue of *Ten Paintings of Venice*, Martha Jackson
Gallery, New York



Fig. 8
Salvador Dalí on the Grand Canal, Venice, 1961

the city that emerged from "Italy's economic miracle" of the post-war period, a tourist attraction consolidated by mass culture through films and literature. In the *Venice* series, 18 of the titles of the work draw from stereotyped postcard views of the city: the baroque, a wedding, a romantic night, the carnival by the Grand Canal and romance in St Mark's (one piece even features Fontana himself and his wife Teresita) [fig. 4 and 5]. Others incorporate references to the climate and times, with specific ranges of colour: according to the symbolism of titles and tones, gold is thus the sun, black is the night, and silver is the moonlight [fig. 6].¹⁰ They all seem to mockingly pursue the image promoted by the films full of gondolas, carnival masks, sumptuous churches and gold galore that were designed to attract tourists: romantic encounters or tragic destinies among alleyways and canals, evenings spent to the voluptuous drone of Charles Aznavour's *Que c'est triste Venise*.¹¹

Certainly, irony was present in his canvases from the outset, and accompanied them throughout their journey from the artist's studio in Milan to the abovementioned *Arte e Contemplazione* exhibition at the Palazzo Grassi. However, this interpretation was reinforced when the work crossed the Atlantic to be shown in New York, as the first page of the catalogue featured a bold photograph of Fontana in a gondola outside the basilica of Santa Maria della Salute [fig. 7]. His irreverence is evident if we compare it to similar photographs published around that time, such as the portrait of Salvador Dalí on the Grand Canal that same year [fig. 8]. The careful arrangement of the elements inside a gold frame can be taken as an attempt to exoticise Venice, but also as an open self-exoticisation: the mocking incarnation of the artist who displays in a photographic portrait his passage through an iconic geography.

The immortality of Venice

For Fontana, this contradictory city that was both sentimentalist and redundant¹² was a well-known place: he had taken part in its International Art Biennale in 1930, 1948 and – with a gallery of his own – 1958. He also maintained considerable correspondence with the directors of the Biennale during those years; these letters are imbued with the postulates of Spatialism at its most dynamic.¹³ Fontana was already known to Venetian audiences, who had witnessed a particularly vital moment in his production marked by the exploration of *buchi* ("holes", 1949) and *tagli* ("cuts", 1958). *Spatial Concept, Venice was All in Gold* belongs to a special moment in his career, as during the cycle that began in 1960 – and lasted until his death – the artist combined extensive exploration of materials with a passionate return to painting: a return in which pigment is not just *colour*, but chiefly

a material whose physical properties make it possible to model the painter's graphic gesture on the canvas. Enrico Crispolti has stated of the *Venice* series that Fontana "has formal similarities with a vague erotic accent", "a faithful and personal fanciful interpretation from the perspective of lyrical contemplation and imaginative response to the Venetian baroque".¹⁴ The combination of materiality, sensuality and baroque was also highlighted by Italo Tomassoni: "For Fontana this is a means of re-possessing an image [that of Venice] and then breathing completely new life into it... to incorporate its forms and lines into this conscious, understood and intellectually dominated territory."¹⁵ The idea of rewriting the baroque, an interpretation derived above all from material observation of the use of gold in the series, takes us back to Fontana's assertions in the famous *Manifiesto Blanco* (White Manifesto), a document written in Buenos Aires together with his students in 1946, which would later become a milestone in the founding of Spatialism in Italy. In it his statements on the representation of space in early painting and his ambition to increasingly expand represented space led him to view the baroque masters as forerunners of modern practices, as it was they who were "a leap ahead" and "represent [space] with a magnificence that is still unsurpassed and add the notion of time to the plastic arts"¹⁶: whereas before the modern period art was unaware of "the workings of nature", the baroque as a modern expression incorporates notions of time, matter and space stemming from the advances of science in understanding the world. Far from being isolated, Fontana's thought is linked to a generation of Italian intellectuals – of whom the art historian Lionello Venturi is an emblem¹⁷ – who during the interwar period attempted to reconsider the relationship between tradition and modernity, showing "the error of the rationalist invasion"¹⁸ in order to establish new experiential-material links between the twentieth-century artists and "the primitives".

Part of this reworking of the connection between modern and early painting is visible in the technique used in *Spatial Concept, Venice Was All in Gold*: on a creamy base of alkyd paint – a material derived from polyester – Fontana used red synthetic paint as a ground layer for the gold with which he later covered the painting's surface.¹⁹ These three steps are a direct reference to the technique used to execute the illuminated altarpieces produced in northern Italy before 1400 by masters such as Duccio and Cennino, in whose workshops the wooden panels were covered with a light gesso base before applying the traditional *tronco*: a reddish-brown clay pigment used as a base for the gold leaf, in order to enhance its warmth.²⁰ In relation to this inspiration drawn from early art, Pia Gottschaller puts forward the hypothesis that Fontana – just as Venturi praised Giotto – views the gold of medieval and byzantine icons as a strategy of spatial

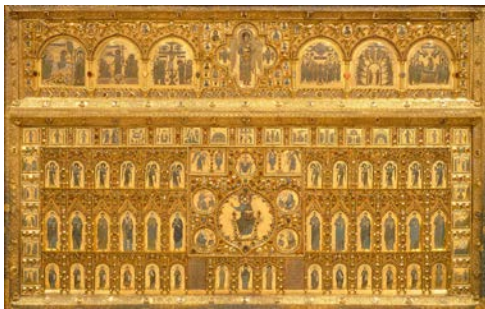


Fig. 9
Pala d'Oro
St Mark's Basilica, Venice



Figs. 10-11
Materials found
in Lucio Fontana's
studio on Corso
Monforte



Fig. 12
Fontana in his studio on Corso Monforte

synthesis: the appearance of the indefinite space of the divine.²¹ Similarly, the inclusion of coloured Murano glass in several pieces in the *Venice* series is based on a direct reference to the hundreds of gems adorning the *Pala d'Oro*, the main altarpiece in St Mark's and an emblem of the city, which was embellished by various craftsmen between the tenth and fourteenth centuries [fig. 9].

Although the use of gold in *Spatial Concept, Venice Was All in Gold* and other works by the artist is widely discussed, it is evident that its contingent context suggests a host of connections between past and present. This material exploration of the history of Italian art found its way into Fontana's oeuvre in the 1930s, when his investigation of craft techniques in Italy and Argentina led him to produce pieces in vitrified terracotta, coloured ceramics, gilt bronze and mosaic. From this perspective, the use of gold and glass is both symbolic and historical: it is the link between his work and earlier material tradition, but also proof of the misguided academic distinction between "fine arts" and "applied arts". The replacement of gold and jewels with their industrial and craft equivalents – polyester and glass – is not mockery but an attempt to create an art unfettered by nostalgia for the past [fig. 19, 11 and 12].

Milan and the emergence of the new

Reviewing the exhibition *Arte e Contemplazione*, Gillo Dorfles writes that "with a valiant fantastical streak, Fontana has once again triumphed in creating a new and original genre",²² underlining the artist's bold use of an industrial plastic material instead of oil paint. The conflict on the merger of "fine arts" and "applied arts" that pervades Fontana's whole career is embodied in his artistic praxis by the incorporation of various materials whose disparate origin questions the validity of established artistic genres. Fontana engaged in this task as part of a truly modern pursuit: the construction by the artist (as an intellectual) of new genres that attest to mankind's advance. This self-imposition allows us to gauge the tone of the debates that arose in the cultural context of 1950s Italy, in which art and design shared the same stage in a fluent dialogue between artistic production and industrial and artisanal processes.²³ Fontana himself stated in an interview granted around this time that "I really used paintings for decorative purposes, and I don't see anything wrong with that, as walls can be decorated... It was later that decorating acquired its pejorative sense."²⁴ *Spatial Concept, Venice Was All in Gold* recalls some aspects of the artist's previous work focused on ornamental uses, such as the ceramics executed for the Cinema Arlecchino (1948) and the balcony of the Lanzone 6 tower (1951-52) in Milan [figs. 13 and 14], the city where Fontana spent most of his life and from which his family hailed.



Fig. 13
Lucio Fontana
Ceramic figure designed for the Cinema Arlecchino, 1948

Fig. 14
Cover of the Italian design magazine *Domus* devoted to
Fontana's intervention in the Cinema Arlecchino, 1948



Fig. 15
Sardinian immigrant
outside the Pirelli
skyscraper, Milan, 1968
Photograph by Ugo Mulas

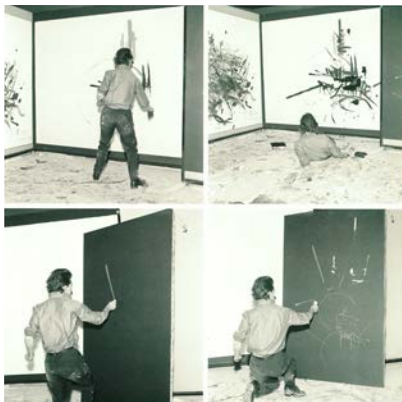


Fig. 16
Georges Mathieu at the Galleria del Cavallino,
Venice, 1959

Unlike the Venice of golden basilicas, Milan of the early 1960s was illuminated by the steely gleam of the Pirelli skyscraper [fig. 15]: the emblem of the modernity and economic boom of the “Italian post-war miracle”, which Lucio Magri defines as an act of creating wealth from destruction (exploitation of workers and peasants and forced industrialisation of artisanal production).²⁵ Milan made an art of what Maoism then called “using backwardness as a developmental resource” as opposed to American Fordism, an appealing modernisation that reached homes through television, avoiding the gaze of the old city that stood in ruins following the war.²⁶ Its industry gave rise to motor vehicles, fashion and books for the rest of the country and in its art galleries art informel – the main art trend of the day in Europe – was beginning to give way to sharp criticism of the traditional art model through the monochrome colours and cutting conceptualism of Piero Manzoni, Enrico Castellani and Fontana himself. With respect to this critical stance towards gestural art, the use of hands in the Venice series indicates a second level of parodic criticism that underlies his mockery of the city: according to Benjamin Buchloh, Fontana’s use of hands is merely “an evident sign of negation of the falsely expressionistic and subjectivist attitudes of gestural painting typical of neo-surrealist automatism, which had flooded the scene in post-war Europe.”²⁷ Like other artists who bitingly criticised the Milan scene, Fontana regards art informel and the institutionalisation of the historical avant-garde movements as an output stuck in the rut of “exploring petit bourgeois subjectivity”, a retardataire and nostalgic art.²⁸

Venice is thus a criticism of post-war expressionism’s famous visits to the city of the canals, such as that of abstract painter Georges Mathieu in September 1959 [fig. 16]. The French artist treated the select audience at the Galleria del Cavallino to a controversial paint performance as a tribute to Tintoretto and his legendary work on the Battle of Lepanto: the art-historical citation and “shamanic and frenzied” gestuality²⁹ of the monumental paintings resulting from this action reflect the use of myth as a quest for the identity of European post-war art, promoted by the practitioners of art informel.³⁰ Along the same lines, in 1960 the abstract expressionist Franz Kline showed his work in a much publicised exhibition in the American pavilion of the Venice Biennale, linking himself in his statements given in interviews to old masters like Rembrandt and Velázquez.³¹ In *Spatial Concept, Venice Was All in Gold*, these aspects – quotation and the gestural – are used to highlight the contrasting commonplaces present in expressionist production: in Fontana’s piece the fingerprints are covered by several layers of a new industrial material, making it impossible to distinguish the paintbrush or spatula; the reference to the splendour of the olden days is shown to be sickly-sweet and easy to look at through the use of gold and gestuality, elements that are deliberately intended to provide



Fig. 17
Lucio Fontana working on *Spatial Concept*.
New York 10, 1962
Photograph by Carlo Cisventi



Fig. 18
Lucio Fontana visiting his Milan studio after
it was bombed, 1946

the spectator with a pleasant shock. Far from the meaningful experience proposed by art informel (which he judges to be an evasion of the European post-war culture scene), Fontana attempts to adopt a position as an artist who is aware of the aims of modern art and promotes them by using the best pigments and supports to be had in his own day.

From baroque metropolis to contemporary metropolis

Far from being univocal, Fontana's mature oeuvre combines the lucid visual economy of a foreigner, a returned migrant's romantic encounter with his homeland and the sarcasm of a Milanese who entrusts himself with the modern reinterpretation of his own cultural past. Crispolti believes that the impact visiting New York in 1961 had on Fontana – the sight of the haven of metal and glass skyscrapers – and his subsequent execution of a new series on the city using metals (*New York*, 1962 [fig. 17]) attests to a prediction of the material progress made by modern art through technology. Fontana also stated of the city in a postcard "It is more beautiful than Venice! Its glass skyscrapers resemble cascades of water that fall from the sky"³² and decided to change both the support and its functions, establishing in the comparison of his two series an imaginary journey between the baroque metropolis and the contemporary metropolis.³³

Fontana harnesses his creative impulse of decades to achieve acclaim as an artist and intellectual through the series *Venice* and *New York*. Just as the war destroyed his studio [fig. 18] and gave him the chance to start from scratch after returning to Milan in 1947 (when he publicised the idea that he had begun his professional career when the war ended), the crack that divides *Spatial Concept, Venice Was All in Gold* into two is a gesture of culmination and closure of this imagined trajectory: a monument to the *tagli* at the peak of his international career and an act of destruction which he converts into a space for invention. As Giulio Carlo Argan stresses, not even at the peak of his career did he cease to use *Spatial Concept* as a title for his canvases, likening the space he worked on to endless scientific praxis albeit – fortunately – different from the kind that can be approached using numbers and formulas.³⁴

Notes

- 1 *Arte e Contemplazione*, Palazzo Grassi, Centro Internazionale delle Arti e del Costume, Venice, July–October 1961.
- 2 *Lucio Fontana: Ten Paintings of Venice*, Martha Jackson Gallery, New York, 21 November–16 December 1961.
- 3 Luca Massimo Barbero, “Lucio Fontana: Venice / New York”. In Luca Massimo Barbero (ed.): *Lucio Fontana: Venezia / New York*, Venice, Peggy Guggenheim Collection, 2006, p. 26.
- 4 Lawrence Alloway: “Man on the Border”. In *Lucio Fontana: Ten Paintings of Venice*, op. cit. note 2, n.p.
- 5 Anthony White: “Lucio Fontana: Between Utopia and Kitsch”. In *Grey Room*, no. 5, autumn 2001, p. 56.
- 6 Barbara Hess: *Lucio Fontana*, London, Taschen, 2006, p. 22.
- 7 Whereas *Arte e Contemplazione* featured 19 pieces, *Ten Paintings of Venice* showed only 10, though it included three that were not included in the Palazzo Grassi exhibition: *Spatial Concept, Moon in Venice; Spatial Concept, Baroque Venice* and *Spatial Concept, Sun in St Mark’s Square*.
- 8 Barbara Hess 2006, op. cit., note 6, p. 62.
- 9 Barbero 2006, op. cit., note 3, p. 26.
- 10 Paolo Campiglio, “I Only Believe in Art”. In Barbero (ed.) 2006, op. cit. note 3, p. 204.
- 11 Although Aznavour’s song is from 1964, it is a magnificence example of the cultural products that arose from the bucolic image described above.
- 12 Opinion of Fontana gleaned from his correspondence by Luca Massimo Barbero, in Barbero (ed.) 2006, op. cit., note 3, p. 28.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- 14 Enrico Crispolti (ed.): *Fontana, Catalogo generale*. Milan, Electa, 1986, p. 23.
- 15 Italo Tomassoni, “Per una ipotesi barocca”, Rome, Edizioni dell’Ateneo, 1963, p. 128: quoted in Campiglio, 36.
- 16 The *Manifiesto Blanco* assumes that all art up to the avant-garde movements is shaped from nature, which moulds the artist’s subconscious (like that of any men) from the origins of reason. Modern art is thus a space for transition that does not succeed in fully breaking away from this dynamic and contemporary artists must take a “second leap” and generate a materialist art suppressing natural forms. [Lucio Fontana et. al.]: *Manifiesto Blanco: nosotros continuamos la evolución del arte* [1946]. Reproduced in *Lucio Fontana: el espacio como exploración*. Madrid, Ministerio de Cultura, 1982, pp. 115–22.
- 17 The prospective view of modern art in relation to the past in the *Manifiesto Blanco* comes close to Venturi’s postulates. One of the most controversial passages deals with the representation of space in Giotto and Cézanne, artistic synthesis and “the three-dimensional effect through pure intuition, without following any rules of perspective” at which both painters arrived. In Lionello Venturi: *El gusto de los primitivos*. Madrid, Alianza, 1991, pp. 207–8.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 34.
- 19 Pia Gottschaller: *Lucio Fontana: The Artist’s Materials*. Los Angeles, The Getty Conservation Institute, 2012, pp. 97–99.
- 20 David Bomford et al.: *Art in the Making: Italian Painting before 1400*. London, National Gallery, 1989, p. 21.
- 21 Gottschaller 2012, op. cit., note 19, p. 102.
- 22 Gillo Dorfles: “Arte e Contemplazione a Palazzo Grassi”. In *Domus* no. 382, September 1961, p. 43.
- 23 Luca Massimo Barbero, “Milano / Europa”. In Luca Massimo Barbero (ed.), *Gli irripetibili anni ‘60: Un dialogo tra Roma e Milano*. Milan, Skira, 2011, p. 26.
- 24 Carla Lonzi: *Autoritratto*. Bari, De Donato, 1969.
- 25 Lucio Magri: *El sastre de Ulm: El comunismo del siglo XX. Hechos y reflexiones*. Buenos Aires, CLACSO, 2011, pp. 154–55.
- 26 Vanni Codeluppi: “Milano, città della modernità”. In *Gli irripetibili anni ‘60*, op. cit., note 23, p. 13.

Notes

- 27 Buchloh also stresses that until the mid-1950s Fontana signed some of his paintings with a fingerprint – an initial gesture in this mockery of the liberal subjectivist model of art production. Benjamin Buchloh, *Formalismo e historicidad. Modelos y métodos en el arte del siglo XX*. Madrid, Akal, 2004, pp. 43–55.
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. 44.
- 29 Toni Toniato: “The Cavallino Constellation”. In Luca Massimo Barbero (ed.), *Venice 1948–1986: The Art Scene*. Milan, Skira, 2006, pp. 105–106.
- 30 Buchloh 2004, *op. cit.*, note 27, p. 15.
- 31 Luca Massimo Barbero and Sileno Salvagnini: “1948 1954”. In Barbero (ed.) 2006 (Venise...), *op. cit.*, note 29, pp. 65–67.
- 32 Quoted in Barbero (ed.) 2006 (*Lucio Fontana...*), *op. cit.*, note 3, p. 37.
- 33 Enrico Crispolti: “The Originality of a Master of Anticipation”. In Barbero (ed.) 2006 (*Lucio Fontana...*), *op. cit.*, note 3, p. 53.
- 34 Giulio Carlo Argan: “Comentarios”. In *Lucio Fontana: el espacio como exploración*. Exh. cat., Madrid, Ministerio de Cultura, 1982, p. 114.