

Discovery

Meta-thinking

Invention

Fontana

Whitehead Russell

“The art of progress is to preserve order amid change, and to preserve change amid order”

“Science may set limits to knowledge, but should not set limits to imagination”

Conceptual Art

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Lucio Fontana: Spatial Concept, ‘Waiting’: 1960;

Tate Modern, London

Concetto Spaziale, ‘Venezia’: 1961;

Private Collection

Spatial Concept, “Waiting” is all simplicity that can’t be trusted as it offers us both a revolutionary book-end to the art of the Renaissance that began in Florence some 500 years ago and a revelational breaking of new artistic ground. In one slashing gesture, Fontana dramatically overcame the illusionistic nature of painting and integrated real space and real voids into two-dimensional art. The medium now becomes the message in keeping with science, technology and art of the time as well as with his earlier plea for a new art (Manifesto Blanco, 1946) that embraced modernity and movement. *Spatial Concept, “Waiting”* is one of a series of works Fontana made which featured a slashed canvas and are collectively known as the *Tagli* (‘cuts’). The physical opening of this picture’s surface not only “discovered” the space behind the canvas, thereby blurring the distinction between two and three dimensionality, it also implied that a continuum existed between a viewer’s space, the pictorial surface and what lay behind. Liberation from the Renaissance heritage of depth using the illusion of perspective is at hand. A general sense of mystery and depth is enhanced by careful attention to detail: canvas front is monochromatically painted (also ensures that the surface edges curl away backwards when slashed) and its reverse is lined with black gauze so that darkness shimmers behind the open cuts. In opening up space beyond the confining plane of the picture, “space age” art has been created that stages and stimulates the viewer’s version of their inner world, the outer cosmos and the infinite. Fontana’s *Spazialismo* movement has now fully arrived and we are invited to let it take us anywhere we already know how to go. Fontana had always kept up-to-date with the latest developments in science and openly welcomed the transformative power of technology that was “going to change everything”. He was of course both right and wrong – it would just be a question of time.

For all its confrontational suddenness, Fontana’s signature slash was many years in the making. A wide range of biographical (Italian father and Argentinian mother, an excellent bilingual education and academic degrees in both engineering and sculpture); historical (world war and post-war years); and cultural (varying socio-economic and political approaches to life and the arts) strongly influenced Fontana’s early artistic creations. Although this diversity was initially described as “disconcerting”, giving Fontana the appearance of being a “highly complicated and inconsistent artist” that was driven by a special “inner turbulence”, a more enlightened view suggested that Fontana was always searching for something more and timeless in his art and was unusually comfortable in the “space” between art categories. In wanting to be both a sculptor (like his father) and a painter (like his grand-father), Fontana embraced the power of “and” and rejected the weakness of “or”. For him the “opposable mind” was a reality as he sat easily with two apparently contradictory thoughts before deciding on action that transcended both. Superb mastery of materials in sculpture was therefore seen as both a blessing and a constraint that would need to be overcome if he was going to be truly innovative. Inevitably, Fontana sculpted his way into painting - initially with his *Buchi* (perforations) and even more emphatically with his *Tagli* (all after the age of 50). And once he discovered the “hole”, he became an “artist of space” and all else was invented variation. Paradoxically, no matter how ground-breaking his leap of creative-destruction was, any subsequent approach that was too derivative ran the risk of producing art that was cliché, or even worse, ruminating.

Although Fontana often emphasised conception over execution, his artistic breakthroughs were all action and reflection that were intimately linked. In this context, broad knowledge, rich life experiences and the personal invention of how to invent were all wonderful assets. Whilst Fontana’s “slash” series exposed a hidden dimension behind the canvas, his *Concetto Spaziale, “Venezia”* series worked on top of the canvas. Painting now launched sculpture as the baroque city of light rises off the canvas in a gold painted, heavy impasto composition of rippling reflections and pillar-like perforations surrounded by muddled whorls of creamy-white. Venice had always been full of dichotomies and this was truer now than ever before. Despite and because of her unique geography and history, Fontana’s Venice was both physically sinking and spiritually drowning in post-war materialism. New solutions were urgently required and modern science and art responded (grand public-private collaborations in engineering, architecture and contemporary art across all its dimensions). Necessity is the mother of invention as energy and matter, light and space, and the long now are all specifically re-imagined and re-framed to integrate the new with the old in Venezia’s re-launch. Fontana’s conceptual art, meta-cognitive principles (knowledge-based, experiential and regulatory) and the overarching narrative of this “art of thinking” series that started with the Renaissance 12 months ago profoundly reaffirms that “*plus ça change, plus c’est la meme chose*”.

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