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I did not make holes in order to wreck the picture. On the contrary, I made holes in order to find something else.

—Lucio Fontana

THE TEARING OF A BLANK CANVAS—LIKE THE KNIFE ON skin—contains a force that violates, but does so without violence. It is a controlled force that creates as it destroys.

Lucio Fontana (1899-1968), artist and sculptor, was born in Argentina, raised in Milan, and returned to Argentina as a wounded veteran after World War I. In Milan, Fontana had trained as a sculptor at the Academia di Brera between 1928 and 1930. Hardly avant-garde, the school taught traditional figurative sculpture based on 19th-century prototypes, but Fontana also experimented with more progressive, abstract styles of art. When he returned to Argentina in 1946, he was well versed in the stylistic languages of Cubism, Futurism, and the more austere abstraction of Mondrian. He put his education to good use by becoming an integral part of the Argentinian art world, collaborating with other artists and founding the Academia Altamira, a school devoted to artistic experimentation.

In the ashes of the second world war, Fontana returned to Italy in 1948 and with others founded the *Movimento spaziale* (Spatial Movement). Fontana and others in the Spatial Movement hoped to create a new type of art that went beyond two-dimensional boundaries by fusing elements such as movement, color, sound, space, and time. Tearing down the “virtual” space of painting, they created new, actual spaces for viewers to explore through multiple senses, not simply vision. Paralleling the development of Abstract Expressionism and similar movements in Europe and Latin America, these artists were part of a growing contemporary art trend that questioned the utility of naturalism, the conventional use of materials, and the artist’s and viewer’s role in creating art.

At mid century many artists were searching for a type of art that expressed the dawning of a new age, one more hopeful and forward looking. Fontana’s best-known work might not at first seem to fit this formula, being composed of sheets of metal or canvas mutilated by different mechanisms of force; the slice of a knife, the punch of a fist, the piercing of a lance. Yet the subsequent wounds to the material, frayed and fresh, allow something new to emerge as they allow light’s movement to become part of the creation, playing on the cuffs and edges of the artist’s interventions. While politics was not necessarily central in his work, Fontana’s rejection of artistic convention and even paint itself seems to reflect a rejection of the world that brought the horror of war and the scars of postwar recovery. His interest in using space as an expressionistic medium—behind the canvas, within the canvas—seems to reflect a search for a better, more hopeful place. By focusing on a realm of reality that depended on the senses, perhaps he was aiming toward a more universal way to experience art: a communal experience that

both demystified art and might heal the divisions between people. In 1949 Fontana began experimenting with what became some of his most inspired work, producing paintings in which the canvases were torn, ripped, and mutilated by his hand. In the 1950s the first hints of surgical cuts began appearing on canvases. Fontana the sculptor worked in a similar fashion in terracotta, making beautiful spheres with gashes that both invited and repelled the observer. In 1966 he won first prize at the 33rd Venice Biennial, featuring a white canvas with a single vertical slash.

Fontana’s creation through destruction challenged the art world to rethink the limits of two dimensions and probe the potential of that third. In his slash paintings Fontana soaks the canvas in paint, cuts into its moist skin, and uses backing tape beneath the opening to create the illusion of space beyond the painting’s surface. In *Spatial Concept: Expectations* (cover), a decentered slash floats near the center of the canvas at a slight angle and disturbs the austerity of the neutral rectangular background. The slight opening that the slit provides, introduces the artist’s imperfect action, but it also creates a slight undulation in the otherwise smooth surface, which alerts the viewer to its new status as a three-dimensional object. The opening created a space beyond the canvas. It is slowly beginning to expand as its center widens, but the edges remain tapered. It is a work created by the conjunction of material, artist, and viewer, each incomplete without the other. As he had said of his work, “infinity passes through them, light passes through them, there is no need to paint” (quoted in Crispolti E, Siligato R [eds]. *Spatialism and Informel: The Fifties*. Exhibit catalog. Milan, 1998:144-150).

The sensual, inviting, forbidden spaces are rife with potential symbolism: erotic, hopeful, foreign. Through these cuts Fontana created new undetermined realities, leaving the viewer to see in them what they choose, maybe even a reality without pain, or disease, or illness. The act of destruction allows the creation of that potential, but the final outcome is based on variables that we may not control. It is at that pregnant moment as a knife moves through skin that anything can happen—healing, or even further destruction. And the scar on the canvas and the gap that it bridges tell the story of how we have come so far that we can actually create new realities when the old ones are filled with disease and pain. The scar speaks of pain but is really of hope.

David R. Flum, MD

Lucio Fontana (1899-1968), *Spatial Concept: Expectations*, 1960, Italian, born Argentina. Slashed canvas and gauze. 100.3×80.3 cm.

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Epigraph: quoted in Trini T. The last interview given by Fontana. In: Beeren W, Serota N, eds. *Lucio Fontana*. Exhibit catalog. Amsterdam & London, 1988:34-36.

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