

LUCIO FONTANA



ON THE THRESHOLD

Edited by Iria Candela

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From the outside, Fontana may appear to be a highly complicated and fickle artist. The ease with which he accommodates any number of styles and his capacity for continual self-transformation have the capacity to surprise, as if one is watching a juggler. —Edoardo Persico, 1936

The critic Edoardo Persico was one of Lucio Fontana's earliest supporters and in 1936 wrote a short monograph on the artist just months before his own premature death. Though he sought to qualify his assessment of the artist's facility by seeing something coherent in his shifting idioms, Persico's image of a juggler is apt in ways he did not intend. A dual citizen of Italy and Argentina, Fontana crossed cultures easily, deftly maneuvering his professional networks, including those in France. Accomplished in tomb sculpture, he also answered to monumental government commissions, while taking astonishing liberties in the medium of small-scale ceramics. Dashing and "virile" in person, so his supporters emphasized, he made sculptures of feminine delicacy and baroque otherworldliness. Effortlessness marked Fontana's manner, notably in his balance of creative independence and Fascist allegiance. In other words, he kept several balls in the air, a remarkable feat amid a repressive dictatorship.

Fontana was almost fifty when, in 1947, he embarked on the twenty-year career for which he is best known, the artist of precocious light and space installations and punctured canvases. One tends to forget that his formative period occurred during the second decade of the Fascist *ventennio* under a regime that tolerated, at times encouraged, modernism, if not political dissent. Born in 1899 in Rosario de Santa Fe, Argentina, to émigré parents of Italian lineage, Fontana was educated in Milan and its environs and fought for the fatherland on the frontlines of World War I. He then embraced the violent *squadristo* of the Fascist movement.¹ Following his family back to Rosario in 1922, he trained in his father's commercial sculpture business, which specialized in funerary monuments. His familiarity with Christian iconography that commemorated the immortality of the spirit would serve him well under the secular religion of Fascism. As a fallback, commissions for tomb sculpture, still prevalent in the Catholic cultures of Argentina and Italy, continued to provide him with a steady income in both countries during the interwar period, while he pursued his "pure art."²

In 1927 Fontana set sail again for Milan, where he would remain until his departure for Buenos Aires in 1940, and to where he returned in 1947, living in Italy until his death in 1968. Though a brief stint in his early twenties working on the Pampas and his cross-Atlantic journeys might have given Fontana a broad worldview and love of the open



fig. 1 Adolfo Wildt, *Prison (Il Prigione)*, 1915. Marble, H. 26 3/8 in. (67 cm), W. TK in. (TK cm), D. TK in. (TK cm). Owner TK



fig. 2 Ernesto de Fiori, *Marlene Dietrich*, 1931. Painted plaster, H. TK in. (TK cm), W. TK in. (TK cm), D. TK in. (TK cm). Owner TK

landscape, in his mind Argentina was, and always would be, a cultural hinterland.³ In that regard, he was a model product of the Italian Liberal state's strategy of emigrant colonialism in the Americas, one that encouraged allegiance and returns—actual or monetary—to its borders.⁴ Fontana attested to keeping the flame of “Italian genius” burning inside him and wanted to make his name on the European stage.⁵ As his letters reveal, Fontana was relentlessly ambitious, a character trait that accounts for his rapacious assimilation of the recent history of modernism. He enrolled at the Accademia di Belle Arti di Brera to study under Adolfo Wildt, whom he had singled out as the only worthwhile Italian sculptor.⁶ An idiosyncratic figure among the older generation, whose work did not fit easily into any one stylistic category, Wildt had a penchant for depicting bodies in states of mystic reverie, which he wrought from marble, chiseled, bored through, and honed to the point of seeming immateriality (fig. 1 TK *Prison/Il Prigione*). His student took note.

Wildt died in 1931, just as Fontana began to exhibit colored gesso figures and terracotta reliefs at the Galleria del Milione, a venue for European avant-garde art in Milan; several of these same works also appeared in the Fascist state exhibitions. Fontana's *Black Man/ Figure (Uomo nero, 1930, pl. TK)*, a large plaster covered in tar, marked his rupture with Wildt and traditional bodily canons in favor of a schematic primitivism. Like his contemporary *Victory (Italian title TK)* made for Giuseppe Terragni's *Monument to the Fallen (Italian title TK)*, comparisons were made to the work of Ossip Zadkine, while the roughly hewn forms also approximated those of Mario Sironi, one of the leading painters of the Novecento. Ernesto De Fiori, a sculptor well known in Italy at the time, produced polychrome plaster busts of a blonde, red-lipped Marlene Dietrich (fig. 2 TK), among others, with a quivering surface touch, but Fontana exceeded his example by decorating the skin of his female portraits in shiny gold (plates TK). More sui generis were his incised terracottas, such as *Black Figures (Italian title TK, date TK, fig. 3 TK)* and *Figure at the Window (Italian title TK, date TK)*. Neither traditional relief nor sculpture in the round, they combined painted and barely delineated forms. “Is this sculpture?” provocatively asked the critic and architect Raffaello Giolli, establishing some key themes of critical writing on the artist: that he collapsed distinction between mediums, dematerialized mass through brightly tinted and reflective surfaces, and broke through closed form by leaving the material in a state of sketch-like approximation.⁷

Fontana set his sights on pushing the boundaries of figurative sculpture; though aware of Surrealism, he never experimented with the found object or assemblage, nor did the steely machine fantasies of Futurism attract him. The pieces that he continued to produce in carved marble and cast bronze, while competent, were hardly unconventional (*Little Boy of the Paraná [Spanish title TK], 1942; Wounded Woman [Spanish title TK], 1944*). Instead, he astutely chose to make his reputation as an



fig. 3 Lucio Fontana, *Black Figures (Italian TK)*, 1931. Terracotta and paint, H. TK in. (TK cm), W. TK in. (TK cm), D. TK in. (TK cm). Owner TK

avant-garde artist by working with malleable cement, plaster, or clay, materials that allowed for immediacy of expression and lent themselves to coloristic fantasies with polychrome surfaces, painted and glazed. Although he was not always considered successful and taken by some as merely polemical, several Milanese critics immediately rallied around Fontana as “a combative artist, eager for new experiences” and “fascinated by the new.”⁸ In an influential text, [[art historian? curator? critic?]] Piero Torriano emphasized the artist's risk-taking and manliness in the gendered discourse of Fascist culture, effectively countering the perceptions of those who would see but intemperance or aesthetic indulgence: “Tall, dark, robust, with a squared face and large forehead, strong jawed and energetic bearing, this young man pleases with his open demeanor, resolve, and the ardent passion that animates him. A passion for which he abandoned a successful business and threw away a fortune to return to Italy and take back the sculpture studio that he had abandoned in his youth when he volunteered for the war. And he throws himself into his art with such force that it impresses itself into his work in a singular way.”⁹

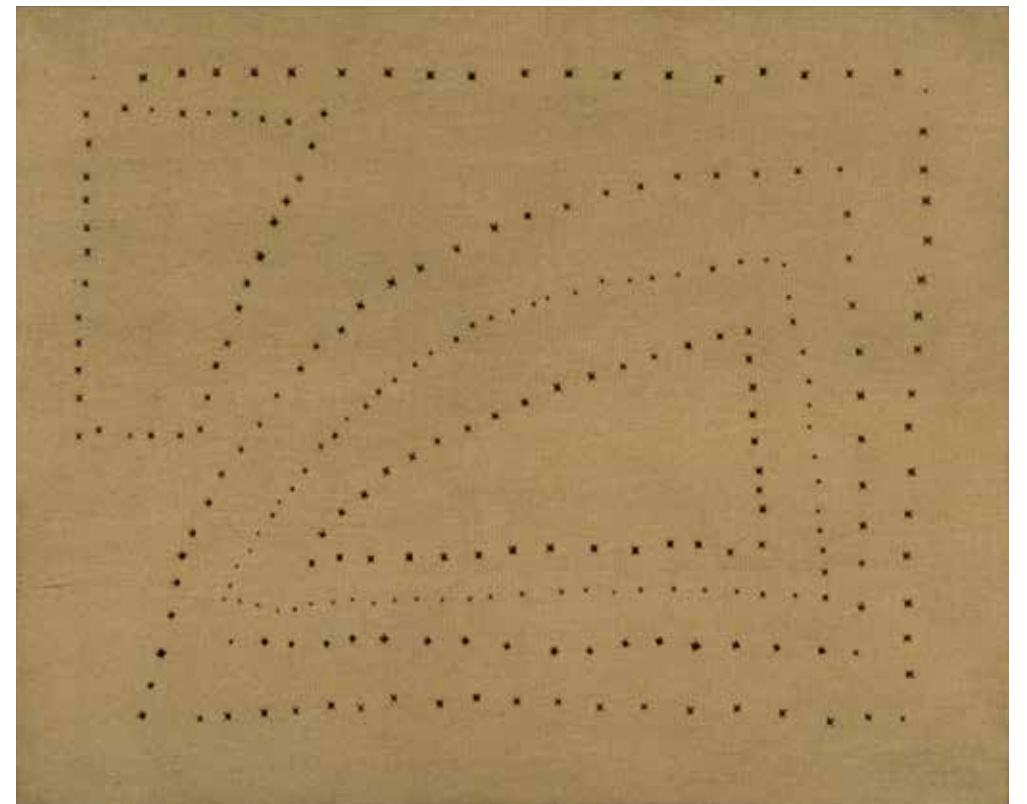
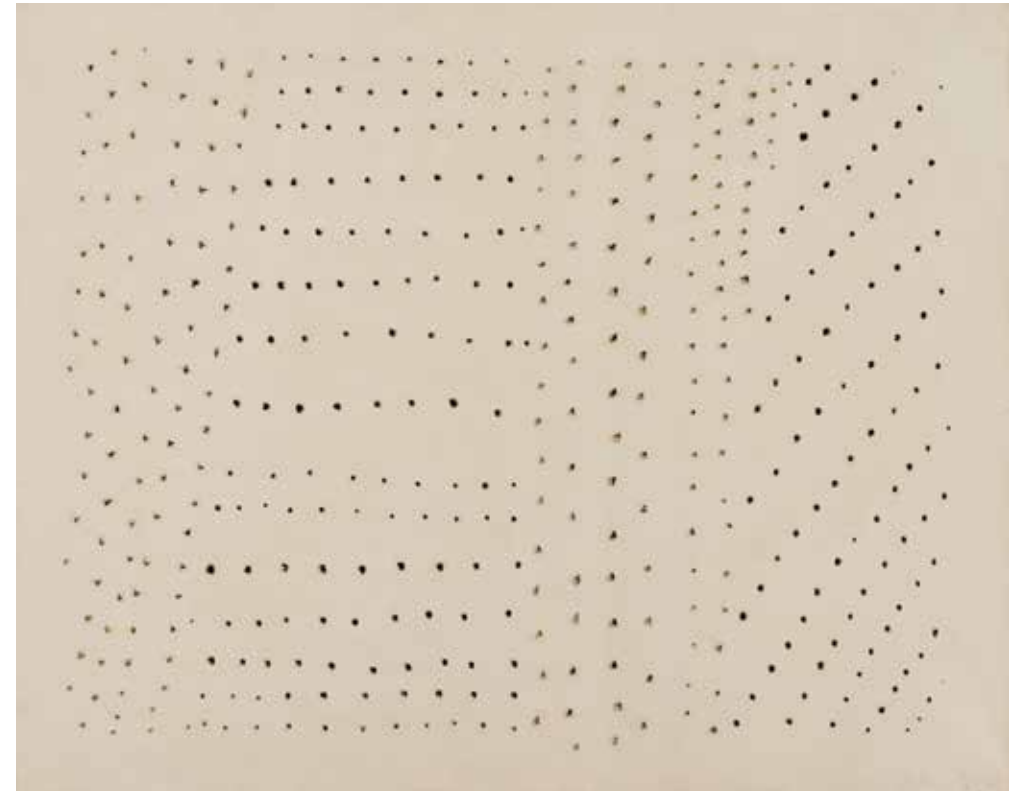
Persico and others positioned Fontana as emblematic of a younger generation (“between thirty and forty years of age”) committed to modernity and sincerity (or “realism”) in their work, two loaded words in the culture of the Fascist period. The artist's eclecticism was a sign of “critical consciousness” and “an attachment to reality” that signaled openness to European trends rather than conforming to stale and chauvinistic traditions. Quoting the German critic Georg Simmel on expressionism (and influenced by the contemporary Milanese school of Phenomenology¹⁰), Persico observed that Fontana plied and pulled the unformed matter in such a way—restless and impetuous—as to imprint both his physical touch and the drama of his inner being: “He made the mass shudder.” Several critics likened this spiritual intensity, achieved through visible struggle with the material, to the Baroque, the antithesis of classical repose.¹¹ “Fontana never liked solemn sculpture,” Giolli commented, “silent blocks repelled him.”¹²

In the larger, contentious cultural landscape of the Fascist period, Fontana was an emerging and minor artist, even if singular aspects of his early work set the stage for his later career. Not by chance, he managed to carve out a space for himself in 1930s Milan, Italy's industrial city, geographically proximate to the rest of Europe and the center of originative thinking in architecture and design, in contrast to Rome, the seat of state power and bureaucracy, where pressures to conform to an ossified, imperialist classicism were more pronounced. Fontana showed throughout the 1930s at the Galleria del Milione, which hosted exhibitions of Vasily Kandinsky, Fernand Léger, Max Ernst, and Willi Baumeister, alongside work by both figurative and abstract Italian artists, and sold avant-garde journals such as *Documents* and *Cahiers d'Art* in its bookstore.¹³ Fontana collaborated with several architects of the Rationalist movement, also based in Milan, the equivalent of the



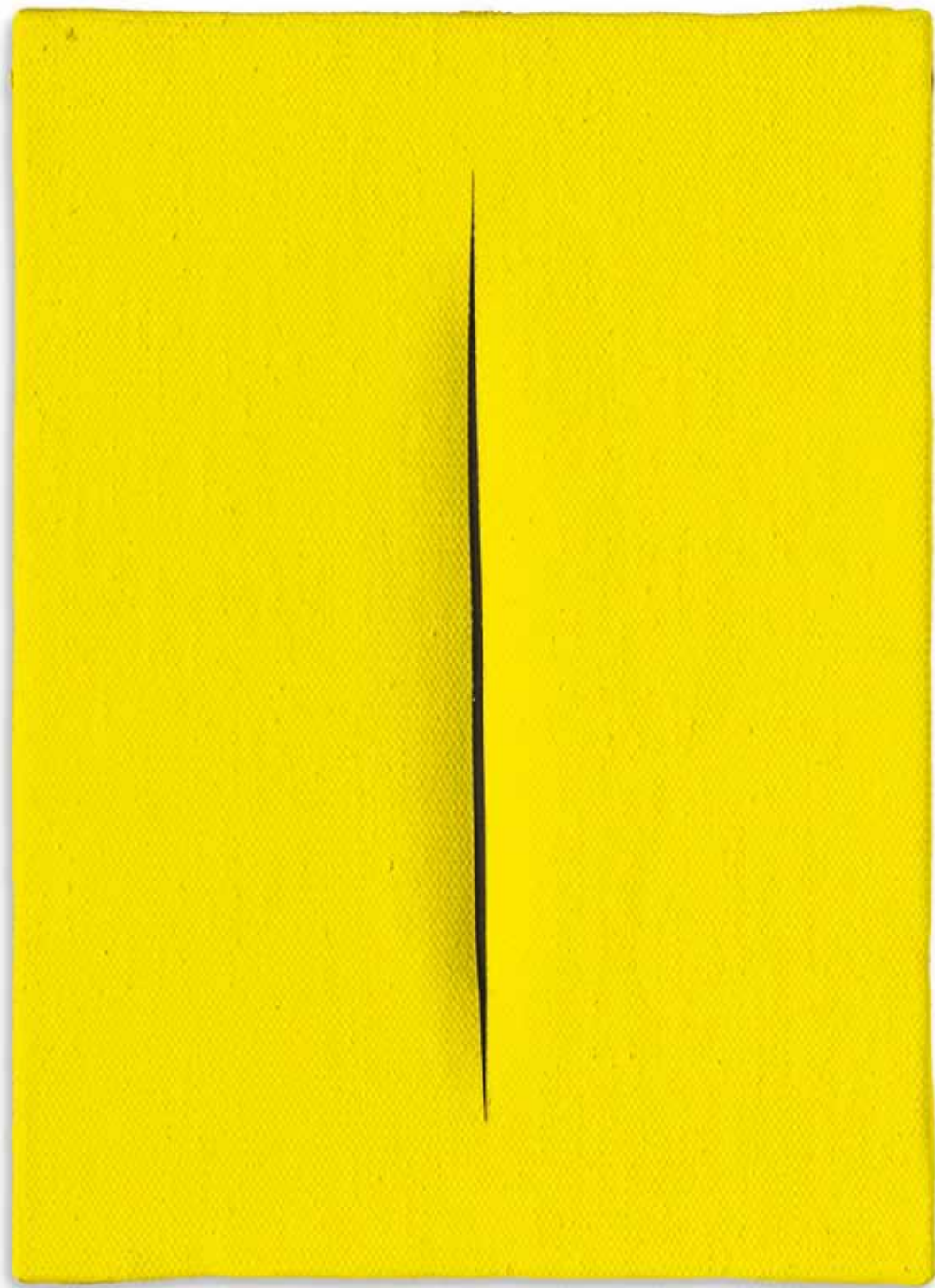
Captions for narrative images are longer, and will include dates, names, places and events.

pl. 00 *Olympic Champion (Waiting Athlete)*, 1931-32

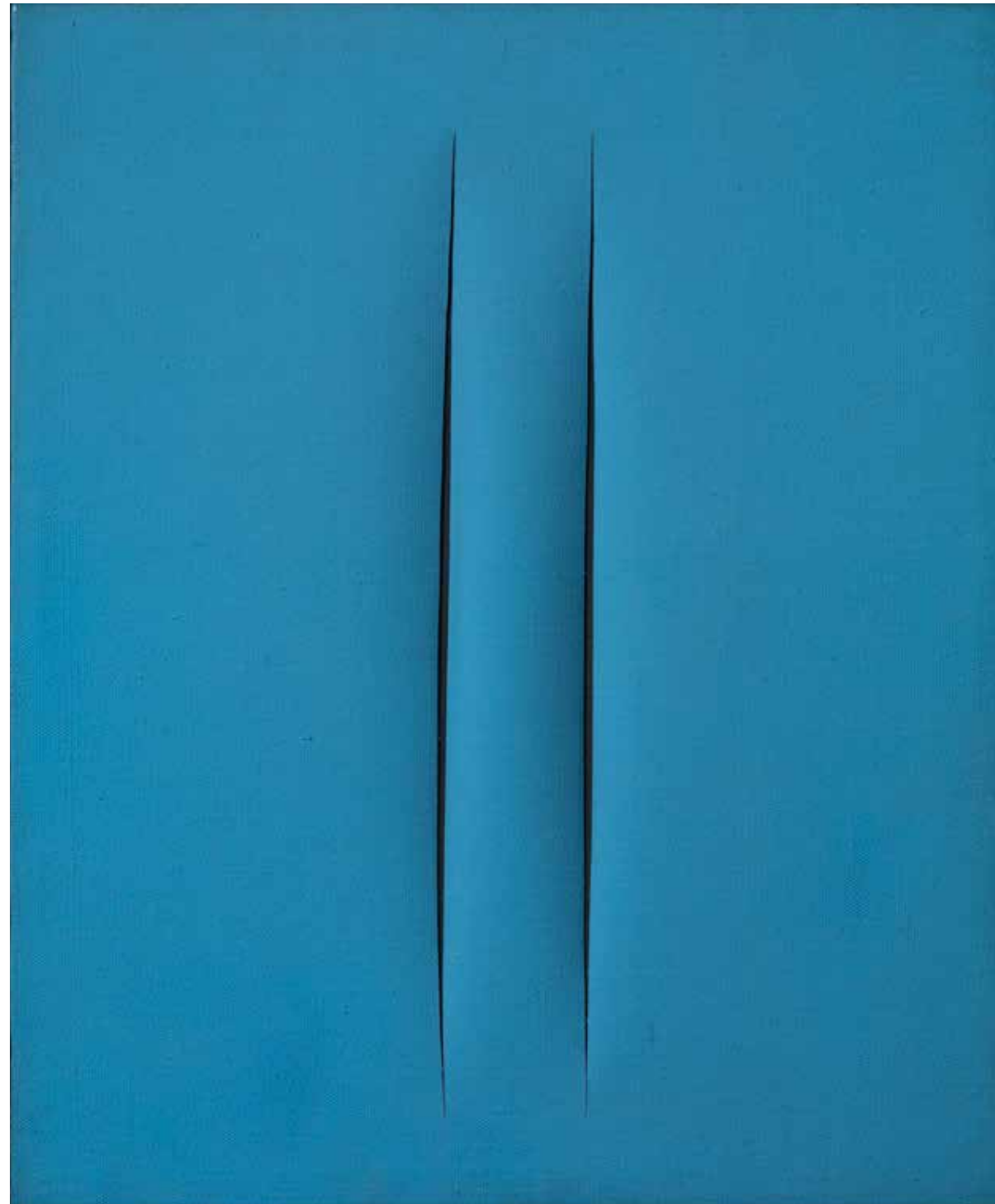


pl. 00 *Spatial Concept*, 1960

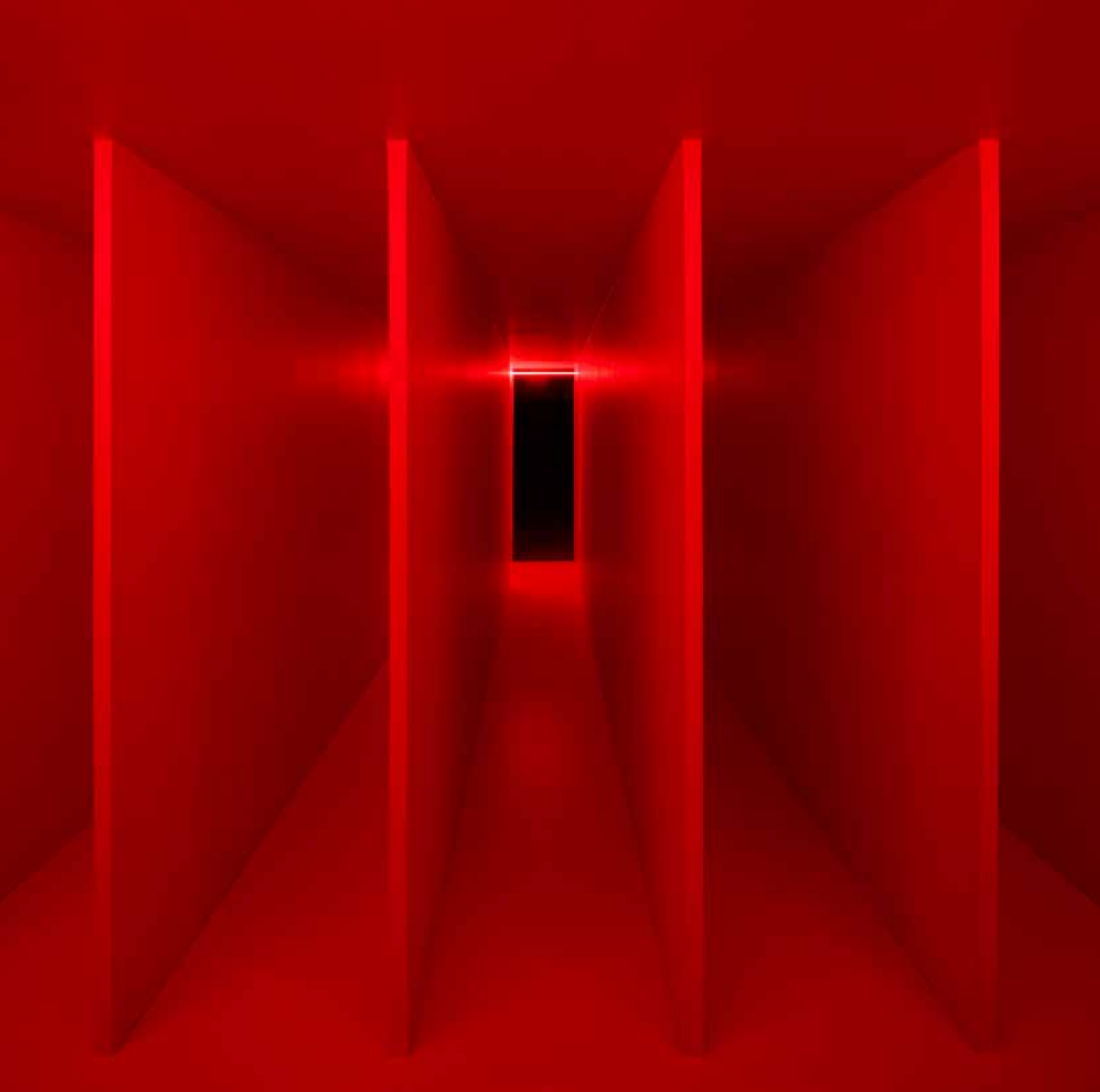
pl. 00 *Spatial Concept*, date TK



pl. 00 *Spatial Concept, Expectation*, 1967



pl. 00 *Spatial Concept, Expectations*, 1966



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Lucio Fontana

On the Threshold

A reassessment of the work of one of the most innovative artists of the 20th century, emphasizing his Argentine background and interdisciplinary approach to both art and life.

LUCIO FONTANA (1899–1968), a major figure of postwar European art, blurred numerous boundaries in both his life and his work. Moving beyond the slashed canvases for which he is renowned, this book takes a fresh look at Fontana's innovations in painting, drawing, ceramics, sculpture, and installation art. Archival images of environments, public commissions, installations, and now-destroyed pieces accompany lavish illustrations of his production from 1930 to the late 1960s, providing a new approach to an artist who responded to the political, cultural, and technological thresholds that defined the mid-20th century.

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Contents

Introduction Iria Candela

The Juggler Emily Braun

The War Years: Lucio Fontana in Argentina Andrea Giunta

Not an Against but a For: Lucio Fontana and European Art, 1947-1968 Anthony White

The Latin Axis in Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde Art Enrico Crispolti

Looking Through the Glass, and What Fontana Found There Pia Gottschaller

Plates and Archival Photography Works in the Exhibition Selected Readings

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