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## *Historic Notes*

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It has been pointed out to me that I speak of Fontana as though he were an uncle of mine. Actually, I have never met him in person, but he is the founder of the school of thought to which I subscribe. Fontana is a creator of new parameters, a neurotic Italian – in the sense meant by Rudi Fuchs – with a tendency to explore the whole horizon of existing problems and their possible solution in a capricious, spontaneous manner.

By process of an elementary syllogism, we have become blood brothers in art. Italian art, in fact, refers to many points raised by Fontana, even those in which reside the greatest resistance to change, such as the sense of spontaneity and ease, the "sprezzatura" in Castiglione.

Through his gift for ease of composition, the deepest, preexisting cultural layers are regenerated and passed on to the benefit of generations to follow. And this is only one aspect of the far reaching effects of his work.

In 1946, Fontana deliberately sets himself up as an aspiring founder of a new cultural epoch. His ideas expounded in the "Manifesto bianco" (published at the end of the second world war), and his experience leading up to it, are sufficient premises upon which to evaluate the importance of those new elements brought up by him and discussed in the manifesto, which called for a breakthrough into a new era, and proposed space as the key.

The theories which the "Manifesto bianco" expounds are of an historic nature, dealing with the changing existence of man. The author is optimistic, resurrecting the old theories of the avant-garde on the obsolescence of painting, sculpture, poetry and music as art forms and foreseeing a *wholistic art*.

*Wholistic art* is the representation of space. Fontana sets even this definition in an historic context, pinpointing the XIII century as the beginning of modern art, with the first representation of space. In practical terms, he assumes the role of a postulator of new ideas, being the only person able to do so at the time. The zero-moment, dating from *Concetti spaziali*, arose out of an experience, highly unusual in its complexity, that he lived through in a previous period. At the zero-moment, Fontana is in his prime (he is 47 years old), with a varied career behind him. The unusual complexity of this experience, lies in the fact that he has passed beyond the learning stage to become a great master, with all the responsibilities thereby entailed. All this between the beginning of the Thirties and 1945, in Europe and South America where he worked alternatively.

We have lived through the Eighties, trying to conceal our discomfort and strain, the phenomenon of introducing experimental art into figurative art. Fine, Fontana explored unhesitatingly the whole gamut of academic art (Wildt), official art of the fascist regime (Arturo Martini) and, parallel to this, abstract art (Persico) and European avant-garde as well as whatever he could reap from South American culture.

One experience doesn't preclude another. One doesn't surpass the other. Fontana digs deep and his art reflects the trends in whose co-existence lie the contradictions of the Thirties. While the

Twenties turned the avant-garde ideas of the previous decade upside-down, and returned to the subjects and techniques of figurative art, it was for the Thirties to draw on both. As can therefore be imagined, the image of the period is somewhat lacking in dignity.

After the Academy, Fontana begins examining different aspects of the problem: on the one hand, the official art of Arturo Martini, and on the other, the abstract movement and futurism. In 1930, he exhibits at the Biennale in Venice together with *Vittoria*, and in the same year has an exhibition at the Milione Gallery, the centre of the abstract movement; in 1934 he works on "Abstraction-cr ation" and in 1935, presents the *Discobolo*, so full of rhetoric, at the II Quadriennale in Rome. In 1949, he begins his spatial ambients and the holes. Then in 1950 he carries out the first drawings for the door of Milan Cathedral.

The Thirties mainly served as a time for chewing over the most prominent ideas of the century and Fontana takes most credit for this. His abstract sculptures of 1934 are dynamic, differing from the academic, geometric abstraction; the reasoning of futurism lies behind them, animating the space and using it to create direction. At the same time (I must stress the contemporaneous aspect here) he begins working in ceramics at Albisola, using terracotta, the principle material used in official art at the time, and by its main protagonist, Martini. However, Fontana's surfaces bear no resemblance to the smooth, even ones of Martini; they are pierced with holes and agitated. He has discovered a new material in Medardo Rosso...

The most curious aspect of Fontana is his ability to place himself with ease, in the perilous position of protagonist of two seemingly irreconcilable camps: the avant-garde movement with its ideology and the other with its straightforward craftsman approach. His flexibility radically differentiates him from the intransigent Medardo Rosso who rejected all his own early figurative work; but then they are of two different generations. Rosso came before avant-garde, whereas Fontana came before its passing. This second passing, however, was not due to a reactionary swing as occurred in the Twenties, but a transition into a *wholistic art*. *Wholistic art* goes far beyond trying to imitate nature, rather it seeks to establish a system in art that parallels the very breath of space in nature. Chronologically in fact, the first holes and the first spatial ambient came out together in 1949, guaranteeing the breadth and measure of the newly adopted spacial art.

The zero-moment falls in a climate in which such a synthesis has been awaited and even called for by Arturo Martini in his testament, the book entitled *La scultura lingua morta* (Martini died in 1947).

*Let me only serve myself.*

*Let me be not a comparison, but a unity.*

*Let me have no image, lest I be exalted.*

*Let me be not the weight, but the scales.*

*Let me not be trapped within the three dimensions where death lurks.*

*Let me be not prisoner of one style, but be a free, elusive substance.*

Even in Martini's a self-commiseration there are elements which help to liberate art; the holes could be seen as the incarnation of the reborn Martini's new precepts.

Fontana digests the central ideas of mid-century art and smooths out any anxieties and upheavals. The stark formality of the holes arises out of a tangle of problems and much that was bad, and manages to resurface, casting a shadow across the ground.