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Lucio Fontana: an approach

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When I was young, some ten years after the end of the second world war, seated at the table with my family, I would encounter mysterious words such as Triennale in Milan (Fontana), or Biennale in Venice (Fautrier). These words enveloped in an aura of beauty and elegance, were often linked to wonderful journeys, as the architect needed wine as well as stimulus for his work. So it was that these words slowly took on meaning, and eventually, linked in their proper context, helped to shape the artistic education of a young man and his first encounter with *modern art*; an encounter which, for we Swiss, was steeped in history. I am reminded of the tribute paid by the Swiss mercenaries in the service of the Sforza: for example, defending Milan against the troops, of Francesco I, who invaded the city from the west and in the last battle in 1515, near Marignano and Melegnano, close to Milan. That battle, as is well known, was an ignominious defeat for the Swiss troops. The blow did however, have its positive side, in that it distinctly marked the beginning of a new era. Hodler, the great Swiss artist, tried to come to terms with that historic twist of fate, drawing and painting numerous sketches and paintings, towards the end of the last century, in preparation for three large canvases destined for the main exhibition hall of the Parliament for the Swiss Confederation in Berne. His work provoked bitter arguments. Most parliamentaries misunderstood the true intentions of the artist, interpreting his glorifying portrayal of the events of 1515 as a withdrawal in the face of the enemy. Hanging the pictures in the place envisaged therefore became impossible; today they are hung, in fact, in the Landesmuseum in Zurich, the museum of Swiss culture and history. Our return to these Italian regions after four and a half centuries, was in itself quite peaceable, although there certainly were analogies to be made with those past events. My generation, those born shortly after the end of the second world war, found itself at the end of an era and facing the dawn of another. We experienced a new way of perceiving events and things in the world around us, and it was to this new perception that we tried to give expression in the Sixties. Today, these changes lie at the very heart of our discussions, even affecting the building up of a permanent, international collection of modern art at the Castello di Rivoli, in Turin.

25 years on, this time seated around the table of Emilio Vedova, in Venice, we asked our host to recount us something further, in his lively, passionate manner, on the topic of the Biennale in Venice, in particular, the period following the first world war up until the shake up of 1968. Our questions which centred round names such as: Fontana, Burri, Vedova also touching on Jorn, Fautrier and towards the end, Manzoni and Klein, were already pointing in certain direction and revealing specific interests. What we heard served to confirm that those protagonists, the so called "third avant-garde", of the period of so much polemic, identified with *abstract art as a programme* and were fully aware that the source and roots of their work lay in Russian constructivism. There were also many pointers linking them with Dessau's Bauhaus, and further afield to its effects on architecture and design, which flourished during the 40's and 50's, making great strides in stylistic development particularly in Italy. Neither the war nor Fascism succeeded in holding back to any

degree, the continuity of work on this programme, which was for us a foremost objective in a serious study. The profession of faith in abstract art, using the language of modernity, was considered an all important duty. The "Zero" movement was therefore the logical conclusion to the matter. It should be stressed that it was a conclusion, and not a bridge towards the future. And so it fell to the Americans, with artists like Warhol and Rauschenberg, to contradict that dogma and to return to a figurative universe and to create a new expression for their ideas. The "Nouveau Réalisme" (Restany) and "Fluxus" (Maciunas), both contributed to this transition. Their surprising new elements and constructions were emphatically oriented towards new values. It was only later that the importance of the following generation was recognised for its work in the 60's in cities such as: Milan, Rome, Turin and then Venice, Berlin, Düsseldorf and finally even in Paris, London and Brussels. Their contributions characterize the image of our era, an era of transition, a bridging. They gave artistic expression to the image of *discontinuity*. Here in Italy, there was talk of "Poor art" while in Northern Europe, Kirkeby was speaking of "Forbidden gardens".

In my living room in Istanbul and Turkey at the end of the 60's, there was the opportunity to experience, for the second time after Berlin, living on the borders of two worlds, and to experiment with modes of developing private research work along the same "seaming". It is against a background of such experiences that we are trying to analyse today, the years in which we made our names, the "silly Sixties". As we begin writing the story, we are also organizing a sort of "portrait gallery" of our times, of those who were the main protagonists. As our work of schematization progresses, we discover the vitality of this "seaming", and of the controversy between *continuity* and *discontinuity*; a vitality which we shall document with names and particulars in the following pages. Here we remember the late work of Schwitters, Malevich and Picabia, the black paintings by Derain, and Magritte's "époque vache", which at the time were considered "incidentals", but which today arouse great interest. In the last exhibition of "Documenta 7", in the summer of 1982, in Kassel, we tried to give some insight into these reflections and to try to translate into figurative expression, the relative ideas and concepts with the insertion of a few artists of the previous generation, such as: Lohse, Burri, Vedova and Klossowski, Meret Oppenheim, and even had they still been alive, Fontana and Jorn. The bridge was built, this time by artists like Beuys, Merz, Rainer and Oldenburg. Other important suggestions for the preparation of our exhibition came from Broodthaers, Fabro and Kirkeby. These experiences of confrontation and dialogue at very different levels, emphasize, yet again, the value both of the Castello di Rivoli's intention to create a permanent exhibition, and also the powerful influence that Lucio Fontana had on our generation. Placed in an unusual context with different references, his work certainly appears in a surprisingly, different light.

The showing of Pollock's work and that of young American painters of his generation, organized by the New York Museum of Modern Art in 1958-59, toured Europe far and wide for over a year. Baselitz saw the exhibition in Berlin, Nitsch saw it in Vienna, I saw in Basle and Kounellis would most certainly not have missed it in Rome. It was, for all of us, an event of great consequence, speaking out strongly on post-war changes, it had the effect of awakening an entire generation. That exhibition represented a powerful challenge. Its intentions and its radical approach to expressive forms affected us all to an unexpected degree. We were ill-prepared for it. Here was a challenge to be faced, the effects of which it was impossible to foresee at the time. One of the consequences was that young artists, German speaking in particular, who were just appearing on the scene at the time, felt obliged to give up any continuity of development, which up until then had been a general rule, in order to rock the art world with uniqueness of gesture even at the risk of suddenly reaching the beginning of the end.

These gestures and unrepeatable, even irreversible actions we got to know, not only through

Pollock's work, but also through that of Fontana. The paintings done with informal strokes, were frequently spoken of in terms of the uniqueness of an artist's sketch and were to be defined for many years by the main statements on the subject of the 50's. These referred, perhaps too often, to the writings and way of life of the Far East, which did not help to solve the stylistic dilemma, nor to help the progress of the real work of painting. Everything indicated that the efforts to develop abstraction as a programme were becoming exhausted. It was clearly felt to be necessary to look for new ideas in painting, for what with monochrome painting, and experiments with kinetics, art was heading irrevocably towards the end, the "zero" moment. In the last desperate attempts, painting became wheels or rails or else became totally discredited as "reactionary" or "bourgeois". Tracts from Tarabukin's book *Le dernier tableau du chevalet à la machine* (Moscow 1923), started being widely quoted, for valid reasons, in my opinion, it is well worth reading and remains an important work even today.

It was Fontana, then, who came up with the idea of perforating and cutting into the canvas using a punch or a cutter. These new techniques gave him the freedom to explore new ideas, and with a decisive stroke, he succeeds in his own inimitable style, in conveying the concept of *reduction to the essential* with the utmost grace and simplicity. These simple pictorial-plastic operations allowed the artist great freedom, and at the same time, overcame any possible argument with colleagues, continually offering surprising new stimuli and themes, both on surfaces and in space.

Already, in the 30's, Fontana had vastly enlarged our concepts of visual perception – a stylistic source for an entire generation. Considering these results from the formal point of view i.e. history and style, we undoubtedly come across the names of Fautrier, Tàpies and Dubuffet, but there are also threads which lead us to Twombly and Rainer. Without wishing to in any way diminish their work, these names linked to Fontana, all demonstrate the breadth of argument being put forward at the time. The same concepts were taken up again and developed by two unusual characters, namely Klein and Manzoni. Shortly afterwards, we find Judd investigating *reduction to the essential* in greater depth, in his *Specific objects* (1965), and strongly conveying the theme throughout his work. In the work of Chamberlain, Rückriem or Toroni, we find the same point of departure, however, this time addressed to a younger audience. The extraordinary sensuality of Fontana's paintings, both from all points of view, never ceases to amaze. It reflects the work of the master craftsman working on large clay masses, his intuition in ceramics and heritage of tradition. This heritage, however, in no way prevents us from rediscovering in our own personal way, nor from experimenting in new ways with his work. This relationship with Mother Earth is transmitted directly through his canvases and through his dramatic interventions in the world of theatre, where Fontana tackles the theme of Eros's eternal struggle between life and death. Fontana takes up the challenge offered by such an inexhaustible theme, with great dignity, taking on full responsibility for the picture.