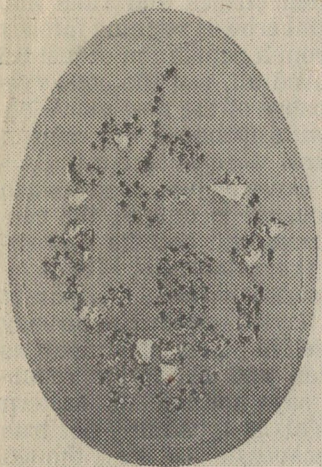


Showman in his own space



Fontana's Spatial Concept: The End of God (1963).

THE FIRST exhibition in this country of paintings, drawings and sculpture by Argentinian / Italian artist Lucio Fontana is currently at the Whitechapel. It's an exciting show — the reality of Fontana's work is even better than its reputation. Fontana led a group of Italian artists that called themselves the Spatialists. A sociable showman, he inspired their manifestos, the first of which was published '47. His natural excitement with contemporary life led to great claims about the future as well. Fontana was no theoretician, his written ideas came from his art and not the other way round.

The 50s were optimistic times, scientific research into space and the availability of television were seen as liberating forces that could only advance artistic possibilities. The unknown was an abstract land waiting to be colonised and artists were in healthy competition about how far to go in

you at this exhibition is how much pleasure Fontana got out of the creative act, out of making things. Free in his range of materials, he set himself no rules. Painting and sculpture overlap and at times the paint is part of the preparation, heaped on in order to be manipulated. By calling a series *Teatrini* (Little Stages) in the mid-60s, he shows that he used paint to construct a stage, not create an illusion.

Pushing and prodding, Fontana explicitly suggests the figure in his elaborate terracotta relief *Battle* (1947-48). With many works, the canvas itself becomes the figure and it is manipulated in much the same way. Fontana was not a purist — even when using white towards his death in 1968, the white is warm. *Trinity* (1966), which consists of three panels of repeating lines of punctured dots, is a reassuring piece, with its central spiral flanked by panels in the manner of a traditional triptych.

After 1947 Fontana titled all works "Spatial Concept" but some had additional titles as well: *Heaven, Hell, Expectations*. Fontana's work is never an illustration of mystical intention, continuous staring will not take you off to infinity — it is religious because Catholicism was integral to his society.

The swirling constellations studded with glass jewels thrown into a galaxy of metal paint is more to do with decorative beauty than meditation. Its effect is the same as that of Baroque art, bringing Heaven into the church.

Fontana was a generous artist, his work is not secretive. The three giant egg-shaped canvases called the *End of God* (1963-1964) are powerful self-contained images. The middle egg is the colour of leaves as



Lucio Fontana . . . a spatialist who set himself no rules

metal fragments, it has a skeletal front and wounded skin. Fontana was born in Argentina, he returned for a number of working years, and it is possible to detect the harsher Baroque influence of the Spanish Colonial church in these eggs.

Fontana broke the surface and for that he has been celebrated. He broke it as beautifully and with as much control as he did everything else. To break, cut or puncture can imply aggression and destruction but there is no violence

The bronze sculptures, *Nature*, sit on the floor almost humming. These rough volcanic planets with splits in their sides look ready to explode or hatch out. Often with Fontana's work we are aware of force coming from within; his method of punching out the canvas or metal from behind literally forces his creation towards us. Jackson Pollock dripped paint, Fontana sliced canvas, and yet neither were sensationalists. In the 20 years since he died, many artists

ceptualists and Nihilists). Even though he did say in his last interview that in the future people would be too busy travelling the galaxies to bother with painting, his "end of art" prophecies have sometimes been taken too literally.

This show reinforces the tradition of making art, a triumph of matter and mind in equal doses. We are not yet in Space and Fontana's objects are very down to earth.

● *Lucio Fontana at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, Whitechapel*