

Enduring and Ephemeral Monuments – How to Conserve Them

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Starting from a study on Italian artist Lucio Fontana's collaboration with architects and from several conservation treatments carried out on his environmental artworks, the aim of this talk is to present the problems related to conserving and presenting this particular type of artwork. The approach is aimed at investigating the interplay of theory, conservation, and reconstruction through the double lens of historical research on the one hand, and contemporary conservation and museology debates on the other.

The artist's first collaborations with architects date from the 1930s and included Baldessari, Terragni, BBPR, and Figini and Pollini. This led to his experimentation with new kinds of relationships between art and architecture, in both bas-relief and interior decoration; activities that continued until the end of his career. He paired it with his better known research into "spatialism", which he undertook in the mid-1940s.

The first and second case studies deal with artworks by Lucio Fontana that, although created for a specific space, were removed from their original locations and placed in new contexts. The first is related to the intervention carried out on the work created for the atrium of Hotel Alpi in Bozen, Italy. Fontana was commissioned in 1957 to decorate a pilaster (310 x 160 x 70 cm) with enamelled terracotta blocks. The second concerns the ceiling, *Spatial Environment with Cuts* (plaster, six cuts in a white background, 400 x 814.3 cm), which Fontana created in 1960 for the Milanese house of Antonio Melandri, his friend and patron.

The third case study deals with problems linked to temporary artworks that went missing at the end of exhibitions, trade fairs, and celebratory events, some of which were later rebuilt. One of them is *Struttura al neon per la IX Triennale di Milano* (Neon Structure for the 9th Triennale of Milan), 1951, 51 A 1, designed by Lucio Fontana for Architects Luciano Baldessari and Marcello Grisotti at the Triennale dedicated to the relationship between art and architecture. The work, a "luminous arabesque", was made of 100 metres of neon tubing anchored to the ceiling above the *Scalone d'onore* (Staircase of Honour) in the Palazzo della Triennale. It won the Triennale Award, and photos of it were published in *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, *Art d'Aujourd'hui*, *Graphis*, *Madi*, and *Die Neue Zeitung*, which gave international visibility to Fontana's environmental work.

For the first two case studies, a history of the re-installations will be presented, while the third will be dealt with through a description of a new reconstruction carried out for the exhibition *Lucio Fontana. Ambienti/Environments*, curated by Marina Pugliese, Barbara Ferriani, and Vincente Todolì in collaboration with the Lucio Fontana

Foundation, 21 September 2017–25 February 2018, at the Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan.¹

First Case Study

The use of ceramics as a fourth dimension of sculpture was not new to Fontana, who had begun to experiment with new plastic solutions in the kilns of Albissola, Italy, in the 1930s. In 1939, in an article in the daily newspaper, *Tempo*, Fontana stated, "I am a sculptor and not a ceramist. I have never thrown a dish on a wheel or painted a vase [...]. Fire acted as an intermediary for the shape and colour. [...] The critics said ceramics; I said sculpture."²

In that decade, his first collaborations took place with architects – including Baldessari, Terragni, Figini, Pollini, and BBPR –, which led him to experiment with new kinds of relationships between art and architecture, with bas-reliefs on external surfaces and as internal decoration. These activities continued until the end of his career, alongside his more famous artistic and "spatial" research.

In 1957 Lucio Fontana received a commission to create a decorative element for a support pillar in front of the reception desk of Hotel Alpi in Bolzano to be inaugurated the next year. He created a very dynamic and sculptural ceramic bas-relief, which was developed around the four sides with figures in movement and marks played out in black and grey hues on a white background (Fig. 1). The narration is divided into two parts: the first diurnal, under the sign of the sun, and the second nocturnal, under the sign of the moon. The marks appear next to figurative elements typical of the artist's decorative repertoire – dancers and knights –, recalling his first spatial experiments dating back to the end of the 1940s. One pillar face bearing the date and the artist's signature presents two dancers: at the top, a pavilion with a sliver of moon and, at the bottom, marks dominated by a complex spiral. On the opposite face, there is a knight on a rearing, almost dancing horse next to a dynamic character on foot. At the top there is a hint of the sun, and at the bottom there are signs suggesting a "large still life" of two interlocking spirals. The more essential marks continue on the lateral faces.

When we were asked to organise the removal of the pillar in 2011 because the new hotel owners had plans for a different lay-out of the atrium that did not include the pillar, we had to deal with the problem of placing the work elsewhere. At that time, a new destination for the artwork had not yet been found. Having decided to show it at an exhibition that would be held the next year, we worked with the Rome-



Fig. 1: Lucio Fontana, Pilastro, 57 A 3, 1957, ceramic, 310x160x70cm, Hotel Alpi, Bozen, Italy

based company, Equilibrate, to design a weight-bearing mobile structure. Given the considerable weight of the pillar, it had to be possible to completely dismantle it, so a solution was required that simplified its detachment, subsequent assembly, and storage. Due to its placement almost directly in front of the reception desk, the bas-relief composed of 78 cemented tiles had suffered damage from numerous incidents, some still visible and others roughly hidden by restorations that had altered considerably over time. We further identified cracks and chipped areas due both to the assembly technique and to stress caused by failing weight-bearing structures as well as old “stabilising” procedures carried out with cement and various kinds of glue.

Starting with straightened and reduced photos of the four sides of the pillar and with the measurements of the pieces,

a study was made of a highly adaptable assembly system providing, at least in the first stage, broad possibilities for regulating and recording the position of the tiles. Despite the correspondence and continuity between the tiles, which was achieved via a single coat of clay, it was indispensable to be able to distribute and compensate for the differences in levels, the empty areas, and the deformations provoked by the firing of the clay.

For logistical reasons, a structure was made of steel tubes consisting of two longitudinal halves, both divided into three parts. It reproduced the net volume of the pillar encumbered with the decorations and attachment systems, while extensive areas were prepared for anchoring the tiles. The tiles were mounted on individual supports made of stainless-steel plates and having “short legs” to displace at least part of the weight of the pieces. The use of these simple plates made it possible to stabilise the position of the points for attachment on the back of the piece at the time of installation. Anchor points were created on the back with steel-threaded bolts embedded between small masses of epoxy resin. Thanks to two threaded bars that function as adjustable hooks, every plate was coupled with a “counterplate” having two “key-hole-shaped” slots. Starting from the bottom, the tiles were first attached to the structure, blocking the counterplates with clamps and self-tapping screws.

After assembling a significant number of terracotta tiles, verifying the positioning and making all the necessary adjustments, the counterplates were gradually soldered to the structure. A space of at least two millimetres was left between tiles to prevent them from touching and damaging one another. An accurate alignment of each tile with those surrounding it was achieved by adjusting the hooks and screw-spacers.

At the time of the dismantling, which was carried out in reverse order, from top to bottom, the tiles were separated from the counterplates, which at that point were permanently soldered to the structure, making later assembly fast and precise. After the first preliminary assembly, carried out in our studio, the definitive assembly took place for an exhibition where the bas-relief was presented in two halves (Fig. 2). Lastly, a mobile base was designed and built for the definitive assembly of the plates, which made it possible to attach the tiles on the two structures and to later bring them closer together. This mobile base makes it possible to carry out examinations and maintenance in the future and will permit its dismantling and assembly in a new location (Fig. 3). At the beginning of 2018, the artwork was mounted in the restaurant located in the Torre of Fondazione Prada in Milan, thus once again in a public space, and has become a part of the architecture and interior design of Rem Koolhaas.

Second Case Study

Rigorous planning for removal of artworks from their original location must, in our opinion, not only guarantee easy movement and successive assembly under secure conditions, but must also foresee all the possible variables that can arise over time, including further moves to new locations. This



Fig. 2: Lucio Fontana, *Pilastro*, 57 A 3, 1957, presented in two halves

does not always happen, and the case we are going to present will demonstrate this.

In 1959, Borsani commissioned Fontana with designing the interior decoration for an apartment on the sixth floor of Corso di Porta Vittoria 7 in Milan (Fig. 4). The artist designed a ceiling originally intended to cover the entire living room area of the apartment. There are, in fact, three colour sketches, signed and dated 1959, in which the artist develops different solutions. In the end, only the window section of the living room was involved in Fontana's work, and its construction was assigned to a company whose name we do not know but which must have had the artist's final working plan in its possession at the time.

The spatial environment ceiling, with cuts of different lengths whose depth was emphasised by light from the windows, was the first experiment with his series of "cuts" on an architectural scale, a series that continued until the end of his career. After remodeling work took place in the apartment in 2009, the ceiling was removed by a Milanese restoration company.

As documented by the photos taken during the work and on the occasion of two temporary presentations of the artwork – the first in Maastricht in 2009 and the second at the Galleria d'Arte Moderna di Roma in 2010 –, the ceiling was divided into eight parts, the depth was reduced, beehive panels were applied, and it was no longer mounted as a ceiling but vertically on a wall. The eight panels of approximately 100 kg each were inserted into a perimeter cornice and, at each new location, the cuts had to be plastered and

repaired, and the panels repaired all along the perimeter, due to damage caused during the relocations. Furthermore, the existing structure and the kind of support panels used made it no longer possible to place the work of art on a ceiling.

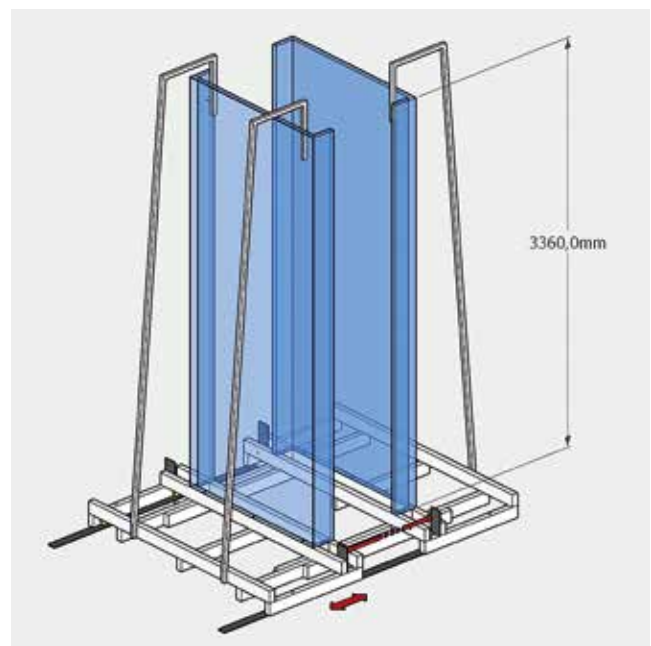


Fig. 3: Mobile structure designed for Lucio Fontana, *Pilastro*, 57 A 3, 1957 (© B. Ferriani)



Fig. 4: Lucio Fontana, Spatial Environment with Cuts, 1960, Milan, plaster; six cuts in a white background, 400 x 814.3 cm



Fig. 6: Lucio Fontana, Spatial Environment with Cuts, 1960, Milan, installation on the ceiling



Fig. 5: Lucio Fontana, Spatial Environment with Cuts, 1960, Milan, installation in vertical position

In 2016, upon request of the new owners, it was decided to intervene again in order to permit more appropriate use and conservation of the artwork. The owners wanted to make sure that it could not only be mounted on walls but also, as originally, on the ceiling.

It was decided to make four support panels instead of eight to minimise interference with the cuts, using carbon fiber composite supports that offer high performance and have a much lower weight than other kinds of support. Taking into account the weight of each panel, metal structures were mounted on the back that made relocation and ceiling suspension possible. The support structure we built makes it possible to mount the artwork on either a wall or a ceiling (Figs. 5 and 6). Every element was studied to the smallest detail so that all the operations can be carried out safely by a team of only three or four people (Figs. 7 and 8).

Operations like the one described above, which require the removal of artworks from their original locations, always pose numerous questions. Is it better to lose works that were created for a specific context, leaving them to historical documentation to prove their existence, or is it better to conserve them in new contexts? Although, as seen in all museums, artworks have often been removed from their original contexts, each time taking on new connotations, how can we ensure that these moves will not lead to the loss of their original values over time?



Figs. 7 and 8: Lucio Fontana, Spatial Environment with Cuts, 1960, Milan, during the installation on the ceiling



Fig. 9: Lucio Fontana, *Neon Structure for the 9th Triennale of Milan, 51 A 1, 1951, Milan, white neon crystal tubes, 2.80 ca x 12 x 10 m*



Fig. 10: Lucio Fontana, *Neon Structure for the 9th Triennale of Milan, 51 A 1, 1951, leaflet by VIPLA, 1951*

Third Case Study

The same issues are applicable to temporary artworks created by Fontana for exhibitions, trade fairs, and celebratory events. They often went missing at the end of the events for which they were created, and were later rebuilt.

Having ascertained that the reconstruction was the result of the knowledge and interpretative tools of their time as well as of the requirements of new exhibition contexts, an attempt will be made to show how a historically accurate reconstruction, based on the analysis of various sources (original documents, letters, articles, interviews, videos, and critical essays) can be considered a conservation strategy for works that were originally created as “ephemeral” and later became fundamental to art history.

The PhD thesis of Marina Pugliese and four years of follow-up research conducted by Barbara Ferriani led to the exhibition *Lucio Fontana Ambienti/Environments*, held in 2017 at the Pirelli HangarBicocca in Milan. At this show, curated by Marina Pugliese, Barbara Ferriani, and Vicente Todoli in collaboration with the Fondazione Lucio Fontana, nine reconstructed environments and two reconstructed environmental artworks were presented, four of which had been reconstructed previously.

This case study looks at the “Neon Structure” designed in 1951 by Lucio Fontana for the 9th edition of the Milan

Triennial (Fig. 9). Fontana was commissioned by Architect Baldessari to make a spatial structure for that occasion. The artwork was installed above the monumental staircase of the building as part of the exhibition itinerary designed by Baldessari.

It was a huge neon structure, an approximately 100-metre arabesque of fluorescent light hung from the ceiling by wires that were almost invisible to the eye. Its creation was entrusted to the Claude company. Until recently, the only documentation of this historic setting were black and white photographs.

The recent finding of a leaflet by VIPLA, a company of the Montedison Group, which at that time had begun to commercialise PVC flooring, has allowed us to ascertain that the neon was actually hanging under a “blue Giotto sky” (Fig. 10). The presence of the blue ceiling is also documented by colour proofs and sketches carried out by Baldessari in 1951 for the installation. In these sketches, the architect defines the colours for the space, floor and walls. As can be seen in one of the sketches, the blue to be used on the ceiling is clearly indicated, as is the word “Giotto” in correspondence with the same blue in another sketch.

After the event, the neon was destroyed, but since then many reconstructions have been made. The environment was first recreated in 1972, on the occasion of the retrospective exhibition on Lucio Fontana at the Palazzo Reale

in Milan, once again organised by Baldessari. Of this reconstruction we knew only that the dimensions of the neon had been slightly reduced to adapt them to the location. The many reconstructions were almost always carried out by the Claude company, which first constructed it in 1951.

A comparison of historical photographs and drawings of many of the reconstructions, discovered through archival research, has allowed us to ascertain that the dimensions of all the later replicas are not those of the original, but those of the first reconstruction in 1972. Through sheer persistence, it has been possible to locate the original design on a one-to-one scale (12 x 10 metres), which is different from those of the first reconstruction in 1972 at Palazzo Reale (11 x 8 metres).

Now there are two versions of the same artwork, shown at La Caixa in Madrid and the Museo del 900 in Milan, as well as a third that was included in the exhibition at the Pirelli HangarBicocca in Milan. This third reconstruction is true to the original and therefore different from the pre-existing reconstructions.

Can these three versions coexist? The possibility of realising several versions of the same artwork should clearly be the artist's choice, but when the artist is no longer alive, is it possible, proper, or desirable for this to happen? Will the legal and historical point of view be in agreement or disagreement?

These are questions that must be faced if we want to conserve such artworks properly.

All images (except Fig. 3): © Fondazione Lucio Fontana by SIAE 2020.

¹ Marina PUGLIESE, Barbara FERRIANI, Vicente TODOLÍ, Lucio Fontana Ambienti/Environments, Milan 2018.

² Lucio FONTANA, La mia ceramica, in: *Tempo*, 21 September 1939.