
LUCIO FONTANA AND ARCHITECTURE

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ABSTRACT: Lucio Fontana's collaboration with architects, which continued to progress over the entire period of his creative experience along with his more famous artistic and spatial production, offered important opportunities for experimentation and research. The artist worked with architects such as Luigi Figini, Gino Pollini, Giò Ponti, Luciano Baldessari, Marco Zanuso, Osvaldo Borsani and Ico Parisi, and it was actually the architects who first intuited the innovative scope of his research. It involved works of a temporary nature carried out for exhibitions, trade fairs and celebrations of historical events, some of which went missing at the end of the events, but also some that became an integral part of extant architecture. Indeed, the artist made numerous environmental works for public buildings, hotels, cinemas and private homes, using traditional materials such as ceramics, mosaics and plaster, as well as new media such as fluorescent colours, black lights, neon lights, and more. As often happens, and as needs and tastes changed, the works were decontextualized and assumed a different connotation.

Here below is a description of the choices made during three of the seven restorations we carried out in the last few years on environmental works created by Fontana between the mid-1940s and the end of the 1950s, which were taken from their original location and moved to new sites.

KEYWORDS: Environmental work, decontextualization, recontextualization, supporting structure

1. Introduction

Modern and contemporary artworks raise a number of issues, both practical and ethical, as to their preservation, their originality, authorship and reproducibility. For many years, museums and cultural institutions have been working towards a definition of universal protocols dealing with the conservation and presentation of complex contemporary artworks and have begun to explore the relationship between artwork production and restoration policies focusing on artworks' historical and critical considerations. Indeed, the 20th century was the first historical period in which art production and an attempt to deal with its conservation in a philological manner took place contemporaneously, as

the methodology choices linked to conservation enjoy the indisputable advantage of being linked chronologically to the creative act of artists. In previous centuries as well - in almost all texts dealing with art history, commissioning clients, and the art market -, close attention was paid to the concept of conservation, restoration and authenticity, but their interpretation was not always unequivocal, and over the centuries these concepts have been linked in very different ways, depending on the changes taking place in social, political and religious arenas.

Artworks have often been removed from their original contexts, each time taking on new connotations. How can we ensure that these same passages do not lead to the loss of their original values over time? It is for these reasons that it appears increasingly important to understand what the true fundamental values of a work are and, even more than in the past, that it becomes necessary to recognise these values in order to conserve them.

2. Case Study I

The first case study concerns the architectural collaborations to build and create Cinema Arlecchino, which opened in October 1949 in via San Pietro dell'Orto in Milan. The post-war reconstruction was going forward very quickly, and the collaboration among painters, sculptors and architects, envisioned by Le Corbusier in 1947, had become reality. Fontana, who had returned to Milan from Argentina only two years earlier, wrote to his brother: "If only you could see Milan: it is something wonderful. It looks like an immense building site."¹

As requested by the owners, Cinema Arlecchino was meant to be small and intimate, more a club than a simple cinema. It was to include approximately 400 seats to watch first-run films at set times.² The project was given to Architects Roberto Menghi and Mario Righini, who then requested the collaboration of Lucio Fontana and Piero Fornasetti.

Hanging from the ceiling, at the entrance to the cinema, a "Harlequin" sculpture by Fontana welcomed the movie-goers. (Fig.1) As Paolo Campiglio wrote in one of his essays,³ „Harlequin is the symbol of regained freedom, an homage to the cunning and power of irreverent laughter against all the restrictions imposed by the powers-that-be." The entryway walls and those along the stairways leading to the floor below were decorated with a diamond pattern inspired by Harlequin's costume, as were the floors made of white Candoglia and black Belgian marble.

The lounge area between the stairs and the screening room were decorated by Fornasetti: panels printed with scenes from Harlequin's life covering the pilasters and a stained-glass window above the bar. Inside the screening room with its brightly colored seats was Fontana's enameled ceramic bas-relief, "Battle", attached to the wall below the screen.(Fig.2) Using ceramics as a sculptural fourth dimension was not new for Fontana, who had begun experimenting with new approaches to sculpture at the Albissola kilns in the 1930s. In a 1939 article that appeared in the newspaper, "Tempo", Fontana

¹ Campiglio, Paolo (editor): Lucio Fontana. Lettere 1919-1968, Skira, Milano 1999, p. 97.

² Bertelli, C. (editor), Roberto Menghi, cit. p.16, Domus vol. VI 1948, no. 231, pp.18-21; Paolo Campiglio (editor), Lucio Fontana l'Arlecchino, Charta 2010, p. 41.

³ Campiglio, Paolo (editor), Lucio Fontana l'Arlecchino, Charta 2010, p. 41.

said, “I’m a sculptor and not a ceramicist. I have never thrown a plate or painted a vase. [...] Fire was a kind of intermediary, perpetuating the shape and colour. [...] The critics said ceramics; I said sculpture.”⁴



Fig. 1 Cinema Arlecchino. In: *Domus*, no. 231, vol. VI, 1948, p.18, Courtesy Domus

Fig. 2 Projection room at Cinema Arlecchino. In: *Domus*, no.231, vol. VI, 1948, cover, Courtesy Domus

After an injunction to close the cinema because the small projection room did not meet local safety laws, in 2009 the owners decided to rent out the space and remove the artworks that had decorated the cinema from the beginning. Once they were removed from their original context, what would their destination be? As regards the Harlequin sculpture, we were asked to design a framework that made it possible to anchor it not to a ceiling but to a wall. As soon as it had been removed from the ceiling, to which it had been attached with hooks inserted into “eyes” set into the cement-like back, we realised that the artist had originally planned to backlight it with 9 lightbulbs set along the entire perimeter. The new way of presenting the artwork, vertically instead of on the ceiling, would eliminate part of its original concept, returning its sculptural quality but not its essential link to the architecture of the cinema. Therefore, after proceeding to the usual restoration procedures on the sculpture, we designed a system with Equilibrate Srl that will permit its attachment either to a wall, as requested by the owners, or to a ceiling, as originally intended, also permitting smooth handling in the assembly and transport stages, something of no small importance that is often overlooked. At the conclusion of our work, the piece was displayed at the Claudia Gian Ferrari Gallery in Milan, and again in April 2018 it was presented at an exhibition in Brescia where, in both cases, unfortunately, it was hung not on the ceiling but on a wall. (Fig.3)

⁴ Fontana, Lucio: “la mia ceramica”. In: *Tempo*, 21 settembre 1939.



Fig. 3 Lucio Fontana, *Arlecchino*, Galleria Claudia Gian Ferrari, Milan, 2010, Courtesy of Fondazione Lucio Fontana

More complex was the removal of the large ceramic bas-relief, and the planning and implementation of its new support structure. As already pointed out, the bas-relief composed of 7 blocks following the curve of the wall behind the screen was set into the cement of the load-bearing structure behind it. After removing the individual blocks, having previously created a fitted form of foam rubber, a structure was built with the same curvature as the wall it had been attached to at Cinema Arlecchino. On the back of the blocks, anchoring points attached the framework to adjustable brackets. In this case as well, the structures were planned in such a way that they can be easily handled, assembled and kept in crates. (Fig.4)



Fig. 4 Lucio Fontana, *Battaglia*, Galleria Claudia Gian Ferrari, Milan, 2010, Courtesy of Fondazione Lucio Fontana

The bas-relief, purchased by Fondazione Prada, is now displayed at the foundation cinema, but not in the screening room. Furthermore, the supporting structure that followed the original curve of the wall behind the cinema screen was replaced with a new structure that anchors the bas-relief parallel to the wall. Thus, although once again in a cinema, it has lost its original function. During the cleaning phase, we unexpectedly discovered that some sections were originally painted with fluorescent colour, such that when the lights went out, “Battle” was lit up by Wood’s lamps interacting with the fluorescence. (Fig.5) Thus the work carried out on this environment gives witness to the fact that Fontana, a year before his famous environment with black light at the Naviglio Gallery, had already used this new medium in an artistic sphere. Unfortunately, there are few remaining traces of this fluorescent colour, both due to their natural deterioration and probably to cleaning operations carried out on the surfaces, due to ignorance of the presence of these very delicate areas painted after the firing.

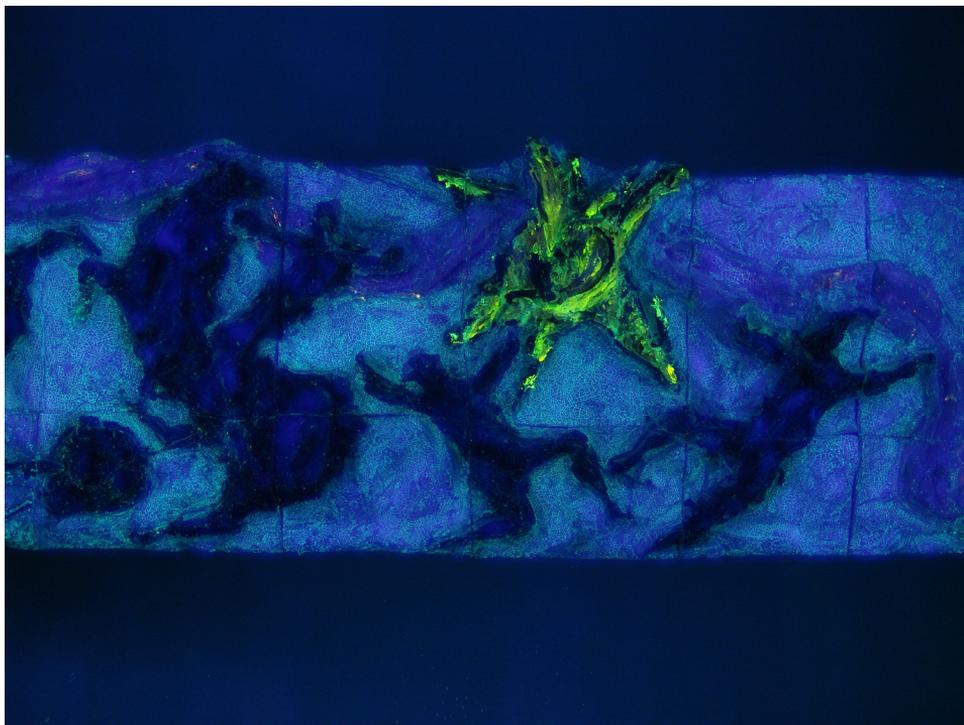


Fig. 5 Lucio Fontana, *Battaglia*, detail illuminated by Black light, Courtesy of Fondazione Lucio Fontana, Photo: Barbara Ferriani

3. Case Study II

Another restoration project we dealt with was the removal of a ceiling created by Lucio Fontana in 1956 for the dining room of the Hotel del Golfo on the Island of Elba, as it risked destruction in the refurbishment of the building. (Fig.6) The artwork, which measures 150 square metres, consists of incisions, cuts, slashes and applied materials in the fresh plaster of the ceiling.

Thanks to the intervention of Fondazione Fontana, which was necessary due to the absence of legislation preventing the destruction of the work (as it was classified as being too recent to be protected by Cultural Heritage legislation), the Department of Architecture and Contemporary Art for the Ministry of Cultural Heritage purchased the work, committing to the care and conservation, as well as the revalorisation of this masterpiece.⁵ The options of utilising the *strappo* or the *stacco* methods to remove the ceiling were rejected because the reliefs and incisions characterising the work affected the entire depth of the plaster structure. For this reason, we decided to employ the *stacco a massello* technique. The work was divided into 25 panels (sections of 2 x 3 m) cut according to a grid plan that would save, as far as possible, Fontana's "marks", and that took into account the limitations

⁵ Direction of works: Carlo Birrozzi, Matteo Ceriana. Caterina Bon Valsassina (Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali, Direzione Regionale per i Beni Culturali e Paesaggistici della Lombardia), Marina Pugliese (Comune di Milano, Museo del 900), Nini Ardemagni Laurini (Fondazione Lucio Fontana). Planning: Barbara Ferriani, Cristina Vazio, Paolo Rolli, Gianni Gambaro, Fabio Meroni. Working team: Barbara Ferriani srl, Cristina Vazio S.a.s. with Gennaro Costruzioni and Zime Srl.

presented by the original reinforcement of the supporting structure as well as the dimensions and weight of the panels required in order to facilitate their future transport. In the initial phase of planning, during which restorers, architects and structural engineers were all involved, graphic reliefs, both photographic and photogrammetric, were carried out so as to create a computerised model that could be used in the simulation of the various stages of the detachment process.



Fig. 6 Lucio Fontana, *Soffitto*, 1956, Hotel del Golfo, Procchio, Isola d'Elba, historical photograph, Courtesy of Fondazione Lucio Fontana

The first phase of the treatment consisted of *facing* the surface with the application of a cotton gauze and protection of the sections in relief the cuts and incisions, as well as the undercuts and holes. Following this phase, supports were built beneath the ceiling: 25 counter-forms sustained by a brace-scaffolding structure. The first incisions to be made were those from below — this was done in order to avoid breaks in the plaster that could have resulted from the shifting force lines and weight-bearing points during subsequent demolition from above. Only once the joists had been identified and removed from the extrados was it possible to carry out the incisions from above in order to completely isolate each panel. Considering the extreme fragility of the work, the removal of all extra material from the rear of the panels was carried out using electric drills with diamond-tip blades. All of these actions were preceded by necessary consolidation treatments of the weaker areas, and assessments were carried out at regular intervals. Once the thinning procedures had been completed, the entire surface was consolidated. Any cracks and breaks were filled, the *backing* of the piece was completed with the application of a „treatment layer” and with the gluing of the panels onto their new supports. Due to the lack of suitable supports on the market for the weight and dimensions of the panels, these

supports had to be specifically manufactured. They were constructed with internal reinforcing and thread inserts in strategic positions that allowed not only for the temporary movement of the panels, but also for their final positioning in their new location.

Once loaded onto trailers, in which scaffolding structures had been purposely erected in order to sustain the panel supports, the panels were transported to Milan where they were placed in a temporary laboratory in Palazzo Litta, the Regional headquarters of the Department for Cultural Heritage. Here, the restoration of the surfaces was started. Each panel was turned over and positioned on a mobile structure that facilitated not only the removal of the facing gauze, and the cleaning, consolidation and reintegration of the superficial paint layer, but also the realignment of the panels in order to simulate the final reconstruction of the work. In order to avoid physical stress on the panels during their repositioning, appropriate metal structures were created, allowing for the panels' rotation to be carried out in a suspended position.



Fig. 7 Lucio Fontana, *Soffitto*, Museo del 900, Milan, 2010. Courtesy of Fondazione Lucio Fontana

In the spring of 2010, thanks to an agreement between the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and the Magistrate of Milan, the work was installed in a great hall dedicated to the art of Lucio Fontana in the Museo del Novecento. (Fig.7) The panels were turned over, positioned, and suspended on support structures which facilitated their transport to and lifting on the top floor of the museum. Each panel was reinforced with an intermediate frame boasting specialised attachment mechanisms that were adapted to the supporting architectural structure. Using micrometric measurements, it was possible to reposition each panel exactly as it had been prior to its disassembly. (Fig.8) The restoration of this unique piece was completed in November 2010 and is documented in a video which follows the

restorers' work.⁶



Fig. 8 De Lonti Daniele, Lucio Fontana, *Soffitto*, Museo del 900, Milan, 2010, photographed during assembly, Courtesy of Fondazione Lucio Fontana

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⁶ Bologna, Sabina: "I segni salvati", 2010.

