

LUCIO FONTANA: THE POST-FASCIST MASCULINE FIGURE

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Abstract:

The 'cut' paintings of the Italian artist Lucio Fontana (1899 – 1968) are intensely sexual objects. For many viewers, their rawly coloured surfaces ruptured by deep vertical gashes strongly evoke female genitalia. Fontana's violent cutting of the canvas has also been compared to the muscular gestures of male 'action' painters such as Jackson Pollock. What such interpretations fail to grasp, however, is the critique of gender identity, and in particular masculine identity, at the heart of Fontana's work. However, as I will show, Fontana relied on an inversion of diametrically opposed notions of maleness and femaleness rather than any deconstruction of the opposition itself. As I outline in my paper, Fontana's critique first emerges in the artist's depictions of the male body immediately after Italy's military defeat in WWII. Fontana's limp and mangled clay warriors splashed with oozing layers of reflective glaze directly challenge the hard, ballistic ideal of the masculine body theorized in the proto-fascist writings of the Italian Futurist poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. Drawing on the work of Hal Foster and Jeffrey Schnapp on the representation of fascist masculinity, I argue that Fontana developed an alternative model of maleness to that encountered in the official culture of Mussolini's Italy. Accordingly, as I also demonstrate, his work gives insight into the extraordinary transformations in male body imagery that took place in avant-garde and official cultural circles in Italy during the first half of the 20th century.

Paper:

Lucio Fontana's 'cut' paintings of the 1960s are often discussed as representations of female genitalia. Tobias Berger, for example, recently cited Gustave Courbet's *Origin of the World* and Lucio Fontana's slashed canvases as part of a modern art historical lineage of vaginal imagery.¹ Such comparisons seem particularly apt in those examples of Fontana's works with a single, vertical tear in a monochrome canvas. As a corollary to this identification of the paintings with vaginal imagery, it is tempting to see Fontana's attack on the picture surface as an exemplary masculine act. Responding to Jackson Pollock's mythologisation in the American and European press as a 'cowboy' artist, in interviews during the 1960s Fontana described his origins as an Argentine *gaucho*, an expert marksman who made a living rounding up cattle and sleeping under the stars.² Such self-descriptions could lend credence to a reading of Fontana's gesture as a gendered performance, reciprocating the vaginal associations of the paintings with the image of a sharp-shooting, manly artist.

This reading of Fontana's work, however, has been frequently questioned. From the moment these works were first exhibited, critics were uncertain about the vaginal interpretation. As Georges Limbour noted in 1959, "If we say that certain tears open like vulvas, we introduce into these openings an erotic allusion which we feel is probably displaced."³ More recently Sarah Whitfield has compared works such as *Concetto Spaziale* simultaneously to vulvas and to the wound of Christ, arguing that the artist uses the "gouged slit to bring together in one image the extremes of the sacred and the profane."⁴ For these writers the iconography of such works is extremely ambivalent, and their gender associations are by no means clear.

Which account is closer to the truth? In this paper I will argue that Fontana's work questions pre-existing notions of gender identity. However, as I will show, he relied on a powerful inversion of diametrically opposed notions of maleness and femaleness rather than any deconstruction of the opposition itself. Although the focus of my discussion is Fontana's post-WWII work, I demonstrate that he drew upon artistic traditions reaching back through the first half-century of Italian history, including Fascist art during the period of Mussolini's reign of 1922 – 1943 and Futurist art and literature from 1909 onwards. Fontana fought and was wounded on the same WWI battlefields as the famously belligerent and misogynist Italian Futurists, and subsequently made a living as an artist in Fascist Italy. Accordingly, his work gives insight into the extraordinary transformations in male body imagery in avant-garde and official cultural circles in 20th century Italy.

In the late 1940s Fontana produced a series of warrior sculptures. *Il Guerriero* of 1949 is a one meter-high, polychrome ceramic sculpture depicting a standing figure holding a small shield. This work fits into a lineage of athletic warrior images that reaches back through the history of 19th century European neo-classical sculpture, a lineage that is in turn grounded in the ideals of the Italian renaissance and the Classical past. Comparison with a typical 19th century representative of this lineage, Canova's *Perseus with the Head of Medusa*, serves to highlight the transformation that Fontana wrought upon that tradition. What we first notice about Fontana's work in comparison to the Canova is the extremely uneven surface of the sculpture. Instead of the cool, calm surface of the neo-classical sculpture, the surface of Fontana's work is extremely irregular. Broad gouges, incisions and furrows have been worked into the wet clay surface to create a texture of surprising variety. The chest and legs of the figure have been marked with a swirling volute design, and the material malleability of the clay is extremely evident – there is no sense of the compact, self-contained entity presented by Canova's figure. Rather, the sculpture, in spite of the static pose,

appears to be in a constant state of flowing movement. This can be traced not simply to the handling of the clay but also to the highly reflective glaze applied. The shimmering light effects caused by the glaze cause the work to undergo substantial visual transformations as the viewer walks around the object to get a closer look.

In a separate sculpture of the same date and title, we see another warrior figure, this time without a shield, in which the effect is slightly different. As with the above work, the figure stands erect, one leg is slightly raised, arms on the hips, but again the surface is extremely irregular. Deep gouges define the boundaries between limbs, rugged crests of clay seem to literally lurch forth from the surface, and the strident green glaze appears to be running down the figure, giving the impression of melting wax. Furthermore, the reflective quality of the colour captures ambient light and scatters it across the surface of the figure, creating uncertainty about the material composition of the surface. How are we to understand these works? At this period in the artist's career, Fontana was reconsidering some of the artistic traditions he had been influenced by and contributed to. One of the most immediate of these was the Italian art movement known as the *Novecento*. Part of the Europe-wide 'call to order' tendency that rejected the innovations introduced by the historical avant-gardes prior to WWI, the type of sculptural work produced by *Novecento* artists was summed up by the Director of the Venice Biennale Antonio Maraini in his text *Sculptors of Today* written in 1929.⁵ Maraini praised the work of Libero Andreotti, such as *Brandano pescatore* of 1928, for a return to primitive Italian models for sculpture, under the influence of which the sculptor's work had "hardened, simplified and squared itself off."⁶ The work of Romano Romanelli, the author of hieratic and expressionless portrait busts such as *Ritratto di Ardengo Soffici* of 1929, was acclaimed for the way in which he "architecturally conceives the plasticity of form in an organic whole."⁷ Margherita Sarfatti, a major organiser of the movement, argued that *Novecento* sculptors "frame the beautiful human architecture within clearly squared-off, geometric blocks..."⁸ Such comments were in line with remarks made by Benito Mussolini in his speech inaugurating the first *Novecento* exhibition in 1926, when the dictator praised the work of the group for "the decisiveness and the precision of the line, the clarity and richness of the colours, the solid plasticity of objects and figures."⁹

The reason why ideals of 'solid plasticity' or three-dimensionality, geometry and precision appealed to cultural officials within the regime and to Mussolini himself was summed up by Giuseppe Bottai, the editor of the journal *Critica Fascista* in 1927. According to Bottai, "Fascist art... manifests itself in a simple tendency, generated by the same tendency that operates in the political field, towards constructions that are more solid, stronger and more ample, in the line of the great indigenous tradition of Italian art."¹⁰ As this passage demonstrates, the qualities of solidity and firmness promulgated by artists and critics in this period were readily associated with a traditionalist constellation of social and political values.

Fontana often created work that conformed to these theories during the Fascist period. However, he also created works that went against these ideas. Works such as *Signorina seduta* of 1934, where the artist applied gold paint to the areas of the sculpture depicting the woman's skin, were described by one critic as seeking to "break the closed form of sculpture" and representing "the decomposition of volume."¹¹ Such tendencies, which were visible in Fontana's still lifes and female figures in the 1930s and only began to emerge in his depictions of male figures after WWII, pointedly reject the rhetoric of "solid plasticity" with its connections to fascist political ideals. In what follows, I will focus on the relationship between Fontana's post-war male warrior figures works and the definitions of masculinity and femininity that were expressed in Fascist and proto-Fascist images and texts.

The discourse of gender during the Fascist period dictated specific kinds of associations between gender identity and physical qualities. As George Mosse has argued, both Italian and German fascist society celebrated the Greek ideal of masculine perfection, including athletic build, steely determination, self-sacrificing heroism, and calm grace.¹² The exaltation of masculinity as inherently virile in explicit opposition to the feminine, an idea drawn from the writings of the German writer Otto Weininger, was enormously popular among Italian extreme right-wing groups. Tight boundaries paralleling the rigid borders of racist nationalism were drawn around the ideal of the masculine body, which was increasingly described as being characterised by clarity of form and decisiveness. One of the most extreme formulations of this rhetoric was put forward by the Italian Futurist poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, who drew upon this language of strength and solidity to eulogise the very physical make-up of the fascist dictator himself. In a text written in 1929 Marinetti described Mussolini as a man "carved out of the mighty rocks of our peninsula" whose "great gesture-fist-image-conviction" embodies the "cubic will of the state."¹³

Beneath the surface of this image of hard strength and perfection in Fascist culture, however, was a far more sinister rhetoric of gender. As Klaus Theweleit has documented, in the writings of the volunteer armies of the German Freikorps during WWI masculinity is formulated as a rigid, tightly bound container in opposition to formless matter. As Theweleit summarizes: "The most urgent task of the man of steel is to pursue, to dam in, and to subdue any force that threatens to transform him back into the horribly disorganized jumble of flesh, hair, skin, bones, intestines and feelings that calls itself human."¹⁴ As Theweleit recounts, that formless realm of the physical was continually associated in the minds of the Freikorps with the feminine and with a deeply threatening ego dissolution.

Although it is important to retain a sense of the differences between Italian and German ideas of gender identity in this period, the dread of disorganized, organic being encountered in the texts of the Freikorps also lay behind the Italian Futurists' scorn for women. In writings by Marinetti such as *Mafarka Le Futuriste* of 1910, woman is represented as a terrifying, formless force associated with death and non-being. A major event in the novel is the main character's giving birth to a son without recourse to a woman's reproductive system, an event which Marinetti celebrates as follows: "What joy to have brought you into the world so beautiful and free of all the stains that come from the evil vulva and predispose one to decrepitude and death..."¹⁵ The horror of women in this novel reaches its climax in a scene where one of the woman protagonists meets her end as a morass of "scarlet mud" which Marinetti describes as "an amalgam of hair, vertebrae and bones which seemed to have been gnawed on by a tiger on heat."¹⁶

As if in a prophylactic move against perceived threats to the post-WWI masculine body, writers such as Ernst Jünger in Germany and Marinetti in Italy created the ideal of a man-machine figure, wherein the male was represented as a bullet or missile. As Ernst von Salomon wrote in his diary of experiences in the trenches of WWI "Was I now perhaps one with the weapon? Was I not machine – cold metal?"¹⁷ This smooth column of rigid, metallic matter, ready at any moment to violently attack the forces of dissolution, was embodied visually most effectively in the work of the Italian artist R. Bertelli or in Ernesto Thyat's *Dux*, a bullet-like portrait of Mussolini, which Jeffrey Schnapp has described as a phallic figure which signifies "a retreat, typical of Fascism, away from the messy miasma of embodied sexuality."¹⁸

In contrast to these resolutely bounded, rigid figures, Fontana's mangled and shiny warriors embody the abject qualities associated with femaleness that are encountered in proto-fascist texts. Their highly irregular surfaces repudiate the hardened surfaces and solid volumes of *Novecento* sculpture, opening the figure with their deep furrows and loose crests of clay. Furthermore, their apparently liquid melting surfaces aggressively deny that metallic hardness or rigid outline typical of the Fascist definition of maleness. Hal Foster has argued that the machine-like bodies in the Dada/Surrealist works of Max Ernst and Hans Bellmer were "ambiguous explorations of the (proto) fascist obsession with the body as armour... as a prosthesis that served to shore up a disrupted body image or to support a ruined ego construction."¹⁹ To take Foster's suggestive metaphor of the armoured body, Fontana's warriors have been prised out of their hard shell casing, to expose the 'disorganised jumble of flesh' associated by Theweleit's Freikorps soldiers with the formless realm of the feminine. In this sense, rather than unpacking the diametrically opposed definitions of maleness and femaleness that circulated in official and avant-garde texts in the first half of the twentieth century, Fontana performed a startling reversal of those texts' associations between physical qualities and gender identity.

Nevertheless, Fontana's mangled and glistening warrior figures do provide a critical analogue to one of the most compelling images of Futurist sculpture, Umberto Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* from 1913. This vigorously striding figure, with its streamlined plates of metal seeming to literally carve swathes through space, projects the desired metallisation of the body dreamed of in the Futurist and proto-fascist rhetoric of body as machine. Fontana cited Boccioni's sculpture as a precedent for his own work in the year that he made *Il Guerriero*, when he argued that both seek to form connections with space: Boccioni's through opening the solid form of the object, Fontana's through reflective colour that amplifies the relationship between surface and ambient light. However, when we examine the 1949 work in relation to the Boccioni it is evident that Fontana sought to unsheathe the armour-plated hardness of the belligerent futurist figure and replace it with a warrior conceived as the sticky jelly within the metallised man.

After the historical catastrophe of WWII Fontana was in an ideal position to reflect upon the pointlessness of war and the absurdity of the masculine warrior figure. In letters to his family at the beginning of the war, he professed his admiration for the Germans and looked forward to the day when Italy would invade Greece, Yugoslavia and Africa. However, in an interview only 4 years later in 1943, he related that as a soldier during WWI he "had lived all the horror of the battlefield," leaving him with the "bitter taste of tragedy and the pressing desire to return home, tormented and deceived."²⁰ The warrior sculptures he produced in the wake of a second world conflict revisit that earlier moment of trauma, responding to the 'solid plasticity' of fascist man by reviving the decrepit figure which Mussolini's regime had sought to repair. In so doing, Fontana reached deeply into the psychological structure of fascism, colliding the artificial extremities of gender identity developed in Europe during the first half of the 20th century.

¹ Berger was discussing "To the Moon and Back" by Rohan Weallans, on the occasion of that artist winning the Trust Waikato National Contemporary Art Award, Waikato Museum of Art and History Te Whare Taonga o Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand. See *New Zealand Listener* October 4-10 2003 Vol 190 No 3308 (Viewed online at <http://www.listener.co.nz/default.807.sm> - viewed 10/06/2004.

² This account of his own biography first appears in Stefano Ghiberti, "Rinuncio ai Miliardi per Diventare Scultore" *Gente* 29/5/1959

³ Georges Limbour, "Paris Chronique," *Art International* (Zurich) 3(5-6) 1959, 53.

⁴ Sarah Whitfield "Handling Space," in *Lucio Fontana*, London: Hayward Gallery, 1999, 44.

⁵ Quoted in Carlo Pirovano, ed., *Scultura italiana del Novecento* (Milan: Electa, 1991), 110.

⁶ Maraini in Pirovano, *Scultura italiana*, 104.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁸ Margherita Sarfatti, "Scultori e pittori d'oggi a Venezia," *Nuova antologia* 339 (1928): 466. Quoted in Barocchi, *Storia moderna dell'arte in Italia*, 116.

⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 11.

¹⁰ Giuseppe Botta "Risultanze dell'inchiesta sull'arte fascista," *Critica fascista* 5, no. 4 (1927): 61.

¹¹ Leonardo Sinisgalli, "La scultura di Lucio Fontana," *L'Italia Letteraria*, November 24; 1934. Eduardo Persico, *Lucio Fontana*, 1936. n. p.

¹² See George Mosse "Fascist Aesthetics and Society: Some Considerations" *Journal of Contemporary History* 31, 1996, 245 – 252.

¹³ From "Portrait of Mussolini" (1929), quoted in Hal Foster. "Prosthetic Gods," *Modernism/Modernity* 4.2 (1997), 18.

¹⁴ See Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies* (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, c1987-c1989) Vol. II, p. 160.

¹⁵ Marinetti quoted in Cinzia Sartini Blum, *The Other Modernism F.T. Marinetti's Futurist Fiction of Power* (Berkeley : University of California Press, 1996) 57.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Quoted in Hal Foster "Armor Fou," *October* 56 (1991) 85.

¹⁸ Jeffrey Schnapp, "Heads of State," in *Art Issues* 24 (1992), 27.

¹⁹ Foster, "Armor Fou" 67-8.

²⁰ Lucio Fontana "El Temperamento en el Argentino Lucio Fontana" *La Nacion* 6 June 1943.