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An exhibition in a former Olivetti showroom collapses the boundaries between space and time, art and architecture

Abstract or figurative? Architecture or art? Matter or space? Body or soul? Past or present? Exterior or interior? These polarities are exposed as illusions in a small but intense new show in Venice. Housed in the showroom designed for typewriter manufacturer Olivetti by the Venetian architect Carlo Scarpa, the exhibition brings together work by mid-century Argentine-born artist Lucio Fontana and contemporary sculptor Antony Gormley. Scarpa and Fontana have form. The former, described by Fontana as a "fine, sensitive architect", looked after the Italian pavilion at the Venice Biennale from 1948 until 1972, during which period Fontana showed six times. Most significant for the duo was the gallery of 1966, which Fontana created in collaboration with Scarpa. Images by photographer Ugo Mulas of the show, entitled *Spatial Ambience (White)*, show a stark, white, lunar-bright space, interrupted by oval portals and geometric divisions, in which Fontana's trademark slashed canvases, all white, transcend their artistic origin to become architecture in their own right. Gormley is of another generation. Nevertheless, he shares the older pair's desire to collapse the boundaries between architecture, humanity, space and form and create a borderless, harmonious universe. Beautifully curated by Luca Massimo Barbero, the result is a vital, provocative visual conversation.

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Lucio Fontana at the Venice Biennale in 1966 © Archivio Cameraphoto Epoche

Commissioned by Olivetti in 1957 to redesign a dark, diminutive den huddled under the 16th-century colonnades of Piazza San Marco, Scarpa created a space that exemplified his sensibility for eastern aesthetics. Although he only visited Japan twice — he tragically died there in 1978 after falling down a staircase — like many western architects of his generation, he took inspiration from Japonisme, the influence of Japanese art on western artists and architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright. But Scarpa went beyond exoticisation. Undoubtedly, his feeling for non-western forms was forged in Venice, a city where the interplay of light, water and stone, as well as centuries of commerce with Asia, have fertilised a porous, mobile, aquatic architecture far from sturdy classical western templates. That heritage allowed him to turn Olivetti's store into a miniature Zen kingdom, at once water garden, temple and vitrine. Installing a fountain — a spare stone slab and a single spout — in the entrance, he hollowed out the dingy, divided rooms into a single entity centred on a pale, broad-stepped staircase which seems to hover as if suspended by invisible strings. With ivory-hued plaster walls, intimate, doorless rooms opening on to corridor-like balconies, teak and rosewood trellis-style screens shielding walls and windows, and a shimmering mosaic floor, the showroom boasts a mesmerising equilibrium between flowing rhythms, oblique light, natural materials and spare, orthogonal lines.



The exhibition takes place in a former Olivetti showroom renovated by Carlo Scarpa in the late 1950s © Photo Ela Bialkowska, OKNostudio

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There could be no better home for a dialogue between Fontana and Gormley. The former saw architecture as a setting for art to transcend its identity as inert image to become an agent of space and time in its own right. The latter believes that the body is itself a form of architecture, a vessel for human experience that is always interacting with the space around it. To the soothing trickle of the fountain, visitors are greeted by “Rise” (1983-84), a life-size, prostrate figure modelled in lead from a cast of Gormley’s own body. His companions include three small models by Gormley — a graphite, faceted block “Small Stem Model” (2019), his white nylon mesh figure “Contract VII Model” (2021) and “Clay Model I” (2021), a crouched man clasping his knees in vulnerable despair — laid out in a row in the shop window. Installed along the side wall are three small sculptures by Fontana: “Toro” (Bull) (1931), a near-abstract wedge of terracotta, “Nudo” (1926), a plaster sculpture which imagines the body as a smooth, faceless arabesque, and “Winged Victory” (1937), an expressionist sweep of glazed ceramic as if the figure is melting before our eyes. What these figures have in common is their aura of stillness and solitude, qualities heightened by Scarpa’s tranquil sanctuary and counterpointed by the manic tourist jostle of the piazza outside. Yet beyond those similarities, the sculptures are deliberately various.



Installation view of the Venice show, featuring works by Lucio Fontana © Photo Ela Bialkowska, OKNOstudio



Three works by Antony Gormley are laid out in the gallery window © Photo Ela Bialkowska, OKNOstudio

Thanks to his continued fidelity to the human form, Gormley’s art operates as a meditation on being, prompting us to consider our relationship with every element of our world: material, metaphysical, psychoanalytical, philosophical. Fontana’s practice, however, evolved into a meditation on space itself. Certainly, in those early figurative sculptures the Argentine is making images of bodies in order to interrogate humanity’s rapport with what lies outside our skin. But by the 1950s

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he had embraced abstraction, piercing blank canvases with holes and cuts which turn the viewers themselves into the human element within the work, obliged to look through the flat surface of conventional painting to imagine the cosmos beyond. Today, as science and art enjoy technological advances that Fontana could not have imagined, it's easy to forget the revolutionary nature of his ideas.



Works by Fontana and Gormley on display © Photo Ela Bialkowska, OKNOstudio

“Lucio Fontana radically repositioned the visual,” says Gormley as he walks me through the Olivetti space. Gormley pauses in front of a quartet of rough sketches made by Fontana in 1951. To the undiscerning eye, they are a scratchy ensemble of circles segmented by diagonal and vertical lines with scrawled notes announcing “spatial point of view” and “terrestrial point of view”. However, Gormley reads these jottings as clearly as if they were crystalline prose, explaining to me how the smaller circle is Fontana’s way of showing how the human, terrestrial eye reaches its limit at the point where cosmic space — the bigger circles — begins. Fontana’s drawings, continues Gormley, demonstrate how our short-sighted vision is a result of our dependence on perspective, which allows us to go no further than our immediate horizon both in the picture plane and in reality. By physically breaking through the material surface, Fontana’s violent rupture gestures at the shocking magnitude of space beyond our field of vision. The necessity of rupture also echoes through the work of Gormley and Scarpa. It is intrinsic to Gormley sculptures such as “Subject III” (2021), a life-size figure created in an open cast-iron grid so that it is essentially permeable, trapped in a state of permanent threshold, simultaneously open and closed.



Works by Lucio Fontana © Photo: Ela Bialkowska, OKNOstudio

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Scarpa performs the same expression with his architecture. From his austere juxtapositions of solid planes and open spaces to those wooden window screens, he has designed a space that acts both to contain us and to set us free. A withholding and enticing that turns both those within the showroom and those outside on the piazza into objects and subjects of each other's gaze. Such seductive, irresolvable tensions make this show more than the sum of its parts. There's a galaxy of glorious art in Venice this season, but this tiny planet promises a universe of possibilities.