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Critical Fontana

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CRITICAL FONTANA Howard Singerman

Lucio Fontana: Between Utopia and Kitsch by Anthony White.
Cambridge, MA: MIT Press,
2011. 336 pp. \$29.95 cloth.

The subtitle of Anthony White's monograph on the Italian artist Lucio Fontana, *Between Utopia and Kitsch*, lays out the terms of the book's central—and oft-repeated—argument: that Fontana's art, a "collision of avant-garde techniques and a kitsch past redolent with outmoded, even infantile desires possesses a critical force" (14). Both Fontana's avant-garde techniques—the perforations and slashes of his *Buchi* (Holes, 1949–68) and *Tagli* (Cuts, 1958–68), for example—and his embrace of kitsch's shiny surfaces and ersatz construction worked to desubliminate and degrade painting, and "only in its decrepitude did Fontana believe painting could have a utopian potential" (18). White's book may well be, as he claims, the first to "systematically account" for the "puzzling paradoxes of the artist's work" (6), but it is not the first English-language monograph on Fontana. There is a good deal of critical and historical writing on Fontana, most of it, particularly in English, has been, as White notes, in exhibition catalogs. The first English-language catalog, with a short, smart essay by Lawrence Alloway, accompanied Fontana's first one-person show, at Martha Jackson Gallery, in New York City in 1961. And while White's book covers the entirety of Fontana's career from the 1920s forward, it is here—with the Jackson show and the reception of the artist's Venice

paintings in New York—that the book begins.

A series of ten five-foot-square *Spatial Concepts* bearing subtitles like *At Dawn Venice Was All Golden* or *Sun in Piazza San Marco* (both 1961)—“phrases likely to be appended to mass-produced post-cards for the Italian tourist market” (9)—the Venice paintings enact the collision of avant-garde and kitsch that White’s system turns on. They are, as befits avant-garde practice, monochromes, or nearly so, and punctured or slashed as Fontana’s paintings had been since the first *Buchi* of 1949, but the paint is silver and gold acrylic laid on like frosting, and Fontana crusted his surfaces with Murano glass. The paintings are at once at least ironically aspirational and, as White’s chapter title has it, “damaged goods.” While they evoke the breakthroughs of the avant-garde and even, in their “lavishly ornament[ed]” surfaces, “the antiquated luxuries of the medieval past” (6), their kitsch titles and elaborate surfaces—and their empty, seemingly mechanical repetitions of a decade-old avant-garde strategy—insist on painting’s failure, its “decrepitude.” In White’s accounting, Fontana’s system is far more complex than the simple, “Manichean” (11) opposition that Clement Greenberg offered in “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939).¹ Rather, Fontana’s is doubly articulated, each pole internally divided against itself, “thereby disallowing

any false reconciliation or mastery. In Fontana’s work, both avant-garde and kitsch are riven by a radical incompleteness: a modernity rigorously opposed to that which exists in the present, and grounded in a hopeful, forward-looking appreciation for what has seemingly passed into historical oblivion” (14).

White borrows the phrase “damaged goods” from Walter Benjamin, and he links Fontana’s attraction to the outmoded (whether to the antiquated dreams of a past art, the unfulfilled dreams of an earlier avant-garde, or the pleasure promised by *objects de luxe* or their commodity knockoffs) to Benjamin’s idea of the “dialectical image”: “Benjamin’s argument that certain cultural products offer a critical image of modernity’s contradictions has immense significance for Fontana’s work” (13). And over and over again, across four decades of work, White points to Fontana’s “use of outmoded forms to draw pointed comparisons between modernity’s utopian dreams of fulfillment and their fatal obsolescence as kitsch within commodity culture” (271). While Benjamin’s concept is a fruitful one for White, he acknowledges that they are strange bedfellows; Fontana was, after all, a member of Italian fascist movement and “clearly had no ideological opposition to the theme of Italian military victory” (96) when, in May

1936, authorities renamed the Hall of Honor—a commission he shared with the critic and architect Edoardo Persico and others at the VI Triennale of Milan—the Hall of Victory in celebration of Italy's invasion of Ethiopia. But White draws on Benjamin for more than his theorization of the dialectical image; he uses Benjamin to give Fontana his sensibility: "It is no coincidence, nevertheless, that in 1936 both the writer and the artist were described independently as being 'touched by extremes.' The two men were fascinated by the most novel and shocking techniques of the avant-garde, and yet both cherished objects and styles rendered obsolete by the myth of progress" (14).

White's discussion of Fontana as a dialectician is nuanced and complex, but the presentation of Fontana as an artist who works interestingly in between things is a long-standing motif in writing on the artist. The title of Erika Billeter's lead essay in the catalog for Guggenheim Museum's 1977 Fontana retrospective, his first in the United States, predicts the syntax, if not all the terms, for White's own work: "Lucio Fontana: Between Tradition and Avant-Garde."² Lawrence Alloway's essay for the 1961 Martha Jackson catalog is entitled "Man on the Border," and while it is quite brief, it plots a number of the strategies and oppositions that White will pursue:

"He is the enemy of media purity, and chooses the ambiguous border between the arts, where paintings look like sculpture and sculpture meets painting halfway."³ This, I should note, is the oldest theme in Fontana criticism; it emerges in Persico's 1936 monograph, the first extended critical assessment of Fontana's work, when the artist's transgressions—his border crossings—were those of a sculptor rather than a painter: Fontana's aim was "to resolve sculpture and painting," mustering "all of the acquired taste of the sculptor and all of his chromatic obsessions."⁴ White has little interest in pursuing this categorical crossover directly, whether because of its obviousness or its formalism; his concern instead is with Fontana's engagement with the broader "project of the historical avant-garde, critiquing the traditional boundaries of the autonomous art object" (125)—not the boundaries between *métier*, but those that separate the traditional work of art from its surroundings, whether physical, spatial (hence Fontana's "spatialism"), or the broader life-world represented by applied art, mass culture, and the kitsch of his title.

The Fontana that Alloway presents in 1961 is already, as White's will be, a more complicated artist than the one Persico has drawn. His trespasses are doubled, and the boundaries he crosses have more at stake: his work is troubled by "a

problem at the core.” According to Alloway,

Fontana’s ambiguity has to do with the status of the work of art. Ever since Art Nouveau artists have made the decorative arts expressive and the expressive arts decorative. This transcendence of the traditional limits of the fine and applied arts is Fontana’s theme. . . . [H]e ignores the borders of painting and sculpture, and of the fine and the applied arts. . . . [Thus it] is a part of his border activity that his works often have a connection with the chic.⁵

Alloway’s spatial metaphor is somewhat slippery; Fontana is both on the border and disdainful of it, but it is clear that he needs those categories to be felt as set: painting and sculpture, fine and applied arts, avant-grade and tradition, avant-garde and kitsch—or at least his critics do. Where White differs from Alloway, and certainly from Persico, is around the question of resolution, of success. He cannot think Fontana’s transgression as “transcendence,” as Alloway does, and he uses the descriptions Persico recorded in his 1936 monograph—of the way in which Fontana’s gold paint “conquered the [plaster or terra cotta] mass like a shiver” and “represents the decomposition

of volume” (47)—as evidence not of “all of the acquired taste of the sculptor and all of his chromatic obsessions gathered together in the perfect unity of the work,”⁶ but of the work’s failure to cohere, of Fontana’s conscious refusal of “any false reconciliation or mastery.”

Writing of Fontana’s large polychrome and gilded plaster sculptures—works such as *Victory of the Air* and *Seated Young Woman*, both 1934, and both of which figure in White’s account—Persico insists that “the sculptor’s most recent works are neither . . . bizarre nor paradoxical but the attempt at extreme coherence [*coerenza*].”⁷ Or, perhaps, “extreme consistency.” This is not a passage that White cites—for obvious reasons—but I want to use the ambiguity available in the Italian word *coerenza* to underline the difference between Persico’s Fontana and White’s. Neither are interested in Fontana as a maker of oddities or paradoxes (accounting for such “puzzling paradoxes” is, after all, the explicit purpose of White’s systematic approach), but where, for Persico, Fontana’s value lies in the coherence of the work, its unity, for White it is in the consistency of Fontana’s attack on just such unity, and his career-long critical “commitment to questioning the status and function of the art object” (64). It is symptomatic, then, that White translates Persico’s phrase “acutezza critica” (the writer is

assessing the insistence with which Fontana had distilled the developments of recent European art and turned them to his purposes) as “critical consciousness” (27). “Critical acumen,” the more conventional translation, suggests a professional strategy, an artistic practice both within and in relation to a field of other practices; “critical consciousness” is rather more internal and Benjaminian, and it works to separate Fontana from the sort of avant-garde maneuvering within which, as White quotes Benjamin, the “newest remains, in every respect the same” (7).

White’s citation of Benjamin on modernity appears in his discussion of the Venice paintings and his (and Fontana’s) reading of the failure of *Art Informel*: Fontana “was aware that, in his era, avant-garde attacks on traditional painting often produced nothing ‘new’ and did not liberate the viewer from classical or mythical aspects of art. He responded to this situation by distancing himself from the concerns of contemporary European gestural painting” (7). White’s Fontana is characterized by his distance—an insistently critical and historical distance that mimics White’s own, a position not so much within the “field of cultural production,” as Bourdieu has it, but on it. Thus, from beginning to end, Fontana is seen “continuously going against the flow of developments in modern art” (19), “at odds

with the prevailing artistic tendencies of the day” (27), and standing “at a considerable distance from the circumstances in which he found himself, exposing them to analysis and critique” (271). The work of distancing gives each of White’s chapters its form—and in each chapter Fontana’s work takes its specific form in determinate opposition to a cultural practice that it is not (a cultural practice that has failed to account for its historical situatedness), and against which it will make sense.

White writes in his conclusion, “I maintain that the works make no sense unless they are considered in relation to historical developments such as fascist cultural policy and the rise of modern consumer culture, and the particular form of those phenomena in Italy” (271). But these broad and somewhat cursorily sketched historical developments appear only when Fontana casts his referential shadow upon them; they are invoked only insofar as they can be linked to one or another of Fontana’s elements of style—his gilding or glazing or neon—or to a moment of stylistic change. And they are mostly seen in parallax, only as they are triangulated by another artist or movement less critical and more idealist than Fontana: the Novecento, the Milione abstractionists, *Art Informel*. While a number of other artists appear in the book, they are there for the most part as

negative examples, embodiments of the “prevailing artistic tendencies of the day.” White pushes his artist away from any situation that might embed him within a broader cultural field or link him to any position other than the one White stakes out for him.

This move is particularly obvious in White’s discussion of Fontana’s abstractions of the mid-1930s, which were, he admits, “produced in the context of his acquaintance with the ‘Milione group’ of abstract artists” (65), a group “influenced . . . by the artists of the Paris-based Abstraction-Creation group, who exalted geometry as an expression of a transcendent, universal order” (68). “Acquaintance” and “influenced” are interestingly anodyne words here: Fontana was a member of the Gallery Milione and a signatory to the 1935 “Declaration of the Exhibitors at the ‘First Collective Exhibition of Italian Abstract Art,’” and he exhibited in Paris with Abstraction-Creation. This affiliation in both its form and its content runs against White’s project—and maybe Fontana’s: the Milione group was “simply perpetuating the ideals of the Novecento movement in an abstract mode. In their manifestos and writings, [they] associated their work not with the materiality shared by the flat canvas and wall but with the a priori realm of pure geometry” (67). White acknowledges that Fontana signed the Declaration, and that

“on paper he subscribed to their ideas,” but he insists (in yet another figure of distance), that “such aspirations to transcendence could not be further from his idea of art” and “his abstract work would continue the critique he initiated” at the beginning of his career (68).

White’s book is an often convincing reading of a selection of Fontana’s key works and a strong rereading of the critical reception of those works, taking each work and its historical and phenomenal effects both with and against that initial reception. One thing White’s rereading makes very clear, but that seems to run counter to his narrative, is that Fontana’s work has been consistently on exhibition and on the scene from the 1920s on, and has never been without criticism, for the most part supportive, certainly attentive. Given the incisiveness of Fontana’s critique and the relentlessness of his critical vision, its embrace of the outmoded and the improper, how is it that Fontana’s work appeared so frequently and so centrally—in biennials and triennials across Italy—throughout his career? How is it, to take a specific example, that Carlo Carra, the primary practitioner and theorist of the sort of Novecento work that Fontana “savagely critiqued” in chapter 2 (127), comes to appear (without further comment) in chapter 3 on a list of those critics who “wrote favorably of Fontana’s abstract

work" (64)? This is, perhaps, more a sociological question than a critical one; its answer lies in the networks and institutions of modern art in Italy rather than in the work. But it suggests a methodological question as well: Where and when and to whom is Fontana's criticality visible, legible? In his closing pages, White returns one last time to the Venice paintings and to artist and critic Sidney Tillim's failure to read Fontana's paintings as he has:

By relating Fontana's work to its specific social and historical context, I have sought to avoid the misunderstandings that have plagued the reception of his work. . . . As an example of such misconceptions I return once again to Sidney Tillim. . . . In his writings Tillim praised Claes Oldenburg's pop art "adoption of traditional kitsch" but condemned Fontana for his "Venetian enchantment." Whether or not these opposing judgments relate to differences in artistic quality, they can certainly be explained by a critic's failure to appreciate the culturally specific kitsch references within Fontana's work. (271)

Tillim, it seems, needed the knowledge that White has, and that White's Fontana had, without which, again, "the works make no

sense." Perhaps we need a reception theory of criticality, or at least to ask *how* an artwork is critical, or better *when* is it. It may be that criticality is, as Hal Foster has suggested, *nachträglich*; it has its effect only after the fact, only under interpretation.

Fontana is the hero of White's narrative in a way that, despite the author's own real critical acumen, recalls an older art history—the story of a single artist in his singularity and separateness. Despite Fontana's refusal of the artist's gift, his "dream," or White's, "of art released from the death sentence of artistic genius" (233), White's artist is omniscient in relation to his historical position: he and White know the same things and share the same values (even the same idealism—the idea of a critical work of art that is at once transparent to correct critical knowledge and has only now been correctly read). "Determining the border between working *with*, and merely working *within*, the contextual factors is an inescapable critical demand,"⁸ wrote Michael Podro some years ago, in *The Critical Historians of Art* (1982), an intellectual history of the German tradition of art history. Clearly, White has decided—has made "the critical judgment"—that unlike Carlo Carra or Georges Mathieu, Fontana is working *with* his historical situation. But it is clear as well that Fontana's

“commitment to questioning the status and function of the art object” (64)—his “vision of the artwork” (84)—produces an artist who looks very much like the historian—a Fontana who dreams of a critical work of art—one written and ready for reading.

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NOTES

1. Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939), in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, vol. 1: *Perceptions and Judgments, 1939–1944*, ed. John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 5–22.
2. Erika Billeter, “Lucio Fontana: Between Tradition and Avant-Garde,” in *Lucio Fontana, 1899–1968: A Retrospective* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1977), 13–20.
3. Lawrence Alloway, “Man on the Border,” in *Lucio Fontana: Ten Paintings of Venice*, exhibition catalog (New York: Martha Jackson Gallery, 1961), n.p.
4. “[T]utte le esperienze di gusto dello scultore e tutte le sue ossessioni cromatiche sono adunate nella perfetta unità dell’opera”: Edoardo Persico, *Lucio Fontana* (Milan: Edizioni di Campo Grafico, 1936), excerpted in *Corrente: Il Movimento di Arte e Cultura di Opposizione, 1930–1945* [Current: The movement of art and culture in opposition, 1930–1945], ed. Mario di Micheli (Milan: Vangelista, 1985), 288, my translation.
5. Alloway, “Man on the Border,” n.p.
6. Persico, *Lucio Fontana*, 288, my translation.
7. “Le ultime opere dello scultore non sono, a questa stregua, né una bizzarria né un paradosso, ma un tentativo di estrema coerenza”: Persico, *Lucio Fontana*, 288, my translation.
8. Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), 205.