

DEPARTURE FROM THE SURFACE

The Invention of Italian Modernism

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The early 1960s usher in a revolutionary new understanding of the pictorial concept in northern Italy. While the 1950s had been characterised by a gestural, impulsive abstraction (Emilio Vedova) and a conquest of the image carrier by cutting through the canvas (Lucio Fontana, Alberto Burri), contemporary art of the 1960s now directed its attention to the reflexive plasticity of a work's surface.

In his famous work *Concetto spaziale*, Lucio Fontana had ruptured the two-dimensionality of the canvas with his radical gesture of cutting through it with a knife. Art thus conquered the third dimension very much in the spirit of Fontana's vision: *In the future, man and mankind are destined to leave this earth both physically or spiritually and to conquer space.*

In the wake of this momentous step, artists such as Agostino Bonalumi, Enrico Castellani or Paolo Scheggi increasingly take an interest in the objectness of a surface-centred pictorial concept oscillating between image carrier and image substance. The spirit of a new beginning, of a new form of expression renouncing any recognised iconography, goes hand in hand with an examination of the influence of light, space and movement.

Particularly in Milan, influences of the optical art tradition (Marcel Duchamp's *Rotary Demisphere*) and advanced integrated design (Max Bill, among others) lead to artworks that combine notions of free and applied creativity in line with the Bauhaus tradition into a new concept of art. Artists like Getulio Alviani, Grazia Varisco and Alberto Biasi produce innovative pictorial objects that transcend the scope of traditional panel painting. These artists explore the phenomena and preconditions of optical perception, implementing them with great experimental freshness in unique artistic forms.

With the gestural cut performed by an artist such as Lucio Fontana, who sought to defy the limitation of the canvas, an infinite space is created which the young artists of the 1960s enter with a new-found lightness. Their focus on optical effects – and, with it, their stimulation of the viewer's perception – allows the space thus opened up to grow and expand further in a very special way, transforming it into a tangible aesthetic experience.