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Lucio Fontana and Fausto Melotti
Divergent but Parallel

The July 1961 issue of *Domus*, the influential Italian art and design periodical, devoted eighteen pages to preparations for the *Esposizione Internazionale del Lavoro* (*International Labor Exhibition*), or *Italia '61* – a massive international exhibition and trade fair that would coincide with the centenary of Italy's unification and celebrate the country's rapid modernization in the postwar period.[1] Most of the article's numerous photographs depicted the construction of buildings and exhibition spaces, but four of them caught Lucio Fontana (1899–1968) and Fausto Melotti (1901–1986) (fig. 1), two titans of Italian art, casually taking a break during the installation of Melotti's large wall of ceramic tiles.

These four black-and-white photographs capture a brief moment in the significant forty-year friendship of Fontana and Melotti. Born within three years of each other at the turn of the twentieth century, they met in 1928 as fellow sculpture students at the Accademia di Brera in Milan and remained close until Fontana's death in 1968. Their careers spanned an especially volatile period in Italian history, stretching from Fascist rule to the emergence of Italy as an established, industrialized nation in the postwar era. Fontana and Melotti developed distinctive personal styles, creating new forms and approaches across a wide range of media, but in the wake of World War II they made important contributions to the advancement of Italian art through their ceramic sculpture.

Fontana and Melotti first worked with clay in the late 1920s and 1930s, but they both vigorously reengaged with the material between the mid-1940s and the early 1960s, becoming pioneers in an explosion of ceramic production within avant-garde art and design in postwar Italy. The omnipresence of ceramics emerged from both practical and more philosophical considerations. Clay was a cheap and easily accessible material, attractive features to artists working in a country still recovering from the economic and structural devastation of war. Also attractive for its immediacy and tactility, clay requires the artist's direct physical engagement and yields readily to his or her touch. Fired in a kiln, the malleable substance undergoes dramatic transformation, permanently fixing its shape while remaining fragile. At a time when loss and life's transience were palpable, these characteristics of clay seemed especially poignant and resonant.

Against the backdrop of both rapid industrialization and increased artistic freedom in the wake of Fascism's collapse, the return to clay helped to redefine modern art in Italy. Paradoxically, it established a new, uniquely Italian modernism by accessing the long, rich tradition of artisanal ceramic craftsmanship that included Etruscan terracotta, classical manifestations from antiquity, and the polychrome master works of the Renaissance, exemplified in the work of Lucca della Robbia. Whether through traditional craft forms like vases and plates or more overtly sculptural, nonutilitarian pieces, ceramics in postwar Italy offered avenues for formal experimentation and collaboration within contemporary life. Fontana and Melotti successfully challenged and blurred the distinctions between fine art practice and the often-debased category of commercial ceramic endeavors.

Before and After Fascism

Fontana and Melotti launched their artistic careers during the *ventennio*, the roughly twenty years of Fascist rule that began in 1922. They created their first ceramic works in this period, which saw a flourishing of ceramic production in Italy. Artists associated with Futurism, the Italian avant-garde movement that thrived during World War I, and sculptors like Arturo Martini frequently created ceramic pieces in the years between the two world wars, as numerous active, well-established centers of ceramic production prospered during the first half of the twentieth century. In the early 1930s, Melotti worked for the Richard Ginori Company, a ceramic manufacturer run at the time by Gio Ponti, the Italian architect and founder of *Domus*. In 1937, Fontana worked at the Sèvres porcelain factories in France and learned most of his technical knowledge in the late 1930s from Tullio Mazzotti, whose father Giuseppe Mazzotti established a commercial ceramics studio in the Italian Riviera town of Albissola Mare in 1903.

Along with monumental sculpture, ceramics proved especially conducive to the goals of the Fascist Party, but unlike other dictatorial regimes that censured avant-garde artists, Mussolini's Fascism embraced modernism alongside a variety of artistic approaches, including classical statuary, forays into

abstraction, and industrial design.[2] During the *ventennio* the government established a hierarchy among the arts, with all forms, ceramics included, subservient to the great public art, architecture. The style or material was secondary to art's ability to function for the greater good within society, whether through the creation of jobs in a commercial operation or the communication of Fascist ideology.[3] Under this rubric, the utilitarian function inherent to ceramics and its production within an extensive system of studios, kilns, and factories came into favor as an especially worthwhile artistic pursuit.

Many artists worked under Fascist rule in Italy and accepted state commissions, but most, including Fontana and Melotti, did not subscribe to the party's ideology. They were pragmatic participants in the only viable system available to artists who wanted to make a living in their chosen field. In 1939, Melotti began working on a project for E42, the urban complex just outside Rome where Mussolini intended to host a great World Exhibition in 1942 to mark the twenty-year anniversary of Italian Fascism. The sculptural group (fig. 2) for this project brought Melotti to Rome and occupied most of his time throughout the early 1940s. He returned to Milan in 1943 to find his studio badly damaged from Allied bombings, while Fontana left Italy altogether in 1940, returning to his native Argentina for the duration of the war.

Melotti operated in relative isolation until the end of the war, working almost exclusively with clay and using a muffle kiln he rented for his studio. His choice of material owed much to dire economic conditions, but clay also provided therapeutic tactile immediacy and a material means to work through the traumas of the war. Melotti stated, "I have to confess that the war upset me very much. You can't even think about making abstract art when there's something inside your soul that I'm not saying leads you toward desperation, but toward figures of desperation."[4]

Melotti's work in clay, both before and after the war, included utilitarian, traditional ceramic objects like vases and architectural tiles, but the pieces from the mid-1940s are intimate, figural sculptures. Melotti warped and molded the clay, experimenting with a wide range of styles and techniques that reflected a personal and often melancholic outlook. Whether expressed through the raw terracotta of *The Philosophers* (*I filosofi*) (1945, cat. 21), the white painted clay bas-relief of *Postwar Period* (*Dopoguerra*) (1946, cat. 24), or the chaotic polychrome of *Madness* (*La follia*) (ca. 1947, cat. 25) and *Letter to Fontana* (*Lettera a Fontana*) (cat. 20), Melotti's ceramics from the 1940s depict solitary, enigmatic figures suggestive of the artist's isolation and psychological turmoil.

Figure 1
Lucio Fontana and Fausto Melotti during the installation of *Italia '61*. Photographs originally published in *Domus* (380/July 1961).

At first glance, the tête-à-tête of the two figures in *The Philosophers* seems to refute a claim of pervasive solitude in Melotti's work from this period. One figure indeed leans its head toward the other, but the form of the second figure, absent hands and head, suggests instead a sorrowful longing for human contact and conversation. *Letter to Fontana*, though formally quite different from the simple figures of *The Philosophers*, similarly expresses the anguish of loneliness and disconnection. Presented as a sculptural "letter" to his beloved friend who had returned to his native Argentina during the war, the work projects a perplexing ceramic atmosphere punctuated by a single, disembodied face that merges into its vertically striated background. The work highlights the artist's physical presence, with visible fingermarks dotting the base of the work and distinctly handled surfaces, but its muddled glazing and abstracted forms deny a straightforward interpretation or message. The sole figure, a yellow face spotted with areas of visceral red and green swirls, mouth open in the midst of a distressed cry, is set in an abstract, midnight blue background. The radiating points and warm coloring of the figure evoke the Sun of May, the national emblem of Argentina that consists of a yellow, personified sun with facial features.

Many of Melotti's ceramics from the 1940s made overt reference to the conditions brought to Italy by WWII and its aftermath. *Madness*, with its hemorrhaging color scheme, gaping holes, and fragmented body, unavoidably recalls the bodily traumas wrought by bombings and battles. Depicting a female figure, with two small children at its base, the work evokes the suffering of those who lived through the war, and its title further expresses the tragic absurdity of such a catastrophic event. Remembering WWII a decade later, Melotti reflected:

> *The breeze we thought to be the harbinger of dawn, was the wind of war, division, massacre. Once again the barbarism of the north raided the Mediterranean. The noble land of Spain had the privilege to hear the first roar of the beast and Picasso marked* Guernica *the first station of this long Via Crucis. Drunk with massacre and weary, art produces folly, sometimes fascinating folly.*[5]

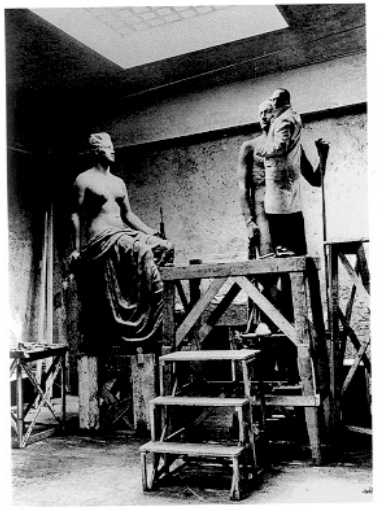


Figure 2
Fausto Melotti working on the clay model of *The Fields Are Redeemed* (*Si redimono i campi*) for the E42 project, 1942.

For Melotti, art provided a measure of salvation from such conditions, a path reflected in his mention of the Via Crucis or the visual representations of the Stations of the Cross demarcating Christ's way to resurrection. Fontana did not share Melotti's overt interest in visual storytelling or in the expression of personal psychological trauma in his work, but his ceramic sculptures in the immediate postwar period did draw upon similar subjects of redemption and reflection. He created numerous battle scenes and evoked religious themes, as in his extensive ceramic series *Stations of the Cross* (*Via Crucis*) (1947, fig. 3) and *Assumption* (*Assunzione*) (1947, cat. 1), one of the first works Fontana created upon his return to Italy. Further, both Fontana and Melotti made numerous harlequin figures during this period, which as recent scholarship has suggested should be understood within the greater "rhetoric of rebirth" prevalent in postwar Milan.[6] Following the wildly successful restaging of Carlo Goldoni's play *The Harlequin: Servant of Two Masters* (*L'Arlecchino servitore dei due padroni*) in 1947, the harlequin became a powerful "symbol of regained liberty, a homage to ingenuity, cunning and force of laughter against every constriction of established power"[7] (cat. 5).

Melotti also continued to explore reconstruction and resurrection in his bas-relief panel *Postwar Period*. The artist's thin, vertical figures reappear in this work, their bodies abstracted to simple mounds of clay for heads and two thin swaths representing torso and limbs respectively. Even with minimal detail and color, Melotti provides a quiet if hopeful scenario that both confronts the legacy of the war directly and sets this scene apart from his more melancholic work of the same period. The two figures walk side by side in a sparsely modeled environment, away from a large pile of fragments resembling bombed wreckage. Melotti delineates the composition with a prominent pillar just to the left of the figures, with structures of a rebuilt city awaiting them on the other side.

The narrative structure built into the form of *Postwar Period* also recalls the numerous *teatrini*, or "little theaters," that Melotti made until the 1970s. With their staged interiors and box-like frames, these small, intimate objects evoke theatrical scenery or stage sets, and like his other ceramic sculptures from the 1940s, many of them confront the psychological traumas and aftermath of WWII. Melotti populated their spare interior spaces with solitary figures and fragmented bodies, all highly abstracted with minimal distinguishing detail. Varying his form and technique for each one, Melotti alternated between raw terracotta and carefully chosen glazes, and each teatrini has a unique framing structure. Some of them are very linear, light, and open, such as *Theater* (*Teatrino*) (1950, cat. 28), and some are architectural and complex, such as *Orpheus* (*Orfeo*) (ca. 1945, cat. 23). In *Echo* (*L'eco*) (1945, cat. 22) Melotti built up the exterior walls, making the interior visible only through a vertical slit in the center. He heightened the play between inside and outside by projecting the handless arms of the single, lithe figure outward into the space beyond. The walls of *Echo* are indented with a square grid, exhibiting the inclusion of basic shapes and geometric patterning that would become a hallmark of Melotti's postwar ceramic practice.

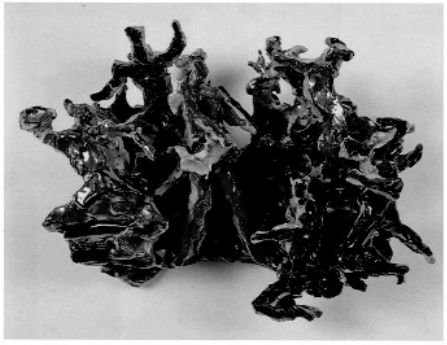


Figure 3
Lucio Fontana, *Stations of the Cross (Station 1)* (*Via Crucis* [*Stazione 1*]), 1947. Glazed ceramic, approximately 6 11/16 × 11 7/16 × 10 5/8 in. (17 × 29 × 27 cm).

Echo also demonstrates Melotti's interests beyond the visual arts, which included literature, the dramatic arts, and music. A poet and writer in his own right, Melotti frequently drew upon Italy's rich storytelling traditions, using characters from ancient myths and plays for inspiration. The thin figure in *Echo* alludes to Echo, the mountain nymph from Greek and Roman mythology who loved to talk, though her doomed love for Narcissus resulted in her being vaporized into a disembodied voice. In *Orpheus* (*Orfeo*), Melotti again drew on ancient mythology to explore the visual representation of sound and oral communication, showing a standing figure reaching toward a large, abstracted lyre, or string instrument, traditionally associated with Orpheus, the great musician and poet.

Melotti was not the only artist at the time to create psychologically charged visual narratives or even stage-like sculptures. His teatrinis share many formal similarities with the Surrealist constructions of the interwar years, or with the assemblage boxes of the American artist Joseph Cornell, who similarly created private, symbolic universes. Alberto Giacometti provides an especially apt parallel. He was born the same year as Melotti, and his career likewise spanned the pre- and postwar periods. In *The Palace at 4 a.m.* (1932, fig. 4) created during his association with the Parisian Surrealists, Giacometti constructed a delicate scaffolding or stage set, populating it with fragile pieces of wire, wood, and glass to connote an obsessive relationship with a woman. Giacometti returned to the idea of a framing box in his postwar work *The Nose* (*Le Nez*), (1947) enclosing a central ominous, fragmented head in a wire structure.

In constructing objects with such delineated interiors and exteriors, Melotti and his international contemporaries introduced materials not traditionally associated with sculpture and explored postwar melancholy and malaise. Melotti's particular choice to work in clay, however, differentiates his work, allowing it to express a more substantive, tactile material presence while situating it within a particular Italian lineage, not one connected to the modernism of Paris. Fontana also created shallow wooden "theaters" in the later postwar years, but Martini is the more relevant connection.

One of the few artists Melotti had contact with during the war, Martini sometimes came to Melotti's studio to use the kiln that Melotti had installed upon his return to Milan. Though Martini's work is often dismissed in the history of modernism for his failure to break away from classical figuration, Martini proved influential to Melotti and Fontana's generation. He achieved

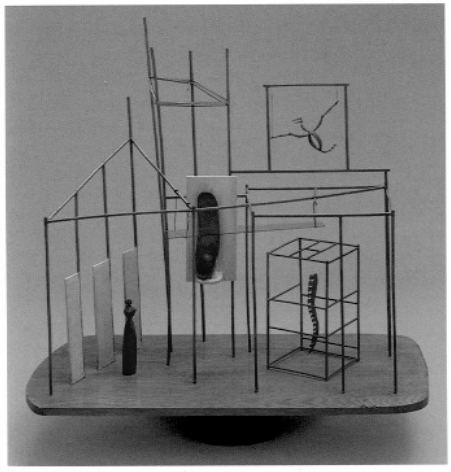


Figure 4
Alberto Giacometti, *The Palace at 4 a.m.*, 1932. Wood, glass, wire, and string, 25 × 28 1/4 × 15 3/4 in. (63.5 × 71.8 × 40 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

great success in the 1920s and 1930s as a monumental sculptor under the Fascist regime, but also produced smaller, more personal works, including his own little terracotta "theaters," including *Solitude* (*Christmas*) (*Solitudine* [*Natale*]) (1932, fig. 5), that bear striking formal similarities to Melotti's teatrini. Melotti also looked to Martini's *The Mad Mother* (*La madre folle*) (1929, fig. 6) when creating *Madness*, referring to the body position and implied distress of the female figure.

Martini believed clay provided access to primordial nature and essential purity, aspects he tried to convey in his own figural terracotta sculptures. Unlike the many artists of the Parisian avant-garde who drew inspiration from cultures outside their own, including those of Africa or the South Pacific, Martini looked to his Italian cultural heritage, in particular to the art of the Etruscans and their rich tradition of terracotta. The publicizing of the excavations at Veio, Cerveteri, and Tarquinia, as well as the exhibition of the Apollo of Veio in 1918 at the Museo Nazionale Etrusco in Rome, prompted widespread interest in the pre-Roman culture during the interwar years. Martini, like many Italians, became enthralled by the legacy of Etruscan civilization, which the Fascist government had promoted in unabashedly nationalist terms as a uniquely Italian culture, independent from Hellenism.[8]

Beyond his work, Martini also proved influential through his assessment of the current state of sculptural practice expressed in the essay "Scultura lingua morta" ("Dead Language Sculpture").[9] Published in 1945 at the moment of Fascism's collapse in Italy, "Scultura lingua morta" became a touchstone for postwar sculptors, even reaching Fontana while he was in Argentina. The essay proclaimed that sculpture was a "dead language which has not found the vernacular [*volgare*]," and added that it was "encumbered by all the passions and encrustations of the ancient works."[10] Written when Martini's reputation was already in steep decline, the text reads as a pessimistic take on the medium by an artist disillusioned at the end of his career, but he did believe sculpture could be salvaged if it disavowed statuary and became instead an "art of the blind," material transformed through touch not sight. He wrote:

Figure 5
Arturo Martini, *Solitude (Noël)* (*Solitudine* [*Noël*]), 1932. Terracotta, height 18 7/8 in. (48 cm). Private Collection, Milan.

Figure 6
Arturo Martini, *The Mad Mother* (*La madre folle*), 1929. Terracotta, 74 13/16 × 30 11/16 × 25 9/16 in. (190 × 78 × 65 cm). Collezioni d'Arte e di Storia della Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio, Bologna.

> *Language transforms also: noise becomes sound, words change meaning, color becomes tone; in sculpture volume must turn itself into shape. In true art, sentiment, beauty, or character are just humbug; what is eternal in it is substance. A true sculptor can make sculpture simply by squeezing the clay between his hands.... If the art of the blind is the truth, let it be free: pure forms and the soul which is in everything and everywhere; let us no longer confuse the real life of sculpture with the apparent life of a statue.*[11]

The process of manipulating clay, of "squeezing" it between one's hands, made the substance a natural choice for artists interested in tactility, and Fontana and Melotti's generation heeded Martini's call to reinvigorate the medium of sculpture through such direct, visceral engagement with material. Martini died in 1947, and thus was not able to experience the newfound artistic freedoms or availability of materials that followed the collapse of Fascism, but postwar Italian art continued the approaches and debates of the 1920s and1930s. The diversity of artistic styles under Fascism and a desire to establish a uniquely Italian modernism continued well into the postwar period, creating an artistic environment comfortable with the simultaneous exploration of dichotomies like commercial products versus fine art, modern versus traditional, abstraction versus figuration, and materiality versus immateriality.

Modern Art and Industrial Craft

Bolstered by the influx of foreign aid, Italy experienced a period of great economic growth and prosperity after World War II known as the *miracolo italiano* (Italian miracle). Although the push toward modernization had begun during the Fascist era, the country rushed to catch up with other industrialized nations, prompting mass migration of the populace from the South to the North to meet labor needs, an increase in the consumption of mass-produced consumer goods, and a radical transformation of the cultural landscape.[12] The changes helped shape Italian postwar modernism and supported the maturation of Italian industrial design, which came to global prominence in the 1950s and 1960s.

Beneath this explosive, innovative moment in Italian culture, however, there existed an anxiety over the advancement of Italian modernism, a fear that progress would come at the cost of traditional workmanship. Industrialization brought economic prosperity and numerous opportunities for designers and artists, but it also generated serious cultural debates on the relevance of craft, art, and the modes of their production in the new economy. The goal of leading Italian cultural figures like Gio Ponti was to convince both artistic practitioners and the general public of the benefits of a new, all-encompassing modern lifestyle. Ponti turned *Domus* into a leading international design publication during this time, using its pages to advertise the virtues of Italian art and design to an international audience as well as to educate its domestic readers about good taste and beauty in every aspect of their lives – from the new glass and steel skyscrapers in Milan to consumer products like the Fiat 500 or Olivetti typewriters, to the ashtrays, vases, and works of art decorating their homes.

Ponti's vision of an Italian modernism required blurring the age-old boundaries between the vaunted, exclusive realm of fine art and the rapidly changing space and substance of everyday life. He celebrated the rich traditions of Italian craftsmanship, which he saw as representative of the "highest, liveliest abilities" of the country and "perhaps the best part" of the Italian people. Ponti became an ardent supporter of postwar Italian ceramics, which he saw as a "vibrant and courageous" avant-garde art form, arguing that Italian painters and sculptors created a "happy marriage between the ceramic arts and modern artists."[13] For Ponti, the benefit of such a combination was the elevation and establishment of design to the level of high art, a means to persuade the general public of the value in thoughtfully crafted, beautiful things in all areas of their lives. In an editorial for *Domus* heralding the triumph of Italian ceramics at the landmark Ninth Milan Triennial in 1951, Ponti wrote:

> *This land of ours, where the perennial joy of youth is united to the strength of antiquity and where grace and barbarism often are mingled in disquieting proportions, this Italy brings a message of independence and shows how important and priceless the gift is, to be able to express oneself without premeditation, through materialized forms.... Time does not exist in Italian things. In what is formed by Italian hands, you will not find the thought or rule of one man. That is the meaning of our fantasy. We have imagination, and the pluck to pursue it directly and immediately and we feel the urge of transposing fearlessly our imagination in poetic reality and in living art.*[14]

Ponti's public, enthusiastic support for Fontana's and Melotti's ceramics as well as their high-profile commissions helped raise the reputations of both artists, whose output in the postwar period was extensive and diverse. While beginning as private, internalized pursuits or studio-based experiments, their postwar ceramics became very public symbols of Italian modernism. Fontana and Melotti produced ceramics ranging from public architectural elements to nonutilitarian sculptures to vases, ashtrays, and other domestic goods. Both artists participated in numerous Milan Triennials, the triennial design exhibitions Ponti often helped organize. Ponti devoted extensive coverage to Fontana's and Melotti's ceramics in the pages of *Domus* and his other publication, *Stile*, between 1946 and 1961, whether through individual feature stories, frequently written by Ponti's daughter, Dr. Lisa Ponti, or by reproducing their work in the illustrations for reviews of notable exhibitions and events. For example, on one of its covers in 1948, *Domus* prominently featured a color reproduction of Fontana's large-scale ceramic commission for the Cinema Arlecchino in Milan on its cover and in a lengthy spread about the newly renovated movie theater.[15]

In addition to the Cinema Arlecchino project, Fontana completed numerous small and large-scale ceramic commissions visible in the public domain, in the real, lived spaces of modern, urban Italy. He created private ceramic sculptures to adorn cemetery plots at the Cimitero Monumentale di Milano (The Monumental Cemetery of Milan), interior schemes for private residences, and collaborated with architects tasked with rebuilding Milan in the aftermath of WWII bombings. One of Fontana's largest architectural projects was the creation of textural and graphic ceramic panels (1947, fig. 7) for the facade of the new building at 11 via Senato, designed by the architects and industrial designers Roberto Menghi and Marco Zanuso.

Melotti also completed numerous significant ceramic commissions, frequently collaborating with Ponti on his architectural projects. In 1958, Melotti contributed large, ceramic sculptural elements to Ponti's Alitalia ticket office in New York (1958, fig. 9) as well as various sizes of glazed ceramic tiles that blanketed the walls of the space. His most extensive commission,

Figure 7
Lucio Fontana, Polychrome stoneware detail on via Senato, 11, Milan, 1947. (Architects Marco Zanuso, Roberto Menghi).

Figure 8
Gio Ponti, Alitalia offices on Fifth Avenue, New York, 1958, with ceramic works by Fausto Melotti.

however, was for Ponti's Villa Planchart, a single-family home in Caracas. Ponti integrated Melotti's ceramics throughout the project. Ceramic tiles saturated the open patio space located at the center of the structure, and massive vertical strips of colored rectangles, recalling dominoes with their circle-punctuated surfaces, covered the sole wall in the space (1955, fig.9). In between these ceramic rows, Melotti interspersed thousands of variously sized, ceramic circles, creating a dynamic texture that continues through to the interior space of the house. The ceramic cladding dominates the wall behind the central staircase, broken up by two large ceramic figures.

Fontana and Melotti's prolonged personal and professional involvement with Ponti suggests they supported his vision of Italian modernism. They expressed, verbally and through their work, a desire to advance modern art and contribute to the cultural capital of postwar Italy, domestically and as an international export, but crucial to both endeavors was the need to redefine the parameters of ceramics. Their work in clay undeniably provided a decent and stable source of income for both men, but neither Fontana nor Melotti wanted to be classified as a "ceramic" artist. They worked hard to distinguish their practices from traditional artisanship or high-quality but mass-produced utilitarian objects. Melotti, especially in interviews from later in his career, expressed uneasiness, not so much with working in clay, but with the commercial connotations that came with such pursuits.[16] He acknowledged that his success with ceramics provided a very good living for him and his family, but he felt ashamed because asking a sculptor to make ceramics was like "asking a poet to write advertisements."[17] Fontana, likewise, made the distinction between the artistic and commercial aspects of his ceramic work. In "La mia ceramica" ("My Ceramics"), a text he published in 1939 shortly before departing for Argentina, Fontana wrote:

> *I am a sculptor not a ceramicist. I have never turned a plate on a wheel or painted a vase. I detest the lacy designs and dainty nuances. I loathe the mystification of technique, the amazing technical achievement of Sevres or Copenhagen [that] satisfies the taste of the upper classes and collectors. They are thrilled by the fragility and delicacy of the ware. I am looking for something different. . . . People call my ceramics primeval. The material looked as if it had been hit by an earthquake, yet was motionless. Critics called these ceramics. I called them sculpture.*[18]

By the postwar period, however, contemporary criticism was quick to distinguish the "scultori-ceramisti," or sculptor-ceramicists, from traditional artisans, and like Fontana, emphasized the uniqueness of their objects and handling of material. The Italian critic Gillo Dorfles, for example, discussed the ceramic work of artists like Fontana and Melotti in a resolutely modernist framework, emphasizing their autonomy and creative independence. He stressed their use of private kilns to make singular, exceptional sculptures, which shared little with the reproducible domestic objects produced at large, established centers of ceramic production. For Dorfles, modern ceramics excised the purely decorative or functional, rejecting both traditional sculptural forms and rote procedures of artisanal production.[19]

Modern Italian ceramics possessed a distinctive capacity to innovate stylistically *and* give form to the new spirit of Italian life. As Dorfles wrote, "One of the duties of modern ceramic art is to simultaneously insert into the modern environment, the aesthetic qualities of painting and sculpture and the practical qualities of household furnishings."[20] The choice to work with clay provided an opportunity to reach a wider audience, for Fontana's and Melotti's works to be seen from the street, used in the home, and exhibited not just in the gallery but also at the trade fair. Clay also enabled both artists to experiment, to try new sculptural techniques, and disregard artistic divisions between art and craft. In this way, postwar Italian art and design built upon the desire to integrate art into life begun in the Fascist era or, to go even further back, to the functionality and civic mindedness of art during the Renaissance.

Fontana's and Melotti's ceramics, however, even when embracing the quotidian practicalities of domestic objects or moving outside the space of the gallery, always remained firmly entrenched in the rarefied sphere of high art. Fontana insisted that his ceramics achieved the level of fine art because they were "monotypes," unique objects directly and carefully modeled by the artist.[21] Melotti frequently denied the functionality of his more overtly "commercial" objects like vases by making them too large to be practical for a typical consumer or by blocking the ability to insert anything into the vessel by pinching the clay together toward the top. The point was not to make "artistic" ceramics or "useful" sculptures but to merge the best aspects of both to create a new, modern Italian artistic language.

The populism embedded in the critical and artistic conceptualization of postwar Italian ceramics, in the merging of art and design, did have its limits. Ponti's audience was not the average Italian but a combination of the international cultural elite and the new upper and middle classes that expanded during

Figure 9
Gio Ponti, Villa Planchart, Caracas, 1955, with ceramic works by Fausto Melotti.

Italy's "economic miracle" – an educated, urban population enthusiastic about technological innovation, highly designed consumer products, and overall cultural literacy. The lifestyle presented in *Domus* was, for most, aspirational at best, and the majority of Fontana's and Melotti's ceramics remained accessible only to the top echelon of Italian society. While Ponti's intentions were no doubt sincere, and both Fontana and Melotti genuinely wanted to dismantle established artistic conventions they viewed as out of touch with contemporary life and engage a wider public, their great experiment resulted in a highly advanced formal language available to subsequent generations of artists.

Form over Function

In an interview from 1970, two years after Fontana's death, Melotti reflected on their friendship, asserting that while they progressed through their careers on "divergent but parallel" paths they were connected by a mutual "conviction that art is not born already shaped or forged in the material," but "born in the mind."[22] Melotti remembered watching Fontana, on the eve of war, leave for another world and said that when he greeted his friend at the dock in Genoa in 1947, he had come "back with clear ideas."[23] Fontana returned to Italy armed with the "ideas" of Spazialismo or Spatialism, an artistic tendency he developed in Argentina along with a group of his students at the Accademia di Altamira in Buenos Aires.

In 1946, Fontana helped write the "Manifiesto blanco" ("White Manifesto"). The document served as the first public declaration of Spatialism, which called for a new art invigorated by an embrace of the "age of mechanics" and "discoveries of science." Fontana and his fellow Spatialists wrote that, "What is needed is a change in essence and in form. What is needed is the transcending of painting, of sculpture, of poetry, and of music. We need a greater art that is in accord with the demands of the new spirit."[24] Spatialist art embraced space in all its facets, both physical and conceptual. As they stated in the "White Manifesto":

> *We conceive the synthesis as a sum total of physical elements: color, sound, movement, time, space, all making up a psycho-physical unity. Color, the element of space, sound, the element of time, and the movement that develops in time and space, are the fundamental forms of the new art, which contains the four dimensions of existence. Time and space.*[25]

This set of artistic ideas informed and drove Fontana's artistic output for the remainder of his career. Throughout the postwar period, he published subsequent manifestoes outlining Spatialist principles and gained additional disciples from among his Italian contemporaries. In the mid-1950s, his work became increasingly abstract as he explored the two modes of mark making – perforating a surface with either gaping holes or decisive, vertical slices – that would come to define his career. Almost all of these later works, regardless of medium or material, bore a variant of the title *Spatial Concept* (*Concetto spaziale*). Spatialism, however, was not a means to develop a signature style or create a rigid set of artistic principles. Fontana's postwar ideology emphasized the spirit of experimentation, substantiated by the range of his artistic activities, especially in his ceramics.

Like Melotti, who worked almost exclusively with clay until 1959, Fontana concentrated most of his effort in the immediate postwar period on ceramics. Neither artist limited himself to one style or ceramic technique, moving seamlessly between abstraction and figuration, rough and smooth handling, large and small scales, raw and glazed surfaces. Fontana and Melotti both wanted to move beyond the exhausted "dead language of sculpture" described by Martini, and the specialized techniques and refined, formulaic aesthetics of traditional ceramics. In her review of the 1948 Biennale, the first held following the War, Lisa Ponti wrote that, "sculpture … remains in crisis: and we see our sculptor-ceramicists making the most of this crisis. … In certain respects, this lively intervention of ceramics is somewhat like a florescence of the baroque, provisional, capricious, in reaction to classical sculpture, which is exhausted."[26]

Fontana's work from the first ten years after the end of WWII was often described as baroque, due in large part to the promotion of the baroque, not the exhausted classicism of the Renaissance, as a viable artistic antecedent for the new machine age that appeared throughout Fontana's Spatialist manifestoes. His use of the baroque was complex and not meant to revive the style of painting and sculpture that emerged in the seventeenth century, but rather to explore how dynamism and movement could be expressed through inert matter. While Melotti never publically subscribed to the tenets of Spatialism, his ceramics share with Fontana's the desire to synthesize color, movement, time, and space, and to eliminate traditional boundaries between painting, sculpture, and other art forms.

Fontana and Melotti achieved this synthesis primarily through their uses of color. Both had used various glazes in their ceramics from the 1930s, but deployed color rather conventionally to distinguish elements of a composition. By the 1940s, however, Fontana's and Melotti's approaches to glazing became increasingly more experimental. Melotti oscillated between completely raw, minimally glazed, and richly layered surfaces, while Fontana amplified his overall approach to color. In Fontana's and some of Melotti's more chaotically glazed works from the period, like *Letter to Fontana*, color obfuscates as much as it delineates. Both artists used multiple glazes, but allowed them to ooze, swirl, and drip, coagulating into dynamic surfaces that emphasize the materiality of the work more than they encourage a coherent reading. In Fontana's *Ascension*, for example, the figures are differentiated from the ink-colored mass below by either a white glaze, applied so thinly the clay is still visible underneath, or a deep, rusty brown. A similar approach is also visible in his *Battle* (*Battaglia*) (1947, cat. 2) created in the same year. The majority of the surface is treated with an iridescent, coppery purple, with a handful of the warriors in the midst of a violent battle further coated with azure blue and pale yellow, congealing in places into a mottled turquoise.

Similar to Jackson Pollack's approach to an Abstract Expressionist painting, Fontana's and Melotti's applications of glazes were neither haphazard nor random. The colors are exquisitely balanced throughout the compositions, lending a gracefulness to pieces whose material below the surface remained a torrent of physical mass. Their particular uses of high gloss or metallic glazes were also crucial. Many of Fontana's and Melotti's ceramics from this period share a common formal characteristic: vertical orientation. The striations on *Letter to Fontana*, the upward gaze of *Madness*, the outstretched limbs of *Battle*, or the pointed peaks of *Ascension*, project beyond the boundaries of the sculpture. The shine of the glazes extended this effect, and further emphasized the rhythmic movement of the underlying material.

Fontana and Melotti both accentuated the tactility of clay while extending its physical presence in time and space through the surface effects of their glazes, but their work still betrays divergent paths to achieve those results. Melotti's ceramics, no matter the vibrancy of their glazes or the largeness of their form, retain a quiet intimacy and lyricism. Even in his most visually busy or materially labored pieces like *Untitled* (*Senza titolo*) (ca. 1955, cat. 29), his ceramics possess an emotional and physical delicacy. In comparison, Fontana's ceramics are bombastic, muddled masses exploding off of walls, floors, and tabletops, a deluge of matter, massive in force regardless of its physical dimensions. These differences have as much to do with unique temperaments of each artist as much as any grander historical or art historical context, but they also demonstrate the range of experimental possibilities embedded within the material of clay and the processes of ceramics. Fontana and Melotti collapsed boundaries between painting and sculpture, using the immediacy and malleability of clay to synthesize space and time.

Spatial Experiments in Albissola: Fontana's *Nature*

While Fontana explored the principles of Spatialism throughout the last twenty years of his life, producing numerous baroque ceramics and *Spatial Concepts*, one of his most ambitious "spatial" projects was the *Nature* sculptures (*Nature*). The series consisted of massive, solid clay spheres with irregular forms, pierced by either a crudely dug circular hole or linear trench. Some of the works are over 100 centimeters in diameter and weigh hundreds of pounds, forcing Fontana to blend the clay with grog – filler made from finely ground fragments of previously fired ceramics – to prevent the sculptures from exploding in the kiln during firing.[27] Fontana also created a related, smaller group of *Nature* sculptures, sometimes referred to as "ciottoli" or "pebbles" (1959, cats. 14 and 15). These were also solid spheres of clay, but were subsequently cut in half, painted, and often displayed side-by-side.

Better known today in the bronze versions Fontana cast later, the *Nature* series began as an ambitious ceramic project in

Albissola at Ceas (Ceramisti Associati) in 1959. By the mid-twentieth century, Albissola was already one of the leading and oldest established centers of ceramic production in Italy, but in the postwar period it quickly cultivated a reputation as a location for artistic experimentation. The critical debates may have been waged in the pages of *Domus* or in the various exhibitions and events on display across Italy, but many of the new forms and modern approaches to clay sculpture were created in Albissola. A popular tourist destination on the Italian Riviera, the city had no problem attracting a wide variety of art world luminaries from Milan and other cosmopolitan capitals. Albissola served as a lush, natural setting infused with the smell of sea salt and the rich local earth – a prime location for tapping into primordial archetypes. With its long history of ceramic production and established kilns, factories, and galleries, Albissola also provided the infrastructure necessary to nurture an artistic enclave exploring the possibilities of clay.

Tullio Mazzotti ran one of the most important factories in Albissola. Like Ponti, Tullio, who changed his name to Tullio d'Albissola, was a fierce supporter of the resurgence of ceramic practice in the postwar period, but he had encouraged his father, back in the 1920s, to establish a separate workshop within the factory where artists could come and create.[28] Fontana met Tullio in 1934 and began working consistently with him in 1936, experimenting with a wide range of techniques and materials, including terracotta, grès stoneware,and smoother ceramics. Through Tullio and his workshop in Albissola, Fontana met and collaborated with a vast array of Italian and international avant-garde artists throughout the 1940s and '50s.[29]

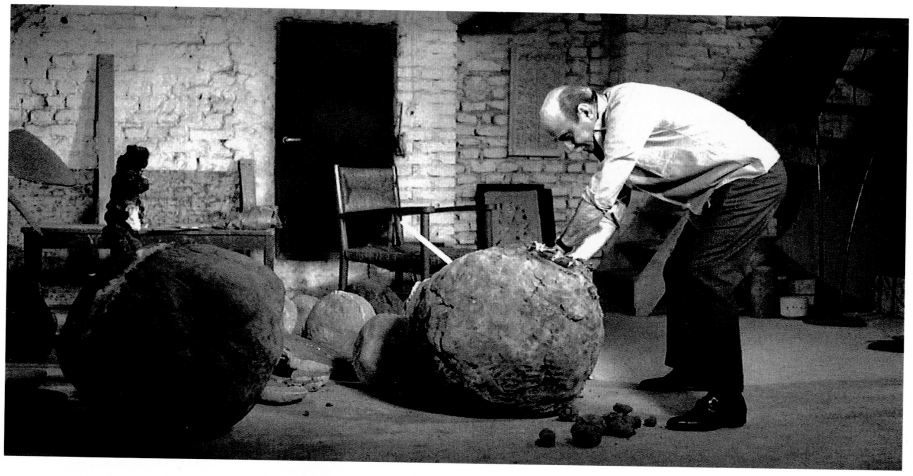
Coinciding with Fontana's transition to his abstract, "Spatialist" ceramics, the Incontri Internazionale delle Ceramica (International encounters in ceramics) took place in 1954. The event brought together a diverse group of artists to Albissola, including the Italians Enrico Baj, Fontana, and Emilio Scanavino, the Chilean artist Matta, the French Canadian poet and artist Roland Giguère, and Northern European artists associated with the avant-garde group CoBRA including Karel Appel, Corneille, Asger Jorn, and the Belgian writer Theodor Koenig. The Incontri functioned as a kind of informal artistic workshop, a technical training seminar, and scholarly proceeding – all in a summer camp–like atmosphere (fig. 10). Encouraged to experiment and let their imaginations go free, the participating artists produced, often collaboratively, work that emphasized the materiality of clay and made innovative use of color. Some works focused

Figure 10
Asger Jorn working the clay with a motorino at the Fabbrica San Giorgio, Albissola, 1959.

more on the painted surface than the form of the ceramic, but most were undeniably sculptural – three-dimensional things, expressively shaped and crudely handled.

Fontana's *Nature* series was one of the most materially explicit projects to come out of Albissola in the postwar period. He made the pieces with the help of Umberto Ghersi, a local ceramic artist and technician. Ghersi prepared the earthen material and kept it wet with dampened strips of fabric as Fontana modeled the forms.[30] As photographs show, the creation of the *Nature* works was a laborious and physical process. Fontana used his bare hands, a thick piece of rope, or a large stick to attack and shape the clay, digging deep holes or lacerating the surface in broad, rough cuts (fig. 11). Ghersi then managed the firing process. Fontana briefly returned to Milan during this stage, but wrote to Ghersi, imploring him to "Look after the balls as if they were your own!" Fontana insisted that these orbs would prove famous after their creation and commended Ghersi for his faithful and cooperative assistance through their "gestation." Fontana closed his letter by asking Ghersi to telephone him, noting that no matter what happened he would come right to Albissola.[31]

From the beginning the *Nature* sculptures generated a multiplicity of mental associations and interpretations. Fontana displayed them for the first time in Venice during the summer of 1960 as a part of the group exhibition *Dalla natura all'arte* (*From Nature to Art*), which then traveled to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, in December. After seeing the *Nature* works at Fontana's well-received solo exhibition a year later at the Iris Clert Gallery in Paris, the French critic Luce Hoctin wrote that Fontana's "*ballons*" or "balls" were enigmatic presences,[32] whereas Toni Toniato described the *Nature* works as "balls of fire and earth," "artificial meteorites," "giant pods," and monsters released from hibernation or from a terrible nightmare."[33] Toniato focused most of his attention on the material properties of the pieces using language laden with biological



references, pointing out how their "shells" bore the cracks, grooves, and traces of the artist's touch, and had "marks like a tortoise." Like many other commentators at the time, Toniato also used language that highlighted the fertility and violence of nature, stating that the clay cores were "impregnated" and their "fecundity, inscrutable."[34]

The sexual and reproductive connotations were warranted. Many art historians have seen the holes and cuts of the *Nature* series in the context of bodily orifices, both male and female. Some have even pointed out that in the Italian vernacular of the postwar period, *natura*, the singular form of the word "nature," was a slang phrase for genitalia, especially female genitalia.[35] Fontana himself encouraged this reading, but also suggested another possible reference for the *Nature* sculptures.[36] He stated:

> *I was thinking of these worlds, of the moon with these . . . holes, this appalling silence, which makes us anxious, and the astronauts in a new world. And then, these . . . in the artist's imagination . . . these immense things which have been there thousands of millions of years . . . and man arrives, in deadly silence, in this anxiety, and leaves a vital sign of his arrival. . . . There were these closed forms, which signaled a desire to make the inert material live.*[37]

The reference to galactic, spatial bodies reflects both the widespread global fascination with outer space during the postwar period and Fontana's obsession with the limitlessness and technological implications of modern physics and space travel expressed in his Spatialist manifestoes. The 1960s were the pinnacle of the space race, a moment memorable for launching the first human into space and for the first lunar landing. The silence, darkness, and chasms of outer space were highly influential concepts for Fontana, and he became fascinated by the photographs of celestial surfaces and bodies taken from satellites. Fontana had even viewed a meteor in the home of the Albissola artist and fellow astronomy enthusiast Antonio Sabetelli just prior to creating the *Nature* series.[38]

Figure 11
Lucio Fontana working on the *Nature* sculptures, 1960.

Fontana's interest in space as an organizing conceptual and formal principle, as well as his increasing desire to create spatial and sensory experience also shaped how he chose to install the *Natures* for *Dalla natura all'arte*. The exhibition organizers allotted Fontana three galleries at the Palazzo Grassi. Fontana transformed two of the galleries, creating unique spatial environments. In one room, he installed *Exaltation of a Form* (*Esaltazione di una Forma*). Using a considerable amount of pink satin provided by SNIA, the textile company and owners at the time of the Palazzo, diagonally stretched bands, and a leaning polyhedron structure placed in the center of the room, Fontana turned the gallery into a claustrophobic, cave-like space (fig. 12).[39]

The *Nature* series occupied the final gallery. Fontana placed each sculpture on its own pedestal, made from found objects such as wooden stools and boxes. He painted the walls a muddy ochre color and included some text incorporating the phrase *terra madre* (mother earth), visible in an installation photograph (fig. 13).[40] Walking into such a dark space, filled with lumbering, visceral clay bodies and seemingly indecipherable material smeared on almost every surface must have generated quite a sensory experience in visitors to the exhibition. As the artist Gianni Colombo recollected, the entire installation felt "very barbaric" and "very direct."[41]

The *Nature* sculptures managed to simultaneously express the raw origins of life on earth and the mysterious emptiness of outer space. As Fontana wrote to the Belgian artist Jef Verheyen in 1961, "I love them [the *Natures*] very much, they are nothingness or the beginning of everything."[42] For Fontana art was no longer about the simple presentation of an autonomous object and figurative subject. He sought

instead to enable viewers to create emotional and imaginative experiences for themselves through their encounters with his materials.

The Evolution of Material

The *Nature* sculptures marked Fontana's last significant foray into ceramics. While he continued to thoughtfully engage with materials, he increasingly turned his attention in the1960s to using new technological forms of media to continue exploring the possibilities of space. He created total environments like his *Ambiente spaziale bianco* (*White Spatial Ambience*) at the thirty-third Venice Biennale in 1966. In his 1961 works *Cubo di luce* (*struttura luminosa*) [(*Cube of Light*) (*Luminous Structure*)] and *Fonti di energia* (*Sources of Energy*), installed on the ceiling for *Italia '61*, Fontana embraced the artistic potential of neon, a material that created ephemeral, dynamic spatial effects.

Around the corner from Fontana's *Italia '61* installation, of course, stood Melotti's monumental wall (over 12 meters high), which consisted of 800 ceramic tiles, each of them measuring 50 by 70 centimeters (fig. 14). The panels hung in a grid pattern on an elaborate metal structure fastened over one of the makeshift exhibition walls. Overall the group was similar to Melotti's previous large-scale architectural panel commissions with a white and pastel color scheme, with a few more saturated panels interspersed and four much larger, dark panels breaking up the total field. Though most of the individual tiles comprised abstract, geometric panels and grids, each panel was meant to illustrate a different facet of "The Evolution of Form in Craftwork," the theme given to Melotti by the exhibition's organizers. The work became a highlight of *Italia '61*, receiving ample coverage in the pages of *Domus* and even making the cover of the international version of *Life*.[43] Melotti's wall of tiles, however, also stands as a visual closing argument, attesting to the achievements of postwar Italian artists to merge ceramics with avant-garde practice. It also marked the end of Melotti's sustained engagement with ceramics.

Like Fontana, Melotti turned his attention elsewhere, embarking on a decades-long involvement with abstract metal sculpture. As Fontana did with neon, Melotti's thin, linear sculptures used a modern and industrial material. Both artists embraced new materials and became increasingly interested in large-scale projects and environmental installations, tendencies that came to characterize much of the vanguard and experimental art in the later postwar period.

The *Nature* series and Melotti's massive project for *Italia '61* can be seen as the culmination of the utopian ceramic

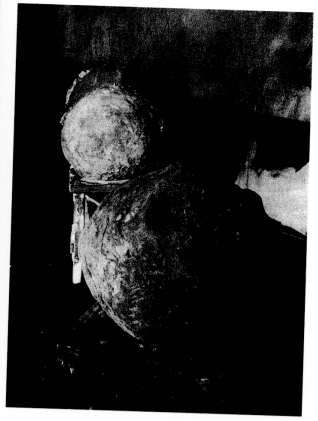


Figure 12
Lucio Fontana, *Exaltation of Form (Esaltazione di una forma)*, 1960. Cloth, in the exhibition *Dalla natura all'arte*, Palazzo Grassi, Venice, August–October 1960.

Figure 13
Lucio Fontana, installation view of *Nature*, 1960, for the exhibition *Dalla nature all'arte* at the Palazzo Grassi, Venice, August–October 1960.

experiment of the years immediately following WWII. In the 1940s and 1950s, clay provided something tangible and familiar in a moment that must have felt both exhilaratingly wide open and terrifyingly uncertain. With the passage of twenty years, however, the world had again changed, and Italian artists, like their international colleagues, slowly moved away from ceramic work. For avant-garde artists of the mid- and late-1960s the traditional connotations of polychrome ceramics and terracotta no longer held much interest. Their use of raw, quotidian substances like water, dirt, and live animals, however, suggest a continued interest in the artistic possibilities of humble, immediate materials.

The wedge between the fine and decorative arts returned in the late postwar period, but perhaps more significantly the debate no longer seemed to matter much among most vanguard artists.[44] Modernism established a footing in Italian art and design, and there were new debates and new tendencies to explore. Just as it had been before and after the Second World War in Italy, however, this moment was not so much a total break as a fascinating, complex continuation. The sculptural projects of the next Italian avant-garde, Arte Povera – Jannis Kounnelis's horses, Giovanni Anselmo's wilting lettuce, or Mario Merz's dirt and glass igloos – may seem to have little in common with Melotti's theaters or Fontana's polychrome ceramic figures of the late 1940s, but they indicated a new dialect more certainly than a different language.

The next generation of Italian artists used and augmented many of the tactics Fontana and Melotti developed in the 1940s and 1950s. In the late 1960s, Fontana, alongside those artists associated with Arte Povera, openly embraced collaboration with commercial and industrial entities, working alongside engineers, industrial designers, architects, and art dealers, just as his ceramic projects depended on the assistance of technicians and figures like Ponti or Tullio in the preceding decades. More than anything, though, the artists of the 1960s sustained the spirit of experimentation that informed so much of the ceramic output in the postwar period, visible, for example, in Albissola during the summer of 1954. Italian artists remained committed to pushing forward the medium of sculpture through an intense and unrelenting investigation of materiality. The Italian encounter with clay and ceramics in the immediate postwar period may have been a brief, and at times a messy mixture of contradictory stances, but it produced a new model for artistic process based on the possibilities of radical, dynamic experimentation with material.

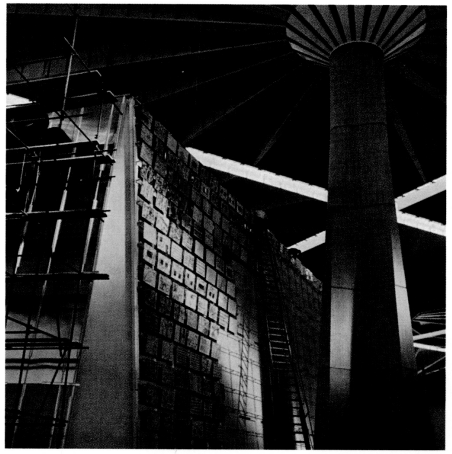


Figure 14
Fausto Melotti, Project for *Italia '61*, published in *Domus* (380/July 1961).