

Cutting Traditional Painting: Iconoclasm in Lucio Fontana and Madi's Praxis and Theories

'The Spatial Concepts movement was born in Buenos Aires a product of your 1946 [Madí] manifesto'¹, wrote Lucio Fontana to Gyula Kosice in 1947; Fontana positions his theories and praxis in dialogue with those of Madí. Adding to the scarce literature on Fontana's interchanges with Argentinian artists and aesthetic debates², this paper will evaluate the likenesses between Fontana's Buchi (Holes) and Tagli (Cuts)—his perforations and incisions of canvases—and Rhod Rothfuss's *marcos recortados* (cut-out frames); ultimately, it will situate their works as '[configurations] of the avant-garde in and from Latin America'³. First, I will argue that these inventions and (in/sub)versions of the European avant-garde occur through an iconoclastic dialectic in their texts that are written in a Latin American milieu of (extra)aesthetic experimentation and theorisation that reconstructs European avant-garde genealogies to philosophise their paradoxes⁴. Through transnational vectors of artists, books, journals, and teachers⁵, critical interchange causes ruptures with Europe and the sacrosanct surface/edge of the pictorial plane—shattering Leon Alberti's paintings-as-windows illusion of three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional surface—through an innovative technique of desecration. From here, I will evaluate the points of divergence between the artists as Rothfuss's autonomous painting 'begins and ends with itself'⁶, whilst Fontana transcends the limits of easel paintings into symbolic Infinity. This discussion of disjunctions will continue into an analysis of the alignment of the social and the formal in their works. Whilst the Argentinian avant-garde defies ahistorical, asocial Greenbergian formalism to resist the propagandistic culture and isolationism of Peronism through their materialism⁷—positioning their cosmopolitan abstraction as national and local—Fontana's gesture of the slash occurs within the regional *Italian Informel* debate on the commercialisation of art⁸.

¹ Lucio Fontana, "Letter to Gyula Kosice, 1947," in *Inverted Utopias: Avant-Garde Art in Latin America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 519-520.

² Andrea Giunta, "The War Years: Fontana in Argentina," in *Lucio Fontana: On the Threshold* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum Of Art, 2019), 41-49.

³ Mari Carmen Ramirez, *Inverted Utopias*, x

⁴ Mari Carmen Ramirez, *Inverted Utopias*, 5.

⁵ Ana Jorgelina Pozzi-Harris, "Marginal Distruptions: Concrete and Madí Art in Argentina, 1940—1955," PhD diss., (University of Texas, 2007), 73.

⁶ Rhod Rothfuss, "The Frame: A Problem of Contemporary Art," in *Art in Latin America: The Modern Era, 1820-1980* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 329.

⁷ Pozzie-Harris, *Distruptions*, 149

⁸ Anthony White, "The Cuts," in *Lucio Fontana: Between Utopia and Kitsch* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2014), 245-247

A Climate of Critique: Beyond the European Avant-Garde

It is within the ‘urban societies’ of ‘open countries’—those on the Atlantic side with mass migration—that were receptive to the cultural and commercial exchange with Europe⁹. However, until the *época heroica* arrives with an impetus to transgress the tradition of abstraction, avant-garde practice to the Emilio Pettoruti and Xul Solar’s cubist and expressionist modes, or Joaquin Torres-Garcia’s assimilation of geometric abstraction with figuration¹⁰. Consequently, the magazine *Aruto’s* (1944) resolute position against figuration is a radical proposal. *Arturo* opens with the broad declaration, ‘To Invent is to find or discover new and unknown things’ by any means¹¹. The *Madí* manifesto particularises invention as that of ‘technique’ and creation as that of ‘essence.’¹² Within an evolution of Theo van Doesburg’s Art Concret, they propose scientific/mathematic art that creates essential forms of shapes and colours from the mind¹³. The result is a self-sufficient art object.

A decade earlier, Fontana experiments with the *Milanese Concrete Group* in the 1930s and exhibited at *Galleria del Millione*¹⁴. Fontana sought to integrate the art object and the wall (Fig. 1). Anthony White argues that these sculptures activate the architectural plane¹⁵. Nonetheless, his aims to undermine the boundaries of art objects oppose his contemporaries’s pursuit of autonomous art objects. Thus, he experiments with the reflective gaze of ceramics to connect mass with spaces through light (Fig.2)¹⁶. His decision to return to non-figuration and develop his theories follows his move from Rosario to Buenos Aires in 1944; it indicates he entered an environment that reinvigorates the potential of abstract art.

⁹ Osbel Suárez, “Introduction,” in *Cold America: Geometric Abstraction in Latin America (1934-1973)* (Madrid: Fundacion Juan March, 2011), 6.

¹⁰ Sean Nesselrode Moncada, “Art for Partisan Life: Nonobjectivity Translated to Buenos Aires, 1944–48.” *ICAA Documents Project Working Papers* 3, no. 1 (2013): 3; César Paterneso, “Irregular Frame/Shaped Canvas: Anticipations, Inheritances, Borrowings,” *Cold America*, 39.

¹¹ Carmelo Arden Quin, *Art in Latin America*, 140

¹² Gyula, *Art in Latin America*, 330

¹³ Moncada, “Art for Partisan Life” 6

¹⁴ Pozzie-Harris, *Distruptions*, 66

¹⁵ White, *Utopia*, 63

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 100

When concrete art arrives in Argentina, artists provide a 'critical and transformative' reception¹⁷, which leads to the inventive technique of the cut-through picture plane and the cut-out frame. In Rothfuss's essay, he traces the evolution from naturalism to Postimpressionism, Cubism, Futurism, Neoplasticism, and Constructivism's closest expression of reality¹⁸. Hence, the basis of his critique of the frame is that it perpetuates the illusion that one looks at the world. It fragments paintings and implies continuations. Thus, he proposes 'active' frames whereby the composition's shape determines the structure of its edges. Following this, the painting 'begins and ends with itself'¹⁹; it is self-sufficient. He resolves the contradictions of concrete art in their 'search for greater reality' and 'totality'²⁰. In his Yellow Quadrangle (Fig. 3), he cuts the paper panel 5 millimetres deep to accommodate the extension of the rectangle from the left side. He cuts, colours, and places other quadrangles—black, blue, red, green—and paints black borders, perhaps a tribute to Torres-Garcia²¹.

Rothfuss, through Torres-Garcia, and Fontana, through Madí, are examples of a transnational exchange between artist-theorists that assimilate Latin American avant-garde values with those of Europe. According to Torres-Garcia's diaries, Rothfuss visited his studios nine times from 1943²², where the latter saw sculptures with irregular supports²³. Furthermore, Torres-Garcia shares texts from Mondrian in *Círculo y Cuadrado* and explains van Doesburg's concepts in *La Nación*²⁴. Argentine artists were also privy to narrativisations of the progression towards abstract art in catalogues such as *Cubism and Abstract Art (1936)*²⁵. Rothfuss positions himself in this progression, for he places his works alongside Mondrian and Kandinsky's paintings in his Arturo article (Fig. 4). Specifically, he critiques these transliterations to theorise his inventive technique.

¹⁷ Paternes, *Cold*, 39

¹⁸ Rothfuss, *Art in Latin America*, 329

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Pia, Gottschaller, "Making Art Concrete." In *Making Art Concrete* (Los Angeles, California: The Getty Institute, 2017), 32.

²² Pozzie-Harris, *Disruptions*, 56

²³ Paternes, *Cold*, 35

²⁴ Gottschaller, *Concrete*, 27

²⁵ Moncada, *Partisan*, 6

Fontana is a vector of the European avant-garde and teaches in Buenos Aires at the *Altamira*: Free School of Plastic Arts from 1946: ‘an experimental school for teaching and promoting the art of the present.’²⁶ It is a critical environment that aims to challenge ‘old and new moulds’²⁷. The teachers, such as Pettoruti and Jorge Romero Brest, are vectors of the European avant-garde; however, manifestos, periodicals, and exhibitions are the vectors of the Argentines. He would have been aware of aesthetic debates and inventions that were offshoots from concrete art. Through his connection with Koysice, Fontana organised an exhibition of Madí in October 1946²⁸. He would have seen cut-out frames, articulated paintings, and articulated sculptures. Then, in November 1946, he and his class penned the White Manifesto that theorises Spatialism. In a letter to d’Albisola, he writes ‘There seems to be a great evolution [here].’²⁹ As he begins his manifesto with “WE ARE THE EVOLUTION OF ART”, he is within this discourse he describes.³⁰

Similar to Rothfuss, Fontana argues that there has been a development of ‘idealism’ to ‘materialism’ as abstract art begins to depict ‘existence’ in its ‘concrete forms’³¹; he critiques its success. Though art aims to express true, pure forms, it must evolve to meet ‘the physics of the epoch,’ likely inspired by Einstein’s relativity of space and time. To do so, there must be a ‘new art’ of ‘new forms’ that goes ‘beyond painting, sculpture, and poetry’; it integrates the dimensions of space and time into 4D art³². He situates this art in a lineage of Baroque art, Impressionism, and Futurism, in which motion combines space and time. He insists on the invention of new techniques, technologies, and materials to assist this 4D art³³. His theorisations of invention (technique) for creation (essence) nod to Madí, his criticality to Rothfuss.

Furthermore, the ‘animism’ that both manifestos call for is a trait of Latin American ‘constructivist projects,’ argues Mari Carmen Ramirez³⁴. Their concrete structures are both passive/

²⁶ Giunta, *Threshold*, 45

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Pozzie-Harris, *Disruptions*, 67

²⁹ Fontana, “Letter, 1946”, in Lucio Fontana: Catalogue Raisonné (Milan, Italy: Skira Editore, 2005), 1011.

³⁰ Fontana, *Art in Latin America*, 331

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Ramirez, *Utopias*, 200

objective and active/subjective. She locates it across the avant-garde from Uruguayan Torres-Garcia to Brazilian Neo-Concretists to the Argentinian Madí, in which interplays of lights/shadows and material/immaterial animate make concrete/constructive experiences. The animism occurs in Kosice's Madi Light Structure (Fig. 5): an abstract form made of the bent neon tube that inspires his use of neon arabesques in Spatial Environments. It is a 'Latin American axis'³⁵ of vitalism that connects the otherwise chronologically distant syncretism of Fontana's theory across the Baroque, Futurism, and Madí³⁶.

The (Un)contained Art Object

What are the discrepancies between their theories/praxis or autonomous art objects/their negations? Rothfuss's titles after the pure colours and shapes that extend his frames, 'Three Yellow Circles' or 'Yellow Quadrangle', hone that the art is self-sufficient. However, these names highlight Rothfuss's contribution to the progression of modernist art; they act as signatures of his invention. The importance of innovation perhaps explains a debate in the literature of why Rothfuss—despite likely being inspired formally and theoretically by Torres-Garcia's abstract experiment with irregular planes—made his frames in his first experiments (as shown in Arturo) cut-outs of figurative, cubist works akin to Pettoruti³⁷. Scholars question why, given the resemblance to Torres-Garcia otherwise, Rothfuss did not use non-figuration. It is perhaps that Rothfuss wanted to mature his own cohesive non-figurative language. Thus arises the problematics of a universal, self-referential art: they are within history and genealogy, and audiences must still be trained to comprehend them³⁸.

In addition, the extent to which the art is autonomous is challenged by the protrusions of the painting and its elements. Scholars argue that Rothfuss engages with the debate of the co-planar: Maldonado's proposal that a painted background insinuates an illusion of figure/ground that does not occur if the forms are split into constituent parts that rods hold against the white wall of the gallery³⁹. Hence, Rothfuss perhaps proposes that the shadows of the flatly painted but 3D constituent parts

³⁵ Crispolti, *Threshold*, 64

³⁶ Ramirez, *Utopias*, 5

³⁷ Paternes, *Cold*, 35

³⁸ Robert M Linsley, "Book of Creation"; in *Beyond Resemblance* (London, England: Reaktion Books, 2017), 163.

³⁹ Paternesto, *Cold*, 37

attached to the background dissolve these illusions. However, this questions its autonomy if its caveats are light and shadows.

Whilst there are tensions between praxis and theory, two-and-three-dimensionality, it is a balancing act of modernism's medium-specificity and anti-illusory aims. Fontana, on the other hand, sought to negate the pictorial plane. The title 'Spatial Concepts' encompasses his Holes/Cuts and other series suggesting that he is averse to medium specificity. Unlike Rothfuss, he sought to integrate the art object into space; it is the idea he varies across all his cycles. His use of irregular canvases in *Quanta* (1959) (Fig. 6) sets a series of them on a wall such that the negative space between them becomes a part of a larger composition. Moreover, he conceptualises a specific experience of space as his age of spatial travel and transmission gave rise to it. He sought for forms to *be* space⁴⁰. Furthermore, with an 'inventive capacity' to visualise the future⁴¹, he claims the experience of 4D art is art unbounded by gravity. The horizon line of the extra-terrestrial further defies the perspective of the Renaissance⁴². He imagines a future perspective of infinity without spatial or temporal limitations, beyond material forms and objects.

Acknowledging the impossibility of his theory without total dissolution of the art object, regardless of old or new mediums, he scars traditions of easel paintings to get as close as possible to spatial forms and sensations⁴³. White argues that his Buchi punctures recognisable ovals and circles into the paper such that there is a figure/ground illusion in which the figure is space⁴⁴. However, phenomenologically, immaterial forms occur as projections through backlit Buchi (Fig. 7). With his perforations of canvases, he raises reliefs as shadows, uses Moholy-Nagy's notion of photograms and modulators to use the painting as a means—not an end—to refract and reflect light into compositions on walls⁴⁵. Through photography, he captures endless variations of forms. It is the transmission of light that is the initial institutional context for Buchi. He relegates secondary art objects beneath the primary art effect⁴⁶; it is the interplay of negative/positive and light that activates art. Most of all, the gesture is a

⁴⁰ White, *Utopia*, 205

⁴¹ Crispolti, *Catalogue*, 13

⁴² Stephen Petersen, "Launching the Spatial Movement", in *Space-Age Aesthetics* (Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press, 2009), 70—72

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴⁴ White, *Utopia*, 206

⁴⁵ Peterson, "From Matter to Light: Fontana's 'Spatial Concepts' and Experimental Photography," *Art on Paper* 4, no. 4 (2000): 52.

⁴⁶ Peterson, *Space-Age*, 88.

sign of his aim of its dematerialisation for art to be truly four-dimensional. Hence, he uses a Stanley knife to slice his monochrome canvases into Tagli and places a black gauze on his back to allow to eye to drift into the sublime infinite (Fig. 8)⁴⁷.

Forms of Socialism

Lastly, to what extent does Fontana's gesture, like Rothfuss's forms, reconfigure the European avant-garde with extra-aesthetic aims to engage with the social/political matrix? Madi operated in a context in which a populist, nationalist, militarist leader with inclinations towards German and Italian fascist politics reigns through a coup in 1944 and then an election in 1945⁴⁸. The government promotes regional art that is academic and figurative. They legitimise themselves through the National Salon and modifications of its prize titles as well as its requirements. Moreover, there is an explicit hostile environment towards non-figurative art as a Minister of Education at the National Salon of 1948, declares abstract art as a signifier of 'degradation'.⁴⁹

In 1947, Madí exhibited in Paris at Galeria Van Riel, entering an international art history⁵⁰. However, due to being culturally and geographically isolated, and with Paris still seen as the hub of modern art, the nuance of their desire to enter from 'peripheries' into 'centres' through contributions to universalist art is local.⁵¹

Regarding the materialist aims of the European non-figurative art, they 'reformulate' along Marxist lines 'to suit the realities of their local milieus'.⁵² As AACI, the second faction that split from Madi, argues: scientific art opposes fiction. Relatedly, Madí claims that the role of the invention/creation, and by implication the artist, is to 'construct a classless society'.⁵³ Hence, their autonomous artworks, theoretically free from 'interpretation, 'meaning,' and 'representation,' connect audiences with the realities beneath their false consciousness.⁵⁴ This effect occurs because the representation perpetuates class

⁴⁷ Gottschaller, *Lucio Fontana: The Artist's Materials* (Los Angeles, California: Getty Publications, 2012), 87

⁴⁸ Andrea Giunta, "Modern Art on the Margins of Peronism." In *Avant-Garde, Internationalism, and Politics*. (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007), 26—30.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 39—42

⁵⁰ Moncada, *Parisian*, 13

⁵¹ Natalia Sassu Suarez Ferri, "Carlos Cruz-Diez's Psychchromies: Between Centre and Periphery," *Tate Papers* 32 (2019), <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/32/carlos-cruz-diez-psychchrom>.

⁵² Ramirez, *Inverted Utopias*, x

⁵³ Gyula, *Art in Latin America*, 330

⁵⁴ Pozzie-Harris, *Distruptions*, 141-154

hierarchies due to the pervasive ideologies of oppressive societies and their associative, corruptive ‘concepts, connotations, and feelings.’⁵⁵ Particularly, pure forms resist propaganda, such as idealisations of Peron and his wife, Eva, or the widespread ‘advertisements, brochures, and posters.’⁵⁶

Contrastingly, Fontana operates outside of this milieu during the production of Buchi and Tagli, in Italy, and his art does not exist in an explicit political discourse, perhaps besides the renunciation of classicism after its association with the fascist force. Nonetheless, there is a cultural discourse that implicates capitalism more generally. In his utopian vision, his 4D art (his gesture of space-time) will not be a sellable, consumable object for the bourgeoisie. In his contemporary context, the Informel movement popularised the gesture as resistance towards the alienation of industrialisation, for it signifies the creator’s spontaneity and individuality⁵⁷. However, the critical discourse of the time found the Informel self-expressive gesture to become mechanical and commercialised - a critique by the Against Style manifesto signees, of which Yves Klein is one. With awareness of this discourse, White argues that Fontana’s Tagli coopts this current state of the gesture and treads the liminalities between the handmade gesture and the art market’s culture of commercialisation: indicative of a body and a style. He presents the gesture of the author on the brink of disappearance. Hence White argues that Fontana’s gesture is a critical attitude towards modernist myths of the artist’s significance through an ambivalent attitude towards ‘mechanised, commercialised art.’⁵⁸

Conclusion

This paper implies that Fontana’s exchanges with the Argentinian avant-garde should not be neglected by scholars of his Spatial Concepts, for his theories arise from a Latin American discourse centred around artist-theorists in 1940s Buenos Aires who interrogate the concepts of 1930s European concrete art to contribute to the evolution of the avant-garde. Hence, to understand his preoccupations and his decision to formalise them into a turn in his oeuvre, this paper has given an account of the qualities of Latin American art, such as experimentation, extra-aesthetic function, synthesis, and animism, as well as the highly local historical conditions of an avant-garde socially and internationally on the margins, which seeks to find a place in the centre of aesthetic debate through an iconoclastic dialectic. Finding

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ White, *Utopia*, 235

⁵⁸ Ibid, 245.

European art through local transnational vectors, they critique it and find inventive ways to destroy Alberti's window. Nonetheless, this paper also accounts for the disharmony between theories and praxis, the logic of aesthetic autonomy and the poetic of a future space-time phenomenology. Further research into the likenesses between Fontana and other Latin American artist-theorists will illuminate more transnational exchanges of (extra-)aesthetic values and the innovations that arise from this.

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Illustrations



(Figure 1) Lucio Fontana, *Scultura astratta* (*Abstract Sculpture*), 1934, Hauser & Wirth



(Figure 2) Lucio Fontana, *Crocifisso (detail)*, 1948, Polychrome ceramics, 42 x 27 x 11.5 cm



Figure 3) Rhod Rothfuss, *Yellow Quadrangle*, 1955, Museum of Modern Art, New York

En este momento, cuando más lejos parece que está el artista de la naturaleza, Vicente Huidobro dirá: "Nunca el hombre ha estado más cerca de la naturaleza, que ahora que no trata de imitarla en sus apariencias, sino haciendo como ella, imitándola en lo profundo de sus leyes constructivas, en la realización de un todo dentro del mecanismo de la producción de formas nuevas."

Pero, mientras se solucionaba el problema de la creación plástica, pura, la misma solución (por un principio dialéctico inquebrantable) creaba otro, que se siente menos en el neoplasticismo y en el constructivismo, por su composición ortogonal, que en el cubismo o en el no-objetivismo, y fué: *el marco*.

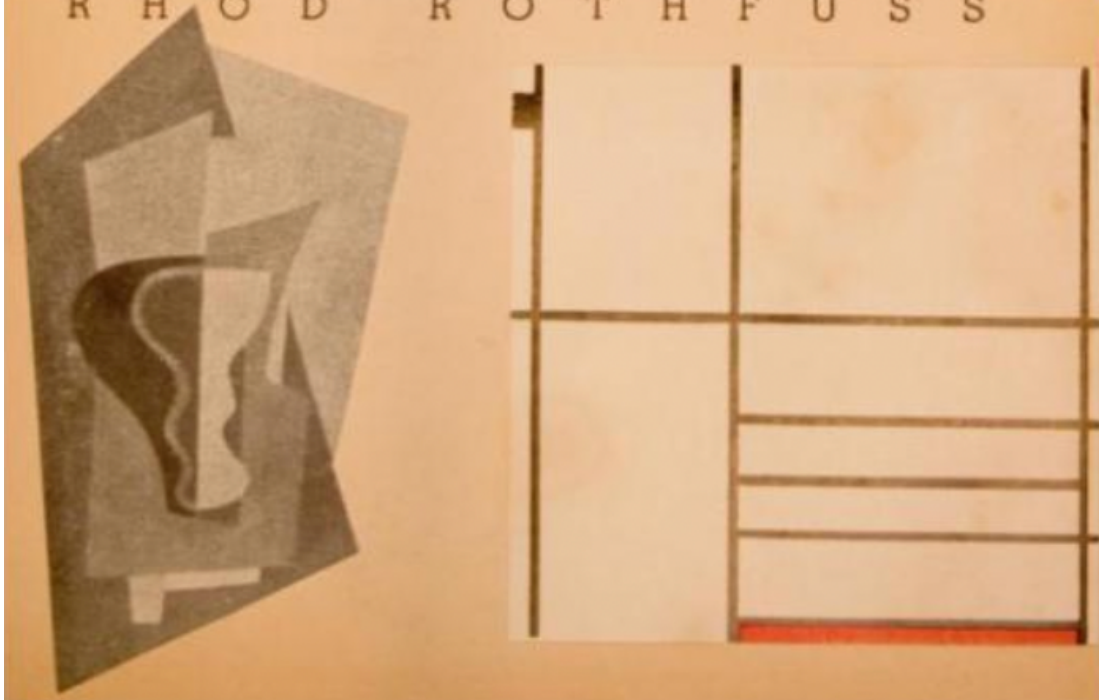
El cubismo y el no objetivismo, por sus composiciones basadas, ya en ritmos de líneas oblicuas, ya en figuras triangulares o poligonales, se crearon a sí mismos el problema de que un marco rectangular, cortaba el desarrollo plástico del tema. El cuadro, inevitablemente, quedaba reducido a un fragmento.

Pronto se intuye esto. Y los cuadros muestran las soluciones buscadas. Por ejemplo MAN RAY, LÉGER, BRAQUE y más cerca nuestro, el cubista de otoño Pettoruti, entre otros, componen algunas de sus obras en círculos, elipses o polígonos, que inscriben en el cuadrilongo del marco. Pero esto no es tampoco una solución. Porque, precisamente es lo regular de esas figuras, el contorno ininterrumpido, simétrico, lo que domina la composición, cortándola.

Es por esto que la generalidad de esos cuadros siguieron en aquel concepto de *ventana* de los cuadros naturalistas, dándonos una parte del tema pero no la totalidad de él. Una pintura con un marco regular hace presentir una continuidad del tema, que sólo desaparece, cuando el marco está rigurosamente estructurado de acuerdo a la composición de la pintura.

Vale decir, cuando se hace jugar al borde de la tela, un papel activo en la creación plástica. Papel que debe tenerlo siempre. Una pintura debe ser algo que empiece y termine en ella misma. Sin solución de continuidad.

R H O D R O T H F U S S



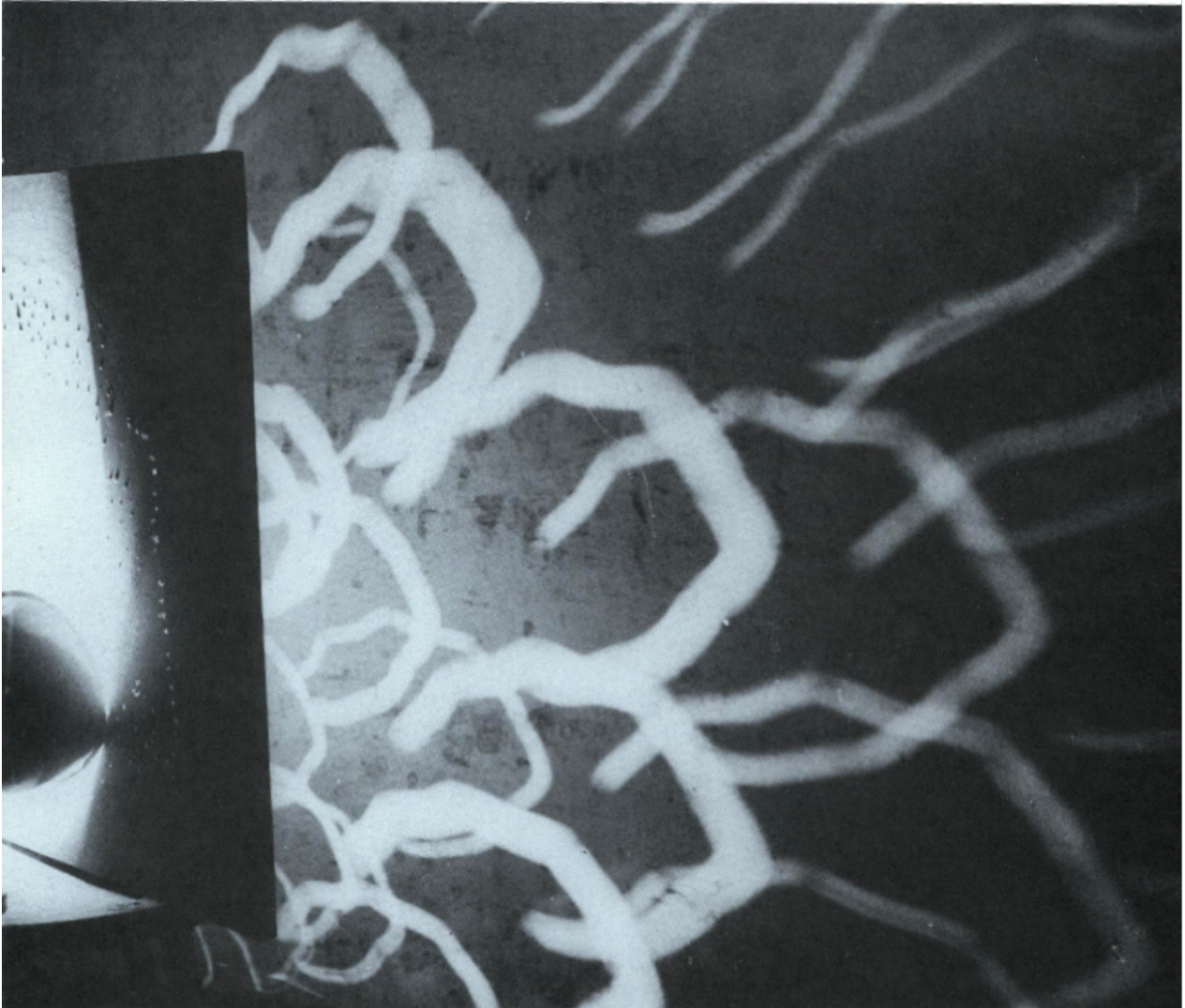
(Figure 4) Rhod Rothfuss, El marco:: un problema de plástica actual, 1944, scan by ICAA



(Figure 5) Gyula Kosice, *Luminescent Madi Structure No. 6*, 1946, neon gas, Plexiglas, wood box, the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Texas



Figure 6) Lucio Fontana, *Spatial Concept (Quanta)*, 1960, Water-based paint, holes, and cuts on canvas



(Figure 7) Lucio Fontana, *Spatial Concept (Buchi)*, oil on pierced paper, 1951-52



(Figure 8) Lucio Fontana, *Spatial Concept. Waiting*, 1966, Water-based paint on canvas with cuts. 169.5 x 117.5 x 7cm. Collection Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam