

INTROSPECTIVE MAGAZINE



EDITOR'S PICK

'Blah, Blah, Blah.' Mel Bochner Tells Us about a Very Cool Museum Show He Curated

The American conceptual artist has organized an exhibition of his works together with those of post-war Italian talents Alighiero Boetti and Lucio Fontana at the Hudson Valley's Magazzino Italian Art space.

by Ted Loos | November 15, 2020

Discovering surprising artistic crosscurrents and unexpected connections among works of art is part of the enjoyment of museum going. Of course, these days, after months of lockdown, just walking in the door of an art-filled building is a revitalizing pleasure.

As cultural institutions come back to life this fall, one of those edifying exhibitions that makes us see art and visual culture afresh is on view now through January 11 at Magazzino Italian Art, a relatively new museum housed in a sleekly contemporary concrete-and-glass building, designed by Spanish architect Miguel Quismondo, just 60 miles up the Hudson River from Manhattan, in Cold Spring, New York. Titled “Bochner Boetti Fontana,” it features three legendary artists: one American and two Italian.

Leaf peeping may be past its peak in the Hudson Valley, but art is in full flower, and this is your chance to drink it in, whether you drive or take Metro-North, on a route that hugs the river with spectacular views.

Organized by the American conceptual artist

Mel Bochner, the show is small and powerful, comprising 17 works. Seven of them, a varied group including paintings and sculptures, are by Bochner. The artist cleverly juxtaposed these pieces with ones by two stars of post-war Italian art: Alighiero Boetti (1940–94) was a key figure of Arte Povera — the 1960s and ’70s movement of “plain” or “poor” art that is essentially an Italian branch of conceptualism ; he is represented here by five works, each in a different material but all grid-based. And Lucio Fontana (1899–1968), a founder of Spatialism who was later famed for his slashed-canvas paintings, has five works on display, each of them exemplifying his ability to grab the viewer with bold visual gestures.



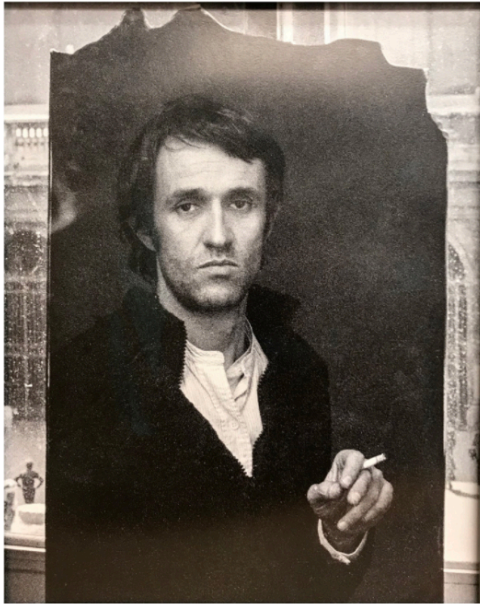
The exhibition “Bochner Boetti Fontana,” on view through January 2011 at Magazzino Italian Art in New York’s Hudson Valley, displays works by American conceptual artist Mel Bochner, who curated the show, as well as Italian artists Alighiero Boetti, a founder of the Arte Povera movement, and Lucio Fontana, a founder of Spatialism. Top: From left, Fontana’s *Io Sono un Santo*, 1958; Boetti’s *Tavola pitagorica*, 1990 (top); and Bochner’s *Blah, Blah, Blah*, 2009 (bottom), *Language Is Not Transparent (Italian / English)*, 1970/2019, and *Measurement: 12 inches Between* 1999. All photos by Alexa Hoyer, courtesy of Magazzino Italian Art Foundation, unless otherwise noted



Thanks to its layered mix of European and American sensibilities, the show “goes beyond any sort of provincial sense of national origin,” says Bochner, seen here in Rome in 1985. Photo by Lizbeth Marano

The Boettis come from Giorgio Spanu and Nancy Olnick, the husband-and-wife collectors who founded Magazzino three years ago as a showplace for their trove of Arte Povera–focused Italian art. The Fontanas are on loan from the Fondazione Fontana and private collectors; Bochner supplied his own works.

The show “is not about compare and contrast, which I despise,” says Bochner, 80, who is perhaps most famous for his witty text-painting series that plays with the phrase “Blah Blah Blah.” Instead, he continues, “it’s about hopefully taking a viewer on some kind of journey and seeing works that speak to each other.” As you might expect from an artist who paints with words, he doesn’t mince them.



Bochner met Boetti (left) in 1970, when they were shown together in Turin, Italy. "While we were very different, there were some conceptual relationships in terms of systems, series, repetition and common materials," Bochner says of the dialogue between their works (photo by Gianfranco Gorgoni). As for his thoughts on Fontana (right, with a work from his series "I Quanta"), Bochner recalls being shocked — in a good way — by the Italian's slashed-canvas paintings when he first saw them, in 1961, at Pittsburgh's Carnegie International exhibition (photo courtesy of Fondazione Lucio Fontana).

The opening work is Fontana's 1960 *Concetto Spaziale, Quanta*, composed of an array of painting fragments whose deep red color echoes Bochner's *Measurement: 12 Inches Between*, a red rectangle with a small square cut out of its center and a white square the size of the missing piece placed to its side.

The blue grid of Bochner's *Counting: 24 Trajectories* (1997) plays off the orange of Fontana's classic 1959 slash painting *Concetto Spaziale, Attese* (Space Concept, Waits), displayed next to it.

Bochner says he hasn't curated a show since 1966, when he put together the pioneering "Working Drawings and Other Visible Things on Paper Not Necessarily Meant to be Viewed as Art" at the School of Visual Arts in New York.



With its contemporary concrete-and-glass building, designed by Spanish architect Miguel Quismondo and opened just three years ago, Magazzino seems an especially apt home for this show. The institution, dedicated to Italian art and located in the Hudson Valley, was founded by an American, Nancy Olnick, and an Italian, Giorgio Spanu, a married couple whose own collection focuses on Arte Povera. Photo by Montse Zamorano

“It was an exhibition of books of xeroxed copies of other artists’ works,” he says. “And it’s sometimes considered the first work of conceptual art.”

The Magazzino show does have a more recent antecedent, however. A few years ago, Bochner collaborated with gallerist David Totah, who has a space on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, on an exhibition of his works and Boetti’s.

“It had Boetti’s embroideries, which have text and color, and my paintings on velvet, which have text and color,” says Bochner. “David thought that was a really interesting juxtaposition, and it turns out to be so.”

The roots of Bochner’s interest in the two late, great Italian artists goes way back, to when Bochner was a student at the Carnegie Institute of Technology, in Pittsburgh, and saw Fontana’s radical work at the 1961 Carnegie International exhibition.

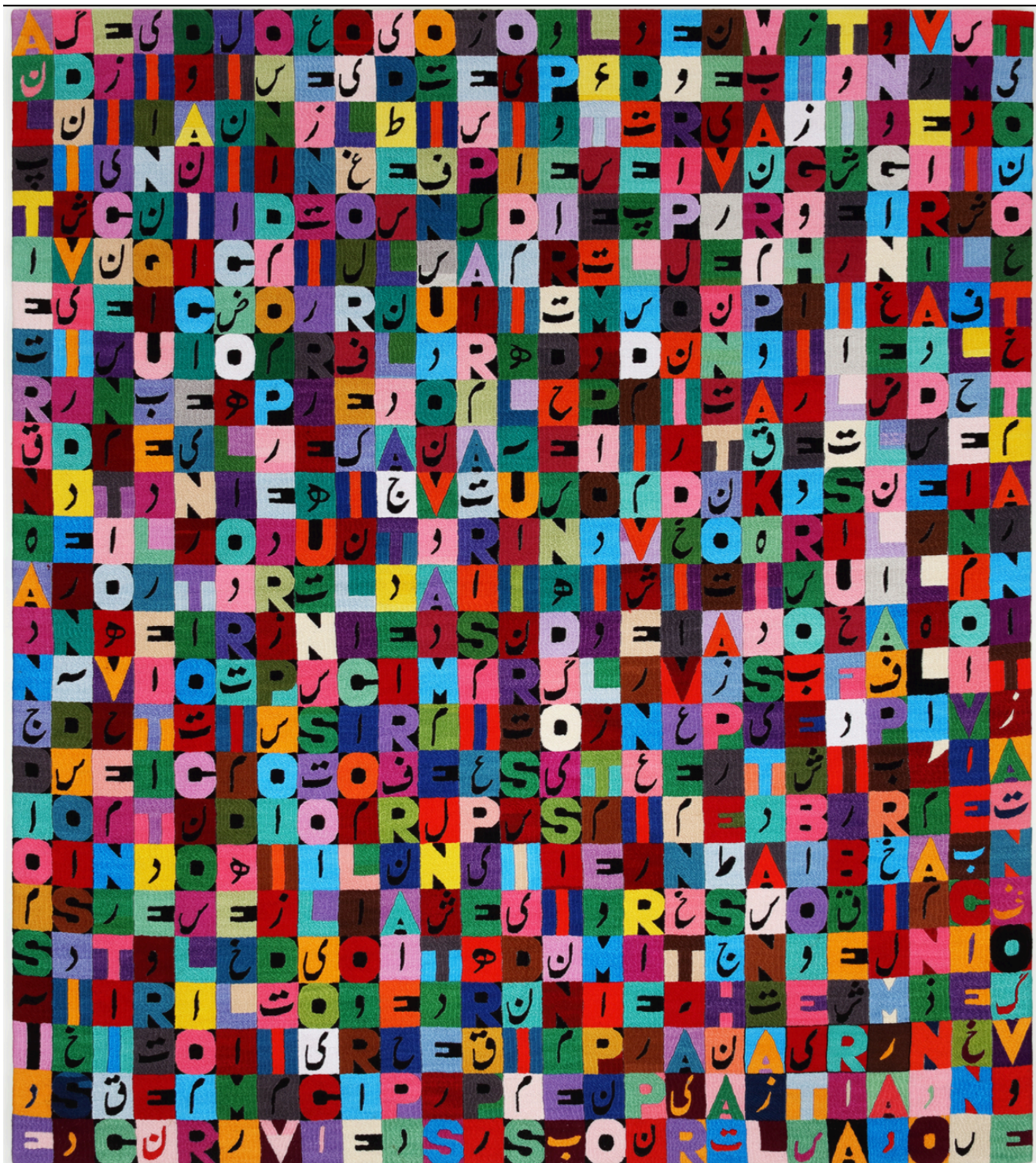


The show "is not about compare and contrast, which I despise," says Bochner. Instead, "it's about hopefully taking a viewer on some kind of journey and seeing works that speak to each other."

"At the time, nothing surprised me — not Willem de Kooning, not Franz Kline, not Robert Motherwell," says Bochner, citing some of the cutting-edge Abstract Expressionist painters of the day. "But in the last room, there was a large canvas, slashed down the center, and I was just shocked. And I went up to the guard and said, 'Listen, somebody just slashed that painting in there.' He laughed and said, 'Everybody thinks that, but the artist slashed it himself.' And I went, 'Really? Why would he do that?' That was my first Fontana experience."

Bochner met Boetti in 1970, when they were shown together in Turin, Italy.

"While we were very different, there were some conceptual relationships in terms of systems, series, repetition and common materials," Bochner says of the dialogue between his work and Boetti's. "He and I were on a similar wavelength. And also I appreciated what I took to be his humor. He was a funny guy."



Boetti completed his *Alternandosi e dividendosi*, an embroidery on fabric, in 1989. Photo by Marco Anelli, courtesy of the Olnick Spanu Collection

Arte Povera — which often used humble materials to offer a thoughtful look at immigration and nationality, as well as a critique of postwar Italian society — wasn't exactly known as a laugh-a-minute movement. But Bochner's take on Boetti reveals the levels of sophistication that imbue the works of the three artists in the show, all of whom deftly surf the line between humor and seriousness.

"They share a sense of irony," says Olnick. She and Spanu met Bochner a couple years ago at a gallery dinner, and they quickly hit it off. Soon, they began hatching a plan for this Magazzino show.



"What I love about Arte Povera is that it wants the viewer to become part of the work," says Olnick, "and you can see a clear connection to that in this show." On the back wall are, from left, Boetti's *Alternandosi e dividendosi*, 1989; Fontana's *Concetto Spaziale, Attese*, 1959; and Bochner's *Counting: 24 Trajectories*, 1997.

Measurement — with the deeper meaning of how we assess the world around us — is a theme that crops up again and again in the art on view. It's also a concept vividly present to visitors here these days, as Magazzino uses technology to enforce social distancing in the age of Covid-19:

Museumgoers must wear lanyards attached to buzzers that vibrate if they come within six feet of anyone else's.



Bochner's *Meditation on the Theorem of Pythagoras*, 1972/1993, is a floor sculpture comprising rows of petite pieces of colored Murano glass, a nod to Italy and its influence. Olnick and Spanu also collect Murano.

The use and meaning of text are also explored in the works on display. Among these is the Fontana work *Io Sono un Santo* (1958), thought to be his first punctured canvas, which contains the title phrase, meaning “I am a saint,” in graphic script on a neutral background, with a less legible “non” (“not”), inserted after “Io.” Not far away, Boetti's *Tavola pitagorica* (1990), with its grid of letters, evokes the stacked words of Bochner's *Blah, Blah, Blah* (2009).

The playful and inventive side of Bochner that comes out in that work is also evident in his floor sculpture *Meditation on the Theorem of Pythagoras* (1972/1993), comprising rows of small, smooth chunks of Murano glass in a rainbow of colors, a nod to Italy and its influence. (Olnick and Spanu happen to collect Murano, too.)



Fontana's *lo Sono un Santo* is thought to be the first canvas he slashed.

Through its complex mixing of European and American sensibilities, the show “goes beyond any sort of provincial sense of national origin,” says Bochner. It’s a cosmopolitanism that suits Magazzino — a museum of Italian art in the Hudson Valley, founded by an American (Olnick) and an Italian (Spanu) — perfectly.

Viewing the exhibition, you’ll find yourself engaged with these works even as they retain their conceptual mystery — they draw you in quietly but firmly. As Olnick puts it, “What I love about Arte Povera is that it wants the viewer to become part of the work, and you can see a clear connection to that in this show.” ■