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Art Beyond the Globe: Lucio Fontana's Spatial Identity

Abstract

In several works produced in the 1950s and 60s, the Argentine-Italian artist Lucio Fontana (1899 – 1968) proposed that the advent of space travel would lead to a profound decentring of human identity. In this article selected works by Fontana are discussed with reference to statements made by the artist and his contemporary critics as well as to more recent, theoretical writings on space and the body. It is argued that Fontana put forward in his work the idea that travel through outer space would render the image of the modern subject unrecognisable.

From his local base in Milan, the Argentine-Italian artist Lucio Fontana (1899 – 1968) created a post-global art for the era of interplanetary space travel. In several works produced in the 1950s and 1960s Fontana proposed that the advent of regular travel through outer space would have major consequences for the traditional notion of the art object and the conventional, humanist model of the self. In this paper, I discuss several works in Fontana's career and interpret them by examining statements made by the artist and his critics in the light of theoretical writings on space and the body by Giorgio Agamben, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guatarri, and Anthony Vidler. As I argue, Fontana was deeply inspired by the fantasy of space travel. However, he also believed that the technology making such travel possible, and the profound decentring of human identity it would bring about, would render the image of the modern subject virtually unrecognisable.

Scholarship on Fontana has rarely considered the relationship between his work of the 1950s and 1960s and the advent of space travel. Until recently, most studies have avoided this question and interpreted the artist's punctured and slashed canvases of this period as an 'action-based art' situated somewhere between abstract painting and performance.¹ The two most significant exceptions to this are Sarah Whitfield's essay 'Handling Space,' (1999), and Stephen Petersen's PhD thesis, 'Space and the Space Age in Postwar European Art: Lucio Fontana, Yves Klein, and their Contemporaries' (2001). Petersen, who is concerned with the years 1947 – 1953, argues that Fontana's interest in space travel was part of a strategy to ensure his success in the market by drawing on the popular fascination with space travel.² Whitfield sees Fontana's cut and gouged paintings of the early to mid 1960s as representing the deeply cratered surface of the moon and the physical and mental pain experienced by the astronaut.³ My interpretation differs from these two studies in that my principal focus is the work produced during the late 1950s and 1960s, and, rather than seeing Fontana as focused primarily on the destination of space travel or on the experience of those who undertake such journeys, I view Fontana's work as reflecting upon the implications of this phenomenon for the self image of those remaining on earth.

1. Schimmel, 1998, p. 18.

2. Petersen, 2001, pp. 33 – 102.

3. Whitfield, 1999, pp. 44, 46.



Fig. 1. Lucio Fontana, *Spatial Environment*, 1949. Papier mâché, fluorescent paint and ultraviolet light, lost or destroyed [Reconstruction 1976]. Milan, Lucio Fontana Foundation. (Courtesy Fondazione Lucio Fontana.)

Lucio Fontana began his career as a sculptor in Argentina in the 1920s and made a variety of sculptural works in several different materials throughout the 1930s and 40s. However, after transferring to Milan in the later 1940s his practice began to change and he shifted from discrete sculptural objects to installations involving electric light, in a development that he described as 'spatial art'. In the first example of this new art, Fontana designed an architectural installation in 1949 titled *Spatial Environment* [Fig. 1]. The work was made of papier-mâché and coated with fluorescent paint, hung from the ceiling of a darkened room, and then bombarded with ultraviolet light in a manner that caused the fluorescent paint to glow. In justifying this change from sculpture to installation art, Fontana frequently argued that conventional forms of art would soon cease to exist, a fact he connected to a world transformed by the phenomenon of space travel. As he argued in 1949, 'I assure you that on the moon no-one will make paintings, but they will make spatial art.'⁴ In 1962 he would clarify this idea. 'One day we will go up in space ships, with little paintings under our arms, but then on what walls will we hang them?'⁵ The following year he reiterated this point:

Think about when there are big space stations. Do you think that the men of the future will build columns with capitals there? Or that they will call painters to paint? ... No, art, as it is thought of today, will end.⁶

4. Fontana, 1949, p. 248. This and all subsequent translations from the Italian are the author's.

5. Nozza, 1962, p. 30.

6. Rossi, 1963, p. 50.

In an era of moon walks, space ships and space stations, conventional art works or architecture would be redundant.

Fontana initially believed that installation was the most appropriate art form for this new era. Installation was a relatively new development, disconnected from the past, in the same manner that space travel itself was new. However, he soon began to argue that a truly spatial art would have to be fully integrated with the empty space around it. This meant that no object whatsoever, even an object which formed part of a broader architectural complex, would accord with the new spatial era.⁷ Spatial art, he began to realise, could only be arrays of light broadcast via television. Not only would such a work no longer be an object, it would have no specific locality: through the use of television, for example, he aimed to 'have an exhibition simultaneously in New York, Milan, Berlin, the whole world over, to transmit forms.' Fontana wanted to create, in other words, a truly global work of art.⁸ Going beyond even this trans-national vision, he also anticipated that spatial art would be transmitted to aeroplanes and missiles, devices either circling the globe, floating in space, or exiting the planet's atmosphere and leaving the earth behind.

Fontana quickly discovered that there were several practical obstacles to realising this vision of spatial art. He therefore adopted another approach and began painting for the first time in his career. This turn to painting may seem surprising given his disdain for traditional art forms. However, initially these new works of the early 1950s were not conventional paintings in any sense of the word. They involved several unusual techniques, including punctures into the canvas, and lights installed behind the works projecting light out into the room beyond the work. In this way, Fontana continued the idea of transmitting light put forward in his original idea of spatial art. Even when he ceased using special lighting devices for his punctured and cut canvases of the later 1950s and 1960s, these works satisfied one definition of spatial art – they presented a form made of space within the painting. However, the principal relationship of these later works to spatial art and the era of space travel was their ability to refer to an art form yet to arrive. As Fontana explained in 1962, 'the hole is the beginning of a sculpture in space.'⁹ It was for this reason that Fontana titled his paintings *Spatial Concept: Expectations* - they were the beginning of a type of work which he expected would be realised in the future.

This return to painting certainly did not prevent critics from connecting his work to the phenomenon of space travel. In 1955 Giampiero Giani underscored the relationship between the punctured paintings and recent discoveries of science. Citing Fontana's interest in the fragmentation, rapidity and complexity of modern life, Giani explained the artist's concept of space in the following manner:

7. Fontana, 1951-1952.

8. Fontana, 1972, p. 164.

9. Pancera, 1962.

The term space does not refer to a space around something... but rather corresponds to the revelations that science has offered to the imaginations of men. A barbarian inspires and influences this modern life, ready to depart from our planet, weighing heavily upon those feelings that up until yesterday had helped us to live ... The anti-artistic ... The end of cultured art.¹⁰

For Giani the punctured paintings demonstrated that the future of art, and the human-centred world of affect that such art was traditionally created to address, were severely threatened by the cultural indifference of the scientific endeavour that had led to space exploration.

This theme of the conquest of space as something inherently problematic rather than simply utopian would develop more explicitly in Fontana's work and thought in the 1960s. In that period the artist began to argue that the rapid pace of technological change had necessitated a shift away from traditional art and the conventional image of the self:

The man of today... is too lost in a dimension that is immense for him, is too oppressed by the triumphs of science, is too dismayed by the inventions that follow one after the other, to recognize himself in figurative painting. What is wanted is an absolutely new language.¹¹

In blaming feelings of disorientation, fear and depression on the advent of new technology and a related sensation of sheer physical magnitude, Fontana's thinking was aligned with that of other twentieth-century writers, artists and architects for whom the experience of space in modernity is the cause of psychopathology. As Anthony Vidler has shown in his book *Warped Space*, Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin insisted on the painful psychological experiences brought about by the twentieth-century metropolis. In the view of these German critics, in the modern city individuals undergo the dissolution of familiar notions of place and their replacement with a disorienting, flattened space which allows for no particularized or local viewpoint.¹² For Fontana a similar experience of spatial anguish was related not to actual journeys through metropolitan space but rather imagined voyages into the space beyond the globe.

In the 1960s, for example, the artist frequently described the astronaut, an individual who lives far away from the natural origins of human life, as undergoing discomfort and terror in the nothingness of outer space. In an interview of 1963, for example, he noted that, 'Man has embarked on the conquest of space, but he is only at the beginning and before the infinite he feels dismayed, lost' adding that 'Man has fear of space; he feels a physical pain from it.'¹³ Many of his violently gouged sculptures and paintings were an attempt to give visual form to this experience, and to provoke reflection upon the ramifications of space travel for the self-image of those who, unlike the astronaut, remain behind on our planet.

In 1959, Fontana began a series of sculptures titled *Spatial Concept: Nature*. Forming large clods of terracotta into crudely shaped balls, Fontana wounded them with a variety

10. Giani, 1955, pp. 128–129.

11. Livi, 1962, p. 52.

12. Vidler, 2000, pp. 72, 77-78.

13. Rossi, 1963, p. 50.

of different openings. The following year he began casting the same works in bronze [Fig. 2]. These sculptures, which resemble enormous, over-ripe fruit, strongly engage with the viewer's experience of the body. When standing close to these colossal balls of mud or metal, their torn-open holes yawn ominously at the viewer. By literally opening up his sculptures Fontana created a profoundly visceral relationship between the work of art and the viewer's body. However, this relationship was anything but affirming of the viewer's sense of self.



Fig. 2. Lucio Fontana, *Spatial Concept: Nature*, 1959 – 1960. Bronze, 67 x 80 cm. Rome, Private collection. (Courtesy Fondazione Lucio Fontana.)

While the motif of the hole takes on an undeniably female connotation in these works, many of the openings are as anal as they are genital. Moreover, it is worth pointing out that in interviews Fontana was fond of calling these works his 'balls'.¹⁴ This ambivalent quality is an important aspect of the viewer's experience. Contemporary reviewers pointed out the 'primordial carnality' of the *Nature* series, drawing attention to their resemblance to burst-open figs and the fat buttocks of ancient female fertility figures.¹⁵

14. Venturoli, 1966, pp. 49, 54.

15. Dorfles, 1960, p. 38; L. C., 1961, p. 21; Argan, 1960, p. 287.

However, critics also saw a heterogeneous range of things in these works. Toni Toniato described them as 'Balls of fire and earth, artificial meteorites, gigantic pods, monstrous and sacred in their fecund inscrutability.' Luce Hoctin saw them simply as 'enigmatic presences' which provoked him to ask whether they were 'sculptures, spheres, creatures?' Marcello Venturoli, noting their 'menacing vitality between vegetable and animal' and their uneven surface, which made it appear as if they were breathing in and out, compared them to monsters and man-eating sharks. In one of the more peculiar images evoked by these works, Eduoard Roditi called them 'the world's biggest, heaviest and most indigestible doughnuts.'¹⁶ From this sample of critical comments, it is clear that the *Nature* sculptures had an unstable and unsettling significance for the viewer. In fact, for all their potential to evoke physical union, the respective role and position of viewer and object in that imagined intercourse is far from certain. Simultaneously organ and orifice, devourer and digested, these objects are just as likely to make the viewer feel consumed by – or gag on – these things as to fulfil any dream of erotic consummation. For all their appeal to the sexual body, that appeal is also deeply threatening of the viewer's own sense of self. To appreciate fully this troubling element of the works, we need to listen to Fontana's own commentary.

In his initial descriptions of the *Nature* series, in a theme that was to become central to his thought in the 1960s, Fontana stressed the concept of 'nothingness'. In a letter to Jef Verheyen in 1961, he noted that 'I will show a group of sculptures ... they are a group of balls in terracotta, with cuts and holes, I love them very much, they are nothingness [*il nulla*] or the beginning of everything.'¹⁷ We might find ourselves readily agreeing with the artist when he argues that these works are at the beginning of something, as they appear to speak to the origins of organic life itself. But in what sense might we consider them to be 'nothingness?'

For Fontana, these works would address that question in two distinct senses. The first sense is connected to the artist's long-standing ambition to break down the distinction between the art object and empty space. As Fontana wrote in letter to a colleague, he was acutely aware that these works appeared to contradict his previous ambition to produce a spatial art, in the sense that they possess a formidable sense of solid form.¹⁸ However, as he later argued, this return to massiveness was a dialectical strategy: it emphasised the complete opposite of mass. As he explained,

it wasn't, really, wanting to make volume in a new form ... you know, volume ... matter, human body ... it was this form of nothing, broken, given life by a blow, but it was truly the desire to construct a volume from nothing, to value a nothing, with a form, with a hole.¹⁹

For Fontana what was important about the ball shape was not so much its potential for organic metaphor but rather its capacity to be a non-form – an aesthetic non-entity.

16. Toniato, 1961, pp. 54, 56; Hoctin, 1961; Venturoli, 1960; Roditi, 1962, p. 64.

17. Campiglio, 1996, p. 192.

18. Campiglio, 1996, p. 193.

19. Lonzi, 1969, p. 388.

Then Fontana gave this nothing an empty space, breaking the ball's shell, opening it to the environment and the spectator. In this rupturing of the ball with a gash or hole, 'nothing' has been added to a non-form; thus it remains form-less. As Georges Bataille first proposed in his definition of this term, and Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois have argued in their subsequent work on Bataille, the formless is that which confounds categories, or, more precisely, exists 'beneath' the idea of category itself.²⁰ Bois has also maintained that Fontana's post-war artwork should be seen as an instance of Bataille's 'base materialism' that obstinately refuses the sublimatory tendency within high modernism.²¹ I would argue further with regard to Fontana's *Nature* series that it is precisely because of the tendency of these works to elude categories and their resistance to sublimation that viewers' reactions to them were profoundly anxious. Indeed, their capacity to dwell imaginatively both inside and outside the body is directly related to this formless character. As J.-A. França argued, these sculptures evoked 'a space beyond space, an interior space, dark, mysterious.'²² Simultaneously 'out there' and 'in here', the *Nature* sculptures subvert our existing categories of form, space and personal identity. Giorgio Agamben has argued that,

Things are not outside of us, in measurable external space, like neutral objects (*ob-jecta*) of use and exchange; rather, they open to us the original place solely from which the experience of measurable external space becomes possible. They are therefore held and comprehended from the outset in the *topos outopos* (placeless place, no place-place) in which our experience of being-in-the-world is situated.²³

Like Agamben's description of the concept of 'thing', the *Nature* sculptures are deeply hostile to our inherited notion of physical identity with its strict boundaries between interior and exterior, subject and object. They demonstrate that space is a matter of the boundaries of our bodies breaking down in relation to the objects around us.

Above I argued that these sculptures would come to signify nothingness in two senses for the artist. The first sense was their formless quality; the second, equally a source of anxiety for the viewer, was their dual evocation of infinity and mortality. In an interview recorded in 1967 Fontana described the genesis of the *Nature* sculptures in his fantasy of a lunar landing:

I thought about these worlds, about the moon with ... these holes, this awful silence that makes us anxious, and the astronauts in a new world ... And now ... these immense things that have been there for millions of years ... man arrives, in a mortal silence, in this deep anxiety.²⁴

In a similarly revealing interview published in 1966, the artist made an explicit connection between this conception of the *Nature* sculptures and his contemporary painting:

20. Bataille, 1985, p. 31; Bois and Krauss, 2000, p. 18.

21. Bois, 1989, p. 243.

22. França, 1961, p. 45.

23. Agamben, 1993, p. 59.

24. Lonzi, 1969, p. 389.

Man goes to these worlds and finds them empty. Huge, uninhabited chunks of minerals. We arrive and understand this anguish, these isolated balls ... Now there are people who recognize that the hole, in the sense of the void, nothing, made by subtraction from the canvas, can say a great deal.²⁵

This interpretation of the *Nature* series provoked one contemporary critic to envisage them as 'dead planet[s]'.²⁶ These comments show that the artist related these works to the dead wasteland of earth's satellite, with its environment completely hostile to biological life, and its cold isolation in the infinite expanse of space. Moreover, as these works lead the viewer to experience the boundaries between the human body, objects and space as uncertain, when Fontana linked his sculptures to the isolation and morbidity of far-flung planets he was able to suggest something disturbing about our earth-bound existence: when compared to the infinity of space and time, the mortal body would, like the moon, come to resemble a dead, used-up shell.

Fontana would address similar issues in his 1960s paintings. In the period between the first exhibition of the *Nature* sculptures and the interviews cited above from the later 1960s, Fontana had embarked on a new type of painting, related to his earlier punctured works. These belong to the series titled *Spatial Concept: The End of God* [Fig. 3]. A group of thirty-eight works, executed between 1963 and 1964, which were painted on ovoid canvases of identical dimensions, all 178 centimetres high, the height of the average Italian male in the 1960s. Fontana covered each painting in a uniform coat of stridently coloured oil paint. This, in combination with the unusual format, unified the picture surface and drew attention to the whole canvas as a physical object, which stood in a reciprocal relationship to the viewer's body. Moreover, as with the *Nature* sculptures, the shape of these works was redolent of organic forms such as eggs, which strongly promoted a bodily connotation.

In one sense these works correspond to the concept of the 'body without organs' formulated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Anti Oedipus* in 1972. In contrast to the conventional notion of the self and the body put forward in psychoanalysis, caught in the narrowly conceived drama of the Oedipal triangle, Deleuze and Guattari propose an organless body, one that has escaped its putative role in the structures of family and authority that would contain and limit its energies. This body, similar to that encountered in the language of certain schizophrenic writers and patients, has a unique morphology:

The body without organs is an egg ... nothing here is representative; rather all is live and lived experience: the actual lived emotion ... Nothing but bands of intensity, potentials, thresholds, and gradients. A harrowing, emotionally overwhelming experience, which brings the schizo as close as possible to matter, to a burning, living center of matter.²⁷

The concept of the organless body put forward in this critique of psychoanalysis is an egg in the sense that it escapes pre-existing, authoritarian structures of desire by allowing the body's energy to stream uninterrupted across its uniform surface. Fontana's brightly coloured, egg-shaped canvases have many affinities with this conception of the body, in

25. Venturoli, 1966, p. 54.

26. Venturoli, 1966, p. 54.

27. Deleuze and Guattari, 2004, p. 21.

that while they mirror the size, frontality and verticality of the body's image they lack the anatomical structures that would lend order to an otherwise undifferentiated zone of vitality.

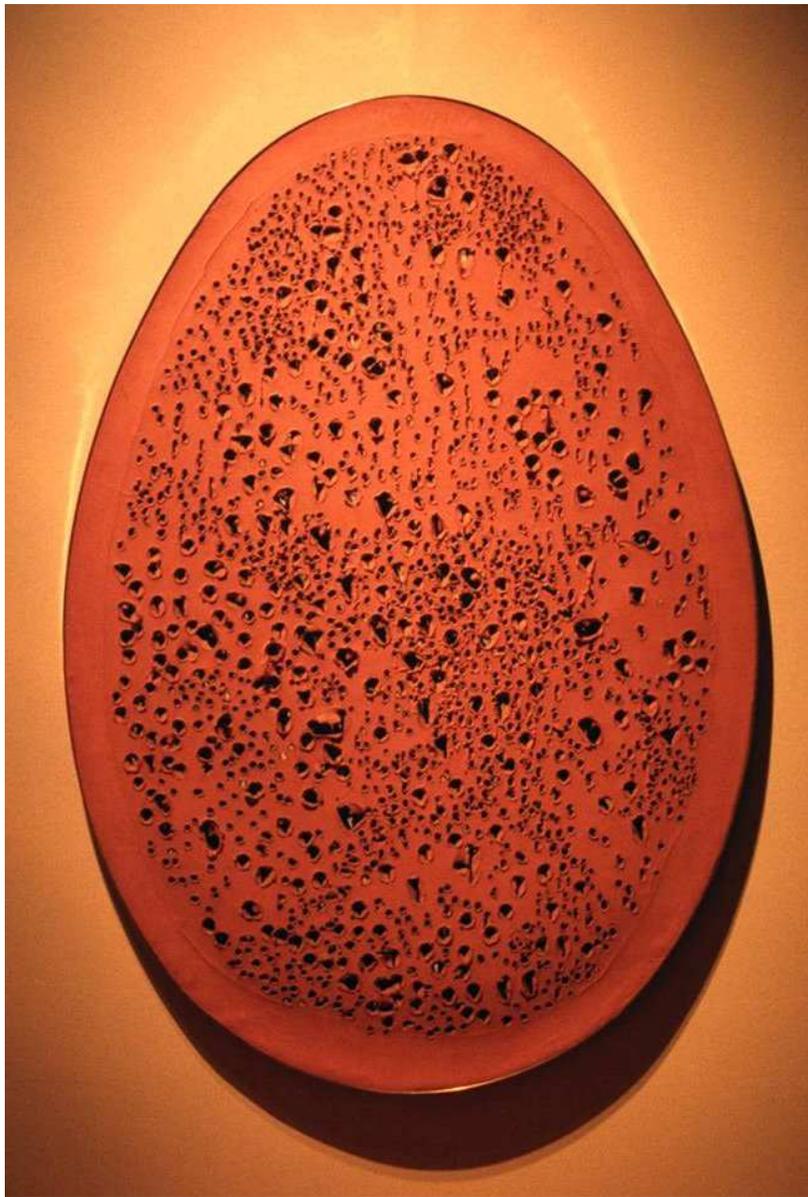


Fig. 3. Lucio Fontana, *Spatial Concept: The End of God*, 1964. Oil on canvas, 178 x 123 cm. Verona, Private collection. (Courtesy Fondazione Lucio Fontana.)

However, in another sense Fontana's works resist the image of the 'body without organs' in that the savage punctures broken into their surfaces introduce an element that is foreign to Deleuze and Guattari's critique of negation. While the paint was still wet, Fontana studded the canvas with punctures and gashes of varying dimensions, building up the wet paint around the ruptures as if to suggest wounds in a physical body. To stand in front of one of these acid-coloured, egg-shaped canvases is to undergo an intensely disturbing

experience. The plenitude of the body presented in the iconic shape and vibrant colour is violated by the torn-open cuts and welts, showing that presence to be fragmented and hollow. The viewer's idealised self-image shares, as it were, the brutal mutilation experienced by the ovoid shape, so that he or she is confronted with a vision of the body as broken and empty.

Another reason to distinguish these works from the thought of Deleuze and Guattari is that the spur for Fontana's thought about the body in these works was not a critique of psychoanalysis but rather his belief that the achievements of industrialised modernity, and in particular the advent of space travel, had completely confounded the individual's ability to form a coherent image of the self. Technological change had given humanity the capacity to leave the globe behind, realising the dreams of Leonardo da Vinci, literally entering into empty space. As Fontana would comment in 1962, 'space is no longer an abstraction, but has become a dimension in which man can live, violating it with jets, with the sputnik, with spaceships.'²⁸ This endeavour, as Hannah Arendt cautioned, is part of a general movement in modernity toward making life 'more "artificial," toward cutting the last tie through which man even belongs among the children of nature.'²⁹ This was a fact that Fontana did not celebrate but rather was circumspect about. Living at a time when it was possible to contemplate existing far away from the natural origins of human life, Fontana sees the individual as undergoing what he described as 'physiological anguish' and 'a dumbfounding of the soul' in the midst of the nothingness of empty space.³⁰ As a result, the aspiration to represent the sensuous figure of the human body in painting is no longer possible, even at the level of abstract form. In his paintings of this period, Fontana fragmented and emptied out the body's image to show the mortality of the self in the diabolically empty spaces discovered by technological modernity.

Between 1949 and the late 1960s, Fontana's attitude to the relationship between art and space travel changed dramatically. Whereas in his early dreams of spatial art the prospect of space travel provoked him to imagine a new kind of art which would take the form of fabulous light displays beamed to objects hurtling through space, in later years, his attitude would change.³¹ Rather than a promising or utopian ideal, space travel for Fontana was not only harmful for those who undertook such journeys, but also reflected problematically on the self-image of those dwelling on this planet. In 1966, the artist explained that the meaning of the title *The End of God* was not connected to religion in the conventional sense of the word, but rather was about the end of 'man imagining himself to be God'.³² In other words, the title explicitly referred to an anti-humanist position. Unlike his contemporary Michel Foucault, who anticipated a post modern era in which 'man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea,' Fontana never dreamed of dispensing altogether with the category of the human subject.³³

28. Livi, 1962, p. 52.

29. Arendt, 1958, p. 2.

30. Rossi, 1963, p. 50.

31. Whitfield, 1999, p. 44.

32. Van der Marck, 1966, p. 4

33. Foucault, 1994, p. 387.

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However, he did warn that in a post-global age, faced with the terrifying emptiness of outer space, the self would appear as a fragmented, hollowed-out, empty fullness – a kind of zero.

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