

THREE REASONS WHY FUTURISM IS MORE CONTEMPORARY THAN EVER

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INTRODUCTION

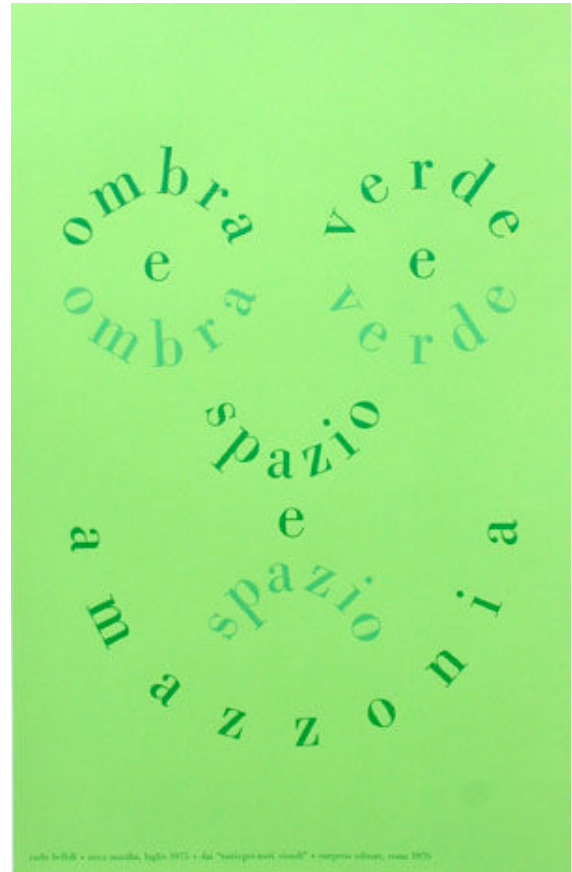
More than one world-class trend research scholar defined the Zero's as the age of a "new modernity", using the "modernist paradigm" as a reference for the current cultural climate. It is difficult to disagree: it appears clear that the social need of an overarching, systematic design behind societies marks the paradigmatic difference between this first decade of the new millennium and the postmodernist years between 1977 -year of first surfacing of Transavanguardia in Italy- and the year of 9/11. In the short span of these last few of years, a number of societal indicators of various nature and scale pointed out how the modernist idea of structure, of progress, ultimately of avant-garde is back "en vogue". This short essay will attempt to identify connections and threads between some examples of contemporary phenomena in the cultural and branding worlds, and the techniques and poetics of Italian Futurism, the modern art movement aiming to achieve universal change and reconstruction at the beginning of the XX Century.

Labeled as "The Other Modernism" (1996) by Cinzia Sartini Blum, who analyzed the rhetorical mechanisms used by Marinetti, founder and director of Futurism, the movement roared into the 1910's with a uniquely innovative mix of aesthetic visions and communication techniques. While other aspects of the movement, from the articulation of their ideological theories to the outcome of their culinary experiments, appear weak and irrelevant to our contemporary understanding and taste, the overall design and deployment of the movement remains what brand marketers would define as a "best practice" and a "benchmark". Furthermore, Marinetti's aesthetic intuitions, even some among the ones by the late Marinetti, appear blessed by the ability to identify future qualities of great relevance, especially when retrospectively studied along the general lines of post-WWII art history.

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□ 1 . THE FUTURIST MOMENT AND ITS MODERN FUTURE

What did Filippo Tommaso Marinetti intend to achieve with the launch of his "Manifesto of Futurismo" in 1909? First of all, the creation of an Italian art movement capable to compete with the latest developments of international avant-garde. Till then still fragmented and immersed in her never-ending past, Italy was home to regional art movements of narrow provincial limitation, incapable to relate to the cutting edge art currents of their times. Marinetti made a bold move aiming to change this unacceptable situation. Secondly, Marinetti had the ambition to unify Italian artists, poets and young spirits thanks to his mix of populist, nationalist and vitalist vision, a mix he derived from the likes of Sorel and Nietzsche. The complex, imperfect and somewhat confused nature of Futurist ideology fully reveals itself by reading Marinetti's political essays "Democrazia Futurista" or "Al di la' del comunismo". But there is more: bigger surprises are created by reading the notes about Futurism written by Italian communist leader Antonio Gramsci, where Marinetti is defined as "the only real revolutionary mind of his times". Or studying the circulation stats of Futurist publications like "Lacerba", read at its point of maximum diffusion by 20.000 people in a previously unthinkable -for those days- cross-class mix of proletarians, anarchists, nationalists, poets, artists and



CONSISTENCY IN AUDIOVISUAL POETRY

From Carlo Belloli's 1976
"Testi Pre-Testi Visuali"

more. A complex picture which would require in depth analysis with appropriate historical distance to appraise the different facets of reality.

It is not the intention of this essay to deny or somehow justify the reactionary nature of several Futurist ideas and practices. Perhaps the ability to reach a political maturity is where the movement showed its limits. It is however important to study events in their context. The Italian 1910's were perhaps the first decade when the young nation was seeking its destiny as one country in history. It was a country where things were changing fast, and people were changing fast. Interventionism was just another word for national pride, in a climate where regions of the country were still provinces of another empire. The quest for artistic integrity met the quest for political leadership. Marinetti tried to cope with change but somehow he lost his momentum after the war. After 1919, Futurism struggled to maintain political relevance. Fundamentally anarchist and internationalist, the movement could not live up to its revolutionary ambitions. It imploded into the regime, although it maintained a dignity above the average status of plain "art of the regime".

Futurismo ended, Secondo Futurismo began. The real value of Secondo Futurismo, the extension of the movement into the 1920's and 1930's, is mainly in its ability to reach across applied arts, from advertising to design, retrospectively culminating in Fortunato Depero's American experience in his Chelsea studio, which he described in his rare autobiographical book "Un Futurista a New York" (1931, 1932, 1940, edit. 1986, re-edit. 1990). An experience rich of important projects, for example as the art director of several 1930's covers for the likes of Vogue, Harper's Bazaar and The New Yorker. Secondo Futurismo had paintings, novels, poetry to be accounted for, but its real core was elsewhere: experimental radio drama's, interior design, graphic design, and then sensorial explorations like Marinetti's Tactilism, or like Prampolini's "Materia", a 1930's anticipation of informal techniques of essential beauty.

Marjorie Perloff crafted a triggering definition: "The Futurist Moment" (1986, 2003 second ed.), which is also the title of her book about Russian, French and English protagonists in the context of the movement. I would dare to propose the following comparison: the "Futurist moment" is what 1977 has been to the punk movement in popular culture. Or the 1964 Venice Biennale for American art. It is the moment of maximum energy of a movement or group, the time of greatest impact of a proposition, the phase when the energy of a cultural trend is most intense. But what is left of the grand ambitions that shocked the art world and fueled this Italian dream, what is left beyond this ambition to always be absolutely contemporary, as generated between 1909, year of the first Manifesto, to 1916, year when the best mind of the movement, Umberto Boccioni, died during war?

I would like to herewith explore what I consider three key assets to the renewed popularity and success of Futurism. It has been a great leap from the political ban in the immediate postwar years to the great 1986 retrospective at Palazzo Grassi in Venice. I would like to herewith propose an interdisciplinary analysis of some aspects of Futurism from the following selected points of view:

- the ability to generate highly impacting manifesto's and communicate by leveraging viral techniques to amplify the message;
- the ambition to construct an aesthetic universe according to one unified vision, beyond the barriers of high art and popular culture;
- the ability to identify lines of development for the ideas of the movement within the early manifestations of new poetics.

The thesis of this article is that the outcome of such analysis will offer arguments for an objective appraisal of how contemporary several among Futurist aesthetic visions and communication practices are.

□ 2 . FOUNDATION, MANIFESTO AND PROVOCATIONS: A MODERNIST BIRTH OF CONTEMPORARY "VIRAL MARKETING"?

In the chapter "Violence and Precision: the Manifesto as an art form" of her "The Futurist Moment" (cit.), Perloff described some of the critical features that made the first Manifesto a disruptive innovation in the field of modern art, or perhaps one could argue in the domain of what we could call nowadays "brand management", as then intuitively applied to modern art movements. I would like to herewith propose two clusters of analysis: the internal features of the Manifesto as a unique semantic combination of narrative elements, and the contextual techniques of communication and deployment of the Futurist movement, from the launch of the Manifesto onwards, which made the "Futurist proposition" actionable. Even further: according to Perloff, it is possible to look upon the Futurist movement from the eyes of conceptual art, with the Manifesto's being the true key asset to the entire aesthetic and philosophical operation orchestrated by Marinetti. This article will not further elaborate about this last, fascinating hypothesis, which is however worth considering for deeper studies indeed.

First of all, Marinetti clarified in his correspondence with Severini, while frustrating his ambitions to launch his own "manifesto", the key points of internal strength of a "manifesto" format: a mix of iconic and bold statements where semantic violence meets writing synthesis, with the ability to evoke and the precise stroke against the "passeists". At the same time, describing the first "Founding Manifesto" of 1909, Perloff interestingly indicated in the symbolist narrative that opens and ends the document as the source of a unique power for an art manifesto: the power inducted by the "suspension of disbelief". What is generally reviewed as a proofpoint of conceptual weakness -the tension between the ultramodern message and the decadent set where the action takes place- is appraised by Perloff as one of the master strokes by Marinetti as a publicist: the talent to create a world of narrative where everything can be believed. And therefore also the existence of a Futurist movement, a movement that up to that moment -up to the publication by Le Figaro of this manifesto- was actually limited to one member, Marinetti himself.

Secondly, it appears crucial an asset the choice of media; the ability to write statements of great impact only would not have been enough for an Italian art movement of the early 1900's. Any statement coming from Italy would have been classified as the product of a provincial, marginal artistic scene. Hence the choice to launch the movement from the first page of *Le Figaro* of Paris, at the time leading newspaper in the capital of the art world. From here, an aggressive strategy was necessary for the small group to be noticed, and ultimately exist. Marinetti never doubted: bad press was the best option to be noticed, and he never feared negative feedback from audiences and mass media. He actually saw an asset in scandal, and this is another element of fascination in Futurism, retrospectively.

But which were the communication strategies staged by Marinetti and his small group of artists and poets? Some representative examples are campaign initiatives like the 1910 Venetian action, with the Futurists dropping from the top of San Marco church their leaflets demanding the reconstruction of Venice as a contemporary metropolis. Crucial to the popularity of the movement was the ability to spread the message with the techniques of cabaret and theatre: here, the staging of proto-situationist events before the opening of Futurist evenings, like the selling of the same theatre seat to ten different people, played a great role: this was a gimmick to fuel tension and propel arguments even before the beginning of the always controversial show, guaranteeing the negative publicity with high visibility that Marinetti was precisely seeking. One might say, some of this techniques reached our business marketing world in the form of viral marketing or entertainment publicity (eg, the Sex Pistols publicity campaigns).

Examining the impressive collection of Futurist manifestos as edited by Umbro Apollonio (1973), the reader gets an overview of how this format -equivalent to some extent to the contemporary brand positioning statements by corporations and marketing agencies alike- was exploited to its limit by Marinetti and his associates. Of course, this choice of quantity implied that sometimes quality of outcome was stretched thin: if poetry and painting were massively represented, other manifesto's were pure territorial benchmark, with no real substance beyond plain statements of intent. With its understandable limits, Futurism offered however a newly wide platform to those aspiring to a total art, omnipresent in everyday life, from kindergarten to politics. Similarly, *Secondo Futurismo* expressed its most relevant talent in the advertising work by Depero, moving therefore towards applied arts. But what was the perceived difference between high art and applied arts in the vision of Futurism?

□ 3 . THE FUTURIST RECONSTRUCTION OF THE UNIVERSE: FROM ART UTOPIY TO TO EXISTENTIAL PROJECT

"The Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe" is the title of a 1915 manifesto by Giacomo Balla and Fortunato Depero, a short text published as a leaflet including references to Boccioni's visual visions, to Marinetti's words-in-freedom, and to the technical requirements of the futurist toy for children. The challenge behind this specific manifesto is how art can dissolve itself into life. Never before such a utopian ambition was cultivated with so much focus. From fashion to carpet design, from cuisine to lust, every single feature of what we call today a "lifestyle" seemingly appeared on the horizon of the futurists. This genuine ambition seems to parallel today's commercial dream of marketing icons and corporate brands to offer and deploy a holistic brand experience, a parallel that might prove once again an extraordinary anticipatory insight by Marinetti and his friends. The scope of the movement soon outgrew the movement itself, from painting to practices of love and seduction, ideally encompassing everything that can be experienced by human mind and body.

The examination of Marinetti's " *Teoria e Invenzione Futurista*" (1968, post.), curated by Luciano De Maria for the prestigious Meridiani collection by Mondadori of Milan, is a true eye-opener. Only the direct study of minor essays highlights the complexity of a movement which was everything, and -to a certain extent- the contrary thereof. For example, although genuinely reactionary, futurism was -in the 1910s!- in favor of free love, abolition of marriage as a form of social constraint on the individual and political rights to vote for women, a legislative feature which would be introduced into Italian civil life in 1946 only. And although being classified as a right-wing movement for its proximity with the regime, Futurism was genuinely internationalist, advocating the right for every nation to develop their own futurist avant-garde instead of imposing one style for all countries. Although rejecting Communism as the kind of revolution that would fit with Italy's national destiny, Marinetti did not hesitate praising the bolshevik revolution as a "great futurist moment in Russian history". He advocated a genuine international vision and continued vigorously rejecting any racism, a belief which Marinetti would manifest even in the darkest years of the italian late 1930's.

□ 4 . FROM CONTRADICTION TO CONSISTENCY, FROM FUTURE TO HERITAGE: OR BACK TO FUTURE AGAIN?

The key question ultimately is, after its academic glorification in the 1930's, the ideological ban until the 1960's and the celebration of 1986, what is truly left of Futurism in the history of art? The exercise of identifying lines of continuity between Futurism and later developments either in high art or popular culture is seemingly an easy task. Lista (2002, cit.) points at examples like Roy Lichtenstein's direct quote of Carra's "Red Horseman", or to the affinity between Futurist interest in metals as materials for books and other artifacts as an ideological background to Courregé's 1968 "Metal Dress". In his "Le Due Avanguardie" (1966), Maurizio Calvesi outlines an articulate analysis of the touchpoints between Futurism and Pop Art.

Expanding the review further, it is perhaps triggering to open the landscape of a hypothetical review to popular culture. Here the philological research is sometimes made easy by artist statements, like Peter Saville's direct credit to Fortunato Depero for some of his cover design for New Order. Or it might become become deductive hypothesis when looking at some early graphic productions like Depero's "Depero is a genius" postcards as possible anticipation of the art direction by Anton Corbijn for bands like Depeche Mode in their early 1990's "Devotional" period. Or it might remain at the stage of fascinating intellectual reference, like when juxtaposing the ambition to represent the world through the eyes of dynamic, simultaneous synthesis with experiments like the workshop by Masaki Fujihata at Tokyo

NCC Center in October 2003. Futurism as an anticipation of digital futures, from words in freedom capable to revolutionize the poetic page to the desktop revolution, from Bergson's theories to the pervasive presence of internet? Fascinating perhaps, but debatable.

It seems more appropriate to turn the investigation to direct evidence of which directions a hypothetical artistic testament by Marinetti would have left to envision next steps for the poetic evolution of the movement. It was in 1943 that the old leader, in spite of the dramatic situation of civil war dividing Italy, identified what he labeled as "the future of Futurism". This was the work of an extremely young poet living in Milan, Carlo Belloli. Described by Mary Ellen Solt in her pivotal "Concrete Poetry: a World View" (1968, as reproduced on Kenneth Goldsmith's www.ubu.com), as the mind capable to anticipate the technical and poetical directions of the Concrete Poetry movement, Belloli showed to the late Marinetti his "Text Poems" and his "Words for the War". Marinetti urged him to publish his works, and identified in the innovative audiovisual poetry by Belloli a new field of aesthetic research.

While "contradiction" marked the developments of Futurism across its 30 years of history, "consistency" could be the key word to describe how Belloli pursued his poetic quest in the nearly 60 years of his life following the end of WWII. Gifted with the philosophical and critical talent to identify and describe the deepest theoretical meaning and technical nature of rhetorical enablers of his work, Belloli moved to Basel, where he spent his life as a professor in aesthetics, an art critic and a poet. His works managed to anticipate, for example, with his 1950's three dimensional "Poetry Bodies" in plexiglass, phenomena like digital 3D poetry, as acknowledged by "holopoetry" creator, artist Eduardo Kac. From his early masterpieces, like "Acthung", validated as the first concrete poem ever with 10 years of anticipation on the experiments by Gomringer in Switzerland and the Noigrandes group in Brazil, to works like 1976 "Testi Pre-Tesi Visuali", "consistency" becomes without doubt the best key word to describe his artistic path, with highlights like the masterpiece "Acqua", published by Gomringer in "Konkrete Poesie".

Furthermore, in his work as an art critic Belloli demonstrated the ability to articulate theoretical visions, as proven by his continuing, direct dialogue with the likes of the Delaunay's, Vasarely, Max Bill, Bruno Munari, Getulio Alviani and more. A particular case is then constituted by the commonality of artistic visions with his wife Mary Vieira, whose sculpting achievements include the 1968 "Polyvolumes", where interaction between audience and artwork is brought to the innovative outcome of a truly co-creative dialogue, determining at each and every moment of interaction a unique aesthetic experience, totally personalized in a way that might result inspirational to nowadays thinkers working on digital co-creation. But how actual is the work by Belloli in 2005?

Very contemporary, one can conclude. While Vieira will enjoy a first Brazilian show in Sao Paulo and Rio, inclusive of her major works, Belloli himself as poet was featured in a key event like LACMA "Beyond Geometry", curated by Lynn Zelevansky, and its related catalogue, published by MIT Press (2004). And his works, as presented during an international cycle of lectures in the UK, in Amsterdam and in New York, proved to fascinate both talented students and experienced art directors. Perhaps it is time for a renaissance of Belloli's aesthetic vision? Since he himself always chose not to promote his work, with an aristocratic reservedness of great elegance and appeal, this might be a true discovery.

□ 5 . OPEN CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this short essay was to provide some inspirational information of general nature around Futurism and its subsequent evolutions and show some relations to contemporary culture, both high and popular. At the same time, some lines defining the contemporaneity of the Futurist movement were envisioned and drawn, including:

- the Manifesto as an equivalent to brand positioning visionary platforms, made actionable by innovative viral communication campaigns;
- the ambition to generate a vision supportive of an entire lifestyle, dissolving art into life, equivalent to the efforts of contemporary branding icons;
- the poetic consistency and critical acumen of one of the best representative of Futurist heritage after the end of Futurism.

Links between the Futurist practices and our contemporary world can be identified not only -and well beyond- the narrow realm of modern and contemporary art practices: publicity and new marketing techniques, lifestyle and experience branding, graphic and digital design are few of the domains which would simply require more in depth exploration to further substantiate the thesis of this article.

The world that Marinetti, Boccioni, Sant'Elia and their fellow artists, poets and designers envisioned might look a lot like the world of today: a fundamentally visual world, where technology is elevated to beauty, a world where everything happens simultaneously, a world where individuals increasingly immerse themselves into omnipresent aesthetics. The 2005 Times Square in New York or Shinjuku in Tokyo, with their fascinating bombardment of images and sensations, might have pleased the thirst for a connected future of this group of avant-garde visionaries from a deeply classic country.

The retour à l'ordre by the likes of Carra' and the very last Boccioni just proved that these artists could also connect again to their roots, beyond the Futurist Moment. This added, in my opinion, even more interest to the individual artists, beyond the discipline and the sphere of the collective movement. What we owe to Futurism -without excusing or leaving unmentioned some of its ideological and philosophical limits- is the courage to think big, the drive to invent one's future in spite of one's limited starting point, against all odds. From the weaknesses and the mistakes of the men who tried to deliver it, the Futurist dream emerged once again, and speaks to us today, more contemporary than ever.

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