

ARTFORUM

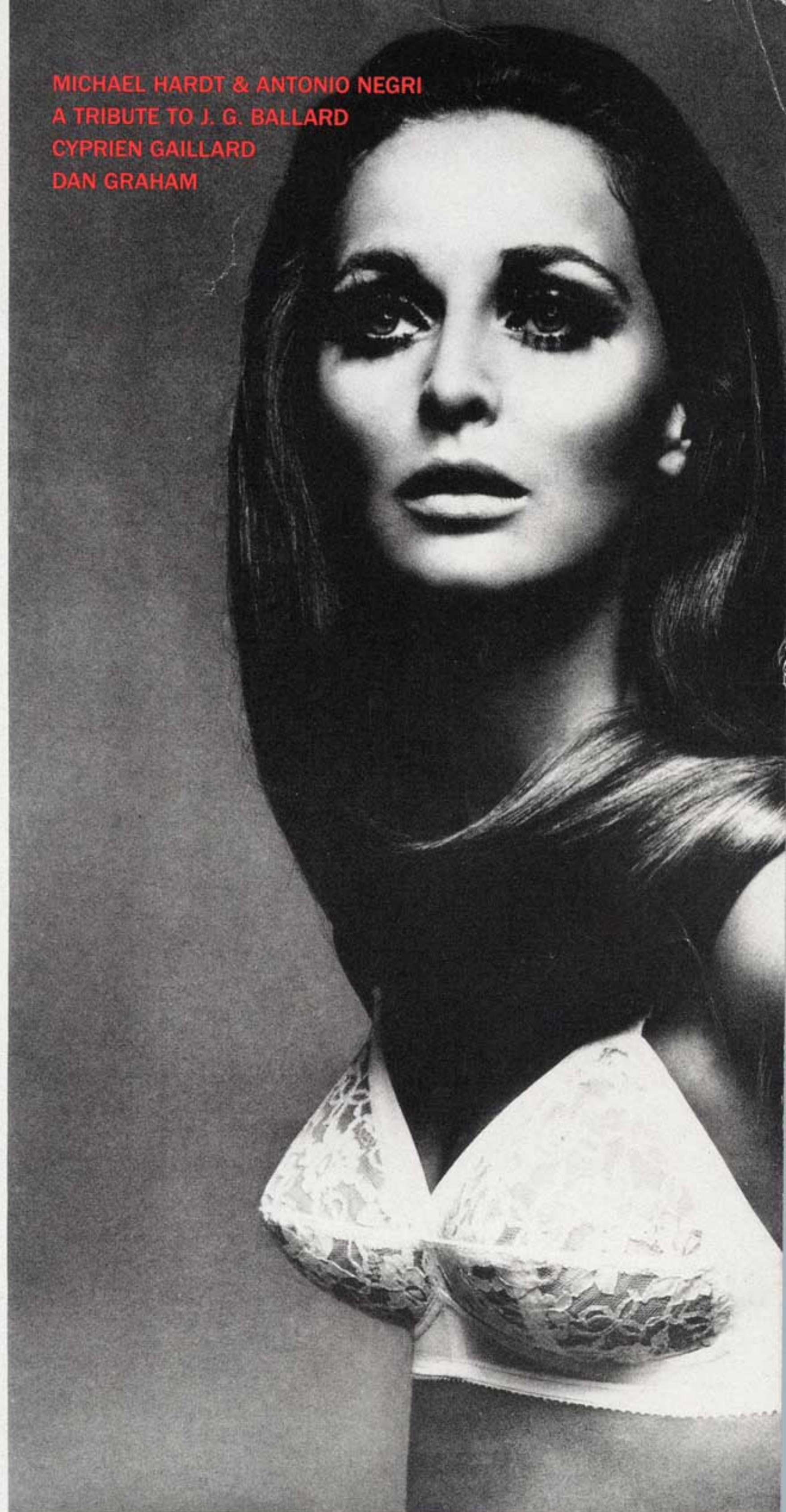
OCTOBER 2009

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FIGURATIVE
BY
DAN
GRAHAM

MICHAEL HARDT & ANTONIO NEGRI
A TRIBUTE TO J. G. BALLARD
CYPRIEN GAILLARD
DAN GRAHAM



If nature didn't, Warner



Manifesto Destiny

MARIA GOUGH ON CENTENARY FUTURISM EXHIBITIONS

On the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of the Futurist Manifesto, art historian Maria Gough takes stock of the numerous exhibitions celebrating the movement this past summer, while writers Charlotte Birnbaum and Bruce Sterling muse on Futurism's legacy, from comestibles to combat.

ITALIAN FUTURISM TURNED ONE HUNDRED this past February, but nobody much celebrated—at least not any of the major museums on this side of the Atlantic. Conferences, new publications, and live readings of manifestos have certainly abounded, and this fall's extensive Performa will be devoted to the anniversary; yet with the exception of a cluster of vitrines in the basement of the Education and Research Building at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the “Speed Limits” show organized by the Canadian Centre for Architecture in Montreal with the Wolfsonian-Florida International University in Miami Beach, the silence on the North American museum front has been stunning, particularly given Futurism's fundamental significance to the historical avant-gardes. But it has also been rather fitting: The Futurists, after all, wanted to destroy the museum, an institution they deplored as the absolute enemy of contemporary art. Whatever the intellectual, ideological, and pragmatic reasons for this current silence (for example, impatience with Futurism's utopian claims, abhorrence of its call to

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purify society through war and of its scorn for women, or simply the fact that many of the best pictures were already out on loan), it could not contrast more dramatically with the museological clamor in Europe, where a gigantic, sprawling, and seemingly interminable

birthday party has been in full swing for over a year.

Major centenary exhibitions have opened—two each in Milan, Rome, and Rovereto, Italy, and others in Venice, Berlin, Paris, and London. Most of these have produced scholarly catalogues, each heftier than the last, as well as a cacophony of symposia and concerts that have kept the crowds coming, sacerdotal and secular alike. At times, the party, like the movement itself, has spilled into the street: In homage to Futurism's enthusiasm for mechanized transit, a “FuturTram” trundled through downtown Milan this past spring, while the movement were explored by the Taverna dei Futuristi in Rome, whose menu included *risotto all'alchechegio*, a *primo piatto* composed by Futurist poet Paolo Buzzi.

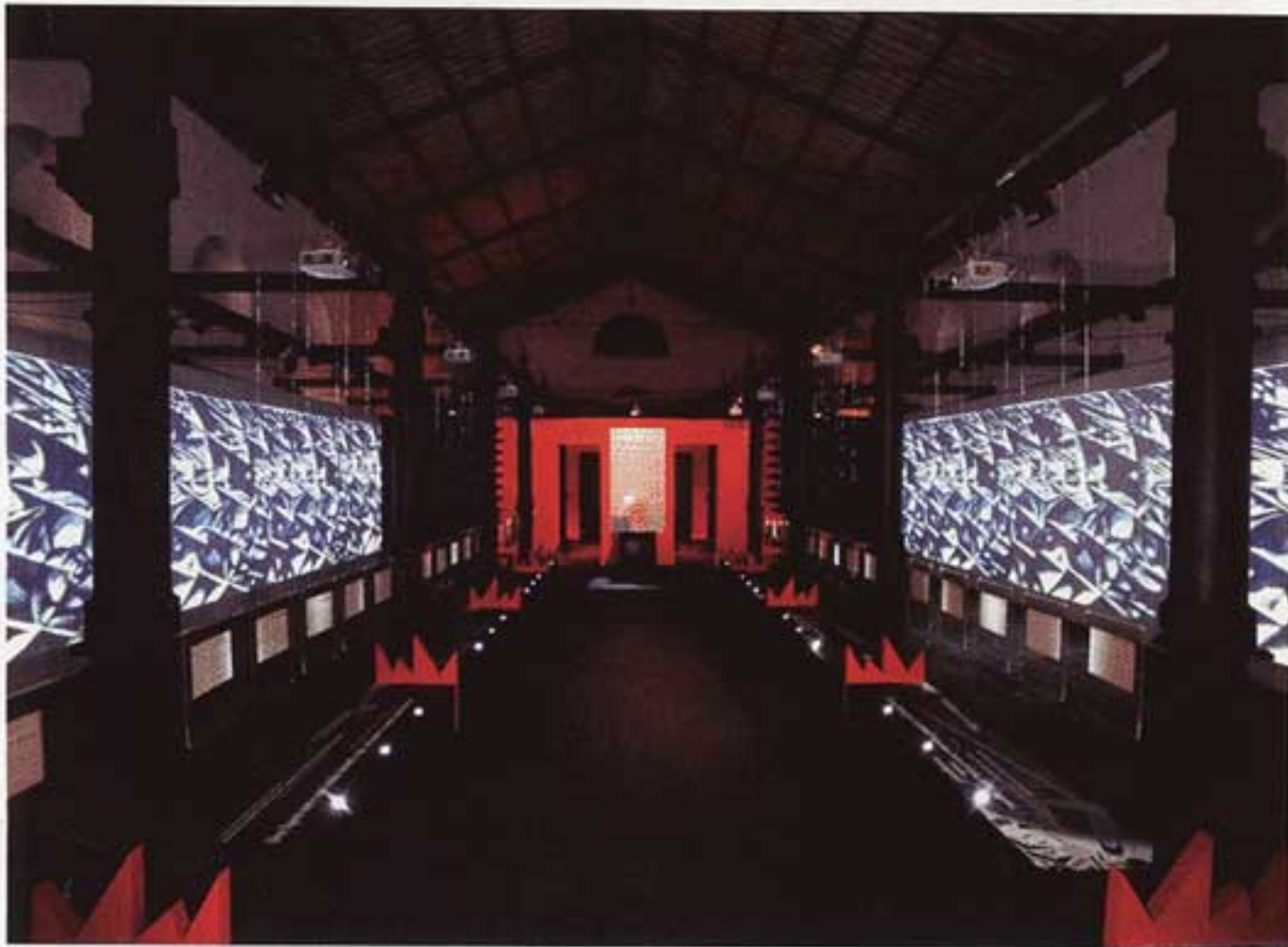
Anniversary exhibitions are typically timed to an individual artist's birth, but in this instance they celebrate a mass-media event, perhaps the first to have been orchestrated by an art-world representative: the publication of “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism” on the front page of *Le Figaro* in Paris on February 20, 1909. Penned by the Alexandrian-born Franco-Italian poet F. T. Marinetti, whose primary literary language was French, the manifesto agitated for a radical presentism in both aesthetics and everyday life. Rejecting the past, Marinetti called for a vigorous embrace of modernity in all its most contemporary manifestations, particularly those having to do with



February 20, 1909, edition of *Le Figaro* with F. T. Marinetti's Futurist Manifesto.

the acceleration of our experiential reality: “A racing car is more beautiful than the *Victory of Samothrace*,” he shouted at his unsuspecting readers.

It was not only the heretical content of this attack launched from Italy that was inaugurated as a new, all-encompassing platform for aesthetic theory and practice, however, but also its form of articulation as a manifesto—a genre borrowed from religious and political tracts, perhaps the most famous example being the *Communist Manifesto*. Add to this the unprecedented hijacking of the mainstream press by a young poet (thanks apparently to the assistance of an Egyptian examiner and epicure, one Pasha Mohammed el Rachi, who also happened to be a substantial shareholder in



View of "Futurismo Manifesto 100 x 100: 100 Anni per 100 Manifesti," 2009, MACRO Future, Rome.

Le Figaro and an old friend of Marinetti's father), and one has all the major components of Futurism as it would henceforth develop, spreading rapidly from literature to painting, sculpture, architecture, music, theater, fashion, photography, and film. The fact that the recent celebrations were built around Marinetti's ambush of *Le Figaro's* faithful—rather than around, say, any of the earlier iterations of the founding manifesto that had appeared previously or even on the very same day albeit in more obscure Italian, French, Mexican, and Romanian publications—is worth emphasizing, for it goes to the heart of that which most distinguishes Futurism as well as its perspicacity with respect to the later history of art: first, its sheer entrepreneurial savvy, which enabled its successful negotiation of the otherwise unequal relations obtaining between the center of the art world (Paris) and the periphery (Italy) at the time, and, second, its pioneering redefinition of the work of art as publicity stunt.

ONE OF THE TWO CENTENARY exhibitions to grapple directly with Futurism's recourse to the genre of the manifesto was "*Futurismo Manifesto 100 x 100: 100 Anni per 100 Manifesti*," at MACRO Future, the second site of the Museo d'Arte Contemporanea Roma. Curated by Achille Bonito Oliva, the show was conceived in concert with Gino Di Maggio, Vincenzo Capalbo, and the renowned composer, performer, and Futurist musicologist Daniele Lombardi and was complemented by a separate, valuable new collection of documents and essays, *Ritratto di Marinetti* (Fondazione Mudima, 2009). An antechamber lined with dozens of small monitors and speakers (featuring photographs of Futurism's protagonists and archival audio recordings

of their declamations and ruminations) ushered visitors from the brilliant Roman sunshine into a darkened, eighty-foot-long gallery. At the end of this navelike space hung an original copy of the front page of *Le Figaro*, suspended between two transparent sheets. Dramatically lit, the ephemeral

newspaper took on all the trappings of a modern reliquary, dripping with aura. As inappropriate as it sounds, this highly theatrical staging nevertheless had a certain poignancy with respect to both Futurism's original premise and our own historical moment; with speed comes obsolescence, and we now seem to be confronting daily the death or at least profound mutation of that first truly mass medium.

Along both sides of the gallery ran a continuous digital video projection consisting of a scramble of moving images (depicting biplanes and other Futurist icons hurtling down the wall at terrific speeds), audio recordings, documentary photographs, reproductions of paintings and ephemera, and now-famous punch lines from manifestos ("You think that we are mad. Instead, we are the Primitives of a new sensibility," and so on). Directed by Capalbo and Marilena Bertozzi, and accompanied by music written by Lombardi and the Futurist composers Aldo Giuntini and Alfredo Casella, this engaging projection sought to transform the passive viewer into a "*visit-attore*" ("visit actor," a play on *visitatore*, "visitor") by placing him or her in the center of the manifesto, just as the Futurist painters Giacomo Balla, Umberto Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Luigi Russolo, and Gino Severini had endeavored "to put the spectator in the center of the picture." I am not convinced that the projection accomplished this objective—one shared by many avant-garde artists who, perhaps most notably El Lissitzky, thought long and hard about modern spectatorship—but it certainly animated the manifesto genre itself as a form of spectacle, opening it up to a synesthetic, rather than exclusively readerly, apperception.

The projection thus helped to guide and sustain the visitor's interest in the show's hundred manifestos—all

from the collection of Marinetti's late daughter Luce—the majority of which were laid out in the next gallery in vitrines and largely inaccessible beyond their first pages. Penned by various Futurists but apparently always submitted to Marinetti for ratification, these tracts originally appeared in a vast array of periodicals, exhibition catalogues, and books and also as independent brochures, thereby underscoring Futurism's cunning mobilization of all available forms of print media. A fourth gallery closed out the show with various films about the movement, the most interesting of which was Capalbo and Ezio Godoli's *La metropoli futurista: Il viaggio virtuale nella metropoli Futurista* (The Futurist Metropolis: A Virtual Voyage in the Futurist Metropolis), 1999/2006, a digital animation of the Futurist city as it had been proposed in the second decade of the 1900s by the architects Antonio Sant'Elia and Virgilio Marchi, whose extraordinary drawings transformed the modern apartment building into little more than a hub for myriad forms of vehicular circulation.

The other centenary show to foreground Futurist print media was "*F. T. Marinetti = Futurismo*," curated by Luigi Sansone at the Fondazione Stelline in Milan. Although this exhibition was markedly less theatrical, its title's stark equation became a kind of Futurist provocation in itself, resonating with the polemical battles that took place a century ago over ownership of the movement, in which the term *Marinettismo* arose as a way to sideline its founder and diminish his monopoly control. Were we meant to read the show's title as defensively territorial, aggressively reductive, or perhaps even deliberately playful (in the spirit of, say, Marinetti's exhibited drawing *SI = NO*, circa 1915)? It was hard to decide. All provocation aside, however, the original and primary contribution of the exhibition lay in its exploration of Marinetti's sustained involvement with the visual arts, beyond his induction of various Symbolist-*cum*-Divisionist painters into the movement. It featured, for example, portraits of the poet executed in a variety of media by compatriots and foreign nationals alike, including an eccentric ink sketch by one of the so-called grandfathers of Russian Futurism, Nikolai Kulbin, the

Saint Petersburg physician-artist who hosted Marinetti's visit to his city in 1914; numerous seldom-seen drawings both whimsical and strident by the Neapolitan Futurist writer and artist Francesco Cangiullo; and an intriguing mixed-media bas-relief by the still too little known Bohemian Rougena Zatkova, a friend of the Marinetti family.

But the exhibition's biggest revelation was the extent to which Marinetti was himself a visual artist. In addition to *Sudan-Parigi*, 1921, an extraordinarily prescient mixed-media assemblage dating from Marinetti's "tactilist" period, the show included several dozen works on paper—graphic wanderings, really—many of which had never been exhibited. Among these was a compelling likeness of Carrà's distinctive physiognomy for which Marinetti's pen seems almost to have never left the paper, its meandering line conjoining the art of caricature with Liberty or *Stile Floreale* (the Italian equivalent of Art Nouveau). Most significant of all were the poet's thirty or so word-image games in ink, collage, or both, made between 1913 and 1916, to which he gave the name *tavole parolibere*, after his most important literary invention of the early Futurist period, *parole in libertà*, or "words in freedom." Partly inspired by the new communication technologies of wireless telegraphy, radio,

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and phonography, as well as by the staccato rhythms of trench warfare, this was a mode of literary composition that demanded the destruction of syntax; the abolition of adverbs, adjectives, conjunctions, and punctuation; the deployment of verbs in the infinitive; onomatopoeia, mathematical symbols, musical notations, and dynamic typography. But Marinetti sought to push the visual implications still further: "Words in freedom," he wrote in 1919, "become *tavole parolibere* [words in freedom pictures] and *poesie murali* [mural poems], that is, actual paintings to look at, rather than literary compositions to read or declaim." A case in



View of "Futurismo Manifesto 100 x 100: 100 Anni per 100 Manifesti," 2009, MACRO Future, Rome.

point at the Stelline was the previously unexhibited vertical scroll *Bombardement d'Andrinople: Mots en liberté futuristes* (Bombardment of Adrianopolis: Futurist Words in Freedom), 1913, made after Marinetti was in the Balkans as a war correspondent for the French newspaper *L'Intransigeant*; this object, rediscovered in the archives of the English poet Harold Monro at the University of California, Los Angeles, provides a more fully visual counterpart to the already dynamic typography of Marinetti's most important words-in-freedom poem, *Zang Tumb Tumb* (1914).

A FEW BLOCKS DOWN THE ROAD, the Palazzo Reale offered "*Futurismo 1909–2009: Velocità + Arte + Azione*," a mammoth and comprehensive show of over 250 works, curated by Giovanni Lista and Ada Masoero. Charting the *longue durée* of Futurism across all media but especially that of painting, the exhibition focused on the movement's stylistic development from its Divisionist roots through "Plastic Dynamism"—its period of greatest renown—and from there on to "mechanical art" in the '20s and "aero-painting" in the '30s. It is worth noting that it was the sole centenary exhibition to have proceeded along such traditional art-historical lines, with style being understood as the *sine qua non* of history itself. The show's encyclopedic nature enabled the inclusion of significant work that is not as widely known—such as the extensive corpus of Enrico Prampolini, a second-generation Futurist gifted with an outstanding plastic imagination—but this also meant that the exhibition became increasingly baggy and diffuse as it proceeded. Diffuseness is not always a bad thing, of course, since it may allow new and different narratives to emerge, but in this case none did.

That said, the exhibition concluded with two refreshing codas: a brief survey of the legacy of Futurism in the postwar period, and a small screening room that offered visitors a glimpse at some fascinating, rarely available Futurist and related film material, including *Velocità* (1930) by Tina Cordero, Guido Martina, and Pippo Oriani, and a number of documentaries celebrating Italian modernization. Partly inspired by Futurist poetics as well as by Soviet cinematic practice, these last were produced by the Istituto Luce, a powerful organ of Fascist propaganda in the '30s. Given this connection, and the fact that "*Futurismo 1909–2009*" was the only centenary exhibition to deal ambitiously with Futurism's development over time, I was struck by the almost complete absence in the galleries of any discussion of the movement's controversial relationship to Fascism in the '20s and '30s. In this silence, it should be noted, the Palazzo Reale was not alone. Perhaps the subject was deemed inappropriate for the festive tone of the anniversary celebrations. Or has the traditional historical amnesia about, and oversimplification of, the movement's relationship to Fascism now been overlaid with a new sensitivity to the issue prompted by the present-day Italian right's sudden and enthusiastic embrace of Futurism as an authentic expression of "the culture of the right" (*la cultura di destra*)?

Emphatically stated up front, by contrast, were the movement's Milanese origins: "Futurism returns to Milan," an introductory wall text announced, "the city that incubated it and was the movement's chosen location during its early and most interesting years." True, but surely a slap in the face of the Centre Pompidou, whose "*Le Futurisme à Paris—Une Avant-garde explosive*," curated by Didier Ottinger with Ester



Umberto Boccioni, *Dinamismo di un corpo umano* (Dynamism of a Human Body), 1913, oil on canvas, 39 1/2 x 39 1/2".

explosive," curated by Didier Ottinger with Ester Coen and Matthew Gale, had kicked off the birthday party in October 2008, beating everyone to the punch. The ambition of the Pompidou show was to situate the genesis of Futurism in the extensive back-and-forth that took place in Paris between the Italian painters and their fellow artists, including not only Picasso, Braque, and the Salon Cubists but also the Orphists, Russian Cubo-Futurists, and British Vorticists. The centerpiece was a reconstruction of the Futurists' groundbreaking February 1912 show at the Galerie Bernheim-Jeune in Paris, which involved the gathering of several dozen pictures now dispersed in major collections around the world. On the one hand, this was a bold and appealing move—to locate the development of a movement beyond the confines of national borders, foregrounding the role of Paris as a cosmopolitan incubator for artists of diverse nationalities, and of French as the lingua franca that enabled this exchange to take place. In this sense, the show's intricate story of the simultaneous rejection and assimilation of Futurism in Paris suggested that the movement was, from its very inception, an international rather than strictly national phenomenon. On the other hand, this was also a repackaging of more or less the standard French line on Futurism, received south of the Alps as yet another Gallic attempt to steal Italy's loudest aesthetic thunder since the Baroque.

Thus, when the show traveled to the Scuderie del Quirinale in Rome (it subsequently went to Tate

Modern in London), it fell to its Italian commissioner, Coen, to bring Futurism home. This she accomplished by reshuffling the deck: Though she retained most of the paintings from the Bernheim-Jeune show, broad thematic groupings replaced historical reconstruction. The entire first half of the show was devoted exclusively to Italian paintings and sculptures. Only after Italian priority had been securely (re) established was the question of Futurism's international diffusion broached. In the second half of the exhibition, Coen

reduced the number of Salon Cubist pictures and excluded all but one of the paintings by the so-called French Futurist Félix Del Marle, to whom the Pompidou had devoted half a gallery. Perhaps the most aesthetically compelling installation at the Scuderie was the final one, where huddled on a single wall—rather than kept at a polite distance from one another—were exemplary *papiers collés* by Severini and Picasso, along with small oils by Ardengo Soffici and Liubov Popova. Across the room, as if not only closing the show but also announcing Futurism's path forward, were three, highly keyed abstractions by the incomparable Balla; it was as if, in these last works, Futurism had finally broken free of the stodgy figuration that—as the Scuderie show perhaps inadvertently demonstrated—had often beleaguered the movement's quest for plastic dynamism, all its efforts and rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding.

INTERESTINGLY, THE PANORAMA of pan-European modernist and avant-garde movements was the central subject of Coen's independent curatorial effort at the Museo di Arte Moderna e Contemporanea (MART) in Rovereto, "*Futurismo 100: Illuminazioni: Avanguardie a confronto: Italia, Germania, Russia.*" Of all the centenary exhibitions, the MART show was the most intrepid, foregrounding the international spirit of avant-garde production on the eve of World War I, with particular reference to the circle of Expressionist,

Cubist, Orphist, and abstract artists gathered around Herwarth Walden's Berlin journal *Der Sturm* (founded in 1910) and to the Russian Primitivists, Cubo-Futurists, and Rayists. Eschewing the traditional format of an exhibition catalogue, the show's accompanying publication is a book of primary documents pertaining to the synchronic diffusion of Futurism beyond Milan, each of its sections organized around a specific city, or pairing thereof, in which this diffusion took place: Paris, Berlin, Florence-Rome, Moscow, and New York. Culled from archival and published sources alike, this book is a major work of scholarship in its own right, representing some twenty years of research.

Putting aside the usual art-historical obsession with unidirectional paths of influence, the MART show sought instead to build a network of resonances through thoughtful juxtaposition of specific objects. It was helped in this endeavor by its installation, with truly exceptional works by Robert Delaunay, Wassily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, and others. By constellating the Italians with their avant-garde counterparts abroad, the exhibition effectively reread Futurism: It foregrounded the abstraction that was always latent in the Italian movement but was rarely made explicit in its early years. Boccioni's large oil *Dynamism of a Human Body*, 1913, and Severini's *Forms of a Dancer in the Light* (*Dancer with Paillettes*), 1912, for example, were but two cases in point. (In this regard, the absence of Balla in Rovereto—due to the consignment of his major paintings to an exhibition planned for the Museo Correr in Venice but canceled at the eleventh hour—was a real shame.) Thinking about Futurism in terms of its nascent abstraction, rather than its emphasis on the iconography of modernity—all those speeding automobiles and electric lights—defamiliarizes our object of study, affording it new plenitude and breadth. In the spirit of the movement itself, then, the MART's take on Futurism looked forward to the next big birthday party—the celebration of abstraction's hundredth year—which will all too soon be upon us. □

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