Futurism, or: How to Be Shot of it

Arnaud Labelle-Rojoux

Translator: Simon Pleasance

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/565>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.565

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 April 2009

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Arnaud Labelle-Rojoux, « Futurism, or: How to Be Shot of it », *Critique d'art* [Online], 33 | Printemps 2009, Online since 26 January 2012, connection on 21 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/565> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.565

This text was automatically generated on 21 April 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

Futurism, or: How to Be Shot of it

Arnaud Labelle-Rojoux

Translation : Simon Pleasance

REFERENCES

Lista, Giovanni. *Le Futurisme : une avant-garde radicale*, Paris : Gallimard, 2008, (Découvertes)

Lista, Giovanni. *Le Journal des futurismes*, Paris : Hazan, 2008

Serra, Maurizio. *Marinetti et la révolution futuriste*, Paris : Ed. de l'Herne, 2008, (Carnets)

Villers, Jean-Pierre de. *Debout sur la cime du monde : manifestes futuristes 1909-1924*, Paris : Dilecta, 2008

Futurisme et surréalisme, Lausanne : L'Age d'homme, 2008

Le Futurisme à Paris : une avant-garde explosive, Paris : Ed. du Centre Pompidou ; Milan : 5 Continents, 2008

- 1 All the signs were, probably, there telling me not to pass comment on the topicality of Italian Futurism for the review critique d'art. First and foremost, the on-going bad press about Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and his associated flock, with an unambiguous shift towards Mussolini's fascism, making any contact—even at an intellectual level—with Futurism dubious; more specifically, the show at the Centre Pompidou devoted to "Early Futurism" (1909-1915). This latter, brandishing every shade of revolt, emerges—and this may well make a dent in certain Gospel truths—aggrandized by the comparison with its better respected Parisian cousin, Cubism. Perceived all of a sudden as over scrupulous and formalist, it duly bolsters a nagging critical stimulus precisely where, hitherto, a selective memory or cosy ignorance sufficed to settle things with the Futurist painters likened to cameo roles. Lastly, not being a thoroughbred art historian, I sensed no special brief involving either rehabilitation or condemnation, in the face of a movement which nevertheless bids us to take up a "stance". It was an essay received by email from Marc Dachy, a recognized Dada expert, with the deliberately provocative title, *Une Avant-garde*

*ridicule*¹, which decided me to plunge back into reading the various Futurist manifestos², and question the place of Futurism in the history of the avant-gardes.

- 2 Modernity, as we well know, cannot be scaled down to the different movements described and/or self-proclaimed as “avant-garde”, but it is indisputably indebted to them for the far-reaching changes that have occurred in every area of creative artwork. So there is no point in trying to call back into question what Dada, Surrealism, Lettrism, the Situationist International, and Fluxus were, on the pretext that what hallmarks them all is the fact that they formed groups around often impassioned thinkers, stepped up the number of messianic manifestos, and indulged in much invective. Their legacy, albeit not always claimed, appears broadly shared, whether one refers to the poetry, objects or action-art. Judging by the evidence, the same does not apply to Italian Futurism, despite its undeniably avant-garde nature. In particular if we reckon that what sets the avant-garde apart from any old art or literary school is, in addition to its incorporation in the age, its desire to threaten it by allocating to the artist a role akin to that of the activist. Hullabaloo and hurly-burly, buzzwords, rebukes and reprimands, fire and backfire, refusal of all manner of conformity, routine, and earmarked aesthetic arenas: the avant-garde is inseparable from all-encompassing systems of thought and discourse rooted in certainty. This is why the legacy afore-mentioned is never accepted without prior specifications by potential offshoots. The swaggering Marinetti’s full membership (give or take one or two slight reservations) in the Fascism regime makes the Futurist bequest perform more awkward than others. For all this, should Italian Futurism—which came into being in 1909, let us recall—be seen as an avant-garde, and the first of its century?³ It is of course possible, as Marc Dachy thinks, to consider that it was not only late Futurism with its blatant Fascist sympathies that poses problems, but Futurism as a whole, including the original version, which actually foretold Mussolini-style Fascism⁴ by way of its vituperative rhetoric, its warmongering bellicosity and its patriotism, which all represent its leading ideas. Here again, however, is this incompatible with “the historical contribution of Futurism” as underscored, with many a well illustrated example, by Giovanni Lista⁵ who emphasizes its overall revolutionary dimension? The fact, furthermore, that the movement has not stayed the course is a statement of the obvious. The fact that the troublemaker, with all his bluff stowed away, in reality may have had the soul of a cocked-hatted academician is just as certain (on Marinetti’s “confusionism”, read Maurizio Serra’s excellent essay: *Marinetti et la révolution futuriste*). But can we still deny the scope of manifestos such as “L’Imagination sans fils et les mots en liberté” [(loosely) translated as “Wireless Imagination and Free-wheeling Words”. Trans], “L’Art des bruits” [“The Art of Noises”] and “Le Music-hall”, all dated 1913, which explore hitherto uncharted categories?
- 3 Futurism, as is clear to see, does not seem to be one avant-garde among others, even if, like them all, it cultivated scandal, smithereened genres, and broadened means of creation to the most fleeting of forms. As a justified foil when we talk of Futurism, the denunciation of the Fascist ideology nevertheless sidesteps a broader issue which is seldom broached (except in the manner of the postmoderns in order to clearly scrap “the legacy of the avant-gardes”): the irksome avant-garde tendency towards press-ganging, which Dada, in the end, was the sole movement not to succumb to—but Dada was a movement without a programme, save one that involved being undisciplined, libertarian, anti-war, disparate, international, and, in the person of Tristan Tzara, resistant to the “hygienic future”! The approach, stigmatizing obviously inexcusable persuasions (they

were definitely not just Italian and Futurist), does away, furthermore, with the common causality of the avant-gardes, which was as mysterious as it was necessary to modernity—the causality of the “logical revolts” which informed them, over and above rubber-stamped declaratory commitments. André Breton raised questions in this respect during a lecture delivered in Barcelona in 1922, probably imagining a possible merger of all the avant-gardes: “I reckon that Cubism, Futurism and Dada are not, all things considered, three distinct movements and that all three are part of a more general movement, whose precise meaning and breadth we are still not acquainted with.”⁶ These days, we know that this merger did not exist, except in negative ways in the illusion of going beyond them, as nursed by the Situationist International. Each and every avant-garde remains for a specific while incorporated in history, complete with its scandals, its challenges, and its stimulating utopias, not forgetting its worrisome shadowy zones, its concealments, and its repression. Futurism was one such moment.

NOTES

1. This text has also done the rounds on the Internet. Its title takes up a position diametrically opposed to the subtitle of the exhibition at the Centre Pompidou “Une avant-garde explosive” and ironically hijacks that of Giovanni Lista’s book, *Le Futurisme : une avant-garde radicale*.
2. Jean-Pierre de Villers has selected 27 manifestos published between 1909 and 1924. They are reproduced in facsimile in *Debout sur la cime du monde*. In his preface, the author quite rightly emphasizes their immediate and lasting effect, but he does not attempt to distinguish “early Futurism”, with Umberto Boccioni and Gino Severini, from ‘Marinettism’ with its more disquieting overtones.
3. “Avant-garde des avant-gardes” according to Simona Cigliana, in her essay “Tératopédie et sexualité du Futurisme au Surréalisme”, in *Futurisme et Surréalisme*, pp. 125-146
4. As illustrated by the “Futurist political programme” published in 1913 by the magazine *Lacerba*. In 1922, Gramsci would confirm in a letter to Trotsky that the “spokesmanlike principles of pre-war Futurism have become Fascistic”.
5. In *Futurisme : une avant-garde radicale*, it is a pity about the biased tone of the accounts included at the end of the book, which, while bringing out the hostility from all quarters produced by Futurism, might have offered a clearer understanding of its particular status in the history of the avant-gardes.
6. Quoted by Barbara Meazzi, “Les marges du Futurisme et du Surréalisme : entre ‘l’Esprit nouveau’ et les ‘documents internationaux de l’Esprit nouveau’” in *Futurisme et Surréalisme*, p. 113.