

F. T. Marinetti publishes the first Futurist manifesto on the front page of *Le Figaro* in Paris: for the first time, the avant-garde associates itself with media culture and positions itself in defiance of history and tradition.

On February 20, 1909, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876–1944) published his “Manifeste de fondation du Futurisme,” the first Futurist manifesto, on the front page of the French newspaper *Le Figaro* [1]. This event signaled the public arrival of Futurism, and pointed in multiple ways to its specific project.

First of all, it showed that, from its very outset, Futurism wished to establish the avant-garde’s liaison with mass culture. Second, it demonstrated a conviction that all techniques and strategies operative in mass-cultural production would henceforth be essential for the propagation of avant-garde practices as well; the mere decision to publish the manifesto in the widest-circulation newspaper in France demonstrated the triple embrace of advertising, journalism, and forms of mass distribution. Third, it indicated that, from its initial stages, Futurism was committed to a fusion of artistic practices with advanced forms of technology in a way that Cubism, while confronting this question in the development of collage, would never wholly embrace. The slogans of Futurism that celebrated “congenital dynamism,” “the break-up of the object,” and “light as a destroyer of forms,” while also lauding the mechanical, famously declared that a speeding automobile is “more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace”: this was to prefer the industrialized object to the unique rarity of the cult statue. And last, although not yet visible in 1909, it prepared the way for Futurism to overturn traditional assumptions about the avant-garde’s innate tendency toward, and association with, progressivist, leftist—if not Marxist—politics. For Futurism was to become, in Italy in 1919, the first avant-garde movement of the twentieth century to have its own political and ideological project assimilated into the formation of fascist ideology.

From backwater to frontrunner

In terms of its artists’ models, the background of Futurism is complex. Its sources are to be found in nineteenth-century French Symbolism, in French neo-Impressionist or divisionist painting, and in early-twentieth-century Cubism, which was evolving contemporaneously with Futurism and was clearly known to the majority of the artists in the Italian movement. What was specifically Italian in Futurism’s formation, however, was the very

belatedness of this modernist avant-garde. Thus, at the moment of the manifesto’s first publication, the key figures of Futurist painting, such as Umberto Boccioni (1882–1916), Giacomo Balla (1871–1958), and Carlo Carrà (1881–1966), were still working in the rather *retardataire* manner of 1880s divisionism. None of the strategies that had emerged in Paris in the wake of Cézanne’s discoveries, or in the development of Fauvism or early Cubism, entered Futurist painting at its earliest moment, that is to say, prior to 1910. Furthermore, Futurism was typified by the eclecticism with which these belatedly discovered avant-garde strategies were adapted. Indeed, the speed with which they were then patched together in order to reformulate a new Futurist pictorial and sculptural aesthetic is indicative of that very eclecticism.

In the wake of Marinetti’s manifesto, several other Futurist manifestos followed, written by artists who had joined the group. Among them were *Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto*, published in 1910 and signed by Boccioni, Balla, Carrà, Luigi Russolo (1885–1947), and Gino Severini (1883–1966); the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture*, published in 1912 by Boccioni; *Fotodinamismo futurista*, also published in 1912, by the photographer Anton Giulio Bragaglia; a 1912 manifesto of Futurist music by Ballila Pratella (1880–1955); Russolo’s “The Art of Noises” in 1913; and a manifesto of Futurist architecture by Antonio Sant’Elia (1888–1916) in 1914.

As pronounced in these documents, the strategies of Futurism revolved around three central issues. First, there was an emphasis on synesthesia (the breaking down of the boundaries between the different senses, for instance, between sight, sound, and touch) and kinesthesia (the breaking down of the distinction between the body at rest and the body in motion). Second, Futurism tried to construct an analogue between pictorial signification and existing technologies of vision and representation, such as those being developed by photography—particularly in its extended forms, such as chronophotography—and by early cinema. Third, Futurism’s rigorous condemnation of the culture of the past, its violent attack on the legacies of bourgeois tradition, organized an equally passionate affirmation of the need to integrate art with advanced technology, even the technology of warfare, opening up the movement to fascism.

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pour accepter notre tâche. Quand nous aurons accompli ce que nous nous sommes proposé, nous aurons accompli ce que nous nous sommes proposé.

Les Courtes
Aujourd'hui, à 1 heure, Courses à Vincennes - Gagnant de Favorit

A Travers Paris
Le roi des Belges a quitté M. Standaert, ministre de Belgique à Paris, de déposer en son nom une protestation contre le projet de loi de dégrèvement de l'impôt sur le revenu.

Le Roi à l'Élysée... Palais
Le roi et sa suite ont quitté le palais de l'Élysée à 11 heures.

Le complot Caillaux
M. Caillaux a formé un petit complot pour démissionner de son poste de ministre.

Le Futurisme
M. Marin a écrit une petite notice sur le futurisme.

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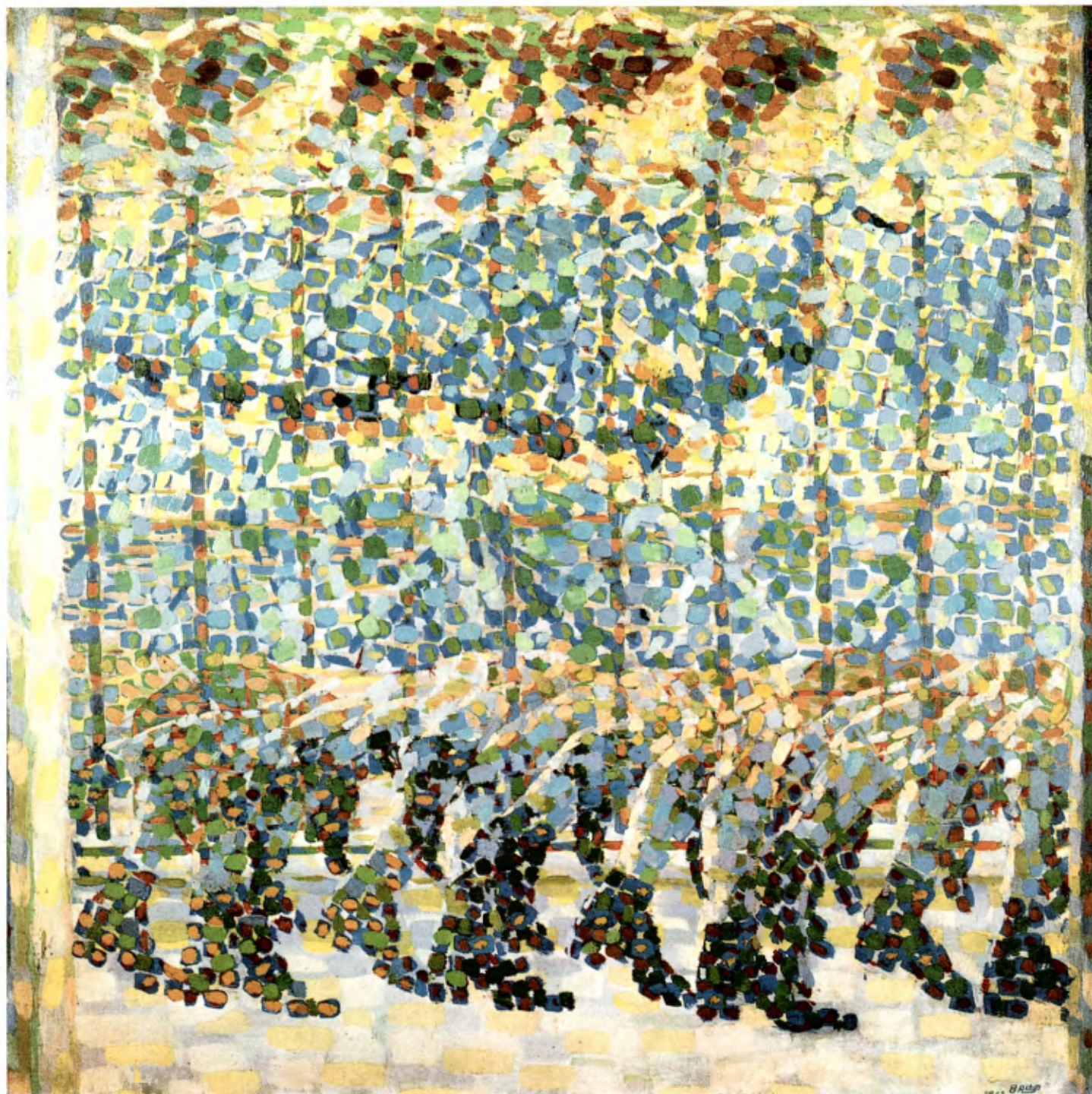
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1900-1909



2 • Giacomo Balla, *Girl Running on a Balcony*, 1912

Oil on canvas, 125 x 125 (49¼ x 49¼)

Futurism's stress on synesthesia and kinesthesia followed directly from its critique of the bourgeois aesthetic according to which painting and sculpture were traditionally understood as static arts. It was in contradistinction to this that Futurism strove to incorporate the experience of simultaneity, temporality, and bodily movement within the boundaries of the art object. Such an attempt to make the perception of movement an integral element of the representation of the body in space was informed by Futurism's discovery of the French scientist Étienne-Jules Marey's

"chronophotography," an early form of stroboscopic work. Paradoxically, however, it was the literalness with which Balla and Boccioni used a divisionist pictorial idiom to interpret Marey's scientific device that marked their work as strangely delayed and limited, since the very status of the painting as a singular static object was something the Futurist painters never challenged. Further, in trying to adopt chronophotography to their own art, the Futurists bound the pictorial signifier into a purely *mimetic* relationship with the technological field—picturing movement by

blurring outlines, for example—rather than into a *structural* one, such as adopting the serial forms of industrial production.

Futures without a past

Balla was undoubtedly the most interesting painter in the movement, even though at the time of the first manifesto in 1909 he was still working in a very traditional way, as he literally applied divisionist methods to the perception of light and public urban space. This is most evident in his painting *Street Light* (1909–10), where the juxtaposition between nature and culture is programmatically stated in the opposition between a street lantern and the moon, and where the dynamism of light waves is executed in a painfully literal manner by swallowlike wedges that surge away from the luminous source, which are transformed chromatically as they move from the iridescence at the picture's center toward the complete absence of chroma at its margins, a representation of darkness and night.



3 • Umberto Boccioni, *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, 1913 (1931 cast)
Bronze, 111.2 × 88.5 × 40 (43¼ × 34½ × 15¼)



4 • Giacomo Balla, *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash*, 1912
Oil on canvas, 89.9 × 109.9 (35½ × 43¼)

By 1912 Balla had redefined his pictorial syntax by folding the repetitive contours characteristic of chronophotography into his own representation of objects. Paintings such as *Girl Running on a Balcony* [2] or *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash* [4], both from 1912, are significant for the literal way they inscribe the simultaneity of the perception of movement onto the spatial organization of the painting. In 1913, Balla's step to abandon representation altogether in order to find a more adequate way to depict speed, temporality, movement, and visual transformation led to one of the first valid models of nonrepresentational painting. With all figuration deleted, these works were devoted both to the repetition of a structural armature in order to articulate sequence and speed and to a nonrepresentational chromatic idiom that abandoned all references to local color. The compositional and coloristic matrix thus formed no longer participates in what could be called

▲ Cubism's transformation of Renaissance perspective into a new phenomenological space; rather, Balla attempts a transformation of pictorial space into a mechanical, optical, or a temporal space by means of fully nonrepresentational strategies.

Two examples of Boccioni's sculpture clarify the Futurist relationship to the kinesthetic perception of objects in space. The first, *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* [3], in its peculiar ambiguity between a robot and an amphibious figure, once again attempts to incorporate the traces visible in Marey's chronophotography into the sculptural body. Yet, at the same time as it inserts the fluidity of perception into a static representation, it generates the peculiar hybrid between spatial contiguity and the singular, holistic, sculptural object. In Boccioni's *Dynamism of a Speeding Horse and House* [5], Futurism's susceptibility to the illusionistic adaptation of motion photography is rejected, however, in favor of a static object in which the effects of simultaneity and kinesthesia are produced by the mere juxtaposition of different materials and the degree of fragmentation to which they are presented. Unlike

▲ 1911

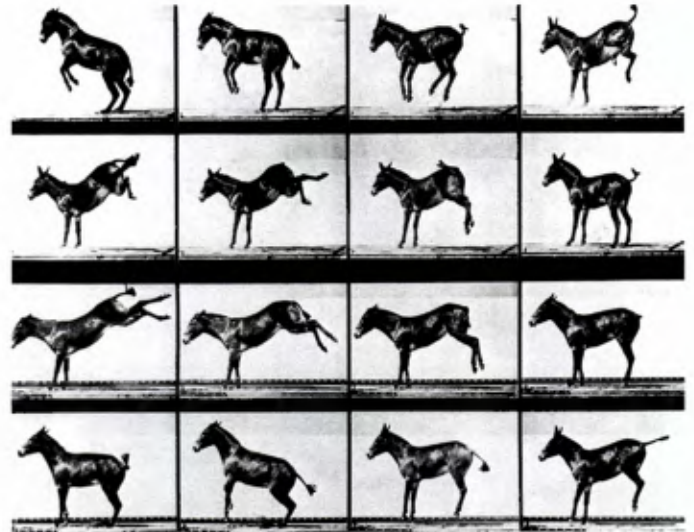
**Eadweard Muybridge (1830–1904)
and Étienne-Jules Marey (1830–1904)**

The Englishman Eadweard Muybridge and the Frenchman Étienne-Jules Marey are yoked in time and by work: not only do they share the same birth and death dates, but also together they pioneered the photographic study of movement in ways that influenced not only the development of Futurist art but also the modern rationalization of labor and, it could be argued, of space-time in general.

First known as a photographer of American West and Central American landscapes, Muybridge was enlisted in 1872 by Leland Stanford, the millionaire ex-governor of California, in a racing dispute about the gait of horses. In Palo Alto, Muybridge photographed horses with a battery of cameras; typically, he arranged the images in rows and reshoot them in a grid that could be scanned both horizontally and vertically. A book, *The Horse in Motion*, which Stanford bowdlerized, appeared in 1882, the same year that Muybridge sailed to Europe for a lecture tour. In Paris he was welcomed by Marey, the famous photographer Nadar, the Salon painter Ernest Meissonier, and the great physiologist Hermann von Helmholtz—some indication of the range of interest in this work that registered perceptual units beyond the limits of human vision.

Unlike Muybridge, who considered himself an artist, Marey was a physiologist by training who had previously worked on graphic methods to record motion. When he first saw work by Muybridge in the science journal *La Nature* in 1878, he turned to photography as a more precise and neutral way to register discrete movement. Marey first devised a photographic gun with a circular plate that yielded near-instantaneous serial photographs from a singular viewpoint. He then used a slotted disk in front of the camera to break up movement in set intervals that could be registered on a single photographic plate; it was this work that he first described as “chronophotography.” In order to avoid superimposition, Marey clad his subjects entirely in black, with metal-studded strips along arms and legs (bits of paper were used for animals). Along with the singular viewpoint, this device effectively restored a spatio-temporal coherence to the very perceptual field that was otherwise fragmented. It was more scientific than the Muybridge approach, which did not have a consistent point of view or interval between images, but it was also less radical in its disruption of the apparent continuum of vision.

It was this disruption that most intrigued the modernists—the Futurists in their pursuit of a subversive speed, and artists like Marcel Duchamp in their search for spatio-temporal dimensions not previously perceived. But could it be that, like Muybridge and Marey, these artists were also involved in a historical dialectic that far exceeded their work as individuals—a modern dialectic of a ceaseless renovation of perception, of a perpetual liberating and disciplining of vision that would persist throughout the twentieth century?





5 • Umberto Boccioni, *Dynamism of a Speeding Horse and House*, 1914–15
Gouache, oil, wood, paste-board, copper, and painted iron, 112.9 × 115 (44½ × 45¼)

Unique Forms of Continuity in Space, which retains the traditional sculptural methods of modeling and bronze-casting, the work incorporates industrially produced materials as called for in Boccioni's own manifesto: leather, found fragments of glass, shards of metal, preformed elements of wood. One of the first fully nonrepresentational sculptures of the twentieth century, it compares most adequately with the abstract sculpture produced in Russia at that time by Vladimir Tatlin.

Insofar as collage surfaced as the key technique in the contradictory range of Futurism's attempts to fuse avant-garde sensibilities with mass culture, Carrà's *Interventionist Demonstration* (6) is a central example of the Futurist aesthetic as it came to a climax just before World War I. Indeed, the work incorporates all of the devices with which Futurism was most engaged: the legacy of divisionist painting; the Cubist fragmentation of traditional perceptual space; the insertion of clippings from newspapers and found materials from advertising; the suggestion of kinesthesia through a visual dynamic set up by the collage's construction as both a vortex and a matrix of crisscrossing power lines set as mutually counteractive diagonals; and last, but not least, the juxtaposition of the separate phonetic dimension of language with its graphic signifiers.

Typically enough, the phonetic performance of language in *Interventionist Demonstration* is in almost all instances onomatopoeic. In directly imitating the sounds of sirens (the wail evoked by "HU-HU-HU-HU"), the screeches of engines and machine guns ("TRrrrrrrrr" or "traaak tataatraak"), the screams of people ("EVVIVAAA"), it is distinctly different from the structural

analysis of the phonetic, the textual, and the graphic components of language in Russian Cubo-Futurist poetry or the calligrammes of Apollinaire. The juxtaposition of anti-German war slogans ("Down with Austro-Hungary") with found advertising material, or the concatenation of Italian patriotic declarations ("Italia Italia") with musical fragments, continues the technique of Cubist collage but turns this aesthetic into a new model of mass-cultural instigation and propaganda. Its glorification of war is further registered in the drum beats evoked by the words "ZANG TUMB TUUM."

A liberation of language: *parole in libertà*

Zang Tumb Tuum of 1914, the first collection of Marinetti's "free word poetry" was prefaced by his slightly earlier manifesto of Futurist poetry, *Destruction of Syntax—Imagination without Strings—Words-in-Freedom*. Using a set of expressive typographic and orthographic variations and an unstructured spatial organization, *Zang Tumb Tuum* tries to express the sights, sounds, and smells of the poet's experience in Tripoli. This assertion of "words-in-freedom" emerged from a long and complicated dialogue with late-nineteenth-century Symbolist poetry and its early-twentieth-century legacy in France. Although deeply influenced by, and dependent upon, the example of Mallarmé, Marinetti publicly declared his opposition to the French poet's project. Insisting that



6 • Carlo Carrà, *Interventionist Demonstration*, 1914
Tempera and collage on cardboard, 38.5 × 30 (15½ × 11¼)

words must be liberated from the static and esoteric models of language with which Mallarmé had been engaged, Marinetti promoted a new dynamic of “wireless imagination” intended to assimilate the simultaneity of perception to the new sounds of advertising and technological experience. *Words-in-Freedom* is the programmatic declaration by Marinetti in which all of the traditional fetters to which language had been subjected—lexicity, the production of meaning, syntax, grammar—are supposedly ruptured in favor of a purely phonetic, purely textual, purely graphic performance. But in fact, against Marinetti’s will, the mimetic relationship to the technological apparatus binds this model of poetry all the more into the traditional determinants of linguistic representation.

This was the source of one of the conflicts that arose between Marinetti and the Russian avant-garde when in 1914 the Italian poet went to Moscow in an attempt to proselytize for Futurism. What the Russian Cubo-Futurist poets criticized Marinetti for was the relationship manifested in his work between poetry and the mimetic operations of language, particularly his use of onomatopoeia—the formation of words imitating sounds associated with the act or objects to be denoted. At that time, the Russian Futurists had already moved to a structuralist understanding of the arbitrary logic of language, which meant that they enforced a strict separation of both the phonetics and the graphics of signs—the way language sounds and the way it looks—from the natural world to which those signs might refer. So insistent were the Russian Futurists on making this separation the subject of their own writing that they carried it to the point of constructing a new antisemantic and antilexical poetry.

Fascism and Futurism

The rise of fascism in Italy at the end of World War I brought the ideological and political orientation of Futurism into focus. The celebration of technology, the anti-*passatista* (antitraditionalist) position, the rigorous condemnation of the culture of the past, the violent deformation of the legacies of bourgeois culture, were all essential elements of Futurism from its inception. But these were now linked with an equally passionate affirmation of the necessity to integrate art and warfare as the most advanced instance of the technological. If in the first manifesto Marinetti had constructed a myth of origin for the Futurist movement—he recounts the moment of his awakening when, racing in his sports car, he overturned in the muddy waters of a suburban ditch thereupon to emerge, reborn, as a post-Symbolist artist and Futurist poet—this had already announced a deep commitment to the irrationality of violence and power.

Marinetti’s espousal of advanced industrial technology and the aesthetic of the machine led him to welcome the outbreak of war as a great purification in line with his overall hatred of tradition and bourgeois cultural subjectivity. As the first avant-gardist to set out deliberately to destroy tradition, Marinetti declared his own war by calling for the destruction of cultural institutions—opera houses,

theaters, libraries, museums. In doing so, he positioned Futurist culture at the forefront of a newly emerging rupture between the avant-garde and tradition by organizing the avant-garde as the stage for the annihilation of historical continuity and historical memory. Further, Marinetti’s subsequent, postwar attempt to synchronize art and advanced technology with fascist ideology was to be the only occasion in the history of twentieth-century avant-gardes where a link between these elements was positioned explicitly in the perspective of reactionary right-wing politics.

In the embrace of fascism by Marinetti—who unsuccessfully stood for parliament as a Fascist Party candidate in 1919, and who eventually became Mussolini’s cultural adviser—one of the key problems facing twentieth-century avant-gardes thus emerged. This is the question of whether avant-garde practices are still to be situated within the bourgeois public sphere or whether they should aim to contribute to the formation of different mass-cultural public spheres, be they fascist public spheres (if there could ever be such a thing) or proletarian public spheres, the goal of Russian and Soviet artists working at that time. Alternatively, as in the case of Dada, the avant-garde could rally for the destruction of the bourgeois public sphere, including its institutions and discursive formations.

With the accidental death of Boccioni in 1916, the death in battle of Sant’Elia in the same year, and the radical change in political and aesthetic orientation on the parts of Severini and Carrà around the same time, Futurism lost its way as an avant-garde movement (although Marinetti would continue to pursue a Futurist agenda in art, literature, and politics throughout the twenties and thirties). Severini, living in Paris, abandoned his Cubo-divisionist pictorial strategies in 1916 and adopted pure, classical forms inspired by the art of the Italian Renaissance. By returning to tradition in this way, and by using quattrocento painting as the matrix of *italianità*, he was a harbinger of the later, gradual secession of fascist ideology from modernist practices. This ideology of the nation state would undertake to connect itself instead to the roots of local cultures, whose origins it would seek to recover.

The encounter between Carrà and Giorgio de Chirico in a military hospital in Ferrara in 1917 triggered a further instance of counterreaction within the avant-garde. Carrà had already become restless under the yoke of Futurism and had written that he no longer cared for “emotional electricians’ games.” Now, he absorbed de Chirico’s attention to form [7]. Practically overnight, Carrà abandoned all the Futurist projects with which he had been involved to practice the older man’s *pittura metafisica*. In this sense, the discovery of de Chirico has to be recognized as an integral element of Italian avant-garde thinking at that time. Turning to the geometric solidity of “primitivist” painters such as Le Douanier Rousseau and the early Renaissance artists Giotto and Uccello, Carrà spoke of them as the creators of “plastic worlds,” or better, “plastic tragedies.” His article on Giotto in the newspaper *La Voce* (1915) addressed Giotto as a man devoted to “pure plasticity,” the “fourteenth-century visionary” who brought the “magic silence of forms” back to life. Giotto, he wrote, was dedicated to “the original



7 • Giorgio de Chirico, *The Disquieting Muses*, 1925
Oil on canvas, 97 × 67 (38¼ × 26½)

solidity of things.” Carrà’s celebration of formal solidity as the antidote to Futurist disintegration repeats the terms through which modernist painting had originally developed pictorial stability in reaction against a pursuit of the evanescence of light. “We, who feel that we are the nondegenerate offspring of a great race of builders,” Carrà wrote in the catalogue of his 1917 exhibition in Milan, “have always sought precise, substantial figures and terms, and the ideal atmosphere without which a painting does not go beyond elaborate technicalism and episodic analysis of external reality.” Thus does Carrà reject Impressionism and the Futurist imitation of its effects. In 1918, Carrà theorized the method that he and de Chirico had developed in the essay “Contributo a un nuove arte metafisica.”

Carrà’s *Metaphysical Muse* [8] demonstrates his absorption of de Chirico’s visual repertory. On the slanting floorboards of a shallow stage, he places the plaster mannequin of a tennis player, in combination with geometrical solids and painted stage sets of maps and buildings. In fact, all the paintings he showed in the Milan exhibition shared the nocturnal silence of de Chirico’s palace courtyards and city squares, interrupted by nothing except long, isolated shadows.



8 • Carlo Carrà, *Metaphysical Muse*, 1917
Oil on canvas, 90 × 66 (35½ × 26)

After noise, silence; after the celebration of the mass displacements imposed by war, praise for the patrician sensibilities of tradition. Carrà’s and Severini’s emergence from the very ranks of Futurism to become key followers of de Chirico was the first and perhaps the most intense example of the antimodernism or countermodernism that subsequently spread throughout Europe in various parallel movements, to which the collective name “*rappel à l’ordre*” was given. Paradoxically, it was within the art of de Chirico and Carrà that the dimension of historical memory so vituperatively prosecuted and eroded within the first four years of Futurist activity returned with a vengeance, to become the central issue within which these artists would continue to operate. BB/RK

FURTHER READING

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- Christine Poggi, *In Defiance of Painting* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992)