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“And What is There to See in an Old Picture?” The concept of the museum in Early futurist manifestos

I cannot accept that our sorrows, our fragile courage . . . should be taken for daily walks through the museum. (Founding Manifesto, 1909)

When Futurism emerged on the cultural arena in 1909 its main goal was to dismiss the meaning of all earlier achievements, to repudiate any link to past or existent traditions so that it could start anew, with a clean slate, to “emerge naked from the river of time”¹. The *tabula rasa*, proclaimed so ostentatiously by the futurists as their only “foundation”, was not only a rhetorical device, but also a meaningful operational mechanism in their strategy. In a country where tradition was a fundamental factor in defining the aesthetic standard a fresh beginning was, the Futurists have argued, the only mode of surpassing the perpetual value system. Yet, rejecting the past was neither a new element in the cultural discourse, nor an entirely novel strategy. Futurism was able however, from the very beginning, to understand the wide ranging implications this open repudiation of cultural values would have, and, with forcefulness and ingenuity, to use the fullest impact of this denial to suggest the superiority of its innovative elements.

“We will fight with all our might the fanatical, senseless and snobbish religion of the past.”² With inflammatory and incisive statements the futurists openly acknowledged throughout their existence the necessity to renounce the perception of the past and tradition as essential elements in the cultural discourse, and overtly discarded the validity

of their cohesive and coherent attributes. As early as 1909, the Founding Manifesto powerfully, and undeniably, projected the futurist stance towards past and tradition. In a bombastic style, and with open, audacious, and rebellious statements, supported by carefully orchestrated hidden metaphors and graphic allegories, the text authoritatively argued for a total breakaway from the pre-existent, imposed, cultural boundaries, arbitrarily determined by “the eternal, futile worship of the past”³. This “cry of rebellion”⁴, was not directed to a single field, but to Italian culture as a whole. The innovative factor of this abrupt rupture and discontinuity, is to be found not only in Futurism’s idiosyncratic rhetoric, but also in the particularities of the national context in which this movement was born.

The museum emerges as early as the Founding Manifesto as the most powerful and encompassing metaphor of the past. The metaphor is decoded in a later text where the futurists stated more overtly that the “religion of the past [has been] encouraged by the vicious presence of the museums”⁵. In the context of the First manifesto analogies,—a favorite attribute of futurist visual and textual vocabulary—are used to clarify the meaning of the metaphor. “Museums: cemeteries!” Equating in this condensed statement a venerated cultural institution with death, the futurists openly rejected the validity and the vitality of existing taste and acknowledged their aim to formulate an artistic program which would challenge the past and look for innovative alternatives.⁶ It is significant to point out here that while the Founding manifesto was essentially intended to establish a literary movement, it is in the visual arts that Marinetti found the most evocative examples.⁷ The futurists argued that the museums, “these reinforced-concrete buildings”⁸, project a staged, redundant and arbitrary inner narrative.

Museums . . . Identical, surely, in the promiscuity of so many bodies unknown to one another. Museums: public dormitories where one lies forever besides hated or unknown beings. Museums: absurd abattoirs of painters and sculptors ferociously slaughtering one another with colours and lines along fought-over walls!⁹

Separated from the “miracles of contemporary life” behind a constructed, artificial facade, the museum, the futurists argued, is a focal

source of perpetuating existent values and suppressing any innovative element. "And what is there to see in an old painting . . . ? Admiring an old painting is like pouring our sensibility into a funerary urn instead of projecting it into the distance."¹⁰ The constant juxtaposition of the museum and death is intended to suggest even more dramatically the dichotomy between this institution and "the surrounding environment . . . the frantic life of our great cities"¹¹. While the museum appears to have a coherent, progressive, and logical inner structure, this dichotomy is the source of the museum's unchangeable aesthetic values. "[H]iding behind a facade of false modernity . . . they [the museums] are actually ensnared by tradition, academism and, above all, a nauseating cerebral laziness."¹² The stagnation inherent in the museum's discourse is also the originator of its isolation. However, the futurists argue that the museum's authoritative position allows its immobile inner structure to become a unique aesthetic standard which is imposed and disseminated to a large audience. "[T]he public always sees as it has been taught to see, through eyes wrapped by routine."¹³ The futurists were eager to suggest to the audience to look "upon nature and not upon the museum as the one and only standard".¹⁴ It is not only in this text that the futurists address the audience directly by suggesting that the museum has the power to impose its aesthetic standard. In the 1912 "Manifesto of Futurist Literature", Marinetti's argument for the dismantling of the "I" is based on the suggestion that "the inner self [of the individual] was destroyed by the library and the museum."

The notion of death is the pivotal element in constructing the metaphor of the museum as it is the key of the concept of the "masterpiece" and "immortal" artists. A contemporary writer, Mario Morasso has also pointed out in his critical analysis of the 1904 Venice Biennale, that the category of "Dead artists" was an important part of the classification within the exhibition structure of the Venetian exhibition¹⁵. Indeed the futurists wanted to underline that this "fanatical worship of all that is old and worm-eaten"¹⁶, projected by the inner structure and the narrative of the museum is enhancing a perception of an absolute aesthetic value, based exclusively on previous cultural discourse. The artists and the artworks, apparently so coherently represented by the linear progression outlined by the narrative of the exhibition space,

are in fact heightening the artificiality of the aesthetic discourse of the museum. The double “death” of the artist—first in a literal sense, and secondly in a symbolic one as part of a constructed realm—, is ironically at the same time, the originator of artistic “immortality”. Within the inner structure of the museum the “immortality” of the artist becomes the most valuable attribute in staging the qualities of the “eternal” masterpiece. The relationship between death, past, immortality and the “aura” of originality and superiority that are given within the cultural discourse is heightened by Papini in a direct and sarcastic way.

It is certain that many people in front of whom we bend . . . with respect, our hat in our hand, . . . would be valued very differently had they been among us today . . . The genius who lives likes us . . . does seem to resemble a “genius” [as his image] is too contradictory to the rhetoric. Death is necessary so that the distance can create the halo and the legend that is needed.¹⁷

Moreover, the “passion for eternal things, a desire for immortal, imperishable masterworks”¹⁸ which, by recycling the same aesthetic values, allows the stagnation of the inner discourse of the museum, (and of culture) and becomes the major impediment to any cultural rejuvenation. The almost religious reverence for the past, present in Italian cultural discourse, is very articulately presented in a contemporary critique of the Founding Manifesto, published in France, in which the author acknowledges that “In Italy you cannot make a step without bumping into a dead [body] . . . a famous dead. They live in a perpetual church where everything is sacred . . . ”¹⁹

The concept of “death” has not only a unifying quality but also bears some similarities to Barthes’ disjunction between the artist/author and the artwork. In Futurism, the entire structure of the museum is expanded symbolically to represent the authoritative symbiosis of the immortality of both the artist and the masterpiece. In this process both the “author” and the “eternal masterpiece” are displaced from their originating source, and yet in this new, staged structure they construct the most persuasive forum of supreme, definite value. Unquestionable, static, and above all unique and unattainable, eternal values become the common denominator of the inner narrative of the museum. This apparent cohesiveness of the museum, based however solely on past,

recognized, artistic vocabulary, heightens its aesthetic vision of “art-as-ideal, art-as-sublime-holy-inaccessible . . . art-as-torment-purity-vow-solitude-disdain for reality”²⁰.

It is interesting to compare the futurist deconstruction of the museum, with recent analysis, by Derrida, Foucault, Preziosi and Weber, among others, of the development and structure of various cultural institutions, and their mode of operating within society.²¹ There are significant similarities between the authoritative aesthetic standard of the museum and the notion of the “artist/author” described by Foucault in “What is an Author?”. Moreover the futurists recognize, in an almost Derridean fashion, the “abyss [that exists] between these docile slaves of past tradition and [them] free moderns, who are confident in the radiant splendour of [their] time”.²² Preziosi’s analysis of the development of the Fogg museum in the late 19th century, underlines how the concern for creating a coherent system based on classifications triggers the structure its archive to be constructed as “historical and genealogical narratives, fixing historical, geographic, and media boundaries. . . . [T]he evolving system was grounded in a notion of periodicization metaphorized after Vasarian framework of the-man-and/as-his-work.”²³ Similarly, Morasso as early as 1904, has perceived this desire to define clear categories and divisions being detrimental to the structure of the Venice Biennale, and later the futurists would perceive it as an inherent problem in museums. Moreover, the futurists would argue that this interest in creating divisions, for defining and reinforcing limits and borderlines, would generate a type of “labelling” among contemporary artists that would have only a negative impact in the development of the artist.

And about our esteemed “specialists”? Throw them all out. Finish them off! The Portraitists, the Genre Painters, the Lake Painters, the Mountain Painters. We have put enough with these impotent painters . . . phoney ceramists, sold-out poster painters, idiotic illustrators²⁴

While in the Founding Manifesto the futurists do not elaborate on the extend of the “damages of daily round[s] of the museum, libraries and academies (cemeteries of vain effort)”²⁵, in later texts they openly acknowledge that the “spineless worshipping of old canvases, old statues and old bric-a brac, . . . of everything which is worm-ridden

and corroded by time''²⁶ is an impediment for the promotion and acceptance of new art and younger artists. In the manifesto of Futurist painters the tone is vociferous and the metaphors and allegories are replaced by a direct attack using laconic, yet striking sentences.

Ask these priests of a veritable religious cult, these guardians of old aesthetic laws, where can we go and see the works of Giovanni Segantini today. Ask them why the officials of the Commission have never heard of the existence of Gaetano Previati. Ask them where they can see Medardo Rosso's sculptures, or who takes the slightest interest in artists who have not yet had twenty years of struggle and suffering behind them, but are still producing works destined to honour their fatherland?²⁷

The museum should be perceived in futurist texts in an allegorical sense, as it symbolizes other institutions with a "passeist" character: academies, libraries, "museums and cemeteries of mummified syllogism."²⁸ The inner immobility and stagnation, the basis and coherence of the museum's inner structure, is allegorically expanded by the futurists to gigantic proportions, encompassing cities and the entire country. Venice was particularly targeted by the futurists in their manifestos. With offensive statements and striking analogies, these texts intended to highlight not only the encompassing values of the notions of past and tradition, the stage-like artificial structure of the city, but also the diametrically opposed, innovative character of Futurism.

The manifestoes addressed to Venice, a declamatory call for rejecting the fixed myth constructed by the city, are among the best examples of Futurism's capacity of working as an effective and efficient advertising campaign. Disseminated in traditional forms, such as journals and books, read in conferences and mailed to most European newspapers, the text of "Against Passeist Venice" was made available to the public in the most innovative mode to date. On 27 April 1910, 800.000 copies of the text,—an astonishing number even by a xerox and computer age standard,—were scattered from the top of the Tower in Piazza San Marco.

We repudiate ancient Venice, . . . exhausted and ravaged . . . market of antiquarian fakers . . . great sewer of tradition. We want to heal this rotting city, magnificent sore of the past.²⁹

It is difficult to evaluate what was more shocking to the Venetians: the text, or the novel means by which it was disseminated. Only two months later, however, Boccioni had an exhibition in Venice, at Ca'Pesaro, and Marinetti did not miss the occasion to further promote the futurist ideas in that city. At the Fenice theater in Venice the futurists presented, in the format of the *serate*, the text of "Futurist Speech to the Venetians". With similar aggressivity the text projected the futurist vision of the city's facade immersed in the past.

Venetians! Venetians! Why would you want still and forever be faithful slaves of Past, the nurses of the saddest hospital in the world, where dying souls, poisoned by the virus of sentimentalism are languishing.³⁰

Here again, the visual arts are the key in deconstructing the museum-like staging of the city. Venice is a city of "old paintings", "fake antiquarians", "imitators and plagiarists". The notion of death is, again, a central element in projecting the artificiality of pre-existent, a structure whose pattern and coherence is based exclusively on past aesthetic values. Direct and offensive, without leaving any room for subtleties the text denounces the "romantic", "sentimental" facade of the city which "murmurs invitations to all visitors of the world."³¹

Shouldn't I compare your gondoliers to grave diggers, who dig in a rhythm, deep pits in a flooded cemetery?³²

What is been dismissed here is not the city as a whole, but rather its constructed facade, which becomes an impediment for Venice to live in the present. Contrary to what seems to be suggested by these texts, the futurists do not lack the respect and reverence inspired by the genuine cemeteries. In fact they argue that even those spaces have not been spared from the artificiality of the cultural discourse. "Down with all marble-chippers who are cluttering up . . . and profaning our cemeteries!"³³ To enhance even more its symbolic value within the cultural discourse, the allegory of the museum is extended to the whole country. Not only is Italy covered with "museums like so many graveyards", but Italy itself becomes a "land of the dead, a vast Pompeii, white with sepulchres" with fixed aesthetic values. Indeed these analogies are projected on to the state of Italian culture, a culture where, the futurists argue, "the traditional aesthetic laws reigned supreme"³⁴.

I should point out, however, that the futurists were not the first to challenge the institutionalized aesthetic values of museum. As early as the mid 19th century, Baudelaire, without dismissing the validity of this institution, had, however, perceived the limitations imposed by the Salon, and implicitly of the Academy, as well as the consequences of exclusively studying past traditions. More blatant are the comments made by artists as different as Courbet, Pissarro, Cezanne, or Nolde who have acknowledged the shifting role of the museum within the artistic discourse of the late 19th and the early 20th century. Cezanne moderately stated that the Louvre should be only an intermediary, and that the artist must free oneself from all schools. Courbet's rhetorical, yet blunt proposition, foreshadowing the futurist rhetoric, that a "vast bonfire should be made of the Louvre and all its contents" was similar in both tone and content to that of Pissarro, who has suggested that "all necropolises of art should be burned." Equally significant is Nolde's comment in a 1912 text which echoes and parallels futurists' concerns. "Our museums are becoming larger and fuller, and they are growing fast. I am no friend of these vast agglomerations, which suffocate us with their size."³⁵

I do not want to suggest here that the dismissal of the museum as a focal aesthetic standard was widely expressed by others, rather I want to point out again Futurism's ability not only to synthesize previously introduced ideas, but also to present them with an unprecedented forcefulness in accessible, yet memorable laconic phrases. Once again Futurism's aim to reach a mass audience with an advertising-like mechanism, proved to be an efficient tactic. There are very few who recall Pissarro, Nolde's or even Courbet's stance towards the museum, while the futurists' view became a "stigma" which, too often, has overshadowed the profound implications of their theory.

"We will destroy the museums . . . Turn aside the canals to flood the museums! . . . Oh! the joy of seeing the glorious old canvases bobbing adrift . . . !"³⁶ Needless to say this never happened, nor had the futurists actually intended to do so. However, the rebellious stance of Futurism was neither gratuitous nor superficial. Dismissing the museum as the allegorical representation of the contemporary cultural discourse in which "the tyranny of the notions of harmony and good taste"³⁷

were the sole attributes of the arts, and attacking the “worn-out prototype of the Beautiful and the Great”³⁸, Futurism embarked on a relentless crusade not only to revitalize Italian culture, but also to re-evaluate and redefine the concept of the notion of art.

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Notes:

1. “We Abjure Our Symbolist Masters, the Last Lovers of the Moon”, *Marinetti, Selected Writings*, R.W. Flint editor, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Inc., 1972), p. 66.
2. “Manifesto of the Futurist Painters”, 1910, in *Futurist Manifestos*, Umbro Apollonio, ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973) English translation. p. 24.
3. “Founding Manifesto”, in *Futurismo & Futurismi*, exhibition catalogue, Pontus Hulten, editor, (Milan: Bompiani 1986), p. 516. English text.
4. “Manifesto of the Futurist Painters”, Apollonio, op. cit., p. 24.
5. “Manifesto of the Futurist Painters”, p. 24.
6. The rejection of the past has become central to the avant-garde and Roland Barthes has proposed a definition of the avant-garde in which “death” plays the key role. “Being [part] of the avant-garde means understanding death; being arriere-garde is to still love it. ” Quoted by Giovanni Lista, *Les Futuristes*, (Paris: Henri Veyrier, 1988), p. 20.
7. Ironically, the vehement rejection of the past does not have a pivotal role position in the visual vocabulary of the futurists.
8. “Manifesto of the Futurist Painters”, in Apollonio, p. 26.
9. “Founding Manifesto”, in Hulten, p. 516. The relationship between the museum and death has been discussed also by contemporary critics such as Douglas Crimp in his essay, “On the Museum’s Ruins” in *The Anti-Aesthetics, Essays on Post-modern Culture*, Hal Foster, editor, (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1986), pp. 43–57.
10. “Founding Manifesto”, p. 516.
11. “Manifesto of the Futurist Painters”, in Apollonio, op. cit., p. 25.
12. “Manifesto of the Futurist Painters”, p. 25.
13. “The Exhibitors to the Public”, manifesto, 1912 in *Theories of Modern Art*, Herschell B. Chipp, editor, (Los Angeles and Berkeley, University of California Press, 1972), p. 298.
14. “Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto” 1910, In Apollonio, op. cit., p. 29.
15. Mario Morasso, *La Vita Moderna nell’Arte*, (Torino: Fratelli Bocca, Editori,

1904). This book is a critical account of the Fifth Venice Biennale in 1903, which was organized and structured in concordance with *Il nuovo Regolamento* for the show established in 1902. The significance of Morasso's analysis is that it underlines the numerous shortcomings of the exhibition, and, foreshadowing the futurists, heightens the perpetuating aesthetic standards.

16. "Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto" 1910, in Apollonio, op. cit., p. 27.

17. Papini, "Le Passe n'existe pas", reprinted in *Futurisme, Manifestes, Proclamations, Documents*, Giovanni Lista editor, (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1973), p. 92-3. My translation.

18. "The Symbolist Masters . . ." in Marinetti, op. cit., p. 66.

19. Andre Ibels, from the newspaper *La Vie de Paris*, (n. d.) reprinted in *Le Premier Manifeste du Futurisme*, Jean-Pierre A. De Villiers, editor, (Ottawa: Editions de l'Universite d' Ottawa, 1986) p. 161.

20. "Weights, Measures and Prices of Artistic Genius", manifesto, 1914, in Hulten, ed., p. 569.

21. I am referring in particular here to Jocavec Derrida *The Truth in Painting*, (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1983), Michel Foucault's "Panopticism" in *The Foucault Reader*, Paul Rabinow, editor, (1984), and "What is an Author?" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, Donald S. Bouchard, editor, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1977), Samuel Weber *Institutions and Interpretations*, (Minneapolis: UMP, 1987), and ??? Preziosi *Rethinking Art History. Meditations on a Coy Science*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989). See also Louga Crimp, "The Postmodern Museum" in (*Parachute* 46, Mar.-May, 1987, 61-67) or Parruia Mainardi, "Postmodern History at the Musee d'Orsay" (*October* 41, Summer 1987, 109-127). The recent growing interest in an in depth analysis of the museum and its role within the cultural discourse is responsible for many new articles and books on this subject published in the last two years.

22. "Manifesto of the Futurist Painters", Apollonio, p. 25.

23. Preziosi, (1989) Chapter Three, "The Panoptic Gaze and the Anamorphic Archive", p. 75.

24. Manifesto of the Futurist Painters, p. 26.

25. "Founding Manifesto", p. 516.

26. "Manifesto of the Futurist Painters", p. 24.

27. "Manifesto of the Futurist Painters", p. 26.

28. "Weights, Measures and Prices of Artistic Genius", Hulten, p. 570.

29. "Against Passeist Venice", manifesto, in Hulten, p. 596. To maximize the impact of their inflammatory statements, the entire text is composed of only four, very brief paragraphs.

30. "Discours Futuriste Aux Venetiens". 1910, Lista (1973), p. 113. My translation.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

33. "Manifesto of the Futurist Painters", p. 26.

34. "Manifesto of the Futurist Painters", p. 25.

35. Chipp, op. cit., chapters on Post-Impressionism and German Expressionism, pp. 19, 23 and 272. It is significant to mention that the article published in the New York newspaper *The Sun* commenting on the emergence of Futurism and its breakthrough manifesto, mentions the similarities between Courbet's comments and the futurist desire to destroy the museums. See de Villiers, op. cit., p. 171.

36. "Founding Manifesto", in Hulten, pp. 514-16.

37. "Manifesto of the Futurist Painters", Apollonio, p. 26.

38. "The Variety Theater", manifesto, 1913, in Hulten, pp. 588-90.

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