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| Futurism and Dance |
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| Dance, as both motif and medium, corresponds with several aspirations articulated in Futurist *manifesti*. An art form that employs movement as one of its key materials, dance lends itself to the Futurist goal of conveying speed and dynamism. By extension, dance operates in different temporal and spatial registers than painting, sculpture and poetry, media employed in the initial development of a Futurist aesthetic. Dances unfold sequentially, mingling memories of past actions with present perceptions; they occur in real space, as bodies interpenetrate with one another and their surroundings. Associated with modern, urban spaces of entertainment, dance also offered the Futurists a means to explore themes of technology, nightlife, and the crowd. Finally, dance served at the turn of the twentieth century as a primary vehicle for the invention of multimedia art forms—exemplified by the work of Loïe Fuller and the Ballets Russes—thus both mirroring and fueling Futurist experimentation with new genres such as the *serata* and *parole in libertà*. At the same time, dance posed problems endemic to Futurist art and ideology. The medium’s corporeal basis and its longstanding link with female practitioners proved an uncomfortable fit with the ideal Futurist subject, envisioned as a phallic fusion of human and machine. In turn, dance awakened Futurist anxieties about the resistance of somatic and sensual experience, of nature and matter, to their model of militant masculinity. |
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Gino Severini, in nearly 100 pictures on the theme executed between 1909 and 1916, linked dance with sensory immediacy as a means to ‘put the spectator at the center of the picture’—a key tenet of Umberto Boccioni’s 1910 ‘Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto’. Based in Paris, Severini witnessed dance forms ranging from the theatrical stagings of Fuller and Isadora Duncan to social dances such as the tango and *danse de l’ours* (bear dance). In *Dynamic Hieroglyphic of the Bal Tabarin* (1912; Museum of Modern Art, New York), which pictures a popular nightclub south of Montmartre, Severini draws on Neo-Impressionism and Cubism to straddle representational and abstract modes. Partial glimpses of recognizable objects (streamers, skirt ruffles, top hats) commingle with actual objects (sequins affixed to the canvas that refract ambient light) and non-referential elements—lines, shapes and colours intended to evoke movement, sound, and touch. The breakdown of boundaries within and between bodies in this large canvas parallels the imagined entry of the viewer into the scene as a participant. Later works, such as *Dancer=Propeller=Sea* (1915; Metropolitan Museum of Art), use dance to illustrate Severini’s developing theory of ‘plastic analogy’, whereby the process of perception initiates a chain of sensory associations and mental images. The diagonal orientation of this large-scale oil painting enhances the implied movement of its abstract forms, creating the appearance of matter in flux. These swirling shapes, which simultaneously eclipse the performer’s body and materialize its dynamic action, allow Severini to analogize dance both to ocean waves and to airplane propellers, reconciling nature (gendered female in Futurist ideology) with the machine. In *Articulated Dancer* (1915; Fondazione Magnani-Rocca, Parma) Severini employs literal rather than implied kinetics. He rigs a marionette-like female dancer to a non-objective canvas with a system of pulleys, inviting the viewer with a parenthetical clause in the title to ‘pull the string and blow on the moving parts’, and thereby to serve as a partner in the dance the painting performs.  File: SeveriniDancer=Propeller=Sea.jpg  Figure Severini's Dancer=Propeller=Sea, 1915.  Source: <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/488472>  While Severini used dance to develop a Futurist painterly idiom, Futurist artists based in Rome experimented with the production of choreographic works. In 1914, Giacomo Balla conceived a ‘typographical ballet’ entitled *Macchina Tipografica* (*Printing Press*) in which twelve actors impersonate the movements and sounds of a newspaper typesetting machine. Perhaps inspired by F.T. Marinetti’s poetic declamations and the genre of *parole in libertà*, Balla envisioned the dancers as alphabetic letters, devising an onomatopoeic text to be recited during the performance. Serge Diaghilev, based in Rome at that time, considered staging *Printing Press* as a Ballets Russes production. Instead, he opted to realize another of Balla’s theatrical concepts, the ‘dancerless ballet’ *Feu d’artifice* (*Fireworks*, 1917), set to a score by Igor Stravinsky. Staged only once, on 12 April 1917 at the Teatro Costanzi in Rome, *Feu d’artifice* consisted of a sculptural set of geometric constructions onto which colored electric lights were projected, glancing off the set at changing intervals. Dispensing with narrative, subject matter, and even the live performer, this spectacle of pure light, color, and sound partly fulfills the Futurist aim to extinguish the static object and produce dynamism itself. Sketches for this production resemble Balla’s abstract images of political demonstrations, such as *Flags on the Altar of the Country* (1915; Galleria Nazionale d’Arts Moderna, Rome). This connection suggests that dance, for Balla, bore the potential to unify individuals, to harness their energy, and to galvanize a crowd into action—aims directly linked to the Futurists’ nationalistic project during the First World War.  File: CensiAerofuturista.jpg  Figure Giannina Censi in aerofuturista, 1931.  Source: <http://proa.org/esp/exhibition-el-universo-futurista-obras-sala-4-6.php>  During the same years, the Paris-based dancer and poet Valentine de Saint-Point invented a hybrid, dance-based art form called *Métachorie*, which she affiliated with Futurism. Author of the ‘Manifesto of Futurist Women’ and the ‘Futurist Manifesto of Lust’, Saint-Point aimed to transcend the gendered division of body and spirit in Futurist rhetoric. Accordingly, she conceived of *Métachorie* as an ‘idéist dance’ that combined the sensual rhythm of music with the cerebral rhythm of poetry and the geometric stylization of the plastic arts. The first performance of *Metachoric Dances*, on 20 December 1913 at the Comédie des Champs-Élysées, consisted of a solo dance in four sections, labeled ‘Poems of Love’, ‘Atmospheric Poems’, ‘Pantheistic Poems’, and ‘Poems of War’, in which Saint-Point employed a style ranging from sharp and angular to soft, flowing movement. With geometric abstractions projected behind the dancer and a sonoric accompaniment that combined poems by Saint-Point (declaimed by the actor Édouard de Max) and music adapted from compositions by Florent Schmitt, Claude Debussy, Erik Satie, and Francesco Pratella, and perfume wafting through the hall, the *Metachoric Dances* attempted to engage viewers in both mind and body. However, Marinetti repudiated *Métachorie* in his 1917 ‘Manifesto of Futurist Dance’, published after Saint-Point’s second presentation of the genre at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York on 3 April 1917. Critiquing *Métachorie* as ‘static’, ‘emotionless’, and ‘passéiste’, Marinetti called for a more heroic form premised upon the dancer’s fusion with ‘the divine machines of speed and war’—a prescription fulfilled by Giannina Censi’s ‘Aerodanze’, performed on 31 October 1931 at the Galleria Pesaro in Milan, accompanied by poetic declamation by Marinetti and a backdrop of paintings by Enrico Prampolini. Dressed in a shimmering bodystocking and aviator’s helmet, Censi performed movements evoking simultaneously the mechanics of an airplane and the bodily experience of flight. Like the genre of *aeropittura* (aerial painting), invented in 1929, Censi’s ‘Aerodanze’ tie the Futurist worship of the machine to the Fascist image of Benito Mussolini as the nation’s pilot. |
| Further reading:  (Berghaus)  (Fonti)  (Klöck)  (Locke)  (Poggi)  (Veroli) |