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| Vorticism |
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| In 1914, Wyndham Lewis and Ezra Pound began the British avant-garde literary and visual arts movement known as Vorticism. In addition to Lewis and Pound, its members included writers and artists such as Richard Aldington, Lawrence Atkinson, William Roberts, Helen Saunders, Dorothy Shakespear, and Edward Wasworth. David Bomberg, Jacob Epstein, and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska were also associated with the group. Responding to Impressionism, Cubism, and Futurism, the passéism of the British national character and the rise of the First World War, Vorticists produced artwork that emphasized geometric shape, hardness, motion, and power. Pound, who coined the term ‘vorticism,’ referred to the ‘vortex’ as ‘the point of maximum energy.’ By depicting abstract motion and acceleration, they saw themselves as reacting specifically to French Cubism’s reliance on the material world and the speed-fetishism of F.T. Marinetti and the Italian Futurists. Marinetti’s understanding of movement relied on actual machines—cars, airplanes, etc.—whereas other Futurists, such as Umberto Boccioni, sought to explore the interior and exterior sensation of speed by combining abstract and concrete detail. The Vorticist competition with the Futurists was also part of their nationalistic avant-garde campaign. In contrast to what they saw as a reactionary and outdated British literature, Vorticists stressed individuality, attentiveness and aggression in order to champion a new, modern British nation. Lewis introduced many of these ideas in the short-lived but highly influential magazine, *Blast*. The Vorticist movement itself disbanded in the early years of WWI. |
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File: WyndhamLewisComposition.jpg  Figure 1 *Composition*, by Wyndham Lewis, 1913  Source: https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/lewis-composition-n05886  The development of Vorticism cannot be separated from Roger Fry’s Omega Workshops, a London-based artistic community that merged fine and decorative art. Although a member, Lewis was concerned with Fry’s lack of technical skill in furniture and decorative design, his rejection of machine-made art and the prettiness of Omega artwork. These aesthetic disagreements turned more volatile when Lewis became suspicious of the cut Fry received from the sales at the 1912 Post-Impressionist Exhibition. Later, after accusing Fry of arrogating a commission to design a room for the Ideal Home Exhibition, Lewis (along with a few other artists) resigned from Omega, creating a rival artists’ commune known as the Rebel Art Centre, which engaged much more openly with Cubism and Futurism. Many of those who left were simply tired of Fry’s bossiness and, while Lewis became the leader of the new group, the other rebels did not simply fall in line with his aesthetic theories. Lewis’s abstract and often geometric designs represented the ways urban, mechanized existence oppressed humanity at the same time that these new modes of existence gave people (especially artists) greater freedoms and insights into their own intuitions. Christopher Nevinson’s Futurist paintings often depicted engines and mechanical innovation, while Epstein’s sculptures were influenced by Neoclassicism, Cubism, and primitivism.  File: UniqueForms.jpg  Figure 2 *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, by Umberto Boccioni, 1913  Source: http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/485540  The Rebel Art Centre published the inaugural issue of *Blast: Review of the Great English Vortex* in June 1914; the second and final issue, entitled the ‘War Number,’ was published in July 1915. The journal includes essays, reviews, poems, stories, stylized typeface, woodcuts, and reproductions of paintings and sculptures. Mimicking the way Marinetti had declared the existence of Futurism within the pages of the newspaper *Le Figaro* in 1909, the first issue of *Blast* includes the Vorticist manifesto. Attempting to promote British art and nationalism despite a weak Victorian literature and more advanced European art, the manifesto ‘blasts’ and ‘blesses’ different nations, climates, artists, politicians and behaviours. It criticises French sensationalism, America’s messianic vision, and Marinetti’s theories. Breaking away from what they saw as British priggishness, humor, and the effete, provincial nature of Victorian literature, the Vorticists promoted the modern state of Britain and its literature, including its ships, industrial backbone, its suffrage movement, and the biting humor of its literature. In the later ‘War Number’ issue, Lewis saw this avant-garde quality of Vorticist literature as a way to symbolically fight German nationalism and romanticism at the same time that British troops were fighting them on the Western Front. This issue includes numerous abstract designs by Shakespear and Saunders, including Saunders’s *Island of Laputa*. Despite Lewis’s exuberance that *Blast* would continue after WWI, some Vorticists were actually killed during the trench warfare, including Gaudier-Brzeska and T.E. Hulme, an art critic and advocate of Vorticism. Ultimately, wartime and postwar concerns overshadowed avant-garde aesthetics and the importance of art. Lewis would claim years later that *Blast* and Vorticism itself had been ‘snuffed out by the Great War.’ |
| Further reading:  (Antliff and Klein)  (Antliff and Green, The Vorticists: Manifesto for a Modern World)  (Cianci)  (Cork)  (Dasenbrock)  (Hickman)  (Peppis) |