**Vorticism**

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 Wadsworth. 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 In contrast to what they saw as a reactionary and outdated British literature, Vorticists stressed individuality, attentiveness and aggression in order to champion a new, modern British nation.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.

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.

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.”

Images for Vorticism Entry:

1. Umberto Boccioni’s *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913)

Link to Material: http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/485540

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1. Wyndham Lewis’s *Composition* (c. 1913)

Link to Material: https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/lewis-composition-n05886

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3, Page of *Blast* magazine (first page of Manifesto [begins with “Blast First (from

politeness) England]; on page 11 of the magazine)

Link to Material: http://www.modjourn.org/render.php?id=1158591480633184&view=mjp\_object

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1. Helen Saunders’s *Island of Laputa* (1915)

Link to Material: http://smartcollection.uchicago.edu/view/objects/asitem/People$00401126/3/title-asc;jsessionid=C04D47AD7487828FFD6784CFDEBF4AE7?t:state:flow=b70dc760-8b48-4280-8dc7-131b35a90743

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**References and Further Reading**

Antliff, M. and Klein, S.W. (eds.) (2013) *Vorticism: New Perspectives*,New York: Oxford UP. (This edited collection covers the history and reception of Vorticism as well as new critical approaches to the movement.)

Antliff, M. and Green, V. (eds.) (2010) *The Vorticists: Manifesto for a Modern World*, London: Tate Publishing. (With chapters on Cubism and the origins of Vorticism, *Blast* and mechanical reproduction, and Alvin Langdon Coburn’s Vortographs, this essay collection also offers many high-quality reprints of Vorticist woodcuts, paintings, photographs, and statues.)

Cianci, G. (ed.) (1991) *Modernismo/Modernismi: Dall’avanguardia storica agli anni Trenta e oltre*, Milan: Principato. (A key source for a discussion of futurism and the English avant-garde).

Cork, R. (1976) *Vorticism and Abstract Art in the First Machine Age*, Vol. 1. Berkeley:

University of California Press. (This volume traces the growth of Vorticism, from “dissension at the Omega” to WWI. It also includes numerous illustrations—including photographs from the Rebel Art Center, paintings, and reprints from *Blast*.)

Dasenbrock, R.W. (1985) *The Literary Vorticism* *of Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis: Towards the Condition of Painting*, Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP. (In its discussion of the relationship between the modernist arts, this book explores Lewis’s and Pound’s aesthetics—particularly the interaction of the arts in the pages of *Blast* as well as the primacy of painting and its influence on Vorticist literature.)

Hickman, M.B. (2005) *The Geometry of Modernism: The Vorticist Idiom in Lewis, Pound, H.D., and Yeats*, Austin: University of Texas Press. (By looking at the geometrical nature of modernism, Hickman analyzes Vorticist “geometry” as a reaction to British literary effeminacy and as a response to the occult, which would show up in later works by H.D. and Yeats. Hickman offers an insightful analysis of the reception of *Blast*.)

Peppis, P. (2000) *Literature, Politics, and the English Avant-Garde: Nation and Empire,*

*1901-1918*, New York: Cambridge UP. (Peppis’s in-depth study covers Lewis’s reaction to the Edwardian Englishness reflected in *The English Review*, the Vorticists’ competition with Futurism, and their reaction to German militarism and established art.)

Electronic resources:

Both issues of Blast are accessible digitally through the Modernist Journals Project: http://www.modjourn.org/.