

My Futurist Past, Present and Future

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Bruno Munari's relationship with Futurism is a complicated one. This is true not only in historical terms, but particularly in relation to Munari's aesthetics vis-a-vis the formal and experimental legacy of Futurism. What is crucial here is not to attempt to document Munari's degree of adherence to Futurist programmes or his level of involvement with certain projects proposed by the Futurists, but rather to seek to understand the development of his aesthetic creed and his artistic experimentation as it departs from the polymorphous Futurist production.

The few historical accounts available of Munari's early career show, on the one hand, a relationship of proximity to the Futurist movement, and on the other a gradual distancing from and eventually a full emancipation from Marinetti's group. In both his sketchy autobiography and in the various interviews he gave in the 1970s and '80s, Munari showed a tendency to evade questions which referred to his 'Futurist years', and to downplay his initial attachment to the movement, characterising it as a phase in his career that had only historical significance. As Meneguzzo pointed out 'Munari [did] not want to risk that all he [had] done over more than sixty years of work be classified as a derivative of Futurism for the mere fact of having participated – from 1927 to 1936 – in a few exhibitions of the movement [...], as a member of the group'.¹ In fact, Munari claimed – and the oxymoron was consciously and ironically chosen here – that he had had a 'Futurist *past*'.²

One cannot forget that Munari met the Futurists at the very beginning of his career, in a preparatory phase of his artistic development. When, in 1926, Munari moved from his Veneto home town Badia Polesine to Milan, he was nineteen and he almost immediately joined the Futurists. Futurism was one of the driving artistic forces in Italy and possessed some of the most active groups in the country, particularly in Milan. One may wonder if there were opportunistic, self-promotional reasons for joining the Futurist group, although later Munari ironically commented

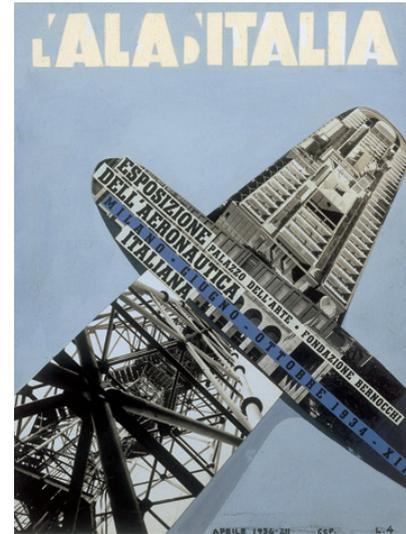
¹ M. Meneguzzo, *Bruno Munari. Opere 1930-1995* (Bergamo: Fumagalli, 1995), p. 7.

² G. Dorflès, 'Capriole lessicali' in B. Finessi (ed.) *Su Munari: 104 testimonianze, 152 inediti di Bruno Munari* (Milan: Abitare Segesta, 1999), p. 192.



*Bombardament
of New York*
1942

L'Ala d'Italia
1934



on Marinetti's abilities as an artistic entrepreneur: 'Marinetti used to summon us imperiously [...] although the art shows he organised were held in the summer, during the low season of art galleries'.³

Although he produced some works which appear quite problematic from a political standpoint (the collages for *L'Ala d'Italia* and *Tempo* or *Bombardament of New York*, 1942),⁴ and in some of his writing of the period – for instance the *Manifesto of the Twenty-five Year-old Futurists* (1934), co-signed with Furlan, Manzoni, Castagnedi and Regina and then published as *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Aeroplastics*⁵ – he paid lip service to Fascism (like many other Italian intellectuals and artists at that time). The ideological motivations behind Munari's artistic activities are quite tenuous, and cannot be lumped together with the general Futurist attitude towards Fascism, particularly in the light of Munari's very democratic and anti-elitist idea of art, as discussed years later in books like *Design as Art*.⁶ Munari's temperament was also quite removed from the bombastic rhetoric and clownish elements of Futurist propaganda. Riccardo Castagnedi, Munari's assistant and business partner in the 1930s, remembers the total lack of *vis polemica* in Munari and the fact that he watched the Futurist 'brawls' and 'riots' with a detached smile.⁷

It is likely that Munari felt drawn towards the Futurists because of the heterogeneity of their methods, their ability to mix different art forms and techniques, their exploration of new media and new avenues of expression, all of which were quite congenial to his own conception of art, and because of their links with the cultural industry (design, advertising, graphics, architecture, etc.). Munari once claimed in an interview that for him, at the early stage of his career, 'it was a matter of "trying things out", of wanting to know as much as possible'.⁸

3 Meneguzzo, p. 10.

4 Cf. J. Schnapp, 'Bruno Munari's Bombs' in J. Mendelson (ed.), *Magazines, Modernity and War* (Madrid: Textos, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 2008), pp. 141-159.

5 In C. Salaris, *Aero... futurismo e mito del volo* (Rome: Le Parole Gelate, 1985), p. 36.

6 B. Munari, *Arte come mestiere* (Bari: Laterza, 1966).

7 R. Ricas, 'Via Carlo Ravizza 14' in Finessi, p. 63.

8 C. A. Quintavalle, 'Intervista a Bruno Munari' in G. Bianchino (ed.) *Bruno Munari: Il disegno, il design* (Mantua: Corraini, 2008), pp. 34-39, 243.

Munari was indeed a conspicuous example of an artist who wished to integrate various sources of inspiration into his artistic vocabulary and to channel those influences into his rigorous artistic research. Munari was in fact influenced by and he borrowed elements from many artists and artistic trends outside the Futurism circle. His interest in abstractionism, for instance, came to the fore quite early on in his career. His first solo exhibition was held at the Milione Gallery in Milan, a venue founded in 1930 by Gino Ghiringhelli and directed by Edoardo Persico, who was at that time the editor of *Casabella*, a magazine which was to become a point of reference for architects and designers worldwide. In the gallery's bulletin, *Il Milione: Bollettino della Galleria del Milione*, Persico serialised some fundamental texts of the abstract art movement in Europe, such as Kandinsky's *Point and Line to Plane (Punkt und Linie zu Fläche, 1926)* or Paul Klee's *Notebooks (Tagebücher, 1920)*, and many of the artists gathering at the Galleria Milione, such as Lucio Fontana, Atanasio Soldati, Mauro Reggiani and Luigi Veronesi also became leading figures in Italian abstract art.⁹ The Milione's library was also one of the first institutions in Italy to make available the famous *Bauhausbücher* (14 volumes published between 1925 and 1931), and where Munari could have familiarised himself with the experimental graphics of Moholy-Nagy and Herbert Bayer, director of the print workshop at the Bauhaus. It was in fact thanks to Persico that the works of Gropius, Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright were discussed and analysed in Italy, and in Milan particularly. Consequently, the Milione Gallery became the meeting point for key representatives of Italian rationalist architecture like Giuseppe Terragni, Alberto Sartoris, Luigi Figini and Gino Pollini.

Regarding the relationship with Futurism, it should not be forgotten that Munari was active during a 'regressive' phase of the movement, within the so-called 'return to order' (*ritorno all'ordine*) expressed by post-WWI Futurism, after the demise of the group during the war. In addition to distancing itself from the rhetoric and iconoclastic euphoria of the 'heroic years', it is evident that the movement lost the strong innovative charge of the early years, while Munari's strong experimental vein and his capacity to re-invent himself remained constant throughout his career. Moreover, Munari was facing historical evidence that the language of the avant-garde was inherently destined to run out: avant-gardist radical proposals and gestures, intrinsically instantaneous and ephemeral, become trite and ineffectual when repeated too many times. The values of modernity and modernism extolled in the early 1910s by the first manifestos of Futurism, were already common knowledge in the 1920s. However, what remained of that legacy was its experimental thrust and a series of ideas that were left purely at the stage of the project and had not been fully expressed and fleshed out.

To understand this cultural-historical passage, it may be useful to resort to a conceptual synthesis expressed by Umberto Eco in his *Postscript to 'The Name of the Rose'*, in which he claimed: 'there comes a moment in which the avant-garde (the modern) can not go any further, because it has finally produced a metalanguage that speaks of its impossible texts (conceptual art). The post-modern answer to the modern is to recognise that the past, since it can not be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: ironically, in a non-innocent manner'.¹⁰

Munari's artistic experimentation and visual research in the early years seem to synthesise the transitional phase in the development of modern art that Eco fleshes out. On the one hand Munari overcomes the antagonistic 'nihilism' of the avant-garde in terms of parodic citationism (with a genuine postmodernist attitude *ante litteram*); on the other he singles out the most fruitful formal ideas proposed by the Futurists and develops them in very

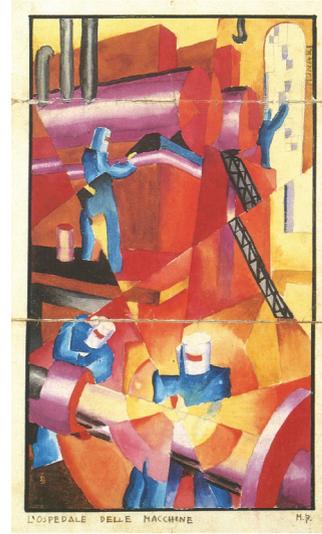
9 Cf. E. Crispolti (ed.), *Dal futurismo all'astrattismo. Un percorso d'avanguardia nell'arte italiana del primo Novecento* (Rome: Edieuropa/De Luca Editori, 2002).

10 U. Eco, *Il nome della rosa*. 2nd ed. (Milan: Bompiani, 1983), p. 529.



rRrR
(*Sound of an
Aeroplane*)
c. 1927

*The Machine's
Hospital*
1929



personal directions, attuned to the type of artistic experimentation that informed the European scene at that time and that saw visual arts moving towards abstractionism. Far from expressing the nihilistic outcomes of conceptual art, as synthesised by Eco, Munari is able to bypass any dead-ends, any formal exhaustion of specific art forms, by constantly moving from art form to art form (which was in itself a Futurist method), and by deepening a full range of conceptual ideas with different languages and materials, constantly side-stepping and transferring intuitions in different expressive domains: from visual art to industrial design, from advertising to video art and film, from photography to performance art.

In reference to the first point, elements of irony and playfulness – parodic revisitations of themes or stylistic elements used by Futurism and other avant-garde groups – are clearly visible in Munari's earlier works, to the point that he prompted a rebuke by Brunas (Bruna Somenzi) who openly criticised Munari in 1932 in the journal *Futurismo*: 'Futurism is too serious and does not allow one to joke about it or to use bitter useless passéist irony [...]. Be a good polite "student" and leave behind any criticism or the presumption to be a "master"'.¹¹

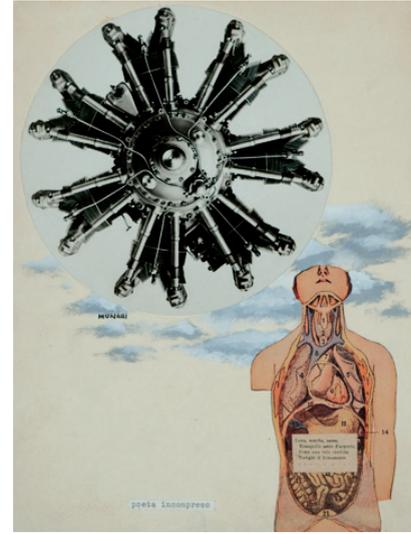
As early as 1927, when Munari was only twenty years old, one can discern elements that were indicative of an ironic distance towards the aesthetic theories of Futurism. In his collage *rRrR (Sound of an Aeroplane)* one can clearly see the ironic and parodic allusion to the onomatopoeic experimentation of Marinetti's famous words-in-freedom novel: *Zang Tumb Tuuum* (1914), beginning with the very name he adopted to sign the painting: 'BUM', which is both an abbreviation of Bruno Munari and the most common onomatopoeia in Italian usage associated with an explosion. The letters 'R' are written in ink, capitalised or in lowercase, italicised, as if part of a table in a first grade spelling-book. The aeroplane does not show any dynamism; the wheels are those of a bicycle and

¹¹ C. Salaris, *Storia del futurismo* (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1985), p. 201.



*And thus we would
set about seeking an
aeroplane woman*
1930s

*Misunderstood
Poet*
1933



the perspective is overtly askew. The drawing does not reflect the oblique vision provoked by flight, so dear to aeropainters such as Tullio Crali or Fedele Azari, but mimics in parodic terms the drawings of elementary school children.

The same ironic attitude towards aeropainting, a dominant trend in Futurist art at that time, which incidentally he somehow contributed to on the margins,¹² is also visible in a series of later sketches and photomontages all made in 1936, such as *The Poetic Joy of Flight*,¹³ *The Smell of the Aircraft*, *Back then the Aeroplane was made of Bamboo and Canvas* and *And thus we would set about seeking an aeroplane woman*. The latter in particular is interesting also because it is testimony to Munari's own exploration of another key issue discussed by Marinetti and his acolytes in the 1910s, specifically in manifestos such as *Multiplied Man and the Reign of the Machine* (1910), that is, the imaginative coupling of man and machines ('*identificazione dell'uomo con il motore*'), which was translated by Munari in terms of pseudo-mythological, centaur-like, but also post-human, cyborg-like, imagery, and which is visible in collages like *Misunderstood Poet* (1933) or *They have even invented this, the world has gone mad*¹⁴ (1930s).

A similar tongue-in-cheek tone towards the Futurist's rhetoric of machines is visible in the painting titled *The Machine's Hospital*, which seems a response to Fedele Azari's manifesto of 1927 *For a Society for the Protection of Machines*, in which Azari stated that machines are living beings with their own peculiar and specific intelligence and sensibility. The same theriomorphic imagination is further discussed in Munari's *Manifesto of Machinism* (a Futurist gesture par excellence), published in 1952, which is, again, an ironic and playful revisitation of one of the favourite *topoi* of Marinetti's movement.

¹² See Schnapp.

¹³ See p. 119 in the present catalogue.

¹⁴ See p. 110 in the present catalogue.

However, as already stated, Munari clearly realised that it was possible to develop some of the most salient aspects and ideas that were left unfinished in the first wave of Futurism. Leaving aside their polemical rhetoric, the Futurists' exuberant early experimentalism was fertile ground for a formal exploration that was conceptually driven. For Munari it was necessary to bypass the formal regression and the mystical drifts of the 'Second Futurism' of the 1920s and '30s, to recuperate their original inventive force.

In various interviews, Munari repeatedly cited Enrico Prampolini, one of the most prominent names in the Futurist circle, as an inspirational figure, and an artist who was far more up-to-date with and aware of the wider international artistic scene than Marinetti. It was thanks to Prampolini that Munari embarked on some of his most innovative experimental activities, related to the so-called 'polymaterial art', which was a novelty in the European contexts of the early twentieth century, and which Prampolini had extensively practiced and theorised since 1915. This is clearly visible in *ABC Dadà*, in which Munari employs all sort of objects to compose his Dadaist spelling tables, and which seem to anticipate Italo Calvino's *Piccolo sillabario illustrato*.¹⁵

Another important Futurist source of inspiration for Munari was the manifesto *Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe* (1915), signed by Giacomo Balla and Fortunato Depero, which can be considered one of the first theoretical texts of abstract art produced in Italy. In it we can see Munari's aesthetic in a nutshell, for instance in the suggested use of lowly materials such as

strands of wire, cotton, wool, silk of every thickness and coloured glass, tissue paper, celluloid, metal netting, every sort of transparent and highly coloured material. Fabrics, mirrors, sheets of metal, coloured tin-foil, every sort of gaudy material. Mechanical and electrical devices; musical and noise-making elements, chemically luminous liquids of variable colours; springs, levers, tubes, etc.¹⁶

Another element of continuity between Balla and Depero's manifesto and Munari's experimentation is their interest in toys, crafted in order to broaden children's sensitivity, imagination and physical dynamism – ideas that, as stated, Munari developed and expanded in his widely praised 'pedagogical artistic laboratories' for children. Moreover, he engaged in designing a series of toys like the *Scatola di Architettura MC N. 1* (1945), an architecture box containing a series of wooden bricks of various shapes to make any number of different buildings; and *Meo Cat* (1949) and *Zizi the Monkey* (1952), toys made of foam rubber designed for Pirelli. The same could be said about Balla and Depero's proposal for a 'rotoplastic noise fountain', as Munari went on to build several fountains in the 1950s, such as the one that was placed in front of the book pavilion at the Venice Biennale of 1954, the large rotating fountain, with brightly coloured vertical blades, for the Fiera di Milano of 1955,¹⁷ or the *5 Drop Fountain* made in Tokyo in 1965.

A particular focal point of interest for both Munari and the Futurists was also the representation of 'dynamism' in art. Faithful to the idea of 'studying "how one thing becomes another", that is the natural evolution of things',¹⁸

15 I. Calvino, *Romanzi e racconti*, vol. III, ed. by M. Barenghi and B. Falcetto (Milan: Mondadori, 1994), pp. 334-341.

16 G. Balla and F. Depero, *Ricostruzione Futurista dell'universo* [1915], Milan: Direzione del Movimento Futurista. In U. Apollonio, *Futurist Manifestos* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), pp. 197-200.

17 B. Munari, *Codice ovvio*, ed. by P. Fossati (Turin: Einaudi, 1971), pp. 58-63.

18 B. Munari, 'Introduzione di Bruno Munari', in *Futurismo linea sino a Peruzzi*, ed. by F. Miglietta (Cosenza: Il Calabrese, 1975).



Meo Cat
1949



Zizi the Monkey
1952

there are a number of works that bear witness to Munari's gradual transition from Futurism, as a preparatory phase in his career, to abstractionism which characterised his production starting from the 1930s. As he claimed years later: 'I became conscious of the fact that working in accordance with Futurist methods meant using static techniques to show dynamic things. Thus, back then, I came to realise that what the Futurists were doing was to freeze a specific moment of dynamism'.¹⁹

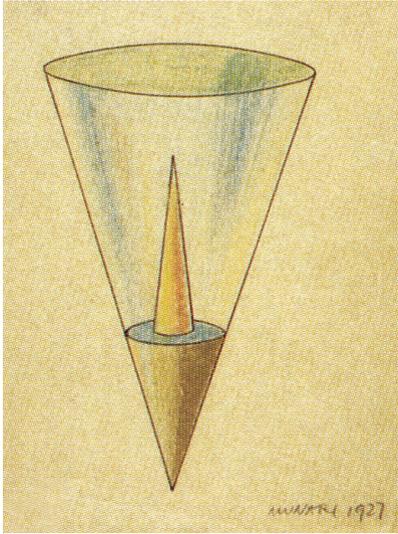
Actually, in this regard, it is interesting to consider the preparatory phase of Munari's transition to abstractionism, which is testimony of his own 'freezing' of dynamism. In the sketch *Walking Man*²⁰ (1931), for instance, it is evident that Munari was trying to study Boccioni's famous sculpture *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913), by reducing the intrinsic dynamism of a marching man, explored by Boccioni in his sculpture, to its basic geometric and volumetric structure. Rather than in movement itself, at this stage Munari seems more interested in what remains permanent in the dynamic flux of a moving figure, in the intrinsic constitutional geometry of a whirling image. As a matter of fact, when studying and representing the human figure, Munari always aimed at geometrical essentialism if not minimalism, as one can see for instance in the 1927 *Portrait of the Futurist Luigi Russolo* or in the illustrations for Marinetti's theatrical piece *The Naked Prompter* (1929-1930), reproduced in the journal *Comoedia*.²¹ The same could be said about *At the Double*²² (1932) a drawing in which the reference to Giacomo Balla's *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash* (1912) or *Girl Running on a Balcony* (1913) is easily detectable. The dynamism of the running man is here recomposed into a precise geometrical structure. In *Man in Movement* (1931), the geometric stylisation of the human body is eventually completed, in such a manner that any residual

19 M. Hájek, 'Nello spazio. Intervista a Bruno Munari' in *Finessi*, pp. 136-139 (136).

20 See p. 36 in the present catalogue.

21 F. T. Marinetti, 'Il suggeritore nudo. Simultaneità Futurista in undici sintesi' in *Comoedia. Rassegna mensile del teatro* 11-12 (1929-1930), pp. 38-44. Reproduced in this catalogue.

22 See p. 38 in the present catalogue.



Portrait of the Futurist
Luigi Russolo
1927



Man in Movement
1931

element of dynamism is converted into representational essentialism. *Man in Movement* moves clearly towards the abstract, not as a break but as a formal deepening, combining the Futurist aesthetic and that of the international masters of abstractionism, such as Piet Mondrian, Theo van Doesburg, Kazimir Malevich, or Robert Delaunay.

However, the works that seem to make all these ideas and cues converge – not only as a formal synthesis, but as a genuine experimental breakthrough – are the *Useless Machines*, one of the first examples of mobiles in the history of European art. Although they seem to take inspiration, in their technical affinities, from Balla and Depero's 'dynamic three-dimensional constructions' as theorised in *Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe*, Munari's *Useless Machines* should be read as surreptitious ironic interpretations of Futurism tecnolatRIA, more Dadaist in spirit. Rather than opting for any grandiose or powerful machinery, in the spirit of Marinetti's early manifestos, Munari's *Useless Machines* were built with very light materials like paper, thin wooden sticks and silk threads,²³ practicing a form of aesthetic minimalism or rather essentialism that was far from the Futuristic hyperbolic thematisation of machines and technology. On the other hand, however, the *Useless Machines* wanted to challenge the nihilistic drift of abstract art, by reinventing it with the introduction of a genuine dynamic element into the composition, producing in turn the first Italian example of kinetic art.

As Munari wrote in *Design as Art*: 'Personally, I thought that instead of painting squares, triangles and other geometric forms which still had a realistic feel (take Kandinsky, for instance), it might be interesting to free abstract forms from the stasis of paintings and suspend them in the air, joining them together so that they might inhabit our environment with us, sensitive to the actual feel of reality'.²⁴

²³ C. Lichtenstein, A. W. Häberli, *Far vedere L'aria: A Visual Reader on Bruno Munari* (Berlin: Springer. 2000), p. 38.

²⁴ Munari 1966, p. 10.



Umberto Boccioni
*Unique Forms of
Continuity in Space*
1913



Giacomo Balla
*Girl Running on a
Balcony*
1913

With his *Useless Machines*, Munari was in fact interested in exploring the time-space continuum, and how to make a work of art that could interact with the environment and change accordingly: to make a work of art that is truly, and constitutionally dynamic, outdoing on this score both the Futurists and the abstractionists. Following his proverbial dictum that 'one thing leads to another'²⁵ (*Da cosa nasce cosa*), going beyond Futurism for Munari was not a matter of radically breaking with the past, but developing and deepening what the past has left us, in order to produce something that speaks to the present and to the future.

25 B. Munari, *Da cosa nasce cosa* (Bari: Laterza, 1981).