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Ton van Kalmthout

Two Exhibitions on Futurism in the Netherlands

Despite some early exhibitions of Futurist work in 1912 and 1913 in Amsterdam, The Hague and Rotterdam, Futurism gained little foothold in the Netherlands.¹ After the Second World War, it was virtually ignored by museums. For decades, only a few monographs on the movement, translated from other languages, were published. Now, after more than a century, two Dutch museums have finally taken the initiative to organize two retrospectives. Neither refers explicitly to the other, and the timing seems to have been coincidental. The first of the two was held between 25 September 2022 and 19 February 2023 at Rijksmuseum Twenthe in the city of Enschede, a museum devoted to both modern and pre-modern art. The second was shown from 29 April to 3 September 2023 at the Kröller-Müller Museum, also a national institution, located in the De Hoge Veluwe national park near the village of Otterlo. This museum focusses on fine art from the late nineteenth century onwards.

The growing interest in Futurism in the Dutch-speaking world in recent years could already be inferred from Caro Verbeek's PhD thesis *Ruiken aan de tijd: De olfactorische dimensie van het futurisme (1909–1942)* (Smelling Time: The Olfactory Dimension of Futurism, 1909–1942) and from the publication of eleven Futurist manifestos, many of them translated for the first time into Dutch by Thomas Crombez (*Futuristische manifesten*, 2020). Two richly illustrated books with essays on Futurism have now been added to these, publications that serve as catalogues to the exhibitions discussed here. The first one, *Marinetti en het futurisme: Manifest voor een nieuwe wereld* (Marinetti and Futurism: Manifesto for a New World), runs to a modest 96 pages. The main substance is to be found in two chapters, one by Joery de Winter and the other by Maurizio Scudiero. Both provide a general overview, but also offer some personal views on the movement. The chapters are supplemented by short thematic interludes by the aforementioned Caro Verbeek and editor Julia Wolters. The second book, *Futurism & Europe: The Aesthetics of a New World*, published in English and Dutch, is much more ambitious and runs to 383 pages. It contains twenty-two detailed chapters on Futurism's relations with the European avant-garde and is striving to elucidate the 'Futurist refashioning of the universe'. Its final part lists, amongst other things, thirty-five Futurist manifes-

¹ See Kalmthout: "Futurism in the Netherlands."

tos and proclamations from 1909–1942. I shall include both books in my discussion of the two exhibitions.

The exhibition at Rijksmuseum Twenthe

Marinetti en het futurisme: Manifest voor een nieuwe wereld was a compact display of 53 exhibits, thematically arranged and clearly explained on text panels: ‘Manifesto for a New World’, ‘Serata’, ‘Graphics’, ‘Dynamics’, ‘Arte meccanica’, ‘Aeropittura’, ‘Politics’, ‘World War I’ and ‘World War II’. According to the first wall panel, the exhibition wanted to focus on two aspects of Futurism: it sought to follow Futurist artists ‘through tumultuous times’ and to show ‘how the ideals of Marinetti sometimes clash, and then run parallel with political developments in the Italy that was between two world wars’.

The exhibition included mainly paintings and drawings, supplemented by large photo reproductions, some sculptures and display cases with printed matter. Programmatic quotes from Futurist manifestos were displayed on the walls. The ensemble was also enlivened by various visual and non-visual exhibits: moving images on film, a sound recording of a poetry recitation by Marinetti, a reconstruction of an *intonarumori* like those made by Luigi Russolo, and some olfactory samples (both the ‘fragrance of the bourgeoisie’ despised by the Futurists and their preferred scents, redolent of the New Age, machines and war: ‘Tabac blond’, ‘Ozone’ and ‘Eau de Cologne’). With a few exceptions, all artworks on display came from public and private collections in Italy, including those of the F.T. Marinetti and Giacomo Balla heirs (Fortunato Depero had no children and hence no heirs).

As the title of the exhibition indicates, Marinetti as the driving force of the Futurist movement was the main focus of the exhibition. The accompanying volume highlights this fact with several portraits and photographic images of some of his manifestos and books. In the two main chapters, however, he fades into the background. Scudiero pays no particular attention to him, while De Winter presents him only as the steadfast leader and inspirer who made no distinction between art and politics, and whose wealth, relationships and reputation allowed the movement to survive into the 1930s. The authors acknowledge that Marinetti challenged bourgeois morality and the established order, and that his movement produced a number of important works. But at the same time, De Winter writes, this move-



Fig. 1. The second section of the exhibition in Enschede. From left to right, we can see a quote (translated into Dutch) from Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto* of 1909, and works by Giacomo Balla: *Dimostrazione patriottica* (Patriotic Demonstration, 1915); Giacomo Balla: *Espansione dinamica + velocità* (Dynamic Expansion + Speed, 1913); Giacomo Balla: *Compenetrazioni iridescenti* (Iridescent Interpretation, 1913); Umberto Boccioni: *Cavallo + cavaliere + caseggiato* (Horse + Rider + Houses, 1913–14); Umberto Boccioni: *Dinamismo plastico + cavallo + case* (Plastic Dynamism + Horse + Houses', 1914); Umberto Boccioni: *Forme uniche della continuità nello spazio* (Unique Forms of Continuity in Space, 1913); Anton Giulio Bragaglia: *Ventaglio* (The Fan, 1928).

ment glorified war and contributed to Mussolini's Fascist dictatorship, "with all its attendant atrocities".²

De Winter highlights Futurism's innovative power, pointing to the movement's changeable and diverse nature. He and Scudiero discuss, amongst other things, the social context in which Futurism was launched in 1909, the Futurists' visual work, their experiments in typography, poetry and music, the scandalous performances (*serate futuriste*), their contributions to theatre, film and dance, architecture and design, and cooking. Their views on women are also covered, as well as their political activities before the movement's demise and Marinetti's death in 1944. *En passant*, De Winter mentions the Futurists' quest for an *arte totale*, as advocated in Balla and Depero's manifesto *Ricostruzione futurista dell' universo* (The Futurist Refashioning of the Universe, 1915), discussed by Scudiero. For both authors, the

2 De Winter: "Marinetti: Manifest voor een nieuwe wereld", p. 47.

impact of Futurist innovation is beyond doubt. According to De Winter, by the end of 1912, Futurism had already inspired offshoots “in every corner of the globe”.³ And according to Scudiero, whose chapter title tellingly describes Futurism as “the vanguard of the avant-garde” (without, incidentally, mentioning those other avant-gardes, with the exception of Cubism), it was “soon very popular in Europe”.⁴

This international response to Futurism is sometimes rather exaggerated by the two authors. More annoying than this, however, is the pedantic tone with which the exhibition attempted to contextualize Futurism in the present day. The first text panel posited that Futurist art “changed the way we see the world but could not avoid the dark forces”, which leads me to add the question: “Is that the consequence of wanting to renew the whole of society?” No clear answer was given in this exhibition, but according to the final panel, radical innovators like the Futurists had little regard for “the pitfalls, the contradictions and the complexity of our existence”. The exhibition concluded by asking what this meant for the present day: “How will art develop this time? What forms, what images determine the face of our century? What do Marinetti and the Futurists have to say to us now? And above all, what role will the radicals of our time play?”

These are issues which Arnoud Odding, the (now former) director of the museum, repeatedly underlines in his contribution to the exhibition catalogue, because “once again we live in a time when reckless people think they can put democracy on the line.”⁵ A programmatic text panel accompanying a side-room presentation, entitled ‘True Futurism is Green’ and featuring diverse work from the museum’s permanent collections, offered this perspective: “We have to get away from colonial exploitation and start cooperating with nature, instead of against it”, and “True Futurism means: living together with everything that lives, flourishes and is always changing.”

The Futurism exhibition in Enschede was complemented in other parts of the museum building by contemporary works. One showed a series of eleven stills from Pier Paolo Pasolini’s film *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (*Salò, or The 120 Days of Sodom*, 1975), adapted by visual artist Rein Jelle Terpstra under the title *The Setting of Violence*. Terpstra removed the actors from the stills and left the Futurist paintings on the walls of the filmed rooms. This way these works of art stand out even more and, according to an accompanying text, “survey that which their ideology has helped to inflict. Are they silent witnesses or accomplices?” Such moralism, which apparently still troubles the public assessment of Fu-

3 Ibid., p. 30.

4 Scudiero: “Futurisme: De avant-garde van de avant-garde”, p. 54.

5 Odding: “Recht overeind op de top van de wereld, dagen wij nog éénmaal de sterren uit!”, p. 14.

turism, did little to diminish the value of the exhibition itself. A measured selection of Futurist works of art had been exhibited for the first time in postwar Holland, including several masterpieces by Giacomo Balla, Umberto Boccioni, Fortunato Depero, Enrico Prampolini, Luigi Russolo and Gino Severini. As such, it provided an excellent stepping stone to the much more extensive exhibition in Otterlo.

The exhibition at the Kröller-Müller Museum

With 209 objects on display, *Futurism and Europe: The Aesthetics of a New World* was a sizeable exhibition. It was likewise divided into nine thematic sections, each introduced on text panels: 'Futurism & Europe. The Aesthetics of a New World', 'Tour europeo', 'Futurismo tridimensionale', 'La città futurista', 'Parole libere', 'L'universo futurista', 'Moda', 'Case d'arte', 'Vita notturna' and 'Teatro'. In addition to paintings and drawings, sculptures and photographs, this exhibition presented films and pictures in gigantic proportions. There were also posters and advertisements, display cases with printed matter, architectural designs and models, fashion and costume designs, as well as designs for furniture and everyday utensils. Some of the exhibits came from Kröller-Müller's own collection, but most were loans from collections elsewhere in Europe and beyond. These were not only works by Futurists, but also by a large number of other Modernist artists. Indeed, the exhibition focussed on the interaction between Futurism and concurrent avant-garde movements and institutions, such as Cubism in France, Russian Futurism and Constructivism, De Stijl in the Netherlands and Bauhaus in Germany. That interaction, according to the text panel at the beginning of the exhibition, involved "both mutual admiration and mutual friction and rivalry".

The exhibition paid due attention to the interactions between various avant-garde movements, and the catalogue shows how Marinetti tirelessly took the lead in putting Futurism on the international map, incorporating various avant-garde trends from elsewhere in Europe. Several Italian Futurists maintained personal relationships with colleagues in Russia, Germany, Switzerland, France and the Netherlands. They tried to keep abreast of each other's work by following attentively the reports in the press. Sometimes this gave rise to conflicts, but these remained largely out of view in the exhibition. The catalogue makes them slightly more visible, above all by focusing on the rivalry between Futurists and Cubists and the disregard they felt for of each other's innovative achievements. Something similar applies to the Italian Futurists rejecting their Russian counterpart, and vice versa (the Russians liked to present themselves as a movement that developed earlier and entirely independently from Italian Futurism).



Fig. 2. A view of the applied-arts section in Otterlo with works from the Futurist *case d'arte*. In the background and middle row left: Giacomo Balla's furniture for a dining room (1918–19). Background centre: Giacomo Balla, Elica Balla and Luce Balla's smoking table (1920); Duncan Grant's four-fold screen with lily pond design (1913–14). Display case to the back right: various porcelain designs by Nikolay Suetin (1923 – late 1920s); Marianne Brandt's teapot (1924); Nikolay Diulgheroff & Tullio D'Albisola's vase with a double handle and Futurist decoration (1932); Hendrik Petrus Berlage and Piet Zwart's breakfast set (1924–27). Middle row centre: Ivo Pannaggi's dining room chair for Casa Zampini (1925); Gerrit Rietveld's Zigzag Chair (c.1932); Gerrit Rietveld's Berlin Chair (1923). Middle row on the right: Gerrit Rietveld's Three-Tube Lamp (c.1922; replica of 2014); Gerrit Rietveld's Red and Blue Chair (c.1923). Display case to front left: Giacomo Balla's screen with speedline (1916–17).

The catalogue nevertheless puts particular emphasis on the mutual admiration between the Futurists and their fellow Modernists. Now and then we read that Futurism was receptive to influences from other avant-gardes – in particular Expressionism and Cubism, De Stijl and Bauhaus – and, much more often, that these European movements borrowed extensively from the Italian Futurists. Their influence is the most widely reported, given that it was their exhibition. The text on the wall panels accompanying the works of art presented numerous Futurist inventions that had been imitated throughout Europe: the concepts of an *arte totale* and an *arte-vita* (a continuum of art and life), the representation of the modern city, mixed media and polymaterialism, experiments in architecture, graphic design and fashion, *case d'arte* (artists' workshops and exhibition galleries) selling unusual ceramics, furniture and design objects, theatrical art and dance.

Occasionally, however, the curator Fabio Benzi and his catalogue authors indulge in a certain overestimation of Futurism. Only three contributions to the ac-

companying book discuss moments when the Futurists had less impact than they had hoped for. Benzi points out that the applied art of Giacomo Balla and his fellow Futurists enjoyed very little support from the furniture and fashion industry after the Great War, when neoclassical tastes prevailed and Art Déco emerged on the scene.⁶ In his chapter on *De Stijl*, Sjoerd van Faassen observes that Futurisms' orientation towards Cubism and Constructivism meant that only *De Stijl* architecture acknowledged a minor influence of the Italians. Indeed, only a few artists in the Netherlands showed an interest in Futurism.⁷ Marinetti's and Prampolini's ideas about Futurist dance did not catch on in other European countries either, writes Günter Berghaus, since both artists lacked sufficient understanding of choreography and dance technique.⁸ Such nuances help to build a more realistic assessment of the impact of Futurism on the European art scene.

But perhaps it is too early for a comprehensive appraisal; for those not thoroughly versed in the various avant-garde movements cited by the museum in association with Futurism, it was hard enough to tell which of the exhibited works formed part of the Italian movement or were merely related to it. Only half-way through the show did a chronologically arranged panel of events in world history give a simultaneous and separate overview of key achievements in Futurist and Modernist art. This also underscored the great merit of the exhibition, in that it provided a broad overview of thirty-five years of Futurism in relation to other prewar trends of innovation and renewal.

Conclusion

Two varied exhibitions, neither of which perhaps fully achieved its purpose, nevertheless provided an attractive overview of the wide-ranging field in which the Futurists were active. Both will have appealed to new audiences.⁹ Each offered its own interpretation: while Rijksmuseum Twenthe paid considerable attention to Futurism's political engagement, the Kröller-Müller Museum was more concerned with Futurism's resonance amongst the international avant-garde. Both also fo-

6 Benzi: "Futurism & Europe: The Aesthetics of a New World", pp. 29–30.

7 See Faassen: "De Stijl & Futurism", pp. 60–62 and 66–68.

8 Berghaus: "Italian Futurist Dance", pp. 258–259.

9 There were two Dutch-language publications to accompany the Kröller-Müller Museum's exhibition catalogue: for adults, the thematic issue *De dynamische lijn* (The Dynamic Line) of the magazine *Kunstschrift*, edited by Mariette Haveman, and for children, *Het grote toekomstboek* (The Great Book of the Future), edited by Matthea Versteeg, a short educational publication with explanations, questions and suggested activities.

cussed on the innovative aspects of Futurism and its revolutionary contributions to diverse artistic disciplines. In doing so, the exhibitions and their catalogues made bold claims about their subject matter. De Winter, for example, states: “All the later avant-gardes – Dada, Surrealism, Constructivism, De Stijl, et cetera – were indebted to their Italian predecessor.”¹⁰ And Fabio Benzi, in the Otterlo catalogue, even suggested that Futurism conquered “public opinion worldwide”.¹¹ The equally fierce resistance to the Futurists’ radicalism and provocations is virtually ignored, something that unfortunately feeds the myth of a steady victory march.

That the Futurists’ ambitions and their realization did not materialize out of the blue was also left unexplored by the exhibitions. An occasional mention was made in Otterlo of the Arts and Crafts Movement and Art Nouveau, but without elaborating on the connection with Futurism. Various pre-modernist phenomena in European culture on which Futurism built, in spite of its programme, such as traditional portraiture, landscapes and cityscapes, were almost entirely ignored, as were nineteenth-century reform movement and developments such as the *soirées artistiques* and the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. More historical framing such as this would have offered a more nuanced vision of Futurism’s innovative power.

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¹⁰ De Winter: “Marinetti: Manifest voor een nieuwe wereld”, p. 19.

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