



Section 5: **Reviews**

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Futurism and War Conference Zagreb (28–29 June 2014)

Introduction

The First World War and Avant-Garde Art was an international conference that opened symbolically on 28 June 2014, on the centenary of the murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo. It was held at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb (Croatia), together with an exhibition of the same name showing material from the Marinko Sudac collection. Both events were organized by the Institute of Avant-garde Studies, a privately-funded organization that seeks to foster research into the entire spectrum of the Eastern European avant-garde through international co-operation.

The conference involved Slavists and art historians from Britain, Croatia, Germany, Hungary, Montenegro, Russia, Serbia, Switzerland and the USA. They traced, in 21 papers, the global transformations brought about in the political, public and cultural life in Europe during the years 1914 to 1918. The military events not only caused millions of deaths, but also led to the falling of four empires, to the formation of new states and the establishment of several totalitarian régimes of different political orientations. The First World War affected the personal life of many protagonists of the avant-garde. It cut Europe into front lines and blocked the free cultural exchange of ideas that had been a precondition for the birth of Modernism; yet, it also lumped together artists of diverse origin in places such as the Cabaret Voltaire, where they created new art movements. In other cities, the Great War triggered a transformation and radical reorganization of existing avant-garde circles (e.g. German Expressionism), or a politicization of aesthetics (as in Italian and Russian Futurism).

The focus of the Zagreb conference was on avant-garde art; many papers concerned themselves with Expressionism, Futurism and Dada, as well as other modernist movements in the territory of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire and Yugoslavia. Consideration was also given to the Balkan neo-avant-gardes after the Second World War and to Russian art of the post-Soviet period, but in this report, I shall only highlight the contributions that focussed upon Italian and Russian Futurism.

Italian Futurism and war

Günter Berghaus (Bristol) painted a broad picture of the Italian Futurists' attitude towards war. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti was a lawyer by education and therefore perfectly familiar with traditional and modern theories of state and revolution. In his early years, he was strongly influenced by Mikhail Bakunin and George Sorel. His political engagement veered between anarchist proclamations of violent insurrection and militaristic Irredentism. In the Libyan War and First Balkan War he found inspiration for his concept of war as the ultimate cleanser for the world. Many Futurists joined the Lombard Battalion of Volunteer Cyclists and Automobilists in the First World War and had to face many scenes of gruesome devastation, yet they continued to believe that destruction was a necessary first stage before a new world could be erected. After the war, they sought to realize their Utopian ideas by founding the Futurist Political Party and to align themselves with the *Arditi* stormtroopers and the *Fasci di combattimento*. In the 'Red Biennium' of 1918–20, the cleansing function of war was replaced with that of an 'Italian revolution'. Marinetti saw the 'New Italy' governed by a 'proletariat of geniuses', but this was not exactly what the Fascist leadership, least of all Mussolini, wanted to establish. Consequently, Marinetti quit the *Fasci* in 1920.

The concept of a 'new sensibility' in Futurist aesthetics and its relation to war was the focus of a paper by Hans Günter (Bielefeld). Starting off with Umberto Boccioni's *Pittura scultura futuriste: Dinamismo plastico* (Futurist Painting and Sculpture: Dynamism in Space, 1914), he showed that the artist was profoundly influenced by Impressionism and its Italian derivative, Divisionism. Sensation and intuition became key aspects of his notion of a *sensibilità pittorica moderna*, which had more in common with a 'synthesized Impressionism' than with an all-too 'rational' French Cubism. Marinetti, following Boccioni, wanted a renewed concept of *sensibilità*, but as his *Bombardamento di Adrianopoli* (The Bombardment of Adrianople, 1912) showed, it was a rather sensualist form, for which he also used the term *lirismo*. He overcame his Symbolist heritage only in 1912, date of the *Manifesto tecnico della letteratura futurista* (Technical Manifesto of Futurist Literature), and the first *parole in libertà* (Words-in-Freedom). In the *lirismo rapidissimo, brutale e immediato* (swift, brutal, and immediate lyricism)¹ of *Zang Tumb Tuum*, he renewed the concept of reportage that attempted to capture multiple sensations, i.e. visual, acoustic, olfactory impressions of battle, in an

¹ Marinetti: "Distruzione della sintassi – Immaginazione senza fili – Parole in libertà." F. T. Marinetti: *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, p.76. English translation "Destruction of Syntax – Untrammelled Imagination – Words-in-Freedom." *Critical Writings*, p. 127.



Fig. 1. Fedja Vukić speaking on *The First World War and Visual Communication*

inter-media work poised between the visual arts and literature. While Boccioni associated the modern sensibility with Big-City Life, Marinetti saw it realized in war as a total environmental event which, according to Günter, “demands to be treated in the form of a total work of art, a *gesamtkunstwerk*.”

The interrelations between avant-garde art practice, ideological manipulation and commercial communication was the topic of a paper by Fedja Vukić (Zagreb). Drawing on material of the Wolfsonian-Florida International University in Miami Beach, he demonstrated the influences of military propaganda on the Futurist avant-garde, especially in the field of advertising. Examples from the second Futurist phase of the 1920s and 30s served to show how the Futurists transformed the publicity methods of the Belle Epoque and introduced new values and aesthetics that were linked to Mussolini’s corporate society. Vukić’s material spanned a broad spectrum from the *architettura pubblicitaria* in the ‘bolted book’, *Depero Futurista Dinamo Azari* (1927) to the magazine, *Stile futurista* (1934–1935), from Enrico Prampolini via Marcello Nizzoli to Bruno Munari.

Russian Futurism and the Great War

Olga Burenina (Zurich) showed that the Russian Futurists, like Marinetti, used war as a metaphor for distinguishing avant-garde art from the traditionalist world, a conflict represented, for example, in the opera *Pobeda nad solntsem* (Victory over the Sun, 1913) by Alexei Kruchenykh, Velimir Khlebnikov and Mikhail Matyushin. According to Burenina, the Russian Futurists were also influenced by Anarchism, in particular by Bakunin's idea that "Die Lust der Zerstörung ist eine schaffende Lust" (the passion for destruction is a creative passion).² Anarchist war against State authority together with a nihilistic pathos made the Russian Futurists want to "throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc., etc. overboard from the Ship of the Modernity".³ Eliminating the aesthetic object with its deforming character was thought to be a creative act. Burenina suggested an echo here of Herbert George Wells' futurological novel, *War of the Worlds* (1897) and pointed to Velimir Khlebnikov's Anarchist skepticism and his formulation of "words of new holy war" in the manifesto, *Truba marsian* (The Trumpet of the Martians, 1916).⁴

The above mentioned opera, *Victory over the Sun*, was performed in 1913 in a stage design by Kazimir Malevich, in which he used for the first time the motif of a black square, thus offering a prototype for the famous *Cherni kvadrat* (Black Square, 1915). Leonid Katsis (Moscow) suggested in his paper that the military vocabulary of the opera was inspired by the Balkan Wars. He also interpreted Ilya Zdanevich's five plays as a response to *Victory over the Sun* and explored further echoes of the drama in Soviet art, including non-official artists such as Mikhail Grobman and Ilya Kabakov.

Nina Gurianova (Chicago) noticed that, in the context of the Russian avant-garde, it was Wassily Kandinsky, who for the first time portrayed the artist as a warrior and compared him to St. George. Much of her paper was dedicated to the aesthetics of anarchy, by which she meant an anesthetization of military action and a violent deconstruction of the old aesthetics. For the Russian avant-garde, 'war' became a metaphor for a whole range of issues. She discussed the responses to the Great War amongst Futurists and found that, on the whole, they did not engage in War propaganda, in contrast to Vasilii Vasil'evich Rozanov's *Voina 1914 goda i russkoe vozrozhdenie* (The War of 1914 and the Russian Revival, 1915) or the popular *lubok* prints. As examples of the spiritual, even religious feeling

² Bakunin: "Die Reaction in Deutschland", p. 1002; "The Reaction in Germany", p. 58

³ Burljuk, et al.: "Poshchechina obshchestvennomu vkusu", p. 65; "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste", p. 51.

⁴ Khlebnikov, et al.: *Truba marsian*; "The Trumpet of the Martians", p. 104.

towards war she cited Natalia Goncharova's series *Misticheskie obrazi voini* (Mystical Images of War, 1914), published in Moscow in the first months of the First World War. Olga Rozanova in her fifteen linocuts called *Voina* (War, 1915) used fragments from real newspaper to interpret the events of the time, and Aleksei Kruchenykh made an artists' book, *Vselenskaia voina* (Universal War, 1916), in which a series of collages echoed the chaos and destruction of the Great War. To demonstrate how diametrically opposed these artists were to the Italian Futurists, she cited Viktor Romanovich Khovin's essay, "Futurizm i voina" (Futurism and War, 1915), in which Marinetti's slogan of war as a necessary cleanser was rejected as an unacceptable ideology.

In her presentation on the iconography of the war, Natalya Zlydneva (Moscow) analysed the allegorical and symbolical motif of explosion that conveys a disturbing feeling of conflict in Russian Cubo-Futurist paintings. In her interpretation, she drew on Iuri Lotman's *Kul'tura i vzryv* (Culture and Explosion, 1992), which demonstrates that these explosions could have a wide range of meanings. For the Futurists, a letter was an explosion and a word a barrage of explosions. Therefore, their poetry was by nature 'explosive'.

Tatiana Jovović (Podgorica) in her detailed study of Mayakovsky's treatment of war demonstrated a development of physiological images and defiant, hyperbolic metaphors, which force the reader to corporally feel the horrors of war. Her analysis, based on Leonid Lipavsky's article, "Horror Research" (1930),⁵ showed how the poet created an anatomic theatre, in which pathological manifestations of smoldering human flesh and blood were accompanied by the roaring and howling cacophony of battle. The First World War was perceived very negatively by the Russian Futurists. Mayakovsky's patriotic enthusiasm quickly changed into a condemnation of war in "Bez belykh flagov" (No White Flags) and "Voina i iazyk" (War and Language), both published in *Nov* newspaper in 1914. Mayakovsky claimed that the "verbal clothes were torn for war expression and should be changed", that "the military tasks for poets are revision of the arsenal of old words and creation of new words".⁶ This concept – subsequently called *ostraneniie* (defamiliarization) by Viktor Shklovsky⁷ – was further developed in Mayakovsky's poem, *Voina i mir* (War and the World, 1916).⁸

5 Lipavskii: *Issledovanie uzhasa*.

6 Maiakovskii: "Voina i iazyk", p. 328.

7 Shklovski: "Iskusstvo kak priyem." English translation: "Art as Technique."

8 In the Russian language, the words мир (world) and миръ (peace) are transliterated as *mir*. The different spellings were abolished in 1918, thus obliterating the distinction between the titles of Leo Tolstoy's *Война и мир* (War and Peace) and Mayakovsky's *Война и Миръ* (War and the World), a fact that must strike a chord with H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* (1897).

Sonja Briski Uzelac (Zagreb) analysed the transition from the concept of New Art in pre-war Russian Futurism (“The Academy and Pushkin are less intelligible than hieroglyphs”⁹) to the attempt to build new artistic institutions after the February Revolution. While the Imperial Academy of Arts was abolished, different views on what should replace it circulated in the new government. The leftist block, supported by the Futurists, sought to overcome the separation of art and life and to create new training institutions intimately connected to the new life. The destruction of ‘art mausoleums’ went hand in hand with the establishment of Free State Workshops for the Arts (*Svobodnye gosudarstvennye khudozhestvennye masterskie*) in Petrograd and Moscow, with elected professors, self-government by pupils, etc. The productionist ethos of those years can also be seen in the VKhUTEMAS and VKhUTEIN, which Uzelac linked to the experience of the Bauhaus. In her view, they did not represent any longer the liberating and creative spirit that characterized the first institutional initiatives in post-revolutionary Russia because, after 1923, the Left (i.e. the Futurists, Anarchists and Constructivists) were successively disempowered and the old academy system was reintroduced.

The use of military metaphors in twentieth-century avant-garde art was traced by Ekaterina Lazareva (Moscow). Starting from the concept of the ‘advance-guard’ in medieval and early modern warfare¹⁰ and ending with Clement Greenberg’s *Avant-Garde and Kitsch* (1939), she showed how the early avant-garde idea of art as advancement and anticipation was replaced during the war by the idea of art itself as a weapon and how the successive developments of military science and new methods of warfare, such as guerrilla, terrorism, digital hacking enriched the artistic vocabulary of modern and contemporary art (including Underground art of the 1970s, the Guerrilla Girls in the 1980s and recent Pussy Riot actionism). The transition of Russian Futurism from Anarchist rebellion against conservative tastes to an organized struggle for productivism and factography can be read as a symbolical change conditioned by the experience of the First World War. The militant rhetoric used by the LEF group was later picked up by their opponents and entered the official language of Stalinist culture in the 1930s, but also became a subversive strategy in the 1990s for conceptualists such as Andrey Monastyrsky and radical artists such as Dmitrii Pimenov.

⁹ Burliuk, et al.: “Poshchechina obshchestvennomu vkusu”, p. 65; “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste”, p. 51.

¹⁰ See Calinescu: “‘Avant-garde’: Some Terminological Considerations.”



Fig. 2. Futurist manifestos at the Exhibition of the Sudac Collection.

It is expected that all papers of this conference will soon be made available in a book to be published by the Institute of Avant-garde Studies in Zagreb.

Futurism in the Sudac Collection

On 28 June, on the occasion of the conference on *The First World War and Avant-Garde Art*, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb opened an exhibition of material stemming from the Marinko Sudac collection. It included a wall of Futurist manifestos, most of them also translated in a folder displayed in the hall,¹¹ Futurist magazines and newspapers, and a large selection of artists' books from the Central-European avant-garde.

¹¹ Margetić and Miličić: *Sažetci futurističkih manifesta i prijevod na engleski*.

The exhibition included a graphic timeline accompanied by many original photographs, which provided a historical and cultural context for the artworks and documents displayed in the hall. Although most of the items from the collection belong to the period after the First World War, the exhibition marked the very beginning of the European avant-garde with eighteen manifestos of Italian Futurism, ranging from the early *Manifesto dei pittori futuristi* (Manifesto of the Futurist Painters) and *La pittura futurista: Manifesto tecnico* (Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting, both 1910) and Marinetti's *Zang Tumb Tuum* (1914) to the manifestos from the second phase (*secondo futurismo*), such as *I diritti artistici propugnati dai futuristi italiani* (Artistic Rights Defended by the Italian Futurists, 1923), or *L'impero italiano* (The Italian Empire, 1923). Late Russian Futurism was presented by Aleksei Kruchenykh's book, *Lef agitki Maiakovskogo, Aseeva, Tret'iakova* (*Lef Agitation by Mayakovsky, Aseev and Tretyakov*, 1925).

Some of the most interesting exhibits came from Hungary, for example the activist journals edited by writer and artist Lajos Kassák: *MA* (Budapest 1916–19; Vienna, 1920–26), *Dokumentum* (Budapest, 1926–1927) and *Munka* (Budapest, 1928–39), or Iván Hevesy's pathbreaking study, *A futurista, expresszionista és kubista festészet* (Futurist, Expressionist and Cubist Painting, 1919). The historical avantgarde from the Balkans was represented by *Zenit*, an international journal for art and culture published in Zagreb and Belgrade from 1921 until 1926 by Ljubomir Micić, and *Tank: Revue internationale active / Tank!: Revue internationale de l'art vivant* (Ljubljana, 1927–28). The impressive section of post-war magazines and books that connected Zagreb to the main developments of art in Europe was supplemented with Dadaist publications such as *Dada-Jok*, edited and designed by Branko Ve Poljanski, and *Dada-Tank*, edited and designed by Dragan Aleksić in 1922. From the works of art displayed, mention should be made of a group of photographs and designs related to the avant-garde group *Traveleri*, which staged Marinetti's *Tamburo di fuoco* (The Drum of Fire, 1922) in the gymnasium of Zagreb's First Grammar School.

Taken as a whole, the Marinko Sudac Collection with over 10,000 works of art and documents can be considered a major resource for avant-garde studies. It has assembled a wide-ranging selection of historical material, mainly from Central and Eastern Europe, but also with substantial holdings from adjacent countries, such as Italy. Much of it is accessible in an online Virtual Museum of Avant-Garde Art: www.avantgarde-museum.com.

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