

LUCA BUVOLI

injury mostly deriving from a stroke and affecting the production or comprehension of speech and the ability to read or write. Due to their condition, our readers often pause on Marinetti's words, at other times they stumble on them struggling to pronounce them; they slow down to spell a word out, or they recreate it from scratch transforming the very body of the text. Appearing on screen in typed form as they are recited, the manifesto's excerpts include quotes such as "Except in struggle, there is no more beauty. No work without an aggressive character can be a masterpiece." Via repetition and fragmentation the aphasics' struggling recitation functions as a quietly subversive means to critique the Futurist celebration of speed and violence, and its contempt for women. In the carefully crafted collapse of image, text, and sound, intimacy

simulation of aphasia. But Buvoli's unfiltered emphasis on the physical and psychological trauma at the origin of the displacement of meaning allows him to create a dialogue between body and language that bridges the conceptual and the sensual in a distinctive way, poignantly referencing the traumatic historic dismantling of modernist myths.

Fusing the verbal and the visual, a disjunctive poetry of hopeful disillusionment takes place, an anti-heroic ode to Futurism from the shores of Post-Utopia. The video's strength lies in the finely-calibrated rhythmic tension between text and image, written and spoken word, figure and ground, abstraction and representation. Video camera in hand, Buvoli captures his sitters in live-action sound portraits. Employing the technique of rotoscoping,

Rotoscoping is a common technique in the history of animation, first employed to draw Koko the clown in the series *Out of the Inkwell* (1914). A means of capturing movement, it is usually used to merge live action and animation in the storyline with highly realistic effects, as exemplified by the film *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988). In the Soviet Union, in particular, it was employed under the name of 'éclair' as one of the principal tools of Socialist Realism from the 1930s to the 1950s. Here the artist uses it, instead, to accentuate the disjunction between the realism of the video footage and the imaginative reinvention of the shot images through linear drawing and colour, in a continuous oscillation between in and out of visibility. Through this effect, Buvoli succeeds in protecting the vulnerability of the aphasic individuals from the potentially aggressive eye of the camera, lending their appearance a veil of subtlety and a degree of privacy – their features are never fully disclosed. At the same time, he creates a vocabulary that infinitely postpones completion and frustrates the desire for full comprehension. Favouring hand-drawing over each frame, the artist celebrates

lost its significance in favour of the projectile" and "the non-place of speed has definitely supplanted that of place", as pointed out by philosopher Paul Virilio.

It is interesting to note that, as though further deconstructing Marinetti's attempt to spread his belligerent message to a mass audience from the pages of *Le Figaro*, Buvoli's contemporary counter-manifesto reached out beyond museum audiences into the homes of millions of TV viewers as clips from the Italian version of the video, *Velocità Zero*, were broadcasted on Italian television in October 2008 as part of a campaign ad launched by A.I.T.A. (Italian Aphasia Associations) to foster awareness on aphasia.



is conjured in the midst of combative pronouncements of heroic grandiosity, and fragility is disclosed as a counterpoint to the urgency of the aggressive energy advocated by Marinetti. As such, *Velocity Zero* transforms Futurism from within: Buvoli creates a new text within the text, a novel string of "words in freedom" dismantling Marinetti's very own. The slowing down of language and the difficulty of communication are also employed to symbolically counter the ideology of power and violence that informs our society. Referencing both propaganda and advertising, the format of the manifesto allows here for a timely critique of the ideologies of control and authority that permeate our everyday life in a media-saturated culture. Moreover, the chance slippages introduced in language in *Velocity Zero* recall the materialisation and dislocation of language of Marcel Duchamp's textual work which scholar David Joselit has interestingly related to a

thousands of drawings are realized by hand over the realistic filmed images, frame by frame. Lines in fleeting motion now trace fragments and memories of those visages and half-busts in unadorned interiors. Suffused with gestures of delicate indeterminacy and purposeful tentativeness, these animated images reverberate a profusely dynamic energy all their own in tension with the fixity of the camera – they recall and counter Umberto Boccioni's exuberant line forces, while nodding to Alberto Giacometti's figure drawings in their vulnerability and forever-postponed closure. Vibrant with life, these images take momentary form – sometimes as the outline of a face, sometimes just as the detail of an ear, a nose, or a mouth – and dissolve under our eyes only to reappear again overlapping with the documentary footage and the sounds of the readers' voices, each encounter punctuated with a syncopated tempo.

slowness through process. The tension between wholeness and fragmentation further mirrors the chasm between utopian dreams and reality. On one hand, Buvoli's figures are filmed up close and with an angle from below that makes them seemingly larger than life and potent, ironically echoing the preferred perspective from which Mussolini's images were shot in the propaganda films produced by the Italian Istituto Luce; on the other, their filmed substance tends to dissolve in favour of drawn fragmented outlines. Evoking a disjunction between the inner and the outer body, substance and appearance, Buvoli's animation also calls to mind artist Maria Lassnig's explorations of inside-out corporeality.

While referencing the vocabularies of Fascist film and Futurist painting, Buvoli informs them with anti-authoritarian meanings and a multi-layered notion of consciousness. By slowing the speed down, he offers also a subtle critique of present notions of space and time in a society where "territory has



Created with great sensitivity and respect for its protagonists, *Velocity Zero* conjures intimate disclosure of one's impending fragility in comprehending the world inside and outside oneself. The video and the whole installation are a reflection on Futurism turned upside down into a touching and yet unsentimental song to strength wrapped in gentleness. If speed is the essence of war, then slowing things down is the centre of a quietly engaged art aiming to spark critical thought, and indeed so it does with results of highly resonating quality.

Francesca Pietropaolo

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Velocity Zero



Slow it Down to the Limit: Futurism at Velocity Zero

“Speed is the essence of war” Sun Tzu

A love for powerful speed, aggressive energy, youthful dynamism and fearless rupture with all things past is the hallmark of Futurism. Created in the early twentieth century by the writer and all-round *agent provocateur* Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944), the Italian avant-garde movement aimed to bridge art and life in new, provocative ways. Its founding manifesto, penned by Marinetti, was published in the Parisian newspaper *Le Figaro* in 1909, his text a bombastic

announcement of the movement’s radical aspiration to redefine art and assert its transformative power in the modern world. The format of the manifesto as combative vehicle of direct, fast dissemination of aesthetic ideas to a mass audience was a true novelty, the form and content of its message inextricably intertwined. In its pages, Marinetti celebrated a new kind of beauty found “in struggle” and in “the violent assault against unknown forces”, revealing a penchant for conflict and the ambition of starting history over again from scratch in a society that would be fundamentally altered by the changes in consciousness Futurism advocated. Intimately associated with the love for power and speed was the celebration of the “destructive gesture” that would announce a new world: it rhymed with the grim definition of the necessity of war as “hygiene of the world”.

A century later, from this ambivalent mixture of intense hope propelled into the future and the inherently dark-sided desire for *tabula rasa*, the art of Luca Buvoli takes its cues with results of distinctive subtlety. In his multi-media installation *Velocity Zero* (2006-2009) realised for the Estorick Collection and shown to coincide with the 100th anniversary of the above-mentioned manifesto, the Italian born U.S. based artist explores Futurism as forever caught between the vital impulse to transform and enact change and the hovering danger of an authoritarian voice imposing its own, one-dimensional redefinition of consciousness. The relationship between the aesthetic and the political – with a special emphasis on the avant garde’s association with Fascism – and the faith in modern progress are subject to in-depth scrutiny.

A fresh, disenchanted look at the myths of modernism through contemporary eyes, this site-specific work masterfully blends a diverse range of artistic languages – painting, drawing, film, and animation. In the hybrid territory of *Velocity Zero* the conceptual and the perceptual touch, if ever so lightly. Enveloped in the installation’s embrace of images, colours, and sounds, the viewers/listeners find themselves immersed in a dimension that welcomes active inquisitiveness of the mind and the senses.

Upon stepping in, we are greeted by the whimsical rhythm of a mural painting capturing the energy of a speedy car, its unfolding transforming the gallery walls into the uncharted racing territory of our fancy. A ubiquitous Futurist motif, the automobile is, like the propeller, one of Marinetti’s emblems of progress



and modern beauty, a synthesis of body-as-machine. Here it is juxtaposed to a figure in the act of speaking irony. While the speedy car appears ready to jump off the surface of the wall on which it is painted and freely race in and out of our space, we are nevertheless reminded of the force of gravity that subjects our dreams. A mechanical body caught in its impossible ‘flight’ through space, Buvoli’s automobile is a blend of potency and loss of control. It evokes both levity and corporeality; it is meant as a paradox of permanent transience, the visible guise of invisible forces, embodiment of movement as *dynamis* reconfigured.

In dialogue with this mural stands a series of hand-painted propoganda posters which reflect on the bridge between Futurism and Fascism. These works on paper exist in a tension between two and three dimensions: Buvoli hangs them on the gallery walls as flat pictures, and yet the shaped three-dimensional presence imparted by the dynamic outlines of their individually built frames suggests their readiness to extend off the wall’s surface. (In past installations, the artist has let some posters verge further into the architectural space, hanging them in ways that recall the pop-up format of many of his artist’s books). They are painting-as-drawing-as-sculpture, a hybrid of Futurist inspiration. The other elements of the installation are the two videos *A Very Beautiful Day After Tomorrow* and *Velocity Zero* both from 2006-2007, the latter shown on a flat screen blending in the mural described above.

Buvoli’s practice explores the conflation of abstraction, figuration, and language. In *Velocity Zero*, line, body, and text are the elements of a highly personal vocabulary giving birth to a dystopic, ephemeral “monument to movement”. Used by the artist to refer to his earlier sculptural vectors, this meaningful oxymoron can be extended to characterise the *Velocity Zero* project as a whole: it is an idiosyncratic embodiment



of movement which reveals the deconstructive impulse of Buvoli’s art deflating rhetoric from within with subtle irony. While the speedy car appears ready to jump off the surface of the wall on which it is painted and freely race in and out of our space, we are nevertheless reminded of the force of gravity that subjects our dreams. A mechanical body caught in its impossible ‘flight’ through space, Buvoli’s automobile is a blend of potency and loss of control. It evokes both levity and corporeality; it is meant as a paradox of permanent transience, the visible guise of invisible forces, embodiment of movement as *dynamis* reconfigured.

Velocity Zero tells a tale of impossible perfection: it gives form to the tension towards a horizon where limits are overcome and yet where lingers the awareness of the unfulfilled spatial, temporal, and conceptual gap between what we aspire to be and what we are, the ideal and the real.

This multi-layered installation – a newly conceived, focused configuration of the project on Futurism first presented at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia in 2007 and subsequently developed as a commission for the 2007 Venice Biennale – echoes and pushes further certain themes and concerns that have animated Buvoli’s work since its coming of age in the 1990s. The theme of flight and loss of control, in particular, is a recurring metaphor for present notions of heroism, vulnerability, and masculinity as illustrated by his pivotal projects *Not-a-Superhero* (1992-1999) and *Flying* (1999-2003). In addressing

these issues the artist has exploited the possibilities of a range of media over the years, often simultaneously – comics, performance, the artist’s book, sculpture, painting, drawing, installation, film, and animation. His art hinges on both in-depth analysis and an emphasis on open-ended process, the bases for his delicately balanced mixture of inward and outward gaze, intimacy and worldly concerns. Buvoli always infuses the personal with the collective, one illuminating the other.

Velocity Zero resonates in interesting ways with the Venice Biennale installation where, in a terse vocabulary of red, white and turquoise, sculptural vectors, a witty materialisation of Futurist line forces, met spelled-out text – quotes from Marinetti – and the central figure of a flying man, his arms wide open like the wings of an aeroplane. A play with the Futurist celebration of the aviator and the propeller, the figure’s silhouette was rendered in the graphic idiom of Fascist propaganda. Thus it effectively questioned the modernist ideal of man-as-machine and simultaneously evoked the ever-present risks of cultural and political forms of authoritarianism. The artist’s interest lies in the dual symbolic nature of flight as poetic vessel of freedom and as expression of fantasies of potency leading to violence and destruction. This flying alter-ego is also a symbol of the contemporary self sceptical of grand systems – a poignant reminder, as such, of Walter Benjamin’s angel of history although Buvoli never really ceases to believe in the uplifting possibilities of a better future.

Born in Brescia, Italy in 1963, the son of an Italian aviator who, during the last phase of World War II, following the fall of Mussolini, was detained in German prison camps in Europe, the artist grew up between Italy and the United States. He permanently moved to New York in 1988 where he currently lives, maintaining his studio in Manhattan’s East Village. After receiving his B.F.A. from the Accademia di Belle Arti in Venice (1985) and his M.A. from S.U.N.Y., Albany (1989), he obtained his M.F.A.

LIST OF IMAGES (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT):

1. *Instant Before Incident (Marinetti’s Drive 1908)*, 2008. Detail. Interior view. Installation at the Mattress Factory, Pittsburgh, part of *Inner and Outer Space*. Reinforced UV stable polyester resin, pigment, steel, plexiglass.
2. *View of Phase 2 with: Vector Tricolor (Entanglement of Modernist Myths)*, 2007. Detail, view of the project at the 52nd Venice Biennale with the video *A Very Beautiful Day After Tomorrow (Un Bellissimo Dopodomani)*. Reinforced polyester and polyurethane resin, metal, plexiglass, plaster, and other materials.
3. *Instant Before Incident (Marinetti’s Drive 1908)*, 2008. Exterior view
4. Stills from animated/live-action video: *A Very Beautiful Day After Tomorrow (Un Bellissimo Dopodomani)*, 2007, DVD, 9 minutes, color, sound.
5. Digital image of gallery
6. Stills from animated/live-action video: *Excerpts from: Velocity Zero*, 2007. DVD, 5 minutes, color, sound.

from the School of Visual Arts, New York (1991). Since his formative student years in Venice he has been concerned with issues focusing on the body and language, his sources spanning ‘across borders’ from history, science, and film to philosophy, comics and psychoanalysis. In his work, he fuses intellectual inquisitiveness with a playful experimentation with different materials, techniques and art forms – his approach to art-making a blend of boundless inventiveness and disciplined exactitude.

In what ways does Futurism trigger the artist’s creative imagination? Looking at the Italian avant garde through the lenses of his richly nuanced experience of cultural insider/outsider, Buvoli finds in it a fertile departure point to intimately delve into his cultural heritage and into everyday life in America’s technologically-driven society. Thus he merges the awareness of the past and of the present together with the questions for the future, all in one-as-many dimension(s). In this light, he also touches on the limits of our contemporary culture where the past is no longer “a source to turn to in order to enrich the present and the present is no longer fed on future perspectives” as described by anthropologist Marc Augé.

Buvoli first started working on his Futurist project prompted by the reflection on the new dimension of control and fear permeating everyday life as a result of the tragic events of September 11 in New York City. From that moment, as the artist noted, “new forms of manipulation of ideological systems” emerged.

In his simultaneously coherent and open-ended work *Velocity Zero*, he employs Marinetti’s avant garde as a malleable sounding board for today’s tensions and aspirations. The ambiguities of the movement’s utopian impulse spark a reflection that oscillates between hope and disillusionment. As history has shown us many times over, ideology can result in forms of totalitarianism and dreams can veer into nightmares.



Bending the avant garde to his artistic needs, Buvoli adopts it as catalyst for a fundamental reconsideration of what it means to make art today and to raise questions about the impact of art on life and the world at large.

With *Velocity Zero* the artist creates a non hierarchical blend of different artistic languages. Media extend beyond their respective confines creating zones of interconnection like anatomical parts of a body, like elements of a polycentric, internally dynamic reality. We thread our way through this collage-like space as through a tale of multiple paths and meanings: the elements of *Velocity Zero* together compose a subtle conversation piece, one mindful of the richness of Mikhail Bachtin’s notion of open dialogue, transposed from literature to visual art. It is a multiple conversation in which the artist speaks with different sides of himself and we, as his audience, become engaged in the exchange and respond to it both individually and by way of sharing thoughts and emotions with our visiting companions. The result is the encounter of many voices, all equally important, in a knowingly crafted balance of cohesion and fragmentation. The elements comprising the installation are moments of a process that disintegrates the feeling of wholeness associated with Futurism, its vision of totality countered by the open-ended infinity of a paradoxical velocity zero.

Shown in the intimate scale of a video monitor equipped with headphones, the video *A Very Beautiful Day After Tomorrow* (2006-2007) merges passages of animation with documentary footage, mixing the historical and the contemporary. The work takes inspiration from a poignant motto Marinetti coined and passed on to his daughter Vittoria towards the end of his life and when the fascist regime he had supported was about to collapse: “There will be a very beautiful day after tomorrow.” The phrase, which Vittoria recalls in her filmed interview with the off-camera Buvoli, encapsulates her father’s legacy and all the ambiguities of his modernist project. Circling back to the lingering ambivalence of the message, the video ends with the progressive pacing down and distortion of the Fascist patriotic song *The Aviator’s Song*. The artist asked a children’s choir from his adoptive Vicenza to sing the song. As the refrain celebrating the propeller’s speed is intoned, its recording is manipulated to give way to rambling sounds of uneasy, dark quality. By way of a slippage between signifier and signified, singing voice and song’s content, the artist evokes the tumbling down of

self-celebrative narratives and echoes the disillusioning lesson of history over the promises of youth.

The animated film *Excerpts from Velocity Zero*, one of the installation’s centerpieces, focuses on Futurism’s founding manifesto and it explores the relationship between body and language in new ways. Working in close collaboration with speech and language psychopathologists, Buvoli filmed some American men and women affected by stuttering and aphasia reading out loud excerpts from the eleven bombastic statements of the 1909 manifesto in its English translation. (The artist also realised a version of the video with Italian speakers.) Aphasia is a clinical impairment of language caused by brain

