

# Art in America

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# Watching the Skies

Luca Buvoli and Holly Zausner share an interest in film, sculpture and airborne forms. Buvoli's most recent animated short explores the poetics and politics of flight. Zausner's 35mm film features rubber figures in slow motion above Berlin.

BY RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN

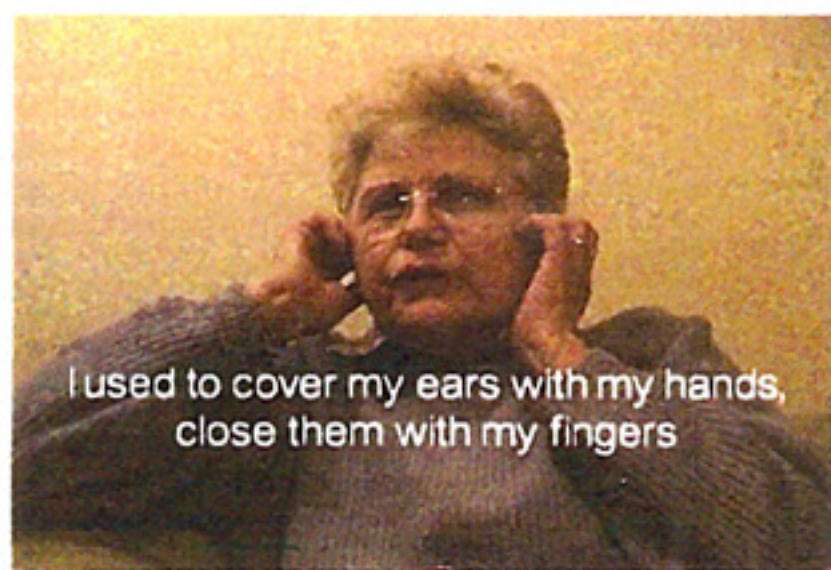
## Luca Buvoli: Fear of Flying

At times, Luca Buvoli seems like a one-man art collective. It's not unusual for an exhibition of his work to include the mediums of sculpture, drawing, animated film and the artist's book, each component launching another branch of the proliferating, comic-book-influenced narratives that are this artist's stock and trade. A few years ago, he created a fictional company called Luca Buvoli Comics to conceptually corral his diverse activities. He also saw this enterprise as a way of distancing himself from Not-a-Superhero, a recurring alter-ego character in his work who flies around the world confronting not evil villains but philosophical dilemmas.

Diversity continues to mark Buvoli's work—he's lately added mosaic to the mediums he employs—though film seems to be commanding more and more of his attention. He has also begun to subvert the make-believe ambience of his work by focusing on how specific historical events have touched his own family. Unchanged, however, is Buvoli's distinctive, faux-naïve drawing style, which suggests the earnest informality of a talented teenager copying a favorite comic book or making a notebook sketch for a science project. In sculpture, he creates a similar effect by favoring everyday materials assembled into flimsy, provisional-looking, kitelike structures that function as three-dimensional diagrams. Nor has he given up his obsession with human flight. The cape-clad, sky-zooming Not-a-Superhero may have been retired (at least temporarily), but defying gravity is still central to Buvoli's objects and visual tales. Indeed, aviation is the central theme of his most recent film, *Adapting One's Senses to High Altitude Flying (For Intermediates)—an Almost Silent Version* (2004),

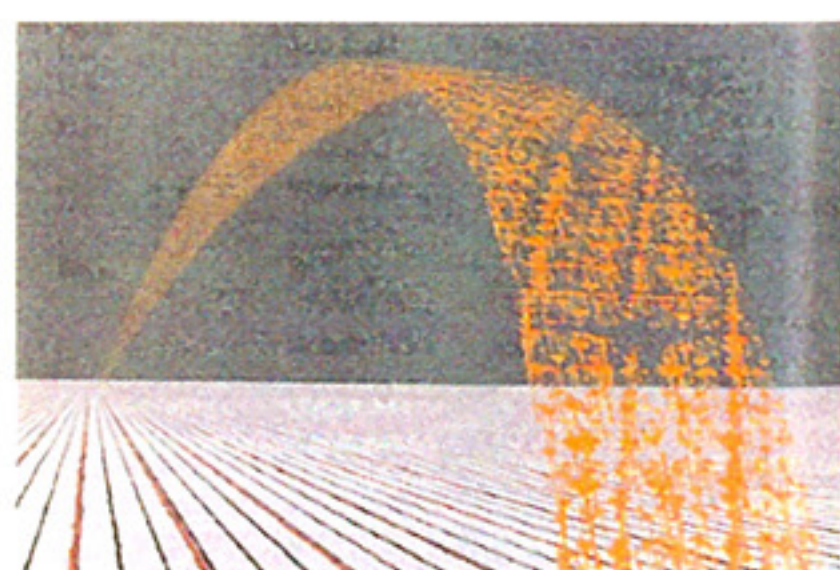
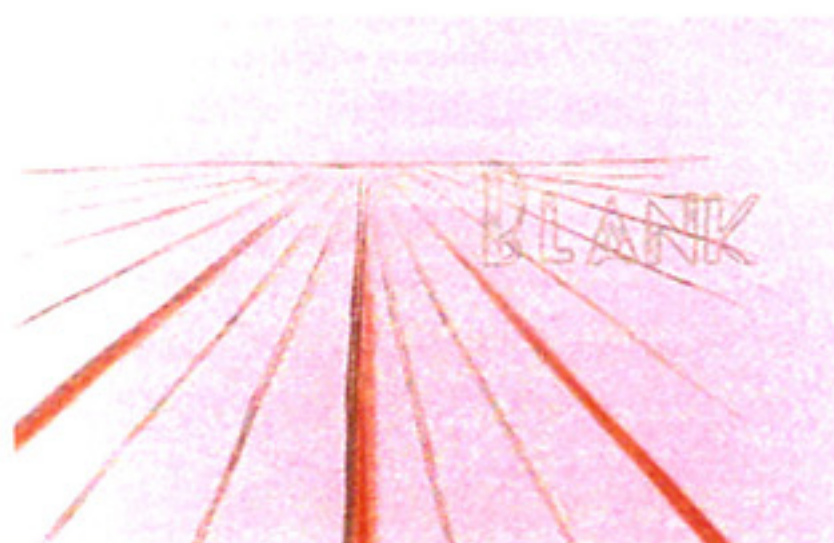
which will premiere at New York's Museum of Modern Art on Nov. 22.

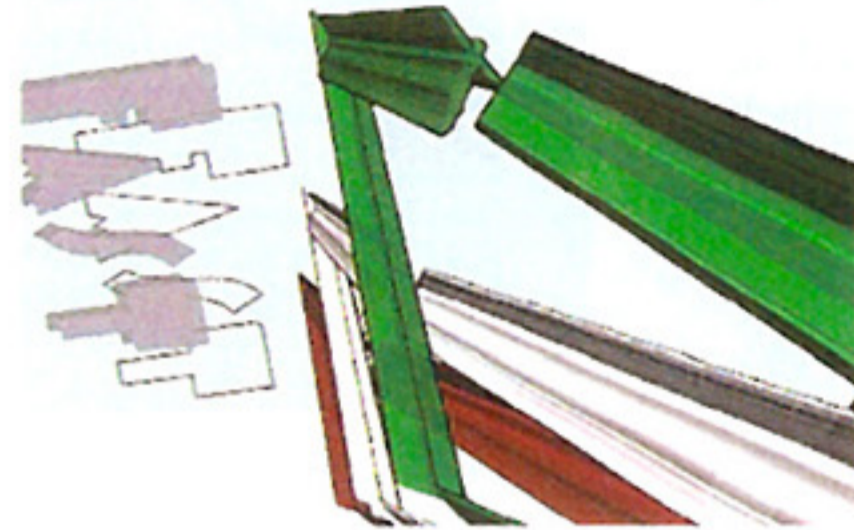
This 8-minute film, which mixes video with hand-drawn and computer animation, opens with a subtitled video sequence of an elderly woman (the artist's mother) reminiscing in Italian about hearing warplanes pass overhead in her youth during WWII. As she tells how she would cover her ears, close her eyes and hide under a blanket, a few shaky, hand-drawn lines begin to surround her image. Then the video picture drops out, leaving only the animated outline of Signora Buvoli as drawn by her son. In one of those rapid metamorphoses so characteristic of Buvoli's work, the sketch of the old woman is quickly reconfigured into a drawing of a young girl, who then pulls a blanket over her



I used to cover my ears with my hands, close them with my fingers

Images this spread, unless otherwise noted, from Luca Buvoli's *Adapting One's Senses to High Altitude Flying (For Intermediates)—an Almost Silent Version*, 2004, DVD incorporating hand-drawn and computer animation, approx. 8 minutes.





head. Here, at the very moment the film switches from video to drawing, Buvoli wastes no time in unleashing the imaginative potential of animation. From this point on, *Adapting One's Senses to High Altitude Flying* is almost entirely animated: Buvoli draws shifting geometric shapes (a spiral, a helix, tapering vectors), airborne human figures, and aircraft flying over maplike designs alone or in mass formation. Although, as the title says, the film is "almost silent," there is a soundtrack that includes passages of muffled organ music, as well as voices pronouncing the written words that appear, one by one, throughout the film.

Each of these words, spelled out in uppercase, sans serif letters, appears briefly in a corner of the frame, just long enough for the viewer to try to grasp its connection to the accompanying image. For those familiar with Buvoli's earlier Not-a-Superhero works, which feature spindly, childlike lettering, the new typeface will be a surprise, but the change hasn't been made merely for the sake of novelty. Buvoli based his new lettering on fonts favored by the Italian Futurists, especially those who celebrated aviation under Mussolini. In keeping with the Futurist concept of *parole in libertà* (words in freedom), Buvoli's film presents a relationship of word to image that is intentionally unstable, with words and pictures sometimes matching up and at other times seeming to drift away or run ahead of each other. It's hard to tell if the images are driving the words or vice versa.

The word sequence, which is in English and Italian, is highly associative. AIR, the first term, is followed by ARIA, MARIA, AVE, AVIATION, AIR FORCE, GRAVITY, EARTH, LAND, MOTHERLAND, FOREIGN, FOREST, FORWARD, FAR, FARTHER, PATRIOT, PARADE, PARODY, PARADOX. . . . This lexicon evokes a child's primer, but it also plays with etymology and psychological associations. Given that Buvoli's previous work is filled with references to Jacques Lacan (two examples: a foil-and-wire sculpture from

1992 wittily incorporates one of Lacan's diagrams into a superhero emblem and, as the artist has pointed out, the small "a" in Not-a-Superhero's name is a nod to Lacan's "little object 'a'"), it makes sense to interpret this string of words as a Lacanian "signifying chain." For Lacan, the unconscious is structured like a string of words in which meaning is constantly deferred from one term to the next. Buvoli effects a similar deferral with his list of terms that glancingly touch on religion, physics, technology and ideology. Their meaning is ultimately in the very movement, the interconnection of roles and concepts. Buvoli's images also

have this kind of shifting movement. Near the beginning of the film, for instance, an image of blue sky (AIR) leads to an airborne Virgin Mary (MARIA), who is replaced by a yellow airplane (AVIATION), which multiplies into hundreds of identical planes that flow over a flat landscape to gradually form a vast rainbowlike arch.

The mass of yellow airplanes is one of several sequences in *Adapting One's Senses to High Altitude Flying* that was created by computer animation. In Buvoli's previous films, the thousands of frames had to be individually drawn by the artist, making such a sequence almost unthinkable. Later in this film, computer animation again comes into play when the "camera" circles around a ribbonlike helix shape rising from a flat plane into the sky. This form was borrowed, the artist told me, from *Surviving Spin*, a textbook that teaches pilots how to pull out of a spiraling dive. (In making this film and the one before it, *Flying—Practical Training for Beginners*, 1999, Buvoli immersed himself in the technical aspects of aviation.) But despite this digital element, and the inclusion of two video sequences, the film retains the low-tech, do-it-yourself look of Buvoli's previous efforts. Along with the constant allusions to childhood, this unpretentious style is crucial to the success of Buvoli's animation, drawing viewers into his conceptually dense films.

**Vector Blue (Remembering the End of Future), 2003, reinforced polyester resin, metal rods, pigment, wire, dimensions variable; at the Glassell School of Fine Art, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. Photo Thomas R. Du Brock.**



As is usual with Buvoli, the shapes that appear on screen also exist as sculptures. For an exhibition at the Glassell School of Art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, in 2003, he created a large-scale sculpture of the "vectors" that appear in one of the film's sequences. Made from cast polyurethane resin mixed with a variety of substances including Gatorade, these zigzagging blue, orange and gray girderlike forms, which were suspended above viewers' heads by thin wires, seemed to trace the flight path of some confused pilot. In fact, they take their form from the outline of a man with his arms spread out as if trying to fly (presumably the Gatorade is meant to help him in this strenuous athletic activity). Buvoli has also painted small posters for his film with similar flying-man-and-vector motifs. Both sculptures and posters carry references to Italian Futurism, which is full of such graphic effects in its attempts to convey movement. These Futurist speeding-mass motifs, Buvoli suggests, may have influenced the streaks and lines used to depict speed in American comic books. If true, this iconographic link gives Buvoli's own iconography a certain logic, while also suggesting a resemblance between the Fascist pilot hero and the superheroes of Marvel Comics.

In the film, there's a video shot of an elderly man (Buvoli's father) striking the same pose as the figures depicted on the posters and in the vector sculptures. Accompanying his image, which is replaced for a split second by the shot of a small boy in the same pose, and then by computer-aided animations of the man-and-vector motif, is a word sequence that begins "PATRIOT, PARADE." Here, the artist is evoking his father's past as a test pilot for the Italian air force during WW II and in the postwar period. On the soundtrack a children's chorus is heard singing a Fascist-era Italian song about the "pilot's beautiful life." The lyrics, translated into English, are spelled out in time to the music in sing-along fashion. The ironic contrast between the sweetness of the children's voices and the propagandistic lyrics emphasizes how little is "beautiful" in a war pilot's life. At the center of all Buvoli's art, perhaps, is a quest for the child's perspective on adult folly. If he summons the notion of the superhero, it's only to demolish the ideology behind it, just as his fragile wire-cloth-and-plastic

sculptures are as far from the monumental and "heroic" as possible.

In the catalogue of his recent show at the Weatherspoon Art Museum in Greensboro, N.C., (an extremely long and narrow spiralbound volume that continues the artist's practice of using eccentric formats for his exhibition catalogues), Buvoli recounts how the impact of current events moved him to examine his family's past. Since 9/11, he tells curator Ron Platt, "a whole culture of fear has subsequently developed around the experience of flying. . . . I felt strange giving lectures on my work after those events. And, the Flying project was—in name at least—about teaching individuals to fly, which was exactly what the hijackers themselves had gone through. I started to get paranoid about going through airport security and being on a plane with my workbooks and papers. Things could have really been misinterpreted, at least this is what I thought. What until that time I had perceived as a metaphorical space in the project's Beginner's level, now I have re-addressed as real issues of control and power. This has triggered my desire to explore my father's experience of flying planes."

The last shot of the film is of Buvoli's father being interviewed by his son (who remains off-screen) about his wartime experiences. In a reversal of the opening sequence of the artist's mother, the scene, shot in an antique-looking kitchen adorned with well-used copper pots and pans, starts with an animated portrait of Signore Buvoli, which is then filled out and replaced by a color video image. After recalling that he never spoke about the war when his son was growing up, he says that

now he has forgotten nearly all the details of that time. "It's better this way," he concludes. Even though the younger Buvoli offers no rejoinder, we can be sure that he disagrees, for his allusive animated essay on the poetics and politics of flight is also an artful meditation on the necessity and complexity of remembering.