

Leaden feet cannot dance

Cian O'Neill visits the Futurism exhibition
Tate Modern until September 20

There is more uncertain hope today in the shining future than there was for the early part of the last century when certain artists and politicians urged aggressive political and social transformation, feeling as they did that science and mechanization would diminish toil and an attendant defeat of nostalgic romanticism or tradition, produce a world freer, more dangerous, yet allowing of much more innovation and, it was hoped, happiness. Even for an art movement Futurism was short-lived [c. 1910-15] but in that brief spell it exemplified the times, preaching as it did Schopenhauer's indifference to tradition, Nietzsche's disdain of soft-heartedness and the ultimately dangerous idolatry of the machine, of the inhuman. It was a tradition rent with paradoxes – painters who tried to paint like spectrometers, sculptors who loathed the work of Phidias, and it could never last – the future is only the future for so long; yet more than this it was always going to be frustrated as a movement because it was founded in technocratic anarchism / proto-fascism and no ideological leader[s] would ever be tolerated in perpetuity. In any event, its bragadaccio language was rather drowned out by the Great War, and just what legacy it left is difficult to gauge because it didn't leave behind great art, or [at least directly] inspire many great artists of subsequent years. When one considers just how mechaniza-

tion affected human existence; how *Arbeit* didn't *Macht Frei* after all but led instead to new problems, it seems ill-conceived, naïve even, and on a purely visual level it is not unlike the early digital wristwatch in that it now looks more dated than any analogue equivalent and seems to have less to say to us, if indeed it even still functions as it was intended to at all. One might wonder then why the Tate has chosen to grant the summer season to this grab-bag movement, but one would with certitude assert upon having seen it that it makes some sense out of it, if only in that it shows how piecemeal, fractious and faintly silly it was from its first crowded hour of life in Italy, to its unlamented obliteration in the shellfire of Flanders.

The urge to destruction is there in the *First Manifesto* by Italian poet F.T. Marinetti, published in *le Figaro* in February, 1909 and situated in the first room of this exhibition: 'Wreck, wreck the venerable cities, pitilessly!' One smiles now at such a sentiment, but it is worth remembering that the Colosseum was at this time but one stripped and mistreated relic amongst many in Italy, where respect for tradition in anything other than the preparation of soft cheeses has never been a strong point. It is asserted that, '[N]o work without an aggressive character can be a masterpiece', that the nude is painting is, '[A]s nauseous and as tedious as adultery in literature', and that, '[T]he art critics are useless and harmful'; which save for the final declaration is obviously all nonsense. 'All forms of imitation must be despised', apparently, save for an inelegantly coloured imitation of the fauves or cubists by, well, any one of the futurist painters as constituted in their mind a [sub-species of] painterly method, as long as a few angry diagonals or arrows are thrown athwart the picture plane to make the whole thing look 'dynamic'.

In room 2, which sprawls confusingly over the underlit space allotted this show of illogically mapped rooms, one sees canvas upon canvas [only a handful of sculptures are included and none deserving of mention] in which this formula is repeated. This is bad enough, but the colours are amongst the ugliest that this writer has ever seen: lime green straight out of a tube in some painting starter-kit, vague browns that would shame a biscuit, and purple. Purple, purple everywhere, in fact – and not a drop applied before the painter neglected to think. The deliberate election of a brutish palette is an old shock tactic in painting, but the compositional malformations and marred lines of so many of these works belie a simple lack of artistic intelligence that make the viewer conclude, in some amaze, that these colours were chosen because the painter actually thought them pleasing to the eye. Which eye that was, one can only guess at, but it is not human, and if it is, it is not practised.

There are too many rooms in this exhibition [one each for



F.T. Marinetti



Kupka's 'Compliment'

participant countries or nebulously associated movements – Italy, Russia, Orphism, Cubism, Section D'Or and Vorticism are all thrown in] and narrative flow is not to be found, though a quasi-scientific tone in the disparate works is perceptible. Certainly, there is more interest in this than design, in the stead of which one finds colour chart studies [such as Kupka's 'Compliment' [1912], which looks like an abstracted still life of julienned courgettes]; fractal / stained glass oddities [e.g. Severini's almost successful 'The Dance of the "Pan-Pan" at the Monico' [1910-11 & 1959-60]]; attempts to capture movement [see Boccioni's 'Dynamism of a Human Body' [1913], which nondescript mass is chained to the earth with doughty impasto] or the changes in moonlight [one of the most spurious pieces here – Carra's green and white celebration of the overlooked 'Wedge' shape, entitled 'Movement in Moonlight' [1910-11]]. One finds lots of impersonal and pseudo-intellectual titles too, such as: 'Horizontal Construction [Horizontal Volumes]' [1912] which is actually a portrait of a seated figure with some diagonal and lateral lines added; and Boccioni's risible 'States of Mind' series, which includes two canvases under the theme, '[T]hose who stay' [1911]. These last two are principally leaf-green paint swatches with some slurred forms moving away to the right, presumably trying to escape the judgement of posterity.



Goncharova's 'The Cyclist'

Indeed, posterity has judged of this period harshly, perhaps because almost all things special are just that because they are not for or within the powers of everyone and capturing an essence of light or motion is no easy thing when painting is inherently static, but older artists such as Turner had repeatedly shown, many years previous, that it could be done through the winning of advanced plastic skill. Sure line, precise handling and careful [not necessarily modest] tonality may allow great painters to travel almost as light as air over an image of moving water or sunshine, and so teach us something of the operation and mystery of motion and light. Despite the grandiloquence of their manifestos and the po-faced titles, one leaves the work of the futurists disappointed because they just didn't have their 'chops'. Leaden feet cannot dance – see Goncharova's 'The Cyclist' [1913], where the bike and rider look as fleet as granite.

Of published 'heat and noise' at least, there is much evidence. Room 7 contained many of the numerous texts published by the associated groups of artists, including the English Futurist manifesto which stupidly demands that sport be considered an essential element in art and attacks the, '[M]ania for immortality' that would, despite their tremblings, pass safely by the door of most of the futurists; the 'simultaneous book' written by Blaise Cendrars and clumsily painted over by Sonia Delauney; and Wyndham Lewis' 'Blast', the damp squib which patriotic English art critics continue to laud as relevant to the development of Western thought, in the face of all evidence. Little or no humour / charm is noticeable in the many, many words put out by these people and so the mind soon drifts away from all the circumlocutory dogma to wander over the works looking for something as might truly puzzle or please: something that it does not find.



The whimpering end that the futurists found when the more politically strident Italian Futurists' desire for war was satisfied may have made them re-evaluate their brave speechifying – Balla's warmongering 'Forms Cry Long Live Italy' [1915], for example is palpably more optimistic than his 'The Risks of War' [1915] and makes one wonder how brave Nietzsche himself would have been in the Trenches. Some sort of reality-check about war being beautiful is seen in the English C.R.W. Nevinson's, 'Bursting Shell' [1915], but why is the explosion re-imagined in a conch-like whorl? Regardless of whether or not beauty may be found in chaos, it looks daft, and this show drear. The challenge of capturing something about light, vision and motion can be the engine for the creation of a vital, modern art which acknowledges the physical realities of the world, but the price of their enjoyment is the moiety of skill required to successfully pin the hurricane-seeding wings of a moving butterfly to a flat picture plane. With that skill absent and one's forbearance worn down by all the prating, this exhibition of 'Futurist' art seems a spectacle as unedifying, as unsatisfying, as would be that of Cro-Magnon man wrestling a Rubik's cube in his pants.