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Fernández Castrillo, C. (2014). Depero and Photo-performance.

En: Futurist Depero. 1913-1950. Manuel Fontán del Junco

(ed.). Madrid: Fundación Juan March, 2014, pp. 287-291.

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# DEPERO and Photo-performance.

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The dichotomy between art and technology (*episteme/techne* or *artes liberales/artes mechanicae*) has determined the evolution of aesthetics and society, giving rise to numerous expressions of approbation and rejection over the course of history. In 1909 the Futurists emerged on the European art scene to the cry of “The whip or dynamite!”<sup>1</sup> proclaiming that it was no longer possible to escape from scientific discoveries and the influence of the new means of transport, production, and communication that were transforming the world into an ever faster and better connected place. There was an urgent need to establish a new aesthetic-communicative system capable of capturing the unprecedentedly vibrant and frenetic rhythm of society. The early Italian avant-garde artists thus distanced themselves from late 19th-century cultural trends by proposing a specific plan of action that could stir up the conscience of their contemporaries against *passéism* (*passatismo*, nostalgia for the past) and passivity.

In his desire to provoke reaction, the Futurists' leader Filippo Tommaso Marinetti decided to publish his inaugural manifesto in the French *Le Figaro*, the most popular newspaper of the day. Through this initial public act, Marinetti aimed to disseminate his thinking on a global scale beyond the frontiers of Italy, choosing the quintessentially modern city of Paris from which to do so. This was a statement of intent in which Marinetti overtly expressed his desire to explore the creative potential of works based on the technical advances of industrial society and the new means of communication.

In the alliance between art and technology, the Futurists believed that they had discovered the answer to the crisis of the modern age as well as the ideal route to confront the innumerable challenges and uncertainties that the future seemed to hold in store. This approach represented a radical change of direction in the debate on the respective status of the artistic disciplines and an authentic revolution with regard to the role of the work itself, the creator, and the public, an issue of perhaps even more relevance and significance in the present day.

The increase in the number of methods available to produce a mechanical reproduction of reality and the influence of mass communication on the world of

culture in the early 20th century were certainly decisive in establishing the bases of Media Art. Nonetheless, the breakdown of the old boundaries between the arts and the acceptance of new media was not devoid of controversy. Later in this text we will see that in this complex interaction lay some of the keys to the evolution of contemporary art up to our own time.

When analyzing the development of the relationship between art and technology, a preeminent role should be given to the invention of photography in 1839 and the intense debate on the issue of its entry into the Olympus of the arts which took place from that point onwards in Parisian intellectual circles. In a brief article entitled “Le public moderne et la photographie” [The Modern Public and Photography] published among his writings on the 1859 Salon, Charles Baudelaire referred to the polemical reception of the invention: “If photography is allowed to supplement art in some of its functions, it will soon have supplanted or corrupted it altogether thanks to the stupidity of the multitude which is its natural ally.”<sup>2</sup> Baudelaire warned of its dangers while also criticizing the unstoppable “decline of the aura.” Walter Benjamin returned to this idea in his celebrated essay of 1936, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in which he reflected on the crisis of perception in relation to the breakdown of the original’s *hic et nunc* and the emancipation of the work of art with regard to its link with reality. The emergence of photography resulted in an unprecedented creative explosion in the field of the visual arts, with its maximum expression to be found in avant-garde creation.

And yet, despite largely conforming to Marinetti’s declared principles, the reception of the new medium was not as enthusiastic as might have been expected and led to a rupture within the Futurist movement between the defenders of the traditional mode of representing reality, associated with the old artistic disciplines (painting, sculpture, poetry, theater), and the supporters of the introduction of new media.

Initially, Futurism’s official position reflected the general opinion of the day, which considered photography a mere technique, a simple instrument devoid of originality for improving precision in the mechanical, superficial, and fragmentary reproduction of reality. This viewpoint was largely due to the stance adopted by the painter Umberto Boccioni,<sup>3</sup> the leading Futurist thinker together with Marinetti. Boccioni rejected photography because it did not conform to his concept of art as the transmission of the *élan vital* [life force], as propounded in 1907 by the French philosopher Henri Bergson in *L’Évolution créatrice* [Creative Evolution].<sup>4</sup>

With the aim of revealing the expressive possibilities of photography and in line with Futurist ideas, in 1911 Anton Giulio Bragaglia (1890–1960) proposed a new

system for capturing the image in movement, which he termed photodynamism.<sup>5</sup> It aspired to go beyond the lineal, continuous nature of Étienne Jules Marey's chronophotographs in order to represent the essence of the dynamism and energy latent within every movement through the use of very long exposures. By demonstrating photodynamism's capacity to show the *élan vital* through the continuous trajectory of the moving object in the image, Bragaglia strove to refute contemporary criticism of photography. Among his most important images are *Lo schiaffo* [The Slap] of 1910, a provocative depiction of one of the most quintessentially Futurist acts, and the agile movement of the fingers in *Dattilografa* [The Typist] of 1913.

Aware of the significant competition that Works of this type could imply for his own investigations in the fields of painting and sculpture, Boccioni took refuge behind his particular interpretation of Bergson's theories in order to justify his rejection of photodynamism<sup>6</sup> and his wholehearted defense of the old artistic disciplines. As a result, the Futurists' official position was based on a synchronic representation of reality based on Boccioni's simultaneity, as opposed to the diachronic approach of the heterodox Bragaglia, who was interested in expressing the progression of movement in time.

On August 1, 1913 Boccioni issued his final denunciation in the Florentine journal *Lacerba*:

So much the worse for the short-sighted who thought we were in love with the isolated incident – who thought we were amateurs of trajectories and mechanical movements. We have always rejected with disgust and scorn even a distant relationship with photography, because it is outside of art.<sup>7</sup>

This categorical statement can be called into question if we look at Futurist paintings of this period, which are so closely linked to the advances achieved through experimentation with photography. In *Dinamismo di un cane a guinzaglio* [Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash] of 1912, Giacomo Balla translated a stroboscopic vision of movement into playful terms, while in his *Bambina che corre sul balcone* [Girl Running on a Balcony] of 1912 he investigated the painterly potential of Marey's chronophotography. Finally, among the numerous possible examples, an important one is the vibrant movement of the poles of the banners painted by Carlo Carrà in the purest photodynamic style in his *Funerali dell'anarchico Galli* [Funerals of the Anarchist Galli] of 1911.

Sadly, the extremely negative reception of photography made an experimental approach difficult and placed the most visionary artists in an awkward situation. It is significant that the *Manifesto della fotografia futurista* [Manifesto of Futurist Photography] by Marinetti and Tato (Guglielmo Sansoni, 1896–1974) was not published until 1930.

The Futurists principally made use of photography in order to promote the movement through the dissemination of portraits of its leading representatives and images of their works. The first known print associated with the group dates from 1908, showing a proud Marinetti at the wheel of his new car, to which he would refer a year later in his inaugural manifesto when he recounted his famous accident. In the years prior to the founding of Futurism, Marinetti generally had himself photographed in a mocking pose to emphasize his charismatic nature. This attitude would radically change from 1909 onwards, when he became the leader of the principal Italian avant-garde movement, after which he systematically censored pictures in which he appeared in too human a guise.

The first Futurist portrait photographs were taken around 1912 and followed the model evolved in the iconographic tradition of bourgeois portraiture. This is evident in the first picture of the group, in which Marinetti, Boccioni, Carrà, Russolo, and Severini are lined up in front of the camera on the pavement in Paris in February of that year, at the time of the exhibition at the Bernheim-Jeune gallery. Interestingly, among the most original contributions of this type is the multi-perspective, pre-Futurist portrait of Boccioni entitled *Io-noi* [I–We] of 1905–7, which reflects his interest in exploring his own identity through the simultaneous representation of his appearance in five different states.

The desire to capture the *élan vital*, which was difficult to achieve in traditional photographs, culminated in 1915 with the official entry into the Futurist movement of Fortunato Depero, who introduced one of the most important contributions to the field of photography, namely photoperformance. With this new genre, Depero strove to portray the subject through his or her gestures and movements in order to reproduce the emotions and states of mind of the moment captured for posterity. This approach is closely related to the desire to express vitality and the Futurist spirit, fusing art and life, which was one of the movement's principal aims, as Marinetti explained that same year when he recalled its origins:

*It was the new formula of Art-action [...] the youthful, modernizing, anti-traditional, optimistic, heroic, and dynamic standard that had to be raised over the ruins of passéism (the static and traditional, professional and pessimistic, pacifist and nostalgic, decorative and aesthetic mind set).<sup>8</sup>*

The project advanced by Marinetti was not confined to a simple confrontation between modernity and tradition. Rather, it announced an authentic socio-cultural battle. The Futurist leader was convinced of the need to bring about a profound transformation in patterns of behavior through the incorporation of art into all aspects of daily life. In order to achieve this goal, Marinetti did not hesitate to offer an apology for violence designed to produce a greater impact. By offering

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Depero’s pugilistic *Autoritratto con pugno* [Selfportrait with Punch] of 1915 is the most authentic expression of this defiant attitude in iconographic terms and a faithful reflection of Futurism’s irrepressible spirit. In the image Depero is shown throwing a punch at the camera and thus at the viewer. Despite the controversy which the medium of photography had generated, the artista continued with his attempt to explore its potential and, following the direction pursued by Bragaglia, initiated a new expressive terrain by associating photography with performance.<sup>9</sup> For this strategy Depero adopted the provocative dynamic present in the so-called *serate futuriste* [Futurist evenings], an unprecedented format based on interaction with the public which combined theater with music, political debate, and celebration. The term “performance” was in fact first coined in 1914 by the journalist Paolo Scarfoglio to describe one of these events that took place at Sprovieri’s gallery in Naples.

The adoption of an ironic attitude is also evident in the self-portraits of many other intellectuals including Giacomo Balla and the Swiss poet Gilbert Clavel, who appears in an iconoclastic pose alongside a very young Depero in one of his photoperformances. With their clowning and exaggerated laughter, these artists offered a thought-provoking challenge to the concept of photography as a passive representation of reality. Depero also included brushstrokes of color and texts in his photographs, which he transformed into self-promotional postcards, and thus into forerunners of Mail Art. As a result, Depero moved beyond the old hierarchy that existed between the artistic disciplines, opening up the way towards the exploration of new creative synergies between different media.

In the manifesto entitled *Ricostruzione futurista dell’universo* [Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe] of 1915 [cat. 36], Depero, together with Balla, announced their intention of “recreating” the universe “entirely” according to the “whims of our inspiration.”<sup>10</sup> In later works Depero would give shape to this idea through the use of the techniques of photomontage (the combination of photographic images of different origins) and photocollage (the insertion of a

photographic element into another medium such as drawing or painting). Examples include *New York, film vissuto* [*New York – A Lived Film*] of 1930–31.

Alongside these original works mention should be made of the important documentary facet of photo-performance. Some of the surviving images evoke the atmosphere of those improvised and unrepeatable spectacles. In some cases they offer an idea of the way a work was created while in others they function as a record of unrealized projects. Overall, these photographic reportages respond to the desire to unite art and life, as in the film *Vita futurista* [*Futurist Life*] of 1916, in which a group performance allowed the artists themselves to illustrate the Futurist model of behavior in opposition to the *passéist* attitude. In addition, these photographs were a vehicle for the promotion of their artistic productions, of which the maximum expression would have been *Il futurismo italianissimo* [*The Very Italian Futurism*], a film-performance on the Futurists, their works, and the sites of their creative activities, which Depero announced in 1926 but never actually made.

The transgressive creative impulse that arose with photo-performance was not overshadowed by the aerial visions of Futurist aero-photography in the 1930s. Rather, official Futurism's rejection of photography at this period functioned as a spur to Depero. He used photo-performance to reveal the imperious need to generate real contact with the viewer, provoking an active rather than a merely contemplative response and involving the spectator mentally and physically as a fundamental part of the creative process. This discourse would subsequently be developed by the Canadian Marshall McLuhan in his communication theories on the distinction between "hot" and "cool" media.<sup>11</sup>

In effect, the limited degree of interaction with the public together with the difficulty of conveying the dynamism of the present and the vibrant energy of the artist constituted the principal reason why Marinetti supported Boccioni's position, hindering the inclusion of photography and subsequently of film in Futurist experiments. The communion between art and technology was thus postponed, given that Marinetti's stance meant that the Futurists were only initially interested in photography as a tool for revitalizing earlier artistic expressions while rejecting it as an autonomous medium.

Through his significant contribution, Depero revealed the ideological contradictions that existed within an unstable context dominated by profound changes. It was from those changes that some of the most inspiring contributions arose for an understanding of the still complex relationship between the world of art and technological advances.

## Notas

1. "Frusta o dynamite!"; Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "La Divina commedia è un verminaio di glossatori" (1917), in F. T. Marinetti, *Teoria e invenzione futurista*, ed. Luciano De Maria (Milan: Mondadori, 1998).
2. "S'il est permis à la photographie de suppléer l'art dans quelques-unes de ses fonctions, elle l'aura bientôt supplanté ou corrompu tout à fait, grâce à l'alliance naturelle qu'elle trouvera dans la sottise de la multitude"; Charles Baudelaire, "Le public moderne et la photographie," quoted here from "The Salon of 1859: The Modern Public and Photography," in *The Mirror of Art: Critical Studies*, trans. and ed. Jonathan Mayne (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 232.
3. Umberto Boccioni maintained that Futurist investigations on "simultaneity" had preceded those of the French; Umberto Boccioni, "Il dinamismo futurista e la pittura francese" [Futurist Dynamism and French Painting], *Lacerba*, yr. 1, no. 15 (Florence, August 1, 1913). A year later, in "Simultaneità" [Simultaneity], published in the same journal, he reaffirmed his position, stating that: "Nessuno prima di noi aveva usato questa parola per definire la nuova condizione di vita nella quale si sarebbe manifestato il nuovo dramma plastico" [No one had used those words before us to define the new condition of life in which the new plastic drama would manifest itself]. He thus proclaimed the absolute necessity of incorporating the concept of "simultaneity" into the modern work of art, given that it was "l'esaltazione lirica, la plastica manifestazione di un nuovo assoluto; la velocità di un nuovo e meraviglioso spettacolo; la vita moderna di una nuova febbre; la scoperta scientifica" [lyrical exaltation, the visual manifestation of an absolute newness; the speed of a new and marvelous spectacle; the modern life of a new fever; scientific discovery]; Umberto Boccioni, *Pittura scultura futuriste (dinamismo plastico)* (Milan: Edizioni Futuriste di Poesia, 1914), 169–71. One of his most representative visual creations in this sense is *Visioni simultanee* [Simultaneous Visions] of 1911, which he exhibited at the Bernheim-Jeune gallery in Paris.
4. In reality, Bergson was proposing an argument closer to Bragaglia's theory: "En un certain sens, le mouvement est plus que les positions et que leur ordre, car il suffit de se le donner, dans sa simplicité indivisible, pour que l'infinité des positions successives ainsi que leur ordre soient donnés du même coup, avec, en plus, quelque chose qui n'est ni ordre ni position mais qui est l'essentiel : la mobilité [In one sense, movement is more than the positions and than their order, for it is sufficient to make it, in its indivisible simplicity, to secure that the infinity of the successive positions as also their order be given at once – with something else which is neither order nor position but which is essential: the

mobility]; Henri Bergson, *L'Évolution créatrice*, quoted here from *Creative Evolution* (New York: Henry Holt, 1911), 91.

5. The first edition of *Fotodinamica futurista* was printed in 1911 by the publishing house Ugo Nalato in Rome after it was turned down by Edizioni Futuriste di Poesia. According to Bragaglia, between 1911 and 1913 there were three different versions of the original work; Anton Giulio Bragaglia, "La fotografia del movimento," *Noi e il mondo* (Rome, April 1, 1913).

6. Boccioni revealed his decided opposition to photodynamism in a letter to Giuseppe Sprovieri dated September 4, 1913, in which he informed him of his intention to retrieve his 1913 sculpture *Forme uniche della continuità nello spazio* [Unique Forms of Continuity in Space] [cat. 11] from Paris in order to show it in the forthcoming exhibition at his gallery. At the end of the text he warned Sprovieri: "Mi raccomando, te lo scrivo a nome degli amici futuristi, escludi qualsiasi contatto con la fotodinamica di Bragaglia" [I recommend, in the name of all the Futurist friends, that you avoid any contact with Bragaglia's photodynamism]; Umberto Boccioni, cited in *Archivi del futurismo*, vol. I, ed. Maria Drudi Gambillo and Teresa Fiori (Rome: De Luca, 1986), 288. This attitude was repeated in his "Avviso," published in October 1913, in which he rejected any connection between pictorial Futurism and photodynamism. "Data l'ignoranza generale in materia d'arte, e per evitare equivoci, noi pittori futuristi dichiariamo che tutto ciò che si riferisce alla fotodinamica concerne esclusivamente delle innovazioni nel campo della fotografia. Tali ricerche puramente fotografiche non hanno assolutamente nulla a che fare col Dinamismo plastico da noi inventato, né con qualsiasi ricerca dinamica nel dominio della pittura, della scultura e dell'architettura" [Given the general lack of knowledge about art, and in order to avoid any misunderstanding, we the Futurist painters declare that anything relating to photodynamism only concerns innovations in the field of photography. Such purely photographic investigations have absolutely nothing to do with the Plastic dynamism invented by us, nor with any investigation of dynamism in the field of painting, sculpture, and architecture]; "Avviso," *Lacerba*, yr. 1, no. 19 (Florence, October 1, 1913).

7. "Peggio per i miopi che ci hanno creduti innamorati dell'episodio. Che hanno creduto vedere in noi dei cacciatori di traiettorie e di gesti meccanici. Una benché lontana parentela con la fotografia l'abbiamo sempre respinta con disgusto e con disprezzo perché fuori dell'arte"; Boccioni, "Il dinamismo futurista e la pittura francese," quoted here from *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. Umbro Apollonio (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 110.

8. “Era la nuova formula dell’Arte-azione [...] bandiera rinnovatrice, antitradizionale, ottimistica, eroica e dinamica, che si doveva inalberare sulle rovine del passatismo (stato d’animo statico e tradizionale, professionale e pessimistico, pacifista e nostalgico, infine decorativo ed estetico)”; Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Per la guerra sola igiene del mondo* (Milan: Edizioni Futuriste di *Poesia*, 1915) [cat. 6].

9. RoseLee Goldberg offers an interesting survey of the evolution of performance, from the first *serata futurista*, which took place on January 12, 1910 in the Teatro Rosetti, to the present day. RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2001).

10. Giacomo Balla and Fortunato Depero, *Ricostruzione futurista dell’universo*, (Milan: Direzione del Movimento Futurista, March 11, 1915). For a full reproduction of this manifesto in English, see pp. 369–75.

11. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding the Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).