II. Revolutionaries of the Theatrical Experience: Fuller and the Futurists

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The most novel and intriguing artistic achievements are often those that spring from artists reacting to a world in flux. Inspired by the tumultuous climate that surrounds them, revolutionary artists in turn seek to effect their own changes. The Futurist movement in Italy during the early twentieth century came blazing forth with an energy and vision not unlike those that had sparked the experimentation of the first modern dancers. In particular, the Futurists transformed theatrical performance in much the same way that the dynamic mover Loïe Fuller redefined dance on the stage. It was the emergence of new technologies before and just after the turn of the century that enraptured Fuller and the Futurists, who voiced the pulsing vibrancy of life as they knew it through their work. These innovators envisioned a day when the reciprocal relationship between life and art would be so seamless that life itself would become the ultimate work of art.

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the prime originator of the Futurist movement, composed his “Founding and Manifesto of Futurism” in 1909 to condemn what he saw as a stagnant, academic approach to art, guilty of hindering the progress of young creative minds. He announced
that "we establish Futurism, because we want to free this land from its smellgy
gangrene of professors, archaeologists, ciceroni and antiquarians," and
he equated museums with graveyards.\(^1\) The world had been jolted by
the machine. What was beautiful to the Futurists was the gleam of
metal, the roar of the motor, not the musk of faded canvases or folios.

Futurist insight translated quite readily to the stage; Marinetti
and his colleagues found the theatre to be an ideal forum for capturing
the excitement of the here-and-now. As outlined in 1915 in "The Fu-
turist Synthetic Theatre," another of the movement's declarations,
Futurists were committed to "arriving at a true synthesis, of freeing
themselves from a technique that involves prolixity, meticulous analy-
sis." They loathed the process and product of the well-established
dramatists. The manifesto further explained that "our frenzied passion
for real, swift, elegant, complicated . . . Futurist life" should be mani-
fested in a theatrical event in which no logic or technique would inter-
cept the impetus of the artist; "he must be preoccupied only with cre-
ating synthetic expressions of cerebral energy that have the absolute
value of novelty."\(^2\) What the Futurists wished to do was to create some-
thing fresh that would invigorate an audience.

Along a similar vein, the art form that has come to be known
as modern dance was being created by individuals who found them-
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Modern dance pioneers sought to develop an avenue that would enable them to express, and evoke in an audience, the ebullient raw emotion of life. Among the most radical dancemakers toward the end of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth was an American-born woman named Loïe Fuller. Her work was generated in opposition to the exhibition of ever-smiling clones with kicking legs. Her spontaneity transcended formulaic fairy-tale loveliness. It became Fuller's mission to present something of passion and substance. The result was so revolutionary that whether she was indeed dancing still perplexes many dance historians. Regarding the concept of dance, Fuller herself, who had little formal dance training, said, "there ought to be a word better adapted to the thing."4 The freshness that she brought to her art as a dancer not classically trained proved to be a boon to her creativity, just as Marinetti having been a poet and other Futurists, such as Giacomo Balla and Enrico Prampolini, having been painters enabled them to bring novelty to the theatre.

When Fuller settled in Paris in 1892 and performed with the Folies-Bergère, she was adored, praised, and became "accepted as one of the leading revolutionaries in art."5 What Loïe Fuller did that was so cataclysmic was essentially to reinvent live human performance through the glory of technology—specifically lighting. Reflecting on her career, she said, "I consider my work to be the point of departure of the great light symphony which will transform the theatre of the future. We don't know enough about the infinite resources of light, and how many treasures are enclosed in the simple ray of a projector."6 With a keen appreciation for scientific investigation, Fuller worked tirelessly in her own laboratory, experimenting with unique mixtures of colors, developing new lighting gels and machines that would illuminate her other magnificent "invention," the expansive and perpetually moving silk fabric that she wore and manipulated as a costume. The result was a stunning achievement. In his 1893 article "Considerations on the Art of Loïe Fuller and the Dance," the Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé proclaimed her performance to be "an intoxication of art, and simultaneously, an industrial accomplishment."7

An intensive investigation of the work of Loïe Fuller in light of the Futurists, and vice versa, reveals that concrete physical and philosophical similarities exist between what she and they produced before an audience within the space of the theatre. While it may be a gross
A drawing from an unnamed publication dated April 1893 showing Loie Fuller in a dance using mirrors to multiply her image. Because the weight of the mirrors made touring it difficult, this dance was performed only one or two times. From the Robinson-Locke Collection of The New York Public Library of the Performing Arts. By courtesy of Sally R. Sommer.

overstatement to claim, as the Fuller biographer and Futurist researcher Giovanni Lista does, that “for their luminous game and color” Fuller’s dances were “a model of inspiration for the creation of a futurist theatre,” it is true that the Futurists viewed Fuller’s accomplishments in a favorable light. In the “Manifesto of the Futurist Dance,” printed in 1917, Marinetti compares her work with that of Isadora Duncan, Valentine de Saint-Point, and others, and concludes that “we Futurists prefer Louie [sic] Fuller . . . (utilization of electric light and mechanisms).”
He was most attracted to the idea that her performances were transcendent "beyond muscular possibilities." Analogous use of "electric light" and "mechanisms" aside, both the Futurists and Fuller sought to create a performance that would reveal emotion, often through the use of color, while simultaneously provoking the sensory and imaginative facilities of the spectator. Each of them investigated the relationships among form, color, and motion in space; each considered the possibility that costume + light = a scenography that placed the performer in a subservient role, the scenography acting as a "performer" in itself, instead of functioning as mere decoration. Above all, Fuller and the Futurists were determined to produce the total, harmonized, scintillating theatrical event.

In his "Futurist Scenography," a manifesto printed in 1915 that contemplated the presence of stage elements, Enrico Prampolini expressed the need to "substitute for scenic action an emotional order that awakens all sensations necessary to the development of the work." Instead of blatant plot rendering, he craved a breed of drama that consisted solely of succinct, perceivable emotion. Prampolini wished to create the "illuminating stage," which would "irradiate the colors demanded by the theatrical action with all its emotional power." In this environment, the theatrical action itself would effectively "express the soul of the character." The desired effect was explained in program notes for a 1927 Paris performance of Théâtre de la Pantomime Futuriste. His Compagnie de Pantomime italienne, appearing at the Théâtre de la Madeleine, hoped to generate the arousal of a "psychological synchronism in the soul of the spectator."

Fuller was no different. According to Mallarmé, "she blend[ed] with the rapidly changing colors... their rapid emotional changes—delight, mourning, anger." In the poet's opinion, watching the dance was to witness "the dizziness of soul made visible by an artifice." Like Prampolini, Fuller recognized the enlightening potential in the manifestation of sensation. As she conceived it, sensation was conveyed through her movements. In her autobiography, Fifteen Years of a Dancer's Life, With Some Account of Her Distinguished Friends, there is some thoughtful analysis of her art. In almost stream-of-consciousness progression she writes, "What is the dance? It is motion. What is motion? The expression of a sensation. What is a sensation? The reaction in the human body produced by the mind." Her ambition, she says, was
to stimulate the audience: “to impress an idea I endeavour, by my motions, to cause its birth in the spectator’s mind, to awaken his imagination.” It is clear that both Loïe Fuller and Enrico Prampolini valued giving physical dimension to emotion.

Along with emotion, the Futurist artists and Fuller invested theatrical action with a dynamism of abstract form and color in space. In describing her the dance critic André Levinson called her, “a great imaginative creator of forms,” and remarked that “her drapes animate and organize space, give her a dreamlike ambiance,” referring to the way in which the visual image of her perpetually mutating costume, lit in an array of changing colors, was a commotion of kaleidoscopic splendor. Although some of the images brought to life by her lit drapes in motion resembled flowers, butterflies, tornadoes, or other natural phenomena, the key to her brilliance was that she surpassed mere representation. Her gargantuan derivatives of these forms were made fantastic by their constant permutation and saturation of radiance. “She is a spectacle that is scarcely equaled by rainbows, torchlight processions, Niagara Falls, or naval parades,” said Hugh Morton in the Metropolitan Magazine around 1896.

With her unique fusion of vigorous and unpredictable activity, she invested her stage presence with an intangible potency. In acknowledgment of this principle, Fuller wrote, “I can express this force which is indefinable but certain in its impact. I have motion. That means that all the elements of nature may be expressed.” It would be narrow-minded and restricting, however, to label Fuller’s works as naturalistic or realistic, and this pigeonholing was not championed by Fuller. She endeavored to make her presentations magical, and her refracted lighting effects deflected the forms into abstract patterns. Sally Sommer aptly explains that “this was a theatre of pure motion,” and even goes as far as to call it “plastic.”

In their “Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe” manifesto of 1915, Giacomo Balla and Fortunato Depero declared that “we will find abstract equivalents for every form and element in the universe, and then we will combine them according to the caprice of our inspiration, creating plastic complexes which we will set in motion.” Balla, who had been a painter for the greater part of his artistic career, left the canvas to explore three-dimensional “line-forces of speed.” His result was the “plastic complexes,” which are described in the manifesto as
Loïe Fuller at the Paris Opéra around 1893–6, from an unnamed French newspaper. By courtesy of Sally R. Sommer.

“brightly colored and extremely luminous,” as “action-art,” as “energy of will” that are capable of “penetration.” The complexes are said to undergo “successive transformations (cones, pyramids, spheres, etc.).”\textsuperscript{18} Employed in a theatrical situation, the exhilaration of these inherently dramatic objects would be disseminated, fusing Futurist frenzy with life in general. Like Fuller, who was able to create an image whose magnificent metamorphosis transcended reality, so, too, did the Futurists construct objects that exceeded actuality and gave rise to a new reality.

A final and especially compelling point of comparison can be made between Loïe Fuller and the Futurists regarding the function of costume and lighting as scenographic actors. As Fuller grew in fame throughout Europe, she developed larger and more expansive silk garments that she could manipulate with the aid of internal rods extending
her arms. When she combined this costume with increasingly complex lighting equipment and design, including her novel underlighting technique and the use of mirrors, what became de-emphasized in her performance was the presence of her own human body. The mobile image consisted of material and light that had its own precisely engineered movement vocabulary. As it has been explained in the French journal *Photographies,*

> The body was, for her, only a central mechanism subservient to a visual result: the effects of her sails. The apparitions of Loïe Fuller were a harmony, like an osmosis, between her figures in perpetual metamorphoses and, through her engineering, her incessant variations of lighting, her complex scenic apparatus enhanced especially with her game of mirrors.\(^{19}\)

Similarly, Depero designed costumes with a plasticity that would subjugate the performer in integration with the complete stage complex. Serge Diaghilev of the Ballets Russes commissioned Depero in 1917 to design a production of *The Song of the Nightingale.* Although the project never came to fruition owing to disputes over unmet deadlines, surviving written accounts and sketches of the designs reveal what had been intended.\(^{20}\) Specifically, a note made by Depero described that “the human figure disappeared under the volume, the wings, and the shields of fantastical plastic appearance. The person was nothing but a hidden mechanical means to guide these magical and abstract costumes and their lively and ever-changing appearance.”\(^{21}\) Like the total scenic unity of Fuller’s work, Depero designed a “plastic stage complex,” completed by the moving, transformational figure.

Another example of scenery acting as performer was quite literally manifested in Balla’s presentation of *Feu d’artifice,* set to Igor Stravinsky’s *Fireworks.* Presented in Rome by Diaghilev in 1917, the theatrical event did not fulfill its performance potential owing to an argument between the machinists and electricians at the Teatro Costanzi, leaving Balla to execute the complex lighting cues alone. The stage action consisted of “a complex of prismatic wooden shapes covered with canvas and painted. These were topped with smaller forms of translucent fabric which could be illuminated from inside. . . . Ballet dancers were replaced by the movement of colored light over these geometric surfaces, so that light and color expressed the changing moods of the
Costume designs by Fortunato Depero for a projected work called *Mimismagia*, dated 1916, now in the Depero Museum, Rovereto. From Michael Kirby, *Futurist Performance*.
It may be no coincidence that this theatrical creation was commissioned about one year after Fuller’s Paris performance of *Feu d’artifice*, set to the same Stravinsky score and executed by Fuller and her assembled troupe of young women.

The correlation between Fuller’s theatrical presentations and the work of the Futurists in the area of theatre design is not entirely conclusive of any direct influence. However, when considered in the context of their time, the developments of each reveal groundbreaking ideas. Both Fuller and Marinetti set out to reinvent art so that it would have more consequence than the traditional and banal artworks already in existence. While even more obvious similarities can be exploited in the domain of technical lighting design, what is particularly striking is the parallel nature of Fuller’s and the Futurists’ notions about, and goals regarding, the performer and the audience.

The fact remains that Loïe Fuller was a well-known and widely celebrated revolutionary artist throughout Europe before and during the creative period of the Futurists. Because her arrival in Paris coincided with the movement known as Art Nouveau, theoreticians are inclined to recognize her as having concretely influenced, and been influenced by, concepts of that style. A frequently cited source of inspiration for both Fuller and the Futurists was the theories of the Symbolists. Much of the theatre of today has taken a cue from the bold visions of Loïe Fuller and the Futurists. The current explorations of the lighting designer Jennifer Tipton and the choreographer Dana Reitz, with their collaboration of light and motion, are evidence that such invigorating stage investigations are still in progress. Most certainly, debates regarding depth and substance in performance have also yet to cease.

Notes


6. Loïe Fuller, quoted in ibid.


12. Mallarmé, quoted in Sommer, p. 58.

13. Fuller, *Fifteen Years*, p. 70.


17. Sommer, p. 65.


