

The cornerstone of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's aesthetics was the "lyrical intoxication with matter" that should be expressed by "an orchestral style, at once polychromatic, polyphonic, and polymorphous [which] can embrace the life of matter..." This style, characteristic of his 1913 poem *Zang Tumb Tumb*, is what László Moholy-Nagy of the Bauhaus acknowledged as an avant-garde effort "to liberate art [literature] from the disparateness of the eye and ear." The poem's hybrid **verbo-voco-visual form** and its focus on sound instead of meaning incited further innovations in the idiomatic structure of all Futurist arts, particularly synthetic theatre. Reaching from sound poetry to theatre this new idiom prompted a kind of 'sonic writing' (close to one of the axes of our approach:) "les écritures sonores [qui] deviennent la voie pour une autre dramaturgie théâtrale." Apparently, Futurist 'sonic writing' can be considered a predecessor of such 'une autre dramaturgie théâtrale' which deals with the performative and intermedial potential of sound and informs aurality of the postdramatic stage.

Exploring the historical traces of such development, I would like to revisit the Futurist concepts of *complesso plastico motorumoristo* [plastic noise-kinetic complex] and synthetic theatre. Futurists synthesized elements of sound poetry, painting, sculpture, and performance into so called '*sintesi futuriste*,' that is, shortest possible explosions of theatricality, fusions of the plastic and sonic elements of theatre. In that way, they established common principles of the avant-garde art which Moholy-Nagy called "**a vision in motion**", which led to a new "synoptic, synergetic, and synacoustic art" of the Bauhaus. These principles are still alive in theatre discourse and practice found in the works of Heiner Goebbels, Theatregroep Hollandia, and Societas Raffaello Sanzio, to name but a few.



FIGURE 2

This tendency incited by sound poetry had a strong support in Futurist abstract painting, as well. It was **two painting manifestos** from 1913: “Chromophony - the Colours of Sounds” by Enrico Prampolini and “The Painting of Sounds, Noises and Smells” by Carlo Carrà that established synaesthetic, vibrational interference between colour and sound, breaking ground for the synthetic form of Futurist theatre. Prampolini, an abstractionist painter who became the most successful stage designer of Futurism, defined painting as an aggregation of chromatic vibrations in the atmosphere, a synergy of sound and colour, and “the perception of sound colours.” At the same time, Carrà believed that sounds, noises, and smells incorporated in the painterly expression of colours, lines, and volumes can build dynamic, polyphonic architectural forms similar to music. He perceived vibrations of sound and colour, and their dispersion in the atmosphere as integral to a ‘total painting’ “*a painting which is a plastic state of mind of the universal* [that] requires the active cooperation of all the senses.”¹ Their notion of the essential correlation of sound and plastic arts inspired Depero’s *Colori*, a pioneering attempt at a kinetic sound sculpture in performance.

¹ Apollonio, 115.

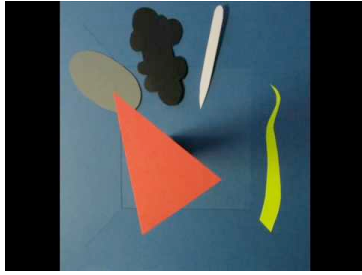


FIGURE 3

Fortunato Depero's *Colori* (1915) is subtitled “an abstract theatrical synthesis.”

It consists of a pale-blue room with no doors or windows in which four characters or, rather, four objects, move and talk in an abstract language of babble and noise. The cast members have no human traits: the author describes them in physical terms: GRAY is “dark, plastic, dynamic ovoid;” RED is “plastic, triangular, dynamic polyhedron;” WHITE is “plastic, long-lined, sharp point;” and BLACK is “multiglobe.” The four produce vocalizations corresponding to the chromatic and formal essence of their own shape and colour.

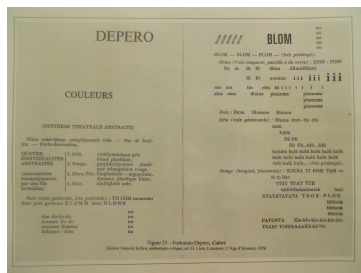


FIGURE 4

Their lines are written in the verbo-voco-visual style of *parole in libertà*; the two-page script contains vertical and horizontal lines of letters of different size, different typeface, and different level of boldness. Fragments of their speech go accordingly:

BLACK: **TO COM** momomoo dom pom grommo **BLOM** uoco **DLONN**

WHITE: **ZINN – FLINN** fin ui tli tli dlinn ...

GRAY: Bluma dum du clu umu fubulù ...

RED: **SO KRA TI BOM TAM** cò te' to' lico²

Near the end of the play, they start to relentlessly repeat their lines in unison until a whistle interrupts them marking an alogical/abstract closing. It remained unclear whether it is a picture/sculpture staged according to the laws of chromophony or a sound composition transformed into a kinetic stage entity. That made Giovanni Lista call the piece “a kind of ballet of abstract forms and sounds.”³ In any case, *Colori* represented an initial try in genuine audio-visual scenography and choreography that brought about the notion of the plastic moto-rumorist complex as an expressive mode of Futurist synthetic theatre.

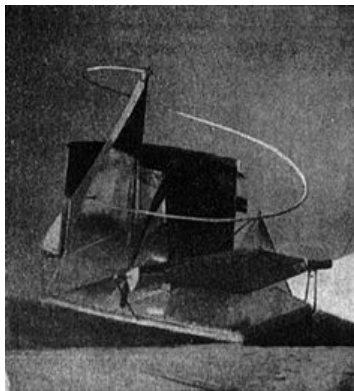


FIGURE 5

² Kirby, *Futurist Performance*, 278.

³ Lista, *La Scène Futuriste*, 206.

The term *complesso plastico motorumoristo*, was first coined by Balla and Depero in the manifesto “Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe” (1915). It was meant to describe the creation of marionette-like or robot-like “polyexpressive artificial living beings.” Balla and Depero defined the “complex” as “poetry + painting + sculpture + music... a noisiest-pictorial-psyche complex plasticism, onomatopoeia, graphic equivalents of noises, phonoplastic equivalents, psycho-plastic equivalents etc.”⁴ They were obviously looking for a notion broad enough to encompass all material elements and forms of sensory perception capable to synthesize all that was seen and heard on the stage. Finally, the plastic moto-rumorist complex meant something much wider than a certain mode of stage design. As a dynamic interaction of light, noise, and motion within the time and space of stage performance, it became the theatrical equivalent to the basic concepts of Futurist art - simultaneity, compenetration, and dynamism – applied in theatrical context. Sound was considered its inextricable part - it was a medium in which key attributes of motion and noise, amalgamate creating materiality and the atmosphere of theatre stage.

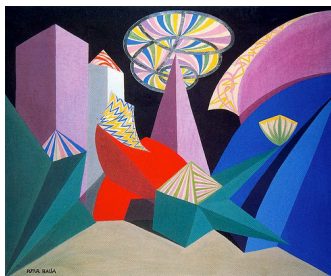


FIGURE 6

⁴ Apollonio, *Futurist Manifestos*, 199.

Giacomo Balla's set for Igor Stravinsky's ballet *Feu d'artifice* was conceived as such an amalgamation. The "ballet" premiered on 24 April 1917 at the Teatro Costanzi in Rome under the direction of Serge Diaghilev, conducted by Ernest Ansermet.. There were no human performers on stage. Instead, a big flower-like sculpture with a heart made of sound, an atmosphere made of light, and the muscles made of abstract forms pulsated in front of the audience. A luminous set was a complex of abstract sculptures made of prismatic, pointed, and cylindrical wooden boxes covered with painted fabric. The lower structures diffracted and reflected beams of lights, while the upper ones, transparent and translucent, were illuminated from inside.



FIGURE 7

Balla literally had lights replace the dancers. He virtually choreographed Stravinsky's score through changes of light. In a show that lasted a mere five minutes, there were forty-nine light cues. Balla had to construct a lighting keyboard in the theatre booth. It helped music and colour to synthesize in a dynamic play of bursts of sounds and lights. Surprisingly shaped shadows extended toward and around the audience in the rhythm of Stravinsky's music. Actually, the stage itself, a space without actors, became a moto-rumorist polyexpressive entity. Here is a computer assisted reconstruction of the ballet.

VIDEO 1 <http://www.franciscosouki.com/fireworks.html> 0:24-0:50 [25 sec]

In his manifesto, “**Futurist Scenic Atmosphere**,” Prampolini demanded the decorative set to be replaced by the active scenery. He argued: “It is a question of renouncing the mimic decor, which operates on the surface, in order to enter into the domain of architecture concerned with depth.”⁵ His ultimate goal was “a personification of space in the role of the actor, as a dynamic interacting element between the scenic environment and the spectator.”⁶ Human bodies, objects, lights, and sounds, he thought, should unite on stage to create an *attore-spazio (space-as-actor)* in front of the audience’s eyes and ears.

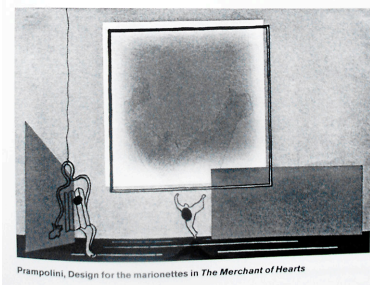


FIGURE 8

An attempt on such a creation was his ‘abstract pantomime’ *Santa velocità* staged in 1927, first in Paris, and later in Rome, Milan, and Turin. The piece had neither words nor actors, only set and sound. The stage was bare; the audience just saw a luminescent backdrop of skyscrapers and neon lights and heard a sonic background of intense traffic in the streets and the frenzy of metropolitan nightlife. Prampolini’s directions read: “Only artistic intervention [is] a human song that arrests and subdues the

⁵ ?Apollonio, *Futurist Manifestos*, Ibid.,111.

⁶ Kirby, *Futurist Performance*, 230.

noise of speedy life out there. [...] But after the vocal slowly finishes, the rhythm of speed and modernity takes over in an extraordinary crescendo: magic, immense and deafening.”⁷ Clearly, dramatic action did not need performers but active scenery of lights, projections, and intense textures of urban din produced by Luigi Russolo’s *intonarumori* [noise intoners]. [It was a rare case of their theatrical use – usually they will go for demonstration/concert on their own]. And all of this in contrast to a quiet, solitary human song [coming offstage]. Instead of routinely relying on dramatic conflict, Prampolini thus has achieved a fully theatrical effect through an abstract sound and set design. By an interchange of blocks of sound and light, he created his ideal ‘space-as-actor.’

Prampolini thought that words and gestures alone cannot create states of mind; only the stage designer, with his perceptual means can create a theatrical world equivalent to the play itself. For him **a stage designer and** [as we agree on the intermedial and sculptural value of theatre sound] **a sound designer** become autonomous artists, and not mere executors of dramatic representation. We are now aware as Marie-Madaleine Mervant-Roux stressed that “sound is not an illustration of, but is constitutional of the theatrical space - theatre sound is not an object to be perceived, but a tangible spatial event.” Theatre sound, I would add, is not a mere sign of performance but performance itself. One cannot think of Robert Wilson’s productions without sound design by Hans Peter Kuhn and music by Phillip Glass, or Roberto Castelucci’s performances without sound dramaturgy by Ciara Guidi and sound design by Scott Gibbons. Their practice undoubtedly transformed contemporary understanding of theatre sound.

⁷ *Le Théâtre Futurist Italien*, vol. 2, 120.

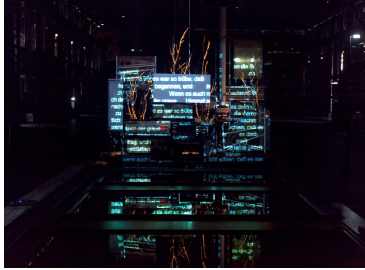


FIGURE 9

Heiner Goebbels, who for years stood at the forefront of exploration of theatre sound, remounted his 2007 *Stifters Dinge* at the last year's Ruhrtriennale in Duisburg, Germany. As program notes read, it is a performance and an installation, "a composition for five pianos without pianists, a play without actors, a performance without performers," [...] "an invitation to the spectators to enter a fascinating space full of sounds and images, a poetic invitation to watch and listen." [Let's see a video trailer for the piece.]

VIDEO 2 - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Jvtmms0YNI> [50 sec]



FIGURE 10

All we see and hear on stage revolves around our awakening to the life of objects whose significance grows with the audio-visual atmosphere they create. **Objects in theatre** are usually part of the set and serve as props. However, Goebbels asserts, "central here is that things **now become the main characters**: the curtain, the lighting, the images, the noises, the sounds, the voices, wind and fog, water and ice. The margins become the

center, as in Adalbert Stifter, who on his 19th-century literary journeys dedicated himself to detailed descriptions of nature and phenomena on the margins of events.”⁸ Another big admirer of Stifter, Thomas Mann held that “behind the quiet, inward exactitude of his descriptions there is at work a predilection for the excessive, the elemental and the catastrophic.” Goebbels takes Stifter’s descriptions of nature “as a confrontation with the unknown: with the forces that man cannot master.” Consequently, together with stage, light and video designer Klaus Grünberg and sound designer Willi Bopp, he stages his natural environments [nowadays obviously slated for destruction], as a music theatre piece, an abstract/concrete equivalent to the writer’s narrative. And, as Prampolini would say, he employs aural and visual stage material and its perceptual means to create a space-as-actor able to incite a certain state of mind in the audience.



FIGURE 11

The set consists of five prepared pianos turned to the side and mounted like a wall, amongst leafless trees and noise making machines. Mechanical devices set pianos in motion, making them at times menacing and at others vulnerable. They entice sounds from pipes, sheet metal, and stones. In front of this assemblage lie three pools, scattered with sand and flooded with water. Their surface gets hit by different light projections and

⁸ Goebbels

disturbed by ice and rain drops. The screens are raised and lowered to create a dynamic collage of light, reflections, and projected images (like renaissance masterpiece ‘Hunt in the Forest’ by Paolo Uccello). From loudspeakers, located around the pools, we hear aboriginal chants from Papua New Guinea, an interview with Claude Levi-Strauss on human condition, and a reading from Stifter’s prose, a terrifying tale of the solitude in the frozen forest. Digitally controlled keyboards play individually (Bach's slow Italian Concerto is heard at one point). Towards the end the whole sounding wall starts to move with threatening slowness over the water while the pianos finally join in an agitated crescendo. The silent end when pianos recede to leave the pools bubbling and polluted, reminds audience of an environmental disaster.



FIGURE 12

Goebbels builds a **highly dense atmosphere of images and sounds** by using a kinetic mechanical set, noise instruments, lights, projections, voice and music recordings - all advanced technological devices. Nevertheless, he doesn’t shy away from his prime devotion to the elements: “It [all] came by working with the water, [...] it came by the wood and the metal and the space.” Admittedly, focusing on the materiality of Stifter’s things, Goebbels did not intend to tell their story but to create an active scenic atmosphere, that, as Prampolini would say, “communicate to the viewer the lyrical

emotion and sensibility of the material itself.” Contemporary German philosopher Gernot Bohme defines atmosphere as ecstasy of things. “Atmospheres, he claims, articulate the spheres of presence of things through their properties.”⁹ In Goebbels’s performance, sound is obviously one of the main atmosphere-creating ecstasies. Reviewer Gelsey Bell describes what she’s heard: “The soundscape is dirty and mysterious... the tones are impure... replete with low, gritty discordances. ... The set groans and hums like a waiting beast. Not necessarily an unkind beast, but a disfigured one — a patient monster half in the shadows, waiting until you are more accustomed to its presence, its natural rumblings, before it starts to *really* sing.”¹⁰ And that is exactly what Goebbels wanted to do, to let us “encounter with the unfamiliar, with forces beyond our control that are simultaneously alluring and terrifying,” **to listen and, maybe, to hear them sing.** As Jean-Luc Nancy says: “To be listening is always to be on the edge of meaning, or in an edgy meaning [...] as if the sound were precisely nothing else than this edge, this fringe, this margin.”¹¹

Clearly, *Stifters Dinge* transfers our state of mind **from the state of hearing into the state of listening.** By exposing ecstasies of marginal objects, through their sounds together with their moto-rumorist actions, Goebbels builds a 'construction site in the ear.' Thus, if you let me cite Prampolini again, he renounces “mimic decor” and enters “into the domain of architecture [of sound and stage] which is concerned with depth.” Inviting us to listen, Goebbels invokes our co-presence in his music theatre event and empowers us not only to see and hear phenomena, but to communicate with Being, however secretive it may be.

9 Gernot Bohme

10 Gelsey Bell, TDR, Volume 54, Number 3, Fall 2010 (T 207), pp. 150-158, 151

11 Nancy, *Listening*, 2002, 7

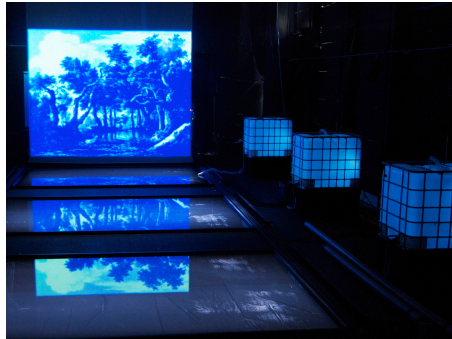


FIGURE 13