

## The *time* of Unique Forms of Continuity on Space

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*The following paper about the work in plaster by Umberto Boccioni, Unique Forms of Continuity on Space, was developed by MAC USP intern, Marina Barzon Silva, as the final project to the class Social History of Time, taught by Professor João Paulo Pimenta, attended by the student on the first term of 2013 on the department of History at the Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas of Universidade de São Paulo, where she pursues her BA. Boccioni's work was taken as object to survey the notion of time in debate by the society of the turn of the Twentieth century.*

In 1913, futurist Umberto Boccioni wrote to the art critic and owner of Galleria Futurista of Rome and Naples, Giuseppe Sprovieri, about his most recent sculpture, *Unique Forms of Continuity on Space*; "it is my latest work, and the most free"<sup>1</sup>. It is also the one that, according to the artist, would carry all the necessary characteristics for a truly modern sculpture.

Critics – besides the artist himself – ever since considered *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* the maximum synthesis of Boccioni's sculpture production. The human figure, that appears to move, is represented at different times simultaneously. Although originally built in plaster, it is its bronze versions, which are predominantly part of the collective unconscious. The metal, rejected by the Boccioni as plastic possibility<sup>2</sup>, emphasizes the aesthetics of the machine, important to the futurist poetic, giving further support to the interpretation of the figure as a kind of hybrid of machine and men. However, it is the plaster, allied with the absence of arms, which renders freedom to the body and induces the viewer to focus on projections of the figure bringing a greater perception of motion. The sculpture seems to be windswept by a gale in the opposite direction of the motion, making it even more dragged and continuous. Part of a series of human forms in plaster produced by the artist between the years of 1912 and 1913 it was the only one of these sculptures to survive time<sup>3</sup>.

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1 BORTULUCCE, Vanessa Beatriz. *Os conceitos de movimento e espaço em quatro esculturas de Umberto Boccioni*. In: Revista de História da Arte e Arqueologia, nº 10, Jul - Dec 2008. Campinas, Editora Unicamp, p. 112.

2 Apollinaire suggested to Boccioni to transcribe his works in plaster into bronze for they carried a 'quality of historical document'. Boccioni, who always defended the end of tradition and of use of classic materials even more strongly in the case of sculpture than painting, rejected the idea.

3 Most of the sculptural work of Boccioni was eventually destroyed in circumstances not yet clarified. The only works in plaster of the artist that are still preserved are *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* and *Development of a Bottle in Space*, both in MAC-USP collection, and *Antigracioso* in the collection of the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome.

## I. Time of the Futurists.

Some years before Boccioni's the sculptural production, more precisely in 1905, Einstein published his first papers on the *Theory of Relativity*, rupturing, in modern physics, with Newtonian concepts of time and space. Norbert Elias states that "Einstein showed that Newtonian representation of a unique and uniform time throughout the extent of the physical universe was not sustainable"<sup>4</sup>, just as the understanding of these two dimensions as independent and distinct concepts was inapplicable for the "positional relationships themselves are totally inseparable from each other"<sup>5</sup>. Time and space began then to be understood as physically interdependent.

While Einstein changed the conception of time and space, and their relations in physics, Bergson dedicated himself to the definition of the concepts of time, space, duration and movement in philosophy. There is a concomitant change in the understanding of time in various disciplines. It seems plausible then that those changes are related to a change in the understanding of time for that society as a whole. Time is considered, by Bergson, as a succession of events, so present, past and future would no longer be thought as linear, but as pervious periods, claiming that "there is no doubt that the time for us is initially confused with the continuity of our inner life"<sup>6</sup> when, a little later, he interpreted the *Theory of Relativity* from a philosophical point of view in his work *Duration and Simultaneity*.

Octavio Paz, in *Los Hijos del Limo*, declares that in conceptions of time prior to modernity there was always a social desire to minimize change. He states that "the range of conceptions of time<sup>7</sup> is immense, but all this prodigious and variety can be reduced to a single principle"<sup>8</sup> that is of the "attempts to overturn changes"<sup>9</sup> for the benefit of a "timeless time"<sup>10</sup>. Modernity would then be the first time a society produces a temporal conception that celebrates change, valuing difference, novelty, and evolution, i.e. the *future*. Finite and irreversible time would be the result of this society, supportive of theoretical changes and capable of creating an art grounded on the break of tradition, or yet in its complete denial. Such criticism of tradition, important both to the theory and aesthetics of avant-garde movements, would begin, according to Paz, with awareness of belonging to a tradition, so henceforth be able to break it and choose for oneself a tradition that was deemed consistent, that is, "critical passion"<sup>11</sup>

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4 ELIAS, Norbert. *Sobre o Tempo*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Jorge Zahar, 1998, p. 35.

5 Ibid, p. 81.

6 BERGSON, Henri. *Duração e Simultaneidade: a propósito da teoria de Einstein*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2006, p. 51.

7 PAZ, Octavio. *Los Hijos del Limo: Del romanticismo a la vanguardia*. Barcelona: Editorial Seix Barral, 1974. The author mentions in this range: the concept of "timeless past" of what he calls the primitives, the "cyclical and void" time of the Buddhists, the "annulation of opposites of brahman" and the Christian eternal time (author's translation).

8 Ibid, p. 36.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid. 23.

which would be for the author the very historical conscience.

This movement breaking with traditions in vogue, and the establishment of a chosen tradition that Paz defines as the “tradition of the rupture”<sup>12</sup>, is present in the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture* published by Boccioni in 1912. He establishes for his sculptural production a tradition, but at the same time that he qualifies, deconstructs it. He states that “sculpture, as it has been understood until today by the artists of the last century and of this one is monstrously anachronic”<sup>13</sup>, exemplifying the historical consciousness that the preceding art would not represent its own time. He states “the artists copy the nude and studies classical statue with the naïve conviction of finding a style that matches the modern sensitivity without leaving the traditional conception of sculptural form”<sup>14</sup>. Throughout his manifesto Boccioni mentions two artists whose production would be a valid attempt, though not completely successful, of expression of modernity in sculpture. The first is Rodin, canon of modern sculpture. The second, and also the one that would most approach a poetic befitting his own time in Boccioni’s vision, is Impressionist Medardo Rosso. Boccioni states that Rosso is the “single greatest modern sculptor who has tried to open the sculpture to a more vast field”<sup>15</sup>, but still misses the “synthetic thinking capable of asserting a law”<sup>16</sup>.

All changes of fundamental aspect in the art of the turn of the century mirrored somewhat the technological, philosophical and scientific innovations of that society. Meyer Schapiro wrote in his essay *Einstein and Cubism: Science and Art*:

*In its rupture with the practice of centuries of painting as an art that required a studied similarity in the representation, the new styles were seen as a revolution comparable to the new physics that dethroned absolutes so long accepted.*<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, the use of terms such as space-time, fourth dimension, continuity and simultaneity would have led to speculation about the relation between the futurist production and these changes in the understanding of time in both physics and philosophy<sup>18</sup>. The author states “in the decades that followed the first article of Einstein on the relativity suggestive terms of his theory in writings on art”<sup>19</sup> began to appear. Annateresa Fabris defends in *Futurismo: uma poética da modernidade* that Boccioni “knowingly used the Bergsonian concept of duration and perhaps intuitively the one of space-time”<sup>20</sup>. Vanessa Bortulucce also defends that “Boccioni’s vision has a direct link with the Bergsonian idea of time

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12 Ibid, p.21.

13 BOCCIONI, Umberto. *Manifesto Técnico da Escultura Futurista*, 1912. In: BERNARDINI, Aurora Fornoni (org). *O Futurismo Italiano*. São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1980, p.74.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid. 75.

16 Ibid.

17 SHAPIRO, Meyer. *A Unidade da Arte de Picasso*. São Paulo: Cosac & Naify Edições, 2002, p. 81.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid.

20 FABRIS, Annateresa. *Futurismo: uma poética da modernidade*. São Paulo: Editora Perspectiva, 1987, p 118.

as “duration” as pure dimension of consciousness”<sup>21</sup>. It would even be possible to defend also a reverse path of influences, since the concept of environmental sculpture, defended by Boccioni both in his manifesto and in his book, in which he states that “today our mental evolution does not allow us to understand more an individual or an object isolated from its environment”<sup>22</sup> seems corresponding to ideas Bergson stated after Boccioni’s work, in which he affirms that the “immediate material environment, the one, perceived by each of us participates in the duration of the conscience of one’s own”<sup>23</sup>.

The “intuition” of Bergson and Einstein theories would be justified by an “a essential unity of the culture”<sup>24</sup> of the period. According to Schapiro’s interpretation “the notion of unity of these fields in a particular culture or era was based on the idea of organic connection of different parts of a culture as a whole”<sup>25</sup>, resembling what was defended by Burckhardt<sup>26</sup> in his essay *The State as a Work of Art*, in which he defends that the unity of different aspects of Italian Renaissance society is the calculated rationality. Scientists, philosophers and artists would have a similar conception of world, not necessarily by direct relations, but by a “common set of philosophical assumptions, shared experience of conditions of life of the period and ideologies that emerge to answer them”<sup>27</sup>, for there is not a conception of time that is not reflective of the understanding of the world of its society, thus there is no artistic production that does not pervades the needs and desires of the society in which was produced.

The conflictive relationship the Futurists have with the past would be present then in other aspects of the culture of the period, having its origin in a dream of modernity<sup>28</sup>, in which the new, the novelty, the change would be the utopia fuel of the modern spirit, of a world without past. This negation of the past through the repudiation of the academicism appears in different intensities in all avant-garde movements, including of which the Futurist concept of time that for decades has been advocated as permeated by the influence of modern physics by critics such as Siegfried Giedion and Erwin Panofsky, and that is frequently understood as similar to the one of Cubism.

The artists themselves, however, refute this similarity, what lead Boccioni to dedicate a chapter of his book to the subject, *about what differentiates us from Cubism*. His main criticism is about the inability of these to represent a continuous development of the movement, and that the outcome would then be a static representation of different times or the same time in different points of view, thus not representing the time. The Futurist art was for him more evolved

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21 BORTULUCCE. 2008, p. 104.

22 BOCCIONI, Umberto. *Pittura, scultura futuriste: dinamismo plastico*. Milano: Poesia, 1914, p.121.

23 BERGSON, p. 55.

24 SCHAPIRO. 2002, p. 126.

25 Ibid.

26 BURKHARDT, Jacob. *O Estado como Obra de Arte*. São Paulo: Penguin & Companhia das Letras, 2012

27 SCHAPIRO. 2002, p. 126.

28 PAZ, 1974, p. 21.

for being able to depict different moments maintaining continuity. According to Elias, “determining positional relations between events that occur in a continuous evolutionary series, without reducing them conceptually to the static positions between represents a much more difficult task”<sup>29</sup>. It is this continual evolution, expressed in the title of Boccioni’s work that constitutes something fundamental in his sculptural production, significant and expressive of its own time.

Regarding the relationship of the movement with Einstein's work it was repudiated by the physicist himself that stated; “this new artistic language has nothing in common with the theory of relativity”<sup>30</sup>, even if Bergson’s interpretation of it has so many approaches to Boccioni’s theories. Einstein affirms however that art and science have their similarities for:

*Where the world ceases to be the stage of hopes, desires and wishes, where we are face as free creatures, admiring, questioning, contemplating, there we enter the realm of Art and Science. If what we contemplate and experience is described in the language of logic, we practice science; if it is mediated through forms which the connections are inaccessible to conscious thought, although intuitively recognized as significant, we practice art. Common to both is the loving dedication to the extra-personal, the apart from the will*<sup>31</sup>.

## II. The Time of the Work.

The denial of the past and the appreciation of the new, the defense of aesthetics of modernity itself, which broke with the academicism, is at the heart of the Futurist movement. In sculptural terms, the composition of a work capable of integrating the object and the environment, conveying the idea of motion, was the primary goal of Boccioni. Schapiro states, “the Futurists perceived the dynamic movement as the key principle of modernity and endeavored to express in their paintings and sculptures their perception of objects in motion”<sup>32</sup>. Boccioni affirms, “in sculpture, as in painting, one can not renew but looking to the STYLE OF MOTION”<sup>33</sup>.

*Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* would then be the expression of the *plastic dynamism*, which would unite the *endless plastic apparent* and *endless plastic interior*, creating an *environmental sculpture*<sup>34</sup>, proposed by Boccioni as the ideal sculpture solution to the futurist aesthetic needs. Vanessa Bortulucce states; “according to the artist theory the distances between one object and another are

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29 ELIAS, 1998, p. 81.

30 EINSTEIN, in a letter of 1946 sent to a scholar who had sent him an article associating avant-garde movements and the Theory of Relativity. In: Schapiro, 2002, p. 169.

31 EINSTEIN, in response to an editor of an avant-garde magazine, when asked what did he think on the relations between his theory and art, 1921. In: Schapiro, 2002, p. 81-82.

32 SCHAPIRO, 2002, p. 110.

33 BOCCIONI, 1912, p. 76. Highlights on the original.

34 Ibid. Terms used by the author throughout his manifesto.

not voids, but material continuity of various intensities”<sup>35</sup>. For Boccioni, then, to create an innovative sculpture one would need to “MODEL THE ATMOSPHERE surrounding the things”<sup>36</sup>, so that all the elements of the sculpture could shape it as “a pure construction of plastic elements completely renovated”<sup>37</sup>.

Among those elements Boccioni considered the colour as something fundamental, the dynamic expression of possibility. Coloration could “increase the emotional force of the surfaces, while the note of a colored surface could accentuated violently the abstract meaning of the plastic fact”<sup>38</sup>. The lightness of *Unique Forms* is partially due to its color, the white of the original plaster, thus purposely left, since the artist did paint other of his sculptures in the same material, is one of three fundamental features for the construction of a figure in the understanding of Boccioni; color, line and shape, and it is lost in their translations in bronze. The chosen material also reinforces the lightness. To the artist the matter of the work was fundamental, in his Manifesto he states to be necessary to “destroy all literary and traditional nobility of the marble and the bronze”<sup>39</sup>. The plaster brings, therefore, a number of attributes for this work of Boccioni. In first place, being a material so far used only for sculptural projects, which later would have as finished pieces a marble or bronze versions, to present this version as the finished work Boccioni breaks with the traditional academicism despised by the Futurists, breaks with the references of past productions, highlighting the truly modern in the artist conception. Secondly, plaster is a much more delicate and difficult material for conservation when compared with more traditional materials, or even wood, which then emphasizes the ephemeral side of the work of art, suitable for that period and without pretensions to transcend time, as if the idea of the artist would be not to install something lasting, but to create something capable of inflicting a succession of other ruptures, to make way for future creations. It is to sacrifice the present, and with it his work, to benefiting the future, not the one reached by him but for the future generations.

The idea of motion conveyed by the matter and colour is even more accentuated by the absence of arms, which seems to emphasize the fluidity and continuity of this movement by not establishing a visual blockage between the work and the viewer. The perception of time is due to the motion perception, insinuated by many elements in the work, and by making the observation of movement possible Boccioni breaks with the statics in sculpture, inserting in it another dimension. The time appears in *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* as the fourth dimension of the sculpture, revealing the “positional reactions within an evolutionary *continuum*”<sup>40</sup>, differing in yet another aspect of academic works, which portray the movement by choosing a fruitful instant, that even when hinting a before and after, those should be imagined by the observer, not actu-

35 BORTULUCCE, 2008, p. 104.

36 BOCCIONI, 1912, p. 79. Highlights on the original.

37 Ibid.

38 BOCCIONI, 1912, p. 78.

39 Ibid, p. 79.

40 ELIAS, 1998, p. 81.

ally being built by the artist, who depicted just a pose, a rich static moment, but not time in itself. For Bergson “real time has no instants”<sup>41</sup>, for the moment would be the result of space, in this logic this fruitful moment would be even further from successful representation of time.

By the way that Bergson conceives time and continuity it can be assumed that the fundamental differential Boccioni’s sculpture is the fact that it possess a memory, since for the philosopher “it is impossible to distinguish between the duration, however short it may be, separating two seconds and a memory that binds them together, since duration is essentially a continuation of what is no longer on what is”<sup>42</sup>. I.e. the ability of Boccioni to effectively introduce a new dimension, the one of time, in sculpture, is rightly connected to its ability to depict the continuous, so emphasized in his theory, attributed by the memory the sculpture carries within itself.

The eagerness of the artist to produce something significantly representative of his time seems to have been somewhat achieved, as it is reflected in *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* the change in the conception of time that pervaded the different philosophical-scientific productions fruit of modernity.

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41 BERGSON, p. 62.

42 Ibid, p. 57.