

2024

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## Recommended Citation

Braden, Jess (2024). “Vessels of Dynamism: Dynamic Emergence and the ‘*questione della donna*’ within Benedetta’s *aeropittura*” *The Macksey Journal*: Volume 5, Article 37.

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# Vessels of Dynamism: Dynamic Emergence and the “*questione della donna*” within Benedetta’s *aeropittura*

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## Abstract

In its inception F.T. Marinetti’s notorious writing, “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism”, promoted a “*disprezzo della donna*” [scorn for woman] which became a hallmark of Futurism’s heroic period from 1909-1916. However, despite the movement’s inherent misogyny, many women actively participated in the Futurist landscape. *Paroliberista*, painter and writer, Benedetta Cappa Marinetti was the most prolific of these futurists, but her accomplishments are often overlooked in modern scholarship, due to her marriage with Futurism’s founder. Benedetta’s body of work is one that actively engages with the Futurist “*questione della donna*” and stands in opposition of the work of the early futurists through a convergence of the natural world and the technological. Through the examination of her *Aeropittura*, writings and public speaking, this research will further explore Benedetta’s painting through the prism of maternity and birth iconography, and its intersections with traditional futurist theories of gender. These intersections become a crossroads in which a new divine feminine emerges, Benedetta’s futurist vision.

**Keywords:** Aeropittura, Benedetta Cappa Marinetti, Feminism, Futurism, Futurist Art, Futurist Women, Italian Futurism

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Upon its publication in the pages of the Parisian *Le Figaro*, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism" openly rejected the antiquated structures of Italian society, glorifying war, violence and a "*disprezzo della donna*" or scorn of woman (Marinetti 51). Adhering to the principles of Marinetti's manifesto, the Futurist art movement upended traditional ideals of Italian art built during the renaissance, placing an emphasis on the concept of dynamism and technology as subject matter—a new elevation of the strength and virility of man. However, despite the misogyny of Futurism, many women were drawn to and actively participated in the Futurist landscape. One such woman was Benedetta, *paroliberista*,<sup>1</sup> painter, writer and wife of F.T. Marinetti; she was arguably the most prolific woman participating in Futurism's second period, that began after the World War I and continued until F.T. Marinetti's death in 1944. Benedetta's body of work is one that actively engages with the Futurist "*questione della donna*"<sup>2</sup> and stands in opposition to the misogyny of Futurism's early period. Yet, Benedetta's place in the Futurist landscape is often conflated with that of her husband, Marinetti, in modern scholarship, overlooking her individual perspectives and unfairly linking her status within Futurism to her relationship (Larkin 185).<sup>3</sup> Despite these connotations, Benedetta's *aeropittura*<sup>4</sup> in Futurism's second period stands within its own sphere; moving past formal qualities of *aeropittura* itself, into a spiritual realm that invokes the power of the maternal. Through the examination of her *aeropittura*, writing, and public speaking, we will further explore Benedetta's painting through the lens of maternity and birth iconography, and its resulting intersections with traditional Futurist perspectives of gender. These intersections become a crossroads in which a new divine feminine emerges, Benedetta's Futurist vision.

Upon deeper examination, we can see the misogyny of Futurism is in fact paradoxically feminist in its discussion on gender differences. As Lucia Re states in her examination of this paradox, Futurism raised issues surrounding "the ideological overdetermination of gender divisions and gender roles in contemporary society" (Re 256). The act of questioning gender roles and divisions is a hallmark of contemporary feminist thought, however the questioning of gender roles in the context of Futurism is not done with women's liberation in mind. Instead, the early Futurists viewed traditional feminine traits as the antithesis to the essence of the Futurist man, placing Woman in the category of the antiquated past. This othering of the feminine in the Futurist landscape also extends to the concept of the maternal, and to reproduction. Re points out how F.T. Marinetti's Futurist ideal appears in the act of mechanical reproduction, as illustrated in his novel *Mafarka il futurista*. In this novel a perfect mechanical child is birthed through the pregnancy of the male protagonist (Re 255). Through this fictional child, the male Futurist ideal is born without woman; emphasizing the erasure of the feminine.

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<sup>1</sup> One who engages in *parole in libertà* or "words-in-freedom"—a Futurist practice of free-form visual poetry that challenged conventional poetic form, and was read as literature, but also viewed as visual art.

<sup>2</sup> "The woman question"

<sup>3</sup> Larkin further examines this conflation in her dissertation in a noteworthy manner through citing Lisa Panzera's writing in "La Futurista: Benedetta Cappa Marinetti", in which Panzera states that Benedetta's "role as mother and wife remained essential to her identity, "making it impossible for her to produce any work outside the confines of her relationship with Marinetti- thus, outside of futurism". Aside from being married to Marinetti, Benedetta also gave birth to three daughters Vittoria, Ala and Luce.

<sup>4</sup> Aero-painting.

This ideology of feminine erasure also extends to the other side of Futurism's paradoxical feminism, as seen within the "Manifesto of the Futurist Woman" penned by Valentine de Saint-Point in 1912. Providing an early perspective of Futurism through the female gaze de Saint-Point calls for the destruction of gendered division of humanity by "man" and "woman", instead insisting only the existence of the "masculine" and "feminine." This notion of ideal unity between the masculine and feminine proves fleeting as de Saint-Point ultimately issues her call to the Futurist woman: "Women, for too long a time misguided by morals and prejudices, return to your sublime instinct: to violence and cruelty" (De Saint-Point 113). Although she expresses the idea of a union between the masculine and feminine multiple times in her writing, de Saint-Point's conclusion ultimately urges women to abandon their "feminine" traits, replacing them with the more masculine traits of virility, violence and cruelty in order to seek liberation.

Along with mechanical reproduction and the woman's adoption of virility, the Futurist emphasis on dynamism also contributes to an erasure of the feminine from the Futurist landscape. Reflecting on a 1912 painting by Giacomo Balla, *Bambina x balcone* [Figure 1], which depicts a girl running on a balcony, Clara Orban illustrates this mode of erasure stating "dynamism of the object in motion proves essential, so all reference to gender appears secondary" (Orban 63). The figure's dynamism translates into androgyny, in turn removing women as pictorial subjects in Futurist art. This further reinforces the "*disprezzo della donna*" of Marinetti's original manifesto, as it separates the Futurist man from the antiquated past.

During its second period, the landscape of Futurism began to change, and women's voices began to emerge within the pages of magazines such as *L'Italia futurista* and *Roma futurista* (Re 261).<sup>5</sup> It was during this period that Benedetta entered the Futurist movement, beginning her study under Giacomo Balla in 1917. Through Balla she met F.T. Marinetti in 1918, and they began to correspond. Benedetta's correspondence with Marinetti provides a vast amount of insight into their relationship, revealing the paradox of Marinetti himself. Siobhan Conaty, in her examination of these letters, points to one, dated November 23, 1918, as a point of origin to the pair's intellectual bond. However, it also provides insight into Benedetta's own convictions and independence. She writes: "Thank you for keeping your promise about the books I sent you. I was troubled...to see my name written as 'parolibra futurista'. I am too free and rebellious—I do not want to be constricted. I only want to be me" (Conaty 20). By 1919, the nature of their letters shifted from purely intellectual correspondence to romantic, as Marinetti began to address Benedetta with "My dear strong spirit and sweet one," and throughout 1920-21, he began to send Benedetta love letters and telegrams daily when they were apart (Conaty 20).<sup>6</sup> It is also notable that Marinetti often referred to the work of Benedetta during this time period as "genius", as shown in a letter dated October 10, 1921: "I hope that you do not ever forget the force and original strength of your genius, your work. You must work for you, for me, for us" (Conaty 20). This letter reveals that not only was the Futurist movement paradoxical in

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<sup>5</sup> The First World War was also a catalyst for the emergence of women into traditionally men's spaces, as it required a large number of women to fill the gaps in the traditionally male workforce during the war.

<sup>6</sup> Conaty points out "It is notable that these passionate, sentimental, and somewhat traditional letters were being penned by the leader of the Futurist movement at the same time he was writing treatises *against* the tenets of love and sentimentalism". Starting in the summer of 1920 Marinetti began addressing his letters to Benedetta as "B.Cappa Marinetti", three years before they were officially married.

its feminism, but Marinetti was paradoxical himself when it came to his private life and his Futurist life; there was no “disprezzo della donna” for Marinetti when it came to Benedetta.<sup>7</sup> Marinetti’s respect for Benedetta’s genius as an artist and writer placed her in a unique position of influence as a Futurist woman; she had the opportunity to shift Futurism’s trajectory from the inside and become an integral part of ushering in Futurism’s second phase.

Moving forward into Futurism’s second period, a derivation of de Saint-Point’s idea of union between the masculine and the feminine emerges through the *aeropittura* works of Benedetta. Futurism’s postwar shift replaced the chaos and violence of its heroic period with the spiritual aspects and sensations of modern technology, such as air and auto travel (Conaty 21). In 1931, the *Manifesto dell’ Aeropittura* was published by Marinetti and signed by eight male futurists and Benedetta. *Aeropittura*, a new formal movement within futurism, set out to capture “the optical and sensations of flight attained from firsthand experiences of flying” (Conaty 22). Benedetta, unlike many other women of the time period, had firsthand experience flying in airplanes. Benedetta used *aeropittura* to represent a union between the traditional Futurist themes of dynamism and technology and the spirituality of the natural world. Yet, Benedetta’s paintings differ from the traditional *aeropittura* of second period Futurism, as her works were not literal translations of flight imagery. Instead, her paintings possessed a cosmic nature, moving past the idea of a mere union of the sexes, and echoing the power of the maternal feminine.

In an analysis of Benedetta’s body of work, Conaty acknowledges that “Benedetta recognized ‘the feminine’ and the female body as possessing a power not available to men, and she used it to undermine systems of masculine domination and to appropriate authority” (Conaty 25). This power unavailable to men is the power of maternity and childbirth. In an unpublished English language speech, “The Modern Woman’s Contribution to Literature and Art,” from 1936, Benedetta discusses this power of motherhood: “Woman is an immediate being, little tied to the past, more to the future, since she carries life in her very self, therefore she loves the new” (Larkin 281).<sup>8</sup> Benedetta argues that Woman, by nature, is Futurist; the ability to carry life (and thus the future), makes her a vessel of dynamism.

Benedetta’s 1931 painting *Il Grande X* [Figure 2] operates as an acknowledgement of this power. Across the canvas of this work an inverted “X” is displayed, a traditional symbol appropriated by the Italian Fascist movement. As Conaty notes, this inversion of the “X” is representative of Benedetta’s critique of the hypermasculinity of Mussolini’s fascist movement, of which she was a supporter (Conaty 24). Benedetta’s “X” divides the canvas into four quadrants, where the “X”’s intersection reveals a point of emergence; here traditional Futurist imagery of a dynamic city is revealed, spreading over the bottom quadrant of the canvas. In the

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<sup>7</sup> Marinetti and Benedetta finally married in 1923, had three daughters and a happy family life. Conaty suggests that these factors helped to influence Marinetti in shifting futurism’s trajectory in the second phase of futurism, and I must agree. For further analysis and reading on the letters between Benedetta and Marinetti, see Conaty’s article.

<sup>8</sup> Larkin, 281. A note on Benedetta’s speech: as Larkin discusses in her dissertation, *The Modern Woman’s Contribution to Literature and Art* was a speech given in a broadcast in Rome on December 28th, 1936. The speech’s typescript is held at the Getty Research Institute. For this paper, I will be citing Benedetta’s aforementioned speech from an appendix of Larkin’s dissertation, “Unpublished Selections from The Papers of F.T. Marinetti and Benedetta Cappa Marinetti Research Library, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, California”

remaining three quadrants surrounding the cityscape, there exists an ethereal realm. Two figures on the right side of the canvas – clearly female and male, assert the existence of two separate sexes. The female figure is ascending into the feminine spiritual realm, as the male is descending towards the masculine Futurist city; both are on a journey towards their respective spheres. What makes the imagery of *Il Grande X* extremely disruptive to traditional Futurist works is that it also operates as an allegory for birth and the maternal. The spiritual feminine realm envelopes the masculine cityscape on three sides as a birth canal, as the Futurist city bursts forth into life. The utopian Futurist city within *Il Grande X* only exists through the addition of the spiritual feminine to the Futurist landscape.<sup>9</sup> Calling back to *The Modern Woman's Contribution to Literature and Art*, Benedetta paints a picture of a spiritual realm, similar to the one in *Il Grande X*:

A few men artists one night, the night of the first Futurist Manifest, said: 'Standing on top of the world we challenge the stars'. It was a cry of rebellion which would have remained arid in space if it had not been united to the center of the earth and to the heart of humanity. This was and must remain the feminine object. (Larkin 282)

The cry of rebellion Benedetta describes, which can be interpreted as the beginning of Futurism itself, is only anchored in reality through the intersection of what is the feminine object. Here, Benedetta makes the claim that a feminine space has existed in the Futurist movement since its birth. This notion can be further explored in the words of Marinetti's manifesto itself, "Oh! Maternal ditch, nearly full of muddy water! Fair factory drain! I gulped down your bracing slime, which reminded me of the sacred black breast of my Sudanese nurse" (Marinetti 50). As stated in his 1909 manifesto, upon emerging from an accident in which his automobile flipped over in a ditch, Marinetti and his companions laid the foundation of Futurism. With the phrase "maternal ditch" Marinetti paints an allegory for emergence from a womb, and the sludge becomes representative of nourishing breast milk; he has, through the feminine dynamism of birth, emerged into a new futurist world.

We now turn to examine two works from Benedetta's famous *Sintesi delle Comunicazioni* Series [Figure 5], *Sintesi delle comunicazioni maritime* [Figure 3] and *Sintesi delle comunicazioni terrestri* [Figure 4], which both carry a continuation of Benedetta's assertion that the feminine is essential to the functioning of Italian Futurist society.<sup>10</sup> In *Sintesi delle comunicazioni maritime* a large ship departs from an industrial area in the upper right of the canvas, carried along by the folding waves of the sea. Through the use of color and line, the sea

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<sup>9</sup> In connection with the addition of the feminine to the futurist cityscape, we can further look at the placement of Benedetta's signature within *Il Grande X*. Benedetta signs her name in a bold yellow and red, echoing the bright colors depicting the dynamism of the city lights, across a building in the bottom quadrant. To quote Conaty, "By placing her name in the only segment which depicts earthly activity, Benedetta in effect consecrates this Futurist city with her feminine presence" (Conaty, 24).

<sup>10</sup> A brief background of Benedetta's *Sintesi delle comunicazioni* series [See Fig. 5]. This five part series of murals was commissioned by the Italian State for the Central Post Office in Palermo Sicily. Looming at over three meters high and two meters wide, each panel depicts a different Futurist theme surrounding technological advancement. Through this series Benedetta employs the convergence of the technological (masculine) with the power of nature (feminine) to illustrate these advancements. *Sintesi delle comunicazioni* was featured in the 2014 exhibition, "Italian Futurism, 1909-1924: Reconstructing the Universe" at the Guggenheim Museum in New York City, where it was the crown jewel of the show.

parts in the familiar inverted “X,” as the ship emerges forth towards its destination of a town; creating a focal point where the bottom of the ship's bow is parting the waves. It should be noted that the entire front of the ship is not fully visible, but instead it is enveloped by the water in an act of dynamic emergence, as it is born into the Futurist landscape. Just as the Futurist city in *Il Grande X* would not exist without the ethereal feminine space above, the ship within *Sintesi delle comunicazioni maritime* would be unable to push forth towards its destination in an act of Futurist dynamism, without the enveloping waves of the powerful feminine sea.

Within *Sintesi delle comunicazioni terrestri* this theme of emergence is also continued. The painting depicts a road, moving up through a tunnel that opens into a jagged highway carved out of mountainous terrain, as sunlight streaks across the canvas above. The right side of the canvas includes a small village at the edge of a body of water. Though *Sintesi delle comunicazioni terrestri* does not include the same imagery of the inverted “X” as the previous works mentioned, a convergence still exists. The modern technology of the highway is still surrounded by the natural feminine elements of light, water and earth as it emerges forth from the mountain's tunnel. The mouth of the tunnel is painted using abstract folds which bear, as Conaty notes, “a remarkable similarity to the later, first-generation feminist artists’ ‘Vaginal Iconography’” (25). Benedetta once again infuses imagery of maternal dynamism into *Sintesi delle comunicazioni terrestri* as an automobile traveling through the tunnel must engage in an act of emergence through the feminine mountain to continue on the Futurist journey into technological progress.

For Benedetta, the maternal dynamism represented in her work is a foundational instinct of motherhood, which is intrinsically tied to creative impulse. In her writing “*La Donna nella Concezione Futurista*” Benedetta states: “...dentro di questa libertà [per l’istinto animale] la donna sarà madre come sarà artista come sarà colta, come sarà bella de degna. Vocazione artistica, maternità, cultura, dignità sono istinti!” (Larkin 208).<sup>11</sup> For Benedetta’s futurist woman these separate facets of feminine identity, are not learned traits or vocations, but instinctual ones. This idea is further enforced in a closing statement made by Benedetta in *The Modern Woman’s Contribution to Literature and Art*. She states:

With intention I have not named women artists nor catoloughed [sic]their works.  
I say: the influence on modern art belongs to all women, and they all make,  
everyday, this rapid, chaotic epoch, strained in battle and rich in passions, but in  
which we live the certainty of a more luminous and serene to-morrow. (Larkin  
283)

In her declaration that “modern art belongs to all women”, Benedetta is once again emphasizing the correlation between womanhood and creative instinct. Benedetta’s society cannot exist without the spiritual dynamism of women. The woman's spiritual instincts merge with the masculine technological, propelling it forward with her feminine dynamism, birthing the Futurist utopia. Benedetta’s Futurist woman simultaneously advances de Saint-Point’s ideal unity of the sexes, while challenging Marinetti’s ideal of mechanical reproduction as the

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<sup>11</sup> As Larkin only provides Benedetta’s statement in Italian, I will offer my own translation of her words: [...within this freedom [due to animal instinct] the woman will be a mother as she will be an artist as she will be cultured, as she will be beautiful and worthy. Artistic vocation, motherhood, culture, dignity are instincts].

spiritual instincts of woman (just as the strength and virility of man) cannot create life alone. Feminine instinct and masculine virility must arrive at an intersection, the focal point of the inverted “X”, to start the dynamic synthesis of Futurism.

Benedetta’s answer to the “*questione della donna*” exists radically within the landscape of Futurism, linking feminine creative instinct to the Futurist movement as a vital component, directly challenging traditional Futurist perspectives of gender. For Benedetta, woman is not a representation of the antiquated past, but instead a vessel of dynamism into the future with her ability to create life. The spiritual elements of Benedetta’s *aeropittura* reframe the Futurist landscape, opening the door to scholars for a new analytical perspective—one that does not just end with the glorified technological virility of the movement’s pre-war heroic period, but instead a more holistic view of true Futurist dynamism.

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## Appendix



Figure 1: Giacomo Balla, *Bambina x balcone (Girl Running on a Balcony)* (1912). Oil on Canvas, 49" x 49".



Figure 2: Bendedetta, *Il Grande X (The Great X)*(1931), Oil on canvas, 50 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" x 35 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub>".



Figure 3: Benedetta, *Sintesi delle comunicazioni maritime (Synthesis of Sea Communications)* (1933), tempera and encaustic on panel, 126" x 76 13/16."



Figure 4 Benedetta, *Sintesi delle comunicazioni terrestri (Synthesis of Land Communications)* (1933), tempera and encaustic on panel, 126" x 76 13/16".



Figure 5 Benedetta, *Sintesi delle comunicazioni (Synthesis of Communications)*. 1933–1934, tempera and encaustic on panel, 120" x 76 13/16" inches each.