Futurist Fashion: Three Manifestoes
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Futurism remains the least understood of early twentieth-century art movements, largely because it staked its cultural terrain outside the bounds of traditional painting and sculpture. The Futurists aimed at “reconstructing the universe,” not only through the practical design of objects and spaces, but also by exploiting the mass media and public spectacle. They conceived of a modern “antihumanity,” whose existence thrived on the technological values of speed, dynamism, and ceaseless innovation.

The Futurist avant-garde invented a political style of provocation, believing that the tyranny of tradition could only be overcome by a constant assault on passeiste institutions, social mores, and even gender roles. Nowhere is their aesthetic and ideological agenda better displayed than in the theory and design of fashion. Through the specifics of dress, the Futurists wanted to clothe a revolutionary body politic that thrived on the need for individual expression in an anonymous, mass society (fig. 1). Moreover, the fashion phenomenon operated on a number of levels congenial to the Futurist enterprise: it promoted the new and discarded the old, blurred the lines between art and industry, and was predicated on style as both a social and an aesthetic statement.

Though some designs were crafted by the artists themselves and in a few instances manufactured by commercial firms, Futurist fashion remained largely in the realm of theory. It was propagated in consummate Futurist style through the written manifesto—its blend of creative posturing and political agitation. Some eight manifestoes on clothing were issued over the years, the majority addressing the deplorable lack of imagination in men's styles. Other Futurist proclamations, such as Giacomo Balla and Fortunato Depero's Reconstruzione futurista del universo (The Futurist Reconstruction of the Universe; 1915) and F. T. Marinetti's Contro il lusso femmineile (Against Feminine Luxury; 1920), raised the issue of fashion in the context of design and feminism, respectively. A thorough study of Futurist sartorial invention and reconfiguration of the human form would also have to take into account the costume and stage design of Depero and Enrico Prampolini.

In general, the Futurists argued for clothes that promoted health and comfort and that banished frivolous detail, expensive fabrics, and ultimately class distinction in dress. Sleek lines and simple shapes promoted the unencumbered movement of the human body, and the fast-paced rhythm of modern life was evoked by dynamic textile designs and asymmetrical cuts (fig. 2). The Futurists suggested an unorthodox use of natural and industrial fabrics—paper, straw, burlap, rubber, metals, and plastics. Browns, blacks, and grays were debunked as stodgy and traditional, while brilliant primary colors and reflective, even phosphorescent surfaces pointed the way to a shimmering, exuberant future.

As propagators of the new, the Futurists lived for the moment between the already outmoded and the next season's style. They were responsible for transforming the ideology of modern consumerism into an aesthetic theory by envisioning
clothes that would last only a short time. The reasons for built-in obsolescence were threefold: it necessitated continued creativity on the part of the artist, provided sensual delights and novelty for the wearer-consumer, and served as a stimulus to the national economy. The first manifesto on Futurist fashion, Balla’s *Le Vêtement masculin futuriste: Manifeste* (The Antineutral Suit: Futurist Manifesto, 1914; fig. 3), also introduced the concept of “transformable” apparel. Though the actual technology remained rather vague, in theory, with the push of a “pneumatic” button, the wearer could jettison his long sleeves or change the color or fit of his suit. A year later Balla expanded this idea to include “mechanical trimmings, surprises, tricks, disappearance of individuals.” Not only did this allow the wearer unprecedented “self-expression,” it also turned him or her into a provocateur and performance artist. The purpose of Futurist dress was to act upon the environment, to stun, to upset, to annoy, and ultimately to liberate bourgeois society from its stuffy sartorial and social conventions.

The three fashion manifestoes published here in English for the first time span the Futurist movement from its beginnings around World War I, through the rise of Fascism, to the second decade of the regime. The continuity of ideas bridge the chronological division between the original movement and so-called Second Futurism (after 1915), although the war did change perceptions of both women and the economy. Futurist attitudes toward dress were woven into the movement’s dominant ideological fabric. Typically the manifestoes display a strident nationalism merged with anarchic individualism, a belief in the cultural superiority of the Italian race, and in the right of the artistically gifted to lead a rejuvenated, modern nation. With characteristic imperialist rhetoric, Futurist writers on fashion saw Italian style as a means of competing with and exerting political influence on the rest of Western Europe. They also anticipated today’s couturier celebrity status, maintaining that a “great poet or painter” should run the fashion houses and that designers were in the same league of genius as the old masters.

Clothing was therefore both a symbol and vehicle of the new “Futurist Democracy,” as evident in Balla’s manifesto on *Il vestito antineutrale: Manifesto futurista* (The Antineutral Suit: Futurist Manifesto, 1914; fig. 3), an altered version of his *Futurist Manifesto of Men’s Clothing* published four months earlier. Issued shortly after the outbreak of war, it exudes Futurist propaganda for the interventionist cause (Italy’s entry in the war on the side of the Triple Entente). Marinetti likely contributed to the revised text, with its bellicose tone and incendiary verbiage. The opposition between past and future now becomes a national battle between neutralists (pacifists) and interventionists, the cowardly and the daring. In the discourse of style, this translates into an assault on timid conformity, boring designs, and bodily constrictions. Though the headings of fashion dos and don’ts remain virtually the same as the earlier manifesto, the outfits themselves are now geared toward military superiority: the agility to dart and to defend, to overcome the dowdy enemy.
The manifesto concludes by identifying the Futurist interventionist suit with the colors and patriotic significance of the Italian flag.

Considered the father of Futurist fashion, Balla began designing textiles and suits in 1912–13. With asymmetrical cuts and diagonal surface patterns, the brightly colored outfits were a direct translation of the dynamic “force-lines” of his painted canvases (fig. 4). His fashion projects only increased in the teens and twenties, as part of his and Depero’s utopian vision of a total Futurist environment. Never mass-produced, his models were realized in small numbers by local Roman tailors and by his daughters Elica and Luce in the household studio. Balla had considerable influence on younger abstract painters in the years following World War II; the geometric exuberance and ice-cream colors of his scarfs and blouses also clearly anticipated Emilio Pucci’s silks of the 1960s (figs. 5 and 6).

As to the infamous “antineutral” suit, it was actually intended to dress the Futurists during their interventionist activities in the Italian piazze. Marinetti, Balla, and the poet Francesco Cangiullo were each to wear one at the demonstrations planned for the University of Rome on December 11 and 12, but only Cangiullo’s was ready in time (fig. 7). In the midst of the mayhem, he jumped above the crowd in his red,
white, and green suit accompanied by a similarly colored beret crowned by a silver star. The appearance of this “living flag” delighted the onlookers who responded with shouts, whistles, and applause. Cangiullo was later carried aloft in triumph by the throngs of demonstrators.5

After 1915 Balla turned to women’s dress and accessories, particularly blouses, hats, and scarfs, but they remained secondary to his reevaluation of the male wardrobe (fig. 8). This gender bias was typical of the Futurist movement on the whole, especially in the prewar years. On the one hand, Futurist ideology revolved around a rhetoric of masculine strength versus feminine weakness, of the need for a decisive, virile politics versus the effeminate vacillation of liberal parliamentarism. Masculinity equaled progress, and femininity the past. On the other hand, the Futurists were correct in perceiving that creativity in fashion was essentially a female prerogative and that men’s apparel lagged far behind in choice, inventiveness, and freedom of expression.6

Aside from the misogynist discourse engendered by the Futurists’ general love of conflict, their attitudes toward women were anything but clear-cut. Their disdain was directed specifically against the concept of the feminine as wily seductress or innocent flower. The feminine was identified with sentimentality and, hence, passéiste culture. Marinetti and other Futurist writers argued that artificial layers of beguiling silks and suffocating perfumes actually obscured and hindered the female sex. Ultimately they supported the feminist movement insofar as it would undermine such traditional social and political institutions as marriage and the family and liberate human sexuality on the whole from predetermined gender roles.7

Not coincidentally, the first and only Futurist manifesto on women’s clothing appeared right after World War I, at a time when Italian women, like other European women, had advanced their economic and social position by having maintained the home front. Although the women’s movement was at its height, the issue of universal suffrage became a lost cause after 1925, when Benito Mussolini’s dictatorship rendered the vote irrelevant. Volt published his Manifesto della moda femminile futurista (Futurist Manifesto of Women’s Fashion) in 1920 at a particularly volatile moment between the end of the war and the rise of Fascism, which accounts for the rather frenetic and emancipatory tone of the text.

In Volt’s manifesto, woman is now a principal agent of revolt, a “walking synthesis” of the audacious, performance-oriented aesthetic of the Futurist universe. Indeed, in an acknowledgment of the ingenuity traditionally accorded the design of woman’s clothes, he announces that “women’s fashion has always been more or less Futurist.” The Futurist hymn to progress reaches new extremes (“Women’s fashion can never be extravagant enough”) as the female body becomes a conduit for advanced telecommunications. Woman is now equipped to take on the icons of modern warfare and transportation: machine guns, airplanes, submarines. Lest
her progressive image threaten to eradicate sexual difference once and for all, Volt reassures the public that the distinctive female silhouette will be maintained, even accentuated. As Enrico Crispolti has noted, woman is still not the creator of her own image, but merely part of the fashion system to be refigured by the Futurists. By contrast, in the same year, and in a more egalitarian moment, Marinetti called for women to design their own attire, true to their own individual shapes, making their simply adorned bodies into “an original living poem.”

The aggressive and liberating female fashion statement was short-lived: under Fascism women were officially relegated to the roles of wife and mother, and the regime’s alliance with the Catholic Church reinforced traditional proscriptions on sexuality. Though Balla and others continued to design clothing for women that was current with other European trends (figs. 9 and 10), the emancipatory politics of manifestoes on women came to an end.

Ever currying favor with the regime, the Futurists could continue with their provocative style as long as their propaganda supported the official line. Hence, Il manifesto futurista del cappello italiano (The Futurist Manifest of the Italian Hat) is rife with the virile and chauvinistic posturing of the 1930s. Typically the manifesto calls for more raucous colors and radical shapes, as the hat becomes man’s best friend and mechanical butler, illuminating his path in the dark, sending off messages, even massaging the body. Futurist innovation will rescue a lagging Italian export and restore the Italian male to his former Latin vigor. In a classic metaphor of castration, the authors claim that a man without a hat has an amputated look, equating the bare head with a “severed part.” Not only is the hat essential to the male sexual identity, but the Italian hat is the most stylish and thus the most potent of them all! It is the Italian hat, after all, that will “propagate the beauty of the race” throughout the world. Among the most tongue in cheek of the fashion manifestoes, the text nonetheless makes proud reference to the Futurist contribution to the rise and style of Fascism. It also flatters Mussolini as the ideal masculine type, based on the Futurist qualities of “variety, ferocity, dynamic momentum, and lyricism.”

In their radical ambitions, the Futurists anticipated much of the modern fashion phenomenon. Adapting to post-war economic realities and shifting class identities, they promulgated good design available to all through inexpensive materials and recognized the cyclical nature of the fashion economy. The timely call for the democratization of fashion coincided with the expansion of the clothing industry: style was no longer the exclusive sign of the upper classes, but was made increasingly available to the middle classes through standardized production and the dissemination of images through the print media. Their abrasive chauvinism notwithstanding, the Futurists correctly predicted the international triumph of Italian style in the decades following World War II. Most importantly they were prescient in understanding clothing design as a legitimate politics of the body and not merely a superfluous decoration subject to the whims of fashion.
Appendix 1

The Antineutral Suit: Futurist Manifesto

Humanity always dressed itself with modesty, fear, caution, and indecision, forever wearing the mourning suit, the cape, or the cloak. The male body was habitually diminished by neutral shades and colors, degraded by black, stifled by belts, and imprisoned by folds of fabric. Until now, men wore suits of static colors and forms, rather solemn, heavy, uncomfortable, draped, and priestly. They were expressions of timidity, melancholia, and slavery, a negation of the muscular life, which was repressed by the unhealthy traditionalism of weighty materials and boring, effeminate, or decadent halftones. The mood and rhythms resembled a funereal, depressing, and desolate peace.

TODAY we want to abolish:
1. All of the neutral “nice,” faded, “fanciful,” murky, and humble colors.
2. All pedantic, professorial, and teutonic shapes and hues. Designs with stripes, checks, and diplomatic little dots.
3. Mourning suits, which are not even fitting for grave-diggers. The heroic dead should not be lamented but rather commemorated by us in red dress.
4. The mediocrity of moderation, so-called good taste and so-called harmony of colors and forms, that curb our excitement and slow us down.
5. The symmetrical cut and static lines that tire, depress, sadden, and bind the muscles; the uniformity of ill-fitting lapels and all wrinkles; useless buttons and starched collars and cuffs.

We Futurists want to liberate our race from every neutrality, from fearful and enervating indecision, from negating pessimism and nostalgic, romantic, and flaccid inertia. We want to color Italy with Futurist audacity and risk, and finally give Italians joyful and bellicose clothing.

Futurist attire will therefore be:
1. Aggressive, in order to intensify the courage of the strong and overcome the sensitivity of the cowardly.
2. Agile, such that it will augment litheness of body and encourage momentum in struggle, stride, and the charge of battle.
3. Dynamic, with textiles of dynamic patterns and colors (triangles, cones, spirals, ellipses, circles) that inspire the love of danger, speed, and assault, and loathing of peace and immobility.
4. Simplicity and comfort, that is, easy to put on and take off, so that one is well prepared to aim the gun, ford the streams, and hurl oneself into the water.
5. Hygienic, or cut in such a way that every pore of the skin can breathe during long marches and steep climbs.
6. Joyful. Colored materials of thrilling iridescence. The use of muscular colors: the most violet violet, the reddest red, the deepest of deep blues, the greenest of greens, brilliant yellows, vermilions, and oranges.
7. Illuminating. Phosphorescent textiles that can ignite temerity in a fearful crowd, spread light around when it rains, and meliorate the dimness of twilight in the streets and in the nerves.
8. Strong willed. Violent colors and designs that are imperious and impetuous like the commands on the field of battle.
9. Asymmetrical. For example, the tips of sleeves and fronts of jackets will be rounded on the left side, squared off on the right. There will be ingenious counterdispositions of lines.
10. Short-lived, so that we may incessantly renew the wanton pleasure and liveliness of the body.
11. Changeable, by means of alterations (the incorporation of materials, of enlargements and layers, varying colors and designs) to dispose of when and where you want, from whatever part of the suit, by pneumatic buttons. In this way anyone can invent a new suit, at any moment. The changes will be arrogant, annoying, unsettling, decisive, warlike, etc.

The Futurist hat will be asymmetrical and of exhuberant, aggressive colors. Futurist shoes will be dynamic, different from one another in form and color, and happily able to kick all the neutralists.

The pairing of yellow and black will be vehemently prohibited.

One thinks and acts as one dresses. Since neutrality is the synthesis of all tradition, today we Futurists display these antineutral, that is, cheerfully bellicose, clothes.

Only the gouty ones disapprove of us.

All of Italy’s youth will recognize that we don our feisty Futurist banners for our urgent and imperative great war.

If the government does not take off its passeiste attire of fear and indecision, then we will double, CENTRUPLE THE RED of the tricolor flag, in which we dress.

Giacomo Balla, painter.

Approved enthusiastically by the Direction of the Futurist Movement and by all of the Italian Futurist groups.

Volantino della Direzione del Movimento Futurista, Milan, September 11, 1914.

Appendix 2

Futurist Manifesto of Women’s Fashion

Women’s fashion has always been more or less Futurist. Fashion: the female equivalent of Futurism. Speed, novelty, courage of creation. Greenish yellow bile of professors against Futurism, old bags against style. For the moment, they can rejoice! Fashion is going through a period of stagnation and boredom. Mediocrity and wretchedness weave gray
spider webs upon the colored flower beds of fashion and art.

Current styles (the blouse and chemise) try in vain to hide their basic poverty of conception under the false labels of distinction and sobriety. There is a complete lack of originality, a withering of fantasy. The imagination of the artist is relegated to details and nuances. The sickening litany of “saintly simplicity” “divine symmetry” and so-called good taste. Silly dreams of exhuming the past: “Let’s revive the classics.” Exhaustion, mollification, feeble-mindedness.

We Futurists intend to react against this state of things with extreme brutality. We don’t need to start a revolution. It’s enough to multiply a hundredfold the dynamic virtues of fashion, unleashing the briddles that hinder them from surging forth, leaping over the vertiginous jaws of the Absurd.

A. INGENUITY
One must absolutely claim the dictatorship of artistic ingenuity in female fashion against the parliamentary meddling of foolish speculation and the routine. A great poet or painter must take over the directorship of all the great women’s fashion houses. Fashion is an art, like architecture and music. A dress that is ingeniously conceived and carried well has the same value as a fresco by Michelangelo or a Titian Madonna.

B. DARING
The Futurist woman must have the same courage in donning the new styles of clothing as we did in declaring our wordsin-freedom against the asinine rebelliousness of Italian and foreign audiences. Women’s fashion can never be extravagant enough. And here too we will begin by abolishing symmetry. We will fashion zigzag decolletés, sleeves that differ from one another, shoes of varying shapes, colors, and heights. We will create illusionistic, sarcastic, sonorous, loud, deadly, and explosive attire: gowns that trigger surprises and transformations, outfitted with springs, stingers, camera lenses, electric currents, reflectors, perfumed sprays, fireworks, chemical preparations, and thousands of gadgets fit to play the most wicked tricks and disconcerting pranks on maladroit suitors and sentimental fools. In woman we can idealize the most fascinating conquests of modern life. And so we will have the machine-gun woman, the thanks-de-Somme woman [sic], the radio-telegraph antenna woman, the airplane woman, the submarine woman, the motorboat woman. We will transform the elegant lady into a real, living three-dimensional complex. There is no need to fear that in so doing the female silhouette will lose its capricious and provocative grace. The new forms will not hide but accentuate, develop, and exaggerate the gulls and promontories of the female peninsula. Art exaggeration. Upon the feminine profile we will graft the most aggressive lines and garish colors of our Futurist pictures. We will exalt the female flesh in a frenzy of spirals and triangles. We will succeed in sculpting the astral body of woman with the chisel of an exasperated geometry!

C. ECONOMY
The new fashions will be affordable for all the beautiful women, who are legion in Italy. The relative cost of precious material makes a garb expensive, not the form or color, which we will offer, free, to all Italians. After three years of war and shortages of raw material, it is ridiculous to continue manufacturing leather shoes and silk gowns. The reign of silk in the history of female fashion must come to an end, just as the reign of marble is now finished in architectural constructions. One hundred new revolutionary materials riot in the piazza, demanding to be admitted into the making of womanly clothes. We fling open wide the doors of the fashion ateliers to paper, cardboard, glass, tinfoil, aluminum, ceramic, rubber, fish skin, burlap, oakum, hemp, gas, growing plants, and living animals.

Every woman will be a walking synthesis of the universe.

You have the high honor of being loved by us, sappersoldiers at the avant-garde of an army of lightning.

VOLT [VINCENZO FANI]
ROMA FUTURISTA, ROME, FEBRUARY 29, 1920.
The combatants of Vittorio Veneto, of the squad activities in the Italian squares and of the March on Rome, whose heroism has surpassed that of the Romans, must not copy the cultural fashions of centuries ago and in a climate that has certainly changed. The young athletic Italians, victorious in Los Angeles, must now also overcome this barbaric habit that derives from a foolish sentimentality toward history.

Affirming, therefore the aesthetic necessity of the hat
1. We condemn the Nordic use of black and of neutral colors that give the wet, snowy, foggy streets of the city the appearance of a stagnant muddy melancholy, as if it were raining tortoises and chunks of stone swept along by torrents of brown.

2. We condemn the types of traditional headgear that jar with the speed and utilitarian aesthetic of our great mechanical civilization, as for example, the pretentious top hat that hinders swiftness of foot, and attracts funerals like a magnet.

In August, in the Italian squares flooded by dazzling light and torrid silence, the black or gray hat of the passerby floats along sadly, like dung.

Color! We need color to compete with the Italian sun.

3. We propose the Futurist functionality of the hat, which until now has done little or nothing for man. From now on it must illuminate him, signal to him, take care of him, defend him, speed him up, slow him down, etc.

We will create the following types of hat, which through aesthetic, hygienic, and functional perfection, will serve, complete, or correct the ideal Italian masculine figure with emphases on variety, ferocity, dynamic momentum, and lyricism indebted to the new style of Mussolini: (1) speed hat (for everyday use); (2) night hat (for evening); (3) sumptuous hat (for parading); (4) aerial-sportive hat; (5) sun hat; (6) rain hat; (7) mountaineering hat; (8) marine hat; (9) defense hat; (10) poetic hat; (11) publicity hat; (12) simultaneous hat; (13) plastic hat; (14) tactile hat; (15) illuminated-signal hat; (16) gramophone hat; (17) radiotelephonic hat; (18) therapeutic hat (resin, camphor, menthol, with a screen that modulates the cosmic waves); (19) automatic greeting hat (through a system of infrared rays); (20) an intelligence imparting hat for the idiots who criticize this manifesto.

They will be made in felt, velvet, straw, cork, light metals, glass, celluloid, agglomerations, fur, sponge, fiber, neon tubes, etc., alone or combined.

The polychromy of these hats will give to the sunlit squares the flavor of immense fruit dishes and the luxury of huge jewelry stores. The night streets will be perfumed and illuminated by melodious currents, which will finally kill off the age-old fondness for moonlight.

So will emerge the ideal hat—a work of Italian art, both uplifting and multipurpose, which, while intensifying and propagating the beauty of the race, will impose one of our most important national industries once again upon the world.

Given that our beautiful peninsula is the byway for tourists of every nation—they even come to visit bareheaded, if that is their pleasure—we will welcome them with our customary gentility. But we will yank the new Italian hat over their heads, to show them that there is nothing in common anymore between the servility of the ciceroni a hundred years ago and the fierce inventive originality of the fascist Futurists of today.

F. T. Marinetti
Enrico Prampolini
Mino Somenzi
Futurismo, Rome, March 5, 1933.