

What weapon do you destroy a canon with?

Kirsty White

In **The Futurist Manifesto** published in 1909, the poet Filippo Marinetti writes that: “Admiring an old picture is the same as pouring [one’s] sensibility into a funerary urn.” Adamant that art should celebrate the modern world and the industry and technology that characterised it, he called on artists to denounce the past and “destroy the museums”. While the artist’s plans were figurative rather than literal, in retrospect, he might have granted the 20th century a favour if he had fulfilled them. Eradicating museums would have erased the art historical canon. Artists accordingly would have started the new century carte blanche, liberated from 500 plus years of male-dominated history.

The effects of such iconoclasm can only be speculated. Could it have helped the suffragette movement in their cause? Bolstered the actions of feminist writers and thinkers like Mina Loy? It’s hard to say. What is certain is that now, some hundred years or so after Marinetti wrote his manifesto, Western society is, in a similar way to the Futurists, reevaluating its connection with history. Only today, in the light of women’s movement, the LGBT movement, the black rights movement and the environmental crisis, the impetus is not on destruction, but on rewriting.

It is this ethos that influences Melissa Gordon’s **Collision** (2016–ongoing), a performance work that stages feminist, playwright and artist Mina Loy’s 1916 play of the same title. Loy’s play went unperformed for a century after it was written, until Gordon staged it at the Bluecoat, Liverpool in 2016. Her decision to do so was as much to do with the play’s writer as it was its subject matter. Loy was one of the many overlooked female figures in the 20th century, a fact Gordon attempts to rectify by staging her work today.

Informing this is Gordon’s hunch that modernism began as a predominantly feminine pursuit. Many early presentations of modernist work were organised by women, often in their homes – such as writer Gertrude Stein’s Saturday night gatherings at 27 rue de Fleurus in Paris or writer and patron Mabel Dodge’s “Wednesday Evenings” at her New York home, 23 Fifth Avenue. In 1920 painter and art collector Katherine Dreier established the Société Anonyme in collaboration with Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray, a “reference library” of artworks that exemplified the new movements emerging at the turn of the century (The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, no date). Nine years later Lillie P. Bliss, Mary Quinn Sullivan, and Abby Aldrich Rockefeller founded the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the first institution in North America devoted exclusively to modern art.

Women were also responsible for some of the most important artworks in the modernist canon. This includes **Fountain** (1917), an artwork widely attributed to Duchamp, prior to the discovery of a letter penned by the artist to his sister Suzanne dated 11 April 1917. In it he writes: “One of my female friends who had adopted the pseudonym Richard Mutt sent me a porcelain urinal as a sculpture” (Scottish Review of Books, 2014). Historian Irene Gammel asserts that the artwork was in fact made by the performance artist Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, a friend of Duchamp’s who often declared readymade materials as works of art.

There is an underlying desire to uncover these stories in Gordon’s practice, to champion the women that pioneered modernism, and to *blow up* the biases of the canon. In her diptych **Blow Up Modernists “Copycat”, Pollock and Janet Sobel** (2016) Gordon juxtaposes two silkscreened canvases – one an enlarged reproduction of a Jackson Pollock painting, and the other, a fragment of a painting by one of Jackson’s contemporaries Janet Sobel. The work highlights the similarity of the paintings, both of which use a drip painting technique. Like evidence they are testament to an uncelebrated fact: Pollock saw Sobel’s own “drip paintings” in 1946 at an exhibition in Peggy Guggenheim’s Art of This Century Gallery in New York.

Not only does Gordon's comparison question the originality of Jackson's iconic method, it also highlights one of many examples of male artists gaining widespread recognition for the same or similar work as that of female artists, when female artists get little or none. As is widely known, Pollock became famous for inventing "drip painting" in 1947, whilst Sobel is relatively unknown.

In privileging figures excluded from the mainstream modernist narrative, Gordon adopts a revisionist approach to history. She, like other feminist artists, writers and theorists, challenges the orthodox view put forward by the Western art historical canon that white male creativity surpasses that of female artists or artists of colour. And while the titles of her works are as violent in their ambitions as Marinetti's – **Blow Up Modernists, Collision** – she is working at cross purposes to the Futurist. Gordon's practice is invested in interrogating the past, and, and like a detective, piecing together an alternative hierarchy or lineage for herself as an artist.

Historically this exercise is not uncommon amongst female artists. Curator Helen Molesworth, following feminist art historian Lisa Tickner, writes that "one of the effects of operating within a genealogy marked by absences and omissions is that you try to seek out your predecessors rather than refute them" (Molesworth, 2010, p.505). In other words, female artists, bereft of an origin story, will seek to construct their own, finding and attaching themselves to "(real and elective) artist-mothers" (Tickner, 2002, p.29). Male artists on the other hand, comfortably entrenched in an art-historical narrative, will "either make an homage to their fathers (Richard Serra to Jackson Pollock), kill their fathers (Frank Stella to Pollock), or pointedly ignore their fathers (Luc Tuymans to Pollock)" (Molesworth, 2010, p.504). Seen in this light, Marinetti's call to "destroy the museums" could only be voiced from a male perspective. Men can play fast and loose with their history, while women – still struggling to establish theirs – can't.

This is not to say that female artists are universally venerating. They can be as damning to their "fathers" as they are respectful to their "mothers". In Gordon's aforementioned **Blow Up Modernists** series for example, the artist irreverently reproduces canonical works by Mondrian, Pollock and van Doesburg, enlarging and re-enlarging signs of deterioration visible in the painting's reproduction. In a similar vein Loy's play **Collision** parodies the lone male artist, who believes in his own individual genius. The protagonist, referred to simply as "Man," demands isolation so that he may engage "in the act of 'CREATION'" (Loy, 1916). Once alone, he presses an electric button that creates "shattering insistent noise," and exalts in the spectacle of this machine-made cacophony. According to academic Suzanne W. Churchill, in her essay **Courting an Audience: Loy's Plays** (2017), this is a caricature of Marinetti. Loy is ridiculing the futurist men who were her contemporaries, who as she saw it "expresse[d] contempt of the public and perform[ed] for [their] own satisfaction and self-aggrandisement" (Churchill, 2017).

It is for this reason that Loy's play stands out to Gordon as an "example of an alternative modernism: kinetic, shape-shifting [and] event-orientated" (Gordon, 2018). Academic Julie Schmid shares this view writing in her essay **Mina Loy's Futurist Theatre** (1996): **Collision** is "one of the only feminist responses to and re-workings of the futurist dramatic aesthetic" (Schmid, 1996, p.1). Written after Loy's brief involvement with the movement, from 1913–15, the play's innovative use of language, kinetic scenery and short scenes are devices prevalent in futurist theatre. However, Loy subverts these traditions via parody, writing a script composed mostly of stage directions, that are ultimately more important than the protagonist. As Schmid confirms:

The light, the moveable floor, the "incursive planes and angles of walls and ceiling," and the "occasional explosion," foreground [a] futuristic, mechanical world. Rather than functioning merely as a backdrop, the scenography becomes foreground and the actor

a background to the vibrating planes, loud noise, and changing lights of the scenery. Although the character, Man, instigates the pandemonium by “press[ing] the electric button,” the play is ultimately about this kinetic process rather than it is about his involvement in it (Schmid, 1996, p.4).

Loy's privileging of scenography over character and dialogue, makes the futurist artist farcical, overwhelmed by his own techniques. To Gordon this character is akin to a prop, included merely to activate the scenography. In her 2016 staging of **Collision**, she casts a corporeal mime, Rita Pulga in this role, interested in how mime influenced modern dance and theatre, and how this influence is little-acknowledged. For the 2018 performance, Pulga returns alongside a second mime, making a play that was scripted to parody the notion of the lone male artist, now about two performers working together to expand, and then dismantle, the play's kinetic scenery. Gordon is thus not only piecing together an alternative modernist canon, she is also recasting the existing one, enabling the language of modernism to be spoken by more than one voice.

While Gordon's revisions to the modernist canon are successful in bringing less-known female artists to the attention of contemporary audiences, she is ultimately limited by how inclusive she can be by the canon itself. As curator and writer Maura Reilly explains in her 2018 book **Curatorial Activism**, the very attempt to insert a minority into a narrative that has been biased towards another group, perpetuates the binary opposition between the superior and the subordinate. Until such hegemonies are dismantled, the dominant group will continue to be advantaged. One way of removing these hierarchies is to abolish the canon altogether. To stop advancing some works over others on the basis of subjective criteria such as “quality” and argue that all art has significance “including cultural artifacts, non-Western and Western alike” (Reilly, 2018, p.30). Whereas the futurists argued that the past was obsolete, its influence to those not represented – female and queer artists and artists of colour – is felt acutely. Ultimately it is not about destroying the museums as Marinetti proposed but about abolishing their organisational structures. Until that happens though, an alternative modernism based on women and artists of colour will more than suffice.

Bibliography

Churchill, S. 2017. Courting an Audience: Loy's Plays. In: Churchill, S. ed. **Mina Loy: Navigating the Avant-Garde**. Davidson College. [Online]. [Accessed 10 June 2018]. Available from: <http://mina-loy.com/futurism/two-plays/>

Gordon. M. 2018. Email to Kirsty White, 16 June.

Loy, M. 1916. **Two Plays, Mina Loy**. [Online]. [Accessed 10 June 2018]. Available from: <http://mlarchive.suzannechurchill.com/items/show/1>

Marinetti, F.T. 1909. **The Futurist Manifesto (aka The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism)**. [Online]. [Accessed 10 June 2018]. Available from: <http://391.org/manifestos/1909-the-futurist-manifesto-f-t-marinetti.html>

Molesworth, H. 2010. How to Install Art as a Feminist. In: Butler, C., and Schwartz, A. ed. **Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art**. New York: Museum of Modern Art, pp.499-513.

Reilly, M. 2018. **Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating**. London: Thames and Hudson.

Schmid, J. 1996. Mina Loy's Futurist Theatre. **Performing Arts Journal** 18(1), 1-7. The MIT Press. [Online]. [Accessed 30 June 2018, from Project MUSE database].

Scottish Review of Books. 2014. **How Duchamp stole the Urinal**. [Online]. [Accessed 24 June 2018]. Available from: <https://www.scottishreviewofbooks.org/2014/11/how-duchamp-stole-the-urinal/>

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation. [no date]. **Katherine S. Dreier**. [Online]. [Accessed 24 June 2018]. Available from: <https://www.guggenheim.org/history/katherine-s-dreier>

Tickner, L. 2002. Mediating Generation: the mother-daughter plot. **Art History**. 25(1), pp.23-46.