

THE FUTURE OF “FUTURISM”

By Victor Margolin

Paolo Vermicelli, a great-nephew of Filippo Tomasso Marinetti, the founder of Futurism, has recently taken a major American art book publisher to court for using the term “Futurism” in an art history survey text without his permission. Vermicelli, in a brief filed with the New York State Supreme Court, claims that he, as the executor of the Marinetti estate, owns worldwide rights to the term. He vowed to put irresponsible scholars and cultural workers on notice to prevent them from freely exploiting his property as they have done for years in their lectures, publications, and exhibitions.

“Marinetti was a genius,” Vermicelli said in a recent press interview. “‘Futurism’ is one of the great terms of the 20th century and my uncle never benefited financially from his creation of it while others profited hugely from it.” As an example, he cited the Italian scholar Pasta Fagiolo, who made tens of lira from his ground-breaking treatise on the Futurist movement in which he claimed that Marinetti had once exchanged pinky rings with Czarina Alexandra during his visit to Russia. Vermicelli, himself a writer manqué whose neo-Fascist diatribes against the Ethiopians have been refused by periodicals all over the world, may have a personal ax to grind against more successful authors such as Fagiolo, who built a successful career on the back of Marinetti’s indiscretions.

Hans Brinker, the Dutch president of the Omnivorous Group, which owns an international conglomerate of publishing houses, printing plants, and television repair franchises throughout the world, has vowed to vigorously fight Vermicelli’s claim. “Should he be successful,” argued Brinker in a recent satellite broadcast to the worldwide press, “the whole of cultural history will be endangered. The executors of other artists’ estates, mainly failed artists themselves, are waiting in the wings to bring forth their own suits. “

Vermicelli has demanded that anyone who uses the term “Futurism” in print or public speech must pay a royalty. Furthermore, he wants all references to Futurism, written or verbal, to be followed by the credit line, “Cited with permission of the Estate of Filippo Tomasso Marinetti.” Vermicelli has petitioned Italian president Aldo Calimari to equip the nightsticks of all carabinieri with small microphones and tape recorders in order to catch violators. Anyone who says “Futurism” in public and is unable to produce a letter of permission from Vermicelli on demand will be charged with cultural theft and fined heavily.

Should Vermicelli win his New York case, those wishing to use “Futurism” in print or speech will either have to pay him a permissions fee or excise the term from all future (rather than futurist) editions of their publications and public lectures. It is thus possible that the history of modern art will be told without reference to Futurism. If the executors of other estates follow Vermicelli’s lead, Cubism, Expressionism, Fauvism, Dada, and Constructivism may also be excised from art history. “Publishers and scholars will simply be unable to afford all the rights payments” said Brinker. “We will have to go on without these terms. “

The International Association of Art Critics has filed an amicus curiae brief with Brinker’s publishing company to support its defense against Vermicelli’s claim. “A victory for Vermicelli will mean the end of art criticism as we know it,” wrote Bogumil Cbcvchichi, the Bulgarian president of the critics’ association. Meanwhile, a group of Italian neo-Futurist anarchists has begun a 24-hour vigil in front of Vermicelli’s villa in Mantua. Each time he leaves the house, they taunt him with catcalls of “Vermicelli Falso Futurista” (Vermicelli False Futurist). This, however, has not deterred Vermicelli from strutting around Mantua in a black shirt and jodhpurs. He has, in fact, amassed a small following of neo-Fascist acolytes, who see in their leader’s copyright claims the chance to finance their own agenda of shutting down all McDonalds, Burger Kings, and Kentucky Fried Chicken franchises in Italy.

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