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Umberto Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*:
How materiality obfuscates originality, intent, and ethics

THESIS

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by

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DEDICATION

To

My family, for supporting me throughout my academic career

My friends, for keeping me sane during the academic process

The voices in my head, for forcing me to write this

And my grandfather, for always believing in me

But who will, sadly, never get to read this

I love you all and wish you the best in your own endeavors

I have been your shelter
and you have been mine
but you've grown out of the need
standing beneath the rain alone
I'm ready to see you strong
see you go
I can't be your shield
so I'll stand beside you
weathering the torrent together

When the storm abates
the clouds dissipate
I might fade away
life sweeping me out of yours
look towards the dawn
you'll know where I am
you'll never be alone

Excerpt from personal poetry

“Praise the Sun” – Solaire of Astora, gesturing, *Dark Souls*

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Umberto Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*:
How materiality obfuscates originality, intent, and ethics

By

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Chancellor's Professor Cécile Whiting

After Umberto Boccioni's death in 1916 one of his most famous works, the plaster sculpture *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, was cast in bronze on multiple occasions. These copies were disseminated to many prominent museums and bronze came to be seen as the original medium of the work by the general public. In this paper I argue that plaster, as a material, more accurately represents the artistic intent of Boccioni than the bronze copies that followed his passing through a mixture of visual analysis and textual evidence. I also call attention to the provenance of the sculpture, in both its plaster and bronze forms, in an attempt to proliferate the fact that the original work is plaster as well as to critique the ethics of museums that choose to display its bronze iterations. I conclude that the Tate Modern is the only museum that currently displays a bronze *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* ethically due to its open and accurate acknowledgement of the work's history as a posthumous copy.

Umberto Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*: How materiality obfuscates originality, intent, and ethics

By Eric Anthony Colbert

Umberto Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (Italian: *Forme Uniche della Continuità nello Spazio*) is one of the defining works of the Futurist movement and has possibly become the most well-known Futurist artwork. The sculpture blends many elements that were key to the Futurist movement – most significantly it conveys dynamism, speed, and violence – into a singular sculptural form. Though it is one of the most easily identifiable works created by Boccioni, and the Futurist movement as a whole, it is not what it seems. Many will recognize the bronze versions of *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, but seemingly few realize that these are not the original work.

The original *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* was a plaster sculpture made by Boccioni in 1913, and the bronze versions of his work were created and distributed after his death in 1916. Plaster casts of bronze and marble works have been traded between museums, art schools, workshops, and private collectors for centuries. Yet none of these copies have been mistaken for the original work by a large portion of society. Nor is it typical for original works to be made of plaster and their copies to be made of bronze. Moreover, the bronze copies, in this case, have become the work itself. In their shifting status from simulacral to original, these bronze recasts have altered the materiality of the work and thereby altered its physical and cultural significance. Ultimately the bronzes have shifted the interpretation of the work towards a more mechanically-focused futurist artwork that ignores the nuance that the plaster work employs to advance Futurist ideals of speed, space formation, and destruction. The bronze casts of Boccioni's original *Unique Forms of Continuity of Space* which were posthumously created

by third-parties confuse the plaster work's identity as a Futurist work of subversive defiance and its origins. This confusion is in part due to the display of such bronze casts in museums that do not draw adequate attention to the history of their casts and fail to treat their artworks as historical objects.

The bronze casts of *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* share the same form as the plaster cast, and both function as re-creations of movement discussed in the *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism* by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. The controversial manifesto was published in 1909 on the front page of *Le Figaro*, a daily Parisian newspaper, along with various other European publications, and called for the violent modernization of Italy into a militarized and fully industrialized nation.¹ The core ideal of Futurism that Marinetti set forth in this manifesto was speed: acceleration so great that it renders both time and space meaningless, thereby allowing a new Italy to leave behind its culturally stagnant past.² He highlights the importance of speed to Futurism both in the manifesto's content and in his energetic writing style, mixing violent and modern themes (like cars, trains, and electrical lights) with vivid, fanciful descriptions which proceed rapidly due to Marinetti's usage of short sentences. The manifesto was written more like a short story than an informative decree, befitting of Marinetti's occupation as a poet; yet, it still sets forth the ideals that became the pillars of Futurist ideology.

Movement in sculptural forms is also something that Boccioni speaks to directly in his theoretical text, *Futurist Sculpture*. Written approximately a year before the creation of *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, Boccioni's text focuses on how Futurist sculptors can create

¹ Christine Poggi, "Futurist Velocities," in *Inventing Futurism: the art and politics of artificial optimism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 1.

² The logic of this idea proceeds that if one could travel anywhere instantaneously, due to a ludicrous amount of speed, that space would lose meaning since any distance could be traveled in equal amounts of time (i.e. instantly), and time would lose all meaning since it would be equally nonexistent over any amount of distance; Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism," in *Futurism: An Anthology* ed. by Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittan (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 49–53.

sculptures that conform to Futurist ideology in ways that previous manifestos and technical writings had not explained.³ Earlier Futurist texts had focused on fleshing out the ideological basis of Futurism or detailed how paintings and music should be handled by Futurists. As a result, Boccioni was the first to engage with sculpture specifically.⁴ He saw movement as something that could be exploited by Futurist artists to elevate their sculptures as truly modern works, citing the rhythmic movements of pistons and cog wheels as optimal reference points for modern artists.⁵ From such source material he wished to establish a systematic style of movement – certain sculptural qualities that could be distilled and implemented to reproduce a Futurist spirit.⁶ He also asserted that force-lines, a concept covered in an earlier text by fellow futurist Giacomo Balla, should be employed to propel sculptural figures; explicitly advocating for the use of straight “primitive” force-lines instead of curved “muscular” force-lines to serve as a symbol of the severity of modern machinery.⁷

In both the plaster and bronze versions, *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* is a human-like figure without arms that is lunging forward. The work’s form is solid yet fluid, appearing as chunks of mass that have heterogeneously congealed together. Many of these chunks extend backward from the form’s legs and body, and these backward protrusions lend a high degree of momentum to this work. They appear to be left in the wake of the figure’s lunge, like air being cleaved so quickly that our eyes can’t perceive the actual absence of space. Recesses and holes permeate the work near these protrusions, serving to accentuate the form of such protrusions and

³ Umberto Boccioni, “Futurist Sculpture,” in *Futurism: An Anthology* ed. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittan. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 118.

⁴ Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittan, ed., *Futurism: An Anthology* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), v-vi.

⁵ Boccioni, “Futurist Sculpture,” 118.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 118.

affirming this notion of corporealized absence. The sculpture is a captured blur, an immobile allusion to the act of motion, and in this way it depicts the Futurist obsession with speed.

There are, however, precious few straight lines in the bronze and plaster casts. The boxes upon which the figure stands and its rectangular base (which appears in the original plaster work and only a few of its bronze copies) are made of straight lines. There is a linear cross that appears in the face of the figure, and there is a horizontal line that appears along the figure's chest. These latter lines are formed by absences in the figure; the image of the cross protrudes from the figure's face while the chest line appears due to the fact that the right half of the figure's chest emerges from the figure itself. The artwork's straight lines – as detailed above – do not function as force-lines in Boccioni's conception of the term since they do not contribute directly to the forward motion of the figure. That is not to say, however, that the work is without force-lines. As discussed earlier, the work's backward protrusions function as force-lines that grant momentum to the figure, thereby embodying Boccioni's conception of movement without adopting his specific formal requirements.

While the bronze and plaster casts share the same formal elements in their composition and volume, their differing mediums alter how the works are interpreted. The bronze casts, specifically, engender a reading of motion that is mechanical as opposed to bodily. Mechanical and machine imagery feature heavily in Futurist writings and artworks, serving to assert the modernity of the Futurist movement. The fourth tenant of Futurism set out by Marinetti in the *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism* proceeds, “We affirm the that the beauty of the world has been enriched by a new form of beauty; the beauty of speed. A racing car with a hood that glistens with large pipes resembling a serpent with explosive breath...a roaring automobile that

seems to ride on grapeshot—that is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace.”⁸ Although Marinetti’s conception of speed is still partially derived from natural forms, e.g. a serpent with explosive breath, the main object that generates speed is a slick new automobile. Since the bronze casts of *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* are made of metal it would be easy to draw direct connections between their material qualities and the idea of speed expressed by Marinetti. In doing so the figure becomes a machine or a cyborg, overcoming human limitations through the use of machinery and propelled visually through formal effects alone.

Boccioni’s conception of speed for his plaster work, however, seems to be a bit more nuanced than this. As stated before, Boccioni believed that machinery acts as a good reference point for modern artist, but he also made a clear distinction between curved lines symbolizing natural forms and straight lines symbolizing mechanical forms. Both the plaster and bronze casts of Boccioni’s work prominently feature curved lines over straight lines, so it stands to reason that Boccioni intentionally utilized natural forms in his work to highlight the figure as more human than machine. Additionally, while plaster doesn’t necessarily have a natural quality to it, it does not evoke the immediate mechanical imagery that bronze does through its materiality. Mechanical elements are still at play in the plaster work – the figure still appears to be wearing some form of metal armor and its face and chest are both comprised of mechanically-derived straight lines – but these mechanical elements do not overshadow the other formal and ideological elements that grant speed to the work through natural iconography. It is worth noting that Boccioni started making sculptures only after he wrote his technical manifesto on Futurist sculpture, so any statements he made about the exact mechanics of sculptural forms were made without practical knowledge and were, therefore, subject to change even if the ideals behind such mechanics were maintained.

⁸ Marinetti, “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism,” 51.

In addition to embodying speed, both mediums of *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* inspire movement in their viewers. Since sculptures are three dimensional objects, viewers have to interact with them spatially in order to fully experience them, but the artwork itself forces viewers to interact with it. The composition of the sculpture is extremely dynamic: the guiding lines that would usually draw one's eyes to a certain section or to an important part of the object are curved and move about the work in seemingly random directions. The various holes in the sculpture also aim to confuse the viewer as they appear extremely deep from certain angles and in certain lighting yet prove to be relatively shallow when viewed directly. These compositional contradictions give viewers conflicting information about what is important and where they should look. To make any sense of the sculpture, viewers have to follow some of these twisting, guiding curves. These sinuous lines point to other sections of the sculpture, which are also constructed from curves, until the viewer is brought back to where they started. In addition, the work looks drastically different from different angles: The figure's chest looks bigger on one side than on the other, the figure's midriff looks unnaturally thin when looked at from a diagonal or unnaturally wide from the back, and the figure doesn't even look like it has a head from the front and back. Boccioni constructed this piece with the intent of forcing viewers to move around it when they searched for its focus, only to end up physically experiencing the sculpture as motion.

Boccioni was also concerned with making sculptures that formed their surroundings. While discussing the advances made in other mediums by Futurists in *Futurist Sculpture*, he states:

Why should sculpture lag behind, restricted by laws which no one has the right to impose? Let's turn everything upside down and proclaim that **the absolute and complete abolition of finite lines and the self-contained statue. Let's open up the figure and let it enclose the environment.** We declare that the environment must form part of the

plastic whole, a world of its own, with its own laws: so that the pavement can jump up to your table, so that your head might be crossing the street while your lamp is twining a web of plaster rays from one house to the next...A sculptural whole, like a painting, should not resemble anything but itself, since figures and objects exist in art without regard to the logic of their appearance in the world⁹

Boccioni hoped to create works that were simultaneously distinct from, yet impacted, their environments by having his works interact with the surrounding space. Indeed, both the plaster and bronze casts have hectic compositions that point around and outside of themselves, forcing viewers to move around the work and the room while simultaneously drawing their eyes to different areas of the environment formed between the work and the room itself. Boccioni expanded this idea of space as a part of his works in a later text, *The Plastic Foundations of Futurist Sculpture and Painting*, stating:

When I say that sculpture must try and model the atmosphere, I mean that I want to suppress, i.e., FORGET, all the traditional and sentimental values concerning atmosphere, the recent naturalism which veils objects, making them diaphanous or distant like a dream, etc., etc. For me atmosphere is a materiality that exists between objects, distorting plastic values. Instead of making it float overhead like a puff of air (because culture has taught me that atmosphere is intangible or made of gas, etc.) I feel it, seek it, seize hold of it and emphasize it by using all the various effects which lights, shadows, and streams of energy have on it. Hence, I create the atmosphere!¹⁰

Boccioni now shows that not only can he have his works interact with their environments, but they can also shape the space between his sculptures and the walls around them. This belief is, however, predicated on Boccioni's control over the space in question so that he could manipulate the lighting and "energy" of his works. Both of these understandings of his sculpture require that the work command attention to itself only as much as it draws attention to its environment and its place within it.

⁹ Boccioni, "Futurist Sculpture," 117.

¹⁰ Umberto Boccioni, "The Plastic Foundations of Futurist Sculpture and Painting," in *Futurism: An Anthology* ed. Lawrence Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittan (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 140.

The materiality of these casts becomes especially significant regarding Boccioni's concern with the way in which sculptures shape their environments. Due to their reflective quality the bronze copies conflict with his theories about the sculpture's engagement with the environment. While one might think that the reflectivity of a metal would enhance its reference to its environment, it only enhances its own self-referentially as it returns the entire sculptural and environmental experience to an interaction between the viewer and the work itself; reflectivity dissuades any interaction with the environment beyond the work and encourages a narcissistic relationship between viewer and object by placing more emphasis on the reflection of the environment than the environment itself. This issue of reflectivity is further compounded by the lights museums use in their gallery spaces as they cause the figure to shine and draw more attention to itself; an issue Boccioni himself wished to avoid.¹¹ The bronze sculptures have also gained patinas during their years of their display which contrast with their usual polished sheen, and such visual textural qualities increase interest in the material quality of the work rather than its surrounding environment. As such the patinas increase the object's self-referentiality and takes away from its ability to highlight its environment. The bronze works have a distinct emphasis on their material qualities while the plaster work emphasizes its formal qualities, thus enabling it to shift attention away from itself.

The plaster original has a consistent textural quality and lacks any material qualities that would force the viewer to interact with it instead of its environment. Boccioni viewed plaster as an ideal medium for his sculptures as it would preserve his forms and remain inert to atmospheric effects (over which he wouldn't have control).¹² As a non-reflective surface, the

¹¹ Maria Elena Versari, "'Impressionism Solidified' – Umberto Boccioni's Works in Plaster," in *Plaster Casts: Making, Collecting and Displaying from Classical Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Rune Frederiksen and Eckart Marchand (New York: De Gruyter, 2010) 345.

¹² Versari, "Impressionism Solidified," 346-347

plaster sculpture stands apart from its environment rather than acting as an amalgamation of the sculptural forms and the space in which it resides. The effects of museum or gallery lighting on the work wouldn't prove as unpredictable as bronze, and the white surface of the plaster allowed Boccioni to control the contrast between the sculpture's illuminated whiteness and shadows through formal manipulation alone.¹³ The surface of the plaster is also uniform, drawing less attention to its own material qualities and more to its formal qualities; putting pressure on the viewer to move and interact with the room rather than itself. The inertness of plaster can therefore be seen as more serviceable to the Futurist ideal of motion than bronze because the surface of the work isn't as greatly affected by where it is displayed and maintains focus on the formal elements of the work which inspire interaction with the environment beyond the figure itself.

Speed and motion, as they appear in *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism* and as they are expressed by both versions *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, help to develop, both ideologically and formally, another key element of Futurism: violence. Marinetti championed the idea of violent revolution, stating that, "We intend to glorify war—the only hygiene for the world—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of anarchists, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and contempt for woman."¹⁴ In Boccioni's sculpture, this embrace of war (if not patriotism) endows his figure with armor; most notably it seems to be wearing a war helmet and possibly a breastplate. The figure's stance is also quite active, increasing the aggression of the work. There is not so much an outward display of violence as an effort to embody a state of violence. There's a gash that runs down the front and back of the work, beginning to split the work into two pieces straight down the middle, and the work as a whole doesn't appear exceedingly stable due to the

¹³ Versari, "Impressionism Solidified," 347

¹⁴ Marinetti, "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism," 51.

fluidity of the figure. Because of these factors, and because of the speed already inherent in the piece, it looks as if it is being violently torn apart by the force of its own momentum. The sections of the work that were earlier interpreted as force-lines (or blur lines) could also very well be seen as pieces of the figure itself – being torn off due to its ridiculous speed – which might explain why Boccioni made the sculpture without arms. As the figure transcends time and space through extreme velocity its armor is crushed and its body is obliterated, echoing the end that all human progress must come to terms with – death.

Marinetti actually embraces death in *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism* as a way to purge old ideas and bring new energy to the movement. He says:

When we are forty, others who are younger and stronger will throw us in the wastebasket, like useless manuscripts. – We want it to happen! They will come against us, our successors; they will come from far away, from every direction, dancing to the winged cadence of their first songs, extending predatory claws, sniffing doglike at doors of the academies for the good smell of our decaying mind, long since promised to the libraries' catacombs...Panting with contempt and anxiety, they will storm around us, and all of them exasperated by our lofty daring, will attempt to kill us, driven by a hatred all the more implacable because their hearts will be intoxicated with love and admiration for us. In their eyes, strong and healthy Injustice will radiantly burst. – Art, in fact, can be nothing if not violence, cruelty, and injustice.¹⁵

Death, in this instance, is a metaphor for the destruction of one's work: poems, books, and other various forms of art. Marinetti wanted artists' works to exist only while they were relevant and innovative, and once those works lost their pertinence, he wanted the youth of the next generation to destroy the works of the past and carve out a new artistic future for themselves. He suggests that destruction is drawn from a place of admiration; new artists tear down old artists out of respect for their contributions to the movement as a whole to maintain the ideals of Futurism that those works represented. In addition, Marinetti explicitly states that art is, at least

¹⁵ While certain words in this translation are questionable, and the translation itself is a bit too direct (I have taken two years of Italian and believe I have some insight in this matter), the translation itself is faithful to the content of the manifesto; Marinetti, "Manifesto of Futurism," 52.

in part, a manifestation of violence, showing that Futurist art must be derived from violence in order for it to be relevant.

Boccioni reflected this idea of destructive succession in his original plaster cast of *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*. Since plaster is a solid yet brittle material Boccioni was able to create a dynamic sculpture that would be relevant to his time, by preserving his form, while preparing for its eventual destruction. Beyond being a weaker sculptural material than, say, stone, marble, or bronze, plaster has a distinct history of use that Boccioni would have been aware of. Plaster, throughout history, has been used as a secondary material in the sculptural process. Many sculptural works start as clay or wax models, which allow the artist to make many adjustments to the model without destroying it. Those models are cast in plaster to maintain their form and are then either used as reference material by artists who transfer their form to other materials by hand (like stone or marble) or are used as a model from which other casts are directly taken (like bronze). Once a plaster cast has been realized in another material it's role in the sculptural process is completed and they are either put in storage, sold off, or destroyed. There is much historical precedent for the destruction of plaster casts as they are simply not as durable as materials like bronze (especially when placed in the outdoors, plaster is particularly susceptible to weathering). Nor have they been viewed as works of art and have therefore been treated poorly. With all of this in mind, Boccioni can be seen as creating a sculpture that lacks a future due to its medium; it is not durable and yet it is meant to be the final work. It is made from a material that is secondary to others yet it is not meant to yield a primary, or final, work in order for it to be sacrificed in the name of Futurism. This understanding of the work, however, is confused by the bronze versions of the work as they exist in primary mediums, alluding to their

own destruction through their forms yet not themselves committed to any actual destruction. And, of course, the plaster version has in fact not been destroyed.

Boccioni's use of plaster further reinforces the Futurist disdain for academies while also utilizing the connotations of such institutions to assert the iconoclastic drive of Futurist works. Plaster, from the perspective of the academy, is seen as a secondary material which serves as precursor to art works but are not necessarily works of art in their own right. Boccioni, in creating a work directly from this material, can be seen as condemning the academies and academic traditions that Futurists saw as bastions of cultural stagnation. He also uses the pre-existing academic conception of plaster for his own purposes; creating a work that has no past since plaster is viewed as a precursor material that has no future except as a duplicate in another material, further reinforcing that the work was to be destroyed. Ironically, the fact that the bronze sculptures were made and superseded the plaster in the public eye reinforces the academic ideals that Boccioni was battling against. Nevertheless, the original plaster still exists; it has been overshadowed but not destroyed.

The artist's anticipation of his sculpture's destruction is also echoed in the form of the figure itself. The figure could be thought of as destroying itself through its own momentum; its forward lunge into space is what tears it apart. Boccioni knows that his work will be eradicated by the very movement which created it, so he prepares it both physically and philosophically for its day of reckoning by having it embody its own destruction. While the bronze works still have the same formal elements as the plaster cast that allude to the destruction of the work, the fact that they are made from a more durable material than the original mutes this interpretation of the work.

Another interesting thing to note about Boccioni's work is its title. For a movement so concerned with the destruction of its own intellectual and artistic property, as well as the destruction of the world's intellectual and artistic property, it is strange that "*Continuity*" would be connected to "*Forms*" in any work associated with the movement. But what's important in this title is that it's a "*Unique*" form of "*Continuity*"; the sculpture is not a form of continuity, as in a form that is continuous, because it is meant to be eradicated. *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* is a manifestation of something else that is continuous, that lives with or without the work. What is meant to be continuous in this work is the spirit of Futurism: the idea that destruction can innovate and speed can invigorate.

Returning to Boccioni's text, *Futurist Sculpture*, will grant more insight into how the work's title correlates with destruction. The text is motivated by a desire to break from traditional forms of sculpture in order to make a truly Futurist, and in Boccioni's eyes truly modern, sculptural program.¹⁶ He repeats this sentiment throughout the text, and goes as far as to describe the usage of earlier sculptural models as a basis for modern works, specifically sculptures created by Egyptians, Greeks, and Michelangelo, as, "trying to draw water from a dry well with a bottomless bucket."¹⁷ The problem that he sees with such old sculptures, other than the fact that any Futurist would see them as symbols of artistic stagnation, is that they are self-contained; they do not engage with the viewer or any space beyond the structure.¹⁸ He cites Medardo Rosso, a sculptor contemporaneous with Boccioni, as being able to escape such self-containment by abstracting figures into planes but he criticizes him as also limited in this regard due to his Impressionistic reliance on creating works quickly and without much planning.¹⁹

¹⁶ Boccioni, "Futurist Sculpture."

¹⁷ Ibid., 114.

¹⁸ Ibid., 115-117.

¹⁹ Ibid., 116.

Boccioni wants to make sculptures that expand beyond their forms into the space around them and shape, or even become, their environments.²⁰

With this in mind, the “*Space*” in *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* takes on a new meaning; it is no longer a vague conception of space, as in all space everywhere, but rather the immediate space which surrounds the work. This space is meant to be structured by the work itself, and along with the earlier interpretation of the title, can be seen as creating a Futurist environment of destruction and speed for itself and its viewers. Since the work forces viewers to interact with it, and by interacting with the work viewers have movement forced upon themselves but also enact change upon their visual conception of the work, viewers participate in the destruction of the work. The form itself is static, and if the work were to remain static it would fail as a futurist artwork, so Boccioni designed the work such that it would force viewers to move through its surrounding environment to create a dynamic work of art. Furthermore, by changing the visual form of the work through their own movement viewers are able to see the work lunge forward and destroy itself, thereby making the work perform its own destruction and making the viewer an accomplice in said destruction – thereby implicating the viewer in a Futurist act and the history of Futurism. *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* therefore alludes to Boccioni’s Futurist desire for its destruction.

Unique Forms of Continuity in Space, however, was not destroyed and was eventually interred in the Museum of Contemporary Art at the University of São Paulo (MCA-USP): a terrible fate in the eyes of a Futurist.²¹ The word “interred” is consciously used here to allude to the fact that Futurists viewed museums as cemeteries; institutions that archive artistic or intellectual property that drain energy from those who visit them and promote intellectual

²⁰ Ibid., 117.

²¹ “P33 – Unique Forms of Continuity in Space,” Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, accessed December 12, 2017, <http://mam.org.br/en/exposicao/p33-unique-forms-of-continuity-in-space/>

stagnation.²² To the Marinetti who wrote the *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism*, it would be the height of folly for a Futurist artwork to be displayed in a museum for any amount of time. It also goes against Boccioni's own intentions to put his artwork in a museum; as has been discussed in this paper, his work is constructed, both formally and through Futurist texts, with the hopes of being destroyed. Yet the original plaster cast of *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, a work made by an Italian, now sits in a Brazilian museum (Figure 2).

Since the MCA-USP chooses to display *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* against Boccioni's desire it can be inferred that the museum doesn't take artists' intentions into account when displaying their works. More accurately, the MCA-USP does not allow artists' intentions to conflict with the display of their works, but it does exploit the ideology of the artist and the artwork to justify the artwork's display. Ideology, in this way, is seen as representative of a culture during a specific time, in this case as the cultural heritage of Italy during the Futurist period between 1909 and 1944 (or, more accurately, first wave Futurism from 1909 to the 1920s).²³ The museum treats works as primary historical objects; displaying the work and explaining its context in order to give viewers an accurate account of its relationship with Futurism. This is a desire shared by many universal art museums – although their reasons for stating this purpose seem to be driven by their need to validate their acquisition practices.²⁴ There has been seemingly no controversy surrounding MCA-USP's acquisition of the work; none have tried to claim it as Italian patrimony as of yet. It should also be noted that one of the main duties of a museum is the protection of its artworks, especially brittle and original works like the one in question. In the modern era, the ethics of conserving cultural heritage outweigh

²² Marinetti, "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism," 52-53

²³ Joshua C. Taylor, *Futurism: The Museum of Modern Art, New York* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, May 1961), 114.

²⁴ "Declaration on the Importance of Universal Museums," *ICOM News*, 2004, http://archives.icom.museum/pdf/E_news2004/p4_2004-1.pdf

the ethics of maintaining artistic intent. It is not the museum's fault that Boccioni's work failed to reach its envisioned Futurist resolution, and by putting it on display the museum is able to show the historical fact that Futurist movement failed to live up to its own stated ideology.

While the MCA-USP is ethical in exhibiting the original plaster cast of *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* in relation to its historical context, some other museums that exhibit bronze re-casts of this work do not meet these same ethical standards as they fail to adequately recognize the history of such casts. Boccioni made the original plaster sculpture in 1913 and he died in 1916 after he joined the Italian army and suffered a fatal injury during a cavalry training exercise. After his death the plaster sculpture was left in the care of Fedele Azari, a fellow Futurist artist who held onto the work until he sold it to Marinetti in 1928.²⁵ Marinetti then had two bronze casts of the sculpture made, one in 1931 and the other in 1934, at the Chiurazzi Foundry in Naples.²⁶ No justification has been found for Marinetti's decision, but it presumably derives from the Futurist transition (from first wave to second wave Futurism) into Mussolini's fascist regime after World War I. The 1931 bronze was acquired by the Municipality of Milan in 1934 and was, and is still, on display at the Museo del Novecento (Museum of the Twentieth Century) in Milan.²⁷ Marinetti died in 1944 and the plaster sculpture and its 1934 bronze cast were transferred to his wife, Benedetta Marinetti, who sold the 1934 bronze cast to the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1948.²⁸ Benedetta then had two bronze casts of the plaster sculpture made in 1949 at the Giovanni and Angelo Nicci Foundry in Rome, which she sold to

²⁵ Marina Barzon Silva, "Chronology of the works Unique Forms of Continuity in Space and Development of a Bottle in Space by Umberto Boccioni," (presentation, Seminário Internacional de Conservação de Escultura Moderna, Museum of Contemporary Art of the University of São Paulo, November 22-23, 2012), 1-2.
available at:

http://www.mac.usp.br/mac/conteudo/academico/publicacoes/boletins/escultura/pdfs/CRONO_BOCCIONI_ING.pdf

²⁶ Silva, "Chronology," 2.

²⁷ Ibid., 3.

²⁸ Ibid., 3.

private collections between 1950 and 1951: one to the Paolo Marinotti Collection in Milan and one to the Lydia and Harry Lewis Winston Collection in New York.²⁹ Similar to her husband, Benedetta's motivations for this decision are unknown but could have been the result of her position as a Futurist artist or the monetary gain acquired from such transactions. In 1952 she sold the original plaster sculpture to Francisco Matarazzo Sobrinho, a Brazilian industrialist and entrepreneur, who donated the sculpture to the São Paulo Museum of Modern Art (MAM) that same year.³⁰ Under Sobrinho's supervision the plaster was cast in bronze at the Benedetto Mettelo Foundry in 1960, and the plaster work itself was restored before and after this casting by Vittorio Sinigaglia, who is assumedly a professional art restorer.³¹ Sobrinho donated this 1960 bronze cast to the MCA-USP in 1962, and the MAM donated the original plaster sculpture to the MCA-USP in 1963.³² The MCA-USP had a bronze cast made specifically for the Tate in 1972 in exchange for one of Henry Moore's *Reclining Figures*.³³ In that same year 8 bronze casts are surmoulded from the 1949 bronze cast in the Mattioli collection by the Galleria Medusa in Rome, one of which has ended up at the Kröller-Müller Museum in the Netherlands but the circulation of most of these copies has not been well documented.³⁴ Finally, in 1989, Lydia Malbin Winston donated her 1949 bronze to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; thus finalizing the provenance of the original and various copies of *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* in circulation today.³⁵ As has been shown, Boccioni had not made a bronze cast of this work during his lifetime. He even advocated against the utilization of classical materials

²⁹ Ibid., 4.

³⁰ Ibid., 4.

³¹ Ibid., 4.

³² Ibid., 4.

³³ Ibid., 5.

³⁴ Silva, "Chronology," 5.

³⁵ Ibid., 6.

(specifically bronze) in futurist sculpture.³⁶ Though these casts are made from molds taken from the original work, except for those created by the Galleria Medusa, they were never touched by Boccioni himself nor authorized by him. Because of this, these casts cannot be seen to represent their intended historical context because their materiality betrays the intervention of individuals outside the Futurist historical context.

These bronze casts are currently in the holdings of the Museo del Novecento, Milan, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Tate Modern, London, and the Kröller-Müller Museum, Netherlands.³⁷ The Museo del Novecento lacks adequate online access to their catalog, so it will not be addressed in this paper. The Museum of Modern Art, however, presents this work as Boccioni's attempt to break with the classical past (which MoMA sees as a somewhat failed attempt because they say its bronze form resembles the *Nike of Samothrace*), but the writers fail to draw attention to the fact that this work was cast posthumously and inaccurately date the work as the 1931 bronze when they are in possession of the 1934 bronze.³⁸ The Kröller-Müller Museum acknowledges the Futurist dislike for "Classical marble or bronze sculpture," the operative word in this phrase assumedly being "Classical," yet overlooks Boccioni's distaste for bronze as representative of the classical tradition.³⁹ This museum also does not draw attention to the artist's death, and even frames the discussion of the work to make it seem like the bronze work was made during Boccioni's

³⁶ Boccioni, "Futurist Sculpture," 118

³⁷ "Unique Forms of Continuity in Space," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed December 12, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/485540>; "Unique Forms of Continuity in Space," Museum of Modern Art, accessed December 12, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81179>; "Unique Forms of Continuity in Space," Tate, accessed December 12, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/boccioni-unique-forms-of-continuity-in-space-t01589>; "Forme uniche della continuità nello spazio," Kröller-Müller Museum, accessed December 12, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81179>.

³⁸ The website does state that this work was cast in 1931 but there is no mention of the Boccioni's death in 1916; Museum of Modern Art, "Unique."

³⁹ Kröller-Müller Museum, "Forme."

lifetime, which makes matters even worse since this bronze wasn't even cast from the original.⁴⁰ The Metropolitan, however, states that its bronze re-cast was made from Boccioni's original plaster cast after his death, even if it does not mention Boccioni's distaste for bronze and inaccurately date their bronze cast to 1950 instead of 1949.⁴¹ The Tate Modern also openly recognizes that Boccioni never cast this work in bronze during his lifetime and explains how such a work became cast in bronze and disseminated through their detailed provenance, thus giving an accurate account of the work's Futurist roots as well as its modern reality.⁴² Two of these museums, the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, signed the *Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums* which states that museums are to provide ample context as to the works in their possession, and while the Metropolitan Museum of Art shows that the work was not made during Boccioni's lifetime, neither museum supplies enough information to warrant the display of a copied artwork.⁴³ Only the Tate Modern seemingly has enough information pertaining to the work's history and legacy to ethically display it as a historical object.

The bronze casts of *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* have been able to overshadow the original work, at least in part, due to their display in these museums. Most of these museums do not provide ample context for the work or go out of their way to reference the original work, so it is understandable that original work could go under the radar. The prominence of these bronzes also has to do with the popularity of the museums they are displayed in because the MoMA, Met, and Tate are world-renowned museums, and therefore the works they display gain more attention than a university museum in Brazil (in part due to the ease of access to such

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Unique."

⁴² Tate, "Unique."

⁴³ "Declaration."

museums). The provenance of the original and subsequent copies has also proven to be a bit convoluted and difficult to pin down, making it hard for museums and museum-goers alike to understand the origins of this series of sculptures. It would also stand to reason that even if the works were displayed with perfect provenance and context they would still be viewed as the original sculptures, or at least as more important than the original sculpture, just because their images have proliferated more than the original plaster sculpture. It could also be that the original work is disregarded by the public due to a general understanding that plaster works are not finished products or that they are byproducts of finished artworks. It could even simply be that the bronze casts are more interesting to look at than their plaster progenitor. Most likely the obscurity of the original work is a result of these factors, and probably more that haven't been addressed here. Yet, even though the bronze works maintain a strong presence in the cultural subconscious, they do not accurately convey the ideals of the movement from which they are formally indebted and lack the nuance and ideological reinforcement that Boccioni imbued in his work.

Though the bronze casts of *Unique Forms of Continuity of Space* hold the same form as Boccioni's original plaster sculpture, they fail to live up to their Futurist roots due to their separation from the artist himself, posthumous dissemination through third-parties, and lack of adequate reference to the Futurist ideals of motion, space, and destruction. Boccioni's original sculpture can be seen embodiment of the Futurist ideals of speed, violence, and destructive succession through the association of its formal qualities and the content of its title with important Futurist texts. The bronze copies of this sculpture, however, diminish these meanings through the self-contained materiality of bronze and its mechanical connotations. Though the original artwork is a great representation of many of these layered Futurist ideals it ultimately

fails as a Futurist work because it was not destroyed by its movement and now resides in a museum. Museums treat these art objects as historical objects through their handling of the work and its copies, striving to preserve the sculpture over enacting the wishes of their respective artists. Many museums do not provide enough information in relation to this work in order to display its copies as historical objects, and even displaying these bronze copies at all confuses the context of the original work by overshadowing its very existence. This confusion is in part due to the display of such bronze casts in museums that do not draw adequate attention to the history of their casts and fail to treat their artworks as historical objects. If enough information is provided as to the legacy and modern history of the work, as the Tate Modern does, then copies of the work may be ethically displayed.

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