

*The Vorticists: Rebel Artists in London and
New York, 1918-1918* at Tate Britain,
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Diagonals

Is the diagonal the sign of Vorticism? Was the angled setting of the word BLAST across the journal's cover part of a wider intention to make print agree with paint? Or was it set that way because it would not otherwise fit? Or, again, was it done because Leveridge & Co., the printers of *BLAST*, set their own name diagonally across the four large posters attached to the front of their premises (as a photograph shows)? If we read Lewis's large Vorticist painting *The Crowd* (1914-15) as a diagonal narrative of revolution and revolt, should we see it also as a deliberate rejection of the horizontal calm of Cubism? When Edward Wadsworth, Frederick Etchells, Helen Saunders, and the youthful William Roberts set landscapes and figures at an angle across canvases and paper, should we interpret this as evidence for the Vorticists being a coherent group, a movement that might, by analogy with Cubism, have been called Diagonalism?

To adopt such a term, even hypothetically, would imply that Vorticism was a limited visual enterprise, and clearly it was not. The exhibition that I am reviewing here presented the Vorticists under two different titles, each implying complexity and interpretability. At the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University in North Carolina, and in Venice, at the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, the exhibition (superbly curated by Mark Antliff and Vivien Greene) was entitled *The Vorticists: Rebel Artists in London and New York, 1914-18*, whereas the version shown at Tate Britain was named – without dates – as *The Vorticists: Manifesto for a Modern World*.

The first title is reasonable enough: American and Italian audiences unfamiliar with a short-lived movement in British art require dates, explanations, and a little rebellion. And what better than to mention New York, even though no Vorticist ever worked in the city?

The point is that the Vorticists exhibited there, not very successfully, when the lawyer John Quinn, with Ezra Pound's long-distance help, arranged an exhibition at the Penguin Club in New York City early in 1917. That exhibition, and the Doré Galleries exhibition of June 1915 in London's New Bond Street, are the reference points for this show, which sets out to reconstruct those exhibitions and to show as many surviving works as possible. In addition, there is a reconstruction of a third exhibition, *Vortographs and Paintings by Alvin Langdon Coburn*, held at the Camera Club off the Strand in London, and which opened early in February 1917, just days after the New York exhibition had closed.

To direct an audience's attention forward in time, as the subtitle *Manifesto for a Modern World* does, is to suggest that Vorticism was in some way purposive, conceiving the outline of a future that did not then exist. This is apparently consistent with Lewis's remark that '*We are the first men of a Future that has not materialized*' (BB 256): but that was a much later, and notably pessimistic, interpretation of what had happened to modernism in art and literature by 1937. None of this has anything to do with Italian Futurism. Lewis wrote in the 'Manifesto' of the first *BLAST*, in 1914, that 'an art must be organic with its Time' (B1 34); this phrase both asserts the 'presentism' that is a feature of Vorticist self-description, and is a rare invocation of the organic in accounts of these artists' struggle to conceive, and represent, a visual relationship with a newly-mechanized world. It is a question of making manifest in art what was intrinsic to the new technology. To put it slightly differently, the Vorticists took what was implicit in certain objects in the world and turned them into objects of contemplation. This might have justified a slightly different subtitle: 'Manifesto *of* a Modern World', which, though too puzzling for actual use, would have described the Vorticists' purposes – or the ones that Lewis invented for them. This interpretation ties the Vorticists to their moment, and concedes the historical point so often made, that the First World War put an end to the movement. The importance of the subtitle as it stands is its suggestion that Vorticism has a persistent meaning, and a continuity of impact as an art movement.

Divergence

The impact of the exhibition differed at each of its three locations. From the photographs I have seen, the Vorticists looked particularly comfortable in the contemporary spaces of Rafael Viñoly's block-like 2005 Nasher Museum. Such contemporary modernism as this is the distant offspring of Vorticism's reworking of urban space, or of the modernizing architectural visions of the Caliph in Lewis's *The Caliph's Design*, itself a continuation of Vorticism by other means. By contrast, the low, corridor-like spaces at the Guggenheim Collection did not serve the Vorticists' work nearly so well. My own experience was that there is a constrained, almost underground, feeling to these galleries, where works like Gaudier's *Hieratic Head of Ezra Pound* and Epstein's reconstructed *Rock Drill* were poorly served because they demand space around them, and this was not available. (A number of us with an interest in the exhibition happened to meet there one Sunday morning – the day after we had attended the associated Symposium – and were somewhat surprised to be asked not to talk to each other; so the Guggenheim Collection is unwelcoming as well as cramped.) The Tate's huge rooms were as accessible as ever, and *Rock Drill* was given the space it requires, a dramatic solo act before the collective outburst.

Andrew Lambirth, the art critic of *The Spectator*, has written that '[t]he show was given too much space and ended up being curiously diffuse', and there is a limited truth in that.¹ Limited, because what seems diffuse can be what is not fully grasped: thirteen artists were present here (together with copies of *BLAST*, posters, and printed polemics), and the relationship between the work of each is not always immediately apparent. Indeed, to question any felt sense of diffuseness is to open up an awkward but crucial question: if the overall effect is diffuse, is Vorticism then definable? Was it a various and divergent cultural event lacking a core of meaning? Yet if it was divergent, and the artists were moving together in some real sense, is that not a virtue? Should we not expect the artistic practice of such differing personalities as Epstein, Gaudier, and Wadsworth to diverge rather than converge? Indeed, why should criticism place such a premium on 'unity' and 'coherence' when in this cultural field *difference* is already self-evidently present?

Collectivity

Yet I have already proposed that Vorticism stood in a definable relationship to the technology of its time. If that is true of its interpretation of certain objects (machines), or of city and industrial landscapes, what then of the representations of the human body, of which there are many? Epstein's *Rock Drill* (1913-15) seems to offer an immediate answer, particularly as it was placed at the Tate, guarding the entrance, white figure over black drill, looking dramatically preoccupied in front of a wall painted dark puce. That colour alluded to the cover of *BLAST*, and thus to the community of artists to which Epstein and his sculpture belonged. If the reconstructed figure is confident in its drilling (as it seems to me to be), and is indeed preoccupied by what it is 'doing', can we then argue that it fails in its relationship with the technology of its time because it is not critical of it? The obvious riposte would be to say that it asks us to recognize that man and machine have here become related, or fused, in ways that are detrimental to the sense of being fully human. Yet *Rock Drill* persists, surely, in celebrating man's ability, through technology, to 'do things', to penetrate and command the physical world. Only when Epstein took away the drill and the figure's right forearm and left hand did it come to signify pathos, an object at once expressing and internalizing the loss of life in the First World War. Given an internal life, it becomes now a physical presence that is critique, not celebration, and as a result of that change Epstein moves into the Vorticist community represented by *BLAST* and the exhibitions rebuilt here. That Epstein did not want to sign Lewis's 'Manifesto' is beside the point; he is a (slightly late) Vorticist because he finally created an expressive object that makes a critique of the world into which it has entered.

From this dramatic point onwards, the Tate version of the exhibition becomes a collectivity. The room entitled 'Modern Art in London 1912-1914' was an introduction to several artists in their pre-Vorticist phases: Edward Wadsworth, Helen Saunders, David Bomberg, and others make their entrance here, in a survey that indicates how active London was at this time. The outstanding work was Bomberg's *The Mud Bath* and Lewis's *Timon* portfolio. A particular pleasure of this room was the photographs of the Vorticists together, notably one at the Rebel Art Centre showing Lewis on a stepladder, with what may be a *Timon* drawing on the wall, and his colleagues, with their neat haircuts,

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sitting listening. The next room dealt with the first number of *BLAST*, the sole creation of Wyndham Lewis, but not an instance of self-promotion: seven artists as well as Lewis himself appeared in it, including William Roberts, aged nineteen at the time of its publication. Then comes the first reconstructed exhibition, the one held at the Doré Galleries in June 1915. This was followed by an exceptionally interesting room devoted to *BLAST* 2, the 'War Number' of 1915. The 'Camera Club' reconstruction of Vortographs follows (February 1917), and segues into the Penguin Club exhibition of January – February 1917.

The importance of this exhibition was to restore to public awareness one of the rare occasions when British artists successfully entered the European avant-garde. It was evidently a popular event, and it was fascinating to see visitors working their way through the copies of *BLAST* that had been made available. There were some sympathetic reviews, and some that were not (these are discussed below; the reviews in Italy, incidentally, were more numerous, and less excitable, than those published in London). There is some irony in the fact that the exhibition should have originated in the United States and visited Venice before it reached London, where Lewis once wrote the words: 'Long live the great art vortex sprung up in the centre of this town!' (*B1* [7]). The three reconstructed exhibitions did not dominate one's view of *The Vorticists*. Only Coburn's Vortographs made a firmly structured experience, and this for the simple reason that the photographs had survived as a group of works, unlike the art, from which so much is now missing. Indeed, the visitor had to do a certain amount of mental reconstruction as he or she went around. Vorticism never was one thing, and it was more rewarding to treat this exhibition as a variety of related events and incidents, rather than a structured experience. Groups of Gaudier's sculptures, appropriately merging with the *BLAST* war number; the photographs, and the many fascinating documents of advertisement, controversy, and celebration: all these contributed to an overall effect of busy achievement in which it was possible to reconstruct the way in which great works emerge from, and live among, lesser ones.

Imperfect Verticals

In practice, far more material was presented in this exhibition than the historical reconstruction of three exhibitions, and this was necessary for

one overwhelming reason: many works are lost, and to a surprising extent; in 1974, Richard Cork calculated that ‘incredible as it may seem, thirty-eight out of the forty-nine works displayed by the full members of the movement at the 1915 [Doré Galleries] *Vorticist Exhibition* are now missing’.² There may have been a few discoveries since, but that remains the essential situation. It is compounded by the unwillingness of Bomberg to be part of – or named as part of – the Vorticist group, although he exhibited three paintings and three drawings at the Doré, more than any others among ‘those invited to show’.³ The outcome in his case (loss and unwillingness taken together) is that there are only three works by him in this exhibition, one of which was shown only at Nasher. This is disproportionately few, and distorts his contribution to the art of his time, whether it is considered Vorticist or part of the wider activity in London. On the other hand, one of the two seen at Tate is the masterly *The Mud Bath* (1914), a major painting, whilst the other is an intriguing small pencil and watercolour design, *Abstract Composition* of c.1914. (The third work is a double-sided ‘Study for *The Mud Bath*’.) The difficulties caused for this project by the sheer number of lost works applies as much to Lewis (who was careless about preservation, and also painted over several Vorticist works) and to Wadsworth (who destroyed his own woodblocks), as to Helen Saunders or a lesser figure such as Frederick Etchells. The presence of other aspects of art production was as necessary on this occasion as it was when Cork conceived the ground-breaking *Vorticism and its Allies* exhibition in 1974.

What happens if we apply the *diagonal* test, with which I opened this discussion, to Bomberg’s *The Mud Bath*, or to Lewis’s *The Crowd*, or to work by Roberts and others? Richard Cork provides a useful context when he differentiates Lewis’s lost *Kermesse* (c.1912; a sketch survives) from Bomberg’s *A Vision of Ezekiel* (1912) by saying that the latter ‘lacks the caustic and eruptive quality which Lewis’s art always possesses, offering instead a more stable and imposing vision’.⁴ We can transfer this remark to *The Mud Bath* and ask if it has these qualities, whilst asking what its relationship to Vorticism might be. There are four layers to the work: the oatmeal colour of the bath surround, the red rectangle of the bath itself, the jagged and disruptive blue-and-white designation of human limbs, and a dark brown beam or pillar which projects, from a point near the base of the picture across to the top, an imperfect vertical. Indeed, the work is replete with imperfect verticals, or diagonals. The bath is set at an angle across the canvas, giving strong

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diagonals at the lower left margin and across both top and bottom. The limbs are jumbled and mixed, with not a single unambiguous horizontal or vertical. The vigour that is attributed to these limbs is surely close to Cork's 'eruptive' quality. To the eye, the work is permanently unsettling, permitting no resting place, except perhaps across the entire canvas. *The Mud Bath* would have been impossible without Cubism or Futurism, and indeed Expressionism, but it resembles none of these. Yet it is not *sui generis*; its London art context is unmistakable, and its affinity with Vorticism undeniable. (It is also a scene from urban London, based on Schevzik's Steam Baths in London's Brick Lane, and not a 'mud bath' at all.) Richard Cork draws attention to a possible source, or predecessor design, the oil sketch *Bathing Scene* of 1912-13, which already has a number of diagonals, one of them 'a brandished club'.⁵ If that design – almost X-shaped – determined the diagonality of *The Mud Bath* then it was made too early to have anything to do with Vorticism as it later developed, or with the practice of Wyndham Lewis, who brought Bomberg into the orbit of Vorticism, recognizing early his abilities.

Revolutionary Crowd

The difficulties caused by the loss of Vorticist work was particularly apparent in the Doré Galleries reconstruction. Works by C. R. W. Nevinson, Bomberg, Duncan Grant, and Lawrence Atkinson were hung together, but in a speculative way. Nevinson's *Bursting Shell* (1915) was not among the three paintings he showed at the Doré, but this made a suitable substitute with the correct date. The Bomberg shown was *Abstract Composition* (c.1914), although (according to the wall notes adjacent to the work) 'it is not known which works Bomberg submitted' in response to the invitation to exhibit, because the Doré catalogue included the no doubt deliberately unhelpful titles 'Decorative Experiment' and 'Design in Colour'. The Grant shown – a collage which is not in the catalogue – was chosen on the grounds that Grant 'is known to have shown a number of reliefs which contained pieces of wood' of this kind, and which 'might have resembled the rectilinear patterns of his paintings and collages of that period'. The Atkinson is the *Abstract* dated c.1915-1920, showing three sloping panels reaching upwards, two of which may be the heads of figures. Given the

circumstances, one can only congratulate the curators on their knowledge and ingenuity in confronting this problem.

If these were minor works, Lewis's *The Crowd* is not. The wall note to this read, in part: 'In this vision of an abstracted metropolis tiny interlinked figures subsumed by vertical buildings contrast with larger individuals at the bottom who may be closing a door against the insurgent mass. A political subtext of opposing factions is reinforced by the red and tricolour flags brandished by the crowds.' This may underestimate the diagonal movement of the crowds, upwards and across the canvas from left to right. The figures at the bottom left, certainly French but otherwise difficult to identify, may indeed be closing a large door, but not *against* the crowds, who are heading away from them, upwards and to the right. Some of the beret-wearing Frenchmen are standing around with a relaxed air, which does not suggest that a confrontation is taking place. *The Crowd* has two structures: the powerful verticals and horizontals that signify the city, but without representing it; and the overall diagonal movement of the crowd towards the top right, where it attacks treadmills, represented by huge red wheels with human figures constrained within them. The red flags they carry – one is near the centre of the picture – are surely significant, not least because Lewis does not seem to be satirizing the figures carrying them. The wall note reads: 'The outbreak of war in 1914 led Lewis to consider the power of political ideas to form and manipulate crowds. In the war number of *BLAST* he wrote "THE CROWD is the first mobilization of a country" (B2 [94])'. The first part of that I can agree with, but this is a revolutionary crowd, not a mobilizing or wartime one, as in 'The Crowd Master', which is being quoted here. This picture is difficult to interpret, but there is agreement that it is about the power of ideas to affect political and public behaviour. Paul Edwards believes it is pessimistic, but not excessively so.⁶ He also points out that the 'predominantly diagonal emphases' so prevalent in the Vorticist drawings are diminished in *The Crowd*.⁷ Diagonals do define the revolutionary crowd, however, and they take significance from that, in that they are attempting to escape both the physical constraints of the city, and the mental constraints of the dominant ideas that prevent them acting in their own interests.

Contemplative

Do we then have a two-tier Vorticism, one with central figures – Jessica Dismorr, Etchells, Gaudier-Brzeska, Roberts, Helen Saunders, Wadsworth and Lewis, to list them as they appeared as ‘The Vorticist Group’ in the Doré Galleries catalogue – with Bomberg and Epstein as adjuncts, and the artist Lawrence Atkinson, the photographer and artist Malcolm Arbuthnot, and the painter Cuthbert Hamilton. Yet the three last are signatories to the *BLAST* ‘Manifesto’! It becomes clear that neither being a signatory there, nor being a participant at the Doré Galleries, is sufficient to define an artist as a Vorticist. What then should be done by way of definition?

We can explore Wyndham Lewis’s contribution. It was Lewis who sought out Bomberg at his home, and on their first meeting discussed art with him until dawn.⁸ It was Lewis who identified William Roberts as likely to be a significant painter. The lack of generosity in their later view of Lewis has obscured the crucial rôle that Lewis played in establishing them as significant artists when they were very young. It is because Lewis was – or, more accurately, is thought to have been – ‘difficult’ that their versions of events have been taken far more seriously than they deserve. This process has been documented by Dominika Buchowska, and it is evident from her account that Bomberg and Roberts were themselves difficult individuals.⁹ The crucial moment for both was the exhibition of Lewis’s work held at the Tate Gallery (as it then was) in 1956. Entitled *Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism*, it opened in July, nine months before Lewis’s death. The exhibition’s organizers decided, unfortunately, to add a section to the exhibition entitled ‘Other Vorticists’, and this caused offence to Bomberg and Roberts. The latter responded by publishing a series of pamphlets directed against Lewis and the Tate. A moment’s consideration would have led him to realize that Lewis himself could not have been responsible for this organizational decision; but he persisted in causing distress to Lewis, who was already very ill. A pamphlet entitled *A Press View at the Tate Gallery* begins: ‘Wyndham Lewis, aided by Sir John Rothenstein, The Arts Council, and some Partners, Buddies and Pals of the Press, is making a bid to establish himself as the sole originator of abstract painting in England’.¹⁰ This was wholly untrue. Lewis was not involved in the process at all. The remainder of this pamphlet consists of a detailed account of Roberts’s own life and works, a list of articles

published by *The New Age* in 1913 and 1914 showing – what was indisputable – that other artists than Lewis were active in establishing ‘abstract art’ in London in those years, and stories intended to discredit Lewis.

Roberts describes himself and other painters of the time as ‘the English Cubists’;¹¹ these were Epstein, Wadsworth, Nevinson, Bomberg, Roberts, and Gaudier-Brzeska, according to a list on the back cover of the pamphlet that is dedicated to T. E. Hulme. *A Press View*, and the other two pamphlets, are obsessive and mildly paranoid. *The Resurrection of Vorticism and the Apotheosis of Wyndham Lewis at the Tate* reprints letters that Roberts sent to, respectively, *The Listener*, *The Times*, and *The New Statesman*, none of which was published, their self-serving eccentricity all too obvious. In two of them he says that he did not respond to an invitation to participate because the request had not come from Lewis himself; this is a ridiculous condition to set. In a more moderately-expressed obituary notice Roberts says that ‘it is not the blind and aged artist that I picture, for that figure I never knew’; this confirms that he knew of Lewis’s condition at the time he wrote the cruelly insensitive Vortex pamphlets.¹²

Bomberg, meanwhile, was writing but not publishing. In April 1956 he wrote a set of notes, now in the Tate archive, from which Buchowska quotes:

I was never a Vorticist on the contrary on every occasion I repudiated it. T.E. HULME JUNE 9th 1914 NEW AGE BRINGS THIS OUT CLEARLY. I HAVE ALWAYS KEPT MYSELF at arms length from Lewis whenever he made his late insatiated [*sic*] visits to my studio to see what I was doing he was not welcome.¹³

Yet Lewis had been most welcome on his first midnight visit to Bomberg’s home: ‘[W]e had talked ourselves silly when he left – dawn, the next morning. I recognized in the conversation, a Slade man honouring the same pledge to which I was staking my life – namely a Partizan’.¹⁴ There is something personally troubled and yet opportunistic about the way in which Roberts (the instigator), and Bomberg, turn upon Lewis. Intellectually, both justify their position by invoking T. E. Hulme as the alternative to the Lewis of *BLAST*, and this is scarcely surprising, since Hulme supported them both. So it is that in *A Press*

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View at the Tate Gallery, Roberts quotes Hulme as writing in *The New Age* that Bomberg had ‘very wisely’ distanced himself from Lewis’s Rebel Art Centre, and that he ‘stands somewhat apart from the other English Cubists’.¹⁵ So Hulme provided the authority for their self-description as ‘English Cubists’, despite their work having no resemblance whatever to the Cubism of Picasso and Braque.

The importance of this controversy lies in its relationship to Lewis’s notorious remark in the ‘Introduction’ to the *Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism* catalogue that ‘Vorticism, in fact, was what I, personally, did, and said, at a certain period’.¹⁶ This remark is still capable of generating a certain amount of heat, and it was quoted frequently during the *Repositioning Vorticism* symposium attached to the opening of *The Vorticists* in June 2011. It is usually understood as evidence for Lewis’s overbearing arrogance, and as an attempt to wrench the movement away from the other participants. But does one ‘do’ or ‘say’ a painting or drawing? Lewis surely means that what he *did* was organization, notably setting up the Rebel Art Centre, editing *BLAST*, and arranging the Doré Galleries exhibition; whilst what he *said* was spoken to newspapers to get publicity, and was written in *BLAST* and elsewhere on behalf of the art he was promoting.

This is separately confirmed by an article Lewis wrote for *Vogue* shortly after the Tate exhibition closed: ‘I expended a good deal of energy in order to create the impression that a multitude existed where there was in fact not much more than a very vigorous One’ (*WLA* 457); and if that seems to assert his primacy, he goes on to give his own list of Vorticists. Helen Saunders and Jessica Dismorr are named first, followed by Wadsworth, Etchells, Hamilton, Roberts, and Gaudier-Brzeska: this is the core group as Lewis saw it. The very existence of this list contradicts any suggestion that Lewis believed that he alone constituted ‘Vorticism’. Lewis does refer to himself as ‘a very vigorous One’, but this is a point about publicity, not art. It is the same point, in different words, that he makes in the *Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism* exhibition catalogue: that he was engaged in organization – ‘what I, personally, did, and said’ – and that the theory and practice of Vorticist art followed behind that. This seems to me obvious, but I am not optimistic that other critics will prefer this point of view to the pleasures of denouncing Lewis for his supposed arrogance.

To return to the 1956 catalogue introduction. It is only in his next sentence that Lewis begins to talk about art: ‘This may be expanded into

a certain theory regarding visual art'.¹⁷ To identify this theory we can look at Lewis's primary theoretical statements of 1914-15, such as the note for the Doré catalogue, or the brilliant and undervalued essay 'A Review of Contemporary Art' in *BLAST* 2. We find, in the latter, a trenchant and effective critique of Picasso for his limiting attachment to still life, his dehumanization of the object, his tasteful arrangement of wallpaper and newspaper shapes in synthetic Cubism, and above all the *inactivity* of his work, its essential lack of energy: 'Picasso's structures are not ENERGETIC ones, in the sense that they are very static dwelling houses. A machine is in a greater or less degree, a living thing. Its lines and masses imply force and action, whereas those of a dwelling do not' (*WLA* 70). This does not mean that Lewis was committed to the values of the machine, as so many critics have assumed; on the contrary, 'the construction of a man' requires 'the suggestions of life and displacement that you get in a machine' (*WLA* 71), but making the image of man (or woman) has primacy. This is equally the case in a crucial passage from the Doré Galleries catalogue, which is related:

By Vorticism we mean (a) *Activity* as opposed to the tasteful *Passivity* of Picasso; (b) SIGNIFICANCE as opposed to the dull or anecdotal character to which the Naturalist is condemned; (c) ESSENTIAL MOVEMENT and ACTIVITY (such as the energy of a mind) as opposed to the imitative cinematography, the fuss and hysterics of the Futurists. (*WLA* 96)

This passage, significantly, was printed in the 1956 Tate catalogue at the head of the list of works exhibited by the 'Other Vorticists', and it could not have been more appropriately used.

We can ask if the work of the Vorticists resembles Cubism, and the answer is that it does not. Does it resemble Futurism? It does not, though derivations are evident. Is it committed to still life? There is hardly one to be seen. Were the Vorticists committed to life outside the artist's studio? Yes, they were – and consistently so. Is there a sense of essential movement in most Vorticist work? That is undeniable. And is there not, in the best Vorticist work, the sense of an energy of mind, whether in Epstein's *Rock Drill*, Saunders's *Island of Laputa* (1915), Bomberg's *The Mud Bath*, and even Roberts's awkward *Study for the lost painting 'Two Step'* (1915)? In other words, Lewis's contemporaneous accounts of Vorticism accurately describe the work being done by the

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core group of artists who were in *BLAST* or who showed at the Doré Galleries. At the same time, it must be apparent that nobody *told* these artists to work in these ways, and that they were most certainly not directed by Wyndham Lewis. Roberts was right to object to John Rothenstein's proposition in the Catalogue that the 'Other Vorticists' were present as 'an indication of the effect of his immediate impact upon his contemporaries'.¹⁸ He rightly says of *The Mud Bath* (which he calls a 'Cubist' composition) that 'There is as little indication here of a Lewis "Impact" as there is a Gauguin impact upon Renoir'.¹⁹ The only artist among the *BLAST* signatories to undergo 'a conversion experience at the Rebel Art Centre in 1914' was Lawrence Atkinson, who had two works in this exhibition, both of them significantly angled.²⁰ He was previously a Fauvist, and his conversion experience meant that what had to be learned was a control of diagonals.

Beyond the diagonal, as it were, lies a further shared characteristic of Vorticist art: its tendency towards detachment, and the consequent contemplative ambience that this encourages. The objects that Vorticism considered tended to be public or semi-public: Lewis's *The Crowd* (1914-15) depicts urban revolt; Wadsworth's woodcuts *Cleckbeaton* and *Rotterdam* (both 1914) are severe abstractions of urban structures; Gaudier's *Hieratic Head of Ezra Pound* (1914) is public sculpture; Etchells's *Progression* (1914-16) resembles architecture on the move; Helen Saunders's *The Rock Driller* (c.1913; not in exhibition) is doubly public in being a satire upon Epstein's *Rock Drill*, itself egregiously demanding of space; the shapes in Jessica Dismorr's *Abstract Composition* (c.1914-15) could be moving through (outer) space; *The Mud Bath* is about community life lived in public. When the Vorticists turn to the human form, it is dancers they choose to represent: Roberts's *Two Step* sketch, Bomberg's *The Dancer* of 1913-14, Lewis's *Composition* of 1913. Even the relatively scarce single figures seem to be living out in the world, as are Saunders's *Vorticist Composition with Figure in Blue and Yellow* (c.1915), or Lewis's various *Timon* figures.²¹ All these characteristics confirm the Vorticists' distance from Cubist still-life, Futurist involvement, or Expressionist transcendence.

There is a further aspect to distancing or detachment. In an article published in 1982, Michael Durman and I argued that the sense of detachment was present in Lewis's work from very early in his career. In 1908, as an immature 26-year old he travelled in Brittany with his mother and her companion, and observed the summer fêtes or

Kermesse, with its conspicuous dancing, eating, and drinking, but necessarily at a distance: for how could he engage with the celebrants? ‘To stand back in detachment was the only choice open to this self-conscious representative of the intelligence’, we wrote. Lewis dealt with this problem ‘in his drawing and in his fiction by expressing the relationship itself.’²² This led to the rural scenes, drawn in emphatic blues and off-whites of *Kermesse* and *The Dancers* (both 1912); in the former the wild dancing (‘the sense of sexual abandon is menacing’) is watched by a thrilled observer who resembles Lewis.²³ These dancers lead directly to the Vorticist *Composition* of 1913, which, as Paul Edwards says, ‘depicts a dancing couple (the male more abstracted, robotic and threatening than the female in *apache* dance posture beneath him)’.²⁴ Durman and I foregrounded Lewis’s striking claim that the Vorticists conceived their ‘mission’ as being to create work ‘electric with a more mastered, vivid vitality’ (*WLA* 59), and we argued that Lewis was a dominant figure whose own preoccupations – detachment, and the contemplation of the represented object that followed upon this – became features of almost all Vorticist work.

Today, I would wish to be more cautious about making this claim for Lewis’s dominance, not least because there has been a revaluation of the relative significance of the ‘other Vorticists’, particularly the women artists. At the same time I am at a loss to explain the apparent convergence among Vorticist artists on matters of content (public or semi-public, and far more varied than anything being done in Europe, and with no still lifes), and the characteristic tendency towards detachment and contemplativeness, which is widely shared amongst them. This cannot have been ‘taught’ or imposed by Lewis, though his example must have contributed to its occurrence (though not for each and every artist). One hardly wants to fall back on semi-mystical accounts of the ‘intuitive’ sharing of ‘life’ and ‘art’; it is better to stop short of that, and limit one’s commentary to recognizing that a rewarding mode of reception for many Vorticist artworks is to treat them as opportunities for contemplative reflection. My own experience was slightly unexpected: I found myself intuitively engaged by Dorothy Shakespear’s *Composition in Blue and Black* (1914-15), a small work that was used as part of the publicity for *The Vorticists*, and whose tantalizing structure – an impossibly ‘heavy’ and complex design suspended by a thread from an upright pillar – provokes both unease and a compensatory pleasure that does not diminish with continued looking.

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The same mode of reading can be applied to more obviously significant works, such as *The Mud Bath* or Lewis's *The Crowd*.

'Ultra-leftist'

The Vorticists attracted some intelligent and informed reviews. Laura Cumming has written well about the art of this period, and about Lewis specifically, for a number of years, and her review in *The Observer* was perceptive and lively. She recognizes that 'Epstein was never a paid-up vorticist', and hints that *Rock Drill's* presence at the beginning of the exhibition is slightly misleading. As to Lewis, she traces a line from *Timon of Athens* (1912) through to *Workshop* and *The Crowd*, and identifies the two last as 'masterpieces' alongside *The Mud Bath* and the *Hieratic Head*. The requirements of weekly art journalism are such that the kind of full understanding Cumming possesses has to be half-disguised by extravagant comparisons: the grids of *The Crowd* resemble pinball machines, whilst *Workshop* 'conjures pop art half a century in advance'.²⁵ As to modes of reading, she urged visitors to 'try to remain indifferent' to the Cubism and Futurism everywhere apparent. *Architect with Green Tie* (1909) is unexpectedly and accurately praised, as is Wadsworth's *Newcastle*. Laura Cummings's only slip is to refer to 'this machine-loving movement' (which it was not).

Adrian Hamilton, writing in *The Independent*, accepted the internationalist premises of the exhibition: the Vorticists were important in British terms but 'also served as a significant bridge between the avant-garde movements of Paris and Europe and the US'.²⁶ In addition, 'their aims were truly radical and their achievements considerable in their brief period of vitality'. Hamilton picks out Lewis's *Timon* prints ('breathtaking'), and has particular praise for Gaudier's *Red Stone Dancer* (c.1913). *Workshop* is (again) 'a masterpiece' and 'a brilliant play of squared lines and soft colours that shows, behind all the egotism, what a powerful and innovative artist he [Lewis] was'. Art journalism does still insouciantly merge personality with artworks, as here; but these remarks valuably maintain an emerging consensus.

The comprehensive negativity of Jackie Wullschlager, the art critic of *The Financial Times*, approaches the breathtaking (in another sense), though the excesses of her review are such that even partly-informed readers would have smelled a rat. The exhibition is a 'disappointing

confusion', 'parochial and uneven', Vorticist theories were 'wholly derived from Paris and Milan', and the Tate (patronizingly) 'ought to do better'.²⁷ Depths of absurdity are reached when the critic asks: 'Was it a visual movement at all?' Accurate quotation is beyond her: 'Lewis's boast that "Vorticism was what I, personally, said and did" is only too true: his movement was little more than a self-promotional gimmick'. She refers to 'monochrome' compositions by Lewis that are 'formulaic and dated'; if this means the *Timon* portfolio, the remark shows a comprehensive failure of judgement. Wullschlager is the only one among the newspaper reviewers to dismiss the women Vorticists' work: 'The inclusion of too many post-Cubist abstract repetitions by Helen Saunders, Jessica Dismorr and Dorothy Shakespear – all lacking energy, flair or individuality – is lamentable: if this is an attempt to rehabilitate women artists, the attempt backfires.' This is a criticism directed at curatorial decisions: worthless work should have been excluded, whatever the cost to the public understanding of the movement as one that was unusual in having women members. Not only are Saunders, Dismorr, and Shakespear readily distinguishable from each other, the discovery by Mark Antliff of two overlooked (effectively, missing) works by Saunders was clearly to the advantage of the exhibition and to our understanding of her work. If these artists lack energy, one wonders what would satisfy Wullschlager: a bench on fire, as in the current British Art Show? A grenade attack? Criticism such as this is reactionary and regressive, and often comes close to the kind of abuse suffered by the Vorticists themselves at the hands of the art critics of their time.²⁸

Academic critics are not exempt from making unsustainable claims, however. An example is the remark in Alex Houen's *Terrorism and Modern Literature*, where he writes that 'Lewis moves from rhetorically aligning Vorticism with terroristic violence to presenting a "strike" that is essentially literary'.²⁹ Such a remark – published in 2002 – perhaps means the end of a phase in criticism when it was still possible to say anything about Lewis, however strange, and not expect to be asked for an evidence-based justification. More significant is a recent commentary by Terry Eagleton, which has to be repudiated precisely because of his authority within criticism.

Eagleton's review in *The Times Literary Supplement* of Alex Danchev's accessible Penguin edition of twentieth-century artists' manifestos appeared under the title 'Fast forward', with the sub-heading 'Future fetishists and artists who don't paint: how the revolutionary aims

of the avant-garde led to the “sick joke” of postmodernism’.³⁰ These words mark the endorsement by a conservative literary journal of the Marxist Eagleton’s obsessive dislike of postmodernism. The assumption is that all modernist roads lead to postmodernism. Part way through, Eagleton writes: ‘Some manifestos, as Danchev notes, came to resemble modernist poems, full of typographical high-jinks and obscenity-sprinkled obscurantism. “Tragic humour is the birthmark of the North”, Wyndham Lewis wrote, meaninglessly, in a manifesto in his journal *Blast*.’³¹ It’s difficult not to laugh at Eagleton’s blunder: Lewis wrote ‘birthright’, not ‘birthmark’. The double Freudian slip exposes Eagleton as desiring to mark, or stain, Lewis’s thought, and at the same time as altering his text so that it indeed becomes meaningless. Elsewhere in the review he refers contemptuously to a ‘Deleuze-like cult of desire’; perhaps he should look to his own, so cruelly exposed here. (If he has carried over a misprint from Danchev’s book, he has nevertheless assumed incoherence on Lewis’s part, and hasn’t checked the original.)

Lewis’s point about the art and culture of the North (if this is Eagleton’s problem) is readily understood by anyone who has read *BLAST* with attention; it was a way of differentiating the movement from Futurism, on the basis of an idea about northern Gothic already present in the art theorists Alois Riegl and Wilhelm Worringer, and which was familiar to T. E. Hulme.³² For Eagleton, this is ‘ultra-leftism’, a baffling assertion until you examine his own politics. Immediately after ‘quoting’ Lewis he writes: ‘Ridiculing all this ultra-leftism, however, is as risky as it is easy’, a risk he is prepared to take, and at length. He eventually reaches the obvious conclusion that these manifestoes are written in a spirit of self-parody, and are ‘performances rather than propositions’.³³ Who could be surprised at this? Elsewhere, modernist manifestoes ‘involved an assault on the idea of men and women as autonomous individuals with rich interior lives’. Instead, ‘Proustian interiority was to be ripped apart by an art that was externalizing, mechanistic and deconstructive’.³⁴ We have met these terms before in relation to Vorticism, and Eagleton is conventional in refusing to allow any sense of interiority or critique to the new art; all that is absorbed by Proust. He is conventional too in his language of ‘assault’ and ‘ripp[ing]’, and again when he writes that the manifesto writers were ‘waging an unpleasantly macho campaign against moralism, realism and Romanticism’.

There is an alternative, a ‘more positive strand of avant-garde revolt’ that has ‘complex relations to Bolshevism, Trotskyism and [...] Fascism’, but this line is not developed at all; the author prefers ever more elaborate denunciations of Dadaists, evidently a particular *bête noire*. We know from his autobiography that Eagleton was once a Trotskyist, and his Wikipedia entry specifies membership of the International Socialists and the Workers’ Socialist League (neither of which now exists). He has always had a sympathetic interest in Trotskyism’s political and cultural possibilities, as recent reviews in *The London Review of Books* indicate. The immediate reference here is probably to André Breton, who was Trotskyist in the late 1930s. Eagleton’s other allegiance is to the Roman Catholic Church, and this may account for his objection to the modernists’ campaign against ‘moralism’. Both Trotskyism and institutional Catholicism are authoritarian systems, the former making a claim to be the vanguard party that will lead the working class towards revolutionary change. For Trotskyists, ‘ultra-leftism’ is anathema; the term originates with Lenin’s *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder* (1920), which denounces those communists who refuse to work with non-revolutionary organizations, such as bourgeois trades unions, or parliament. Objections extend to those who lack (Bolshevik) political discipline, or who believe in spontaneity in political organization, and an absence of hierarchical organization that brings them close to anarchism. ‘Ultra-leftism’ also means a tendency to ignore the specifics of a political situation in favour of vigorous self-generated action.

This means that Eagleton’s description of Lewis and *BLAST* as ‘ultra-leftist’ is a political insult that can only be made (today) from a Trotskyist position. It has nothing to do with the question of whether there is any left-wing content, as usually understood, in Lewis’s writing. It is precisely the extravagance of *BLAST*, its ignoring of the ordinary culture of its time in favour of a spectacular avant-garde intervention, to which Eagleton objects. Vorticism (and every other similar movement) lacked discipline, and that is a libertarian fault, intolerable to an authoritarian Marxist-Leninist.

It is far from clear what Eagleton knows about Vorticism – not a great deal, judging by his ‘birthmark’ mistake – but where anarchism is concerned, he speaks more truly than he knows. Anarchism was a theory that consistently appealed to Lewis. He met anarchists in Spain during his visit there in 1909, and in the 1920s he read extensively in the

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work of the French anarchist theorist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, and he returned to Proudhon after the right-wing drift of the 1930s. In the *BLAST* period, Lewis is associated with anarchists. As Mark Antliff shows in one of the outstanding essays in *The Vorticists*, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska was a committed anarchist, and Evelyn Silber pointed to the libertarian tendencies in Jacob Epstein's understanding of Walt Whitman in her paper for the Tate symposium associated with the exhibition. Taken together, the Vorticists were a loose grouping of artists and writers who intended a project of personal liberation and imaginative freedom; their art attempted to embody that, and often succeeded. As a group, they worked both with each other, and at a distance from each other, and sometimes in conflict with each other. For a brief moment between 1913 and 1915 it worked, and that constituted the Vorticist moment. The Vorticists made up a decentered collective enterprise. With all its contradictions and convergences, its divergent practices and its brief coherence, the Vorticists functioned, finally, as an anarchist collective.

Notes

¹ Andrew Lambirth, *A Critic's Choice[?]* 1900-1950, exh. cat. (London: Browse & Darby, 2011), unpaginated.

² Richard Cork, 'Introduction', *Vorticism and its Allies*, exh. cat. (London: Arts Council of Great Britain / Hayward Gallery, 1974), 26, n. 1.

³ Anna Gruetzner Robins, "'Reforming with a pick-axe": The First Vorticist Exhibition at the Doré Galleries in 1915', in Mark Antliff and Vivien Greene (eds), *The Vorticists: Rebel Artists in London and New York, 1914-1918* (London: Tate Publishing, 2010): 59-65, 61.

⁴ Richard Cork, *David Bomberg* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 43.

⁵ Richard Cork, *Vorticism and Abstract Art in the First Machine Age, Volume 1: Origins and Development* (London: Gordon Fraser, 1976), 204.

⁶ Paul Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer* (New Haven CT and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 134.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁸ Bomberg's account is quoted in Dominika Buchowska, 'Vorticism Denied: Wyndham Lewis and the English Cubists' in Andrzej Gąsiorek, Alice Reeve-Tucker, and Nathan Waddell (eds), *Wyndham Lewis and the*

Cultures of Modernity (Farnham, Surrey and Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2011): 37-55, 38-39. For Roberts's accounts, see *ibid.*, 39-41.

⁹ See Buchowska, 'Vorticism Denied'.

¹⁰ William Roberts, *A Press View at the Tate Gallery* ([London]: [William Roberts], 1956), [2].

¹¹ *Ibid.*, [9].

¹² William Roberts, 'Wyndham Lewis, the Vorticist', *The Listener* (21 March 1957): 470. Lewis died on 7 March.

¹³ Buchowska, 'Vorticism Denied', 52.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁵ Roberts, *A Press View at the Tate Gallery*, [9].

¹⁶ Wyndham Lewis, 'Introduction', *Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism*, exh. cat. (London: Tate Gallery, 1956), 3. See also *WLA* 451.

¹⁷ Lewis, 'Introduction', *Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism*, 3.

¹⁸ John Rothenstein, 'Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism', in *Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism*: 5-7, 5.

¹⁹ William Roberts, *Cometism and Vorticism: A Tate Gallery Catalogue Revised* ([London]: [William Roberts], 1956), [6].

²⁰ Richard Warren, 'Lawrence Atkinson – Vorticist After Vorticism' at <<http://richardawarren.wordpress.com/about/>>. Accessed 31 October 2011.

²¹ The works mentioned here are accessible and well-reproduced in Paul Edwards (ed.), *BLAST: Vorticism 1914-1918* (Aldershot and Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2000), 72ff.

²² Michael Durman and Alan Munton, 'Wyndham Lewis and the Nature of Vorticism', in Giovanni Cianci (ed.), *Wyndham Lewis: Letteratura / Pittura* (Palermo: Sellerio editore, 1982): 101-18, 105.

²³ Lisa Tickner, *Modern Life & Modern Subjects: British Art in the Early Twentieth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 104.

²⁴ Paul Edwards, 'Wyndham Lewis's Vorticism: A Strange Synthesis', in Antliff and Greene (eds), *The Vorticists*: 35-45, 43.

²⁵ Laura Cumming, 'Ghosts from the worshipful age', *The Observer*, *The New Review* section (19 June 2011): 32-33.

²⁶ Adrian Hamilton, 'Back to the futurist', *The Independent*, *Viewspaper* section (13 June 2011): 18-19, 18.

²⁷ Jackie Wullschlager, 'Blast from the past', *Financial Times*, *Life and Arts* section (18-19 June 2011): 14.

²⁸ If Wullschlager is perverse and unobservant, the critic of *The Times*, Rachel Campbell-Johnston, is merely depressing in her refusal to find the

show's argument 'convincing': no reasons are given for this view. This critic also engages in fiction-making, apparently inventing a story about the photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn which claims that Lewis, 'despite his professed ardour for all things mechanical, expelled their maker from his group for using a camera'. See Rachel Campbell-Johnston, "'The Vorticist revolution is a failed flash in the pan'", *The Times*, Section 2 (14 June 2011): 10-11, 11. Can a flash of gold 'fail'? A further review is Alastair Sooke, 'Vorticism, the one-man show', *The Daily Telegraph* (14 June 2011): 23.

²⁹ Alex Houen, *Terrorism and Modern Literature, from Joseph Conrad to Ciaran Carson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 107. Houen also writes: 'Considering the prevalence of Syndicalist violence in Britain, the affiliation of Lewis's separatism is clear' (106).

³⁰ Terry Eagleton, 'Fast forward', *The Times Literary Supplement* 5634 (25 March 2011): 3-4.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

³² See Otto Rank, *Art and Art: Creative Urge and Personality Development*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1989), 5, 11. First published in German, and first translated, in 1932.

³³ Eagleton, 'Fast forward', 4.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.