Vorticist Antecedents

Philip Head

The Wyndham Lewis Society
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The comment of Don Marquis, in 1917, that 'Vorticism is the result when Cubism and Futurism rush into a vacuum from opposite sides, meeting in the centre' represents conventional wisdom in its depiction of Vorticism as a fortuitous amalgamation of those two continental antecedents. As part of the European avant-garde's push towards a 'new art' for the 20th century, Cubism and Futurism did each contribute by example and purpose to the evolution of Vorticism, but did so to less decisive and less cogent effect than the forces behind the third major contributor to the 'new art', Expressionism. Why this was so, how it came about, and why (in general) it has been neglected in most modern art history, is the subject matter of what follows.

The Vorticist group evolved in London in 1913-14; its presence became publicly apparent in mid-1914 with the first publication of Blast, edited by Wyndham Lewis. Vorticism then advertised itself as 'the English Parallel Movement to Cubism and Expressionism', offering a 'Death Blow to Impressionism and Futurism'. Thus, where the initial Vorticist propaganda consciously drew on continental forerunners, they were not of intention Cubo-Futurist but Cubo-Expressionist.

But Expressionism had been primarily a German-inspired development in the arts over the preceding decade, and the outbreak of war with Germany shortly after the publication of Blast made the aesthetic affinities of Vorticism with Expressionism something the Vorticists had prudently to sideline in further publicising an 'English Parallel Movement'. They had still to hold their first (and only) dedicated Vorticist exhibition in London; this took place in June 1915, at the time of the publication of the second (and final) issue of Blast.

In the preface to the catalogue of the 1915 exhibition, Lewis sought to define Vorticism in a mode of negative dialectics. 'By Vorticism', he said, '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 histrionics of the Futurists'.

In this exposition Expressionism was circumspectly left out. It was not 'opposed', though that would have been politically expedient. Lewis did condemn Germany's
'truculent methods of warfare' but also drew attention to 'those idealler ways in which Germany traditionally excels' – art, music and philosophy. Nevertheless, German Expressionism was to remain, even when the war was over, in a kind of limbo for British artists and their public. The Bloomsbury circle had by 1918 gained dominance over the presentation of continental modernism in Britain, and their personal tastes and commercial interests led them to push forward the more readily acceptable French exponents. No book on modern German art was to be published in Britain until 1938, when Herbert Read observed that, even at that date, modern German art was still totally unknown to the general public in Great Britain, and was almost entirely neglected by art critics, collectors and dealers. In short, Vorticism and Expressionism were never seriously juxtaposed, or their elements looked at critically one against the other, in a sustained debate.

In his later life Lewis was to assert, controversially, that Vorticism was only 'what I personally, did and said' at a particular time. That stark, but not wholly indefensible claim awaits the judgement of history, but the Vortician label adheres firmly to Lewis as a pictorial artist in the period around 1913–15 and, less firmly, to him as an imaginative writer. He was certainly the dominant figure among the group who exhibited as Vorticists – though not the only outstanding painter – and Ezra Pound, who gave the group their name, said at the time that if Lewis had not been a Vortician painter he would have been a Vortician something else, whereas if Wadsworth had not been a Vortician painter he would have been (as he was to become) some other kind of painter.

Near the end of his life, in 1956, Lewis offered a valedictory for Vorticism as 'an intellectual eruption, productive of a closely-packed, brightly-coloured alphabet of objects with a logic of its own. The doctrine which is implicit in this eruption is to be looked for in the shapes for which it was responsible'. If Lewis provided an epitaph – *si monumentum requiris*, deciper Vortician works according to their linguistic code – we can now seek its baptismal certificate.

We can begin with the time Lewis spent in Munich in 1906, as part of his extended youthful wanderings. Arriving in February, in 'the city of Thomas Mann, Kandinsky and Richard Strauss', as his biographer Jeffrey Meyers puts it, he stayed for six months at the Pension Bellevue at Theresienstrasse 30 and rented a studio at Amalienstrasse 85. He took German lessons and enrolled at an evening class at the Akademie Heymann, one of Munich’s many private art schools where, according to Meyers, 'his friend Edward Wadsworth also studied'.

This last point seems doubtful. Although Wadsworth was in Munich in 1906 'in order to learn German and study engineering draughtsmanship', according to Richard Cork, he seems not to have made acquaintance with Lewis until 1913. In Munich he was attracted to classes at the Knirr Art School (where Paul Klee had earlier attended). This school was also in the Amalienstrasse, but there is no evidence, outside Meyers' comment, that Lewis and Wadsworth ever con-sciously met in Munich. They had in common a shared nationality in a cosmopolitan city, but little else of close interest at that time. Wadsworth, age 17, had still to begin a formal art education, while Lewis – several years older – had left the Slade some time previously and was technically much more advanced. But, notwithstanding the lack of any apparent direct contact in Munich, it remains a striking coincidence that Lewis and Wadsworth, alone among their British contemporaries in having spent time studying art and life there, also came to share an artistic vision to the extent that Lewis was later to acknowledge at least that Wadsworth was 'the painter most closely associated with my Vortician activities' even if he saw those activities as uniquely personal.

Lewis's stay in Munich is thinly documented. Most accounts of his continental travels concentrate on the time he spent in Paris, rather than elsewhere. But his time in Munich was more than a vocational episode. It offered him access to artistic and philosophical enterprise that Paris at that time could not equal, and Lewis later referred to Paris and Munich, jointly, as his 'alma maters'.

It offered, as Adolf Vogt suggests, a German aesthetic, 'a way of feeling and thinking' quite different from the 'less reflective and less meditative French temperament'. Although Impressionism was the main alternative in France, in the later 19th century, to anecdotal or academically constrained art, it had relatively little impact in Germany. As the French critic Camille Mauclair acknowledged, Impressionism was 'an art which does not give much scope to intellectuality, an art whose followers admit scarcely anything but immediate vision, rejecting philosophy and symbols and occupying themselves only with the consideration of light, picturesqueness, keen and clever observation, and antipathy to abstraction, as the innate qualities of French art'.

The 'new art' of the new century had no such antipathy to abstraction. Instead, it required the artist to impose his own inner vision on the created work, 'the subjectively painterly thing that is called a picture', in Kandinsky's words, and required the viewer to participate in the work's unique visibility. That, in turn, supposed an awareness of the language of painting exceeding the 'exemplary banality' of much late 19th century studio art.

But already in the 19th century, as Vogt observes, German painters were exhibiting in their best work 'a remarkable concord of idea and visual means'. Acceptance of autonomous critical values for the plastic arts gave German painters (pre-eminently those in Munich) an intellectual impetus which French art largely lacked. There were painters like Seurat's friend Alexandre Séron, who sought to 'take the Idea evoked by a gesture and express it by means of a concordance of expressive linear directions', but they were neither characteristic nor influential. One might add that, of the major French innovators of the early 20th century, Braque did
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Eliot had studied philosophy and psychology. In 1896 his first book, Un de l'esprimper, set out a theory of the "third dimension" in art and philosophy. He published this work in the Munich University journal Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Psychologie, and in 1898 he published a second book, Praktische Psychologie, which was widely influential. Eliot's teaching was highly creative, and his influence was felt in many contemporary artists, including the Futurists of the early 1920s. His ideas about the relationship between art and life have been a source of inspiration for many modern artists, and his work continues to be studied and discussed by art historians and critics.

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acquaintances Lewis made during his stay in 1906, and what notions he acquired from them, we can only speculate.

Tschudi Madsen has said of the work of both Endell and Obrist, that it evidences 'the same tension between a balanced conception of form and an intricate, whirling subsidiary movement' - a step towards the 'new art of the new century and, not least, a premonition of the pictorial mode of Vorticism. As the 1890s progressed, the Sezession lost some of its dissenting identity. A progressive faction, the Freie Vereinigung Münchener Künstler, made its appearance, as did a commercial mass-market for Jugendstil-inspired artefacts. A young Munich art historian, Wilhelm Woringer, criticised what he saw as widespread relapses by members of the Sezession towards the complacencies of the old artists' association from which they had seceded. By a series of opportune events, a doctoral dissertation prepared by Woringer in 1906 became an aesthetic bible for subsequent German Expressionism. Published in 1908 as Abstraktion und Einfühlung, Woringer's book soon went into seven editions. Its arguments were grounded in - though they significantly diverged from - the work of two respected older Munich art theoreticians, Adolf Hildebrand and Theodor Lipps.

Susanne Langer has described Hildebrand - a practising sculptor - as the 'first art theorist who recognised the purely visual and otherwise illusory nature of pictorial space, and underlined its paramount importance for the aims and practices of painters'. His book, Das Problem der Form, published in 1893, was repeatedly reprinted, and an English translation appeared in 1907.

Also in 1893 Lipps (for T. E. Hulme 'the greatest writer on aesthetics') developed at the University a psychological theory round the concept of Einfühlung (empathy) and, it is recorded, 'helped to bring the idea back into artistic practice near the end of the century', influencing - among others - Endell. Thus both the Munich Sezession and the Munich-based modernisation of German aesthetic theory made an appearance in 1892-93. If by 1906 the reforming livery of the Sezession had become a little threadbare, Munich was then still at the leading edge of the new disciplines of aesthetics and art history, which had developed in the previous decade or so 'at a pace of speculation that perhaps has not since been seen and will not ever be equalled'.

In this stimulating climate Woringer's book engendered a further development. He set out to 'rehabilitate through scientific analysis' the 'misunderstood and ridiculed values of the abstract artistic volition' overshadowed by Lipps' emphasis on the principle of empathy. On the basis that 'the work of art, as an autonomous organism, stands beside nature on equal terms', and maintaining that 'the specific laws of art have, in principle, nothing to do with the aesthetics of natural beauty'. Woringer argued not against the significance of empathy, but that the concept of empathy was 'inapplicable to wide tracts of art history'. There was also to be found an aesthetics based on man's 'urge to abstraction', which was no less valid, and this urge stood 'at the beginning of every art' as an impulse to self-alienation.

We can see in each of the successive manifestations of the Munich avant-garde, from 1892-93 onwards; the Sezession and its offshoots, the developments which led to the setting up of the dissident Neue Kunstler Vereinigung (NKV) in 1908-09, and the formation of the Blaue Reiter group in 1911 (a secession from the NKV in all but name); in each of these developments there was a continuously active intellectual debate on the fundamentals of aesthetics for which Paris, despite a mystically charged reaction against Impressionism, had no parallel.

The Munich Sezession began as a breakaway movement to secure patronage in the fine arts, but an important offshoot dedicated to a parallel development in applied art, the Vereinigte Werkstätten für Kunst im Handwerk, appeared in 1897. Endell and Obrist were leading members, others of the group included two men whose reputations had initially been made as painters: Peter Behrens and Richard Riemerschmid. Behrens was soon to become a key figure in early modernist architecture and Riemerschmid in the development of modern functional furniture. As early as 1899 a 'Riemerschmid chair' was marketed by the fashion-conscious Liberty & Co in London and remained in their catalogue for long afterwards. Munich, as well as being the centre of the emergent psychologically-based modernist aesthetic, was also, by 1900, the focus of the movement in 20th century functional design which culminated in the setting up of the Bauhaus. The three candidates nominated in 1915 for the future directorship of the Bauhaus were Endell, Obrist and (successfully) a former assistant to Behrens, Walter Gropius. Gropius had himself studied at Munich's Technische Hochschule, and among the Bauhaus 'Masters' whom he recruited were several associated with Munich: Kandinsky, Klee, Muche and Albers.

Much of Lewis's own early reputation was made in his modernist interior design work, though this aspect is largely under-recognised. Its importance is brought out in Richard Cork's study Art Beyond the Gallery, which examines in detail several of Lewis's commissions in the period 1912-15. Cork also traces Lewis's 'fascination with interiors' back even to his early fictional writings before 1910.

Lewis's commissions included work on the décor of Mme Strindberg's cabaret Cave of the Golden calf in London in 1912. The Cave, Richard Cork points out, 'was conceived as a space where painting, sculpture and interior design together performed a concentrated function', a place where Lewis's centrepiece Kermesse 'was originally intended to play a prominent part in this exclamatory, unpredictable and subversive environment'.

'Unpredictable' and 'subversive' were epithets which, six years earlier, had characterised the Munich where Lewis stayed. An 'extremely biting and outspoken critic of German politics and mores', the journal Simplicissimus, achieved a global circulation of 100,000. The satirical cabaret Die Elf Schaarfrichter, set up in 1901,
had the father of Mme Strindberg's child, the playwright Frank Wedekind, as a leading contributor and Ernst Stern as stage designer. 'Resented by the complacent ruling class of the day as a savage and destructive assault on the most sacrosanct values of society', this well-patronised cabaret had more bite than contemporary French 'cabarets artistiques'.

Obrist had said in 1901 that 'the first act in the drama of the art of the future' was being played out in Munich. But that drama had still to be brought to the point of public recognition. Beginning in 1905, in Werner Haftmann's account of Painting in the Twentieth Century, 'everything was ready for a solution. The Jugendstil aesthetic had openly raised the question of abstract art. The ideas of the Nabis and the Fauves had had a stimulating effect ... The push was supplied by Wassily Kandinsky'. And it 'was not accident', Haftmann adds, 'that Kandinsky's decisive steps should have been taken in Munich', for it was there that 'the theoretical groundwork for abstract painting had been laid'.

Kandinsky – by then a close friend of Obrist – had become increasingly prominent in the Munich art world since his arrival in 1896 when, with other Russian students, notably Alexei Jawlensky, he had enrolled at Anton Azbe's private art school, later continuing his studies at the Academy under von Stuck. In 1902 he became 'president of a new group of fairly advanced students called Phalanx ... more important for the exhibitions it organised than for the work its own members were producing'. It was 'a very open group ... always anxious to bring foreign artists to the attention of the Munich public'.

In that role the Phalanx sponsored exhibitions in 1902–04 by French, Belgian and other artists from among neo-Impressionists, Nabis and those later to be identified as Fauves. These groups, although they were not governed by any clearly defined aesthetic, were all forerunners of the 'radically changed attitude to reality' which Haftmann considers the key characteristic of the new art. Paul Signac, for example, saw the subject as 'only one part of the work of art, no more important than the other elements – colour, drawing and composition'. These painters who, taking Impressionism as a starting point, pushed beyond it, seem to have had a wider impact than in Paris in reinvigorating the Munich scene and maintaining it as 'a leading centre for the exchange of ideas in Europe'. And, according to André Breton, the theoretical speculations of the Nabis founder-member Paul Serusier 'lead quite naturally to later credos such as Kandinsky's'.

Lewis had left Munich before these initial developments were reified in the more formal groupings of the NKV in 1909 and the Blaue Reiter of 1911, two initiatives instigated by Kandinsky. But the main elements of later Munich Expressionism were apparent in 1906, a time when, as Haftmann says, things were ready for a solution. The Expressionist author Franz Jung was to compare that earlier period of ferment favourably with the one that followed. In 1911, he relates in his autobiography, 'I was already too late for the Schwabing Bohemianism which put its stamp on nearly a decade of German literature and art ... the élan of their épater le bourgeois' which they had taken over from Paris'.

The intellectual climate of Munich was set not only by its artists and art theorists. It was characterised, as Roy Pascal put it, by 'the ease of communication, even intimacy, in its cultural community'. Central figures included the psychologist Otto Gross, the poet and philologist Karl Wolfskehl, and the philosopher Ludwig Klages who, Sir Ernst Gombrich later suggested, 'marred the value of his intuitive insights by his Bergsonian irrationalism'. Wolfskehl was a close friend of Obrist, and an early supporter of Kandinsky. Of Klages, John Willett has suggested that his work on graphology and the gestural aspects of Expressionism made him 'quite as much as the more reputable Wilhelm Worring ... to be considered, for better or worse, as one of the unconscious prophets of modern German art'.

These several groups had come together with the poetic Stefan George circle, between 1897 and 1904, in a loosely associated Nietzschean-inspired Kosmikerkreis, with an 'extensive significance ... in the cultural atmosphere of Munich'. The Kosmikerkreis was probably the most potent single manifestation of the tide of European thought which, around 1900, held that 'so powerful had the forces of intellect become that they were threatening to destroy the side of man which drew its strength from irrational, subconscious, spiritual sources'.

Something of this cultural climate is captured in Lewis's first major novel Tarr, not completed until 1916 but begun many years earlier. Ostensibly set in Paris, it is concerned primarily (as Lewis acknowledges in his autobiography) with the psychological world of the German art-student and the German bourgeois-bohemian. The novel's major characters are German, Germanised Russian, or English. The long café discussions between the protagonists Tarr and Kreisler (an echo of Hofmann's Kapellmeister) are notionally conducted in German. The philosophical arguments underpinning them are mostly moulded in the German dialectical tradition of Fichte, Stirner and Nietzsche. Very little about the novel is Parisian except in providing a setting for a teatro grotesco whose dramatis personae are primarily six expatriate characters in search of an auditor.

From all accounts, Munich café conversation in the early 1900s was infused, if not obsessed, with debates about Mutterrecht and Vatermord. In Lewis's short play of 1917, The Ideal Giant, set in a Viennese café in London, Vatermord is the very motif. Elsewhere in Lewis's work of the period, the English-speaking narrator of his short story 'A Soldier of Humour' (the author, thinly concealed) interrupts his discourse to analyse his parentage in apparently gratuitous Teutonic terms: 'Vom Vater hab ich die Statur. ... It must be from my mother that I get the Lust zu fabulieren'.
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German critic Max Raphael had in 1912 dismissed Cubism as ‘an attempt, on the part of creatively impotent but ambitious persons, who have learned to “hawk and spit” from Picasso, to mobilise the press and exhibitions with a view to getting publicity and gaining business’, while Futurism represented for him ‘the total arbitrariness of utter creative impotence’.

Vorticism’s pictorial intensity and implicit violence, or absence of ‘charm’, as Augustus John once put it, led the art critic of The Times during the 1915 exhibition of the London Group to accuse the Vorticists of producing pictures which ‘should the Junker happily take to painting, instead of disturbing the peace of Europe’, he would seek to emulate. Lewis pointedly replied that ‘the Junker, obviously, if he painted, would do florid and disreputable canvases of nymphs and dryads, or very sentimental “portraits of the Junker’s mother”’. The implicit criticism of the orthodox critic in wartime, that Vorticism was un-English, was curiously paralleled by the French orthodoxy that found Cubism un-French and German orthodoxy that found Expressionism un-German.

Lewis intended his wartime novel Tarr, and his play, Enemy of the Stars, to demonstrate a literary equivalent to the Vorticist pictorial mode. There was also a kind of overlapping relationship between Vorticism and the purely literary movement of Imagism, centred in London at the same time, both enjoying the forceful advocacy of Ezra Pound. The two movements both peaked, in terms of their public exposure, in 1914–15, and a historicised perception of a common identity is demonstrated by the illustrated book-cover to Peter Jones’ 1970s anthology, Imagist Poetry, which reproduces William Roberts’ painting of the Vorticists at the Eiffel Tower restaurant, celebrating the publication of Blast.

German Expressionism did embody a literary as much as a pictorial presence. A closeness between Expressionist poetry and Vorticism, at least in their theoretical substructure, is remarked on by Patrick Bridgewater in the introduction to his anthology of Twentieth Century German Verse. The association of the literary and the visual (and, indeed, the musical) aspects of Expressionism is readily apparent in the canonical Blaue Reiter Almanac of 1912, edited by Kandinsky and Franz Marc. Not the least notable feature of this compilation – published in Munich in German – is that over half the contributors were Russian. The strong Russian presence in Munich between the 1890s and 1910 included many figures other than Kandinsky and Jawlensky. Camilla Gray, in her study of Russian experimental art, notes that ‘it was more natural for the Russian art student to make for Munich than Paris’. This meant that Munich ‘became aware much sooner than Paris of the work of the Russian avant-garde’. Conversely the ‘Munich school’ were strongly represented in Russian exhibitions of contemporary art.

A specially Russian contribution to burgeoning Munich Expressionism originated in their familiarity with Orthodox church iconography. This provided an established means to express ‘the spiritual in art’, a precedent outside the post-Renaissance Western European tradition. In a modern context the Orthodox iconography could be developed either into an increasingly pure abstraction, or into a modified Byzantinism. The latter variant, in particular, stimulated T. E. Hulme to develop his own, Worringen-based, aesthetic for the ‘new art’, and this initiative – to some degree at least – influenced Lewis’s own development in 1913–14 of a distinctive Vortacist aesthetic.

Vorticism’s relationship to Expressionism is best visualised as a flow of two streams fed, in part, and unevenly, from a common proto-Expressionist, proto-Vortician source, rather than as a flow from one stream to the other. The setting up of Die Brücke in 1905 is generally taken as the first manifestation of modern German Expressionism, and there is no difficulty in tracing in the artistic milieu of Munich before that date evidences of some common antecedents.

Hermann Obst’s unpublished papers include comments about art, dating from 1895, under the title Ecstatic Vortex. Peg Weiss describes this compilation as ‘a literary parallel to the visual image’ which embodies ‘an astonishing anticipation of Vortician poetry’. Of one of Obst’s pupils, Hans Schmidtits, Wilhelm Weber says he ‘took inspiration from Obst’s notion that the spiral is one of the basic forms that visualize dynamic force. In his early pictures, painted between 1902 and 1904, he reduced a glacial landscape, for instance, to a series of vortexes, tubular segments and rudimentary spheres’.

A variant exploration of the imagery of the vortex came from the painter and novelist Alfred Kubin, an enigmatic figure working in Munich who played a recurrent role in each of Kandinsky’s main initiatives, the Phalanx, the NKV and the Blaue Reiter. In his book Die andere Seite, cited by Haftmann as illustrative of the changed perception of reality in 1905–10, Kubin speaks of the pursuit of an abstract mode of art, and his discovery that the artistic imagination flourished at ‘a point round which energies maintained an unstable equilibrium’.

Thus, in Munich, the vortex, named or implied, was readily visualised in the years preceding the emergence of the ‘new art’ as a point of experience at which the long-dominant traditions of naturalist art, in their various guises, could be supplanted by a creative vision which combined the ecstatic with the geometric. As a motif of this transcendent experience, the vortex could point to the purposes of the ‘new art’. In Britain, too, ‘progressive’ Edwardian discussion groups appear to have used the vortex illustratively or figuratively before Ezra Pound appropriated it to label Lewis’s evolving artistic intentions. The Theosophical Society, who made use of the concept, were also sometimes held responsible for encouraging, as ‘thought-forms’, the ‘spook-like hauntings’ which Lewis found, and disliked, in Kandinsky’s abstractions.

Although Lewis later said that Vorticism was ‘smushed out’ by the First World War, its demise was not immediately apparent. His 1919 pamphlet, The Caliph’s
Design, was challengingly sub-titled ‘Architects! Where is your Vortex?’ and there
was current talk of a third issue of Blast. The definitive demise of Vorticism was the
failure of the March 1920 ‘Group X’ exhibition in London to attract any general
interest, symptomatic of absence of patronage. Group X was made up of most of the
surviving pre-war Vorticists, led by Lewis, and some newcomers – notably McKnight
Kauffer – who sympathised with Lewis’s view that ‘the experiments undertaken all
over Europe during the last ten years should be utilized directly and developed and
not be lightly abandoned’.

From the start the Group X enterprise lacked the ebullience of pre-war Vorticism.
In that, it was not alone. In his study, Cubism, John Golding observes that, after
the war, many artists ‘experienced a sense of disillusion and disorientation that
prevented them from taking up where they left off’. And Cubism had begun to lose some of its
sense of communal purpose even before the war. Ozenfant and Jeanneret published
their influential Après Le Cubisme in 1918, criticising the lack of precision in Cubist
art, and in 1919 Blaise Cendrars suggested that Cubism no longer offered ‘enough
novelty and surprise to provide nourishment for a new generation’. Italian Futurism
and Russian Cubo-Futurism were politicised within their respective totalitarian
regimes in the early 1920s. German Expressionism did flourish in the early days of
the Weimar Republic, but more particularly in the theatre, in film and in literature.
Experimental pictorial art, where it did not convert into Dada (whose ‘fathers’ Hans
Richter held to be Kandinsky and Klee) increasingly turned towards Magischer
Realismus or the Neue Sachlichkeit. Vorticism, the least firmly rooted of the various
‘new arts’ in 1914, and planted in stonier soil than any, easily withered.

The problem was not only a loss of ‘novelty and surprise’, although these
transient feelings characterised the 1920s. The ‘new art’ of the pre-war era was
destined to a restricted popularity. It demanded an understanding of abstract artistic
intention to a degree which earlier ‘modern’ art – Impressionist or post-Impressionist
– had not required. In 1912 the critic Josep Junoy, (discussing Picasso) contended that
the viewer, no less than the artist, now had to ‘consider as a whole the series of
ideas which are given plastic form by means of simultaneous formulae and
continuously modified motifs and ways of seeing’.

As to Vorticism in particular, Lewis told John Quinn early in 1919 ‘the public’s
eye first struck a canvas of mine when I was already experimenting beyond the zone
of that eye’s comprehension or special knowledge of the subject’. Moreover, the term
‘vortex’ was never applied with much exactitude to painterly work which more often
sought to articulate virtual space in constructivist, tectonic modes than by means of
spirals and curvilinear forms. But, as with Pound’s attempts to draw aesthetic
parallels between Vorticist art and analytical geometry, the imposition of a
descriptive label or an analogy is secondary to the acts of creation to which the label
or analogy has been applied. If Vorticist art was not always vortical, works now

ascribed to the Cubist canon are not always cubical, post-Impressionism is something
chronologically subsequent to an indefinable something else, and the inevitable fate
of any Futurist work of art was to be inescapably passed at the moment of its
completion – the logic of Futurism lay in performance art’, where it had no peer.

Ultimately the enduring work of art, painterly or literary, has to stand clear of its
philosophical trappings and be independent of the hazards of immediate (and
posthumous) critical reception. The achievement of Vorticism marks, for the most
part, some impressive and expressive evidence of artistic durability, whose
antecedents are more complex and more substantial than some histories allow.

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