



RA Bertelli  
*Continuous Profile of  
Mussolini* 1933

## ■ Speed

Whitechapel Art Gallery London  
September 11 to November 22

Now that it is impossible to walk into any 20th-century survey exhibition (of which there may soon be an epidemic) without tripping over the corpses of Marcel Duchamp and Jackson Pollock, it's a credit to 'Speed' curators Jeremy Millar and Michiel Schwarz to have given us a fresh view of these two giants. Our new vantage point is that of the slippery notion of speed. With Duchamp, whose revolutionary impact has been driven home to the point of tedium, our attention is here directed exclusively at the supersonic, instantaneous speed at which his art is produced. In the accompanying wall panel – and 'Speed' is crammed with such didacticisms – for the snow shovel *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, 1915, critic Boris Groys compares the readymade with splitting the atom, lending Duchamp the typically 20th-century, scientific credibility needed to lure any miscreants still left out there. And, with Pollock, we are

treated to Hans Namuth and Robert Falkenberg's 1951 film of the maestro's choreographic outdoor splatterings. This work drew the exhibition's biggest crowd, and watching the rhythmic pace at which Pollock builds his masterpiece, the way he makes painting look so cool, smoking look so important, it seemed that this work might above all illustrate the speed with which modern audiences fall in love with photogenic heroes.

Indeed, the connections to the concept of speed in this exhibition can be so lateral as to beg such oblique deciphering. Some are literally about speed, high speed in particular, like Chris Burden's *C.B.T.V. to Einstein*, 1977, wherein the Californian conceptualist turns a modest rubberband-propelled airplane, flown on the Concorde, into the fastest object on earth, or RA Bertelli's *Continuous Profile of Mussolini*, 1933, or Barry Le Va's *Velocity Piece*, 1970. Or they might be about very low speed, such as Rodney Graham's *School of Velocity*, 1993, or Jem Southam's series of four photographs documenting a very slowly crumbling cliff, *Red Mudstone, Sidmouth, Devon, December 1995-May 1996*. Elsewhere, as with Duchamp and Pollock, or Dan Flavin's *Untitled (Monument for Vladimir Tatlin)*, 1975, which, as Smithson explains in the nearby quote, is an 'instant monument', or even Mark Edelman Boren's marvellous *Budgie Stuffed with J G Ballard's 'Crash'*, 1991, the curators foray into their own unexpected vision of the overlap between art and speed, and these can be the most satisfying moments in the exhibition.

Too often, however, 'Speed' splinters into loosely connected concepts, such as time (Jan Dibbets' *The Shortest Day at the Van Abbemuseum*, 1970) or the machine age (Fernand Léger, *Ballet Mécanique*, 1924) or simultaneity (Pierre Bismuth, *L'Histoire du Soldat*, 1998, in which we watch on video a young man listen to the very music we too are listening to). The chosen topic spills sloppily into different, though related, issues, and the exhibition starts to spring leaks or grow repetitious, as in the overkill of automobile imagery. The inclusion of some works, furthermore, becomes incomprehensible, for example Marcel Breuer's *Club Armchair 'Wassily'*, 1927-28, which looks perfectly still to me, or Joseph Beuys' beautiful *Schlitten (Sled)*, 1969, so laden with symbolism I can hardly imagine its actually suggesting a quick bob down a snowy hill. The show, at times, seems rather appropriately to spin out of control – but it does have its satisfying turns.

Opening up with Martin Creed's *Thirty-Nine Metronomes Beating Time, One at Every Speed*, 1995-97, misleadingly set what I hoped was the ironic tone for the show. Here, I thought, is a truly contemporary view of speed: low-tech, small-scale, uncelebratory and out of synch. Quickly followed by Robert Smithson's *Rundown*, 1969, a slow-moving, pointless picture of speed as inevitable, entropic collapse, I was still enchanted. But, disappointment soon set in; boys will be boys, and it wasn't long before the picture lapsed into the more conventional, hackneyed idea of speed: jet-powered, futuristic,

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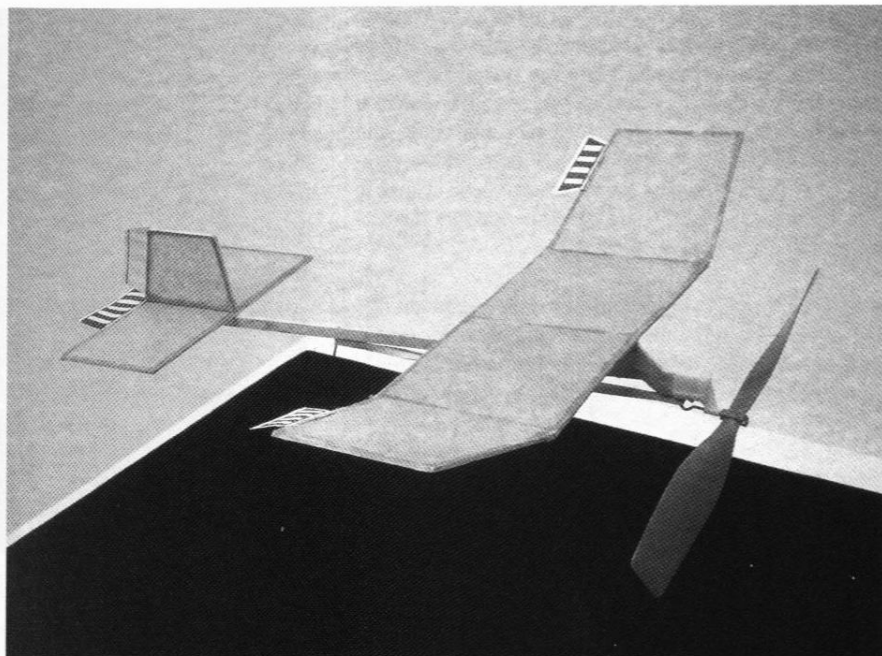
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Chris Burden  
C.B.T.V. to Einstein  
1977



rocket-propelled and above all, really fast! The Emblem of Modernity! The Spirit of the Age! The catalogue is full of such tiresome rhetoric: Milan Kundera, 'Speed is a form of ecstasy the technical revolution has bestowed on man', or Andrew Ross, '[Speed is] the most glamorous, profitable and dangerous narcotic of the 20th century.' Maybe it's because I've never even bothered to get a driver's licence, but frankly, I don't buy it. Although the catalogue admits briefly to such contemporary portraits of speed as sitting fog-bound in an airport lounge, or watching impatiently as an image drains with merciless leisure, pixel by pixel, off the internet, don't be deceived; this in an exhibition by boys who seem to have only recently been weaned off toy racing cars. When Creed's work is later repeated, inexplicably fragmented and scattered into groups of four throughout the show, reduced to a mascot, a playful clock-like soundtrack for the show, we realise that the fabulously unsynchronised marching band that opened the exhibition has been quickly regimented back into conventional shape.

Perhaps 'Speed's most startling discovery is the twinning of the most unlikely -isms of 20th-century art history: High Modernism, painting and sculpture c1905-38, and High Conceptualism, Weiner, Burden, Le Va, Kawara, Smithson et al. These are the two art-historical moments joined against all odds to enjoy the lion's share of the exhibition, becoming bizarre, look-alike representatives of the century. Whilst observing a vitrine in which Futurist manifestoes, Picabian ephemera and Constructivist publications fit very comfortably alongside Ed Ruscha and Chris Burden artists' books, I began to imagine beginner art history students some 300 years hence, when periods within the 20th Century will indeed blur together indistinguishably, struggling to untangle the almost imperceptible dif-

ferences between Chris Burden and FT Marinetti (it's easy: Burden had a friend shoot him; Marinetti got his friends shot). In the look of the exhibition itself, a cross between the 1937 'Degenerate Art' show, with its quasi-propagandistic texts plastered everywhere, and a Kosuth-like, colourless, text-heavy installation, these two periods, heretofore unrelated, miraculously coalesce. Their shared, blatant machismo, the extreme confidence in the work, the deliberate sense of experimentation and political radicality: I never noticed before how much these seemingly distant moments are actually deadringers.

Despite all the hyperbole about split-second technology and the mind-blowing acceleration of daily life, 'Speed' is a surprisingly nostalgic exhibition, reviewing the good old days of the violent 20th Century. How else might we explain the preponderance of so many corny, failed visual representations of speed – such as the horizontal lines of cartoony flight in Roy Lichtenstein's boring *In the Car*, 1963, John McCracken's 'aerodynamic' *Mach 2*, 1992, Marcel Duchamp's goofy *Rotoreliefs (Optical discs)*, 1959, or the wavy figure pathetically attempting to occupy time and space in Umberto Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, 1913, while the prevalent, truly successful depiction of speed, ie film and photography, have been relegated to the margins of the show, as if accused of cheating.

In attempting to forge the necessary conceptual connections, after a while I started observing everything in terms of speed: my own quickening pace as I raced past yet another dull, modernist painting of dashboards or car crashes. Or, upon noticing that one of these tired little pictures belongs to the collection of David Bowie, I began to reflect upon the speed with which a once radical music and image-maker can degenerate into a staid art investor,

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MIDLAND MAINLINE





Edward Lipski  
Body 1996

and suddenly the whole 20th Century felt depressing. Given the overtly didactic nature of the show, an analogy with academia might relate 'Speed' to one of those university courses in which classes have been lazily replaced by a series of guest speakers. With such illustrious and enjoyable invitees as Smithson, Apollinaire, Gabo, Baudrillard – and no expense seems to have been spared to drag in the best of them – you hardly notice that the professor has been absent all along. ■

**Speed** is also at The Photographers' Gallery, London September 19 to November 14 and tours to the Madonald Stewart Art Centre, Guelph, Canada September 24 to October 31, and is accompanied by a film programme.

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## ■ Personal Effects

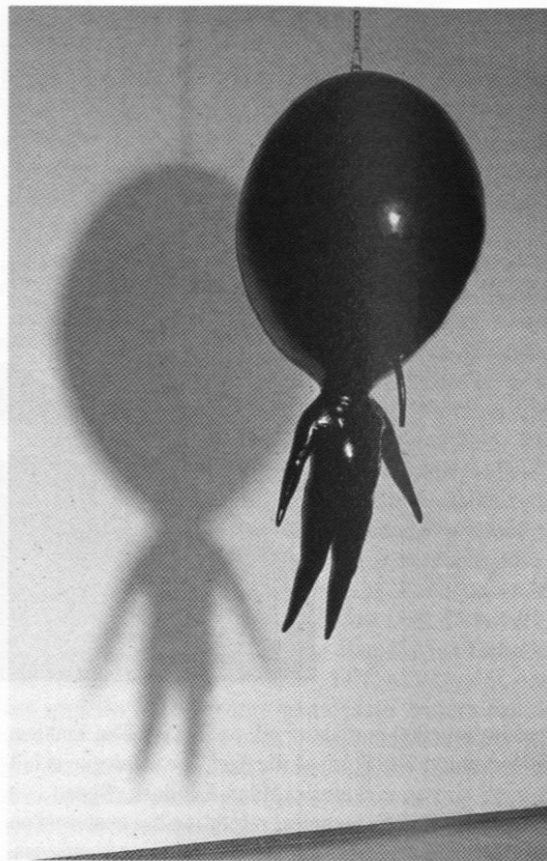
**Spacex** Exeter September 5 to October 17

In line with the artworld's current preoccupation with social anthropology, 'Personal Effects' has collected a number of works together to illustrate how inanimate objects may reflect or accrue human values such as memory, emotional attachment and desire. This is not new territory by any means, but the assembled objects make an engaging enough collection to make the exercise worthwhile.

Using objects that signify beyond the apparent and most immediately obvious is the mainstay of much current art practice, and most of the works here are no exception to the rule. Each artist looks at objects and the way they function in a different way. Nina Saunders takes items of furniture that signify certain archetypes, in this instance the opulent stature and upholstery of the leather chairs associated with the luxury of doing nothing in the drawing room or gentleman's club. However, by fashioning *Pure Thought 1* in white, rather than the



Yinka Shonibare  
Untitled 1997



usual Sauvignon or ruddy chestnut, and by introducing an enormous spherical bubble into the seat beneath the buttoned leather, all practical use is cancelled in favour of a device that invokes feelings of absurdity and loss in the face of a familiar object that has been made strange.

Yinka Shonibare continues his crusade against colonial repression and its subsequent modern-day equivalents with *Victorian Footstool* and his *Untitled (from Effnik Series)*. The footstool, a *faux* Victorian reproduction taken from his *Victorian Philanthropist's Parlour*, is upholstered in ethnic fabrics with additional images of African footballers in European strips. *Untitled* is a large colour photograph of Shonibare in the costume of a Georgian gentleman. In throwing together all these snippets of history, past and present, and mixing them with various contemporary deceits, the lines between genuine and counterfeit and between true and false become somewhat confused, leaving one wondering just who, ultimately, is really directing this miscellaneous narrative.

The uniform of a different kind of gentleman altogether makes its appearance in Edward Lipski's *Body*, comprising as it does a dwarfish, or childlike, all-over rubber suit of the variety popular in sex dungeons, with a single rubber ventilation pipe protruding from its mouthpart. It is not quite a suit however, as there are no hands and feet, which suggests, with the grossly inflated head that sits atop the body, an extra-terrestrial fetishist rather than the more traditional corporate executive, politician or judge. It is the rubber though, in its role within the fetishists' compendium of articles that assuage the rich and complex fears of castration, and which have their roots very much within the subconscious realm of memory and desire, that is the key here.

Jordan Baseman's *One Twelfth* is a scale model of the gallows used in the Lansing State Penitentiary in Kansas between 1944 and 1965 and, within reason, is exact in every detail, complete with working parts. *One Twelfth*