On February 20, 1909, an Italian poet named Filippo Tommaso Marinetti unleashed the avant-garde on Europe when he proclaimed “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism” on the front page of a Paris newspaper. It is impossible to look at Italian art from the first half of the 20th century without considering the movement christened by this manifesto—a “mass movement” that encompassed not only poetry, but painting, architecture, design and even advertising.

One hundred years later, Futurism’s birth was commemorated by two major publications by Christine Poggi. The timing was a happy accident, according to Poggi, an art history professor. The two books represent over 12 years’ exploration of a movement that has received relatively little notice in the English-speaking world, largely because of its later association with Italian fascism.

In Inventing Futurism: The Art and Politics of Artificial Optimism, Poggi takes an interdisciplinary approach to themes favored by Futurists—including crowds, technology and misogyny—and sheds light on complexities and ambiguities that have often been overlooked. Futurism: An Anthology, edited by Poggi along with Lawrence Rainey from the University of York and Laura Wittman from Stanford University, presents an extensive collection of Futurist manifestos, poetry, plays and visual art in all media. The only resource of its kind in English, the anthology casts a wide net, encompassing artists and writers, including women, who are not usually part of the discussion of Futurism.
Q: What is Futurism as Marinetti defined it in the 1909 manifesto?

Poggi: The manifesto contained 11 points, and these points argued that Italy should cut all its ties with tradition and the past—museums should be flooded, libraries burned and so forth—so that there would be a completely clean slate to allow artists and Italy in general to start fresh and build a new future. There was a sense that the past was a burden to be cast off. The manifesto also praised nationalism and militarism, expressed disdain for women and included a very inflammatory phrase declaring “War the world’s only hygiene.” So it was very much a nationalist movement that wanted to put Italy on the map as another big imperialist power competing with the other European powers.

Q: The notion of throwing off the past is interesting, given the role of Roman and Renaissance art and architecture in establishing Italy on the cultural map.

Poggi: Italy is a terrible place for modern artists in that you have this immense and unavoidable heritage of Roman classical antiquity, the Renaissance, and the Baroque. You have Michelangelo. You have Bernini. It’s really difficult for a modern artist to feel that he or she could compete with such great artists. The Futurist painter and sculptor Umberto Boccioni writes in his diaries about how overwhelmed he is by the greatness of these figures. So the past really was sensed as a burden.

Q: Besides this need to cast off the past, what are some of the themes that characterize Futurism?

Poggi: Marinetti wrote a narrative prologue to the manifesto in which he tells the story of bursting out of his apartment, which he describes as a kind of Orientalist interior with rugs and filigree brass lamps. It’s a narrative that has him leaving that interior for the street and jumping into a race car. Eventually the race car overturns in a ditch, and he’s reborn in industrial sludge—he’s covered in industrial muck. It’s actually very funny. And then he stands up covered in mud and heroically declares the 11 points of the manifesto. So I think there is some self-parody at work here. But the narrative tells the story of a rebirth, an alliance of the human subject with the machine, and even with factory waste. It’s a story of leaving the interior for the street, being active in the street, becoming a movement that would address the masses. It also talks about the thrill of speed, velocity. A lot of these themes then play out in Futurism.

Q: Why has Futurism been so poorly understood?

Poggi: In part because the Futurists published so many of their own manifestos and texts, and because they developed the art of the manifesto, which involved making very extreme claims, being provocative, inflammatory. These manifestos have often been taken literally. Marinetti himself frequently rewrote the manifestos of other writers and artists to make them more outrageous. He wanted them to be publicity stunts. So that’s one problem—these manifestos exist, and they’ve been used as the best source for reading the artworks. And sometimes there’s a discrepancy between the two.

The other factor is that after World War I this group of artists did, for the most part, become fascist. That has cast a pall over the entire movement, but it doesn’t mean that the movement isn’t interesting.

Q: Would you characterize Futurism as ultimately optimistic or pessimistic?

Poggi: I think the Futurists were optimistic in their own terms. I was interested in a statement Marinetti made twice, that in inventing Futurism, he wanted to embrace artificial optimism in order to counter his own and Italy’s pessimism. I felt that phrase captured perfectly the idea that this art, this optimism, was artificial. The Futurist artists struggled to represent the utopian image of the Italy that they wanted to construct, which didn’t exist yet. And the future was endlessly postponed. It’s a kind of ambivalent stance in which one aspires to something that is always out of reach or deferred. I don’t think they ever felt they had fully achieved it.