

## How to Write an Avant-Garde Manifesto

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*To launch a manifesto you have to want: A. B. & C., and fulminate against 1, 2, & 3.*

Tristan Tzara, Dadaist Manifesto, 1918

### *Founding*

I have been up all night, drafting this manifesto. But no unbounded pride buoys me up, only caffeine and the expectations of my comrades. Earlier today these comrades, now all sucking their pillows in sleep, sent me an outline of everything they wanted, a rough sketch of grand plans “to destroy the old world of 1, 2, & 3”—normal stuff for radical or fringe groups like ours. But—*blast!* I have tumbled a full tumbler of coffee on their manuscript, which they had inexplicably penned with a dull quill and some homemade India ink. (Those guys. Always trying to be *antique*.) Now their words are a murky morass of shifting, competing signifiers, a grapheme gruel in midnight hues. And I am left without a clear blueprint. I hardly know where to begin.

Since it’s getting late, and I’m getting desperate, I’ve decided to pilfer the manifestos of other radical or avant-garde groups—Futurist, Vorticist, Surrealist, Dadaist, Unabomberist, etc.—for ideas of what kind of diatribe is expected of me. Yet looking over these screeds now, each seems at turns effective and ineffective, utterly convincing and utterly ridiculous. And while such antitheses might be perfectly acceptable to me, I fear my co-conspirators would not approve. So I will try my best

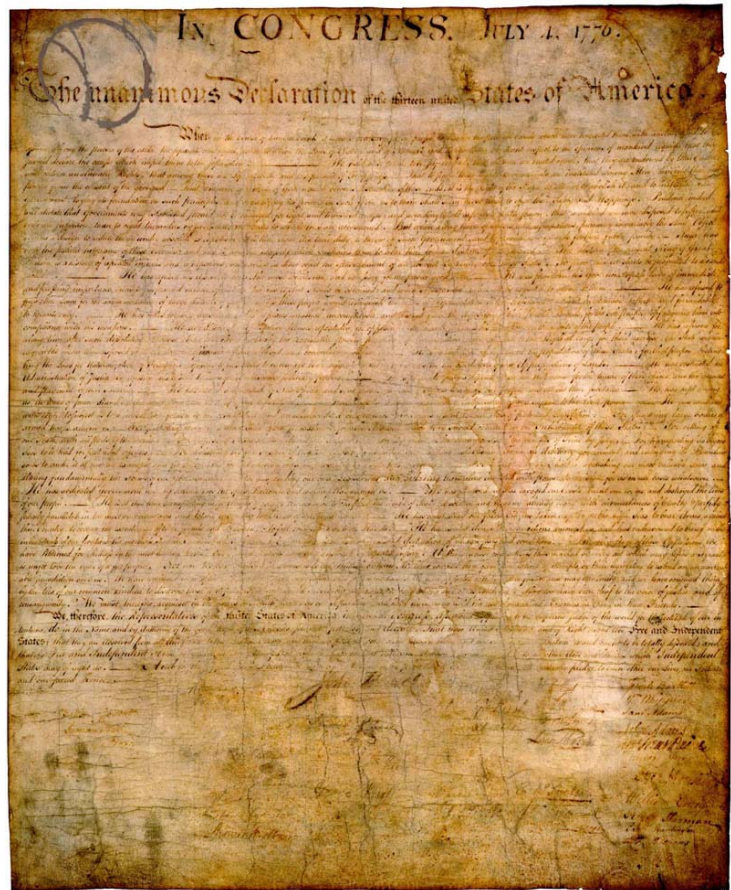
to pinch the best from each text and cast out the chaff. Maybe then by tomorrow's deadline I'll have penned a kind of avant-garde manifesto writer's how-to manual, which might *itself* be an avant-garde manifesto of sorts for even the most finicky fringe group to demolish old orders and establish new ones with, though it will have been totally plagiarized.

### ***Rule One***

#### ***DO drink coffee***

This rule might surprise you, for hasn't coffee been only catastrophic thus far in our project? Yet, after much research, I have been won-over by the stuff. In its defense, may I start by mentioning that the opening of England's first coffee house corresponded with the height of the monarchy-toppling English Civil War? Or that over the ensuing decades, as London coffee houses became increasingly popular, they increasingly became breeding grounds for radicalism, showcases for the city's radical pamphleteers. So threatening were these caffeinated establishments' anti-establishment tendencies that in 1676 Charles II felt compelled to temporarily close them, seeing them as "places where the disaffected met, and spread scandalous reports concerning the conduct of His Majesty and his Ministers" (from Kaufmann, 1). It is no surprise, then, that in the next century Benjamin Franklin turned to these same London coffee houses to refine his radical-pamphleteering skills, which through him passed into that seminal avant-garde manifesto, the *American Declaration of Independence of 1776*. Nor is it surprising that that particular radical manifesto was first presented to the public at Philadelphia's *Merchant's Coffee House*.

→  
Coffee stains on  
*The US Declaration of Independence of 1776*,  
a seminal avant-garde  
manifesto.



Perhaps these are just coincidences. But there are more. In 1876, a century after the birth of American independence, the founder of Futurism was born, F.T. Marinetti, whose movement's radical recipes often called for coffee. Richard Jensen describes one of the “more radical dishes” from Marinetti’s *Futurist Cookbook*, as “salami immersed in a bath of hot black coffee flavoured with eau-de-Cologne” (35). Also, from Marinetti’s daughter we learn that her father referred to a waiter’s inadvertent juggling and spilling of coffee as a “Futurist dance” or a “very theatrical form of Futurist aviation” (49). But, perhaps most interesting is how Marinetti imagines coffee as a key ingredient of *Marinetti*, the rousing, alarming Marinetti before whom so many trembled. For apparently Marinetti “liked to describe himself as the ‘caffeine of Europe’” (Ford, 1). And his friends who helped him issue his Futurist wake-up call presumably felt his caffeine-like influence. “We have been up

all night, my friends and I” Marinetti says, in the *Founding* section that precedes the *Futurist Manifesto of 1909*, “an immense pride was buoying us up, because we felt ourselves alone at that hour, alone, awake, and on our feet” (1). Marinetti’s manifesto runs rife with wakefulness, restlessness, activity, and motion—in opposition to that dreamy repose of not just the people sleeping all around him who were not up writing Futurism’s manifesto, but particularly of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Romantics. This opposition is in no way lost on them. “Up to now,” they say, “literature has exalted a pensive immobility, ecstasy, and sleep. We intend to exalt aggressive action, a feverish insomnia” (1).

The insomnia that Marinetti here praises and suffers from is evident to a greater or lesser extent in many manifestos of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Tristan Tzara, in his *Dadaist Manifesto of 1918*, claims “we have experienced the trembling and the awakening. Drunk with energy” (1). And Andre Breton, in his *Surrealist Manifesto of 1924*, similarly states:

My eyes had been open for a long time when I heard the clock in the apartment above strike five. I wanted to go back to sleep, but I couldn't; I was wide awake and a thousand thoughts were crowding through my mind. (1)

Though few critics have touched on avant-garde insomnia *per se*, they have made much of Futurism’s valorization of aggressive activity, motion and speed. For it seems one could easily assume that unlike Breton here, Marinetti would never put in his manifesto that he “wanted to go back to sleep.” Furthermore, many critics see the Futurists and their affiliate *isms*, especially Vorticism, as, for the most part, cheerleaders of the technological prostheses that elicit for humans such active, speed-enhancing characteristics. Hal Foster claims the Futurists and other “machinic

modernisms” turned technology into an art object emblematic of the “modern spirit” (5). Jeffrey Schnapp sees the racing auto as Marinetti’s “emblem of the transformation of premodern into modern man” (Speed, 3). Marinetti’s fetishization of the race-car does much to warrant such critical hyperbole, but despite his salivation on the bonnet of his car, we must not overemphasize the emblem, and must cautiously go back to reminding ourselves what this race-car emblematic *of*, namely speed, agitated energy, frantic movement, tireless factory work. Thus, especially as it is the substance that fuels the activity of writing *about* the car, or the activity of writing the manifesto, or the activity of writing, or activity *per se*, we must not forget coffee’s status as one of the primary, perhaps *the* primary modern prosthesis. When Marinetti sings of “great crowds agitated by work,” then, we much remind ourselves of how, willfully or not, he evokes Balzac’s description of the effects of caffeine.

Balzac, under coffee’s influence, writes *of* coffee’s influence in his *Traité des Excitants modernes*, claiming that “every thing becomes agitated,” that “ideas are set in motion,” that “memories charge forward,” that “logic's artillery rushes out with its train and canon-cartridges,” and “the vigil begins and ends with torrential downpours of black water, just like the battle with its black powder” (from Schnapp, *Romance* 249). Compare these irrepressible movements and violent actions occasioned by Balzac’s coffee with those brought on by Marinetti’s speeding car. Compare the “cannon-cartridges” of “black powder” of Balzac’s coffee with the “machine gun fire” and the “explosive breath” of Marinetti’s hot rod. Both the exoskeleton prosthesis of the automobile and the internal, nervous system-enhancing prosthesis of coffee, overlap here in a gun torrent of warfare. And in both cases, this warfare makes an enemy of complacency, lassitude, sleep, the past, death.



**F.T.  
Marinetti**  
As "*The  
caffeine of  
Europe.*"

In Eliot's "The Waste Land," often called "the manifesto of the Lost Generation," coffee again fuels the human machine into a restless insomnia. The coffee consumed in the Hofgarten in the initial stanza sustains the poem's wakeful vigilance. Its effects are felt almost immediately, when by the end of the stanza we read someone is reading "much of the night." The chasing of death until it escapes "down the vast violet living and throbbing sky" of Marinetti's manifesto becomes in "The Fire Sermon" another "violet hour" of vigilance, in which "eyes and back / turn upward from the desk, when the human engine waits / like a taxi throbbing waiting." From the Marinetti to the Eliot, the youthful careening of a car speeding out of control hunting death becomes the staid and serene vigil of a waiting taxi, but both scenes throb with a life that has donned the caffeine prosthesis.

And as I recollect how just yesterday, while drinking coffee on Denmark Street, I saw someone tack on the café wall a coffee-stained document, "*A Radical Manifesto for the New Millennium*, by S. Brian Willson," it seems that wherever

coffee is served, so too is served the long-held tradition of overturning long-held traditions. Coffee giveth and coffee taketh away. For didn't it bring me to this pass by destroying the outline of my comrades who are now resting comfortably in their beds like the mindless automatons they are, while I stay up all night, with the help of coffee, to write this damn thing?

### ***Rule Two***

#### ***DO NOT obscure your radical manifesto with PYROTECHNICS.***

Wyndham Lewis, in *Blasting and Bombardiering*, describes an odd encounter from soldiering days, when, in the midst of leading troops through clockwork gunnery maneuvers, some superior brass accosts him about his other life as an artist:

“Bombardier... what is all this *Futurism* about?” (22). Lewis, standing at attention, in uniform, with “rifle on shoulder and heels together,” is appalled by the impropriety of the question, of the sudden meeting of his militaristic and artistic lives. He says “this Jack-in-office had no right really to catch me in that attitude, since [...] it was wholly unsuited for expounding on the mysteries of an esoteric technique” (23). Continuing, he declares that the “parade ground was a place for arms, and not a forum for civic discussion.” But why would Lewis imply art and war are mutually exclusive, when just a few years earlier he had willfully sought to conflate them? Lewis’ manifesto, published in *Blast!* in 1914 lustily expounds a literary militarism. The incendiary rhetoric of Marinetti’s dispatch of 1909 excited Lewis so much that he led England’s nascent avant-garde, the Vorticists, into the new fiery fray. How could Lewis resist: “We want to glorify war - the only cure for the world,” Marinetti raged. “Let the good incendiaries with charred fingers come! Here they are! Heap up the fire to the shelves of the libraries!” Together, Marinetti and Lewis armed the avant-garde manifesto with

the mortar round and the machine gun. Lewis' incandescent cannons in *Blast!* pulverize vast epochs: "BLAST years 1837 to 1900," and bohemian socio-cultural castes: "BLAST—Pasty shadow cast by gigantic BOEHM." (30).

Perhaps the very name *avant-garde* presaged the caustic militarism of Marinetti's Futurists and Lewis' Vorticists. Whereas as the military avant-garde formed the leading fringes of an attack unit, where one would find the most highly trained soldiers, the historical or artistic avant-garde imagined themselves as the radical artistic elite, on the leading fringes of cultural society, even reality. There they sought to carry out their only mission, to rupture prescribed cultural boundaries that they, on the leading fringe, were always bumping up against. There Marinetti's fetishization of the factory and the machine ruptured the sleepy library and museum culture of bourgeois Italy. There his prosthetic-centrism exploded the romantic ideal of the unified body, the "nontechnological subject" (Foster 5). The avant-garde's revolutionary nature carried over into their manifestos, which themselves seem eager to break out of their prescribed limitations as words on paper. Thus the avant-garde manifesto's fiery rhetoric does not merely describe its author's tactics for exploding norms, but performs them (Puchner 451). The oft-cited typographical innovations of Futurism and Vorticism evince the desire of the avant-garde to issue words that transcend their status as such. *Blast's* bon mots, writ large in explosive BOLD CAPITALS playfully perform the bombing raids implicit in its radical bombasticism. Lewis and Marinetti imagine that the red glare of incendiaries would come as a package deal with, and shine glowingly upon their radical manifestos.

But things didn't quite work out that way. From what I can gather, the Great War and its pyrotechnics recontextualized the avant-garde's cultural locale, rendering its revolutionary agenda a fantasy bubble already burst. For suddenly, after the first

few days of August 1914, exploding bodies became the *norm*; the leading edge of actual armies, armed with actual incendiaries, was rupturing boundaries all over Europe. Soon these tropes of troops rupturing boundaries and exploding bodies, as the new status quo and thus the new passé, were no longer under the jurisdiction of the avant-garde elite; they had been appropriated by the masses.

Marinetti probably knew this would happen. For as much as his manifestos' militarism enacted Futurism's revolutionary paradigm, it enacted Marinetti's ploy to grab the attention of as many people as possible. For he believed that the common ear and eye are not particularly sensitive ears and eyes, that they essentially need to be yelled at, that they need to have things SPELLED OUT for them with the subtlety of hand-grenades. He believed that if he wanted to achieve his mission of popularizing the act of exploding boundaries, say, between high and low art, he would have to fill the pages of the popular press with the most fulminating high-art bombasticism he could muster. So he did. And in a sense, it worked. At least he got the public's attention. But Marinetti had to know, after capitalizing on Europeans' readiness to tune-in to his manifesto-violence, that the louder and brighter violence in the bombs of World War One were bound to steal the show. The years 1914 to 1918 testify to lowbrow culture's eagerness to be the captive audience *par excellence*, reactive to big guns. And any raised brows of critique at that eagerness sunders high and low culture all over again. Which is what happened.

For, by 1918 the Dadaists started issuing radical manifestos that parodied Marinetti's incendiary rhetoric, thus driving a wedge between their group and Futurism/Vorticism, which they felt had become, because of the war's violence, too affiliated with what was now the mainstream: "To launch a manifesto" they mocked, "you have to want: A. B. & C., and fulminate against 1, 2, & 3" (1). The "real"

violence of the war had trumped the artificial violence of incendiary words, so much that after it Lewis complained of the distinct feeling of having had his voice smothered: “No sooner had I become famous, or rather notorious, than the War came with a crash, and with it, when I joined the army, I was in a sense plunged back into anonymity once more” (Lewis 30).

And perhaps this is why, when the brass accosted him about Futurism, Lewis got so anxiously indignant. The war did so much to make Futurist violence passé, that many of the avant-garde who had affiliated with it prior to 1914 eventually seemed to feel embarrassed by it, and wanted to distance themselves from it, or, when they could, rewrite their more scathing manifesto tracts to tone them down a few notches. In 1926, when Ezra Pound rewrote poems that had appeared in *Blast!*, we find the all-caps portions of “Salutation the Third” such as in “HERE is the taste of my BOOT. CARESS it, lick off the BLACKING,” have been put into lower case, divested of explosive typography. Furthermore, certain of the poem’s more scathing lines, such as: “Let us SPIT upon those who fawn upon the JEWS for their money,” becomes, merely, “Let us spit upon those who pat the big-bellies for profit” (Pound 569, 1312). The former explosive rhetoric raised in people’s minds an association with the war, an association in which the avant-garde’s words must have always paled next to memories of real bombing raids. How easily, then, were the Futurist/Vorticist literary cannons elided, disarmed, or circumvented, like a misguided Maginot Line of signification.

Just like the manifestos of the Vorticists/Futurists, the *Unabomber Manifesto of 1995* compromises its own radicalism by the addition of a pyrotechnics display.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I am aware that, unlike this paper’s previously mentioned manifestos, the *Unabomber Manifesto* has been read by most critics as a piece of political activism rather than of avant-gardism. Yet as my focus in this section is the efficacy of radical performativity in manifestos in general, I hope this leap will not be too irritating to the reader.

Like the Vorticists and Futurists themselves, Ted Kaczynski did not think his words alone would get, or perhaps even warrant, the public's attention. Seemingly, he felt impotent without the prosthesis of incendiaries: "In order to get our message before the public with some chance of making a lasting impression, we've had to kill people" (1). But his incendiaries were not typographical, indeed they consisted of an actual bombing campaign, with mail-bombs in carved wooden boxes, but otherwise tech-savvily constructed, which is ironic, considering how loudly the manifesto itself fulminates against the military-industrial complex. This juxtaposition of pro- and anti-technology tendencies confused the public enough, without them then having the moral dilemma of the bombs actually detonating, after which they felt armored against anything the *Unabomber Manifesto* might have had to say.

All this is to say that because Kaczynski's manifesto came equipped with its own Great War (because it had already been contextualized by his 17-year stint as one of the CIA's most wanted terrorists, and because the *Times* and *Post* editors agreed to publish his manifesto only under the duress of threats that that campaign would continue) he did not have to wait for a war to start for popular interest to focus more on bombs than bon mots. It happened right away. So, though Kaczynski's bombing rampage succeeded in getting his manifesto published, it ultimately backfired because it distracted the world from the radicalist performance of his letters on the page. He would have been better off with a smaller readership who could actually see his words than, what he got, millions who just saw smoke. In sum, *Pyrotechnics*, and other such ham-fisted extravagances ultimately deafen, blind and generally numb the receptors of the populace to the subtleties inherent in any radical agenda. Surely, then, radical manifesto writers who employ incendiaries should reap what they sow and [Insert nuclear hellfire]

***Rule Two-and-a-Half***

***DO NOT use FRENCH expressions.***

This interdiction, *à propos*, simply commemorates some far-distant historical events.

The first two, *au bout du compte*, contrast each other:

- 1) In 1657, the English Parliament offered monarch-toppling Oliver Cromwell the English crown; he refused it.
- 2) In 1804, the French Senate offered the monarch-toppling Napoleon Bonaparte the French crown; he accepted it—and crowned himself Emperor.

This oversimplified juxtaposition illustrates the traditional slight tilt of *French* towards tyrannical elitism. The Norman Conquest of England located French within aristocracies from a very early stage, as William the Conqueror and his barons imposed their language, from the top down, on the English masses. And even when we look to the other hand, to the fringes of society, we see that since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, French has become the *lingua franca* of radicalism and the avant-garde. Marinetti, for instance, showed his contempt for the philistine English by delivering his London lectures in French. We cannot abide installed cultural establishments of any kind, especially linguistic ones, and *especially* among fringe groups. If the avant-garde becomes complacent with French, surely that complacency will keep them from discovering new realities that are, as is *au mieux de nos intérêts*, off the conceptual map of that ur-elitist *lingua franca*. As far as I can determine, keeping all French

expressions at bay will give your manifesto *carte blanche* to expound an ever more radical radicalism, instead of just propping up the establishment's radicalism.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Rule Three***

#### ***The Anti-dialectic: DO NOT use QUOTATIONS***

“I write a manifesto and I want nothing.” In saying this, the *Dadaist Manifesto of 1918* castigates what had hitherto been the role of avant-garde, that of *unsatirically* wanting A, B, C and scorning 1, 2, 3. Duna Maver explains that this anti-manifesto sentiment among the Dadaists stems from Tzara's rejection of “the logic of territoriality” (76). Tzara felt the Futurist/Vorticist manifestos' drawing of dividing lines between accepted and violently rejected dogma was too much a process of rational thought, which he viewed with suspicion, holding it responsible for Europe's seemingly endless and pointless intellectual debates and armed conflagrations. Tzara thus resisted the competitive nature of dialectics, which pitted intellectual camps against each other, each vying for control of the territory of the mind, and imagined Dadaism as outside of dialectical rationalism. Answering dialectical debates dialectically, on their terms, he thought, would merely affirm and reinforce the context in which rationality is valorized. Says Tzara: “Dialectics kills. It lives by producing corpses, which lie strewn across an empty field where the wind has ceased to blow.”

Dadaism helped spawn other avant-garde groups who refused to play the manifesto's rational-thought-driven game of wanting A, B, C and scorning 1, 2, 3. For

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<sup>2</sup> It hardly needs mentioning that *English*, the language of the unwashed masses in King William's time, and ever more the mainstream language of our current global village, should never be admitted into any truly radical manifesto.

isn't it much more radical to want A, B, *Q*? Or to want, as Tzara wanted, *nothing*? Such groups were quick to write manifestos to describe this new desire for *irrational* things. Breton's *Surrealist Manifesto of 1924* announces his disdain for rational systems, and imagines and desires a dreamy world beyond them:

We are still living under the reign of logic [...] But in this day and age logical methods are applicable only to solving problems of secondary interest. The absolute rationalism that is still in vogue allows us to consider only facts relating directly to our experience. (1)

Action-based groups like the Situationists and Fluxus, too, removed themselves from what they considered life's prescribed rational systems; the *Situationist Manifesto of 1960* states: "we dispute [political and union organizations'] capacity to organize anything other than the management of that which already exists" (1). Perhaps seeing how Tzara ultimately abandoned Dadaism on the basis of its unsustainability, due to its innate lack of goals, Guy Debord innovated a way in which Situationism could create its own self-contained, self-reflexive goals and thus establish a kind of dialectics but still remain beholden to none. This was to elicit a seemingly contradictory<sup>3</sup> blurring of the distinction between art and "life" in general or at large, which had been a main goal of the avant-garde at least since Marinetti. But the Situationists did not shy from contradictions. Indeed, it seems they sought them out, celebrated them, performed them. For example, they might on the one hand claim that Situationists engage in the "theory or practical activity of constructing situations," and in their next sentence they might define Situationism as "a meaningless term improperly derived from the above," or claim "the notion of situationism is obviously devised by antisituationists" (1). Situationism's manifesto itself performs its own goal

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<sup>3</sup> (to their goal of remaining beholden to none)

of irrationality by self-medicating, through absurd contradiction, its own rationalist infections. And performing such contradictions sustained strange, self-reflexive goals because contradictions contain their own inner dialectic.

This hostility to non-self-contradiction, this refusal to play the self-affirming games of others, pervades Situationism's situations, such as their infamous situationist sandpaper book-cover, which serves to erode textual environments indiscriminately, or the Situationist International presentation in 1989 at London's *Institute of Contemporary Arts*, at which an audience member who asked inquisitively, "What is situationism?" was countered with "We are not here to answer cuntish questions." Such self-reflexive rejections of all precedent contexts draw from Emerson, who urged would-be self-reliant freethinking scholars of his day to stop listening to "the courtly muses of Europe," reminding them that "meek young men" who "grow up in libraries" forget that Cicero, Locke and Bacon were only young men in libraries when they wrote [their] books" (Emerson 934). Sentiments such as these must have come to the Situationists via Marinetti who also picked up on Emersonians self-reliant library-scorn, frequently sandpapering the same views upon museums and the visual arts. In his *Futurist Manifesto of 1909*, he claims: "To admire an old painting is to pour our sensitiveness into a funeral urn, instead of throwing it forward by violent casts of creation and action" (1).

Surely, then, quoting "great writers" in a radical manifesto exposes one's lust for accepted precedents and rational dialogues, for dusty, dead canonical authors and artists to rise and swivel at one's command either for or against. I can see little difference between such manifesto methodology—of bringing out the big literary

guns to impress your readers—and Kaczynski’s firebrand bombasticism. And we know how that story ended.<sup>4</sup>

### **Rule Four**

***EVERYONE deserves a say: DO NOT publish your manifesto.***

The self-reflexive illogic of Situationism and its affiliates has germinated through the so-called postmodern age, informing a menagerie of avant-garde *isms* whose manifestos increasingly prized self-negation, self-deprecation, and a general tongue-in-cheek unseriousness. The invented personalities of the *Neoist Manifesto*, for instance, engage in faux-angst riddled agit-prop yoked to no clear agenda other than one of obfuscation of anything that might be construed as one. Such is the case when “Karen Eliot” scorns “people so far behind the times as to look for intellectual meanings in a text.” This is a sticky stumper. If we take at face value Eliot’s meaning, that we should not look for meaning in a text, we have immediately not taken her implicit advice to not look for meaning in a text in the act of taking her advice, in even thinking that her meaning should be taken so seriously. But, if there is no meaning to the text that says there are no meanings in texts, then...maybe...there *are* meanings? But if that meaning is to say that there are none... Hmm. The hall-of-mirrors effect of this paradox endlessly replicates an empty rhetoric.

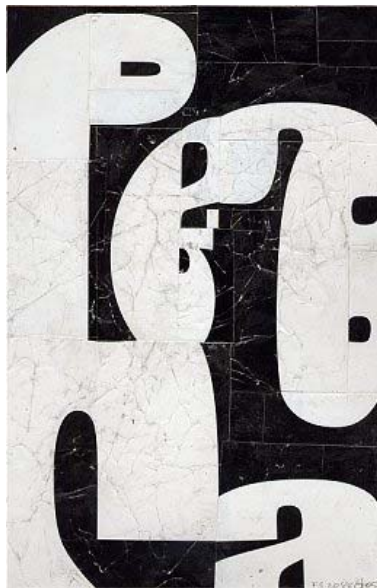
Replication, of which we will shortly see more (and more tangible) examples, has been one of defining characteristic of postmodernist art, art which becomes a Platonic '*simulacrum*, ' fitting in and fitting for an age redundant with the mass

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<sup>4</sup> According to Ryan Simmons, “Kaczynski shows that the distinction between authorship and terrorism is increasingly untenable.”

production of so many soup cans, Campbells' or Warhol's, or both (Jameson 158, Eagleton 133)—it would hardly matter to the Neoists and likeminded *ists*, because to them art and life have become interchangeable; their manifesto, the same one that scorns intellectual meanings in texts, also celebrates

the recycling, editing rearranging, reprocessing and reusing of multiplicity, of the political propaganda, corporate commercial messages and cultural signs that are presented to us every day through the media - the new spectacular landscape that has replaced nature...”



***The New and Improved Neoist Manifesto*** says you should not look for meaning in a text, but rather read it like a painting...or *does* it?

Beyond this blank pastiche, such Warholian “consumer fetishisms——do not seem to function as critical or political statements” (Jameson 158). Martin Puchner has the same experience of other postmodern manifestos. In a stagebill for the Lincoln Center Festival he finds that Bloomingdale’s has issued *Isabella Rossellini’s Manifesto*

which instructs the reader to “Write your own manifesto” in its blank spaces, leaving it to the reader to decide what it will say. Thus this mass-produced blank invitation serves to democratize the avant-garde manifesto genre once reserved for cultural elites, much like how Warhol’s mass produced silk-screened soup cans, in theory mimicking what Henry Ford’s Model-T did for the auto market, made “art” accessible to mere plebs. But in bringing itself to mass consumerist culture, the manifesto has *become* mass consumerist culture. Puchner notes this simulacrum, considering *Isabella Rossellini’s Manifesto*, where

it does not matter what kind of manifesto you write as long as you write it with Bloomingdale’s products [...] Just as avant-garde aesthetics has been appropriated by institutions such as the Lincoln Center, so the manifesto’s revolutionary gesture has been appropriated by advertisement.

Bill Drummond’s *Open Manifesto*, too, exhibits mass consumer culture’s tincturing of a genre that has been opened up and emptied out. Appearing online, but otherwise structurally identical to *Isabella Rossellini’s Manifesto*, Drummond’s *Open Manifesto* lets readers mark empty boxes of cyberspace with content.<sup>5</sup> As long as they limit their input to 100 words or less, their squares of radicalism might then be quilted into the ever-growing document. Jim Beattie has made the cut with:

FUCK ART I WANT A BURGER

*jim beattie United Kingdom 252: 13/12/06*

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<sup>5</sup> Most recent manifestos have been groomed for cyberspace, where we see, concurrent with the what is arguably (relatively speaking) the greatest explosion of radical pamphleteering and avant-garde manifesto-making since the lead up to the English Civil War, the democratization (for those who can afford computers and who are willing to subjugate themselves under the infrastructures and bad postures that make them possible) of self-replicating self-revolving satellites toppling themselves, toppling all but the means behind the simulacrum, what for me says “Acer” or “Windows XP.”

So Drummond merely midwives Beattie's revolutionary revelation, the likes of which have not been seen since Pound delivered us from (T.S.) Eliot's police voices, except here the revolution turns a turnstile into a McDo's, chrome to reflect naught but a McDo's hard ad copy soundbyte mindcrack.<sup>6</sup> Thus Drummond's and Isabella Rossellini's manifesto silences speak volumes about the consequences of the postmodern tendency to view saying as some kind of colonialist, oppressive, soul-crushing enterprise. Where, as Puchner claims Isabella Rossellini "shies away from writing on behalf of anyone, from exerting any kind of authority," and Drummond's *Open Manifesto* seemingly seeks, if anything, to keep Drummond from speaking, a vacuum gapes, until the prevailing tendencies of the environment (i.e. the desire for burgers, in this case) get sucked up into it and the medium becomes, so long as the receiver hangs up his or her hang-ups, the "message."

But why so nervous about saying when this age has run rife with Karen Eliots, all proclaiming the essentially arbitrary tie between signifier and signified? If we wield such noodley weaponry when we use words, why the reticence? Shouldn't saying become then like a Nerf sport, where, since the projectiles are divested of the means to harm, the use of them compensates with increased vigour? But the opposite has been the case. Postmodernist avant-garde groups like the Neoists, Fluxus and others struggle to reconcile what Puchner calls the authoritative and dogmatic character of the manifesto with their own agenda of toppling authorities and dogmas. This concern among manifesto writers seemingly proceeds from concerns underpinning our *Rule Three* against the use of quotation. The fear is that when we

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<sup>6</sup> Puchner notes the difference between this newer tendency of the manifesto and those of Marinetti's time: "The manifesto, a form that shuns reflection and privileges action, is thus turned back on itself; a genre of action becomes a genre of reflection" (453).

speaking, our future selves might be for others what Cicero was for Emerson's would-be self-reliant scholars, a pedigreed aristocrat canonically oppressing all who had not yet written their own declarations of independence, who thus might allow themselves to be intellectually bullied by the past. This fear is perhaps the main reason why Karen Eliot seems so bent on proclaiming the meaninglessness of words; it is her alibi, if she ever comes to exist and gets called an authoritarian tyrant for having a manifesto and using it as a platform to propound, as would a dictator, an authoritarian agenda, even if it is that of not having one.

This is not a new conflict, between wanting to say and not wanting to oppress. It raged even in the time of coffee-coated Franklin. Franklin's avant-garde manifesto *Information to Those Who Would Remove to America*, describes a democratized New World where the old thrones of Europe have been toppled to the extent that a typical American of his time would

think himself more oblig'd to a Genealogist, who could prove for him that his Ancestors & Relations for ten Generations had been Ploughmen, Smiths, Carpenters, Turners, Weavers, Tanners... & consequently that they were useful Members of Society; than if he could only prove that they were Gentlemen, doing nothing of Value, but living idly off the Labour of others... and otherwise good for nothing... (3)

Yet, apparently, the consequences of this American genealogical ideal, which revokes aristocratic lineages could not be reconciled with Franklin's own manifest authorial ambitions; at the time of his writing his *Information* he is living in France, for reasons that he divulges while waxing secretly autobiographic:

Hence the natural geniuses that have arisen in America, with such Talents, have uniformly quitted that country for Europe, where they can be more suitably rewarded. (5)

On the surface here he is simply talking about how there are few in America rich enough to purchase the paintings and sculpture that adorn the palaces of the Old World aristocracy, and that painters and sculptors born in the New World have to go back to the Old if they wish to find work. But if we read (and even write a bit) between the lines, Franklin here unveils his realization that in a purely democratized world where no one has pedigreed, privileged access to realms of genius, a world consisting entirely of budding Ciceros, Bacons, Lockes, the supply of works of genius will always exceed the demand. For why would Americans subordinate themselves to the intellectual work of any “natural genius” when they’re supposedly aware of the latent natural genius within themselves? Realizing this supply/demand disparity in America, Franklin “quitted that country for Europe,” which remained a safe haven for the intellectual aristocracy, a place where he could dupe a literate leisure class to subordinate their natural geniuses to his, where he could reap “suitable reward” for being what he was, a precursor to Napoleon, the self-crowned dictator. Early American literature runs rife with this same conundrum. Hawthorne’s “The Devil in Manuscript” describes the same saturated market of “natural genius” in an idealized New World: ““What a volumous mass the unpublished literature of America must be!’ ‘Oh the Alexandrine manuscripts were nothing to it,’ said my friend” (Hawthorne 332). Here even an unpublished manuscript becomes an encoded demonic force, a sigil through which the would-be author invokes the Old One, the Old World monarch. For when out of frustration its unpublished state the story’s author Oberon throws his manuscript into the fireplace, it bursts into flames and, when its pages of

smoldering potency are borne aloft upon the chimney smoke and widely disseminate, it gets “published” at last. Then in an orgasmic thrill Oberon, too, becomes a Kandinskian, Napoleonic destroyer:

My tales!...The Chimney! The roof! The fiend has gone forth by night,  
and startled all in fear and wonder from their beds! Here I stand—a  
triumphant author! Huzza! Huzza! My brain has set the town on fire.

(Hawthorne 337)

Ambitions of authorship will always run rife with passé Great War violence, will always betray a lust for canonical pedigree and remain thus un-avant. Unless you keep your "natural genius" to yourself, you are, like Franklin, like Napoleon: you claim to bring us all a new order of things; then you don the well-rested-on laurel crown of the tyrant. So, in the strictest sense, there is no “freedom of the press.” When you send to the press you oppress in your nostalgia for an authoritarian voice. And, if in the dissemination of our writing we thus destroy the free world, if we atrophy the arms of the populace by flexing our intellectual muscles for them, if we impoverish by giving gifts to those who would have gifts to give had they not been so used to just receiving them, then even an unpublished manuscript contains potential for powder-keg potentates like Oberon’s imps in an unopened Pandora's box.

Knowing all this, seemingly, the writers of the most recent crop of manifestos have seen to it that their projects have become, as much as possible, exercises in non-existence. Michael Betancourt, for example, has written *The \_\_\_\_\_ Manifesto of 1996*, which allows online readers to fill in blanks punctured texts culled from Dadaist manifestos. And even this isn’t enough to render all authoritarian agendas blank, since, at the end of the manifesto, there is a *reset* button; even these online participants ultimately undermine themselves. The *Stuckist Manifesto*, too,

perpetuates a Karen Eliotian self-denouncery, spinning and nibbling on the heels of an ouroboros: “Stuckism embraces all that it denounces. We only denounce that which stops at the starting point — Stuckism starts at the stopping point!”(1) So clearly, after reviewing these most recent manifestos, one feels that erasure is the best antidote for them. And with such conclusions, I feel that I can only advise such a rule of thumb for manifestos in general; they should never explicitly or implicitly advise others on what they should or shouldn’t do, say or believe. So perhaps the best bet would be to steer clear of publishing them or even writing them in the first place. Don’t say anything at all...because ultimately “everyone” deserves a say.

### ***Rule Five***

#### ***Repeat Rules ONE through FIVE.***

To conclude, and to summarize my five points, the fiery pentagram, if you will, that shapes and sharpens this the most radical of radical pamphlets: drink coffee, don’t use explosives, never use French expressions (*bien sur!*), never involve yourself in dialectics with precedents, never publish nor write nor even think your manifesto. Ultimately you will undo the whole project of toppling vainglories, finding it a vainglorious activity, fitting only for radical self-debasement, for it will be clear that it is the rupture itself that has become vainglorious and status-quo, rather than the status-quo with which you are rupturing your ties.<sup>7</sup> Then, post-ultimately, you will find such a reposed response of self-undoing, or of not doing the undoing or toppling or rupturing, though seeming at first militantly *avant*, also signals an epoch of an epic retreat from the leading edge. For, by constantly turning inward in self-reflexive navel

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<sup>7</sup> Puchner speaks at length about this dominant feature of the avant-garde manifesto, how, over a hundred years the revolution it wants to elicit has itself grown passe: “Futurism breaks with Symbolism; Vorticism breaks with Futurism; Dadaism breaks with everything that came before; Surrealism breaks with Dadaism; Situationism breaks with Surrealism; Fluxus breaks with Dada; Conceptual Art breaks with Fluxus[...] Each time, the break with the past is the preparation for a new departure” (451).

erasing, the Situationists and like-minded avant-garders reveal their tactical affiliation with that age old tradition *Monasticism*, or the sleeping, or *the dead*.<sup>8</sup> The *Neoist Manifesto* says as much: “Going to sleep may be the most important part of the creative process.”<sup>9</sup>



Though I feel like I have failed my task, I should be going to sleep now, too, since the morning light is slowly steeping through my blinds. But how could I sleep when my bloodstream has become utterly saturated with boiling streams of caffeine? So I will leave myself out on this table for the breakfast of my soon-to-be waking comrades, who have been snoring for what seems fifty-odd years now. O my comrades, awake. Come spill me. Topple and upturn. Or topple my expectations of being toppled and leave me be. And then, when I am least expecting it, dash me round with your clumsily naïve futurist energies. I will bear your past-scorn when it comes. Yoke<sup>10</sup> my Gordian neck with your favored hand. Kiss me when you drink deep. Then out. Open

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<sup>8</sup> See Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” in *The Egoist*, September/December 1919, in which he evokes early 20<sup>th</sup> century manifestoes that severed themselves from the past. Here Eliot characterizes himself as “a member of the largest collective of all, the dead. Now bodiless, the dead are present as the living past of literature.”

<sup>9</sup> Siwel, my familiar rat, stays up with me tonight to help me edit. At this point she insists I transcribe a Marinettean fulminating rebuke, something about the self-aggrandizement involved in putting one’s self *sous rat-ure*? Something about the tyranny involved in leaving inviolate those who did not want to find themselves intellectually un-tyrannized? I can barely hear her through her squeaky snarls. Is she critiquing Situationism or Neoism or *me*?

<sup>10</sup> your desire for coffee upon

your mouth wide and proclaim your new era.<sup>11</sup> I will remain only faintly on your breath.

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<sup>11</sup> Apparently, at some point after I wrote this, someone spilled and splashed coffee all over my desk, staining the following rudimentary manifesto notes:

*The empty vessels of convo:*

1. Say or be said upon; you're the colonist or you're the colony (either can be *fun*).
2. Listen carefully. Speak carefully. That doesn't necessarily mean you can't say things like:  
*Oomph Brouhaha.*

*The convoy:*

1. Were going somewhere new now; we had better be prepared.
2. Newness is the new oldness.
3. We want an agenda too delicious and complex for bullet-point lists.
4. So (a) put this down and go on a long walk now. (b) Eat healthfully in moderation, and (c1) as much as possible, be kind to your surroundings.
5. (c2) Here's one I can't quite answer yet, so it will remain a question rather than a statement:  
Divvy out justice?
6. Don't despair, you'll die soon enough.

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