

The ART of the MANIFESTO

by Mary Ann Caws

The beginning of the 20th century witnessed what Mary Ann Caws has called “The Manifesto Moment”—a ten-year period of “glorious madness” in which nearly every -ism that we identify with Modernism proclaimed its existence. These manifestos were written predominantly by young writers and artists; one might even say that the manifesto is a youth genre, inspired not merely by the characteristic idealism of youth, but also by its infamous angst and anger.

One hundred years later, in the age of Columbine and in a time of heightened student violence, the manifesto may offer young writers, if not all writers, a proactive strategy for expressing their diverse frustrations and angers. The manifesto, as Columbia professor Steven Marcus has written, is a kind of “action writing,” and, as Caws herself reminds us, “the manifesto is a freeing device: for the self, and the oversocialized self.”—The Editors

TEACHING THE MANIFESTO

Originally a *manifesto* was a piece of evidence in a court of law, put on show to catch the eye. The manifesto was from the beginning, and has remained, a deliberate manipulation of the public view. Setting out the terms of the faith toward which the listening public is to be swayed, it is a document of an ideology, crafted to convince and convert or —occasionally—to show off and amuse.

The whole idea of a manifesto is to proclaim something or other in which you believe strongly, or to spoof that idea. It can be on behalf of a movement, real or imagined, in which you participate (or which you lead) or which you make up as a humorous idea.

In the case of a real manifesto, like *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), it is the ideological content that is made clear. In the case of an aesthetic manifesto, it is the point of view that you want to make obvious, even if you are spoofing it. In “Dada Excites Everything” (see p. 8), the Romanian poet Tristan Tzara, otherwise known as Papa-Dada, is at once mocking the egotism of movement-leaders and *being* the movement-creator and the leader of Dada. In “Aphorisms on Futurism” (see p. 7), the American poet Mina

MARY ANN CAWS is the editor of *Manifesto: A Century of Isms* (University of Nebraska Press, 2001). Caws is Distinguished Professor of English, French, and Comparative Literature at the Graduate School of CUNY. This article is adapted from her introduction to *Manifesto*.

Loy uses the aphorism to create a manifesto in every moment. The aphorism is a superbly modern genre in its brevity. It can stand alone or exist as part of a series, in which each item relates to the whole—at once a fragment and a statement complete in itself. Loy’s aphorisms are of the latter variety.

ELEMENTS OF THE MANIFESTO

MADNESS: At its most endearing, a manifesto has a madness about it. It is peculiar and angry, quirky, or downright crazed.

OPPOSITION: The manifesto is always opposed to something—generally posing some “we,” explicit or implicit, against some other “they.” The manifesto can be set up like a battlefield. It can start out as a credo, but then it wants to make a persuasive move from the “I believe” of the speaker toward the “you” of the listener or reader, who should be sufficiently convinced to join in.

VOLUME: The manifesto is by nature a loud genre, unlike the essay. What I would call the “high manifesto,” on the model of “high Modernism” is often noisy in its appearance, like a typographical alarm or an implicit rebel yell. It calls for capital letters, loves bigness, demands attention. Rem Koohaas’s “Bigness: Or the Problem of Large” begins, “Beyond a certain scale, architecture acquires the properties of Bigness. The best reason to broach Bigness is the one given by climbers of Mount Everest: ‘because it is there.’ Bigness is ultimate architecture.”

EXCESS: The manifesto makes an art of excess. This is how it differs from the standard and sometimes self-congratulatory *ars poetica*, rational and measured. The manifesto is an act of *démésure*, going past what is thought of as proper, sane, and literary. Its outreach demands an extravagant self-assurance.

STYLE: The manifesto has to draw the audience into the belief of the speaker, by hook or by crook. The present tense suits the manifesto, as does the rapid enumeration of elements in a list or bullet form. The Symbolist painter Odilon Redon begins his “Suggestive Arts” (1909) with a question: “What was it that at the beginning made my work difficult?” Similarly, Paul Klee writes in “On Modern Art” (1924): “May I use a simile, the simile of a tree?” Since we are invited to answer, we feel included. The manifesto is generally, by mode and form, an exhortation to a whole way of thinking and being rather than a simple command or definition. At its height, it is a poem in heightened prose.

Aphorisms on Futurism 1914–1919

DIE in the Past
Live in the Future.

THE velocity of velocities arrives in starting.
IN pressing the material to derive its essence, matter becomes deformed.

AND form hurtling against itself is thrown beyond the synopsis of vision.

THE straight line and the circle are the parents of design, form the basis of art; there is no limit to their coherent variability.

LOVE the hideous in order to find the sublime core of it.

OPEN your arms to the dilapidated; rehabilitate them.

YOU prefer to observe the past on which your eyes are already opened.

BUT the Future is only dark from outside.

Leap into it—and it EXPLODES with *Light*.

FORGET that you live in houses, that you may live in yourself—

FOR the smallest people live in the greatest houses.

BUT the smallest person, potentially, is as great as the Universe.

WHAT can you know of expansion, who limit yourselves to compromise?

HITHERTO the great man has achieved greatness by keeping the people small.

BUT in the Future, by inspiring the people to expand to their fullest capacity, the great man proportionately must be tremendous—a God.

LOVE of others is the appreciation of oneself.

MAY your egotism be so gigantic that you comprise mankind in your self-sympathy.

THE Future is limitless—the past a trail of insidious reactions.

LIFE is only limited by our prejudices. Destroy them, and you cease to be at the mercy of yourself.

TIME is the dispersion of intensiveness.

THE Futurist can live a thousand years in one poem.

HE can compress every aesthetic principle in one line.

THE mind is a magician bound by assimilations; let him loose and the smallest idea conceived in freedom will suffice to negate the wisdom of all fore-fathers.

LOOKING on the past you arrive at “Yes,” but before you can act upon it you have already arrived at “No.”

THE Futurist must leap from affirmative to affirmative, ignoring intermittent negations—must spring from stepping-stone to stone of creative exploration; without slipping back into the turbid stream of accepted facts.

THERE are no excrescences on the absolute, to which man may pin his faith.

TODAY is the crisis in consciousness.

CONSCIOUSNESS cannot spontaneously accept or reject new forms, as offered by creative genius; it is the new form, for however great a period of time it may remain a mere irritant—that molds consciousness to the necessary amplitude for holding it.

CONSCIOUSNESS has no climax.

LET the Universe flow into your consciousness, there is no limit to its capacity, nothing that it shall not re-create.

UNSCREW your capability of absorption and grasp the elements of Life—*Whole*.

MISERY is in the disintegration of Joy;

Intellect, of Intuition;

Acceptance, of Inspiration.

CEASE to build up your personality with the ejections of irrelevant minds.

NOT to be a cipher in your ambient,

But to color your ambient with your preferences.

NOT to accept experience at its face value.

BUT to readjust activity to the peculiarity of your own will.

THESE are the primary tentatives towards independence. [...]

ACCEPT the tremendous truth of Futurism

Leaving all those

Knick-knacks.

—Mina Loy

MINA LOY, “Aphorisms on Futurism (1914–1919),” *The Last Lunar Baedeker*, ed. Roger L. Conover (Highlands: The Jargon Society, 1982), p. 311. Reprinted courtesy of Roger L. Conover, Mina Loy’s literary executor.

DADA EXCITES EVERYTHING

(The signatories of this manifesto live in France, America, Spain, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Belgium, etc., but have no nationality.)

DADA knows everything. DADA spits everything out.

BUT

HAS DADA EVER SPOKEN TO YOU:

YES - NO about Italy
YES - NO about accordions
YES - NO about women's pants
 about the fatherland
 about sardines
 about Fiume
 about Art (you exaggerate my friend)
 about gentleness
 about D'Annunzio
 what a horror
 about heroism
 about mustaches
 about lewdness
 about sleeping with Verlaine
 about the ideal (it's nice)
 about Massachusetts
 about the past
 about odors
 about salads
 about genius. about genius. about genius
 about the eight-hour day
 and about Parma violets

NEVER NEVER NEVER

DADA doesn't speak. DADA has no fixed idea. DADA doesn't catch flies.

**THE MINISTRY IS OVERTURNED. BY WHOM?
BY DADA**

The Futurist is dead. Of What? Of DADA

YES - NO A young girl commits suicide. Because of What? DADA
 The spirits are telephoned. Who invented it? DADA
 Someone walks on your feet. It's DADA
 If you have serious ideas about life,
 If you make artistic discoveries
 and if all of a sudden your head begins to crackle with
 laughter,
 if you find all your ideas useless and ridiculous, know that

IT IS DADA BEGINNING TO SPEAK TO YOU

cubism constructs a cathedral of *artistic* liver paste
WHAT DOES DADA DO?
 expressionism poisons *artistic* sardines
WHAT DOES DADA DO?
 simultaneism is still at its first *artistic* communion
WHAT DOES DADA DO?
 futurism wants to mount in an *artistic* lyricism-elevator
WHAT DOES DADA DO?
 unaniam embraces allism and fishes with an *artistic* line
WHAT DOES DADA DO?
 neo-classicism discovers the good deeds of *artistic* art
WHAT DOES DADA DO?
 paroxysm makes a trust of all *artistic* cheeses
WHAT DOES DADA DO?
 ultraism recommends the mixture of these seven *artistic* things
WHAT DOES DADA DO?
 creationism vorticism imagism also propose some *artistic* recipes
WHAT DOES DADA DO?

WHAT DOES DADA DO?

50 francs reward to the person who finds the best
 way to explain DADA to us

Dada passes everything through a new net.
 Dada is the bitterness which opens its laugh on all that which has been
made consecrated forgotten in our language in our brain in our habits.
 It says to you: There is Humanity and the lovely idiocies which have made
 it happy to this advanced age

DADA HAS ALWAYS EXISTED

THE HOLY VIRGIN WAS ALREADY A DADAIST

DADA IS NEVER RIGHT

Citizens, comrades, ladies, gentlemen
 Beware of forgeries!

Imitators of DADA want to present DADA in an *artistic* form which it has
 never had

CITIZENS,

You are presented today in a pornographic form, a vulgar and baroque spirit
 which is not the PURE IDIOCY claimed by DADA

BUT DOGMATISM AND PRETENTIOUS IMBECILITY

Paris January 12, 1921

E. Varèse, Tr. Tzara, Ph. Soupault,
 Soubeyran, J. Rigaut, G. Ribemont-Dessaignes, M. Ray, F. Picabia,
 B. Péret, C. Pansaers, R. Hülsenbeck, J. Evola, M. Ernst,
 P. Eluard, Suz. Duchamp, M. Duchamp, Crotti, G. Cantarelli, Marg. Buffet,
 Gab. Buffet, A. Breton, Baargeld, Arp., W. C. Arensberg,
 L. Aragon.

For all information
 write "AU SANS PAREIL"
 37, Avenue Kléber.
 Tel. PASSY 25-22

—Tristan Tzara

TRISTAN TZARA, "Dada Manifesto (1918)," in *Approximate Man and Other Writings*, ed. and trans. by Mary Ann Caws (Wayne State University Press, 1973), pp. 147-48.