

## The Manifesto. Negotiating Reality

*Nanna Katrine Bisbjerg*

With *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism* (1909) by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Tristan Tzara's *DADA Manifesto 1918* (1918) as cases this article will discuss the negotiations of time and history taking place in the avant-garde manifestos.

The writing, reading and proclamation of manifestos has from the very beginning been a central practice for what we today call the avant-gardes.

The avant-garde manifesto is in more than one way a transgressive and transforming genre.

The avant-garde manifesto places itself in between the spheres of art and theory; it is both to be seen as theory, as directions and guidelines for the future art to come, and as a work of art in itself. That is, the manifesto is both means and end, both action and goal.

### *The Manifesto as performative*

The manifesto can be seen as an action or as a performative, since it founds the movement, and founds the "we" of the movement that it represents. The writing, reading or declamation of the manifesto is what founds the movement.

Besides the performative character of the manifesto is underscored by the fact that the manifesto was often declared from stages, as was for example Tristan Tzara's *Dada Manifesto 1918*.

Theoretically, the manifesto as an action, or as a performative, can be explained with the British philosopher of language J.L. Austin's theory of speech acts presented in his book *How to do things with words* (1962).

Austin shows how language acts and not just says. How certain utterances are not only descriptive or to use Austin's word constative, but actually acts, performs an action, which directly influences the social reality. The performative or perlocutionary utterance *does* what it says.

The manifesto is a founding and defining action. As an example of this we have these lines from *The Manifesto of Futurism*:

*It is from Italy that we launch this violently upsetting incendiary manifesto of ours.*

*With it today we establish Futurism.<sup>1</sup>*

According to Austin it does not make sense to judge the perlocutionary utterance as to whether it is verifiable or not, whether it is true or false. Instead it must be judged according to other criteria, most importantly according to criteria of seriousness. These criteria are for example; if the circumstances are appropriate, the intention of the one speaking, and if the one speaking / uttering the performative and thereby performing the action has the authority to do so<sup>1</sup>.

Martin Puchner in his book *Poetry of Revolution* (2007) claims, that the manifesto does not fulfil these criteria since it (or the subject pronouncing it) lacks the authority it claims to possess, the manifesto does not yet possess this authority. Puchner after all grants the manifestos if not performative power then at least theatrical power. According to Puchner the manifestos assume the performative power of speech acts. They assume the authority, which they do not yet have. In continuation of Puchner one can say, that the manifesto borrows its point of enunciation, and in that way its authority, from the future. The manifesto projects itself forward in time anticipating what will have happened and speaks as if it had already happened, as if the movement was already founded, as if this we of the movement already existed and the manifesto already possessed the authority of this “we”

### *Negotiations of time and history*

When the manifesto is seen as an action, as a performative (or at least as a theatrical assuming to be a performative), it becomes clear, that the manifesto contains as a central aspect political discussions about the experience of time and history.

It is not only in regard to the categories of theory, work and praxis, that the manifesto places itself in between, it is also in regard to time. The manifestos are both dealing with the conception of past, present and future. They are rewriting, negotiating and subverting the conceptions of time and history, and different conceptions of time and history can be seen within a single manifesto.

As an example of this and of how the manifesto projects itself or its point of enunciation forward in time, into the future, look at this part from the futurist manifesto:

*So let them come, the gay incendiaries with charred fingers! Here they are! Here they are!*

*Come on! Set fire to the library shelves! Turn aside the channels to flood the museums!... Oh the*

---

<sup>1</sup> E.g. to marry somebody is done by a performative utterance, but you have to be a priest or the like to perform this action .

*joy of seeing the glorious old canvases bobbing adrift on those waters, discoloured and shredded!...*<sup>ii</sup>

Here we see a lot of the manifestos devices; imperatives, exclamation marks, the grammatical tense shifts from future to present tense. In this piece of text the actions the futurists want to make happen are happening now, they have already happened, the museums have already been flooded and the paintings are now drifting in the water.

This is an example of how the manifesto occupies the future. The manifesto writes about the future as if it had already happened, it writes about the not-yet-being, the not yet existing and in that way gives it textual form and existence in the present.

This is a way of actualizing the future, and of making a radical different future easier to imagine. Here the future is not some distant dream, it can and will happen, it is happening now!

#### *The “now” of the manifesto*

The time of the manifesto is this “now”, this moment where the future becomes actualized, a moment of inevitable action.

In its founding action the manifesto often (re)writes the history of the past leading up to this now of the manifesto; the moment of action. In this rewriting the manifesto foregrounds other things and aspects than the dominant discourse (of for example society) and shows that everything is not good, that there are injustices and other bad things going on.

Before the manifesto’s “now”, before the break with the past, it must be made clear why a radical break with the past is desired.

In the first part of *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism* before the launching of the actual manifesto, Marinetti writes of the past as:

*The old canal muttering in feeble prayers and the creaking bones of sickly palaces above their damp green beards*<sup>iii</sup>

Here the heritage from the future is portrayed as sick, unhealthy and weak, as something negative, as “a horrible shell of wisdom”<sup>iv</sup> that the futurists wants to “break out of”<sup>v</sup>.

And this is what they explicitly do in the launching of the manifesto, where they “affirm the new beauty of speed”<sup>vi</sup>, and call the museums “graveyards” and “cemeteries” and wants too flood them and to set fire to the libraries.

This part of the text is portraying the past all the way up to the now of the manifesto in negative terms. At the same time this is a creation of a mythical version of the history of the birth of the futurist movement and manifesto. This complete mythical version even contains a metaphor of rebirth. When Marinetti crashes in his car and rolls over into a ditch, it is described like this:

*O maternal ditch, almost full of muddy water! Fair factory drain. I gulped down your nourishing sludge; and I remembered the blessed black breast of my Sudanese nurse..*<sup>vii</sup>

And it is of course after being reborn, after coming out of the ditch

*torn, filthy and stinking[...]  
faces smeared with good factory muck - plastered with metallic waste, with senseless sweat, with celestial soot [...]our arms in slings*<sup>viii</sup>,

that the manifesto is launched, that the futurists declare their “high intentions to all the living of the earth”<sup>ix</sup>.

In the *DADA Manifesto 1918* the rewriting of history is not mythical, here it becomes clear in a more directly political way why we have to break with the past. In the Dada manifesto we have criticism of religion, represented as “a crystalbluff-madonna”<sup>x</sup>, capitalism; “the monetary system”<sup>xi</sup> and of previous art movements’ attempts to break with capitalism and the bourgeois state of the art:

*We’ve had enough of the cubist and futurist academies: laboratories of formal ideas. Do we make art in order to make money and keep the bourgeoisie happy?.. Every group of artists has ended up at this bank, straddling various comets. Leaving the door open to the possibility of wallowing in comfort and food*<sup>xii</sup>

Dadaism puts forth a critique of the actual present society and of the other avant-garde movement's attempts to change this society, saying that they had not succeeded in what they promised, there was no break, no revolutionary action, these movements had just been a continuation of the old. This conception of time, where the future is only being thought as, and only possible as, a continuation of the past, Janet Lyon in her essay *Feminist Futural – Five Kinds of Time* calls “public time” using the vocabulary Guy Debord or “general time of society” using the vocabulary of Bergson and Deleuze. This “general time of society” is a universal and unidimensional conception of time, here time is deterministic and the future can be nothing but an elaboration of the past and present.

It is to a great extent this universal conception of time that the manifestos seek to negotiate. In the manifesto's founding action, in its “now”, it establishes a new point of enunciation, a new we. This becomes a platform from where the actions of changing the future of society can start. In a society dominated by an opponent discourse that leaves no room for other voices and other conceptions this is an important first step.

#### *Wishes for change and fears of assimilation*

Regarding Marinetti one can doubt that he had any problems with a universalistic conception of the world, of history and society, as long as it was his version, his truth that was the dominant one. The “now” Marinetti establishes in *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism* does make room for something new, it does establish a break. But this new we it establishes; “We the young and strong futurists” is indeed a very excluding we. It is the young and rich with time to waste, time to stay up all night, and with money to spend, money that gives access to cars and ensures it is not a big thing if a car crashes.

Marinetti stages that

*When we are forty, other younger and stronger men will probably throw us in the waste-baskets like useless manuscripts –we want that to happen.*<sup>xiii</sup>

Marinetti has no problem with the fact, that the manifesto as genre is also colonizing, and that it subscribes to a universalistic conception of truth, time and history, his only problem was, that according to him it was the wrong version of truth, that is not his version, that was the dominant one.

The paradox of the manifesto, the fact that it at the same time as it challenges universalism also affirms it, because it just creates a new version (for example of a supposed universal but in reality excluding we), Marinetti did not consider a problem.

This is very different for the Dadaists.

*The Dada Manifesto 1918* expresses a thorough rejection of universalism and its implied logic. This is clear all the way through this manifesto. Tzara starts by making ironic comments about the manifesto genre:

*To launch a manifesto you have to want: A. B. & C. and fulminate against 1, 2, & 3:  
I am writing a manifesto and there's nothing I want<sup>xiv</sup>*

Here Dada also negotiates the rules of the manifesto, the limits and conventions of the genre itself (which is also why the Dada manifestos are sometimes called anti-manifestos).

In *The Dada Manifesto 1918* the opposites continue, nowhere is there a clear definition of anything. Where Marinetti in *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism* (1909) used the first third part of the text to create a myth of the birth of the manifesto and movement, this Dada manifesto claims, that

*DADA DOES NOT MEAN ANYTHING<sup>xv</sup>*

And continues by listing up all the different explanations that have been given by others of the origin of the word:

*We read in papers that the Negroes of the Kroo race call the tail of a sacred cow: DADA. A cube, and a mother, in a certain region of Italy, are called: DADA. The word for a hobby horse, a children's nurse, a double affirmative in Russian and Romanian is also DADA.<sup>xvi</sup>*

Tzara continues with ironically calling the persons who try to explain the word “learned journalists”, “bourgeois little playwrights and” “jesuscallingthelittlechildrentohim saints”<sup>xvii</sup> and thereby connecting them to old conservative institutions (“stiffened faculties”<sup>xviii</sup>), capitalism and religion. Ideologies and institutions which for Tzara and Dada all represent universalistic and oppressing ways of thinking and acting.

Tzara continues:

*a sensitivity cannot be built on the basis of a word; every sort of construction converges into a boring form of perfection, a stagnant idea of a golden swamp<sup>xix</sup>*

Again we see the universalism and stagnation of society foregrounded, the “general time of society” is the dominant conception of time in the society Dada wants to break with.

When in the last part of the manifesto it is claimed that Dada is

*the abolition of logic” of memory of archaeology , of prophets and the abolition of the future<sup>xx</sup>*

it is exactly “general time of society”, the stagnant conception of time and history, the conception, where the future can be nothing but a continuation of past and present, that they want to abolish. In the opinion of Dada the dominant discourse of today, the way we think today only enables us to imagine the future as a continuation of the past and present and they want to abolish that.

The elaboration of history following this logic is exactly what

*has made it impossible for us to be anything other than impassive towards policemen –the cause of slavery- putrid rats with whom the bourgeois are fed up to the teeth, and who have infected the only corridors of clear and clean grass that remained open to artists.<sup>xxi</sup>*

Whether this is a direct attack on policemen blaming them for slavery, I cannot say, but it is for sure an attack on the society they represent, a society dominated by a universalistic way of thinking, that has made us unable to see the absurdity and injustices of the world (e.g. slavery in all its forms), and to imagine the possibility of a radically different and better world.

*Capacities for change? Some questions and conclusions.*

But can Dada do anything more than make us capable of thinking outside the box, than make us aware of the absurdity of the world and make us wanting a radically different future? Can they and do they propose a better version of society?

The Dada painter and film maker Hans Richter writes in 1964:

*After Dada had proclaimed for six years that everything must be, ought to be and was being put an end to, turned upside down and left there – it put an end to itself.[..] Dada had given birth to a new way of thinking, a new attitude a new ethos .. both in art and thought . But by its very nature[.]. It could not become a discipline or a theory – not in the universe of liberty that it had itself set out to claim.<sup>xxii</sup>*

It is here that Richter sees Dadaism changing into Surrealism, he doesn't see Surrealism as an antithesis to Dada, (- in the beginning, he says, it is very hard to tell the difference,) but the nihilism of Dada had to be extended with a theory, a goal and an orientation towards the future, a plan of action.

But with the surrealists' launching of manifestos or more exactly with the surrealist disputes about who was allowed to launch manifestos, it again becomes very clear, that the control over the manifesto goes hand in hand with the control over the history of the movement. The dispute of the surrealist manifestos was very much about exercising this control.

If surrealism did succeed in suggesting and realizing a new society, or if, as Danish lecturer Mikkel Bolt would say, the Situationists and Situationist International were the first to conscious attempt to unite Dada's negations with a more socially functional art, is a question I cannot discuss any further here. .

What we can conclude is, that the manifestos were and are still very powerful. Especially according to the historization the manifestos were and are powerful, it is still to the manifestos we go back and in the manifestos we find our sources and support when we want to define, understand and historize the avant-gardes.

### *Bibliography*

- Austin, J.L.: *How to do Things with Words*, Oxford University Press 1976
- Bolt, Mikkel: *Den uundgæelige opløsning af afsavnets verden. Situationisterne som manifestoskrivere* Kultur & Klasse 107, Medusa 2009 p. 74-90
- Lyon, Janet: *Feminist Futural – Five Kinds of Time*, in "Manifest", Rett Kopi
- Lyon, Janet: *Manifestos. Provocations of the Modern*, Cornell University Press 1999,

- Marinetti, F: *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism* in “Art in Theory” 1900-1990, (Ed. Harrison & Wood) Blackwell Publishers, Oxford 1992 p. 145- 149
- Puchner, Martin: *Poetry of the Revolution. Marx Manifestos and the Avant-Gardes*, Princeton 2007
- Richter, Hans: *DADA. Art and antiart*, Thames and Hudson, London 1978,
- Tzara, Tristan: *Dada Manifesto 1918*, English version in the archive on the webpage [www.391.org](http://www.391.org) under “Tzara 23/3 1918”  
(A scan of the original French version from the magazine “DADA #3” can be seen on ubuweb: [http://www.ubuweb.com/historical/dada/pdf/Dada-No.3\\_Dec-1918\\_Page-01.pdf](http://www.ubuweb.com/historical/dada/pdf/Dada-No.3_Dec-1918_Page-01.pdf) )

---

i	<i>Founding and Manifesto of Futurism</i> (1909)
ii	<i>Founding and Manifesto of Futurism</i> (1909)
iii	<i>Founding and Manifesto of Futurism</i> (1909)
iv	<i>Founding and Manifesto of Futurism</i> (1909).The quotation in its whole sounds: <i>Let’s break out of the horrible shell of wisdom and throw ourselves like pride-ripened fruit into the wide, contorted mouth of the wind!</i>
v	
vi	<i>Founding and Manifesto of Futurism</i> (1909) : <i>We affirm that the world’s magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty: The beauty of speed</i>
vii	<i>Founding and Manifesto of Futurism</i> (1909) The quotation in its whole sounds: O maternal ditch, almost full of muddy water! Fair factory drain. I gulped down your nourishing sludge; and I remembered the blessed black breast of my Sudanese nurse...When I came up – torn, filthy and stinking from under the capsized car, I felt the white-hot iron of joy deliciously pass through my heart! [...] And so, faces smeared with good factory muck - plastered with metallic waste, with senseless sweat, with celestial soot – we, bruised, our arms in slings, but unafraid, declared our high intentions to all the living of the earth
viii	<i>Founding and Manifesto of Futurism</i> (1909)
ix	<i>Founding and Manifesto of Futurism</i> (1909)
x	<i>Dada Manifesto 1918</i>
xi	<i>Dada Manifesto 1918</i>
xii	<i>Dada Manifesto 1918</i>
xiii	<i>Founding and Manifesto of Futurism</i> (1909)
xiv	<i>Dada Manifesto 1918</i>
xv	<i>Dada Manifesto 1918</i>
xvi	<i>Dada Manifesto 1918</i>
xvii	<i>Dada Manifesto 1918</i>
xviii	<i>Dada Manifesto 1918</i>
xix	<i>Dada Manifesto 1918</i>
xx	<i>Dada Manifesto 1918</i>
xxi	<i>Dada Manifesto 1918</i>
xxii	<i>DADA. Art and antiart</i> (1978)