

‘Pandemic and Protest, Revolution and Reflection: The Online Manifesto in 2020-2021’

Julian Hanna, Tilburg University (Netherlands) & ITI/LARSyS (Portugal)

Preamble

Welcome to the season of our discontent. I hope this finds you well.

The manifesto is the *ur*-genre of the avant-garde, reflecting (and often encouraging) crisis and upheaval in politics, society and the arts. The genre’s high period, what Mary Ann Caws calls the ‘manifesto moment’, happened a century ago, in the decade following the first manifesto of Italian Futurism of 1909, and there have been several waves since (Caws, xxii). Most studies of the manifesto, however, were written before 2008, and so they (largely) miss the latest wave - the digital manifesto - and the unprecedented upheaval that has accompanied this newly invigorated form between the years 2008-2021.

Manifestos thrive in times like these - times of uncertainty, times of crisis, and also (because we must be hopeful) times of promise. I wrote about some of these themes in *The Manifesto Handbook*, which came out in February of last year, on the eve of the pandemic. The following month, Breanne Fahs’ extensive anthology *Burn It Down! Feminist Manifestos for the Revolution* was published. As Fahs states in her introduction: ‘we have returned again to a period of cultural reckoning People who once stood on the sidelines are jumping into the fray’ (3). Through mainstream social media platforms including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, as well as niche and alternative online spaces, the manifesto has reclaimed its function as a primary marker of history in the making. But whether analogue or digital, the manifesto has always served extremely diverse movements and ends. Taking the optimistic view, manifestos can act, in the words of the sociologist Bruno Latour (in his ‘Compositionist Manifesto’), ‘Not as a war cry ... but rather as a warning, a call to attention, so as to stop going further in the same way as before toward the future’ (473).

In this paper I will survey some of the dozens of manifestos that have appeared online in the past year and attempt to draw some conclusions and place them in a broader context of online culture. As I note in my book, manifestos are always at the bleeding edge of culture and politics (often literally). The threats they contain are potent because they are sincere: there is always enough instability and wildness about the manifesto to give it real menace - the possibility, near or distant, of real danger, real action, actual revolution. What kinds of manifestos will we need going forward into the 2020s - a decade that (let’s face it) is not off to an easy start, and that urgently requires our active engagement as scholars and citizens? What kinds of manifestos do we deserve, and what kind will we get?

I began collecting manifestos (even more than usual) at the start of the pandemic, keeping a sort of hybrid pandemic-protest manifesto diary. As we all know, it was a very out-of-the-ordinary year, a year whose only consolation perhaps is the feeling that one is living through and bearing witness to history in the making. The account that follows is divided chronologically, moving through the four seasons beginning in Spring 2020 and concluding with the current season (as I write this), Spring 2021. The flourishing of manifestos of all types has shown 2020-2021 to be a period of both action and reflection. More precisely it was a year of reflection and reevaluation (spring) followed by action and upheaval (summer) followed by frustration and promises of change (autumn) followed by reaction and acceleration into near collapse (winter) followed by mounting fatigue, near

delirium, and finally some hope for the future with the arrival of spring and vaccinations. But alongside this wider progression of the seasons there are also subtler cultural shifts which the manifesto may help to trace, including changes to forms of expression as new technologies are taken up and new digital habits and techniques are born or refined and disseminated across new (as well as older) platforms, creating new possibilities.

Spring 2020

If there is one manifesto emblematic of the tone of Spring 2020 it must be 'The Self-Quarantine Manifesto' launched from the website #StayTheFuckHome. The blunt and practical open source manifesto, launched in March in 25 languages, describes itself as 'a set of loose guidelines for people who wish to join the movement and take action that can actually make a difference'. Another high profile manifesto from March, this time focusing - even at this early stage - on actions for bringing about a different post-pandemic world, was published by Bruno Latour on both the recently launched French news and analysis site *AOC* and in several languages on Latour's own website. It takes the form of a questionnaire; a notable variation on the traditional top-down approach of even the most revolutionary manifestos. There is still some combative manifesto phrasing, however. For example: 'Now is the time for the annual stock-take. When common sense asks us to "start production up again as quickly as possible", we have to shout back, "Absolutely not!"' But overall this kinder, gentler, more convivial and democratic style of manifesto is a continuation of the 'Compositionist' manifesto from a decade earlier. Seizing the opportunity for change at the outset of the pandemic, Latour asks: 'What are some suspended activities that you would like to see not coming back?' Similarly, New School design researcher Oscar Salguero's manifesto for a post-Covid world, 'HIBER 1.0: An Interior Life', focuses on the metaphor of hibernation, the forced break with consumerism and social life and the opportunity for introspection and planning for a post-pandemic world. The manifesto, published in March in several languages and disseminated both as a printable A1 poster and via an Instagram slideshow (an increasingly common form of activism), declares in a performative style: 'We are consumer dormant, yet cognitively dynamic. From this point forward, we can author the narrative.'

In the arts, new conditions brought by government responses to the first wave of the pandemic - including lockdown confinement, museum and theatre closures, and event cancellations - prompted an accompanying wave of manifestos. Some, like *e-flux* magazine's 'Letters Against Separation', launched by Hito Steyerl in April, and *3:AM Magazine*'s '3:AM in Lockdown' series, which ran from March to June, sought on one level to provide a space for conversations that were no longer taking place in person. On another level they opened up larger conversations about art or writing in general - how we create and how we live - that are similar in this sense and scale to the aim of Latour's questionnaire: to bring about a reckoning, to have a long overdue conversation about the big issues, and to think about what we truly want. At the same time, and again in parallel with Latour, there is a sense that this reckoning may require a different type of manifesto from the traditional one-note avant-garde provocation. As Guangzhou-based curator Nikita Yingqian Cai suggests: 'The recurring temporality, planetary scale, and racial-political ripples of the pandemic have shuffled our epistemological ground, be it in Guangzhou, Beijing, Tashkent, Mexico City, Italy, London, Berlin, Seoul, Moscow, somewhere in rural Russia, or on an island. The physical separation prompts us to identify with each other's doubts and ambivalence beyond direct actions and manifestos.'

Here again was the positive and hopeful silver lining of what Latour calls ‘this unexpected pause’: time to reflect and face the concerns that are overlooked in the mad rush of normal everyday life. Through May, City Lights Bookstore and Gray Area ran an open invitation manifesto series, with contributions made in short, self-shot video format by professional writers and artists (from Douglas Rushkoff to Annie Sprinkle) and non-professionals on a wide range of topics: ‘a collaborative poetic reflection on current sociopolitical, economic, and ecological challenges’. Published as a curated YouTube playlist, the selected manifestos appear as songs, rants, speeches, poems, and various other hybrid forms. Meanwhile, the issue of livelihood for artists and culture industry workers came to the fore. In Portugal, for example, a movement to protect cultural sector workers was launched (primarily via Facebook) in April with demonstrations held across the country and a manifesto signed by three hundred prominent artists and writers (‘Vigília Cultura e Artes’).

Despite the focus on the pandemic and its immediate effects, manifestos on other important issues also came to light. One example is the European-focused ‘Art for UBI’ manifesto, launched by the Institute of Radical Imagination in January 2020 and signed by Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi and other prominent artists and intellectuals, which would become especially timely in the coming months as the issue of a form of universal basic income for artists went mainstream during the pandemic as a result of closures. Another striking example is ‘Rethinking the Apocalypse: An Indigenous Anti-Futurist Manifesto’, a radical anti-manifesto launched in March, which proclaims in part:

We are not concerned with how our enemies name their dead world or how they recognize or acknowledge us or these lands. We are not concerned with re-working their ways of managing control or honoring their dead agreements or treaties. They will not be compelled to end the destruction that their world is predicated upon. We do not plead to with them to end global warming, as it is the conclusion of their apocalyptic imperative and their life is built upon the death of Mother Earth.

We bury the right wing and the left wing together in the earth they are so hungry to consume. The conclusion of the ideological war of colonial politics is that Indigenous Peoples always lose, unless we lose ourselves.

The manifesto ends with a blank space labelled ‘{emptiness}’, representing the future that was denied native peoples by colonisation.

Summer 2020

Then suddenly, as we all saw in the news, and many of us witnessed in the streets with our own eyes, another type of manifesto and manifestation was dominating international headlines. The death of George Floyd on 25 May, captured in a nine-minute-twenty-nine-second video, led to protests that were not only nationwide in the US but worldwide, in cities like Berlin and Paris, Lisbon and Rio de Janeiro. In June, several blocks of Seattle’s Capitol Hill neighbourhood were declared an autonomous zone (‘CHAZ’) by protesters. They issued a manifesto with a list of more than thirty demands, related to the justice system, education, the economy, and health and human services. The Black Lives Matter movement, meanwhile, had published various manifestos since its inception in 2013 following the killing of Trayvon Martin. With a new upsurge in support during the summer of 2020, BLM drafted a list of seven demands for its official website, including ‘Defund the police’ and a call to ‘Convict and ban Trump from future political office’. There was

also the new feature of a space to co-sign the list of demands, and thus presumably to be added to a database of supporters.

By early June the slogans ‘I can’t breathe’, ‘No justice, no peace’, ‘Defund the police’ and ‘Black Lives Matter’ were heard everywhere. Can a slogan be a manifesto? In the 1960s Malcolm X’s ‘By any means necessary’ was ubiquitous; Ezra Pound’s ‘Make it new’ encapsulated the modernist movement; even Shepard Fairey’s ‘Hope’ poster for Barack Obama’s 2008 campaign managed to represent a political platform in a single word. The Portuguese Marxist scholar Boaventura de Sousa Santos includes a ‘minifesto’ in his introduction to *Epistemologies of the South* (2014) (3). Nietzsche, the philosopher whose influence on manifesto style has been more profound than any except Marx, famously declared: ‘It is my ambition to say in ten sentences what everyone else says in a book’ (82). What about one sentence, or one word? Slogans work as manifestos because the best manifestos are simultaneously brief, compact, concise; and grand, conceptually all-encompassing. The slogans of June were manifestos in this sense.

I remember reading a (humorous) tweet last summer linking the proliferation of high quality protest videos to the number of unemployed film school graduates in cities like New York and San Francisco. But in fact citizen video *has* vastly improved in the past couple of years, and more importantly it has become more *important*. People know how to use the technology, from framing and lighting to using professional editing tools, microphones, green screens, and they know how to act in front of a camera. We are also becoming more critical viewers. As a result, some of the best manifestos are no longer written screeds but viral videos, often spontaneously composed and shot in the thick of the action. Countless videos of speeches from protesters and community leaders appeared online during the summer of 2020. Protest videos are plainly a new form of making manifest. As Sara Ahmed writes: ‘In the labor of making manifest we make a manifesto’ (252).

Of course the foil for these protest video manifestos is the police brutality video, one of which ignited the biggest protests in half a century: the video 17-year-old Darnella Frazier took of George Floyd’s murder in Minneapolis. There have been numerous examples since, including compilations of the most grievous instances of police violence captured during the protests last summer and too many police shootings of unarmed Black and Hispanic men, women and children to count. Frazier’s video literally made manifest, bore witness, brought facts to light; it contradicted the official police statement issued after Floyd’s death and led to the eventual trial and conviction of Derek Chauvin, where it was used as a key piece of evidence.

Manifestos are typically of a marginal and ephemeral nature - once pamphlets and posters, they are now more often tweets or Instagram posts or TikToks, fleeting Reddit posts or YouTube videos lost in the continuous ebb and flow, shouting mostly unheard on a distant corner of the internet. Occasionally, however, a manifesto will go viral as Frazier’s did last summer, and incite action in real numbers, on real streets, calling for and bringing real change. Against the status quo and ‘weapons of delay’ (in Martin Luther King’s phrase), they seek to upend the present, give a voice to the unheard, and push for the arrival of a better future.

Autumn 2020

Autumn was a restless season. The long running and alarmingly consequential reality TV program that was the US presidential election reached its finale in November, with a protracted outcome that nevertheless brought relief to many around the world. More than ever during this time, ‘manifesto-

ese' became the norm; with everyone trading barbs and slogans on various social media platforms, including newly popular platforms such as Parler, Gab, and Rumble, that would become even more popular during the winter as prominent figures on the American Right were banned from mainstream platforms (Ray). (In October the conspiracy group QAnon, which had been growing exponentially during the pandemic year, was banned from YouTube.) Seizing on a line from Trump during the presidential debates, the far-right street-fighting group the Proud Boys began to circulate memes and make polo shirts bearing the manifesto-like slogan 'stand back and stand by' (Timberg & Dwoskin). As I write in *The Manifesto Handbook*:

the shifts happening to language on the internet more broadly also impact manifesto writing, possibly to a disproportionate degree given the natural affinities between manifestos and social media. Twitter is an obvious example: if you use the platform regularly, as a lot of writers do, in effect you're already fluent in *manifesto-ese*. You are conditioned to make your point as clearly and directly as possible, to find and push forward a strong "take" on any issue, and to win converts with emotional, gut-level appeals. We are more competitive than ever, projecting arrogance as we shout to be heard in the crowded marketplace of ideas. In the process we expand the Overton window, the sense of what is acceptable in polite discourse. It might be wise to ask: is this desirable? (131)

Among academics and students and digital workers of all kinds, meanwhile, a very tangible Zoom fatigue began to set in. This extreme weariness of screen-based communication, manifesting as outrage and exhaustion, is perfectly captured in artist and educator Michelle Kasprzak's 'Anti-Video Chat Manifesto' (2020), published on her blog, which declares: 'WE REFUSE to fake human presence.' After a collective shoutout to the new surveillance ('Hello NSA Hello FiveEyes Hello China Hello hacker who lives downstairs Hello University IT Department Hello random person joining the call'), Kasprzak makes a passionate plea for non-visual communication:

Here is my voice: Listen.
It is full of unquantifiable information. It is human, soft, real. ...
So no, no video today. Or tomorrow.
You'll remember what I look like, when we meet again.

Winter 2020-2021

Winter brought a new wave of the pandemic across Europe, the US and elsewhere, and there was a general sense of upheaval and near collapse, both in terms of pandemic and protest. The latter could be seen in the January 6, 2021 invasion by Trump supporters of the US Capitol building - a stark reminder, if one were needed, that manifestos are not by any means necessarily progressive, and neither is the counterculture. The so-called 'QAnon Shaman', Jake Angeli, made headlines when he manifested inside the Capitol, like a meme suddenly come to life, wearing a 'shamanic' headdress with horns, an assortment of furs, red, white and blue warpaint, and carrying a spear. He was photographed standing in front of the Vice President's chair on the Senate floor. Earlier the same day the President himself offered a case - often seen in manifesto writing - of violent speech overstepping the bounds into incitement of real-world violence, while at the same time on various platforms inflammatory chatter from his supporters was spilling over into real-life action as well.

Conclusion: Spring 2021

Almost halfway through 2021 it is hard to argue that everything is fine; in fact the now ancient 'This is fine' meme (the cartoon dog trying to reassure himself that the situation is not hopeless while everything around him goes up in flames) still seems like an apt reflection of our present moment. So, how can manifestos help? Where is interesting work happening in the field of manifesto writing in the early 2020s? And what more can be done?

What I hope to see going forward is more collaboration, more experimentation, and fewer boilerplate manifestos in the manner of Marx and Marinetti. A good example of what is possible in terms of formal innovation comes from Rosa Menkman, author of the 'Glitch Studies Manifesto' (2010). Menkman's latest manifesto (2015/2020), 'institutions of Resolution Disputes (i.R.D.)', is critical of institutional failures. It takes the form of five apparently inscrutable acrylic panels that require de-encrypting to be read. Each panel depicts a different tenet, for example: 'Through iRD's tactics beyond resolution, the otherwise grey mundane objects of everyday life show their colours. iRD are not a Wunderkabinet of dead media, but a foggy bootleg trail for vernacular resistance.' The book containing this manifesto ends with a quote from Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), still a key influence for the current generation of cyberfeminists.

'A Manifesto for Touch in Crisis', a collaborative manifesto currently being written for the ongoing In-Touch project at University College London, is an interesting example both in terms of its origins and its subject matter (Steimle & Pourjafarian). Scholarly manifestos have become increasingly common in recent years across the disciplines, even taking the form of academic papers (e.g. Hanna et al). Regarding subject matter, this project and its manifesto suddenly finds itself the forefront of research into human relations during the pandemic. Looking ahead into 2021, the Ars Electronica festival promises 'A New Digital Deal', jumping ahead metaphorically from the anticipated post-pandemic 'roaring twenties' to the Roosevelt-inspired New Deal thirties. In my own work I recently co-wrote a manifesto titled 'The Possibility of Atopia' - or rather an 'unmanifesto', in keeping with the atopian theme: 'not invented from utopian fantasies but made from existing scraps of materials' (Auger & Hanna). Is this the future of manifestos - beyond utopia and dystopia?

Finally, a note on the subject of crisis and rebuilding: the French poet Guillaume Apollinaire's last manifesto, 'The New Spirit and the Poets' (1917-18), was published shortly before his death in Paris during the last great pandemic a century ago, two days before the end of the First World War. His manifesto's influential 'call to order' declares a return to Classicism and a turning away from Romanticism after the carnage and chaos of the war. It is an example of the manifesto's tendency to draw a line against the past. No more looking backward, no more dwelling in the past, no more tragedy and defeat, only youth and optimism, hope in the present and future, in art and society alike ('The new spirit which will dominate the poetry of the entire world'; 227). Not only to tear down but also to constructively envision the world that comes afterwards - that is the hard part. Some use manifestos to imagine and bring about better futures, others (especially on the Right) to evoke nostalgia for an imaginary past. Scanning the horizon, critiquing the present and pushing forward new futures are the manifesto's principal tasks. Many of the dreams first articulated in manifestos keep recurring down through the decades, even centuries. Thinking about and shaping the future, and forming communities, are some of the manifesto's greatest strengths. In the best cases the three elements come together:

future vision + practical social/artistic application + community = manifesto

Works Cited

'3:AM in Lockdown'. *3:AM Magazine*. <https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/?s=3%3Aam+in+lockdown>. Accessed 30 April 2021.

Ahmed, Sara. *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke University Press, 2017.

Apollinaire, Guillaume. 'The New Spirit and the Poets'. *Selected Writings of Guillaume Apollinaire*, trans. Roger Shattuck. New Directions, 1971, pp. 227-37.

'Art for UBI (Manifesto)'. *Institute of Radical Imagination*. 16 January 2021. <https://instituteofradicalimagination.org/2021/01/16/art-for-ubi-manifesto-launching-campaign/>. Accessed 24 April 2021.

Auger, James, and Julian Hanna. 'The Possibility of Atopia: An Unmanifesto'. *Perspecta 54: Atopia*. MIT Press (forthcoming 2021).

'BLM Demands'. *Black Lives Matter*. <https://blacklivesmatter.com/blm-demands/>. Accessed 3 May 2021.

Cai, Nikita Yingqian. 'Letters against Separation - Nikita Yingqian Cai in Guangzhou'. *e-flux*. <https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/letters-against-separation-nikita-yingqian-cai-in-guangzhou/9945>. Accessed 22 April 2021.

'Capitol Hill Autonomous Zone - Demands'. <https://capitolhillautonomous.zone/demands.html>. Accessed (via Wayback Machine) 6 May 2021.

Caws, Mary Ann. *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*. University of Nebraska Press, 2001.

Fahs, Breanne. *Burn It Down: Feminist Manifestos for the Revolution*. Verso, 2020.

Hanna, Julian. *The Manifesto Handbook: 95 Theses on an Incendiary Form*. Zero Books, 2020.

Hanna, Julian, et al. 'Dissent by Design: A Manifesto for CHI Manifestos'. *Extended Abstracts of the 2019 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, May 2019, pp. 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3290607.3310423>. Accessed 1 May 2021.

Kasprzak, Michelle. 'Anti-Video Chat Manifesto'. <https://michelle.kasprzak.ca/blog/writing-lecturing/anti-video-chat-manifesto>. Accessed 3 May 2021.

Latour, Bruno. 'What protective measures can you think of so we don't go back to the pre-crisis production model?' *Bruno Latour*, 29 March 2020. http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/downloads/P-202-AOC-ENGLISH_1.pdf. Accessed 1 May 2021.

'Manifesto - City Lights x Gray Area'. *YouTube*. <https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLm8zJ0HKEJIZ59JTGIV6JwGxDpkILrViq>. Accessed 1 May 2021.

Menkman, Rosa. 'institutions of Resolution Disputes (i.R.D.)'. *Beyond Resolution*, 2020. https://beyondbeyondresolution.nyc3.digitaloceanspaces.com/Rosa%20Menkman_Beyond%20Resolution_2020.pdf. Accessed 30 April 2021.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Twilight of the Idols with the Antichrist and Ecce Homo*. Wordsworth Editions, 2007.

Ray, Siladitya. 'The Far-Right Is Flocking To These Alternate Social Media Apps - Not All Of Them Are Thrilled'. *Forbes*, 14 January 2021. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/siladityaray/2021/01/14/the-far-right-is-flocking-to-these-alternate-social-media-apps---not-all-of-them-are-thrilled/?sh=31657efd55a4>. Accessed 30 April 2021.

'Rethinking the Apocalypse: An Indigenous Anti-Futurist Manifesto'. *Indigenous Action*. <https://indigenouaction.org/wp-content/uploads/rethinking-the-apocalypse-PRINT.pdf>. Accessed 11 April 2021.

Salguero, Oscar. 'HIBER 1.0: An Interior Life'. *Nobody is an Island*. <https://nobodyisanisland.cc/OSCAR-SALGUERO-HIBER-1-0-An-Interior-Life>. Accessed 2 May 2021.

Santos, Bonaventura de Sousa. *Epistemologies of the South*. Routledge, 2016.

'The Self-Quarantine Manifesto'. <https://staythefuckhome.com>. Accessed 30 April 2021.

Steimle, Jürgen, and Narjes Pourjafarian, 'A Manifesto for Touch in Crisis'. *In-Touch: Digital Touch Communication*. <https://in-touch-digital.com/a-manifesto-for-touch-in-crisis/>. Accessed 1 May 2021.

Timberg, Craig, and Elizabeth Dwoskin. 'Trump's debate comments give an online boost to a group social media companies have long struggled against.' *Washington Post*, 30 September 2021. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2020/09/30/trump-debate-rightwing-celebration/>. Accessed 1 May 2021.

'Vigília Cultura e Artes'. *Facebook*. <https://m.facebook.com/vigiliaculturaeartes/>. Accessed 22 April 2021.