
24 Questions Concerning Manifestoes

Q&A by Clémence de Montgolfier & Niki Korth

1.) Could a Manifesto exist without words? What would this look like? What would it sound like?

a dog barking

a trumpet

a cry

a klaxon ?

Jimi Hendrix's Star Spangled Banner

Daft Punk

Sometimes I feel like an art piece is in itself a Manifesto when it is really strong and clear ; also some electronic music pieces feel like Manifestoes. It feels like it expresses a statement when they are self-sufficient and radical. They become independent.

2.) Could a Manifesto be about Love, or Telepathy, or Magic?

Insofar as these are attainable, I believe that a Manifesto could cover these topics. I believe such Manifestoes would

also overcome the seeming necessity of arrogance and self-righteousness with which they are commonly plagued, and would enable them to be more declarations of universal inclusivity. These would be the primordial Manifestoes from which our present existence is derived, the illusory place of origin that we invent in order to make sense for our present state. They would further enact safeguards against abuse and secure a future in which playful memory allows us to protect our humanity.

3.) What do we want from a Manifesto? To change the world? Proclaim the self? Glory? Feedback?

It is difficult to approach the topic of what 'we' want from a Manifesto without first discerning who or what 'we' are. Perhaps this is the whole idea of composing one - a proclamation of self in many ways, but perhaps more a declaration of self whose greatest success is merely identifying, in words, the contours and borders of the self writing it. It is very different if it is a group of drunk teenagers writing a Manifesto because it seems to be a gesture that authenticates their alienation from the rest of the world, outside of a small group of their peers whose company they enjoy, because it offers some level of intellectual and pleasurable stimulation they cannot find with other peer groups. But obviously the desire behind the Manifesto is different if one is writing one for public viewing of some kind, whether anonymous or not, in some setting in which larger numbers of less-informed individuals consent to take the time to read it.

I think that much of the motivation is about Glory, but in that way in which we pretend that it is not, the whole social fabric around it may pretend, and construct ridiculous, elaborate customs around ensuring that it appear not to be

about such a pompous, potentially-liberating, affirmation of one's purpose or potential in the world. I think that many problems would be solved if they were more about feedback, if they were able to be more intelligent in the sense of being able to adapt their states or actions in response to varying situations, varying requirements, and past experience, rather than trying in vain to bring change 'only from within'.

4.) What do you think a person our age in China thinks when they hear the word 'Manifesto'?

Maybe they think about Mao's Red Book? Communism is fairly idealist and revolutionary. This is where revolution starts to smell bad and turns into authoritarianism. But can we still say that China is communist? Maybe what is gone of China is idealism and what is left of it is authority? I wonder how conscious of your own indoctrination you are able to be when you have been indoctrinated forever. It's like children raised by cults or by the Amish. Or to a not-so-larger extent, it's just like the rest of us. So the question turns into, how conscious are we of our own indoctrination? Is art an indoctrination?

5.) Is it appropriate that I began the previous question/sentence with the words 'what do you think'? Why or why not? How would it be different if the word 'China' was replaced with 'the Middle East'?

I believe it is appropriate in terms of commonly accepted behaviors and opinions, maybe because China is far away enough from our culture in a sense so that we feel concerned or threatened or worried about the people there. Which sounds very selfish, but it is selfish, and I believe that if we – 'western global' culture, are not directly threatened

by other cultures (political, economical, sociological), we will never act first, because we usually act to protect ourselves (our power) and in our best personal interest. Worrying about others is counter-productive in a liberal economy.

If it was 'the Middle East', then the conversation would be highly explosive, because, well, we DO directly feel threatened by those countries, and since 9/11 it feels more and more like a cold war going on there (pretty hot actually). And in France especially today it is very obvious. I think The French government believes it should have control over Islamic French people and show its authority upon them, and by extension to the Middle East, because they fear they will lose their power if they don't. It's a politic based on fear, and as Jenny Holzer wrote, fear feeds on fear, and it is a very elegant weapon.

6.) Is it problematic that the previous question includes the identification of a speaking subject, an 'I'? Do you suppose that this rarely occurs or appears in a Manifesto?

On the contrary, I believe a Manifesto is all about the 'I', and the affirmation of the self, its claims and its being-to-the-world. The 'I' might be a group of course, and the larger the group is, the more the 'I' becomes powerful and real.

7.) Do we need to define what we want and what we claim in order to be a group? Do we even need to want and claim anything?

It seems that the conventional understanding of human evolution would state that it is a biological necessity to want

and claim things, since this is an extension of the basic act of seeking food and sustenance through which life can be maintained. I obviously say this from a more philosophical than scientific point of view, and wish to challenge this idea but lack the critical vocabulary. Since wanting, claiming, and needing are all very different concepts it is difficult to discern how we should approach these inevitabilities and the extent to which they are composed as such, within the prospect of 'grouping'. I prefer to see groups as collections of activity rather than collections of individuals overseeing possessions, and think that it is much more functional to see groups, even those one is a part of, in light of how they appear from outside in order to prevent this more materialist conception from taking hold in my imagination. In chemistry a group is understood as a combination of atoms that have a recognizable identity in a number of compounds - thus they are collections of disparate components that come together in a certain, consistent way that one is able to apprehend when found amidst different combinations over time. This is obviously different than what we are talking about since in such a situation, the autonomy and agency of the atoms is not much cause for concern. It seems that with the arts, the symptom of the Manifesto is like the atoms attempting to assert themselves against the classification the expository media performs.

The question then becomes one of competing techniques of measurement and prediction, and I do not believe that we will get very far if we seek only to classify ourselves on the level of the properties we wish to acquire, but instead should approach the discernment of the picture in terms of the interactions between us.

8.) How are Manifestoes juvenile? Why don't people write them alone?

Well, I think Marinetti wrote the Futurist Manifesto by himself and then found a bunch of his friends to sign it, right? I believe that Manifestoes are juvenile when they are the expression of an egotistic desire to be recognized, just like when a child yells and cries to get what he wants or to be paid attention to when adults don't consider him the center of the universe anymore. Discovering that your self is living among other selves is supposed to be the basis of the construction of identity; otherwise you become a tyrant. I was always fascinated by the obviously childish characteristics of some famous tyrants, and their inability to deal with anger; their need of power and getting everything they could demand. To me, it is just like a child yelling to get a toy. And some children can be very cruel too. This all sounds like a real pathology! Anyhow maybe Manifestoes can be juvenile when they are naive as well. It sounds nicer, but maybe naive can also be dangerous (get manipulated, or not being aware).

9.) What about the ironical Manifestoes? Is this one? Can you try to write ideas for a Manifesto that would take effect in the case where Aliens would come to planet Earth?

I think that this document definitely has the possibility to be perceived as an ironic Manifesto, especially in the idea of feigning ignorance as well as being deliberately contrary - and it does contain many proclamations. But they are more wishes than demands, which is a different form of communicating want or desire, so I would say that in this context (which will take many forms), it is debatable, and that the debate is perhaps more interesting than answering this element of the question any more decisively.

Generally, it seems that the ironical ones are more successful in the sense of being inviting to laughter and

absurdity - which is why thinking of the Manifesto composed in response to Earth's first contact with Aliens is fascinating... Some ideas are: there would have to be a huge, incredibly interesting meeting of various people from different disciplines/backgrounds/life situations: botanists, dancers, circus performers, politicians, surgeons, individuals with 'non-standard' sensory perception (blind, deaf, psychic, physically handicapped, autistic, etc.), religious leaders, kindergarten teachers, filmmakers, tailors, plumbers, like Noah's Arc of professional expertise as well as 'commonality' - they would all have to be together or somehow in communication in order to figure out how to best guide the world into safely and productively coming to understand these Aliens. It would be best to proceed on the assumption that they are non-violent, but cautiously so that we are not taken advantage of - innocent until proven guilty (which evokes a wholly different tone than I intended...), and that they very likely have completely different ways of communicating and that we must be very open-minded to cognitive stretches that may leave us bewildered. 'Think of how different the world outside of your Mother's womb must have appeared when you first came upon it - if there hadn't been anyone there to care for you, who was looking to learn as much from you as he or she or they were to also teach you, you would never have made it to this day. And now you cannot remember this moment. We must think of this as we share our world with these beings that are new to us. Perhaps someday we will be lucky enough to come upon their world, but for now we must [...] and then the lazar guns suddenly emerge from the bushes and vanquish the young idealist standing at the podium, and an invisible gas washes over the land and all human and animal life dies... But the bodies remain alive, the zombie genre quickly crosses over into the science fiction landscape, the bodies are kept 'functioning' but the spirit is gone. The body is willing but the flesh is weak - if only they had brought the

young cinematographers to the table for discussion - we could have been saved...

10.) If a Manifesto were a food, what would it taste like?

I would say like spicy Indian food; at first it is delicious and new, and the more you eat it the more you realize it burns like hell, then you can't taste anything anymore, and then you're just hurt (sweat, stomach aches, regrets).

11.) Could a non-dogmatic Manifesto possibly emerge in the quasi-military social structure of a starship crew? Could space travelers/space travel be the antidote to the restless, revolutionary-focused (and thereby unfocused) energy of our generation?

I think people write non-dogmatic Manifestoes when they have the ability to be rebellious, which is, if you have enough money to not be constrained by labor, if you have enough education to develop a critical thinking, if you have enough other people to share and develop your rebellious ideas with. So I don't think a starship crew could write a Manifesto, unless some of the members decide to prepare a coup against their leader and take over the galaxy or something. But I don't know why I have the feeling that a Manifesto is more a show-off coming from a group of intellectuals than a practical recipe on how to make revolution. When an armed rebellion against the dominating power really happens, claiming beforehand that it's going to happen is very likely to make it be crushed by this very power. I think the coming of time-travelers would provoke world riots ! This is because people wouldn't agree on what to do about it, and which decisions to make about such a huge discovery that would change everything we know.

Probably some big firm would want to hold the monopoly of time-travel formulas and devices (time-travel would then be the privilege of a financially eligible elite, at least for a couple hundred years). Then the UN would have to write a universal law in order to prevent people from changing things in the past, and revealing things from the future to past people (well, if we discovered space-travelers they wouldn't have respected this law for sure). Then the USA would send CIA agents back in time to undo the Intafada in Palestine or something. So I think it would be a nightmare because we would have no means to know if the present would have been changed at all, and maybe in this case, everything that would happen could be somebody's will and fault. A world where chance doesn't exist is an interesting scenario.

12.) What is the worst Manifesto you can think of / find out about?

Searching for the worst Manifesto is more difficult than expected, it would likely come from a terribly violent, close-minded type of group that is looking to destroy the entire concept of civil liberties and reap havoc, violence, and rape on huge populations of people, in the name of advancement of some ideal of hatred that promotes the agents behind the Manifesto as the most [...] members of the population. Maybe this is too obvious, perhaps it would be the subtle Manifesto of subconscious marketing techniques, the one stating that 'we are committed to controlling every node of pleasure in the minds of our clients in order that we craft them into docile lab rats who, under our invisible tutelage, enable us to remove humanity from their corporeal manifestations and place them in a virtual world in which we may test and observe them so as to discover each day more precisely how we may control them and squeeze out

every drop of their individual personality in order to learn more of what the Human is in order to keep this information away from them and reprogram them into serving us, so that every cell in their body is devoted to servicing our every whim, but they remain ignorant of it.'

So this may be rather vague, but in trying to answer this question it was interesting just searching through all the various Manifestoes that emerge in Google. There are many more Manifestoes promoting scientific responsibility than those that promote a similar level of accountability in the arts. While this does not tell us whether or not one is more common than the other, since what we see immediately is that the scientific ones are simply more popular and visited more often than the others, I would not be surprised if this was the case. Scientists and philosophers following WWII felt more responsible for the atomic bomb than artists, after all, and at first this seems to make sense. And I suppose that is the best conclusion to this response: the Manifesto stating that artists should not approach these terrains, have no value or purpose there, would have to be in the group of worst Manifestoes imaginable.

13.) How does the coming-together of a Manifesto compare to the act of conception with human beings? What exactly is the intercourse that brings the Manifesto into being?

Maybe impulse and passion are what bring people to write Manifestoes. Can you say you can have beer-goggles when writing a Manifesto as well? There is definitely here something of a common will to plan a common project. But I see it more as related to desire, maybe the need to seduce, maybe strategies to get what you want, maybe the self-satisfaction of obtaining what you were lusting for. Or

maybe a desire to go beyond the personal interests and reach a common interest, and seeing yourself through the other – or being mirrored ? Just like ‘there is no sexual relationship’, maybe there cannot be any real common Manifesto, but the interactions of power between the different people writing it ?

14.) Why are Manifestoes not written in the art world when they are the most needed? Like today in France, when censorship is getting harder, and the government is getting stronger, why does art feels like getting more docile in the public sphere? Are we that afraid?

Is it because not everyone can agree? Or because no one wants to admit to others that they are afraid, due to the fear that stating this could make one more vulnerable? I am not all that familiar with the specific situation in France, but It seems like it has much to do with money - when one is at the mercy of where they receive their supportive resources and feels little agency due to this dependence, it seems inevitable that they will take less risks in order to protect what little they have. But isn't this why humans and animals began living in groups, in order to progress through the ability to take greater risks because one is not alone? If we are that afraid I think it is all the more reason to come together, at least discursively, and disengage from the isolation and segmentation that comes with lofty notions of The Art World being a mirror-world Mount Olympus. It is more liberating to play against the gods, or to play in front of them in a manner they are not capable of (since with mortality comes a passion that cannot be understood within eternity) than to attempt to play with them strictly according to their rules. But if art has become completely domesticated, then it is time to ask the housewives.

15.) Is there a different conception of a Manifesto in France than in America?

I don't think so. Actually I do not really know how a Manifesto is conceived in America - the French conception of it would be: 'a declaration of a group stating their claim'; to write a Manifesto is also performative, in the sense that it often makes effective the existence of the group writing it; by proclaiming what it wants, the group proclaims its existence to the world. What comes to mind as a European is the artistic avant-gardes of the 20th century, and also it has a taste of revolution and struggle for freedom, utopia, and idealism.

16.) Isn't the very idea of a Manifesto obsolete?

How can an idea be obsolete? Or I suppose it is different for something to be an idea 'of something' - in any case, the historical idea is more democratic than it seems to be given credit for, in the sense that it is a public declaration usually made in order to incur or provoke support, although it is a declaration of goals, tracks, policies, various things that are restrictive insofar as they offer structure. I do not think that these ideas are obsolete, it just seems that they have been diluted today and appear under other names, such as mission statements, narrative proposals (to receive funding), and business plans. But all of these require a language without passion, a formal register that does not allow the condemnations that color the Manifesto such that it is more viscerally descriptive and caters to the imagination. Maybe not diluted so much as displaced. As a transitive verb 'obsolete' would mean to bring a product or idea to no longer be used by replacing it with something new. If this has happened, who was responsible? Or is it natural, as it is

to grow old and fall into disuse?

17.) Why are young artists like us so not-political nowadays?

It is interesting that you say 'not-political' instead of 'non-political'. 'Non -' would suggest more of an effort to be counter-political (and what would this be, 'purely aesthetic', only to be perceived and not to be 'apprehended', but then the noun came to mean a set of principles underlying and guiding, thereby becoming political insofar as it is strategic.) But not-political sounds so much more apathetic, which I think is more accurate. Few young artists are expressing vehemence toward 'the political', often they just aren't addressing it at all. It seems like this is because the political playing field is the marketplace to which we feel ourselves to be at mercy. In order to be 'successful' we are taught that we must leave politics to the curators and critics who are also at mercy of the market or the academic system that processes and inscribes the history of our political relevance. So I do think that some of it has to do with laziness, as well as a narcissism that believes that it is better to just indulge and explore oneself as much as possible in order to exploit all these notions and scents of individual genius that they need in order to typify the type of artist to be carried through history. I think in order to be political we need to start thinking of the history of infrastructural changes, like the adoption of the metric system and the building of railroads and highway systems, park regulations and public gardens and farms, etc., as a form of art in line with impressionism, surrealism, fluxus, neo-realist film, etc.

And with the Internet maybe this is possible? Of course I think that has a lot to do with the not-politicalness too, the opportunities it proposes are most often seized in the form of

making a website of themselves and their work, with a requisite CV and high-resolution images of their work and incredibly brief statement. Then the pressure becomes how to best represent oneself on this incredibly small scale, so that maybe people will spend 7 minutes looking at it and then move on. But we could be using these spaces to organize enormous undertakings that would better the world's ability for creative expression, and produce works through it, and in so doing compensate for what our respective governments are not doing, or counter-act what they are.

18.) How does one 'obey' a Manifesto? Is this necessary for a Manifesto to be a true Manifesto?

That's a good question. My answer to the second one would be: NO. And here we could discuss about how to define the truth of a statement. Is true REAL or is true RIGHT? How can we know what's right for real? Haha! No answer to that. About Obeying, I think the people writing them try to live by their rules, but I guess the main way to 'obey' is activism, and the fight to turn your Manifesto into effective actions. I think Merce Cunningham said, instead of being someone, doing something.

19.) Today, if you could ask for anything in the world what would it be?

I would ask for there to be some way for things to be done (i.e., for foodstuffs to be prepared and made distributable to the population, for creativity to be fostered and 'progress' to be maintained in a way that is humane rather than just vaguely striving to attain material wealth, for people to

interact and have pleasure in work, but not in a manipulative way), without a money economy. I believe that we have outgrown it, that it no longer fits with the way that people live and these various industries function. It was a remarkable step in the evolution of human consciousness when the money economy eclipsed the bartering economy, when the perceived unanimity and universal translatability of a third party arbiter of value enabled exchange, of both services and products (and to which should labor belong?), to occur with more ease and precision and on a much larger scale.

But there always had to be an image of the King on the coins, right? Or is this too cynical, could it have been possible without this? Now it is difficult to imagine a world without money, but already the exchange of physical currency is far less common. In any case, in answering this I also realize that, after this, what I want more than anything is an ability to communicate more clearly and effectively, at the drop of a hat, with a remarkable eloquence that is both playful, humorous, and thought-provoking, one that is nearly effortless and seems to drip from my lips and pen (or, at times, a keyboard). But actually, if I were to have this I would likely lose a lot of other things, the struggle is important after all. But does the current state create a more difficult, strenuous or tenuous struggle for the reader, listener, interviewer? I do not know, but maybe what I want is for struggle to be better understood. I do think we need it, but it just doesn't need to be violent, and we just need to be open to the amount of effort and open-mindedness it requires for conflicts to be resolved once they are fully articulated and understood (which may be an impossible moment anyway), to be comfortable with change and willing to take efforts to achieve it and figure out what the best changes are for as many as possible to be happy and

satisfied with existence, and to design frameworks through which the future will be safe-guarded.

20.) Are Manifestoes inevitably political, or is it always pretend?

I don't think a Manifesto is always pretend, I think people believe in what they say/write, and I think they think they're right ; but I think I'm right too in a way, so, my opinions might be as wrong as theirs. I think writing a Manifesto is a gesture that is in essence political, in the sense of 'politics' being the whole of human relations in their structure, and how these structures fabricate the world.

21.) If you were to be a tyrant, what type of tyrant would you be?

I cannot tell is you are asking what I would do were I to be a tyrant, or what class of tyrant I would fall into if I had been born into a tyrannical disposition. It is a hard question to answer, especially since I have always been quite counter to the entire concept of tyranny. And this is not only in the sense of disliking tyrants and disapproving what they do. As a matter of fact, I have always found great stress in my difficulty in expressing anything beyond the equator of the spherical representation of the dichotomy of tyranny and freedom if it were to be illustrated topographically and made a point on such a globe. But what would the polar opposite be? And what would be found in between? While I am not sure if freedom is its opposite (and maybe the lesson here is that there are no true opposites..), I continue to stray further from your question of. In efforts to return there, I will change my destination coordinates to where I first began fleeing the course - what are the different classes of tyrants?:

1.) *The Tyrant who exhausts the corporeal storehouses of a huge percentage of the population (i.e., by starving them through excessive taxation or seizure of property or fighting large-scale wars and killing a large number of the subjects off).*

2.) *The Tyrant who seeks to control the thoughts and daily life activities of all of his subjects; for various reasons not limited to: megalomania, extreme paranoia, insanity, [...]. This one would take extreme efforts in maintaining surveillance (or at least the constant possibility of it), strict censorship, etc.*

3.) *The Tyrant who provokes and provides structural support for internal war against/elimination of a subset of his population.*

In reality, of course, it seems every tyrant is a combination of all of these. Interestingly, it was Peter Zenger's publishing of accusations that implied that Governor Cosby, appointed as royal governor of the colony of New York in 1732, was a tyrant that perpetuated the trial that eventually established the first precedent to the freedom of the press in the American colonies. Criticism of the government become approvable and free of the risk of censorship so long as it was 'supported by truth and stated without malice'. In any case, if I somehow was a tyrant I would at least keep everyone alive and well-fed, but would probably be more like the tyrannical elite of ancient Greece, forcing talented individuals to entertain myself and my guests with song, dance, comedy, etc. I would also force them to entertain 'the Masses' and encourage them all to work together to entertain each other. I would also force scientists to work with artists to ensure that their inventions cater to the hearts

of the population and do not threaten their well-being, and would require everyone to dance together at least three nights per week. I suppose this would place me somewhere in between the first two classes of tyrants I describe above.

22.) If you would write a Manifesto what would it be about?

I would write something about how we all need to be concerned about how the internet and digital media technologies are affecting children, and from that something about 'leveling the playing-field' of available technology for more impoverished parts of the world. But not in the sense that we should just throw computers all over the place, but that it needs to be taken very seriously and carefully and seen as a new species of communication whose introduction into new, more ubiquitous environments, should be tended to in a manner that is mindful of spiritual and cultural difference in the moral parameters of representation. Then something about how social media technology and smart technology could destroy the world and take away the future of childhood, replacing it with an infantilism that lasts far beyond middle-age, removing the whole conceptual constellation of glory, love, camaraderie, joy, intellectual stimulation, [...], and replacing it with complacent neutralization, a larger majority being mostly 'happy' more of the time... And then I would propose an idea about how this could be fixed or avoided, or the steps to be taken in figuring out the problem.

23.) Can a single person write a Manifesto by himself? Is it still valid?

By himself, no; by herself, yes.

Ha! [...] As much as I want to say that it would be valid, it does not seem to be the case, unless one looks at the term more loosely as simply a public declaration of one's aims, in which case it seems that MySpace and Facebook profiles could be understood as Manifestoes, and then we would see the problem completely differently, or would realize that the problem is far more ubiquitous than we thought.

24.) How does a Manifesto compare to a spectacle?

Manifestum : plain, apparent, evident, manifest

In French, a demonstration is called a "manifestation" and a "manifestation divine" is a sign revealing obviously the presence of God. I think to write a Manifesto is a grand gesture, and it is very spectacular in itself, it is meant to impress in a way, to show off, to proclaim, it is full of drama. And as a matter of fact, the level of language used is often very pompous.

If you write a Manifesto you place yourself in the center of your own revolution, and you are your own hero, and you create a status for yourself, as if you exist more than other people because of this status. I wonder who people address when writing a Manifesto. The government? The nation? everyone? their friends? But who's listening? History? And yet History is made by their governments, which make Manifestoes look like naive utopian rebellions, that were pointless, but sweet, like a kitten trying to bite you. So writing a Manifesto might still make a better point than not writing a Manifesto after all.

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The Big Conversation Space

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Niki Korth & Clémence de Montgolfier are two young artists living in San Francisco and Paris. Together they are building The Big Conversation Space, an open discursive platform, taking various formats such as a website, printed matter, drawings, questionnaires, public interventions, film or sound-objects, all being conversation-based, and all being made with the belief that speech and power need to be questioned further. They speak English, French, German, some Spanish, Klingon, or anything else. What would you like to have a conversation about ?

www.thebigconversationspace.org

This project was realized in 2010 for the group show *MANIFEST-O* at Concrete Utopia project space in Brooklyn, NY, curated by Melanie Kress and Rosie duPont.

www.concreteutopia.org
