It’s Not Over (’Til It’s Over)

Martin Puchner

Writing the history of the avant-garde is a melancholy business. Through the confluence of unique historical forces, it is often claimed, an unprecedented radicalism across the arts emerged in the early twentieth century, lasting to the late thirties. According to this story, individual artists and art collectives took on all hitherto accepted artistic forms, blasting nineteenth-century reformism, the high modernist religion of art, and the bourgeois institution of the museum. But the avant-garde was not only “against,” although it certainly was against almost everything. Its creative destructions resulted in astonishing inventions from collages to nonsense poetry, with artists often smashing the different arts together in cabarets, little magazines, or impromptu galleries. There had been heroic attempts at breaking with convention before, and the avant-gardists sought to enlist these predecessors in their efforts, but for the most part they had to do the heavy lifting themselves. The story usually ends on a sad note with the observation that things have not been the same; all that is left for us to do is to celebrate in hindsight what we must call the historical avant-garde. Put another way, the avant-garde as we know and love it is history.

Where does this story come from? Historically, one of its first promoters were avant-garde collectives of the sixties such as the Situationists, who declared that the original avant-gardes had failed when they had been absorbed into the art market and the academy; if a new and true avant-garde was to emerge, it first had to learn from the failures of the older one. Soon this belief that the historical avant-garde had failed and was thus irredeemably lost to history was taken up by theorists. An influential representative is Peter Bürger, who viewed the avant-garde of the early twentieth century as a historical one, whose original achievements could never be replicated.1 The historical avant-garde was unique, he claimed, just as it was also doomed to failure when its ambitions could not be realized nor its achievements maintained by its successors. Behind Bürger’s theory stands nothing less than a Hegelian conception of history, which posits the grand project of sublating art and life. Few scholars now believe in this immensely successful claim that the historical avant-garde sought to merge art and life, but the grand history, accord-
ing to which the historical avant-garde was both unique and doomed to failure, still yields considerable influence, just as avant-garde research continues to focus to a large extent on this historical period.

More recently Bürgel’s history has been joined by neo-Marxist variants, which are no less wedded to a grand theory of history. Here the most compelling and influential work has been done by the likes of Fredric Jameson and Perry Anderson, whose economic and sociological histories of the avant-garde seek to explain why the historical avant-garde is irredeemably historical and why we cannot have anything like a real avant-garde today. The reason mustered for this claim is a theory of global capitalism. In the early twentieth century, this theory holds, we still had tensions between capitalism and older forms of production, and it was on these tensions that modernism and the avant-gardes thrived. Today, we live in a world entirely saturated by capitalism, so that the conditions of possibility of an avant-garde have disappeared. Not everyone subscribes to the economic determinism driving this history, but its conclusions have found surprisingly widespread acceptance nonetheless: the avant-garde is over because its socioeconomic conditions of possibility are gone.

The problem with these theories is that the news of the end of the avant-garde seems not to have arrived in the relevant quarters. Everywhere across the arts, individuals and groups continue avant-garde projects. There are two possible attitudes one might take towards these recalcitrant vanguardists. One is to tell them that they are simply wrong, that what they mistakenly take for avant-garde practices are really something entirely different (postmodernism; nostalgic return to an avant-garde that is lost; empty repetition and imitation). The other is to acknowledge that what is wrong is the conception of the avant-garde as something firmly and safely lodged in the past. I think the only possible path is the second. Since history cannot be anything but a critical reconstruction of the past as it actually occurred—and this must include the history of the present—the very fact that there are all these unexpected avant-gardes springing up among us today should force us to take note; dismissing them as so many mistakes is simply unconvincing. The problem is not with the current avant-gardes; the problem is with the historiography that had declared them to be impossible.

Fortunately, in taking the new avant-gardes seriously, we do not have to throw history overboard entirely. Rather, we must conceive of a different type of history, one that avoids the nostalgic trap of an original, authentic avant-garde that is then variously betrayed by its successors. What kind of history would avoid the false conception of an authentic avant-garde that is irredeemably lost? A history not based on progress and points of no return, but one open to the possibility of repeated
avant-gardes, in short, a history of repetition. One illustration of such a history of repetition is the history of the avant-garde manifesto. I tried to write such a history in *Poetry of the Revolution*. Its approach was historical, but it showed how history repeats, tracking the many ways in which avant-garde groups used manifestos to found new movements only to find that such foundational acts needed to be repeated over and over again.

There is one problem with such a history of repetition: the avant-gardes themselves have been quite insistent on creating points of no return. So isn’t such a history of repetition precisely a history of failure? This is the case only if we posit that their purpose was to avoid any form of repetition in the first place. But no avant-garde and no manifesto can be accused of such naïveté. To be sure, few manifestos openly admitted the necessity of repetition in advance—this would have rendered their foundational force inoperative. But no writer of avant-garde manifestos had any illusions about the chances of success. Indeed, talk of success and failure raises the question of what kind of criteria one should use as a measure. We can’t take manifestos and their revolutionary ambition at face value and assume that every avant-garde act and manifesto failed if they did not lead to an instant and complete revolution of art and society. Rather, success and failure should be measured by the force, inventiveness, and wit of these acts of rebellion themselves. In a world where manifestos sprang up everywhere, no one expected to write the only or the last manifesto. The act of writing manifestos would be repeated over and over again, and there was nothing wrong with that, as long as some manifestos made it even if others didn’t.

I tracked political and art manifestos from the *Communist Manifesto* through the sixties, detailing the different phases, differences, and repetitions of avant-garde groups and their manifestos. But as this history came closer and closer to the present, I found myself becoming uncertain about how to proceed. I knew I needed to resist the lure of historical closure, the claim that the time of the manifesto was over, as Hegelian, Marxist, and other prophets of the end of the avant-garde were wont to do. But how should I know for whom and in what way manifestos were being written today? And should my book end with a prophecy of its own, or perhaps with a manual for writing manifestos in the future?

I left things open, not knowing what to do. Fortunately, other people did. After my book was published, they started sending me their manifestos in scores, including a poet and union activist working in Pretoria, South Africa, and the author of the *Hacker Manifesto*. Having written a history of the avant-gardes that, hesitantly, went up to the present, I found, to my great surprise, that I was drawn to the periphery of various kinds of avant-garde activities myself. What was more, these avant-
garde activities were not shallow repetitions, empty commodifications, or otherwise betrayals of the original and authentic avant-garde, nor anachronistic acts executed by idiots who somehow had failed to notice that the time of the avant-garde and hence the time of the manifesto had come to an end. Rather, many of them proved to be extremely canny in negotiating the complex history of repetition that connected them to the avant-gardes of the early twentieth century without succumbing to a history of decline and no return. The four case studies that follow illustrate how current avant-garde groups draw on the history of the avant-garde, using it as a springboard for their own practices.

*Rett Kopi* Documents the Future

*Rett Kopi* is a Norwegian cultural magazine, which devoted an elaborate special issue to the genre of the manifesto, published under the editorship of Karin Nygaard and Ellef Prestsaeter in 2007. *Rett Kopi* started out as a philosophy journal, but when the two editors began working on the manifesto issue, Mr. Prestsaeter writes, the material “forced us to rethink the whole concept of *Rett Kopi*. Confronting the manifesto we felt a need to change our approach and consequently developed the strategy one reviewer aptly described as ‘archival activism.’” A handsome large-format publication running to over two hundred pages, this manifesto issue of *Rett Kopi* moves between English and Norwegian. The first part presents translations into Norwegian, often for the first time, from the history of the manifesto, including the first futurist manifesto of 1909 and up to the recent *Hacker Manifesto* by McKenzie Wark. This very span is notable. Even in this historical section, called *Manifestsamling* (collection of manifestos), the editors opted not to replicate the history of the historical avant-garde, but to bring the history of the genre right up to the present.

The second section moves into a different, and on the face of it extremely scholarly, mode: *Sluttnoter* (endnotes). Aren’t endnotes, born of the university, inimical to the manifesto? Not in the way they are done here. Among the “endnotes” selected, very cunningly, is Gertrude Stein’s spoof of Marinetti, “Mary Nettie,” as well as texts by authors of manifestos commenting on their own manifestos, such as Donna Haraway or McKenzie Wark. These texts are not so much endnotes as responses, reflections on the form and history of the manifesto by scholars and authors of manifestos alike. It is important to realize that this form of metamanifesto has been part of the history of the manifesto from the beginning, at least since Tristan Tzara’s *Manifesto Dada 1918*, which is also included in the first section.
The next part is called “articles” and consists of essays on manifestos by scholars such as Janet Lyon and Marjorie Perloff (and myself). But the collection does not end there, moving from the history of the manifesto, via the endnotes, to essays. There are two more sections consisting of short texts that undertake a reflection on the manifesto in yet another mode, by reflecting on the project of Rett Køpi itself. The first consists of responses to the journal’s title, “Rett Køpi Documents the Future,” in the form of a question: “Can the future be documented?” followed by an ordliste (dictionary) of six keywords closely associated with the manifesto: document; future; the futurist moment; manifesto; revolution; utopia.

The conception of the entire project, beginning with the title, “Rett Køpi Documents the Future,” is attuned to the temporality of the manifesto and can be interpreted as acknowledging that the act of documenting the history of manifestos amounts to a history of the future. It is thus a historical project, although precisely not a nostalgic history of no return. As one reviewer put it: “Rett Køpi recycles a selection of more or less classic and well-known manifestoes, precisely not in a nostalgic-retrospective spirit, but rather as fuel for renewal or even progress (a word few people have dared to use lately).” The act of documenting the future can be interpreted as an orientation not only towards the past, but also towards the future. Indeed, the publication itself is indebted to the collage style of avant-garde manifestos. More important, the volume’s documentary effort was meant to spark an interest in future manifestos. In fact, this manifesto issue did much to introduce the manifesto genre to Norway, soliciting reactions across a wide spectrum from the National Art Academy to a private marketing college. Documenting the past, especially in the canny way done here, has done its part to bring about the manifesto’s future.

The use of the past for the purposes of the future is established avant-garde practice. The surrealists, for example, were keenly interested in their predecessors, including lists of protosurrealists in their manifestos. Every future-oriented act reconfigures history. In this sense, Rett Køpi recognized an essential feature of the so-called historical avant-garde and translated this feature into the present. Only purist historiographies that buy into a simplistic story of no return and a pseudohistorical understanding of singularity find something wrong or contradictory in this dynamic between reconstructed past and envisioned future.

Serpentine Gallery Manifesto Marathon

Like Rett Køpi, the Serpentine Manifesto Marathon was highly conscious of the history of avant-garde manifestos and the temporal intricacies
manifestos invariably get caught up in. Its collection of manifestos, published in 2009 by Koenig Books in London, is a large-format book of about 230 pages. Where Rett Kopi had opted for a collage in white and blue, the Serpentine Gallery created a red cover, on which is printed in white letters a veritable manifesto, or rather, a metamanifesto, whose six points amount to a defense of the avant-garde of the present.


The Serpentine Gallery is aware of the two major waves of previous avant-gardes and their manifestos. This history did not need to be repressed, or dismissed as a history of failure. It was a history of repetition, in which the avant-gardes of the early twentieth century were repeated, with a difference, in the sixties and seventies.

2. *We now live in a time that is more atomized and has less cohesive artistic movements.*

There is a hint of the Hegelian/Marxist history of progress and decline here that seems to explain a demise of the avant-garde through a broad sociological history of an increasing atomization of society. I think this history is problematic—was society really more cohesive, less atomized one hundred years ago? But then this pessimistic note is immediately followed by a third point:

3. *At this moment, there is a reconnection to the manifesto as a document of poetic and political intent.*

The notion of a possible reconnection to the manifesto as a genre is presented as a way of overcoming the sociological history of decline hinted at in the previous point. The stage is set, therefore, for new manifestos and new avant-gardes. Atomization turns out to be not so bad after all, or else it does not really matter. Who knows, perhaps atomization is good for manifestos, since manifestos thrive in an atmosphere of competition, attack, and defense. There is an echo here of *Rett Kopi*'s description of itself as seeking to “document the future”—indeed Hans Ulrich Obrist, who conceived of Serpentine’s Manifesto Marathon and edited the volume, also contributed to the *Rett Kopi* special issue.

4. *This is a declaration of artistic will and newly found optimism.*

From the past tense of the first point, and the historical view of the present in the next two, we are now moving into a new mode in which the
text we are reading is identifying itself as a manifesto in its own right. Deictically, the manifesto is here pointing towards itself and evokes the proper spirit of optimism that goes with the writing of a futurist text.

5. New modes of publication and production are a means to distribute ideas in the form of texts, documents, and radical pamphlets.
6. This futurological congress presents manifestos for the twenty-first century. This book is urgent.

These final two (equally deictic) points sketch a theory of the manifesto as something that brings together a literary genre, a mode of publication, and a means of distributing ideas, adding that this indeed is the purpose of the manifestos collected here. The last sentence has once more the character of a metamanifesto: all manifestos are urgent, aiming at the moment when words become actions.

Between the covers, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Julia Peyton-Jones assemble reflections on the history of the manifesto as well as historical manifestos. More important, however, are the more than fifty new manifestos written in response to their call. They come from different art forms and disciplines, including film, performance art, and architecture, starting, in alphabetical order, from Marina Abramović through Brian Eno, Rem Koolhaas, and Yoko Ono to Yvonne Rainer and Lebbeus Woods. Together, they compose a panoply of manifestos and the various attitudes one might take towards the genre and its history. There are manifestos that declare what they are against and what they are for. Many manifestos include commentaries on the genre of the manifesto and its condition in the twenty-first century, even the impossibility of writing manifestos. Some manifesto use large, bold letters, others are less declarative and more essayistic; some take the form of a dialogue with different voices, while others speak for a group rather than an individual. Some are handwritten, while others include images and drawings. They variously call for political revolution, the end of abstract cinema, and an end to the ban on smoking; they are against modernism, as well as for a return to modernism. One simply states, in white letters against a black background, across two pages: “It doesn’t get better.” That, one assumes, is not an optimistic manifesto.

Two things stand out. For all the variety and hand-wringing about the possibility of manifestos, they are all manifestos or responses to the genre of the manifesto. Indeed, both the variety and the hand-wringing were part of the manifesto all along. Like the opening metamanifesto on the cover, many manifestos mention previous manifestos, but this history is seen, for the most part, not as disabling; rather, as in the case of Rett Kopi, it becomes part of what it means to write a manifesto now.
History, once it abandons the progressive history of no return that must ignore the manifestos of the present, is an ally, not an enemy, of the avant-gardes of the present.

The most notable thing about the Serpentine Gallery Manifesto Marathon was that it was precisely that, a marathon. The manifestos were not just written documents, but performed. The Serpentine Gallery is located near Speaker’s Corner—the organizers mention the proximity to Marx. The marathon occurred in a pavilion designed by Frank Gehry. The performance style varied, but invariably, manifestos were treated as a performance genre, as something charged by the presence of speaker and audience. This performance character leaves traces on the manifestos themselves. The best example of this is Ben Vautier’s manifesto, which includes stage directions of acts Vautier performed while reciting the manifesto, namely ripping pages out of a Serpentine catalogue.

In this context, it might be interesting to detail how the history of the avant-garde was included in this marathon. Many of the manifestos—as well as the metamanifesto on the cover—refer to the history of manifestos in the twentieth century, some even harking back to the *Communist Manifesto*. The catalogue opens with essays on the history of manifestos (including one by me). These historical reflections, however, played no role in the performed Marathon. In this sense, a distinction was made between a purely historical reflection, even one open to the future, and manifestos, including those that reflected on the genre’s past.

There was one exception to this rule. Hans Ulrich Obrist engaged in a dialogue with Eric Hobsbawm about manifestos and revolutions. This was a dialogue, to be sure, and not a manifesto, but then again, some of the manifestos collected here opted for the form of the dialogue. Indeed, even Marx and Engels had toyed with the idea of writing their *Communist Manifesto* in dialogic form, and the final text still bears traces of this origin. In its own way, the Manifesto Marathon thus preserved a crucial feature of the historical manifesto, namely its performative dimension, and translated this feature into the present.

537 Broadway, New York City

The constructive relation between the history of the avant-garde and its future becomes visible when one visits important sites of previous avant-gardes. The first such site I was drawn to was 537 Broadway, which has had a varied history. The loft was bought by George Maciunas, leader of Fluxus, in 1966. Space was very cheap, and 537 was one of several buildings that Maciunas turned into fluxhouses, sometimes with the
support of the NEA. In 1975 he received a severe beating ordered by his creditors, which would have killed him had not a dancer opened the door and scared off the attackers (later Maciunas was married in the same spot). After Maciunas died in 1978 he left the space to Jean Dupuy, a performance artist. By the early eighties Emily Harvey, an art consultant, began renting the space from Dupuy. Dupuy, Harvey, and her husband Christian Xatrec turned the space into the Grommet Gallery, devoted to Fluxus and other avant-garde art. In 1985 Harvey bought the space from Dupuy and renamed it the Emily Harvey Gallery, focusing its programming more fully on Fluxus and its latter-day performance-art inheritors.

I got involved with 537 briefly when Stephen Squibb contacted me about doing a manifesto-centered event there. The event took place under the auspices of International Pastimes, a series of performance events combining theory and art making, organized by Squibb and Bosko Blagojevic. International Pastimes got involved with 537 indirectly. Christian Xatrec had given the space to Joao Simoes, giving him carte blanche for programming, and Simoes in turn had invited International Pastimes, giving them a free hand; he only reserved the right to turn the event into material for a film.

The event itself thus had at least two dimensions. From one perspective, it shared many features with an academic discussion. The official topic was my book *Poetry of the Revolution*, and after I had given a short summary, Stephen, Bosko, and I talked about manifestos and then opened the discussion to the approximately forty people who had showed up, a combination of scholars and artists. The result was one of the best discussions on manifestos I have participated in, with the history of the manifesto being brought to bear on the particular challenges faced by the artists interested in this genre today.

At the same time, the event was itself an exhibit, a curated event in a former Fluxus space under the ultimate auspices of an artist, who used it as material in a film. I don’t know what has happened to the material that the audience, Stephen, Bosko, and I provided, but one thing is certain: if Simoes ends up using it, it will not be as a mere documentation of a discussion.

Soho is not what it used to be, what with skyrocketing real estate prices and gentrification. Fluxus can be said to have contributed to the gentrification of Soho, and the changing use of the space does reflect a certain commercialization. For example, Emily Harvey used the space for her work as an art consultant, selling paintings and prints to corporate clients. At the same time, the space is not used for commercial purposes now. Indeed Fluxus itself was never free from market forces. Although
space was quite cheap, Maciunas had the capital to start fluxhouses, and sometimes received government funding to support his activities. The space and its owners have variously tried both to preserve and to continue the Fluxus history, without being stifled by this double imperative. The gallery is devoted to preserving the Fluxus legacy, but it also leaves programming in several hands without exerting control. My own presence, as a historian of manifestos, is perhaps the best proof of this incorporation of history into art making. 537 Broadway is not a museum dedicated to Fluxus, but a space that has adapted to the changing environment of New York City in the twenty-first century.

Spiegelgasse 1, Zurich

Going back in time, my final destination was one of the original places of the original avant-garde: the Dadaist Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich at Spiegelgasse 1. Here, no one had invited me: I went there, let us say, as an avant-garde tourist. Spiegelgasse 1 is located in the old city center of Zurich, close to the Limmat, in a maze of small streets on a pretty steep incline. When you approach the house, located on a corner, you get the impression that you are faced with a museum. There is a plaque on the outside alerting the passerby that this is the place where the historical Cabaret Voltaire had taken place once upon a time.

That time had not lasted very long. The Cabaret Voltaire was in operation only for three months, in 1916, before it was kicked out due to noise complaints. After that, the space continued to exist as a bar, until it was closed permanently, again due to noise complaints, in the 1950s. It was not until 2002 that a group of artists, intent on both preserving this historical avant-garde space and using it for their own productions, occupied the building. In response to this action, a committee was formed to save the space. An early supporter was Swatch, the large Swiss watch manufacturer, which offered funds, provided that the city of Zurich supported the project as well. This happened, and the building was turned once again into a bar and performance space.

The new Cabaret Voltaire manages the balancing act between history and present with considerable sophistication. One of the organizers, Adrian Notz, represents the historical face, the attempt to preserve Dada’s legacy. There is a glass display case that contains Dada publications as well as some scholarship on Dada near the entrance. Once again, histories of the avant-garde play a role in the formulation of new avant-gardes. Notz, who calls himself a Dadaologist, also travels to conferences and seeks out traces of Dada around the world. In fact, Spiegelgasse 1 was
a veritable excavation project. Documenting history, the website of the new Cabaret Voltaire details the various uses of the house before and after Dada. The space looks quite different, although the archaeologists managed to preserve a characteristic pillar in the middle of the room. Being interested in Dada today is, among other things, an archaeological endeavor.

Philipp Meier represents the current face of the Cabaret Voltaire. He curates the performance space, although without exerting much control in order to preserve the free-wheeling spirit of Dada. Paradoxically, he explained to me on the phone, this means that performances do not always have a close connection to the original Dadaists. For public events, no rent has to be paid, only a modest contribution to expenses. The space can also be rented for private events for a fee.

Philipp Meier also uses his name and that of the new Cabaret Voltaire to support other events with advertising and logistics. In the midst of the financial crisis, a former professional swimmer, Roland Wagner, announced his participation in a Swiss swimming competition, declaring that he would achieve a new world record. To the great surprise of the sports fans, he stopped halfway, returned to the beginning and acted as if he had won the race. He let it be known that his performance was meant as a critique of the performance-oriented mindset that had caused the financial crisis.

Avant-garde purists have frowned upon the combination of art and commerce at work in the new Cabaret Voltaire, protesting as much against the involvement of the city government as against corporate sponsoring. Wasn’t this precisely what Dada was against? Not really. From the beginning, Dada maintained a playful attitude towards commerce. After all, the whole reason why the group had been invited to provide entertainment at Spiegelgasse 1 was to increase sales. Several Dadaists developed their collage techniques by working as graphic designers. And Dada promoted itself through forms of publicity not dissimilar to advertising, manifestos among them. The purism associated with the original Cabaret Voltaire is a product of progressive history, of stories of decline, of a nostalgia for a time when true avant-gardes were still possible.

In this context, it might have amused the Dadaists, rather than outraged them, that in order to finance its support, Swatch created a Dada watch, Dada Traces, whose limited edition contains small bits of original Dada documents. Not only the Swiss corporate world has embraced the Dadaists, who once upon a time printed business cards identifying their gallery as the Dada World Headquarters. The Swiss republic has embraced Dada as well, putting Sophie Täuber, one of the few women associated with Dada and one of the few Dada Swiss citizens, on the fifty franc note.
As the Dadaists recommended back in the teens, a piece of advice that has never been as sound as it is today: “Invest your money in Dada.”

Appendix: Five Theses on the History of the Manifesto

I. The manifesto interprets the world—and changes it.

Although related to other future-oriented genres such as the apocalypse, the Jeremiad, the prophecy, and the oracle, the manifesto is unique in that it purports to participate in bringing about whatever future it predicts. While those other genres merely serve to reveal a future that is going to take place anyway, the manifesto is an active genre, one that wants to contribute to the making of the future. This conception of the manifesto was centrally shaped by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels when they wrote what would become the most influential manifesto in that genre’s history and therefore the text that has defined what it means to write a manifesto ever since. The *Communist Manifesto* announces a break, a revolutionary upheaval, and it itself, qua its own speech acts, enacts this break as well. In this way, the *Communist Manifesto* adheres to Marx’s eleventh thesis on Ludwig Feuerbach, that philosophers should not only interpret the world, but (also) change it.

Another way of characterizing the manifesto’s relation to the future is to say that the *Communist Manifesto* documents the future. It does so to the extent that it lays out general laws of history. But it also tries to occupy the future in an act of prolepsis, of creative anticipation. This documentation must be conceived of as an active, even an activist act, as a documentation that itself produces what it documents. Future manifestos must find ways of arriving at compelling interpretations of the world, but they must also develop ways of involving their own speech acts in the project of changing it.

II. The manifesto is a revolutionary genre; it can only function within a revolutionary horizon.

The *Communist Manifesto* has become the defining genre for political manifestos but also, since the late nineteenth century, for art manifestos. Due to this inheritance, one can speak of a revolutionary horizon of the manifesto. It is against the *Communist Manifesto* and its particular notion of revolution that all subsequent manifestos, from Dadaist manifestos and the foundational manifestos of the various communist internationals to the manifestos of the 1960s, have had to establish themselves. Indeed, the different forms the manifesto has taken in the last hundred and fifty years can be attributed to changing meanings of the concept of revolution.
To articulate this revolutionary horizon, I use a phrase from Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire*, “poetry” of the revolution, with which Marx captured the rhetoric or form of the revolution as opposed to its content. The writer Marx here thinks about the relation between literature broadly conceived and the world. The manifesto, I think, is this poetry of the revolution, the way in which different revolutions are articulated and articulate themselves. The future of the manifesto will depend on our ability to invent a new poetry of the revolution within a given revolutionary horizon.

**III. The art manifesto and the political manifesto are closely intertwined; the future of the one hinges on the future of the other.**

The uncertainty about how and in what form manifestos can and should be written now is undoubtedly related to a general political crisis of the Left. This does not mean, however, that art manifestos are simply secondary formations, that they copy from political ones and that if we want a new art manifesto we need to have a new political manifesto first. For the history of the manifesto is a double history, entailing both political and art manifestos. Only by understanding their connection can we conceive of new and timely forms of manifestos. Needless to say, it does not make sense to advocate a return to Dada or Lenin, neo-Dadaism or neo-Bolshevism. But no art manifesto can exist without having established a relation to political manifestos and conversely, no political manifesto will have force without reflecting on its relation to art, to literature, to the poetry of the revolution.

**IV. No avant-garde manifesto has ever been outside the spectacle.**

The myth of the purity of the historical avant-garde and its later cooptation by the society of the spectacle is untenable. Usually it is Dada that is called upon to guarantee the purity of the avant-garde and, by extension, the purity of the manifesto. The avant-garde, in this view, was radically anticommercial, dedicated to a purely anarchic politics; it preserved a pure opposition in the still center of the Great War. But in fact the historical avant-garde has never been entirely outside the spectacle. The avant-garde manifestos themselves are the best proof of this. F. T. Marinetti used the manifesto as part of an advertisement campaign, which included paid advertisements in newspapers, and the Dadaist Cabaret Voltaire was initially a business proposition meant to provide entertainment to boost sales. Indeed, many Dadaists worked in advertising and graphic design. To be sure, the avant-garde spectacle was a peculiar kind of spectacle, mixing art and revolution, opposition and cooptation, but it was not something that can be meaningfully described as having taken place outside the spectacle. Future manifestos
should not speak as if from outside the spectacle especially if they want to establish a critical relation to it.

V. The manifesto encodes grand narratives.

Beginning with the first sentence of the *Communist Manifesto*, manifestos have often engaged in narrative history. More recently, historians of postmodernism (such as Perry Anderson) have declared the end of grand narratives and sometimes concluded that for this reason there can be no more manifestos. They were right to notice the connection: the manifesto is a genre premised on a grand narrative. But their predictions turned out to be wrong. For now that the prominence of the postmodern is on the wane, grand narrative and thus the manifesto is on the rise again. The task today is more than ever to invent new narratives, even perhaps grand or grandiose ones. The future of the manifesto will depend on our willingness and ability to construct narratives. And new manifestos can become the mode through which such new narratives will be articulated.

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NOTES

1. Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974).
8. In addition to inviting me to the gallery, Stephen Squibb is also responsible for researching its history. I would like to thank him for both.
9. I would like to thank Philipp Meier for talking to me about Cabaret Voltaire.
10. This text first appeared in *Rett Kopi Dokumenterer Fremtiden: Manifest* (Oslo: Rett Kopi, 2007): 182–83, and was also published, in a translation by Ellef Prestsaeter, as “Fem teser om manifestets fremtid,” *Klassekampen*, June 29th, 2007, 14–15. I would like to thank the publisher for the permission to reprint this text here.