
Manifesto:
Graphic, Sonic, Affective Object

JANE BIRKIN

Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton, UK

Media Theory
Vol. 1 | No. 1 | 152-161
© The Author(s) 2017
CC-BY-NC-ND
<http://mediatheoryjournal.org/>

A manifesto is commonly accepted as a public declaration of policy and aims. Whilst it is primarily a written document, the notion of declaration transports us back to the voice; to the thrill of the soapbox and the megaphone; to the spoken word as public affirmation and promise. Although the modern *political* manifesto is a policy document that is too long and convoluted to be read out by politicians in full, key points are voiced by party leaders and officials, and the printed manifesto is ritually waved in front of TV cameras: an *illusion* of promise through the mediated presentation of a material object. But these objects have become corporate in style and language. They add to the countless examples of the grey literature that surround us today, produced by governments, universities and other similar institutions. A different rendition of the manifesto is the one put routinely forward by art students everywhere as a part of a project, often set early on in their course, where they inventively state their aims and intentions in a very material way.

I want to examine the graphic, sonic and affective authority of the manifesto-object, with particular reference to the *Blast* Manifesto of 1914 that was included in the first issue of *Blast*¹, a journal published in 1914 and 1915 by the British Vorticist movement – this is, after all, an opportune moment to discuss a manifesto that is sited within the first issue of a journal. As well as being a work of art in its own right, and the inspiration for many student projects, the *Blast* Manifesto is a genuine attempt to set forth change; it is a substantive declaration through content *and* form.

Blast was short-lived, with only two issues produced. The Archive at the University of Southampton where I spend one half of my working life has a good copy of each of these two issues, bound together – probably in the 1950s – but with issue one still retaining its startling pink cover, emblazoned with the word ‘BLAST’ in heavy, black, diagonal type: Ezra Pound described the journal as this ‘great MAGENTA cover’d opusculus’². With a strong nationalist and imperialist slant, it is a politically questionable yet desirable object that I regularly take off the shelf to handle, to admire and to be stirred by. It is not yet out of copyright in the UK, so excerpts are provided here using recommended transcription techniques for scientific and technical texts³. Meaningful formatting – but not type style – has been preserved. (The extract from the Mayakovsky poem presented later is treated in the same way). A good quality digitized copy of the first issue of *Blast* is available within U.S. copyright at <http://library.brown.edu/pdfs/1143209523824858.pdf>.

Blast was in large part motivated by Marinetti and the new Italian avant-garde, and was initiated with the aim of founding a new movement in literature and art in Britain – a riposte to Marinetti over his attempts to assimilate the British avant-garde into his own movement. The first issue is edited and mostly written by Wyndham Lewis, assisted by Ezra Pound, and with contributions from Rebecca West, Ford Madox Ford, Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, Edward Wadsworth and Jacob Epstein. Despite its short life, *Blast* is regarded as a seminal pre-World War I modernist journal, ‘the quintessential modernist little magazine’⁴. It contains poems, woodcuts and a play by Wyndham Lewis entitled ‘Enemy of the Stars’, but significantly here, it presents what has become known as the Vorticist Manifesto, including a page of signatories at the end, taking up the first 43 of the 160 pages. The Manifesto is clearly titled, and begins with lists of things to be blasted, cursed, blessed and damned – this is arresting and non-negotiable language from the beginning.

This first section is bold and experimental in both content and design. It is highly typographic, taking inspiration from works of contemporary concrete poetry such as Marinetti’s own *Zang Tumb Tuuum* (1912), but very different in form to the most famous Futurist Manifesto (one of many produced), which was published in a fairly

5

BLAST HUMOUR

Quack ENGLISH drug for stupidity and sleepiness.

Arch enemy of REAL, conventionalizing like

gunshot, freezing supple
REAL in ferocious chemistry
of laughter.

BLAST SPORT

HUMOUR'S FIRST COUSIN AND ACCOMPLICE.

Impossibility for Englishmen to be
grave and keep his end up,
psychologically.

Impossible for him to use Humour
as well and be persistently
grave.

Alas! necessity for big doll's show
in front of mouth.

Visitation of Heaven on

English Miss

gums, canines of **FIXED GRIN**

Death's Head symbol of Anti-Life.

CURSE those who will hang over this
Manifesto with **SILLY CANINES** exposed.

17

conventional way on the front page of the French newspaper, *Le Figaro*, on 20 February 1909. However, both these manifestos lament the tepid state of art at the time. They call for, and indeed presage, a far more vibrant and experimental modernist culture.

Continuing on through *Blast* issue one: at page 30 the title 'manifesto' appears again, this time in smaller type, a hierarchical typographic operation that suggests a manifesto *within* a manifesto. What follows is a seven-part text, each part comprising a list of orderly numbered points. Although still black, stark and visually striking, this

sub-section is less diverse in layout – perhaps moving more towards what we expect of a manifesto in style – but still experimental in language terms.

- 7** It is intelligence electrified by flood of Naivety.
- 8** It is Chaos invading Concept and bursting it like nitrogen.
- 9** It is the Individual masquerading as Humanity like a child in clothes too big for him.
- 10** Tragic Humour is the birthright of the North.
- 11** Any great Northern Art will partake of this insidious and volcanic chaos.
- 12** No great ENGLISH Art need to be ashamed to share some glory with France, to-morrow it may be with Germany, where the Elizabethans did before it.
- 13** But it will never be French, any more than Shakespeare was, the most catholic and subtle Englishman

Not only is the *Blast* Manifesto a bold example of typographic experimentation that is highly visual and extremely important to the history of visual culture – especially what we now know as Concrete (or Visual) Poetry, a practice continued today by artists / writers / poets such as Derek Beaulieu⁵, for example – it has sonic qualities as well. It speaks to us directly. At times it even shouts, with a voice and an urgency that incites passion and zeal. The blackness of the type and variations in scale and position replicate the intonations, the emphases and the pauses of the human voice. We scan the text and we simultaneously hear it: it is a double assault on our senses.

Of course, we already have in mind the performance poetry of the Italian Futurists. Marinetti's performances of *Zang Tumb Tuuum* were particularly remarkable and left audiences stunned. Marinetti's experimental 'novel' was set in the Balkan War, which he had witnessed firsthand as a war reporter, and it used *parole in libertà* (words in freedom): distinctive typographic devices and layouts that would define the futurist style. But it was *performed* as an experimental sound poem, using different speeds and permutations of voice to give an extraordinary rendering of the sounds of battle. A manifesto is anyway a performative text, an affirmation and a declaration – and 'bless', 'blast', 'curse' and 'damn' are performative words – in line with the early designation by J.L. Austin, in *How to Do Things with Words*, where the 'saying' and the 'doing' are one and the same thing (famously, the utterance of 'I do' in the course of the marriage ceremony)⁶. The Futurist Manifesto is a model of this notion of performativity, with its declarations, such as, 'We affirm that the world's magnificence has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed', forming the foundation of futurist thought and action.⁷

The heavy, black imprint of *Blast*, its imperfect, squashed ink letter rims, very noticeable in the original, provides evidence of the letterpress printing process and evokes other sounds that must be acknowledged: the click of the moveable type and the loud, repetitive, mechanical noise of the printing press. These are sounds that are fitting as well to the Futurist culture that embraced technology, speed and industry. Kittler would later discuss the noise of the typewriter, describing it as a 'discursive machine-gun'⁸; Marinetti evoked the sounds of battle through *Zang Tumb Tuuum*; and note the reference to gunshot in the first extract from *Blast* provided here. The sound of the battle reverberates through the sound *and* the look of words and through the technology that produces them. The typescript is a visual trace of the regulated and repetitive sound of the machine gun; the typographic diversity of the futurist and vorticist imprints makes visible the sonic miscellany of earlier battles.

In 1923, El Lissitzky and Vladimir Mayakovsky collaborated on a book of Mayakovsky's poems entitled *For the Voice*.⁹ This collection of poems was made for the voice, to be read out at rallies and meetings by supporters of the revolution. This is, like *Blast*, a paradigm of Graphic Modernism and the design and layout of the

poems again function in connection with the human voice. Working closely with the Berlin typesetters, El Lissitzky was responsible for the avant-garde typographics that begin each poem and for the overall design of the book, which includes a thumb-index. Sophie Lissitsky-Küpper writes:

It was Mayakovsky himself who suggested Lissitsky should design the book, in which the poet included thirteen of his best-known poems, the ones most frequently used in public speeches. Mayakovsky wanted the book to be designed in a way that would make it easy to be read aloud, hence the title. Lissitzky's solution to this requirement was a stroke of genius. To help the speaker find the poem he wanted in the shortest possible time, Lissitzky adopted the principle of the thumb index.¹⁰



Form ranks! Forward march!
No squabbling ad nauseam.
Silence, speakers!

For the Voice is not claiming to be a manifesto: rather, it is a score, a *manual* for revolutionary speakers. And Lissitzky's graphics are not mere illustrations in a revolutionary style, they are affective visual poems; tied closely to the poems 'proper' and designed to rally the speaker, to direct the desired mode of address.

As with the sounds of the battle in Marinetti's *Zang Zang Tuuum*, sounds other than human speech resonate in *For the Voice*. The poem 'Proper Respect for Horses' (written in 1918), tells the story of a weary war-horse – a metaphor for the state of the Russian nation – starting with a bold and graphic visualisation of the 'clip-clap-clop-clup' of the horse's hooves and progressing to build a picture of the horse slipping and eventually crashing to the ground. This is all executed through a profound and technically brilliant relationship between sound and meaning of words in the Russian language – and to a large extent in the English translation – that reaches into the conscious and sub-conscious mind. As Judith Stapanian-Apkarian writes, this goes far beyond a simple use of onomatopoeia.¹¹

The appreciation of this material object continues: original copies of *For the Voice* are extremely rare and in 2000 the British Library published its facsimile edition¹², along with a separate translation and an accompanying book of collected essays, *Voices of the Revolution*, which includes information on the poems, the graphics and the translation. The facsimile edition exactly duplicates not only the design elements, including the thumb-index, but also the colour of the inks and the paper stock, resulting in an object that is as close to the original as possible.

Amongst more recent Concrete Poets, John Cage is noticeably influenced by early twentieth-century graphic styles. Although Cage is most recognised in popular culture as an avant-garde composer and music theorist, his practice engages with *visual* culture, not only through his alternative ways of presenting scores and his highly visual performances, but through his experimental writing and Concrete Poetry. Often formed by the *I Ching* chance operations that dominated his musical compositions from the 1950s onwards, Cage's texts frequently defy normal comprehension and so become more concerned with sound and musicality than with language. Cage writes in his foreword to his book of poems, *M*:

Syntax, according to Norman O. Brown, is the arrangement of the army. As we move away from it, we demilitarize language. This demilitarization of language is conducted in many ways: a single language is pulverized; the boundaries between two or more languages are crossed: elements not strictly linguistic (graphic, musical) are introduced.¹³

We can attempt to analyse the words of the *Blast* Manifesto – and *Blast* contains significant references that point to what Wyndham Lewis saw as the complex problems of the contemporary world – but we have to conclude that this text too is partly non-syntactical: it is ‘demilitarized’ in the Cagean sense, yet highly militarised – a call to action – in its form. Poet and critic Craig Dworkin coined the phrase ‘conceptual writing’¹⁴ as a way of including the practices of concrete poets such as Cage, conceptual artists and those of language poets. Dworkin’s co-author, Kenneth Goldsmith, argues that conceptual writing ‘invokes a *thinkership* rather than a *readership*’, maintaining that once the *system* is understood, the *words* do not matter.¹⁵ This notion fits with Goldsmith’s own poetic works such as *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*¹⁶, where radio and TV reports of events such as the assassination of JFK, including jingles, weather reports and all, are flatly transcribed; or *Day*¹⁷, where he similarly handles a copy of *The New York Times*, making no distinction between editorial or advertisement, systematically stripping the newspaper of any graphic or typographic hierarchy¹⁸. This flattening negates – but at the same time addresses – the auditory and visual qualities of the originals. It is the direct opposite of *Blast* in methodological terms. Yet Goldsmith himself, and other conceptual poets such as Christian Bök, give readings that are unexpectedly affective and performative (in the theatrical and phenomenological sense, as defined by Judith Butler¹⁹, for example), although still disciplined in comparison to Marinetti’s performances of *Zang Zang Tuuum*.

In 2009, following a revival of interest in Wyndham Lewis, *Blast* was reprinted by Gingko Press. In 2011, Tate Britain invited the public to submit work on the themes of ‘Blast’ and ‘Bless’ to mark their exhibition, ‘The Vorticists: Manifesto for a Modern World?’. A website²⁰ was created to present the best submissions. Like the *Blast* journal’s own publication span, the duration of this web-based collection was

brief. The Tumblr site is *at the moment of writing* occupied by adverts for skin whitening, stretch-mark removal, wrinkle cream and X-Box, demonstrating a silent and stealthy form of moveable type that is fitting to our age (and our weaponry). Marjorie Perloff, who writes on twentieth and twenty-first century poetry and poetics, including the work of the modernists, uses the term ‘moving information’²¹ to signify the pushing around of language in the digital age, as well as the act of being emotionally moved by the work. The material affect of the written word – and Goldsmith argues that ‘we can choose to weigh it *and* we can choose to read it’²² – is palpable and persistent.

Notes

¹ Wyndham Lewis ed. *Blast* no.1-2 (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1914,1915)

² <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/blogs/blast-radical-vorticist-manifesto>

³ See, for example, Mary-Jo Kline and Susan H. Perdue, ‘Transcribing the Source Text’ in their book *A Guide to Documentary Editing*, 3rd edition (Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2008). Available at <http://gde.upress.virginia.edu/04-gde.html>

⁴ The Modernist Journals Project at Brown University and the University of Tulsa: http://modjourn.org/render.php?id=1158591480633184&view=mjp_object

⁵ For examples of Derek Beaulieu’s concrete poetry, see his blog: <https://derekbeaulieu.wordpress.com>

⁶ J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962) 5.

⁷ *Words in Freedom*, exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2009: <https://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2009/futurism/>

⁸ Friedrich A. Kittler. *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press,1986) 191.

⁹ Vladimir Mayakovsky. *For the Voice* (Moscow-Berlin: State Publishing House, 1923)

¹⁰ Sophie Lissitsky-Küpper, quoted in ‘Note on the Date of Publication of *For the Voice*’. In Patricia Railing (ed) *Voices of Revolution: Collected Essays* (London: British Library, 2000), 13.

¹¹ Judith Stapanian-Apkarian, ‘Modernist “Vision” in the Poems of Mayakovsky’. In Railing (ed) *Voices of Revolution*, 115-118.

¹² Vladimir Mayakovsky *For the Voice* (London: British Library, 2000)

¹³ John Cage. Foreword to *M: Writings '67-'72* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1973)

¹⁴ Craig Dworkin and Kennerth Goldsmith. *Against Expression: an Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2011), xxiii.

¹⁵ Kenneth Goldsmith ‘Conceptual Writing: A Worldview’. Poetry Foundation: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2012/04/conceptual-writing-a-worldview>

¹⁶ Kenneth Goldsmith. *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* (Brooklyn, NY: Powerhouse Books, 2013)

¹⁷ Kenneth Goldsmith. *Day* (Great Barrington, Mass:The Figures, 2003)

¹⁸ Dworkin and Goldsmith. *Against Expression*, 249.

¹⁹ Judith Butler, ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: an Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,’ in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. A. Jones (London: Routledge, 2003), 397.

²⁰ <https://blastbless.tumblr.com>

²¹ Marjorie Perloff, “‘Moving Information’: On Kenneth Goldsmith’s *The Weather*.” Ubuweb Papers: http://www.ubu.com/papers/kg_ol_perloff.html

²² Kenneth Goldsmith. *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 34.

Jane Birkin is an artist, designer and scholar. She is a visiting lecturer and researcher at Winchester School of Art, University of Southampton. She also works on exhibitions in Special Collections at the University of Southampton Library, as exhibition designer as well as in a curatorial role. Taking the archive as the primary locus of her own practice, she is specifically concerned with institutional description techniques that define and manage the photographic image. Birkin's research functions at the intersection of text and image, combining media culture and techniques of the archive, as well as contemporary discourse on art and conceptual writing.

Email: j.a.birkin@gmail.com