



*Axon: Creative Explorations*, Vol 10, No 2, December 2020

## INTRODUCTION

### Manifestos, diatribes and creative interventions

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The theme for this issue of *Axon* emerged during a conference in late 2019, where paper after paper combined coherent research with impassioned critiques of the state of the university, the state of the environment, and the state of politics. Evident in these presentations was both a determination to generate positive change, and impatience at the apparent slowness of senior members' responses to the what-is of the current moment. It seemed timely to provide a platform for these concerns, and invite contributions that combine personal, political and scholarly passions; and the manifesto form seemed to have the right combination of elements for this context.

Manifestos have a vibrant history. While they are not often identified as specifically *scholarly* documents, they are the product of deep and sustained thought, focused investigation, and axiological reflection, and thus are capable of offering creative interventions that are worth attention. Though formally defined as political or institutional statements, they have been deployed by artists at least since Sir Joshua Reynolds' *Discourses on Art* (1797).[i] FT Marinetti's Futurist manifesto[ii] — 'that ur-manifesto of the avant garde' (Hanna 2014)[iii] — was published in 1909; Tristan Tzara's 1918 Dada Manifesto[iv] rapidly followed, and André Breton delivered three Surrealist Manifestos between 1924 and 1929.[v] Many artists' and poets' manifestos have appeared since then,[vi] and the form remains an important one, whether presented in all seriousness or as part of creative play.

With this in mind, at the end of 2019 we drafted and circulated a call for papers; and then everything changed, for the worse. Catastrophic fires gripped Australia during the southern summer, followed by devastating hail. Then came the news of a novel coronavirus and much of the world going into lockdown. Now, as we finish compiling this issue of *Axon*, the World Health Organization is reporting some 1.5 million deaths worldwide, and the global economy seems to be lurching toward destruction. **HL Hix's** short, pithy manifesto on 'despairmentalism' — which arrived in *Axon's* in-tray not long after we had gone into lockdown, and which considers the many forms in which despair manifests — is perfectly suited to the strangeness and distress of 2020, and nicely aligned with what a reviewer of this piece termed its 'contradictory call to lay down arms, to feel, to desire, to reorient, to resist, to find oneself in opposition to'. In this it exemplifies one way of looking at this plague year, because though it has brought new disasters with each month, it has also shown people working to support their communities, renewed engagement in politics, and deep concern for environmental degradation. It could almost be averred that we humans are beginning to recognise the value of what Dublin-based post-punk band Fontaines D.C. wrote in their manifesto: 'Live everywhere through empathy'.[vii]

Empathy is at the heart of many of the works included in the current issue of *Axon*, evident in the

number of multi-author collaborations involved, and in the focus of most of these articles, which direct their gaze outward to the wounded world, and to wounded communities. The more-than-human domain, and the burning need for humans to connect ethically with that domain, are featured in poem sequences, photo essays, personal and scholarly essays and performative writing. In **Marianne Boruch's** poem sequence, Australian wildlife address the reader in blunt, demotic language; 'I'm not sure how much is diatribe or manifesto in this work', she writes, 'but perhaps some of the pieces go back to a universal ache and rage and loss, certainly among the ancient reasons for poetry'. **Mark Roper** explores the loneliness of the human species when they are divorced from the natural environment, and efforts to communicate beyond the human community; **Ed Southorn's** photo-essay sees culture in nature, and considers a way to connect with everything that is, in his account of the struggle between property development and the world of growing things; and **James Harpur's** poetic account of rivers and their being (punctuated by comments offered by the anonymous reviewers), urges a different, pre-Enlightenment eye to be brought to considerations of water, to arrest the ever-growing degradation of this planet. **Virginia Barratt, Ashley Haywood and Nick Taylor's** manifesto introduces the other-than voice in their swamp-writing collaboration, who 'are always *writing-with* in life', and the collective **In Her Interior** (Francesca da Rimini and Virginia Barratt) similarly give voice to new beings in a multi-voiced 'fugue' that addresses the damaged world.

Beyond the immediate crises facing so many individuals, organisations and governments are the weeping sores that have not been taken seriously, in many cases for decades. A number of the contributions challenge this, and articulate their demands for change. **Kate Cantrell and Kelly Palmer** map out the structures of the twenty-first century academy and what they describe as its 'self-cannibalising tendencies', starkly setting out impacts on the precariat employees. **Corinna Di Niro, Pablo Muslera and Amelia Walker** tackle the unsustainable structures of the academy, and its failure to provide career pathways for the many scholars it trains. **Bronwyn Fredericks and Abraham Bradfield** powerfully reject the 'whitewashing' of Australian policy, polity and society, and present a demand for more ethical and more creative approaches to be applied both by those in power, and those who are complicit with the systems of power. **Sandra Renew** shifts focus to misogyny and the uninterrupted workings of power, and offers an argument of why and how to dismantle the 'master's house' without using the 'master's tools'.

Writing on or against or about disaster has a long history in the literary domain, and several of the contributions take on that role. **Susan Ballard** is one of 13 authors who collaborated to express the lived experience of what they term the 'new normal' that is the product of climate change, while **Elanna Herbert's** photo-essay *cum* diary of an abandoned burnt-out car — material traces of the catastrophic fire in her home town — brings powerfully to consciousness the desolation wrought by environment crises. **Oz Hardwick's** poetic essay addresses the 'rhetoric of emergency' associated with governments' uncertain attempts to deal with COVID-19 while maintaining business as usual; **Dennis Haskell** in essay and poetry recounts the experience of COVID-quarantine; and **Drager Meurtant** responds to the catastrophe of COVID in Europe in his poetry/photo-essay; and, in a piece written in two languages and from two hemispheres, **Dominique Hecq and Chantal Danjou** present a poetic and fragmentary exploration of the disaster of the pandemic: 'See you on the other side of uncertainty'.

But rage and despair are not the only responses to a multifaceted sense of crisis, to what it is to live in the space between threat and trauma; and **Antonia Pont** weaves together three discrete, but related philosophical frameworks to suggest three ways in which time works on us, and how practices and habit's mechanisms can deepen capacity to craft a fuller self, even under the strictures of surveillance capitalism, even during a global pandemic. **Lesley Saunders'** short essay considers how one might respond to the chain of disasters 'without resorting to prelapsarian or millenarian views', recommending a return to gift economy and a recognition of 'creative frailty'. **Elizabeth Smither's** *Wild Books* performs the consolation and comforts of friendship in the face of minor as well as major disasters; **Brook Emery** considers creative alternatives to the standard perspectives on the nature of our world and our place in it; and **Owen Bullock** presents 100 words of haiku to offer a rich set of vignettes of the world in lockdown. **Lucas Ihlein and Kim Williams** send readers to a sequence of blogpost-manifesti they produced for the 2020 Biennale of Sydney, a juxtaposition of forms that allow them to produce art and/as exegesis and to tackle, in both registers, their concerns for environmental and social issues. **Yael Padan, Vanesa Castán Broto, Jane Rendell, and David Roberts** likewise explicate the use of the manifesto form, in this case to create shared voices and a community oriented toward epistemic justice. **Brenda Cooper's** account of a discarded life, a discovered owl, and a hunted-down boojum celebrates the creative affordances of happenstance, metonymy and metamorphosis, and **Steven Langsford and Amelia Walker** offer a conversation between a cognitive scientist and a poet about the creative potentiality of diversity for collective survival, affordances of ecopoetry in the face of environmental crises. Finally, **Lauren Terry's** manifesto on plasticity deploys the devices of the manifesto — formatting, layout, register — to capture attention and to set up in the body of the reader a stuttering, then galvanising rhythm.

This set of manifestos, diatribes, essays, poems and images is, overall, surprisingly hopeful. While there are elements of bleak honesty in how these works recognise and contend the profound impact of disaster in all its modes, in gesturing towards ways of living more fully than merely, in a Beckettian way, going on, they provide thinking tools that might be used to initiate positive creative interventions.

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[i] Reynolds, Joshua 1975 [1797] *Discourses on Art* (ed Robert Wark), New Haven: Yale University Press

[ii] Marinetti, FT 1973 [1909] 'The founding and manifesto of Futurism' (trans RW Flint), in Umbro Apollonio (ed), *Documents of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art: Futurist Manifestos*, London: Thames & Hudson, 19–24

[iii] Hanna, Julian 2014 'Manifestos: A manifesto', *The Atlantic* (24 June), <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/06/manifestos-a-manifesto-the-10-things-all-manifestos-need/372135/> (accessed 12 February 2020)

[iv] Tzara, T 1918, *Dada Manifesto*, *391 Manifestos*, [https://391.org/manifestos/1918-dada-manifesto-tristan-tzara/#.WFP\\_nvkrJPZ](https://391.org/manifestos/1918-dada-manifesto-tristan-tzara/#.WFP_nvkrJPZ) (accessed 16 December 2016)

[v] Breton, 1 1969 *Manifestoes of Surrealism* (trans R Seaver and HR Lane), Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press

[vi] Including Charles Olsen's 1966 [1950] 'Projective verse', in James Scully (ed), *Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, London: Fontana/Collins, 271–82; Julian Rosenfeldt's video installation *Manifesto* (2015) features Cate Blanchett performing collages of artist manifestos and other writings (see [https://www.julianrosefeldt.com/film-and-video-works/manifesto-\\_2014-2015/](https://www.julianrosefeldt.com/film-and-video-works/manifesto-_2014-2015/)); Jessica Wilkinson and Ali Alizadeh produced *The Realpoetik manifesto* for *Cordite Poetry Review* (14 November 2012; see <http://cordite.org.au/essays/the-realpoetik-manifesto/>); and volume 4.2 of *Axon* (2014) featured both Clements (<https://axonjournal.com.au/issue-7/return-palindrome-real>) and Petra White (<https://axonjournal.com.au/issue-7/stretching-imaginable-0>) raising the issue of the relationship between poetic

expression and manifesto intent.

[vii] Fontaines D.C. n.d. 'A manifesto', *WePresent*, <https://wepresent.wetransfer.com/story/a-manifesto-by-fontaines-dc-grian-chatten/> (accessed 8 September 2020)

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