

## Man-o Man-ifesto!

by Alexandra Juhasz

### *Manifesto*

PARK AVENUE ARMORY | DECEMBER 7, 2016 – JANUARY 8, 2017



Video still: Julian Rosefeldt, *Manifesto*, 2015. © Julian Rosefeldt and VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Park Ave Armory.

Julian Rosefeldt's *Manifesto*, which recently screened at Manhattan's Park Avenue Armory, is a cynical spectacular celebrating men's ideas about modern Western art by way of a starlet's heroic virtuosity. Cate Blanchett plays eleven female leads, and one man, in as many masterfully-executed tales. Each a magnificent nod to yet another cinematic genre, all play at once across a huge arena in an utterly spellbinding triumph of staging, a tour de force of technology, and a showy display of old-fashioned big-budget movie-know-how. Like so many of the ginormous mega-hits of the current art world, the thing reeks of money—as well as talent—and everything this magnificent combo allows. This excess also begets *Manifesto's* dark heart, Rosefeldt's contemptuous manifestation of just the opulent, grandiose art form for our time: overblown pastiche-collage.

Initially spoken against capitalism and similar evils, and their glib conventions and markets, the words of many fiery manifestos are flippantly rendered at the Armory—albeit also spectacularly—through the very formats most often under critique: mad money, craft, and magnitude. But the huge room seems organized not to honor the words of the utterly interchangeable authors whose manifestos are put to use as the actress' sole dialogue. Rather, primary deference is afforded to Blanchett and her director. Rousing snippets of manifestos are both equated and eviscerated by Rosefeldt's hyper-investment in his own master project: the making of his "manifesto of manifestos." Yes, his use of cinematic form is versatile and

intelligent enough to carry his actress as she morphs via hair, makeup, costume, and performance (à la Cindy Sherman but without the power of either autobiographical pull or its linked feminist self-awareness). Yes, you watch in wonder as Blanchett changes face and accent across the space. Yet this proves to be another cynical touch. Why ever put all these manly men's words into the mouth of one babe unless we are the better to see the (one true) man in the festo?

What follows will not be my own feminist screed via tallying (by my count, three or four female-penned manifestos in the bunch of fifty-plus; one or two traditions of disruption from outside Europe or its satellites; perhaps a few artists of color; not at all sure about the queers, etc., etc.) For counting ain't the half of it: there's already reams of extant writing on how diversity improves any cultural, institutional, or even corporate affair; and I have smaller fish to fry in this critique, and re-rendering, of possible Man, or Woman, -ifestos.



Installation view: Julian Rosefeldt, *Manifesto*. Park Avenue Armory, December 7, 2016 – January 8, 2017. Photo: James Ewing.

Manifestos speak focused directives about and through the most needed form for their besieged times. Womanifestos strive to reflect, in form, their author's core beliefs about form, the power of art, and the corruption of what currently surrounds us. At the same time they embody and enact the potential of what must be made instead. So sure, Rosefeldt's rococo assemblage may be his own version of Twain's *Gilded* Agespoken ironically through the celebrity-laden, glib, and costly media he offers as just so for our noxious age—but I find this mockery to be the last thing we need in our moment of catastrophe. Where Rosefeldt, like so many other blustering men of this moment (although not most of the men who he quotes) thinks we must go large and showy, I'll point to some competing beliefs and their linked practices.

There are other places to see more principled (wo)manifestations of manifestos. Take the recent outdoor re-staging of Zoe Leonard's 1992 *I Want a President*. Also playing out scale to respond to our current overblown conditions, Leonard's minimal, I-voiced plea has been enhanced, for 2016, to the size of a building, this allowing for one woman's small but eloquent plea to speak to crowds, in public, and much more forcefully than any of our



Zoe Leonard, *I want a president*, 1992. A High Line Commission. On view October 11 – November 17, 2016. Courtesy of Friends of the High Line. Photo: Timothy Schenck.

hand-held screens ever could. Taylor Mac's recent *24-Decade History of Popular Music* also engaged with size, place and communal spectacle. Performed in a warehouse for twenty-four hours to a crowd of 650 or so overnight guests, this extravaganza proved to be the outrageous engorged form just the right size for his Macifesto, one about the production of queer community through art and rendered through pain, healing, and time. His "radical faerie realness ritual" depended upon Mac telling us why so many of us were there, as well as what he wanted for us and for himself, as the opus played through his own exposed,

vulnerable, fallible and performing body. Leonard's and Mac's located and principled expressions of their personal and defiant positions—rendered in the big or small forms necessary for each particular tract and act—is what I want from my manifestos.

For, every woman is entitled to her own ifesto: what we want when we are done with the putrid, immoral art of our time. And I want my (man)ifestos to be humble and maybe even cheap. I don't want my (wo)manifestations(hu)manifestos to be corporate sponsored or sick with money! Actually, I need my (wo)manifestos to be exactly as big and expensive as is necessary to move people to think, feel, and act. I want these empowering words to be urgent to their place and time and alive within their own community. I want my (mac)ifestos to say who penned them and why. I want to know how words about art matter to their author and to me, and my friends, and to this country, and the world. I want my manifestos to help.

Rosefeldt flattens out just this precision and individually-situated defiance from scores of history's greatest manifestos under the weight of his own bloated, if masterful, bravado. His work is impressive, smart, and entirely of, but not against, this outrageous moment in art and history.

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CONTRIBUTOR

Alexandra Juhasz