

Manifests Are Meant to Clear the Air and Challenge – Nobody Has the Right to Obey

On Roger Bernat's and Roberto Fratini's manifest *FFF: The Friendly Face of Fascism. For an Aesthetics of Devices*, which you will find, revised and updated by the authors with respect to previous versions, in the "Documents" section <[PDF link](#)>

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Abstract

The commentary classifies Roger Bernat's and Roberto Fratini's FFF manifest, published in 2018, as an artistic praxis. It shows that the drafting itself of a manifest can be understood as a performative practice: the commented text, which is only perceived in a mediate manner in terms of its information content, appears as performative; in other words, as it directly reaches the readers and with the associations and ideas it unleashes.

It is not until the "guidelines of an aesthetics of devices" emerge, announced towards the end of the manifest, that it also becomes the description of an aesthetic programme. In its turn, this aesthetic practice can target political objectives while creating an aesthetic confusion, unfolding a critical effect on itself and acting as a call to an autonomous performance. The readers of the manifest, as well as the audience of an FFF performance, can adopt and put into practice a stance of their own within the debate that this provokes.

Keywords: device, aesthetic practice, participation, autonomous thought, emancipation, Roger Bernat, Roberto Fratini, manifest

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What political, social and/or artistic importance does the manifest still have at present, also with a view to the ecological challenges of the migration movements and global refugees? Has everything has been said, and nothing is now possible, or rather is this artistic practice more current than ever as a political formulation?

Dogramaci; Schneider, 2017: 14

In December 2018, Roger Bernat and Roberto Fratini published a manifest that is regarded as an artistic practice and that, at the same time, sets out some political objectives, while creating a confusion that, as we must suppose to the benefit of the authors, involves criticism and empowerment of the autonomous action. We will comment on this text, entitled *FFF: Friendly Face of Fascism. For an Aesthetics of Devices*, from the point of view of the aesthetic practice because it pursues an objective; it not only seeks to work in an aesthetic sense, but also in a political one. In the end, this supposition feeds off the experiences of the spectators who come into contact with the theatre aesthetics through FFF productions,² whose strategies are structurally paired with the objectives of the manifest. If we take as a reference its lessons, demands, provocations and manifestations, the manifest pursues the social intention of enabling critical thought, autonomy, participation and self-empowerment. Taking into account the growing influence of the media in the context of the *me too* debate, the new youth environmentalist

1. Comment by Yvonne Rainer in an interview with Helmut Ploebst (2007) on his text known as "No-manifesto"; "Manifests are meant to clear the air and challenge, and then their usefulness is over", cited in: *Yes! Das Manifest als künstlerische Praxis* (Brandstetter, 2017: 26). Citation by Hannah Arendt "Kein Mensch hat das Recht zu gehorchen bei Kant" (no man has the right to obey, according to Kant) in an interview with Joachim Fest (1964), in which she speaks of Adolf Eichmann' trial, <<https://youtu.be/GN6rzHemaYo>>, minute 17:02.

2. The Friendly Face of Fascism is the name of the theatre company formed by Roger Bernat, Roberto Fratini, Txalo Toloza, Cristóbal Saavedra, Ana Rovira, Marie-Klara González and Helena Febrés. The name of the company was coined in 2008 by Pedro Soler and Roger Bernat. Some of its shows are *Domini Públic* (Teatre Lliure, Barcelona, 2008), *La consagració de la primavera* (Teatro Milagro, Mexico, 2010), *Please, Continue (Hamlet)* (Théâtre du Grütli, Geneva, 2011), *Pendent de votació* (Centro Dramático Nacional, Madrid, 2012), *Desplazamiento del Palacio de La Moneda* (STML, Santiago, 2014), *Numax-Fagor-plus* (KunstenFestivalDesArts, Brussels, 2014), *No se registran conversaciones de interés* (MUCEM, Marseilles, 2016-2017) and *The Place of the Thing* (Documenta 14, Athens-Kassel, 2017).

movement or so many other efficient online mass protests, the experience of the group is taking on a new and current meaning and power, and the concept of participation is in fashion both in politics and theatre, in a theoretical and practical sense. From this perspective, formats that explore the possibilities of authentic participation are gaining ground.

Nevertheless, what can we say about the capacity for critical thought; in other words, about differentiating the point of view characteristic of the “views” proclaimed in public and with great success? And how are artistic activities positioned in relation to this? Supposing that the participation of the audience is not an end in itself but is rather conceived as an exercise in the capacity for critical thought, the participatory formats always aim to make spectators more autonomous in a democratic sense, an objective that we can call “participatory autonomy”. How does art manage to initiate something that we can call “participatory autonomy”; in other words, to start a thing that, as Wolfgang Ulrich (2019: 42) wonders, calls on people to “emancipate themselves from the standards of the present and thereby introduce new critical ideas”? The concept of “autonomy of the artist” and his/her work has been repeatedly discussed since the Renaissance, and today it still polarises and politicises the theoretical debates of art. In this way, autonomous artists – in the sense of “just” pursuing their own interests instead of committing, for example, to minorities and gender issues – are increasingly the subject of criticism. In contrast, if they deal with issues dictated by the left wing of the debate, such as gender, *me too*, refugees and integration of minorities, it is often considered that they lack autonomy faced with the current discursive taste and are pigeonholed in the conservative field of arts policy: “In the case of right-wing artists, autonomy means situating oneself towards a Western European identity that in a such a way, in the end, the concepts of autonomy and identity are mixed up” (Ulrich, 2019: 42). The dichotomy between participating and autonomy seems to interweave again with the dichotomy of political orientations and motivate arts policy debates.

The self-defined manifest *FFF: The Friendly Face of Fascism. For an Aesthetics of Devices*, published recently by the theatre company led by the director Roger Bernat and the playwright, dance theoretician and teacher Roberto Fratini, challenges, on the one hand, the displaced lines of discourse, following in contrast the style of apodictic statements, rather than supporting self-empowerment and autonomy. Within its annunciating character, it represents at the same time an “experiment in scenic realization.”

In general, a manifest is considered to be a written stance about an aesthetic, artistic or political vision, which usually makes a critical reference to existing concepts, while proclaiming the author’s own work. A manifest can mean taking a stance on an artistic vision, in most cases of a group, which expresses or endeavours to start an aesthetic revolution, an artistic reorientation or a social or political change, while moving on from the past and focusing on something new (Asholt, Fähnders, 1995 and Poole, 2014). Within the late 19th and early 20th century artistic panorama, many movements and groups emerged that published their principles or utopias in manifests, such as the call for the suppression of the separation between art and life by the

historical avant-garde and the radical rejection of traditional artistic perceptions of the main bourgeois current: “The start of the 20th century is generally considered an especially productive phase of the manifestos: Futurism, expressionism, Dadaism or surrealism completed their artistic productions with eloquent statements, expressed through newspapers, almanacs, pamphlets or also performance art” (Dogramaci; Schneider, 2017: 10), while suppressing the distinction between performance and reality, between logic and alogic. The typical form of the public programming of the artistic avant-gardes consists of declaring their art to be a social “vital practice” (Bürger, 1974: 72) and adopting a stance critical of tradition and oriented to the future, but also related to the audience, while distancing politically, socially and artistically from tradition. Wolfgang Asholt and Walter Fähnders (1995: 15) call historical avant-gardism a “manifestantism” that has found “its most characteristic artistic medium” in this genre. Above all, the programme of the Dadaists often has contradictions, which they explicitly proclaim in their manifest: “I am against action; for continuous contradiction, for affirmation too, I am neither for nor against and I do not explain because I hate common sense. Dada Means Nothing” (cited in Fiebach, 2003: 285). This rejection of meaning, the transgression of conventions, the call to contradiction and, in general, the rejection of everything that at the same time involves affirmations are generally considered characteristics of the avant-garde manifestos, which Gabriele Brandstetter (2017: 21) describes precisely for that reason as a “two-pronged gesture of the manifest within the avant-garde.” It is also necessary to see within the same context, according to Joachim Fiebach (2003: 285), “the absolutely ironic use of art.”

In this respect, it is legitimate to wonder how far the *FFF* manifest also presents signs of this alogic, contradiction, rejection and inconsequence. What function could a – alogical, contradictory and inconsequent – manifest have today within an artistic and theatrical setting? The “guidelines of an aesthetic of devices” announced towards the end of the manifest text identify it as a description of an aesthetic programme. It is not until after completing the reading that the reader knows who the authors are and that the text is considered to belong to the genre of the manifest. Moreover, this closeness with the genre of the manifest is already suggested through the proclaiming tone and the plain, homogenous and structured form of the text in clearly differentiated points. Moreover, concepts like *proclamation*, *call*, *provocation* or *fight* are common in historical manifestos. The self-definition at the end of the text suggests urgency and “speculates in any case with an action-reaction relationship between the artist and the audience,” as Ralph Poole writes (2014: X).

In the second paragraph it says that *FFF* “does not produce shows but rather designs devices.” The very self-referentiality of this affirmation presents the text not only as an informative product but, in keeping with the aforementioned character of the manifestos, as a *literary* and, therefore, *aesthetic* product. In terms of the aesthetic effect of the manifestos, Gabriele Brandstetter (2017: 18) argues that “in terms of its structure – as an act of speech, as an act of showing and proclaiming something that becomes manifest –,

the manifest is performative,” adding that manifests, as well as their creation, their effect and their reception, are conveyed “almost exclusively through the reproduced text” but that “they must be understood as a performative praxis, which must not be described only as an act of speech, but also as a event presented corporeally” (Brandstetter, 2017: 12); that is, in the sense of acts of performative speech. The manifest does not merely call for proclamation and controversy, but also *carries it out*: it itself *proclaims* and *polemicises*.

Under these conditions, we will not evaluate the content of the FFF manifest nor analyse it as an aesthetic production, as a *literary genre*; instead, we will observe its *performative* aspect. By experimenting with and perceiving the text as a performative act, that is, as an *artistic* action, one can think of *how* it captivates the readers, what stimulates them and what ideas it generates.

In this respect, it is first necessary to briefly contextualise Roger Bernat and FFF. As an author, he is responsible for the artistic group FFF, an internationally renowned company, with theatre director Roger Bernat as its visible head, whose inclination toward provocation soon culminated in him being called an *enfant terrible* (Abad, 2003). With his “Trilogia 70” – with shows like *Joventut Europea* (1999), *Flors* (2000) and *Que algú em tapi la boca* (2001) – he articulates a provocative critique of representative text-based theatre. For example, *Flors* mixes a gesture of rejection with high art, which sets the grandeur of operatic *mise-en-scène* against the profanity of a drastic pornographic scene opulently performed. As an explorer of limits and an advocator of a hybrid art form straddling theatre and installation, Bernat increasingly relies on a special form of *conceptual direction* while trying to redefine the role of the audience in contemporary theatre. Since the creation of FFF (2008), Bernat and Fratini have worked on a new aesthetics, in which the audience becomes the protagonist of the scene. These productions overcome the limits between theatre, installation and performance art, or rather expand them radically, taking to its limits not only the theatre genre but also the status of the spectator and the artist-author. The concept of device also takes on a central role: “The device renders the performance obsolete while continuing to produce performances... In the aesthetic field, devices give priority to knowledge of the rules over knowledge of the performances” (Sánchez, 2017: 335). Thus, the actor ceases to control the scenic event and the experience of those present to tend to disappear, so that those present take control of their political strength and seize on theatre as a place for social debate. In 2016, Bernat and Fratini (2016: 95) published the article “Seeing Oneself Living”, which both authors called a kind of manifest of their theoretical-practical work method. This involved the possibility of an emancipatory and participatory structure of scenic realization, which stands out because the spectator always knows *what* is manipulated. In the manipulation they see the condition for an emancipatory drive, which often substitutes the quasi-religious devotion with complex text-based theatre: “The awareness of being manipulated is the indispensable prerequisite to constitute a hypothesis of emancipation. Theatre should not have a stale smell of incense, sacrifice, collective ecstasy, and acclamation. For if we believe that theatre is not the place for political

oversimplification, it is neither the best venue for fabricating religious shortcuts to the socio-political complexity of present times.” Therefore, instead of allowing the spectators emancipation in the first place, as Brecht does, this emancipation moves to a second strategic position while making it emerge paradoxically precisely because of this. Thus begins the emancipation of the spectator, who sees himself or herself as capable of seeing and questioning power with their gaze and as soon as they gain intellectual freedom to be able to reflect on it and make of it what they want. Constanze Schellow (2016: 194) objects that in theatre a device of power *always* acts and that we cannot imagine the emancipated spectator as a happy personified result of a practice of specific realization that, finally, “helps the spectator to conquer his/her right, and only that,” but, as Nikolaus Müller-Schöll notes (cited in Schellow, 2016: 194), as a “utopian potential that turns against the ideology of the performance like any institutionalised theatre form.”

The manifest text itself has an illustrative and explanatory nature: the term device conceived by Michel Foucault (1978) in the context of power and discourse is evoked up to six times — almost like a conjuring trick, like a magic formula —. According to Foucault, the “device” brings together specific regulations and discourses, heterogeneous elements such as manifestations, rules, practices and institutions that maintain certain changing mutual bonds. Gerald Siegmund (2014) defines the device as “a heterogeneous set of discursive and non-discursive phenomena” that arises from the need to “strategically solve a social problem.” It fulfils this function by coordinating power relations and generating knowledge, while influencing social behaviour and thinking. As it is always linked to current power relations, for Foucault it became a means of describing the workings of society hidden within the structures.

Theatre as an aesthetic device has also been a subject of debate for some years as part of social action, and thus the aesthetic device fulfils another additional function “if it does not want to become identical to the social constellations that it gathers and repeats, to disappear as theatre” (Siegmund, 2014). Thus, according to Siegmund, it advocates a re-evaluation of the “aesthetic part of the device”: aesthetic phenomena, in particular artistic and aesthetic practices, must be perceived as a “paradigmatic place for device negotiation”; that is, as “a union of tangible elements (bodies, objects, spaces) as well as intangible and discursive elements (movement, sound, voice).” The concept of *device* thus leads to “a redefinition of scenic realization as a specific device that arises from and forms part of other social devices and at the same time plays with them” (Siegmund; Aggermann; Döcker, 2014). This expanded definition of theatre becomes important in the context of the current debate on the digital revolution, network cultures and modified knowledge cultures.

How is the manifest presented in the light of this power device? The first thing that stands out to us in the text of the manifest is its outward form: each new paragraph — including the title *FFF: The Friendly Face of Fascism. For an Aesthetics of the Device* — starts with the initials FFF. The programmatic uniform and graphic configuration (an almost identical length of the

points listed; blank lines repeated between sections) evokes the typical form of many manifests. Although the *FFF* text is exclusively in the singular, by repeating the abbreviation “FFF” there is a shift in the importance of the individual towards the collective; many avant-garde manifests are also presented with the voice of a group, “a voice that seeks to speak on behalf of a community that promises an idea, a programme, a vision of the future” (Brandstetter, 2017: 21). In addition, the collective refers to the human gender itself, which reflects on the human condition. The text includes five footnotes, which suggest an academic form, which further weakens the performative nature of the text. Cryptic announcements, contrasts and changing styles produce *confusion* instead: juxtaposed manifestations that, in different formulations, seek to convey the old effect of avant-garde impetus: “FFF promotes exploitation and achieves conspiracy”; “FFF is a theatre made for users, because it is the invocation of a collective ghost, because it is poor and imperfect”; “Nobody enjoys FFF devices”; “FFF is the value added of the system, its *squandering*”, “FFF cultivates crowds and harvests solitudes”, “FFF knows no barriers between stage and stalls, between public and private”. Brandstetter (2017: 19) defines the stylistic features of the manifest generally as “controversial and pathetic, and at the same time apodictic and anapodictic and patently missionary.” This tone, which alternates between pathos, ambiguity, irony, sarcasm, provocation and hide and seek, which now vindicates and announces it apodictically, now going back on itself in allogical terms turns and polemicalising it, is maintained throughout the text.

Sometimes the style of the manifest is reminiscent of an impetuous teenager who brings his or her own aesthetics and questions social structures, such as when he or she proclaims to have no language of his or her own or vision of the individual, but instead uses the language of power: “It is the copy of the system”, to immediately assert that it also represents “its *realization*”. The “system” is controversially declared the enemy. In addition, the text besieges the reader with a whole bunch of diverse and often contradictory concepts: it speaks of “dissolving barriers”, “emancipation”, “added value of the system”, “society of the spectacle”, “autonomy”, “control”, “mobilisation”, “interactivity”, “interpassivity”, “exploitation”, “cynicism”, “conspiracy”, “noise”, “silence”, “crowd”, “loneliness”, “cruel theatre”, “poor”, “dream” and “wakefulness”, “technology”, “conscious fiction” – the reader finds it difficult to extract a particular theme – and even the “device”, explicitly mentioned six times. When it speaks of the immobile spectator “with eyes open”, the text becomes, at best, a voluptuous transgression. In contrast, some things are a utopian design: “If at least the theatre was the last place to get bored!” This desire may be the reality, or rather the opposite, so the cacophonous avalanche of demands is subverted by another nuance: the text has, after all, an authoritarian, even fascist-like gesture. When the reader is suddenly shaken, in the fifth point, by the phrase “FFF is *totalitarian* theatre”, with the adjective in italics and with a hyphen between “total” and “itarian” that enables various interpretations, one wonders how it is compatible with an illustriously critical aesthetics of the device. According to Hannah Arendt, the features of a totalitarian regime also include the *abolition* of the

critical and the destruction of a protected private space; its essence is terror. FFF plays with ideas of disintegrating the boundaries between private and public spaces: “FFF knows no barriers between stage and platform, between public and private.”

Right at the end, when talking about the collective ghost of “users” and “device failure”, that is, when the “male” view falls into disrepute (“FFF mistrusts a male theatre that imagines a female audience”), this impetus gives way to a softer style, which is more vulnerable and more critical of success: “FFF is a theatre made by users, because it is the invocation of a collective ghost, because it is poor and imperfect; FFF is the failing device.” This “feminine” style opens up a new critical space that is opposed to the “fascism” used on behalf of the group and constitutes an ironic interpretation of both this denomination and the wise, apodictic tone that has imbued the text so far.

Also notable is the contradiction between the programmatic announcement of the title of “develop a device” and its “failure”, which equates to FFF itself. Thus, the “friendly face of fascism” highlights the failure of the programme (of the device) itself. The manifest is self-produced as a contradiction, as an absurdity. From a logical point of view, it goes without saying, it deactivates itself. It appears, “manifests” itself, becomes important in its stylistic presence, and in the end is led to the *ad absurdum*. In this way, the text of the manifest also generates a theatrical aesthetic experience that, according to Siegmund (2014), characterises theatre as a device and can currently consist of “detecting absences, gaps, ruptures, cracks and divides, verbalising them” and generating contexts “with which we play at theatre to make them unutterable and perhaps even uncontrollable.” Thus, the logic and the contradiction of the FFF manifest become apparent by looking at a few excerpts. In this way it is possible to suppress contradictions in a dialectical movement: the authoritarian tone of instruction, which seemed to tutor and incapacitate the reader, now arouses, with the help of stylistically caused confusion, their self-empowerment, whilst ultimately causing a critical and informative effect. This self-referential dilemma and its suppression through activity, by means of a new different action, certainly allows for enlightened hope. On the other hand, these contradictions also lead to a systemic idea (fundamental, for example, in the theatre universe of the German director and playwright René Pollesch), according to which everything – both criticism and affirmation – is absorbed by the system and so there is no possibility of existence outside it.

Thus, is it possible that Bernat and Fratini have formulated a farce in the form of a manifest, which others would have loved to write? It is very likely that within this manifest FFF calls for the autonomy of artists and recipients, through indirect means and in a paradoxical arrangement of stylistic elements of power and emancipation in the form of a manifest. However, the critical question arises as to whether this ambiguity *can* be understood today, given that resistance to manipulation seems to be weakening and the forms of the culture of consumption and control seem to be normalising.



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