

A Manifesto That Reads Itself: Towards a palimpsest method for 'reading' site-specific works of art

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A method is proposed for reading video works as a palimpsest: examining the source texts (the original manifestos), the visual text, and, perhaps most importantly, the spatial context, and then adding an often-overlooked layer: the location and its history as a third 'text.' Relying on the notion of the linguistic turn, this method 'reads' different constructs as 'texts'; relying on the notion of the spatial turn, it views space as an essential context on which the entire interpretation of the text is based.

The article focuses on one video segment from *Manifesto*, a thirteen-channel video installation created by the German artist Julian Rosefeldt in 2015. In this work, Rosefeldt offers a broad perspective on the corpus of twentieth-century art manifestos; but instead of using them as guides he turns them into material for his work.

The chosen segment, 'Dadaism,' is based on excerpts from manifestos and texts written by members of that movement. It is set in a graveyard, where a widower reads a eulogy.



Introduction

‘Reading’ is a commonly metaphor in the field of art. Throughout the second half of the twentieth-century, following the linguistic turn,¹ concepts such as the ‘visual text’ have increasingly been adopted by scholars. An entire scholarly field, ‘visual literacy,’² has been established, while approaches such as semiotics and hermeneutics have crossed the boundaries from literary criticism into art analysis. This shift has been accompanied by a growing number of scholars of comparative literature who transfer their reading methods from verbal texts to the analysis of visual texts.

Inspired by the work of Ferdinand de Saussure³ and Ludwig Wittgenstein,⁴ a growing interest in the syntax of artworks has emerged. Alongside the rise of psychoanalytical approaches,⁵ new modes of ‘reading’ works of art have been developed and theorized.

Two of the most influential approaches to reading art were introduced by Erwin Panofsky and Roland Barthes. While Panofsky introduced the Iconological approach to analyzing visual imagery,⁶ Roland Barthes who, building upon the works of linguists and applying the textual constructs to the field of visual imagery, developed the semiotic approach.⁷

Alternative approaches in the growing field of Visual Culture studies⁸ suggest that social contextualization is an essential tool for analyzing visual texts. This often

¹ The definition of the Linguistic Turn and some insightful works on that matter can be found in Richard Rorty, ed., *The Linguistic Turn, Recent Essays in Philosophical Method* (University of Chicago Press, 1967).

² According to Peña and Dobson’s work from 2021, the first use of the term ‘visual literacy’ is by Davis (1939). See Ernesto Peña and Teresa M. Dobson, “The Lost Years of Visual Literacy,” *Journal of Visual Literacy* 40, no. 1 (2021): 1–14; and Ernesto Peña, “The Three Waves of Visual Literacy,” *Journal of Visual Literacy* 44, no. 1 (2025): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1051144x.2025.2462379>.

³ In his seminal work he laid the ground for linguistics; his writings are also taught in art schools to this day. See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Perry Meisel and Haun Saussy, trans. Baskin Wade Baskin (Columbia University Press, 2011).

⁴ Especially his 1921 and 1953 works, see: Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, ed. Charles Kay Ogden, trans. Frank Plumpton Ramsey (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1922); Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

⁵ Which in itself relies upon the narratological urge and the wish to comprehend the world (albeit the inner world of the patient) by means of narratological and textual analysis.

⁶ Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (Harper & Row, 1972). Later, W. J. T. Mitchell developed the concept further, see W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (University of Chicago Press, 1986).

⁷ Initiated in his 1964 work, translated into English in 1967, and developed in his writings from then on. See Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (Hill and Wang, 1967).

⁸ From its outset in the 1990s it has been a growing field. For substantial reading, see Mirzoeff’s work from 1999 and Mike Bal’s controversial text from 2003. More recent writings are published in the *Journal of Visual Culture* and other outlets. Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Routledge, 1999); Mieke Bal, “Visual Essentialism and the

involves integrating social science methods and ethnographic research techniques into the analysis while interpreting the image as a cultural ‘text’ and reading it critically to reveal its author’s social assumptions and positioning, as well as the social forces involved in the creation of the ‘text.’

Nevertheless, merely visual and textual approaches do not always seem sufficient when one encounters a more complex interdisciplinary work of art. Many artistic elements are relevant for further investigation, but this article deals with only one: the spatial-historical aspect, which makes an often-overlooked yet highly fruitful contribution that can enrich the reading of the artistic ‘text.’

Focusing on Julian Rosefeldt’s thirteen-channel installation *Manifesto*, which is dedicated to the Dada movement’s manifestos, I propose a new analytical approach, ‘palimpsest reading,’ which examines the intersection in the artistic ‘text’ of three layers: the textual, the visual, and the spatial-historical. The underlying idea is while textual approaches have gained considerable traction among art scholars in the wake of the linguistic turn, spatial approaches have found less enthusiasm, despite the spatial turn.⁹

Manifesto was not an arbitrary choice. While many other works could effectively illustrate the palimpsest reading method, this particular piece stands out as a compelling example of the intersection of the textual and visual realms.

First, it references the Dada movement, whose fusion of text and the visual arts makes it relevant for the utilization of textual approaches in the analysis of art. Second, *Manifesto* employs original Dadaist texts as foundational materials, incorporating them into the scenography; as such it is a fruitful example of how the textual and the visual intertwine, building upon and interpreting each other. Finally, the filmic scene is situated in a space that not only correlates with the visual imagery present in the Dadaist texts but also embodies the history of an architectural cut-and-paste act, echoing the collage and assemblage methods that are quintessential Dadaism.

In the following pages, two routes will be followed: one introducing the palimpsest reading method, the other analyzing the video installation *Manifesto* as a palimpsest work of art. While acknowledging that not every work of art is made intentionally in order to be read as a palimpsest, the method relies on Fredric Jameson’s work on the political unconscious,¹⁰ which proposes a psychoanalytically influenced Marxist

Object of Visual Culture,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 2, no. 1 (2003): 5–32.

⁹ The semiotic framework for analyzing artworks, heavily influenced by the linguistic turn, has garnered widespread acceptance as a methodological tool within art history and visual culture studies. However, to date, the integration of spatial analytical approaches remains notably absent in this discourse.

¹⁰ Fredric, Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Cornell University Press, 1982).

understanding of literature as a symbolic act, and constructed a new literary theory that can apply to many other social products.

The layered analysis of a work of art, dissecting it into components and ‘reading’ them as palimpsests, will incorporate theories from the literary criticism along with urban studies’ perception of space as a palimpsest.

This study is driven by the need for a method that can be used to interpret works of art associated with a specific space. This does not mean merely works of art made intentionally as ‘site-specific’ works, but instead works of art that utilize a particular space, acknowledging its historical layers, whether consciously or, more often, unconsciously. This category includes video art filmed in a specific location, as here; but also photographs, paintings, performances, and even sculptures that bear a relationship to a particular site.

The article begins by presenting the 2015 video installation *Manifesto*, by the German artist Julian Rosefeldt. The next section elaborates on the genre of artistic manifestos as a unique phenomenon at the intersection of the textual and the visual, while proclaiming a new approach or style in the arts. The third section proposes the palimpsest approach as a method for reading specific site-related artworks and presents its criteria. The fourth section looks at the ‘Dadaist’ video segment of *Manifesto*. This is followed by sections that employ the palimpsest method to analyze the textual, visual, and spatial-historical layers of the work. The last section, before the conclusion, analyzes the act of disassembly and reassembly as a core procedure of both the Dadaists and Rosefeldt himself—and most interestingly, of the architect reorganizing the cemetery in which the video was filmed, as will be discussed later on.

Manifesto

In 2015, the German artist Julian Rosefeldt created *Manifesto*, a video installation produced in collaboration with Australian actress Cate Blanchett. *Manifesto* was first presented as a thirteen-channel video installation projected on large screens at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) in Melbourne in December 2015.¹¹ Following its debut, the work was presented in prominent art venues in Berlin, New York, Paris, and Buenos Aires, among others. In January 2017, it was adapted into a full-length film that was shown at various film festivals. This adaptation condensed

¹¹ Additional information about the artwork can be read on the artist’s website, where one can also view the video segments that make up the work: https://www.julianrosefeldt.com/film-and-video-works/manifesto-_2014-2015/. Accessed October 4, 2025.

the original 130 minutes of content into a ninety-minute viewing experience.¹² The project involves turning twentieth-century art manifestos into ten-minute videos that portray their essence; the videos are presented concurrently in the same space, so that each manifesto vocally intrudes on the others, resulting in a cacophonous mass. Each video bears the title of an artistic movement and features excerpts from manifestos related to that movement and to other movements that align with its central ideas.

Blanchett portrays a different character in each video,¹³ with a distinct accent, manner of speech, facial expression, posture, and, of course, a completely different appearance from the characters in the other videos.¹⁴ Rosefeldt and Blanchett shaped each character in a way that highlights various types of relationships with the text. The relationship between the character and the text is variously ironic, a mirror image, comedic, or illustrative—but is often more complex, illuminating hidden aspects and layers of the text they address. A few connections are so tenuous that it is difficult to understand the choice.

In an interview included in the exhibition catalogue, Rosefeldt stated that his intention was to allow Blanchett to express the manifestos through her character, rather than to stage them.¹⁵

Rosefeldt provides viewers with an opportunity to contemplate the texts that shaped the understanding of art in the twentieth-century, inviting them to pause, reflect, and to ask, in the light of their presentation by himself and Blanchett, what remains, what has changed, what is still relevant today, and what can only be seen from a distance.

Rosefeldt chose fifty-three manifestos, dissected them in terms of content and form, and turned them into thirteen videos. Each video contains textual elements drawn from the manifestos of a specific movement or a general trend in art thought. They are presented by a character who does not necessarily embody the spirit of the movement

¹² Various researchers have written about this shift from video installation to film. This article will not investigate further into this aspect of the work, but for more on that see Gabrielle O'Brien, "The Art of Metamorphosis: Julian Rosefeldt's 'Manifesto,'" *Metro*, no. 196 (2018): 96–101; Hugo Ljungbäck, "From Art Gallery to Movie Theatre: Spectatorship in Julian Rosefeldt's Manifesto," *AM Journal of Art and Media Studies*, no. 15 (2018).

¹³ There are two exceptions. Her character is not shown in the introductory video; only a flaming wick is visible and her voice is heard in the background. In another of the videos, she simultaneously portrays two characters conversing with each other (a news anchor and a field reporter).

¹⁴ A vital observation on this metamorphosis character of the artwork can be found in Burcu Dogramaci's work, suggesting the metamorphosis character of the artwork the metamorphosis character of the manifesto genre, and the instability of the young men who wrote those artistic manifestos at the start of the twentieth-century: Burcu Dogramaci, "Speaking, Acting, Transforming: The Manifesto as Metamorphosis," in Rosefeldt, *Manifesto*, 92–95.

¹⁵ Sarah Tutten and Justin Paton, "Interview with Julian Rosefeldt," in Julian Rosefeldt, *Manifesto: A Film Installation in Twelve Scenes* (Koenig Books, 2016), 96–99.

and placed in situations and spaces that do not necessarily belong to the same thematic realm addressed by the texts.

For instance, the video titled 'Architecture' depicts a day in the life of a worker in a recycling plant, starting in the early morning as she sits at a small table in her kitchen in a huge apartment block. She writes something, wakes a girl up, and goes out into the cold. She rides a motorcycle through the city, passing various architectural landmarks, until she arrives at the factory and begins work. Throughout her silent routine, a voice-over reads excerpts from several manifestos on architecture. These manifestos are so different from one another that at times the text, being a collage of multiple texts, contradicts itself.

In another video, 'Fluxus,' Blanchett portrays a strict director managing a musical play rehearsal in a large theatre. She is wearing high heels, keeps her chin high and her posture stiff, has a Russian accent, and keeps yelling at the dancers while they rehearse. Her diatribe, constructed from multiple texts related to the Fluxus movement, creates a dissonance between the movement's openness and freedom and the director's strict character.

Other movements are portrayed in different manners: The Pop-up movement video portrays a religious family sitting together at dinner while Blanchett, as the mother, is reading excerpts from different pop-up related manifestos; the Futurist segment features a stockbroker, in slow motion, which contradicts the emphasis of speed in Futuristic texts; and so on.

The strange mixtures created by Rosefeldt demand that viewers pay closer attention to the various elements – the textual, the aesthetic, and the spatial – and understand them outside their original context. Rosefeldt offers us a deconstructive experiment: how would we understand the Futurist manifesto were it presented in a manner contrary to its concepts, such as in slow motion? How would the Fluxus manifesto sound if read with a heavy Russian accent? How would an architectural manifesto resonate within the walls of a waste-recycling plant? This is not merely a question of context; it is also a fundamental disconnection of the political and aesthetic interpretations of each of the movements Rosefeldt chose to sample.

Many aspects and layers of *Manifesto* are the products of deconstruction and reconstruction. In the selection of text excerpts, Rosefeldt has already linked fundamentally different manifestos, some of them from movements not really compatible with that from which the video segment derives its title. For instance, the 'Fluxus' segment includes texts associated with the Merz movement and with performance artists; the 'Vorticism' segment incorporates manifestos from the Blue

Rider movement and abstract expressionism; the segment on Surrealism contains texts from the Spatialism movement; and so on. The performances by Blanchett herself, who assumes twelve different personas throughout the piece, can also be categorized as deconstruction and reconstruction.

In the installation, the soundtracks of the several segments, all in Blanchett's voice, play simultaneously, overlapping one another, serving as a background for or overshadowing one another. At a specific, synchronized moment, they converge into harmony, where each sound has a distinct role and pitch, and together they combine to form a single, harmonious chord. Blanchett is facing the camera in all videos, and is using a robot-like monotonic tone, in a unique pitch to each one of them. This is the sole moment of reassembly of the fragmented Blanchett. Immediately afterwards, however, she fractures again into twelve distinct figures, remote and alienated from the others, operating within their own geographical, thematic, and ideological realms.¹⁶

Art manifestos

Rosefeldt's work cannot be understood without the context of the corpus of texts he is relying on. The manifesto, as a defined genre with unique characteristics, is thought to have originated with the *Communist Manifesto*.¹⁷ As Martin Puchner argues, that inspired the writing of Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto*,¹⁸ adapted to suit art. Ever since, the term has been used retrospectively, as in the 'manifesto of symbolism' and the 'manifesto of romanticism.'¹⁹ We should note, however, that other writers trace the genre to pamphlets issued to the public by government authorities, a means for the ruler to force power upon the public, and, as Galia Yanoshevsky claims, to affirm citizenship and identity. In her article on the manifesto genre, she traces its genealogy, with emphasis on its 'fuzzy borderlines' and its various forms: political, artistic, and literary.²⁰

¹⁶ In the film version, the screen is blackened, and small cubes with the different videos rise one by one until they fill the screen. This article will not examine the differences between the versions; other researchers have done so, as mentioned earlier.

¹⁷ The two significant advocates of this historical claim are Caws and Puchner. See: Mary Ann Caws, *Manifesto: A Century of Isms* (University of Nebraska Press, 2001); Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes* (Princeton University Press, 2006).

¹⁸ Written by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in 1909. Marinetti is considered one of the founders of the Surrealist movement in art; his Manifesto played a crucial role in the establishment of the artistic movement, which became one of the most famous and influential movements of modernism.

¹⁹ Galia Yanoshevsky, "Three Decades of Writing on Manifesto: The Making of a Genre," *Poetics Today* 30, no. 2 (2009): 257–86.

²⁰ Yanoshevsky, "Three Decades of Writing on Manifesto": 257–86.

Building on Peter Bürger's discussion in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*,²¹ we can distinguish three ways in which manifestos relate to politics. First, directly political manifestos – exemplified by Marx and Engels's Communist Manifesto – aim to transform social and economic structures. Second, literary manifestos such as those associated with symbolism articulate primarily aesthetic programs, with any political force operating indirectly, through their redefinition of form and sensibility. A third configuration, associated with the historical avant-garde (including Dada and Surrealism), no longer maintains a clear boundary between aesthetic and political spheres: in Bürger's account, their attack on the institution of autonomous art renders artistic form and institutional decisions politically charged.²²

Artistic manifestos address questions such as the purpose, origins, and characteristics of art. Some focus on its political function, some on its aesthetic dimensions, and some on the relationship between the two. To understand the difference between the two, it is worth turning to Jacques Rancière, who identified three key regimes in Western thought about art: the ethical regime of images, the poetic/representational regime of images, and the aesthetic regime.²³

In the ethical regime, the origins and truths of the images, as well as their intended purpose, must be examined; that is, the relationship between the images and the relevant ethos. The poetic regime classifies the arts according to their modes of creation, that is, as genres, and considers fidelity to the source, evaluation of imitations, distinctions, and comparisons. Unlike the first two, the aesthetic regime focuses on the unique sensory existence of artistic products, detaching them from any genre or functional context. It is concerned with the autonomy of art and its liberation from all rules. According to Rancière, this regime is the essence of modernity.²⁴

Modernity is a concept with different meanings in art and politics. Still, at this point of tension, Rancière discusses the distribution of the sensible: 'It is not true, as the prevalent opinion today suggests, that the artists' aspirations for a total revolution of the sensible prepared the ground for totalitarianism. It is more accurate to say that the idea of political avant-garde is fundamentally divided between the strategic and the aesthetic conceptualizations of the avant-garde.'²⁵

²¹ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, translated by Michael Shaw and Jochen Schulte-Sasse (University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

²² Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 82–182.

²³ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (Continuum, 2004).

²⁴ Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution*, 26.

²⁵ Rancière, *The Distribution of the Sensible*.

In other words, the aesthetic and political dimensions are interconnected, presenting different interpretations of the same fundamental idea—a single worldview expressed in various forms. And the Manifesto is a unique art form that does both.

Benedikt Hjartarson viewed the manifesto as the embodiment of the modernist spirit, which seeks new modes of representation and is characterized by fervor and provocative intent regarding content, structure, and aesthetics.²⁶

To understand Rosefeldt's choice to bring the manifestos to life via an actress impersonating different characters, two critical observations are important. As Puchner noted, one of the manifesto's aesthetic innovations was the use of theatricality.²⁷ The theatricality, alongside additional expressions of make-believe, said Puchner, masks the authors' lack of genuine authority about the field they wish to discuss; they are not yet part of the discourse they seek to enter. Another observation, made by Nana Ariel,²⁸ is the general use of the first-person plural – 'we' – which inherently includes the reader in the assertions made in the manifesto. This 'interpellative²⁹ structure' calls the subject, whether reader or viewer, to identify themselves with the group.³⁰

By their nature, manifestos are positioned in the space between the aesthetic and the political. As such, they are rooted in a defined social context, refer to it—often through confrontation—and work to effect change in it. As Peter Bürger observed, the Avant-Garde movements were not confronting specific artistic methods or movements but the very institutions of art and literature. They attacked the art or literary establishment because they viewed these fields as autonomous and disconnected from the political and social arena; they demanded art that intervenes in social and political life rather than merely observing it from the sidelines.³¹

The manifesto, as a genre, primarily seeks to effect change in the world by means of words. By nature, manifestos are concerned with changing the existing situation;³² metamorphosis is their passion and ambition – to transform an old world according

²⁶ Benedikt Hjartarson, "Myths of Rupture: The Manifesto and the Concept of Avant-Garde," *Modernism*, ed. Astradur Eysteinnsson and Vivian Liska (John Benjamins, 2007), 173–94.

²⁷ Puchner, *Manifesto = Theatre*, 2002.

²⁸ Nana Ariel, "Characteristics of the Manifesto," in *Manifestos: Writings of Discontent on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century* (Bar-Ilan University Press, 2018), 29–44 [Hebrew].

²⁹ The term interpellation was coined by Althusser. See Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," *The Anthropology of the State: A Reader*, October 1, 2006, 299–340.

³⁰ Ariel, *Manifestos*, 55.

³¹ Ariel, *Manifestos*, 55.

³² Caws, *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*.

to their own principles and establish a new reality in its place. It is interesting to think of *Manifesto* as a creation that itself undergoes metamorphosis, as will be further discussed.

Towards a palimpsest reading

‘Palimpsest’ comes from the Greek παλίμψηστος (palimpsēstos), ‘written over again.’ Initially, it referred to a substrate writing surface whose original text was later erased to permit new writing. In antiquity, when parchment and similar materials were rare and costly, this practice was common.

The erasure was typically conducted through scraping, washing, or sanding; traces of the original text often remained visible to the naked eye, however, or can be detected using modern technology (UV photography and X-rays). The concept of a palimpsest has evolved beyond its literal definition and now serves as a metaphor for overlays of text, memory, history, and culture. For example, the term can be applied to a literary work that reflects the presence of earlier texts, expanding on the idea of ‘intertextuality.’ In urban studies, it describes the urban landscape of structures built in multiple layers over those of earlier periods.

The metaphor of a palimpsest, where history is inscribed, erased, and rewritten, resonates strongly with the urban imagery of cities and urban environments undergoing cycles of destruction and reconstruction. The structures visible on the streets are frequently built upon the remnants of earlier buildings that represented different eras, regimes, and ideologies. Every culture and period have left their mark on the urban landscape. At the same time, some traces have been erased through the demolition of buildings or their repurposing, while others remain and continue to shape the narrative of the streets.³³

The concept of the palimpsest within an urban context offers a textual interpretation of urban space, suggesting that its development necessitates a significant erasure of the past.³⁴ This perspective positions architecture as a visual

³³ The use of the term in this context is connected to both the linguistic turn mentioned earlier, and the spatial turn, as described by Eduard Soja. He highlighted the extensive use of spatial metaphors and the growing interest in spatial research within both the social sciences and the humanities.

³⁴ Earlier research has suggested a palimpsest reading of the city of Berlin, which is where the video was filmed. A significant work by Andreas Huyssen suggests reading Berlin as an urban palimpsest, one that intertwines history with its ever-changing concrete environments. Another prominent example was written by Matthew Philpotts, suggesting a ‘Cultural-Political’ analysis of the Reich Aviation Ministry in Berlin. See Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford University Press, 2003); Matthew Philpotts, “Cultural-Political Palimpsests: The Reich Aviation Ministry and the Multiple Temporalities of Dictatorship,” *New German Critique* 39, no. 3 (2012): 207–30.

text, revealing the city's history with a clarity comparable to that of a written historical document.

Going back to *Manifesto*, As I have previously suggested, inspired by the use of palimpsest in urban studies, the filming location of each scene can be taken as an additional metaphorical 'text,' another textual layer that is not merely a physical site and visual complement to the text, but also as one that challenges, corresponds with, and opposes its content and style.

A palimpsest reading suggests that history itself is written and overwritten in the video – sometimes as an auditory text (sound), sometimes as an aesthetic text (an image), and sometimes as a spatial 'text' (the site's past), which can be erased, for instance, when the location's identity and history are not made explicit but can be recovered from the film palimpsest, as suggested here and will be further demonstrated.

The assumption here is that the location of a scene bears intrinsic significance, whether or not the creators were aware of the site's history.³⁵ The presence of space, along with its various layers of history and visual expressions, carries a multitude of political, sociological, historical, and aesthetic implications that contribute to the creative process.

Following the guidelines offered by the palimpsest metaphor, the textual, visual, and spatial layers will be explored but also analyzed as themselves a palimpsest, in the hope of detecting a forgotten history, or better yet, a genealogy of the text, the image, and the space.

The Dada Manifesto

One of Rosefeldt's thirteen videos, 'Dadaism,'³⁶ calls for special attention, because Dada itself was fascinated by language and its deconstruction. Even prior to Rosefeldt's presentation of it, Dada was a movement that pioneered performance as a form of art and thus marked the first time in history that a manifesto was in essence performing itself: the movement's roots lay in performative readings of manifestos and experimental writing at the Cabaret Voltaire, which are remembered as its establishment event.³⁷

³⁵ As Jameson puts it, 'The assertion of a political unconscious proposes that we undertake just such a final analysis and explore the multiple paths that lead to the unmasking of cultural artifacts as socially symbolic acts' (Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 20). The palimpsest analytical method aims to form yet another route as such.

³⁶ The video is called 'dadism' and is dedicated to the movement. The text read by the actor in the video was compiled by Rosefeldt from various segments of different Dadaist manifestos from different times and places. It is available for watching on the artist's website, as mentioned earlier.

³⁷ In his book on Dada, Richard Huelsenbeck writes some of his personal memories from those experimental events: Richard Huelsenbeck and Bernard Karpel, *Dada*, Rowohlt, 1964.

The Dada movement was established in Zurich in 1916 and soon spread to Berlin, Paris, and New York.³⁸ Founded by war refugees as an anti-war cultural-political movement, Dada stood against rational thought and the art that emerged from it, which, it was claimed, failed to portray the absurdity of the horrors of war or, worse still, collaborated in war crimes. The Dadaists declared war on rational art and attacked the very idea and meaning of logical thought, seen as a bourgeois concept from which war arose.³⁹ The performative actions of these artists, cultural figures, and political activists transcended the boundaries of the traditional art world.⁴⁰ The Dadaist manifestos were nihilistic, filled with contradictions and paradoxes, self-denial, and parody.⁴¹ Not infrequently, they were accompanied by provocative performative events that raised questions about the boundaries of art and its social role and totally dissolved the manifesto genre, so that it required a basic rethinking, even leading to declarations of the death of the manifesto: for how can one write a manifesto after Dada?

Textual reading

The ‘Dadaism’ segment incorporates eight manifestos by six different authors,⁴² all of them written in 1918 or 1920, combined into a eulogy read by a mourning widow. In *Manifesto*’s exhibition catalogue, the texts used in the videos are ordered according to Blanchette’s speech. Next to each excerpt, in the margins, an annotation states the writer and year. The formatting of the text in the catalogue is inspired by the Dadaist style, with multiple font sizes, bold text, and uppercase letters to emphasize the effect. Parts of the scripts, mostly director’s notes, are printed in the margins: ‘Starts screaming, spitting out the words disdainfully, while the audience continues to listen quietly’;⁴³ ‘Voice over while we see the quiet crowd on the way from the church to the grave.’⁴⁴

Tristan Tzara, Dada Manifesto 1918 (1918)

‘Dadaism’ begins with a voice-over of a woman saying, ‘Pavilions of intense joy and widowers with the sadness of poison.’⁴⁵ Her words add a layer of meaning to the faint-

³⁸ Robert Motherwell, ed., *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology* (Wittenborn, Schultz, 1951).

³⁹ Ariel, *Manifestos*, 55. Further reading on the Dada movement can be found in *Exquisite Dada*, edited by Jürgen Schafer.

⁴⁰ Motherwell, *The Dada Painters and Poets*, 165.

⁴¹ Motherwell, *The Dada Painters and Poets*, 37.

⁴² A list of the quoted manifestos can be found in the appendix. As the original texts are in numerous languages, the relevant translations can be found in the work’s catalogue from 2016. Alternative translations can be found in Rosefeldt, *Manifesto*.

⁴³ Tristan Tzara, ‘The Dada Manifesto 1918,’ 1918, as quoted in the artwork and in its catalogue: Rosefeldt, *Manifesto*, 32–33.

⁴⁴ Rosefeldt, *Manifesto*, 32.

⁴⁵ Rosefeldt, *Manifesto*, 32.

looking widow, played by the same actress whose voice is heard speaking. Later in the video, when the ceremony reaches its destination – the burial site – the woman mounts a platform to read her eulogy aloud. But even before then we have heard her thoughts, as it were.

The author of the text she is quoting, the Romanian-born Tristan Tzara, was one of the founders of the Dada movement. After several years in Switzerland, in 1919 he moved to France.⁴⁶ He brought with him the concept of Dada, hoping that in Paris he could turn it into a global movement. In the text taken from *The Dada Manifesto 1918*, Tzara performs a bold and grotesque statement during which he declares, ‘Here we cast anchor in rich ground. Ghosts drunk on energy, we dig the trident into unsuspecting flesh. We are a downpour of maledictions as tropically abundant as vertiginous vegetation.’⁴⁷

The text continues, revealing its influence for the video’s mourning theme: ‘We will put an end to mourning and replace tears by sirens screeching from one continent to another. Pavilions of intense joy, and widowers with the sadness of poison.’⁴⁸ This line probably inspired Rosefeldt’s depiction of the widow reading the eulogy in the cemetery. Additional excerpts from the 1918 Dada Manifesto are woven throughout the video segment, showcasing Tzara’s and the Dada movement’s resistance to logic.

The text is quoted later in the eulogy, when the woman declares, ‘I am against systems. The most acceptable system is, in principle, to have none. Abolition of logic: Dada. Abolition of memory: Dada. Abolition of archeology: Dada. Abolition of the future: Dada.’⁴⁹ While the text mobilizes the modernist impulse toward the demolition of the past and the allure of the new, it does so in a characteristically Dadaist manner that simultaneously performs and parodies this very tendency. Rather than proposing ‘Dada’ – a deliberately meaningless, babble-like word – as a coherent or preferred future, the gesture exposes the absurdity of such futurist aspirations, laying bare the paradox at the heart of the movement: the drive to negate inherited forms while undermining the seriousness of that negation itself. Dada is presented as the successor to bourgeois life, a new path relieved of class manners, with preference to one’s intuitions and childish urges.

Lines from Tzara’s text, emphasizing the same idea of abolition and deletion, appears later as well, interpolated between other Dada manifestos: ‘Dada means nothing’ and ‘Logic is always wrong.’

⁴⁶ Motherwell, *The Dada Painters and Poets*.

⁴⁷ Rosefeldt, *Manifesto*, 32.

⁴⁸ Rosefeldt, *Manifesto*, 32.

⁴⁹ Rosefeldt, *Manifesto*, 33.

Towards the end of the segment, the *Dada Manifesto 1918*, with which it begins, is quoted again. Tzara's words, spoken by the widow, argue that a marriage of art to reason is an abomination; such art will devour its own tail. The marriage metaphor suits both the character of the widow and the emphasis on sinful marriage, which complements the critique of the bourgeoisie.

Francis Picabia, *Dada Cannibalistic Manifesto* (1920)

Following the exposition, which shows the crowd escorting the casket, introducing us to the figure of the woman with red hair and her voice, the cortege proceeds to the grave pit, where the widow approaches the podium to speak.

Her first words to the crowd quote Francis Picabia's cannibalistic manifesto: 'One dies as a hero or as an idiot, which is the same thing. The only word that is not ephemeral is the word "death."' ⁵⁰ She returns to this text later: 'You are all complete idiots, made with the alcohol of purified sleep.' ⁵¹

These words, hurled at the mourners, create a dissonance. On the one hand, they are part of her eulogy, and one should not judge a widow in her grief. On the other hand, the contradiction between the beautifully organized ceremony and her crude remark highlights the ironic and blunt tone of her remarks throughout the ten-minute video. The title 'Cannibalistic Manifesto' only adds to the morbid affect, which will increase as the video continues.

Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, *The Pleasures of Dada* (1920)

From there, the widow continues with an insult taken from 'The Pleasures of Dada' by Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, which was originally read at the Salon des Indépendants (Grand Palais des Champs-Élysées) on February 5, 1920. ⁵² This text indicts the bourgeois for their bad habits—conforming to established social norms. She accuses them of being too scared to let go of their beliefs and says, 'You don't understand that one can be attached to nothing and be happy.' ⁵³ In contrast, the Dadaists are portrayed as individuals who reject these rules and achieve true happiness through their liberation. Whereas the bourgeois, '...got some bad habits. You're too fond of what you've been taught to be fond of. Cemeteries, melancholy, the tragic lover, Venetian gondolas.' ⁵⁴ Here again she invokes the image of death and mourning, not a metaphor for decay, as in the aforementioned context, but as a symbol of how

⁵⁰ Francis Picabia, "Dada Cannibalistic Manifesto" (1920), as quoted in the artwork and its catalogue.; Rosefeldt, *Manifesto*, 32.

⁵¹ Rosefeldt, *Manifesto*, 33.

⁵² Josephine Dawn Adès, ed., *The DADA Reader: A Critical Anthology* (University of Chicago Press, 2006), 181.

⁵³ Rosefeldt, *Manifesto*, 32.

⁵⁴ Rosefeldt, *Manifesto*, 32.

pleasure is derived from melancholy: just as the story of a tragic love gives readers pleasure, despite its sadness, the cemetery provides the catharsis that comes from imposing order on chaos.⁵⁵

Paul Éluard, *Five Ways to Dada Shortage or Two Words of Explanation* (1920)

The next text quoted by the mourner, was read at the same event in 1920 as the preceding text.⁵⁶ According to Paul Éluard, ‘We see nothing, we love nothing. We are indifferent, ... we suck in everything around us; we do nothing.’⁵⁷ This passage offers itself to two contrasting interpretations: one addressed to the Dadaist movement and the other to the bourgeois. As a manifesto, it can be interpreted as a call to embrace nothingness, as Tzara suggested earlier. Conversely, given that the Dadaists themselves often had bourgeois backgrounds, perhaps the speaker includes himself among the numb individuals he criticizes, as if saying, ‘We must change our ways.’

Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, *To the Public* (1920)

At the climax of her eulogy, the widow returns to Ribemont-Dessaignes, this time “To the Public,”⁵⁸ a text rich in harsh images of a damaged body: the public is described as having rotten teeth, a tongue covered in sores, ears full of scabs, and ugly, uncontrollable limbs. The widow warns the public, that is, the crowd at the funeral, ‘It’s us who are the murderers of your newborn babies.’⁵⁹ Again, the three motives that run through all the texts are vivid and horrible images of death and suffering, indictment of the comfortable life of the bourgeoisie, and symbols of family life—marriage and babies—being shattered. Right after this statement to the audience, delivered with a nearly psychotic display of loss of control, the widow collects herself.

Louis Aragon, *Dada Manifesto* (1920)

Manifesto is a multi-channel video installation, which means that, while focusing on one segment, spectators are surrounded by the audio and video of other manifestos being read elsewhere in the gallery space. About six minutes into the cycle,⁶⁰ the speaker in each video, all played by Blanchett, turns to look into the camera and reads text from her script, as if from a teleprompter, in a metallic monotone. Each speaks in a different pitch, creating a cacophony disharmonic sound.

⁵⁵ A later argument will suggest the cemetery works here as a heterotopia; See the ‘Spatial Reading’ section.

⁵⁶ Adès, *The DADA Reader*, 185.

⁵⁷ Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, ‘To the Public,’ 1920, as quoted in the artwork and its catalogue, p. 32.

⁵⁸ Rosefeldt, *Manifesto*, 32.

⁵⁹ Rosefeldt, *Manifesto*, 32.

⁶⁰ In video installations, the video is played in a loop. In *Manifesto*, the thirteen videos screened throughout the gallery space are perfectly synchronized.

In the Dadaism segment, the widow's robot-like performance is of a text by Louis Aragon, in which he calls for 'No more painters, no more writers, no more musicians, no more sculptors, no more religions, no more republicans, no more royalists'⁶¹ and so on. She seems to be possessed until she concludes, 'No more anything, no more nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing.' The need to destroy, to annul, is repeated here again, manifesting the modernist wish to create the new on the remnants of the past, after first demolishing it.

Richard Huelsenbeck, *First German Dada Manifesto* (1918)

The widow concludes her eulogy with the words of Richard Huelsenbeck: 'The best and most extraordinary artists will be those who every hour snatch the tatters of their bodies out of the frenzied cataract of life; who, with bleeding hands and hearts, hold fast to the intelligence of their time. To sit in a chair for a single moment is to risk one's life.'⁶² The connection between the comfortable bourgeois life and death is poignantly illustrated in the funeral scene, which reveals the complexities of upper-class fellowship. While the gathering may appear outwardly polite and respectful, a deeper layer of anger and viciousness simmers beneath the surface. This duality captures the essence of the Dada movement, highlighting the absurdity of a society that maintains decorum in the face of mortality while masking its underlying tensions and contradictions. The funeral, therefore, serves as a microcosm of bourgeois life, where the pretense of civility coexists with a stark disregard for the profound realities of existence and loss. The Dadaists, with their anti-establishment ethos, challenge these conventions, pushing against the boundaries of social norms and questioning the authenticity of such performances within the cultural milieu.

Two main features can be identified in the texts Rosefeldt chose for his video: one is strong affect, be it fierceness, rage, or disgust; the other is colorful figurative speech, describing detailed (and in most cases horrific) imagery. Reading the text or listening to the character deliver it leaves such a strong after-image that it almost becomes an imaginary layer of hallucinatory imagery, complementing the scene. Moreover, Rosefeldt's script foregrounds the manifesto's theatricality and interpellative address—its constitutive 'we'—that, as Puchner shows, stages authority even as it lacks it.⁶³

⁶¹ Louis Aragon, 'Dada Manifesto,' 1920, as quoted in the artwork and its catalogue, p. 33.

⁶² Richard Huelsenbeck, "First German Dada Manifesto," 1918, as quoted in the artwork and its catalogue, p. 32.

⁶³ Puchner, "Manifesto = Theatre,;" Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution*.

A visual reading

French wi(n)dow

The video opens with an aerial view of a path in a forest, around which two child figures are playing, curious about their surroundings and chasing one another. The camera moves from a bird's-eye view and turns to look at the entrance of a rural church building in Scandinavian style, from which a funeral procession is emerging, led by a Dixieland band.

Blanchett's voice is heard in a voice-over, quoting from Tristan Tzara's 1918 Dada Manifesto. The children who had been playing in the forest join the procession as it turns onto the cemetery's paths, and the camera provides a close-up view of one of the marchers: a middle-aged woman with reddish hair, wearing a widow's hat with a net veil.

Rosefeldt employed the motifs of mourning and widowhood to illustrate the manifestos associated with the Dada movement. He also uses playful childhood as a contrast to emphasize this motif of contrast between life and death. This selection underscores, on one hand, the Dadaists' deconstruction of meaning, effectively leading to a metaphorical stripping away of significance. On the other hand, it serves to create an event infused with irony and even humor, two defining characteristics of the Dada movement. In this scenario, the weeping widow addresses an audience of mourners at an official ceremony, delivering a speech filled with vulgarities that starkly contrasts with the occasion's solemnity and serious demeanor.

The eulogist is identified as a widow, among other things, by her veiled mourning cap. In England during the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries, and later in the United States, it was customary for upper-class widows to wear this cap for an entire year as part of their mourning practices.⁶⁴

The image of the new widow resonates with a work by Marcel Duchamp, which was the first he signed as his female alter ego, Rose Sélavy.⁶⁵ Its title, 'Fresh Widow,' is a play on words, 'French Window' and 'Fresh Widow.' It is a scaled-down construction of a French window made of wood, which Duchamp commissioned from a carpenter. He darkened its panes with pieces of black leather, which he requested be polished daily like shoes.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Clair Hughes, "Hats On, Hats Off," *Cultural Studies Review* 22, no. 1 (2016): 118–43.

⁶⁵ The word-play in French suggest an alternative way to read this not merely as a female name, but also as a statement meaning 'eros is life'.

⁶⁶ Anne D'Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine, eds., *Marcel Duchamp* (Museum of Modern Art, 1973), 291.

The work was created by Duchamp after his return to New York from a trip to Paris in 1920. Some interpret it as a critique of the war, which resulted in many widows. It was conceived as if Duchamp was implying that one can find a fresh widow on every French window.

These contexts alone illuminate Rosefeldt's decision to feature the widow as the face of the Dada movement; however, Blanchett's performance introduces an additional layer of reference to the manifestos and the movement itself. Throughout the video, the widow stands at the podium, her voice breaking as she delivers blunt and insulting remarks to the audience gathered at the funeral.

The procession, passes by graves until it reaches the open grave. The people are of various ages, yet all are well-dressed in suits, their hair neatly styled, and some with hats. It is evident that they belong to the upper echelons of society. The group gathers around the grave; the widow approaches a podium beside a floral wreath of white flowers.

As the widow speaks, we see her in close-up as well as a broader picture of the funeral, which is organized in the traditional manner, with all the social symbols typical of such an event. The officiating clergyman is dressed appropriately; all those present bow their heads and cross their arms across their chest, some holding umbrellas and others holding flowers. They wear a frozen expression that does not change throughout the widow's speech, however provocative and challenging her words.

At a certain point, in her speech the widow declares, quoting Paul Éluard: 'We see everything, we love nothing. We are indifferent.'⁶⁷

In fact, she is the only character who is not indifferent; instead, she is emotive, while the others present are completely expressionless. If any sounds emerge from the group around the grave they come from the dogs, who occasionally suppress a whimper that attracts a look from their owners and a gentle pull on the leash. The widow continues her eulogy, quoting (as we have seen) Paul Éluard, Tristan Tzara, and Francis Picabia. Her speech grows increasingly fervent, changing from a measured, broken voice on the verge of tears into a preaching, accusatory discourse filled with contempt for those present. We witness the barrage of insults that Blanchett delivers in her protected social role as a recent widow. The anger is indeed accentuated by her high social status, which is reflected in her manner of speaking, her upright posture, and facial pallor, but it bursts forth from her with great violence and flashes

⁶⁷ Paul Eluard, "Five Ways to Dada Shortage or two Words of Explanation," 1920, as quoted in the artwork and its catalogue, p. 32.

like her red hair. The initial impression of the video is ironic due to the apparent disparity between the ceremony, the bluntness of the content, and the severity of the accusations. However, it is not only ironic but also a fairly apt representation of the Dadaists themselves – upper-class individuals, well-connected figures with power, who can afford to be vulgar and remain protected. The woman is shielded by her class and widowed status.

A spatial reading

However, the widow is not the only element of the video that engages with the act of erasure and the Dadaist resistance. The video dedicated to the Dada movement and its manifestos takes place in a cemetery. The cemetery has unique characteristics, as it houses graves and memorial monuments for persons who were and are no longer. In his text 'Of Other Spaces' Foucault presents the cemetery as a unique example of Heterotopia.⁶⁸ Foucault outlines the historical development of cemeteries in Western society, starting with the period when burial grounds were often situated in the heart of cities, adjacent to churches. He notes the shift in the nineteenth-century, when the decision was made to ensure that everyone, regardless of social status, had a personal gravestone. Additionally, a change in perception prompted the relocation of cemeteries to suburban areas to mitigate the risk of plague outbreaks associated with the dead. Foucault characterizes the cemetery as a place connected to all the places in the city, as everyone has a deceased relative buried there. He identifies the cemetery as "the other city," where each family possesses its dark resting place.⁶⁹

The cemetery is a kind of shadow city, a negative of the town. Earlier in the text, Foucault defines heterotopias as

real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," translated by Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 22–27.

⁶⁹ Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 25.

⁷⁰ Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 24.

In her Hebrew translation of Foucault's work, Ariella Azoulay added an afterword exploring how Foucault articulates the simultaneous presence of different times in a given place. She argues that the spatial concept of simultaneity is fundamental to Foucault's thesis and is the foundation for his entire conceptual framework of heterotopia.⁷¹

The example of the cemetery is the best illustration of how the relationships between space and time are closely linked to those between life and death; the dead have always existed, but cemeteries in Western society have been transformed as a result of changes in society's attitude towards its dead. The 'Otherness' of the dead vis-à-vis the living has always existed, but the manner of their separation and their positioning in space has changed over time. Foucault describes the institutionalization of the cult of death in Western society, which he claims gave rise to the cemetery as we know it today, where there is a tombstone for every deceased person, a grave one visits to pay respects to the soul that has departed from the world. According to him, this is the result of secularization; in earlier periods the belief prevailed that the body is merely a shell containing the soul. Once the soul has departed, the body holds no value and is to be discarded. Foucault describes the social hierarchy of the Middle Ages, when those of higher status were buried in identifiable graves, whereas commoners were piled in heaps without identification, because their memory held no value in the stratified culture.

The choice of a cemetery for the presentation of the Dadaist manifestos can be understood through their use of the rhetoric of erasure, resistance to the old, and desire to abandon all previous forms in order to discard old art and create new art. However, the choice of the cemetery can also be understood as a contrast to the perception of the cemetery as a place of absence. For Foucault, the cemetery is a place of the accumulation of time into infinity, as he states: "The cemetery is certainly a place unlike ordinary cultural spaces. It is a space that is, however, connected with all the sites of the city-state or society or village, etc., since each individual, each family has relatives in the cemetery."⁷²

The spatial otherness of the cemetery emerges not from its separation from the city, but from the intricate connections that link it directly to every part of the urban landscape. It functions as a negative of the settlement, akin to an 'underworld' that embodies all that has passed yet still lingers within the consciousness of the residents.

⁷¹ Ariella Azoulay, "Afterword: Disciplining Spaces and Spaces of Discipline," in Michel Foucault, *Heterotopia: Of Other Spaces*, translated by Ariella Azoulay (Resling, 2010), 107–28 [Hebrew].

⁷² Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 25.

It is interesting to consider the cemetery as a sophisticated construct devised by modernity to engage with spatial history as a palimpsest. Before a particular layer of history is erased, the city's inhabitants create a representation to preserve it, whether in a museum, a library, or a cemetery. In this way, one can rewrite the narrative without losing the preceding layers, so that they continue to exist in some form rather than disappearing entirely. The cemetery today may be regarded as a site of absence, emptiness, nothingness; but Foucault presents it alongside the library and the museum as sites that accumulate time infinitely:

The idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place, this whole idea belongs to our modernity. The museum and the library are heterotopias that are proper to Western culture of the nineteenth century.⁷³

Cut-and-paste

The cemetery chosen for the scene is not just any cemetery, but one with a unique historical narrative. The *South-Western Cemetery in Stahnsdorf, Berlin* is a large and prominent burial site where many notable individuals of the twentieth-century are interred. It is an urban cemetery with sections for the different communities who live in the city, under one administration.⁷⁴

The historical process described by Foucault, in which graves were transferred from city centers to the suburbs, is reflected in the history of the cemetery where the video was filmed. The *South-Western Cemetery* of Berlin in Stahnsdorf was opened in 1909, when the growth of the city's population made it impossible to continue burying people in the cemeteries inside the city. To address the issue, the Evangelical church acquired land in various locations outside Berlin and established cemeteries there.⁷⁵

After the official opening of the civilian section in 1919, in 1922–1923 it was decided to consolidate the graves of soldiers of the Allied powers who had died in various places in Germany into four permanent cemeteries. One of the locations selected for this

⁷³ Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 26.

⁷⁴ "Südwestkirchhof Stahnsdorf," accessed June 17, 2025, <http://www.suedwestkirchhof.de/english.html>.

⁷⁵ Lands outside the city were purchased by the Evangelical Church in Stahnsdorf, Barenfeld, and Mohlebeck for the purpose of becoming burial sites.

purpose was the cemetery in Stahnsdorf. Between 1924 and 1925, remains from 146 grave plots were relocated there.⁷⁶

With the rise of the Nazis, approximately 15,000 graves were added to the Stahnsdorf cemetery in 1938 and 1939, as part of the ‘reburial’ project designed to enable Hitler and his architect, Albert Speer, to implement their plans for constructing the north-south axis of the ‘new city’ of Germania.⁷⁷ To achieve this goal, it was decided to clear the area designated for the axis. Among the structures earmarked for removal were the cemeteries of Saint Matthew and the Second Apostle in the Schöneberg district of Berlin. These sites were intended for the development of the new Reich Insurance Office and the southern railway station, which was planned to serve as a monumental endpoint for the inner city axis. To that end, these cemeteries were legally revoked, and the graves within them were relocated to burial spaces purchased by the church on the outskirts of the city.

Only a few parts of the Germania project were completed, due to the outbreak of the Second World War, but the evacuation of the cemeteries did proceed. However, the reburials in Stahnsdorf were not completed until the 1950s.

This cemetery, therefore, can be read as a collage in itself, a twisted cut-and-paste piece made by an architect. As the project was launched almost a decade after the Dadaists spread the word about collages throughout Europe, one might speculate that this method of reorganizing land almost as if it were text might have been influenced by those insightful young men calling themselves ‘Dadaists.’

Rosefeldt’s collage of the Dadaistic manifestos produces a layered work that weaves together history and memory in the audio-visual sphere. As David Banash noticed in his 2013 article on the politics of the cut,⁷⁸ a collagic work is often a means to criticize through the act of repositioning and framing:

‘The critical practice of collage is often one of opening the sutures, revealing the seams and hidden contexts, contents, and connections eclipsed by the ideological work of framing.’⁷⁹

⁷⁶ CWGC, “Berlin South-Western Cemetery: Cemetery Details,” CWGC, accessed June 17, 2025, <https://www.cwgc.org/visit-us/find-cemeteries-memorials/cemetery-details/90900/berlin-south-western-cemetery/>.

⁷⁷ Martin Kitchen, *Speer: Hitler’s Architect* (Yale University Press, 2015); Joachim Fest, *Speer: The Final Verdict*, trans. Ewald Osers and Alexandra Dring (Harcourt, 2002).

⁷⁸ David Banash, “Critique: Collage and the Politics of the Cut,” *Collage Culture*, January 1, 2013, 121–71.

⁷⁹ Banash, *Collage and the Politics of the Cut*, p.165. Interestingly, Banash himself mentions the use of Nazi content in collage works by avant-garde artists.

Conclusion

This article proposes the palimpsest method as a way of reading artworks that are both materially and conceptually bound to a site. Drawing on the linguistic and spatial turns, it has sought to expand existing methods of textual and visual analysis by incorporating the historical, social, and political strata embedded within the spatial contexts of artistic production. Through a detailed analysis of Julian Rosefeldt's *Manifesto*, particularly its 'Dadaism' segment, the study demonstrates how textual, visual, and spatial layers can be read as overlapping inscriptions that together construct meaning. The article began by outlining the theoretical foundations of this approach, engaging Fredric Jameson's notion of the *Political Unconscious* and Jacques Rancière's concept of the *Distribution of the Sensible*. It then turned to the genre of the artistic manifesto as a hybrid form, inherently poised between aesthetic autonomy and political address, before analyzing the *Manifesto* installation through its textual composition, visual rhetoric, and spatial-historical site: the Stahnsdorf cemetery in Berlin.

By tracing the palimpsest of this site, with its architectural history of displacement and reburial, the reading revealed how the cemetery's 'identity' resonates with Dadaist strategies of deconstruction and reconstruction. The cemetery is not merely a backdrop but an active textual layer, an archive of erased and rewritten histories. Understanding the site as a palimpsest sheds light on the artwork's political unconscious: the site's historical and ideological baggage peers through the textual and visual cracks, regardless of the artist's conscious intent.

Ultimately, this approach offers a transferable framework for analyzing other site-based artworks—installations, performances, or films—that engage with the layered histories of their environments. However, the basis of this new reading method suggested here lies in conceiving artworks as layered structures whose elements—textual, visual, spatial, or others—can be examined genealogically. Whether applied to works explicitly anchored in a place or to those engaging other dimensions of cultural history, palimpsest reading encourages a historical excavation of every component: costume, sound, gesture, scenography, and setting. In each case, meaning arises from the intersections among these layers, understood as fragments of a single and dynamic whole.

By reading across layers of the artwork, apparent or erased, the palimpsest method uncovers the hidden temporalities that shape artistic meaning and reveals how the aesthetic and the political continually rewrite one another on the surfaces of history.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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