

**IF IT IS BEAUTIFUL, IT IS USEFUL :**

**A FEW WORDS FOR DIDIER MUTEL AND HIS UNHEEDED MANIFESTO.**

Didier Mutel is a synaesthetic printer. He is focused on the bite—of acid on metal, of the metal plate on paper, of the printed words on the mind. He knows that all senses must be involved in the creation, reception, and survival of the crafts of engraving and printing in the new millennium.

To this end, he bravely asserts himself in that quintessential Modernist mode—a manifesto intended to alert the world to the near-extinction of the form. But is anyone listening? They didn't much listen in 2006, when Mutel, having spent long nights, stolen hours, the last lingering energies of his artist mind writing, setting, and printing the original French language manifesto, sent a batch of nearly 100 copies to members of the book arts world. His colleagues at the *École régionale des beaux-arts de Besançon* were enthusiastic, but not many ripples came back from outside his inner circle. Too small a distribution? The wrong medium? Pissing in the wind?

The genesis of the project was part personal conviction, part politics. Mutel has had a life-long compulsion to create art and convey the love of his craft to students and to the public. His involvement with the *Atelier Georges Leblanc* (the last surviving 18th century printer's shop on the rue St. Jacques in Paris—once the epicenter of printing in France, so near is it to the Universities) provided the more immediate impetus for the manifesto. After years of working to save the atelier—to preserve it as a cultural space, for both historical reasons and the hope that it could serve as a locus for the rebirth of the printing arts—it was lost—a victim of a grindingly laborious and slow political process. In a way, the impending loss of the printer's shop—with its attendant spirits, presses, centuries-old felts and

weights—radicalized Mutel. He needed to dig down to the root of the problem in order to identify it.

That problem is the obviation of a craft that compelled the world to become modern.

The manifesto was curated and written by Didier to sound an alarm. Curated? Yes—the words are from F. T. Marinetti, Tristan Tzara, Raoul Hausmann, Hans Arp, Ivan Puni, De Stijl, Théo Van Doesburg, Kurt Schwitters, Hans Arp, Christof Spengemann, Lázló Moholy-Nagy, Jan Tschichold, El Lissitzky, A. M. Cassandre, and Paul Renner. In reappropriating the words of the great manifestos of the modern era, Mutel is performing the core function of a printer—he is re-setting their words—and recasting them for new eyes. His manifesto is contrary to that of F. T. Marinetti however, because Mutel urges us towards old forms renewed, not new forms brushed with the patina of age. In an era when the definition of “the book” is in question (what next? redefining the earth? the stars?) he is committed to putting ink on paper over and over again. He is committed to a process that is not analogous, but which is *analogos*—balanced. It is craft. It is making: paper, ink, type, plate, print, binding, case, label, the thing. Mutel’s greater fear is that we are losing the craft of craft.

In the tradition of the great manifestos, Mutel is most concerned with the radical act of destruction in the service of rebuilding - the eating away of those parts that do not inform his aesthetic. This is literalized in his craft, as acid dissolves and renders away the metal that does not figure in his design.

Examine the most carefully chosen words and phrases in the manifesto: *incisive*, an intention that gives rise to a form, *inoffensive views* reinforce childishness; *acid consciousness*; *tenderness*; *metamorphosis*; *metallic scarification*; *a survival reflex*; *clarity*—and you understand that Didier Mutel embeds himself in his books. (In *The Outside*, he does this literally—reproducing x-rays of his skull, nearly shattered years ago in Italy—a young man’s history written in silver bromide and blood.)

His commitment is academic, historical, and artistic. It is an act of the five senses—combined and confused. From his early works (Stefan Zweig’s *Lettre d’une Inconnue*, a scroll encapsulated in a lead canister that threatens to prick the reader’s finger; Wallace Stevens’ touchstone poem “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird” contained between boards of orange-tinted wood) to his newer works (*The Forbes Simulachres*, his measured, anachronous *fuck-all-y’all-yer-gonna-die-some-day* still carries the smell of the workshop), his productions have engaged all organs of admittance.

His triumphantly clever books, *4 speeches/coup de dès* and his setting of Stevenson’s *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, are his most traditional, as they draw on wordplay and semantic humor. *Jekyll & Hyde* embodies the change/dissolution of the title character in the text. As Mr. Hyde takes over, words grow, distort, and overpower the narrative. Eventually, the letters on the page fall away and leave the reader with no thread to hold. In the 3-part *4 speeches/coup de dès*, the images of audio waves are the same—but one purports to be a group of speeches by Bush 43; another, a group by Tony Blair; and the last—the real thing—is of an unidentified man reading Mallarme’s “Un Coup de Dès Jamais N’Abolira le Hasard,” that modern masterwork that launched a thousand artists’ books. The concept is trenchantly funny; the books are beautifully executed.

And Alice in Wonderland? The deluxe edition of *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* in the collection of the Beinecke Library consists of 71 plates printed in so many variations of color and texture to total 284 prints—all of them grotesques of Alice. It’s not the book you remember from childhood; nor is it a *livre d’artiste*, that tired arranged marriage of limited edition plates and classic literature. It is not decorative. In Alice we see the fulfillment of Mutel’s mission—the act of eating away is the message. The act is embedded in the physical result: the plate, the negative, the original, the burn and the bite.

The proof of this act is best embodied in Mutel's masterwork, *The Outside*. This re-setting, obsessive deconstruction, and expansion of the haunting "Le Horla", a horror story by Guy de Maupassant, shows the possibilities of a printer's craft. This years-long project, culminating in 36 volumes contained in 28 discrete cases, takes the creepy story of a man who is convinced that he is being overtaken by an alien presence and explores every facet: The out sides; the out slides; the out sights; the out skies; out fights; out signs; out flights; out sizes; out shines; fights; time; find; smiles/slimes/mind/guide/blind/dice/tide/ mightlightsuicidespinesslices. In reworking this ambiguous tale, Mutel constructs an entire world of paranoia, including a lexicon, an original song, and a miniature landscape created by the books themselves. Yet, he brings the work to the heart, as well, with his poignant rendering of the number of dead soldiers in the never-ending conflict in the Middle East as gestured by the book of tickets that is *The Out Fights*: "Because I cannot find the cause."

Mutel's manifesto is *synechdochal*—*acide brut* stands for the entire craft of printing and its power. It is rhetorical in large gestures. It is ... but why not let Didier talk about Didier? He explains his motives for the manifesto thusly:

*"This was crucial. Crucial as a tribute to many artists and creators who at their time did extraordinary things, without whom we would not be here today. Not just in the field of typography or artists' books, their works have belonged for many years to big art history—and art has no limit, art means of course aesthetic, social ... all scene. The world could not exist without a strong meaning. When meanings and signs are not clear or disappear, the world sounds like a broken perspective. With artworks these artists gave to the 20th century meanings, answers and signs. Existence does not mean much without these so-called "useless experiences" which are created by artists. I am reminded of the line said by a man to Charles Eames about a chair: "It is beautiful but useless" and of Eames' answer: "If it is beautiful, it is useful." Taking citations from creators of the 20th century*

*was a way to connect with this history. The first part of the manifesto is built from strong words from surrealists, futurists, constructivists, dadaists. Maybe this gives the text a violent and weird tonality. A manifesto cannot exist with mild commercial words based on a marketing study. The second part of the manifesto is done in 62 definitions, a political program solely about engraving and etching.*

*"The manifesto is an act among other wills."*

It's that act of will that distinguishes him from other artists. Even as he has as a goal to rally them and combine their power, he stands apart in his visceral dedication to the fundamentals of making art—a rare commitment that goes beyond paper and ink. It's about time we had a good old-fashioned intelligent rant to hyperbolize the sorry state of the world. And Mutel gives us a solution—made of pure acid—to eat through, cut through, burn off the deadened calluses—to sting and make new our best tools—our hands, our imaginations, our desire for the creation of beautiful things.

Like any good manifesto, it demands abnegation of obsolete understandings and the redefinition of delegitimized models of expression. It contradicts itself because its goal, ever Whitmanesque, is to do just that. What is it? A defense of engraving and printing—a call for a recommitment to the craft—but with a clearer purpose—a moral one. It is intended to urge a conversation about the survival, the repositioning, the re-legitimizing of an ancient craft—one that shaped the world as brutally and as irrevocably as war. Didier Mutel is trying to save that world.

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