

Writing acts and writing performativity

Producing and disseminating leaflets

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Writing(s) at the Crossroads: The process-product interface

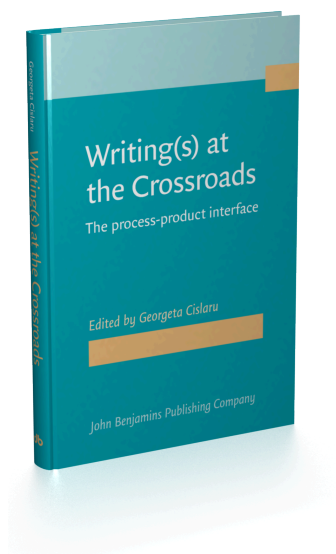
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Writing acts and writing performativity

Producing and disseminating leaflets

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This chapter is about public writings which pertain to collective action, common objects of a protest graphic culture: leaflets. From a pragmatic viewpoint, I try to analyze the way these written objects operate.

In order to do this, I aim to explore the notion of “writing act” developed by Béatrice Fraenkel. Through a contemporary case study, mainly based on an ethnographic fieldwork on a French feminist protest march in 2011 and on casual sources about protest practices, I try to scrutinize the writing act related to leaflets and to understand the specificities of written performativity. More precisely, I aim to point out how taking into account the material aspect of these situated writings, the handling gestures and bodily commitment allows to show how the stages of production and dissemination of the leaflets are an integral part of a writing act related to these writings, and how their performativity is intimately related to their materiality.

Therefore, first I show how the stage of material production of the leaflets is a collective and sustained activity, and a collective enunciation. Then, situated observations and photographic enquiry point out how the actors make use of real skills when handing out leaflets. Subsequently, I try to understand to what extent this gesture of handing out leaflets is part of the performative written enunciation and I aim to show how getting the addressee(s) to take the leaflets is a fundamental stage in the performativity of these distributed writings. Finally, by assigning the leaflets' utterances to the precise situations in which they are handed out, I try to point out how the writing acts of leafleting have different meanings, values and stakes in diverse situated actions.

Keywords: writing act; written performativity; materiality of writing; leaflets; distributed writings; protest writings; protest march

1. Introduction

1.1 Studying leaflets

Many writings of different kinds (posters, banners, placards, stickers, graffiti, pamphlets...) take an essential part in collective, political and protest action; and writing practices are a crucial element of what historian Charles Tilly has called the « repertoire of collective action » (Tilly 1986, 541; Tilly 2008).¹ Moreover, protest writings and the uses of writing can be regarded as specific objects of anthropological or historical study in line with major works in history about writing and reading practices.²

Leaflets are part of a protest – and activist – graphic culture, in which they seem to be common objects, in two senses: ordinary, mundane and well-known writings on the one hand; writings shared by very different groups, political and social movements, on the other hand. Furthermore, they are used in diverse situations: from election or information campaigns to gatherings, protest marches, sit-ins, strikes, as well as more occasional interventions; from lawful and institutionalized situations to clandestine and dangerous ones, depending on countries and times. Finally, the ways of disseminating leaflets also vary: leaflets can usually be handed out in public spaces, but also delivered in mailboxes, left on windshields or other available places; they can be posted up on walls and different surfaces, thrown, dropped, and so on.

My dissertation-in-progress is about these common, versatile and barely studied public writings, especially about leaflets produced in France during the 1950s and 1960s. In this work, I scrutinize from various angles the way these written objects operate: how can one act with these writings? How can these writings act? In order to achieve this, my research focuses on three points: (i) first, a pragmatic analysis of a corpus of leaflets from archival collections; (ii) secondly production and dissemination practices through case studies; (iii) and finally ideas about these writings' capacity of action over time through the testimonies of several actors. In doing so, I hope to examine the relevance of the notion of writing act(s) related to leaflets.

In this paper, I focus on the notion of writing act mainly through a contemporary case study.

1. For further discussions on this notion see Tarrow (2010) and Offerlé (2008).

2. These main works are historian Roger Chartier's ones in modern history (Chartier 1994; 1995, and 1998 for the main works in English). As Barton and Papen point out, "historical studies are prominent within francophone research on writing" and "the work of historians has had greater influence on studies of contemporary practices than is the case in the Anglophone world" (Barton & Papen 2010, 15). Protest writings are particularly studied in contemporary historical works of Philippe Artières (Artières & Rodak 2008; Artières 2013).

1.2 The notion of writing act

Béatrice Fraenkel derives the notion of “writing act” from that of “speech act” proposed by philosopher of language John Austin (Austin 1975). She has developed the notion in three main works: two are in French (Fraenkel 2006; 2007) and one is in English (Fraenkel 2010).³ For this paper, I will rely on both the English and French texts.

In her 2006 article, Fraenkel clarifies the paradoxical status of the writing act in Austin’s view. She shows that although he considers them as model of acts, at the same time, he reduces their written characteristics to orality. Besides, Béatrice Fraenkel studies features of a writing act model based on written legal acts, following the approach of Austin who is constantly nourished by legal references, as she points out (Fraenkel 2006, 78). In conclusion, she proposes to free oneself from this legal model and to identify “ordinary acts” (Fraenkel 2006, 89). In order to achieve this, first, she follows Austin’s analytical choice, i.e. starting with ordinary verbs referring to day-to-day acts: “*copier, enregistrer, signer, étiqueter, afficher etc.*”, namely “copying, registering, signing, labelling, posting up” (Fraenkel 2006, 90). Secondly, she proposes that:

when we do them [ordinary acts], we are doing three things simultaneously: making an artifact (a copy, a register, a label, a signature, a poster), producing an utterance and doing an act that changes the course of big and small things.
(Fraenkel 2006, 90)⁴

Thirdly, she invites us to pay close attention first to “written objects, polygraphical and falling within chains of writing” (Fraenkel 2006, 90).

Therefore, I would like to raise the question of whether there is an ordinary writing act related to leaflets: one that would be, for instance, different from putting up. And if so, how can we describe it? What are its features?

This leaves us facing straight away certain difficulties concerning the possible verb referring to this act. First, if in French a leaflet is named *un tract*, the verb *tracter* is a neologism used by activists and collective movements, but not necessarily by a majority of French speakers. In English, the verb *to leaflet* and the form *leaflet-ing* exist but are not particularly common. Secondly, as for the verb *posting up* (or *afficher* in French), *leaflet-ing* as much as *tracter* is indeed making a leaflet; however the meaning of the two verbs insists on the diffusion or publication’s stages.

3. She also uses it in a chapter of a book in English (Fraenkel 2011). Unless noted otherwise, I translate to English the quotations from French Fraenkel’s papers (more particularly 2006 and 2007).

4. In French: “en les [des actes courants] effectuant on se livre à trois choses en même temps: fabriquer un artefact (une copie, un registre, une étiquette, une signature, une affiche), produire un énoncé et poser un acte qui modifie le cours des choses, petites et grandes”.

This leads to another question: is the stage of material production of the artifact known as “leaflet” (composing, laying-out, printing) outside of the writing act known as *leafleting*? Yet, the utterance is “produced” during this preparatory stage. It is possible to discern here one of the main characteristics of written acts and written performativity: a totally different temporality from that of speech acts. Two specific legal cases cited by Fraenkel can be useful to understand this better. Firstly, the act of making a will (*tester* in French) raises the question: when is the scene of the testamentary act performed? When the dying person is dictating their will and signing it, or when the will is being read? (Fraenkel 2006, 75). Similarly, one can think, in French law, of the procedure of writs being served by bailiffs’ clerks (named *signifier* in French), i.e. delivering a missive from the court to the addressee in person. As Collard shows (Collard 2010) and Fraenkel sums up: “Between the moment of the act making and that of its being delivered to the addressee in person, who can say when the performative act occurs?” (Fraenkel 2006, 84).⁵ We could, likewise, simply ask: when is the writing act of *leafleting* performed?

Identifying a writing act related to leaflets, naming it, understanding its performativity is not that easy. A way to modestly progress in these aims is to accurately describe the making and disseminating stages by taking into account the material aspect of writing.

1.3 Materiality of writing

By the material aspect of writing I do not think here of either a linguistic sign’s materiality, nor of a graphical aspect of writing, but of its characteristics as an artifact, an object. As cited before, when carrying out a writing act, one is “making an artifact”: registering it is making a register, copying it is making a copy. More generally, we can assume that the material aspect of writing is fundamental, regardless of whether one thinks in terms of pragmatics or not. Writing is also “an artisanal activity”:

We are so familiar with the objects that we write – letters, exercise books, notebooks, messages – that we find it difficult to see writing as a craft skill. However, it is clear that when I write *in* a notebook, for example, not only do I fill it but I also *create it*. I produce it as a written object. The same goes for all our writing activities: we are constantly producing written objects without giving them a thought. (Fraenkel 2010, 39)

So writings are hybrid artifacts, combining graphical and linguistic characteristics but also material and spatial ones (Fraenkel 2001a and 2001b; Denis & Pontille 2010b).

5. “Entre le moment de fabrication de l’acte et celui de sa remise en mains propres, qui dira où s’opère l’acte performatif?”

Paying such attention to material aspects results in specific methodological choices and analytical shifts. It implies, first, to watchfully and finely look at small scales: at precise producing gestures and activities; at handling gestures and bodily commitments of actors with these objects. We also have to closely analyze the written objects themselves (supports, shapes, sizes, proper materials...). Yet, contrary to some representations of stable artifacts, like all materials and objects, written objects can be fragile, vulnerable and need attention, care and maintenance (Fraenkel 2011, 310–312; Denis & Pontille 2011 and 2010b). We thus have to look closely at maintenance, conservation and care practices or, on the contrary, at erasing or destructing ones. Methodologically, one can find these detailed analyses in both ethnographic inquiries (observing, describing, photographing small and seemingly insignificant gestures or objects), in the work on corpus of writings (handling, touching, measuring, turning over written objects) and in the study of records of writing activities and situations in documents, stories and archives (taking notice of precise endogenous terms and regular naming patterns of actions).

I aim to point out how taking into account the material aspect of situated writing, handling gestures and bodily commitment allows to show how the producing and disseminating stages are an integral part of a writing act related to leaflets, and how the performativity of writing is intimately related to its materiality.

2. Producing leaflets

In this paper, I rely on two types of data. The first kind is extracted from different casual sources (normative or prescriptive texts, records of actions, scenes) about protest practices in the 1960s and 1970s. Secondly, the main data comes from a collective ethnographic fieldwork on a feminist protest march (the feminist protest march, 5th March 2011, for Women's Day), conducted in 2011.⁶ The study consisted on the one hand of ethnographical situated observations and a photographic

6. This collective study was executed as part of the methodological workshop "Writings of Feminist Protest" organized by Béatrice Fraenkel and Claire Bustarret in 2010–2011 at EHESS Paris. The enquiry was on two marches: a night march organized by *Rage de nuit* collective the 27th November 2010 in Paris; the feminist combined protest march for the Women Day, the 5th March 2011. Workshop's participants all together took part in this enquiry that led to the one-day workshop "*Manifester avec l'écrit* [Protesting with Writing]", the 6th may 2011, where spoke Béatrice Fraenkel, Sophie Pène, Isabelle Bretthauer, Valentina Tomasini, Nora Labo, Arnaud Dubois, Maud Valegeas and myself. Much of this chapter is based on this talk and also on another specific work with Claire Bustarret who particularly studied banners and placards during the fieldwork.

inquiry (photographs of situations where written objects are carried by actors or somehow present) to examine the uses and activities specific to writing practices in protest marches; and on the other hand of the systematic gathering of leaflets on site, to study their material, graphical and linguistic characteristics.

I did not directly observe the production stages of the leaflets for the 5th March 2011 protest march but the systematic description of the material aspects of the corpus of writings and the support of writing scenes from other collective actions can already point out several important characteristics. Indeed, manufacturing these printed sheets of paper is a collective and sustained activity.

2.1 The writing temporalities

Other protest writings are sometimes created on site, just before or during the march. For instance, on the 5th March 2011, Claire Bustarret documented several scenes in which activists were manually writing placards with markers just before the march started or in which a mother was setting up handmade sandwich boards and armbands on her children's bodies as well as her own.⁷ Sometimes banners are even completed just before the demonstration starts, like in a record of a *MLF* feminist activist about her first protest march:

As I speak a little Russian, I was in charge of sticking pre-cut, fancy red satin Cyrillic letters the right way. (...) For the first time, that 8th of March I had the impression of being where I 'had to be'. (*Génération MLF 1968–2008* 2008, 240 quoted in Fraenkel 2011b, 16; my translation)⁸

On the contrary, leaflets are made before the march. They are made elsewhere, but they generally are *for* the specific march or collective action.

The leaflets gathered during the 5th March protest march are all printed sheets of paper. So, the making of these writings consists of roughly at least three steps: composing the text and laying it out, which could be accomplished simultaneously or not, and printing. Leaflets are often rapidly produced but these stages themselves can be of different durations depending on the case. For instance, concerning the combined leaflets (leaflets produced by several political and social collectives grouping together around common claims) like two made for this joint protest march and studied by Maud Valegeas (see Figures

7. Claire Bustarret talked about banners and placards in the 5th March 2011 protest march in a symposium organized by our research center during the *Writing Research Across Borders Conference*, on 21th February 2014, in Nanterre University.

8. In French: "Parce que je parlais un peu russe, on m'a chargée de coller dans le bon sens des lettres cyrilliques prédécoupées dans un joli tissu de satin rouge (...) Ce 8 mars pour la première fois j'ai eu l'impression d'être où "je devais être""

1 and 2), choosing words and appending signatures is usually quite a long and decisive process. Meetings are organized, first versions are composed and sent by e-mail or distributed during the meeting, discussions occur, amendments to the text are made during the meeting or by e-mail, and when there are debates, signatures can be added, removed, added again. For the leaflet made by young organizations for the 5th March (see Figure 2), the process took twelve days.⁹



Figure 1. The combined leaflet from the *Collectif Droits des Femmes* [Women's Rights Group]. A5 front and back, glazed paper, black, white, red and pink. Scan by the author

As we can see and as Fraenkel proposes, the temporality of writing is not an isolated or an immediate moment: "Writing time is an excessively 'socialized' time, continuous, joined together with other writings and other acts" (Fraenkel 2006, 83).¹⁰ Or, to say it otherwise, the temporal frame of writing is well specified by the notion of "*chaînes d'écriture*" or chains of writing (Fraenkel 2006, 83; Fraenkel 2001b).

This temporal characteristic is, as shown by our examples, intimately linked to another one: "the capacity of incorporating 'several hands', of accumulating them over time while safeguarding a certain unity" (Fraenkel 2006, 83).¹¹ Indeed, leaflet composition and leaflet making is a collective activity.

9. It is Maud Valegeas that finely presented this process of composing and signing the two leaflets reproduced here, during her talk on the one-day workshop "*Manifester avec l'écrit* [Protesting with Writing]", the 6th May 2011. I am here only repeating some of her acute analyses.

10. "Le temps de l'écrit est un temps 'socialisé' à l'excès, continu, solidaire de part en part d'autres écrits et d'autres actes".

11. "sa capacité à intégrer 'plusieurs mains', à les cumuler dans le temps tout en sauvegardant une certaine unité".

L'égalité femmes/hommes : un problème réglé ?

Notre génération a grandi avec l'idée que les luttes féministes avaient atteint leurs buts. Pourtant aujourd'hui, même les quelques acquis réels sont remis en cause. Face au retour des idées réactionnaires notamment portées par le Front National et contre l'endurcissement des politiques libérales, une relève féministe est nécessaire ! Des associations et des collectifs se créent un peu partout : la nouvelle génération féministe est en marche !

L'égalité au travail : encore un long chemin à parcourir...

Les écarts de salaires entre les hommes et les femmes et les hommes sont de 27% en moyenne et les femmes occupent plus de 80% des emplois à temps partiel. Ces chiffres trahissent différents problèmes : les femmes sont orientées dès le plus jeune âge, à cause des filières sexuées, vers les métiers les plus précaires et les moins bien payés, elles sont poussées aux temps partiels pour favoriser leur exploitation gratuite dans le cadre domestique (tâches ménagères, éducation des enfants), et elles sont également victimes de nombreuses discriminations : à travail et diplôme égal, elles gagnent toujours 10% de moins que les hommes. Avec la crise et les plans d'austérité, les femmes sont encore plus durement touchées par la précarité aujourd'hui. Et le seront encore plus demain, du fait du recul de l'âge départ à la retraite amoindissant nettement leurs pensions. La crise actuelle aggrave ces inégalités.

Le droit à disposer de son corps

Sans un réel service public, les droits à l'avortement et à la contraception ne sont que théoriques. Pourtant le gouvernement ferme de nombreux Centres d'Interruption Volontaire de Grossesse, menace de diminuer les subventions du Planning familial et supprime des postes d'infirmières et d'assistantes sociales sur les lycées et les facs. A quoi sert un droit qui ne peut être utilisé ? Le coût de la contraception et de l'avortement rend particulièrement difficile pour les jeunes et les femmes les plus précaires la maîtrise de leur sexualité et le droit à disposer de leur corps.

Pour l'émancipation des femmes

La prise en charge par la société de ces questions n'est pas assumée, et cela est lié à la mise à disposition du corps de femmes. Les violences physiques et psychologiques, le harcèlement et les viols, découlent des systèmes patriarcaux et du maintien de la domination masculine, qui entrave l'émancipation des femmes, qui passe par une destruction des systèmes de

- A travail égal, salaire égal !
- Avortement et contraceptions libres et gratuits ! Non à la fermeture des civg et des plannings !
- Non à la fermeture des crèches publiques !
- Pour une loi cadre contre les violences faites aux femmes !
- Pour le droit à disposer de son corps, moyens de protection pour toutes les sexualités, notamment lesbiennes ! Pilules du lendemain dans les lycées et les facs, centres de planification et crèches publiques dans les universités !

UN 8 MARS SOUS LE SIGNE DE LA SOLIDARITE INTERNATIONALE!

Depuis 1910, le 8 mars est la journée internationale de lutte et de manifestations pour les droits des femmes. Cette année, cette journée a lieu dans un contexte de soulèvements révolutionnaires des peuples du monde arabe notamment en Egypte et en Tunisie où les dictateurs, Ben Ali et Moubarak, ont dû quitter le pouvoir ! Les féministes de ces pays ont participé pleinement à ces processus d'émancipation. Là-bas comme partout, les schémas d'oppression de genre doivent être abolis !

Nous exprimons notre soutien et notre solidarité internationale à tou·te·s celles et ceux qui luttent pour leur émancipation et leurs droits.

genre faisant correspondre à chaque sexe un rôle et une identité. La lutte des femmes rejoint donc la lutte des lesbiennes, Gays, Bi, Trans et Intersexes.

Face à cette situation, la lutte pour les droits des femmes est plus que jamais d'actualité. Reconstruire un mouvement féministe massif est toujours aussi urgent. Le 8 mars est la journée internationale de lutte pour les droits des femmes. Mobilisons-nous pour l'émancipation de chacun·e, la lutte pour l'égalité entre femmes et hommes et la défense des droits des femmes !

**MANIFESTATION Samedi 5 mars 2011 à 14h30
Parvis des droits de l'homme / M°Trocadéro**

Collectif féministe Paris 3, Collectif féministe Paris 8, Collectif Tirésias Paris 4, SUD étudiant, NPA Jeunes, MJCF.

Figure 2. The combined leaflet from several "youth" organizations. A4 back, black and white Scan by Maud Valegeas

2.2 Polygraphy. A collective enunciation

Even when the leaflets do not stem from several organizations grouped together around common claims but from a single group, composition can be a collective activity. An example of a writing scene extracted from an activist newspaper allows us to see this. The scene is from an article out of the Maoist paper *Servir le*

peuple, 1st April 1968, entitled “Alès, les ouvriers de la céramique en grève [Alès, Ceramic Workers on Strike]”. It took place during the Workers Assembly held just after a protest march in the city. The local trade union’s secretary wanted to stop the strike:

That’s when workers get angry, they all agree, *they want to go on, they go on*.

Throughout the action, the secretary will fight each initiative, each right idea coming from the workers. So, the workers decide *together* to design a leaflet to popularize their struggle, and they get to work. Leaning over a worker’s shoulder, the secretary of the local trade union reads what the latter has written: “Yet our claims are quite negligible whereas the boss’s profits are tremendous”.

“Tremendous? What do you know about it?”

Surprised, the worker says everybody knows about it. But the secretary protests.

“That’s impossible. You can’t say tremendous. First we don’t know anything about it. Second, we’ll cut ourselves off from the boss. He can sue us for libel. We have to say ‘substantial’. Then the worker wrote: “Situation in Alès is really disastrous”, which causes a new fit from the secretary. “Disastrous? It’s too strong a word to use here! It is not that disastrous! We must say ‘In a phase of economic recession!’” But all the workers point out to him that economic recession is precisely bourgeois language for ‘Disastrous workers situation’.

In the meantime, another worker, who did not let himself get disturbed by all this chitchat, intervenes and reads his leaflet, which is enthusiastically accepted by all the others.¹²

This scene presents a set of actions related to leaflet making: the group decision to “make a leaflet”, the “work” of composing and writing, the reading of a temporary version, the debate about the words used, the reading aloud of another proposition, the collective validation. Composing a leaflet is a stake and several actors are part of it – the group of workers, the local trade union’s secretary, the first composing worker, and the second one. This writing practice is presented, in this activist newspaper relating a strike, as a collective action: they decide together, compose together, and validate the text together. But we can see how choosing words is the subject of debate and struggle and is part of the strike itself.

Other actors are not mentioned here, although their participation is crucial in the making of leaflets, in this 1960s scene. These are the ones that lay out, and type or print, then reproduce (by duplicating, roneo...) the chosen text. In our collective enquiry about the feminist protest march, these stages are also a

12. *Servir le peuple* 1st April 1968, no. 19. *Archives Nationales*. 78 aj/29. I translate.

blind spot but a systematic codicological description of the gathered leaflets can highlight some regularities.¹³

2.3 Printed sheets of paper

Out of our corpus of 30 writings, apart from one, the medium of all these written objects is the unique sheet. Thus, the typographical and codicological unit of leaflets is neither the notebook nor the page, which are the codicological units of books, booklets or pamphlets, but the sheet. Besides, all of the leaflets are printed, which distinguishes them from the tools and writing techniques used for making other protest written objects, like banners and placards, often handmade. Similarly, the formats of the leaflets are standardized ones (mainly in A4, for 16 leaflets, 7 in A5 and 4 in A6), contrary to some “do-it-yourself” formats of placards. (see Figures 1, 2 and 8).

An interesting characteristic is, among all these printed writings, the opposition between the leaflets made by personal or homemade techniques and the leaflets professionally or semi-professionally made. The first ones are, indeed, printed on ordinary paper, common in office supplies, whereas the second ones are on glazed paper, which is variably thick and rigid, and may sometimes bear the references of the professional printer marked in small letters in the top or bottom corners. It can therefore be said that several hands are involved in the making of these leaflets: how can their involvement in the responsibility of the utterance be characterized?

Moreover, what we observed by paying close attention to the material aspect of these writings compelled to explore this issue in greater detail. On the one side because at the outcome of this making process, once the leaflet is made, this “product” is not stable. Indeed writings are objects, and being so, they are fragile, vulnerable; they can change and be materially altered. They can fade, fly away in the wind, be burnt, betorn up to shreds, cut out... They need to be maintained and cared for (Fraenkel 2011, 310–312; Denis & Pontille 2011 and 2010b). Thus, once the product is made, the process is still going on. On the other side, as leaflets are sheets, and ones made in multiple copies, this leads to physical and material constraints that require real know-how. This also conduces to consider differently the part of these characteristics in the performativity of these flying sheets.

13. Codicology, or science of codex, is the study of books and particularly manuscripts as material objects. Codicology and paleography are essential to history of writing, particularly of medieval and modern Europe, and the study of writing and reading practices (McKenzie 1986; Chartier 1994 and 1995). But these “auxiliary sciences” of history prove to be really useful to study contemporary practices. For more references and analysis about codicology see Fraenkel (2001a, 124) and Mbodj-Pouye (2010, 127 and 139–141).

3. Handing out leaflets: A technique and know-how

Situated observations and, above all, photographs are a really efficient way to meticulously describe the various aspects of the leafleting technique: body postures, small and big gestures, body positioning in space, movements. This reveals that the actors – demonstrators and activists – make use of real skills when handing out leaflets.

3.1 Storing

Leaflets constitute, indeed, *piles* of sheets. Before the protest march, they need to be stored and transported where the march takes place. During the demonstration, they also need to be stockpiled in a place, accessible throughout all the march, for the demonstrators to come and restock fresh leaflets to be handed out. Some groups have a car at their disposal for this purpose, present all throughout the march, where they stock leaflets, other written objects like banners and other objects used during the demonstration.¹⁴ Other demonstrators can store the leaflets in various containers, often various bags, carried on their bodies (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. An activist carrying a bag full with leaflets. Paris, 5th March 2011. Photograph by the author

14. We observed the same use of a car during the Night protest march organized by *Rage de nuit* collective, on the 27th November 2010, at night.

3.2 Holding: Tools and bodies

Once the leaflets have been collected, their material characteristics set other constraints for the people who hand them out. Indeed, leaflets are numerous and flying sheets of paper: they need to be both *held*, in order not to fall, fly away or scatter, and *kept* and *carried*, for the activists to hand out the greatest number without having to come back to the car or storing places too often, without risking too long of an interruption of the distribution. To do so, the demonstrators adopt several tactics. Either they tightly hold the pack of leaflets, often by pressing them on their body (see Figure 4). They may also install a tool on their bodies where leaflets are stored and where they regularly draw fistfuls of sheets, like this Parisian demonstrator, who is visibly experienced, carrying all through the march a big blue bag around her neck (see Figure 3).



Figure 4. Participants holding packs of leaflets. Paris, 5th March 2011. Photograph by the author

3.3 Moving

Then the activists move to go and give the leaflets to addressees. By observing their positioning with regards to that of the cortege, one can notice several scenarios.

First, the people that hand out leaflets can be positioned in a specific space, i.e. on the sides of the cortege. They are walking in parallel at a different pace and they devote a large part of their demonstration time exclusively to leafleting. Secondly, they can be *inside* the cortege, and from time to time come away from it to go and give leaflets to the people on the sides, then return to the cortege. Finally, they can

be *inside* the cortege but on the edges, close to the passersby, handing leaflets while parading (see Figure 5). Thus, within a protest march, one can observe very parallel and different rhythms of action, and of writing action: a kind of choreography related to writings becomes apparent.



Figure 5. On the left, the cortege, and several activists leafleting on its sides. Paris, 5th March 2011. Photograph by the author

Therefore handing out leaflets during a protest clearly appears to involve the body, and to use it in accordance with very specific ways, requiring, and constituting at the same time special skills. Leafleting truly belongs to what Stany Grelet calls “the techniques of struggle” and “the technologies of protest” (Grelet 2005, my translation), following in an inspiring way the propositions of anthropologist Marcel Mauss to closely examine the “techniques of the body”, and those of his student Haudricourt’s to meticulously describe and analyze techniques and technologies (Mauss 1973; Haudricourt & Jean-Brunhes Delamarre 1955; Haudricourt 1987).

Fieldwork also reveals the complexity of the relations between the written objects’ carriers and their utterances. The activists who carry banners and brandish placards are not necessarily those who produced the utterances inscribed on them. In the same way, the demonstrators who hand out leaflets are not necessarily those who composed the text of the leaflets: so they are not proper enunciators or speakers. However, to what extent is handing out leaflets part of the performative written enunciation and a form of responsibility for the utterance?

4. Getting the addressee(s) to take the leaflet(s): The performativity of distributed writings

The observation and description of the precise leafleting gestures and actions shows the importance and the role of the material aspect of the leaflets in their performativity. Indeed leaflets are writings that, during a protest march, the activists properly *hand out*, i.e. give or deliver *by hand* to an individual addressee, and the activists' aim is clearly to make the addressees *take* the leaflets.

4.1 Handing out

To make the addressees take the writings, the activists, once again, make use, often carefully, of specific skills, relying on gestures, moves and oral interactions. First, they move towards the aimed addressee; they extend the hand that holds the leaflet and look at the person whom they are handing it out to; very often, they complete these gestures with initial verbal contact (salutation: "Hello!"; ask: "Do you want to know who we are?"; presentation of the writing: "The leaflet disseminated in Iran"). The aim of these words is to make the addressee take the leaflets, and to potentially engage in a longer conversation about the protest march. Once the addressee takes the leaflet, they leave (see Figure 6).

These efforts are not necessarily successful: the passersby often refuses to take the leaflet, or does not take it straightaway, as in the scene below, related by some French feminist activists in their account of the historic feminist protest march of the 20th November 1971 in Paris in the feminist newspaper *Le torchon brûle* n. 3.

(...) On the whole our leaflets are well received by women, passers by, storekeepers. A lot of women express their agreement: "The youth is less dumb than we are." In a café, a fifty-year old woman is outraged: "What are they doing, all these men, in the protest? *They* don't need to have an abortion!"

But one woman flatly refuses the leaflet, saying she's not interested.

– But what about the others?

– Let them sort things out!

After five minutes of an increasingly hostile discussion, a comrade says to her:

– And yet, if women don't take matters in their own hands, men won't do it for us.

– *That* is really true that! (Then she took the paper).¹⁵

15. *Le torchon brûle* 3, February 1972, reproduced in App et al. 2011, 21–27. The extract is page 23–24. I translate.



Figure 6. An activist is handing out a leaflet. Paris, 5th March 2011. Photograph by the author

As one can see, taking the leaflet, “taking the paper” in this precise situation is not a trifling gesture at all for this woman. It is both a mark of interest or disinterest for the leaflet and maybe for the demonstration (“she’s not interested”) and, in this case, a mark of agreement with at least an exchange of words, and maybe ideas. The scene also clearly shows the activists’ commitment in *one* act of handing out *one* leaflet, and how each addressee counts.

4.2 Giving the greatest number of leaflets. Reaching addressees

Moreover, the demonstrators who hand out leaflets also try to give out the greatest number of them, like the experienced activist we have already seen who systematically hands out leaflets to all passers by positioned on the sides of cortege, making a kind of circle (see Figure 7). Fieldwork observation also shows how activists try to give out the greatest number of leaflets to the greatest number of people, avoiding handing out a leaflet twice to the same person. So, the leaflets are indeed *distributed* writings, i.e. public writings, in multiple copies, circulating, and aimed at reaching an audience, but, specifically, at reaching *individual* or *distinct* addressees in an audience.



Figure 7. The cortege is at the left of the image (marked by the arrow). The same activist as in Figure 3 is handing out leaflets to people who are watching the march. We are on the *Champs-Élysées*, Paris, 5th March 2011. Photograph by the author

4.3 The performativity of leaflets

Managing not only to give out the leaflet but also to make one take the writing is essential, because that is one of the conditions first, for the leaflet to be *read*, and then for the discourse developed in the leaflet to act. To say it otherwise, the activity of making an addressee take the leaflet is one of the felicity conditions of the acts related to the leaflet, in an analogous (but not similar) way to the conditions to “secure uptake” mentioned by Austin (Austin 1975, 138). Thus, taking

into account the materiality of writing and the situatedness of writing uses leads to comprehend felicity conditions in a different manner: no longer as “stabilized conventional procedures and principles”, but as “concrete situations of accomplishment of performative enunciations” (Denis 2006, 14).¹⁶

Besides, from the participants’ point of view, leafleting during a protest march is not meaningless. Leafleting is a way to mark their social, political, or ideological belonging and membership to a collective, to notify it and to perform it. This is also a way for them to indicate that they *at least* agree with the messages displayed in public spaces by this precise collective. Handing out leaflets and, even, brandishing or just holding them, without having written them, even without having read them, is a form of commitment to these leaflets, a form of responsibility. Frequent situations, both historical and contemporaneous, of verbal, physical and legal clashes during or about leafleting situations remind us of this. This point deserves a more in-depth investigation, though we can bear in mind the fact that leafleting is a public practice, and leaflets are public writings, which are framed and recognized by the Law. In certain times or countries, handing out or even having a leaflet can lead to serious sanctions.

The relationships between the written objects’ carriers and the utterances appears thus to be more complex than superficial links. The situated observation I carried out led me to push this issue further. Indeed, observing the gestures, bodies and postures during the protest march highlights to whom and in which space the leaflets are handed out. So, in the final part of this paper, I would like to try and assign utterances to these precise situations. If one of the aims of leaflets and leafleting is to convey messages across public spaces, leafleting can be seen as doing several and different things.

5. Leafleting: Situated acts, various stakes

5.1 Presenting oneself and explaining the collective action

Most of the gathered leaflets have common discursive characteristics. Generally the name and/or logo of the collective taking charge of the utterance is present. Graphically, it is usually placed at the top of the sheet, in the header, or at the bottom, in the signature, or both (see Figures 1, 2 and 8).

16. I translate: “les conditions de félicité (...) ne sont plus figées sous la forme de procédures et de principes conventionnels stabilisés (...). Elles sont appréhendées en tant que situations concrètes d’accomplissement des énonciations performatives.”

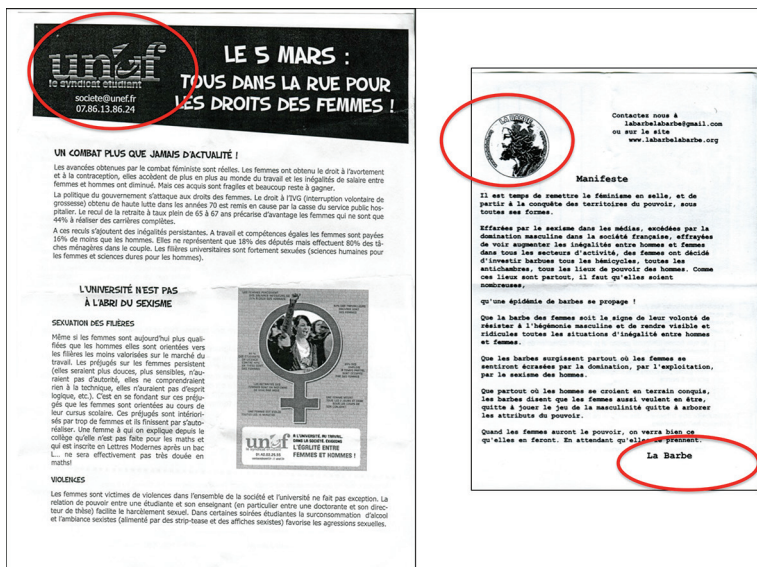


Figure 8. Left: the leaflet from the student trade union UNEF. A4, front, black and white. Right: front of the leaflet from *La Barbe*; A5 black and white. Scans by the author

Then, the enunciators do several things, often intertwined: they analyze the situation which protest march is reacting to, they explain the reasons and motives for the collective's participation, and finally, they claim or suggest a number of measures, actions that should be taken. So, when they are handed out to the passersby, leaflets and leafleting seem aimed both at presenting the collective, explaining its positions as well as making sense of the march, either on the spot (see Figure 9), or after the fact, i.e. at giving it a meaning.

Yet fieldwork reveals that a lot of leaflets are handed out *amongst* the demonstrators, and in many ways: leafleting shows contact and also struggles between collectives.

5.2 Making presence and actions known

Leafleting amongst demonstrators occurs at different times. It may happen before the beginning of the march: on the *Parvis des Droits de l'Homme* (or Trocadero esplanade), some activists who hand out leaflets are walking around, among static, more or less shapeless groups of demonstrators, and give out leaflets to the people they are passing by. Leafleting amongst the participants also frequently happens during the march, within the cortege or on its sides (see Figure 6). In both situations, handing out the leaflets seems to have a different aim: showing to other collectives one's effective presence in the protest, and also making one's point of view



Figure 9. Passersby on the *Champs-Élysées*, watching the cortege and reading leaflets. Paris, 5th March 2011. Photograph by the author

known. This partly evokes one of the aspects often highlighted in the research on protest marches, i.e. their self-centered character (Favre 2006).

Most of the leaflets handed out amongst participants are linked to the specific 5th March demonstration and are from collectives which are part of it. But in a different way, some leaflets handed out within the cortege are not related to the motives of the current march. They are announcements of other upcoming collective actions (often gatherings, marches and meetings), not specifically about women or feminist actions, and calls to take part in them. In these situations, leafleting carried out by activists and aimed at participants in the march aims to establish contact with them, to inform them about their actions, but also to potentially recruit participants.

5.3 Displaying exteriority or disagreement. Disrupting the demonstration

Finally, observation reveals some leaflets handed out by groups who do not parade and do not take part in the march. During the 5th March demonstration, two cases got my attention.

First of all, roughly halfway through the demonstration's route, one could see a bus shelter covered with posters of a collective (*Voie prolétarienne partisan*). Posters are put up in order to be seen from the cortege (see Figure 10). Some people brandish placards, looking at the cortege; one brandishes a newspaper; two others hand out leaflets. One is rather static and gives out leaflets to the demonstrators passing nearby; the other takes several steps towards the cortege, and regularly goes

into it and gives out leaflets to demonstrators. When reading the leaflets, one can see that these writings explain the collective's position on the oppression of women. Here, leafleting is clearly aimed at the cortege, and not at passersby. And a real site for leafleting and disseminating the writings is set up, before the cortege's arrival. During the big joint marches and demonstrations, like those on the First of May in France, one can often see these kinds of installations, all along the main cortege, often made by political parties or trade-unions: the activists use the configuration of ordinary public space, and temporarily transform them, with posters, flags, and often tables and chairs, into stands, or points of sale and of dissemination, and also gathering points. But, on the 5th March 2011, even if the protest march was a joint demonstration and a rather institutionalized one, the site described just above was the only example of this kind of installation. The stake for this collective seems to be seen, to make its presence and its positions known, maybe to recruit people, but by materially marking its exteriority and by not taking part in the march.



Figure 10. Activists handing out leaflets and brandishing newspapers. The cortege goes from left to right (see the arrows). Paris, 5th March 2011. Photograph by the author

The second situation is even more puzzling: in a location set about two-thirds of the march's route, a rather large group of people gets settled on a small square, totally static, on the left of the main cortege, but close enough for demonstrators to "crash into" the group. They hold a banner directed toward the cortege, with a slogan handwritten on it, but barely visible from a distance; they are silent and they use a very particular way of handing out or, more exactly, not handing out leaflets. Indeed, in front of the banner, some persons hand leaflets high up, in a rigid bodily

position, without moving, and without giving the leaflets to the demonstrators, like a kind of human display rack. The people who want to have the leaflets *have* to go and grasp them. Besides, the text, soberly printed on white paper, explains the reasons for their disagreement and for their refusal to take part in the march. After initial reactions of surprise and small stops, the wave of demonstrators gradually bypasses the group and resumes walking. So, in this case, the act of leafleting or rather brandishing leaflets and not handing them out, which is part of a larger action of writing, is aimed to *display* – to the demonstrators first and also, albeit not clearly, to the passersby – a refusal to be part of the collective action. It also disrupts spatially, bodily and temporally the protest march, which precisely presents itself as a joint and united collective action.

The material description of leaflets, of the handling gestures, bodies, positioning in space and actions around writings, thus reveals that the protest march does not boil down to an interaction between the demonstrators and a vague « audience », or between the cortege and the passersby. It is also constituted of moments of contact, exchanges, clashes, disagreements and antagonisms between groups. Moreover, at the outcome of this analysis, one can see that, even if the leaflets are made for the event, they do not appear only as writings on or about the event. Indeed, the different writing acts of leafleting, and the specific actions around these writings, contribute to shape the event as well, in all its singularity.

6. Conclusion

In this study of leaflets and leafleting in a feminist protest march, I have tried to show the relevance and specificities of the notion of writing act. As we have seen, and in line with Fraenkel's propositions, a writing act is characterized by some aspects unique to writing and to written enunciation: a temporality totally different from the instantaneousness of speech acts, i.e. a continuous and distended time; a collective or multiple enunciation, or polygraphy; a production of written objects. Seriously taking into account this last and major feature, by using accurate and detailed observations and descriptions as methodological tools, indeed shows that *leafleting* is not a writing act performed at a given moment by only one enunciative instance. The production (or making) and disseminating stages are both part of a leafleting act. Moreover, the study of the gestures and tactics to hand out and make the addressees take the writings specifically shows how the material characteristics of the leaflets – and their consequences in terms of gestures, bodily commitment, techniques, and maintenance practices – are crucial to understanding how the performativity of these “writing acts” operates and is ensured, but also the performativity of the speech acts.

The notion of writing act is still an exploratory one, but, here, the distinction between writing act and speech act has to be stressed. As Béatrice Fraenkel explains, the writing act is not a twin or a double of the oral speech act but it appears as an act in its own right: “a writing act is added to a speech act and this writing act is not simply an act of scription, because it assigns a specific value to the utterance” (Fraenkel 2007, 103, my translation). A good example to better understand this point is her analysis of the road signs such as ‘Dog’ or ‘Keep off the Grass’, carrying on Austin’s analysis of these types of utterances. First, these road signs are indeed “warnings”, i.e. well known performative and precisely exercitive speech acts. Secondly, these signs are artifacts located in specific places and so they “take on their full performative force only when they are displayed in an appropriate place”. But Fraenkel goes further by explaining that:

(...) they do much more than ensure optimum conditions for the effectiveness of these ‘performatives’. They also modify the places where they are found: the house which displays a ‘Beware of the Dog’ sign becomes a forbidden, protected place, just as the notices ‘Keep off the Grass’ or ‘No Posters’ modify the status of the grass or the wall. (Fraenkel 2010, 38)

The road sign ‘Keep off the Grass’ is, thus, both a speech act of warning and a writing act of “labelling” (Fraenkel 2010, 38). In this line, analytically distinguishing between the speech acts of the leaflet’s utterances and the writing acts of leafleting seems to be a fruitful hypothesis. But, compared to the sign ‘Keep off the Grass’, the leaflets appear to be more complicated, or at least different, to examine: first because they are discourses and not short and concise utterances, secondly because they are not placed signs – i.e. not exactly stable writings but stabilized ones (Denis & Pontille 2010a; 2011) – but rather circulating writings.

And, precisely, this last point appears to me as a crucial one. Indeed, the starting question of my research about leaflets is about the notion of *écritures exposées* proposed and analyzed by several major historical works in epigraphy (Fraenkel 1994), also called “exhibited writings” (Petrucci 2006, 191), “displayed writings” (Fraenkel 2011), and belonging to more general “public lettering” (Petrucci 1993). Characterized by their legibility, visibility and publicness (Fraenkel 2011, 306), this family of writings encompasses a set of various, day-to-day and well known urban writings: tags, graffiti, political and advertising posters, road signs, signage systems, but also solemn writings specifically studied by Petrucci. Therefore, do leaflets belong to *displayed writings*, as they seem to do?

Leaflets can be and are often posted up, stuck on walls, and thus operate as displayed writings. Besides, among the family of protest writings, leaflets almost always go hand in hand with other displayed writings such as political posters, with which they are systematically linked. But a closer look at artifacts, bodies, techniques, and situations, like the ones I have presented here, clearly shows some

specificities of these writings. Instead of being displayed or exhibited, leaflets appear to be *distributed* writings in the literal sense – which can be temporarily characterized as public, free, mobile and multiple writings, (aimed at) materially reaching individual addressees among an audience, one by one.

And, as soon as one pays attention to them, a set of numerous usual practices and ordinary writings arise. They have very different graphic, discursive and linguistic characteristics, and can be distributed in various situations: for instance advertising handbills and flyers, free newspapers, but also visiting or business cards, booklets, exam papers, folders, files... Lots of objects, not necessarily written, are also distributed daily, handed out and circulated in public places (Scollon 1997). In order to avoid typologies, as well as analogies or large categories that could flatten down the performative force and the specific modes of action of these writings, it is necessary to maintain a close look at both precise utterances, graphic features, handling gestures, bodily commitment, places, and objects. Focusing both on the material characteristics of “graphic artifacts” (maps, petitions, files, lists), and on the actors, gestures and concrete ways in which these objects circulate among people and places is a fruitful way to better understand how written objects perform and shape forms of urban governance, Matthew S. Hull argues in *The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan* (Hull 2012). Thus, a modest way of understanding how writings shape our world is to try and assess what things we are doing when we are concretely disseminating, distributing and circulating writings.

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