

## WHAT IS AN ART MANIFESTO?

Angela Sun

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### 1. WHAT IS AN ART MANIFESTO?

Examples of art manifestos:

- Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's *Foundation and Manifesto of Futurism* (1909)
- Hugo Ball's *Dada Manifesto* (1916)
- Theo van Doesburg and others' *De Stijl Manifesto* (1918)
- Walter Gropius' *Bauhaus Manifesto* (1919)
- Le Corbusier's *Toward an Architecture* (1923)
- Valerie Solanas' *SCUM Manifesto* (1967)

From Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' *Communist Manifesto* (1848):

The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. WORKERS OF THE WORLD, UNITE!

From Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto* (1909):

Up to now, literature has extolled a contemplative stillness, rapture, and reverie. We intend to glorify aggressive action, a restive wakefulness, life at the double, the slap and the punching fist. [...] We believe that this wonderful world has been further enriched by a new beauty, the beauty of speed. A racing car, its bonnet decked with exhaust pipes like serpents with galvanic breath... a roaring motor car, which seems to race on like machine-gun fire, is more beautiful than the Winged Victory of Samothrace. [...] We today are founding "Futurism" because we wish to free our country from the stinking canker of its professors, archaeologists, tour guides, and antiquarians. [...] What on earth is there to be discovered in an old painting

other than the laboured contortions of the artist, trying to break down the insuperable barriers which prevent him from giving full expression to his artistic dream?<sup>1</sup>

From Umberto Boccioni's *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting* (1910):

Our growing need of truth is no longer satisfied with Form and Colour as they have been understood hitherto. The gesture which we would reproduce on canvas shall no longer be a fixed moment in universal dynamism. It shall simply be the dynamic sensation itself. [...]

We Declare:

- That all forms of imitation must be despised, all forms of originality glorified.
- That it is essential to rebel against the tyranny of the terms "harmony" and "good taste" as being too elastic expressions, by the help of which it is easy to demolish the works of Rembrandt, of Goya, and of Rodin. [...]
- That all subjects previously used must be swept aside in order to express our whirling life of steel, of pride, of fever and of speed.
- That the name of "madman" with which it is attempted to gag all innovators should be looked upon as a title of honour. [...]

We Fight:

- Against the bituminous tints by which it is attempted to obtain the patina of time upon modern pictures.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.societyforasianart.org/sites/default/files/manifesto\\_futurista.pdf](https://www.societyforasianart.org/sites/default/files/manifesto_futurista.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.arthistoryproject.com/artists/umberto-boccioni/technical-manifesto-of-futurist-painting/>



1. *First-personal*: they are written by an artist and concern their own artistic practices.
2. *Iconoclast*: they present ideas that opposes some status quo.
3. *Stylized*: they are written with attention to rhetorical effect.
  - a. Typically, they are really self-conscious and self-referential texts.
4. *Idealist*: they are motivated by some values or (typically political) philosophy.
5. *Prescriptive*: they involve a call to action.
6. *Instructive*: they provide instructions on how the stated ideals can be translated into an artistic practice.

## 2. MODERNITY AND THE NEED FOR ART MANIFESTOS

From Ananda K. Coomaraswamy's *Art and Swadeshi* (1909):

If you go into one of those shops frequented by tourists in Indian towns, you will find amongst the flimsy wood carving and shallow brass work, the cheap enamels and the overloaded embroideries which are outward manifestations of the degradation of Indian craftsmanship [...] They are bought by American connoisseurs and German collectors for museums, for the education of Europe in design and for the benefit of the European manufacturer, for whom, too, they are reproduced in such papers as the *Journal of Indian Art*, and lectured on in Technical Schools and Schools of Art. For while the creative power of the craftsman has been long destroyed by commercialism in the West, it remained alive with us till yesterday, and even today some part of it survives.

Indian design is an inexhaustible treasure-house of fine invention. But have you ever reflected that all this invention belongs to the past—that modern India, Anglicised India, has produced no beauty and romance, but has gone far to destroy the beauty and romance which are our heritage from the past? Go into a *Swadeshi* shop—you will not find the evidences of Indian invention, the wealth of beauty which the Indian craftsman used to lavish on the simplest articles of daily use [...] but you will find every kind of imitation of the productions of European commerce, differing only from their

unlovely prototypes in their slightly higher price and slightly inferior quality.  
[...]

You see, this loss of beauty in our lives is a proof that we do not love India; for India, above all nations, was beautiful once, and that was not long ago. It is the weakness of our national movement that we do not love India; we love suburban England, we love the comfortable bourgeois prosperity that is to be some day established when we have learned enough science and forgotten enough art to successfully compete with Europe in a commercial war conducted on its present lines. It is not thus that nations are made.<sup>3</sup>

From Tania Bruguera's *Manifesto on Artists' Rights* (2012):

Art is not a luxury. Art is a basic social need to which everyone has a right.  
[...]

The governments of nations where artists work have the duty to protect their right to dissent because that is their social function: to question and address what is difficult to confront.

Without the possibility to dissent, an artist becomes an administrator of technical goods, behaves like a consumption manufacturer and transforms into a jester. It is a sad society where this is all social awareness creates. [...]

Critical thinking is a civic right which becomes evident in artistic practices. That is why, when threatened, we should not talk of censorship, but of the violation of artists' rights.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. ART MANIFESTOS AND THE IMPORTANCE OF ARTISTIC HONESTY

From Walter Gropius' *What is Architecture?* (1919):

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<sup>3</sup> <https://academic.oup.com/book/27652/chapter/197759529>

<sup>4</sup> [https://taniabruquera.com/wp-content/uploads/manifesto\\_on\\_artists\\_rights\\_-\\_eng.pdf](https://taniabruquera.com/wp-content/uploads/manifesto_on_artists_rights_-_eng.pdf)

What is architecture? The crystalline expression of man's noblest thoughts, his ardour, his humanity, his faith, his religion! That is what it once was! But who of those living in our age that is cursed with practicality still comprehends its all-embracing, soul-giving nature? We walk through our streets and cities and do not howl with shame at such deserts of ugliness! Let us be quite clear: these grey, hollow, spiritless mock-ups, in which we live and work, will be shameful evidence for posterity of the spiritual descent into hell of our generation [...] Structures created by practical requirements and necessity do not satisfy the longing for a world of beauty built anew from the bottom up, for the rebirth of that spiritual unity which ascended to the miracle of the Gothic cathedrals. [...] Artists, let us at last break down the walls erected by our deforming academic training between the 'arts' and all of us become builders again! Let us together will, think out, create the new idea of architecture. [...] Architects, sculptors, painters, we must all return to the crafts! For there is no "professional art". [...] Painters and sculptors, become craftsmen again, smash the frame of salon art that is around your pictures, go into the buildings, bless them with fairy tales of colour, chisel ideas into the bare walls—and build in imagination, unconcerned about technical difficulties.<sup>5</sup>

From Le Corbusier's *Toward an Architecture* (1923):

The history of Architecture unfolds itself slowly across the centuries as a modification of structure and ornament, but in the last fifty years steel and concrete have brought new conquests, which are the index of a greater capacity for construction, and of an architecture in which the old codes have overturned. If we challenge the past, we shall learn that " styles " no longer exist for us, that a style belonging to our own period has come about ; and there has been a Revolution.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <https://designmanifestos.org/walter-gropius-what-is-architecture/>

<sup>6</sup> [https://archive.org/stream/TowardsANewArchitectureCorbusierLe/Towards%20a%20New%20Architectur%20-%20Corbusier%20Le%20\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/TowardsANewArchitectureCorbusierLe/Towards%20a%20New%20Architectur%20-%20Corbusier%20Le%20_djvu.txt)



Le Corbusier, Villa Savoye, 1928

#### 4. ARTISTIC PRESCRIPTIONS

From Giacomo Balla's *Futurist Manifesto of Men's Clothing* (1913):

We Futurists, in those brief gaps between our great struggles for renewal, have spent the time discussing, as is our wont, very many subjects. For quite some time now we have been convinced that today's clothes, while they may be somewhat simplified to suit certain modern requirements, are still atrociously passéist.

WE MUST DESTROY ALL PASSÉIST CLOTHES, and everything about them which is tight-fitting, colourless, funereal, decadent, boring and unhygienic. As far as materials are concerned, we must abolish: wishy-washy, pretty-pretty, gloomy, and neutral colours, along with patterns composed of lines, checks and spots. In cut and design: the abolition of static lines, all uniformities such as ridiculous turn-ups, vents, etc. [...]

WE MUST INVENT FUTURIST CLOTHES, hap-hap-hap-haphappy clothes, daring clothes with brilliant colours and dynamic lines. They must be simple, and above all they must be made to last for a short time only in order to encourage industrial activity and to provide constant and novel enjoyment for our bodies. USE materials with forceful MUSCULAR colours [...] The consequent merry dazzle produced by our clothes in the noisy streets, which we shall have transformed

with our FUTURIST architecture, will mean that everything will begin to sparkle like the glorious prism of a jeweller's gigantic glass-front [...]

We are fighting against:

- a. the timidity and symmetry of colours, colours which are arranged in wishy-washy patterns of idiotic spots and stripes;
- b. all forms of lifeless attire which make man feel tired, depressed, miserable and sad, and which restrict movement producing a triste wanness;
- c. so-called 'good taste' and harmony, which weaken the soul and take the spring out of the step.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.readingdesign.org/futurist-manifesto-mens-clothing>