

Manifesto



Artistic Articulations of Engagement

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Abstract

How do artists call for engagement and political relevance with regard to the “ecological imperative”? This contribution focuses on the revival of the Manifesto in contemporary art. This revival formalized an intertextual rhetoric of exclamation and polemic in service to a new ethical stand: a relational worldview. I argue that discourse analysis can identify a shift in format that ultimately touches upon the academic discourse as well.



The Revival of a Format

Something manifests itself in a material form and an aesthetic expression. By this operation, a force or idea turns real, becomes evident and obvious. In other words, the manifesto implies turning a vision into something palpable. But how does an idea, an artistic concept, gain *bindingness* — a categorical obligation? In the following essay, I want to discuss *the manifesto* as an artistic format of articulation, more precisely as a mode of claiming art’s direct relevance to society, if not the world. In the long history and development of artistic discourse, the manifesto has become the rhetorical mode for voicing a concern, announcing urgency, and identifying the need to act.¹ There is no manifesto without the gesture towards engagement. This might be the reason for the revival of this avant-garde format.² To phrase it differently, the manifesto offers an opportunity to analyze the aesthetic constitution of engagement.

1 The genre of the manifesto has received extensive treatment in research, especially in its position for the avant-gardes. Cf., for example, Karl Heinrich Peter, *Proklamationen und Manifeste* (Stuttgart: Cotta Verlag, 1964); Wolfgang Asholt and Walter Fähnders, *Manifeste und Proklamationen der europäischen Avantgarde (1909–1938)* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1995); Hubert van den Berg, *Manifeste: Intentionalität* (Amsterdam: Rodolpi, 1998); Friedrich Wilhelm Malsch, *Künstlermanifeste: Studien zu einem Aspekt moderner Kunst am Beispiel des italienischen Futurismus* (Weimar: VDG, 1997); Marjorie Perloff, “‘Violence and Precision’: The Manifesto as Art Form,” *Chicago Review* 34, no. 2 (1984): 65–101; Burcu Dogramaci and Katja M. Schneider ed., *‘Clear the Air’: Künstlermanifeste seit den 1960er Jahren* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2017).

2 Silke Peters, “Für klare Stellung: Neue Manifeste für die Kunst,” 2009, <http://manifeste.twoday.net/>.

With ‘manifesto’, I want to extend the reflection of engagement to notions of rhetoric and speech acts. The verb ‘to manifest’ stands for a certain ideal of communication, commitment and the will to act. Moreover, the manifesto corresponds to a distinctive self-definition of artists and art historians alike. A close reading of the manifesto as format reveals several issues that touch upon developments in the tension between aesthetic design and the content-driven agenda, a tension that is also in the foreground of academic writing.

In the papers of Ad Reinhardt, one finds an undated note that deals with the typology of artistic discourses.³ The abstract painter, a highly articulate voice of nineteen fifties New York, reflects on the link between the development of art and the paradigmatic formats of artistic articulation. Reinhardt’s single sheet outline leads from the technical manual of the fifteenth century “handbook” on perspective and proportions up to the ‘interview’ — a format that started an unprecedented career in the middle of the twentieth century.⁴ One thinks, of course, of Andy Warhol as the master of the interview, but also of Hans Ulrich Obrist, who built his career as a curator on the collection of interviews.⁵ Reinhardt attributes the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to the age of academic ‘discourses’; the nineteenth century, in contrast, expressed itself in ‘private writing’ and ‘letters’.

In 2008, Obrist organized a *Manifesto Marathon*, putting the format that, following Reinhardt’s list, was the twentieth century’s dominant genre before the interview, centerstage.⁶ Obrist drew a line from the historic avant-gardes to the radical manifestos of the 1960s and 1970s and, further, proclaimed the manifesto

3 Ms., Ad Reinhardt Papers, Microfilm, Archives of American Art. Washington, D.C.

4 Peter J. Schneemann, “Formate künstlerischer Theoriebildung,” in *Theorie²: Potenzial und Potenzierung künstlerischer Theorie*, ed. Eva Ehninger und Magdalena Nieslony (Bern: Peter Lang, 2014), 33–48.

5 Michael Diers, Lars Blunck and Hans Ulrich Obrist, eds., *Das Interview: Formen und Foren des Künstlergesprächs* (Hamburg: Philo Fine Arts, 2013).

6 Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Serpentine Gallery Manifesto Marathon* (London: Koenig Books, 2009). Cf. Nicola Lees, *Serpentine Gallery Manifesto Marathon* (Köln: König, 2009); Viviana Birolli, “Manifestes à la carte: Serpentine Gallery Manifesto Marathon,” *Marges: Revue d’art contemporain* 21 (2015): 61–71.

the organ of the future. Finally, the event posited a link between the manifesto as a ‘document of poetic and political intent’ and a situation of urgency.

Why did Obrist celebrate the format of the historical avant-gardes, asking seventy artists to read, to sing or to perform statements? What kind of revival of the manifesto is this? Do we see a shift from the ego-document to a new negotiation of shared values and responsibilities? Certainly, the rhetoric of the manifesto indicates a specific understanding of the status given to artistic articulation. Today, the artist is aware of the clear differentiations between personal observation and documentation, analytical research strategy, theoretical reflection and activist exhortation. In the art world, ranging from the academies to contemporary publishing culture, we have to acknowledge a complex typology of verbal articulation in which the discursive dimensions of art manifest themselves. The implications of the mode of speaking are fundamental because they reflect the different roles assigned to the players in the field.⁷

Since the long tradition of the artistic manifesto is experiencing a comeback, we have the opportunity to reflect on the interplay between two perspectives: the intertextual implication on the formal level and, on the content level, the aesthetics of articulation and communication — the issues at stake today and their implications about the function of art in society.⁸

A Format in Transformation

A manifesto has a strong formal quality, a clear set of rhetorical figures. These formal features are mirrored in visual compositions that translate language into graphic appearance. Distributed as pamphlets and flyers or posters, manifestos have to be reproduced as facsimiles to preserve their visual language. This important correspondence between rhetorical means and visual manifestation can be observed equally well in the variations of Futurist experiments as well as in typographic details like the use of small capitals.

7 Matthias Michalka and Beatrice von Bismarck, *The artist as...* (Wien: MUMOK, 2006).

8 Schneemann, “Formate künstlerischer Theoriebildung.”

Proclamations address the public directly. Descriptions and observations give way to calls and claims. Paragraphs get reduced to short and final statements; the incorporation of a rhythmic appearance of notions and idioms heightens the impact.

The manifesto as proclamation often goes together with numbered listing. The list, with its specific rhythm and repetition, creates a rule system, evoking canonical texts such as the Ten Commandments. Examples can be found from diverse artists: Ad Reinhardt's 'Rules', Sol LeWitt's 'Sentences'⁹ or Thomas Hirschhorn's pronouncements.¹⁰

In the context of the avant-garde, an interesting formal feature of the manifesto and the call for change can be observed: the rhetorical figure of negation, of protesting a ruling system and rejecting an established order, a tradition, developed a strong intertextual marker. We will come back to the thesis that, historically, the manifesto is strongly bound to a dynamic, activist, and, in some cases, destructive drive.¹¹

When we look at contemporary reinterpretations of the manifesto, the strong intertextual tradition is immediately recognisable. A prominent example of a strategic and informed use of the intensified statement is Jonathan Meese's extensive writings. His long manifestos, distributed as authenticated, *faksimilierte* "outbursts" or theatrically performed readings, overtly allude to the avant-gardes.¹² A manifesto attacks and negates the existing order. Deploying coarse language, allusions to fascist rhetoric and rhythmic repetition, often numbered, the artist calls for an art that represents itself as a radical force. Here, a term, a conviction or rule, as subject and even as label, becomes defined *ex negativo*.

9 Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," 1967. Cf. Rosalind Krauss, "LeWitt in Progress," *October* 6 (1978): 47–60, accessed 11 July 2021, <https://doi.org/10.2307/778617>.

10 Thomas Hirschhorn, *Critical Laboratory: The Writings of Thomas Hirschhorn*, ed. Lisa Lee and Hal Foster (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013).

11 Cf., for example, manifestos like "Le Refus global," released on August 9, 1948 in Montreal by a group of young artists and writers.

12 Jonathan Meese, *Ausgewählte Schriften zur Diktatur der Kunst*, ed. Robert Eikmeyer (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2012).

Die “Diktatur der Kunst” verneint jede “Machtwahl”

1. verneint jede ideologische Drecksmacht
2. verneint jede politische Kackmacht
3. verneint jede furzdemokratische Pupsmacht¹³

Just as the format of the manifesto has a close relationship with graphic design, there is also a complex relationship with performative expression, spoken language and theatrical performance. In recent years, these artistic strategies have become explicitly evident and differentiated in the development of the lecture-performance.¹⁴ It is noteworthy that artistic research has led to an experimental interrogation of this genre, situated as it is in teaching institutions.

In 2015, the artistic investigation into the tradition of the political statement climaxed in Julian Rosefeldt’s work *Manifesto*.¹⁵ In a monumental 13-channel film installation, he presents a looped collage of historic artists’ manifestos, translated into performance. Cate Blanchett’s acting augments the artificial aesthetic and fictitious quality of this “restaged declamation”. Although the paratextual discourse of the installation positions itself as a homage and as a kind of critical review of the political potential of the avant-garde rhetoric, a different, much more radical question surfaces. Through explicit play with the formal rule system of the manifesto, a certain aestheticizing, in the sense of *over forming* or *super shaping* becomes evident. The staged rhetoric, the acting-out of an attitude, empties the manifesto of its content and leaves us with a nostalgic mood of

13 Jonathan Meese and Jan Bauer, *Diktatur der Kunst: Das radikalste Buch. Die Diktatur der Kunst ist die ultravisionärste Totalstutopie aller Zeiten!* (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2011). Cf. Harald Falckenberg, “Jenseits von Gut und Böse. Das Phänomen Jonathan Meese,” in *Jonathan Meese: Revolution*, ed. Carl Haenlein and Carsten Ahrens (Hannover: Kestner Gesellschaft, 2002), 21–42.

14 Gabriele Klein and Wolfgang Sting, *Performance Positionen zur zeitgenössischen szenischen Kunst* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2015).

15 Julian Rosefeldt, *Manifesto 2015*, 13-channel film installation, Colour, 26-channel sound (13 x Stereo), Shot on HD, Aspect ratio 16:9, Loop, 4 min (plus 12 x 10 min 30 sec, 130 min total running time). Cf. Anna-Catharina Gebbers et al., eds., *Julian Rosefeldt: Manifesto* (Australian Centre for the Moving Image [ACMI], Melbourne; Hamburger Bahnhof — Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin; Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; Sprengel Museum, Hannover, 2015). Exhibition Catalog.

remembering failure. The public no longer feels addressed but experiences, rather, their displacement from a lost language of utopia. One could observe a similar effect at the Venice Biennale 2015, Arena, where Okwui Enwezor staged a reading of all three volumes of the iconic *Das Kapital*. The reading by professional actors was directed by the artist Isaac Julien and was performed in the ‘Arena’, a stage designed by the architect David Adjaye for the celebration of the spoken word.

Like an echo of a past paradigm, the exhortation acquired a rhythm and melody in its own right. Indeed, one could refer to a number of other examples that demonstrate the complex play between formal mannerisms and urgency.¹⁶ The emancipation of a format directs the focus to the tension between the ‘message’ and an artistic ‘realisation’. In discussing instruments of engagement, one is confronted with the imaginative power of performative language.¹⁷

The Call to Act and to Care

There is, however, a species of manifesto that indicates a clear refusal of any aestheticization — neither a game nor deconstruction, it is instead an expression of urgency. Rasheed Araeen’s contribution to Obrist’s Marathon 2008 is one such example. He presented his widely acclaimed *Manifesto for the 21st Century* printed in *Third Text* 2009, albeit with a significant shift in the title: *Ecoaesthetics: A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century*.¹⁸ Araeen, born in 1935 in Karachi, is the founder of *Third Text* and participated in *documenta 14*.

His contribution is interesting because we can read it as a manifesto about manifestos. More precisely, he deploys the key terms that define and, thus, redefine the manifesto:

Art today is also trapped by the facile idea of confrontation, which merely produces media scandals (...), its function is merely to provide the artist with success in the art

16 See, for example, the discussions around the Berlin Biennale curated by Artur Żmijewski.

17 Cf. Boris Groys, “On Art Activism,” *e-flux Journal*, no. 56 (June 2014).

18 Rasheed Araeen, “Ecoaesthetics: A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century,” *Third Text* 23, no. 5 (2009): 679–684.

market. This inflates the artist's nar-ego further and turns him or her into a celebrity, providing spectacular entertainment for the public but without any significant critical or social function.¹⁹

Here, Araeen not only addresses the artists as a public figure but also reflects on the intrinsic rituals of the art world, the economy of attention. One could claim, however, that the value of 'scandal', which he laments as a problem of contemporary art, is a natural rhetorical *topos* of the manifesto. Since the Futurists, the rhetoric of the manifesto has played with the connection between the personal statement and the theatrical, inherently public claim that stirs up established values. Araeen's attack, tellingly, alludes to Dadaism, refusing to continue the manifesto tradition of the European avant-gardes.

This manifesto (...) proposes that artists should (...) stop playing the silly games of the so-called neo-Dada confrontation. Instead artists should instead focus their imagination on what is there in life, to enhance not only their own creative potential but also the collective life of earth's inhabitants. The world today is facing enormous violence and this will increase in the rest of twenty-first century as the Earth's resources shrink due to the stupidity of the kind of life humans have been pursuing. Art can and should strive for an alternative that is not only aesthetically (...) productive but is also beneficial to all forms of life on our planet. We humans are the gift of mother Earth, and it is now our duty as its guardians to protect the earth from impending disaster.²⁰

When the manifesto attempts to redefine the manifesto, there is a tension between a formalized rhetoric, where the manifesto could be called an aesthetic form, and its content/agenda, an ethical imperative to act. The new manifesto is one of the formats linked to the notion of an 'ecological imperative'—a stance

19 Araeen, "Ecoaesthetics: A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century," 680.

20 Araeen, "Ecoaesthetics: A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century," 684.

towards human resource management built upon Kantian ethics.²¹ Today, society is rethinking the use of visual and textual manifestations of human culture as crucial tools to mediate the ethics of the environmental crisis.

Araeen is attempting to use the avant-garde rhetoric beyond any *l'art pour l'art* attitude and to, by doing so, redefine the manifesto beyond its Eurocentric tradition. He uses the rhetorical power of urgency and concern, as well as a new trope of the appeal, to call for an attitude of caring and repairing. The 'new manifesto' demands engagement with nothing less than the world as such, the planet, and demands a radical shift in our orientation towards the world.

Heretofore, I have given an abbreviated reference to the central position of the manifesto in the narration of modernism and the avant-garde movements — both in the self-positioning of modernist artists and in the historiographical work of contemporary scholars. This helps us see a fundamental shift in some of the paradigms at stake: the modernist manifesto aggravated for change, negated the past and promised a future.²² Deconstruction of existing orders, progress and speed shape the manifesto from Marinetti onwards.

However, the modernist manifestos concerned themselves with mere decades or centuries. The new manifesto, the 'Anthropocene manifesto', has a different time scale.²³ In the discourse around the Anthropocene, tomorrow and the promise of the future of the avant-gardes have shifted — now we speak about 'deep time' — and it is hardly possible to think on a larger scale than geological epochs. But this shift goes far beyond a simple question of scale: it poses the question 'how we can mediate the need for protection of the environment without referring

21 Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of An Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). First published in German, 1979. Cf. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

22 Lawrence S. Rainey, Christine Poggi, and Laura Wittman, eds., *Futurism: An Anthology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009); Elza Adamowicz and Simona Storchi, *Back to the Futurists: The Avant-garde and its Legacy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017).

23 Aleida Assmann, "The Future of Cultural Heritage and Its Challenges," in *Cultural Sustainability*, ed. Torsten Meireis and Gabriele Rippl (London: Routledge, 2019), 25–35.

backwards to a supposed (and ideological) unity and integrity?’ A damaged environment urgently calls us to ‘reclaim, restore, and remediate’²⁴. But what does it mean when the cultural technique of ‘deconstruction’ is countered by a rhetoric of preservation, conservation and reconstruction? What happens, then, to the theatrical gesture, the call for utopian radicality? The postmodern quotation of and play with format itself? Ecocritical and activist approaches want to judge art on its ability to change reality. A criterion like formal innovation has lost its unquestioned authority; ecocriticism now calls for judging impact, practical consequences or solutions achieved by artistic acts.

The most promising examples of the manifesto today do not negate the aesthetic quality of the format and its rich intertextual history. On the contrary, there is an interest in reflecting on the implications of the formats we use, up to a fictionalisation and a merger between reenactment and preenactment.²⁵ We become aware of the ideological traps of statements that claim moral superiority and legitimization on the basis of identity. The artistic manifesto demonstrates by means of aesthetic *evidentia* a reflective openness, fragility and even ambivalence.²⁶

The reflection on the manifesto, taking into account the shift asked for by Araeen’s manifesto, exceeds the established field of “Art Theory”. The challenge of the ‘ecological imperative’ is inevitably bound to the question of ‘formats’. How do the arts mediate responsibility? Which scenarios and courses of action, i.e. options to act, are evoked? How are the rhetorics of engagement addressing a wider public? Approaches in artistic research, in particular, mark ongoing shifts that can also be observed in academic writing. The supremacy of analysis and

24 Sacha Kagan, “The Practice of Ecological Art,” *Plastik* 4, 15 February 2014, accessed 10 October 2019, <http://art-science.univparis1.fr/plastik/document.php?id=866>. Cf. also Sacha Kagan, *Art and Sustainability: Connecting Patterns for a Culture of Complexity* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2011); Susan Gablik, *The Reenchantment of Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991); and the categorizations used in Linda Weintraub, *To Life: Eco Art in Pursuit of a Sustainable Planet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

25 Charlotte Klink, “Yael Bartanas ‘A Manifesto’: Widerständigkeit und Entgrenzung der Kunst,” in *‘Clear the Air’: Künstlermanifeste in Choreographie, Performance Art und Bildender Kunst seit den 1960er Jahren*, ed. Burcu Dogramaci and Katja Schneider (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2017), 173–191.

26 Rachel Mader, *Radikal Ambivalent Engagement und Verantwortung in den Künsten Heute* (Zürich: Diaphanes, 2014).

deconstruction is interrogated by the imperative to voice a position. The rhetoric of critical distance is being supplanted by the desire to overcome analysis and get involved.²⁷ The way we communicate our motivations and our findings becomes constitutive for the role we take on.

A reflection on the formats we chose to communicate our work is crucial. Indeed, since 2021, an interdisciplinary research group, composed of art historians, literary scholars and anthropologists, has been studying how contemporary cultures grapple with the ethical demands of climate change.²⁸ Our objects of study are palpable examples of how culture prompts us to take action, to accept the demands of the ecological imperative — yet we find that it is only through collaboration, within and without the academy, utilizing our overlapping competencies and refusing to stay within the narrow boundaries of our ‘discipline’, that we come near to approaching these objects on their own terms.

In the final analysis, the manifesto, the trappings of which this essay at times adorns itself with, is a verbal *and* a visual object, and cannot be analyzed without recourse to these two related but different ways of thinking. As Neumann and Rippl point out, ‘verbal-visual configurations frequently point beyond existing orders of the sayable and the visible’²⁹. Although they speak here of ekphrasis and, therefore, of literature, the results of our interdisciplinary research — and of this essay — tell the same story about other cultural products, be they manifestos or academic essays. To tackle a problem of this scale, we must leave the old ways of thinking — of researching — behind. It is no longer enough to investigate solely the verbal or the visual; climate change is a problem that calls for new competencies and new formats of mediations and demands we struggle beyond the already-said and the already-seen. Artists have pushed the boundaries

27 *A Farewell to Critique? Reconsidering Critique as Art Historical Method*, Copenhagen, 25–27 Oct 2018.

28 Cf. the Swiss National Science Foundation Sinergia project ‘Mediating the Ecological Imperative: Formats and Modes of Engagement’ (2021–2024), <https://www.ecological-imperative.ch>.

29 Birgit Neumann and Gabriele Rippl, *Verbal-Visual Configurations in Postcolonial Literature: Intermedial Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2020).

of representation and documentation, communication and participation, have developed strategies of engagement that investigate intertextual traditions like the handbook, the letter, the treatise or the interview. If this essay was a manifesto, it would conclude thus: Let us learn from them.

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