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Lomonosov Moscow State University**

Actual Problems of Theory and History of Art

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For art historians, historians, students and art lovers.

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AN APPROACH TO AVANT-GARDE MANIFESTOES

A complicated dialogue between art and society, as well as within art itself, presents an important aspect of Modernism. The genre that contributed to make this dialogue interesting and understandable is the manifesto. In order to support this viewpoint it is enough to read one of these forbearers of future nowadays (e.g. already a century old Manifesto of Futurism of 1909) and to realize to what an extent the problems that these manifestoes present are still actual, and the language they use is clear and convincing. For the history and theory of modern art they are especially interesting since they present both documents and events at the same time.

A priori theory

In the general introduction to the anthology *Art in Theory 1900–2000* the editors as an important feature of Modernism cite the fact that it “assumes certain kinds of relations between art and theory and between art and language”¹. In these statements they refer to, among others, Clement Greenberg who claims that “development of modern art has been ‘immanent to practice’ and never a matter of theory”². Later on in the anthology the authors state that “It follows that theory must always be *posthoc*, (...) that theoretical work is work which attempts to follow and to recount those developments which practice has already initiated”³.

The same theory is offered by most avant-garde manifestoes as well. They don’t, however, present this theory retrospectively but at the very beginning, at the moment when a new poetic expression is being established, *ad hoc* or *a priori*. They explicitly expose their individual as well as group aesthetic aspirations, explaining them and negating the past up until the present, determining their role in the culture, society and history. The need for theory or, more precisely, the attempt of an artist to use words is a specific phenomenon that will become an inevitable practice in the art history of the twentieth century, the practice that can’t be circumvented in the treatment of the most relevant movements of that time. This is why it can be claimed that the avant-garde and the manifesto as a genre are closely interconnected and even conditioned by each other. A turbulent history of the genre supports this theory, reaching into the distant past, even before the French Revolution in 1789.

Considering the vast number of these texts, art history encountered the problem of finding a suitable approach, which would install order in this field of study. However, besides the problem of finding the approach to the study of manifestoes, the manifestoes themselves create a problem in the field of history and theory of art because they impose themselves in the analysis of certain movements. We can ask the question: which methodology, for instance, can be a valid approach to the study of Dadaism if we take into account numerous manifestoes of this movement? Aren’t the

artists themselves the interpreters of their *future* poetics, thereby denying the role of art criticism and the future theory and history of art? It is quite likely that some manifesto writers had the ambition to cancel the history of art as well as museums and other cultural institutions – this is even explicitly emphasized in the *Futurist Manifesto*.

It is precisely these contradictions, expressed by manifestoes themselves, which influenced the emergence of studies of this phenomenon, bestowing manifestoes with a duly deserved attention in the field of the historical avant-gardes.

Unstable Form

Narrowly defined a manifesto is a type of a programmatic, performative and, especially in the sphere of art, metapoetic text. Leaflets, resolutions, declarations, statements and programmes can all be added to this group. This list could also be supplemented with various forms of a polemic and utopian discourse. Broadly speaking, these texts are also occasionally interpreted as manifestoes and this tendency is quite present in the discourse of art history. The same interpretative approach can also be applied to the texts in exhibition catalogues, leaflets, essays, letters, diary notes, and others. Finally, not only texts but also speeches, pictures, posters, buildings and events can be considered as manifestoes. In the contemporary public speeches today the term is used quite loosely whereby almost anything can be called *Manifesto*. In a book by Janet Lyon *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern*⁴ the author states that one of the Andre Agassi's tennis matches has been called a manifesto by a commentator.

In addition to this, we should add that a special difficulty is posed by the texts that weren't initially called manifestoes, and weren't even written or perceived as such by their authors, but nevertheless they were later interpreted and read as these. These readings of the texts which weren't originally intended as manifestoes will become more frequent in time and they were mostly applied to the texts of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century.

It can be said that bearing the title of manifesto means possessing a feature that eludes a simple definition. Some authors have, for these purposes, coined the term "manifestantism" which should mark the necessary feature a manifesto should have in order to be called so, and which makes it different from any other genre. **Claude Abastado** also refers to this kind of definition when he says that "the manifesto does not exist in the absolute sense of the term"⁵.

The Genesis of the Genre

The causes for the emergence of this genre can be found in each moment of history in which there was a collective dissatisfaction with the ruling regime and the increased level of social consciousness because each manifesto has to have *displeasure* and *intention*, there has to be *us* and *them*.

But what is the period that we should start from in the historical overview? If we consider the manifesto as a text which conveys the intentions of the individual or the group directly to the public, then many texts throughout the history could be considered and the starting point could be found at any moment in the distant past. In this brief overview we won't go that far, we won't even consider Luther's *Ninety-five theses* published in 1517,

which match the modern understanding of the manifesto in numerous ways. Although we have to note that Luther's text represents the moment in which the manifestoes published by the reigning powers and those published by the opposing ones start to become differentiated. Their place of birth is England and not France, although in this country the manifestoes will flourish together with the revolution. In the abovementioned book by Janet Lyon she cites G. E. Aylmer who says that "Nowhere else (...) do we find the combination of radical journalism and pamphleteering, ideological zeal, political activism, and mass organization that prevail in England from 1646–49"⁶. These are the years of great social upheavals in England and that kind of climate is suitable for manifestoes.

Similar to Janet Lyon, Martin Puchner also offers a clear overview of manifestoes in a political climate and this is why both of them first refer to *Diggers* and *Levelers*, the two movements that fostered political, agrarian and economic reforms in England. This is when we encounter the first text of a revolutionary character that is titled that "A New Engagement, or, Manifesto" (1648). Then, even more frequently cited is the *Manifesto of Equals* (1796) as an example from the period of the French revolution.

But we should pause for a little longer on the next stage of this overview. This is 1848, the year when the most famous text by Marx and Engels was published. The public speech of the time, the revolutionary time in France, craved for the genre such as a manifesto. That is why in search for a pattern that determines the form of the communication with the wider public we inevitably turn to the *Communist Manifesto* which forces itself upon us as the precedent for the artistic avant-gardes at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. It is precisely the writing style and its effective structure that offer such freshness to this manifesto. It is clear, open, and occasionally theatrical, it employs a vernacular vocabulary without superfluous rhetorical ornamentation, offering the diagnosis of the condition at the very beginning and listing all the things that need to be done in order to change the condition. "Far more than Nietzsche, Marx (who seems to have penned most of *The Manifesto*) wrote with a hammer about the realities of the capitalist system that were emerging in his time"⁷. Speaking with a hammer will be a rhetorical model for many manifestoes to come.

The complete adjustment of the genre to the aesthetic needs occurred in 1909 when Marinetti's manifesto was published. The author's intention to use this genre is obvious in this text. The use of rhetorical figures, the text's composition, the strategic impact on the reader and the writing style owe a lot to the text by Marx and Engels. Marjorie Perloff notes that Marinetti called this skill the *art of making manifestoes*. This is how Marinetti introduces the manifesto into the repertoire of genres of the avant-garde art making it its important instrument. It is now clear that the manifesto becomes for both the history and theory of art a genre that can not be avoided.

Possible Approaches

Up until three decades ago the research of manifestoes was of only marginal interest. The situation is different nowadays: the anthologies of manifestoes have been published as well as theoretical works, case studies and dissertations. The essential difference among these works are different approaches to manifestoes. These works approach to manifestoes as a complex phenomenon in which multiple aspects of Modernism intersect. In most of these works the abovementioned milestone texts appear. This evolution of the study of manifestoes is logical and justified, yet, all the works

face the crucial problem of defining the manifesto. If we ask ourselves what the defining characteristics of manifestoes are and what its role is, we will only encounter new questions. Throughout the history of art some of them can be quite disturbing. Here are some examples:

If the role of a manifesto in the history of avant-garde is necessary, is it then possible to interpret, or even just look at artworks without referring to the manifestoes of each movement? (Let's imagine a beholder, or even an art critic, in front of an abstract artwork). Or, to put it differently: when does an artwork become a mere illustration of a manifesto?

In how far is a manifesto an expression of a utopian quest for a *method of creation* which would lead to the absurdity of the avant-garde, to a certain *avant-garde academy*, namely to the method in which the avant-garde can be canonized as an aesthetic category?

Is manifesto a symptom of crisis, a loss of belief in the power of art to speak for itself, with its own works?

The manifesto was, among most of the authors who joined it, understood as a form which announces the very modernity of the modern times. Some authors consider it as a genre with stable characteristics, while the others think quite the opposite. The one who approaches manifestoes with the knowledge of the existent research about it, is left with the possibility to make one's own approach subjective. Therefore, I will now outline a few approaches that can respond to the current problems in history and theory of art or at least to the actualization of these problems.

1. Manifesto as a Source (Document) of Art History

Is the manifesto a reliable source for an art historian? On the one hand, it does offer an insight into the intentions of an author and signatories, but on the other hand most of these intentions are not fulfilled. Another question that should be asked is: which manifestoes should be analyzed? If we divide the manifestoes into political, literary and artistic, should all of these be studied by art historians? Art history mostly encompasses the ones that are in the domain of visual arts, but also literary manifestoes whose poetics can be applied to the visual arts belonging to the same movement. The latter are most frequently cited in research on manifestoes even though they were written by writers (e. g. Marinetti, Tzara, Breton). This is why art history often resorts to the use of structuralist and poststructuralist methodology, which is primarily intended as a means of analyzing a text.

Manifestoes can not be separated from the structure of social power even when we speak about artistic manifestoes and not only the political ones. This is why in this case the approaches suggested by the *new art history*, in which the center is detached from the object and directed to the socio-political and ideological context, prove extremely useful.

Manifestoes can mislead art historians because they are often read as group statements or collective credos. Statements and credos may possess a programmatic character but they are never a call to action to the extent that a manifesto is. On the other hand, the similarity with a statement is a striking one since manifestoes were mostly written by one person only. By the frequent use of the pronoun that "we", which is sometimes supported by the signatures of the members, the manifesto suggests the coherence of an art movement which is not always true. In some cases (e.g. Futurism or Surrealism) the manifesto

influences the loyalty of the members and holds the members in one place. This is why we approach them as proofs, as well as legal acts which keep the intentions of an artist intact and expressed in a clear and straightforward language.

2. Manifesto as an Art Form

According to Flaker “avant-garde” manifestoes are not reliable testimonies about the aesthetic period of development” because in them a “cognitive function gives way to the expressive one”⁸. This would mean that the main value of the manifesto is in its expression, and not in the domain of criticism or theory. If the manifesto is a creative practice, then the messages of these “programmatic” texts are not to be identified with the movements themselves, although we mentioned in the previous approach that these become spontaneously connected to the established movements in the history of modern art.

In this approach to manifestoes as art forms the emphasis is placed on the similarities between the poetics of a movement and poetics of an art work of the same movement, that is to say, between a literary and a visual form. The similarities between the characteristics of literary and visual elements as well as narrative and content of the paintings, their stylistic figures and visual expression, can often be found.

If, when reading Breton’s or Tzara’s manifestoes, we adopt an approach as if we are not reading a manifesto, we will see that we are in reality reading one hermetic, experimental artwork.

3. Manifesto as a Special Avant-garde Work

What kind of role does the manifesto assume in the avant-garde oeuvre and to what extent does it contribute to its definition? In the relationship to the audience, does the first place belong to the manifesto or to an artwork? Or both of them together? If we accept Burger’s theory, according to which the demand of the avant-garde is *the return of art to the practice of life*, then manifestoes are one of the main strategic means of the avant-garde, maybe even more so than the visual or literary artworks. They stand between the work and the beholder. Some time ago only an artwork used to stand between an artist and a beholder, and now the inter-space of this trinity is filled by the manifesto – for, as much as it is inevitable as a bridge between a beholder and an artwork, it is also inevitable as a bridge between artists and their works.

If we experience the manifesto as solely a literary genre and medium, then each painter who makes attempts at writing enters the domain of multimedia or, at least, intermedia expression. From this point of view, the manifesto is an integral part of an art work, because it became clear that theory can become practice or, even better, a work can become an art work. On this borderline between the theory and practice, the manifesto finds its living space and it is exactly within this space that avant-garde artists strive to realize their creations.

...

This is why the understanding of manifestoes can enrich the understanding of the avant-garde as a whole. Even if the manifesto does not exist in the absolute definition of the term, even if it eludes definitions, precisely as such it becomes paradigmatic for the period in which it flourishes.

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МАНИФЕСТЫ АВАНГАРДА: ПОПЫТКА ОСМЫСЛЕНИЯ

В докладе рассмотрена роль авангардных манифестов в истории и теории искусства, а также их связь с этими дисциплинами. Представлены основные черты манифестов как литературного жанра, а также сам жанр, выходящий за пределы строго литературного определения. Приводится краткий анализ Манифеста Коммунистической партии, необходимый для выявления сходства, существующего между ним и манифестами авангардистских художественных течений. В текст включен также обзор истории жанра с XVII по XX вв. В конце предлагается несколько возможных подходов к исследованию авангардистских манифестов: манифест как источник по истории искусства (документ), манифест как художественная форма и манифест как особое авангардистское произведение.

Примечания

¹ *Art in Theory 1900–2000, An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, C. Harrison, P. Wood eds., Oxford 2003, p. 3.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ J. Lyon, *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern*, Ithaca 1999.

⁵ He presented this introduction in his text which was published as an introductory article to the special edition of the magazine *Littérature* with the title *Les manifestes: C. Abastado, Introduction à l'analyse des manifestes*, in *Littérature* 39 (October 1980). This thematic issue is, at the same time, the first collection of essays about manifestoes.

⁶ J. Lyon, *Manifestoes* cit., p. 16.

⁷ M. Bookchin, *The Communist Manifesto: Insights and Problems, in New Politics*, 6/4 n.s. (24) (1998).

⁸ A. Flaker, *Avangardni manifest kao književna vrsta, in Književna kritika*, 16/5 (1985), pp. 127–136; we encounter a similar thought in Abastado's work (see note 5).