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Manifestos

Most of the participants here have written manifestos. I have no manifestos to propound and I don't think I have ever drafted a document under that name, although I have drafted equivalent texts. However, I've been reading documents called manifestos for the best part of a century and I suppose this gives me some credibility as a commentator on a manifesto marathon. I started my intellectual life at school in Berlin at the age of fifteen with one manifesto – Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto*. I have a press-photograph of me in my eighties reading the Italian daily newspaper *Il Manifesto*, which is, I think, the last European paper to describe itself as communist. Because my parents were married in the Zurich of the First World War among Lenin and the Dadaists of the Cabaret Voltaire, I would like to think that a Dadaist Manifesto issued a loud fart at the moment of my conception, but unfortunately the first Dadaist Manifesto was recited three months before this could have happened.

Actually, systematic manifesto-readers are a twentieth-century species. There had been plenty of such collective statements, mainly religious and political, in earlier centuries, but they went under different labels: petitions, charters, appeals and so on. There were the great declarations – the Declaration of Independence of the USA, the Declaration of the Rights of Man – but typically they are statements of very official governments and organisations, like the Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. Most manifestos belong to the last century.

How will manifestos survive the twenty-first century? Political parties and movements are not what they were in the last century and they were, after all, one of the two great producers of manifestos. The arts were the other. Again, with the rise of the business society and MBA jargon, they have been largely replaced by that appalling invention, the 'mission statement'. None of the mission statements I have come across says anything worth saying, unless you are a fan of badly written platitudes. You can't walk more than a few yards through the undergrowth of print without stubbing your toe on some example, almost universally vapid in sentiment, telling you the equivalent of 'Have a nice day' and 'Your call is important to us'.

Still, manifestos are competing quite successfully with mission statements. There are almost twenty million potential clicks under this heading on Google, and this leaves plenty, even if you exclude Manifesto Records and its various products. I can't say they all live up to the dictionary definition, which is 'a public declaration of principles, policies or intentions, specially of a political nature'. Or of any other nature. They include a breast-feeding manifesto, a wildlife gardening manifesto, a manifesto for the hills, which deals with livestock in the Scots highlands, and a rather tempting manifesto for a new walking culture by Wrights and Sites with plenty of references to the Dadaists, the Situationists, André Breton and Brecht, but, rather surprisingly, none to the champion of urban walkers, Walter Benjamin. And, of course, they include all the manifestos of this marathon.

I haven't had a chance to hear much of this weekend's manifestos, but one thing that strikes me about them is that so many of them are individual statements and not, like almost all manifestos in the past, group statements, representing some collective 'we', whether formally organised or not. Certainly that is the case of all the political manifestos I can think of. They always speak in the plural and aim to win supporters (also in the plural). That is also traditionally the case of manifestos in the arts, which have become popular since the Futurists introduced the word into the world of art in 1909, thanks to Marinetti's Italian gift of the rhetorical gab. In doing so they beat the French to it by a few years. I am sure the Cubists would have liked to invent the M-word, but they were not very political at that time and better at thinking in paint than in words. I am of course thinking of avant-gardes that recognise themselves as such at the time, not of labels and schools that are created retrospectively like 'post-Impressionism', or are invented by critics and, increasingly, by dealers like 'Abstract Expressionism'. I am thinking of genuine groups of people, sometimes built round a person or a periodical, however short-lived, conscious of what they are against as well as what they think they have in common: Dadaists, Surrealists, De Stijl, LEF or the Independent Group round which Pop Art emerged in Britain in the 1950s. Or, for that matter, the original photographers' collective, Magnum. If you like, they are all campaigning bodies.

I'm not sure what purely individual manifestos are there for, other than one person's fears for the present and hopes for the future, which they may or may not hope is shared by others. How is this to be realised? Is it primarily by self-cultivation and shared experience, as Vivienne Westwood tells us in her attractive manifesto? How else? The Futurists invented public self-advertisement. It is a sign of our disintegrating and chaotic society that media publicity is today the first thing that comes into a potential manifestant's mind rather than the traditional way of collective action. Of course individuals may also use a

manifesto to advertise, and so to claim priority for, some personal innovation, as in Jeff Noon's Literary Manifesto in 2001 (*Guardian*, 10 January 2000). There is also the terrorist manifesto pioneered by the Unabomber in 1995, which advertises an individual attempt to change society, in this case by sending incendiary bombs to selected enemies, but I'm not sure whether this belongs to the field of politics or conceptual art. But there's yet another purely individual manifesto or ego trip that has nobody in mind but the solipsist who issues it. The extreme example of this is that extraordinary document, Yves Klein's *Chelsea Hotel Manifesto of 1961*. Klein, you may remember, had built a career on painting a single colour, an immediately recognisable dark blue. Nothing else: on square and oblong canvases, on anything three-dimensional, mostly sponges but also on models whom he got to roll in the paint. The manifesto explains that it was because he was haunted by the blue sky – though Klein's blue is as un-cerulean a colour as I have ever seen. As he lay on the beach in Nice, he tells us, 'I began to feel hatred for the birds which flew back and forth across my blue cloudless sky, because they tried to bore holes in my greatest and most beautiful work. Birds must be eliminated.'

I don't have to tell you that Klein found critics to explain his profundity and dealers to sell him to the punters. He has been given the sort of immortality he deserved by the Gagosian Gallery, which has copyrighted his manifesto.

This brings me to the content of the manifestos of my lifetime. The first thing that strikes me, looking back on them, is that the real interest of these documents is not in what they actually call for. Most of that tends to be obvious, even platitudinous – and large landfill sites could be made to overflow with such stuff, or it is destined for rapid obsolescence. That is true even of the great and inspiring *Communist Manifesto*, which remains so alive that in the last ten years it has been rediscovered by the capitalists themselves, in the absence, in the West, of a left with serious political significance. The reason we read it

today is the same one that made me read it when I was fifteen: it is the wonderful, irresistible style and verve of the text. But chiefly it is the soaring analytical vision of world change in the first few pages. Most of what the manifesto actually recommended is of purely historical interest, and most readers skip it except for the clarion call at the end – the one about the workers having nothing to lose except their chains, they have a world to win. Workers of all countries unite. Unfortunately this is also well past its sell-by date.

Of course that is the trouble about any writings concerning the future: it is unknowable. We know what we don't like about the present and why, which is why all manifestos are best at denunciation. As for the future, we have only the certainty that what we do will have unintended consequences.

If all this is true of so permanent a text as the Communist Manifesto, it is even more true of manifestos in the creative arts. For a lot of artists, as an American jazz player once told me in a nightclub, 'Words are not my instrument.' Even where they are, as among poets, even the very bright ones, creation doesn't follow the path of 'I think and then I write', but a much less controllable one. That, if I may say so, is the trouble with conceptual art. Intellectually the concepts in conceptual art are usually uninteresting, unless they can be read as jokes, like Duchamp's urinal or, to my mind much more fun, the works of Paul Klee.

So reading most manifestos in the arts for their intended meaning is a frustrating experience except maybe as a performance. And even then they are better as wit and jokes than in the oratorical mode. This is probably why Dada, that style for stand-up comics, is still the standby of so many manifestos today: its humour is both funny and black and, like Surrealism, it doesn't call for interpretations but for the imagination to play, which is, after all, the foundation of all creative work. And anyway the test of the pudding is not the description of the dish on the restaurant menu, however flowery, but the eating.

This is where the creators in the arts have been more successful than their manifestos. In my *Age of Extremes* I wrote: 'Why brilliant fashion designers, a notoriously non-analytic breed, sometimes succeed in anticipating the shape of things to come better than professional predictors, is one of the most obscure questions in history and, for the historian of the arts, one of the most central.' I still don't know the answer. Looking back at the arts in the last decade before 1914, we can see that much about them anticipated the breakdown of bourgeois civilisation after that date. The Pop Art of the 1950s and 1960s acknowledged the implications of the Fordist economy and mass consumer society and, in doing so, the abdication of the old visual work of art. Who knows, a historian writing fifty years hence may say the same about what is happening in the arts, or what goes by the name of art, in our moment of capitalist crisis and may retreat for the rich civilisations of the West. Like the remarkable quasi-documentary film *Man on Wire*, but much more uneasily, the arts walk the tightrope between soul and market, between individual and collective creation, even between recognisable and identifiable human creative products and their engulfment by technology and the all-embracing noise of the internet. On the whole late capitalism has provided a good living for more creative people than ever before, but it has fortunately not made them satisfied either with their situation or with society. What anticipations will the historian of 2060 read into the cultural productions of the past thirty years? I don't know and can't know, but there'll be a few manifestos issued on the way.

Part I

THE PREDICAMENT OF 'HIGH CULTURE' TODAY

2

Where Are the Arts Going?

Actually it is inappropriate to ask a historian what culture will look like in the new millennium. We are experts on the past. We are not concerned with the future, and certainly not with the future of the arts, which are experiencing the most revolutionary era of their long history. But since we cannot rely on the professional prophets, in spite of the gigantic sums being expended by governments and businesses on their prognoses, a historian may venture into the field of futurology. After all, despite all upheavals, past, present and future do form an indivisible continuum.

What characterises the arts in our century is their dependence on, and their transformation by, the historically unique technological revolution, particularly the technologies of communication and reproduction. For the second force that has revolutionised culture, that of the mass consumer society, is unthinkable without the technological revolution, for example without film, without radio, without television, without portable

sound in your shirt pocket. But it is precisely this that allows few general predictions on the future of art as such. The old visual arts, such as painting and sculpture, have until recently remained pure handicraft; they have simply not been part of industrialisation – hence, incidentally, the crisis in which they find themselves today. Literature, on the other hand, adjusted itself to mechanical reproduction half a millennium ago, in the days of Gutenberg. The poem is intended neither as a work for public performance (as was once the case with the epic, which therefore died out after the invention of printing), nor – as for example in Chinese classical literature – as a work of calligraphy. It is simply a unit mechanically assembled from alphabetical symbols. Where, when and how we receive it, on paper, on screen or elsewhere, is not entirely unimportant, but it is a secondary matter.

Music, meanwhile, has in the twentieth century, and for the first time in history, broken through the wall of purely physical communication between instrument and ear. The overwhelming majority of sounds and noises that we hear as a cultural experience today reach us indirectly – mechanically reproduced or transmitted from a distance. So each of the Muses has had a different experience of Walter Benjamin's age of reproduction, and faces the future in a different way.

So let me begin with a brief overview of the individual areas of culture. As a writer, I may be permitted to look first at literature.

I will begin with the realisation that (in contrast to the early twentieth century) humanity in the twenty-first century will no longer consist mainly of illiterates. Today there are already only two parts of the world where the majority of people are illiterate: southern Asia (India, Pakistan and the surrounding regions) and Africa. Formal education means books and readers. A mere 5 per cent rise in literacy means an increase of fifty million potential readers, at least of textbooks. What is more, since the middle of our century most of the population in the

so-called 'developed' nations can expect to receive secondary education, and in the last third of the century a significant percentage of the age groups in question receives higher education (in England today the proportion is around a third). So the audience for literature of all kinds has multiplied. And with it, incidentally, the whole 'educated public' to which all the arts of Western high culture have been addressed since the eighteenth century. In absolute figures this new audience for literature continues to rise steeply. Even the actual mass media are aimed at it.

The film *The English Patient*, for example, shows the hero reading Herodotus, and straight away masses of British and Americans buy this old Greek historian, having previously at best known only his name.

Such democratisation of written material must necessarily – as in the nineteenth century – lead to fragmentation through the rise of old and new vernacular literatures and – also as in the nineteenth century – to a golden age for translators. For how, other than through translations, could Shakespeare and Dickens, Balzac and the great Russians become the common property of the international bourgeois culture? This is still partly true in our own times. A John le Carré becomes a best-seller, because he is regularly translated into thirty to fifty languages. But the position is today fundamentally different in two respects.

First, as we know, the word has for some time been in retreat from the image, and the written and printed word from that spoken on the screen. Comic strips and picture books with minimal text are now by no means aimed only at beginners still learning to spell. What carries much more weight, however, is the retreat of the printed in the face of the spoken and illustrated news. The press, the main medium of Habermas's 'public sphere' in the nineteenth and well into the twentieth centuries, will hardly be able to maintain this position in the twenty-first century. But second, today's global economy and

global culture need a global language to supplement the local language, and not only for an insignificant elite in terms of numbers, but for broader strata of the population. Today English is this global language, and will probably remain so in the twenty-first century. An international specialist literature in English is already developing. And this new English-Esperanto has as little to do with the English literary language as the church Latin of the Middle Ages has to do with Virgil and Cicero.

But all this cannot stop the quantitative rise of literature, that is, of words in type – not even that of *belles lettres*. In fact I would almost like to maintain that – despite all pessimistic prognoses – the traditional main medium of literature, the printed book, will hold its own without great difficulty, with a few exceptions, such as the great reference books, lexicons, dictionaries, etc., the darlings of the internet. First, there is nothing easier and more practical to read than the small, portable and clearly printed pocket book invented by Aldus Manutius in Venice in the sixteenth century – much easier and more practical than the print of computer text, which again is incomparably easier to read than the flickering text on the screen. Which is something that can be confirmed by anyone who spends an hour reading the same text first in printed form and then on the computer screen. Even the ebook does not rest its claim on superior readability, but on greater storage capacity and no turning of pages.

Second, printed paper is, as yet, more durable than technologically more advanced media. The first edition of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* is still legible today, but thirty-year-old computer texts are not necessarily so, either because – like old photocopies and films – they have only a limited life, or because the technology becomes out of date so quickly that the latest computers simply cannot read them any more. The triumphal progress of the computer will not kill off the book just as the cinema, the radio, the television and other technological innovations have failed to do so.

The second fine art that is doing well today is architecture, and this will continue in the twenty-first century. For humanity cannot live without buildings. Paintings are a luxury, but houses are a necessity. Who designs and builds buildings, where, how, with what materials, in what style, whether as architect, engineer or computer – all this will probably change, but not the need to create buildings. Indeed, one can even say that in the course of the twentieth century the architect, particularly the architect of great public buildings, has become the ruler of the world of the fine arts. He – generally it is still a he – finds the most suitable, that is, the most costly and impressive, expression for the megalomania of wealth and power, and also that of nationalisms. (After all, the Basque region has just commissioned an international star to produce a national symbol, namely an unconventional art museum in Bilbao, which will house another national symbol, Picasso's *Guernica*, although actually Picasso did not paint it as an example of Basque regional art.)

That this trend will continue into the next century is fairly certain. Today Kuala Lumpur and Shanghai are already proving their prospective entitlement to economic world-class status with new record heights for skyscrapers, and Germany, reunited, is transforming its new capital into a gigantic building site. But what sort of buildings will become symbols of the twenty-first century? One thing is certain: they will be large ones. In the age of the masses they are less likely to be the seats of government, or even those of the great international corporations, even if these continue to lend their names to skyscrapers. Almost certainly, they will be buildings or building complexes open to the public. Before the bourgeois age they were, at least in the West, the churches. In the nineteenth century they were typically, at least in the cities, the opera houses, the cathedrals of the bourgeoisie, and the railway stations, the cathedrals of progress by technology. (It would be worth studying one day why, in the second half of the twentieth century, monumentality stopped being a feature of railway stations and

their successors, the airports. Perhaps it will return tomorrow.) At the end of our millennium there are three types of building or complex that are suitable as new symbols of the public sphere: first, the large sport and performance arenas and stadiums; second, the international hotel; and third, the most recent of these developments, the gigantic closed buildings of the new shopping and entertainment centres. If I had to bet on one of these horses, it would be the arenas and stadiums. But if you ask me how long the fashion will last that has been rampant since the building of the Sydney Opera House, namely of designing these buildings in unexpected and fantastic forms, I can give you no answer.

What about music? At the end of the twentieth century we are living in a world saturated with music. Sounds accompany us everywhere, and particularly when we are waiting in closed spaces – whether on the telephone, on an aircraft or at the hairdresser's. The consumer society seems to consider silence a crime. So music has nothing to fear in the twenty-first century. Admittedly it will sound quite different by comparison with the twentieth century. It has already been fundamentally revolutionised by electronics, which means that it is already largely independent of the inventive talent and technical skill of the artistic individual. The music of the twenty-first century will be mainly produced, and will reach our ears, without much human input.

But what will we actually be listening to? Classical music basically lives on a dead repertoire. Of the sixty or so operas performed by the Vienna State Opera in 1996/7, only one was by a composer born in the twentieth century, and things are not much better in the concert hall. In addition, the potential concert audience, which even in a city of more than a million inhabitants at best consists of about twenty thousand elderly ladies and gentlemen, is hardly replenishing itself. This cannot go on indefinitely. Indeed, as long as the repertoire remains frozen in time, not even the huge new audience of

indirect listeners to music can rescue the classical music business. How many recordings of the Jupiter Symphony, of Schubert's *Winterreise*, or the *Missa Solemnis* can the market find room for? Since the Second World War this market has been saved three times by technological innovations, that is, by the successive moves to long-playing records, to cassettes and to CDs. The technological revolution continues, but the computer and the internet are practically destroying copyright as well as the producer's monopoly, and will therefore probably have a negative effect on sales. All of this in no way means the end of classical music, but with some degree of certainty it does mean a change in its role in cultural life, and with total certainty a change in its social structure.

A certain exhaustion can also be observed today even in commercial mass music, an area that has been so lively, dynamic and creative in this century.

I will mention only one indication. In July, for example, a survey of rock-music fans and experts showed that almost all of the one hundred 'best rock records of all time' came from the 1960s, and practically none from the last two decades. But so far, pop music has succeeded over and over again in reinvigorating itself, and should be able to do so in the new century too.

So there will be singing and swinging in the twenty-first century just as in the twentieth, even if sometimes in unexpected forms.

Where the visual arts are concerned, things look different. Sculpture is scraping a miserable existence at the edge of culture, for it has been abandoned in the course of this century by both public and private life as a means of recording reality or human-shaped symbolism. Just compare the cemetery of today with its nineteenth-century counterpart, decked with monuments. In the 1870s of the Third Republic, more than 210 monuments were erected in Paris, that is, an average of three per year. A third of all these statues disappeared during the Second World War, and the massacre of statues, as is well

known, continued merrily on aesthetic grounds under André Malraux. Moreover, after the Second World War, at least outside the Soviet area, few new war memorials were built, partly because the names of the new dead could be engraved on the bases of the First World War memorials. The old allegories and symbols have vanished too. In short, sculpture has lost its main market. It has tried to save itself, perhaps by analogy with architecture, by gigantism in public spaces – big is impressive, whatever the shape – and with the help of a few serious talents; with what success 2050 will judge better than we can.

The basis of the Western visual arts – in contrast, for example, to the Islamic arts – is the representation of reality. Fundamentally, figurative art has thus suffered since the mid-nineteenth century from the competition of photography, which achieves its main traditional task, the representation of the impression of the senses on the human eye, more easily, more cheaply and far more precisely. This, I believe, explains the rise of the avant-garde since the Impressionists, that is, of a painting beyond the capabilities of the camera: whether through new techniques of representation, through Expressionism, through fantasy and vision, and ultimately through abstraction, the rejection of representationalism. This search for alternatives was modified by the cycle of fashion into an endless search for the new, which of course, by analogy with science and technology, was considered to be better, more progressive, more modern. This 'shock of the new' (Robert Hughes) has lost its artistic legitimacy since the 1950s, for reasons that I do not have time to examine more closely here. In addition, modern technology today also produces abstract, or at least purely decorative, art just as well as manual craft. Painting thus finds itself in what is to my mind a desperate crisis; which does not mean that there will be no more good, or even outstanding, painters. It is probably not by chance that the Turner Prize, conferred on the best young British artists of the year, has found fewer painters among the candidates in the last ten years. This

year (1997) there are none at all among the four candidates in the final round of this competition. Painting is also disregarded at the Venice Biennale.

So what are the artists doing? They are making so-called 'installations' and videos, although these are less interesting than the work of stage designers and advertising specialists. They play with often scandalous *objets trouvés*. They have ideas, sometimes bad ones. The visual arts of the 1990s are moving from art back to the idea: only humans have ideas, in contrast to the lens or the computer. Art is no longer what I can do and produce creatively, but what I am thinking. 'Conceptual art' is ultimately derived from Marcel Duchamp. And, like Duchamp, with his ground-breaking exhibition of a public urinal as 'ready-made art', such fashions do not aim to extend the field of fine art, but to destroy it. They are declarations of war on fine art, or rather on the 'work of art', the creation of a single artist, an icon intended to be admired and revered by the observer, and to be judged by critics according to aesthetic criteria of beauty. Indeed, what art critic does this today? Who today still uses the word 'beauty' without irony in critical discourse? Only mathematicians, chess players, sports reporters, admirers of human beauty, whether in appearance or voice, who are able without difficulty to come to a consensus on 'beauty' or lack of beauty. Art critics cannot do this.

What seems significant to me now is that, after three-quarters of a century, visual artists are returning to the mood of the Dadaist years, that is, to the apocalyptic avant-gardes of the years around 1917–23, which wanted not to modernise art as such, but to liquidate it. I believe they have somehow recognised that our traditional concept of art is now really on the way out. It still applies to the old manually created art, which has petrified into classicism. But it simply no longer applies to the world of sensory impressions and feelings that today inundate mankind.

And this for two reasons. First, because this inundation can

simply no longer be analysed into a disconnected series of personal artistic creations. Even haute couture is today no longer understood as the playground of brilliant individual creators, of a Balenciaga, a Dior, a Gianni Versace, whose great works, commissioned as one-off pieces by rich patrons, inspire and thus dominate the fashion of the masses. The big names have become commercials for the global firms in the industry of general adornment of the human body. The house of Dior lives not on creations for rich ladies, but on mass sales of the cosmetics and ready-to-wear clothing ennobled by its name. This industry, like all those that serve a humanity no longer under the duress of the physical subsistence level, has a creative element, but it is not and cannot be creation in the sense of the old vocabulary of the autonomous artistic individual who aspires to genius. Indeed, in the new vocabulary of offers of employment, 'creative' now hardly means more than work of a not exclusively routine nature.

Second, we live in a world of consumer civilisation, in which the (preferably immediate) fulfilment of all human wishes is supposed to determine the structure of life. Is there a hierarchy among the possibilities of wish fulfilment? Can there be one? Is there any sense at all in singling out one or other source of this delight and examining it separately? Drugs and rock music, as we know, have gone together since the 1960s. The experience of English youth at their so-called raves does not consist separately of music and dancing, drinking, drugs and sex, of one's own clothing – adornment of the body at the height of current fashion – and that of the mass of others at these Orphic festivals, but of all these together, at this and no other moment. And it is precisely these connections that today form the typical cultural experience for most people.

The old bourgeois society was the age of separatism in the arts and high culture. As religion was once, art was 'something higher', or a step towards something higher: that is, 'culture'. The enjoyment of art led to spiritual improvement and was a

kind of devotional activity, whether in private, like reading, or in public, in the theatre, the concert hall, the museum, or in the acknowledged sites of world culture, such as the Pyramids or the Pantheon. It was sharply distinguished from everyday life and from mere 'entertainment', at least until one day 'entertainment' was promoted to become culture, for example, Johann Strauss conducted by Carlos Kleiber, rather than Johann Strauss played at a Viennese wine tavern, or the Hollywood B-film promoted to the status of art by the critics of Paris. This kind of artistic experience of course still exists, as is proved by, among other things, our own participation in the Salzburg Festival. But first, it is not culturally accessible to everyone, and second it is, at least for the younger generation, no longer the typical cultural experience. The wall between culture and life, between reverence and consumption, between work and leisure, between body and spirit, is being knocked down. In other words, 'culture' in the critically evaluative bourgeois sense of the word is giving way to 'culture' in the purely descriptive anthropological sense.

At the end of the twentieth century the work of art not only became lost in the spate of words, sounds and images in the universal environment that once would have been called 'art', but also vanished in this dissolution of the aesthetic experience in the sphere where it is impossible to distinguish between feelings that have developed within us and those that have been brought in from outside. In these circumstances, how can we speak of art?

How much passion for a piece of music or a picture today rests on association – not on the song being beautiful, but on its being 'our song'? We cannot say, and the role of the living arts, or even their continued existence in the twenty-first century, will remain unclear until we can do so.