

Manifesto on Artists' Rights

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

Art is a way of building thought, of being aware of oneself and of the others at the same time. It is a methodology in constant transformation for the search of a here and now.

Art is an invitation to questioning; it is the social place of doubt, of wanting to understand and wanting to change reality.

Art is not only a statement of the present, it is also a call for a different future, a better one. Therefore, it is a right not only to enjoy art, but to be able to create it.

Art is a common good that does not have to be entirely understood in the moment one finds it.

Art is a space of vulnerability from which what is social is deconstructed to construct what is human.

Artists not only have the right to dissent, but the duty to do so.

Artists have the right to dissent not only from affective, moral, philosophical, or cultural aspects, but also from economic and political ones.

Artists have the right to disagree with power, with the status quo.

Artists have the right to be respected and protected when they dissent.

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.

Artists also have the right to be understood in the complexity of their dissent. An artist should not be judged first and discussed later. Artists should not be sent to jail because of proposing a "different" reality, for sharing their ideas, for wanting to strike up a conversation on the way the present unfolds. If the artist's proposal is not understood, it should be discussed by all, not censored by a few.

If one publicly expresses and evinces ideas in a different way from that of those in power, governments, corporations and religious institutions too easily declare that one is irresponsible, wanting to use guilt and incite the masses to violent reactions as their best defense strategy, instead of processing criticism and calling for public debate. Nothing justifies the use of violence against an idea or the person suggesting it.

Governments have the duty to provide a space for self-criticism in which they are accountable for their actions, a space where the people can question them. No government is infallible; no human being --even if elected-- has the right to talk for all the citizens. No social solution is permanent and it is the artists who have the opportunity and the duty to suggest the imagery of other social alternatives, of using their communication tools from a space of sensitive responsibility.

Artists suggest a meta-reality, a potential future to be experienced in the present. They suggest experimenting a moment which has not yet arrived, a situation of "what if that were this way." Therefore, they cannot be judged from spaces in the past, from laws trying to preserve what is already established.

Governments must stop fearing ideas.

Governments, corporations (today they are like alternative governments), and religious institutions are not the only ones with a right to build a future; this is the right of citizens, and artists are active citizens. That is why artists have the right and the responsibility not only to think up a different and better world, but to try to build it.

Artists have the right to be activists (part artists/part activists), because they are an active part of civil society, because art is a safe space from which people can debate, interpret, build, and educate. This space must be defended because it benefits us all: art is a social tool.

Governments should not control art and artists. They should protect them.

Artists have the right not to be censored when gestating their work or during the research process of conceiving it. Artists have the right to create the work they want to create, with no limits; they have the duty to be responsible without self-censorship.

Society has the right to have its public spaces as spaces for creativity and artistic expression, since they also are collective spaces for knowledge and debate. Public space belongs to civic society, not to governments, corporations, or religious institutions.

Freedom of artistic expression does not emerge spontaneously. It is something one learns to reach leaving behind pressure, emotional blackmail, censorship, and self-censorship. This is a difficult process that should be respected and appreciated.

Artistic censorship not only affects artists but the community as well, because it creates an atmosphere of fear and self-censorship paralyzing the possibility of exercising critical thinking.

To think differently from those in power does not make you irresponsible.

In moments of high sensitivity (wars, legislative changes, political transitions), it is the duty of the government to protect and guarantee dissident, questioning voices, because these are moments in which one cannot do away with rationality and critical thought and it is sometimes only through art that many emerging ideas can make a public appearance. Without dissent there is no chance of progress.

Socially committed artists talk about difficult moments, deal with sensitive topics, but, unlike journalists, they have no legal protection when doing their work. Unlike corporations, they have no significant economic backing. Unlike governments, they have no political power. Art is a social work based on a practice that makes artists vulnerable and, as is the case with journalists, corporations, and governmental or religious institutions, they have the right to be protected because they are doing a public service.

The right to decide the value of an artistic statement is not a right of those in power. It is not the right of governments, of corporations, of religious institutions to define what art is. It is the right of artists to define what art is for them.

Art is a complex product without a single and final interpretation. Artists have the right of not having their oeuvre reduced or simplified as a schematic interpretation which may be manipulated by those in power to provoke and, consequently, result in public offenses directed to the artists, so as to invalidate their proposals.

To create a space for dialogue and not for violence against works of art questioning established ideas and realities, governments should provide educational platforms from which artistic practice may be better understood.

We must be cautious about the increasing criminalization of socially committed artistic creation under the rationale of national security and the need to control information because of political reasons with the purpose of censoring artists.

There are many types of strategies for political censorship. Political censorship is not only exercised through direct political pressure, but censoring the access to economic support, creating a bureaucratic censorship postponing production processes, marginalizing the visibility of a project by drawing artists away from legitimization, and distribution circuits; controlling the right to travel, deciding who has the right to talk on what subjects; and, at times, even using "popular sensitivity" as censorship. All these are decisions taken and conducted from political power so as not to be challenged.

On the other hand, there are artists who are internationally acknowledged and admired because of being *artists* in their countries of origin and who, at a given time, for one reason or another, migrate and establish themselves temporarily in other countries where they find a new type of censorship, a censorship that relegates, pigeonholes, and sets them inside a limited mental geography where they are only allowed to talk critically of the country they come from and not the country to which they have arrived. This is a situation of censorship in which artists are relegated to being uni-dimensionally political: a used political object.

The process of discovering a different society, the inner negotiation required to understand the place of arrival and the place one has left, is inherent to contemporary condition, which is, increasingly, a migrant condition. This is a condition that artists embody and on which they have the right to express. After all, a national culture is the hybridization of the image those who do not live in the country have of it and all present day by day build, wherever they have originally come from.

We cannot ask artists, whose work is to question society, to keep silent and resort to self-censorship once they cross a territorial border.

Artists have the right not to be fragmented as human beings or as social beings.

Artistic expression is a space to challenge meanings, to defy what is imaginable. This is what, as times goes by, is recognized as culture.

A society with freedom of artistic expression is a healthier society. It is a society where citizens allow themselves to dream with a better world where they have a place. It is a society that expresses itself better, because it expresses itself in its entire complexity.

There is no other type of practice in the public sphere providing the qualities of the space created by art. That is why this space must be protected.

Governments have the duty to protect all their citizens, including those who may be considered uncomfortable because they question government or what is socially established.

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.