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Theo van Doesburg
Manifesto of Proletarian Art
April 1923

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“Manifest Proletkunst” (Manifesto of Proletarian Art), a text written by the Dutch artist Theo van Doesburg, published in Kurt Schwitters’ periodical *Merz* #2 in April 1923 (Hannover, p.24–25), with signatures by leading artists of the international avant-garde (Schwitters, Hans Arp, Tristan Tzara and Christof Spengemann).

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An art that refers to a certain class of people does not exist, and if it were to exist, it would not be important to life.

To those who wish to create proletarian art, we ask: “What is proletarian art?” Is it art made by proletarians themselves? Or art which serves only the proletariat? Or art to arouse proletarian (revolutionary) instincts? Art, made by proletarians, does not exist because the proletarian, when he creates art, no longer remains a proletarian, but becomes an artist. The artist is neither proletarian nor bourgeois, and what he creates belongs neither to the proletariat nor the bourgeoisie, but to all. Art is an intellectual function of man with the purpose of delivering him from the chaos of life (tragedy). Art is free in the use of its means, but bound to its own laws, and only to its own laws, and as soon as the work is a work of art, it is far superior to the class differences of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. If, however, the art should serve exclusively the proletariat, apart from the fact that the proletariat is interested in bourgeois taste, this art would be limited, and as limited as, specifically, bourgeois art. Such an art would not be universal, would not grow out of the sense of global nationality [*Weltnationalitätsgefühl*], but from individual, social, temporally and spatially limited views.

If, then, art should tend to call up proletarian instincts, it basically uses the same means as ecclesiastical or nationalist art. As banal as it sounds in itself, it is basically the same whether someone paints a Red Army with Trotsky at the head or an Imperial Army with Napoleon at the head. For the value of the image as a work of art, it is irrelevant whether proletarian instincts or patriotic feelings are to be aroused. The one thing, like the other, is, from the point of view of art, a fraud.

Art should only awaken the creative powers in man with its own resources, its goal is the mature man, not the proletarian or the citizen. Only small talents can make something of proletarian art (that is, politics in a painted state) because of the lack of culture, since they do not overlook greatness. The artist, however, renounces the special field of social organization.

The art as we want it is neither proletarian nor bourgeois, for it develops forces that are strong enough to influence the whole culture, rather than to be influenced by social conditions.

The proletariat is a condition which must be overcome, the bourgeoisie is a condition which must be overcome. But as the proletarians imitate the Bourgeoisikult with their Proletkult, it is precisely they who support this corrupt civilization of the bourgeoisie, without being conscious of it; to the detriment of art and to the loss of culture.

Through their conservative love for the old, uplifted forms of expression and their incomprehensible dislike for the new art, they keep alive what they want to combat according to their program: bourgeois culture. Thus it is that bourgeois sentimentalism and bourgeois romanticism, despite all the intense efforts of the radical artists to destroy them, still persist and are even cultivated. Communism is as much a bourgeois matter as socialism, namely capitalism in a new form. The bourgeoisie uses the apparatus of communism, which is not an invention of the proletariat but of the bourgeoisie, only as a means of renewal for its own decomposing culture (Russia). Consequently, the proletarian artist struggles neither for art, nor for the future

new life, but for the bourgeoisie. Each proletarian work of art is nothing but a poster for the bourgeoisie.

What we are preparing, on the other hand, is the total work of art [*Gesamtkunstwerk*], which is exalted above all posters, whether they are made for champagne, Dada, or Communist dictatorship.