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Afterthought

Joanna van der Zanden

According to the multidisciplinary range of voices in this book, expressed through careful research analyses, it is time that we give a more prominent and positive role to what is considered as imperfect. Each chapter can be read as a statement, a proclamation. It is therefore that I imagine what the result would be if all these voices would get together to write a manifesto.

Historically, manifestos have functioned as statements against the norm: to set new ideals, new focuses and beliefs. They play and have played a role in social, political, and cultural movements, and often they contain a concrete number of statements that together proclaim an agenda of actions, perspectives, and dos or don'ts.¹

In this afterthought I will lead you through a possible outcome of such an imaginative gathering of all the voices represented in this book. It is an attempt, an exercise, and, in accordance with the central themes of this book, I ask you to please not count me on my mistakes.

The Ideal but Incomplete Manifesto on Imperfection

What would a manifesto envisioning an ideal world including imperfections state? We might start this manifesto with two words of caution. First, as more than one contributor to this volume has explained, it is important not to idealize imperfect looks, shapes, or stories when they reveal social ills, injustice, and poverty; and not to gloss over problems of privilege in thinking about imperfections. Second, the practice of imperfection deviates from

¹ To avoid a manifesto being too rigid in its proclamations, some manifestos (a famous example is Marinetti's Manifesto of Futurism) are written on purpose in eleven statements, instead of ten, to underscore their incompleteness. The idea behind this practice is that the manifesto can grow, as more arguments can be added: these manifestos are open for adjustment and, in that sense, are imperfect.

given norms and standards, and these standards should be considered within their own context. As the authors of this book have shown in detail, one should always ask the question: who defines what is perfect or imperfect, and on the basis of which motivation, regulation, or system? This means that what is conceived as imperfect needs to occur within the context of the given times and places. This also means that our manifesto cannot become very specific. Our statements will need to aim to be universal. This manifesto should be a general plea for all sorts of objects, artifacts, human and nonhuman beings *to have the right to be its own shape and have its own appearance*. We will not make a mention of certain specific shapes, by claiming, for instance, that “crooked” cucumbers are perfectly imperfect and that they should not be discriminated over “straight” cucumbers. And our manifesto is written to reach out to as many people as possible.

Within this manifesto, we could consider giving room for different groups to speak out. Artists could declare that *making mistakes fuels creativity*. There is beauty to be found in failure and imperfections. Wilfully made or not, an artistic vocabulary is not complete without containing flaws, glitches, frictions, fragilities, errors and corrections, breaks, misfits, instabilities, and even finitude and death. All articulated in their own artistic medium: materialized, performed or expressed otherwise, imperfections reveal for many makers and their audiences a sense of authenticity. It is perceived as a token of the unexpected, which gives way for new creative possibilities. Some artists would claim that aesthetic modes of imperfection are the perfect way to critique the cultural or political establishment. They can function as an act of resistance and become change makers in restricted systems.

Farmers, biologists, and environmentalist may point out that *a sustainable future cannot be without “imperfect” animals and nature*. If we keep on “weeding out” nonhuman life in order to create a picture-perfect aesthetic garden or to develop the most profitable food production chain, we will damage more than what is good for us and for the planet. In other words, what is perceived as “perfect” is, in ecological terms, often very destructive. Sufficiency is just one side of the coin. Working with nature and tuning in to its unpredictability, its diverse shapes, colors, and characters helps us to understand and appreciate the unique qualities of “wild” nature, be it a cow or a carrot, a flower bed or an insect.

Psychologists, sociologists, and media researchers would promote the widespread acceptance and production of *true and imperfect images of ourselves as healing and liberating*. The digital revolution has brought a picture perfectness that is impossible to live up to. Pursuits of perfection can take a

heavy toll on one's mental health as well. This statement would be signed by large groups of citizens reclaiming the right to be authentic, to not fit in, and to be accepted for it. They would plea for societal ideals to shift from being a perfect insider to being a perfect outsider. Bodily appearance, language, beliefs, skills—they would argue that each individual should be esteemed for their uniqueness, making social injustice a societal illness of the past.

We might end the manifesto with a general mentioning of the future effects of imperfections as different modes to relate to the world. *The more we engage with all kinds of frictions and failures, the more we will care.* The peculiar evolution in contemporary consumerist cultures is that they have made perfection the standard and not the exception. Which makes up for a growing waste mountain. New forms of solidarity and empathy with nonliving beings, technology, objects, and the material world could lead to a more humble human–nonhuman relationship, challenging also the idea that only humans can become political actors.

This manifesto should then be translated in all languages possible, made available in text, speech, songs, images, performances, physical and virtual. Parts of the manifesto could be tailored to concrete groups and occasions. And it will adjust over time, as no manifesto is perfect, just as no archival list is perfect.

I can only imagine what such a manifesto could bring about.