

'Manifesto': Film Review | Sundance 2017



Courtesy of Sundance

Cate Blanchett stars as 13 different characters in this semi-experimental take on artistic manifestos directed by Julian Rosefeldt.

Cate Blanchett doesn't play 13 characters so much as embody 13 different ideas and approaches to 20th century art in *Manifesto*, German video artist Julian Rosefeldt's feature-length version of his eponymous, multi-screen installation from 2015. The texts all come from art manifestos but are put in the mouth of often very surprising characters. The film thus features a homeless person raving about Situationism; a tattooed rock chick screaming about Stridentism; a funeral speaker extolling Dada — “From now on, we want to shit in different colors,” she intones — and a conservative mother delivering a prayer on Pop Art before the family's Sunday lunch.

Rosefeldt and a very game Blanchett spring one surprising creation on the viewer after the other. But what it all adds up to is of course up for debate. *Manifesto* features a conversation between two Cates, one a redheaded news anchor and the other a blonde reporter live during a nighttime downpour, in which conceptual art is discussed — and it is this section, in particular, that seems to contain both a possible explanation of the piece as well as its own defense. One of the Cates even wonders whether it is the intention of the artist to bore the viewer — and responses to that question may vary depending on one's tolerance for theoretical discussions of art and/or one's interest in the chameleonic qualities of the project's star.

As a regular theatrical feature, the film hardly has a future, even on the arthouse circuit. But as an ideological jukebox movie about 20th century art, this film should interest festivals and spaces in the art world that haven't yet featured the 13-screen version.

The central conceit of the project, which gives it some intellectual heft and occasionally also makes it very funny, is the apparent dissonance between the characters and their worlds on the one hand and the extracts about art either voiced as dialogue or heard in voiceover, also by Blanchett (about five sources are used per school or type of art). A Russian choreographer thus instructs her troupe about Fluxus and a worker in a garbage incineration plant muses about, among other things, futurist architecture. The relationship between each character and the texts he/she is quoting isn't necessarily evident and might even be completely absent.



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Because the sources of the manifestos aren't identified until the end credits, viewers are simply asked to dip into and out of the different texts as characters emerge, disappear and, frequently, return later. As the film progresses, recurring themes, shared ideas and preoccupations start to emerge (the realization that some of the most modern-sounding texts are also the oldest ones will only occur at the end). Many artists (or writers on art) seem to have been concerned with trying to grapple with the subconscious; with a possible escape from uncertainty; with defining their identity and the world around them; and with trying to comprehend their perceived reality. Modern art thus emerges as a continued effort to try and come up with ways to comprehend the world and the people that populate it. And isn't this search for meaning and certainty something that every single person (and thus also every single character in this project) can relate to?

The appeal for Blanchett of an atypical work such as this one is obvious, since as an actress she's normally asked to perform characters, which in turn are building blocks of stories that might explore more complex ideas. But she therefore typically can never be aware of the film's overall meaning or additional layers, as she has to stay in character and stick to what only her character knows. Here, that barrier has been removed and the process has been reversed, with Blanchett performing the ideas directly as various individual characters, each with her (and in one case, his) own wardrobe, hair, make-up and, somewhat distractingly, own emphatic accent (think Blanchett in *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*).

The mosaic-type collage that thus emerges is a necessarily more linear version of the multi-screen installation and will work best for viewers with some knowledge of art history and a willingness to engage in its theoretical musings.

Incredibly, *Manifesto* was shot in only 12 days and looks like a million dollars, with production design Erwin Prib doing a particularly good job of finding breathtaking and very different locations in and around Berlin. Nils Frahm and Ben Lukas Boysen's versatile score completes the package.

Production companies: Schiwago Film, Australian Centre for the Moving Image Melbourne the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Nationalgalerie – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Sprengel Museum, Burger Collection, Ruhrtriennale

Cast: Cate Blanchett

Writer-Director: Julian Rosefeldt

Producer: Julian Rosefeldt

Executive producers: Wassili Zygouris, Marcos Kantis, Martin Lehwald

Director of photography: Christoph Krauss

Production designer: Erwin Prib

Costume designer: Bina Daigeler

Editor: Bobby Good

Music: Nils Frahm, Ben Lukas Boysen

Sales: The Match Factory

No rating, 94 minutes

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