Free Art Manifesto

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What we believe

Art exists to be shared. Restricting access to a work goes against the very reason it was made.

Digital art can be copied at almost no cost, so for the first time in history every work can reach everyone. We believe it should. A work should travel freely, and its audience should be decided by the people who read, watch and listen to it, not by whoever owns the rights.

We do not ask for art without authors. We ask for art without owners. The one thing a work must never lose is the name of the person who made it.

Copyright protects owners, not artists

Copyright is defended in the name of artists, but in practice the rights rarely stay with them. To be distributed, most artists sign their rights over to a handful of major labels, publishers and studios. These companies own the catalogues, the masters and the back-catalogue income, often for the full length of copyright: the author's life plus seventy years.

This is not a new complaint, and it does not come only from activists:

- In 1993, producer Steve Albini laid out a typical record deal line by line and showed how a band could sell 250,000 records and still owe the label money (The Problem with Music).
- In 2000, Courtney Love did the same arithmetic from the artist's side and called the system theft from the people it claims to protect (Courtney Love Does the Math).
- In 2022, Rebecca Giblin and Cory Doctorow described how a few intermediaries sit between creators and audiences and capture most of the value, whatever the law gives to artists on paper (Chokepoint Capitalism).

Giving artists more copyright under this structure mostly gives more to the companies they must sign it over to. We do not blame artists for signing. We blame a system where signing is the only way to be heard.

Art should not be a job

Art is a vocation. When a work must first be profitable, profit starts shaping the work: shorter songs for streaming payouts, sequels instead of risks, deadlines instead of inspiration.

The writer Lewis Hyde made this case in *The Gift* (1983): a work of art lives in a gift economy, not a market economy. It is received, not merely bought, and it creates a bond between maker and audience that a sale cannot.

"Then only the rich can make art"

This is the strongest objection, and we take it seriously. If art cannot pay the rent, those with inheritances or free time win. That is how art worked under aristocratic patronage, and we do not want to go back there.

Our answer is that artists need an income that does not depend on selling their art, not a monopoly on copies:

- **Universal basic income** frees everyone, artists included, to pursue a vocation without turning it into a product.
- **Income attached to the person, not the job**, as proposed by French economist Bernard Friot with his *salaire à vie*.
- **Existing models**: France's *intermittence du spectacle* already pays performers and technicians between contracts, recognising that creative work does not fit a regular job.

These are political choices, and not all of them exist yet. But copyright is not the alternative to them. Today most artists already cannot live from their rights. Copyright did not make art a viable job for most artists. It made it a lottery.

Reward as gratitude

Artists getting money is a good thing. But it should come as a reward after a work has been enjoyed, not as a toll before it can be seen. People should be able to give what they want, when they want, directly to the author.

This already works: Radiohead released *In Rainbows* (2007) as pay-what-you-want, and Bandcamp, Patreon and Liberapay let audiences pay artists directly.

"Voluntary payment doesn't pay small artists"
True: an unknown artist receives little from tips. But the current system pays them even less:

- Since early 2024, a track on Spotify must reach 1,000 streams in 12 months to earn any recorded-music royalty at all. Below that, its share is redistributed to tracks that pass the threshold (Music Business Worldwide).
- Spotify expected this to move about $40 million a year from small tracks to bigger ones (Music Business Worldwide). Researchers at CREATe noted that the platform's own data shows streams are heavily concentrated on a tiny fraction of artists (CREATe, 2023).
- Meanwhile, platforms still run ads on and around these works.

So the choice is not between voluntary payment and a fair wage. It is between a small reward that goes straight to the artist and a system that pays small artists nothing while monetising their work.

Attribution, not ownership

The only thing a work must never be free of is its author. Every copy, remix and reuse must name the person who made it. Attribution is what lets gratitude find its way back to the artist.

We are not against all rights. We keep one and drop the rest:

Right	Today	What we propose
To be named as the author	Yes	Yes, forever
To control who copies and shares	Yes, for life + 70 years	No
To sell or transfer that control	Yes	No: nothing left to sell

This split already exists in law. French law separates *droit moral*, the right to be credited, which is perpetual and cannot be sold, from *droits patrimoniaux*, the economic monopoly (Code de la propriété intellectuelle, art. L121-1, on Légifrance). We keep the first and abolish the second.

In practice, artists can apply this today with the Creative Commons Attribution licence: anyone may share and adapt the work, as long as they credit the author (CC BY 4.0). Enforcing attribution does need a rule. We accept that openly: one simple right, held by the author, that cannot be bought.

Let people choose, without the thumb on the scale

We trust audiences. If people want something, they should get it, even if critics call it low quality. Taste is not ours to police.

What we oppose is not popular art. It is popularity that has been manufactured:

- **Recommendation algorithms tuned for ad revenue**, which push whatever keeps people watching rather than what they would choose.
- **Marketing budgets** that only rights-holding giants can afford, and which buy visibility rather than earn it.
- **Blockbusters built for profit**: works designed by committee to be safe for the largest market, not made from passion or artistic intent.
- **Catalogue control**, where a few companies decide what gets released, reissued, or left to disappear.

Remove exclusive ownership and these levers lose much of their power. When anyone can share a work, no single company controls where it appears. What spreads, spreads because people pass it on.

Digital works, not physical objects

This manifesto is about digital media: music files, ebooks, films, images, games. Copying them costs nearly nothing, so restricting copies creates a scarcity that does not need to exist.

Physical objects are different. Printing a book, pressing a vinyl or framing a print costs paper, materials and labour. Charging for that is fair, and the publishers, printers and distributors who do that work earn their place.

We are not against everyone who works alongside artists either. Editors, translators, sound engineers and illustrators often do real creative work, and they deserve credit and reward like any author. Our target is narrower: the companies whose main business is owning rights and collecting income from works they did not make.

Answers to common objections

"Big companies will take free works and profit from them"
No one should pay for what is free, and selling a free work as if it were exclusive is a scam. But companies can still profit from free works by selling convenience or attention: a nicer app, a curated catalogue, ads placed around the content.

We accept this, for three reasons:

1. **No one can own the work.** A platform that hosts a free work cannot stop anyone else from hosting it too. Without exclusivity, it must compete on service, and the price falls towards the real cost of that service.
2. **Attribution travels with the work.** Every copy names the author and can point to a way of thanking them, so wider distribution means more people who can reward the artist.

3. **It already happens, under copyright.** Platforms run ads on artists' work today and pay small artists nothing. Our model does not create this problem. It removes the exclusivity that makes it worse.

Artists who want stronger guarantees can choose a share-alike licence, which requires every adaptation to stay free as well. This is the "copyleft" principle that Richard Stallman created for software (GNU Manifesto).

"Copyright freed artists from patrons"
Historically, it partly did. But today the rights mostly end up with labels and publishers, who have become the new patrons, with more power than the old ones. Freeing artists now means giving them an income that owns nothing, not a property they will have to sign away.

"Without copyright, no one will invest in art"
Some large productions would become harder to fund. We accept that. Economists Michele Boldrin and David Levine argue that monopoly rights are not needed for creative work to thrive, and that their costs outweigh their benefits (Against Intellectual Monopoly). Art made from passion has existed long before copyright, and will outlive it.

Sources and further reading

- Steve Albini, The Problem with Music (1993)
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- Rebecca Giblin and Cory Doctorow, Chokepoint Capitalism (2022)
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- Bernard Friot, *Vaincre Macron* (2017) and the work of Réseau Salariat on the *salaire à vie*
- Music Business Worldwide, Spotify's 1,000-play royalty threshold (2023)
- CREATe, Rethinking Royalties: Spotify's New Streaming Threshold (2023)
- French Code de la propriété intellectuelle, art. L121-1 (Légifrance)
- Creative Commons, Attribution 4.0 licence
- Richard Stallman, The GNU Manifesto (1985)
- Michele Boldrin and David Levine, Against Intellectual Monopoly (2008)
- Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture* (2004)