

The Office of Useful Art



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Social Autonomy and the Use Value of Art

– John Byrne

In 1917, Marcel Duchamp placed a urinal on a pedestal, signed it R. Mutt and declared it art. In 2010, Cuban artist Tania Bruguera took an identical urinal, signed it R. Mutt, reconnected it to the plumbing system in the Queens Museum of Art's men's room, and called it Arte Útil.¹

The Asociación de Arte Útil (AAU) is the home of an ongoing and propositional art project instigated by Tania Bruguera. The overall intention of the Asociación is to produce an international online and offline resource, or toolkit, that brings together and propagates forms of art practice that seek to

Arte Útil projects should:

- 1. Propose new uses for art within society*
- 2. Challenge the field within which it operates (civic, legislative, pedagogical, scientific, economic, etc.)*
- 3. Be 'timing specific', responding to current urgencies*
- 4. Be implemented and function in real situations*
- 5. Replace authors with initiators and spectators with users*
- 6. Have practical, beneficial outcomes for its users*
- 7. Pursue sustainability whilst adapting to changing conditions*
- 8. Re-establish aesthetics as a system of transformation³*

These are also the criteria by which any application for inclusion in the AAU online resource/archive is considered.⁴ At the time of writing, there are over four hundred entries, including work as familiar as Bauhaus and as diverse as Theaster Gates's *Dorchester Projects* (2009), an artist-led regeneration of housing in Chicago; Darren O'Donnell's *Haircuts by Children* (2006–07); Ruben Santiago's *Turning a public toilet into a spa* (2007); and the AHT Group/Sun Development PTY project 'Violence prevention through urban upgrading (VPUU)' (2006–ongoing), a holistic attempt to improve living conditions and reduce violence in the township of Khayelitsha, in Cape Town, South Africa. The archive also includes projects by Bruguera herself, such as Immigrant Movement International, founded in 2010, conceived as a community space hosted by the Queens Museum and encompassing a diverse range of activities, from public

John Byrne analyses the Asociación de Arte Útil's agenda of 'useful art' and the role of the artist in neoliberalism.

have direct and lasting social, political and economic impact. Begun in 2013, at the Arte Útil Lab at the Queens Museum of Art in New York, the project has consisted of a series of public programmes, workshops, symposia and events at a number of art museums and institutions; an online platform with a selected archive-cum-database of useful art projects and other Arte Útil-related materials; several exhibition-presentations of the project and its archive; and most recently, an Office of Useful Art, due to be opened by the Granby Four Streets Community Land Trust in Liverpool in late 2016.²

Underpinning the AAU is a collaboratively developed set of criteria for the production, distribution and propagation of Arte Útil:

- ¹ Press release for 'Arte Útil Lab: Investigating the Parameters of Useful Art', Queens Museum of Art, New York, 17 February–2 June 2013, available at http://artforum.com/uploads/guide.002/id07566/press_release.pdf (last accessed on 18 August 2016).
- ² It is also worth mentioning that AAU has developed within a broader constellation of interconnected projects, including the Autonomy Project (2010–11) and the five-year programme 'Uses of Art - The Legacy of 1848 and 1989' (2013–17) by the confederation of art museums L'Internationale. See <http://theautonomyproject.org/> and <http://www.internationalonline.org/programmes/list> (both last accessed on 18 August 2016).
- ³ These criteria came about as a result of discussions at the Queens Museum, Grizedale Arts, Cumbria and the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven in the run up to the exhibition 'Museum of Arte Útil' at the Van Abbemuseum from 7 December 2013 to 30 March 2014. See <http://museumartutil.net> and <http://www.arte-util.org/about/colophon/> (both last accessed on 18 August 2016).
- ⁴ The AAU archive is currently run by Broadcasting the Archive, an independent project conceived by Gemma Medina Estupiñán and Alessandra Saviotti, which aims to 'reactivate and mediate the Arte Útil's archive within and beyond the museum's context'. See <http://broadcastingthearchive.tumblr.com> (last accessed on 18 August 2016).



programming, residencies and workshops to language lessons and free legal services, with the ultimate goal of developing ‘an international think tank that recognises (im)migrants’ role in the advancement of society at large’.⁵

The AAU – the projects that constitute it and its call for an international movement of oppositional artistic strategies – immediately conjures up a familiar landscape of ethical and aesthetic dilemmas. In an art world where artworks are being replaced by experiences, passive audiences are giving way to active ‘users’ and museums are repurposing themselves as producers of new civic identities, AAU might simply seem to offer one more stark alternative to the

established neo-Kantian logics of aesthetic autonomy and disinterested contemplation. Moreover, at first glance it might seem that Arte Útil is barely distinguishable from existing modes of socially engaged art practice, such as Jonas Staal’s New World Summit or Ahmet Ögüt’s Silent University, to give just two recent examples (both also feature in the AAU archive), but I would argue that the AAU represents something more ambitious and far-reaching than the individual projects and practices that fall within its remit. The AAU is nothing less than a radical reorganisation of our relationship to art, artists, museums, galleries and their attendant ‘art worlds’ as we commonly know them – or knew them – to be.

Tania Bruguera, *Arte Útil*, 2013. Courtesy Studio Bruguera

⁵ See <http://www.queensmuseum.org/immigrant-movement-international> (last accessed on 18 August 2016).

To this end, the AAU demands an alternative set of descriptive and evaluative terms. For the Museum of Arte Útil, at the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven in 2013, theorist Stephen Wright was commissioned to produce a 'Lexicon of Usership', in an attempt to develop terminology more suited to evaluating forms of complex co-production and usership, extending well beyond the borders of our current 'museological' understanding of art.⁶ The AAU archive is divided into sections such as 'urban development', 'scientific', 'economy' and 'environment', and the entries for specific projects (which can be downloaded as printable pdfs) are categorised in terms of their 'initiators', 'goals', 'users' and 'beneficial outcomes'. In Wright's compendium, the question is posed, wouldn't it be better to simply retire terms like 'authorship', 'objecthood' and 'autonomy'?⁷

In fact, I would suggest that Arte Útil raises two key and interrelated issues about the changing nature and status of aesthetic autonomy, and that, furthermore, these two issues may uncover an internal and inherited contradiction within contemporary art practice – an as-yet-unresolved contradiction that begins to point beyond the historical impasse of autonomy versus social engagement. If this is the case, then projects such as Arte Útil, and the whole notion of 'useful art', carry with them the means and the necessity to rethink and repurpose the term 'autonomy' in order to reactivate the very possibility of a radical alternative.



The first and most familiar of the two key issues that are raised by Arte Útil concerns the material (or increasingly immaterial) status of the work of art itself. If art is to resist the status quo, then surely it must provide us with something to resist it with or by? Whether this 'artwork' be a recalcitrant object, a gesture, a process or something else is not at stake here; rather, what is at stake is the cultural investment in the recognisable manifestation of that thing we call 'art'. This concern is historically underpinned by discourses surrounding the relation of aesthetic autonomy to the

process of making and craft as possible alternatives to the industrialised and commercialised commodification of mass-produced culture that developed throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. More often than not, these positions developed nostalgic notions of the autonomy of art and valorised handmade artefacts or artworks against items produced through divided, alienated labour and the reification of commodity culture.

The second and more recent of the key issues raised by this notion of useful art concerns *work* – the kind of labour that the work of art has now become (or is becoming). This perhaps more pressing issue has its theoretical underpinnings in the Italian autonomism and draws upon a set of concerns regarding the ideological coercion, and subsequent instrumentalisation, of traditionally oppositional discourses within an increasingly globalised neoliberal economy. As the artist Liam Gillick has succinctly put it:

*The accusation ... is that artists are at best the ultimate freelance knowledge workers and at worst barely capable of distinguishing themselves from the consuming desire to work at all times, neurotic people who deploy a series of practices that coincide quite neatly with the requirements of neoliberal, predatory, continually mutating capitalism of the every moment. Artists are people who behave, communicate and innovate in the same manner as those who spend their days trying to capitalise every moment and exchange of daily life. They offer no alternative.*⁸

If Gillick is right, then we now find ourselves at an increasingly difficult and complex cultural impasse. On the one hand, it becomes increasingly impossible to resist the status quo through any kind of recognisable artistic gesture – material or otherwise – without falling into the trap of a commodified and commercialised art industry. On the other, it is similarly impossible to step outside the framework of the art industry – as a recognisable form of radical gesture or resistance – when any attempt to do so runs the risk of direct complicity with the deregulatory logic of capital. What was once

6 See Steven Wright, *Towards a Lexicon of Usership*, Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2013, available at <http://www.arte-util.org/tools/lexicon/> (last accessed on 18 August 2016).

7 As alternatives Wright suggests 'emerging concepts' such as 'Cognitive Surplus', 'Double-Ontology', 'Museum 3.0', 'Narratorship' and 'Repurposing', and new 'Modes of Usership' such as 'Gleaning', 'Hacking', 'Piggybacking' and 'Poaching'. See *ibid.*

8 Liam Gillick, 'The Good of Work', *e-flux journal*, issue 16, May 2010, available at <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-good-of-work/> (last accessed on 18 August 2016).

seen to be the pursuit of an alternative artistic lifestyle, the refusal to ‘fit in’ or to follow the patterns and rhythms of a contracted nine-to-five job, is now the new standard of precarious labour. Any symbolic value in this form of alterity has already been commodified and re-consumed as neoliberal forms of autonomous ‘self-management’.



Another way of trying to think through this conundrum, and also of attempting to avoid any collapse into the familiar binary of aesthetics versus politics (however interconnected, intertwined or emplotted they may be), is to re-examine the historical emergence of the idea of useful art itself. The AAU points out that ‘Arte Útil in Spanish roughly translates as useful art, but also suggests art as a device or tool’.⁹ The term’s manifold meaning can be difficult to translate into English, where the very idea of useful art often appears as either an oxymoron or an irrelevance – where art’s ‘use’ is merely a function or addendum of its value as art. (An attitude captured, for instance, in Oscar Wilde’s 1891 novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by the phrase ‘All art is quite useless.’¹⁰)

In 1969, Argentinean-born artist Eduardo Costa began a series of artistic interventions titled *Useful Art Works* that were intended to bring modest improvements to daily life in New York. These works – which included, for example, the simple act of buying and replacing missing metal street signs, or, more ambitiously, repainting a subway station on the Flushing Line (a proposal Costa was prevented from completing) – were intended as an attack on the assumption that art and utility were two separate and incompatible spheres. Also in 1969, Mierle Laderman Ukeles – another key figure for Arte Útil – produced her ‘Manifesto for Maintenance Art’, centred on the invisible and gendered labour that underpins the functioning of culture and its institutions.¹¹ A washing performance by Ukeles was the closing event for Bruguera’s

initial Arte Útil Lab at the Queens Museum, conducted with the participation of the institution’s director and its maintenance supervisor.¹² Through her subsequent research, Bruguera discovered that the Italian artist Pino Poggi had previously referred to ‘Arte Utile’; the intention of which, according to Poggi’s 1965 manifesto, is to ‘help give the average man a clear grasp of his real problems in life [...] AU is not limited solely to the precincts of the universities and academies, where the same, small clique of intellectuals constantly embalms the whole with their verbiage’; instead, ‘AU will only exist of the people and for the people in public places, in shopping centres and as street theatre’.¹³

Arte Útil and its 1960s precursors are also embedded, I would contend, within a longer and often overlooked lineage of artistic resistance. To ask when and why the juxtaposition of ‘use’ and ‘art’ became problematic is to return to a period before the neo-Kantian architecture of artistic

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production, distribution and reception, when aesthetics, politics, autonomy and the uses of art all played a role in the production of a new sense of the civic in Europe. In that period, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the idea of useful art had a decisive role in imagining social alternatives to the economic and cultural impact of the Industrial Revolution.

The growing difficulty in reconciling use or use value with the alienation of mechanised mass production during this period is perhaps most clearly expressed in the writings of Karl Marx, specifically in his attempt to distinguish between use value and exchange value.¹⁴ As Fredric Jameson

9 See the ‘about’ page of the Museum of Arte Útil website: <http://museumarteutil.net/about/> (last accessed on 18 August 2016).

10 Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, London: Penguin Books, 1985, p.4.

11 Mierle Laderman Ukeles, ‘MANIFESTO FOR MAINTENANCE ART 1969! Proposal for an exhibition “CARE”’, available at http://www.feldmangallery.com/media/pdfs/Ukeles_MANIFESTO.pdf (last accessed on 18 August 2016).

12 The performance is documented at <https://vimeo.com/69101898> (last accessed on 18 August 2016).

13 Pino Poggi, ‘Manifest Arte Utile I’ (1965), available at <http://www.arte-utile.net/PinoPoggi/web-content/navigation/f-au.html> (last accessed on 18 August 2016).

14 See Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1* (1867, trans. Ben Fowkes), London: Penguin, 1990, pp.131–38.



Mierle Laderman Ukeles performance at Arte Útil Lab, Queens Museum, New York, 2013. Courtesy the artist and Studio Bruguera

has recently reminded us, underpinning this distinction is an inherited moral and ethical imperative. Use value, for Marx, was both qualitative and bodily, a metaphysical imperative regarding the necessity of material and social production.¹⁵ Exchange value, on the other hand, tended to be equated with the quantitative, as a more abstract function of the mind and soul. This analytical attempt to separate the bodily, material and qualitative from the mental, abstract and quantitative is also familiar from the famous ‘base and superstructure’ metaphor that Marx employed in his ‘Preface to A Critique of Political Economy’ (1859). Here, a real, material and economic base (which Marx suggested could be analysed with the accuracy of science) is seen as the true driving force of history, producing the ideological superstructure of law, politics, ethics and culture.

As we know, the historical consequences of this bifurcation for the role of art in the West have been profound. At one extreme, art and culture came to be seen as little more than a functional reflection of the true economic driving forces of history (with the concomitant assumption that a reading or analysis of culture could provide a key to understanding these material driving forces). At the other extreme, an emerging

mentality of art for art’s sake saw political and ethical value in this separation, arguing that art and culture should be isolated from the material necessities of everyday life and held within an autonomous, aesthetic field. The political argument for this position was that art and culture had to be protected from the corrupting forces of industrialised capital if they were to remain a viable vehicle through which to imagine any kind of alternative utopian future. This latter position, propagated by Alfred H. Barr, Jr’s development of a white-cube museum space (as the most appropriate arena to experience autonomous works of art) and an accompanying historical narrative of isms (underpinned by a commitment to the pursuit of technical radicalism as a viable artistic end in itself) is still largely with us today.

However, in opposition to both of these polarities (art as a mere function of its socio-economic determinants or art as a separate, emancipatory and autonomous field) a more discernibly left-wing lineage emerged, arguing for the value of art and culture as the physical embodiment of non-alienated labour, and for art and craft to be used as a means of protecting the moral and ethical ownership of work and labour against the instrumentalising and brutalising forces of mass production. This tradi-

15 See Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume 1*, London: Verso, 2014.

tion, which emphasises craft, design and making – and extends from John Ruskin and William Morris to Constructivism, Bauhaus and beyond – also provides, I would argue, the conceptual framework within which the two seemingly irreconcilable positions of autonomy and heteronomy have traditionally met: the qualitative and ethical bodily function of the work or labour of art that, in turn, underpins the valorisation of authentic labour in art. By insisting on the dialectical codependency of autonomy and heteronomy, and – whether tacitly or explicitly – on the use value of art as its distinguishing trait, this lineage encompasses both the scale and ambition of AAU today.



Despite recent attempts to think through the complex relationships of autonomy and heteronomy, there remains a tendency to posit any understanding of art's social and political functions in terms of its ability to bridge the gap between art and life.¹⁶ As a result, the flexible and productive relationship involving autonomy, heteronomy and use value remains a fixed one between irreconcilable though mutually dependent

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regimes. Put another way: artists might work with communities to produce all manner of ephemeral, temporal and ongoing projects, but it is still expected that we experience the legacy or residue of the activity itself as art, or at least as art as we know it, within and through the existing framework of art world reception (museums, galleries, biennials, websites, books, journals, etc.).

The 2013 exhibition of the Museum of Arte Útil at the Van Abbemuseum was, in part, an attempt to shift some of these received ideas. Visitors were given the choice of either paying a standard entrance fee or

gaining free entry by agreeing to be an active 'user' of the show. The Van Abbemuseum itself was proposed as a 'social power plant' – a site of interchange and co-production, where history and art could be collaboratively reused as a means to imagine new forms of civic citizenship. The show's centre was a physical presentation of the Arte Útil online archive; surrounding rooms were organised according to a series of thematics, mixing artworks, documentation and makeshift structures and carrying instructions for the visitor-user on 'what to use and how to use it'.¹⁷ Perhaps inevitably, the exhibition also highlighted its own physical and ideological limitations: when the spaces were activated – through discussions, meetings, presentations, workshops or performances – the potentialities of Arte Útil became accessible and usable; when they were not, the current templates we have for experiencing artworks in galleries and museum spaces – as objectifications of invested artistic labour, whose latent surplus value is waiting to be extracted via the aesthetic experience of spectatorship – began to contradict the manifest intentions of both the AAU and the long-term projects whose legacies were on display.

But there is also another, and perhaps more radical, way of thinking through this conundrum that, I would argue, the project of Arte Útil can help provide. What if we simply accept that the avant-garde dream of uniting art and life has finally come true, as deregulated nightmare? What if we also accept that there is no longer a discernable split between material base and ideological superstructure? And what if we can finally agree that art and life have already merged, not as the emancipatory and dialectical resolution of a historical struggle, but as the neoliberal elision of work and leisure through the aestheticisation of labour? If this is the case, then art, as it now exists, provides little more than a commodified cypher of delusional radicality, a semiotised mechanism which now functions, rather like Jean Baudrillard's Disneyland, as a last ideological lie – a mythological guarantee that there still somehow exists a reality beyond art, a discernable material and economic base that art can still be an

16 For instance, Jacques Rancière posits a metapolitics of aesthetics as a means to illuminate the full complexity and interconnectedness of aesthetic and political debate within the Western canon. See J. Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (trans. Gabriel Rockhill), London: Continuum, 2004. See also Claire Bishop's *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), which is more orientated towards objectified forms of resistance as art in gallery spaces.

17 See <http://museumarteuil.net/about/> (last accessed on 18 August 2016).



Installation view, 'The Museum of Arte Útil', archive room, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 2013-14. Photograph: Peter Cox. Courtesy Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven

effective and productive part of. This admittedly bleak scenario would suggest that we have reached a point of cultural saturation, an overlap and integration of previously identifiable political positions, in which left and right ideologies have blended and blurred – a successful occupation of art by life and life by art.

However unpalatable these observations may be, or however discordantly they may jar with our cherished notions of art's ameliorative and reparatory capacity, they would also seem to be the only possible solution for remapping a territory of effective artistic activism under current conditions. And this activist-pragmatist approach, as Bruguera herself outlined at the most recent AAU Summit,¹⁸ should operate at multiple political levels. To be able to talk to institutions of power, let alone to harbour the ambition of changing their systems of operation, the AAU must also be capable of operating at an institutional level. It is not enough to simply point towards a set of seemingly useful purposes that social art projects can engage themselves with – which, for Bruguera, would be to infantilise the concept of Arte Útil. The focus must be on changing existing power structures rather than merely illustrating their current shortcomings through the tried and tested vehicles of art practice. In this way, Bruguera's alignment of the AAU with the mechanisms of various international

institutions can be seen as a deliberate and pragmatic attempt to change the way such institutions operate – a kind of activist approach at an institutional level. This process also goes hand in hand with the expansion of an international AAU network that, to some extent, has already begun to grow and govern itself autonomously as a self-regulated user-based resource.

No doubt as a result of these factors, Bruguera displays an ambivalent, and sometimes contradictory, relationship to her own role as artist and/or instigator, on the one hand questioning the use and purpose of the authorial role of the artist within the museum or gallery setting, and on the other openly adopting the 'artist' role as and when it is a useful tool for addressing power. In her own conflictual and well-publicised relationship with the Cuban government, Bruguera's right to be seen as an artist (as well as her official validation as an artist through her participation in major exhibitions, biennales, etc.) provides both a public platform and legal mandate for her voice as well as others' to be publicly heard.

Yet such fluid and contradictory forms of pragmatism may well begin to run counter to the overall concerns of the AAU project. To really provide new models of practice as meaningful alternatives to the current political status quo, the AAU needs to develop a rigorous theory of how it can begin to value the co-production and redistribution

18 'Arte Útil Summit 2016', Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art, 22-25 July 2016. See <http://www.arte-util.org/studies/arte-util-summit-2016/> (last accessed on 18 August 2016).



of real and existing social knowledge. This can only be achieved through the development of a truly peer-to-peer online and offline network of collaborating associates, affiliates and active constituents who are willing to test and redefine the legal, moral and ethical limits of reproducing and repurposing existing art-led projects to their own, and each other's, social ends and needs. Such a strategy would depend on a real, rather than symbolic, commitment to the development and co-production of strategies for artistic and social change. And if this is the case, then we may have to confront some of the difficulties in retaining or propagating the current role and function of the 'artist' in our neoliberal society, however useful artists may appear to be in confronting the existing legal systems of power. After all, is it not also in the interests of power to maintain and sustain the existing category of the artist?

In light of this, we might consider AAU's recently established collaboration with the residents of the Granby Four Streets Community Land Trust in Liverpool. The CLT itself evolved out of a twenty-year struggle by residents against attempts by local and national government to depopulate and demolish the local community and its infrastructure. At one point, around 2007, when only five houses on one street (Cairn Street) remained occupied, a group of female residents began to develop forms of everyday resistance and activism by moving their lives onto the street: planting flowers, sitting at tables, redecorating boarded-up buildings and, above all, developing a shared knowledge of housing and property law. The Granby Four Streets CLT, formed in 2011 as a not-for-profit community-interest company and emerging from a grass-roots activism, successfully lobbied and secured assets from the local authority, which they then began to regenerate. Granby Four Streets were recently brought to the attention of the UK media through their collaboration with the London-based architects' collective Assemble to renovate houses in the area with the participation of local residents, a project that won the 2015 Turner Prize.

Yet perhaps much more than Assemble – the de facto recipients of the Turner Prize, who were deemed the 'artists' in this community-based collaboration – it is the

example of Granby Four Streets that suggests a model of resistance to current frameworks of instrumentalising totality that does not, as a consequence, do the dirty work of neoliberalism in the name of art. Granby's newfound Office of Useful Art intends to develop ground-up, constituency-led uses of the Asociación's toolkit, providing valuable means to collectively rethink the role of art as socially produced knowledge. After successfully fighting local and national government policy for many years, the Granby residents are well aware of the dangers of instrumentalisation. For them, the AAU offers access to a growing network of resources and institutional links whilst, at the same time, inviting their contributions toward the growth of the Asociación which is keen to listen to and learn from their wealth of experience. Such active forms of reciprocity are, I would argue, capable of developing beyond the usual experience, in art, of exchange as symbolic gesture. Instead, they indicate the capacity for new forms of oppositional realpolitik, operating as a double ontological proposition – able to function as both, or either, a work of art and/or a radical social proposition for living otherwise.

In this scenario, terms like 'autonomy' once again become useful precisely because they are now, seemingly, so useless. To reject autonomy out of hand, to assume that it is a term that can somehow be jettisoned or retired, is to give too much ground away to a predatory neoliberal logic that is more than capable of rebranding activism for its own needs. Instead, autonomy must be reframed and repurposed as a site of social productivity; a collective struggle to re-complexify and reimagine 'art' as a practice of lived resistance. And the key to this, I would argue, lies in the subtle and self-conscious shift in the terms and conditions of art practice that projects like the AAU both represent and, more importantly, can effect – from a use of art that symbolically imagines alternative possible futures within an existing framework of production and consumption, to a use of art that enables diverse constituencies to reimagine what the work, or labour, of art could be today.