



### **Tools of Renewal: Tania Bruguera and Arte Util.**

Speak of "useful art" and you run the risk of encountering reprobations: art is supposed to be useless by nature and to have managed to free itself from all contingencies, according to a modern and universalist gesture. Thinking the opposite is almost iconoclastic. It is not insignificant that a committed artist such as the Cuban Tania Bruguera has taken this term Arte Útil on her own to create another cartography of contemporary art, a repertoire of artistic projects responding to other emergencies and thwarting both the devitalization of merchant art and the instrumentalization of art for propaganda purposes.

Meeting with Alessandra Saviotti, PhD student at Liverpool John Moore University and researcher in charge of the archives of Arte Util.

#### **- When did the Arte Útil concept emerge and how was it connected to Tania Bruguera's practice?**

In the work of Tania Bruguera, the concept of Arte Útil emerged first in the context of *Cátedra de Arte de Conducta* (Behaviour Art School), an art project carried on between 2002 and 2009 in the artist's home in Havana (Cuba). *Cátedra de Arte de Conducta* was formalized as an art school devoted to the study of the interconnections between performance, politics and their role in society. The curriculum encouraged students to conceive actions as artworks "aimed to transform some spaces in society through art, transcending symbolic representation or metaphor, and meeting with their activity some deficits in reality and in life, through Arte Útil (Useful Art)" (Bruguera, 2002 - 2009). From 2011 with the publication of a special issue of *Contraindicaciones* entirely devoted to Arte Útil (Bruguera and España, 2011) and the opening of the *Immigrant Movement International* (2011) in Corona, Queens (USA), the definition of Arte Útil has gained more political value across the development of her projects. Sometimes in her work the English translation such as "Useful Art" appeared, however for Bruguera, the use of the Spanish term has become more and more urgent as it represents a political statement – as well as being more nuanced – for the recognition of a terminology coming from other places. She recently wrote: "Making art in Latin America can

have real consequences for artists who decide to engage with social or political commentary... The Spanish terms I use force critics to try and understand my artistic position; it is a decolonizing act—a way to argue that some terms will never be completely understood unless we inhabit them”(Bishop and Bruguera, 2020).

The term *Arte Útil* however, has been already proposed by other artists in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries such as architect Juan O’Gorman who mentioned the term in relation with architecture during a conference in Mexico City (O’Gorman, 1934), Pino Poggi in Italy who used the Italian version “*Arte Utile*” for his manifesto (Poggi, 1965), Eduardo Costa who introduced the concept through a series of interventions in New York City (Costa, 1969), and finally John Perreault, a curator who proposed an exhibition titled “*Usable Art*” in New York City, where the work of Costa was included among others (Perreault, 1981). The common aspects across the definitions seems to be the idea of using art as a tool for real change that played a decisive role in imagining new forms of social and political organisations, often after a period of turmoil.

Bruguera has been deeply invested in developing both a conceptual framework for the term and a practice around *Arte Útil*’s principles, for example through the *Asociación de Arte Útil*, and the *Instituto de Artivismo Hannah Arendt (INSTAR)* in Havana.

### **- Why did *Arte Útil* appear as the best way to empower communities?**

On one hand *Arte Útil*’s practices could not appear immediately as art. According to their ‘1:1 scale’ prominence in fact, they don’t employ any device to manifest themselves into the world or to represent what they are. Therefore, like any other tool that is available to be used, they function in the same manner. On the other hand, *Arte Útil* it is about imagining a scenario, a proposal, a future that does not exist yet, it is as living the future in the present (Bruguera, 2016). Hence this is what only art can do, and the reason why we should claim that this power comes from art. Another crucial aspect is the challenge to ownership typical of a Western conception of art: according to the 5th criteria, *Arte Útil* should ‘Replace authors with initiators and spectators with users’. This principle suggests that a project should be seen as a proposal that others should take and carry on even without the intervention of the artist who conceived it. Somehow it is the same approach to usership: it is impossible to control. The moment a project is appropriated by a specific constituency or community it becomes collectively owned; it will be part of life. As a consequence, because usership is the modality by which art manifests in this case, it becomes the entry point for the audience who transforms into a community of users, not spectators or participants. As Bruguera affirms: ‘If you work in *Arte Útil*, what can be more gratifying than to see your idea incorporated into the daily life of people? Or to the social programme of a city? Or to nuances in the vocabulary of the individuals?’ (Bruguera, 2016).

### **- How can *Arte Útil* decentralize the art authority and system of legitimation?**

To answer this question, I am going to introduce another term that Bruguera uses in describing the importance of the political context where her work exists and manifests. The term in question is political-timing-specific. This definition goes beyond the notion of site-specificity, and introduces the unique peculiarities of the political landscapes; something that goes beyond the formalist criteria focused on universalist cultural dimensions (Bruguera, 2019). In other terms, it is not just about reacting to the specificity of a space, rather of a political context that renders the artistic act as both perceivable on a 1:1 scale and at the same time able to anticipate a certain kind of reaction from those in power. The idea of being political-timing-specific arose in order to highlight the political dynamics which are proper to Cuba, in particular as a way to test the government’s propaganda. We could take #YoTambienExijo (2014-15) as an example that is still reverberating as I write. At the end of

2014 Barack Obama and Raúl Castro agreed to restore diplomatic ties and potentially bringing to an end to five decades of hostility; Bruguera then decided to restage her work *El susurro de Tatlin #6 (versión para La Habana)* (Tatlin's Whisper #6 [Havana Version]) in La Havana's Plaza de la Revolución, and as in the original version of the performance, allow Cubans to freely express their thoughts for a minute. The fact that the declaration opened some political uncertainties created the perfect political-timing-specific context for Bruguera's work. To accompany the performance, she addressed three letters to Obama, Castro and Pope Francis where she asked for freedom of speech and to protest, the end of social inequality, and open elections.

Tania was then arrested and freed several times even before staging the performance, but I believe that just the idea of using art to question those in power through an action arrived like a storm that needed to be contained somehow. The government decided to use its usual tools that time, such as the arrest and questioning, however the performance led to the public reading on Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) that provoked other reactions which are described later.

To go back to your question, precisely using art as a tool to anticipate the future - imagine if Cubans could run for elections - or provoke an unexpected feedback from those in power – the sabotaging of a reading group - highlights that everything can be put into question, even the State apparatus.

**- Could you explain the concept of 1:1 scale? Does it go against the use of symbolism or metaphor in art?**

1:1 scale is a term we use a lot to describe how Arte Útil operates. It is also one of the 8 criteria we wrote to describe what we mean with the definition; it is quite important because it gives us the proper term to define art as a tool. Art in a 1:1 scale refuses representation, meaning that it does not need any device, object, surrogate to situate itself into either the world or the art world. Let's think about some of the case studies that are included in the Arte Útil archive, for example Núria Güell's *Ayuda Humanitaria* (2008-2013). In 2008 while Güell was a student at the *Cátedra de Arte de Conducta* in Havana, she decided to develop a project in order to offer herself as a bride to any Cuban who wanted to leave the island and migrate to Spain to obtain Spanish citizenship. She set up an open call for the best love letter which was then submitted to a jury composed by three prostitutes who decided Güell's future husband. Once the winner was declared, she organized the wedding and the travel to Spain where after some years, her husband got Spanish citizenship. The project ended with their public divorce in 2013 during the opening of the *Museum of Arte Útil* in the Netherlands. The divorce was officiated by Charles Esche, the director of the Van Abbemuseum, who as a public servant, could legally preside over the divorce. This is clearly how 1:1 scale works: the wedding was real, the citizenship was real, the divorce was real. On the other hand, it was a project about love and freedom; as Güell very well puts it: *or to the illusion of freedom, and winning someone's heart and seducing them* (ndr. tourists) *allowed Cubans to dream with a new life, a better—or different—life, regardless of it being real or unreal...I decided to marry a Cuban man in order to understand and draw attention to what was happening in the country, that exchange of interests, that market of dreams, sex and company.* 1:1 scale is a work of art in real life.

**- Could you tell us more about the Instituto de Artivismo Hannah Arendt in Cuba?**

The *Instituto de Artivismo Hannah Arendt* (INSTAR) was founded after a public action carried out by Bruguera in 2015 that coincided with the celebration of the Declaración de la República de Cuba (20<sup>th</sup> May 1902). For 100 consecutive hours she read and discussed

Hannah Arendt's book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in her home, her voice was amplified through a speaker into the surrounding streets. The action encouraged visitors to read from the book too, hence the public reading provoked a strong reaction by the government that tried to sabotage Bruguera's action: a team of workers started digging a hole with jackhammers right in front of her house in order to disturb and eventually stop the reading. Like for the previous pedagogical art project *Catédra de Arte de Conducta*, Bruguera used her own house as a form of public space. In Cuba public space is almost inaccessible to those who would like to address and discuss ideas publicly because it is highly regulated, therefore these kinds of conversations are impossible in non-institutional sites. The reading was a turning point for Bruguera who understood that she should have transformed this temporary performance in a systematic commitment to promote civic education and civic literacy in Cuba, therefore the idea of the Instituto was born. The decision of raising funds through a Kickstarter campaign was not just a practical matter. In fact, more than 900 people around the world donated to the project for a total of \$100,000, and thanks to this network INSTAR can function as a bridge between people living in Cuba and elsewhere. It was also a strategy to be transparent with respect to the objections that often are raised against projects that aim to speak directly to those in power such as this one: the government typically suggests that they are part of a political strategy used by foreign powers to undermine the Cuban government.

INSTAR is a place where ideas can be discussed and potentially become civic actions not just a critique of the government. The Institute should be a place to discuss without fear, in order to contribute to the future of the country through art which is a very powerful tool because it is prefigurative. According to Bruguera art lets people imagine and live in the future while the experience happens in the present (Bishop and Bruguera, 2020). In particular about the notion of Artivism – the combination of art and activism - she affirms that it has the power to catch the target of the protest unaware due to the unexpected nature of the action, so there is no time to react. This temporary delay is what determines the efficacy of the action because 'by the time your target has understood what you've done, and found a way to respond, you've already reached a much larger audience (and even people who want to join your cause)'.

The mission of INSTAR is to work with everyone who wants to be engaged in Cuba, not just art trained people, in order to imagine a new future for the country through civic literacy where the emphasis should not just be on the economic projects and money as a means of freedom. The organization of the program is horizontal because it is developed according to the demands of the students and participants and the decisions are taken by consensus. According to the INSTAR manifesto (available at <https://artivismo.org/mision/>) the Institute has 3 main areas: Wish, Think and Do. They also suggest the methodology of the institute: first there is a space to discuss and express the wishes for the country in which they live; then rethink the collective wishes and think about ways to make them happen; and finally the organization of actions to be carried on in the public space.

Parallel to the program of classes and events, the Institute has promoted several open calls addressed to Cuban citizens such as the residency Vita Activa, and a series of prizes focused on the production of audiovisuals, critical essays on the Cuban revolution, and investigative journalism.

At the time of this writing the Institute has been in constant dialogue with the different collectives that are demanding freedom of expression and the end of censorship in Cuba such as the Movimiento San Isidro and the 27N for example.

**- Do you think that the kind of art that is promoted by Arte Útil gets more attention / is growing these days? If so, why?**

Arte Útil and consequently usership as a way to approach art, has been practiced extensively in different contexts and places at least from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, until Kant - as the 'software

engineer' of modern art - proposed that the purpose of art was to be *purposeless*, and for it to just have an aesthetic function. Through the research that led to the Arte Útil archive, it has been very clear that art has been used as a way to intervene into society by producing beneficial outcomes; it was important to acknowledge this at the institutional level too. Trying to write the history of Arte Útil has been important in terms of 'coefficient of art', meaning that for too long Arte Útil has been at the margin of the conversation about what and how art should be in order to be granted institutional access. The institutional context has been resistant to these kinds of practices, even though this is not necessarily an issue, it is important to create the conditions for these practices to thrive too and question the role of art and its dedicated institutions. For example, the idea of a 'museum 3.0' intended as a place devoted to usership as the method employed to create meaning, has been gaining institutional traction in some European museums such as the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art, and the Whitworth, among the others.

Immediately after the Covid-19 pandemic hit, the demands on art and in particular on socially engaged art practices increased. The reason might be because art is a sort of special antidote in times of emergency: it can show the world otherwise, it imagines and speculates about the future, it can give new languages and registers (Laing, 2020). Because the pandemic has been just one big emergency in the middle of all the others (such as climate emergency, violation of basic human rights in some parts of the world, and so on), somehow those artists who were already working according to AU's principles were quite ready to rethink some of their projects and provide mutual support in their communities, for example. Some decided to offer what they can do better – precisely art – to help their fellow citizens, friends, neighbors, families, strangers and so on. Perhaps the fact that AU is able to fill the gap between an art-informed audience and a non-informed one, could be the reason why it is becoming more visible lately.

#### **- What are you telling someone who would say it's not art?**

The first reaction would be to point to the Arte Útil archive to confirm that the practice has been there for two centuries, and it should be considered as part of the history of art. Then I would mention the double ontological status that Arte Útil put forward, as a way to overcome the binarism between art and non-art. According to the double otology in fact, these kinds of artworks appear as what they are (for example a restaurant) and the artistic proposition of what they are (such as art that takes the shape of a restaurant). This characteristic is not immediately perceivable, but it is precisely the reason why we talk about Arte Útil as a 1:1 scale practice. For it is a practice that puts into question what we perceive as immediately visible through a pragmatic approach versus contemplation and spectatorship, it reimagines the relationships between fields that perhaps were totally unrelated earlier. As noted by Pablo Helguera when he wrote about Socially Engaged Art, artists who work in this field need to create links and alliances between their projects and other fields that usually belong to other disciplines, 'moving them temporarily into a space of ambiguity' (Helguera, 2011).

To conclude, it is not about necessarily creating consensus around the definition because it does not matter if everyone shares the same idea of what art should be; Arte Útil is about what art can do.

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