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Author Archive

[Arte Útil and the attempt to change the world](#)

April 28th, 2014 by Alessandra Saviotti

When in 2010 Charles Esche, Van Abbemuseum's director, decided to invite Tania Bruguera for a personal exhibition, she came up with 29 different proposals. The event suggests some interesting clues about Bruguera's personality, either an *artist* – as she calls herself – or a performer or again a political artist. However the final idea didn't need so much time to emerge and in a short time the museum's curators, Annie Fletcher and Nick Aikens together with the researchers based in the museum, decided to embrace her proposal which was the transformation of the traditional museum in the Museum of Arte Útil.

From the beginning the project was a challenge for both for the institutions involved in the process (Van Abbemuseum and Queens Museum of Art), the artists and the researchers. Everyone was asked to put up for discussion his or her role, identity and work methodology. Thus artists became initiators, researchers became activators, artworks changed name in case studies, curators turn out to be composers and visitors became users. The entire process was named *Social Power Plant*.



Tania Bruguera. Courtesy of the Artist

The idea behind Arte Útil has been developed and implemented with the Immigrant Movement International, supported by the Queens Museum of Art, New York. In that museum – which organised an exhibition called *Useful Art* in 1981 – Tania Bruguera had the intuition to connect artists with their ongoing projects worldwide. The first step toward the Museum of Arte Útil was the transformation of the first floor of the Queens Museum in the “Arte Útil Lab”. A space for discussion, where laboratories, seminars and talks took place around the idea of using art as a tool to change the reality we live in.

Little by little Bruguera, together with the museums' team, felt the urgency to try to trace a history and an develop an archive of case studies. Step by step we felt the desire to define a new movement, which soon became the aim of our collective effort. Hence at the end of 2012, after countless meetings via skype between the two teams based in New York and Eindhoven, the eight criteria, which define what Arte Útil is, were written.

Today the archive has a pivotal role for the entire project, and the fact that was occupying the central room of the Van Abbemuseum is not a coincidence. According to Charles Esche's words, the museum always places itself in a precise historical moment; it relates to the past, but it has to look at the future.

How can a museum reinvent itself and change its function in a transitional moment such as the one we are living in? How can it face a crisis, which is not only economical but also social and cultural? Thanks to this kind of groundbreaking projects, the museum reveals its vulnerability, but precisely through this auto-critique we can try to define why and if an institution should survive.



Apolonija Šušteršič, *Light Therapy*. Photo Peter Cox

Through the composition of the archive, we decided what makes sense to preserve for the future, but also what to remember. This is the reason why we decided to invite a number of international correspondents – chosen among curators, writers and critics engaged in social practices – who intervened suggesting artists and projects worldwide, and to launch an open call for the submission of projects. *Arte Útil* is a movement that arose from the 20th century, but aims to tell the history of the 21st century, so it must use the instruments of our present-time, one above all, the Internet. The next challenge was to give a spatial shape to the 213 selected case studies out of 507, which compose the archive. However the most difficult task was to include inside the museum spaces projects and practices that are implemented in the real world, in other words in 1:1 scale. Thinking about how to display actions producing beneficial outcomes for its users in the real world. Once again every role was challenged, starting from the space itself.

What we have, is what we really want? Is it possible to break up the idea of white cube and traditional spectatorship, which we are used to refer to when we are inside the museum?

The Museum of *Arte Útil* is an attempt to reform the modernist idea of the museum: every room, every object, everything inside the museum should be useful and produce a real beneficial outcome for the users.



The Museum of *Arte Útil*, Room of Controversies. Photo Peter Cox

Our aim was not to have the most popular exhibition, but the one in which people could spend more time in and interact with. Thus, the Museum of *Arte Útil* was free for its users. The scenography has been designed by Construct Lab, a collective which comprehends designers, sociologists, artists and graphic designers, who literally transformed the white cube, building a circular wooden wall, which cut

the museum's 10 rooms and connected the extern with the intern of the building. The connection with the city is not only symbolic, in fact we included in the team some students from the Design Academy Eindhoven and we tried to actively involve the museum's volunteers. During the 2 weeks dedicated to the installation – which happened in the spaces of the exhibition – every team member; the curators, the artists who came for the opening, the designers, the students and even some journalists, used the spaces as office, kitchen or working place trying to implement the idea of Arte Útil, from the beginning.

Finally, December the 7th 2013 was the day of the opening, which marked the beginning of the following phase, the so-called activation. Yes, because this museum doesn't really function without its users. The archive needs to be fed with new case studies, the projects must be used and every room should be filled up with people and concrete proposals to develop either in the city or elsewhere, wherever it may be useful.



Bik Van der Pol, Loompanics. Photo Peter Cox

The way towards the museum 3.0, as Stephen Wright defines it, is long and difficult, but it is necessary to transform the role of the spectator into user, in order to overcome the idea of consumer. The use of the museum, indeed, produces new value, a sort of surplus, which should be redistributed to the community. One of the projects presented in the exhibition, the *Honest Shop* by Grizedale Arts, could be considered as an example in order to understand roles and significances shifts inside the museum. The *Honest Shop* is an unstaffed shop, which sells local and homemade products. The whole idea is about clients and suppliers trust: clients should pay the right amount of money based on the product label and register their purchase in a customer book. Thus the museum becomes a sort of facilitator for the development of a local micro-economy organized by people who can benefit from their skills. This process generates both an economical and a social value because money is re-distributed both between the producers (80%) and the museum (20%) that uses the profit to organize the public program. 48 artists were invited to present their works in the frame of the exhibition; some of them are included with more than one project, for instance the Austrian collective *WochenKlausur*.

The Museum of Arte Útil suggests a new possibility toward the museum of the future, what is going to happen after?

To conclude with Tania Bruguera's words, "Arte Útil is not neo-liberal art, it's not relational aesthetics. Arte Útil is the form of practical utopia, it is also civil disobedience art. Arte Útil is trying to close the gap between contemporary art and our contemporary non-art trained audience. She always says that the world is divided in two kinds of people: those who think who are going to change the world by making fun of it, and those who have fun trying to change the world".

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