Essay
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Beyond the Exhibition?

A SPECULATION ON HOW THE MUSEUM MIGHT BE PUT TO USE

When speculating on how museums today might be put to use, two inter-dependent contexts should be considered. The first is the premise that the modern museum, a European construct first embodied in the Louvre (Paris, 1793), needs to be rethought in light of our present conjuncture.

In Europe this is felt through the dying embers of social democracy, the subsequent shift in the public's relationship to the state and notions of the public, and the need for new forms of politics that are defined outside market or managerial spheres. Such a moment calls for a change in how the museum engages with different forms of civil society, so that it might mediate positions and subjectivities emerging out of this conjuncture. Secondly, it is informed by a consideration of artistic practice and a corresponding political subjectivity that are defined by their relationship to use or what theorist Stephen Wright has termed the 'politics of usership.'[1] When brought into the institution this politics of usership, which is in part a response to current conditions, reveals some of the fundamental characteristics, suppositions, and limitations upon which museum display (and modern aesthetic experience) is based. Forcing us to look beyond questions of display, their theoretical and pragmatic methodology ask deeper questions about how the institution might allow different inputs and impulses to speak through it. How might such a process lay the ground for new forms of relations between the museum and civil society to emerge?

Let's begin by considering the exhibition *Museum of Arte Útil* at the Van Abbemuseum, which was the catalyst for this reflection and within which many of the contradictions and potentials of this predicament can be found. Initiated by artist Tania Bruguera, the exhibition was centred around an archive or inventory of over 200 projects which aimed to identify and track artistic practices that had notions of use, usership, or use-value at their core. It saw artistic thinking as a tool, as the Spanish word *útil* implies, with which to intervene in social reality.[2] The archive, which lives online,[3] begins in the early nineteenth century with the early labour-exchange project *Cincinnati Time Store*.[4] It runs up

1 See Stephen Wright, *Toward a Lexicon of Usership* (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2013), p. 2.
2 For a more in-depth description of the exhibition see Nick Aikens, 'The Use of History and the Histories of Use: Museum of Arte Útil and Really Useful Knowledge,' Alter Institutionality, L'Internationale, 13 January 2015, www.internationaleonline.org/research/alter_institutionality/14_the_use_of_history_and_the_histories_of_use_museum_of_arte_til_and_really_useful_knowledge.
3 See www.arte-util.org.
4 See www.arte-util.org/projects/cincinnati-time-store.

Fig 1 Labour exchange project *Cincinnati Time Store*, 2015

until the present day serving as a means to inventorize or track how artistic thinking has been used to negotiate perceived failings in existing social or political structures. This could mean setting up an alternative pedagogical project such as the *Public School*[5] or proposing a whole new conception of the state as in NSK's State in Time.[6] Presented through a series of groupings, such as 'Use it Yourself,' 'A-legal,' or 'Institutional Repurpose,' the extended display of the archive went in tandem with a series of live projects in the galleries such as Apolonija Šušteršic's *Light Therapy* or Grizedale Arts's *Honest Shop*.

Fig 2 A discussion, meeting, or workshop that took place within the *Museum of Arte Útil*. Discussion in Apoloijna Šušteršič's *Light Therapy Room*, 2014

Alongside these projects the museum invited the public to 'use' the museum. As a result well over a hundred different discussions, meetings, and workshops took place within the galleries ranging from city council policy meetings to students from the Eindhoven Design Academy who were using the archive room to generate ideas for new social design projects in the city.[7] All of this was housed within an elaborate scenography, conceived as a 'Social Power Plant' that aimed to draw on the knowledge generated

5 See www.arte-util.org/projects/the-public-school.
6 See www.arte-util.org/projects/state-in-time-or-nsk-state.
7 See the *Museum of Arte Útil* calendar http://museumarteutil.net/calendar.
See constructLab, 'Understanding the Social Power Plant' in this publication, pp. 436–441.

within the archive and the activities in the museum for 'fuel' to generate projects outside. The conception of the exhibition aimed to both track a history of practices and turn the museum itself into a site of usership.

The rhetoric of the Arte Útil project is deliberately polemic, defined as it is through a set of criteria and insisting on the role art should play in upsetting entrenched systems of power or market logic. Yet its presence in the institution (Van Abbemuseum) highlighted a wider issue: that the art museum and specifically the format of the exhibition is not yet able to accommodate the type of political approach this works speaks to.[8] Even though the *Museum of Arte Útil* sought to shift the notion of use onto the institution in an attempt to open itself up to different constituents, the exhibition format determines that the institution presents its knowledge to a listening and predominantly passive audience. Similarly, the exhibition format itself is complicit in a wider form of conditioning—both on the artworks it represents and the subjects it addresses. While this has been increasingly interrupted in recent years through project-based exhibitions where galleries are momentarily hijacked as sites for discussion, production, or pedagogy—becoming 'part community centre, part laboratory and part-academy' as was the case with the *Museum of Arte Útil*—they remain as interventions within the conceptual framework and architecture of the exhibition.[9] What needs to be addressed is how the question of usership can be applied more holistically to the museum.

8 The notion of what constitutes Arte Útil was arrived at via a set of criteria that was formulated by Tania Bruguera and curators at the Queens Museum in New York, Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, and Grizedale Arts in Coniston. Arte Útil projects should: 1) Propose new uses for art within society; 2) Use artistic thinking to challenge the field within which it operates; 3) Respond to current urgencies; 4) Operate on a 1:1 scale; 5) Replace authors with initiators and spectators with users; 6) Have practical, beneficial outcomes for its users; 7) Pursue sustainability; and 8) Re-establish aesthetics as a system of transformation. See www.arte-util.org/about/colophon.

9 Charles Esche, 'Beyond Institutional Critique: Modest Proposals Made in the Spirit of "Necessity is the Mother of Invention,"' in *Bik Van der Pol: With Love from the Kitchen* (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2005), pp. 22–26.

I. From Representation to Use

In *Toward a Lexicon of Usership*, commissioned as part of the *Museum of Arte Útil*, and republished in this reader, Wright opens by defining what he sees as the 'emergence of a new form of political subjectivity: that of usership.'[10] Tying the notion of usership to the onset of 2.0 culture and user-generated content he sees the political category of usership as challenging three 'deeply entrenched conceptual edifices in contemporary society: *spectatorship, expert culture and ownership*.' Importantly, these three poles are what have defined the modernist aesthetic experience, as detailed in the writings of Immanuel Kant, the eighteenth-century philosopher to which Wright directs most of his fire. He sees Kant's notions of 'disinterested spectatorship' and 'purposeless purpose' as being the bedrock upon which art has, through the course of modernism, increasingly turned in on itself, serving only as a means of reflection and limiting its traction in the real, writing:

> The former [purposeless purpose] imperative was to ensure art's universality, preserving it form the realm of use and utilitarian interest, enabling it to freely embody what he rather nicely called 'aesthetic ideas,' which could be the object of knowledge. But Kant realised that he somehow had to protect this objective dimension of art as knowledge from the slippery slopes of subjective appreciation, even while explicitly acknowledging that art was something that could only be apprehended subjectively. ... Hence his second, complementary brainchild, 'disinterested spectatorship'. It would be difficult to overstate the almost fantastic robustness of this conceptual arrangement that accounts for its extraordinary longevity.[11]

Wright's position is that a politics of usership, and its

10 Wright, *Toward a Lexicon of Usership*, p. 3.
11 Ibid., p. 20.

emergence in new forms of artistic practice, overturns Kant's two major contributions to our understanding of—or relationship to—aesthetic experience. It insists on those who engage with art as being neither disinterested nor spectators. Rather, going one step past Jacques Rancière's 'emancipated spectator,' as engaged users.

Importantly, Wright also posits that our understanding of artistic practice should be gleaned not through a reflection on abstract notions that it may conjure up, but rather through its use. Here Wright draws on the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein and specifically his idea of 'meaning through use' presented in the *Philosophical Investigations*.[12] Wittgenstein uses the analogy of a toolbox containing multiple tools, positing that we should only arrive at an understanding of the meaning of language when we consider its application, or the use of the tools. When considered abstractly (as isolated words on a page) language, and by inference philosophy at large, becomes devoid of meaning.

For art what this approach entails is a turn away from, or reliance on, representation as the primary mode of aesthetic operation. Specifically, the modernist tradition of representation turning in on itself as self-referential, representing not something with which it engages, but representation itself. This self-referential representation can easily become a mode of abstraction, which cannot be put to use and therefore no meaning can be gleaned from it. The move away from representation (or the 'de-activation of art's aesthetic function') leads to what Wright identifies as a range of art practices that take place on what he terms a 1:1 scale. These are not scaled down versions, prototypes, or representations of that which artists seek to address, but the things themselves. He writes: 'Though 1:1 scale initiatives make use of representation in any number of ways, they are not themselves representative of anything. ...

12 P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, eds. and trans., *Philosophical Investigations*, 4th edition (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

1:1 scale practices are both what they are and propositions of what they are.'[13] If artistic practice is no longer representative or scaled, how are we to discern what is art from what is not? Further still, if art projects are being played out on a 1:1 scale, 'in the real,' how can they (physically or conceptually) find a place in the museum?

Fig 3 Laurie Jo Reynolds, *Tamms Year Ten*, 2012
Fig 4 Jeanne van Heeswijk, *Freehouse*, Rotterdam, 2008

Important examples of 1:1 user-based practices are Laurie Jo Reynolds's *Tamms Year Ten* (TY10) and Jeanne van Heeswijk's *Freehouse*. Reynolds' TY10 programme was a multi-year campaign to close a maximum-security prison in Illinois. Rather than functioning as a critique of the systems of solitary confinement or under-representation for prisoners, TY10 was a political, activist campaign initiated by Reynolds and subsequently a whole team of volunteers with the intent of closing the prison, which in 2012, it succeeded in doing. Speaking to Reynolds, who as part of the *Museum of Arte Útil* spent two months in the Van Abbemuseum, was revealing; she understood TY10 as an art project, rather than as solely an activist campaign. Firstly, she said its definition as an art project could be found in its ambition and seemingly unrealizable aims. Only when conceived as art could the scale and ambition of what she was trying to do be considered. Similarly, when considering the time-based, relational aspect of TY10, the dialogic, durational mode of Reynolds's art practice becomes clear. This is a campaign that is understood through complex, emotionally laden notions of time and relations. However, throughout the project, the line between political activism and artistic project was barely discernible to the naked eye. Rather, it was, as Wright writes in relation to 1:1 scale practice 'informed by artistic self-understanding, not framed as art.' This redefinition of art through self-understanding allows us to escape the often reductive discussion of what is or isn't art and instead allow us to think more productively about how much art a project contains,

13 Wright, *Toward a Lexicon of Usership*, p. 3.

or what Wright names the 'co-efficient of art.'[14]

In the Netherlands, Van Heeswijk's *Freehouse* has seen the artist work in the Afrikaanderwijk district in Rotterdam since 2009. She has instigated a series of initiatives and commercial enterprises (a clothes studio, shop, cafe, and community centre as well as working with stall owners on the local market) that draw on the skills of the community, many of whom are migrants, and serving as a direct challenge to the mass gentrification which the neighbourhood is undergoing. The result has been the foundation of a workers' co-operative that is in a position to lobby the city government in relation to its members (who are all local traders and residents) and that has the capacity to challenge existing political or economic interests. In this sense it is an example of a form of civic organization that can shape new political positions.

What these two projects share are artists working with different constituency groups, users of the projects, over long periods of time to challenge entrenched systems. They rely on the artist relinquishing their role as sole author (rather they become organizers or orchestrators of a larger workforce) and they take place on a 1:1 scale. Importantly, they signal emergent forms of civil society that have the capacity to both challenge existing structures or put forward alternatives.

Returning to Wright, what he does so effectively in his lexicon is to link this type of artistic thinking to what he sees as a 'broader usological turn' in society. Wright sees this as being ushered in by the disintegration of long-held collective political frameworks. In Europe this is most visible through the long decline of social democracy, which has relied heavily on consensus and representative democracy. Within this long decline, larger, more structured forms of political representation such as trade unions, have waned dramatically. Usership, as a mode of political action is interesting precisely because it steps outside (or simply doesn't have time for) consensus

14 Ibid., p. 13.

or political representation. It speaks directly through its users. Similarly, users like the hacker community for example are not to be found in state institutions or academies but in the cracks of civil society. Further still (and perhaps unfortunately), usership does not purport to offer a grand political narrative, rather it is simply implemented within existing systems, as with TY10 or *Freehouse*. Indeed, what is interesting about Wright's notion of usership is that it is not articulated collectively, but visible through its application and the manner in which it intervenes in the contexts where it is found.

Fig 5 Laurie Jo Reynolds, *Tamms Year 10*, archival installation at the Museum of Arte Útil, Van Abbemuseum, 2014

II: Distance of Display

The prospect of the institution aligning itself with such methodologies and political approaches is appealing. Indeed it was one of the motivations for initiating the *Museum of Arte Útil* and including TY10 and *Freehouse* as major contributions to the exhibition. Yet, the very concept of a *Museum of Arte Útil* and the presentation of such projects presents an inherent contradiction: namely by bringing projects and ways of working that happened in the field, on a 1:1 scale and often over long periods into the museum, they become frozen, subject to institutional capture and modes of presentation. The

format of the exhibition, where projects are represented through photographs, documents, or accounts of activities that happened elsewhere, brings into sharp relief questions surrounding display, context, and the framing of the museum. The exhibition format instigates a fundamental—even ontological—shift in the reading of a project. They inevitably lose their status as 1:1 practice. They are reframed, 'de-fanged' as Wright would say, as representational art. The mode of translation that takes place when projects are presented in the museum, such as the elaborate cartographic installation that Van Heeswijk used to represent *Freehouse* or the detailed archival presentation of TY10, can allow for different relations and time frames within a project to be mapped. But the people and contexts involved inevitably become flattened by their presence in the museum. The result is twofold: returning to Wittgenstein, we are unable to understand their meanings as we are unable to grapple fully with their use. Their defining characteristic as user-based practices—how they draw on multiple inputs and necessarily mutate and unfold—is codified through representational systems, be they maps, archives, or photographs. In some respects this critique could be seen as specific to the type of projects that Arte Útil is engaged with. However, the way in which the context formed by museum display informs how artworks are understood can be seen as one of the founding critiques of museum and exhibition practice.

What are the implications for the museum if it is to think beyond the distance of display? This question is not to renounce the exhibition but rather to acknowledge what a move beyond it might mean, both pragmatically and theoretically. In his book *Museum Memories: History, Technology, Art* (1999)[15] literary scholar Didier Maleuvre, begins by recounting the criticisms that accompanied the opening of the Louvre—one of the first public museums—in Paris in 1793, articulated particularly in

Fig 6 Hubert Robert, *Refurbishment project of the Grande Galerie of the Louvre*, 1796, oil on canvas, 115 x 145 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris

15 Didier Maleuvre, *Museum Memories: History, Technology, Art* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

the writings of the influential Quatremère de Quincy.[16] Maleuvre notes that at the heart of his critique was the argument that artworks should be seen in their original context for their true meaning to be understood. 'An art work without its original context vanishes,' he writes.[17] For De Quincy, the 'social dictates' as Maleuvre calls them, are the most pressing thing when understanding the work of art—its publicness, its authenticity, and he even goes so far as to point to its 'use' writing: 'I need to find them useful, in order to find them beautiful.'[18]

Contemporaneous to De Quincy's critique of the Louvre is the introduction of Kant's notions of the 'disinterested spectator' and 'purposeless purpose' which, Wright would argue, were both set up to empty the aesthetic experience of notions of use and subjectivity.[19] Viewed from this perspective, the primary philosophical and experiential ingredients of the modern museum experience was one that sought to create distance, both literal and conceptual, between the work of art and the world at large. Fast forward over two hundred years and the problems encountered by the display of user-based practices is not entirely new.

For Kant and subsequently many others this distancing is what allows artworks and their contexts to be meaningfully mediated and for a political space to be formed. Indeed, Maleuvre sees De Quincy's critique and insistence on 'art's entrenchment in immanence' as a far more potent neutralizing factor than the context of the institution.[20] If they are unable to reflect on the culture out of which they sprung, they have no critical traction. Hegel is the figure who is crucial in articulating that the work of art only in fact appears once it abstracts itself from the framework of what he describes as 'empirical immediacy.'

16 The influential artist, art historian, and then director of the Académie des Beaux-Arts (1816–1839), Quatremère wielded huge influence as a cultural actor and commentator in late eighteenth, early nineteenth-century Paris.

17 Maleuvre, *Museum Memories*, p. 32.

18 Ibid.

19 Significantly, Wright's argument doesn't acknowledge that this emptying out was seen by Kant as a means to distinguish the private interest from the common good, which would serve as a prerequisite to engage with the latter.

20 Wright, *Toward a Lexicon of Usership*, p. 33.

Maleuvre recounts: 'Hegel reveals that what Quatremère holds to be the very heart of the artwork, its original context, is actually merely incidental. Where the artwork once belonged is a comparatively superficial matter, Hegel claims.' It is the move into the museum that allows a mediation on the artwork and its context to take place.

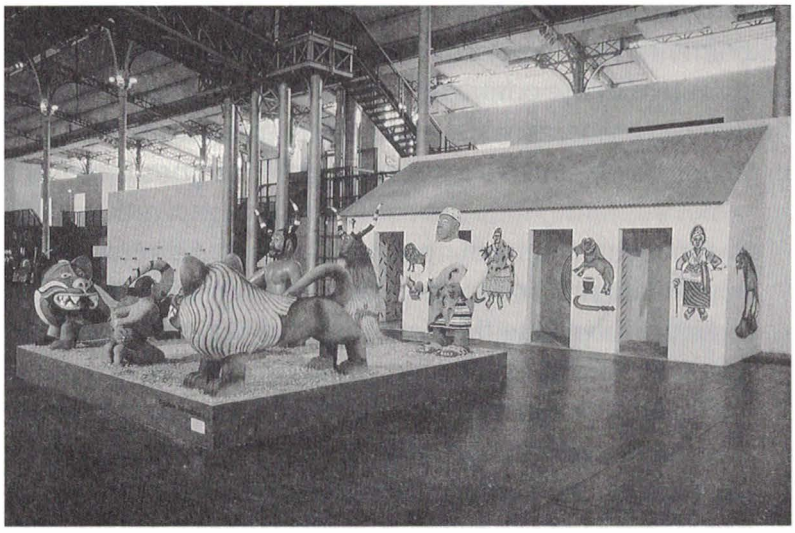

Fig 7 Exhibition view *Magiciens de la terre*, curated by Jean-Hubert Martin, La Grande Halle, Parc de la Villette, Paris, 1989

Yet when one thinks how the space of the museum has evolved into the architecture of the modernist white cube, the potential of the distancing of display becomes subsumed within a context and political formation all its own—namely that of a modernist, Western construction with a specific mode of conditioning, both of the art it presents and the subjects it speaks to. This becomes most explicit with the Western museum's move to incorporate artworks form the so-called 'global south.' Think of the de-contextualizing move made by the curators of *Magiciens de la terre* at the Centre Pompidou, Paris in 1989, for example, who purported to present artworks from outside the West next to their European and American counterparts on an equal footing, giving primacy to the

materiality and formal quality of the objects themselves.[21] Such a strategy took place within the framework of the white cube or its moving image counterpart, the black box, meaning the cultural context of the work of art becomes determined not through understanding the origins out of which it came, but through its colonial capture in the museum. Museum framing, far from opening up new readings and political potential, freezes its contents. Returning to Maleuvre, such a freezing is indicative of the contradiction of museum display: 'Museums are paradoxical: they shelter restlessness but in doing so, they build a home around it.' He goes on:

> The museum thus manifests modern culture in the grip of a capitalist dynamic of historical production. Museums replicate the tensions of capital, with its fits of accumulation and expenditure, stockpiling and liquidation: museums preserve culture in a permanent state of rootlessness, that is they choose rootlessness as the principle by which to conserve culture. In capitalism as in the museum, rootlessness turns into a principle, into permanent impermanence.[22]

Such a position is a worrying indictment, yet the contradiction is persuasive. For if we accept the 'paradox' of culture's rootlessness within the museum and that this 'replicates' the tensions of capital, the supposed political or interpretive potential afforded by the space of the museum and the distance of display seems increasingly untenable. Viewed in this light, the contradiction inherent within a *Museum of Arte Útil* is indicative of a wider paradox implicit within museum display: that museum display mirrors capitalist conditioning. The task today would appear to be how to foster, rather than conserve, a condition of restlessness?

21 See Pablo Lafuente, 'Introduction: From the Outside In—"Magiciens de la Terre" and Two Histories of Exhibitions,' in *Making Art Global (Part 2): 'Magiciens de la Terre' 1989*, Lucy Steeds et al. Exhibition Histories Series (London: Afterall, 2013), pp. 8–23.
22 Maleuvre, *Museum Memories*, pp. 38–39.