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with Patricia Vasquez

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What is the relationship between Arte de Conducta, Arte Útil and Political-Timing Specific?

The relationship between all these concepts is the frustration I have with the way language and concepts are used to explain artistic actions, practices and experiences. It is not that I consider impossible extrapolating something into written/spoken language, but I see over and over the easy ways in which people misuse artistic concepts. Critics, artists, and art historians, we all have forced art concepts into art practices that need new definitions to be explained. How many times you have heard a young artist defining his/her practice as conceptual art just because it vaguely resembles the "look" of a conceptual art piece, but have no intention to follow that research? Sometimes such declaration is made simply because it is the easiest way out of that kind of conversation but mostly it is the result of a lack of proper concepts to define the practice. Too often things are being put together because of how they look and not because of their purposes and intentions, misleading the understanding of artistic practices around us. While doing that kind of declarations states historical continuity, it is also a reductionism.

The need to historicize one's work, to put it in the context of art history and of your contemporaries, is acquired during your student years, it is not a natural impulse. Your natural impulse as an artist is to express yourself and to try to understand things around you. In my case, as a person coming from a country that, while a western one, is surrounded by mystique and misinformation, I found myself in the early years of my art practice explaining the context the work was reacting to/dialoguing with, in order to have the reading I wanted from the work. I had few incidents where critics approached my work and even wrote about it projecting superficial relationships with other artists' work,

or where they tried to force it into certain art traditions that had nothing to do with what I even knew. They mostly projected their misinformation, prejudices and idealisms about Cuba. I'm not saying that the artist is the sole authority over the work and I actually enjoy when critics see a perspective in my work that I have not even thought about; but I had to spend a lot of years re-directing the understanding of my work and explaining the mistakes critics made. Now I have their texts in my website and when they are not accurate I include a note, so people know that this was not the intention of the work or that the data is inaccurate. This is also why I have favored the interview format over the essay; I had to learn to explain the work as much as I had to learn how to do the work.

Another moment when I had extreme difficulties with artistic concepts/traditions was when I was studying performance art in the United States for my Master degree. I went to study it because it was the practice I felt more interested in, and very few places offered performance studies. In the process I found how my practice was much more linked to political actions/performances/issues in Cuba, Latin America and the former socialist countries than practices coming from New York in the 70's. Having to put my work in front of those historical traditions, explain it from those perspectives, felt as a colonization act. I was wondering why people could not do the opposite: try to understand the work's political context from within. Another element was the fact that I had to speak in a language that I could not master and from which nuances were absent, it made me feel that my work was extremely simplistic, as it was the understanding of it. I was very frustrated, explaining why the work was not this and was not that. Then, I decided to start defining what I was doing by what it was instead of what it was not. That at least would put people in the position of stopping their mechanical assumptions and start the conversation from other grounds. It was important that the concept was in Spanish to highlight the fact that you were missing some cultural references, as well as stating clearly that it belonged to another tradition, another context.

Performance art as well as Social/Public Art Practice are relatively young practices, therefore concepts from other practices are very often used to define them, instead of finding what could be more accurate. It is too easy to explain something that is still in its defining stage as something else that is already well defined and we all agree on; but is not the same thing nor have the same intentions. Doing this has very dangerous implications. Often what is seen as an incongruence in social art practice is not really an incongruence of the practice or of the specific artwork analyzed; but it is just the incongruence of using a term that doesn't belong to that practice and consequently, using a point of view and a set of values that are dislocated. It is hard to be coherent as a social art practitioner when your work is scrutinized with concepts from installation art or minimal art or painting. Finding new ways to name the elements you are working with or processes you have to go through to create your work, and that are not reflected on concepts you know already, is not only a political act but also a way to not get trapped on limited expectations and outcomes of the art practice.

Does Arte Útil have consequences? Of what kind ?

The point of Arte Útil (Useful Art) is to imagine, create, develop and implement something that is giving people a clearly beneficial outcome. It is art because it comes from that practice, which is to say that it comes from the hope and the belief that things can be done in a better way, even when the conditions are not there yet for it to happen. Art is the space from which one behaves as if the conditions for things to happen are in place and everybody had agreed on what we are proposing. It is about making believe, while we know that we don't have much more than the belief itself.

Arte Útil is about understanding that art, as a propositional format, is not enough anymore. Arte Útil goes from the state of a proposition onto its implementation in the real. It is about understanding that propositions coming from the arts have to go onto their next step and be implemented; that they have to leave the realm of the unreachable, of the desired impossibility, to be part of the realm of the existent, the realm of the real and functional. While Arte Útil can be like a 'pilot' or 'beta' program, it has to be presented in

its working stage and hopefully shown to / shared with the people that can make it happen in a larger and more established format i.e. people who benefits from the work, activists, politicians, philanthropists, etc. Art made as Arte Útil does not have a planned obsolescence, to the contrary, it is a proposal that can be taken by others and continued without the artist's further intervention. The artist proposes its possible lifespan, some projects are imagined as short and concrete, other projects are desired as to having a longer impact in people's life, taken by society at large. Arte Útil is not about consumption but about making happen.

Arte Útil is about transforming affect into effectiveness.

For Arte Útil failure is not a possibility. If the project fails it is not Arte Útil. The artist has the challenge to find the ways in which her proposition can actually work. So, the means by which the work is done do not depend on a capricious ideal, but on what can actually be achieved and on how much one can push reality into the dreamed. Therefore the outlines of the project are determined by the relationship with the people for whom the work is done and the alterations of the conditions in which they will be done. The momento d'oro (golden moment) appears when the project is actually in motion, when people for which it is done understand it, when they expropriate it from the artist and they make it their own. Arte Útil intervenes in people's life and hopefully becomes part of people's life.

Claire Bishop has written that, for you, Arte Útil is not about doing something good, but about a conjunction of usefulness and illegality, can you expand in this idea?

When you are imagining society functioning differently and you want this to be shared and experienced as a reality, you encounter one of your biggest obstacles: the law. We know too well about the function of the law and the way in which social and civic progressive ideas are always implemented with too many compromises. By the time they acquire legal status such ideas and concepts are in need to be challenged with updated,

more progressive views. Laws are temporary regulations and as citizens it is our duty to push them as much as we can.

In social art there is this recurrent reference to good as equivalent to kindness, it is a very boring idea that artists are doing methodologically plain and simple good to people with their art. It reminds me when people were talking about performance as a healing device, as therapy. I have even heard some critics referring to artists doing some social projects as having Mother Teresa's syndrome. Social art is not about rescuing people but about giving people tools to rescue themselves. Social art is not about falsely seeing the good in all but about trusting people's growth. I am not sure that doing what people think is good is always the right path to achieve a good result, and yet, good does not mean the same thing for everybody. Most of the time transformation is a very painful and erratic path. Sometimes people need to confront many 'demons' to arrive to a new stage of their selves, and 'doing good' creates dependency. Also, you may solve one problem through art for an specific person in an specific situation, but you know that it was only one of the many problems people have to solve, so that is not very comforting either. The artist doing social art is not a shaman, nor a magician, nor a healer, nor a saint, nor a mom; it is closer to a teacher, to a negotiator, to a builder for social behavior and social structures. So I am not sure that good is the right word nor the right attitude. Social art works with direct reality; dealing with it is not about 'good' or bad that would be an over simplification and a too easy self-gratification for the artist. One doesn't work in the social sphere to feel good but to think of a different society.

What new insights you have in your concept of Arte Útil as Immigrant Movement International continues to live and develop?

Arte Útil is the way in which I practice social art. It is a socially coherent (artistic) material that works as the entry point for the audience. Too often one hears about the barrier between the artwork and the un-informed audience that can't access the work. The usefulness of the work for the audience, when we talk about social engaged art, is key on my view to solve this problem.

Regarding the development of Immigrant Movement International, its first year was devoted to educate ourselves on the language of real politics and to set up a hyper-realistic copy of a community center. We went from providing services last year to making the participation of the members of the community more inclusive. This year it is going through a transition for the members to take over the project in the near future.

How do you see art in the gallery / museum / art market as being useful?

Each exhibition format has its own social goals and natural audience, each can be used in a specific way while you are aware of the ways in which artistic value and audience's attention works on each. In the case of social art practice I think these formats are a material to work with as context not as the end in itself.

Is it important for an artist to own their ideas?

In terms of work process, social and political art practice is a collective effort where the artist's role mutates over time: from initiator (the one that proposes the idea), to information conduit (educating and sharing with the group the explanation of the project, open to new developments of the idea from the group), to facilitator (of the direction of the project), to disappear (becoming another member of the group giving his/her role to another member).

It is hard to let authorship go, because of the way we are educated in art schools and because of the way art market works, but one has to do it. If you work in the social sphere, what is more gratifying than seeing your idea incorporated into people's daily life? Or into a social program in a city? Or into nuances in people's lexicon? That seems to me as the natural place for social art works that achieve their highest level of popularity. The same way that images based on art get to live as part of a shower curtain, a tea cup or a t-shirt, for socially engaged art its pop distribution should be society itself, society's civic institutions, social behavior and so on.

What is the benefit of art stepping into other realms (pedagogy, journalism, social work or something else)? What is the responsibility that art has upon other disciplines?

First of all it is a matter of coherence. If you position yourself between two practices, let's say for the sake of this conversation that you choose to do art stepping into journalism, what seems more interesting is not only that art could benefit from journalism (using its techniques, concepts, creative views, etc) to expand the language and the outcomes of art, but that art can provide some strategies, some new avenues to journalism; having artists and journalists as audiences with the same level of interest.

It is also a matter of exigency. For example I have seen artists working on electronic or on scientific technology that are seen with great enthusiasm, as something new and exciting by the art world. But when the people working at the same level of the artist but in the other sphere see the work, they are not motivated nor interested because either the proposal is completely absurd in a way that is not bringing a creative thought to them, or because the subject or the research used by the artist is old news for them.

Using resources from other practices without trying to bring new values to such practice is an exercise of plain formalism.

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