



## Features

# Don't Look the Other Way: Escuela de Arte Útil

By Elia Rita November 21, 2017

*In-depth, critical perspectives exploring art and visual culture on the West Coast.*

Art-related practitioners are increasingly called on to affect systemic change, and are asked to contribute, transform, and engage with the community. This seemingly herculean task might add up to an intermittent sense of helplessness, because art was once encapsulated in an autonomous realm where artists were considered powerless to affect reality. However, some assert that socially engaged art practices, which often run parallel to and push against mainstream art history, can free us from a “feeling of guilt or regret, which you necessarily have in more representational modes of working.”<sup>1</sup>

Freedom or burden? A feeling of guilt came, for the first time, in autumn, after eight weeks in *Escuela de Arte Útil* (*School of Useful Art*), a pedagogical project that lasted from June 20 to August 10, 2017, and was commissioned by Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco to coincide with the exhibition *Tania Bruguera: Talking to Power/Hablándole al Poder*. Prior to my attendance at the *Escuela*, and to my living in the Bay Area, I was a performance artist in Spain. I came to San Francisco to finish my thesis on walking as an aesthetic and political instrument of public space reappropriation, a spatial right at risk of being paved over by unrestrained privatization. Now, after being involved in the *Escuela*, I have called into question the ethical claims of my practice. Have I been able to transcend plain (self)expression in my work? Am I truly engaging with the politics of poetics?



Alistair Hudson, guest instructor at *Escuela de Arte Útil*, a commissioned art project for the exhibition *Tania Bruguera: Talking to Power/Hablándole al Poder*, Yerba Buena

Center for the Arts, San Francisco, 2017. Courtesy of Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Photo: Nando Alvarez-Perez

Art education in Spain, although slowly evolving, focuses mostly on the fields of symbolism and metaphor, even though the discipline of social-practice art has gained traction since the 2008 economic crisis. An alarming amount of art students are gently pushed into the world, “blissed” with innocence, unaware that its problems can be tackled *using* their skills and resources, outdistancing representation and exhibition. Acknowledging the lack of such training in my art education, and the controversies raised by Arte Útil and other forms of social-practice art, I decided to attend the *Escuela* as an auditor. Thus, I could legitimately question the proposed good intentions and results of my practice and theirs.

Eight weeks, three days a week, four hours a day, added up to a total of 128 hours of free, academic concentration on Arte Útil, compared to a scant twenty-minute presentation on a similar idea—*artivism*—during the four years of my BFA in Spain. The notion of what constitutes Arte Útil arrived via a set of criteria formulated by Tania Bruguera and a group of curators from Queens Museum (New York), Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven, the Netherlands), and Grizedale Arts (Coniston, England), throughout their independent collaborations with the artist. Arte Útil designates an art that overcomes the aesthetic role posited by modernism, and operates as a tool for social, political, and cultural change. This mode of operation often keeps its name untranslated, as the Spanish word *útil* means both “tool” (a noun, describing its function) and “useful” (an adjective, placing value).



Class assignments of *Escuela de Arte Útil*, a commissioned art project for the exhibition *Tania Bruguera: Talking to Power/Hablándole al Poder*, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, 2017. Courtesy of Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Photo: Nando Alvarez-Perez.

In contrast to the slow-paced advancement of the Spanish university, four Bay Area schools—whom Bruguera noted in a recent interview “normally compete with each other”<sup>2</sup>—swiftly joined forces to form *Escuela de Arte Útil*, in cooperation with the Asociación de Arte Útil, a communication forum and database of case studies and resources co-directed by Bruguera and Alistair Hudson (Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art), YBCA, and Van Abbemuseum. California College of the Arts, San Francisco Art Institute, the University of California, Berkeley, and San Francisco State University all granted school credit to students who committed to consistent attendance and active participation at the *Escuela*. Three economic hypotheses might explain their eagerness: the allocation of funds shaping the sociopolitical commitment of the academy; the (un)availability of public social services inevitably motivating certain types of practices, and the art market’s latest trends dictating the universities’ agendas.



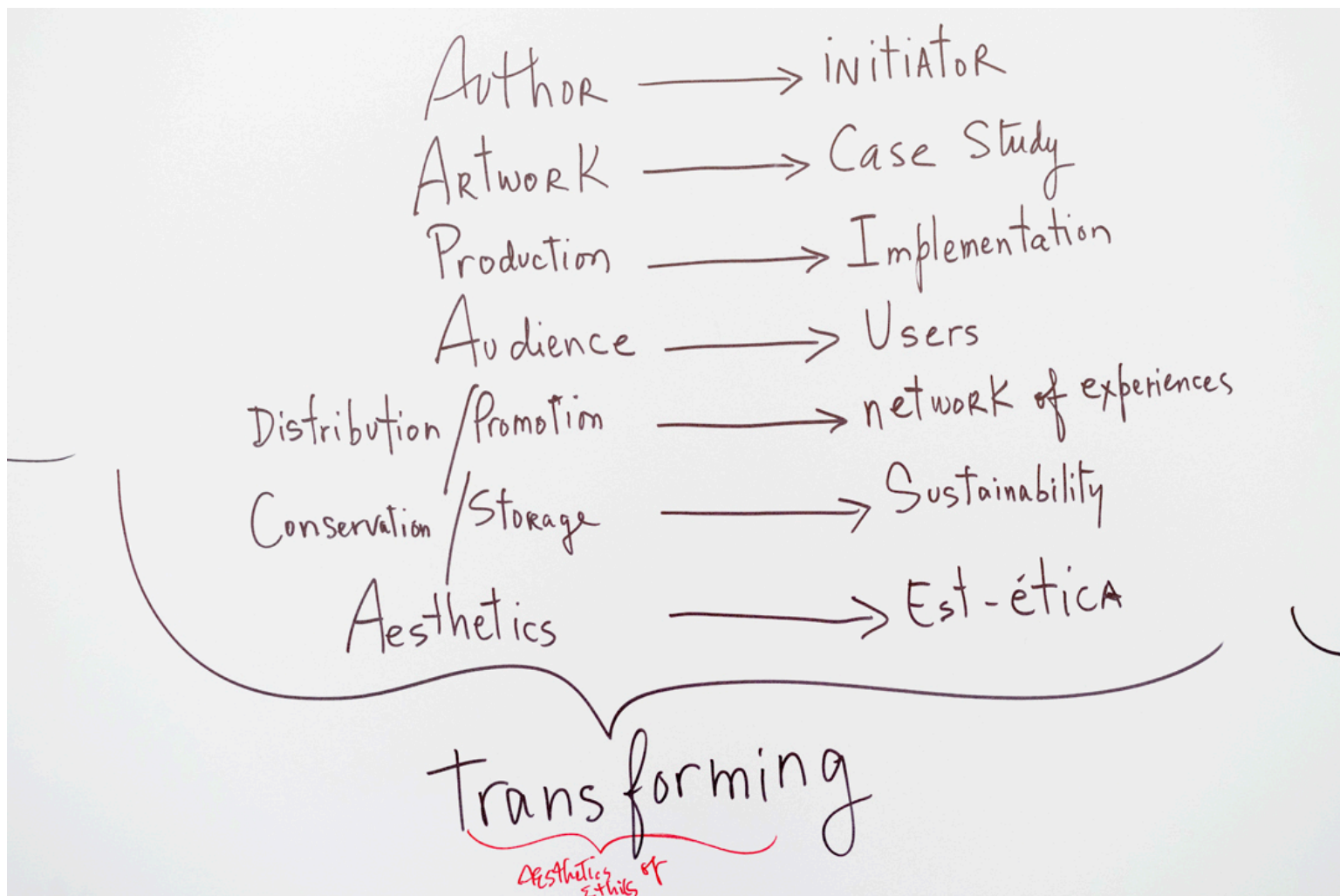
The *Escuela* was both an update of an earlier pedagogical project initiated by Bruguera in Havana—*Cátedra Arte de Conducta (Behavior Art School) (2003–2009)*—and the implementation of an Arte Útil initiative designed to provide practical and beneficial outcomes for its users. By way of a performative act, the *Escuela* not only asserted that another type of art was possible, but that art education could be free in the United States if institutions are willing to pool funds, organizational skills, and infrastructure. The proposal surpassed mere exhibition through embodiment; art educators and students, administrators, and community members all assembled within the walls of an exhibition to attend a fully functioning school.



Discussion after the lecture on "Institutional Self-Criticism" at *Escuela de Arte Útil*, a commissioned art project for the exhibition *Tania Bruguera: Talking to Power/Hablándole al Poder*, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, 2017. Courtesy of Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Photo: Nando Alvarez-Perez.

YBCA made a step in the direction of "usership," in an attempt to leave behind the often-uncontested notion of spectatorship that is so familiar in museums, as Stephen Wright, key scholar in Arte Útil, proposes in *Towards a Lexicon of Usership*. If this example was followed, educational initiatives inside the museum would allow for the roles of the spectator and student to not only be interchangeable, but transcended. Replicating the model set by the *Cátedra*, invitations were given to officially enrolled students at the participating schools or through YBCA's adult fellowship program, and anyone from the general public interested in attending on a drop-in basis (with paid gallery admission or "Pay What You Can" membership of YBCA) could do so, enlarging the number of participants considerably. As with Bruguera's house in Havana, the week finished with a party, this time on the art institution's premises. The school configuration was rendered, as Claire Bishop points out in an essay referring to the *Cátedra*, both official and informal.<sup>3</sup>

Despite these gestures of anti-institutional rebellion, the *Escuela* kept a vertical hierarchy of unidirectional knowledge-sharing, and resorted to conventional pedagogical methodologies: lectures, readings, and group assignments all directed toward a final Arte Útil project prototype. After an introduction during the first week to Arte Útil and the archive of case studies that legitimizes this art genre, individual artists, collectives, and curators were invited to illustrate the topics mentioned on the syllabus: "a-legality," "active hyperrealism," "reforming capital," "beneficial outcomes," "sustainability," "intersection with other disciplines," and "modes of creative collaboration." Also, one-to-one meetings with guest instructors or Bruguera were available every Friday, outside of the class schedule.



The Aesthetics of Ethics. *Escuela de Arte Útil*, a commissioned art project for the exhibition *Tania Bruguera: Talking to Power/Hablándole al Poder*, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, 2017. Courtesy of Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Photo: Nando Alvarez-Perez.

In an interview with Gemma Medina Estupiñan after the *Escuela's* run at YBCA concluded, she evaluated the areas of improvement of the *Escuela* on behalf of Asociación de Arte Útil, and acknowledged the need for a horizontal structure that would allow for the power dynamics inherent in a teacher–student relationship to be dismantled.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the immaterial wealth of the social network was made visible only toward the end of the *Escuela*, when the artist and community organizer Rick Lowe, guest instructor in the sixth week, proposed a roundtable for a group introduction, commonplace in social practice but otherwise missing in the *Escuela's* curriculum. Participants—who had been arbitrarily split up since the beginning into small assemblies, hindering the ability to form interpersonal relationships, and distributed spatially within a conventional classroom arrangement—were, only then, able to notice their own potential.

Nevertheless, there has been a sincere dedication to the formation and future betterment of *Escuela de Arte Útil*. In its first iteration at YBCA, the outcomes of its untested character and nomadic nature suggested several adjustments, which have already been advanced for consecutive editions. The next installation of the *Escuela* will be at ICA Virginia Commonwealth University in January 2018, and then in Mexico during the summer of 2018. There, in order to foster more thoughtful interactions between the attendees and the broader community, the *Escuela's* open call will target a multidisciplinary enrollment, its duration will be extended, and the prototypes of Arte Útil projects proposed by the participants will be appended to existing, context-specific initiatives.





Members of the Asociación de Arte Útil and students at Escuela de Arte Útil, a commissioned art project for the exhibition *Tania Bruguera: Talking to Power/Hablándole al Poder*, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, 2017. Courtesy of Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Photo: Nando Alvarez-Perez

My experience in the *Escuela* made me realize that a feeling of guilt or regret will appear in all of us who, confronted with this *útil* mode of working, continue falling into the aesthetic gesture and placing our artistic and curatorial vision ahead of current urgencies. We can, and should, remain critical of socially engaged art practices, but since they have opened our eyes to a new way of art making—which becomes more generative and effective upon each examination—looking the other way might be a sign of carelessness.

[Editor's Note: The author of this article is a co-translator of the cited *Towards a Lexicon of Usership* by Stephen Wright.]

## Notes

1. "Arte Útil and Actioning Desire. Annie Fletcher in Conversation with Tania Bruguera." *What's the Use?: Constellations of Art, History, and Knowledge: A Critical Reader* (Valiz, 2016), 318–323.
2. Monica Westin, "Escuela de Arte Útil: A Proto-Institution Implementing Performance as Usefulness," *Art & Education*, Oct. 11, 2017, accessed Nov. 8, 2017, <http://www.artandeducation.net/schoolwatch/158874/escuela-de-arte-til-a-proto-institution-implementing-performance-as-usefulness>.
3. Claire Bishop, "Pedagogic Projects: 'How Do You Bring a Classroom to Life as If It Were a Work of Art?'," *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (Verso, 2012), 241–250.
4. From a personal communication with Gemma Medina Estupiñan on November 6, 2017.

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