



## Use the Museum

Escuela de Arte Útil (School of Useful Art), June 20–August 10, 2017, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, California

In an act of extreme self-sacrifice, renowned Cuban artist Tania Bruguera once loaded a bullet into a revolver and played Russian roulette in front of a live audience. She has been arrested, bruised, dragged by the hair and charged for publicly defending free speech. Just recently she announced her candidacy to become Cuba's next president and urged others to do the same as an antidote to the fear-based apathy that grips Havana. Her actions are not forms of dissidence nor opposition. They do not advocate for a single group nor ideology, but for *everyone*. Bruguera enunciates her resistance as political art.

Over the course of summer (in the northern hemisphere) I was fortunate to attend a few sessions of *Escuela de Arte Útil* (School of Useful Art), a new iteration of an ongoing project by Bruguera commissioned by YBCA as part of her major survey *Tania Bruguera: Talking to Power / Hablándole al Poder*. In short, the *Escuela* is a classroom set up inside the gallery where students explore the concept of *Arte Útil* (translated as both *useful art* and *art as a tool*) and its potential to effect social and political change. As a sporadic member of the *Escuela* I want to clarify that this account is not exhaustive but rather a glimpse into the some of the discussions that took place at the *Escuela* over the past couple of months.

As you enter the main gallery, a revolver sits on top of an otherwise empty table, facing a group of empty plastic chairs. Towards the back, footage of Bruguera performing *Self-sabotage* reveals the installation as a tableau of the moment where she held the gun to her temple and pressed the trigger at the 53rd Venice Biennale in 2009. Just outside that room, another installation recreates a public performance (*Tatlin's Whisper #6*) where Bruguera gave Cuban citizens an open mic to speak

freely about their concerns for one minute, resulting in the arrest of her collaborators, participants and Bruguera herself (in an aborted second iteration of the work in 2014). Weaving through other works in the show, a few steps further towards the back quadrant of the main gallery, the set-up for the *Escuela* becomes visible.

Paired with teaching essentials (whiteboards, mic/speakers, and a screen), a series of modular cube seats made of mdf board and foam are scattered above a large orange carpet where the students sprawl. The energetic hue of the carpet extends from underneath the cubes to the wall, and spills out onto an external wall, visually connecting the *Escuela* to a courtyard where participants huddle between sessions to continue their discussions or to have a bite under the sun. Out in the courtyard, above eye view, a customisable marquee visible from the street delivers messages from the students—such as ‘art is a verb,’ ‘use the museum’ and ‘u r not a loan’—to the outside world. These paired-back yet deliberate elements of design tie the space together and bring to mind a Bauhausian use-driven kind of simplicity.

Although YBCA describes the *Escuela* as an ‘immersive public art project’, it almost feels wrong to draw a line around it, to pigeonhole it. At times an artwork, relational work, university course, or social initiative—the *Escuela* has many hats and it’s this condition of existing between categories that gives it its strength. Gallery visitors might stumble across it mid-session and see it as a live, participatory work, while students from affiliated universities (California College of the Arts, San Francisco Art Institute, the University of California, Berkeley, San Francisco State University) get actual university credits for attending.

The format of the *Escuela* is unlike other educational and public programs offered by museums, which might extend to a few days in the case of symposiums. The *Escuela* takes its time, practising the notion of ‘slow art,’ which is championed by Bruguera early in the syllabus. As explained by the artist, slow art opposes the quick consumption of art and its commercialisation, and instead believes in art not as a product but as a tool that can be used to respond to current issues. Accordingly, four hour-long sessions take place three days of the week over a period of nearly three months where Bruguera, the students and an array of local and international lecturers and guests—including Jeanne van Heeswijk, Alistair Hudson, Rick Lowe, Debt Collective, WochenKlausur, AntiEviction Mapping Project, Bonnie Ora Sherk, and Karissa McKelvey of Debt Collective—unpack questions surrounding the usability of art, its potential to address social urgencies and the role and responsibility that artists and cultural institutions have in this endeavour.

In class, Bruguera’s passion, earnest demeanor and hunger to incite participation are palpable and nothing short of admirable. In some of the early sessions, as she lays down the concepts that form the foundation of *Arte Útil* together with guest lecturer Alastair Hudson (co-director of *The Asociación de Arte Útil* and director of the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art) the values that have come to characterise her own socially driven practice over the decades inevitably come to the light.

In terms of its genesis, *Arte Útil* derives from a parallel or alternative art-historical trajectory. Renouncing Immanuel Kant’s conception of art as autonomous, separate from the messiness of life, Hudson remarks on figures such as John Ruskin (1818-1900), and movements like the Arts & Crafts Movement, the Mechanics Institutes, the Hull House in Chicago and the Bauhaus, all of which shared a view of art as

something practical and integrated into different facets of life. Similarly, *Arte Útil* rejects the autonomy of art and proposes that art exists as a network, an ecology of use that is not separate from the everyday, one that looks outwards and is concerned with the ethical and political dimensions of artistic creativity rather than with its value in the market.

When it comes to the white cube, it's not a matter of rejecting museum structures for Bruguera and Hudson but rather re-thinking them and seeing how far they can bend. By focusing on usefulness as an entry point for audiences, rather than a site for passive viewing, the museum can function as a civic space where the citizen is at the centre. The citizen gives value to art and art gives value back. The relation is reciprocal. It's this reconfiguration of relationships within museums that is essential to *Arte Útil*. Even in terms of the language that art institutions use, *Arte Útil* proposes a new lexicon: the *author* that *produces an artwork* for an *audience* is replaced by an *initiator* that *implements a case study* for the benefit of *users*. The *distribution and promotion* of work is replaced by a *network of experiences*, shifting the emphasis towards values of *sustainability* and *ethics*. The language here shifts from one of art to social transformation.

These values are also reflected in Hudson's directorship at MIMA through what he calls the Museum 3.0, a museum that functions in terms of its usership, and more broadly across YBCA's programming, especially through the vision of its recently appointed director of Visual Arts Lucía Sanromán. Although it's important to acknowledge that there's an element of risk in taking on a project like the *Escuela* (and the exhibition at large)—especially for a key cultural institution bound by discourses dominated by autonomous art objects—Sanromán, together with curatorial associate Susie Kantor, have blazingly resolved the difficulties in representing actions and social processes within a gallery context. This is not to say that Bruguera is not in high institutional demand despite the fact she refuses to abide by the market, rather it is evidence of a systemic shift that has been taking place across cultural institutions artists have been increasingly allowed to redirect museum resources towards socially driven projects. The *Escuela* itself is only a small part in a decade long project full of successful collaborations between Bruguera and number of cultural institutions. It began as the evolution of her previous work *Cátedra Arte de Conducta (Behavior Art School)*, which took place at her home in Havana from 2003 through 2009, and ever since Bruguera has been teaching and researching *Arte Útil* through an academy in Havana; the *Arte Útil* lab at Queens Museum, through residencies at Immigrant Movement International, New York and at the Museum of *Arte Útil*, in the Old Building of the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.

Although this language of social transformation has become to ubiquitous and some of these buzzwords seem to be part of every arts grant application, there is something different about *Arte Útil*. So much socially engaged and public art loses sight of who ultimately benefits and frankly, in the great majority of cases, it's the artist and museum that gain cultural capital while the communities they work in or represent remain largely unaffected. This is one of the biggest ongoing challenges that socially engaged community-based public art has faced over the past two decades. Recognising this paradox, Bruguera, together with curators at the Queens Museum, New York, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven and Grizedale Arts, Coniston, formulated a criteria of 8 points to determine the constitutive characteristics of *Arte Útil* projects.

*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
- 8) Re-establish aesthetics as a system of transformation

Through the contribution of researchers and curators such as Gemma Medina Estupiñan and Alessandra Saviotti, Bruguera and the *Asociación de Arte Útil* have created a comprehensive archive of 200 art projects that have been vetted as meeting the 8 criteria—such as a project where an artist discovered how to make bulletproof skin in the lab by using spider silk; a boat fitted-out for practicing legal and safe abortions in international waters; and a project that used a Brazilian telenovela as a medium to educate domestic labourers about fair employment rights. The archive is the backbone of *Arte Útil* and far from static, it keeps on evolving. Throughout the course of the *Escuela*, many of these projects are used as examples to inspire the students and to prompt discussion, including a final task where small groups present their own *Arte Útil* project, and might even put it into fruition if the time allows.

In a memorable exercise in the *Escuela*, Bruguera turns to her pupils to put the criteria to the test. After a viewing and presentation of Suzanne Lacey's striking performance *De tu Puño y Letra* (2015)—where over 350 men gather in a bullring in Quito, Ecuador, for a choreographed reading of letters written by women that have been victims of domestic abuse—students were asked to present ideas on how they could transform the work into an *Arte Útil* project. What became apparent is that raising awareness is not enough when addressing urgent social matters. Although art and activism share a history of entanglements and work in the public arena has increasingly become commonplace, seldom do these gestures evolve from the expressive and symbolic to something practical or outcome based. Bruguera's criteria connects artist driven projects that go beyond commentary and reflection, ones that find loopholes in systems; redirect resources; do something that hasn't been done before; and anticipate problems before they've occurred.

In relation to Australia, the *Arte Util* archive includes the Green Bans Movement - particularly focusing on the contribution of artists such as Ian Millis and Jack Munday, as well as the spaces that continue to engage with its legacy, including Big Fag Press and Firstdraft among others. Also included are the Yirrkala bark petitions—initiated by Djambawa Marawili and artists from the Yirrkala region—which were the first traditional documents prepared by Indigenous Australians that were recognised by the Australian Parliament. In addition, a handful of artists from the archive have also shown at some stage in Australia such as *Escuela* guest lecturer Jeanne van Heeswijk, who collaborated with the Museum of Contemporary Art

Australia's C3West in a project that looked at issues of waste management in the city of Goulburn; and collectives such as Torolab and Futurefarmers who have both exhibited at the MCA.

Personally, one of the few criticisms I have is the lack of acknowledgement of artistic creativity outside the bounds of Western art-historical categories (which might have been addressed in the "Disquisitions" section of the book). The idea to think of any Indigenous culture where art is not entangled in politics, spirituality, and everyday life. Although the contributions of all the historical references Hudson nods to (Ruskin, Bauhaus... etc.) are extremely valuable, I was disappointed to see a historicisation of modernity without a mention of what 80% of the world was experiencing under the brutality of colonialism. This omission is often identified in decolonial theory and constitutes one of their main criticisms of Postcolonial and Postmodern theory: although postmodern thought challenges and problematises Modernity, it does so within the bounds of European knowledge and by relying on its categories and epistemology. In that regard, *Arte Útil* does not seem to consider critical thinking (and art!) outside of Europe either as a precursor for their philosophy or in terms of bringing epistemic diversity into the initiative.

In my opinion, the fact that Bruguera is Cuban (like Hudson remarked), does not make the *Escuela* a decolonial project. It's not about an individual's country of origin or race but about their positionality. And although every value in the makeup of *Arte Útil* is shared by the decolonial agenda, it seemed like a missed opportunity to connect with useful art outside the Western art canon, especially given the times we're living and in an American context where issues of race and the persistence of coloniality in the form of racism and sexism seem to be one of the most essential urgencies.

But despite of this the *Escuela* succeeds in its intent. The way important questions were opened to students and the environment of absolute trust, love and respect are a testament that the *Escuela* isn't a fixed structure, it's flexible, porous and most importantly willing to listen. So as per Bruguera's own philosophy on the lifespan of works the *Escuela* is a long-term process, a living thing that continues to mutate and learn about itself. As Bruguera puts it, 'that's the thing about slow art, it takes the time that is needed to enter people's lives.' Long discussions, awkward questions, jokes, beers, exchanging numbers; it's the kind of work you'll probably keep in touch with, the kind that will stay in your life.

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*Escuela de Arte Útil* is organized by Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, in collaboration with California College of the Arts, the San Francisco Art Institute, the University of California at Berkeley, San Francisco State University, Asociación de Arte Útil (Alessandra Saviotti and Gemma Medina Estupinan), and the YBCA Fellows program. It was commissioned as part of *Tania Bruguera: Talking to Power / Hablándole al Poder* on view at YBCA through October 29, 2017.

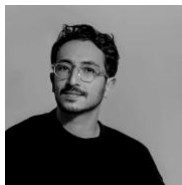


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Tania Bruguera, *Escuela de Arte Útil*, 2017–ongoing. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, 2017. Courtesy Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.

*Photo - James Im*

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### Ivan Muñiz Reed

Ivan Muñiz Reed is an independent curator, writer and researcher with a keen interest in Latin American practices. He is a founding member and Associate Curator at The Curators' Department, and was previously Assistant Curator at the MCA Australia. Forthcoming projects include the exhibition *Repertoires of Contention: Tony Garifalakis & Joaquin Segura*, opening at Gertrude Contemporary, Melbourne, in September 2017. He is currently based in San Francisco completing a PhD on decolonial aesthetics.