

I would like to thank first of all Nato Thompson and Tom Finkelppearl for making happen what was already on my “it would never happen” project folder. I want to thank them for their intelligence and extreme generosity. To Anne Pasternak, you have to tell me one day how you convinced these people to fund this complex and multilayered project. To Ali, my wonderful right hand. To all the staff at Creativetime and Queens Museum of Art for all their kindness, enthusiasm, creativity and support. Thanks to all of you for making me not able to complain about anything, which may be in itself an art piece since it is such a rare state of grace, especially for an artist.

I also want to thank the artists who graciously lent me their work so today we can be surrounded by some examples of *Useful Art*. I would like to thank the participants, who have been thinking about and doing useful art for a long time, and to the responders with whom I created a brainstorm group that was fantastic. To all the artists who I invited to be part of the *Useful Art Association* and who very quickly joined, I am looking forward to work together in a longer ongoing conversations and projects on *Useful Art*.

Thanks to all of you for joining us here at the headquarters of *Immigrant Movement International*, and welcome to Corona to those who have never been here.

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## **Introduction on Useful Art**

By Tania Bruguera

*Useful Art* is not something new. It may have not be called that, it may not have had been mainstream in the art world, but it is a practice that somehow has become a natural path for artists dealing with political art and social issues.

All art is useful, yes, but the usefulness we are talking about is the immersion of art directly into society with all our resources. It has been too long since we have made the gesture of the French Revolution the epitome of the democratization of art. We do not have to enter the Louvre or the castles, we have to enter people’s houses, people’s lives, this is where useful art is. We should not care for how many people are going to museums (and I know sometimes they count even when they only come to use the restroom). We need to focus on the quality of the exchange between art and its audience.

And when I talk about audience, I have to say that while I understand and have worked in the past with the disparities and specificities of different audiences, I have found that useful art is a very efficient way to deal with both the informed and the non-informed audiences with the same level of interest and engagement. However, this also brings a lot of institutional challenges and should be acknowledged.

The prejudice with the practical usefulness of art is that it becomes design. And true enough while doing research on the term, I found that there was an exhibition titled: Useful Art in 1981 at the Queens Museum of Art, curate by John Perrault. When I talked to him to inquire more, since there was no documentation at the museum, I was told that the exhibition consisted of objects of utilitarian nature with a strong artistic design quality. But the utilitarian component I'm looking for does not aim to make something that is already useful more beautiful, but on the contrary aims to focus on the beauty of being useful. It looks at the research of the concept and potential of usefulness itself as an aesthetic category.

Why Useful Art in the headquarters of *Immigrant Movement International*? Because *Useful Art* is the medium I'm using to do this project and this is what you are going to see when you come here on a normal day. So I wanted to set up the conversation with what is mostly people from the art world today here on my methodology for this work so it can be judged from that perspective.

*Useful Art* is a way of working with aesthetic experiences that focus on the implementation of art in society where art's function is no longer to be a space for "signaling" problems, but the place from which to create the proposal and implementation of possible solutions. We should go back to the times when art was not something to look at in awe, but something to generate from. If it is political art, it deals with the consequences, if it deals with the consequences, I think it has to be useful art.

Coincidentally while doing my research on the term, that I originally used in Spanish "Arte Útil" [which like in French (art utile) or Italian (arte utile) because they have a dimension that is lost in English—the fact that utile means also a tool], my friend Claire pointed to the Manifiesto de Arte Útil written by Argentinean artist Eduardo Costa in 1969. The scanned version is on our website [www.immigrant-movement.us](http://www.immigrant-movement.us).

The manifesto is actually the description of the initial two works in his series *Useful Art Works*, done here in NYC on March 15, 1969, as part of street works performed by a group of artists and poets. The first of these works consisted of buying the missing metal street signs in the area of midtown New York on his own expense and placing them in the right place. The signs that read E42st, E51st, E49st, E45st, E44st, and W51st were intended to be considered as a discontinuous literary work with six lines.

The second *Useful Art* work he made consisted of painting the subway station at 42<sup>nd</sup> street and 5<sup>th</sup> Ave. on the Flushing line—the same line you may have taken to come here today. These art works were intended to attack the myth of the lack of utility of the arts while being in themselves a modest contribution to the improvement of the city living conditions. Both works were performed between 2:30 and 7a.m. to avoid any problems involving the municipal laws.

This shows us some of the ways in which initial Useful Art was solved. Now we are going to hear about the continuation of this research from our presenters and discuss some of the pros and cons of this practice in the following conversation.

I have always said that we have to put Duchamp's urinal back in the restroom. Now that urinal is in the restroom of the Queens Museum, you can see it and pee on it.