

## Arte Útil part 1 – A practical theorization

by Emanuele Rinaldo Meschini

We had taken for granted that the art's role is to problematize reality, the existence, to interfere in the everyday to reinterpret it, sometimes even glorify it, for then disappear, evaporate without trace. We had taken for granted this function for art, because we have always seen it in a galleries'-museums'-independent way or anyhow far from the true reality, i.e. the one really though. On the other hand we have replaced sociality with popularity, that is known to be prerogative of the famous one-in-million. It is even come to think that Bourriaud's relational aesthetics involved some effective social implication. In the 70s, when it was attempted to change something, it appeared for a while that a new system was on the horizon, that a new code was interpreted. It was only a blunder. The historical-what-ever-utopian Italia Pavilion in the 1976 Biennale *Environment as social*, curated by Enrico Crispolti, introduced a new cultural alphabetization frame made by an art which is in real contact with its environment. In that pavilion the art work was transformed in operability and the measurement criterion was the response in the social. The pioneering operations, because that they were, as Volterra 73 and Gubbio 76, with their pros and cons, had opened a way that was suddenly closed and now those new alphabetization signs seem as Lescaux's graffiti: far away century from us. The next period, the 80s in particular, was, with some obviously exception as the collective Group Material, a continuous act of pain and refuse. Afterwards, the 90s had represented a sort of limbo, constantly struggled between a real interest towards social and a reappropriation of it in a galleries'-exhibition's way. Skipping the phenomenon of the occupations as a new need, and sometimes as a new art trend, we come at the current times and at the *Arte Útil*. This term, coined by the Cuban artist Tania Bruguera (1968), put itself, as the restarting of a speech interrupted for years, with all of a resurfaced memory strength. The *Arte Útil*, which, however, in its English translation *Useful Art* loses the physical sense of the operation, is a very articulated and complex practice and, at the same time, a resolution. We had problematized and inquired the reality for such long time that we forgot the most important thing: the answers. Obviously, saying that the *Arte Útil* is "only" an answer is exceedingly reductive. We begin saying that a definition of it is, in the strict meaning of the term, complicated.

Tania Bruguera represents for the *Arte Útil* the same as William James did for the American pragmatism, that is the movement's spreader and coordinator. Her œuvre/operation is very gentle because it doesn't consist only in inventing a new artistic modality but in tracking the roots and outlining their future developments.

On the other hand, Bruguera herself is the first in working in a long-term social way, as her *Immigrant Movement International* and *Migrant People Party*, addressed not only to the research and to the creation of a common platform over which debate the increasing and pressing issue of the acknowledgment of the migrant status, but also to a real implication and an implementation in the reality through a social as much as political practice, demonstrate. The *Immigrant Movement* project represents a work which are inscribed under the label *long-term* project. This social-political operation represent a sort of "gym" for Bruguera herself, for testing the *Arte Útil's*

effectiveness and practicality. Immigrant Movement, conceived in 2005, expects an implementation period from 2010 to 2015. The headquarter is in the multi-ethnic district of Corona, in Queens. Scope of the project is to establish a relation with the district through workshops, actions, events and collaborations with the social services, to define the migration concept according to the continuous social-political-natural changes that push everyone of us to become a migrant.

As said before, problematize is no longer enough. So Tania Bruguera merges the research of a new status, for what it's going to be soon a common condition for everyone, with a very strong political activism, which become itself a yardstick of an art which wants to define itself as useful. The *Queens Museum of Art*, supporter of the entire operation, sweeps away, anyway, the usual questions about the artistically legitimacy of a project as, for example, Immigrant Movement. Focusing further the attention over the *Art Útil's* concept, we have to say that this is an open concern and the best way to know its principles is starting from the criteria drawn by the artist and showed on the *Arte Útil* association's website (<http://arteutil.net>).

These are structured in eight points:

1. Propose a new use for art within society ;
2. Challenge the field within which it operates (civic, legislative, pedagogical, scientific, economic, etc) ;
3. Be 'timing specific', responding to current urgencies ;
4. Be implemented and function in a real situation ;
5. Replace authors with initiators and spectators with users;
6. Have practical, beneficial outcomes for its users ;
7. Pursue sustainability whilst adapting to changing conditions ;
8. Re-establish aesthetics as a system of transformation.

Every one of these points could open a theoretical pit and would risk to bring the whole in the world of the pure speculation and of the stand-alone problematization again. The best way to resolve the issues that these criteria create is to analyze them through an example, better if this is one of those selected by Bruguera herself. The example in case is the one of the Austrian collective WochenKlausur and in particular about its 1995 action *Immigrant Labour*. The group rose at the beginnings of the 90s and its first project was in 1993. The name derives from the working methodology because WochenKlausur, that could be translated as "week of cloistered", refers to the first project 's step, that is the one in which the participants meet for scheduling and designing the operation in a cloistered, exactly, atmosphere. The invitation from an artistic institution is the basis of all, and this warrants and justifies their actions inside the artistic context. The period granted for an exposition is usually used by the WochenKlausur as a moment of design and implementation in the social context. The group core is composed of eight members, among them stand out Wolfgang Zinggl, not so much for his artistic formation but instead for his political activity as a member of the Green Party (Grunen). In fact, the political side in the collective's actions is always well defined and at the same time it's absolutely non-partisan (but always with a left's background), in the sense that their actions aren't finalized to the political electioneering and have no use to increase the media attention on the party. Grunen and

WochenKlausur are two well distinct elements, but the interesting thing is this are the formation and the political/diplomatic practice in defining the group's strategies. The collective's members switch for every project because of the praxis is to collaborate with local artists and operators allocated in the action territories. This modality differs from the classical artistic approach in the social action and also for this reason they can be included in the "bruguerian criteria". A basic difference between the *Arte Útil* and the one that could be defined as *autonomous art* or *independent art* lives in the concept of presentation instead of representation. A project útil doesn't point simply to structure a situation, but, given the common action basis, is "donated" to a community which develops its following action modalities. There's a quite clear difference between an artist who decides to create a performance with a political aim and one who gives the tools to counteract a political system. In this case the Hirschhorn example the *Bataille monument* (2002) is exemplary. The artist worked with the Turkish community of Kassel not really for the sharing of the opera, but for its practical construction. The performance participants, and here relies the abyssal difference, were paid as normal movie extras and they gave no contribute to the opera except for their presence. This one represents only one of the many sides of the social (dis)engagement of many artists, in fact, one thing is the participation, other is the presence and this dualism is the same that mediates between presentation and representation. Rolling back to the 1995 Graz's project of the WochenKlausur, we can recover the most *Arte Útil's* criteria. Even here, as in all of the other cases, the operation rises from a cultural institution's call, specifically the Graz's Steirischer Herbst festival. The issue that the WochenKlausur decided to deal with was refer to a group of refugees in order to grant them the permanence in Austria. At the time of the operation, the Social Affairs Ministry had established the maximum number of work permissions to allow that year yet (1995). So, to solve the issue, the Austrian collective decided to act through a legal loophole. The Austrian laws about immigration contemplated for foreign artists a different statute which didn't need a "normal" working permission, but it consisted in granting their own subsistence with the artist work. That is, the artist didn't need a regular permission but he had to demonstrate that he could sustain himself with his own artistic production.

Knowing this legal loophole, the seven refugees who took part to the project changed their life status from immigrant to artist through the Social Sculpture's production. The refugees/artists, in the main part Kurdish and Bosnian, begun to work on the project intending as social sculpture mainly as collection of first aid materials. The Kurdish refugee/artist Hoshyar Mohiden begun to realize social sculptures commissioned by the advertising agency Croce & Wir, gathering for a year children food to send then to the Kurdish cities of Dohuk, Erbil and Sulemanija. With the same idea other refugees/artists gathered children dresses and school material to send to Bosnia, others repaired bicycles for the Student Association of the Graz's University. To guarantee the artistry of the entire operation, all of the works were shown to public in an exhibition titled *Project Social Sculptor*, showed inside the 1996 Steirischer Herbst festival. To demonstrate the validity and specially the utility of the project, the law about the foreign artists in Austria was modified in 2006, deleting the privileges allowed before, having demonstrated the vulnerability of a system put on the corner by an "artistic" action. As said before, reading again the project knowing the *Arte Útil* criteria, we can explain its contents through a sort of practical theorization.

Let's start from the number 1 point: propose new uses for art within society. The Graz's WochenKlausur's operation represents, essentially, a new employment of art inside society because it doesn't aim to operate at all with art's media and languages, but it chooses a sense shift instead, which is not more focused on the egoistic/egotistic production of an object or of a behaviour, but on the participate creation to resolve a real problem. For real we mean here not only something real and historically dated. Also Delacroix's paintings speak about the French Revolution, but the reality we are talking is based on what is standing outside the artistic world sphere. A reality understood as that can't be presented outside its essence and so it can't be represented as nothing instead itself. This difference between presentation and representation ensures that what WochenKlausur brings is a new utilization of art.

Point number 2: challenge the field within which it operates (civic, legislative, pedagogical, scientific, economic, etc.) This point represents, in some aspects, the stylistic signature of the Austrian group. In this case is also the keystone of the entire project. To interfere directly on the immigration law represents a direct challenge (won) to the legislative bureaucratic system, and the 2006 regulation change underlines this feature.

Point number 3: be 'timing specific', responding to current urgencies. This feature too is included in the WochenKlausur's operative routine, maybe for this reason they are the best example of *Arte Útil*, because they answer to an urgency extremely specific. The presence of Bosnian refugees during the war in the ex Yugoslavia is a proof. On the one hand, in fact, the work permit's issue, pertinent to the residence permit, can be considered a timeless issue but the refugees' nationality and the collected aids' destination demonstrate the operation in a certain and specific portion of historical time, as the one pertinent to the early 90s Balkan conflict.

Point number 4: be implemented and function in real situations. This point is clear too. The legal loophole changed the refugees' status giving them a work and above all a legal permanence in Austria. Moreover one of them got married in Austria while other two got artistic commissions.

Point number 5: replace authors with initiators and spectators with users. The Futurists at their time hoped a change in the spectator's role yet, no longer passive but inlaid inside the core of artistic creation's itself. The new and complicated perspective in the author role is the authorial loss or, as Maria Lind said, the "ethic of authorial renunciation". The artist, the WochenKlausur in this case, is not such because his production, this adjective is no longer needed for an art which wants to be *útil* because it doesn't need an author but an initiator, someone able to generate, to start, a process which would be carried on by others. The Superflex, a Danish group which can be rightly part of the *Arte Útil* category, is engaged by years in fighting the copyright as authorial wall against sharing. In the Graz's case, the WochenKlausur started a path carried on by others drawing the guidelines of a project of which they didn't know the development.

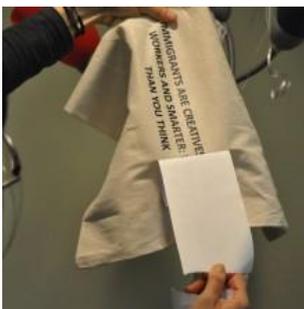
Point number 6: have practical, beneficial outcomes for its users. For them who are still asking themselves, despite all, how to estimate this kind of art's effects, the answer is in the Graz's project, in which the users can benefit of a job and of a resulting residence permit.

Point number 7: pursue sustainability whilst adapting to changing conditions. These are the basis of the artistic challenge to the society. In this case the WochenKlausurs were able to bypass them going through the legislative side to obtain a practical benefit/result directed to, and above all, future repeatability, until 2006 at least, when the law was changed.

Point number 8: re-establish aesthetics as a system of transformation. Between all the points, this one is probably the most complicated and far apart the less "practical". Regarding the aesthetic concept applied to the *Arte Útil*, Bruguera often use the term *aest-ethics*, linking the aesthetic value with the ethic one. This hybrid word is clearly more appropriate to this kind of research that made the operation's ethicality one of its focal point. The intervention/operation has to be ethic too to be útil and the aesthetic of the operation resides exactly in this balance between the needing of the intervention and its right place in a range of values. The Graz's project is aesthetic and it uses the aesthetic as a transformation system because it's ethically útil.



Immigrant Movement International (IM International). Courtesy of Immigrant Movement International. Photo, IM International



Tania Bruguera, Immigrant Movement International, 2011 - 2015 *Event #1: MAKE A MOVEMENT* (Slogan Workshop), 3 Aprile 2011. Courtesy, Studio Bruguera and Immigrant Movement International. Photo, Ahram Jeon



Tania Bruguera, *Tatlin Whisper # 6* (Havana version), 2009. Courtesy, Studio Bruguera



WochenKlausur, *Immigrant Labour Issue*, Graz, 1995. Courtesy WochenKlausur.



WochenKlausur, *Immigrant Labour Issue*, Graz, 1995. Courtesy WochenKlausur



WochenKlausur, *Immigrant Labour Issue*, Graz, 1995. Courtesy WochenKlausur

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