USEFUL CURATING

Stéphanie Bertrand

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Expression is an artist's fundamental act; use is a curator's.[1]
Peter Eleey

Over the past few years, the idea of *Arte Útil* has expanded out of artistic practice to gain increasing traction at an institutional level. In 2013, the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven launched the 'Museum of Arte Útil', initiated by artist Tania Bruguera who first coined the term. The project was explicitly designed to transform the existing institution into a 'Social Power Plant'. Its goal was to elicit collective usership towards tactical social change, often through sustained activity in partnership with the local community.[2] Around the same time, the Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (MIMA) announced its new vision for a Museum 3.0 derived from 'Usership Theory'. This new perspective repositioned the institution as a shared and responsive network, driven by a civic agenda invested with social purpose.[3] Likewise, a number of smaller art initiatives have recently demonstrated a similar commitment to a more efficacious view of the cultural institution. Ormston House's programmatic turn in 2015 towards greater community engagement – which led to the highly mediatised public outcry over its possible closure during the summer of 2018 – is endemic of this shift, and makes plain its timeliness and necessity.

In light of this recent proliferation of more useful cultural endeavours and of their perceived urgency, it has become vital to examine more

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1. Peter Eleey, 'What About Responsibility?', in *Ten Fundamental Questions of Curating*, ed. Jens Hoffman (Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2013), 118.

2. 'From a Museum to a Social Powerplant', http://museumarteutil.net/about/.

3. 'Vision for 2015–2018', http://www.visitmima.com/about/vision-for-2015-2018/.

closely utility's implication for institutional and curatorial practices. For this implication differs significantly from its import for art. And this despite claims to the effect that there is no longer any ontological difference between contemporary art and curating.[4] Simply transferring Arte Útil's pragmatic mode of action to an institutional context is precarious, regardless of the move's ostensive logic – rightly equating institutional stability with a greater potential for sustainability. Such relocation, in fact, overlooks the fundamental divergences that distinguish the traditions of artistic and curatorial practice when it comes to their operational effects, beyond their now comparable procedures.

Indeed, art has long been marked, and continues to be influenced by modern aesthetic theory, positing art as society's antithesis, and accordingly predicating its critical value upon its lack of social function. In this sense, one need only think of Theodore Adorno's famous quote: 'insofar as a social function can be predicated for artworks, it is their functionlessness'.[5] As follows, when proponents of Useful Art call for more concrete social engagement, they are effectively negating this tradition by introducing a pragmatic action that aims to directly transform reality (i.e., the civic sphere) in view of a tangibly beneficial effect.

In contrast, curating as an institutional practice, by definition, already performs a social function. It mediates the encounter between the artist, the artwork, the public and the institution. As curator Maria Lind affirms: 'if the curatorial implies a function that can be located among a range of different activities within the art system, it is by necessity intimately connected with mediation in its various forms'.[6] In other words, as Jean Davallon argues, instances of cultural mediation like curating represent such a heterogeneous

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4.   In his essay 'Politics of Installation,' Groys affirms that the acts of making art and displaying art have become ontologically indistinct with contemporary art. Boris Groys, 'The Politics of Installation', E-Flux Journal, no. 2 January 2009, https://www.e-flux.com/journal/02/68504/politics-of-installation/. A statement echoed by curator and critic John Roberts' statement to the effect that: 'there are no fixed technical and intellectual boundaries that divide curator and artist, the curator as producer from the artist as producer.' John Roberts, 'The Curator as Producer: Aesthetic Reason, Nonaesthetic Reason, and Infinite Ideation', *Manifesta Journal*, no. 10, The Curator as Producer (2009-2010): 54.

5.   Theodore Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. R. Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), VI (1970), 227.

6.   Maria Lind, 'Performing the Curatorial: An Introduction', in *Performing the Curatorial: Within and Beyond Art,* ed. Maria Lind (Stockholm: Sternberg Press, 2012), 16.

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set of contextually situated practices that they can only be defined in terms of a common task. This (essentially social) task, according to the author, is to provide public access to artworks and to knowledge by constructing an interface between the two mutually foreign realms of audience and art/knowledge so that the former might grasp or appropriate the latter.[7]

Nevertheless, highlighting these disparities in praxis between art and curating is not done here so as to undermine the recent momentum of cultural institutions in the direction of more social involvement. This is not to say that curators and institutions should not adapt their practices towards the pursuit of greater public service – especially given the current network paradigm's extensive precarity. However, it seems imperative, at this juncture, to unpack the ways in which the disparate development and conflicting functions proper to art and to curating distinctly modulate their rapport to the notion of efficacy. If, as Peter Eleey asserts, use is the curator's fundamental act, then the question raised is how might one formulate a cogent theory of useful curating – or *curaduría útil* to paraphrase Bruguera's famed expression – in light of its already existing function.

Clearly, the rapprochement drawn here between curating and social efficacy is not meant to be solely nominal. If such were the case, useful curating would amount to nothing more than a redundant designation, re-affirming the practice's intrinsic public function. Instead, the conflation of curatorial practice and a certain understanding of usefulness derived from Arte Útil is meant to convey some additional, 'socially transformative' dimension in excess of the curator's fundamental mediating operation. That being said, the chief argument proposed here is that if curating is to remain faithful to its practice, then useful curating cannot simply be conceived in terms of a supplementary pragmatic action. To wit, curatorial practice cannot fulfil this new utilitarian remit in the same way as art. In the absence of a commensurate tradition of functionlessness, tacking a second pragmatic role on top of curating's standing intermediary function would ultimately result in denaturing the already fragmented practice. Instead, the claim is that rather than constituting a surplus to its mediating operation – expanding or redirecting its field of action – this

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7. Jean Davallon, 'La médiation: la communication en procès?', *MEI | Médiation et information,* no. 19 (2003): 38.

utilitarian dimension should, on the contrary, narrow curating's scope.

Hence, in order to define useful curating in contradistinction to Useful Art as a narrow scope of mediation, it proves necessary to differentiate curatorial intervention from Arte Útil's pragmatic initiative. To do so, recent advances in the field of cognitive science provide a valuable framework by proposing an entirely new category of action: epistemic action – at variance with standard pragmatic action.

The notion of epistemic action first appears in David Kirsh and Paul Maglio's seminal 1994 paper on the video game Tetris[8] – which later contributes to the emergence of the now popular extended mind theory. In this paper, the authors analyse behaviour observed during play in order to demonstrate the differences between both types of actions. Based on their findings, they argue that pragmatic actions change the world in order to achieve a specific goal. In contrast, epistemic actions change the world in order to abet cognitive processes by exteriorizing part of the mental computational procedure. In the words of philosophers Andy Clark and David Chalmers, co-authors of the extended mind theory:

> *epistemic actions alter the world so as to aid and augment cognitive processes such as recognition and search. Merely pragmatic actions, by contrast, alter the world because some physical change is desirable for its own sake (e.g., putting cement into a hole in a dam).*[9]

In terms of their practical demonstration, Kirsh and Maglio highlight, for instance, the time that it takes to mentally rotate a Tetris piece, known as a zoid, by 90 degrees, which is in the order of 800–1200 milliseconds. In comparison, the time that it takes to externally rotate a zoid by 90 degrees using the controllers is in the order of 100 milliseconds, plus another 200 milliseconds for the subject to select the correct button.[10] Clearly,

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8.   David Kirsh and Paul Maglio, 'On Distinguishing Epistemic from Pragmatic Action', *Cognitive Science*, no. 18 (1994): 513–549.

9.   Andy Clark and David J. Chalmers, 'The Extended Mind', *The Extended Mind*, ed. Richard Menary (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010), 28.

10.   David Kirsh and Paul Maglio, 'On Distinguishing Epistemic from Pragmatic Action', *Cognitive Science*, no. 18 (1994): 529-532.

this temporal discrepancy attests to the fact that it is far more efficient in the context of such a time-sensitive game to rely on the external device, as opposed to internal cognitive processes, to compute one's goal.

In light of this example, it is imperative to clarify here that epistemic actions are not restricted to the particular context of gaming, nor only appear in the present technological era. In fact, they encompass a wide range of activities that human beings have relied on for centuries to facilitate internal mental processes towards the resolution of a query or challenge. Beyond the game of Tetris, examples of such active externalism – i.e., the use of one's environment to aid or augment cognitive function towards problem-solving – include: the use of pen and paper to complete long multiplication, or to serve as a mnemonic support in order to off-load information (e.g., a diary); the reliance on a nautical slide rule to calculate speed-time-distance problems; even the common practice of counting on one's fingers to assist in tallies or enumerations.

In sum, epistemic actions diverge from strict measures of efficiency, effectiveness and satisfaction.[11] They involve modifying the external environment not as a way of achieving an objective, but instead as a means of uncovering valuable information, which is either unavailable, hard to detect or retrieve, or difficult to compute.[12] As Kirsh and Maglio remark:

> *these actions are not used to implement a plan, or to implement a reaction; they are used to change the world in order to simplify the problem-solving task. Thus, we distinguish pragmatic actions – actions performed to bring one physically closer to a goal – from epistemic actions – actions performed to uncover information that is hidden or hard to compute mentally.*[13]

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11.   M. Fjeld and W. Barendregt, 'Epistemic action: A measure for cognitive support in Tangible User Interfaces?', *Proceedings of Measuring Behavior 2008*, eds. A. J. Spink et al., (Maastricht, The Netherlands, August 26-29, 2008): 1.

12.   David Kirsh and Paul Maglio, 'On Distinguishing Epistemic from Pragmatic Action', *Cognitive Science*, no. 18 (1994): 515.

13.   Ibid. 513.

Ultimately, the novelty of epistemic actions, according to the authors, lies in the fact that unlike pragmatic actions, their purpose is not to have an effect on the environment so much as to have an effect on the agent.[14]

Now to return to the present text's chief concern – which is to outline parameters of useful curating in relation to Useful Art – the abovementioned distinction between pragmatic action and epistemic action tenders a crucial nuance in praxis. As previously suggested, while Arte Útil relies on cooperation and usership, its enterprise is essentially geared towards a decisive pragmatic action. Even whilst it involves substantial collaboration with a primary audience, and explicitly aims to provide participants with agency, Arte Útil distinguishes itself from other forms of relational aesthetics and discursive practices by explicitly defining its scope of action in terms of a positive tangible achievement. As Tania Bruguera writes in 'Reflexions on Arte Útil (Useful Art)':

> *the sense of Arte Útil (Useful Art) is to imagine, create, develop*
> *and implement something that, produced in artistic practice, offers*
> *the people a clearly beneficial result'. (...) 'Arte Útil has to do with*
> *the understanding that art, only as a proposal, is not enough now.*
> *Arte Útil goes from the state of proposal to that of application in*
> *reality. It has to do with understanding that proposals coming*
> *from art must give their next step and be applied, must leave*
> *the sphere of what is unattainable, of the desired impossibility,*
> *to be part of what exists, of the real and functional sphere.*[15]

As follows, Useful Art's ultimate objective, viz. the decisive purpose of its action, is to effectively change the world in order to provide users with a clearly beneficial, concrete result – a pragmatic outcome conceived as an end in and of itself. As an example, for the project *Intervention #1* realised in 2012[16], artist Núria Güell contracted a construction worker to remove the entrance doors to foreclosed properties in Spain (purchased by the banks during the crisis through public bailouts at 50%

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14.   Ibid. 546.

15.   Tania Bruguera, 'Reflexions on Arte Útil (Useful Art)', Tania Bruguera (artist website), November 2012, http://www.taniabruguera.com/cms/592-0-Reflexions+on+Arte+til+Useful+Art.htm.

16.   https://www.arte-util.org/projects/intervention-1/

of their appraised value) in order to make them open and accessible for public use, without the occupants being liable for trespassing. The project's pragmatic action – the door removal – had a clearly beneficial result for the homeless and those evicted by the banks: enabling them to lawfully occupy the foreclosed properties. Likewise, Derek Curry's project *Public Dissentiment* (2016-ongoing)[17] currently provides an online activist tool that enables protesters to negatively impact the price of a publicly traded company's stock by temporarily spooking high-frequency trading bots via social media swarming so as to trigger 'flash crashes'. In this way, the project effectively changes the world – i.e., generates dips in stock prices – in order to ensure that stockholders and decision-makers take *real* notice of public objections and disputes.

Naturally, this does not mean that Arte Útil projects fail to have any kind of impact when it comes to enactive cognition, nor fail to have a transformative effect on thought processes and mental problem-solving capabilities. In fact, Bruguera plainly alludes to such effects in her text. And the projects outlined above certainly offer a new perspective on systemic forces and creative counter measures. However, Arte Útil projects' primary objective remains concrete social transformation. In consequence, the means deployed principally bolster a pragmatic result, which is, in fact, what urgent social problems immediately demand as an effective response.

In contrast, curating's traditional mediating function, in some sense, is considerably more akin to epistemic action than pragmatic action. Indeed, exhibition-making's fundamental remits share marked similarities with the former type of action's designs. According to Kirsh and Maglio, the chief purpose of an epistemic action is to decrease complexity and unreliability. They write:

> *we use the term epistemic action to designate a physical action whose primary function is to improve cognition by: 1. reducing the memory involved in mental computation, that is, space complexity; 2. reducing the number of steps involved in mental computation, that is, time complexity; 3. reducing the probability*

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17.   https://www.arte-util.org/projects/public-dissentiment/

of error of mental computation, that is, unreliability.[18]

In essence, curating pursues commensurate objectives in its field of engagement through the contextualisation and mediation of artworks. On the one hand, curatorial practice ideally strives to reduce complexity in order to facilitate meaningful contact between the artworks and the public. Its intervention endeavours to render multifaceted and information-dense works legible to an extended and differentiated audience in two ways. First, by providing information about the work, thereby minimizing space complexity; and second, by setting up a framing narrative designed to narrow interpretive latitude – as well as often presenting thematically related works – thereby decreasing time complexity. On the other hand, curatorial practice also ideally strives to reduce unreliability by safeguarding artworks against extraneous readings. Its *mise-en-contexte* is not only aimed at clarifying, but equally at circumscribing public reception to a reasonable span in content, consistent with the specific semantic and historical import of the distinct artworks and artefacts on display.

Moreover, there is another sense in which institutional practices might be said to function as epistemic action. This sense concerns the role of cultural institutions in civic society as collective repositories of memory. In outlining the downsides and dangers of the extended mind, David Chalmers lists, among the vulnerabilities resulting from such active externalism, the loss of memory, and by extension loss of self, associated with the destruction of property in natural catastrophes.[19] Although Chalmers is expressly referring to personal belongings, the recent descriptions of the devastating fire at the Museu Nacional in Rio de Janeiro as a loss of memory bare similarities to his version. One of the museum's vice directors, Luiz Duarte, for instance, described the blaze as an unbearable catastrophe, stating: 'it is 200 years of this country's heritage. It is 200 years of memory'. Likewise, former environment minister and candidate in the 2018 presidential elections Marina Silva qualified the destruction of the museum as 'a lobotomy of the Brazilian memory'.[20] These accounts

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18.   David Kirsh and Paul Maglio, 'On Distinguishing Epistemic from Pragmatic Action', *Cognitive Science*, no. 18 (1994): 514.

19.   David J. Chalmers, 'Is your phone part of your mind?', TEDxSydney (lecture), 2011.

20.   Dom Phillips, 'Brazil museum fire: 'incalculable' loss as 200-year-old Rio institution gutted', The Guardian, 3 September 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/03/fire-engulfs-brazil-national-museum-rio.

suggest that cultural institutions as a whole additionally reduce space complexity by exteriorizing the shared burden of collective remembrance, and providing public access for recall purposes in times of need.

In this way, traditional curatorial and institutional practices intrinsically share affinities with epistemic actions both in terms of their objectives – i.e., reduction in complexity and unreliability – and, in a certain sense, their function, e.g., memory off-loading. These parallels at the level of intent and operation are what initially permit the present rapprochement between curatorial praxis and this type of cognitive action. However, barring these analogous features, conventional curating models of exhibition-making and institutional practices do not actually conform to strict criteria of epistemic actions. These approaches typically establish a mode of contextualisation and mediation prior to the public's encounter with the works that remains fixed at the time of reception. As follows, standard forms of curating and institutional procedures are not interactively looped in with viewers as part of a real-time coupling. They are predominantly static, as opposed to dynamic praxes.

In this respect, Arte Útil provides an instructive point of comparison. While targeting a specific pragmatic action, these projects very often proceed according to what might be qualified as an analogue process of interleaving planning and execution – that is to say, an operational mode that begins implementation before all the details of a plan have been settled.[21] Such an interleaving process is designed to engage with a changing environment presenting unforeseen challenges and obstacles. It is reactive in nature and adapts to emerging situations. As Kirsh and Maglio observe:

> *interleaving is a valuable strategy for coping with a dynamic, hard to predict world. When the consequences of action cannot be confidently predicted, it is wise to update one's plan as soon as new information arrives. Interleaving planners work just that way; they make sense when it seems inevitable that plans will have to be re-evaluated after each action, and modifications*

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21.   David Kirsh and Paul Maglio, 'On Distinguishing Epistemic from Pragmatic Action', *Cognitive Science*, no. 18 (1994): 525.

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made to adapt the on-going plan to the new circumstances.[22]

Useful Art projects typically adopt what Pablo Helguera characterises as a 'collaborative participation scheme':[23] they undertake their planned initiative in cooperation with participants prior to the artist having worked out every single aspect of its realisation. This procedural mode ensures that participants are linked as part of an interactive feedback loop enabling them to adapt the project through a continuously recalibrated plan, depending on changing circumstances, in view of a set pragmatic goal. In a parallel way, if useful curating is to truly function as an efficacious epistemic action, then it requires a greater degree of dynamic public interaction: to wit, a much more integrated real-time coupling with the viewer cum user.

Nevertheless, it is important to disambiguate this requirement from the current theoretical emphasis on processual curating in the field's literature. The avowal of process-based curatorial approaches in recent years has essentially been grounded upon credence in the political viability of open-endedness, experimentation and indeterminacy. In this, it shares with a recent precedent for applying epistemic action to an art world context. In his 2017 book *Making Sense*, Simon Penny claims that art practices involve 'embodied epistemic speculation', which can be directed towards 'the creation of new possibilities or problem creation'. The author relies on the concept of the ludic to argue that art, like play, can be exploratory, experimental and generative. Instead of instrumentally used for the purposes of reductive analytical tasks like problem-solving – i.e., 'getting the right answers' – Penny advocates for art's epistemic potential to assist in formulating 'the right questions'.[24]

Whether or not such an application of epistemic action effectively corresponds to the kind of interactive computer aesthetics Penny is examining, however, is beyond the purview of the present text. For the

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22.   Ibid.

23.   Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook* (New York: Jorge Pinto Books Inc., 2011), 15. NB: Helguera makes this stipulation more generally with regards to socially engaged art, and not solely in reference to the more specific practice of Arte Útil, though it very much applies to the latter.

24.   Simon Penny, *Making Sense: Cognition, Computing, Art, and Embodiment* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017), 376.

idea of useful curating necessarily entails a definitive brief. Here again, the comparison with Arte Útil provides a valuable working model in circumscribing the idea's scope of action. If Useful Art often proceeds according to an interleaving process – thus supporting a degree of openness when it comes to participant collaboration – it is not indeterminate in its ultimate function, which is to bring about pragmatic change in specific real-world circumstances.[25] In a similar way, while an epistemic action leaves the ultimate choice or judgement involved in the problem-solving task up to the individual, it is tailored towards the resolution of a definitive problem. Thus, if useful curating is to be truly efficacious, then it cannot be open-ended and experimental, much as it may be interactive. It must necessarily be directed toward a determinate problem. And this, regardless of whether this problem is ascertained by the user, the artist or the curator; as well as whether the curatorial structure can be implemented in other contexts, or remains locally constrained.[26] Far from reducing curatorial intervention to a menial analytical task, however, the claim here is that this conception can instead focus the practice on an urgent problem-solving assignment towards the resolution of a specific social issue.

In conclusion, this essay has attempted to formulate a cogent understanding of useful curating by bringing the cognitive-science distinction between pragmatic action and epistemic action to bear upon curatorial practice. Both the intent and the challenge of this effort was to remain faithful to curatorial practice as a mediating procedure on the one hand, and to an idea of efficacy derived from Arte Útil, entailing both public collaboration and the resolution of a specific social problem on the other. The chief claim of this text is that curatorial and institutional practices have the potential to fulfil an embodied cognitive function that is socially beneficial beyond mere memory extension. This idea of useful curating accordingly implies a shift in praxis from assisting aesthetic judgement to aiding a troubleshooting capability of a different order. Ultimately, the proposal put forward is that such an approach can establish an integrated

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25. This is clear from Tania Bruguera's affirmation that: 'for Art Útil, failure is not a possibility. If the project fails, it is not Art Útil. Artists have the challenge of finding forms in which their proposal may actually work'. Tania Bruguera, 'Reflexions on Arte Útil (Useful Art)', Tania Bruguera (artist website), November 2012, http://www.taniabruguera.com/cms/592-0-Reflexions+on+Arte+til+Useful+Art.htm.

26. Think of the standard controllers involved in *Tetris*, for example, which might be used in other games to different effect.

feedback loop with the audience, not via an open-ended, experimental and indeterminate process directed towards democratic rehearsal and purported emancipation; but instead via an epistemic action aimed at aiding and augmenting the user's cognitive functions towards the resolution of a particular social problem. This consequently involves the surpassing of both classical accounts of participation, and a contemplative mode of reception founded upon artistic judgement, in view of a new understanding of public engagement and agency. Whether this is achieved through a greater integration of technology into curatorial practice enabling more accessibility and closed-loop interaction, for instance, or on the basis of new conceptions of the socially extended mind, remains to be explored.

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