

ORGANISATION



Arte Útil Summit 2016; photo by Michelle Maddison

IN 2014, Alistair Hudson was appointed Director of Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (mima), part of Teesside University. From 2004 to 2014, he was Deputy Director of Grizedale Arts – a contemporary arts residency and commissioning agency in the central Lake District in rural Northern England. In keeping with the principles of Arte Útil, mima describes itself as a ‘useful’ museum, established through ‘user-ship’ rather than spectatorship.

Joanne Laws: Can you give some details on your background at Grizedale Arts?

Alistair Hudson: The impetus behind Grizedale Arts was to evolve an anti-romantic version of art outside metropolitan centres. The ‘long story of art’ is one of art being useful and operating as part of ordinary life. From the Arts and Crafts movement to the Bauhaus, the history of modernism is laced with people’s ambitions to escape autonomy, and for art to have social or political agency in the world. The art market emerged alongside the rise of the affluent bourgeoisie during the Industrial Revolution and arguably came to its logical conclusion with the economic crash of 2007. At Grizedale Arts we wanted to reconnect with the longer history of art as social tool, in a similar way to what social reformer John Ruskin (also a native of Coniston village) attempted to do in the nineteenth century.

JL: Perhaps you could provide a working definition of the term ‘Arte Útil’. What does it mean and where did it come from?

AH: Arte Útil roughly translates from Spanish as ‘Useful Art’. Cuban artist and activist Tania Bruguera created the Arte Útil Association in January 2011 as a discursive, knowledge-sharing platform focusing on art as a device for social change across the world. The Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven began working with Bruguera on a strand of research, while collaborating with other like minded artists and institutions, including Grizedale Arts, who were interested in similar ideas. All of these voices started to converge around the idea of useful art and in 2012 Tania came to Grizedale where together we wrote the ‘criteria’ for Arte Útil. In 2013 we collaborated on the Museum of Arte Útil exhibition at the Van Abbemuseum. From there we began to build partnerships with other institutions and artists to develop the Association, a website and the Arte Útil Archive which showcases practical examples from around the world that work in this way, outside the performative frame of art. The archive is intended as a toolbox to help other artists and communities initiate projects elsewhere.

JL: Can you give an example of a project you’ve been involved in (at mima or elsewhere) that, for you, best embodies or celebrates the principles of useful art?

AH: A good example is one we did at Grizedale, in the village of Coniston, called ‘The Honest Shop’. It is a community shop with a cash desk but no staff that sells a range of products made by locals, such as food, cakes, vegetables and crafts. The project evolved into a sustainable shop for the community which still runs, but it also has a kind of political agency. It raises money for the community hall (the Coniston Institute) and offers people a human connection in a place where relationships are often strained by the day-to-day practicalities of tour-

ism. In a way, the shop is the true face of the village because local people come together to make and contribute things that represent them. For me, the shop highlights a really fundamental idea of user-ship. Rather than the work of art being authored by a single person, it has what I call a ‘redistributed authorship’. The shop manifests a double ontological status: it is both a work of art and the thing itself. It’s not a picture or a representation of an idea of a shop – it is a shop. It has artistic currency in a very broad and connected way, and demonstrates the important role that art-thinking has in economics and politics, even in a small village.

JL: Can you say something about the range of projects included in the Arte Útil Archive?

AH: The Arte Útil Archive contains a broad range of over 500 projects, both historical and contemporary, that have taken place across the world. Overtly political projects include Judi Werthein’s *Brinco* (2005): specially-designed trainers for immigrants crossing the US/Mexican border, with a survival kit built into the heel. Also featuring in the archive is Ahmet Ögüt’s ongoing project *The Silent University* which offers a platform for immigrants to share their skills and knowledge, because their ‘illegal’ status prevents them from partaking in formal education. Tania Bruguera recently crowd-sourced over \$100,000 to establish her Instituto de Artivismo Hannah Arendt in Cuba, which has allowed her to develop an educational curriculum based on the principles of arts activism. Bruguera’s long-term project *Immigrant Movement International* (2011) examined growing concerns about the political representation, status and conditions facing immigrants.

JL: Do you think that the concept of ‘useful art’ is beginning to filter into the realm of contemporary art, given that Assemble won the 2015 Turner Prize?

AH: This was a fairly controversial decision within the art world. Many people within the conventions of contemporary art perceived it as an assault on the canon of the individual artist and on the art market as well. It stretched the tolerance of inherited ideas of what art is. Some argued that projects like ‘Granby Four Streets’ are enabling the neoliberal agenda by filling the holes left by inadequate state services, which is quite a misreading of the Granby project. This conservative response is rooted in the belief that art really shouldn’t be political – it’s ok to be political, but within the confines of the art world. Once art starts to be genuinely political, or become politics, social change, economics or the thing itself, somehow it is no longer seen as art. It has escaped the control of who decides what art is or isn’t. Once something is solving a problem, it isn’t allowed to be called art anymore, and I find this enormously restricting on the potential of what art can do when working within a spectrum of activities. This is one of the fundamental arguments that we are trying to dismantle.

JL: You hosted the Arte Útil Summit 2016 at mima last July. Can you give us insights into any updated thinking in the field?

AH: When a summit travels to somewhere it doesn’t necessarily have a meta-discourse. In the spirit of Arte Útil, which examines the specific urgencies of place, the summit at mima was conceived as a discursive

platform which sought to address the impact of the recent EU referendum and the ongoing issues of migration specific to the context of Middlesbrough. Bringing all this energy from elsewhere – from museums, academic institutions, local charities and so on – we held a series of workshops around the town with the aim of developing solutions that would have currency going forward. We set an agenda and we’re already seeing an impact on the ground, with the initiation of a housing project and one of our local artists Emily Hesse deciding to run for mayor!

The Arte Útil Summit 2017 will be held in the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, and will take the form of the first Arte Útil Summer School. We are currently developing a curriculum that will offer a transferable model of how to work in this way. I think the future is really in promoting this way of working and offering resources to initiate further projects around the world.

JL: As Director of mima, can you share any details of the upcoming programme or future aspirations you may have for the institution?

AH: We describe mima as a ‘useful’ museum established through ‘user-ship’ rather than spectatorship. A lot of our work operates outside the institution. We considered what might happen if we actually made this our central focus, and we effectively programmed mima according to this agenda. Infiltrating the museum from the ‘outside in’ offers an awareness of urgency, community and context. Conventionally, arts intuitions like this show exhibitions in pristine galleries and they run a public programme comprising education and outreach strands. Even bookshops and cafés revolve around the agenda of promoting and supporting the ‘great art’. But what we are beginning to do at mima is reverse that polarity, so that our principle activity is our public programme – education, community outreach, socially-driven projects etc. These in turn are supported by the exhibitions and collections which are thought through as a tool in support of this wider agenda of social change.

One of our current projects is ‘New Linthorpe’ by artist Emily Hesse and curator James Beighton. The duo are investigating ways to reflect the character of modern day Middlesbrough whilst also capturing the spirit of the nineteenth century Linthorpe Art Pottery – an innovative form of Victorian pottery made from the red brick clay underlying Middlesbrough. Emily took over the Office of Arte Útil here in the museum for the past few months, to talk about politics and the post-Brexit situation. It was then that she decided to run for mayor. So the key issue is for the museum to act, with its constituents, as a civic agency that applies art processes and thinking to ordinary life across the region.

JL: I’m wondering if you have any thoughts on the role of critical language in tracking and mediating these developments. Can you see any evidence of new platforms or forms of language that might be evolving to try to engage with these practices?

AH: We’ve had lots of discussions around the importance of language because it so directly influences the ways in which people understand the concept. Theorist and independent researcher Stephen Wright developed a publication for Arte Útil called *Toward a Lexicon of Usership*. The book represents the beginnings of a terminology, categorised into three strands namely: Emerging Concepts (including ‘narratorship’ and ‘1:1 scale’); Modes of Usership (such as ‘use it together’); Concepts to be Retired (terms perceived as outmoded or superfluous such as ‘spectatorship’ and ‘authorship’).

In keeping with the concept itself, lexicons, glossaries and user-guides are very functional. Language is also important when presenting outcomes to audiences. When the archive becomes an exhibition, it has failed, because you are exhibiting the terminology rather than the thing itself. The Community Land Trust (who manage Granby Four Streets in Liverpool) recently opened their own Office of Useful Art. They realised that this type of activity isn’t something that should be exhibited in a traditional sense, so they found ways to offer insights into similar projects from communities around the world that can be learned from. All this material and these emerging networks of connectivity demonstrate an understanding of what art can do, rather than what it is. Shaping the world outside your front door in this way has a lot of currency.

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