

## What's the Use?

Editor's Introduction

This reader on art, use, and history comes at the end of modernity's end, after its long goodbye from its postmodern deathbed.

Throughout the modern period the human subject was conditioned by a rigorous logic of cause and effect. Everything was defined by what came before, and knowing what came before was the central objective of any pursuit of knowledge. It was common to return upstream to a phenomenon's source, with writing linear histories as the natural outcome of this endeavour. All of history flowed in one direction and time ended when the two great rivers of late twentieth-century ideology met: democratic capitalism and communism. They battled until the bitter end, both claiming to offer the natural expression of the way of the world. For the West the Cold War was the war that would end all wars, the war that would end history, as Francis Fukuyama was later to proclaim.<sup>1</sup>

In the wake of 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the establishment of the Internet, a postmodern, manic-depressive zombie time was set in motion. Celebrating infinite growth in new 'liberalized' economies coincided with the perpetual mourning for the injustice that free-roaming, globalized capitalism induced. For some time Third Way new leftism believed it could marry the incommensurable forces of social security and global capitalism. This utopian, two-faced automaton wasn't meant to be and it too died amid the financial crisis of 2008. Fukuyama's proclamation of the end of history was in one sense, at least, correct. Neoliberal hegemony signaled the end of a certain conception of time—we were no longer able to look forward as modernism had bid us do for so long. Instead we became stuck, our wheels spinning in the quagmire of the continuous present.

In art, modernism's tunnel vision was epitomized by the idea of schools and movements that represented stages of a singular and ongoing development, the endless 'isms' of art history. Such categorizations involved viewing history from a particular perspective—namely Western and colonial—discounting discourses and inputs beyond the

confines of its specific cultural and political parameters. But modernism also placed history within an interpretative straightjacket, unable to cut loose from its relationship to art that preceded it or came after. In essence, modernism exiled art to a place where it was unable to claim traction outside its own boundaries, whilst limiting its capacity to draw on history as a means to negotiate the present. Even more so than the modern subject, modern art was trapped due to being the representation of the force that produced it.

Such a mode of viewing art and its so-called 'development' has, thankfully, long been challenged. Postcolonial discourse succeeded in significantly reorienting, if not quite overcoming, the hegemony of a Western conception of the 'development' of its own field. With postmodern eclecticism, representation started to feast on itself, passionately exploring its own end. Now, as we reflect modernism on itself, we are forced to reconsider what value system art stands for or against—what, if anything, art represents. From this perspective, the role modernism ascribed to art, and its position of exile from the world, has itself to be fled. But where should we look for alternative roles? This reader suggests, through a variety of historical perspectives, theoretical positions, artistic practices, and curatorial models that one way out of the impasse might be through considering art's relationship to use.

The rich variety of texts and artists' contributions herein test the possibility of analyzing art through use. The case studies and material draw extensively from a new long-term programme organized by the museum confederation L'Internationale: *The Uses of Art – The Legacy of 1848 and 1989*.<sup>2</sup> Within this

<sup>2</sup> L'Internationale is a confederation of six modern and contemporary art institutions: Moderna galerija, Ljubljana; Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid; Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona (MACBA), Barcelona; Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen (M HKA), Antwerp; SALT, Istanbul and Ankara; and Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven. L'Internationale works with complementary partners such as: Grizedale Arts, Coniston, United Kingdom; Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool; Stiftung Universität Hildesheim, Hildesheim; and University College Ghent School of Arts, Ghent along with associate organizations from the academic and artistic fields. The confederation takes its name from the workers' anthem 'L'Internationale,' which calls for an equitable and democratic society with reference to the historical labour movement.

<sup>1</sup> For Fukuyama 'the end of history' meant the establishment of liberal democracy and capitalism as final and universal forms of government. See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

programme, four activities dealt specifically with the relation of art to use, even if there were differences in approach, sometimes profound ones. These activities were: the exhibition *Really Useful Knowledge*, organized by Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, curated by What How & for Whom/WHW, 2015; the exhibition *Confessions of the Imperfect, 1848–1989–Today*, organized by the Van Abbemuseum together with curator Alistair Hudson, 2014–2015; the conference 'The Uses of Art: History,' organized by Thomas Lange, Institut für Bildende Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft, University of Hildesheim, 2014; and the exhibition *Museum of Arte Útil*, also organized by the Van Abbemuseum and initiated by artist Tania Bruguera, 2013. Combined with several special commissions by writers and artists, this reader provides a timely overview of the uses of art that seeks to inspire debate in trying to collectively imagine a future after modernity's end.

### Art's Relative Use

Use is a thorny term. Embedded in it are questions of effect, utility, and instrumentalization, notions long seen as anathema to the field of art production, critique, and presentation. Taken more broadly as we do here, usefulness appears as a transient, malleable category. What was useful once might be utterly useless or incomprehensible later. What is useful to one person can be useless to another. Here, use's transient nature defines its presence as a relative category. Some put forward that art's use is only achieved when one can see results. Others argue that it is precisely in the unseen and immeasurable that art's use presides. Many intermingle the two. Yet there is some common ground, because however usefulness is defined, it is never an inherent quality or a representation of use—it speaks to a set of relationships of use. This relativity of use, enabling use to provoke discussion, makes it a productive wedge with which to break open modernism's stranglehold on art.

What is useful is what is affective. Through analyzing affects one can retrace useful relationships. The study of use therefore involves looking at the texture of affective surfaces.

These surfaces are not the counterpoint to modernity's endlessly receding origin that asked the modern subject to always dig deeper. They are the composite outcome of impure genealogies: that is, the family tree of use is contingent and chaotic—how something is intended to be used is not how it can be really useful. When, for instance, workers in nineteenth-century Britain were offered education by their employers, it was not the skills desired by their masters they considered truly useful. The affect of being in an educational surrounding was that it inspired the workers to turn from being educated into becoming educators. Affective relations are a messy affair, which is not something to purify through modern hygiene, but they can be carefully traced and analyzed. Instead of an all-encompassing overview, what is gained through these analyses is a detailed insight into the dizzying yet exciting web of societal and cultural relationships that link one thing to another.

Looking within the frame of use profoundly affects the category of art. Works themselves may stay the same, though the manner in which one relates to them undergoes significant shifts. In the modern condition, art was isolated, often serving as a critical mirror for reality. This reflective relationship is not necessarily obliterated when looking at art through its use, only this moment of reflection is folded into societal and cultural relationships. Art finds its specificity in dialogue with other types of relationships. If use often follows conventional lines, in the context of artistic intervention and through its self-awareness as art, it quite deliberately veers off these lines introducing new forms of use. Art thereby repurposes, as Stephen Wright argues, how something is used. It is then not so much a thing, but a type of relationship that is sometimes more pronounced than others. Art is still a specific domain but its specificity lies in its ability to connect different social, political, and economic fields. By analyzing these hybrid relationships, we come to a new understanding of art's use.

Likewise, the notion of use and its transient nature opposes the modernist understanding of historical progress: one thing leading to

the next. Instead of acting as an overarching frame for development, usefulness points to specific moments in time, to a series of different singularities and relationships of affectedness. How or why did something become useful to somebody? This simple question has great currency in our contemporary moment, defined as it is through fragmentation, fracture, and its multiple genealogies. In its simplest form, use helps us come to terms with a situation in which people from different regions, with very different histories, interact. Instead of offering a coherent master narrative that seeks to fold everything into one enormous play of modernity, use offers a way to consider dialogues without knowing their beginning or end.

### Historical Montage versus Linear Progression

This reader seeks to reorient modernism's insistence on progress by engaging in multiple understandings, interpretations, and applications of history. It seeks to revisit the long modern period, tracing the bond between Art and History in relation to subjectivity and autonomy. It explores the changing definitions of history, culture, memory, and oblivion in relation to the individual and the collective as key topics of an unfinished modern condition that emerges in the early nineteenth century. Various contributions focus on the role art plays in producing ideas, theories, and reinterpretations of 'history' within the struggle between collective identifications and making sense of the world on an individual level. The reader therefore explores art's critical potential as producer of knowledge through the construction of relations between past, present, and future. It both deals with and addresses the industrial and social revolutions and reorganizations of the subject and the community—from the nineteenth century to today.

As such, these texts and projects aim to contribute not only to a historical understanding of this particular timeframe, but to thinking through expanded and interwoven layers of time that reveal multiple connections: thinking and working with and in constellations. Through thinking in constellations it is possible to dismiss the idea of a historical series of 'developments,'

enabling connections between things and incidents of very different origins and times. For Walter Benjamin the image and application of constellations enables a critical practice that the image of a progressive sequence does not allow; it takes the opportunity to open the eyes and minds of historians and artists to the interrelation of events across time and to understand history as filled by the presence of a 'now.' In his text 'On the Concept of History' Benjamin points out that what 'has been' comes together in a flash in the now to form a constellation.<sup>3</sup>

Together the contributions and overall composition of this reader suggest that thinking and practicing history in constellations is a much more fluid notion that can accommodate what the idea of 'progression' neglects: the synchronicity of the asynchronous. Considering history as a constantly changing creation of the present, periods appear also not to be fixed, but reveal their malleable quality because they are the subject of working minds, determined to put forward an understanding of the present through reflecting on the past appearing in the present. Seen in this light the task of an artist and a historian, as well as the use of art and the use of history, adopt different means but have the same methodological basis. It is the work of montage and therefore a constant struggle to write and rewrite, construct and deconstruct narratives that enable any present to understand itself through and with a past. Montage was for Benjamin the only justifiable method to gain access to history because it makes past occurrences, terms, opinions, deeds, images, etc., present. According to Benjamin the just method to do so is to imagine these things from the past in our own space, and with our own terms, opinions, deeds, and past things. The artistic and curatorial endeavours brought together here witness this work on and with history and seek to reveal how these narratives have been constructed.

<sup>3</sup> See Walter Benjamin, 'On the Concept of History,' in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, bd. 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974 [1940]).

### A Polemical Toolkit of Usership

This publication is divided into three sections that focus on history, artistic practice, and exhibition strategies, exploring art's affects and relative use. As 'usership' is a contested term, instead of tying the material together in an all-embracing theoretical frame, art's relation to use is introduced provocatively through Stephen Wright's 'Toward a Lexicon of Usership.' The text was originally commissioned to coincide with the *Museum of Arte Útil* and functions as a rogue fourth section in the book. Wright's short publication has proved both a pivotal and divisive contribution to recent conversations on art and use for a number of artists, thinkers, and curators. The text is inserted here as a polemical toolkit with which to explore the implications of a turn toward use. The core radicalism in his proposal is that modern systems of value and quality are simply no longer able to grasp what is at stake in the relation between art, artist, user, and society at large. This requires us to make a double lexical move. Certain terms need to be retired from use, while new terms need to be unpacked and constructed so that art can be repurposed to different ends.

### Constellating History

The first section revolves around history, presenting both a series of relevant constellations to redefine the contemporary moment and ways to understand these constellations as a methodological and subsequently political exercise. One of these constellations is drawn around the anachronistic figure of art critic and social thinker John Ruskin (1819–1900). The affective web of relationships that is spun out of his writings is a clear demonstration of how history forms constellations that can become legible through montage. Ruskin was an early agent who argued for understanding art through use. While his ideas foresaw repercussions in different fields of architecture and design, as Lara Garcia Diaz details in her essay, his ideas on art and use have been forgotten within the field of art itself. Tamara Diaz Bringas, for example, looks at practices and initiatives taking place in Fidel Castro's Cuba as a means

to understand the combination of impulses and methodologies behind Tania Bruguera's notion of 'Arte Útil.' Adrian Rifkin's text similarly constellates ideas of use, the really useful, and the 'útil,' crisscrossing back and forth between nineteenth-century Britain and today to explore and bend our understanding of these terms.

### Practicing Art, Knowledge, and Use

The second and largest section focuses on artistic practice itself. Through a diverse set of examples, both the affective working of artworks themselves and associated artistic practice, are presented and analyzed. Here the notion of constellations reemerges through the groupings of artworks. Thomas Lange analyzes, for example, Christoph Schlingensiefel's controversial *Ausländer raus!* [Foreigners out!] project, which intermingles contemporary migration policy in Austria and reality TV in the heart of the cultural centre of Vienna. This complex project orchestrates a montage of social and political forms and discourses that reactivates aggressive racist scripts from the past, combined with the complexities of guilt and repression.

Within this section film and video emerge as mediums that have been deployed to produce relationships of affect. Perhaps more than any other medium these reveal the potential of montage to re-situate relationships between past and present, author and actor, image and affect. These films are constructed, as Georges Didi-Huberman analyzes in the work of Jean-Luc Godard, to bring forth an active response from the subject. The viewer is asked not to merely experience a story that exists outside him or her, but to reconsider, through affective strategies, one's position toward that which is presented. The section concludes with a look at a series of artistic practices whose production is not a work to be placed on pedestal, but exists out of real and active social relationships, such as the *Freehouse* project by Jeanne van Heeswijk in the Rotterdam Afrikaanderwijk. These practices link more directly to what Bruguera calls 'Arte Útil.'

### Exhibiting and Instituting

The final section presents a series of reflections on the role of the museum and specifically the

exhibition when used to present an affective montage. The museum is an unlikely site for such gestures. It is the architectural and institutional embodiment of modernism, a generator and gatekeeper of histories, understood most explicitly through its conservation of objects or its presentation of unfolding narratives of history through exhibitions. The contributions try to track, expose, and challenge this position. The means with which to do this are varied. Specific institutions, like the Museo Reina Sofía, are analyzed, as in Jesús Carrillo's text, or exhibitions that focus on use directly as in *1:1 Stopover* in Moderna galerija, Ljubljana discussed by Zdenka Badovinac. Historical events in exhibition making are likewise looked at, as in the exchange between art historians Alois Riegl and Alexander Dörner, revisited by Steven ten Thije. Reflecting on how the museum positions itself in relation to the fields of use and history is central to the perceived role of institutions today, as museum directors Charles Esche and Manuel Borja-Villel address in their conversation. This section also gives space to the three exhibitions that form the main source of inspiration for this publication and concludes with a substantial reflection on the framing and methodologies of these projects by curators involved.

At the end of the end one expects to find a new beginning. Turning the page so that a new chapter can start. Yet the beginning that is proposed here is not the next chapter in an unfolding story. When entering this terrain of relationships of use not one but countless chapters open up. Constellations do not follow each other in the numbing cadence of cause and effect, but appear unexpectedly and seemingly at random when the stars start to move, each with their own trajectory and speed. When reading the material, we imagine new constellations to appear, and hope it will provide inspiration and energy to appropriate and repurpose events in a meaningful montage. Our ambition is that these constellations might allow a greater sensitivity to the dense affective tissue of relationships embedded within our daily reality. This reality is one that holds present, past, and future all at once—and it is ours to use.