

Toward a Lexicon of Usership

Stephen Wright



Emergent concepts
(underpinning
usership)



Conceptual
institutions to be
retired



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'the cause and origin of a thing and its eventual usefulness, its actual employment and place in a system of purposes, lie worlds apart; whatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and again reinterpreted to new ends, taken over, transformed, and redirected by some power superior to it; all events are a subduing, a becoming master, and all subduing and becoming master involves a fresh interpretation, an adaptation through which any previous 'meaning' or 'purpose' are necessarily obscured or even obliterated.'

—
Nietzsche,
*On the Genealogy of
Morals*, II, 12.

Toward a Lexicon of Usership

The past several decades have witnessed what might be described as a broad *usological* turn across all sectors of society. Of course, people have been using words and tools, services and drugs, since time immemorial. But with the rise of networked culture, users have come to play a key role as producers of information, meaning and value, breaking down the long-standing opposition between consumption and production. With the decline of such categories of political subjectivity as organised labour, and the waning of the social-democratic consensus, *usership* has emerged as an unexpected alternative – one that is neither clear cut nor welcomed by all. For usership runs up against three stalwart *conceptual edifices* of the contemporary order: *expert culture*, for which users are invariably misusers; *spectatorship*, for which usership is inherently opportunistic and fraught with self-interest; and most trenchantly of all, the expanding regime of *ownership*, which has sought to curtail long-standing rights of use. Yet usership remains as tenacious as it is unruly. The cultural sphere, too, has witnessed a shift. Turning away from pursuing art's *aesthetic function*, many practitioners are redefining their engagement with art, less in terms of *authorship* than as users of artistic competence, insisting that art foster more robust use values and gain more bite in the real.

Challenging these dominant conceptual institutions feels disorienting, however, as the very words and concepts one might 'use' to name and clarify use-oriented practices are not readily available. All too often, user-driven initiatives fall prey to lexical capture by a vocabulary inherited from modernity. Yet no genuine self-understanding of the relational and dialectical category of usership will be possible until the existent *conceptual lexicon* is retooled. This requires both retiring seemingly self-evident terms (and the institutions they name), while at the same time introducing a set of emergent concepts. In the spirit of usership this may be done best by *repurposing* the overlooked terms and modes of use, which remain operative in the shadows cast by modernity's expert culture.



'use the country
itself, as its own map'
-
Lewis Carroll,
*Sylvie and Bruno
Concluded* (1893)

1:1 scale

Art and art-related practices that are oriented toward user-ship rather than spectatorship are characterised more than anything else by their scale of operations: they operate on the 1:1 scale. They are not scaled-down models – or artworld-as-sisted prototypes – of potentially useful things or services (the kinds of tasks and devices that might well be useful if ever they were wrested from the neutering frames of artistic autonomy and allowed traction in the real). Though 1:1 scale initiatives make use of representation in any number of ways, they are not themselves representations of anything. The usological turn in creative practice over the past two decades or so has brought with it increasing numbers of such full-scale practices, coterminous with whatever they happen to be grappling. 1:1 practices are both what they are, and propositions of what they are.

Scaling up operations in this way breaks with modernist conceptions of scale. By and large, the art of the twentieth century, like so many post-conceptual practices today, operated at a reduced scale; art was practiced as both other than, and smaller than, whatever reality it set out to map. In his 1893 story, *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*, Lewis Carroll tells of an impromptu conversation between the narrator and an outlandish, even otherworldly character called 'Mein Herr,' regarding the largest scale of map 'that would be really useful.'

'We very soon got to six yards to the mile. Then we tried a hundred yards to the mile. And then came the grandest idea of all! We actually made a map of the country, on the scale of a mile to the mile! (...) It has never been spread out, yet (...) the farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight! So now we use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well.'

A book could be devoted to unpacking that pithy parable! Were the farmers right, do maps (embodiments of the will to make-visible) constitute ecological threats? Every light-shedding device will also inevitably cast shadow, and a map (or any representation) is also a light-occluding device. But whatever it may mean to 'use the country itself, as its own map,' and



however it may be done, one thing is sure: it provides an uncannily concise description of the logic of art on the 1:1 scale – as good a description of many usership-oriented initiatives as any on hand.

Notorious for creating tales full of mesmerising warps in the fabric of space and time, Carroll undercuts some of the fundamental assumptions about scaled-back representation: its role as surrogate, its status as an abstraction, and its use as a convention that references the real to which it is subordinate. The ‘grandest idea of all’ – that is, producing a full-scale representation – turned out to be useless... And this is precisely the pitfall of so many politically motivated art initiatives today: they remain squarely within the paradigm of spectatorship. Mein Herr’s map, replaceable as it is by the territory it surveys, raises questions about what happens to representation when, at its limit, it resembles its subject so closely as to confound the distinction between what is real and what is not. It evacuates the mapping event altogether. The territory is neither mapped nor transformed in any way. And yet, used ‘as its own map,’ all is transformed. In this case, the representation not only refuses to be subordinate to its subject, it is also interchangeable with it, and even superior, as Carroll slyly suggests. The ontological discontinuity between map and land – and by extension, between art and whatever life form it permeates – disappears as soon as the territory is made to function on the 1:1 scale as its own self-styled cartography. What are the conditions of possibility and usership of a land’s cartographic function, the *becoming-map* of the landscape?

Or more simply, what do 1:1 practices look like, when they start to use the land as its own map? Well they don’t look like anything other than what they also are; nor are they something to be looked at and they certainly don’t look like art. One might well describe these practices as being positively ‘redundant,’ as enacting a function already fulfilled by something else – as having, in other words, a ‘double ontology.’ Yet in many cases, being burdened with an ontology (let alone a double one!) seems to be just exactly what they are seeking to escape from. Certainly they are intent on eluding ideological and



1:1 scale

institutional capture, and the kind of defanged representation to which it leads; but that does not describe the full thrust of these projects. They seem to be seeking to escape performative and ontological capture as art altogether. It is certainly possible to describe them as having a double ontology; but it may be more closely in keeping with their self-understanding to argue that this is not an ontological issue at all, but rather a question of the extent to which they are informed by a certain coefficient of art. Informed by artistic self-understanding, not framed as art.



Allure

When an art-informed practice is ramped up to the 1:1 scale, deactivating its primary aesthetic function and activating instead its usual or useful function, there's no sure way of seeing it as art. There are certainly no perceptual properties to tip us off once its coefficient of artistic visibility drops to the negligible. To perceive such practices as art requires some supplementary theoretical information, something that lets us know that the initiative, whatever it may be, is both what it is, and a *proposition* of what it is; some external knowledge letting us know that the initiative's existence does not exhaust itself in its function and outcome, but that it is *about* something. It embodies meaning. But what does that knowledge do for our *conception* and even our *perception* of an activity which itself remains unchanged? However we may wish describe such practices, something definitely happens to our understanding when we see things anew under the aspect of art – either as having a 'double ontology,' simultaneously and inseparably what they are and artistic propositions of what they are; or as having a certain 'coefficient of art,' thus avoiding the issue of art's ontology altogether; or as having an 'infrathin' dimension, to use Marcel Duchamp's cleverly elusive term for an equally elusive dimension. Artworlders invariably assume that our appreciation of something is somehow enriched or augmented, when we learn it is art inspired. Occasionally, though, we hear someone proclaim, upon discovering that some usual activity or service was grounded in artistic self-understanding, that they 'didn't even know it was art,' and find ourselves wondering whether that discovery came as an epiphany or as a let down...

One concept that has been put forward to describe the shift in how we conceive of and perhaps perceive an object or activity once learning of its concealed dimension is that of 'allure,' a term used by Graham Harman. It may seem paradoxical to draw upon the lexicon of Harman's 'object-oriented ontology' in a discussion of relationally defined, usership-oriented social practices; and doubly so in that 'allure' has unabashedly aesthetic overtones. However, speculative realism, with which Harman is closely associated, has done more than any body of thought to challenge Kantian hegemony. On top of which,

'We need a general term to cover both the comic and charming ways of encountering the sincerity of objects, and the best term I can think of is *allure*.'

-
Graham Harman,
*Guerrilla
Metaphysics.
Phenomenology and
the Carpentry of
Things*



allure doesn't so much restore art's aesthetic function as allow us see to aesthetics from a new angle.

The 'labour of allure,' writes Harman, involves separating an object from its traits, even as these traits remain physically inseparable from the object. 'Allure,' as he describes it, 'is a special and intermittent experience in which the intimate bond between a thing's unity and its plurality of notes somehow partially disintegrates.' These notes become sensual objects in their own right, rather than disappearing into the thing to which they belong as happens under ordinary conditions of perception. Allure is not necessarily aesthetic perception but 'whereas normal experience deals solely with surface qualities,' Harman explains, 'allure apparently brings objects directly into play by invoking them as dark agents at work beneath those qualities.' In some way, allure 'connects the upper and lower floors of an object in the manner of a trapdoor or spiral staircase.' Well, that could suit our purposes quite well, could it not? The thing changes not one bit, yet once the trapdoor springs open and the 'dark agents' are on the loose, nothing could be more different.



'an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art: an artworld.'

- Arthur C. Danto, 'The Artworld' (1964)

Artworlds (art-sustaining environments)

Common sense seems to tell us that we all live in one and the same world. Upholding the conjecture of a plurality of worlds requires a sustained theoretical effort. And yet the consensus around one-worldism has found itself seriously challenged of late: from every quarter, other worlds appear not only possible but far more plausible and desirable than the hegemonic version that continues to pass itself off as the only one. The ontological chauvinism of one-world theory has made some headway into art as well and the mainstream artworld tends to assert a sort of axiological and ontological superiority over its contenders and counterparts. It doesn't so much deny their existence – art tends to know intuitively and by definition that other worlds are plausible, flattering itself as being one of the more sophisticated launch pads for world multiplication – as it questions their value, saying in effect that though other worlds may be plausible, they're just not much good. However, the past decade has seen an increasing number of art-related practitioners scale up from the production of artworks alone to actively conceiving and developing the art-sustaining environments required if their practices are to thrive, often far from the referenced field of art. Artworlds are the places where art is used and, as such, are fundamental to any usological examination of art and art-related practice.



'I realised very soon the danger of repeating indiscriminately this form of expression and decided to limit the production of 'readymades' to a small number yearly. I was aware at that time, that for the spectator even more than for the artist, art is a habit-forming drug.'

-
Marcel Duchamp,
'Apropos of Readymades' (1961)

Assisted readymades and artworld-assisted prototypes

In a short exposé delivered in 1961, Marcel Duchamp offered some acute insights into the logic of readymades – describing them as highly ‘addictive drugs.’ In addition to standard readymades, by which usual objects have their use value suspended (as if placed between invisible parentheses) as they are inserted into the performative framework of the artworld, and his farsighted (but uninstantiated) suggestion of *reciprocal* readymades, which restore use value to artworks through their withdrawal from the performative frame, Duchamp briefly describes an intermediary variant. These, he says, are basically standard readymades, except that they have been modified ever so slightly. He calls these ‘assisted readymades’ (*readymades aidés*). It’s a nice term – and prescient too; today we have a different name for such deeds and contrivances modestly tweaked by artistic subjectivity: we call them *contemporary art*.

While the assisted readymade has become the addiction of the autonomous artworld, apparently intent on pursuing its logic exhaustively until such time as every commodity on earth has an identical counterpart in the realm of art, it is now rivaled by another trope: the artworld-assisted *prototype*. On the one hand, the prototype borrows the principle of industrial-design characteristic of the readymade but rather than embracing the logic of the multiple, it insists upon its experimental uniqueness. One might say that the proliferation of prototypes in contemporary art production is yet another symptom of an ongoing usological shift; but inasmuch as these prototypes are by no means autonomous but require artworld assistance to function at all, they are above all rather spectacular examples of an attempt to square the conceptual architecture and protocols of autonomous art with emergent intuitions. Such prototypes might indeed be functional, if ever they were freed from their artworld-assistance mechanisms and made available for genuine use.



Authorship

With the rise of possessive individualism in seventeenth-century Europe, a previously unheard-of idea began to gain currency – one that today has achieved hegemony – according to which individuals are conceived as the sole proprietors of their skills and owe nothing to society for them, meaning that these skills (and those of others) are commodities to be bought and sold at the marketplace. One of the conventions for packaging those skills is the conceptual institution of *authorship*. People had been using words, notes and pigment to string together tales, tunes and pictures forever, and though history retains the names of some of the more illustrious, it hadn't occurred to anyone that users of words, melodies and colours could somehow lay claim in any meaningful way to some particular arrangement that they had come up with; that they could claim authorship of some particular configuration of otherwise freely circulating marks and noises, and as such regulate other people's use of them. Previously, ideas and sentences, rhymes and rhythms were socially available for all to use (that is, modify, or not, and reproduce). Authorship became the name for stabilising that semiotic swarm, commodifying it by by congealing it around a single name – a signature – as if it owed nothing to the contributive usership of society. What Michel Foucault famously called the 'authorship function' developed as a way of containing semiotic dispersion around an arbitrary signifier (a proper name).

The twentieth century was not kind to authorship (though by then the institution of authorship had long since triumphed). Psychoanalysis, hermeneutics and post-structuralism amongst many others challenged the idea of a constituent subject underpinning authorship, shifting the locus of production toward the subconscious, the collective, the reader or the viewer... But these critiques, though they deconstructed the notion, paradoxically only strengthened the market value of authorship. Today, authorship continues to function in a sort of holy trinity with objecthood and spectatorship as a mainstay of the mainstream artworld. Indeed, from an investment perspective, authorship has now overtaken objecthood as a monetisable commodity.

The possessive quality of modern democratic liberal theory is found in its conception of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them.

- C.B. MacPherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (1962)



However, authorship is facing a challenge from contributive usership. As users contribute content, knowledge, know-how and value, the question as to how they be acknowledged becomes pressing. With the rise of collectively organised art-sustaining environments, single-signature authorship tends to lose its purchase – like possessive individualism in reverse.



Autonomy

'the watchword of
l'art pour l'art was
always the mask of its
opposite'

-
Theodor Adorno,
Aesthetic Theory
(1970)

Autonomy is a tricky term to handle because in the field of art it has come to denote almost the opposite of what it set out to name. Literally, *auto / nomos* means to determine one's own laws. When art slowly but surely pried open a new social space for itself in nineteenth-century European society, on the basis of aesthetic principles laid out by Kant, Hegel, Diderot and others, it was in the name of giving itself its own laws. Its 'conquest of space,' as Pierre Bourdieu calls it, was about wresting art from the overarching control and hindrance of religious and political authorities, carving out a separate sphere for itself where it could develop in keeping with its own internal logic. This space of autonomous art determined the art of modernity. Of course, the autonomy was only ever relative – but it was effective, and jealously guarded. In fact it still is. IncurSIONS from other fields were repulsed vigorously. Indeed, they still are. This autonomous sphere was seen as a place where art was free from the overcodes of the general economy (its own, utterly unregulated market notwithstanding) and the utilitarian rationality of market society – and as such, something be cherished and protected. This realm of autonomy was never supposed to be a comfort zone, but the place where art could develop audacious, scandalous, seditious works and ideas - which it set about doing.

However, autonomous art came at a cost – one that for many has become too much to bear. The price to pay for autonomy are the invisible parentheses that bracket art off from being taken seriously as a proposition having consequences beyond the aesthetic realm. Art judged by art's standards can be easily written off as, well... *just art*. Of contemplative value to people who like that sort of thing, but without teeth. Of course autonomous art has regularly claimed to bite the hand that feeds it; but never very hard. To gain use value, to find a usership, requires that art quit the autonomous sphere of purposeless purpose and disinterested spectatorship. For many practitioners today, autonomous art has become less a place of self-determined experimentation than a prison house – a sphere where one must conform to the law of permanent ontological exception, which has left the autonomous artworld rife with cynicism.



'the coefficient of art
is like an arithmetical
relation between
the unexpressed
but intended and
the unintentionally
expressed'

-
Marcel Duchamp,
'The Creative Act'
(1957)

Coefficient of art

In a famous eight-minute talk called 'The Creative Act,' Marcel Duchamp put forth the idea of a 'coefficient of art,' by which he referred to the discrepancy, inherent in any artistic proposition, between intention and actual realization, setting out to define this gap by a sort of 'arithmetical relation between the unexpressed but intended and the unintentionally expressed.' It is of course this gap that prevents art from being exhausted in the moment of its emergence, conferring on it the potential to evolve through interpretation. Coefficient of art is a nice term, but a strange one too, as if there were something 'unintentionally expressed' in those words – as if it itself had a coefficient of art which was not immediately audible to Duchamp himself. That there might be variable coefficients of art may enable us to understand how art may be construed so as to not fall prey to ontological capture. To speak of 'coefficients of art' is to suggest that art is not a set of objects or events, distinct from the larger set of objects and events that are not art, but rather a degree of intensity liable to be present in any number of things – indeed, in any number of symbolic configurations, activities or passivities. Could it be that art is no longer (or perhaps never was) a minority practice, but rather something practiced by a majority, appearing with varying coefficients in different contexts? What coefficient of art have we here? Or there? What is the coefficient of art of such and such a gesture, object or practice?

It is a radically deontological conception of art – as socialised competence, rather than performed works. A way of describing art gone fallow, and then to seed; finding itself in a permanent state of extraterritorial reciprocity, having no territory of its own. An unexpected fate, but then, art-historical movement is never lineal; if anything, it seems avunculineal (based not on direct lineage but on the looser inspiration drawn freely from those bearing some family resemblance) moving like the knight on the chessboard, one step to the side for every two forward. Lateral shifts do indeed appear to be taking place on the art field. And though in many ways, if contemporary art seems to be the purview of Duchamp's nieces and nephews, sometimes we may feel more like his orphans.



Cognitive surplus

The expression ‘user-generated content’ describes both individual and, more importantly, social acts. No one generates content just for themselves. Insofar as user-generated knowledge creates meaning, and value, it must be user-shared. Detractors of usership are quick to point to that category’s built-in component of self-interest. Yet even as users pursue self-interest, they mutualise uses and produce a kind of usership surplus, building upon and expanding prior uses. In this way, usership is contributive and yields more than the sum of the individual uses that comprise it: sharing all the tools in a workshop allows everyone to benefit both from the use of the tools and (even more so) from the compounding know-how of their collective usership. Call it a utility surplus. When the mode of usership in question involves connecting brainpower – what Gabriel Tarde calls ‘intercerebral collaboration’ – the type of excess produced is referred to as ‘cognitive surplus.’

For instance, when users tag images, texts, sounds or videos, they make those tags available and avail themselves of others’ tags in an upward spiral. The rise of contributive usership through new media tools came as something of a surprise; indeed, it could not have been predicted because the possibility of that usership was less determined by the tools themselves than by the desire to gain access to one another. The potential impact of usership-driven cognitive surplus is pretty staggering. Wikipedia, for instance, an extraordinary user-made initiative by any account, has been built out of roughly 1% of the man-hours that Americans spend watching television each year... What makes user-uploaded libraries and film archives and p2p file-sharing arrangements work is usership surplus.

User-aggregated task engines, such as reCAPTCHA (those distorted texts found at the bottom of online registration forms, that one has to retype to reduce spam) produce astronomical amounts of cognitive surplus - that in the case of reCAPTCHA is turned toward transcribing all the books and newspapers prior to 1945, whose print cannot be machine read with reliable accuracy. It is estimated that some 200 millions CAPTCHAs are solved by humans every day, requiring on average a mere ten seconds of labour time... which, totals some

‘The atomization of social life in the twentieth century left us so far removed from participatory culture that when it came back, we needed the phrase ‘participatory culture’ to describe it.’

– Clay Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus* (2010)



150,000 hours of unremunerated labour each day. One of the largest factories in the world, driven by inadvertent labour alone. Leaving aside the question as to the universal human value of the tasks into which projects such as reCAPTCHA have yoked internet users, they underscore the prodigious cognitive-surplus potential that aggregated usership embodies. A labour force tantamount to the one required to build the pyramids or put astronauts on the moon – accomplished as the by-product of a primary task! Aggregated usership brings a previously unheard-of potential for cognitive surplus into play, one liable to utterly transform our conception of labour. For now usership has precious little say over the use of its community-generated surplus, and rarely accrues its share of the benefits it produces.

Competence

If 1:1 scale, usership-driven practices are not performed as art, then what will become of art? For all the invaluable insights provided by performance studies, it is clear that performativity has an inherent blind spot, just as any outlook has; and in the wake of the ostentatious and inflationary use of that concept in any number of theoretical sauces, it is 1:1 scale practices which have laid bare its basic aporia. What performativity overlooks is what exactly is being performed - and with respect to art practices leaving the sandbox of art for the social, that can best be called 'competence.' Now after a century of radical deskilling, to speak of artistic competence is to sound suspiciously conservative, if not downright reactionary - at least to the experts policing the field. But competence is not to be confused here with artistic *métier* or skill in the fine arts tradition. In fact it is to be understood as virtually synonymous with *incompetence*, for usership-generated practice is founded on *mutualising incompetence*. On the face of it, that seems an odd thing to say; but, a competence can only be defined as such from the perspective of a corresponding incompetence. And in effect, it is only because a given incompetence is somehow competence-deficient that it calls a competence to the fore. This is of fundamental importance in situations of collaboration, where art engages in skill sharing and competence crossing with other modes of activity whose domains of competence, and hence of incompetence, are very different. By mutualising (in)competence, this difference is made fruitful and productive. For instance, as Robert Filliou once famously put it in his equivalency principle, there is in art a fundamental equivalency between the well done, the poorly done, and the not done. Because this 'principle' seems self-evident to art - making it a basic artistic competence - while remaining almost certainly unacceptable to any other field of activity, it goes some way to underscoring what art per se brings to the table of 1:1 scale practice, once its aesthetic function has been deactivated.

At any event, one can observe a definite tendency amongst contemporary practitioners not to be pressured into constantly performing underlying competences. An analogy can be drawn here with Noam Chomsky's famous distinction



'The difference between linguistic competence and linguistic performance can be illustrated by slips of the tongue, such as 'noble tons of soil' for 'noble sons of toil.' Uttering such a slip doesn't mean that we don't know English but rather that we've simply made a mistake because we were tired, distracted, or whatever. Such 'errors' also aren't evidence that you are a poor English speaker... When we say someone is a better speaker than someone else, we are referring to performance, not competence.'

- Kristin Denham & Anne Lobeck, *Linguistics for Everyone* (2010)



between linguistic competence (inherent to all native speakers of a natural language enabling them to distinguish a grammatically coherent speech act from one that is not) and linguistic performance (actualising that competence in producing speech acts). One can, of course, always perform a competence; but one *need* never perform it for that competence to exist. This gives art particular potency in its contemporary moment of trans-social migration: it can deploy its (in)competences and self-understanding in social settings far removed from art, without ever performing them as art.

This is a huge issue, because it has to do with the socialisation of art and the repurposing of existent institutions, both conceptual and physical. Chomsky's insistence on competence has often been criticized as being ahistorical – referring to an inherent, hard-wired attribute – and thus unable to account for change in the way language is actually used or 'performed'. This may not be an insurmountable obstacle, though, inasmuch as competence can also be construed itself as something dynamic, constantly being informed through a kind of feedback loop by developments in performance. What is perhaps most attractive about the idea that competence need never be performed in order to exist is that it draws attention to, and provides an escape route from, an event-centered conception of art – one of the most rarely challenged mainstays of artworld ideology, according to which art is not only made up of events (exhibitions, publications, production of works) but is itself seen as event. On the one hand, the everyday, here-and-now perspective of usership doesn't allow this privilege. But on the other hand, without those everyday acts of usership and repurposing, there is no way to account for how events actually come about! To put it differently, one might associate event with performance and competence with everyday usership – something largely invisible to the event-focused attention economy but which may actually be the engine of social transformation. It is certainly fair to say that there is an extraordinary amount of art-related competence at work and at play that is simply not being performed – that is, not being captured institutionally and performed as event. The implications for curatorship are obviously immense.



Conceptual edifices

We dwell in conceptual edifices. They shelter and confine us, with or without our consent, even in the great outdoors. The architecture of these complex, invisible edifices relies on conceptual building blocks repurposed from previous edifices. Though it is rare to be able to point to the architect of any given conceptual edifice, as their users, we are all somehow their co-architects. We use them for our purposes, for without users, they are just empty shells; with time, they come to bear the brunt of usership's wear and tear and ultimately can no longer contain the uses to which they put. By thwarting purposes, they invite repurposing: with a bit of help from their usership, they inevitably undergo change: an annex is added here, a tunnel and a trapdoor there. But that can only go so far. At some point users tear them down and establish new ones. Needless to say, the conceptual architecture of these edifices very much determines the physical architecture of all society's institutions. Many conceptual edifices of modernity, including Spectatorship, Authorship, the Aesthetic Function of Art, the Nation State and Productivism are showing signs of severe stress and need to be torn down so their constituent parts can be put to new ends.

'Just as the reader
can make a new book
through reading...
the user can make a
new building through
using.'

-
Jonathan Hill,
*Actions of
Architecture:
Architects and
Creative Users* (2003)



'The creation of a new use is possible only by deactivating an old use, rendering it inoperative.'

—
Giorgio Agamben,
Profanations

Deactivate (art's aesthetic function)

'Deactivate' is a verb often used by Giorgio Agamben to name the political conditions of possibility for genuine paradigm shifts, which can only happen, he contends, if residual power structures are effectively deactivated. If they are merely displaced or overhauled, their power remains active. To describe the paradigm shifts underway in many contemporary discourse-based and interventionist art practices, investigator Mabel Tapia rightly speaks of the 'deactivation of art's aesthetic function.' It is a stinging formulation, to be sure, but it succinctly captures the radicality of the moment. To say that art's aesthetic function has today been deactivated (and, where still active, has become something of a decoy), is not of course to say that artworks no longer have an aesthetic, or are somehow aesthetic-free – which would be absurd. All sensual things have an aesthetic; that cannot be deactivated. But they do not necessarily have an *aesthetic function*. It was Kant who assigned art an aesthetic function: he did not believe art was functionless, only that it should not be seen as having a purposive or a goal-oriented function, but one which endlessly unfolds in disinterested aesthetic contemplation. As long as that function remains active, art remains outside the realm of usership and can have no operative use value.

Deactivating art's aesthetic function, rendering it inoperative, opens art up – by Agamben's account – to other functions. To a heuristic function, for instance; or an epistemic function. Or the more operative functions of 1:1 scale practices.

But art's aesthetic function is so intimately bound up with many contemporary understandings of what art is that the aesthetic function has become almost ontologised – as if that historically determined (and altogether recent) function were inseparable from art's very mode of being... exactly what Kant had hoped for. This accounts for the reticence amongst some practitioners to envisage the deactivation of art's aesthetic function. Other practitioners, however, have concluded that it is only by deactivating this debilitating, use-precluding function that they can make way for a purposive aesthetics of art; an aesthetics repurposed in the name of usership.



Disinterested spectatorship

'Kant's view is different: one withdraws to the 'theoretical,' the onlooking, standpoint of the spectator, but this position is the position of the Judge.'

- Hannah Arendt, *Lectures of Kant's Political Philosophy* (1970)

Immanuel Kant is the single greatest architect of the conceptual edifice of modern, autonomous art. For all intents and purposes, the conceptual architecture of today's art museums (and, hence, their physical architecture of display) is underpinned by Kant's two intermeshed and brilliantly paradoxical imperatives, formulated at the end of the eighteenth century. On the one hand, he argued, art is characterised by its 'purposeless purpose'; on the other it was geared toward 'disinterested spectatorship.' The former imperative was to ensure art's universality, preserving it from the realm of use and utilitarian interest, enabling it to freely embody what he rather nicely called 'aesthetic ideas,' which could be the object of knowledge. But Kant realised that he somehow had to protect this objective dimension of art as knowledge from the slippery slopes of subjective appreciation, even while explicitly acknowledging that art was something that could only be apprehended subjectively... Hence his second, complementary brainchild, 'disinterested spectatorship.' It would be difficult to overstate the almost fantastic robustness of this conceptual arrangement - which, of course, is precisely what accounts for its extraordinary longevity.

For Kant, an actor in any given situation - or, worse still, a *user* - is not 'autonomous,' and is incapable of theoretical onlooking. As one of Kant's most lucid commentators, Hannah Arendt, points out: 'The standard is the spectator. And this standard is autonomous.' Kant was adamant about these issues, because he felt that if spectatorship fell prey to subjective interest, all was lost. In what can only be described as a pre-Wittgensteinian moment in his *Critique of Judgement*, Kant argued that one could not *say*, before a painting or other artwork, 'this is beautiful *for me*.' For to thus qualify an aesthetic judgement subjectively, *for me*, rather than making a universal claim, was an illicit use of language. Such subjectivity was reserved for issues of preference (Kant mentions Canary wine...), and was precluded from aesthetic judgement that required disinterested spectatorship.

If disinterested spectatorship continues to enjoy strong art-world support, not least of all because it is so entrenched in



institutional architecture, it has recently been somewhat upstaged by a not unrelated notion – what Jacques Rancière’s refers to as *emancipated spectatorship*... Seeking to save spectatorship from the inherent passivity to which it has been relegated by such unlikely adversaries as Bertolt Brecht and Guy Debord, Rancière has argued that ‘it is in the power of associating and dissociating that the emancipation of the spectator consists...’ Spectators, he claims counterintuitively, know what they see, and know what to do with it, translating and counter-translating in terms of their own experiences. Like *The Emancipated Spectator* as a whole, the argument is enticing, but odd. Does it not stretch the definition, and agency, of spectatorship a notch too far? Genuinely emancipated, spectatorship rolls up its sleeves, as it were, becoming something else altogether, and it may not be unreasonable to name that something else ‘usership.’ In many respects, *The Emancipated Spectator* reads much better if one replaces ‘spectator’ with ‘user’...



Double ontology

1:1 scale practices operating within a paradigm of usership, actually being what they are – house-painting outfits, online archives, libraries, restaurants, mushroom hunts, whatever – and at the same time artistic propositions of what they are, can be described in different ways, depending on what set of properties (or allure) one wishes to emphasise. They can be described as *redundant*, inasmuch as they fulfill a function, as art, which they already fulfill as whatever it is they are. They can also be said to have a *double ontology*: a primary ontology as whatever they are, and a secondary ontology as artistic propositions of that same thing. The sorts of things Marcel Duchamp once punningly referred to as ‘reciprocal readymades.’

Practices with ‘double ontologies’ do not immediately appear as art, though that is where their self-understanding is grounded. To that degree, at least, they do indeed break with the basic tenets of autonomous art. Whatever its descriptive power, however, the notion of a double ontology has two downsides. Firstly, it is not entirely sure that two ontologies are better than one, even if a double-take of this kind allows for considerable usological and escapological play. In fact, in some ways, it may be twice as cumbersome, and an enormous concession to institutional theory, reinforcing as it does the idea that art has an ontology at all. Secondly, to describe practices in these terms is to make them inherently reliant on performative capture to repatriate them into the art frame – otherwise, their secondary (artistic) ontology remains inert, and not so much disappears as fails to appear in the first place. From the perspective of institutional theory, this is intolerable: what is not performed as art, is not art, and so is lost to posterity. But in another way, that may be precisely the point. To disappear from that ontological landscape altogether in order to gain traction somewhere else.

‘It was like living a secret life, somehow dishonest, but I felt that to reveal the purpose of the undertaking would compromise the outcome, like the Schrodinger’s Cat example, where the observance of something changes the outcome.’

–
Raivo Puusemp
‘Thoughts on Control’
(2013)



'Escape is all that remains.'
-
Henri Laborit,
Éloge de la fuite
(1976)

Escapology

Escapology, broadly speaking, refers to the rapidly growing field of empirical enquiry and speculative research into the ways and means, tactics and strategies of escaping capture. Not so much Houdini-style escape from physical bonds (though his methodologies hold metaphorical appeal for both researchers and practitioners as well as for popular culture), as from the more insidious forms of capture in contemporary society that hobble action, desire and thought by cloaking them in often invisible overcodes. Capture may be ideological, encouraging agents to think in terms of categories whose mere existence is their sole merit. Or it may be institutional, framing practices into a sphere of action that determines their specific visibility and forecloses their potential deployment. Ever increasingly, both in the general economy and in the symbolic economies of art and activism, capture may be logistical, subsuming human decision-making and rationality itself into algorithms. Capture may be epistemic, terminological, but whatever its configuration, escapology is about fleeing its normative clutches. The mode of escapology most widespread in the mainstream artworld has to do with escaping the ontological capture that is the bane of autonomous art practice, whereby actions or objects have their very mode of being (their 'ontology') captured as art; just art. This form of capture relies on that most perversely neoliberal form of capture – operative or performative capture, whereby things are put to work, made to perform. Escapology, in short, is the theory and practice of suspending the operations of all these mechanisms of capture.

Yet escapology is a paradoxical undertaking, and an often-ambivalent science. For obvious reasons, escape itself can neither assert itself for what it is, nor perform itself as escape: it must always appear impossible from the perspective of power, yet at the same time it must be always already under way. Escapology, then, is less the study and implementation of sets of tactics or strategies for avoiding capture, than the acknowledgement of a simple, concrete fact: *escape happens*. This is escapology's *a priori*, and though it seeks to better appreciate the escapological drive in contemporary culture, it does not see escape as a self-conscious attempt to escape *from* something. It envisages escape in terms of offensive retreat; as such, it shares



none of the projective logic of an event-driven vision of history. Whereas (left-leaning) art historians and social theorists have conditioned us to think of emancipation, and indeed of art itself, in terms of events – whether past or yet to come – escapology rejects this masculinist perspective as one premised on the luxury of being able to wait for the coming event or to look back on the one which took place. Escapology is the science of the kind of everyday elusiveness, leakage and doing-others that can really only be described as ‘escape’ once power structures shift to capture its movement. Ultimately, escapology’s examples, those that instantiate its concrete truth, all lie beyond, or behind, the event horizon itself.

In lieu of an example, then, consider this speculative etymology suggestively put forth by a contemporary escapologist. The verb ‘escape’ is usually thought to derive from the Vulgar Latin *excapare*, from *ex-* (‘out’) + *capio* (‘capture’). It may well be, however, that it comes from the Late Latin *ex cappa*, in reference not to capture at all but to a ‘cape’ or cloak which remains behind even as the living body which it had clad has slipped away.



'not infrequently,
in these situations,
you were really art;
it's just that no one
noticed'

-
Mladen Stilinovic,
Dear Art (1999)

Eventhood

Eventhood is the horizon line in the spontaneous ideology of much art-historical discourse. Art historians have accustomed us to seeing art in terms of events: artworks, exhibitions, publications, movements... construing art as an irruptive event, penetrating stable appearance with novelty and all the attendant fireworks. But this is a strangely masculinist understanding of art-historical process. To focus on the epiphany of 'events' – and to see art itself as event – rather than on fugitive occurrences, is to foreground particular moments when a set of material, social and imaginary ruptures come together and produce a break in the flow of history. As Dimitris Papadopoulos, Niamh Stephenson and Vassilis Tsianos have argued in *Escape Routes – Control and Subversion in the Twenty-First Century* (2008), an escapological perspective is inherently different: 'An event is never in the present; it can only be designated as an event in retrospect or anticipated as a future possibility. To pin our hopes on events is a nominalist move which draws on the masculinist luxury of having the power both to name things and to wait about for salvation. Because events are never in the present, if we highlight their role in social change we do so at the expense of considering the potency of the present that is made of people's everyday practices: the practices employed to navigate daily life and to sustain relations, the practices which are at the heart of social transformation long before we are able to name it as such.' In our society of the event, the event itself disappears from view. It becomes the horizon line itself.



Expertise / Expert culture

From the high-minded perspective of expert culture, users' claims are inherently shot through with self-interest. Take the experts of State. On the one hand anxious to uphold their regime of exception with respect to the market-driven private sector, public-sector experts are quick to point out that they serve users, rather than customers or clients; and on the other hand, they are the first to again uphold their exceptional status by stigmatizing users (or consumer advocacy groups) as the Trojan Horse of this same market-driven logic... But the person who takes such and such a bus line every morning at dawn to get to work knows something about that line which no urban planning expert, whose perspective is informed by countless disinterested 'studies,' can simply ever know. This cognitive privilege is user specific.

It is expert culture – whether the editors, the urban planners, the curators – which is most hostile to usership: from the perspective of expertise, *use* is invariably *misuse*. But from the perspective of users, everywhere, so-called misuse is simply... use. In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre points out a fundamental difference between the cognitive space of usership and the epistemological chauvinism of expert culture.

'The user's space is lived – not represented... When compared with the abstract space of the experts (architects, urbanists, planners), the space of the everyday activities of users is a concrete one which is to say, subjective.'

Of course, this is also what makes usership something of a double-edged sword, which is precisely what makes it interesting to consider, not as an alternative to the supposedly universal category of the 'proletariat,' for instance, but as a way of rethinking the dialectics of collective and individual agency.

Michel Foucault is premonitory in this respect. In his usage, usership at once designates the site where individuals and their compartments and needs are expected, where a space is available for their agency, both defining and circumscribing it; and it refers to the way in which these same users surge up and barge into a universe, which, though accustomed to

'B's competencies enrich A's competencies if C's incompetencies enrich B's competencies then C's incompetencies change polarity and move to a higher order'

- François Deck, 'Reciprocal Expertise' (2004)



managing their existence, finds itself thrown off balance by their speaking out as users. In other words – and this is related to Foucault’s theory of political action – it is not as if users burst forth in places where they are not expected; rather, the very immediacy of their presence is ambivalent and cannot be reduced to a progressive recognition, nor to a mere cooptation by the powers that be. Governance, control, disciplining devices of all kinds, necessarily generate users whose agency is neither exclusively rebellious nor purely submissive toward an exterior norm. They know they will never be owners; that they will never eliminate that dimension of exteriority from the power relations that impact on them. Users take on those instances of power closest to them. And in addition to this proximity, or because of it, they do not envisage that the solution to their problem could lie in any sort of future to which the present might or ought to be subordinated (very different in this respect to any revolutionary horizon). They have neither the time to be revolutionary – because things have to change – nor the patience to be reformists, because things have to stop. Such is the *radical pragmatism of usership*.

Externalities (positive and negative)

Externalities are the by-products of usership. Economists define externalities as the inadvertent or indirect benefits or costs that result from a given activity or transaction. Acid rain, for instance, is considered a negative externality of using coal-fired power stations. In calculating the overall social value of that type of energy production, one would have to calculate the intended benefits and the negative externality of being surrounded by dead forests, and so on. One classic example of a positive externality is beekeeping. Beekeepers keep bees primarily for their honey, which accounts only for a modest contribution to the general economy. A spillover effect or positive externality of their activity is the pollination of surrounding crops by the bees (some 80% of all crops are pollinated in this way) – which generates a non-monetised value incommensurably greater than the value of the harvested honey. The implications for usership are tremendous.

Detractors of usership invariably point to its negative externalities. Champions of ownership bemoan the fact that they cannot monetise the positive externalities of their activities that users enjoy for free. But usership is in fact akin to pollination - users are like bees, as it were, producing incalculable externalities. As Yann Moulier Boutang has argued (rather optimistically) in *The Bee and the Economist*, we may currently be transitioning from an 'economy of exchange and production toward an economy of pollination and contribution' – that is, an economy of usership.



'pollination is but one example of a complex symbiosis underlying the many contributions not based on market exchange'

–
Yann Moulier Boutang,
The Bee and the Economist (2010)



'Always implicated,
and yet elusive.'
-
Maurice Blanchot
*The Infinite
Conversation*
(1969)

Extraterritorial reciprocity

What happens when art leaves its 'own' territory? When it moves into situations of collaboration in other territories? When it migrates south, socially and epistemically speaking? All too often, we tend to devote attention to what art does when it gets to whatever new territory it invests, rather than thinking about what happens to the place art left behind. But it is no less important to attend to the fate of art's place of departure than to its point of arrival. Does it not open a kind of invisible void through its often conspicuous absence – taunting culture, the way nature abhors a vacuum? This is the operation of *extraterritorial reciprocity*, a perhaps excessively multi-syllabic way of describing how in leaving its own territory for another, in becoming a 1:1 scale practice, art vacates, in a gesture of reciprocity, a space for other social practices to use. This space, and all that goes with it, formerly reserved for art but suddenly made available to other forms of endeavor, is often a tremendously desirable and useful resource for practitioners from other fields – the very fields where art may have migrated and who repurpose art's vacant space their own use.

It is easy to see what would tempt art to migrate southwards, slipping its moorings and making its way into the shadows of the attention economy; in trading off autonomy for the social; exchanging artworks for practices: the desire to gain traction in the social realm and not find itself, time and again, written off as 'just art.' But the space art leaves behind is a polyvalent one, and the swap may be mutually beneficial. Extraterritorial reciprocity, then, consists of art vacating its convention-bestowed territory in the artworld, making it available to other activities, in a gesture of reciprocity as it sets up shop in a different domain. This is an art without a territory, which operates in the intersubjective space of collaboration. Yet that 'space' is really no space at all, or only in the metaphorical sense of the term; it is probably more accurate to speak of a 'time' of collaboration and intervention – the time of common yet heterogeneous purpose. But the geographical model, with its cartography of partially overlapping territories, has the advantage of providing a tangible picture of what practitioners of reciprocal extraterritoriality are really after. Constitutive mobility. Elusive implication.

Gaming

Some would contend that usership is about gaming the system – misusing its intentions to achieve better outcomes. That may be, but insofar as one could also argue the converse (that the system games its usership), the question becomes: is there anything outside gaming? Certainly there are different ways of gaming, but is there anything beyond gaming? Is playing the spoilsport not also a game? It is by no means a moot point, for we know that in language games, for instance, usership alone determines whatever meaning there may be. In *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga argues that what he calls the ‘troublesome *only* feeling’ (i.e., that it’s only a game) is abolished in play. Is that also true for art? The Situationists, who quote Huizinga’s remarks on ‘just gaming’ approvingly, sought to develop a ‘superior game’ that would be characterized by the disappearance of any competitive dimension - ‘a bad product of a bad society,’ in their eyes. One of the last texts written by Guy Debord is a short treatise called ‘Notes on Poker,’ a game he played frequently and about which he held highly unorthodox views. Since poker is a game of bluff, he argued, the good player never bluffs, nor pays any heed to other players’ bluffing, but only ever plays his hand. It’s hard to say whether the theory has any application in the game of poker; but it provides astounding insight into the game of usership. Spectators see bluff everywhere and take it into account. Users consider bluff to be negligible and follow only the knowledge they have of their means at any given moment. If others bluff, it is of no concern to users. Usership is not beyond gaming; indeed, it’s just gaming – but playing for real.



‘The bad player sees bluff everywhere, and takes it into account. The good player considers it negligible and follows only the knowledge he has of his cards in hand at any given moment.’
- Guy Debord, ‘Notes on Poker’ (1990)



'Leftovers are clusters
of possibilities'
-
Pierre Pons, in Agnès
Varda, *The Gleaners
and I* (2000)

Gleaning

Gleaning has been a customary right to farm products in Europe and elsewhere since the Middle Ages. It refers to both the right and the practice of gathering leftover crops from farmers' fields after they have been commercially harvested or where reaping is not economically viable. Gleaning differs from scrounging in that, unlike the latter, it is legally regulated - it is a common and informal type of usufruct that ensures gleaners a circumscribed right to use (*usus*) others' property and to enjoy its fruits (*fructus*). Because it is specifically regulated (for instance, after thrashing, the collecting of the straw and the fallen grains of wheat is authorised) it is distinguished from pilfering - defined as the offence of stealing fruit or vegetables before they have fallen to the ground. A more subordinate mode of usership than, say, poaching, gleaning is nevertheless significant because it points to historically entrenched rights of common usership over resources found in private domains. Today, immaterial gleaning is widely practiced by a whole host of art-related practitioners; its agricultural antecedents offer it a haven from encroachment by groups lobbying on behalf of increased intellectual property rights and the foreclosure of the epistemic commons.

Hacking

‘Hacking’ is a great old Saxon word. A hack is a kind of beveled cut with an axe. Not a clean slice, but an oblique chop – opening something up in a way that’s not easy to repair. There has been much speculation about when and why the term was adopted by programmers. But the most thought-provoking discussion of what hacking means socially is to be found in *A Hacker Manifesto*, by McKenzie Wark. It is a rare thing, and the measure of genuine intellectual creativity, when a writer is able to develop and deploy a full-fledged, conceptual vocabulary and use it in a sustained way: the writing becomes at once the staging ground and the first application of a new way of talking.

A hacker, in Wark’s lexicon, is very different from the image of the super-specialised anarcho-programmer, or criminal subculture, which the term still conjures up for most people; it refers to someone who hacks into knowledge-production networks of any kind, and liberates that knowledge from an economy of scarcity. ‘While not everyone is a hacker, everyone hacks,’ writes Wark, suggesting that hacking is really quite akin to usership of knowledge, information, images, sounds and other social resources that one might find useful. In a society based on private-property relations, scarcity is always being presented as if it were natural; but in the contemporary context, where intellectual property is the dominant property form, scarcity is artificial, counter-productive – and the bane of hackers – for the simple reason that appropriating knowledge and information deprives no one else from accessing it. This is a key issue in art-related practice – indeed, Wark talks about hacking as if it *were* an art-related practice – for the system of value-production in the mainstream artworld is also premised on a regime of scarcity, underpinned by the author’s signature. Wark hacks his rather unorthodox theory out of Marxism: like Marx, Wark believes human history can be conceptualised in terms of class relations and conflict. Today though, he argues, this conflict is most acute between what he calls the ‘vectoralist’ class (the class that owns the pipelines, the satellites and the servers, which has come to supplant the hegemony of the capitalist class) and the new productive class that Wark describes as hackers, whose purpose it is to free knowledge from illusions of scarcity. The hacker class, he argues, arises out of



‘What calls for a creative application of the hack is the production of new vectors along which the event may continue to unfold after its initial explosion into social space, and avoid capture by representation.’

– McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto* (2004)



the transformation of information into property, in the form of intellectual property.

This is a usefully redescriptive understanding of hacking. And it sheds an interesting light on the Obama Administration's unwavering reaction to the recent Snowden hack, whose shock waves continue to reverberate through global civil society: 'The documents are the private property of the United States Government and must be returned immediately.' As if the hacked documents' ownership were their salient feature! In another way, though, it makes sense to see hacking as a way of turning documents against their owners. In political terms, one might argue that leaking documents is the 'southern' response to the 'northern' privatization of information – southern being understood in an epistemic and political sense. A counterhegemonic gesture, using the information power produced by the adversary – the readymade documents – to tactical advantage. Something that in the hacker milieu is often referred to as 'hack value.'

Hack value is difficult to define and ultimately can only be exemplified. But, by and large, it refers to a kind of aesthetics of hacking. For instance, repurposing things in an unexpected way can be said to have hack value; as can contributing anonymously to collectively used configurations, in the spirit of free software. Steven Levy, in his book *Hackers*, talks at length about what he calls a 'hacker ethic.' But as Brian Harvey has argued, that expression may be a misnomer and that what he discovered was in fact a hacker *aesthetic*. For example, when free-software developer Richard Stallman says that information should be given out freely – an opinion universally held in hacker circles – his opinion is not only based on a notion of property as theft, which would be an ethical position. His argument is that keeping information secret is inefficient; it leads to an absurd, unaesthetic duplication of effort amongst the information's usership.



'Stasis is the new movement.'
-
Kenneth Goldsmith,
Uncreative Writing
(2011)

Idleness (creative and expressive)

Can we think of art, not as something that must be performed, but which might well exist as a latent competence, an active yeast or undercurrent beneath the visible field of events, all the more potent in that it remains unperformed? Can we not think of art as capable of a self-conscious, Bartelby-like decision to *prefer not to* (in this case, not to inject competence into the art frame) but instead to bide its time and, perhaps, redirect that competence elsewhere?

Even in its most proactive, productivist moments, there is something profoundly idle about usership. Something slack. It uses what is, what's there. Plagiarism, appropriation, repurposing, patching and sampling, cutting and pasting, then databasing and tagging for reuse – these are the domains of usership's expertise. Translating is a form of usership (of a text, a word, a string of words, an image or a sound): users are translators, transposing what they find in one idiom into another. And while translating can be hard work, it is creatively idle, making do with what is available rather than feeling compelled to add something else.



*‘aktivnoe strmelenie
k nichemu’*
-
Mit’ki Motto (USSR,
1980s)

Imperformativity

Imperformativity

Usership is characterised by its radical imperformativity. It eschews performative capture. To perform usership would be to spectacularise it – that is, to negate it, to make it into something else. Imperformativity is not usership’s horizon, but rather its modus operandi.

Toward a Lexicon of Usership



Lexicon

The powerful conceptual vocabulary inherited from Western modernity presents us with an unusual – indeed, historically unprecedented – paradox. The conceptual toolbox is full; all the word tools are there, and in great shape too. But, somehow, they're not quite the right tools for the jobs at hand; they are the right tools for a job no longer needed – tools calibrated to older conceptual edifices, founded in mainstream arts-sustaining environments, aligned to practices (before they were even called that) stemming from aesthetic autonomy. And yet, since they are the tools that continue to enjoy the legitimacy of expert culture, their very presence precludes the proper identification of the right job...

Where the crisis of the lexical toolbox's inadequacy becomes excruciatingly obvious, however, is where the continued use of a tool warps, twists and distorts emergent intuitions, forcing contemporary practices into twentieth-century molds. Since we can neither think nor even name art without appropriate terms, retooling our conceptual vocabulary has become a crucial task, one that can only be undertaken by fostering terminological cross-pollination with other avenues of human activity. What we need, perhaps more than anything, is a retooled lexicon. This has nothing to do with drumming up some sort of new expert speak or coining neologisms, and everything to do with repurposing common terms from other lexical fields, other practices of knowledge. The only way to produce a meaningful, user-repurposed wordscape, uninhibited by an overcoded vocabulary, is to listen to the language games of other activities, experimentally importing notional edifices. An extradisciplinary retrofit of sorts, paying heed to the ongoing usological turn in contemporary practice.

Rather than seeing art as the lens through which to consider conceptual migration, it might well prefer to see itself as a host to, and guest of, lexical migrants. If it is to have a useful critical edge, and if it is to challenge invisible norms, naming must be a tool for undoing apparent self-evidences – that 'misty mantle of illusion,' as Nietzsche caustically put it, 'that counts as essential, so-called 'reality'.' Which is tantamount to wresting 'art' from 'art,' sundering art from itself.

'Unspeakably more depends on what things are called than on what they are. (...) Only as creators can we destroy! But let us not forget that in the long run it is enough to create new names and plausibilities in order to create new 'things'.'
- Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, § 58. (1890)



'Whatever it wins,
it does not keep.
It must constantly
manipulate events in
order to turn them
into 'opportunities'.'

-
Michel de Certeau,
*The Practice of
Everyday Life* (1980)

Loopholes

Loopholes are the quintessence of usership-instantiated tactics since they offer ways into systems without physically damaging them. Literally, or least historically, 'loopholes' were the narrow vertical windows found in castle walls. The defenders of the castle on the inside referred to them as 'arrow slits,' using them to launch arrows against assailants, who, on the other hand, referred to them as loopholes – the only anchor point for the loop on their climbing rope, and hence the only ready means of gaining entry without breaching or destroying the wall or gate. Thus a loophole in a law - or customary use, institutional convention and so on – often contravenes the intent of the law without technically breaking it. Users have an inherent knack – call it the cognitive privilege of usership – for finding ambiguities in a system which can be used to circumvent its implied or explicitly stated intent. Loopholes are sought out and used strategically and creatively by users, including artists, in all manner of circumstances, including taxation, security, elections, politics, different levels of the legal system and civil liberties.

Artists as users are in a way particularly well equipped to exploit such grey zones inasmuch as one of the reflexes of artistic competence is '*détournement*' – never responding forthrightly to expectations, nor refusing to engage, but rather countering obliquely. Art itself, like the space of autonomy within which mainstream practices operate, is often used as a foil to avoid the legal consequences that would apply to the same action if it were not 'art' or carried out in art's name. Usership-driven art uses loopholes both in the mainstream art system and beyond to circumvent any number of overcodes. The highly paradoxical instrumentalisation of artistic autonomy is one widely practiced example.

More consequential forms of loopholing invariably occur in sectors of society where legal norms have failed to keep pace with social need – including migration, mores, ownership issues and various fields of expert privilege – as expressed through the actual usership of available legal instruments. These slackspaces of normative action (sometimes called legal voids) emerge quickly but are swiftly shut down, making

Loopholes



loopholing a particularly dynamic mode of under-the-radar operation. Users of such practices know from experience and observation that while it is both fun and possible to outfox the authorities for a while, once the loophole has come to light, their window of opportunity is already closing and it's time to move on.



'I leave it an open
book'
-
Macedonio
Fernandez, *The
Museum of Eterna's
Novel* (1925-52)

Museum 3.0

Museums these days find themselves in the throes of a crisis of self-understanding, hesitating between irreconcilable museological paradigms and userships. On the one hand, their physical architecture of display is very much top down: curatorship determines content which is oriented toward spectatorship. On the other hand, while concerned about protecting their 'vertical dignity,' to the degree that they have tried to keep pace with the usological turn in the field of culture, museums have embraced elements of 2.0 culture. Not in the digital-media sense of the term – we are not talking about some kind of online museum – but insofar as their model of legitimation is at least partially premised on visitor experience, feedback and input. One might argue we have already implemented a 2.0 museum model, we simply haven't acknowledged it yet. Or more precisely, we have usership-dependent museums, integrating elements of user-generated content, without recognising the contributive usership and its collective input. Museums have so far proved reluctant to make way for usership, both because their physical architecture is geared toward display (not use), but above all because their conceptual architecture would have to be thoroughly revamped in order to make this integration meaningful.

But broader economic developments in society may soon compel them to take bolder steps. Both from a practical and a theoretical perspective, it seems pointless to continue to bemoan the dismantling of the social-democratic consensus and its public institutions, including museums, by the neoliberal revolution. This war of attrition can go on indefinitely, but with ever diminishing returns – and entrenchment in a resistential posture of defending the status quo is a depressing prospect. The moment calls for a bolder strategy. What may be required is to rethink the conceptual architecture of our evolving institutions from a perspective outside the public / private binary – repurposing tools, categories and opportunities inadvertently made available to new ends. Here again the category of usership – a form of collective subjectivity no more governable by neoliberalism than it is palatable to social democracy – comes to mind. In contemporary 2.0 culture, usership generates both content and value; indeed, it is a locus of



surplus-value extraction, for it is rarely if ever remunerated. In this respect, 2.0 culture is both a promise, and a swindle. For the time being, 3.0 names the prospect of fulfilling that promise. Though contemporary modes of accumulation have come to rely on usership – making it a category that is unlikely to go away any time soon – it stands opposed to that mainstay of neoliberalism that is ownership. For, simply, users are not owners. Nor are they spectators. But what if the museum made way for usership, actually embedding it in its *modus operandi*? A museum where usership, not spectatorship, is the key form of relationality; where the content and value it engenders are mutualised for the community of users themselves? Where the usership of museums, like that of languages, produces their meaning? Current scenarios predictions about what 3.0 culture might look like invariably focus on the advent of the ‘semantic web’ and insinuate that user engagement will somehow wane in favor of object-oriented content – data talking to data. But this seems excessively ideologically determined, as if users only actively use by default and would really prefer to consume. The offline 3.0 museum, like a kind of walk-in toolbox for usership, could be a place where user engagement – user wear and tear – was explicitly acknowledged as generating value, and as such was entitled to share that value.

Remunerated usership (not financial retribution, perhaps, but in some negotiated form) is tantamount to a cultural revolution, and could only go hand in hand with a politics of usership based on the counterintuitive self-understanding that usership in fact generates value rather than consuming it; for the time being, many users remain grateful not to have to pay for use. When in the 1970s Jean-Luc Godard quipped that television viewers ought to be paid to watch, it was assumed he was sarcastically commenting on the quality of broadcasting. Thirty-five years on, the remark appears utterly premonitory: if usership generates value, it should be remunerated. If it produces surplus value, great! We may be witnessing the end of work as we know it. But that surplus value must be redistributed within the community that produced it, not foster capital accumulation for a rentier class of property owners, who play no useful or productive role in the economy *per se*, but who



monopolise access to the use of physical and financial assets and technologies. In *From Capital-Labour to Capital-Life*, Maurizio Lazzarato has recently argued that 'capture, both in creation and realisation, is a reciprocal seizure open to the unpredictable and infinite, now that 'creator' and 'user' tend to merge.' All too often, creation and use find themselves radically separated by political economy. But applied to museum usership, they might be made to merge: usership, far from being synonymous with consumption (destruction), spills over into production. Usership is creation socialised, and as such engenders a surplus.



'Things happen one way and we tell about them in the opposite sense. You seem to start at the beginning. And in reality you have started at the end.'

- Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (1938)

Narratorship (talking art)

When artistic practice takes place on the 1:1 scale (far from the performative frames of the artworld) how can it be repatriated into the fold of art without betraying its fundamental thrust and use value? In the absence of such reterritorialisation, how can we ensure that it not be lost to posterity? How is documentation of the project to be shaken from its state of inertia? Or its residual by-products wrested from their opacity? And their exhibition torn from its mute passivity? In modern times, it was the aesthetic function of art that guaranteed their activation, giving them a voice – ensuring what Michel de Certeau would call their '*prise de parole*.' It was an ambivalent operation, for while it was art's aesthetic regime that authorised them to speak, to mean, no sooner did it do so that retracted that speech in the name of the aesthetic overcode to which they remained subaltern. Today, though, with the deactivation of art's aesthetic function, it is more precisely the document, the exhibition, the proposition itself that seem to call for a gesture to free their potentiality from its latency; now it is they who lay claim to our speech, not the other way round. In other words, the activation of practices that have deliberately impaired their coefficient of specific visibility cannot be dealt with by a *narrative*, as was supposed by late twentieth-century narratologists, but only through the active agency of *narratorship*.

Narratorship names the vital function of the narrating subject and, as such, opens up a new discursive life for the object (or the document) behind the exhibition's back. The inflationary rise of artists' talks, curated panels, open forums and rap sessions all and sundry has been one of the more marked developments in contemporary art over the past decade – and one of the most significant inasmuch as the need for 'talking art' may be seen as palliating a knowledge crisis. By and large, the tendency has been to integrate talking into the existent conceptual and physical architecture of the artworld; to think of the verbal as a mere enhancement of the visible, rather than perceiving it as a potential alternative to often reifying exhibition structures. Though such narratorship can be adapted to the modalities of visibilisation – indeed, anything can be – it is worth considering this tendency more closely and ask whether artists talking about their work is not a thoroughly vi-



able and particularly non-reifying way for art to appear in the world – including object-based work. Isn't it invariably more stimulating to hear artists present their work than to have to go and look at their exhibitions? Beyond the trivial explanation that this is because the artist's presence evidences an existential engagement in the work that is not otherwise tangible, it may also reveal that the site of art itself has undergone an historical shift; that art itself is not immediately present, but withdrawn, its coefficient of specific visibility too low for it to be detected and identified as such. One might then contend that in the case of off-the-radar practices, talking art – like the popular musical form of 'talking blues' – is a means of activating a proposition as art. Narratorship as a mode of using art seems to point the way to a thorough overhaul of how art is apprehended, and where it takes place.

Objecthood

Objecthood, in a triangulated arrangement with authorship and spectatorship, forms one of the linchpins of the mainstream contemporary artworld. Indeed, a generation ago, it was *the* dominant conceptual institution in art – becoming the target for politicised concept artists who felt that by attacking, and as they put it, ‘dematerializing’ the reified, fetishised and commodified art object, they could bring down what they saw as a corrupt art system. Though it led to some fantastic art, the assault failed, or more precisely perhaps, succeeded in a perversely unforeseeable way. Objecthood turned out to be a more flexible category than it had seemed (or than it had been). By-products of interventions and snapshots of performances became art objects, as did protocols for immaterial conceptual pieces. And not only did the residual documents become fetishized objects; artistic objecthood itself expanded its purview with documentation and performative capture becoming dominant artistic genres. What had previously been seen as support documents (if indeed they were seen at all) became the object of art. More unexpectedly still, the very characteristics that concept art objected to in objecthood spread to non-objectual artistic experience, once it became clear that it too could be commodified and monetized. To a large degree, in a kind of zero-sum game, objecthood has now been surpassed by what might be called ‘eventhood’ as a hegemonic conceptual institution.



‘Perhaps most important, Conceptualists indicated that the most exciting ‘art’ might still be buried in social energies not yet recognized as art.’

– Lucy Lippard, ‘Escape Attempts’ (1997).



'Theft!'
-
Pierre-Joseph
Proudhon,
What is Property?
(1840)

Ownership
(copyright is not for users)

Ownership (copyright is not for users)

Proudhon's definition of property ownership is at once the most sparing, and unsparing ever proposed. Ownership describes a legal institution that codifies a relationship of exclusivity with respect to an object, or any property construed to be an object, in terms of rights and control. It is made up of complex sets of instruments of regulation and enforcement, and is such a mainstay of liberal ideology that it would enjoy virtually self-evident status in majority opinion were it not for... usership, which challenges its very conditions of possibility by insisting on use value and rights of use.

There isn't much land left to privatise – it's mostly already in the hands of owners – so ownership is now expanding vertically, codifying the notion of 'intellectual property' as fast as it can dream up the arguments and erect the firewalls. But whereas land is, if not scarce, at least finite, privatising the vertical domain of knowledge requires creating artificial scarcity in the realm of potentially unlimited profusion. And here ownership knows very well the name of its nemesis: usership. Copyright laws and other legal fictions to crack down on p2p and TorrentShare sites, 'premium' (i.e., paid) subscriptions to user-fuelled media like YouTube and other streaming sites, beguiling algorithms for monetising user-supplied search results by Google, even a special 'photocopillage' tax on photocopy machines. Capitalism is still grappling for a durable model of accumulation for the twenty-first century, but in every case the force to be reckoned with is the same: usership. A category that must by no means be done away with, since it is the locus and agent of surplus-value extraction; but one that cannot be easily governed and whose inherent interests stand opposed to ownership.



Piggybacking

'We lie, as Emerson said, in the lap of an immense intelligence.'

-
John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems* (1927)

Literally, of course, piggybacking refers to carrying a person on one's back or shoulders. By extension, it also refers to transporting something by having it ride on the back of something else – a kind of free ride at no inconvenience to the vehicle since it was going there anyway. Piggybacking has become a widespread mode of usership in the past decade due to the advent of wireless Internet connections. Piggybacking on internet access is the practice of using another subscriber's wireless service without their explicit permission or knowledge. It is a legal and ethical grey zone, regulated in some places, permitted in others. It is a form of freeloading (another nice term), different from parasitism and more akin to a logic of the epiphyte: whereas parasites are the uninvited guests who overeat to the point of endangering the host's food supply, and thereby ultimately imperiling the well-being of the parasites themselves, the epiphyte lives in a negotiated form of symbiosis with the host. As a form of usership – one very often exploited by art practices operating outside of art-financed domains – piggybacking is akin to reading someone else's newspaper over their shoulder, using a drinking fountain, reading from the light of a porch lamp, that is, benefitting the user at no expense to others. Art practices that use platforms like skype, for example, as their medium or support might be described as piggybacking off a free and widely used (though often somewhat dodgy) service. In a society whose distribution of resources is so massively and systemically skewed, piggybacking may be seen as a user-driven form of redistributive symbolic justice.



'Everyday life invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others.'

-
Michel de Certeau,
*The Practice of
Everyday Life* (1980)

Poaching

Poaching is a particularly evocative mode of usership, drawing attention to some of usership's most salient features. Though it may seem rustic and agrarian, it can also be seen as the rural predecessor to hacking, if the latter is understood and practiced as a form of digital poaching – armed with usb thumb drives, say, rather than snares and guns.

In 2008, ace-hacker Aaron Swartz wrote his 'Guerrilla Open Access Manifesto,' where he argued for the 'need to take information, wherever it is stored, make our copies and share them with the world...We need to download scientific journals and upload them to file sharing networks.' The good news, if Swartz can be believed, is that this is exactly what is happening. Possibly the most interesting passage in the Manifesto is not where he argues for a principled practice of document sharing amongst users, but where he claims that it's what's occurring anyway:

'Meanwhile, those who have been locked out are not standing idly by. You have been sneaking through holes and climbing over fences, liberating the information locked up by the publishers and sharing them with your friends. But all of this action goes on in the dark, hidden underground. It's called stealing or piracy, as if sharing a wealth of knowledge were the moral equivalent of plundering a ship and murdering its crew.'

Swartz's image of 'sneaking through holes and climbing over fences' draws explicitly on the rhetoric of poaching. Breaches in fences are a recurrent element in its iconography. In most folklore, if not in painterly representation (presumably because of the class bias of its patrons) poachers were widely identified with and celebrated. They were invariably portrayed as one step ahead of the gamekeeper. Traditionally, poaching had nothing to do with the mercenary-style massacre of endangered species with which it has become associated today; it was all about the proactive redistribution of resources, like wood, fruit, fish, game... Legally speaking, poaching is hunting that, for whatever reason, is not allowed. Poaching is one of those 'catch-all' terms for off-the-radar modes of intervention, whereby in the shadow of the night,



unauthorised agents (poachers) make stealthy forays behind the enclosures of the owner's land, capture their prey, and withdraw. And in that respect, though born of necessity (the young Marx famously linked the rise of poaching from private woodlots to a rise in unemployment), for those who practice it, poaching has always been a bit of a game – there is a kind of aesthetics of poaching, which distinguishes it from say cattle rustling. Could it be that both the scale and mode of poaching constitute a useful paradigm, and genealogy, for many contemporary stealth practices whose game are documents rather than venison?

One of the characteristics of poaching is that it is by definition rigorously *imperformative*. A poacher who signs his work, or who *performs* his poach, is no poacher at all – or at least not for long. Poaching inherently withdraws from the event horizon, taking cover in the usual. Events are easy to spot; the usual, on the other hand, is invisible. The subjectivities we are called upon to perform in our prosumer society, though they may appear subversive, are easily read by power. All too often, it seems, we perform our rebellion. As Proudhon put it, in a moment of pre-Foucauldian insight:

'To be ruled is to be kept an eye on, inspected, spied on, regulated, indoctrinated, sermonised, listed and checked off, estimated, appraised, censured, ordered about by creatures without knowledge and without virtues. To be ruled is at every operation, transaction, movement, to be noted, registered, counted, priced, admonished, prevented, reformed, redressed, corrected.'

That's a pretty thorough, and entirely frightening checklist. In *Six Easy Pieces on Autonomy, Dignity, and Meaningful Work and Play*, James Scott refers to a whole realm of what he calls 'infrapolitics,' practiced outside the visible spectrum of what passes for political activity in event-oriented historiography. It is a term that grasps perfectly the imperformative, everyday practice of poaching. Because poaching happens.

'The state has historically thwarted lower-class organisation, let alone public defiance. For subordinate groups, such politics is dan-



gerous. They have, by and large, understood, as have guerrillas, that divisibility, small numbers, and dispersion help them avoid reprisal. By infrapolitics I have in mind such acts as foot-dragging, poaching, pilfering, dissimulation, sabotage, desertion, absenteeism, squatting, and flight. Why risk getting shot for a failed mutiny when desertion will do just as well? Why risk an open land invasion when squatting will secure de facto land rights? Why openly petition for rights to wood, fish, and game when poaching will accomplish the same purpose quietly?



Profanation

Profanation, as Giorgio Agamben defines it, is ‘the returning to common usership what had been separated in the sphere of the sacred.’ To suggest that profanation instantiates a *return* is of course to imply that common use constitutes the initial state. In Europe today, Agamben is the philosopher who has looked most searchingly into the issue of usership, recently disclosing that the forthcoming final volume of *Homo sacer* will be devoted to the question. That which is sacred is removed from the realm of usership; it is intangible, untouchable, and must not be profaned by consumption. This is true literally and figuratively. Today, as Agamben argues, the usership prohibition has found its place of choice in the Museum, where it is protected by the stalwart institution of spectatorship. Of course the museification of the world is almost total – spectatorship allows its extension far beyond the museum walls to any ‘separated dimension where that which is no longer perceived as true and decisive has been transferred.’ It’s art, but, well, *it’s just art*. This is why in the institution of spectatorship, the analogy between capitalism and religion becomes so evident. And why usership, understood as the reality of using, is a political act: for it repurposes what is used. Repurposing, by transforming former ends into new means, neutralises the sacred. In this respect, *usership is synonymous with the act of profanation*. The useful, indeed the used in general, is profane.

In his essay on profanation, Agamben both challenges a fundamental proscription of autonomous art and Kantian aesthetics (that art, in essence, must not be profaned... under the threat of ceasing to be art at all) yet also seems to rule out the possibility of something like... ‘useful art.’ For in the act of artistic profanation, as he sees it, objects do not so much gain *use* value as a kind of *ludic* value... But what about practices that have multiple uses? Can 1:1 scale practices not be conceptualized in terms of profanation – inasmuch as they would seem to embody the very essence of a living form that has become inseparable from life itself?

‘Once profaned, that which was unavailable and separate loses its aura and is returned to use. Profanation deactivates the apparatuses of power and returns to common use the spaces that power had seized.’

– Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations* (2007)



'When artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience, a wall is built around them that renders almost opaque their general significance...'

John Dewey,
Art as Experience
(1934)

Purposeless purpose

Some two centuries ago, through two exceedingly potent, and paradox-laden concepts, Immanuel Kant defined the mechanisms of capture for autonomous art. Art, Kant argued, is geared toward 'disinterested spectatorship,' through which he introduced the disinterested spectator as the new heroic figure of aesthetic experience. Since everything about that term precludes usership, it dovetailed nicely with Kant's other architectural brainchild: art's 'purposeless purpose' – by which he did not mean that art was useless or without purpose; rather, its usefulness is its uselessness, its purpose is to be purposeless. In a world hell-bent on cost-benefit analysis and utilitarian rationality, this circularity is not without virtue. But it comes at an exceedingly high cost: it deprives art of any purchase, any use-value in the real. To repurpose art and develop a form of purposive aesthetics, then, would require breaking completely with the autonomous sphere of art and the values underpinning it. And this is precisely where we are now with respect to usership-purposed practices: facing the imperative to build a new art-sustaining environment from the ground up.



Reciprocal readymades

'Wanting to expose the basic antinomy between art and readymades I imagined a 'reciprocal readymade': use a Rembrandt as an ironing board!'
- Marcel Duchamp, 'Apropos of Readymades' (1961)

In a late text, Marcel Duchamp set out to distinguish several different types of readymades. Of particular interest in the present context is the genre he punningly described as 'reciprocal readymades.' Anxious, he claimed, 'to emphasize the fundamental antinomy between art and the readymade,' Duchamp defined this radically new, yet subsequently never instantiated genre through an example: 'Use a Rembrandt as an ironing-board.' More than a mere quip to be taken at face value, or a facetious mockery of use-value, Duchamp's example points to the symbolic potential of recycling art – and more broadly, artistic tools and competences – into other lifeworlds. In that respect, the reciprocal readymade is the obverse of the standard readymade, which recycles the real – in the form of manufactured objects – into the symbolic economy of art. Historically speaking, the readymade is inseparably bound up with objecthood: it refers to a readymade, manufactured object. Yet, it would be reductive to confine the readymade to its objective dimension alone, if only because it provides such a strong general image of the reciprocal logic between art and the real.

In the same way that framing an object in an art context neutralises it as an object (distinguishing it, as it were, from the mere real thing), can the de-framing of an artwork neutralise it, in reciprocal fashion, as art? This is an important question, and one to which Duchamp was expressly alluding, because it would enable art to produce a use-value. Since Immanuel Kant's influential championing of 'purposeless purpose' and 'disinterested spectatorship' as defining features of our engagement with art, it has been broadly held that art cannot produce use-value. Kant argued in effect that art, unlike design, could not be evaluated and appreciated on the basis of its objective purpose – be it external, regarding the object's utility, or internal, regarding the object's perfection. In so doing, Kant sought to preserve art from the realm of the 'merely useful'; and in our contemporary world where utilitarian rationality and the sort of cost-benefit analysis to which it leads reign supreme, where art is regularly co-opted by such profit-driven, subjectivity-production industries as advertising, to even mention use-value tends to smack of the philistine. Of course one



might say that in such a context there is something circular about defending art on the basis of its uselessness alone (or even its 'radical uselessness,' as Adorno put it), for it would seem to suggest there is something very worthwhile and thus useful about something entirely lacking use-value...

At any event, an increasing number of art-related practices in the public sphere cannot be adequately understood unless their primary ambition to produce a use-value is taken into account. In trying to grasp what is at stake and at play in many of the art-informed practices which are, today, self-consciously concerned with generating use-value by injecting artistic skills into the real, it is no doubt useful to anchor their approach in art-historical terms. And perhaps the most straightforward way to understand such works is as attempts to reactivate the unacknowledged genre of artistic activity conceived by Duchamp. For though he never got beyond the speculative phase – never actually putting his thoughts on the reciprocal readymade into practice – Duchamp clearly saw it as a way of 'de-signing' art, of removing the signature by using an artwork to produce a use-value. For it is quite difficult to imagine how an artist-signed artwork (a 'Rembrandt'), put to use as an ironing board, could then be re-signed as an 'artistic' ironing board, at least not within the sphere of autonomous art. Indeed, Duchamp's point was that (until such time as the art-sustaining environment changed substantively) it would revert to non-art status – the price to be paid for acquiring use-value, though it would assuredly be a most uncommon ironing board. With the rise of usership-determined practices, it just may be that after lying dormant so long the reciprocal readymade's time has finally come.



Redundancy

Art has become redundant, in every sense of the term. Far from its doom, this may prove to be its salvation. The challenge for this century's art production is to free itself from its economic and social dependency on the institutional-market structure. To do that, it must, from an art-historical perspective, free itself from the conceptual and physical architecture bequeathed upon us by the twentieth-century art economy. Art must find a self-sustaining existence. Perhaps it already has; call it redundancy.

One thing that twentieth-century art could never wholeheartedly commit itself to be was something other than art – subordinating itself, ontologically, to whatever activity or entity it also was. This is a singularly uncourageous posture, but art's privileged ontological status enabled it to subordinate all other modes of objecthood and activity to itself. Redundancy means putting an end to art's twentieth-century ontological exception.

So, what is 'redundant' art? It is not possible to define it by what it looks like – it doesn't look, or not look, like art. It looks like what it is: the redundant thing or action. Redundancy ends the charade of artistic autonomy. It is neither more nor less creative or expressive than whatever it also happens to be. Redundant art covers all those activities and passivities, enterprises, initiatives and pursuits, which, though informed by art and an art-historical self-understanding, are in fact just what they are and what they appear to be. They are redundant only as art.

A redundant system is one that duplicates the same system. Art is not redundant the way in anatomy a second kidney is said to be a redundant organ (the body being able to function with one alone). Art is redundant as an artistic initiative: its artistic ontology is utterly redundant with respect to its primary ontology. Of course twentieth-century art did make regular forays into life systems, life worlds, beyond the porous confines of its autonomous sphere. But it invariably did so as art – at best as a replication – not as a redundant instance of what it also happens to be.

In other words, art's function as a liberating force is dependent not only on its becoming something other than art but also maintaining its identity as a specific material as well as a symbolic practice.'

– Rasheed Araeen, *Art Beyond Art* (2011)



Redundancy is invariably seen as depreciative, a term used to discredit something – be it an activity, phenomenon, object, or utterance – whose function is already fulfilled by something else. However, the notion of redundancy is a highly useful focusing tool in understanding the logic of forward-looking art in the early years of our century. Repurposing redundancy allows us to name in a new way practices that do indistinguishably what is already being perfectly well done in other realms of human activity, and to do it with an entirely different self-understanding. Though redundant, they are by no means superfluous. Today, we see art apparently withdrawing from the world (at least from the artworld); yet upon closer scrutiny, that withdrawal appears more as a merging with the world, a quest for redundancy.

Repurposing

There is often a kind of heuristic advantage to frontloading the prefix 're' onto verbs and nouns all and sundry. This is certainly the case with the watchword of usership, 'repurposing' – a term that captures both usership's paradoxical idleness (no need to add anything new) and its transformative dynamic (putting the given to new purposes). In a way, we've already got all the tools and skills we require – they're just not being *used* for the best purposes; we need to wrest them from their original purposes to repurpose them for other tasks. The immediate task at hand is to develop purposive artistic practices.



'Remember that bull's head I made out of the handlebars and the seat of a bicycle, which everybody recognized as a bull's head? I'd like to see it metamorphose in the opposite direction. Suppose my bull's head is thrown on the scrap heap. Eventually some guy may come along and say, 'Now there's something that would come in very handy for the handlebars and seat of my bicycle...' And so a double metamorphosis would have been achieved.'

- Pablo Picasso (1957)



'provide the strength
for breaking the rules
in the very act that
brings them into play'

-
Michel Foucault,
'Pierre Boulez:
Passing Through the
Screen' (1982)

Slackspace

Slackspace is a technical term in computer science that refers to the under-used or residually-used storage space of file clusters on a hard drive. Typically, computers store files in clusters of a fixed size – for instance, files may be stored in clusters of four kilobytes. If the computer stores a file that is only two kilobytes in a four-kilobyte cluster, there will be two-thousand bytes of slackspace. It's as if the house were bigger when measured on the inside than when measured on the outside! At any rate, in almost any given file (unless its size is exactly divisible by the system's cluster storage size), there is an available space – one that can be used for other purposes. Typically, this slackspace is not empty, but contains leftover information from previously deleted files – making it of great interest to forensic investigators. But hackers often use slackspace as a hiding place for information they wish to conceal, encrypting it – in the strictest sense of the term – in the cluster of an unrelated file. One need not be a conspiracist to see the terrific use-potential of such spaces. Expert culture certainly sees it as 'wasted' space, just waiting to be misused...

However, it is its metaphorical descriptive power which is of interest to us in our contemporary moment of free terminological migration. Slackspace may refer to any similar gap between parts, the wiggle-room between law and custom, the space of play between prescription and actual usership. Slackspace names a vacancy where the imperatives of productivism and conformity are tolerably low; a highly creative space, caught between two normativities (just as a vacant lot is suspended between a defunct usage and an as-yet unrealised one), making it a realm of potentiality. Socially speaking, it is the adaptive space where opportunity effects change. By no means a revolutionary space (it by no means proclaims the overthrow of norms, merely their incessant renegotiation), it is the usual realm of usership.

Though he never uses the term, we derive this understanding of a slackspace as constitutive of usership from Michel Foucault. In the second volume of his *History of Sexuality*, catchily entitled 'The Uses of Pleasure,' Foucault performs a close reading of how *chresis* – the classical Greek term for use or

Slackspace



usage – diverged from codified rules; how ‘use’ names a kind of gap between desire and law – a space of leeway and play never entirely chosen by those who use it, but whose use changes the rules of the game.



'The one caveat is that it must not be called art.'
-
Allan Kaprow,
Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life
(2003)

Specific visibility (sub specie artis)

In a seminal statement written in 1964, Donald Judd argued that the emerging art of the time could best be described under the heading of 'specific objects.' Close to fifty years on, one might argue that the condition of art today is one of its specific visibility. Judd's 'specific objects' didn't much look like previous art; they were more 'minimal' in many respects; but they weren't invisible, particularly not as art, since the whole point was to frame them as such, thereby provoking a disruptive event of perception within the conceptual and physical architecture of the artworld.

Today, for better or for worse, art has become a question of specific visibility within institutional frameworks, or of specific invisibility without. Yet interestingly, as ever more art eludes those performative frames, the whole issue of art's invisibility becomes dedramatised, as if art were on the cusp of yet another ontological shift, moving from being determined by its coefficient of specific visibility to the coefficient of art it imparts on its host form. Less a question of being, than of intensity. Which of course only augments art's elusiveness, and immunity to scopoc capture. It is unsurprising, indeed it is self-evident, that the smaller things get, the harder they are to see. We need magnifying glasses to read fine print, electron microscopes to see virus-size circuitry. Though not visible to the naked eye, small things are not invisible in conceptual terms; just very small. Their 'invisibility,' if makes any sense at all to talk in that way, is a mere function of their scale. In and of itself, this is of no interest for a politics of perception.

What is interesting, and always somewhat surprising, is the invisibility of often very large, even cumbersome, otherwise utterly obvious things; things that elude visual recognition *per se* despite their 'hyperobtrusive situation' – as Edgar Allan Poe puts it – right before our eyes. This ontological invisibility concerns an entire set of otherwise disparate objects and activities whose specific visibility has effectively been somehow purloined. Now an ontological fate as unique as this does surely raise some conceptual issues; and some key political ones as well. The category of paradoxically invisible, yet otherwise visible things is that of 1:1 artistic practice.



Spectatorship

'Do not enrich the spectacle. Diminish it.'

-
Guy Debord,
*Secret Instructions
for a Putsch in
Culture* (1961)

To a still greater extent than objecthood or authorship, spectatorship continues to enjoy almost self-evident status in conventional discourse as a necessary component of any plausible artworld. Indeed, in both popular and learned parlance, there is a tendency to conflate looking at something, and in some cases simply seeing something, with spectatorship. Yet spectatorship is not synonymous with mere viewing; it is a powerful conceptual institution in contemporary societies with a specific history – one whose historical underpinning needs to be unpacked.

The critical sermons of contemporary art are rife with celebration about free and active viewer participation. Yet there is something almost pathetic about such claims at a time when ever more practitioners are deliberately impairing the coefficient of artistic visibility of their activity, beating an offensive retreat into the shadows of the artworld's attention economy, envisaging forms of relationality and usage that fly in the face of the very regime of visibility designated by the collective noun 'spectatorship.' When art appears outside of the authorised performative framework, there is no reason that it should occur to those engaging with it to constitute themselves as spectators. Such practices seem to break with spectatorship altogether, to which they increasingly prefer the more extensive and inclusive notion of usership. Is the current mainstream focus on spectatorship – evidenced by a number of recent theoretical publications (Marie-Josée Mondzain's *Homo Spectator*, Christian Ruby's *Figure of the Spectator*, or Jacques Rancière's *Emancipated Spectator* being but the most speculative examples) – anything more than a last-ditch effort to stave off a paradigm shift already well underway? The real question, of course, remains: what alternative forms of usership of art are today being put forward to displace and replace it? But to better understand the full implications of this now largely obsolescent institution, it is useful to recall its historical trajectory.

It was Nietzsche, who, in the third essay of his *Genealogy of Morals*, first pointed out how the concept of 'spectatorship' was cunningly introduced into aesthetics in the late eight-



eenth century by Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of Judgement*, ‘unconsciously’ making the spectator the new heroic figure of art of the modern era. Nietzsche’s own rather conventional proposal – reintroduce the artist as the authentic subject of art – is less interesting than his mordant critique of what is implied by the paradigm shift brought about by Kant. The problem with Kant’s aesthetic paradigm, he argues, is that it sets up a conceptual edifice in which ‘a lack of any refined first-hand experience reposes in the shape of a fat worm of error. ‘That is beautiful,’ said Kant, ‘which gives us pleasure *without interest.*’ Without interest!’ One can only imagine Nietzsche’s incredulous howl at the very thought... Yet his insight is unassailable: Kant introduced what he called ‘disinterested spectatorship’ into aesthetics and made it one of the two mainstays of the conceptual (and hence physical) architecture of museums for the two centuries to come. The consequences of Kant’s paradoxical brainchild can hardly be overstated, for not only did he introduce a fundamentally passive form of relationality (spectatorship) as the cornerstone of the aesthetic regime of art, he shored it up by insisting on its *désintéressement* – in other words, that it remain exempt from any possible use, usership or use value. This would be the grounds for art’s permanent status of ontological exception throughout the twentieth century.

In *Shipwreck with Spectator*, Hans Blumenberg examines the genealogy of spectatorship, with particular attention to the metaphorical imperative of spectatorship to contemplate the distress of the shipwrecked from a safe vantage point on dry land - metaphorical, that is, of theory’s relationship to practice (*‘theoría,’* he points out somewhat speculatively, derives from *theoros*, or ‘spectator’). It must be said, however, that the advent of Kantian spectatorship had the tremendous advantage of opening up a new space for aesthetic practice – the autonomous field of art. Yet, at the same time – though this would only become obvious two centuries on when art had conquered and fully occupied that space – it tethered art to autonomy and to spectatorship. Today we see cutting edge practices seeking to wrest themselves from spectatorship and the autonomy of art (perceived as shackles rather than opportunities), not in a

Spectatorship



desire to return to a pre-modern paradigm, but to reactivate a mode of usership that remains forbidden under the regime of spectatorship. It is nevertheless remarkable to see the extent to which the conceptual architecture of contemporary art conventions of display derive from Kantian premises; and to what extent they have been at once normalised through institutional embodiment and naturalised in discourse – even as they are becoming increasingly out of joint with emergent practices.



'you have to struggle with or deform an engineered social programme to practise complex social exchange'

-
Richard Sennett,
Together (2012)

UIT ('use it together')

There is a loathsome expression that has gained currency recently, which refers to taking pride in something, accepting something fully, adapting it to one's purposes, claiming one's due: *'Own it!'* If it appears innocuous, that is only because the ideology of ownership is by now so deeply embedded in the contemporary psyche. The expression is sometimes even applied to public institutions – but rather than users being invited to 'take usership' of their local museum or school through their active involvement (*'Just use it!'*), validation is expressed in terms of 'owning them.' As if ownership were synonymous with pride in, and care of, objects and actions, as opposed to the thoughtlessness and carelessness of usership. This rhetoric of ownership in idiomatic speech is a revealing symptom in our era of cross-the-board privatisation.

Although ownership names a relationship to an object based on exclusivity, usership names a far more hands-on mode of engagement. DIY (do it yourself) culture emerged in industrial societies when the division of labour had atomized people's relationship to the production process and ratified expert culture; it was based on taking up and using tools and instruments traditionally reserved for experts. Punk culture took DIY's challenge to expert prerogative a step further – to the level of DIT (do it together). Its watchword has enduring appeal: 'Here's a chord. Here's another. Now let's start a band.' Of course with the mass availability and usership of digital media, what might be called UIY (use it yourself) culture has become a major form of knowledge and value production. But can one really use alone? Usership is a strangely impersonal collective noun – it doesn't really name a collectivity of users, but it definitely implies multiplicity. *'Séparés, on est ensemble'* – Stéphane Mallarmé's wonderful line from *The White Water-lily* – nicely grasps the mutualization both by affinity and by contagion implied by usership. UIT (use it together) is one way to invite users to consciously build upon this social dimension of usership.



Usology

Usology is an ambulant and approximate science, devoted to the study of uses and modes of usership. Current trends in usological research have tended to focus more specifically on what might be referred to as the ‘tactical polyvalence of usages.’ The reference here is of course to Michel Foucault’s famous formulation regarding the ‘tactical polyvalence of discourse,’ where he emphasizes the complex and unstable play whereby ‘discourse may be at once an instrument and an effect of power, but also an obstacle, a barrier, a hindrance and a starting point for an opposing strategy.’ By examining – and accompanying – usership in action, usology is attentive to this constitutive polyvalence. Usership names both what actualises the function of a space, a building or an initiative and what, in one and the same movement, thwarts that same function. Because this duality is constitutive of usership, it has been the object of particular usological scrutiny. Usology, however, is a far more sweeping field of extradisciplinary enquiry, spanning everything from the history of the ways and means of using to usership’s conditions of possibility as put forward in various theories of practice.

‘Pushed to their ideal limits, these procedures and ruses of users compose the network of an antidiscipline...’

– Michel de Certeau,
*The Practice of
Everyday Life* (1980)



'to think life as that which is never given as property but only as a common use... will demand the elaboration of a theory of use and, moving forward from that, a critique of the operative and governmental ontology that continues, under various disguises, to determine the destiny of the human species.'

-
Giorgio Agamben,
The Highest Poverty
(2013)

Usual (the usual ≠ the event)

A generation ago, the work of Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau persuasively analysed the goings-on, inventiveness and usership of what has come to be called 'the everyday.' Though it's hard to believe, the everyday has since become a victim of its own unforeseeable success. It has been championed, commodified and framed by spectatorship. For a long time, I considered 'the everyday' to be the environment of usership – the way eventhood is to spectatorship. But it was a poor fit. I couldn't quite figure out what the right concept and the right word might be to name usership's sphere of engagement. I never did figure it out; that's not how language use works. I overheard it one day. A regular stepped up to the bar, exchanged a quick glance with the barman who asked, invitingly, as if confident in what he already knew, '*the usual*'?



'Don't ask for the meaning, ask for the use.'

- Ludwig Wittgenstein (circa 1945)

Usership

The past two decades have witnessed the emergence of a new category of political subjectivity: that of usership. It's not as if using is anything new – people have been using tools, languages and any variety of goods and services (not to mention mind-altering substances) since time immemorial. But the rise of user-generated content and value in 2.0 culture, as well as democratic polities whose legitimacy is founded on the ability of the governed to appropriate and use available political and economic instruments, has produced active 'users' (not just rebels, prosumers or automatons) whose agency is exerted, paradoxically, exactly where it is expected.

Usership represents a radical challenge to at least three stalwart conceptual institutions in contemporary culture: spectatorship, expert culture, and ownership. Modernist artistic conventions, premised on so-called disinterested spectatorship, dismiss usership (and use value, rights of usage) as inherently instrumental – and the mainstream artworld's physical and conceptual architecture is entirely unprepared to even speak of usership, even as many contemporary artistic practices imply a regime of engagement and relationality entirely at odds with that described by spectatorship. In the artworld and other lifeworlds, it is expert culture – whether embodied in curatorship or formulated by the city hall's design office and other wardens of the possible – which is most hostile to usership. From the perspective of expertise, premised as it is on notions of universality and the general interest, usership is a particularly egregious mode of self-interest. For the expert, to put it bluntly, use is invariably misuse. Usership represents a still more deep-seated challenge to ownership in an economy where surplus-value extraction is increasingly focused on use: how long will communities of use sit by as their user-generated content value, rather than being remunerated, is expropriated and privatised?

Usership is neither revolutionary (usership shares none of the messianic potential attributed to the proletariat) nor is it docile or submissive. It is hands-on, task specific, proximate and self-regulating. And it is operative only in the here and now – it has no transcendental horizonline. We might put it this way:



users always and only play away from homegames; they don't have their own field, and just use those that are available available. For one thing, because users know they are not owners, and that whatever their demands, whatever their successes, users know that, no matter what, it will never be all theirs. The challenge is clearly to imagine, and to instantiate, a non-instrumental, emancipated form of usership.

Though usership remains dramatically undertheorised – indeed, the word itself, though immediately understandable, has not been ratified by those indexes of expert culture called dictionaries – there are some compelling philosophical underpinnings that may help to better grasp the concept. The most over-arching is perhaps Ludwig Wittgenstein's user-based theory of meaning in his *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein argues that in language, all the meaning that there is, and all the stability, is determined by the users of that language, and by nothing else. It seems radically relativistic, yet language usership provides a relative stability of meaning – for the language is used by all, owned by none. It changes, but no one user can effect change; we are, at best, co-authors in the language game of usership. Wittgenstein's insight provides a sort of prism through which to imagine all forms of usership in terms of a self-regulating language game.

So if usership names a category of engagement, of cognitive privilege (if one may call it that), of those whose repurposing of art is neither that of a spectator, an expert nor an owner, then why has art-critical discourse and practice been so reluctant to adopt it? Artworld ideologues speak of 'participation,' often sexing it up with adjectives like 'free' and 'emancipated.' We speak freely of 'art lovers,' but 'art users' smacks of philistinism – which certainly says something about the lingering aristocratic values underpinning contemporary art's ostensibly democratic ethos. Perhaps part of the reason for the artworld's discomfort with usership is that it is an eminently unromantic category. It has none of gusty tailings of hijacking, pirating, '*détournement*' and other such forms of performative high jinks that have become so fashionable in artworldly circles. It may ultimately better name the underlying logic of



those operations, but it remains essentially different. Because it is radically imperformative. To perform usership would be to spectacularise it, make it an event – that is, to negate it, to make it into something else. Here the distinction between spectatorship and usership is clearest cut: spectatorship is to the spectacle as usership is to... the usual.

Usership, then, names not just a form of opportunity-dependent relationality, but a self-regulating mode of engagement and operation. Which makes usership itself a potentially powerful tool. In the same way that usership is all about repurposing available ways and means without seeking to possess them, it can itself be repurposed as a mode of leverage, a fulcrum, a shifter, and as such, a game-changer. That newly-purposed ironing board somebody mentioned may be just the war machine we've been looking for. Usership Potemkin.

Toward a Lexicon of Usership

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Stephen Wright

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Nick Aikens and Stephen Wright

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Toward a Lexicon of Usership

'...since we can neither think nor even name art without appropriate terms, retooling our conceptual vocabulary has become a crucial task, one that can only be undertaken by fostering terminological cross-pollination with other avenues of human activity.'

