Making Use: Practice-based Art PhDs in Postartistic Times
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The proposed paper was catalyzed by the recent exhibition Making Use: Life in Postartistic Times (Museum of Modern Art Warsaw, 2016). Showcasing some 120 practices, it aimed to reinvigorate the axiom of the historical avant-garde: the interpenetration of art and life. A cornucopia of uses, the exhibition evidenced the wealth of ways that artistic skills and techniques can be put to work in the worlds beyond art.

As is well known, the uselessness of art is an evergreen concern that wraps with its aspirations of autonomy. Kant’s preoccupation with disinterest and, in a related vein, the radical purposelessness of art that Adorno’s thinking holds so dear both cast a long shadow over critical contemporary art. While these concerns have always chaffed against the production of knowledge as core to practice-based art research, what is less clear is how this epistemic enterprise resonates within the ‘userological turn’ that is reorienting contemporary art as social praxis. Nowhere, for instance, is art research referenced in Stephen Wright’s publication, Towards a Lexicon of Usership. Yet implicit throughout this textbook of userology is what Michael Biggs and Daniel Büchler identify as the generic requirements of research (‘question and answer’, ‘method’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘audience’). What userology gains by suppressing these coordinates is territory that while cleared of the thorny history and demands of art research nevertheless benefits from its ethos and expertise.

Making Use was shot through with examples of practice-based art research, but the exhibition foregoes framing them as such, opting instead to emphasize their specific use values. A case in point is the (re)presentation of Liberate Tate’s The Gift. The descriptive panel accompanying the documentary video in Making Use concerns the


2 Ibid.

cause and effect of placing a 1.5 ton, 16.5m wind turbine blade in Tate Modern’s Turbine Hall to draw attention to BP’s sponsorship of this national institution in order to end its corporate support. That this has been accomplished after years of struggle is nothing short of fantastic. Though from the perspective of art research, how change like this takes place is on par with its affect. What is missing from the account in Making Use is, for instance, how Liberate Tate used investigative research to exercise the Freedom of Information Act and reveal that BP’s sponsorship never exceeded the paltry sum of £330k per year. For sure, utility is one of the reasons why rationalizing and evidencing research methods are so central to (practice-based art) research. Transparency here is essential for transferability, thereby enabling other practitioners to adopt and adapt methods for their own ends.

Meanwhile, beyond the distinguishing features of art research as an epistemic enterprise, PhD programmes are undergoing pressure to prove their worth. The consequences of funding cuts to education outstrip rising tuition fees. There is increasing competition for a shrinking number of research positions in institutions of art. This requires that PhD programmes radically rethink their curricula to ensure that, in keeping with their duty of care, they prepare candidates effectively for the realities of post-doctoral life. This includes considering how their research might address the cavalcade of crises (i.e. climate change, mass displacement and migration and growing inequality) that are creating the conditions for our lived experience and so much more.

All this provides the backdrop for the proposed paper as it takes up the question: ‘Art research: What’s the use?’. This begins with situating my particular response in relation to both the userological turn and my ongoing research into value, including my paper on value systems in art research for the 2015 NAFAE conference. I will then explore the use value of methods both in and emerging from practice-based research and, crucially, how specific examples are being deployed beyond the worlds of art. That part of Research Practice Practice Research is hosted by Littoral Arts provides a unique opportunity to consider their praxis as it operates in and beyond institutions of art research and within the userological turn. Ultimately, this paper seeks to prime discussion regarding what PhD curricula might gain and lose by pivoting on use as well as how the methods of practice-based research are represented in contemporary art.

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