

## **Usership<sup>1</sup>: a new surplus?**

*By Florencia Reznik*

The star of new technologies of information and communication, *usership* refers to a mode of cultural production in which value is collaboratively created and then shared amongst a community. Stephen Wright challenges us to question why in the art's sphere some structures still persist that allow this value to end up in private hands.

Usership names a way to "share the land", to re-appropriate a territory<sup>2</sup> which, in turn, will never become entirely a property. It does not convey the abolition of private property, but proposes a new relationship between the community and the value generated by the community. To make this possible a piece of art should occupy new spaces, mobilizing boundaries, redefining limits. Usership questions the security of the home. It challenges us to reinterpret the rules of coexistence in a specific space and time. It can only be seen operating in familiar conceptual territories. But it remains a foreign.



**Jeff Wall. The crooked path, 1991, Photography.**

*What we see here is not a natural situation. It is called "vacant space", or "vague", in French [vacant]. But it is not empty. It is vacant because there was something there before. It is in between two uses. An irrational, not intentional line can be seen. It was made by the repetitive pace of anonymous usurpers.*

Usership is a form of cultural agency, which encompasses subjects, areas and functions that used to be clearly separated. According to this perspective, the work of art is not simply what the artist produces in his workshop and then becomes merchandise or object of veneration in a museum. It acquires its value and status as artwork by the interaction of interpretations and judges generated throughout a creative process that includes multiple subjects and spaces.

It has already been highlighted by many critical theories that the creation of art value involves artists and curators, critics, institutions (such as museums and galleries), collectors, viewers, and even producers of materials that artists use for their crafts: they all work together to produce the value of a piece. The peculiarity of Stephen Wright's perspective is the emphasis that this value is not reduced to exchange value in the market, but is primarily use-value: it represents a collaborative confluence of utilities that a community of users finds in artistic

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, Stephen, "Paid Usership", online magazine n.e.w.s., submitted Sun, 2010-03-21 18:40. <http://northeastwestsouth.net/paid-usership>

<sup>2</sup> Wright, Stephen, "Diggers all! Copyright is for losers", online magazine n.e.w.s., submitted Fri, 2009-04-17 12:50. <http://northeastwestsouth.net/diggers-all-copyright-losers-0>

production. The user replaces the old figure of the spectator who passively watched or consumed what was produced by others: by contrast, he combines the functions of producer and viewer, because it is through use that an object acquires its value.

However, this new production model, in which value is created in community, coexists with the fact that many companies and institutions continue to operate on a logic that separates producers from viewers. They have taken advantage of this situation to extract most of their profit from users. They only take into account the value of a work in terms of exchange value. It is a business model that accomplished what has never before been achieved: to extract a surplus mainly from the consumer, to produce value without labor, that is, without paid work.

In spite of this, another potentially emancipatory value will have been produced. The same collaborative practices that allow this appropriation of the surplus value also develop creative ways of sociability that enable new strategies to move towards purposes other than those of the market. Collaborative practices generate content that is socially relevant. Even if they still represent emerging areas of the social sphere, they might be able to gradually change society as a whole. Internet is a new tool that can be used to fight appropriation. On the Internet content is not always appropriated, it is shared through social networks that are governed with a different logic and ethics to the market. The emergence of Internet users today has the characteristics of a new political subjectivity –although we will have to redefine the notion of subjectivity in different terms from its modern definition.

The question is what this tool is used for, in what context and by whom: the use value of an instrument is revealed when it is operated. Maybe it is undeniable that usership resembles a double-edged sword, and this is what makes it interesting to incorporate into the arts sphere. Today, usership has an opportunity to exit the scheme of private appropriation of communally produced value, but at the same time it should be noted that it is still functional to a hegemonic business model.

Internet can serve as a model to criticize the appropriation of communally generated value, which still works with substantial rigor in the arts sphere, through three institutions. Combined these three institutions define what we call the "logic of spectatorship" and are the spectatorship itself, the culture of experts and property<sup>3</sup>. They each determine that artists are relegated to the role of producers and dissociated, respectively, of the spectators, experts (critics, curators, etc.) and the owners (who buy their work, whether they are individuals or institutions). In turn, they define how the artistic functions on aesthetic, epistemological and ontological levels. The authority of these three institutions regulates artistic activity defining and limiting its possibilities. But the artists are

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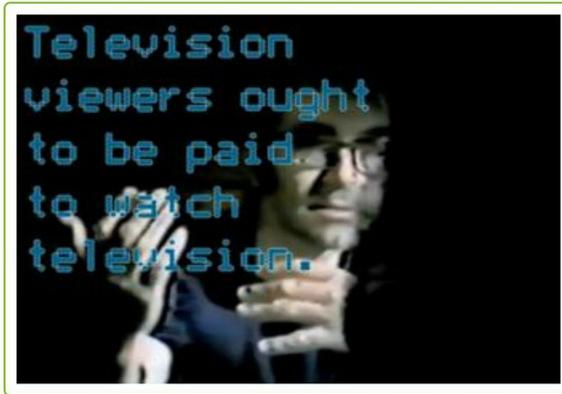
<sup>3</sup> Wright, Stephen, "Be for real: the usership challenge to expert culture". Online magazine n.e.w.s., submitted Thu, 2008-07-24 03:31. <http://northeastwestsouth.net/be-real-usership-challenge-expert-culture-0>

not the ones who are at the head of these institutions.

Current artistic conventions, which have their roots in modernism, based on the so called "disinterest" of the viewer, discard the usership (and also the notions of use-value and use-rights) as essentially instrumental. The art world is not at all prepared to discuss usership, although artistic practices increasingly involve different commitment schemes that show that the logic of spectatorship fails to accurately describe. Furthermore, one could even stop speaking of "artists" and start talking about "cultural agents". A cultural agent defined in the terms of user can not be reduced to the role of producer, but occupies a place that calls into question the dichotomies that until today operate at the base of the three institutions mentioned above. In all cases, what usership makes clear is that the value of art (a value that can not be reduced to money) is produced through the interaction of all these figures and need not be embodied in specific and distinct subjects.

Though we all use language, drugs, public services, etc., the notion of usership has never been integrated into the culture of experts and it is therefore not easy to find theories about it - in fact, it was never granted permission to enter this field. Actually, it is fair to say that the reason for this is that it is not only an imposition, but is usership itself which requires that some sort of boundary separates users from viewers, experts and owners, since otherwise art would lose its specificity, and so therefore its critical potential towards these same institutions. Usership is a category that exceeds the arts, haunting the entire society. It affects the art sphere in a way that allows it to enter into a new relationship with its outside. This new relationship can only be a conflictive one. What usership entails is that the space in which art is produced is questionable. Usership inhabits these institutions as a ghost would; it occupies territories in a way that makes them *inappropriate*. This is a characteristic that can function as a critic of the private appropriation of value produced collectively. Recall that we do not mean simply the value that someone acquires when they buy a lucrative piece of art, since its value exceeds its market value. The value of a socially relevant piece of art is created when the experience is involved creatively with other social institutions (on the contrary it is inhibited when, for example, it is possessed by a museum and it is badly curated, or when it is not exposed but kept hidden in a file that is not shared, when no one has access to investigate, to learn from it).

Usership is an artistic regime that proposes a completely different way of compromise to the one defined on the basis of naive opposition of art vs world. Conceiving art under the paradigm of spectatorship serves its fetishization. Is there an artistic strategy that can produce a use value for society as a whole? This can only be reached if the three institutions that still manage to keep the artwork isolated are transcended. What may be the strategy?



Contemporary art seeks to create in the margins of institutions and extend the boundaries of their own forms. This allows artists to create new images that are not merely representations of the real or possible. Thus, by drawing the always-new boundaries that define its context, art is able to enrich daily and political experience, provided that in turn it nourishes from what exceeds it. When art appears not in terms of its specific purposes (to be an artwork) but in terms of its specific means (skills), it has, in principle, a very low coefficient of artistic visibility: we see it, but not as art. However, this impaired visibility can be inversely proportional to the political effectiveness of the work. By injecting new skills, specifically artistic, into the social sphere, a work will remain free to develop all its symbolic force to give greater visibility and legibility to all kinds of social processes.

If a work is to have a use-value for a community of users, it must not only show a purpose, but a purpose other than artistic: a purpose that is social-change oriented. But can art arise purposes beyond its frame? Or maybe its task is to find ways to extend the framework, which defines the specificity of art? Art committed to the scheme of work defined by usership succeeds in destabilizing the boundary, weakening the inside and the outside of the frame, but does not eliminate it. Thus, the work would not be encapsulated in the category of "just art", nor it would remain outside of art institutions condemning itself to invisibility.

Stephen Wright explicitly qualifies as a "farce" the experience of relational or participatory art: it did no more than introduce viewers to the world of art in a more active way -if you will-, but it did not change the society as a whole in institutional terms, it did not try to change the territory in which art functions. The viewers became participants, but not users. Art cannot be merely an isolated instance where the subjects get involved and then take to the privacy of their homes an "enriching experience".

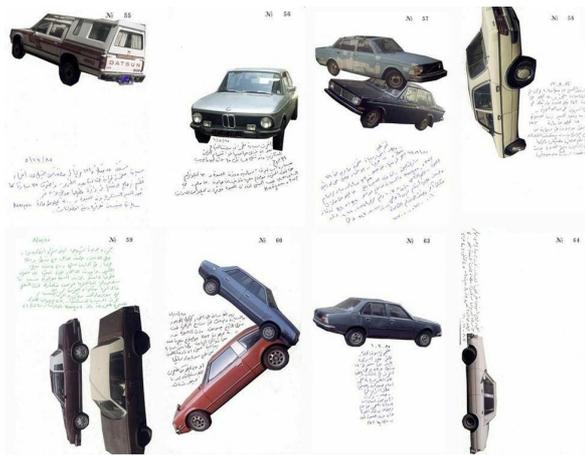


**Grupo de Arte Callejero (GAC) (Street Art Group). "Aquí viven genocidas". Street poster.**

This group was founded in 1997 in Argentina. Its members are artists, photographers and graphic designers. They strongly question the artistic institutions by developing interventions on the forms of symbolic control in the public space: they create deviations and subversions of signs and public advertising. They provide resources that contribute to the building of the identity of "escraches", a mode of direct action invented by HIJOS (an institution that gathers the sons of

disappeared people during the Military Government in Argentina). This contributed to the human rights fight. They anonymously put up maps that indicate where the unpunished genocides live. "Aquí viven genocidas" is a map of the city of Buenos Aires in which the addresses of these repressors are shown. Countless copies of this maps covered the streets in the occasion of the 25 anniversary of the last Coup d'état. This helped people to realize that they were neighbors with this people and mobilizes a series of "escraches": public demonstrations in front of the repressors houses. After that, the sense of community in the different neighborhoods changed forever.

Taking Duchamp's *ready-made* notion, Stephen Wright develops his own notion of "reciprocal readymade" (a concept that took shape in the exhibition "The Future of the Reciprocal Readymade. The use-value of art", curated by him). This consists of a dynamic of "*detritorialization-reterritorialization*", which attempts to graft artistic skills in everyday environment, which creates a situation of "reciprocal extraterritoriality". When artists introduce their artistic skills, perceptions and habits in the symbolic economy of the social, the artistic moves out of the frame, creating a void in the world of art. This forces a reciprocal movement: it creates another movement of *reterritorialization*<sup>4</sup>. This is a dynamic in which art can help change the world in specific situations.



**The Atlas Group, "Notebook Volume 38; Already Been in a Lake of Fire (1975-2002)".**

It is a collection of images of Lebanese bomb-cars. To build these images, the group photographed the engine or what it was left after the attack. "It is the part that suffers the less after the explosion. And it is useful to recognize the brand or model of the car", they explain.

**The Atlas Group** aims to address the fresh History of Lebanon, with an emphasis in the wars between 1975 and 1991. Based in Beirut and Nueva York, they gather a series of documentation whose authenticity and authorship can be

put into question. Following a narrative interpretation of History that mixes documentary with fiction, they transcend the usual ways in which war is represented: a bloody story with no victims or guilty.

<sup>4</sup> Deleuze, Gilles and Félix Guattari. 1972. *Anti-Oedipus*. Trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane. London and New York: Continuum, 2004.

Throughout the history of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline there have been debates that are worn out from today's perspective, although it would be too easy to say that have been overcome. From opposite perspectives it has been said that art either has no use or that art should be "committed". We know that art is part of reality, not merely a reflection or a fantasy. Pieces of art are parts of reality, they inhabit the world affecting other things and being affected by them. As such, art fulfills a certain function, has a certain value, explicitly raised as an end or not. Wright intends to focus on the artistic to the extent that it is endowed with a use value socially determined, which would be revealed only in the specific and unique situation in which it is operated. Paying attention to the current phenomenon that represents the emergence of the figure of usership, new modes of production and appropriation of value can start to be understood. Art can be a tool for social change in the direction towards a model of collaborative and supportive cultural agency: the question is what it is used for and who makes a profit with it.