

[00:00:01] **PAUL O'NEILL**

Good afternoon, everybody. Welcome to this semester's Visitor Talks. The first—well, it wasn't supposed to be the first, but it is the first—talk in the series called "You Talkin' to Me?", and I'm delighted to have the artist and activist Tania Bruguera here with us as our first visitor for this semester. Tania was actually the very first person I invited to speak at CCS when I joined the team almost four years ago. So, it's a little bit of an anniversary for both of us. But we're delighted to have Tania here to speak as our first visitor as part of the "Talks" program.

[00:00:47] **PAUL O'NEILL**

As part of this semester's talks, we've asked each visitor to think about discursive practice and the agency of the addressee. And, to reflect upon whom we speak to when we are working, speaking... When we are working, speaking or exhibiting? In accounting for the essential inclusion of the other, the viewer, the public, these "Visitor Talks" extend the importance of speaking as doing, as discursive practice, crucial to the curatorial as a public space of intersection between people, ideas, and things. We've asked Tania—along with all the rest of our visitors this semester—to think about the role of the addressee, specifically not that of the producer or the author, but the person or public to whom Tania speaks when addressing or when making art, as a fundamental question of ethical, artistic and curatorial practice.

[00:01:40] **PAUL O'NEILL**

Put simply, the primary question for this semester is, for whom do we exhibit? What does it actually mean to be the subject being addressed within a specific space—physical, conceptual, or sociopolitical? What are the very modes of address in which the work operates, but also, what is it that is actively being addressed in the world through this work? What is being exhibited when we are addressing the public and when do we speak ourselves into the world?

[00:02:10] **PAUL O'NEILL**

It seems, I think, really appropriate to have an artist such as Tania Bruguera as our first speaker for this series, as an artist who's been very much involved for, I think, over 25 years, as one of the leading political and performance artists of her generation, researching and provoking different ways in which art can be applied to the world, to everyday political life, often focusing on what she has called the transformation of the condition of the viewer into one of active citizenry or of the social affects into political effectiveness. Tania's practice has often—or more often than not, even—collapsed its artistic function into political life or into bare life. As many of you know, Tania has been arrested and detained in Cuba on a number of occasions between December 2014 and January 2015 for having organized the public performance of *Tatlin's Whisper #6* in Havana, Plaza de la Revolución, a public performance, which aims to, or basically just involves setting up an open mic in a public square where Cubans were invited to openly speak and express their thoughts. She along with many of her colleagues, activists, artists, bloggers and journalists were during that period arrested for their political work.

[00:03:34] **PAUL O'NEILL**

Aside from this collapse into everyday political and bare life, Tania's artworks have been exhibited in numerous significant large scale international exhibitions across the world, from Documenta 11 to the 2015 Venice Biennale, to the Istanbul Biennial 2003, to Shanghai Biennial 2004, Gwangju in Korea 2008. Her work is held in many, many museums across the world, such as Tate Modern, the Guggenheim, MoMA, Bronx Museum, and many others. Most recently, and I think most significantly, Tania has set up a new institution called the Hannah Arendt International Institution for Activism in Havana, of which I'm actually one of the founding members. Kickstarter does work, somehow. Which is a school, an exhibition space, and a think tank for activist artists to engage with local and national Cuban artists and activists, and the institution aspires to create a peaceful and considered response wherever there is violence—Like many of her long term projects, such as Asociación de Arte Útil, or the Immigrant Movement

International, or the Free School Cátedra Arte de Conducta, that they've all been extensive investigations or interventions into the institutional structure of collective memory, education and politics.

[00:05:01] **PAUL O'NEILL**

To define Tania's practice, she has even created a whole language, or a nomenclature, around her work and works that she has an affinity with. So, terms such as "Arte Conducta," or "conduct" or "behavioral art;" "Arte Útil," or "useful" art, roughly translated as art as a device or a tool or political timing, specific art or aesthetics. In other words, Tania has even created a whole language around her practice where there is not one that would sufficiently or effectively define it. I'm going to just end with a description that Tania herself provided, it's a little bit kind of paraphrased, in an interview that she did with me and a number of our students two years ago for Bomb Magazine, where she stated that 'Arte Útil, or 'useful art,' is not about morals or about what is so called 'good,' 'correct,' or 'acceptable.' It is about creating possibilities for those who are unjustly exploited, for those whom the law does not protect, for those who do not have any other alternative than to rebel against the system. I'm always nervous to talk in universal terms. It's easy to simplify. Arte Útil is not NGO art. It's est-éthics, it's the ethics of social transformation. Arte Útil is about a collective ethics, therefore it can't involve another person's exploitation. Arte Útil is the zone of ethical ecology, the ethics of the exploited against the morals of the exploiter. I could define them with what I call Arte Útil or 'useful art' because they went beyond complaining about social problems, and instead tried to change them by implementing different solutions. They were not only imagining impossible utopian situations, which is what most artists do, but they were also trying to build practical utopias. Arte Útil is social practice in art, in the art of the addressee. There are some important differences though. Social practice shows us what is going on, turns the audience into participants and plays with our awareness on a given subject. Change for Arte Útil does not occur in people's psychology but in their concrete reality. Arte Útil has to be implemented and function for real. If it doesn't, it's not Arte Útil. Arte Útil is not to look at, or to be at, but to do

something with." So, delighted to invite Tania Bruguera, who's talk is going to be called, "Art: What For?" Tania.

[00:07:44] **TANIA BRUGUERA**

Well, first of all, I have to say that I don't speak that well. There was very good editing of my interview by the students, and I just have to say I'm very, very happy to be here. It's always a pleasure to have the chance to exchange ideas with Paul, and all of you, since I want to see you in museums later and magazines and we're going to be acquainted very much in the future. So, it's nice to start the conversation now.

[00:08:19] **TANIA BRUGUERA**

I'm going today to focus on one project, which doesn't mean we cannot talk about other projects. It is the most difficult project to talk about because it's still going on. So, it's still in development, and let's see how it goes. This is not one of those lectures where you know exactly what you're going to say before you say it. I'm trying to experiment with you, since you talk about the addressees, and see how this goes. So therefore, please feel free to interrupt if something is not clear or you want to know a little more. There are many, many slides. They are all, except three, text—because I have bad memory, so I need to see text to remember what I'm talking about—and, because I really want to focus on how this Arte Útil project is evolving.

[00:09:35] **TANIA BRUGUERA**

Okay, let's start. So, basically the question I have asked myself—always asked myself—is "what is art for?" I'm not so worried, or I think I have understood very well, "where is it done?" "For whom is it done?" All of these questions are already something that I have addressed in the work and I feel it has sufficiently satisfied one or the other project, minimally. So, "what is art for?" is the question I always ask myself because I feel that right now, there is a synchronicity problem between the art that is done, and the art that needs to be done, or the art that is for today and now. And I feel a lot of art that we see today is an art done with the resources and the perspective of art from the last

century or even two centuries ago, some of it. So, what is art for? I feel it's the most important question, at least for me and for a group of us who are trying to understand—we don't want to eliminate art, we want to understand, how can art be part of reality? How can art be part of people's lives? How can art reinvent its own role and function in society?

[00:11:00] **TANIA BRUGUERA**

So, of course, the answer to that question, or the way I have formalized that question to have a conversation with my peers, is the creation of the concept Arte Útil. Arte Útil in Spanish means... útil in Spanish, like many Latin languages, is "useful," but it's also the tool or the instrument or device by which the use is being delivered. So, I really like the idea that it's in Spanish for two reasons. First of all, because I suffered like hell when I was in school and had to learn performance and all these other words that were none in Spanish, and I feel like some other languages sometimes are better than English, for something, so there you go. But also, because it has this double entendre of usefulness—if you say only useful, it reduces too much in terms of this kind of utilitarian part of the action. So basically, what Arte Útil is, is a way to synthesize a practice that has been done for a long time, and that is still going on, not only by artists, but by self organized groups, by initiatives all over the world, by people who are trying to transform society and that are actually taking over some of the resources of the state, or intervening some of the domains of the state to present and try to implement another option.

[00:12:54] **TANIA BRUGUERA**

Okay, how did I put this project together? Well, first of all, I had this idea in 2003. I was at the Conducta project. I was thinking about socially engaged and political art, and the fact that something was missing in all of the things I was reading. And I said, well, what is missing in this idea of—in Spanish, in socialist countries, we talk about 'trabajo socialmente útil,' so, work that is socially useful—so I say, okay, then maybe this is what is missing, the fact that all of these socially engaged projects are just presenting the

problem or maybe solving in a temporary manner, in term of just the experience, but not the infrastructure or the institutional changes. So I say: how can I put together this conversation among my peers? So I say: okay, I'm going to divide the conversation into three parts. The first question is, does Arte Útil exist? Second question, is Arte Útil necessary? And the third question, how to preserve Arte Útil without a big degree of blurriness and noise in this preservation?

[00:14:21] **TANIA BRUGUERA**

Okay, let's start with the first question and say: does Arte Útil exist? The strategy I'm using is, we created an archive and I'm going to try, I don't know if there is, well, you'll see the archive later... We created an archive, we created a lexicon, we created a museum—and this is the exhibition—and we created a school. So basically, Arte Útil is a process, an artistic process, that includes the questioning of the institutions that legitimate a practice of art. So, one is the institutional memory, the archives. The other one is the language by which we define the practice, the lexicon. The museum, the institution that actually legitimates but also shares with the public those legitimations. And, a school, meaning appropriating an institution that perpetuates the conversation over time. I actually, in 2010, decided not to work anymore in museums because I really felt that it was an institution that limited the practice that I wanted to do. But, the Van Abbe called me for a solo show, and I said, okay, instead of doing a solo show, why don't we do that?

[00:16:02] **TANIA BRUGUERA**

The Útil Museum. And this is what you see here. One of the curators had a great idea, Nick Aikens, had a great idea to turn off the lights of another museum, and only leave use for museum. And actually, we even played with, for a while, that we're going to change museum for "useum." So basically, what we tried to do in the exhibition was to deconstruct different methodologies and show the methodologies at work by shooting some projects from the archive, and putting it in the space. The space was divided in different sections. Maybe it's too much detailed, if I want to talk about the general

point. But, one thing I want to point out that I really like about the way we distributed the knowledge in the museum is that we actually put a "room of controversy." And it's something I really like because usually when you're going to make your case, you try to be as affirmative as possible. But here, we incorporated doubt into the structure of legitimacy. And this is the room where we put projects that we could not, in the group, agree if they were Arte Útil or not.

[00:17:26] **TANIA BRUGUERA**

So, we had projects that were in the margin of whether Arte Útil could be seen, or something that could be confused with Arte Útil.

[00:17:36] **TANIA BRUGUERA**

And, actually, that was the most important device in the show to start the conversation of how to define Arte Útil, because we didn't want to have a proper definition, or too many definitions. So, people can come up with their own ideas of what Arte Útil is by seeing the examples, by adding with all the examples and understanding. And in this room we put things like, for example, either they were not useful, or they were not intended to be useful, but the audience, or the people, made it useful.

[00:18:13] **TANIA BRUGUERA**

So, basically, this is what the museum was. In the museum, we decided not to have a guided tour, like these books with the guided tour, but to have instead a book by which to navigate the practice. And that was the lexicon. So, the lexicon was instead of the guided tour of the show, and was the guide entrance to the knowledge of Arte Útil. One thing that I really like about the lexicon is that it was done—we commissioned this to Stephen Wright, Paul was too busy here, but we gave it to Stephen Wright—and one thing that we really liked about the way he (and this is downloadable online on the Arte Útil website) and one thing we really like is that he not only put together a group of concepts, but, he actually decided that some concepts should be retired, which is something that I felt was pretty interesting.

[00:19:21] **TANIA BRUGUERA**

And also, of course, this was a very approximative lexicon that is still in the works. So, we want to commission another person to do a new lexicon for next year when we go to the second reiteration of the Museum of Arte Útil in Canada. Okay, so why is Arte Útil necessary? I feel that—we feel, because now we are a group. This is something interesting that has happened in the project. I initiated this project and now there is a group of people who are doing so much for the project and taking care of the archive, making sure that books are being published about it. So, it is a team effort. But, one of the reasons that we feel that Arte Útil is necessary is in part because we feel that we need to start changing the culture, in art, of producing into implementing. This is something that we feel Arte Útil does very well. Arte Útil is not about producing, it's about implementing, and trying to understand the process of implementation and the consequences of implementation. So yes, we do think it's necessary. And of course, the idea to preserve Arte Útil is through an association that we have created.

[00:20:52] **TANIA BRUGUERA**

The association is something that is active, is very young. It's only two years—one and a half years—old. What we're doing in the association is we are, every year, we are meeting. Last year was in Middlesbrough at MIMA, which is a museum run by Alistair Hudson, who is the other person really much in the association. And, we're doing a yearly get together, and also we try every year to create a book. One, I think you have it here, is *What's the Use?*, which was the first book that we presented in the first association meeting. These are books that we don't produce, but what we do is the people in the team, through the Internationale or different grants or different exhibitions, we are trying to use those moments to create books that talk about the issues that we're interested in. The second book is coming up this year, it's about audience, it's called constituency—so what we're doing this year is a book about how to see audiences as constituency. So, it's trying to challenge the ideas of audience as we usually approach it.

[00:22:28] **TANIA BRUGUERA**

Another way to preserve Arte Útil is to create a collection of Arte Útil. But, this brings a big problem because this work does not belong to us, or to the association, or to me, or to anybody, or each artist—its now part of the archive. But, the concept of collection that we are dealing with is two: first, the artists who have given the project for the archive, in a way, they are giving the option to the people who look at the archive to take the project and implement it somewhere else. Of course, with communicating with the artists, et cetera—it's kind of an open source. But also, we are trying to create a collection by which museums buy an Arte Útil project, and decide how much money is worth that project. We divide that money in, depending the quantity, maybe in ten years or five, depending how much money it is. And then we want every year to give one to three projects in the archive the money that corresponds to that year if we divide the money. So, the idea of the collection is actually a way by which to make sure some of the projects in the archive keep happening and have fundings, where, as you know, it's very hard to get funding after a while.

[00:23:55] **TANIA BRUGUERA**

Okay, so how are we doing this? The first thing we did is to create an archive and have research. We created a criteria, I'm not going to read it now, but we created a criteria saying like, okay, everybody agrees that Arte Útil is this point, and the criteria was not meant to be public. It was something we put together when we started meeting at the Van Abbe, and deciding who or how to define Arte Útil. I have to say that for me, it was also an institutional exercise, because we had so many discussions at the Van Abbe, and many times I knew what the answer was, but I didn't say it because I wanted them to discuss and to come up with this and to kind of appropriate the concept. So, another thing we did is to look at the prehistory of Arte Útil. By looking back, we researched more than 250 case studies, from 1800 to now. Some come from the art, some come from non-art resources. But also, we found out that there was an artist from Argentina called Eduardo Costa who had written in 1969 a manifesto of Arte Útil, with the exact

same words, he called it Useful Artworks, but you know, he's from Argentina, so it's Arte Útil.

[00:25:33] **TANIA BRUGUERA**

So, as you can see in this case, his idea of Arte Útil was to reconstruct and to fix this area, this corner in New York. It was interesting because in 1969, to maybe the '80s, or beginning of the '90s, the idea of usefulness in art was reciting mostly in beautifying something, how to make something more beautiful. So, the only way in which art could be implemented is by making something more "beautiful." But, Eduardo Costa already understood another dimension of usefulness. Then, in the middle of the exhibition preparation, we discovered that there is a guy called Pino Poggi that—I swear to god—I thought it was one of my students from the summer academy where I teach Arte Útil who was inventing this person. But no, he's an actual artist that existed, who was friends with Joseph Beuys and he's actually in some of the photos with him. We received a call from a critic saying we're so happy you are putting his work in the show. We're like, who is this artist? And we thought it was of course a joke. And then the son of Pino called us. He's still alive, he's in Italy. He showed us a manifesto of Arte Útil—Útile, because he was an Italian—that he wrote in 1965.

[00:27:11] **TANIA BRUGUERA**

So it's even previous from Eduardo Costa. It was a very interesting moment in the Van Abbe because everybody panicked, because okay, "one is fine, but two people came up with the same idea of Arte Útil, and Jesus, we invited Tania and she didn't even come up with this," you know.

[00:27:31] **TANIA BRUGUERA**

So, I think it was a really good moment to understand exactly what Arte Útil is. It's not about property, it's not about ownership. It's about carrying a cultural conversation together. So after the panic moment, I said no, no this is actually better, because it makes the case that if three people, in three different countries, in three different times,

came up with the exact name, we are up to something here. So, this is something that... then everybody was happy.

[00:28:03] **TANIA BRUGUERA**

Then what we did, we realized when we started doing the archives that we had a problem, which is that not all the projects could fulfill all the criteria. So we decided, okay, how will we do this? Because these are Arte Útil, but it's not enough "Útil," or enough art. This happened for a few reasons. One of the reasons was that some of the projects were done really early on, before the art institution and the art world and the art critics were able to accept something like Arte Útil, so they only could come to a certain level. And, the second reason for some of this is many of these did not come from the art world, or from the arts, so it was not looked at as art, it was looked at as something else. So we decided to create three categories. One is a proposal, like when somebody has the intention of doing Arte Útil, or something useful, or use-art, through other means, but it only stays as such and nothing happens—most of the time it was because they couldn't find funding. The second is when you have a prototype, which you actually find in some museum of somebody who says okay, "let's do one, let's do it once," and, that's it.

[00:29:28] **TANIA BRUGUERA**

And then that means that people could experience, but it stays in the realm of either the institution or just a short group of people experience. So, it was not implemented and it was not taken by all the people. And then, we decided that the last category is the one that we are more interested in, which is the works that are able to be implemented in reality. By implementation, we are saying not only that they could be completely fulfilled, but that also other institutions and other people take the idea over, and reproduce it somewhere else or continue the project without the original artists or initiatives.

[00:30:15] **TANIA BRUGUERA**

Okay, second question. We have some things that are kind of methodologies or principles that we find that are very important to Arte Útil. Some of these are the fact that Arte Útil is not about presenting a problem, it is about transforming the affect that the problem generates in people into political and institutional and structural and infrastructural effectiveness. So it's not only about proposing, it's not only about saying, it's about doing.

[00:30:58] **TANIA BRUGUERA**

Another methodology we use is active-hyperrealism. What we mean by active-hyperrealism is something that looks like the thing, but also operates like the thing. So, it's not only a mimetic gesture, but is also a questioning of the operational capacity of the thing. Basically, if we do something that is, let's say, wants to work with the idea of the law, then it has to be something that becomes a law. It doesn't look like a law on a wall of a museum, it does need to have a process by which it becomes an actual law and people who know about it understand it as law. And we'll talk later where the artists know of this, don't worry.

[00:31:52] **TANIA BRUGUERA**

So the other thing that we use is the idea of transitional institutions. What do we mean about transitional institutions? Institutions that come to be what they need to exist. So, institutions are created, as of course institutional critique. But, it is a process by which you don't point at a problem, but you actually show that it's possible to change the problem. And this is by doing a parallel institution—making sure that the other institution sees you, because otherwise...

[00:32:29] **TANIA BRUGUERA**

The other thing, as Paul was saying, is this concept of Est-ética. I had a big discussion with Claire Bishop and a lot of critics, when they see the work I'm doing, and all this Arte Útil work. They always say "where is the art, where is the aesthetic?" Which gets a little

old as a question, but, it is a valid situation where... and I understand the case of Claire, with whom I had a long time, back-and-forth conversation. She wants to see where the transformational moment resides, where the actual distancing process resides—it is so close to reality. So, basically, one day, I saw work in a Spanish Esthetica, and then I look, and say, "whoa, est-ética." So "est" means, in Latin, "it is," and ética is ethics, so I said "perfect. That's the solution." So basically, if we are talking about doing an art that is about an ethical ecosystem and sustainable ecosystem of ethics, then of course the aesthetic of this kind of project is in the ethical proposal. So, we don't need to have an aesthetical shock, confrontational, or so on. But we want to do, let's say, all of the aesthetic consequences or relationships that you have with the aesthetics, with the ethics.

[00:34:21] **TANIA BRUGUERA**

And this is something that I can describe later if somebody wants more explanation, that is very tangible. This is not only a conceptual issue, this is extremely tangible. There are many examples in the Arte Útil archive in which when you see what the project is about, you understand that the shift in the ethic is not only a formal one, but it's one that actually makes you understand, and empowers you to say, "you know what? Yes, things can be different."

[00:34:54] **TANIA BRUGUERA**

So of course, art as a tool is Arte Útil, and this is also—sometimes we had confrontations because they say, well, we don't want to instrumentalize art, but Arte Útil is not instrumentalizing art—its using all the capacity art has, to do something else beyond itself. It's not a self-reflection activity, but it's a way by which you position yourself as an artist, in society, in a very different parameter. So, political, Tania, is specific. Art, of course, it's understandable, this idea that art that is understood as urgency, not art that is done for the pleasure or just because of the caprice of an artist, but because there exists an urgency by which art has to step in, as one of the solutions, or one of the vehicles or the tools where nothing else probably in society is able to talk about it, or to

propose how to move forward. Of course, this idea of not producing, but implementing---and I have to say that this already brings a very different set of thinking because when you start doing a project, understanding that it's production, yes, it tells a process of sharing the process with the people, et cetera, but already the work has an ontological condition that generates how it's going to be seen and interacted with.

[00:36:38] **TANIA BRUGUERA**

Mainly it's to be consumed, even if it's not commercial. As I say, consume is in a more, yeah...but when you start thinking about implementation, from the beginning, you have to start thinking, "okay, I'm not going to be the sole author, I have to share this with other people, how do we make sure that this is functioning," and so on.

[00:36:59] **TANIA BRUGUERA**

And, the other thing is, in Arte Útil, the art tries to anticipate, instead of react. And I think this is also very important—especially with the situation we have right now here in the United States—but this idea that art is not something that reacts a posteriori, that comments after the fact, but is trying to anticipate what is going on. So, preemptive art, kind of. Is Arte Útil necessary? I think so, but many times people have said, "okay, Arte Útil, you know, it's just a liberal thing because you're trying to make the system work better." No, Arte Útil is not to make things work better. It's to actually propose a different system altogether. So Arte Útil is not this kind of [situation] that you see, when analysis is invited to a corporation to make sure everybody understand the logo properly, or feels better because it's painted blue, and everybody comes, "oh, I like this room." No, it's something that actually tries to understand the system, in order to change it and propose a new one.

[00:38:16] **TANIA BRUGUERA**

So therefore, it's not about efficiency, but about effectiveness. And I think that's a very important distinction for this practice. And again, implementation. I keep saying implementation because I want to put it in your head. You have this idea of creating

some sort of alternative society, no? Well we talk about this, how to preserve, I think, the Asociación Arte Útil, and I want to take the opportunity to invite you all to San Francisco, where this summer we're going to do the first School of Arte Útil. Also, we're going to have the second Association of Arte Útil meeting—it's going to be in September. The school is at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, and the Association of Arte Útil meeting is at the SFMOMA. I think this will be a good place, maybe for you, to understand better what I just said today, what Arte Útil is, because we're going to invite many people from the archive to talk about the practice.

[00:39:26] **TANIA BRUGUERA**

And I think that's it for today. Yeah, that's it for today. I just want some questions. I don't know how clear it was, but yeah.