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A User Is Haunting the Art World

Stephen Wright. *Toward a Lexicon of Usership*. Eindhoven, Netherlands:

Van Abbemuseum, 2013. 68 pp., no ills.

Published on the occasion of the exhibition *Museum of Arte Útil* at the Van Abbemuseum, the book is available as a PDF under “Tools” at <http://museumarteuil.net>. A new print edition is in the planning stages, but a release date has not been announced.

Imagine our day-to-day world infiltrated by artist-generated replicants so identical to ordinary events, people, and social circumstances, but also so precise in their counterfeit functions that they wouldn't “look like anything other than what they also are” (4). What would this 1:1 scale art be like, and how would it relate to those commonplace things it so deftly duplicated? In a cultural economy flooded with functioning facsimiles, the stalwart notion of art for art's sake would be pushed past its breaking point and quite literally into the event horizon of our everyday experience. Exactly what purpose would this breakthrough serve? Perhaps more important, how would nonartists relate to an ontological subversion of their familiar world? Would they fear it or ignore it or simply not notice the difference? Or would they come to embrace this ineffable infiltration, seeing it as not just a seditious exit strategy available to a small art cultural elite, but also useful for escaping their own, precariously proscribed ninety-ninth-percentile existence? One thing is clear, the contemplative distance between a thing and its representation, previously considered necessary for aesthetic judgment, would melt away, and so would cultural “experts” like me. Habitual refrains from tradition-bound art critics, such as “Is it a political demonstration or is it performance art?” or “Is it art or is it activism?” would simply go unheeded in a universe filled with 1:1 artworks. These would be meaningless questions. Living would become form and vice versa. Similarly, spectatorship, authorship, and ownership—all staples of mainstream contemporary art—would wither away to be replaced by *usership*, or more precisely by swarms of emancipated users whose collective hacking, gleaning, poaching, and sharing would pleurably produce a surplus of social

benefits, much in the way pollinating bees yield incommensurably greater value to agriculture than the honey that humans harvest. What began as an exodus from contemporary art's ontological confines then begins to spill out in all directions, usefully repurposing the everyday and bringing about an end to the tyranny of ownership.

No, these are not plot points for some Philip Dick–like sci-fi series; they are instead plausible scenarios set off by the Paris-based theorist Stephen Wright's smart, slim book *Toward a Lexicon of Usership*. Granted, I am applying his intellectually nuanced project in quite a literal, even ham-fisted way. Still, this ungainly approach allows Wright's provocations to slice deep into core debates about contemporary art, especially regarding the vexed topic of socially engaged practice. These are contested topics that Wright has in fact focused on before.

In 2004, two months before Nato Thompson's widely acclaimed exhibition *The Interventionists: Art in the Social Sphere* opened at Mass MoCA, Wright organized a modest installation entitled *The Future of the Reciprocal Readymade (The use-value of art)* for Apex Art space in downtown Manhattan. Wright's show even featured several of the same artists' collectives as *The Interventionists*, including the Yes Men, the Critical Art Ensemble, and the Atlas Group. Thompson and Wright both underscored the tactical instrumentality of these practitioners, and both described their exhibitions as “tool-boxes” for spectators to actively use rather than passively consume. However, while Thompson unequivocally described the work in *The Interventionists* as art that agitates “for social change using magic tricks, faux fashion and jacked-up lawn mowers,” Wright's curatorial interest was focused on the privileges and limitations imposed on these politicized practices by mainstream art as it seeks to strictly police the line separating art from life: “In one way or another, all the collectives in this project [the Apex Art exhibition] confront a common operative paradox: though informed by art-related skills, their work suffers from—or, should we say, enjoys—impaired visibility as art.”²

Grounding Wright's logic is Marcel Duchamp's famed invention of the *reverse readymade*. (This is the topic and title of a chapter in the book, as are most of the italicized terms in this review.) If a bottle rack

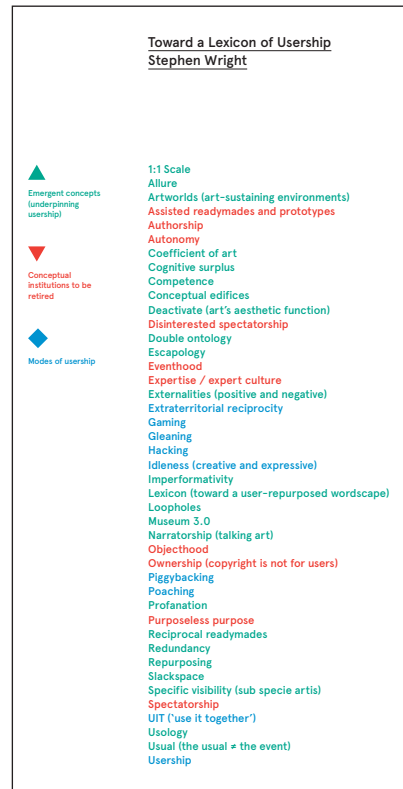
placed in an art gallery can be viewed as a sculpture, then a Rembrandt can be turned into an ordinary ironing board. Once that possibility is established, then who is to say a work of art could not also function politically as well? Taking it a step further, Wright boldly proposes a future in which art exists “without artists, without artworks, and without an artworld.”³ A decade later, his book *Toward a Lexicon of Usership* attempts to lay out this earlier proposition in detail. Nonetheless, a question dogs his logic both then and now. Why does anyone need an ironing board made from a singular canvas by a master painter when there are plenty of functioning ironing boards made of far less precious materials already available? Wright's 1:1 art is fundamentally superfluous. By contrast, such redundancy does not even appear in Thompson's social-art paradigm because he attributes to contemporary artists unique tactical competencies that make their transition into everyday life a plus rather than a surplus. This expertise includes the abilities to ingeniously trespass into nonart spaces, to disguise art as social activism or social activism as art, and to interrupt daily routines with unexpected, spectacular encounters that highlight the soul-numbing effect of customary regimes or corporate culture (as in the work of the Critical Art Ensemble). Even at its most self-effacing, what makes this kind of *détournement* different from similar acts by community activists, or even clever anarchist pranksters, for that matter, is that moment of *dénouement* when we as spectators recognize that our encounter is with “art.” The case of the Yes Men is useful here. What has prevented their deceptive hijinks from landing them in prison? Nothing less than that final dramatic act in which their forged corporate identities are torn away and they appear in real life as neither con men nor terrorists, but instead as just a couple of artists exercising their constitutional right to free speech. This revelation also dissolves the Yes Men's nuanced replication of reality. Thompson's position also leaves open a narrow but sufficient gap for cultural experts to debate whether or not there is such a thing as politically engaged aesthetics, a pursuit that is for many today the holy grail of socially engaged art.

Wright's dilemma lies elsewhere, as this new book makes clear. Once the frame separating art from life is entirely removed, art's privileged status as a sphere of auto-

mous fantasy and experimentation ceases to exist. It was, after all, by way of this detached framing that aesthetic experience promised to slow down the deluge of data typically assailing our senses, thus allowing us a means through which to reflect on sensory phenomena in a pleurably unencumbered and contemplative way. The more disinterested the viewer is in seeking to use this reflective experience for some specific purpose, the more likely a common social solidarity will emerge about the nature of abstract and noninstrumental ideals such as freedom and democracy, but also such nonconceptual things as beauty and taste. Beholding a work of art is one means of encountering the aesthetic. Wright is certainly not the first theorist to see the shortcomings of this essentially Kantian position. Feminist, queer, and deconstructive critiques by the likes of Adrian Piper, Amelia Jones, and Jacques Derrida immediately come to mind. But Wright is interested in the social cost of traditional aesthetics to artistic practice itself. He argues that what was once the very basis of art's revolutionary importance to enlightenment thought, its purposeless purpose in conventional Kantian terms, has led it to become "a prison house . . . where one must conform to the law of permanent ontological exception, which has left the autonomous artworld rife with cynicism" (12). A bit too much blame for this calamity is laid at Kant's feet, when it would be more accurate to accuse the opportunistic assimilation of the philosopher's concepts by a contemporary art establishment rife not only with cynicism, but also with ludicrous sums of finance capital that stabilize the status quo. One need only check out Michael Wayne's book *Red Kant* to imagine other possible exit strategies from such venality and world-weariness.⁴ Nevertheless, Wright sees one way for art to save itself: by deactivating the entire game of artistic aesthetics in exchange for usership, a transition that would appear to also bring art as we know it to an end: "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 noninstrumental, emancipated form of usership" (67).

In its subtlest passages, *Toward a Lexicon of Usership* reads like a complex parable in which a human pursuit called art, having

once flourished in the womb of autonomous freedom, now wishes to be delivered into the world. The Nietzschean overtones are no coincidence. The book even begins with a citation from *On the Genealogy of Morals* that states, in part, that "whatever exists, having somehow come into being, is again and



again reinterpreted to new ends."⁵ To be sure, art's overcoming of art requires actively forgetting its origin story, a goading that should raise hackles among art historians of all stripes. That said, at its most obvious or 1:1 level, Wright's book is just what it claims to be: a provisional lexicon of emerging concepts and terms aimed at repurposing the theory and practice of contemporary art. Certainly a tall order, though one Wright tackles in the manner of classical philosophy, building his case painstakingly, concept by concept, except with a twist. Wright's *Lexicon* unfolds in a rhizomatic and aphoristic fashion that relates it to the philosophical tradition of Nietzsche and Gilles Deleuze. The book consists of forty-three chapters, most one or two pages long, and each with a pithy epigraph to which the chapter refers directly

or indirectly. Each lexical entry links to one or more others that in turn link to still other terms. Take for instance Wright's phrase *double ontology*, which he offers as one way to conceive of useful art's dual nature, insofar as it has a primary ontology as whatever it is, and a secondary ontology as artistic proposition of that same thing: "house-painting outfits, online archives, libraries, restaurants, or mushroom hunts" (22). *Double ontology* is connected to *redundancy*: "It doesn't look, or not look, like art. It looks like what it is: the redundant thing or action" (54); and *redundancy* couples with the *coefficient of art*: "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" (13). All of these concepts fold back on themselves, not unlike the Rembrandt ironing board, which according to Wright, was Duchamp's "way of 'de-signing' art, of removing the signature by using an artwork to produce a use-value" (53).

Wright's entire project in fact continuously folds back upon itself, which is devilishly peculiar if you think of his theory as an argument against art world hermeticism. It is also quite opposite the approach found in the writings of most theorists and practitioners associated with socially engaged art in the Anglo-American context, such as Lucy R. Lippard, Tom Finkelppearl, Grant Kester, Shannon Jackson, Nato Thompson, Suzanne Lacy, Ted Purves, Julia Bryan-Wilson, Nicolas Lampert, Stephen Duncombe, Martha Rosler, Pablo Helguera, Claire Bishop, Marisa Jahn, Brian Holmes, Beverly Naidus, Josh MacPhee, John Roberts, Marc James Léger, and myself. His maverick status alone makes Wright's carefully spun ideas useful as a counterweight to the social-practice majority. It is also understandable that Wright cites Duchamp as his methodological and art-historical antecedent rather than the more familiar Joseph Beuys or Alan Kaprow or Hans Haacke. Useful comparisons might also be drawn, however, to the work of certain conceptual artists whose immanent interrogation of art's ontological status eventually led to more direct, politicized practices. This was the case with the UK-US collective *Art & Language* between 1968 and 1976, a period of group activity that Chris Gilbert describes

as evolving from a “concern with art-related issues to organizational ones to activism outside the art context.”⁶ Ultimately A&L members founded two subsequent New Left editorial projects, the magazine *The Fox* and the works of the artist group Red-Herring. Interestingly, A&L was also preoccupied with lists, indexes, and language games, all intended to deaestheticize and dehermeticize traditional artistic competencies while opening art up to the public sphere. To put it another way, A&L sought to push aggressively against artistic autonomy from the inside until the prophylactic covering protecting contemporary art’s very paradigm imploded. This was not intended to be an act of anarchic nihilism of the sort so often embraced as critical work by the art world. Instead, the objective was to lower artistic resistance to the messy, heteronomous realm of political, social, and economic life, allowing it to rush in. Unlike A&L, Wright’s double ontology seeks implosion without event, that is to say, without a moment of violent rupture or revolution. And for me this is where his project becomes most engaging and unpredictable, to the point where I begin to wonder if his *Lexicon* is really a manual for operating usership or if, in keeping with the artistic theory he describes, the book is both a lexicon and something else.

Approached straight on as a lexicon of terms, Wright’s *Lexicon* has definite limits. About a fourth of his entries are already operative among cultural producers, especially in the peer-to-peer (P2P) digital world. While it is interesting to see how the author shapes terms to fit his overall project, among them *gleaning*, *gaming*, *poaching*, *loopholing*, and *repurposing* (each is the topic of a chapter), their inclusion tends to fill out rather than expand the conceptual thesis of the volume. Of course their inclusion does also add an empirical dimension, as if to say that usership is already under way if only we had the conceptual vocabulary with which to perceive it clearly. Fair enough. But approaching this book solely as a toolbox for fixing what is wrong with contemporary art leads to rather obvious outcomes. Take for instance Tania Bruguera’s exhibition and research project *Arte Útil*, which was in fact the occasion for publishing Wright’s lexicon. A perfectly fine undertaking in its own right—except when viewed as an instantiation of Wright’s ideas about usership. At that point, things

become too easily proscriptive, and the peculiar allure of Wright’s project is, ironically, scaled down to become an illustration. Consider for example *Arte Útil*’s invitation to piss into a replica of Duchamp’s *Fountain*, now installed in the men’s bathroom at the Queens Museum in New York. Neither the problem of useful art nor artistic scale finds relief in this intervention because *Fountain*’s artistic framing has only been nudged a bit off pedestal (although conceivably relocating the urinal to a Walmart washroom might be another matter).⁷

Claude Lévi-Strauss once remarked that “all miniatures seem to have intrinsic aesthetic quality—and from what should they draw this constant virtue if not from the dimensions themselves?”⁸ Lévi-Strauss pointed out that while Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel frescos are extremely large in size, insofar as they attempt to depict the entire Christian cosmology in one location they are indeed miniature. Similarly, we might initially think of one of Duane Hanson’s eerily lifelike sculptures in 1:1 terms if we focus on scale and color and texture but not odor or movement. What remains, however, when the replication of things is so precise that this process of scaling-up that Wright describes becomes undetectable as art? Where do the artist and her artwork go, even as both are always right there in front of us? Or is the effect like that of the “uncanny valley,” a hypothesis of robotics in which an unsettling psychological response occurs when encountering an almost exact, though not quite perfectly rendered robotic human face? Wright does indeed hint at something like this several times in his *Lexicon*, referring to art’s double ontology and Duchamp’s coefficient of art, both of which allow for the retention of some degree of artistic self-understanding, even if the work is not framed as art. But it is his discussion of *allure*, that is most intriguing, perhaps because it resembles a depsychologized version Sigmund Freud’s notion of the uncanny. Once again in staunch opposition to Kant, who forbids access to “the thing in itself,” Wright informs us that an object’s allure implies an agency that comes from things themselves. Wright applies this idea, which he borrows from the philosophically fashionable work of Speculative Realism, to his deaestheticized 1:1 art and concludes that while the thing changes not

one bit, “once the trapdoor springs open and the ‘dark agents’ are on the loose, nothing could be more different” (7). Here the dark agency is that “infrathin” space of the artistic coefficient at work. Wright could have done much more with this entry; nevertheless, it is one of many points where the *Lexicon* is least like the writings of other contemporary social-art theorists and yet simultaneously most strangely familiar. For in a world rapidly being transformed into a synthetic version of itself, the implication of Wright’s project is not merely plausible, it may be inexorable. Curiously, it evokes the all-but-forgotten theorist Jack Burnham, whose 1968 book *Beyond Modern Sculpture* prophesized that artists working in collaboration with systems theorists, neuroscientists, robotics technicians, and so forth would one day give birth to artificially intelligent, physically mobile entities that would in turn eventually replace all organic lifeforms.⁹ Burnham’s teleological, Faustian dynamic fell from favor in the 1980s, along with such notions as grand narratives and proletarian class warfare. Allegedly he even softened his predictions in later editions of the book. Nonetheless, the radicalness of his proposition can be gleaned by trying to imagine aesthetic experience taking place without any human subjectivity present at all.

However, there is another, less sensational counter-reading to Wright’s insistence that art is staging an escape from itself. What if we turned his logic around one hundred eighty degrees to suggest that it is not art, but the world of everything else whose ontological integrity has imploded. As everything becomes a resource for monetization, as privacy vanishes, and as our personal genetic material and dream experiences are mined for profit, art, despite all of our jaded academic wrangling, may appear as a zone of certitude in an otherwise tumultuous reality. Which begs the question: who is actually seeking an escape route from where in this parable? Today one need not even be a professional artist to partake of its pleasures. Thanks to ever more accessible advanced reproduction technologies, artistic production is no longer off limits to the multitude. What kid with a 3D printer couldn’t knock out her own Jeff Koons with the click of the finger? As John Roberts puts it, a certain kind of technologically equipped amateur artist who is traveling on the “way

up,” encounters the deskilled professional artist “on the way down.”¹⁰ Roberts’s point of convergence could very well be Wright’s space of usership. Likewise the massive artistic redundancy Wright describes is homologous with the inherent overproduction of art, a condition that I have described as the “dark matter” essential to the reproduction of the mainstream, hierarchical art world. Therefore, rather than art scaling itself up to “real” proportions in 1:1 fashion, perhaps it is the multifarious everyday that is moving up “from below,” in order to occupy art. And why? Because it appears to be one of the few remaining spaces not fully predetermined by the needs of capital. That may seem naïve to readers of *Art Journal*, but for many nonspecialists art is still perceived to be a space of free play that offers an escape from drudgery and the sense that things just go on. Either way, a certain predictable precariousness has become an existential fact for most people, just as wanting to experience something, anything that escapes the slim space behind which we have barricaded ourselves is a growing, commonplace desire. It may even help explain the attraction of religious fundamentalism as much as steadily rising numbers of art school applicants, insofar as both seek an existence from the disciplinary precariousness of modern living.

The ultimate strangeness of Wright’s slender volume may be the way it does exactly what he theorizes against, by scaling down complex ideas in order to make them more readily accessible. Such contradictions would hobble a less impressive thinker. For Wright, paradox is an indispensable coefficient of his method. It is also what makes *Toward a Lexicon of Usership* essential reading, once one slips past the deceptive usefulness of the book’s exterior to find its trap door brimming with uncanny allure.

1. Nato Thompson, curatorial statement for *The Interventionists*, 2004, Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, at www.massmoca.org/event_details.php?id=38, as of January 30, 2015. See also my essay “Delirium and Resistance after the Social Turn,” *Field 1* (Spring 2015), at <http://field-journal.com/issue-1/sholette>, as of May 29, 2015.

2. Stephen Wright, curatorial statement for *The Future of the Reciprocal Readymade*, 2004, Apex Art, at www.apexart.org/exhibitions/wright.php, as of January 30, 2015.

3. *Ibid.*

4. Michael Wayne, *Red Kant: Aesthetics, Marxism and the Third Critique*, Bloomsbury Studies in

Philosophy (London: Bloomsbury, 2014). For video of a March 2015 discussion between Wayne and Wright at the CUNY Graduate Center, New York, see <http://centerforthehumanities.org/program/red-kant-stephen-wright-and-michael-wayne-conversation>, as of May 29, 2015.

5. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Arnold Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 2009), 513.

6. Chris Gilbert, “Art & Language and the Institutional Form in Anglo-American Collectivism,” in *Collectivism after Modernism: The Art of Social Imagination after 1945*, ed. Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 90. Art & Language had participants in the United Kingdom, United States, New Zealand, Canada, and Australia. Chris Gilbert voluntarily made his exit from the art world in 2006 in order to devote himself to political activism in Venezuela.

7. Bruguera’s *Arte Útil* concept was first realized as an experimental lab project in June 2013 at the Queens Museum in New York before evolving into *Museum of Arte Útil*, an exhibition that temporarily rebranded the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, Netherlands, from December 2013 to March 2014. The aim was to create a “Social Powerplant . . . where art’s use value and social function is put to the test.” The contents of *Museum of Arte Útil* are now archived at the Van Abbemuseum. See <http://museumarteuil.net/about/>, as of June 1, 2015.

8. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 23.

9. See Jack Burnham, *Beyond Modern Sculpture: The Effects of Science and Technology on the Sculpture of This Century* (New York: G. Braziller, 1968), 375.

10. John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art after the Readymade* (London: Verso, 2007), 159.

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