About the Bombophone and the Utilitarian Value of Art

Describing his art practice as socially engaged, Nikola Macura emphasizes that most of his works possess a specific kind of utilitarian value. In his latest project *From Noise to Sound*, he uses the method of upcycling: finding and taking weapons and other items from the military scrapyard in Temerin, and artistically transforming them into unique musical instruments, such as the bombophone – a wind instrument made from M57 hand launcher projectile/grenade shells. The use value of these art objects is reflected in the possibility of producing musical performances on them in collaboration with professional musicians and the “Rusty Orchestra”, as Macura calls it. This artistic procedure opens up a range of potential problem frameworks for analysing the relationship between the utility of art and its social, symbolic or aesthetic function.

In the context of Western philosophy, towards the end of the eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant argued that art possesses purposiveness without purpose (Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck), which frees it from any function and use.[[1]](#footnote-1) By formulating the thesis of the autonomy of art, he elevated it to a pedestal removed from everyday life. In *The Critique of Judgment* (Der Kritik der Urteilskraft), Kant explores aesthetic judgment as a subjective aspect of separating art from practical life concerns. He asserts that the pleasure determined by the judgment of taste is devoid of any interest, that is, what we associate with the existence of the object.[[2]](#footnote-2) Thus, for Kant, the aesthetic judgment lies between sensory experience and reason. By articulating the universality of aesthetic judgment, he clarified the separation of the aesthetic from all practical life contexts. The consequence of adopting his aesthetics in bourgeois societies is the separation of the work of art from life practices, as well as the idea that the work of art is entirely independent of society. In this way, the thesis of a free and “disinterested” observer becomes one of the pillars of modernity, and the idea of the autonomy of art hinders the development of the theory of the usefulness of art.[[3]](#footnote-3)

For a different line of consideration regarding the social purpose of art, the critical thought and analysis of social trends by John Ruskin is crucial. Unlike his early writings, in which he disputes the relevance of art to everyday life, in his later *Lectures on Art* at the University of Oxford in 1870, Ruskin refutes these views and argues for the practical use value of art.[[4]](#footnote-4) His emphasis on the relationship between beauty and utility demonstrates resistance to the idea of aesthetic autonomy, and he no longer prioritizes the concept of beauty over the use value of art. Ruskin was one of the first critics who perceived art as part of a holistic ecosystem where its use in education, activism, but also environmental protection must be recognized. Because of these views, he was outraged by the processes of industrialization caused by the capitalist mode of production which dehumanized Britain. Based on Ruskin’s ideas of reconsidering the social function of art and its use value in the utilitarian everyday life, the concept of *Arte Útil* (Useful Art) emerged.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Considering the relationship between the utilitarian and aesthetic functions of art, the position of Giorgio Agamben is significant. He emphasizes that creating new use value is possible only by deactivating the old use, making it non-operative.[[6]](#footnote-6) The semantic coincidence or perhaps the theoretical impulse for the method(ology) of Macura’s artistic procedure can actually be directly derived from the process of taking *deactivated* mines, grenades, projectiles, and attributing new use values to them in the form of *bombophones* or other similar instruments for making music. Agamben’s theory primarily pertains to the analysis of broader fields of hegemonic social models and power systems, such as capitalism, which can be changed only if the conditions for their effective *deactivation* are created.*[[7]](#footnote-7)* Analogous to Agamben’s theory, Mabel Tapia used the formulation “deactivation of the aesthetic function of art” [[8]](#footnote-8) to describe the paradigm shift in today’s discursive and socially engaged art practices, including Macura’s position. The claim that the aesthetic function of art is deactivated today does not mean that works of art no longer have aesthetics, or are in some way free from aesthetics. Any sensory things have aesthetics that cannot be deactivated, but they do not necessarily have an aesthetic function. As long as this function remains active, art stays outside the domain of the user and cannot have any operational use value.[[9]](#footnote-9) Deactivating the aesthetic function of art, making it non-operative, opens art – according to Agamben’s thesis – to other functions.

It is precisely these other functions of art, its utilitarian nature, and the repurposing of materials impregnated with the strong signifier of the original function – as is the case with weapons – that become the focal point of Nikola Macura’s art project. Utilitarian objects that produced the sound of gunfire, blasts, bursts or explosions during the anti-Yugoslav wars are translated into the world of utilitarian objects within the art system, whose function is to produce sounds, music and compositions with a clear anti-war message. The artist enriches the purposefulness of the objects, i.e., musical instruments, through performative actions, adding additional symbolic content, which is crucial at a time when social trends in the region are marked by strong tendencies towards retraditionalization, historical revisionism, and denial of crimes. Finally, by creating a new and different utilitarian aesthetic component of art, whose purposefulness is realized through direct use, Macura speaks of the transformative potential of art.

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1. Immanuel Kant, *Der Kritik der Urteilskraft,* Ditzingen:Philipp Reclam Jun Verlag GmbH, 2004. pp. 233-234 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. p. 116-117 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Alessandra Saviotti, *Hacking Art Education: Arte Útil as an educational methodology to foster change for curriculum planning,* doctoral thesis, p. 32, accessed on 9.6. 2024, <https://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/id/eprint/22729/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John Ruskin, *Lectures on Art*, Wokingham; Dodo Press, p. 53. See the special lecture The Relation of Art to Use. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Alessandra Saviotti, op. cit. p. 28. The author provides a detailed overview of the genealogy of the concept of *Arte Útil* in Spanish, Italian and English, highlighting in particular the contribution to the reactivation of this concept by the artist and activist Tania Bruguera. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations,* New York: Zone Books, 2007, p. 86 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid, 87 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Stephen Wright, Toward a Lexicon of Usership. Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2014, p. 32 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)