THE SCHOOLHOUSE AND THE BUS
Mobility, Pedagogy, and Engagement

PABLO HELGUERA
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The School of Panamerican Unrest title page, top left. Pablo Helguera with Paraguayan sculptor Hermann Guggiari at the Plaza del Cabildo, Asunción, Paraguay, September 2006. Photo courtesy of the artist.

The School of Panamerican Unrest title page, top right. Panamerican banner hanging at the old palace of Congress, Asunción, Paraguay, September 2006.

The School of Panamerican Unrest title page, bottom left. Panamerican ceremony in Puebla, Mexico, July 2006.

The School of Panamerican Unrest title page, bottom right. Panamerican schoolhouse in Casa del Lago, Mexico City, July 2006.

1. Setting up the school house at the School of the Arts, Mérida, Yucatán, Mexico, July 2006.

2. School of Panamerican Unrest workshop, Calgary, Alberta, May 2006.


4. Photo of the bell, Mexico City, June 2006.

5. Director of Casa del Lago cultural center José Luis Paredes (Pacho) at the Panamerican Ceremony, Casa del Lago, Mexico City, July 2006.


7. Schoolhouse at Plaza de la Merced, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, July 2006.

8. The School of Panamerican Unrest discussion at Helen Pitt Gallery, Vancouver, British Columbia, May 2006.


Endnotes


2 Interview between Suzanne Lacy and Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, September 18, 2006.

THE 8TH FLOOR

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THE 8TH FLOOR

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THE SCHOOL OF PANAMERICAN UNREST
The Schoolhouse and the Bus: Mobility, Pedagogy, and Engagement is an exhibition that presents two socially engaged projects that encapsulate a process of translation between the unearthing of lived experience and the formulas of exhibition practice. In organizing such an exhibition, in dialogue with the artists, we as curators were forced to question how socially engaged artwork can be translated—physically, spatially, and spiritually—into the often stagnant, neutral space of a gallery. How do objects that are byproducts of an artistic process figure into the presentation of an ephemeral, relational project? To what degree does the archive of an artwork become the work itself? Featured in the exhibition are maps of Medellín and of a journey across the Americas, collages, on-the-road documentary footage punctuated by collective declarations made by community members of twenty-nine cities, video interviews with residents of Medellín, souvenirs, ephemera, and records including news articles, letters, and blog posts. These materials, some conceived as artworks, others selected to recreate an out-of-reach context, point to two projects that differ in scale, duration, and atmosphere. Larger structures have been restaged—the yellow fabric tent of a schoolhouse and an illuminated shelf displaying personal affects—to reflect the elastic characteristics of time and place, as a partial manifestation of the lived experiences that continue to comprise the work. Two socially engaged projects, Suzanne Lacy and Pilar Riaño-Alcázar’s Skin of Memory and Pablo Helguera’s The School of Panamerican Unrest, originally realized in 1999 and 2006 respectively, intersect conceptually within the exhibition The Schoolhouse and the Bus: Mobility, Pedagogy, and Engagement, having been informed by and produced within the broader geographic frame of the Americas, and specifically Medellín, Colombia.

From the beginning, both Helguera, Lacy, and Lacy’s collaborator Riaño-Alcázar, questioned the efficacy of relying heavily on the display of objects to adequately capture and represent the unruliness of lived experience and the formulas of exhibition practice. In organizing such an exhibition, in dialogue with the artists, we as curators were forced to question how socially engaged artwork can be translated—physically, spatially, and spiritually—into the often stagnant, neutral space of a gallery. How do objects that are byproducts of an artistic process figure into the presentation of an ephemeral, relational project? To what degree does the archive of an artwork become the work itself? Featured in the exhibition are maps of Medellín and of a journey across the Americas, collages, on-the-road documentary footage punctuated by collective declarations made by community members of twenty-nine cities, video interviews with residents of Medellín, souvenirs, ephemera, and records including news articles, letters, and blog posts. These materials, some conceived as artworks, others selected to recreate an out-of-reach context, point to two projects that differ in scale, duration, and atmosphere. Larger structures have been restaged—the yellow fabric tent of a schoolhouse and an illuminated shelf displaying personal affects—to reflect the elastic characteristics of time and place, as a partial manifestation of the lived experiences that continue to comprise the work. Two socially engaged projects, Suzanne Lacy and Pilar Riaño-Alcázar’s Skin of Memory and Pablo Helguera’s The School of Panamerican Unrest, originally realized in 1999 and 2006 respectively, intersect conceptually within the exhibition The Schoolhouse and the Bus: Mobility, Pedagogy, and Engagement, having been informed by and produced within the broader geographic frame of the Americas, and specifically Medellín, Colombia.

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The installation of Lacy and Riaño-Alcalá’s Skin of Memory is anchored by the display of a collection of personal objects, that collectively function as a community memorial. Originally presented in a bus in Medellín, the “museo arqueologico del Barrio Antioquia” was a mobile commemorative exhibition that travelled to different parts of the Barrio, crossing contested boundaries rather than having residents risk the trip, in order to safely share the project with different communities. It displayed 500 items selected and offered by participants, including currency, figurines, identification cards, stuffed animals, toys, jewelry, household items, and the clothes of those killed in shootouts. Within The Schoolhouse and the Bus, the objects featured in the mobile museum have been reduced to a partial installation of ephemera retrieved from individuals in Medellín who contributed objects in 1999, flanked by video documentation of the project. Adding to the viewer’s experience, Lacy and Riaño-Alcalá present maps, news articles, and a timeline in order to enrich our understanding of this conflicted period in Barrio Antioquia.

At the center of Helguera’s installation of The School of Panamerican Unrest is a yellow schoolhouse. Inside, an hour-long documentary of Helguera’s odyssey begins with him reflecting on then-recent events...11, the Iraq War. In the video, he posits, “I wanted to understand how the American ideals of peace, brotherhood, and unity had evolved to a project of global hegemony, and I felt, that we needed to look back at history at the time when the conscience of the new world had been founded. Where were those 19th century ideals of perfect American democracies imagined by leaders like Jefferson and Bolivar? Where was the America described in the poetry of Walt Whitman and Jose Marti?” Like the personal affects that comprise Lacy and Riaño-Alcalá’s project, Helguera’s archival material is, at times, absorbed into his artistic output. His series of collages, The Panamerican Suite, were made in a restorative, therapeutic effort, following the conclusion of the 25,000 mile trip, which left him physically and emotionally drained. They are comprised of maps, scientific and mathematical diagrams, with captions excised from book pages.
to the promotion of civil society and democratic engagement, with interactive educational installations that facilitate dialogue about Medellín's history of violence.

The Museum's mission is closely linked with the Skin of Memory project, which began laying the groundwork for Medellín's Museo Casa de la Memoria, which opened its doors to the public in 2012. Founded with support and input from many collaborators involved in the Victims of Armed Conflict Care Program, the Skin of Memory project began in 1999 to document the experiences of survivors of the armed conflict. In the years that followed the first iteration of Skin of Memory, it became an opportunity to extend the project, reflecting on the decade of documentation and to understand where it had succeeded and failed. In 2011, when the Medellín Biennial MDE11 invited Lacy and Riaño-Alcalá to show Skin of Memory Revisited, it was an opportunity to re-examine the project's impact and legacy. The problem with determining impact is that social practice as an art form is continually in flux, both materially and procedurally, and does not necessarily follow a scientific method of research and evaluation assessable by standardized criteria.

As an art form, our understanding of the best practices in re-presenting any socially engaged artwork is contingent on its particular components, characteristics, and relationship to context. While it is important to make a distinction between the archival components and the artwork within the exhibition, art and the archives it produces (or the archives that produce the artwork) are always inextricably linked. To reframe the question in relation to context, does all of the content of the exhibition become artwork—albeit archive-based—by virtue of being shown in an art museum? Or does a gallery setting elevate the status for all involved? Is its status as art retained beyond the gallery?

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The School of Panamerican Unrest, then-director Mónica Castillo witnessed the realization amongst students of how rarely art criticism was practiced. This prompted one of the first outcomes of Helguera's project, the creation of a panamerican school in Mérida, Yucatán. In writing about her experience with the institutional dynamics that helped shape aesthetic movements following World War II.

Another example of an outcome of Helguera's project was triggered by his stop in Mérida during the Cold War. Helguera was extensively interviewed by Fox, whose work illuminates the connection between the institutional dynamics that helped shape aesthetic movements following World War II. Published in 2013, Claire Fox's book Making Art Panamerican and the arts programs of the Pan American Union within the context of hemispheric cultural relations during the Cold War. Helguera was extensively interviewed by Fox, whose work illuminates the connection between the institutional dynamics that helped shape aesthetic movements following World War II. Published in 2013, Claire Fox's book Making Art Panamerican and the arts programs of the Pan American Union within the context of hemispheric cultural relations during the Cold War.

The School of Panamerican Unrest and an exhibition presented by kurimanzutto gallery in Mexico City in 2010 (although any documentation of communities (and other locales where he stopped). Taking Helguera's 2008 presentation largely because of the project's vast geographic scope, with twenty-nine official participating countries and forty-two presenting artists.

The effects of Helguera's project were far-reaching, but the project's vast geographic scope, with twenty-nine official participating countries and forty-two presenting artists, made it difficult to determine the project's impact. The problem with determining impact is that social practice as an art form is continually in flux, both materially and procedurally, and does not necessarily follow a scientific method of research and evaluation assessable by standardized criteria.

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to “recreate.” I do completely relate to your comments about when you present something you did 20 years ago: it feels more like theatre. I saw this as a way of influencing the School of Panamerican Unrest and a historical event, and that was okay too. I imagine this is very different from recreating a project, in the sense that when you do it, you don’t think of it as a re-

Suzanne: Yes, I can’t show everything about a multi-year project involving so many actors, but rather, I am concerned with representing the relationality inherent over almost twenty years. This set of relationalities occurred within a timeframe within which many political events and personal experiences occurred among people who are still living and working there. I don’t know how to talk about the intimacy of common cause that we have.

Suzanne: That goes to that issue of being adept at communicating ideas to different audiences. Art does provide something other than the visual and, particularly in social practice, we engage with ideas of coherence, political analysis, and the “shape” of engagement.

Pablo: When I talk about enticing the public or engaging them, I don’t necessarily mean that it has to be in an aesthetic way. I think it can also be a utilitarian type of engagement where you offer them something that is useful, that is interesting, that can play a familiar function. With the SPU project I... Participants would come to talks, workshops, and civic ceremonies where we’d read speeches. At times it took the form of the political ceremony, where we would sing anthems and then read speeches. The workshops were more literary and were something that people connected with in a very basic manner.

Suzanne: Pilar and I are struggling to capture the Medellín projects for a U.S. audience. The complexity of the interacting forces and themes of that project read very differently when displayed in Colombia. In the U.S. we often think of Colombia through the lens of narco-trafficking.

Pablo: I’d be curious, Pablo, what has the process of preparing this exhibition brought up for you, as an artist? Cause that’s part of the reason you and I were interested in this exhibition, to crystallize these projects in forms of display.

Suzanne: The School of Panamerican Unrest is not how beautiful the display will be, though I know it will be, but the coherency of the idea. How does the body of an artist move from one tip of a continent to the next, organizing, formulating conversation, gathering people playing into U.S. premises. I think everything has deficiencies, and the best I can do is to see them together:

Pablo: That’s closest I can get to narrating what happened. I think we just need to accept that these are ephemeral things and difficult to frame in a clean or final narrative.
interest in context-based social issues for young artists, the real rewards of the art world are still via a system of visual art display linked to the market.

Today, communication with the art profession is largely through some form of exhibition. It wasn’t true in the 70s, or maybe I should say it wasn’t true in my experience coming out of CalArts and entering a developing performance art scene. Since I was first in school, where we eagerly adopted portapaks and photography, the technology of presentation has developed exponentially. Where we used to use high 8 film, you can now use 70 mm cameras. Presentation is much more important, which can be a dilemma for an art practice that comes out of ephemeral ideas.

As our exhibition has been framed by the curators as involving “mobility, pedagogy, and engagement,” the idea of translation is critical: there is the art in communities, and then there are those to whom it is communicated—whether directly to people in a community, over news media, or to art professionals. In this translation from a Medellín installation and performance project to the exhibition, so many questions arise. Pablo, I’m curious about the striking visual quality of your work and how you navigate between the beautiful presentation of the work and the public sphere where the work is constructed.

Pablo:

When teaching social practice, I have noticed that many students come to the field without an art background. They come from anthropology or psychology, etc. but they have no knowledge of art history nor have they made art objects. For them, all the art historical references from Duchamp to anyone else were very remote and unclear. They struggle with the visual manifestation of the things they do.

This made me value the type of traditional studio education I received, learning the basics of painting, printmaking, photography, etc. It is this proximity to making things that can be helpful in creating sensorial experiences. In addition, because I have worked in museums for 25 years, I do think a lot about how things are presented to a public and how they might interact with them, sensorially and intellectually.

I am grateful for having been exposed to traditional ways of making and exhibiting art because they offer us a tool kit for shaping experience in other ways. And I see education as part of that tool kit of course, particularly in how one considers the type of audience that one may engage with and the ways in which an experience could be meaningful to them. Last but not a very delicate question that right now has become very important. Today we are witnesses of the “biennialist” syndrome—the tendency of parachuting artists into random cities and countries to make an artwork about that place, often with little engagement with the local reality. We know that a lot of site-specific work can mean well but is misguided. And yet, I think it is also important to recognize two things: one, that as artists we can never shed the condition of outsiders, and second, that this condition can be a strength when we are honest about it—meaning, when we don’t pretend to be insiders.

I always think of Paulo Freire and preaching a pedagogy, in how he approached the relationship with others, acknowledging very directly with whichever group he was working with, that we are not the same people. We have different personal histories, different cultural backgrounds, education, and perhaps social status.

Suzanne:

I think you’re right, but I can nuance this a bit with my involvement as a white woman in racial conflicts and, in other countries, as a U.S. citizen in places where our government has been destructive. One has to be agile to work cross-culturally in circumstances where strong politics are at play, whether it’s a man working with women, or a free person working with prison inmates. “Difference” operates differently within various moments and contexts. Working with Pilar, I’m always very conscious of how deeply the U.S. is implicated in the politics and violences in Colombia.

It’s the degree to which you can listen, learn, co-create an analysis, and make an empathic connection through the work that positions you as a student of others. In each project I begin as a learner. What I learned in Oakland, in the early 90s, working with the racialization of youth as political signifiers in a rising neo-liberalism, brought me to Medellín, Colombia. For the “we” that typifies all my work—its collective producers—the mutual exploration in an expanded classroom that results in a project.

Pablo:

Absolutely. That was really the way I thought of the school, but I never imagined The School of Panamerican Unrest advocating indoctrination of a particular view of anything. It was really like a horizontal platform for collective learning.

Suzanne:

That process we are describing is often missing in colleges. The only way you get to be a good social practice artist is if you’re willing to put yourself in risky and powerless positions. Universities have a hard time producing risky experiences, but they are good at teaching representation skills suitable for museums and galleries. While there is a genuine...
invited to join the team because of the work I’d done in the 90s with Oakland teenagers. It was an incredible opportunity to be part of a larger process, one I didn’t initiate. My colleagues in Medellín were exploring how “the city educates.” Now, many years later, Antioquia Province is “The State That Educates.”

Pablo:

When I made *The School of Panamerican Unrest*, I did not have a pre-established strategy. In fact, when I conceived it originally it was not meant to be a road trip: I thought it would be a series of encounters in different cities around the Americas. A lot of the project unfolded in real time. And a lot of the circumstances would have been impossible to predict until they actually happened. I had to use everything that I knew, at that point, about performance and education. At times I was an educator, an activist, therapist, journalist, and I was the screen onto which people projected their frustrations, interests or ideas. I had to contend with performing all these different roles and learning how to perform them successfully. I also learned the importance of improvisation, of thinking on your feet as new circumstances arose and evolved.

My role as artist played in a rather predictable manner until I crossed into Guatemala. After that point, the question of whether this project was art or not became gradually less important. This was really about coming to address and engage with local issues. And to be a successful listener and activator of conversations and debates that mattered in those places at the time.

When we ask about what kind of expertise or practices we incorporate into our work, I see the artist rather as a composer—someone who does not play every single instrument but knows what those instruments can do, and how they can incorporate them successfully into a larger reflection. While we as artists have to perform many roles, the objective is not to impersonate or to supplant an actual expert, but to create gestures that help bring other disciplines into the art discourse.

Suzanne:

What’s interesting is that you traced—with your body—a learning trajectory for social practice. When your project first came across my radar, I thought “this guy is positioning himself as a performer as well as a student and producer of other’s learning experiences.” You created an expanded classroom to trans-continentally explore political, pedagogic and interpersonal experiences. You also put yourself through an educational process as an artist.

Pablo:

This connects to another question about the artist as outsider, specifically what kind of license do you have to enter into a cultural community that is not your own? I think this is...
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7. Skin of Memory. 1999. Maps mark where the buses will appear. Photo by Lizanne Lacey.
10. Skin of Memory. 1999. Lizanne Lacey.
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