THE SCHOOLHOUSE AND THE BUS

BY ELYSE A. GONZALES
Suzanne Lacy and Pablo Helguera are social practice artists, representing two generations, who have helped shape the field through their influential writings, teaching, and artworks. Over the past two decades, many contemporary artists have increasingly sought a way for art to foment larger societal change. This has given rise to social practice—also known as socially engaged—art, which is notable for its emphasis on performance, activism, and often non-object-centered art making. This field is reliant on audience participation generated through time-based events such as performances, conversations, and workshops. Lacy's and Helguera's works are further identifiable as socially engaged art by the fact that they respond to cultural and political concerns, promoting the empowerment and transformation of communities. In short, they intend for their work to be catalysts of positive change for the communities in which they work. Their pairing in this exhibition is based on a number of connections and intersections between their respective practices.

Lacy and Helguera have taught together, conducted public conversations with each other, and even collaborated on a work at the College Art Association’s annual conference in Los Angeles (2012), staged as an impromptu class about social practice. Despite this history, their contributions to the field have never been specifically addressed in relation to each other. Their deep affinities include the means and methods by which they have influenced socially engaged art, not only through their works but also through their extensive and ongoing writings and teachings about the field, all of which continue to contribute to the implementation and interpretation of socially engaged art.

Lacy (b. 1945, Wasco, CA) is a pioneering social practice artist, and her work dates to the early 1970s, through her initial involvement in the feminist art movements. Highly influential, her unique artistic vision is related to social issues such as class, mass media, violence, and racial and gender inequities. Many of her earlier artworks serve as primary exemplars of what was then called “new genre public art,” a term Lacy coined in her influential writings, which preceded “social practice.” Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art (1995), the most well known of her books, was the first definitive collection of essays devoted to explaining the field with her own selections, as well as those by other artists and curators.  

Helguera (b. 1971, Mexico City) represents the next generation of social practice, and his work has evolved using methods of public engagement that are in dialogue with Lacy’s seminal strategies. For the last twenty years he has made work that addresses a range of subjects including anthropology, museums, pedagogy, sociolinguistics, ethnography, memory, and the absurd. Helguera, like Lacy, has contributed extensively to the discourse of social practice: in addition to publishing numerous articles on the subject of social practice, his book Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook (2011) became an influential text within the field. While Lacy’s book established and laid out the nascent territory of social practice, Education for Socially Engaged Art is the first social practice primer to offer practical advice for making socially engaged art that is both artistically and ethically sound. Furthermore, the book raises issues and questions related to assessment of socially engaged art, advocating the use of tools from other fields of study as a potential means of addressing this concern. This is an increasingly important discussion topic that Helguera has spearheaded, considering social practice’s growing popularity, and the fact that this genre, by its very nature, eschews traditional notions of success—that is, the expected formal and aesthetic parameters established by the mainstream art world.

These artists also share a keen understanding of pedagogy and an incorporation of pedagogical principles into their work, which is to be expected considering social practice’s roots in learning and teaching techniques. From early on, Lacy has incorporated fundamental pedagogical tools into her practice, of which the most essential are conversation and the act of listening. As she often states, these two basic tools guide her throughout the research, development, and implementation phases of her projects, with the hope of changing cultural attitudes by informing and engaging diverse audiences.
Helguera is perhaps best known for works that are overtly about and based on principles of pedagogy, works that collectively incorporate standard learning elements such as lectures, symposia, workshops, and games. *Education for Socially Engaged Art* articulates his investment in pedagogy, arguing that educational tools are not only useful but also essential for producing socially engaged art. Although Helguera was already invested in this methodology, he credits Lacy—a reader of the book’s early drafts—with helping him to realize that pedagogy should be more of a focal point.

The incorporation of pedagogy and pedagogical methods is less surprising when one considers that both artists have taught social practice. For over thirty years Lacy has influenced the study of social practice at the university level, by helping to establish academic programs devoted to socially engaged art, most recently in 2002 as Founding Chair of the MFA program in Public Practice at Otis College of Art and Design. In 2016, she was named a professor of art at USC’s Roski School of Art and Design, where she continues to influence and train scores of artists in the field. Simultaneous to his practice, Helguera works as a museum educator—currently as Director of Adult and Academic Programs at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Like Lacy, Helguera has helped the public, artists, and students learn about and understand how to produce socially engaged works through his own museum education programs, as well as numerous international adjunct teaching positions. (For more in-depth information about both these artists please see their artist biographies on pages 91–92.)

Rather than conduct a broad survey in the form of a book or exhibition—an impossibility considering their equally extensive bodies of work, and the expansiveness of their working methods—*Mobilizing Pedagogy* focuses on one significant project by each of these artists, demonstrating their affinities and reflecting a conversation about art and the artists through the development of social practice.
Lacy's *Skin of Memory* (1999–2017), executed with Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, and Helguera's *The School of Panamerican Unrest* (2006) are artistically and personally pivotal projects linked by their emphasis on public engagement, pedagogy, and mobility. These critical elements continue to make these works seminal for the field. (An in-depth description of both of the projects can be found on pages 17 and 49.)

**SKIN OF MEMORY:**
A MOBILE MUSEUM FOR THE COMMUNITY

_Skin of Memory_ was initially presented in Medellín, Colombia, in collaboration with cultural anthropologist and professor Pilar Riaño-Alcalá of the University of British Columbia, Vancouver. Lacy was invited by Riaño-Alcalá, who is from Colombia and has worked for many years in Medellín, to develop an art project in relation to an ongoing, multiplatform initiative that dealt with the incessant social disruption of Barrio Antioquia, a neighborhood routinely affected by drug-related and political violence. Guided by Riaño-Alcalá's in-depth (and continuous) research on youth, violence, and memory in Medellín, the two collaborated with numerous stakeholders, including community members, activists, educators, artists, architects, historians, social scientists, and NGOs. Together, they developed a project that transformed a bus into a mobile museum. Locals lent over 500 mementos that filled the interior and relate to their lived experience of this violent neighborhood, whether joyful or mournful. Many of the items on display directly relate to the rampant gang violence and deep-seated factional divides in the barrio, which made this project potentially dangerous when considering the sadness and retaliatory desires it might inspire in visitors. By treating all the objects as equally important, in a sanctified manner, on custom-made shelves outfitted with small light bulbs, the lenders and their implicit stories were given dignity and respect. Such an installation offered the residents a communal opportunity to both celebrate their neighborhood and grieve for those losses.
Consequently, public emotional reactions and responses among visitors to the bus, which ran the gamut, were encouraged despite the fear of violence. Having their personal losses so publicly recognized, residents could, just as importantly, recognize the mutual suffering and losses of others. Scholar David Gutiérrez Castañeda, who has written extensively on the project, sees the work as an example of how collaboration between artists, community organizers, social workers, and human rights activists can “interconnect art with social projects, with community healing.” In this instance, if it weren’t for the art objects and their display some of the most important aspects of the grieving process in Barrio Antioquia in 1999 would not have been able to be articulated.”

Visitors to the bus and lenders of objects were further linked by anonymous letters, in which the artists asked participants to write their hopes for the barrio’s future. Such acknowledgment of collective memories and mutual hopes for the future is the fundamental basis for confronting past violence and the resulting social fragmentation, as well as the beginning of the facilitation of any kind of resolution of the traumatic past.

Skin of Memory continues to be significant for its efficacy not only as a community-building and healing exercise, but also as a seminal example of community-activist public art in Latin America, influencing a generation of youths, activists, and artists, especially in Medellín. When curator Bill Kelley Jr. was commissioned to co-curate the Encuentro Internacional de Medellín (MDE11) at the Museo de Antioquia, he asked Lacy and Riaño-Alcalá to re-present this work. In his research, Kelley came to understand that Skin of Memory was a key reference point for many who participated in the 1999 iteration. For the first time, affiliated activists and organizers saw that their work was “marked as an important cultural, artistic venture, not solely as activism. It allowed a generation of activists to consider their work in concert with, and as art, inspiring them to continue in this vein.”

Lacy speaks fondly of the project because it was the first time she was commissioned to make work as part of a larger initiative comprised of anthropologists, educators, community leaders, historians, social leaders, and activists. Adding to this unique opportunity was the fact that each of these team members already believed that art could be a force and means of dealing with the past in order to envision new, better presents and futures. In this instance, Lacy was able to act more like a consultant, focusing her attention on the aesthetic conceptualization of the project. As a result, she was able to execute it more quickly because there was an infrastructure for implementation, made possible through the concerted efforts of this larger overall team, already in place for several years. Unlike her previous projects (and those since), Lacy did not have to spend time making connections between stakeholders, gaining their trust, justifying the project, or organizing the production elements such as the media components and educational training. Consequently, Skin of Memory provided her with a vivid example of how artists could strategically be included as a force in the ongoing community-building initiatives of a city. However, this was only possible if a committed group of advocates valued artistic contributions and continued to maintain complex and dynamic community relations as well as the infrastructure to facilitate such projects.

Foundational elements of Skin of Memory, beyond engagement, also included pedagogy and mobility. Like all her other works, this project was and continues to be built on models of learning, which promote discussion at their root. Lacy saw this endeavor as a form of public pedagogy, especially with regards to the youth and women who participated by soliciting objects from community members in Barrio Antioquia. By giving them this charge, along with appropriate training and monetary compensation, they gained important skills and, just as importantly, a sense of confidence and membership in another community of peers. “They were learning leadership skills, going to the neighborhood watch groups to speak and seeing their issues emerge as important sources for policy development.” As a
result they came to understand how to represent themselves and the political implications of that self-representation.

Another important element in the work is its emphasis on movement and transition. The concept of the mobile museum grew from an understanding of the territorial divides between gangs that made it impossible for neighborhood residents to experience the work, unless it moved to areas they could safely access. This idea of mobility is poignantly embedded in the project through experiences of the participants who facilitated the project. Young teens who helped acquire the objects for the mobile museum, normally isolated in their individual areas, “were going out of the barrios, meeting with other youth and thinking of themselves as part of their city.” Even the culmination of the project in 1999 was based on increasing community exchange, with a series of six spirited processions that included mimes, bicyclists, stilt walkers, and pedestrians, all of whom traveled through various areas of the barrio to deliver a letter from an anonymous neighbor to each home. It concluded in a celebratory send-off for the bus, and under the mantle of this closing event, those who participated or followed along experienced freedom of movement, as they were able to visit normally unsanctioned areas. This increased mobility remains a visual component of the project in the iterations that followed, through accompanying maps documenting the path of the bus.

THE SCHOOL OF PANAMERICAN UNREST: A MOBILE SCHOOLHOUSE

Helguera’s recent artistic conceptualizations, books, and articles are rooted in his seminal work, The School of Panamerican Unrest (SPU). For this project Helguera erected a schoolhouse, or “nomadic think tank,” at twenty-nine stops, beginning in Anchorage, Alaska, and continuing south, crossing continents, to the southernmost tip of the Americas, Tierra del Fuego. Along the way, he conducted talks, film screenings, panel discussions, civic events, and workshops that focused on the concept of “Panamericanism”—the once prevailing nineteenth-century, utopian ideal of a unified, collaborative coalition between all the countries in North, South, and Central America. This concept has become controversial since the mid-twentieth century due to the rise of nationalist ideologies, neoliberal policies, and the increasingly dominant economic and government strategies of the United States. The discussions that Helguera instigated, which sometimes became contentious, surrounded topics such as immigration, globalism, national identity, regionalism, and art’s role in society.

The School of Panamerican Unrest remains one of the most extensive public artworks to have ever been realized. Its scale and goals—to try to understand and connect seemingly disparate communities throughout the Americas—deeply affected Helguera’s practice, and inspired many artists. The formative influence of the work on the artist, at a personal level, is due not only to the physical and emotional demands that surrounded it, but also to his deeper investment in pedagogy and the conceptualization of all his work thereafter:

The type of challenges and situations I encountered in my trip, and the way I was forced to respond to them, made me aware of how important pedagogy is as a tool to create meaningful communication with different communities [...] It made me realize that socially engaged art, if it is to be the result of meaningful interaction, has to go beyond the nominal and the symbolic, and the listening process. It has to be earnest and sincere—not simply a blank space onto which participants are invited to have their say, but a process by which their input has direct and relevant impact in the resulting outcome of the work. This was the objective, for example, of the Panamerican Addresses. These addresses allowed anyone who wished to participate in a workshop the ability to channel their ideas, feelings, and emotions into a public statement summarizing issues facing a city and/or individual artistic communities, while suggesting potential solutions. Later
they were read in semi-formal presentations organized by the artist and his hosts. Although the incorporation of such pedagogical tools in art—question and answer sessions, games, and collaborative exercises, especially evident in the project’s collective writing sessions—is a common occurrence now, his methods and their implementation were less prominent at the time. In so doing, he created his own unique artistic approach, based on the experimentation that his project necessitated. Helguera’s work encouraged other artists to consider similarly ambitious projects incorporating new forms of engagement, based on pedagogical models that foster a deeper understanding and discourse among their audiences.

Adding to the project’s influence was Helguera’s insistence on transparency throughout and after its conclusion. His blog and web posts plainly revealed not only the transformative, revelatory moments that occurred but also the external challenges of social practice projects, such as low attendance at an event, car troubles, or even inclement weather. This straightforward approach allowed the public to fully grasp the rewards, intricacies, and difficulties of working in this manner. His ongoing review of the many elements of the project as it exists now—ephemera, diary entries, outside commentary, and video documentation—has helped him begin to assess this project and others like it in a broader context. His bilingual book, *The School of Panamerican Unrest: An Anthology of Documents* (2011), is an attempt at one form of assessment. Although it includes the addresses and an essay by the artist, the overwhelming majority of written contributions are frank statements about the work, some critical, by those who witnessed and participated in the project. The anthology allows both participants and public alike to evaluate *The School of Panamerican Unrest* and formulate their own appraisals. With this in mind, Helguera has offered to open the related archive of materials to anyone who wants access, with the hope that others will devise different methods of evaluation.
Movement is another explicit device in Helguera’s project. That he developed a work incorporating travel isn’t so unusual, considering his inclination toward nomadic endeavors. One of his earlier works, *Conservatory of Dead Languages* (2004–ongoing), involves the artist traveling throughout Mexico to record the voices of the last living speakers of native languages, resulting in a phonographic archive. Given its epic scale, *The School of Panamerican Unrest* is certainly an extreme example of this interest in travel:

I decided that, in order to be consistent with the comprehensiveness of the premise, I had to drive with the school down the entire Pan-American Highway. The idea in part, was to give attention to the expected “capitals” of the art world (Los Angeles, Mexico City, Buenos Aires, etc.) but focus equally on locations outside of the regular routes of art-world biennials and art production.15

The unbroken continuity of his journey helped him remain focused on the concepts and ideas engendered by the myriad conversations he was having and witnessing. As he frequently states, central to the project were those interpersonal encounters, and his ability to share those experiences with others along the way. The project ended up being a unique snapshot of the concerns, fears, and joys facing communities and artists in different places at a specific moment in time.

Both *Mobilizing Pedagogy* and *The Schoolhouse and the Bus* demonstrate how two renowned socially engaged artists, Suzanne Lacy and Pablo Helguera, have approached the field. Their foundational projects utilize differing but complementary methods to positively impact communities through engagement, pedagogy, and mobility. This book and related exhibition function as a lens through which visitors can examine the universal issues addressed by the artists. Just as importantly, the exhibition provides an opportunity to learn more about the genre of social practice that is increasingly playing a larger role in both art and society.
Skin of Memory, 1999. Photo by Carlos Sanchez.
Pablo Helguera with Paraguayan sculptor Hermann Guggiari at the Plaza del Cabildo, Asunción, Paraguay, September 2006. Photo courtesy of the artist.
SPU schoolhouse at the School of Fine Arts in Mérida, Yucatán, June 2006. Photo courtesy of the artist.
SPU schoolhouse at the Plaza de la Merced, Tegucigalpa, Honduras, June 2006. Photo courtesy of the artist.