Mobilizing Pedagogy

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The School of Panamerican Unrest was a social practice art project and mobile think tank. Initiated by Pablo Helguera, a Mexican artist based in New York City, it investigated current sociopolitical issues in light of nineteenth-century utopian ideals of Panamerican unity. The crucible for its development was the post-9/11 United States, an environment marked by patriotism, guardedness, and militaristic policies such as the Bush Doctrine, which authorized preemptive attacks on other countries in the name of national security. By contrast, The School of Panamerican Unrest (SPU) sought to encompass the sprawling narratives of the Americas—North and South—and, in doing so, promote intercultural understanding.

Piloting in Zürich in 2003, The School of Panamerican Unrest centered around a wooden schoolhouse erected in the gallery, in which Helguera held discussions on topics relating to Panamerican identity. A grant from Creative Capital allowed the project to expand into a major work of public art. In the spring of 2006, after an inaugural ceremony on Ellis Island, Helguera flew to Anchorage, Alaska, and from there took The School of Panamerican Unrest on the road. From May 19 to September 15 he traveled approximately 25,000 miles by van on the Pan-American Highway to Tierra del Fuego at the southernmost tip of South America. Along the way, he made twenty-nine official stops, putting on film screenings, lectures, and workshops that explored issues such as immigration, housing, urban development, and the social role of artists.

The visual centerpiece of the nomadic SPU, a collapsible schoolhouse made of steel pipe, yellow canvas, and an iconic brass bell, grounded the work under the rubric of pedagogy. The SPU’s educational methods incorporated games, dialogic strategies, and inquiry-based learning. Local hosts identified crucial issues facing their city as topics for discussion. At times Helguera acted as the workshop’s secretary, by facilitating the writing of a “Panamerican Address,” a document signed by its multiple authors, expressing their hopes and fears for the future of their city, and identifying opportunities for activism.

The strenuous and sometimes dangerous trip down the Pan-American Highway was a one-time event for Helguera, yet a public presence of The School of Panamerican Unrest persists. To brand his project, Helguera created banners bearing the emblem of a bell with an eye, an image that speaks to symbols of freedom used throughout the Americas such as the Liberty Bell in the United States, the Bell of Dolores in Mexico, and the Independence Bell that figures in the histories of some Central American countries. The banners were hung alongside the schoolhouse at each of the twenty-nine stops, transforming museum galleries and city squares into ceremonial spaces at which speeches were made, Panamerican Addresses read, and a “Panamerican Anthem” played. These rituals continued off route in postscript “stops” in cities such as New York and Santa Barbara, California. Upon completion of the original journey, Helguera began Panamerican Suite (2006–ongoing), a series of collages that wrestle and play with the concept of Panamericanism.