Mobilizing Pedagogy

Reisman, Sara, Gonzales, Elyse A.

Published by Amherst College Press

Reisman, Sara and Elyse A. Gonzales.
Mobilizing Pedagogy: Two Social Practice Projects in the Americas by Pablo Helguera with Suzanne Lacy and
Pilar Riaño-Alcalá.
Amherst College Press, 2019.

→ For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/99349

🔗 For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3115420
JOURNEY NOTES OF PANAMERICA: THE SOCIAL PRACTICES OF ART

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN ARTIST PABLO HELGUERA AND ADETTY PÉREZ DE MILES
Would you ever consider undertaking a performance like The School of Panamerican Unrest (SPU) in the future? And if you did, how you would do it differently?

I most definitely do not consider it a performance piece, but a socially engaged art project. It consisted of a series of actions or activities that would be impossible to repeat because of the specific context and time within which they happened. So repeating this trip would mean something completely different, apart from the fact that I am in a different stage in my life, where I feel I could not undertake such a project, knowing what I know now.

Latin America has also become a very destabilized region in some places. For example, I don’t think I would be able to safely go to Venezuela at this point. But, most importantly, what would be the objective of repeating the journey myself? I would not mind if someone else were to undertake the same journey. In fact, it would be really interesting for someone else to do it. Because it would be a different person, a different time, a different perspective, for whom and which all I did was offer, perhaps, a model.

How did the work of Suzanne Lacy and that of Juan Downey, such as Video Trans Americas (1976), which documented his travels from North to Central and South America, inform your practice or the thought-process behind The School of Panamerican Unrest?

I knew Suzanne’s work at the time and admired it, and had been told about Downey’s work while planning my trip, yet his intentions and purposes seemed to differ from mine, and I still feel that way.

I should stress that artistic genealogy was not at the top of my concerns at that moment. I was mainly reacting to the events of the moment—the post-9/11 foreign policy (known as the Bush Doctrine) that had emerged then, and I was thinking a lot about the role that the US played in trying to shape the “world order.” I was also thinking about education, which is why, generally, it is difficult for me to discuss this project as an artist-centered, conceptual activity. In executing this project, my job was the one that I normally play: an educator. In the process of education you are not there to talk about yourself, but rather external issues. The personal impact, implications, and emotional involvement were so powerful, however, that this impact was impossible for me to ignore, though I tried. But when I completed the SPU and returned home I realized that I had a lot to process in that regard.

I still think that, if anything, the value of the project lies in the conversations that took place and the kind of debates that it triggered surrounding nationalism, regionalism, and national identity—and more specifically about the question of art’s role in constructing or deconstructing national identity. While there was definitely a travelogue aspect to it, to me at the project’s core were those encounters, those conversations with people. It was about them and their views of the world in that moment.

I would like the project to exist in collective memory, as a snapshot of a period in the Americas.

One of the things that I thought was important was precisely a notion of time and space: how the reception of the work and engagement with the work differed in North, Central, and South America. In North America, north of the Mexican border, there seemed
to be an emphasis on the function of art. What different types of engagement did you see with the work, for example, in New York versus Honduras?

PH I noticed in general, first, the willingness and desire of local communities to engage with and entertain my ideas of how to do the workshops, which was very important. When I arrived in a particular location, I proposed a certain structure to my visit: First, I would develop, in collaboration with the local host, a topic for a panel-style discussion. The following day I would run a workshop that resulted in the collective writing of the Panamerican Address, or a proclamation inspired by the discussions we had the previous day.

APM What caught my attention in some of the conversations at SPU events was not so much the discussion of the “instrumentalization” of art but rather discussions of cultural capital, the labor of internships, and the work that goes on behind the scenes to create a massively produced piece like this one. There was suspicion and questions in places like New York and Argentina—who is the work for, and who benefits from it? At the same time, there were people genuinely interested in talking about your work in relation to their own context. Does that make sense?

PH The question of how an artist benefits from any socially engaged artwork is always present. To an extent, it is conceivable that an artist might be taking on a particular social cause to improve his or her standing in the prestige economy and (or going even further), that this artist might be more interested in getting credit for what they do rather than in the actual results a project generates. I don’t think an artist can, or should, ever try to hush those criticisms; nor are we ever exempt from receiving them. For that reason, in my view, the only thing one can do is to go about their work with sincerity and integrity, and hopefully the work will be recognized as more than a superficial, self-serving gesture.

PH I have also argued in other places that artists can never “disappear” as authors or instigators of a socially engaged project because authorship also means accountability.

APM In various places I received criticisms about the project and/or the “covert agenda” that some perceived in it. But there was no covert agenda. The project was plainly laid out to the participants wherever I went. Interestingly, in places like Argentina, Venezuela, and Colombia, the critical reactions of some artists, which were videotaped, ironically described the precise political and cultural juncture that some of these communities were undergoing at the time. In cases such as in Buenos Aires, where artists wanted to debate the notion of “debate,” the dynamic and meta-meta-meta-analysis that took place showed how an obsession with critique, while stifling and unproductive, was also representative of the local critical discourse.

APM Although I think there were parallels between some of the art capitals like New York and Argentina, the sensibility of each place was also different. For instance, in Tegucigalpa there was a great desire to engage with you and with the SPU as an art project. We’ve talked a bit about your interest in collaboration, and how communication is at the center of community-building. How did your collaborative or communicative goals change as you were going through the process of the artwork?
Some aspects of the project evolved as the trip unfolded. For example, when I started these debates and discussions in Alaska, I did not initially think of the idea of inviting people to write a collective address. This evolved naturally as part of a process that, to me, became increasingly important because it made sharing the consensus of discussion and ideas from every place with the other locations not only possible but also our goal. We published the addresses on a blog, since it was before social media, and communication was not as fluid as it is today.

In order to accomplish that goal, I counted on people’s willingness and desire to be part of the process, even if only to humor me. Many times that didn’t work out because people were not so interested in being a part of it, or because people didn’t show up, or because people wanted to talk about other things. So, in some places, I wasn’t able to do the address in those workshops. The point is that my goals started to become clear as I interacted with these communities, and so the project had the potential to connect different cities. We had a number of instances where people in other cities were following what we were doing—they were excited to welcome us and had great expectations. They were getting ready to do their own presentations once I got there.

You situate the work clearly within education or within the pedagogical impulses of art. How were these pedagogical impulses and identifying yourself as an educator an important part of the work? I think that there’s a lot of talk about the pedagogical turn in art, but how a work is pedagogical is not often defined. What are some of the characteristics that give the work the pedagogical impulse that you often write about and talk about in relationship to this project? How does the pedagogical impulse in your work impact or mediate the work of the SPU in ways that it might not if it didn’t have that component?

I think it has to do with the idea of outcomes. When I started the project and called it The School of Panamerican Unrest, I was explicitly thinking about my own professional involvement with museum education. Specifically, the objective was to employ a pedagogical discursive process to elicit a collective response. In other words, debates and workshops were the approaches through which we would reach a collective reflection that would later become public.

It was important that there were actionable items that resulted from the conversations. So the Panamerican Addresses became statements of purpose, as well as an outcome of the project, or a way in which the discussions could turn into something specific. In the discourse of critical pedagogy you could see it as a statement of conscientização, Paulo Freire’s term for critical consciousness.

Each address was meant to be a collective statement about a reality that was considered present at the time. So that was a very simple way in which pedagogy informed my thinking. Thinking about how the project had to change and adapt, it was a huge challenge to consider all of the different ways in which the project could take place. I had to use everything that I knew about being an educator at the time to make things work. In education you have a toolbox of approaches and methods that you can employ depending on the circumstance. If I were in a gallery speaking to a group of people with PhDs in art history,
it would be completely different to working with a group of kids who had never been to a museum before. You need to learn to use the appropriate structures to have a conversation that will be meaningful to that particular group of people of art.

It’s less an issue about how much you know of a subject and much more an issue of how you are able to construct a conversation or debate on a particular subject. In the case of going to these different cities, I was obviously the least knowledgeable person in each one of those places because I was the visitor, the tourist, I guess. At the same time, however, I could use my own ignorance in a productive way by inviting those to tell me, “How would you describe this place in five words?” Things like that. The responses from each of them were fascinating, and what they disagreed on was even more fascinating.

**APM**  
Your pedagogical approach here is very much centered on critical pedagogy, and also it reminds me a little bit of Jacques Rancière’s *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991). That is not without its tensions; there have been some critiques and misreading of Rancière’s work. Still, the figure of the ignorant schoolmaster calls our attention to ways in which educators summon students to use their own intelligence, without attempting to impose expert knowledge on their learning. Modes of education that rely on authoritarian knowledge presume that the learner is unequal and, therefore, less capable than the expert, which, according to Rancière, has a stultifying (or perhaps stupefying) effect on learners that is oppressive rather than emancipatory. This outlook is contiguous in part with Freire’s writing on non-hierarchical and collective learning. Your pedagogical approach avoids a deficit-based understanding of the knowledge of a community; instead, *SPU* moves beyond an education that is top-down...

**PH**  
*The Ignorant Schoolmaster* was very much in vogue in some art circles when I did my trip, yet I confess I have an ambivalent relationship with it. I appreciated Rancière’s arguments and even felt vindicated by my approach as a generalist educator who works in museums. With that said, I also felt that the book opens the door for many misinterpretations of what education can be, the worst of which suggests that one doesn’t need any expertise to teach (which I don’t think was Rancière’s message in any case). It goes without saying that there is a difference between not knowing a subject that you have to teach and not knowing how to teach. And paradoxically, being an “ignorant” schoolmaster is more difficult than being a supposedly “learned” schoolmaster who teaches with conventional methods.

In a sense, I remained adamant that I was there to help the group construct their own ideas. I was the ignorant schoolmaster, who helped them give shape to their statements without telling them what statement to write.

**APM**  
How did your experience with *The School of Panamerican Unrest* inform your work and your book *Education for Socially Engaged Art* (2013)?

**PH**  
*The School of Panamerican Unrest* was the most important project in my development as an artist. It informed my thinking about education, social practice, public art, and the role that art plays in our society. Remember, these were the early years of social practice. Now, we see it in a historic way, but at that time we were not really using the term “social practice.” In fact, I remember my first meeting and
conversation with Claire Bishop in London two years before my trip. Though she told me that she was researching this type of art form, it was not a phrase that we, as its practitioners, regularly used.

After the trip, I was invited to lead a class at Portland State University taught by Harrell Fletcher and Jen Delos Reyes. Harrell had established an important social practice program at PSU. I also taught at the social practice program started by Ted Purves, who unfortunately passed away recently. Those initial experiences of teaching social practice showed me that there was a great need to articulate some of the guiding principles of social practice. That's what led me to write the book *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, which was my attempt to describe how these approaches or educational methods can work in the creation of a socially engaged experience.

We are so invested in this objective interpretation of art that we think it is impossible to measure the impact of an artwork on the world. I felt that, if anything, social practice should be a commitment to verify that what you’re doing in fact has an impact in the world. It is not about the good intentions; it’s about actual impact in places and communities and in reality.

The notion of “verifying” the impact of a work of art is quite complicated. Can you measure the impact of a work of art? That is what I think distinguishes social practice from performance. Performance art to me is a discipline, and it’s an art form that gives physical reality to various ideas. Those ideas happen in the world, but in the end they still are read in the symbolic realm of art, whereas in social practice, you have to insert yourself in reality and affect it outside of the protective definition of art. It doesn’t work to say, for example, that you are creating a school if you’re not teaching anything—that is, if it is not actually educating or functioning as a school. It doesn’t work to say that you’re doing a music project if you don’t play the music. In these cases, you’re not doing social practice; you are creating a symbolic representation that is not dissimilar to painting. There’s nothing wrong with that, but it should be acknowledged that it is a symbolic representation, not a direct engagement with the world.

An artist should establish what they’re trying to accomplish and how to go about it, and then figure out what impact it has. There is a whole set of evaluation criteria that you use in museum education to know things: what drove people there; if anything changed in their thinking after the experience; if they would do it again; and questions that are not yes/no questions but open-ended, providing a more complex and nuanced understanding of where this person was emotionally or mentally before the experience, as well as after it. You can determine whether you had any impact.

Artists often argue that they don’t want to be subjected to bureaucratic standards of effectiveness because that would limit their creativity, but this argument is weak. If you have a mission you have a purpose, and this purpose can and should be evaluated. If you do a political piece that intends to get people to reflect on the happening of the country, then ostensibly you want people to reflect on this thing and not on something else.
In the art world we talk about participatory art practices, but often the audience or the participants are excluded from the conversation.

The School of Panamerican Unrest: An Anthology of Documents (2011), a book that I edited in collaboration with Sarah Demeuse, has this evaluation as a goal. With that in mind, I invited people to speak about their experiences. Not everybody had nice things to say; some of them were very critical, but that was okay with me. I felt that’s what it is: it’s the public evaluation of the projects. The most important thing is the ability to create a transparent process by which the participants can provide their feedback and not as an art review. You can witness the meaning of the experience to them. Still, we as practitioners have a lot left to do with regard to how we evaluate public experiences.

How do you, as an artist, go about doing that, or are you leaving that work for someone else?

I feel I have reached a point where all I can do is provide the entire archive for others to make those assessments. Every time I tried to exhibit the project, which is indeed massive, I confronted issues like how to accurately communicate what that experience was and what happened. I have decided that the best I can do is to offer the entirety of the documentation, as an archive, to people who may want to explore it, allowing them to draw their own conclusions. I think in the future, there will be people who will have different methods of assessing impact. They will probably have a better sense of what was helpful, interesting, or meaningful about those experiences.

As an educator and artist, I believe that we are, by nature, outsiders, and that the notion of the artist who speaks exclusively about individual experience belongs to a modernist tradition that we have to overcome, because we speak to and about experience, and human experience is universal. I am trained to work with other people’s perspectives and views of life. Individuals around the world share many more things than they think. In other words, culture does not make us Martians or complete extra-terrestrials to one another.

The notion of a nomad is used in theory, art, and academia without much examination as to how it can help raise questions of who has privilege. The type of privilege I’m referring to comes with being an artist: associated cultural capital and money granted. Although artists often struggle to get grant money to support their projects, this type of privilege allows artists to travel, to be nomadic.

I was confronted with my privilege at every stop, and more so when I was in Latin America. In places like Colombia, for example, I realized at some point that part of the reason I was resented—at least I suspected—was because I was a Mexican artist based in New York City, with this ability to have mobility throughout the continent.

I was very aware of the fact that I had support from a significant foundation, Creative Capital, to do this project, and I was repeatedly reminded of this financial privilege. At the same time, it became a boring discussion: Yes, I have the ability to do this—so what? Let’s move on. To me, it didn’t matter at all who I was; what mattered was that we were there to have a discussion. Transparency about it was a necessity, one that goes back to critical pedagogy and to Freire, who did not hide his privilege. He would say, and I paraphrase here, “Well, I have been given this opportunity to be in this place where
I can be a teacher, and I have this knowledge that you might not have, but sometimes you have knowledge that I don’t have.” It was a direct acknowledgment that I always tried to convey during the project. Despite the funding, I carried out the project with hard work and a tight budget. Many times I was completely stranded with no money, and it was very stressful at different times.

**APM** In moving forward, what did you learn in this process? What would you like to continue to do or advance, regarding this project? Are there things that you wouldn’t do again?

**PH** Yes, perhaps. As you get older, you develop thicker skin and learn not to become too emotional. I think the process of social engagement in art is still a fairly new to artists. We are not yet entirely capable of dealing with it emotionally. I know this from artist friends who have also engaged in projects that are really powerful and transformative, but sometimes difficult to assimilate. These projects result in emotional trauma, which we are ill equipped to deal with.

**APM** Well, I think what I hear you say is that the *SPU* affirmed the importance of social practice as a method for you, a method of living, with some caution here—the emotional impact of the work—but you survived it!

**PH** More and more, social practice is simply becoming social justice, art for social justice. That’s fine—except that in the process of politicizing the practice, we need to ask ourselves: Why is it important for it to continue being art? That is something I wish we could reflect on a little bit more. What is it about its identifier as artwork that makes it meaningful and worth producing in this way? Or should we completely forget about it as art and become activists? Those are some of the questions that we will be have to deal with in the future with socially engaged art.

Another key discussion that we’re having right now is how do you activate these practices. We ask ourselves: What are the standards for communicating these ephemeral forms to a third audience that was never part of it in the first place? How do we communicate what happens? How do museums that traditionally collect, preserve, and display objects engage with these art forms, and how might they “preserve” the ideas behind them for future knowledge? Those are some of the questions that need solutions, or approaches to solutions, especially as we try to historicize this practice.

**APM** This is why the work of the curator is so important. I think that they are not only doing all of the above but also trying to reach a third audience. They are thinking about how these “standards” are communicated, while addressing how these practices become legitimized. A similar process occurs when art is being professionalized. I think there’s a great deal of room to continue to work in these directions from multiple perspectives.

**PH** Absolutely.
ESCUELA PANAMERICANA DEL DESASOSIEGO

conmemora su presencia en
La Universidad de Los Andes
Bogotá Colombia
agosto 12 de 2006