Mobilizing Pedagogy

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OBJECT LESSONS:
THE ROLE OF MATERIAL CULTURE IN SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART
BY SARA REISMAN
The Schoolhouse and the Bus: Mobility, Pedagogy, and Engagement is an exhibition that presents two artistic projects that encapsulate a process of translation between 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 two socially engaged projects. Suzanne Lacy and Pilar Riaño-Alcalá’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-Alcalá, questioned the efficacy of relying heavily on the display of objects to adequately capture and represent their respective works. Questions surrounding the limitations of conventional exhibition making are acutely raised in the context of socially engaged artistic practice, where the desire to show the work, and the experiential and relational nature of the artwork, are often in conflict with the means of translating the experience into a display. Indebted to the legacy of conceptual art, artists and curators are continuously compelled to attempt this process, whether it is for visibility, legacy, art world legitimacy, or a more engaged notion of pedagogy. As Lucy Lippard has noted, “Conceptualists indicated that the most exciting ‘art’ might still be buried in social energies not yet recognized as art.” Integral to any true avant-garde artistic gesture, these energies can contribute to an object being unrecognizable as art. The unknown artwork—its unknowability—can sometimes signal its potential for radicality, still raising the age-old question, “but is it art?” Even if we feel certain that it is art (because we say so), it is always worth questioning the impulse driving us to display works of art, since these social energies can never be fully re-presented as they were originally realized. As challenging as it may be to grasp and resolve these endeavors as art, the opportunity to learn from ephemeral practices, particularly human exchange, has become increasingly urgent in times of political and social instability.

Leading up to Skin of Memory (1999), artist Suzanne Lacy was approached by Colombian anthropologist Pilar Riaño-Alcalá to collaborate with a team that included architect Vicky Rameriz, designer Raul Cabra, and local artisans, contributing to a process conceived to “find alternatives to violence and strengthen civil society” in Medellín’s Barrio Antioquia, an area ravaged by increasing violence related to the drug trade. Riaño-Alcalá invited Lacy to work within the community based on the sustained engagement and success of her decade-long The Oakland Projects (1991–2001). Staged in eight parts, The Oakland Projects included The Roof Is On Fire (1993–1994), which explored the tensions between youth and the police in Oakland, California, and Expectations Summer Project (1997), which examined the personal and political impacts of teen pregnancy. Lacy’s multilayered approach to engaging local youth on issues concerning their well-being—health, education, safety, and public policy—interested Riaño-Alcalá,
who, at the time, was organizing on the community level in Medellín in response to the needs of neighborhood youth, whose experiences were fraught with the trauma associated with localized violence. The parallels between youth cultures in Medellín and Oakland are based in what Lacy and Riaño describe as “unprocessed personal losses” and “consequent paralysis and violence.”

In 2003, artist Pablo Helguera began planning a four-month journey titled *The School of Panamerican Unrest* (2006), which would result in a road trip across the Americas. Beginning in Anchorage, Alaska, he concluded in Tierra del Fuego, Argentina, having made twenty-nine stops across two continents. At each stop—in places like Mexico City, Bogotá, Vancouver, Calgary, Mérida, and San Salvador—Helguera set up a mobile schoolhouse, where he collaborated with local organizations and individuals in participatory workshops, that were a hybrid of performance art and experiential education. Featuring readings, performances, and lectures, they were shaped by the people involved at each location. Motivated by what he has described as a lack of communication between different countries within the Americas, Helguera’s project offered an opportunity to draw connections between the vast diversity of cultural communities that make up the continent. In order to reveal the potential relationships between these varied geographic locations, Helguera worked with local participants at each site on a community-specific basis to articulate the role and possibilities of art and culture to address the social, political, and economic issues of that moment in 2006.

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 leading up to his project: September 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 José Martí?” 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 (examples at pp. 20–24), were made in a restorative, therapeutic effort, following the conclusion of the 25,000 mile trip, which left him physically and emotionally drained. They comprise maps and scientific and mathematical diagrams, with captions excised from book pages.

These statements read like a postscript, musings and reflections on Helguera’s rigorous itinerary. If we recognize that objects are limited in their capacity to re-present or capture a project, to create an atmosphere, or impart the experience of being there, are there other ways of understanding the transformative potentials of a socially engaged artwork? One approach might be to reconstruct a scene and invite the public to experience a simulation. Another might be to restage a similar project in a new place, with information about the original artwork. Additionally, we can attempt to capture some of the ripple effects of said project, to assess what, if any, connections can be made in terms of the its subsequent 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 gallery? There is a tension generated by the idea that an artwork’s value—in terms of people, places, and even money—changes when it leaves the site of its production and enactment, and is brought into the gallery. Are the work’s participants relegated to artistic material, or does a gallery setting elevate the status for all involved? Is its status as art retained beyond the gallery?

The answers to these questions are subjective and will depend on whom you ask. Ultimately, it is the after-effects, or legacies, of Helguera’s and Lacy and Riaño-Alcalá’s projects that reflect their value in the world as art or otherwise. Both projects clearly resonate with those who experienced...
them directly, as well as others who learned about them after the fact. In 2011, when
the Medellín Biennial MDE11 invited Lacy and Riaño-Alcalá to show Skin of Memory Revisited, it became an opportunity to extend the project, reflecting on the decade that had passed since its initiation in 1999, and to understand where it had succeeded and failed. In the years that followed the first iteration of Skin of Memory, the Victims of Armed Conflict Care Program 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 of the same collaborators involved in Skin of Memory, the Museum’s mission is closely linked to the promotion of civil society and democratic engagement, with interactive educational installations that facilitate dialogue about Medellín’s history of violence.

The effects of Helguera’s The School of Panamerican Unrest are more difficult to trace, largely because of the project’s vast geographic scope, with twenty-nine official participating communities (and other locales where he stopped). Taking Helguera’s 2008 presentation of documentation of The School of Panamerican Unrest curated by Itzel Vargas at Casa del Lago in Mexico City, one of the project’s art world echoes could be found in panamericana, an exhibition presented by kurimanzutto gallery in Mexico City in 2010 (although any connection between The School of Panamerican Unrest and panamericana was not acknowledged in promotional materials), which aimed to connect artists from different countries in Latin America. Published in 2013, Claire Fox’s book Making Art Panamerican situates the visual 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 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 in the Yucatán, where he worked with La Escuela Superior de Artes. In writing about her experience with The School of Panamerican Unrest, then-director Mónica Castillo witnessed the realization amongst students of how rarely art criticism was practiced. This prompted one student, Debora Carneval, to organize critiques of artwork made in Mérida. In its Panamerican address, the city of Mérida had declared, “there is a lack of critical analysis of the art scene; that we consider that the end is not to necessarily transgress, but rather to make art as we see fit in order to reflect our ideas.”

A shared ethos of both Helguera’s The School of Panamerican Unrest and Lacy and Riaño-Alcalá’s Skin of Memory is that each was conceived to engage participants in ways that maintain their agency, whether by making declarations that reflect on local conditions, or selecting objects for display that represent collective loss. From the distance of time and place, it becomes clear that the relational nature of each artwork is supported by objects—maps, documents, newspapers, collages, videos, and souvenirs—whether it be in the production or presentation, as prompts for sustained engagement. As with any temporal form of art, the viewer must actively reflect upon the communication transmitted by the artwork, simultaneously expanding its meaning, recognizing the impossibility of a time-based, experiential artwork being singularly understood any one individual, in its entirety. This is the crux of exhibiting social practice: the art objects provide an aesthetic point of entry, but the installation is only fulfilled as socially engaged art when the dialogical prompt is activated relationally. The lesson learned might be a teachable moment in which objects are revealed to be essential, yet they never tell the whole story.