Mobilizing Pedagogy

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Lacy and Helguera: we have a great deal to learn from this artistic pairing, indeed, a great deal to learn about how “learning” itself propels artistic making. Of course, Suzanne Lacy and Pablo Helguera have been implicitly paired—and compared—before. They have shared the dais in public dialogues and shared space in art catalogues and other publications. They have been found together on syllabi (including mine at UC Berkeley) and in many other books, events, workshops, and venues that seek to come to terms with the practice of socially engaged art. With Mobilizing Pedagogy, however, we have the chance to look deeply into the practices and processes of two artists and two art projects. In particular, we have the chance to see how these extraordinary practitioners claim and resist their identities as artists in order to create meaningful social experiences that are educational (though not in the usual sense), cross borders (often through unorthodox means), and move within the geography of the Americas, including the LA/LA geography signified and debated in 2017/2018 at Pacific Standard Time. In what follows, I follow a daisy chain through this proposition. So let me begin, again.

ART AND SOCIAL PRACTICE

As noted in the book’s introduction, Suzanne Lacy and Pablo Helguera are exemplary figures in a socially oriented movement of cultural practitioners whose work challenges traditional parameters of art. In the wider world of art and culture, there are many different ways of labeling this kind of practice—relational aesthetics, social practice, post-studio art, community art, participatory art, and socially engaged art. Lacy herself coined the term “new genre public art” to characterize a mode of public art practice that differed from the nationalist traditions and plop-art conventions of public art, asking what might happen if art became truly “publicized,” that is, undone and redone by the public’s claims. If one creative model finds the artist working hermetically in her studio, releasing a finished work into a gallery or onto a public, other models now start with the site of arrival. New genre public artists and socially engaged artists are now trained to excavate the material, historical, and sociological conditions of the commissioning site, crafting a public artwork that respond to the local conditions that they find. For many artists, those conditions include volatile political and economic factors that might exceed the values and original intentions of the commissioning body. And for many of those artists, the central “material” of socially engaged art is social exchange itself. Indeed, the embrace of the social is partly an embrace of the relational—that is, an embrace of person-to-person encounter is akin to a material aspect of the art object. Rather than conceiving art as a thing bound by a frame or balanced atop a pedestal, art becomes most interesting as a structure for enabling interaction among those who encounter it; in such social practice artwork, social interaction is a central material and itself an artistic form. The art requires action and encounter in order to become itself and, to some ways of thinking, requires continued action to remain itself.

Both Suzanne Lacy’s Skin of Memory and Pablo Helguera’s The School of Panamerican Unrest foreground social exchange as a central condition and material of artistic practice. Indeed, in the region surrounding the Colombian city of Medellin, the site of Lacy’s work with sociologist Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, sociality was particularly volatile. After decades of violence and trauma within and across barrios in the region, citizens had lost the capacity to trust as well as to create conditions for safe dialogue. To enter into any kind of social dialogue was a highly political, not to mention risky, act. While his goals were different, Helguera, too, chose to transform public dialogue into an aesthetic practice within the networked conversation spaces of The School of Panamerican Unrest. Moving across the Americas from cities such as Vancouver, Chicago, Portland, and San Francisco to Mexico City, San Salvador, Caracas, and Guatemala City, Helguera and his interlocutors established dialogic spaces for reflection and deliberation about the social and artistic values that they held most dear.

SOCIAL PRACTICE
AND PUBLIC PEDAGOGY

Of course, the decision to turn toward sociality in art is hardly meaningful without pragmatic ideas for execution. On the one hand, we can
say that the aesthetic encounter is always a social encounter. It provides a space for large and small groups to gather; pace Modernist critics, the meaning and experience of the artwork will be influenced by the social context in which it is housed. To some degree then, social practice foregrounds a relational dimension in art that was always there. On the other hand, the techniques and skill sets of social practice art expand beyond the technical skills of brushwork or the manipulation of clay, so the expressive and conceptual skills of such work change when the art's site, its public dialogue, and its community engagement become central goals rather than peripheral effects.

At this point, it is worth noticing another shared dimension of Lacy and Helguera's work: their excavation of pedagogical practice as an art form and as a pragmatic resource for artistic action. Indeed, the social turn in art very much coincides with a pedagogical turn, even as many educational domains have come to rely on art to animate the classroom. Following in the educational tradition of John Dewey's *Art as Experience*, innovative pedagogical critics and teachers consistently turn to the arts—employing storytelling, image-making, peer-to-peer dialogue, and hands-on exercises to inspire active learning. Of course, these artistic techniques in education can be adapted to reinspire the experience of cutting-edge public art as well. As such, we also find many social practice artists using these aesthetically inspired pedagogical techniques in their own community engagement. Indeed, Helguera's own book, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, is a pragmatic exploration of this synergy. The stories, images, and perspectives of participants do not simply respond to the artwork but are themselves part of the art's production. Interpretive and educational engagement does not only come after the artwork but is part of its origin.

For artists such as Lacy and Helguera, this pedagogical shift also has politics attached. It echoes Dewey's conceptions of the democratic potential of pragmatic pedagogy, as well as the perspectives of Paolo Freire on the power of radical pedagogy. As elaborated in Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, socially responsive education requires a shift not only in content but also in method. Specifically, it must counter hierarchical and unidirectional methods of what Freire called “banking” education into participatory pedagogy where power is shared among teacher and student. Such practices adapt themselves well to situations where artists and activists are also concerned with their own hierarchical positions vis-à-vis the communities they serve. New genre public art thus makes use of new genres of public pedagogy. Whether framing Panamerican exploration as a “school” or making transformational use of a “school bus,” Helguera and Lacy's experiments demonstrate how a pedagogical consciousness can transform the art experience and conversely how schooling could be transformed by an aesthetic imagination. At a time when art seeks to become more pedagogical—and the school seeks to become more artful—such social practices embody a mutually productive intersection.

**PUBLIC PEDAGOGY AND MOBILITY**

“Share a meaningful object with others,” said Lacy and Riaño-Alcalá, to shaken communities surrounding Medellín. “Write a new declaration for your city,” said Helguera, to artistic communities across the longitude of a Panamerican circuit. In both cases, the artists extracted and circulated a cherished exercise of progressive pedagogy. Within *Skin of Memory*, Lacy and Riaño-Alcalá asked their participants to investigate their personal archives. Sometimes, this meant peeling back the layers of trauma and violence; sometimes this meant touching the treasured stories of lost family history. In all cases, this meant daring to retrieve a delicate object of deep personal value and daring further to share that object with others. It meant sharing that object with strangers unknown, strangers who might even have been connected to one's experience of trauma and violence. It was a volatile pedagogical exercise of show and tell. Some seven years later, Helguera's gathered communities marshaled and reimagined the rhetorical address of a democratic declaration, connecting anew to that first person plural—“WE, the PEOPLE”—and allowing themselves to deliberate about what that pronoun could possibly signify in complex political times. Both gestures opened the process of aesthetic
making to a community of participants that exceeded the authorial vision of the artist-teacher. And both gestures made use of progressive pedagogical techniques that value the stories and aspirations of citizens and students as more than, or as much as, those of politicians and teachers.

It seems no coincidence that these two artistic projects gained their energy and inspiration from a Latin American imagination—what for some might be called an “Americas” consciousness or, for others, a Bolivarian consciousness. The inspiration and compass for both those projects seem to ally with a southern hemispheric understanding of hemispheric connection. Their sensibilities recall the performative pedagogy of Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal as they plotted a new revolution—as well as that of the more recent, much-heralded Mayor Mockus of Bogotá, who understood the role of art in reimagining civic connection. The political-aesthetic leadership traditions of Latin America are propelled, too, by the historical legacies of José Vasconcelos and José Martí, as well as Simón Bolívar himself, in plotting a movement that truly moved across regions of the world. In both cases, Skin of Memory and The School of Panamerican Unrest “move” in a school bus and across geographies variously mobilized under a school’s portable pop-up tent. They are guided by a “South” American tradition of progressive pedagogy that undoes the borders within and across the regions that they encounter. Borders among barrios are shaken loose when memories of lost children are shared. Borders between “South” and “North” America are undone by Panamerican people and Panamerican practices that unsettle South/North distinctions, opting instead to (s)pan into a networked conversation across the equator, across LA and... LA.

MOBILITY AND ART, AGAIN

Having routed through a daisy chain of connections—among social practice, pedagogy, and geography—we are ending where we began in the space of art. When Riaño-Alcalá reached out to Lacy after doing on-the-ground social work in Medellín, she knew that an artistic consciousness could help advance the community work she had already begun. An art project was allowed a degree of mobility and freedom to travel across psychological and geographic lines that were otherwise taboo. Meanwhile, in order to activate a public conversation about the Americas, Helguera’s mobile project relied upon artists as well; a network of artistically allied friends created landing points for SPU’s unrest across a Panamerican line.

But artistic mobility is not only a spatial concept but also a temporal one. The Skin of Memory launched in 1999 and again in 2011; The School of Panamerican Unrest traveled in 2006, and its documentation has been recalled for various occasions since. Now in a joint exhibit, these projects are moving again; they are moving across time to enter 2017 and across medium, as the exhibition and this book attempt to recall processes of the past. Such a remounting inevitably invites new questions about the politics of mobility and global citizenship, especially at a time of debate about a fortified “wall” across the borders of the Americas. This recalling also creates new conceptual challenges and new aesthetic opportunities as curators install documentation of processes and social exchange inside the relatively static scene of an exhibition format. In such a space, mementos become spaces, and behaviors become artifacts. At the same time, these objects prompt a new kind of reflection as we stare into the glass-paneled reflections of past memories, or as we encounter a pop-up tent and imagine the conversations that might have happened there. And, in such moments, these specimens, images, objects, and artifacts might also become invitations to new processes and new behaviors. What memories must we recall now? What new conversations need to occur inside the gathering spaces of a school that will not rest? Recalling the social experiments of Helguera and Lacy also means imagining new public pedagogies for the future. Let’s be sure that they—and we—keep moving.