

THE PEDAGOGICAL IMPULSE THE LIVING ARCHIVE

The Living Archive is a series of interviews about art, pedagogy and knowing. Based on their residencies in schools, Artists Hannah Jickling and Helen Reed selected six artists, curators and educators whose practices served as a point of reference

during their residency activities. Through these conversations *The Living Archive* seeks to expand the dialogue around artist placements and participatory practices within educational structures and art institutions.

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Pablo Helguera, *The School of Panamerican Unrest*, 2003–2006. Courtesy of the Artist.

Bad Education:

Helen Reed interviews

Pablo Helguera

HELEN REED works with specific groups of people such as Twin Peaks fans, lesbian separatists, and high school art teacher candidates. In each project, collaboration is a working process from which the artwork emerges. Reed favors collaborators that reflect her interest in participatory culture, affinity groups, and fantasy-based subcultures. Her projects take vernacular form such as television shows, publications, postcards and other forms of easily transmittable and dispersed media, so as to circulate back into the communities from which they are generated.

Reed has exhibited work at Prefix Institute for Contemporary Art (Toronto), apexart (New York), Smack Mellon (New York), Portland Art Museum, Seattle Art Museum and La Centrale Galerie Powerhouse (Montréal). She holds a BFA from the Emily Carr University of Art and Design (Vancouver), an MFA in Art and Social Practice from Portland State University.

PABLO HELGUERA is a New York based artist working with installation, sculpture, photography, drawing, and performance. Helguera's work focuses on a variety of topics ranging from history, pedagogy, sociolinguistics, ethnography, memory and the absurd, in formats that are widely varied including the lecture, museum display strategies, musical performances and written fiction.

His work as an educator is intersected with his interests as an artist, making his work reflect on issues of interpretation, dialogue, and the role of contemporary culture in a global reality. This intersection is best exemplified in his project, "The School of Panamerican Unrest," a nomadic think-tank that physically crossed the continent by car from Anchorage, Alaska to Tierra del Fuego, Argentina making 40 stops in between. Covering almost 20,000 miles, it is considered one of the most extensive public art projects on record.

Since 2007, he has been the Director of Adult and Academic programs at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

The educational turn is a well-documented trend in contemporary art as evidenced by the proliferation, in the past 10 years, of artist-run schools and pedagogy projects, such as workshops, lectures, and discussion groups. More than just borrowing educational forms, artists are also adopting processes and methodologies that pedagogical frameworks offer, such as collaborative dialogues, action research, and experiential learning.

Though artists and educators may overlap in process, there are different criteria, expectations, and outcomes for projects that are invested in the world of art, and projects that are invested in the world of education. Is it possible that a good artwork amounts to a bad education? What are the expectations of each field, whose criteria will we use to evaluate these projects, and where is there convergence?

Helen Reed met Pablo Helguera at the MoMA Staff Café, in New York to chat about some of the current intersections between art and education. Helguera has worked between these fields for over 20 years. He observes, in his publication *Education For Socially Engaged Art* that “education today is fueled by progressive ideas, ranging from critical pedagogy and inquiry based learning to the exploration of creativity in early childhood. For this reason it is important to understand the existing structures of education and to learn how to innovate within them. To offer a critique, for example, the old-fashioned boarding school system of memorization today would be equivalent, in the art world, to mounting a fierce attack on a nineteenth-century art movement.”¹ With this acknowledgement in mind—of the blind spots between disciplines—we discussed the relationship between presentation and making, learning outcomes versus abstract education, and how to be revolutionary and at the same time institutional.

HELEN REED: As a place to start, I want to refer to the introduction of *Education for Socially Engaged Art*. You mentioned that you came to art and education simultaneously, and that consequently you noticed many similarities between the two fields. Can you describe the kinds of crossovers that you noticed, and how these parallels influenced your practice?

PABLO HELGUERA: I was at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, which happens to be a school and a museum. It's an institution that is connected by a bridge, between the school and the museum. Immediately, I was exposed to a relationship with art that was between presentation and making. I was broke as a student and I started working at the museum, first as part of a paid internship. I would cross the bridge all the time, between one place and the other. I would be in my dirty painting clothes in the classroom then I would get very preppy to go into the other environment. I did not think anything about being in the education department, but I just happened to gravitate there because I was bilingual and because they needed people for outreach,

etc. I made sense there. So it's not something that I particularly chose.

But the moment I started to realize that teaching is very much connected to performing then I started

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noticing points at which things started to connect. When I graduated from school I was already doing performative lectures and the like. I started becoming interested in what became known as *Institutional Critique*, artists who were appropriating the modes of display within museums. So I was doing a lot of that in the early 90s. I became very interested in fiction and the whole idea that you, as an artist, can construct this environment that really questions the limit of what you consider reality. Museums become particularly attractive when you are interested in fiction. That is what a lot of *Institutional Critique* artists do, modifying certain aspects of the interior of the space, which all of a

sudden make you realize that there is something else going on. In doing so, you are altering the protocols, the regular expectations. So I started doing that, but I still didn't see a direct connection to education for a while. But eventually I realized that the best thing I can do is to bring what I'm learning from the environment of the institution into my own work. And I started creating fictional museums, fictional artists, and those fictional artists started having biographies and bodies of work and interpretive materials. I was much more interested in the peripheral components of an artwork than the art work itself.

I remember once, in Portland, I did a piece at a University that was called *Mock Turtle*. There was a whole exhibition around an object that nobody could see, but there were hundreds of labels and interpretive materials around this object. Supposedly it's a turtle that you can see inside a box, but you can't really see it. It's this idea of how the object is basically unnecessary; it's really more the stories around the object and how the contextual framework, the interpretive framework of the object is what

really matters in the end, and that this is what really influences our perception of it.

By that time, *Relational Aesthetics* was in vogue. Artists were out there doing projects that were based on creating intersubjective relationships. But I became suspicious of the quality of those exchanges. I remember I was working at the Guggenheim, seeing artists like Rirkrit Tiravanija

presenting projects. And I remember, for example, once, Rirkrit saying he wanted to do a project that used a gallery for children's activities. I remember the curator calling us in the education department and being like "Quick, quick we have to come up with kids and bring them to the gallery to do activities with them." Nothing against Rirkrit, but I felt that the whole project was so haphazard and so artificial. Because really, we are pretending that we are doing education here, that we were creating a great experience for these kids. I have no idea what ended up happening with the project. But those were the kind of experiences that made me suddenly realize: isn't it interesting that I'm here, a mere educator, like many other educators who actually know very well how to produce these experiences, that's our expertise; and yet we have absolutely no power over this certain situation where people, who know absolutely nothing about these audiences, decide they want to do an educational experience for them in the guise of an artwork, which has to happen promptly and efficiently. And the action will likely be covered by art magazines; by people who know absolutely nothing about these audiences, and then they will most likely be convinced that something really great happened. While those, who supposedly the activity was created for, most likely were hurried into a situation self-proclaimed as educational and perhaps manipulated into being photographed as part of the documentation.

This is a very common tendency of museums that dates back to the 80s when institutions were trying to do multicultural inclusion in gal-



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leries. So you would bring a bunch of kids from the low income neighborhoods, give them a T-shirt from the museum and stand them in front of the steps of the museum, and then show the photo to the funders. Whatever they do there, whatever experience they have there doesn't really matter, what really matters is that those kids of color are in front of the gates of the museum. Those are the kind of experiences that made me realize that I don't want to make that kind of "relational" art. I don't want to make art that's about saying that I did something. I want to make art that does something. I don't always care whether people understand or not that I am doing it, but I want to know for my own sake that what I did had that impulse.

To me, that's the enormous gap between art that claims to be about social change, and art that embodies social change. And that is why the relationship between pedagogy and art is absolutely crucial, because pedagogy and education are about emphasis on the embodiment of the process, on the dialogue, on the exchange, on intersubjective communication, and on human relationships. The product may or may not be necessary or important. But it cannot happen if this exchange

does not take place. Art, traditionally, has not always been about the process. Ultimately in a museum when you look at a painting, the process of its making is interesting to know, but it is not essential to experiencing the work. What matters is that it's there; that it happened. In socially engaged art, that is the opposite: what is important is the process, and the process is inextricable from the experience.

What you are saying reminds me of something that Shannon Jackson mentioned in her talk at *Open Engagement* this past year. She said something to the effect of what looks like innovation in one field may be old news in another field. And I'm thinking about this in the way that some processes of education are taken up in socially engaged art.

I was reading a bit about Reggio Emilia before I came to meet you, because I had learned that you have a Reggio Emilia component in the show downstairs. I found this quote by Loris Malaguzzi: "We need to

produce situations in which children learn by themselves, in which children can take advantage of their own knowledge and resources... We need to define the role of the adult, not as a transmitter, but as a creator of relationships—relationships not only between people but also between things, between thoughts, with the environment."²

Sounds a lot like socially engaged art, right?

Right! But I wanted to ask you about where we diverge. It feels like we may be in a compromised position. As artists there is an impera-



Pablo Helguera, *Artoon*, 2009. Courtesy of the Artist.



"I think I saw somewhere something about you doing something somewhere."

Pablo Helguera, *Artoon*, 2009.
Courtesy of the Artist.

tive to participate in a cycle of production, to be acknowledged as authors, or to be thought of as primary authors, and to participate in an art discourse. In what way do we have to diverge from educational processes?

We still belong to a tradition of art making where things acquire different meanings depending on the context. So like Duchamp's urinal, of course it's useful as a urinal and when it becomes art it becomes useful in other ways as art. And like what Tom Finklepearl was saying, it's time to put the urinal back in the bathroom³, because we've come to a point where the usefulness of art as aesthetics has run its course. So it's time to go back and think about aesthetics as something that functions in the world in a different way.

Which creates an interesting problem: why don't we just abandon aesthetics altogether? Why don't I just become a Reggio Emilia educator since their philosophy is close to what I do? Maybe I should just move to Italy and teach little kids. There's this tendency by young artists of thinking: "maybe I'm just doing something ill informed and ridiculous, and I might as

well just become a professional in whatever field I'm interested in. Maybe I should become a horticulturalist", or whatever. The other side is that the artist is performing roles that are ostensibly performed better by professionals of those disciplines, like in Rirkrit's case: the educators do it so much better than them, so why is he getting the credit? And why is what educators are doing not considered art? Why should a mediocre education program be celebrated as this wonderful relational aesthetics piece, when a wonderful education program that really changes people's lives can never be considered an important artwork?

So the issue is really, what is the contextual social territory where this takes place? Where are you staking your claims? And where are you producing criticality? To simply say that Reggio Emilia is a great artwork is completely untrue. That's not their goal; their goal is to create better citizens for the world, etc. As an artist, what becomes really interesting is to consider this thinking within the context of art making, the context of the role of art in society. Art, for better or for worse, continues to be this playing field that is defined by its capacity to redefine itself. You cannot say, "This is not art!" because tomorrow it could be, or "It can be art," because I say it is. Art is a space, which we have created, where we can cease to subscribe to the demands and the rules of society; it is a space where we can pretend. We can play, we can rethink things, we can think about them backwards.

But just to clarify: when I say that Reggio Emilia is not real art, I don't think it's enough to make art with "pretend" education. I don't think one should justify the use of any semblance in education for the sake of art, as was the case of that children's activity by Rirkrit I described, unless if you are just meant to be joking or playing (which is not very interesting to begin with). My point is that when you are making certain claims, or even generating certain impressions about what you are doing, you need to do them in an effective way in order to really affect the world, otherwise your artistic intervention in the social realm is no different from making a painting in the studio. And there is a difference between symbolic and actual intervention.



We can be very critical of this work because we are very familiar with formalism and with abstraction, and there are a slew of theoretical approaches. Whenever you do an abstract painting that looks exactly like Mondrian, people will tell you that your work is not very relevant because you're just copying Mondrian. And yet, you're completely home free if you do this conceptual project of a school that doesn't teach anybody and where nobody learns anything, but it looks really great in the press release.

In your chapter, *Notes Towards a Transpedagogy*, you talked about the phenomena of education as art projects resisting preconceived learning outcomes because they didn't want to be perceived as didactic. You used the term "abstract education"⁴ to describe these kinds of projects. Can you talk about this term a bit more?

This term came from my own dissatisfaction with seeing artists supposedly making educational projects, particularly alternative school projects. It has to do with the educational turn in curating where people who came from a very vague and generally stereotyped knowledge about education all of a sudden thought it was a great buzz word. They would not use the term education; they would say pedagogy because that sounds more academic, or more intelligent. I remember once in a conference, as part of the Liverpool Biennial in 2007, I attended a panel. I was an audience member, and the speakers included Charles Esche and a few artists, and an artist presented a social practice type of project. And I remember asking, well how do you even know what the outcome was? How do you calculate the outcome? Don't you think you need to know whether what you did really had any effect? And I remember the artist saying, "well that would instrumentalize the work." Others supported her view. At that point in time, to try to learn more about the experience was bad because it would make the documentation process bureaucratic; to me, it was a convenient way to make a project that lacked accountability.

Granted in the UK especially, the notion of evaluation has a bad name because educational institutions have to function within some overly rigid framework called the Bologna Accord, which is about meeting standards of education. So, partially the reaction against evaluation

comes from that. But I also felt that there was a complete misunderstanding of what evaluation means. In fact, we evaluate everything all the time in art. Otherwise art criticism wouldn't exist. We've had art critics pretty much since art started.

Why is it that we can be very critical of standard artworks that we understand the parameters of? We can be very critical of this work because we are very familiar with formalism and with abstraction, and there are a slew of theoretical approaches. Whenever you do an abstract painting that looks exactly like Mondrian, people will tell you that your work is not very relevant because you're just copying Mondrian. And yet, you're completely home free if you do this conceptual project of a school that doesn't teach anybody and where nobody learns anything, but it looks really great in the press release.

So by “abstract education” you meant projects that use the language and framework of education, but don't function as education?

It's complicated. Because I don't want to say that it's bad to do that. Sometimes you just want to do a project that's about the idea of this or that. You want to do a project that's about dance; it doesn't mean that you have to dance. It's very different to do a painting about war, than to participate in a war.

That's why in my book, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, I tried to address this problem by making a distinction between what I understand as symbolic versus actual practice. What I tried to argue in the book is that in art, the strongest, more longstanding tradition is art as symbolic act; art that's a representation of the world. You make an artwork that is a thing on its own, but it addresses the world. *Guernica* is a symbolic act. It tells you about the horrors of *Guernica*, the mass killings.

In the 60s that starts to change, artists don't want to do things about the world; they want to do things that are acts *in* the world. That's why performance art emerges. I'm not going to make a theatre piece where I pretend to be x, y or z. I'm going to do a real live action where I am Pablo Helguera and I'm talking to you, Helen. And we're going to have this experience, and this experience can only possibly exist in this moment in time and never again, anywhere else. And that's what this artwork is about. That's what Fluxus was about, that's what John Cage talked about, and that's what Alan Kaprow's happenings were about; it's a very Zen idea. Suzanne Lacy's performances, for example, they were about these women at this moment. It might be art history later. It might later become a product. But the fact of the matter is that what it is at that moment can never be repeated.

So, to me, socially engaged art emerges from that tradition of the here-and-now. What the “here-and-now” means, in my view, is that the artistic act is inextricable from the time/place context, but that it also affects it in a very direct way. The work needs to be understood, described, and possibly evaluated and critiqued in terms of what those actual events were. Whenever you don't have that information, which is unfortunately most of the time, there is no way to know whether it

happened or not. Those projects that you know are really creating an impact, that they have a presence; it's almost self-evident. I mean whatever you want to say about Tania Bruguera's *Immigrant Movement International*, you can go there today and see it. It's happening right now. She isn't making it up.

Can you talk about the tension between usefulness, ambiguity, and learning outcomes? You mention that we evaluate things all the time anyway. How do you evaluate art pedagogy projects?

Creating an ambiguous experience doesn't mean that you cannot evaluate it. It only means that you have to think about it differently. We are not doing a Reggio Emilia School downstairs in the *Common Senses* Installation. If someone came here and said, "well this is not a Reggio Emilia School, so you have totally flunked!" From this perspective we certainly have failed. But that's not what it is meant to do; it's meant to bring visitors to the museum, to encounter it.

If you analyze a Fluxus performance and you say, "Well this guy is a really bad actor, he's not Hamlet." Of course he's not Hamlet, this is not Shakespeare; it's Fluxus. It sets its own rationale. And when you start becoming interested in Fluxus you realize that it has its own internal logic. Then you realize that this is a better Fluxus piece than this other one, because this creates a better situation for what Fluxus is trying to do, which is creating this open space of playing, of irreverence, of attacking bourgeois ideas about art. For these reasons this one piece is particularly successful. So you can set your own terms of success.

You might say, well I am not doing a school, I'm just going to pretend I'm doing a school; I'm making this fictional school. If that's clear from the onset then it's much easier. If, on the other hand, you're trying to have your cake and eat it too, which means that I'm going to say that I'm doing a transformational project but in reality I'm just going to pretend I am doing it. That's when your project completely falls apart. And it's completely clear; the moment that you scratch it you realize that there is no substance to it.

I'm interested in your relationship to institutions. You created an institution, *The School of Panamerican Unrest*. And, of course, your work here at MoMA is embedded in the institution. You talk about *Institutional Critique* in, *Notes Towards a Transpedagogy*, and mention that many artists are still working with these ideas. Can you talk about your relationship to institutions and *Institutional Critique*?

Institutional critique was very important to me. Andrea Fraser, Hans Haake, Fred Wilson, all these people that I very much respect and have had a dialogue with – what was really interesting to me and shocking at the same time was that I started seeing their works when I was already working in a museum. It was interesting because I felt like while I loved this work, it was really critiquing the museum, and who was it really critiquing? I thought it was critiquing me because I was part of a museum. And then I thought what does it really mean to critique myself in that way? If I'm honest with my own critiques

shouldn't I just resign and move to, say, the hills and farm? Shouldn't I start a revolution from the hills?

I grew up in Mexico under what was known as the perfect dictatorship, which was a party called The PRI who ruled Mexico for 71 years. The Mexican Revolution was an incredibly complicated civil conflict, which was really about the land and about social classes. It finally ends when the strongest general of the revolution, creates a political party and solves the problem of power by saying that there's this party and that every 6 years there's going to be an election. In reality, the election was more of a transition of power within the party. The PRI never lost an election for 71 years. In a way, it was not ruled by a single individual, but it was ruled by the same few families. This all ended in 2000. But what is interesting is that the party was called *The Institutional Revolutionary Party, Partido Revolucionario Institucional*. Just think about those words, it's just completely nonsense. How can you be revolutionary and at the same time institutional? That's what we were for 71 years.

All these reflections lead me to think that I don't want to move into the hills, I like working in museums. And at the same time, I realize that these critiques also get institutionalized and that the museum actually loves them. Now Andrea Fraser is in the galleries; she finally has been collected and so what does that mean?

My conclusion was that we can best be revolutionaries when we best learn how to be institutional. Occupy Museums tried to occupy here at MoMA. The moment they got inside MoMA they didn't know what to do, because they were like, "Do we burn it down?" What does that do? I'm completely aware of how power supports art and how we're completely dependent on that power.

“ Instead of critiquing the current system, you have to make a new system that will render the previous system superfluous or irrelevant. So as artists we need to build institutions, we need to be institutional.

But to have this attitude like, "Let's just destroy the museum!" Look at the Baghdad Museum, for example. At the recent Creative Time Summit Michael Rakowitz showed that image of the looted Baghdad Museum and it was horrifying. No one said, "Great! They

destroyed the symbol of power!" No, it's a huge tragedy. We lost an incredibly important part of civilization and culture, which will never come back. They erased a chapter of history. There's nothing worse than that.

So yes, I want to protect the museum. The idea of preserving the past doesn't have to be in conflict with the idea of being revolutionary. Instead of burning down institutions, why don't we just build something else, like what Buckminster Fuller used to say. Instead of critiquing the current system, you have to make a new system that will render the previous system superfluous or irrelevant. So as artists we need to build institutions, we need to be institutional.

That's why I created *The School of Panamerican Unrest*. It was real in many ways. We conducted more programming and more workshops than many museums have done in many years. *The School of Panameri-*

can *Unrest* was my attempt to explore or defend the idea that these two things are not contradictory, the idea of revolution and the idea of stability could coexist. The PRI was very problematic but it did exist for 71 years, and the culture did not disappear. Maybe it is also part of what art making is; art making is that combination of revolutions and stabilizations. Nothing can be constantly revolutionary forever.

It's almost impossible to find an artist who was changing for their entire career, who revolutionized all the time.

Institutions also provide some safety for these kinds of practices. Education departments, for example, frequently support socially engaged art. Something that I think about, while working outside of art institutions, is that the safety net is gone. Is that something that you experienced with *The School of Panamerican Unrest*? Was there hostility around you being identified as an artist?

I experienced incredible hostility in almost every respect. Not always because I was an art-

ist, more usually because I was coming from New York. In Venezuela people were saying that I was pro-Bush. There was an imperialist feeling to it for some people and there was a missionary feel to others; people wanted me to solve their lives.

In respect to what you were asking about education departments in museums, I did experience a very interesting difference between the northern part of the project and the southern part. The northern part was relatively well supported by local institutions. Like in Portland, I did it at PNCA and a bunch of other places. We had a very comfortable gallery to hold our conversations and we had a budget. I stayed in a nice place. That did not happen in other places. I was in the plazas, we were trying to prevent people from stealing our stuff in the street and we were completely exposed. Many times people thought I was an evangelist and people would tell me, "We're catholic here, we're not interested in your protestant ideas whatever." Other people thought I was an Optician, because the school symbol is a bell with an eye. So people would come wanting to get their eyes tested. But there was a wonderful ambiguity there, which was much more interesting than when I was with an institution. When you enter a place like the MoMA and you see a project you say, "Oh, this is an artwork." But when you are in the middle of the city, like in Honduras or Paraguay, then there is no reference, except that it is very odd to see this kind of public art there. So I loved the possibility of what you could do with that ambiguity; in a way it was liberating.



Pablo Helguera, *Mock Turtle*, 2001.
Courtesy of the Artist.

What I'm trying to say is that projects like this, they can have the ability to benefit from the different context in which they appear. In the specific context of the museum, the reason why education departments appear to be very welcoming and very appropriate for this kind of stuff is because they are designed for people. Education is about people and about visitors and they are adjusted to the porosity of social relationships. Curatorial departments, historically, are about objects and connoisseurship. They are about understanding the object and how to exhibit it and how to maintain its narrative and things like that. More and more these divisions are eroding.

1. Helguera, P. (2011). *Education for a socially engaged art*. (p. 80). New York, NY: Jorge Pinto Books.

2. Malaguzzi, L. (1994). *Your image of the child: Where teaching begins*. *Early childhood educational exchange*, (96), 52-61.

3. Finklepearl, T. (2012, October). *Creative time summit*, New York, NY.

4. Helguera, P. (2010). *Notes towards a transpedagogy*. In K. Ehrlich (Ed.), *Art, architecture, pedagogy: Experiments in learning* (pp. 98-112). Valencia, California: Center for Integrated Media (Helguera, 2010)