

The Pedagogical Impulse: Aberrant Residencies and Classroom Ecologies

by Stephanie Springgay



Artist residencies no longer occur only in specialized studio venues dedicated to artistic production, but also take shape in schools, farms, campgrounds, restaurants, hotels, hospitals and even incorporate mobile devices such as vans and bicycles. One such aberrant model is *The Pedagogical Impulse*, a research-creation project at the intersection between social practice, knowledge production, pedagogy and “school.” As a site for artistic research in art and education, the project has initiated a number of experimental, critical and collaborative projects, including a series of artist residencies across a number of educational sites in Toronto with artists Sarah Febbraro, Shannon Gerard, Rodrigo Hernandez-Gomez, Hannah Jickling, Hazel Meyer and Helen Reed.¹

The larger research-creation project draws on Pablo Helguera’s concept of “transpedagogy”—a term used to describe projects that “blend educational processes and art-making in works that offer an experience that is clearly different from conventional art academies or formal art education.”² In transpedagogy, the pedagogical value is not in the transfer of art skills or techniques; rather, the pedagogical process becomes the artwork.

Today there are an increasing number of artists whose practices are concerned with transpedagogy. Often referred to as socially engaged art, such projects function in a transdisciplinary way, re-conceptualizing particular problems or conditions through artistic practices. Important precedents to socially engaged art and transdisciplinary methodologies include the Artist Placement Group (APG) and the conceptualization of the artist as cultural worker, both of which emerged in the 1960s.

The Artist Placement Group, created in 1965 by Barbara Steveni and founded a year later by Steveni and her former partner John Latham, along with Barry Flanagan, David Hall, Anna Ridley and Jeffrey Shaw, influenced the shift in artistic practice away from solitary studio production. The APG placed artists in industry and later in government departments as a way for artists to relocate their practices away from the studio and gallery and to redefine the role of artists in society. The radical premise behind the placements was what the APG called the “open brief”: the placements were not directed by the host organization, there was no obligation or expectation of services rendered by the artists and outcomes were not determined in advance but the artists were to be paid a wage by the host organi-

zation. In developing an art practice beyond the studio and exhibition space, the “artist assumes the role of facilitating creativity among ‘everyday’ people.”³ The APG fostered the belief that artists have a “useful contribution to make to the world, and that artists can serve society—not by making works of art, but through their verbal interactions in the context of institutions and organisations.”⁴ The model developed by Steveni shifted the typical patronage or commercial ties between industry and artists, insisting that art was a valuable research and educational practice for these organizations.

Scholars have begun to draw parallel links between the work of the APG and artists working with participatory frameworks. A survey exhibition of the APG’s practices, mounted at the Raven Row gallery in London in 2012, curated by Steveni, Antony Hudek and Alex Sainsbury, attests to the APG’s ubiquitous influence on contemporary art. As part of our ongoing research-creation project on aberrant residencies, Helen Reed, Hannah Jickling and I spent a week at the Tate Archives sifting through the APG collection, visiting the Raven Row exhibition and interviewing Barbara Steveni and Antony Hudek.⁵

The history of the APG is of particular value for art education in examining the practices of artists who work collectively with students and teachers in public schools. In our interview with Hudek, he asked how the APG work might be used politically. How does the APG impact practitioners today? And beyond the legacy of the APG as a historical archeology located in the archives at the Tate, what is the value of re-examining this work in the context of art education?⁶

While Hudek's questions stimulate a number of conversations regarding the APG's significance, our focus is on the "open brief" and its implications for school-based residencies.⁷ Examining the practices of the APG provides useful insights into The Pedagogical Impulse residencies. Current school-based art education curricula are typically governed by ready-made concepts and pre-determined ideas and opinions, re-enforcing dogmatic understandings while conforming to normative ideology. In contrast, the "open brief," Steveni argues, is a process of "not knowing," which becomes "the basis of action moving forward,"⁸ and which engenders a relational, aberrant and ecological re-formation of art, classroom and life. Our interest in the APG and artist residencies is shaped by questions such as: what do we mean when we attach "pedagogy" as a term of reference to artistic practice, and to artist residencies? And what are the implications of situating residencies in and alongside "learning" in schools?

The Open Brief

The APG negotiated placements with individual businesses such as British Steel, Scottish Television, Esso, Ocean Fleets Ltd., and government offices such as the Department of Health and the Department of the Environment, and much later the Southwark Education Department. The placements ideally occurred in two phases: a feasibility study that might last one or two months, followed by a longer engagement.¹⁰

APG's emphasis on "placement," "context" and the "artist as cultural worker" sought to

foster links between art and other disciplines whereby the "artist moves out of the closed art world into the domain of decision making and recognized areas of large-scale problem handling."¹¹

In an undated memo, provided to us by Steveni, the APG describes the procedure for a placement to consist of a brief feasibility study followed by a longer "fellowship" period. The main feature of the placement was that the organization paid the artist but there was no commitment by the artist to produce a work of art with the funds. In the feasibility period, the artist would spend time with the host organization, to learn about the context of the placement, often using methods similar to ethnographic fieldwork, such as participation, observation, research design, defining objectives and problem-posing. Instead of asking industry to fund one-off projects by artists, or to provide resources and materials for artists to create art, the APG model emphasized that "context is half the work." The APG's aim was to contribute to society by bringing creative practices to bear on problems or issues identified within the host organization. The host organization did not pre-determine a problem, but rather through the open brief, or a period of "not-knowing," the artist moved through the day-to-day operations of the organization in order to focus on an area of interest. The artist—who would later be called the "Incidental Person"—was free to function as he or she wished and to discover relationships between previously unrelated areas.

In 1989, the APG changed its name to O+I

"The artist—who would later be called the 'Incidental Person'—was free to function as he or she wished and to discover relationships between previously unrelated areas."

Hazel Meyer, *Walls to the Ball*, 2012, collaborative artwork with grade 10, 11 and 12 Toronto students.
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE PEDAGOGICAL IMPULSE



(Organization and Imagination) in an effort to distinguish itself from arts council funded projects that situated artists in schools and adopted the term “placement.” This pervasive model of artist residencies places artists in schools on a short-term, project-oriented basis in order to supplement the regular teacher’s art curriculum. Some of the challenges faced by such programs include lack of collaboration between artist and classroom teacher, and an object-oriented focus that is not context-specific—in other words, what an artist produces in one school is similarly produced in another without any regard for classroom or school context. These artist placement models are focused on the art object and hands-on experiential learning that supplements the existing curriculum, rather than thinking about how the classroom itself becomes an artistic practice.

In 1989, O+I established its first school-based placement called the Southwark Educational Research Project. This placement took place in six elementary and six secondary schools in inner London at a time when the responsibility for education was being passed to local authorities. O+I’s objective was to examine the drop-out rate of students between secondary school and post-secondary education using film, interview protocols and observational methods. In an era of outcomes-based research, the pressure to produce measurable results was not lost on Steveni. Instead, she organized a community action at the local town hall where video documentation of the O+I placement was screened, and various community members,

“This pervasive model of artist residencies places artists in schools on a short-term, project-oriented basis in order to supplement the regular teacher’s art curriculum.”

Helen Reed and Hannah Jickling, *Ask Me Chocolates*, 2012
collaborative artwork with Toronto grade six class.
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE PEDAGOGICAL IMPULSE



teachers, students, parents and the artists involved used the artistic practice as research to catapult conversations, actions and new ways of thinking about educational reform. Unlike current models of artists working in schools, where their function and outcome is already determined, O+I's educational placement was a radical departure for artists, long before other school-based interventions had taken shape.¹² Moreover, the Southwark Educational Project reflects Helguera's concerns about transpedagogical projects. He suggests that artists working with transpedagogy need to better understand existing educational structures in order to transform and reinvent them. Similar to the "open brief" methodology, transpedagogical practices should not focus on art as a discipline but rather on the social processes of exchange.

Helguera contends that socially engaged art practices range from symbolic to actual, a distinction he feels is necessary in understanding the work as democratizing, radical or collaborative. Symbolic practices are designed to address issues metaphorically or symbolically while actual practices affect the public sphere in meaningful ways. Typical artist-in-school placements are symbolic gestures that introduce students to professional artists and to art skills and techniques, while rarely enabling students to become collaborators in the construction of the work, or to connect the practice of creating and making with research, modes of inquiry and life. Helguera writes: "There are as many kinds of participation as there are participatory projects, but nominal or symbolic interac-

tion cannot be equated with an in-depth, long-term exchange of ideas, experiences, and collaborations, as their goals are different."¹³ Informed by the "open brief" methodology and Helguera's conception of transpedagogy, we developed *The Pedagogical Impulse* residencies, which consisted of 12 projects sited in seven Toronto schools and two community arts spaces.

The Pedagogical Impulse

In *The Pedagogical Impulse* residencies, an artist—or sometimes two artists—collaborated with a classroom teacher or host organization and a group of students to inquire into a curriculum concept through artistic interventions. The artists did not approach the residencies with pre-established art projects in mind nor a set of technical skills they wanted the students to master. Rather, what emerged in each classroom context was co-composed between teachers, artists and students through class discussions, small experimental activities, artistic interventions, slide-shows of contemporary art, research-driven assignments and student interests. Like the "Incidental Person," artists were installed in classrooms as intrinsic perversions, opening the classroom to unintended consequences.

Hannah Jickling and Helen Reed's *Ask Me Chocolates* is a series of limited edition artist multiples created with a group of grade six students at Multiple Elementary.¹⁴ Examining trade and value, the students worked with Jickling and Reed for five months experimenting with discrete artistic gestures including: making and selling snowballs (when snow was

“..what emerged in each classroom context was co-composed between teachers, artists and students through class discussions, small experimental activities, artistic interventions, slide-shows of contemporary art, research-driven assignments and student interests.”

Rodrigo Hernández-Gómez, *Museum Without Entrance*, students at the Contemporary Zoological Conservatory, Toronto, 2013.
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE PEDAGOGICAL IMPULSE



a rarity in the city); using the subway as a studio; visiting two chocolate-making facilities—the Cadbury factory and Chocosol, a pedal-powered, stone-ground, horizontally-traded chocolatier; and learning about trade, artists’ multiples, the history of bathroom humour in art, child labour and the cacao industry, “labourness” and artists’ interventions into the world of commerce. The culminating project included each student designing their own chocolate mould, which was then used to create a limited edition set of multiples. These chocolate multiples were subsequently traded with other students in the school for songs, services and objects such as books, a lightsabre, a can of tuna, an autographed baseball, a serenade, dancing, and a headstand. Resisting a formula for both art practice and curricula-making, Jickling and Reed created conditions for networks of solidarity and sociality in the class. Rather than flattening education, Jickling and Reed transformed the classroom from a site of transmission of what one already knows to a laboratory fuelled by investigation, curiosity and in(ter)vention. Instigating their residencies with snowball sales, a walk through a neighbourhood or the re-branding of garbage, their pedagogical frame of reference is suggestive of Gilles Deleuze writing that “we never know in advance how someone will learn.”¹⁵ The chocolates become a co-composed learning event that unfolds and enfolds through different social interactions.

Rodrigo Hernandez-Gomez’s *Museum Without Entrance* (MWE), which he executed with five different classes in a range of schools across the city, similarly reflects this openness

“...chocolate multiples were subsequently traded with other students in the school for songs, services and objects such as books, a lightsabre, a can of tuna, an autographed baseball, a serenade, dancing, and a headstand.”



Rodrigo Hernandez-Gomez, *Museum Without Entrance*, 2013, Toronto students at the Contemporary Zoological Conservatory. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE PEDAGOGICAL IMPULSE

“In a traditional museum, the relationship between the artifacts, the collector and the visitor often maintain an impersonal quality and a complex symbolic distance. The intent here is to provide students with an experience, instead of formal references or prescribed understandings about contemporary art.”



Rodrigo Hernandez-Gomez, *Museum Without Entrance*, 2013
 ribbon cutting with students and ASAP Locks.
 IMAGE COURTESY OF THE PEDAGOGICAL IMPULSE

to unintended consequences. MWE develops from the idea of decentering our prescribed relationships to cultural activities. The project brings together collectors, private collections and audiences in the city of Toronto to create the MWE. For example, two secondary art classes visited the store ASAP Locks, where they had the opportunity to examine safes from the 1800s up close, see hundreds of different locking mechanisms that highlighted the changing history and landscape of Toronto architecture, and experiment with locking themselves up using an antique set of handcuffs from the Don Jail. The MWE visits become an encounter with the collector’s particular point of view, and his or her motives and method of collecting, as well as the particularities of the site where the artifacts are kept. The collection and the site together express a lot about local history and values. This experience is meant to open up a space that allows the students to draw connections between themselves, the artifacts in the collection and the city. In a traditional museum, the relationship between the artifacts, the collector and the visitor often maintain an impersonal quality and a complex symbolic distance. The intent here is to provide students with an experience, instead of formal references or prescribed understandings about contemporary art. Countering the tendency in art education to be discipline-specific, Hernandez-Gomez is not concerned with contextualizing the project or locating it for students within the history of art. Rather than validating the work from the outside, the

project operates as almost a counter-curricular measure, placing students in an unfamiliar context outside of the classroom and formal art structures, while intervening into private spaces and emphasizing being *in situ*.

Hernandez-Gomez’s destabilization of artistic canons and spectatorship is an interesting dilemma because the notion of “audience” has historically been a part of the discourse of art. For the APG, its survival in the art world is burdened by the “dead weight” and impenetrability of its archival documentation. Similarly, the work produced in the school residencies becomes inaccessible to an outside audience, an audience that was not involved in the process. Because classrooms are closed spaces, invisible and unobservable by an audience, the work is often devalued.¹⁶ Hudek argues that the paradox of representation is dangerous, noting that the recent APG show had the potential to congeal and crystallize something that should remain fluid.¹⁷ Presented as “documentation,” both the APG and the school-based residencies risk becoming fetishized objects, a kind of aestheticized encounter with distant others. Perhaps the embedded criticality of MWE, and its radical incompleteness, means that we need to become, in the words of the Raqs Media Collective, “comfortable with the idea that the circumference of a work is always larger than the boundedness of its nominated authorship. The work of art is never done, and so there is always room for another authorship.”¹⁸ Whether examining an assortment of locks and safes at ASAP Locks, folk art in

the living room of Mr. Fujikawa, or getting friendly with some unusual taxidermy at the Contemporary Zoological Conservatory, the project became what it was because of the immediate connections between students, collections and collectors. Instead of viewing knowledge as external to an event of learning, something to be measured and accounted for prior to or after the experience itself, learning becomes co-extensive to the project. In these moments learning becomes an ecology of inhabitation. It is no longer a sum of parts, but expresses itself as a conjunctive, an interstitial space of movement. What matters is not outcome or impact, but affect, dispersion and resonance, which enables different people, with different subjectivities and capacities, to enter the field of practice in and through difference.

Such an account of difference materializes in *Walls to the Ball* and *Ponytail Express*, two projects that place relationships, movement and exchange at the core of their production. *Walls to the Ball* is an ongoing project by Hazel Meyer. In one iteration of the project, she worked with two classes at a Toronto secondary school, integrating sport, movement, textiles and gender. Students experimented with different knotting techniques, including macramé and braiding, and collaborated on producing two large basketball-type nets, each one stretching 12 metres in length. After weeks of braiding labour in the art classroom, the students installed the project in the gym, tying the two netted-constructions together. The school community was invited during lunch hour to interact and engage with the net, which included jumping over it, swinging it, and shooting any number of the 15 basketballs that were in play. One student was enlisted to use a drum to create a rhythmic beat in the gym space.

Like at many other schools in the city, this school's art program measured artistic success on accuracy of representation, favoring a particularly conservative and formalist attitude towards art based on the transmission of expert knowledge. Rather, emphasizing movement and activation, Meyer's projects intervene into the existing curriculum to create new kinds of micropolitical potential. For instance, Meyer's *Ponytail Express*, a project realized in collaboration with the Art Gallery of Ontario's Youth Council, and *Friday*, a project by Sarah Febbraro and a grade 10–12 art class that re-appropriated the high school talent show, speak to the ways that learning arises from chaotic and unpredictable encounters.

Re-conceptualizing residencies as micropolitical, as ecologies of habitation, is an ethical engagement that deterritorializes dominant codes and normalizing structures embedded within education. Ecology, in the broadest sense of the word, refers to experimentation, complex patterns of relation and co-adaptation between processes that are actively shaped through interrelation. Ecology is not the preservation of endangered species, according to the philosopher Felix Guattari, but rather it engenders "conditions for the creation and development of unprecedented formations of subjectivity that have never been seen and never felt."¹⁹ If our concern is to create transpedagogical practices in the arts that are more than simply symbolic gestures at learning, then perhaps we need to rethink *in situ* as ecologies of inhabitation. In this sense, then, learning as compliance becomes learning as an ongoing event, aberrant, diverging and departing from intended and knowable frameworks. It is the undecidability of pedagogy *in situ* that enables us to participate in, and potentially change, how we negotiate classrooms, learning and life. ×

Stephanie Springgay is an Associate Professor in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. Her research focuses on the intersections between contemporary art and pedagogy, with a particular interest in theories of movement and affect. Her most recent research-creation projects are documented at www.thepedagogicalimpulse.com and www.artistsoupkitchen.com. She has published widely in academic journals and is the co-editor of the book M/othering a Bodied Curriculum: Theories and Practices of Relational Teaching (University of Toronto Press), with Debra Freedman; co-editor of Curriculum and the Cultural Body (Peter Lang) with Debra Freedman; and author of Body Knowledge and Curriculum: Pedagogies of Touch in Youth and Visual Culture (Peter Lang).

Endnotes

- 1 www.thepedagogicalimpulse.com
- 2 Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art* (New York: Jorge Pinto Books, 2011), 77.
- 3 Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (New York: Verso, 2012), 163.
- 4 Bishop, 164.
- 5 These interviews with various artists, curators and arts educators are published on the "Living Archive" section of www.thepedagogicalimpulse.com.
- 6 Antony Hudek, interview with the author.
- 7 Stephanie Springgay is the lead researcher on this project. She has worked collaboratively with her research team: Arden Hagedorn, Patrick Phillips, Nikki Rotas, Julie Smitka, Sarah Truman and Zofia Zaliwska, all graduate students at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.
- 8 Barbara Steveni, interview with the author.
- 9 Steveni's authorship of the APG (later renamed O+I), and her pivotal role in negotiating placements for and developing the international profile of the APG, has been obscured in historical records and in art publications by the work of her former husband and partner John Latham.
- 10 Antony Hudek and Alex Sainsbury, "The APG Approach," in *The Individual and the Organisation: Artist Placement Group 1966–79* (2012). Published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name, shown at Raven Row Gallery, London, UK. www.ravenrow.org/pdf/42/tr_apg_final_spreads.pdf.
- 11 Southwark Educational Research Project publication (nd)
- 12 Antony Hudek, interview with the author.
- 13 Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, 13.
- 14 School names have been changed in order to maintain anonymity.
- 15 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 165.
- 16 Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, 2012
- 17 Antony Hudek, interview with the author.
- 18 Raqs Media Collective, "How To Be an Artist at Night," in *Art School (Propositions for the 21st Century)*, ed. Steven Henry Madoff (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 78.
- 19 Félix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-aesthetic Paradigm* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 91.