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## Suzanne Lacy and Pablo Helguera in Conversation



*Pablo Helguera, Sara Reisman, and Suzanne Lacy on November 2, 2017 at Corwin Pavilion, UC Santa Barbara. (Photo by Elyse Gonzales.)*

**ELYSE GONZALES:** My name is Elyse Gonzales, and I am the Assistant Director and Curator of exhibitions at the Art, Design, & Architecture Museum at UC Santa Barbara. This talk came out of an exhibition that is currently on view at the Museum, titled *The Schoolhouse and the Bus: Engagement, Pedagogy, and Mobility. Two Projects by Pablo Helguera and Suzanne Lacy with Pilar Riaño-Alcalá*, and which is part of *Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA*, an initiative that includes over 70 different exhibitions that examine the widespread and ambitious exploration of Latin America and Latino art in dialogue with Los Angeles. This exhibition is curated by myself and co-curator Sara

Reisman, who is the Executive and Artistic Director of the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation, which is focused on supporting art and social justice through grant-making to organizations and exhibitions at The 8th Floor. She will be moderating the conversation.

**SARA REISMAN:** According to Wikipedia, “Social practice is an art medium that focuses on engagement through human interaction and social discourse. Since it is people and their relationships that form the medium of such works—rather than a particular process of production—social engagement is not only a part of a work’s organization, execution, or continuation, but also an aesthetic in itself: of interaction and development. Socially engaged art aims to create social and/or political change through collaboration with individuals, communities, and institutions in the creation of participatory art. The discipline values the process of a work over any finished product or object.”

**SUZANNE LACY:** So, did you write that, Pablo?

**SR:** Well, it’s interesting you ask that, because I looked at the sources, and the first two footnotes were Pablo Helguera, from his Education for Socially Engaged Art, and Tom Finkelpearl, who is the Commissioner of Cultural Affairs in New York City and who has done a lot of writing and advocacy around social practice. But there was a time, not that long ago, when the terms “socially engaged art” or “social practice” were not in use. So, I want to pose the question to each of you, do you consider yourselves socially engaged artists? Are you working with social practice?

**SL:** Terminology, such as social practice, helps us move from one evolution of the practice to the next. Years ago I termed it “new genre public art” as a way to emphasize how public art and new genre art could mix in a practice that extended beyond the art world. At this point I consider myself part of the discourses on social practice, socially engaged art, performance, and conceptual art. I think terminology announces and frames new forms of inquiry, something fundamental to this experimental practice.

**PABLO HELGUERA:** Yes, I agree with Suzanne, and I would say and add that perhaps the same problem applies to the definition of art in general. When you see people who aren’t very familiar with art, the first question they ask is, “But is it art?”; and they also ask whether there’s an answer to that question. Well, they think there’s an answer to that question, and if the answer is “no,” then of course the artwork in question is, in their view, worthless. But as I think, and as all of us who work in the art field know, it’s really much less about what it’s called than what it does. And it doesn’t really matter how you call it at this moment, because it probably will be called something different ten, twenty, fifty years from now. I think this becomes almost a red herring for many artists. How do you define yourself? How do you describe your practice in an elevator pitch? That doesn’t really matter. What really matters is the set of concerns that informs what you do, and how those concerns turn into an activity, action, work, or gesture that becomes meaningful. I think that these types of things that we are doing right now, which we have a hard time defining because of the proximity of time, will eventually be called whatever, but what really concerns us as artists is how what we do becomes relevant.

**SL:** Remember when Nicolas Bourriaud invented that great label of “Relational Aesthetics,” and we were all so excited about the title and so disillusioned about what was in it?

**SR:** Why were you disillusioned?

**SL:** He basically selected gallery-based practices through the work of a few artists, almost all men. The related practices that emerged in galleries are interesting, but what people got excited about was the idea of foregrounding relationships in a practice, which, by the way, was fundamental to early feminist art. The feminist origins of social practice are not fully explored yet; I understand Kari Conte is thinking of this territory.

**PH:** Yes, exactly. I do remember when relational aesthetics came into vogue, and all these artists were being written about and having exhibitions. I was an educator at The Guggenheim Museum, and I was working on shows for these artists, and that's when I realized that this term and its way of defining what these guys did was really not relational at all, or was relational in a very limited capacity, let's say. What I meant was that the kind of participation that went on in certain exhibitions or pieces that these artists were making was not really deeply engaging with an audience, and that was one of the first moments where I felt that I wanted to make work that truly was about interpersonal relationships and conversations with individuals, and not simply nominal participation.

**SL:** What was interesting was that the book [Relational Aesthetics] focused our attention on that aspect of the work, helping along a discourse on the nature of relational aesthetics. That's where I think these names or titles become helpful as building blocks. One of the things going on now is that social practice as a term gets mixed up with endeavors from other fields, like architecture or political science. I always add the caveat "social practice art." The way "social practice" is used allows us to think through relationships in a discipline-based practice that is social and relational.

**SR:** Or mixed up with graphic design. I've heard graphic designers say, "Graphic design is a social practice," because you have to engage with people to come up with the design. To take this in the direction of the exhibition that's on view at the Art, Design, & Architecture Museum—The Schoolhouse and the Bus: Mobility, Pedagogy, and Engagement—the exhibition really emerged in response to artworks of yours that Elyse and I thought overlapped. The "schoolhouse" is Pablo's The School of Panamerican Unrest; it's the space in which the activation of that project has largely taken place, where it's kind of a prompt for the cultural exchange that Pablo facilitated throughout the Americas. The "bus" refers to the mobile museum of Suzanne's Skin of Memory. Elyse and I were interested in how these two projects are conceptually linked, but they're also geographically linked. There is a point of intersection in Medellín, Colombia. Not literally; it's not like you met on the road together, but I wanted to make the connection that this was our thinking. There are many other intersections we could've made, I think, but something happened once we settled on The Schoolhouse and the Bus. Prior to this exhibition, you hadn't shown together before, from what I understand. However, there is a moment that you worked together, at the College Art Association. Could you talk about how you knew of each other's work and what it means to show together?

**PH:** When as an art student, at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, I had just arrived from Mexico, I thought I was going to be making paintings. I wanted to be a muralist. And then I had to take a performance art class, and I hated performance art. I thought it was ridiculous, it didn't make any sense to me. The class was with a professor who was a young performance artist at the time. She started showing videos of different artists, and—this is 1989—at some point, she showed a video of an artist named Suzanne Lacy, and it was a work made in '83/'84, "Whisper, the Waves, the Wind."

It was a video of a performance, a project that Suzanne had done in collaboration with Sharon Allen, on the beach of California, inviting women who were 65 and older to sit at the beach and then speak about their experiences. That piece had quite an impact on me, because it helped me confront and reflect on my cultural values. I was going through a difficult period, trying to make sense of American culture and the way that it saw its own history. And I always felt that it did not value it properly, that there was a sense that this was a society always looking to the future, but not very good at looking at the past. And I was coming from a country that always looks at the past and is not very good at looking at the future.

I did not think about doing performance for a long time, but that piece always stayed in my mind. So, for me it's, of course, a big honor to be in dialogue with Suzanne. And when I actually met Suzanne, if I recall, I think it was in 2008 when we were at a conference together at the Hayward Gallery organized by Sally Tallant from The Serpentine. If you have never met Suzanne, when you meet

her, you'll see how accessible she is and how it's easy to talk to her, and in my job when I'm in museums, I work with a lot of artists who come to lecture at the museum, and I can tell you that's not usually what happens with women artists of that stature. I appreciated it very much. It also signaled to me that there is a trait of artists who work in the realm of social practice: You have to be open to other people. It's no longer the type of practice that is about locking yourself in a studio and just being with yourself making these masterpieces, and in this very private environment. What we do is very public, and even though we have our introspective moments, we are working with others all the time, and it's crucial for us to have that type of openness.

**SL:** Speaking of relational aesthetics, you might have just put your finger on an important aspect of this practice that is deeply reflective and personal. We operate within a public and/or a relational space where our subjectivity meets with another subjectivity, or other subjectivities. If you think about the studio as a metaphor for reflection and communication, for us the difference could be that we're not reflecting with materials but with engagement and conversation processes.

Back in the 70s at The Woman's Building (and before at CalArts) we were inventing new forms of performance art, making it up as we went along. For one of my classes, I did a project called "Self-Other." The first assignment was to figure out some issue the students cared about deeply—part of their own experience—and do a performance around that theme. Then, a week later, they were asked to reflect on how that issue was part of a larger social issue or phenomenon and make a broader, more analytic statement. Finally, I asked them to go out and actually find someone who was identifiable with that experience and do a project about that. So, for example, when I was a kid, I used to collect things from the alley, scavenging from trash cans, and I began to think about that as a practice having to do with homelessness. And then that led me to do "The Bag Lady," which was to go out and try to connect with homeless people. That sort of movement between the self and the other and the constant reflection about what that means on a social or political level, to empathize with an experience, seems fundamental to this process.

**PH:** Speaking of performing, I also want to mention that when I was in my student years in Chicago, when I graduated, it was really difficult to exhibit your work in galleries. There was a recession in the early 90s. But Chicago had, and still has, an amazing theater community. And sooner or later, I landed in a little community theater known as The Blue Rider Theater, and I started doing theater and performance. And then I started dealing with actors. Something that I really loved about the theater acting process was the interdependence that exists in a play, because when you do a play, you completely depend on your team to really work. If somebody doesn't remember his or her line, then the whole play is ruined, right? I really loved the emotional connections that would take place in a process like this. What it showed me was that it was completely different from the studio experience that I was describing, where it was so self-centered and so much about you competing against the others. This was really about doing something together and about learning how to negotiate and learn from one another. I feel that's always been something that at least personally has been of great interest to me. And I think that also plays a role when you are doing a social practice project, which is, in a way, perhaps, working on a social script that is unfolding and that you're writing collectively.

**SL:** To answer your question about when I first heard of Pablo's work, I was in the Creative Capital network as well. I saw this funded project, this young guy that was going to drive all the way from Alaska to the tip of South America. And I thought, "That's a really interesting performance," because I immediately understood the notion of a journey. Also, I'm into cars and driving and things. [laughter] The challenge of going from the tip of one continent to another was very interesting, a form of conceptual work. It was reminiscent of the 70s and immersion in experience. Barbara T. Smith did an interesting work that involved a long journey. And then you added the complexity of the

engagement with multiple people along the way. I was very drawn to the project even before I knew you.

**SR:** That's a good lead into the context for the two projects that are on view at the AD&A Museum. So we'll start with Suzanne. *Skin of Memory* came out of certain conditions, and you were approached about the project. Can you talk a little bit about what you were asked to respond to, who reached out to you, and how?

**SL:** I was working on a set of projects in Oakland that led me down a path of learning about the relationship between class, race, and age in California, and how legal and public policies were being shaped as a result of social circumstances within which young people lived. I met Pilar Riaño-Alcalá in Vancouver during that time, when I invited her to do an anti-racism workshop with a group of 30 young women I was working with there. Pilar immediately saw the relationship between the violence and youth culture themes in the 90s in Medellín, Colombia (the site of her research) and what was going on in Oakland—not just the violence per se, but the way in which young people were imaginaries upon which the public located its fears.

The drug culture had eroded poor youth of color and their communities in California and in Colombia. There was reportedly governmental collusion with the drug trade in both regions. And the youth culture in Oakland and Medellín was vibrant and resilient. Pilar invited me to work with her in Medellín, to support the anthropological community field work she was doing on the relationship between memory and violence in that country, and how memory work might reduce violence.

I was invited into a circle of activists and historians and social practitioners of various kinds who were working on civil society in Colombia. Their beginning work, since the early 90s, resulted in a national movement that was one generator of the peace process under way there right now.

**SR:** And is it typical that you would be invited in as an artist? Has that happened in many other instances?

**SL:** I'm usually invited around an issue and I join forces with political organizations in different places. But in my own town, like Oakland when I lived there, I might choose my own issues. In Medellín, an invitation was definitely necessary. I could not have entered such an activated political space without an invitation. We created this museum of memories that would reflect the memories of people in a small and historic community, provoking a collective exploration of how memory was intertwined with violence as well as serving as a key to reducing local violence.

**SR:** Pablo, you were responding to a different set of conditions with *The School on Panamerican Unrest*, correct?

**PH:** The seed of the project really came after 9/11. I was in New York on 9/11. In the days following those events, many of us felt completely paralyzed. Particularly, I felt that art-making was useless at that moment, that it was really impossible to even think about making art in that climate. And that went on for a little while. Later, as the Bush doctrine started rattling and growing toward the invasion of Iraq, I became very interested in exploring the history of US foreign policy.

As a Mexican national, of course I immediately turned to the parallels between US National security policy and the history of US foreign relations in Latin America, which in the nineteenth century included the Monroe doctrine and especially the idea of Manifest Destiny, which was an important fuel to the US-Mexico war. In addition, as an immigrant, I was very much aware of the way in which other Latin Americans, people from all parts of Latin America, bonded with one another outside of Latin America, how we bonded through cultural relationships and connections, and how difficult it is to see that in Latin America itself. It happens when we all are foreigners and we are in a third place,

but not so much when we are in our respective countries. Mexico rarely looks south, and the South looks more to Europe. Argentina looks more to France and Spain than it will look to Mexico.

At the same time, the European Union was becoming a very important, powerful conglomerate, a full financial bloc, and I kept wondering, “Why in Latin America don’t we have something similar?” So I came to the conclusion that it would be really interesting to have a series of conversations through the Americas, asking what is Pan-Americanism? How should North and South America best interrelate culturally? If we were countries that were born around the same time, and our modernities or political processes were born around the same time, how is it that we are so divided? Initially, I wanted to do this by flying to different cities, but it didn’t feel right. It would just be costly and not really be that interesting. And one day, I was writing a grant to Creative Capital, and then I had this crazy idea, “Well, I’m just gonna say I’m gonna drive.” I got excited with the application process. And when you write these grants, you promise the world. And to my surprise, I got the grant. So then I had to do it.

It was actually a really interesting process. The reality is I became much more enamored with the idea that driving the entirety of the Pan-American Highway was not only an important symbolic gesture but was also, in my view, consistent with the enormity of the Americas. I also wanted to connect with the history of the various travelers, from the missionaries to Humboldt to the beat poets, to so many different people who had travelled through the Americas, and to trace a little bit of those patterns in the journey.

As I researched the history of Pan-Americanism, I discovered a number of videos that were produced by an office created after World War II in the United States, such as Journey to Bananaland. Many of the films produced in the United States about Latin America had the political purpose to sensitize American audiences toward the identities of the countries that were to the south. It was a political niche, because the US needed to create bonds between the US and the rest of the countries. It had to do with the Cold War and what eventually became the Good Neighbor policy.

There was an office created around that time called the Office of Inter-American Affairs that produced a number of educational videos about Latin American countries. While the films must have had good intentions, seen from today’s perspective they come off as incredibly condescending, naïve, and even racist. In a film about Peru, for instance, the narrator describes with great admiration how people who live there can be educated and some might even live in sophisticated homes. The implication, of course, is that people in Latin America should be expected to be primitive, live in huts, and ride donkeys.

As insensitive as it was, it does display an awareness and kind of a curiosity that, though very naïve, is the initiation of an understanding of the other from the American perspective. That was, to me, the beginning of the research project of Pan-Americanism.

Then, in 2003, a curator in Switzerland—this was a few months before the invasion of Iraq, when the invasion was a foregone conclusion—the curator, Frederikke Hansen, at the Shedhalle, in Zurich, invited me to participate in an exhibition about war and peace. When she asked me if I had any ideas for such an exhibition, I told her precisely what I was thinking about. Because I am an educator, I really felt that the best platform for this type of discussion on Pan-Americanism would be a school. Not a school in the sense that I’m the teacher that is teaching others, but rather a school as a collective learning exercise.

I was very interested in creating a schoolhouse that had the qualities of the little schoolhouse on the prairie. The schoolhouse that was built in Switzerland for the initial chapter of the project had the

famous quote by John Donne, “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent...any man’s death diminishes me.” It’s a famous quote that is used by Hemingway in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (the end of quote is, “therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee”). The message that each individual life involves each and every one of us was very important to me, and I felt it pointed to the idea that we all share the same continent, which was a nice way to think about that notion of togetherness that was initially invoked by the idea of Pan-Americanism.

So, I started a series of workshops in that location. After that initial version of the school in Zurich, I realized that the only way that I could actually make this project happen in a meaningful way was to do it in the Americas itself. I did not want to go to the big capitals of the Americas. I did not want to go to just Buenos Aires and São Paulo and New York and L.A. and such, but also go to the small towns, to the small places that also constitute the Americas, and that’s what informed the entire project.

**SL:** For *Skin of Memory*, I was invited to a small community called Barrio Antioquia in the middle of Medellín. The region was beset by multiple forms of violence, including governmental and non-governmental actors, guerrillas, drug traffickers, criminals, and so on. The idea was to take the research of anthropologists, including Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, and put it into a work of public art. The artwork would reflect the ideas that the academics, organizers, and politicians we worked with thought might help rebuild their society. They were thinking about how a city becomes a city that learns. In other words, what can art add to this idea of a pedagogic space that a city occupies? In Barrio Antioquia, which was about I think 20,000 people, about 2,000 homes, the violence was personal: Your son might have killed my father, and when we had the funeral for your son, my nephew might drive by and shoot at the funeral. So it was a violent space, but it also was a place where many people had come together to promote social change. Anthropologists were working on how objects, if they contained memories, could be used in workshops where people shared memories. Could such memory work help reconstruct the social fabric?

So we knew that we were going to make a museum, and it was going to involve objects loaned by people in the community, from their homes, but we couldn’t put it in any one location, because the barrio was so territorialized by past violences. You might not be able to go down the street where one person lived—you created alternative routes based on enmities and grievances, even though it was only two square miles. We made a museum in a bus, filled with objects from people’s homes, that moved from place to place to place. On any given day, some of the people in the barrio could go to this museum over the course of ten days. For the same reasons, we displayed the objects anonymously. So, while they weren’t identified by the owners, collectively they described a community’s loss. Our team of youth helped people in the bus begin to reconstruct the memories, the places, and the people that made the whole. The bus remained violence- and graffiti-free over that time, which was somewhat remarkable.

Then we sent the bus to the main area of Medellín, to the central city area, so that it represented the people of this highly stigmatized barrio in a strong light. Just before we sent it off, we did a parade and performance that delivered hopes and dreams to local residents. Earlier, when residents came to the bus in the barrio, they would be asked to write a letter to an unknown neighbor and leave it in the bus. The idea was once again to subvert territorialities and grudges, like “Ugh, this letter came from Pablo. I don’t like Pablo, and therefore. . . .” Before the bus was sent to the center of the city, we had teams of mimes who delivered the letters back to neighbors along the parade routes. So residents received letters wishing for positive things for the future of the barrio.

**SR:** I’m curious how you engaged people in writing those letters, and who was involved? And what were the objects?

**SL:** We put together a team of mostly young people (there was a mother or two included), and they became a leadership team. Pilar gave them lessons in anthropological research, and they went from house to house—almost every house in the barrio—and asked people, “What object would you loan us that contains a significant memory?” They wrote down the memories, as many of the residents couldn’t write. An interesting result of this project was that the young people on the team—about ten or so—became leaders in their community on subsequent projects. Some of them are actually participating in the project today, gathering objects for this installation, contacting people, sending photos. These were kids whom I first met when they were 18 or so. Now, however, many years later, one has gone to college, one has children who have been killed in violence in the city, one has a small catering business, and so on. When you look at this installation today, you see on one side a video projection from the 1999 project; on the other you’ll see the new iteration of the project from 2011, when we went back for an exhibition at Museo de Antioquia. That exhibition involved creating a single shelf of objects, and talking to 15 of our colleagues there about the intervening years and changes in violence in Medellín. Over 75 people from the 1999 project attended a performative reunion in the middle of the museum during an international meeting of artists on community activism and pedagogy co-curated by Bill Kelley, Jr., called Encuentro Internacional de Medellín (MDE11).

**PH:** I’ll say a little more about mobility, which you mentioned as a component of your project. In 2002, I organized a symposium titled “The Museum as Medium,” a gathering essentially about institutional critique. I had the idea of organizing an event in Mexico City and in New York with the exact same format, because I felt that it would be interesting to have the same questions but different participants and cultural contexts. What was interesting to me was that the same questions generated very different answers because of the local context. In New York, for example, notions of power had mostly to do with economics, while in Mexico City, they had to do with politics.

So, in the following year, when I started thinking about The School of Panamerican Unrest, I wanted to try the same approach. I wanted to ask the same question in completely different places. And indeed, the contrast in the way in which the questions were answered in places as different as Anchorage and Tegucigalpa, Honduras, was dramatic. People would reply, responding to the history of that particular place, the legacy of good and bad things that have happened in those locations. So, in a way, the project became that movable model of questioning that was filled and that was signified against wherever it went.

**SR:** What are the challenges that you each faced doing these projects? I can imagine, Suzanne, you were invited in, but it seems like the cultural fabric would be quite fragile in Medellín when you were there. Or had that fabric already started to strengthen because of this organization?

**SL:** It wasn’t an organization. I want to make clear what it was about this project that was amazing to me. I was used to producing my own “everything”—aesthetic production, community organizing, public relations, fundraising—I come from an era in art production very different from today’s. Most of the people in performance and social practice (we didn’t call it that in the 70s, of course) began outside of museums. I exhibited in museums, as well, but in a retrospective or documentary manner. Basically, my practice was developed within personal and social relations, political structures, organizations and institutions, and what we called the “media surround.” There were no helpful museums raising money, curators directing projects, and so on.

In Medellín I was invited into a really sophisticated group of people—academics, NGO workers, educators—who had been working since the early 90s on creating a civil society in Colombia. They were literary theorists and economists, anthropologists and historians. It was great to be among intellectuals who were also dedicated activists. It was amazing to work in an environment where I

was part of a team, got to be the artist, didn't have to do everything. (In reality I couldn't have done so, as my Spanish is significantly less than fluent.) We worked collectively to figure out what best represented the goals of this working group and how we could integrate into the existing programs and address identified problems that the community faced.

The obvious thing that I thought I would encounter being there was being white, but it turns out that wasn't really the issue that surfaced, as it did in the US communities in which I'd worked. The problem there was being a gringa. I represented a person from the US in Colombia, the epicenter of US intervention in Latin America, a profound militaristic, governmental, and economic presence we exert to our own benefit. People on a personal level are kind and welcoming, but on a political level I was very conscious of the fact that I represented a place they were familiar with, but I also represented a government (not that I represent the government), or at least a country, that has been deeply damaging to the lives of people there. Negotiating that territory was a serious act. Coming from the US I had more stereotypes of the problems in Colombia, but I learned a different set of realities on the ground.

**SR:** Pablo, did you face specific challenges?

**PH:** You can say that the challenges I faced in this project lie at the core of the process of social practice, and more specifically, the role that the artist plays in the process and how one acknowledges his or her role. As Suzanne was saying, she was contending with the cultural baggage that an American carries when entering Colombia. In my case it just varied widely, depending on where I went. In a country like Guatemala, for example, a Mexican artist coming into Guatemala was regarded with great suspicion.

In addition to dealing with one's own cultural baggage, another challenge was to find a strategy to generate productive conversations. In Buenos Aires, for example, people deeply questioned my project philosophically. They would not let me have a conversation with them, because they wanted to talk about what I meant by "conversation." They wanted me to explain what I meant by "explaining." It was such a hair-splitting process of definitions that it made it difficult to make any progress. A key aspect of these dialogues required the participants to show a certain openness and reveal their vulnerabilities; this was difficult to do there. In contrast, in some countries like El Salvador or smaller countries in Central America, participants were really willing to engage along the parameters I proposed. It seems to me that this was because, to people in these countries, the notion of belonging to a larger entity really had a resonance and a relevance. They certainly cared a lot about these issues, and they wanted to humor me by being part of a process that I was proposing. I was proposing a very structured process of discussion and conversation that I was not willing to see any changes to and that was sometimes challenging. But at the same time, I always felt that in order for it to be a true engagement, it needed to happen that way.

So, it was a combination of dealing with the cultural historic backgrounds of every place that I was going to and really trying to find a model of conversational collaboration that would be meaningful and productive for that particular exchange. One of the most wonderful experiences I had was when I arrived at Asunción in Paraguay, a country that had a terrible dictatorship, like many places in South America, and it was struggling at the time, and is still struggling today. When I arrived, the art world there told me, "We're so excited that you are here—you're the first artist that has come from outside in ten years." Artists from Argentina or Brazil or other places that had opportunity to go would rather go to Europe or the US and other places. Nobody cared about going to Paraguay. And that's when I felt that I truly belonged there, in those locations where there's no expectation of anything happening. Those are the places where we as artists are needed. Of course we have to insert ourselves in situations where we feel it's urgent and it's necessary, and we have to be, for example,

part of the political process here in this country and such. But at the same time, we have to pay attention to those communities that feel abandoned or that don't feel included in a conversation.

**SR:** I'm going to move on to the point of pedagogy, since both of you are so deeply involved in pedagogy. The first time I probably heard of an artist saying, "My material is pedagogical," was Gregg Bordowitz, an activist artist who's involved with the Whitney Independent Study Program in New York. And since that time, that was in 2002 or 2003, around the time that you were thinking about doing *The School of Panamerican Unrest*, it became really clear that pedagogy can be a tool for art, and it can also be an art form in itself. How did you come to pedagogy as an art form, and how do you use it?

**SL:** I've been deeply influenced by my teachers. For a working-class kid like me, education was the way out of the tiny little town in the San Joaquin Valley that I grew up in. I'm deeply committed to working-class people and people of color being able to access free education. The more the better.

I was in high school when California passed the Higher Education Act in the 60s. It created a system of junior colleges, state colleges, and universities (this is one of them) that gave every kid that graduated from high school in California the opportunity to go to whichever one of those institutions they had the brains to get into. I happily went to years and years of college, and it changed my life. It got me out of that town, but it gave me a global perspective. Living in Wasco, California, I didn't know that the world comprises incredible differences of experience, and that's what I've learned through my work. For me, the most important aspect of my work is that I learn through the generosity of the people I work with who share their experiences with me.

So the preparation for our work becomes a reciprocal learning environment that takes place over months, sometimes years. I'm still working on a project now in Bristol, England, which I've been involved in for ten years, called "The University of Local Knowledge." It's about working-class knowledge. Working with Penny Evans and Carolyn Hassan, co-founders of the Knowle West Media Centre there, we've collected 900 short videos of "local knowledge" that are arranged into an online "university," with the videos assembled into "classes" and the local residents of Knowle West as teachers.

Pedagogy in art is both part of the process, but also part of the intention of the work, because the work intends to educate in some public way. It might be educating to personal experiences that have political consequence. Coming from feminism, the personal is political. Being engaged with the process of learning through developing the work and through to its public intention style is how I approach the idea of pedagogy. I've been influenced by critical pedagogy, and I find it an interesting way to think about art, in addition to the Western European theory that's a given in art. I appreciate the educators who are critically thinking through what it means to explore power in a reciprocal learning situation.

**PH:** I think the reason education is important for us is because it's a method or a process through which we can accomplish specific goals. But I don't believe that one should expect praise just for engaging in education.

For example, when you say, "My teaching is my art," that becomes a really beautiful thing to say, but it also becomes a cliché. In the end it is not too different from saying, "Checking my iPhone is my art," or "Taking a shower every morning is my art." I'm not interested in simply declaring any sort of activity that I do as an artwork; what I am interested in is learning the language and process of a particular discipline in an effective and impactful way. In education, what's really most important is to use that language that you have learned and employ it toward different goals. And there are so many things we can do with it. The reason I started employing it was because I observed that the

kind of participatory or relational art that was proliferating and celebrated everywhere was based on rather vacuous exchanges. I felt that artists needed to generate processes that led to deeper experiences, and not just to communicating to a select cadre of artist friends, but to all sorts of audiences.

So, for me, artworks that seek recognition for merely saying they are doing education are not interesting. It is what I describe as symbolic play, like children pretending that they are firemen or astronauts. Social practice to me consists in going beyond representation and symbolic play; it is a way to affect the world with actions. In *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, I wrote that the difference from more conventional forms of art-making is that for centuries we have dealt with a tradition of representation where artists are basically making an image of something that is reality, that represents reality. We're talking about reality, and that's totally okay. But social practice tries to be that reality, to not just stay in the realm of representation, but to be in the realm of real action. We're not pretending that we're doing a campaign. We are doing the campaign. It's about inserting yourself in the social process in order to affect it and change it. And if you do not change it, then that matters.

**SL:** So if you don't do an action or if something doesn't happen in the social sphere, can that still be a success as art?

**PH:** I'm not sure about what exactly constitutes success. I had this question when I did the Panamerican project. I wondered, what really constitutes the success of these projects? But we also ask ourselves that for other fields. We ask ourselves about activism: Was a particular movement effective? Was Occupy Wall Street successful or not? These are very difficult questions to answer. In education, it's also difficult, because you don't know the effect of something you learned until sometimes 20 years later. Many times, you see an artwork, let's say, many years before, and then it comes back to you, and then suddenly you come to realizations. I think we contend with the problem that these insights, these realizations, are not immediate, they're not automatic. I absolutely believe that you have to measure and you have to evaluate what you do, and we have to keep ourselves honest, and we have to have mechanisms through which what we do is critiqued and put to the test. But sometimes putting these impossible boundaries or parameters can be detrimental.

**SR:** You gave a kind of structure to one part of the engagement in *The School of Panamerican Unrest*, the Panamerican addresses that you instigated in different cities.

**PH:** That was a very basic component of the project that emerged organically, because initially, I just wanted to have these discussions. But then I felt that the discussions needed to lead somewhere, that we needed to have an actionable item that would emerge from those conversations. That's why, in the second gathering that we had, which was in Vancouver, we decided to put everything we had discussed into some kind of manifesto, and that was the first Panamerican address.

The idea was that the things that we had discussed—the concerns of the city and the cultural community in that particular city—could be expressed in an affirmative or proactive manner through this declaration. It made it official, it made it very open and public, and it almost made us all invested in coming with a deliverable, not simply having a conversation. It was about our saying, "You guys represent the city today. You guys are the representatives. What is your message to the rest of the world about the issues that your city faces?" It became a very symbolic and simple act of civic engagement that, nonetheless, people generally took very seriously. People would say, "Well, I'm not speaking only for myself, I'm speaking for my entire community when I say these words." It was also nice to be able to do that with people who were only accustomed to speaking about their own experience. It was forcing them to think about the experience of people around them as well. It didn't always work because I depended on the goodwill and the openness of the communities I was working with, and many times it didn't work at all. For example, in Buenos Aires, it was difficult to convince them to work with me, because they wanted me to define work. Or in Chicago, nobody

showed up, and I was by myself in the workshop. And then other times in other cities, there was a massive amount of people who wanted to write the address.

**SR:** And are you in touch with any of the people who wrote the addresses? Have any addresses materialized in any, even if very small, cultural change?

**PH:** Yes. For example, in Mérida, Yucatan, something happened that I've mentioned before. The discussions in Mérida, which took place in the local art school, quickly showed the tensions between the younger artists, who were interested in making conceptual art, and the older artists, who were more interested in traditional and folk art. There was a fundamental misunderstanding between both groups. The older artists felt that the younger artists were making "New York" type of art, while the younger artists felt that the older artists were making work for tourists. So, we had a very interesting discussion between them about the function and purpose of art. The discussion resulted in identifying the challenges and contradictions of making art in that city, and what was needed were discussions such as the one we were having then. The agreement was that there would be a week or a month of criticism where people would actually review one another's shows and have discussions about art, which then indeed took place for a period of time.

This might be a very small achievement in the larger scope of things, but it was an instance in which a community realized that they needed that kind of conversation, and that they had never really sat at a table and just spoken to one another. This simple act of sitting together and confronting one another's ideas was very revealing for both sides, because it didn't exist before.

Going back to education: when you're a professor or instructor, you always ask yourself if what you teach really has had any impact. It will be rare to expect all the thousands of students you've taught to have been deeply transformed, but if only a small group has actually had a deep transformation and done something with it, then I think you can consider yourself successful.

**SR:** Suzanne, with *Skin of Memory*, are there certain outcomes that you were able to measure?

**SL:** I have a conflicted relationship to this question, and it is one I've explored in writing since the eighties, I think. On the one hand, the answer is "yes," there were measurable outcomes. In the case of Medellín, I was fortunate enough to have had an anthropologist as a collaborator. Pilar has published the project results in academic journals, so she can give a qualitative analysis of the project with quantitative facts. But, I was also trained here at University of California at Santa Barbara as a zoological scientist, so this notion of proof in the arts is questionable. When we enter social practice, we put ourselves into a difficult position, because people expect, as they do in direct political action, measurable change. Or at least they hope for it. And as you point out rightly, transformation in individuals and, more complexly, in cultures and in laws—all of these things are difficult to gauge.

One problem that it creates for artists is that we don't have tools to make appropriate social scientific measurements, and even if we did, I'd suspect the reported results due to experimenter bias. But in our field we like to claim results. How do you know if what you say you're doing, you're really doing? By what measures are you making that claim? As artists, the fallback position, to be perfectly blunt, is anecdote: I tell you the story of Jane or Bob and how their lives were changed, and you presume that this extends to many people. The part of me trained as a scientist is suspicious of anecdote, particularly when relayed by the person who is claiming the credit for the change. So when people ask me if I cause change with my work, I tend to divert the question—"Can we ask another question?"

Those of us in social practice are generally pretty good at finding spokespeople who can testify to their experience in persuasive ways. But are a few stories proof of social impact, and if so, on what level?

In a 1982 project in New Orleans, I took this issue on. I wrote an article for *New Art Examiner* to see if quantifiable information was of any use in determining the impact of the project, which was to introduce the ERA (Equal Rights Amendment), and I measured the number of times the name entered the news media during the time I was there. Part of the project was to raise the level of awareness of the need to pass the amendment, and Louisiana hadn't passed it yet. So we counted X number of times it showed up in all the articles, and the numbers of people involved in the project, and so on. It was interesting data, but at the end of it I said, "And I don't know if that's what art does."

Early political art activists (70s-90s) put ourselves in a position where our post-studio operations through art had very large ambitions: "Yes, we're out there in the world to call attention to, to end violence against women." Change in political situations, which is what we're ultimately after, is different than personal experience transformation—though of course not unrelated. Yes, change does take place meaningfully in individuals, but it also needs to take place in collective experience. It also takes place in policy, and people like Richard Ross are working on these kinds of issues in serious political ways, as activists and as artists.

I think we need to think more deeply about what it is that art does and how it is measured. We have to be careful of our claims for art, but also careful what kind of issues, what kind of expectations we lay on art, which, after all, is ephemeral and often doesn't have many financial resources attached to it, compared to larger political efforts.

**PH:** I should add that, unfortunately for social practice, I think we position ourselves in a really difficult place. On the one hand, we try to effect change in society, but on the other, we exist still in the art world, which demands an aesthetic experience of a certain sort. And this is the struggle Suzanne and I have had putting this exhibition together: it is the problem of, how do you really make a social practice project look visually interesting or engaging in the exhibition space? How do you really conform to those traditional demands of art-making and wanting to make something interesting or engaging or beautiful? We are always constantly trying to balance what is really the visually appealing or interesting project with the social relevance of the project. And I think we're still trying to figure out how we can balance those demands.

**SL:** Social change doesn't happen through a single person (in general), and it certainly doesn't happen through a single art project. It happens through the collective activity of many, many people working in many ways to push the ball up the hill in the same direction. That's why it's really difficult to ascribe social impact to an artwork. If we look to Pilar, the anthropologist I worked with on this project, she'll report quantitative, measurable results in terms of media coverage, received narratives in the letters, whether or not we were vandalized, the number of youth who continued as project leaders in other areas, and so on. But she won't claim sweeping changes; she is too much of a political organizer for that. However unpersuaded I might feel about whether art causes substantial change, I do think it's one of the most interesting questions to entertain in our field: How do we know we're doing what we say we're doing?

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**Suzanne Lacy** is a Los Angeles-based artist who is internationally renowned as a pioneer in socially engaged art. Her installations, videos, and performances have dealt with issues such as sexual violence, rural and urban poverty, incarceration, gender identity, labor, and aging. Working

collaboratively within traditions of fine art performance and community organizing, Lacy has realized large-scale projects in London, Brooklyn, Medellín, Los Angeles, Quito, Northwest England, and Madrid. She holds a Doctor of Philosophy from Gray's School of Art at Robert Gordon University in Scotland and is a professor at the Roski School of Art and Design at the University of Southern California.

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**Elyse A. Gonzales** is Assistant Director and Curator of Exhibitions at the Art, Design & Architecture Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara. While at the museum she has curated numerous collection exhibitions and organized several group shows focused on relevant contemporary topics and the university's distinguished alumni. She also initiated an Artist-in-Residence exhibition program, commissioning emerging artists to create new works in the museum's galleries. Prior to working at the AD&A Museum, Gonzales was Assistant Curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania.

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