

ARTSEEN

PABLO HELGUERA & SUZANNE LACY: *The Schoolhouse and The Bus: Mobility, Pedagogy, and Engagement*

by Vijay Masharani

THE 8TH FLOOR | FEBRUARY 9 – MAY 12

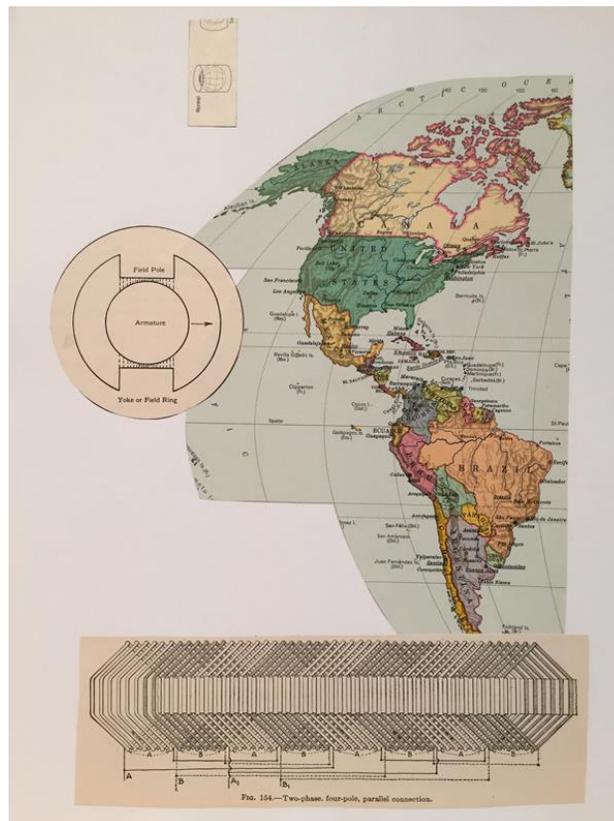


Pablo Helguera, *School of Panamerican Unrest Banner*, 2006.
Installation view, AD&A Museum, UC Santa Barbara.

Both the works in *The Schoolhouse and The Bus* are over; in this exhibition, we are presented with an archive. With Suzanne Lacy's *Skin of Memory*, we encounter a partial reconstruction of a collaborative exhibition that originally took place in Colombia in 1999, buttressed by videos that describe both the works and their social context. In the case of Pablo Helguera's *The School for Panamerican Unrest* (2006), the artist's nomadic trip to thirty locations all along the historical Pan-American highway is documented through image, writing, video, collage, and sculpture. As Boris Groys has noted, "art documentation

is neither the making present of a past art event nor the promise of a coming artwork, but the only possible form of reference to an artistic activity that cannot be represented in other way.” Thus, this exhibition retells the events in a necessarily imprecise manner, using the archive itself as an expressive medium.

In a documentary displayed within a reconstruction of the yellow schoolhouse that the artist brought to each destination, Helguera describes how *The School for Panamerican Unrest* project emerges out of a crisis of institutions—the political failure of American democracy to prevent two pointless wars and the failure of arts institutions to meaningfully support the forging of new publics, forms of identification, and visions of futurity. However, the impetus to pursue this project was not only a reaction to recent political events; as the artist noted via email, “I was looking at what appeared to be at the time a successful model of integration: the European Union ... I was keenly aware on how those of Latino descent are culturally connected somehow ... [and] wanted to know if the common colonial and post-colonial history of the American countries gave us a certain kind of kinship with one another, and if we could reflect on that legacy together.” It was in the context of these potentials that the artist set out, stopping at thirty locations along the historical Pan-American highway. Along the way, he hosted discussions with fellow artists, academics, journalists, and activists in an attempt to forge, through a discursive and pedagogical format, a supranational notion of Panamericanism. The deliberations that occurred at each location produced a series of spoken addresses, the transcripts of which are reproduced in full in one of the gallery rooms.



Pablo Helguera, *Two-phase, four-pole, parallel connection*, from *Panamerican Suite*, 2006.
Collage on paper, 9 × 12 inches. Courtesy the artist.

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Made in collaboration with cultural anthropologist Pilar Riaño-Alcalá, Suzanne Lacy’s *Skin of Memory* seems to also be based on a belief in the emancipatory potential of cultural production. Within the 8th Floor space we see a reproduction of an exhibition that originally took place in a school bus in Medellín. Documentary footage collected and assembled by the artist describes how in the 1990s violence proliferated in the Colombian city due to cartel activity and conflicts between leftist guerillas and right-wing paramilitary groups. The exhibition consisted of items—a cooker, a balaclava, various candles, shoes, jeans, lawn gnomes, handwritten notes, and photographs—that belonged to lost children and siblings lit by small fluorescent bulbs that give the space a pensive atmosphere. In archival footage of the exhibition, we see visitors to the exhibition smiling, lining up outside, and conversing about the works.

In *The School for Panamerican Unrest*, Helguera grapples with his presence as a leader, an artist, and necessarily an outsider from the communities that he works with, a position that at times led to conflict—most notably, in Caracas where, in the artist’s words, he was “accused of promoting ideology ... of being a sort of evangelist of art ... and promoting an imperialist agenda from the center.” “I had to hold my ground in establishing the rules of engagement,” Helguera recalls, “It was a delicate balance.” Lacy, on the other hand, does not get “in the weeds,” so to speak, regarding the questions of her own authority. Without her name on the wall, the project would be understood as only the product of the community. Perhaps this is by design; in a projected video from 2011, participants in the original bus exhibition reflect back and describe how the project successfully engendered a space for collective memory, ultimately serving as a locus for tangible political action and community healing. This piece serves to vouch for the original exhibition, effectively establishing criteria for success after the fact.

Both *The Schoolhouse* and *The Bus* respond to a perceived dearth of social resources. Helguera sees a lack of meaningful identification across continents, while Lacy accurately diagnosed a lack of healing spaces in Medellín for those who were dealing with traumatic

loss. As we are today faced with a crisis of institutions (in fact, I would argue that the crises Helguera invokes never really took a break), these works are a reminder that the revolutionary potential of the arts depends on a radical expansion of genres so that the production of new institutions is itself figured as a creative process.

CONTRIBUTOR

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