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*Ginevra Ludovici*

IMT School for Advanced Studies Lucca, Italy

## Expanding the public space through art. A conversation with Pablo Helguera

Pablo Helguera (Mexico City, 1971) 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.

For this issue of *Studia de Arte et Educatione*, the contribution, in the form of a conversation, will retrace Helguera's work to focus on questions of publicness, art and participation in a moment in which socially engaged practices are increasingly established in the contemporary art realm.

By articulating the artist's strategies and operating methodologies, the aim is to shed light on ways in which art can contribute to widen the public discourse on the social and political life and create accessible spaces of meeting, confrontation and dialogue, in which a counter-narrative to the dominant neoliberal framework can take place.

**Hi Pablo, thank you for taking the time to have this conversation. Your work – which spanned over thirty years of career – is well-known for being a sort of pioneer for the new generation of artists regarded in the area of socially engaged art. You embody both the role of the artist and the educator. How has this overlapping informed your practice?**

I came to social practice or socially engaged art by accident, due to my unusual background.

I came from Mexico City to Chicago to study painting at the Art Institute. When I did my BFA, there were classes in all media: performance, video, photography etc.

At first, I was not too fond of performance art. It didn't make sense to me at first, but eventually I would gravitate toward it. I come from a family of musicians and writers, and I wanted to insert music and text into my paintings somehow, and I was frustrated because I couldn't really fit them there. During that time, I got an internship at the Art Institute of Chicago, which is a major art institution and the museum attached to the art school. I worked for the chief curator of the department of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas at the museum.

My first museum job included checking object labels and doing office work, which later led me to give tours. This performative aspect of being in the museum galleries and talking about art was very exciting to me.

Shortly after, I embraced performance art more directly when I realized that anything could be a performance and that I could incorporate all the things that I wanted. I knew that I would never be like a writer, singer, or actor, but I would make pieces that incorporate all those things.

After graduation, I continued working in museums. In 1995 I got a job at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, where I became involved in organizing public programs. It was a wonderful experience because it was a sort of second education for me since I was constantly exposed to incredibly interesting and influential artists talking about their work. I met and organized lectures by Pipilotti Rist, Cindy Sherman, Stan Douglas, and other prominent artists from that period. I also organized a lecture by writer Lawrence Weschler. He had just published what would become an essential book for me titled *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder*. The book is an essay about the museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles and, more broadly, with the notion of the Wunderkammer and the question of how wonder can be reinserted in museums. Weschler's book introduced me to the world of institutional critique, and from there I got very interested in the work of artists like Andrea Fraser, Fred Wilson, Michael Asher and others.

At the same time, I started focusing more on another dominating practice that was also happening in art in the nineties: relational aesthetics. I went on to run the public programs at the Guggenheim in New York City, where following this interest I organized a symposium focusing primarily on institutional critique, titled *The Museum as Medium*. The symposium took place both in New York and Mexico City.

However, during that time, I was already noticing that this kind of interactive work produced by artists in the institutional critique and relational aesthetics arena did not go deeper to really interact with people. In other words, these kinds of artistic practices still looked at the viewer as a passive individual, a passive consumer of art.

As an artist I wanted to create a more profound connection with the public, and I felt that, given my training as an educator, I could do that because in education one is trained to listen, talk to people, and develop a relationship with a viewer. I felt more and more that my work needed to be responsive to the viewer and be something you enter into dialogue with.

**I think this aspect, in particular, is essential as you developed a specific methodology aimed at creating spaces of encounter, dialogue, and exchange with the**

**members of your audience that became active participants in the staged settings you put into place. Would you describe how this path based on participation and collective learning experiences started?**

It all started in 2001 when I was visiting Eastern Europe. I was in Croatia, and over the course of a train ride I had an incidental conversation with a Croatian teenager who spoke perfect Spanish. She shared that she had learned Spanish by watching Mexican soap operas, which were very popular in Croatia. That encounter led me to doing some research on the subject, and I learned that Mexican soap operas, also known as telenovelas, had a gigantic influence in post-communist Europe. They are Cinderella-like stories with powerful and hopeful stories about social ascendance and where gender, class and race-related obstacles are overcome by the main character. It seemed to me that in the post-communist era these issues of class and race had not been properly addressed, and these programs proved to be cathartic for the population.

I thus created what I think was one of my first social practice projects, at a time in which we still did not have the terminology for this kind of work. It was called The Soap Opera Institute, or Instituto de la Telenovela, and it opened at Galerija P74 in Ljubljana, Slovenia, in 2002. It was the first time that I did a project that was an exhibition but functioned as an educational project. The project aimed to trace the impact of Latin American soap operas on the rest of the world. As the project traveled, we activated the space with workshops, performances, and publications. I ran it like an educational institution. It later traveled to many different places, such as the 8<sup>th</sup> Havana Biennial, HDLU center in Zagreb, and a gallery in London, amongst many others.

This was my first attempt to create a series of engagement mechanisms, as well as inventing what I would call a 'methodological model,' which is also very rooted in pedagogy and allows the use of educational scores or lessons plans in a performative way, rather than in a pre-established way as in the school curriculum.

This model of the Soap Opera Institute was important because this nomadic form of pedagogical presentation would become a precursor for The School of Panamerican Unrest.

**The School of Panamerican Unrest, initiated in 2003, is probably one of your most renowned works and one of the most extensive public art projects to date. It consisted of a nomadic think-tank that physically crossed the American continent by car from Anchorage, Alaska, to Ushuaia, Argentina, in Tierra del Fuego, and that activated connections between the different regions of the Americas through discussions, performances, screenings, and short-term and long-term collaborations between organizations and individuals. How did the idea come about?**

The idea for this project came after the 9/11 attacks in New York, which led to the Iraq invasion by the US the following year. The attack by Osama Bin Laden was a traumatic experience for all of us, but the reaction of the US was not less shocking. As a Mexican immigrant in New York, I wanted to study the history of this hegemonic arrogance that the United States has shown over its history.

I came up with the idea of becoming a sort of anthropologist of the Americans and reverting the logic of the American anthropologist that goes to Mexico. This led me to explore what I felt were the roots of some of the best aspects of the American democratic spirit that formed this country.

Going back to the roots of the democratic thinking that animated the origins of the US, I paid attention to the notion of Pan-Americanism, an idea in vogue during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> that consisted in envisioning all the Americas as one whole country. Pan-Americanism was a thing not only in Northern America, where this concept was set forth primarily in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century by Henry Clay and Thomas Jefferson but also in the South, for example, by Simon Bolivar and Josè de San Martin in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

At the same time, in the early 2000s we were still looking at the European Union as a successful project of cultural and economic integration and I wanted to know why such integration felt so difficult in the Americas. If we created a utopian country called Pan-America, what would that look like? Further, I wanted to know how national identity informed culture in the Americas at present.

Then I came up with the idea that I needed to ask this question directly to people by driving down the Pan-American highway, which is approximately 20,000 miles and is the longest in the world. It's an enormous length, and it's not even a real highway but a conceptual one because it is an interconnection of roads that receive that name in some parts, but it's not by any means a single road. However, it is largely possible to drive down from Alaska to Chile.

### **When did the project start? How did it practically work?**

I was invited by a museum in Switzerland in 2003, where they asked me to do a show on the subject of peace. That's where I first kind of developed the idea of the schoolhouse as a space for learning, but that's also when I realized that the only way I could really conduct this project successfully was by actually driving down the entire length of the Pan-American highway and stop not only in big cities but also in small towns, and being physically there.

I received a grant from Creative Capital foundation to realize the project. It took like two years to organize the itinerary, and with the grant's financial resources, I could buy a van and build a schoolhouse in the form of a collapsible structure. Also, I set up a website, a sort of blog where I was annotating what happened at all the journey stops, and I got a camera and a bell.

I managed to get volunteers to ride with me from one spot to the next, allowing me to also shoot some videos. Driving itself was a lot of work: for starters, Alaska is an incredibly huge territory; it's bigger than Texas and California, and a bunch of other states put together. We would just be driving all day on roads that were, for most parts, completely deserted.

Another factor that also is important about this project is that it happened right before the social media era, at a time when very few people had Facebook, and Twitter and Instagram were not invented yet. My way to connect with the world had to be with a blog that I could update daily in internet cafes.

The journey functioned this way: I would get to a city, and we would have an event that was organized by the host venue (generally an art organization) of that place – which in most of the cases, I connected with and arranged in advance – on a topic that they had chosen related to the city. The next day, I would have a workshop with participants, and I would invite them to write a speech, a Pan-American speech with them as representatives of the city that then I would share on my blog.

**How did the dynamic change according to the diverse places and geographies you crossed? Did you observe any differences or similarities between the cities you were visiting during your journey?**

The dynamic changed according to place, but somehow there were also interesting similarities.

For example, Vancouver is where we first stopped after our departure in Anchorage. We were hosted by the Helen Pitt Gallery, an artist-run space. The conversation was about the process of gentrification that the city was undergoing – Vancouver was preparing for the Winter Olympics back then – which was also creating ruptures and erasures in the artistic scene.

In the US, in general, since it is a rich country, I could present the project in museums and art organizations that had resources, where we had more theoretical discussions around the arts field. Yet, when I arrived in Mexico, the dynamics started to change, and the discussions around geopolitics became more real.

The first step was Mexicali, a place north of the border of Mexico, very close to the United States. It is an important city of the State of Baja California, but it is a quieter border town compared to Tijuana, which is nearby.

Local artists spoke not so much about the border but about basically making art in the deserts, like inhabiting a place in the middle of nowhere. Someone said, “we are the front teeth of Latin America,” and I think it was a powerful observation because that’s where Latin America begins.

It was interesting that those conversations, as they progressed over the months, started showing a lot of similarities between places that maybe had no physical connections.

For instance, I saw parallelism between Anchorage and Mexicali, even if they are very distant: some artists basically saw themselves in the middle of a place and non-place, which was the inevitable context in which they made their art.

In that same way, one of the conversations I had in El Salvador resonated with some that I had in Colombia, which dealt with local civil wars and the difficulty of making art in the middle of a conflict.

Some cities struggled with “the second city complex,” which means that they are not the capitals of their countries, so there is always a feeling of being on the periphery and not receiving enough attention.

Through the different discussions, I started to see very clearly that many of these places were not just defined by their own specific traditional history but also by the contemporary presence and the way that their particular art world functioned. Through

this specific lens, I felt I was visiting the “Republic of contemporary art,” and I was coming into contact with embassies of people who were connected to artistic practice. So, basically, I connected with a particular kind of knowledge that was not always shared by the people surrounding them. For example, in Merida, which is in Yucatan, I observed a clash between the old school of traditional artists and the younger generation, which was interested in making very conceptual art, tied to the preferences of the Western art market. Through the presence of the school, we had an exciting dialogue about that, which otherwise would not have been possible.

In that sense, the school became a catalyst for needed discussions, but that did not happen before. I think this was one of the project’s best parts: the idea that I could actually facilitate debates between individuals. So, it was not so much a project about educating me or the public attending the events on the challenges and specificities of making art in one place, but it was really about learning about one another and thinking about common topics from different perspectives.

The school became to me a crucial work to help me understand some of the complexities and challenges of doing socially engaged art at a time when we did not have a name for this practice, or at least it was not used widely amongst artists. It gave me a great deal of insight into how a method of interacting applies in different social and political contexts: the experiments were beneficial to getting inside of those things, and it gave me an understanding of the potential of doing works that have this traveling quality, which can be replicated or remade in different places.

**Another important participatory artwork was the Ælia Media project you carried out in Bologna, Italy, in 2011. It was again an alter-institutional experiment since it worked as a nomadic cultural journalism institute and broadcast center, but also as an alternative arts multimedia channel online. What was the inspiration behind the realization of the project? And how did it connect with the specificity of the Italian socio-political climate of that time?**

The project was significant for me because it allowed me to do what I love the most: going to a new place, trying to understand its history, and doing something responsive to that.

The project of Ælia Media was the recipient of the first International Participatory Art Award created by the Region of Emilia Romagna. I don’t know if they had a very clear idea of what they meant by participatory art because back at the time, the vocabulary around these practices was not formed yet.

However, the organization hired an excellent team of curators, composed of Julia Draganovic and Claudia Löffelholz, and a serious and competent panel of experts in the jury.

The jury members were Julia Draganovic, Alfredo Jaar, Bert Theis, Luigi Benedetti, and Rudolf Frieling. I was lucky enough to be selected for the project.

During the selection process, I was brought to Bologna to make my proposal or do the research toward making the proposal, which was helpful. I had never been there before, and I fell in love with the city. Bologna is not only beautiful and culturally

vibrant, it is also the oldest university city in the world. The University of Bologna was founded in 1088.

I was also very interested in the student movement of 1977, and I tried to interview the former students who were part of that experience. Another aspect that sparked my attention was the impact of the global recession of 2008 on the arts scene, leading many art spaces and galleries to close down. There was a very important alternative space, Neon, which was initiated in 1981, and just around that time I was there, it was closing its doors for good. It was a difficult moment for the local artists who were seeing the art spaces disappearing, especially in a city like Bologna, which does not have the same artistic infrastructure that other cities in Europe have, like London, Paris, or Berlin.

It's not a place where the commercial galleries can take hold, and it's not a place where an alternative art world emerges. But, at the same time, what I was noticing – and I think it's still true today – is that Bologna produces a lot of artists, in terms of people who have graduated from the university or the art academy. Still, they can't stay in the city and have to move to other parts of Europe or Italy to pursue their careers.

So, the question for me was: what can we do to offer a space for artists to work there? And to me, the answer was somewhere in the history of alternative radio and television in Bologna linked to the student movement, for example, Radio Alice, an independent/guerrilla radio station initiated in 1976 and one of the first and most prominent platforms of communication for the young left.

Therefore, we created the *Ælia Media* project. The name refers to a very mysterious, large marble stone with cryptic epigraphs famous for being “the enigma of Bologna.” Written in the stone is the name of Aelia Laelia Crispis, who appears to be a fictional character, and it's one of the most interesting enigmas in Western history. Many different writers and historians, including Bolognese naturalist Ulysse Aldrovandi and eminent foreign visitors such as Sir Walter Scott, Gérard de Nerval, and Carl Jung, tried to decode it. This riddle felt compelling to me because I saw a connection to what I was trying to do in the project: having a dialogic process that helped us decipher the enigma for a specific moment.

At the time, I was reading *The Emancipated Spectator* by Jacques Rancière, where he claims that the spectator that is emancipated is someone who becomes a translator, and an active reader, which was inspiring to me. I felt that I could try to offer a space where artists could actually play that role, so helping to decipher the city for us at that moment is how it became *Ælia Media*.

From the beginning, I recognized that I'm not from Bologna or even Italian. So, I could not claim to have any special knowledge about the city's history, which is why I turned to the artists I invited to become radio station producers to develop programming related to the city.

We created a summer course for younger emerging artists and developed a platform for people from multidisciplinary backgrounds, like theater, music and visual arts, to learn how to produce radio. After the course, we organized programming that each of these artists would lead on specific topics, such as the history of the student movement in Bologna, feminism, immigration, and stories about the city that are not known very well. We decided to launch the project as part of the live transmissions



of existing alternative radio stations of the city – Radio Città Fujiko, Radio Città del Capo and Raio Kairós – at times of the day where they had available slots.

The day of the project's launch was also very interesting, even if it wasn't intentional. It was in October 2011 when the 'Occupy Rome' movement also started. It was a very exciting moment for us because we developed an active lineup of conversations and discussions. We interviewed local politicians, Franco Bifo Berardi – Italian theorist, activist and former member of Radio Alice – and artist Marina Abramovich, who, in 1977, presented in Bologna one of her most famous works, *Imponderabilia*, with Ulay.

One interesting thing is that many of the producers of that period continue producing radio, in particular, two of them: Fedra Boscaro and Stefano Pasquini.. In this sense, *Ælia Media* created a legacy for some people who were able to discover the radio as a medium for their practice.

**While you were working at the *Ælia Media* project, you also wrote the essay *Education of Socially Engaged Art (2011)*, in which you propose a sort of dictionary, a toolkit, to navigate the realm of socially engaged practices (SEA). What triggered you to write this book? After eleven years from its publication – and considering the recent developments in SEA – do you think other factors or dynamics should be considered other than what you have already outlined?**

I started writing this book in 2010 when I was invited to teach a semester-long class on social practice at Portland State University. It was one of the first social practice programs in the country. When I was researching for the course, I realized that there were basically no textbooks that really helped people understand social practice in a practical sense. Some theoretical writings were produced by scholars like Claire, Bishop, Grant Kester, and Tom Finkelpearl, but these were not texts directed to an art student population.

I wanted to create a manual for people like me who encountered the problems I encountered in my practice, like when I went to Bologna or drove the Pan-American highway.

At the same time, I was also observing that many artists were doing things that many people in the art world were calling 'social practice,' but to me, they were not social practice at all. They were sometimes very superficial projects that supposedly were participatory but did not really constitute a true collaboration or exchange. So, I had this urge to write against these practices, but I decided it was not really helpful. Instead, I decided to create something that tried to argue for best practices in social practice that can be considered socially engaged art, which is what led to this book.

During that time, I was invited by curator Josè Roca to become the pedagogical curator of the Mercosul Biennial. It was an unusual and exciting opportunity to try to think of education in a biennial context, which is often transitory, event-based and ephemeral. This very nature of biennials, of course, represents a problem for a work that is about developing relationships. I was flying between New York, Bologna and Porto Alegre for a year carrying out all these projects. It was a difficult time, but it was



very exciting because I was comparing notes constantly about the different contexts in which I was working to describe some of the issues that I think should be in the manual of any artist who does socially engaged art.

The book emerged partially from those experiences but also from my observations in general of what constitutes a socially engaged practice. There were so many issues in the book that, still to this day, I consider very important, starting with the very notion of socially engaged art and the difference between socially engaged art and social practice.

Some people would avoid the term art and just call it social practice, while I wanted to emphasize that we are still within the art realm and that the work we produce must establish a dialogue with the art world. Also, partially because of those experiences that proclaim themselves participatory, I tried to make those distinctions in the book regarding symbolic and actual practice. For example, pretending that you're doing a school project is very different from actually doing it. It is the actual doing that really makes social practice to me. It's not about depicting another reality; it's about creating another reality. It's like breaking the fourth wall in the visual arts. It's a fourth wall where there's no distance between the viewer and the artwork and where these elements are integrated. Museums still cannot properly understand that because they are predicated on the idea that they are the fourth wall, they are art history. That's why it's so hard for museums to do this kind of work.

**In the publication, you discuss the concept of transpedagogy, a notion you have been developing since the 2000s, to indicate „a series of projects by artists and collectives around the world that blend the educational processes and art-making in ways that are clearly different to the more conventional functions of art academies or of formal art education.” In recent years we are witnessing a proliferation of educational platforms led by artists, curators, and practitioners in the arts field. What do you think about this phenomenon? What are the limits and spaces for the possibilities of these projects?**

While working on the book, I noticed how education had become an interesting subject matter for both artists, curators and art institutions.

A term emerged around 2008, the pedagogical turn in curating. As I understood it, it was a way to incorporate pedagogy into the curatorial practice to create more significant insights in exhibition-making. The issue is that mostly curators were involved in these practices, and they provided a very academic and elitarian understanding of what education is, more focused on exposition than on engagement with people. To me, that was very problematic.

But there was a fascination with pedagogy by artists who were doing pedagogical or educational projects. As I said, the problem was they were primarily rooted in representing education or depicting education rather than actually doing it. It was like representing an idealized version of what the activity is. And education is a perfect candidate to romanticize, since there is this idea that education is an act of freedom that allows people to liberate their minds and helps trigger change and revolutions.

As an educator, I felt very clearly that many simply fell into that romanticism of education instead of actually practicing education.

In 2009, I organized a symposium at MoMA titled *Transpedagogy*, in which we put forth the idea that if we want to analyze our works – which employ education – from a critical lens, we need to see them both as art and education. In other words, one thing does not replace the other, but it can and must function in both capacities.

I invited artists and scholars to write about how education enters their work, and the concept of Transpedagogy emerged from those reflections.

**Many of your artistic projects took place in public settings and you also wrote about public art in your weekly column “Beautiful Eccentrics,” launched two years ago. In the article “La Plaza and the Occupied Place” you reflect upon the idea of practicing socially engaged placemaking through various examples, such as the Mexican town plaza, a constructed and fictionalized space within a school in Reggio Emilia and the space created in Zuccotti Park during Occupy Wall Street. In the text, you also point to the role that the artist/architect can play in constructing the socially engaged commons. How can art contribute to the creation of public spaces? And how can it construct a counter-narrative to the dominant neoliberal framework?**

It’s interesting to think about the history of public art and how socially engaged art inserted itself within that tradition. Public art has always existed and its most prominent feature aside from being accessible is its permanence. The great difference between public art and social practices is that the latter has a very ephemeral quality. It’s usually action-based, discussion-based, or experience-based. It’s not like a public sculpture that gets installed in a square and lasts for decades. On the other hand, I believe socially-engaged art has started having a legacy, which is not a physical one, but it’s something of another nature that continues in the memories and the practices of other generations.

For example, consider the 1970s scene of alternative art spaces in New York, where places like White Columns or Artists Space functioned as an alternative to the museum world. However, these spaces then became institutions on their own. I wrote this text in 2010 titled *Alternative Time and Instant Audience*. Departing from this specific history in New York, I asked: if White Columns was the solution in the 1970s, what is the alternative space we can create for ourselves today?

To answer, I tried to explore the idea of the public program as an alternative space. The dialogic, experiential space functions as a public art form since public programs are generally open to the public and freely accessible. But it’s not public art because it’s not something permanent; it has an expiration date. I tried to argue how we, as artists, can determine the expiration date of the artwork itself.

I have always admired projects that last only for a finite number of years, and then they die, like project spaces or public programs, because they are spontaneous and ephemeral. I think this ephemerality is very meaningful and should be considered more in the production of public art.

**Abstract**

Pablo Helguera (Mexico City, 1971) is a New York based artist working with installation, sculpture, photography, drawing, socially engaged art and performance. Helguera's work focuses in 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 has usually intersected his interest as an artist. This intersection is best exemplified in his project, *The School of Panamerican Unrest* (2003–2006), a nomadic think-tank that physically crossed the American continent by car from Anchorage, Alaska to Tierra del Fuego, making 40 stops in between. Covering almost 20,000 miles, it is considered one of the most extensive public art projects on record as well as a pioneering work for the new generation of artworks regarded under the area of socially engaged art. The contribution, in the form of a conversation, will retrace Helguera's work to focus on questions of publicness, art and participation in a moment in which socially engaged practices are increasingly established in the contemporary art realm. By articulating the artist's strategies and operating methodologies, the aim is to shed light on ways in which art can contribute to widen the public discourse on the social and political life and create accessible spaces of meeting, confrontation and dialogue, in which a counter-narrative to the dominant neoliberal frame work can take place.

**Keywords:** socially-engaged art; public; space; participation; education

**Ginevra Ludovici** (Rome, 1992) is an independent curator and a Ph.D. candidate at the IMT School for Advanced Studies Lucca. Graduated in Economics and Management from Bocconi University and in Contemporary Arts History at Ca 'Foscari University, in 2019 she attended CAMPO – course for curators of the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo. Her research interests focus on radical pedagogy programs and processes of self-institutionalization in the arts.

