

**Pablo Helguera****ARTIST**

I find the term "artist" and the definition of the term "artist" a very entertaining let's say, or amusing problem because today, to call yourself an artist, in some instances it appears to be an arrogant statement which to me derives from the history associated with modern and contemporary art and the perceptions of what an artist may be. Or let's say the traditional perception of what an artist may be. In other words, a being that is an illuminated individual who by some magical or powerful reason has this vision that he is able to put in an artwork or an object that then becomes sacred or becomes adored or celebrated by a community. So you become a very special person that has this innate ability to express yourself on a very high level and I think that it's an interesting perception that has dominated a great deal of art to this day. Still when you say, I am an artist, it almost feels like you need to prove it. In most societies when you claim that you are an artist there has to be some kind of proof, in the same way in which when you say this is an artwork, you know, the burden is on you to prove that it is in fact something should be deemed valuable to be an artwork. It has been interesting to me to see that many people of my generation and later, sharing the same discomfort with what the term artist conveys, have tried to elude or escape from it by saying things like, I'm just a maker, I am a cultural producer, I am an agent of change or in some cases, I'm a social practitioner for example. But I happen to think that it is actually really important to always stress that category of art and that category of artist because it's precisely that area of human activity that is thoroughly grounded in the ambiguous and in the shifting identities. It's the place that we have to explore new territories and new questions and to destabilize what is always assumed. And indeed it's an uncomfortable place to be, but I think this is at the same a very necessary place to be. The moment you say that I am an artist, it's basically acknowledging that you exist in that shifting territory of meanings and of narratives and of human concerns that are constantly defining us. I am an artist who works in a museum and that's a very uncomfortable place to be, because an artist who works in a museum is basically... Is an actor who is basically working behind the set of the stage. Looking at the stage in motion and in action when you should theoretically be on the stage. So it feels like a very contradictory thing to be. Like a place, that you should not really belong to. But I also believe that being an artist is also being an outsider, or being someone who is always kind of not in the right place. Someone who is not exactly fitting in. And that very act of not quite belonging to where you are, I think is incredibly important to make your mind reflect and respond to those facts. When an artist enters in anthropology, or an artist enters into political activism, or an artist enters into social work, that fact of not really quite fitting in, not being one of the people that were, let's say, professionally trained, or directed from the beginnings of their lives, to fit into that realm is important to acknowledge and it becomes absolutely a part of who you become.

**ARTWORK**

Very early on I became very interested in performance art for a variety of reasons...Maybe reasons that I did not fully understand at the beginning. I first was excited by performance art, because it seemed to me that it was the one territory in art where everything was possible. Anything could become a performance. Any simple act or action could become an artwork. It was not dependent on an object, it was not dependent on anything else, something that happened in time. But later I realized that what was really interesting to me, regarding performance, was the fact that it had so much to do with the behavior of the individual and the way in which an individual interacts with others in time and space. This is to say that what was really interesting to me from the very beginning was the sociology of art. If your role is a policeman, then you have to basically show the strength of a policeman, or if you are a fireman, or if you are a salesman then you have to be good at certain things. There are certain expectations on your behavior. I thought that was really interesting to think about when we look at art. Because art is, as I said, it's this ambiguous territory that really changes our perceptions somehow of acting in many ways and yet, the society that supports art making which we normally call the art world tends to be very constrained and very structured in how it assigns roles to each one of its participants. So, if I am an artist in the art world,

my job is to make these artworks that theoretically can change everything, or can be revolutionary, or can attract attention to others and rise in value and attention in the world. If I am a collector, my job is then to collect and preserve those works, if I am a curator, my job is to put them together. There is like a lot of different jobs, or positions, or descriptions that one fulfills by adopting those positions. So that led me to start making a number of works that, you would say, perhaps are very meta very kind of like introspective in understanding the very process through which we value and interpret art. The first one was a manual of contemporary art style which essentially is a social etiquette manual for the art world that was essentially, you could say an ironic or satire, in the style of Jonathan Swift the Irish writer, that told somebody how to behave in the art world and by doing so, trying to uncover the ways, or the rituals that we all participate in. Rituals that sometimes are absurd and nonsensical but then we all want to support them, or we all feel it's necessary for us to be part of them. And that led me to the other things that were of course connected to performance, and as an educator, I became very interested in working with actors to participate let's day, in symposiums or very academic formats and see if I could actually build and direct a symposium as a play following the conventions of the academic symposium and so forth. So basically I have always been interested in how sociology and the social behavior as individuals help sustain and shape the way that we experience and perceive art. You could say theoretically that if you are an artist everything you produce is an artwork right? Which already puts you in trouble because there are many things that many artists have done they did not consider artworks, and that maybe after they pass away somebody comes and retroactively calls them an artwork. I think there are instances where one needs to be very clear where the art starts and where it ends, where you are producing something that is framed, literally but also conceptually you know? As 'here is the artwork,' you know? Here is where the art starts and where it ends. But I think that there are instances that are required of us when we have to basically create things that might not have boundaries that way. So coming from the perspective of an educator I ask myself, what kind of art could one make, or should one make that doesn't have those kinds of dependencies, that it can only make sense when you understand the context that it is criticizing. Or it can only make sense when you are inside an art gallery or a museum for it to be made. And that was, I think, my impulse at least for the kind of work I started producing later which now people are calling socially engaged art. Which was essentially an attempt to produce experiences and actions that are collective, that are social in a context that may or may not be attached to an art context. Basically existing outside of the sphere of art physically, but maybe not conceptually. In other words, I would make a school, or I would teach a workshop, or I would be doing a collaboration with a community, or would do a documentary project. How do you really define an artwork and an artist? I am essentially producing something that at times can be seen as art, but it doesn't always have to be art. It can have a double identity. It can function in a number of registers. It doesn't really need ultimately to be called an artwork for it to have a meaning. Or at least those are the kind of things that I feel are most important to me.

## PRODUCTION

I tend to say that my studio is a museum where I observe visitors all the time. It's a style of studio. I also have a traditional studio I would say. That is really where I produce more conventional artworks. What is it really what drives the product? I feel very strongly that the idea should always be the driving force of whatever you do. In other words, I don't believe in this idea that I should go to the studio and say, I'm going to make a painting today or I will be making a painting that will look like this or that. I don't operate that way. I operate more in a sense that I need to make a project that is really about the relationship between land and the sea, or something about borders. I study the problem and as I study the problem, ideas emerge and issues emerge and that leads me to certain resources, certain things that might lead me to ways in which I can respond to them and then when I am in that moment of responding to them then I can look at the set of tools that I have available to do that. It could be through a cartoon, it could be through a drawing, it can be through building a giant structure, or making a video. The limitations are just my own capabilities of what I can do to respond to it. I also wonder maybe because I am a performance artist, I think that I like to adopt those roles in the production process of becoming someone else. So I have become a book store owner, a book seller, I have become a research institute director, I have become a social protest singer, and a

bunch of other different identities and to me that becomes a very important aspect of the entire work. Just adopting and accepting that identity.

## MATERIAL

I think that my material tends to be history and tends to be language. At some point, I believed that the driving force behind everything that I did was that possibility to look back and see if there was any resonance with the present. This was true of a period where I was making work that was about biography. Finding interesting individuals that were kind of obscure or not very well known and then I would bring them to the foreground and speak about them. I was playing the role of being the historian, biographer or also a creative writer. When you look back at everything that I have done. When I look back on everything I have done, I see that as a constant. In the end, I have been a script writer. That what I do is to find a script in the problems that attract me and then I try to write the script about them. Then the script starts dictating other things. It starts dictating what should come into it. Should it be with other actors, should it be images, should it be objects, should it be a traditional exhibition, or should it be a transatlantic trip, or should it be an opera, or should it be a very intimate installation, or a room where you enter and you experience something. My background is that I come from a classical music family, where everybody is a classical musician, and whoever was not a musician was a writer. And I think those two things constantly come back in one form or the other. In the realm of performance, it really has come back in the reflection on the subject of the interpreter vs. performer. In performance art, typically, the performer is the artist, in classical music that almost never is the case. The composer composes the work in the same way that the theater playwright writes the play and then someone else gets to perform it. It's two different kinds of expertise, but in the early years of performance art especially, it was basically the artist would do the performance. I'm interested in that separation, and I'm interested in the very notion of interpretation as well. I like the challenge of one as an artist also devising a work that must be interpreted, and there is a possibility of interpreting that particular work in a variety of different ways. Those are things that I constantly think about.

## MEDIUM

I find performance as something bigger than a medium. I think there is a problem when you call performance a medium because it invites the desire to define what that medium is and many times when I talk to people to who really do consider performance a medium, or a genre, or a discipline, they immediately... it's always conditioned with very specific aesthetic constraints. This happens a lot when someone like a book artist who makes artist books develops it into a discipline and then, there are good and bad artist books. It becomes very aestheticized and becomes very developed in an exclusionary way. But I think performance is too powerful of an idea to be constrained to the medium treatment. Performance is something that is an adjective and not so much of a noun. It defines every other activity. You can talk about performative photography. You can talk about performative painting. You can talk about performative videos. It's not so easy to do that with other mediums. That possibility of performance to really expand and become almost anything and define the quality of something I think is very important. I really think that socially engaged art perhaps is a development of performance art, in that it's about acting in the real world but it still borrows from performance a great deal. The things that we create when we are out there in the world, many times depend on creating certain fictions or certain contexts. You can define them or describe them as performative. So performance is always there and it seems to me, to simply call it a medium wouldn't give full justice of that entire concept that has been so influential for the last four or five decades.

## PROCESS

The first project that I did then that was perhaps a direct reflection on social practice and the possibilities of social practice, was called de 'Instituto de la Telenovela', which was a research institute on the history of the Latin-American soap opera. [Insert: 'Instituto de la Telenovela'] This was

in partial recognition that the Mexican soap was so popular in Eastern Europe where I was living at that time that it had become a huge not only educational vehicle for people to understand what Latin America was, but it had also become a huge economic product. Anyway, the 'Instituto de la Telenovela' was first opened in Ljubljana, in Slovenia and it functioned like a real research institute so when you would walk into the gallery you would see this very colorful modernist architecture, Mexican style, in the style of Barragán an exhibition and research materials and I would provide workshops and lectures and things like that on the soap. It was one of the first attempts to really appropriate the institutional language of a very specific purpose, which was educational, which was to let people know about what soap operas were. How this literal form that many people consider trash was actually very sophisticated in their fabrication and how it had a real social impact in the world. So, 'Instituto de la Telenovela' became this project that while it existed within in the verbal and the discursive context of the art world it didn't necessarily depend on it to exist. It could just be a center I and I'm very interested in the possibility of attaining that kind of autonomy through art. And fast forwarding to the present, right now I am opening a bookstore in Brooklyn in Red Hook called 'Librería Donceles' which will open this month. Which is essentially the same thing. It's basically a book store that sells books in Spanish. It's going to be the only Spanish bookstore in New York City. A city that has two million Spanish speakers and yet zero Spanish speaking bookstores and it also revives perhaps the dying art of having a used bookstore in an era where everything seems to be digital. [Insert: Librería Donceles] So I feel that over the years I have attempted to produce projects that while I wear and I am promoting a reflection on art they maintain a certain autonomy from it. They don't really need necessarily the artistic context to be justified.

## PRESENTATION

I think that socially engaged art is a way of working for artists that are seeking a deeper relationship with the viewer slash participant. I think for many years art has been constrained by the passivity, by the assumption of the passivity of the spectator. In other words that, when you make a painting that essentially is only hanging there, and people are walking around and looking at it. That is really one of the central assumptions of modernism. That art is this object that is there to be experienced almost in a spiritual way by this passive receptor. Even performance art, when it emerged, it still treated visitors or participants mainly as these kinds of neutral spectators that were just there in obscurity while the action took place. And it was not until later with Fluxus and perhaps the work of Alan Kaprow and others that really tried to erase boundaries in between the audience and the artist. And I think that socially engaged art tries to take it a step further by truly creating situations where the public stops becoming this anonymous or faceless entity and it becomes real and concrete individuals that partake in a particular activity. There is a statement by Jacques Rancière in the emancipated spectator, where he talks about his idea that to him an emancipated community is a community of readers and translators. So he tries to imagine a world that is pretty much like the social media world. Where today we are all producing content all the time, so even though there is a Facebook let's say or a twitter or whatever. We are constantly churning out ideas and pictures. We all are content producers. What I think is very important to say is that this emancipated community can only be truly emancipated as long as the spectator is no longer a spectator but goes beyond the role of the reader and the interpreter. If we truly are to cross the boundary of the modern paradigm where the painting is hanging there and you come simply to admire it. It's really a scenario where the participant is no longer dependent on the existence of the work but can actually produce their own individual content, and operate in a more autonomous way. To me that is really what socially engaged art attempts to do. Which creates enormous problems for criticism and for aesthetics because what basically you are doing is creating a scenario where there is no real central artwork to focus on. There is no Pablo artwork that is standing here that me as a critic will come and criticize but it's really more of a process through which people develop their own things and then the artwork might be conceived as this entire proposition where all these things are happening, but it's no longer the single object that is standing and hanging in a gallery. So to me, the excitement and the potential of social practice lies precisely in the possibility that it can disengage itself completely from that canonical modernist narrative interpretation, and then become a possibility for other individuals to stop being the faceless public and become more independent producers that are perhaps in dialogue with one another.

## INTENTION

Well I am an imperfect individual like everybody else and I think that I contradict myself all the time as to what is really my ultimate purpose on what I want to do and I suspect that the final goals or purposes tend to be more appropriate for someone who is like an activist, or a hero of some sort where your purpose is to liberate a country, or to solve a social problem. I mean, I have many causes, I have many desires but I'm not sure if I can call them my goal in life. I am somebody who was born, like many of us, on the border of the analog and the digital world. When I was born in the seventies of course, the online world didn't exist, computers didn't really exist yet - personal computers and I was kind of as a kid the witness of the computer revolution and the transition into the digital world. Looking back on what I have done has been about reflecting about what it means to be a human being in this new universe, where things can be completely virtual. Where you can have a private life that is completely disengaged with humanity. Where you can have conversations and experiences any other individuals other than yourself. Perhaps as reaction of that fact, I have ended up producing a lot of works that are about reminding people about what it means to be human again, or what it means to simply walk around a used book store and touch an old and smelly and yellow book, or simply what it feels like to receive a handwritten letter from someone, or what it feels like to go to school again or to play guitar. Things that might be very simple and very basic but at the same time, they say everything about being a human being and being engaged actively with your five senses in the world, and trying to find meaning from those experiences. So, I think that a lot of the things that I do have a restorative desire or aim. That they desire to recognize the value of things that have been overlooked. The things that have been forgotten, and that give us our core identity as a society. So many of the things that I do are absurd. Many of them are impractical, and many of them are idealistic and unsustainable, but the point of making them is not really to aspire to sustainability or to permanence but to simply recognize that these are about ideas that we should all think about and values that maybe we should revisit in our lives.

## METHOD

I think as an artist one works in two ways. One is the way in which you basically stumble into something and that provokes a response, or you have a particular feeling about something and then you make the work. That's a more intuitive way. There is also perhaps the more methodical approach, which is when you are invited to a place to think about a problem and then trying to solve it. I tend to follow the steps of a regular researcher, I'm trying to understand the context where I am, learn as much as I can from that context and see if any of it speaks to me and whether there is anything I can do to provoke reflection on it. Generally that turns into really exciting adventures, and it can be very exhausting and stressful in many ways where you basically feel you are in a labyrinth and you cannot get out of it but I think that's part of the method, it's part of basically approaching a problem. I do think however, that as an artist one of the greatest challenges that we have is that we have to be careful not to fall into formulas. The kiss of death for an artist, it is the danger of constantly doing things always the same way, where you basically you make a certain kind of installation and you'll get invited to do it again and again. There are many artists who operate that way, who simply produce like a factory every single thing. It's a way to protect yourself against the unexpected nature of the world. You know to simply produce the same, or use the same responses for different problems. But it's yet something that we as artists have to be very careful about and prepared to essentially respond critically to.

## ART

I was just reading about famous last phrases. Alexander the Great when he died, apparently he said that there are no more worlds left to conquer. That was his famous last phrase. Which to him, perhaps meant "well I have done it all" and there is nothing left for anyone else to do so I'm ready to go. Perhaps you could interpret it in that way. But art is a world that can never be conquered. Art is this environment and this territory that the moment that you try to define it, the moment that you try

to control it and set its boundaries it immediately will show you new boundaries, it will immediately, it will contradict whatever you attempt to do to give it a final meaning. To me that's one of the things that is most exciting about art, that it just can never end, that it's a world that just can never be conquered.

#### BIO \*

\* 1971 Mexico City/MX, based in New York City. Helguera works with installation, sculpture, photography, drawing, socially engaged art and performance. His 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, making his work often reflects on issues of interpretation, dialogue, and the role of contemporary culture in a global reality. Pablo Helguera performed individually at the Museum of Modern Art /Gramercy Theater, in 2003, where he showed his work "Parallel Lives". His musical composition, "Endingness" has been performed by the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. Helguera has exhibited or performed at venues such as the Museo de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid; ICA Boston; RCA London; 8th Havana Biennal, PERFORMA 05, Havana; Shedhalle, Zurich; MoMA P.S.1, New York; Brooklyn Museum; IFA Galerie, Bonn; Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, Tokyo; MALBA museum in Buenos Aires, Ex-Teresa Espacio Alternativo in Mexico City, The Bronx Museum, Artist Space, and Sculpture Center, amongst many others. Since 2007, he is Director of Adult and Academic programs at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. He has organized close to 1000 public events in conjunction with nearly 100 exhibitions. In 2010 he was appointed pedagogical curator of the 8th Mercosul Biennial in Porto Alegre, Brazil, which took place in September, 2011. He is currently Senior Resident of Location One in New York. He presented a solo exhibition at Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City in 2012

WEB: <http://pablohelguera.net>

#### Credits:

The interview was conducted on March 4 2015 at Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Interviewed by: Johannes M. Hedinger

Filmed and recorded by: Konstanze Schuetze

Edited by: Paul Barsch

Transcript by: Wolfram Eggebrecht, Lea Hoßbach, Ella Tetrault

Produced by: University of Cologne (Cologne), Institut für Kunst&Kunsttheorie