

LOOKING AT LOS ANGELES: Art and Artists on the Left Coast

Looking at Los Angeles: The Public School

November 12th, 2009 by [Lily Simonson](#)



The Public School, 2009. Courtesy Telic Arts Exchange.

Gold Leafing. Sadism & Masochism. Practical Electro-Mechanisms. The Coming Insurrection. What do these topics have in common? Perhaps with some head-scratching we could ferret out a few threads, but here's the one I'm going to address: they are all examples of courses offered by [The Public School in Los Angeles](#). Not to be confused with [Los Angeles' public school system](#), The Public School operates under the auspices of [Telic Arts Exchange](#), a nonprofit organization nestled in amongst a stretch of contemporary commercial galleries in LA's Chinatown. The notions of public and private have been a hot topic in our [Looking at Los Angeles](#) posts, perhaps because there is more of the latter than the former, and the arenas that are demarcated as public often fail to deliver.

The Public School, however, is true to its name and functions as a site of porous, transmutable, open and democratic educational exchanges. Anybody can propose a class. Anybody can express interest in that class. Once a critical mass of people express interest, anybody can offer to teach the class. A small committee moderates the final steps of the process, including finding an instructor and scheduling the course. However, committee members typically step down after several months, making room for new committee members to join and keeping the system as open to transformation as possible. The result, as you can see from the extensive list of courses offered, is an incredibly varied selection of subjects, ranging from pragmatic to esoteric, concrete to abstract. Yet all classes share a collaborative spirit, owing, most likely, to the democratic method employed in actualizing each course.

Developed in early 2008 as an arena for discourse related to Telic's exhibitions, The Public School began to grow immediately. Within months, Telic co-directors Sean Dockray and Fiona Whitton decided to discontinue Telic's [long-running program](#) of exhibitions, performances, lectures, happenings, etc. and concentrate on The Public School. Since that time, affiliate public schools have been initiated in five other cities. Dockray answered my questions via email from Brussels, where the newest arm of The Public School opened last week.



Still from "Instrument Buildathon," organized by Stephen van Dyck and Eric Lindley, 2007. Courtesy Telic Arts Exchange.

Lily Simonson: *How did the focus shift from Telic's exhibition space to the Public School?*

Sean Dockray: We started the public school in our basement to be in conversation with the exhibition space (open to all kinds of conversation: agreement, contradiction, influence, etc). After about 6 months, we were nearing 5 years of exhibitions and we felt that the school was more exciting for us to do than the exhibitions...it allowed us to work with people whose practices we wanted to support (practices that were conceptual, process-based, research-oriented, or other flavors of non-object centered practice, things that weren't widely recognized as art, and so on) in a very easy and organic way. The gallery and exhibition context, on the other hand, imposed all kinds of expectations that were rarely very useful for those practices. Even an exhibition that shows something in progress requires this level of exhibit-ability that was more of a distraction.

Also when we swapped the gallery for a school, we swapped a number of terms, which had their own effects: an exhibition maybe became a class, the audience became...students? When a student goes to a class, they go with different expectations and they are prepared to engage with the others and the subject in a different way. They are prepared to stay longer, ask questions, argue with others, etc.

We could work with projects that were still only an idea and help them come into fruition; we could work with projects that have been going on for 10 years; we could work with vague constellations of thought or people that barely amounted to a project. All of these possibilities made it exciting for us to switch models and start operating as a school.

LS: *The Public School has returned to the main drag of Chung King Road (an epicenter of contemporary art galleries). How would you characterize its relationship to the art world? To Los Angeles in general?*

SD: There are so many art worlds, it's difficult to answer this question...I think the public school provides a certain kind of resource or space, maybe like a cafe or a bar or a library that allows for art and non-art, for juxtaposition of people and territories and ideas.

As for Los Angeles, that's another tough one, because the school is always changing and so is the city, and the parts of the city that engage with the school and vice versa. And I always imagine how huge Los Angeles is, and how small our new space is, and really can't understand the relationship when the scales are so astoundingly dissimilar.

But, I think Los Angeles has a brilliant history and current context of alternative spaces, and this has been confirmed by my time [in other cities where the] local art scenes are more or less connected to international markets, and really pale in comparison to the vitality of self-organized/self-initiated/artist-run projects. I think the public school is one part of that history and contributes to what is happening now.

The galleries here are pretty conservative and the young people and students coming out of schools and others who don't participate solely in the commercial art market are pretty ambitious, energetic, and creative and so they just make their own contexts for doing things. Lots of space (even if it really isn't always cheap), commercial art context, lots of materials and industries, not much state funding, and a dominant mythology that anything is possible in LA (which may not be true, but then if enough people act that way, some great things happen).

LS: *The Public School has blossomed into quite a diaspora: Brussels, Chicago, Paris, Philadelphia, New York. What are the other TPS outposts like? How does place affect the quality of exchange, and the courses?*

SD: I haven't been to Chicago or Philadelphia. New York is an architecture school in collaboration with an architecture firm there called [common room](#), as part of a fellowship (through the Van Alen Institute). Paris is through an art center called [bétonsalon](#), located precariously within a university. Brussels is in a house given through a residency to [Komplot](#), who is spearheading the school (t)here. I do think that the cities and the institutional contexts certainly affect the nature of proposals. How [they are affected] is a matter of conjecture. It's difficult to get people to begin thinking about proposing the 'unknown' in other places: what you want to learn, a situation you want to be in but have no idea how it will go, etc. There is a lot more proposing things that they want to teach (what they already know). But I can't say if this is cultural, or a matter of publicity. I think they are all super exciting, with different groups of brilliant people and different contexts for having the classes, different furniture, different ways of introducing people, different existing discussions. For example, I was told in Brussels there is a lot of cooking, but almost no knitting, whereas in LA there are lots and lots of relatively young people

flash points



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categories

> Columns (441)

> Art 2.1: Creating on the Social Web (13)

> BOMB in the Building (19)

> Calling from Canada (2)

> Center Field | Art in the Middle with Bad

at Sports. (8)

> Future Metaphors (2)

> Gastro-Vision (13)

> GIF(t) Basket (7)

> Inside the Artist's Studio (13)

> Letter from London (67)

> Lives and Works in Berlin (4)

> Looking at Los Angeles (23)

> No Preservatives: Conversations about Conservation (15)

> On Location: Inside Art Documentary

Production (7)

> On View Now (2)

> Open Enrollment (20)

> Teaching with Contemporary Art (134)

> The Weekly Roundup (71)

> What's Cookin': The Art21index (34)

> Flash Points: (229)

Compassion: Do artists have a social responsibility? (10)

Fantasy: Does art expand our ability to imagine? (22)

How can art effect political change? (39)

How do we experience art? (16)

How does art respond to and redefine the natural world? (28)

Must art be ethical? (24)

Systems: Can art transcend paradigms? (22)

Transformation: How does art adapt and change over time? (17)

What is the value of art? (37)

What's so shocking about contemporary art? (18)

> Video: (325)

Classroom (6)

Conversation (7)

Excerpt (35)

search

subscribe

Art21 Blog feed

Video feed

Education feed

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communicate



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pages

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who take up knitting (and this is reflected in our class proposals). A little thing.
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I am hoping that these various public schools begin to circulate between each other... if it's just awareness at first, that's great, but eventually people and proposals and classes. As there are more [sites for The Public School], which are also closer together, I think this is more likely. For example, Paris is an hour or so from Brussels, and so already there have been classes and people going back and forth.

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3 Responses to "Looking at Los Angeles: The Public School"

[Öffentliche Google-Waves - Dijit](#) on November 12, 2009 5:42 pm

[...] Looking at Los Angeles: The Public School | Art21 Blog [...]

[newmediafix.net » Blog Archive » The Public School: news and 5 classes coming up on November 20, 2009 11:06 am](#)

[...] but first, have a look at a piece about Telic and the school that we like on the Art21 blog, written by Lily Simonson:
<http://blog.art21.org/2009/11/12/looking-at-los-angeles-the-public-school/> [...]

[Borderland » Critical Readings](#) on January 7, 2010 4:53 am

[...] The Public School in Los Angeles is a school with no curriculum. Someone proposes a class, and when enough interest builds, a teacher is found to teach whoever signed up. The school isn't accredited; there are no degree programs. It's a project of Telic Arts Exchange, an organization that "emphasizes social exchange, interactivity and public participation to produce a critical engagement with new media and culture." More on the history, here. [...]

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Reblog (128)

Spoof (6)

Uncut (4)

Art21 Access '09 (25)

Art21 Artists: (952)

Alfredo Jaar (32)

Allan McCollum (21)

Ailora & Calzadilla (43)

An-My Lê (22)

Andrea Zittel (24)

Ann Hamilton (29)

Arturo Herrera (23)

Barbara Kruger (35)

Barry McGee (36)

Beryl Korot (4)

Bruce Nauman (38)

Cai Guo-Qiang (38)

Cao Fei (25)

Carrie Mae Weems (26)

Catherine Sullivan (19)

Charles Atlas (10)

Cindy Sherman (27)

Collier Schorr (19)

Do-Ho Suh (24)

Doris Salcedo (19)

Eleanor Antin (22)

Elizabeth Murray (8)

Ellen Gallagher (16)

Florian Maier-Aichen (13)

Fred Wilson (11)

Gabriel Orozco (30)

Hiroshi Sugimoto (27)

Hubbard & Birchler (7)

Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle (19)

Ida Applebroog (21)

James Turrell (23)

Janine Antoni (19)

Jeff Koons (49)

Jenny Holzer (77)

Jessica Stockholder (22)

John Baldessari (32)

John Feodorov (1)

Josiah McElheny (32)

Judy Pfaff (23)

Julie Mehretu (30)

Kara Walker (60)

Kerry James Marshall (33)

Kiki Smith (44)

Kimsooja (13)

Krzysztof Wodiczko (19)

Lari Pittman (13)

Laurie Anderson (25)

Laurie Simmons (31)

Laylah Ali (21)

Louise Bourgeois (57)

Margaret Kilgallen (8)

Mark Bradford (53)

Mark Dion (43)

Martin Puryear (22)

Mary Heilmann (22)

Matthew Barney (34)

Matthew Ritchie (18)

Maya Lin (33)

Mel Chin (23)

Michael Ray Charles (4)

Mike Kelley (40)

Nancy Spero (36)

Oliver Herring (33)

Paul McCarthy (22)

Paul Pfeiffer (15)

Pepón Osorio (7)

Pierre Huyghe (26)

Raymond Pettibon (34)

Richard Serra (40)

Richard Tuttle (20)

Robert Adams (20)

Robert Ryman (22)

Roni Horn (27)

Sally Mann (22)

Shahzia Sikander (16)

Susan Rothenberg (11)

Tim Hawkinson (16)

Trenton Doyle Hancock (26)

Ursula von Rydingsvard (23)

December 2009

November 2009

October 2009

September 2009

August 2009

July 2009

June 2009

May 2009

April 2009

March 2009

February 2009

January 2009

December 2008

November 2008

October 2008

September 2008

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2 of 4

8/3/10 10:42 PM

Vija Celmins (12)
Walton Ford (13)
William Kentridge (35)
William Wegman (18)
Yinka Shonibare MBE (35)
Art21 News (239)
Biennials (49)
Education (207)
Exhibitions (548)
Festivals (35)
Guest Blog (379)
Interviews (164)
Locations: (973)
Africa (2)
Argentina (1)
Asia (2)
Australia (8)
Canada (19)
Caribbean (2)
China (11)
Colombia (3)
Cuba (2)
Denmark (9)
France (21)
Germany (55)
Greece (19)
Iceland (1)
India (5)
Iraq (1)
Ireland (3)
Italy (26)
Japan (3)
Korea (2)
Mexico (3)
Middle East (2)
Netherlands (9)
Poland (1)
Russia (1)
Scotland (2)
South Africa (2)
Spain (23)
Sweden (3)
Switzerland (15)
Taiwan (1)
Thailand (1)
Turkey (2)
Ukraine (1)
United Kingdom (109)
USA (753)
Boston (18)
Chicago (52)
Connecticut (1)
Houston (6)
Indianapolis (13)
Los Angeles (91)
Miami (6)
Minneapolis (1)
Nebraska (3)
New Orleans (22)
New York City (359)
Ohio (9)
Philadelphia (15)
Pittsburgh (3)
Portland (2)
San Francisco (41)
Seattle (3)
Texas (22)
Washington (3)
Washington D.C. (23)
Media: (993)
Architecture (31)
Design (46)
Drawing & Collage (188)
Fashion (13)
Film & Video (254)
Food (4)
Installation (373)
New Media (148)
Painting (241)
Performance (186)
Photography (206)
Printmaking (47)
Public Art (154)
Sculpture (300)
Social (91)

- Sound (13)
- Sound & Music (61)
- Photos (19)
- Podcasts (6)
- Prizes (39)
- Programs-Events (234)
- Publications (70)
- Season 5 (99)
- Support Art21 (7)
- Uncategorized (14)