



Paul Pescador: PSA

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Essay by Iván A. Ramos

In the introduction of *PSA*, Paul Pescador states a simple yet impossible goal: to make a video that “helps simplify engagement with government.” Simple, because Pescador tells us that this work aims to reproduce a service similar to the 70s television program *Schoolhouse Rock*, which for decades taught schoolchildren the basics of government and its processes. These animations demystified civic engagement and educated young citizens. In the decades since *Schoolhouse Rock*, the possibility of successfully and easily creating popularity with around systems of government and their entities seems to have become an ever distant and impossible goal. Pescador illustrates this in the opening minutes, as we see footage of Trump and his swarms of followers invading the capitol. At the core of this attack was Trump’s ability to exploit a growing distrust in government and to leverage a general sense of ignorance about how its democratic institutions, such as elections, work. Added to this fraying trust is the ongoing, uncontrolled COVID crisis which revealed a general disinvestment from government entities; a government that seemingly favored keeping a predatory economy going at the expense of our most vulnerable populations. The working class have been forced to stay on the job, risking exposure to the virus in order to keep an increasingly privatized economy going. *PSA* is a necessary work that wants to encourage our public involvement and perhaps rescue our weakened trust in our governments.

However, Pescador, a government worker for many years, retains hope that in the midst of this growing distrust—much of it the result of a disappearing notion of “the public” that have left the local, state, and national government on the brink of economic catastrophe—there is still something essential about helping people learn why and *how* to turn to and engage civic institutions. In this way, *PSA* joins the genealogy of social practice in contemporary art, a genre invested in using the aesthetic to explore the potentialities of co-dependence, as described by performance theorist Shannon Jackson. In other words, socially engaged art can shed light on the mutual responsibility we have to uphold structures of support, inviting its audiences to participate not only with a work of art, but—perhaps more importantly—also with the social structures that we each interact with that make us ethically responsible to our place within them. Indeed, Jackson highlights how social practice in art engages with multiple notions of support—from the support we owe each other to what socially engaged art offers to support social relations. This is especially true in the context of institutional forms that may appear too big to support us.

Although the title, *PSA*, evokes the public service announcement, usually perceived as a fairly dry, didactic, impersonal, and aesthetically uninteresting genre, Pescador infuses the piece with their signature aesthetic playfulness and wit. Pescador is adept at exploring the quotidian by exploring how everyday experiences glimmer with the absurd and beautiful difficulty of relating to others, not excluding lovers, friends, and even our past selves. *PSA* is a deeply personal work in multiple ways. Most prominently, the piece draws from Pescador’s own experiences working for city government. On another level and as a

recurring aspect of their oeuvre, the video often makes us aware of the artist's own body and presence. This is especially significant since this is one of Pescador's first works as an out trans artist. Pescador does come out to us in an act of self-revelation (as well as trust in the viewer) and offers a glimpse of their first steps toward what is not only a personal but also a bureaucratic journey—one that inevitably obliges trans and other gender non-conforming subjects to navigate the social and the civic in new ways. From the first moments of declaring oneself as trans, someone who will be perceived as a “new” person to the world, trans and gender non-conforming people must learn to traverse an often hostile world anew. For Pescador, this might begin with the possibility of claiming a new name, an act that will thrust them into a web of governmental processes that will hopefully result in accessing the proper support to keep at least some of the realities of anti-trans violence at bay. But they also acknowledge that as a trans person they must consistently place their trust in governmental institutions meant to protect us, most exemplified in the piece through Pescador's experience of casual yet frightening anti-trans violence in the streets, which leads the artist to wonder if the police will provide the support they need.

So, now that we know the social and aesthetic concerns that set the foundation of *PSA*, we can delve into the manifold strategies that Pescador deftly deploys in the hope of showing their audience how to engage with the social institutions we need to access, especially when they might seem Kafkaesque in their magnitude. *PSA* is structured around a play of images, including found footage, original video, and animation, anchored by the voices of a number of interviewees who spoke with Pescador. In addition, Pescador's narration and presence guides us through the piece, first by setting up the aims of the video and then by introducing and explaining the guiding questions that make up each section. Hence, *PSA* sits somewhere between public service announcement and video essay, moving between its educational goals and Pescador's and the interviewees own narratives. This movement between modes is so seamless, it is one of the work's many feats.

Pescador is aware that this is not an easy project. They admit that to engage with government, at the local, state, or national level, is indeed difficult work. But they are supported by the interview subjects who will help the artist map out the difficulties, and necessities, of learning to engage with civic institutions effectively. These collaborators for the most part may sound young, yet they speak from years of experience, in some cases going back to their childhood translating labyrinthine governmental processes to parents, and from professional experiences working for local governments and other agencies. Each of *PSA*'s short segments is structured around a central question, from the fairly basic “how do you define government?” “why did you get involved?” to the more abstract “what is the power of groups and organizing?” and “where does the government go from here?” We listen to Pescador and their collaborators' answers while viewing images that illustrate their words. This project's civic guides are deeply knowledgeable about the vastness of the system, expressing a sense of hope (“government is for building the best society possible”) as well as an awareness of the reality that citizens often engage with government at their worst (“an oppressive machine” “the boot on my neck”). The video's constant association between spoken words and images grounds the changing moods of the multiple narrators, in some ways keeping even the darkest moments from falling into despair.

PSA's concept of “process” animates the piece. Pescador and their collaborators recognize that learning to engage with government means becoming familiar with systems that will appear intimidating to those seeking to access them, such as access to food stamps or speaking up at a public hearing. Pescador mirrors this idea aesthetically throughout *PSA* by showing us their own process, unmasking the work of creativity. Their transparent process of making on camera functions as an appeal to making things happen with government; after all, process involves cultivating patience and resilience, which one must sometimes revisit to achieve a desired result. The revelation of process brings together the major strands of the piece : the civic goals of the project, Pescador's aesthetic vocabulary, and ultimately, their own self-disclosure as a trans artist, who wonders, how might government support “how I want to move through the world?” This last question extends beyond the context of living as trans to permeate the

whole piece in order to become empowered to directly ask: “how will government support how I want to move through the world?”

As in all of Pescador’s work, the images that anchor *PSA* move between the lighthearted and the serious, but mostly land on the former in order to make the work and the voices in it accessible to the viewer. I was struck by the juxtaposition of images in each of my viewings, finding myself surprised by small gestures and associations that I had previously missed. I want to especially note the playful use of narrating with objects guided by Pescador’s hands, their long nails strikingly manicured with red nail-polish, including a toy bicycle during a discussion of the need for public roads, and in a particularly witty moment, the use of a toy fish to create phonetic resonance with the word “efficiency.” These moments abound throughout the piece, reminding viewers of Pescador’s body as it begins to engage publically as a trans person, as well as a nod to the rest of their work, which is filled with playful objects that serve to stage the absurdity of the quotidian. Pescador extends their aesthetic sense of playfulness through the use of animation, which the artist uses to enliven and lighten engaging with government. Although Pescador’s drawing style could be confused as rudimentary, their ludic wit recalls the world of *Schoolhouse Rock*. This is *Schoolhouse Rock* is reinterpreted through a uniquely queer aesthetic.

Ultimately, *PSA* toggles between optimism and despair, and inevitably (and perhaps accidentally) lands on the side of despair as the sections progress. And how could it not? Even the brightest of optimist would have to admit that the grim realities of the past year leave little space for hope. But after years of thinking with and writing about Pescador’s work I have learned that they are incapable of the kind of cynicism that could undermine the goals of this project. Indeed, perhaps another artist could end up weighed down by the stark realities of the work ahead of us. *PSA* ends with a hopeful note, as Pescador cedes the last words of the video to one of their collaborators who reminds us, “the government is ours, we should make it act for what we need.” So I will end by following the artist and erring on the side of optimism, optimism which appears through discussions and images of the mass Black Lives Matter protests that showed that the people can still come together to advocate for a more just system. I stay with this hope and want to suggest that in its own humble way *PSA* offers a page turning, encouragement for its viewers to ask in unison “how might the government support how we want to move through the world?”

Ivan A. Ramos

Iván A. Ramos is an assistant professor of LGBTQ studies in the Harriet Tubman Department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Maryland, College Park, where he is also affiliated faculty with the U.S. Latina/o Studies Program and the Latin American Studies Center. His first book, *Sonic Negations: Unbelonging Subjects, Inauthentic Objects, and Sound between Mexico and the United States* (under contract with NYU Press), examines how Mexican and U.S. Latino/a artists and publics utilized sound to articulate negation in the wake of NAFTA. Iván’s broader research investigates the links and slippages between transnational Latino/a American aesthetics in relationship to the everydayness of contemporary and historical violence. His writing has appeared in several journals including *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, *ASAP/Journal*, *Third Text* and *Latino Studies*, as well as the catalog for the exhibition *Axis Mundo: Queer Networks in Chicano L.A.*, sponsored by the Getty Foundation. His research has been supported by the National Humanities Institute and the Ford Foundation.

PSA Video Index

Paul Pescador: PSA — 1. How do you define government?

Paul Pescador: PSA (2021)

How do you define government?

5 mins, 59 secs

PSA asks panel discussion speakers how they would define government. Is there a common understanding of government? Is it easy to break down how it works?

Paul Pescador: PSA — 2. Why did you get involved?

5 mins 49 secs

What are the backgrounds of each panel discussion speaker who has worked with government and politics? What can one learn about from their experiences?

Paul Pescador: PSA — 3. What should people know about in order to get involved?

5 mins 49 secs

If the public wants to better understand their government systems, what do they need to know? A good start to getting involved would be to gather insights from those who have worked with government as well as informed citizens.

Paul Pescador: PSA — 4. What works well in government?

6 mins 34 secs

The series addresses challenges with government. Despite frustrations, what systems function well? What can we learn from these systems?

Paul Pescador: PSA — 5. Why isn't government more accessible?

5 mins 39 secs

The government is or may appear accessible to the public. Why is this the case and how can the government work to remove this disconnection and create a better sense of accessibility?

Paul Pescador: PSA — 6. I try to get involved and it doesn't work. What then?

5 mins 4 secs

What happens if someone tries to speak up on an issue and/or goes through the process to address a concern but nothing occurs. What should they do next?

Paul Pescador: PSA — 7. How do citizens request information?

5 mins

If government information is publicly accessible, how does the public access it? What type of information can they acquire and what are the processes in order for them to obtain it?

Paul Pescador: PSA — 8. Why is the government so complex? Can't it be simpler?

4 mins 23 secs

When good people try to solve issues and community concerns with the government, why does it become overwhelming? How do we avoid this discouragement? Why are governmental systems so complicated?

Paul Pescador: PSA — 9. What is the power of groups and organizing?

5 mins and 23 secs

Activism often means getting involved with a group, a community-led organization, or joining a march/protest for rights—what defines the power of community organizing to shape government?

Paul Pescador: PSA — 10. What role does evaluation have in moving the government forward?

5 mins and 12 secs

What is governmental data? Why is it gathered and how does it affect how the government operates?

Paul Pescador: PSA — 11. What technological bridges and divides exist within government systems?

6 mins 28 secs

How is government with 21st century technology? How can improvements be made in order to allow the public to feel connected and supported by its governmental organizations?

Paul Pescador: PSA — 12. Where does the government go from here?

6 mins and 32 secs

In 2020, powerful currents and events have affected this country (political uprisings and elections) as well as a devastating global pandemic, PSA concludes with the question: Where does the government go from here?

Special thanks to the *PSA* Participants

Anonymous, writer

Anonymous, native Angeleno

Anonymous, arts admin

Robert Banks, Clinical Associate Professor of Public Diplomacy, University of Southern California (USC)

Maura Brewer, artist

Asha Bukojemsky, curator, Dual Citizen

Helen Campbell, Senior Planner, State of California Governor's Office of Planning and Research

York Chang, artist and lawyer

Nateene Diu, curator

Vyki Englert, principal, Compiler LA

Benjamin Farnsworth, alien architect

Elaine Kahn, organizer, Safe LAPL

Rochele Gomez, artist

Asuka Hisa, cultural worker

Umi Hsu, civically-minded cultural worker; formerly employed by the City of Los Angeles

Christopher Mangum-James, cultural worker

Hunter Owens, Programmer Analyst IV (retired); formerly employed by the City of Los Angeles

Linda Theung, editor

Tatiana Vahan, artist

Anuradha Vikram, curator, UCLA Art Sci Center