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Keynote Address:
Pepón Osorio

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Suzanne Sato: As I rounded a corner at the new, beautifully renovated and reinstalled American Art Gallery at the Newark Museum of Art during the Newark pre-conference session, I was greeted by *No Crying in the Barber Shop*, a work by our next speaker, artist Pepón Osorio. I leave you to read the biographical notes in your conference materials for more detailed information, but the two words that always characterize Pepón's work for me are "memory" and "dialog." The specific memory of a Latino Puerto Rican experience, as well as the ways in which those memories resonate for viewers of all heritages, and the dialog within the works themselves and between Pepón and his public.

His achievements are many, really much more extensive than I can possibly acknowledge here, but some of the signal points have been his critically celebrated first retrospective at el Museo del Barrio; his widely acclaimed piece, *The Scene of the Crime (Whose Crime?)* at the 1993 Whitney Biennial. Through major recognition at the Johannesburg Biennale, the Havana Biennale, and shows and major installations in institutions such as the Reina Sofía in Madrid, the Newark Museum, in Puerto Rico, in Japan, in Mexico and Europe, all over the world and the country.

The cross-disciplinary nature of his work is demonstrated by the many awards he has received from many different disciplines. His NEA grant in sculpture. Ben Cameron reminds me, a design grant from the Theater Communications Group. A New York dance and performance BESSIE award for his video on environmental collaborations with his wife, choreographer Merian Soto. A Lila Wallace Arts Partners award; a Rockefeller Intercultural Film video fellowship. And in 1999, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Fellowship and the CalArts Alpert Award for Arts in the visual arts.

It's a signal career that is only just in midstream. It gives me great, great pleasure to introduce Pepón Osorio.

Osorio: Hi, good afternoon. Thank you, Suzanne Sato. There you are.

I think that one of my best qualities is that I'm extremely, extremely informal, and what best to be at a luncheon, right? One of the advantages of not reading the information that is sent to you is that you over-prepare. For some reason, I thought I had to do a presentation for an hour and a half, and it turns

out to be only half an hour. So I will try to condense everything that I wanted to say in this half an hour, but I have a tendency of overextending myself. As in my work, I'll have to say, why make it simple when it can be really complicated? So it's not about "more is better," it's about really being complicated. So here I am.

I'm trained as a social worker, went to school as an artist of color. I've always been told by my parents that being an artist is just not going to do it, that you have to have a second career in your pocket just in case that doesn't work. And so I did. I went to social work and did everything that I could possibly have done in school to do that. But my inclination was always to be an artist.

I talk in very fragmented ways. I hope you get used to it. I have no shame. I try to stay away from that lineal thinking.

When I came to New York City in 1975, I decided that I was just going to go to school, do everything that I had to do, and then try out the arts. A friend of mine had moved in with me – and I'm just making all these connections, so it somehow makes sense to you at the end. A friend of mine went to Pratt Institute, which I'd never heard of before. In fact, I've never seen a work of art until I was seventeen – an original work of art, in a museum, until I was seventeen.

I went to her studio at Pratt Institute and started to look at all the stuff she was doing while she was doing her Masters in Art, and it was very fascinating. Fascinating because I always knew that for me, my conception of change had to do with the ability of moving forward, out of where you are in your home, going out there and trying to transform. That could be the community, your family, anywhere on the outside. I realized that what she was trying to do was to transform – by the way, her name is Awilda Sterling – the world within her studio. It was very fascinating.

I worked with the New York Human Resources Administration in child abuse and neglect intervention in New York City, and I visited many, many homes, I would say at least five hundred to six hundred homes in my tenure as a social worker. I realized at some point in that career, which was very short – at least, shorter than my career as an artist – I realized that social work just didn't work, and that I needed to do some other stuff with what I had in mind.

I don't have a dream. I mean, I have a dream, I just don't have big plans for my dreams. I always think that in order to transform, in order to move forward and work with what I'll define later as "community," I have to do it in a very small level. Always my intention is to go from the small, that that little tiny pebble can then get together with all sorts of things and become a rock. Then that rock can become something else. So my intention as an artist, as I see other artists, for example, Rick Lowe and Lydia Yee, with these incredible plans which I admired, I never envisioned that as part of my creating and my work. I am more interested in creating artwork on a one-to-one level.

I told you I was very fragmented. I lost it. I took a left curve. Now I'm trying to get back on track.

So what I did at the beginning as an artist was to create work that had to do with nature, with the environment. Visiting Pratt Institute with my friends was about this incredible mankind, nature, the preservation, Earth, smell, going back to all this.

I visited a lot with the art world, this was back in the early '80s in the Soho area, where the art world was mostly concentrated, and where I went, and I saw the contemporary artists. Went to Mary Boone's gallery, went to all these different galleries that were so incredible to me, and so big, so spacious, so out of control.

Then I realized that that's exactly what it was. It was completely out of control. That as a person of color that's a colonized Puerto Rican, I, a Latino person, I was completely left out all the time from that reality. That was really important, and I always remember this, because it was extremely important to go as an artist to visit places where you feel are not going to be part of you. That was incredible frustration, and I left. I just thought to myself, I have to take big chances.

I quit my job. I don't remember the time. But it was in 1980-something, and I quit my job as a social worker with Human Resources. Everyone laughed, everybody thought that I was completely insane, and maybe I was. And I called a friend. I was living in the South Bronx, and I called a friend to help me look for a studio, because that's what artists had to do, you know, you have to look for your studio.

We came across an organization, the Bronx Council on the Arts. They provided me a space within the Longwood Arts Project, provided me a space that lasted – I was there from the beginning – must have

been fifteen years. And worked, and did every work that I had to do there.

I am saying this because out of that frustration, I decided to remove myself and stay completely away from the epicenter of the art world and create work in the periphery of it. I think that for me was one of the most important lessons so far, that my visual somehow has to match my ideology. If both match, then I feel I have created a work of art that is perfect, or is as perfect as it can be; there's no such thing as perfect. As good as it can be.

So I'm going to show you a lot of slides from, well, after that time. For five years, I worked with Merian Soto, the choreographer. We worked specifically in theater. I stayed completely away from museums, from the art world, from galleries, from commercial. None of that mattered to me. What really mattered to me was that connection that I had to do with the artwork, that connection that the artwork had to the community, and that the community had to the larger universe. That's exactly what made sense, and it still makes sense to me. One of the most incredible things for me is to realize that I can have a studio, open my studio, and find someone from the street to just walk in and give me immediate feedback on the work.

After all this, I realized what I had to do was to continue in the same venue at the same time. I realized that I was doing, not therapeutic social work, but I was doing work that had to do with the work that I had just left in social work. And that was involving non-arts professionals in the practice of creating work. At the same time, as a contemporary artist, I was allowing the community to witness the process in which the art was created. I will be very honest with you, this is not something that I have consciously made. It was intuitive. I immediately felt that it was the right thing to do, and what I had to do, so I went on and did it.

For the first time, in 1989, 1990, el Museo del Barrio, Susana Torruella Leval – I'm sure that most of you know her – was then curator of el Museo del Barrio, and she offered me an exhibition, a retrospective. Five years have gone by in which I have created a lot of work outside a museum. So she was inviting me to bring all the work, that accumulation of work, into the museum to show it to the public.

I was very resentful. I was extremely sensitive to the idea of exhibiting work that was outside of its natural environment, the museum or the community. And

because I didn't want it to fall in the same trap of the five artists, the five white male artists who were showing work in Soho then. You know who they are, Julian Schnabel, blah blah blah, and the rest of them. I didn't want it to fall into the same trap, and I didn't want it to fall into that connection that for me was not about art, but it was basically about a superficial element that was surrounding the work.

And so then I did, and I started to work with funeral home owners for that exhibition. I always work from a place that is extremely intimate, like from self, my very personal experience. I always think that the exhibition space is a place of negotiation. Where I come in with one specific thing or one specific worry, and bring people to look at it, and which is this place where people meet and people get together and then they look at it and they said, "Wow! He's going through exactly the same thing I'm going through."

So a lot of the issues that I touch in my work are related to that experience of negotiation. Who I am, who are they, and let's come and meet together.

When I mention the word "community," I am not referring to the entire South Bronx. I am not referring to the entire Latino community in the United States. I will imagine that my work has repercussions in that, somehow, or a fraction of the work. When I talk about community, I am specifically talking about the people who are in the inner circle, in the immediate circle of people who are in touch with me. The rest of those people definitely are community, but they're not the people that I talk to on an everyday basis. For me, community is a place and it's a group of people that I come in touch with constantly, that I know their lives, that I know personally what's going on, that they know about me, and that we exchange information.

What happens as a result of that, for me, it's out of control. There is definitely another community on the outer circle. I just wanted to make this very clear, because when I go into work with non-arts professionals, that's what I call community: them, their families, their extended family, the people that are affected by these, but not the whole gamut of community. Because obviously, I will get very confused as to what I and who I wanted to work with, and show work, and exchange ideas.

So with this piece, *AIDS in the Latino Community*, I went to funeral home owner Ortiz in East Harlem. I told him that I wanted to create a piece about victims of AIDS, that I wanted to create a piece about the

AIDS epidemic, and the effects of the epidemic in marginalized communities.

It was very interesting, because for about a month, I visited funeral services. I talked to the people. I talked to everyone around, because I wanted to know what was it in that ritual of saying goodbye to our loved ones? What was it in that moment of separation? What was it in there that was of great importance to everyone, or to certain members in the community?

I worked with Body Positive. I don't know if you know this, it's an organization who deals with people who are affected by AIDS, or who are HIV positive. And the reason why I worked was because immediately after the epidemic broke, I realized that all other people in our communities, in the Latino community in the South Bronx, who had AIDS, full-blown AIDS, or were HIV positive, were somehow removed from the community. I thought it was really interesting to see the reaction and the relationship of being there but not being there at the same time, and how much shame that brought, to not only the family, but the people around them.

I started to do a lot of research and work around them. I'm just going to show you slides of what the result is.

There is a moment in which I work that I'm constantly in touch with the people around, who I'm working with, and then probably about three weeks before the exhibition, or four weeks before the exhibition, I remove myself from the community, work, and then come back presenting the work. That evolves and changes all the time.

What I'm saying is, little did I know that what I was doing is exactly what I was doing as a social worker, going and visiting homes, knocking on doors, moving from here and there, realizing that the impact that I had as a social worker was very similar in many different ways. Obviously, the art has a much greater extent of interpretation, and I wasn't forced to implement change. I was always given the opportunity as an artist for people to create change on their own terms, not on my terms.

Then I realized that what I was doing with working in the art profession was just that, making all these connections all over the place, and seeing how people open the doors, and seeing how people at the same time open themselves to the work.

I want to say one more thing before I show the slides, and what I'm always asking and I'm always surprised the community with whom I work is open to, is that I've asked them, the same way that I open up myself, I open up my life, I open up my stories, I ask them to open up their stories and share them in a larger perspective with a larger group of people. That is one of the most challenging things you can possibly ask an artist to another community. It is almost as if I ask you now, in a dialog, to open up your stories, the ones that you've been hiding for so long, to open them up and share in a public forum here. It's extremely, extremely hard to do.

That's why I'm so honored and so blessed by the people that I work with, that constant need and constant trust of sharing, which obviously brings a lot of other issues, ethical issues and so on, which I'll hopefully talk about later.

I'll just show you the *AIDS in the Latino Community*. The first slide is pretty obscure. We turned the museum into a funeral home. Lots of quotes, lots of messages that were told to me and inscribed on the wall, and also on the carpet. I'm saying "we," because a lot of the people came forward and helped me out with this. We brought the temperature of the museum really low, so in the summer it was about in the fifties, the air conditioner was about fifty, so it felt really cold. We also all together created, with the staff of el Museo, the flower arrangements.

The entire thing was very much a place of meditation. It was a place of contemplation, but at the same time, a place where you thought you were right there with your own destiny, and then it was also a place where you pay tribute to the ones you've lost, not only of AIDS, but also due to many other illnesses.

It was very interesting, the opening night, I spent my time between half of the museum, which was the other part of the retrospective, celebrating life, and this one. I remember going from one place to the other, constantly bringing water to people. Because there were literally people sobbing on the chairs. You will see them later, the people sobbing on the chairs.

My inspiration here was Mildred Pearson, the woman who learned two secrets about her son. One, that he was dying of AIDS; the other one, that he was a homosexual. It was extremely difficult for her, so what you see on the wall here is one of the comments that she made. Mildred Pearson opened an organization called Mother Love, where mothers got together

on Sunday afternoons for brunch in her house and talked – mothers who were in a similar situation – and talked about their experiences.

"When AIDS came out, he looked worried. It was almost as if he knew that his days were counted. That was the very first time that I saw a man cry. I still remember in his face, and in his face is a wish for living." And these were just comments.

Also, the caskets were of many different styles. Some of them were extremely expensive mahogany. Some were not so expensive. I always try to be very careful with what I call "expensive" and "not expensive," because what's not expensive for me is very expensive for others.

So it was a very moving piece. And they were both in Spanish and English. I'm translating now, but there was no translation. Some of the wording was in English, and some of the quotes were in Spanish.

"Sonia was telling me at the funeral of the son of the policeman that people will realize the impact of this epidemic when they start missing the political figures, and by then it will be too late."

These were comments that were given to me that stuck in my mind. People tell me the stories and I remember them.

From then on, surprisingly enough, I went from five years' seclusion in the South Bronx, where everything was completely isolated – that's all I remember about the South Bronx. Torn-down buildings, burned, and right in the middle of that whole place, there was this public school, the Longwood Arts Project and the public school, where everything around was in complete isolation.

Surprisingly enough also, the most creative minds come from places where there's the least.

From then on... I was invited to the Whitney Biennial with this piece. I didn't know what to do. I was, like, whoa, I should go back in isolation more often!

I created this piece with the help of two detectives. We visited many, many crime scenes. At the same time, I worked with families of the South Bronx. The question was, who am I as a Latino person, in relationship to the world, in relationship to what's out there? How does Hollywood portray me as a Latino? It was very interesting, because there are a lot of subtle messages here.

The place looks like a Hollywood set, yet there were many things here that you would not find in a Hollywood set. For example, the back, where that oval shaped glass is, is full of trophies. Hollywood would have never dared at that time, although it's changing...would have never dared to show the accomplishments of the Latino family.

I use stereotype as a way of really going to the nitty-gritty and getting to the negotiation. I think that there is a tremendous pull and push in the Latino community about how we should be portrayed, and it's extremely important to me to have a voice of the working class families, of the working class people of the South Bronx then and now. And the many different other communities.

So what some people call kitsch, what some people call memorabilia, what some people call sacred, it's an element that I use always for negotiation. I always have to present the other side of the message that is never given an opportunity to be heard.

When you come into this installation, you're standing in front of a dead body. She's, well, a mannequin, of course, she's right in the middle. You're confronting yourself with the idea that Hollywood always presents the Latina as extremely accessible, extremely sexual, and here it is on a horizontal position, dead. I'm trying to take what is given to me, the images that I've been raised with, and somehow with this installation, reverse them. Subtle messages, yet weaving the whole idea of class, race, ethnicity to a point of disbelief.

Caution: some of my installations, you're allowed to come in, some of my installations you are not allowed to come in. This is a sacred place. The Latino home is a temple, as many other different homes. In some installations, I wanted to leave it as such, as a sacred place where you're not allowed to come in. And you will see it even more. There was a welcome mat at the beginning, and it says, "Only if you can understand."

A lot of the people were making comments, and I wrote all the comments in the jackets of the video. Some of them were, "I don't go to the movies, because I always get scared when the lights go down that the lady next to me will just grab her purse as if I was someone who was going to steal her purse." Lots of comments, not only about the movie, but also about the whole setup in the movie theater.

I wanted to show you a video. Can we go for Video 1? I wanted to show you the video, the image that goes right here.

It's the constant cycle of violence. I never wanted to address the things directly, I guess it comes from my colonized mentality. I always want to go around it, or subvert it, or some way that I can talk about exactly the same thing but not pound everyone over the head with the idea of what I'm talking about, or what I'm trying to say. So this leaves a bigger space of negotiation imagination.

There was a connection, there's a level of energy that happens in the work that is also very subliminal. I think a lot of the people stand in front of it... It's either you reject this because you hate dealing with a stereotype, or you embrace it because it somehow reminds you of some part of your life experience.

If you live in a conventional home, you're always assigned to that chair. God forbid you take that chair away from your father and sit at the dinner table. And I noticed that a lot. So then I assigned different places in the chairs. However, these people are historical people in the community.

I don't know if some of you know who this person is, she's a storyteller, one of the very first immigrants who came to New York City and worked for the library and has an extensive archive of Puerto Rican history. Very, very well known person. So each one of them took a place at the table.

Angel: the Shoe Shiner. For many years I visited this guy. Went down to the basement, almost like Orpheus. I had to go all the way down to the basement to visit him. And he was a shoe-shiner. I remember in his conversation about him feeling depressed and out of place, and always having to give. His job was about giving and bringing light to other people, but very little was given to him. So I made this piece in his honor. There's a videotape on the very top, and a videotape at the bottom. On the very top, he's spitting, you know, when you spit, you get more shine on your shoes. At the very bottom, he's shining. So if you're looking at the piece, and all of a sudden you're standing on top of it and here is this guy spitting right onto where you are. It's very interesting, because at the same time you're standing there, and that's exactly what I sensed from him. It wasn't so much that he was depressed as he was angry. Can we show the video?

My video work, it's more of a cacophony than anything else. I think that we're saturated with video images. I was saturated with stuff, so I'm more simple. I want to get the same image over and over and over again, as to tell the story, when you put it all together, to tell the story of what this person is. Then that's the bottom of it. All the way to the end. At the same time, this is what he does, nine to five.

So my frustration came when I went to the Whitney Biennial, that piece went straight from my studio all the way to the collection. The community that I was working with and for did not see the work. A lot of the work was going from one end to the other. I just said, well, now is a chance for me to take advantage of what has been given to me, turn it around, and bring it back to the community.

From then on, whatever piece of work that is commissioned of me has to be seen in the context of community before it enters a museum, so then the museum also has the opportunity to look at the community, as the community has the opportunity to look at the museum. All I'm basically doing is raising two giant mirrors and I'm allowing them to see each other.

The first pieces, *Scene of a Crime* and *The Shoe Shiner*, are devastating. I mean, at the end of these pieces, I don't look like this at all. As I said, it's a lot of work, and emotionally draining.

Sometimes I just wanted to protect myself and work on a lighter note. Although this didn't turn out to be very light, either. But it's *No Crying Allowed in the Barber Shop*. It was seen in Hartford, Connecticut, Real Art Ways, for the first time. It was a piece that involved every barbershop in the community, and we brought them in. It's my experience as a child, five years old, into the passage of machismo in the Latino culture. How my father went to take me for the first time to get a haircut as a child. I was devastated, crying all over the place, and brought so much shame to my father because I didn't act like a little macho.

Two men are crying in the front. Monitors with men crying twenty-four hours, and I left them on constantly, so then people can go by the storefront and see these men crying.

By the way, these pieces travel around the world after they're seen in communities. I'll show you very briefly, because I'm afraid we're running out of time.

The place looked more like a beauty parlor than a barbershop, and there's a specific reason to this. I wanted to explore the feminine side of men. I want people to confront... I want *men* to confront themselves with it, and it was very effective.

The top was full of sperm, male sperm, and that's what this is. There's a wonderful joke, but we're in lunch and I can't tell you.

The images of tattoos on the wall, black and white, you know, the conventional barbershop pink, I don't know if you noticed that.

The Last Supper, where women were excluded. And each one of the chairs is on velvet, and the body, the naked body of the male was printed on. I usually take people from the community to volunteer for this.

It's interesting, because people look at it at the barbershop, and they were talking about it. But it is, for me, it's just philosophically, it's what makes a man. If you were looking at this, this is the composition of what makes the average man in America. Baseball, you know all this stuff, it's what constitutes that.

But when I present it to a lot of the people, they get very confronted with it. We pay more attention to cars than we pay to families.

Oh, I have to show you the barbershop piece. Sorry. These were the images. There were like about seventeen monitors all over the place. This is where the images were facing the community. The women were really pissed off at me. God forbid we see a vulnerability of men. We can't tolerate that.

There were images of circumcision operations, images, other images that I've left out, but... Cover? No, cover this, the image of the video. It's still on. Males were eager to pose for the camera on this. They were like so happy, it was, like, "At last!"

How we impose on ourselves as macho, but also as Puerto Ricans, with the flag and the identity, and it's a self-imposition that deals with all that. Getting a haircut. Going into this place with a video camera was incredible. Male gesturing. The denial of the adornments, but we love gold, we love to wear things, more than women.

Badge of Honor. It's a piece, another work, father and son. I wanted to create a piece with the Newark community. In a conversation with about ten to fifteen kids in the community, we were just talking,

and I was saying, "Where are your parents? Where's your father?" And no one said a word. I realized that it was a serious situation in which a lot of the kids in the community, especially the boys, and also the girls, are growing up without their parents.

So I did a piece. For about three weeks, I worked with Salsa; she's a video-maker who worked with me in the creation of the video. I went to the father who was in prison, and we made this conversation between the father and son. The son was at home. I went for about three weeks with only one word in mind.

I sat there with the camera, and I said to him, "Freedom. Go." And he talked about freedom. Well, that information, I brought to the son later on that afternoon. And I said, "This is what your father has to say to you," without saying anything about freedom. I recorded his reaction while he was listening to his father on TV at home. Then that information, that reaction, I went on the next day and brought it to the father. I said, "This is what your son has to say about what we just recorded." And I went for three weeks.

Halfway through, I almost gave up on this project, because halfway through, I didn't want to believe that what they were saying was true. I just didn't want to believe what the father said was actually true, and the son. I thought they were kidding me around. And they said to me, "You know, we have to believe. If we don't believe, we would never finish the job."

I just said, "You know, I'm going to go along," and I confronted the father. And he did, in reality, it was true. Everything that was said there. You'll see it. Because it was so surreal. It disguises such a philosophical mind that you cannot think that what this society has told you about incarceration matches with what I saw there. I just wanted to share that with you. At the end, I constructed this piece.

The last installation, the barbershop piece, people went in, they knew it was a work of art, but they didn't *know* it was a work of art, so I had to tell them.

And in this one, as you come in, this is on the outside. Then you come in, and there's more like that kind of an experience, you read what it's all about, and so on. Then you make a right and go into the space, and this is it, it's just a father and son.

At the end, I had the father on the left images, and the son on the right, pretty much about the size of this screen here, and they were talking to each other

back and forth. Here again, you go from the extreme of the most, to a place that has the least. And how you become the negotiator with this family. Your eye, you're ear dropping, but at the same time, you're negotiating this life, and your life. Some of this, some of his quotes still stay in my mind as I raise my children.

I didn't do this alone. This was tremendous help from the system that helped me out, the county jail helped me out. Also, tremendous help from the son, he and I went shopping for all this stuff. It's not a re-creation, it's my interpretation of the son's living room.

Now, the tricky thing here is that I've asked these people to tell the stories, then later on, they were advised that their stories will be told in public. So it's about their very personal life being opened to the public. People in the community knew who they were. People in the community just stood there and realized that this is the same person that everyone had said went out on a trip.

Archival information, photographs, I use this a lot to look at where the community was then, where the community is now. They also gave me the pictures of the family, so I incorporate them into the piece. Can we listen to the video?

[Video tape]

Father: *Nelson, I want to ask you one question, that it bothers me. I know you love me, but are you ashamed of Daddy?*

Son: *No, I'm not, because you're my dad, and you know, things that what you did, you know, that's, that's in the past and, like you said, you know, forgive. And sometimes you can't forget, sometimes you can. Because I don't really care who's here. No, because that don't matter to me, you know, because you're listening to me, and I'm talking to you, and you're talking to me. And to me, that's just me and you. That's who's talking, so it doesn't really matter to me.*

Dad, I wanted to ask you a question now. I want to know, you're asking me if I can tell time. Can you tell time? Because every time you go in there, it's like, for a long period of time, and you're in there more time than what you're out here with me. I want to know if you can tell time, because you're in there more than what you're out here with us.

Father: *Not only do I know how to tell time, Nelson, I'm doing time for what...my mistakes. Okay? So if you want to talk about time, we're talking about... I asked you the question, can you tell time? You said yes. But I can't tell when your mother tells you to be home by six and you're home by six-thirty. From six to six-thirty, that's a half-hour different. And it's not like you don't got a watch. You got three watches.*

Son: *Dad, how much do you care about me?*

Father: *[inaudible] everything to me. For most of all I... Nelson, I thank God for you, because you're everything to me. I love you.*

[End of video]

Osorio: I think that somehow my work is about giving meaning in situations and places that people see as dead-ends. I always think that somehow I'm able to go in there and transform the situation, and bring hope to it.

Can we forward it now? I want to show you what I do with storefronts as I go in from day one, and then I have a tape.

This is a storefront in the South Bronx where I did a piece called *Las Twines*, The Twin Girls, and this is how I find the place, and how it's transformed.

I find my assistants and preparers right in the community. I bring the studio into people's homes. That's the transformation. Unfortunately, I can't show you any more.

I have a videotape that I wanted to show you. But before we end, I don't want to leave without addressing the circumstances in which a lot of New Yorkers find themselves after September 11th, and I just wanted to bring a little bit of hope.

The site reminded me of what the South Bronx looked like when I started working, and all this comes out as a result of that. All this work comes as a result of inspiration, of doing and creating work out of places that there's nothing there. I hope that somehow, as ironic as it might sound, I'm also the kind of person who leaves their best joke for the wake. I wanted to say that there's a sense, and there's a little hope in which you guys can create.

I wanted to show you the barbershop opening, so then you will see how people from the academia,

people from museums, come together with people from the community in one place. Hopefully you will see it.

This is opening day. We gave free haircuts. You always have to give something for free.

I'm just going to leave it on, because I know that we have a question and answer. There's no sound.

I wanted also to say that when I come in and work with communities, I always have a question in mind. This is what I have to give the community. Then my question is, what does the community have to give me, and why do they have to give me this? And all this work is what they have to give me. Thank you.

Sato: We have time for just a couple of questions, so do we see any hands?

Audience: Thank you for a wonderful presentation. I have a question about how you are negotiating your acceptance and popularity in a very academically-determined fine arts institutional discourse? I know that you are very sensitive to creating work that is still accessible, and maybe has very different meanings for your community. But as you alluded, when it goes straight into the Whitney, then you're very much a part of the "Mary Boone" kind of institutions.

Osorio: I think that so far, we have not come up with a possibility of housing art outside museums and institutions. So my relationship is a hate/love relationship with institutions that are depositories for art, places of depository for art. So my relationship is love and hate.

I think that what I need to do more than anything else is, in negotiating, it's balancing the possibilities that it doesn't take seventeen years of their life for a person to look at art for the first time, as it took me.

I think that what I wanted to do is that as long as the work is presented in a community setting that is reflective of that very instant in that place, and that people witness the process of contemporary art, and look at an artist pulling his hair, crying, screaming, laughing, and all that, and demystifying the notion of what an artist is, I am pleased.

I am not interested in creating work that is commercial, nor do I think that the top five galleries are interested in the work that I'm doing. We just don't

match, and that's perfectly fine with me. There's so much out there in the world that... Why concentrate on that?

Audience: Obviously, one of the strengths of your work is the specific stories that you're telling, the individuals that you're working with. You hinted a little bit at the implications of that, but I wondered if you could talk some more about the relationship that you negotiate with people, whether you see those people as your collaborators or your subjects, and how you deal with issues of representation and how the two of you arrive at a place that's comfortable for you both.

Osorio: It varies. It varies a lot. I don't know if you realize it goes from the general to the specific. I can open up to this larger community to closing up to just one father and son and mom.

When a story is told to me that I feel has relevance to what I wanted it to do, I often share that with the person. I always keep them aware. Like when the son said, "I don't care who's listening to this," that was me in the background suddenly saying, "Hundreds and thousands of people are going to listen to this! You've got to be careful with this!" And he just said that, because I'm constantly... I think that I have an ethical kind of burden on me, that I just wanted to be responsible enough with it.

I also make agreements with families. I mean, that tape, the father and son, I brought it forward to the son and to the father and showed them, before I finished the editing, a rough cut, and asked them if it was okay. I had about forty-five hours. I edited it to eighteen minutes. I showed them and asked them if it was okay, that that can happen.

I also made a deal with this family, *Badge of Honor*, that when this piece gets sold, they get a percentage of it as a way of giving back, only towards his education, that the money can be used only towards that. Specifically, his education. You know, so then I balance also that kind of responsibility that I have with people.

In other works, people come forward, when it's shown in the community, they see the video. They know they're going to be on video, and if I hear of any objections, then I open up a conversation and a dialog with them. So far, I haven't had any problems. But you know, it's a big responsibility. I

know this. I know this. Did I answer the question? Okay. Thank you.

Sato: I want to thank Pepón very much for sharing with us. Thank you very much.

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