

Queens Museum of Art, Queens, NY

“Corona Plaza: Center of Everywhere”

Running Time: 6:46

[regal horns music]

CORONA IS ABOUT 70% LATIN AMERICAN. WHAT WE SAW WAS THIS AMAZING OPPORTUNITY FOR US TO WORK IN THIS NEIGHBORHOOD, GET OUTSIDE OF THE DOORS OF THE MUSEUM, AND NOT JUST ABOUT BRINGING PEOPLE TO THE MUSEUM, BUT STARTING TO WORK OUTSIDE IN THAT COMMUNITY WITH THOSE NEW IMMIGRANTS. SO NOT JUST OPEN UP ART POSSIBILITIES, BUT TO OPEN UP LIFE POSSIBILITIES.

YOU KNOW, WE THOUGHT THAT IT WOULD BE REALLY GREAT TO DO SOME PUBLIC ART PROJECTS. SO WE APPLIED TO THE INSTITUTE FOR MUSEUM AND LIBRARY SERVICES AND GOT A GRANT FOR TWO YEARS, AND THAT GRANT WAS CALLED "CORONA: CENTER OF EVERYWHERE." AND THAT WAS OUR FIRST REALLY IN-DEPTH EXPERIMENT WITH HOW WE COULD GET, YOU KNOW, SERIOUS ART PROJECTS INTERWOVEN INTO THOSE FESTIVALS.

SO WE'D HAVE THESE STREET FAIRS WHERE WE WOULD HAVE LOCAL PERFORMERS, DANCE GROUPS, MUSIC GROUPS, AND THAT WHOLE PROCESS OF FINDING ALL THIS LOCAL TALENT WAS GREAT FOR US AS WELL. THERE ARE QUITE A LOT OF ACCOMPLISHED MUSICIANS AND DANCERS IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD, AND A LOT OF THEM ARE TEACHING OR STARTING SCHOOLS AS WELL HERE. SO IT'S REALLY A VIBRANT COMMUNITY, AND WHAT WE SAW WAS THAT THAT'S AN ASSET TO US AS A CULTURAL INSTITUTION.

SHAUN LEONARDO IS AN ARTIST WHO HAS A PERSONA AS A LUCHA LIBRE WRESTLER, WHICH IS THIS MEXICAN TRADITION OF WEARING THE MASK AND WRESTLING. IT'S A SORT OF POP CULTURE-- LIKE PROFESSIONAL WRESTLING WE HAVE HERE IN THE UNITED STATES.

THERE ACTUALLY WAS A SUMMERLONG CAMPAIGN INTRODUCING THIS CHARACTER TO THE LOCAL COMMUNITY OF CORONA PLAZA. WE PUT A PROMO VIDEO IN STOREFRONTS AND WINDOWFRONTS. I VISITED THE COMMUNITY, VISITED RESTAURANTS. I EVEN VISITED SCHOOLS AND INTRODUCED EL "C" TO ABOUT 200 STUDENTS, SMALL KIDS. THE IDEA WAS THAT BY THE TIME THIS WRESTLING EVENT APPROACHED, THAT THE COMMUNITY WOULD ALREADY FEEL A SENSE OF CONNECTION TO THIS PERSON. WE ONLY PITCHED IT AS A WRESTLING EVENT. SO BY THE TIME I STEPPED UP INTO THAT RING, EVERYONE EXPECTED ANOTHER OPPONENT. SO THAT ELEMENT OF SURPRISE, THAT HUMOR, THAT ELEMENT OF--OF REALLY INTRODUCING PERFORMANCE ART ACTIVITY AT THE VERY LAST MOMENT AND ANNOUNCING THIS ENTIRE EVENT THAT'S A LUCHA LIBRE WRESTLING SPECTACLE WAS VERY INTEGRAL TO THE

IDEA. SO IT WASN'T UNTIL I QUITE LITERALLY STARTED GRAPPLING WITH NO ONE THAT THEY REALIZED, HEY, SOMETHING ELSE IS GOING ON HERE. [chuckles]
[crowd cheering]

HE GOT INTO THE RING, AND HE WRESTLED THE INVISIBLE MAN.

SO I ALREADY SET MYSELF UP AS THIS CHAMPION OF THE COMMUNITY. AND THEY RECEIVED ME AS THAT. BUT AS THE MATCH PROCEEDS, IT GETS QUITE INTENSE. PEOPLE REALIZE THAT I'M QUITE LITERALLY DAMAGING MY OWN BODY. IN MEXICAN WRESTLING, THE TRADITION IS THAT THE IDENTITY IS UNDERSTOOD ONLY BY THE DESIGN OF THE MASK. [grunting]

[shouting in Spanish]

THEY WANT A HERO IN THEIR LIVES. THEY WANT VICTORY. AND ESSENTIALLY, I TEAR DOWN THAT PERSON THROUGHOUT THE MATCH. HE IS LEFT BARED TO COMPLETE EXPOSURE BECAUSE I DE-MASK MYSELF. [crowd jeering]

THE WHOLE THING WAS MEANT TO BE LARGER THAN LIFE AND THEN TO HAVE HIM LOSE, AND HE WAS EL CONQUISTADOR VERSUS EL HOMBRE INVISIBLE. SO IT WAS THIS KIND OF THING ABOUT WHO'S INVISIBLE AND NOT VISIBLE, WHO'S THE CONQUEROR, OR, YOU KNOW, IT BROUGHT UP IMPERIAL EXPERIENCE AND SO FORTH AND THIS KIND OF LUCHA LIBRE PERFORMER AS THIS, YOU KNOW, INVINCIBLE ANTI-IMPERIALIST. [crowd cheering]

THE STRUCTURE AROUND IT WAS THAT THERE WAS THIS DAYLONG COMMUNITY FESTIVAL THAT WENT ON ALL AFTERNOON. AND THERE WERE A SERIES OF TENTS ALL THROUGH CORONA PLAZA, AND YOU HAD HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS AND IMMIGRANT RIGHTS GROUPS. SO THERE WAS--THE KIND OF SOCIAL MET THE ARTISTIC.

THE OPPOSITE OF THAT MAYBE WOULD BE MIKE ESTABROOK'S PROJECT, AND THAT WAS SOMETHING THAT WAS VERY QUIET IN SOME SENSES. HIS PROJECT WAS TO CREATE A KIND OF MASCOT FOR CORONA, AND IT WAS CALLED LA CORONITA, WHICH, UNLIKE THIS BIG, OVER-THE-TOP FIGURE, WAS THIS LITTLE GIRL FIGURE WHO HAD A CROWN. IT WAS KIND OF LIKE IF YOU READ CHILDREN'S BOOKS OR SOMETHING, LIKE, THE IMAGINATION OF WHAT A HERO-- YOU KNOW, A LITTLE GIRL WHO THINKS SHE'S THE HERO OR WHATEVER OF THE COMMUNITY. AND CORONITA IS, LIKE, A DIMINUTIVE OF CORONA.

THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IS TO JUST INVOLVE THE COMMUNITY DIRECTLY IN THE PROCESS AND ACTUALLY HAVE THEM USE THEIR MEMORIES AND THEIR IDEAS OF WHAT THEIR NEIGHBORHOOD MEANS TO THEM AS A PART OF THE PIECE. ONE OF THE STORIES I USED CONCERNED THE LAKE IN CORONA PARK. SOMEONE WROTE THAT THAT WAS THEIR FAVORITE PLACE BECAUSE IT REMINDED THEM OF THEIR HOME IN ECUADOR, AND THEY REMEMBERED BEING

ON BOATS IN THE LAKE WITH THEIR BROTHER AND JUST, YOU KNOW, KIND OF BOATING AROUND. SO I MADE AN ANIMATION BASED ON THAT AND INSTALLED TWO FIGURES OUT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE LAKE IN A BOAT. WE ACTUALLY WORKED WITH THE BOATHOUSE OVER THERE, WHICH WAS THIS KIND OF NEAT, ALTERNATIVE, FUNKY BOATHOUSE PLACE THAT-- THEY WERE MORE THAN HAPPY TO WORK WITH US, AND YEAH, THEY LENT US A BOAT AND HELPED US ANCHOR IT. AND IT WAS OUT THERE FOR TWO MONTHS WITH TWO OF MY LITTLE CUTOUT CHARACTERS.

A LOT OF PEOPLE IN THE COMMUNITY REALLY SAID THAT ART WASN'T SOMETHING THAT IT NEEDED. THEY HAD A PRECONCEIVED NOTION OF WHAT ART WAS. AND THEY THOUGHT ART WOULD JUST-- WAS JUST-- WE'RE GONNA BRING A PAINTING AND INSTALL IT IN YOUR BUSINESS, OR WE'RE GONNA HAVE-- WE'RE GONNA MAKE SOME KIND OF ABSTRACT STRUCTURE AND STICK IT IN THE MIDDLE OF YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD. BUT IN REALITY, I THINK, ONCE THEY GOT TO WORK WITH US MORE, THEY REALLY SAW THAT THE ART THAT WE WERE REFERRING TO WAS SOMETHING DEEPER THAN THAT.

IT CERTAINLY WAS NOT CREATED AS AN AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE. THAT'S IN NONE OF THE GRANT APPLICATION. WE ALMOST NEVER TALK ABOUT IT. BUT IT WAS AMAZING IN TERMS OF THE WAY THAT OUR AUDIENCES HAVE CONTINUED TO GROW.

A LOT OF OUR PROGRAMMING IS DONE RIGHT NOW THROUGH SUGGESTIONS FROM COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS, SO AT LEAST 1/3 OF ALL OF OUR PUBLIC PROGRAMMING, WHETHER THEY BE EVENTS, FESTIVALS, AND SO FORTH. THOSE-- A LOT OF THEM COME TO US RIGHT NOW FROM PEOPLE WHO ENGAGE WITH US FIRST AT OFF-SITE, AT CORONA PLAZA, OR, YOU KNOW, THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS THAT WE DEVELOPED OR THROUGH PARTNERING ORGANIZATIONS. AND SO THAT, TO ME, IS IMPORTANT THAT WHAT HAS RESULTED IN GENERAL IS A SENSE THAT THE MUSEUM IS OPEN.

WE'RE NOT A COMMUNITY CENTER. WE REALLY AREN'T, AND WE DON'T WANT IT TO LOOK LIKE A COMMUNITY CENTER. WE'RE IN A MUSEUM, A FORMAL MUSEUM. THE IDEA IS TO OPEN THE DOORS TO THAT KIND OF FORMAL SPACE TO THE COMMUNITY, BUT NOT TO BE A COMMUNITY CENTER FIRST. I THINK IT'S MORE INTERESTING TO BE SORT OF BOTH AT THE SAME TIME.

THE BIGGEST THING THAT MUSEUMS CAN TAKE FROM PROJECTS AND THINGS IS THAT YOU HAVE TO OPEN YOUR DOORS TO THE COMMUNITY. YOU HAVE TO BE ACCESSIBLE. YOU HAVE TO REALLY MAKE-- HAVE THE COMMUNITY UNDERSTAND WHAT ART IS AND ALSO LEARN WHAT ART IS FOR THEM AND ALSO INCORPORATE THAT IN YOUR OWN MUSEUM.

WHAT WE LEARNED WHEN WE TALKED TO THE ARTISTS THAT PARTICIPATED IN "CORONA PLAZA: CENTER OF EVERYWHERE" IS THAT A LOT OF PEOPLE FELT

THEY WOULD LIKE TO HAVE LONGER RESIDENCIES SO THAT THEY COULD BUILD THEIR PROJECTS MORE ORGANICALLY BASED ON THEIR RESEARCH AND THEIR TIME SPENT.

WE HAVE--A PARTNER ON THIS IS CREATIVE TIME, ANOTHER PUBLIC ART ORGANIZATION IN NEW YORK, AND TOGETHER, WE HAVE SPONSORED TANIA BRUGUERA. AND SHE HAS ACTUALLY MOVED TO CORONA, AND SHE'S SPENDING 24/7 IN CORONA, HAS SET UP SHOP ON ROOSEVELT AVENUE IN A STOREFRONT, AND SHE'S GONNA DO A YEARLONG PROJECT ABOUT IMMIGRATION IN THE COMMUNITY, AND IT'S GRADUALLY TAKING SHAPE.

PART OF THE PROJECT IS TO TRY TO LOOK AT THE WAY IN WHICH WE REPRESENT THE IMMIGRANTS. AND PART OF THAT ALSO HAS TO DO WITH THE WAY IN WHICH PEOPLE, YOU KNOW, DEMONSTRATE FOR THEIR RIGHTS. AND I THINK ONE SPECIFIC ASPECT IS SLOGANS. SO I'M TRYING TO SET UP A SLOGAN WORKSHOP.

FOR ME, WHAT'S IMPORTANT IS WHAT WE TAKE FROM IT. YOU KNOW, THESE PROJECTS HAVE A CERTAIN LIFE SPAN, AND SOMETIMES THE ARTIST'S, YOU KNOW, ENGAGEMENT IN THAT ENDS AT A PARTICULAR TIME, AND THAT'S FINE, BUT AS AN INSTITUTION THAT'S INVESTED IN SEEING THOSE RELATIONSHIPS OR THOSE IDEAS BE BUILT ON, SO THAT, FOR ME, IS SUCCESS. [train rumbling]