

Corona Plaza Center of Everywhere

Speakers: Prerana Reddy, Tom Finkelppearl, Shaun El Leonardo,
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>> PRERANA REDDY: 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.

>> TOM FINKELPEARL: We thought that it'd 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. That grant was called Corona Center of Everywhere.

That was our first really in-depth experiment with how we could get serious art projects interwoven into the festivals.

>> PRERANA REDDY: So we'd have these street fairs where we'd 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. What we saw was that's an asset to us as a cultural institution.

>> TOM FINKELPEARL: 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 sort of pop culture like professional wrestling we have here in the United States.

>> SHAUN EL LEONARDO: There actually was a summer long campaign introducing this character to the local community of Corona Plaza. We put a promo video in store fronts and window fronts.

I visited the community, visited restaurants. I even visited schools and introduced LC 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.

That element of surprise, that humor, that element of really introducing performance art activity at the very last moment and announcing this entire event as 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 wait something else is going on here.

>> TOM FINKELPEARL: He got into the ring and he wrestled the invisible man.

>> SHAUN EL LEONARDO: So I already set myself up as this champion of the community. 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. They want a hero in their lives. They want victory. Essentially I tear down that person throughout the match. He is left bared to complete exposure because I de-mask myself.

>> PRERANA REDDY: The whole thing was meant to be larger than life and then to have him lose. He was El Conquistador versus El Hombre Invisible so it was this kind of thing about who is invisible and not visible, who is the conqueror or it brought up imperial experience and so forth and this kind of Lucha Libre performer as this invincible canteen imperialist.

>> TOM FINKELPEARL: The structure around it was that there was this day long community festival that went on all afternoon. There were a series of tents all through Corona Plaza and you had healthcare providers and immigrant rights groups so there was a kind of social met the artistic.

>> PRERANA REDDY: The opposite of that maybe would be my Grassroots Project and that was something that was very quiet. In some senses this project was to create a kind of mask-op 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's kind of like if you read children's books or something like the imagination of what a hero little girl who thinks she's the hero or whatever at the community. Coronita is like a diminutive of Corona.

>> MIKE ESTABROOK: 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 concern the lake in Corona Park. Someone wrote 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 kind of floating 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 boat house over there which was this kind of neat alternative funky boat house place that they were more than happy to work with us. 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.

>> NAILA ROSARIO: 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. They thought art was just you were going to bring the painting and install it in your business or we're going to 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.

>> TOM FINKELPEARL: It certainly was not created as an audience development initiative. That's in none of the grant applications. We almost never talk about it but it was amazing in terms of the way that our audiences have continued to grow.

>> PRERANA REDDY: A lot of our programming is done right now through suggestions from community organizations so at least one-third of all of our public programming whether they be events, festivals and so forth a lot of them come to us right now from people who engaged with us first at off-site at Corona Plaza or through partnerships that we developed or through partnering organizations. That to me is important that what has resulted in general is a sense that the museum is open.

>> TOM FINKELPEARL: We're not a community center. We really aren't and we don't want it to look like a community center. We're 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.

>> NAILA ROSARIO: The biggest thing that museums can take from projects like this is you have to open your doors to the community. You have to be a festival. You have to really have the community understand what art is and also learn what art is for them and also incorporate that in your own museum.

>> PRERANA REDDY: What we learned when we talked to artists that participated in Corona Plaza Center of Everywhere is that a lot of people felt they would like to have longer residency so that they could build their projects more organically based on their research and their time spent.

>> TOM FINKELPEARL: We have a partner and this is Creative Time, another public art organization in New York. Together we have sponsored Tania Bruguera. She has actually moved to Corona and she is spending 24/7 in Corona, has set up shop on Roosevelt Avenue in a store front and she's going to do a yearlong project about immigration in the community. It's gradually taking shape.

>> TANIA BRUGUERA: Part of the project is to try to look at the way in which we represent the immigrants. Part of that also has to do with the way in which people demonstrate for their rights. I think one of the specific aspects is slogans so I'm trying to set up a slogan workshop.

>> PRERANA REDDY: For me what's important is what we take from it. These projects have a certain life span and sometimes the artists 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.