

## reForm

Temple Contemporary at Tyler School of Art,  
Temple University, Philadelphia //  
August 28, 2015 through May 20, 2016

A critique is a writer's professional and personal assessment of an exhibition, formed without consulting its creators, and shaped by his or her expertise and experience. Its audience is the profession. Each issue of the journal features one to three critiques of a current or recent exhibition.

# Installation Art Meets Public History What Can We Learn from Pepón Osorio?

Keith Ragone

As an artist and an exhibition designer, I often find myself walking a line between navigating content to create meaning, and simply creating a series of visual conceits that seem to activate space. And as someone who frequently serves in the role of developer for history museums, I also find myself frustrated with a reticence to experiment with new approaches, especially art-based ones. I was anxious to see *reForm*, an installation by artist Pepón Osorio at Temple Contemporary, a gallery that is part of Temple University's Tyler School of Art. I felt—I hoped—that there would be something to learn here, something to take away about the possibilities of mining the place where art and history intersect.

The work of Osorio travels within a duality, one of personal journey as artist, and the other, his public journey—a journey that he creates for and with an audience. In both,

though, Osorio is, above all, a storyteller.<sup>1</sup> His narratives are complex and visually stunning, and they draw both on his artist's sensibilities and the social fabric and voice of the communities in which he is engaged.

That is the case with *reForm*, Osorio's installation. The exhibition is about North Philadelphia's Fairhill Elementary School—a closed neighborhood school—and about race, a marginalized community, and a failed public education system. In 2013 Fairhill, along with 23 other neighborhood schools, was closed to meet state budget shortfalls—a result of Pennsylvania politics and a decision by the Philadelphia School Reform Commission.

<sup>1</sup> See Erick Lyle, "Substitute Teacher: Pepón Osorio's Philadelphia School," *Art in America*, June 28, 2016, accessed August 10, 2016, <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/news/substitute-teacher-pepn-osorios-philadelphia-school/>.



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*Ofrendas* (offerings). These 3D collages capture the personal stories of Pepón Osorio's Bobcat collaborators. All images are: Pepón Osorio, *reForm* (detail), 2015, mixed media and video installation.

fig. 1. (left)

Every surface of the Tyler classroom is covered, including the ceiling, where building systems are wrapped in colorful fabrics.



fig. 2. (right)

Detail of an *ofrenda*.



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According to Temple Contemporary’s website, the gallery commissioned Osorio to create the installation. Working with Osorio was in keeping with the work of Temple Contemporary; the gallery’s mission is to creatively re-imagine the social function of art through questions of local relevance and international significance. Temple Contemporary frequently shows art that is project-based. Often, the projects are about the artist’s dialogue/collaboration/involvement within a community, a neighborhood, or a stakeholder group, such as the recent project *Funeral for a Home*, a performance work by Billy Dufala, Steven Dufala, and Jacob Helman, who worked with the Mantua community in West Philadelphia to chronicle the life of an abandoned, typical, city row home scheduled for demolition. *reForm* is a hybrid. In crafting a story about the school, Osorio curates and designs an art installation that transcends both what you would expect to see in a classic art installation and a classic history exhibition. He mines to great effect objects and narratives from collaborative partners—in this case Fairhill’s former students, teachers, and members of its surrounding community.

Osorio uses one of the art school’s basement classrooms and its adjoining hallways as a canvas. He creates an immersive environment using the flotsam and jetsam from a shuttered school—desks, lockers, science-lab workbenches and equipment, and countless pieces of ephemera, the detritus of the school’s former inhabitants—backpacks, books, notebooks, papers, drawings—used stuff. If you can imagine it, it’s there, all organized in a predictable setting—until you look closely: every inch of the “gallery” is covered, from its floors to its ceiling, playfully layered, creating a catalogue of school-place material culture (fig. 1).

The many objects in this exhibition and their arrangement create a physical framework for the voice(s) of the story/artwork—the voices of the “Bobcats Collective” (the artist’s collaborators—10 former Fairhill students, who take their name from the closed school’s mascot). Their voices are poetic, captured on two large video screens, in a series of altars or *Dia de los Muertos*/Day of the Dead *ofrendas* (offerings), and in real time as guides who are available to talk to visitors about the experience (intro image & fig. 2).

Through the run of the exhibition, the space/gallery continued to function as a university classroom in the Tyler School of Art within Osorio's *mise en scène* of the Fairhill classroom. This dynamic overlay of purposes adds to the richness of the experience and activity.

Bringing an artist's sensibility to exhibitions that frame popular, social, and public history content and stories is not new. Nor is an exhibition where curators are willing to work with constituencies/audiences/communities to create an exhibition through an interpretive development process, one that draws on their expectations and experiences. Two examples that come to mind are Fred Wilson's seminal *Mining the Museum* at the Maryland Historical Society in the early 1990s, and Santa Cruz Museum of History and Art director Nina Simon's ongoing work on the "participatory museum."

So why am I surprised every time I encounter an exhibition in an arts institution that has interpretive history themes and content

combined with the voice of audience? Conversely, why am I not surprised that interpretive exhibits in history museums more often than not lack the kind of poetic magic that an artist's vision can provide?

*reForm* had drawn me into a complex history in a way that I had seldom been drawn into a topic in a traditional history museum installation. Its fantastic combination of objects, its colors and rich textures, and the way in which personal narratives from the people that are the story unfolded within and through them: all formed a set of narratives reframed by the artist in extremely compelling ways (fig. 3). The exhibition does not pretend to be objective or didactic—there is only one very short introductory text panel. Its outcome is, instead, experiential. We walk into the artist's installation surrounded by voices, recorded and present, surrounded by visual elements that are familiar yet surprise at every turn, like the floating test tubes over the lab tables, the classroom worktables that morph into chalk boards, and the collaged altar pieces that are



fig. 3. "Classroom" corner with notebook wallpaper and media screens.

the real story, holding actual and symbolic personal effects belonging to Osorio's *real* storytellers—the Bobcats (figs. 4, 5, 6).

As *reForm* unfolds through the lens of the curator/designer, it seems to avoid standard content/narrative hierarchies, or many of the other things that we as museum professionals look for as we evaluate for

success. It presents a different model: one that straddles two worlds that don't intersect very often, or, at least, don't often intersect well—the world of art gallery and history museum. But as I walked through *reForm*, I could not help watching my experience both as exhibition designer and an artist, engaged in the ambiguity that characterizes great art—you make your own meaning; it doesn't

fig. 4. (left)

Worktables with "blackboard" tops were used as a meeting place for Tyler students and visitors alike.



fig. 5. (right)

The recreated/imagined science-lab area with video.



fig. 6.

Floating test tubes activate the science lab.



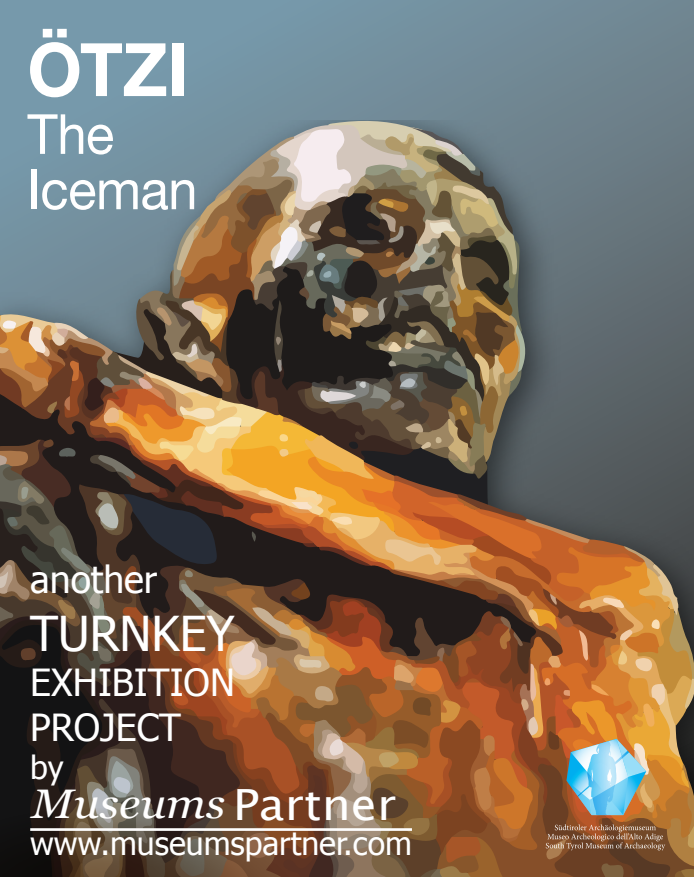
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“tell” you how to feel. I loved *reForm*’s raw messiness, and the authenticity of the exhibit’s voice(s).

I wonder what we as museum professionals can learn from the work of Pepón Osorio, not to mention the many other artists engaged in the creation of work with public history content and themes. How can we create experiences that not only capture the complexity of narrative in our efforts to create meaning, but also allow for the surprise, revelation, and transformation that is often the result of an encounter with an artist’s work? For me, those encounters always allow and often demand self-reflection: what is my relationship to this story, how do I fit into its narrative, and why am I moved? To some extent, those questions also guide me in my practice as an artist—but always guide the work I do as an exhibition designer. Perhaps making some additional room for the “artist’s” sensibility, along with the voices of our audiences, can refresh and reform our standard storytelling practice in history museum exhibitions. ■

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# Shattering the “Museum Effect”

## Pros and Cons to the Program/Exhibition

Izzy Kasdin

One of the most thought-provoking critiques I have come across about museums as institutions is the discussion of the “museum effect.” In exhibitions, the “museum effect” occurs by the very act of putting objects on display, and by classifying them within the theme of an exhibition. Despite our best intentions as museum professionals, we can inadvertently fix meaning, making it more difficult for visitors to think for themselves and assign their own meanings to what they see. As the art historian and critic Svetlana Alpers points out, museums have a “tendency to isolate something from its world, to offer it up for attentive looking” and they can, as a result, “make it hard to see.”

*reForm*—which blurs the lines between static display and active programming, between art and artifact—makes strides toward shattering the “museum effect.” It does so by breaking rules: by saturating the exhibition space with material and sound; by blurring boundaries between “visitor” and “display”; by relinquishing the curatorial authority to interpret; and by ultimately embracing an explicitly activist, political stance.

### Breaking the “Less Is More” Rule

At first, *reForm* blends into the Temple University building in which it is placed.

The installation recreates a school hallway and classroom from Fairhill Elementary School, one of 23 public schools closed in Philadelphia by the city’s controversial School Reform Commission. It covers one small hallway and classroom in the bowels of Temple’s Tyler School of Art. Following Fairhill’s closure, Temple Contemporary commissioned Philadelphia-based artist Pepón Osorio to creatively address the loss; Fairhill was not far from Temple’s campus. Osorio, formerly a social worker, specializes in large-scale installations grounded in communities.

Osorio “mobilized a community-wide response,” according to *reForm*’s introductory text panel, which involved participation from the former Fairhill principal, students, parents, and teachers. In essence, he co-created the installation with the community members who had lived the history. The group removed surplus material from the shuttered school building and used the material to develop the immersive classroom space that is the *reForm* exhibition. Central to the process, the text panel explains, was the “Bobcats Collective,” a group of 10 former Fairhill students.

While the exhibition is small—it only encompasses one narrow hallway and a



classroom—it packs quite an emotional and visual punch (fig. 1). Salvaged elementary school cubbies and coat racks line the hallway that forms the entrance to the main classroom installation. On one wall, there is a display of student artwork, mounted on colored construction paper—no different from one you might find in any elementary school corridor. On the other wall, above a set of salvaged Fairhill cubbies, are photographs of the exhibition development process. The photographs show, for example,

a truck transporting desks and chalkboards from Fairhill to Temple’s Tyler School of Art, a meeting of the Bobcats Collective, and students creating some of the artwork and imagery that is on display.

The “classroom” contains the main part of the installation. Every bit of space is packed with material. Stuffed backpacks cover the ceiling. Stacks of books line the baseboards. Enlarged sheets of looseleaf paper—on which former Fairhill students wrote essay

**fig. 1.** View of main classroom exhibit in *reForm*. All images are: Pepón Osorio, *reForm* (detail), 2015, mixed media and video installation.



fig. 2.

Video installation  
in *reForm*.



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responses to the writing prompt, “Why do you miss Fairhill?”—paper the walls, floor to ceiling. Video installations of various sizes greet the visitor at every turn. Sound from the films fills the room. The visual focal point of the classroom is the back wall, which has been converted into a massive, green, classroom chalkboard. Written on it, in meticulous, serif script, is the exact letter that the superintendent of Philadelphia schools, Dr. William Hite, wrote to parents announcing Fairhill’s closure. Centered beneath it is a salvaged cot from the school nurse’s office. Other corners of the room feature the classroom items removed from Fairhill. There is a reconstructed science classroom, with microscopes, lab benches, and a skeleton; there are lockers, an art slop sink, and human anatomy posters. By ignoring a rule of exhibition curation—that “less is more”—Osorio manages to make each individual object become a completely integrated part of an overall story and argument. I, like most visitors, am drawn to stories, arcs, and synthesis, so I found these objects in context to be naturally engaging. Moreover, the realistic classroom, made possible by the saturated space, established one of the most universally familiar settings to all American visitors; this made the space perhaps less alienating, intimidating, and elitist than a white-walled gallery.

### Inspiring Advocacy

Like the installation’s overstuffed physical environment, the auditory environment is overwhelming. Osorio did not employ any of the modern exhibition technologies that isolate sound—another “rule” broken in *reForm*. A responsive, stylized chant of student reflections forms a large part of the exhibition’s verbal messaging and soundscape. Small video screens, mounted on giant Ticonderoga pencils and artistically

surrounded by a collage of student photographs, miniature protest signs, and tiny classroom objects, show close-ups of students as they share feelings about their school's closing (fig. 2). They comment on the lack of resources funneled to their schools, the inescapable "death or jail" pipeline, their desire to learn and graduate, and their feelings of resignation. Between individual students' thoughts, the videos are synced so that it is as if they all chant the refrain, "It's time that when we speak, you listen." The audio is played through megaphones attached to each of the pencil posts, and adopts the megaphones' tinny, shouted sound quality.

Megaphones, in fact, are a prominent motif throughout the room, and they serve both as speakers and as invitations to speak. Flanking the main classroom space are two small walls. On each is mounted a box in which sits a megaphone with the caption, "Say it like it is!" and "*iDilo como es!*" encouraging visitors to pick them up and shout through them (fig. 3).

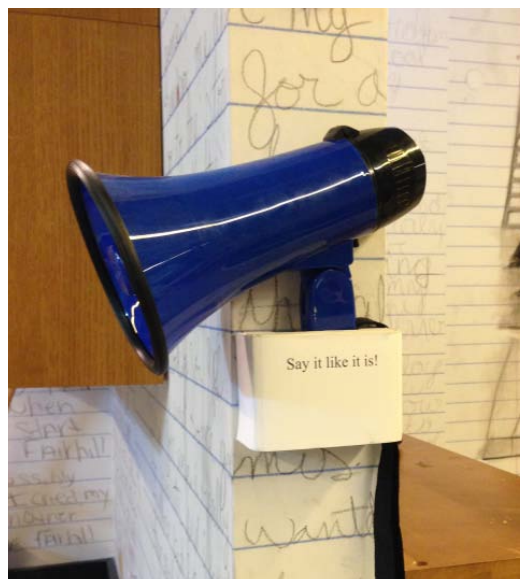
The density of the environment and the intensity of the audio experience made me feel as if I had been absorbed into the political world of the exhibition. The audio presentation only lasts about two or three minutes, but because it repeats continuously and is audible throughout the room, I couldn't help but feel like I was in the middle of a real-time protest. By the end of my visit, I knew exactly when to shout, "It's time that when we speak, you listen," And I knew that, if I wanted it, a megaphone was readily available as my tool of protest.

### Blurring Boundaries

The power of *reForm* lies in how it sits at the intersection of exhibition and program. In this context, a "program" is some event,

workshop, or ongoing interactive element that encourages visitors to participate in some kind of activity, discussion, or creative process related to the education reform theme of the installation. Exhibition and program are inextricably linked in *reForm*; every piece of the display was very clearly created as a result of a program and every program that occurs in the space very clearly draws upon the display. There are no barriers to touching, and the entire exhibition is visibly a work in progress.

The central exhibition space is filled with tables and chairs—the surfaces of the tables are chalkboard material on which visitors are encouraged to scrawl—which form the working "program" arm of the installation. The space was actively used as a Tyler School of Art classroom during the academic year. On Saturdays, it was used as "a gathering space for free educational and advocacy programs selected with input from the Fairhill community," according to the introductory text panel. As a result, supplies such as paper, markers, and paint



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fig. 3.

Megaphones are readily available in *reForm*.

are strewn about the exhibition for use in programming, and the products of those programs are scattered about as well (fig. 4). At first, the student essays papering the walls and clay models of school officials were some of the student projects in the display. Over time, more and more student creations were added to the space, including homemade lie detector tests and a model of the students' ideal imaginary Fairhill School, all a result of workshops with the artist.

The debris left over from *reForm*'s workshop programming adds to the overall sense of use and activity in the installation, which counters the imagery of powerlessness and silencing over the school closure that some of the displays artistically convey. I felt like something was about to happen—as if the bell was about to ring, and students would come bustling in to do some kind of project or act of protest. The visibility of programming serves as a testament to the acts of reflection, resistance, and resolution in education policy issues that happened in

fig. 4.

Lie detector tests made in one of *reForm*'s Saturday workshops.



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the *reForm* space. Even though there was not a program on during my visit, the abundant evidence of past programs gave me the sense that scores of visitors before me had taken active steps toward reconciling the issues presented. In this figurative company, it is impossible to just “look.”

### Avoiding Curatorial Didacticism and Objectivity

The immersive space in *reForm* makes explanatory text quite impractical, and there is indeed very little in *reForm*. There is so much physical content that objects would have had to be more spaced out to make labels even a remote possibility. Moreover, the installation is, for the most part, composed of objects that visitors see on a daily basis and is made to appear like a classroom, probably one of the most universally familiar environments, in need of little explanation. Individual labels on objects would have been condescending, at best. For example, Osorio and the Bobcats repurposed classroom cubbies to hold mundane artifacts (fig. 5). A plexiglass door separates them from the visitor. All are labeled exactly as they are: ceiling tiles with a label that says “ceiling tiles,” an eraser with an “eraser” label, and so on. These objects had very little interpretive value, in spite of, and, I would even argue, because of their brief, limiting label and isolated presentation—the very essence of the “museum effect.” Compared with the *in situ* style of the rest of the material, this cubby display restricts the interpretations that visitors themselves can develop with regard to the installation’s content, and restricts the meanings that the objects can have by removing them from their natural habitat.

The lack of didactic text certainly forced me to make my own meaning out of the

fig. 5.

Isolated,  
labeled objects  
in repurposed  
cubbies.

objects, images, and multimedia displays elsewhere in the installation, and I felt that it must have encouraged other visitors to do the same. This is a positive outcome of shattering the “museum effect,” and certainly helped to cultivate the feelings of advocacy and protest, described above, in ways that measured, explanatory text may not have accomplished. Leaving visitors to their own devices where interpretation is concerned can allow them to draw conclusions that curatorial text is not traditionally “allowed” to assert. The installation did not itself need to break the rule that requires clear, objective, and concisely written content. After making my way through the students’ fond memories of Fairhill written on the wall, hearing the students’ frustration emanating from the video installations, and reading the matter-of-fact, unsympathetic letter to parents announcing Fairhill’s closure—all while experiencing a paucity of interpretive labeling—I, as a visitor, filled in the gaps with my own emotionally-charged interpretations. The installation primed me, as a visitor, to break the objectivity rule on the curators’ behalf.

The lack of didactic labeling made it impossible for me to be passive while viewing the installation. As a result, *reForm* gave me a stake in its issues by forcing me to think—constantly, critically, and personally—about the content, and to create my own interpretation of it.

### Conclusion—and User Warnings

By breaking some fundamental rules of museum exhibition—by filling the gallery space with content, blurring boundaries between “visitor” and “display,” by offering limited textual guidance (and thereby relinquishing curatorial authority to interpret), by ignoring the obligation to be



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objective, and by embracing an advocacy stance, *reForm* offers up tools to mitigate the “museum effect”—in short, to make exhibitions, and the objects they contain, less static and restrictively defined. In *reForm*, the objects and multimedia displays that comprise the exhibition become active products of constant meaning making, and the visitor becomes empowered to draw his or her own conclusions about the material. As a result, the objects and media create a site of engagement and protest,

and the visitor, by association, becomes a protester—certainly an untraditionally political outcome for an exhibition. Nicholas Thomas, Director of the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, posits that “Museums work when they offer their audiences problems rather than solutions.” After experiencing *reForm*, I would carry this further, and argue that museums work when they offer their audiences a stake in the problem.

However, I have to say, that despite all of the obvious participatory opportunities within the exhibition, and despite feeling invested in the “problem,” I left feeling a little helpless and a little isolated from the action. *reForm* shows us that the same barrierless, uninterpreted environment that gives objects and stories life, agency, and physical context can also negatively impact the visitor experience. Though *reForm*’s worktables, art supplies, and overall appearance suggested that this was a place to create, it was unclear what the everyday visitor should specifically be doing, saying, or making in the space. Though the target audience for participating in the installation’s “programs” was never explicitly stated, I felt like I might not have been it. It didn’t seem like the Saturday workshops were widely advertised beyond the immediate Fairhill community. And the response prompts around the room—like the “Fairhill Memories” sticky-note wall—all required a familiarity with Fairhill. Moreover, the refrain of “when we speak, you listen” seemed to imply that I should *not* be the one speaking.

For those of us who have no direct link to Fairhill, but feel emotionally moved by the

installation or hear the implicit call to action, the way forward could be fuzzy. Even with the availability of megaphones to declare our solidarity, there was little guidance as to what to say, outside of what the students were already shouting through their video messages. *reForm* demonstrates that a hybrid exhibition/programming space, if not rigorously managed and effectively framed for a broad audience, has the potential to become an echo chamber. How can we push the sense of activism that participatory exhibitions like *reForm* create *beyond* the exhibition walls? And is it—should it—be the exhibition’s job to provide an action plan for each visitor-turned-protester?

Boundary-pushing exhibitions, of course, create as many problems as they solve. The exhibition/program hybrid might help us to respond to and engage with the world and the exhibition itself, but it can also muddy the waters of visitor satisfaction and political action. Yet *reForm* demonstrates that there is much potential in crossing the boundary between exhibition and program. Our challenge is to take the tools *reForm* uses and continue to experiment, so we can ensure that exhibitions strive for engagement, inclusion, and nuance while also achieving clarity and measurable impact. After all, exhibitions should, in Alpers’ words, continue to make it easier, rather than harder, to “see.” ■

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