



For Immediate Release

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## ***TEMPLE CONTEMPORARY EXPLORES AFTERMATH OF A SCHOOL CLOSING THROUGH A WORK OF ART***

**A Consortium of North Philadelphians, Led by the  
Artist Pepón Osorio, Engage an Intractable Social Problem**

Philadelphia, PA — The door is still bolted on the empty concrete shell that once was Fairhill Elementary, but the issues and emotions surrounding the 2013 closing of the North Philadelphia school still resonate. This year, Temple Contemporary, the gallery of Tyler School of Art at Temple University, sets out to explore the closing from the viewpoint of Fairhill residents.

The vehicle is a major commissioned art project entitled *reForm* which launches on **Friday, May 1, 2015**, from 3:30 to 6:00 pm with a gathering and cook-out on the Fairhill school grounds at West Somerset Street between North 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Streets in North Philadelphia. *reForm* has been conceived by artist Pepón Osorio, who is internationally known for weaving together installation, performance, and public art in major works grounded in social justice.

*reForm* is generously supported by the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage.

At the launch on Friday, May 1, former Fairhill students, teachers, parents and administrators will move left-behind chalk boards, desks, chairs and mementos from now empty classrooms onto the bed of a truck. From a podium nearby, they will share associations evoked by the objects and relate memories about the school. After the gathering, the students and project team will transport the items to a classroom at Tyler, thereby laying the foundation for an unconventional, participatory exhibition there that will open **August 21, 2015** and continue throughout the academic year.

The idea for the May 1<sup>st</sup> rally came from the former Fairhill students on the *reForm* team, who call themselves the Bobcats (after the school's mascot). They are modeling the day after a Fairhill

tradition called ‘Funday,’ a day of recreation and learning. For this ‘Funday,’ the former Fairhill principal Darlene Lomax is creating a memorial plaque that is the same size as the for-sale sign now pinned on the school’s front—but her plaque will give the history of the school.

“Many families in North Philadelphia had generations-long ties to Fairhill and to the very day it was shuttered, they considered it *theirs*—a safe haven and community anchor. Hopefully, *reForm* can put a human face to an issue that is typically dominated by dialogue about academic standards and budgetary concerns,” says Rob Blackson, executive director, Temple Contemporary.

Osorio and his team are essentially relocating the closed elementary school to a classroom at Temple University’s Tyler School of Art. This immersive, changing space is the exhibition component of *reForm* as well as an activity hub created by and for the extended Fairhill student community, their families, and project participants. “The exhibition at Tyler will be a kind of testimony to what comes out of the ongoing meetings and community forums held by our circle of participants,” notes Osorio.

Eventually, every surface—walls, ceiling and floors—will be covered with moving images; photographs printed like novelty items to reflect depth and give a punch; a cascade of vintage snapshots and class portraits; a miniature scale model of the Fairhill school building; desks, chairs, classroom items and art and memorabilia belonging to Fairhill students and families. Utilizing new technology, the tables and chairs will be decalé with historical photographs.

This over-the-top tableau will evoke a landscape of memory and evolve daily as community residents hold a steady stream of planning meetings, workshops, and public programs there. The programs will be planned by the project participants, not by Tyler, nor by the artist. For Osorio, the sense of agency that residents may gain from the group process is as important as the installation environment: “I am hoping that this project, with all its components, counters the feelings that I’ve heard so many North Philadelphians describe—feeling invisible in the bureaucratic decision-making of the school closings.”

The 10 high-school age participants who formerly attended Fairhill and self-identify as “Bobcats” are Molly Caro, Dante Quinones, Abraham Ramos, Lenise Ruiz, Lynoska Santa, Justin Serrano, Coralís Torres, Chelsey Velez, Laura Velez and Kiara Villegas. They are joined by Lomax; Tim

Gibbon, former after school and summer program coordinator; and Marangeli Mejia Rabell, the project's coordinator for community engagement.

Osorio's large-scale recreations of everyday spaces have long been inspired by his collaboration with a particular urban community. *reForm* is different, he says: "This begins where my projects usually end, with an exhibition. The exhibition at Tyler in August is intended to kick off a whole new wave of community gatherings and meetings on the subject of the closing of Fairhill Elementary."

Fairhill Elementary is one of 24 schools that have been closed in Philadelphia since 2013 by the city's school reform commission, which has cited a district-wide budget crisis. For the last two years, Fairhill's former students have been dispersed among several other nearby schools.

### **Pepòn Osorio**

Pepòn Osorio is widely known for highly detailed, room-sized installations that transport some part of the working-class Latino experience into major museums and galleries. He has created projects in Philadelphia before. In 1999, he began a period of research with the city's Department of Human Services (DHS), using funds from a grant that he had received for the MacArthur Foundation. For three years, he worked to explore the relationships between caseworkers and their clients: the result was *Face to Face* (2002), a mixed-media, video and sound installation exhibition at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

He has noted, "I am not necessarily at ease with the physical stillness that I see in museum galleries. I need to engage people. I need to create some sort of performative element where one is not in front of the artwork, but, rather, consumed by it."

In one of his best known works, *En la barbería no se llora* (*No crying in the barbershop*), 1994, he created a crowded tableau of an inner city barbershop, complete with ruby-red flocked barber's chairs decorated with white doilies and photographic representations of male bodies, house plants, and the Puerto Rican flag. Embedded on each throne-like chair was a video monitor showing a grown man crying. In some installation venues, Osorio offered free haircuts to visitors off the street.

Osorio has frequently opted to show his installations in neighborhood storefronts before exhibiting them in museums or galleries. This was the case with *Badge of Honor*, 1995, a work inspired by discussions with young men living in Newark, New Jersey. Distressed to learn that some saw having a father in prison as a “badge of honor,” Osorio reconstructed an imaginary prison cell and a boy’s bedroom as a two-part diorama. More recently, his *Face to Face*, 2002, transported viewers directly into the crowded and traumatic bureaucracy of a child welfare office.

A professor at Tyler School of the Arts, Osorio has been the recipient of many national awards, including the Smithsonian Legacy Award for the Visual Arts (2008).

### **Temple Contemporary**

Temple Contemporary began in 2011 at Temple University’s Tyler School of Art as a way of bringing transformative projects to unusual places all across Philadelphia.

Last year, the gallery mounted *Funeral for a Home*, a yearlong public art and history project that brought hundreds of people together to pay homage to the passing of the places they call home. The project, which explored the issue of ‘urban renewal’ in Philadelphia and the family history behind a 142-old row house slated for demolition, was capped by a New Orleans-style funeral procession that wended its way through the Mantua neighborhood of West Philadelphia before reaching the final resting place of the vacant row house at 3711 Melon Street.

*Funeral for a Home* grew out of the gallery’s unique curatorial program, which seeks ideas for exhibitions and projects from its 35-member advisory council, representing a broad spectrum of Philadelphians. Council members are asked to submit questions of local relevance and international significance that they do not know the answers to. After the topics are discussed, the group votes to explore the questions that creatively address the City’s most pressing social and cultural needs.

Another question raised by the council led Temple Contemporary to a collaboration with the Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts and Philadelphia’s NPR affiliate WHY? on *Restoring Ideals*, also in 2014. Through a citywide on-line voting process, Philadelphians selected 10 community-based organizations that they felt best embodied America’s founding ideals. Each organization then was asked to pick an object from its archives that was emblematic of these ideals,

but in desperate need of restoration. Professional conservators then conserved these objects at Temple Contemporary.

Since 2012, Temple Contemporary has also worked with an extensive network of partners to restore advertisements representing sometimes generations-old family run businesses in North Philadelphia. *Vital Signs* program began when the gallery realized that many of the signs for local businesses were so faded and damaged that they were sending out a message of blight, rather than advertising services offered by a vital business community.

### **Accompanying Publication**

*reForm* will be accompanied by a full-color publication in the summer of 2016. Essay contributions to the catalog will be made by Tom Finkelppearl, Commissioner of New York City's Department of Cultural Affairs; Amalia Mesa-Bains, artist and author; Martha Rosler, artist; Mark Warren, sociologist; and Nijmie Dzurinko, former Executive Director of the Philadelphia Student Union. *reForm's* catalog will be distributed internationally and published by Art Editions North.

### **Information**

Temple Contemporary's mission is to creatively re-imagine the social function of art through questions of local relevance and international significance. Gallery hours are Wednesday through Saturday 11 – 6 and by appointment. 2001 North 13<sup>th</sup> Street, Phila. PA. 19122. 215 777 9139 [www.templecontemporary.org](http://www.templecontemporary.org)

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