Olga Viso Narrator

Lorena Duarte Interviewer

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Olga Viso - **OV** Lorena Duarte - **LD**

LD: Today is Wednesday, February 16, 2011. My name is Lorena Duarte. I'm here for the Minnesota Historical Society's Latino Oral History Project, and I'm going to be conducting the interview today. I'm here at the Walker Art Center with Olga Viso in her office.

First of all, I just want to say thank you. I know you're very busy, so thank you for taking time and sharing your story with the Historical Society.

If we can start off with your name and how to spell it, please...

OV: Olga Viso,

LD: Your date of birth and occupation, please?

OV: September 5, 1966, and I'm executive director of the Walker Art Center.

LD: Could you tell me just a little bit about your childhood, your family, the names of your parents, siblings? Start there.

OV: My parents are Cuban immigrants to the United States. My mother's name is also Olga, Olga Ernesta Garcia. My father is Juan Viso. My father came, actually, before the 1959 revolution in Cuba. He was a medical student. He graduated in 1955, and then came to the United States to do his medical residency. He was trying, I guess, to make himself more marketable when he came back to Cuba. But there had been shifting political sands in Cuba, so he decided to stay in this country. He returned to Cuba to bring back his wife—he was married to someone else at the time—and my half brother, Jorge Viso. Jorge was born in Cuba in 1959, in the months after the revolution. My dad came with his son and his wife at the time, to Miami.

My parents didn't know each other in Cuba; although, they probably had lived seven blocks from one another. My mother was born and grew up in Havana. My father was born in Santiago, but my dad lived in Havana to attend medical school. My mother did come to the U. S. as an exile. She came in November of 1961. She had a very different kind of exile experience than my father, who was able to leave on his own terms, whereas my mother left with sixty pounds of her worldly possessions and had to leave her family behind. She came to Miami, and different members of her family came at different points in time in the 1960s and well into the 1970s, actually. So they met in Miami. My father had since gotten divorced during those intervening years. They married in 1965 and I was born in 1966.

I didn't grow up in Miami. I didn't grow up in a large Latino community or the exile Cuban community in Miami because my father was a physician. In the 1960s, the space industry was booming in Florida with NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration] and Cape Canaveral. These little towns very close to Cocoa Beach and The Kennedy Space Center grew immensely, became heavily populated, and these small communities recruited physicians up and down the east coast. My dad was one of those physicians who was recruited to a little town about three hours from Miami called Melbourne, Florida. It was very close to the Kennedy Space Center. My parents made their life there, and I was born there. I grew up going to Miami once a month to see my aunts and uncles and cousins, and my grandmother, and other relatives.

LD: Do you have siblings?

OV: I'm an only child of my parents. I have a half brother who is seven years older.

LD: What kind of a kid were you? Did you like sports, school, academics? What was it like growing up there at that time?

OV: I'd say my passion was always in the arts. My mother says that ever since I could really hold a pencil and a piece of paper in front of me, I started to draw and draw the things around me. I'd say that my parents very much nurtured my interest as an individual in the arts. I took a lot of private classes really from, probably, the age seven on, in addition to art classes in school. Even through college—I was an art major in college—that passion was something that has been lifelong. I also played piano for eight years. Again, my parents were very encouraging in helping me really focus on arts and culture, and so consequently, I didn't play a lot of sports, because between my painting and drawing classes, and school activities, and my piano classes, I was very busy. [chuckles]

I was also a very strong academic kid, so I studied a lot. I think it was typical of a first generation exile where your parents really instill in you that belief that you have a special opportunity, and that you need to take advantage of it and excel. So my parents both encouraged the creative side, but also really pushed me on the academic side.

LD: Anything kind of remarkable about high school years or up to that point? When did you graduate?

OV: I graduated from high school in 1983. I was quite young; I graduated at age sixteen. I was young to begin with for my class because I was born in September. Then I skipped a grade; I think it was eighth grade. That consequently made me younger throughout my high school experience, and then I graduated from college just before turning twenty-one. I wasn't even of legal age when I was in college.

[laughter]

LD: That's got to be one of those non typical college experiences.

OV: Yes.

LD: I was young. I was seventeen.

OV: My parents were older when they had me; my parents were forty. I grew up as an only child with older Latin parents.

LD: Where did you go to college?

OV: I went to Rollins College, which is in Winter Park, Florida. It is a small liberal arts school.

LD: You were an arts major?

OV: I was an art major, although I started out as a pre-med student following the family tradition. It extended to women as well as men in the family. But I was taking art simultaneously. I think that with the arts and sciences there is a correlation. There's kind of a creativity in science akin to the arts. You often see people who started in the sciences and who end up in the arts or vice versa.

LD: Right.

OV: I think the core sense of finding innovation and curiosity in the sciences is parallel to what motivates people to get involved in the arts.

I quickly embraced my passion and focused on art as my major. Of course my parents, as most parents, were concerned about how would you survive with a career in the arts? How would you pay the bills as an artist? So I took a lot of business classes, marketing classes. I was going to go more towards the advertising and PR [public relations] route. I did a lot of graphic design while I was in high school and in college, too. I worked for a design company and a PR firm, so I always had that sort of interest in people and communicating messages and images. I pursued that for a few years out of college, but I wasn't, I would say, really stimulated in the sense that this wasn't what I felt my life passion was focused on.

I grew up in a small town that did not have a major art museum, and I didn't really grow up going to the Metropolitan Museum or to the Museum of Modern Art.

There was a small art and history center in my home town of Melbourne. I think probably like anyone who gets involved and makes a career choice in the arts, I had one of those decisive experiences that affirmed one's desire to be in the arts or to work in a museum. That goes back to age eleven when I walked into this little history center and museum, and saw a show about musical instruments. I walked into the museum and there were all these funky-looking instruments that I didn't recognize, that sort of looked like guitars and things I recognized. They were under vitrines and not accessible. It didn't really mean much until on a field trip from school, they shuttled us into a room and people took these instruments and performed them live. It was one of those experiences I'll never forget, and I became very devoted to the concept of the museum. So I knew I wanted to do museum work even then.

I quickly figured out by going around and interviewing people who were working in museums about how they got to where they were. It was clear that I did not only need to be an art major, but I also needed a major in art history.

So I quit my marketing job. I'd saved up enough money - I'd worked in marketing maybe about a year and a half or so out of college. I moved to Atlanta because I felt like I needed to get out of Florida and settle my roots outside Florida, consciously away from my family. So I went to graduate school. I had to take art history classes to be able to get into graduate school.

LD: Where did you go?

OV: I went to Emory University in Atlanta.

What was interesting in my undergraduate school was that if you were on the path to be a practicing artist, you didn't really take a lot of art history. You took studio classes.

LD: Right.

OV: As a visual arts major you kind of looked down at the art history students as the artists who couldn't cut it.

[laughter]

OV: So, consequently, I didn't take a lot of art history in my undergraduate school years, but then to go into museum work, you needed a degree in art history. I've always been passionate about history and those two things came together for me. I went to graduate school at Emory University, and I worked at the High Museum in Atlanta, which is really where I got my first training working in museums. I started as an intern working the front desk, and then worked my way to being a curatorial assistant, and being the assistant to

the deputy director and the director. I really learned what the whole organization is and what a museum does.

LD: Can I just back up just for a second?

OV: Yes.

LD: Did you ever consider pursuing art full time?

OV: No. I'd say the other realization that I maybe even made in college, and subsequently afterwards, is that my passion was really more focused on writing about art than actually making art. I would say in my experience at Rollins, my college experience there, I had some exceptional writing and literary professors. I think that's where I found that my real voice was expressed in my writing. The fact that I had made art meant that I understood the creative process, and what artists go through, and what that looks like. My visual practice as an artist was really focused on painting. I was at that point in college where, by the second year, we all got computers.

So, for me, writing was a way of painting on the computer screen, seeing how words get put together, and really painting on the screen and making reflections about art. I think that coupled with my love of history, those things all came together, and I really found my place working in a museum. Ironically enough—I think it happens certainly with anyone young—as you get older, you recognize the experiences that you've had as you were younger. My focus on marketing, and PR, and development, and fund raising, which is so much a part of an executive director's job in a museum - all those skills were really essential to shaping what I do now, which is writing and curatorial work, but also administrative work and supporting the programs at the Walker through advocating for them in the community and garnering support for the programs that we do for our audiences.

LD: I want to step to a different focus. Growing up, you grew up in a small town and you said you kind of went back once a month to Miami. Did you have a sense of being Latina as a young child or a sense of being *other*? Was there a large Latino community where you grew up?

OV: There really wasn't a sizeable Latino community where I grew up, although as I got older it was more so. I think there were many physicians that were being brought to the area. My dad was also very active in recruiting and welcoming other Latinos. So my parents would always host them and try to welcome new couples coming into what was a very non-Latino community at that time. That has since changed quite dramatically.

I think what was interesting about the community there is that it wasn't specifically Cuban. It was actually quite pan-Latino. There were couples from Argentina, from Colombia, from Nicaragua, and Puerto Rico. There was kind of a fascinating mix of people, so I always had a much more pan-Latino experience, which I see as very parallel

here in Minnesota. Even though it's a very small community here, it's quite a cross section of people from many different countries and many different experiences.

I feel that corresponds to the way I grew up I think, for me, what was always striking was going to Miami and feeling *one* culture *so* focused on its identity, while I actually felt more American and less Cuban; although my parents were older. My parents speak fluently in Spanish, but a lot of my other friends growing up who had Cuban parents or Latino parents didn't grow up with a strong use of language. My parents really insisted on that. I grew up with a strong sense of life in Cuba, preserving those traditions. I cook a pretty mean Cuban meal.

[laughter]

Those histories were very alive and present in my family. But I would say that what I didn't grow up with was the sort of more militant kind of view of the Cuban exile experience. My parents talked openly about their transitions and their experience, but you didn't grow within that sort of culture in Miami. I grew up - I don't know - maybe more open and curious about Latino experiences other than just the Cuban experience. I didn't have to carry the baggage, the weight of that exile in the same way.

LD: You were in Atlanta going to school and working. What did you do once you graduated?

OV: I continued to work at the High Museum for a while. I wanted to really advance within the field. I knew I wanted to be a curator. I knew I wanted to work with living artists. I knew that my focus would be contemporary art. I'd been there for almost four or five years. So I ended up taking a job in Florida, returning home in many ways, although it was to south Florida for the first time. I worked as an assistant curator at the Norton Museum of Art in West Palm Beach, Florida, which is really one of the oldest museums in Florida with a strong collection. I spent a lot of time in Miami, and in fact came to know Miami in a very different way than I did as a child.

Those early visits were very family focused, and they were in Hialeah, and it was all sort of about family as an adult. I was meeting a different exile community in Miami at the time, in which there were many artists who came in the 1980s, in and around, and after, the Mariel Boat Lift. Subsequently, in the early 1990s, many Cubans who had been born around the revolution and had grown up in Cuba were coming into exile. So I was having encounters with people who had very different kinds of exile experiences.

One of the first exhibitions that I did as a curator in that museum was actually of four Cuban women artists who had all had very different exile experiences, and had come out at different times. That was in 1992 to 1993, and I was in my twenties. This was a time when there was a great focus within the contemporary art world. It was a moment of multiculturalism and many institutions and museums were doing these big, vast surveys of Latin American art essentially putting artists who had very different kinds of visions and practices together simply because they spoke Spanish, even though their sensibilities

had nothing to do with one another. That exhibition I curated was, probably, my first attempt to sort of argue that even within one culture, exile is not a monolithic experience. It's quite complex. I think that was my early response to that. Also, meeting many of those artists and hearing them made me realize that the stories that they were telling were very different than what was being written about their work.

LD: How so?

OV: One artist in particular - Ana Mendieta - had died very young, and her work appropriated aspects of Santeria and Afro-Cuban culture. She really appropriated it as a way to connect with her own culture, a part of her culture that she didn't experience growing up in Cuba, that tied very much to other interests that she had in art making, but it was immediately interpreted that she was, at the time, a member of some occult group. It wasn't understood at all as a serious religion, let alone that she was really kind of adopting the iconography and aspects of the culture to tell another story.

There were just so many generalizations and stereotyping and people being boxed in and understood in certain ways. I would say, as a young curator emerging in that landscape, I also had to fight to create my own identity within. That was complicated in a couple of different ways, because as a fluent speaker, as one of the only curators at probably every institution I've ever worked at who is a Latino speaker, by default I would be an expert on things Latino and all artists Latino.

LD: Right.

OV: I have, in my career, done many exhibitions of artists who come from Argentina, who come from Cuba, who come from Brazil, different parts of the world. I don't know that I would consider myself an expert in Latin American art, but I also don't deny my interest in wanting to, I would say in all those cases, present those artists in a much broader context. I was trying to find my path within the contemporary art world as a scholar interested in international art with a strong interest in Latin American art, but I was being repeatedly framed a particular way. I was at the Norton Museum for maybe three years, and I brought work by Latin American artists into the collection, and I did that show on the Cuban exile experience. Then I went to the Smithsonian at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden as a curator of contemporary art. There, I would say, too, what I encountered was a strong Latino community at the Smithsonian who did not always join in my desire to speak more broadly about the contributions of Latin American artists in an international context. I often felt there was a kind of resistance or feeling that I wasn't Latina enough.

[chuckles]

I was always resisting creating a gallery of Latin American artists. All I wanted to do was insert those artists into a history that was a global history. I did not want to relegate and put together artists, again, whose works may have completely different sensibilities even

though they share a common language, and which is not necessarily the way they want their works looked at or to be interpreted.

I spent twelve years at the Smithsonian. I eventually became the director of the Hirshhorn Museum. I would say, over time, that my colleagues in the community there came to appreciate that I was sort of in it for the long haul in terms of the recognition that I wanted for these artists that I was focusing on. It was about working to have these artists be internationally recognized and understood as contributing to the larger dialog and not just one specific one. They all cared about that, but their works also operated on these other levels. I would say that's probably the thing I'm most proud of in the exhibitions that I've done, that I've sought to revise the kind of understanding of artists' work and to frame them in a much broader context.

The work of Ana Mendieta, who was the Cuban artist who died very young in the 1980s, is someone who I would say I feel really good about bringing her art to a much greater and broader understanding. Now she's seen as a pivotal artist of the 1970s on an international scale, and her work has influenced a whole generation of artists since her time. But when she was alive, she was shunned and placed in a much more limited context of artists that her works didn't really have much connection to.

LD: Washington, D.C. has a very interesting Latino community, as well. Did you have any kind of interactions with that community? One of the things that I think sometimes is a struggle is how to bring the Latino community into these institutions. One of the folks that I interviewed for this project is Maria Cristina Tavera.

OV: Yes.

LD: She was talking about a grant that she wrote bringing people in to see exhibits, etcetera.

Let's talk a little bit about your time there in D.C. and those interactions and, then, move to this community and what that's been like.

OV: Sure

LD: Tell me a little bit about D.C. itself and your interactions there and how that played into your life at the museum.

OV: As I said, I was at the Hirshhorn for twelve years. I was a curator of contemporary art there. The program at the Hirshhorn, like at the Walker, is a program that is globally focused, so it's really looking at modern and contemporary art made internationally. Of course, I think I came in and I focused on certain gaps and omissions of artists who weren't in the strongly American and European focused collection. I began to, once again, include them and be the conscious voice saying, "We need to look at this work. If we're doing a group exhibition, we need to be looking at artists from Latin America." I

did exhibitions that, again, focused on Latino and Latin American artists in the broader context.

At the time that I was there, there was a lot of—and there still is—consciousness at the Smithsonian to want to incorporate Latino voices into the nineteen museums and research centers that make up the Smithsonian. There was, actually, a study that had been done before I came to the Smithsonian. I went to the Smithsonian in 1995. There had been an advisor to the head of the Smithsonian who was focused on Latino issues and Latino affairs. What they did was create some seed money every year—I believe it was a million dollars or several million dollars—that the institutions could apply for, to bring works into the collection, to do special exhibitions, or to do programs. I think it was a very smart incentivizing model for the Smithsonian to help institutions either bring experts in to help them identify what the needs in the collection were, or to stimulate programming.

I got involved with the Latino community at the Smithsonian that was in and around the Latino Affairs Office. I was invited to planning committees and grant review committees and watched in those twelve years what evolved into the results those programs helped generate and support, and their desire, more broadly, to create a Latino museum of history and culture, which has been a movement at the Smithsonian that's been in the works for a long, long time.

I think that I struggled maybe in those relationships. I had sort of come during a period where the Latino community felt under represented and underappreciated. Many were lower-level paid positions that didn't feel there was equity in terms of pay. You know, to the Smithsonian's credit, they tried to be very, very responsive to that in recruiting staff. I became one of three Latinos that were in executive positions at the Smithsonian during that history, sort of getting beyond the feeling of being downtrodden.

LD: Right.

OV: I came in with a different experience - a younger and different experience. I wanted to kind of infiltrate the Latino voices and experiences everywhere, instead of taking a more militant posture and always coming from a position of exclusion rather than an opportunity to have a clear voice. I think in that regard, maybe I was useful in the Smithsonian's evolution as it tried to learn how to better represent the Latino experience across all the museums. I think there is, again, still very much a strong movement to realize the Latino museum of history and culture.

LD: Can you tell us a little bit about that?

OV: It's been three years since I left the Smithsonian, so I'm not fully up to speed. I think that there are definitely some congressmen who are very much behind this notion. I, myself, am not sure where I come on the need to create that museum. It becomes challenging in contemporary art and culture, because artists don't want to be defined or framed that way. I think it's important to acknowledge the history and how that history

has been created, but I think it gets complicated as you go forward. Again, I'm more for trying to infiltrate all the institutions instead of having to create one that's separate.

LD: Right, right.

So you came to good old Minnesota three years ago?

OV: Yes.

LD: What prompted the move?

OV: I really came to work at the Walker Art Center, which is one of the most exceptional contemporary art institutions in the world, not just the country. There are very few contemporary institutions that not only have a museum under the same roof but a performing arts program, a film and video program, and a commitment to design. It really is a multidisciplinary art center. The position hadn't been vacant in seventeen years, so it was really a once-in-lifetime experience to lead one of the foremost contemporary institutions. I didn't have any family. I didn't know anyone. Institutionally, I had colleagues here at the Walker, because I had worked with many of them over the years.

LD: There was a kind of a relationship, right?

OV: Yes, the Walker was certainly a peer to my former institution, to the Hirshhorn Museum, with very similar missions and programs. We shared exhibitions, co-organized exhibitions, and had real strong collegial—and still do—ties. I had been here for exhibitions. I'd been here for the opening of the expansion in 2005. I never thought Minnesota would be a place I would live, but the opportunity to come to the Walker was one that I couldn't really resist.

LD: Do you recall your first impressions of Minnesota?

OV: Well, I had come here for exhibitions, but I'd come in the summer, so I didn't really have a sense of...

LD: I mean more like as a residence. I live here now. [chuckles]

OV: When I interviewed, I said to the Board, "You don't have to sell me on the Walker, but I'm not sure I can live here." [laughter] "I just don't know enough. I need to come and spend a week and see if I can imagine myself here." They very graciously supported that idea. I came and spent a week here and tried to imagine what it would mean to live here. I think what appealed to me then, and has been reaffirmed over time, is that it is one of the most amazing philanthropic communities in the country. The awareness, commitment, consciousness of culture is so much more broadly understood in this community than in a city like D.C. or most American cities. It's why a place like the Walker can exist in Minnesota. It's because of that belief in having an institution that is

really on the leading edge and forefront of identifying where culture is moving, and of artistic practice and how it's changing over time, but is also a place that becomes a kind of threshold to the rest of the world.

LD: How so?

OV: Well, in our programs, we really track and present the most compelling artists, and film and video, visual arts, and performing arts around the globe. I would say the Walker's program is, probably, one of the most globally focused programs of any in the country. The cultural curiosity of people here in Minnesota is to have a lens out to the rest of the world. Artists' expressions, artists' works are about their experiences, right? They become a vehicle to talk about human experience and different experiences throughout an inst the world and what connects us all, no matter where we come from. Again, I think it's kind of amazing that this community here believes and supports an institution that really provides and is committed to providing that perspective.

LD: When you arrived, that would have been 2007.

OV: January 2008.

LD: Oh, my gosh.

OV: But I was hired in the fall of 2007

LD: January, no less. Wow.

[chuckles]

LD: As a long time resident myself of the area, it's interesting because, I don't know if it's some of the events that you've had like the Rock the Garden stuff or the Thursday...

OV: Target Free Thursday.

LD: I know a lot of those programs have been going on for a long time, not necessarily, at least with the current stuff, but I get a sense that the Walker is more welcoming or more open than I remember it being ten years ago or fifteen years ago or whatever. First of all, that's just my personal impression.

OV: It makes me so happy to hear you say that, because we've made a conscious effort.

LD: I was going to ask: if it is that you're really looking to open it up to the community? Honestly, some people might say, "Oh, that's just a big white box. What does that have to do with who I am or my life?" I really get a sense that there's absolutely this emphasis on culture and the global perspective, but I really sense that the Walker is Minnesotan.

OV: We have a sign right now on the side of the building that says, "Minnesota Made." I don't know if you noticed that.

There's a local artist Liz Magor whose work is featured in the shop in the window display, and it's part of this "MN Made" festival that we're organizing that is focused on local artists and local productions in the artistic community here—not that the Walker hasn't always done that. But I think we are really, let's say, putting it more at the forefront.

LD: Yes, that's what it seems like.

OV: We are celebrating those moments and acknowledging that we may be this platform for a global perspective and conversation, but we're still very locally rooted and part of this community. We have a number of Minnesota artists whose works are in the current exhibition right now. We just finished doing a survey of Alec Soth's photography. He's based in Saint Paul. We've also tried to be accessible, I would say, in the tone of our communication, the invitation, the way we talk about the Walker, and the language in our *Walker* magazine.

Last summer we did a big experiment on our green space called Open Field where we invited the community - as broadly defined as possible - to come and bring your book club or your yoga class. There was a group of attorneys and artists interested in Native American land treaty issues who came and did their discussions out on our lawn. We programmed events. We partnered with other organizations to do events. We had several artists' collectives who created experiences out there with the public, and then invited people to come and do what they wanted to do there. I think the tone of that invitation was very authentic and genuine. We want to be this kind of cultural commons. We're really playing with the idea of what it means to create a cultural commons and to see the Walker as a partner, as a resource, as a place to feel that we're not just adjacent to the community. We're imbedded within it. I think it was a very successful programming experiment. It's still influencing how we even do programs inside. We're going to do it again next summer.

I think that has gone a long way towards making people feel that the Walker is more accessible or relevant to them. That's something that I'm very committed to doing and continuing to develop.

LD: Part of the community, of course, is the Latino community, which, as you said, is very diverse. You have old school, sixth generation Mexican Americans right next to a recently arrived Ecuadorian immigrant.

OV: Yes.

LD: What has been your impression of Minnesota's Latino community?

OV: I've been able to intersect through a couple of different avenues. I have a trustee, Esperanza Guererro-Anderson, who has been in Minnesota a very long time. She is a Latina entrepreneur, head of Milestone Growth Fund, who actually convenes other entrepreneurs and helps not just Latinos, but anyone coming and wanting to start a business in Minnesota. She's an inspiring force. So she organized, very early on in my tenure here, a gathering of women entrepreneurs, many of them Latino, though not exclusively. That was a great entrée. I remember that event so clearly. I was struck by these women from Aruba, and from Ecuador, and from Colombia, and Guatemala. It was such a fantastic mix of people with many different life experiences, many of whom had been here a very long time. That, I would say, was quite inspiring and an early introduction to what the Latino community is becoming now as immigrants come from other parts of the world.

Then, in the local artist community, there are a number of artists, Doug Padilla in particular, who reached out to me and shared their feeling that many in the local artist community, not just Latinos, didn't feel very welcome at the Walker. So he hosted a salon in his studio where I met a number of artists. When I did a show of an Argentine artist Guillermo Kuitca just last summer, I invited Doug to organize a group of Latino artists and anyone interested in the work to tour through the show.

I've met people in the corporate arena, the artistic community, and the Chicano-Latino Affairs Council invited me, in I think my second year here, to give the keynote speech for the thirtieth anniversary of the Council. I would say it was through that engagement that I learned more about the history of the Latino experience here than I did when I came. There was a gathering of around 750 Latinos from all over the state that came to that event, at which I had the honor of speaking. That's given me an interesting kind of cross section, and an understanding of the different individuals who are here and how they got here. The stories are always radically different.

LD: Yes. Obviously, your field is the art world, and you've met some folks through Doug, whom I've known forever.

Talk to me a little bit about Latino art in Minnesota, what you've seen, where you hope it goes, and where, perhaps, the Walker fits into any of that.

OV: Yes, I've met Doug and I've met many artists here. I'm not really a curator anymore.

LD: Right.

OV: Our curatorial staff is out there visiting artists regularly. I don't know that I'm quite on the pulse. I build on my curators' research, but it's not my own research, necessarily, to help in really understanding what the Latino art community is doing and what its struggles are. My perception is that so many of these artists are looking for community, looking for a broader artistic community, and wanting to have avenues for the

presentation of their works that are much more broadly defined. Their relationship, certainly, with the Walker is important.

What I've come to know and understand, too, is that there used to be, in the 1970s and 1980s, more alternative spaces, more galleries, more venues for artists' work to be presented. With the closure of many of those spaces it puts more pressure, I think, on the larger institutions to fill that place.

One of the things that I started last year was an artist pass. It's a \$20 a year pass instead of the \$60 membership or the \$150 family membership. It's a way for artists to have access to the galleries at any time. That, for me, was important. I can't promise that every artist is going to have an exhibition at the Walker, an exhibition opportunity, but I want the Walker to be seen as a place to come, that they're welcome, that they feel comfortable, that they see as a resource, that we know who they are, and that we acknowledge their contributions. I want them to see that we help introduce them to places, we nominate them for grants or other opportunities, that there is this awareness and acknowledgement and support, and that the Walker is seen as a resource for their creative practice, instead of this hallowed white building that they can't enter.

We have a couple of initiatives—I know Doug is involved, as others are—with the McKnight Foundation, which is called mnartists.org. It's an online resource for artists to register and have discourse about their work, and to post events. They can post their work. We have someone on staff here who helps move that online community into actual gallery experiences here, so the "MN Made" program is a mnartists.org program, for example, where artists can come, connect, and meet. Again, we want the Walker to become a platform for artists to engage with one another, to present their works, maybe not in an exhibition but maybe in one of our artists marts. We did one that was for book artists and designers, many of whom knew about each other's works but had never met before. We hosted a weekend-long event we called a Multiples Mall. What was fantastic is not just the thirty or so artists that participated in it, but all the artists who came through that weekend and were able to engage with one another. I think the Latino artists are very much a part of that.

We try to do that when we do exhibitions, too. For example, I brought an Argentine artist, Guillermo Kuitca here. We did a major survey of his work. That was a great opportunity to invite the Latino artistic community in, which I did, to meet him, to tour the show, to be able to have a moment with him. We invited them to the opening so that they could meet Guillermo. So it's finding those moments where there is an intersection. I've reached out using the network. I reached out to Doug and said, "Help me identify folks in the community that would be interested in this. I'll organize something if you can get folks here."

LD: As you move forward, first, just personally, two years, five years, ten years down the line, what do you see yourself doing?

OV: I probably see myself still at the Walker at least for the next five years, and probably ten years. It's an institution that I feel very committed to. I think I will always, no matter what I do, be engaged in the art world, and support artists, and write about art. I think if there's one thing that I maybe miss in my current job, it's that I'm not able to write as much as I used to, because of the demands of my job. I'm trying to organize an exhibition maybe once every three years or so, and to write an article here and there. I guess what I'm saying is I'm in the right field. I'm one of those people who is lucky that my avocation is my vocation. I'm doing something that I love.

LD: As you see the larger artistic community in Minnesota, what do you hope for in the next, two, five, ten years?

OV: I would say that what's been fascinating being here and getting to know the artistic community more broadly. What is different than Washington, D.C. and other cities that I've lived in—is that it really is a multidisciplinary arts community. There's a very strong dance community, strong theater community, strong film community. The visual arts community is a little smaller. I would like to see that grow.

If we look at the whole community, the Minneapolis/Saint Paul community, as an arts ecosystem, we need to ask - those large and small organizations and the academic institutions - how do we support the artists in this community so that they feel supported, that they have resources to present their works? Because of the challenging financial times that we've been through, there are not the same number of grants available. I think one of the reasons this community has had such a strong, vital artistic community is because there have been foundations like the McKnight Foundation and the Jerome Foundation and the Bush Foundation. I've met many artists who said, "I came here to go to college..." or "I came as a student and I didn't leave, because I got a grant. I got supported. I started my dance company here and was able to find resources and support and venues." I worry about the future of artists staying here, and whether the city can have a vibrant, strong arts community if we don't have all those networks of support. It's not just one museum or a handful that is needed for support. It takes the small art centers. It takes a gallery system. It takes the big museums. It takes foundations, and it takes the private individuals collecting to make that possible and make this a vibrant city. We need to help foster that and help make connections and encourage people to support what artists do in society, and that the support, is what has made our city distinctive.

LD: You've talked a few times about kind of the notion of separating off - some people describe it as kind of a ghettoization, so you have the Latino corner, you have the Asian corner, etcetera. As you look forward, what do you hope to see as far as artistic expression and how that intersects with the different cultures? What is your vision? Yes, a broader context, but what does that look like? How is the community brought into that?

OV: I think there's a variety of different ways to sort of tackle that. I'd say we try to even scope out a year of programming or two or three years of programming, and we're looking at not just the museum part but the performing arts part, the film and video part. Is our program balanced in presenting different artists from different parts of the world so

that we're consciously looking at Latin America, we're consciously looking at Asia, we're consciously looking at Africa, we're looking at the Middle East? That's something that the Walker made a huge investment in the 1980s and 1990s when it created an advisory council of colleagues around the world that would help the curatorial staff here keep that lens broad and open, not just within the local community but internationally. If you go and look at the impact of that initiative, which meant committing resources, committing energy, committing focus, it changed our collection.

It changed the percentage of works by artists from other parts of the world in pretty significant ways. I think we have a really solid start in Latin America and in Asia, in particular. We're really looking at the Middle East right now and wanting to build on the two areas where we have a good foundation. There are others that we need to build. It's making that part of our collection a priority, and part of our exhibition and programming priorities. We try to look as broadly as possible, and then try to balance that across multiple years, and across the programs so that global image is moving and shifting and it's feeding back into the collection, and also into the programs that we do, the artists that we bring and the stories that their works tell so that it creates different moments of opportunity to engage with different communities locally.

With this artist from Argentina, for example, we did reach out a lot to the Latino community through our education programs. We offered Spanish language tours. It was a summer program, so we didn't go out into the school system in quite the same way as we might have if it had been at another time of the year.

We try to find those moments when artists are particularly interested, too, or when the content of their work engenders a discussion. Then we will partner with smaller organizations or more grass roots organizations within a community, if we don't already have established relationships, to not only get the word out but to create programs that engender discussion of the issues around whatever that experience is that we're talking about. I think we look to the program and the artists themselves.

What's interesting with an artist like Guillermo Kuitca is how he matured in many ways—he's a few years older than me—because he lived through that moment of multiculturalism and people wanting to ghettoize him as an artist based in Argentina. I think he's been successful in that his work, especially his early work, because it makes it so clear that he's dealing with the political situation, the military dictatorship in Argentina that defined his youth and a whole generation of people's experience. It's there, but he's communicating through the way that he paints, and the way he paints his subject matter, about much larger experiences of dislocation, of migration, of identity, and how that is defined. While an artist may be talking about a very culturally specific experience, they're oftentimes looking for the universal threads that communicate with people more broadly. I think that's where you can really forge understanding. You invite the Latino community, but you're also inviting the Latino community that intersects with our core audiences or other communities that, then, come away with a deeper understanding of Argentina and its history. His grandparents were Ukrainian immigrants fleeing from Europe, so those stories get told. Then there are all kinds of issues around

his sexual identity and growing up in a Latin country. All those stories kind of unravel within the exhibition, and that allows you to create programs where you can tell those stories and bring them to life.

I think that's the great power of art - to be able to sometimes tell very challenging stories, very poignant parts of people's history and experience in a more neutral setting. We really strive, and I think the Walker has always strived, to create a space where a multiplicity of perspectives can be presented and held and where you can foster discussions around them. My predecessor, Kathy Halbreich, often talked of the Walker as a safe place for unsafe ideas. I don't think that's just for the art making practice. I think that's talking about the ideas that are inspired by the works. Artists are, after all, responding to their times, responding to their experiences, and seeking to connect with others.

To answer your question more specifically, I think what I'm interested in is how, over a period of time, we can bring artists from Latin America, or here locally, and create opportunities where those different stories and experiences can be told singly or as part of a bigger tapestry of experience, whether it's in a group show or it's one single artist's show. There are different ways of bringing those stories in and then seizing those opportunities to reach out into the community.

LD: To me, it seems really important that a broader community understands this—I talk about ghettoization—the ghettoized community and vastly misunderstood community. The arts absolutely is a way, but the arts can also present that in the ivory tower, big white building. I think that, perhaps, as Doug said, there is the sense of feeling, "Where is my place there?" It's really good to hear your vision and how that can happen in a real way, in a possible way.

OV: I think where it's more challenging is in the exhibition program, because you've got larger crowds of people moving through the space. What I'm interested in is taking some of the successful models from our film program and our performing arts program where there's very much a culture of post-screening discussions and post-performance discussions with the artists. In our film program, we just did a whole series on China last year, sixty years of the Republic of China. We just did a series on Iran, on contemporary film making in Iran, because there's been that kind of flourishing of creative activity in response to what's happening there. Our film curator, Sheryl Mousley, invites professors from the University of Minnesota to give an introduction or to talk about China, to kind of comment on what this arc of film history demonstrated, on what has shifted in that culture that can bring perspective, and then to foster discussion about it. I think film and performing arts has created a very active culture of dialog and discourse and understanding. It's not that we haven't done that in the visual arts program. It's just a little more challenging because when you gather people together for a talk it is different.

So we are trying to take the lessons from those programs and to foster the same thing in the exhibition program.

LD: Is there anything else that you'd like to share? We've covered a lot.

OV: Well, I don't know if this is relevant, but I'd say there was a sort of a pivotal experience that was both the personal and professional coming together. As I mentioned, the Cuban artist—I've written probably the most definitive catalog [Unseen Mendieta: The Unpublished Works of Ana Mendieta] about her biography and what not—left Cuba at age twelve, and then didn't go back again until she was thirty. I was working on the artist and her history and really diving into Cuban history and Cuban exile history, but I had never been to Cuba because I was born in the United States. So I went to Cuba in, I guess it would have been my early thirties, which is around the age that she went for the first time. I was going to do research to reconstruct her visits back to Cuba, because they really weren't documented anywhere. Nobody knew how many times she'd gone back. She had been embraced by the current government's cultural entity as this exile who was coming back. She sort of has this interesting place because she's an American citizen, but she showed within Cuban national exhibitions because she'd been born in Cuba. It was kind of an interesting moment in the early 1980s that she was a part of. There were stories in the states and in Miami in particular, but nobody wanted to talk about that history. I went to Cuba to do research and interviewed family members and artists who knew her, and I was able to actually document that she'd gone seven times. For me, it was my first metaphorical "return." I wasn't born there, but I'd had all these stories and experiences shared by my family. I spent about ten days there and did the things that exiles do. I found my dad's apartment in Havana and my mom's house and understood, probably for the first time as an adult, what I had understood up until then as this very abstract experience that I felt my parents had experienced. I understood it in a much more potent way by being there, understanding what they lost, understanding what they missed, understanding what they pine for, imagining what it might have been like if I'd been born and grown up there. You go through all those experiences, which I think are an important maturing kind of experience. In many ways, I had worked so hard up until that time to define myself as proud to be Latino, but as a scholar who was working on many other things. In many ways I had already established myself, and was then able to reembrace my culture.

LD: It paints a very beautiful picture.

[laughter]

LD: You painted it with words.

On behalf of the Historical Society, thank you so much.

OV: Oh, it is my pleasure.

LD: I know you're very, very busy so we really appreciate you taking the time and sharing your story with us.

OV: Thank you for your interest.