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Oral history interview with Hiram Maristany, 2021 August 8-10

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Contact Information
Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington. D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions
www.aaa.si.edu/

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Hiram Maristany on 2021 August 8–10. The interview took place over Zoom at Maristany's home in Queens, NY, and was conducted by E. Carmen Ramos for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

[00:00:00.24]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Continue.

[00:00:02.90]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Okay. It came up and it says, on my end, continue.

[00:00:06.75]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Okay. So you can hit continue.

[00:00:09.80]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Here we go.

[00:00:11.15]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Okay. Great. Well, thank you.

[00:00:14.42]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Read that on the tops. You're verifying it.

[00:00:18.11]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So good morning, Hiram. Thank you for being here and for agreeing to do these interviews, this oral history interview for the Archives of American Art. It's August 8, 2021. I am E. Carmen Ramos, former curator of Latinx art and acting chief curator of the Smithsonian American Art Museum and incoming chief curatorial and conservation officer at the National Gallery of Art. And this is the first day of an oral history with the photographer, Hiram Maristany, for the Archives of American Art.

[00:00:52.85]

Welcome, Hiram, again, and thank you for making time for these interviews. It's the goal of this oral history interview to capture your story as an artist. This includes aspects of your biography, your coming of age as an artist, a discussion of the different parts of your career and cultural activities, and, in your case, also your activism. I hope that this oral history will be useful to scholars learning about your work, the work of Puerto Rican artists during the rise of the Nuyorican movement, and photographers, active, like you were, since the 1960s. So I'm really excited to get started today.

[00:01:36.00]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Okay.

[00:01:36.81]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: I thought we'd start with some family background. Can you tell me about your parents?

[00:01:44.34]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Okay. My parents are both born in Puerto Rico in Maya West. And—well, let's start with my mother. My mother was one of 17 children. She had 15 brothers and one sister. And she was the baby of all of them. She didn't have a lot of clout in the family. And she was—well, in her era, you know, women were not treated—well, even today—but women were treated very badly, very poorly.

[00:02:28.63]

And in many cases, she had a lot of difficulties just surviving. My family on her side were renowned for being shipbuilders. They made what we would call small sailing boats for fishermen, but they also made very, very large and expensive, uh, what certain people would call, yachts. And the family was, at some point or another, engaged in some form of business, okay. And as—well, let me say it a little more clearly. My uncles were, my mother was not engaged in none of that. And she, um—did not have a good life; she really wanted to get away from it as quickly as possible.

[00:03:28.78]

And my aunt, Carmen, decided when she got married that she was going to bring her little sister with her to New York. My aunt married a man who, by those standards, was working class. And he was connected. So he had a job in New York City with the Department of Water. And anybody who had a job with the city or state or government, or job where, like, you know, it was very, very steady, very, very—you know. And he really liked my mother. So my aunt and my mother—my aunt was the poorest of all her siblings. And my aunt would come to visit her every Sunday or Sat—on the weekends. My mother married my father, who was a person of color. He was of African descent.

[00:04:34.91]

He was somebody who, you know, had great difficulty in this country because of racism. And my last name, Maristany, he sounds Italian. And he made a lot of associations with racism based on language. Every time he spoke, you know, all kinds of things came down on him. He never really mastered the English language. He was a person who settled into—like many male of his generation—became [inaudible]. Essentially, he was someone who worked in the butcher shop when he was was around. He did a lot of different jobs.

[00:05:27.02]

He was gone most of the year. He would be on a ship for three, four, six months, and he left his family. And my mother had to fend for herself, you know, in terms of trying to survive and, just—a tough time. And it was a very, very tough existence. I went through a lot of changes because I was expected to do a lot more than some of my other siblings. I had three brothers—four boys—and I had four sisters. It was a large family. We lived in, essentially, a three bedroom apartment. The boys had a room, the girls had the room, and we had—I don't know if it's correct terms—but we had something called bunk beds.

[00:06:19.00]

And we shared those rooms and shared everything. And there was no sense of privacy or ownership. What I do remember is that we didn't have a lot of books, didn't have a lot of them. I just remember that my older sister, Carmen, was assigned a task of watching out for me. And she always monitored my activities; she made sure that I was not with the wrong people. And she essentially, also, was the person who I did—she taught me fundamentals of reading and writing. So it was a very, very tough time.

[00:07:09.73]

I can't describe how tough it was, but it was—we were not welcome. Puerto Ricans in New York City were not welcome. We were cheap labor. So we were treated as foreigners. But in many ways, we were always told that we were Americans; yet we received the treatment of foreigners. And many of the issues that I dealt with were that that treatment would be to see that we were also being villainized every opportunity. The powers to be would do that.

[00:07:59.83]

Whenever we saw images of us in the press, they were always negative. Whenever we were engaged, we were engaged in a negative kind of context. And I guess that's what—began my activism. It began my response. And I didn't know it at the time, but I was very, very—angry—at a system that professed on one end, you know, the land of liberty and peace and justice and all that, and then it behaved the exact opposite towards us. And I guess I was very resentful because I felt I did nothing wrong, but yet I was being treated as if I committed a crime of the century. Just being Puerto Rican was a crime.

[00:08:48.80]

So my parents tried their best to prepare us and tried our best. But for my generation, school was not a—it was not a safe place. I feel or felt that you went to school to survive. We didn't go there to get an education. But in many cases, we—well, my case, I should say—I was mis-educated. And I use that word intentionally, mis-educated. We were not given an offer—an equal opportunity to receive education, and school was a violent place. School was not a place where you went to get nurtured, or to learn. And I just recall a sense of, every day, getting up, and I said, here we go again. You have to go with your toughest, toughest armor on.

[00:10:01.44]

And I recall when the last bell rang and we're leaving, you still weren't home-free because you had to go through the gauntlet of surviving other people's dislike of you.

[00:10:18.05]

It was a tough existence. My parents did the best they could. My father's was—he wasn't there most of the time. We didn't have a lot of male parenting. So I hope I gave you a little background. Oh, I need to say their names. My mother's name was Margarita Maristany. My father's name was Reinaldo Maristany. And he was senior because he named his firstborn male son after him who became junior.

[00:10:52.11]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So what order were you in the children? You were the—

[00:10:58.11]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I was equivalent to the dead center.

[00:11:01.88]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Okay.

[00:11:03.72]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I was—and that was also a problem because I was not the eldest, which got a lot of attention and respect. And I was not the youngest, because the youngest got a lot of things. So I was in this never-never land. This place where, you know, my eldest brothers and sisters could do horrendous things and be forgiven. I would not be forgiven. My sisters got away with murder. I would not be—so it was a strange place in—however, when my father dies—and ten years old, nine—and, uh, life for me changed quite a bit because I had to start participating in helping my mother. We didn't have a lot of—we were probably the poorest family on the block.

[00:12:02.30]

And every working hour, I had to do some—I shined shoes, I bagged groceries, I did all the things that poor people do today to earn two, three, four dollars. It doesn't seem like a lot of money, but it was a lot of money. And you made a difference.

[00:12:29.73]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: This is when you were nine, ten, you know, kind of a pre-teen to teenager?

[00:12:34.83]

HIRAM MARISTANY: [Inaudible] again, after my father's death. So I say a year or two later, you know, I was expected to—I used to sell—so it's ironic, but I used to sell shopping bags in a place that we used to call la marqueta, which was a central spot where tropical food was being sold then. And I bought them for two cents and I sold them for a nickel. And at the end of the day, I had maybe eight to nine dollars in change. So you could hear me coming because it was loud.

[00:13:12.41]

But I would contribute that and I would get probably a dollar or $1.50 for my efforts—because I always would make sure that I benefit from it. But it's something that I was compelled to do and many of my siblings didn't know that I was functioning. So my mother always had a special kind of relationship with me that she didn't have with her other—other male sons, I should say.

[00:13:45.99]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: You mentioned that Puerto Ricans felt like they were foreigners in the United States, in New York. Could you give me an example of that? What might be an example of how you felt that way?

[00:13:58.84]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Well, a couple of—let me give you a real—most of my life in my household, I was known as Hiram, which is Hiram in Spanish. I go to school for the first time, and they're calling, "Hiram," and I don't respond to it. So when they finally figure out that I was Hiram, they started giving me a battery of tests thinking that I was deaf, that I couldn't hear. And I'm using this as an example because there was a language barrier there. And that barrier was that my language was secondary and unimportant, and that I had to speak English. And if I didn't speak English, or if I didn't respond to English, there was something wrong with me.

[00:14:51.48]

And that was very, very subtle thing. And for people who are non—who are not bilingual, it's a kind of—even today, you know, English only. They tried to impose that on the entire island of Puerto Rico. And even today, most Puerto Ricans speak English. So it's just kind of—the other thing that I recall is because my name's from Italian, I used to show up at places and they would say, well would Hiram Maristany stand up, and I would stand up, they would say, no, no, we mean the Italian Hiram Maristany. They would say that to me.

[00:15:33.29]

And it was this kind of—in some cases, the people didn't mean to be offensive, but they didn't know that was and is. The kind of things that a lot of privileged people take for granted. And they impose it. My father, when he was trying to find an apartment, he would, you know, call up, and he had to send my mother, who was light skinned, okay. But if he showed up, the apartment all of a sudden was taken. And it's hard to say that today with all the laws and rules today. But back then, racism was rampant and was real.

[00:16:16.59]

And, you know, though we suffered under the same kind of hatred a lot of African Americans suffered, it was a real eye opener for a lot of people who—my father was—you know, by my standard—he was very patriotic. He believed in this country. And over years, he became more and more and embittered because of the treatment he received. That's something that—he died almost equivalent to a military status, and he was a part of the military. But even African Americans that were part of the military service were treated so poorly. And it's a profound contradiction. And the people who perpetrated it don't see it as a contradiction. They thought and think it's okay to have that kind of behavior.

[00:17:18.92]

So I hope those illustrate the example of how we were treated. There were far more worse cases that, as a child, I did not experience. But the amount of police violence against Puerto Ricans is unreal. I mean, I saw personally many Rodney Kings, physical beatings of males in

the street. And we had to be quiet about it. If you objected, you were subject to being beaten as well. So it's a real—this is not imaginatory; it's not something I made up. There are a lot of my contemporaries who lost or experienced that kind of behavior.

[00:18:17.70]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Two things. Hiram, I don't know where your microphone is, but occasionally you sound lower. Your voice sounds lower. It kind of fluctuates a little bit.

[00:18:29.31]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Am I moving back and forth because sometimes—

[00:18:31.50]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: —maybe, it seems—I don't know if it's something with your microphone, but just—

[00:18:36.28]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Is it now?

[00:18:37.80]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Now you sound good. And I could hear you the other times, it just sounds lower and it comes in and out. I don't know—

[00:18:44.29]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I raised it a little better. So hopefully, we won't have that problem.

[00:18:48.84]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: And then I don't think you mentioned how your father came to the United States. You talked about your mom and your aunts and how she came because of your aunt.

[00:19:00.57]

HIRAM MARISTANY: The truth is that I know very little about my father's family. It was very little recorded in Puerto Rico of people of—my mother's family had a record. My father's family, very few—

[00:19:22.83]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: —okay. I'm having trouble hearing you again. Can you make sure that the microphone is plugged in.

[00:19:31.88]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yeah, hold on a minute. One second. Is that any better?

[00:19:44.99]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Yeah. That's okay.

[00:19:50.75]

HIRAM MARISTANY: My father came—both of my parents arrived here on boats and ships. They didn't come together. He came—my father was here two weeks before my mother arrived. Now we were never really given a detailed explanation of how they met. My suspicion is that something happened in Puerto Rico before they left.

[00:20:15.74]

[Loud noises.]

[00:20:19.42]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: I can hear all that. Whoever is with you, I can hear all that.

[00:20:23.23]

HIRAM MARISTANY: That's not here. Is that—one second.

[00:20:27.28]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: I'm hearing a lot of activity. Door slamming and things like that. It's not here in my house.

[00:20:32.43]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Okay. Hold on. Let me just try and look at something. [Gets up.]

It's my neighbors.

[00:20:50.24]

[Inaudible]—the garbage. Let's hope that it stops.

[00:20:54.54]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Okay.

[00:20:59.04]

HIRAM MARISTANY: My parents came here on ships several years apart.

[00:21:07.53]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: They came to Brooklyn, right? I remember you telling me that. That's where they arrived.

[00:21:11.94]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Well, Brooklyn was very, very important because Brooklyn was the setup. We were welcome in Brooklyn.

[00:21:20.04]

[Sound of neighbors.]

[00:21:22.74]

Oh boy, this is crazy.

[00:21:28.50]

It's almost like my karma, you know, you're gonna do something—Hold on. I'm going to close the window. See if that—

[Gets up.]

[00:21:35.35]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Yeah, maybe that'll help.

[00:21:49.18]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Any better?

[00:21:51.45]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Sounds a little better right now. No, I still hear it. It sounds like it's in your house. It's crazy.

[00:22:00.66]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Can I suggest—maybe I can do this—where I am, is right over where they're loading all of the—oh yeah, this is not going to work.

[00:22:14.11]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: I'm going to just hit pause for a second, then. So until—let me just say pause.

[00:22:19.20]

HIRAM MARISTANY: All right.

[00:22:20.79]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Okay, so we're recording again.

[00:22:23.94]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Brooklyn was very, very important to most Puerto Ricans because it was a place where—people who have arrived here beforehand knew what was going on in the rest of the city. Well, we called it *barrio*, back then when my parents came there—was a very small sliver of land. It's no accident that most of the people that lived on my block were from the region that is now referred to as Maya West—Aguadilla.

[00:22:59.42]

So that if you found a place and a friend or a family customer came and they would contact you, and that person will tell you, Well, there's an apartment available, such and such, or, There's a job available, such and such. And it was a buddy system that frankly, we forgot how to use—we don't use as effectively today. We were very, very poor, we cooperated with each other far better than we do today. But Brooklyn for my parents was very good.

[00:23:39.10]

My mother—was here and they lived in Brooklyn for a while. They got—they were notified that there was an apartment available in East Harlem and the reason that we were moving to East Harlem is it was a place where there were significant numbers of us so that we felt safe. *Era un barrio*. Okay?

[00:24:10.10]

And it was a real thing that, even though the building that we moved in was a building that was—it was reserved for the poorest people. Right next door were a building which was dated for people who had money, clout, jobs. And they were a different class. They were a different—and that's something that I think took me a long time to understand why amongst Puerto Ricans we had differences because there was class issues there.

[00:24:47.59]

My mother's family was middle class. Her father's class was not middle class. They were very, very poor. So that, because of ethnic backgrounds, it also reflected our social status. My father was very tall, very good looking and a very proud man. And—I can understand that he had a lot of problems in Puerto Rico. So it also reflected itself here. So my mother came—my father came in 1928, my mother came in 1930—at the beginning of the depression. I mean, this is crazy. Traveling from a beautiful island and you come into a country that is beginning to go into a depression.

[00:25:42.42]

So I can imagine what was going on for most Americans. Specifically, white Americans who were losing their jobs, who were going into this incredible economic, you know, uh, difficulty. And here we have people migrating to a country and that we were not being welcomed. So at one point, Puerto Ricans were required to walk around with what was stated as a passport. It was an identification card that verified that you were an American citizen and that you, you know, uh, had a right to be here.—That's how my family was tracked—my father's family was tracked.

[00:26:34.97]

When he applied for those things, he had to put in his mother's name, his father's name. And that's how we, 50 years later, found out who our aunts and our uncles were on his side, because there are very few records of his family. But they came here, basically, looking for work. They came here because they—the island was suffering from what we considered a depression. Puerto Rico has been in a depression for many, many decades prior, and still, in many cases, still is in a very depressed state.

[00:27:15.14]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Okay. You've spoken a lot, and you've already mentioned it in the context of your experience at school, that there was a lot of violence, right, when you were growing up in your neighborhood. And I know that you and I—I recently mentioned to you that Raphael Montañez Ortiz also talks about his upbringing that way, on the Lower East Side, which was another community that was similar to a *barrio* in that it was—it had a Puerto Rican community and it also had an immigrant community of people from parts of Europe, had a huge Jewish community, Italian community, and all of that. So I was just wondering if you could talk a little bit about—what do you mean by violence? How did you experience that violence? Beyond the examples that you've already given, if there's anything else you can say.

[00:28:14.70]

HIRAM MARISTANY: There's no lack of form for the different types of violence—

[00:28:18.83]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: [Laughs.]

[00:28:19.31]

HIRAM MARISTANY: —I experienced. Well, let me take it—a thing that—it's very, very unique to me, okay?—Well, not unique to me, but I take particular notice of it. When I was a young man, I recall walking with my mother and my siblings. The East Side of Third Avenue, we were allowed—excuse me, the West Side. We tried to cross over to the East side and we were stopped by, largely, Italian Americans, who, in part, were, in fact, immigrants. Some of them were not even American citizens. But their notion was that we were foreigners because of our language.

[00:29:18.70]

I recall my elder brother, who was maybe 13—or 12 or 13. He went across the street to buy something and he literally got chased by three Italian males who were adults. And they call him all kinds of names. I didn't—I didn't quite understand what the n-word was back then, but my brother was terrorized. And my other brother, my other elder brother, who was ready to fight all the time—he was quick to fight—he wanted to go back to get them. It was that kind of mindset at a young age, it's us against them.

[00:30:20.09]

I recall when we were—now I'm getting to be like 14 or 15—we were confined to a specific area. And that goes—let me describe what the streets—and we used to do by Avenue. Fifth Avenue was the borderline. Third Avenue was the other borderline. We were confined to, roughly, 100 feet all the way to, roughly—and now it's not that clear that the drop off point—but roughly, 122nd, 123rd. That was in my notion of a *barrio*. And we were confined there. We did not leave there and when we did do, we needed to have a reason for leaving.

[00:31:11.48]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Between what avenues was that?

[00:31:13.82]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Fifth Avenue, Manhattan, and Third Avenue in Manhattan. And the ones in between is Fifth, Park, and then Madison, and then Lexington Avenue, and then Third Avenue. We're talking about five avenues.

[00:31:32.93]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: And your building where you grew up was between what avenues?

[00:31:37.16]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Madison and Park. And my block was one—it's a unique block and I make reference to it all the times in my photos. It's called 111th Street. 111th Street had the unique distinction of being one of the poorest blocks in all of the state of New York. We had over 4,000 people living in a space that was designed for 1,000. We were all on top of each other, literally. And we had a different connection, so there was a lot of internal violence that we had towards each other. And we were always fighting for territory.

[00:32:19.71]

People from the third block could not be in our block. And that was the rise of gangs in East Harlem. And it's very hard to describe this to people now, who go anywhere they want. But I remember I had a girlfriend on 104th Street and I lived on 11th Street. I was terrorized to go see her because she lived in Dragon territory. I lived in Viceroy territory. I was not a member of the Viceroys but, because I lived there, the people of 104th Street had profound, deep resentment. And if I was there by myself, I would be attacked.

[00:33:00.03]

So that a lot of the violence of America, we learned very, very quickly. We learned how to be very destructive towards each other. But I shouldn't internalize, as exclude, it because the violence really came from external forces. The violence primarily came from Italian Americans. And some of that violence also came from African Americans.—It's a unique reality that sometimes African Americans don't realize how brutal they were to Puerto Ricans.

[00:33:36.36]

We had to learn to defend ourselves. And it was almost like a badge of ho—a badge of honor—to be brutal to African Americans. It's a crazy system of violence. And the measurements of success is something that we had to learn. I can recall my junior high school years, going to school and having to fight in school, leaving school and having to fight leaving school, going home, and then going to another area in *el barrio* and having to fight there as well. So there was a constant threat of one's life being taken.

[00:34:24.57]

And many of my contemporaries—but for the grace of God, it would have been I—walked into situations that—they did not survive. Not that they did anything wrong, but they did not understand those parameters and circumstances. And I recall the young man, The violence taught me that you have to commit a crime so that you can become a man. And one of the yardsticks was to father a child. The other yardstick was to go to prison.

[00:35:06.71]

And I got many a fight because I was called all kinds of names, because I didn't go to jail. It's ironic, but that's——that's the way it was. If you were considered smart, your masculinity was challenged. It's an amazing system of how the internal rage that was going on—. It's hard to describe to people who never experienced that, who want to—who want to make it an intellectual discourse and debate. There are certain things that I have in me that are triggered by certain things that go back to when I was a young person. Well, let me cite one of them.

[00:35:58.51]

I really, really value friendship. Trust and honor is something that I cannot violate. And what happens to a lot of people is that they don't understand that. There's a generation, you cannot give them the impression that you're not being truthful. You violate that, you will never have access to them again. And that is a survival skill. It's not a moralistic judgment whether it's good or bad and how one can forgive and—that's the luxury of people who have not survived certain kinds of realities. And I thought [inaudible]

[00:36:46.63]

[Loud noises.]

[00:36:49.60]

That's not—is that here, me, or is that you?

[00:36:53.38]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: There's a little noise on my end, but there's more—there's more noise on your end as well. So it's not as bad as it was before. But I am hearing something but it's okay. I could hear you.

[00:37:04.66]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Well, the point—the point that I'm making is that it became a holistic system of violence. We—adapted to it really well.

[00:37:25.35]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: I just wanted to get some other basic biographical details down on the record. What schools did you go to? You want to PS something. Junior high school, high school, just those kind of basic details.

[00:37:43.84]

HIRAM MARISTANY: PS 108 was my elementary school. And my mother was very, very concerned that when I was ready for junior high school, she didn't want to send me to the local high school because young men were being killed in those junior high schools. So her solution to the problem was to send me to Catholic school, not knowing that Catholic school was as violent. [Laughs.]

But that's not—that's not good—[laughs]. I went to a school, a Catholic school that was named Commander Shea, Commander John J. Shea Memorial. And that was on 111th Street. I'm very grateful to her for sending me there because I met a lot of brothers, and they were Dominican, of the order of—Dominican order. And they—they did something that I'm so grateful. They demanded that we learn.

[00:38:51.31]

Their premise was, not only can we learn, we must learn. And they took nothing short then of excelling. Now their methodology was not the best because they were very, very violent towards us. Until this day, I don't know how to spell because as I was coming of age, I was also very rebellious. And we would get hit on our hand with a leather belt for every word we misspelled. And I got to the point where I could absorb the pain. I—so I, uh—we would line up, and there were two lines; there was a line that you would get hit and there was a line if they spelled the word correctly. I would just get up and walk into the line to get hit and not even be challenged.

[00:39:38.98]

—But later on in life, that proved to be very helpful to me because I go to a Jesuit school, Jesuit college. And that was Fordham University. Fordham was extraordinary. I was involved in a program called—Excel. And it was for people like me that had very bad experiences, you know. I was thrown out of high school. For three years, I went to a high school that was called Haaren High School—also filled with all the worst kids. It was not about academic excellence. It was about whether you had a police record or not.

[00:40:42.08]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: What year were you at Haaren High School, do you recall? Freddy Rodriguez also went to Heron High School, by the way.

[00:40:47.63]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Oh yeah?

[00:40:48.23]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Yeah.

[00:40:51.11]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Jesus, not very good with—let's say—well, before I went to Haaren high school—let me give you the chronological order. I went to PS 108. Then I went to Commander Shea Memorial. Then I went to a public school because we could not afford to continue to pay for me to go to Commander J. The school was $1 a week.—My mother could not afford that. She had eight children. She lost her husband in the Korean War—that's 1953, 54.

[00:41:37.12]

So I had to go to a school called Galvani. It was full of primarily Italian Americans. I was okay because my name was Maristany. Until I opened my mouth, they knew that I was Puerto Rican and all hell broke. From Galvani, I go to Haaren. Haaren was a war zone. I'm not putting it—I'm not sanitizing it. You literally were—and many of my fellow students came to school with weapons. I never did that. But your life was on the line. And I didn't know who to avoid. Not whether you were going to be challenged or not, you just had to avoid them because they were deadly.

[00:42:39.54]

My personal experience is that I was miseducated, and I use that word very, very intentionally. The system was designed to make sure we remained uneducated, so that we could not compete with certain jobs, and that we would eventually become the pipeline to the criminal quote, unquote, "justice system".

[00:43:06.67]

It was no accident that most of my contemporaries wind up in prison. I am so fortunate and blessed that I never went to jail. Haaren high school was not a very pleasant experience. And eventually, I leave just before graduation because it got to the point where I had several cases with certain people that became life-threatening. And it became where we were arming ourselves.

[00:43:43.02]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So did you have to get a GED? Is that how you got a high school diploma?

[00:43:46.80]

HIRAM MARISTANY: No, what I did is—I didn't take the test—what I did it is I went to this program at Fordham, in Excel. And if you pass this test, it gave you one. And I was not prepared for that. Let me just say this because I have a real chip on my shoulder about this. I don't consider myself to be stupid or not intelligent. I consider myself a person who this system systematically beat down and tried to make me a clone and tried to make me something that I was not.

[00:44:33.52]

And in my defiance, I didn't do certain things that were in my best interest. I didn't believe the adage that education was the equalizer, because many of the so-called educators that I met were as racist as you could—

[00:44:57.49]

[Loud noises.]

[00:44:58.99]

Sorry about that. It's not coming from here. I don't know how to adjust it.

[00:45:17.69]

Hold on. [Gets up.]

[00:45:20.50]

[Inaudible.]

[00:45:22.45]

Anyway, the point that I'm trying to make is that there's a real, real problem [loud noises]

even today. A lot of us—you know, listen to this, there's a car horn blowing. It's crazy.

[00:45:47.48]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: It's OK. I can hear you. I'm going to mute myself so that my noise is not heard. So that's what—it's going to take me a little time to respond a little bit sometimes.

[00:45:58.23]

HIRAM MARISTANY: All right. The point I'm trying to make is that I recall the last time I was in formal education thing, I was walking away from education and I was full, then—I had—I had a revolver in my hip.—I'm trying to describe something to you that it's very, very important. If I stayed, I probably would have been killed—because I would have probably killed somebody and ultimately, it would have escalated and I would have lost, or I would have wind up in prison.

[00:46:45.07]

Once you're in that system, you can never get out of it. One of the blessings that I had is that I met people who cared for me. I met people who treated me fairly. It's strange, but I always try to treat people the way I want to be treated. But I am not afraid of a fight. And many of our young people believe that this country has not did a disservice to us. That what is wrong with Puerto Ricans is Puerto Ricans. And I take exception with that. What's wrong with us is our involvement with this country. And the bad things they did to us. And they will have to answer for it.

[00:47:54.93]

So I hope you—I hope I'm conveying just what I did no—you know, out of control. But it's important that you understand that education is a very, very soft spot. I feel cheated. I feel as if someone abused something that they had no right to do. I go to—I go to Fordham University and I take this test. And the proctor said, How did you do this? They thought I was cheating. I had to take the test over. Do you understand what I just said? They thought I was cheating. They made me take it over and the second time I took it, I got even a higher score. It's what—enough said.

[00:48:50.15]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So you went to Fordham. What did you study there?

[00:48:54.11]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I didn't stay at Fordham because then [sound of car alarm] life for me—What is going on? [Looks out of window.]

[00:49:02.99]

You should know that that's a police car. I live across the street from a precinct. This is how they call each other because when they're inconvenienced, they are very, very annoyed, yet they can inconvenience us and it's not a problem. But anyway, um, what was your question? I'm sorry I lost track.

[00:49:24.90]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: I was asking about Fordham.

[00:49:27.47]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Oh. You have to understand, it was a shock for me to walk in there and not have to defend myself, to walk into there and to have teachers say, Listen, this essay you wrote was very, very good, but this is what you need to do to correct it; do it over and I'll give you a good grade. You mean, I can do it over? And that you didn't accuse me of somehow, you know, doing something wrong?

[00:50:03.32]

I was not used to this kind of—in other words, I was being treated like a student, as opposed to being someone who's always a suspect to doing something wrong. I didn't stay at Fordham because this is also the beginning of something that was raging in me. After high school, I took a huge trip to Mexico. We, uh, some—some—we drive a car from New York to California. And back then, they used to pay you $50 bucks to do that. And we take a trip. We were given a month to take it, actually almost three weeks. And we go down to Laredo and we're going to Mexico—and I see poverty for the first time, real poverty. Not American poverty.

[00:51:00.14]

I see how the Indigenous people are being treated in their own country. And I'm enraged. And it's all burning in me. So that is beginning of my activism.—I'm coming of age now.

[00:51:18.36]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: What year did you go to Mexico?

[00:51:20.61]

HIRAM MARISTANY: This is 1963.

[00:51:22.65]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: 19—what?—

[00:51:23.91]

HIRAM MARISTANY: —63.

[00:51:25.11]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: 1963. And who paid you to go there?

[00:51:28.83]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Well, nobody paid me. My mother, upon my graduation, gave me an envelope. And she saved a thousand dollars. She said, this is for being a good son. Take this money do whatever you want with it. But when you come back—take a trip—when you come back, you no longer live here. I was stunned by that. I was also very hurt. I think she knew what she was doing. She knew that I could survive. She did not want me to stay home.

[00:52:05.22]

I take the money. And naively, I take 200 dollars and I put the other in a bank account and we start driving.

[00:52:18.97]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Who did you go with? Who's we?

[00:52:20.98]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I went was a good friend of mine. His name was Alan Arlich [ph]. He was my roommate. I had an apartment. He's now an attorney. His father was a rabbi. He was a very good friend. We go to California for the first time and we see all kinds of stuff. Because of his experience, he only filtered it through the Jewish experience. When I go to California and I ain't go to San Francisco, I go and hang out with the real hippies in Haight-Ashbury.

[00:53:06.22]

I see—a lot of America. I'm a photographer. And the day I go to the Grand Canyon, I leave my camera home because I'm a New Yorker and we thought that—you can't impress New Yorkers. When I see the Grand Canyon, I am stunned by the scale. I see how huge this country is and how beautiful this country is. So that trip was also enlightening me, as a person. And also seeing some of the ways other people are being mistreated, specifically Mexicans, in Arizona, and Mexicans in—well, African Americans in Georgia and Alabama and Texas. We get stopped every fifth town because we had New York license plates. And every time we got stopped is when I was driving. When Alan was driving, we didn't get stopped.

[00:54:10.09]

So whenever we were in the Southern states, he drove most of the way, or, at night, I drove, because, literally—in one case, we were stopping in Georgia at night and we were taken to a court thing at 1:00 at night. And we thought we were not going to survive this. They woke the judge up, Judge Davis. Luckily, I had 100 dollars in traveler's check. He said, Well, we have to find you something. And we didn't have that much money. He said, Well, what do you have? I said, Well, I have 100 dollars in travelers check.—Oh that'll be fine. That'll pay the fine. So those are the kinds of experiences. But upon my return from this trip is the beginning of my engagement with activism.

[00:55:15.34]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: You've already mentioned that you were a photographer during this trip. So I want to maybe backtrack a little bit and maybe talk about how you came to be a photographer? Who introduced you to photography? And then we can get back to the activism. So when did you become aware of photography?

[00:55:41.32]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Well, it's a strange reality. My mother always believed that I'd always get into trouble. But when I was a very young person, my mother used to rent me out to [noise]—is that here? Okay. My mother used to rent me out to the local bodega. I was a stock boy. My mother used to rent me out to the local plumber, the local electrician. And I used to make like 10 dollars a day. Now I was always used to working. I was always used to—I was always working with my hands. And she wanted to be sure that I had skills.

[00:56:32.41]

So I understood carpentry. I understood plumbing. I understood—and my mother always said, well, what did you learn today? And I had to verbally tell her what I learned today. I preface this by—because photography was something that I was introduced to by a social worker named Dan Murrow. He was someone that came to East Harlem because the amount of violence that was going on in East Harlem was unbelievably high. And there were many gang wars and gang—I mean, just daily, would see Puerto Ricans in handcuffs. And we were attacking each other because that's one of the things that colonized people do. They attack each other.

[00:57:25.35]

I lived in an area that was dominated by a gang called the Viceroys. They were particularly notorious for being very, very violent. Dan Murrow used to negotiate with gang leaders to try and find a truce, or a common ground where they can exist and not continue the violence. He was a Quaker. And the agency he worked for was an agency called the American Friends Service Committee. Dan was a huge man, very, very—physically—very, very strong. But he was also a very gentle man.

[00:58:11.37]

I didn't have many male positive figures in my life. Dan was very, very partial to me because I was very, very polite and very quiet. And he always said, You have eyes that will get you into trouble because you're scanning everything and you're absorbing everything. So he became very much a mentor to me. And he said, You know, I think you have the soul of an artist, but you don't know it. I said, Well, what is an artist and what does an artist do? Because sadly, then, I didn't know artists. Sadly, I never met a Puerto Rican artist. In many contexts, that was an oxymoron.

[00:59:06.69]

So he enjoyed taking pictures. So he said, Listen, I'm going to go and I'm going to take the picture; why don't you come with me? So I went with him. And on a few occasions, he gave me the camera and I took a couple of pictures. And when he developed he said, look, these are the photos you took; wow, they're really good. I said, Yeah, good like what do you mean? Good to throw away? Because I was conditioned to think negatively. Anyway, the point is that this he says, Well, I'm going to see if I can find a second hand camera, a used camera. So he takes me to a pawnshop. And we're going through cameras. I said, Oh, I like that one because I liked the color of the camera. I didn't know anything about them.

[00:59:57.44]

So he get me the camera. He says, Okay, I'm going to give you your basic instruction in photography. So he literally takes me through all the pieces, This is the lens, this is the shutter, this is diaphragms, this is f- stop. So what he was amazed is that the next couple of days, he said, Hiram, do you remember what I told you? I said, Yeah, I did. He said, Well, tell me where the cameras consist of? And I repeated it almost verbatim. He said, How did you remember that? I said, I just can do that.

[01:00:30.60]

So I didn't know that I had something equivalent to a photographic memory. That's how I got accused of being cheating all the time. So I would read something and I remember it. Anyway, the point is that he's teaching me photography. Now I'm taking a lot of photos of my family and people that I know. I get to the point where I start asking, Well, how does one make a print? And he says, Well, that's a silver gelatin. And I start asking him questions that he could not answer. So he says, Hiram, you're asking me questions that I don't know, I don't know how to answer.

[01:01:14.60]

So I was very, very blessed and fortunate. This is 1959.—I'm in the street and I see a photographer, somebody that I never saw—what I thought was an artist. His name was Bob Henriques. He had just returned from the Cuban Revolution. He was someone that worked for a real famous magazine. It was called Paris Match. And he was a part of Magnum Photos. And he said, Kid, come here, man—because I followed him for a couple of days. He said, you can carry my camera for 10 dollars. I said, 10 dollars? Now it's like a fortune. So he gives me his camera case. It was very, very heavy. I barely could do it.

[01:02:12.66]

At the end of the day, he says, Well, how did you fare? I said, Oh man, that was great. I love to see you take pictures of men. And just, out of a whim, I don't know why I said it but I said words to this effect, One day, I will become a great photographer. And I knew that moment that I was going to be a photographer. I didn't know why; I didn't know how; I didn't know—it's just something that just was burning inside.

[01:02:45.45]

He smiles and he looks at me. So we start walking and he goes into his bag and he pulls out a camera. He said, This camera is for you. I'll be back in six weeks. Take photos. Show me what you have done with this, kid. He said, I'm not giving you this camera; it's something you have to earn. That's very, very important to me because that's the system that I came up on. You had to earn your way, no one gave it to you.

[01:03:20.86]

So he leaves. I didn't know anything about photography. I didn't know about what type of camera it was. And I'm dumbfounded. I don't know what the hell I'm going to do. I don't know how to open this thing. I don't know what kind of film it takes. What the hell do I—the only resource, the only thing that was available to me was the one place where knowledge was equal. It was called the Aguilar Public Library on 110th Street. I go in there and I speak to Miss Johnson, a white woman, who says to me, So you want to learn photography, right? I said, Yeah, Is there a book? That's how naive I was. She said, There's a whole section of books on photography.

[01:04:14.75]

I said, Where do I begin because—and I pull out the camera and show it to her. I said, I need to learn how to use this camera. And she could barely—the camera was a Leica 3G. I didn't know how to say Leica, I used to call it Leeca. And she didn't know how to say it. So we go and we start looking for rangefinding cameras. We couldn't find anything like that. So I kept coming back. And one day, I returned and she's smiling. She calls me to her, she says, I have something for you. And in big letters is the Leica manual. In the Leica manual, are all these different Leicas. Page 38, Leica 3G.

[01:05:09.36]

I turn to page 38 and go through—to open Leica 3G. And there's a figure. There's a diagram. I take my camera out and I open it. And the relationship between studying and technology was cemented that day. So I had to give the book back. And she said, Don't worry, Hiram, there's nobody in here that's going to take this book. This book is for you. You will use it. So long story short, about for a month, every day, I read the section on Leica 3G to the extent that I knew what was on each page and I could really open the camera, understand its functions, understand all the parts of it.

[01:06:05.22]

But I did not understand photography. I understood the mechanics of the camera. And that's the other thing that I'm really grateful to photography because it taught me that you had to be a technician and a mechanic to be an artist. You have to understand how things are operating together and how you had to bring them together. It's not something that, I mean—or painters because I know they have to understand texture; they have to understand volume; they have to understand how many different shades of blue there are, how many—all of the underlying things that, when they make a decision, it's not just a decision, it is a multiple of decisions that come in order to create art.

[01:06:52.74]

So I now had to learn photography. I had to learn exposure, composition, a whole bunch of stuff that, frankly, I was not prepared for. So I finally learned the type of film [inaudible]. Film was a dollar a roll. I had to borrow a dollar. I didn't have that. I buy a roll of film, put it in the camera. The role had 36 exposures. I take 36 exposures. 35 of them were horrendously terrible photographs. The worst thing in the world you could ever see, I did, I managed to do it. One photograph, the last photo—I'm in terror because this man is coming back. He comes when said was going to come. He sits at my mother's table, she gives him coffee. She gives him some stuff that she made. He was very, very happy because my mother treated him right. And he remembers, he used to say my mother is part cubana because she made great coffee.

[01:08:07.06]

In photography, there's something we call a contact sheet. I slide my contact sheet with one exposure correct. The rest of them are disasters. I'm ashamed. I'm hiding my face. I duck and keep—my face is in shame. I had my hands covering my face. I said, I'm sorry that I did such a bad job.

[01:08:27.10]

He looks at me and he says, You know, you have to learn something tonight. You're doing something that I hope you never could continue to do. You are spending so much time on what you did wrong, you didn't look at what you did right. This is a beautiful photograph. And he pointed to it. I said, What do you mean? He said, This is a great photo. You took a really good photo. And I was so relieved. But it was also a lesson, a lifelong lesson, that I try to spend my time focusing on what I did right. Because as a colonized person, we are all taught to see ourselves in the most negative way we can see.

[01:09:22.48]

So he got up from the table and he came over, he gave me a huge bear hug. My mother was very, very proud of me. I buy another roll. Same disaster. Half of the stuff didn't come out correct. But maybe five pictures came out. And over time, I got better and better. Dan

Murrow was my inspiration to photography. I will always be indebted to him. Bob Henriques was the disciplinarian that I needed. He told me that there are no excuses. You continue until it's right.

[01:10:13.72]

I guess that's part of my philosophy. When you look at some of my images, you do not see the technology. You do not see the correct exposure. You do not see the composition. You do not see the correct texture, value. What you see is what Dan told me, the inspiration of a great photographer. I hope I answered your question to how I got—how I became a photographer.

[01:10:47.07]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Who taught you how to print?

[01:10:49.83]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Oh boy. A Russian Jew who was in the Holocaust. His name was Pop Horn. He had a photography shop. And, again, I was very naive. I didn't know certain things. In the middle of winter it was 90 degrees. He always had long sleeve shirts. I ask him, why are you always wearing long sleeved shirts? He says, I don't want to talk about that. He was a master printer. So when I walked into the darkroom, he said, You could sit at the chair and you have to learn to watch and observe. And you have to understand that things are—it's a continuum. You start this process the same way all the time and then you make small varied changes in order to improve it.

[01:11:53.03]

So I had to sit there for almost three weeks. He said, Now you can stand next to me. And what it was is that he was seeing how much pieces I had and how much I wanted to become a printer. So eventually, he allows me to get on the enlarger. And he kept saying to me, you have to understand that you have to produce your best, not for me. You have to produce your best for yourself. So when you hand someone a print, it's the best you can do. Doesn't mean it's going to be the best print ever printed. It's your best. So Pop Horn was very, very special to me. It's the first time I ever got fired.

[01:12:48.04]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Could you say his name again clearly? It's sounding a little muffled. Could you just say his name again?

[01:12:54.13]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I didn't know. His name was Ephraim Rabinovitch. I don't even know how to spell that. But he was referred to by everybody as Pops—as in father—Horn. His real name was Horowitz, or something like that. But he never liked to use that. He was very ashamed of being Jewish. And the reason was—is that he finally rolls up the sleeves and he had numbers on his arm. He was in one of the concentration camps. He was a Holocaust survivor. He was very kind to me, but he was also very real.

[01:13:37.28]

He calls me in, he says, Hiram, go get me some—buy me a bagel and some coffee and you get yourself a doughnut. And he didn't allow me to drink coffee; I could only drink hot chocolate. And when I came back and I sat in the store with him. And he said Hiram, you're a great apprentice. I have a lot of love for you. But I am firing you. I said, Why? What did I do wrong? He said, You didn't do anything wrong. I can't teach you anymore. You got to go somewhere else so someone else can teach you.

[01:14:21.61]

I was devastated. And I go and I tell my mother. And my mother said, He knew what he was doing. He was right. So she said, So what are you doing with all this photography and everything? I said, Mami, I'm going to be—I'm going to be a photographer. Her words to me were, There's no such thing as a Puerto Rican photographer. She burst my bubble. I was—wow, man, wow.

[01:14:53.33]

You know, I'm very angry and somewhat resentment towards her. So I come back maybe a month, two months later. And I say, Mami, then I guess I will be the first one. And she smiled. And she said, Why did it take you so long? She knew that I was going to do this. She knew that I was not—she was not going to stop me. She wanted the fire to be in me—not something she wanted.

[01:15:30.44]

35 years later, I take her to the entrance of the Metropolitan Museum. Some of my images are hanging on the wall. And she looks at me, she says, This is from a son of mine? Standing next to her is the great artist, Rafael Tufiño, ex-governor Ferré, and Thomas Holding [ph]. A picture from 111th Street [ph].—But anyway.

[01:16:04.01]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: You've also mentioned to me that you were part of Alexey Brodovitch's class at the New School?

[01:16:13.94]

HIRAM MARISTANY: That happened—that happened—well, I don't know if it was New School, I think it was Parsons School of Design. That, I owe to another artist who was very kind to me, Benedict Fernández. He's somebody you can look up.

[01:16:36.06]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: I'm familiar with his work.

[01:16:38.74]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Benedict did not have the same experiences that I had, in terms of growing up—I grew up in quote, unquote, a "ghetto". I grew up with some of the most violent realities. But Benedict was also very kind to me. And he introduced me to Alexey Brodovitch. He had a class where he—Bruce Davidson—I mean, some really major artists were there. I was only a kid of the *barrio*. I never saw myself as this—. He would hold up images of the students, and I sat in the back; I was trying to disappear.

[01:17:31.58]

I was afraid that people would find out that I was not a photographer. I was afraid that these gu—everybody in the room were photographers except for me—and that I was there under false pretenses. So I'm hiding. But he holds up one of my images and he asked, Who took this photograph? And nobody responded. Until one of the other artist said, The kid in the back took the shot.—And this is what I expected, This is the worst image that I have ever seen; wHow dare you show this? What is wrong with you? This is garbage.

[01:18:10.37]

And I braced myself. And he said, this is a wonderful photograph. And what I'm trying to illustrate to you, that my precondition was about failure, about not achieving anything. So that experience started me believing that I could possibly do something of value. One of the images that he chose was the image that you chose, one of the images that the Smithsonian chose, and the image was *Children at Play*. So it's—an interesting phenomenon.

[01:19:00.67]

So I just find these parallels coming into play. But—he was very, very touched; his photographic experience—he photographed part of the Russian Revolution. So he went way back. He was also very, very instrumental in the Harper's Bazaar, that he was a fashion designer. And some of the stuff he did was just amazing. I came out of the raw streets and I was not, you know, too impressed with fashion until I started learning about it and how difficult it was. He introduced me to Bresson. He introduced me to Paul Strand. He introduced me—and he started talking to them as people. And he's saying, this is how they perceive beauty. The same way you perceive beauty.

[01:19:58.81]

And he unleashed a part of an aesthetic that I had that was confined. I'm very grateful to Benedict and Alexey. To be a great artist—if I am; I'm not saying that I am—is also directly related to the art people that are around you, that inspire you, that don't make it easy for you, but that say, Yes, there are possibilities, things you can do.

[01:20:38.09]

And, again, just look at the number of people that I mentioned that helped me on my way, on my journey. I'm very, very fortunate and very, very grateful to. At the time, I didn't understand it and didn't appreciate it. But now as a mature person, I truly appreciate it. And indirectly, I'm attempting to pass it forward and give the next generation some insight of mine. I don't know whether that's going to happen, but that's the intent.

[01:21:16.40]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: I just had—did you meet Benedict Fernández in Alexey Brodovitch's class, or in another context?

[01:21:22.79]

HIRAM MARISTANY: In another context. We were—well, again, these are also parallels. We were part of an artist collective group, which Ralph Montañez was at.

[01:21:34.41]

Let me just be [inaudible]. That's the only time I was ever in the room with him. He came off very, very negative to me. He was very self-centered and self-involved. And didn't want to deal with it.

[01:21:49.07]

But we were a collective of artists that were focusing on issues such as the exclusion of photographers and Latino and Puerto Ricans in major museums. Ralph Montañez led a very effective campaign against the Metropolitan Museum of Art. I didn't want to participate. I didn't want to be a part of it. I grew—joined the other group that were demonstrating against the Whitney Museum.

[01:22:23.03]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Is that the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition?

[01:22:25.46]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yes, ma'am. And one of the people that was a part of that was a woman named Alice Neal, who I liked. I didn't know how incredibly talented she was. And she was kind of, like, almost bohemian. She really liked Puerto Ricans. And she wanted to come and she says, Do you ever allow people to do a portrait of you? I said, No, you can't point a camera at me. No, I don't do that. I didn't know that it would have been a high honor to have her do a portrait of me. And she was—but I joined that group, thus, where I meet Benedict. We would sit around coffee shops and we would talk about what we thought was injustice, but what we thought what we needed to do about it. And he was more inclined, I think, with Ralph Ortiz.

[01:23:32.54]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: He was more what I couldn't hear that

[01:23:34.79]

HIRAM MARISTANY: He was closer to Ralph Ortiz in that group. But there's a photo that I took of Benedict Fernández and Ralph Ortiz and other members of that coalition. One of my disciplines is that wherever I went, I document. I didn't know why but I documented it. So I believe I gave that image to El Museo.

[01:24:03.92]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So the organization that Raphael Montañez Ortiz was—is—was the Art Workers' Coalition?

[01:24:10.22]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I wouldn't know. I turned off. When I turned off—

[01:24:13.91]

E. CARMEN RAMOS:—maybe the Puerto Rican—there was a Puerto Rican Art Workers' Coalition as well, it was more Puerto Rican artists.

[01:24:20.69]

HIRAM MARISTANY: That is where I met Marcos Dimas, Adrián García—who else—Armando Soto. I mean, and you see the joy that I had—to see that there were Puerto Rican artists—I was like, Wow, this is cool. I didn't meet a Puerto Rican photographer until many, many years later—you know, a rare breed. But that whole, kind of, time of us coming together in that collective form was very, very, very unique and very, very cool.

[01:25:08.78]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So was the collective that you're mentioning something else other than the Art Workers' Coalition? Because you're mentioning that you were part of a collective with Raphael Montañez. So I'm just trying to get the terminology.

[01:25:20.93]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I think those kinds of collectives evolve into something [inaudible].

[01:25:27.81]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So what year were these?

[01:25:31.26]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I'm very bad with years. But let me give a guesstimate. I think it was 1965-66. Okay.—One of the ways you can track a lot of this is there was an exhibit at Union Settlement where there was a coalition of people coming together. There's a very famous photo. I'm not in the photo, but I was there. Because I was a documentarian, I really felt instinctively and intuitively that I should never be a part of the history if I'm documenting. So therefore, I never wanted to be photographed.

[01:26:13.76]

But there was an exhibit at Union Settlement that I think was the foundation for the beginning of what would later be called the Puerto Rican arts movement. To his credit—Marcos Dimas should be given a lot of credit for being early. So it's Adrián García, Martín Rubio was the other artist who I liked. They were from the Lower East Side. And they were just good people I don't know if I can describe that. A little bit on the crazy side, a little bit of, you know—but just cool people.

[01:27:00.35]

That leads towards the emergence of el Taller. The Taller also leads toward the emergence of something that is very close and dear to me, which is the beginning in the development of the institutionalized form of El Museo del Barrio—not the public education program that Ralph Ortiz was involved in. The other person that was a part of this early collective was a woman named Nitza Tufiño. She has to be included. She was a key part of it. And this is way before the Museo.

[01:27:53.34]

Now, just to illustrate my range, I knew other artists, photographers, but they were primarily Black photographers. One of them was a legendary person that I'm so grateful to have known and met, Roy DeCarava. Major, major influence. He wanted me to join the collective and [inaudible]. I told him I had no problem identifying as a Black person, a person of color. I

said, I have no problem doing that; however, I am Puerto Rican. And that if anything, I should organize a collective of Puerto Rican and Latino artists.

[01:28:39.33]

He was kind of resentment to them, but I think he understood that. Roy was ahead of his time. And I think those kinds of simultaneous things going on with the emergence of the Studio Museum of Harlem, the emergence of National Black Theater with Ann Teer, with the emergence of Black Poets, the Last Poets. These things I was engaged in and involved with. And because it was focused in Harlem, that was my interest, okay, because I thought, on many levels, the Harlem community was being under-served on many levels.

[01:29:30.87]

So my focus was those kinds of things, as opposed to external things. I also thought that the Whitney and the Met and the major institutions were employing systematized racism. But my focus was to try and document a lot of stuff that was local and within the Harlem experience

[01:30:08.43]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: You also mentioned that, at this time, around this time in the early 60s, that you were politically active. You've mentioned to me that you attended the March on Washington.

[01:30:23.16]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yes.

[01:30:23.61]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: And I was wondering if we could talk about that. How did you come to attend that event? Who did you go with? Was there a contingent of Puerto Ricans that attended this event?

[01:30:34.47]

HIRAM MARISTANY: This is going to sound crazy, but—one of the things that history does that I find very, very troublesome—Is that—if this issue was brought [inaudible]. I remember the March on Washington and I remember its controversy. And some of the controversy was also in the African American community. People believe that all African Americans supported Martin Luther King. I don't believe that's correct. Many of the African Americans that I knew, the brothers that I knew thought, Oh man, I'm not going there, man; there's going to be a whole lot of trouble. And Martin Luther King is a troublemaker. He comes from the South. How can he speak for us in the North?

[01:31:27.91]

So to answer your question, there was not a contingency of Latinos or Puerto Ricans going to the March on Washington. I decided, because everybody told me they didn't want to go, that I should go. You understand my decision-making process?

[01:31:46.29]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: [Nods.]

[01:31:49.32]

HIRAM MARISTANY: So I go by myself. Didn't know how to get to Washington on my own. So I go to the local church and I said, Listen, I want to go and I don't have any money; how can I get to March on Washington? So one of the ladies says, Well, our church is—all our buses are filled, okay? You have to go to a Pentecostal church on 115th Street. And if you get there early enough, they may have a seat for you. You have to come with at least 10 dollars in your pocket because you may have to buy lunch.

[01:32:26.49]

I said, Okay. I go; they give me a seat. I didn't have 10 dollars. I had to borrow money from

my friends. I borrowed two dollars from this person until I got to 10 dollars. I put my cameras in my bag, I—everything. I knew who some of the people were. I understood what Snake [ph] was; I understood who H.R. Brown was. And I was reading at the time a lot of political papers, such as the Black Panther Party newspaper. I was reading a lot of political stuff, trying to align myself. I read—it was very hard to read, but—very difficult book to read, but —*War and Peace*.

[01:33:22.59]

I wanted to get a perspective of what revolution was. Anyway—the March on Washington was significant to me because it was one of the first times legislation was being done on behalf of the people. That meant that it's possible for real change. So when I go, I see that this is a huge event. I've never been participating in the event of this scale. So it took us almost two hours just to get into the city of Washington because there were literally hundreds of buses lining up.

[01:34:10.85]

So when we finally get to the section that is allocated to us, when we come out, huge contingents of people singing, We Shall Overcome. It's the first time I'm involved in any kind of massive movement. There were people who were walking around who had extra food. A woman walked up to me and said, Are you hungry? I said, Yes, I am. She gave me a tuna fish sandwich and a little thing of chocolate milk; that was lunch. The point I'm making is that it was a feeling of—a friendliness that I was not used to.

[01:35:02.07]

So we go to what is now the Mall. And, because I was very small, I'm walking towards the steps and going through the crowd. And I get there and the police stopped me. And they said, do you have a press pass? I didn't know what a press pass was, so I said no. So one of the older guys who had the press pass, he told the police officer, Oh, he's with me. So I get past—again, an act of kindness. So I'm there with my beat up, rickety, little Leica F2 camera. And all I see is the bottom of his feet. I couldn't see the podium. I couldn't see him speak.

[01:35:54.89]

So I'm underneath the huge speaker. So when he does the "I have a dream" speech, I hear it twice, because of the echo. So he says, I have a dream, it bounces and it comes back.

[01:36:19.56]

—It was an incredible experience. I couldn't take any photos because—I wasn't going to take photos of him. So I decided to take photos of the people that came to the march, not Martin Luther King, which was reserved for the people with press passes and the people who could really see it.

[01:36:41.05]

So I think that also disciplined me to focus on the crowd, the people. Everywhere I go, I always turn the camera around and photograph the people who are observing this, the people who were there and the people—so that it was a beginning process for me. I didn't know it, but at the time, at the top of the steps, was a very famous photographer who I wanted to become like, and that was Bresson. He was there himself, and he photographed it. And I see the images he took of that; it was amazing. But he could have walked past me and I didn't know it. That is so true of so many famous people, that, because of my the lack of access, I could not engage.

[01:37:35.47]

But I've never published any of those images. I will make a few of those available for show that I've scheduled—I have—at the Museo del Barrio, which will chronicle everything that I have di—all the different levels of work that I've done. And I'll have a few interviews of the March on Washington. But it's the first, kind of, account that I think is more important, not the photographer.

[01:38:04.17]

That—at a very young age, I decided to go toward my own; didn't need anybody to prove. That's something that I'm very, very proud of. Some of my friends here said, Why did you go there?—because that was Black, that had nothing to do with us. These are Puerto Ricans I was speaking to. So it's—I'm very, very proud of the fact that I was there.

[01:38:44.37]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: —So you were also mentioning briefly that your activism started very young.

[01:38:53.55]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yes.

[01:38:53.94]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So could you talk about your earliest experiences with activism?

[01:39:03.48]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Okay. I will do so, but let me do something that I think is important. It's giving me an indication that my battery is running low. I need to get my charger, which is where we originally started. So give me a second.

[01:39:15.66]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: I'm just going to put on pause.

[01:39:17.19]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Okay.

[01:39:17.49]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Sure.

[01:39:22.38]

[Ringing sound.]

[01:39:22.82]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Is that here—me? Okay.

[01:39:29.07]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Can you hear that if I pause? I mean, if I mute?

[01:39:33.96]

HIRAM MARISTANY: No, I can't hear it.

[01:39:42.78]

For me, my experience with activism occurs roughly in the early 60s when I take this trip to Mexico. And realizing that we were—we were traveling and there was a real—I was with my good friend. And his experience was different in terms of—he really didn't see bad to poor treatment of Indigenous people. He really did not react that way, the way I was reacting.

[01:40:46.41]

And I was learning about different cultures in University. And I was learning about different, you know—I was preparing myself to go to University and to study the Aztecs, the Olmecs. These Indigenous people that had incredible accomplishment, and even more so, incredible art. These people, when you refer to them, you should refer to them with the utmost respect.

[01:41:22.89]

When I saw—when we go into Mexico City [inaudible]—they said it was called el Zócalo. The Zócalo is a place where it's, like, the center of Mexico City. It's Moctezuma's city. The Spanish built a Cathedral on top of his temple. I mean, the arrogance of that. And people accept it like, So what? What's the big deal? For me, the beginning of the rage of injustice starts there.

[01:42:11.14]

I stayed with an Indigenous family. They had a one-room home. Their divisions, their walls, were blankets. They were very generous. I had money, you know.—Anyway, I learned very, very quickly that they were all so full with pride; they didn't want to be treated, you know, to be disrespected—you know, like, charity. So I had to find a way to pay them.

[01:42:57.51]

So one of the young men—one of the children; there were five of them—when I leave, I give him 10 rolls of film. But he looks at me and he said, You know, this represents my father's salary; he doesn't make this in a year. I said, This is my gift to you. You can do it piece by piece, or you can do it [inaudible]. And what they would do is take that roll of film—that we paid two dollars for—they would sell it for 20 dollars. Now, 20 dollars to us doesn't seem like much, but for the Indigenous—the point was, I gave them something that did not dishonor them. Showed them respect.

[01:43:45.74]

When I come back from Mexico, I'm a changed person. When I come back from Mexico, I begin to see injustice as a global reality, not just my personal reality. And that's one of the problems that I think—that many Indigenous people or people who are being brutalized—is that we only see those things through our own personal filter and not see the [inaudible].

[01:44:19.86]

So now, I'm coming of age where I'm draft-able. So I received my draft notice. I received my tokens, as my generation used to say. The selective services, when you were going to be drafted, it would send you a token so that you had no excuse for not showing up at Whitehall Street.—I'm deciding whether I'm going to go to fight in Vietnam or not. And I found that, myself, very, very interesting, for the letter—they said that Your service will show how much, you know, what America means to you and your patriotism. And you know what I say, You know, it's amazing that I didn't exist until I was available to fight somebody else's war—fighting for a freedom that I don't believe I have.

[01:45:20.46]

So I start the process of saying, Well, I don't think I'm going to go to the war. So when I get drafted, I'm there with damn near my high school graduating class. A lot of the guys recognize me—a lot of guys—a lot of guys I had a lot of fights with recognize me, I should say. Anyway, we—standing next to me is one of my dearest friends. He tells me What am I complaining about, man? We're going to go and beat those Japanese butts and we'll be home over the weekend. And I tell them, First of all, it's not Japan, it's Vietnam. I also tell them they've been fighting 30 years. They just beat and defeated the French.

[01:46:19.46]

And he's looking at me with this puzzlement. He says, How do you know that? I said, I read that. And they did not tell you that we're going to be fighting against people who built cities under the ground? Who are determined to fight and be liberated? They didn't tell you that the enemy we're going to be—and he's puzzled. He volunteered to become the tank commander. This is no joke. This guy was very, very serious; you respected him. But long story short, he dies 45 years later of Agent Orange, for his exposure in Vietnam. I'm telling you this because this—because it's in my political involvement.

[01:47:10.51]

I start a photography workshop in East Harlem, on 117th Street. Many of my students—later, become—two of them become ministers of the Young Lord Party. This is before the Young Lords. I'm holding, now what, some people refer to as political education classes. And the

discussion was—is to—make links with countries and people that are impoverished, that are part of the major problem, the larger problem that Vietnam's a part of. By connection, I connect Puerto Rico to that as well.

[01:48:00.86]

I said, We're talking about the same person that is—the same people—that are trying to enslave and tell the North Vietnamese what to do; and yet, they are in Puerto Rico telling us how we should or should not be behaving. So that workshop, that photography workshop, became very, very—very political. I invited very political people to come. One of them was, uh—became a minister of education. Pablo "Yoruba" Guzmán and "Fi" were members of my workshop.

[01:48:50.56]

And it was not a workshop necessarily for photography, it was a workshop for political discourse, to have the discussion. It was not to say that you had to agree with me, but that you had to have an effective dialogue and discussion about our liberation and our independence. And now I'm talking about, specifically, Puerto Rico. And I tried to draw some parallels to the way the government behaved, in terms of, you know, I remember we went into real detailed discussions about the Jones Act that Puerto Rico imposes on—I mean, the United States imposes on Puerto Rico.

[01:49:39.29]

So from that point of view, on my own, I go and meet with—at the Black Panther Party's headquarters on 122nd street and 7th Avenue. I'm the only Puerto Rican in the room. And I meet a lot of the members of the party that later—lifelong friends of mine. Several were killed during the siege. But—so I'm there early, but I'm also alone.

[01:50:22.67]

This is a strange parallel, but, simultaneously, which also happened in the Puerto Rican arts movement, we're all talking about who we are and what we aren't, and we're trying to assert ourselves and to have our own aesthetic, our own values, be respected, and be a part of the greater art world, which we were also very much excluded. So it's like a dual lane going on, activism and activism as it relates to art and history.

[01:51:07.68]

We were very, very concerned that we went through this whole phase of just dealing with the quotes of the *[Little] Red Book* of Mao Tse-tung [*sic* - Zedong]. We were required to read really sophisticated, heavy stuff like, you know, Fritz [*sic* - Frantz] Fanon's *Black Man, White Faces* [*sic - Black Skin, White Masks*]. We were doing our own independent research and study because we wanted to have some answers for the manner in which we were going to lead our lives.

[01:52:04.69]

Universities are erupting. I'm at Columbia when SDS takes over the buildings because the administration decided to take some land from the Harlem community so that they can build a University, and they were going to exclude the Harlem community from it. They do that even today. They have a lot of their facilities, and they exclude a lot of the Harlem community from access.—City College erupted; that's where I meet my future wife, on the picket line. It's a strange world.

[01:52:51.55]

So what happens is that activism becomes a part of a daily life cycle, who you are and what you are. If you were not directly engaged in some kind of political activities, you were discussing it. It was in the air. A lot of "isms" was going on. The antiwar movement, the civil rights movement, feminism, Black Power, our whole sense of, you know, the Puerto Rican arts movement—a whole list of stuff that was going on. And if you were not doing something, you were considered—it was not cool to sit on the sidelines. That's predominantly how I was engaged in activism.

[01:53:58.10]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: How did you—as far as I know, you didn't serve in the Vietnam War. So how did—how did you not serve? Or do I have that incorrect?

[01:54:07.58]

HIRAM MARISTANY: No, I did not serve. I did not serve. So a whole bunch of stuff that occurred. What I believe—well, let me try and describe. Back then they had what was called a draft board. And each board had its own sector. And my draft board was draft board number 10. And this is strange, but I think I was very blessed in the sense that my draft board had a lot of volunteers. A lot of Puerto Ricans volunteered for the draft.

[01:55:04.31]

So essentially, I think that they—what's the word that I'm looking for?—they filled their quota. And I was—well, when you go into the military service, you have to take this test. And I intentionally messed this test up. And they said—one of the sergeants said—I mean—major said, You think you're the only person to figure it out that you can mess up this test? We've had smarter people than you try to do this; we could see immediately that—. So they made me take the test over. I still messed it up.

[01:55:51.27]

They knew that I was going to give them a hard time and that I did want to go. And I made a statement that, you know, Listen—they kept asking me, Are you a conscientious—? I said, No, I'm not; give me a weapon and I will kill the first racist bastard that I meet. They were like, Whoa. Because they were prepared for other things, other than where I was coming from. So what I do remember is that there's a whole lot of—well, I was prepared to go to—Canada.

[01:56:33.84]

I packed my bags. I went to the bank, took some money out that I had. I emptied it out. I gave some money to my brother in case I needed it. They didn't have a lot of money—but I was definitely not going to serve in Vietnam. There are other aspects of my life as it relates to that I'd rather not get into because there were people who helped me; and, you know, I don't want to put them in a compromising position, even though it's a long time ago.

[01:57:14.62]

But I want to honor the memories because some of them are gone. But as I told you earlier, I am extraordinarily blessed and fortunate. A lot of people helped me. This is one of the cases that they did intervene and help me—specifically, Dan Murrow and his family and his friends. He was very, very concerned about me. And because he was a Quaker and a pacifist, he understood. And I said Dan, I'm not a pacifist; I'm not doing that; I can't in good conscience claim that I'm a consciencentious objector.

[01:58:06.54]

So whatever consequences I have to pay, I will pay. And people went to extraordinary measures to help me. I don't want to make a statement to make it seem as if I'm trivializing something. I don't want to do that. So I hope I answered your question.

[01:58:30.44]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Yes, you did. You did. So it is 12:48, and I wanted to turn to your photography, because we haven't really talked about it in great depth. But I'm a little concerned—

[01:58:54.82]

HIRAM MARISTANY: You want to open this conversation because I don't know if you can limit this to—

[01:58:59.45]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Yeah, I know. It's a little close to 1:00 when we said we would stop. it might be better to start tomorrow.

[01:59:07.77]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Okay.

[01:59:08.40]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: And then we can—

[01:59:10.91]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I think that would be really, really good because—let me just say something that I think is very important, that you hear this. I am very grateful to photography. Had I not come to it, I don't think I would be here right now. I think that I would have lived a life that was predestined for me. And that was to have done a lot of negative things, and not done a lot of the positive things that photography afforded me. One of them is my direct association with El Museo del Barrio. Had I not been a photographer, that would have never happened. And I'm grateful for that. So I just wanted to put that in context for you.

[02:00:03.51]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Okay. Well, then I look forward to talking to you tomorrow and we'll be covering more intensely, your work. The initial work that you did, pre- the Young Lords, and documenting the life and culture of El Barrio. And then we can talk about the Young Lord work, and also touch on other projects that you've done and your relationship with El Museo del Barrio, exhibitions that you've been part of as well—because we want to document, obviously, your experience as an artist.

[02:00:40.49]

HIRAM MARISTANY: [Inaudible] exhibition. The one who had, really, did that is my sister that recently passed. But I'm trying to get a hold of—she had a journal of everything that I did. I don't know where that disappeared to, but I will try my best to give you as many of the exhibits I remember, but soon as they're done, I try and move on to the next one. So it gets very difficult for me to have accurate dates and what they were about.

[02:01:17.47]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: No worries. We'll do the best we can do.

[02:01:21.79]

HIRAM MARISTANY: All right.

[02:01:22.33]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So thank you, Hiram. And I'll stop recording.

[02:01:26.68]

HIRAM MARISTANY: What time tomorrow do you want to do this?

[02:01:29.23]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Same time, 10:30.

[02:01:31.84]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Okay.

[02:01:32.35]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: 10:30 AM.

[02:01:34.09]

HIRAM MARISTANY: All right.

[02:01:34.84]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So thank you.

[02:01:36.22]

HIRAM MARISTANY: All right.

[02:01:36.67]

[END OF TRACK marist21_1of3_digvid_m.]

[00:00:01.38]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I can't hear you.

[00:00:02.16]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Did you click it off?

[00:00:04.33]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Here you go. Continue. Now, am I on mute?

[00:00:10.77]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: No, you're not on mute.

[00:00:12.84]

HIRAM MARISTANY: All right.

[00:00:13.32]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: I can hear you. You can hear me.

[00:00:15.15]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Mm-hmm.

[00:00:15.57]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Okay. Well, thank you, Hiram, for joining me again to continue our conversation. This is—today is August 9, 2021, and I'm E. Carmen Ramos, and it's my pleasure to be talking to Hiram Maristany, the photographer from El Barrio, and this is part two of his oral history for the Archives of American Art.

[00:00:43.29]

And Hiram, reflecting on our conversation yesterday, I had a few clarifying questions that I wanted to ask you, and one is, how and where did you learn about the history of photography? We mentioned several—you mentioned several artists in our discussion yesterday, but I never asked that specific question.

[00:01:13.71]

HIRAM MARISTANY: My first venture into photography was not to discover that history. I was driven by it—but I had very little resources of people that I could ask questions to, specifically technical questions: questions about cameras, cameras [inaudible] questions about optics, questions about how to figure out issues related to exposure, issues related to basically a whole variety of things, but not photography as a discipline or photography as a—or photography's history.

[00:01:57.61]

I believe that I accidentally stumbled into that, and some of my mentors were always taking

methods of art, and in many cases, they assumed I knew who the artists were.

[00:02:14.94]

To give you a good description of them, one of my mentors, Dan Murrow, talked to me about Mathew Brady, and he kept saying that what Mathew Brady did in photography is critical because he documented something that most people only have a distant memory of; they didn't see what war was like. They didn't see the real issue related to war.

[00:02:47.73]

So it's the first time I heard the word "document" or "documentary." And I was puzzled by that because, Why I didn't know about—know that?—I felt very, very disturbed. And I go back to another issue—but I think it's related—and that is the lack of formal education that I had. I never got, really—I never received—good fundamental history, history in terms of American history, in terms of Puerto Rico history, in terms in general. And equally so, I didn't have any reference to the history of photography.

[00:03:32.76]

When I went to—and I think I can attribute a lot of this to the class with Benedict Fernández and Alexey Brodovitch, they opened—they enlightened me to the fact that there were other people that were doing things that predated me.

[00:03:56.55]

For example, in one of the classes, we talked about—you know, I was very, very concerned because every time we would talk about history, we were talking about France, we were talking about Italy, we were talking about artists who did things in other countries. And I kept asking, Well, who are the artists that photographed East Harlem? And they looked at each other, said, Why would anyone photograph East Harlem? And I said, Well, that's where I live, and that's what's important to me.

[00:04:31.51]

So to my amazement, one of the people in the back—I don't remember his name—said, you ought to check out somebody named Helen Levitt. I said, Who is she? And he said, She photographed East Harlem way before you. Then, I was, like, stunned, and the only place that I had in reference was to go to the public library. I looked her up and, behold, she had images of East Harlem.

[00:05:07.55]

And then I started reading about her, and she was not treated really well, and she was not given a lot of credit I think she was due, in part because of the subject she photographs. And all kinds of parallels started to come in, in that relationship, because she was really genuinely photographing people, and she didn't make the distinction that we were in East Harlem.

[00:05:35.35]

The other reality is that after seeing her, I said, Well, what other female photographers were doing work? And I ran into Dorothea Lange, I ran into Margaret Bourke-White, I ran into—. And I was intrigued because many of their subjects was the same subject that I was photographing, and that is poor people—even though our approach to those poor people were different because I wasn't photographing poor people in abstract, because I was and am poor. So I had a different sense of it. But some of the images that were produced were just outstanding images—images of—very, very sensitive images, and images that were not some of the stuff I saw a lot of male photographers were doing that was very, very dominant and not—had very little sensitivity.

[00:06:39.01]

There was another photographer—his name was Goldstein—who did East Harlem as well. And he did East Harlem—he photographed East Harlem right after the war, and some of his images were incredible as well.

[00:06:55.13]

But all of it lacked a sense of cultural identity. Didn't speak to some of the things that I knew that was going on in the images that they could not respond to, they couldn't relate to. They didn't have that culture connection.

[00:07:13.19]

So that is the beginning of my introduction to photography's history. Then I started studying history in general. And I ran into Paul Strand, and ran into [inaudible - ph]—I'm not sure I'm pronouncing his name correctly—Bresson, all of them. And I became almost like a human sponge. I was absorbing all these multitudes of images and cultures that were going on. And I felt really, really good because something was available to me that I had walked past for so long.

[00:07:52.96]

And in part, I did not receive—I did not get the proper direction to identify those things, or find those things. So I had a lot of help with the librarian at the Aguilar library. She was very, very helpful.

[00:08:13.46]

And I think the thing that resonated a lot to me in terms of that history is when she presented me with a book entitled *The Family Of Man*, which was an exhibit that was done at the Museum of Modern Art. And the introduction to the person who was one of the organizers of it, I think, was a poet named Carl Sandburg, and he wrote a really beautiful poem.

[00:08:44.30]

And I think that started me on the road of connecting photography with art. That poem was very, very instrumental in saying that there's more to photography than just documenting. Right? There's more to photography than just history. You know, Mathew Brady was doing more or less a historical documentation.

[00:09:13.06]

That's very important to me, but I wanted to do something that I think was a little different. So I really made an enormous effort to understand the discipline, but also to understand its roots.

[00:09:29.11]

I also realized—in studying it, I started finding out that there were different mediums; there was diiatypes, there was lithographs, that were photographic elements, there were gravures —.

[00:09:44.77]

And it was like I was one person—I wanted to be prepared. I didn't want to be—I didn't want to appear ignorant whenever I spoke with other artists and other photographers. And I knew that I had a lot of limitations, not because of my lack of ability, but the fact that I never had access.

[00:10:09.58]

And it was very enlightening to me. I felt really good that I had a sense of—it was the beginning of my global understanding because photography was also—there was one other artist who influenced me tremendously, and his name was Robert Capa. He's a war correspondent photographer. He managed to find and photograph of war, but he kept the humanity in it, which is almost a contradiction because war is not about humanity. Those kinds of things had a tremendous impact on me.

[00:10:53.06]

And the sadness is that for the most part, other than Dan Murrow and, uh, you know—my other mentors, in terms of other artists and photographers—essentially I was alone. And that

was a strange, strange feeling. And, I guess, the more I learned, the more accessible I was to other people and other photographers.

[00:11:33.29]

You know, it was very difficult because I was photographing—this may sound crazy but I viewed the world through my camera—but I was looking out as opposed to looking in. It was a way for me to speak without, um, having the great difficulty that, you know, uh—my inability of my writing skills was not what I wanted them to be.

[00:12:08.37]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Can you clarify that? What you mean by that, that you were looking out and not looking in? Do you mean that the pictures were a form of communication? Or—

[00:12:18.89]

HIRAM MARISTANY: —yeah—

[00:12:20.18]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: —or do you also mean that you were—your works were about the community and not about you personally? Or, I mean, obviously they are—you are part of the community, so you are in them. But just clarify what you mean by that.

[00:12:42.40]

HIRAM MARISTANY: —Growing up in East Harlem, I always had the impression in terms of, you know, let's say—let's call it the media, let's call it the external world. Their perception of all of us, including me, was negative, and it was not accurate. And some of the scenarios that my fellow, uh—young people and people of my age—we had a—we—so little was expected of us, and what was expected of us were very, very negative. And I always felt that there was a burden of something always on top of us, looking at us, okay, and judging us and qualifying us.

[00:13:35.71]

My feeling of looking out was that, through photography, I can send messages out and not have to, um, qualify those messages. And I think photography was a—a leveler, an equalizer.

[00:14:00.34]

And when I looked at other artists' work—not, you know—not—in many ways, some of the photography, I was thinking, it made me synonymous. I was invisible. And I always wanted to tell the story of my community and not my story, okay? Rarely would I ever appear in the images. And I went to extraordinary measures to try to keep my bias or my opinions out of the visuals. Sometimes I was successful, sometimes I wasn't.

[00:14:33.91]

But I realized at a very young age that I had a lot of, uh, negative, uh, reality struggles in my community because that's what I was taught. That's what they told me to think. That's how they told me to behave. And it took an enormous effort not to continue that and not to, uh, perpetrate and believe that we are fundamentally wrong, or fundamentally bad, or fundamentally, uh, not a part of the general world. So it's—I hope I explained that to you.

[00:15:13.85]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Yes, you did. And you mentioned the class that you took with Benedict Fernández. So was that the—was he in the Alexey Brodovitch workshop, or was this in other contexts?

[00:15:27.66]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Oh yeah, he was—he—he introduced me to Alexey, and he introduced me to—and it was, uh, Parsons School of Design there. And I think he was a professor there, and he was—and he was very generous because, you know, even to be in that class, it was

very, very expensive, and I was dirt poor. I couldn't afford anything. And he was very, very kind and made sure that I felt welcome.

[00:15:55.26]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: We're talking about Benedict Fernández?

[00:15:57.44]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yes.

[00:15:58.19]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Yes, okay.

[00:15:58.94]

HIRAM MARISTANY: And when I finally meet Alexey—I was blessed because at one point, he invites us to his home, and I took photos of him in his home—of Alexey Brodovitch, that is—and I still have those.

[00:16:19.48]

And they mean a lot to me because, uh—I, generally speaking, had very few traditions that go beyond my parents. My parents were not connected to Puerto Rico. My mother was here almost 70 years. She never returned. She never wanted to return. So there was a cutoff. I—when I eventually go back to Puerto Rico—I meet cousins, but that's accidental. It's not that we had a family kind of a relationship.

[00:16:58.72]

—But it was a—a real change, I think, in terms of looking at—I felt responsible to start telling a different narrative. I felt responsible to—in my mind—to start telling the truth because a lot of the things that was perpetrated about us was not the truth. And, uh—So in that context, I was looking out.

[00:17:29.27]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Mm-hmm. Okay.—Since—there's another question that I have for you about Roy DeCarava, that you mentioned yesterday—we can get back to that later because you started talking about your approach to photography, so I want us to continue in that line of thought.

[00:17:50.65]

And the first body of work that you created was when you were very, very young—right, you started photographing as a teenager—

[00:17:59.50]

HIRAM MARISTANY: —yes—

[00:18:00.10]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: —including some of the photographs that are in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum come from that period, when you were very young. And you really captured *el barrio* in a—in a respectful way, in a joyous way, in an affirmative way, in a way that emphasizes the culture that existed there—and you present people with a sense of power and agency.

[00:18:31.39]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Thank you for that.

[00:18:31.81]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: That's one of the things that I notice when I see your pictures, right? And you've said this before, even in—in the midst of poverty, right, you captured joy that

existed in our communities and in *el barrio* in particular.

[00:18:51.05]

And you've started talking about some of your goals, already, as a photographer: sending messages out, you know, leveling the playing field, photography as an equalizer, making the story of your community visible, combating the negativity of the representation of Puerto Rican people in the media, um, and wanting to present a different narrative of this community. Were there other goals that you had beyond the ones that you've just shared with us?

[00:19:31.17]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I would say, not really, but with the exception of one thing that I wanted to do.—And I came from a family of very tall people; I am not the tallest person in the world. So some people would call—would say that I had a Napoleonic complex because I was always trying to prove myself. And I wanted to be the best photographer I could be—in part because I thought my community deserved that; it deserved good photography.

[00:20:10.21]

But the other part was that—is that—part of our—my colonization was that somehow our products were less valuable because they were our product. And I have continued, then and now, to fight tooth and nails to change that perception. Our products, if anything, are worth more because they are our products. That it is an asset, when we do not have to have someone interpret the cultural analysis and define it for us.

[00:20:55.09]

One of the things that I am very proud of is that, when we were at the Smithsonian, quite a few people came from New York, people that I knew; and a couple of them said some things to me—said, Hiram, your stuff is 50 years old, and we're still responding to it.

[00:21:16.92]

It's an emotional thing. It's not an aesthetic thing. It's not about the good quality of art or my composition, my exposure—whatever. It's about that people in my community have been looked over for so long that, when they see themselves, and not in a negative way, they almost—instinctively—respond to it and react to it.

[00:21:53.05]

It's possibly—like, some Asian philosophy—the yin and yang. I have to be very careful not to have too much of that because I don't want to taint it, or paint it, or make an adjustment to the reality. We are impoverished, we have a lot of strikes against us, we have a system that does not respond to our needs, we have—and I don't want to romanticize it and make it something that it is not. But—it fills me with joy, when I look at certain images, and when I, in certain cases, foster talk about them.

[00:22:34.77]

And one of the things that I was talking about was—there's an image of children playing in a hydrant. It is an amazing image because it is an image—that doesn't require words in my community. I don't have to tell somebody what that is. They see it and they automatically respond to it. There are different levels of response, and then there are people who are—in many cases in my family—there are people who actually were on line to participate within that reality.

[00:23:14.74]

So it's really important that—what I'm trying to say is that I don't want my work to appear as if—that I am—sugarcoating poverty and making it something—presenting it as a value. I don't think anyone should be poor, okay? But at the same time, we shouldn't be victimized because of our poverty. And that's part of what I was hoping to change. And so I hope I responded to your question here.

[00:23:56.38]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: I think you did. And you were talking about one photograph in particular, *Hydrant in the Air*, from 1963, which was one of the main images that we use to promote the exhibition *Down These Mean Streets* at the Smithsonian. And there are other really powerful pictures that you created during this time. And most of the photographs that the Smithsonian American Art Museum acquired were from before your Young Lords period, you know before—they were before that—because, of course, your photography starts before that phase in your life.

[00:24:37.36]

And one of the—another one of the powerful pictures from that period is *Group of Young Men on 111th Street*. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about that picture and what your thoughts were when you took that.

[00:24:53.77]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Well, you have to understand—even the other image we made reference to—I have a unique sense and that is that I know most of the people in my imagery. I know them [inaudible] as a neighbor, or I know them personally, and there's a trust issue that I've established with them. I used to walk around East Harlem with very expensive equipment and I never got attacked, I never had any problems, and because, in many cases, they interpreted or felt that I was a part of them, as opposed to someone coming in and documenting them.

[00:25:37.02]

And in certain senses, I was also invisible to them. They didn't see me. They did not see that I was documenting them. It was almost as if it was a natural process. But let me talk about the *Group of Young Men*, okay?

[00:25:55.56]

I'm very proud of that image because I think it reflects how we looked and who we were. To speak of East Harlem and not to speak of the African American experience would be a disservice to East Harlem. We grew up in the midst of a community that included African Americans, and we made no distinction between them. We judged them based on the quality of their character.

[00:26:27.03]

And in that image, what I find very, very extraordinary is that each of the subjects, in some form or another, were touching each other, and in that context, there was a sense of unity and a sense of, uh, of love and respect for each other.

[00:26:47.64]

And it's nonverbal communication. I've had, in other situations, other curators ask me, How did you get them to do that? And my response was that I had nothing to do with it. It was a natural process that they went through. And I was very blessed to be there to photograph, to document it.—But—it's the kind of stuff that goes unregistered in these times. A lot of people don't see that kind of—relationships.

[00:27:25.42]

In that image, there are roughly, what, about almost nine people or so, and quite a few of them are African Americans. You cannot make the decision as to who's who, okay? And it's—well—I think I've said enough.—It's a very emotional image to me.

[00:27:53.89]

—And at times when you present imagery, you have to let that go. Sometimes it's very difficult to do that. You have to keep your opinion and your bias to yourself. So it's—well, again—I said too much during this; but continue.

[00:28:17.39]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Another image that really touched me when I saw it—and I think you

remember when I first saw it—it's *The Gathering*, from 1964, which is an image of a group of transgender Puerto Ricans—I think—maybe there are other—I think they're all Puerto Ricans—sitting on a stoop. And I remember seeing that picture and it really blew me away. I said, That's powerful. And I wonder if you could talk about that image.

[00:29:00.13]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I will talk about it. And in the process of talking about it I also have to admit certain realities of my community and some of the stuff that I went through.

[00:29:11.79]

I grew up in a community that was very homophobic—extreme homophobic—and to a certain extent, I was homophobic. That image came about because I knew one of the persons in there, and I knew that person before that person decided to be a transgender. The person had a real affection for me, and that person always asked me, When are you going to take a photograph of me? And to be honest, I was putting it off. And I realized that I have to do this because it's the right thing to do.

[00:30:01.52]

So I was there that day and I said, Listen, I'll take a photograph of you today; is it cool? Can we do it today? And the person said, Sure, we can do it today; is it okay if I have some of my friends in it?

[00:30:19.51]

So most photographers, when they're going to take a photo, they always have to make an adjustment to the camera. So I was making my adjustments, and when I look up, what I see is a scene of all these people. They're all smiling, they're all looking down. And when I took the photo, I knew something happened.

[00:30:41.95]

I put the camera down, and everybody, they all felt something. And said, Listen, I can't hang out; I can't hang around no more. I walked away and several weeks later, I presented each one of them with an enlargement, a very large print.

[00:31:04.32]

One of the people passed, uh—passed—away, and I went to the services, and everybody knew I was the photographer. It was amazing. I brought another print for the parents. And it's a very powerful print because—not because other people like it or see something in it, but I'm very proud of the fact that I treated people the way I wanted to be treated.

[00:31:44.30]

I know it doesn't make sense these days, but—talking 50 years ago—when that was not the norm—and I got a lot of negative response from people who saw that I did that, that I treated them with honor, respect, and I think some of that is reflected in the image.

[00:32:17.02]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: I guess, when I look at your pictures from this early period, where you're documenting *el barrio*, and even during your younger period, they capture a very inclusive view of your community—inclusive is a term that we use today; that's not the term that was used in the '60s or '70s—but you capture pictures of people that, now, we would define as Afro-Puerto Rican or Afro-Latinx, women as leaders—we'll get more to that when we talk about the Young Lord photographs—again, we've already discussed this group of transgender Puerto Ricans—.

[00:33:06.01]

What informed the way that you defined your community this way, in such an inclusive way?

[00:33:16.24]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Hmm. I don't know if I can answer that. That's a—threw a curveball at me here.

[00:33:21.94]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: [Laughs.]

[00:33:27.78]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I think—one of the yardsticks that I had—and not in terms of, you know, aesthetics or anything—but one of the things that my mother always told me, she said, You're going to be judged by people who don't know you, and you always have to have—you always have to be in the best—physically, you know—you have to dress well, you have to look well, you have to present well.

[00:33:56.39]

When you produce work, people are going to be judgmental to it. People are going to resent it because you're documenting something that some people don't want to see. Sometimes they don't want to see their own beauty. They don't want to see the parts of them that—

[00:34:18.33]

Surviving in East Harlem—in general and back in the '60s—was about tooth and nail survival. You had to be tough. You could not be weak or soft. And I guess what I was trying to do was to have those elements in the imagery.

[00:34:45.09]

I caught hell because I was photographing Afro-Boricuas. And many times—my first exhibition, I had a whole series of portraits up, and four of them were Afro-Boricuas, and many people said, Why those images up there? They're not Puerto Rican. And there was an association with color and how Puerto Rican you are—or not, depending on your perspective.

[00:35:27.22]

I knew that was unjust, so I intentionally and sometimes subliminally photographed as many as I could, in part as an act of defiance. I didn't want somebody to say someone was not Puerto Rican because they were Black.

[00:35:50.96]

And that's something that—even to today, to a certain extent—that still happens. And actually, if you look at certain organizations and you look at them and you take a photograph of the entire staff, you may see less than one percent—and I'm talking about Latino organizations and specifically Puerto Rican organizations, where you see as to what percentage would be Afro- whatever.

[00:36:23.95]

And that's an issue that, I think, frankly, we collectively have to address and deal with head-on. We get into this whole semantics of, you know—gender nouns, and the proper pronoun and everything, and we do not address the larger issue of racism.

[00:36:51.08]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So in our discussion yesterday, you mentioned that you identify as a Black person—person of African descent.

[00:36:59.03]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yes.

[00:37:00.14]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So how did that come about? I know that that was a very big part of the philosophy of the Young Lords, um, but, you know, this identification preceded that—at least

that's my understanding, so—.

[00:37:22.10]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Well, let me describe part of my family. My mother was very, very light skinned, very fair. I have cousins that, for all intents and purposes, can be perceived as European. They look—they have green eyes, [inaudible].

[00:37:44.37]

On my father's side, those are direct Africans. On my father's side—someone in my father's side was a slave. No way about it.

[00:37:57.24]

So in my family, my siblings, these are the nicknames that they have: my oldest brother was named Reinaldo Mercedes Jr, his nickname was Negro, which is "Blackie;" my sister's [inaudible], her name was China. She looked Taína. She looked more like Diana [ph]. All the women were very small and short like me. All the men were very tall like my father. My father was six foot.

[00:38:36.33]

Now, if you ever get a chance to be around my crazy family, you will see we are all Africans, that we are of African descent.

[00:38:47.09]

Now, to go to something that you said about the Young Lords, when we came together, we had to deal with that. And for the longest, our community was in denial. Prior to the Young Lords, we did not deal with—we had—we would say—affectionately we would call each other negrito or negrita, but we didn't deal with our internal racism as a people, and that's still true today.

[00:39:23.47]

There are people who are addressing it, and there are people who are, in fact, attempting to resolve that.

[00:39:32.22]

But I am, by most standards, the lightest person in my family, and many people judge my family based on how I appear, and then judge my family based on how my brothers appear. And all my brothers were dark skinned and tall.

[00:39:59.31]

And they used to give me a hard time because they said, Bro, you're not a Maristany, man; you were adopted. Somebody left you at the door, man. You're not one of us. They used to give me a hard time because I was not a typical to one in how they appeared. But we had one sister that was very, very dark—and her name—her nickname was India.

[00:40:27.56]

So it's—it was natural to me. It was not something that I had to force myself to address, okay?

[00:40:43.71]

Enough said.

[00:40:49.86]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Other images that we could talk about—another one that you've said is important to you is Casa Evita, from 1965, that depicts a street scene seen from way high above, and you're looking down and across a set of building storefronts on the street level, some with Spanish language signage. There's a lot of life in the picture. There's—curtains

are billowing with the wind and all of that—. I wonder if you could talk about that picture and what led to that.

[00:41:30.78]

HIRAM MARISTANY: That image is very important to me because it always reminds me, That's how East Harlem used to look. It speaks visually of an era and a time it freezes.

[00:41:48.00]

At the bottom of the picture, there's a whole street scene, and—. That photograph was taken on 116th Street. And 116th Street was important because it was a place that was adjacent to La Marqueta, and la Marqueta was the place where we went for food and clothes and commerce. 116th Street was an extension of that.

[00:42:15.64]

And at the bottom of that picture, you'll see that most of the, let's say, shoes and clothing were outside hanging up on a—immediately accessible, immediately available to people who are walking by.

[00:42:36.99]

Casa Evita is significant because it also shows the physical structures of the buildings. And what's important about that image to me is that it gives you the impression of that some of the visuals are also part of—they're like little cells that you could see into different apartments. And in that image, you have people that are looking out. And there's a particular person looking at me, and I didn't see that when I took the photo. But for me, that image is significant because it becomes: who is the audience.

[00:43:27.71]

And what I liked about the image also—you made mentions to it—that in the image, there is a sense of movement, movement of the people and movement of a curtain up in the building. That is very, very subtle, very, very quiet; but it's also a very, very powerful image. So I'm very, very proud of that image. I'm also proud that, you know, it appears at the Smithsonian.

[00:44:05.82]

It's something that—most of my imagery will continue to have people in it. I'm learning—I'm not a very good landscape photographer—but I'm learning how to do that. And what that image does—people are in that image, but the dominance of that image is buildings. The dominance of it is the commerce that's going on at the lower level. So I'm very proud of that. I mean, I'm very, very pleased with it.

[00:44:49.51]

I had to do it several times—because they—well, I don't want to get technical, but there was a lot of difficulties with the vertical lines; and whenever you deal with buildings, you have things on parallax and stuff like that that you have to adjust it, you have to make those—you have to give the impression—give the illusion that everything is natural, when it is not. So it was a difficult image to create and to do. And finally, after the second try, when I was ready is when I took the image. So it's—I worked on that. I worked on that quite a bit.

[00:45:40.83]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Night View, another photograph that we included in—that is part of the Smithsonian American Art Museum's collection and was featured in *Down These Mean Streets*, and it's another image that I understand is important to you from our conversations. It's a beautiful image. It portrays a—trying to remember what those streets are called. Is it a play street?

[00:46:05.74]

HIRAM MARISTANY: It's a play street.

[00:46:06.81]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: A play street. Yeah, certain streets that are closed—that were closed off in New York to traffic, to allow children to play outdoors. And the image focuses on this play street, but interestingly, it's at night, so there are no children on the playground.

[00:46:26.90]

HIRAM MARISTANY: That image is important to me in as far as that a lot of bizarre things happened that night in East Harlem.

[00:46:40.37]

What was important to me is that I had an overview that normally people would never see. That image required three different exposures—one for the street, one for the building, and one for the sky—and I had to learn how to do that. I took that—I made samples of that image at least seven to eight times before I was able to put all those combinations together.

[00:47:11.77]

And—remove the status for a moment—it was a technological challenge. How do you do that? How do you make it appear as if it's one exposure? So I had to trace—on a 4 by 5 camera—I had to trace every one of the things and give individual exposures and then create one negative from that.

[00:47:42.16]

Other artists, when they see it, they know—they get mesmerized by it because they know there's something going on that does not—normally, when you have an extreme like that, it's either the highlights or the shadows that dominate. This was balanced.

[00:47:59.89]

The other thing is that you see the people moving around in the image. This was a very long exposure. And when the final print was made, I was very, very intrigued because I realized that I was showing something—I was showing a poor community. I was showing that we were impoverished, but that poverty didn't define us. It did not tell—it didn't tell our story just because we were poor.

[00:48:37.61]

And it's—a lot of people really admiring that image, and it makes you feel good because it's very subtle. So it's not as overt as some of the other images that are very direct. This, you have to absorb. You have to look at it for a while to get the full thing.

[00:49:08.56]

And then the skyline is very, very important because in the evenings, there are some beautiful moments in East Harlem that never get registered, never be seen. And I was trying to capture that.

[00:49:29.70]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: During this time that you were starting out as a photographer, you were captured in several recorded programs and a newspaper article in *The New York Times*. Some of these include "Manhattan Battleground," a recorded program about gangs, I think, which I haven't seen, but I've heard about; "Harlem Crusader," a recorded program about Dan Murrow, the Quaker social worker who was based in East Harlem, which I did see; and a *New York Times Magazine* article about life in *el barrio*, in which you were interviewed using an alias, and which published some of your photographs in the article itself.

[00:50:15.27]

How did these come about, and what was their impact on you? Because in a way, you became, I don't want to say a celebrity, but you were in the news.

[00:50:27.43]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Well, I don't know about that because I was not very happy with, first of all, appearing in *The New York Times*. *The New York Times*, like the *Daily News*, like most newspapers of that era, were very anti Puerto Rican. And I think the person who was the writer was—he interviewed me, and if you ever read the article, you would understand that I predict gentrification 50 years before it happens. And I saw it—and I saw that there was a relat—there was a movement being prepared in front of me that was the removal of the Puerto Rican community to be replaced by upper class, and that's the reality of East Harlem right now.

[00:51:23.24]

So what I was very pleased with is that, when they publish the images, most of my community didn't read the article, they looked at the photographs.

[00:51:39.07]

Now, in terms of being a celebrity, I did get a lot of recognition because my community doesn't read *The New York Times*. They do watch television, and the film on the social worker Dan Murrow was aired on NBC, and I did receive a certain status as a result of that.

[00:52:06.92]

But if you saw the thing, you'll see that I was very, very young. I was, like—I was 15 years old. And a lot of people referred—in the film, one of the people referred to me as "Hiram's camera." Everybody knew that because I always had a camera with me.

[00:52:31.39]

And I had to learn how to document. I didn't have any guidelines. Nobody—I didn't have another artist that I could say, Well, how do you do this, how do you do that? I had to fail and then redo it until I did it correctly. So I was learning by trial and error; that's not the best way to learn.

[00:52:54.35]

But—I look back on that, and—I'm pleased that it happened because, if anything, I am in the retrospection of what I think East Harlem was and will continue to be. I am a member of my community that happens to be a photographer, not a photographer who's from *el barrio*. I am from *el barrio*, and I happen to be a photographer. That is very, very important and, uh—

[00:53:38.38]

You know, I can't speak for other artists, but I am very, very interested in seeing other artists, specifically in Puerto Rico, that document the community in Puerto Rico the way I documented East Harlem. I think that that's an important thing because we have to take ownership for our own history. We should not allow other people to come in and do that, and then process it, and then give it back to us. Whether we do a good job or a poor job, the point is that we're doing it.

[00:54:20.19]

And I guess this is a precursor to an agency that I think is significant, which allowed me to continue to do that, and that is the birth of El Museo del Barrio. That my participation with Museo del Barrio was a natural process. It was not accidental.

[00:54:45.97]

I'm very grateful to the leadership of El Museo del Barrio. I'm very grateful to the incredible experience I had because of the documenting of our community. I also documented the history of El Museo del Barrio. So it's—hopefully, I think it was a natural process.

[00:55:08.90]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: [Inaudible.]

[00:55:12.95]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Okay, I can't hear you.

[00:55:15.32]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So we'll get back to El Museo del Barrio, but I wanted to also talk right now about the fact that right around the same time that you were capturing these scenes of *el barrio*, Bruce Davidson created a portfolio depicting 111th Street—

[00:55:41.83]

HIRAM MARISTANY: —no, 100th Street.

[00:55:43.17]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Excuse me; I'm sorry. I meant 100th street. Yeah. And it's a well-known and celebrated project in his career. It was funded by the Ford Foundation. It was also presented at the Museum of Modern Art, in 1970, in an exhibition. And I know that you were aware of this project—from what I understand, as it was—even before he started and during that time—and that you also knew some of the people that he photographed.

[00:56:20.07]

So what do you think—what were your thoughts about the series? Or tell me how you came to know about it and what your thoughts are about it.

[00:56:30.22]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I think it would be fair to begin by qualifying the following. I think Bruce Davidson is an excellent photographer. I have no questions or no issues with his ability as a photographer.

[00:56:45.18]

My involvement with this was through an agency that I think actually welcomes Bruce to East Harlem, and that was the East Harlem Protestant Parish. The person who was the head of that was Reverend Norman Nettie. Reverend Norman Nettie knew me, and he knew that I was documenting the community.

[00:57:07.14]

But you have to understand, back then, the way things were done. I didn't have the pedigree that Bruce Davidson had. Bruce Davidson is also a graduate of Yale University. He had many books. He worked on large format photography, which is a controlled process. It's not shoot-from-the-hip documentary photography, which I was engaged with. I had no time to set things up. I had to react to what was in front of me and capture it as quickly as I passed it because it would be gone. Bruce Davidson tried his best to show what he felt the interpretation of East Harlem was.

[00:58:07.21]

Now, my objections are clearly that I was documenting the entirety of East Harlem and he was documenting one block. He had unbelievable resources available to him. I had none.

[00:58:28.26]

For the historical record, my collection was something that I paid for. No one gave me a grant; no one bought me a roll of film; no one developed a roll of film for me, and no one made prints for me, okay? So my resentment towards him evolved when, you know, he gets a book out of it. The Ford Foundation, this fund, apparently decides who is going to document my community, and I resented the hell out of that, and still do.

[00:59:04.55]

One of my fellow photographers who wrote an interesting piece—he was named Phil Dante—he wrote a piece in *The New York Times* condemning that. And part of the time—what he was condemning was that—and it still happens today—that some people at the Ford Foundation believe that they can define our history, believe that they can make choices that

represent and speak for us.

[00:59:43.98]

Now, it's not about a comparison between me and Bruce Davidson because Bruce Davidson did an incredible job. He did a series that I think was entitled "Coney Island," which was in the early '50s—that is powerful stuff. Really well done. However, his misinterpretation of East Harlem is insulting and disrespectful.

[01:00:17.17]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: What are some images that you felt were misrepresentations?

[01:00:23.99]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Well, the one that created a lot of controversy was the nude photograph of the Black woman on the bed.

[01:00:31.10]

Now, aesthetically, it's a powerful, beautiful image; but it's not representative of East Harlem, and that's what—I can't do that. I can't take what I perceive is something to be and imposing on this entire community, as if it is my understanding of what my community is. And there is a fundamental sense that privileged people feel they have the right and they do not have to answer to poor people.

[01:01:16.06]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: What was misrepresentative about that picture?

[01:01:20.25]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Well—[laughs]

I have to be very careful wording it because I'm going to get angry and too emotional. I don't want that.

[01:01:30.04]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: I just want to be precise.

[01:01:31.81]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yeah, but I also have to be very, very careful because—what's the word that I'm looking for?

[01:01:40.78]

Well, let me go to some other images within his thing. He has a beautiful portrait of two African American people, which is beautiful images. But he has this tendency of focusing on that, as opposed to focusing on Puerto Ricans. Puerto Ricans almost are minor or secondary. It is his interpretation of what East Harlem is.

[01:02:10.96]

Now, when I can go to Ireland and I can start taking pictures and defining what Irish culture is and it'd be accepted, then he can do that in my community.

[01:02:28.55]

And this is part of a much larger process that is being played out today with artistic cultural museums and institutions. They take other people's culture and feel they have the right to define it, to manipulate it, to massage it, to do whatever they feel they should. Listen, I'm getting angry, so I need to calm down a bit, okay?

[01:02:54.96]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Okay.

[01:02:56.25]

HIRAM MARISTANY: But the important point here is I live in this community. I do not have that prerogative to define this entire community. Who the hell let me? Because the Ford Foundation gave him money? The Ford Foundation licensed him?

[01:03:21.05]

And that's part of the problem. Part of the problem that affects—that affects institutions of privilege and arrogance.

[01:03:36.67]

It also has to do with my profound problem with the Smithsonian, so I'm not going to excuse them either. You have 100 year history of negating Indigenous people. They have hundreds years of negating women, 100 years of negating—it's riddled with all that.

[01:04:03.27]

So my point—[loud noises]. Is that not coming from here? From me?

[01:04:07.31]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Yes, it is. It's not coming from here.

[01:04:10.85]

HIRAM MARISTANY: It's—just—I don't know. The timing of this is—if you want to put this on pause and I'll take it over across the street.

[01:04:20.16]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Okay, We can put it on pause.

[01:04:22.59]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Okay, Yeah.

[01:04:26.34]

Okay. Well, let me turn to respond to something more before we take a break. I guess one of my objections are—is that there's a lot of politics relating to poor communities, and in many cases, of poor communities that have no options. They don't make decisions. Other people with money and influence make those decisions.

[01:04:53.60]

I am very resentful for when people come into a community and feel they can bring their values over the community's values. And if they don't know the community's values, they should not be interpreting it. And there's a sense that—there's an adage that "we know what's best for you" kind of scenario.

[01:05:21.09]

The other thing that I think that I was also very resentful, in terms of that whole production, is he—Bruce Davidson, you know—received an enormous amount of money for doing that from the Ford Foundation. He also got a show at the MoMA. They realize—it's almost 50 years later—I am now being recognized by the MoMA. There's no justice in that.

[01:05:53.81]

Not that I'm saying my work is as good as his or anything—I'm not making those comparisons. But clearly, the powers to be that made those decisions are based on racism. And there is no other way you can define it. We have to deal with that, that there are institutions, even today, that are functioning in those old paradigms. And if anything, we should be changing those paradigms.

[01:06:26.14]

So, again, I don't want to get upset, but it's important that when the day comes when Latinos can document anywhere in the world and be accepted like Europeans are accepted, then we will have a level playing field. Right now, it's not level. And we have people who know the least about us defining us.

[01:07:00.01]

So, enough said.

[01:07:03.52]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Okay. Let's now turn to another major period in your life and in your life as a photographer, and it's an aspect of your life that probably most people know you or associate you with, which is the fact that you are founding member of the New York Young Lords, which was a radical Puerto Rican youth group, activist group, whose founding was in part inspired by the Black Panthers. How would you narrate the story of the origin of the Young Lords and your involvement with them?

[01:07:44.59]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Okay. Well, let me—I'm very, very shy to use terms like "founding member." I was one of its earliest members. I was a part of the group that—when we were organizing, we—were seeking permission from the Chicago branch of Young Lords, which were the original founders.

[01:08:14.21]

My role within that was that I drove the car down, and I drove other members of the—then—membership. They were not—nobody had any official title or anything. But many of them later became ministers of the organization.

[01:08:34.60]

My engagement, in terms, you know, of the Young Lords, is that I had a photography workshop on 117th Street, and that workshop was significant because many of the members used to come there and have whole discussions and debates in terms of what we need to do to liberate ourselves, to gain our independence from the United States. And my role in that was that, uh, I facilitated that—that workshop—as a place where we could gather and we could have those types of discussions. So I was there, prior to the Young Lords, holding those kinds of discussions and meetings. Two of the ministers later were a part of our—my workshop. Okay?

[01:09:40.19]

Uh—I believe very strongly in that I was influenced by the antiwar movement, the anti-Vietnam movement. I was—I came of age and I was going to be drafted and sent to Vietnam. Many of my contemporaries did go to Vietnam, and many of them did not return. And some that did return returned very, very damaged—use of drugs or shell shock—a whole list of things that even the ones that did return had terrible lives as a direct result of the Vietnam War experience. Okay?

[01:10:27.31]

And I was pretty convinced that if I would have gone, I would not have survived, okay? Because the Vietnam War thing is that—what they did to a lot of Puerto Ricans is they made us—what was called "point." These are the guys who used to go down into the tunnels and the holes to find the enemy and to chase the enemy. So—I clearly didn't want to do that.

[01:10:57.22]

There's also an era, a time when it was a lot of isms. There was a lot of—there was an antiwar movement, there was the civil rights movement, there was the feminist movement. There was, uh, anti—uh, in many ways, it began there with the anti-apartheid movement, the connections with, uh, international, uh, imperialism in terms of, you know, Africa.

[01:11:33.61]

And we were making connections on—in terms of that there were similar relationships that, uh, were being conducted in Vietnam, but all over the world, you know? And in particular, Latin America. You know, we saw, uh, the relationship that America had with Mexico and many countries in Latin America—they were not healthy relationships. And in many cases, America supported outright dictators—corrupt people, okay?—and then they would insist that we, uh, honor the American tradition by fighting and dying for, you know, liberty and all the rhetoric of America.

[01:12:27.79]

My experience was that—well, I guess one of my greatest talents is that I was smart enough to know that history was unfolding in front of me and I had to document it. And by history, I mean that, you know, we were very, very young, but we were not a typical mode of quote unquote, "activists." A lot of activism in our community were controlled by quite a few organizations and quite a few things.

[01:13:11.29]

For example, it was an era of the real Great Society, and there were a lot of people who were profiting by the poverty of communities. They were writing grants, they were trying to find methods to, you know, reduce the crime rate, reduce the dropout rate, reduce the teenage pregnancy rate—all that—but they were not necessarily trying to prevent it; they were trying to get more money to address those kinds of issues.

[01:13:44.13]

We, Young Lords, didn't believe in that. We believed that the issue—and continues to be the issue—is the manner and the conduct that this country has behaved, and this country has, in fact, attempted to, uh, confine us and to keep us down.

[01:14:06.17]

There's no accident that, when we looked at all the primary things that we needed as a community—specifically health, education, housing—we took those on as issues, and we said that this is no accident that we have one of the poorest health delivery systems in all of the nation—and that's poor people. And that's almost every state in the nation. It's not just New York. So we made those parallels and we defined it.

[01:14:40.23]

We also understood that, you know, housing, you know, should be something that we should have, and not necessarily have it be something that—East Harlem was a wasteland. Nobody wanted it, nobody took care of it, nobody supported it.

[01:14:59.51]

When it became profitable is when it—all of the empty spaces that were in East Harlem—when we were kids, we used to be able to go from one backyard, all the way from 111th street to 116th street, without ever hitting the streets, okay, because it was so many vacant lots. So when someone said, Well, it's time to develop East Harlem, massive kinds of construction started. Most of the new construction was not for poor people.

[01:15:37.10]

And what some people defined as affordable, you have to ask, affordable to whom? Even today, there's this project coming up that is supposed to be a 20/80 relationship. 20% is supposed to be mainly affordable to—but affordable is that a family has to earn something like 70, 80,000 dollars a year in order to be quote, "affordable." Most incomes in East Harlem—no one even touched that, no one even approached that. So then it becomes this—it's almost rhetoric, to use those words. "Affordable" is very deceiving. To use words like "diversity" is also very deceiving.

[01:16:29.32]

When we approach the issue of education, you know, there's no reason why—If you look at all the districts in Manhattan, there are certain districts that have extraordinary records in terms of how it educates its young people. And right next door, a poor community has the

worst record. That's not accidental. That's not something that happened. It is planned obsolescence. It's the way things were done and the way things were, you know—.

[01:17:07.61]

And as members of the Young Lords, we understood that, and we understood that the system needs to be changed, not the people. There's nothing wrong with the people. What we were taught as a part of our colonization: there's something wrong with us—and we don't—we don't merit, uh, fair housing; we don't merit good education; we don't merit—health care—healthy, good health care—affordable, good health care, okay.

[01:17:46.65]

Then we took on some topics that are very controversial within our community, and that is the so-called legal justice system. There's no accident that most of those prisons are filled with people of color—okay?—and poor people. That's not an accident. It's not the problem of, you know, we have more criminals. It's a system that is designed to have lack of poor education, and it becomes a pipeline to the prison system. You know, there's a direct correlation and direct connection. We were pointing those out.

[01:18:29.79]

And—the problem is that—many of the agencies of that era were not interested in changing those problems. They were interested in doing band-aid solutions, so that they can have jobs and feel that they were doing something within the community. And we believed, and still believe, that you need to change the system. It's the system that is being very, very destructive to our communities.

[01:19:08.58]

So fundamentally, I was a member of the Young Lords, uh, but I think one of my principal role was to record and document those events.

[01:19:22.04]

Now, for the historical records, you need to know that I was not supported by the Young Lords, and in many cases, they gave me a hard time. In many cases, they didn't understand what I was doing. Many members made it very difficult for me. And in some cases, they said, Why are you doing this?, and condemned me.

[01:19:48.01]

However, 30, 40 years later, they were pleased that I did it. They were pleased that there is a visual record—of who was there and what occurred.

[01:20:02.45]

But again, it's something that I financed.—It's something that, you know—I took some of the economics, you know, away from my family to pay for this, because photography is not inexpensive. It's very expensive.

[01:20:23.60]

So—I'm very pleased with the imagery of the Young Lords, but as you said earlier, I am best known by some people, and some people will make the assumption that I became a photographer as a result of the Young Lords. I was a photographer way before the Young Lords, and I am a photographer way after the Young Lords, and I still continue to document my community. So I hope that I responded to your question.

[01:20:58.79]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: [Inaudible.]

[01:21:07.06]

HIRAM MARISTANY: One second. I can't hear you.

[01:21:10.74]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Thank you, Hiram, for answering that question. So when people refer to you as the official photographer of the Young Lords, is that a misnomer? Was that your title? Were you a minister?

[01:21:24.53]

HIRAM MARISTANY: No, no. I have the distinction of being probably one of many—one of a few—people who refused to become a minister.—And say this not to denigrate anybody. But I understood how important it was to document.

[01:21:47.74]

And in many cases they made me do other things. I had the title of being the organizer/director of the Breakfast Program, so there were several different breakfasts that I organized and managed.

[01:22:15.51]

I was very, very instrumental in trying to do—with each of the offensives—I was there and I was there early. The takeover at Lincoln Hospital, I documented as well. Matter of fact, there's a film that has just been released that is entitled *The Takeover of Lincoln Hospital*, and quite a bit of the film useed a lot of my imagery in it. Uh, its—um—.

[01:22:54.65]

Part of the Garbage Offensive, which was the earliest activity of Young Lords, I documented it as well. So there's a lot of, uh, things that I was involved with. But through documentation, it illustrates who was there, the time, and the period, okay? So I'm very proud of that, and I'm still trying to organize that as well.

[01:23:28.95]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So you were not known as the official photographer of the Young Lords? That's a name that has been—or a term that has been used since then—

[01:23:37.70]

HIRAM MARISTANY:—I was under the division of various different ministries, okay? One was the Education Ministry, which Juan was—or was it Yoruba? I think it was Yoruba. And I was a part of that.

[01:23:56.03]

But my other role in terms of documenting—you've got to understand that I can't get into the details here—but I was a part of the group of people that were identifying infiltrators, so I documented everyone that came in. And we used—some of those images—we had a lot of help. Won't name who was helping us, but we had a lot of help, and we were tracking people who are part of a COINTEL. Are you familiar with that?

[01:24:30.98]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Yes, I am.

[01:24:34.52]

HIRAM MARISTANY: So in many ways, I was invisible to a lot of cadres because we were spending a lot of time tracking what we felt were—. We identified quite a few, and I know we—there are some that we did not see, or we did not, you know, uh—identify. But that was my other role, was to make sure that we could do the best job we could by having images of people.

[01:25:09.98]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So your photographs were used to document who was attending meetings and rallies and events?

[01:25:17.47]

HIRAM MARISTANY: No, no. No, no. That I did do, but to become a young Lord, you had to have a session with me first. So I took photographs of you, and then I made those available to the guys who were going to go and check what your background was, who was—you had to say what community you came from, and we went through the community every day.

[01:25:43.03]

An interesting note—when I was—the early membership—the office was like 50 feet, maybe 100 feet, away from where I was born and raised. So Young Lords, who were not from East Harlem, go to East Harlem and they started asking about me, and my friend just said, Yo, you're asking about Hiram? What the hell's the matter with you, man? And they gave them a hard time, and in a couple of cases, they ran them out.

[01:26:15.67]

And what they learned is that *el barrio* is a very close knit community, and if you didn't know somebody, you could not, you know, just go in and get those questions answered like that.

[01:26:30.09]

But, to answer your question, no, I was not known as the official photographer. When, years later, when we have the first exhibit, which is now approaching 40 years ago, that term became relevant.

[01:26:49.88]

They also brought in another photographer because there was a lot of issues that we had with some of the leadership. Specifically, the other photographer was named Michael Abramson—very good photographer.

[01:27:07.85]

I was supposed to do a book that was entitled *Pa'lante*. I refused to do it under the guise of—it was my position, that I wanted to tell our story, not tell their story. And a lot of the thing was, you know, a lot of egos are engaged, and I refused to do it. And they demanded that I did something, and I said, No, I would not do that. So their response to me was to bring in another photographer. And, well, he did the best he could but he wasn't from the community. There was a lot of things that were not available to him.

[01:27:52.45]

So it's—even as a photographer, even as a long-term resident of East Harlem, there was a lot of controversy, and I felt very, very comfortable that I could walk into my community and be very, very safe. A lot of people knew me as a child, so I was not a foreigner.

[01:28:22.58]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So *Pa'lante* was a production of the Young Lords, and they sought out Michael Abramson to document—create images for the book? Is that what you're saying?

[01:28:37.43]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I think yes, and also—well, I think they felt they had no choice because I was not cooperating with them. I did not believe in what they wanted to do with it. And the issue was that there was an interpretation that they felt that I focus primarily on Felipe Luciano and not on them. And that's when the implosion happened, when large sections of the Young Lords left and then it became something else.

[01:29:20.62]

The *Pa'lante* book was something that, if you look at it, you'll see there are a lot of personal essays that were written by people like Juan González, who was—who's a professor now. He's a prolific writer and he does a lot of stuff. *Pa'lante* should have been about what we were doing to help the community, but I think that's what we needed to focus on.

[01:29:55.23]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So you had a different vision for what the book should do?

[01:29:58.32]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Oh, yes.

[01:30:02.42]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Okay. I think we've kind of touched on this issue, but I just want to make sure we get it on the record.

[01:30:14.67]

You've noted to me before that the Young Lords joined you—and this is a quote that I have from an earlier conversation that we had—"the Young Lords joined me"—I love that quote—and the way I interpret that is that you are part of the neighborhood, you are from *el barrio*—as you already noted, many of the Young Lords were from outside of *el barrio*—and also that you were an activist in *el barrio* before the Young Lords came and did their activism in the neighborhood. So I just wanted to specify, is that what you meant by that phrase?

[01:30:56.54]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yes.

[01:30:57.49]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Or was there something else?

[01:30:59.39]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Well, let me expand on that a little, if I may. I was a political animal before then. I was also very aware that I was not an academic. Many of the leadership of the Young Lords came out of college campuses, and their notion of doing things came from that point of view.

[01:31:34.82]

I also felt, and I continue to feel, that there were several different types of Young Lords. The Lords that got the most respect were the ones that came from the community. The Lords that got respect, even though they came from college campuses, they also received respect. But then there was a time when there was no longer any talk. The rhetoric was over. You had to go out and produce.

[01:32:09.81]

There are times that people responded to us because they knew me as a child. A lot of people didn't agree with what the Young Lords were doing, but they were sympathetic because we were going there not asking for something. We were not asking for a vote. We were not asking for money. We were not asking for influence. That was a real change. That was radical for that time.

[01:32:45.22]

One of the problems that we had was that we were using the same words, but they had different meanings. There were certain members of the Young Lords that was from—well, we took in almost anybody. If you were on drugs, we took you in—we had a detox center., okay? We took in people who we had to watch because they would steal things. They were not—we did not qualify you in order for you to be a Young Lord. We tried to make you a better person, and we tried to make sure that there were certain disciplines that you could not violate, but we did not have a standard prototype of which allowed you to be a Young Lord.

[01:33:30.96]

So that, in many ways, people were really fascinated and very interested in the long run, because all you had to be is a person from the community—and I mean from the community.

So we also had African Americans who were a part of the Young Lords who could not speak Spanish at all. So that it was not something that—well, let me give you the comparison.

[01:33:58.45]

A lot of people felt that we were going to do what ASPIRA used to do, and that was to mold you into a good citizen. We didn't want good citizenship. We wanted people who were going to understand that there's something wrong in this system and we have to figure out what we can do about it and to make effective change. And I underline the word effective—not just change for the sake of change. And that's part of, I think, the legacy.

[01:34:33.45]

The two agencies in East Harlem now that are still revered, almost 50 years after the fact, one of them is the Young Lords and the other one is the one we're going to eventually speak about, and that is El Museo del Barrio. They still create tremendous passion, and people get crazy about it when they talk about it. And I am the only person that was in both those worlds simultaneously.

[01:35:05.55]

So *Pa'lante*, the book, has a lot of very important images and a lot of important information. It's not my book. And there are a lot of Lords that are very resentful to me because of that—but that's the way it is.

[01:35:25.78]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So let's talk about how you approached documenting the Young Lords. You were always with a camera and were able to capture their activism right in the midst of it taking place. You captured many of their key offenses, as you've noted already. You documented their style, the way that they presented themselves—their self fashioning—their impact, and their integration in the community as well. Could you talk about how you approached documenting the Young Lords?

[01:36:12.15]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Okay. One, I had an enormous advantage because I knew most of them. Two, my other advantage is that I was smart enough to work towards becoming invisible. And by that, I mean you are able to do things in a way that does the following—[sound of phone alarm]

is that me? Is that here?

[01:36:47.48]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Yeah. It's not—it's not on my side, I don't think. I don't know where that's coming from. It's recording.

[01:36:57.15]

HIRAM MARISTANY: You're kidding. All right. Well, my understanding of what a good documentarian does is—unlike Bruce Davidson, I'm up close and personal. I was in the midst of stuff.

[01:37:17.65]

For example, the first takeover of People's Church—I have images of when the police come in. So a lot of us get beat up.

[01:37:29.02]

It was not a telephoto lens at a long distance documentation. This was documentation that people after a while didn't see me with my camera. And in some cases, they would come to me later the next day and say, Hiram, man, where were you, man? We were—I'd say, Brother, I was there, I took a photograph of you.

[01:37:51.52]

So that ability to be almost invisible in the midst of all this chaos—because most of the time, it was chaos. And I mean chaos not so much from our point of view, but when we didn't know what was going to be the reaction to what we did.

[01:38:11.66]

To cite the example, the Garbage Offensive. We naively cleaned the streets, we bagged them, we put in there—we were trying to be quote unquote, "good citizens," and we asked the sanitation to pick up the garbage that—we put neat piles so that it would be easy for them; they could just toss them in. They send us to hell. We went back and we said, Listen, we cleaned the streets. All we want you to do is take the garbage and that's that. They send us out. They called the police on us. So the solution was: we threw it in the street.

[01:38:52.06]

Now, I have images of Young Lords and of people actually throwing the garbage in the street. Those will never be published in a museum, and I keep them separate because my job was not to document those kinds of things. It was documenting what the reaction would be when the garbage was in the street. So I had to make—I had to learn how to filter and edit on the fly.

[01:39:25.34]

Part of the documentation that I had, that I thought was very, very, very important, is, I had to discipline a lot of Young Lords because when you point a camera at them, they start to—they start to pose, and they start to profile. And people who knew me knew that I would just put the camera down and I wouldn't take a picture at all. And they figured it out, that, you know, Don't pay attention to him, just do what you got to do, and then I would continue to document. So my style was, I'm interested in the story, not interested in promoting you.

[01:40:14.57]

And in some cases, that created some conflict. But the overall effect of that was that, if you look at a lot of my imagery, there are not people staring into the camera and performing for the camera.

[01:40:31.76]

Now, the group that I had a lot of problems with was the Black Panthers, so I gave them a lot of my work. I gave them the negative and the contact sheets—which was a huge mistake, but that's how sometimes we learn.

[01:40:51.86]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So what were the problems that you had with them, that you had to do that?

[01:40:56.39]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Well, a lot of them would—you know, you would point a camera at them and they would pose, and, you know, pound their chest, fists in the air, "power to the people," you know. I'm not—hopefully I'm not degrading them or disrespecting them, okay, but with the Young Lords, I told them, Don't do that; we have more than enough things we should be focusing on and working towards.

[01:41:27.18]

It's just—it's the nature of that era and that time, that people wanted recognition. If you look at many of—other than when it's a portrait, rarely do you see people staring into the camera lens.

[01:42:04.56]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: —One of the striking things about your Young Lords pictures, that to some extent—not entirely—but to some extent differ from your works documenting, or capturing—and I use the word documenting, not to say that it's just a documentation; I know that your photographs are artistic—so let's say representing the streets of *el barrio*—that

there's a lot of cropping that takes place with some of your—with some of your Young Lords photographs, like the image of the chest of the young Lord member with the political buttons. And there's some more dramatic angles—again, because you're in the middle of things.

[01:42:52.72]

So did you approach documenting *el barrio* and the Young Lords differently, or did you see them as all the same?

[01:43:02.97]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Most definitely, I saw them differently. Documenting *el barrio*, I was not under threat of life and limb, even though I had to be very careful where I was in my permits. And I also have to be very selective of where I pointed my camera.

[01:43:22.97]

There were certain people in East Harlem that you don't point a camera at, so I had to know that. And I had to know not to do that, because I did not want it to be that I was becoming somehow a policeman, because there was a lot of illegal activity going on, so I had to be selective in that context.

[01:43:48.10]

In terms of the Young Lords, I had to be very, very, very—I think your analysis is correct. There is a lot of editing that I was doing when I was doing the Young Lords, because, as I said, there was a lot of chaos.

[01:44:09.33]

At any given moment, the scenario could change with the Young Lords, and I had to be very, very quick on my feet, and I had to have—well, I'll give you an example.

[01:44:29.75]

For the Young Lords, I operated with two cameras. I always had to have a backup camera. One, if the camera was taken from me—and I was thinking now, because I was a person that was of interest to New York City Police Department; they knew that I had a lot of documentation of it—but the backup camera was there so that if it was taken, I can continue to document. It was a matter of preparation that I needed to have all the time when I was dealing with the Young Lords—not so as much as with the *el barrio* community.

[01:45:15.06]

The other form of documentation with the Young Lords is that, you're right that I did crop things. With the photo you're talking about, it's entitled "Buttons"—the two different buttons, the Black Panther button and the Young Lord button—that was a selection that was almost an afterthought. I saw it, and I walked up to it, and I took the photo of it, and I composed it. But many of the images of the Young Lords, because I was so close to it, I can detail it from almost so then with East Harlem.

[01:45:59.74]

So it's that kind of, um—what's the word I'm looking for? There's a certain rhythm one has, in photographing. I shoot what is called in triptychs. I shoot a minimum of three images, maximum of five, of any given scene. But as I'm doing that, I'm adjusting the exposure. So I'm working—I'm making many, many decisions in nanoseconds so that I'm closer with the Young Lords than I was with East Harlem.

[01:46:48.02]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Another noticeable aspect of your photographs of the Young Lords—and I mentioned this earlier—is your depiction of women members of the Young Lord party as participants, as leaders. And a very powerful photograph from the series is your, what I call a portrait of Denise Oliver. And she's speaking, and in the way distance, you see representations of Pedro Albizu Campos, Mao Tse Tung [*sic* - Zedong], and I think it might be

Che Guevara. There are three pictures; I can't remember the three. And that's a very powerful image. I was wondering if you could talk about how conscious you were of portraying the active role of women in the Young Lords organization.

[01:47:45.12]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Very conscious of that. Extremely conscious of it. I had a certain bias that I had to work past, in that the bias that I had as a man is that I was attracted to beautiful women, and at times, the beauty outweighed the importance of that person and what they were doing. So I've photographed as many women as possible, regardless of how they appeared. It's very difficult to do.

[01:48:27.96]

I also photographed some of the power breakers—the power brokers—that were a part of the Young Lord party. Specifically, I have a stunning picture of Edith Morales. I have a stunning picture of Iris Benítez. I have stunning images of, uh—well, women that you probably wouldn't know, but—. And the idea is that a portrait of them, okay, sometime would be the only thing that I could do because they would not engage up center, so I took a lot of portraits of them in meetings. So there's a whole series of them being very, very relaxed, very, very—

[01:49:24.05]

I'm most proud of that because it shows—it shows us when we're tired, when some of us, you know, we leave the office and we go home to another world, another life, another thing. I was always, when I finished—on the average, I left the office about 10:00 at night; I wasn't with my family the whole day, okay—and when I got home, I was exhausted, but I knew there was still things that I had to do, you know, for my kids and my family.

[01:49:58.06]

And it was a very tough experience. You know, my ex-wife, she always had an issue with me because I was feeding other people's children and I didn't feed my own. My children were very blessed and fortunate that they had food and they had another parent that could do it. Some of the children that I was feeding didn't have that.

[01:50:26.56]

So there was a lot of sacrifices that I had to make on behalf of, you know, my family. Some of them were good and some were not that good. But it's really, really important that—

[01:50:42.53]

Let me just say something for the historical record. The Health Ministry was guided and led by women. Okay? That credit is not given to the women of the Young Lords party.

[01:51:04.56]

There was an African American woman who was a part of, uh, Lincoln Hospital, Cleo. She was phenomenal. She did incredible work. There were people who organized, you know, getting people into nursing school. People who organized at 1199 when it was still a relatively young union.

[01:51:38.69]

So there was a lot of union activity, a lot of stuff like that, and that was done primarily by women. And it's not focused upon; it's not given the attention that I think is due; and that's in part because some of the male leadership wasn't sophisticated enough to do it. So in my way, I tried to document that.

[01:52:10.99]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So we've spoken about how you see photography—in a way, you know, as a form of documentation, it does do that—but that you see it as an artistic vehicle as well.

[01:52:25.35]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yeah.

[01:52:25.95]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: And did you see your photography as a form of activism? Or do you see your photography as a form of activism?

[01:52:35.37]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I do. Yeah. One of the things I say, and sometimes way often, but to be a good documentarian you have to have several elements. One, you have to be prepared and be at the moment; you've got to be there. Two, you have to have all your technical skills honed to a T, that you don't have to think about it. And then three, if you're lucky, your produce art, because sometimes when you're documenting, you don't know whether you're producing art or not.

[01:53:16.68]

Because, in my case, I'm so engaged in the process of documenting it that I am not necessarily engaged in the process of looking at it through an art filter. So I don't consciously see it as art. But when I'm doing it, I know it is art.

[01:53:45.86]

There's a particular image that is a Young Lord image, but many people don't see it as a Young Lord image, and that is the clothing drive. And that's an image of incredible light coming in and out. The moment I took it, I knew that it was going to be an outstanding image. But that's rare—rarity—that's not commonplace.

[01:54:17.46]

If it's not art, I'm not ashamed of it. But when it is art, I'm very, very pleased. And sometimes, I'm so close to things I can't make that judgment. I can't see it. So it's—I'm just very pleased that I was there, and I'm very pleased that I did document as much as I did.

[01:54:50.89]

And it's a process that continues. Hopefully the archives or something will eventually be made available for the next generation to expand upon, to create as much or better or to develop similar realities down the road—but that the precedent has been established, that, through my work, they can, uh, not make the same mistakes I made.

[01:55:29.56]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Did you play a role in the *Pa'lante* newspaper? I know that photography was displayed there in many different ways.

[01:55:39.23]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Well, the role that I played is that I was very close with Richard Pérez, who was the editor, and I made available a lot of my work to him, and it was not about photo credit. A lot of stuff that appeared in the *Pa'lante* newspaper was my work, but it's not identified as my work. The criteria was not to do—to get photo credit.

[01:56:13.56]

There's a couple of times he, you know, he took a lot of license—liberties—and used photographs, and, I thought, not in the best way, and we had many arguments about that.

[01:56:30.47]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So do you think you could recognize your pictures now if you were to look at the *Pa'lante* newspaper and say, Yeah, this one's mine, that one's mine.

[01:56:40.52]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yeah. Yes, I do.

[01:56:41.81]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: And did they publish photographs by other photographers as well?

[01:56:46.76]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Well, yes, but—I think for the most part, what they did is, they were happy to have images that were related to the articles, and wherever they got them, they were very, very pleased with that.

[01:57:01.04]

Because the first couple of issues of *Pa'lante* was boring. It looked like—you know, it was all text. And when we went out to community, a lot of community people said, I'm not going to read this. So I think initially, some people felt, Well, let's put a photograph in there so that it'll break it up. They did not understand the power of photography. That's the reality.

[01:57:40.26]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Did you publish your Young Lord photographs anywhere else?

[01:57:44.79]

HIRAM MARISTANY: We did show in an exhibit that we had at the Caribbean Cultural Center, and it was in a magazine called *Caribe*. And that catalog we used to give away to people who came to the show. And it was a significant publication because it's the first time images of a Young Lord are being published together as a unit.

[01:58:19.65]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So that show was called "Caribe"? What was it called? That was the magazine. What was the show called?

[01:58:24.91]

[Sound of car siren.]

[01:58:28.25]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Hold on. I got it. Hold on a second. Pause it a moment.

[01:58:35.87]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: We're recording.

[01:58:37.19]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Okay. The name of the exhibition was *The Young Lords, 1969-1975*. Subtext: Exhibition by Hiram Maristany, okay, 1983. So it's approaching four years.

[01:59:02.29]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: But during the time that the Young Lords were active, did you publish your photographs in any other place beyond the *Pa'lante* paper?

[01:59:16.19]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Individual photographs, but not a bunch of photographs of the Young Lords. I have not done a book. Some people, you know, are insisting that I do a book. I made our images available to Mickey Meléndez when he did his book.

[01:59:46.52]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: What book was that?

[01:59:49.04]

HIRAM MARISTANY: *We Took the Streets*, Mickey Meléndez.

[01:59:59.95]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: And did other people beyond Mickey or publishers approach you about your work and wanting to publish it?

[02:00:09.78]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yes—oh, I stand corrected. There's a book that was done by—I think his name was Michael [inaudible] [*sic* - Darrel Enck Wanzer]—I can't pronounce his last name. He's out of the Midwest, and it's—Young Lords—is the title. And he had, I think, 20 images of mine in his book.

[02:00:45.51]

Now, the most current book doesn't have my images, but it's Johanna Fernández.

[02:00:59.46]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: And why doesn't she include pictures of—your pictures—in her book?

[02:01:02.95]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Well, it's a difficult subject, but I'll try and keep it brief.

[02:01:12.99]

She tried to do an exhibit in the Bronx, okay? She's an academic, and she has this notion that, you know, she does what you do—she curates—because what you do is not that difficult. Do you hear, Carmen?

[02:01:30.30]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: [Laughs.]

[02:01:34.53]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I told her she's not a curator. I told her that you should not be doing this. Okay? She defied me and she did it anyway.

[02:01:45.67]

So she goes to the Bronx museum and she asks Holly, the museum director, to do a show. The funders wanted to know if I was engaged in the show. She tells them yes. They didn't believe her. She makes me go and bring 20 silver gelatin prints with me. I go to the Bronx museum and I show. And basically, they wanted to see if she really knew me and that if she had access to me—because frankly, I didn't have access to her; I didn't even make access to her.

[02:02:28.09]

Long story short, she's trying to raise funding and no one's responding to her. She asked me to give her 20 images on a CD. I reluctantly give it to her. I tell her, Do not give this to anyone other than the funders that you're going to try and raise money.

[02:02:48.68]

She agrees, then she goes and does something else. She gives it to someone else. They put my work on the internet. She thought that it would be fine because she knows I'm not checking it, that I don't deal with it. But she didn't understand that my children are all over that.

[02:03:09.21]

So anyway, when the third party posted all the images, my daughter and my son independently said, you know, Dad, your stuff's on the show. So I confront her and said, What—she said, So what's the big deal? I decided to give it to them.

[02:03:29.71]

I was very, very upset. I don't want anything to do with her. She violated the trust. She doesn't know what that means.

[02:03:50.79]

—So the point is that—I don't deal with her personally anymore. It's okay that she can do whatever she wants, but it's not something that I want to do anymore with her.

[02:04:08.28]

So that element of her book—she's very, very regretful that she didn't have my image in the book.

[02:04:31.11]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: I want to start shifting our conversation to the—Puerto Rico—what you call the Puerto Rican cultural movement that was developing at this time, of which you are a part of. And I want to start by still connecting it a little bit to the Young Lords, in that I remember talking to Marcos Dimas, one of the founders of Taller Boricua, and he told me that the Young Lords' storefront was located right across the street from Taller Boricua's first location, I believe.

[02:05:08.43]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Right.

[02:05:09.03]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: And I wonder if you could talk about your awareness of Taller Boricua at this time, and what was their interaction with the Young Lords. So kind of like two questions —one about their interaction with the Young Lords, but then also their interaction with you.

[02:05:27.60]

And I know, for instance, that there's an image—there's a print of *[En el Espíritu de] Betances* that Marcos created that was reproduced in one of the *Pa'lante* papers, and he—and according to him, anyway, it was appropriated. [Laughs.] No one asked him whether or not it could be used. It was used. It was used.

[02:05:52.68]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I can't respond to that because—

[02:05:54.39]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: —I know. I know. But I mean, he didn't seem angry about it. He was just —he just noted that—hello?

[02:06:02.24]

HIRAM MARISTANY: You're talking about appropriating. You realize how much of my work is —people just use? And then they come to me and they say, Hiram, it's good to see you, man. Listen, I want to let you know I really love your work. By the way, I published this book. Is it okay that I use your work?

[02:06:22.97]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: [Laughs.]

[02:06:27.30]

HIRAM MARISTANY: So yeah, I know what that feels like. But let me talk about Taller Boricua for a brief moment.

[02:06:35.80]

The Taller Boricua was right across the street from the Young Lords office. They were very much engaged. Now, depending on what period of time you're talking about of Taller Boricua

—because many of the members there moved on, they didn't stay very long—including me. I was an early member of el Taller.

[02:07:02.10]

And my significant other, in terms of the Taller, was Nitza Tufiño. I know Nita way before I knew Marta. Nita introduced me to—well, not introduced me, but she was a part of the now early Museo. But she was also always connected with, uh, Taller Boricua.

[02:07:38.06]

So what I recall, el Taller was doing a lot of stuff in terms of graphic workshops, and it made some stuff available to the Young Lords. Now, I don't know—I didn't do any negotiating—I don't know how what happened, but Richie Pérez, who was the guy who did the *Pa'lante* newspaper, was known for doing that—not asking permission, just using work. It didn't bother me because, you know, I had no problem with it, but I knew it bothered other of the artists.

[02:08:21.72]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: I don't know if it bothered Marcos. He just mentioned—that's the way—I just described the way he, in a joking way, said that it was appropriated.

[02:08:34.26]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Well, the Taller Boricua is the last to be throwing stones because they used some of my work without my permission. So I mean, it's—and it was commonplace. It's not that, you know, it happened rarely; it happened all the time. And there was a sense that, because they knew you, they didn't show—they can always ask you after the fact, you know, which is what happened a lot to me.

[02:09:10.70]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So what was the relationship between the two groups?

[02:09:16.65]

HIRAM MARISTANY: The Young Lords and Taller Boricua?

[02:09:19.19]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Yes.

[02:09:19.46]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Well, I knew most of the members of the Taller Boricua. I think they did not know many of the members of the Young Lords. They knew only the leadership, and—it was an interesting, uh, relationship. I think that they were very much—what's the word I'm looking for?—they were very sympathetic to the cause of Young Lords. They didn't do anything. They didn't come out in mass to support us, but they were not against us.

[02:10:07.45]

Hold on a moment.

[02:10:07.78]

[Video image of narrator is interrupted.]

[02:10:31.36]

Okay. For some reason it jumped off. But they didn't necessarily come out in rallies with us, but they were very much—we had a good—I would say it would be fair that we had a good relationship with them. Many of them were very helpful.

[02:11:00.79]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Did—did—were the philosophies of the two groups similar, or different?

[02:11:05.77]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Similar in certain respects. They're not as radical as the Young Lords. They were, uh, radical, but I don't think as radical.

[02:11:31.71]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: There were other—obviously, there's an explosion of Puerto Rican culture—Nuyorican culture, one might say, as the term was being coined and defined at that time—in the '60s and '70s. Were you—how aware were you of all these activities taking place, all these groups emerging?

[02:11:57.34]

So we have En Foco; we have the Nuyorican Poets Cafe in the Lower East Side, and I know you mentioned that you knew some people on the Lower East Side. I mean, just getting back to just the photographers that were emerging at this time: Phil Dante; Frank Espada was working for some time; Benedict Fernández, which you've already mentioned; Máximo Cólon was working at this time; there are others—Sophie Rivera—all the photographers that were part of En Foco, Taller Boricua, and then also El Museo.

[02:12:35.20]

So this is a real explosion, in positive terms—awakening—a kind of cultural awakening of Puerto Ricans who were very much grounded in the reality of New York, of kind of being in a part of a diaspora. They—some groups—did look back to the island, but there was this grounding in this reality of being part of the diaspora, in the Puerto Rican diaspora in the United States. How aware were you of this larger cultural awakening that was taking place?

[02:13:20.33]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I was very, very aware of it. I tried to deal with—um, well, let me focus on [inaudible].

[02:13:34.01]

En Foco, thankfully, is—is—activities [ph] in the Bronx.—I was expected to join a lot of groups and a lot of organizations, because I was there ahead of all of them. And—part of the problem I had with En Foco is that En Foco attempted to do an exhibit that—a community center in the Bronx, a center in *el barrio*, centered on abstract, uh—uh—

[02:14:20.44]

Quite a few of them did not identify as Puerto Rican photographers. They wanted to be known as photographers.—I had no problem with it. However, I had a problem with the fact that somehow they were more concerned with—being a part of, let's say, an institution's collection, specifically, the Museum City of New York, the Met, the Museo del Barrio.

[02:15:10.25]

I guess there was a sense of resentment to me because I was already a member of El Museo, in that I did not have that need to go down that road, that route. Okay?

[02:15:26.62]

On a personal note, Phil Dante always wanted to have an exhibit with me, and he was a very dear friend of mine and I had a lot of respect for him. There was a loose relationship that was forming of En Foco. There was a demand that I joined them.

[02:15:58.42]

Well, let me be specific. Today, there's a project in the Bronx called the documentary photography thing. My understanding, they're doing excellent work. They also are demanding that I join them.

[02:16:14.82]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: This a current group?

[02:16:16.23]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yes.

[02:16:16.95]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Mm-hmm. And it's called the documentary what?

[02:16:20.64]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Something in photography. And they're doing that—and my understanding is that they have outdoor shows. They're doing—they're doing some exciting stuff in photography. The guy who's—he's a war correspondent; he's a white person. I would love to try and meet with him.

[02:16:44.89]

But please understand that people use my name, they use who I am, and without asking permission, without, you know—. They feel that some way or another that I have this kind of obligation to do this kind of stuff.

[02:17:08.15]

—En Foco was a point that it was primarily dealing with Latino photographers. All of a sudden they changed.—I guess what they were seeking, I already had. I already had a show at the Met, I had a show at the Museum City of New York, I had a show—I had many shows out at El Museo.

[02:17:39.07]

I'm not sure why we didn't have a better working relationship, because I was always working.

[02:17:52.19]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: I think one thing that you said yesterday about Roy DeCarava, that he wanted you to be part of a group—

[02:18:01.63]

HIRAM MARISTANY: —yes—

[02:18:03.40]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: —and I'm wondering if that was the Kamoinge group [Kamoinge Workshop]—and I think I'm mispronouncing it. I know that I'm not pronouncing it correctly.

[02:18:11.62]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I can't pronounce it either, so we're in the same—

[02:18:14.22]

[They laugh.]

[02:18:16.00]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: —but it was a group that he co-founded in 1963. He was the director through '65, and then it's continued, I think—in fact, the group is still active. But, um, what—was that the group that he invited you to be part of?—Yes?

[02:18:34.52]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yes. And I would have been an early member. And he really liked my work. He liked me, and I liked him. I just didn't feel right to do that—in part because I wanted to do something within my community. I had no issue with, you know, being

identified as Black. That was not the issue. But—

[02:19:05.75]

Well, I think essentially I was not a joiner. I didn't join. I didn't join.—And I was used to, essentially, always being by myself. But he was an especial—he was a rare and special person. I don't know if you've seen any of his work.

[02:19:28.86]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Of course. Yes. Absolutely.

[02:19:30.99]

HIRAM MARISTANY: All right. Well—he later moves on to becoming a professor at Hunter College. And Hunter College didn't treat him really well. And I'm not talking about his professorship here; I'm talking to him as an artist, as a photographer. It's a sad—sad reality.

[02:19:59.81]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So I guess the question that I have is—so you decided not really to become active with the group that Roy DeCarava was putting together for Black photographers because you wanted to do something within your community. There were artistic groups within your community that you could have been part of, but you chose not to become part of those. So—

[02:20:23.70]

HIRAM MARISTANY: —you have to understand that I ran a very, very effective photography workshop. I trained a lot of young photographers, okay?—It's not as though I was idle, you know?

[02:20:43.85]

What part of the problem was is that I didn't see En Foco doing the things that I was doing. There was a great—some good photographers in there that, you know, I admired, okay? But—you got to understand the mindset of a lot of Puerto Ricans back then; it was about territory. I was in East Harlem; I didn't feel comfortable going to the Bronx. I didn't know the Bronx. I didn't know—people didn't know me.

[02:21:24.70]

My exclusion was not a negative statement. It's just that I was not, you know, accustomed to joining other organizations and doing that kind of stuff. I liked En Foco. I had issues with it when it started [inaudible]—did not focus on us. But that's, you know—

[02:21:51.40]

[Voices in background.]

[02:21:55.17]

All right. Hold on a moment. Let me just check something. [Gets up.]

[02:21:58.09]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Okay.

[02:22:17.03]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I find it interesting, there's nobody in the backyard, so—. I don't know where that sound is coming from.

[02:22:20.81]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: [Laughs.]

[02:22:28.05]

You know, one of the things that you did during this period is that you documented the activities of Taller Boricua.

[02:22:38.79]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Oh, yeah.

[02:22:39.44]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Yeah.

[02:22:42.58]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Now, I gave it to—what's this name?—Jesus—. What is it that I was trying to do was to inspire someone in the Taller to do what I was doing. The photographer at that time was a guy named Tito, who was later killed in police custody. He really wasn't a photographer—he had great interest in photography.

[02:23:18.91]

And he asked me many times, you know, what can I do in photography? And I said, A good place to start is to document your own events. And by documenting, I don't mean that you line everybody up and you take a picture of them and then you put all their names underneath them. I used to call that the el diario formula for photography.

[02:23:47.17

My insistence to him was, photograph your event. Do it as—and I gave him a concept. The way I document, I use the principle of storyboard. There's a beginning, a middle, and an end. It was like, Look at it, you can follow it, and then you can come to, hopefully, a conclusion.

[02:24:12.50]

So what never happened was—is that—the Taller Boricua was so loosely organized and managed that there was no one really documenting. And then it was an internal split in the Taller where half of the group goes and starts its own thing, and it was called Galería Moriviví, and that was led by Carlos Osorio.

[02:24:47.49]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Carlos Osorio.

[02:24:49.34]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yes.

[02:24:49.88]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Okay. Your sound is going in and out a little.

[02:24:53.52]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Okay. Is it—is it me, or is it that background—

[02:24:56.94]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: —I don't know what it is.

[02:24:59.19]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I don't know where that's coming from. There's no one in the backyard.

[02:25:03.18]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Yeah, no. No, it's not noise. It's just sometimes you're speaking and then your voice goes down a little bit, and then it comes back, so it's like—.

[02:25:12.31]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Okay. Hold on a second. Let me just try and do something. Okay. Well, here. I got it. That better?

[02:25:31.88]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Let's talk a little, and then I'll see if it's better.

[02:25:35.20]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Now?

[02:25:37.25]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: It's pretty much the same.

[02:25:39.47]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Okay. Well, anyway, what I was trying to say—that I really think the Taller Boricua had tremendous potential, and the previous administration, under Fernando Salicruz, did not measure up to what they should have been doing and what they could have done.

[02:26:05.27]

I think Marcos was trying his best to do some of those things. But for the longest, they didn't have a workshop going. And that's the name of the organization, you know? And that's largely due to, and the credit has to be given, to Nitza Tufiño. She does those workshops. She's very good at doing that. So it's a really important aspect of how they're supposed to be functioning.

[02:26:41.12]

But the relationship that I had with them is that I knew most of them, and when El Museo comes along, I like to go to Museo because I wanted to do work. There was a lot of partying, a lot of, you know, being bohemian.

[02:27:04.83]

And that's cool. I mean, if that's what you want to do, you know, I'm not passing judgment. It's not what I wanted to do. And what I wanted to do was to create good work. That took concentration and effort on my part.

[02:27:21.49]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: There was a time when you were documenting their activities, their members in action, and why did you want to document that aspect of their work and community service?

[02:27:35.93]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Because I think, then and now, they're an important part of our collective history. They are also a very important part of what I would call the Puerto Rican arts movement. And people like Jorge Soto was critical to them. People like Martín Rubio was critical to that. There's a whole bunch of people that deserve to be documented, deserve to have their voices heard. As I said, the previous administration was not doing that. And I think that the Taller is a critical, important part.

[02:28:28.25]

Now, if you listen to them, they tell the stories as if they were the only ones that did anything, and they tell the story as if El Museo did very little. I don't want to get into that debate or discussion. What I do know is that I documented El Museo's accomplishments, and that cannot be denied because it is in fact documented. And the point of this is not to rely on hearsay, not to rely on memory, because memory can be very—can be a destructive narrative, depending on what you want to remember and what you want to forget can be totally different stories. So—

[02:29:20.39]

There's a very famous image of Jorge Soto and a bunch of the others sitting in a sculpture that I took. As I recall, he didn't want me to take the picture, and I told them all very politely and very nicely, Don't tell me what to do, man. And I'm glad that I took the picture because it's probably the only example of a clear photograph of him. There are a few other ones of him that are very, very good. But for the most part, they didn't see value in documenting their own work, which is sad, you know? Which is sad.

[02:30:08.80]

But again, they are an important part of the history, okay? And I hope that one day they will put something together that will speak to the entire history of the Taller because right now, at best, it's fragmented—at best. Okay.

[02:30:35.43]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: We're going to almost shift to our conversation of El Museo del Barrio. I just wanted to ask if you—you know, you've referred to the Puerto Rican arts movement as taking place during this time. The other term that has emerged around this period is Nuyorican, and I was wondering if you could talk about whether you use or embrace that term.

[02:31:04.96]

HIRAM MARISTANY: It doesn't bother me either way because one of the things that happens, I think, is a lot of people love to label things so that they can put it—they can confine it, they can move it from one place to the other.

[02:31:22.25]

By definition, I would be considered a Nuyorican artist. That doesn't bother me, but I consider myself an artist who is of Puerto Rican descent. But people want to, somehow, in certain cases, be put down because in Puerto Rico, you say that, you—somehow it gets interpreted as you're less than, you know? You're not a legitimate Puerto Rican; you're not a real artist.

[02:32:00.26]

And the last time I was in Puerto Rico, which was a long time ago, everybody knew my name—didn't know how I looked. People who understood art on the island revered what I did. They know what I did. And I'm talking about on the island. I'm not talking about New York or Young Lords. I did some significant things in terms of—with the Museo; I'm not saying I did this independently—but the reality is that we did some pioneer development in Puerto Rico before it was hip for Puerto Ricans to follow through [inaudible].

[02:32:49.80]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: I lost that sentence. Your voice went down.

[02:32:54.72]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Okay. What we did was pioneering, way ahead of the people on the island. To be specific, what we did as it related to Taíno culture; we went, we identified, and we went to Utuado, we photographed petroglyphs—I mean, we did like a research study. We did not take any of our pre-notion biases or our own colonization and treated it like that.

[02:33:35.90]

We also went to Loíza and Bélgica and we documented the Afro- Boricua element as well, and we did so with earnest. We did so with respect. We thought it was an important element of our history and our culture. This is way before I knew—

[02:33:54.70]

To a certain extent, even to this day, there are certain elements of Afro- Boricua that have never been addressed on the island of Puerto Rico. We did this 50 years ago. I'm going to be

participating in a project in September, where we're going to be talking about some visual documentation that Marta Moreno Vega and I did 50 years ago. And the young woman who's doing it, her name is Melanie Maldonado. She's doing a fabulous job of keeping that trajectory in history alive.

[02:34:35.15]

But she's alone. There's nobody giving them grants. Nobody's—it's a crying shame that we—and we have people referring to us as New York Ricans and Gringo and Americano, and they're not taking care of business. And they're not taking care of the stuff that needs to be done to honor those traditions. And we, Nuyocranos—

[02:35:04.60]

And well, on a personal note, when I go to Puerto Rico with Marta and we do a visual study of Taíno petroglyphs, I give Dr. Ricardo Alegría a print of the Atabex that I took 55—53 years ago. He looks at it and he said, cheers. He said, I would never believe that a kid born in New York City would come to Puerto Rico and honor Taíno traditions in our image. I was—I was honored and flabbergasted by that.

[02:35:49.33]

But no one still—no one has picked up that baton that I—made available. There should be a research project and a half on Taíno culture and civilization. Similarly, on Afro- Boricua traditions, the different types of Africans that came there.—Note that I did not use the word "slave"—because, on the island, that's what they want to do; they want to define you by how you were brought to that island.

[02:36:23.90]

Those Africans that came to the island, their history must be told, and it must be revered and respected. But that's something that, you know, many Puerto Ricans still haven't embraced, and it's a sad commentary, but that is the reality.

[02:36:48.48]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So we've started talking about the work that you did at and with El Museo del Barrio. When did you become active and involved with El Museo? Like, what was the beginning of your relationship with that organization?

[02:37:07.43]

HIRAM MARISTANY: The first time I hear of the work is through Nitza Tufiño. She tells me—you know, I couldn't even pronounce the word museo. She says to me, Listen, the new director of Museo del Barrio wants to meet you, and he wants to, you know, look at his work. And then I said, Nitza, I'm not going all the way over there; why don't he come here if he wants to see it, you know? I'll be happy to show it to him.

[02:37:41.94]

But there was this kind of—that I was being summoned, and that I had to go over to see Ralph Ortiz. I said, No, I'm not going to see Ralph. So we dropped it.

[02:37:55.31]

A couple of months pass, she comes back—Hiram, I want to make some—let me have a couple of your images so that I can show him the kind of work that you do. I said, fine. So I give Nitza 20 images in a box of *el barrio*. Didn't have any images of Taíno. Matter of fact, didn't even know the word Taíno. So she presented to him.

[02:38:28.59]

So typical of Nitza, I don't see—I don't see her for the next two, three months. So when I run into her, I said, Nitza, where's my pictures? Bring them back. Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, I'm going to bring them, but they're still looking at them; they love the stuff in there. And Nitza and her helter skelter, so I said, Listen, just bring them back. I didn't want to get into an issue with her. She never returns them to me.

[02:38:57.67]

So incidentally, what happens is Ralph leaves and they put on a—they do a search committee to find a new director, and they choose Marta Moreno Vega. She accepts the job and she goes to where El Museo was, which is on the West Side. It was not in *el barrio*, and did not—was not born there.

[02:39:24.59]

She is shocked and she writes this—she writes this in her book—that she's really upset because El Museo del Barrio's turned out to be more than a bunch of boxes in the closet. And she got—hold up. My neighbors are screaming in the hallway.

[02:39:49.99]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: I'm not hearing it.

[02:39:51.37]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Okay, cool. Anyway, the point is that she's going through all the files, and she comes to a box, and she opens it and she sees photographs of *el barrio*. And she gets emotional and she starts to cry. And she says, Yeah, I saw these images of East Harlem and I identified with them. They were powerful images, and I knew I had to take this job.

[02:40:28.78]

And she wanted to find out who was the photographer that took these pictures.—Marta Moreno Rivera—Marta Moreno Vega—returns my pictures to me.—But I didn't know that.

[02:40:50.08]

So we meet two months before she returns the photos to me. I thought she was working for Ralph Ortiz. I didn't want anything to do with El Museo or Ralph, so she says, Hiram, you got to trust me. So she said, I'm going to give you a consulting job that's four days—four hours a week, one day a week. I said, Marta, I don't need this. I don't want it. She says, I want you to come. And what she was doing is she was showing me that she was legit and that we were going to be doing something fabulous.

[02:41:28.40]

So when I go to Museo, I start meeting other people, and I say, Oh, wow, this is real. And Ralph was not around. I really did not like him. I think he was—well, I won't get into my personal characteristics of him. But anyway, to this day I have not—other than the one time we were in a room together where I took that photo—I've never been in a room with him.

[02:42:00.29]

Marta tells me, Hiram, we're going to need a photographer, and we're going to need you. I said, Marta, well—anyway, I take the job, which is now three days a week. From the other job that I had, I take almost a $20,000 reduction in salary and it created all kinds of havoc with my spouse. And I told her, No, I will bring that—it'll rise again to the same amount or more; But right now, we do not have the funding to cover me right now.

[02:42:45.65]

And to Marta, I give her a lot of credit because she lived up to her word. She said something and she did follow through—and she did.

[02:42:54.29]

But it became a job that was one of the most difficult jobs I ever had, but it was a job that I loved to have gone to. Every day was different, every day was a challenge, and I was learning as much as I was giving. And El Museo was an incredible opportunity for me to be—I was a well-respected photographer. I didn't know who I was. And El Museo was an incubator to teach me who I was. And I will always be forever grateful for that experience and that opportunity.

[02:43:37.61]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So what was your title? What was the job? Or did you—I mean, what was the job?

[02:43:44.03]

HIRAM MARISTANY: My first title was photographer, okay? And I didn't—I didn't and still don't believe in titles. But Marta gave me the title of the director of—the director of the photography department that consisted of one person. So I had a title, but it didn't mean anything.

[02:44:08.51]

Then, eventually, I bring on an assistant, I bring on two people, and we create what I consider outstanding work. Marta creates a magazine of El Museo del Barrio. It was called *Quimbamba*. That's a Swahili word for "come together."

[02:44:30.68]

And we start producing—or I start producing—a level of photography in that magazine that has not been matched even to this day. Some of the photography in that magazine is outstanding, extraordinary. I take a lot of credit for that.—Well, not only me, but my assistant and others.

[02:44:54.37]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Who were the assistants? Their names?

[02:44:57.16]

HIRAM MARISTANY: José Gómez. He was Dominican. Really good brother. Good brother. Who was the other guy? Louis Wayne [ph]. Puerto Rican. Real funny. Always telling jokes.

[02:45:15.29]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: And they were both photographers?

[02:45:18.16]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Well, they became photographers. They were not—they loved photography, but they were not as knowledgeable or skillful as I was. So every project we were on was a learning process for them. And then they started doing photographs—when I couldn't do it, I would give them—you know? And it was good work. They did good work, you know?

[02:45:53.44]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: How long was *Quimbamba* produced?

[02:45:59.51]

HIRAM MARISTANY: —Oh, boy.—Well, you could—till Marta's departure. I think that would be 1974—1975. So it's like two years, three years, I think—the maximum.

[02:46:21.73]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: And what kind of stories were published there? What were the photographs that you included in—

[02:46:29.68]

HIRAM MARISTANY: One of the things that I think Marta did that was very wise, she had to answer a lot of East- Harlem- based critique. People did not—they thought the concept of a museum was very elitist. We thought that we don't need a museum in East Harlem because Puerto Ricans don't have any history or any aesthetic, any art history, and that it's not relevant. And I think Marta attacked that because we were still then a part of the Board of Education, which was a disaster. So she wrote articles explaining that we do have an

aesthetic, we do have an art history, and our art history predates American history.

[02:47:31.05]

So one of the first articles we wrote was on Taínos and what the position was, you know, This is Taíno art; its 900 years or 1,000 years older than some European art; so what do you mean we don't have an art history? Because many people on the island believe the history of Puerto Rico begins on the arrival of the Spanish—okay?—that there was nothing there—in other words, we were discovered; when Europeans came to the island, it became relevant and pertinent.

[02:48:13.40]

So there was articles on Taíno artifacts. I took photos. She sent me to places like the Museum of Natural History, that has a huge collection of Taíno art. Margaret Mead was there; I met her and she was pleased to see.

[02:48:39.92]

She said, It's about time you came here to reclaim what is yours; but please, whatever you do, do not allow this work to go back to Puerto Rico. I said, Why not? She said, Because they will sell it; because that's what was going on in Puerto Rico. They were selling work to individual collectors. And they claim that they took it—they took some of the best work so that they could preserve it. Some of the file cabinets dated 1909 that they removed the stuff from Puerto Rico in those years.

[02:49:22.91]

So what Marta was doing, I think, was very, very sophisticated. And she was answering, but she was also presenting, so that it was an educational process as well as to counter certain other claims.

[02:49:41.12]

Then we immediately went to the Afro Boricua. So Marta sent me to cover the Festival de Santiago Apóstol en Loíza. I mean, I was stunned visually. I mean, it was an amazing—I'm a New York kid, man; I've never been to—. This was the closest thing to—one of the films that I've loved as a young man was a film called *Black Orpheus*, and it speaks to an incredible love story, but it shows the kind of violent Brazil, man. I was like, Wow, amazing.

[02:50:20.55]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: And you know, I knew that you were going to say that, right before you said that. [Laughs.]

Yeah, no, you said there was a film. The first thing that came to my mind was *Black Orpheus*.

[02:50:30.57]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Oh, man. Well, anyway, there were so many similarities besides that. And it was an incredible experience, meeting with Puerto Ricans that were singing and dancing in the street at the festival.

[02:50:52.44]

Well, I—we came back and we published [inaudible]. And you have to understand that no one was doing anything anywhere close to that. So we were pioneering, and we know that we were pioneering—an experience [inaudible], that's key. Then, in her wisdom again, she said, Okay, this time, we're going to go, but we're going to document *artesanos*, praying they knew what the hell that was.

[02:51:25.23]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Okay, I couldn't hear that. You were going to document what?

[02:51:28.83]

HIRAM MARISTANY: *Artesanos*. Artisans.

[02:51:30.30]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Oh, okay, artisans. Okay.

[02:51:34.00]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I mean, it was an amazing, amazing story, in as far as that, when we started meeting them, they were so humble and generous. And they were almost like folkloric people—people that, you know—I mean, it was an incredible experience. When I come back, we published those.

[02:51:57.80]

So we had direct correlation between my documentation and what Marta was doing in terms of building the institution. Marta, whenever she wrote a proposal that you had something, like, from Puerto Rico, she said, I'm sending some pictures. I said, Yeah, okay, Marta. I had no problem.

[02:52:20.88]

I have a firm belief that the quality of the images also impacted a lot of funders because they saw [inaudible] both. And in that relationship of the level of work that we were producing, I mean, I felt so honored and so privileged that I—I too received an education, and El Museo enlightened me to my—it made me a better Puerto Rican. It made me a proud Puerto Rican. And I can say that, and I can stand anywhere and not feel humbled by some cousins of mine that, when I went, refer to me as a Americano and put me down. They can't do that no more. I can't hear you.

[02:53:25.74]

[Sound of object hitting ground.]

[02:53:26.55]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Oops. Excuse me.

[02:53:32.33]

When you went to Puerto Rico for El Museo, was that the first time that you went to the island—

[02:53:38.56]

HIRAM MARISTANY: —no, no—

[02:53:38.90]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: —or had you gone before?

[02:53:41.48]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I'd gone before. I went with—I went with—what is that? A political group, uh MPI—Movimiento Independentista del Progreso [*sic* - Movimiento Pro Independencia]—something along those lines.

[02:54:01.60]

And I was learning about the politics of Puerto Rico. I was very disappointed and very upset by that, in part because the leadership of many of these organizations were affluent, privileged, egocentric Puerto Ricans that really resented poor people.

[02:54:29.96]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: And this is a group based in New York that traveled to the island, or?

[02:54:35.29]

HIRAM MARISTANY: They had a division here in New York. So I go to the island to check out —

[02:54:41.27]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: —yeah. I'm losing you a little bit again. I can't hear. There is some noise in the background on your side.

[02:54:47.66]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I don't know where that's coming from, but—we checked out the island. I go with a friend of mine. And I meet cousins for the first time, you know? I'm an adult, I'm not a child.

[02:55:04.70]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So when you went with the Puerto Rican group, when was that approximately? Was that in the '60s, or?

[02:55:11.90]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yeah, it was the '60s. It was like '68.

[02:55:15.88]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Okay.

[02:55:17.75]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Actually, I was there before because I was there on my honeymoon in '66—'67.

[02:55:25.77]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Okay, so 1967. So your honeymoon was the first time you went back—was the first time you went because you were born here in the States?

[02:55:37.43]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yeah. Yeah.

[02:55:38.40]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Okay. So could you talk about *The Art Heritage of Puerto Rico* exhibition? You've mentioned it already, but I know that you were involved with that. Could you talk about your involvement in that show?

[02:56:00.75]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Technically, I was not a part of that show, other than the fact that they used a couple of images in the show, but not as a part of the actual show, because the show focused on painting and painters and graphic illustrators. It was paintings and posters.

[02:56:22.53]

Now, in terms of the history of art in Puerto Rico, one of the most highest art forms for Puerto Ricans is the Puerto Rican poster. I mean, it is amazing work that they do.

[02:56:37.11]

So essentially, my role was, when we were negotiating with them, is—the Met knew even less about Puerto Rico than we did. They put together a narrative of what we needed to document so the big bank sold. Marta sends me as the advanced group to go and document island culture, Afro Boricua culture, and what they refer to as artisan culture. Those two things, I already [inaudible] to be very important, but they were the foundation for the exhibition.

[02:57:27.58]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Right. So these are things that you've already described as being presented in *Quimbamba*?

[02:57:33.54]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Right.

[02:57:34.74]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Right.

[02:57:35.07]

HIRAM MARISTANY: But I had to expand some of—For example, the paintings: I went to all major institutions in paintings. They gave me a list of paintings.

[02:57:47.56]

For instance, there's a very famous painting called *La Escuela del [Maestro] Rafael Cordero*. It's a very, very small painting. And when I was studying photography and studying that, I saw that image, and I was amazed to hold that in my hand. It was an amazing painting, painted by Rafael—no, excuse me—by Francisco Oller.

[02:58:15.67]

I also photographed *El Velorio*, which back then was in bad shape. They didn't take care of it. We shamed them into—the University de Río Piedras—restoring that painting—because they left it there—because it was, again, Francisco Oller, and he was considered a Puerto Rican painter, so it had very little value.

[02:58:45.11]

We go to Museo de Ponce with ex-Governor Ferré, and he has 16th century Flemish paintings in it. Some of them are very, very beautiful, but the Puerto Ricans are way in the back in rooms that didn't have a temperature control or humidity control. The Puerto Rican work was, you know, of little value.

[02:59:19.00]

So he wanted to know why I was photographing the Puerto Rican stuff and not photographing the Flemish stuff. So it's that kind of scenario.

[02:59:31.83]

I also go to el Ateneo. I go to El Museo de—a bunch of other stuff that I can't remember the names. The Ateneo treated us very poorly because they felt they were the only authorities on Puerto Rican art.

[02:59:57.89]

The other place was the Division of Education, which had incredible posters. And whenever we could, we got a duplicate rather than the photograph. We brought—I brought back as many duplicate posters as possible. That was used to do storyboarding and to formulate the construction of the exhibition. So my role was primarily that.

[03:00:43.23]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So you mentioned that you—you mentioned earlier that you exhibited at the Met. I thought that it was in *The Art Heritage of Puerto Rico* exhibition. So did you exhibit at the Met in some other way? Because, just for the record, *The Art Heritage of Puerto Rico* was presented at the Metropolitan Museum of Art—just to make that clear.

[03:01:01.87]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yeah. My participation was also in the development of the catalog for that show. I did most of the color plates for the catalog, which was used as a part of the exhibition.

[03:01:26.48]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So that's how your work was exhibited at the Met?

[03:01:28.69]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yes.

[03:01:29.58]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Okay.

[03:01:35.25]

Now, I know that in the years following that, Marta Moreno Vega left—

[03:01:43.74]

HIRAM MARISTANY: —yes—

[03:01:45.00]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: —El Museo, and then you became the director.

[03:01:50.71]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yes. Well, I was interim for a long time. For the historical record, I did not want to become the executive director of El Museo del Barrio. But we were so vulnerable, because what occurred was an implosion. We were just disgusting. We were fighting each other.

[03:02:20.28]

And there's a whole element out there that I resented on two levels. One, Marta Moreno Vega identifies as being Black and being from *el barrio*—which she was, she grew up in 108th. I was also similar characteristics. There was a whole group of people who felt that they were better off—they were better at doing what we should—what we were doing.

[03:02:56.92]

Specifically, you had organizations like Friends of Puerto Rico. You had [inaudible]. You had a bunch of people that, frankly, I had a lot of issues with—in part because they would do things downtown, and they would do things that did not encourage nor welcomed Puerto Ricans, or poor people, or East Harlemites, and that we somehow were insignificant and irrelevant, and that they were more—they had more of an authority. And they were very elitist.

[03:03:42.25]

When Marta resigns—and for the record, Marta was very, very devastated by this, okay?—and as a result of a lawsuit, Marta resigns. And I believe that the institution was extraordinary vulnerable.

[03:04:12.76]

One of the things that we had to do was to get our books in order. Our books were not in order. And whether there was malfeasance or not, the fact that your books are not in order almost implies criminal activity.

[03:04:34.56]

I'm very pleased to say that that was not the case. Marta was beyond question—she was honest—and we had to prove it by making a [inaudible]. So essentially, what we needed was time. We needed time to bring in real accountants and really put that together.

[03:04:56.80]

So the deal that was cut was that I would be the interim director for a year. Because naively

we thought that we could do it in a year.

[03:05:10.05]

Now, my role was to be—it was [inaudible] practically intimate. I stood at the door, making sure that a lot of destructive people did not come in and start dismantling it [inaudible], because that's what a lot of people wanted to do.

[03:05:35.18]

What essentially happens is many of the politicians wanted to use El Museo as their platform to get votes. We were one of the few organizations in East Harlem that did not owe them favors, because everything you did in town you had to clear through them, okay?

[03:06:10.61]

My stewardship produced the following. I didn't allow anyone to come in and take anything and use it for purposes that were not legal.

[03:06:38.14]

—Many, many, many a time, I had to learn a whole bunch of things—how to read a balance sheet, how to do budgeting, how to do—because essentially I'm a photographer, essentially I ran a photography department. So I learned—I had one-on-one everything, okay?

[03:07:02.76]

They made you go to school to understand basic accounting. I went to—what was it?—Long Island University, okay? I took several courses, okay?

[03:07:19.07]

And Marta was very, very helpful at that time. Though she was not the director, she came in and she helped. She helped write proposals. In some cases, she rewrote my proposal because, you know, I'm not a proposal writer; I didn't know how to do that.

[03:07:39.45]

But what we were doing essentially was buying time. And eventually, 4 and a half years later, the accountant calls me and he says, We got everything in place; we can go to court and we will win. We're accounting for everything. And we then call the court and we're going to have the showdown between the people who are suing us.

[03:08:14.47]

Nitza's opinion was on one side, and Marta was on the other side; I had to choose between. Nitza was my closest friend, and Marta Moreno was a new friend. I had to choose. And I chose what I thought was right, and that was Marta Moreno Vega.

[03:08:34.73]

So when we decide to meet with them, they elected to drop the case. So the lawsuit disappeared.

[03:08:53.32]

Six weeks later, I was fired, and the person who fired me was then the chairwoman. Her name was—uh, with a *jota* [Jacqueline Biaggi]—a very, very kind, sweet person. She said, Hiram, I'm not firing you. I'm sending you back to what you are. I'm sending you back to be the great artist that you are. I'm sending you home, and we all are grateful for your service.

[03:09:22.21]

—Because, you know, I'm such a boy scout that they didn't have any vices on me.

[03:09:29.23]

You know, I didn't have a drug addiction, I was not a womanizer, I didn't have alcohol in my

family, and I could not be bought. You couldn't cut a deal with me and pay me for me to give up the institution, you know? So in that capacity, I did some phenomenal things on behalf of El Museo del Barrio.

[03:09:55.23]

Now, I'm telling you this because—you know, I don't feel this is important for it to be known, because I'm very proud of what I did—but what's important is that, for future generations, people have to understand the enormous sacrifice that both Marta and I went through. There was a time when we didn't have enough money for payroll, and she and I went and got enough money from our personal accounts to take care of payroll.

[03:10:31.13]

What I think is important is that, right now, there are people who work at El Museo del Barrio that think there was this stable, established institution, that it really didn't have any growing pains, and really did not emerge from the community. I am the last born *el barrio* director of El Museo del Barrio. Marta Moreno Vega is the last born *el barrio*, legitimate—and I mean legitimate not in a negative way—executive director of El Museo del Barrio.

[03:11:10.93]

She's an extraordinary person, and an extraordinary thing—that she created something that serves the community she was born and raised in. And I feel very, very honored and pleased that I had a role in it. But it's not about what I get out of it.

[03:11:35.29]

On a different note, but a very important note, I remember my last day at El Museo del Barrio. I get up, I embrace all the people that supported me, and as I'm walking through the door, I could hear them all crying because they knew that something was dying, and what was dying is—what I represented. What I represented was a compassion for my community, and a compassion for an institution that should and will always be a part of the *el barrio* community.

[03:12:21.77]

And that—what I was replaced with was something else, and we can talk about that if you like. But—that's why I get very, very emotional when I deal with El Museo. It's more than an institution. It means a lot to a lot of people, and most of them are dying off now. And there's generations that believe that El Museo has been there for 150 years. They think it's like the establishment. It is not.

[03:13:00.01]

So I hope I answered your question.—You got—your speaker.

[03:13:12.14]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Yes, you did. So was there anything, any programs or anything that you initiated while you were the director?

[03:13:24.51]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yeah, but most of it was Marta's ideas. But one thing I'm very proud of—Marta initiated the adult and children's workshops. She didn't have enough time to really develop it because the success of the Met show created all kinds of new stresses that we were not familiar with. We didn't know how to cope or handle that stuff. But upon her departure, I successfully took money from all different divisions to put into the workshop programs.

[03:14:03.22]

I believed in it tremendously. I believed that we have an obligation—this institution has an obligation—to teach as many young people about art, and specifically the art history of Puerto Rico. We did it with earnest. We did it with dance, we did it with anatomy, we did it with drawing, we did it with etchings, we did it with—we had like six or seven different

disciplines, okay?

[03:14:33.41]

And we brought in artists who were Puerto Rican for the most part and Latinos in general—so we are finding the best artists to do the best instruction. That's something I'm very, very proud of. I took two young artists who I knew—intuitively, instinctively—had the talent and the resources to be great directors. One of them is Humberto Figueroa, who became a museum director later. He was a phenomenal artist and director.

[03:15:09.96]

The other person is Sigfrido Benítez. And we had a lot of arguments, and I told him, Now, listen, you're going to do this because I know you can do it, and there's no more discussion. And they were very angry at me for a long time. But they did exceptional jobs, and I'm very, very proud that our community received instruction in art.

[03:15:39.32]

And in a way, it's a direct reflection of what my history was. I did not have any instruction in art—let alone Puerto Rican art—I mean, just art in general. So I'm very, very proud of my commitment to those programs.

[03:16:03.78]

I'm also very proud of my commitment to—I brought in different organizations. I brought in a Black organization from North Africa, and we had a show with them. They gave me an award for their involvement because they never had an Hispanic organization that would greet them and treat them with respect and honor. And in this case, it's something that I learned from Marta. But it's something that I did and I'm very, very proud of that.

[03:16:42.97]

I also was one of the first artists—again, with Marta's direction and leadership—we put together one of the first exhibits that encouraged Latin Americans to be a part of El Museo del Barrio. We also encouraged—

[03:17:02.72]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: —what exhibition was that?

[03:17:04.68]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I think it was called *We the People*.

[03:17:11.17]

We also had Indigenous people from [sound of person talking]—sorry—we had Indigenous people from the United States, and we had a one—a group of people who are Indigenous people from Canada, and they referred to themselves as First Nation. And when they came to the opening of the show, they came in full dress. I mean, it was an amazing exhibit that we had multi cultures in the same room doing certain things that, prior to that, El Museo has never been engaged with. And unfortunately, to this day, they still have not equaled that or surpassed that.

[03:17:57.91]

So yes, there are a few things that I'm very proud of that I did.

[03:18:09.63]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: While there's more to talk about, and we've been talking for more than two hours [laughs]—I think probably more than three hours—

[03:18:18.39]

HIRAM MARISTANY: —when is this, tomorrow?—

[03:18:20.17]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: —so I think that we need to schedule one more session—I don't think it has to be as long as this—just to kind of wrap some things up, because there's more to talk about other facets of your work. And—

[03:18:34.48]

HIRAM MARISTANY: —well, let me take a moment to really thank you because I got some stuff off my chest that I've been carrying around for a very long time, and it feels good to do that, you know, to purge it.

[03:18:51.38]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: I'm happy about that.

[03:18:53.52]

HIRAM MARISTANY: But you also have to understand that I'm the one that walked around in silence, knowing what my contribution was, and it's never been acknowledged.—And I take a lesser role because I think the real injustice has been done to Marta Moreno Vega. She needs to get her just due before I receive mine. So thank you.

[03:19:35.36]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Well, thank you for opening yourself up to this conversation. I think it will reveal a lot about your work, about the history of El Museo, and I'm very happy to be facilitating it.

[03:19:53.64]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Okay. Now, you can stop recording for a moment.

[03:19:58.83]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Okay. All right. Thank you, Hiram.

[03:20:02.91]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Thank you. But—

[03:20:08.19]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: —I'm going to stop now, okay?

[03:20:10.02]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yes.—each of you and your family on Facebook.

[END OF TRACK marist21_2of3_digvid_m.]

[00:00:00.09]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: —Continue. Can you hit continue too on your end?

[00:00:02.52]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yes.

[00:00:04.00]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Yes. Great. Well, thank you, Hiram, for making some more time to wrap up our oral history for the Archives of American Art. It's August 10, 2021. I'm E. Carmen Ramos. And I'm here again with Hiram Maristany, the photographer.

[00:00:25.44]

And I had a few clarifying questions based on our conversation yesterday. And I wanted to

ask you that, when you went to Puerto Rico, when you were working with El Museo Barrio and you were preparing for *The Art Heritage of Puerto Rico* exhibition—I'm wondering, how did you know what to do and who to meet there? Did you make some contacts with people in Puerto Rico that helped introduce you around? So how did you learn how to get around in Puerto Rico?

[00:01:07.23]

HIRAM MARISTANY: There were two factors. One, most of the institutions in Puerto Rico responded to the Met, the Metropolitan Museum of Art. They did not respond to El Museo, okay? In their eyes, we were like this insignificant, irrelevant, not-worthy organization or institution.

[00:01:36.41]

I guess what we were fortunate and blessed to have was relationship with some primary artists, specifically Rafael Tufiño, Antonio Martorell—a few other people that I can't—their names will come to me—Tony Maldonado—and someone else who was in it.

[00:02:08.16]

Then there was somebody at the Division of Education, Walter Chiesa, who was, I mean, incredibly—he took us around. He knew the island backwards and forwards. He also had a sense of history and culture relevance but he was not that strong in art, okay? So the one that was very helpful with that, surprisingly, was Antonio Martorell—very, very knowledgeable person and very, very helpful.

[00:02:42.05]

Now I say this using these artists names but the truth of the matter is one of the profound contributions that I think that Nitza Tufiño made is that Nitza Tufiño knew everybody. She was the daughter of a great artist. There was no door that was closed to her. And were it not for her, we would not have been as successful.

[00:03:06.08]

And I say that because I think, in fact, she did not receive the credit that she deserved, in terms of her participation and her contribution to that exhibition, because it was not all the brass facts and the data. The Metropolitan gave the impression that, you know, they did everything and that we were there as their assistants. And the reality was, it's almost the opposite. We—

[00:03:37.30]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: —so—

[00:03:38.77]

HIRAM MARISTANY: —go ahead. I'm sorry.

[00:03:39.90]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: No. I guess the question that I didn't ask before is, how did the idea for *The Art Heritage of Puerto Rico* exhibition come about? Was that Marta Moreno Vega's idea? Did she go to the Met with it? How did it—

[00:03:56.60]

HIRAM MARISTANY: —I think, it was also—a common—well, first of all, I don't know specifically because I wasn't a part of that negotiation. But one has to describe something that I think—hold on a second. You got to pause a minute. I'm going to have to turn the television off in the other room because it jumps very, very loud.

[00:04:20.49]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Okay. I'll pause it now.

[00:04:21.99]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Okay.

[00:04:22.26]

The reality of that show—you have to understand the environment in the early '70s and, in particular what the Met has just gone through with another show that they did, which was entitled *Harlem on My Mind*, that had a lot of issues, a lot of problems. And they needed to somehow do something that, uh—not that our show erased that problem, because that problem was primarily with African Americans—but they were, in a sense, almost pleased that we were eager to work with them.

[00:05:11.04]

We didn't make it easy for them because the reality is—and this is to Marta's credit—they came to us with an understanding is, All we want is your name; we're going to do it. We know more about this than you do. You guys don't—you're really irrelevant.

[00:05:27.71]

And they brought a couple of people with us that I thought were very, very helpful. And one of them was someone named Irvine MacManus. He was the last [inaudible]. Now, my personal opinion, I didn't like Irvine. I thought he was a sellout. He would do anything that the Met wanted. And he came on with this kind of—elitism, okay? And I had great difficulty with him.

[00:05:56.81]

And Martha did everything she could to keep us apart because he would make some really nasty, derogatory statements about people. And he was used to doing that. And nobody would challenge him. Nobody would say anything about it. He didn't have the greatest love for poor people. He didn't have the greatest love for people of color.

[00:06:18.77]

I wouldn't call him a racist but he was not eager to embrace people. But he was very, very helpful in terms of he understand how the Met operated, because we needed somebody to interpret that kind of stuff for us. We didn't understand why we had to send memos on memos on memos. I mean, that was crazy. And Martha streamlined it.

[00:06:50.04]

Another person that was very, very important—I can't think of the person's name. He was a curator—also in the same tradition as Irving—very, very aloof and arrogant—talked down to people. And that was probably the way things were done back in those days, the way they functioned.

[00:07:15.71]

What's his name? In this conversation, it'll come to me and I'll give you that. But he was a curator. But he was very knowledgeable. Didn't know anything about Puerto Rico, didn't know anything about Puerto Ricans. Knew quite a bit about art from Spain, the historical elements of Spain. And that proved to be very helpful with some of the stuff that we, in Puerto Rico, were trying to uncover. So—Geldzahler—something Geldzahler.

[00:07:47.01]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Yes. I think I know who you mean.

[00:07:49.23]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Okay. And in a strange way, he was very, very helpful. I don't think he was intending to be helpful. But he was very helpful, very knowledgeable.

[00:08:02.02]

The show came about in a way I think as a mutual understanding that they proposed it to us. I don't think it was something that we wanted to do initially. But the profoundness of the show is that it was the art heritage of Puerto Rico, pre-Columbian to the present. The present back then was 1971, two, or three. And it was also a comprehensive attempt to chronicle and document that history that has laid dormant for the longest. And it lay dormant in Puerto Rico.

[00:08:38.74]

Now there were certain people who knew that history but they were fragmented in different institutions in Puerto Rico. Specifically, the one that was most knowledgeable in terms of that but didn't welcome the public was el Ateneo.

[00:08:55.02]

I was treated very badly at Ateneo. They thought I was a janitor, okay? And I went there to do a job. I didn't even speak to them; I took the pictures and I left. Because they had this thing that—well, I don't want to get into it, but—. They treated everybody from New York badly, not just me. They didn't single me out but it still felt as if it was a personal attack. They were not gracious. They were not interested in the show. They felt that the Met should have used them and they were the only authorities.

[00:09:40.68]

I believe that Marta's agreement to that was somewhat of a mistake, because I don't think we were prepared from the point of view of El Museo's culture. We were very tight. We were very close. But we didn't have certain kinds of disciplines that were required to do a show of that nature. And the Met functions on a strict calendar. They're not fooling. We had to adjust to that, because we didn't have that long history of that kind of stuff.

[00:10:20.40]

To Marta's credit—to some of the other people on the staff, such as Hilda Gillis—another woman on the staff, her name was Carmen Morgan—they all produced and excelled. It was an enormous collective effort. It was not just Marta by herself. And unfortunately, I think that that created some of the conflict that came around the road later—within the staff, that is. So I hope I responded to your question.

[00:11:02.70]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Yes, you did. okay. And—I want us to try—we don't have a lot of time today, so hopefully we can cover a lot of ground. I just have some quick questions. I hope we can be concise.

[00:11:25.87]

HIRAM MARISTANY: All right.

[00:11:27.81]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: And my question—I just had a clarifying question about who bought on the lawsuit against Marta Moreno Vega. You mentioned Nitza Tufiño but then you also said "them," right? So it sounded like it was more than her, that there were other people. So I just kind of wanted to clarify who—

[00:11:46.96]

HIRAM MARISTANY: —Nitza Tufiño, Hilda Gillis, and Carmen Morgan. They were the principals that brought the lawsuit against Marta. It was based on several—somethings—or accusations I should say. One, that she abused her authority. That was one of the issues.

[00:12:13.99]

The second issue is that she didn't handle money or she misappropriated money. And then, three, overall, that she was—and this is the appealing kind of thing, because that's what really did a lot of the damage—that somehow she was stifling the rest of the staff. I don't think any of that was true.

[00:12:43.30]

Now, I had to make a decision. The decision was—as I said earlier, Nitza was my friend. I knew Nitza much longer than Marta. On the other side, it was Marta, myself, and Lauren Moreno. Lauren Moreno was Marta's sister-in-law, but she didn't function as a sister. She functioned as the one who took care of the books, who handled the—all of us were all novices to all the positions in the museum, including myself.

[00:13:21.72]

I didn't know how to run a photography department. I had to learn on the fly. I had to do it, you know. But in my case, I was very fortunate that I had a lot of experience with producing work. Far as I was learning, I was producing. But that is the dynamics of the lawsuit, our three women against three other people.

[00:13:51.66]

I was the only male in this hodgepodge of women, okay? And it's not easy being the only male in that circumstance. To this day, I have a deep fondness for Hilda Gillis. She's a special person to me. I really can't say that for Nitza enven though she was my friend. And Carmen was okay, you know, but I never had that kind of dynamic with her. So—trying to be concise.

[00:14:27.02]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Okay. [Laughs.]

All right. I wanted to clarify—you mentioned—we talked a bit about your photography workshop. And I know that it was also—you described it as a political forum, also, right?

[00:14:46.34]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yes.

[00:14:46.71]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: And I just wanted to clarify if you mentored any artists, because I know that there were people new to photography. There were people who are there for the political forum component of the workshop.

[00:14:59.81]

HIRAM MARISTANY: If I did, I'm not aware of it. I don't track things like that. I don't focus on that energy. There's a lot of artists that, when they see me, somehow they say that I trained them, but I don't remember them in that context. Because—what I do remember is that political environment, that you had to pass that test before we got into the mechanics of photography, and documenting, and so on.

[00:15:33.06]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So you did, in that workshop, you did impart knowledge about the practice of photography in addition to—

[00:15:44.13]

HIRAM MARISTANY: —oh yeah—as we were dealing with political realities, we were focusing on photography. And I used to give assignments to people, to look at certain books. For example, one of the assignments I gave was to review the work of Bresson, the China—okay?

[00:16:07.50]

Now technically, he began photographing the wrong people. He was photographing Chiang Kai-shek. Then, as Mao became predominant, he got into that. So my point here, to them, was just because you document them, that doesn't mean that they're progressive. Because a lot of the documentation in, let's say the '50s, were documenting—they were not progressive people.

[00:16:38.94]

I also have assigned a lot of young artists to review the work of Robert Capa. And he did some work in Spain, with regards to the loyalists, with regards to—. And we would have a discussion about what was the Civil War in Spain, why was that going—we were getting to words.

[00:17:01.40]

And we would start defining words like fascism, so that it fit within photography dialogue. But it was extremely political. And I guess a lot of that also led towards the development of some precepts for the awards.

[00:17:23.33]

[00:17:26.02]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Okay. Well, in conversations that you and I have had before, we've talked about other bodies of work that you've created after the initial work that you did, documenting and representing *el barrio*.

[00:17:44.85]

And then you have your Young Lord work. And we've spoken about—the work that you've mentioned to me was the photography of Loíza, and documenting the Afro-Puerto Rican—this Afro-Puerto Rican community in on the island.

[00:18:05.60]

And also, you mentioned color photography, that you've done a body of work of color photography. So we've talked a little bit about Loíza because that overlaps with your work at El Museo del Barrio. But I was wondering if there are other phases in—other bodies of work.

[00:18:26.96]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yeah, [inaudible]. But let me speak to Loíza for a moment, okay? There's a bit of a regret that I was not able to do what I wanted to do. And that was to stay in Loíza for six months, to photograph Loíza without the festival, because my main purpose was to document the festival. That was when the town was walking in all kinds of different types of people.

[00:18:57.11]

I wanted to do something similar to what I was doing in East Harlem. But I also know from my experience in East Harlem, you have to be recognized. People have to trust you before they'll allow you to photograph them when they're at ease or relaxed, and they're not—

[00:19:16.58]

I also regret that I didn't do that in Bélgica, which is the other part of the African influence in that. We went there with a specific purpose of trying to produce work that we did in New York. And we felt very, very strong that our communities were ignoring and not addressing those issues at all, but in particular, not addressing it in New York.

[00:19:45.39]

And we felt very, very strong about trying to document and demonstrate that there is such a thing as an Afroboricua, because we went through some kind of a—hello? Are you there?

[00:20:03.76]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Yes, I'm here.

[00:20:05.03]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Okay, something happened. I don't know what.

[00:20:07.03]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Can you hear me? I can see you. Nothing changed on my end.

[00:20:10.35]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Okay, I do not know what happened. Well, one of the things that I think that makes that difficult is that, sadly, I don't believe that's being done at all today. I think there's—and I feel somewhat a part of that failure, because I didn't train another generation of young artists to feel that that's important.

[00:20:42.15]

You can do whatever you want. But you also should be including that. It should be a part of our processes, in terms of, you know, our history.

[00:20:53.88]

So some of the other stuff that I did—and understand that it was—somebody's trying to reach me. So let me—hold on a second, okay?

[00:21:02.82]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Mm-hmm. Want me to pause?

[00:21:04.56]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yes, pause, please.

[00:21:09.60]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Okay.

[00:21:10.56]

HIRAM MARISTANY: So what I'm trying to say is that I really appreciate Marta Moreno Vega because she was thinking far ahead of her time. And what we do have is as a direct result of her moving in that direction. She gives me some credit because I photographed as much as I could. I didn't just go to take a couple of snapshots.

[00:21:44.10]

One of the limitations that I have—and I still have limitations—is, a lot of that work was lost because, when I left El Museo, I left quite a bit of it there. And my predecessor didn't value it. And a lot of it was lost to either getting rid of it or not preserving it.

[00:22:10.03]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So you left the negatives there?

[00:22:12.22]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yeah, and I thought—and I know I was naive when I think of it—but I thought they belonged here. I thought this was something that should be had at El Museo del Barrio. And if I would have known, I would not have done that. But that's, like, the way I learned, sometimes in the negative experiences.

[00:22:36.84]

In addition, I've done civil rights. In addition, I did some work on the antiwar movement. I did some work on what I call the Black Power movement, which is more like, I guess, some limited work with Malcolm X. And meanwhile, I'm always documenting my community. So it's at best—it's splintered. It's not a concentrated focal effort.

[00:23:11.82]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So the Malcolm X work, meaning that you documented Malcolm X in New York?

[00:23:16.20]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yes, I did. Now I don't have them because I gave—upon his death, I gave the family my contacts and negatives—because, again, I believe it belonged to them. And I'm very sensitive to the fact that I could not profit from his death.

[00:23:37.68]

People called me all kinds of names because they say, Hiram, you can make money off this; you can, you know—people would buy this. There's no record of this. No one has ever seen that. And I gave it to the family.

[00:23:52.03]

I don't even know if it still exists or it's still gone. But it's quite a few contacts and negatives. And I guess that's what my philosophy is. There are certain things that we, as photographers, create that belongs to us, but also other realities as well.

[00:24:19.15]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: And how about the color photography that you'd mentioned to me before?

[00:24:23.02]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Okay, well, I am viewed more—basically as a black-and-white photographer. But back in the days of Museo, I worked in both black and white and color. I cannot do that now, by no means. It's two different mindsets when you're photographing in color or in black and white.

[00:24:44.74]

And consequently, I think, the black and white suffered some because I was using exposures that should have been of color. And sometimes they overlap. And they didn't overlap smoothly.

[00:25:02.08]

But the color was significant to me because, when I started going to Puerto Rico, a lot of the visual images were even enhanced because of the color. I don't think the color was as enhancing in terms of New York. But in Puerto Rico, it was just striking.

[00:25:30.37]

I will consider myself a black-and-white photographer. But I did do quite a bit of color photography. And we're going through mostly color slides I've had. And this is—I'm going to sound real old—but Kodachrome—that's a dying form, but just, actually, in color.

[00:25:57.76]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: And was this when you were doing the research for *The Art Heritage of Puerto Rico*?

[00:26:03.56]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yes.

[00:26:04.21]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So it was that period. But you kept those? So you kept the color ones?

[00:26:07.69]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yes, I did. And that was accidental because I put them in a box. When I left, okay, my assistant, Lee Gomez, he brought them to me. And most people didn't even pay attention to it because I was primarily viewed as a black-and-white photographer. And the black and white that I left there was not valued. So it probably was like an afterthought.

[00:26:37.64]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So when you—are there other bodies of work that you want to mention?

[00:26:48.20]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I can't think of—no. I think it's—the work that I really wanted to get into, but as soon as I got—it led me to the Young Lords and that was the civil rights movement. So that's helter skelter. I did things off and on.

[00:27:14.57]

Once the Young Lords came to the exhibit is when I started to concentrate. And I was doing that almost every day. I was at the office every day. I had to discipline myself to document all—I documented all the major events. And in many cases, I could prepare for them.

[00:27:39.79]

There's a well-known photograph event called the Bronx March. I was given two days notice. So I had to get my equipment together. I had to have a backup camera. I mean, it's not it's not as simple as a lot of people think—you just pick up a camera and start shooting.

[00:27:57.56]

You have more than enough for film. I had to have different types of film because if it was going to rain or—all those factors were taken into consideration. So the preparation for a lot of the Young Lords stuff took a lot of effort and concentration.

[00:28:17.81]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: This was the march that was coming together with the Black Panthers? Is that the one?

[00:28:23.30]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yeah.

[00:28:33.45]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: I wanted to also talk about some of the key exhibitions that you've had over the course of your career. And I know you mentioned you don't remember a lot of that.

[00:28:46.50]

HIRAM MARISTANY: [Laughs.] I can give it my best. [Laughs.]

[00:28:48.99]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: [Laughs.]

But in talking to Miguel Luciano, he mentioned to me that you had discussed with him that you were part of an early exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem—and we briefly touched upon it as well—that was likely organized by Roy DeCarava. And I did find, in a text about him, that he had organized a show at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1969, called *Through Black Eyes*. So does that sound familiar to you?

[00:29:19.51]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Again, but we're talking 1969. What I remember—and this is a strange thing. But I don't remember the dates. What I remember was the incredible feeling of pride I had, being around those guys. He was such an incredible artist and equally, incredible person.

[00:29:45.21]

So I just remember him asking me, Listen, everybody's bringing in five images. But I want you to bring in ten. I said, why do I have to bring in ten? He said, because I asked you to bring in ten.

[00:30:02.89]

He was that kind of a straight shooter. He didn't fool around. But he was a kind of person that I feel very comfortable exhibiting with, very comfortable with him critiquing my work. And if he didn't like something, he put it in a positive context. He was never cruel or rude. So I remember that.

[00:30:32.21]

And then the other person is, that I had a really good relationship with, the then-director, Ed Spriggs. He was also a really, really—he was somebody who—you could see that he was in love with his people. He loved people. He loved Black people. He was not ashamed of it.

[00:30:52.12]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: What institution is this again?

[00:30:54.97]

HIRAM MARISTANY: This is Studio Museum in Harlem.

[00:30:56.64]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Oh, so you didn't—Okay. I didn't recognize what you—

[00:31:00.03]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Ed—

[00:31:01.56]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Edge Space.

[00:31:03.08]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Space? That was his name?

[00:31:04.53]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: No, no. I thought you said Edge Space.

[00:31:06.84]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Oh, no, no, Ed Spriggs was his name.

[00:31:09.66]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Oh, Ed Fries, okay.

[00:31:11.85]

HIRAM MARISTANY: And he was a very, very—I think he was a very cool, very hip person.

[00:31:19.15]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Okay. So I don't know if we want to continue trying to talk about some of the early exhibitions.

[00:31:31.83]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Well, there was another show that I wanted to talk about, that I thought was very, very good. I've only had one show that was not about Puerto Ricans. I had an exhibit at the East Harlem Youth Employment Service. And it was a show when I returned from Mexico.

[00:31:52.01]

And it was well received. It was in their conference room. It's a huge room.

[00:32:00.95]

What I remember about the show was is that I focused on the Indigenous people of Mexico. I was very proud of that. I felt an affinity with poor people of Mexico. They could not speak to me because they couldn't—they didn't know how to speak Spanish. They spoke their own language.

[00:32:24.60]

So the way we communicated, it was point and gesture, just, kind of, you know—but a gentle and kind people. I was very, very proud of that show. But it's the only one that I ever had that didn't directly involve Puerto Ricans.

[00:32:45.63]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: East Harlem Employment Service.

[00:32:47.17]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yeah, East Harlem Youth Employment—Youth Employment.

[00:32:50.05]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Youth Employment?

[00:32:51.13]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yeah, yes. What the other show, that I think that I was very, very excited about, was a show that—wow, it just slipped my mind. Well, we could come back to it. I just remembered right now.

[00:33:18.69]

I'm talking, now, this is in 1968. It's a show that I did at a place that was called The Real Great Society. It was a show in East Harlem, but not about East Harlem. It was a show that showed dancers, singers, performance.

[00:34:00.15]

And I was very proud of that show because I highlighted people who normally did not get highlighted. And that was very, very, very important to me. Then the last show, that was really early in my career, was a show that Marta insisted that I did. And I didn't want to do it.

[00:34:23.94]

It was a show called *El Arte de la Aguja*, The Art of the Needle. And it was basically crochet. And I remember my argument: Martha, I've worked for magazines. I've done an incredible job. So you're going to send me take pictures of a bunch of old ladies crocheting? What the hell's the matter with you? She said, Hiram, do it.

[00:34:49.59]

And we went at it. We went at it. So she won. I am grateful to her for making me do it.

[00:34:59.58]

When the show opened, and we had 16 by 20, silver gelatin prints that I printed of these old people, they came with their entire family—and I mean entire family, from their children, their grandchildren, their nieces, their nephews, their cousins. It was a family gathering.

[00:35:19.01]

Some of them, it was the only time in their lives that they were the center of attraction. Well, just to say, I got in a lot of trouble. Marta was really upset at me. But I took the photos off the wall. And I awarded to two of the participants of the show because it was that kind of sentiment and feeling.

[00:35:45.02]

I'm was very proud of that show. I'm not too proud of the fact that I didn't want to do it. But

it turned out to be a very, very rewarding exhibition.

[00:35:57.72]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Okay. So I want to jump, now, to the last several years, where you've received more attention for your work. And you've been included—your work has been included in several exhibitions. And I wanted to talk about a few of those.

[00:36:29.54]

But first, I wanted to ask you why you think your work is attracting this attention now. What do you think is behind that?

[00:36:37.85]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I have no idea, in terms of me, personally. But I think this is an environment that is coming to pass with many museums and institutions of that nature. I think there's a rush to do something that some people refer to as "diversity."

[00:36:59.96]

I'm all for diversity. I'm not for diversity when it's convenient, to try and reduce the baggage of these institutions. I have been by myself, in the cold, for so long. And I was here for a reason. It was not that I didn't want to participate. But I didn't want my work to become something that people would use for the wrong purpose.

[00:37:29.46]

I wanted it to be—let's look at one of the shows that I think gave me quite a bit of attention. And that was a show that was entitled *Anchor*. Five other artists reviewed my work. And they designed projects around it. And I documented their project.

[00:37:48.65]

That, to me, is a significant way of using my work, and art in general, to produce some constructive elements of it. It's not just art for the sake of art, big-A art as opposed to little-A art. Again, an exhibit that I didn't want to do. [Laughs.]

[00:38:12.22]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So that was the first exhibition that I wanted us to talk about because I think that was an important exhibition for you. And I wanted to find out how did this show come about. It was an exhibition at Hunter's East Harlem gallery that had been fairly recently established in that space. It hadn't been that long in that location.

[00:38:36.99]

So how did this show come about? Was it through the efforts of Pedro Pedraza, who I know is a big supporter of yours, and was a former director of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies, which is obviously part of Hunter University?

[00:38:54.14]

HIRAM MARISTANY: The way it started, I didn't particularly—there were several directors at the center of a Puerto Rican Studies that behaved very badly, very poorly. I didn't want anything to do with it. And me, Pedro Pedraza says, Hiram, you've got to come down. You've got to meet Felo [ph]. You've got to meet—Pedro, I don't want to deal—your academics are—you're driving me crazy, man. I don't want to deal with you guys.

[00:39:20.24]

He continues and continues and continues. I go down and meet Felo. And I am welcome, to my own surprise. I'm shocked. They knew my work. They knew who I was. And then he reminded me of the spirit of who started that place, is his friend, Frank Bonilla, an amazing man, and intelligent man, but a man that never forgot that he was a part of the community. And he respected his community. And he wanted the best for his community. It was not self-serving or self-centered.

[00:39:56.72]

One of the things that began to happen as my time at the center—we wanted to do an exhibit. Felo opened the discussion. And he opened it in a way—or excuse me. Pedro opened the discussion, and then Felo followed through.

[00:40:19.20]

So the issue was who could curate the show of mine. There were a lot of people who, they hang something on the wall and they're curators. You know, what you do, Carmen, is easy. No one has to, you know—you don't have to go to school for that, you know? And every other person is a curator.

[00:40:44.03]

So we went back and forth. There was a miss drawn up. And we systematically eliminated people until we stopped at Susana Leval. Susana Leval was a former director of El Museo del Barrio.

[00:40:59.30]

I always had a lot of respect for her. We also were at odds. And Felo said to me, Well, Hiram, will you have difficulty? I said, No, I will work with her, and I trust her judgment. I trust the fact that she will—she knows photography. She loves photography. And she will be fair.

[00:41:21.68]

And that's what I wanted. I wanted somebody who would be fair. It's not about, you know, selecting work that I like, but it's somebody who probably has—and this is what curators do. They make artists even better than they perceive themselves to be.

[00:41:39.56]

So the agreement was that we were going to do this. When we go to the [inaudible], all kinds of political people started getting involved. I do not do well with politics. When I say no, I mean no. When I say yes, I mean yes. Somehow with politicians, I get so confused with them.

[00:42:03.78]

Long story short, the politics of Hunter College came into focus. The policies of El Centro de Estudios Puertorriqueños came into focus. I feel bad, to this day, that the Centro did not treat Susana Leval the way she should have been treated.

[00:42:28.71]

The administration at Hunter College did not treat me well. And were it not for the curator of the show, Arden Sherman, I would have not done that show.

[00:42:48.97]

Like many of the things that I worry—learn how to handle them—is that I was, indeed, to a large extent, still very much alone. I was used to doing things on my own. And it's very hard to deal with somebody who takes your stuff and goes off into a different room and then comes back. That's not something that I do very well.

[00:43:20.27]

She proved to be very, very good at what she was doing. She knew a lot of stuff, in terms of photography in general, that I didn't know. And I think the convincing reality was is that Susana Leval embraced her and said, Hiram, this is the thing to do. Don't be concerned about that in the way this thing unfolded, in the way it evolved.

[00:43:51.30]

I owe a lot to Susana. I owe a lot to her in the sense that—I hope this doesn't sound corny or trite—but there are people in this world that keep you honest. They tell you what you need

to hear, not what you want to hear.

[00:44:12.49]

And I categorize her as one of those people that, in fact, does that. So she was very, very instrumental in the development of the *Anchor* show. And also, to a certain extent, she was very instrumental in the process of working with the Smithsonian exhibition, *Down These Mean Streets*.

[00:44:37.90]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Well, it's definitely helping connect us, you and I.

[00:44:41.77]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Oh, yeah.

[00:44:42.07]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: And Pedro, and Pedro.

[00:44:44.65]

HIRAM MARISTANY: You and I had some difficulties too.

[00:44:46.70]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: [Laughs.] I know. We did. We worked them out though.

[00:44:49.73]

[Laughs.]

[00:44:53.41]

So one of the things that happened with this exhibition is that you met a younger generation, obviously, including Miguel Luciano, who you've really developed a close bond with. And we'll talk about him later. I just wanted to connect this exhibition with you coming together and meeting Miguel, which I think is also important.

[00:45:20.20]

HIRAM MARISTANY: He was also one of the artists in the *Anchor* show.

[00:45:23.59]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Right, yeah that's what I meant to say—meant to convey. So the second important series of exhibitions that happened, that you were involved in some of the shows, or one of the shows, was the series of 2015 exhibitions on the Young Lords.

[00:45:44.80]

We've already mentioned the exhibition at the Bronx Museum. And you were not part of that. But I know that you were part of the exhibition at El Museo del Barrio. And so I just wonder if you could talk a little bit about that. And I know that this exhibition, this Young Lords exhibition that they did, brought you in touch with El Museo again, after many years of not being in their orbit.

[00:46:10.69]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Well, that's a pretty historical fact. I boycotted El Museo del Barrio for 35 years. I would not go in, nor would I allow anyone to talk to me—in part, because of the behavior of the director that preceded me. And he tried to eliminate a lot of my imagery, a lot of the imagery of the *barrio*, as I said earlier, that I took a lot of photographs of people of color that are, quote, unquote, "not perceived to be Puerto Rican."

[00:46:47.65]

And—

[00:46:51.15]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: —is this Jack Agüeros?

[00:46:52.95]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yes it is—

[00:46:53.95]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: —is this Jack Agüeros?

[00:46:54.90]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I don't want to use his name. But yes, he's the one who preceded me. And essentially, what happened there is, there was a condemnation of El Museo in the following context.

[00:47:11.94]

That administration believed that—the previous administration—that we were illegitimate. We didn't do anything of any value. And that he was going to make the El Museo del Barrio a real, world-class, museum. And his philosophy was that—and this is my interpretation—that, in exchange for bringing that kind of world-class status, that he was going to minimize and marginalize Puerto Ricans and bring in the Latin American experience.

[00:47:43.90]

I have no problem with the Latin Americans being a part of the Museo del Barrio, but not at the cost of Puerto Ricans. And I refuse to deal with that and to allow that. He had done some things that were really uncalled for and unnecessary. But he, literally, threw work of mine out, into a bin, in front of El Museo del Barrio. And the community was outraged with that.

[00:48:12.52]

A lot of people don't know this, man. But I got the heat. Now let me just say this, because it's important. I didn't do anything wrong. But people came to me and were angry that I threw the work out. They did not make the connection that someone else did it.

[00:48:34.84]

What is important here is, that boycott, I just said, You guys are going to do that? Do that. It's okay. I'm not going to—I just will not participate. And that created a lot of problems between me and Susana. She would send me a letter and stuff, and I would return it. I just didn't want to do it.

[00:48:55.20]

The way the Young Lords show came into being is—and I've got to give Arden Sherman credit. She and fellow curators—because you guys hang out together—you have curator meetings, you know, curator beings. I don't know what you call it.

[00:49:15.99]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: [Laughs.]

[00:49:17.45]

HIRAM MARISTANY: She was meeting with one of the curators from El Museo del Barrio. What was her name? It'll come to me.

[00:49:26.67]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Rocío? Rocío Aranda?

[00:49:28.28]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yes. So Rocío was talking to her. She said, Yeah, but I've been trying to contact and reach this photographer in East Harlem. He's well known. He's famous—everybody—you know? But he doesn't respond to anything that I send.

[00:49:43.25]

And she said, Is he from East Harlem? She says, Oh, you're talking about Hiram. She says, Yeah, I've been trying to reach him. She said, Well, I just had a show with him. And she said, Wow, you mean—because—and this is part of the arrogance of El Museo back then, was that if you didn't have a show at El Museo, that means you were dead. You didn't do anything. They didn't perceive you as working anywhere else.

[00:50:08.12]

So she then comes to me. And she says, Hiram, listen. I spoke with her. They're trying to do a Young Lords show. I said, Listen to the absurdity of that. Just take this into consideration. They're going to do a show on the Young Lords—Hold on a moment. It's my daughter.

[00:50:33.62]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Okay, I'm going to pause.

[00:50:35.60]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yes, please.

[00:50:41.25]

Just craziness. They're trying to do a show. And The Bronx is trying to do a show. The lower side's doing a show. And none of them have work.

[00:50:55.35]

And there were some perceptions that were made, that I was going to be in part of the Bronx show, which I resent very much. My name was used improperly. And some people used my name to fundraise.

[00:51:09.12]

And some of the funders, when they came to the show, they were extremely upset with me, as if I misled them. And that's the kind of thing that happens to me. I get into trouble for something I did not do. So Rocío finally—I agreed to meet with her. And we meet at La Fonda Boricua.

[00:51:32.97]

She comes. She says, Hiram, thank you for meeting with me. I just wanted to let you know. So Arden, in that day, it was a tag team. Both of them got on me, Hiram, you've got to do this, dah, dah, dah, dah.

[00:51:48.37]

So I said, well, look. Okay, I'll help you. Let me know what you have. And I will fill in the gaps.

[00:51:56.61]

She said, We don't have anything. I said, But you have a show projected to open in six weeks. What do you mean you don't have anything? Long story short, I agreed to do it. And I started printing.

[00:52:12.05]

I printed for a month and a half, every day, to produce 35 prints for that show. I was paid ridiculously—a fraction of what I was—but it was important to do because I thought it would be in the service of the community.

[00:52:30.65]

The Museo had enough problems. They did not need to do the following, to have a bad show on the Young Lords. That would have been insulting. And that would have led to all kinds of—who knows what the repercussions of that would have been.

[00:52:49.13]

And for whatever it's worth, I don't take credit for things that I have not done. But I'm going to take credit for this. I prevented a disaster because, if they would have put some of the nonsense they had up in the Bronx in *el barrio*, it would have been very, very difficult.

[00:53:12.42]

So that show, I'm very proud of. It was done almost overnight. It was done in five weeks. What I think is important is that it gave a certain credibility to El Museo again because it's the first show in a long time that was about *el barrio*. It was about Puerto Ricans. And was about poor people.

[00:53:41.69]

And subliminally, El Museo didn't get that message. They didn't even see that. They didn't produce a catalog. They didn't do—and when they do other things—quote, unquote, "Latin American"—they put the time, the effort, and the money into it. And we seem to be stepchildren.

[00:54:02.77]

And I got on Patrick and his staff and the directors and the board of directors. And I told them all, man, This behavior has to stop. You think that people are stupid. And you think that you can play a pacification program with us, give us song and dance. You're big in a dance group. You have some people put on skirts and they do Bomba. And that's all we are.

[00:54:34.83]

No, we are as much as part of the exhibition criteria as anyone. We are not secondary. And I—well, you can hear it in my tone when I'm speaking to you, how intense I get—because at times—and it's not done on the malice; it's just accepted. They don't realize that they're doing it.

[00:54:58.78]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: So these are conversations that you have with Patrick now because I don't think Patrick was a director during that show. That was Danielle, right? I think Danielle was the director.

[00:55:09.94]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Thank you for clarifying that.

[00:55:11.30]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Yeah.

[00:55:11.59]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I have a lot of respect for Patrick. I have, equally, a lot of respect for the head curator, you know? The point here is they are in the process of recovering a lot of bad behavior that they did not create. They still have to answer for it.

[00:55:36.11]

And that's something that I think—Rodrigo Mora's the chief curator—I have a lot of respect for him. He knows what he's doing. And there's an old poet that wrote something that I think is very important. And it's appropriate for this statement right now. He said, I would be Puerto Rican if I was born on the moon.

[00:56:04.80]

And his name is Juan Antonio Corretjer. And that's a sentiment that a lot of Nuyorquinos have to feel, because we feel—because we were not born on the island. That's a little personal to you too, Carmen. So I'm not going to beat you up. But—

[00:56:20.76]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: What did I do? [Laughs.]

[00:56:22.86]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Not being born on the island.

[00:56:25.08]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Well, what island? The Dominican Republic? I'm not Puerto Rican so I'm not going to be going to Puerto Rico.

[00:56:30.06]

HIRAM MARISTANY: The Dominican Republic.

[00:56:32.23]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: [Laughs.] Well, my parents migrated. I don't have control over that.

[00:56:36.52]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Well, neither did I. But the point is that we're classified less than because we were not born on the island.

[00:56:46.71]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Oh yeah, absolutely. Yeah.

[00:56:48.74]

HIRAM MARISTANY: There was also a perception that in order to be a good curator, you have to be Puerto Rican. That's not true at all. And I think Rodrigo demonstrates that. And other people demonstrate it. The point is that we should always be going for the best curator, whether they're green, Martian, Russian, Italian, Chinese, or what have you. And that's the premise that I'm trying to focus on.

[00:57:18.48]

So I hope that gives you a sense of the kinds of exhibitions I've been engaged in, and why I felt they were important. The last exhibit that I want to let you know that I personally believe was my baby, was a show that we did. It was called *Nostalgia*.

[00:57:37.13]

We took a typical Puerto Rican living room, bedroom, apartment. And we put it in the gallery. And we were reminding people that our aesthetics is not just in painting or etchings or graphics.

[00:57:55.35]

Some of our aesthetics is what we choose to live with, what we put on, in terms of our clothes, the way we comb my hair, the lipstick that we use. All the things that are of value to us, is part of our aesthetics.

[00:58:10.08]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Was this El Museo?

[00:58:11.49]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

[00:58:13.14]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: What was that show called? It was called *Nostalgia*?

[00:58:15.93]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yeah, *Nostalgia*. Yeah. And I have some images of it where I had my mother's sofa, with the plastic on it, with the little dollies. In my household, you could destroy the place—do not move the dollies. Just don't mess with those, you know?

[00:58:44.15]

Again, I'm very, very fortunate and very, very blessed that I was around those things. There's a lot of other programs, that were not exhibitions, that were equally as profound, in particular for me—the workshops—the adult and children's workshops were profound elements for me.

[00:59:08.70]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: I know, there's that nice photograph that I remember you showing me, of the young girl—little girl—in front of El Museo. And she probably was a child in one of the workshops or—

[00:59:20.54]

HIRAM MARISTANY: —oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. And what's important, at the end of the workshop season—we used to have a cycle, I think, of six weeks—we would have an exhibit of their work. And we would honor one child with making the poster, from that group.

[00:59:41.73]

And I got into a big, big controversy, and a fight. One year, the work that was the best was the work of an African American kid. And people raised hell. Oh, you can't do that; you've got to have—it's got to be—it's the best work. And that's what we were going to do. And that's where we put it up. I took a lot of heat; but I believe I was right, because it's about the best work.

[01:00:17.59]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: We could also briefly just touch on *Down These Mean Streets*, an exhibition that I organized. And as I did with a lot of my projects at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, these were exhibitions that were created out of acquisitions, efforts to really expand the collection.

[01:00:44.28]

So they were permanent collection exhibitions. But most of the work on view were new acquisitions. It was new work that I was bringing into the collection. And I feel that exhibition really helped bring your work to a national—it helped to make it more visible nationally because we're a national institution. That's one way that I looked at it.

[01:01:08.00]

HIRAM MARISTANY: That's very true, very true.

[01:01:09.66]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: But I wanted to get your thoughts about your participation in that exhibition.

[01:01:15.73]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Well [laughs], it's not an easy process. But it was a very interesting process. And I think, what I enjoyed the most of it is, I was being perceived on a national level for the first time in my life.

[01:01:40.39]

The Smithsonian decided to announce part of the show, and it used—they made a poster, even though they don't make posters, utilizing one of my images.

[01:01:54.91]

Then one of the magazines, they utilized another image, which I'm very proud of. It was *Children at Play*. In its way, it was saying something to me, that—it validated something that I could not do in the past,

[01:02:15.80]

Somebody else said that I am an artist. I know that I was an artist. But it's really important for people who—and like myself, I've been on the outside. I've never been a part of popular shows. I don't follow trends. I'm not doing things because, you know, it will further my career.

[01:02:44.37]

But that show was very, very significant to me because, when I walk in, one of the center panels when you walk in, were my visuals. People came to the show from New York. I was surprised to see so many barrio-ites that came to that show.

[01:03:03.49]

And it gave me a recognition that I did not have. And it also instilled something that I thought was very, very critical, and instilled a sense of pride in my family and my children. They were overwhelmed by that.

[01:03:23.98]

And I'm very, very pleased with the show. I'm also pleased with the fact that there's a permanency to being a part of a collection in the Smithsonian. And whenever I'm discussing to somebody, and I need to show them some work, I pull out my phone, go to Smithsonian, and there it is.

[01:03:52.78]

It's documented. I don't have to say anything. My name appears under the title of the Smithsonian Museum of Art. So I'm very thankful for that.

[01:04:05.98]

It doesn't dismiss a lot of the previous behavior. But, potentially, it's a beginning. Potentially, people like you going there and moving on, hopefully somebody that replaces you will be in the same context as you. There's hope that the change is evolving.

[01:04:34.98]

I'll be very honest. five, ten years ago, I would not have believed that would have been possible. I would not have believed that I would ever be at the Smithsonian—because, fundamentally, I'm the guy that agitates. I'm the guy that points out. I'm the guy that screams, the emperor is not wearing any clothes.

[01:04:55.74]

Some people applaud that. But most people resent that. So it's part of what I define as being an artist.

[01:05:11.65]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: The last a project that I wanted to talk about is Miguel Luciano's public art project, Mapping Resistance, which shared the history of the Young Lords in situ, by placing large-scale reproductions of your Young Lords photography throughout *el barrio*, right in the community where these major events took place, like the garbage offensive, for instance.

[01:05:42.67]

How did you work with Miguel on this project? And what has been the impact of seeing your work through the eyes of someone of a younger generation?

[01:05:54.52]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I think that is an amazing thing. And I tell him all the time. We joke with each other. I don't have a reputation of being very—that I joke a lot. He is comfortable enough now—

[01:06:13.28]

When it comes to photography, I am very serious. I enjoy working with him because I learn from him. He teaches me. And he shows me directions and paths that I never would take.

[01:06:29.63]

We had a debate, argument slash shouting match, about whether we should put the images at ground level so that our community can actually walk up to the images and touch them, and/or potentially vandalize them, or do whatever.

[01:06:50.82]

And I think, both of us, in some way or another, felt that they were going to be vandalized, because that was a pattern of a lot of things that happened in East Harlem. To my amazement, they were not vandalized. They were respected and they were honored.

[01:07:13.44]

One of the important things that I hope that I'm doing, when I relate to Miguel—I have a lot of experience that he will never have. He can live through some of that experience of mine, and hopefully not make the mistakes I made, but move on and continue. I'm trying to pass the baton on to the next generation.

[01:07:42.99]

He's not a photographer. I am desperate to find young photographers who want to do the work. Sadly, I meet some young photographers and they don't want to do the work.

[01:07:56.13]

Photography is hard. Photography is not point and shoot. Photography is not pull out your cell phone. You have to understand optics. You have to understand a lot of stuff to do it right. And you have to be in command—the artist, not the camera.

[01:08:16.24]

There's no such thing as good automatic settings to create art. It's the artists that makes those decisions. And whether he makes the right decisions or the wrong decisions, that person is responsible, not a mechanical-functioning apparatus.

[01:08:38.68]

So I am thankful and grateful. He's always been very kind to me. And you also—when I start talking about the siege at People's Church, when 300 policemen came for 15 Young Lords—how that felt.

[01:09:04.24]

People want to fantasize—romanticize that experience. There were a lot of nights I live in terror. I was always very fearful that I would not survive and my children would be without a father.

[01:09:19.16]

We were dealing with COINTEL. And he listens to this, and says, Wow, this stuff is amazing. He's not—he's eager to find out that history. He's eager to find out the history of the exhibition at the Met. He's a resident. He has a residency at the Met.

[01:09:39.57]

But he's also challenging the Met to include us—and not include us because they're being benevolent, because they're doing us a favor, they're doing something because they think it's the right thing to do.

[01:09:55.80]

He and his generation have to start functioning as if it is our right to be there. We do not have to ask permission. And if they don't have us there, there's something wrong with them.

[01:10:12.31]

So it's—when I'm around him, I feel good. When I'm around him—the truth is that I have a lot of hope in a lot of young people when I look at him.

[01:10:25.75]

There's a lot of stuff I don't like—the kind of disregard they have for tradition. They like to break rules that they don't understand. And we go at it.

[01:10:41.19]

But it's important that I have a tremendous respect for him. I honor him. And I'm going to work with him as much as I can, because, in the final analysis, he works. He does the job. He doesn't sit around and talk about what he's going to do, like a lot of people who—they do one tenth of the work and they want to take 100 percent of the credit.

[01:11:17.00]

What we do is hard. So projects that I like the most is—Mapping Resistance, I think, was a wonderful project because we had an opportunity to have lectures. And we had an opportunity to have tours. We had an opportunity to reach a new generation of people who—

[01:11:43.20]

And this is what he kept saying to me because I don't say things—he says, you don't see this, but when you stand in front of people and you're talking—he's talking 50 years ago—I can't do that. I can say the year. But I wasn't even born back then.

[01:12:01.10]

So my answer to you is that I'm in awe of that generation. I'm in awe of the generation. I wish that I had another 50 or 60 years with my knowledge now, and we'd be doing so much more. But the physical body, that does not perform like I did when I was in my 30s.

[01:12:27.74]

Again, I'm grateful that I still speak to my community. And he helps me do it.

[01:12:43.05]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Yeah, well, I'm definitely part of the Miguel Luciano fan club. [Laughs.]

You don't have to tell me.

[01:12:49.08]

HIRAM MARISTANY: All right, cool.

[01:12:53.07]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: It was recently announced that you would be participating in the fifth edition of Greater New York, produced by MoMA PS1—

[01:13:02.34]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yes.

[01:13:03.93]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: —which is an important survey of artists that's happened—as I say, it's the fifth edition, so it's happened five times before—focusing on artists living and working in the New York City area, broadly defined.

[01:13:19.92]

And they're doing things a little differently now, because they're asking more established artists, like you. It's more of an emerging artist series, historically. This year, they're doing something different. And are you excited about participating in that show?

[01:13:38.53]

HIRAM MARISTANY: I am very excited. One of the problems I have with all these damn institutions, they don't seem to give artists enough time. They have these bizarre schedules.

[01:13:49.32]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: When did you find out that you were going to be part of the show?

[01:13:53.10]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Okay, let me see.—Two weeks—three weeks ago—that I was definitely going to be in the show.

[01:14:03.16]

See, one of the problems is also that you have dialogue. And the dialogue, until they say, Yes, you're in the show—you know, you don't set in gear.

[01:14:15.70]

Now, when I did find out about it, I was working on another project, *Takeover*. It was a film project. So I've had my—my hands are in several different pies simultaneously.

[01:14:29.74]

Right now, I'm working on that exhibition. And I'm also opening up a discussion with the El Museo del Barrio to do a show that is scheduled for 2022 or '23.

[01:14:42.79]

So—I'm constantly working. And I had to take two weeks off because right after the premiere of the film, I was exhausted, in part because I was working with some crazy people at La Fonda. They drove me crazy. But I have to learn how to pace myself much better.

[01:15:14.60]

So right now, I'm focusing my energy on doing the MoMA exhibition. That is priority. But it's a different style. It's a different—now I'm searching for negatives. And that's—

[01:15:31.83]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: —so what work are you presenting there?

[01:15:34.47]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Well, initially I gave them—I made available 20 images. And they selected 14 of them. I'm not sure if all 14 are going to be in the exhibit. But they were very, very excited about the images they did select, because most of them were non-traditional images, and specifically as they relate to the Young Lords.

[01:16:00.96]

So I'm finding negatives. I have to also scan certain negatives. I have a whole other list of problems that are—a lot of my negatives are 50 years old. And they're biodegrading. And I have to come up with alternatives.

[01:16:22.30]

I have to produce the highest-quality silver gelatin prints. That's not an easy task. The place where I used to print, at Hunter College, I no longer have access to due to the pandemic. If I have to send this to a commercial lab, it's a small fortune.

[01:16:42.28]

So there are a lot of logistics and factors that you need to have time in order to do these things. And it just seems as that, you know—the clock seems to be accelerating. And it's not easy. It's not easy.

[01:17:01.71]

But I'm excited about the show. I'm also excited—the fact that this will be the first time in a long time that I've been in a collaborative show with artists that I don't know. The *Anchor* show, I knew most of the artists, not all of them. But I had a certain comfort zone with them. These artists, I will not know. So it's an interesting dynamic. So I'm excited about it.

[01:17:35.12]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Great. So in addition to printing from slides from the past, or from negatives from the past, I know that you're still working on building—organizing your archive. Are you taking new photographs? What are you working on now?

[01:17:54.77]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Okay, what I'm doing is that I'm making a radical transition from analog to digital. I consider myself somewhat of a student. And if I'm going to do digital, I'm going to do digital really well.

[01:18:15.24]

So I'm in the process of learning certain aspects of digital that are important. I'm also attempting to buy a really good digital camera that is not just a conventional camera, a camera that is specifically functions within the digital reality.

[01:18:36.24]

I will always be documenting my community. But one of the things I have not been doing lately is that I have not been going to events. And that's what drives a lot of my documentation: events and certain people.

[01:18:54.79]

I'm also doing things like—two years ago, I went to six or seven different graduations. And it's important that I start showing those kinds of things as well because they were not important to me at one time.

[01:19:15.93]

So I think I'm increasing the documentation level, in terms of understanding the more community-based elements that are not protests, that are not those kinds of events. I'm looking more towards common, ordinary events that need to be documented.

[01:19:41.06]

I'm documenting dancers. I've always documented dancers. And I'm trying to create the following. As a side business, or business that will be eventually primary, I'm producing what I call Boricua-centric posters.

[01:20:06.60]

And the necessity for those processes is that I give enough of an explanation of the image without overloading it. And the posters will be cliché so that they're far more affordable than silver gelatins. Silver gelatins are very expensive. And a lot of my community, one, cannot or will not spend that kind of money, because we don't have a community that buys art.

[01:20:38.29]

That should change. But the reality is that they still are not buying art at any match level. So those are the new directions I'm moving in.

[01:20:52.04]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: That's great to hear, that you're embracing digital photography.

[01:20:55.73]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Oh, yeah. I'm going to be very good at it too.

[01:20:59.66]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: I really look forward to seeing what you do with that.

[01:21:03.04]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Oh, yeah. I have I have a couple of ideas that—I've seen some things that I—and that's what I think I love about digital. It's a new frontier. You can do stuff that literally would be almost impossible to do in analog.

[01:21:22.79]

Analog has the same quality that you still can't get from digital. But there's certain qualities in digital that are just sensational, and in particular, layering. That's one of the things I really want to master. So—

[01:21:41.25]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Well, thank you, Hiram, for making and devoting so much time to this interview, over three days. And I just want to wish you a happy birthday.

[01:21:53.10]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Thank you.

[01:21:54.45]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Today is your birthday. And you're—

[01:21:56.94]

HIRAM MARISTANY: —getting older. [Laughs.]

[01:21:59.55]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: [Laughs.]

And it's really been a pleasure to know your work, to be able to present it in an exhibition, and to be able to know you, and to have this conversation. I am hoping that this—

[01:22:13.22]

HIRAM MARISTANY: —my honor, my pleasure. Let me just say something because it's very, very important. I always say this to you. And I think it's important.

[01:22:20.69]

I want to thank you, because most of the things in my life that are positive did not happen easily. I had to work. I had to earn that. And the show that we did together, I'm very, very proud of that—very, very proud of it. That's something that—you should know that. I think of you very highly.

[01:22:48.44]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Thank you, Hiram. And *Down These Mean Streets* was a very special

exhibition for me too. It was special for me because I may not be from *el barrio*. But I'm from New York. I'm Latina. And those images were about me. They were about me too. Right?

[01:23:06.92]

And your work, we located in the center of the exhibition. It was in the beginning. And we had a poster of your work. And that was what drew people to the space.

[01:23:20.15]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Oh, the kids fell out when they saw that.

[01:23:22.07]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Yeah, but your actual work was in the center of the exhibition. And I always called that the heart. It was the heart of the show. It really was the heart of the show because of the kinds of images that you were presenting—

[01:23:35.27]

HIRAM MARISTANY: -well, thank you. And that means a lot to me—

[01:23:37.02]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: —it was very—it was—I really—I put it there deliberately.

[01:23:42.41]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Well, thank you. And one of the things that I think is important is that, as I continue to evolve, I really want to have an opportunity that—what Hunter is trying to make it relevant.

[01:24:03.95]

If possible, I would love to do something where I can be in a gathering with people, specifically young people, young artists, and we can have dialogue, because one of the problems, I think, that East Harlem has, other than el Taller Boricua and El Museo del Barrio art space, there are very few places that we even engage or talk about art.

[01:24:30.68]

And sometimes, you know, you need to feed that. And I think that sometimes, young artists believe that being an artist is as easy and as simple as going on the internet.

[01:24:55.63]

And I think that we have to somehow find a way to start communicating better. I think there's a real void there. And I think I'm prepared to try and change that. I'm prepared to work with—and I always put a precursor on it because I really want to have serious people.

[01:25:20.52]

I want to have people who are prepared to work. Because, God knows, people—if they take your perception that it's easy, they will quickly say, Oh, yeah, I want to be a photographer because it's easy. It's simple. I want to be a curator because all I've got to do is hang it on the wall. And we have to start doing a better job of educating our artists about art realities. So enough said.

[01:25:53.73]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Well, thank you, Hiram, again, for being part of this oral history. Thank you on behalf of the Archives of American Art. And we look forward to sharing it with scholars and the public.

[01:26:06.55]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Okay.

[01:26:08.04]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Thank you.

[01:26:09.00]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Thank you.

[01:26:09.84]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Thank you very much.

[01:26:10.45]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Goodnight now. All the best.

[01:26:11.58]

E. CARMEN RAMOS: Okay, goodnight. All right. Bye bye.

[01:26:13.35]

HIRAM MARISTANY: Yeah.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]