

# COMMONWEALTH: A NOTE FROM THE COLLABORATORS

*By* The Editors

**O**ur project started as a simple line of questioning. Curators from three institutions, each based in a US political territory designated as a “commonwealth,” chose to think together about what that term actually means. In this partnership among Beta-Local (San Juan, PR), the Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University (Richmond, VA), and Philadelphia Contemporary (Philadelphia, PA), we set out to investigate its history, its utopian potential, and its limitations. As we know, the United States of America began as a colony founded on land taken from indigenous peoples. Its revolutionary texts espoused the idea of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—while embracing slavery and denying women the right to vote. In the nineteenth century the USA became an empire itself, and it remains so through its ongoing colonization of Puerto Rico. How is one to swallow such massive contradictions?

Since 2018, the curatorial team has been meeting in our respective cities, considering these questions and formulating a collaborative project—one that would reflect shared values and commitments while respecting differences in our institutions, our

contexts, and our perspectives. Through our collaborative work as well as community processes in each city, we explored the meaning of commonwealth. We explored our connection to the land, our unity or division as a common people, and the voices of resistance that come together to fight injustice within our communities. Together, our curatorial team also selected a group of artists from whom to commission works that would respond to ideas of “common wealth” and “common debt.” We initially planned to present them through exhibitions in all three cities, along with a more traditional print publication and localized public programming—but the onset of COVID-19 forced us to pivot.

We agreed that each organization would take the lead on one re-formulated component of the project: Beta-Local would lead on this re-envisioned publication, the ICA would focus on a reconceived exhibition and work with the artists to adapt their commissioned projects into a spatially distanced indoor-outdoor exhibition, and Philadelphia Contemporary would emphasize its community council, regranting, and a neighborhood banner initiative. The two physical manifestations of *Commonwealth* are now the banner project and a billboard by Firelei Baez in Philadelphia (October 15, 2020-January 10, 2021), and an exhibition of all the commissioned works at the ICA occur both in and around the building to allow socially distanced viewing (September 12, 2020 – January 10, 2021). The newly-obvious benefits of digital programming also opened paths to collaborative digital programs that link our communities and connect to others.

*Commonwealth* is organized and curated by Beta-Local co-directors Pablo Guardiola, Michael Linares, and nibia pastrana santiago and former co-director Sofía Gallisá Muriente; ICA at VCU Chief Curator Stephanie Smith; Noah Simblist, Chair of Painting + Printmaking at VCUarts; and Kerry Bickford, Director of Programs, Nicole Pollard, Program Coordinator and Nato Thompson, Sueyun and Gene Locks Artistic Director at Philadelphia Contemporary.

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