

# COMMON STAKES – LOCAL PERSPECTIVES: BETA-LOCAL

*By* Pablo Guardiola and Michael Linares

**W**hen Beta-Local was invited to participate in the collaborative Commonwealth project, our initial response was one of alarm. We went from being alarmed to considering the offer and then deciding to actively participate in it.

To begin with, the concept of “commonwealth” means something different within the immediate geopolitical context of Beta-Local, which is Puerto Rico and the Caribbean. Its local meaning is not the same as in Pennsylvania and Virginia. In plain English, “commonwealth” refers to the legal definition of Puerto Rico’s relationship with the United States. The term is only used in the USA. This concept, or legal statute, in Puerto Rican Spanish is called *Estado Libre Asociado de Puerto Rico* (ELA), roughly translated as the Free Associated State of Puerto Rico. Since 1952, our “commonwealth” has been a kind of smoke screen designed during the Cold War to evade a concrete reality: Puerto Rico is a colony of the United States. Today it is an anachronistic status that still applies out of sheer inertia. Even the claims of its injustices and failures are anachronistic. Is there someone who still believes today, in the 21st century, in emancipation

struggles within the hyper neo-liberal global paradigm? When it comes to decolonial practices, in Puerto Rico we're still dealing with the basics. To sum up, in English Puerto Rico is considered an "Unincorporated Organized Territory with Commonwealth Status," in Spanish it is the *Estado Libre Asociado de Puerto Rico*. In the Caribbean West Indies, it also means something else. But this should be discussed elsewhere.

The ELA was presented at the time as a promise of modernity. For many, it was and continues to be (consciously or unconsciously) the only possible modernity for the island. Like many other political projects from the middle of the last century, it ended up being a failure. It was a fallacy, developed in part by exclusion. It was argued from the beginning that human rights were equal to acquisition rights, not common goods. The social mobility of some was possible thanks to the disappearance of others. A clear example of this has been the massive (and in some cases, forced) migration of Puerto Ricans to the United States (first to Hawaii and New York, and in present times to states like Florida and Texas, among others) and to other territories (for example, St. Croix). Puerto Rican migration has been a cyclical phenomenon, and it continues exponentially today. It becomes impossible to articulate an autonomous voice from Puerto Rico; it will always be conditioned by our unilateral relationship with the United States.

For Beta-Local, participating in this project presents the possibility of operating within a system of non-unilateral relations with the United States. The organization's relationship with the USA is a zig zag. Within that situation, it is necessary to find opportunities to interact from other latitudes, generating autonomous and horizontal pockets of action, in

direct relationships (sometimes difficult and complex) with collaborators, both here and there, locally and abroad, expanding the possibilities of that zig zag.

*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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