



COMMON STAKES — LOCAL PERSPECTIVES: INSTITUTE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART AT VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY

By Noah Simblist and Stephanie Smith

For the ICA, *Commonwealth* brings up a number of important issues. First, the notion of “the commons” is one that the ICA is centered on. It has promised to be a common space for multiple communities within Virginia Commonwealth University and the city of Richmond. Second, the notion of “wealth” is something that neither the museum nor the university define exclusively in monetary terms, instead advocating for value in terms of culturally or educationally enriching experiences. At the same time, the ICA and VCU acknowledge that actual capital has real material effects on our institutions despite their lofty goals.

The university is a particular context for the ICA. It promises to be a space for discourse and knowledge but is also a major force of development. As a result VCU is an active agent in the complexity of class and race in the city of Richmond. To develop this project Noah Simblist and Stephanie Smith taught an undergraduate seminar on the topic of Commonwealth in spring 2019. This course was a space for the curators to collaborate with students in an early phase of research for the project and to hone in on the key concepts of the project. They read historical and theoretical texts ranging from the 1776 *Virginia Declaration of Rights* to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's 2009 book *Commonwealth*. Other texts included Silvia Federici's "Feminism and the Politics of the Commons" and Taylor Keeanga-Yamahtta's book *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*.

But the context of this class, and the university itself, is the city in which it was held. Histories of class- and race-based divisions are inscribed in the city of Richmond itself, as are histories of resistance, resilience, and coalition. Richmond was the capital of the Confederacy, as evidenced by Monument Avenue and other traces of its racist past. But it also was a foundational site of the American Revolution and the beginnings of American democracy. As a way to extend study to the public, the ICA presented *Summer Sessions: Commonwealth*, an extensive public research and discussion series that considered the ideas of Commonwealth in relation to Richmond. It was developed in partnership with local activists and artists, several of whom we went on to commission (Duron Chavis as well as Quilian Riano of DSGN AGNC,, Alicia Díaz, and The Conciliation Project, and program partner Rebecca Keel of Southerners on New Ground). *Summer Sessions: Commonwealth* was organized into thematic segments that included Natural Resources, Built Environment, Dependence

+ Independence, Assembly, and Public Domain. These sessions included lectures, workshops, performances, and field trips. The project was designed by DSGN AGNC + Fundación Horizontal + El Equipo Mazzanti, as a flexible discursive space that allowed for multiple forms of education and engagement. Significantly, it was sited in the first floor gallery of the ICA, the same site where the exhibition of the commissioned works can be found in fall 2020.

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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