



COMMON STAKES — LOCAL PERSPECTIVES: PHILADELPHIA CONTEMPORARY

By Kerry Bickford and Nicole Pollard

Philadelphia Contemporary was founded in 2016 on the principle that partnerships across the city of Philadelphia and beyond it would strengthen and enrich its curatorial program. Since that time, we have continued to explore the potential of partnerships to disrupt the power dynamics of cultural institutions, using our programs as opportunities to cede and share power with cultural producers across the city and around the world. *Commonwealth* has been an important opportunity for us to enact these values, particularly in how we build trust with local communities and hold ourselves accountable to their input. Philadelphia Contemporary is currently in the early stages of conceiving and designing a permanent museum building centered around these principles of partnership. The lessons we learn from our work on *Commonwealth* will guide the shape of our institution as we transition into a more permanent home.

In early 2019, Philadelphia Contemporary moved into The Bank at the intersection of Lancaster and Powelton Avenues in West

Philadelphia, a former branch of the United Bank of Philadelphia that was transformed into a local arts and community center in 2017. The renovation of The Bank was part of a larger push by institutional and residential stakeholders to create spaces to address how decades of gentrification and urban renewal had displaced families and communities and drastically altered the character of the neighborhoods that had once made up Philadelphia’s Black Bottom. The stakes and inadequacies of our “commonwealth,” and the role of community organizing and local historians in creating new possibilities for sharing local wealth more equitably, could not have been clearer. Philadelphia Contemporary’s manifestation of the *Commonwealth* project was developed out of our dialogues with these histories, communities, and geographies.

For us, the term “commonwealth” is meant to identify both a set of values and a set of processes by which we can gather and mobilize the input of community stakeholders. Throughout the process of developing *Commonwealth*, we have worked to foster relationships between our cultural institution and the residents and stakeholders of the West Philadelphia neighborhoods of Mantua, Powelton Village, West Powelton, Mill Creek and Belmont, not only for the short term, but for many years to come. Philadelphia Contemporary formed a Community Council to inform various aspects of the local manifestation of the project, and also to set a precedent for a more collaborative, civically engaged program in the future. The council members have met monthly from August 2019 to October 2020 and have served as ambassadors to their communities in gathering and providing important insights on the neighborhood’s history and current needs and interests. They have helped to develop light-pole banners along lower Lancaster Avenue and direct a

substantial regrating initiative in which funds from the William Penn Foundation were distributed to support a number of local organizations in West Philadelphia: Al Bustan Seeds of Culture, Neighborhood Bike Works, Scribe Video Center, Spiral Q, the Tiberino Museum, and Tiny WPA.

Our hope is that we can continue to learn from our work on *Commonwealth*, using this community guidance to inform how we can continue to invite civic participation from the multitude of neighborhoods and communities within the city of Philadelphia in ways that help to plan, direct and shape our future programs. The processes of “common wealth” have also guided our efforts to share resources with cultural organizations in these neighborhoods, and to seek to learn from forms of mutual aid that these communities have developed and maintained.

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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