

WHAT IS “COMMONWEALTH”

By The Editors

The United States of America can be described as many things but “a place where people hold wealth in common” would not be one of them. If not wealth, then what do we hold in common? Who is the “we” that defines our nation, our states, our cities, and our communities?

Maybe we shouldn’t let go of holding wealth in common. Can we redefine “wealth” and redistribute it in ways that foster greater well-being for all? Essentially, can we draw on the collective power embedded in the term “commonwealth” while at the same time recognizing its connection to exploitation and colonialism? In the Puerto Rican context, Commonwealth has a very particular meaning, associated with American colonialism. This fact has been a recurring touchstone for this project to consider.

In the spring and summer of 2020, the pandemic has challenged our public health infrastructure on both a local and global level. It has prompted big and urgent questions: Do we rely on government or private corporations to keep us healthy and safe? Are these our only two options? And when we say “government,” do we mean local or federal or both? Who knows what’s best for us and who has the ability to follow through on a promise of care? In addition to the public health crisis, we saw a collective pushback against racism and police violence on both a national

and global scale. The offense that called forth this rage was a betrayal of the commonwealth.

In response to these crises we have seen people come together for the common good in a myriad of ways. Mutual aid groups have gathered food, rent support, and other supplies so that neighbors can help one another survive. In some cities, people sheltering in place would come outside to applaud first responders. A remarkably diverse coalition came together, often in the streets, to commit to anti-racism. In the US a discourse of abolition has risen to the surface as we realize that there is little justice in the justice system. Protesters cried “I can’t breathe,” invoking the image of society as a body that has been choked off from the resources it needs to live by the very system that was established to protect it. Despite the fact that we have lost faith in some systems, we have built new ones and treated “commonwealth” as an idea that is an organic thing, something that must constantly adapt to maintain a commitment to the common good.

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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