



THE WORLD WE WANT IS US

By The Editors

Over one weekend in November 2020, words and images of protest and collective care were projected onto the ICA's facade. For *The World We Want Is Us*, artists and Southerners On New Ground (SONG) members Shazza Berhan and Laura Chow Reeve cocreated a series of images that were projected onto the ICA by Dustin Klein, known for his now-iconic interventions on the Lee Monument in Marcus-David Peters Circle in Richmond. The project built on prior collaboration with SONG VA Statewide Organizer Rebecca Keel as a facilitator for Summer Sessions: Commonwealth in 2019, a public research and discussion series that considered the larger ideas of Commonwealth in relation to Richmond.

Berhan's and Reeve's visuals combine text and imagery to envision a new future after community demands for social justice are met. For instance, one depicts protest as a form of collective care; another presents a future in which investments in the public good through health care, housing, education, and the arts lead to safer, happier communities. The artists hope for a time "in which conditions have changed and we no longer have

to fight for dignity and basic safety, building on the work of local organizers, activists, and advocates who have been working for justice, reformation, and liberation.” Their title references a poem of the same name by Alice Walker. Conceived as part of Commonwealth’s Richmond presentation, it was shown November 12–15, 2020, in conjunction with 1708 Gallery’s InLight, an annual citywide festival of outdoor light-based work. In the following conversation, curators Noah Simblist and Stephanie Smith reflect on the project.

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Stephanie: It felt great to see Laura’s and Shazza’s images shining out from the ICA a few weeks ago—especially since we had to walk a tightrope to get to that point. Big public universities like VCU can be exciting contexts but also pose specific challenges, and at times we weren’t sure we’d be able to proceed without compromising the project’s spirit. We decided to write this together to explore the push-pull among activist intentions, aesthetic approaches, and institutional norms—both in this project and in relation to larger frames.

The seeds of the project were planted in summer 2019, when activist and organizer Rebecca Keel facilitated sessions on the themes of “Assembly” and “Public Domain” for *Summer Sessions: Commonwealth*. The 2020 uprisings gave new urgency and visibility to the work that Rebecca and others had been doing for years, including honing six community demands that mixed calls from national movements with Virginia-specific demands, ranging from “defund the police” to the creation of a “Marcus Alert” system to respond to mental health crises. In early

summer 2020, we decided to extend our initial collaboration in the spirit of mutual aid and as part of Commonwealth. Rebecca had recognized that demands like “defund the police” can feel abstract or alienating to some people and wanted to address that through art. Fellow SONG members Shazza Berhan and Laura Chow Reeve began to visualize concrete and poetic ways that people’s lives could be better if those demands were met, and after considering more traditional approaches like a static mural, the team decided to bring Dustin in to project onto the ICA’s facade. We didn’t initially anticipate many challenges beyond technical ones, given that because of COVID-19 we’d already pivoted to an indoor-outdoor project and were installing other large, politically engaged works around the ICA’s exterior.

Noah: One of the things that arts institutions often wrestle with when addressing social or political subject matter is community engagement. That way, the politics that are represented by an artwork can account for the community context in which it is presented. This would take a long time to go deeply into, but this attitude rejects the autonomy of an artwork and instead allows for the fact that its very being is dynamic and informed by the living communities that encounter it. On the one hand, we could have thought that SONG, an activist group, was the social context for the artwork that was presented. But that doesn’t account for other points of view, which is precisely the definition of politics—the negotiation of competing points of view through shared governance. So, I think that you started this process from the standpoint of institutional stewardship and the ethic of a broad form of community engagement by reaching out to some folks at VCU, specifically the office of government relations, and that quickly spread to VCU’s counsel’s office and the office of public affairs, right?

Stephanie: Yes. As with any cultural institution nested inside a university, reaching out to university colleagues isn't "community engagement" in the way you'd think about it at a freestanding nonprofit. It's blurry. In this case, those colleagues were external to the ICA but all of us were still internal to the larger organization, working under a shared, overarching structure that, as a public university, extends all the way out to the Commonwealth of Virginia itself. In this case, several of us had reached out to VCU colleagues earlier, and then yes, the crucial conversations began after I called a colleague in government relations for input. While supportive overall, he raised very reasonable concerns about timing. The projections were initially planned to go up in late October, and since the ICA was a polling place for the November elections, he wondered whether the timing might impact prospective voters. That triggered questions from others as well as a key meeting with you and me, colleagues from the ICA, and leaders from VCU's legal, university relations, and government relations teams. That's when we really began to surface and address the larger issues. Could you start with the concern that the project might constitute "political speech" that could activate the ICA's facade as a "public forum"?

Noah: That issue was interesting to me because, as I understood the legal concerns, if "political speech" were allowed on the outside of the ICA it could transform it into a "public forum" that would have to be open to a wide array of points of view, including ones that might contravene the values of equity and inclusion that VCU strives to uphold, because as a public institution we couldn't restrict any political speech. One example was that if we allowed SONG's projection then we might need to also allow projections from white supremacist groups because of freedom of speech.

As you note, the institutional structure that we were negotiating with was both VCU and the Commonwealth of Virginia. Many don't know just how much VCU is an institution of the state, so much so that the legal team for VCU technically reports to the Attorney General of Virginia. So when we were negotiating the terms of this program, we were negotiating with the state about the conditions of political speech and artistic practice in the public sphere, not just within the context of a university.

In our conversations with VCU legal and public affairs departments, there were two issues at stake. One was that art and politics were assumed to be separate. The other was that putting something outdoors was assumed to be public while something inside the architecture of the ICA was not. This goes against most ways that art institutions like to think of themselves in relation to “the public.” In fact the use of the ICA as a public polling place was great precisely because it reinforced the notion of the museum as a civic space. Furthermore, because there was a political message it was assumed that this was not art but politics. So we had to go to great lengths to prove that it was art and that art could be political and politics (or activism) could be art.

Stephanie: Yes, it was fascinating to listen to the ways different participants understood the labels “art,” “activism,” and “politics” and applied them here. It was also interesting that no concerns were raised about other public works in Commonwealth that are arguably more publicly visible and at least as political in intention. That's especially true for Duron Chavis's *Resiliency Garden* commission—which, like *The World We Want Is Us*, began with an activist's facilitation of part of Summer Sessions. It was strategically useful to reinforce the “art” side of *The World We*

Want Is Us in these conversations, but in other contexts we've described both projects as "art adjacent" to keep things fluid and to avoid over-defining them.

That categorical slippage ended up being a key part of the behind-the-scenes process—practically, conceptually, and ethically. As curators, we were simultaneously seeking paths for the university to support the project; trying to hold space for the creative team to realize their intentions; and also thinking about how all of this sits within larger arcs of contemporary practice. At one point you worried about whether we were in danger of pushing the creative team to water down the activist part of the project, taking away the edge that made it interesting in the first place. Could you say more about that?

Noah: Yes, in my mind, the most interesting aspect of the project was giving an activist group, with values connected to our exhibition, a platform to amplify their work. Much of the art in *Commonwealth* dealt with politics and even activism but this project would ground representation in praxis, something that both Chavis and SONG offered. I worried that by working so hard to make this "art" we might dull down the politics, which was the aesthetic gesture.

This might be a little academic but the French philosopher Jacques Rancière talks about the reciprocal relationship between art and politics through his notion of "aesthetic regimes," reminding us that the hierarchies that we impose on aesthetics introduce politics. In this sense all art is political to some degree. But on the flip side, we could also think about politics as having an aesthetic form, based on the specific configuration of the regime. I remember seeing that beautiful projection of SONG's images on

the ICA and thinking that this was just one piece of a much larger artwork that contained every email and Google doc and meeting that constituted our negotiations with the VCU administration that got us to this point. It reminded me of a famous project called *Picasso in Palestine* that the Van Abbemuseum did with the International Academy of Art in Palestine. The project included not only the loan of a Picasso painting to the occupied West Bank but also the paperwork that documented the convolutions of bureaucracy to get it there.

The irony of the worries that VCU legal had about the project being too political is that by the standards that Tania Bruguera has laid out for art that doesn't just represent politics but also enacts politics, a practice that she calls *Arte Útil*, we didn't quite get there. We were just debating what level of politics could be represented and if an activist can call themselves an artist.

While we didn't note these examples, we had to educate the VCU administration with a PowerPoint that ICA Director Dominic Willson showed our colleagues for final approval. It included ACT UP, Krzysztof Wodiczko, For Freedoms, and others. This level of education is so important and rarely talked about. In standalone museums it's often a part of board stewardship, but in our case it included the stewardship of the state.

Stephanie: Yes. And that builds on prior behind-the-scenes work done by other ICA colleagues. That kind of ongoing diplomatic work is always partial and imperfect, but so necessary.

Overall, things aligned, and the project wasn't crushed or neutered. That could have easily happened, given the inherently conservative, self-protecting nature of most big institutions,

and the ways that people (us included) learn to conform to institutional codes and expectations that sometimes lead people to close in/shut down. I appreciate the good will of everyone around the table (or rather, the Zooms); we were able to explore complex issues in fairly nuanced, spacious ways. Similarly, things could have gone wrong with the creative team if we didn't have a pretty clear sense of each other's values going into the project, backed by practical support and resources from the ICA. It could also have soured if the creative team of artists and activists hadn't been open to the process, or if they felt that we weren't being transparent partners. So much could have gone wrong. So to go back to earlier points: the project involved community engagement in a broad sense, and was also, as you said, politics in action—we shared perspectives, negotiated outcomes, and built support for specific ideas and actions. And all of that really comes down to individual people making space to listen to each other's perspectives. Which is very much in the spirit of *Commonwealth* overall.

So it was especially moving to hear the impromptu speech Rebecca made as our little cluster of chilly, socially-distanced collaborators sipped hot chocolate and cheered the lighting of the projections, to feel their joy in the moment and what it meant in Richmond in 2020, just over a week past the election. To quote the Alice Walker poem that the piece is named after, we're far from there but for a moment it felt like maybe "the world we want is on the way."

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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