



[WE've The People](#): Socially Distanced, Socially Engaged

Sarah Chieko Bonnicksen

Pandemic conditions have been difficult for creative people working in all mediums. Material restrictions increased stresses, and differing levels of access to functional workspace have presented ongoing challenges to making art. Artists with socially driven practices have also faced limitations on how they can work in their communities when the dangers of virus transmission prevent us from being in physical proximity to others. In response to the unique challenges of artmaking that are both socially distanced and socially engaged, students taking Susanne Cockrell's the Fine Arts graduate seminar "Of, By and With People," have been experimenting with new ways to connect with people and create community. On an [exhibition website](#) that will be live until November of next year, the students presented the collective class project, *WE've The People*. The exhibition consists of twelve ritual actions synchronized in time but taking place worldwide, from the San Francisco Bay Area and Los Angeles, to Sydney, Australia, and Bogotá, Colombia. Thinking about rituals as repeated, deliberate, and synchronized actions based in community, this exhibition asks viewers: "What possibilities can we see for building cultures of gratitude and collectivity in the deep ruptures of the moment?"

The title of the exhibition, *WE've, The People*, speaks to the idea of "we" as an action: a process akin to weaving, wherein each step builds upon the last in an ongoing reciprocal negotiation of space and connection. By staging ritual actions in disparate places but connected in time, the class created a series of site-specific projects that are both hyper-local and connected to a more extensive temporal, ideological, and digital space in addition to the physical.

On the *WE've The People* exhibition homepage, each ritual is situated in a grid, reminiscent of the now omnipresent Zoom call, providing 12 digital windows into distinct locales synchronized across time. The disconnect between physical action and

digital meeting space is stitched together in a digital quilt of clickable photographs that lead to documentation of the full projects. Each student's choreographed action engages people and other living occupants at their respective local site, giving a sense of different intersecting scales of community. As thematic or material resonances occur between and within various projects, students are seen working together and engaging with the environment, family, neighbors, strangers, or friends. This collective body of work suggests layers of interconnection that span digital and physical space and time.

Several students' rituals directly engage their heritage and family history. In his project *Recipes for Difficult Friendships*, Carlos Medellín investigates the history of salt in Colombia, including its use as currency in pre-colonial societies. By making a recipe for salt bread passed down through his family, he uses the ritual actions of cooking and eating together to break down barriers and encourage connection between communities. Rachel Parish also looks to her family history for her project *50 Mothers*, wherein she explores her relationship to her ancestors in collaboration with mud, representing and commemorating resistance and agency. In a ritual action, Parish and her children speak the names of the fifty mothers in her family lineage that have lived in the United States while marking fabric with mud from the San Francisco bay's shore.

Many of the rituals also collaboratively consider the environments where they take place. Jasmin Viducic's *Moving Like Water* involves syncing her weaving process to the natural rhythms along the shore of Lake Tahoe. Her weaving features colors inspired by the landscape and reads as a material document of a conversation between Viducic and the environment where she is situated. Niv Rajendra's *Within the Rock Pools of North Bondi (Eora Country)* is located in the Australian rock pools referenced in the title. In an evocative video, Rajendra shows a montage of vividly colored rock pool creatures, organic digital forms, and her ritual interactions with ocean waves accompanied by audio that prompts viewers to consider their impact on everything around them. In an accompanying text, Rajendra also offers thanks to the living beings sharing the space around her ritual site.

Some rituals engage strangers, or yet unknown members of students' communities, by leaving behind items that may be encountered after the ritual occurs. In his project *Lands End*, Steve Zhang releases several letters and drawings in bottles along the San Francisco coast addressed to a friend, a stranger, and himself in the future. A short video shows him throwing a clear wine-sized glass bottle into the churning waves off San Francisco's Mile Rock Beach to find its way to an unknown recipient. In a similar gesture for her project *Beads of Light*, Mia Zhou scatters hand-crafted glowing beads around a park near her Millbrae residence as a gift to those who pass through. A series

of photographs shows a mysterious constellation of bright orange beads gleaming in a dark landscape of eucalyptus tree shadows and fallen leaves. These open-ended communications express hope for connection between isolated individuals and recognize the potential impact of actions beyond their immediate enactment.

Overall, each of the twelve rituals documented in *WE've The People* presents a different way to think about community and how we share, intersect, and occupy space and time. Although the pandemic has exaggerated physical disconnection, the spatially distant but temporally synced rituals of *WE've The People* encourage viewers to consider other types of connections between humans, their environments, and the world. We are all situated in local and global ecologies, where everything connects in a complex web, and every action reverberates beyond itself. Many people have been forced to radically rethink their social interactions, but rather than see these challenges as an endpoint, *WE've The People* approaches them as spaces of opportunity and discovery.

WE've The People was organized by Susanne Cockrell and students of the graduate seminary “Of, By, and With People,” in collaboration with the CCA Exhibitions Department for CCA@CCA.

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Sarah Chieko Bonnickson is currently an MFA student at California College of the Arts, where she is studying Design. She also holds a BA in Rhetoric from UC Berkeley, with a concentration in Narrative and Image and a Minor in Art History.