

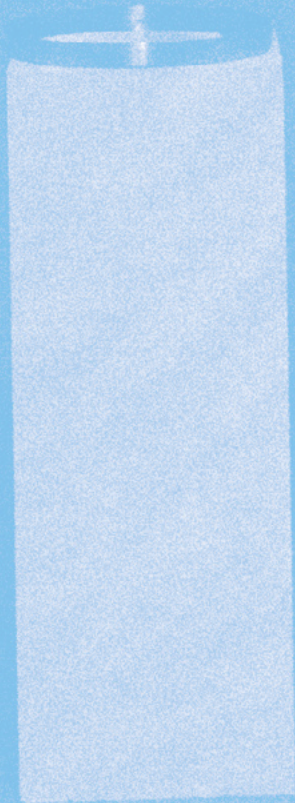
ON WISHING AND WELLNESS:

AN INTERVIEW WITH PLAYSPACE DIRECTORS LAUREN SORRESSO AND YANG LI

by Katherine Jemima Hamilton

Since its conception in 2005, PLAYSPACE Gallery (The Paulette Long and Shepard Pollack Art Community Experiment) has been a space for CCA graduate students to challenge traditional ideas and forms of the exhibition. Each year, new directors take over the gallery's identity and programming, presenting programs that are oriented toward the academic community. Lauren Sorresso, Yang Li, and Yu Jin Sun, the 2021 directors, faced a challenging year for experimentation, as the campus's hybrid status was already experimental ground. The result was an exhibition in the spring entirely online, and one in the fall that was "on/offline." Both centered wellness: for ourselves and other humans, and for non-human beings, including the earth. RRR editor Katherine Jemima Hamilton spoke to Lauren Sorresso and Yang Li over Zoom in mid-September to discuss this year's exhibition programs and curating in the space between on- and offline.

The following conversation has been edited for clarity.



**Katherine
Jemima
Hamilton
(KJH)**

The word “well” has emerged as a critical term for understanding your year-long exhibition program: the first exhibition of your residency was titled *Well Wishes* and the second *Well-Meaning Beings*. To start, can you define what you mean by “well”?

**Lauren
Sorresso
(LS)**

A lot of this year’s programming came from wanting to define the term “wellness.” We were struck by the fact that wellness is an important topic, but the word itself is so broad that it’s almost empty of meaning. When we started the directorship in January, I think most people were still in a place of processing how the pandemic changed our lives. As such, we wanted to use wellness as a starting point for this year’s programs.

**Yang Li
(YL)**

We were also inspired by how various artists were dealing with the pandemic. For example, we took inspiration from Tega Brain, and Sam Lavigne’s digital work *Get Well Soon, 2020*. It’s a digital greeting card that offers the readers encouragement through difficult periods in their lives. We found this work encouraging and hoped it would inspire others as we were preparing *Well Wishes* in our first semester at CCA—October or November 2020. At that time, we were still yearning to connect with people—just really wanting a physical connection with others.

*Outdoor
installation
image of
Well-Mean-
ing Beings at
PLAySPACE
Gallery,
located at
141 Hubbell
Street.*



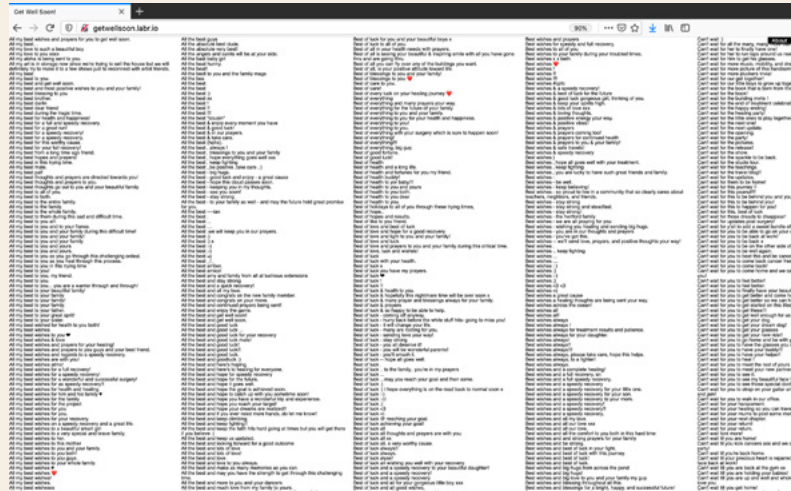
LS

We also wanted *Well Wishes*, which was entirely online, to be an opportunity to use this digital space that we're on regularly nowadays in a way that was more reflective and hopeful. For our second exhibition, *Well-Meaning Beings*, we had the opportunity to have a physical show, so we wanted to consider how we are interacting in ways that promote "well-being." Many of the artists we were looking at had moved beyond just thinking about what wellness means to humans; they were thinking about what it means to be in harmony with nature or have conversations with other forms of life. That was the starting point for thinking about how our relationships with the world are cyclical and how we can live life in a more balanced way.

YL

With the first exhibition, we wished for a connection between human beings. In the second, we've been layering this connection for almost one year, which made us focus more on something beyond human beings. That's how the concepts of "wellness" transfer from a real connection between humans to the other creatures beyond human beings.

Screen-shot of Tega Brain, and Sam Lavigne, Get Well Soon, 2020.



KJH

As you mentioned, *Well Wishes* was an exhibition that took place entirely online. Naturally, it included many artists who engage the realm of the digital directly in their work. For example, Jarod Solomon's work *Digital Fountain*, 2017, brought water's movement and symbolism into the online world. Allison Parrish's poems explore how machines learn to create and use language. I'm wondering, how and where do wishing and technology intersect?

LS

That question makes me think about the common idiom that "technology is magic." I do think about the way that we connect through technology and the fact that it's intangible. Although ideally, we could all connect in person, there is something to be said about the possibility of connection through technology. I don't know if we were looking specifically at technology as a form of relationship building. Still, in wanting to showcase digital works, we were thinking about hybrid forms of connection. Jarod Solomon's *Digital Fountain* is an excellent example of creating mixed experiences. In these digital representations, there are still elements of that tactile physical experience of being near a fountain. You can still feel the water in Jarod's work, it's just been translated, modified, looped, and glitched. This looping and glitching turns it into something new. There is alchemy and some magic in that process.

Screen-
shot of the
*Well-Meaning
Beings* web-
site.

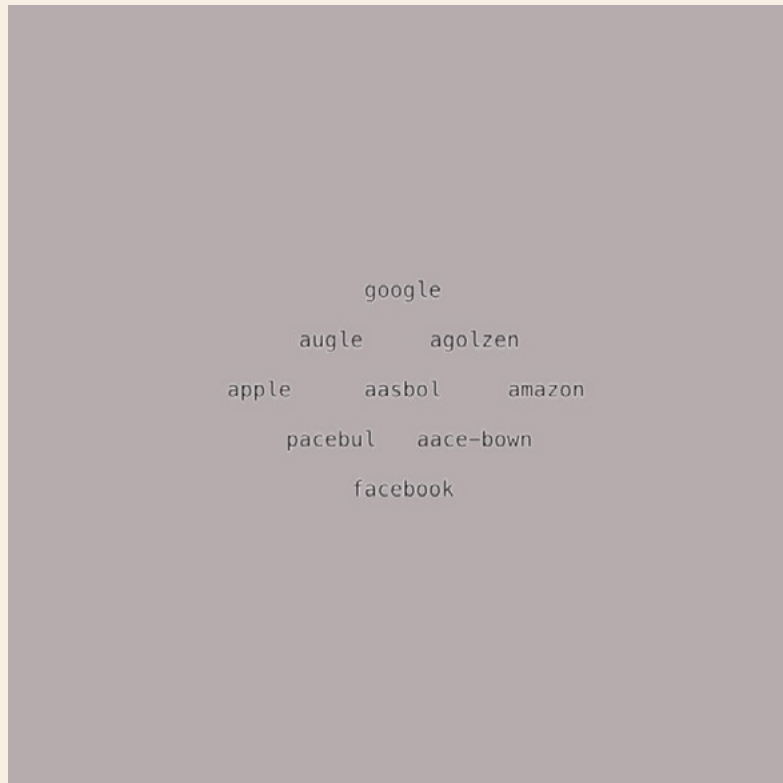


We first saw Allison Parrish's computer generated *Compass* series of poems when they were published in *Bomb* magazine in 2020. The artist told us that there was more interest in the work from the art world than from poetry publications. We thought that was curious and wanted to know more. As algorithms curate more and more of our content and our interactions behind the scenes, it was fascinating that they could also be something that generates artworks.

LS These digital artworks related to nature are an alternative for people who cannot be around the landscape or wildlife. It's also an alternative way for humans to connect with nature, just like how we connect online or in another technical way.

KJH These works are an approximation when the real thing isn't available to us for whatever reason.

Screen-shot of the *Well-Meaning Beings* website.



LS

It goes both ways. Rachel Parish's artwork *The Shape of History*, 2020, in *Well-Meaning Beings* started during the lockdown when she couldn't get into the school studio. The works are daily records of the sun's movement, recording a particular period in a specific place. Physical experiences themselves are transitory and temporal, but they can be recorded. Rachel had the idea that we could film her creating some of these drawings and then see how that translates digitally. There's something very calming and meditative about watching Rachel make these drawings. Being there, you can feel the wind; you can feel the sun, the ambiance. While it's not the same experience, there are many similar qualities where you can hear the scratching of the pencil on the paper and the asphalt and watch the rhythmic motions of the line drawings. We've been thinking about a lot for the last year: what are these translations back and forth? How do these experiences work together to create new knowledge in both types of spaces?

YL

I didn't have a chance to see Parish creating her work in person, but I edited the videos, so my experience of the artwork is exclusively through digital documentation. I was listening to the sounds she made while drawing; I felt like I could hear the sunshine. The video almost put me in a meditative trance—I was so calm. And I hope others who experience the work digitally will feel calm as well.

Rachel Parish,
*The Shape of
History*, 2020.

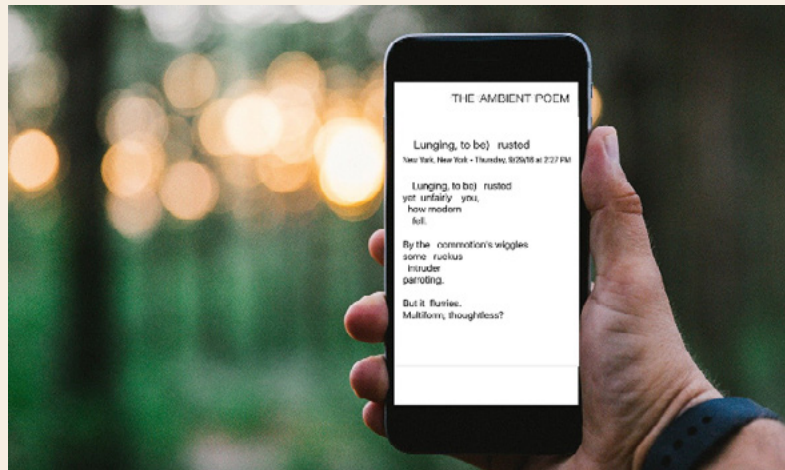


KJH We've discussed this a bit already, but I would love to think more deeply with you both about those intersections between the two exhibitions. In the curatorial essays that you each wrote individually for *Well-Meaning Beings* you describe the on/offline exhibition as one that evolved from *Well Wishes*. Can you say more about how you see the works in each exhibition speaking to each other?

YL All of the artists in the show are trying to collaborate with beings who are more than human. This collaboration comes through both program and technique. Rachel Parish, for example, is trying to cooperate with the sun. It's an alternative way for the artist to think about what else they could do besides working with people during this time of isolation.

LS Lohren Green's work, *The Ambient Poem*, 2015-2019, exemplifies this hybrid way of knowing the world. This hybrid exhibition model forced Green and us to think about how this series of works have been exhibited before. What are ways that we can tell the story of this work online and in-person? There's a lot of experimentation in how we presented the work in this hybrid form. The piece prompted us to ask what a hybrid show can look like?

Lohren Green, *The Ambient Poem* (screen shot), 2015-2019.



- KJH** It seems that the hybrid model presented a prompt to the artists of how they could collaborate with non-human beings. Considering the duality of these exhibitions, how does meaning manifest from the combination of the artworks in their respective digital and physical spheres? In the three essays framing *Well-Meaning Beings*, you all write that the artists in this exhibition take environmental elements and recontextualize them, generating new interactions. What kinds of unique interactions have you noticed arising from the show?
- KJH** It seems that the hybrid model presented a prompt to the artists of how they could collaborate with non-human beings. Considering the duality of these exhibitions, how does meaning manifest from the combination of the artworks in their respective digital and physical spheres? In the three essays framing *Well-Meaning Beings*, you all write that the artists in this exhibition take environmental elements and recontextualize them, generating new interactions. What kinds of unique interactions have you noticed arising from the show?
- LS** Gordon D. Fung's installation work, *and drinketh water of the rain of heaven*, 2021, is interesting in this context. We first became familiar with Fung's work through his Instagram account, where he documents his work and tells its story through Instagram. That's something we've been thinking about, too: how does this work show up in these other digital spaces? Fung was eager to install the artwork in the gallery. He had designed it in his head but made the installation explicitly for PLAYSPACE. The piece was unfinished until the other day when parts he had ordered finally arrived. It's exciting that there is flexibility and fluidity in navigating the restrictions around collaboration and gathering right now. Niv Rajendra's video work, *In Conversation with the Black Bean Tree*, 2021, requires headphones because of the proximity between her and Fung's work. The video is a conversation between her and a tree in her yard. There's a personal nature that felt right for having giant headphones around your ears watching it by yourself. It's a more intimate experience with the video work and encourages a more focused and intentional listening to that conversation.

YL Rajendra's work also made me think about how different one person's experience of the work in the gallery versus the person viewing it on their laptop. From my own experience, the difference between experiencing the artwork in the gallery versus in the home created other grounds for interpreting the work. The physical space made me concentrate more on the video works themselves and create a more focused dialogue between viewers and the work. Viewing the work from my laptop might create other interactions around our surroundings and make me lose some of my concentration. Those viewing the exhibition online will have different experiences from those considering it in person.

KJH Finally, what wishes do you have for all the well-meaning beings in your life?

LS We had people semi-anonymously submit wishes to the website that scrolled along the bottom of the exhibition page for *Well Wishes*. My desire was for my son to meet his great-grandparents. Unfortunately, at the time, with the situation with COVID and vaccination, we couldn't do it. But over the summer, we flew out so that he could meet them.

YL I hope, in the future, we don't experience too many wildfires or climate disasters. We need to care about all the environmental things and make our world better.

Screenshot of Gordon D. Fung's and drinketh water of the rain of heaven, 2021



Well-Meaning Beings is on view at **PLAySPACE** gallery at 141 Hubbell Street until December 11th, and features the work of **Gordon D. Fung, Lohren Green, Niv Rajendra, and Rachel Parish**. You can also access the exhibition online at wellmeaning-beings.cca.edu

Lauren Sorresso is an independent curator, freelance marketer, and occasional artist based in San Francisco. She has over 15 years of professional experience working for art galleries, creative agencies, and technology companies. She studied at Colorado College, receiving a BA in Studio Art, and at California College of the Arts, working on her MA, Curatorial Practice — in progress.

Yang Li is a curator at OCAT, a contemporary art museum based in Shenzhen, China, where she works with artists and curators worldwide. Since starting there in 2019, she has partnered with the curatorial teams to finish two individual artist exhibitions and four group exhibitions. She holds a BS in Industrial Engineering from Purdue University and an MS in Project Management from Northwestern University. She is currently pursuing an MA in Curatorial Practice at California College of the Arts.

Katherine Jemima Hamilton is a curator, educator, and dual-degree MA Curatorial Practice and Visual Critical studies student at CCA.