From the outset, *Commonwealth*—a new group exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond—is an exercise in contradiction. Just outside the building’s entrance, an expansive urban garden created for the exhibition by food justice activist Duron Chavis celebrates Black life and the necessity of inclusive space through garden beds overlayed with images and quotes from Assata Shakur, Audre Lorde, and other Black activists and intellectuals. A nearby mural spanning both a wall and the pavement below declares *BLACK SPACE MATTERS*, echoing the street murals that appeared in cities across the country this summer. And then, just beyond the garden, a swath of graffiti spreads across the building’s titanium exterior. Despite attempts to remove the tags, you can easily make out the messages: *BLM*, *Fuck 12*, and, notably, *Fuck VCU* and *VCU doesn’t care BLM.* Next to these messages, a pair of security cameras observes the area—a reminder of the structures within which the ICA must operate.

The parallel, conflicting statements here are arresting: on one hand, we find an admirable artistic intervention, commissioned by a powerful institution, acknowledging systemic disparities and chipping away at food insecurity (the produce harvested from the garden is donated to VCU’s on-campus food pantry for students in need). On the other hand, we find a firm condemnation of that same institution for otherwise failing to reflect those same values.

The graffiti came during protests that erupted in Richmond following the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor by police. They are also evidence of the criticism leveled against VCU following the university president’s reaction to the uprising. In July, one day after police tear-gassed protestors and arrested several demonstrators—among them VCU students and members of VCU’s Student Government Association (SGA)—the university’s president, Michael Rao, released a [statement](https://blogs.vcu.edu/president/2020/07/26/violent-demonstrations/) denouncing a purported $100,000 in damage to VCU property sustained during a boiling point in the protests, while also claiming solidarity with the cause. The SGA promptly [responded](https://www.instagram.com/p/CDPZ7XEljMD/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link) to Rao’s statement, asserting that the university “prioritizes profit and image over the wellbeing of students.” President Rao’s inconsistent declaration of solidarity and intimation of fear toward protestors is reflected on Richmond’s streets: many of the storefront windows lining the city’s commercial districts are sealed by both protective plywood and Black Lives Matter signs.

VCU’s contentious recent history doesn’t necessarily invalidate the intention or impact of *Commonwealth*, but it frames the institution and exhibition with a web of paradoxes that characterize our modern world and which we all must navigate. In a way, this is the very premise of the exhibition. A joint project of the ICA, Philadelphia Contemporary, and Beta-Local in San Juan, Puerto Rico, *Commonwealth* mines the innate discrepancy of its title: the power and utopian promise of “common wealth” versus the actual colonialism and inequity entrenched in the past and present of each venue’s city. Originally planned as an exhibition presented in different capacities in all three designated commonwealth territories, the pandemic ultimately restricted the physical exhibition of newly commissioned works to the ICA (which the curatorial team takes care to note is built on stolen Powhatan land). Along with an extensive lineup of related programming, Beta-Local has overseen a bilingual publication that will be released serially, both in print and digitally, over the course of the fall, while Philadelphia Contemporary has developed a neighborhood regranting program and banner project in its city.

For a project so geographically widespread and conceptually ambitious, the physical exhibition is limited to a relatively modest selection of artworks that probe various facets of commonwealth status without overwhelming the space. The indoor gallery is largely populated by three video installations. Two of these combine documented choreography and sculptural elements installed alongside the videos to confront colonial histories, including occupation of indigenous lands (in a video by Tanya Lukin Linklater) and the overlapping tobacco industries that have shaped both Virginia and Puerto Rico (in a video by Alicia Díaz). In the third film, *Ricerche: two*, artist Sharon Hayes interviewed two Dallas-area women’s tackle football teams as the players huddled together and took turns candidly reflecting on life as athletes. The piece’s panoramic, concave screen pulls the viewer into the group and creates a feeling of intimacy. Because the players’ presence on the field is immediately read as a contradiction of gender roles, the work is also inherently political. The players’ perspectives, personalities, and gender expressions are in no way homogenous; they are a team, not a monolith—an important distinction that must be made about every community represented in the exhibition.

In addition to the video installations, the indoor gallery includes hanging textile panels by Carolina Caycedo. Titled *Distressed Debt*,these five sheer banners are printed with collages of archival documents from Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Puerto Rico associated with historically destructive public utility bonds. Despite the banality of its elements, the colorful hodgepodge of state letterhead, currency embellishments, and decorative stamps makes for a deceptively inviting centerpiece in the gallery. One panel bears the slogan, “If you think the charm of Puerto Rico is unique, let us tell you about the bonds of Puerto Rico,” as if the commonwealth’s financial strife were a tourist attraction. According to the adjacent wall text, Caycedo was interested in the way the deterioration of physical currency mirrors Puerto Rico’s economic crisis. But the discordant commercial polish unifying the panels seems more like a sardonic conflation of the commonwealth’s public image and its far less ideal reality—Puerto Rico has a bond debt fifteen times those of mainland states. Since the “commonwealth” designation has been used to obscure the fact that Puerto Rico remains a colony of the United States, the contradictions of this label are especially fraught.

Though the art world has sustained incalculable damage as a result of pandemic shutdowns, the creative charge for museums and galleries to literally turn themselves inside out has, in some cases, brought art directly to communities too often alienated by gallery walls. The curators of *Commonwealth* made equal use of the ICA’s outdoor space and indoor galleries—a necessary design in pandemic days, and one that supports *Commonwealth*’s community-minded ethos. The work not only spills out onto the busy corner of Broad and Belvidere through Chavis’s *Resiliency Garden*, it also climbs up the building’s exterior in the form of two murals. Though understated compared to Firelei Báez’s dramatic, billboard-scale mural personifying revolution as a female deity emerging from an ocean wave, Monica Rodriguez’s wraparound mural of monuments to Caribbean independence movements is no less compelling.

Also presented outdoors is a recurring live performance conceived by Puerto Rico-based artist Nelson Rivera. For *El Maestro 4*, the artistenlists non-Spanish-speaking Americans to read speech excerpts from Puerto Rican independence movement leader Pedro Albizu Campos—in Spanish, into a megaphone. In the inaugural performance, the speakers’ thick American accents and inelegant delivery made abundantly clear that the volunteer readers are meant to be anything but “maestros” (unlike Albizu Campos, who, by the way, spoke eight languages). The humor and vulnerability in the performance collapse the tension and violence that American English-speakers inflict on language differences. At the same time, the interpretation of the text by non-Spanish speakers distills the political proclamations to the intrinsically abstract expressions that all words really are. Though an ephemeral and ostensibly simple gesture, Rivera’s contribution to *Commonwealth* is the exhibition’s most powerful play on incongruity. During a virtual panel discussion hosted by the ICA, Rivera noted that the incendiary speeches included in his score put Albizu Campos in prison. “If it’s a crime to say those things,” he added, “we should all commit that crime.”

Not far from the ICA, collective action converges at the focal point of Richmond’s Monument Avenue and the city’s recent protests. Here, a thirteen-ton monument to confederate general Robert E. Lee towers over what is now referred to as Marcus-David Peters Circle, in honor of an unarmed man killed by police in Richmond in 2018. The massive pedestal is now encircled by miniature memorials to Black lives lost to police violence and coated in vivid graffiti demanding justice. Just feet away, a community garden grows fresh produce, with essential items left in a box nearby for those in need. Activists host monthly music performances and continue to organize demonstrations. A pair of basketball hoops and a picnic table overflowing with food donations encourages gathering and exchange. Sometimes, a volunteer will cook up hot food. While Richmond has uprooted many confederate memorials since the protests began, the Lee monument’s pending removal has been delayed by a legal battle as of this writing. In the meantime, activists have reclaimed the space, here at the epicenter of the former capital of the Confederacy, built on occupied Indigenous ground. While the ICA has attempted to create vital space for artists and viewers alike to challenge inequity and envision truly “common wealth,” at Marcus-David Peters Circle, a consciously paradoxical site of both historical atrocity and an ongoing struggle for justice, activists are making it a reality.