

December 16, 2020

Artists Helping Artists: Care Networks in The Time of Pandemic



Sick In Quarters

Mendieta Platter by Hamtramck Ceramck

Ceramck

\$268.13

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Cobalt on stoneware, 17"x17.5"x1.5"

Price includes domestic U.S. shipping

Hamtramck Ceramck is a Michigan based collective that produces physical and digital artworks in a collaborative environment.

<http://www.hamtramckceramck.com>

[Image description: the image is rectangular and horizontal, and depicts a lighter tan-toned hand and forearm holding a plate up against a white wall. The plate is large with slightly raised edges, and is slightly uneven, appearing hand-sculpted. It is white or off-white, with a shape drawn in dark blue glaze in the center and occupying most of the plate. The shape consists of an outer ring that has an amorphous, blob-like shape. Inside it are 5 roughly parallel wavy, thick lines that fill the outer ring. Around the lip of the plate, following its circular shape, is a link reading, in lower case letters, "www.artnet.com/artists/ana-mendieta". The person holding the plate, who wears a blue wrist band, obscured the "a" and "r" of "artists" with their thumb.]

Mendieta Platter by Hamtramck Ceramck Courtesy of Sick In Quarters

By Celia Glastris

Care is a feeling which can be incredibly simple. It only gains complexity when it is not given.

“The state failed us. You know,” says Anthony Romero, performance artist, organizer, and Professor of the Practice at School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University, “like the federal government just failed to provide any meaningful assistance.” “So, people provide for themselves.”

That's the origin story of care networks, or community-based projects like mutual aid that respond to crisis or immediate needs and which have risen in prevalence since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

For [Sick In Quarters](#), it all started when an anonymous community member and friend was having difficulty finding proper care for a heart complication which resulted from contracting COVID-19. This emergency created a call-to-action for the nationwide collective of disabled artists, activists, and advocates for justice to originate. Or maybe their call-to-action came from something much earlier, greater, and malevolent, the nation's long and historical neglect to pass universal healthcare, which compounded on a global pandemic, is an act of necropolitics, or the use of social and governmental authority to dictate how some people may live and how some must die. Necropolitics is a term first originated by Achille Mbembe and a topic that Judith Butler [recently discussed with Verso Books](#) in a conversation about COVID-19.

In Sick In Quarters' beginnings, the collective reached out to journalists and local television organizations about the lack of care access, testing, and treatment for COVID-19 patients. Eventually they set up an online art donation-based fundraiser, where people from around the world could buy donated artworks. This fundraising model is not new to the collective. "When a community knows how to monetize their art in a general sense, it seems logical to use that knowledge to organize, mobilize, and help people, especially in times of crisis," wrote Sick In Quarters. The collective declined to meet for an interview over Zoom based on access needs, however they did provide a thoughtful collaborated Google document. "Many community-based artists already exist within mutual aid systems: giving and receiving aid for medical care, transportation, housing, and food. We know that this type of community care works."

Since the pandemic, artist-run practices centered around care, most popularly models that revolve around mutual aid like Sick In Quarters, [Public Assistants](#), and [Herbal Mutual Aid Network](#) have increased in prevalence, while more established examples like [8Ball Community](#) have become more widely recognized. Through coalitional 'radical care,' as termed by Tamara Kneese and Hi'ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart in the March edition of the Duke

journal [*Social Text*](#), these organizations are seeking to deliver real, transformational and structural solutions to living and even thriving in a capitalist state that has challenged their existence. However, in many ways these solutions would not function without and recycle capitalist techniques such as Sick In Quarters' online art fair and it's modified, diversified fundraising model of utilizing three grassroot organizations to spread its bets in an economic globalization framework.

What are care networks and why now?

“The forcing of us back into our homes creates a situation where those of us who have complicated feelings about a home and about family have to re-reckon with those traumas. It's part of the kind of present processing and reflection that I'm doing, and healing. But it's also why I probably have never thought about care as much as I think about care now,” says Anthony Romero, professor at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts who made time after his Open Studio Class let out to have an interview over Zoom. The current artist-in-residence with the City of Boston at the Mayor's Office for Immigrant Advancement spends his free-time working with a rent strike coalition and organizing a timebank daycare. Romero also helped draft the [Open Letter from Boston Arts and Cultural Workers in Demand of Racial Equity and Social Transformation](#) earlier this year.

Networks of care are in essence methods by which any community works to provide support in place for unmet needs. These can look like [timebanking](#), a form of mutual living that uses time as a form of currency that participants can alleviate their and others' needs that extend beyond what is possible in the 24/7 hour day. Another notably significant method is [community fridges](#), where fresh produce and food is provided in an often brightly painted refrigerator for members of a community to drop off and share food, thereby both reducing food insecurity and food waste. Perhaps however the most well-known form of mutual aid, it is important to note, is not charity but rather solidarity. Mutual aid is, as Dean Spades says, “a form of political participation in which people take responsibility for caring for one another and changing political conditions, not just through symbolic acts or putting pressure on their representatives in

government but by actually building new social relations that are more survivable.” [A New Yorker article](#) finds that what was once radical is becoming far more mainstream since the need for aid has become so widespread since the coronavirus.

SIQ MUTUAL AID: DISABILITY JUSTICE FUNDRAISER

Sick In Quarters organizes itself across time zones. They are a group of volunteers primarily located in Pennsylvania, New York, California, and Illinois. To execute their work, they use a variety of online services such as scheduling helpers and task managers. “We generally work together mid-day through the evening hours and communicate via texting or a voice channel on Discord. Sometimes we will have video meetings via Zoom or Discord if we’re all feeling up to it,” writes SIQ. At present, Sick In Quarters is organizing an online Disability Justice Fundraiser. Soon, they will be reinstating a second iteration.

The Sick In Quarters mutual aid Disability Justice Fundraiser features a variety of artists producing work across disparate mediums about different subject matters, from disability, to the Black Liberation Movement, to queer identity. This spectrum is indicative of the intersectionality of disability justice. “Disability is inherently colonial,” wrote Sick In Quarters. “It is not fundamentally an issue of medicine or health, nor just an issue of sensitivity or compassion; rather it is an issue of politics and power(lessness), power over, and power to,” writes SIQ. “Transformation is direly needed in order to address the field’s previous erasure of BIPOC experience, racial hierarchies, policing points of view, and moments of careerism over coalition. Intersectional perspectives and efforts are essential towards rewriting disability as a social condition, rather than a social identity.” Some of the works submitted include a zine by SICK Magazine, a publication by chronically ill and disabled people, an ACAB paper mâché banner by artist Katch, a leather harness by Sanguis Ornatus, an Herbal Remedies Bundle by Heilbron Herbs, and *Eyes that lick the flame*, a vacuum-sealed kombucha by the queer food project, Spiral Theory Test Kitchen.

The DESIGNED FOR SIQ section originated when several artists reached out to the collective with interest in designing posters, postcards, and t-shirts as merch for the fundraiser.

“Flying Saucer Press offered to help us with printing, which was huge. Rich, the owner/director, made the process easy and accessible for us.” Many of the works in this collection highlight the obstacles that coronavirus have brought to the foreground that are not new for people that are sick or chronically ill such as through the t-shirt designed for Sick In Quarters by Patty Lu called SIQ SAD WORLD, which features a variety of medical instruments, and macabrely written words like ‘MOURN,’ ‘PATIENT ADVOCACY,’ ‘THEY,’ and ‘FLAMES.’ The sentiment of the t-shirt could be attributed both to a coronavirus patient or someone with a pre-existing condition. “Practically any symptom or effect as a result of COVID-19 could also be what a chronically ill and/or disabled person face daily and contracting COVID-19 on top of existing symptoms can be and continues to be deadly,” wrote the collective.



SIQ SAD WORLD By Patty Lu, "Sick in Quarters" T-Shirt by Mira Moore.
Courtesy of Sick In Quarters.

“Sick In Quarters” by Mira Moore similarly blurs coronavirus and disability. A heart-shaped, Polly Pocket bedroom is printed onto a white tee with Sick In Quarters in an oval and a heart overlaid on top. It speaks to how chronically ill and disabled people have already been affected by isolation which is heightened by the pandemic. “There seems to be a

misunderstanding with this- we do want to see our friends and families, to interact with the world the way we did before, but this continues to be pushed back by able-bodied people going to large unnecessary gatherings and therefore spreading the virus.” The kitschy font and imagery of the t-shirt make sheltering-in-place or isolation seem like a fun getaway vacation, subverted by the collective’s abrasive name ‘*Sick In Quarters*’ which sounds anything but enjoyable. It calls attention to [America’s severe problem with Individualism](#). Able-bodied folks and conservatives have been complaining about quarantine ever since its initial mandate but far too many have failed to follow essential precautions which cause the virus to continue to spread. Both the self-disciplining protocol and those that disregard it in favor of homosocial activities are not only failing at-risk communities, but as Butler said, they are ‘letting them die.’ Part of what is so powerful about Sick In Quarters’ work and the production of an online community is bringing into conversation lived experiences of disabled and chronically ill people. Shared mourning is an act of care.

What are Radical Care Networks?

Tamara Kneese and Hi‘ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart get hyper-specific with terminology in *Radical Care: Survival Strategies for Uncertain Times* published in the March edition of the Duke journal, *Social Text*. Kneese and Hobart’s article has inspired this story to follow the same lineage and employ the terminology of “radical care networks.”

Over a Zoom interview, Tamara Kneese, who is an Assistant Professor at the University of San Francisco explained what qualified as radical care. “While it can be connected to an individual, it could be about self-preservation as a form of radical activism,” she gives as an example Audre Lorde, the self-described ‘Black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet,’ whose work, particularly *Cancer Journals* have been foundational in the development of radical care. “It also has to connect in that way to the collective. What is the larger structural change you are trying to make?”

For Sick In Quarters, whose specific lens of activism comes through disability justice, radical care means accessibility for all. “We all have different access needs and we deserve to be

loved and feel safe. Especially during this time within a pandemic where the disabled community is so often forgotten. We must rely on each other,” wrote Sick In Quarters. One could argue that finding access needs for the individual at its first iteration was an act of radical care. However, when Sick In Quarters changed their fundraising model into a coalition, they solidified it as a radical care network.

Sick in Quarters reallocated the disability fundraiser proceeds equally to G.L.I.T.S, Women for Political Change Mutual Aid Project, and Walela Nehanda, each of which has seen fundamental transformation. G.L.I.T.S. Inc., (which stands for Gay and Lesbian Living in a Transgender Society) is a grassroots organization devoted to uplifting LGBTQIA+ people on a global scale, which on November 18th opened the [first ever housing building devoted to the Black Trans community in Queens](#). [Women for Political Change Mutual Aid Project](#) is providing \$200 payments to women and trans and non-binary folks. Walela Nehanda is a Black nonbinary, queer, nationally renowned poet, community organizer and leukemia warrior, who on December 11th celebrated their [“Re-Birthday”](#) as a result of receiving a new immune system due to their Be-The-Match stem-cell transplant.



Ceyenne Doroshow, founder of G.L.I.T.S at the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the new dwelling, Glits One, the first ever building devoted to Black trans community. Photo: qns.com

History repeating itself

Sick In Quarters’ Disability Justice Art Fundraiser is a strange phenomenon. For one, WFPC Mutual Aid Project, Walela Nehanda, and G.L.I.T.S. each had transformations that were in part made possible by the coalitional work of Sick In Quarters’ Disability Justice art fundraiser. However, each need existed before the coronavirus. With mutual aid, a fundamental problem that

is occurring with its rapid popularization is that communities are solving problems of structural neglect that should be attended to by the state. In the New Yorker article called, “What Mutual Aid Can Do During a Pandemic,” Jia Tolentino said, “We can be so moved by the way people come together to overcome hardship that we lose sight of the fact that many of these hardships should not exist at all.” Or, iterated through Kneese’s words, “When the government says ‘Gofundyourself’ what are you going to do?”

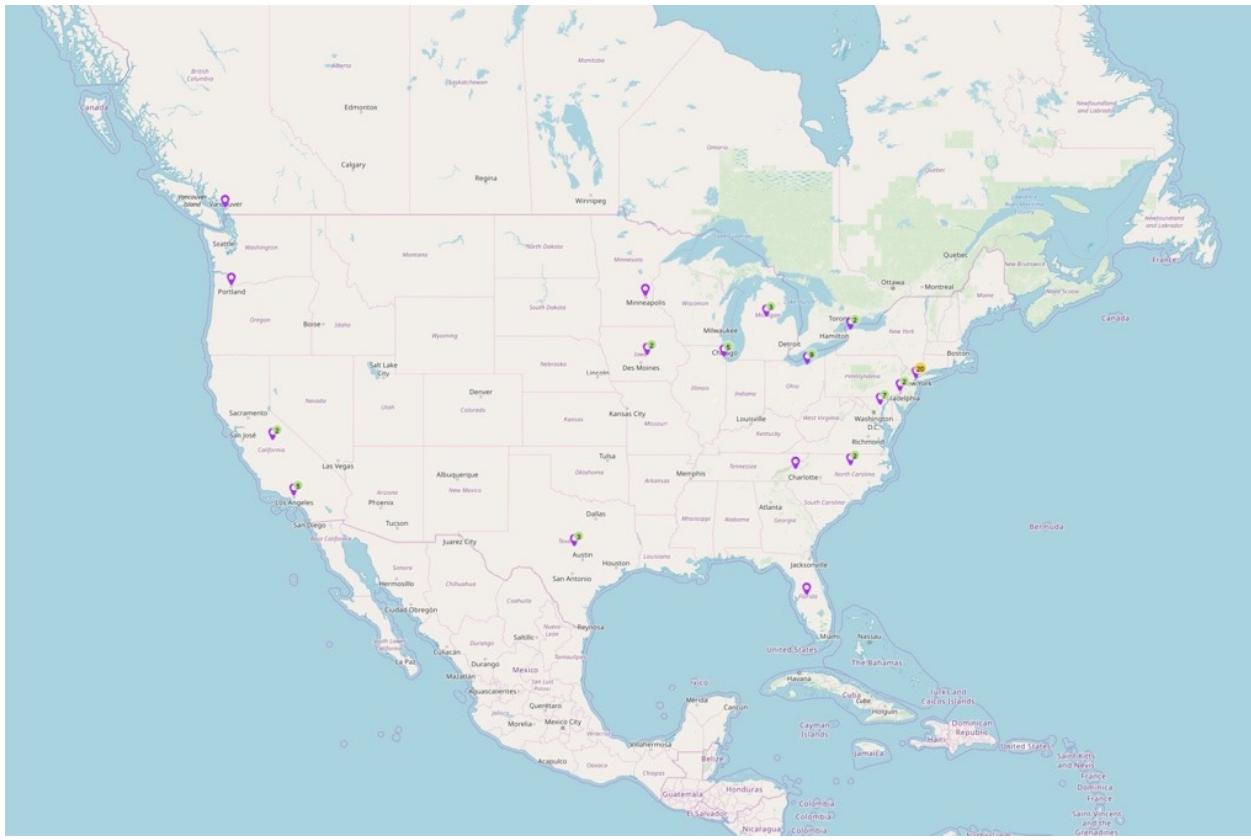
Additionally, the Sick In Quarters Disability Justice mutual aid website has some uncanny resemblances to two other forms of selling art. The first is charity auctions, a prolific form of donor-centric philanthropy in the Art World, which as reminded by the slogan “solidarity not charity,” mutual aid fundamentally is not. The second, simply because this is their form of monetizing work, the fundraising model has semblance to 2020’s global online art fairs. Even though it was for mutual aid, Sick In Quarters’ Disability Justice Fundraiser used an economic model of globalization.

Over an email, David Joselit, Professor of Art, Film, and Visual Studies at Harvard, author of *After Art*, and who published *Heritage and Debt* on art and globalization this year wrote, “as a biological agent the Covid-19 virus is about as global as something can be.” He explained how globalization can be used as an agent for many different things. For Sick In Quarters, the collective used the same economic framework as the online art fairs that Art Basel and Frieze used this year, but for very different reasons. “But even within this economic framework, there are many specific and even singular experiences of globalization. One of these could even be the efforts at mutual aid you mention that, through the capacity of the Internet, aid a “community” which is located in many different geographical sites.”

The irony mirrored a particular work for purchase called *Mendieta Platter* by Hamtramck Ceramck, which is a hand-thrown plate with a cobalt blue figure in the center. Written across the edges of the plate is www.artnet.com/artists/ana-mendieta. The link-inscription brings context to the center figure. It’s a caricature of the Cuban American Ana Mendieta’s iconic and personal *Silueta series*, in which she planted traces of her body into the earth. It seems that Hamtramck Ceramck is saying that the sale of such spiritual work on a website which caters to speculative

investors is sacrilegious. As a sold work of art on Sick In Quarters' website, the *Mendieta Platter* communicates how similar SIQ's Disability Justice Fundraiser is as a 'business' model to artnet, a global marketplace to buy and sell artworks, while exposing how they are being used for much different reasons.

Since the pandemic a survey by [Americans for the Arts](#) states that sixty-three percent of artists or creative workers are fully unemployed because of COVID-19 and ninety four percent have experienced income loss. Additionally, as Kerry Cardoza of *Newcity* Chicago points out in "["Hardest Hit: Pandemic Lays Bare Art Worker Precarity,"](#)" "More than half of all visual artists report being self-employed, only seventy-nine percent of whom had health insurance coverage, leaving many at risk during this health crisis." It is possible that because more people and perhaps specifically those in the creative industry are out of work, radical care networks are organizing that are making meaningful, structural change to living in a capitalist state, adapting techniques of commerce that have proven useful but harmful before. It is important to understand, however, that the coronavirus is not the cause for this need, it only unveiled the lack of social infrastructure that some have always known to be true, and others are only just now paying attention to.



Sick In Quarters Disability Justice Fundraiser consists of the online auction of works of art from artists across North America (including three works for purchase made by an artist in Finland not pictured in this data visualization), forming their own globalization network. Made for article.