**Picturing the Pandemic: Images from the Pandemic Journaling Project and the Rhode Island COVID-19 Archive**

In spring of 2022, the creators of the Pandemic Journaling Project (PJP), an online journaling platform that let people around the world record their pandemic stories in real time, invited Providence Public Library (PPL) to serve as the collaborative site for the Providence iteration of *Picturing the Pandemic (PTP)* exhibition planned for spring of 2023. In fall of 2022, the first iteration of *PTP* had been exhibited at the Hartford Public Library, transforming a selection of PJP contributions from digital existence to physically manifested images exhibited with one another in a space of visibility, creating new ways to literally “see” and consider the meaning and potential of these images.

For PPL, the possibility of hosting a *PTP* exhibition seemed felicitous, given the library’s role in co-creating and co-managing, with the RI Historical Society (RIHS), the RI COVID-19 Archive (RICA)—a public digital archive established to document the lived experience of Rhode Islanders during the COVID-19 pandemic. Like the PJP, RICA was founded in the early weeks of COVID-related lockdowns. Both initiatives were built on the belief that every person has something valuable to contribute to the documented history of the pandemic, even those who might not be reflected in news media accounts, medical statistics, or other governmental data, and that the very practice of documenting personal experiences can strengthen the voices of individual contributors as well as those of their communities. Both projects outlined very broad criteria for inclusion: whatever a contributor thought related to their experience of the pandemic—from masks to supply shortages, feelings of social isolation or hope for the future, connections to nature or artistic expression—was relevant. Like PJP, RICA collected digitally, and welcomed submissions in all manner of media—text, photographs, moving images, audio—allowing contributors to document their experiences by means of whatever available method best expressed what they wanted to remember and communicate. And while the submission processes differed in various ways for the two projects, both allowed contributors to maintain their anonymity in the publicly accessible sections of the archived material.

One major difference between the projects was the geographical scope of collection. While PJP was open to anyone, anywhere in the world, RICA was—as its title states—meant to collect the experiences of people in Rhode Island. This scope was consistent with the missions of RICA’s co-founding organizations and the staff leadership within them. At PPL, Curator of Rhode Island Collections Kate Wells has spearheaded the library’s decade-long initiative to refocus collecting efforts to better reflect the lived experiences of Rhode Islanders, including helping to build a robust community archives program that both assists community members in organizing and preserving their own materials and collects, preserves, and makes publicly accessible a wide variety of culturally rich community collections at the library. At RIHS, Curator and Archivist of Moving Image and Audio Collections Becca Bender initiated and invented multiple projects that empowered Rhode Islanders to share and

preserve their own archival moving images and audio, as well as create original works using materials from the RIHS collections. (Bender left RIHS in December, 2022.)

Providence’s thriving arts and design community is part of the DNA of the city’s unique character, and RICA is filled with responses to COVID that take the form of original artworks rendered across the media spectrum. One of the early group submissions by artists was Adaptive Practices: Six Artists Redefine Isolation and Distraction, an interactive project developed at PPL in the spring of 2020 as the pandemic necessitated lockdowns, and designed to address widespread anxiety about how to navigate unrelenting uncertainty, fluctuating productivity, and debilitating isolation during quarantine. Six artists, who had all served as Creative Fellows in PPL’s Special Collections Department, designed experiential activities that could be accessed virtually and asynchronously by members of the public, enabling them to experience how an artist’s creative process often encompasses venturing into the unknown, enduring “fallow” periods of reflection and synthesis in which no immediate “product” results, and working in solitude when necessary. The idea was to reframe these experiences and conditions—which were dreaded during lockdown—as having the potential for generativity, and to celebrate the human capacity for ingenuity and resourcefulness, which daily life now demanded.

In this spring of 2023, while looking through the submissions to choose a representative selection for the PTP exhibition, we were struck by how many artists had contributed to RICA throughout the past three years—whether with sketches, sculptures, performances, moving images, or photographs—and we were gratified to have so many creative expressions of personal experience to choose from. We were also cognizant of gaps in the record, as well as efforts to rectify them. In the summer of 2020 it became apparent that the collection was over-representative of the suburban and upper middle class experience; during lockdown and the initial health care crisis, people who could work from home, with easy access to technology, were most likely to have the time and ability to contribute. In order to address the socioeconomic and geographic disparities of documentation, funds from the Rhode Island Council for the Humanities were procured, enabling the project to hire a team member who developed and conducted direct outreach to majority Hispanic and Latinx communities as well as the healthcare community.

There are still absences, or voices only faintly heard. While we do have contributions from essential workers and people who became ill with COVID-19, they are underrepresented in RICA, given their numbers within the state’s population. While we have documentation of the protests that arose in response to the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and other Black and Brown people across the country, as well as demonstrations in protest of the rise of anti-Asian violence, we have few submissions expressing personal reflections on either the violence itself or the protests that arose in response. We recognize the importance of these absences: Whose voices are missing? Which stories remain untold?

As the exhibition opens, we continue to seek out the voices, stories, and expressions as yet undocumented in RICA, and we hope that the exhibition itself, and the programs and events planned around it, will provide opportunities for remembrance, reflection,
and reassessment of our individual and collective trajectories, however circuitous, across these three years and into the future. When this exhibition ends on June 30, 2023, collecting for a will end as well. While COVID is still with us, and still impacting some people much more than others, conditions have shifted. We’ve traveled some distance since 2020, however discontinuously, sometimes stopping altogether and often looping back over ground already covered. It seems like the right time to acknowledge and assess the many miles we’ve traveled to get here, and to turn our eyes to the possibilities ahead.

The Pandemic Journaling Project

In Spring 2020, as the fabric of everyday life was being rapidly transformed, a team led by anthropologists Katherine A. Mason at Brown University and Sarah S. Willen at the University of Connecticut launched the Pandemic Journaling Project (PJP), an online, weekly journaling platform that invited ordinary people around the world to chronicle their stories in real-time — for themselves and for the historical record. Like the Rhode Island COVID-19 Archive, PJP grew out of a sense of urgency that a world turned upside down needed to be documented and that the experiences of those living through it needed to be honored and preserved.

In the first months of the pandemic, standard anthropological research methods—which rely largely on in-person interviews and participant-observation—were impossible to implement. The PJP team therefore took a different approach. They provided participants around the world with tools to document and preserve their own experiences. With nothing but a smartphone, anyone age 15 or older, living anywhere in the world, could create a weekly record of their pandemic lives using text, audio recordings, or photographs. The platform was available in Spanish and English, and participants could contribute in any language. They also could download a PDF of their complete journals at any time, so that they could keep a copy for their own personal records as well as for the project’s archive.

In keeping with standard practice in anthropological research, all contributions were anonymous, and no names were collected or preserved. This insured privacy and confidentiality for all participants. Each time they journaled, participants also could choose whether to make their journal entries available for sharing on the PJP website’s “Featured Entries” page or keep them private for themselves and the archive. With anonymous entries curated by the PJP team, and without the possibility of commenting or “likes,” the Featured Entries
page provided a safe space for connection and solidarity without the pressures of social media. These weekly opportunities to share thoughts and experiences and learn from others helped many journalers cope with the stresses of this time.

Rooted in a commitment to democratizing knowledge production, the PJP platform was designed define “journaling” expansively, so that participants were not limited to writing. A spirit of “archival activism” also guided the work.1 On its website, PJP makes a strong pitch for why participation matters: “Usually, history is written only by the powerful. When the history of COVID-19 is written, let’s make sure that doesn’t happen.” Through purposeful outreach to those whose stories might not otherwise be preserved, as well as through multiple forms of active community engagement, PJP aims to decolonize future histories of the pandemic.2

Building the PJP model during the chaotic early months of the pandemic felt much like building a plane while in flight. Somewhat to the surprise of the team, the plane flew. Between May 2020 and May 2022, over 1,800 people in 55 countries created nearly 27,000 journal entries in writing, audio, or images—including over 2,800 images. Participants ranged in age from 15 to 91, and hailed from all walks of life. Included in the archive—among many others—are the voices of students, medical staff and other essential workers, unemployed service workers, retirees, and isolated new mothers. All contribute unique and important perspectives to the history of COVID-19.

At the same time, it quickly became apparent that an archive of the COVID years would necessarily include much more than stories of COVID itself. PJP journalers documented the full breadth of their lives and individual stories during this time. They wrote of their anguish over the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and other victims of racist violence. They photographed the eerie landscapes of wildfires burning across the western U.S. They uploaded audio of their real-time reactions to the January 6th insurrection at the US Capitol. They took photographs of their families in their homes in South Africa, Germany, and China, and of social justice marches on the streets of the US, Canada, Mexico, and France. In each of these moments, PJP participants, lovingly dubbed “grassroots


ethnographers” by the PJP team, put their voices on the record in journal entries that vary widely in tone, detail, and degree of intimacy. All of their journals are theirs to keep — and for 25 years they also will be accessible to select researchers, some of whom have already begun analyzing them in an effort to understand these pandemic times. After 25 years, the PJP archive will be open to the public as a freely accessible historical resource.

The *Picturing the Pandemic* Traveling Exhibition

In creating the *Picturing the Pandemic* exhibition, PJP teamed up with the Luce Foundation-funded project, *Seeing Truth: Art, Science, Museums, and Making Knowledge*, to explore the power of multimedia journaling — as a way not only to create knowledge, but also to find our creativity, share our pandemic experiences, learn from others, and strengthen our voices. The exhibition first opened in October 2022 at the Hartford Public Library, in Hartford, Connecticut, before traveling to Providence. Additional exhibition locations include Heidelberg, Germany (opening April 2023), and Mexico City, Mexico (opening May 2023). In each local exhibition, PJP materials are placed in dialogue with multimedia materials produced by local community members.

PJP is proud to collaborate with the Providence Public Library in presenting *Picturing the Pandemic* in Providence. We also invite you to visit three satellite exhibitions on the Brown University campus, which augment the primary exhibition at PPL and build bridges between the Library and the Brown community. At the Stephen Robert Campus Center, we are partnering with Brown’s Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology to present, “The Pandemic Journaling Project: A Grassroots Collaborative Ethnography.” Here you will find more on the origins and goals of the Pandemic Journaling Project, including a sketchbook chronicling the pandemic created by a PJP participant. After viewing the sketchbook, walk over to Brown’s Population Studies and Training Center to see images from the PJP archive that engage issues of population health, including mass vaccination and reproductive health. Finally, visit Brown’s Swearer Center for an exhibit on the mental health dimensions of the pandemic curated by students in PJP co-founder Katherine A. Mason’s Spring 2023 Anthropology of Mental Health course.

The *Picturing the Pandemic* traveling exhibition was originally created by Sarah S. Willen and Alexis L. Boylan.

To learn more about the exhibition, including our other locations in Hartford, Heidelberg, Mexico City, visit the exhibition website.


In the Exhibition

Video

Rhode Island COVID-19 Archive Moving Images

Charlie Mather, “Corona Times: A Coronavirus Documentary”.
Eli Nixon, “Toy Theater I created during first weeks of isolation”.
Haley Lang, “Video about how coronavirus affected me and my family”.
Ian C, “The COVID Experience”.
Lina Bravo, “PPL Bandana as a Mask”.
Little Compton Historical Society, “Little Compton Historical Society Two-Minute-Tours”.
Maia Farish, “Westminster Street at sundown”.
MT, “COVID Recital”.
Regin T. Hogan, “COVID19 Example of Distance Learning”.
Robert Mcmahon, “coping with COVID-19”.
Rose Weaver, “Don’t Take the Memories With You - final”.

8mm Film Festival

From RICA

Abigail Amatucci, “At Home,” 8mm Film Festival, Summer 2020.
Anthony Earabino, “Resetting,” 8mm Film Festival, Summer 2020.
Anthony McGill, “[Untitled],” 8mm Film Festival, Summer 2020.
Azurae Cruz, “[Untitled],” 8mm Film Festival, Summer 2020.
Brian Bouyea and Rebecca Magnotta, “[Untitled],” 8mm Film Festival, Summer 2020.
Brian May, “Waving to You,” 8mm Film Festival, Summer 2020.
Chris Bird, “[Untitled],” 8mm Film Festival, Summer 2020.
Cooper Hammond, “Tomorrow,” 8mm Film Festival, Summer 2020.
Drone Dolores Collaborative, “The Emergence Tape,” 8mm Film Festival, Summer 2020.
Heather Lucas, “Dear Baby,” 8mm Film Festival, Summer 2020.
Jonathan Pitts-Wiley, “Quarantimes,” 8mm Film Festival, Summer 2020.
Jon Stening, “[Untitled],” 8mm Film Festival, Summer 2020.
Justine Johnson, “Amongst the Lockdown, Shmoopypfest 2020,” 8mm Film Festival, Summer 2020.
Lacko, “My Deepest Fear,” 8mm Film Festival, Summer 2020.
Lionel Jeffries, “[Untitled],” 8mm Film Festival, Summer 2020.
Olajide Adeleke, “There or Hear,” 8mm Film Festival, Summer 2020.
Selene Means, “[Untitled],” 8mm Film Festival, Summer 2020.
Xander Monge, “[Untitled],” 8mm Film Festival, Summer 2020.

Updated Info & Policies

From RICA

Dragan Gill, “Photo of two posters on a telephone pole at night,” April 15, 2020.
Claire Uziel, “Photo of sign at Dunkin’ Donuts Center,” May 19, 2020.
Dragan Gill, “Photo of Rent Strike Graffiti.”

Fabric Panels
7. @mask_up_ri, “@creola.p3 gorgeously masking up,” Rhode Island COVID-19 Archive, August 3, 2020.
29. @mask_up_ri, “Our beloved beautiful Queens doing their part. Make sure you’re masking up and protecting your community!” Rhode Island COVID-19 Archive, July 16, 2020.
34. Martha Kuhlman, “100,000,” Rhode Island COVID-19 Archive, June 1, 2020

Plywood Panels
Text
From RICA

Audio/Music
From RICA

Journal
The images are excerpts from Urgency Reader 2: Mutual Aid Publishing During Crisis through Queer Archive.Work, edited by Paul Soulellis and made by 110 contributors. It was submitted to the Rhode Island COVID-19 Archive under the title “A collaborative art project about life in quarantine.”
Adam Chuong, “New Horizons”.
arthur katrina, “NOTES FROM WEEK ONE: THE RELUCTANT HERMIT, THE INTIMATE APOCALYPSE, VRIUS DAZE INTUITIVE MIXTAPES VOL. 1-5”.
Bean Drake, “Fair Winds and Following Seas”.
corinne ang, “walking distance”.
Danny Aldred, “Nullius in Verba”.
hua Duttweller, “Aren’t We All, Just Keep”.
Kit, “futurity”.
lermworm, “Quarantine Thoughts (What happens next?)”.
Nina Muccia, “at home at last forever”.
Noa Mori, “In the Wake of the Crisis We Must // A Thin Layer of Sanitizer & Fear”.
Sophie Seita and Naomi Woo, “Manifesto of The Hildegard von Bingen Society for Gardening Companions”.
Zoë Pully, “ME, MYSELF & I / A WALK”.

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Essay: Picturing the Pandemic: Images from the Pandemic Journaling Project and the Rhode Island COVID-19 Archive by Christina Bevilacqua in conversation with Kate Wells and Becca Bender

Essay: The Pandemic Journaling Project by Katherine A. Mason and Sarah S. Willen

Exhibition curated by Christina Bevilacqua and Sophia Ellis in conversation with Katherine A. Mason, Sarah S. Willen, and Jason Tranchida

Exhibition designed by Jason Tranchida
Moving image features designed by Rai Terry
Catalog and printed materials designed by Lois Harada
Catalog cover and postcards letterpress printed by Lois Harada at DWRI Letterpress, Providence

Providence Public Library
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Ready to add your voice?
Scan the code to share your thoughts about the COVID-19 pandemic—in words, a drawing, a photo, or by recording your voice.
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