Getting Back to What Once and Never Was
By Dan S. Wang

The crisis of 2021 is this: that the bundled crises of the previous year, what Jelani Cobb called a “crisis cubed,” was no aberration but rather a dramatic introduction to a new generalized condition without definitive end. Instead of bottoming out and returning to a former state, the notion of “recovery” becomes something at once more concrete and more elusive; simply being well. Given that everything from classroom learning to supply chain management going forward builds on the unprecedented shifts of 2020, the conventional notion of, say, a quantifiable rebound must surrender to our rather more existential situation. The genesis and unfolding of the series of artists’ projects at 18th Street Arts Center called Recovery Justice: Being Well stands as an example of artists engaged in an organic process bearing the spirit of our take-nothing-for-granted times. The planning began with email and pandemic-necessitated Zoom meetings, followed by the joy and trepidation of our first in-person discussions. Come showtime in Spring of 2021, artists installed work under distanced precautions and in staggered time slots. For some weeks the show was accessible only by appointment under the conditions of a partial reopening. With restrictions lifted as COVID numbers fell, the return to in-person art life culminated in the July 10, 2021 event Left/Right/Here at the Airport campus, a night’s worth of related programming. Hundreds showed up for a classic 18th Street experience: galleries on view, committed performances by Recovery Justice artists, open Airport studios, food and wares on offer. Except for the continued masking and regulated attendance, the fête had the celebratory vibe of a pre-pandemic art party.

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Exhibitions and Programs
Does this mean we are recovered? Hardly. It is noted frequently that the pandemic exposed—that is to say, uncovered—economic inequities, incompetent political leadership, a lack of popular science literacy, and many other failings in national preparedness and organization. And yet none of these afflictions are new. For example, the brutalities visited upon people simply for “living while Black” certainly predate the police killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. Lola del Fresno addresses this unacceptably persistent and particularly terroristic form of racism in \textit{RUN JONNY RUN}, a wall drawing of a ranch home layered with video projection of a lone male figure jogging on dark sidewalks, running away from the camera. While the work evokes the horrible 2020 murder of Ahmaud Arbery, a young unarmed Black man fatally criminalized for his presence in a residential neighborhood, the referent just as easily figures as the tale of teenager Trayvon Martin, whose murder was a key event in the rise of consciousness that eventually took form as the Black Lives Matter movement. That was nearly ten years ago. Moreover, given the styling of del Fresno’s line-drawn house, the work suggests that the arbitrary deadliness of “doing x while Black” is a problem as old as the advent of segregated suburban space and mid-century white flight. Putting the exhibition title in relation to this work means that “recovered justice” entails deep excavations surrounding patterns of injustice that are old but constantly—and tragically—refreshed.

Del Fresno’s is not the only contribution to spill over the eighteen months of the most recent crises. Luciana Abait’s craggy den-sized paper sculpture, \textit{The maps that failed us}, made of an oversized world
map crumpled so that the terrain of entire nations resemble the folds of an arctic glacier rapidly melting, brings into view a planetary challenge that exceeds the current crisis even as it constitutes it. Rebecca Youssef’s contributions, also motivated by ecological concern, include a work of an intimate presence, a simple photocopied palm-sized stapled booklet. Though physically small, the free ‘zine deals with a temporal scale closer to the durations of massive environmental change addressed by Abait: it contains illustrated instructions for harvesting, storing, and planting acorns, and tells the story of Youssef’s ongoing efforts (20k acorns planted so far) to propagate the regal native oaks of Southern California. Whether visceral like del Fresno’s, critical like Abait’s, or ameliorative like Youssef’s, these works tackle subjects for which there is no returning to an unseen state, no recovering in a literal sense.

That said, other artists certainly did take the acute crises of 2020 as a focal point. Perhaps most directly and one of the earliest of the proposed contributions, Board-Ups (2020), assembled by Nicola Goode and Sara Daleiden, treats the covering/re-covering dynamic at its most concretely material expression. The pair put together a selection of raw plywood sheets bearing expressions in aerosol, marker, wheatpaste, and other street techniques by artists named and unnamed. The sheets were scavenged from the cache of discarded protective boards that had been installed by retailers during the unrest of late May 2020, when the angry + radical + opportunistic hordes trashed stores in Santa Monica’s upscale shopping district in dramatically targeted looting. The plain plywood sheets were tagged almost immediately. Within days the boarded up streetscape of Santa Monica was decorated with tributes to those lost to police violence, calls for peace, inspirational quotations, and an endless assortment of tags, throwies, and sgs—the protective covers themselves got covered, as it were. Never intended as public space but nonetheless jammed by artists, Goode and Daleiden recognized the collectively embellished plywood as local documents of the national and international George Floyd Uprising, not to mention an explosion of pent-up pandemic creativity. By diverting these objects from the waste stream, the artists preserved a sampler of the grassroots mark-making that blossomed in concert with the assault on property and liberation of goods. Seen a year on, they serve as a poignant reminder that any meaningful recovery—any being well—must reckon with the post-gentrification city; that what happened in Santa Monica was not the self-destructively rageful inner-city rebellion of generations past but more like a critique by-the-deed of a bourgeois urban space that prioritizes the well-heeled consumer.

This is where the subtitle comes into full view: Being Well. The pandemic delivered extremes. People either had their workloads doubled or found themselves suddenly unemployed. In lockdown people were either isolated and lonely, or struggling for personal space in overcrowded quarters. Many put up with the lockdown even though they themselves knew no one with COVID while others had the virus rip through their whole family. Into the no-win circumstances of pandemic life came the language of care. Caring for each other and ourselves—and figuring out how to enact the will to care under unprecedented conditions—emerged as the most positive avenue for bearable pandemic life. Susie McKay Krieser and Yrneh Gabon perfectly caught this spirit of care with their collaboration One Mask, One Love, One Heart❤️. With the titular phrase presented over a grid of twenty-four torso portraits, each one an 18th Street Arts Center artist or staff person holding an open self-hug stance, the composition is a picture
of the longing for human touch, and in its absence, the necessity of self-care. This healing image is delivered in three doses: a video, a central reproduction in the exhibition brochure, and, most grandly, as an oversized vinyl mural installed as part of the inaugural outdoor Glider Wall display. But for the overwhelming number of COVID deaths, not to mention an ugly rise of political extremism within the United States, this is a work that might be dismissed as sentimental. Surviving cinnabar “airpocalyptic” skies, an attempted fascist coup, and the seared—in fear of infection cures us of that interpretation. Instead, given the threats in the air, One Mask, One Love, One Heart operates as a balm for those exhausted by the pandemic-age struggle for bare life. As it turns out, the external factors of mass vaccinations and a relative political calm let Recovery Justice: Being Well end its run under less stressful circumstances than it started. As such, the arc of the show benefited from the rounding of a public health corner. And yet, with a third surge underway as of this writing driven by the super aggressive Delta variant, we are reminded that our upended lives continue insofar as the reality of a recovery won’t be anything measurable, and the metrics of justice cannot be only about returning to what was sometimes a perfectly ghastly past. Simply being well, from moment to moment, beginning with the ability to express care, is our available recovery no matter the challenges to come. Which is to say, the artists are left with the question with which we began: what is a recovery?

Participating artists in Recovery Justice: Being Well included:

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Partners included the Community Clinics Association of Los Angeles County (CACLAC), St. John’s Well Child & Family Center, and the Community Corporation of Santa Monica.


2 The neologism airpocalypse came into popular use through news reports about extreme air pollution in Beijing and other Chinese cities beginning around 2013. The smothering blanket of choking breast fire smoke that reddened Northern California skies in September 2020 thrust the term into the American context.