



## Relationships Do the Heavy Lifting: [Second Helping: CCA@CCA Post-Election Town Hall](#)

*Katherine Hamilton*

The results of the 2020 General election left us with more questions than answers. How can activists and allies amplify initiatives that electoral politics have never touched? How do we ensure the initiatives and movements activists began long before this election cycle carry on beyond January 2021? The panelists on CCA@CCA's November 16th gathering, *Second Helping: CCA@CCA Post-Election Town Hall*, are asking themselves and their communities these questions and demanding answers, and creating the conditions for us to develop solutions. Panelists included Jocelyn Jackson of People's Kitchen Collective, Conrad Guevara representing Real Time & Space and their Town Fridge in Oakland, Larissa Gilbert representing the Oxbow School and 2727 California, and Lexa Walsh of Oakland Stock. The panelists addressed food justice, food sovereignty, and the ways communities can fulfill individual human needs and desires.

Jocelyn Jackson, one of the three artist-activists at the Oakland-based organization People's Kitchen Collective, discussed how she was decentering whiteness in not only her practice but in the broader spheres of food justice and mutual aid. We live in so many before/after moments; how do we lean into the presentness of gathering together? So much of mutual aid work before the pandemic was about being together, occupying not only physical space with each other but holding each other in many ways that are no longer safe or possible for those who may need it the most. Jackson emphasized that she and her team were working to re-create that space and feeling of pre-pandemic care in a world that dictates we not gather together in the way we could before. How do we commit to gestures that are arts forward, social justice forward, and ancestor forward in this time of necessary isolation?

While the answers to these questions are not straightforward, nor will they yield immediate and final results, the People's Kitchen Collective's love of their people allowed creative forms of care to manifest. By focusing on peoples' material needs, they put together an event in October that saw six-hundred Beloved Community Bags to unhoused people and Cook-A-Long bags to families and neighbors in West and East Oakland. The bags included recipes and ingredients for a meal that participants cooked together with PKC on Zoom and donated library books to feed the brain. The ingredients in the food they served have historical reference points for those who consume it – they know these dishes like they know old friends or family members. “It’s something people look to,” Jackson added, “something that has heart and presence connected to it.” Using food to ground a community at a point in time, in a shared love or history, helped foster and recreate that sense of connection we lost with the ability to gather.

Larissa Gilbert of The Oxbow School shared their experiences as a budding community organizer and feeder. Gilbert admitted a profound sense of isolation during the first few months of the pandemic for them and those still residing at the Oxbow campus in Napa. They began taking care of the community garden on campus. Spending time nurturing and caring for the plants brought them profound gratitude for the garden and the earth. Yet, the artist remained frustrated they could not share this gratitude as they could not bring people in to harvest or cook.

Gilbert contacted the non-profit art and education space 2727 California to create a partnership for fresh produce distribution in Berkeley and Oakland. Gilbert's offerings began small, but they scaled up as they became more experienced in farming and distributing produce. While delivering the food to fifteen families all summer was rewarding in and of itself, Gilbert noted that understanding growing food and eating as a part of their artistic practice provided an uncomplicated way of being together with others, both human and non-human. In sharing the food they grew, Gilbert felt they could combat many harmful and oppressive systems through this simple act. Farming itself is an act of mutual aid: if you pay attention to the soil, love the earth, it will care for you back.

Artist and activist Conrad Guevara spoke candidly about their experience setting up and maintaining an SF Free Fridge, a site where folks can donate or take food. Early in the pandemic, Guevara found themselves “doom scrolling” on Instagram and noticed Free Fridges popping up around NYC and then in the Bay Area. They contacted Town Fridge headquarters to set up their own fridge outside the studio Real Time & Space, receiving an overwhelming amount of community support. Guevara admitted that

seeing the amount of suffering and endless need in the Bay Area right in front of their studio was difficult; it emphasized how vain it can feel to make artwork in the middle of a pandemic. “I’m like, coming here to be creative and have a career for my genius ideas!” they joked. Still, this question of “what are we doing, and why are we doing it?” rings true to many of us as we continue to make artwork and fulfill capitalist expectations during a moment of collective trauma. Community organizing work challenges the heroic role of the artist by creating decentralized, non-hierarchical forms of mutual-aid, fostering a network of adoration and trust, rather than one of guilt.

As a social practice artist, Lexa Walsh is also addressing the feeling of artmaking as futile during times of crisis. Since the start of the pandemic, Walsh has been making and distributing containers of home-made soup. Walsh’s pre-pandemic work, such as “Meal Ticket,” brought groups of people with contrasting backgrounds or politics together to engage in difficult conversations over a hot meal. While this type of work became impossible due to the need to distance from each other, sharing recipes and food remained a means to exchange conversation. As the artist was well versed in making much food for many people on a small budget, they quickly pivoted to distribute food in a way that followed pandemic health and safety guidelines. Walsh initially began offering soup on social media, which grew to a form of mutual aid when Walsh donated the money collected from donations for the soup to various social justice organizations. Some farms or markets in Oakland contributed ingredients for the soups, and Walsh built a network of volunteers to distribute the meals. As Guevara noticed, while there is a seemingly constant need in the Bay Area, there are also the community resources to address those needs. While more aid from governmental structures would have been life-changing to many, we should also have confidence in our communities to provide help and resources when we ask for them.

This pandemic has created many logistical problems for mutual-aid networks in place pre-pandemic. Our ability to gather and be present among each other has been taken away momentarily, though for a good reason. Mutual-aid work that feeds people naturally requires access to resources. However, creating and sustaining relationships with people—be they volunteers who stay past midnight, farmers or bakers who donate their leftovers—has kept these networks afloat during the pandemic. If there is not a sense of connection, Jackson concluded, a sense of truth, trust, and transparency between people and the organization, then these networks would not be steadfast or sustainable. Yes, resources are necessary to continue feeding people and filling peoples’ basic needs, but *relationships* do the heavy lifting.

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*Second Helping: CCA@CCA Post-Election Town Hall* was organized by the CCA Exhibitions department, and moderated by Sam Vernon and Menaja Ganesh featuring artists Jocelyn Jackson, Conrad Guevara, Larissa Gilbert, and Lexa Walsh. The event was held as part of the CCA@CCA Series.

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