

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Alison S. Cohn, "Artist Carrie Mae Weems: 'COVID-19 Is Not an Equal Opportunity,'" *Harper's Bazaar*, August 17, 2020

BAZAAR

Artist Carrie Mae Weems: "COVID-19 Is Not an Equal Opportunity Virus"

Her Resist COVID Take 6! public awareness campaign aims to get information into the hands of those most impacted.

BY ALISON S. COHN / AUG 17, 2020



PHOTO BY BRE'ANN WHITE, COURTESY CARRIE MAE WEEMS AND LIBRARY STREET COLLECTIVE

Referring to the recommended six feet of separation required for proper social distancing, artist Carrie Mae Weems's Resist COVID Take Six! public awareness campaign aims to get information and resources to combat the

spread of the deadly coronavirus into the hands of BIPOC communities via billboards, buttons, lawn signs, take-out bags, and other creative means. Activism and a belief that representation matters has always been central to the MacArthur Genius grant recipient's work. In her iconic *The Kitchen Table Series* (1990)—currently on view at Jack Shainman gallery's online viewing room—Weems herself posed as the self-assured main subject, using a kitchen table as her domestic stage, and she has consistently created images that insist on the worth of Black people throughout her more than four-decade photographic career.

Since its launch in April, Weems's grassroots campaign has reached 10 cities across the United States. Now, for Resist COVID Take Six!'s next chapter, she's partnering with Library Street Collective, a Detroit-based gallery that has developed and executed several impactful initiatives at the intersection of art and social justice since the onset of the pandemic. They include selling artist coloring books to raise money for child hunger; supporting artist Jammie Holmes's *They're going to Kill Me* sky media demonstration, which flew George Floyd's last words over five American cities; and launching a new charitable auction platform, Alliance.

Here, we speak with Weems and Library Street Collective's cofounder Anthony Curis about their shared mission.

What was your inspiration for the Resist COVID Take 6! campaign?

Carrie Mae Weems: It really arose out of a conversation with a very close friend, Pierre Loving, about the impact of COVID-19 on people of color and what we could do about it. COVID-19 is not an equal opportunity virus. The numbers are staggering. For example, there was a report from Chicago in early April that 72 percent of people killed in that city by the coronavirus were Black, despite making up less than a third of its population. I understood immediately that our mission was to create an artist-driven public awareness campaign that attempts to get information into the hands of the most impacted.

**BECAUSE OF INEQUITY,
BLACK, BROWN & NATIVE PEOPLE
HAVE BEEN THE MOST IMPACTED BY COVID-19!**

**THIS MUST
BE CHANGED!!!**

CARRIE MAE WEEMS

**WASH YOUR HANDS, COVER YOUR FACE,
KEEP A SAFE DISTANCE & GET TESTED!**



**RESIST
COVID
TAKE 6!**
A SOCIAL JUSTICE BY PRODUCT
RESISTCOVIDTAKE6.COM

Resist COVID Take 6! poster.

COURTESY CARRIE MAE WEEMS

What was your process? Obviously, there are unique challenges to doing photo shoots during a pandemic.

CMW: Well I'm fortunate that I've been working for many years, so I have thousands of photographs in my own archive that I could choose from. I've been photographing people and places forever. One photo that I think is particularly impactful, and that I've also used in relation to Black Lives Matter, features a double entendre: a young boy in a hood. People are aware of what a *hood* means. There's a history to that.

Another photograph that I selected features a group of people in dialogue with one another. It's based on past events at MoMA's sculpture garden that rarely included people of color. So I invited a diverse group of people to hang out with me in the garden and have a series of conversations there.



Resist COVID Take 6! posters in East Village, Detroit.

PHOTO BY BRE'ANN WHITE, COURTESY CARRIE MAE WEEMS AND LIBRARY STREET COLLECTIVE

Could you explain the role that text plays in these works?

CMW: Text is often an important part of my work as it was here. I asked myself, “What is it that I need to hear first and foremost?” Should a poster read, “Sadly people of color have been the most impacted by COVID-19”? Or should it be, “As usual, the most impacted by COVID-19 have been people of color”?



We are debunking the myths, the fantasies, and the fake news around COVID-19.

So I was pounding away on my computer, generating statements, and then just sort of slowly editing them down. We want to alert people of color that they have to wash up and they have to mask up and they have to back up. Those are the things. Also that COVID-19 is not a hoax, which is very, very important given what the president was saying. He’s only backed off of the idea that COVID-19 was a hoax and that it was going to disappear very recently, after 167,000 Americans have died of COVID-19 and five million have been infected, right? We are debunking the myths, the fantasies, and the fake news around COVID-19. I wear a button every day that says, “COVID-19 is Not a Hoax.” I’m hoping that I can have a whole dress made stating that fact.



Resist COVID Take 6! button.

COURTESY CARRIE MAE WEEMS

How did you choose the distribution channels for your messages?

CMW: Every city is different, which is why we put together a selection of materials—including lawn signs, billboards, wheatpaste posters, buttons, masks, magnets, tote bags, and shopping bags—and then each city can then decide what they actually need and how they can best serve their communities.

In Syracuse, New York, where I live, we focused on lawn signs. I wanted them to be beautiful, thoughtful, and engaging. Something that people would want to see. Syracuse is four hours from New York City and two hours away from Albany, right? But the median income here is lower than that of the state of Mississippi. Homes are collapsing, and many stores are boarded up, right? There's no visual language, right? There's nothing of beauty. There's nothing to excite the imagination. We put the first signs up at the beginning of April, and what I'm very excited by is that so many of them are still there. I drive around and I look for them.

What other cities have signed on to be part of Resist COVID Take 6?

CMW: It's really taking on great traction. It's in New York City, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Savannah, Miami, Sarasota, Nashville, Dallas, and Chicago. And we're really excited to now be partnering with Library Street Collective to bring the project to Detroit.



Resist COVID Take 6! posters in East Village, Detroit.

PHOTO BY BRE'ANN WHITE, COURTESY CARRIE MAE WEEMS AND LIBRARY STREET COLLECTIVE

Can you tell us more about what you're doing together in Detroit and why this partnership is so meaningful?

Anthony Curis: We were immediately drawn to Carrie's project by its message, but also the means in which the campaign could be translated on a very personal scale.

Library Street Collective is based in Detroit, a city with a nearly 85 percent Black population. Although COVID-19 is a global issue, it can be very localized by the severity of its impact on specific populations. So cities like Detroit have been disproportionately affected by the disease, and we felt that it was a really compelling and important project to bring here. Also, obviously, the chance to work with the great Carrie Mae Weems was an honor that we couldn't pass up!

We thought that we could make the most impact by concentrating our efforts in a very singular geographic area of the city, East Village, which is a neighborhood about 10 minutes outside of downtown. We've installed wheatpaste posters on a number of commercial and residential buildings throughout the neighborhood. And these will range in scale from, modest in size to some being larger than billboards. One of the benefits of keeping the posters in close proximity is that residents will have an opportunity to safely walk past them and view the entirety of Carrie's message.

How will you be partnering with local businesses and nonprofits to further spread the message?

AC: There are two really incredible nonprofits in the area that we're going to be partnering with, the Empowerment Plan and Downtown Boxing Gym. Empowerment Plan is an organization that is working to break the generational cycle of homelessness through employment. They hire low-income minority, single parents from local shelters and train them in sewing and manufacturing. And they actually produce sleeping bags that double as coats for the homeless and those in need. Downtown Boxing Gym is a free after-school academic and athletic program for Detroit students ages eight to 18. Both organizations will be distributing Resist COVID Take Six! tote bags, stickers, and buttons.

And separately in the neighborhood, we're partnering with a number of small businesses like restaurants who can serve as another vehicle to help promote the message. We're providing free paper bags with the campaign's messages, which they can use for take-out.



Resist COVID Take 6! poster in East Village, Detroit.

PHOTO BY BRE'ANN WHITE, COURTESY CARRIE MAE WEEMS AND LIBRARY STREET COLLECTIVE

Where would you like to see Resist COVID Take 6! go next?

CMW: At the end of the day, we're just all making little drops in the pool, and it has a certain kind of reverberation. Cities and governments are still sitting at the table trying to decide if the design of a door hanger is appropriate. Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot, bless her heart, she's one of the mayors that's been out there the longest, right? They *finally* were able to get up a billboard recently. The level of bureaucracy at this moment is tragic.

Maybe there are still some issues with the message of our campaign. Maybe it's not all crystalline and perfect, and hasn't been worked on by 90 people making \$200,000 a year, right? But we've done something. And I know that it's impactful. I know that it's meaningful. In fact, the city of Syracuse is now using our materials on their website. With luck, we'll all get to the other side of midnight.