

Street Art During a Pandemic: The San Francisco Bay Area Experience

“We are brave. We are hopeful. We are resilient. We are San Francisco.” This inspirational message appeared on the side of Hayes Valley restaurant, Dobbs Ferry of San Francisco. [1] Lee Ann Frahm, artist and owner of Dobbs Ferry, created it because she believes “words can heal, they can make us smile, they can make us feel, they can make us laugh or cry.” [2] Frahm’s message strives to unite the San Francisco community as it faces the challenges of COVID-19. Street art has proliferated across the Bay Area since the pandemic began. The art has sparked joy and unity for residents, while also giving people a medium to express themselves.



We are San Francisco. Image credit: Matt Stein 2020.

CAPTURING SAN FRANCISCO’S EXPERIENCE WITHIN A COVID-19 ARCHIVE

In March 2020, Arizona State University historians launched [A Journal of the Plague Year: An Archive of COVID-19 \(JOTPY\)](#) following the World Health Organization’s declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic. [JOTPY](#) is a crowdsourced digital archive aimed at preserving the pandemic’s impact on everyday life. The archive allows individuals to submit personal stories, photos, videos, art, and documents. All stories, from mundane to extraordinary, are an essential part of the archive as it strives to capture life during the COVID-19 pandemic. [3]

Despite best efforts to include the diversity of voices in the archive, historians face the harsh reality that silences still, and always will, exist. In [“Archiving a Plague Year: Building a Crowdsourced Digital Archive of COVID-19,”](#) historians Tom Beazley, Victoria Cain, and Rebecca S. Wingo, discuss how the pandemic has strained historian’s efforts to include traditionally marginalized groups of people in the archive. In the face of adversity, [JOTPY](#) historians continue to address this issue. [4] One way [JOTPY](#) is attempting to fill potential silences is through specialized collections that exist within the archive, such as the

regional differences in COVID-19 experiences as shown by the collections on Boston, Carleton College, Australia, Peru, the Philippines, rural areas and the [San Francisco Bay Area Collection](#). [5]



Empty Golden Gate Bridge. Image credit: Michelle Zimmerman 2020.

PANDEMIC ART IN SAN FRANCISCO

Street art has been a popular medium of expression for many San Francisco Bay Area residents during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite adversity, artists continue to create. According to a [survey](#) by Americans for the Arts, 94% of artists “experienced a loss of income from the pandemic.” [6] [Jennifer Billock](#) of *Smithsonian Magazine* reports that artists are adapting to pandemic challenges by “taking over public spaces...using their art forms to express beauty, support, and dissent.” Billock adds “one of the spaces where...debate can emerge, especially among those who are marginalized or less able to speak within the media, is the street.” [7] By capturing street art within the COVID-19 archive, many diverse perspectives and voices that would otherwise be silenced are instead preserved.

The San Francisco Bay Area has seen a recent rise in street and public art. Local street artist fnnch launched a “Honey Bear Hunt” at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic “to provide a safe way to get out of [the] house and enjoy art during COVID times.” [8] Over 3,500 patrons purchased a Honey Bear Kit from [fnnch](#) and displayed the artist’s work on their homes or places of business. A simple scroll through fnnch’s Instagram page shows how much joy and unity the Honey Bear has brought to San Francisco Bay Area residents. [9] fnnch’s work has also inspired others to spread their own messages during these trying times. From “Please wear a mask. It’s

simple,” to the addition of a Black Lives Matter sign, San Francisco Bay Area residents are using fnch’s art, as a medium to express themselves. [10]



BLM Honey Bear. Image credit: Matt Stein 2020.

Street art is also being used to send powerful messages about social justice. Murals were created on the plywood used to board up Oakland businesses during the protests that followed the death of George Floyd. The Oakland murals capture local reactions to the nation-wide #nojusticenopeace protests. Black Lives Matter and George Floyd are the most dominant mural subjects. One mural also depicts a protestor wearing a face mask. The murals reflect the overall surge in support of Black Lives Matters protests taking place throughout the San Francisco Bay Area during the COVID-19 pandemic. [11]



Rise Above. Image credit: East Bay Times June 2020.

San Francisco Bay Area suburbs are also seeing an increase in street art. A community rock garden appeared at the start of California’s shelter-in-place orders. The garden grew into a beautiful myriad of rocks with diverse messaging. One rock displays a painting of a nurse

wearing a mask - half of her clothes are her nurse's uniform, the other half are her as Wonder Woman. While many rocks contain uplifting and encouraging messages, others include important social justice messages such as "BLM" and "Defund the Police." [12] These rocks are a reminder of the other aspects of life San Francisco Bay Area residents are experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Wonder Woman. Image credit: article author 2020.

By including street art within the San Francisco Bay Area Collection, [A Journal of the Plague Year](#) is ensuring that the diversity of the COVID-19 experience is preserved. Street art, however, is just one way that San Francisco Bay Area residents are expressing themselves during the COVID-19 experience. How is the pandemic impacting your life?

Have a story to share? Contribute your experience using the [Share Your Story](#) page. Use the hashtag **#sanfranciscobayarea** to be included in the official San Francisco Bay Area Collection.

Keywords: silences, San Francisco, street art, COVID-19, voices

[1] Shanna Gagnon, "We Are Brave. We Are Hopeful. We Are Resilient. We Are San Francisco," *A Journal of the Plague Year*, San Francisco Bay Area Collection, June 30, 2020, <https://covid-19archive.org/s/archive/item/22226>.

[2] Dobbs Ferry (@dobbsferrysf), "Well it's been almost two months since the Shelter In Place," Instagram photo, May 12, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/dobbsferrysf/>.

[3] A Journal of the Plague Year: An Archive of COVID-19, accessed August 3, 2020, <https://covid-19archive.org/s/archive/page/welcome>.

[4] Tom Beazley, Victoria Cain and Rebecca S. Wingo, “Archiving a Plague Year: Building a Crowdsourced Digital Archive of COVID-19,” *The newsmagazine of the American Historical Association Perspectives on History*, June 29, 2020, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/summer-2020/archiving-a-plague-year-building-a-crowdsourced-digital-archive-of-covid-19>.

[5] A Journal of the Plague Year: An Archive of COVID-19, San Francisco Bay Area Collection, accessed August 3, 2020, <https://covid-19archive.org/s/archive/page/sanfranciscobayarea>.

[6] Irvin Zhang, “Here’s how artists are creating – and surviving – during the COVID-19 pandemic,” *News@Northeastern*, June 24, 2020, <https://news.northeastern.edu/2020/06/24/heres-how-three-artists-are-creating-art-and-surviving-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>.

[7] Jennifer Billock, “How Street Artists Around the World Are Reacting to Life With COVID-19,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, April 23, 2020, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/how-street-artists-around-world-are-reacting-to-life-with-covid-19-180974712/>.

[8] fnnch, “The map for the Honey Bear Hunt is online,” Facebook, June 26, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/fnnch>.

[9] fnnch (@fnnch), “Random acts of art. San Francisco, CA,” Instagram, August 3, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/fnnch/>.

[10] Shanna Gagnon, “Honey Bear Hunt in San Francisco,” A Journal of the Plague Year, San Francisco Bay Area Collection, July 11, 2020, <https://covid-19archive.org/s/archive/item/23832>.

[11] Shanna Gagnon, “#NoJusticeNoPeace Murals Blanket Downtown Oakland,” A Journal of the Plague Year, San Francisco Bay Area Collection, June 9, 2020, <https://covid-19archive.org/s/archive/item/20493>.

[12] Shanna Gagnon, “Community Rock Garden,” A Journal of the Plague Year, San Francisco Bay Area Collection, June 29, 2020, <https://covid-19archive.org/s/archive/item/22093>.

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