

Corona and Work around the Globe

Edited by
Andreas Eckert and Felicitas Hentschke

DE GRUYTER
OLDENBOURG

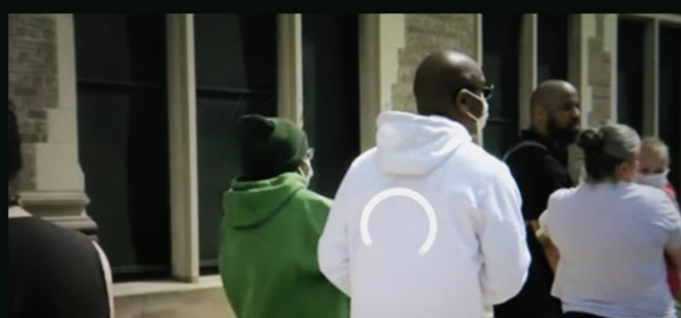
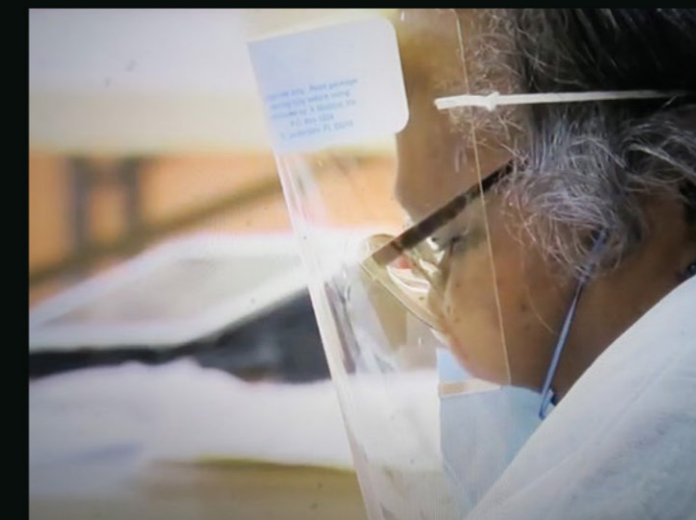
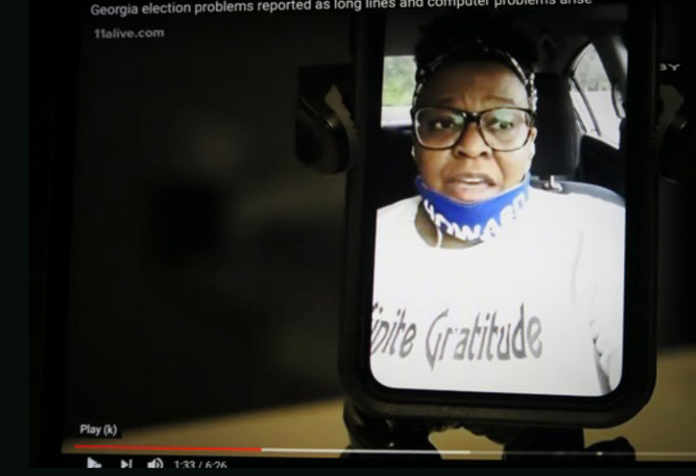
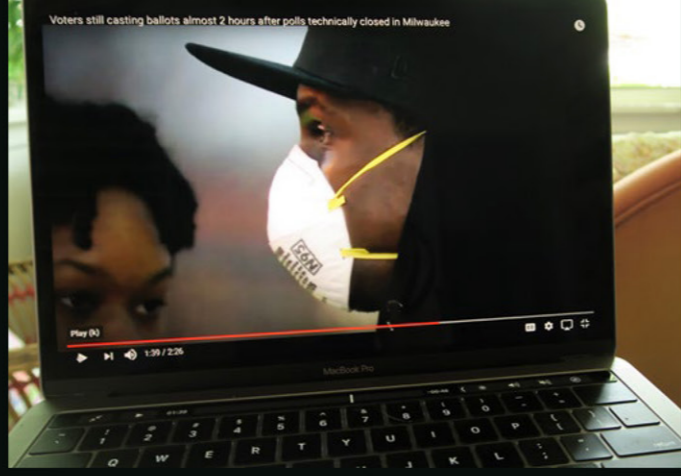
Ellen Rothenberg

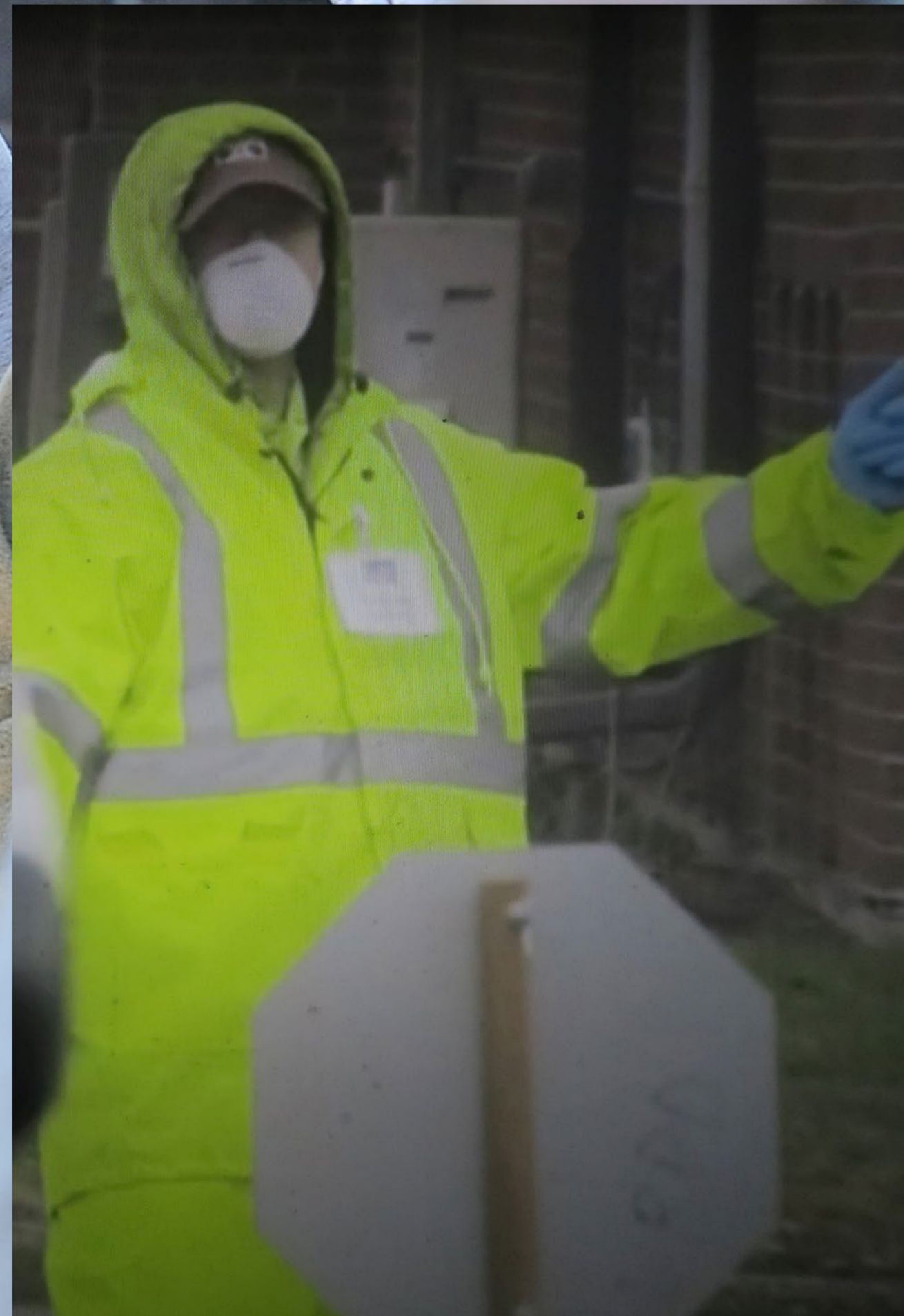
**'This is Ridiculous,' Voting as Labor During COVID-19:
A Report from the United States**

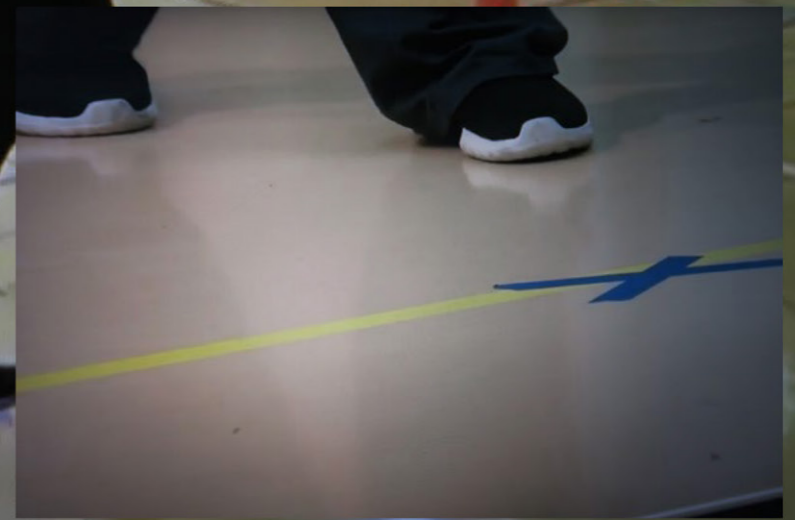
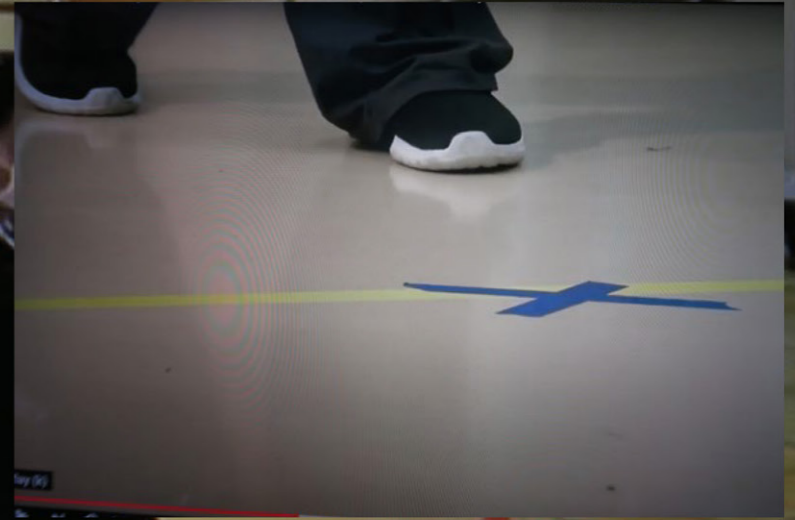
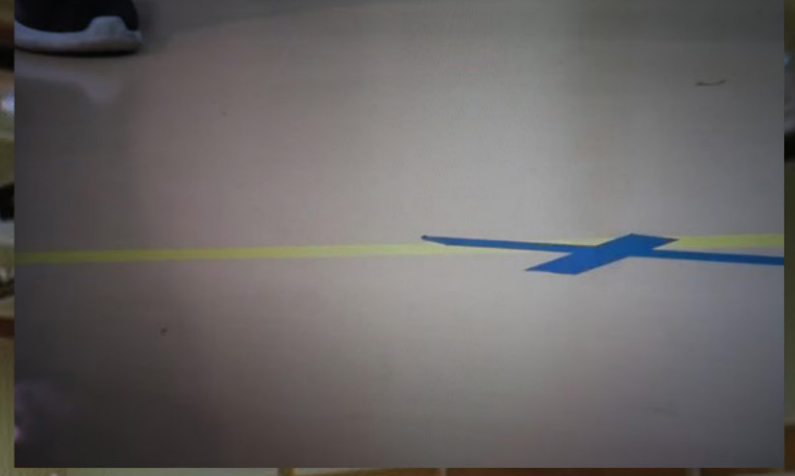


















E5₁

E5₁

LIVE

G7 0



Ellen Rothenberg, with Felicitas Hentschke

Insistence on Voting Despite the Pandemic is an Act of Resistance – An Interview

Ellen Rothenberg teaches at the School of the Art Institute (SAIC) in Chicago. But first and foremost, she is an artist and political activist who critically deals with socially relevant issues through installations, performances, visual essays, and other media. Her art is not limited to museums and galleries. She takes her work into the public space and seeks dialogue with passers-by.

In her work, she comments on issues and challenges faced by civil society. She draws attention to inequality and criticizes working conditions, especially in relation to women and others who are discriminated against on the basis of their gender, race, or class, from a historical and contemporary perspective. She encourages the communities around her to develop collaborative practices in response to these complex issues and challenges. In this sense, her art is very powerful and optimistic.

We invited Rothenberg to contribute a visual essay to this book. Like all of the other authors, we asked her how she experienced the coronavirus crisis and what touched her the most – without losing sight of the subject of work.

The result is a piece on the primary elections in the American states of Wisconsin and Georgia, which took place on April 7 and June 9, entitled “‘This is Ridiculous,’ Voting as Labor During COVID-19: A Report from the United States.” She forces the viewer to look at the dilemma in which the citizens found themselves at the time, having to choose between a commitment to exercise their democratic rights and participate in the elections and a commitment to protect themselves and others during lockdown. An advantage of her way of working compared with the more linear texts penned by scholars is the simultaneity of the messages that she can express in their complex connectedness. This enables her to show the inequality, racism, and dysfunctionality of the social system at play more than ever during the elections under the condition of coronavirus – and that voting is a form of work.

In this interview we talk to her about all of these things and also ask her what impact coronavirus is having on her own work.

When we think about certain global moments in history – the first moon landing, or the 9/11 attacks on New York – most people who witnessed these defining events still vividly remember where they were and what they were doing when they heard the news. Coronavirus is a different kind of event, more a kind of phase, rather than a snapshot in history, that comes with drastic measures and consequences for each and every one of us and that will definitely remain in the collective consciousness for a long time. You were (and still are) in Chicago. How did it concern you personally – your daily life? Work? What are your observations on the pandemic experience in your city and on a larger scale in the United States?

Initially we became aware of coronavirus through the news, watching daily broadcasts concerning the situation in Wuhan and through discussions with colleagues, friends, and my international students. Understandably, students were anxious about the virus and its effects on their families and communities in their home countries. As COVID-19 spread to Europe there was a shift towards certainty, a new calculation of ‘when’ – not ‘whether’ – it would surface in the United States.

In counterpoint to the news, we were receiving official denials from our government and a complete lack of mobilization at the national, state, and local levels. There was an atmosphere of apprehension coupled with a sense of inevitability. It was only a matter of time before the virus would arrive in the United States. Then, with a shock, New York City was hit. The governmental and institutional responses occurred in slow motion after weeks of denial, hesitation, and waiting. The crisis flooded the country. Suddenly Chicago closed down. We experienced the extreme quiet, no traffic, no planes, no people on the streets. We were left in a vacuum without contingency plans, or clear information – silence.

Quickly and on a broad national scale the virus exposed the weaknesses and cracks in our economic and social systems. Without universal health care, and with an extensive history of health inequality, communities of color were disproportionately affected by the virus. Hospitals were overwhelmed and without the necessary equipment or facilities to care for the avalanche of sick patients or the supplies to keep their staff protected and safe. Gaps in the supply chain resulted in shortages of personal protective equipment (PPE), food, and daily supplies. The politicization of the virus by a president and his administration unable and unwilling to lead, to support scientific findings, and to unite the country has resulted in the current catastrophe. Vast economic divides in our society, in Chicago, and across the country directly impacted an individual’s ability to survive the pandemic. The outrage and violence that followed became a call to action and people took to the streets to address them in publicly in “Black Lives Matter.”

You created a photo essay for this volume “‘This is Ridiculous,’ Voting as Labor During COVID-19: A Report from the United States.” What is its story? What do you want to narrate?

It is not a story per se, but a texture of relationships, a panorama both historical and contemporary, a landscape of conditions. The visual essay reflects the time we are living through. It is neither fictional nor personal. It is public and of the moment. It examines the media images of the primary elections from the distance of pandemic isolation through the screen. The primary elections in Wisconsin and Georgia occurred on April 7 and June 9, 2020, respectively. Despite very real risks, people were forced to vote in person during a pandemic lockdown, because of conflicting political efforts to skew or impact the vote. The images trace a national portrait of chaos and dysfunction. People standing six feet apart for hours, in the rain, to exercise their right to vote. They endured delays caused by a shortage of poll workers, closed or limited numbers of polling stations, malfunctioning equipment. It was a labor of citizenship inscribed across these events by ordinary people. Their frustration, their stoicism, their anger, and commitment appear within this essay.

What do you know about the protagonists of your story?

I don’t know them, but I recognize them. They’re clearly Americans, working people. They could be my neighbors, former students, friends, or people encountered on the street. One thing is clear, communities of color are being targeted with policies of voter suppression. Their insistence on voting despite the pandemic is an act of resistance. Voting rights suppression is a human rights violation and a strategy of repression familiar to generations of American communities of color.

In your work, the subject ‘work and labor’ is present in many projects. You are interested in feminist histories of labor and social action. How much ‘work’ is in your art work and specifically in “This is Ridiculous.” For example, in your installation “For the Instruction of Young Ladies” (1989) and in “Beautiful Youth” (1992) you examine the history of education for women as a method of socialization rather than as a means of acquiring knowledge. Or, taking an example from another type of work,

in “Industry Not Servitude” (1996) you are concerned with the history of the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association, the first labor organization for women mill workers in the United States. These women activists broke new ground in the area of women’s rights and made significant contributions to anti-slavery movements and labor reform.

2020 is the centennial anniversary of women’s suffrage in the United States and marks the passage of the nineteenth amendment giving women the right to vote. Currently I’m working on a public art work commissioned by the Weinberg Newton Gallery in Chicago, in partnership with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) on voting rights. At this moment, when voter suppression is part of the current political landscape, there is a through line, a direct connection both to the suffrage movement and the struggle for civil rights and electoral access during the 1960s, which extends to the present. Today we are witnessing comparable contestations of human rights and social justice in the United States and on a global scale. The pandemic throws a sharp light on the institutional oppression and violence of our social, political, and economic systems.

You ask about coronavirus and how much this pandemic has influenced my thinking and current work. With the re:work invitation to participate in “Corona and Work Around the Globe” it’s essential to speak about political activism and solidarity in times of isolation and social distancing, at a precarious moment of political instability and threat to our democratic system. As a ‘high-risk’ individual susceptible to the virus, how do I actively labor as a citizen from a state of seclusion? This is crucial.

Both the exhibition in Chicago and the essay in the re:work volume closely align with my commitments to artmaking, activism, and community. Publication and exhibition are discursive frameworks supporting possibilities of solidarity and resistance; opportunities to expose systemic inequalities uncovered by the pandemic, and disrupt official narratives. As a counter to isolation, they pose a critical public presence in conversation with others internationally.

In your precise working process, are you ever caught by surprise? Maybe by other stories you discover in the material you work with, stories also worth being told?

Artmaking, like research or writing, requires a series of returns to the material, to the place, to the archive, or to the image. It is only through repeated presence and attention that things come into focus and coalesce with meaning. The surprise is in uncovering connections. Often an oblique image or photograph, a tangential side note becomes key in understanding what’s there.

As a very productive artist (and teacher) over the course of the last thirty years, you can look back on a long list of art installations and performances. In your self-description you say that you are very much influenced by the social and political actions of the sixties. You are used to working with historians, anthropologists, and archivists. What motivated you to work in an interdisciplinary context? And how do you collaborate with individuals in various disciplines in “This is Ridiculous”?

Working collaboratively and across disciplines always enriches and informs the work. We have the benefit of other perspectives whether the collaborators are academics or skilled professionals, tradespeople, or members of other countries or communities. They have an expertise, a knowledge based on a lived experience which would be impossible to duplicate or access in any other way. This generosity of exchange deepens my understanding; it takes me to places that would be off-limits otherwise. It’s a privilege to learn this way and exciting to gain entrance to these multiple worlds.

What do you teach your students? New techniques to approach projects and their own art work? Do you give them tasks – to work on the theme of coronavirus? Or discuss critically the relation between social media and art? What is new or has changed in the classroom (beyond the fact that you meet online)?

Teaching during coronavirus shifts the emphasis toward developing an understanding of persistence, how to keep going, how to produce work under less than ideal conditions, in isolation, remote from the institution and institutional values. The crisis demands that we address questions of survival and ethics, to consider how our work functions in the world.

In photography you have to make a lot of decisions within split seconds. Maurice speaks of serendipity. You work with existing photographs and have time to look at them carefully and to absorb, to edit, and to modify them? What kind of previous knowledge do you need? Did you do a lot of research? How you approach the photographs?

Photography has been a kind of notation or record taking, a visual text that deals with physical circumstances and the materiality of the moment. It is a record of impressions.

Do you have a favorite picture in this essay? If you had to single it out and you had to give it a subtitle, what would it be?

The essay is a singular work with layered images, it’s not possible to select one photograph for commentary or to subtitle. The layering produces a kind of visual noise, the dissonance of voting during coronavirus. The images contain artefacts of their construction, photographed off the screen, there are digital indicators of loading or broadcast. It’s necessary to view them together as kind of a panoramic social snapshot. The collection of images reflects the simultaneity of activities and experience in the process of voting. Like a visual text it’s temporal, a passage structured within the architecture of the publication.

If there is a narrative arc it articulates the voting process – people standing in line, being registered and sanitized, waiting outside, waiting inside. Poll workers in PPE, directing people, answering questions, cleaning the voting booths, counting ballots. Images of people as they labor to be citizens under the condition of coronavirus. “This is Ridiculous” in its layered presence asks for a kind of continuous return to ‘reading’ what is there, to encounter small details that on first glance might appear insignificant but are often telling.