



TRACE

A COVID-19 Memorial

RESOURCE GUIDE



Integrating this
interactive artwork
into your gathering



INTRODUCTION TO THE ARTWORK



Trace is an interactive installation created by artist **Nyssa Chow**.

This artwork is a memorial to the essential workers who tragically lost their lives in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The piece involves one hundred names of these workers, each complemented by a dedicated phrase about the worker shared by their loved ones. *Trace* uses heat-sensitive paint so that the names and memories become visible when the wall is warmed by the touch of a hand. The use of touch reminds us of the barriers to touch in that period, as well as the fundamental, life-saving role that human connection and contact have in the face of loss. The names fade back into invisibility once the heat dissolves, evoking the temporary nature of memory and the fragility of life.

Trace was installed on the ground floor of the CUNY Graduate School of Public Health & Health Policy (CUNY SPH) in collaboration with the Harlem Health Initiative (HHI), the New York City Preparedness and Recovery Institute (PRI), the CUNY SPH Foundation, and Manhattan Community Board 10. By placing *Trace* in the academic environment of CUNY SPH and the community-oriented environment of HHI, we hope to activate further reflection, education, and dialogue about this period. The installation offers stakeholders and the public a space for reflection, ongoing learning, collective organizing, and action.

Learn more about Nyssa's work at tellinghistories.com/nyssachow



Why focus on essential workers?



The idea that some work was “essential” to our ability to survive as a society took shape early in the pandemic. Essential work was performed by a range of individuals, including health care workers at many levels, utility workers, critical retail workers, food production workers, public safety workers, and transportation workers, among others.¹

When COVID-19 stay-at-home orders were issued, many of these essential workers were required to continue working in person. They did this in most cases without adequate physical and occupational protections, such as mandatory universal paid sick leave for those unable to work due to COVID-19 (which was limited to certain occupations) and without a federal health and safety standard that would have protected workers from exposure to SARS-CoV-2 in the workplace.²

The people who were most vulnerable in this period were those working in occupations that did not have sufficient personal protective equipment or early access to vaccinations, and those who were working informally and without paperwork, typically undocumented immigrants. For instance, one study estimates that a full quarter of meat-processing and poultry workers, who were considered essential during the pandemic and suffered major COVID-19 outbreaks,³ were working informally and thus did not receive the employment benefits, paid sick leave, and expanded health care access offered through policies like the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, also known as the CARES Act.⁴

Why focus on essential workers?



In the event that we face another similar pandemic, essential workers should be provided with personal protective equipment and informed of the perils of exposure and measures to protect themselves in potentially unsafe work environments. According to the Center for American Progress (CAP) and the World Health Organization, key policy reforms to protect workers should include: safety standards to protect them from airborne diseases, risk-related additional compensation, paid family and medical leave, as well as access to affordable health care, quality child care, strong enforcement of workplace standards, and access to unions to advocate for safety protections and fair compensation.^{5,6} Longer term, it will also be important to work toward improved workplace mental health and well-being, in ways that center worker voice and equity.⁷



Credit: Robinson Greig

How to Interact with Trace



Interacting with *Trace* involves using the warmth of your hands to connect with the stories and memories held in the artwork.

We recommend approaching *Trace* with the following in mind:

- ✱ We suggest taking your time and moving with intention. Touch the wall with tenderness, as you would gently touch another person.
- ✱ You may want to use your palms and press gently to warm the wall.
- ✱ You may want to use both hands placed next to each other.
- ✱ You may want to work together with someone else to make visible a full phrase and name.



Integrating Trace into Your Use of the Space



We believe there are a range of ways that people hosting events in this space can approach how *Trace* is incorporated into their event. Exactly how they do this will depend on the goals, themes, and audiences of the gathering. Here are three tactics, along with guidance on when each might be most suitable:

Introductory Engagement: Letting attendees know that *Trace* is present in the space and encouraging them to interact with it during a break.

Recommended for: Events where the artwork may be complementary rather than a central focus. Works well for conferences, gatherings, and community events

Medium Engagement: Designating a brief, intentional time to interact with *Trace*, either individually or collectively. This can look like a brief guided reflection or facilitated discussion.

Recommended for: Events related to *Trace*'s central issues, such as COVID-19, pandemics, and labor issues.

Deeper Engagement: Building an event or workshop where *Trace* is a central element. This can look like having artist talks, storytelling circles, panel discussions, or hands-on activities inspired by the artwork.

Recommended for: Events centered on public health, creating emotional connection, and social transformation. This approach focuses more on exploring the emotional and structural impact of pandemics and labor conditions. With this approach, event goals might include rich dialogue, emotional connectivity, and collective personal reflection.

Support for Engaging with Trace



Because of the themes involved in *Trace*, interacting with this artwork has the potential to generate a range of feelings, including difficult emotions. Visitors might experience sadness, grief, anger, and other emotions. For these reasons, we include here support resources that we hope will be of use in navigating these emotions:



Calvary Hospital Bereavement Program

(718) 518-2281

lpappalardi@calvaryhospital.org

Bereavement support programs available for adults, teens, and children in the Bronx, downtown Brooklyn, and Upper Manhattan



Center for Complicated Grief

complicatedgrief.columbia.edu

Resources on complicated grief such as self-assessments and webinars



The Center for Loss and Renewal

212-874-4711

lossaandrenewal.com

info@lossandrenewal.com

Individual and group bereavement counseling to understand and cope with a life-changing loss or transition



HOPEline Services

oasas.ny.gov/hopeline

call 1-877-8-HOPENY(467369) or text HOPENY (467369)

24/7 substance use and addiction support line

Resources for Immigrant New Yorkers



Trace presents the experiences of a number of undocumented immigrants. We include here resources specific to supporting immigrants in NYC:

New Women New Yorkers

info@nywomenimmigrants.org

nywomenimmigrants.org

Programs and services to empower immigrant women to obtain meaningful employment or pursue higher education in NYC; offers a safe, inclusive space for building community

NYC DOHMH Immigrant Health Care Resources

[View Resources](#)

Low- and no-cost City services available for all immigrants from the NYC Department of Health & Mental Hygiene:

- ✱ Health insurance and access to care
- ✱ Public benefits and immigration status
- ✱ Maternal health care
- ✱ Asylum seeker resources

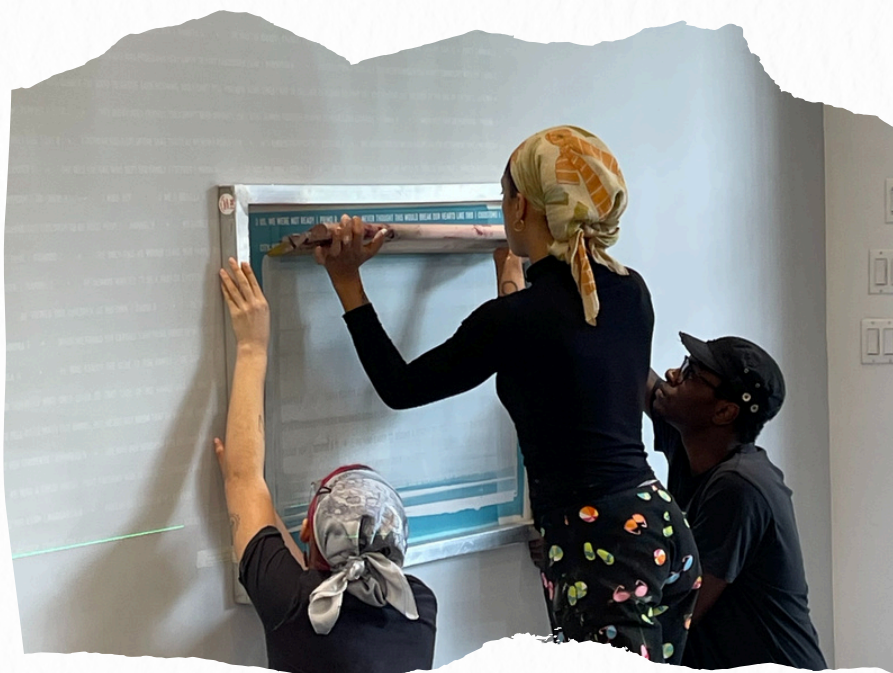
Know Your Rights Resources for Immigrant New Yorkers

[View Resources](#)

The NYC Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs has created Know Your Rights booklets in multiple languages to share information and resources:

- ✱ What to do if ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) agents approach you
- ✱ What to do if your friend or family member is detained
- ✱ Sanctuary City Laws in New York City
- ✱ Free and confidential legal help

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



It took a team of passionate contributors to bring *Trace* to life. Our heartfelt thanks go to the following individuals for their work:

Leslie Diuguid, *Screen Printer/Artist*

Makaio Johnson, *Art Assistant*

Naia Bautista, *Art Assistant*

Shannon Stovall, *Art Assistant*



REFERENCES



1. Gaitens J, Condon M, Fernandes E, McDiarmid M. COVID-19 and Essential Workers: A Narrative Review of Health Outcomes and Moral Injury. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2021;18(4):1446. Published 2021 Feb 4. doi:10.3390/ijerph18041446
2. Hanage WP, Testa C, Chen JT, et al. COVID-19: US federal accountability for entry, spread, and inequities-lessons for the future. *Eur J Epidemiol*. 2020;35(11):995-1006. doi:10.1007/s10654-020-00689-2
3. Steinberg J. COVID-19 Outbreak Among Employees at a Meat Processing Facility — South Dakota, March–April 2020. *MMWR Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. 2020;69. doi:<https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6931a2>
4. Lowe AE, Herstein JJ, Brett-Major D, et al. Integrating an Ethics Advisory Committee Into Public Health Response: A Case Study of COVID-19, Infection Prevention and Control, and Essential Work in the United States. *Public Health Rep*. Published online November 14, 2024. doi:10.1177/00333549241291951
5. Madland D, Glynn SJ, Leibenluft J, Workman S. How the Federal Government Can Protect Essential Workers in the Fight Against Coronavirus. 2020. Center for American Progress. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/federal-government-can-protect-essential-workers-fight-coronavirus/>
6. World Health Organization. *Closing the gap in a generation: health equity through action on the social determinants of health*. World Health Organization. Published August 27, 2008. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241563703>
7. Murthy V. Office of the Surgeon General. *Workplace Mental Health & Well-Being*. HHS.gov. Published May 24, 2024. <https://www.hhs.gov/surgeongeneral/reports-and-publications/workplace-well-being/index.html>

Contact & Connect



HarlemHealth@sph.cuny.edu



55 West 125th St, Ground Floor
New York, NY 10027



@cuny_sph_hhi



@cuny-sph-hhi.bsky.social



facebook.com/CUNYSPHHHI



Harlem Health Initiative at CUNY SPH