

Memories and Records: Thoughts on The Vaccine Archive

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Vicki Sung-yeon Kwon, an art historian and curator, and Lathika Sritharan, a public health researcher, discuss their collaborative project *Memories and Records: The Vaccine Archive*, an archive display of vaccine-related memories and immunization records of people from various parts of the world. They share challenges and accomplishments of collaborating with multidisciplinary participants and mounting an art exhibition at the UNAIDS building. As Canadians of Asian ethnic and cultural background, Kwon and Sritharan contemplate how vaccines are differently remembered in the Global North and the Global South.





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Kaisu Koski, *Injection Simulator* (2015)

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MEMORIES AND RECORDS: THOUGHTS ON *THE VACCINE* *ARCHIVE*

VICKI SUNG-YEON KWON, LATHIKA SRITHARAN

Vicki Sung-yeon Kwon, an art historian and curator, and Lathika Sritharan, a public health researcher, discuss their collaborative project Memories and Records: The Vaccine Archive, an archive display of vaccine-related memories and immunization records of people from various parts of the world. They share challenges and accomplishments of collaborating with multidisciplinary participants and mounting an art exhibition at the UNAIDS building. As Canadians of Asian ethnic and cultural background, Kwon and Sritharan contemplate how vaccines are differently remembered in the Global North and the Global South.

Vicki Sung-yeon Kwon, historienne de l'art et conservatrice, et Lathika Sritharan, chercheuse en santé publique, discutent de leur projet collaboratif Memories and Records: The Vaccine Archive, une archive présentant des souvenirs liés au vaccin et des dossiers de vaccination de personnes de diverses parties du monde. Ils partagent les défis et les réalisations de collaborer avec des participants multidisciplinaires et de monter une exposition d'art dans le bâtiment de l'ONUSIDA. En tant que Canadiens d'origine ethnique et culturelle asiatique, Kwon et Sritharan réfléchissent à la façon dont les vaccins sont mémorisés différemment dans le Nord global et le Sud global.

BACKGROUND ON PROJECT

Memories and Records: *The Vaccine Archive* aims to provoke thought on images and records of immunization in an era of mass migration and cross-border activities. The project was prompted by the question, “Is it possible to achieve herd immunity in contact zones, where people from diverse geopolitical backgrounds cross borders and gather together?” With a growing number of travellers and migrants, it is a global challenge to have systems in which individuals in all communities can be fully vaccinated against epidemic disease. The system of state-controlled prevention of epidemic disease could result in disjuncture between those who are safeguarded by the system and those who are not. What happens when migrant populations reside together in a community without knowing each other’s vaccination history?

Vicki Kwon, an immigrant from the Republic of Korea to Canada, and Lathika Sritharan, born and raised in Canada in a family of Sri Lankan immigrants, acknowledged the challenge of immunization for those living in Canada after migrating from their countries of origin. Kwon and Sritharan met as the two primary research coordinators of <Immune Nations>—Kwon as the project manager from the University of Alberta, working with Natalie Loveless and Sean Caulfield, and Sritharan as the research coordinator of the Global Strategy Lab, overseeing three projects led by Steven Hoffman, including <Immune Nations>. While working for three years on the collaborative project, Kwon and Sritharan learned about each other’s research and formed a team. *The Vaccine Archive* was developed with the benefit of Kwon’s expertise in archival research and curating exhibitions and Sritharan’s experience researching the health of Tamil-speaking immigrants in Canada.

For the project, Kwon and Sritharan collected two main sets of materials:

1. The first was memories and records of individuals who immigrated to or studied in Canada and their immunization records from

their countries of birth. The collected memories are in the form of transcribed interviews as well as artifacts and personal memorabilia related to vaccination. Some of the collected artifacts were lent by public participants who willingly shared experiences and memories of their own or their family members' vaccinations.

2. The second was everyday objects related to vaccination, consisting mostly of postcards (7), postage stamps (30), press images from newspapers (10), and advertising materials (12). The archived objects were collected from diverse geographical areas, including Africa, Asia, Europe, and North and South America.

The Vaccine Archive in the exhibition <Immune Nations> required multiple layers of collaboration. *The Vaccine Archive* invited public participants to engage by sharing their memories and their archive materials, and by participating in the survey that was part of the project. Mounting the exhibition <Immune Nations> also required three years of collaboration with interdisciplinary team members. The exhibition was mounted at privileged academic and political venues aimed at high-profile audience groups—the Trondheim Academy of Fine Art (Galleri KiT) at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, to coincide with the GLOBVAC conference, and the UNAIDS building, in Geneva, Switzerland, to coincide with the 70th World Health Assembly.

At these sites, *The Vaccine Archive* displayed artifacts and prints that offer views into the various issues surrounding global immunization today: the credibility and practicality of paper-based immunization records; the ethnic, cultural, gender-based, and geopolitical stereotypes embedded in the visual representations within vaccination advertisements; and systems of dissemination of vaccination in the Global South. In addition to the collected artifacts, public participation was a key component of *The Vaccine Archive*. Participants of various nationalities and ethnicities sent their immunization records and memories to be displayed, and during the exhibitions, visitors were invited to participate by filling out a vaccination card based solely on their memory.

CONVERSATION BETWEEN KWON AND SRITHARAN

Sritharan: When we first started <Immune Nations>, I was intrigued by the concept of art as a political intervention. Coming from a strong science background, art was a foreign discipline to me and I was excited at the prospect of collaborating with artists to produce impactful pieces. I was already familiar with the topic of vaccines, as a public health professional, and understood the challenges that came with influencing policy with health research. I remember thinking that if it was possible to influence policy through art, this could be a game-changer.

As part of the core team who helped plan and coordinate the project from the very beginning, I had the opportunity to see the ins and outs of putting on an art exhibition, and the immense time it took to plan such an art exhibition for an international audience. At the beginning, it almost seemed impossible to imagine what this exhibit could look like and whether it would be possible to do everything we said we would do.

Kwon: I felt the same way! I first joined the <Immune Nations> project to assist with workshops, exhibition logistics, budget control, and communication. When I had the first meeting with the team in January 2015, I was quite impressed with the projects that the Global Strategy Lab was taking part in and the budget that was allocated for <Immune Nations> by the Norway Research Council. I was confident about art administration, but I was nervous about working with all these high-profile participants, including artists, lawyers, scientists, and global advocacy professionals. Imagining the interdisciplinary collaboration and the forthcoming exhibition in one of the UN headquarters fascinated me.

As soon as I received the project budget outlined by the Global Strategy Lab, I noticed that our collaborators in health policy, science, and law knew very little about coordinating an art exhibition. The initial budget outlined costs for workshops and publications, without anything allocated for putting up an actual art exhibition (such as production, shipping, installation, design, etc.). I immediately recognized the

challenge of creating an art exhibition with non-art professionals—or, rather, with a grant that did not automatically understand how to allocate budget lines for non-traditional research outputs. So, in the beginning, a possible budget shortage when it came to the installation was the biggest concern for me. By the second year of the project, we secured two major Canadian grants, from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) and Killam Cornerstone Grant from the University of Alberta. In any case, all that is to note that you and I were initially not part of the art-making team. During the first workshop, however, I developed an idea to make an archive display with vaccine memorabilia and records of migrating populations and was invited to run with it. Since I had just learned about your research on the health challenges of Tamil-speaking immigrants in Toronto, I was really excited to potentially work with you on it.

Sritharan: When you first told me about your idea for *The Vaccine Archive* project, I immediately knew that I wanted to be a part of this piece. As a child of immigrant parents, I knew the difficulties that they faced when asked by their health care providers about the types of immunizations they had received and whether they were up to date with their current immunizations. Not to mention that they did not carry an immunization card with them when immigrating to Canada. South Asian immigrants, Sri Lankan Tamils in particular, are at greater risk of acquiring vaccine-preventable diseases, as many were displaced during the civil war. I was very interested in seeing how the records of individuals around the world differed from one another, and wondered whether it was possible to capture the challenges of immunizing migrant populations in this project. I knew it was a large undertaking that would take a lot of time and resources, but I also knew that we had a great team consisting of individuals with different strengths. Knowing that the exhibition was going to take place during the World Health Assembly was also very exciting, as it had the potential to be viewed by many influential policy makers.

Kwon: My first impression of the first workshop in Ottawa in 2015 was that the goals and procedures of creating an art exhibition were slightly different among the science and policy participants and the

artists. The science and policy participants were seemingly quite committed to the idea that we should create artworks strongly addressing vaccines' lifesaving function. Artists, in contrast, were clear that we're not there to simply illustrate a topic, but to research deeply and present work creatively. I, personally, was skeptical about whether the understanding of art's function could be mutually and completely understood by both parties. Policy makers need a clear goal to make action plans. Artists keep the outcomes open-ended and often find the outcome via research and experimentation. The way we think and the procedures we follow are different.

For example, one of the most challenging components of the project for me was the *Survey Cards*. During the second workshop, in 2016, some folks suggested cancelling the *Survey Cards* because of the unreliability of the cards as a source for evaluation of the project and because of the improbability of the people visiting UNAIDS taking a moment to complete such a survey. Some collaborators suggested using a machine instead to survey customer satisfaction, like the machines with buttons of smiling, neutral, and unhappy faces found in airport washrooms, so that we could get quantified measures. Their emphasis on drawing out quantifiable data reflected the methodologies in social sciences and medicine, which aim to draw practical, quantifiable information from an experiment. In contrast, art aims to inspire people to think differently, opening up a chance for the viewers to see and think through unaccustomed perspectives, instead of having a certain answer suggested to them.

Sritharan: Well, for my part, you gave me great confidence at the beginning of the project that we were more than capable of bringing together this unique piece. You talked me through everything you were thinking of, which really helped me understand what it was that you wanted to convey. I was excited about the final display and the reaction to the different immunization cards found across the world, and I think having individuals fill out their own immunization cards at the exhibit was a great interactive aspect of the project.

Kwon: I am glad I was convincing! This was the first project in which I participated as an artist, my background being art history and cura-

torial studies. This new experience of being an artist was not only fascinating but also nerve-wracking. A curator conducts research, creates a framework to put artworks together, and frames the exhibition with thematic, historic, and intellectual discourses. As an artist, I needed to create a work from scratch: identifying an idea, choosing the medium and methods of execution, experimenting with techniques, and completing the final display. The decision-making amongst all possible artistic choices was all on me.

I drew on previous experience with archive exhibitions that tended to have poor visual impact when displayed. Instead of displaying the original objects as they were, I thought it would be important to reproduce them artistically to strengthen the message. In order to present small-sized artifacts and interview text with a better visual impact, I had to think of all possible ways to display them in both the white cube gallery of Galleri KiT, and in context of the glass walls and marble floor in the atrium of UNAIDS. The challenge became easier when I considered *The Vaccine Archive* as a small, curated exhibition, placed within the bigger curated exhibition of *<Immune Nations>*. I set the theoretical frame and plans, and then you and I collected and researched the archive objects and developed the plan to scan, enlarge, and print the objects. At that point, I reached out to Morgan Wedderpoon, an Edmonton-based printmaking artist, to work with us to create impactful reproductions of the artifacts in order to amplify the stories and stereotypes embedded in the tiny postage stamps and monochrome personal immunization cards. The final outcome was rewarding. Our project was well presented at two international exhibitions with diverse audiences—such as health researchers and policy makers—who might not attend contemporary art exhibitions as often as art professionals.

Sritharan: I agree. The overall goal of the project was always to put on an art exhibition—but to know that it has stimulated positive feedback and discussion from audiences that don't normally care about art has been rewarding. I'm quite proud to have worked alongside all of the project participants and to have been able to help coordinate such a large undertaking.

Kwon: In some ways, the opening reception of both exhibitions in Trondheim and Geneva overshadowed the art by emphasizing the funders and VIP celebrities who attended the receptions. On the other hand, the exhibitions would have never been so successfully exposed to such a great number of viewers without the support of these organizations—such as the GLOBVAC Conference, the WHO, GAVI, the Vaccine Alliance, and the Canadian federal Department of Health—and the visit of the First Lady of Namibia. For me, this was one of the difficulties of the exhibition, where the research-based artworks were designed to impact an audience primarily of global health policy experts. The amount of time allocated to their speeches, and having the opening be an official side-event of the World Health Assembly, turned the artworks and artists into a backdrop. This made me think about how art is consumed in global events. Although the eight art projects displayed in the exhibition were intellectual creations, not decorative art, the way in which the opening receptions of our exhibition unfolded consumed both the art and the artists as decorative props to global academic and political events. Of course, this is not unique to this event, but says something about the role of art at big international openings in general.

Sritharan: For me, I think the hardest thing about the project as a whole, was less at the end, with the openings, but throughout the project with the difficulty of staying connected. We had many different platforms to keep everyone connected, including a Pinterest board. But it was still difficult at times to communicate with one another. The in-person workshops were probably the most productive for everyone during the three years. That is when the work was really propelled forward. Unfortunately, I was unable to attend the workshops and exhibits themselves and this was a huge challenge for me. I was grateful that you approached me with your idea and was interested in collaborating. You made both a great collaborator and coordinator on this project, and on the overall project as well.

Kwon: You too, Lathika. I think the three years of collaboration intersected with a number of events in your life! Marriage, pregnancy, motherhood [...] all huge important events in your life happened to you during our three years of collaboration.

Sritharan: Now as a mother, this project has definitely opened my eyes to the importance of keeping an immunization record for myself and my son. I've explored new apps that allow you to do this so that no matter where we travel, we have this record on hand.



Vicki S. Kwon, with Lathika Sritharan and Morgan Wedderspoon, *Memories and Records – The Vaccine Archive*, Galleri KiT, Trondheim, 2017. An archive collection and prints on Photo Tex. Photo by Yanir Shani.



- Vicki S. Kwon, with Lathika Sritharan and Morgan Wedderspoon, *Memories and Records – The Vaccine Archive*, Galleri KiT, Trondheim, 2017. An archive collection and prints on Photo Tex. Photo by Vicki S. Kwon.



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