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The word "bead" comes from the Middle English "bede", meaning "prayer."

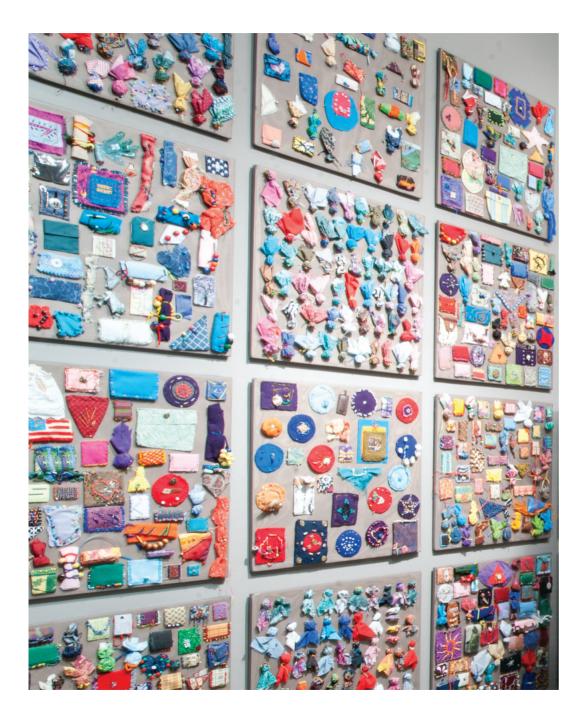


"bead"

خرزة 珠子 пацерку PERLE perle chaplèt perle perle માળાનો મણકો मनका üveggyöngy PERALINA ビーズ 구슬 manik बेअद perle PÉROLA перла talón boncuk

"prayer" GEBED صلاة 祈祷 малітва BØN prière lapriyè gebet ñembo'e આજીજી કે અભ્યથર્ના पर्ाथर्ना limádság PREGHIERA 祈り 기도 doa पराएर bønn ORAÇÃO молитва oración namaz





BEADED PRAYERS Project

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The Beaded Prayers Project is an ongoing collaborative artwork initiated and directed by fiber artist, Sonya Clark. To date, over 5000 people ages 6 to 90 of diverse backgrounds from 35 countries have participated in the traveling exhibit by creating and contributing the beaded packets exhibited here.

The name of the project comes directly from the shared history of the words "bead" and "prayer". In Old English *biddan*, from which "bead" is derived, means "to ask" or "to pray". The concept for creating packets with potent contents is influenced by traditions among different peoples from the African Diaspora. The packets of the Akan peoples in Ghana are called *ensuman*. The Hausa and Yoruba people of Nigeria make *tira*. Afro Brazilians make *patua*. Bakongo peoples in the Congo make *minkisi*. In the United States some African Americans refer to them as *mojo*. Powerful prayer packets are found in other traditions as well. They are known as *doaa nameh* in Iran, *scapulars* among Catholics, *dhuwas* in Sri Lanka, and *mezuzahs* and *tefillin* in the Jewish tradition. Even the Romans and Greeks had a practice of using *lamellae* and *phylacteries*.

Each packet contains a wish, hope, dream, blessing or prayer of an individual participant written on a piece of paper and encased with a covering that has at least one bead on the outer surface. (There are, however, a few improvisations of these parameters in the exhibit.) Most participants have made two packets: one to keep and the other to become part of the traveling exhibition. The eclectic display celebrates both the role of the individual and the importance of one's place in the community. From the exquisitely crafted to the crudely stitched, each beaded packet is a unique manifestation of an individual aspiration. Even those pieces that resemble one another on the outside no doubt have different messages sealed inside. Sealing the writings inside the beaded packets borrows from the African packet tradition that inspired the project. Historically, African packets are made from leather or cloth casings filled with sacred writings and other tokens of power. Closing the packets makes their contents inaccessible. In those packets containing writing it is the presence of the word, not the ability to read it, that yields their power. The casing acts as a veil elevating the contents to an intangible realm. The power of secrecy is a significant factor in the healing process



"Each packet contains a wish, hope, dream, blessing or prayer of an individual participant written on a piece of paper and encased with a covering that has at least one bead on the outer surface."





Above Indian amulet

for many. To one participant in the Beaded Prayers Project, an adult survivor of child abuse, the sense of anonymity was the most healing and meaningful aspect of the project. Beadwork, embroidery, and other textile art processes have been used to heal individuals and communities because they are functional and familiar. A well-known example of a contemporary collaboration using a craft tradition is the Names Project AIDS Memorial Quilt, which grew to include 10, 000 quilts in 2 years. The packets in the Beaded Prayers Project are smaller, lighter, and more portable than the quilt blocks in the Names Project, yet the power of accumulation is as essential. Likewise, the display of the beaded prayer packets is reminscent of bits of cloth coming together to create a unified quilt.

Above Tunisian amulet Rosary Native American amulet



"Before there was the word There was the bead Connecting to protection Foreseeing Believing in Making safe the future."

icely Rodway, New York, USA

BEADS, BODY-MINDS, AND THE SENSES

Dr. Henry John Drewal



Since 1991 Henry John Drewal has been the Evjue-Bascom Professor of Art History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Curator of African Art at the Chazen Museum of Art. He was chair of the Art Department at The Cleveland State University, and Curator of African Art at The Cleveland Museum of Art. After graduating from Hamilton College he joined the Peace Corps in Nigeria where he apprenticed himself to a Yoruba sculptor. That experience led him to interdisciplinary studies at Columbia University where he received two Masters degrees and a PhD. He has published several books, edited volumes, and articles and curated major exhibitions on African/ African Diaspora arts, among them: Introspectives: Contemporary Art by Americans and Brazilians of African Descent; Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought; Beads, Body, and Soul: Art and Light in the Yoruba Universe; Mami Wata: Arts for Water Spirits in Africa and Its Diasporas, and most recently Dynasty and Divinity: Ife Art in Ancient Nigeria.

Arts teach, heal, protect, and move us in wonderfully mysterious ways. They deepen and intensify our lived experiences, touching places we often suppress, ignore, or are unconscious of. In Africa and its Diasporas (and universally), arts are an essential, pervasive part of life. The notion of "art for art's sake" is nonsense. Art has always been made by humans for humans, and for a variety of needs and purposes - whether social or personal, physical, psychological, or spiritual. The Beaded Prayers Project epitomizes these principles in multiple ways. Inspired by the amuletic traditions of Africa and elsewhere, Sonya Clark envisioned an organic, ever-expanding artistic collaboration that would bring together individuals to form creative communities engaged in a shared task: To express their hopes, dreams, and desires and to ennoble and embellish these aspirations by enclosing them in creatively beaded packets. The Beaded Prayers Project is fully interactive and multi-sensorial. It takes the often static encounter with the arts and makes it active, engaging, and evocative. As participants create beaded prayers, they "come alive" as their senses of sight, touch, motion, and hearing engage with the intricate movements and focused meditations that attend the acts of beading and praying. Individual bodies and minds join with others to create community.

The Beaded Prayers Project project is a perfect example of the multi-sensorial essence of art experiences – something I am studying using an approach I term *sensiotics*. *Sensiotics* reminds us that we experience the world, and especially evocative moments involving the arts, with all our senses, though we often privilege some and remain unconscious of others. With the Beaded Prayers Project, multiple senses are awakened and engaged – sight, touch, rhythm/motion, and hearing – as we enter a deep state of concentration and focus on the meticulous work of beading.

The Beaded Prayers Project project has been an incredible success. Inspired by the Names AIDS Memorial quilt project and amulet and divination traditions from Africa and the African Diaspora, Clark created the idea of a community-based, collaborative art-making project that would engage people of all ages and backgrounds in a reflective and creative process – using beads to make small packets containing written expressions of hope, faith,



"As participants create beaded prayers, they "come alive" as their senses of sight, touch, motion, and hearing engage with the intricate movements and focused meditations that attend the acts of beading and praying."

Beaded Prayers Project embodies the knowledge and wisdom of communities – the knowledge that derives from our bodies engaged in creative acts. Inspired by the coded-beaded wisdom of the *Lukasa* memory boards of the Luba Peoples of Central Africa, Clark created a series of exquisite sculptures whose



desires, and aspirations. Each participant creates two beaded praver containers - one remains with the participant and the second travels with the project to be exhibited with all the others made during workshops lead by Clark. Since 1998 when the project began it has been exhibited in more than 35 places worldwide - it has touched the hearts, minds and spirits of more than 5000 people. She has taught the workshops at each venue, and then encouraged others to spread the word, the vision, and the artistry to many others along the way. It typifies her commitment to art for the sake of people, and for the enhancement of the lives of "ordinary" folks who might otherwise never consider themselves "artists." The impact and artfulness of this project come in the doing/making. We learn with our whole body-minds through sensory immersion. Whether we are aware of it or not, all of our senses are fully engaged as we experience the world and its art. Creativity encourages us to unite both mind and body in a task. In the Beaded Prayers Project, we first reflect on our life and the lives of others, then formulate an aspiration, materialize it in writing, wrap it in a package, and seal it with beads. Each step pushes us to focus and concentrate, trance-forming us into a meditative state that quiets the noise and multiple distractions of everyday life in order to open ourselves to new visions and possibilities. During such moments, we become art.

Above Participants at different Beaded Prayers Project workshops tactility and color reinforced memory, knowledge, and action. Then with the Beaded Prayers Project, she continued to foster simultaneously both art and a sense of community. I know of no other artist working in this way – she is an original thinker, fully devoted to realizing her unique vision of how and what art can contribute to our understandings of ourselves and the societies we create with our hands and minds.

African Inspirations

The artistry of assemblage and accumulation is wide and deep in Africa. To cite just a few examples: Bamana hunters' tunics bedecked in protective leather amulets and *boli* animal-like bundles that hide a myriad of empowering substances; the accoutrements of Fon Bochio power figures; the Nkisi Nkonde of the Kongo peoples of Central Africa, or the beaded *lukasa* memory boards of the Luba. The hunters' amulets contain empowering matter – herbs, roots, medicines, and sacred texts, some from the Koran, others from other sources. In combination, they work to protect the hunter from dangers both physical and spiritual. The multiplication of forms and materials signal enhanced power and presence, protection and spiritual action. More is more. The density of materials implies the intensification of energy, vital force, and heightened efficacy. Multiplication builds webs, links, networks,



auras of potency – connections that can accomplish things. And part of the enabling power radiating from these materials comes from the fact of what remains *unseen* – the secrecy and awe that surround the hidden material within. It is an affecting presence made possible by its absence from sight. What is unseen may never be fully known. Having no limits, it becomes more powerfully imagined. In sacred contexts, it is often the most awesome, spiritually-charged objects that are hidden from view – like the Jewish Torah, the Kabba at Islam's Mekkah, a Catholic saint's relic, or the Yoruba mask of Iyanla, the Great Mother. They loom large in our mind's eye and imagination...

African Diaspora Trans-form-ation









Such religious beliefs and practices came with the Africans enslaved and carried to the Americas and other parts of the world. They may have come empty-handed, but not empty-headed. Sanctified, protective amulets took on even more crucial importance in lives of bondage and constant threat in societies where "masters" thought nothing of using up and discarding their "property." Survival demanded extraordinary strength, courage, endurance, and wisdom. Thus continued the professions of wise priests and priestesses, healers and diviners. In America, they became known as conjur men and women - African-Americans trained in the arts of medicine and spiritual protection, able to "conjur up" and activate spiritual forces to heal, protect, and empower individuals and communities. And what they made were mojo - amuletic packets to be carried on their bodies or hidden in the rafters of plantation cabins. The African-American word mojo comes from the Central African KiKongo word mooyo meaning "empowering prescriptions." Africans in Haiti created similar forms. There, hougans or priests were versed in making paquet Kongo (Kongo power packets) - the same kind of amulet as a mojo. In Brazil, such power amulets sometimes took the outward form of "jewelry" called *balangandans* to camouflage them from "masters." But they possessed the inner, spiritual energy of amulets. Among the suspended and beaded forms are fruits associated with ritual offerings to ancestral African gods, as well as the cylindrical containers that held the documents of manumission. This so-called "jewelry" signified spiritual protection and successful agency - freedom achieved despite the odds.

"The act of beading is meditative. It requires careful attention and much repetition... [it] allows us to hear others that can offer us hope, teach us new lessons, and help us meet challenges, overcome obstacles, and conquer."

Left page

Brazilian amulet

Tibetan amulet made of leather

Lukasa from the Democratic Republic of Congo

Rosarv

Like these African and African Diaspora antecedents, the Beaded Prayers Project seeks to inspire groups of makers with a shared creative experience – to first reflect on their lives and dreams, to express them in writing, and then to seal them with beads. The act of beading is meditative. It requires careful attention and much repetition. It takes us to a different mental/emotional place and space – it stills the nagging voices in our head and allows us to hear others that can offer us hope, teach us new lessons, and help us meet challenges, overcome obstacles, and conquer.

As a former participant in the Beaded Prayers Project, I experienced all the feelings, emotions, and transformations noted above. And my sister Mary did as well. Her words describing her own Beaded Prayers Project experience resonate with mine:

> "I have had two opportunities to join Beaded Prayer workshops – one at a public library in Queens, New York and a second at the Newark Museum, New Jersey. At these community (communal) gatherings, I joined others in creating my own unique beaded prayer packets. At the first workshop, after completing the cloth and bead pouch, I inserted a very general prayer-dream-wish... something for the world. The second workshop was held at a difficult time for a member of my family, and the wish I inserted was much more personal. I have kept both packets in the years since, and have held the second a number of times as I focused on sending out a "prayer" or intention for that family member."

And my partner Dr. Sarah K. Khan reflected on her own Beaded Prayers Project experience with these words:

"Beaded prayers are perfect amulets. They are dreams and desires for goodness, bounded into beauty by hope-filled hands. Only joy can emanate from such prayers."

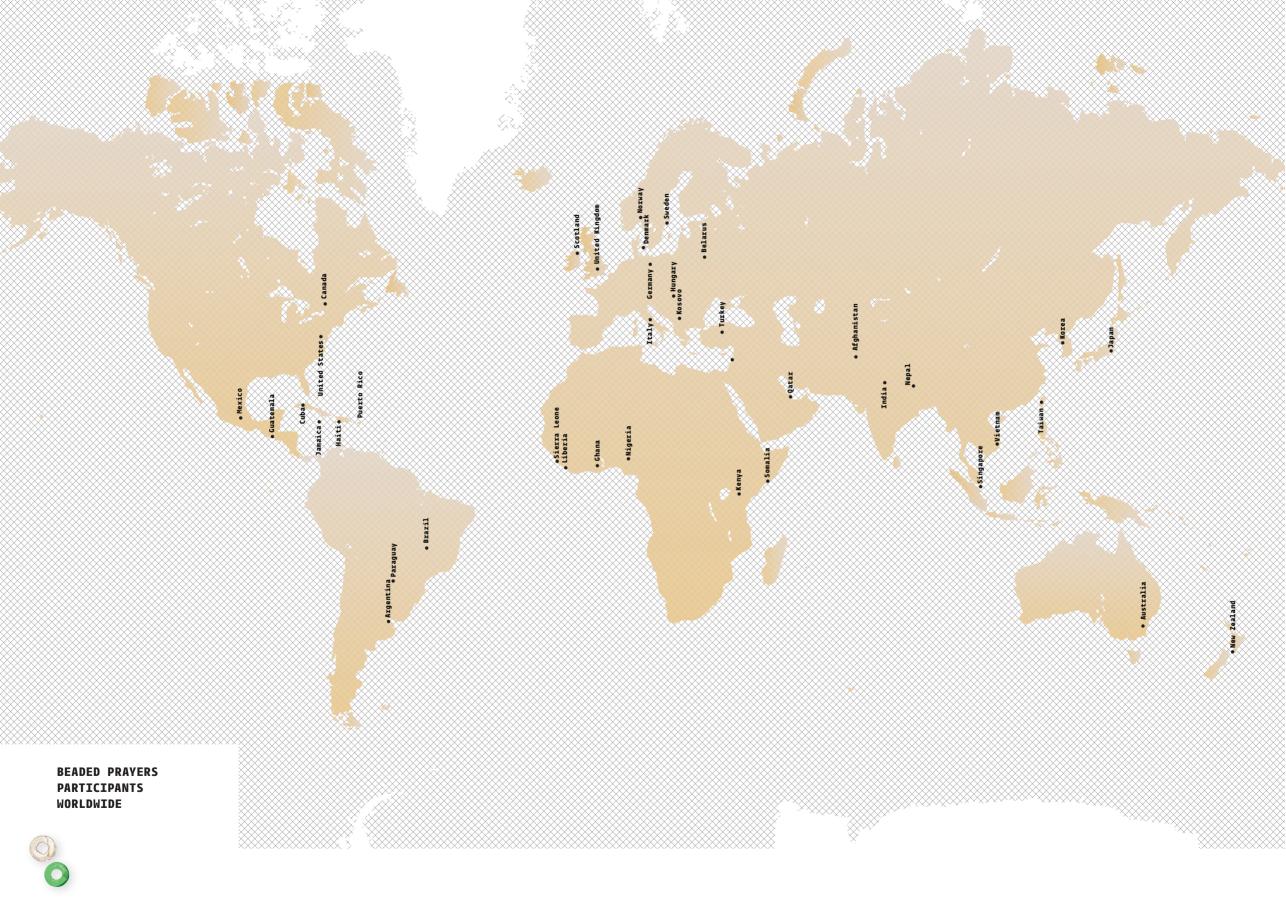
18

"Beaded prayers are perfect amulets. They are dreams and desires for goodness, bounded into beauty by hope-filled hands. Only joy can emanate from such prayers."

We may never know the specific effects of the Beaded Prayers Project in helping to heal either the world or persons, but we should never underestimate the power of positive thinking and creative communal practice to change things. The Beaded Prayers Project has touched thousands around the world and I pray that its impact continues to heal, protect, and empower us, our families, and our communities.

"This project is a wonderful opportunity to think in a positive and reflective way.

Christine Orlando, Virginia, USA















OVER THE YEARS









"The Beaded Prayers provides a wonderful survey of how popular artifacts can be tolerant, transforming individual devotion into a collective harmony independent of their original fundaments."

Dr. Zeca Ligiéro, Brazil

ARTIST AS CATALYST: Sonya Clark's beaded Prayers project

Ashley Kistler



Ashley Kistler is Director of the Anderson Gallery at the VCU School of the Arts in Richmond, having previously served in curatorial positions at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and the Visual Arts Center of Richmond. Over the last 25 years, she has organized dozens of exhibitions presenting the work of regional, national, and international artists, as well as artists' residencies, symposia, film/video series, and performing arts events. She has also authored and/or edited numerous exhibition catalogues, including You, Your Sun and Shadow; The Nameless Hour: Places of Reverie, Paths of Reflection; Imaging South Africa: Collection Projects by Siemon Allen; and Elizabeth King: The Sizes of Things in the Mind's Eve. The Beaded Prayers Project opened at the Anderson Gallery of the Virginia Commonwealth University School of the Arts in mid-January 2009, having been previously seen at nearly 30 venues around the country and in Canada, Brazil, Ghana, and Australia. By the time it reached Richmond, this room-sized installation contained over 5,000 small beaded packets assembled and contributed by people of all ages and backgrounds; it also eventually included several dozen new additions made by VCU students and Richmond residents during two workshop sessions. Artist Sonya Clark had launched her ongoing community-focused project a decade earlier, inspired by the many African and African Diasporic traditions of creating protective amulets with powerful contents, which in turn have helped to define the themes of identity and cultural continuity that suffuse her own fiber-based work.

While the Beaded Prayers Project had typically been encountered as a self-contained show during its tour, it appeared at the Anderson Gallery in conjunction with the traveling exhibition *Embodying the Sacred in Yoruba Art: Featuring the Bernard and Patricia Wagner Collection*, as it had at the Newark Museum in Newark, New Jersey, the previous summer. This latter exhibition explored the relationship between art and the spiritual realm in Yoruba culture through nearly 70 works in diverse media. Facilitated by the physical location of the Beaded Prayers Project in a first-floor gallery a few steps away from the introductory section of *Embodying the Sacred*, the concepts and content of both presentations were mutually reinforcing.

Direct links between the two sometimes surfaced, as with the Yoruba diviner's necklace and the several shrines, or *iborí*, which conceal empowering substances related in intent to the written wish, blessing, or prayer encased within each beaded packet. Experienced within this complementary context, Clark's participatory project assumed an enhanced educational role in informing a broad audience. Perhaps most significantly, it underscored by example an essential point made evident in the Yoruba exhibition for which a parallel in our own contemporary culture has, until recently, largely been absent. As Clark describes it, "Art belongs to everybody. It cannot exist without a community."



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Sonya Clark at the Anderson Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University



Clark's observation attests to the momentum steadily gained over the past two decades by a transformative phenomenon variously known as participatory, relational, community-based, dialogic, littoral, interventionist, socially engaged, and new genre public art, whose practitioners override the notion of art as commodity by repositioning their work as an agent of social engagement and change. For their realization, these projects are linked by a common reliance on the direct participation of the public in the creative process, each taking as its collaborative canvas the network of human relations and interactions thus engendered. In doing so, they redefine to varying degrees the customary roles of artist and audience and the process by which art is made and experienced.

During a recent visit to the VCU campus, for instance, artist Paul Ramírez Jonas described the participatory process he devised for *Key to the City* (2010), which granted access to this special symbol to thousands of citizens in New York City, while involving Mayor Michael Bloomberg as one of many collaborators. Harrell Fletcher, another guest artist, discussed his collaborative online project with Miranda July, *Learning to Love You More* (2002–09), which invited people everywhere to respond to creative assignments by following simple instructions and then documenting the results. For a 2004 public art installation in Richmond,

"... these projects are linked by a common reliance on the direct participation of the public in the creative process, each taking as its collaborative canvas the network of human relations and interactions thus engendered. In doing so, they redefine to varying degrees the customary roles of artist and audience and the process by which art is made and experienced." photographer Wendy Ewald, well known for her community-based projects, enlisted as collaborators resident school children, whose portraits and comments appeared on 30 monumental outdoor banners, illuminating the rapid changes taking place in their historic city neighborhood.² This area of contemporary art practice now encompasses the broadest range of projects imaginable, surveyed most recently in *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991–2011*, which highlights a number of the most significant examples.³



Spurred in large measure by the French critic Nicolas Bourriaud's 1998 book, *Relational Aesthetics*, and propelled by contributions from such notable thinkers as art historian and author Claire Bishop, the critical debate surrounding the proliferation of collaborative or collective art practices has also paved the way for new graduate programs in the field, as Barbara Pollack recounts in a recent article.⁴ The P.L.A.C.E. Program in the College of Fine Arts at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, which is explicitly based on Bourriaud's theories judging by the program's website description, can be added to her list of three programs at the Otis College of Art and Design, Portland State University, and the University of Southern California, respectively titled Public Practice, Art and Social Practice, and Public Art Studies.

The influence of this trend can also be felt in the recent establishment of the International Award for Participatory Art, institutional positions like the Curator of Public Practice at the Walker Art Center, and conferences devoted to socially engaged art practices. Another indicator relates to the shifting mandates of private foundations, noted by art historian and critic Grant Kester over 15 years ago, whose guidelines for funding more often than not contain the now familiar stipulations "community-based" and





While participants were given general guidelines, either directly in workshops or by referral to the project's website, they also had great latitude to proceed in whatever way they wished, as evidenced by contributions ranging from the exquisitely crafted to the crudely stitched. "social issues."⁵ Public participation has even infiltrated the once sacrosanct process of curation, for better or worse, determining by nomination which artists will be considered for inclusion in the Brooklyn Museum's upcoming *GO*: *a community-curated open studio project*, or deciding by vote the recipient of the first \$100,000 Mohn Award given by the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles, to cite only two current examples.

Within this vast array of community-centered creative activity, Clark's enterprise relates most closely to projects like the AIDS Memorial Quilt, or a recent installation by the Saudi female artist Manal Al Dowayan, which consists of many strands of large prayer beads that bear the names of the anonymous women who painted them. The participatory character of these and other pertinent examples arises from the practical application of a craft tradition, framed by a workshop setting that can accommodate a wide variety of individuals—circumstances to which Clark's talents, interests, and background are particularly well suited. Given the nature of the assignments that participants undertake, they are also connected by their potentially ameliorative effects.

Distinctly separate from the artist's personal studio practice, which has earned her an increasingly visible presence as an accomplished maker, the Beaded Prayers Project has nonetheless consumed vast amounts of her time and energy since she conceived and began to develop it. Her ongoing oversight of its growth and travel, and her effort to sustain a decade's worth of related programs reflect, on the one hand, the deep commitment of a veteran educator intent on reaching diverse audiences far beyond her own immediate academic community.

At the same time, within the framework she established for participants, Clark retains for herself a significant role in shaping the project's outcome and presentation. While participants were given general guidelines, either directly in workshops or by referral to the project's website, they also had great latitude to proceed in whatever way they wished, as evidenced by contributions ranging from the exquisitely crafted to the crudely stitched. Considering the overall aesthetic impact of the project, however, Clark corrals and gives order to these multifarious responses by carefully attaching each single packet to a two-foot-square panel, starting a new panel as each one fills up. The current collection of many dozens of panels easily fills a twenty-foot square room, floor to ceiling, achieving an effect reminiscent of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, though on the much more intimate scale dictated by its small component parts. As Clark observes, "The power is in the collective display."⁶ The visual punch delivered by this incremental accumulation over time and space, achieved by a painstaking presentation, not only illuminates the history and content of the Beaded Prayers Project, but also reminds us of increasing opportunities for participation in what was, not so long ago, an appreciably more insular world.

Notes

 As quoted in Liz Treutler, "The Semiotics of Community Art," *McGill Tribune*, 30 March 2004 (online edition), www.mcgilltribune.com.
See Ashley Kistler, ed., Wendy Ewald, *In Peace and Harmony: Carver Portraits* (Richmond, VA: Visual Arts Center of Richmond, 2004).
Nato Thompson, ed., *Living as Form: Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012).
"You're Engaged," *Artnews*, 1 January 2011 (digital edition),

www.artnews.com.

5. "Aesthetic Evangelists: Conversion and Empowerment in Contemporary Community Art," *Afterimage*, January 1995, p. 5.

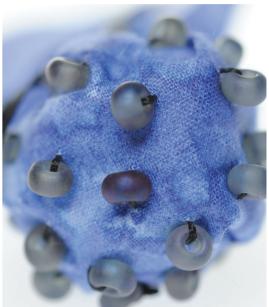
 As quoted in Patricia Malarcher, "Packages of Wishes and Dreams: The Beaded Prayers Project," Surface Design Journal, Spring 2003, p. 33.

The power of accumulation keeps the magic alive.

Jennifer Meduit, Canada

















"Like amulets, beads have been endowed with cultural meaning by people across the globe."

0

Victoria Loe Hicks, **Texas, USA**



A LIVING ORGANISM: THE BEADED PRAYERS PROJECT

Sonya Clark



Sonya Clark has been Chair of the Craft/Material Studies Department at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond since 2006. Formerly, a Baldwin-Bascom Professor of Creative Arts at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Clark holds an MFA from Cranbrook Academy of Art, a BFA from the Art Institute of Chicago, and a BA from Amherst College. She has received awards including a 2011 United States Artists Glasgow Fellowship, a Pollock-Krasner, an Art Matters Grant, a Rockefeller Bellagio Residency in Italy, a Canberra School of Arts Residency in Australia, and a Red Gate Residency in China. Her work has been exhibited in over 250 museums and galleries in countries throughout the Americas, Africa, Europe, and Asia, Australia. I am often tempted to describe the Beaded Prayers Project in a neat linear progression. But, that would be neither honest nor accurate. Every time I attempt to point to how the project began, I start in a different place. This project is drawn from many roots and has many branches. Like a tree, its organic structure continues to expand and so does its story.

Sometimes the story begins with the Senegalese necklace a dear friend, Leah Gilliam, gave me. It was a simple thing: a gift from her first trip to West Africa, a cord with three leather amulets attached, a necklace to protect me. I wore it constantly never knowing what magic was sealed tight in the three leather packets.

Sometimes it starts with the first time I saw an image of an Egungun in an African Studies class with Dr. Rowland Abiodun at Amherst College in the late 1980s. Its familiarity struck deep. The multi-layered cloths resonant of the Pitchy Patchy characters I had seen at Jamaican Jonkonnu Festivals in my childhood. The monumentality of these cloth masquerades transplanted from Nigeria to Jamaica presented abundant recognition of human presence and ancestral ties.

Sometimes its inception seems to be the influence of collaborative art forms in action like the Names Aids Memorial Quilt, a pivotal art work that garnered national attention when I was at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the 1990s. There, my teachers (Nick Cave, Ann Wilson, and Joan Livingstone) reinforced the notion that even the most humble textiles speak in a language that has great power.

Sometimes I trace the beginnings of the project back to my childhood. Sitting at my grandmother's side (a tailor by profession) I watched her thread needles with such deftness the eyes of the needles seemed to call the thread could not help but respond. Simultaneously, she recounted stories of her life. The two, stories and stitching, became intertwined in my mind forever.

Sometimes the story starts with my obsession with beads. They too hold stories. In their cross-cultural history and physicality, beads are used as mnemonic devices. We count with them on abacuses and prayer beads. And there is the heart of it, the naming of the project. Bead and prayer share an etymology precisely because they have been used across time and culture to help us remember.

Other times the story starts with an opportunity.

It was 1998. I was in the early stages of my career as an artist and Assistant Professor the Design Department at the University of Wisconsin- Madison. Funding opportunities at this major research university seemed like ripe fruit ready for the picking. I was eager and energetic to apply for everything that was in my reach. The Edna Weichers Grant was one of those opportunities. It was given to a faculty member in the arts whose project embodied the Wisconsin Idea: "the boundaries of the university are the boundaries of the state."

A senior faculty member attempting to be helpful tried to dissuade my application with, "those grants usually go to performing artists not visual." But I knew the past is not always a consistent predictor of the future. So, I wrote a grant application and was prepared to turn it into the appropriate office the next morning. But that grant proposal was not for the Beaded Prayers Project. In the middle of the night, I woke up with a better idea in mind, one given as a gift in a dream. I rewrote the application the second time for the Beaded Prayers Project. And, I included a beaded prayer in the application. And while the premise of the project is that there is power in secrecy and what is written in each beaded prayer is to remain a secret, here, I will divulge that particular beaded prayer came true and many more grants have supported the project.

Quickly the project expanded internationally: first to Australia, then India, Ghana, and Scotland. Before I knew it people from over 35 nations were represented. I shared the multiple vantage points of the project including:

> Art as a collective and communal activity Amulets found throughout the world Beads and their history Quilt aesthetics

Below

Djam Vivie, Ewe drummer an woodcarver from Ghana in an amulet covered shirt passed down from his grandfather.



"The participants were full of stories: personal stories, stories of family traditions, and cultural customs... These stories enlightened the Beaded Prayers Project."

Below.

Abascus

Mali amulet

I collected the beaded prayers that participants contributed by mail and at workshops for the first 5 years. But as the beaded prayers started pouring in, the project doubled over night and I had to change the rules. In 2004, only those beaded prayers that were made at workshops where the exhibit was held would be included in the traveling exhibition. Any others, as always, people were encouraged to start their own projects. And so people did. Families made them at reunions, holidays, for deceased loved ones or for pregnant mothers. This means is that there are many more beaded prayers out there in the world than the 5000 in the exhibit.

Each workshop taught me something. I was concerned the skills required for stitching and beading might be intimidating. But it was at a two-day workshop with a group of skilled bead artists, I learned that skill could get in the way of the project. Masterful in their technique, most of the artists never finished their pieces. From then I learned to say, "Like people, the outside of your packet is not nearly as important as the inside." One participant in a two-hour workshop began saying she was no good at making things and by the end had made a beaded prayer for each person as well as one for the exhibit. There was a Hmong woman who brought her three-year old child to a workshop. The child cried and cried until her mother gave her a needle and thread so she could stitch with us. No pricked fingers! And, really who was I to put an age limit on such a project anyway?

Along with the contributed packets I collected, were their stories. The participants were full of stories: personal stories, stories of family traditions, and cultural customs. More stories than my mind could hold. These stories enlightened the Beaded Prayers Project. The presence of each person was not only embodied in the in their pieces in the exhibition, but many of their stories

"Participants shared stories of relevant practices and traditions: carrying earth from their homeland in their pockets, drinking the ink of water-washed prayers, and more."

made it into the lectures I gave about the project. A suburban mother in Columbus, Ohio made a "sun for her son" a recovering heroine addict, artist Lalla Essaydi shared stories about the meaning of differently shaped amulets in Morocco, and a museum administrator's wish to become a parent once again came true. Participants shared stories of relevant practices and traditions: carrying earth from their homeland in their pockets, drinking the ink of water-washed prayers, and more.

The stories were as varied as the participants. The diversity of participants is captured in the range of amulets in the exhibit itself. When I began the project, I created some simple guidelines. Each beaded prayer packet should:

1. Contain a written wish, hope, dream or prayer 2. Be stitched or tied shut 3. Have at least one bead on its exterior 4. Have a twin that the maker keeps 5. Measure no bigger than one's palms





In 2003, Tracy Hudson, an American who had lived in Ladakh Northern India, sent a letter with a bead prayer to be included in the traveling exhibition. She wrote: "People following the Tibetan Buddhist tradition in the Himalyas also make fabric amulets, mostly for their children... I had this fabric so I felt I must use it to make an amulet, with a prayer inside for the children in Ladakh. In 2012, Tracy, now living in Qatar, came to see the Beaded Prayers exhibit for the first time. She found her original beaded prayer (pictured here) and made a new one to be added to the exhibit.





Give these rules to 5000 people and inevitably they will be broken. In the breaking, a beautiful, motley mix of improvisation erupted. Some whispered their wishes into the cloth and sealed them shut. Others burned their hopes and rubbed ashes into the cloth. Some are glass. Others clay. Some are large and some are miniscule. Some are beaded with finesse and others barely stitched together. Some look the as another but were made by people on other sides of the planet. All are powerful testaments to our story, the human story of individuality and community. The Beaded Prayers Project continues to have a life of its own. Its pulse, energy, and agency reaches far beyond what I, as one individual, could have ever imagined.



What a wonderful exhibit – a very creative, thoughtful mind to put on such a unique exibit – a universal spirit of community. Fantastic thought!

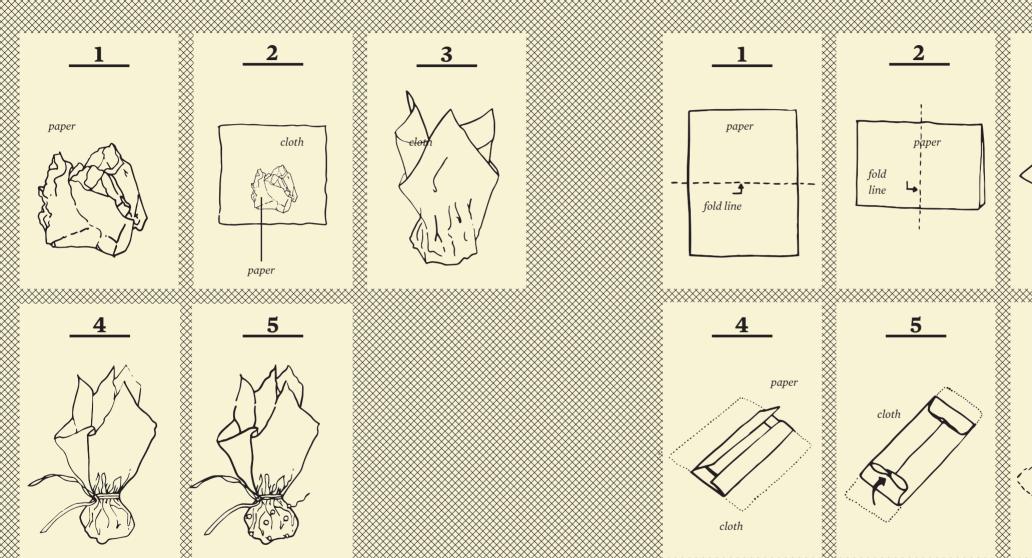
Roseanna Siela, New York, USA

Diagrammed Beading Techniques

Single Bead Edge
Double Bead Edge
No Fray Fold
Bundle Prayer
Taffy Style Prayer





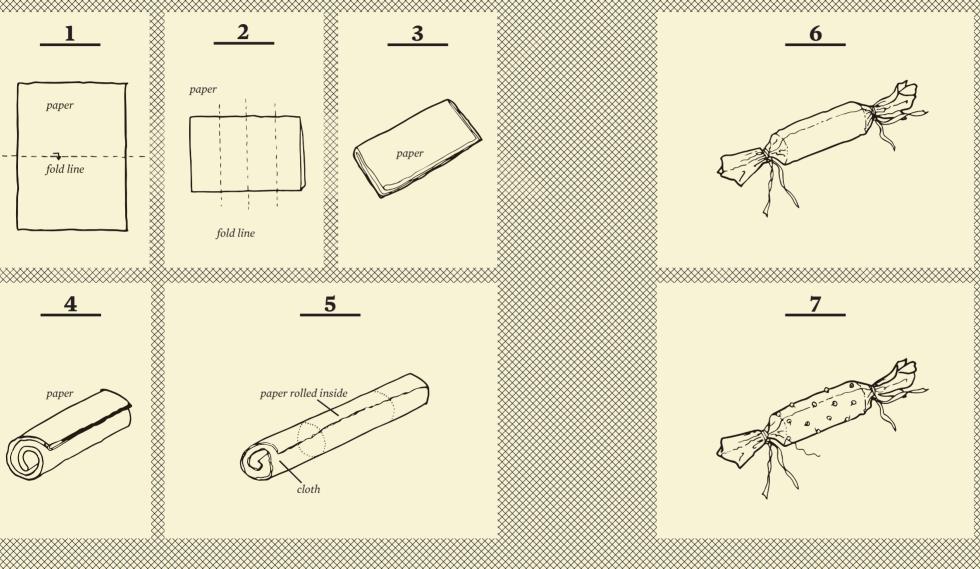


NO FRAY Fold

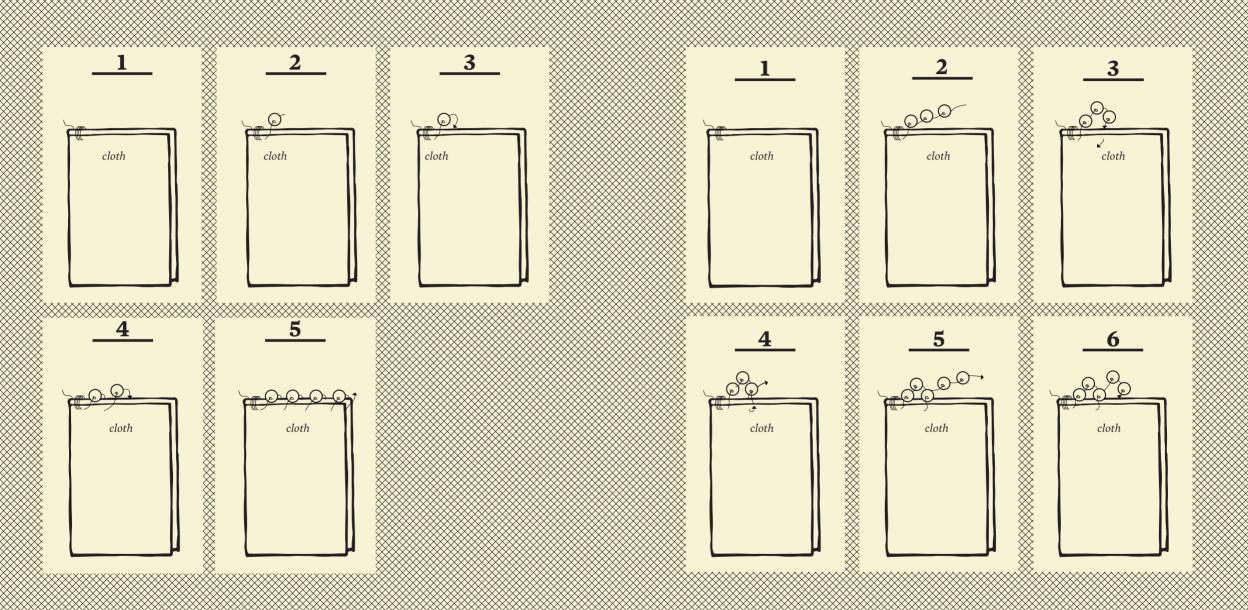
<u>3</u>

<u>6</u>





SINGLE BEADED Edge DOUBLE BEADED Edge



EXHIBITS

2012 • Virginia Commonweath University Qatar Gallery, Doha, Qatar 2009 • Anderson Gallery, VCUArts, Richmond, Virginia 2008 • University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Nebraska • Newark Museum, Newark, New Jersey • Icebox, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 2007 • Haystack Community Center, Deer Isle, Maine • Purdue University Galleries, West Lafayette,

- Indiana
- Manchester Craftsmen's Guild, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
- Queens Borough Public Library, Jamaica, New York

2006

- Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco, California
- King Arts Complex, Columbus, Ohio

2005

- Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists, Boston, Massachusetts
- NCA Gallery, Detroit, Michigan
- Association of the Worldwide Study of the African Diaspora Conference, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
- Florida A&M University, Tallahassee, Florida

2004 • Silver Cultural Arts Center. Plymouth, New Hampshire

- River Arts Center, Sauk City, Wisconsin
- Montreal Arts Interculturels, Montreal, Canada

2003

- Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, Maryland
- Art Gallery, Berea College, Berea, Kentucky
- McLean Arts Center, Bloomington, Illinois

2002

- St. Thomas University, St. Paul, Minnesota
- American Library Association Conference, Atlanta. Georgia

Creative Alliance, Baltimore, Maryland

- Madison Municipal Building Gallery, Madison, Wisconsin
- Seippel Center for the Arts, Beaver Dam, Wisconsin

2000

- Gallery of Design, University of Wisconsin, Madison. Wisconsin
- Canberra School of Art, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia

2005

• Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts

SELECTED BEADED PRAYERS PROJECT

LECTURES AND WORKSHOPS

2004

• Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, Maryland

2003

- Transylvania University, Lexington, Kentucky
- Milwaukee Area Technical College, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
- Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, Maryland

2002

- Sheridan Global Middle School, St. Paul, Minnesota
- Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, Minnesota
- Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, Maryland
- Waverly Center for Teen Parents, Baltimore, Maryland
- Columbia College, Art Department, Chicago, Illinois,
- Boys and Girls Club, Madison, Wisconsin
- St. Paul's Schools, Brooklandville, Maryland
- College Art Association, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

2001

- St. Paul's Schools, Brooklandville, Maryland
- International Creators: 13th Annual Series. Harbourfront Center, Toronto, Canada
- Textile Program, Sheridan College, Oakville, Canada
- Detroit Institute of Art, Detroit, Michigan
- Packer Collegiate, Brooklyn, New York
- City of Madison Minority Affairs Committee, Madison. Wisconsin
- Vera Court Girl Neighborhood Power. Madison. Wisconsin
- African American Ethnic Academy, Madison, Wisconsin
- Wilson School, Mequon, Wisconsin
- artWORKS Afterschool Program, Packer Community Center, Madison, Wisconsin
- Upward Bound, Beloit College, Beloit, Wisconsin
- Fiber Program, Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, Maryland
- Seippel Center for the Arts, Beaver Dam, Wisconsin
- Coolidge Elementary School, Detroit, Michigan, Jefferson School, Beaver Dam, Wisconsin
- Penland School of Craft, Penland, North Carolina
- Textile Friends at Roslvn Chapel. Pencuik. Scotland
- Mahindra United World College, Pune, India

- McDonogh School, Owings Mills, Maryland
- College of Art at Kwame Nkrumah University, Kumasi, Ghana

2001

2000

- YMI Cultural Center, Asheville, North Carolina
- Park School, Baltimore, Maryland
- University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, Wisconsin,
- Sauk City Middle School, Sauk City, Wisconsin
- Memorial High School, Madison, Wisconsin
- Greater Madison Urban League, Teen Parenting Program, Madison, Wisconsin
- Charlottesville High School, Charlottesville, Virginia
- River Falls Public Library, River Falls, Wisconsin,
- Milwaukee County Historical Society, Milwaukee, Wisconsin
- Chazen Museum of Art, Madison, Wisconsin

1999

- Columbus Art Museum, Columbus, Ohio
- Prevent Child Abuse Association, Madison, Wisconsin, 1999
- Greater Chicago Bead Society, Chicago, Illinois

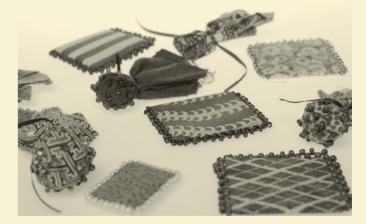


"A vibrant, meaningful, splendidly crafted, personal work that is being shared by so many, with so many."

L.Durst, New York, U.S.A







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The Beaded Prayers Project Sonya Clark

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