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## **Sustained Connection through Material Dialogue: International collaborative painting during the COVID-19 pandemic**

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### **Introduction**

Worldwide COVID-19 disruption has resulted in both challenges and opportunities during this research period, with travel restrictions and social distancing reshaping how practice-led research (PLR) approached cross-cultural collaboration. This paper briefly discusses experiences from an ongoing PLR project, specifically how the material practice of painting was used to maintain international contact. I examine how physical postage was utilised as an alternative to—and at times, intervention into—online platforms during a time of physical disconnection and screen fatigue. It is important to note that this doctoral research began in 2019 in the pursuit of a pre-defined face-to-face model of dialogic collaboration. I proposed to collaborate with artists in South-East Asia through a combination of residency programs and studio visits that were organised through connections I established when living in this region across 2016 and 2017. These face-to-face collaborations were to be shared, in-person studio sessions, where each collaborator could observe, inquire and reciprocate each other's utterances as we worked. Although traditionally the term utterance is conceived as a unit of speech, this PLR has extended this concept to also include written and material units of language—with material language predominantly encountered as drawn and painterly mark-making. I did get the opportunity to collaborate in person locally, both in between and after lockdown periods—an experience presented at ACUADS last year (See 2020)—however, this paper will instead focus on how methods were adapted to maintain an inquiry into the material practice of painting despite travel restrictions.

My PLR is through dialogic collaboration, predominantly informed by a synthesis of ideas between Charles Green's (2001) notion of *third hand*, and Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) Dialogism, a perspective which has been expanded by secondary Bakhtinian scholars such as Lynn Pearce (1994) and Caryl Emerson (1996). Through this synthesis, collaborations are understood as an exchange of reciprocated utterances

where meaning is negotiated and transformed intersubjectively. In this case, meaning is negotiated primarily across a reciprocal exchange of material utterances. Through a dialogic perspective, these exchanges acknowledge the plurality of meaning and do not require consensus or compromise (Bakhtin 1981)—a perspective that embraces difference as ‘both a condition and a consequence [of dialogue]’ (Pearce 1994, p. 202). Although power imbalances are inevitable, collaboration is distinct from cooption, in that it inherently decentralises the self, a shift in agency from the individual to the composite that can create ‘a third artistic identity [or hand] superimposed over and exceeding the individual artists’ (Green 2001, p. 179). Third hand is inherently an intervention that disrupts solo practice, granting access to emergences beyond the limits of an artist working on their own—or as Green (2001) puts it, collaboration is ‘not simply the sum of two parts’ (p. 180).

Through this dialogic approach to collaboration, this PLR has encountered a number of cross-cultural collaborations, with this paper specifically focusing on two international projects that used postage. The first of these two projects was with artist Zhèng Yǔqiáo (or Joey Zheng) who I met when living in Shanghai in 2016. Zheng is a Hunan-born Chinese national, who at the time was studying in the UK across London’s strict lockdown periods. The second project was with, Liú Wǎntíng (Rita Lau), who I have still never met in-person, but I would have been working with through one of my cancelled residencies. Lau is an artist who lived in Kowloon during the 2020 Hong Kong protests. Both Zheng and Lau inhabited spaces much more disrupted than mine—disruptions that from Perth can often feel like a world away—yet these two projects endured over months as we posted back and forth a series of collaborative paintings and studies. These two exchanges were drawn out over months not simply because of COVID-led postage congestion, but due to the disruption we each individually faced given our locales; and again, I acknowledge I experienced the least disruption by far. I also acknowledge each artist’s proper Chinese name—Mandarin and Cantonese respectively—however, I refer to these artists as Joey Zheng and Rita Lau in this paper as these were the names used by the artists themselves during collaboration.

Although the projects with Zheng and Lau were very much separate, they overlapped both conceptually and chronologically, forming links as I responded to them from my studio in Perth, Western Australia. To provide a greater sense of context, the two projects discussed in this paper are part of a much larger group of collaborations.

These collaborations were fragmented across my studio at any one time, gradually intersecting as I moved back and forth between more than a dozen concurrent exchanges (Figure 1). Each project negotiated a multitude of artistic and cultural perspectives and practices; however, through a dialogic perspective, difference was not negotiated in terms of right or wrong but rather difference was known to be unavoidable, necessary and valued (Emerson, 1996). In this way my studio also emulated Bakhtin's (1981) notion of *heteroglossia* that recognises the plurality of meaning, which privileges context over text. The heteroglossic nature of language is such that the meaning of an utterance shifts as it is reiterated across different contexts (Bakhtin 1981). Each iteration represented a unique and unrepeatable speech event that transforms an utterance's meaning across different times, spaces or socio-cultural climates (Bakhtin 1981). Therefore, the meaning of these collaborative material utterances transformed as they were sent from one studio and then opened in the other. Collaborative artworks took on new meaning and connections in the new context in which they were unpacked and reworked, adding to the already inherent difference in interpretation resulting from the artists' different lifeworlds.

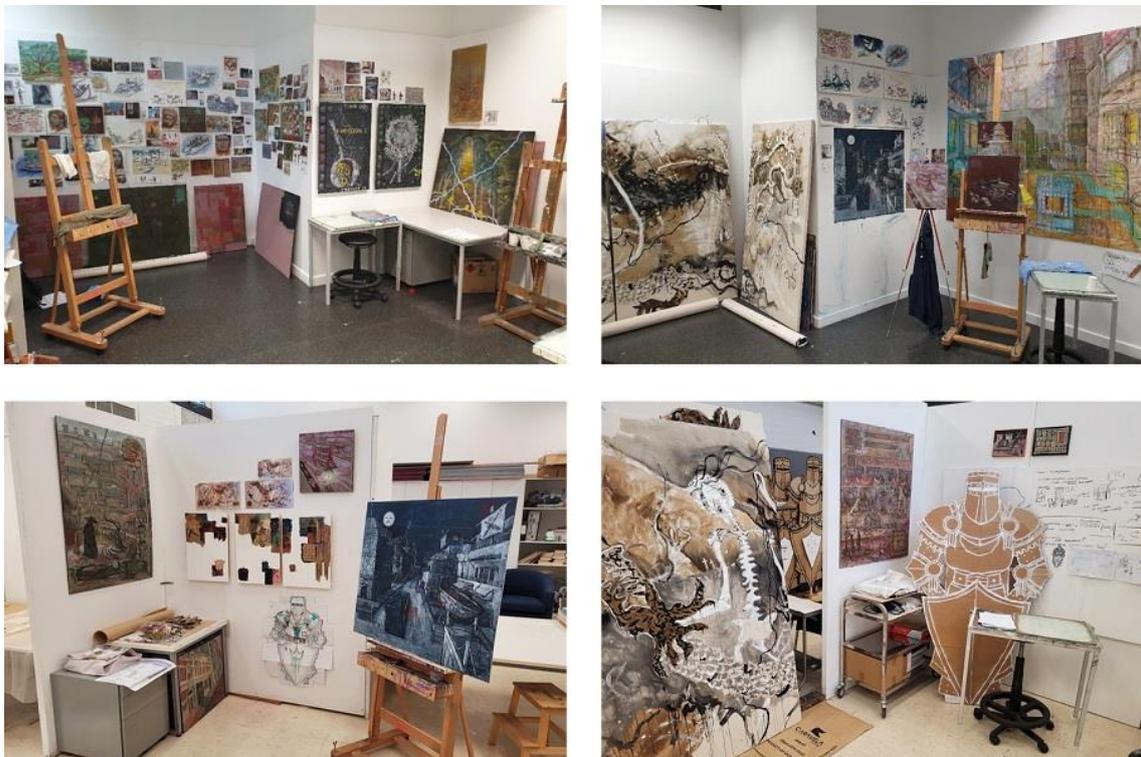


Figure 1: Photographs of studio space at Edith Cowan University across 2020–2021

## Postage

Now I address the obvious question, why use post? Both Zheng and Lau were more than competent with a variety of creative software, while I have years of experience across digital media through a long-standing design practice. Further still, we all had access to many online platforms that facilitate simultaneous video-chat, screen-sharing and editing functions; so in a way, we could have still observed, inquired and reciprocated each other's utterances as we worked. However, even during the relatively modest periods of COVID-19 disruption in Perth, I witnessed many parts of my life shift online—and I know many members of my community-of-practice, including myself, were frustrated with screen fatigue. Most importantly, however, as an oil painter I value the unique material language of painting, a language I stubbornly hope to preserve despite an increased reliance on Zoom meetings and share folders, a language that has been declared dead multiple times throughout its history. Therefore, material practice served as an intervention against the ever-increasing online connectivity facilitated by lockdowns and social restrictions.

In looking to the efforts of artists before me, I discovered that collaborative painting is far less common when compared to the influx of collaborative art that grew out of post-modernism. For example, the more common approaches to collaboration centered around performance or video as discussed in Green's (2001) seminal text, *Third Hand: Collaboration in Art from Conceptualism to Postmodernism*. Painting is also presented as a less common way of working in Ellen Mara De Watcher's (2017) more recent compilation of interviews with contemporary collaborative partnerships and/or collectives. Throughout De Watcher's (2017) book *Co-Art: Artists on Creative Collaboration* artists interviewed across Asia, Europe, South America and North America predominantly collaborated through video, multimedia, performance, art-activism, and/or installation. These approaches to collaborative practice notwithstanding, I cannot claim that artists exchanging paintings and studies via postage is something new, as inspiration came through several sources. For example, the book *I Send You This Cadmium Red* (Berger et al., 2000) documents the long-term postal correspondence between John Berger and John Christie, and there are also Carol Archer's (Archer 2010–2011, Archer, 2012–2014, Archer 2015, Archer and Kelen 2010) multiple post-based projects. More recently, and closer to home, Nyoongar artist Sandra Hill and Chinese painter Gao Xu Yong created a much larger one-off painting *The Dragon and the Wagyl* (Hill & Gao 2012) for NAIDOC (National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee) Week, working

between Perth and Shanghai. The book *Framing Conflict* (Brown et al. 2014) details the exchange of a series of multidisciplinary artworks between Charles Green himself and his partner and long-time collaborator Lyndell Brown, along with their contemporary John Cattapan. Among others, these four examples of collaborative practice in particular helped expand my thinking beyond my original face-to-face model.

Collaborating through postal services did bring with it limitations on cost, size and materials, and of course an inherent lag ranging from weeks to months between responses. These limitations were not considered as incidental or separate from the artworks, rather they were viewed as a fundamental part of the encounter. Limitations that facilitated dialogue and carried with them their own unique experiences, just as communicating through video-calls would carry its own qualities. For example, the lag between sending and receiving artwork was unfamiliar to all three of us who had grown up with the ubiquity of email. Lau, Zheng and I had never needed to rely on post to communicate, therefore the inherent lag of sending and receiving postage instantly disrupted the communication paradigm we had grown up with. The format for each collaboration was different due to the circumstances of each artist, Zheng and I sent back-and-forth smaller studies that could fit into an A4 envelope (Figure 2), while Lau and I exchanged a much larger mailing tube that contained rolled up pieces of canvas (Figure 3). During both of these projects, each series of artworks was sent back and forth in its entirety, yet there was no expectation to respond to all or any of the pieces. Further still, all artists knew they could respond in any way they felt, as long as the outcome could fit back into the original package.



Figure 2: A4 envelopes used to send painted studies with Zheng [addresses blurred] (2020)



Figure 3: Mailing tube used to send painted studies with Lau [addresses blurred] (2021)

### Material Dialogue

Inspired to adapt my approaches, I began my exchange with Zheng with a quiet utterance, not wanting to resolve anything too quickly. We were taking our time as collaborators new to this way of working, so we could all make sense of how to negotiate ideas through a shared handling of materials. I already knew that Zheng had an illustration practice that rendered dreamlike children’s stories, so I wanted to begin our dialogue in a way that kept any emergent narratives open-ended. One of the first utterances I sent was a series of lines resembling a doorway (Figure 4, top left)—an unassuming whisper of an image that I hoped would be interpreted as an invitation to respond, not as an instruction to follow. This material dialogue was negotiated over months and several return journeys between London and Perth, eventually developing into the small study seen in Figure 4 (bottom right). One utterance at a time, Zheng and I fleshed out numerous whimsical characters, places

and backstories across our small series of studies (Figure 5). The meaning behind any of these characters or places were kept open as they transformed, avoiding any attempts to fix or resolve emergences. Each response was not instantaneous, with these smaller studies often sitting on my desk for weeks before I ever made a mark. It was in between other tasks that I would handle them, deliberating how I wanted to respond—wondering what might add value to our conversation. When it came time to draw or paint, this deliberation was then negotiated through the material language of each piece.



Figure 4: See & Zheng (2019-2020), 'Development of material dialogue I', mixed media on paper, 12cm x 11.5cm



Figure 5: See & Zheng (2019-2020), 'Development of material dialogue II', mixed media on paper, 6cm x 14cm

When it came to my collaboration with Lau, I had not seen any of her artworks before this project, so I made a point to remain ignorant until after our material exchange had begun. However, I soon discovered she had a studio and mural painting practice focused on tree-filled urban spaces. As this language emerged in our dialogue, Lau began to paint a scene from the street of her studio looking out towards *Lion Rock*, an iconic landmark for Hong Kong locals (Figure 6, top). As I responded, it was an unusually rainy day for Perth, so I spent some time layering drips and washes before rendering swans and riverbanks (Figure 6, bottom-left). Eventually I painted the shape of Perth's Swan River into the grey sky, responding to Lion Rock with my own local iconography. I was painting in my studio in Perth in a moment of time-and-space different to that of Lau's—two moments separated by many weeks and thousands of kilometers—but connected through our small series of paintings. Responding to both Zheng and Lau in moments strung together across many months deepened my connection to my collaborators' space, and I hoped theirs to mine.



Figure 6: See & Lau (2020-2021), 'Development of material dialogue I', acrylic on loose canvas, 60cm x 50cm

Responses also included written forms as the meaning of imagery became further negotiated through a combination of English and simplified and traditional Chinese characters. Written utterances were sometimes woven into the artworks themselves (Figures 7 & 8), as well as appearing on the backs of surfaces (Figures 9 & 10), which complemented and extended their material counterparts. Due to my limited ability to read simplified Chinese characters, and my lack of familiarity with traditional Chinese characters, these hand-written utterances took a long time to interpret, decode, and ultimately respond to. If I did not recognise characters, I would redraw them one-by-one in the translator app Pleco (Figure 11), retracing my collaborator's

handwriting on my phone's touchscreen. Although using Pleco extended material practice into a digital space, the performativity of retracing my collaborator's strokes was very different to simply copying and pasting entire blocks of text into Google translate. Rather, this handwritten approach turned dialogue into a gradual unravelling as I translated one character at a time. It was a process that demanded I pay great attention to the qualities of my collaborators' writing as I slowly decoded it. From a creative-emergence perspective, this slow process also led to some interesting responses emerging through a combination of mistranslation and misinterpretation, as well as me trying to anticipate what a message might say before decoding it as a whole.



Figure 7: See & Zheng (2020), 'Painted study I', mixed media on cartridge paper, 20cm x 24cm



Figure 8: See & Zheng (2020), 'Painted study II', mixed media on cartridge paper, 20cm x 27cm

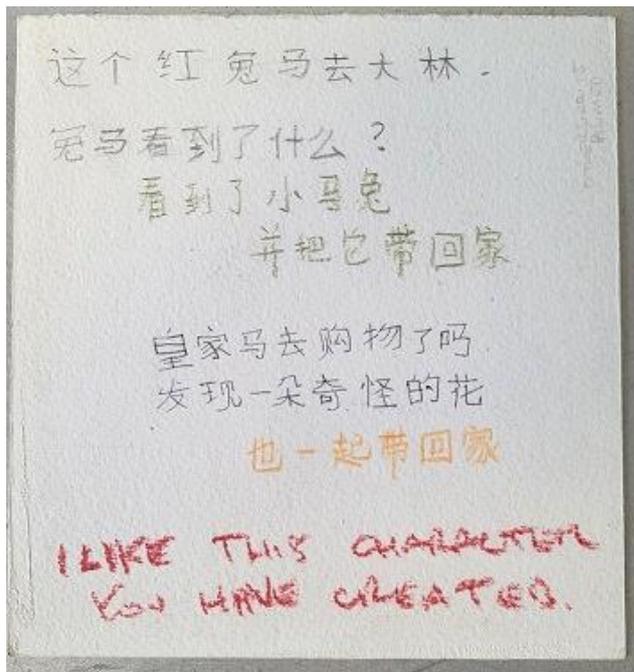


Figure 9: See & Zheng (2020), 'Reverse side of painted study', mixed media on paper

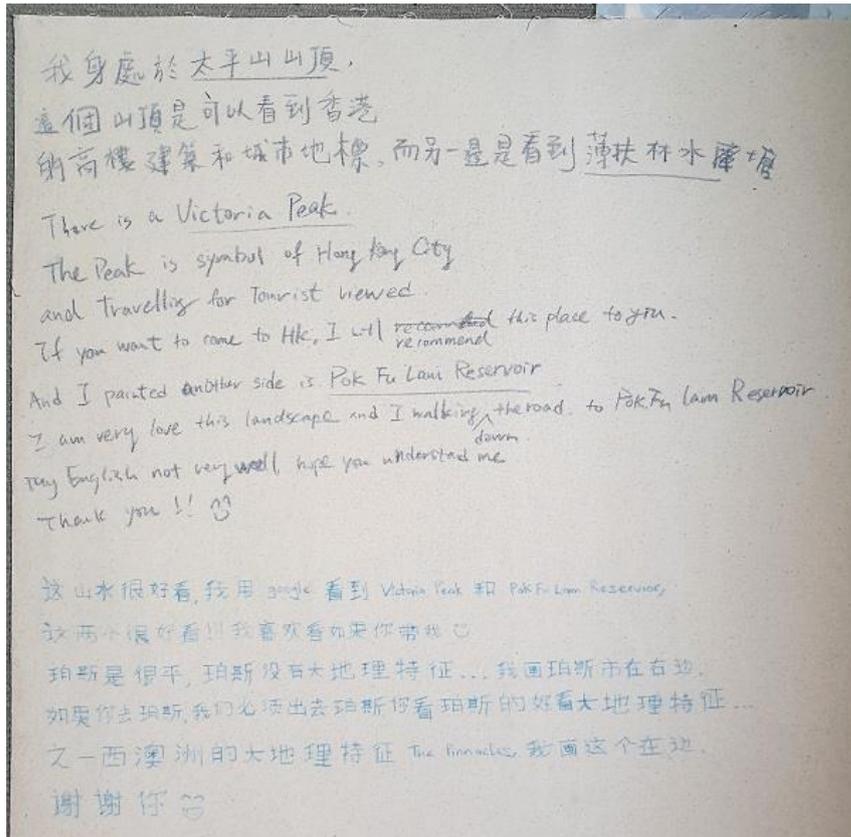


Figure 10: See & Lau (2020), 'Reverse side of painted study', mixed media on canvas



Figure 11: Screenshot of my phone as I use the *Pleco* app's touchscreen feature.

Eventually we looked beyond the artworks themselves, as documentation of our studio practice also became part of the greater dialogue. Figure 12 shows an annotated photograph of my studio sent along with the paintings, an attempt to share my process, which for the most part had remained unseen by Lau. Similarly, with Zheng, Figure 13 shows a screenshot of my phone-camera engaging face-detection when attempting to document Zheng's response; a moment of serendipity that I could not help but share by printing and annotating this screenshot and posting it along with the artworks. Figures 12 & 13 are both examples of notes or photos (supplementary utterances) occasionally posted along with artworks to invite additional layers of dialogue that might extend, contextualise or inspire our main utterances. I say *main utterances* not to devalue the contributions of other mediums, but rather to emphasise that our dialogue focused on the material language of paint, a language we were attempting to preserve. Both I and my collaborators could have easily used our phones to send photos back and forth as we worked in the studio. However, we mostly avoided this practice—not just because we enjoyed the surprise of unpacking each other's responses but also because I did not want to risk an exchange where paintings were experienced through the types of knowledge privileged by digital imagery. This privileging of documentation over the qualities of the artwork is discussed by arts research scholar, Harmony Bench (2012), who warns against over-experiencing creative outcomes through their documentation. In other words, I didn't want to risk experiencing a painting more through its representation than through the painting itself. Beyond this, there did exist a dialogue over messenger apps, but this was reserved for exchanging pleasantries or logistical information.

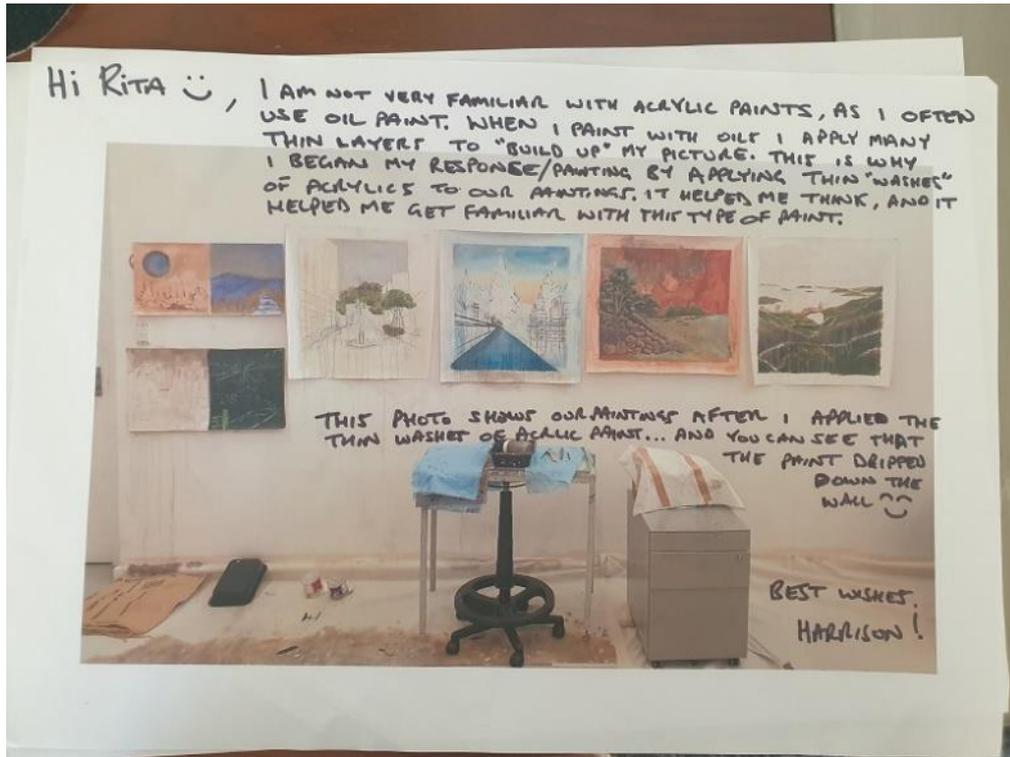


Figure 12: Annotated photo of my studio in Perth (2020)



Figure 13: Screenshot of attempts to photograph painted study by See & Zheng (2020)

## Reflections

As I increasingly relied on online platforms across many other parts of my research, the sending and receiving of artefacts that had been physically handled by my collaborators became an important counterstance. Artefacts that not only recorded their creation but captured their handling became treasured as the physical manifestations of collaborative encounters. As I responded to these paintings through

my own handling, I would inevitably discover another's imprints, stroke-pressures, smudges, creases and tears, along with the qualities of our paints, pencils, canvas and paper—material records that cannot be backed-up or replicated digitally (Figures 14 & 15). Because of the time and energy invested in these types of exchanges, there existed a bittersweetness each time an artwork was in transit: I was excited to see how each artist had responded, while also knowing that these material utterances could vanish amongst the unimaginable constellations of international freight sent and received each day. However, this experience of handling something that could not be replaced contributed to the sense that these artefacts were tethered to the very real places that each artist was working from.



Figure 14: Unpacking studies by See & Zheng (2020)



Figure 15: Unpacking studies by See & Lau (2021)

When I looked at paintings that Lau and I created pinned up in each of our studios 6,000 km apart (Figures 16 & 17), knowing that these paintings existed between two spaces that we could not co-occupy, I felt a greater sense of connection when compared to the ubiquity and convenience of online communication. During both of these collaborations Zheng, Lau and I all navigated our other ongoing projects, studies and professional obligations. Postage-based collaboration sat in contrast to these other obligations, having no fixed timelines or quotas for productivity. This approach not only invited serendipity but also shifted how I conceived of my relationship with productivity and time. It also made working along a singular linear timeline impossible, shifting back and forth between multiple artists negotiating multiple artworks across multiple times-and-spaces. Perhaps most importantly, unlike all the exchanges that I carry with me on my phone at all times (emails, messenger apps and/or share-folders), these postage-based collaborations forced periods of dormancy.



Figure 16: Painted studies by See & Lau (2020) set up in See's studio at ECU in Perth, Western Australia



Figure 17: Painted studies by See & Lau (2020) set up in studio in Lau's studio in Kowloon, Hong Kong [Photograph: Rita Lau]

While in transit, dormant projects were never inert, rather I thought of this separation as forced periods of rest and an alternative to the 'business as usual' approach to COVID-19. Maintaining projects where the access and frequency of responses were out of my control meant these collaborations had to exist beyond my everyday deadlines. Participating in exchanges that were out of my control created a series of moments beyond the expectation of productivity afforded by online communication: a series of moments reserved for the shared handling of materials by individuals half a world away. Adapting to postage-based collaboration has kept me connected in ways that sit in stark contrast to the online experience—a connection across borders that privileges material handling, not rapid-fire responses, and which captures moments within a series of artefacts as they were shared across continents.

Acknowledging that this paper is limited to early findings from a still ongoing PLR project, I will conclude by addressing how this approach might extend beyond a response to COVID. Although COVID-disruption has indeed accelerated many aspects of our lives into digital spaces, this trajectory was already set in many instances. It is a trajectory evident in the existence, and increased adoption, of so many online platforms—for example, social media, cryptocurrency, video and music streaming, online meetings, and internet shopping—which all existed prior to the global pandemic. If the post-pandemic world does not redirect its trajectory away from the digital, I surmise that there will be a need for material dialogue to serve as an alternative. After the slow and considered connection that I experienced while collaborating with Lau and Zheng—and many others during my research—these exchanges continue to stand in contrast to how I connected to people and places through my phone or computer. The time lag of postage exchanges forced a different cadence to my usual workflow, a slower and deeper rhythm of thinking and making that disrupted what often felt like an unrelenting flow of internet communication.

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