

***'(from the) elsewhere': exploring materiality
through cooperative practice***

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'(from the) elsewhere': exploring materiality through cooperative practice

By using methods of collaborative practice alongside slow movements and mail art as a research methodology, this contextual statement explores how cooperative practice can occupy the intersection between physical and digital spaces to find new ways of working with materials (Reed, 2019). Our focus on materiality involves 'processes of deformation and transformation', pushing the boundaries of a material through various manipulations; the time spent working on (thinking through, and playing with) a material allows for a greater appreciation of its physical properties (Delueze and Guattari, 2015, p.38). Steadily attuning to the material as a collective allows for a radical closeness, demonstrating how cooperative and process driven practices can extend the boundaries of both individualism and materiality, pushing both contributor and work into new, more generative spaces. By referring to historical examples of mail art, as well as theories on collaboration, we aim to add to this existing knowledge through a new lens of slowness.

A collaborative art practice can be defined as a process involving two or more artists who work together and author their work as a collaboration; the artists work to co-construct new knowledge and share ideas, recognising that thinking can become a social process (Billing et al., 2007). Collaborative approaches can be applied to any process or medium, across disciplines, encouraging artists to work in innovative ways; honest communication and constructive criticism allows for unimpeded experimentation, and as such collaborators become less fearful of failure due to the shared support of one another (John-Steiner, 2000).

Collaboration is an umbrella term that encompasses all working methods including 'collective,

communal, common, cooperative, coordinated, combined [where artists are said to be working 'conversationally' rather than 'collaboratively' [as a form of] 'anti-compromise' (De Wachter, 2017, p.20). As such, we can conclude that the term collaboration may not be helpful in describing our project and instead 'cooperation' is more reflective of our supportive practice, as it suggests mutually benefitting from each other and working towards a shared goal; this involves confrontation and deliberation, negotiating with each other to move beyond what we could achieve as individuals (Billing et al., 2007). Our aim then is to utilise these methods of cooperative practice, combining them with a process of mail art to develop our own joint working practice, and establish new ways of co-art making and material exploration.

We will apply Billing et al. (2007), John-Steiner's (2000), and De Wachter's (2017) observations on cooperative art making to explore the variety of approaches to collaborative art, as well as offering a critique of its success and how it is utilised in the digital realm. This has been supported by Schwabe (2016) and Blom's (2007) research on mail art, allowing us to understand its history and its relevance in contemporary digital culture. We will also be using Reed's (2019) discussion of slow art as a methodology to understand how taking a more evaluative approach to cooperative making can both support mental wellbeing and better evaluate the importance of the work we create. B+B's (2007) essay on the importance of play and Lange-Berndt's (2015) discussions of materiality will demonstrate how our embrace of process, cooperation and play have allowed for radical approaches to exploring and questioning materiality.

In April 2022 we decided that our cooperative practice would centre around a postal project; speaking via email and social media, we chose to work exclusively on four A1 sheets of paper

which would be sent via Royal Mail. Alongside this, we decided to keep note of when the papers were sent and received which took the form of a poetic ledger through which we reflected on our initial experience of the paper's surface and tracked any additions made. This process has culminated in a digital publication which consists of scans, ledgers, email correspondence and open-ended thoughts which can be found [here](#). This format was chosen to reflect the importance of the digital spaces where our initial conversations took place; it demonstrates how we have advanced upon the historical Fluxus postal art methods, creating a synergy between analogue processes and digital environments (Tate, 2023). In line with this use of the digital, we began to mark out our thoughts in distinct colours (one as green, one as brown); this made our ongoing conversations perceptible, showing visually how our dialogue built. We share the understanding that maintaining agency and respecting an individual voice is crucial for a rewarding cooperative practice; it was never our intention to merge into one unit, but rather we sought to build on each other's contributions.

Before evaluating our own use of cooperative methods, it is important to consider how art practices have been viewed over time and how collaborative practices emerged. The perception of art production has changed from artists originally being considered as producers of decorative objects, operating in artisan guilds (De Wachter, 2017). Over time and especially after the Industrial Revolution the perceived value and skill increased in the individual artist, epitomised by Immanuel Kant's (1790) *Critique of Judgement* which laid harsh perceptions on what was deemed 'real art' and created the cliché of the 'artist as genius' which is still very impactful on today's perception of artists. Over time and culminating around the late 1960's, specifically in the UK, groups of artists such as Art & Language and the Fluxus movement began collaborating as a 'generational rejection of the conventional' as well as questioning personalised authorship to go against the then current art world conventions (Green, 2001).

While the history of art has often overlooked collaborative efforts, there has been a recent institutional appreciation for collaborative projects, demonstrated by the 2021 Turner Prize having a shortlist formed entirely of collectives (ARTFORUM, 2021). This could be critiqued as merely being a current art world trend, or it could be seen to reflect something a lot deeper, possibly a greater cultural shift to shared knowledge, social justice, and an overall unifying togetherness.



Fig 1: Members of the Belfast-based Array Collective at a 2019 Pride event (Laura O'Connor, 2021)

To determine whether collaborative practice can be a useful method for artists, or relevant to our practice and research interests, we must consider the intricacies of working with others. In order for a collaborative project to function, there needs to be immense care put into a collaboration, as Billing et al. (2007) states that many ethical issues can arise; these can include an unequal balance of responsibilities, a lack of reciprocity or careless expectations.

Collaboration should not simply be seen as a better or more successful alternative to other forms of practice, instead, its success is dependent on the reasoning and motivation behind a collaboration as Billing et al. (2007) describes that collaboration has to produce results that would not otherwise be possible through independent methods of working. As such the context for the project is essential, while it also provides other benefits that allow for more creative freedom as Groys (2008, p.21) describes how the decision to 'relinquish exclusive authorship' benefits the artists, supposedly frees them 'from the power that [the] uninvolved viewer exerts over the resulting artwork.' We have employed methods of 'dialogic' communication which De Wachter (2017, p.20) describes as a type of communication that 'does not resolve itself by finding common ground' but instead values differences, allowing for an ease in sharing and challenging ideas. This created a supportive but intellectually stimulating partnership, with cooperative processes allowing us to share in innovative ways, exploring the transference of materials through the postal system.

When considering the logistics of cooperative practice and material exploration, we realised the need for us to adopt a method which facilitates hands-on making despite us living in different cities; the postal service bridged this gap. Mail art is understood as 'a movement based on the principle of sending small scale works through the postal service' (Tate, 2022). This explanation, however, does not account for the context in which mail art gained momentum. In the late 1950's, Ray Johnson formed *The New York Correspondence School of Art*, 'an actual functioning postal network' which is widely seen to mark the beginning of the movement (Blom, 2007, p.7). Johnson's pithy pedagogical approach to forming a dynamic social network, quite ironically, placed him at the centre of all correspondence; the instances of lacking reciprocity and uncertainty as to whether correspondence was acknowledged hints at an arrogance we wished to avoid when incorporating this method. In the decades that followed, numerous artist

duos (including Paulo Bruscky and Robert Rehfeldt) used mail art to overcome ‘cultural control, censorship, and oppression’ (Schwabe, 2016, p.257). Working within the bounds of a surveillance state, mail art provided a largely playful means for circulating ideas beyond borders and maintaining meaningful connection at a time of isolation (Gilbert, 2015).

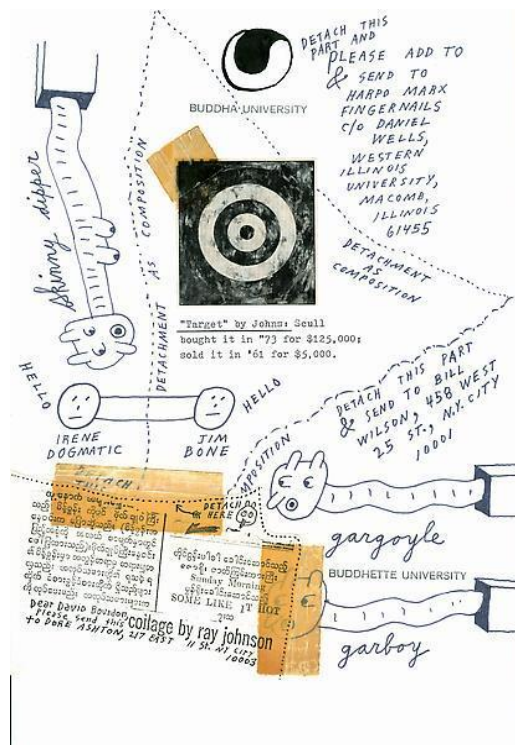


Fig 2: Detachment as Composition, (Ray Johnson, 1950's)

In recent years, both during and post-pandemic, we have seen an influx of postal projects, such as the ARTISTS RESPONDING TO... ‘The Postcard Project’ (2020-21) or Fronteer Gallery’s (2023) numerous ‘Postcard Exhibitions’; these projects were a response to the lack of opportunity for physical exhibitions during the various lockdowns; they were an attempt to reach beyond the digital. Reflecting upon our decision to explore mail art, we began considering it as a “post pandemic” movement against the dominance of digital technologies seen throughout the pandemic. Preciado (2021) explored how the influence and restrictions of digital culture

increased during the pandemic, stating how the pandemic has caused a societal 'mutation' to the technological, with forms of digital communication like social media and zoom acting as a 'digital mask' causing us to lose our sense of individuality, with forms of digital technology and communication being described as 'ultraconnected prisons of the future' (Preciado, 2020). Could then a return to the analogue be a radical rebellion, an act of care? By embracing a cooperative working practice and returning to analogue processes such as mail art, are we resisting and emancipating ourselves of technology in the era of post Covid-19 fatigue?

As such, our use of mail art also incorporates slow art as a methodology, hoping to reoccupy our physical bodies against the hyper efficiency of the digital age. On discussing slow art, the Ashmolean (2023) suggests how taking a slower approach to considering art, as both a viewer and an artist, can greatly benefit meaningful connection with the work. Slowness is defined as 'the quality of moving or happening without much speed' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). However, within an arts context Reed (2019) explores how slow art can support an ongoing conversation between artwork and a viewer but can also be applied to how an artist views their own work, providing a flexible structure through which sincere, embodied encounters with the materials become possible. This is further demonstrated by Tate (2023) who states that slow art is 'less concerned with the agency of the artwork itself than with the necessity of devoted attentiveness and favourable conditions for that dynamic, intimate experience'. We have embraced this methodology through actions of 'slow looking', focusing our attention on the present moment of material play. It is important to consider how these processes intersect with concepts around wellbeing and mindfulness, which is further reflected by our 'statement on collaboration' document which establishes a safe and trusting working environment (Tate, 2023). This return to a slower analogue form of working can also be a form of solidarity against capitalism as hierarchical concepts around work put more value on speed and efficiency (Reed, 2019). Our embrace of slowness coincided with the (2022) Royal Mail strikes, causing the

postal workers to become unwittingly related to our process, delaying our work and thus further allowing for a more considerate and reflective working process.

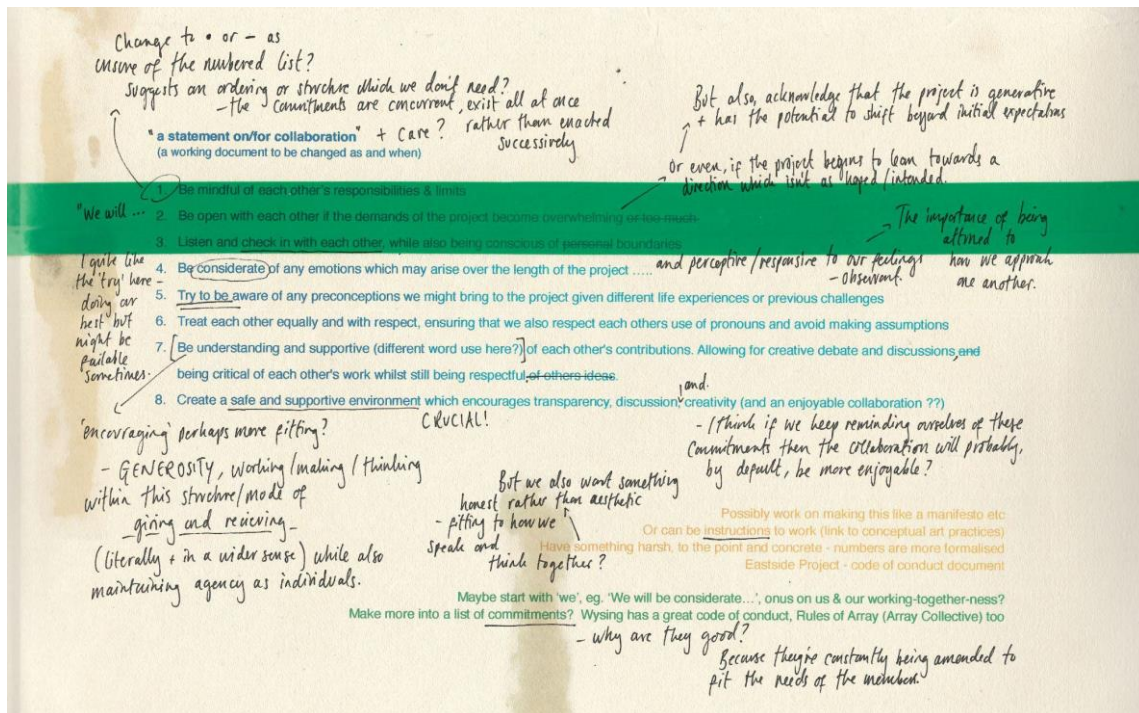


Fig 3: Statement on collaboration (Jacob Carter & Poppy Jones-Little, 2023)

Throughout our cooperative project we have been influenced by what Deleuze and Guattari (2015, p.38) describe as the 'matter-movement'; this speculates that an artist's work is shaped from 'matter' (whether this is a material or a concept) which has multiple states of being, multiple entry and exit points. Undeniably, our collective approach has honed in on these multiple states, examining the wetness of paint, the fluidity of natural dyes, the scent of oil, the reflective qualities of tin foil, and so on. These moments of attentiveness have allowed us to be experimental in our approach to material, being led by intuitive trial and error, seeing how far we can push a material before the supposed "matter" falls apart. The attempt to define 'materiality' easily becomes fraught. The extensive scholarship is full of pitfalls, contradictions, and severe

options. For the purposes of this project, we employed Lange-Berndt's definition of 'materials' as 'substances that are always subject to change, be it through handling [or] interaction with their surroundings' (Lange-Berndt, p.12). Understanding material through its ability to shift resonates strongly with our approach to material play and process; material is not only stuff or concrete matter, but also the processes it undergoes, the actions which become embedded. Our interaction with the papers have been focused on process driven actions (such as tearing, staining, folding, burying, coating) demonstrating how such processes can generate unpredictable results as process art is one which 'invites risk, uncertainty, vision [and] unpredictability' (Grant, 2018, p.1). When questioning the potential reception of the individual papers, we had no doubt that the works would be understood through the processes which are clearly apparent to the viewer.

This attention given to the substance of the paper marks the project as distinct from mail art tradition, in which the importance was supposedly placed upon 'the content of the object - the conception and diffusion of ideas - not the form' (Schwabe, 2016, p.256). The Jiffy envelope (fig 4), which transported the papers throughout the project, is included within the publication; the packaging bore the marks and scuffs of continuous handling, making it a perfect example of our process.



Fig 4: Digital scan of Jiffy packaging (Jacob Carter & Poppy Jones-Little, 2023)

The element of play was also especially important for engaging with a process driven exploration of materiality. B+B (2007, p.115) describes how a 'productive collaboration requires a willingness to play' and how this creative play can shift the power relations between artists and allow them to test each other's boundaries. This has been evident within our own cooperative approaches to playing with materials (such as our approach to performing certain actions on paper like cutting, tearing, staining). However, B+B (2007, p.117) still offers a critique of creative play, stating how the process is not 'critical or radical in itself' but requires a 'combination of imagination and logic' in order for something useful to be gained from a process of perceivably pointless and playful activity. In line with this, we felt it was vital to continually evaluate our incorporation of play, coming to the conclusion that it elicited more chance happenings and innovative explorations of materiality. It challenged our concepts of productivity, as well as removing the limitations of personal expertise so that there remained an element of surprise in our discoveries.



Fig 5: Digital scan of collaborative artwork, (Jacob Carter & Poppy Jones-Little, 2023)

Our sustained collaboration and embrace of play has been successful in enabling us to address complicated questions; allowing us to move beyond the 'powerful belief in a separate, independent self and in the glory of individual achievement' and instead prioritise an idea of 'we-ness' (John-Steiner, 2000, p.204). In many ways this point demonstrates that through cooperative practice we are able to overcome challenges and create more innovative work in a way that would be impossible independently. John-Steiner (2000) describes how collaboration can be seen as a paradox where it allows collaborators to deepen their individual skills whilst also learning the benefits of reciprocal working. As such, interdependence is an effective method for sharing each other's confidence while still developing a sustained connection.

Alongside the physical mailings, the project was sustained and heavily reliant upon digital mailings; the emails, direct messages and Zoom calls (with the support of screen sharing

alongside a digital whiteboard) shaped the collaboration. If our spoken correspondence had also been via the post, the project would have taken a different turn. While our hand-to-paper working incorporated 'slow time', our conversations were almost immediate, losing that element of surprise and intrigue that posting provides with there being no anxious excited wait to receive something hand delivered (Reed, 2019). Nonetheless, this was intuitive rather than conceptualised, we were relying on the means we have become most accustomed to as creatives in the current climate. Looking forward, we feel this project has the depth to constitute an exhibition or archival showing. Moving out from the rubric of mailing (giving & receiving) and online discussion, to incorporate an in-person audience. This zooming out from our means of production, into a space other than our own (into an[other] elsewhere), would be a huge shift in our cooperative practice. Namely, it would be face-to-face, unmediated by the metaverse.

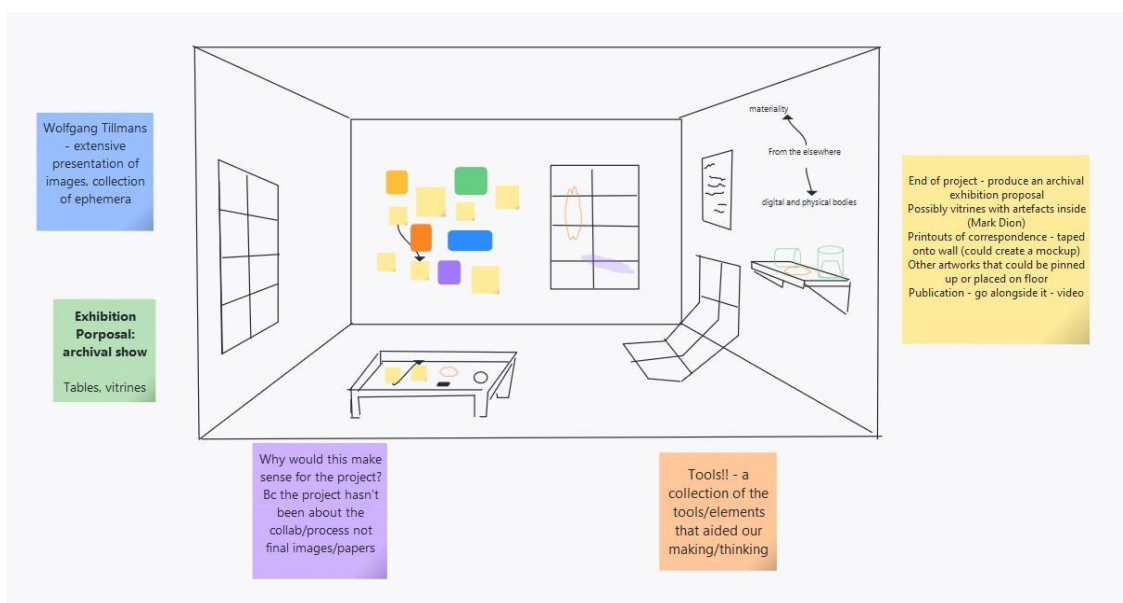


Fig 6: Exhibition proposal digital drawing, (Jacob Carter & Poppy Jones-Little, 2023)

Utilising digital formats, such as zoom meetings and Google Docs to prepare notes (and even to write this essay that you are reading) was easily accessible; the benefit of this way of working being that it is 'permanent, mappable, and viewable', which felt beneficial without compromising our desire for technological emancipation (Manovich, 2008, p.74). Groys (2008) further describes how it is difficult to avoid the use of technology, especially when the inherently interactive nature of digital communication aids cooperative practice so well. Whilst the internet can be seen as a platform that 'promotes both a sense of connection and one of independence' it can also often 'reinforc[e] feelings of loneliness and despair' (De Wachter, 2017, p.223). As such, it can be said that any sense of real bodily participation is lost through the virtual, in a similar way in which Preciado (2021) discussed, that we can become unaware of our own body and as Groys (2008, p.29) describes fall 'into a state of self-oblivion'. We felt that through our combination of both physical and digital processes we were able to break away from this sense of dissociation, although we are eager to pursue an in-person collaboration in the future in order to fully appreciate the difference.

In conclusion, making use of John-Steiner's (2000), De Wachter's (2017) and Billing et al. (2007) thoughts on collaboration has enabled us to redefine our working process into one that is cooperative. We have developed a collective approach to gaining and sharing knowledge, finding that cooperation leads to innovative, freeing, and radical ways of art making which allows us to take more creative risks. Throughout the project, we have acknowledged the significant benefit that honest communication and continuous mutual support has, encouraging us to think more critically about how we investigate materiality. This has enabled us to push the boundaries of our individual ways of working, recognising that a cooperative practice allows us to resist the capitalist and Kantian ideals of value, "artist genius" and the hierarchical approaches to learning (Kant, 2009). While De Wachter (2017, P.224) states that collaboration

is still 'overshadowed by individualism', she recognises that it can act as 'an antidote to isolation or extreme individualism at a time when solitary living and loneliness are on the increase'. Certainly, as the project progressed we perceived a real sense of genuine relief in sidestepping the immense individualism which often clings to art making. Our unified making and harmonising of action brought a sense of ease, through which we were still able to maintain an essential sense of self (John-Steiner, 2000). Reflecting on this experience, we will undoubtedly be pursuing further collaborative projects.

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