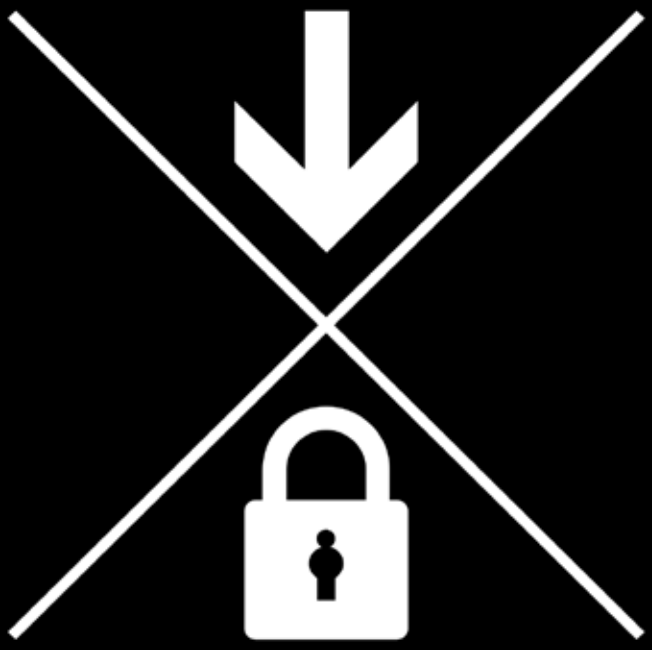

LOCKDOWN
COLLABORATIONS

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Collaborative Painting UK

Dedicated to David Black

First published 2021

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In loving memory of Val Cottrell, Chris Stanley and my Grandad Bill Spencer.

FOREWORD

It was 1999, and as a graffiti writer and recently graduated design student I decided to move to Bristol to seek out new horizons. My plan was to hang out and paint with some other guys I knew from Hull who were already living there – Paris, Eko and Xenz – and see what life would bring in this new environment. In making that move I parachuted myself directly into Bristol's flourishing underground scene, meeting artists and musicians, rappers and DJs, and many other like-minded creative people. It was against this backdrop that I first met Luke Palmer, or simply Acerone as he is known in the multiple worlds he inhabits. Being a Bristol native he was already well connected to a lot of the same people I was meeting, and through painting graffiti together we gravitated into a larger group that eventually became the TCF Crew (Twentieth Century Frescoes). The ten or so members of the crew fitted together easily as we all had previous experience of painting collaborative graffiti pieces in one form or another, and it seemed to make sense without having to think about it at all. This new situation elevated our collective experience and we began to regularly make more and more elaborate pieces with three or four, then six or seven, then nine or ten artists at a time on one wall together. We buzzed off it; it felt natural, and it helped to shape the way we all saw the world around us and how much more we could achieve in working with other people.

Fast forward fifteen years or so and we had all moved on to new things, although we still remained connected as friends. Luke called me one day and proceeded to tell me in detail the story of Tunisian Collaborative Painting – a group of artists working in secret and in silence together on one canvas – the goal being as much about the activity as the result. It was also a form of defiance made all the more poignant as it took place during a time in Tunisian history when artistic expression had been outlawed by the regime. Luke was in fact laying out a powerful premise. He told me he was planning an event based on this idea but with the aim of involving a really diverse mix of visual artists. He had graffiti writers, but also illustrators, scenic artists, abstract artists and portrait painters on board, and would I be interested in taking part? I don't remember thinking too hard about it before I agreed, it sounded like a lot of fun – and indeed it was – and helped feed into and develop his ongoing teaching work and creative concepts through all sorts of different applications.

Fast forward again another few years to 2020 and the Covid-19 pandemic suddenly pushed its way onto the stage, changing innumerable aspects of the life we were used to living. As the new reality of disconnection and isolation emerged, we all had to find new ways to communicate and collaborate as best we could. In the midst of a dark and uncertain time I knew Luke's collaborative painting business had been put on hold, as had my design work in the events industry. We spoke many times about the impact of it all, and his thoughts eventually turned to the fact that he had just taken delivery of twelve large canvases for a collaborative painting job that could no longer happen. The short-lived question was what to do with them? Never one to squander a resource he had soon reinvented the stymied enterprise into a new collaborative painting project, and without knowing it then, the basis for this book. In starting a simple geometric painting and then physically passing it on to another artist he had begun to wrestle back control of the narrative – creating for the sake of it – and all the good things that brings to the creator. Physical collaboration was still possible, and perhaps the new constraints and circumstances would yield unforeseen opportunities to advance.

As the pandemic dragged into 2021 and lockdown was reinstated for a third time, Luke again responded to the circumstances with another collaborative project – #A4FOR5 – this time making use of both digital and physical formats to allow scattered and isolated artists to collaborate once again. By connecting via Instagram and then passing on their physical work to each other via an unobstructed channel – the humble red post box – they were able to create not only a whole body of new work, but also create new connections and new and more meaningful outcomes. Distance and separation were transcended and yet another new collaborative format was introduced.

This book will take you on a journey through the images from these exciting and innovative projects, as well as shedding light on the circumstances surrounding this slew of creative collaboration.

Each page contains something special that celebrates the small victories and triumphs that collaborative artistic working can bring. In addition, it provides an insight into the lives, processes and aesthetic offerings of the artists involved.

Rob Lawes/ZIML
May 2021

PREFACE

It was Thursday 12th March 2020, a day when severe acute respiratory syndrome Coronavirus 2, or COVID-19 as it became commonly known, was still relatively minor news in Bristol, England. At the time there were no more than 500 cases within the UK and fewer than a handful of fatalities. I had barely given it a second thought, my diary was filling up and there was work to do; a growing number of Collaborative Painting UK workshops to facilitate, large-scale office murals to paint, and showcases at festivals to organise. Summer 2020 was shaping up to be the break I had been working so hard to secure ever since quitting my job as a lecturer two years earlier.

I was on my way to meet my friend and fellow artist Felix Braun at the Royal West of England Academy (RWA) to finalise plans for our co-curation of the 'Streets Ahead' exhibition, a full gallery takeover during the summer, showcasing 20 local contemporary artists exploring the future of street art. As I climbed the huge marble staircase, Felix came into view. He was sat at a table, but looked slightly odd. I then realised he was wearing blue rubber gloves, the kind I wear when spray-painting murals and canvases. I mentally made the connection to COVID-19 and shot him a wry smile in recognition of his vehement health and safety efforts. "I'll offer no apology," he said without hesitation, "I'll do everything I can to not spread this thing."

Challenges were addressed, exhibiting artists' progress discussed and further plans were made before we left the building and wandered outside into the unusually warm early springtime sunshine. Felix spoke up and told me of his concern that Coronavirus might actually stop the exhibition happening at all. My wry smile turned into a nervous laugh. This simply was not a possibility in my mind. We owed it to the artists to make the show happen, we had all done so much work towards it already, and surely this was just a flu variant that would pass in no time at all. I looked him square in the eye: "It'll be fine... you worry too much."

As I returned to my car, I checked my phone and opened a new email. It was from a client for whom I was working the following week, facilitating a Collaborative Painting workshop for 60 participants underneath the wings of Concorde at Bristol Aerospace Museum: "Due to many of our colleagues travelling from various countries around Europe, we regret to inform you that we are cancelling all of our plans to hold our event in Bristol next week." My heart sank and my palms began to sweat. Could Felix have been right to have been so cautious?

Eleven days later on the 23rd March 2020, the United Kingdom was put into full lockdown and every citizen in the country was ordered to stay at home, only being permitted to leave for a short amount of exercise, essential shopping and work that could not be done from home. One by one, the cancellations came in until my diary was completely clear again; no workshops, no festivals, no commissions, and no RWA exhibition. I felt like everything I had worked for was slipping away and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

How was I to save Collaborative Painting UK, and more importantly, my sanity, during a pandemic that made contact with humans outside of my own immediate family, effectively illegal?

This book is a document of the small, personalised projects I facilitated between April 2020 and April 2021, an entire year during which the United Kingdom was subjected to varying degrees of lockdown restrictions. Its content is divided into two main sections, Lockdown Collaborations: a series of canvases and digital images that I started and then passed on to other visual artists to complete, and #A4FOR5: a team activity whereby six people each make five new artworks at A4 size and then distribute them a week later to the rest of their group.

These projects were not preplanned. They were a spontaneous response to losing my usual practice of facilitating team-building workshops, art projects for young people and community groups, and delivering arts in health sessions for inpatients at Bristol Children's Hospital. For reasons associated with my own mental health, I needed to keep myself busy, engaged with making art, connected other creative people, and most importantly remain feeling like I was still an active artist.

As the months passed, the entire world was bombarded on a daily basis with ascending line graphs, terrifying statistics and real life stories of pain, loss, and struggling just to get by, the only comfort being a shared knowingness that we were all fighting the same battle together, despite being as unprepared and unsure of what would happen next as each other.

Developing systems to facilitate new ways to collaborate with other artists began as a selfish act, imagined solely to give me a reason to keep painting, keep conversations with other artists going, and to have some positive outcomes to look forward to. To begin with, I hadn't considered the effects these small projects would have on my collaborators, but soon I would receive feedback from participants informing me that the lockdown collaborations were affecting more than just my own need to keep active.

Luke Palmer/Acerone
May 2021

INTRODUCTION

"Knowledge and understanding is a collaborative activity. It is a social fabric that we all weave together. We all make our contribution and depend on things other people know for the security of our own knowledge. It is a collaborative and dynamic process."[1]

When we collaborate with another person, entity or organisation, we are actively facilitating the opportunity to share a task and use combined knowledge, skills and expertise to achieve a goal. I have been collaborating with other artists since I first picked up a can of spray paint in the summer of 1994, a more innocent time when my life was split between skateboarding all day and mixing jungle 12" vinyl records all night. Graphics from skateboard decks, logos from skate brands, psychedelic rave flyers and record sleeves were all major influences on my keen eye for art and design, and soon I would find myself taking to the walls to paint my own uninitiated interpretations of graffiti lettering.

The graffiti and spray can art movement has always been collaborative, or perhaps more accurately, had a crew mentality at its core, since its inception in the streets and subways of New York City five decades ago. Strength in numbers, shared responsibilities, mentoring of younger artists and efficiency were all contributing factors in building this natural tendency for graffiti writers to work together. My experience of growing up as a fledgling graffiti artist in Bristol throughout the 1990s was no different, and I quickly recognised the benefits I received from working alongside other artists. I swiftly learned as more experienced writers shared their techniques and skills with me, unknowingly sowing seeds of friendship that would continue to grow a quarter of a century later.

But it was not until after I had broadened my own artistic practice by working in areas outside the graffiti and street art scene that I truly began to understand the power of collaboration within the visual arts. During my time as an art teacher for young adults with learning difficulties and disabilities, I discovered a little-known art movement originating from Tunisia that had such a profound impact on my understanding of art and collaboration, that it would change the course of my life forever.

Tunisian Collaborative Painting (TCP) found its way to the UK on an ordinary Sunday evening in 2015 whilst I was hastily throwing together a lesson plan for the following morning's art session. Searching YouTube for inspiration, I happened across a short video showing a group of artists in a New York art school, painting together on a large canvas in complete silence. A dapper man with a moustache narrated the video and explained that the technique the artists were following was called 'Tunisian Collaborative Painting' and followed a simple set of rules: Artists work together on a single canvas for a set period of time without prior discussion or agreed subject, one artist is chosen to begin the painting then anyone else in the group can join in and paint at any time, anyone can paint over anyone else's work, and the painting process is to be conducted in complete silence. The results were said to always produce images that look like the work of a single artist.

Encouraging my students to work together in silence was the perfect idea for a Monday morning, so I created a lesson based around the technique and tried it out for the first time the following day. I was truly amazed by what happened.

Students who had begun the session with protests of "I can't paint", "I'm rubbish at art", and "It's impossible to not talk for an hour!", soon settled into the activity and quickly lost their inhibitions. By simply responding to the marks that their peers were making, they appeared less concerned about what they were painting and more focussed on where to paint next. Amidst the silence, a sense of excitement filled the room as blank canvases were abruptly filled with bright colours, geometric shapes, spots and blobs, concentric circles and stripes. Soon the paintings were finished and the stillness pierced with shrieks of excitement as my students began pouring out everything they had wanted to say whilst painting but had been unable to do so. I was stunned that such a simple set of rules had provided an opportunity to unite the groups in a way that was fully inclusive and accessible to everyone. And to my surprise, the final paintings did indeed all look like the work of a single artist.

Over the coming months, my students and I created over 50 Tunisian Collaborative Paintings in our classroom. During one session with a group of four wheelchair users, I sat down, picked up a brush and joined in.. Within minutes I became totally absorbed in the process, mentally leaving the classroom and drifting into the rhythms of our silent group, until I totally forgot that I was supposed to be teaching. Suddenly the silence was broken as another teacher crashed into my classroom looking for the faculty's most scarce resource, a board-rubber. I jumped, embarrassed that I had slipped out of my professional role for the moment. As I regained composure, I looked back at the painting we had created and I could not believe my eyes. The image looked like that of Indigenous Australian art; colourful, bold, and what looked like interconnecting primitive symbols that made me wonder if we had unknowingly tapped into a visual language new to us. I was glowing, enriched with a feeling that I knew each of the students a little more personally and sensed that we had become a better group that afternoon. We sat around our painting and celebrated what we had achieved.

That evening as I drove home, I cried. Something about that experience had moved me on what I can only describe as a spiritual level, leaving me desperate to find out more about Tunisian Collaborative Painting. My initial searches online uncovered nothing more than the original YouTube video and a short Wikipedia page explaining its origins and outlining the rules, but nothing more. I dug deeper, looking for academic studies, research papers, and other artists who practiced it – but again – I found nothing. With no other leads to follow, I decided to try and contact the man with the moustache in the YouTube video. After some desktop research, I discovered that he was David Black and then found his website that described him as an artist and Tony award winning Broadway producer. The site also provided his email address, so I wrote to him, introducing myself and asking for more information about this mysterious art form.

Within the hour, I received a phone call from David who told me that my email to him was the most exciting thing that he had read in a long time. As far as David was aware, I was the only person in the world conducting Tunisian Collaborative Painting at that time, as he was now retired and the Tunisian artists who began the practice had stopped after liberation following the end of the Jasmine Revolution in January 2011. I asked many questions and David told me the entire story of Tunisian Collaborative Painting. Two hours later and we had become friends – and partners – in taking Tunisian Collaborative Painting forwards. I slept little that night, my mind already planning my next project; to take Tunisian Collaborative Painting outside the classroom and introduce it to a multitude of spaces in the UK.

On Friday 27th May 2016, 20 artists from different disciplines gathered at Kings Weston House in Bristol to paint across five canvases for three hours, following the rules of Tunisian Collaborative Painting. The event was hugely successful and produced five of the most incredible paintings I have ever seen. The artists' feedback spoke of feelings of liberation and connection, and that they had been inspired and enlightened by the experience. One artist told me that it had made him reconsider his entire practice. Another said: "Anyone can do this, and everyone should!". I became more determined than ever to share this new art form as widely as I could.

During the remainder of 2016 and throughout 2017 I facilitated many more TCP sessions with artists at art festivals, with children in schools, and with inpatients at Bristol Royal Hospital For Children. The opportunity arose for me to work with the Bristol charity The Grand Appeal to provide a series of art activities for children at the hospital, so I developed a project where inpatients and their immediate families could work together to produce a Tunisian Collaborative Painting whilst staying on the ward. Over the space of six months, we created eight new paintings created by mums, dads, brothers, sisters, cousins, and grandparents which now hang on the walls of the ward. Families reported how much they valued the opportunity to spend time with their child whilst in hospital in a space that focussed on creativity and creation, rather than illnesses and treatments. Staff on the ward were excited to have new artworks on the walls that radiated such positivity, and I instinctively knew that these paintings were the most meaningful works of art I had ever made.

News of my work facilitating Tunisian Collaborative Painting with artists had begun to spread and I was approached by the Royal West of England Academy to host a live TCP session with a small group of artists in one of the galleries during a drawing festival. This led to an offer of a short residency at the RWA during summer 2018, where I worked with 40 artists over the course of two weeks to produce ten new Tunisian Collaborative Paintings. These new paintings along with the collection from the Kings Weston House event were exhibited at the Royal West of England Academy during February 2019 for four weeks, and formed the first Tunisian Collaborative Painting exhibition in the UK. A series of workshops were also held for young people, families and community groups in the galleries at the RWA.

As my passion for Tunisian Collaborative Painting continued to grow, my ability to conform to teaching within a mainstream educational environment was fading. I realised that with 25 years' experience of being an active artist, 15 years of teaching in both mainstream and community settings, and with Tunisian Collaborative Painting as a tool, I could forge a new career for myself. So I quit my full time teaching post and set up Collaborative Painting UK — a socail enterprise facilitating creative arts workshops and training for businesses to build a more creative culture in the workplace. The benefits of participating in TCP are proven, artists feel liberated, students work together more harmoniously, families feel more connected, and it brings visibility to those who are often forgotten. Most importantly, TCP is fully inclusive and accessible for all. 'Anyone can do this, and everyone should' became TCP's mantra.

Recognising that I lacked much of the basic knowledge needed when forming a business, I enrolled myself onto two Bristol based courses: 'Business Start Up' with the School for Social Entrepreneurs (SSE) and then onto the NatWest Accelerator programme. My confidence grew as I began to see the fruits of my labour appear; more enquiries were arriving, previous clients were rebooking, and my network of other like-minded social entrepreneurs was growing. But it was to be short lived as the Coronavirus pandemic forced the world into lockdown measures and evrything i was working towards came to an abrupt stop.

Sat in my studio, surrounded by piles of materials for workshops I would no longer facilitate, I suddenly tore open the packaging from one of twelve large canvases and began working. Using a technique closely associated with Japanese nōtan, I cut a series of geometric shapes, lines and circles into a sheet of sticky-back plastic which I then arranged onto the canvas and used as a stencil to spray paint through. Something felt good about playing with the balance between straight line and arc, black and white, and arranging equal amounts of positive and negative space. For in that moment, I felt fully in control of something. Over the following weeks I painted all twelve canvases with intricate geometric nōtan patterns.

As I stared at the new collection of work I had created, I felt alone. The lack of human connection was beginning to take its toll and I was bored. My paintings looked bored too, each one staring back at me, begging for a scrap of excitement. They needed to connect with different artists; and so did I.

Using my smartphone to photograph, crop and post images of my canvases to Instagram, I included short passages of text offering local artists the opportunity to take on one of my paintings and add their own work to it. The uptake was surprisingly quick and as each canvas was claimed, the threads of direct message conversation between myself and each collaborator grew longer and longer; initially focused on the painting challenge, but rapidly turning to wider topics including the lockdown measures, difficulties in homeschooling children, our mental health and various coping strategies. We made clandestine arrangements whereby I would sneak out in the evenings under the cover of darkness to deliver a canvas direct to their home or studio, leaving it in an agreed space somewhere in their front garden and then return home undetected. I justified my unessential travel as essential work, because at that time it was the only work I had.

Of the 18 artists who responded to my posts, many are friends that I have known and collaborated with for many years, others I knew of but had not met in person, and some were names that were completely new to me. Most were local and based in Bristol, but interest from artists who lived further afield like Mark Titchner in London, Paul Spencer in Bournemouth and Xenz in Rome forced me to adapt the methodology I had employed for collaborating on the physical canvases, so created high-resolution digital reproductions that could be sent electronically. Creating a digital channel also opened up the opportunity for me to collaborate with some other artists who felt that the safety risks of taking a physical canvas from me were simply too high at a time when we had no known defence against the new COVID-19 virus, other than to avoid all unnecessary contact with the outside world.

Communication channels between the collaborating artists and myself forged a variety of different pathways. Many remained text based within Instagram, WhatsApp and through email, whereas others developed via Zoom and Skype video calls or sometimes simply through traditional phone calls. As the various conversations developed, I quickly realised that each one offered an insight into our inter-human connection; how well we knew each other, how we negotiated working together, our thoughts, our ideas, our feelings. Using sound capture software and voice transcription apps, I turned our digitised voices into long passages of text and began editing down our conversations until all that was left were the most relevant sections.

One by one, my collaborators informed me that their work was done and I could return to collect the canvas. With excitement building, I would hurry to find an excuse to leave the house, and take a significant detour to Bristol and fetch it. The acute sense of anticipation I felt as I walked each garden path, greet the artist and lay my eyes on the new interpretation of my work was palpable. Each one I recovered became my new favourite. If my goal a few months earlier had been to connect creatively with other artists, I had succeeded; but the pandemic was far from over and there would be many more months of lockdown restrictions to come.

Luke Palmer/Acerone
June 2021

1. Camber, Diane. "Sir Ken Robinson: Knowledge Is a Collaborative and Dynamic Process." tableau.com. 23rd October, 2015. https://www.tableau.com/about/blog/2015/10/sir-ken-robinson-knowledge-collaborative-and-dynamic-process-45263. Accessed 9th June, 2021.

LOCKDOWN COLLABORATIONS

Canvases

Akarat
Andy Council
Bex Glover
Ben One
Gina Love
Dibz
Gage
2Keen
3Dom
Jody
Turoe
Ziml

× Acerone

Digital

Felix FLX Braun
Clayton Saunders
Paul Spencer
Mark Titchner
Oli T
Xenz

× Acerone

‘CITIZENS OF ROME’

AK: As a kid growing up in Bristol I always looked up to the local graffiti writers like Dicy, Feek, Paris and yourself, and loved studying the productions that crews like Twentieth Century Frescos and KTF painted on some of the massive walls in the city. Just walking around Bristol and taking all that stuff in was a big inspiration for me.

A: I often think about how lucky we have been to grow up in a city that is so rich in creativity. I know we grew up at different times, but I think the vibe for art, music and all things alternative has remained pretty consistent in Bristol. Have you had many other influences outside of graffiti and street art?

AK: Yeah, art was always in the family home too. My Dad is into all sorts of art and my Mum has always been very creative too so I grew up being surrounded by it. I started drawing at an early age and as I got older, it seemed like the logical progression to me to start painting onto walls.

I’ve also always been into classical paintings. Caravaggio would be one of my favourite painters, but I’ve never seen the point in taking my work too far down the classical route because I know I’m never gonna be better than Caravaggio. So I really just take influences from all the things that interest and inspire me.

A: Now you point it out I can totally see that influence in the work you painted on the lockdown collaboration canvas.

AK: Renaissance painters did use a lot of gold and that’s why the gold became a big part of this painting. I’ve always been into symbols and icons and studying the difference between a symbol and an icon, that grey area that lies in between them. I mean, just gold as a colour on its own can symbolise so much. Is there any more obvious icon of wealth? I have always enjoyed looking at images that become less static when you start to be able to read the symbolism interwoven through them.

A: It looks like you’ve used stencils as well as freehand on the canvas. Do you have a specific technique to the way you approach a painting?

AK: My technique for this one was to paint everything in spray paint, mixing up freehand along with stencils. I really like stencils for the crisp finish they produce but then usually add in messier bits freehand over the top to loosen it back up.

The girl in the painting is a friend of mine called Soph and the image was taken from a photo that I saw on her Instagram feed. She is a costume designer and was using her skills to make masks for people in the NHS. I started to think about just how weird it is right now that I can only see my friend on the fucking screen of a phone. And even then her face was covered with one of her masks so I couldn’t actually see her.

The whole experience of lockdown and not seeing anyone for so long just feels so odd to me. So it felt good to channel some of those feelings into the painting.

A: I especially like the pawn in the foreground. You mentioned the use of symbols and icons earlier - does the pawn represent anything in particular?

AK: Ah, yes it does! You might notice it wears a golden crown too? It is the pawn that made it across the chessboard and turned into a queen, representing the little person who becomes the hero. I tried to paint the whole piece with a sort of superhero, iconoclastic feel to portray that.

The ‘citizens of Rome’ text within the piece is something that I’ve used in some of my previous paintings and references the first little spread of democracy. I feel like we’re wired to be subjects rather than citizens - and I was just playing with the question of ‘what does it mean to be a citizen’ anyway?

A: I’m also interested in how you found collaborating on a canvas that I had painted on first. Have you done much collaboration before or was this a new thing for you?

AK: To collaborate with you was amazing for me as I have only ever collaborated with one really close friend before. Our styles are very different but we grew up together and have always just painted alongside each other, mostly on walls. So it did feel completely different to the methods ive used before and it was a great opportunity to explore interacting with your piece through my own painting process.

Transcribed from Instagram voice messages
May 2020

‘ARR TYPE’

A: We’ve been collaborating for over ten years now; I think the M-Shed mural we did was way back in 2010 and we’ve worked together on and off ever since. How did you get into doing what you do?

AC: I have always been an artist. I’ve always drawn or painted pieces since as far back as I can remember. I found it was an easy way to express myself and get ideas out of my head and onto paper...and also to entertain myself I guess. I definitely recognise a therapeutic value to it. I remember drawing pictures for other kids at school, so in some respects that was almost like my earliest commissioned work. Where I might have failed at other things academically, like getting things down in writing, I felt I could always fall back on doing my artwork. I suppose it was something that I received praise and encouragement for doing, from family and friends and teachers. It’s something that has been nurtured and it grew with me.

It’s really interesting that you are recording these conversations and using transcribing software to create text versions to work from. I’ve started thinking dyslexia might be something that I have lived with myself as I have always found it a lot easier to draw than to write.

A: My experience of dyslexia is that it slows me down to the point where I generally find reading and writing laborious and unenjoyable. But when I have a passage of text from a transcribed conversation in front of me all I have to do is edit it to make it read naturally, which I have found that I actually quite enjoy doing. Working out how to convert speech into text has been such a massive help for me during this project, I wish I had learned how to do it years ago...it would have saved me a lot of time and stress.

AC: Cutting down on stress is really important right now. During lockdown I initially found connecting with creativity really hard. I mean, first of all it was an overwhelming feeling of just wanting to keep myself and my family safe, constantly being worried and unsure what the future would bring. Those feelings of stress and anxiety all around me would wear me out and I found turning on the creativity tap really difficult.

A: I can really relate to that. As soon as lockdown started it was as if my ability to even begin to think about my creative work vanished, along with everything else. I had lost all my commissioned work, the festivals I was painting at and curating a major exhibition, so needed to do something to keep my creativity flowing or else I’m sure I would have really suffered mentally - and spiritually. This project has given me a reason to keep painting, keep my collaborative practice going, and to stay in contact with other artists in the city. It’s really helped me to remain connected with people in a more meaningful way than via endless messages through a glass screen.

AC: When you delivered the piece to me I had already been in a lockdown situation for quite a while and family life was getting quite full-on with all of us under the same roof and trying to keep ourselves entertained. A lot of the work I had been doing earlier in the year was very illustrative and had to be exactly what the client wanted and so you know, it’s very directed. So when you gave me the canvas I was really happy to do something that wasn’t going to be drawn or done on the computer in Photoshop or Illustrator or even in VR; I was ready to get the paint out again. It suddenly felt like I could let loose and just do what I wanted to do. In a lot of ways, I felt like I was escaping from the constraints of lockdown as well as the constraints of the usual project briefs and directed work. I actually rushed down to the studio, it was the first time I had been there in months, and raided the paint bag. I went into the drawers looking for my acrylics and paint pens as soon as I got home.

I started ripping into the canvas, really painting into it. It just felt like a physical expression against the lockdown time we are in. An explosion almost. You can see explosions and fizzes are there in the piece.

A: It’s amazing to hear you speak so passionately about painting into one of my paintings. When I started the project I never imagined that the idea would provoke such strong responses from the collaborating artists.

What you painted is definitely more loose and abstract than your work often is, what was the process?

AC: It’d been a long time since I’ve done any painting on canvas so with this piece I just went for it and attacked it with some white spray paint hitting into the black areas and vice versa with black spray paint into the white. I did initially have an idea of doing very illustrative, linear pieces in just black and white, perhaps buildings with very fine line work. But I ended up mimicking some of the styles in some of my more recent spray-painted pieces with wires and things going in and out with pinks and golds. Part of me wanted to put a black outline around some parts and give it a more illustrated feel like some of my other work, but I decided to keep it free-flowing and a little bit more abstract which I think I enjoyed. It became quite expressive and very therapeutic, and I really feel like it did me a lot of good.

A: There is a crazy balance/off-balance thing happening with the symmetry which fills it full of energy, it really captures my attention. And the more I look at it, the more I can see the shapes from the original painting - there is so much to look at and take in.

AC: Yeah it’s interesting because the piece, however much it’s changed, still has got the symmetry it started with and you can still see the structure of the original patterning. The piece itself isn’t really of anything though. To me it looks like a load of abstract techno weirdness. Members of my family can see things in it like a corgi, an Afghan hound and dragons but for me it reminds me of old school 1990s video games, in particular an old favourite of mine called R-Type. Which is why I’ve given it the title ‘Arr Type’ - but with an emphasis on the West Country ‘R’.

Transcribed from Whatsapp voice messages
May 2020

‘NEW TERRITORIES’

BG: I have a memory from many, many years ago of my Dad showing me drawings that his Dad had done. I never met my Grandad, but he was good at drawing and a keen artist and I think that must have sparked off my own interest in art at a young age. As a kid I was always drawing and painting and trying to draw little cartoon characters. I remember my Mum and Dad being quite encouraging of me doing paintings all around the house. I took art GCSE at school, then an art foundation, then studied graphic design at Uni before working in London as a graphic designer.

I’m originally from Somerset and grew up in the countryside and I think that was partly where my love of nature and wildlife comes from. I came back to the West Country from London in 2008 and was really inspired by the Bristol art scene. I was kind of aware of graffiti art before, but it wasn’t until I was living in Bristol that I really started to become more interested in it.

A: Your style combines very tightly drawn lines and shapes over blasts of spray paint, so I can totally see your background in graphic design. How did you come to start using spray paint in your paintings?

BG: I’d started working for myself as a designer when I moved back to Bristol and it allowed me more time to explore my drawing and painting and develop the work I was doing. Around that time I was asked to donate a painting for one of the TEMWA charity auctions and whilst at the event, I got to see a lot of work on show by other artists who I really admire, like Will Barras, Xenz, and Mr Jago. I could see how they were fusing graffiti art and spray can techniques with fine art and I just decided that it was something I’d really like to do more of myself. That was the first thing that sparked me to really start pushing my painting and develop my style. I realised that I wanted to follow the path of being an artist as my career, rather than just doing graphic design work all the time.

A: I’m interested to know about your experiences of collaboration in the past. As a street artist who hasn’t taken the traditional graffiti art route, I wonder if you’ve done many collaborative pieces before now?

BG: I haven’t really collaborated with anyone before, apart from the Collaborative Painting UK event that I did with you at the RWA last year. I really enjoyed doing that, although I was quite nervous and wasn’t sure how I would find it because I’m so used to working on my own. It was quite interesting to see how you can work with other people’s work to inform your own. I actually found the whole experience to be quite enlightening, I learned a lot about myself and how I work through doing it. Other than that, I’ve not collaborated with anyone before, although it’s been something I have really wanted to do for some time, so it was great to be given this opportunity.

A: So how did you approach painting the lockdown collaboration canvas, and is there any story behind what you decided to paint?

BG: I decided to title the piece ‘New Territories’ to represent the idea of this painting being something that I haven’t done before, so a new territory for me and definitely an approach I’d like to revisit again. I liked the geometric lines and shapes in your original painting and working over the top of them really seemed to work for me. The whole painting just kind of flowed. I saw it as an interesting grid where I could pick out shapes and work with them to merge into the foliage in the scenery of my painting. It gave me different lines and points to work with so I didn’t have to plan what I did, I just worked with what was already there. I feel like I worked a bit more loosely than I would perhaps on a commissioned piece or some of my current work and it was much more freestyle and fluid which felt nice. You can still see parts of your painting in there which was important because it definitely had a big influence on what I painted.

I also added in a black wolf at the end — he was exploring a new territory as well. I guess maybe somewhere in my mind I was thinking that right now, all of us are exploring new territories.

Transcribed from Whatsapp voice messages
May 2020

‘I BRING YOU THE FUTURE’

A: I never realised we were the same age; I had always thought that you were slightly older than me because of how progressive your music was. And it was only very recently that I realised that you were painting graffiti before you were making tunes. Were you always into the hip hop scene growing up?

B: I think that with us being the same age we can both fully appreciate that we didn’t experience that moment of hip hop coming over to the UK from America, because it was already here — we were already embedded into it. I think that there was the transition in the late ‘70s where youth culture in England started looking to America, but by the time our generation came about in the 1990s we began with a version of amalgamated elements, not just from America but also from all over the rest of the world. And with hip hop you have to bring your own dynamic, your own style and pattern, right? So when we did it in England, we were never going to just do what they had already done in America. That way of thinking was always the blueprint for me, whether it was painting walls or making music, I always felt I had to add something to the culture. If you’re just doing what the next man has already done, nobody is ever going to remember you.

A: So for you the goal is to be remembered?

B: Yeah, I guess initially it was. You know that feeling of ‘don’t let me just drown’ — I want to get somewhere and this is like my little life raft. In the graffiti scene I found a set of like-minded people around me, whereas before I was gawky and awkward and wearing my older brothers’ clothes to school. I had fuck all and was moving around schools a lot, getting thrown out of most of them and never living in one place consistently. I felt really fucking weird, twitchy a lot of the time, always feeling paranoid. I thought that everyone else knew about my situation which really made me feel like shit. But I had this secret graffiti thing going on, so I just painted and painted and carried on expressing myself creatively. I could go out and do it at night and nobody had to know about the little underground world of the 15 or 20 of us. We didn’t care about anyone except for our immediate group and it gave me a solid link to people that were slightly older... people who had been through the same shit as me.

A: Like so many of us, you used graffiti as a form of escapism. How was it growing up for you?

B: I had very countercultural parents. My mum was chilled, she would let everybody into the house and we didn’t really have a curfew back then, so you know, we would all just kick about, blaze a bit, get some paint together and get ready to head out into the night. Looking back it was really magical, as well as challenging. I guess it was everything that you expect adolescence to be, but to be honest we didn’t have a very stable housing situation and leaving school at 14 meant that I didn’t get a single GCSE or go to college. I didn’t do any of that journey but what I did have was graffiti.

A: You’re from Swindon but have had strong links to Bristol and London for as long as I can remember. In fact some of the first graffiti pieces I photographed at Brislington warehouse in 1995 were by you and Hyde. How did you end up traveling about so much as a kid?

B: Simple — it was the era of no train barriers! I was often 50 miles away from my hometown in another city, often at like two or three in the morning. The only thing we had to worry about was if they caught us whilst on the train.

A: You gotta do the old ‘hide in the toilet’ trick...

B: Yeah, you know that. But even if they caught you they’d just kick you off at the next station. You’d just disappear for a couple of hours, put your jacket under your shirt, come back and wait outside the station for the train to pull in and quickly walk straight onto it. We had a lot of fun going to London and Bristol as each one was less than an hour away from Swindon. It was a beautiful time man; no barriers, no mobile phones, no fucking security camera, none of that shit, bro. It was just us being young, being free, and getting out there into the world.

A: So how does all this relate to the canvas?

B: The canvas covers all the formative stuff from my early years. Some of the interesting conversations that I’ve had with you recently have been around the things we share from our youth that weren’t ‘New York’. We’ve had a lot of conversations about hardcore and jungle music, pirate radio and all of these other things that are really important to our experience of growing up in England. So the painting I did reflects a load of aspects from that era, but mostly relating to the music that was happening at that time.

A: And not just hip hop. There is so much in there that I recognise from the early rave scene.

B: I was painting graffiti before I knew about hip hop. In fact I didn't even like hip hop back then, so much of it didn't appeal to me at all. It sounded like I was watching an American film. That said, I liked Public Enemy because it was loud and fast and felt like cold Britain — aggressive, council estate Britain. Whereas if I listened to a Nice and Smooth record, or later on a Snoop Dogg record, I just wouldn't feel it. Where I'm from, the people weren't necessarily into hip hop, they'd like a little bit but mostly we would hear dancehall, soul, early rave music and later on, jungle.

A: Oh man, but I love Nice and Smooth...

B: And I love that you love them... but they do absolutely nothing for me.

A: So how did you end up making music yourself?

B: We started by just having fun, literally just throwing anything and everything through a sampler. It was like everyone had been invited to go joyriding in the evolving technology of the time. No one knew how to use it properly, it was just a case of plug it in, try this out, try that out and figure a way to make it work. There was no YouTube tutorial or anything back then but we just played with it and figured out how to start making a tune.

A: Playing with process often leads to unexpected and totally unique results. How did it progress from experimenting into something you took more seriously?

B: I loved the idea that I could make a tune in my bedroom with very basic kit, get it pressed onto vinyl at the cutting house down the road, and then head straight over to the pirate station with it. And matey-boy the MC from four doors down might voice it for me and then we've got this little thing happening and everyone in the area loves it. It generates a feeling of 'well, maybe I could do it as well', which genuinely has a mad knock on effect. I wanted to capture something like that in the canvas, because I believe that all this stuff we are doing is essentially creating ritual space. I believe that what we did with the graffiti movement recaptured an initiation ritual that was missing.

A: Can you explain more about what you mean by that?

B: For people like me that didn't really have anything secure growing up, the spirits sort of kicked back and said: "Actually, you need an initiation", and we found that very thing in the tools that we created around us. Think about it, it's got all the elements; you change your name and take on a new persona to create the 'new you'. So now we're going to change up what you were and you're going to get to press the reset button, you now get to tell us who you are, rather than allowing all the things that have happened around you that were out of your control being the defining factor to who you are. We literally did all that ourselves. And then we figured out how to teach other people how to do it, pushing each other forward and keeping the progression of the culture we had created moving forwards at the same time.

It sounds so simple; but when you consider that it actually rewired the circuitry of how people consider youth culture, it really isn't.

Our art form is exhibited in museums now. It ain't small! It's something that has actually transformed the creative working of so many communities. Graffiti is the biggest art movement that the world has ever seen.

Transcribed from Zoom video call
June 2020

'LOCKDOWN NATION'

GL: I think I'm quite an antisocial person these days, I spend a lot of my time by myself in the studio. In the past I've had periods where I've been doing exhibitions and lots of public things but more recently I've been taking a bit of a step back and finding space to focus on developing my own art practice.

I started painting when I was about 19 and was absolutely hell-bent on being an illustrator. But when I discovered abstract painting, I hadn't encountered anything like that in my life. It allowed me to completely escape. For the past 20 years I've used abstract painting as an outlet for mental health, OCD and anxiety. Any time I feel a bit mad I retreat to the studio to create. It's just such a magical feeling. I think it's very primal. I actively encourage being engaged with any form of creativity. It's like my mantra for life; 'you must be creative in some shape or form!'

During lockdown I have felt like the wartime spirit in me has come out a little bit and I've not actually found it too disturbing. I have quite enjoyed it which I do feel a little bit guilty for saying because I know lots of people have been really struggling with losing loved ones. I lost my dad in November and for quite a long time I felt it unfathomable that normal life could exist without such a deep sense of grief. During lockdown I've really just been able to stop and I've had no pressure from the outside world. It's been a weird bubble for me that has actually been really helpful.

A: I'm so sorry about your Dad, I know how tough it has been for you.

GL: I didn't really even paint for a few months afterwards because I was just completely bewildered, but when you told me you were doing this project I immediately wanted to do it as a way to try and focus my mind on being creative again. My paintings need to consume me while I'm doing them and if I can't connect the piece then it just won't work. I like being completely obsessed with a painting, where I'll wake up at two or three in the morning and my mind is already thinking, 'oh, I could just do this to it!'

A: Ha! I'm almost the opposite — i'll get lost in the process of painting and then look at my watch after what felt like half an hour to see it's actually two or three am and I'll have no idea where the time went.

So how did you find the process of painting into an image I had already painted? Did you feel ok with adding to my work or was there any reluctance?

GL: Oh no not at all, in fact it has been really cool to be involved in this project. I absolutely loved your original piece and to be honest I've been feeling a bit bad for taking it on such a long journey. I didn't mean to destroy it completely. I began thinking that I'd paint over some of the black sections, and then add smaller bits over some of the white and just see where it goes. But then I kept adding more and more to it.

The whole process completely took over my mind and became a total distraction from all the lockdown weirdness.

A: Then I'd say our collaboration was a complete success! In all honesty, if a painting that I made and then passed to you became a catalyst for you to break out of an artists-block and emerge yourself in the process of creating again, then I feel incredibly honoured to have been able to have helped you in that way. Albeit unintentionally!

The fact that it has travelled so far from what it originally was is totally fine with me, I'm not at all precious about it. If anything, I'm happy that it has turned into a visual representation of your journey.

GL: It is definitely that! My art goes against any form of normality and I don't like it to represent anything to do with the mundane, because it's a complete escape to me. I don't paint for anybody else; I'm painting for myself and trying to figure out what it is I want to say and how I want to say it — how I want to present myself within my paintings. I know I should probably be a bit more business-focused, especially in these weird times but it just doesn't feel right to me at the moment. It's not about money or trying to achieve success. Painting during lockdown has really allowed me to sit with the here and now and appreciate more simple things in life.

Transcribed from WhatsApp voice messages
June 2020

‘CUT N PASTE’

A: Your Instagram feed is packed full of very detailed and colourful exchanges between you and other artists where you’ve drawn designs in each other’s sketchbooks. How did you begin collaborating with other graffiti artists in this way?

D: Just through friendships on and off-line really.

I tend to ask artists that I’m friends with or admire if they’d like to do something with me and it goes from there. If you don’t ask you don’t get type of thing. The worst they can do is say no!

A: For sure, I’m a firm believer in that one. I guess it helps to have a strong body of work behind you too, so when you approach someone new on social media or whatever, they can easily see what you’ve already been doing and the level you’re working at.

I think Instagram in particular has really opened up those possibilities. To be able to make links with say, a New York legend in a few clicks of your phone is something I never would have imagined would be possible when I started painting in the ‘90s...

D: Yeah man it’s a great tool, especially for connecting with people far away. Like you said, it really is just a few clicks and someone on the other side of the world can be contacted. It’s crazy.

A: Have you sent black books across the world to writers in other countries?

D: Yes, I sent one across to New York that has a crazy story attached to it. It finally made its way back this year — after over five years of being away lol. I also have one in Germany at the moment with Skore 79 and another one in Florida with a FUA crew mate.

A: Five years away?! Wow. Are you able to share the story? I’d love to hear it.

D: It’s a pretty sad story bro.

The last person to get the book was a dude in my FUA crew who wrote Proze. I wasn’t actually planning on him doing a piece in that book but another crew mate who had just finished working in it passed it on to him and told me Proze would send it back to me once he’d finished his bit.

So he had it for a while and I didn’t hear from him in ages. I tried for ages to contact him to no avail, so I dropped a text to the guy before him and he replied saying, “ah shit man, Proze has been sent to prison...”

After about nine months he got out and he texted me that very morning saying, “Yo... I’m so sorry bro, I’ve been away, I’ve not forgotten about the book, I’ll get it done ASAP and send it back to you.”

Later that day I saw he was posting some pretty personal stuff on Facebook and I guess I just figured he was having some difficulties readjusting back to normal life. That same evening my Facebook feed became full of RIP Steve Proze posts...it turns out the dude committed suicide later that day.

A: Oh man, no way....

D: So I’m like, fuck this is awful, I was just chatting with him earlier that day. It was hard to take in, I couldn’t quite believe it had happened. Then I realised I probably wouldn’t get my book back either.

Then completely out of the blue, about three months later the guy who had it before him messaged me saying he was going round to Steve’s house and he’d try and find my book. And he did!

A: Wow, so you eventually did get it back...?
That’s incredible! Agreed though, that’s a very sad story.

D: Yeah it was horrible man. I’d never met him in person but I used to chop it up with him all the time online. I felt like I’d lost someone close you know, even though we’d never actually met. The dude was so talented too.

A: Was that the last thing he ever created?

D: It was yeah. He had worked on it a little that very morning, then went out later that day when it happened. A lot of people have said to me that I should finish it, but nah, it doesn’t feel right, I think it should be left alone. Sad as fuck but I have to say I’m really happy to get it back as there’s some absolute gems in there.

A: I guess it’s a big risk to use this process with these black book collabs because there is every chance that there will be a hiccup somewhere along the way and you’ll never get it back. How do you manage that?

D: For sure! I mean, I trust all the guys that were lined up to paint in it, so I really just hoped for the best that It would come back one day.

A: I applaud you for five years of patience... you must have been buzzing when it finally came home!

D: Yeah I was so happy to get it back, trust me!
It hasn’t put me off though I’d still do it again lol.

I’ve actually got a black book that Skeme (TMT) sent me too. He sent me a blank book with only one Skeme piece in there — then I filled the rest myself! He was so cool. Sent me a bunch of stickers and a dope ‘Crime in the City’ t-shirt too!

A: To make that collab happen is very cool...
it really doesn’t get more iconic than Skeme.

So do you have any plans for the black books and all the collaborations you’ve done in them or are they now keepsakes for yourself?

D: It’s kinda hard to put them on display and show them in the book format so they’re just keepsakes really. Something to give my kids when I’m gone.

A: It seems such a shame for such an incredible amount of quality work and so many collaborations to remain hidden away forever! Have you ever thought about turning them into publications in their own right? Maybe even a complete volume of them all in one book?

D: I like the idea of making a big book outta them all. Yeah that could be a plan for the future.

Transcribed from Instagram direct messages
April 2021

‘CURIOUS FROG’

A: I think i first noticed your work in Bristol about five or six years ago, the first painting being the huge mural across two sides of a house in Totterdown overlooking Victoria Park and the main train line out of Temple Meads. That was a huge piece and seriously impressive, especially considering it was a solo effort — at least I assume you painted it on your own? Interestingly I’ve noticed that the majority of your work appears to be solo. What are your thoughts on collaborating with other artists on murals, and do you have a preferred way of working?

G: Thanks, yeah that mural was quite a challenge on my own, clambering around a huge scaffolding and painting in mid-winter. The views and the passing trains made it fun. Totterdown is where I lived for many years and where a lot of my mural projects started, very creative and friendly part of Bristol.

You’re right I often paint solo when it comes to commissions, I guess over the years I’ve learnt to work fast and have a clear idea of how I want it to look. I’d love to paint with other mural artists and it’s been happening more often recently. I love it when different styles combine but I think each artist should have creative freedom so a loose brief or painting for fun is the best.

I paint letters and characters with mates as much as possible and that’s great fun, no pressure on the outcome, everyone brings something to the wall, thinking on the spot together.

A: I guess in some ways it makes sense to make a clear distinction between the commissioned work and the stuff you paint just for yourself, especially if you’ve developed an efficient way of working on commissions. And it leaves the space open when painting with mates to experiment, try out new things and enjoy the process of freestyling.

A: With this in mind, i assume the Lockdown Collaboration canvas that I gave to you to paint into felt more like a ‘painting for fun’ piece rather than a commission. I’m interested in how you approached it, what was your process? Your parts of the painting strike me as being very well planned and perfectly painted. Were there any parts of the design I had painted that inspired the direction you took?

G: Yeah exactly. This collaboration was a chance for me to mix different styles and have fun with no time restraints. I had no idea that you were going to bring me a geometric black and white design which is the polar opposite to my vibrant nature so a few different ideas popped into my head. But the more I looked at that central circle and that clear horizontal divide the more I visualised a moon reflected on a lake and the triangles made me think of mountains so that was the starting point. I hadn’t planned anything else and that’s how I approached each session on this canvas. I would paint a few hours and then leave it for a few days to see the next element, adding more and more layers until the composition and the scene looked complete to me. Before the sunflower and curious frog went in it looked a bit empty to me and I wanted more depth, a different point of view or a sense of observing from a cliff edge. The leaping graffiti monster fish with the out of control fisherman was a lot of fun and made me laugh! I kept imagining him shouting WTF?! Same when I painted the frog.

So a chance to add the ‘Serif’ lettering in there and a bit of illustration was a nice bit of creative freedom. I used freehand spray cans for the background, Posca pens for the boat scene, acrylic paint brush for the foreground leaves and finally stencils for the birds. A great chance to mix it all up! I tried my best to keep some of your geometric patterns as reflections in the water and almost over did the spray, but there was no turning back! I love that the sky has your untouched crazy geometry, something I would never have done myself. So thanks for a fun experiment and it’ll be really interesting to see the other artists’ approaches to your bold patterns.

Conversation taken from email exchange
August 2020

‘THE ANSWERS ARE BLOWING IN THE WIND’

A: Easy mate! Hope all is well with you. I’m seeing some seriously nice paintings on your feed at the moment — loving them!

2K: Aha! A lot of them are really old now. When me and my son were homeless, all my stuff got scattered. I’m getting bits ‘n’ bobs back together again now though. It was a pretty crazy time; I couldn’t read or write properly for about three years and I lost all my hand styles. But it’s coming back now. I see your getting stuck right into your geometric stuff at the moment, right?!

A: Yeah man, the balance of the black and white with the simplicity of straight lines and perfect circles is bringing a bit of balance into my life right now. It’s much needed!

2K: I always liked your approach. You should put some in the fields.

A: I started out by doing the geometric stuff on my own, almost as a therapeutic activity in the evenings, but when lockdown happened and I couldn’t collaborate in person with anyone anymore, I started delivering the canvases I had been painting to other artists around the city to add their bits onto and the Lockdown Collaboration project just naturally happened. So...I have one canvas left to be painted. Would you be up for doing something on it?!

2K: I could do a character of me with my crop circle clobber on, with your geo design in the background if ya like?

A: It’s entirely up to you man. I’ll do my geometry thing, deliver it to you and you just respond in any way you want to. It’s totally over to you. No guidance from me, just respond to what’s on there in whichever way feels right to you.

2K: Fuck it, yeah man I’m in. Seeing as it’s you...

—-

A: Canvas left by ya front door mate.

2K; Got it bro, blimey it’s huge. Sorry I missed ya, had to pop out. Gotta be honest, bit nervous I don’t want to mess it up.

A: Anything goes bro, please just go for it. I’m not at all precious about these canvases, so don’t fear, jump in and do your thing!

2K: But it’s sacred geometry... and I kinda got a weird relationship with this particular formation. I used to put out this very design on average 800ft across. It’s really beautiful. I’m gonna chat with some of my old circle makers see how I should treat it.

A: It’s all about responding in whatever way feels good. I’d like it to kick off some new ideas, encourage some experimenting and just get you responding to what I’ve done. If it feels stressful – just stop. This is supposed to be a bit of fun, make sure it stays that way. If it gets deep and meaningful, I think that’s great – but remember it’s only paint on a canvas. Just enjoy the process mate.

2K: You got the Tree Chakra. You got the Pentagon. All signs of all kinds for all times.

A: Tree Chakra?!? Do tell!!

2K: You already know

A; I do? Erm, maybe I just don’t know that I know that I know...

2K: I’m reading what you know right now. It’s all on your canvas.

A: DEEP!

2K: Welcome to the house of Baker-Dias.

—-

2K: Easy Bro. I’ve worked out my concept, actually I’ve come up with three but they’re a little deep. Maybe in the future we can do them separately, but the concept for this canvas is simpler, attractive and fitting. Sometimes the crowd just wants to see windmills.

I have to home school my son at the moment, so I’ll start the sketches tomorrow. Got a nice new sketch pad and some pencils for it. About time, I’ve been using stubs for months!

A: I love that you’ve really given this some thought mate. Enjoy and give me a shout if ya need anything.

2K: It’s gonna be three of the most influential crop circle makers in the UK.

A: Who are they?

2K: Aero, my brother and me...
The title came to me this morning from an old tune; ‘The Answers are Blowing In the Wind’. I’m gonna paint a silhouette of the crop at the bottom with the 3 characters emerging from da corn field.

Your design represents the universe.

A: I am honoured to discover more about my painting from the Baker-Dias interpretation than from my own consciousness!

2K: It’s all the same thing man...

Selected texts exchanged via Instagram direct messaging
September 2020


THE ANSWER
BLOCKING DA WAY

3Dom Acerone

‘DUEL HERITAGE’

A: I wanted to talk to you about collaboration, but also a bit about history. Where did you grow up and how did you start getting into graffiti?

3D: I grew up in a little town called Whitney, which is David Cameron’s constituency. It’s pretty sleepy so in terms of graffiti, I gotta be honest, I didn’t even really know what real graffiti was. I used to have to catch a bus to school because my town was so small there wasn’t a secondary school. I used to see some tagging on that route and I always wondered how it got there and who had done it. So I was always engaged, looking at the walls and thinking about graffiti as a kid.

A: So what brought you to Bristol?

3D: University. But I realised the other day that I’ve actually been in Bristol for 18 years now, longer than the time that I lived in Whitney. So I consider myself an adopted Bristolian now, I’ve made it my home.

A: Ah, but you’ll have to sever your ‘Cameron-ian’ roots now though!

3D: Yeah, trust me, I have. Good riddance.

A: Something really interesting that has come up for me loads whilst doing these lockdown collaborations is recognising that the way we naturally collaborate within the world of graffiti is really quite unique. Collaboration happens all the time in music, dance, and drama, but within visual art is kind of rare, right? In fact, I would say that the vast majority of paintings I have made have been with other graffiti artists, whereas for the average fine artist having other people add to your work is pretty much unheard of.

3D: I think we kind of take it for granted just how much we benefit from the collaborations that we do as graffiti artists. Sometimes I might work with other people to pull off an illegal piece as it feels safer to work with others in that situation. That could be beneficial on a psychological level where you think to yourself, we’re friends, we’re a team, we’re in this together, and that gives you the confidence to get out there and do it.

But more often these days I see collaboration as a social thing. When I’m in my studio I’ll do my own thing and I wouldn’t want anyone else touching my shit. I do enjoy working on my own and exploring my ideas. But I do really love working on a big wall with a bunch of other artists where you all do a main piece and then work out how to merge things together by putting this bit here and another bit up there and because you’re working with like-minded people it all just happens very naturally.

I enjoy both processes of doing your own stuff and collaborating with others and I see it all as equally important to my development as an artist. Like when I did your Tunisian Collaborative Painting session at the RWA. That was a big, big eye opener for me, you know, really just completely letting go of what you’re painting, learning in real time to not be so precious about what you paint and also to be playful with the stuff other artists have painted around you. I found that experience to be quite liberating.

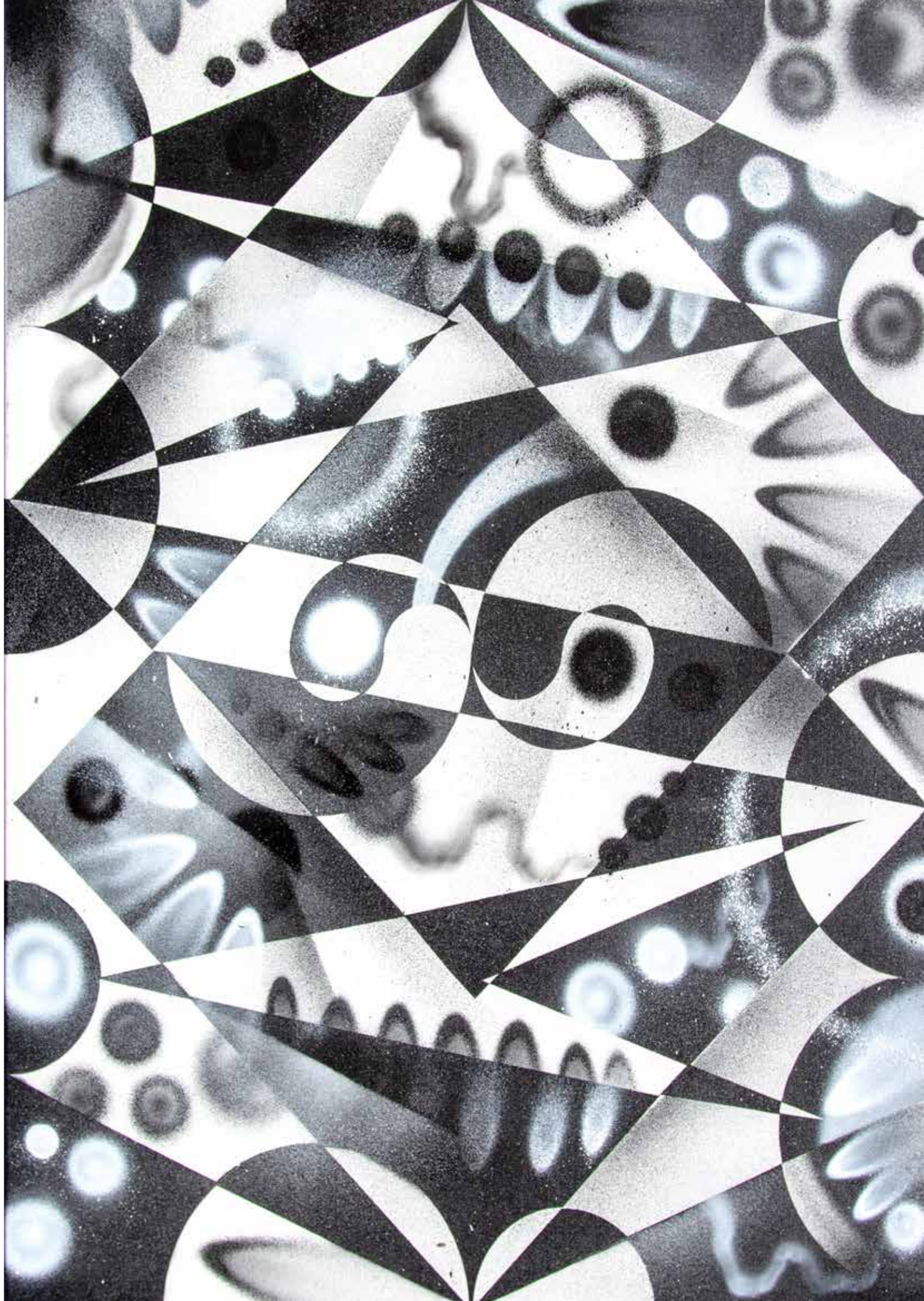
A: The word ‘liberating’ comes up a lot in the review sessions I host following a TCP workshop. I’m always really grateful for participants who take part in my TCP sessions who are from other creative disciplines because it allows me the chance to share with them the opportunity to let go of their usual processes and take a risk. I fell in love with that process the moment I discovered it because it encapsulates all of those benefits we have enjoyed for years through painting graff and makes it accessible to everyone. It is about learning to let go and realising that not everything we have to make has to be precious. Sometimes that’s where the next exciting idea can be found.

3D: Definitely. Pushing yourself out of your comfort zones is a good thing.

Another big positive to come out of collaboration is that many minds working together shakes up the norm.

For so many years now graffiti productions have kind of defaulted to a piece-character-piece format with a single colour emulsion background to link it all together. To me, that’s missionary position graff...

Transcribed from Facetime video call
August 2020



Jody Acerone

‘BREAKOUT’

J: My work has always been heavily based on reference and recreating something. I always think within a piece of street art you’ve got two elements at play; there’s the idea and the execution. I’ve always had the confidence to know that I have the skills to execute whatever I want to paint, so my pieces are only ever as good as the reference.

I ended up painting something organic growing over the top of your very graphic, sharp-edged shapes, which is different to the things that people would usually be expecting me to paint, you know, the hands, eyes or portraits. I wanted my elements to be breaking out of the shapes you created and work within the whole composition to really keep it looking like a collaboration between the two of us. It’s been really nice to do something really freestyle and allow my mind to just go into neutral. I really like the fact that it has turned out so differently to what I had planned.

A: Of all the artists, you held on to your canvas for the longest amount of time, almost the entire year! How long did you actually spend painting it when you did eventually get round to it?!

J: I don’t know how long it took to paint to be honest, Stephen Hawking said about time not being linear. If you’re doing an hour of something you really don’t want to do, tax returns or sitting in an airport lounge, it feels like forever, but if you’re working on something you love, hours can feel like minutes. I find that currently it isn’t easy to access a state of flow because there are just so many distractions in life, so it was a win for me to lose myself in painting this canvas.

A: I’ve followed your work since the Barton Hill days and although I know you’ve painted collaboratively in recent years, I don’t think I’ve ever known you to be in a crew or paint with other artists back in the early days. What’s your relationship with collaboration?

J: I’ve always tended to work alone because back in the Barton Hill days no one really wanted to know me. I wasn’t part of TUB, they were all a fair bit older than me, and I didn’t really go out and paint illegally. My work wasn’t really thought of as being part of that grass root graffiti scene, but obviously I was welcomed with open arms by John Nation (youth worker at Barton Hill Youth Centre 1981-91) and he was not only an influence but a strong supporter and mentor. I think he always loved the fact that there was a slightly younger guy doing something different that was more palatable to the public eye. You have to remember the public generally hated graffiti back in the 1980s because it was so underground, and so John was forever trying to convince the press and the local people that what we were doing at Barton Hill was a good thing and had value to the community and culture. He could direct the attention of press or visitors to one of my pieces and make that point more so than with wild-style lettering, so I guess I was kind of a good PR point of entry for Barton Hill youth club in a lot of ways.

I think we do tend to look back on the Barton Hill days with rose tinted glasses, and quite rightly so, but I was never really part of any crew. People would paint pieces and add their dedications, but they’d never put my name up because I was seen as this odd young kid painting black and white faces and they didn’t want to be associated with that. I wasn’t quite graffiti enough and street art hadn’t been born as a concept yet, so I was always more of an outsider and collaboration didn’t really present itself as a natural way of working for me.

A; Do you think that now that you have developed your own style and practice and are more confident, collaboration is something that you consciously choose to do rather than see a regular way of working?

J: Definitely. And I think it’s always good to work with other people and also for other people. At times I’ve felt that I’ve wanted to go fully out on my own, only paint my own work, exhibiting around the world, sell originals etc, and I’ve done that sporadically but there is always a high risk of disappearing up your own rear. That way of working becomes so ego driven because you’re always having to think about you; your next piece in your next exhibition to get your next sale. It becomes completely egocentric, and I don’t like that. This is why from a commercial point of view, I enjoy working with brands and companies that already have an identity, and working together to bring out the best in both of us. It might be an unpopular thing to say but you should work for other people, it’s a really important thing to do, not just from a business or financial point of view, but also for personal development. To learn how to sit in rooms, meet people who work in different industries, to give presentations and to be able to talk about your work, it’s all part of being an artist.

A: How did you decide when the piece was done?

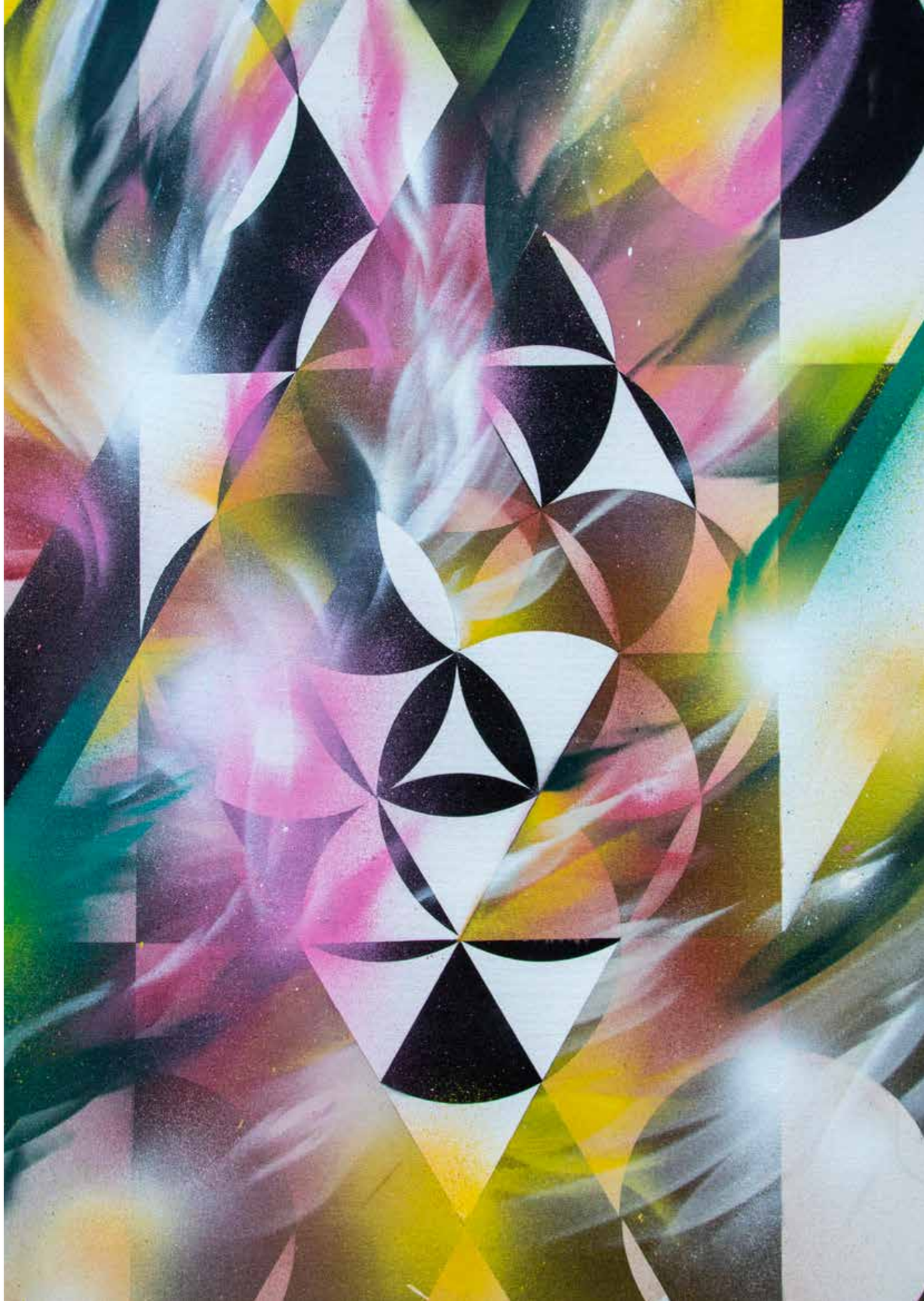
J: I’ve always judged a piece of work on a simple question ‘Would you hang that in your house’? I find it is an important thing to think about whenever you’re working on a painting. I think my part is done but as it’s a collaboration between the two of us, I think it’d be great if you would keep going with it and go back over some of my bits with your shapes.

A: I may well do that! Do you take anything else away from doing this collaboration?

J: One of the things that’s become very obvious to me whilst painting this has been just how preordained and set my work is. I’ll always be 90% sure of what it’s going to look like, so to do something without a script was good for me.

I realised how important it is for me to find the space to freestyle and just enjoy the moment.

In person conversation recorded onto iPhone 8
April 2021



‘NOTHING NEW’

T: I hate talking about my work but I’ll do it anyway, just cos its you.

A: Thanks mate, appreciated. So what inspired you to respond to my call out to artists to take part in the Lockdown Collaborations project?

T: I’ve been off of work for a while now and I was just bored. I wanted to do something new to push me out of my comfort zone and your project popped up at the perfect time for me to do just that. I was just up for doing something totally different to what I’d normally do, so starting off with a canvas you had already painted a pattern on gave me that opportunity. I didn’t want to paint a wild style burner on there in the style id usually go for because I don’t think it would have worked over the black and white background.

A: So what came first, the skull or the tags?

T: I drew the tags straight onto the canvas freestyle with paint pens. Then I used a finger smudge technique where I smudge everything and splat paint over it and to make it look as rough as I can, then tighten it all back up again.

I did the tags because obviously as graffiti artists, that’s the essence of where we come from. You said recently that you haven’t seen any tags recently that made you want to take photos of them and I also think that side of things, you know, writers taking pride in their hand-style has been lost.

I did the tags on there to prove to you that the core element of Bristol graffiti does still have style!

A: Ha! I like that. And how about the masked skull, is this a metaphor for 2020 and the impact COVID-19 is having on the world?

T: Nah not intentionally. I initially thought about doing a photorealistic face because you wouldn’t necessarily expect it from me. I was thinking of a ghostly face, maybe a woman’s face but for some reason I didn’t go with that. After I had done the tags in black and white, I thought that a skull would fit better.

Masks are obviously associated with graffiti writers as we wear them all the time, so I added it to the skull to reference that. Maybe other people will see it differently with everything that is going on right now but that wasn’t what I was thinking when I painted it. It was more that the mask served as a good way for me to bring in some colour and allowed me to add the bright green vapours and make them drip off of your Acer tag the top. It adds contrast to all the black and white in the rest of the painting and breaks it up.

A: I really like the green again all the black and white, it definitely adds the spark it needed to bring the whole image to life. There is still a fair amount of my graphic still visible in the background, did you give that much thought or was it just a case of getting going on it and seeing what happened?

T: I wanted to keep as much as your image as possible because obviously I wanted it to look like a collaboration and not just all about me. It was important for me for there to still be a lot of your work coming through. If you look closely you can see there is a little bit in the middle of the mask which the centre point of your image that I kept in there. To be honest I didn’t think about it too much and made decisions as I went along, just seeing what worked and then moving one to the next bit. I tended to only spend about an hour at a time on it and it felt like it came together pretty quickly.

I think it works. If nothing else it was good to have a distraction at an otherwise pretty miserable time.

Transcribed from WhatsApp voice messages
May 2020

‘PURPOSE’

A: Let’s go back to the core of what connected us in the first place — spraying paint onto walls. You and I were both part of Twentieth Century Frescos crew and must have painted hundreds of pieces during the 1990s and 2000s that represented TCF as a collective. I remember you using the metaphor of a jazz band jamming together to illustrate how we used to work as a collective on large productions — someone laying down a background across the wall was almost like a drummer’s beat that the rest of us could take little samples of and mix into whatever we individually wanted to paint. It’s a brilliant way to describe it because everyone can relate to seeing lots of musicians collaborating in a band to create a piece of music, whereas the idea of ten artists painting one single canvas comparatively is quite unusual. Why do you think collaboration comes so naturally to graffiti artists?

Z: I don’t think it necessarily does come naturally, but the format and situational aspect of graffiti presents more opportunities for collaborating, and often more necessities too. It breaks down into two main elements I think. The physical and the visual. The physical is more obvious, such as hooking each other up with paint, or finding a new spot, or transport and networking to enable the whole thing to happen. It’s easily framed by the concept of simple teamwork. The visual element is more dynamic though, and takes more of the character of the people involved to function, so whether they can handle another person painting over elements of their piece — like a character over the letters — or the background weaving into the foreground over letters, etc. Some people can’t do that for whatever reason. That’s not a criticism either, especially when you come back to the jazz band analogy. You can’t have the sax solo at the exact same time as the lead vocal.

One solution to that is you keep them apart, and in a lot of graffiti that is how it works — just piece, piece, piece, with space between them and maybe a common colour background. But then when the players get familiar with each other over time, or are already minded to see painting a piece in that way then they can riff into each other’s gaps and spaces. It becomes an interplay. Perhaps a better analogy is a rap crew. You can’t really have two rappers rapping different lines over each other, especially when at whatever level there is an expression of ego somewhere in that equation. But you can have rappers dropping little words and lines into gaps and pauses, or emphasising and reinforcing a word at the end of the bar, etc. Perhaps even intertwining whole lines and creating something more of a joint effort like a call and response, or two characters involved in the overall narrative.

It’s the same with graffiti productions really. The lettering saying the writer’s name is like the rapping and pretty much the same rules can apply.

It’s basically about not clashing and hopefully making something greater than the sum of the parts involved.

There is also a third element to the role of collaboration though, which is about problem solving and involves both physical and visual aspects. Perhaps you brought some crap colour that really clashes with everyone else on the wall, so you need some other cans from another person there to substitute it, or perhaps you just need a few squirts of the next guy’s colours to create a bit more visual harmony — like a more united front — We meant to do this’ sort of thing. It’s something that a tight crew will do naturally in my experience, by suggesting things to each other during the painting process, ‘Hey, use some of this colour to make that letter zing out’ or whatever.

Of course, this is in the context of some daytime, legal wall where everything is generally focused on the painting itself. Things work a lot differently when it’s some night time trackside or whatever. The physical becomes much more part of the collaborative process. Helping each other over a fence, or stashing paint ahead of time in some nearby bush. Maybe not even painting and just being a lookout, or catching photos of everyone’s work the next day. The focus shifts towards that side of things then too, and in fact I’d argue the ‘art’ of graffiti is intertwined in this concept really. The art of pulling it off. Of getting away with it, and all the effort and teamwork that goes into that. The visual aspect of it is maybe equivalent, or maybe even less important in that sort of situation.

A: It fascinates me that graffiti artists have really pushed these aspects of collaboration to the point where teams of individuals are able to come together to produce technically incredible works of art, at enormous scale under extremely dangerous conditions. For example, some of the whole trains being painted in Europe and recently in New York are some of the most impressive pieces of graffiti i have seen in years, and those three elements of the collaborative process you mentioned; the visual, the physical and problem solving, are evidently a massive part of what makes such paintings possible.

We did something very different to that with the lockdown collaboration canvas yet we still used all three elements to pull it off. Are there any similarities that you notice between painting a wall with someone else and painting the collaborative canvas?

Z: The main similarity is the negotiation of free space, but in the absence of the other artist being physically there with you to discuss it, it’s on you the second artist to make those decisions. ‘I’ll go over this area, but leave that’ kind of thing. In fact, you could argue that with all of your lockdown collaboration canvases that it was about initially determining what is the ‘free space’ before knowing how to proceed. I have done a few walls where for example a background was put in the day previously, and then you arrive to put in your piece after that, which is a similar process. In this sense it’s a parallel to recording music in a studio in that you can have a whole backing track made in advance, then a singer comes and drops their vocals over it the following week, and perhaps there’s a soloist rocking sax or keys layering into it too.

More usually though, big production pieces are more akin to a bunch of performers arriving on stage and playing something together live. As long as there’s a drummer keeping time, the rest should at least sound cohesive, and then the final outcome is defined by the skills of the artists as opposed to an overseer or producer. Really, in that sense it’s very free, and something interesting I’ve realised over the years about doing those sort of productions is that it can dispense with a hierarchy — or ‘boss’ and ‘workers’ scenario — and instead is a more cooperative model, with each artist sharing equally in the success of the overall entity they create. After years of working as a commercial artist, I know now how rare that concept actually is in the real world, and how spoiled I was to have a good run of it for so many years.

A: It’s interesting to look at how people work together in other creative settings and compare them to how we work as graffiti artists. I agree that in the most part, graffiti artists are generally not overly precious about the work they make and so the idea of someone else adding a bit onto your work, cutting across a section or asking you to adapt something to make it fit into a space more tidily just feels like a standard part of the process. For me, it was always one of the most exciting bits of painting graffiti as a crew, probably because it requires you to trust the other artists and embrace the unknown.

I’ve worked as part of a team in many different settings whilst employed as a youth worker, teacher and lecturer, and rarely, if ever saw this approach adopted in mainstream settings. The idea of dropping the hierarchy, allowing the preconceived ideas of each other’s professional identities to fall away and allow everyone to develop their own way of working together towards a common cause, simply doesn’t happen. In fact, other than within grass roots activities like, skateboarding, breakdancing, BMXing, Parkour, DJing, rapping and of course graffiti writing, it is very unusual to see collaboration occurring naturally based on what an individual brings to the party, rather than their place in the group being decided by the label or title they have been given.

Z: I think the big difference is that graffiti and a lot of the ‘street’ disciplines do not revolve around making money as their purpose — they are all about having fun and making achievements. Once money comes into it, a lot changes, and encourages the individual to place the ‘getting’ of the money foremost in the equation as the main purpose of the endeavour. The art has already become secondary in this respect.

There is also an aspect of ‘predictability’ that business ventures require, so planning and hierarchies help to ensure that. People can afford to think and behave differently when their actions are not directly relevant to their income though. It becomes about the love, the sense of belonging, the sense of the group achieving together and how that then reflects on and translates back to the individual. In that respect it’s similar to playing a team sport like football, but it’s the artistic equivalent. It’s funny how people will ask “do you get paid for this?” when they see you doing a wall, but how many times would they ask a bunch of people in the park if they are getting paid for playing football together? They get the point of the endeavour with sport, perhaps as it’s more fundamental in our culture than art seems to be. I think for this reason, the place of collaborative art in society becomes even more important as it’s seemingly so uncommon.

We live in the age of the individual so anything that can help remind us or reconnect us with a tribal or shared mentality can be very healthy and must feed into the outcome on some extra level.

Conversation taken from email exchange
March 2021

Felix Braun Acerone

‘NŌTAN RE-EDIT’

A: Felix and I have been friends for many years having worked alongside each other in the youth and community engagement sector, as well as collaborating closely on a number of our own street art and graffiti related projects. Our next venture was to co-curate an exhibition exploring the future of Bristol street art at the Royal West of England Academy in summer 2020, After being informed that the pandemic would force the show to be cancelled via an unceremonious email, Felix and I remained in close contact and created the ‘Nōtan Re-Edit’ collaboration. Sharp as ever, Felix returned his part of the painting digitally, accompanied by this piece of writing:

F: I’ve been involved in a number of Collaborative Painting UK projects and have always painted/drawn into and/or around what my fellow artists were creating, however for my Lockdown Collaboration piece I decided to take a very different approach.

This time I began working on Luke’s original image as if I were creating a remix, or a re-edit, if you like. I love music and have made a number of re-edits of favourite disco tracks in my time. The predecessor of the remix, the ‘re-edit’, essentially involved cutting up and splicing carefully back together sections of reel to reel 8, 12 or 16-track audio tape. Literally cut and paste. All that the re-editor would add would be a splash of reverb or tape delay, to enhance changes and in some cases hide abrupt chops.

With this philosophy in mind I set about cutting up Luke’s original piece (or a digital print of it at least) and rearranging the elements to make something new. I saw using splashes of paint as the equivalent of adding new audio effects, and the introduction of sparse colours as the EQ on the mixing desk, boosting the bass and shining up the treble, if you will.

I’m not sure the final outcome is entirely in keeping with the spirit of the original work, or even that respectful of its aesthetic; but Luke and I are good friends and I knew if anyone wasn’t going to be precious about the original, it was him.

Collaboration can relegate the ego, redirecting the focus of the creative process into the space that exists between the artists. It is also, for me, a liberating process. A context within which one can venture out of one’s clichés and over-worked tropes.

Having begun my public artistic journey painting graffiti, I too have experienced the benefits of collaboration for many years. I have also witnessed its pitfalls and the way some of the bigger egos in ‘the game’ can use its open-ended possibilities to subjugate the more meek amongst us — although that too can be a really useful learning process. Some people dominate and ‘go for self’ without even being aware of it!

So collaboration is a really useful vehicle for important life lessons too. We all collaborate and cooperate every day, but for your average fine artist, to do this within their practice is most often a completely alien concept. And this is important to recognise too. A lot of what I learnt from collaborating with other graffiti writers informs my individual practice as a painter: about colour, composition, process, juxtaposing form, exploring new influences. Every artist has a favourite artist no one else has heard of.

I think this is the space where the virtual collaboration of this project exists, because we all worked independently of one another, privately and quietly, in the vein of individual studio practice; and we are working together in exploring a multitude of interpretations of the same original piece that Luke emailed to us.

This is why I liken it to doing a remix or a re-edit. The original recording artist is rarely present and gets very little say in what the remixer does to their work. They are forced to let go of their idea of what their song was… and brace themselves! This made the concept unique. It was Luke taking collaboration in yet another new direction.

I loved the idea that the original piece was a starting point to be taken on a journey into the unknown. Indeed, I had no idea where I was going to take it. I didn’t need to; it already had the essentials: form, structure, balance. Anything added or taken away from that made it into something new; perhaps a relative of the original, an evolution, a mutation, even. In this sense I see this process and concept as a very visceral and honest reflection of how lockdown made me feel.

Our lives have had to evolve and mutate to fit new and extreme circumstances. Our contact with one another, with the communities that we take for granted, has had to go virtual and be fragmented in the name of survival.

Taken from Microsoft Word document
April 2020

Clayton Saunders Acerone

‘MOVING ON UP’

CS: I suddenly realised that the deadline had closed just as I had got my portfolio together and I started to panic. But I just went to the tattoo studio in person, introduced myself, gave them my book and amazingly, they got back to me the very next day. So at the ripe old age of 47 I began an apprenticeship in tattooing and now I cant imagine doing anything else. It’s really unfortunate that just as I thought I was about to actually start getting paid clients, this whole shitstorm happened.

A: Our stories have so many similarities; having both recently left careers in teaching, beginning to build more authentic working lives as artists, and being stopped abruptly by the pandemic. You mentioned earlier about the idea of leaving a respectable career in teaching as being total madness and I know exactly what you mean. It did feel like madness to me too, you know walking away from the monthly salary, the routine I was so used to and the perceived sense of security that full time employment brings. But I’ve chosen to reframe how I think about that time now because it wasn’t madness at all, it was necessity. Feeling broken in a job and stuck in a system I no longer believed in, was not security, it was dangerous for my mental health.

CS: It’s great to hear you speak so clearly about about reframing things, that makes a lot of sense to me. In a way I find it quite reassuring to know that I wasn’t doing that journey on my own. You know exactly what I’m talking about, so it feels good to hear your experience as well.

I do think that what we’ve done is brave but it’s also the next part of the journey and that is exciting.

A: Jump and the net will appear! If we didn’t make those difficult decisions then I wouldn’t be running CPUK and you wouldn’t be tattooing, I guess from the crisis comes the next opportunity. So how about the crisis we are in now, how has lockdown been for you?

CS: Ah mate, a lot of home-schooling. You’d think that as experienced teachers we’d be fucking great at it, but no…. My daughter’s five and I started off thinking we’re gonna do all this maths and English but it really quickly turned into us just hanging out spending time together doing a lot of creative stuff. I used to be a working model maker at Aardman and ended up showing her how to make little bits of furniture for her Sylvanian families and stuff like that. It was a lot of quality time mixed with a little bit of work.

Tattoo parlours are still not opening and there isn’t much indication as to when I can go back to that, so in the absence of any real skin to tattoo, I got myself a fake arm and took to it with the machine. I’ve done some quite involved tattoos on that and I bloody loved doing my first portrait on it the other day. It’s such a great thing to do you know, using this time to push and challenge myself to keep getting better.

Recorded via Whatsapp voice messages
June 2020

‘JOURNEY TO NŌTAN’

PS: When I was younger, aged about 13, I got into robotics after spotting the older punk rock kids who were doing it in the clubs around Bournemouth that we used to sneak into. When I saw Malcom McLaren’s ‘Buffalo Gals’ video on Top of the Pops it inspired me to start doing a few more acrobatic moves, body popping and things like that. We formed the Second to None B-boy crew in 1985 with the best breakers from the area and started dancing in a nightclub called Madison Joe’s that we were allowed to use on Saturday afternoons. We would go there and do nothing but dance for hours. It was really just a few of us at first but eventually it attracted a hundred or more people who were regularly turning up to watch us and sometimes get involved. It became really popular so the owners began promoting it as a hip hop club on Saturday afternoons and that was really where Second to None was born.

A: I have always rated Second to None as one of the UKs best B-boy crews, certainly when I was regularly going out to hip hop nights in the early 2000s they were considered world class. I hadn’t realised you’d been around since the mid ‘80s though.

PS: A few of the members changed over the years, but in the late-80s we became quite good as a crew and used to travel up to London to battle a few of the crews up there. We won a few and lost a few, you know how it goes! In about 1989/90, I ended up leaving the crew for various reasons. I turned into a bit of a hippie and headed off towards the festivals and free raves to connect with the Earth a bit more, but to be honest that phase didn’t last for long.

A: I wish I had been around during that early era of UK dance music before it became regulated a few years later, you were lucky to have experienced that!

What got you back into breaking?

PS: In around 2000 a friend I was working with mentioned that he had tickets for the B-boy championships at Brixton Academy and that Second to None were finalists in the competition. It had been 10 years since I had left the crew so I wanted to go along and check it out. As soon as I got to the front entrance I bumped into my old friend Nick Palmer, B-boy Freeze-Fine who couldn’t believe I was there. From then I started hanging around with the crew again which was kind of mad because they had become really successful in the scene, appearing on TV shows and travelling around the world doing their thing. They were all living their own separate lives but still met up as a crew every so often. Being around them got me back into practicing breaking again and the straight up love for hip hop immediately returned. It was good to be dancing with the old crew that I had been a part of all those years ago.

A: So that reunion was 20 years ago now. Are you still breaking?

PS: Well, nah I’m not dancing anymore. About two years ago I had to say, look that’s enough — too many injuries now, I was just in constant pain and well, I wasn’t man enough for that. I still run a jam here in Bournemouth with Nick called Vile Style, that we host at the Pavilion right on the seafront. Of course, we haven’t been able to run it this year because of the lockdown but we’ve done it for the last twelve years and regularly get international groups of B-boys turning up. We’ve had crews from Switzerland, Poland, Italy, France and they all come to it because it’s known as a real rootsy event you know, it’s the real, true old school vibe.

A: Put me on the list for the next one...!
How did you get into light painting photography?

PS: My inspiration to get into light painting was funnily enough from a chiropractor that I visited because of my breakdancing injuries. He was also a really good landscape and wedding photographer. I saw a picture of him stripped to the waist in a boiler suit with these twelve blue parallel lines in an arc next to him, holding this big glowing stick, and I was like ‘What the hell is that?!’ He said it was a light painting — a self-portrait and an ode to Picasso. He explained the story of when Picasso first used photography as a tool for light painting and that really got me intrigued.

I soon started making my own light painting tools, nothing too complicated, just a few LEDs on a stick with a 9-volt battery that I used to make swirly shapes. As I started studying light painting techniques a bit more, I found that people were making more complex tools to help them make really different shapes, really stunning fixed circles and mysterious orb shapes. The images looked really psychedelic and way out there and I loved the graffiti feel that they captured. I have been light painting for around ten years and around eight years ago I teamed up with a good friend, Matt Preston who is also a great light painting photographer. We go under the name of L.A.C.E. — Light Art Colour Experiment and have a Flickr account showing all our work and post regularly on Facebook and Instagram.

A: The way your image has taken the essence of my nōtan design and flipped it into a psychedelic disco ball type image is quite incredible. How did you do it?

PS: I wanted to get involved with the nōtan thing that you were doing so I printed out your design onto a piece of A4, cut out every piece with a scalpel and attached the separate pieces on the top of a Perspex sheet set up in front of my camera. I then painted light behind it with a fibreoptic brush and RGB LED torch and captured the image with a long exposure. I’ve got lots of different tools that I’ve made out of Perspex rods and tubes and kid’s toy lightsabres.

It’s shot through a six-sided kaleidoscope with your image right up against the end. I used a fisheye lens to begin with to create the planet shape and then changed my lens mid exposure — so while the camera is still running in the dark, I changed the lens and then lit it up again to create a full frame and capture the rest of it.

I’m really pleased with how it turned out. I’ve enjoyed doing it and I think in the future I might have a go at creating some of my own nōtan or sacred geometry designs for more photo experiments.

Transcribed from recorded phone conversation
April 2020

‘IT’S THE FEAR THAT KEEPS US HERE’

A: I lost the recording of our chat in July because I’d ticked the wrong option in Zoom and it disappeared… I can’t believe that was almost a year ago! Lockdown really has warped my sense of time.

‘It’s The Fear That Keeps Us Here’ felt like a really poignant phrase when you used it in our collaboration back in July. Do you think it’s still as relevant now, a year later?

MT: It’s a coincidence but I was actually working on a new version of that text just last week. I always really liked it but never felt I had really resolved it fully, so I used it again for a project a friend of mine is doing in Wales. He bought a double-sided A-frame and has started commissioning artists to create artworks for both sides which is then displayed in the street that he lives on. So I made two new versions of that text, one in Welsh and one in English for the other side. So it’s kind of weird that we are talking about our piece again as I just did the new versions last Friday!

I guess the context when we did it was really obviously about lockdown being more about a sort of general mental state. And I think a bit of Brexit was probably in there as well. Whereas with that piece now, it’s much more about the context of Wales and Britain, and questions of independence.

A: The context of the phrase changes with time and the situations we find ourselves in.

MT: Yes as well as where it’s placed of course. Especially with this version which now has the English and Welsh versions next to each other. For the piece I did with you, I was really thinking about just how stuck we were. Physically stuck in our homes but also trapped in this mental state of fear. It feels hard to remember now just how intense it was during that first period but it was a very real, palpable kind of terror. Every time you went to the supermarket or walked past somebody in the street, it was really very unnerving, threatening even, particularly if anyone in your household had health issues.

The majority of us haven’t ever experienced a situation where authorities are imposing such a strict set of laws upon you. It really was a crazy time. And in hindsight I do wonder, why did we do that? Why did we make life so difficult?

A: The thing I found so difficult was losing my sense of identity. Losing all the Collaborative Painting UK work I had lined up, the RWA exhibition and all the festivals was devastating on a financial level, but what hit me hardest was being robbed of my time to be an artist. To get immersed in a project and truly be in my element. Instead it became a family based game of treading water and just getting through each day.

MT: Yeah, I think one of the big problems for me is I still don’t feel like there’s any free space. All the time I’m thinking that I need to be doing this or I’ve got to be there doing this in ten minutes. But again I think that’s also a kind of fear. You know that thing about people feeling like they must achieve something during lockdown, like learning French or running 10k. It’s really just some kind of transference of going to work into another form of labour. You must make yourself busy! But I definitely feel slower, like my brain is in second gear all the time. It takes me a long time to wake up, and I don’t mean physically, more mentally.

A: …and creatively?

MT: Yes it’s definitely a slower process now. It just takes me longer to get to the point where I feel like I’m getting somewhere. It usually takes me the bulk of the day to get to the point where I’m finally deep enough into what I’m doing to actually be creating something decent.

A: I recently saw a photo of a mural you had done in a hospital. It’s good to see you’re able to get back to doing that work again.

MT: That’s been great actually. Over the past month I’ve been out doing projects again and finally managed to get that mural done which had been delayed a few times during lockdown.

A: It looked much more abstract than some of your other text based murals. Almost unreadable.

MT: The text is really quite buried in that one. I mean, those murals are all in male psychiatric intensive care units, so they’re amongst the most severe places you can be in terms of a mental health setting. So the text in the mural couldn’t feel like someone shouting at you, it had to be much more subtle. It’s also a good example of me trying to do something a little bit different visually. It was quite an intense week’s worth of painting but it was really good being there, being around other people and taking time out from being on the damn computer screen.

A: When we've spoken about your work on the psychiatric wards before, I remember you thinking about those projects as collaborations. How do you approach doing a mural on a psychiatric ward collaboratively?

MT: I think there are collaborative elements to it without trying too hard to frame it as an actual collaboration. I'll usually go into the space and have some loose ideas about what I might want to do and then lead a few workshops with inpatients around those ideas, which often helps to identify what the kind of content is going to be. I usually come up with multiple colour schemes for the designs and use a voting process in the unit to help inform how the piece will look.

When I'm working on the painting I sometimes have some of the inpatients join in and help but that depends on many factors. Maybe it's only for five minutes or so but that doesn't matter. It's really about inclusion. The process is quite straightforward and is in many ways a colouring-in process so it's not about having to have really amazing skills. It's more about concentration, a chance to enjoy using paint and brushes on a wall and accepting the nature of the handmade — they're not supposed to be perfect. I really believe that by opening up the opportunity for involvement to the people who reside in those units, it is offering them a chance to build some ownership of the artwork and therefore the ward.

A: It's interesting to hear you explain the process in that way because it very much reminds me of the first collaboration that we worked on together at the Arnolfini in 2006 — the youth engagement project for the British Art Show 6. That was all about using art as a vehicle to engage the young people we were working with into something deeper and more meaningful.

MT: Funnily enough, I wrote something about that project recently. I was asked to take part in an audio project where we talked about public artwork and the fact that once it is installed the conversations about the artwork are always around how great the final thing is. What gets lost is all the activity in the middle, which was where all the learning was done; the stuff that went wrong, the happy accidents, all the little things that prompted the decisions that were made along the way.

I ended up writing quite a lot about the Arnolfini project and how much I learned from how scary it was. I genuinely didn't have a clue what I was supposed to be doing and had certainly never worked with a group of young people before. I talked a lot about how that experience led me down a particular path that I probably wouldn't have done otherwise.

I really wouldn't have considered working in that very collaborative way at that time but that project certainly had a big influence on how I worked after we did it.

Learning about working with other artists like you and Matt (Gillett), with community groups and learning how to accept that losing control can actually be a key part of the process.

A: That notion of simply embracing the fact that you don't know does feel unnatural, but I think it's a really important skill to learn. Knowing that you don't know, is something in itself. It's almost giving you a space to pause, gather together all the things that you do know, and reassess what should happen next.

So back to our collaboration. With you being in London and me in Bristol, collaborating on a canvas in the way I did with local artists wasn't feasible, so I sent you a set of digital reproductions of my canvases. How did you decide on which one to work with?

MT: I had an idea of the text I wanted to use for this piece and how it would look so I went for one of the portrait ones. I'm also a bit of a sucker for symmetry so I did choose one that was symmetrical too. Actually I think I took a couple and laid one on top of another, I can't completely remember but I know it changed quite a lot. That was the anchor really and in a way, you did me a favour because I didn't have to do that first bit which is often where most of the time is spent in building up the initial components from drawings and creating a structure.

A: Ah that's interesting that you superimposed two of my canvases, I did wonder if you had done something like that when I first saw the final image. I hadn't considered that anyone would do this and of course it is only really possible to do when working digitally. That's a pretty cool surprise outcome.

MT: Having your piece was an interesting way to start. To contrast with your geometrics, I pulled out some art and crafts style design elements and then thought, okay, that's going too far that way so I pulled out some more geometric stuff which kind of looks more similar to what you were doing. I just started pulling bits and pieces off of my hard drive and treated it like a collage really, trying to find a balance. A balance between your images and mine.

It ends up being this sort of intuitive thing of getting to a point where the balance between the different elements feels okay and sits right with the text. I guess the text in a way is quite aggressive, so I wanted to bring through more quiet, decorative elements, which were kind of contradictory. They're elements that you might see as being quite domestic, wallpaper pattern type stuff you know? So, I was thinking about that sort of space and asking, 'where is the 'here'?'

Perhaps your 'here' at the moment is a mental space, but it's actually also the 'here' of being stuck inside four walls.

A: There is a tension in it for sure.

MT: Yeah, what I'm really interested in is this point where stuff breaks.

I'm exploring how something like an ecstatic state, a state of rapture, can be depicted visually. If you look at art history there are different ways that do that. You have things like psychedelic art where everything is about the optical effects happening to your vision. You might look at religious art or suprematism, there are all these different ways of depicting a moment of ecstatic purity. I'm trying to get to that visually through overload. What I want is that moment where if you do one more thing, the whole thing collapses.

A: Have you been able to find ways to make collaborative work with any other artists during lockdown?

MT: I started a new collaborative work last week as it happens. I don't tend to collaborate so much with people on visual stuff, it's usually with people doing other things, mainly in sound and music performance. One of my main collaborators is a musician friend of mine, called Daniel O'Sullivan who I've worked with on lots of projects over the years but we started a new one last week. Luckily, he lives pretty local to me and our collaborations always go both ways. He does some sound for my works and I'll do record cover designs and the like for him. We're working on some new videos for a whole lot of audio that we've used before in our performance projects and that has been really good fun.

That said, I do have this terrible relationship with making sound and music stuff. A lot of the time I get this massive imposter syndrome, you know, I'll get really into it and we'll work on loads of stuff — and then I'll just go 'no, I can't deal with it. This isn't me, I'm not a musician.' And I'll want to delete the lot.

We've got a huge amount of material. We're working with 20 or 30 short thirty-second excerpts and the idea is to try and make a series of short, very intense visuals to accompany these passages of sound. But just producing a few seconds o video can take me a very long time, which does become a problem. I mean, it's really nice to work on projects where there are no installation deadlines or financial constraints, so I do find myself leaning towards working on the collaborations with Daniel and avoiding the stuff I really should be working on...

Conversation transcribed from Zoom video call
May 2021


WE
THINK

‘WE ARE FAMILY - REMIX’

A: You’re credited with painting one of the first graffiti productions the streets of Bristol ever saw, ‘Lazy Daze’ back in 1983. What were your early inspirations that got you interested in art?

OT: My Mum was a painter and textiles artist. She used to run an art foundation course in Cambridge and to do all kinds of teaching, so my home life was deeply entrenched with the visual. My dad is a very practical person, a very creative thinker and he taught me a lot of the skills he had. So I was brought up with this whole notion of challenging the normal. I lived in museums as a child, they were my favourite places to be and even now I’ll go to Bristol Museum and I will always find something different, no matter how many times I go there. I feel like I was trained in the art of looking and observing. I think of myself as what you might call an ‘expert noticer’.

I went to Filton College when I was 16 because I couldn’t handle school, it just did my head in. Being dyslexic, school just didn’t work for me, so I took art photography and classical civilization A levels before doing art foundation. At that time I was really just interested in creating and making stuff. Music was a big passion too, I used to head to London every week on a Thursday to go to The Wag Club and see bands and various other things. I was really interested in all kinds of music but also in how the visual was being used alongside sound. For me it was all about The Clash, my favourite band ever without a doubt.

A: Music was a massive influence on me growing up too, albeit a fair few years after you were first out on the scene! In the very early ‘90s I used to go skateboarding into to town every weekend and stop by all the street culture shops at the time; Replay Records, Jaspers, Tribe of One and Westworld on Park St, collect piles of rave flyers that I’d take home and Blu Tack to the walls of my bedroom. I taught myself the basics of graphic design, copying them intricately using a pencil, ruler and calculator to upscale them, sometimes adding little variations to make them my own. I actually copied quite a few of your designs back then, not knowing they were yours for years. How did you get into that so early on?

OT: I had learnt to use a Mac at college whilst studying my degree in fine art. After I left, I saved up and bought one of their very first editions which cost me two-and-a-half thousand pounds back then in 1984. Because I had this advanced bit of kit, I began working for design agencies and then started being asked to do lots of freelance design work, like all those early fliers. It was the beginning of the acid house era so I ended up doing loads of work for nightclubs. I enjoyed doing it but it wasn’t long before I started to wonder, “Why am I doing it for other people when I could be doing it for myself”? So with a few friends I started a club night called 98-Proof, Nick Warren and Grant Marshall were both residents, and before too long I joined in with them and started playing records at the nights too. I didn’t find it difficult because it just fitted with the ethos of everything else I was doing; it was all the same thing to me. It’s a creative process, the cut and paste, punk rock stuff that I’d always been interested in. The assimilation of different things and bringing them all together, smashing it all together - and then making something new that was a little bit different.

A: I feel like we did exactly that on our collaborative piece. Where does collaboration fit in with the work you create these days?

OT: Within all of the creative things that I do whether it’s playing music or making art, there’s a beautiful space, a solitary space where you are fully engaged and completely doing your own thing. But sometimes there’s nothing better than playing records with somebody else, bouncing off each other and spurring each other on. The same thing happens with painting graffiti collaboratively, it’s all about doing something creative that builds relationships, enriches experiences and brings about discussion.

I think that collaboration is really a key factor in helping improve your own communication skills. When you collaborate with somebody, you’re kind of sharing the burden a little bit, you can find it easier to talk about stuff and take things a little bit further. So when you work as an individual, those things will rub off on you and you can start to talk about your own work in maybe more of an objective way, from a different viewpoint. To try and understand your work from different viewpoints is a really strong thing to do. I’m sure that you will have found that within your Tunisian Collaborative Painting process, that it will often open people up to discussion on lots of different levels, not just the ‘I’m gonna put blue here, you’re gonna put red there’. It’s more like, ‘well, I’ve got this idea about how maybe we could use our office space better’.

It’s important to develop the skills you need to be able to work collaboratively, because the strength of the work that’s produced is often greater as a result of all of those different ideas and thinking methods, and all the things that you might miss if you work alone.

Transcribed from Zoom video call
Auguest 2020

‘YIN YANG INFINITY TUNNEL’

X: I was interested in doing this collaboration firstly because I’ve worked with you before and we are friends but mostly because I believe that distance doesn’t have to get in the way of a collaboration. We can be thousands of miles away and still continue a conversation. It’s not just about the presence of the body, you can do things that help something to continue even when you’re not present.

I like the idea that today with technology we can do something at a distance and still make it quite beautiful. We can still make it together and still have that feeling of creating things together.

So I didn’t want the distance to get in the way of us collaborating and to show that we can still be present even though we’re apart. As soon as I saw your image it invited me to just freestyle and add a looseness to your really tight work. The geometric with the freestyle, something heavily planned combined with something just made up right there on the spot. It’s all about contrast and I love that.

A: The almost polar contrast in our styles and techniques has always been a source of wonder to me, especially considering how much we have worked together over the years. I always feel a need to plan what im doing, whereas you are able to rock up to a wall and let rip with a can in each hand and produce effortless masterpieces! Our lockdown collaboration is another example of exactly this.
What inspired the dragons?

X: In March 2020 I went to Japan with my wife, just as the pandemic was beginning to take hold of the planet but never-the-less we had an amazing, inspiring time in Tokyo and Kyoto. It was in the temples in Kyoto where I saw dragons prined on folding screens and immediately wanted to have a go at drawing some of my own.

On our return to Italy we were immediately put into lockdown. In fact, Italy was the first place outside of Wuhan in China to do so. We were badly affected by the pandemic very early on and so the lockdown measures were rigorously enforced. During that time I kept myself entertained by drawing dragons - lots of them. I found it very therapeutic to concentrate on the scales and the twists and turns in the bodies. They almost became tattoo style designs. I also couldn’t help feeling that they were also symbolic of the demon virus that seemed to be stalking everyone and turning the world upside-down.

A: Did the lockdown stop you being able to earn a living from your art?

X: Actually, work-wise I felt some benefits from the fact that literally everyone was in the same situation. A lot of things started to blossom, like your collaboration projects and also I was invited to paint some murals in Oslo and London. I think companies were taking advantage of the fact there weren’t lots of people around and using that space to get big jobs done. So I cant really complain about it to be honest.

A: I guess the lockdown restrictions hindered us in some ways but opened up opportunities in other ways.

X: Yeah, I think as mural artists we quickly learn to overcome many problems and become excellent problem solvers. The pandemic introduced a lot more obstacles to everyday life but in general I feel like I am well used to working in isolation, usually painting in my studio, so it didn’t feel too much like change. And I wear a mask when im painting anyway... So for me it is just about conforming to some new rules when traveling.

A: Prior to your moving to Italy, you were well known for painting murals collaboratively with a long list of other street and graffiti artists. How has it affected your art practice since moving to a new city in a new country?

X: Well as far as output goes I think I’m kind of doing the same amount, just more solo missions when painting walls. I do prefer painting with other people just for the good laughs and how the ideas bounce between us. Ive always loved collaborating with other artists purely because it challenges you to do something different. It’s a conversation that helps you as an artist to develop your style and break out of any constraints or comfort zones you like to sit in. When you’re collaborating with another artist an energy forms and it bounces an idea. That’s why I’ve loved doing it all through my graff career. I’ve always liked to work with other artists more so than solo.

That being said, I still feel the pull of the walls. I wake up and think to myself, today i’m going painting no matter what happens, somewhere I will be spraying. I like that there is more adrenaline pumping when you are painting in places that you’re not familiar with, especially when you’re on your own. It adds to the energy of the work. Obviously you cant sit around dreaming up ideas and you have to work much faster as these spots are not legal halls of fame. Ironically, I’m more worried about the sun now, never the rain.

Recorded via Whatsapp voice messages and email
April 2020

#A4FOR5

#A4FOR5

It was Christmas 2020, and all was not well. Regions around England had been pulled in and out of varying degrees of restriction measures for months, disrupting family plans for the festive season and eventually ending in a dead end situation whereby my wife, children and I were forced to spend Christmas at home, alone. As we entered the first days of the new year, the Prime Minister gave a promise that my children would be returning to school on the 4th of January, allowing me for a moment to dream of once again having space in the day to consider my own work, only to smash that dream a day later by announcing a further lockdown. I had survived eight months of restricted freedom, negotiated the challenges of homeschooling, and managed a severe loss of income, but now I was weak, tired and depressed. The thought of yet another lockdown with all the stresses and struggles that it would bring terrified me, and I did not know if I could take any more.

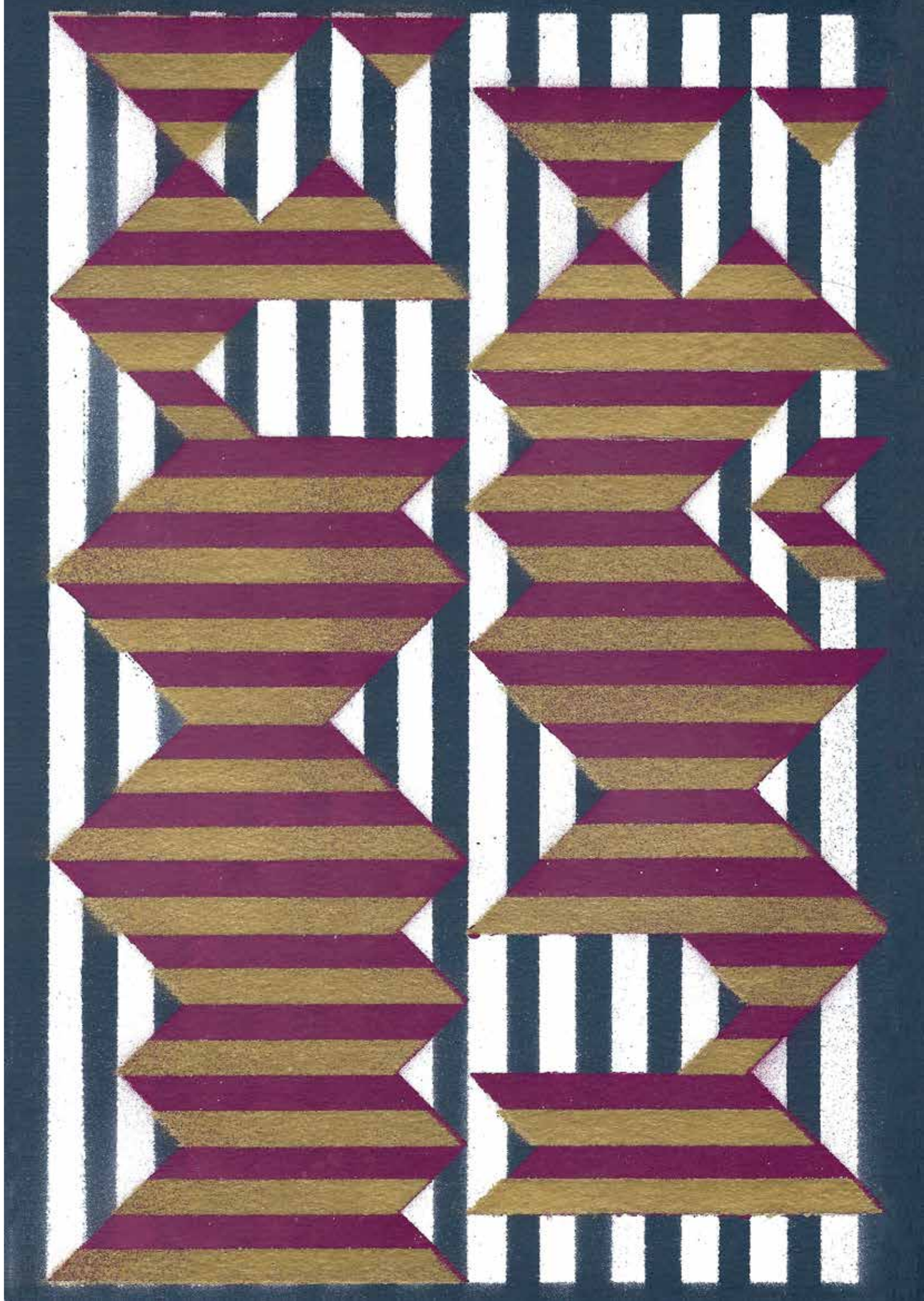
On Tuesday 5th Jan 2021, the third national lockdown began. My children, now au fait with our homeschooling routine, were upstairs getting dressed and preparing for yet another morning perched at the living room table. I stole the moment to venture outside into the bitterly cold garden and used my phone to record a spontaneous video message, calling for other artists to join me in a simple task of creating and sharing physical artwork. I had barely given the concept a second thought as the words spilled from my mouth: "Over the next week, I will make five new pieces of artwork, A4 in size and I am looking for five other artists to do the same. At the end of the week, I will send my five artworks in the post to the other five participants and if we all do the same, we should each receive five new pieces of artwork through our letterboxes. A4 art for five people... A4FOR5."

The idea was simple, measurable, inexpensive and the ideal framework for building new connections with other artists. It gave me a reason to keep creating new work and turned the mundane daily visit from the postman into an event I would await with eager anticipation. When the first five images arrived, I grouped them together and took a photograph with my phone, tagged each of the participants and posted it to Instagram. Many more inquisitive creatives soon got in touch to ask if they could take part, and I found myself adding names to a waiting list that, in turn, naturally created new groups, lined up for the weeks to come.

Instagram proved to be the perfect platform for facilitating such an activity; using the public feed to display images of my own work and process, sharing the works I received from other participants, and using its direct messaging service to create private rooms for each group where I could add participants and keep conversation between each group confidential. To my surprise, these rooms became busy with voices speaking of their thoughts and ideas, concerns and insecurities, and exchanging words of encouragement and friendly wit.

Each of the six #A4FOR5 groups consisted of five participants from Instagram plus me as a sixth member. This naturally meant that I would have to create five individual artworks each week for six weeks; 30 A4 artworks in total. I decided it would be prudent to create an image I could replicate multiple times with ease, by employing two stencils and spray paint. Each week I would cut down a large sheet of 300gsm paper into A4 segments and take them to my studio at the end of the garden. With mask and gloves on, spray cans shaken, paper and stencils aligned, the production line began, and layers of colour built up until each image depicted an abstract pattern of stripes and diamonds to form angular letters that read 'More Love'. Each was slightly different, none of them perfect, all of them made by hand. The act of mailing out envelopes containing a hidden message of goodwill gave me some warmth at a time when the rest of the world felt very cold.

Luke Palmer/Acerone
June 2021



#A4FOR5

GROUP 1

8-15 Jan 2021

Alex Kosta

×

Akarat

×

Hannah Broadway

×

Ryder

×

Neil Watkins


RUN
COMICS
coin-op
CREDIT 01

百鬼夜行

"Hyakki yagyo: Night Parade of 100 Demons"

#A4FOR5

GROUP 2

15-22 Jan 2021

Ben One

×

Hanne Rysgaard

×

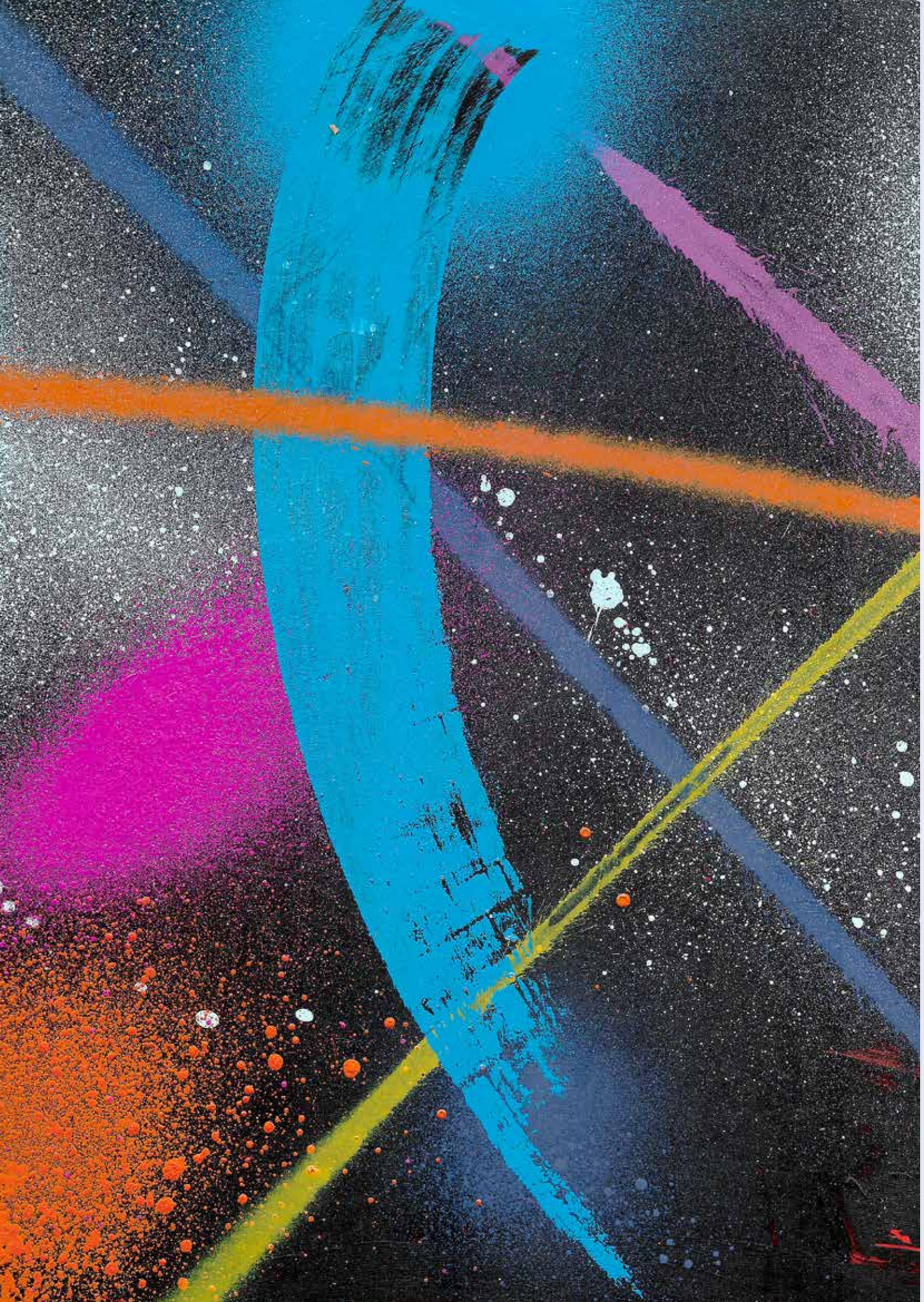
Mark Pritchard

×

Shaun Tubecomix

×

Remer

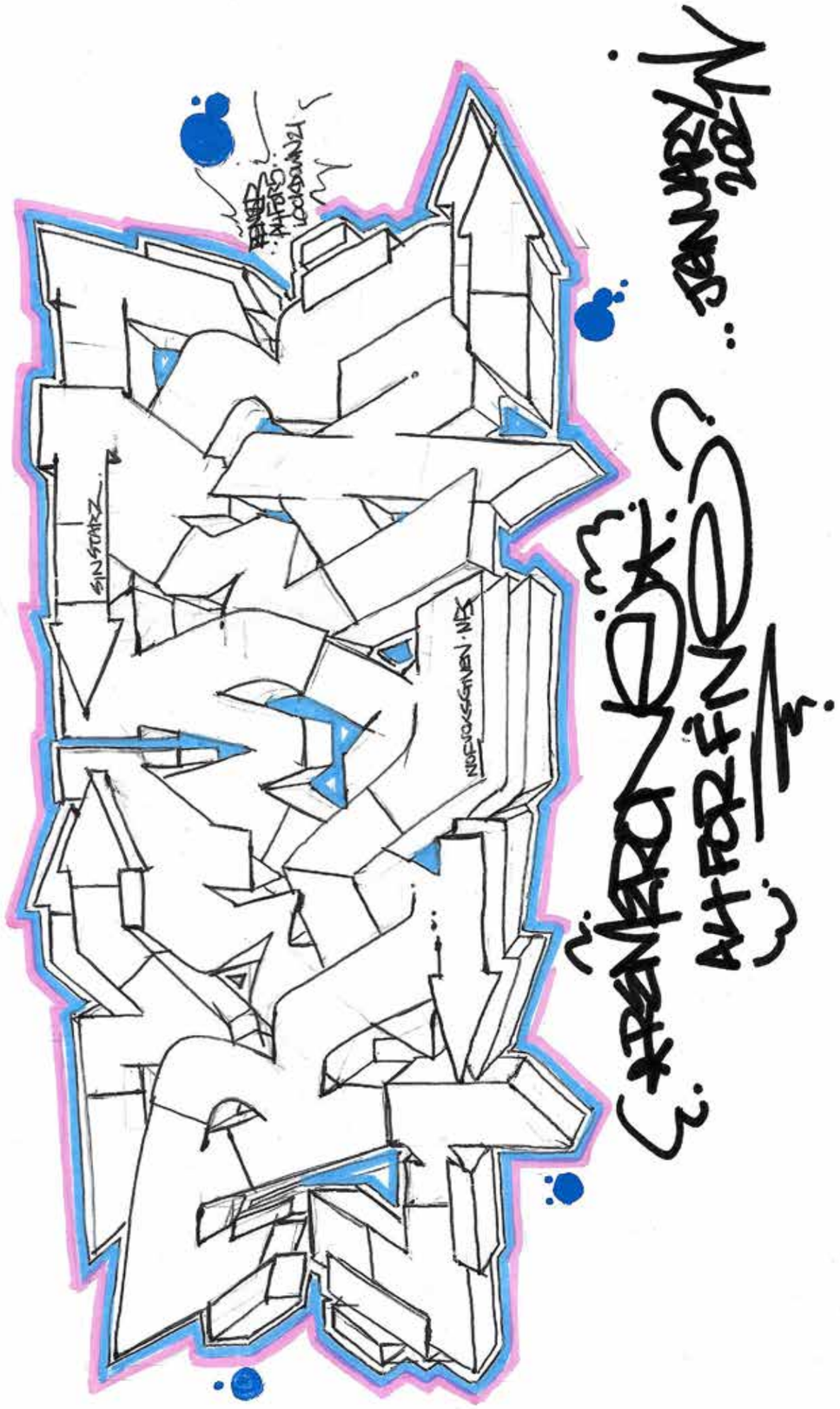


Not quite A4
Sorry Ü
xH.

16/1/2021

'Barril'

19.01.21



#A4FOR5

GROUP 3

22-29 Jan 2021

Nick Weston

×

Kate Bristoltings

×

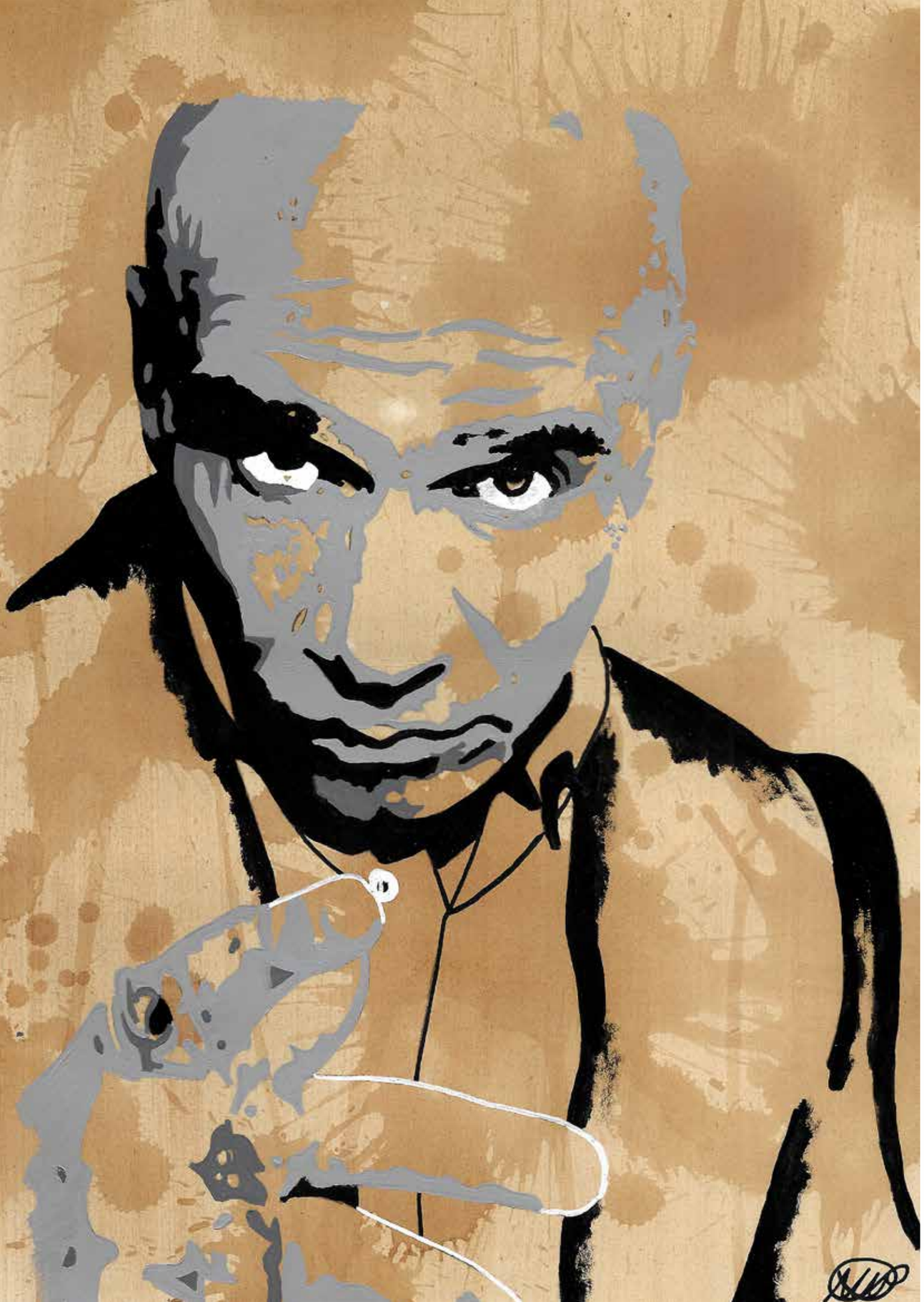
Rosie Newman

×

Sam Emm

×

Will Cullen



回憶：
memory

FREE BIRD WORDS & MUSIC BY ALLEN COLLINS & RONNIE

Great spotted woodpecker
Dendrocopos major

ART BY ROBO BAGGINS FOR ACER
INSTAGRAM: # A4-for5

imagination：
相象力

Golden Era

If I leave here to- mor-row,
Bye, bye ba-by, it's been a sweet love,
would you still re-mem-be
thoughthis feeling I can'

la

la la la

travel：
旅遊

For I must be ___ trav- ling on now . .

#A4FOR5

GROUP 4

29 Jan-5 Feb 2021

Ian Irwin

×

Amber Elise

×

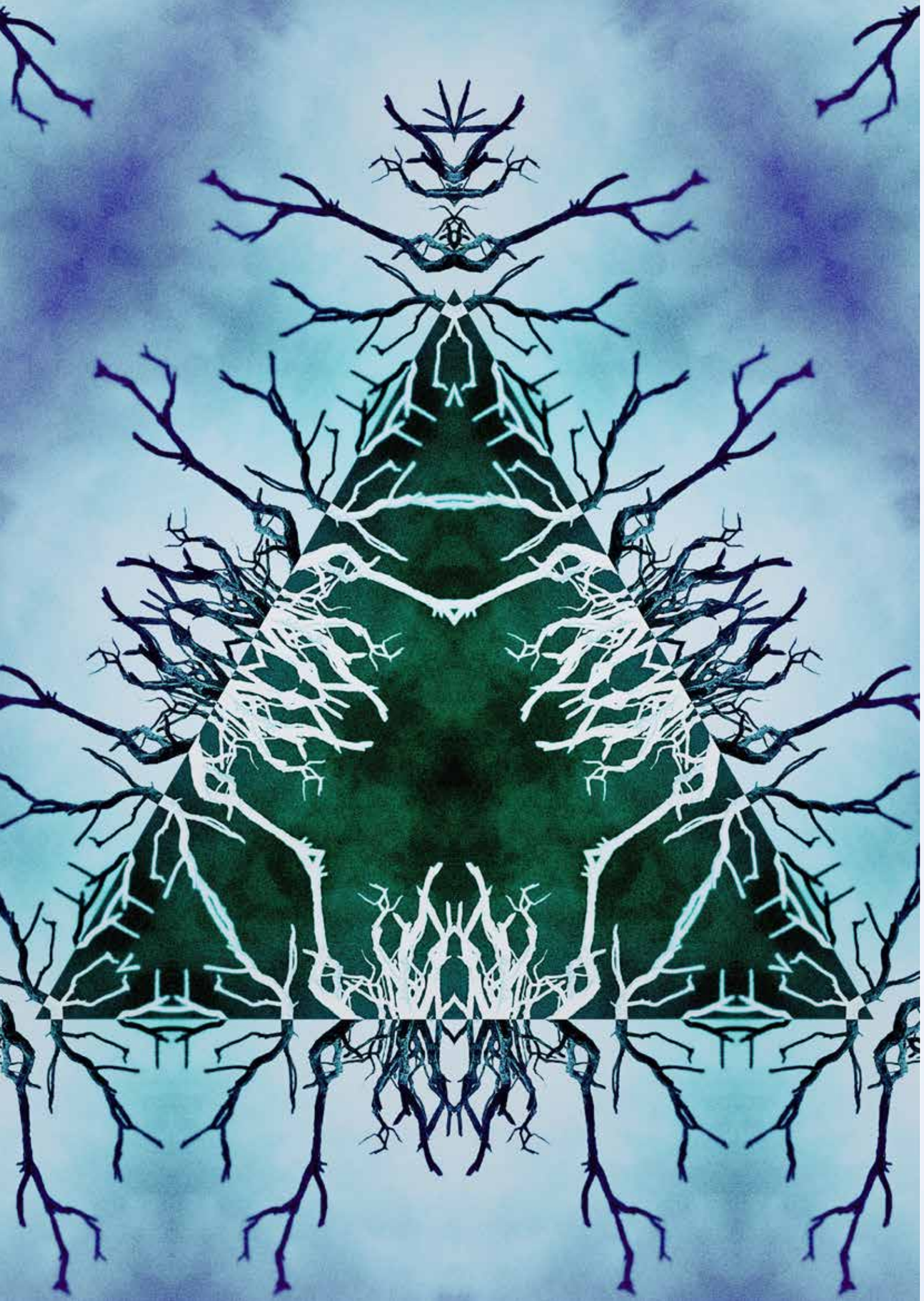
Jessie Woodward

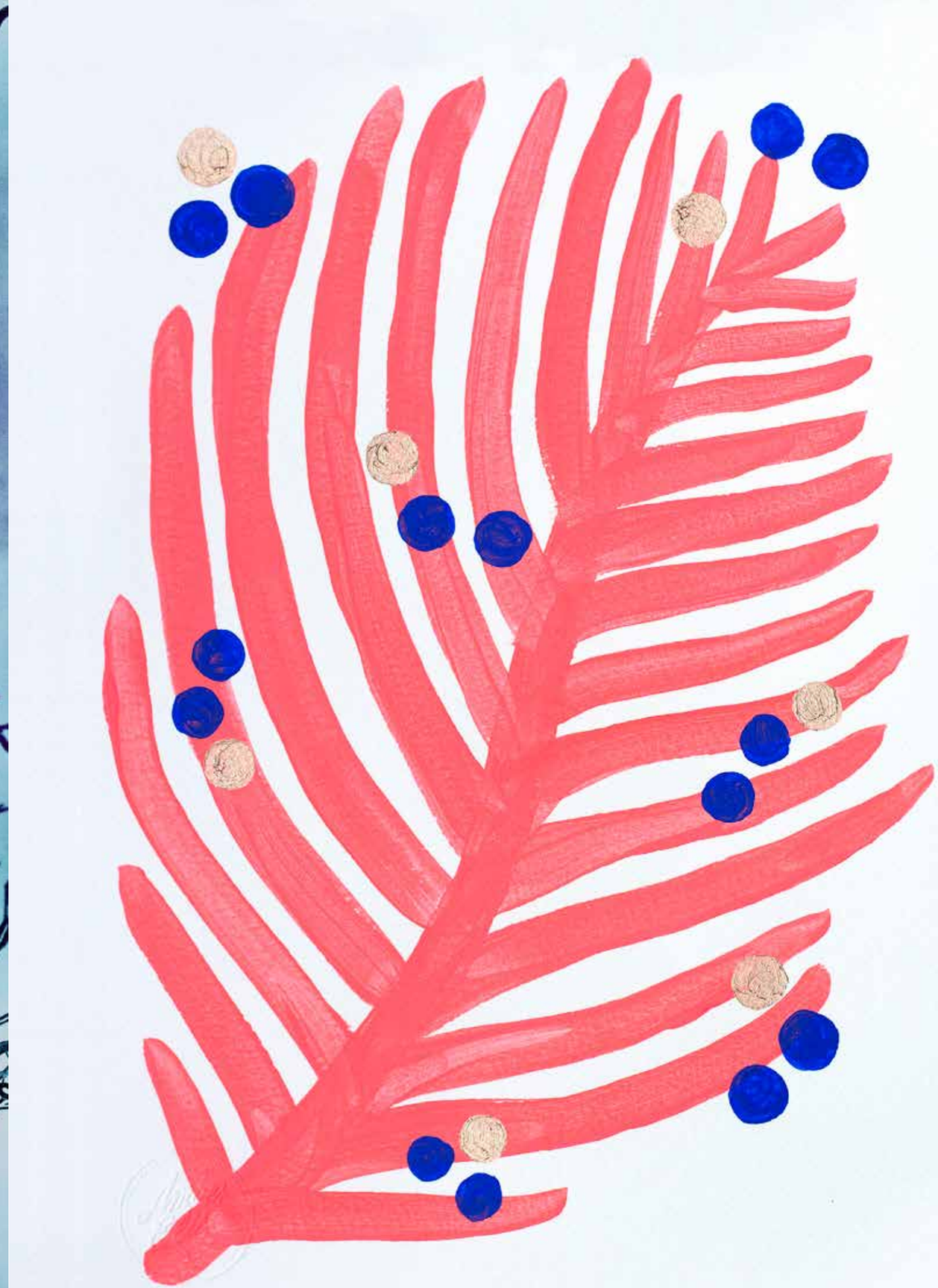
×

Gina Love

×

Conrico Steez





#A4FOR5

GROUP 5

5-12 Feb 2021

Adam de Paor-Evans

×

Ruth Broadway

×

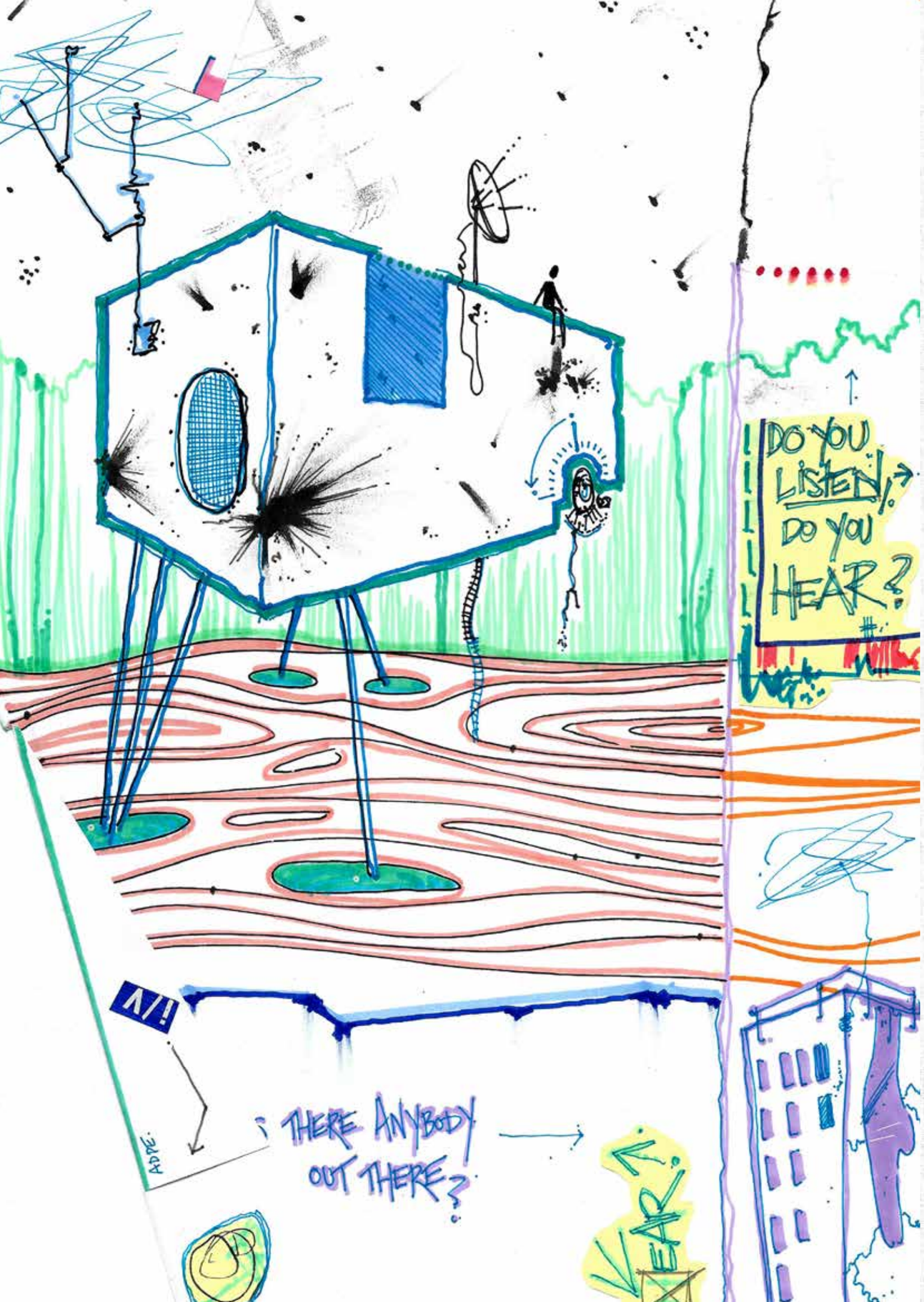
Lily Bloom

×

John Curtis

×

Tash Karti



courage

TK'21

#A4FOR5

GROUP 6

12-19 Feb 2021

Christie Monahan

×

Janine Partington

×

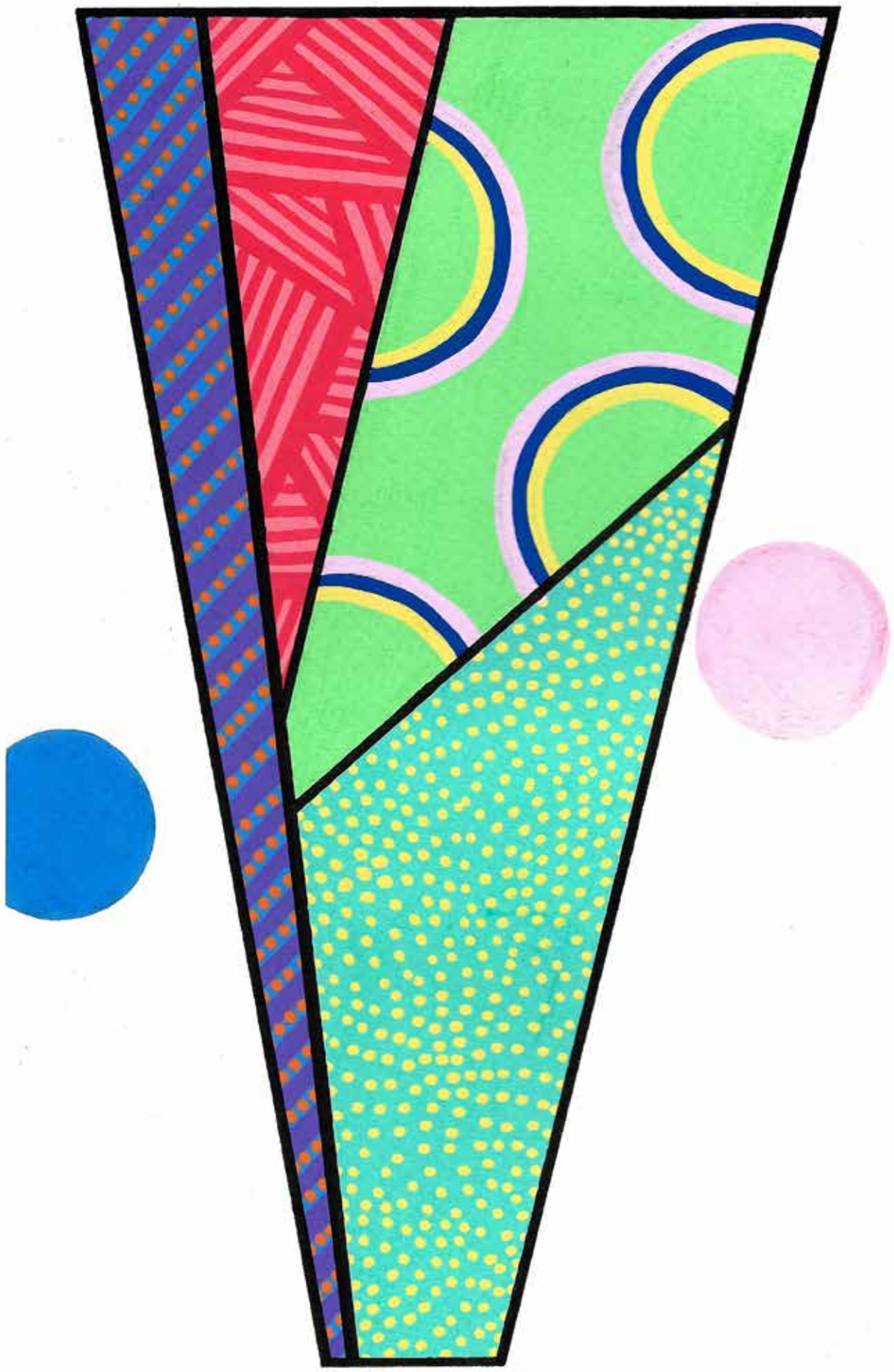
Anonymous

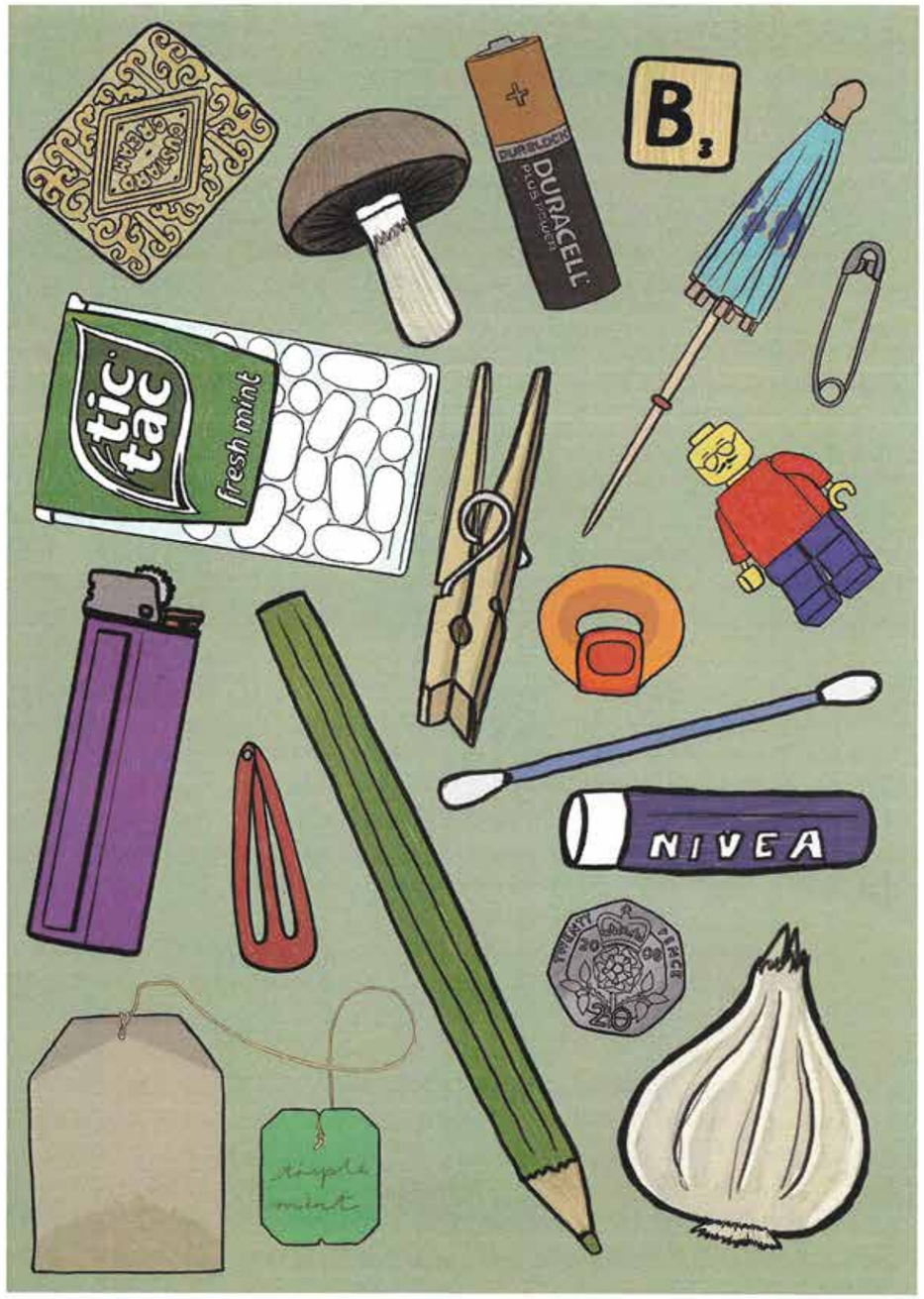
×

Will Martini

×

Zoe Gibbons




tic tac
fresh mint
DURACELL
PLUS POWER
B,
NIVEA
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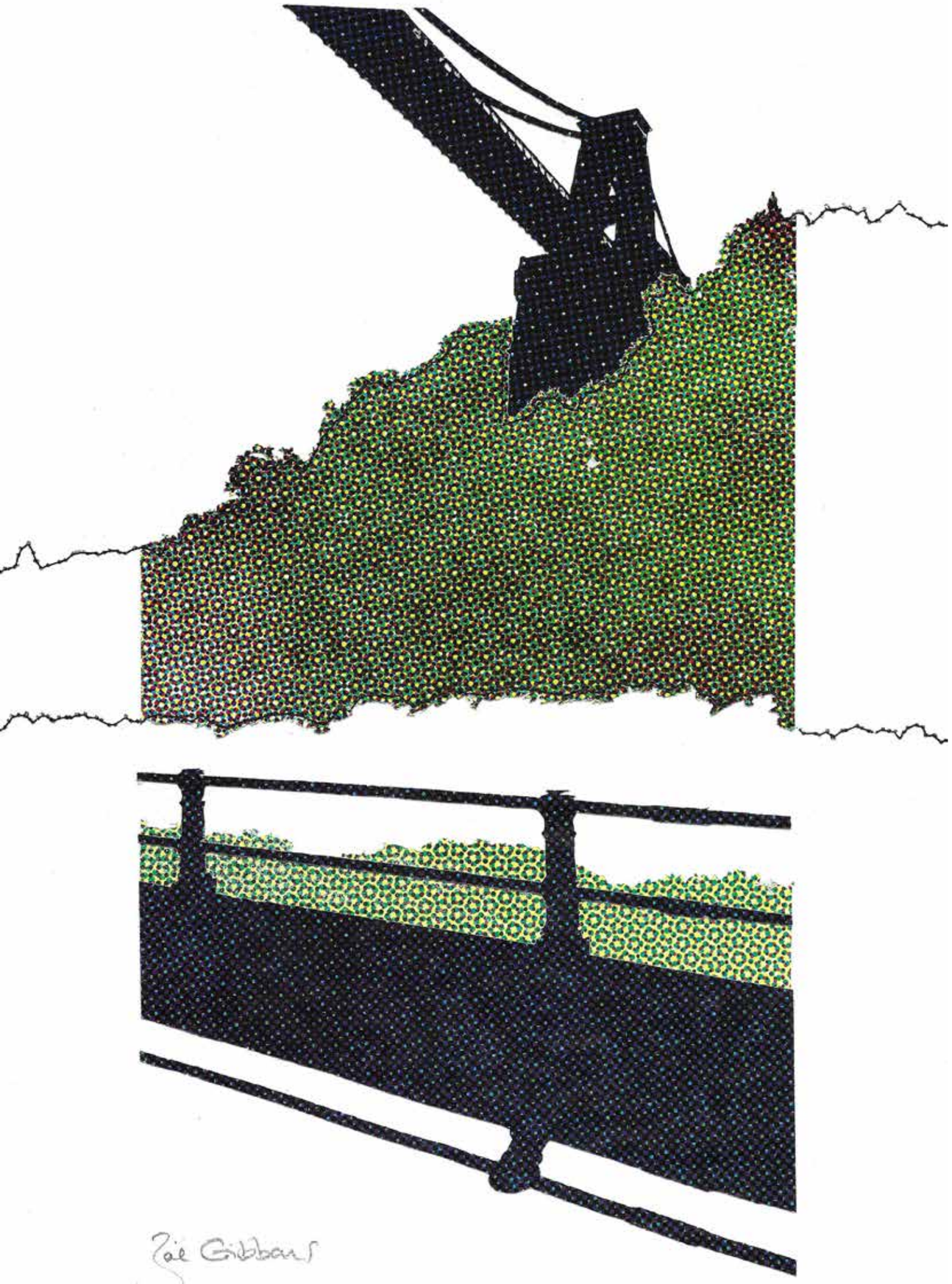

#A4FOR5

REFLECTION

Adam de Paor-Evans

COLLABORATION IN THE COVID-19 CRISIS

It was January 5th, 2021, and in the cold, damp, and dark aftermath of the most unusual Christmas holidays I had ever experienced, I was scrolling through my Instagram feed when a video slid into view uploaded by Luke Palmer of Collaborative Painting UK. When I first met Luke in 2001 at a hip hop jam in Exeter, Devon, he was introduced to me as graffiti writer ACERONE, a photographer, and fellow hip hop lover. Luke's ethos and love of collaborative work was evident even then through his approach to and perception of graffiti practice, which he talks about as a collaborative act: preparing outlines, identifying locations to paint, acquiring materials, final execution of work, even documenting and disseminating the work post-completion are executed collaboratively. On many occasions I have listened to Luke fervently describe an almost macrobiotic process of how he and another writer might share paint, negotiate wall space, and make sense of each other's outlines in order to blend them together to create the sensation of a holistic work. This, I sense, is at the heart of Luke's passion for collaboration, and echoes the shared educational ethos and collaborative nature of graffiti as a support mechanism for creative practice, as the crew mentality developed in 1970s New York.[1]

Forward-wind two decades and his enthusiasm for bringing the collaborative processes and assemblages of drawing, painting, and making art is highly evident in his ongoing engagement through Collaborative Painting UK. When he accepted the challenge of directing Collaborative Painting UK – a role that would see him develop his natural sense of collectivity with his creative drive – I enjoyed witnessing the results as his arts in health social enterprise project grew depth and breadth over a short two year span. Then, in March 2020, the coronavirus pandemic inverted our world as the first full UK lockdown was implemented, and a radical reimagining was desperately needed to address how we think about collaboration, creativity, and making work.

So back to the Instagram post. My thumb, chapped and split from the recurring practice of washing my hands, smearing them in hand sanitizer, and walking in the freezing fog in otiose attempt to exercise, met my forefinger to enlarge the image on the screen of my mobile phone. I unmuted the app and tuned in to what Luke had to say as he stood in the bitterly cold space of his garden and stared square into the camera. The video was a call to artists to make, celebrate, and share work and creativity. The idea was – in many ways – simple, yet as I listened to Luke's explanation of what he wanted to achieve I began to imagine its potential as a method of production that could achieve three crucial new ways to think about relationships in terms of collaboration, dissemination, and the author-audience experience. All three of these phenomena related to themes of cultural distancing, assemblage, and the everyday.

Collaboration is often inseperable from art practices, and the question becomes not whether processes and production of art practices are collaborative, but to what extent. Even at its most absolute and traditional social structure, I would argue that there exists a collaborative relationship between subject and artist, with practices of negotiation at its core. From the conventional sharing of ground and three-dimensional space to the communication of ideas, processes, and collective making and dissemination of made work, the realization of art as a thing; collaboration – in one form or another – takes place. Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat's collaborative paintings from the 1980s positioned them each with a greater international esteem in the art world, whilst the narratives which radiated from canvas into the space of the gallery were loaded with the structures of societal iconography and the power and presence of African American Olympic athletes and the discriminatory systems within which they lived.[2] Throughout the work of In Certain Places, the regionalist sensibilities of the spatio-material world and how they manifest in place-making are investigated through a range of art practices, which can only be successful through rigorous collaborative processes.[3] These are just two examples from an almost endless range of collaborative art praxes, so how does the #A4FOR5 project make sense of collaboration, and what is its collaborative value? Much of the answer lies in its methodology.

#A4FOR5 is a project that responded to the pandemic, and more specifically, social restrictions and the UK's third national lockdown (and arguably the most intense lockdown of the COVID-19 crisis). To achieve collaborative work in such circumstances, usual methods of meeting in a shared space was out of the question. Rather, a collaborative methodology developed through both the virtual world and the new spatially-restricted world the population now were occupying. A series of calls for contributors were made at specific intervals (approximately two to three weeks), and contributors were advised of the process for making and disseminating their completed pieces. Work was made simultaneously by artists in each grouping, and in whatever space they were occupying during lockdown. Some artists were fortunate enough to be working in their studios, but many were producing work made on kitchen units, at dining tables, on beds, on floors – whilst some were concurrently homeschooling, or caring for babies or elderly and vulnerable relatives. With the possibility of artists collaborating in the same physical shared space removed, the notion of shared workspace acquired new meaning, and collaborative space morphed into a composite of the space of Instagram and the spaces of domesticity.

Instagram as critical forum became a significant part of the assemblage of #A4FOR5. During the process of making their work, contributors engaged with one another privately through Instagram direct group messaging, and more openly through their own Instagram profile feeds. Each group's private exchanges contained a broad range of discussion from problems with sourcing materials, finding time to produce the work, and the issues with working in spaces cluttered with the everyday objects and processes of domesticity, to progress reporting and moments of show-and-tell – the latter through photographs posted into the group chat. These group chats offered a digital space for confidential critical reflection, advice, and support between the members of the group. In effect, what started out seemingly as a project which would be undertaken by five individuals simultaneously in isolation then shared at completion, became a shared process; a collaborative project where five major product components become a whole project of sorts, rather than five projects produced concurrently.

Deleuze and Guattari (2016) talk about assemblage not as a programmed set of components, but as a becoming; the processes of coming together. The differences in processes of assemblage between embracing Instagram and not embracing Instagram are far greater than simply using or not using a digital space as a tool. The very act of forming a group chat provides a shared digital space, that is clear. However, when that space is occupied, it becomes a place of dialogue from the first exchange of messages, a place which begins to gain criticality as it is populated with words and images. The words gather momentum and gather complexity; visual representations of work are posted adding to the dialogue, and the digital space becomes, in a sense, its own place. Yet this place is only ever controlled by its members located in physical places of domesticity. A spatio-emotional phenomenon occurs between the occupants of these realms; that which has become collaborative in the space of the digital platform then exists in the domestic spaces of isolation. Almost picnoleptic[4] – but not quite – the montage of text and image in the digital space invade the maker's space as they click on the private chat and consume the group's updates, each time experiencing a momentary tableau of criticality offered to the maker. As the space of the private group chat provides this platform for criticality, so too does the Instagram feed, albeit more curated, even in posts of progress work.

The critical discussions in the group chat and newsfeed underpin one's own self-reflective criticality. For me, the actions, discussions, and representations in the online space influenced my making process; I would close the app and return to my ad hoc, compact drawing board – a small area of computer desk no larger than the area of a piece of A3 paper – recalling fragments of my groups' visuals and words. I can cite one clear example of direct influence when Ruth Broadway – a member of my group – posted work that spoke of almost spiritual power present in a beautifully crafted Pocket Talisman which encouraged me to add the text: "Is there anybody out there?" and "Do you listen? Do you hear?" into the piece I was making, suggesting the lone, distant silhouetted figure, sat atop a derelict communications pod could have very much benefited from an exquisitely handstitched Pocket Talisman. As I gazed through the cold glass into the hollow, vacant street, I recalled that single word, written in red thread: "courage". That very physical and material act of stitching had occupied digital space with all its slickness and touched my emotions on the other side of the screen.

The following day, I stood in the centre of the living room, my breath visible as I exhaled into the silent void and looked intently at five A4 pieces laid out on the mesh of the long fireguard; two were almost complete, two were halfway there, and one was barely started. I stared long at the most unaccomplished sheet, and along the line of A4s to the most comprehensive. I stepped towards the paper, and began to work on the sparsest drawing. With my phone acting as a paperweight restraining one corner of the buckled paper – Instagram open – and the occasional slow scroll through my groups' posts between making ink marks on the page, the two spaces were truly part of the same process of assemblage.

Once the work was complete, each artist was required to post one finished A4 to each of the other artists, so each would receive five works in return. Whilst this form of dissemination was needs-driven due to the lockdown, this act became more than simply distribution of work, it became part of the assemblage – or what could be referred to as a method in the evolving methodology of the #A4FOR5 project. The method comprises systems for batch production, packaging, and shipping, all of which I would argue contribute to the processes of assemblage and the making of the work itself. Collaborators constructed their own packaging solutions, adapted mass-produced A4 wallets, or slipped their product into a board-backed envelope. Many considered how names and addresses would be presented on the package and sought to exploit this as a hint or suggestion of its contents; some used scents, and others sanitized each parcel. Then began the logistics of shipping. A conventional A4 envelope will slip with ease into the wide mouth of a cylindrical red Royal Mail pillar box, but how much did each shipment weigh? For some this was a factor, for others, a 1st class large stamp sufficed. Whatever shipment solution was employed, there was no avoiding the journey to the post office or pillar box.

Virilio's theory of the dromosphere (2006) refers to our accelerated techno-culture which has propelled our environment into one of distorted distances. The notion of spatiality is central to the dromosphere: "In spatial terms, the dromosphere is a physical sphere where speed of evolution and technological advances place humanity at risk, and the related concept of picnolepsy is the perceived speed and immediacy of the world within which one is at a particular moment."[5] Looking back on the traditional city, "Virilio describes the archaic dromosphere as a collection of walls, gates and other boundaries acting as obstacles to confront speed, where at these points a slowing down occurs (Speed and Politics, 29, 31)."[6] In this situation, when one engages with this phenomenon, a morphing of mind-speed occurs.[7] But what if this intensity is reversed?

During the third national lockdown the public were instructed to: "STAY HOME > PROTECT THE NHS > SAVE LIVES"[8] which translated to only venturing outside if absolutely necessary (i.e. if you were a key worker, or for essential shopping, reduced daily exercise, or supporting a vulnerable person). When one ventured out into the world, an uncanniness prevailed, streets sparse, silent, devoid of life. Even the halcyon road where I dwelled was empty of any trace of humans.

As I stepped onto the pavement, five perfectly rough rectangular A4 envelopes clutched close to my hip, I exhaled a deep breath and started up the road to the pillar box. The street was bare. Yet, the abyss I felt between me and the rest of my immediate world was intensely populated by the details of its material make up; the stark twigs of hedgerows and bare branches of trees were frozen aggressively in the thick air, the dense clouds overhead heavy with stress, the outline of each individual stone component of the road surface claimed its own position in what had previously existed as a strip of greyness. As I trod, the crunch of my sole on the paving slabs radiated through my body in rhythm with the deafening swish of the cardboard envelopes as they scraped along the surface of my polyester rain jacket. Within one minute, I was halfway to the pillar box, and although only one minute from home, I felt an overwhelming sense of exposure to the outside world. I winced as the cold sea air sored the corners of my eyelids, and the Government's words reprised in my mind: "...stay home...stay home...stay home...".

Lost in this internal monologue, I was at once upon the junction with the main street, which again, was uncannily calm, yet more unnerving as this once hectic street was barren of the pre-lockdown daily patterns of traffic, people, dogs, smells, and sounds. The pillar box on the corner confronted me, its stark, jolly red cylinder brutish, its gaping mush aggressively cackling at my uneasiness. From its top to its base, I regarded it cautiously. I learned that this particular box had been awarded the status of "Priority Box" as I read the text on the white oblong sticker, and I hurriedly submitted my five A4 wallets in series through the black slot. I turned and walked home, quickly. Never before had a pillar box intimidated me, its menacing smile – all lit up in fierce red – haunted me throughout my two-minute trot home. As I jiggled the key into my front door lock and slid inside, my heart pounded and palpitations saturated with a harrowing hyperreality consumed my whole.

Over the next three days, I squealed with joy each time the postie delivered a beautifully-considered piece of art to my door. Each one felt, looked, and smelled different, I would close my eyes and imagine their authors standing in the room talking with me. I reflected on the A4s I had posted, and hoped that the recipients of my work felt something similar.

Returning to Virilio's dromosphere, the diversions, distractions, and obstacles of techno-culture distort our perception of space, time, and distance, are usually contemplated within the hecticness of our advanced and accelerated lives. But during the lockdown, these diversions, distractions, and obstacles have not vanished, but changed state. External space became stagnant, physical obstacles were fewer, and the tangible distractions that previously invaded our perception of time, space, and distance, were reduced. Travel, movement, and relocation slowed as the world decelerated. Yet, the distortions of spacetime and distance were perpetuated by these very maneuvers. Rather than the dromosphere existing in a world of advancement and acceleration, it existed here in a world of slowness and deceleration. For me, the obstacles became the static details of the outlines of individual stones on the road, the prickly twigs and bare branches, and the hostile pillar box. Simultaneously, the digital world intensified; people worked and studied from home, shopped, met, socialized, and were entertained online, as the cacophony of the internet screwed perceptions of life ad infinitum. If the pre-pandemic dromosphere was ever stably unstable, it now seemed well and truly out of balance.

So, this journey into the dromosphere of the lockdown was a major part of the #A4FOR5 methodology; every collaborator's approach different, each with their own unique method for dissemination to their group in the spatio-material world. The second part of disseminating the completed work then took place online. Via Instagram and championed by Luke, collaborators uploaded and shared various photographic compositions of the artwork they received, most appended with captions, hashtags, emojis, and a string of comments and likes as their audiences consumed the work, a lo-fi curated exhibition in a hi-tech world. Here, the #A4FOR5 assemblage achieved more than reach an audience, as completed work was shared over the winter and spring of 2021, it inspired and recruited future collaborators, forged connections, and laid the foundations for potential collaborations, not least of them, the production of this book.

My final point for discussion in this reflection essay relates to themes of wellbeing and mental health. Luke makes no secret of the fact that his mental health was beginning to suffer during the COVID-19 crisis, and neither do I. Throughout the first wave of Coronavirus and its various lockdowns and tiers of restrictions during a turbulent 2020, creative practitioners worldwide sought to bring their work to audiences in new, digital ways. As musicians, actors, and dancers performed, visual artists and galleries curated and presented, and film and media creatives collaged, montaged, and edited, the public consumed; through uploads, downloads, streams, and screens, culture and the creative industries did its utmost not only to survive, but to offer what it has always offered and more. A rich pool of creative practice could be dived into with the click of a mouse or a tap on the pad, offering distraction, entertainment, relief, consolation, sympathy, empathy, criticality – the list is almost without end – and did much for the wellbeing of the nation. But what about the wellbeing of those creative practitioners? Creatives are highly adaptable in adverse conditions, and many excel in times of hardship, but few were being financially rewarded for their work in the digital realm. Furthermore, as much as creatives nationwide adapted to and took ownership of a variety of digital platforms (the gamer streaming service Twitch for example, which saw a host of DJs exploit its possibilities once the bars and clubs had been shut down), as venue closures meant not only loss of revenue and pay for artists, but lost opportunities for networking, shared experiences, and social interaction – both on and off the stage. Financial matters aside, it is the shared experiences and social interaction in the creative industries that sustains its life and the life of its members. The creative industries are, by nature, collaborative.

The #A4FOR5 project achieved much for the wellbeing of its collaborators. Neil Watkins contemplates that: "It was more about my feelings and my enjoyment. I was being creative again!!", and that the process had revealed being creative was: "Something I hadn't realised I'd missed… my mood was lifted, I was happier, I had a bounce to my walk, I started to think outside the confines of my house again." Furthermore, he expresses the value of this shared sense of creative uplifting and its relationship with reciprocally producing work for others: "…my thoughts went back to the recipients and their enjoyment, we've probably just shared the same experience together but also separately." (IG Messenger, April 2021).

Remer comments that the project took him "…to places I'd like to be more often in this crazy world." (IG Messenger, April 2021), and Hannah Broadway reflects the value in the project promoting – in an almost Gadamer-like way – the will: "to carve out some time just to play" (IG Messenger, May 2021).

Following the many conversations that have taken place after the #A4FOR5 project, and on the moving connections that became apparent between artists' work, Ruth Broadway simply states: "Proof that this collaboration stuff is pretty awesome, isn't it!?" (IG Messenger, May 2021).

Following a close bereavement and the arrival of COVID-19, Ian Irwin looked towards nature to help him through grief, as "Lockdown coincided with an incredible spring", when Ian "produced a series of abstract compositions, processing images of trees and branches through a series of apps." He continues: "I was looking for patterns in the chaos, to reassure and support myself. I posted them on my social media and was invited to join #A4FOR5 as a result. Instantly I felt that my explorations were validated and a chance to share them with other, actual artists really helped me feel that I was connected and part of something in an otherwise challenging time. I am grateful and humbled to have taken part in such a creative, positive collaborative project." (IG Messenger, May 2021).

Taking part in this shared experience as #A4FOR5 came into being brought a small yet powerful moment of physical, tangible collaboration to our otherwise isolated world.

Adam de Paor-Evans
June 2021

ENDNOTES

1. In 'On the Origins of Hip Hop: appropriation and territorial control of urban space', I argued that graffiti praxis "… is a process of development, often discussed with other writers…", and that: "Writers consume the margins of the city as laboratory, studio, workshop and gallery" (Evans 2014: 193), particularly at the Writer's Bench, where show-and-tell sessions were frequently held. Graffiti is not a linear activity, but critically reflective and collaborative, as there was "…also an incredible sense of family that grew from the formative years of hip hop culture" (Evans 2014: 197).

2. Interestingly, works by Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Bas quiat were included in the largest Beijing art show which occupied the one square kilometre of the 798 Art District during the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Pace Beijing seized the opportunity to hold its opening exhibition which featured the works, which Ren discusses as part of a spatio-global/ local connectivity of art space, heritage space, and new state space (2009: 1014-21).

3. In Certain Places is a continually evolving project, where collaboration through conversation and discussion sits at the core of the work, as richly presented in Subplots to a City: Ten Years of In Certain Places (2014).

4. Virilio describes picnolepsy as a tiny death, whereby: "Our vision is that of a montage, a montage of temporalities which are the product not only of the powers that be, but of the technologies that organize time" (1983: 48).

5. In 'The Futurism of Hip Hop: Space, Electro and Science Fiction in Rap', I discussed Virilio's dromosphere through the spatio-metaphor of the video game in relation to Afrofuturism and the nomadic sci-fi narratives in electro-rap (de Paor-Evans 2018: 130-3). Here, I use a similar framing to talk about the journey outside during the time-space of the national lockdown.

6. de Paor-Evans 2018: 131.

7. Deleuze and Guattari discuss this in reference to the nomad whose primary concern was safeguarding plateaued space (2004: 158).

8. From the official www.gov.uk press release: "New TV advert urges public to stay at home to protect the NHS and save lives", with a tagline stating: "The government has launched a major new public campaign urging people to act like they have the virus" (published 10 January 2021, Department of Health and Social Care). If you had the virus, the instructions were: "If you develop symptoms of COVID-19, stay at home and self-isolate immediately. If you have a positive test result but do not have symptoms, stay at home and self-isolate as soon as you receive the results. Your house hold needs to isolate too." Coronavirus (COVID-19), Rules, guidance and support.

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WALLS

‘MORE LOVE’

It was 25th November, my birthday, when a surprise message from my friend and fellow street artist Sepr appeared via Instagram direct message: “Your recent painting under the Cumberland Basin is ace mate! I’d love to hook up with you for a paint at some point if you fancy it? I know it would take some planning to link up our styles but I recon it would be great. Hope all is well, let me know what you think!”

I have always been a big fan of Sepr’s work and although we have known each other for many years and our paths crossed regularly, we had yet to collaborate on a painting. I replied immediately: “Great to hear from you mate, I’d love that. Let me see if I can find us a decent spot that’ll stay up a little longer than the 24 hours that the last one did!”

December rolled by as the UK was pulled in and out of varying degrees of lockdown measures and both Sepr and I tried to juggle life, work, families and Christmas, before January brought in the New Year and a further full UK lockdown. Sepr and I continued to message each other through Instagram developing ideas and working on a design. I asked if he had any characters he wanted to paint that I could use as inspiration for my lettering. “How about you do letters that say ‘MORE LOVE’ and I’ll design a load of cherubs causing chaos and firing love arrows all over the place?!”, was the reply. It felt like the perfect message to paint on a wall that faces a busy inner-city dual carriageway intersection at such a challenging time.

I hadn’t realised it at the time but ‘More Love’ was a phrase being painted by many graffiti artists around the world in an attempt to inject small bursts of positivity into the world during the global pandemic. It became a poignant expression that I would use again in the artwork I created for #A4FOR5 and eventually shared with all the 30 participants involved in the project.

Sepr X Acerone
Bristol - January 2021

Andy Council X Acerone

‘RETURN’

Andy Council and I have a long history of collaborating, our first painting together dating back to 2010 as part of one of the early UPfest events at the Tobacco Factory, Bristol. Although sporadic, our working together has always been easygoing and effortless; we seem to be able to pick up where we left off and fall into a natural rhythm with each other.

Andy was one of the first artists to get in touch with me when I began posting images of the lockdown canvases, which reconnected us and reignited a desire to hit the street and collaborate on some large-scale murals again. He told me about some recent work he had been producing based around the history of sailor’s tattoos and their meanings, then shared some sketches of mechanical swallows he had made from shards of gold, electrical wires and scrap metal.

Legend holds that since swallows return to the same location every year to mate and nest, the swallow will guarantee the sailor returns home safely. A sailor would have one swallow tattooed before setting out on a journey, and the second swallow tattooed at the end of their tour of duty, upon return to their home port. We made the decision that I would design the word ‘Return’, with Andy’s swallows swooping above and around my lettering.

The isolation of yet another lockdown intensified my need to get outside and paint alongside a friend, so I wasted no time in trying to find us an appropriate wall in a decent location. But with the battle for such spaces at an all-time high within the Bristol graffiti scene, my initial searches were unsuccessful. I decided to put out a ‘call for a wall’ on LinkedIn, offering a local business or property owner the chance to have an Andy Council X Acerone mural painted onto their wall for the price of the paint, but still I received no interest.

Eventually, Nigel from Out of Hand got in touch to ask if we could help to freshen up a wall just outside Bristol Temple Meads train station that Jody had previously painted but was now badly weathered. It was the perfect location, road-facing with a constant stream of traffic passing by at all hours of the day. We forged the necessary arrangements and got to work the very next day.

In the days that followed, Andy and I received many messages from people who had seen the work and were eager to find out more about it. Some could not read the text and wanted to know what it meant, others saw the word ‘Return’ and assumed it was a reference to our hope that the world would soon return to normal, and another made a connection between the word ‘Return’ and its location at the gates of a train station.

Andy Council X Acerone
Bristol - February 2021

Jody X Acerone

‘ACE1 — JODY’

Jody and I were making plans to visit Old Kemble Aerodrome in the Cotswolds to size up the fuselage of a decommissioned Boeing 727 as part of a potential commission when I had the idea to visit our mutal friends Epok and Piro; two of our contemporaries who had recently moved from Bristol to Stroud and joined forces in opening an art gallery and studio there. I mentioned it to Jody who readily agreed and advanced the idea to include a stop-off at an infamous graffiti hall of fame on the outskirts of the city.

Aeroplane and gallery visits complete, we finally arrived at our destination a little past 2pm, took a tour of the huge decaying warehouse and chose our wall. As I poured black masonry paint into the roller bucket, I noticed ice crystals forming on its metal handle and I began to think that this might not have been our greatest idea. The paint would never dry in temperatures this cold, and it was already beginning to get dark.

We battled against the elements for at least an hour before admitting defeat, and headed back to our cars to thaw out before returning home. Undeterred, we made arrangements to return and finish our wall a few days later. This time we came prepared; an early start with flasks of tea, snacks, extra layers, and loo roll… just in case. As I began adding my lettering to the wall I noticed areas of masonry paint that still hadn’t dried, from three days earlier.

As we completed the painting and captured our work through photographs and video, Jody told me that despite having painted graffiti since the late 1980s, he had never painted an abandoned warehouse but had always wanted to. I looked around the desolate environment we were stood in; the walls crumbling, the asbestos roof caving in, and rubble on the floor interspersed by crushed cider cans and discarded hypodermic needles. I was frozen to the core, could barely move my fingers and could hardly believe that we had made a 70-mile round trip — twice — to paint a wall hidden away in the Cotswolds that barely anyone would ever see, but had loved every minute of it.

Jody X Acerone
Stroud - February 2021

'LAZY DAZE'

The #A4FOR5 project directly connected me to a large number of local artists with whom I had not previously known; one such artist was Conrico Steez. A few weeks after the project had come to a natural end, Conrico got in touch to ask me for some advice concerning an arts funding application he was interested in, and our conversations developed from there. I felt a good vibe from him, I liked his energy and his artwork intrigued me; combinations of hand drawn, painted and digital techniques, packed with humour and quirky concepts.

During one of our chats, Conrico casually mentioned the idea of us painting a mural together. It just so happened that I had a wall lined up to paint the very next day, so offered to bring him in and asked if he had any ideas of what he wanted to paint. "Something warm and tropical to welcome in the springtime..."

His suggestion immediately got my imagination racing, my mouth inadvertently blurting out a string of words; "Summer Days — Summer Daze —Lazy Daze!". 'Lazy Daze' was the title of one of Bristol's earliest graffiti productions, painted by Oli T in 1983 on the wall of a derelict building in Kingsdown. I described the piece to Conrico; the palm trees, the waves, the boombox and the crab, keen to find of if he knew the piece. He laughed and told me that 1983 was ten years before he was born, but he loved the description and was keen to see the original. Photos were sent, sketches exchanged and plans made; "See you tomorrow!'"

Working with Conrico was effortless, he was as easy going and laid back in person as he had appeared through Instagram and our painting came together naturally, the only challenge being the lamppost that ran down the very centre of the wall which forced me to warp parts of my design in such a way that from a direct face-on viewpoint, the lamppost would blend into the rest of the wall, almost through a process of anamorphosis. As we spoke through the day, we made an interesting realisation; Oli T had painted his piece in 1983, I had begun painting graffiti 12 years later in 1995, and Conrico 12 years on in 2007, and through our collaboration I had inadvertently connected three generations of Bristol street artists through one image.

Later that evening I messaged Oli T to tell him the story and share with him a photograph of our new interpretation of his early work. "That's really cool, see you soon for an out-cider..." he replied.

Conrico Steez X Acerone
Bristol - March 2021

'SMALL AXE'

It was Easter 2021 and I had been offered the opportunity to paint a series of hoardings on Newfoundland Road in St Paul's, a site that had been at the centre of some well organised and highly publicised protests against the felling of a row of ancient maple trees for many years. I had lost track of what stage the campaign had reached, but I was vaguely aware that Bristol City Council had recently given permission for the final tree to be cut down to make way for a new building development.

With this in mind, I was keen to paint something that spoke specifically of that space and would reference the trees and knew the perfect artist to partner up with; 3Dom. He lived locally, has a passion for provoking community engagement through his artwork, and could bring whatever letters I painted to life with his character and background skills.

3Dom and I had been discussing an anthology film series called 'Small Axe' by the artist and director Steve McQueen that was being aired on Sunday evenings throughout the end of 2020. The five films told distinct stories about the lives of West Indian immigrants in London from the 1960s to the 1980s; stories that despite being hugely significant to recent British history, neither of us had ever heard before. The title was taken from the proverb, 'Small axe fall big tree', made infamous by Bob Marley's 1973 song 'Small Axe'. We decided that I would write 'Small Axe', while 3Dom would take care of the rest.

It wasn't until we were halfway through the painting that we received out first objection, from a disgruntled passerby who had become tired of the political wrangling in his area, then a Green Party councillor who suggested we weren't being political enough, demanding we add direct references to other local political figures, and finally a local business owner who aggressively objected to us painting near his car wash, but couldn't effectively explain why.

A little later, I was approached by a lady radiating Grandmother energy who came to thank us for blessing a space she held close to her heart. She said she had helped to coordinate the campaign and had spent many nights camping on the site and at times, even up in the branches of the tree. Then she presented us with arm bands hand painted with a silhouette of a maple leaf and said that we deserved them.

The next morning, I received a text from 3Dom saying that our painting had already gone, now coated in a patchy layer of brown gloss.

3Dom X Acerone
Bristol - April 2021

LUKE PALMER

Luke Palmer is an artist, photographer, lecturer and DJ from Bristol, England, with a background in street art and graffiti spanning back to the mid-1990s. Using the alias Acerone he has exhibited his work publicly on walls across the South West, and in addition to multiple group exhibitions, has had three solo shows; 'Photographiti' and 'Hero's Journey' (Bristol, 2010/2011), and 'Where is Iron John?' (London, 2013). Since leaving a twelve-year career in the youth education sector in 2018, he has worked as a freelance mural artist, a therapeutic arts practitioner at Bristol Royal Hospital for Children, and launched Collaborative Painting UK; a social enterprise using art and creativity to help businesses and community groups foster new forms of communication that improve mental health and wellbeing in the workplace.

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ADAM DE PAOR-EVANS

Dr. Adam de Paor-Evans is an ethnomusicologist, cultural theorist, writer, practitioner, and musicology scholar focusing on the hidden aspects of music cultures. He is Reader in Ethnomusicology and Director of the Creative Practice Research Academy at UCLan. He runs the research project RHYTHM OBSCURA: Revealing Hidden Histories through Ethnomusicology and Cultural Theory and is interested in the relationships between the intertextuality and intangibility of music cultures, their reifications, artefacts, personal histories, and representational devices. In addition to many journal articles and guest chapters, he has published two books entitled: PROVINCIAL HEADZ: British Hip Hop and Critical Regionalism (Equinox Publishers Ltd., 2020), and SCRATCHING THE SURFACE: Hip Hop, Remoteness, and Everyday Life (Squagle House, 2020). He is editor of the biannual publication HEADZ-zINe, which intersects the theory and practice of hip hop, history, and ethnomusicology.

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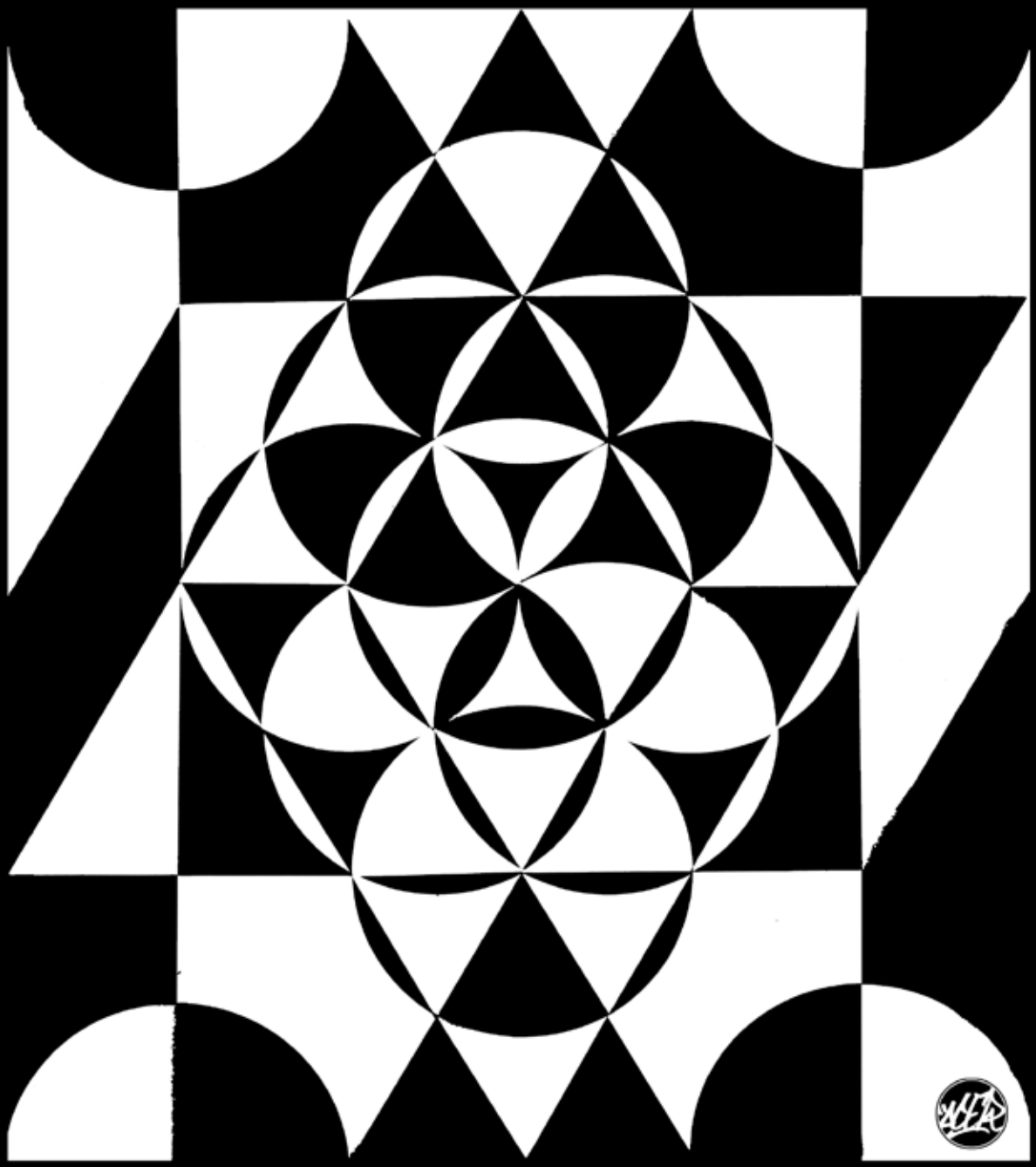
"Lockdown Collaborations is a heartfelt record of what can be achieved when one determined artist/educator takes the debilitating restrictions of 2020's UK COVID-19 lockdown as a challenge to accomplish something truly extraordinary.

The brainchild of Luke 'ACERONE' Palmer, Lockdown Collaborations is an exploration of the triumph of the (creative) human spirit over (air-borne, viral) adversity."

Felix 'FLX' Braun, 2021.



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