

Title

Creativity in Crises: Adapting a community of practice through a landscape of COVID-based disturbances

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Abstract

This co-authored paper discusses reflections from an ongoing dialogic interdisciplinary forum titled, This Is Not A Seminar: Creative Research Dialogues (TINAS), specifically from the perspectives of Ph.D. candidates Gale Mason and Harrison See; both painters and practice-led researchers who regularly participate and benefit from it. The theme “Together in Tough Times” has been particularly poignant as during the uncertainty created by the COVID 19 pandemic, this forum faced unmitigated disruption and an uncertain future. Through the commitment of its members, TINAS adapted as it sought to navigate these difficult times. Two key shifts that took place within these sessions are of particular interest. The necessity of adapting to operating within a space between domestic and professional while challenging a ‘business as usual approach’ and shifting from the analogue world to online communication. There is also a focus on the strategies employed as TINAS rose to the challenge of negotiating with this new terrain, acknowledging their varying levels of success and in some cases, outright failures.

Biographies

Gale Mason

Gale Mason is a London-born figurative painter who is now based in Western Australia. She has also lived and studied in Germany. Through focusing on process and materials as well the status of figurative paintings as a contemporary art medium, she creates images of theatrical settings inhabited by disconnected figures. Gale is a current PhD candidate at Edith Cowen University in Perth.

Harrison See

Harrison See, is a contemporary artist interested in symbolism and allegory that transcends cultural difference. His practice-led research explores dialogic collaborative painting across cultures. See is a PhD candidate in the School of Arts and Humanities (SAH), Edith Cowan University, as well as a New Colombo Plan Alumni and the recipient of a Research Training Program Scholarship.

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The interdisciplinary platform known as TINAS was established in 2012 recognising the need for additional support for practice-led HDR candidates. TINAS was created as an informal, conversation-based model, acknowledging academic rigor, to provide an avenue to investigate the relationship between theory and practice across creative disciplines (Adams et al., 2015). At present, Dr. Lyndall Adams, Dr. Renee Newman, Dr. Marcella Polain and Professor Mindy Blaise act as constants, while Higher Degree Research (HDR) candidates facilitate. Participants originate from the 'School of Arts and Humanities', the 'Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts' and the 'School of Education' at Edith Cowan University.

TINAS is an interdisciplinary *community of practice* (CoP) and welcomes participation from both staff and HDR candidates within performing arts, visual arts, creative writing, social sciences, media studies and design, as well as external industry professionals. The analogue sessions take place weekly, with participants given the opportunity to explore a potential multiplicity of perspectives as they engage in creative research dialogues. TINAS has proven to be an invaluable resource in connecting HDR students from diverse creative fields and generating a vibrant exchange of ideas and experiences. In addition, TINAS provides essential support for HDRs by conducting workshops for research skills. TINAS has afforded its participants the potential to enrich and extend their practices. For example, as Gale Mason is interested in depicting movement in painting, she found her research furthered by listening to performance HDRs discuss bodies in motion through their experiences, perspectives and disciplinary terminology.

Contaminated Diversity

At the beginning of the year, TINAS launched into the new semester with a curated program entitled 'Contaminated Diversities'—a term used by anthropologist Dr. Anna Tsing (2012) in her article, 'Slow Disturbance: Potential Collaborators for a Liveable Earth'—was introduced to initiate conversation. Tsing (2012) uses the term contaminated diversity to describe

cultural and biological lifeforms that have developed as a result of human disturbance. Framing the dynamic between nature and humankind within the anthropocene as collaborative; a 'collaborative adaptation to human-disturbed ecosystems' (Tsing, 2012, p. 95). A diversity that:

...emerges as the detritus of environmental destruction, imperial conquest, profit making, racism, and authoritarian rule—as well as creative becoming. It is not always pretty. But it is who we are and what we have as available working partners for a liveable earth. (Tsing, 2012, p.95)

Tsing (2012) presents the Matsutake mushroom as an example of such collaborative adaptation. This fungus appears in 'blasted landscapes' (Cons, 2016) or where human interference has occurred, and depends on symbiotic relationships with the red pine tree, which similarly thrives in such areas. Arguably the first life to emerge from the devastated landscape of Hiroshima (Ma, 2015), the Matsutake (Figure 1) is now valued as a delicacy in Japan and the Northern Hemisphere. A common feature of such contaminated diversity organisms is their flexibility and resilience. This theme was chosen to coincide with the TINAS model of interdisciplinary exchange, with the emphasis on how diversity can be generated within collaborative synergies.



Figure 1: Image of Matsutake Mushroom (2012) [Photograph by Hank Shaw]

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 represented a tremendous shift in how we all lived and conducted our everyday lives. Necessarily imposed restrictions on social contact, travel and significantly reduced access to campus, and therefore participation. TINAS was no longer able to operate normally as analogue group sessions,

forcing a rethink and demand for flexibility. Reluctant to reduce community contact and support at this particularly difficult time, TINAS facilitators chose to adopt alternate solutions to maintain operations during this period of disturbance. Through digital platforms such as Zoom video conferencing, TINAS continued to operate during this international crisis. The way that these platforms shifted community engagement, created alternative and unconventional approaches to these already creative dialogues of exchange.

The Coronavirus discharged the TINAS community into an uncertain space. Suddenly, the notion of Contaminated Diversities took on new meaning and became of acute relevance. In this era of disruption and uncertainty, as we experience our own landscape of slow disturbance, where the unknown has steadily seeped into our lives, community support is particularly crucial. However, if TINAS was to continue its operations, it would also have to face these challenges and adapt, or re-imagine itself. To treat COVID-19—or rather the disruption we experienced: travel restrictions, social distancing and a general questioning of systems—as a collaborative force for creativity; a ‘creative becoming’ as we collaborated with the many disturbances of COVID-19 restrictions. The poignancy regarding this situation is that the virus itself is an unknown quantity and the duration of the pandemic remains uncertain. TINAS was forced to accept this situation as the new normal, or the *supernormal*, and learn to navigate the unfamiliar. It is also important here to acknowledge that we have been fortunate in the Western states and our period of lock-down was relatively brief in comparison to elsewhere. However, these are reflections from that peculiar time and which may offer insights to those still in, or re-entering lockdown. Insights from this paper are not technical in nature, but rather discuss COVID-based disturbances as a collaborative entity. A collaboration within a seemingly uncreative space (Zoom) as participants navigate the restrictions and opportunities of working within Zoom’s features.

Relocation & Disturbance

Relocating to Zoom shifted TINAS to the virtual, bringing its community exchange with it. This critical strategy enabled TINAS to continue as a CoP, generating creative interdisciplinary dialogues, as well as lending essential support and motivation amongst its participants. This shift thrust its community into a strange new liminal space, blurring boundaries between domestic and professional. Participants’ interior and exterior worlds merged as their private spaces transformed into platforms for communication. This shift revealed further disturbances as the interference of pets, children, doorbells and other house occupants became regular features of TINAS sessions. This nascent space (Figure 2), a product of the *supernormal*, came with its own set of challenges.

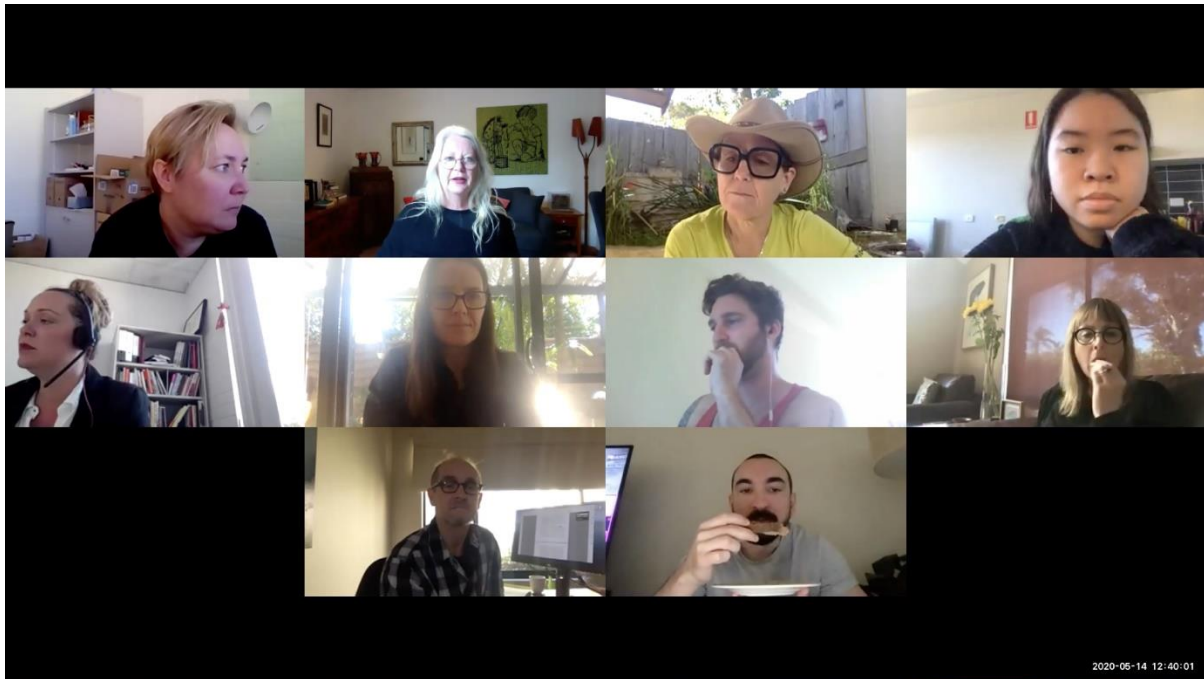


Figure 2: Screenshot from TINAS Zoom meeting 2020-05-14 12.31.07 TINAS (2020)
[image courtesy of TINAS]

For most participants, Zoom was a new tool that required mastering. A tool that relied on a system easily overloaded during the peak of the lockdown. The usual animated exchanges of TINAS became stilted and rigid due to Zoom’s incapacity to allow more than one person to speak at a time—the others waiting their turn while muted. Additionally, not all participants were visible, either because they had not turned on their video mode or because of limited screen space. Thus, all spontaneity and personal interaction were rendered impossible. The subtleties of language, both bodily and verbal disappeared, while the energy and the synergy endemic to TINAS sessions diminished. It was in this space that TINAS participants began their collaboration with COVID-based disturbances, a reluctant partnership with connectivity issues, rigid communication and computer screen fatigue. Seminal theorist Charles Green (2001), asserts that disruptions to creative practice through collaboration grants access to new emergent opportunities; opportunities that Green (2001)—and other theorists of artistic collaboration (Gold, 2018, Harty and Sawdon, 2016, McNally, 2018, De Watcher, 2017)—assert are often inaccessible through an individual’s solo practice. During collaboration subjectivity shifts from the individual to the composite, a fracturing of creative agency navigated by collaborators as they explore new territories, methods and materials (Green, 2001, McNally, 2018, Gold, 2018).

As TINAS navigated disruptions to the forum’s usual approaches, participants adapted to these emergent territories, methods and materials. Therefore, despite technical difficulties, and Zoom not being conducive to the academic rigor and energetic exchanges of normal

TINAS sessions, participants remained resilient in an effort to maintain this CoP. What became clear during this time was the importance of an interactive community within the increasingly isolating HDR experiences induced by COVID restrictions. During the lockdown, this secondary (or meta) function of connection ascended as TINAS transformed into a weekly reflexive touchstone. It was during, and between, these sessions that TINAS reflexively responded to COVID-based disturbances. Adaptations that, like the Matsutake, emerged from an unsuspecting landscape; emergent and supernatural approaches that were incorporated into TINAS creative and interdisciplinary dialogues.

Navigating a Blasted Landscape

In this emergent, yet seemingly unproductive and infertile space—our own ‘blasted landscape’ of sorts—TINAS began the process of adaptation via Zoom’s screen sharing features. Early attempts were direct translations from previous strategies; for example, the simple exchange of creative work for discussion as seen in Figure 3 using the print work of HDR Shana James. Although this virtual space was no substitute for experiencing an artwork within the gallery context for which it was intended—especially as this artwork is over 2 meters high—it was the starting point as participants slowly found their bearings amidst this new landscape and pushed to keep this CoP relevant. Ultimately, this screen sharing of a static image, combined with the already rigid nature of Zoom communication, did not translate to later sessions. An approach that this begrudged partnership between COVID and TINAS rejected, a short-lived emergence that fell back into the soil; nutrients for the next adaptation.

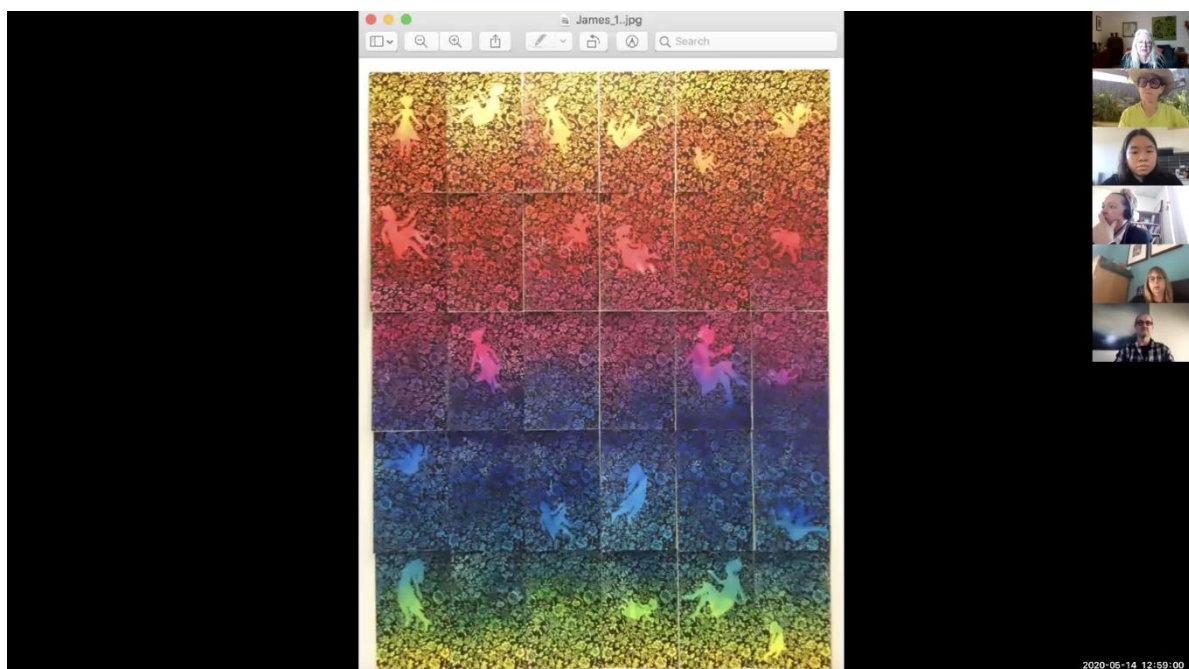


Figure 3: Screenshot from TINAS Zoom meeting 2020-05-14 59.00 TINAS (2020) [image courtesy of TINAS]. Artwork featured: After Jumping Falling (2020) thirty-panel linocut print]

Other attempts saw participants initiate projects outside of the forum, engaging with external online communities through social media, then returning to TINAS with emergent imagery. Figure 4 & 5 shows the Instagram (IG) page Harrison See created for posting digital works he assembled in Adobe Photoshop (PS). See then encouraged others to rework these images and send them back to be re-uploaded either anonymously or tagging them for their contributions. The imagery See created was predominantly non-figurative patterns, avoiding any overt signifiers. The intention was to offer visual invitations for contributors to interpret, rework, and ultimately contaminate.

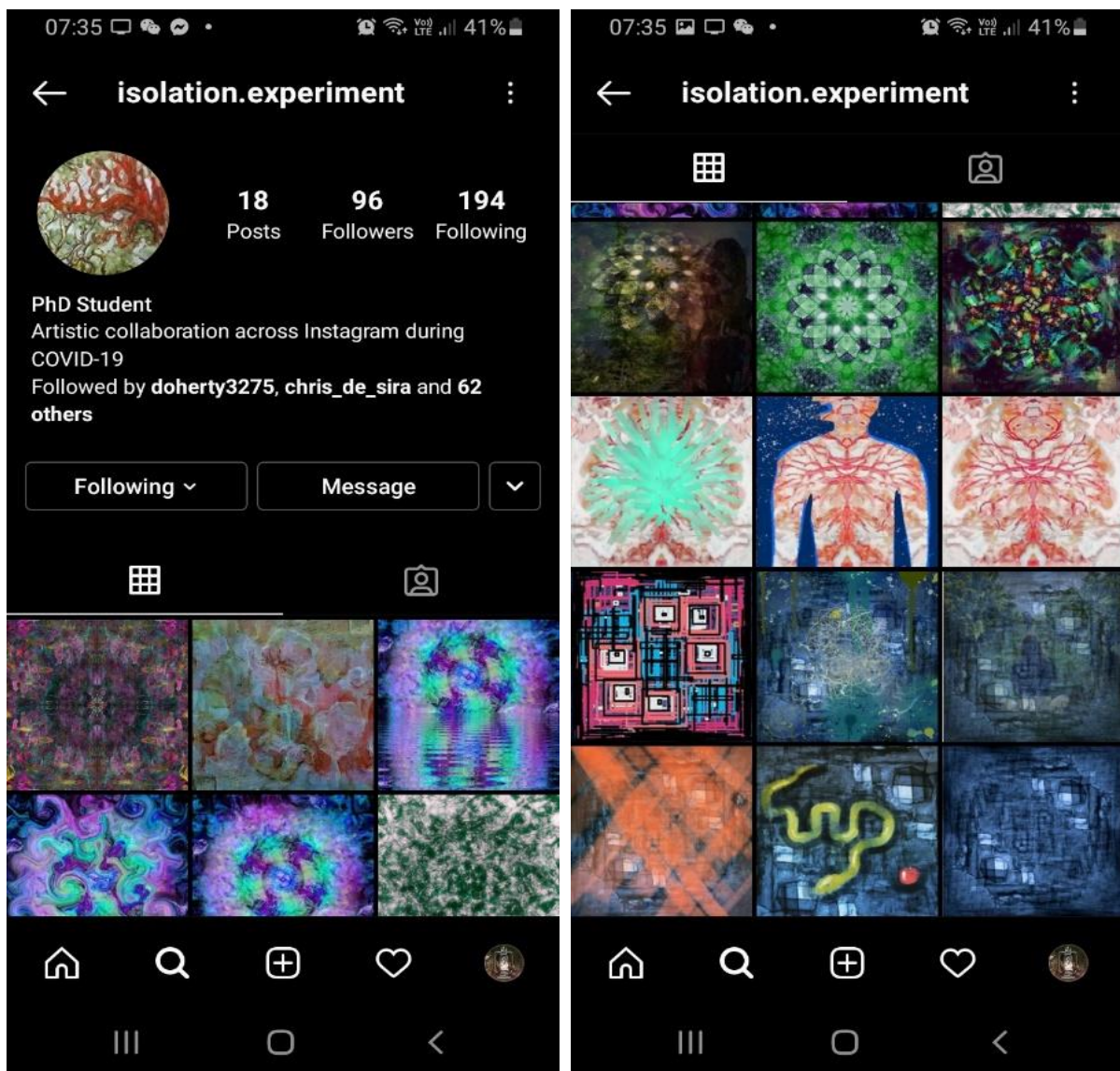
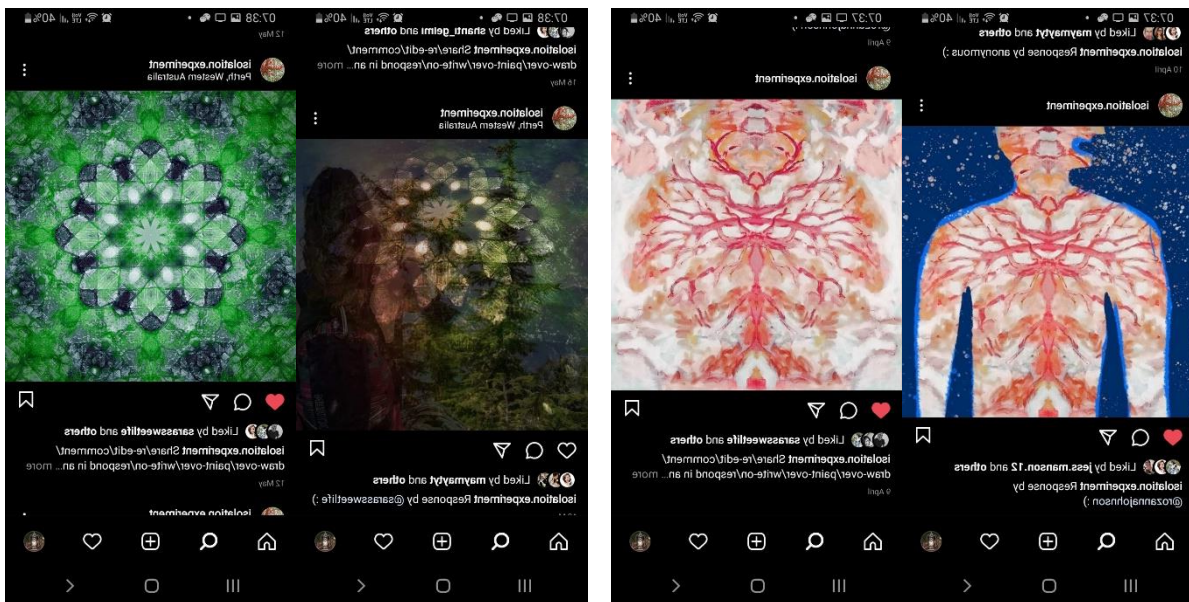


Figure 4 & 5: Screenshots from *isolated.experiment* Instagram page (2020)
[images courtesy of Harrison See]

This idea stemmed from previous TINAS sessions that examined the notion of palimpsest, and the aim was to layer (or contaminate) this imagery beyond recognition; recognition

regarding both content and authorship. Two IG contaminations can be seen in figures 6 & 7 that specifically responded to the COVID pandemic. However, this approach tapered as the IG page slowly received fewer responses. See found it difficult to build followers in the short time-frame, let alone those willing to engage with imagery. Upon inquiring with responders, See discovered that this lack of engagement reflected a growing sense of overexposure to social media as people’s lives increasingly shifted online during COVID-19. A screen fatigue that TINAS participants also experienced as increasing amounts of work, research, creative practice and overall communication relocated online. A fight for resources in a landscape overrun with competing emergencies all adapting to widespread COVID-based disturbances.



Figures 6 & 7: Screenshots from *isolated.experiment* Instagram page (2020) [images courtesy of Harrison See]

Contamination and Palimpsest

In continuing this collaboration with COVID’s many disturbances, TINAS pursued an exchange of creative practice with increase interactivity, participant and musician, Ben Falle screen-shared while constructing an audio palimpsest layered from voice samples of previous TINAS zoom sessions (Figure 8). The result, an almost incoherent (and again contaminated) audio file that shifted in and out of ambiguity. Unlike previous screen-sharing sessions—partly due to most participants’ unfamiliarity with music software—participants began to make suggestions as Falle made changes in real-time. Motivated by curiosity, participants inquired how these layers of sound could be transformed and reworked as discussions focused on this joint-process. This adaptation towards real-time creative practice briefly reintroduced the usual TINAS rigor before again retuning to the soil from which it grew. However, and more importantly, it allowed that to surface which was missing from

previous TINAS sessions, a sense of real-time interactivity that was now clearly important amongst this new landscape. A landscape where other adapting emergences—online media outside of TINAS also competing for our attention—seldom offered.



Figure 8: Screenshot from TINAS Zoom meeting [2020-05-07 12.27.15](#) TINAS 449211814, researcher Ben Falle using music software Ableton Live being used to edit sound recordings (2020) [image courtesy of TINAS]

Expanding on this idea of a cooperative palimpsest, participants began to submit a range of creative works to be experimented with during TINAS sessions. This approach initially limited collaboration to one or two editors taking turns layering files in PS before saving it back into a share-folder for others to access—a process where those not editing files would still be engaged in dialogue around what was happening on their screens. The following adaptation utilised a combination of both Zoom’s screen-sharing and remote-access features further expanding interactivity. For example, Microsoft Paint (MSP) was used to digitally work into a photo of one of Dr. Lyndall Adams’ artworks (*Figure 9*). This was still a one-at-a-time collaboration, however, Zoom’s remote access feature meant that users could quickly tag in and out of control of the on-screen layering. Also, the rudimentary nature of MSP allowed for greater inclusivity from participants less familiar with PS. This digital on-screen collaging soon evolved to include Zoom’s annotation functions.

By the end of the semester, participants were taking full advantage of this function to simultaneously collage in real-time, while still effectively moving between the standard verbal and chat layers of Zoom. A simultaneous digital collaging that helped reclaim some of the rigor and energy that was lost through a rigid one-at-a-time use of Zoom (*Figure 10*).

Furthermore, by this point Zoom's chat feature was well and truly an important part of TINAS; where participants would contribute comments or questions either directly related to, or inspired, by the screen-sharing and verbal exchanges; resulting in multiple simultaneous layers of self-contaminating dialogue. It also must be acknowledged that the inclination to preserve image-based approaches reflects the fact that the majority of participants operate from visual disciplines. Furthermore, Zoom already facilitated verbal interactions (albeit more rigid than face-to-face discussions), which offered a complimentary layer of dialogue to these visual and written counterparts. Ultimately a facilitator was tasked with monitoring the written (chat) layer of Zoom dialogue to keep this sometimes left-behind space democratic and inclusive as these three concurrent, but often alternate, dialogues took place simultaneously.

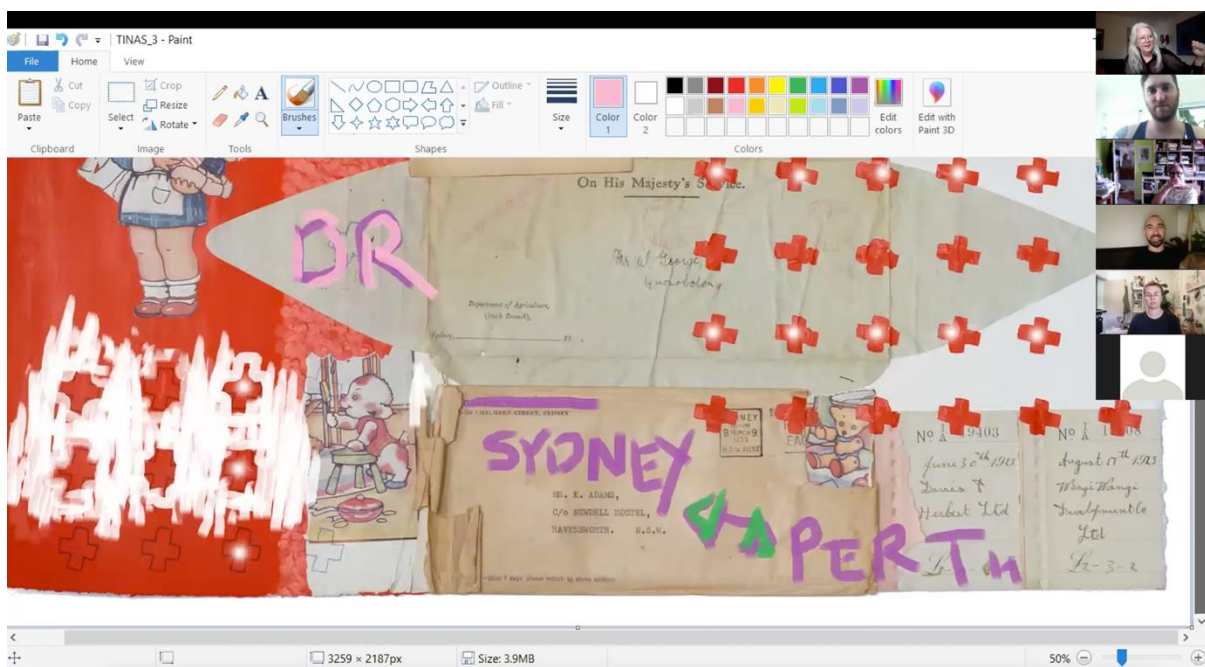


Figure 9: Screenshot from TINAS Zoom meeting [2020-04-02](#) 12.37.59 TINAS 449211814B [image courtesy of TINAS]

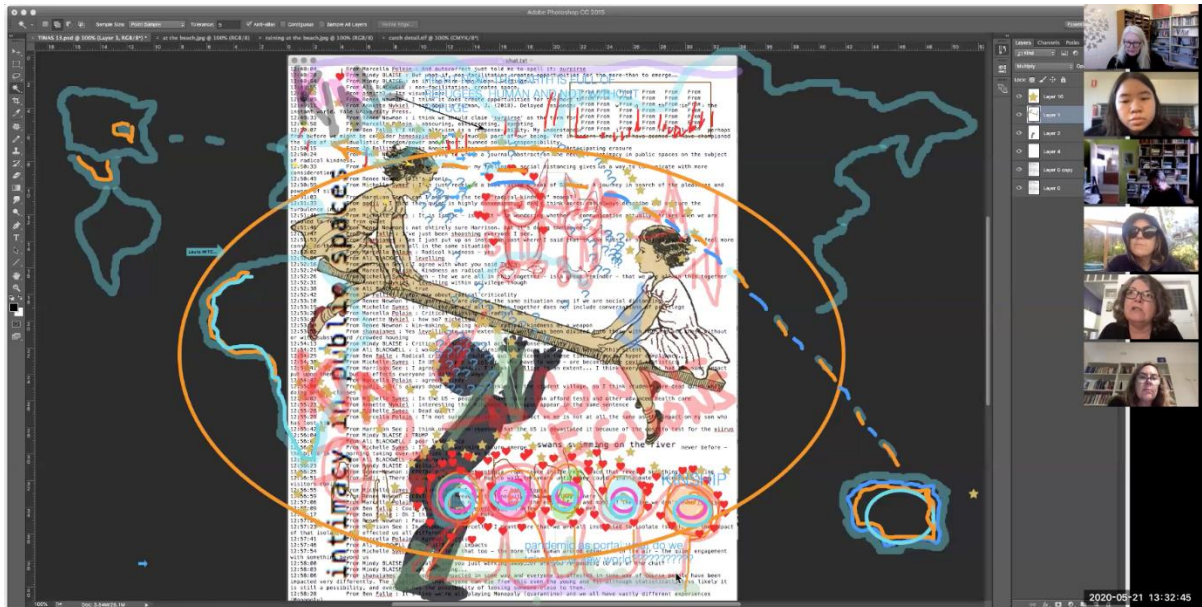


Figure 10: Screenshot from TINAS Zoom meeting 2020-05-21 12.37.56 TINAS 449211814 [image courtesy of TINAS]

As Disturbances Fade

Eventually restrictions eased and participants were slowly allowed to re-enter the same space, marking an intermission from TINAS' partnership with COVID-based disturbances. As the agency of this collaborate entity faded, TINAS did trial a further adaptation dubbed 'Zoom and in the room'. An approach that saw HDRs and staff either participating remotely, or locally from the usual TINAS space; all participants, even those attending in-person, accessing the same Zoom chat from individual devices. Once a new set of technical issues were worked through, this was attempted for several sessions with varying degrees of success. However, the inclusivity afforded to those accessing the forum remotely was outweighed by their inability to engage with participants attending in person, with those in the room beginning to return to the spontaneous and animated exchanges synonymous with a pre-COVID TINAS. To spite the best efforts of facilitators to keep all participants engaged, this created a division that disrupted the usually democratic space of the forum and 'Zoom and in the room' became less viable. However, TINAS' return to normal was not viewed as a de-evolution, but rather as a homecoming from a venture into new territory; a return that brought with it previously untested approaches and a revitalised appreciation of real-world contact. Furthermore, when COVID restrictions return, TINAS will be ready to trial new adaptations that from the very beginning focus on real-time interactivity.

In the absence of the analogue experience in which much of our arts community thrives, adaptation towards a dialogue comprised of real-time cooperative digital collaging, as well as verbal and written communication, became the most interactive and inclusive solution to our

CoP operating over Zoom. Three concurrent and differently paced, and often misaligned, layers of dialogue that bled in and out of each other. A contamination of multiple voices, approaches, and perspectives emergent from TINAS' collaborative encounter with COVID-based disturbances. Zoom was pushed by its participants until some semblance of TINAS' usual rigor resurfaced and the forum discovered emergent approaches within a blasted landscape. Approaches that would not have been trialled if not for the disruptions of COVID-19 restrictions. Although this type of digital collaborative collaging is nothing new, this paper has not aimed to offer technical innovations, nor novel approaches to collaboration, but rather has tracked TINAS' adaptations when partnered with COVID-based disturbances. A frustrating but optimistic partnership that saw these disruptions to its CoP as an opportunity to navigate the blasted landscape of Zoom, and adapt its approaches to creative dialogue accordingly.

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