

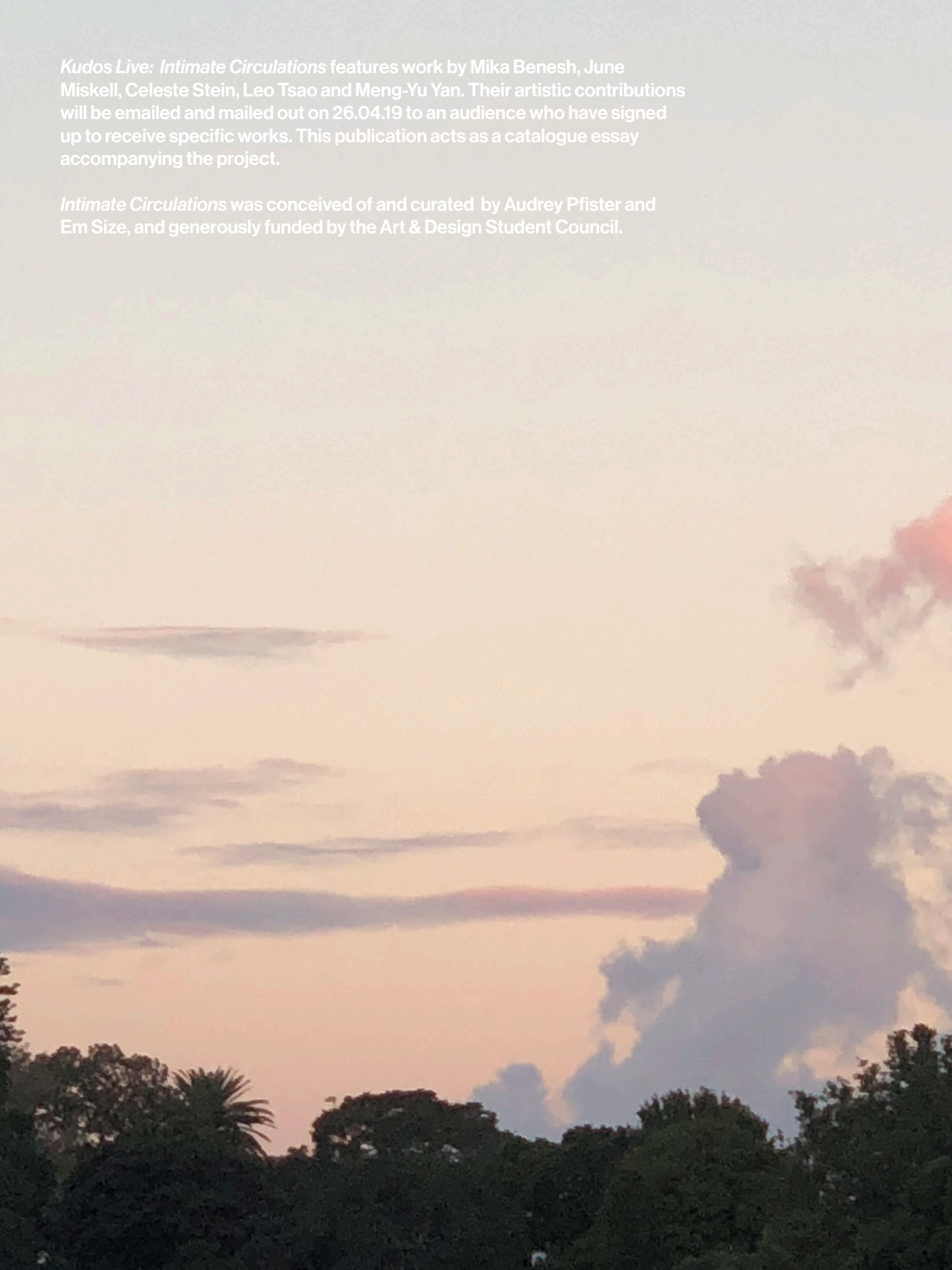
KUDOS LIVE

INTIMATE CIRCULATIONS

We acknowledge and pay our respects to the Bigjigal people of the Dharug Nation and and Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, the traditional custodians of the land on which much of this project has been produced. It is on their unceded country that Kudos Gallery is situated and operates, and this text and project was conceived and created.

Kudos Live: Intimate Circulations features work by Mika Benesh, June Miskell, Celeste Stein, Leo Tsao and Meng-Yu Yan. Their artistic contributions will be emailed and mailed out on 26.04.19 to an audience who have signed up to receive specific works. This publication acts as a catalogue essay accompanying the project.

Intimate Circulations was conceived of and curated by Audrey Pfister and Em Size, and generously funded by the Art & Design Student Council.





Thank you to Audrey Pfister for trusting me to take the lead on this document, which goes alongside a project we have both poured so much into. Thank you also for helping me with the design and final edit of the piece. Between us, about a decade of industry experiences, frustrations, hopes and desires have gone into the development of this project - and I am so proud of the processes and outcomes that we have worked towards. You have taught me so much.

Thank you to Mika Benesh, June Miskell, Celeste Stein, Leo Tsao and Meng-Yu Yan for sharing your talent, trust, vulnerability, and time with Audrey and I in the development of this project. You have all made this experience what it has been for me: a surprising opportunity to imagine curating as a labour that might, in some small way, address the nightmarish social realities that the art world both sits within and actively produces.

Thank you to the Art & Design Student Council for generously funding this project.

Thank you to Luke Letourneau for having faith in Audrey and I to curate this project and for offering us this opportunity. Thank you to Loc Nguyen, Kieran Butler and Rebecca Hall for supporting this project in your various roles at Arc @ UNSW Art & Design.

Thank you to Bella Cornell and Val Schlosberg for including me in *Workshop 2* last year as an artist, and for sharing your curatorial approaches and perspectives with me. This catalogue is indebted to the feelings and processes that you facilitated during that project.

I dedicate the heart that went into this catalogue to Astrid Lorange and Andrew Brooks. To learn through living, with friends, is the most necessary act.

Curating could be like a friendship— a long conversation

The following 'conversation' has been transcribed (in the case of June and Leo), copy and pasted from email (in the case of Meng, Mika and Celeste), edited for brevity and clarity, and arranged on the page by Em. Although each artist was interviewed separately, their thoughts have been intercut and arranged here into a single conversation. Sometimes quotations appear out of order, and are framed as answers to differently worded questions than what was actually asked. Nonetheless, all attempts have been made to keep responses true to their original meaning and general context. This curated arrangement of quotations has been constructed to facilitate a reading of the artists' individual thoughts as a chorus of feelings and ideas that echo and diverge across this project.

[June, Audrey and I brought snacks from the Organic Bread Bar into Kudos Gallery a bit before dusk. We chatted en plein air in the Kudos alleyway.]

[Leo drifted up to me at the 107 co-working space on a skateboard, and we had iced coffee together and we laughed and talked for a long time.]

[Mika, Meng (who's in Paris on an artist residency), and Celeste (who's in Copenhagen on exchange), all generously replied to a couple of questions I sent (quite last minute) over email.]

If you feel comfortable, could you tell us a bit about the work and its relation to the theme of *Intimate Circulations*?

J I guess I would start by saying the work is quite a personal work. It's a text that I've been working on, or hoping to work on, in the back of my mind, for the past two years now. But it's been a long journey having to kind of— even though parts were easier to write than others, it's been a constant journey of thinking through those thoughts before being able to write them down, in any context. But with *Intimate Circulations*, I began by thinking, obviously, around ideas of intimacy and I defaulted to thinking about every relationship I've ever been in for some reason? And I was kind of thinking, what can I do here with old messages or something? And then I was like, no, that's dangerous! [Laughter] Everyone knows your dating history, if you choose to write about certain things people will know who was involved— so then I scrapped that idea and started thinking about my relationship with my mother. There's a different sense of intimacy that I feel with her, and in many ways it's a non-intimate relationship and that's always been the case, since I was quite little, and it's just a normal thing for me, I guess. We don't have the kind of relationship with each other that other people might have with their mums, like 'my mum's my best friend and we go out for coffee' kind of thing... we actually tried going out to lunch together once and it was really awkward in the sense of not knowing what to talk about because we don't have that kind of relationship. We have a very, kind of, functional, household, family, mother-child relationship— like we do things for each other and help each other do things in the context of a home. And outside of that our relationship doesn't really exist. She doesn't really know what to talk to me about and I don't really know what to talk to her about. I was thinking about that, and previous work that slots into how this work has been created, and how intimacy can be non-intimate at the same time.

MY This work is called *New Monocle*. It began with a focus on a thriving lesbian nightclub that existed during the 1930s called *Le Monocle*, located in Montparnasse, Paris. [Meng is currently in Paris to research this site and their photographs in this project have come from this research-focused residency.] The *Le Monocle* site is rich with queer histories, queer ghosts, and queer memories. However, when I arrived at the club I discovered that it had been turned into a strip club for "men only". It's horrible that queer sites constantly get erased and replaced.

The images that emerged [in my project] play on the symbolism of the monocle, which evokes queer visions and queer ways of seeing that challenge the male gaze. The connections made between the circular shape of the monocle, the circular doorway of *Le Monocle*, and the idea of 'circulation', hope to revive and bring back to life our queer kin of the past. This series is about trying to make connections through time when there's nothing physically left of our histories.

C My work is a collection of personal experiences expressed as annotated illustrations. I have compiled the work as a sort of diary in zine form, with each page related by a specific underlying emotion. The work attempts to describe and capture an emotion that I first discovered in a dream. The dream was so visceral that I woke up almost tasting the feeling within it. This taste is the most pure experience I have ever encountered. I see all subsequent moments of encountering this feeling as highly personal and precious. [Before this project] I kept

documentation of this feeling scattered throughout diaries, sketchbooks, iPhone notes, etc. I wanted to use this project as an opportunity to culminate this documentation into one work and share it with an audience. Although the content of the zine doesn't seem that radically personal, it comes from a deep place within me. Therefore, I see the work as total vulnerability. I feel that my zine is an intimate circulation, as it represents a part of me that is spiritual and mysterious.

MB The work is a small zine/publication that ended up being kind of a mediation between my family self and my trans self. [I was] trying to navigate, and speak about, my ideas about gender and culture in a way that respects my family's privacy, but also allows me the space to be honest about my experiences. The immediacy of the project really allowed me to explore this deeper. I felt like I could talk about ideas and experiences that really inform my work, but for whatever reason I haven't been able to actually vocalise or make clear in gallery settings [in the past]. I'm not very comfortable speaking about myself when I'm putting work out there for just anyone to see.

How do you feel about people receiving your work privately, and possibly engaging with it in their bedrooms or living rooms rather than at an opening, art party, or during gallery hours?

C I love love this idea. I think when I do make artwork for a gallery, I often am trying to make people feel like they are viewing it privately, in their own space anyways. The fact that this can now be an audience's reality makes me so happy. For me, knowing this was the end goal allowed me to relax a lot more into the making process. As the zine is so personal, I feel like it's only right for it to also be viewed in a personal space.

MB I really like that the audience is more limited and receives my work directly and privately. It's very fitting, considering that the subject matter I'm dealing with is fairly sensitive and personal. I love the premise of this project and I'd be thrilled to see more of this kind of distribution going on [in the art world]. My work has always been very quiet and introspective, and it's hard to find the right fit for it in most exhibition contexts. I hope that when people read it in the privacy of their homes, they might understand [what I'm trying to say] a bit better than they might if I tried to explain it (the work, myself, my ideas) at an opening, you know?

L I was thinking a lot about the concept of this whole... 'show' — what would you call it? — when I was conceptualising and obviously I already had something that I wanted to say that I had already talked to you about before all of this. And I think [the opportunity to make work for *Intimate Circulations*] just came at a perfect time because I would not have made this work if it was like, in a usual, public context. I also think, especially because it's a video work... I think you're less likely to watch it all in a public space but you're more likely to watch it entirely if you get sent it. I think also because it is probably the most personal work, like immediately tied to me, that I've made, I feel like it's kind of nice and super intimate to have it directly distributed to someone who's probably just by themselves in their room on their laptop.

Do you think the format of this project (using publishing and sharing systems like email and mail for a one-off audience) means that you feel kind of emboldened to make something that you might not want made completely public, and documented a lot, and living on forever [...] Like, if you later decide that you don't want it to see the light of day... it's only going to live on in people's memories, maybe?

L I think there's a lot of grey areas and I was really walking on a fine line in the actual content of my work, in terms of whether it should be made public? Because it does feature shadows of somebody else. So I think in this context it's, yeah, probably more appropriate and I think there's a nice sense of comfort both for the people receiving it and for me to know that there's an anonymity in whoever is watching it and the spaces they're in. I shared it with my

Instagram so I don't know who's signed up [to receive the work] but I think if it wasn't through this platform maybe some people wouldn't have gone out of their way to see the work, if you know what I mean? Like, there's a sense of anonymity for the audience too.

J Totally, I definitely felt like this was perhaps a more comfortable space to articulate some of the experiences and feelings in this work, just because of it being emailed out to an audience that signs up. So in that, there's an interest in working with an audience that wants to receive [specific] work and, also, [...] I've noticed that it's been helpful to be open about these [difficult] experiences with people. Even just having conversations with people, say, at an event and talking about very intimate details despite just meeting ten minutes ago [has been important]... Maybe I haven't sustained a friendship from that moment but each of those conversations have made me able to speak about these things a bit more. [...] The title as well, *Habilin*, it really just translates over to 'will'. It's literally like the will that you give when you pass away. But extending from that, to produce a will is to leave something in trust, right? Like to give something, maybe something physical, to safekeep. And so I guess in emailing it out, the text is something that's given to someone in trust, of not even knowing or having a relationship with them.

C I feel the mail element allowed me to really take the making process personally. I love the mail-out idea, it is the closest we can get to hand gifting a person an artwork - how beautiful!

Why are you drawn to exploring feelings, intimacies, and memories in your work?

MB I think the best kind of work helps people understand each other better and forms some kind of connection between them. I've never really opened up like this, and I hope I'm able to weave all these different threads together in a way that makes sense to somebody who reads it. If just one person gets it, that would mean the world.

C I think in all of my work, I try to maintain a level of intimacy. I want to make art that appeals to our intellect, creativity, and emotions, all at once. I think these elements are all important and necessary for artwork to be moving. I can never seem to separate intimacy from art making, even if I try. Of course I think there is place for art that is just impersonal and smart, or just gushy and silly, etc. But for me, I want all of it, all at once! I want to move many things within an audience at once. I want to share this work with an audience because I believe in the power of relating— forming communities around artwork and feelings.

L I think what I really want, specifically, to be known about [my work], is that it is about the dynamics of interracial relationships and intimacy. And navigating that. And the complexities that come with that and how the same situation, happening in the context of an interracial relationship vs. in the context of a non-interracial relationship is like... so f**king different and, yeah. I don't know, I think this work, I also just wanted it to be expressive of just, the feelings I have now after all of that because I'm not in any relationship now and that's all in the past. But I'm still grappling with, and haunted by, all the emotions associated with that— on a daily basis. And I haven't really had an avenue to express that so I wanted this work to be able to kind of be that. It's quite difficult to talk about this with people around me, for a lot of different reasons... Whether it's because they're associated with my ex-lovers, or how they feel towards me, or what kind of understanding there will be, coming from their standpoint. So, I think it is also, kind of, a therapeutic thing... making this work and forcing myself to confront a lot of things and knowing that it's kind of a process of healing a part of this to share it. Not to anyone in particular, but knowing that other people will see it...

J I guess one of the things that I've been working through is to stop trying to heal— in a way — heal through this process by approaching it with theory. I feel like I've found a very safe home within theory and I've looked at many of these macro and micro systemic relations through theory, quite comfortably, because it's that in-

between where nothing personally really comes through. And of course there's lots of theory that I've read that relates to those experiences. [In the first few pages of *Habilin*] I've included a paragraph from a text I read a while ago which was one of the texts that I was drawn to when I was thinking about these [political] relations that I have through this personal experience. I think I've hidden behind theory a lot... but I feel like [my] voice switches throughout [this] text. It starts off more comfortably sitting in that removed state of writing where my voice isn't really apparent in the first few pages or so, and then it switches into a first person mode to show the breakdown of that [theoretical] safeguard and to get more personal. At the end of the day, I came to the realisation that as much theory as I read... everything [personal experiences and the 'big picture'] is just so interrelated at the smallest possible level. How [my relationship with my mother] exists is informed by all these surrounding things. It just doesn't exist without the effects of all of those...

L [...] I think, like, during a lot of these relationships I wasn't thinking about [how personal relationships can never be evacuated from their social and political context] even though it was what we were all talking about, obviously, being in the communities and spaces that I was in. For some reason I just never connected it personally. And so a lot of things happened and it wasn't until afterwards that I understood everything contextually and through this work, through the process of it, it was the first time that I had done external research which kind of fortified and explained a lot of the things that were happening and that happened... Yeah so, I think, how that happened was because it was coming out a place of like, pure feeling. And also not being able to escape the politics of anything.

How do you manage, resist or work with institutions to make work that is often engaging with feelings and experiences that have historically been (and continue to be) dismissed, appropriated, commodified, fetishised, subjugated etc. by institutions? Has this curatorial experience created a space similar to other institutional spaces, or has it allowed for something else?

M As an artist whose career started within an academic institution, and in some ways [started] because of it, I find myself in a situation where it's difficult to survive outside of it. I've just started to answer this question, and it's already about how difficult I find it to survive as an artist at all. It's difficult for any artist — but I think especially if one is queer, non-binary and non-white, all of which I am, one needs all the support one can get. So far, the most support I have received has been through university. Financially speaking, the scholarship I receive is the reason why I can pay my rent each week and why my practice can exist right now. [Meng is currently completing their Master of Fine Arts (Research) at UNSW Art & Design, with funding from the Australian Government RTP Scholarship]. The support I receive from peers, friends, teachers, and supervisors comes from being at a university. It's also how I came to be involved in this exhibition.

Academic institutions have opened more doors for me than any Australian art prize (which I have never been awarded) or ever-dwindling Australian art grant (which I have never received) could possibly do at present. Having [institutional] access to the work of queer theorists and transgender academic writers like Jack Halberstam, Paul Preciado, Susan Stryker, and José Esteban Muñoz has given me a reason to be alive, or a way to exist in a society that is homophobic and transphobic, patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist. It's an enormous privilege.

My current research is about queer (non)existence and queer spectrality — the way queer history and culture has been erased and queer people have been 'ghosted' by society. I would like to be allowed to exist, full stop. But it would be incredible if I could have more than just one way [to exist] — to have multiple options and multiple opportunities to be. This (e)mail-out exhibition has been a great starting point to explore ways in and

out of institutions, and capitalism, to exist artistically. For one, it eliminates most of the expenses tied to having an exhibition IRL — the material and gallery costs, moving costs, framing costs, minding costs etc. It's also something I can be part of in Sydney whilst I'm currently in Paris. [This project gives me] a way of existing in two places at once, and imagining multiple ways of being and being connected.

On a more personal note, email is a deeply intimate way of communicating for me since it's how I came to know and be with my partner. We met in a bookshop where we exchanged email addresses but how we really got to know and fall for one another was through the long emails we would send each other every day.

I think it's interesting trying to think about, what is the relationship between the personal and the theory? I think people often speak about it in terms of a binary, where you can be academic or you can be personal — or even if you want to find a relationship between those two it can be hard to move between those two registers when they are, sort of, formulated as very different. But I think it's really interesting that you've chosen to open the text more in that 'safe zone' that is probably a space that you gravitated towards in order to understand certain feelings, and then once you understand the theory you sort of bounce back to the feelings. This text has that bouncing back, bouncing between poetics. It's like the theory helps you understand the feelings and the feelings help you understand the theory. I think there's a relationship between feeling and theory that's at work for a lot of us and definitely is in this text...

J I guess with the beginning of the text, in that safe zone, it was kind of about me being able to ground myself somewhere or locate myself somewhere that I could go from. I didn't really approach it at the start thinking that I was going to approach the relationship between my mother and I through our personal experiences. At the start I didn't know how to weave these things together — everything's related but at the same time there are so many different themes that I wanted to explore [in *Habilin*] and I was trying to find a way to structure those that oscillated between the theory and the personal at the same time. But after the first section I realised that I was moving more towards that personal, first person mode of writing, just because I couldn't really use any theory then. As much as I could make this a text that situated myself in what people have academically written, I only know it through my own experience and at the middle point of that, that's all I could write from. I've avoided using 'I' in the past [...] but I can't avoid the 'I' any longer, or stay in theory exclusively. I've got to move into that more... vulnerable position, I guess. To get the feeling of what I want to say out.

E I think the process of writing any interesting or difficult or mixed-genre piece, is always the process of trying to discover how to write — trying to figure out what form the feeling might take. And I wonder how that process of investigation, through doing this work, might have an effect on your thesis? I know you're writing a [n honours] thesis at the moment which will obviously focus on other people's practices and work. But also it's clearly [From what June has previously shared with us] a thesis that, like many theses, comes from a real place of desire,

instinct, feeling... like very personal things as well?

J I was really uncertain about how to do honours. Just because there are certain limitations in doing an art theory thesis — like, at the end of the day you're not doing a cultural studies thesis, and also, you need to use a certain amount of academic jargon. I was trying to navigate between wanting to write in a more poetic or experimental mode and also in a way that blended academic art writing. At the end of the day, I don't know if I'm interested in the actual art object itself or the surrounding contexts and how the work comes into play in those situations.

[...]

[...]

[...]

A I just feel so honoured to have you and your work in this project, and that's what we were sort of getting at with *Intimate Circulations* — kind of creating a space that was sort of safe and comfortable and intimate for the artists and writers and also for the audience as well... just having those, maybe, touching and quieter moments with art and writing. It's so nice to hear that maybe artists have felt that way in making work as well.

E I think I can speak on behalf of both of us in that, we've been kind of blown away and humbled with what people have felt comfortable to share with us and make for this project. I think people have been making quite personal, emotionally-loaded work — or work that hits on those two levels of the personal and the systemic, which I think is so much harder to navigate than anything else you could approach in work. And it's really appreciated and such a bizarre and wonderful feeling to realise that people feel comfortable to share those things with us.

J No, thank you, I don't know if I would have felt as comfortable if it had been two other people. Just having worked with you both before, and knowing you for a particular amount of time, and knowing where you kind of stand in regards to producing things like this... It definitely felt like a comfier space than... other people have approached me in a way where they've alluded to certain things to be explored, do you know what I mean? Like, framing it around identity and things like that? And those people sometimes come out of nowhere and I'm like, we've never met! And I'm like, where is this longer-term kind of relationship where I can actually produce something that I feel comfortable producing? I wouldn't have been able to do the same thing in a different context...

A Wow, thank you, that's so nice to hear. It's really important to me, that aspect of a long term working relationship — or just relationship. It's so valuable just reading this work after seeing what you've done in *Fatal Crush* and in *Framework* last year... like, seeing a body of work take shape...

J It just comes from this longer-term care... everything in this text has developed from previous writing.

[We (Audrey, June and I) keep talking about *Habilin* and June's thesis for a long time in the alleyway/courtyard of Kudos Gallery.]

[After Leo and I talk, we walk/skate through Redfern park and talk about trying to understand your own desires and intra-queer community politics.]

[I reply to Mika and Meng's emails, to thank them.]

[I try to transcribe and edit and compile this 'conversation' as quickly as possible, so I can do other work... like reply to the email Celeste has sent me about a different project we're collaborating on.]

