

Duodecim: A Collaboration Across Time

by Kathryn Allan

“If, as an artist, you find yourself in a situation of being able to make art with others, treat it with respect, even reverence. If you have patience, and if all the artistic stars are aligned, you may, if only for an instant, see through to that moment when working together can unashamedly be called an act of love.”

– Kent Nerburn, *Dancing with the Gods: Reflections on Life and Art*

Paths cross. People we meet leave imprints, carried forward with us through time (Winterson’s ‘inside time’). Jill Misawa Axelson and I met at Glasgow School of Art in 1998 – she an American exchange student via the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, I an undergraduate at GSA on the School of Design’s BA Visual Communication course and a quarter-Scottish Yorkshire immigrant to Scotland’s largest city. Jill’s stay was fleeting and busy – two terms to discover the Art School, its world-renown history, its tutors and students, Glasgow and wider Scotland. And just six months to make new friends.

Jill had travelled alone across time and seas to Glasgow. Her home, Honolulu in Hawaii, is over 6000 miles and two oceans away; there is also an 11-hour time difference, Hawaii observing the Hawaii-Aleutian Time Zone and being almost half a day behind the UK. Jill’s route to GSA was a Design History course – a requirement of her BFA in Graphic Design. She remembers fondly professor Ken Carls and, through his lectures on industrialisation, his introducing her to the Arts & Crafts Movement, the Glasgow Four (of whom one is architect and designer Charles Rennie Mackintosh), and thus Glasgow School of Art’s Mackintosh Building. Following an expression of interest to study abroad, Jill was her university’s first exchange student to GSA. It was, as Jill recalls, “a sweet time”, her sun-spoiled origins making her appreciate the rain and grey skies of Scotland all the more. I, too, was an outlander in Glasgow, my route having been a Foundation Diploma at Hull College and entrance to the second year of a 4-year undergraduate course at GSA.

A friendship grew and, as early twenty-somethings, we were footholds for one another in a foreign land. By virtue of her UK visit, I introduced Jill to various ‘firsts’ – her first left-side-of-the-road car journey, first traditional Scottish music concert, first Yorkshire pudding, and so on. Indeed, I recall her only relief at the prospect of returning to the States being the opportunity to lose the weight I had helped her to gain: Jill is also a dancer. But Jill’s stay at Glasgow, as sweet as it was – both emotionally and literally – concluded all too briefly and my remaining two years of Art School study stretched out ahead of me, Jill-less. On her leaving, she wrote me a letter, which I still have 22 years later and of which the following is a treasured excerpt:

“When I came to Glasgow I thought 6 months would be an eternity [being new and feeling homesick]...inside, I think I understood that it would fly by, and now that I am at a point of departure...many times I lie in bed, unable to sleep...thinking about everything that’s happened in my life since the start of January 1998. I’ve seen so much and met so many people...I know it’ll take time to make sense of it all. I do know that I was lonely and in need of people starting new in Glasgow. And by some star, you invited me into the city. I don’t think I could explain what a big difference that made for me emotionally...I know I will be in touch.”



Figure 1 Kathryn and Jill as young art school students outside the Mackintosh Building, Glasgow School of Art degree show preview night, 1998

Jill was faithful to her words and we remained in contact, exchanging one another’s progress through the subsequent two decades of our lives – hers a busy career in graphic design, initially working for design studios in Chicago then for herself following her relocation back to Hawaii, a marriage, mine further study, then an all-consuming teaching career in the UK education sector. Our communications ebbed and flowed, some years connecting more frequently than others, but always an easy picking up of threads. Since our sharing of those short moments at Glasgow, we spoke regularly of wanting to work together in a creative capacity. We would tumble ideas back and forth, months becoming years, yet it wasn’t until time felt more urgent to us both – the milestone of 40, the aging of parents and so on – that we gave more serious thought to the development of a collaboration.

Jill is brilliant at offering ideas, a reflection of being a successful graphic designer and her day job involving the preparation of multiple solutions and then the presentation of these to clients. (She is also an artist, creating works of beautiful quietude and intimacy). She describes me as being better at putting “the stake in the ground”. So it was, at the tail-end of 2018, 20 years after studying together at Glasgow (and in the year the Mackintosh Building was devastatingly destroyed by its second fire), that Jill brought forth various project possibilities. We settled upon a monthly postal exchange by airmail – the opportunity to physically experience and enjoy one another’s artwork felt important – and titled our collaboration *Duodecim*. This is the Latin word for ‘twelve’, from ‘duo’ (two) and ‘decim’ (ten). Our 12-part project would involve the creation of monthly artworks A and B, with A being the call (to be created by one artist) and B being the response (to be created by the other). The result would be 24 pieces of work making 12 pairs, each a duo, created over 2019. Those artworks I would make would reside in Hawaii and vice versa. January 2019: I put the stake in the ground with 1A, sending the first artwork on its time-travelling journey across the globe. I awaited its delivery across oceans and hours, getting a thrill from tracking its progress online; seeing, digitally, its arrival in Leeds then Heathrow then San Francisco and finally Honolulu (it’s a *long* way to Hawaii) and hoping it hadn’t been opened by US customs en route. Upon receiving it, Jill wrote to me –

“It has arrived! It has arrived! And I feel so much! It’s funny how our friendship and our time at GSA sews so much presence into the piece. At least for me. It feels so significant. Such a strong mark and a ‘start to’...”

I recall my joy at receiving 1B a fortnight or so on. Freeing it from its US Postal Service sticker-encrusted casing, I unwrapped *Au* – an acrylic, paper, bass wood and twine 3 x 5in artwork, painted envelope, within painted envelope, with an internal memo on gold-painted wood of “...*au...aurum...to dawn...to become light...persists still, through time*”. Jill had taken the ‘stake’ and reflected it back to me through her eyes – her voice in response to mine, Rutenberg’s joining of “nervous systems”.

“We crafted a place and discovered it at the same time.” – Brian Rutenberg, *Clear Seeing Place*

Our monthly creative bulletins followed. Within some pairs there is a direct visual relationship, for example the use of the same colours albeit in different media, the development of a part of A into a more significant element of B (see 1A and 1B), or where an image in one medium has been rendered in another (see 4A and 4B). In others, two-dimensional work has become three-dimensional through the extraction of flat elements into those in space (see 3A and 3B). Responses were at times metaphorical, for example in 7A and 7B where a landscape painting was created in response to a work using sound – no overt visual affiliation, rather the symbolism of one medium (music/sound) embodied in another (representational painting).

“Creative work bridges time because the energy of art is not time-bound.” – Winterson

The project in its entirety calls into question ideas of time and relationship. Time – the lapse between our meeting and this collaboration, the project’s year-long timescale, the monthly pulse of each duo, the back-and-forth crossing of time as works were sent in the post through time zones. At some points, the subject of an artwork pair would be time and travel itself. In month 11, for example, my artwork *Migration* was a response to autumnal observations of migrating geese as I commuted to work, Jill’s reply to which was *Ballast for Flight* – an artwork referencing ‘ballast gardens’ and the use of ballast stones to give a centre of gravity to ships crossing turbulent seas. Journeys, both. Relationship – the rapport between its paired creators, the symbiosis of each pair of artworks, the interconnectedness of the 12 duos as one project. And, encircling all of this, clockface-like, is an illustration of friendship through time – invisible bridges. The dawn of month 1 soon became the dusk of month 12 and the conclusion of *Duodecim* arrived in December 2019. The stars that year had aligned, and we had worked together in Nerburn’s act of love. Now, in 2020, we are aligning in other creative ways, me 11 hours in the future, Jill 11 hours in the past, both of us in our own present, and Jill having long-since reclaimed her pudding-free dancer’s physique.

Duodecim can be viewed at www.kathrynallan.com.

Each month’s output is also shared monthly at www.instagram.com/kathrynallan_artist.

www.jillmisawa.com