

#PANDEMICFRIDGE: COLLABORATION AT A DISTANCE

Raluca Iancu

The Covid-19 pandemic affected all aspects of contemporary life, from how we work to how we shop, travel, and eat. Previously banal activities such as going to the grocery store became challenging and anxiety-inducing, with a new level of danger associated with leaving one's home. To document and respond to this global experience, Jennifer Scheuer, assistant professor in printmaking at Purdue University, and I began collaborating on a series of collages titled #PandemicFridge. The project investigates the idea of care, nourishment and sustainability through the motif of the fridge, both literal and metaphorical. Our practice emerged from the pandemic and is indelibly marked by it: the new ways of working we have developed are informed by this experience as we were forced to find workarounds and new avenues to pursue our work (Fig. 1).

a deadly disease versus feeding ourselves. While grocery delivery services became popular at this time, the individual experience in the shopping market changed drastically as well. Initially, arrows on the ground diagrammed the designated flow through the market, which was followed (or not). Every trip was marked by a different item being out of stock: famously, toilet paper, however, every week a new item would be out: ramen noodles, chicken, Pillsbury cinnamon rolls, yeast, or sanitising wipes. A certain rhythm developed, with some item outages more humorous than others. New rituals emerged: a trip to the market was incomplete without a mask and hand sanitiser, and a cleansing ceremony of all new objects brought into the home, whether through washing or quarantine (Fig. 2).



Figure 1

We were interested in how our relationship with sustenance has changed due to the pandemic, so we turned to the fridge as a repository for both food and human experience and connection in this time of isolation. Particularly during the beginning of the pandemic, any outing from our homes came with new tensions: the possibility of contracting



Figure 2

Figure titles and information:

Figure 1: Iancu, Scheuer, #PandemicFridge.

Figure 2: Iancu, empty shelves.

Disasters are the perfect locus to observe the line where function and dysfunction bleed into one another. As the illusions of control and privilege are irreversibly challenged, the natural response is to try to reclaim control. Stocking our fridges, whether through groceries or takeout, is one very human way to re-establish a semblance of autonomy and self-sufficiency.

As the worldwide pandemic was declared in March 2020, everything shifted to an online format. Many normally face-to-face events pivoted to a virtual arena. We all started spending much more time on the internet, attempting to create community through social media. The North Louisiana Virtual Residency is one example: the virtual residency structure emerged and became popular as a result of the pandemic. Jen and I were invited to participate in this residency, which greatly facilitated our collaboration.

The North Louisiana Virtual Residency was made possible by the Ross Lynn Charitable Foundation in collaboration with the North Central Louisiana Art Council. The residency started on 11 May and ended on 3 July 2020. Throughout this time, the artists participating in the residency met weekly. In addition to the group residency “huddles,” Jen and I met one to two times a week via Webex or Zoom to talk about our collaboration and spend time in the studio, carving and drawing together via our screens. The residency opened up a virtual space in which we could work together despite the seven hours that separated us physically. Although we had been talking about collaborating on a project together for several years, we had never found the time.

My home served as the middle point for Jen when she visited her family, so we could meet in person, once at the beginning of the residency to start the project and later on to print and collage. The first meeting was cautious, as we were in a pandemic. Like our trips to the grocery store, our typically warm reunion was fraught with hesitation and some trepidation, obscured by the Covid-19 cloud. At the time, testing was not widely available in our area, so all we could do was practice physical distancing and monitor ourselves for symptoms. Each at one end of my apartment, we could flesh out our project while maintaining a safe distance. We set parameters for the content (fridges) and the scale of the work (9 x 5 inches) (Fig. 3).

Jen and I decided we would lean into the predominantly online modus operandi by crowdsourcing images of people’s fridges. We asked our friends, families and followers to send us images of the interior of their fridges as a starting point, which is where the work’s title stems from. We received images from across the United States, Malaysia, Poland, Spain, and Canada. We decided to keep the # in the title – a nod to the source of the work and the moment in which the work was made.

Our correspondents produced a variety of source images: some were curated and somewhat performative freshly stocked fridges, while others felt more natural, with leftovers and takeout, and yet others were nearly depleted fridges. Regardless, all the photographs were intimate and vulnerable, allowing us a glimpse into people’s everyday



Figure 3

Figure 3: lancu, social media

lives and serving almost as a portrait of the respondent. We decided not to share these images publicly, as they had been sent to us privately and the content felt too personal (Fig. 4).

We used these images as starting points, separating the fridges from their contents. We each created designs for fridges, fridge doors, and food items, resulting in ten blocks carved over the summer. We chose to use relief for the project because of the ease of printing: We could print without a press if necessary, and we both had linoleum and carving tools on hand. By carving and printing the contents and the interiors of the fridges separately, we could explore different combinations through collage. As we had agreed on a scale at our initial meeting, we were free to carve our blocks independently. We each chose fridge layouts and contents based on their appeal to us. The act of carving my friends' food items brought me closer to them. I continue to be thankful for their contribution to our project (Fig. 5).

The collaboration continued beyond the residency. Jen and I had our second meeting a month after the end of the North Louisiana Virtual Residency. On this trip, she brought her small-scale portable press, which allowed us to make one hundred prints in three days. We received support for the project from the Center for Excellence in the Arts and Humanities at Iowa State University, through a "Sheltering the Storm: Processing COVID-19" grant, which allowed us to purchase a variety of paper to print on, with differing weights and colours, totalling over two dozen different kinds of paper. We could not have experimented with such a wide range of papers without this support.

At the end of Jen's visit, we divided the prints equally between us to work on collages separately. Initial collages featured mostly unaltered prints. Later works increased in complexity, including hand tinting with coloured pencils, watercolour, and gouache. We started creating cut-outs and combining fridges and doors to create larger compositions that became folios, mirroring the way fridges function. We freely mixed and matched each other's prints, to the point where the origin of the individual food items became lost in the overall composition (Fig. 6 & 7).

We did not try to recreate any one correspondent's fridge directly, except for one composition replicating my fridge. However, we thought about the different connotations of food and colour and signs of abundance and scarcity. For instance, a fridge full of purple-red food might be off-putting, whereas greens and blues might look fresher and healthier. We contrasted full fridges with empty fridges, fresh food with processed food, and takeout with home-cooked meals. The outcome of this project is a series of 20 collages collected in handbound hardcover portfolio cases. The works can be removed and exhibited individually or together (Fig. 8 & 9)

During subsequent meetings in December 2020 and January, April and June 2021, Jen and I continued working on our prints and collages together, occasionally swapping collages so we could both work on the same piece. Throughout, we continued to meet online and over the

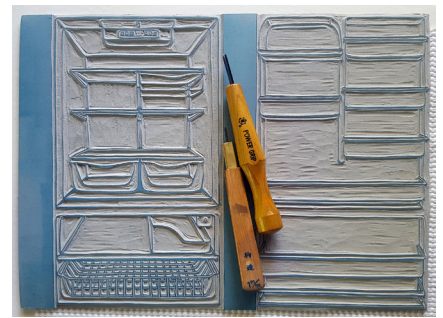


Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

Figure 4: Iancu, fridge plate

Figure 5: Iancu, food plate

Figure 6: Iancu, Scheuer, #PandemicFridge (purple fridge)

phone to share studio time and discuss the project (Fig. 10).

Everything from how we worked on the collaboration to the final title (#PandemicFridge) is a direct result of the Covid-19 pandemic. While the work is intended to be humorous, the content is nonetheless serious, exploring themes of sustenance and control. The miniaturisation of the fridge is appealing; a lot of information is contained within a 9 x 5-inch rectangle (or 9 x 10 inches for the double compositions), keeping the viewer constantly engaged. Moreover, while an image of a fridge with one single item in it might be amusing (Iancu, Scheuer, #PandemicFridge, collage 1), the reality of an empty fridge can be distressing.

The # connects us to this specific moment, with the intention of both challenging and delighting the audience. When found in a gallery, the # in the title of a work evokes social media in an unexpected place: it is meant to be on our screens, not on a gallery label. We are accustomed to the # as a performative element – it is merely a way for us to find related content on social media. A # indicates seeking attention, a desire for engagement.

Ultimately, however, at a time when we are increasingly desensitised through the variety of information media available, a # gets lost in the data and when paired with the pandemic is an inadequate response. Reducing a large-scale worldwide disaster to a # is an attempt to grapple with our loss of control in this situation. Within the gallery setting, the absurdity of this proposition becomes evident: distilling the pandemic into an image of a fully stocked fridge is laughable, especially when the fridge in question is minuscule.

Conversely, this is how we have been attempting to grapple with the pandemic and the cognitive dissonance taking place every day in human actions. Individuals can take effective action to regain control in the face of the pandemic: vaccinations, face masks, and hand washing. Yet, despite concrete evidence to support these actions, many people refuse to follow the guidelines or protest. While #PandemicFridge is light-hearted at face value, a closer inspection reveals these deeper connections.

Despite the anxiety, fear, and discomfort, in the end, the pandemic created a space in which Jen and I could collaborate. We could not have imagined that this would be the form our collaboration would take. Nevertheless, we created work that is a part of the contemporary conversation and chronicled this once-in-a-lifetime event. Although different from our respective studio practices, our collaboration has fed us creatively, and #PandemicFridge is just the first in a series of forthcoming collaborative projects.



Figure 7



Figure 8

Figure 7: Iancu, Scheuer, #PandemicFridge (collage 4)

Figure 8: Iancu, Scheuer, #PandemicFridge (collage 2)

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Raluca Iancu is currently an Assistant Professor in Art & Visual Culture, Printmaking, at Iowa State University (ISU). She earned her MFA in Studio Art, Printmaking, from The University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK), and her BFA in Printmaking from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Halifax, Canada.

Recent awards include a 2022 ISU Early Achievement in Teaching Award, a 2022 UTK Alumni Volunteer 40 under 40 award, the 2021 Foundations in Art: Theory and Education (FATE) Emerging Educator Award, and a 2021 Miller Fellowship from the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (ISU).

She has exhibited internationally, at venues including the National Museum Robevci (Macedonia), the Art Museum of Cluj-Napoca (Romania), and the CICA Museum (Korea); and nationally at the International Print Center of New York (NY), the Bradbury Art Museum, (AR), and the Art Institute of Boston (MA). She has been an artist in residence in the United States, at the Hambidge Center for Creative Arts & Sciences (GA) and the Vermont Studio Center (VT), among others; and internationally at Art Print Residence (Spain), the Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Fine Arts (Poland), and St Michael's Printshop (Canada).

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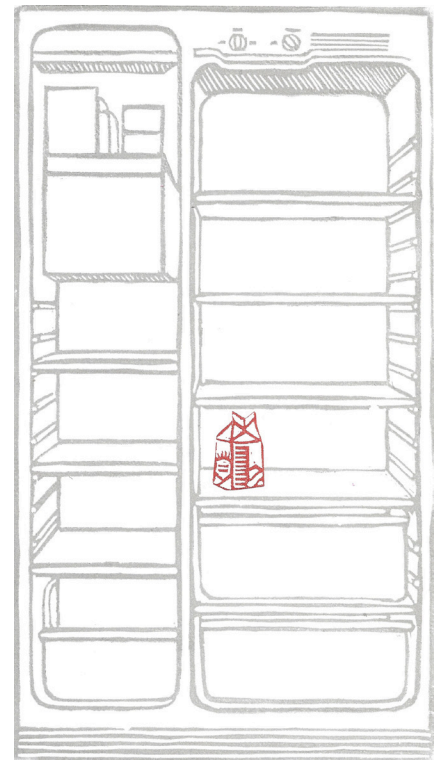


Figure 9

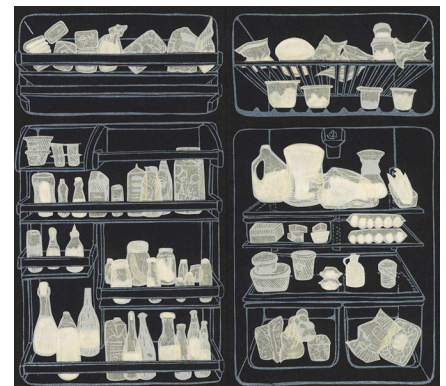


Figure 10

Figure 9: Iancu, Scheuer, #PandemicFridge (collage 1)

Figure 10: Iancu, Scheuer, #PandemicFridge (black fridge)

IMAGE GALLERY



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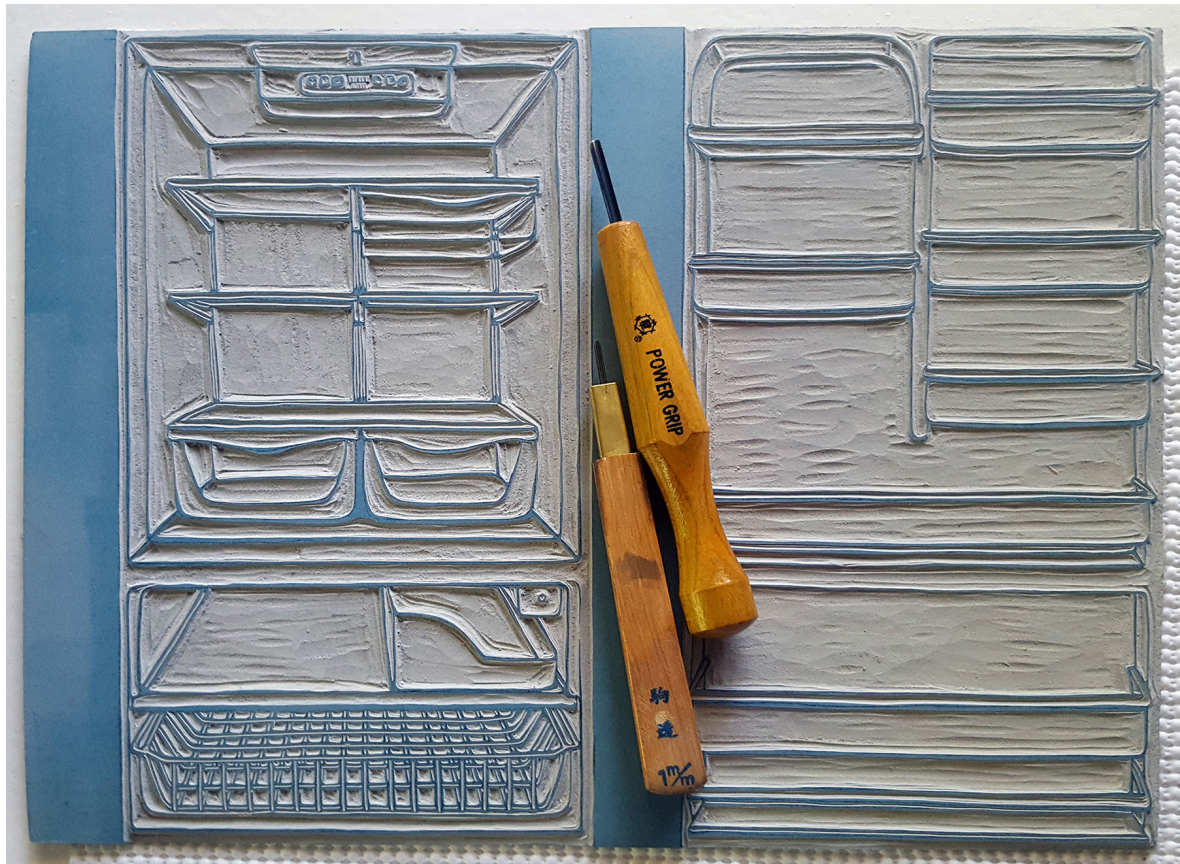
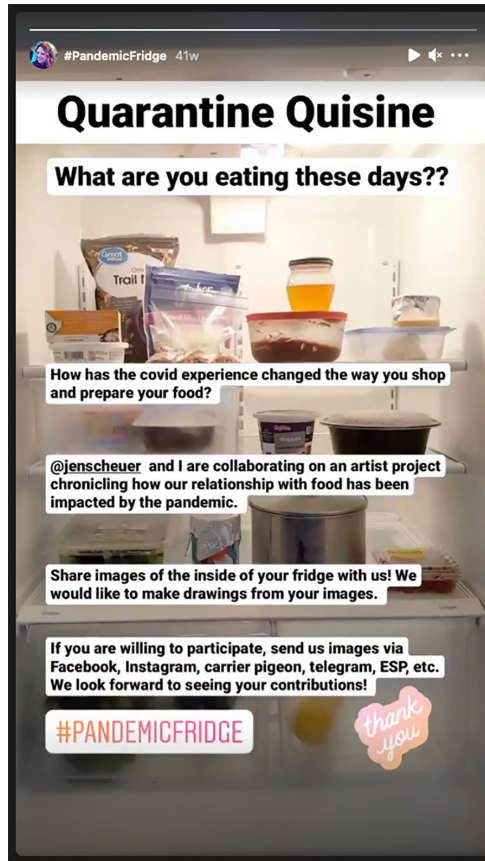


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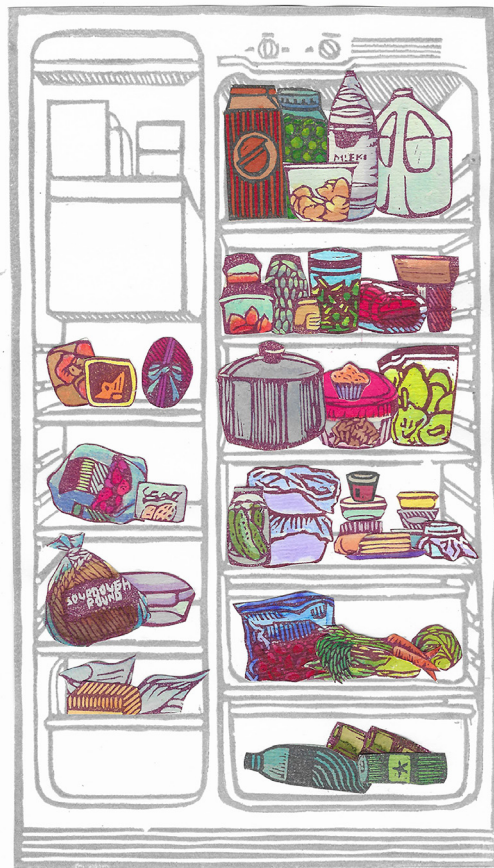


Figure 7: lancu, Scheuer, #PandemicFridge (collage 4)

Figure 8: lancu, Scheuer, #PandemicFridge (collage 2)

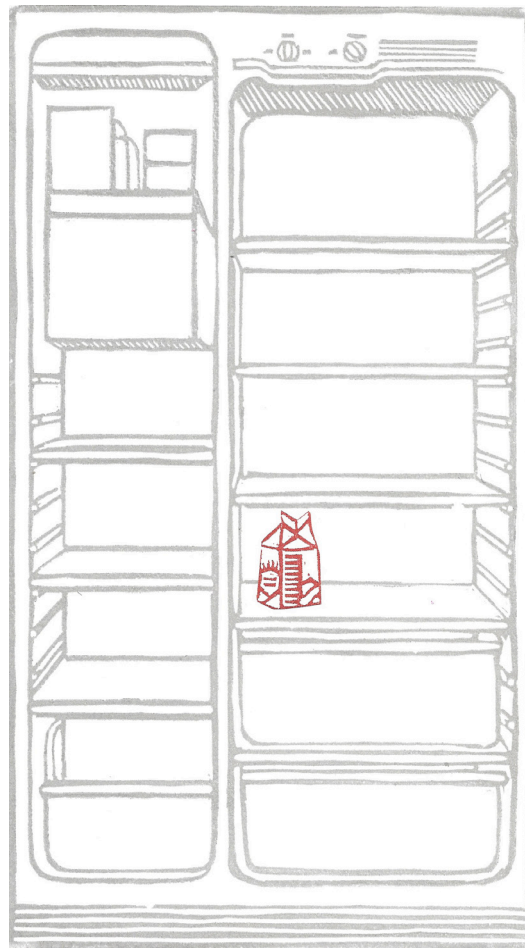


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