

# Propositions for Studio Inquiry

*A Journey into Artists' Studios*

Alison Shields



# Introduction:

## Remain Curious (Studio as Mystery)

*The studio is a space and a condition wherein creative play and progressive thinking yield propositions for reflecting on who we are – individually and collectively – and where we might go next.*

(Wainwright, 2010, p. ix)

### *Studio as a Never-Ending Painting*

*What happens in a studio? How is a studio a way of thinking?* These are the questions I often ask myself as I retreat to my studio. My last studio, in Victoria, British Columbia, on the traditional land of the Lək̓ʷəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples, was part of an artist studio collective called The Ministry of Casual Living. It was an open-concept space with dividing walls, housing approximately fifteen artists. While I spent much of my time alone in the large space, I was always surrounded by objects and imagery in the studios alongside my own, evidence of the presence of other artists and of artistic practices (Figures I.1–I.4). These objects and imagery, while often nonsensical to others, seemed integral to these artists’ practices. In the studio next to me, a hand-made green stuffed creature hung above an orb-like object, appearing to watch over me. In another space, a sign saying ‘Don’t Miss Anything’ that was written on the concrete wall long before I had moved to the building, suddenly disappeared one day. Chairs signified the possibility of a staged meeting. And a dead plant sat in the sink with a sign for the rest of the studio inhabitants. As an artist and art educator, I have always been interested in understanding artistic processes and the drive behind artmaking. Each of these images forms a clue to this mystery. As the site of artistic practices, the studio is the set on which the mystery is played out. I am drawn to these curious objects that somehow transform an old run-down building into something else. These spaces become places where anything can happen. They are spaces of possibility. Within these communal studios, I’ve often felt like I was part of a community, one that spread around the building, and outward towards the city and across the



FIGURE I.1: Ministry of Casual Living Artist-Run-Centre, Victoria, BC, 2020.



FIGURE I.2: Ministry of Casual Living Artist-Run-Centre, Victoria, BC, 2020.



FIGURE I.3: Ministry of Casual Living Artist-Run-Centre, Victoria, BC, 2020.

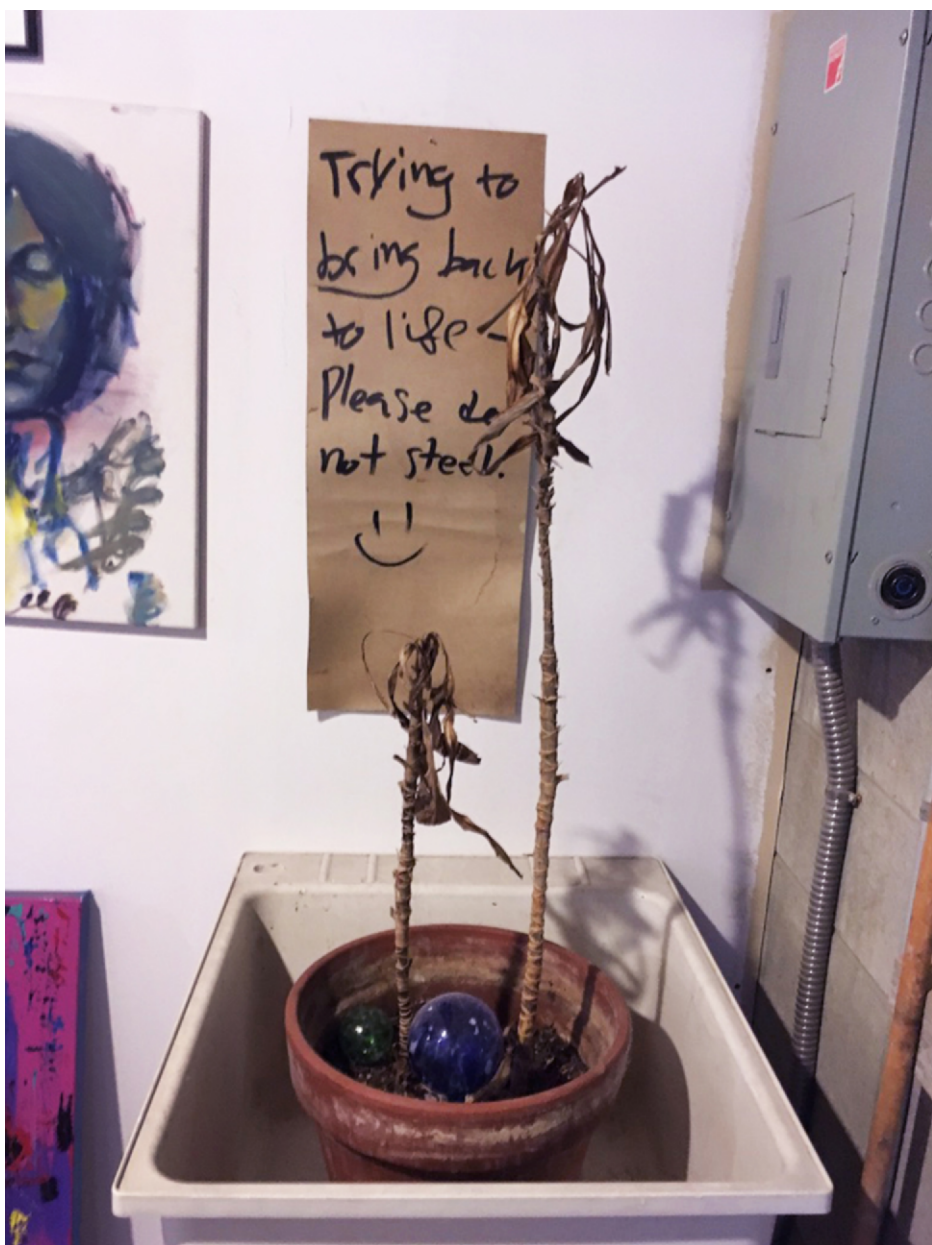


FIGURE I.4: Ministry of Casual Living Artist-Run-Centre, Victoria, BC, 2020.

country. As I work within my current studio, I reflect on a journey I performed years earlier, travelling across Canada, visiting artists in their studios. I take solace in this invisible web of relations that I could imagine after having visited studios across the country, finding connections between the seemingly isolated practices.

Throughout the summers of 2014–16, I indulged my fascination with artists' studios as I embarked on a research trip from Victoria, British Columbia, to St. John's, Newfoundland visiting painters in their studios. Throughout the studio visits, artists described a studio as a stage, a playground, a garden, a laboratory, a waiting room, a puzzle, a cabinet of curiosities, a pressure cooker, a collage, a garden, and a brain. Vancouver-based artist, Fiona Ackerman, described a studio as a 'Heterotopia', a workplace and an anti-workplace, the real and the imaginary coexisting. And in Montreal, Quebec, David Elliott described a painting as a believable parallel universe. In Kamloops, British Columbia, Andrea Kastner said that the studio is full of wormholes and portals; an art studio has the capacity to take us on travels into multiple spaces. For her, time doesn't function in a linear way, and you might get trapped in a wormhole and shoot backwards or forward, or things may happen that you have no control over.

This research emerged from my experience as an artist and art educator. I began my love of art studios as a high school student. At school, I recognized that in the art room, time, and space functioned differently. This space of learning was not one of linear or progressive lessons. It was a space where learning happened in every direction. It was a space where learning happened through our bodies encountering materials. It was a space where the in-between conversations that occurred alongside artmaking created a community unlike any other class. This love of the studio continued through my undergraduate and graduate work as we talked late into the night in the studio as we worked, and into my career as an artist where upon moving to a new city, finding a studio becomes the first priority. The smells, the histories, and in-process artworks fill me up with a feeling of potential.

Within my studio practice throughout the past two decades, I have sought out a space of *not knowing*, *uncertainty*, and *emergence* through the development of both physical and metaphorical never-ending paintings. Originally conceived to examine the infinite potentials of abstract painting through allowing the paintings to continually evolve over time, the paintings began through developing an elaborate system of tracing, painting, and re-painting as a self-generating mechanism through which they would transform. I compared the paintings to organisms evolving and reproducing or geological land formations changing through time, in both cases changing in relation to what came before. While conceptually based in the language of abstraction, I came to realize that this need for change came from not wanting the painting process to end and an ongoing curiosity and excitement about what it might become. My interest in the concept of a 'never-ending

painting' continued throughout the years that followed, although it morphed into other ways of working and reworking the painting, from whitening out and then scraping/wiping away, to eventually cutting up and reconfiguring pieces from various paintings together. This desire for incompleteness remained. Or perhaps it was a resistance towards completion.

This desire and/or resistance weaves into how I understand learning, teaching, thinking, and researching. Learning for me is like that never-ending painting that emerges through the process, while always drawing from what came before it. As I engaged with the hows and whys of artmaking within my own practice, I reflected on my interest in the never-ending painting, this desire to 'stay in the painting process'. I began to ask myself *why I make art*, recognizing that I was driven by my desire to follow curiosities, surprise, and newness that, for me, happened in the studio. At the same time, this answer did not seem adequate. There had to be more to this question.

### *Studio Visit as Encounter*

Within a few weeks, I was in my car, driving across Canada, interviewing artists in their studios. Through these visits, I listened to their stories, their artistic processes, and their investigations, and explored the studios as I continued to find more answers and clues to this ongoing mystery: *What happens in a studio? And, how is a studio a way of thinking?* This book is a story of these encounters and the lessons that I learned along the way as I explore the intimate spaces of the studio, the materiality of the space, the artistic processes that emerge therein, and the communities that connect artists across this vast country.

Through this research, I explore studio practice as a particular kind of thinking and being, one that is material-based, in process, messy, unpredictable, and affective. Through the lens of a 'studio visit' as both a research methodology and artistic practice, I draw from the visits and interviews with these artists to examine how a studio is a way of learning and thinking with materials. As the past several years have seen a move towards online education and increasingly digital ways of living, I recognize what is lost when the materiality of the studio and the ecosystem that is created within is not recognized. Within this virtual world, I miss the materiality of the studio and the learning that happens within, alongside, and through art in a studio classroom. In a time when acquiring studio space in cities and educational settings is increasingly challenging, and online and technology-based learning platforms are becoming more prevalent, I believe that it is ever more urgent to examine the significance of artmaking practices that involve handling materials, and by extension to examine the material spaces necessarily

at the core of those processes. Further, through the examination of the messy processes inherent to studio practices, I propose that studios may stand as radical counterpoints to an increasingly digitized world. I celebrate the particularities and situatedness of studios through their relational and material quality.

During a visit with Monica Tap in Toronto in 2014, I asked her why she makes art. She said: *'Painting was the one thing I didn't know if I could do. I keep doing it because it's still hard. It still seems interesting. It hasn't revealed itself yet. So, why do I continue? Because I remain curious.'* I similarly attend to research through this lens of curiosity. As an artist and educator, I embrace curiosity as a way of engaging with pedagogy as an affective and relational process (Coats, 2023). Through this lens of curiosity, I believe in the power of art to transform us as individuals and society. I am comfortable (or prefer) existing in a space of ambiguity, uncertainty, and complexity that often seems at odds with many research methods and educational institutions. I am comfortable with my faith in the impact of art while recognizing the danger of trying to quantify it. I acknowledge that a single conversation can cause a huge shift in thinking or a trickle effect across waves of thoughts and actions. I recognize that being within the space of art for a moment can cause a material impact on our body.

Thus, rather than considering art as simply an object and a studio as simply a room with four walls and a door, I view the studio as an encounter. Similarly, as a research methodology, I view the studio visit as a particular type of interview, one that is material-based, practice-led, emergent, and conversational. An encounter is a dialogue, an interaction that challenges our ways of thinking and being in the world (O'Sullivan, 2006). I engaged with each studio visit as an encounter, a series of conversations through which emerged new insights and propositions into studio practice. I attend to this research and data analysis through the theoretical lens of new materialism for its 'embodied, affective, relational understanding of the research process' (Hickey-Moody & Page, 2015, p. 1). Within new materialist theories, '[b]odies and things are not as separate as we were once taught, and their interrelationship is vital to how we come to know ourselves as human and interact with our environments' (Hickey-Moody & Page, 2015, p. 2). Intra-action, the process by which bodies encounter each other and generate movement and change (Barad, 2007), highlights how matter and bodies are entangled. According to Hickey-Moody and Page (2015):

A materialist ontology, concerned with matter and the processes of matter, and intra-action between human and non-human things and worlds, recognizes the intertwining of all phenomena – human, non-human, social, physical, material, and immaterial.

(p. 4)

Within this framework, I view a studio visit as a new materialist methodology, one that recognizes my own subjectivities within research as well as my encounters with the places and materials of artmaking. And the studio, as both the site and the subject of this research, is recognized for its role within an ecology of making. Further, new materialist theories embrace the role of the body, messiness, unpredictability, and indeterminacy at the core of artistic practice and pedagogy.

### *Studio as Proposition*

To focus on possibilities and potentials rather than conclusions, and generativity rather than closure, the studio is presented through a series of propositions. The propositions are offerings for ways of thinking about artistic practice, each drawn from a quote from an artist during a studio visit. I ground my understanding of propositions through the work of Sarah Truman and Stephanie Springgay (2016) who examine how walking produces propositions rather than conclusions and allows subjects to move through space in an unpredictable way. They suggest that propositions drawn from walking are both actual and speculative as ‘a hybrid of movement and *lure for feeling* that can *pave the way along which the world advances into novelty*’ (p. 260). Thus, propositions are a pedagogical tool that allows for the emergence of thought, learning, thinking, and being. Rather than defining what learning *is*, it opens up to what learning *can be* and invites an openness to surprise. Erin Manning (2016a) similarly uses propositions as a way of addressing qualities specific to art practice as research. These propositions include (amongst others): ‘Create new forms of knowledge’; ‘Be speculatively pragmatic’; ‘Invent beyond technique’; ‘Dwell in the transversal’; ‘Create alter-economies of value’ (pp. 133–37). Propositions are pedagogical invitations for stimulating conversation about the qualities and potentials of thinking through making in a way that is generative. It is my intention that, rather than direct us to what art making *is*, propositions provoke us to think about what it *could be* to each of us in different ways. Each chapter is titled as a proposition drawn from a comment made in conversation with an artist with whom I visited. These propositions are purposefully ambiguous, to be taken up by readers in their own way.

This book is structured in four sections, each one examining studio practice from a particular lens. It is meant to guide readers to view the interconnection between place, process, and materials within studio practice and to highlight how they come together to foster a unique space for learning that is open-ended, personal, intimate, exploratory, material, and embodied. The introduction of each section addresses that particular lens for a studio followed by more detailed propositions through a discussion of a selection of artists visited. Each section is

concluded through a broader discussion of pedagogy and the role of studio-based learning within education. In order to keep the authenticity of the studio visits and foreground the voices of the artists, direct quotes from the interviews are interwoven throughout the book. They are emphasized in italics. A complete list of the artists discussed, including dates and locations of each studio visit is included at the end of the book.

In the first section, ‘Studio as Place’, I discuss the studio as a pedagogical space. I draw from Ellsworth (2005) who examines architectural and artistic spaces as a form of speculative pedagogy to affirm the role of the body, affect, and subjectivity within pedagogical spaces and to provoke us to imagine what is possible as pedagogy. Within this section, I discuss the methodology of the studio visit as a form of mapping as I situate myself in relation with other artists across the country. I examine a studio as part of an ecosystem (Harris, 2021) and propose that studios exist and thrive as a part of an ever-changing ecosystem. Lastly, I propose that by virtue of the making process, a studio may become a portal that transports us elsewhere.

In the second section, ‘Studio as Process’, I examine the process of artmaking through discussing how the studio is the site of an event (Manning, 2016b). Drawing from artistic researcher Barbara Bolt (2004, 2007, 2013), I examine artmaking as a ‘performative practice’, one that generates experience rather than represents. Through a new materialist lens, art practice is emergent and responsive to our experiences in the world and is generative and iterative. Lastly, through the materiality of the studio, I discuss the significance of ‘not knowing’ within art practice and pedagogy (Fisher & Fortnum, 2013).

In the third section, ‘Studio as Material Thinking’, I examine the material and embodied qualities of artmaking through Springgay’s (2022) discussion of ‘felt-ness’, which recognizes the intimate and relational qualities of artmaking and pedagogy. I begin this section by addressing the role of the body in art practice and assert the need to move away from binaries between thinking and feeling, and value the affective process of learning. Next, I explore studio practice as a messy process, one where the materials may disrupt a desire for control and certainty and examine how materials push us to lean into uncertainty and potentiality. Lastly, I consider how a studio as a collage may be taken up as a process of artmaking as well as a metaphor for studio inquiry.

In the final section, ‘Studio as Dialogue with the World’, I situate studio practice in relation to and in response to the world. Firstly, I examine artmaking as unlearning (Dunne, 2016; Atkinson, 2013) as a way of re-examining how we know what we know. I discuss how through its material quality, a studio may resist traditional understandings of learning. Next, I examine the ways that artmaking invites us to imagine differently. And lastly, I examine how artmaking provokes us to understand

our relationship to the world. I propose that through examining the in-process quality of a studio, we shift away from an emphasis on product and instead on the doing of art through treating artmaking as an ongoing encounter and a ‘never-ending exploration of what it might mean to exist in and with the world’ (Biesta, 2018, p. 17).

At the core of this book is an examination of the processes of artmaking. And in its truest form, a studio is a space of process, one that is ripe with mess, uncertainty, and materials. It is a place where the messiness of the process generates emergent possibilities and where the bodily experience of artmaking may produce affective experiences and relations. For Biesta (2018), education is not a product, ‘but a human being with an altered outlook’ (p. 13). To view the studio as a space of process is to embrace the ‘not knowing’ of artmaking and pedagogy and an openness to learning through making. This book is for artist educators seeking to delve deeper into thinking about studio pedagogies, and for undergraduate and graduate students seeking to examine their studio practice. And it is for artistic researchers examining studio-based inquiry and research as a way of understanding themselves and their place in academia and the world through art practice.