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Merging the Real and the Virtual: 21st century practices and the studio model

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Introduction

The studio plays a special role in art and design education due to its pivotal place in the working lives of artists and designers (Lynas, Budge and Beale, 2013; Zehner, Forsyth, Musgrave, Neale, de la Harpe, Peterson, and Frankham, 2009). The value of the traditional studio and what it brings to the educational experience of art and design education has been argued by many, and this was especially highlighted by participants of the 2009 Australian Studio Teaching Project (Zehner, et al. 2009). Furthermore, from the UK perspective, Duggan echoes this view by arguing 'the studio has long been recognised as the key focus for art and design education – the place where work is generated, reviewed, displayed and stored' (2004, p. 71).

The future of the studio model is now a significant issue because of pressure on Australian and UK universities to justify space and resources in a manner unlike in previous decades (Clarke and Budge, 2010; Dineen and Collins, 2005; Duggan, 2004; Zehner, et al. 2009). In a climate where some report that students are not working in on-campus studios in a way that previous generations of students did due to the complex nature of contemporary student lives there is a concern that students are not experiencing enough learning from peers and tutors (Duggan, 2004). Yet learning to practice is a central component of art and design study and studio based learning comprises a significant component of this (Corner, 2005). Thus, tensions exist and the concept of studio as a physical space for working and learning is being challenged from a number of different angles.

Outside the academy, studio culture and practices are changing, and technology has had a big role in this. The introduction of new technologies such as social media has opened up innovative ways of working for artists and designers (Budge, 2013). The connectivity afforded through such technology is especially exciting for artists and designers who, from time to time, are required to work in relatively isolated studio settings. This sense of connectivity was documented in 2012 (Budge, 2012) through the context of artists and designers who blog. Furthermore, Gauntlett's (2011) work

points to the power of such connectivity amongst those who make. The power of this connectivity in the context of art and design education was foreshadowed by Duggan (2004) a decade ago, and it is now that we are beginning to understand the potential on offer for student learning.

The notion of the virtual studio, has to date been largely defined and discussed in relation to film and television. However, this is now expanding with the uptake of artists and designers using new technologies, such as the interactivity possible with social media platforms (Budge, 2013). Virtual communities and innovative practices amongst artists and designers are flourishing. The virtual studio then, in the context of art and design practice, is a space that is not 'real' or tangible in the sense of an actual 'brick and mortar' studio space. Rather, it comprises digital images (still and video) and text that derives from the work and practices of actual studio spaces. In its current form, the virtual studio is most present in social media such as blogs, Twitter and the highly visual and extremely popular application, Instagram. The popular blog, *Huffington Post Arts and Culture*, recently listed the top 25 artists to follow on Instagram (Huffington Post Arts and Culture, 12 August 2013), emphasising its growing use and cache amongst artists and designers.

In this paper I focus on exploring artist and designers' 21st century virtual studio practices to generate thinking about how such practices might inform university studio learning and teaching. Due to the high uptake of social media applications such as Instagram by artists and designers there is much change occurring in the way creative practitioners communicate their studio practices. This is an exciting time and much can be drawn from this turn to the virtual to inform studio pedagogy in the university art and design context.

Approach

I draw on ethnomethodological research traditions to illustrate how virtual studio practices are altering the way artists and designers use and interpret studio in a manner that is positive, educative and inclusive. Ethnomethodology is a research approach advocated by Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) and embodies reflexivity on the part of the researcher at its core. Ethnomethodology emphasises the experience of the researcher as participant. As a research methodology it places value on the researcher's understandings of behaviour and the nuances of practice due to their embedded position within communities (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2009). In the context of this approach, I use a combination of observations of others and my

reflections as someone who uses Instagram, blogs and Twitter in studio practice to report on and think about virtual studio practices, and to draw understandings from these for learning contexts.

Using this approach I continue in the vein of Gauntlett's notion where he contends that 'making is connecting' (2011) to think about the connecting that can happen through making and the use of virtual studio practices. Gauntlett's book focuses on both offline and online cultures of making. It was published prior to the rise of Instagram, and as such his attention was mostly on Youtube and blogs in the context of making and connecting in the digital realm. However, his argument that digital spaces afford creative practitioners the opportunity to make, share, collaborate and foster community applies equally to the possibilities available through using technology such as Instagram in the studio practices of artists and designers. It is possible that his argument carries even more weight with Instagram due to the level of popularity it has amongst artists and designers.

Virtual studio practices

How are artists and designers using the virtual studio? A case study of one Melbourne-based visual artist's use of Instagram (Budge, under review) reveals much to suggest how artists and designers are using Instagram as part of their creative practice. The artist at the focus of the case study uses Instagram to provide images and text:

1. of herself, as an artist, working in her studio
2. to explore the nature of her art work
3. to interrogate and explore process, including materials
4. of herself engaging with her art networks
5. to showcase other artists' work
6. of places of inspiration and enjoyment
7. of herself and her family (Budge, under review).

My experience as both someone who uses Instagram in studio practice and to follow other artists and designers using the application, is that the seven uses illustrated through the case study above are also evident in the way other artists and designers use Instagram. However, more research needs to be done to ascertain if such uses are consistent across a large number of artists and designers using Instagram before

any general claims can be made. Even so, some important points can be drawn from the limited study of this area to date.

In addition to uses, there are five main *benefits* to using virtual studio practices: 'the social dimension, visual stimulation, understanding of artists' practices, artist collaborations and creative motivation' (Budge, 2013, p. 22). Drawing on work in this area and my observations as a participant in the world of virtual studio practice, I argue that the virtual studio allows for positive, educative and inclusive practices, and evidence this in the following sections.

Feedback and motivation

The most significant positive aspect of artists and designers using virtual studio practices is related to feedback that is possible from others and the motivation for practice that can extend from this. For example, Instagram provides a space for virtual studio practices that allows for feedback on creative work (both work-in-progress and finished work) from anyone who follows an artist/designer's Instagram timeline. Such feedback, of course, cannot be guaranteed to be positive but does appear to play a motivating role. For example, the Melbourne painter, Adriane Strampp, posts images of her work on a regular basis to Instagram. In August 2014 she posted an image of one of her paintings with the text 'Night light. Oil and wax on linen 152 x 152 cm'. She received extensive positive feedback from followers including: 'So beautiful'; 'These just keep becoming more beautiful'; 'Love love love'; 'Beautiful'; 'Haunting beauty'; 'So good'; and 'Your paintings are breathtaking'. Through social media such as Instagram, this kind of feedback on work is immediate and can play a strong role in relation to motivation for art/design practice.

Learning

Artists and designers engaging with virtual studio practices create opportunities to learn from others and provide a space for others to learn from them. By participating in the use of, for example, Instagram, they make their creative practices and lives as artists/designers explicit to the public, and there is much valuable learning in this, especially for emerging practitioners. The connectivity and learning afforded through such involvement extends to a number of important areas including processes, materials, ideas and conceptual approaches, colour, form, context, inspiration, triumphs and difficulties, and collaborations with other practitioners. Moreover, the learning that is possible through observing the working life of an artist/designer is immensely important for emerging creative practitioners.

One example among many is what occurs in the Instagram timeline of Block Shop Textiles, a textile design collaboration business between two American sisters. Their timeline provides fertile ground for emerging designers to learn about establishing a design business and to observe the development of creative work. The Stockman sisters have used images and text to document the birth and continued development of their textile business emphasising the philosophical approach that underpins their work (ethical, fare trade textile design practices in collaboration with traditional block printers in Jaipur, India). The sisters show design samples and discuss colour options through their Instagram timeline. The ask followers for feedback, illustrating that the learning opportunities and process of communicating through Instagram is a mutual one. Moreover, through communicating to their followers this way they provide an opportunity for emerging designers to observe a new and small business become established.

A second example of learning is the way in which Melbourne-based visual artist, Belinda Marshall, uses her Instagram timeline to document her creative experimentation, particularly in relation to colour. Throughout 2014 Belinda is posting an image each day with the hashtag[1], #arteveryday2014, to push her creative capacity and explore what working every day in this manner, essentially in the form of a public diary project, can generate for her. Anyone following her Instagram timeline is privy to this experiment, the possible outcome being inspiration and learning through the process of observing another artist as they experiment and push the boundaries of their practice. Again, the learning that is possible through this interaction is twofold: for the observer of Belinda's timeline, and for Belinda herself.

Inclusivity
The potential for gaining a sense of inclusivity in relation to studio practice is far reaching. Participating in the use of virtual studio (as someone posting images and text via spaces like Instagram, or as observer of those who do) does not rely on the proximity of physical geography to be involved and to learn or engage with other practitioners. For example, the visual artist, Camilla Engman, who lives and works in Sweden, has a large number of people from all over the world interacting with her

[1] A hashtag is 'a short keyword, prefixed with the hash symbol '#' – as a means of coordinating a distributed discussion between more or less large groups of users, who do not need to be connected through existing 'follower' networks' (Bruns and Burgess, 2011, p. 1).

through Instagram. She is also a long-term blogger and Twitter user, documenting her creative process online through these mediums. Camilla is multi-lingual and communicates back and forth via social media, particularly Instagram, with other artists living in many parts of the world about her work and process. The distance between Sweden and Australia is vast but this issue is softened by the connectivity and relative inclusivity of artists using virtual studio practices through social media. Moreover, Camilla runs an annual one week creative intensive in Sweden open to artists everywhere. In 2013, Melbourne artist, Belinda Marshall, succeeded in running a Pozible (crowdsourcing[2]) campaign to attend this event so that she could learn from Camilla in person. All of this was conceivable due artists communicating through the use of virtual studio practices, and the inclusivity that engaging with this technology supports.

A further example illustrating the inclusivity of virtual studio practices is the ability to 'look inside' the working studios of artists and designers. Megan McPherson, a Melbourne artist uses Instagram to document work in all kinds of progress. In addition to the successes, she makes a point of reporting on the problem phases enabling one to see how creative practice unfolds for one artist. This public activity acts to demystify creative practice and increase inclusivity. Other artists who take the viewer inside their studios in a virtual sense through Instagram to create understandings of art practice include Erin M Riley (weave artist), Paul Davies (visual artist), Jon Koko (Illustrator), Elizabeth Barnett (visual artist), and Lily Martin (painter). In this article, I have named only a small number of artists working in this manner; Instagram (and other forms of social media) is home to many more artists and designers working to make art and design practice a public activity via virtual studio practices. The sense of being included in their creative worlds is an enormously compelling and powerful part of engaging with these practices.

Virtual studio and the educational context of art and design
If what Duggan (2004) asserts is accurate, and that students are exposed to less peer and tutor informed learning due to the growing inability or preference to avoid attending and using studio spaces on campus, then the use of virtual studio practices through social media in art and design education could play a valuable role in

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[2] Crowdsourcing 'is the process of obtaining needed services, ideas, or content by soliciting contributions from a large group of people, and especially from an online community, rather than from traditional employees or suppliers' (Wikipedia, Crowdsourcing).

attending to this gap. When one considers that the virtual studio allows for positive, educative and inclusive practices as evidenced through this paper, then the potential for merging real and virtual studio practices suggests much in the way of possibilities for student learning.

The potential is especially rich when considering how students might benefit from linking and connecting with practicing artists and designers through engagement in virtual studio practices. While many traditional studio-based subjects offer opportunities to meet with practicing artists and designers (via for example, studio visits, gallery openings, and in some circumstances short-term placements), the possibilities of achieving this same objective are many-fold when social media applications such as Instagram are integrated into the learning experience. In doing so, students become part of observing and interacting that develops and contributes to building professional connections. Working this manner 'enhance[s] the learning of an artist, whether an emerging artist or an established one' (Budge, 2014). Furthermore, Cropley (2006) has argued the benefits of social connections in relation to the development of creativity in learning environments underscoring the importance of such interactions. If in designing curriculum we provide students with opportunities for low risk and scaffolded support in using applications such as Instagram in a professional realm, we create opportunities to explore the use of contemporary networking practices that will be of benefit to graduates as they enter their professional world of choice.

As Lynas, Budge and Beale (2013) have argued traditional studio learning plays a significant role in engaging students in the process of using their hands to create art or problem solve through design. Affirming the central role that traditional studio plays in the context of a study about textile design learning and teaching they contend that,

> Developing high-level design skills and knowledge is critical to studio learning and teaching. In textile design, the development of core skills and knowledge, involves a combination of internal and external processes for the designer. In developing artistic and design skills the textile designer learns how to work with external experiences and sources of inspiration as well as the internal, through being mindful during the process of making. This is how an individual approach to design is developed and ideas are inspired and gleaned. (Lynas et al. 2013, p. 130)

Traditional real life studio practices in art and design still plays a central role in the story of students learning to be artists and designers. So too is the practice of observing the real life practices of artists and designers. Mishler (1999) research into the lives of artists places much value on spending time and being with other artists in terms of the process of identity formation of oneself as an artist. While there is much value in the role played by traditional studio, the merging of real and virtual studio practices in the way we think about studio has the potential to enhance the learning already experienced by students immersed in the process and discovery of creating in art and design contexts. This is a powerful argument about the learning possible through the benefits of combining both the real and virtual realms of studio.

The future of studio: merging the real and the virtual

In this paper I have argued that by attending to the changes occurring in 21st century studio behaviour and practices, and thinking about their application in the educational context we can further support students in their experience of studio, and in the process of preparing them to engage with the art and design worlds. Such thinking suggests approaches that are forward looking, relevant and engaged while retaining elements currently valued in the studio model. Many art and design students are already experimenting in the use of virtual studio practices as they document their work by photographing or making short videos about it and posting it on social media applications, regardless of whether they recognise it as such. The vast number of artists and designers using Instagram, for example, are testament to the interest and energy in making and connecting (to paraphrase Gauntlett, 2011). Moreover, the virtual studio practices of artists and designers constitute valuable communities of practice that if merged with the real life studio as traditionally practiced in university art and design teaching could contribute considerably to creativity, connectivity and engagement.

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