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art school studios:

three vignettes.

professor
teal triggs

Introduction

My fascination with the art school studio began early in my life; I was ten years old when my father started teaching design at the University of Texas at Austin. It was here where I was introduced to private views for the annual Faculty art exhibition, observed campus student protests (always from a safe distance), and on occasion, was able to sit quietly on a drawing stool in the corner of the studio when my father was teaching a design class. Reflecting on these early experiences I can see how they would later inform my choice to enter UT as an art student and to begin my professional career as a design educator. The studio, in all its different manifestations, has been there throughout; a space where students have experimented, conceptualised their art, and realised their aspirations; and a place where I have done the same.

The following three vignettes offer a few personal experiences whilst drawing on the work of artists and designers who have questioned and redefined the function(s) of an art school studio. As we enter a post-pandemic landscape, the place of the studio in the art school still functions as a core idea, but is under review (or, in some cases under threat). The definition of the studio (from European ateliers to portable structures to today's online environment) is flexible and responds to the needs of the student - different working and social environments, changing production modes, and alternative intellectual and conceptual ways of thinking. I conclude that the art school studio is not in danger of eradication, despite the pressures. The studio will remain as a site of transformation. No longer welded to a physical environment, the studio may be virtual, nomadic, and mobile, leading art critic Nathan O'Donnell to ask, 'Does a single philosophical imperative span these different pedagogical models? And, if so, might there be some value in attempting to evaluate that imperative?' (O'Donnell, 2016). Here I hope to evaluate, in a playful fashion, the ways in which a 'philosophical imperative' for the art school might be explored.

Acknowledgement

This essay grew out of a series of informal conversations with Emily Furnell (and, on occasions with Emily Hawes), that took place over the last couple of years via a digital platform. (The focus was the art school studio, with topics that ranged from the materiality and tools of the studio, performativity and studio as staged space, the importance of studio walls to the potential equability of online studios: far more than can be covered here).



Fig. 1

Vignette 1: Me, my father, and the exhibition at Chelsea

As mentioned, my father was an artist, designer, and educator, based in Austin, Texas (Fig 1). Most of the time his studio was in rental spaces in the centre of town. And every so often, when money was tight for rent, he relocated his studio in our front living room¹. Growing up I remember distinctly the cast iron architect's drafting table with a seafoam green surface, tucked neatly in between the 1950s flagstone fireplace and full-length windows framing the elm trees in the front yard. He would sit there every morning with a cup of American filter coffee, his T-square to hand and set of Rapidograph black ink pens (Fig. 2). As a young child I was in awe of the precision of his drawing in the preparation of camera-ready artwork, and how it would magically return off press as a graphic object with that unique smell of printing inks.

On Sundays, my father would tidy up his makeshift home studio and travel further afield. Grabbing his wooden box of watercolour paints and brushes, with a folding easel in hand, he and his friends would drive out to the edge of town to paint the landscapes of the surrounding countryside. The studio became dynamic, mobile, and a collective space for this group of "Sunday painters". The resulting works highlighted the colours of the Texas landscape - washes of yellow, green and browns took shape as representations of abandoned wood-framed houses and vast hill country landscapes.

¹The "studio home" was characteristic of feminist artists including Alice Neel and Louise Bourgeois who frequently blurred the boundaries between "art and life". The American artist Frances Stark explores in her critique of gendered spaces, 'The Architect & the Housewife' (1999), the 'curious arrangement' of her couch and desk in the living room. The essay problematizes the position of her Danish modern couch and the 'unruly mess made up of stacks of loose papers' on the desk behind it and how it breaks the boundaries of her workplace. Stark explains that it is predicated on the fact that, 'not only is my living room my living room but my living room also serves as my studio.' (1999)

From the late 1960s, my father also taught in a university art school, as explained before, which offered him another kind of studio. The design studios here were not like the adjacent painting studios, though they both shared the smells of built-up splatters of oil paints accumulated over the years. The design studios were fitted out with desks and chairs positioned in an orderly manner; almost as if mirroring the grids of the designer's graph paper. Here students learned how to draw logos, create annual reports, and design posters for art school events. For my father, teaching was an extension of what he had learned both as a design professional and an amateur painter in his other studios.

When my father's design business finally became viable, he did settle into running a professional studio. I was still a kid, and as a Saturday job, I was

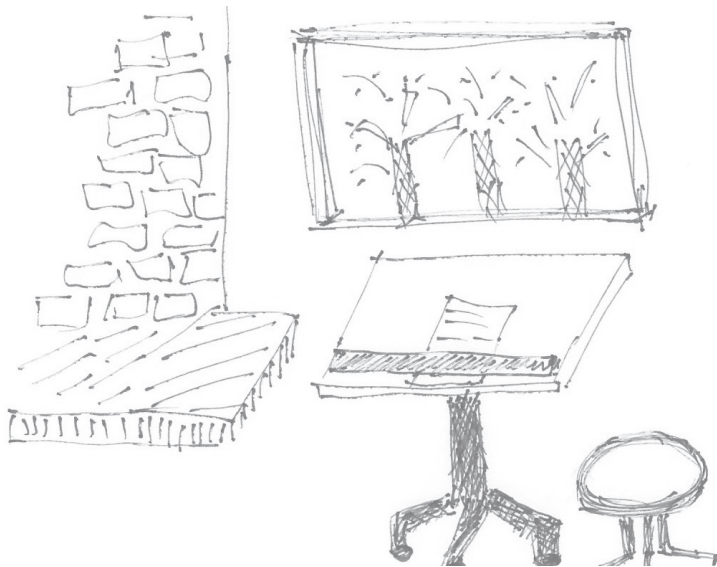


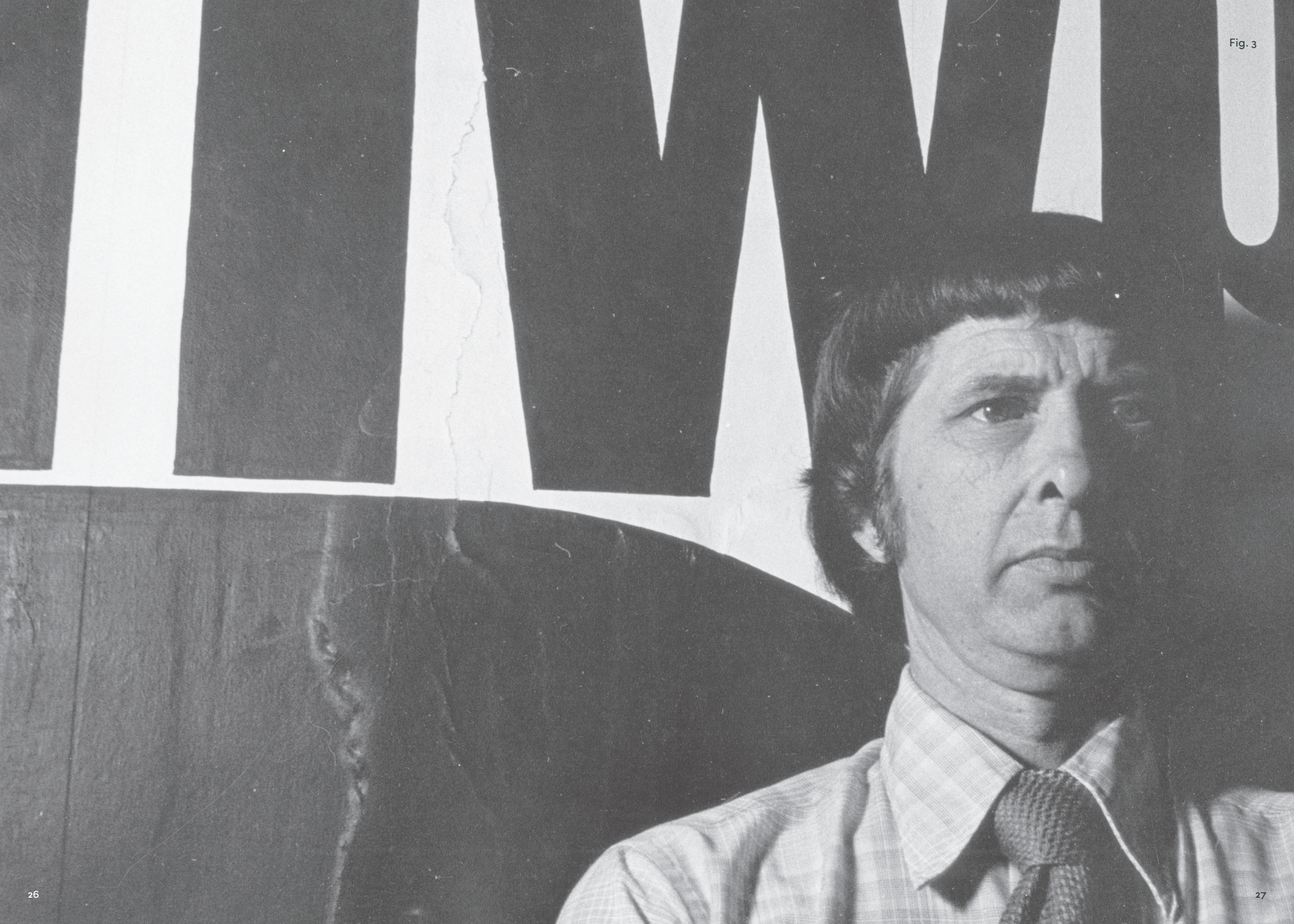
Fig. 2

invited to sweep the front walkway ridding it of leaves and to undertake light cleaning work. It was an opportunity to make movie money, but also a chance to observe my father as a designer in his studio (Fig. 3). As I became increasingly interested in design practice, my father let me take on smaller tasks, inking in logos for example, or collaging images for possible book covers. When I enrolled in University, I did so as a design major and continued to intern for my father during my undergraduate studies. Each Saturday morning, his studio was transformed into an extended classroom, where we would engage in scholarly discussions about the emerging histories and theories of graphic design. This is where my curiosity was nurtured and where, upon reflection, my design learning took place. My father was always the educator and I, the student.

Those early conversations never left me, and continued to inform my interest in design pedagogy and studio learning environments. Much later, in 2008, whilst co-director with Professor Phil Baines of the Information Environments Research Unit, University of the Arts London, we co-curated an exhibition titled 'Space and Learning Environments: A View to the Future?', which directly explored the role of the studio, and where I had a chance to bring my Texan perspective to bear. The exhibition was held at the Triangle Space, Chelsea College of Art and featured twenty-two innovative pedagogical-led case studies from staff working across the University (Fig. 4). The exhibition aimed to prompt discussion around the future of learning spaces whilst highlighting contemporary practices.

The space was divided into three themed areas: Creative Spaces and Places which looked at a context for learning and its impact on the curriculum, Space 2: Rethinking Learning Spaces, where we considered space as an agent of change both inside and outside the classroom, and Space 3: Transcending Spaces, where we looked at notions of interactivity and the relationship between physical and digital technologies. An interactive wall also featured which held suggestion postcards where exhibition goers were able to share their ideas on the future of the studio in the art school. We produced a documentary film capturing the workshops undertaken with staff and students as part of our own learning process² (Fig. 5).

²The documentary film 'Space to Learn' was first shown at Chelsea and accompanied 'Space to Think: Our Teaching, Learning and Making Spaces in the 21st Century', a conference held at UAL, July 2008. Over six hours of documentation was edited into a short documentary screen during the exhibition. Film Interviewer: Teal Triggs, Cinematographer: Roy Cornwall, Sound: Sam Nightingale and Editing: Adrian Thompson.



We featured case studies of different kinds of studio spaces (physical and virtual) and evidenced the learning that had taken place (Fig. 6). We also showcased projects where students had envisaged the future of learning spaces external to the art school, such as libraries, public offices, working archaeology sites, and London's outdoor public spaces. Experimental studio spaces demonstrated how teaching and collaboration might occur in virtual learning environments, for example, such as Second Life. Here student avatars experienced negotiation and collaboration mediated by technology. The virtual space also meant different ways in which the role of the tutor might be considered as a facilitator, where learning was encouraged to be cooperative and collective rather than directed.



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

Physical spaces were de rigueur as topics of enquiry, and several projects referenced historical examples of working environments of artists such as Kurt Schwitters' 'Merzbau' and contemporary artist Allan Wexler's portable rooms and furniture. Peter Nencini, who was a senior tutor on the Camberwell BA Illustration course, offered a speculative project titled 'The Book Room'. The student-led project revisited the use of the studio as a creative environment intended to 'stimulate us as creatives', but within the parameters of cost and sustainability. The studio spaces were created through salvaging disused furniture, shelves and cupboards, and wood that had been thrown away in skips or not in use and in storage. Nencini writes: 'The intention is for the environment to grow and cluster over time... so that it bears the trace of creative activity – a kind of museum, archive,



Fig. 6

library, a dense, wooden environment' (Nencini, 2008). On the other hand, Anne Eggebert showcased her Central St Martin's project 'Gun Powder' with BA Fine Art undergraduates, which aimed to 'develop a practice which is not dependent on studio culture, is innovative and responsive to the environment and is open to the comparative methodology implicit in interdisciplinarity' (Fig. 7). Twenty-five students worked in Essex in the Gunpowder Park with Landscape and Arts Network Services staff and community programmes, '...to engage with the location and the social aspects of those who use it' (Eggebert, 2008). Acknowledging that all art school studios share at first glance, similar physical characteristics, Professor Anne Tallentire and Graham Ellard, also from Central Saint Martins, advocated instead to focus on 'the notion of negotiation as a generative process.' Their project, 'The Double Agents – "The Studio as a Verb"', foregrounded dialogue and negotiation as fundamental principles of their studio where 'the configuration of the working environment followed' (Tallentire and Ellard, 2008). The project began in 2002 as a research group (and continues today) which aimed to bring artists together who shared interests on the practices and theories of time-based media as part of an expanded studio as 'a workshop' as well as 'a point of encounter' (: Double Agents, n.d.) (Fig. 8).



Vignette 2: Pedagogies Past

Part of my work at the Royal College of Art as a researcher involves working with archives. I recently became interested in studios from the long 19th century. Like most art school drawing studios from the period, c. 1900, the Royal College of Art spaces were filled with plaster cast displays of Roman busts. In one photograph from the archive, single casts of body parts such as disembodied feet wearing sandals are seen hanging from picture rails around the top of the walls of the studio. A group of female students sit demurely with drawing boards tilted on their laps, drawing while their professors adorned in academic ceremonial robes look on (Fig. 9). Men and women in the modelling classes at the College were taught separately to ensure the social etiquette of the period was adhered to (Fig. 10, Fig 11). Throughout the Victorian period, women were 'from the working and middle classes' who attended art schools in England and either studied 'applied and decorative arts' in South Kensington, or undertook a fine arts model offered for example, at the Royal Art Academy. Women who attended the latter kinds of schools were considered artists of 'lesser talents, separate but unequal in terms of their intellectual and technical abilities.' Fine arts on the other hand as a profession was deemed as 'serious art study for men' (Zimmermann, 1991: 110). Men entered the professional business of designing and often 'women designers were expected to work as amateurs' (Cunningham, 1999: 188).

As a response to the merger of the Department of Science and Art and the Board of Education in 1901, the Royal College of Art 'reunited' the disciplines of fine and practical art 'in one institution' (Lawrence, 2021: 175). Though some studios remain gender divided, not all studio-based subjects were taught separately. For example, in 1905, a photograph of the College's engraving studio suggests the types of activities that were found in dedicated technical workshops for students at the turn of the century. Dressed in full length white lab coats, both men and women are working side by side to learn the skills of quality engravers (Fig. 12). Other technical skills taught at the College also had their own studios where students would work collectively on projects, including the heraldry class (1905) and mural painting (located appropriately in what was known as The Mural Room).



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

During one of our meetings about studios, my colleague Emily pointed me to some fascinating images from the Slade from about the same time (Fig.13). Clearly of the late Victorian period, the group photograph is a portrait of students in the Slade's lower life drawing room replete with the day's subjects including a young horseman, sitting on a horse and three dogs. It is thought that the drawing assignment was to depict the scene of 'A Horseman Bringing News of a Battle to the Inhabitants of a City' (Slade Archive Project, 2013). To modern day eyes, the studio scene is a somewhat surreal display; plaster cast figures peering down from the shelf above the main doorway, tall tree branches behind as a backdrop with hay on the studio's floor. Male and female students are standing as still as possible in front of what would have been a long exposure for an interior photograph. The image suggests the performative nature of the art school studio. The room is transformed into a site of spectacle using the theatrics of a staged set as its focal point for study whilst reflecting a process of collaborative learning as drawing in the company of others.



Fig. 12



Fig. 13

The studios of the long 19th century were set-up to enhance a pedagogical approach based on "vision" and "object lessons" (e.g., plaster casts, life models and animals). Objects introduced multisensory environments that were meant to be experienced, and so 'that the material presence of things can influence ways of looking, sensing, and knowing' (Korda, 2020: 202). Korda suggests that through the 1890s, these objects would increasingly become replaced by pictures and nature. This idea endured and in 1971 at the RCA, Professor John Norris Wood established the Natural History Illustration and Ecological Studies MA course. The studio was located at the top of the Darwin Building, Kensington Gore, and was home to an aviary, fish, and turtle pond³ (Fig 14). The role of the studio space here functioned to be experiential and performative in order to recalibrate the artist's understanding of the world around them.

Vignette 3: Studio Futures

I vowed not to write a clichéd essay, i.e., by referencing a new post-pandemic context of art school practices; but here we are. This is our new reality. Although Covid-19 meant a rapid rethinking of what the art school studio might be in a new health-aware environment, revisions to the pedagogical underpinning of studio practices were already in progress. For example, these were influenced by the implementation of tighter estate resource modelling (space = costs), demands for shifting to digital-based workshops (e.g., VR, AR), changing economic needs of industrialisation and the political and ecological expectations of incoming students. Ian Heywood posited in 2009, for example, that it's a 'small wonder then that questions have arisen about the sustainability of the studio, and whether it should be replaced by some other kind of learning space' (Heywood, 2019: 195).

Early precedents for thinking differently about learning environments are to be found in distance and blended learning models involving the use of '...broadcast television, telephone, fax, closed video networks and email servers...' (Platz, 2022: 161) to facilitate connection and interaction between students and teachers. The Open University in the UK successfully pioneered distance learning using the distinctive modes of broadcast television and radio for example in 1971. In his essay 'Drawing ex-studio: An eccentric case for correspondence courses', artist and teacher, William Platz, brings to our attention the term 'ex-studio', which he defines as a form of teaching delivery 'without in-person experiences' (Ibid, 2022: 160). The opportunities offered by new kinds of technologies have informed pedagogical practices whilst also redefining the role of the studio environment. For example, Platz reminds us of the rampant popularity of immersive virtual learning environments (VLE) such as Second Life (c. 2000's). The virtual worlds were conducive to collaborative projects via their ability to offer a dynamic exhibition space hosted on islands with avatars as participants. However, Platz reflects that 'attempts to mimic the studio experience only amplify the absence of the studio' (Ibid, 2022: 161).

³The RCA's aviary studio was the inspiration for my children's book *The School of Art* (2015) where students are invited, amongst other activities, to learn about monarch butterflies and what they could teach us about pattern and camouflage in design.



Fig. 14

In my experience, Second Life worked particularly well with collaborative projects that were international in scope. We initiated a transatlantic project in 2008 between my design students from the London College of Communication, and students under the tutelage of my brother (an architect), Riley Triggs at the University of Texas at Austin, to explore how we might share experiences of spatial practices (Fig. 15). A studio space was constructed in Second Life which facilitated students' learning exploring how forms may be produced in virtual spaces and what happens when those forms as recreated might inhabit physical "real" spaces. The intent of the project was to critically engage with the notion of a materiality of objects when co-created in a virtual digital space and then as physical objects in a physical space. Students experienced what it felt like to move from one kind collaborative studio to another, as a way to discover different types of "making" behaviours, and how these might contribute to new knowledge in design.

The art school studio has historically operated as a focal point for project-based work; as a social space offering adjacency for students and tutors to engage in informal critique, collaboration, and dialogic exchanges. As design educator, Katja Fleishmann observes:

'The design studio has unique characteristics that set it apart from other academic disciplines, primarily because studio-based learning and teaching is a workspace and a social environment...' (Fleischmann 2020, 38).

The pandemic expedited what art and design educators were already asking: what does it mean to modernize the art school and within this; how might we reassess the role of the studio?⁴ The traditions and inherent values of studio-based learning were already in play, but challenged further as the art school moved online. Educators were already (pre-pandemic) exploring alternative models for online learning (e.g., including hybrid or blended learning) and identifying what was lost and gained in online learning. Neal Dreamson, for example, remarks:

'When online learning emerged and was considered in design education, many educators and design students believed that it could be ineffective for the studio-based discipline because of loss of direct social interactions.' (Dreamson 2020, 485, citing Ioannou (2017) as source of idea)

Alternative models suggest we must also reconsider how learning is supported. An emerging interest in experimental projects grew out of approaches offered by radical (e.g., critical, subversive, and disruptive) pedagogies. These were employed to challenge normative structures and conventional teaching practices. For example, the underpinning philosophy of The Pedagogy Group in New York - founded in 2012 as a collective of 'socially engaged art educators' - continues to resonate. They write:

'If democracy demands continual cooperation and perpetual self-critique, the transformational site of radical pedagogy can foster the requisite awareness that the suffering of those around us varies in all shades of intensity and historicity and that we must always expand our consciousness to include those who have different experiences than our own'. (The Pedagogy Group 2016, 36).

Today, further questions are to be asked, such as: who is the studio for, and what are the experiences embedded in material practices of the studio that are deemed essential to the education of artists and designers? Radical pedagogies offer a second look at foregrounding the studio experience as emancipatory and transformative by promoting inclusive and diverse ways of knowing and making.



Fig. 15

⁴Daniel Buren who writing in 1979, asks 'what is the function of the studio?' offering as a definition: 'it is the place where the work originates, it is generally a private place, an ivory tower perhaps, it is a stationary place where portable objects are produced' (Buren, 1979: 51). The function of the studio raises for the artist, an inherent "contradiction" between the artwork and the environment in which it is produced. Buren remarks that, 'It is impossible by definition for a work to be seen in place; still, the place where we see it influences the work even more than the place in which it was made and from which it has been cast out' (Buren, 1979: 53).

Sam Thom writes in his book: *A Recent History of Self-Organized Art School Education* (2017, Sternberg Press), that many of the projects 'are small and occasionally nomadic, while emphasizing an approach to learning that is collaborative and discursive....they are about change through experience, about a type of process' (Thom, 2017: 48). Self-organized educational projects included the Open School East (OSE), who were promoted as a 'free' school, established in 2013 and located in Hackney, East London in a disused public library. OSE relocated to Margate in 2017 and was rehoused for a time, in the former Thanet School of Art and Crafts (1931-74), taking advantage of the town's growing popularity with artists relocating from bigger cities. Additionally, the rise of the independent art schools reinforced the post-graduate liberal-arts studio as a focus of experiential learning. For example, The Margate School in the UK, whose curriculum is based on socially engaged themes around 'art, society, nature', aims to 'foster co-creation and peer-learning practices in shared studio spaces' (The Margate School 2023). On the other hand, celebrity artist Tracey Emin's newly formed TKE Studios (also located in Margate), launched in January 2023 in a former Edwardian bathhouse redesigned to house twelve studios for the next generation of art students (Lam 2022; Khomami 2022). We've come full circle.

Conclusion: The Studio Today is Bookable

I return to where I began this essay, and ask if we are any closer in addressing O'Donnell's provocation - is there a 'single philosophical imperative'? Maybe. Studios can clearly be whatever we want them to be, and possibly this is enough (Fig.16). On the one hand, the studio continues to be a responsive space and remains firmly rooted in contemporary notions of art and design practice. Walls have disappeared in new building projects, in favour of open plan spaces. Studios are bookable now, yet it is more a matter of who and in what ways spaces are inhabited which reasons that the studio will never be fixed or static. On the other hand, Emin's small-scale studios in an Edwardian building point to another, older, model. The studio has always been defined by the constraints attached to it as a space, and yet, it has inherently evolved by responding to the needs of students and tutors as they pass through the building each academic year. As an educator the studio is the chosen environment through which pedagogical imperatives remain: to foster experimentation, to encourage reflection, and to promote speculation. My studio today? It is a desk, laptop, single lamp, and Boz Scaggs blaring away on iTunes. Tomorrow, well who knows.



Fig. 16

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figures.

- Fig 1** Edward Triggs as a young artist. Oakland, California. c.1948 before making his way to Austin, Texas. ©Courtesy of the Triggs Estate.
- Fig 2** My Father's Studio. Drawing, 2023. ©Teal Triggs
- Fig 3** Portrait of Edward Triggs' Type Wall in his Design Studio, Late 1970s. photograph ©Teal Triggs
- Fig 4** Exhibition installation, 'Space and Learning Environments: A View to the Future?', Triangle Space, Chelsea College of Art, UAL, 2008. Photograph ©Teal Triggs
- Fig 5** Filming for the documentary 'Space to Learn' was first shown at the Triangle Gallery, Chelsea College of Art and Design. Film Interviewer: Teal Triggs, Cinematographer: Roy Cornwall, Sound: Sam Nightingale and editing: Adrian Thompson. Photograph ©Teal Triggs
- Fig 6** Examples of case study panels collected from staff from across the University highlighting project related to the theme of space and learning environments. 'Space and Learning Environments: A View to the Future?', Triangle Space, Chelsea College of Art, UAL, 2008. Photograph ©Teal Triggs
- Fig 7** Created as part of Anne Eggebert's showcase 'Gunpowder Park' (2007), 'Orchard' by New Zealand artist Bruce Freestone (CSM 2006-2010). The planting of umbrella's as 'saplings' aimed to provide a future source of shelter for the waterlogged or sun-drenched traveller.'
- Fig 8** 'Vito Acconci, in conversation' round table discussion with undergraduates and postgraduates held in Studio Go1, CSM, (2003) as part of the project Double Agents-The Studio as Verb'. Project URL: <http://www.doubleagents.org.uk/>
- Fig 9** Women's Life Class. C. 1900s. Royal College of Art. Royal College of Art Archive. ©Royal College of Art. Photo credit: Royal College of Art. All rights reserved.
- Fig 10** Modelling Class (male students), Royal College of Art, 1905. Royal College of Art Archive. ©Royal College of Art. Photo credit: Royal College of Art. All rights reserved.
- Fig 11** Modelling Class (female students), Royal College of Art, 1905. Royal College of Art Archive. ©Royal College of Art. Photo credit: Royal College of Art. All rights reserved.
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- Fig 13** Darwin Building (The Greenhouse), RCA. 1985-86. Royal College of Art Archive/Hugh Carroll. ©The copyright holder. All rights reserved. Photographer: Hugh Carroll. [have sent email for permission seeking clarification as to copyright holder.]
- Fig 15** Second Life, Students engaging with virtual studio spaces whilst sitting in the Computer Labs at the University of Texas at Austin. (2008) Photograph ©Riley Triggs
- Fig 16** MRes and PGR researchers in conversation. School of Communication, White City Campus, RCA studio. ©Royal College of Art. Photo credit: Richard Haughton. All rights reserved.