

On the Space of Artists: 8 DOORS

EARLY IN 2020 WE BEGAN A PROJECT TITLED ON THE SPACE OF ARTISTS, A PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN PARRAMATTA ARTISTS' STUDIOS (PAS) AND THE RIVERINA. THIS PROJECT HAS BROUGHT PAS ARTISTS LILL COLGAN, KIRTIKA KAIN, GILLIAN KAYROOZ, AND WAGGA-BASED ARTISTS GREGORY CAROSI, ALICE PEACOCK AND PAT RONALD TOGETHER WITH FACILITATORS JAMES FARLEY AND HAYLEY MEGAN FRENCH IN A VIRTUAL SPACE TO DISCUSS STUDIO PRACTICE ACROSS WESTERN SYDNEY AND THE RIVERINA. THROUGH A SERIES OF ONLINE ARTS LABS AND ZOOM SESSIONS, WE DEVELOPED A COLLABORATIVE EXHIBITION OUTCOME AS PART OF THE ARTSTATE 2020 ARTS PROGRAM. AS OUR 8 DOORS WERE BEING INSTALLED ON MORROW STREET WE PREPARED FOR OUR ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION AT ARTSTATE AND RECORDED OUR REFLECTION ON THE PROJECT TO-DATE. WHAT FOLLOWS IS THIS CORRESPONDENCE BETWEEN FACILITATORS JAMES FARLEY AND HAYLEY MEGAN FRENCH IN OCTOBER 2020.

On the Space of Artists acknowledges that this project has taken place across Darug and Wiradjuri land. We pay respects to Elders past, present, and emerging.

James Farley & Hayley Megan French

Hi Hayley,

I hope that everything is going well in the lead up to your trip to Wagga Wagga. We are all looking forward to having the PAS crew visit and for us all to meet in person.

Our eight doors are being installed as I write! The image of a doorway is such a simple expression of space and I couldn't be happier with how we reached this outcome. Part of me wishes we could present the Zoom recording of the eight of us working collaboratively on a sixty-by-six metre mural. I teach the creative process to students each year, telling them that if they trust the process and let the material lead, they will make a path by walking it. But it was quite unique to witness a focused collaborative process unfold in real-time. To think that we started with an empty wall, filled it to overflowing with text, drawings, maps, images, only to collectively pare it back to the simplest and most direct expression of our studio: a doorway. In one of our online arts labs, Greg said, "Exiting the studio is very different to entering one." I feel this idea sums up the collaborative process that led us here nicely.

I've really enjoyed the past few sessions with our artists as we prepare for the *8 Doors* online content and Round Table discussion. It has made me think how much we have learnt from the evolution of this project.

Hey James,

After our last Zoom session on Monday I think it is safe to say we are all looking forward to visiting Wagga next week, meeting you all in person, going for a walk along the river. Great to see that our installers took advantage of the sun yesterday to begin installing our doors.

From our perspective at PAS, a big driver of this partnership was to learn how to meaningfully engage regional artists with our program in Parramatta. It has been enlightening to discuss with the artists their experiences, perceptions and expectations of metropolitan and regional artworld ecologies. I don't believe there is ever enough discussion of expectations in our sector.

Being forced to move this project online has created a model for an online arts lab which allowed artists to participate from wherever they are, whatever they're

working on, and find common ground. There were no career or place-based hierarchies in this space. Only a backdrop of the books being read, the materials being used, the trinkets carried from space to space as reminders of the kind of artist we want to be.

Interestingly, this space led to a collaborative exhibition outcome very different from the proposed group show. What I think is important is that this exhibition acts as a *doorway* to a project which has focused on conversations and investigations between practitioners into the importance of the studio space, or lack thereof, to the work that an artist creates.

Hi Hayley,

Early in the project, we started with two key questions. How do we hold space? How do our spaces hold us? I've been coming back to these questions again and again as I think about the connection we all formed this year. In the beginning, I was fascinated by the idea of physical space. Studio Space, Civic Space, Cultural Space—all the traditional ideas that one may associate with the space of artists. While studio space is undoubtedly important to an artist, I feel less concerned with the need to lock down a definition to describe it. How could we? The spaces where artists work are as personal and idiosyncratic as art itself. We have some artists who work from coordinated and shared studios, others find their space at home. I've most enjoyed hearing about those places you might not expect. We've seen work be made on trains and bedroom floors. Remember Mimi Tong's workshop, where the living room was the studio and the ironing board the easel?

I am excited to see our artists explore and share their spaces with each other through the online exhibition. I instantly connected with Pat's suggestion that most of his work is planned and developed in the car while travelling. Although, I am equally fascinated by Alice's idea that her studio is just a desk, a chair and a computer - a practice existing simultaneously in the physical and virtual space.

As I write, I am on my third play of Lill's *Emotional Wipe Down* playlist—an experiential response which has me thinking beyond space to the ecology of connections surrounding the studio that make practice possible, and so much more engaging.

Hey James,

I keep coming back to these questions also: How do we hold space? How do our spaces hold us? As you have said, our project to-date has focused on practitioners. Our conversations have conceptually, and in practice, mapped the studio. And here we have found our commonalities. But the intervention of *8 Doors* in a prominent civic space brings these questions not only to a wider audience, but also to a wider context. What is the space of artists outside of the studio? Outside of the Regional Gallery? In the Civic space?

How do we hold space?

We ask this in the midst of an evolving pandemic, and in the midst of an ongoing and systemic defunding and devaluing of the arts in Australia. Sitting together (in Zoom) we discussed the space of the studio as one where we can sit with the difficult questions. We can acknowledge our competing priorities and the tensions that we hold in our bodies—I think here in particular about Kirtika speaking of the histories and politics that are held in her body, and the studio as a space to lean in. And of Lill's reference to Sara Ahmed (Queer Phenomenology): "spaces are not exterior to bodies; instead, spaces are like a second skin..." The studio is a space to lean into the body and lean into our materials. To sit with uncertainty. And through holding *this* space, we can find moments of *resistance* and *repair*.

I borrow these words from Olivia Laing (Funny Weather; Art in an Emergency) whose timely writing we discussed in one of our labs.

Hi Hayley,

Yes, *resistance* and *repair* are nice terms to describe some of the work that takes place in the studio space, particularly in the context of 2020. Despite very different approaches to practice, we all agreed that the studio was a place of give and take; where answers and questions coexist, and time, material and process are the common variables. The idea of reciprocity seemed to underpin the various threads we explored this year, from material process and studio relationships, all the way through to the physical and organisational structures of studio space and how they function in a community.

I am thankful that we were forced to slow down, to give time and space for the project to evolve naturally. What I have appreciated in the resulting online approach is that it didn't position anyone as having less - which is often how regional/metropolitan relationships are framed. Instead, our project offered everyone something unique while filling a gap caused by circumstance. For the PAS artists, this project became a space to come together as peers, to share ideas and get to know one another, at a time when it was safer to work from home. For the Riverina artists, those Zoom rooms and the virtual studio created a similar space for connection. It was something new and different from the other institutional spaces that exist in our community. It was a space for artists to come together, to know one another, and to cut straight to the business of being an artist. This is the first level of any arts ecology - opportunities for connection and exchange. In other words, a community.

Reflecting on this year, I feel we all learned to appreciate the simplicity of community and connection. We connected in different ways, informed by a shared experience and sense of empathy. It was never about the forced relationships or a looming deadline to create a new work. It became what it was always meant to be. A space for artists.

Hey James,

Yes, I love that the works that have been created through our arts labs and for this exhibition are not necessarily *of* the artists' practice, but have been created *around* their practice. The drawings, photographs, writing, videos have come out of the provocations in our labs, but also simply the processes of making other work and just being in the studio. The works that will make up the online content of our exhibition are an excellent insight into the personal and intricate spaces of each artists' studio practice. They are individual; and they overlap.

Throughout this process, Kirtika has been working on a major body of work in her home-garage-studio and has remarked on how charged this space feels for her, overwhelmed with materials, dripping with tar. She has been wondering what it would feel like for someone else to step into this space. The *8 Doors* online content gives people this opportunity. We can step into Kirtika's space and experience what is left behind of the works which have now left for exhibition. We can listen to Lill's curated playlist which maps an emotional and spatial experience of their studio, guided by the conversations of our first arts lab.

Hi Hayley,

Initially, I had hoped this partnership would inspire demand for a platform like PAS in Wagga Wagga - and in many ways it has. But not in the way I had anticipated. Despite the commonality established between our artists, there is an undeniable factor of difference... the difference of location. Western Sydney and the Riverina have different populations, different relationships to public and private space, and different proximity and access to a broader metropolitan arts network. These differences lead to a different cultural ecology and above all else, this project has shown us that what makes sense in one place may not necessarily work for another.

How do our spaces hold us?

PAS provides artists with a space that is common, supported, and central to the development of their practice. But it is more than just a physical studio; it is a community of artists whose collective identity elevates the individuals associated with it. It is a professional community, not just for the development of work, but in the cultivation of a shared creative network connected through time to map pathways for artists well beyond their tenure at the physical studio.

The Riverina is far more isolated in terms of network and connection with a broader arts ecology, but there are benefits that many of our artists wouldn't trade for anything. The ability (and space) to have studio space at home was a common theme we discussed, and while the discussion around common studio space has been met with enthusiasm, the demand for community and connection feels all the more pressing.

Hey James,

When I think of how our spaces hold us, I am especially interested to see *Hardenvale - our Home in Absurdia* in Wagga Wagga Art Gallery when we visit next week. Throughout this year, and in our arts labs, we felt a reframing of the home as studio. Working from home forced us to think through how we delineate space and time—I can't stop thinking of Zadie Smith's reflections on the hierarchies of time in her essay *Something to do* (Intimations), and the need to uncouple productivity from time—something we discussed at length in our labs. We also returned often in our conversations to the things (ideas) we surround ourselves with in our studio spaces. We can see in Gillian's doco-style video the importance of these smaller details of the studio space as mirrors, reminders and goals. It is the same with our homes. Our homes reflect back to us not only our memories but our aspirations.

As you say, this project has looked very different to how we planned, and in the midst of a lot of uncertainty, created space for new connections and new pathways. Another important takeaway is the need for specificity in the pathways we create for regional/metropolitan exchange - I look forward to discussing this in our Round Table.

See you in Wagga.

On the Space of Artists is a partnership between Parramatta Artists' Studios, Eastern Riverina Arts and Charles Sturt University.

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