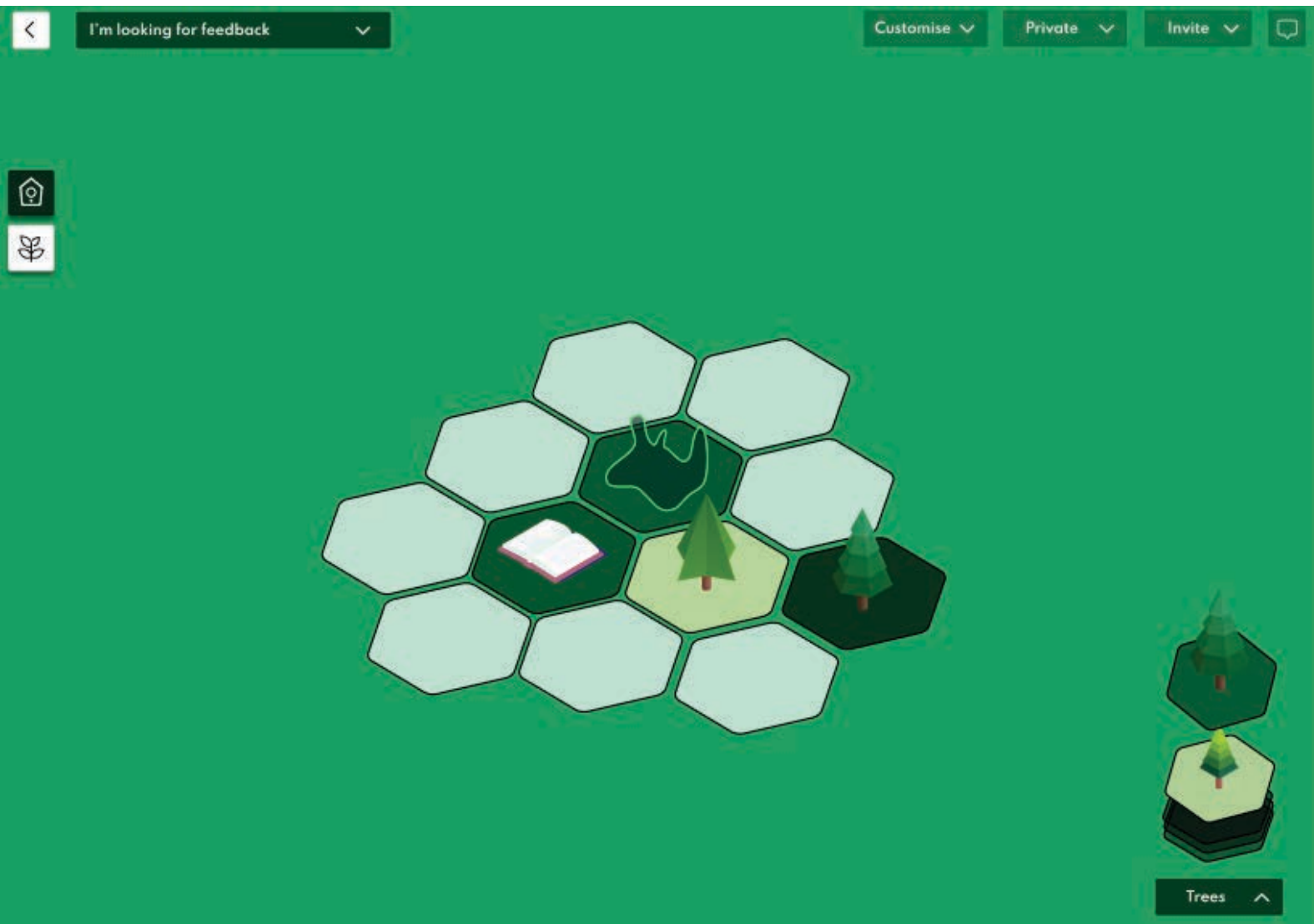


Make garden: Why are we living on the edge?

Andrew Bracey & Frederick Thackeray-Vincent



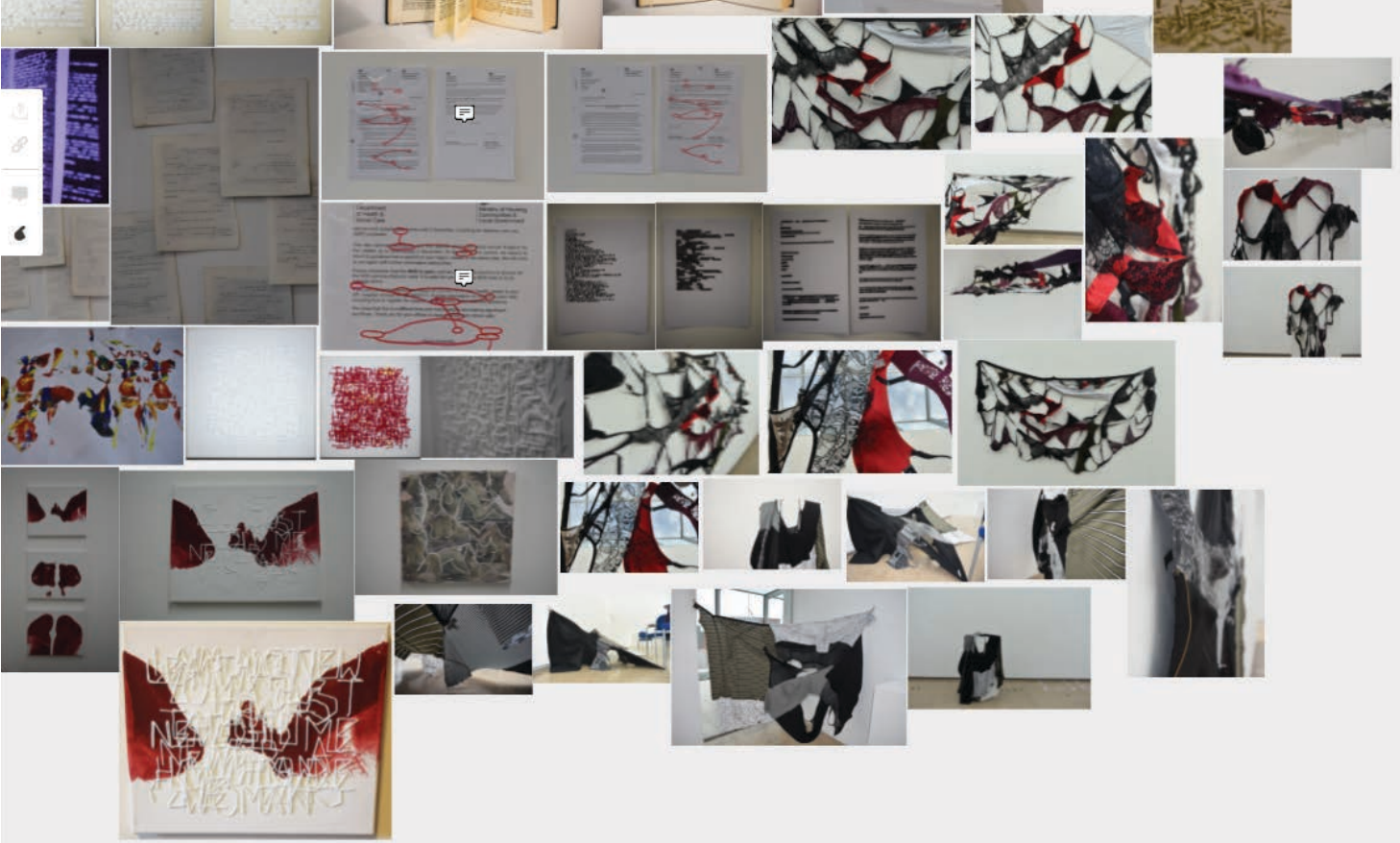
Introduction

Make.garden recognises the isolation unique to each individual's creative practice can negate the benefit of meaningful, constructive relationships within local/global communities. A balance between the two is often hard to negotiate, but is aspirational as best practice.

Make.garden is an online space to capture and evaluate developing artwork in private, whilst also allowing engagement with the wider community of current and as-yet-unknown peers, mimicking the generative potential of the studio.

Make.garden encourages risk and experimentation - of the unknown or yet to be worked out - that are central to the development of an artist, as well as fostering a supportive and critical community around a cohort of makers.





Background

Make.garden started as a research project examining how an artist builds their practice and community in both the digital and 'real' world.

In discussion with over fifty artists, alongside trials of version one of the software, it was clear that the digital tools often utilised by makers both helped and hindered individuals in dealing with the persistent challenges of trying to build their community of practice.

As outlined by philosopher James Williams "many of our online interactions seen in apps useful to us deliberately produce functional distractions that direct us away from information or actions relevant to our immediate task or goals." (Williams, 2018: p) The goals that makers set for themselves, such as completing an artwork, exhibiting in a group show, or changing the way someone sees the world, should be the types of things that technology should help us pursue. In contrast, many of the existing platforms that artists currently use are set up by companies with different and often contrasting goals underlied by pervasive data tracking. Most apps want to keep you scrolling and liking things forever, rather than getting on with being creative.

Make.garden has the same goals and aspiration as artists, because it is made by and for artists. It is a place dedicated to meaningful exchanges.

Isolation/community conundrum

Makers often work alone, comparable to Roland Barthes' analysis of cenobitic monasticism. Artist Fritz Haeg has pinpointed how "artists have a unique ability to see themselves as a part of something but also outside of it" (Haeg: 2012) This makes a marginality that is unique and beneficial to each individual also negate the benefit of meaningful, constructive relationships within local/global communities. The effects and proposed solutions for this tension for makers is at the heart of Make.garden.

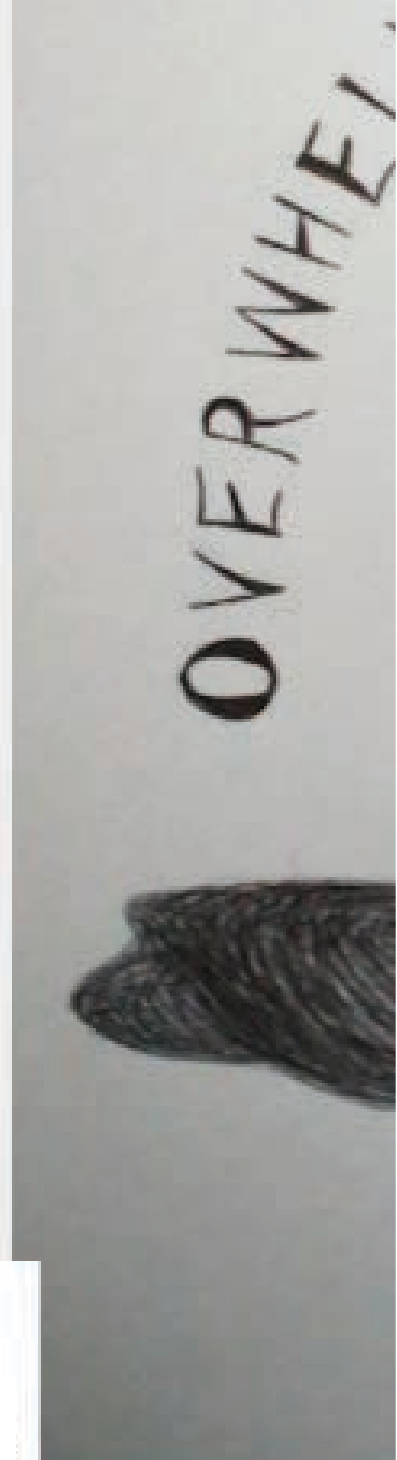
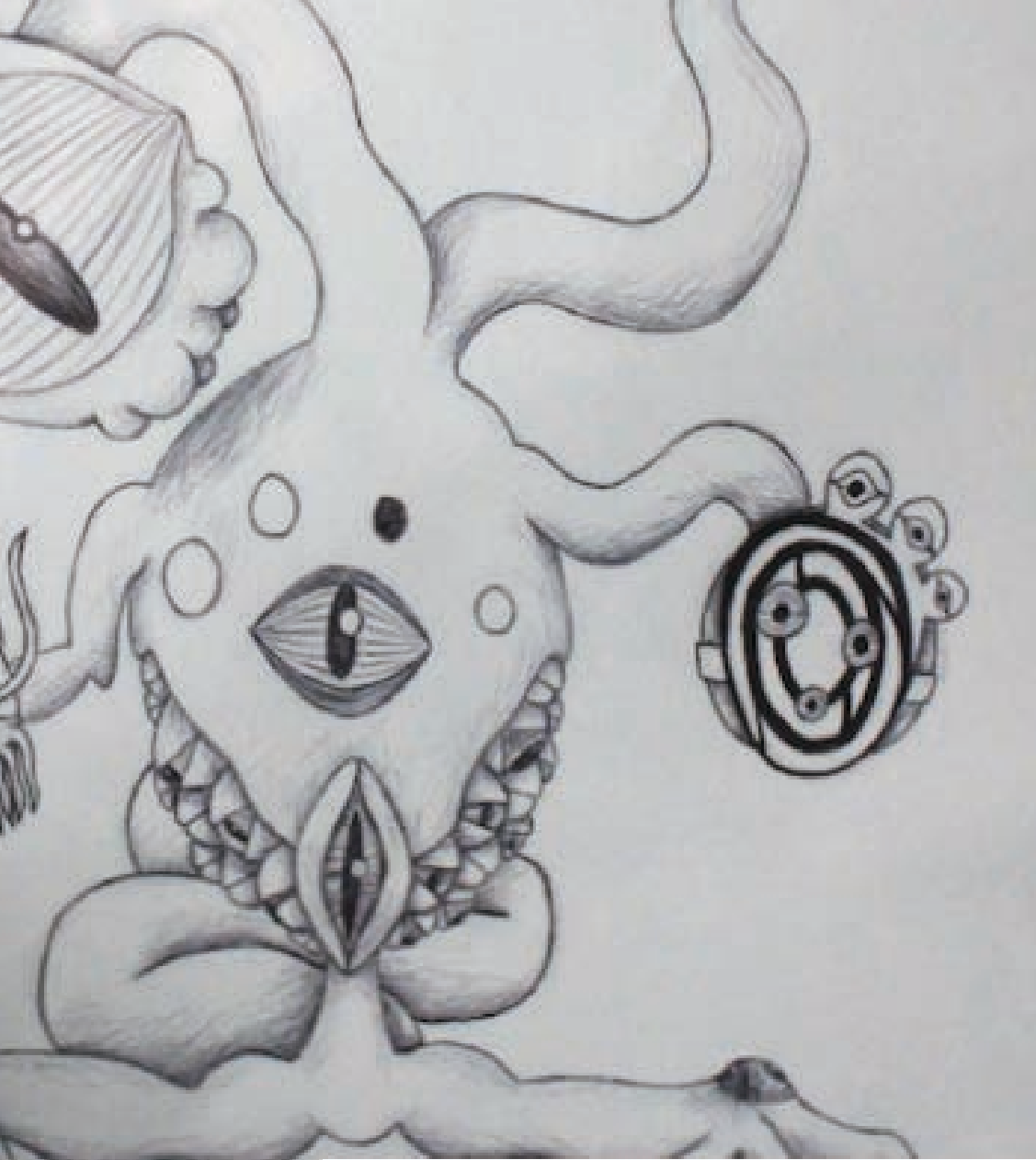
Shared pain points experienced alone

The interview feedback gathered over two years whilst developing Make.garden provided the backbone for identifying what issues were most resonant in the solitary maker. These included but were not limited to:

- Feeling isolated from other makers/people.
- Lack of incidental conversation helpful to their practice (propinquity).
- Wanting access to expert opinion that understands their context and needs (coupling).
- A lack of opportunities to share work in a meaningful way such as showing work in an exhibition.
- Support with writing successful applications for funding.
- Help finding opportunities that support creative growth e.g residencies.
- Deciding how to choose what to do/make/focus on next.
- Combating the feeling of losing motivation and momentum.
- Discovering new inspirations such as texts, videos, interviews, etc.
- Finding the time to make.
- Earning enough directly from their interests.
- Continuing education.

Make.garden has been developed to address these needs through a sharing and supportive environment. Each user's online garden is: a unique space that can be shaped like a studio, whilst being coupled to the maker; instantly able to be exchanged with others in ways that would not otherwise happen; and encourages shared territories to support each other when someone asks for help, critical feedback, or just wants to talk something through.

The coupling in this case is applied to the studio space and the meaningful exchange with someone else that has insight into the context of the maker. The regular contact - synchronous or asynchronous - leads to a maker's momentum being maintained and feeds their creative wellbeing. This is often what is lacking for the solitary maker outside of art education.



Luke Pietnik

2 months ago



I'm struck by how uncanny these illustrations are. It at first seems to be the shading which is the thing, but the shapes and combinations of imagery are deeply rooted in something close to us, but is what we might perceive as 'other'



Conner Vilette-Lawman

2 months ago



It is very lovecraft like creatures

Comment



Comment

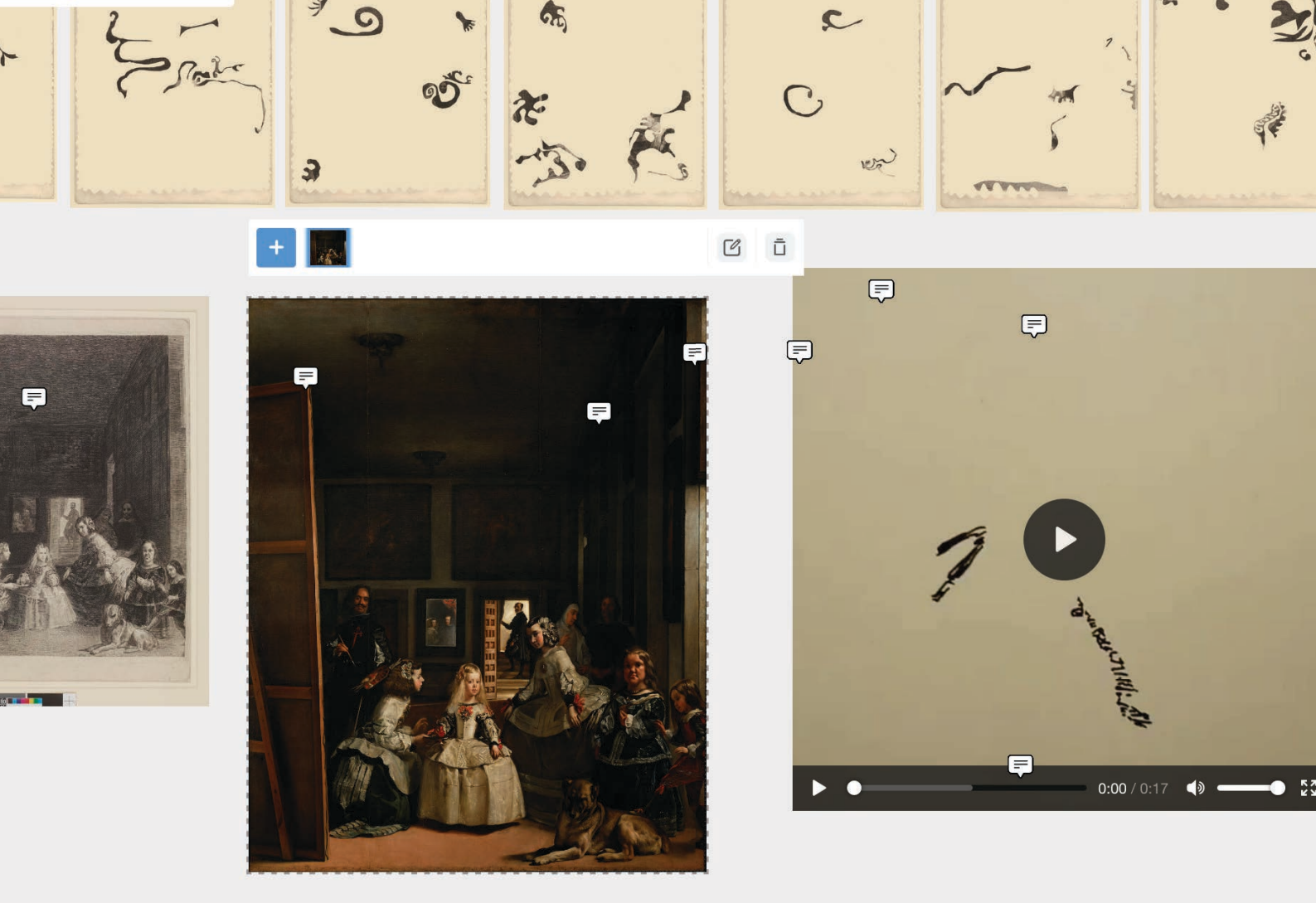
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The (re)creating or (re)establishing the community of the art college studio

The studio has long been the cornerstone of art education; it is the base from which the fundamentals of teaching, learning and independent activity that are vital to the training of artists occur. Rebecca Fortnum has stated that the artist's studio can be understood as "a site of flux and unforeseen events, a 'living' room, the container or arena for creative acts" and as a "holding bay for process that staves off the work's competition, maintaining it as a site of potential rather than a known quantity." (Fortnum: 2013, 74) During the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns enforced by governments around the world, artists and art students were denied access to studio space. They had to improvise from home; bedrooms, garages, kitchen tables also became temporary studios, mirroring the reality of many artists who cannot afford, need or want a studio.

In truth, increasingly many art students do not see the campus based studio as the central place for the activity of making and have used halls of residence bedrooms and communal areas, cafes, libraries, etc. as the places for making, research and thinking about their work. This is partly in line with a post-studio culture that has permeated the contemporary artworld, encapsulated in debates and practices of Daniel Buren and his seminal essay, *The Function of the Studio*; John Baldessari's famous CalArts Class, *Post Studio Art*; and the 'air-miles' artists associated with *Relational Aesthetics*, such as Rirkrit Tiravanija, Dominique Gonzalez-Foerster, Jorge Pardo and Philippe Parreno. Alex Coles has noted in his book, *The Transdisciplinary Studio*, that a number of artists are also working in a transdisciplinary and collective model, akin to the scientific lab or architectural and design studios.

The teaching of art on art courses has both incorporated tendencies such as those discussed above and maintained the core pedagogic importance of the studio for the training of artists. This results in work that is often in a 'finished' state being presented in the campus studio for crits and tutorials, resulting in other vital aspects – half form ideas jotted down, sketches, current books hanging around, postcards of influential artists, etc. – that offer clues to a wider practice and for potential new routes to explore, being largely absent. *Make.garden* allows the digital sharing of works in progress, sketches, notes and inspirational context that usually fill the physical studio. *lit* bridges the gap between a lockdown and post-studio culture and the physical studio; and allows the spontaneous and often 'off-the-cuff' comments to percolate that is often lacking outside of the communal studio environment.



Use for makers - pedagogy

Make.garden offers a platform to encounter the vital aspects of the development of an artwork, but which surround and orbit a work of art. The timeline function can show how a work has developed over time. Inspirational, contextual sources are able to be digitally 'pinned' in the 'canvas' space alongside sketches and ideas. Peripheral aspects and things that still need to be made sense of are allowed to have space. The comment function allows for quick feedback, suggestions or to offer pointers to useful artists, articles or books to research.

Unlike many online platforms Make.garden does not have to be universally shared or visible to others. It offers a safe space that a studio offers to encourage risk and experimentation, to allow the un-and-not-known to be aired without failures, mistakes, dead-ends being publicly seen too early. The engagement between individual makers is not just a matter of activity, but also of community building, supportiveness, criticality, inventiveness, social energy and emergent knowledgeability.

In an art school environment Make.garden offers up numerous possibilities and provocations that fit harmoniously and/or shake up current pedagogic models for art and create a longer measure of effect and impact, beyond the dates of a course. These include but are not limited to:

- Having ownership and feeling confident to share work that is unfinished.
- Online dialogue that is both synchronous and asynchronous.
- Encouraging a symbiotic relationship of mutual gain between users of Make.garden, offering a support structure for developing individual art practices in the communal environment.
- The relation between teaching and learning is not one of simple cause and effect but rather a negotiation, with each community responsible for defining what they would like to learn.
- Whilst recognising that no community can completely design their own learning.
- Education is viewed in terms of rhythms, by which communities and individuals continually renew themselves.
- To co-create a learning environment involves the pollination of the amateur and expert.
- Participation in and reification of knowledge, such as a text book or everyday example, enables the introduction to and explaining of a complex concept through the wisdom of the crowd approach.
- Recognise that newcomers or those on the periphery of a community have perspectives that are often shunned but would be useful to that community and more likely to be found on make.garden.
- Emergence can be local (improvisation) or global (patterns).



Use for makers - beyond the art school

The intention for Make.garden is to create a global peer to peer learning place for individuals, supporting them to build communities and creative practice over the long term in a way that is sympathetic to the specific challenges of making art. This can also be examined in respect of the current online experiences - how they have been designed, how they affect our creative endeavours and how can they be utilised differently?

In recent years there have been several new art schools such as Turps Studio Programme, School of the Damned, Islington Mill Art Academy and Open School East in the UK, which position themselves as affordable unaccredited institutions. The alternative art education offered by these institutions leads to questions: what ultimately is meant to be the outcome of studying art? Why does it need to stop at the end of a course? Why is it so expensive to study art? Do you actually just need the encouragement to keep making?

Education could utilize the tools used in tech for speedy decision making, but that tech might also give a way of recreating the type of education environment. Collect, choose, create, commit, are all decision making methods utilised in tech and private business that have a lot of overlap with the stages of making as an artist and the way art is taught in school. Make.garden is designed with long term interaction arcs sympathetic to the needs of makers, that aims towards an economically distributed, ongoing art school experience beyond the established and alternative institutions.



The effect of physical and online environments, through the analogy of the allotment

In his final lecture series 'How to Live Together' Roland Barthes notion of "idiorrhythmy" which recognizes and respects the individual rhythms of others is considered through the traits of different living spaces such as the desert and their effect on the associated ways of life within each coenobitic society he describes. Barthes quotes from Kafka's Diaries: "Territory; a polyphonic network of familiar sounds: the one I'm able to identify and thereafter function as signs of my space." (Barthes: 2012, 79)

Barthes deliberate coupling of the monastic groups and the marginal spaces that they inhabited is comparable to the artist working in isolation today, whose studio is increasingly located in a deserted area, within an anonymous building and (often) full of social distanced peers all making at their own unique rhythm.

Artists previously interviewed were asked which traits make their studio creatively conducive. The most important was that it was a private, dedicated space that could be ritualised and removed from the life outside of their practice (becoming less distracting as a result), it was important that it was well resourced either with specialist equipment and with useful amenities nearby. Its physical size, layout, cost, condition and lighting were also mentioned. In short it was a place for specialised work.

Though dividing up a building into a series of private cells (as seen in the commercial space often utilized by creatives) may achieve many of the above conditions, it also removes the potential for creative propinquity i.e. the ongoing, easy exchange and support between makers and as result will make it harder for an individual to build their community of practise after traditional education.

The allotment is an idealised territory that can also be established in a wasteland or marginal area, made up of private plots within a shared public common. They exist in an extended bandwidth of humanity compared to the rarified space of contemporary art.

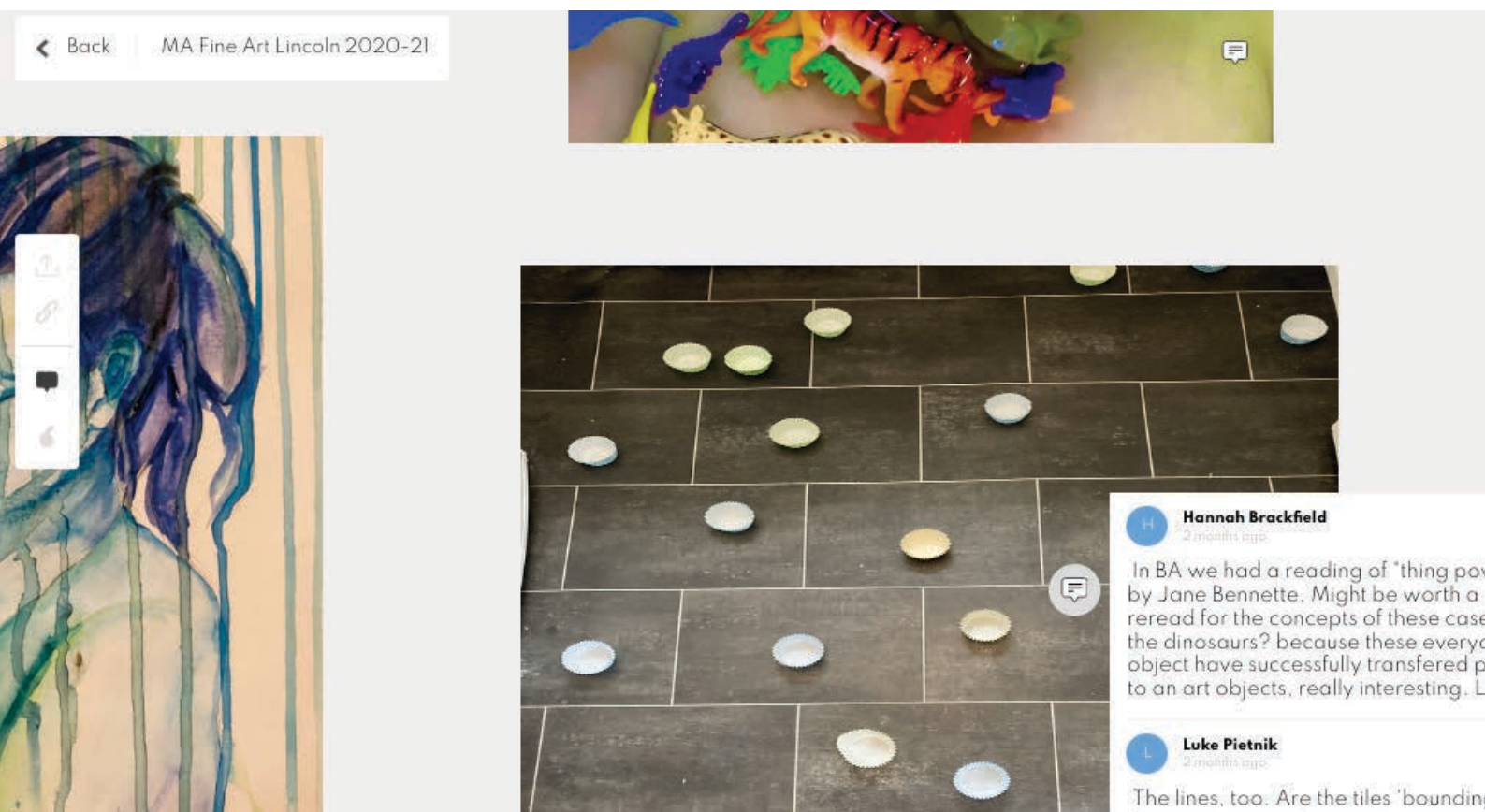
Allotments contain many of the traits of a traditional studio but are also places of higher propinquity. They are shared, living, physical interest, where the work of one alone helps every other participant, making the environment more verdant, diverse and unique. Such shared interests grant many more excuses to strike up a conversation (that run a bit deeper than the average 'like' on social media). Each plot is a place of making, uniquely fashioned to progress ideas, in their own time and under their own volition.

Plants, like artists, can take care of themselves and each other when the conditions are right. As anyone who has ever tried to plant a garden knows, things happen outside of your control not dissimilar to the realities of making art. The process itself - to cultivate, dig, preen and grow something in the garden - is an absorbing and invigorating activity that takes care, commitment, focus, practise, long term vision and persistence much like making art.

Gardening was also an example shared by interviewees as a method to precipitate a creative collision away from making/studio. Other examples included:

- Routine activities are dedicated to something and are often private, such as showering.
- Doing activities to shift perspective, such as riding a bike around the city.
- Being in a neutral or new environment, such as when travelling on a train or bus.
- "When I'm bored or in a tedious environment (like waiting room), situations in which my mind wanders in which there is tedium happening."
- "Putting myself in a suitable situation or space.. now that I have a better idea about what might be a trigger for a new work."
- "Deliberately encountering something outside of my context of what I am doing."
- Extended conversation with someone over the phone or in person.
- "Changing state of mind (taking marijuana or meditating or both!) and then finding something very peculiar even if the object is familiar to me."
- "If I have a shared experience of seeing a show with someone else and then talking about it."

These methods share some similar qualities - such as being time limited, demanding attention - but are all forms of a 'productive inertia' that broadly speaking instigate unexpected perspective. Though the above methods may not be useful to every maker it is similar to Barthes' idea of rhythmos over rhythm, that is reflected in the reality of making; requiring not a repetitive cadence but rather patterns of fluid elements (Barthes: 2012, 7-8).



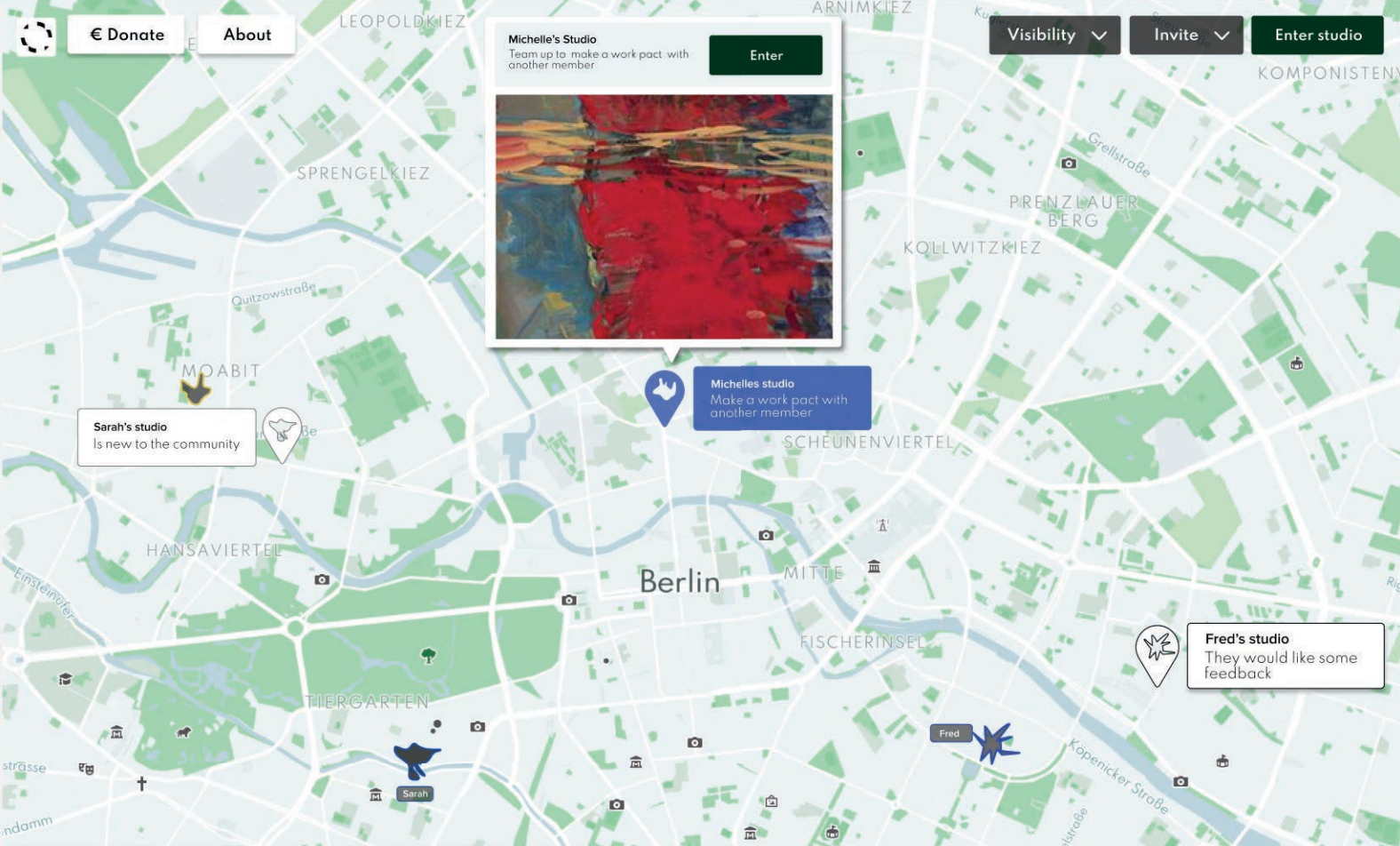
What would the online version of idealised allotment do and what does a ‘meaningful interaction’ actually mean?

In stark contrast to the commitment and focus required to make artwork or an allotment succeed, digital technologies like social media increasingly exploit our decision making biases in a “race to the bottom of the brain stem” (Heath: 2019) in their effort to distract/gain our attention in our increasingly information rich environment.

Makers are well aware of the double-edge deal cut for their attention when using social media and the negative impacts they entail. However given the levels of sophistication and variety of techniques employed, users are less familiar with specific examples of how this is achieved and the cost to them creatively. For instance the control a company exerts by deciding the default menu choices of an application like when you first open Instagram. The options available can subtly shift the question or feeling that you might be having such as, ‘I’m feeling lonely in the studio and would like to talk about my art with someone else’ becomes ‘what is the latest story from my most recent contact’.

Digital environments like the spaces artists create for themselves whether in a studio or somewhere else should be carefully considered. They should not only help to collate information or instigate creative exchange but also support makers to better understand the choices they are making, to ask individual and shared questions such as ‘Where or under what conditions do I need to be that give me the best chance of discovering something meaningful or inspire me to make something new?’, ‘What out of all of my interests and priorities should I focus on?’ etc. Asking these and many other questions can push a single project forward or build over an entire career, producing a unique, powerful voice richly connected to the world around that individual and their immediate/global community.

Rarely does going online today purely help a maker to further their creative search, instead, many online interactions are often an amplifier of underlying anxiety that blocks creative progress. With every ping, nudge, pop up and intervention intended toward the lowest of our appetites and desires they bring us distraction and malaise that goes nowhere. As one interviewee said: “Posting online almost feels like a waste, it goes nowhere and it might be a really good idea.”



Future potentials

How should an online environment behave in order to promote more meaningful interactions that help creatives to build their own community of practise? The following examples describe a few of the techniques used in the second *Make.garden* prototype and what they aim to achieve.

Map information

Makers will be able to add their own studio to a live interactive map, a studio includes their name, studio image, short biography and current need/status.

The map will display creatively stimulating information highlighted by the *Make.garden* community such as nearby green spaces, cultural sites, optional activities like popular walking paths, hidden history or other potential spurs of inspiration.

It will also display active information to encourage incidental exchange. Some might be purely digital like when a member comments on the work of another's studio/garden because they find their work of interest but will also encourage offline interaction when for example, a member sets their status to 'I am in the studio today, and would be up for a group crit, anyone free?'

Invitation and privacy settings.

Once a studio is created, the owner can define how public it is and can specifically invite people who they want to share their space with. This will:

- Instill privacy so that makers can share works in progress when ready.
- Help retain a high bar of entry based on trust and relationship building in order to provide feedback (makers tend to have only a handful of individuals they routinely ask).
- Create participation and reification of creative knowledge that encourage constructive reciprocity between members.

Garden studio

Use hexagonal tiles of each studio creates a 'Chunking' effect allowing people to remember grouped information better. Each tile can also be styled by a member such customisation will:

- Make it easier to find old ideas and references.
 - Allow members to slowly build up a visual picture of the relationships between ideas over time.
 - Create scalable customisation of learning as members activity to make their gardens unique.
- Provide digital dialogue that is both synchronous and asynchronous.
- Cultivated/customised learning which will boost learning potential as demonstrated by two sigma problem (Bloom, 1984).

The screenshot displays a digital garden studio interface with a green background. At the top, there is a navigation bar with a back arrow, a search bar containing "I'm looking for feedback", and three buttons: "Customise", "Private", and "Invite". On the left side, there are three icons: a house, a leaf, and a circular arrow. The main area features a cluster of hexagonal tiles. One tile is highlighted in red and labeled "My references", containing an icon of an open book. Another tile is labeled "Works-in-progress" and contains an icon of a pencil. A "Visibility" settings menu is open on the right, showing four options: "Private" (selected), "Groups", "All Members", and "Public". The "Private" option is described as "Only people you have invited can view, comment and upload to my studio." The "Groups" option is described as "All members of my group(s) can view and comment in my studio." The "All Members" option is described as "All members of make.garden can view and comment in your studio." The "Public" option is described as "Anyone on the internet (including Google) can see your studio. Only you can edit." At the bottom right, there are two more hexagonal tiles: one with a potted plant and one with a yellow sticky note.

What are you looking for? (multiple choice)

to build my community peer feedback for work-in-progress (most popular)

to be a mentor find new inspiration creative momentum

funding to participate in exhibitions to check out other peoples studio and see how they work

too meet other artists find a mentor/expert to sell work Create a workshop

Attend a workshops (e.g. writing, marketing) Freestyle

Continue

Onboarding personalisation

- Views of a newcomer or someone on the margins of their community can quickly become part of the flow of dialogue.
- Avatars preferences can be used to match members with complimentary requirements, such as one member needing and the other aspiring to be a mentor.
- Begin to define the expectation of members and the exchanges the community should aim toward.

Shared Gardens

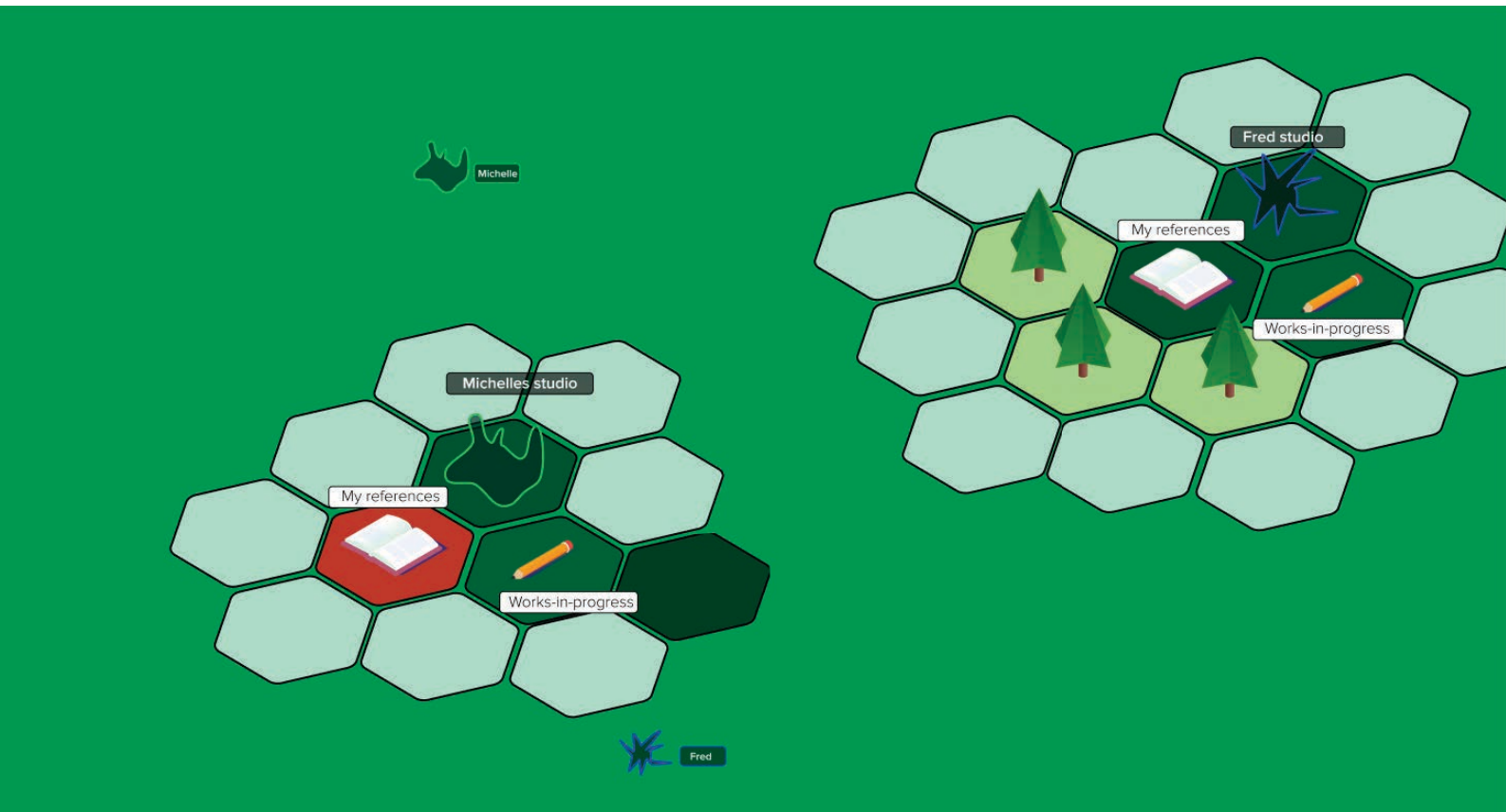
- Co-create a learning environment involves the pollination of the amateur and expert.
- The relation between teaching and learning is not one of simple cause and effect but rather a negotiation, with each community responsible for defining what they would like to learn.
- Use the 'Cheerleading effect'. making individual items more attractive when presented in a group.
- Having a shared experience for exchanging or building spaces together than are tailored to small groups.

Endowment effect

Users are more likely to want to keep something that they own and will value the things they built personally more than something they have not, regardless of their objective market value.

- Avoid anchoring of naive realism: "People are different versions of themselves online which is not useful and one of the negatives of using social media, if the goal is to have specific and considered feedback."

- Having ownership and feeling confident to share work that is not finished.
- Become a cooperative platform, meaning Make.garden will be owned and democratically governed by those who meaningfully engage to further support their community of practice — artists, mentors, and other relevant stakeholders such as developers — with everyone owning their own content and data.
- Ownership of a unique territory within a shared commons that constantly co-creates the education environment of the members by building on emergent local customs, hard won wisdom and shared experience of making.



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