

As easy as 1, 2, 4...  
The Space of Ambiguity in Art and Teaching

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## ABSTRACT

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Susan Marsh

This is a studio-based inquiry into the importance and necessity of ambiguity and improvisation in creative processes. The research and literature reviewed for this essay considers artists working in different mediums, such as film, music, writing, and the visual arts, who describe the thinking behind these aspects of process, as well as their potential in creating room for artistic discovery and interpretation.

The studio work proposed for this thesis was a site-specific work that was to consist of several hundred small boats cast in ice. The boats were to be launched on a river adjoining the campus where the author teaches, during the winter month of February. The process of making these boats is described and documented, as well as the complications that unfolded in completing the work as initially planned. The challenges of working in a new medium, as well as the variability and flux of temperatures and river conditions, led to a smaller scale launch at an alternative location.

This thesis also discusses the links between art and teaching, and the influence of process on these practices. Connections and realizations garnered from the research and experience of the studio work, reflect the author's desire to remain open and implicated as both an artist and teacher.

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## Introduction

As the title suggests, processes in art are rarely formulaic. My first view of 'a how to' book in art, was as a child. Follow the steps and voila, a wonderful painting. The only problem is, I don't think I ever made it beyond Step 1. Suddenly, painting didn't seem all that interesting after all. Product is one thing, process quite another. Art started to become interesting on a new level, when, through the process of making, things revealed themselves in unexpected ways.

Later, as a viewer of art, seeing other interpretations and ideas, stretched my appreciation of this even further. Sometimes, if I was lucky, I saw something that threw me for a loop. Being thrown off in this way was not only exciting, it pushed me into new ways of thinking and looking. I thought art was this, and then art became that, and so on. I didn't understand what I was seeing, and still often don't, but for me, this is what's interesting. The space of not knowing, and where it leads you.

The processes of thinking during the making of art is the most special part for me. My research in the Master's program at Concordia has been to try and understand what happens in process, in the making, that transforms our perceptions. What are these silent dialogues that take place when I'm working? And how do they translate to my efforts as a teacher?

In order to better understand my own process and ideas about art, and how it might relate to my teaching, I have sought out artists whose processes have helped me to better understand the connection between process, creative practice, and learning. I discovered connections that led me to consider that my own process, albeit personal,

might be relevant to my interests in teaching. I began to question whether there were specific processes common and integral to creative thinking and practices. Hearing, seeing, and reading about different approaches to art, made me aware of certain elements that I feel to be important in the process of art making. Whatever the means, the search for connections not previously considered, and the ability to move beyond assumptions and the stasis of knowing, was, in some instances, a common practice in artistic enquiry. These ideas led me to reflect on and consider what might allow for this kind of thinking to take place, particularly in a classroom setting, and how different circumstances or actions might facilitate the process without being systematic or didactic.

Be it called chance, accident, or ambiguity, the space (room) made by these factors first by the artist, or perhaps the process itself, is, I believe, an important one. Space for possibility, perception, choice, matters both in the studio and in the classroom. The artists I researched work from an “unknown” or ambiguity of an idea, form, or sound, that leave openings for discovery or surprise. This is often intentional, as well as essential, it seems, in trying to express the inexpressible, or representing that which is in continuous flux – perceptually, contextually, or otherwise. It is often the surprise that leads to a new meaning or understanding.

Surprise, innovative response, creative participation, stems from what is sometimes referred to as improvisation. Through reflective inquiry in teaching and art, as well as research into the act of improvisation in the arts, what seems also to emerge is that improvisation, as such, cannot occur without a certain foundation of experience. To be open to the accident, to be able to improvise, requires an experience and understanding of one’s practice. When we witness improvisation in music, in performance, and in art,



we don't always see the root from which it sprang. Films by John Cassavetes had such a feeling for me. The visceral effect and immediacy of his films led me to want to better understand his process as a filmmaker. Cassavetes, as I understand it, describes improvisation as something structured, but with room to move.

I think you have to define what improvisation does – not what it is.

Improvisation to me means that there is a characteristic spontaneity in the work which makes it appear not to have been planned. I write a very tight script, and from there on in I allow the actors to interpret it the way they wish. But once they choose their way, then I'm extremely disciplined – and they must also be extremely disciplined about their own interpretations. There's a difference between ad-libbing and improvising, and there's a difference between not knowing what to do and just saying something. When you have an important scene, you want it written; but there are still times when you want things just to happen (Carney 217).

Improvisation is a creative leap from what is known. It does not leap from the unknown to the unknown. This kind of "letting go" has the potential to lead us into new and previously not considered approaches and possibilities. This kind of improvisation, although less apparent in the visual arts, still occurs, however, it is usually between the artist and the materials, or within the artist's process. Painter Francis Bacon, for example, used specific materials to eliminate control and create room for more spontaneous reactions to his subject and medium.

In my case all painting – and the older I get, the more it becomes so – is accident. So I foresee it in my mind, I foresee it, and yet I hardly ever

carry it out as I foresee it. It transforms itself by the actual paint. I use very large brushes, and in the way I work, I don't in fact know very often what the paint will do, and it does many things which are very much better than I could make it do. Is that an accident? Perhaps one could say it's not an accident, because it becomes a selective process which part of this accident one chooses to preserve. One is attempting, of course, to keep the vitality of the accident and yet preserve a continuity... there is a possibility that you get through this accidental thing something much more profound than what you really wanted (Bacon 456).

Processes in both art and teaching, have the potential to create new understandings and fresh responses. I have chosen to do a studio-based inquiry for this research in order to address my desire to stay implicated, curious, and close to the subject and processes that, in turn, guide me as a teacher.

The students I teach are enrolled in a CEGEP level pre-university fine arts program. The CEGEP (collège d'enseignement général et professionnel) system, unique to the province of Quebec, is a post-secondary place of learning for students wanting to further their education, or preparing to later attend university. The CEGEP where I teach is a rurally-based english college. Generally, the majority of the students entering into fine arts program are francophones, and range from 17 to 19 years of age. For many of them, it is a time of great change. For some, it is the first time they are attending school in English, or living away from home. It is also a time where many of the students begin to consider or reconsider their interests and goals.

In many ways, the students in the fine arts program, are both at an interesting and

exciting point in their lives as well as in their relationship to art. Many are just beginning to think about the possibilities of art and what it means to them. These students are introduced to new media and techniques, new approaches to seeing, a wide range of artists' works, and are encouraged to consider different processes of working in developing their ideas. Given the "newness" of these experiences, I have often been inspired by students' openness to experiment, willingness to try, and inventive sensibilities, and perhaps now better appreciate the importance of retaining these qualities in my own art and teaching.

### Studio Inquiry

The original intention of the artwork for this thesis was to do a work that would be situated on the campus where I teach. The reason for this location was that I wanted to consider an everyday local that had significance to my experience teaching at the college. Working full time, I find myself often unable to separate from teaching as easily as I would like at the end of the day, to work on my own studio practice. Despite a divided schedule, and more of a limb than a body of recent work, I have found that my visual and conceptual thinking, essentially, does continue on different levels. I try to keep looking and wondering about what I see and hear – this part of my art-making does not close down. On my way to school in the morning, in the classroom, on the campus, I try to stay aware and interact with my environment in such a way that, on a small scale, I am still involved as an artist, and still participating in the subject that I am learning to teach. In the spirit of perceptual surprise, process, and improvisation, I began thinking of what to do that might reflect my relationship to both the place itself and the students.

To explain one of my paintings is, for me, to take a voyage into the unknown in a leaky boat with a blind navigator, half an oar, and a bag over my head. Groping in the dark, I occasionally find markers that suggest what my work may be about (Falk).

Gathie Falk's above description, represents, for me, what it is like to make art as well as to teach it. Ambiguity, I am realizing, is a necessary and welcome element in making art, looking at art, and teaching art.

As I shopped in a restaurant supply store one afternoon, I came across a bag of 50 or so boat-shaped plastic containers. I bought them, and began working on figuring out a way to use them as moulds to make boats out of ice. For sometime, I had been considering a way to respond to the predictability of winter. Predictable in the constancy of the snow and cold, and the dormancy of the season. Although there is a beauty and silence that comes with snow, there is also, I think at one point, a kind of longing for change. The following is my reflection of the process involved in making the ice boats, and some of what was learned along the way.

#### Getting to Know the Material

Water, then ice, is a material like any other. It has its own set of problems and virtues. Like casting from other materials, I have to think about not getting air bubbles, watching out for undercuts, ways of clamping the mould together, and how to release the cast piece. At this stage, I am also working freezing objects from nature; acorns, seeds, flower bulbs, pine needles, pussy willows, etc., that I have collected or recently acquired, that can be frozen to go inside of the boats. There are experiments with liquids that might

be used in the freezing of these objects, such as beet juice and milk, as well as with different types of found moulds, from the plastic trays of chocolate boxes, to metallic gelatin moulds. Balancing techniques and “Tai-Chi-like” moves in getting the boat moulds to the freezer, without spilling too much water, are also tested.

Although the process requires technical considerations, meaning begins to unfold through the making. As much as I might have thought things through, I can’t predict what the forms and their contents will suggest until I begin working with them. I have an idea of what I want, but not complete control over what I will get. Every time I try freezing something, perhaps using a different mould, adding a colour, or trying a different method, I learn something in the process that alters my thinking as I go. The material is something I have to meet at least halfway, my ideas challenged and reconsidered as I go along. I have yet to set the frozen boats and their contents afloat outside, and the question of whether or not this will work the way I hope, remains unanswered. The ambiguity lies not only in the process of making, but in the subject itself. I know vaguely what it means to me, and why I might be choosing the forms and materials that I am, but my relationship to the work really only unfolds as I work, and at this point, I am hard pressed to say “this is a work about such and such.”

In The Said and the Unsaid, author Stephen Tyler discusses ambiguity in terms of language and conversation, stating that “without some ambiguity, communication is simply impossible” (15). Tyler talks about the difference between the formalist’s approach to language in contrast to that of a functionalist’s. The formalist, according to Tyler, is one who looks for “a complete and unambiguous semantic interpretation,” while the functionalist “prefers to leave intentions inexplicit, leaving it to others” (15).

Although, in some contexts, it may be difficult to accept ambiguity as being a language of substance, in art, the relationship between ambiguity and communication is a necessary one, particularly if, as Tyler also states, “the demand for explicit definition interrupts and potentially halts discussion” (15). In this sense, regarding both the interior communication between the artist, the subject, and the material, and later, between the work and viewer, it is important to keep the lines open. Whatever my leanings as a communicator, I think to myself, the ice, the other side of the conversation, silent as it may be, appears to be more of a functionalist.

### Rethinking

There comes a time when you realize something about your idea or the work itself is not quite right. Today was such a day. I went out with a friend to test some boats on the river near where I live, and brought down about 10 of the boats, and some of the things I had frozen to go inside of them. The process of freezing the items to be placed in the boats had been a wonderful one. I found them to be quite beautiful when I took them out of the moulds, and thought that they would offer an added sculptural and visual interest to the boats through their colours and forms. Today, however, it became apparent that they took away from the boats, and gave a reading to the work that was not intended. The work became more about what was inside of the boats. Visually, the boats were also no longer as pleasing to me. At this point, I let go of my attachment to these frozen elements, and decide to leave them out of the work.

On the plus side, the boats floated well, and did not melt too quickly on the unfrozen water. It was fun to push the boats into the water and watch them flow slowly

with the current. They were much more spontaneous and playful minus their cargo. This aspect now simplified, I began to concentrate on just freezing more boats.



Fig. 1 (a) Testing the Boats



Fig. 2 (b)  
Testing the Boats



Fig. 3 (c) Testing the Boats





Fig. 4 (d) Testing the Boats

### Things happen

Circumstances delayed launching the boats on the scheduled morning. More boats were needed, more figuring out about how to get closer to the shore's edge without falling in. Since I had chosen to locate the work near campus, and that section of the river was quite large and not easily accessible in winter, certain considerations were necessary. For visual impact, given the size of the river, I thought, there would have to be as many boats possible. When there were more frozen boats than I could fit in my freezer, cold temperatures allowed me to store them outside on my balcony. For once, I began to appreciate sub-zero temperatures. The night before I decided to launch the boats, I worked through the night, freezing as many more boats as I could. By 6:30am, I

realized that I was too tired and too late for an early morning launch. It would have to wait for the afternoon, as I had a class at 9:00am. When I returned home in the early afternoon, the weather had warmed substantially, and the 200 or so boats I had stored outside, had melted beyond repair.

Disappointment is huge when time and effort put into a work is lost. What is not lost, I must recognize, is the realization that these upsets do occur in art-making. Despite this rationale, conviction of an idea is tested. Does one start again, decide to let the idea go? It was also difficult to lose the work itself. In some ways, it is an odd attachment considering that the boats themselves were not made to last. Less enthusiastically, I restart the process, though it takes me a good couple of days to face the moulds.

### Starting Over

I eventually grow attached to the boats again, and have (almost) forgotten the 'big melt.' I have become more efficient in my process, and with the experience of the other boats behind me, the boats are looking much better, or perhaps, I cannot help but improve in my technique. Less uneven edges in the casting, and the use of a utility knife to carve off the excess edges from the cast ice, have given the boats a more crafted quality than before. They are less rough looking, and the presence of the mould less apparent. They may be a bit too thin on the sides though, and I begin to wonder if I'm not being too precious with them. Overall though, things are quite good. Essentially, my prolonged experience with the boats has made things somewhat easier on a technical level.

Improvisation, I consider while making the boats, comes partly with the medium itself. Any material has its own characteristics and life so to speak, that must be

understood and respected. There is a certain unknown factor about what will happen – particularly working with ice, and being dependent on weather conditions for the final work. The most improvising, I think, will occur on the day I unpack the boats and place them on the frozen and unfrozen parts of the river.

My favorite part of making the boats, perhaps not surprisingly, is taking them out of the moulds. I am never certain that it will work, and find it pleasing to see each boat, no matter how many more have come before it. Every boat has a slightly different quality and look to it, and I begin to think of them as individuals rather than just one of many. Sisyphus, of Greek mythology, was doomed to push a huge boulder up a hill, only to have it roll down again (Gregory 125). His fate was to do this over and over again. I have to admit, I thought of Sisyphus, particularly when the first set of boats melted, although now, I wonder whether Sisyphus saw something new each time he watched the boulder roll down the hill.

### A Second Medium

This time, I made only 100 boats, and set out on a cold and sunny morning to place them at the site originally intended for the work. The ice was frozen in the area closest to the bridge, though not ideal, I set out about 75 of the boats. The process was difficult and somewhat precarious. Although the ice was frozen, it was not necessarily strong enough to hold my weight. From the shore, I attempted to push the boats out with a long wooden device made by a friend, and also slid them onto the ice with the assistance of a rolled-up plastic slide. The final effect was quite unimpressive given the small number of boats, their closeness to the shore, and static positions on the ice.

Photographs also did not work. I had found the minimal contrast of ice on snow, and extremely bright lighting difficult to contend with.

I moved to the other side of the river, slightly downstream, where there was open water. On this side of the river, as well as the other, I was, thankfully, accompanied by a friend. It would have been very difficult, given the extreme cold and task of unwrapping, placing, and photographing the boats, to go it alone. Even on this side of the river, conditions were not easy. With a rope around my waist, tied to my friend in the event the edge of ice and snow, on which I was positioned, gave away, he could at least pull me out of the water. I put some boats in by hand, and he, by way of the plastic slide. The entry of the boats via the slide was a bit too rough for the boats and several capsized. By hand, I couldn't get in far enough to catch the current, and the boats sat floating, unable to move further into the water. I managed to get a few photographs, but the actual scene was again disappointing. There simply was too little movement and not enough boats.

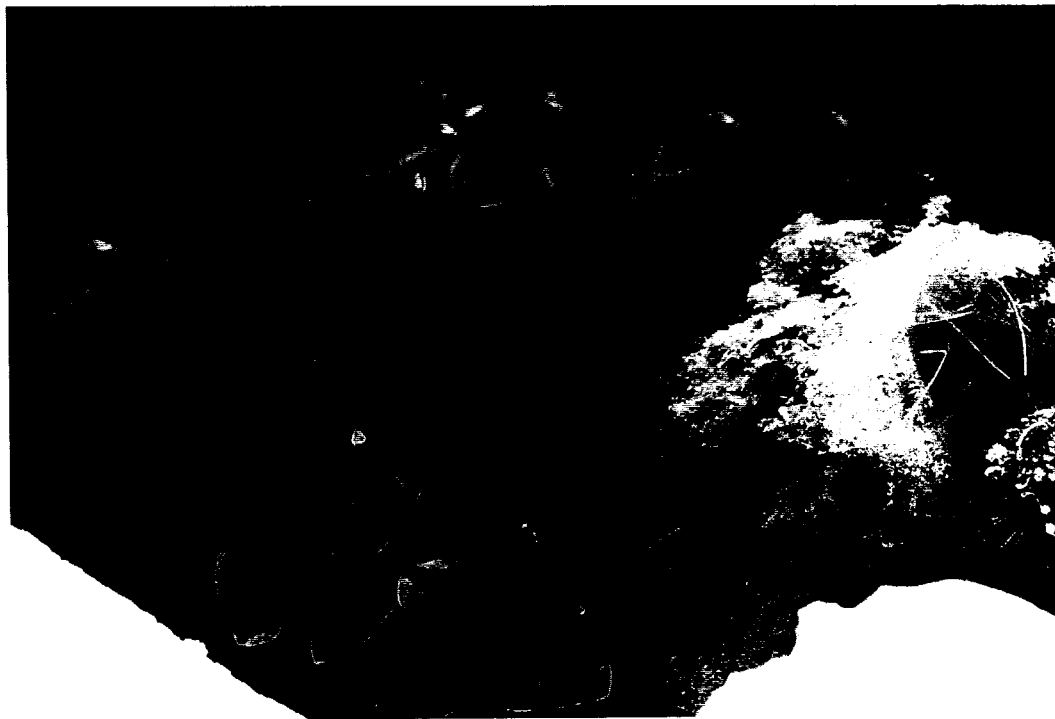


Fig. 5 (a) A Second Attempt



Fig. 6 (b) A Second Attempt

More disappointment, and despite myself, more learning. The second medium in this installation, I realized, is the site itself, and the conditions of winter. Through my cloud of frustration, my friend helped me realize that this too was a material, requiring a give and take, an understanding. Later, I come across a passage in a book on Japanese gardens that proved timely. “One cannot aim at a good garden from the start. Indeed, even though one may begin with such an aim, there are too many elements that refuse to obey orders” (Itoh 88).

To describe and document process, I am also finding, is a strange process in itself, particularly, before the work has reached a kind of end. It is somewhat fragmentary. Insight, if it comes, does not seem to happen in a particular order, nor is it easily

described. There is a fine line between reflection and self-conscious awareness. Is it interesting to others, as well as myself, to extract small details, twists and turns, actions and reactions? To describe something, while still close to it, seems distancing. I recall that I don't usually talk about what I am doing until I'm done. Even photographing the boats, though necessary for documentation purposes, takes away from the spontaneity of the process. I wait for good lighting and consider how the boats will look through the lens. The photograph has the potential to either capture or recreate what is there, and I find myself spending more attention on how the boats will photograph than I want to. Susan Sontag writes that photographs tell us "what we should look at. Photographs tell us how things ought to look, what their subjects should reveal about themselves" (220). The photographing of the boats becomes another medium.

The contrast of the boats themselves and the material used to make them is something else that surfaces in the process. During the second round of making the boats, I take stock of all the plastic involved in making this "environmentally friendly" piece. I have never worked with so much plastic. The moulds themselves, I think while working, are plastic containers that, in their original function, are disposable dishes meant to hold banana-splits, and calculate that I have used almost 2 rolls of plastic wrap to keep the boats separated while in storage – about 180 meters. I have also gone through about 5 rolls of scotch tape to clamp the moulds shut. There is an incredible amount of plastic excess. A great amount of both cold and hot water is also used in their making – the hot to release the boats from the moulds. I become aware of the smell of the water each time I turn the tap, and realize how chemically treated my water actually is.

## Ambiguity

As “one cannot aim at a good garden” (Itoh), one cannot aim at ambiguity. In The Conversations, film editor Walter Murch discusses the presence and necessity of ambiguity in film, and the balance between working with it, and forcing it. Murch believes that “even when the film is finished, some things should remain unresolved,” and sees the viewer, as a kind of “co-collaborator” in this stage of the process. Murch refers to ambiguity as a kind of “fruitful paradox” (Ondaatje 105).

You have to approach every problem as if it’s desperately important to solve it. You can’t say, I don’t want to solve this because it’s got to be ambiguous. If you do that, then there’s a sort of haemorrhaging of the organism (Murch 105).

Ambiguity, by its very nature, is difficult to describe. What might be possible to say, is that it leaves room for different interpretations and choices, before, during and after a work’s completion. When beginning to consider the idea of the boats, the unresolved questions of how they would look and function, what they meant to me, what I was wanting to find in the process, are what made me continue with them. If I had known everything from the start, I would have to ask myself why I was bothering to do it. Michael Ondaatje describes a similar need for this kind of ambiguity in terms of writing.

If I had a blueprint of what I was going to be working on for the next five years I would die of boredom by day three. I would hate to be locked within a given scenario. As a writer you have the licence to surprise yourself, veer off the path (Ondaatje 219).

Gently down the stream...

The third round of freezing the boats yielded a much smaller crop. This time, I made only about 50 boats. My experience with the other boats allowed me to work more quickly, and taught me not to overwork the process. With the first set of boats I was focused on quantity, with the second on craftsmanship, and by the third time, I found it much easier to get the kinds of boats I wanted with less fussing. I made them a little thicker, and clamped the moulds shut in fewer places. The experience of the other boats, helped me to work with much more ease. This is perhaps a natural and obvious progression garnered from practice, yet it still made it easier to deviate from previous methods of making the boats.

The forecast for today had been for cloudy and cold weather, and because of this, I thought I would wait a day or so before venturing out. Instead, I woke up in the morning to find sunshine and warmer temperatures, so I quickly loaded the camera and got ready to go. This time, because of the difficulty of the original site for the boats, I brought them to another section of the river that runs through my neighborhood. By this point, I realized that the original intention of the work, related to the previous site, was changing.

In order to stack the boats in my freezer, I had been wrapping them individually in plastic wrap so that they would not stick together. The previous launch had taught me that unwrapping them was a lengthy process and awkward to do quickly at the shore's edge. Not only does the cold weather mean that not much time can be spent doing this without freezing your hands, it makes it difficult to put out the boats and document them when working alone. This time, before leaving home, I unwrapped the boats leaving just



a layer of plastic between them. Why hadn't I thought of this earlier?! With fewer boats, and less unwrapping, it was much more manageable. I tossed the boats into the water and watched the current move them. Though they sailed off quite quickly, I managed a few photographs, and found the whole process much more relaxed.



Fig. 7 (a) Unpacking the Boats

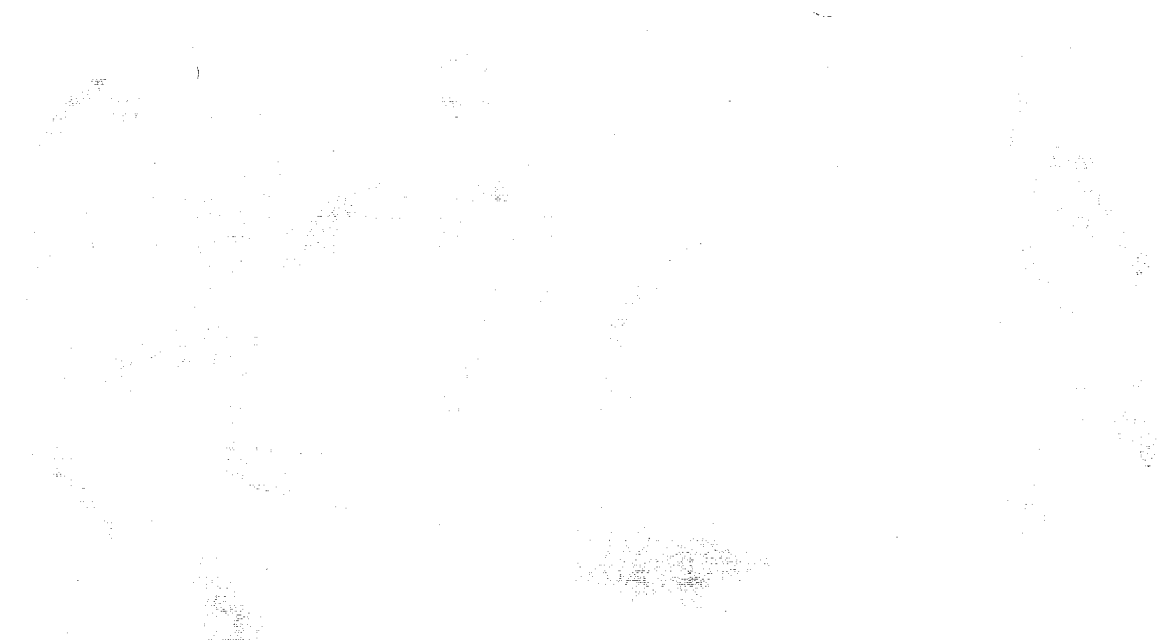


Fig. 8 (b) Unpacking the Boats

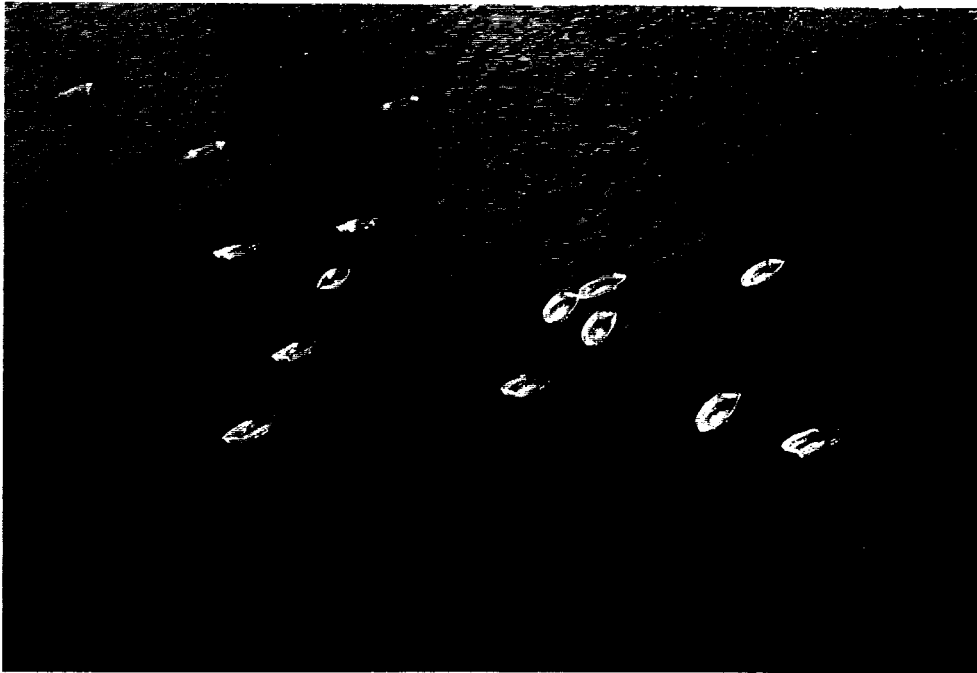


Fig. 9 (a) Floating Away



Fig. 10 (b) Floating Away

## Improvisation

Like good gardens and ambiguity, I'm not sure that improvisation can be the aim. As the saying goes, "timing is everything," and in terms of improvisation, experience seems to help with the timing. The original intent of the project was for the boats to be found by students crossing the bridge on their way to school in the morning. As this part of the project did not happen, in many ways, the act of improvisation, and the surprise that I had hoped would be evoked by the work was lost. In the end, I found myself improvising with the ducks living on the river. Not quite what I initially had in mind... Over the weekend, I brought a couple of boats with some cracked corn inside and put them in the water. Of all the ducks, only one was brave enough to dig into the food. She had quite a little feast, and in a way, it was fun to see that at least one of the boats proved directly interactive.

Improvising, when it works, offers us surprising new ways of listening to a piece of music, responding to a performance, or, perhaps, taking a second look at something. These kinds of acts, for the listener or viewer, pull us out of the expected. As an artist, this pull, in some cases, is part of the process of working. Routine perceptions and assumptions are often fought against, in order to find new ways of experiencing and responding. By altering usual patterns of looking, moving, listening, etc., it is possible to open the door for new or different interpretations and ways of seeing.

Improvisational structures, discovery of "the new," builds on and occurs from a certain foundation of understanding and experience. In The Enjoyment of Music, for example, Louis Armstrong's improvisational playing is described as both aware and innovative. Armstrong himself describes a swing player as someone who is "able to

leave a score and know, or “feel,” just when to leave it, and when to get back to it” (Armstrong 30). Author of Music and Memory, Bob Snyder, explains that this cognitive shift is based on the function of long-term memory. He states that: “Even quite novel events are usually experienced as deviations within some kind of framework of preexisting knowledge” (Snyder 72).

Improvising in one’s medium, be it art or teaching, requires an understanding and basis off which to leap. This “preexisting knowledge” or “awareness” of one’s medium is something that seems both necessary to gain, then let go of, in order to find new ways of seeing. In a way, improvisation might be seen as a kind of giving up of what is known, so that something unknown can be found. Sometimes this happens by accident.

Teaching also has the potential to lead toward different ways of perceiving through the experience of process. This potential, I am learning, is achieved through both a knowledge of subject, and acceptance of ambiguity. As a teacher, any set idea or plan I might have for a project, cannot be completely foreseen. Fortunately, the more I teach, the more aware of my subject I become. The control of inexperience seems to now give way to the potential of the unexpected. Artist Marion Wagschal relates one of the ways her teaching and art has been altered by experience. In an interview with Stanley Horner, Wagschal talks about “giving her students the chance to participate, fill in spaces.” She explains:

When I first started teaching I found it hard to do that. Now I feel much more relaxed about letting things open up more. Not feeling that it all has to happen to a certain plan. If there are empty spaces, I don’t get freaked out about gaps. It’s a very gradual process – it is reflected in my painting

a lot. It's hard to describe it because it's quite an internal process. It's reached a point now where I started doing paintings where I don't have any idea of what I'm doing when I start them, but now I'm doing stuff where I allow myself to do a lot of things (Wagschal Tape 3, Side A).

### An Open Process

Working with the boats has reminded me that even with the best of intentions, things don't always work out as planned. Although the work remains somewhat incomplete, in that the numbers of the boats were less than I had wanted, and the location of where to put them is still a question, the boats themselves persist in my thoughts. I have a feeling, that the idea of the work is one I am not be quite finished with. If not in this work, maybe another. The boats' meaning changed throughout the process, and I am only now beginning to consider, a little, my reasons for making them.

The initial intent was an impetus for beginning, but the reasons for continuing changed along the way. Sometimes an intimacy with a work takes time to unfold. Looking back, after only a short time, some connections begin to emerge. I begin to consider the repetitive labour of making the boats and their temporal existence, the fluid to the solid state of them, then back to the fluid. I think of the boats as playful at times, mournful at others. The act of making the boats and the act of putting them in the water are quite different. Sort of a keeping, then letting go. The items first frozen to go inside the boats, in some ways, manifested the sentiment of the exchange, yet in other ways, they overstated it. Leaving room for myself within the process, and leaving room for the viewer in the work, is essential.

Working in nature, with a temperature-dependent and somewhat fragile material, I recognize, raises the odds that things may not work out as planned. Although these circumstances might seem extreme, the unpredictability of most processes is present no matter the conditions or the medium. To stay open to those changes helps, but does not necessarily guarantee a successful or satisfying end. The question of how much planning is required, or how many chances should be taken, is difficult to answer unequivocally.

In a teaching situation, the risks or chances one takes involve more than one person. The challenge is finding the right mix of known and unknown elements, as much for the teacher as for the students. For new teachers, there are perhaps more unknown elements that make planning difficult, however, I think more experienced teachers need also to be wary of their increasing ability to foresee and predict, particularly when teaching art. Assumptions of knowing made by inexperienced teachers are often tested when projects don't work, students don't respond, or procedures don't work out as planned, and while the more seasoned teacher may face fewer uncertainties, perhaps the challenge is then to stretch the parameters of experience. If artistic ideas and perceptions grow through the process of discovery, would the process of teaching art not require similar strategies?

Walter Murch talks about the differences between the more "process-driven," as he refers to it, and pre-planned methods of film directing, in ways that might be compared to creative processes in art and teaching. In this case, the pre-planned is to have a clear idea in one's mind and then proceed to find ways of realizing that idea, whereas the "process-driven" filmmaker has a direction but not a definitive view of the entire film. He discusses his experience working with filmmakers whose processes fall

into these categories, as well as the problems that may result from both methods of working.

...The most important distinction is whether you allow the process to become an active collaborator in the making of the film, or use it as a machine and try to restrict its contributions. The most extreme practitioner of the latter approach is Hitchcock. The equivalent in another discipline would be an architect like Frank Lloyd Wright who has all the building on the drawing boards, down to the colour of the bedspreads in the room, and his only concern is to make the contractors who'll do the work "get" what he already has. The other approach (in film) – Francis's (Ford Coppola), for example – is to harvest the random elements that the process throws up, things that were not in the filmmaker's mind when he began. I'm overstating in order to clarify the distinction. In fact, nobody is completely hot or cold in this regard... Both systems have their risks. The risk of the Hitchcockian system is that you may stifle the creative force of the people who are collaborating with you. The film that results – even if it's a perfect vision of what somebody had in his head – can be lifeless... It says: I am what I am whether you like it or not. On the other hand, the risk with the process-driven film is that it can collapse into chaos. Somehow the central organizing vision can be so eaten away and compromised by all the various contributors that it collapses under its own weight (Murch 217).

## Individual Process

I try to think about what kind of methods I use in art, and how the process of making the boats relates to other works I have made, as well as to my ideas about teaching. Though the boats were the first work I've made through casting, and it was the first time I had worked with ice, and it was the first time I had worked in a site-specific way, and it was the first time I had make a work intended not to last, there are still connections to my past processes of working.

I may pretend to know what I want a work to look like, but really, once I get going, things change along the way. If I'm paying attention, the material and the idea begins to suggest other ways of going about it, and get beyond the surface of the original thought. Things come up, change shape, and challenge. I try to stay true to my idea, but open to the fact that there are some things that need to be changed in the translation. This is not easy, and sometimes the process is more of a trudge than a glide, but rarely, have I had a set, visual plan. I think that I like and need it this way.

Past work has also consciously included both "readable" and ambiguous elements. I want the viewer to enter into the work, perhaps like I do, with some understanding, but also, without all the answers. My personal impetus and feeling toward the work, is not something I either expect or want the viewer to share. There's a hope that it will offer something, but not necessarily *a* thing. As a viewer, I myself, like to be drawn in, but find it difficult to enter into a work when it doesn't leave room to wonder.



## Surprise in Teaching

This process of working, I am recognizing, influences the way that I teach, the way that I try to teach. The technical foundation of the material, the push to find other ways of seeing, is a large part of teaching art. I think also about trying to include in the projects, a certain space in which the students own ideas can roam and develop. The space is there to offer possibilities of interpretation and choice. If I plan out the entire process for the students, and focus on the end product of their work, I eliminate a major part of learning - the opportunity for discovery. To help students learn about the materials is one thing, to help them develop their process of seeing another.

It is important for me to keep a certain element of surprise going. I find myself not wanting to reveal the next project beforehand, even when I know what it will be. I also find it impossible to plan the entire semester before meeting the students, and without having started to work on initial assignments. Though I set out with goals in mind of what I would like them to learn in a particular course, I think that by paying attention to what is happening in the class, in the students' work, I am better able to plan for relevant teaching strategies. Though the process is grounded in helping the students build their visual skills and understanding of the different mediums, their skills as visual thinkers need also to be considered if they are going to expand on what they know. When I think the timing is right, I like to improvise. Things are more dynamic in the classroom when projects or the way they are presented surprise my students enough to pique their curiosity so that they will want to go further and see what's there.

In his article, "Creativity, Complexity and Improvisation in Daily Life," Alfonso Montuori discusses the nature of improvisation in several contexts, and how it can be

used as a “strategy” in furthering creative response. His description of improvisation is one that takes place very much in the present.

Strategy is a living process of interaction, in which the participant(s) in the activity are free to constantly adapt their course of action to accommodate and/or provoke the unforeseen, the creative. Strategy means creating a generative context that allows for the development of many possible, self-generated ways of achieving the set goal – including the reflection, questioning, and potential abandonment of the goal itself (Montuori).

Being in a classroom situation, with many different voices and experiences, perhaps requires even more of a “presence” than when working alone in one’s studio. The “living process of interaction” as Montuori puts it, though active in individual process, extends to a different and, I think, greater degree when teaching.

## Conclusion

Although the studio part of my research was not realized in the way that I had hoped, and the final work turned out to be unsuccessful in several regards, I have learned from the experience, and am happy to have begun a work that allows me to remain connected to my own studio practice while teaching. Along with the findings that emerged through the process, and how this experience is now with me as a teacher, part of my intention in doing a studio thesis was to find a way of being internally involved in my own art, after being involved in my students’ work during the day. With this work, I began to be able to come home from teaching, freeze some boats, make a little supper,

freeze a few more boats, prepare for the next day, then maybe empty some moulds.



Fig. 11 Working at Home

Though this process was not as cut and dry as I describe it, I am now considering different ways I can integrate my art into the reality of my life, without feeling that I am compromising one or the other. The balance of being involved in the processes of the students as well as my own is not an easy one. I find it important however to stay involved as an artist, if I am going to stay involved as a teacher. To push beyond the certainty of familiar ground into unfamiliar waters, even if it takes a few hundred boats, seems worth the try.

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