

SPEAKERS

Kelly Lloyd, Shannon Stratton

[00:00:36] **KL:** You're listening to *This Thing We Call Art*, a podcast about how, "If a system's created that you're being told is the way people are judged and you're young and you're not a part of a generation of people who are really, like, critical of that yet, you sort of feel like, 'Oh, okay, like, I'm not... I'm not smart, cause I can't, you know, I obviously am not able... I can't perform in this, like, format that like determines whether or not people are smart.' So, it's like, 'I must ... not be smart then...or I don't belong here cause this is like, you know, this is the, you know, this is the thing.'"

I'm your host, Kelly Lloyd, a visual artist, essayist, and educator currently based in the U.K. I've been interviewing people in the arts about their livelihoods since 2017, and today you're going to hear a conversation I had on the 4th of August 2022 with Shannon Stratton.

Shannon Stratton is a Canadian writer, curator, and artist with a focus in craft and artist-run histories. Currently she works between Saugatuck, Michigan and Chicago, Illinois as the Executive Director at Ox-Bow School of Art.

I met Shannon in 2012 when I took the first iteration of her *Party as Form* class. I spoke with Shannon at her home on the Ox-bow Campus. The audio quality for this season is varied, so remember that the transcripts for all these conversations are available on the project's website thisthingwecallart.com.

Our conversation was an hour and 50-minutes-long, and while I wish I could share it with you in its entirety, today, you'll listen to excerpts from it. I'm going to drop you in at the beginning...

[00:02:02] **SS:** Oh, wait a second. I actually made, like, a note in my phone about something that I was just, like, oh right, you should bring that up. What

was it though? Phone notes... I've only recently become a phone note user. And then I forget that I've made notes in my phone. So, every once in a while, I open it up and I'm like, oh, what are these notes? So, let's see...

Well, "In the role of translator between privacy, studio and ideas and a public that resists complicated ideas, the depression that arises over that tension." [LAUGHS ERUPTS] I dunno what, I guess that was something I thought we should talk about...

[00:02:42] **KL:** Do you wanna, like, can you read that slo- slower?

[00:02:46] **SS:** Yeah. Well, I mean, help me decode what my own note says.

It says, "At the threshold", and then it says, "in the role of translator between privacy, studio and ideas and a public that resists complicated ideas", semi colon, "the depression that arises out of that tension."

[00:03:04] **KL:** Do you think when you wrote it, you were like, "This makes sense"?

[00:03:07] **SS:** Oh yeah.

[00:03:07] **KL:** Yeah.

[00:03:08] **SS:** Oh yeah.

[00:03:10] **KL:** [LAUGHS] Um, I, can I read something from my notes? Oh, no, I can't, cause I'm recording on my phone. I think I wrote something, like, after the party that was like, "Like, if you were 20 and you saw your professor dancing, um, like, with you at a party, like, imagine that. Like, it is revolutionary." [LAUGHS]

It's, it's like, so overblown it's like... "*This Is Revolutionary.*" I mean, it could be revolutionary, I don't know. But also, it was like a, you know, whatever, it was an end of the night thought where you were like, "Maybe this is it."

[00:03:47] **SS:** This is it...

[00:03:47] **KL:** This is it...

[00:03:48] **SS:** I think about that a lot cause I think about, like, professors... a professor of mine who was my, like, mentor in undergrad, like, literally, like, my program required that I had a mentor. She was like, actually, like, in the role of that. And she was 37 when I was in- taking my undergrad... and I would've been like, you know, 22 or something. You know, and was just, like, you know, she's like a grownup, she's my mentor. And so, yeah, like, I would be, like, if I was, like, at some party in, like, the forest at one o'clock in the morning with her, I'd think that was pretty awesome.

[00:04:24] **KL:** So, she didn't, you- but that didn't happen with you?

[00:04:26] **SS:** No, we got drunk all the time together.

[00:04:27] **KL:** Okay, cool. [LAUGHS] Just not in the forest though.

[00:04:33] **SS:** Just not in the forest though... And I think it was great. I had, like, a really great, sort of, undergraduate program experience where there was a lot of, like, permeability in terms of people socializing with their, with older people in the art community. Like, not just their actual professors it was just, like, other artists.

And I mean, it's Calgary, it's smaller community. Um, but there was, it was, like, lots of, like, very intergenerational hanging out. And I think actually when I moved to Chicago and went to S.A.I.C. [School of the Art Institute of Chicago], I was sort of sad that there was a lot less intergenerational hanging out. Cause it- at that School [Alberta College of Art and Design] at that time, it was like, you know, everyone's office doors were open and you'd, like, stop by and, like, chit chat about stuff. And we'd have, like, these potlucks in the middle of the, like, the department when we had visiting artists in. Like, drink

wine and, like, bring food and eat together and, like, socialize at professor's houses. And it wasn't, like, this was the, like, good version of that, you know, none of it felt, you know, inappropriate or anything, um, which is just a really smaller community.

So, it's like, I think once you started going to Art School, if you kind of wanted to be, like, if you wanted to hang out, it wasn't like, "You're too young", you know, or anything like that. It was just like, "Oh yeah, more people coming to the artist run center" or whatever.

[00:05:51] **KL:** I wonder like... that, cause was that like pre-email taking over our lives? And then I guess also Calgary being, like, a smaller place than Chicago.

[00:06:03] **SS:** Yeah. I mean, I got my first email address when I was in my undergrad program and that was not even my first year of School. It was probably, like, I dunno, like 1998 or something, or 1999, when I got an email address. And I, like, didn't know what to do with it.

Cause I'm like, why would I email this person their office is right there?! I just, like, go over there and ask them a question. I totally didn't understand what email was for... the only person who emailed me was my mom, from, like, another neighbourhood in the same city to just be, like, some long email about my father or something.
[LAUGHS] That's it.

[00:06:41] **KL:** Ummmm, I do wonder like, like, it's interesting, not that I really know that many people in other disciplines, but I do think the arts like facilitates a kind of, like, closeness with, you know, your professors, (SS: mm-hmm) in a way that other disciplines just, like, do not have. And it's weird because people have asked me this question, like, in the UK. And so, part of me is like, is this a UK-American thing? Um... and I guess in this case, like, is it an American/Canadian thing? Or is it, like, an arts thing that other disciplines just don't have?

Um, and my theory around it was always like, I mean, I've been lucky enough to have people in my life, like you, who I feel like at a

certain point, you treat me like, I'm like a, not your student or something? (SS: mm-hmm) I'm just, like, a person who's in the same field (SS: yeah) who's like doing stuff? (SS: yeah) Sometimes with you, sometimes inspired by you, you know? And then I'm just that person, and also, I used to be your student or something like that.

[00:07:52] **SS:** I mean, that's what I felt like A.C.A.D. was like, Alberta College of Art and Design. Um, which was like the same, I mean, you know, like, I think I, like, was sort of brought up with that, like, through that situation where it felt like that turned over really quickly where you're like, okay, I'm your student, you're my mentor, we're having potlucks at School, you, you invite me over to your place and we have dinner and I get to know you and your cats, and now we're close friends and like, and now we're friends. And the person I'm talking about, I'm actually still friends with, they visited me in New York at one point, you know? And, and like, now feel like these kinds of really old friends that they're like family where you're like, "I haven't talked to you years, now here you are! Yay!" It's like, it's a dinner it's, like, important, you know, and we, like, pick back up and it's, like, fun and, and that's really lovely, but like very, like, not my experience alone. It's a neat, it's definitely a neat thing.

[00:08:59] **KL:** I think I was mostly just like, people were asking me, like, outside of my field. (SS: ooooh) Like people who were, like, in English or whatever. (SS: right) You know? And part of it was also this question of, like, do you have your mentors? That's something I ask people a lot, maybe because in School I was assigned to people? (SS: right) And it's like a weird kind of relationship, cause I feel like it's not like we developed together, or it's not like we found each other in something, like, literally they were assigned to me. (SS: yeah) At S.A.I.C., like, the first people I wanted to work with were like, it's like, I wanted to work with, like, Phyllis Bramson and I wanted to work with like Joseph Grigley... Um, and I think it had a lot to do with, like, what my art looked like and what I wanted my art to look like. (SS: yeah) and then

now, kind of, through picking up, um, you know, relationships with, like, *you*, picking up relationships with, like, Romi Crawford with, like, Terri Kapsalis.

It's like, I don't know if our work looks like each other's work? (SS: yeah) But like, I'm interested in how you treat me, and then also in, in the kinds of ideas you have and the way that you, like, um, navigate the world and your, like, life and, and it's like, I'm interested in all of that. And I feel like that creates a mentor. Not necessarily somebody who's, like, working in the same medium. Right, or even with some of the same ideas. Or something like that.

[00:10:34] SS: So, Laura Vickerson, who was my professor when I was an undergrad, I was in a program called an interdisciplinary program, which was, like, invented at A.C.A.D. a for a couple years and then disappeared. And part of it, if you applied for it, was you had to choose a mentor. And so, I chose Laura cause I'd come in through the Fiber Department and, like, wanted, she was a Fiber Department, like, professor. So, I did choose her, and I don't... I think I chose her because I felt like I had a good rapport with her... I mean, I was like, 20, I mean, like, I don't know, what did I think about anything? Like, [LAUGHS] it's like, what was my art? Who knows? Right?

But I felt like I had a good rapport with her, and I think it was a good, I think it was the right person at the, that time for me, for sure. And then, but there- I've never had any other situation where, like, I had anyone assigned to me or that, like, term "mentor" was, like, you know, a part of the relationship until, like, going to S.A.I.C. and you pick advisors. And when I came into S.A.I.C. from Canada, I didn't know who the professors were and I, like, it wasn't really on the internet yet, you know? Like you couldn- or I didn't know, how to use the internet that way, but you know what I mean? I don't think it really was. It's not like you really could, like, go and Google somebody and, like, see all of their stuff like you can now, right? And so, I was just like, I don't, you know, I don't even *know* who to pick. And, and the admissions department just, like, assigned two people to me.

Whereas I, like, didn't- I moved to the U.S., like, 9/11 happened. I was like, super, like, confused by that and, like, freaked out. They'd, like, assigned people to me because there were- that's what they did at the time when somebody was, like, you know, first year enrolling and, like, didn't know. And it just felt like I never figured out what I should be doing that year. Like, it just felt, like, super discombobulating and yeah, it was, I ne- I kind of felt like I missed out on a lot because I didn't know what I wanted. And I didn't know how to really, like, find out about people and, like, the way you can find out about people now, you know? I didn't really, you know, there's, so there were so many people teaching at S.A.I.C., like, I didn't even know where to begin.

I definitely, like, met some, like, interesting people through that, but I still feel a little bit like, I didn't, you know, in hindsight maybe, um... haven't experienced that first year that really was a powerful one when it comes to like, like a relationship with advisors.

And I struggled that year. I really felt like I missed A.C.A.D. cause I really missed the community that I experienced there. And I felt, like, super lost at S.A.I.C. And, like, nobody's office door is propped open, and, like, I didn't, there was like, where do people hang out? Like, nowhere- you know, like, it just felt like it was 9/11, nobody's downtown anyways. Like, it just was like, "Oh God who-", you know, like, "Help" [LAUGHS], you know, "somebody."

Um, and I think that the thing that, like, um, was- that replaced that for me is that I had, like, a really profound experience by, like, getting a job at the Joan Flasch Artist Book Collection and then 1926, which was the gallery and the base at the first floor of the Roger Brown Study Collection. And I think, like, those two things for me were, like, okay, that's my Grad School experience. They did, these two jobs that, like, put me in touch with material. Um, and didn't end up being so much again, like, not that I didn't have any interesting relationships to people in case anybody who has ever been my teacher's listening to this, it's just that, like, those things were the thing. Like, I was mentored by those objects or something, you know.

Although, you know, like Doro Böhme was at the library and that, the book collection, and Lisa Stone, who was the curator of the Roger Brown [Study] Collection, while they may not have been mentors of, like, per se, they were, like... their presence was really, like, what they did for a living and who they were was definitely, like, super influential to me.

[00:14:43] **KL:** So, you stayed in Chicago.

[00:14:44] **SS:** I stayed in Chicago.

[00:14:46] **KL:** What's the trajectory?

[00:14:48] **SS:** Um, I, uh...

[00:14:50] **KL:** ...A.C.A.D., did you go straight into Grad School after A.C.A.D.?

[00:14:53] **SS:** No, I didn't go straight into undergrad. I went to the University of Calgary for... a.... year? Or a semester... Can't even remember. Very short period of time and then dropped out. And then I moved to Banff, Alberta, Canada and, like, um, I worked in a vintage store, worked in a [United Colors of] Benneton, saved up my money and went to do a thing that I think, like, every Canadian did in the nineties, which was like, go backpacking around Europe and, um, thought at the time that what I really wanted to do was move to London. I really thought like, that's what I wanted. I wanted to go to fashion School. I was, like, really interested in that. And then got- found it, like, really intimidating.

And then I came back to Canada and was like, I'll just go back to Art School and went to A.C.A.D. and went into, um, this, like, created this hybrid program between Painting and Fiber. Um, you know, kind of, like, did that and then had got exposed to S.A.I.C. because Anne Wilson (who was in the Fiber Department at S.A.I.C. for a long time) visited A.C.A.D. when I was there and like, you know, did an artist lecture and talked about the School. And I got really interested in, like,

that Fiber Department. I was like, "Oh, this is pretty interesting, pretty radical." And it's like, just didn't seem like anything that I'd ever, I mean, I loved the department at A.C.A.D., but like, this seemed, like, really next level in a way. Um, and then I took a year off from School and like just, uh, decided to apply to Grad School and applied to S.A.I.C. only... which maybe wasn't the wisest decision, but that was it. And, uh, and then yeah, moved to Chicago and did that. So, when I graduated, uh, I stayed and then I went back to School and took my MA in Art History.

When I went to Grad School as a studio major, I did, I, I paid a lot of student loans I'm paying now. It feels ridiculous to complain about that cause it's like, it was half the amount of money it costs now, which seems absurd. But um, got some scholarships from some Canadian things like, but came as a paying student, and then I got a scholarship to take my MA in Art History. So, I went back and took it. Looking back, it's like that might not have been the best way to make that decision because it was clouded by being the place I'd gotten my MFA.

And I just, when I went, I felt like, "Oh, I'm not... art historians aren't my people." Like, that's kind of what I felt like after. And when I was like, this isn't, like, these aren't my people... like, I shouldn't take a PhD.

[00:17:45] **KL:** Um, so if you had maybe done like your master's in Art History, uh, like, in another place or whatever, you would've been like, "Here are the people that are my people, cause we're all in the program together." As opposed to being like, "My people are over there, like, in this other building"?

[00:17:57] **SS:** I, yeah. I wonder that. And also, that I think there's just a lot of other things I'm interested in. And so, like, had I been somewhere where there was, like, a Sociology Department over here or, like, a Folklore Department or just, like, other things to- like, other types of people to meet. Like, maybe I would've found my people. Like, my academic people.

Cause I actually, I, you know, I don't know. I feel like I'm a lazy academic. I'm like, I kind of think I'm sort of... I, I feel like I'm way more academic in some ways than some folks. Like, kind of more nerdy or bookish or something or whatever. But also, I feel like, you know, I fall short of being a... I don't know.

[00:18:39] **KL:** I also feel like a lazy academic. I...

[00:18:43] **SS:** Great! [LAUGHS]

[00:18:43] **KL:** Um, you know, and so, and I...

[00:18:45] **SS:** It's a new scene it's called *Lazy Academic*.

[00:18:49] **KL:** I think so. I think so. And it's like, I, um, like, I think it is something about a particular way that people are able to use their knowledge.

And it's interesting cause with this class and stuff that I just taught, it's like, I almost need to like, like I can keep things in my head for about two days. Like I can, like, *shove it in there*. And then if somebody asks me about it, I can tell you about, like... yeah. And somebody says like, you know, one word which is in the article, then I could be like, oh, okay, that's where it is. Like blah, blah, blah. Five days later - not in my brain anymore.

And I think one reason why I'm doing this interview project is because I realized that the thing that I remember most is, like, what people tell me in specific places. I don't know. Is that kinaesthetic learning or something?

[00:19:41] **SS:** That's a good question. I don't know. I, um, have a very similar memory and I don't know of what that means. I always call it like at the, a contextual memory. So, I remember things, like, in place and, um, which is, I think what you're saying, like, oh, we were here, we did this, and we talked about this and like, then it's, like, goes in the memory palace like that.

[00:20:06] **KL:** Yeah. And it's the same thing as like, it's like I ride a bike. I stop riding a bike. I forget how to ride a bike. I have to teach myself how to ride a bike again. So, it's like, it's kind of like a similar thing with most things where, like, people assume that you know how to do it. They're- and, you know, I think the only things that I can actually, like, keep a hold of are art-making things. Like body, yeah, like body knowledge things. And so, it's interesting to be like, "What is it that I just can't hold onto?" (SS: yeah) Um, and how is it that academia is perf- is like, yeah, performing certain kinds of knowledge. Like, books, movies, television, it just, it just falls outta my brain. And, um...

[00:20:43] **SS:** Oh, that's nice to know. Cause I feel like I assumed you had really great pop culture recall given, like, the subject to some of, many of your writings, you know, in the past I was like, oh, you must remember every, like, TV shows deeply, movies deeply because there was so much of that content and some of the research you did in Grad School, you know, and I just assumed you had really good recall. (KL: no) I can't. I will literally watch a movie and be like, 15 minutes into the movie and be like, "I've seen this movie." [LAUGHS]

[00:21:15] **KL:** Well, so it's, it's funny though, because it's like, you know, what does it mean that I work with books sometimes? [LAUGHS] And how much of it has to do with like... not re-reading books, but, like, what are the other kinds of relationships we have with books?

Because, like, we assume people are reading more than they probably actually are. Like, especially academics and stuff. Like, I remember somebody told me something like, yeah, when an academic's asked to, like, write a blurb for a like book cover or something, like *maybe* they'll read it.

[00:21:53] **SS:** Yeah. I, like, had the same conversation with somebody once where I realized that... The friend of mine who... yeah, I think one time she was like, "You don't read the whole book, Shannon, like, you just sort

of, you speed read in this way." And I'm like, you, I'm like, "You're a speed reader and stuff?"- " It just, it means that you're like a, you skim in a particular way." And I'm like, "How? What is this? What do you mean?" And I was just like, it just changed my whole, like, impression of things. I'm like, oh, this person reads a ton of books, but they're not really reading them.

[00:22:28] **KL:** And I feel like I was taught how to do that, and I can do that really well. And then it's just like, everything just feels like a game. (SS: yeah) Cause, like, you can find whatever you're looking for. (SS: yeah) And this, I think goes back to our conversation yesterday about kind of like... how you can find what you need to justify (SS: right) your understanding of the world. (SS: right) Um, and I think, I guess like, those things are tied in terms of, like, academia, or, like, knowledge production or something. And, like, what theories then are there for people to be able to hold onto...

[00:23:09] **SS:** My impression is, anyways, I mean, I'm sure there's something, I'm sure I don't know, right. But my impression is that people do not study a writer or an artist with the depth that people used to, historically, right? They're like, well, you know, they, nobody throws their entire life into just, like, deeply understanding this one person's, like, print portfolio from 1961 or whatever, right? Like, it's like, that's not art historians anymore because now there's these, you know, curatorial studies programs, there's these other sort of like cur-, like, art history-lite, things or something. Or, and, or everybody's like a, you know, a contemporary art- is, like, taking a PhD in contemporary art.

They're like, you know, they're not interested in, like, this very particular, like, litho that, like, you know... It's, like, not that same sort of granular kind of understanding of things. And I, you know, like, I wonder, (I don't, it's not the deepest thought) but it's just like, between that and, like a, just, a common sort of, um, practice of the, like, you know, the skim till you find what you need. You know, the, the sort of Wikipedia version of research, it's just, and like, nobody has an editor

anymore. You just like publish whatever you want online, like... I don't know, we're leaving a lot of stuff. You know, we're leaving, leaving a lot of stuff, sort of buried. Or, like, this really deep understanding of things is like, is going away, you know?

Or we understand things only as, like, I don't know, we're not *trying* to understand things, maybe at the depths that, like, we could be, and it's exasperated by, like, the demands to sort of, like, [CLAPS] pump up with something next, like, faster, faster!

[00:24:54] **KL:** Yeah. And I wonder how much... yeah. Like, I was thinking about, like, velocity and then also, like, velocity's impact on, yeah, the way that we learn, but also the way that we, like, process things. So, it's like the fact that, like, I can only retain things really well for two days. Like, how much of that has to do with, like, my mind and how much does it have to do with my mind that I've developed and adapted based to, like, the information, the world that we're like currently in or whatever. And I'm sure it's, like, both. (SS: yeah) Um, but, um...

I consider myself a, you know, a, a lazy academic or a bad academic. I consider myself someone who, like, does not read well. Does not retain reading as much as I need to in order to not be a lazy or bad academic. It's still like, I think I don't, I don't know, but it's like kind of wild when you're like, like, I guess in the scale of academics, I'm, like, a lazy academic, and then on the scale of the artists, I'm like a good academic?

[00:26:01] **SS:** Right.

[00:26:01] **KL:** And I'm just like in the middle there, you know? [LAUGHS] And I, and I've always known, I've always known that you know?

[00:26:10] **SS:** I guess my, my sort of, um, love/hate idea all the time about, like, going and doing something, like even taking a PhD is like, [WHISPER] "Oh no, but I'm not, can't do that." Like, I can only, I can only get, I can only, like, pass, you know, in this way, like within certain sorts of

contexts. I think what really, like, haunts me is the, when I first went to University right after I got out of, like, High School and I, like I said, I dropped out of University for a while and then went back to Art School when I was in the University. I remember taking some, like, two classes. I took like some, like, Greek mythology class and then, like, some poetry class that, like, again, I didn't totally know how to navigate University. I didn't. I was the first person in my family go to college. So, I had, like, no guidance, you know, about, like, nobody to sit down with and be like, "Okay."

I was, like, winging it, you know, it's like, "This sounds cool, sign up for this!" Or, like, "Nothing else is open, so, I guess I'm in this, like, poetry class on Chaucer that like, I don't even know why I'm in this class." And I just, I failed both these classes, like, really miserably and I got, you know, like a really negative experience of the University right away after having been, like, a decent student in High School.

And, uh, and I think, like, that's one of those things where I really, like, I, I dropped outta School and then, like, when I went back to, to Art School, I was, like, so intense about, like, being like, I would read all the books. Like, I would get the reading list for my literature class and read all the books over the break before the class.

Like, just like, "This is not gonna happen again. I can do this" you know? And then I did better, much better in School, you know, when I was going to A.C.A.D. But, um, but that, like, you know, that, that experience of that first year at University, like always haunts me, like, Universities are not for me. Like, [LAUGHS] like I don't...

[00:28:07] **KL:** What was it? Was it, you just like, didn't have the tools to be able to, like, speak in the way that they needed you to speak about these things, and they didn't educate you on what those tools were clearly enough before they evaluated you?

[00:28:23] **SS:** I don't know. I just, it felt like I was in over my head. I mean, I think at the time. It's, I mean, I think in some ways things felt opaque. I remember that Mythology class was like something, a huge lecture

hall. And it just felt like that was like a scale of, of like learning that I don't retain well, you know? I don't go to lectures often. Like, even though sometimes I'm like, "Gosh, that'd be interesting to hear that person talk." I'm not inclined to do it a lot. Like, it just washes over me, you know?

Um, so as part of it, I think is that, that just like the format of, of a lot of those classes was just like incompatible with my, like, learning style or something. But it did, I think in general, that feeling was just like, oh, that's University. It's like, it's big. You're, you're in the, you're there with a bunch of people. It's somebody very small way down there, like giving the lecture and it's overwhelming or it's like, you know, it's, it's, it's like, you know, makes you feel small, and you know, alone. And so, it's kinda like no, and that, and, you know, a small Art School was a very different kind of experience.

I'm, I'm 47 years old, turned 47 this year. [LAUGHS] A lot of unresolved wounds around academia. I, you know, I really have had, like, a very, like, conflicted relationship with academia my whole life. Cause when I was a little kid, I was in, like, a gifted program. And then when I went to University and I failed, I, I had, like, an incredible amount of shame around that and was, like, for me, that was like, I'm, that's it. I'm a failure.

Yeah. I don't know. It's funny. It's always really funny how those things, like, really stick with a person though, Like, you just have, like, hang-ups in life and it's like, it never, it never quite resolves itself, you know?

If a system's created that you're being told is the way people are judged and you're young and you're not a part of a generation of people who are really, like, critical of that yet you sort of feel like, "Oh, okay, like, I'm not... I'm not smart, cause I can't, you know, I obviously am not able, I can't perform in this, like, format that like determines whether or not people are smart. So, it's like, I must be, not be smart then." (KL: yeah) Or, "I don't belong here cause this is like, you know, this is the, you know, this is the thing." Um... [SINGS] Art School...

[00:30:58] **KL:** Art School! And so no, this is really, you know, like, and so then what... I always think that, like, you know, before people were like, there are multi- multimodal learning strategies or whatever, people were like, well, all of the kids that can sit at a desk for hours, like, go here and then everybody else, like, run around or go to art class. (SS: mm-hmm) So it's like, how is the arts, like, a catchall for different kinds of learners? (SS: mm-hmm) Um, and then, like, you're talking about the difference between like the, the, um, spatial difference between being at a lecture hall versus, like being in a, you know, in a, in a small group of people who are in a small community who are able to, like, have a potluck. (SS: yeah)

You know, so it's also kind of like, what community do you want to be in? What relationship do you want to have with all of the other people who are also learning? And then that kind of narrowing, um, down also, like, um, the subjects that you choose? Um...

[00:32:01] **SS:** Well, I, I would say going back to that, like, what is the, you know, the environment that you're gonna be in? Like, I do think that, like, is Art School like a catchall for a lot of different kinds of learners? I mean, I am not a good maker of objects. Like, I am not a crafts person, you know? I mean, I am very interested in craft, you know, and I'm very, I mean, very interested in all kinds of material, art objects, actually I shouldn't even... I mean, I shouldn't differentiate between them to be honest. Like I'm pretty indiscriminate.

I'm pretty interested in a lot of things, but like, I can't make those things. I don't have a lot of patience for that. Kind of like, I don't have, like, very good hand eye coordination. Like, I'm not very good at, like, a, a kind of like fussiness that might result in, you know, like, that tiny drawing on my wall that Edie Fake made.

Like, I don't have that like level of, like, focus and patience. I don't have the kind of, like, uh, bravado and, like, performative, like, core of being to make, like, some big expressive painting that is, like, the opposite of fussy. Like, I just don't have that, those kinds of abilities. It's so weird that I went to Art School.

I'm not a maker. But I identify as one, [LAUGHS] you know, cause I'm just like, definitely not, like, I'm not this, like, person, like, when I was like, "Oh, I'm- these art historians are not my people", I belong there... but I'm like, I'm not actually, like, able to demonstrate a kind of facility with material the way, like, artists normally can. And so, it's sort of feels a little bit like being... bit in no man's land a little bit, you know... yeah.

[00:33:47] **KL:** Does this, this go back to kind of what you were saying in terms of like the Roger Brown [Study] Collection, The Joan Flasch, like, Artist Book Collection, introducing you to materials that you're inspired by and interested in working with? And then kind of this, your ability, um, to remember things that existed in a time and space that were like, grasp- I don't know if, I don't think you said the word graspable, but like...

[00:34:14] **SS:** Yeah.

[00:34:15] **KL:** Do you think that's a kind of line between, like, say curators or, like, space developers or like, you know, cause it's like, you're not actually working with, like, you're not making an object, but like, you're making a relationship between objects. You're making an idea between objects and ideas in a space or...

[00:34:34] **SS:** Yeah. I mean, I think that that's for, I mean, I think that is for me, like, I'm very compelled by and very much miss the, like, that kind of work. Um... currently not a curator, but like, I, I miss, like, that's I still, like, think that, like, I think about things in terms of, like, what is this object doing in this. You know, I loved your students' posters because I just thought that was just such an interesting, that's an art object and it's doing this thing. It's performing in a space and inflecting people's behavior. And it's like, that to me is what makes objects interesting, you know?

Thinking about the class that you just finished teaching, um, like how does a text, like, inflect, like the performance of the, then people enact, you know, with one another or whatever like that. How, how any kind of object like a text object or a different kind of physical object is like a tool or a prompt or an actor in space is like the thing that I am the most compelled by. And I don't think that's what, uh, I don't think that's what *all* curating is though.

[00:35:43] **KL:** What's an example of a thing that you've done where you're like, "That's it. That's the thing."

[00:35:48] **SS:** Like a show? Or just anything?

[00:35:51] **KL:** Or just anything.

[00:35:53] **SS:** Well, *Party as Form* [LAUGHS] I mean, I think... a situation that has got multiple points of prompt, tool, physicality, timestamp. I think it's, like, situations where it's like, something happens, something changes over time. Something is put into motion. There are, you know, chapters to that motion maybe, or there's, like, footnotes to it, or something that there's, like, different registers of, like, what might be a static experience, you know, like that kind of thing. Um, so I mean, the reason that I said *Party as Form* is that it's like, the point of that class was, like, to, at a moment in Chicago when there was so many people doing social practice work to be like, "Why don't you think about it through this lens so that you can, like, really determine whether or not, like, so you can learn, like, think about critically what it means to be inviting people, to do something with you."

And it made a lot of sense to me to have it here [at Ox-bow School of Art], which is a place that seems to have a lot of, like, kind of, rules in place that are about, like, play and, um, uh, and performance, you know. That, so it's, like, already a site that you can sort of exercise that, like, you can test that theory out on or whatever.

And so, for me, that felt like a very perfect thing. Cause it's like, here is, like, let's critique something that's going on in, in our field, let's say, but trickles out beyond it. Like, let's critique a thing with a bunch of texts. Let's put it in a site that's, like, specific to do that work and, like, feel the thing that we're critiquing while we're doing it. And then, like, try to act on it in some way, in a way that feels like very immediate, like, not a lot of chance to, like, fuss over it. And I think cause- and that to me comes more from a place of being somebody that, like, gets lost in, like, "Well, I can't really make this thing, so I guess I won't make anything at all." But, like, if you're short on time, short on materials, you're just like thrown into this thing, like, you'll do a thing and it'll turn out however it is, and then it'll be brilliant, and you'll accept it. And so, I... that's like a constraints-based making, um, that I think is, like, a really like powerful way to learn about something.

So, yeah. I mean, that's why that feels like the thing. Um, of course that's, like, inside teaching and pedagogy, which is so different than being, I mean, museums, like, are teaching tools, but it's, like, different because you've got a close group of people participating versus a museum where you're like, "Who knows who's gonna come by and do this thing."

Um, but, uh, yeah, I think like in, in, like, curatorial settings, I try doing that with exhibitions, like, often. And you know, I think some of them worked and some of them failed, you know. And that feels, like, awkward to admit. It's like, "Oh, maybe that cost a lot of money, and maybe that wasn't what I thought it was gonna be. Or maybe that's not what I wanted it to be, and maybe it would be easier if I just had put some things on a pedestal and put like a didactic on the wall and, like, moved on", you know? But that is, to me that- the times I had to curate shows that looked like that those were the biggest failures to me. And then the things that were more experimental that maybe weren't... were maybe the ones that resonated with me the most, you know?

So, I'm not giving you examples of any of those things. I, um, cause I can't pick a favorite child in that way. I think... yeah.

[00:39:41] **KL:** It's interesting, like, in this class, um, in this *Party as Form* class, trying to talk to them about their parties. But then also trying to talk to them about parties in general, not use language about, like, success or failure or, like, good or bad, because it is really just, like, you had an experience.

[00:40:00] **SS:** Yeah.

[00:40:01] **KL:** You know? And was it a memorable experience? Was it something that, like, made you think? Is it something that humbled you? Is it something that you learned from? Is it something that, that, like you got some, you got to test out something or something like that. It's just kind of like, what are ways that are, um, that allow you to evaluate things on the terms of the things itself? (SS: mm-hmm) As opposed to being like... yeah. I mean, it's interesting even talking to you, like, I don't know if I go to shows being like, "Is this a successful show or not" (SS: right) or something? Um... my own shows I feel like, you know, I don't know if I think of them that way either.

[00:40:49] **SS:** Yeah.

[00:40:50] **KL:** Um, I'm interested in Threewalls... I know you've done a number of, uh, you've done work in a variety of organizations that you have created, and you've also worked with and for to make sure that artists are like compensated properly. (SS: mm-hmm) Before I even knew anything about Threewalls or anything about you, like I knew that you paid artists. (SS: mm-hmm) And that's something that doesn't happen... but I knew that Threewalls was one of the organizations that was doing that. And so, I wanted to acknowledge that work that you're doing... then also ask if maybe Threewalls was a place where you could feel a sense of kind of, like, authorship or something, like, that in a way that maybe you can't feel like you can exercise that in other roles that you've taken.

[00:41:51] **SS:** Me and three other people founded Threewalls when, um, I graduated from Grad School. I, as alluded to earlier, I grew up in Canada and it is essentially mandated that people pay artist fees because you can't get funding from the Canada Council if you don't pay artist fees.

And they have, like, a very clearly defined sort of, um, schedule of what fees are. And it's very detailed. So, it's, like, from writing to reperforming a performance you've already, like, performing forward to a new performance, to a lecture, to a lecture you've done before. Like it's a very highly detailed.... um, and when I moved to the U.S. and I was just like, I don't know. I was in some situation where I was like, "Oh, what's the artist fee?" And it was like, "There's no artist fee." And I was like, "What? There's no artist fee?" And I had no idea. Like, it was just like full ignorance. It wasn't like a, you know, it was just like- oh, I mean, I had the same experience of healthcare in the U.S., so it's like, "Wait, what's this bill?" like, confused. So, I just didn't know. I mean, I was very young when I moved here too. So, when we started *Threewalls*, it was just sort of like, well, I want us, you know, we're gonna pay artist fees, it's an artist run center, we're just like, we're gonna start from there right away. And then I think as the, it ran longer and longer, there are other things got added to that.

It's like, we're paying an artist fee, here's your material stipend. We will make a publication and print it and we'll pay a writer. And you know, all of this comes to \$4,000 or something, you know, like, it was like, and we can do this many shows a year with this budget. So, it was like, very... We did that, and then we paid staff, like, after that.

So, it was like, all of that happened first. Eventually we raised enough money that, like, people could get paid to work there. Um, and I think that's like, I, I mean, regardless of, like, my inability to make compelling objects, I still came through a BFA and MFA program. And especially when I started Threewalls, like saw myself as, like, a person who might have a studio practice someday. If I could like, get my shit together. And the, like, I think my, I think it's just that it, like, is not, you know, I, that's where I started, where it's like, I'm another artist starting

an artist run space, so I'm gonna pay artists. And then I think doing that job, I realized, like, oh, what I can do is I can be like Robin Hood. Where I'm gonna, like, I can get the money and then I can, like, redistribute it. You know, it's like that, like this, I'm a- I can go, I'm a go between. Like, I can figure out how to write these grants and get them in and then, like, redistribute it, like, that's what you do. Like, that's what I'm doing, you know, for, like, my peers or something.

You know, like, when I went to M.A.D. [Museum of Arts and Design], I instituted that we paid artist fees there. It's actually not that hard. You just, like, write the budget differently. You're like, well, now part of the show budget is a \$5,000 artist fee. That's just, we just put that in there. So that's cool, right? You know, like we might have to not do something else, like, or, you know, but this is the budget, and this is what's in here and we can talk about how to make a show outta that.

I hope they're still paying artist fees. I don't know. But that is, um, yeah, I mean, I think it's just sort of feeling like being somebody who can figure out where to get the resources from and then, like, how, like how to help give them to other people. And yeah, but, like, wherever that sort of has transitioned into sort of being more of an administrator. I think I'm losing my sort of sense of, like, you know, creative stimulation, because I'm, like in the weeds maybe too much or something. Like I'm, I'm like getting further and further away from, like, you know, being... what, that's kind of maybe what that note is about. It's like, that's like the, the tension that like comes out of- let's read this quote again.

So: "Being the translator between the privacy of the studio and public that resists complicated ideas, uh, and the depression that arrives out of that tension." It's like it gets, you know, I think that I probably wrote that cause I was thinking about, like, it can be really depressing being the person who's like, I'm trying to, I wanna support and make visible complicated ideas cause I care about them. I think that they matter. And constantly being in the act of like, trying to translate those, whether it's like, I'm trying to put on a show or I'm, like,

you know, like sup- like being the Director of a School where complicated ideas are allowed to happen.

I think just that thing that I wrote was just like the feeling of, like, the tension of trying to sort of be in both places.

The thing about being, like, moulding and making Threewalls, a thing that, that operated, it was like, it did eventually for me, like, run out of steam because I was more and more an administrator there, like after a certain amount of time.

And, um, because it, you know, we had lots of input from our community, people on committees and like, you know, there was a lot of different ways that it wasn't just, like, whatever, my brainchild or something. Like it wasn't a vanity project. And so it was, I think when I left it's because I really wanted to have, like, some creative agency over it and just be like, "I'm curating a show." Like, I, I didn't have to, it's not about, like, an open call or like a jury discussion or... and I still, like, believe in those, like, you know, types of ways of bringing people together. But I think I left cause I wanted to, like, try the other thing out. And then, you know, just encountered the other version of that, which is like, uh, you know, and understandably, like, museums are tasked with trying to appeal to way more people than they can possibly appeal to at any given time. But that's what they think they're trying to do. Um, so, so I don't know. You know. Nobody's ever happy. [LAUGHS] In conclusion.

[00:47:58] **KL:** Um, my last question is, um, the only question that I ask everybody, um, which is, um, did we talk about what you thought we would talk about? Um, or, uh, do you have any questions you'd like to ask me? Or is there, and/or, is there anything you'd just like to say kind of on the record?

[00:48:24] **SS:** Um, do I think this is what we'd talk about? I just figured we'd talk about whatever we talked about. So yes. Um, surprised a little bit that I'm, like, re... maybe I didn't think I was gonna be, like, recounting my journey and quite the way I ended up doing it. I think I probably

thought we were gonna talk a little bit more about... not because I thought you were gonna guide it that way just, but I thought we were gonna end up talking more about like the observed practicalities of working in the art world, um, like as work. Um, and I have no sense of loss for having not talked about that, you know. And then I guess that means that my question for you is, is this what you thought we would talk about?

[00:49:11] **KL:** I don't really, you know, I feel like I choose people who I want to talk to... and I'm interested in, like, how you navigate, um, being in these different roles and one of the roles also being an artist. Um, I'm interested in kind of something you said to me last year, in terms of, like, something you also repeated here where like, "Institutions, institutions are the problem." And it's kind of just like, well, who's in the institutions? I'm also an institution. Where is an institution?

[00:49:38] **SS:** Yeah. I mean, I think I'm always like, thinking about that, like, that I'm, you know, sometimes I'm like, what would I go back to study at University? It's like, what were the things that'd be interested in studying? And I actually think one of the things that I find the most curious is the concept of institution as like a catchall bucket that people can throw, like, a bunch of like awful in, you know? It's just like, whatever I'm pissed about, just goes in this bucket called institution, you know? And without like having any, like, remembering that it's like, oh, like the institution includes me because I work at one. Or like, you know, like, my friend...

I think one of my frustrating things about the, like, institution shit bucket is like a lot of fucking people who need to work have to work in institutions because not everybody gets to be an independent artist or an independent academic or an independent thinker, like, that's not, that's not achievable for like 98% of the population.

And so where do those people work? [WHISPERS] At institutions. You know? And like, they're complicated, working with people's hard... I'm not trying to, like, give a, like, blanket pass to

institutions. It's mostly just to be like, they're difficult. They're filled with people. They're filled with people, negotiating things all the time. They're so filled with people, negotiating things all the time that I think a lot of the time they've lost the plot.

Like, I'm not giving institutions the pass. I'm not making an excuse for 'em. It's not it. It's just mostly, like, people work there and often artists have to because they need a job. And, or academics or whatever. And they make up, most of the people who work there.

So, it's like, it is, uh, it just ends up being this funny, like blanket thing that we like throw all of our, our crap at, but we like don't even really know what it is, you know? Or like, we don't really know what that means, it just becomes sort of a, like, "That's the blanket term I'll just put on some things that I hate." And you're like, "Okay, can we unpack that a little bit?"

And then some people mean institution when they say, like, a thing's been around for a long time, but I think it's come to mean, like, things that are impenetrable that we hate, you know?

It doesn't really mean things that have been around for a long time and proven their worth. It's more like that thing's been around too long and we hate it and it's like impenetrable. Today that's what I think institution means, I don't know what it will mean next week. Um, but anyways. What do people hate right now? Institutions. They've moved on from curators. [LAUGHS] No, I think they hate MFA programs.

[00:52:14] **KL:** Is that what it is now?

[00:52:15] **SS:** I kind of think it's maybe that. It's just like, it's like we hate MFA programs. I think that's, maybe that's cooling off, but I feel like there was like a deep, like no-more-MFA-programs vibe for a minute. We'll see.

[00:52:26] **KL:** Thanks for doing this.

[00:52:27] **SS:** You're welcome. I'm afraid. [LAUGHS]

[00:52:29] **KL:** Don't be afraid! Don't be afraid.

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[00:52:37] **KL:** Epilogue. On the 20th of January 2023, Shannon Stratton wrote to me, “Since our interview, I have been strategizing ways to better support my practice as a writer and curator.”

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[00:52:53] **KL:** You can find more information about Shannon Stratton and her work at her website, shannonraestratton.com. Links to what we spoke about today, as well as other interviews with people in the arts, are on the project’s website thisthingwecallart.com.

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Thanks so much for listening, and tune in next week for my conversation with Dr. Joana Joachim.