The Conditions of Making

Towards a Holistic Ecology of Artistic Practice

What does it take to keep making art?



Greed Feed, 2025 · R. J. Hurst
Victoria, the bra pig · Artist's studio detail

Abstract

What does it take to keep making art? Reading Monona Rossol on studio safety led me to wonder how far that question might take us if we followed an art material back to the people who made it, or followed an artist to the door of a studio they could never enter. I explore those questions through feminist writing on work, textiles and disability, alongside my sculpture *Greed Feed*. I propose five dimensions of artistic sustainability that belong in the same conversation: the physical, ecological, economic, cultural and institutional conditions of making.

Back to the studio tomorrow

Monona Rossol noticed something odd while moving between the chemistry and art departments at the University of Wisconsin. Some of the chemicals were familiar on both sides of the divide. What changed was the way people behaved around them. In the chemistry department she worked with protective equipment. In the art department the same substances became materials to get close to, and some of her fellow artists felt that hearing about the hazards interfered with their creativity (Rossol 1994, 9). I have some sympathy for the desire to get on with making, although a few rather eventful encounters with a Stanley knife have given me an appreciation for the subject.

What interests me about Rossol’s story is how little had to change for a risk to disappear from view. The artist and the chemist could be the same person. The substance could be the same substance. Walk through a different door and a precaution that had seemed perfectly sensible a moment ago could begin to feel faintly ridiculous. I think that tells us something about what we learn in a studio alongside technique. We learn what to notice, what we can interrupt the work for and what we are expected to put up with.

With a knife, at least, the relationship between the tool and the event is fairly easy to follow. Rossol’s account of exposure over time is harder to sit with. She distinguishes a substance that accumulates in the body from an injury that can accumulate even after the substance itself has left (1994, 21–23). A session can seem unremarkable and still be part of a pattern that matters over the course of a working life. That change of timescale altered the question for me. If I care about being able to return to the studio tomorrow, whose working life am I taking into account when a material arrives at my bench?

What came with the garment

In my studio documentation for *Greed Feed* I wrote, “I was surprised how much metal came out of 10 bras” (Hurst 2025b, 36). It is an observation I keep coming back to. I knew what a bra looked like. Even so, the metal laid out on its own told me something I had missed while looking at the whole garment. Its softness was partly an achievement of construction. There was quite a lot of hardware involved in producing that impression.



What came out of ten bras. Seeing the curved wires together makes their quantity visible. Material inventory from the artist’s studio documentation (Hurst 2025b, 36).

Taking a garment apart can show me what holds it together. It gives me much less purchase on the lives of the people who assembled it. Marx’s account of

commodity fetishism offers a historical name for the way relations between producers can appear to us as relations between things (Marx [1867] 1887, chap. 1, sec. 4). Nancy Fraser takes up the part of this problem that interests me most. To turn up for work, a person has to be able to eat, sleep, recover and care for the people who depend on them. An economy can depend on that work while drawing away the time and resources needed to do it (Fraser 2016, 99–102).

Alessandra Mezzadri's research gives this question a location. In her discussion of women doing paid work at home in India, the household is one of the places where production happens. The distinction between a place for earning a wage and a place for keeping a family going begins to look much tidier on paper than it could possibly be in that room. Mezzadri asks what an account of value leaves out when it starts at the factory gate (2021, introduction and discussion of homeworkers). For my purposes, the consequence is quite practical. Knowing the price of a garment gives me no way to tell whether the people whose labour made it possible had enough time or money left to look after themselves.

This is what I mean by **a tax on working bodies**. If exhaustion is an ordinary cost of producing something, somebody has to absorb it. A household can carry that cost long after a finished product has moved on to its next owner. I can ask the question of the bras in my studio without pretending to know where each was sewn or under what conditions. The gap in what I can

establish is itself a reason to be careful about claiming an ethical virtue for reuse. As Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing asks in a different context, who gets to benefit from value made elsewhere (2015, 61–64)? I can account for the use I made of those garments. Their earlier histories deserve more than a guess.

Where the costs of making can fall

Follow a material from its source to its next use. At each stage, a different cost comes into view.

1	**Extraction**	Land, energy and labour make raw materials available.
2	**Manufacture**	Workers shape the material. Households may carry the cost of care and recovery.
3	**Distribution**	The product changes hands. Knowledge of earlier working conditions may fall away.
4	**Studio use**	The artist contributes time, tools and energy to transform it.
5	**Reuse or disposal**	Repair can extend use. Disposal passes the material on as waste.

R. J. Hurst · Conceptual pathway, informed by Mezzadri (2021) and Tsing (2015, 61–64). Stages may overlap or repeat.

What the hand knows

Victoria, the bra pig in *Greed Feed* (Hurst 2025a), belongs here because of one small decision about her mouth. In the sculpture I left the edges of the cup foam exposed and used boning to hold the jaws open. The material that helped a garment keep its shape became the means of preventing a mouth from closing (Hurst 2025b, 49, 52–53). Victoria is caught in the position of having to consume. The construction does some of the speaking for her. *Greed Feed* is part of Jump Left's *MULTIPLICITY '26*, scheduled for 5 December 2026 to 30 January 2027 (Jump Left n.d.).





The mouth, during construction and in the finished sculpture. Cup foam forms the separated jaws. Boning holds them open. R. J. Hurst, Greed Feed, 2025. Studio documentation (Hurst 2025b, 49, 52).

I find it curious that a viewer can readily recognise the open mouth as sculpture, while the ability to construct the garment that made it possible can be dismissed as a domestic accomplishment. Both involve knowing how a

soft material will behave once it is cut, pulled or put under tension. If that knowledge begins to count as artistic intelligence only when it enters a gallery, what have we decided about the people who had it all along?

This is where I want to be quite plain about my own position. I consider historically feminised creative practices equally valuable and significant artistic practices. I am interested in what follows from taking that seriously. Someone has to have the time to learn a technique, another person may need time to teach it, and somebody deciding what gets exhibited has to be able to recognise what they are looking at. An institution can admire an intricate finished object while making very little provision for the knowledge that produced it to survive.

Julia Bryan-Wilson gives me a way of thinking through that tension without asking a stitch to carry the same politics everywhere it appears. Her method brings close attention to how particular textiles were made and what people did with them (2017, introduction, “In the Fray”). Consider Harmony Hammond’s *Floorpieces*. Braided domestic fabrics lie underfoot, where a rug would quite ordinarily belong. In a gallery, that position changes the encounter with a painted and sculptural object (Alexander Gray Associates n.d.). I want to give the making as much attention as the change of setting. The same attentiveness matters when knowledge is held collectively. UNESCO’s convention on intangible cultural heritage recognises craftsmanship, transmission

and the participation of the people who maintain a practice (2003, arts. 2 and 15). Whether a skill continues, and who decides how it is shared, are questions of cultural sustainability in their own right.

Who can get to the work?

There is a question folded into all of this about who has the opportunity to learn in the first place. Rossol points out that the occupational threshold values she discusses were designed around the conditions of most healthy adult workers (1994, 32–33). Safe Work Australia likewise cautions against treating an airborne exposure standard as a dividing line between a healthy and an unhealthy workplace (Safe Work Australia n.d.). What stayed with me was the figure of that assumed worker. Once an institution has built a room, a timetable or an expectation of attendance around one kind of body, everybody else has to negotiate the difference.

An artist's relationship with their immediate environment can **"debilitate or accommodate productivity."** In my case, being able to study fine art through Open Universities Australia and Curtin University changes what is available to me. If attendance in a particular room at a particular time were the price of entry, my capacity to attend would stand in for a judgement about my capacity to make art. Those are two quite different things to ask of a person. Garland-Thomson's account of misfitting helps explain

why an adjustment to the environment can change the answer while the person remains the same (2011, 592–95).

There is a public dimension to that loss. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities connects education with the opportunity to develop artistic and intellectual potential and to contribute to cultural life (United Nations 2006, arts. 24(5) and 30(2)). Carolyn Lazard brings this down to the scale of an arts organisation that has to decide how to spend its time and resources (2019, parts I–II). By the time a gallery is considering whose work to hang, many of the decisions about whose work it *can* hang have already been made elsewhere. An artist needs some way into the room, and often years of opportunity to work before that.

The ecology of accessible making

A practitioner wants to take part in a studio class. Four conditions shape whether that is possible.

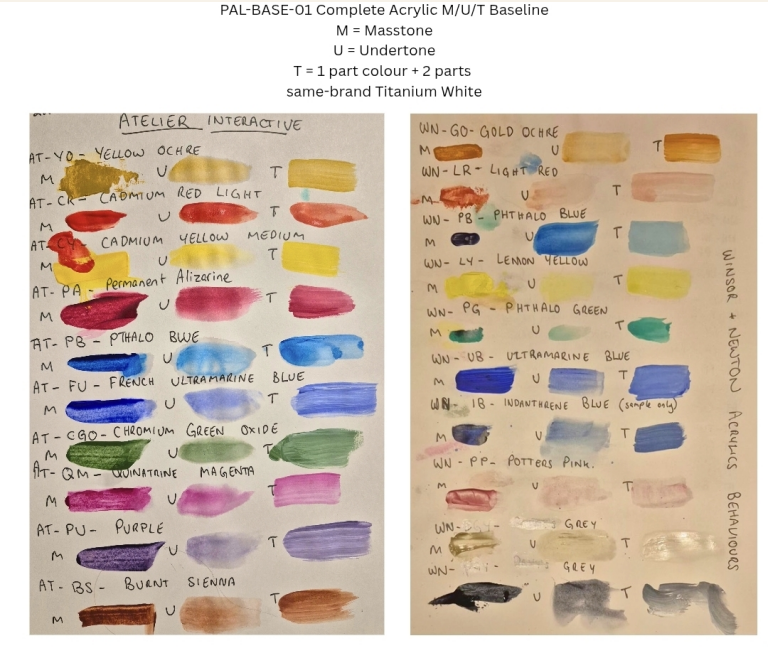
Sensory space	A quieter workspace changes how much of the session the artist can use.
Tools	Bringing a tool to the worktable lets the artist use it from a seated position.
Time and methods	Flexible sessions allow work and recovery to fit together.
Institution	Remote attendance opens another route into the class. Workshop access still needs planning.

What changes? The same artist can participate differently when the working conditions change.

R. J. Hurst · Illustrative studio example, informed by Garland-Thomson (2011, 592–95) and Lazard (2019).

Five questions at the bench

I already know the value of keeping a material comparison in front of me. On my acrylic palette sheets, each colour appears as a masstone, an undertone and a tint. I can put two paints next to one another and see a difference that their names alone would never tell me. I would like to bring some of that patience to the things that are harder to put on a sample sheet. In future material trials, that could mean recording how much handling a method requires, how long an assembly takes and whether it can be repaired. These are questions for the next piece.



Acrylic palette baseline. R. J. Hurst, studio documentation, undated. The display documents a colour comparison.

The five dimensions I propose grew out of that difficulty. The **physical** question asks what a method

requires of a working body over time. The **ecological** one follows what is taken, used and eventually discarded. The **economic** one asks whose time is paid for and who can afford to carry the rest. The **cultural** one asks what knowledge the work draws on and how people can keep teaching, changing and practising it. The **institutional** one asks who gets the opportunity to take part. I want to be able to move between them when a decision looks sensible from one position and begins to look quite different from another.

A second-hand material might be within my budget and require hours of work to recover. Those hours might be the very part of the process I value, or they might cost me the energy to finish the piece. A flexible course can open up an education and still leave a particular workshop beyond reach. I find room for this sort of unfinished accounting in María Puig de la Bellacasa's invitation to attend to neglected relations (2011, abstract). I want a way of talking about sustainability that can admit these complications and still help me make a decision. For me it begins with being able to go back to the studio tomorrow. It extends to the people, places and skills that had to be there before I could open the door.

Five dimensions of sustainable artistic practice

Take one decision at the bench, such as reusing a garment. Look at it through each question. Evidence and studio examples follow the five questions.

Physical	What does the process ask of a body?
Ecological	Where do the materials go?
Economic	Whose time is paid for?
Cultural	How is knowledge passed on?
Institutional	Who can take part?

Read across the dimensions. Recovering a textile can save a purchase and require hours of handling. The same decision has economic and physical consequences.

R. J. Hurst · Artist-developed conceptual framework.

Physical. Protecting working bodies and the ability to return to work. Rossol (1994, 21–23, 32–33) makes duration and variation in exposure visible. Studio example: the proposed record of the bodily demands of each fabrication process.

Ecological. Following materials across extraction, manufacture, use and disposal. Tsing (2015, 61–64) prompts attention to how value is recovered and by whom. Studio example: actual lingerie reuse in Greed Feed, with environmental effects unmeasured.

Economic. Asking who produces value, who is paid and who absorbs costs. Mezzadri (2021) examines homework and the transfer of reproductive costs. Studio example: track extra assembly and repair time in proposed textile trials.

Cultural. Sustaining skills and their transmission under conditions shaped by knowledge holders. UNESCO (2003, arts. 2 and 15) supplies safeguarding vocabulary. Studio example: recognise garment manipulation as structural knowledge and credit contributors where relevant.

Institutional. Changing conditions that govern entry, participation and recognition. Garland-Thomson (2011, 592–95) and Lazard (2019) inform an environmental and organisational reading of access. Publication example: semantic headings, a plain-language companion and adjustable reading options.

Plain-language companion

R. J. Hurst · Entry 001 · 25 November 2026

Making art takes more than an idea and materials. It takes working conditions that allow someone to keep making. I ask who supplies those conditions, who gets to use them and who bears the costs.

Some materials can cause harm over time. I want to choose methods that allow me to keep working. I also want to know what a material may have cost the people who produced it. I call some of those hidden costs “a tax on working bodies.” Costs may include exhaustion, injury or unpaid time spent keeping a household going.

Working with textiles takes knowledge. Joining, shaping and repairing fabric are ways of thinking through a material. I regard practices historically associated with women as equally significant forms of art. These skills also need time, recognition and people who can pass them on.

An environment can make art easier or harder to make. Noise, equipment, schedules and attendance rules can affect who is able to participate. Flexibility can change what someone has the chance to learn and create.

In *Greed Feed*, I turned parts of bras and lingerie into a hanging creature called Victoria. I used familiar garments to explore how femininity is sold and consumed. I know the materials were reused. I would need more information to measure what this choice saved or how the original garments were made.

I use five questions to guide future work.

1. What does this method ask of my body and other working bodies?

2. Where did the materials come from, and what happens to them afterwards?

3. Whose work is recognised and paid for?

4. Whose knowledge makes the work possible, and who decides how that knowledge is shared?

5. What can studios, schools and galleries change so more people can participate?

The full essay includes the scholarship and artwork discussion behind these questions.

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Editorial disclosure

Concept, artistic practice and original propositions by R. J. Hurst. AI assisted with research, editing, design and accessibility.