
Chapter Five

Capacities

In *Chapter 5: Capacities*, we will introduce you to a range of capacities that we believe are necessary in order for you to be present with yourself and with others throughout your production process.

In *Chapter 6: How Are You in the World and How Is the World in You?*, we will provide a model to think through how structural and historical forces impact your beliefs and attitudes about these capacities now and into the future.


* We suggest that the following section be shared with the group as best suits your context, either read aloud—in whole or in part—or assigned to be discussed in your space of learning. Before you begin to read, we invite you to ground yourself in the space: notice the air on your skin and your feet on the ground. What are your feelings and sensations at this moment? What are you bringing to this text? Take a moment to become aware of this. We invite you to notice what comes up for you, as you are reading this chapter. We will ask you to reflect upon this at the end of this chapter.



In this chapter, we emphasize the capacities that we believe are necessary in order to be present with yourself and with others *throughout your production process*. We use the term *capacity* to refer to an ability to acquire knowledge and embody a way of being (a quality of presence) in daily actions and practices. We have noticed that artists who are capable of navigating difficult situations—and who continue to enjoy making art for decades—have developed many of the specific capacities that we will discuss in this chapter. For example, we will share the story of a group of artists in New York City who embody capacities that enable them to confront complex, changing environments, and to create their own business. Zara Serabian-Arthur and her friends formed a cooperatively owned film production company in New York City called Meerkat Media because they wanted to find a way to work with one another on a daily basis, rather than working elsewhere for their day jobs. A cooperative is an organizational form in which resources are distributed equitably and members vote democratically on the issues that impact their work.¹

Members of cooperatives require capacities such as *coordination*, honest *self-reflection*, *skillful listening*, and *communicating* in order to be in a business that is worker-owned. The capacity of coordination is defined as being “reliably able to take powerful, life-affirming actions rooted in shared values and vision in teams, partnerships, and alliances. I remain responsive to evolving conditions.”² We define the capacity of “reflection / skillful listening and communicating” as “the ability to think and talk with others about an aspect of my work or working process, and learning to judge my own work and working process and the work of others.”³ Members of Meerkat care as much about skillful listening and communicating as they do about the films that they produce. Serabian-Arthur says, “For us, an equally exciting project as making our work was the project of figuring out: Was it possible to create work in a way that reflected our values?”⁴ Meerkat created a worker-owned business that enabled them to pursue their vision of artmaking outside of the traditional model of the individual filmmaker working alone. By taking on lucrative, commercial filmmaking jobs, members of Meerkat are able to make media for grassroots groups, purchase filmmaking equipment, and also put aside money for their own independent projects in a pool that members access on a rotating basis. *See Chapter 13: Labor for more.*⁷

Many studio art courses are still taught as though a career path will appear in front of you, based upon merit or talent. It is unlikely that it will.⁵ Just as we invite you to take time to engage with the space of learning itself, questioning the conditions that allow you to gather and learn together with others, we believe that you must develop capacities to navigate the relationships that make your projects and livelihood possible. Art students who have not been taught these capacities often graduate and



face overwhelming questions, such as: How will I find a community of artists? How will I continue my practice after school? Where will I create my work? How will I create opportunities for myself and for others? How will I skillfully negotiate a barter or a sale? As educator Gloria Dall’Alba writes, “While knowledge and skills are necessary, they are insufficient for skillful practice and for transformation of the self that is integral to achieving such practice.”⁶ In other words, it is not enough for you to know how to paint or sculpt if you are not aware of how you learn or practice your skill, or how you become open to new knowledge, people, and situations. As so many artists try to balance artmaking with day jobs and family in complex, changing, economically difficult environments, developing the capacity to navigate relationships with oneself and with others is *as important* as having technical skills and knowledge.

While the fields of mindfulness and somatics are often not brought into studio art courses, we bring them into studio art pedagogy to map out a range of capacities that we believe you will need today. We have made three lists of capacities that might guide your production process: Contemplative Practice,⁷ Studio Habits of Mind,⁸ and Embodiment in Social Context.⁹ Contemplative Practice emphasizes an awareness of self and the present moment; Studio Habits of Mind emphasizes individual expression and technical capacities in the arts; Embodiment in Social Context emphasizes embodiment and transformation in community, or, as somatic practitioner Alta Starr said, “how to be with the world, and not escape it, through your creation.”¹⁰

We invite you to identify the capacities that you already have and the ones you know that you need to develop. While no single person will have developed *all* of these capacities, working in groups allows for a strong balance of capacities, as each member can contribute their strengths and desires for growth.

Contemplative Practice

You might be interested in exploring capacities that are associated with contemplative practice. The Center for a Contemplative Mind in Society developed a toolkit called *Creating Contemplative Community in Higher Education* with the following capacities, listed below. Perhaps you would like to focus on developing one or more of these capacities in the process of making your next project within a space of learning:

- **FOCUSED ATTENTION:** I am able to practice lucid and attentive awareness, noticing distraction and returning to focused attention.

Where will I create my work? How will I create opportunities for myself and for others?

- **CALMNESS:** I am able to practice grounding, centeredness, a sense of ease of being, and equanimity.
- **PATIENCE:** I am able to remain present amid delays or repetitions. I am aware of my own feelings of annoyance or frustration, noticing them without acting upon them.
- **WISDOM:** I am able to practice understanding, perspective-taking, and clarity of thought.
- **COMPASSION:** I am able to practice sensitivity and care with myself and with others, sensing interdependence and connection to all of life.¹¹

Sal Randolph is an artist based in New York City who has developed her own capacity for *patience* and *focused attention*. Randolph is involved in a variety of groups that gather to develop and test experimental practices of sustained attention on works of art.¹² They regularly stand in front of a single work of art for an hour or more, guiding their attention toward specific aspects of the artwork so as to not lose focus. When speaking about her interest in giving each work of art the time that it desires, slowing down her attention so that she can be present with a single artwork Randolph says:

It goes back a long way in my own art practice, to the moment when I was starting to show in galleries and seeing people look at the work. You know, you make the work for a year or so, and ... even at this awesome opening where all your friends are having a good time, people looking at the work are giving it a second, or two, of their attention. That felt like not enough. I started a long series of experiments trying to figure out how to prolong [attention], how to make that deeper, how to see it happen better.¹³

Rather than accepting the lack of patience and focus that Randolph experienced in galleries, Randolph actively created contexts for sustained attention, focus, and patience with works of art. *See Chapter 14: Narrate* ≡ *for a range of feedback, assessment, and critique activities.*⁷

Studio Habits of Mind

Studio Habits of Mind is a framework that was developed from 2001 to 2013 by the researchers and educators Lois Hetland, Ellen Winner, Shirley Veenema, Kimberly Sheridan, Diane Jacquith, and Jill Hogan at Harvard to describe the benefits of arts education. Perhaps you would like to focus on developing one or more of the following capacities in the process of making your next project within a space of learning:

- **DEVELOP CRAFT AND SKILLS:** The materials and tools I use are chosen intentionally and applied with care. I skillfully incorporate new techniques as well as make connections to my previously made artwork/experiences.
- **ENGAGE AND PERSIST:** I challenge myself to embrace my artmaking problems and to develop a distinct focus within my work.
- **ENVISION:** I imagine and practice many ideas/processes before and during my artmaking.
- **EXPRESS:** I am reliably able to create works that convey an idea, a feeling, or a personal meaning. I spend a lot of time identifying the sources that form my beliefs, and I assess whether my sources are credible. I see myself in a state of continuous transformation, seeking to identify the root causes and historical conditions that form my beliefs and knowledge.¹⁴
- **OBSERVE/RESEARCH:** I spend an extensive amount of time observing my subject matter, artmaking processes, and/or the environment around me that I may have otherwise missed.
- **REFLECT / SKILLFUL LISTENING AND COMMUNICATING:** I am reliably able to think and talk with others about an aspect of my work or working process, and learning to judge my own work and working process and the work of others. I can listen actively, with curiosity, and can communicate my thoughts and feelings.¹⁵
- **STRETCH AND EXPLORE:** I take risks in my artmaking and learn from my mistakes.
- **UNDERSTAND (ART) COMMUNITY:** I am reliably able to interact as an artist with other artists (i.e., in classrooms, in local art organizations, and across the art field) and within the broader society. Art is in parentheses here as it can easily be switched with other disciplines, like science or history.¹⁶

Oscar Rene Cornejo, a painter, printmaker, and sculptor living in New York City, is very particular about the tools and the wood that he uses. As Cornejo said to us in an interview:

It became very important to custom-make things from scratch. I like that idea of not needing electricity, and just using manual labor to create things.... It gives agency to me. I'm not relying on a power tool.... Different kinds of [wood] joints, and how they distribute weight, are kind of like portraits of life itself.¹⁷

Cornejo has emphasized a capacity to *develop craft and skills* as well as *observe/research* in order to know which materials will be appropriate for his next project. By using hand saws, chisels, hammers, and wooden

mallets with skill, Cornejo is able to reference traditional Japanese joinery techniques in his work while also honoring the years he spent working on construction sites with his family. *See Chapter 10: Source ■ and Chapter 16: Tools ■ for more on Oscar Rene Cornejo.*⁷

Embodiment in Social Context

Embodiment in Social Context means being reliably able to generate desired actions that are aligned with your values—even under pressure. Embodiment in Social Context draws upon the work of Generative Somatics, founded by Staci Haines in 2000 (originally as GenerationFive). Haines combined the core embodied leadership methodology of the Strozzi Institute, where she trained, with her work on healing trauma and movement building through grassroots organizing. Today, Generative Somatics teaches courses around the country. *See Chapter 3: Who Do You Honor? for more.*⁷ Perhaps you would like to focus on developing one or more of the following capacities in the process of making your next project within a space of learning:

- **SELF-AWARENESS/EMBODIMENT:** I consistently recognize how my thoughts, feelings, and actions are connected to one another. I recognize that embodiment is crucial to ensure that I have access to all the capacities I need. I practice agility and can interrupt my own habits.
- **CONNECTION:** I am reliably able to form and sustain trusting, authentic relationships and to compel others to a shared vision. I am a supportive presence amid difficulty. I am able to give and receive grounded, useful feedback.
- **COORDINATION / COLLECTIVE ACTION:** I am reliably able to take powerful, life-affirming actions rooted in shared values and vision in teams, partnerships, and alliances. I remain responsive to evolving conditions.
- **CONFLICT AS GENERATIVE:** I am reliably able to effectively engage and transform interpersonal and organizational breakdown. I ask for and offer accountability and repair, in a way that generates more dignity and trust for everyone involved.¹⁸

Zara Serabian-Arthur, the member-owner of Meerkat Media mentioned above, has developed the capacities of *connection*. As she says:

For us, an equally exciting project as making our work was the project of figuring out: Was it possible to create work in a way that reflected our values? What might that look like? Engaging in that

work, honestly, has been the most fulfilling work that I've done as an artist, because it's all about manifesting: What do these values, and these ideas of a different world look like in our daily practice? What does it feel like? How does that transform us as individuals, how does that transform us in a group, in a neighborhood, in a community, and what happens when we share those stories to transform the way things work more broadly?¹⁹

Serabian-Arthur believes that her capacities impact her group, her neighborhood, and perhaps even historical forces over time. Her words recall J. K. Gibson-Graham's statement that "if to change ourselves is to change our worlds, and the relation is reciprocal, then the project of history making is never a distant one but always right here, on the borders of our sensing, thinking, feeling, moving bodies."²⁰

Negation

For every incredible cohort of students in classes who show up early, bring materials and food to share with one another, and stay connected long after the semester ends, we have had a class where the majority of students are entirely resistant to the observations and questions above. We are met with apathy and disinterest: arms folded, sitting at a distance, and waiting for the next break. For every faculty cohort that invite us into their institution to lead a workshop to teach them about our framework, we meet faculty members and administrators who are resistant to our approach. We have compiled six common negations to our framework. It is our hope that you will actively engage these negations as you read and talk to other people about the ideas in this book. We encourage you to welcome these discussions in your spaces of learning, so that the group can refine their thinking in respectful debate.

"I want structural analysis, not a self-help book!"

We recognize that our emphasis on embodied and contemplative capacities might be shocking to people who are not used to bringing feeling and sensation into their analytical and theoretical work. We are not suggesting that you "feel good" or "calm down" in order to avoid structural violence. Instead, we align ourselves with transformative organizers who believe that we cannot change the world without simultaneously changing ourselves. What good is knowledge if it does not also lead to action? What does your body already know, and how can you access it? What capacities will enable you to take action? The goal of our emphasis on capacities is to support your transformation.

As Alta Starr writes in “Cultivating the Self”:

These principles may seem, at best, “good ideas,” somewhat desirable and useful, if achievable, but finally, no different from the supposed benefits of any number of self-improvement approaches, feverishly sought and furiously marketed as supposed panaceas for dehumanization. An important distinction, however, is that those approaches reinforce individualism and myths of individual responsibility that obscure the operations of larger systems that unequally distribute power and resources. Generative somatics, on the other hand, is a politicized somatics, attentive to power, and to how social conditions shape individual and collective experience, and more significantly, to the knowledge, competencies and ways of being that are required, of individuals and collectives, to change those conditions. A politicized somatics asks and helps us uncover what the existing systems require us not to know, or feel, what experiences and ways of being are discouraged, or worse, punished. What knowledge is dangerous, and what might we demand of ourselves and each other, of our institutions, political and economic systems, if we refuse numbness and opt for life?

Reflection

1. Which set of capacities—Contemplative Practice, Studio Habits of Mind, or Embodiment in Social Context—feels urgent to you, and why?
2. * What feelings and sensations came up for you while you were reading this chapter? For example, did you feel surprise, frustration, or excitement? How did you hold these in your body? For example, did you sense these emotions in your shoulders, neck, and back while reading this chapter? *See the Social-Emotional Intelligence Project Reflection activity in Chapter 4: Teacher/Facilitator Guides.*⁷

1. The term “Worker Cooperative” means any enterprise that meets all of the following criteria:

- The enterprise is a business entity with one or more classes of membership
- All workers who are willing to accept the responsibilities of membership and who meet member eligibility criteria are eligible to become worker-owners
- A majority of allocated earnings and losses are allocated to worker-owners on the basis of patronage
- The class of worker-owners has a controlling ownership interest
- A majority of the Board of Directors or governing body is elected by the worker-owners on the basis of one-member-one-vote
- Decisions about return on capital investment are made by the worker-owner class or by the Board of Directors or governing body
- United States Federation of Worker Cooperatives, “Worker Ownership,” <https://usworker.coop/what-is-a-worker-cooperative/>.

2. “Studio Habits of Mind” and the following capacities are adapted from Ellen Winner, Lois Hetland, Shirley Veenema, and Kimberly Sheridan, *Studio Thinking 2: The Real Benefits of Visual Arts Education* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2013). See also Harvard Project Zero, “How Do Artists Use The Studio Habits of Mind?” Artcore, 2015, <http://www.artcorelearning.org/studio-habits-of-mind>.

3. The statement, “I can listen actively, with curiosity, and can communicate my thoughts and feelings,” was added by the authors and is not included in Studio Habits of Mind.”

4. Zara Serabian-Arthur, “LABOR,” interview by Susan Jahoda and Caroline Woolard, BFAMFAPhD, at the School of Visual Arts, New York, NY, June 2016, video, 1:22, <https://vimeo.com/192485714>.

5. See Sharon Loudon, ed., *Living and Sustaining a Creative Life: Essays by 40 Working Artists* (Bristol, UK: Intellect Ltd, 2013).

6. Gloria Dall’Alba, ed., “Learning Professional Ways of Being: Ambiguities of becoming,” in *Exploring Education Through Phenomenology, Diverse Approaches*, 41–52 (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 41; See also Chris Cocek, “Exploring Education Through Phenomenology: A Review of Gloria Dall’Alba’s (Ed.) *Diverse Approaches*,” *Phenomenology & Practice* 6, no. 1 (2012): 95–105.

7. See CMind “Contemplative Community in Higher Education: A Toolkit,” The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, February 16, 2018, <http://www.contemplativemind.org/files/Toolkit021618web.pdf>.

8. See Ellen Winner, Lois Hetland, Shirley Veenema, and Kimberly Sheridan, *Studio Thinking 2: The Real Benefits of Visual Arts Education* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2013). See also Harvard Project Zero, “How Do Artists Use The Studio Habits of Mind?” Artcore, 2015, <http://www.artcorelearning.org/studio-habits-of-mind>.

9. See Generative Somatics, Somatic Transformation and Social Justice, “Courses,” <http://www.generativesomatics.org/content/courses>.

10. Alta Starr, interview by Caroline Woolard, New York, NY, September 2018.

11. Adapted from Daniel P. Barbezat and Mirabai Bush, *Contemplative Practices in Higher Education: Powerful Methods to Transform Teaching and Learning* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2014). Adapted in dialogue with Maia Duerr and Carrie Bergman of The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society.

12. See Sal Randolph, “Mildred’s Lane, Summer 2018” (Pedagogical

Platform and Residency, Summer 2018), <http://sal-randolph.com/news/162/mildred-s-lane-summer-2018>.

13. Sal Randolph, interview by BFAMFAPhD members, BFAMFAPhD, at the School of Visual Arts, New York, NY, June 2016, Transcript, Caroline Woolard, New York, NY.

14. The statement, “I spend a lot of time identifying the sources that form my beliefs, and assess whether my sources are credible. I see myself in a state of continuous transformation, seeking to identify the root causes and historical conditions that form my beliefs and knowledge,” was added by the authors and is not included in “Studio Habits of Mind.”

15. The statement, “I can listen actively, with curiosity, and can communicate my thoughts and feelings” was added by the authors and is not included in “Studio Habits of Mind.”

16. “Studio Habits of Mind” and the following capacities are adapted from Ellen Winner, Lois Hetland, Shirley Veenema, and Kimberly Sheridan, *Studio Thinking 2: The Real Benefits of Visual Arts Education*. See also Harvard Project Zero, “How Do Artists Use The Studio Habits of Mind?”

17. Oscar Rene Cornejo, interview by BFAMFAPhD members, BFAMFAPhD, at the artist’s studio, Bronx, NY, April, 2018, transcript by Ruby Mayer, Poughkeepsie, NY.

18. Adapted from Generative Somatics with the permission of Alta Starr and Staci Haines. See Generative Somatics, Somatic Transformation and Social Justice, “Courses.”

19. Serabian-Arthur, “LABOR.”

20. J. K. Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 127.