Grounded Theory Synthesis ([Miro](#))
Conversations with Stanford art students about their creative practice

1. **Theory of Community vs Self**
   Artists seek validation and feedback from trusted relationships, while still valuing creating art for personal fulfillment.
   a. **Personalized relationships**
      i. Personalized relationships with mentors, peers, and communities offer a **sense of belonging**, which helps resolve loneliness that comes with individual art.
         1. Song: thought her art making process has been pretty **lonely**, but accepted it because she found different **outlets for being part of an artistic community** without explicitly making art with them, such as putting together a Stanford wide pop-up art show in SF every year as an officer of ArtX, a visual arts club at Stanford.
      ii. These relationships interact with the artist's "self" by strengthening their **accountability** and helping them stay **focused**.
         1. Jocelyn: "But it's also challenging to play alone because I get distracted a lot, when there's nobody else to keep me accountable, I just won't focus very well."
      iii. Artists seek mentors, peers, and communities with **shared interests** that they **trust**, **admire**, feel **supported/encouraged** by, and have an established **rapport** with.
         1. Savannah: "I've had some really great professors, I look online at their portfolios and see evidence of the same themes appearing [as in my own work], and that exposure helps me build my artistic vocabulary. They help me understand what it means to be an art creator, the difference between taking a pretty picture and actually saying something with art."
         2. Joshua Chien: President of Fleet Street A Cappella Group. "We're a bunch of frickin music nerds…that feeling of having the same interest… it's like, wow, like, we're the same breed of maniacs."
      iv. Engaging with mentors who haven't earned that sense of trust can be a deterrent and demotivator.
         1. Britney: "I've taken some art studio classes and I feel like a lot of professors suck. And [Stanford] has a lot of amazing professors in different areas, so it feels like the institution doesn't value [art] enough to find really great professors]"
         2. Savannah: "A lot of the art classes I've taken are fluffy… My design professors talk about inclusive design all the time but every single design professor is a white male. Like what?"
      v. These networks provide support, productive feedback, answers to questions, an enthusiastic environment, and accountability.
         1. Jaya: "I don't mind when things are hard as long as I have guidance/support and someone to ask questions to"
   b. **Motivations**

i. Art is primarily an intrinsic practice, yet extrinsic motivation can help bring out **higher quality** work (deadlines, parameters, etc).
   1. Jocelyn: "Procrastination really helps me play better, because if you have no time to finish something you really have to focus."
   2. Grace: "The biggest struggle is if I don't have a deadline, I feel like I can just always put it off another day."

ii. Much of artists' work is never shown to others because it's personal or done solely for therapeutic purposes, much less publicized in large platforms/spaces, yet these works are still valued by artists as a space for **internal reflection** or **growth.**
   1. Savannah: "My artistic practice skews to questions about life"
   2. Britney: "Sometimes it's hard to put a finger on what you're feeling, but after journaling I'll have a moment of clarity (Oh THAT'S what it is!)"

iii. Creating art primarily for oneself is usually **therapeutic**, while creating for external validation can sometimes induce **stress** (although stress sometimes does provide benefits such as higher quality of work).
   1. Grace: "Writing for the Daily for publication, or knowing that my screenplay will be shared in class stresses me out, but if only I will see it, then it's therapeutic."

2. **Theory of Social Media**

   Social media provides a platform for **inspiration, contribution,** and **connection** through art, rather than **validation** or boastful **exposure**.

   a. **Consuming**
      i. Artists use social media to find very **specific inspiration** rather than vague inspiration, explicitly picking out specific artists, mediums, techniques, and ideas.
      ii. The artistic process can be kickstarted **serendipitously** by suggested content on social media:
         1. Hannah Kim: "on TikTok, I see someone else playing [a song]. And I kind of want to try it out. Or recently, I've been getting into Spotify Discover Weekly where they give me a song…if I really liked that song…I look up [the song]"
      iii. Seeing high-quality art helps artists refine their taste but can contribute to feelings of **inadequacy** and self-criticism, due to highlighted gaps between their own work and the work they aspire to create.
         1. The consequences of these feelings: loss of motivation, creative blockages, taking a toll on the artist's mental health and wellbeing, leading to anxiety and other negative emotional states.
         2. Rayouf expressed that seeing art on Instagram helped her understand the kinds of art that grip and inspire her, but that because she sees that content, she sees her art as lesser-than: "I have an expectation for the quality I want to deliver and usually it's not *that* (ie the art online)... I look at my art and think, if I looked at this I wouldn't call it art."

   b. **Posting**

i.   The work produced by the community of artists on social media serves as a strong source of inspiration that artists are **eager to contribute** back to through posting their own work, which allows them to participate in a collective creative endeavor.

    1.   Rayouf is hesitant to post finished work online but is inspired to share content of her learning new tools or techniques because she wants to shift the narrative online: "I want to lower the barrier of entry [for others] and challenge the expectation that what you make should always be perfect and amazing"

ii.   The end goal was often not to post something on social media: Most of an artist's work is part of rough drafts or held personal and never shared.

    1.   This is because art can be a deeply personal and vulnerable expression - some artists may feel more comfortable keeping their work within a smaller circle of trusted individuals.

    2.   Yannie used to be an art influencer on YouTube and Instagram, but stopped after a meta-reflection on sharing. "I wonder if sharing was due to **insecurity**, like I need to **validate** myself in front of others… What am I trying to tell people? Am I trying to build a brand? Am I worried that others won't see me?" "Now, I only use Instagram to share my love for my friends. For YouTube, I share only when I feel love for one particular piece and I want to get people to feel that way."

3. **Theory of Process**
Artists look at their art as **more than just the final product**: they see the **process** of the piece as a space of value in itself as an opportunity to **learn** or **express**.

    a. **Human Touch**

        i.   Artists had a deep connection to the fact that their art is "human": they see both their art and the art of others as deeply personal, emotional, experiential, thought-provoking.

            1.   Britney: "Art has a powerful connection to nature, and AI is not natural or organic"

            2.   Savannah: "I associate artistry with being human: being alive and in a body and breathing"

            3.   Jocelyn: "It's just more entertaining to watch lots of people on stage, because we naturally gravitate towards human connections and relationships"

        ii.   The tools that artists use are tied to the art, and artists are drawn to more "authentic" or offline tools in lieu of digital tools because of the physicality of the medium.

            1.   Britney: "Drawing on an iPad feels like the iPad is a middleman, an interpreter butchering the language"

        iii.   AI and technology are seen as something that could be *part* of the process (inspiration, mundane transcriptions, logistical tasks, etc.), but not the whole process in itself: art needs people.

        1. Rayouf: "AI can lower the barrier for exploration, it can help you play around and give you the nudge to make something else"

        2. Song: "I've been using ChatGPT to help write my artist bio. For my art thesis show, I used DALLE to make the flier. I think it's a useful tool, I'm not opposed to it."

    iv. Elaborating on "art needs people": AI cannot replicate the complex nuances of human expression, creativity, emotions, flaws, experiences, and perspectives. It also cannot replicate physicality.

        1. Michelle: "I don't like generating art with AI because it doesn't feel like mine. It feels like someone else is creating an art for me. But if AI is not generating art, it can be good. For example, AI can take a prompt and output a reference human pose that is hard to capture in real life."

        2. Song: "I personally don't feel threatened by AI art, because I'm a painter, and part of a real oil painting is the physicality, it's tangible."

        3. Yannie: "If AI is supposed to optimize for perfection, it's going to just go one way unless the code was meant to create errors. The beauty of human art is that you're actually creating errors, you're just letting yourself go, computers can't do that yet."

    v. Some artists view human-AI collaboration as a fun and entertaining thought, but don't consider it for professional use, due to the reasons above.

        1. Jocelyn: "Google had a thing on their front page where you put in 3 notes then it makes a Bach piece for you, it's entertaining. But I don't use AI for musical use, because to me music is very much human based."

        2. Aleko thinks that ChatGPT's poetry suggestions are more funny than anything else since they're "corny, cheesy."

b. Freedom

    i. Artists enjoy low-stakes creative activities that allow for **experimentation** and **growth** without consequences.

        1. Savannah: "It's always fun to do a lowkey, low-stakes creative activity"

        2. Yannie: "For piano or things I put a lot of effort into, I hate to mess up. But for things I don't care about as much, that's when it leads to myriad possibilities of creativity… I like failing, and it's really low stakes, and it gives me room to grow, and that's the most important part."

    ii. Artistic practices with no clear right or wrong provide a sense of **freedom** and **release**.

        1. Savannah: "Art is fun because it's not clear-cut, you can't get it wrong"

        2. Michelle: "I'm trying to treat drawing more as therapeutic, a stress relieving activity and hobby, and that's nice"

        3. Hannah: "art and cello, everything works...it continues to work and it continues to work and then you have a final project, but then in CS it's like it doesn't work, doesn't work, doesn't work, and then it works. So I think when I do art, I feel more of a short term accomplishment like dopamine rush...CS definitely takes more persistence to get that feeling of success."

c. Growth Mindset

i.   Artists see the process of making mistakes, receiving feedback, and improving in a skill is an **enjoyable** process.
1. Yannie: "It was kind of fun to fail because I didn't want to be a perfectionist at my first time making a dress."
2. Jaya: "Creative pursuits are fun because I like seeing the tangible difference between my first attempt and the most recent. It's so much more exciting and satisfying to *not* be good"
3. Rayouf: "The creative process is crazy, filled with lefts and rights and ideas swinging all over the place, and being a creative is about being able to enjoy that process"

ii.   Artists valued their own improvement in artistic skills as a reflection of their **dedication** to learning and enjoyed seeing their progress and honing of their art form over time.
1. Rayouf: "It's okay if I do something bad because I'm just learning it… You don't need to make the most beautiful thing ever to tap into the arts"
2. Joshua Chien: "Every time he [his vocal instructor] gives me a comment and I can hear myself improve every time he gives me a comment, it just makes me very happy."
3. Aleko on looking back at old journal entries: "I improved and kind of like noting that improvement makes it encouraging to write."

iii.   Artists value **experimentation** and **growth** over perfectionism.
1. Jaya: "Even if it's not the best thing I've written, it's the thing I'm most proud of because of the whole process, because of how much time and iteration went into it"
2. Yannie: "Human error is what creates creativity. Without our flaws, we wouldn't be able to come up with emergent ideas that we would accept."

4. **Theory of Self-Reflection**
   Artists see their art as a form of communication that is explicitly separate from traditional verbal communication, and as a place for learning more about the self.
   a. **Self-Care**
   i.   Artists saw their art as a **personal investment** and an opportunity to engage in **patience** and **focus**.
   1. The artistic process is often slow and iterative, requiring patience and willingness to engage in self-reflection to continually refine their work. These skills can also have a positive impact on their life outside of art, for instance, helping them remain calm in face of difficulties.
   2. Britney: "Art takes a long time, you go through the process and learn patience, it feels like an investment in learning good habits and skills"
   3. Savannah: "Our minds are often wandering, but doing art makes me feel focused"
   4. Yannie: "I use art to hone my 'state of flow' which helps me focus when doing homework, studying for an exam, etc."
   5. Michelle: "Doodling somehow makes me pay attention in class"

    b. Expression
- i. Some artists use their art to understand/communicate their own emotions, experiences, and questions about themselves/the world *without* verbalization
    1. These artists find it challenging to express their thoughts and emotions through verbal communication or writing
    2. Savannah: "I have a lot of questions about the world and life: I can't speak eloquently or write you a paper about that, but I can make art."
    3. Britney: "I've never been able to get words out in a way that feels the same as getting it out visually"
    4. Michelle: "When I look at really good art, I feel very moved, I cannot describe it in words, but I just want to draw it"
- ii. Writing down, expressing, or sharing ideas can be a **liberating** experience that frees the mind and creates a sense of **relief**
    1. Contrary to the commentary about not writing above, these artists enjoy gaining clarity and insight into their artistic process, and use writing to identify and articulate their creative vision more clearly
    2. Britney: "Sometimes it's hard to put a finger on what you're feeling, but after journaling I'll have a moment of clarity (Oh THAT'S what it is!)"
    3. Grace: "That's why I like writing it down, because it feels like I've 'checked it off' and now I can think of something else, it's no longer clouding my brain."
- iii. Materializing ideas makes the idea **meaningful** because it is now lasting and not forgotten (both by self and others).
    1. For the artist, creating a physical representation of their idea can solidify it in their own memory.
    2. Song: "I started journaling after learning about defamiliarization in ITALIC, inspired by a quote from a Russian author about 'if we didn't remember all the things that we did, it's as if we didn't do them.'"
    3. At the same time, materializing ideas can also make them more visible and memorable to others, which can help to create a sense of connection between the artist and their audience.
    4. Michelle: Sketched a family portrait as a birthday gift for her mom, hopes she feels happy and reminded of family whenever she looks at it.

5. **Theory of Self-Identity**
Artists look at their artwork as reflections of their own thoughts, skills, experiences.
    a. Self-identifying
- i. People felt **hesitant** to call themselves artists, writers, or even creatives, even if they have a lot of artistic hobbies or talents because they feel that their work doesn't compare to that of "real" artists.
    1. "a Creative", "a Writer", "an Artist"
    2. Rayouf: "I'm always underwhelmed by what I make… I didn't feel like an artist because what I made wasn't something I'd share with the world."
    3. Hannah: "I would consider myself a sketcher, not like an artist with art."

ii. Artists had a high bar of quality for their work, especially when comparing to others, and tended to be very humble and unafraid to point out their mistakes
   1. Rayouf: "I look at my art and think, if I looked at this I wouldn't call it art."
   2. Michelle: "I feel frustrated because I want [my sketch of friends playing ping pong] to have more vitality... like the Demon Slayer Season 2 theme song art."
   3. Jocelyn: "What I'm playing is never good enough. It can always get better. I've never played anything perfectly before. But one day I'll get there."

iii. Majoring in or finding employment in the preferred medium or receiving positive feedback from peers can alleviate that humility and help artists embrace their own skills/creativity
   1. Rayouf doesn't consider herself an Artist, but explained that the legitimacy of her Product Design major gives her the right to call herself at least creative instead of simply self-identifying
   2. Hannah says that she doesn't consider herself creative in terms of art (drawing) because she hasn't taken an art class

6. **Theory of art in context of life:**
Finding time for artistic creation can be challenging, with guilt acting as a barrier, but artists make conscious decisions to prioritize their creative pursuits.
   a. **Balancing guilt and creativity**
      i. Student artists often feel **guilty** about taking time away from schoolwork, jobs, or relationships to pursue artistic endeavors because they feel that the artistic endeavors are not as valued by Stanford as other pursuits.
         1. Michelle: "If I majored in art, that's what people saw me for in high school, and I wanted to be known more for being smart than being the artist."
         2. Britney: individuals value art here [at Stanford], but on a large scale it's not as valued as working for Bain. Stanford values doing your CS, your math, your engineering, and I felt like people didn't see value in the work I was doing unless it was STEM. It's brainwashed me to feel bad about doing anything non "productive""
         3. Hannah usually does art on her off days because she feels unproductive if she does it on her workdays.
      ii. Conscious decision-making (i.e., intentionally choosing to prioritize artistic practice and invest in creative growth and development) such as setting aside daily time, taking classes, majoring in art, or joining a creative community, helps **alleviate this guilt** and make artistic creation a priority.
         1. Rayouf tries to plan around her schedule to bring her art with her to make it easier to create: "If I'm going to the woodshop anyway for class, I bring personal projects too because I might as well… then I can work on them after class."
         2. Jocelyn: "Since I'm a music major, I have an excuse to spend a lot of time practicing, which I love doing"

3. Michelle: Didn't draw a lot before this quarter, but this quarter, she decided to take the 1-unit Art & Anatomy class because she wanted to improve drawing people, and now she is incentified to draw every day

    iii. Bringing around a portable journal, notebook, or sketchbook can help artists keep track of ideas and ensure that they always have an art-making medium on hand.

1. Aleko carried around three separate notebooks to transcribe well-written sentences and paragraphs from books that he reads, to write down individual words that he finds satisfying, and as a diary to keep track of his daily activity for future reference
2. Michelle: Gave us a tour of her sketchbook with drawings not only for class but also for fun. "I don't like to clean paint or carry paint brushes. That's why I carry a small sketchbook around, and use pencil/pens a lot."

b. A dynamic environment provides balance between artwork, work, and inspiration when needed.

    i. Subjects of artworks are often inspired by moments that happen in the artist's daily routines outside of artmaking.

1. Song: "I let an image come to me while listening to music, daydreaming, watching a movie, or when I'm about to go to sleep. After a while, if the image is still in my head, then I know it's worth materializing."
2. Joshua Chien: "I was on my way home from something and this...one sentence popped in my head....hour later, I'm working on econ homework...like holy crap, I just thought of...an idea for a chorus based off of this one line."

    ii. Students looked to art as a healthy change of pace, serving as a counterbalance to work like computer science problem sets.

1. Jocelyn: "I think it's really nice having something I"m really passionate about outside of school work and p-sets, projects, presentations, etc."
2. Yannie: "In CS, you get to be creative, but it's kind of stifling when you're on a computer. For me art is all about sensory perceptions, when you're typing on the computer all day, you're just using your eyes. I want to produce something more with the world."
3. Hannah on why she balances CS with cello: "CS is very much black and white. This works, this doesn't work and 80% of the time it doesn't work but in art and cello everything works."

    iii. Even within art itself, creative blocks were tackled via stepping away from the art and engaging with different activities, like walks around campus or consuming media.

1. Jocelyn: "Sometimes I just stop and come back later. It's like going to sleep at night. You have troubles, fall asleep, the next day you wake up and you're fine."
2. Song: "At the beginning of spring break, I went through an art block because I felt burned out. I was intense with my practice last quarter, so at the beginning of this quarter I needed a break, but now I'm back...

> When I used to have art blocks, I would overcome it by consuming media, watching anime and shows.”
>
> 3. David on resolving creative blocks: "take a break or drink a cup of coffee...or go for a walk...change my environment, just change something up...whether it's in my physiology...or what's in my context."

iv. However, some artists feel **<u>anxious</u>** when they leave a work off at a place where they're not happy with yet, as the unfinished work preoccupies their mind.

> 1. Song: “When I leave the painting off at a place where I'm not happy yet, it really consumes me. It's like the only thing I can think of. I get really bad tunnel vision when it's not at a good stopping point. I stop drinking water, I stop eating because I can't stop thinking about the painting, and I like to return to it as soon as I can.”