

Studio and Cube

On the relationship between where art is made  
and where art is displayed

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In 1964, Lucas Samaras transferred the contents of his studio-bedroom from his New Jersey address to the Green Gallery on East 57th Street in New York City. He reconstituted the studio-bedroom and exhibited it as art, thereby inserting the space where art is made into the space where art is displayed and sold. The studio was now an artwork in the gallery. It was not sold. "...I guess I wanted," Samaras said, "to do the most personal thing that any artist could do, which is, do a room that would have all the things that the artist lives with, you know, clothes, underwear, artworks in progress. I had books that I had read, or that I was reading. I had my writing, or my autobiographical notes. It was as complete a picture of me without my physical presence as there could possibly be."

Samaras's gesture superimposed the two spaces—studio and gallery—where art solicits its meaning. In his artwork, the mythologies of the studio, which precede and then parallel that of the white cube, overlapped those of the gallery space. By placing the studio in the gallery, he forced the two to coincide, thereby subverting their traditional dialogue. Samaras exhibited a lifestyle—frugal, messy, indifferent to the gallery-person's etiquette of taste. He had, you might say, created a kind of period room—mid-1960s—in a gallery. Period rooms in

museums suggest how a representative of an era lived. By putting on display a lifestyle embalmed in the gallery's artificial time, Samaras was imagining an absent artist: himself. By declaring the residues of the artist's life as art, he reified the image of the absent artist as eloquently as the mourning dog by the empty chair in a Victorian painting calls up the departed master. So, in this work, the gallery framed the studio, which in turn framed the way the artist lived, which in turn framed the artist's implements, which in turn framed the artist—who was missing.

In making his studio-bedroom a conscious work of art, Samaras made, I think, a dandy's gesture. He offered his private life to the public as art. Could this be connected to Beau Brummell strolling out in public, presenting himself as a walking artwork, embodying another kind of lifestyle? Oscar Wilde's unsettling epigram that being natural is a pose isn't too far away. Consciousness makes artifacts of us all. And so does the gallery, the transforming powers of which increase as modernism declines. The spectators in the late-modernist gallery are somehow artificial, aware of being aware—consciousness quoting itself. Though time in the white cube is always changing, the space gives the illusion that time is standing still, as if on a pedestal. Samaras's gesture comments on the aesthetic standards in operation in the 1960s and relies on the vast increase in the gallery's transforming powers. It exemplifies one of the forces that "artified" the empty gallery: collage, and the extension of collage into objects as massive as this studio transfer.

The studio (the agent of creation) is inside the white cube (the agent of transformation); the gallery "quotes" the studio it contains. In the empty studio, one searches for the artist. In the gallery, the artist, when present, is an embarrassing piece of mobile furniture haunting his

or her own product. Indeed, one of the primary tasks of the gallery is to separate the artist from the work and mobilize it for commerce. Both these enclosed spaces are emblematic of the missing artist who, having donated to them special powers, sits apart like James Joyce's artist, paring his nails — or perhaps gnashing them.

Samaras reminds us that it is the artist who generates his or her own mythology, which is then donated to the studio, which becomes, for the public, the mysterious locus of the (potentially subversive) creative act. The artist's myth depends on how the artist is perceived, how the artist lives, and what kind of work he or she produces. It presumes the presence of the lumpen mass that is the artist's indispensable foil — the bourgeoisie, about whom Baudelaire spoke so presciently in his preface to the *Salon of 1846*. For the bourgeoisie, according to one scenario, consigns its alienated imagination not only to the artist, but to the magical space where art is pondered and brought into being.

The space in which the artist thinks is thus a thinking space, a double enclosure, reciprocal, self-referential, compressed, the round skull in the studio box. This doubleness enhances the rhetoric of both the artist and the studio in a shimmer of signs and synecdoches: the studio stands for the art, the artist's implements for the artist, the artist for the process, the product for the artist, the artist for the studio. All of which avoid dealing with the difficulties of art. This self-referential circulation has, in my view, an effect on the development of the self-referential work of art and the closed aesthetic systems of late modernism.

The creative act itself, or its metaphorical incarnation, can be transferred to the gallery. If the artist — and by inference the studio — stands for the creative process, that process can be relocated to the gallery and made

literal. In Vito Acconci's *Seedbed*, one of the sights of New York when it was shown in 1972, the unseen artist lurked under the tilted floor of the Sonnabend Gallery, where his declared program was to masturbate for the duration of the exhibition — a formidable declaration of stamina. We are a long way from Renoir saying he painted with his cock. Acconci, the transplanted creator, was engaged in parodying the act of artistic creation, thus discharging its mystique, which had become a bourgeois fetish. The complexities of this metaphor sprayed out in numerous vectors — not least of them the self-referentiality of the act itself. Acconci also brought his own studio with him, his own body. For a brief time the body became the "canvas" on which artists in places as far apart as Vienna and Los Angeles inscribed their gestures.

This is the first of the points I want to make. The displacement of attention in late modernism from the artwork to the artist, whose creative act focuses on him/her a mythological apparatus, eventually applies also to what what Alice Bellony-Rewald and Michael Peppiatt call "imagination's chamber" — the studio.

Spaces obtain their meaning from social agreements, confirmed by usage, which can change. Implicit in each studio is an ideology derived from that agreement. So we can "read" studios as texts that are as revelatory in their way as artworks themselves. There are four celebrated stations in European art where the studio becomes a manifest subject, each with an increasing consciousness of the studio space, each with a different social agenda: Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding* (1434), in which the artist is an animalcule reflected in the mirror's bubble; Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656), where he gravely studies you from behind the canvas; Vermeer's *The Art*