

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*

of Painting (1666–73), usually known as The Artist in His Studio; and Courbet's The Painter's Studio (1855).

4 In Vermeer's painting, we become acquainted with the ornate back of the artist, which both facilitates and forecloses our vision. We peer over his shoulder into a well of light—and silence. The artist is formidably present but unknown. His back is as mysterious as the back of a canvas. If we return to 1666 and withdraw to the unseen rear of the room in which this painting is being made, we see another back, that of the artist painting his depicted Other, who is himself. We are on the threshold of an infinite regression.

The artist painting himself painting is a curious closed cycle. He presents himself as the medium through which the work is realized. As time goes on into modernism, the artist as medium is translated into the medium itself, paint, which thus may be seen as the metaphorical substance of the artist's body. Paint in modernism becomes a quasi-mythical secretion, almost a generative ejaculation, consonant with the habitual sexism of modernism. (Pollock urinating in Peggy Guggenheim's fireplace is a rude parody of this.) As with the ejaculatory discharge, paint is the vehicle of transcendence. Or to be less Freudian, paint becomes a kind of heroic substance engaged in "transformation," one of modernism's alchemical tropes. Paint as an idealized medium is a successor to the symbolic representation of the painter's means in classical art, of which Chardin's The Attributes of the Arts (1766) is one of hundreds of possible examples—the artist's tools standing for their product, art. The gap between the two implies the missing artist, not unrelated to the implications of Samaras's transplanted studio.

7 Courbet's Painter's Studio is a manifesto summarizing, as he put it, the "moral and physical history of my studio."

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In this metaphorical extravaganza, Courbet materialized a set of ideas issuing directly from the hero at the easel, himself. In the long history of the studio picture, Courbet's may be the first major formulation of the radical nature of this privileged space. Courbet's cast of characters, deployed in an extended frieze, testify to his social concerns and his aesthetic beliefs, attended by a muse who has become a mere model. On the easel is a mild pastorage, which Delacroix thought spatially ambiguous, "as though there were a *real*/sky in the middle of a painting." Above this imperfect but extraordinary picture, which seems to be painted with powerful thumbs, is a vague space that "listens" to the hubbub of ideas below. It is not so much a question of the pictures that can be made in this studio as of the thoughts that can be thought there. Indeed, Courbet provides one of the first modern texts for the relation of studio to exhibition space. Not too far away was the pavilion he created to show his own works rejected by the Salon of 1855. About how he conceived that exhibition space, we have little information.

If Courbet was sending us a message with this representation of his studio, the message is socialist, the compassion hearty, the egotism magnificent, even obtuse, the witnesses on the right unimpeachable, the emblems of oppression on the left irreproachable. This is the first picture that argues in a modern, political manner that the brush may be mightier than the pen. For what we have here in terms of characters and the issues they stand for is a Balzacian novel in potency, generated by an omnivorous mind of great force and confidence but of erratic subtlety, as we watch the two groups of different moral weights balanced around the central fulcrum of Courbet ("I am in the middle, painting"). In his history of Romanticism, Hugh Honour has pointed

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out how different this radical apotheosis of the studio is from the establishment studio, which is smoothly continuous with the social order outside. For example, in one of several paintings of Eugène Giraud's studio by his brother Charles, from around 1860, we see a place where a bourgeois visitor could come to confirm his values. On the left in the Courbet painting, in contrast, is a depiction of that irritant to natural curiosity: the back of a canvas, which, with time, becomes a subject in itself, as noticed by both Jasper Johns and Roy Lichtenstein.

The anonymous back demands disclosure as urgently as Christo's wrapped objects. There is an analogue here to reading. When we see someone reading a book, we want to know what they are reading. When someone reads a letter in a film, we urgently want to see it. What is on the front of the canvas that presents its blind back?

In visual art there is a history of *noticing*. Or rather a history of making visible what has been seen but not looked at. I suppose the same distinction can be made between hearing and listening. Ideas determine what we see, so new ideas seem to materialize subjects out of thin air. The studio is such a subject. We can ransack the nineteenth century—the century of the studio as subject—and discover every variant: the studio as social center, as incubator of new ideas, as revolutionary cell, as church of a new religion, as tradesman's workshop, as conventional enclosure of received ideas, as home of a cult, as production factory (including display of product), as clinical, clean kitchen, as chaotic attic, as site of experiment, as lair of the solitary hero.

Delacroix painted two pictures, one of which unpretentiously helped invent the studio as a subject, the other of which mythologizes the hero in his studio. His *Michelangelo in His Studio* (1850) is the visual correlative of the power of mind—the brooding eye,

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the lowered brow, the artist sprawling in a postpartum pose of meditative withdrawal. According to classical rhetoric, great minds make great bodies (in the case of Michelangelo's figures, vice versa). Michelangelo's *Medici Madonna*, depicted on the right of the painting, signifies the workshop, the thinking space around the thinker inside. A set of conventions is summoned to invigorate a Romantic cliché. As with all inflations of a bourgeois idea into the heroic, it is deflated with a glance. Delacroix, of heroic stature himself in his youth, attempts to advance through a doubtful rhetoric something in which he deeply believed: the power of the imagination. So empowered, art can transform the world—or such was the utopian prospect. It was no coincidence that the two overarching heroes of the nineteenth century were Shakespeare and Michelangelo.

Yet in his own studio, Delacroix, in 1855, glances at the stove in a corner and, in a secular act of more authenticity than his Michelangelo, depicts it, and in doing so, records the studio's most durable inhabitant—apart from the artist: the mundane stove. Perhaps no more abrupt contrast than this can be imagined between high-art rhetoric and what you might call vernacular perception. Delacroix's corner is as frugal as a night watchman's. It is, to my mind, as much invention as depiction insofar as it recognizes an ignored subject, indicating the growing consciousness in the nineteenth century of the studio as subject. This is one of those welcome occasions when a major artist recognizes the value of the unimportant and ignored. The work begins with observation and, through the alchemy of paint, ends in transformation. Delacroix's corner, like its diverging walls, goes in two directions—toward academic descriptive prose and toward radical observation of the banal, most usually associated with Impressionism, in which the unimportant subject,

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something noticed between events, as it were, becomes the source that, when depicted, makes the paint—but not the subject—the hero. Paint as medium and the artist as medium begin a curious mirroring.

In representations of the studio, we gain access to privileged spaces. Studios and lofts are messy with the detritus of their means. Such detritus becomes not just noticeable, as with Delacroix's corner, but a theme with an agenda. In 1967–68, a New York artist, Lowell Nesbitt, went around with a photographer to the studios of his colleagues. Like a film director, he pointed out to his photographer what he wanted photographed. He didn't touch anything or ask for anything to be rearranged.

Sensitive to his own trade, he felt the studios were

“portraits of the artists without their faces and bodies,”^{12, 13} cliché. If we compare the photograph of his own studio with its painted representation, there has been some tidying up, but everything remains in its right place. He has included the paint splatters on the wall that are spinoffs of process, creative residues, or art-in-potency. Indeed, such is our artifying habit that with a little ingenuity we donate aesthetic value to these residual splatters. I say art-in-potency thinking of the well-known story of the artist Yuri Schwabler going around Sam Gilliam's studio in Washington, D.C., collecting bits and pieces of paint-stained canvas from the floor and exhibiting them himself as art. In Nesbitt's painting, the artist's clothes, spread-eagled against the background, stand for the artist who stands with us, painting and looking on (clothes make the missing artist).

^{14, 15} Among the studios Nesbitt visited was Louise Nevelson's. Is her studio “a Louise Nevelson” in that objectification of personality-as-product that has become our filing system for the notion of originality? Nesbitt

also visited Claes Oldenburg's studio, where the mess he recorded was, as in all Nesbitt's work, cleaned up a bit, slightly idealized, but informed by a determination to keep everything exactly in place. This idea of the mess would extend itself to the gallery in the development of another genre—the distribution and/or accumulation piece spread on the floor, which would become as sensitive as the surface of the canvas after the pedestal—sculpture's “frame”—had melted away.

For now, with Nesbitt and others, the artist is gone.

The studio has become the artist *manqué*. The creator is an intruder in his or her own space, and returns

only with various excuses and disguises, as in Jasper Johns's study for *Skin I* (1962), where the missing artist

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(from within) presses his face against the window of the picture plane/studio, leaving only smudges of his presence. Johns's art is, of course, full of references to the missing artist who returns in bits and pieces, his studio “wall” retaining marginal strokes and tests, bits of stilled process. As residues, they are what we might call para-creations, footnotes to the departed painting. In this disabling ambiguity in the artist's perception of himself, no wonder the studio, the apotheosis of process and means, takes on more solidity. For one who has transferred his identity to the medium, who has identified biography with process, and process with studio, there is little opportunity to return from exile. In a situation where every assertion is tinged with doubt, where the relativity of every statement must be precisely explained, the author lurks and shuffles around like a vagrant, denied entry to the formal paradise he has created. Cubism, Constructivism, Expressionism, even Surrealism all ultimately fictionalize the missing author. They fill the void with the myth of the artist, the public's stabilizing frame of reference, perhaps the public's revenge.

Implicit in the secular fragment of Delacroix's studio is the idea that the Romantic imagination can only be incubated in surroundings of poverty and isolation. This underprivileged space has a history, from the young English poet Chatterton writing in his garret, to the fictitious *la Bohème*, to the Bateau-Lavoir in Montmartre, to early SoHo. Early modernist studios, from what we see of them in photographs, have a functional rawness. Like photographs of early performance works they are unconscious of posterity and are generally furnished only with the essentials of art-support and life-support, including the ubiquitous stove. When caught by the camera, these frugal spaces have a rather startled air, like Picasso's Bateau-Lavoir studio in 1908. They do not yet know they are historical documents. But they are the beginnings of the arc that ends with the celebrity artist in his celebrity studio, one of late modernism's dominant fetishes, which domesticates the studio as a source of radical thinking and to some degree compromises the art that issues from it.

The movement that made a fetish of fetishes— Surrealism— emphasized the magic nature of the beast inside the studio, forcing out of the congress of objects a language that had not been seen or heard before. From the Surrealist studio came dreams of social reform based on anarchy, which frequently declined into mild diabolisms, as in Max Ernst's presentation of himself. Artists like the Surrealists and their Romantic predecessors were heirs to what Rudolf Wittkower describes in *Born under Saturn* as the proto-Bohemians of the 1540s in Florence: "...a new type of artist emerged with distinct traits of personality. The approach of these artists to their work is characterized by furious activity alternating with creative pauses, their psychological make-up by agonized introspection, their temperament

by a tendency to melancholy; and their social behavior by a craving for solitude and by eccentricities of an endless variety." Eccentricities indeed, echoed by the Abstract Expressionists and Surrealists, who, as Lee Krasner reported, competed by dressing up their women in bizarre costumes for parties, like poodles on display—a sexism that runs through modernism, also exemplified by the female model in the studio.

The studio as a cultists' club, where a group sets itself up to live, commune with a leader, practice what is unconventional to the popular mind, and manufacture art for the fools who want it, is close to a description of Warhol's ironically named Factory, first located on East 47th Street in New York. There the cult leader, dandified, seemed to hover in idle suspension, a posture refuted by the flow of product to the outside. It would need Roland Barthes to describe Warhol's face, a neutral mask that could accommodate any reading. Warhol's early persona—the silver fetish, silver hair; the walls of silver, light gliding, coruscating, fracturing in an unsettling dazzle— was a marvelous conceit. To work without appearing to work, to be a passive Svengali who held others entranced, so that, nourished by doses of irony and sometimes danger, they believed that everyone outside the group was clumsily comic—that was the quasi-Manson-like character of the artistic cult, which is always a cult of personality. All this ended when the silver carapace was penetrated by the madwoman's bullet. After that, Warhol's cult was different. He could pose as someone already dead, patiently suffering the tedium of the afterlife. Warhol's persona, a brilliant construct, has not been sufficiently appreciated. He made the role-playing of the disco intersect with the studio in a dream of luxury and surface. Advanced art made easy.