

Studio As Site, Set And Subject

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Having divided much of my time as an artist between my own workplace and that of the art school, always negotiating a realistic balance of commitment to making my work with the responsibility for teaching others, I have a history of recruiting models and assistants from among the student body and my teaching colleagues, and of using institutional locations and facilities for production. Beyond the confines of my studio, I also have contact with the larger art world of galleries, transport companies, framers, photo-labs, curators, writers, other artists, and so on. All of this day-to-day experience not only constitutes the environment in which I work, but it may also periodically be drawn on as subject matter. The fact that this has lately become something of a recurrent theme may have been additionally influenced by making several collaborative works with another artist, Jemima Stehli - a total of five pieces completed between 2001 and 2003, all produced in her workspace or mine, not least because for Jemima the studio is recurrently featured as both the location and theme of photographic or video shoots.

Nevertheless, this recent tendency in my own work had already acquired some antecedents prior to the period of collaboration. In the Seventies, I used museums as locations for scenarios based around the act of looking at historical paintings (*She Observed Her Reflection In The Glass*, 1976; *Raising The Camera*, 1977), but in 1996, while teaching at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, I made a work more directly connected to my experience of contemporary art sites. Using a gallery-like 'project space' within the art school, I made a display of figurative paintings borrowed from the studios, shown as the subject of animated interest from a crowd of 'critics' and 'collectors', enacted by students and staff of the academy. In the foreground, obscuring the apparent focus of this group's attention, two 'technicians' hold up a large, grey monochrome painting (specially made to order by the actual painting technician), not only in contrast to the figurative works behind, but also in connection with the photograph that now represents them, because the painting's hue is identical with that of the photographers' grey card, used to measure reflected light. The title, *Debate (18% Reflectance)*, seeks to encourage a consciousness of the relationship between painting and photography, and between numerous other oppositions included in this work: abstraction and figuration, monochrome and colour, narrative and non-narrative, opacity and transparency, centre and edge. In retrospect, it is

interesting to consider whether the centrepiece, the professionally executed grey monochrome, should be considered as a 'real' painting or remain merely as a surrogate. Certainly, when I gave it afterwards to one of the students so that it could be 'recycled', I did so with some regret at sacrificing the object of this Baudrillardian conundrum.

Continuing an interest in both monochromes and exhibition spaces, in 2001 I planned a work where a gallery wall and the work displayed would be conflated as a single, spot-lit white surface, positioned so that the office space beyond would be visible at left and right. The 'behind the scenes' activity would then be depicted as being as eventful as the work presented within the gallery itself. The only existing space I could think of with this kind of design was in New York, so I planned to build a 'set' in London, and shoot everything here. As soon as I started doing the costing, I realised that building the wall alone would be more expensive than a flight to New York, so I duly arranged with the gallery there (Senior & Shopmaker) to visit for a few days when they were changing exhibitions. The advantage of this arrangement, in addition to the ready-made location, was that I could include 'real' gallery staff in the image, establishing it in an ambiguous territory somewhere between documentary fact and staged fiction. Certainly, going into the gallery, preparing to take photographs, was familiarly like going there to prepare an actual exhibition - as I had, in fact, done in that same space the previous year.

Both of these gallery-themed works (*Debate - 18% Reflectance*, and *Exhibition*) derived from an interest in inverting the conventional pictorial relation between centre and edge, bringing 'peripheral' material into the centre as a visual obstruction, and relegating 'interesting' content to the periphery. The body of work that followed almost reverses that construction, with a central element given reinforced definition through the repetitive superimposition of similar views from different positions, while the equally superimposed but dissimilar surrounds progressively lose their individuality in favour of a scrambled collective. Artists' or art school studios have provided material and locations for numerous such pieces. In 2004, I volunteered to conduct a week-long workshop in the summer school of the Slade School of Fine Art at University College London (where I teach during the normal academic year), with the agreement that the event would provide an opportunity to produce a work of my own, with student assistance. In fact, two works were made in adjoining studios, each featuring an empty presentational device, square in plan, located at the centre of the space and parallel with its walls. Following this scheme, on each side of the room was a different subject from within a list of set conventions: life model; landscape; still life; and geometric abstraction. Two

models were hired by the school, and the students in the workshop foraged for wood, paint, furniture, foliage and various props in order to build sets. In one space, a white wooden plinth, photographed successively from each side onto a single piece of film, consolidated its central presence as the potential resting-place for three-dimensional work based on any of the four subjects now surrounding it in a jostling, ghostly montage, waiting to be selected and given substance. Similarly, in the adjoining studio, a white panel lay on the floor, made brighter by the sequence of overlays as the camera recorded it again and again, the prospective site for images drawn from a confusing choice of overlapping subjects. This work in particular (*Four Subjects Evenly Divided Around A Prepared Ground*), shot in black-and-white, has acquired a quality that transcends its original brief, in that an almost Nineteenth Century look contrasts with the stark modernity of the central square, seen obliquely as a bleached, off-register trapezium floating away from the darker ground. By comparison, I had misgivings about the shape of the ready-made plinth in *Four Perspectives*, and later that year I effectively re-made this work at the School Of Fine Art in Athens (now titled: *Four Subjects Viewed From Around A Prepared Base*). The procedure was similar, but this time one of the technicians made a plinth to my specification, painted grey, referencing both antiquity and minimalism at the same time, and separating cleanly from its surrounds.

If art schools can be conveniently associated with recurrent subject matter, they might also be characterised by a set of conventional working methods. Working in the Slade School studios during that same summer of 2004, I also made some pieces alone, in spaces emptied for the vacation. Again using a floor-based white square as a central device, I organised an approximately square studio with the materials and tools associated with four practices (sculpture, painting, photography and filmmaking), neatly laid out in turn in front of the four walls. Once more, the square, in quadruple exposure, is reinforced as the most distinct presence (albeit perhaps merely a blank sheet of photographic paper, a bare projection screen, a prepared canvas, or a flat element for a three-dimensional construction), while the ordered surround dissolves into a chaotic muddle by the act of superimposition.

This interest in the artist's methods, or art school's departments, also provided the basis for another work in Athens. In my own studio I often use masking tape to mark positions on the floor - for lights, tripods, models, etc - and in *Studio Directions* (2004), my most frequently used marking device, a cross, is taped at the centre of a studio. Each wall and the floor in front of it is used to define a territory, in this case for completed works of sculpture, painting and drawing, photography, or electronic imaging (using video and computers), but in

superimposition the carefully ordered display turns to disarrayed clutter in contrast with the reliably consistent central anchor of repeated crosses. Words such as 'clutter' and 'muddle' may, admittedly, be misleadingly pejorative, because one might argue that the contemporary artist feels licensed to move freely from one medium to another without being rigidly tied to a single method, and works like *Division Of Labour* and *Studio Directions* can be understood as a reflection and endorsement of that reality. The camera used to shoot pictures for both of them was a Hasselblad, with a central cross in the viewfinder to locate its subjects and establish vertical and horizontal axes. In the case of *Studio Directions*, it seems apt that the two crosses which I most commonly use to establish positions inside and outside the camera, must here always neatly align with each other in order to achieve a precise result.

The last two works that I made as quadruple exposures were not shot by adopting four positions at 90° intervals around a fixed subject, but, rather, by keeping pace with a rotating figure, *also* moving through 90° segments at the centre of a room, so that my shot would always be of the same rear view against a changing background. *The Artist Circulates* (2005) maintains an interest in the artist's experience, but includes reference to her life beyond the isolation of the studio. Shot, nevertheless, in a studio interior with visible overhead lighting rig (suggesting an artist working with photography), the central character is wearing a bright, stylish dress and high heels, dressed for a private view, perhaps, or an artists' party. At this moment, as she 'circulates' and faces different sides of the studio, she confronts different groups: technicians in overalls; black-suited curators; journalists in outdoor clothing with notepads and cameras; casually attired young artists. In the finished image she hovers distinctly, colourfully, almost animated, at the centre, while the others converge as an overlapping crowd whose individual identities are now less certain. *Petra Turns To Face Her Representations* (2006) is made in the same way, centring on a life model in the art department at the University of Lugano. The representations she faces, in turn, are large-scale drawings and paintings on paper, a shop display mannequin, live video, and a photograph (shown in the process of being made, through the incorporation of a large mirror). As Petra rotates, she pauses to confront four separate modes of depiction, both traditional and contemporary, now collectively circling her as a maze of optional reflections.

In a further work featuring a life model, made three months later in the Slade School, the mode of representation itself is again a subject. In this case, however, the points of view are reduced from four to two, and the stationary, seated figure is seen side-on in profile from two opposing directions. She has

the same appearance in each case, but her profile is laterally inverted, and the backgrounds are different. From one direction she is seen as a subject for art students, drawing at their easels; from the other, she is surrounded by photographers, capturing her likeness on film. In the finished work (*Naked/Nude*, 2006) the two profiles are combined by scanning two separate colour negatives into Photoshop, flipping one horizontally to ensure that it fits congruently on top of the other, and assembling them from separate layers. The seemingly calm and comfortable model is now established as the most stable entity in the image, the photographers and artists crowded around her in a confused overlay, disputing the nature of her rendition as nude subject or naked object of their respective gazes.

A final work to mention in this grouping is as yet only in preparation, merely an annotated sketch on paper, but returns to the theme of *The Artist Circulates*. A woman sits in her studio, attired not for manual work, but dressed up, ready to go out. Behind her, from one direction, we see the tools, materials and products of the artist - paintings or sculpture, perhaps. Looking at her from the opposite side we are now aware of her bookshelves, desk and writing paraphernalia. She does preparatory research, she gets her hands dirty on the shop floor, and she goes out to socialise. She is a thinker, labourer and partygoer - a contemporary artist 'in profile'.

In some respects, it is her literal profile, her outline seen from both sides, strengthened through doubling, the surrounding material from two reverse views now interfaced as composite information, that is at the core of this idea, and the artist in the studio is just one of many possible subjects co-opted to articulate it. Indeed, all the technical methods used to produce the pieces I have described have been applied to a diversity of material, ranging from domestic narratives to rugged landscapes. Nevertheless, when artists address aspects of the world that they experience, they are aware that part of that experience comprises their own practice and the larger art environment. The reflexive act of conflating subject and practice may run the risk of suffering from its own limitations, but it may equally gamble on the appeal of an unadorned, workmanlike solution that excludes extraneous baggage and gets right to the point. Besides, galleries, studios and art schools will doubtless have their own exotic appeal for those who don't normally inhabit them.

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