General

The Fall of the Studio
Artists at Work

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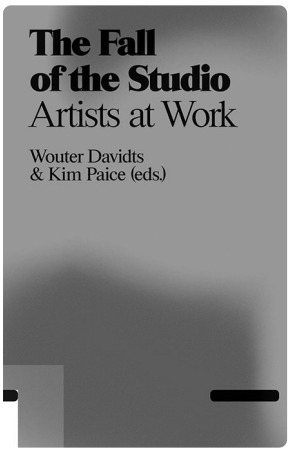
Wouter Davidts and Kim Paice (eds.), *The Fall of the Studio: Artists at Work*, Valiz, Amsterdam, 2009, ISBN 9789078088295, 250 pages



Since the advent of performance, conceptual art, land art and minimal art in the 1960s, the studio has been put in a bad light. The traditional workplace was seen as old-fashioned and limiting for the development of new forms of art. Painting and sculpture, the time-honoured studio disciplines, were declared passé, along with the corresponding tools and techniques. Robert Smithson declared in 1968 that deliverance from the confines of the studio freed the artist 'from the snares of craft and the bondage of creativity'. Daniel Buren concluded in his controversial essay 'Fonction de l'atelier' (1971) that working on location amounted to the 'destruction' of the studio. The studio was declared dead, the post-studio practice was born.

Just who introduced the term 'post-studio' is uncertain. John Baldessari maintains it was Carl Andre, but that is not plausible. Buren and Smithson, who wrote a good deal about the matter, never used the term themselves. What can be said with certainty is that the criticism of the studio was related to the desired transformation of art: handwork was to become mental exercise, while the making of the art work would simply be outsourced. Of all the institutes of the art world that were critically examined in those years, only the studio acquired the prefix 'post'. There is no such thing as 'post-museum', unless one might be speaking of a collection of old postage stamps.

The essays in this book examine the shifts in the nature and use of the artist's studio over the past half of a century, concentrating on individual artists from Robert Morris to Jan de Cock. Although the book does not delve deeply into Smithson, who after all was one of the instigators of the post-studio practice, it gives an intriguing picture of a changing studio practice as a symptom of radical developments in (and outside) art. A few authors report from first-hand experience – Philip Ursprung, for example, visited Olafur Eliasson in his studio – but the vast majority of the writers analyse the workspace by means of studio photos, artists' texts or works of art. And what do we find? Artists who are identified with the old mores, like Mark Rothko, turn out to have maintained a much more complex studio practice, while post-studio celebrities like Buren have not at all taken such a great distance from the studio as often is thought.

Rothko might be considered emblematic for the artist's romantic isolation and existential struggle, culminating in his suicide in his studio. Morgan Thomas, however, convincingly argues that Rothko's paintings do not so much reflect the introspection of the artist and the isolation of the studio, but the complex exchange between the place where the painting was made and the place for which it was created. While working on a commission for a chapel in Houston that still needed to be constructed, Rothko had the walls of the chapel erected in his studio, a dusky former gym in the Bowery in New York. The space was fitted out accordingly, with rope and tackle systems, movable walls and

rolling floor lamps. Rothko's painter's studio was like a film studio, set up to achieve specific pictorial effects, and in a careful analysis of those painterly qualities, Thomas boldly makes comparisons with Alfred Hitchcock's way of working. It is one of the most stimulating essays in the book.

According to Buren, a work of art is doomed to be in places where it does not belong, manipulated by people to whom it does not belong, forever estranged from its origin, the studio. Buren tried to maintain control by working *in situ*, but, as Wouter Davidts argues, he still was not saying farewell to everything the traditional studio stands for – namely, the authority and genius of the individual author. The bond between the art work and the studio was simply replaced by the bond between the art work and the artist. The artist, no longer working like a monk in his cell, became a travelling, networking interventionist. 'My studio is in fact wherever I am,' said Buren. All that his emblematic motif says is: *Buren was here*. The more intensely he denounces the studio, the more clear it becomes how much his work is determined by it.

The contributions become more speculative as the present draws closer. Julia Gelshorn discusses a number of artworks from the 1990s that have the 'masculine mystique' of the studio as their theme. While such heroism might resonate in Matthew Barney's studio cum gymnasium, where the artist clambers over the ceiling like a trained alpinist, it is also clear that in itself this metaphor for artistic effort is rather forced. Kippenberger would seem to underscore this in *Spiderman Studio* (1996), in which the artist is depicted as the eponymous superhero in an attic studio. The installation was first shown in a building in Nice where Henri Matisse once had his studio, under the title *L'atelier Matisse sous-loué à Spiderman*. According to the inscriptions on the paintings surrounding the artist/superhero, his special powers have a rather trivial origin: red wine, sleeping pills, hash and other intoxication-inducing products for which Kippenberger had a penchant. The artist gifted with exceptional talent, personified by Matisse, is replaced here by the artist poisoned by addictive substances, an ordinary mortal who can only pretend to be extraordinary, like the nerd who transmutes into Spiderman. Or, as Kippenberger's reversal of Beuys's famous slogan goes: *Jeder Künstler ist ein Mensch*.

What this well-edited book makes clear is that the post-studio practice should not be taken all too literally, but as an indication of changing views about art and artistry. For no matter how much the workspace of art may have shifted, every artist still has an address. All of the artists discussed in this book had or have a workplace of their own that combines various functions (Eliasson, an employer of architects and art historians, calls his studio a 'centre for knowledge production'). Corporate concourses, offices and other written-off branches of trade and industry are the cuckoo's nests of today's art. Cities where there is plenty of 'cheap' space for rent, like Berlin, Glasgow and Detroit, are the art centres of the future. Even a radical conceptual like Stanley Brouwn rents a workspace of his own. In order to think outside the box of the studio, you need a studio.

Tags

Labour, Art Discourse

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