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The Function of the Posthumous Studio

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Introduction

Contemporary thinking about the nature of the studio and its role within artistic practices encompasses a broad range of contexts that challenge the studio's traditional function, location, definition and relevance. Spaces where artists make art vary wildly. Today, for some artists the contemporary "studio" might be better understood as a laboratory, office or editing suite, or might have no fixed address due to the portability of technology or the peripatetic nature of site specific installation practices. The late-20th century discourse around post-studio practices coincides with the proliferation of a museological genre: the posthumously reconstructed studio, which, in turn, may be considered a sub-genre of the period room. Significant examples of such reconstructions include the studios of Constantin Brancusi in Paris, Francis Bacon in Dublin, Nam June Paik in Korea, Giorgio Morandi in Bologna; there are many more. Australia has its own examples, including Brett Whiteley's studio in Sydney, Norman Lindsay's home and studio in Falconbridge, Arthur Boyd's Bundanon property, and Margaret Olley's Paddington home: three rooms of which have recently been reconstructed for permanent display at Tweed River Art Gallery in Murwillumbah.

The central aim of the practice-based research introduced in this paper is to determine the extent to which the posthumously reconstructed studio can serve as a phenomenon for contemporary art practice to engage with and investigate, to reconsider established understandings of the Modernist studio, and to consider if a productive relationship to contemporary studio practice might be possible. In particular, posthumously reconstructed artists' studios are to be considered for their potential as "virtual" or "prosthetic" studios for contemporary practice, investigating strategies to "re-activate" studios of the past displayed in museums.

The section that follows situates the research within the context of Daniel Buren's critique of the studio. The examples of posthumous reconstructions discussed thereafter are intended as a brief overview of the museological genre. Christian

Jankowski's video work *Cleaning up the Studio* is discussed to establish a precedent of a contemporary artist's interaction with studio reconstructions, and the final section of the paper addresses my own practice-based research based on the studio of Giorgio Morandi.

Daniel Buren

As an early affirmation of the post-studio condition, Daniel Buren's critique of studio practice remains a relevant context for any contemporary analysis of the role of the studio. In his seminal essay *The Function of the Studio* (1971), Buren (ed. Hoffman 2012, p. 85) claimed that 'it is in the studio, and only in the studio, that it [i.e., the work of art] is closest to its own reality... It is therefore only in the studio that the work may be said to belong.' According to Buren, the studio is an integral context for the reception of any work produced in that studio, and he thus argued that the site of a work's production should be where the work remains for display. He claimed that art becomes impoverished when moved outside of the environmental context in which it is made, observing that works of art removed from the studio were 'Torn from their context, their "environment", they had lost their meaning and died, to be reborn as forgeries' (ed. Hoffman 2012, p. 88). Consequently, we might consider the studio as a repository of this missing context, and ask whether there is some insight about the studio experience to be gained from examining studio reconstructions. Buren praised Brancusi's intelligence in stipulating in his will the preservation of his work in the studio in which it was produced. Buren observed that Brancusi, who died in 1957, 'thwarted any attempt to disperse his work, frustrated speculative ventures, and afforded every visitor the same perspective as himself at the moment of creation' (ed. Hoffman 2012, p. 88).

Ironically, Brancusi's original studio had already been demolished due to structural deficiencies in the building ten years before Buren had written his essay. There have since been three posthumous reconstructions of Brancusi's studio, and according to architect Albrecht Barthel, all three 'would fail to recapture what had been lost in the demolition, even though they would display Brancusi's sculptures in their original configuration' (Barthel 2006, p. 37). What kind of value does the studio hold, and why are many artists' studios posthumously preserved or reconstructed? Can some aspect of the 'reality of the work, its "truth"', as Buren put it (ed. Hoffman 2012, p. 88), be discovered or reclaimed in the posthumous studio? Are there new 'functions' of deceased artists' studios to be found? These are some of the questions that emerge from the aforementioned central aim of the research.

The posthumously reconstructed artist's studio, staged for public display, typically ceases to operate as a functional studio, and, situated within the museum, becomes a kind of meta-artwork. The discussion that follows offers a few examples that will assist in the consideration of how the studio might be understood within such a context.

Francis Bacon's Studio

In Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane, the studio of Francis Bacon is posthumously reconstructed after having been relocated from its original site in London, where the artist lived and worked from 1961 until his death in 1992. Unlike Brancusi, Bacon did not plan for or consent to the preservation of his studio. The entire contents of the London studio, including the dust on the floor, were catalogued by archaeologists and moved into the museum in Dublin with painstaking attention to detail. According to the project manager for the Bacon studio reconstruction, Margarita Cappock (ed. Bond 2012, p. 45), 'This process, with its forensic attention to detail, uncovered the full extent of Bacon's visual archive, which was much larger than anticipated.'

Bacon's studio has subsequently become the subject of considerable research and scholarship, informing several publications and exhibitions. The context of the studio played a central role in the recent exhibition *Francis Bacon: Five Decades* (2012), curated by Tony Bond at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, which included over 70 items from Bacon's studio. In the accompanying catalogue, Bond described Bacon's studio as 'a reservoir of creative energy', noting 'a striking similarity between Bacon's productive chaos and the "fonds" or "cultural batteries" of the German artist Joseph Beuys' (ed. Bond 2012, p. 29). Bond notes that Beuys thought of his assemblages of materials as art, whereas Bacon did not think of his own studio in those terms.

It seems paradoxical that Bacon's studio artefacts could be displayed at the Art Gallery of New South Wales while the entire contents of the studio are supposedly preserved and sealed behind glass in Dublin. As it turns out, the archival materials collected from Bacon's studio are not entirely housed within the reconstruction. In fact, about 20 per cent of the contents displayed in the reconstruction are 'not authentic but facsimiles' (Westwood 2012). Cappock has commented (Westwood 2012):

It would have been absolutely pointless to put 70 very important Francis Bacon drawings into a sealed space, so that nobody could access them or carry out further research on them.

Bacon's studio, presented as an authentic specimen under the institutional authority of the museum, might in fact be better understood as an artifice, dislocated and staged for the public. But is such a studio reconstruction just a shallow tourist attraction; merely 'sentimental', 'curious' and 'charming,' as Daniel Buren has observed (Buren 2006, p. 106)?

In spite of the notable absences within Bacon's reconstructed studio—for instance, Bacon's final, unfinished painting has been removed from the easel—many of the artist's visual sources remain evident among the various fragments, and within the architecture itself: his palette is in evidence in expansive proportions across the door and walls, and the naked light bulb suspended from the ceiling is an iconic reminder of the many paintings in which it featured. This is the peripheral and ambient space of Francis Bacon's paintings; the indexical signs of his art, partly fictional, and without the original paintings and drawings. But here in the strange new context of the museum, the studio becomes its own artwork. Hermetically sealed behind glass, the viewer is granted multiple vantage points strategically placed at the doorway, two windows, and through two peepholes positioned at different heights in the wall opposite the doorway. Like a painting, the space is effectively impenetrable, however, it maintains the alluring potential of a fully immersive encounter: one can see that the room exists as a physical reality. It is perhaps this immersive encounter with the space that Bacon craved. The artist was happy to work among the clutter, stating, 'I feel at home here in this chaos because chaos suggests images' (ed. Bond 2012, p. 45).

Nam June Paik's Studio

Shortly before his death, the video art pioneer Nam June Paik sold the contents of his studio in Broome Street, New York. Treating the studio as an artwork, he titled the collection of materials and furniture *Memorabilia*. It is now housed in the Nam June Paik Art Center in Korea. Similar to the approach taken with Bacon's studio, Paik's studio was carefully documented and reconstructed to match the configuration of objects as they were found in the original location. The studio is displayed behind a glass barrier, preventing museum visitors from touching the objects, but low enough to not interrupt the view. Paik's reconstructed studio became the subject of a

work by the contemporary German artist Christian Jankowski following an invitation from the museum to produce a work on site. The resulting video, *Cleaning Up the Studio*, shows a Korean cleaning firm, 'Beautiful Cleaning', at work cleaning the reconstructed studio. In the video, Jankowski's hired cleaners dust and reorganise individual objects in the studio. Cables are wound up, furniture is rearranged, detritus is swept away, and dust is vacuumed, while a spokesman for 'Beautiful Cleaning' speaks about the company's aims and ideals. According to Jankowski (*Getting out of the [Traditional] Studio* [2012]), the cleaning firm spent five hours tidying up the space, and museum staff spent another three weeks returning the reconstruction to its regular configuration, relying on detailed documentation of the studio to restore the display. It seems unlikely that similar access would be granted to Francis Bacon's studio, given the efforts made to replicate the space in accurate detail and preserve even the dust. However, *Cleaning Up the Studio* does suggest the potential of posthumous studios to operate as productive spaces for subsequent artists to enact creative interventions. In spite of their 'museumified' status, such sites may be activated as functional studios once again.

Giorgio Morandi's Studio

My interest in artists' studios posthumously displayed in museums has led to an investigation of the bedroom-studio of Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964). The currency of interest in Morandi's studio as a significant context in which to understand the artist's work is evident from the establishment of his reconstructed studio which has been displayed in the artist's Bologna apartment since 2009 after having previously been installed in the Morandi Museum in the same city. Additionally, the 2012 Documenta exhibition in Kassel, Germany, included a collection of items from the studio of Morandi, exhibited alongside a suite of his paintings.

Morandi, born in 1890, moved into via Fondazza no.36 in Bologna in 1910 with his mother and three sisters following the death of his father in 1909. The artist lived there from this time until his death in 1964, but did not remain in the same apartment; in the mid-1930s the Morandis moved across the hallway into a quieter apartment (Abramowicz 2004, p. 3). Since Morandi's death, his studio has twice been reconstructed for public display. The studio was initially relocated and installed from 1993 in the Morandi Museum at the Palazzo D'Accursio in Bologna. Following the municipality of Bologna's acquisition and renovation of the via Fondazza apartment occupied by Morandi from 1938 to 1964, in 2009 the contents of the studio were returned to that address, where it remains today. The apartment, now a museum,

has preserved most of the original architecture of Morandi's bedroom-studio, except for one corner of the room, which, during Morandi's lifetime, was occupied by two doorways and a stove heater, and now serves as the viewing point from which visitors can observe the studio through a glass partition. Situated on the floor and on tables around the studio are many of the familiar objects recognisable from Morandi's still life paintings. The studio itself resembles a more abundant and expansive version of a Morandi painting, with multiple groupings of still life objects occupying most available surfaces.



Figure 1 David Eastwood, *Casa Morandi* (detail), 2012-13

Paper, cardboard, foam core, wood, plastic, wire, glue, ink & paint, 25 x 32.2 x 36.8 cm



Figure 2 David Eastwood, *Casa Morandi* (detail), 2012-13

Paper, cardboard, foam core, wood, plastic, wire, glue, ink & paint, 25 x 32.2 x 36.8 cm

Practice-Based Research

My method of “accessing” Morandi’s studio has been to source information from postcard images, written descriptions, and photographs found in books and on the internet. Working from these sources, I constructed a 1:15 scale model of Morandi’s studio. The model (Figures 1 and 2), titled *Casa Morandi* after the studio-museum in Bologna, reduced the room in which Morandi lived, slept and worked to the scale of a typical group of the artist’s still life objects. While a high degree of fidelity to Morandi’s actual studio was aimed for, direct access to the studio in situ was not sought, even though the site is open to the public. Rather, remote observation of Morandi’s studio through mediated sources informed the construction of the model, allowing for re-interpretation of the available material, with archival images influencing the outcome. The original studio had, after all, been distorted over time through the renovation of the architecture and the reconfiguration of the contents. Thus, any objective truth about the studio is ultimately elusive.

The interior architecture of the model closely follows the studio as it was during Morandi's lifetime, reinstating the doorways and stove heater removed during the renovation. The miniature furniture and objects inside may be rearranged in any configuration. The model, equipped with removable walls and ceiling, facilitates multiple vantage points, opening up possibilities for ulterior views of Morandi's subjects and their peripheral spaces. Using the model, individual paintings by Morandi can be reconstructed and examined from new angles.

These possibilities have informed the drawings and paintings subsequently developed from the model, such as *Quadri Sbagliati* (Figure 3) showing a downward perspective towards the studio floor, representing the lower half of Morandi's easel along with an assortment of errant still life objects. On the table shown in the upper right are situated objects arranged to emulate Morandi's 1957 still life painting in the permanent collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales. The vantage point in the reinterpretation has shifted from the view that Morandi presents in his work. The model enables this re-enactment of Morandi's studio, imagined as it might have looked in 1957, for example, when Morandi was working on the aforementioned still life painting from the AGNSW collection. The configuration of objects on the table becomes newly visible from an oblique angle, but of greater prominence is the hypothesized surrounding environment. By shifting the vantage point represented in Morandi's 1957 painting, a new perspective emerges. The composition shifts attention toward these peripheral objects occupying the space beneath the table upon which Morandi set up many of his still life arrangements.



Figure 3 David Eastwood, *Quadri Sbagliati*, 2014
Acrylic on polyester, 46 × 38 cm

The title, 'Quadri sbagliati', is an Italian term used by Morandi to describe the paint caked over his easel. Translated in English, the phrase means 'unsuccessful paintings', a reference to Morandi's habit of scraping wet paint off his paintings-in-progress when he was dissatisfied with them. This built-up texture of paint on Morandi's easel suggests a history of discarded painting decisions evident in the accumulation of paint. Likewise, the objects on the floor set aside in favour of the arrangement on the tabletop highlight the speculative dimension of the studio, alluding to alternative possibilities that may yet be enacted. The painting shifts the focus from the tableau to the periphery, where things are relegated to a state of unfulfilled potential.

The process of working from found images to build a model remote from the subject, then producing images of the model, enacts a distancing from primary experience, resulting in drawings and paintings removed from the original, authentic studio. It could be seen that the studio reconstructed as a museum artefact, a simulacrum arranged for public display, is similarly removed from the authenticity of the original studio. It no longer functions as the workspace of the artist, instead becoming a life-size diorama, sealed behind glass and inert. The model of *Casa Morandi* effectively re-activates Morandi's workspace as a miniature, virtual and prosthetic studio within my own studio, and leads to new possibilities for speculation about the studio and its relationship to the images generated from it.

Conclusion

Implicit in the posthumously reconstructed studio is a conflict between attempts to faithfully preserve the workspace of a celebrated artist and the inevitable transformations that take place when the studio is recontextualised as a museum artefact. Museological practices of reconstruction situate the studio as an historical relic and blur its boundaries with the museum, raising questions as to how the studio might be represented and understood. The slippages of boundaries enacted by such studio reconstructions parallel recent incarnations of the studio operating with 'seemingly no disciplinary or spatial boundaries whatsoever.' (Coles 2012, p.74) However its boundaries are understood, the studio can house an accumulation of objects and ideas before they are manifested as art, whether purposeful, incidental or accidental. The complex layers of potential meaning and significance in posthumously displayed studios allow for potential co-opting or reinterpretation through contemporary art practices, expanding preconceived notions of the Modernist studio. In her book *Machine in the Studio*, Caroline A. Jones describes the pre-1960s Modern studio as "a powerful topos—the solitary individual artist in a semi-sacred studio space", with the artist characterized as a "saturnine recluse". (Jones 1996, pp.1-2) Interpretations of the Modernist studio as a private space, a closed shop of contemplation, deliberation and labour contrasts with contemporary views of the limitless condition of the post-studio. The reconstructed studio enables a revision of such interpretations and begins to unsettle the rigid boundaries previously associated with the Modernist studio.

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