The Function of the Studio (when the studio is a laptop)

Caitlin Jones

Brooding, solitary and usually male, the trope of “the artist in the studio” has existed in multiple iterations throughout the history of art. From Rembrandt’s workshop to the twentieth-century Parisian studios of Picasso, Braque and others, to Warhol’s Factory, the studio contains within it an evolving narrative, albeit one that remains focused on a specific physical site of artistic production. In a particularly damning critique of this romantic construct, Daniel Buren posited in a 1971 essay, “The Function of the Studio,” that the studio has a “simultaneously idealizing and ossifying function,” a state of “purgatory” that grants artists limited agency in the production and dissemination of their own work and culture at large. Buren’s essay is a concise example of the postmodern conception of “post studio” practice—a practice cultivated by the likes of Robert Smithson, who came to reject the confines of the physical studio as a site of production in favor of the unconfined natural landscape, or by John Baldessari’s infamous “Post Studio Art” class at CalArts, in which students were encouraged to “stop daubing away at canvases or chipping away at stone” and embrace a wider framework for art production. The influence of these artists is clearly evident in a range of contemporary artistic practices that continue to question traditional modes of production and dissemination.

The legacy of “post studio” art is amplified for artists working with digital forms and online environments. Generally these types of practices are less an overt negation of the “ossifying” element of the studio and more a reflection of how the digital has changed cultural production at large. What happens when the studio in question is simply a laptop in the artist’s kitchen or the local coffee shop? When the studio exists in a network space and is linked to countless other studios, shifting the studio experience from ossifying to dynamic? Or when the site of the studio is the same as that of exhibition and distribution?
Portraits of the “post studio” laptop studio

We write, communicate, relax and create on our computers, and our minds and bodies have become completely and seamlessly integrated to the form—the keyboard an outlet for language and the screen an extension of our eye. New York-based artist Erin Shirreff’s *Shadow, Glare* brings the screen, with its smudges, spots and glares, quickly back into consciousness. Available for download from the online journal *Triple Canopy*, *Shadow, Glare* digitally simulates the effect of light and shadow moving across the screen, its movement and patterns simultaneously subtle and distracting. *Shadow, Glare* is a response to the increasing ubiquity and transparency of our computer screens and the moments when that transparency is broken. Or as the artist states in the introduction to the work, “in my living room the light will shift and suddenly I’ll be looking at all the dust on my computer screen or the splatters of light. That will really jar me back into my chair.” From an artist who works in both traditional and digital contexts, *Shadow, Glare*
reads as a meditation on the lingering physicality that surrounds digital space. It is also a revealing portrait of the artist in her studio—capturing moments of distraction, focus and the areas in between.

The artist Petra Cortright provides a more traditional example of studio portraiture and illustrates the “post studio” laptop condition through a series of self-portraits. In her work *vwebcam* (2007), Cortright takes a customary position in front of her computer’s webcam, the bluish glow of the monitor reflecting off of her unexpressive face. Her pose calls to mind the convention of the candle-lit self-portrait that heavily populates art history, but in this version the artist is in her bedroom and found graphics like pizza slices, tennis balls and lightning bolts move across the screen. *Vwebcam* and other works by Cortright, including *cats spirit spsit spit* and *SSSSSSSSSSSSSWWWWWRRRRRLLLLL* (both 2008), refer more specifically to a contemporary mode of self-portraiture seen in abundance on YouTube in which legions of young women (or men) sit in their bedrooms performing for their webcams and, by extension, the world. The “artist” in this case is still alone in the studio but has immediate access to a broader community. Cortright’s repeated takes on this genre are emblematic not only in their content but also for the self-contained mode by which they are produced and distributed.

The emergence of the Internet accounts for probably the largest divergence between a physical studio and the laptop studio. There is the distraction factor (ready access to email, Facebook, YouTube, etc.), the easy research factor (“What painter wrote that essay about post studio practice?”), but most importantly, it provides access to an unprecedented platform for sharing and collaboration. The image of the solitary artistic genius is replaced by a more collaborative mode of production. This collective spirit and its effects on online studio practices can be seen in a number of so-called surf clubs. *Nasty Nets, Spirit Surfers, Loshadka* and *Double Happiness* have generated, shared and provided commentary on a lot of content in the past four years. Nasty Nets, one of the earliest and best known of these clubs, is a flexible affiliation of artists, academics and designers. Although they have never published any form of manifesto or general statement of purpose, they have continued to post links, sketches for works and ideas specific to this loose and collegial collective blog. The subject of much debate as to its place in the art world, Nasty Nets was described by contributor John Michael Boiling, in a particularly testy comments thread from October 2007, as a place “where ‘art’ often happens, but just as often as ‘not art’ happens.” This lack of any concrete internal definition is part of what has made Nasty Nets so exciting to follow, as projects or inspirations that will likely never see the inside of a physical gallery find a perfect home online. Artist and contributor Kevin Bewersdorf, who is also founder of the more overtly art-specific surf club Spirit Surfers, referred to Nasty Nets (in the aforementioned comments string) as “a public record of our hang out zone (HOZ), critics didn’t used to be allowed in the HOZ or MUD (multi-user dungeon, domain or dimension). Now they can see it all.”
Examples of "under construction"

*Oliver Laric, Versions* (still), 2009; single channel video; 6 minutes and 25 seconds; courtesy the artist and Seventeen Gallery, London

**Always under construction**

Constant change, in the form of beta testing and perpetual updates, is integral to the World Wide Web. In her 2006 essay *The Vernacular Web*, artist Olia Lialina expounds upon the changing nature of the Web—from an amateur to a professional space—and devotes a considerable amount of discussion to the once ubiquitous “under construction” sign. These yellow and black graphics took multiple forms. Images of construction, such as hazard tape, construction workers and hardhats (in still, sparkling and blinking forms), were some of the most easily understood signs on the Web:

Work was everywhere and everywhere there was something that wasn’t ready...“Always Under Construction” didn’t mean the site would never work but actually the opposite. It informed users that there was somebody who was always taking care of the site so it would be interesting to return to again and again...
Even the mainstream press wrote that the web was always under construction so, after a while, people stopped putting it everywhere.³

Without delving too far into a technologically determinant argument, many artists working online or with digital forms embrace forms of art production “under construction” or “in process” as a principal mode of engagement.

Oliver Laric is one of these artists. In both his Internet-based and gallery-based practice he has consistently drawn on ideas of construction and process, most recently in his work(s) Versions (2009). Comprised of sculpture, digital stills and video, Versions is an open-ended and ongoing meditation on the idea of completeness in an era when any “original” image is instantly and constantly copied, remixed, retouched and circulated. Inspired in part by the missile-launch photographs doctored by the Iranian government in 2008, Versions follows a trail of image manipulation from Iran through Disney to hard-core pornography. Multiple iterations of the video portion of Versions exist with invited interpretations by artists, including Momus, Guthrie Lonergan and Dani Admiss. And as amplification of the open-ended nature of Laric’s work, an unknown artist uploaded their own version to YouTube unbeknownst to Laric—a practice the artist has encouraged in other projects. Versions stands out as a clear example of the conflation of production and dissemination occurring within the site of the computer. Researching, viewing, compiling, production, post production, exhibition and distribution double and triple back on themselves in a way that renders their separation untenable, and possibly even undesirable.

In a recent project for the online conceptual fashion magazine DIS, artist Ryan Trecartin makes the process of production giddily visible. Trecartin was invited to create a photo spread for the high-end fashion magazine W (November 2010) and responded with a hyperactive yet completely accurate vision of consumer culture and social networking. As a postscript to the W magazine spread, the DIS piece, titled Web 1.0, lays bare the shot list for the W photo shoot. Web 1.0 illustrates a dizzying range of influences and requirements for hair, makeup and items to be procured including:

2. The Hair Style:: I want to take an Ed Hardy Hat
   And cover it Mostly with White Out (Crusty and some what see-through): One will still be able to tell it’s a Hardy dump
   The White Out bottle will then be
   Hooked to a Belly Chain, It will hang off the Hat to the side of the
   Head above Ear
   On the Rim of the hat I want to create a “Belly Button” situation by
   finding a Plastic Button or making one in Post that looks like Either a
   “Internet Mail Button” or a “Computer Power Button”
   and
   In Post I want to Merge the Home Depot logo with the Mexican Flag, And
   Have it look like it’s Transparently yet richly printed into the clothing. OR at least fused in some way...

Trecartin’s treatment of “accessories,” such as Marc Jacobs bags, software application icons and car steering wheels, reflects a vision of a hyperactive contemporary consumer culture where status and meaning are
conferred by nearly everything around us. In juxtaposition to the high production value of the images in the luxury-concerned W, Web 1.0 feels more like a snapshot of the Internet—an equalizing space where professional and DIY, luxury and banality, high and low coexist in gleeful harmony.

This notion of cultural leveling is also the subject of Aleksandra Domanovic’s *Biennale (Dictum Ac Factum)*. A collaborator (with Oliver Laric, Christoph Priglinger and Georg Schnitzer) in the online curatorial project *VWork.com*, Domanovic’s work, similar to Trecartin’s Web 1.0, investigates how cultural products—art, cinema, music, commercials or politics—are read differently when viewed through the frame of our computer screens. The speed and ease with which one can search Google, YouTube or Wikipedia for information, music and film has radically altered our understanding of the process of research, and *Biennale (Dictum Ac Factum)* takes this shift as its subject.

Made as part of the *Internet Pavilion* project at the 2009 Venice Biennale, Domanovic’s work, a single website composed with embedded images, audio files and YouTube clips, was originally inspired by both Lars von Trier’s stripped-down set for his film *Dogville* and the inclusion of the BitTorrenting site *The Pirate Bay* in the same pavilion. Domanovic uses von Trier as her starting point, the filmmaker himself inspired by Bertolt Brecht’s idea of *verfremdungseffekt* (a theatrical device used to distance the audience from the action or character on stage) and the song “Pirate Jenny” from *The Three Penny Opera*. Combined with her own personal influences, dreams and anxieties, Domanovic creates a work that makes visible the endless paths and circuitous routes of influence and appropriation—always under construction and always close at hand.
Makeup, Facial & Body Hair

1.) The Fore Head, Cheek Bones, and Jaw Line will be very Concept Vehicle, "Facial Steering": So that the Face Vaguely Feels like A Steering Wheel or a Navigational Device for Long Distance and Memory.

2.) The "Go-Tee" area of the Beard. I want to have Man-scaped into the form of the Wireless Signal Icon.

3.) The Rest of his Facial Hair needs to be Sharp edged. Different densities of Blue/ Maroon Black, Almost like Water Color. & His Lips should blend into that Hair

HERE IS A MASH UP » TO HELP VISUALIZE THIS IDEA

Ryan Tercartin, Web 1.0 (detail), 2010; feature for DIS; courtesy the artist and DIS Magazine

Aleksandra Domanovic, Biennale (Dictum Ac Factum) (detail), 2009; still from Lars von Trier's Dogville, 2003; courtesy the artist

All together now

"Thus the studio is a place of multiple activities: production, storage and finally, if all goes well, distribution."
These words by Daniel Buren were originally meant as a critique of the traditional studio system, but the quotation in fact offers a prescient description of art production today. For many artists the notion of the studio does not present a problem to be dismantled or deconstructed. The laptop studio serves simultaneously as the tool, the space, the product and the frame. This conflation of the studio’s many functions is the goal, and quite often the meaning of the work.

The “post studio” laptop studio has other meaningful implications for contemporary art production. The concept of access transforms significantly within this notion of the studio. Access to (virtual) studio space, public access to artists’ work, artist access to materials—each of these transactions is enhanced in the shift. Traditional “open studio” conventions are rendered obsolete as, by its very nature, the laptop studio can always be “open.” The “post studio” laptop studio also significantly disrupts the temporal process of the traditional studio—moments of research, production and dissemination are continually evolving and reorganizing.

In these ways, post studio practice in a contemporary sense could be understood less as a reaction against established norms of production and distribution and more a reaction to expanded cultural platforms writ large.


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