

CURIOUSER AND CURIOUSER: STUDIO RESEARCH AT THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND

DAVID AKENSON

IN 1971, FRENCH CONCEPTUAL ARTIST DANIEL BUREN PROPOSED THE 'EXTINCTION' OF THE STUDIO.

12

The death of the studio was meant to reflect a change from the idea of it as a masculine site—in which the solitary genius creates masterpieces for the modern museum—to one understood as a frame or ideological context for the creation, and also the reception, of works of art. When one thinks of the romantic or artist-genius model, names such as Vincent van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, Jackson Pollock, and Francis Bacon usually come to mind. In Australia, Brett Whitely embodies this form of tortured genius par excellence. In fact, his studio is preserved in Surry Hills, Sydney, as a symbol of his singular gifts. In reaction to this stereotype—and, associated with it, the broader ideological context of modernism—artists began to pursue projects beyond the white cube and the sanctified space of the artist's studio.

As poststructuralist theory replaced romantic ideas of human agency associated with the genius model, the word 'research' began to replace older models of creative work. Discipline-specific models of studio practice in the tertiary-education setting underwent a parallel critical review of the ideological and practical functions associated with the specific focus on discipline expertise. Out of this critique emerged an interest in cross-disciplinary experimentation and socially directed collaborations. But, while it is true the modern understanding of studio practice and associated models of subjectivity has been subject to intense criticism in both theory and practice, arguably, the understanding of what constitutes studio practice has been expanded rather than rejected tout court.

The actual death of the studio will have to await the auditing zeal of the modern university's finance departments. In the meantime, it is worth considering the kinds of research typically undertaken in these studio spaces in the so-called 'post-studio' milieu. At the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), we have very catholic tastes when it comes to both studio and traditional academic research; a kind of aesthetic lingua franca underpins our approach to research, whereby the traditional meets the contemporary, the high meets the low, the inside meets the outside, and the singular meets the collective. The contemporary studio is a space where individual studio research projects associated with a specific medium, as much as collaborations and intra-specific or cross-disciplinary projects, are supported. The student is only asked to contextualise their practice in relation to the broader aesthetic field—to position their research and develop both the material language for making and the conceptual language to articulate that position.

One of the potential consequences of understanding practice as research is a loss of idleness—the requirement to be accountable to research metrics, such as Field of Research (FoR) codes, focussed assessment criteria, or some industry expectation. There is no hiding behind aesthetic disinterest and judgments based on formal qualities. However, unlike science, art does not always submit to such metrics. Having intention meet execution often leads to a tyranny of the concept, a situation where imaginative and creative enquiry are denied or at least stultified. An important consideration in this context is curiosity-driven research, or the idea of following a hunch that captures the student's attention and

leads them down unfamiliar roads of discovery. This form of research entails a certain degree of risk, which might not 'pay off' at assessment time, nor produce an accountable research outcome. Nevertheless, research risks are worth taking, not as a replacement for research accountability but as a complement to it—an excess yet to be accounted for or measured as a research outcome. A kind of traumatic moment in the making that will have been the cause of new research.

While we might want to question some of the assumptions that emerged out of romanticism—in particular, the studio model it engendered—we might not need to expunge all notions of creativity. Studio research today might pursue some kind of 'madness' in the method, to the point where curiosity gets the better of us and we follow a barely contoured hunch with one eye on accountability and the other open to discovery; some new idea within the old or familiar. Curiosity-driven studio research can embrace this madness or moment of uncertainty within the given research context—the art within the science.

At USQ, studio research provides a space for the employment of established methods of research and accountability, but equally, experimentation, reflection, and curiosity-driven enquiry. The student can follow the latest trend, producing a variant of the current formula for institutional success, or work against the grain and risk a qualified reception. This kind of studio research is made with a conscious intention developed from within a given researched context, but equally from a liminal space; a space at the threshold of conscious understanding. Liminal spaces open up possibilities for novel contributions to the known or otherwise mapped, ordered, and reified social and cultural spaces we inhabit.

Down the Rabbit Hole encapsulates something of this way of understanding the studio; an understanding that embraces the liminal space where the known and the unknown, the tried and the untested, collide. This open, littoral space of the 'in between', evocative of the philosophy behind by the present collaboration between the two institutions, is found in much of the work for this exhibition.

For example, Dan Elborne brings together the beautiful and the sublime in slip-cast 'bullets' that commemorate his grandfather's service in the Indonesian War of Independence. The beautiful, hand-painted patterning on the surface of the bullets produces a positive pleasure in response to a formal display, while the sublime feeling associated with the all-too-ordinary function of the real bullet adds a feeling of unease associated with the formlessness of war. AJ Gogas's French-knitted anthropomorphic objects stand vertically, suggesting the humanist subject, and yet the material is soft, requiring armature to give it form and prevent its horizontal collapse. Tarn McLean works at the intersection of art and design, the real and the virtual. Her 'paintings' owe as much to her mobile electronic studio as they do to a physical space. Through a blend of old and new media, McLean breaks free from both ideological positions. Grace Dewar produces 'natural' objects through industrial and chemical materials; beautiful form mixes with a toxic, formless extrusion of industrial material, while Chris Kelly's elegiac works negotiates the political exchange between colonial history, contemporary Western aesthetics, and craft techniques. Her meticulously carved works restage a division of labour marginal to orthodox Marxist accounts as much as they redress alienation. In a project not unrelated to that of Kelly, Jason Castro's sand paintings explore a kind of 'third space' where indigenous identity and Western values and structures of power clash. The face, for Castro, is the meeting of ethics and politics, a post-Levinasian humanism that transcends binary positions of 'I' and 'other', 'us' and 'them'. Linda Clark's meticulously crafted surreal objects resemble Rorschach tests, hovering between the familiar and the not-so-familiar, the conscious and the unconscious, the material body and immaterial thought, while Glen Bowman's formal works bridge the divide between modernist formal experiments and isolationist claims, and engagements with phenomenological space, light, and kinetics.

In fact, all artists represented in this exchange exhibition embrace both the risks and rewards that attend the exploration of this liminal space between two otherwise fixed points of reference. To inhabit this space challenges artist and audience alike to consider an experience at once familiar and distant, a curious space where nothing is quite what it seems. ♦

DAVID AKENSON
Lecturer in Art Theory, Visual Art
University of Southern Queensland

