EVERYBODY KNOWS HOW TO PAINT WALLS

A Thesis

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By

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ABSTRACT

During the past two years I witnessed the transformation of my studio from a traditional working environment to a more ambiguous space. My studio became a space for recreation and socialization as well as a site for contemplation and production. Located among more typical graduate painting studios, my studio often provided visitors with a confounded experience of the space. Though initially accepted into graduate school through the discipline of painting and drawing, I soon abandoned the medium in favor of more mundane activities. With the realization that art could mean more than conventional imagemaking, the focus of my interest shifted from the production of art objects to the emphasis of everyday experiences. Consequently, the existence of artwork found in my studio space became increasingly less obvious. The combination of a lack of art coupled with the ambiguous nature of my studio provided an outward appearance indicative of more casual use. This space and my relationship to it became the subject of my investigations as a graduate student.
Dedicated to my mom, Margaret Weber
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FIELDS OF STUDY

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In *The Real Experiment*, Allan Kaprow writes of two types of art, “artlike” art and “lifelike” art. Kaprow clarifies a distinction between the two by stating, “There is art at the service of art, and art at the service of life.” 1 “Artlike” art comes from a traditional relationship between the artist, the studio, and ultimately, the exhibition space. Often “artlike” art is self referential and relies on an art historical context for its meaning. As Kaprow states, “Artists in this tradition have tended to see their work as engaged in a professional dialogue, one art gesture responding to a previous one and so forth.” 2 “Artlike” art is essentially produced by and for those who inhabit the institutional framework of the artworld. Thus a formal art education inadvertently produces artists who stake their claim in “artlike” art.

In contrast, “lifelike” art concerns itself with the realities of life outside of institutional frameworks. “Lifelike-art-makers’ principle dialogue is not with art but with everything else, one event suggesting another.” 3 The very term “lifelike art” implies that any subject in life can be considered as art. Those creating “lifelike” art often do so without the intention of it ever entering a conventional exhibition space. Furthermore, the distinguishing factors between art and common experience become increasingly ambiguous. As Kaprow suggests:

“What if I had only a vague idea about ‘art’ but didn’t know the conventions that told me when I was in the presence of it, or was making it? What if I were digging a hole—would that be art? What if I didn’t know about audiences and publicity? What if I were to just go shopping? Would that not be art? What if I didn’t

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2 Kaprow, p. 38.
3 Kaprow, p. 38.
realize that art happened at certain times, and in certain places? What if I were to lie awake imagining things at 4 a.m.? Would that be the wrong place and the wrong time for art? What if I weren't aware that art was considered more marvelous than life? What if I were to think art was just paying attention? What if I were to forget to think about art constantly? Could I still make, do, engage in art? Would I be doing something else? Would that be okay?"*

As an artist I have often asked similar questions throughout my education. Though undoubtedly involved in creating "artlike" art it is the influences of "lifelike" art that I hope to preserve in my work.

Working in a studio and walking to and from that studio have become inseparable events in regards to my thoughts of making art. In both situations the passage of time is apparent. However, the actions that take place within these events are often considered in terms of productivity, with one instance typically thought to be more actively productive than the other. The essential relationship between these events is obvious when one realizes the improbability of one event without the other. The situation may more clearly be described as an event and nonevent.

The idea that for every action there must be a preceding and following action is closely related to the notion of event/nonevent. While attempting to balance on two legs of a chair may be an event in itself and even a minor spectacle, it is ultimately succeeded by tipping all the way over and having to pick oneself off of the floor. The latter may be considered a nonevent in comparison to the visual phenomena of physically hovering in midair. Furthermore, the chair must be up-righted again in order to attempt another balancing act. In this case the interaction between the event and nonevent is undeniably important for a total recognition of what it might be like to defy gravity.

In another example one might approach event/nonevent as being a participant in an active/passive situation. A person may consider himself an active viewer while watching

* Kaprow, p. 38.
a particular program of interest on television. Once the program breaks for commercial
sponsorship, however, the same viewer takes a more passive approach while a barrage of
advertising consumes his consciousness. In a situation such as this, one might consider an
event as any moment of cognitive participation. Thus the nonevent becomes those
moments of unawareness brought on by the break of focus in the participant.

Within the framework of “artlike” art it is determined that the event of the studio
eventually be replaced by the event of the exhibition, thus reducing the studio to a
nonevent. Traditionally it is the role of galleries and museums to distinguish art from
non-art while the artist works to produce objects with the intention of placing them into
these galleries and museums. Once these objects reach the desired exhibition space they
are often isolated from the original context of the environment within which they were
made- the studio. Typically within the artist’s studio the object in question is informed
by its relationship with other work and the usual debris that surrounds the workspace. In
an exhibition space the same object is defined as art by its location on a brightly-lit
pedestal or wall. When making the transition from the exclusive setting of the studio to
the public display of galleries and museums a dialogue must take place between the two.

In an introduction to New Observations, Michael Corris writes:

“The ground upon which the studio and the showroom collide is not wholly in the
power of either one. This dialogical space is the context of communication
between the studio and the showroom. It is the site of the mediation of the
universal and the individual; the incubator of art’s institutional form; the initial site
of interpenetration; the space where the normal business of art transpires; the site
of the smooth transcription of production, learning, experimentation, error and
truth from its origin in the studio to its entry into general commerce; it is where
Being is recast as being professional, as the self-organized, self-actualizing
deployment of competencies, structured as normal practice; it is where
negotiations take place on the subject of the deformation of the temporalized
practice of the studio into a more easily manageable, estranged secondary culture.
It is where the artist fights to preserve the complexity of his project, while the
showroom manager tends to treat ends as given; it is born at the very moment when the artist utters the word yes.”

In this definitive statement Corris suggests mediation between the production of the studio and the distribution of the exhibition site, a mediation that ultimately requires a compromise on behalf of the artist. Corris continues, implying, “The task, it seems, would be to rupture the autonomy of the showroom.” It seems the ultimate task for the artist would be to preserve the event of the studio within the exhibition space. Before one begins to do this, however, they must first examine the daily practice of life within the studio.

During the past two years I witnessed the transformation of my studio from a traditional working environment to a more ambiguous space. My studio became a space for recreation and socialization as well as a site for contemplation and production. Located among more typical graduate painting studios, my studio often provided visitors with a confounded experience of the space. Though initially accepted into graduate school through the discipline of painting and drawing, I soon abandoned the medium in favor of more mundane activities. With the realization that art could mean more than conventional imagemaking, the focus of my interest shifted from the production of art objects to the emphasis of everyday experiences. Consequently, the existence of artwork found in my studio space became increasingly less obvious.

My studio consisted of four walls enclosing a section of space within a larger room. The walls were eight feet high and opened up to a pitched ceiling with glass block windows to allow for natural light. At night the space was illuminated by fluorescent

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8 Corris, p. 3.
light, the same light used in most institutional settings. The concrete floor was textured and uneven from years of paint and dust accumulation. The walls of the studio remained sparse and white with only a few papers tacked up at the far end. Some stacks of wood and a spot of sprayed paint on one wall remained as limited evidence to the act of art making. There were two doors to the space, though one was barricaded by a large black metal office locker used to store old paint and various tools. A concrete column interrupted the open space a few feet away from a corner making that section of the studio less accessible. A large white pedestal with a mini-refrigerator on top was placed in this particular corner. There were two tables in the space. A small wooden table painted gray and used primarily as a surface for drawing and a larger table with metal legs used as a desk. A yellow molded fiberglass chair and a green vinyl lounge chair with wooden legs and armrests were often arranged at different locations within the space. A television set and video tape player rested on the larger table with other various papers, books and video tapes. Under the table a blue plastic trash can overflowed with weeks of refuse. In other areas of the room a box fan sat directly on the floor and a wooden stool, pushed against the wall, supported a black radio/compact disc player.

The combination of a lack of art coupled with the banal nature of my studio provided an outward appearance indicative of more casual use. This space and my relationship to it became the subject of my investigations as a graduate student.

Often I would experience the actualization of my studio and its components while not physically present in the space. For example, the stacks of wood always leaning against the wall didn’t mean much to me until I suddenly began thinking about them as I drove my car or laid in bed at night. The thought that I had no intention of using the material for art yet that it existed within the space and in fact had a life of its own
intrigued me. What happened to these leaning stacks of wood as time passed? Did they become any more or less important since initially placed in the space? If they were removed without me knowing it, would my perception of the space change? The idea that we often come into contact with various objects similar to this stack of wood yet never acknowledge their presence provoked me to focus on my own expectations of art.

Entering the studio each day presented a new challenge. If I wasn’t going to spend my time painting then what exactly should I be doing in this space? Often I would sit and contemplate my motives for making art at all. The ensuing passage of time spent sitting, thinking, and waiting became a daily routine within my studio. In Michael Novak’s book, *The Experience of Nothingness*, he writes, “Time on the stage of consciousness, stands still. For the bored, no action is more attractive than any other. The self cannot be drawn into action; it lives by and for distractions; it waits.”

Typically boredom is not an experience sought by anyone, though many are unaware of it until faced with an abundance of time to spare. Even with a wealth of information and stimulation brought by current technologies boredom is still found in everyday routines. Boredom reflects a lull and disinterest in contemporary life, it is associated with a void of nothingness. On the other hand boredom can lead to the root of imagination, awareness and ultimately, creation. Novak qualifies boredom as, “...the discovery that everything is a game.”

In the studio, activities typically associated with boredom became challenges of duration and skill. Through the process of these activities I began to feel as though I was perfecting certain abilities, albeit absurd abilities at that. Bouncing a ball against the wall became a contest of maintaining rhythm and form, while standing on my hands would

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8 Novak, p. 6.
require a heightened sense of physical and mental endurance. Furthermore, the
redundancy of my actions, such as walking in circles or balancing on two legs of a chair,
was motivated by an effort to assimilate the space of the studio. By paying attention
while consciously participating in these activities I soon understood that I was not bored
at all in the studio but rather interested in conveying the events taking place as art.

Although these actions were initially executed without an audience I recreated each
situation on video. In contrast to the theatrical nature of most performance art, I was
adamant on preserving the concrete reality of each task. Using a fairly low tech approach
I hoped to retain qualities of amateur home video in the work. Without easy access to
professional editing capabilities I responded by making formal decisions in camera. I used
the view finder as a cropping device controlling the format of each situation. My decision
of where to begin and end each shot relied solely on the action taking place. The resulting
work varied in duration making a final resolution difficult to perceive. Each video
appeared to begin and end while in progress, creating an ambiguity for any traditional
narrative structure. I attempted a possible resolution within the ball bouncing video by
turning the camera away from the action and allowing it to record a dislocated portion of
the studio. A magazine, laying on a desk, with pages gently moving, filled the view
finder. The audible rhythm of the ball hitting the studio floor and wall continued,
indicating a relationship to a previous shot of myself bouncing the ball in another section
of the studio. The ability to simultaneously experience two or more subjects at once
came as a non-intrusive approach of relating one activity to another within the context of
the studio. Furthermore, actions in one video could continue as the viewer’s interest led
him to another event in another video.
I reshotted each video corresponding to a specific location within the studio. Each episode would take place before one of four walls resulting in four separate videos. Without editing any of the footage each segment lasted the entire duration of a single two hour video tape. The resulting videos contained not only the specific events presented for the camera but also the various nonevents that took place throughout the duration of each uninterrupted shot. The final four videos, totaling eight hours in length, represented a day within the studio.

The transition of the videos to an exhibition space relied heavily on the preservation of their relationship to the original site of production. For my thesis exhibition I decided to simulate this space by fabricating a room within the gallery in the same dimensions and format as my studio. A standard framework of two by four studs was erected in the center of the gallery space measuring twenty three feet, three inches by twelve feet, nine and a half inches. The structure stood eight feet high and its interior was closed off from the rest of the gallery using quarter inch drywall. The only access to the room could be found through a single doorway facing the east wall of the gallery. Upon entering the exhibit viewers had to negotiate through a darkened exterior space to enter the interior of the constructed room. Once inside they were then confronted by four large projections centered on each wall.

Using overhead projectors I reintroduced each video into the constructed space. The direction of each projection corresponded to the original structure of my studio. The projections filled the empty room with images of various objects that surrounded my studio. Chairs, stacks of wood, a radio, a fan and a television were a few things that could be seen in the projections occupying the interior space. Connections were made relating one projection to another. For example, as a person entered through the doorway, an
image of a box fan to their immediate right could be linked to an image of a blowing paper
tacked to the wall across the room. In another section, a leaning stack of wood continued
off the edge of one projection only to reappear in another projection on the adjoining wall.

The action began when I appeared in one projection and began drawing on a sheet
of white paper. As I proceeded to draw I reappeared in another image across the room.
In this video projection I began a sequence of bouncing a ball against the wall. While the
activities continued in both videos I appeared yet a third time in another projection.
Taking position between a leaning stack of wood and the box fan I attempted several hand
stands lasting about one minute a piece. The three simultaneous events were balanced by
a fourth projection of a fairly static image of an uninhabited portion of the studio.
Throughout the two hour duration of the videos my activities changed to include
balancing on two legs of a chair, walking in circles and reading a book.

Due to the angle of projection the shape of each video appeared as a trapezoid
creating a keystone effect on each wall. This effect complemented the issue of space
within each image. As the frame got larger towards the bottom and tapered at the top it
heightened the intersection between the studio floor and wall seen in each projection. The
images themselves appeared to be leaning on the walls creating a visual perception of
shallow space within the installation. As I entered each image to complete a specific task
the size of my figure changed in relationship to the original position of the camera. At
times I would fluctuate from life-size to larger than life depending on my location within
the viewfinder. This difference in scale reinforced the issue of space within each
projected image.

The process of projecting each video removed them stylistically from the genre of
amateur home movies, an association I had originally intended. Initially the videos were
seen only on monitors prior to the installation of the exhibition. The final appearance of each projection, however, approached a more cinematic experience. Allowing light to pass through the video image and reflect off a mirror, the combination of overhead projectors and LCD screens produced a diffused shimmering effect similar to that of film. Furthermore, the enlarged size of each projection depicted a more heroic and stylistically poetic understanding of each activity. Formal qualities found throughout the video installation could be related to various aspects of traditional painting. Associations between reoccurring visual motifs in the videos related the “lifelike” activities to conventional aspects of art making. I had succeeded in presenting the event of the studio within the gallery only to elevate it to the status of “artlike” art.

Ultimately, my biggest concern throughout my two years of graduate work has been an issue of resolution. I considered my thesis exhibition to be one example of possibly many presentations for the similar material. However, I chose not to look at the exhibit as a final resolution in hopes that these concerns would continue to develop future investigations. I hope to challenge my audiences expectations as I question my own experiences in relation to art. I am interested in how familiar experiences become strangely new experiences when brought to our attention as well. In an interview with Swiss artists Peter Fischli and David Weiss they stated, “If you know how much you don’t know, you know more in a way. Because you know that! That’s something!... Everybody knows how to paint walls.”

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APPENDIX

Figure 1: Video still of the studio, north wall. 1999, Hi8 video
Figure 2: Video still of the studio, east wall. 1999, Hi8 video
Figure 3: Video still of the studio, south wall. 1999, Hi8 video
Figure 4: Video still of the studio, west wall. 1999, Hi8 video
Figure 5: Untitled Thesis Exhibition, exterior view. 1999, video installation
Figure 6: Untitled Thesis Exhibition, interior view, northeast corner. 1999, video installation
Figure 7: Untitled Thesis Exhibition, interior view, southeast corner. 1999, video installation
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