

Terrie Fraser

The University of Melbourne, Faculty of the Victorian College of the Arts and the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music

**The Studio: History, myth and legacy. On the changing nature of the space used by artists and the work being done there**

Keywords: Studio, History, Myth, Post-studio, Art Education

The studio is a mercurial place. An examination of the site reveals the studio as the modern artists atelier didn't really emerge until the nineteenth century (Wood 2005). Michael Peppiatt and Alice Bellony-Rewald (1982) claim in 'Imagination's Chamber', that 'art history can be told through the studio'. In drawing on their belief that 'the modern studio cannot be fully appreciated until set in the context of its origins', this paper traces a history of the studio, highlighting myths and cultural changes that have impacted on the space as it has evolved over time, thus linking past studio strategies that resonate with contemporary practices. The investigation highlights the protean character associated with the studio and pinpoints transitions affecting modes of production occurring in the studio. In doing so, it seeks to account for current literature that declares a lack of 'critical scholarship' on the studio (Hoffman 2012; Davidts & Paice 2009; Graw 2003) and the persistent discourse that question the legitimacy of the space (Davidts & Paice 2009). Against this backdrop, preliminary PhD research findings investigating the nature of the studio space in the academic art institution are presented. The research surveys students and academics from The Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne, where there is a strong history of studio based practice. As such, the survey seeks to account for the studio's legacy in the experience of space and place in the Academy today.

In tracing the evolution of the studio space, a distilled history is located by drawing on two major references. Firstly the seminal text 'The Death of the Artist as Hero' by art historian Bernard Smith (1988) and secondly, 'Imagination's Chamber' by Peppiatt and Bellony-Rewald (1988), both identify three major phases where the artist and studio are drastically transformed in response to changing modes of production and cultural transformation.

### **The first phase / Studio origins**

The studio's first phase in western culture, stretches from the origins of art through antiquity to the middle ages. It is primarily defined by the anonymous craftsman and workshop. The one important constant in this era is that 'the individual artist remains obscure, with a status between that of a slave and a craftsman' (Peppiatt and Bellony-Rewald 1988). This first phase also links the cave with the studio by highlighting the action of early human recordings at a special site (Kelly 1975). As such, the cave has links by association with action and site, recording and hallowed space.

John Barnes (2011) aptly notes in 'Roles of the Studio' that contemporary site-specific installation art seems to imply this type of artistic production is 'something new' however, the practice of site specificity is one of the most ancient of all artistic experiences with some of the oldest works of art in existence being, site specific. The caves in El Castillo, Spain with the crimson hand stencils dating more than 40,800 years (Than 2012) or the cave paintings in Arnhem Land, where depictions of mega fauna Genyornis are said to be 40,000 years old (Masters 2010), link the actions of performance and documentation with site and setting.

From the ancient cultures of Egypt, Greece and Rome with a few celebrated exceptions, artists were rarely regarded as more than manual workers or slaves who toiled in factory-like workshops to feed insatiable markets. The Medieval studio belonged to the monks, monasteries and illuminated manuscripts. Here again, there was no desire for personal expression, 'the very concept would have been meaningless' except for the attention to 'technical excellence' (Peppiatt and Bellony-Rewald 1988). From the monasteries and cathedral workshops in the eleventh and twelfth centuries stem the origin and development of the guild system and paradoxically, from the guild master's finishing presentation piece, the legacy of the masterpiece.

Hans Belting (2001) notes the myth of the artworks 'aura', was originally invested in the religious icon. This aura was transferred to the artwork with the idea of the guilds master's piece, being a 'masterpiece' and later to the artist, in the notion of the myth of individual genius. Belting (2001) writes:

This *Meisterstück* was the product of a craft or art education, the rules were enforced by a corporation – in short, it represented the very reverse of freedom and originality... that later reappeared as the free creation of ‘genius’.

### **The second phase**

The second phase is enacted with transitions focusing on the perceptual world, a rise of individual expression embracing intellectual and scholarly exchange, a shift from manual to intellectual labour and the growth of patronage. Wood (2005) observes the difficulty in tracing the shift from the medieval concept of the workshop to the modern idea of the studio. He notes the physical spaces where art was made did not change drastically over this time, but the ‘concept of what art was’ altered remarkably. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries a shift in confidence in the capacity of traditional methods of picture making to grasp reality, altered to the recording of ‘an artist’s experience of the world’. Wood advances ‘the artist now needed a private space where he could gather together and focus upon bits of the perceptible world’ and that this practice ‘changed the nature of the space distinguishing the modern artists studio from the pre-modern workshop’ (Wood 2005).

Thus while still working in relative obscurity, the artists’ status began to change. Smith (1988) notes the mythical notion of ‘artist as hero’, was not drawn from these early ranks but from what was to come in the shift delivered by the Renaissance, and with the changes in the modes of production that broke with the conventions of craft guilds that began to require an artist ‘solve a problem, (and) reveal personal originality’ (Smith 1988).

In this second phase the workshop was not just as a workplace, but a space operating as a public forum and private retreat; a place for discussion, mixing and exchange while also being a site for contemplation, collecting and scholarly intellectual pursuits. It is both a site opening out *onto* the world and a retreat to an interior, reflective, private experience *of* the world.

In this way, two of the most important qualities of the studio were forecast: the artist was presented as a scholar, working with his intellect not his craftsman’s hands, in a study, or a private room which came to represent (with all its collections) the materialization of the workings of his mind (Wood 2005). And secondly, it was a private space to which outsiders were scarcely admitted, giving it an air of secrecy and mystery that performed in a number of ways either by mirroring or framing the

artist's reflection of himself, or by functioning as an 'instrument', as a kind of method for examining or framing the world.

Lexical shifts also reflect the workshops changing nature. During the Renaissance, the word for the place of production was known as the *bottega*, while the *stanza*, (the room) or *studiolo*, (the study) was the space embodying scholarly pursuits, a private room for study and contemplation. These different spaces also reflect the status and prestige associated with the scholar/ artist studying in the *stanza*, and the craftsman / artisan, working in the *bottega*. In 'From Bottega to Studio' Linda Bauer (2008) asserts the substitution of *stanza* for *bottega* can be attributed directly to the rising social aspirations of the artist, since the status associated with *bottega* had become increasingly problematic by the middle of the sixteenth century. Thus Bauer claims,

Michelangelo, when asked to supply a painting, gave a predictably testy response: 'if a citizen of Florence wants a panel painted for an altar, then he had better go to a painter, because I have never been a painter or sculptor who set up shop ["ne fa bottega"] for that purpose.'

But the lexical shift represents more than social aspirations or ambition. As Bauer notes, they point to a 'new set of practices that was rewriting the... economic definition of the artist's workshop... with new ways of acting, thinking and relating' (Bauer 2008).

For example,

The *stanza* as opposed to the *bottega* was a place where artists would assemble in the evenings, outside of the hours of work to draw from the nude in the numerous academies that flourished throughout Italy.... Similarly, the *stanza* as opposed to the *bottega* was a place where the powerful, the interested, and the leisured might properly be found and a new aura of propriety and respectability [was] attached to the work being done there.... Throughout the rest of the century, artists continue to be characterized by the distinction, intellectual or social, of the visitors frequenting their *stanze*.

The studio's reputation of enabling the gathering of innovative artists, 'celebrities' and the avant garde as a site for discussion, exchange in ideas and method are perhaps initiated here with these burgeoning studio mannerisms.

Reflecting on this second phase, Smith proposes artists sought to maintain their new status by creating new institutions, the academies of art, in opposition to the guilds. With these new bearings, the artist became an 'accomplished academic and courtly diplomat', 'socially well adjusted' in line with the 'Albertian ideal' and embodied in the life and art of Raphael, Rubens, Bernini and Reynolds (Smith 1988).

Originally important teaching institutions, the academies later became the arbiter of taste and style, and in many circles, synonymous with conservatism (Kelly, 1975). Against this stifling backdrop, many artists rebelled and from this response an alternative role for the artist developed from those who resisted the 'institutionalization of their work' and preferred to keep it 'under their own personal control' (Smith 1988). It was from the non-conforming image of Michelangelo that the bohemian image of the artist emerged. Smith writes artists embodying these early bohemian principals are Cellini, Caravaggio, Reni, El Greco, Hals, and Rembrandt. 'It was characteristic of ... such artists that they did not think of their art as an economic activity, but as a calling' (Smith 1988).

### **The third phase**

In the third phase a division occurs discriminating the artist as academic and the artist as bohemian. Each responds to culture differently, either by protecting their new role as privileged producer, or protecting their freedom through particular modes of production, action and thought. It is from this point that 'unprecedented diversity' emerges. The studios of the third period reflect the 'freer yet more isolated artist and with it a search for a different kind of identity' (Peppiatt and Bellony-Rewald 1988). Smith accounts for this diversity describing the emergence of different types of artists, such as the political revolutionary artist-hero, embodied in the life and works of David, Goya, and Courbet; to the technical hero, influenced by Kant's aesthetic theory in his *Critique of Judgement* 1790, and embodied in the work of artists such as Manet, Monet, Bonnard and Van Gogh and, a third type of artist, who becomes identified with the monetary value of products, being recognized and driven by the influence of media and market (Smith 1988).

Further diversity is embodied in the archetypal myth of the romantic solitary genius working alone in the garret, exemplified in Balzac's, 'The Unknown Masterpiece' (Balzac 1837). This story presents the individual artist's subjective inquiry and intense struggle to not only conquer reality, but to bring his subject to life. Additional studio manifestations are described by Svetlana Alpers (2005) who notes Cezanne's

studio was his state or frame of mind and that in the seventeenth century European artists began to consider the studio as a 'basic instrument of their art.' It became the very condition of their working, where they probed with a sense of curiosity about the world, where art and science investigated - inside and outside - the studio, where the study of phenomena such as light and optics absorbed both. The studio had moved outside, beyond its enclosed space, to investigate and record the phenomenal world, *plein air*. (Alpers 2005)

Alpers (2005) and Isabelle Graw (2003) both observe the studio has also been the site of investigation and interrogation by artists. Graw asks, "What does it mean when the studio turns into the material, subject and object of an artistic work?" Valesquez, Rembrandt, Vermeer and Courbet all critique the studio. More recently, Bruce Nauman's *Mapping the Studio (Fat Chance John Cage)* (2000) also investigates the 'realities' and potential of the studio, here videoed as a site contemplating the nocturnal activities of cat and mouse chases, fluttering moths and the silence of the space at night. Nauman's intention is to evoke the experience of waiting for the idea to manifest – a desperate or patient experience – recorded like a meditation on the studio's night activities (Kimmelman 2002). Graw (2003) notes that building on Nauman's legacy, from Dan Flavin to Andrea Fraser, artists have identified with critiquing the space and identify with 'post studio' practices by forsaking the studio.

Since the 1960's, the studio has been called into question even suggesting it is still 'ideologically suspect' to speak of certain kinds of solitary studio art practice (Davidts and Paice 2009; Alpers 2005). 'Post -studio' debates of the 1960's that called for the studio's 'extinction' (Buren 1971), and the 'post-post' studio rhetoric of the 90's that again gave up the private sphere of the studio to work on 'projects in open collective situations' (Graw 2003), have given way to early 21<sup>st</sup> century support for a reinvestment of the studio via artistic practices of an expanded or collective nature. A current position declared by Alex Coles is the 'transdisciplinary' model, defined by a fluidity of practices *between* fields (Coles 2012). Barnes (2011) suggests, the earlier artists needed to 'break free from the restrictions imposed on them by the traditional space' (perhaps mimicking the 'bohemians' rupture with the academy) and further, that the move to work outside the traditional confines 'actually broadened the possibilities of art-making processes and production' (Barnes 2011).

Today's studio can be anything from enclosed space to a *plein air* site, a kitchen table and laptop, an office, apartment, museum or university space – even the tram ride – all take on studio functions. In the last 50 years the studio model has been markedly challenged in response to the thrust of the changing needs of artistic practices. This shape-shifting space nevertheless endures, reflecting a flexibility that responds to new and changing possibilities as art practices continue to evolve. With all the studio's many manifestations, the infamous call for the demise of the studio in the 1960's ultimately reflects an act that is at the heart of artistic production since the Renaissance, and that is one of artistic autonomy, and the desire for an artist to be at the center of production, thought and possibility. Davidts & Paice (2009) also note that the transformation of the early-modern artist's workshops from manual practice to a place of intellectual labor, embodies a 'gradual blurring of the line between artistic and academic activities, that today permeate contemporary artistic ways of making.' As such, these ways of practicing in the studio – academic/intellectual labor and artistic/manual labor - have controversial historical precedents. The legacy of *métier*, medium, skills, imitation and master models are topics robustly debated in 'What do Artists Know?' (Elkins 2012). Here, artist scholars examine an array of historical and contemporary positions exploring the basis of expertise and how artistic knowledge is disseminated today in the light of past practices.

Wood (2005) questions the studio's early romantic model as the foundational experience of the world or self. As a model to work by today, he suggests it has become 'increasingly difficult to justify theoretically'. Yet, aspects of the romantic phenomenon *do* persist, and the studio as retreat and site for experimentation with materials and ideas continue to hold agency (Graw 2003). While collaborative practices may question the myth of the solitary artist working alone in the studio, studios can be as varied as art practices and their methods. The space survives as a place of reflection and a place of production – solitary or communal. The studio endures, with resounding flexibility, one that responds and adapts to new and changing possibilities as art practices continue to evolve in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In an academic institution, the studio continues to be a vital ingredient to the methods of teaching, learning and training artists across various disciplines. The PhD survey conducted at the Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne, is concerned with elucidating the studio experience in a university setting from student and academic perspectives and across the six disciplines taught there. The survey was distributed to the whole VCA cohort and used quantitative and qualitative methods via a Survey

Monkey questionnaire. The total distribution was to 1281 participants (Table 1) with a response rate of 139 (Table 2). Figure 1 illustrates the breakdown of these student and academic responses. The aim was to gather data that scrutinized the necessity of the studio, the ideal attributes of the space and the particularities of the studio method of teaching and learning. Findings revealed that 68% of students felt they had the need for a studio space (Fig 2) and 78% of academics confirmed the studio was critically important to the teaching methods of their subject (Fig 3). Students declared attributes that were important to them were bright natural light, wall space, privacy, quietness and silence alongside wireless internet access and spaces that were easy to communicate and collaborate in. Examples of academic responses confirming the value of the studio space to their teaching and learning methods included:

- *'I think a critical relationship to the studio is essential. The constant questioning of 'what is the studio for?' is important, not least in better defining what it is that we do in the studio. So, in that, a good amount of time early on in defining the studio is important for tutors and students. To uncritically receive the mythical space of the studio is unhelpful.'*
- *'The studio space is the Holy Grail of artistic practice. The studio is as much an experience as it is learning. Ritual – Experimental – Connection – Social – Political – Sexual and Other.'*
- *'The Studio is a generative, propositional space where work can be tested and developed through the evolution of ideas, processes, making and reflecting upon making...Teaching in the studio brings energy and enquiry into the studio space, and makes active the hothouse environment that propels practice in the Art School.'*

To conclude, these selected responses indicate the studio continues to serve art practitioners across the disciplines as a vital ingredient in the mix of practice, teaching and learning in the academic institution. The comments seem to suggest the studio preserves a resonance with historical notions of the studio, that is, as a workplace, retreat and experimental site for thoughts, ideas and materials. In the academy, the studio is at the center of a hive of activity for individual or collaborative practices. Rather than dying, these current findings positively affirm the studio's

endurance and capacity to respond – a legacy that harbours its earliest features of both sacred site and working space.

## Tables

SCHOOL	TOTAL
Music	260
Art	470
Performance	410
Film and TV	141
<b>Total</b>	<b>1281</b>

Table 1 Total Survey Distribution to VCA cohort

Participants	Participant %	Participant Numbers
Student	66.91%	93
Academic	33.09%	46
TOTAL	100%	139

Table 2 A total of 139 responses / 11 % forms the basis of the survey analysis

## Figures

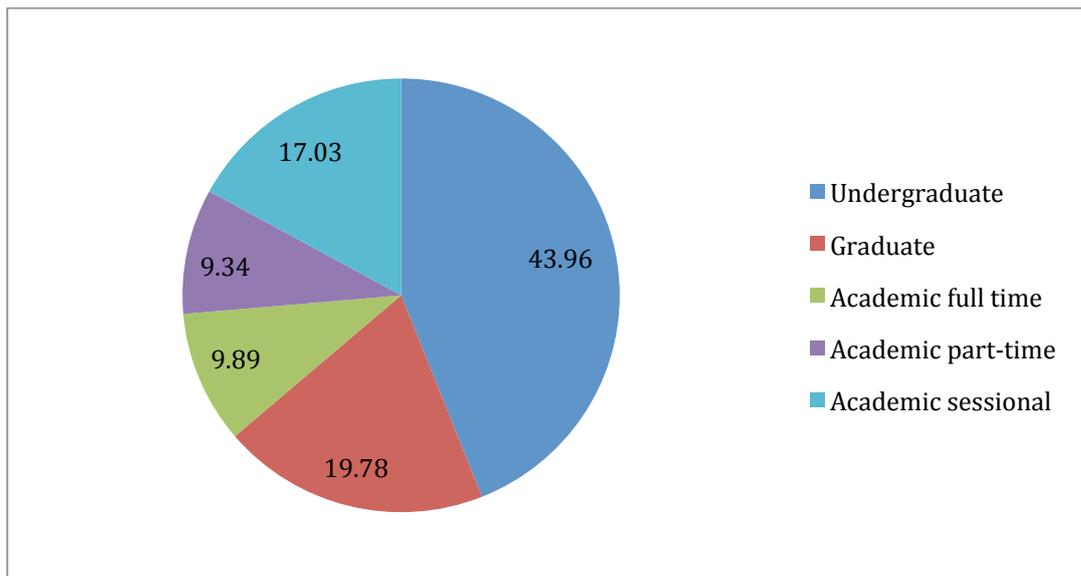


Figure 1 Survey participants: 139 Genuine responses

## Questionnaire Responses

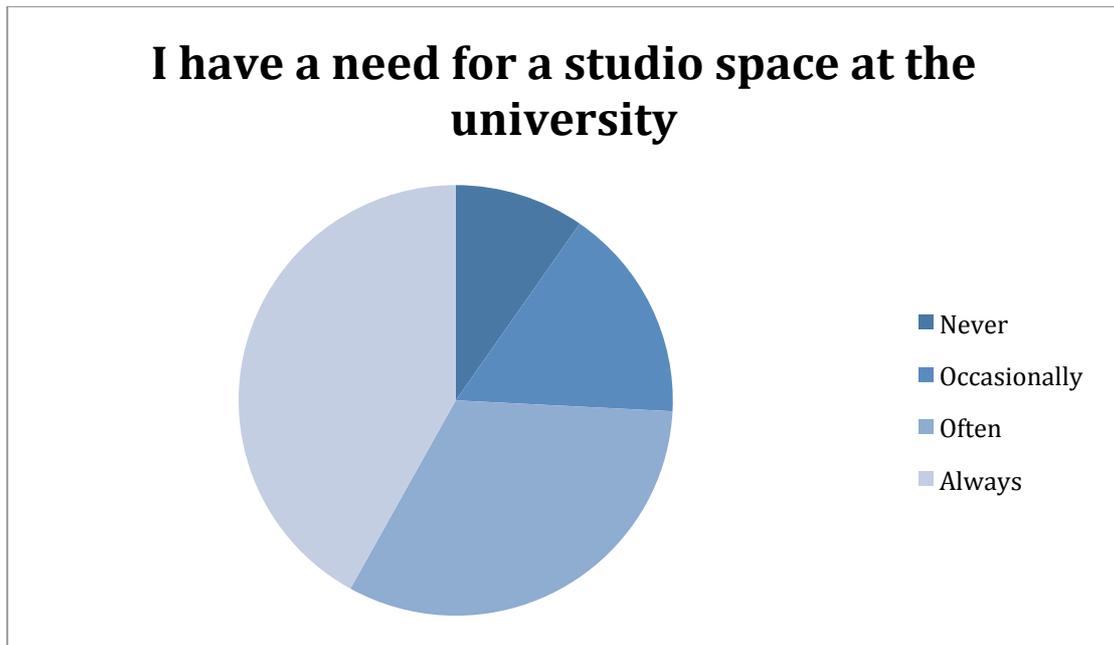


Figure 2 Student Response

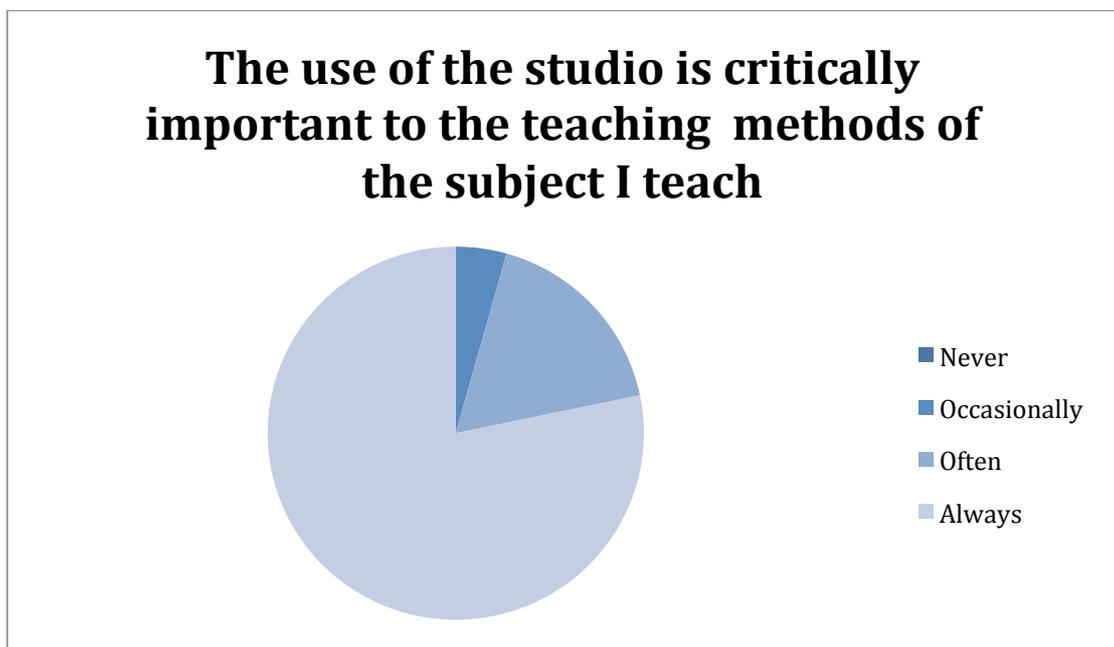


Figure 3 Academic Response

**Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge the financial assistance from the University of Melbourne, Faculty of the VCA and MCM with the award of a Faculty Small Grants Scheme to assist in the cost of data collection and presenting the paper at the ACUADS Conference, 2013.

## References

- ALPERS, A 2005, 'The View from the Studio' in *The Vexations of Art: Velázquez and Others*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London.
- BALZAC, H 1837, 'The Unknown Masterpiece', in *The Unknown Masterpiece*, trans R Howard, intro A Danto, 2001, New York Review of Books, New York.
- BARNES, J 2011, 'Roles of the Studio', *Studio Research*, Issue #0, pp. 6-8.
- BAUER, L 2008, 'From Bottega to Studio', *Renaissance Studies*, Vol. 22 No. 5, pp. 642-649.
- BELTING, H 2001, *The Invisible Masterpiece*, Reaktion, London.
- BUREN, D 1971, 'The Function of the Studio', in M J Jacob & M Grabner (eds), *The Studio Reader: On the Space of Artists*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, pp. 156-162.
- COLES, A 2012, *The Transdisciplinary Studio*, Sternberg Press, Berlin.
- DAVIDTS, W & PAICE, K (eds) 2009, *The Fall of the Studio: Artists at Work*, Antennae, Valiz, Amsterdam.
- ELKINS, J 2012, (ed) *What do Artists Know?* The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, Pennsylvania.
- GRAW, I 2003, 'Atelier Raum ohne Zeit', *Texte Zur Kunst*, (trans, G Moore, 2013), Issue 49, March, pp. 5-9.
- HOFFMAN, J (ed) 2012, *The Studio: Documents of Contemporary Art*, White Chapel and MIT Press, London, Cambridge, pp. 12-17.
- KELLY, F 1975, *The Studio and the Artist*, St. Martin's Press, New York.
- PEPPIATT, M & BELLONY-REWALD, A 1982, *Imagination's Chamber: Artists and Their Studios*, New York Graphic Society, Boston.
- SMITH, B 1988, 'The Death of the Artist as Hero' in *The Death of the Artist as Hero*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, pp. 8-32.
- WOOD, C 2005, 'Indoor-Outdoor: The Studio around 1500' in M Cole & M Pardo (eds), *Inventions of the Studio: Renaissance to Romanticism*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, London, pp. 36-72.

## Electronic Sources

- KIMMELMAN, M 2002, 'Bruce Nauman: 'Mapping the Studio I (Fat Chance John Cage), 2001', *The New York Times, Art in Review*, DIA Center for the Arts, July 05, 2002.

Date accessed 24.08.13, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/07/05/arts/art-in-review-bruce-nauman-mapping-the-studio-i-fat-chance-john-cage.html>

MASTERS, E. 31<sup>st</sup> May 2010, Mega fauna cave painting could be 40,000 years old, *ABC News*, abc.net.au, Date accessed 24.08.13 <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2010-05-31/megafauna-cave-painting-could-be-40000-years-old/847564>

THAN, K, June 14, 2012, 'World's Oldest Cave Art Found – made by Neanderthals?', *National Geographic News*, National Geographic Society, 1996-2013. Date accessed: 24.08.13 <http://news.nationalgeographic.com.au/news/2012/06/120614-neanderthal-cave-paintings-spain-science-pike/>