David J. Getsy
The Reconstruction of the Francis Bacon Studio in Dublin

Dublin has become the posthumous home of Francis Bacon. Some seventy-five years after he left Ireland at the age of sixteen, he has been welcomed back as a local art hero. In addition to important exhibitions and collections, the centerpiece of Dublin's embrace of Bacon is undoubtedly the re-creation of his London studio. Originally located at 7 Reece Mews in South Kensington, the studio and its contents have been moved to the Hugh Lane Gallery, one of Ireland's foremost museums of modern and contemporary art. Donated by John Edwards and the Bacon Estate in 1998, the studio opened in May 2001 in a new wing built specially to house it, as a permanent annex to the HLG, which has undertaken the Herculean task of cataloging and reconstructing Bacon's famously chaotic workplace. A team of archaeologists and art historians sifted through the mass of material, ephemera, and rubbish contained in the studio at the time of the artist's death in 1992. The outcome of this "dig" is a vast, computerized database of over seven thousand records, which viewers can peruse in an interactive gallery. But while this painstaking effort of preservation and reconstruction has yielded spectacular results, its underlying assumptions and motivations appear to have gone unexamined.

Within the history of modern art in Britain and Ireland, Bacon has an iconic status analogous to Jackson Pollock's in the United States. Although retaining figurative representation, he transformed it through an emphasis on the expressive gesture, and the absorption and synthesis of a wide range of visual source material. Bacon used the piles of photographs and newspaper clippings scattered throughout his studio as an ever-evolving image bank. Perilously cluttered, 7 Reece Mews seemed to bear the visual traces of his impulsive working process. (Comments by the artist, such as "chaos for me breeds images," further support this assumption.) The small, dark building also contained a tiny living area with the single bed where Bacon slept. Although collectors and museums were willing to pay extremely high prices for his paintings, he lived and worked in these cramped quarters for over thirty years. Throughout the literature on Bacon, photographs of the studio have

regularly been used to bracket discussions of his art. Through these photographs and written descriptions of the space, the studio itself has become Bacon's most recognizable image. A popular, recently published coffee-table book by photographer Perry Ogden, *7 Reece Mews: Francis Bacon's Studio*, provides another example of the long-standing obsession with the studio as a spectacle distinct from Bacon's art.

Preserved in a Plexiglas box in one room of the HLG's new wing, the studio is buffered by two information galleries. Viewers first encounter a continuously running video of Melvyn Bragg's interview with Bacon in his studio from the *South Bank Show*, shot in 1985. The exit gallery contains computer terminals giving visitors access to the database of the studio's contents. The gallery containing the studio itself is lined with vitrines, displaying a selection of significant objects extracted from the artist's workplace (most notably, Bacon's cast of the death mask of William Blake), as well as photographs of Bacon and his companions.

There are only three limited vantage points from which to see the interior of Bacon's workplace. First, a doorway opens onto the reconstructed atelier. The spectator, however, is given only enough room to step inside the threshold, as a Plexiglas box prevents further entry (a situation that also allows room for only one person to view the space at a time). The two adjacent windows located on the far end of the studio, which were kept blocked by Bacon with the back of his canvases in progress, are opened up to provide a second site from which to peer into the room. Perhaps the strangest treatment of the studio is the third avenue of visual access. When not standing in the doorway or at the window, visitors to the HLG installation are confronted mostly with blank, gray walls. In order to add another vantage point to see inside the studio space, the far corner of one of these solid walls has been pierced with two eyeholes. Two steel cylinders have been attached to the holes and protrude out from the otherwise blank exterior wall. Around twenty centimeters in length and ten in diameter each, these protrusions contain fish-eye lenses, which allow the viewer to see parts of the studio not visible from the door or through the windows. Bacon often used the walls and ceilings of the studio as his palette. The lenses are focused on sections of wall on which Bacon had tested out paints and colors, framing them as if they were paintings in their own right. (Here, the installation builds on an offhand comment by Bacon that these walls were his only "abstract" works.) Whether peeking in the windows, looking through the Plexiglas-encased vestibule, or peering through these eyeholes, the visual experience of Bacon's studio becomes like a solitary peepshow, a voyeuristic quest for the apprehension of some titillating detail.

Reconstruction of the Francis Bacon studio, Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin, 2001.

The limited and restricted vantage points guarantee that one cannot easily see another person looking into the studio, no matter how busy the gallery is. The installation keeps the viewer outside the studio but stages access to a fictitious interiority. Because the studio's main contents are tools and debris, the viewer searches for clues and personalia in and amongst the rubbish. Reading the headlines on discarded newspapers or looking at the photographs strewn across the floor, spectators can easily be fooled into thinking that they are gaining privileged access into Bacon's private space. The initial shock of the chaos of the studio fades, however, as one begins

to recognize how its contents have been subtly arranged. Too many of the photos and books are legible from the doorway, forming lines of sight emanating from the main vantage point inside the threshold. Despite its overwhelming mess and disarray, the space is a carefully orchestrated artifice—one designed to convince us that we are seeing into the inner workings of Bacon's workplace and, by extension, his creative process.

Bacon himself never allowed others to watch him paint, but he did allow people to visit the studio. It came to function, as in the *South Bank* interview, as a means of deflecting attention rather than inviting examination. The studio was less a window into Bacon's private self (as the HLG installation implies) than a shield behind which he could hide when others were present. The literal sedimentation of images and materials was, indeed, a fundamental part of his process, but the studio's spectacular disarray also functioned as a form of camouflage. Despite his undisguised homosexuality and dark subject matter, Bacon achieved a legendary status during his lifetime and was frequently considered one of Britain's greatest living painters. Just as much as his powerful works, his "mad genius" behavior fueled these legends. Bacon hid behind the mythology of the modern artist, and his workplace played a key role in aligning his public persona with that stereotype. Consequently, it was perceived by many as a transparent reflection of the inner workings of the mind that could produce such disturbing paintings—concrete proof of Bacon's "disturbed" eccentricity. Stories of Bacon's dealers wading through the mess to find slashed canvases and recover buried paintings help to confirm the image of Bacon as the contemporary heir to the popular myth of the artist as mad, creative genius. Unfortunately, it is this stereotype, rather than Bacon or his work, that the Hugh Lane Gallery ultimately capitalizes on and enshrines.

The HLG project does little to illuminate the technical, conceptual, and visual sophistication of Bacon's art, nor does it critically engage with the construction of Bacon's artistic persona (by himself and others) through the studio. For all the assiduous reconstruction of the space, the studio is presented less as a workspace than as a social space. Photographs of Bacon's friends and companions (many taken in the studio) have been installed in the display cases, yet there is little attempt in the installation to discuss how Bacon actually used his studio and what it allowed him to do in painting. The focus is largely on Bacon the individual rather than on Bacon the painter. Fittingly, there is no art inside the studio. Unlike other reconstructions, such as the Atelier Brancusi in Paris, the Bacon studio has had its art extracted. An important group of over seventy drawings (Bacon repeatedly and famously denied that he created drawings for his paintings) have been transferred to the HLG collections. Some of the canvases, which remained incomplete

upon Bacon's death, have been installed in a separate gallery in the studio wing, presented like finished works. Preserved as it is in its Plexiglas shell, the Bacon studio resembles an empty stage set, or an old-style natural history museum display. As such, it lacks only its taxidermied protagonist.

Undoubtedly, the cataloging of the disparate contents of the studio and the archaeological and photographic recording of their placement will be of use to Bacon scholars seeking to uncover his employment of visual sources, new techniques, and materials. This computerized visual catalog is the real benefit of the HLG's efforts. It is marked, however, by the same problem as the physical reconstruction of the studio space: the problem of attempting to freeze one final moment in the history of an ever-changing environment. During his life, Bacon's studio could change dramatically and traumatically from hour to hour. The database, much like the installation and the many photographs taken of the studio before it was moved to Dublin from London, can only provide episodic glimpses. Lost is the experience of the constantly shifting mass of materials and images that made the studio so useful to Bacon. Nevertheless, the database provides significant insight into the depth and range of sources at the studio's last incarnation. Beyond this valid justification for the enormous expense of the project, the reason for preserving Bacon's studio in a museum is singular: to capitalize on the mythology of the modern artist by providing visually stunning but ultimately voyeuristic and somewhat exploitative entertainment. The Hugh Lane Gallery may well have gained a successful tourist attraction, but it has lost out on the chance to make a useful critical contribution to the understanding of Bacon—or of modern art.

From Documents *22 (Fall 2002): 65–69.*

THE STUDIO READER

ON THE SPACE OF ARTISTS

EDITED BY **MARY JANE JACOB**
AND **MICHELLE GRABNER**

School of the Art Institute of Chicago

University of Chicago Press
CHICAGO AND LONDON
2010