

Art in space

How is artistic practice changing, and how will this affect the artist's need for studio space? asks Gaynor Aaltonen

Right
Barbara Tyrell in her Work/Live unit at Acme's Fire Station (1997-2001). Photo: Hugo Glendinning (1999)

Far right
'We were real pirates' Photo © AIR 2010

To my mind, it all began with Marcel Duchamp. In the early 20th century the Dadaists and Surrealists challenged the authority of the art object itself. If the artist said a urinal could function as art, then what did that say about art? From that point on, so-called 'fine' art was in a constant state of flux. By the end of that same century installation art focused on process and interaction, not as a means to an end but as the end product itself. Video art, cyberart and new media have further complicated the picture.

Artists' studios were once atelier spaces. Yet many of today's artists don't see crafting objects or scraping paint about as their future. They've set themselves a no-holds-barred brief to advance our understanding of who we are. And digital technology allows people to work in ever-smaller spaces, even in spaces that are 'virtual'. The changing nature of art practice – often involving collaboration not just with other artists but with the public and specialists from many other fields – means that spaces for meeting can be as important as spaces for making. Theoretically speaking, a 'studio' could be a classroom, the street, or a virtual space that exists only online. All it need be is a place to host the creation of something new – new and, in principle, challenging.

As Anna Hart of AIR studios (see a profile of recent work on page 18) points out, collective support can be crucial. One recent AIR artwork by Madalina Zaharia involved sailing on a public pond. Getting

the necessary 'permissions' took around six months of bureaucratic delving, for which Madalina was unprepared. 'I can't see artists routinely filling out risk assessment forms,' says Anna. Another recent project for AIR involves regular cleaning of a Stanton and Staveley manhole cover, under the full moon – 'a bonkers activity in a very forgotten corner of a vast city', as Rosalie Woods charmingly puts it. Rosalie's work is very much about questioning value in society. For this project in particular, she could only work outdoors.

So will artists ever abandon the studio altogether? Jonathan Harvey, co-founder of the London charity Acme Studios, which develops affordable studio space for artists in need, doesn't really buy that. He thinks the argument for ever-smaller spaces tends to be commercially driven. 'In fact, the role of the studio is not just about production, although it can, of course, be that too. The whole business of making and experimentation requires a separate space. Having a studio is as much about self-identification as anything else. Many artists tell me their studio becomes the centre of their lives.

'Artists have had to remain at the margins, because you can't measure artistic success in terms of financial turnover. Artists are both the pioneers and the victims of 'regeneration'. They've always had to grab temporary, cheaper spaces, and often exist in a time of transition for an area, with no long-term security.'

Jonathan would like to see that change, not least because of his strong belief in the value of artistic involvement to the public. Art, he says, is becoming much more democratic. He cites as one example Isa Suarez' 'Human Rights Jukebox', which explored the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights with residents of Southwark and Camberwell.

Graham Ellard, reader in Art, Architecture and the Moving Image at Central Saint Martins, agrees. Yet he finds his students' art practice is changing, fast. 'It's timely that we question the received idea of the studio as the workshop space needed for making large, material objects. In fact, a studio might need to be a shared, multi-use space. It might be better as an edit suite or a gallery.' Acme and the college are now working on a two-year research project examining the future needs of artists within the studio, through a formal knowledge transfer partnership process. However, Jonathan Harvey emphasises that for many artists working right now, it's enough just to have a roof over their heads. Typically, Acme charges rent at a third of market prices. 'We're also looking at ways to develop more work/live spaces,' Jonathan says.

'It's great to see more artists' spaces integrated into new development schemes, and artists having the chance to become a permanent part of a community. I think that's of real public benefit.'

