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**Artists, Art Worlds and Studios: A Research
Note from Wales**

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Abstract

This research note draws from ethnographic research on artistic practice in post-devolution Wales. More specifically it draws from observations, interviews and field notes gathered during encounters with artists 'in-studio'. The research note explores the complex engagement between social researcher, biography and charismatic artist as a dialogic enterprise. This is then discussed in relation to the notions of art-worlds, the creative self and charisma as an accomplished and embodied social fact.

This research note is drawn from a project that was concerned with documenting artists' expectations and perceptions of devolution in Wales in relation to the organisation of the visual arts, funding, cultural identity and representation. The arts in general and the visual arts in particular have become increasingly visible within post-devolution Wales. During a time of cultural modernisation (Housley, 2006 a,b) the role of the visual arts has become increasingly important. However, as stated in previous papers cultural modernisation in Wales is characterised by two tensions; namely between top down *vs* bottom up cultural initiatives and practice and international *vs* introspective notions of culture and practice. Previous work (Housley, 2006 a,b) has explored how this impacts upon the emerging contours of cultural citizenship in Wales in terms of the complex array of competing values that include principals of social inclusion, cosmopolitan ideals and local relevance. It has also explored these tensions within the context of elite Welsh artists' identities and subject positions. In undertaking this trajectory of study I hoped to render visible the way in which issues and processes concerning cultural modernisation in Wales were understood from the point of view of artistic practitioners; highly creative people who produce artefacts for display within the Welsh cultural field and beyond. By taking note of the technology of narration (Maines, 2002:220) I explored how narratives of artistic self inform our understanding of cultural modernisation within a context where national identity is a salient category.

The approach adopted in the study made use of Becker's notion of 'art worlds' which consists of 'all those people and organizations whose activity is necessary to produce the kinds of events and objects which that world characteristically produces' (Becker, 1976:41). It also acknowledged the sociology of cultural display and institutions as

identified by Zolberg (1981) in their study of professionalisation and American art museums. Whilst focusing on individual elite artists the study acknowledged the location of practitioners within a form of life rather than spaces of individuated practice. Bourdieu's (1967) concept of habitus is useful for understanding how art can be understood through the concept of a field of social practices. It has led some, drawing from the art historian Panofsky, to rule out the study of art through individuals, groups or patrons. My study of artists was not an examination of individuals; rather it was a focus on artists as social and cultural *agents* who are active within the field. The preoccupation with the whole has sometimes led to a lack of focus upon creative practitioners as agents. In one sense it is relating the parts and practices to the whole that this study of a specific art world sought to reconsider. This research note develops the analysis of artistic agency within a field of relations by reflecting on the sociological ontology of studios as both a site of creative production and a site of engagement between researcher and the artist as a knowledgeable cultural agent.

Sociological work on art studios is not prominent although cultural analyses and appreciation have explored the setting (Jones, 1997). Bergman (1995) investigates the representations of the 'artist and studio' between the 1930s and 1960's. She analyses photographs of various artists within the studio setting alongside articles concerned with the 'legend of the modernist women' and relates them to discourses of 'masculinity and mystique' and specific constructions of the 'female' as a passive, complimentary atelier in the act of creation (1995:1). Of particular interest are the representations of artists produced by Alexander Liberman in his book *The Artists Studio* (1960). She states that:

I will argue that in the photographic images, and accompanying texts, Liberman ... advanced specific ideas about the mystique of the artist's studio as the *primo mobile* of artistic transcendence.

Whilst this research note does not explore such issues it acknowledges that representations of gender and art identity are of significance. Furthermore, this research note does not seek to explore the representations of the studio *per se* but attempts to understand them as interactional and creative environments that form part of a specific *lebenswelt* and field of relations. Issues relating to masculinity, creativity and the studio space represent avenues for future research.

In one sense artists studios can be understood as performative installations of aesthetic and cultural practice. Whilst Foucault (1977, 1980) and Goffman (1961) have explored other installations such as the 'classroom' in terms of 'social technologies of discipline' it is more difficult to apply this description to the studio. They are not sites where power shapes bodies or populations in terms of a regulated aggregate. Clearly, artist studios 'afford' (Gibson, 1979) certain practices, objects and subjects. The precise sociological characteristics of this matrix are ones which an ethnography of artists' studios can begin to reveal.

Artists Studios: An Ethnographic Account

Walking in to the artist's studio on a late winter's day was not how I had imagined it. Having spoken by phone and corresponded by letter we had arranged to meet (via their personal assistant) in a business like 'window'. On arrival I was met by the personal assistant before finally being led into a large studio within which a number of works in progress were visible. John Poole was a well-known artist who had

worked in the area for over twenty-five years. He was now an internationally recognised visual artist whose work was exported (their word not mine) across the world. His formative years had been spent in Florence studying the great Italian Renaissance tradition and Mexico imbibing the radical and powerful imagery of revolutionary and devotional murals. He has punctuated this apprenticeship through study in north Wales. For both the artist and people who appreciate his art his location in the north of Wales is significant in terms of the surrounding landscape, townscape and weather. An awareness of place was critical for understanding the creative process.

John had promoted and made his art accessible to a number of people through his spectacular wall murals that had been painstakingly prepared and painted on a number of buildings in the area. As a child I would pass three of his murals on my way to school. In winter they brightened up the path to enlightenment with their fantastic use of colour and detail that incorporated and reflected local characters, landmarks and the beautiful, dramatic and wild landscape of the north of Wales. These murals were not merely depictions, but were both real and magic at the same time. John Poole had translated the magic realism of one part of the world and had woven it upon another equally real (and sometimes magic) north west of Wales. In a small way I knew of John's work as an important and loved feature of my own biography and relationship with the built environment of my childhood. In terms of my study of artists within a specific social and cultural context it was interesting to reflect on the reflexive relationship between biography and the ethnography of creative practice 'at home'. In some ways this might undermine the impartiality of the study on the other hand it was

a resource through which the self, art, place and ethnography were brought into focus and interpretation.

However, my purpose that day was to interview John about the role of art in Wales. I had my tape-recorder and my microphone, batteries checked, at the ready and after a cup of tea and general conversation we began the interview. Interviewing an artist within his or her own studio is something that I have now done a number of times. It is an interesting and intense dialogic exchange. The notion that an interview should merely makes respondents 'responsive' in a methodologically sound and ethical manner in the pursuit of data collection is to gloss over a form of interaction that can be an illuminating experience for the ethnographer. Whilst we paid careful attention to our talk, the mutual constitution and development of our discourse was interspersed with memory, rhetorical flourishes, jokes and practical demonstration of artistic ideas. The artist is most definitely not a cultural dope. The studio itself was not merely a passive set lying in the background. The intensity of creation was visibly manifest, pointed out at times and explained in careful detail. The embodied character of creator and created was interspersed with liminal examples of artefacts that were in the process of coming into being; betwixt and between recognisable completion, appreciation, understanding and sale. The detailed face, the empty silhouette all conspired to endow the space with creative energy, power and the will of making. Our talk moved between artefact, biography and eventually to issues concerning creativity, landscape and belonging. This included topics like the weather, the most British of conversations, delivered with a Welsh focus. The wind and rain was beating on the top of the studio roof during our interview. I was pursuing some questions relating to creativity, artistic practice and identity.

I: Is there any way in which your experience of being located in Wales does that have any effect on the type of work that you do? Perhaps in the past or the way you've developed or where you're going (.) is there any way in which your location does affect your work?

A: I think there probably is an effect. But it's no more specific than a kind of psychic gloominess. There is a gloom. I think in this weird magical country of mists and heavy layers of cloud and hills. I think the gloom finds it's way into my work. The ephemeral uncertainty.

I: The environmental in one sense?

A: Yes it's just that. Because that moulds a population as well. The weather changes the psychology of a nation doesn't it?

The interview as a situated activity was not merely confined to matters relating to the particulars of conversational order or discursive machinery. The events and the context of place actively informed the character of our exchange. This included the particular character of the stormy weather that day, not atypical for north west Wales in late autumn. It also confirmed the geographical texture of the studio location. Not in a fashionable part of large metropolis surrounded by coffee houses and bookshops in a redeveloped waterfront complex but on the mountainous coastal fringe of the British Isles. The multi-layered features of interaction are not always accommodated into the analysis of interview data. However, they should at least inform the ethnographic and thick description of places where art is made.

To make sense of such an occasion was also to come to terms with both the beauty and the energy of the artefacts that were intimately available for both inspection and discussion with the artist. Of course 'beauty' and 'energy' are aesthetic constructs that for the sociology of art can only be understood in terms of cultural capital, the social reproduction of taste and art worlds. However, aesthetic responses and observations

are a crucial part of understanding creative spaces. The objects in the studio provided an opportunity to discuss paintings in progress, completed works and issues concerned with style and taste. In some respects this represented a form of visual elicitation, where the artist's artefacts formed visual resources through which issues of practice and creation could be discussed in relation to the artworld that was being explored. The visual forms of organisation as products of the creative act in turn provide a useful means of methodologically bringing together narrative and the visual. Where visual artefacts were reflexively employed as resources for accomplishing and displaying an artistic world view as well as aesthetic principles; Artists would often refer to their work as a means of understanding issues beyond aesthetics or matters of representation. With respect to questions of identity one prominent Welsh artist stated:

My knowledge of Welsh is not very great but there are people who are fluent in Welsh who paint in English or American. But I happen to paint in Welsh. When I say that I've been told I paint in Welsh. Because my pictures do reflect Wales. And they tie up with Welsh poetry and that sort of thing (.) that's what I'm told. It's rather nice to be told I paint in Welsh.

For the artist the interplay between forms, in this case the linguistic and the visual, is something that can be related and connected together through the creative act. The ethnographic challenge is also to relate the parts to the whole.

The site of creation is a 'sacred' site that I had been allowed access into. It was clearly demarcated from the outside world through a series of doors and boundaries. I was led through a number of doors and dark passages before emerging into the natural light of the studio. However, they can also be understood as a form of working installation; the arrangement of work in progress, the physical layout of the tools of creation and

their reflexive intelligibility in terms of the process being undertaken. The observation of art studios suggests that they have certain characteristics and differences that are an extension of the artistic self. The material layout of the studio is a document of creative life and should be read as such. The way in which materials are stored, the ordering of creative production, the smell of tobacco or the stained tea cup placed on top of yesteryears *Times*. They are sites in which individuals create and have features that testify to both the unique character of creation by creative actors but also as recognisable sites of the creative task, places and spaces where specific boundaries between the studio and the outside world are demarcated and the act of creation made both visible and materially demonstrable. They are also sites where I was reflexively aware of my own presence in a site of imagination and practice. I was an observer being shown around by the author of the surroundings. In many respects to read such sites as ones which are divorced from authorship and the demands of such sites and their artefacts to be read in particular ways was a methodological challenge. Alternative readings were to become more apparent after some reflection, post-discourse, within my own space of authorship and interpretation; a space where creative charisma and power were mediated through a little time, some field notes and transcription. It is of course important to also accept that the embodied character of creative expertise and the phenomenological facts of charisma are fundamental features of the artistic world and those who inhabit such forms of social organisation and practice. The immediacy of charisma is difficult to measure or indeed document in any scientific sense as a form of life and practice. However, in terms of ethnography and the sociology of presence, charisma is a witnessable and embodied feature of social interaction.

Of course the subject matter of the artistic endeavour is crucial to exploring art worlds and practices. Art seldom deals with superficialities and often tackles those themes and topics that question our existence, celebrate beauty and tackle the most vexing of existential questions. Art is life. Ethnography and art have lots to learn from one another and not just as a means of accounting for the production and social organisation of artefacts and practices. They are interested in documenting and exploring many of the same things; whether it is ways of seeing, descriptions or accounts of the world and the exploration of life. The exploration of artists and art-worlds renders visible the way in which social organisation and forms of life are multi-layered and complex. The inter-relationship between concepts, ways of talking, visual representation, stories, memory, practices and textual accounts of artistic endeavour provide a case for understanding such worlds in a way that is sensitive to complex organisation and social practice.

One of the artists interviewed in this research had now become very successful and had completed a commission for the nearby University which was near to the studio and situated amongst many of the house fronts and shops that had received artistic enhancement over three decades through wall paintings and murals. The commission had involved the creation of a mural within one of the University buildings where choral and instrumental recitals were performed. In terms of our talk we discussed how this could be understood as representing a movement from murals on the exterior of buildings, bakeries and homes many years ago to the inside, the interior of the collective understanding of the area, its people and institutions. A journey that I had also observed by passing his murals on the way to school some years earlier to taking Degree examinations in the Hall where the mural had been painted. To this extent the

interview with the artists was an opportunity to understand someone who had helped to shape the contours of culture which I myself had negotiated through time.

In many respects this brings to mind the way in which interviewing 'at home' raises a number of issues that needn't be methodologically problematic but useful resources in appreciating the complex character of social worlds. In the case of the interview experience recounted above the interplay between my own biography and the artist was a useful resource for reflexively engaging with the art world in question. Furthermore, the site for the interview enabled not just an appreciation of talk as 'good interview data' but also an opportunity to ask and observe the artist in their most potent environment. The studio is a site of creativity and production where the creative self (as an accountable and reflexive entity) can be most acutely observed. The interplay between talk, painting and the site of creative production display a multi-layered ordering of relations, words and things which enable the ethnographer to appreciate the complexity of the arty world which the artist inhabits. In terms of artists worlds the studio is the primary site of expression, and extension of self, and is a significant part of a whole field of creative relations which they readily acknowledged.

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