

THE STUDIO AND THE COLLABORATION: BETWEEN UTOPIA AND THE NEW ECONOMIC MODEL

Today we are overwhelmed by their number and confused by their origin and functions. The so-called artists studios and their international form, the open studios, have been multiplying throughout Havana recently. But more interesting is the variety of their formats, which show how much that entity has changed since its origins. We no longer know, when we are invited to visit, if we will be calling on an artist who honors us by sharing his living room/bedroom/bathroom/kitchen/recent work/working space; or if we will simply be attending a staging, a substitute for the once home-workshop that today, with a bit of luck, stands halfway between a showroom and a gallery. Neither is it clear for us if we are in a place that is permanently inhabited by art or if it has been temporarily installed on the occasion of certain related events (biennials, fairs, auctions) or tourist seasons – with the hope of receiving potential clients.

Some studios in Havana emulate and surpass because of their physical characteristics (such as spatial design and refurbishment) the traditional institutional exhibition spaces, and the majority of them, given their organization and efficiency (including their staff of specialists, academic studies and training, programming and promotional methods) are very close to the concepts of medium and small industry, or small businesses. Others resemble the model of a management office, with the full efficient management-information network it entails. Artists nowadays seldom work or keep examples of their best and most recent pieces or works in progress in these spaces; many times they are not there to welcome and speak with their visitors. Their assistants take their place and the projects are explained only by virtual means or derived documentation.

If we were to define – in negative – many of these studios, we would say: they are not houses because they are not inhabited and are excessively «well decorated»; they are not workshops because of the suspicious lack of tools or other witnesses that reveal their little or no use; and they are not galleries as such because in fact they are recycled architectures – frequent contradiction between origin and refunctionality – in which inevitable visual interferences attempt against the works themselves. What are they then and why do we keep giving them the same name?

The majority of what we call artists studios in our environment today are a hybrid derived from the founding concept of the workshop, but which has lost intimacy, function and spontaneity, and has assumed a new type of packaging that camouflages, with general acceptance, its new promotional and commercial roles.¹

Such an evolution is not exclusive of our context, but for the time being it seems to be the most adequate form with which our artists, independent promoters, art dealers, entrepreneurs, and, of course, the State itself, attempt to pave the way for the still vulnerable «private gallery» in the country's new economic scene.

It is odd how more recently such a disguised form of the independent promotional-commercial management of art is being assimilated – still timidly but manifestly – by the very Institution that condemned it previously.² The term «project» today is used extensively and benevolently by everyone to describe both a truly creative project (some studios still are), and what is actually a market-tested event of the financial-cultural management of the private sector in the art world (the gallery, the representation office). It is thus that the word «project», so hackneyed these days, is another of the many euphemisms of our language, which lacks the official recognition and the definitive approval of what should be the proper term for the economic and social practice.

We have no reason to fear these transformations or adaptations because they are undeniable signs of changing times, even if we do not consider the scene transparent enough. What is truly erratic in such circumstances is that during transition processes such as this there is a trend to blur the limits, differences between one experience and the other are erased, the protagonists are mixed up, the roles of the parties are altered and memory is erased.

It is, therefore, no coincidence that for this fifth dialogue between the Embassy of Norway and the Figueroa-Vives Studio, we have chosen the theme «collaboration», a practice ever more in disuse (sometimes mixed up with «strategy») that leads us to think in turn of the «artist's studio», an entity that is generating ideas and practices today in visible mutation. Both of them, «Studio» and «collaboration», are located on the very vortex of the slippery scene of change, and the moment coincides with the estimated date in which the Figueroa-Vives home was transformed into a new model for its time: an independent space for art and artists.³

Rather be...

Cabeza de ratón is a cooperative gesture among guest artists and organizers on the twentieth anniversary of what many regard as a pioneer cultural project. We were moved by the sense of timing – when, where and why – to reflect on a current process of transition between the private and institutional scales. In that regard, Cabeza de ratón may also be seen as a statement of its organizers.

Initially we were all moved by the idea of considering the concept of collaboration, so dear to the work methodology of the Figueroa-Vives Studio since its start⁴ and attached to certain ethical principles still alive in our most intimate circle, but in deplorable process of extinction in large part among the national artistic community. Instead, the duets of guest artists went beyond and gave us – without previous agreement among the parties – three distinctive ways to view the framework of the power of art, and the latter as part of the national and international macro economy.

Pepe+Laura chose to reexamine the nature and operation of the Figueroa-Vives Studio since its origin and carry out a «reconstruction» of one of its possible images. Through the use of carefully selected works-objects-witnesses of their past and present history, by extracting them from their habitat to place them in a different location they move away from any commemorative intent and propose to boost the very concept of Studio as a functional typology and power entity.

Jorge&Larry, on the other hand, act from an individual standpoint. Faithful to their vocation for appointment and manipulation as work methodology, and making use of their prerogatives as independent artistic entities, they insist on the validating assets of featuring (one of their series). With such tools they bring to this Studio other individualities that are clear artistic and media references in our environment. Such artists/careers are in themselves another aspect of that power framework.

Celia-Yunior, as they do in the majority of their works, appeal to the verifiable data, to the field research exercise, and to the compilation of evidence. The latter leads us to certain undeniable conclusions, at least from the symbolical premises of art. The suggestive «genealogical tree» they propose of part of the State power's economic framework refers us to reality. They have named it *Encarnaciones* (Incarnations) and is an appeal to the conscience: the difference is possible. But?

...A Big Fish in A Small Pond.

It is still an excellent position under any circumstance: it grants you security, confers you authenticity, and recognizes you as paradigm or reference. It is undoubtedly a solid location, especially in periods of transit in which, we insist, memory is generally lost.

1. Private visits to artists' studios by researchers, students, curators, gallery owners, cultural promoters, etc., motivated by professional interests or academic field research have increasingly given way to the well-known open studios, a group form of expansion and commercial control of those who coordinate them (galleries, museums, travel agencies, etc.). The traditional artist's studio has thus become a product organized and offered to clients and mentors by various parts of the art world, and it is a generally established and institutionalized practice today in almost all cities or cultural capitals in the world.

2. The most recent *Havana Biennial* (2015), particularly the highly publicized collateral section «Zona Franca», did not hesitate to benefit from «projects» of artists and groups that used La Cabaña's exhibition spaces as extensions of their private studios and galleries (managed and set up by their own means and with more or less visual impact, depending on the purchasing capacity of creators and/or sponsors rather than the quality of their proposals). Also, and for the first time, some national press media reported as «novelty» the opening of «artists' studios that show the public the art in progress» (Diana Ferreira. «Open Studio. Templos al descubierto», *Granma* newspaper, Havana, June 14, 2015.).

3. The afternoon of October 9, 1995 is assumed as opening date of the Studio, when a group of Cuban visual artists were literally stranded at the home of Figueroa-Vives when they received the news of the cancellation that same afternoon of their trip to Nantes as guest artists of the «*Les Allumées Nantes - La Havanne*» festival. The unilateral cancellation of the festival by the Cuban Ministry of Culture – which was a setback for the organizers and institutions in that city – was justified by arguing that the French party had also invited to the Festival some Cuban intellectuals in exile. The Island's artists were: Los Carpinteros, Fernando Rodríguez, Tania Bruguera, José A. Figueroa, José Angel Toirac, Osvaldo Yero, Tonel and Cristina Vives, curator of the project.

4. The first artists linked to the Studio were in themselves collaborators: the trio *Los Carpinteros* (Alexandre, Dagoberto and Marco) and the duet Fernando Rodríguez and his alter ego Francisco de la Cal, had recently graduated from the Higher Institute of Art at the time.