Chapter 12
Staging the Studio: Enacting Artful Realities through Digital Photography
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Introduction
As part of a larger project on visual knowing around databases of images on the web,¹ this essay discusses results from fieldwork at the Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten, the post-graduate academy for visual arts in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. The Rijksakademie runs an esteemed two-year residency for fifty artists from all over the world. The following addresses the transformation of these artists’ studios into exhibition spaces during the “RijksakademieOPEN,” an annual event in November when the academy opens its doors to a larger audience. What do these transformations from studio to “white cube” entail? What do the artists put on display, and what do they hide from view? My contribution subsequently zooms in on the photographic documentation of the Open Studios by artists and academy employees. What role does documentation play in the constitution of knowledge about artworks for the academy and the artists themselves? How does photography mediate this documentation process? Lastly, I will address the role of artists’ websites as “spaces of display.” What role do photographic representations of studios and artworks play for resident artists? Should the photographs they present online be seen as part of a web-based portfolio, as a PR-tool, or as an (perhaps incomplete) archive of finished work?

The fieldwork at the Rijksakademie was undertaken in 2009-10 and consisted of systematic participant observation; open-ended interviews with employees and artists; a detailed scrutiny of new initiatives around the artists’ visual documentation practices and that of the academy; and an examination of official policy documents, archival material and funding applications relating to documentation and information management.

Conceptually, I draw on three bodies of work: new media studies, science and technology studies (STS), and empirical ontology. I use new media studies to analyze the co-existence of different frameworks of mediated interactions with images.² New media studies also offer an awareness of how “ways of knowing”³ are intertwined with media storage and retrieval technologies.⁴ STS enables an understanding of images as situated, embodied practice;⁵ emphasizes the importance of treating a variety of actors symmetrically;⁶ and
highlights material and institutional aspects in the embedding of new forms of knowledge.\textsuperscript{7} Finally, I draw on empirical ontological analyses to problematize the epistemological dominance of representation in capturing the complex empirical world.\textsuperscript{8}

**Transforming the studio**

“The RijksakademieOPEN offers visitors a view on the future of art and a chance to look inside the ‘artist laboratories’ that are normally closed. Over 50 artists present new work in studios, technical workshops and project spaces.”\textsuperscript{9}

A telling statement on the Rijksakademie website, not least because of the way the academy stages the artists’ studios as laboratories, as inaccessible, almost sacred spaces to do research. This is a way of giving meaning to the studios based on the premise that artists are researchers, who should be allowed to work in the privacy of their own labs for extended periods of uninterrupted time.\textsuperscript{10}

The statement on the website is also intriguing because of the suggestion that at the RijksakademieOPEN visitors will get to see artistic production “in action.” In practice, this is not really the case. Visitors do get to see the studios and the technical workshops, but these spaces have undergone important transformations. As we will see, the result is much more polished than the metaphor of a visit to a lab suggests.

Brian O’Doherty captured some of the crucial differences between artists’ studios on the one hand and gallery spaces on the other, labeling the former as an “agent of creation” and the latter as an “agent of transformation.” He subsequently argued that it is “one of the primary tasks of the gallery [...] to separate the artist from the work and mobilize it for commerce.”\textsuperscript{11} Commodification is not the primary goal of the RijksakademieOPEN, but the transformation of “sacred” lab into an exhibition space, and the separation of artist from work were indeed described by a number of artists interviewed. One of the interesting aspects of open studios is that the move from “agent of creation” to “agent of transformation” does not entail a move elsewhere; in the case of open studios, the same space morphs from the one into the other. This offers a unique perspective on the transformation process. Artist A (a painter)\textsuperscript{12} had the following to say on the topic:

A: “My interventions in this space have arisen from the idea that the space itself would be exhibited. But in the first instance I intervened to improve my workspace,
or to change it in such a way that it would be easier to be here, and with the hope of making better work, or different work. [...] Because I have been painting for quite some time now, I felt that I had been dealing with it in a formalistic manner. I also think that the more you paint, the more you become aware of any formal peculiarities or typical problems involved in painting. [...] [At the start of the residency] I didn’t really know how to continue. I had actually started painting and got stuck in the process, and then I started doing other things. And in particular, uhm... to get closer... to ... in one way or the other get closer to myself.”

“Paintings... they hang on a white wall, and then you look at them... well... in a very detached manner, and then you’re able to judge whether or not the composition is solid, if the colors work, but I found it all much too rational or too... Well... that you never really come close to the work, and that it always stays in your head.”

SdR: As an artist, you mean?

A: “Yes. What I have strived for is a situation, for the spectator but also for myself, a situation in which the space itself already hampers taking an objective or detached stance. So I literally painted everything, there was mess on the floor, the lights were not working properly so there was no formal white light, so I was really looking for a situation that was not that formal or objective, but more physical, that engages you physically.”

SdR: So really with the idea of... So what did you do first?

A: “Well, at one point I simply started to paint those walls over there, yes, simply because uhm... It also had to do with the fact that you find yourself in an Institute, in a room, and that it is subsequently uhm.... expected of you that you will produce something. To me it was a kind of statement, like ... I do not want it like this, I don’t want to be in this ... I want to be in control, want to be able to define my own rules.”

These interview excerpts point to some of the potential regulative interactions between the artist and the space of the studio. The artist described how the studio acted as a disciplining force, as a result of the space’s embedding in the Rijksakademie. Simultaneously, the artist
tried hard to “tame” the studio and to come to terms with the material and techniques at his disposal. Despite these efforts, some inconsistencies arose in the equilibrium of the “messy studio” when the artist started to stash away some tools that were spread around the room:

A: “The moment you realize that other people will come to your studio and will see it, something happens that puts you at a remove from the work after all, and that turns you into a detached observer, and you start seeing things: Oh, these two things over here do not go well together. [...] I removed a lot; furniture, sculptures I couldn’t exactly place yet... And I was aware of it and tried to keep the... to a minimum [...]. In hindsight, it may have been better if I hadn’t removed anything at all.”

One of the stated goals of the RijksakademieOPEN, expressed in the quote at the beginning of this section, was to open the doors to the artistic lab. In theory it should be possible for artists to do just that: leave everything as it is and keep working. But the interview material indicates that even artists who were acutely aware of potential undesirable effects of the transformation from studio to “cube” could do nothing but go along with it. Though the trope of the autonomous artist-researcher suggests otherwise, some of the elements that influence whether (and when) a studio is ready for display may be beyond an artist’s control.

**Capturing the cubes**

Around the yearly open studios, resident artists at the Rijksakademie intervene in interesting ways in the transformation from studio to exhibition space. But, as we have seen, other factors may also come into play, such as the disciplining and enabling forces of the technique used (painting, installations), the spatial particularities of the studio, and the institutional requirements to produce work and participate in the Open Studios. Neither artists nor academy employees take the RijksakademieOPEN lightly; much is at stake. The Open Studios-weekend attracts a large international crowd. In addition, and perhaps even more importantly, special previews are held for sponsors, experts, dealers, academic relations and the press in the three days prior to the weekend. During the Open Studios, visitors have access to all studios and technical workshops. They are also encouraged to take a look at the portfolios of resident artists in one of the project spaces. This room is furnished
with computers that provide access to relevant photographic documentation on every artist. The documentation is put together by the academy’s documentation center.

For a number of reasons, photographic documentation is crucial for the academy and resident artists. First of all, the photographs have an epistemic function: they are said to consolidate and preserve what we know about works of art. Secondly, several interested parties (e.g. the academy, the artists, dealers) make use of these images for the valorization of artworks. The images are also crucial in trajectories of obtaining funding, both on the part of the academy (demonstrating the ability to find talent) and on the part of the artists (demonstrating their talent, for instance, when applying for fellowships). In addition, the images are also used as part of artists’ portfolios in order to obtain access to cultural institutions like the Rijksakademie or interested galleries. In both of the two latter instances, the images may serve as legitimization for work done in a certain period.

As part of the fieldwork, a month was spent at the Rijksakademie documentation center, where the daily routines of the documentalists on staff were observed. I also followed the freelance photographer who is hired each year around the RijksakademieOPEN to make overviews of the studios, and take photographs of individual works. These photos are subsequently uploaded to the institute’s collection database at the documentation center. The photographer visits all the studios over a period of two weeks. During my fieldwork, he started the day before the first round of previews, a hectic day for all involved. Based on previous experience he knew it was a good idea to wait as long as possible with the first shots. This increases the chance that the works are actually finished and the exhibition spaces straightened out. He began a day before the kick-off, since it is much easier for him to make the photographs without an audience present. Together with employees at the documentation center, the photographer made a list of studios to visit first. They based these decisions on the staff’s estimate with regard to which artists were already done preparing. Upon entering an artist’s studio, the photographer checked with the artist whether or not he had access. However, on several occasions the artists involved were not present, and were also not answering their phones. In principle, the artists themselves had the final say as to when their studios were ready for documentation. But in several instances the photographer made the decision, after he had failed to get in touch with the artist. Artist B’s studio, for example, was photographed in his absence:

B: “The fact is that these pictures are taken by that photographer, and that they automatically end up at the documentation center, and that that documentation is
publicly available, and that no selection is made by them or by the artist himself. [...] An example of how this works is the typical situation around the Open Studios, that the pictures [...] are put in portfolios in folders on desktops of the computers in the project space, and that it was up to us to let them know if you wanted to diverge from this routine practice. [...] In my case these pictures were not very good representations of the paintings, because they were studio overviews, and that is not what I wanted to show. The folder also contained material that I used for the initial applications rounds to gain access to the Rijksakademie... I would have preferred to have left out half of these pictures. So... this is something I need to be more alert to.”

All artists interviewed had very particular ideas about the way their work should (and should not) be documented. Surprisingly, most of them seemed unaware of the fact that the photographer was hired to document their studios and the works on display. Artist C:

C: “I don’t recall receiving an e-mail about it.”

SdR: It took you by surprise. So what did you think about it?

C: “Uhm... well, if it is just for the Rijks, then it’s OK of course, and yes, I was not really done yet, but in the past I once had ... I mean, if you know that it is for internal use, and that you can look at the result at a later stage... But I once experienced.... Do you know, websites like Trendbeheer, they had my work on it... I was making an installation, and three days before the opening of the exhibition, when the work was not finished at all, they showed all kinds of things that I really rather would not have shown at all, there were photos on the website, really very annoying, that’s really incredibly rude, that someone had put them online without consulting me first.”

In interviews, resident artist made im- or explicit distinctions between the Rijksakademie documentation, for “internal” use, and their own documentation. This distinction was partly brought about by the fact that they were used to taking care of their own documentation. In the words of one of the artists: “Taking care of the proper presentation of your work is simply a routine part of any professional artistic practice.” That the academy also likes to
keep track of what is shown at the RijksakademieOPEN came as a surprise to many. Artist C explicitly mentioned that he did not appreciate it when photographs of his work circulate in the public domain without his approval. During the fieldwork, the Rijksakademie management began to consider making fundamental changes to the institute’s website. As part of the plans, they weighed the possibility of making much more of the current work done at the institute available online (for example by displaying photographs of collaborations at the technical workshops). In the interview, I asked artist C for his opinion. He was not enthusiastic: he did not like the idea of presenting semi-finished works of art. He felt that by opening up the working process to public scrutiny there was a risk of giving the wrong impression about the work. Artist D also indicated that her work was not about showing the process, and she therefore failed to see the relevance:

D: “I don’t think it is about the process of making a work, like, I never show, and never have the need to show, for instance images of how the studio... I mean, I have the studio, but it is not about how a work is being made.”

According to the artists interviewed, the process of making a work was irrelevant for the subsequent attribution of meaning. Insight into the process could even be potentially harmful. Ideally, the “eye of the beholder” was only to be granted access after the artist had hidden irrelevant aspects of the production process, and after he or she had made the decision that the work was really finished.

**Performative articulation**

At first glance it seems obvious that the exhibition and documentation of art implies a particular moment in time, a moment one can pinpoint, a moment when all relevant decisions have been made about what an artist may or may not want to show, and when what takes center stage can be photographically recorded. In practice, presentation and documentation do not necessarily coincide (for chronological reasons, but also owing to personal variations in how people go about the documentation; the particularities of the medium; and the type of artwork that is documented). Documentation can be characterized as a signification process that is related to, but also distinct from, the act of display. It contributes in important ways to making meaning about artistic work. Taking recent discussions about photographic representation and documentation of art as a starting point, let us now analyze the role played by photography as a signifying technological medium at the Rijksakademie.
Based on the fieldwork at the academy’s documentation center and the interviews with the freelance photographer, it became clear that both put forth a promise of a “catch-all” photographic archive, which posits the artworks as referents. At the documentation center, photographs were treated as indexical records, as valuable “raw data” collected in the “field” by the photographer. These practices are largely consistent with a modernist inclination to sustain archives with ideational techniques that tend to be a bit traditional. The photographic conventions that the photographer drew on were also in line with this predisposition. To varying degrees, he used the trope of mechanical objectivity, a certain type of photorealism tied to an optical photography: As came to the fore in the interviews, his photographs were to be as neutral as possible; essential parts of the artwork should be in focus, and the representation should as a whole be properly framed. What he deemed to be just below the threshold of acceptable interventions boiled down to “only what was already possible in the darkroom.” The way he mobilized photography fits the standard epistemic trope around photorealism – intentional selection, mediation, and (post-) processing should be avoided as much as possible.

Interestingly, what the photographer saw as minimally invasive was sometimes experienced quite differently by the artists whose studios he documented. In the previous section I already briefly pointed to potential misunderstandings that could arise over decisions as to whether or not a particular artwork or studio set-up were “done” and “documentable.” Below, I will consider more comprehensively a discussion between the freelance photographer and one of the resident artists over how to properly document her studio and her works of art.

A few weeks after the RijksakademieOPEN, I stumbled upon artist E in the hallway of the academy. During the open studios I had accompanied the photographer while he was making overviews of her studio and installations (see Figs. 1 and 2).
Figs. 1 and 2: IPhone snapshots taken by the author during fieldwork on 3-12-2009. The photographer was working on artist E’s studio overviews, photographs of an installation including swimming pool fragments, photographs and other small objects on the wall.

I asked her what she thought about the documentation commissioned by the academy. Among other things, she told me that she did not trust the photographer to properly capture her installation of large swimming-pool objects, photographs, and other smaller objects on the wall. At a later stage, during an interview, I reminded her of this statement and asked if she cared to clarify:

E: Well, I probably said that I didn’t trust him and it sounds a bit harsh, but I know the work, and also, like, things that I think are important about it. The photographer doesn’t want to do post-production; he uses an about 1 meters high tripod and a wide-angle lens, so that the room doesn’t really get distorted. But the effect is that the sculptures look even bigger, heavier, and everything else in the space is reduced to something in the background. For me, the sculptures were like obstacles to get to things on the wall... I ended up asking him to do photos from a normal perspective - eye-height - and offered to do post-production, and give them back to the documentation center. I still have to check if he sent them to the documentation center. [See figs. 3 and 4 for the photographer’s studio overviews at the documentation center. They are taken with the tripod and not at eye level]. And of course I also took shots myself [with an analogue camera].”

Figs. 3 and 4: Studio overviews (artist E) taken by the freelance photographer hired by the Rijksakademie on 3-12-2009. Though the artist asked for other pictures to be included in the academy’s documentation center archive, the photographs above are the only two studio overviews in her portfolio.

The two “practices of representation” diverged radically. While the photographer was mostly worried about lens- and spatial distortion, turning representation into a technical issue, the artist was more concerned with meaning-distortion.
Who was right? At first sight it may seem obvious that the position of the artist should prevail over that of the photographer. In the end, she is the creator of the works. But by asking who made the best representations of the studio we assume that in principle there is only one way to arrive at “perfect” photographic representations. As it turns out, however, quite different photographic practices can coexist, despite major differences in bestowing meaning on the work of art and the role of photography in that signification process.

An alternative way to understand the discussion between artist and photographer takes seriously the constitutive, formative powers of photography. In the examples discussed above, we saw complex interactions and moments of disagreement, and attempts at managing this complexity through dialogue or avoidance. It is very important that we acknowledge this management, because it “opens up possibilities for considering contrasting ways it might be achieved.” This approach does not assume that there is a studio “out there,” waiting to be captured in a photograph. Instead, it assumes that photographs “intervene in an always already organized phenomenon by establishing a measure against which the phenomenon is articulated further.” We already saw that artists and photographer alike differ in how they experience the exhibition spaces and the works on display, and in how they subsequently articulate these experiences photographically. These differences matter. Their positions, resulting from distinctive experience, interests and skills, profoundly structure the next steps taken in the documentation process. After the transformation of private studio to public exhibition space, the studios are once again opened up for signification in the act of documenting. The studio acts as a site for the production of meaning, where the agency of the artist, the photographer, the works of art, and the photographic equipment quite literally come together to produce something different.

Hybrid spaces
What role do photographs play in the signification process that occurs when studios and artworks are documented? As we have seen, it is not productive to treat them as transparent windows or mirrors. Instead, the photographs are “condensations or traces of multiple practices of engagement,” in which certain elements are highlighted and others downplayed – differences that are subsequently further articulated. To wit, the performative dynamics involved in visual documentation do not stop at documenting studio overviews or “finished work.” Visual documentation becomes increasingly multilayered, due in part to the ubiquity of digital images as well as to new modes of visual mediation as a
result of their embedding on the web.

The interviews routinely addressed the question of the resident artists’ websites. Although not all artists have their own website, most of them use their sites as additional, web-based portfolios. These websites are heavily edited spaces of display, which show their work and those aspects about themselves they feel best represent what they stand for as artists (hiding the other parts from view).

Artists F and G both told me they had opted for a website with a homepage that effectively served as an overview of all the work on the site. In artist F’s case, the homepage displayed small photographic icons of all the works on his website.

F: “I find this encouraging in a sense, that if you see all the work at one glance, together, that it works. That, apparently, there are themes I’ve been pursuing throughout the years, and that keep coming back.”

Artist G chose a similar approach, though she executed it differently. All works could be accessed via a list of names of all the works on the site.

G: “It took a while before I found a form that I liked. Other artists’ websites often have a lot of layers. I prefer to see everything at once, so that you don’t have to go through all the information.”

She arranged the work alphabetically rather than chronologically, and visitors only get to see text not images. Once a name is clicked, a new window opens, showing photograph, title of the work, technique and year. The choice of an alphabetical order was in part brought about because she thinks of her work as a “circular” process.

G: “Some works are not important to me right now, but they might be again, but right now they’re not so close to my heart. [...] [W]hen the work is done, in the sense of like... not being still in the making, then...that’s...like...then that’s when this question of documentation comes up, and that, in a way, is when this process starts of, like, linking things to other works, so that’s the big process.

SdR: So that’s really a moment in time, it’s a decision about when something is finished?
G: “Yeah.”

SdR: So when you get back to things, it doesn’t ...

G: “I think there are maybe two processes, 1. the process of making the work; 2. the process of working on the more...like figuring out what my work is about (...) and then the more distant works start to come together, [...] a process of linking, a process that doesn’t really end, [...] like when I add a new work the whole process changes.”

These exchanges reveal that websites can be hybrid spaces: akin to a gallery when they act as spaces of display, and akin to a studio when what artists put on them alters future production. For most of the artists interviewed, their websites served the obvious purpose of acting as an archive or portfolio. But putting new documentation online also helped them discover patterns in their oeuvre, a process that sometimes also fed back into studio work. Effectively, these images become forms of engagement and of (material, technological, social) embedding that shape the access to and production of knowledge about art. They do not only “hide making” and “show creation” but also have the potential to be “creative” themselves.

Conclusion
In this essay I have analyzed some of the particularities of the complex relationships between artistic creation and forms of documentation and display. I have done so through the lens of fieldwork done at the Rijksakademie for the visual arts in Amsterdam in 2009-10. The fieldwork started approximately four weeks before the annual RijksakademieOPEN. On the basis of observations and interviews, I first discussed how artists and Rijksakademie staff (and in particular the photographer hired by the academy) invest themselves in these practices of presentation and documentation. By zooming in on the transformations the artists’ studios underwent in preparation for the Open Studios, I demonstrated that it is not only up to the artist to decide what to display and what to hide from view. The particular artistic technique, the space of the studio, the institutional context, and the audience’s gaze are all important stimulating or restraining conditions in this transformation process.

Secondly, I focused on the photographic documentation of the studios presented at the RijksakamieOpen by the academy and the artists themselves. Documentation presumes
that the transition discussed above from studio to exhibition space has taken place, and that the artworks are ready for display. But, as we have seen, documentation and display are not necessarily congruent. In fact, the practices of artistic documentation analyzed were themselves generative of meaning, and photography played a large role in this signification process. This signals an additional layer of modes of disguise and display in which the notion of fixed, mechanically obtained representations of the studio may have little purchase.

Thirdly, I discussed the ways in which the process of artistic meaning-making does not end after the studios and artwork(s) have been documented. More than serving a merely reductive function, the photographs were themselves new resources and materials; they facilitated new ways of ordering and arranging knowledge about artworks. For example when they were displayed on websites – online spaces of display that renewed the process of hiding making and showing creation. The photographs on artists’ websites were not only the main material presented, actively mediating between past, present and future works. The same image, when brought into relation with other elements on the website or other information on the web in general, could – by virtue of their relationality – simultaneously stimulate innovation and be part of an archive of “finished” works.

Acknowledging that photographs play a role in “symbolic mediation” entails a departure from a clear-cut dichotomy between representation-of-object and object-represented (in this case a studio, an installation, a work of art). Like the artists, artistic techniques, academy infrastructure and the space of the studio, these photographs actively shape what gets obscured and what gets exposed, what becomes figure and what ground, what turns into the typical and into the accidental. In short, they have ontological consequences that deserve serious scholarly attention.

1 The project was called Network Realism and was pursued together with Anne Beaulieu from 2009 to 2011. More information can be found on www.networkrealism.wordpress.com.


10 “Spaces obtain their meaning from social agreements, confirmed by usage, which can change. Implicit in each studio is an ideology derived from that agreement. So we can ‘read’ studios as texts that are as revelatory in their way as artworks themselves.” Brian O’Doherty, *Studio and Cube: On The Relationship Between Where Art Is Made and Where Art Is Displayed* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007), 7.

11 Ibid., 5-6.

12 The interview data have been made anonymous for the purpose of confidentiality.

13 This chapter focuses on visual documentation of studio overviews, installations, sculptures, paintings, drawings, photographs and videos. See the special issue of *Notation / RTRSRCH* 2 (2010), 2 for analyses of the particular dynamics around documenting performing arts.

Claire Waterton, “Experimenting with the Archive: STS-ers As Analysts and Co-constructors of Databases and Other Archival Forms,” in Science, Technology & Human Values 35 (September 1, 2010), 5: 645-76.

Nigel Thrift, “Space,” Theory, Culture & Society 23 (2006), 2–3: 142. Although the expertise is available at the Institute and the academy is at the moment in the middle of changing existing routines, it requires time and resources to experiment with other types of documentation that are not always available.


Hoel 2011, 88.

Barad 2007, 67.

Ibid., 53.


Hoel 2011, 75.