

STUDIO

1.

The studio is at the top of the stairs on the first floor. You can stand in front of the closed door wondering whether the birdsong comes from inside or out (answer: both). Unsnap the rubber band over the latch and walk right in. The room is a loft drenched in light. The windows open out wide. Strange shapes attached to walls reveal their bones from beneath the white veils that cover them. Blocks of marble lay strewn about the floor; smaller pieces have been sorted by type and size on bookcase shelves. Slender iron rods stand propped against the wall. There's a workbench with tools hung carefully in order behind it. A fine white dust coats the floor. There's plenty of light, loads of clarity.

The windows in Fabrizio Prevedello's studio stay open from early spring to late autumn to let the swallows come and go as they please. It's the third year in a row they've nested up between the rafters. You don't see the nest right away because it's been partially concealed by a shelf that catches the mud and their droppings, but a cunningly mounted rearview mirror lets swallows and their admirers see eye to eye in triangulation.

For a better idea of the studio, think of the interior of a two-storey stone cottage in a tiny village of houses all built in stone halfway up a ridge in the Apuan Alps. I use the word cottage because it sounds charmingly rustic, even if the villagers' great grandfather quarrymen might not agree with this form of endearment, having shouldered these tons of rock up the hill, hewn and faced it themselves. *You* call it a cottage!

My own studio is on the ground floor of the same house. The days drift by. Fabrizio and I often query each other on the successful rendition of a work of art or a structure's staying power. Fabrizio knows a lot about wood, joints, welds, chisels, stone, molding, 120 grain sand paper, compressors, pantographs, tires, power cutters, and various other things.

Late morning. The racket of someone upstairs using a grinding wheel (that annoying power tool with a grinding wheel/blade capable of cutting metal or stone) shatters the silence. Now and then the roaring stops for a minute: footsteps are heard, heavy objects shifted across the floor. Sand and plaster flakes sprinkle down through my ceiling. The paradox of a painter living on the first floor and a sculptor living on the second rarely goes unnoticed by visitors. Fabrizio's usual reply is that he loves the room for its light, and if he has to tote kilos up two flights up stairs, so be it. After all, six years ago he was the one who first decided to rent the house vacant for so long after choosing the location and offering me the chance - not to be passed up, by the way - to set up my studio under his. Once in a while, I hear the loud thump of something falling followed by a curse.

2.

What do I mean with all this? What I mean is that a studio is a very important thing. I recall a book by the art historian Svetlana Alpers on Rembrandt entitled *L'officina di Rembrandt* (Rembrandt's Workshop) or something like that. From what I remember, the gist of it was that Rembrandt's studio (like those of many other painters in his day) – chockablock with musical instruments, firearms, bric-a-brac, rugs, exotic accessories, and the most unlikely hats and other articles of clothing – became authentic theaters in which the entire world could be staged with the presence of a suitably garbed model or two. Even before the canvas, the studio was the place for depiction. What did old Rembrandt want from the world, anyway? He already had a copy of his own. His studio was his ivory tower.

The idea of socially responsible art was only developed a few centuries after the Dutch master. Many of the discussions of greatest significance during the 1900s involved the age-old question of whether art was capable of improving the world or not. Illuminated and ambitious artists cannot but wish to make their own contribution in bringing society more justice and beauty. Who would dare affirm otherwise? With slight differences in terminology, the question of art's social utility still holds current interest today: the informed, ambitious, and politically correct artist (and critic) is a cultural operator who may prove useful to a municipal administration in alleviating the discomfort of those who live in the slums or hinterland, let's say. This is an established trend, and funding for the purpose is even available from the European Union, and etcetera.

The mirror opposite image of the ivory tower arose at the same time as the idea of art engagé. Woe to the artist content to shut himself up in there! Shame on the artist who shuns our worldly hustle and bustle! An ivory tower can only produce autism, or even worse, art for art's sake! Among other things, if you're unlucky enough to be the producer of art for art's sake, no respectable curator will ever invite you to show your work in a serious show. Documenta sets the standard here, and ivory towers are banned in the city of Kassel.

Sometimes, from down in the alley, I holler: Fabrizioooo! Do ya' hear me? Time to go chop wood! We're going to need a bit (around fourteen quintals) for the winter! Come on *down*! We've also got to get the plumber to hook us up to the water mains (it's six years we've gone without)! And don't forget - we've got to install a second 150 kilo iron girder if we don't want your sculptures crashing down through my ceiling! Working hard in his ivory tower, Fabrizio rarely replies.

You've got to wonder what keeps a guy locked up in a studio with a welding iron, gluing strips of cardboard together, chiseling into stone or observing the swallows that fly in and out his window. It might – but this is only a lingering suspicion – have something to do with the sense and nonsense of living in this world.

A studio is undoubtedly a refuge. It can also be a laboratory for neurosis as well. A studio can be a world in itself, an abbreviation of the world at large. A studio is an organic whole (Brancusi enclosed his radio in a hollow cube of plaster so it would fit in with all his sculpture). A studio can be an excuse (Pontorno would hide inside whenever his friend Bronzino stopped by to go out for lunch together). So what good is a studio today when everybody's racing out to embrace the world?

3.

Between one sculpture and another, little glass bottles of water with tiny plants and their roots have been hung from the wall using strands of wire. The phenomenon is more evident where Fabrizio lives. At first you don't even notice - they stick to the wall as quiet as geckos. Not much to look at, apparently lacking ambitious plans for growth, taken all together, these *botanicalia* make up a minute indoor garden. A mysterious garden, in fact, because the criteria behind its layout is not easy to discern. My theory is that our attention must not be placed exclusively on the plants for the aesthetic payoff expected, but rather on the plant-container system, which is often enhanced by additional structural elements (shelves, wall niches). You can't call it furniture; it's hardly gardening. I'd settle for micro-landscaping.

Stopping by in late afternoon, the casual visitor is more likely to be greeted with the following image: Fabrizio bent over a table before a window. With his back to the door, you can't tell whether he's checking mail on his laptop or the pines along the mountain crest running down to the sea, pines trotting cheerfully down to the beach in single file like soldiers. This curious simile is not without historical foundation: the Gothic Line was drawn here 68 years ago. That imaginary line once divided the territory in a very real way. The Nazi-Fascist troops were positioned to the north, the Allies to the south. Cannon shot and mortar fire from Livorno were answered from La Spezia over this narrow strip of land between the Apuan Alps and the Tyrrhenian Sea. Shells used to fall nearby. Who can say what those pines remember?

Often when I enter Fabrizio's studio, the first thing I ask him is whether this thing or that thing is a work of art. Until some time ago, in fact, the question was easier and one I could have almost always easily answered myself without embarrassing him: No, that's just scrap! That's just a model! It's only a piece of a something much more complex! Lately, however, he's been doing his very best to put my critical powers to the test, sounding with greater and greater insistence the barrier (both insidious and fascinating) between raw material and completed work of art, between this is just waste and this is good. This is merely structural; that is the object itself. This exists, that, not yet.

This continuous rooting into the idea of what defines a work (finished) is an approach shared by many contemporary artists. At least one problem has emerged so far: with the verdict still out, we're filling our homes and museums with objects (and our heads with ideas) that are effectively unable to make the grade as works of art, and after all the initial buzz and curiosity fades, they slide quickly into art's purgatory as no more than background noise. On the other hand - and here's the good news - the question is probably only inevitable today, and therefore so much the better if people are taking it seriously. I'm thinking of Sol Lewitt cataloguing the objects strewn about Eva Hesse's studio after her death, analyzing them one by one and humming to himself: that's a piece, that's not a piece. That's a piece, that's not a piece.

On second thought, this investigation into a work of art's terms of existence is only today's version of the perpetual dilemma: what makes a painting a good painting? Strip off the superfluous, cut away the excess, keep cutting...(but not too much!) It reminds me of the lightness with which Italo Calvino dedicates one of his most famous *Lezioni Americane*, Guido Cavalcanti skipping lightly over the fence and

everything else. The writer (or artist) who lightens her material also subtracts its gravity in the process. Less weight, less heaviness. We might even raise the stakes by saying that with Duchamp and Conceptualism, art, in its entirety, has put itself on a permanent diet. Continuing the metaphor, a diet prescribed from carefully reasoned choices is nearly always a healthy thing to do, but when it turns into compulsion, look out for anorexia!

5.

Scraps of marble of different type and shape are laid out in the floor (an intentionally artistic arrangement?). The walls, with their geometrically positioned holes, are peeling in harmonious patches. Older traces of paint back to when this was somebody's room in the family home. Doorknobs and bracketing are temporary. Structures. Pieces. Things just happen (or appear) in a studio. Assessing their status isn't easy: are they exclusively themselves or instrumental to something else? A studio is an epistemological gymnasium. The things inside: with which eyes must we view them?

The mountain itself is just one big ivory tower. That's what they tell us (or how they shut us up), those friends of ours who come up to stay for a few days and then hurry back downhill for what they think they're missing up here. Up here, everything's a landscape, and it *can* be tiring. Indoors, outdoors. Vegetable patches, woods, houses, marble quarries, chainsaws, quarry trucks. The mountain supplies the material. There's no shortage of vegetation. Keeping little plants in glass bottles on the wall is not unlike keeping a cat. The swallows fly in and out the studio window as they please. Whose house is it, anyway?

Luca Bertolo, Giustagnana, August 2012