

CORNER OF THE STUDIO (1993)
EL TALLER (1993)

A DESCRIPTION AND REFLECTION UPON TWO RECENT WORKS

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The theme of the studio has appeared constantly in my work since 1969 when I began documenting my work space in a way that related the intellectual aspects of conceptual art with direct references to the material production of the art object, a self-consciously modernist strategy which still informs my work. As the space of production—the specific location of the construction of artwork in both the material and intellectual sense, as the place where the idea is produced as an object for contemplation and distribution—the image of the studio functions as a pictorial grounding of the conceptual aspects of my work. From the beginning, this “objectivication of thought” was established also as an “intellectual montage”, a link between literary material and a physical, technical process associated with “objectness”. The image of a random assembly of books and writing materials on a table occurs throughout the subsequent development of my work; this can be seen in **Summer Script** (1973), **Image/text** (1979), **Art Work** (1983), **In th Studio** (1984), **Studio/Museum/Street** (1986), **The Idea of the University** (1990), and in most of the works of my “Hotel series” in which hotel rooms became a workspace while traveling. The theme of the studio also acts as a personal chronicle and self-reflection on the work itself in relation to the objective social space of the other two recurring thematic locations that appear in my work: the museum and the street.

But in the more recent work, particularly **Corner of the Studio** and **El Taller**, references to questions of production has signalled a shift in my work from an emphasis on questions of subject matter and signification to th aesthetic, ideological, and technical relations between painting and photography. **Corner of the Studio** and **El Taller** were made especially for Galeria Tomas March of Valencia in 1993 and are related to each other in a specific way. Both works are of identical dimensions and formats. Both works consist of an arrangement of four canvases which combine photographs of my studio with rectangular sections of inkd impressions of plywood on acrylic.

The first work, **Corner of the Studio**, was completed in march 1993. Although in fact in the spring of 1987, at the time that I photographed it, I was producing several large canvases (for instance, **My Heroes in the Streets**), none of this work is visible in the image. Therefore, what is represented in this earlier work is more a “space for thinking” than production itself. In contrast, the second series, **El Taller**, was photographed in the same studio space (to the right of the windows visible in **Corner of the Studio**) and is in effect a reprise, a “correction” of the intellectual ambience of the first work by emphasizing the physical fabrication of the work itself, and thus the studio as a “working space” (in spanish, “ElTaller”).

Furthermore, in the earlier work titled **Corner of the Studio**, the image represents the studio as a place for intellectual production only in an indirect way. Unlike other works of this type (eg. the Hotel series), there is not even any paperwork in evidence; only boxed musical and recording equipment, and a single open book on the divan. Yet the various objects and furniture in the image do indicate potential activity: the forementioned book, musical equipment, an ashtray and a case of beer. Industrial buildings can be seen through the window. The open book, on the edge of the divan next to the chair (largely obscured) where I had been sitting, is in fact, although indecipherable as such in the photograph, “Un Coup de Des” by Stephane Mallarme, a book which over the past twenty years has functioned for me as a cipher for abstraction as a poetic concept, for the concept of the “unreadable” at those moments when there seems to be “nothing to say”.

The actual taking of the photograph involved an interruption in the act of reading this book. As for the interruption itself, I do remember that it was the unexpected arrival of Paul Arbez, a friend who documents most of my wok on large-format transparencies. The production of this image then was an “enfolding” of this interruption into my passive act of reading and daydreaming so that my “absent-mindedness” was intersected with another kind of purposive activity: the positioning of the camera, taking light readings, and so on. The technical operation of photography thus functioned as a self-

conscious witness to my private act of reading, as well as providing a concrete spatial reference for an abstract conceptual activity, a document of a specific, narrative autobiographical moment, an "objective preservation of an abstract instance of time. The photograph was then put into the archives until resurrected five years later.

This photographic element of *Corner of the Studio* is in fact a single image cut into four parts. The photograph was first cut in half, after which a rectangular section was then cut from each half, thus providing four segments which were then laminated onto separate canvases, all of which were arranged to approximate the coherence of the original photograph. The specificity of each segment, which is identified by its photographic information, is also determined by the dynamic spatial contrasts, textures and colours of the "abstract" sections of the canvas area which replace the areas of the "cut-away" section of each part of the original photograph, and thus this excision of photographic space has provided a catalyst for a latent painterly practise.

These "abstract" sections are the dynamic, "hot", shifting part of the canvas as contrasted to the "cool", more inert quality of the monochromatic, black and white photographic element, and thus they make a figurative effect against the pictorial ground. Other than the fact that they are all rectangular segments "cut from the whole", they are limited in number and are clustered together so that they replace the approximate area of the canvas in which the photographic segment is missing. Yet despite the limits that this almost systematic function might seem to place on the spontaneous gesture that could be suggested by these painted (actually "impressed") elements, they do in fact produce a sensuous and pictorially-expressive reciprocity with the work as a whole. The contrasts of colour and tone between the painted ground and the woodblock impression, between the chromatic and textural contrasts of the abstract segments themselves, and in the interplay between their rectangularity and the rectangular forms that shape the architectural features of the photographic portion of the images, characterizes what I would identify as "painterly" in the classic sense; that is, as representation primarily concerned with the construction of pictorial space through gestural mark-making.

However by giving the painted sections a more active part than its previous metaphorical function as the "ground" to the "figurative" or signifying function of the photograph, I have reconfigured the painted segments to now function as the figure, and the photograph as the ground. Some implications of this inversion will be elaborated upon later in the discussion of the subsequent work, **EI Taller**. This raises some theoretical questions that have yet to be fully answered. What, for example, are the implications of this for the relative hierarchical relationships between painting and photography as it has evolved historically? Is this a repositioning in my work of painting as a signifying gesturalism in itself? Until this point "gesturalism" has always been repressed in my work and is in my opinion the most problematic aspect of painterly technique. In more general terms, does this constitute a fundamental shift in my work?

Whatever the case, the "hermeneutic substance", the significantly readable aspect of the subject matter given by the photographic element in these works, assumes a new relation to abstraction. Even though the theme of the studio references the production of the work itself, the absence in these works of the human figure, the artist as "actor", protagonist, and producer, sublimates the "figurative" function of the photograph as a signifying representation to the relatively more dynamic painterly performance of the abstract segments. The "author as producer" here is present not as a self-legitimizing "hero", but as an "absence" looking back through the "space of production", reflecting on work in the process of its self-definition.

Self-reflection on the process of production, which is a testimony to a form of modernist pathology, is even more accentuated in the second work of these related works, **EI Taller**. Although it is a reprise of the first series (it consists of four canvases of the same dimensions and of the same studio photographed six years later) there are some fundamental differences: the photographs are in colour and the abstract segments in black and white, a reversal of the system in **Corner of the Studio**; there are four distinct photographs while in the first series a single photograph was cut into four parts; and the imagery shows the actual process, materials and production of the canvases themselves while the first showed only the space of future production.

The four photographs of **EI Taller**, taken in the summer of 1993, document the space of the studio in a precisely-determined structure, with distinct angle shots that combine to represent a unified space, specifically work tables and a wall against which stretched canvases are propped. These canvases are the very same ones upon which their own photographic images are laminated. The four distinct photographs, each laminated onto a canvas of identical dimensions, were shot from slightly diffe-

rent positions but clearly describe a continuous space, a coherent geography of objects and architecture. This structure in itself is not necessarily significant from an interpretive point-of-view, but does involve the attentive spectator in a comprehension of the unity of the work through close observation of the photographic information. The self-referencing of the photographic "ground" is also effected by the referencing of the tools of production (ladder, tables, stretcher bars, canvas, roller, stapler, etc.) and their relative positions in the image so that the "topography" of the photographic space can thus present these objects as figurative emblems that refer to a particular stage in the production process, that is, in the preparation of the canvas ground only, for in fact neither the photographic nor the painting process in itself are represented. There is an emphasis on the "ground" then, that draws attention to the problematic of "figure-ground" relations that are central to this series and all works on canvas related to it.

There is an ironic effect produced by the fact that his emphatic reference to the canvas support as pictorial ground is conveyed specifically by the photographic element which covers most of the surface of each canvas. Since now the photographic surface has become the "ground" for the "painterly" figuration of the woodblock impressions, the history of photographic practice which has provided a competitive and often opposing force to the traditional dominance of painting and the materiality of the canvas support, now ironically acts as a reifying and "affirmative" reference. Just as test subscribes image, here photography subscribes paintings: -it confirms its existence through mechanical representation. However, it would not be entirely accurate to say that this reifying and affirmative effect ceases to be critical of these relations. Rather, through the "displacement" of the "ideal" ground (the white, virginal space of the primed canvas) of painting by the "vulgar" specificity of photographic representation, this ironic reversal provides the opportunity for reflection upon the relative status of the pictorial arts and what we might call the "idea of the picture", the discursive logos of modern thought as represented in the image. The referencing power of photography has returned to the "deconstructed" materiality of painting and its canvas support the possibility of representation that was lost when painting, and especially its "gestural" rhetoric, was superseded by the "industrialization" of pictorial representation through mechanical reproduction such as photography and film. Now painting in its idealist dimension is ironically affirmed, and its reductive material dimension fetishized, through the intervention of photography.

But the point that must be acknowledged here is that painting even in its most idealized and essentialist aesthetics is not "immaculately conceived", -it is itself a technical invention, materially and manually produced to function as the dominant form of pictorial representation throughout most of the history that established its privileged position as the "horizon of meaning" in western high culture, that is, as "the idea of the picture"; and that photographic representation continues this logos in a modernized mode of production. In the historical displacement of its representational function by the mechanical means of representation (photography, film, video, etc.) painting fell back on its historically evolved status as the ideal essentialist space of meaning- that of modernist abstraction. These works in part are shifting this idealist space of painting over to a technical, material discourse and thus to an "expressive" discourse filtered through mechanical process.

This displacement produces a critical reference to the problematic relations that still remain between the legitimacy of painting and photography as constituted in the discourse of high art. My particular position on this issue is briefly stated as follows: that the ideal space of painting as an historically-produced space of potential meaning, as the "ground of signification", can be itself also a "material effect" -that is, that the "poetics" of painting, rendered apparently obsolete by the vulgar specificity of the mechanical representation of the "real", can be recuperated, needs to be recuperated, as a functional element in the construction of significant, historically compelling meaning. This recuperation of the conversion of the ideality of painting into a material effect, is carried out through the dialectical and critical (and ironic, for what is given away is also taken back) contestation of representational function of both painting and photography (its arch-rival in the static visual arts at least) in the field of the picture.

Yet to continue questioning the logic of this displacement: -if photography now assumes the position of the "ground" of representation in the horizon of the pictorial field- what becomes of painting now that it is pushed out into the foreground as "figuration", but still stripped of its representational capability? A description of how this functions in the "abstract" segments of the canvasses of **EI Taller** follows.