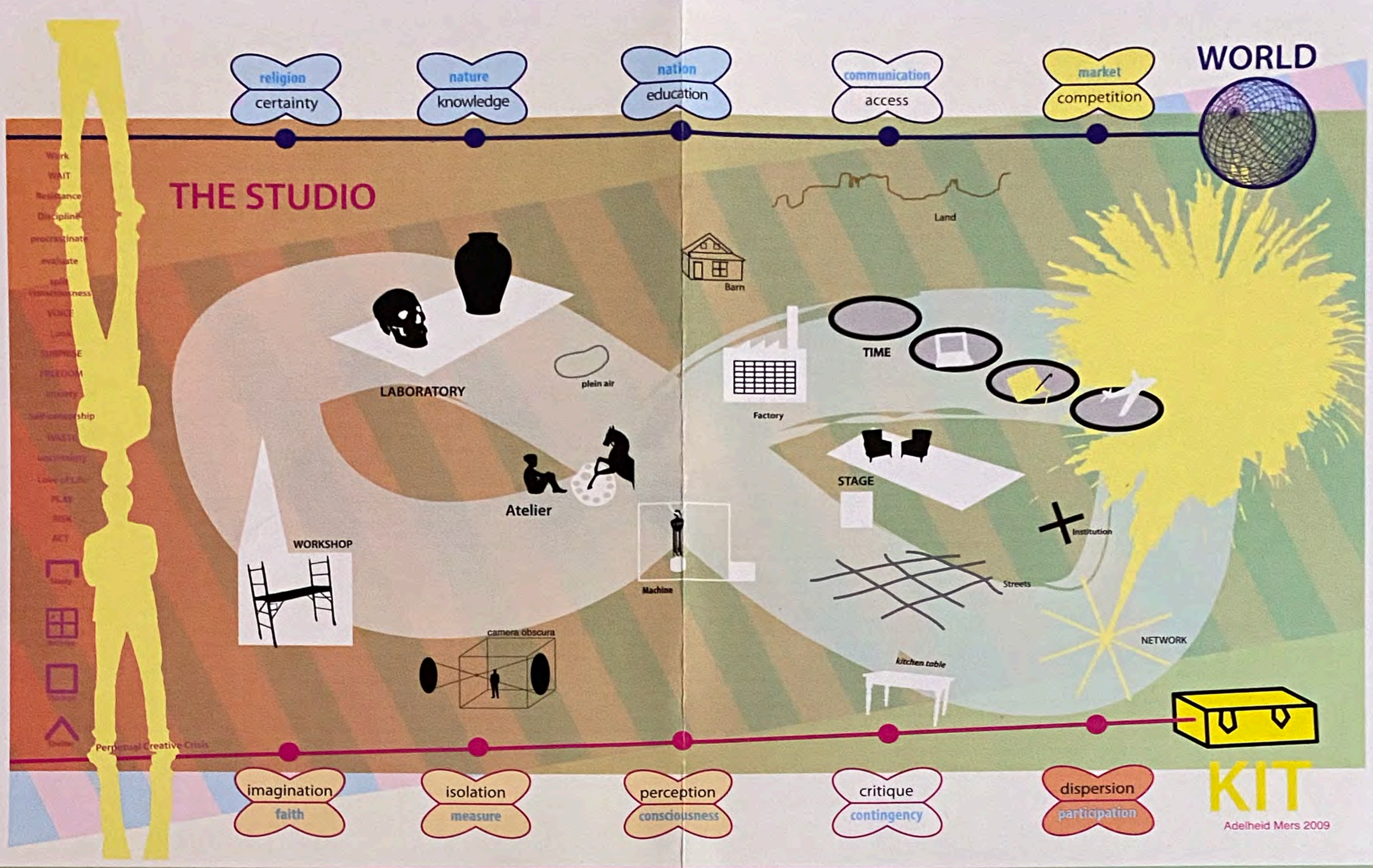

PICTURING the STUDIO

By Michelle Grabner and Annika Marie, curators

Joe Fig: *Can you describe a typical day in the studio?*

Amy Sillman: *I get up late. I'm lazy. My friends say that I'm not lazy, but I think I am. I rarely get up before nine or nine-thirty. Then I putter around, check email and drink coffee, and I walk my dog, call friends, and kind of wake up. I probably get over to the studio around noon. Then I putter around some more, drink more coffee, look at things, change my clothes, move things around, waste time, and do other procrastinating kinds of activities. Then I start working. Then I work pretty hard until, I don't know, until I run out of steam.*[1]

We start with a return to an obvious place, back to Daniel Buren's "The Function of the Studio,"[2] that seminal 1971 essay in which its artist-author would underscore both the studio's unique space of production, while at the same time calling for its disintegration and, thus, explicitly and critically problematizing the studio as a/the site of artistic production for generations of artists-to-come.

But to go back to Buren in 1971 also now entails a jump forward of more than thirty years, to the 21st century and Buren's own revisiting and questioning of his post-studio analysis. He writes in 2007:

> In 1968 when I decided to quit the studio I hadn't realized all of the implications. Many familiar doors were immediately closed to me, although luckily others opened that I hadn't even been aware of. So the implications of not having a studio, as well as to have a studio, automatically implies a production of a certain type of work. Even for me I can see the day when I cannot move or travel anymore, as I have done for over the past forty years. I will either stop working or my work will be different. The only thing that I can imagine helping to keep it going in its present form might be my long experience of moving and looking at different places. Perhaps with documentation I could still work but I would miss those little details that you can only see when you are there, when you meet people. My work would be completely different and certainly, as far as I can tell from my viewpoint today, would revert to more traditional aspects. I prefer not to think about it![3]

It is hard not to take Buren's last line as a bit coy, a sentence that dangles like bait. Buren's prefering not to think about *it* (even with the nebulous referent) flies in the face of quite a lot of thinking about it—thinking about the status and legacy of the auratic studio encoded in the romantic myth of individual creation; about the various undoings and reworkings of the site of artistic production articulated as the laboratory, the study, the kitchen, the home office, the lounge, the factory, the sanctum, the network; about how to identify the active conditions informing the studio of contemporary practice today.

We should be quite clear here, this is not a nostalgic return. There's no mistiness, no enshrinement happening here. In contrast to much of the earlier picturings of artists' studios—from coffee-table tomes to glossy magazine spreads, from romantic documentation to belle-lettrist fashion journalism, from the position of curious philistine voyeur or privileged insider confidant—the "picturing" of this exhibition comes out of a mood of heightened self-consciousness about the very activity of looking, conceiving, and asking what it is to "see" the artist's studio. What is at stake in the representations of artists' studios? Why are we interested in how artists (and others) represent their relation (lived or imagined) to their work—in process, product, and place?

But we should also be careful here. If the "picturing" in the exhibition's title helps to highlight the representational complexities of recognizing something called an "artist's studio," the very range of the works convened here shows the heterogeneity of artistic strategies, modalities, and scales of embodying the studio: photographic documentation and drawings of celebrated studios, the transposition of the contemporary artist's studio into the space of the gallery, theatrical tableaux evidencing its impact on the physical state of the artist's body, delicate line contours of workshop paraphernalia, and so forth. Our picture of the studio comes to look less like an idealist diagram and more like a materialist collage. And while "Picturing the Studio" offers no clean closure to these questions and issues raised, what it does seek to give is a collection of specific studio engagements, and of instances of artists working in, on, and through the studio as a special site of attention, whether that studio operates as subject or premise of that activity.

SAIC School of the Art Institute of Chicago

Michelle Grabner is professor and chair of the Department of Painting and Drawing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and co-director of The Suburban gallery in Oak Park, Illinois. Annika Marie is assistant professor of Art History in the Art + Design Department at Columbia College Chicago.

Julia Fish's paintings are the paragon of perceptual and material awareness. Her unassuming imagery surfaces from layers of carefully applied medium. Thus, Fish's paintings divulge their meaning slowly. The subject of her compositions are not simply the architectural elements and domestic accoutrements that she dedicates to painting, but attention itself. Fish's unyielding awareness in the space of the painting studio and in daily life is intensified in Bas Jan Ader's film *Primary Time*. Problematizing the routine exercise of contemplating a still life in the studio, Ader documents the act of still life creation. Here a vase of cut flowers is not a static object to be interpreted by the artist's gaze, but an aesthetic activity in its own right in which color, composition, and expression are attended to before the painter's eye muses on its form.

Susanne Doremus negotiates the classic profile of her studio chair with a lattice of mark-making culled from both abstract and representational orientations. Her large elegant and urbane fields of layered stria denote a concentrated flurry of rhythmic studio activity. Dana DeGiulio's observational studio drawings commit to pen and ink the contours of brushes, rags, paint spills, blank canvases, and old drawings that litter her studio. Recording this "stuff" functions as a type of fieldwork. Her drawings are an activity distinct from her lyrical abstractions, providing a departure from painterly invention, while expanding her *métier*. Karl Haendel banishes pictorial invention from his studio altogether. Although his subjects are often the very same studio paraphernalia that DeGiulio observes strewn about her workplace, Haendel draws them from photographic documentation, casting them onto paper with the aid of an overhead projector. Magnifying the dimensions of pencils, X-Acto blades, and sheets of crumpled paper, he shrewdly reproduces these images with graphite to achieve uncanny verisimilitude.

Dan Fischer also makes exacting graphite renderings based on found sources or subjects. His course of investigation is dedicated to the copying of iconic photographs that depict modern masters the likes of Jean-Michel Basquiat, Piet Mondrian, Jackson Pollock, and Frank Stella, appropriating images of the artists working or posing in their studio. Perverting while perpetuating the studio's romantic cult status, Joe Fig, like Fischer, draws on the studio as iconic space to create his exhaustively detailed scale models. Conrad Bakker's studio table doppelganger participates in the same impulse, while Daniel Lavitt's portable studio—nestled into a shipping crate—enacts this: both are accurate replications that offer paradoxical commentaries on the contemporary studio. From contempt to celebration, nostalgia to critique, these artists are committed to developing, with an economy of means, new forms, and artifacts based on the perpetual myth of the auratic-studio tradition.

The transposing of Nicholas Frank's studio floor onto the gallery wall in *BIO I*, and the re-creation of Judith Geichman's and Frank Piatek's studios in the Sullivan Galleries seems to poke at the institutional practice of housing, even more so enshrining, famous artists' studios in museums. Ann Craven and Amanda Ross-Ho work explicitly with the ambiguity between private and public space. They challenge institutional influence by displaying and arranging work as if it is still being negotiated in their own workplace, while harnessing the institution's cultural clout to buoy the habits of studio practice into becoming authoritative gestures.

Paradoxically imprisoned by studio routine and cultural expectations of masterwork production, John Baldessari's *I Will Not Make Any More Boring Art*, showing the artist writing this phrase repeatedly, and Alicia Frankovichs's *Fly/Lose*, depicting repeated attempts to walk away from her studio despite being shackled to the studio door, underscore the studio as a an obligatory, limiting frame. Julian Dashper's audio recording of his creaking studio door dwells on the torment of having to make meaningful production within the walls of the studio. Levitating as she studies the work mounted to the wall or showing others collapsed on the floor next to paintings, Carrie Schneider pictures a theatrical response to the gravity of the studio and its impact on the artist's body within the workspace. Matt Keegan's slogans, such as *Work From Home*, and his images of organizational tools, like calendars, seem to spur on dedicated studio work by reminding us that there are seven days in a week and twenty-four hours in a day. Motivated production and studio resourcefulness is also evident in Tom Moody's paper abstractions made while in a permatemp job in the legal department of a large computer company. In a similar way, Frances Stark's poetic collages that champion art making, are tucked within the tasks of the everyday, while Roman Signer's short films result from a curious maneuvering of common materials in both his studio and everyday life.

Barbara Kasten's and James Welling's contributions to the exhibition utilize Jackson Pollock's Long Island barn and Atelier Brancusi, respectively, as specific sites in which to deliberate on theories of abstraction. Meanwhile Leland Rice's C-print titled *Peter Lodato's Studio* unapologetically pushes forwards the tradition of documentary photography and surrogate portraiture. With the surveillance of his own unoccupied studio at night, Bruce Nauman suggests a desire to capture an unexplainable specter; he provides evidence that confirms the site of production as a sacred place, at the same time ratifying its banality.

David Robbins's *Ice Cream Social* engages the TV studio and the promise of television as a democratic medium. As evident in the film's synthetic polish, Robbins does not accept anything less than beauty and loveliness to come from the illusionary potential of this production space. This same stagecraft carries with it wry skepticism in Rodney Graham's *The Gifted Amateur*. This colossal light box triptych emits a glowing mid-century tableau in which Graham, playing the part of a Morris Louis-like painter, is at work in his pajamas in the middle of his living room.

With the droll tableaux of Ivan Brunetti and Nicholas Steindorf, we come back to more representational picturings of the studio. Steindorf, a fresh BFA graduate from the Midwest, likens the artist in the studio to a frenetic, glitzy rock star in his video *In Action* and accompanying posters. Brunetti, a cartoonist and comics author, comes at the subject more quietly. Peeking through a cutout in a small box, one sees his Peanuts-like signature comic figure in the midst of objects that work like signage for the fine arts studio: a jar, a paintbrush, a single exposed light bulb, two gestural abstract paintings. Though vastly different in mood, both seem to comment on the studio as scenery and prop for performing the artist-as-type, for playing a role.

Stephanie Brooks, Shane Huffman, Adelheid Mers, Paul Nudd, Kay Rosen, and Amy Sillman all present examples of work comfortably culled from common sites of production: science lab, library, kitchen, design studio, the body, or the backyard. For example, Kay Rosen's object lessons and linguistic maneuvers draw on cultural research and social archiving. Skillful and witty, her collages and assemblages suggest the scholarship of desktop work and tabletop fabrication. Amy Sillman considers the space of the studio by thinking through the body and the performative nature of her painting practice. A manipulated photograph transforms her bellybutton into a pair of eyes, also suggesting a humorous rumination on the location of the intuitive. Brooks's modest, almost invisible operations in *Tax Forms* shows up another, and under-thematized, dimension of artistic production—the (perhaps ultimate) accountability of profits to the IRS. A closely coordinated statement is Paul Nudd's *Black Milk*, a womb-like video installation of black, bubbling substance, showing a side of studio practice that defies, even makes ridiculous, any idealist identification between giving form to the stuff in the studio and the filling out of standardized form(ing)s. The mysterious organic compositions comprising Shane Huffman's photographs are culled from the mechanics of the darkroom and kitchen. His abstract liquid rings of color are the result of subjecting light-sensitive photographic paper to the microwave. And putting this all together, Mers's attempt to map all the studio practices represented in this exhibition operates organically to arrive at a picture of relation and order.

The following statement of the Pragmatist philosopher John Dewey might be the most apt way of gathering both the diversity and repetition in these picturings of the studio represented in this exhibition: "Awareness means attention, and attention means a crisis of some sort in an existent situation; a forking of the roads of some material, a tendency to go this way and that. It represents something the matter, something out of gear, or in some way menaced, insecure, problematical and strained."[4] Thus framed, the studio as "site of attention" can speak to the dialectical tension of picturing and materializing the studio on two registers: the artist's picturing and embodying the studio; and the institution's picturing and incorporating the studio. At the broadest level, what this tells us is that there are forces—ideological, historical, and cultural—very much at work and play with what the artist's studio looks like and how we look at it. It tells us that we need to be paying attention.

1 Joe Fig, *Inside the Painter's Studio* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2009), 192-193.
2 Daniel Buren, "The Function of the Studio," *October* 10 (Fall 1979): 51-58.
3 Daniel Buren, "The Function of the Studio Revisited: Daniel Buren in Conversation," in *The Studio* (Dublin: Dublin City Gallery, 2007), 106.

4 John Dewey. "Does Reality Possess Practical Character?" in *The Essential Dewey: Volume 1, Pragmatism, Education, Democracy*, ed. Larry A. Hickman and Thomas M. Alexander (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 130.

"Picturing the Studio" is presented in conjunction with the College Art Association's 98th Annual Conference in Chicago, February 10-13, 2010. It is made possible in part with funds from the College Art Association and the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency. It is also part of *Studio Chicago*, a yearlong collaborative project that focuses on the artist's studio. For more information, visit www.saic.edu/exhibitions and www.studiochicago.org.