

ZONES OF SUBJECTIVE PROJECTION: THE ARTIST'S STUDIO AND THE MUSEUM

DAVID M THOMAS

JAY: I never thought I would have a home studio,
like I always liked being in the studio,
and then just one day I was in the studio
just sitting on the couch, staring out the window,
and thinking this is costing like a thousand dollars a day,
just to sit and stare out the window.
(Mascis cited in Thomas 2010, 1)

In the quote above, American grunge guru Jay Mascis suggests, perhaps by chance, something of the existential state that occurs in an artist's studio. Similarly, in Martin Scorsese's 1982 film *The King of Comedy*, the protagonist Rupert Pupkin's basement studio becomes a site for a pathological projection concerned with subjective transformation. Curiously, the ontologically aspirational experience as encountered in the studio can be connected to the experience of the art museum. These two spaces, more usually understood as conceptually separate, are closely linked in that they both relate to and rely upon complex formations of subjectivity.

There are different scenarios for working in the studio. While the most common and frequently romanticised case is the artist working alone in their studio, they may also choose to work alongside assistants or collaborators. This paper considers the journey made from studio to stardom by fictional character Pupkin, as well as the work of real-life (and now deceased) artist Martin Kippenberger, who worked with numerous collaborators and assistants. Kippenberger's work reveals the complexities of subjectivity and its functions in the studio and the museum, deliberately questioning the very possibility of an artist's self-representation. Moreover, he lampooned the idea of the studio as a place for self-construction and the museum as a site for subjective confession, reflection, and transformation.

As his career progressed, Kippenberger increasingly used assistants to develop and fabricate his work. One reason for this was his desire to expand the professional scope of his practice. Being involved with other artists and assistants also provided a sharply objective and satirical articulation to the ever-changing nature of Kippenberger's self-image. His later works clearly demonstrate how many aspects of the studio, the museum, and the self intersect and are comically played out. To expand on the ways Kippenberger addresses the relationships between the artist's studio, the museum, and the subject, I will use the Hegelian master/slave dialectic, as interpreted by Jean Paul Sartre's existential metaphor 'the Look', as a model for the subject's alienation.

THE ARTIST'S STUDIO

The artist's studio is a zone where subjectivities are dreamt up and constantly modified. Here the artist asks very privately formative questions of themselves: 'what kind of artist am I?';

‘what kind of person am I?’; ‘what do I like?’; ‘what kind of thing would an artist like me do?’; ‘what role do I play in the story of art?’. These questions may, at times, unwittingly mimic the modern societal concern with self-improvement.

The desire to improve oneself is most often connected to appearances and expectations of the society in which one’s work and one’s self appear. The studio is a place in which these appearances are considered and manufactured. These appearances do not exist only in this context, nor do they exist hermetically; they are interconnected and are part of an existing exhibition and production system. As Daniel Buren states, ‘the Museum on the one hand and the studio on the other are linked to form the foundation of the same edifice and the same system’ (2010, 156). In the studio, and as I will argue, in the museum, one works on one’s self and teleology of self, as much as one works upon any kind of abstract idea, object, or project. In this way the studio provides the practitioner with a physical space to imagine and enact multiple outcomes.

Humour is also present within these relations and aspirations, and is central to Kippenberger’s practice, located in the somewhat heroic and desperate belief that any artist can achieve objective self-understanding. His work plays with the teleological qualities of studio practice—when the artist projects themselves into their own ‘life movie’ (Diederichsen 2008), with a series of imagined scenarios or professional outcomes. For most artists, this imagined projection might manifest itself as something as reasonable as a professional strategy or career plan. The comic tragedy, in Kippenberger’s eyes, was that the artist might become trapped in this strategy if they became too well-known for doing a certain thing or being a certain kind of artist.

Naturally, most artists dream of improving their practice. Further, through improving what they do, it follows that they improve who they are. Buren (2010, 161) states that the studio is the place in which an artwork can be seen in its most highly detailed ontological and historically appropriate state. He asserts that the studio, or initial place of production, is the most significant space for viewing the work, where the work is most itself. It may well also follow that the studio—as the site of an artist’s initial point of realisation about these understandings and their relationships—is the place where the artist is most themselves.

THE KING OF COMEDY AS A MODEL FOR SUBJECTIVE TRANSFORMATION AND TRANS-STUDIO PRACTICE

An unsettling representation of the above-described scenarios is found in the character of Rupert Pupkin, played by Robert DeNiro, in *The King of Comedy*. Pupkin pretends to be a celebrity comic and performs in his basement studio, which is a careful recreation of the television studio of his idol, comedian and talk-show host Jerry Langford (Jerry Lewis). The studio is complete with cardboard cut-outs of Jerry and his one-time guest Liza Minelli, as well as a large photo-mural of a studio audience. The experience is made all the more realistic by the index of a recorded laugh track.

Pupkin’s profound belief that he is an artist comes from an almost-psychotic personal conviction. This belief is projected at the self, which is, for existentialists at least, as blank as a cinema screen. The backdrop for this projection, the necessary armature for this narrative,

is his basement studio. Ironically, this imaginary space prevents him from attaining the transformation that the approval of an actual audience would afford him. For, in the basement, Pupkin is genuinely isolated; he can only access the world he wishes to belong to via his imagination.

Pupkin not only sees himself as an artist; rather, he dreams of being the best and most powerful artist. Essentially, Pupkin wishes to replace or become Jerry, referring to himself as 'The King of Comedy'. Mortimer notes, 'Rupert's identity is a matter of being transformed into discourse; his status as television image is the highest attainable version of selfhood' (1997, 36). Importantly, Pupkin's selfhood is not achieved through proven ability, acquired secret knowledge, or a specific qualification or award that signifies a particular set of achieved comic skills. More importantly, 'Rupert intuitively grasps that to be a celebrity, one need only be recognised as one' (Mortimer 1997, 35).

In order to achieve his self-actualisation as comedic sovereign, Pupkin needs to leave his lonely basement studio and enter the riskier sphere of action as a real comedian with a real audience. As such, he decides to collaborate with an equally crazed character (fellow autograph hound/artist/assistant/sponsor) Marsha (Sandra Bernhard). Living out her own delusion, she imagines herself in an intense romantic relationship with Jerry Langford. In order to realize their parallel dreams, the pair kidnap Langford and render him inanimate in Marsha's townhouse. By duct-taping him to a chair—in a needlessly over-the-top manner—they turn him, in effect, into a living sculpture. The ransom for Langford is eight minutes of television airtime, long enough for Pupkin to do his comic monologue. The result of this collaboration is that Pupkin, after serving a minimum jail sentence, is catapulted into the kind of heightened state of selfhood that he has so desired. The celebrity status he achieves is not because of his comic ability but because of the extreme nature of his and Marsha's actions. This creates a strange schism between the television-studio space and reality:

This not quite real, not quite imaginary show seamlessly merges Rupert's fantasy life (subjective point of view) and the public world of television (objective point of view). In this last scene, they become inseparable: Rupert has disappeared into the two-dimensional stream of televisual discourse, the contemporary identity taken to its logical extreme. (Mortimer 1997, 36)

IT TAKES MORE THAN ONE TO DEAL WITH THE ONE: MARTIN KIPPENBERGER AS TOP BANANA
Rupert Pupkin's fantasy of becoming the 'king of comedy'—and, more importantly, his strategy for achieving this—can be seen as a metaphor or model for the common cliché of the artist alone in the studio. In order for Pupkin to escape his professional and ontological stasis, he requires real-life accomplices, conspirators, and even hostages. His collaborators are manipulated into transmuting his fantasy into agency. Just as group action was necessary for Pupkin to move from the simulated to the real television studio, so too did Kippenberger's exhibition and studio practice rely on such a strategy. In his work, the artist's studio, and activities therein, were always a kind of simulation of the museum space and its activities. Kippenberger's first major studio began operating out of Berlin in 1978; a Warhol-like factory, it was called Büro Kippenberger (Kippenberger Office). The space functioned as a traditional studio; in it, he created his works with and without assistants. Importantly, it was also a space where he exhibited his and other artists' work in a quasi-museological manner.

Kippenberger produced catalogues, lists of works, and even had stationery made for his Büro. Naturally, the discrete nature of these activities became blurred in this single space. In this setting, his collaboration with artists and assistants came together to address the nature of the museum space as a type of existential studio. This activity often intentionally problematised self-imaging in order to render subjective interpretations of artworks concretely. In these endlessly elaborate activities, Kippenberger addresses the transformative and edifying intentions of the museum space. Once Kippenberger had access to actual museum or museum-like spaces, Büro Kippenberger was given up for the more mobile and fluid method of working with many artists in multiple studio spaces in a number of cities on multiple projects, simultaneously.

What distinguishes Kippenberger's studio practice to that of his peers is that he was unconcerned with producing objects that conformed to purely his ideas. Rather, he believed that his work would benefit from potential communication failures and even malfunctions in its fabrication. This is reminiscent of Warhol's practice where the printed or painted glitch was embraced as ontic slippage. In a more convoluted and deliberate manner, Kippenberger actively encouraged mistakes, misunderstandings, and confusion. This process would often be built on a joke between himself and an assistant, where most of the joke had been forgotten from the night before and the strangely rendered objective remnants were its intended result (Diederichsen 2008, 147). As Diederichsen notes, 'Their [i.e., the assistants] job might have been to make his production more difficult or call it into question, or it might have been to speed it up, to develop ideas, or to hamper their development' (2009, 148).

The studio in these situations was not always Kippenberger's; he might be a kind a guest or interloper, colonizing an artist's practice as well as their work space. According to Diederichsen (2009, 148), these negotiations—with other artists and their spaces—created a conceptual space for the objective rendering of the artist's self in a way that would have been impossible for him to achieve by himself.

One of the maxims in this process was: 'to explore the problem of individuality and authorship, the magic of personal presence in art objects, and the controllability of that which is uncontrollable and contingent' (Diederichsen 2009, 148). Through these elaborate workings, Kippenberger played with the metonymic relationship between artist and artwork and the transfer of the artist's subjectivity into the art object, which occurs as a consequence of this dynamic. These blurred distinctions between artwork/object and artist/subject became central to Kippenberger's project.

Kippenberger's practice was often concerned with the artist's point-of-view and would often result in pictorial descriptions of his ontology. Earlier works were often large-scale, literal renderings of the artist in paint, while later works moved to three-dimensional abstracted representations. These later sculptural works were referred to as 'Peter' objects, and they present uncanny surrogates for the artist. Kippenberger used 'Peter' as a suffix, literally meaning 'guy', as part of his own personal vernacular. For example, when referring to a landscape painter, Kippenberger would call him the 'romantic tree guy' or the 'romantic tree peter'. Diederichsen writes, 'Kippenberger wanted to take his own Peter-hood as an Object. But how can one observe one's own thingamajig? How can one see the suffix that is trailing

behind one's self? This is why, for the first time, his assistants became so important in his work as observers of the observer' (2008, 123).

Kippenberger saw his own role as 'namer' in this process as museological and teleological (Diederichsen 2008). To understand his own position and subjectivity in the field of artistic possibility, it was necessary for Kippenberger to also locate, describe, and name the position and role of the other major players in this narrative. Kippenberger's own life movie included the museum as the ultimate setting and most appropriate site for these explorative works.

THE MUSEUM AS STUDIO OF SUBJECTIVE TRANSFORMATION

Kippenberger Büro's blurred functions reveal Kippenberger's opinion that the museum is an extension of the studio space. He also saw the idea of the studio as narrative content. In his installation, *Spiderman Studio* (1996), a studio set is built in the style of a European artist's loft, with geometric text paintings, a sink, and an effigy of the artist as the superhero Spiderman. The framing context for this staging of the artist-in-his-studio is the museum. Presenting Kippenberger in a space within a space plays with the mythology and ontology of being in the studio. In the museum, the plurality of the visitor's experience is in line with Kippenberger's existentialist assertions that the self (the artist's and the viewer's self) can be anything that it asserts itself to be. Through presenting himself as a fictitious partially rendered superhero, Kippenberger suggests that there is no objectivity to this self, that the self is in a state of constant appearance and disappearance. He also suggests that making art in the studio and looking at it in the museum may have something directly to do with subjectivity.

Carol Duncan and Alan Wallach describe the museum's subjective function in symbolic terms; it is 'a monument to Individualism, and understood as subjective freedom' (Duncan and Wallach 2004, 485). At the point of entering the museum, the individual has an awkward relationship with the art objects found inside. Catherine Lui describes this individual as 'a subject of the Enlightenment and a citizen of the nation-state', while the art object 'is psychologised as an expression of individual creativity and agency. In this way, the museological art object underwrites modern individuality' (2005, 218). The individual, subsumed in the museum space and surrounded by work, can become dramatically destabilised by the multiple self-proxies that they encounter. These spaces can be seen 'as staged environments that elicit ourselves and orient our desire within the trajectories of an imagined past' (Duncan and Wallach 2004, 6). One could also assume this orientation to be directed at the present or the projected future.

This very dramatic, often highly choreographed confrontation could, in its most extreme sense, also be seen as something like what Jean Paul Sartre describes as creating an 'annihilation of one's subjectivity' (Atkins 2005, 89). When a viewer's self-conceived central position (within their world) is challenged by the presence of the artist's proxy, some kind of subjective adjustment has to take place: 'If we understand the art object in the museum as an "ideal vision" of the modern subject, then the museumgoer is taught to assume the correct posture with regard to a continuum of models and ideals to which she may be compared' (Preziosi cited in Lui 2005, 218).

Kim Atkins explains Sartre's concept of 'The Look' as a power struggle based upon Hegel's master/slave dialectic:

Sartre's account of the interpersonal encounter is modeled upon the conflictual relations of the Hegelian master slave dialectic: it is an experience of annihilation of one's subjectivity. This occurs, says Sartre, when another person perceives me. On being looked at, for example, I feel myself to be reduced to an object in the person's perceptual field. This induces in me an acute awareness that I am something other than the centre of the whole world: I am an object in a world in which the Other's consciousness is the centre. This is why, in his discussion of being in the park, Sartre describes the world as 'fleeing' from him when another person comes on the scene. (2005, 89)

If one accepts that artworks in a museum act as metonymic or metaphoric stand-ins for the artist, as in Kippenberger's *Spiderman Studio*, one might also see that the work can generate the sensation of self-consciousness in the viewer, giving them the sense of being 'looked at'. The viewer's subjective position would be greatly disrupted given that this uncanny experience takes place in a large state/national museum, where thousands of works and as many subjective positions are enacted. One could only assume that this would create a kind of alienating confrontation on a grand scale, where one's sense of self 'flees' from the visitor. Of course, this annihilation of subjective experience may also be a pleasurable or potentially liberating experience, where the viewer is given the opportunity to assume numerous potential outcomes of the self. In this way, the museum, like the artist's studio, becomes a site for a kind of subjective speculation and potential empowerment.

CONCLUSION: PLEASE DON'T SEND ME HOME

This discussion has considered the studio as a place where other spaces and narrative outcomes are imagined. In *The King of Comedy*, the artist's studio is a hidden theatrical space where Pupkin's self-actualisation is imagined. However, his actual transformation from 'Schmuck to King' can only occur through collaborative relational action; in this case, a kidnapping that has to happen outside of the home studio. This extreme activity enables Pupkin to commandeer the actual television studio that his home studio simulated. In this way, the initial studio presents the practitioner with a physical space to enact multiple outcomes for artistic self-actualisation. In this instance, the home studio was ultimately inadequate in activating the object as art, or Pupkin as artist.

One finds a similar strategy at work in Kippenberger's practice. The artist's studio becomes a simulation of the museum space and a type of metaphor for the television studio. The assistants and collaborators that produced many of Kippenberger's works are, in effect, its cast and crew. Kippenberger played with the metonymic transference between artist and artwork. He also elaborated upon the all-too-common confusion that exists in art between the artwork and the artist: the realisation that the singer and the song can become conceptually fused.

Kippenberger, with the help of his assistants, played with the expected reception of the

mythical artistic personae and offered it back to the museum as a complex subjective joke. Kippenberger's later sculptural works or 'Peter' sculptures and installations, such as *Spiderman Studio*, addressed the duality between artwork (object) and artist (subject), collapsing it on itself, to create an intentional and highly enjoyable ego deflation. It provided an experience that, for this viewer at least, was simultaneously comically discursive (in regards to the possibility of any individual's subjectivity) and confrontational (in regards to the alienating effects of the studio/museum system).

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IMAGE LIST

Figure 1. Scorsese M, (1982) *Rupid Pupkin's Studio*, film still number 1. *the King of Comedy*, Embassy International Pictures, Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.

Figure 2. Scorsese M, (1982) *Rupid Pupkin's Studio*, film still number 2. *the King of Comedy*, Embassy International Pictures, Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.

Figure 3. Scorsese M, (1982) *Rupid Pupkin's Studio*, film still number 3. *the King of Comedy*, Embassy International Pictures, Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.

Figure 4. Kippenberger M, (1996) *Workshop Matisse subleased to Spiderman*, 'Martin Kippenberger: the problem perspective', Los Angeles, Cambridge, Mass., Museum of Contemporary Art; MIT Press.

Figure 5. Kippenberger M, (1996) *Workshop Matisse subleased to Spiderman*, 'Martin Kippenberger: the problem perspective', Los Angeles, Cambridge, Mass., Museum of Contemporary Art; MIT Press.