



INSIDE THE STUDIO

TWO DECADES OF TALKS
WITH ARTISTS IN NEW YORK

INDEPENDENT CURATORS INTERNATIONAL, NEW YORK

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Duane Michals says, "I don't believe in the eyes, I believe in the mind. . . . I'm not interested in what things look like"; for Haim Steinbach, "Art begins with the eye . . . what we know about the world through the fact that we can see." These opposite thoughts, both of them valid and convincing, give a hint at the richness and range of the nearly seventy texts in this book, all of them excerpts from tape-recorded talks delivered over the last two decades of "New York Studio Events," an annual ICI program of visits to the studios of prominent artists that started in 1981 and continues today. This unique archive of recordings, transcribed and shared here for the first time, constitutes a remarkable record of these artists' thinking at the time each talk took place. Hearing artists speak about their work, especially in their studios, adds unequaled dimension to our understanding; it is an invaluable experience and an exceptional privilege. *Inside the Studio* extends that privilege to the art audience at large, with results that are alternately inspiring, refreshing, thought-provoking, surprising, and humorous, and that are almost always revealing in some way.

The "New York Studio Events" program is a series of studio visits scheduled about a week apart, stretching over the spring months. The visits take place in the early evening, and the artist's talk usually lasts about an hour. Artists may discuss works that they present in slides or on video as well as works currently in the studio. During the visit the guests, averaging about thirty at each event, can ask questions about what they have heard and seen, providing an intimate experience of the artist's work and workplace.

The first studio event took place on a snowy day in February 1981, in the Financial District. It was a visit to the spare sixth-floor walkup studio of sound artist Max Neuhaus, the ICI staff transporting the folding chairs and refreshments up the narrow staircase, the adventurous guests following. The last event in the 2003 program was a talk on an unseasonably hot April day by sculptor Tom Sachs, whose storefront space near Chinatown contains a large but methodically organized array of his tools and parts, as well as a two-ton hoist left by the previous tenant, a machine shop. Over the years between, in enormous rough loft spaces, small living room studios, and almost every other kind of space and location across the city, the exhilarating memories of the talks have accumulated. The program's history has also become thickly embellished with extraartistic experiences: mundane mechanical failures of projectors and burnt-out bulbs have been joined by folding chairs collapsing under guests, clothing anointed with fresh oil paint, lots of fifth-floor walkups, occasional broken elevators and a good number of picturesque but dicey-looking, century-old manual elevators (essentially a floor with a mechanical device to hoist it), deliveries of refreshments gone astray, and more. The experience has also been punctuated by encounters

with nature—being jolted by a bolt of lightning hitting the roof just above our heads, wading through a flooded entrance hall to a studio on the river, wearing coats throughout a visit to an unheated studio during a snowstorm (in April!), and sweltering in early-spring heat waves.

ICI launched “New York Studio Events” as a benefit program to offer a valuable yet seldom available experience that would reflect the educational mission of the organization, which is dedicated to enhancing the understanding and appreciation of contemporary art. The program, which raises funds to support ICI’s exhibitions, is planned each year to include artists who have attained substantial critical recognition and visibility and who have a wide range of viewpoints and aesthetic concerns; most have been included in an ICI exhibition. The aim is not to identify stylistic or conceptual trends, to reflect a curatorial viewpoint, or to illustrate any particular artistic direction, but to represent a broad cross-generational spectrum of approaches to artmaking today. (In its early years, along with visual artists, “New York Studio Events” included important composers, choreographers, and performance artists.) A list of the 208 artists who have participated in the program through the 2003 series appears on pages 292–93.

None of the talks is directed by an interviewer, moderator, or other professional. The artists are told beforehand that they can speak on whatever aspect of their work they wish. Their approaches, and the language they use, vary widely, from thoughts on their work’s intellectual or emotional sources to discussions of formative artistic experiences, working processes and approaches to materials, relationships with art of the past, the current scene, and views on the day-to-day realities of the artist’s life. Some speakers are funny, some entirely sober. Some address broad philosophical issues, some methodically review years of work chronologically, and some focus completely on new works present in the studio.

From one transcript to the next in *Inside the Studio*, then, the reader moves from one unique vision to a completely new one, from one universe to another. There is a chorus of ideas about a hundred different subjects. The talks include personal insights, philosophical reflections, stories, and discussions of the origins of the artists’ practice, the evolution of their thinking, and the intellectual, psychological, spiritual, or even physical basis for the work. Some of the most inspiring comments reflect on basic questions: what is the source of creativity? What is a work *about*? Why does one choose to be an artist?

The formal concerns represented in *Inside the Studio* cover the spectrum of contemporary artistic practice. Many artists offer thoughts on the nature of painting, and both painters and sculptors comment on the use of color. Sculptural theories and practices are addressed by artists working in both traditional and unconventional media, and the talks include a rich array of reflections on the artist’s physical relationship with materials. For Kiki Smith, “Each medium affords you a different experience. The physical manifestation of it is how meaning is constructed.” Louise Bourgeois



Left: Fred Tomaselli speaking in his studio, April 16, 2002, during the "New York Studio Events" program that year
Right: John Currin speaking in his studio, April 10, 2002
Opposite: Tom Sachs speaking in his studio, April 15, 2003

observes, "Material is only material. It is there to serve you and give you the best it can. If you are not satisfied . . . you go to another material."

Artists as diverse as the conceptual photographer Vik Muniz and the painter Terry Winters remark on the nature of drawing, and on the part that it plays in their work. This medium is also central to Jim Dine, who notes, "I've tried through drawing to dissect the anatomy of my inner and outer world." A range of artists discuss their involvement with depictions of the human figure, including painters such as Chuck Close and John Currin and sculptor Joel Shapiro. And narrative content is addressed by artists such as painters Leon Golub and Amy Sillman, conceptual artist Fred Wilson, and photographers Tina Barney and Gregory Crewdson, who says, "Every artist has a central story to tell, and the difficulty, the impossible task, is trying to present that story in pictures."

A number of artists, including Golub, Jenny Holzer, and Steinbach, discuss the role that cultural or political issues play in their practice. Elaine Reichel explains, "What I'm trying to explore and unravel in these works is my own culture's history." Gender issues are among the concerns of several artists, among them Janine Antoni, Sarah Charlesworth, and Laurie Simmons. Meanwhile, R. M. Fischer, Charles Long, and Sachs discuss their involvement with images from the mass media and popular culture. A critical look at nature and landscape remains crucial to numerous artists, including video artist Mary Lucier, who states, "I . . . wanted to comment on how we perceive landscape, how we use it, how we both revere it and denigrate it at the same time." The conceptual and installation artist Mark Dion also deals with nature, but in another register: "My work is largely about the history of natural history."

Many artists note their involvement with other artistic disciplines, such as architecture for Vito Acconci, Donald Judd, Maya Lin, and Andrea Zittel; film for, especially, Douglas Gordon and David Reed; and poetry for Lesley Dill and Michals. A surprising number of artists speak of their struggle to reject the dominant theories of their art school education and to reconnect with the work they did in high school: for Judy Pfaff, Rona Pondick, and Sandy Skoglund this meant transgressing the strictures of Conceptual and Minimalist art theory, for Judith Shea and others it meant embracing "forbidden" figuration, and for others again it involved reconnecting with teenage

pursuits, such as, for William Wegman, drawing the Breck Girl. Several artists, such as Dotty Attie and Robert Kushner, describe the unexpected challenge they faced in teaching themselves how to use oil paints having developed their practices in the days when traditional art materials were disdained.



It's fascinating to learn from several artists how the place in which they grew up played a crucial part in shaping their concerns. Both Lin and Lucier mention the importance of coming from Ohio, as do Fred Tomaselli and John Duff in relation to Southern California, Barney in relation to Rhode Island, and, of course, Ilya Kabakov in relation to the old Soviet Union.

Many artists describe the central role that emotion plays in their work. Petah Coyne remarks, "I work with emotion and the shape comes," while Dill offers, "I want to make work about the emotional bath that we all live in most of the time." Others give surprising replies to the question of where their ideas come from: Jane Hammond often gets ideas for her paintings in dreams. Ross Bleckner, Robert Mapplethorpe, and Muniz, three artists with vastly different approaches, all call artmaking a kind of magic. And several artists speak touchingly about the place of trust in their vision, even when no ideas seem forthcoming: Susan Rothenberg discloses, "I've developed a real trust and a real need to paint. Or rather, I've always had the need but maybe I didn't always have the trust," and Smith says, "I put my total faith and trust in the deep part of my curiosity about things to take me where I'll go."

The talks in *Inside the Studio* explore many more issues, including the influence of other artists or cultures, the use of found materials, involvement with the hand-made, the museum as subject, communication with the viewer, the unity of fine art and applied art, and other topics ranging from the highly theoretical to the completely down-to-earth. One overarching reality, however, becomes clear after reading just a few talks: implicitly or quite directly, all of these artists define their lives and their work as inseparable, and a good number of them relate stories from their lives to illustrate this point.

Almost all of the talks took place in the artists' studios until the 1990s, when the program began to include a few talks in galleries during exhibitions of an artist's work. While still emphasizing the studio as the program's locale, this allowed the inclusion of artists showing their work in New York but living elsewhere, whether in the United States or abroad, as well as artists working outside the traditional studio.

The locations of the studios we visited, in parallel with the overall geography of artists' studios and living spaces in New York, shifted several times over the past two decades, pushed by the real estate market. In the early 1980s, most of the studios included in the program were large, rough, SoHo lofts, former warehouse and light-industry premises made into living and working spaces with sweat equity and offering

not the “loft living” that now symbolizes luxury internationally but a gritty, unglamorous life-style evolving from that in the cold-water flats of previous generations of artists. By the late '80s many artists had been priced out of SoHo, or had chosen not to live there, and were more often to be found in TriBeCa, the East Village, Chelsea, and various neighborhoods of Brooklyn.

Studio practice too has evolved since the start of the program, as more artists have become involved in new media, site-specific installations, and various other approaches to artmaking that require working almost anywhere but a traditional studio setting. There nevertheless continue to be artists who maintain studio spaces that they are willing to open to the view of interested strangers. Some of the participating artists are motivated simply by their wish to support ICI; some use the experience of speaking about their work in this intimate and protected context as part of the process of defining ideas and testing public response to new work.

Between 1981 and 2003, the “New York Studio Events” program included 208 artists or artist teams in 218 talks (some artists spoke twice). Out of these talks, ICI has created an archive of over 150 audiotapes. (During the first four years of the program, unfortunately, the talks were not taped; in later years some artists declined to be taped; others spoke brilliantly but the recorder malfunctioned.) Almost 140 tapes were of sufficient audio quality to be transcribed, of which we were able to include about half in this book. They were kept to a length that would allow the inclusion of a wide range of artists, and since the full transcripts average over 6,000 words each, excerpting them was often a tortuous process that meant choosing among equally insightful passages. The goal was to retain the “voice” of each artist speaking while offering a compelling and coherent text. After the editing was done, the texts were sent to the artists (or, in two cases where the artist has died since the talk, to the foundations representing them) for final approval.

The talks are arranged chronologically to reflect the fact that they took place over almost two decades. Especially when the studio visits date from a number of years back, it is important to realize that the texts reflect the artists’ thinking at the time of the talk, and that their ideas and concerns have likely evolved since then.

The artists in this volume do not constitute a definitive group, and perhaps not even a representative one. Taken together, however, in their number and diversity, their talks form a portrait of the artist today, and an informal snapshot of the New York art world over the last two decades. They also offer an inspiring seminar on contemporary art taught by that most highly esteemed instructor, the artist. Why, when, how, and where a work of art was made—all these are clues to perception. While these artists will remain best known to us through their art, their words bring us a unique insight into the rich substance of artistic practice, a new depth of intellectual and emotional understanding of contemporary art, and a renewed appreciation of the role of the artist in our culture.

ARTISTS' TALKS

All of the artists' texts in this book are excerpts from transcriptions of audiotaped talks that took place as part of the annual ICI benefit series "New York Studio Events."



Born 1952 in Brooklyn, New York. Lives in New York

RONA PONDICK

Selected Solo Exhibitions

"Rona Pondick: Current Work." Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland, 2004

"Rona Pondick." Groninger Museum, Groningen, 2002–2003

"Rona Pondick." Galleria d'Arte Moderna di Bologna, 2002

Selected Group Exhibitions

"Sharing Exoticism." Biennale d'art contemporain de Lyon, 2000

"Alternating Currents." Johannesburg Biennale, 1997

Whitney Biennial. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1991

When I was a graduate student in '77, an art history teacher was talking to me about the scatological references in my work. At the time I had no idea what he meant by this. I went home, looked up scatology in the dictionary, and was horrified. If I could have turned on a dime, I would have. I wanted to make classical work and there I was making scatological work instead.

In '84 I worked on a piece called *Dog* for a year. I wanted my work to have a visceral presence but I didn't know what form it would take. Frustrated, at my wits' end, I picked up *Dog* and threw it across the room. I don't know how I picked this thing up, it weighed 200 pounds. I stomped out of my studio, made myself a cup of coffee, went back to my studio, looked at this thing on the floor, and thought "There's something here."

From '86 until '88 I was working with a brown microcrystalline wax. I had a whole studio full of it. I invited a friend over. His reaction was not what I wanted or expected. His back was riveted against my studio wall, and he said, "This is really strong, but Rona, it looks like there's shit in your studio." I thought, "What's going on here? I've heard this before," and at the same time I thought, "Maybe there's something here I should pursue."

When I could accept the content in my work, I looked to Franz Kafka, one of my biggest heroes. I wanted to embody the contradictions and absurdity hidden in the darkness in his writing. I asked myself what was the most absurd thing I could do with one of these turdlike forms: stick it on a satin pillow. I took a wood beam, stacked the handsewn pillows on top of each other, then placed the bronze turd on top. When I piled these pillows on top of one another it was with the longest pillow on top and the shortest one on the bottom, with one side wider than the other. When I finished the first sculpture I thought it looked like a body sack, sarcophagus, or bed.

It's going to sound bizarre, but the idea of working with a recognizable object like a bed was more upsetting to me than making a scatological sculpture. I was trained by Minimalists who believed image and metaphor were taboo, so I saw what I was doing as a transgression. At the same time that I was afraid of imagery, though, I was excited and turned on by the possibilities, and I asked myself, "What other objects have the kind of metaphoric reading the bed has?" I started collecting objects and turned into a packrat. When I placed a pair of shoes in the middle of my studio I was surprised; here was a stand-in for a person, it implied so much. I felt like I knew the gender, age, and profession of the person who wore the shoes. I was attracted to and wanted to use this symbolic fragment in my work. From shoes and beds I moved to chairs, baby bottles, teeth, and ears. I looked closely at the forms and shapes of these objects. I was interested in what made something feel male or female. I walked around identifying everything obsessively: male, female, male, female. . . .

I knew Freud said that the chair is the holder for the body and therefore is female, but when I looked at a chair I didn't see it as either male or female. Since I didn't see

it as either male or female, I wanted to see if I could inject sex into it. I tried making chair sculptures but they just didn't work, and I wound up throwing many of them out until I discovered that I needed to dwarf the chair so it felt removed from ordinary scale. I then turned the seat of the chair into a buttock and treated the surfaces like a skin. In *Seat*, 1990, I used lace to imply a female skin and in *Chairman*, 1990, I used Spiderman comics to mimic tattooing.

In '90 I started using teeth in my work. I began by using yellow Halloween teeth that the manufacturer soon after discontinued. I called asking if he would consider making them for me and he laughed, saying I was their only admirer and the minimum order was 50,000. I liked these teeth but not enough to order that many. I had to figure out something else. I decided I might as well start casting my own teeth. I'm interested in how the body fragment engages the viewer differently from the whole. When you see part of something you want to figure out immediately what the rest of it is and you assume there is something left out. It is natural to fill in or complete what's missing. I'm interested in the symbolic and metaphoric reading of teeth. We eat with them and they can have a sexual reading. Teeth are a part of us, and we leave them behind when we die.

I once found myself in a very funny position: I was sitting on a panel at the Whitney Museum and someone asked, "So why are you using teeth?" I panicked, asking myself, "Oh damn, I didn't think of this. What do I say?" And before I knew it I'd told 200 people that I had an obsession: every time I was angry with someone I wanted to bite, and I wanted to see what would happen if I channeled that urge into my work. Afterwards a blue-haired woman in a prim suit came up to me and said, "I know exactly what you're talking about: when I gave birth to my baby I wanted to eat it. So I went out and bought a suckling pig the size of my child and ate the whole thing." I thought "They say that artists are weird."

I'm now working on a performance and installation for the Brooklyn Academy of Music and the Brooklyn Museum. The performance is called *Mine*. The costumes for the dancers and a bed that will be used as a stage have the words "I want" written maniacally over the surfaces. We all want; I think wanting is the driving force in life. It is what propels us. We think we want specific things and when we get them we ask ourselves why we wanted them in the first place. We want what we can't have and when we get what we want we want more.

I'm very interested in my artistic roots. I feel close to Egyptian and African art, Brancusi, Giacometti, Bruce Nauman, and Philip Guston. When I finished graduate school I was obsessed with Egyptian and African art. I was trying to understand my likes and dislikes and building my ancestral tree. After looking closely at Egyptian art I started looking at Giacometti. I had a book of his work sitting on my table all the time. I remember the moment when I found a small Egyptian piece that looked like Giacometti's chariot. I realized that Giacometti was looking at Egyptian art and it

made sense that I'd love both. I started to see and understand the connections between things that I loved.

For many years I felt like a Martian, I had no sense of community and didn't feel that I was a part of anything. I was shocked when I found out that there were other artists dealing with the body. We don't create in a vacuum. We all have historical ancestors and teachers. When I went to school, I was trained by Minimalists. I wanted to move away from their ideas but I knew at the same time I had a direct relationship to them. Someone once said to me, "You couldn't do a vertical piece if your life depended on it." I thought, "Wow, that's true." My work is always on the floor, I work with the horizontal, and I use repetition. It was one of those moments when you think, "Oh my God, I am trying so hard not to be anything like my parents, and I am them."

