

# Bacon's Sacred Studio — Nigel Cooke

The mythology machine of Francis Bacon's art, an extension of the artist's scandalising and acerbic reputation when alive, has been going full-tilt now for over half a century. The adjectives routinely appended to his paintings have thus become hollow through overuse; his 'nightmarish vision', 'horrific brutality', and 'existential angst' have come to stand for a time in art now lost, when artists played the role of a conduit between elemental internal emotions and an externalised painted result. The painting itself was the material *factura* of psychic turmoil, or the 'slug trail', as Bacon fondly called his painterly trace.

This romantic conception of the artist as a medium positioned between realities was true of Bacon on a number of other levels, beyond the textbook reading of his 'expressionism'. What goes on inside and what goes on outside, in both bodies and buildings, was an opposition that Bacon strove to conflate in art and in life. The establishing and crossing of boundaries was an essential feature of Bacon's identity; the nexus of this logic was Bacon's studio itself.

It is perhaps for this reason that Bacon's tiny London studio has been moved to the Hugh Lane Gallery in Dublin. Relocated with archeological precision and monumentalised in a glass box, the private space is now finally laid bare for all to see. The perversity of putting this creative den on show as a sacred relic raises questions about Bacon's relation to privacy in life and, by extension, about the universal myth of the creative genius, forging greatness from the interior of a heroic and squalid garret. With the credibility of such myths long since challenged, the Dublin exhibit feels a century older than it is in fact. However intriguing it may be to witness, the sense of intrusion that goes with viewing the studio does not simply reinforce the aura of sacred reverence for creative endeavour. Nor does it merely sentimentalise Bacon's eccentric living setup. Instead, it impels us to examine the concept of Bacon's studio privacy as an active facet of a notion of the sacred, the very notion that we see at work in the Hugh Lane gallery - posthumously legitimising the conversion of privacy into spectacle in this reconstructed studio display.

For an illustration of the complexities of this connection between privacy and the sacred, as well as the conflation of the boundaries by which they are recognised, we need look no further than the mythology of the studio itself. From the many stories that circulate around Bacon's reputation, there emerges a peculiar sequence of events that not only dramatises this logic, but also has consequences which pull the paintings' pictured scenes into a new relation with the centrality of Bacon's studio space. Furthermore, it proves the contradiction of the public display in Dublin of such a private space to be surprisingly appropriate. But first some further background information.

The grandiose, theatrical nature of Bacon's studio privacy was no secret. An integral part of his social mystique, the mythology of the secret space performed a dual function, at once fuelling the aura of Bacon's genius, and providing a refuge from the demands this identity inevitably brought with it. This allowed him both distance from friends and control of his excesses, ultimately providing a structure for all elements of his life. In this way, Bacon was always at work, using the studio as a way of judging the

world of outside appearances. This grubby little box in Kensington was for Bacon like a psychological lens which he used to analyse potential 'sitters' - often heterosexual and usually criminally dangerous men - on his nightly forays into the Soho underworld. Yet while imagining these individuals in the settings of his paintings, Bacon, generally speaking, allowed only photographs of the sitters past the door of the studio, where he preferred to exact his specific brand of pictorial violence in private. The mythology of the space grew from this crossover--danger to safety, public to private. As an architectural structure, it appears distilled in the paintings in opposition to the figures, which lurk, smoke, or copulate in grimy, vaguely drawn London interiors that often make reference to his epically dishevelled 'live-work' studio setup. It is usually a door handle or dangling light bulb that makes the connection, things which were permanently in the sightline of the painter as he made his lonely assault on the canvas, up to his neck in filthy rags, vintage champagne bottles, and bespattered drifts of newsprint and photographs. Although these painted representations were destined for the outside world through exhibitions, the hermetic world of the studio was Bacon's sovereign domain, beyond the need to acknowledge or respond to what is 'other' to either the task or the space. It never spilled out into real life, and real life seldom got a foot in the door.

During the cataloguing of the studio contents before the transportation to Dublin, it is reported that behind the stretcher bars of discarded canvases were stashed rolls of long outdated currencies. This story manages to provide a neat yet romantic symbol for the falling away of responsibility towards the outside world that characterised his studio time.

In this space, Bacon's pictorial violence became possible, a demonic and irresponsible secret, effectively theatricalised in John Maybury's 1998 film about Bacon, *Love is the Devil*.<sup>[i]</sup> Here, the artist's demonic rapture is a crisis in the studio, with Bacon wheeling about, sloshing champagne in hysterical laughter, applying blue oil paint like rouge to his face. A privately ritualistic and excessive performance like this, in which the standards of conventional behaviour are irrelevant, has some distinct theoretical resonances. For example, Jacques Derrida, in *The Gift of Death*, approaches an idea of the demonic as:

Defined as irresponsibility, or, if one wishes, as non-responsibility. It belongs to a space in which there has not yet resounded the injunction to respond; a space in which one does not yet hear the call to explain oneself, one's actions or one's thoughts, to respond to the other and answer for oneself before the other.<sup>[ii]</sup>

There is no such other to answer to in this scene in the film. This is Bacon's privacy in action; the camera is not even really there - it almost takes the place of one of his canvases, an object symbiotic with Bacon's psychology, the evidence as the mute accomplice. More famously, scenarios of laughter, violence and the sacred are familiar from the narratives of Georges Bataille

What is sacred, not being based on a logical accord with itself, is not only contradictory with respect to things but, in an undefined way, is in contradiction with itself. This contradiction is not negative: inside the sacred domain here is, as in dreams, an endless contradiction that multiplies without destroying anything.<sup>[iii]</sup>

In this sense the private actions of the artist are not only in contradiction to norms of

behaviour, but as in Derrida's sense above, part of an irresponsible private logic where even what opposes or threatens to undermine projects ends up reinforcing their sovereignty. The studio's privacy is erected exactly as that which subsumes everything to its laws, dispatching the presence and needs of the other. Maybury's film illustrates this in another sequence where Bacon folklore springs dramatically to life. Petty criminal George Dyer, attempting a burglary, crashes through the skylight of the studio and is immediately invited to bed. This famous story of how Bacon met his lover Dyer is significant for both the violence with which the sacred 'seal' of the studio is broken by a stranger, and the power of the art that familiarises, then consumes Dyer into its vocabulary. Dyer is gradually mummified into the reality of the paintings until the East End minor criminal's identity is reformatted into that of a 'Bacon Sitter'. With Bacon, whether this ever happened is immaterial; either way, the 'other' is radically visualised - in imagination or reality - as only ever gaining access to the studio with the force of a dangerous accident. Yet importantly, what starts out as burglary is converted to imagery and anecdote; the other is translated into painting fodder through the sovereign hospitality of the studio. The initial contradiction of intrusion is, by not being negative in Bataille's terms, already part of the multiplying contradiction of the sacred.

By now it seems as though the studio's sacred privacy is indisputable, an impervious barrier against the other. Yet Bacon's hospitality was not always given out of choice. The pivotal event that I am working towards - an illustration of the sacred, the private and more importantly the imaginative centrality of Bacon's studio space - does not make it into Maybury's film, but involves a more serious brush with criminality.

It is well known that Bacon's sexual proclivities, not least his appetite for sado-masochistic practices, brought him into regular contact with dangerous individuals, and it was this appetite for danger that occasionally reconfigured the barrier between the outside and private worlds of the artist's existence. During a trip to Tangiers, Bacon met Ronnie Kray through a friend. Bacon became familiar with Ronnie and his brother Reggie over time, fascinated by the power they exerted and thrilled by the threatening aura of their capacity for violence. It was the homosexual Ronnie to whom Bacon was more drawn; he was excited by the sadism that seemed to come so naturally to Ronnie, whom Bacon once witnessed publicly humiliate another man one evening in a restaurant by making him kiss his feet. Always daring himself to take the furthest step, the allure of these figures was intoxicating for Bacon both sexually and artistically. Once back in the studio, Bacon the artist could make use of the experiences that would come from exposure to their level of lawlessness. However, although things started off harmlessly enough with the infamous gangsters, back in London circumstances eventually took a turn for the worse. In Bacon's own words:

Some time later one of the ones who worked for them forced his way in to my studio and stole some paintings. He must have been told they were worth a lot of money - the newspapers had printed a story about their selling for colossal sums. The next day I went back to the studio in the afternoon and I found them all there, the whole gang, just sitting around, and Ronnie, the one they called mad and bad, saying how long it had been and how nice it was to see me. Of course I didn't know what to do. It sounds absurd, but all I could think of was to ask them if they'd like a cup of tea. And they said they would, so I made them some and we all sat round and they were terribly polite and just sat there drinking their tea. But when they got up to go there was no doubt what they had meant to tell me. So all I could do was drop the whole thing. A bit later I did manage to buy the pictures back, but I had to pay some ridiculous sum of money.

Anyway, then I was able to destroy them and have done with it. They're still very powerful even now they're in prison. I still hear from them. They send me their paintings. They're very odd. They're always these kinds of soft landscapes with cottages in them. That's really the life they wanted – a life of ease in the country.[iv]

This curious anecdote compacts the sacred logic of Bacon's studio into one circular story. To summarise:

1. **Subtraction.** The sacred seal of the studio is violently ruptured. Paintings were stolen, possibly, in some degree (though this is not known, only suggested on the basis of the consistency of Bacon's backdrops), depictions of or references to that space. So paintings were subtracted from the studio and in place of the missing paintings, the following happens:
2. **Invasion.** Bacon's studio - the hermetic, sacred, existential cave - is invaded by the embodiment of his sexual desire. Powerful men in suits featured regularly in Bacon's paintings and this was the style of dress of the Krays and their henchmen. Like the works coming to life, Bacon's imaginative cast is abruptly and vividly realised, and potential becomes actualised.
3. **Destruction.** Bacon is forced to buy back his own paintings and decides to destroy them.
4. **Parody.** Time passes and the embodiment of desire –the Krays – becomes incarcerated in a real, though parodic, prison, an actual steel cage similar to those Bacon frequently drew around his figures. Meanwhile, Bacon is still painting his fictional cages, widely interpreted as thematising urban alienation, etc. The event gradually becomes another memory. Then, in its place, this happens:
5. **Irony.** The Krays take up painting from within their Baconesque cages.
6. **Alterity.** Inside these cages, by some strange elliptical logic, the Krays complete the picture-circuit by choosing to paint images that represent the opposite of their enclosed surroundings. They are of the open countryside – a subject loathed by Bacon.
7. **Addition.** They send Bacon (still painting cages in his domestic, previously invaded interior) their cage-made paintings.
8. **The Other.** They make the final gesture in the narrative cycle: images of a fictional, bucolic freedom – a pastoral, pastel-coloured, unpopulated elsewhere –are now in Bacon's studio.

What the Krays effectively did was to disarm the sovereignty of the studio with radical alterity in the medium not of violence but of painting. In this way, if Bacon's studio can be understood as operating within the terms of the sacred, then, these crude pictures were the implicit profanity on which the sacred depends by definition. By unknowingly personifying then parodying several strata of Bacon's imaginative vocabulary, through this sequence of actions the Krays unwittingly generated a logic out of Bacon's working sovereignty that could not be subjugated to the sacred. Crediting him with this authority by sending him the daubs in the first place, they succeeded in undermining that authority by turning it inside out and making a picture of it. The visual envelope of

the gesture--an innocuous rural idyll--harboured a darker story, one capable of exposing the fraudulence of Bacon's 'violence', the fragility of his studio 'sovereignty', and the mannerism of his 'prisons'. And by completing the cycle by sending them to the studio itself, the Krays-as-artists consolidated their profane message in the seat of Bacon's creative vision: the psychic lens of the sacred studio. This in turn confirmed the centrality of the studio in the Bacon myth in daily life, as well as in his imaginative working life. It offered a strange body of content – which could not be equated with Bacon's painting vocabulary - hard-wired into kitsch (valueless) scenes of an other that was both unthinkable to Bacon as a subject (the countryside), and anterior to the studio as rigorously private. The little landscapes arriving at his studio were the most ominously profane strangers, innocent at first, yet wrought of disturbing and deadly experiences, visitors to whom Bacon can only have felt betrothed and, ultimately, responsible.

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[i] *Love is the Devil. Study for a Portrait of Francis Bacon*, dir. by John Maybury (BFI, 1998).

[ii] Jacques Derrida (1992), *The Gift of Death*, trans. by David Wills, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, pp.1–2.

[iii] *The Bataille Reader*, ed. by Fred Botting & Scott Wilson, Oxford: Blackwell, 1997, p. 314.

[iv] Michael Peppiatt, *Francis Bacon. Anatomy of an Enigma*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1996, pp. 267–8.

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