



Holding On to Space

Over the past few years, the production of my artwork has required a cell phone, a laptop and an Internet connection. But my current endeavor needs a dedicated physical space, so, after a month of intense looking, I found and moved into a studio.

The neighborhood is a mix of old and new establishments. A taxi garage, a car wash and a tire shop are around the corner from a café, a wine store and two hip, upscale restaurants. There are at least three in-progress construction sites for “lifestyle” apartments, with signs advertising sleek kitchens, fitness centers, roof decks and pet spas.

You probably know where I’m heading with this.

It’s a classic story. Artists move into raw spaces. The neighborhood becomes desirable, buildings get renovated, rents skyrocket. The artists leave. My studio agreement is guaranteed for eight months. After that, who knows?

As I reflect on my hunt, I find myself wondering: How are artists in the United States and around the world dealing with the age-old problem of finding and keeping workspace? I turn to you, the readers of *Communication Arts*, for a wide range of experiences. What challenges have you faced in holding on to (or losing) your studio? Are you sharing or reconfiguring or subletting space? Is government funding available? Have changes brought benefits? Please e-mail me at wendy@wendyrichmond.com. I’d love to hear your stories. Here are a few of mine.

Years ago, I rented a studio in a two-story building owned by a cabinetmaker. The downstairs was occupied by his woodshop and showroom, and he built out the upstairs into artists’ studios. The configuration was more than just workspace: we would periodically have parties where friends and clients wandered through his showroom and our studios. This fostered opportunities—commissions, collaborations, exhibits—for all of us.

I e-mailed my former studio neighbor to ask if the building still existed in its old form. She replied that she had left a few years back. The owner’s business had suffered a downturn and he needed extra income, so he constructed another rental space on the other side of her wall. He leased it to a window-dressing company. “Five people were answering five phones all day,” my friend wrote. “Even my headphones couldn’t block out the din.”

On a more positive note, my recent search uncovered Kunstrraum, a new establishment in Brooklyn that hopes to redefine the way

artists and curators collaborate. A visual artist and her architect husband leased a lot of square footage and built a mix of large and tiny studios plus a gallery. Kunstrraum invites gallery owners and curators to meet with member artists. Its website states: “Kunstrraum is born out of a necessity to create community and foster collaboration between artists, architects, curators, designers, filmmakers and writers.” I hope this win-win situation will survive and thrive.

My best source for studio hunting was Listings Project, an online resource for the New York area started in 2003 by Stephanie Diamond, an artist “obsessed with space,” according to her bio. I subscribed to her newsletter, and every Wednesday, I received an e-mail with cheerfully descriptive posts, most of which included photos. Diamond compiles Listings Project by “reading, curating and personally e-mailing each lister.” (It’s free to subscribe; there is a fee to post.) Groups like Kunstrraum as well as individual matchmaking options are represented. For example, a videographer wanted to rent out his studio half time each week. He was also a teacher, like many artists are, so the studio wasn’t being used every day. He was flexible about the use of the space and happy to share equipment. Unfortunately, the location was not right for me—he would have been a wonderful studio partner (though, ironically, we would never have seen each other!).

I’m happy with the studio I chose, and I’m finished with my search—for now. But when I see garbage on the sidewalk, an absurd thought occurs to me: “Maybe the trash makes the street look undesirable, and that will slow development.” But even more absurd is hoping and believing that my rent won’t go up or that the building won’t be sold.

On my way to my studio the other day, I stopped and chatted with a young man who occupies most of the building next to mine: a huge open space that he uses for painting, photography and filmmaking. He also rents it out to companies for film shoots, which leads to possibilities for work and collaboration. He has not downsized. Just the opposite: he is leasing this space because he outgrew his previous one.

I asked him what he will do if he has to move. His answer was both laid-back and ambitious. “I don’t worry,” he said. “I just stay aware of what’s happening around me and make whatever changes I need to.” **ca**

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