

# Crossing thresholds: a studio of one's own



Above: Zoë Murdoch's studio at Bedford Street, 2013 - 2018



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Writing in 1929, Virginia Woolf posed the question "What conditions are necessary for the creation of works of art?" She suggested that "... a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction".<sup>1</sup>

Writing this, almost one hundred years later, I reflect on Woolf's question but from a different perspective and ask, "What conditions are necessary for the creation of works of visual art?" What does it mean to have a room, a studio, of one's own and how might such a space be obtained not just

for one artist but for many? Going deeper, one could ask how material circumstances affect the mind's ability to be creative and how multiple physical spaces housed together can become both paradoxically individual and collective, private and (occasionally) public. Studio spaces are uncertain milieux. Like particles, perhaps, they can exist in more than one state and they move between security/insecurity of tenure at an alarming and unpredictable rate. Until one enters a studio, one is unsure what happens inside them. How is art made? Why?

Artists' studios are more than the void enclosed by four walls. They are heterotopic spaces (after Foucault) wherein relations with the wider world are changed, reflected or inverted. Certain thresholds are crossed, like that between the reality of the outside world and the interior world of the artist, although these are not mutually exclusive. Studios are thinking spaces that are hospitable to experimentation, play, risk-taking and even failure. A studio is a site of unseen effort and commitment to process, a laboratory where ideas are nurtured into being (free from observation) and the place where they are housed until they are ready to be seen. Once established in such a space it is difficult to leave. Sometimes, however, material circumstances are such that leaving becomes imperative. It is indeed a privilege to have a room of one's own but if that room belongs to the stereotypical garret of the last century with

its connotations of damp, mould, crumbling walls, ninety-one stone stairs to climb and invading birds to chase, then there comes a point when the nature and value of what it means to 'practice' as an artist must be questioned. Would a solicitor's practice survive in such an environment? Or a doctor's?

In 2009 the artist-practitioners housed on the fourth floor of 37-39 Queen Street decided that it was time to consider leaving the building they had inhabited since 1984.<sup>2</sup> In 2012, they did. The move to refurbished premises at 31-33 Bedford Street necessitated a re-brand to "QSS" as the organisational name (Queen Street Studios) was now adrift from its original location. By the end of 2018, QSS was on the move again and in early 2019, they entered a new phase of development and expansion in East Belfast. Now entering its 40th year,

having increased the number of studios from twenty-five to forty-eight, QSS faces the prospect of a third relocation at an unknown point to an unknown destination.

This returns me to 2009 when Jennifer Trouton and I took on the task of finding not just one room but some twenty-five rooms which could support the working practices of a group of painters, sculptors, performance and mixed-media artists. And so began the lengthy process of driving around the city on Sunday afternoons taking note of empty buildings, contacting estate agents, arranging site visits and having our hopes dashed against the intractable wall of proposed boutique hotels or student accommodations. With the support of the Arts Council of Northern Ireland (ACNI), we navigated the unknown world of feasibility studies, and we learned an unfamiliar language which spoke about objectives and constraints, costs and benefits, and assessments of uncertainties. We were uncertain and a little overwhelmed. Is this how art is made? Is this why we became artists? What we knew for sure, however, was that the vacant premises at 31-33 Bedford Street was right for us, until, due to material conditions, it wasn't. And on it goes...

With each move, QSS has upgraded the working conditions for both its artists and valued staff. They have enhanced governance through the inclusion of Board members from the public and private sectors and maintained good relations with key stakeholders including ACNI and Belfast City Council. The improvements in infrastructure, administrative support, equipment and access correspond to the

volume of awards, accolades, prizes and critical acclaim achieved by QSS members on a local and international level. These successes, made quantifiable for funders, enable them to make the case for the Arts – costs and benefits again – so that all art forms have the hope of maintaining a precarious foothold on the funding ladder. QSS has almost doubled in size and has significantly enhanced the support it provides to visual artists. Moving forward, how does it facilitate the provision of so many 'rooms' at an affordable rate?

Back to Woolf. Her aunt, in India, fell from her horse while 'taking the air' and left her niece £500 per year for life. For Woolf, £500 was a life changing amount. She was able to give up a number of 'odd jobs' and concentrate fully on her writing knowing that she was financially secure. Colonial implications aside, today, this bequest (based on an average taken from historical inflation converters) equates to (roughly) thirty-five thousand pounds. Per annum. However, a recent report by ACNI tells us that the mean total income for artists in 2023 was £19,200 and the mean income directly earned from arts activities was £11,200.<sup>3</sup> Neither of these amounts guarantee financial security. Not everyone will be the beneficiary of a substantial bequest, yet artists continue to seek out studio spaces, a room of their own. Each artist will have their unique reasons for doing so. As QSS becomes forty – older than its younger artists and younger than those who have been here since the start – it will continue to provide the necessary conditions for the creation of works of art.



Above: Gail Ritchie's studio, Bloomfield Avenue, 2024. Photo credit: Tim Millen

<sup>1</sup> Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. London: Penguin, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> The first ten years of Queen Street Studios are covered in the 10th anniversary publication: *Beyond the Partitions 1984 – 1994*. Belfast: Queen Street Studios Ltd. 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Arts Council of Northern Ireland. "Working and Living Conditions of Artists in Northern Ireland". 2024. Available online at: <https://artscouncil-ni.s3-assets.com/Working-and-Living-Conditions-of-Artists-In-Northern-Ireland.pdf>