

## Chapter 10

# Dust and Debitage: An Archaeology of Francis Bacon's Studio

**Blaze O'Connor**

This short chapter offers a personal reflection based on the author's involvement in the reconstruction phase of the Francis Bacon studio project. During this project, archaeologists were employed to deconstruct or 'excavate' the contents of Francis Bacon's painting studio in London, and meticulously reconstruct the room at Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane. The studio had long been renowned for its wondrously chaotic contents, its floor strewn with the debris of his creative practice, and its walls—which played the role of an artist's pallet—embellished with vibrant pigments. This chapter draws on 'rubbish theory' relating to the aesthetics of industrial ruins exemplified in the work of Tim Edensor. This research provides a way of exploring why Bacon may have found working in the archaeological equivalent of a 'midden' both an efficacious and enjoyable process.

In 2001, whilst working as an archaeologist in the survey department of Margaret Gowen and Company, I was fortunate enough to work as part of an interdisciplinary team under Gallery Director Barbara Dawson, Project Manager Margarita Cappock, Senior Archaeologist Edmund O'Donovan and Conservator Mary McGrath, during the reconstruction of Francis Bacon's painting studio (Figs. 10.1 and 10.2, see Campbell 2000; McGrath 2000; Hugh Lane Gallery 2001; Cappock 2005). I arrived to what was then still a construction site near the back of Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane, sheltering the architectural shell of the studio, which was bustling with conservators, builders and electricians, and whose steep stairwell 'entrance' already plunged deep into the floor beside it.

One of my favourite memories of those weeks was Ed's and my arrival each morning when we would step across the threshold of the studio doorway, and into the space which, in spite of its dismantling in London, journey across the Irish Sea and reconstruction in Dublin, still felt as if it belonged to Bacon. Ed would announce, or perhaps seek permission for, our entrance into the room with the words 'Good morning Francis!' During the day we could not help wondering if Bacon was looking upon us and our scientific labourings, almost absurd in their attention to detail, the

---

B. O'Connor (✉)

School of Archaeology, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland

**Fig. 10.1** View of the studio.  
(Courtesy of Dublin City  
Gallery The Hugh Lane)



respectful lengths we were going to in order to precision-replicate a product of chaos and accident, and gleefully mocking us.

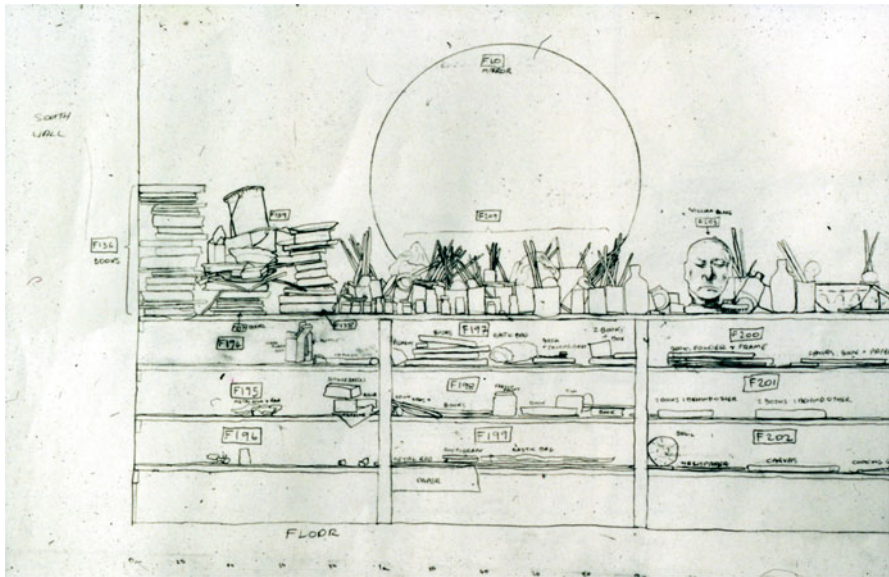
I was struck by the ease with which archaeological processes could be so readily applied in this unusual context—the smooth conceptual shift required, and yet the strangeness and theatre of archaeology as a discipline that the project revealed to me; archaeology as a performance event. The debitage and detritus had built up under all the familiar and complex laws of stratigraphy. Taphonomic forces, accumulation, sedimentation, reuse, repeated activity, truncation, chaîne d'opérateur—these staples of the archaeological thought process were all at home here. The films of dust that lay upon the surfaces of the long shelves at the back of the studio (Fig. 10.3) were carefully curated. These ephemeral contexts had been lovingly but scientifically bagged, their precise provenience labelled and archived along with all of the thousands of other physical remnants. Rediscovered during the reconstruction, what was there to do but return the samples—dust, fluff, minute and unidentifiable fragments—to their correct respective shelves? In the same way that placing an object in a museum or

**Fig. 10.2** View of the paint encrusted door of the studio. (Courtesy of Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane)



gallery elevates its status from everyday object to display piece or artwork, the use of archaeologists in projects like the Bacon Studio perhaps lends the material further cultural weight and value—it firmly establishes the Studio's status as a monument.

The project can also be understood as part of the trend in historical archaeology towards exploring contemporary spaces and cultural practices (e.g. Buchli and Lucas 2001a). These approaches investigate alternative histories, previously undocumented in the traditional sense. Interrogating the material evidence for quotidian practices, they unveil people's engagement with physical places and assemblages, with special attention to temporal and spatial context. Perhaps one of the better known of such projects is Victor Buchli and Gavin Lucas's (2001b) detailed survey of a British council flat, recently abandoned, published in 2001. With limited knowledge of the former occupants' circumstances, the work proposed potential motivations underlying their sudden departure based on the evidence recorded, and set this event within



**Fig. 10.3** Archaeological elevation drawing of the bookshelves at the back of the studio. (Courtesy of Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane)

its wider socioeconomic context. Such approaches seek to enrich existing knowledge based on traditionally documented contemporary histories, as well as to offer new insights that critique and challenge these ‘established’ forms of knowledge and the subjects deemed appropriate for investigation. The subjects of such work tend to highlight contemporary social issues, and have similarly been the focus of artists’ attention (e.g. Whiteread, Rooney and Emin).

Although the significance of Bacon’s profile and the resulting aura surrounding his belongings perhaps contradicts the underlying philosophy of this subdiscipline that, after all, argues for the validity of investigating the ‘ordinary’ individual, the reading of the majority of the materials in his studio as ‘trash’ perhaps mediates this potential disjuncture. The quality of the Bacon archive that resulted from the project offers archaeologists the potential to explore in detail the spatial and chronological relationships between different deposits and features. Each feature and its associated objects and deposits can be located precisely within the studio both vertically and horizontally. Datable items are identified in the database offering *terminus ante quem*-style dating clues as to the likely decade or year Bacon assembled particular boxed collections, distinctive pigment accretions hinting at the last year or month he used them as reference materials.

The aura Bacon’s profile lends his everyday belongings has had a ripple effect. Although the studio’s appearance lends the onlooker the impression that everything that entered the room never left it, Bacon evidently did dispose of some materials at particular times. Three rubbish sacks of materials on the brink of being binned by Bacon in 1978, were rescued with the artist’s blessing by Surrey electrician Mac

Robinson, a friend and drinking partner of Bacon's, and went on sale in 1997 with Ewbank Auctioneers.<sup>1</sup> The auction included items created by Bacon such as slashed and unfinished canvases, diaries, photographs that are reminiscent of those from the studio, a transcript of the famous Bacon interviews published by David Sylvester (1975), and also letters from his friends, colleagues and relatives. The Guardian newspaper's headline attests to the value of all things Baconesque: 'It's trash, but it's Bacon's trash—and it's sold for almost £1 m' (Higgins 1997). The items are now referred to as 'The Robertson Collection'.

The spring clean was evidently not a regular event, however. According to a BBC report on the auction, an 'incensed' Bacon had wanted all of the items to be thrown away after they were disturbed by his workmen at the studio.<sup>2</sup> This reveals on one hand the deliberately curated nature of what at first appears simply to be an accidental archive where everything from unfinished canvases to expired paint tubes was deposited with equal abandon, and on the other, the importance Bacon perhaps assigned to his own depositional processes—evidently some accidents were welcome whilst others were not. Bacon's protectiveness over and fondness of the debitage of his studio is echoed by his comment that 'I live in squalor. The woman who cleans is not allowed to touch the studio. Besides I like the dust—I set it like pastel' (see Hugh Lane Gallery 2001, p. 5).

One of the things demonstrated by Perry Ogden's remarkable photographs of the studio, now art objects in their own right, exhibited and sold as such (Benson 2004), is the stark contrast between the way in which Bacon structured materials within, and built the aesthetic character of, his working space on the one hand, and his domestic quarters on the other. The latter rooms were not without their quirks—the kitchen space featured a bath, and the living room doubled as a bedroom. There are also subtle connections between the two areas—for instance I love the fact that Bacon's bed linen was a combination of hot pink and vibrant orange—colours that so frequently accompany nudes and scenes with sexual undercurrents in his finished paintings, and hues that embellish the studio walls and door. However, the overwhelming aesthetic of his living spaces was somewhat spick and span, pared back, ordered, understated and modest. Surprisingly simple for a man who once worked as an interior designer, but exhibiting a distinctive aesthetic nevertheless.

As a site then, 7 Reece Mews might have been a place where what archaeologists would term 'specialist activities' had been practiced, but these were clearly and deliberately distinguished from domestic life spatially, materially and via the character of depositional events—a dream case study for any archaeologist with a structuralist theoretical bent! The chaos of the studio was therefore a choice. So was there an element of theatre to this outrageous and infamous chaos? Had Bacon cultivated the drama of his studio in the name of notoriety? Although he may have incidentally enjoyed both of these, I want to explore another way of assessing why Bacon chose to work in the archaeological equivalent of a 'midden' in terms of his creative practice. Why was this such a useful mode of operation for Bacon?

---

<sup>1</sup> See [www.liveauctioneers.com/catalog/11767](http://www.liveauctioneers.com/catalog/11767). Accessed June 2008.

<sup>2</sup> See [www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/6474619](http://www.news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/6474619). Accessed June 2008.

**Fig. 10.4** Film still of a screaming nurse from *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925) recovered from the studio. Collection Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane (©The Estate of Francis Bacon. Courtesy Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane)



Through his interviews Bacon has provided us numerous clues as to the creative efficacy of his studio as a workspace:

'I feel at home here in this chaos because chaos suggests images to me.' (Bacon quoted in Hugh Lane Gallery 2001, p. 26)

'Images just drop in as if they were handed down to me.' (Bacon quoted in Sylvester 1996)

'Images also help me find and realize ideas', 'I look at hundreds of very different, contrasting images and I pinch details from them, rather like people who eat from other people's plates.'<sup>3</sup>

'I like to live among the memories and damage.'<sup>4</sup>

'99 % of the time I find that photographs are very much more interesting than either abstract or figurative painting. I've always been haunted by them.' (Bacon quoted in Sylvester 1993, p. 30)

In a filmed interview, Bacon noted how much more interesting and inspiring photographs (e.g. Fig. 10.4) and images were once they had been trodden on a thousand

<sup>3</sup> Bacon quoted at [www.articulations.smithsonianmag.com/archives/84](http://www.articulations.smithsonianmag.com/archives/84). Accessed June 2008.

<sup>4</sup> [www.articulations.smithsonianmag.com/archives/84](http://www.articulations.smithsonianmag.com/archives/84). Accessed June 2008.

times (RTÉ Network 2, 26 May 2001). Very similar ideas have been explored in the recent and growing literature on the aesthetics of trash, or rubbish theory. I would like to borrow from the work of Tim Edensor (2005), a geographer from Manchester, whose work on industrial ruins provides an interesting framework for understanding Bacon's practice and perhaps for understanding archaeology as well.

Edensor (2005) describes the predictable standardised and 'proper' ordering of objects in space that societies regularly enact—'a place for everything, and everything in its place'. In capitalist society there is no room for waste which is carefully hidden through complex concealed systems of collection and disposal. He goes on to outline the effects of the ruination and decay of discrete objects, disrupting, disordering and introducing aesthetic properties that confound our normative ordering of the material world. The alternative aesthetics of detritus—material with unfamiliar sensual qualities, textures, odours and sounds confront the senses sometimes causing surprising associations and memories ('hauntings' in Bacon's terms) to resurface.

This sensual assault heightens the awareness of the materiality of objects, inviting a more active engagement, which is reminiscent of Bacon's treatment of material sources and indeed his own canvases, 100 of which were recovered from the studio in a slashed state. Edensor describes the ruin as 'a space in which things can be engaged with, destroyed and strewn around expressively in contradistinction to interaction with things in regulated realms where typically objects are visually beheld at a distance . . . in the ruin there is no price to pay for destroying things' (Edensor 2005, p. 327). Referring to the frequency of smashed windows and unhinged doors in industrial ruins, Edensor notes 'This testifies to another form of pleasurable action towards things which is enjoyable partly because it is usually prohibited . . . but also because it is a viscerally and sensually exciting engagement with matter' (Edensor 2005).

Edensor's description of objects undergoing decay and transformation strangely recalls some of the writhing and ambiguous forms in Bacon's paintings as well as the paint-encrusted amalgamations of objects atop his studio tables and shelves (Fig. 10.5). He points out that 'The material status of objects in ruins is transient, so that they are in a state of becoming something else or almost nothing that is separately identifiable . . . things eventually become indivisible from other things in peculiar compounds of matter . . . they may merge with other objects or change their characteristics as they become colonized . . . Things get wrapped around each other, penetrate each other, fuse to form weird mixtures of hybrids' (p. 319).

Along with *transformation*, Edensor emphasises the effect of *juxtaposition* in questioning established categories of material so that new associations and images arise (Fig. 10.6). He states that 'in ruins the appearance of an apparently chaotic blend can affront sensibilities more used to things that are conventionally aesthetically regulated . . . the patterns of association which emerge out of the arbitrary combination of things strike peculiar chords of meaning and supposition, and impart unfamiliar aesthetic qualities . . . the ad hoc montages of objects . . . in ruins are not deliberately organized assemblies . . . but are fortuitous combinations which interrupt normative meanings . . . these happenstance montages comment ironically on the previously fixed meanings of their constituent objects . . . juxtapositions . . . have the effect of making the world look more peculiar than it did before' (pp. 322–323).

**Fig. 10.5** A tabletop loaded with artists' materials, the wall behind having served as a paint palette. (Courtesy of Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane)



**Fig. 10.6** Layers of juxtaposed resource materials on the floor of the studio, with an archaeological feature number and north arrow. (Courtesy of Dublin City Gallery The Hugh Lane)





Archaeologist Michael Shanks (2001) has made similar comments in terms of archaeologists' engagement with the discarded materials in ancient deposits. He observes that 'a sensitivity to the strangeness of litter can reveal preconceptions about our cultural classifications . . . such an everyday and mundane occurrence like litter can be surprising. There is, after Nietzsche, a well-worked argument that discovery and innovation arise from metaphor, the juxtaposition of what was previously considered separate . . . Litter creates. So too, the fragment of the past evokes' (Shanks 2001, p. 93).

Returning to the Bacon studio reconstruction project, I will admit that towards the end the temptation to tuck an artefact of one's own, a votive deposit as evidence of one's own identity in a discrete yet visible corner was strong ('I was here too'). We resisted in the name of scientific morality and company reputation. After our work was finished, in a moment that called for a final mark of closure the desire for full and complete documentation of the entire event took over. In hyper-documentation-mode I photographed my own Levi's, now dusty, paint-stained, and linseed-scented, as a last archival effort; hard evidence of my engagement with Bacon's dust before it went into the washing machine. As a colleague of mine Hugh Campbell later pointed out, perhaps I should have put them on e-Bay!

## References

- Benson, C. (Ed.). (2004). *In the time of shaking: Irish artists for Amnesty International*. Dublin: Art for Amnesty.
- Buchli, V., & Lucas, G. (Eds.). (2001a). *Archaeologies of the contemporary past*. London: Routledge.
- Buchli, V., & Lucas, G. (2001b). The archaeology of alienation. A late twentieth-century British council house. In V. Buchli & G. Lucas (Eds.), *Archaeologies of the contemporary past* (pp. 158–167). London: Routledge.
- Campbell, H. (2000). The museum or the garbage can. Notes on the arrival of Francis Bacon's studio in Dublin. *Tracings, 1*, 38–51.
- Cappock, M. (2005). *Francis Bacon's Studio*. London: Merrell.
- Edensor, T. (2005). Waste matter—the Debris of industrial ruins and the disordering of the material world. *Journal of Material Culture, 10*(3), 311–32.
- Higgins, C. (1997). It's trash, but it's Bacon's trash—and it's sold for almost £ 1 m. *The Guardian*, 25 April.
- Hugh Lane Gallery. (2001). *Francis Bacon's studio at the Hugh lane. Exhibition catalogue*. Dublin: Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery of Modern Art and Dublin Corporation.
- McGrath, M. (2000). A moving experience. *Circa, 92*(Summer), 20–5.
- Shanks, M. (2001). Theatre and archaeology. In M. Pearson & M. Shanks (Eds.), *Theatre/Archaeology* (pp. 68–130). London: Routledge.
- Sylvester, D. (1993). *Interviews with Francis Bacon* (4th ed.). London: Thames and Hudson.
- Sylvester, D. (1996). Notes on Francis Bacon. *The Independent*. 14 July.