Imi Knoebel, *Raum 19 III*, 1968, Masonite, wood, multi-part work, overall dimensions variable, c.300 × 600 × 600cm. Installation views at Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, 2006. Photographs: Hélène Binet

From Painting to Sculpture and Back Again (And Again, and Again): On Imi Knoebel's *Raum 19*

– Wouter Davidts

The artist appears in a photograph. Dressed in black and wearing white sneakers, he balances on a ladder in Buster Keaton-like fashion while hanging a painting stretcher high up on the wall. Two other blank stretchers already adorn the surface of the wall, and behind the ladder six large brownish Masonite plates lean against it. Another with rounded edges lies on the floor. The space in the photograph is immaculately clean, apart from the left corner around the sink, which is crammed with diverse tools and debris. The artist depicted is Imi Knoebel, in the midst of working on the sculptural installation *Raum 19* (*Room 19*, 1968) with which he graduated from the Düsseldorf Art Academy that same year. The space portrayed in the photograph is studio number 19 at the Academy, which Knoebel occupied with the artist Imi Giese, and which is next door to the infamous studio of their teacher and mentor Joseph Beuys.[1]

Raum 19, a seminal work within the artist's oeuvre, has not remained within its original studio space. Over the past forty years, Knoebel has reinstalled and reconfigured the piece about ten times for public exhibitions in as many locations.[2] Although the successive versions of *Raum 19* have expanded in size, acquiring an ever wider range of shapes and parts, the work essentially consists of differently sized Masonite panels, Masonite objects and wooden picture stretchers, all variously stacked against the wall, on the floor, attached to the wall or resting against each other. Depending on the site in which they are installed, these elements are put into different configurations, relating in diverse manners to each other and to architectural features such as the walls, floors and corners, and sometimes spreading out over several rooms. Being his graduation piece, *Raum 19* invariably begs the question why Knoebel continually re-installs it — even re-enacts it — and, above all, why he sticks to the denomination of his first studio, Raum 19 at the Düsseldorf Art Academy. What is the importance of the particular space, and what is it meant to convey?

For one of the most recent configurations of *Raum 19*, installed at the Henry Moore Institute in Leeds in 2006, Knoebel placed two large piles of stacked Masonite boxes in the large central exhibition gallery, and filled the smaller back gallery with a dense assembly of boxes, stretchers and panels. Despite the dispersal of the elements and objects across these two different spaces, the Leeds installation surprisingly appeared as one compact ensemble. It wilfully occupied the exhibition galleries as a three-dimensional installation, but invariably emerged as one coherent 'picture'. This very quality has marked all versions and installations of *Raum 19*. Whether one experiences the sculpture in a specific exhibition space or encounters it merely in reproduction, it consistently produces an image *as a whole*. When *Raum 19* was installed in 1987 at the Dia Center for the Arts in New York, Cornelia Lauf rightfully pointed out the ramifications of the spatially 'flat' quality of the work. Installed in a constricted alcove in the industrial building on West 22nd Street, Lauf argued, *Raum 19* resonated intensely with historical traditions of artistic depiction: 'The frontal view conjures up theatrical associations as well as the kind of painting-depicting-painting that was practiced in the seventeenth century.' *Raum 19*, Lauf continued, needs to be situated within the rich art-historical genre of studio portraits and self-portraits in the studio in particular: 'As a reference to the making of art, *Raum 19* becomes a statement about the nature of art and can be related to studio portraits

1 Imi Knoebel left the Werkkunstschule in Darmstadt in 1964 and moved to Düsseldorf together with his friend and companion Imi Giese. Both young artists were highly intrigued by the figure of Joseph Beuys, then the Chair of 'Monumental Art' at the Düsseldorf Art Academy. Initially, the two Imis shared the studio with the painters Blinky Palermo and Jörg Immendorff, but soon afterwards had sole use.

2 *Raum 19* was shown for the first time in the Kunsthaus Hamburg in 1968, and later in several variations, such as in 1979 in the Gallery Friedrich in Köln, in 1982 in the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, in 1983 in the Kunstmuseum Wintherthur and the Kunstmuseum Bonn, in 1987 in the Dia Center for the Arts on 22nd Street in Chelsea, New York. It is currently on view in Dia:Beacon. A second version of the work was installed in 1992 in the Hessisches Landesmuseum in Darmstadt, in 2006 in the Wilhelm-Hack-Museum in Ludwigshafen am Rhein, and a third time at the Henry Moore Institute, Leeds in 2006.

such as those developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, most elaborately by Courbet and Matisse.'[3]

The artist's self-portrait — first and foremost in the studio — has been one of the enduring painterly genres in the history of Western art through which numerous artists have produced some of their most revealing work. While artists such as Rembrandt or Dürer used the self-portrait as a means of self-scrutiny and as a vehicle to question their persona, role and position in society, artists such as Parmigianino or Johannes Gump took it up to show off their talent. Modern painters such as Picasso or Matisse, in their turn, employed it to explore the mystery and drama of creation. But *Raum 19* is not a painting — it is a sculpture. And there is no artist or studio to be seen — only in the few photographs of Knoebel installing the first version of the work in 1968. We simply encounter a collection of objects that at first sight hardly reveal anything about Knoebel himself, let alone about his doings in his studio.

If we follow Lauf's suggestion, *Raum 19* nevertheless should be read as a self-portrait, and by extension, as a self-portrait in the studio. To this end, she rightfully signals Matisse as a possible reference. Matisse painted his studio throughout his career as a means of questioning his painterly practice and artistic personality. While some paintings show the artist at work, such as *Le Peintre dans son atelier* (*The Painter in His Studio*, 1916—17), Matisse predominantly painted the interior of his studio and its contents, such as *L'Atelier sous les toits* (*Studio under the Eaves*, 1903), *L'Atelier rose* (*The Pink Studio*, 1911) and *L'Atelier du Quai Saint-Michel* (*The Studio of the Quai Saint-Michel*, 1916—17). The most famous and intriguing example of this series is undeniably *L'Atelier rouge* (*The Red Studio*, 1911). The painting depicts Matisse's studio in Issy-les-Moulineaux, which features a small retrospective of Matisse's recent painting, sculpture and ceramics. Whereas the artworks appear in colour and detail, the room's architecture and furnishings are indicated only by negative gaps in the deep and all-encompassing red picture plane. The pictorial and spatial effect of the pervasive red colour is simply stunning. Few other paintings, as Jean Leymarie concisely argued, have carried further 'the reduction of volume to the level of the picture surface, all the while magically suggesting the depth of a whole room'.[4] The only sign of the studio's architecture exists in the form of a thin yellow line in the lower left corner — just barely suggesting perspectival space. The line that should mark the corner between the left and rear wall of the studio is absent. The interior space is defined and 'outlined' by the different objects — a closet, a clock, a vase, etc. — that lean against the walls and the different paintings that adorn them. *L'Atelier rouge* is marked by an incessant optical play between the frontal nature of the picture plane and the virtual space of the image: a fundamentally pictorial strategy to create a monochromatic red surface. Or, as John Elderfield once put it, by 'a field of colour flatter than any painted since Giotto'.[5]

Whereas *L'Atelier rouge* and *Raum 19* both enjoy an immediate formal kinship — represented by the shared motif of the empty stretchers that lean against the wall — their affinity is most importantly conceptual. Both works share a similar approach to space, albeit from within a different register; *Raum 19* transposes the flattening of pictorial space found in *L'Atelier rouge* to a flattening of exhibition space, although now by sculptural means. In each iteration, Knoebel has positioned the various objects in such a manner that the line between wall and floor — the space Frank Stella famously claimed that Robert Morris invented with his 'Plywood Show' in 1964 — is blotted out.[6] Time and again, Knoebel fills the space with the work's monochromatic Masonite volumes and elements so that the vertical and horizontal corners disappear and the work generates the aforementioned 'frontal view', or, in other words, a flat picture. Even though the successive installations of *Raum 19* fill different degrees of spatiality, they — contrary

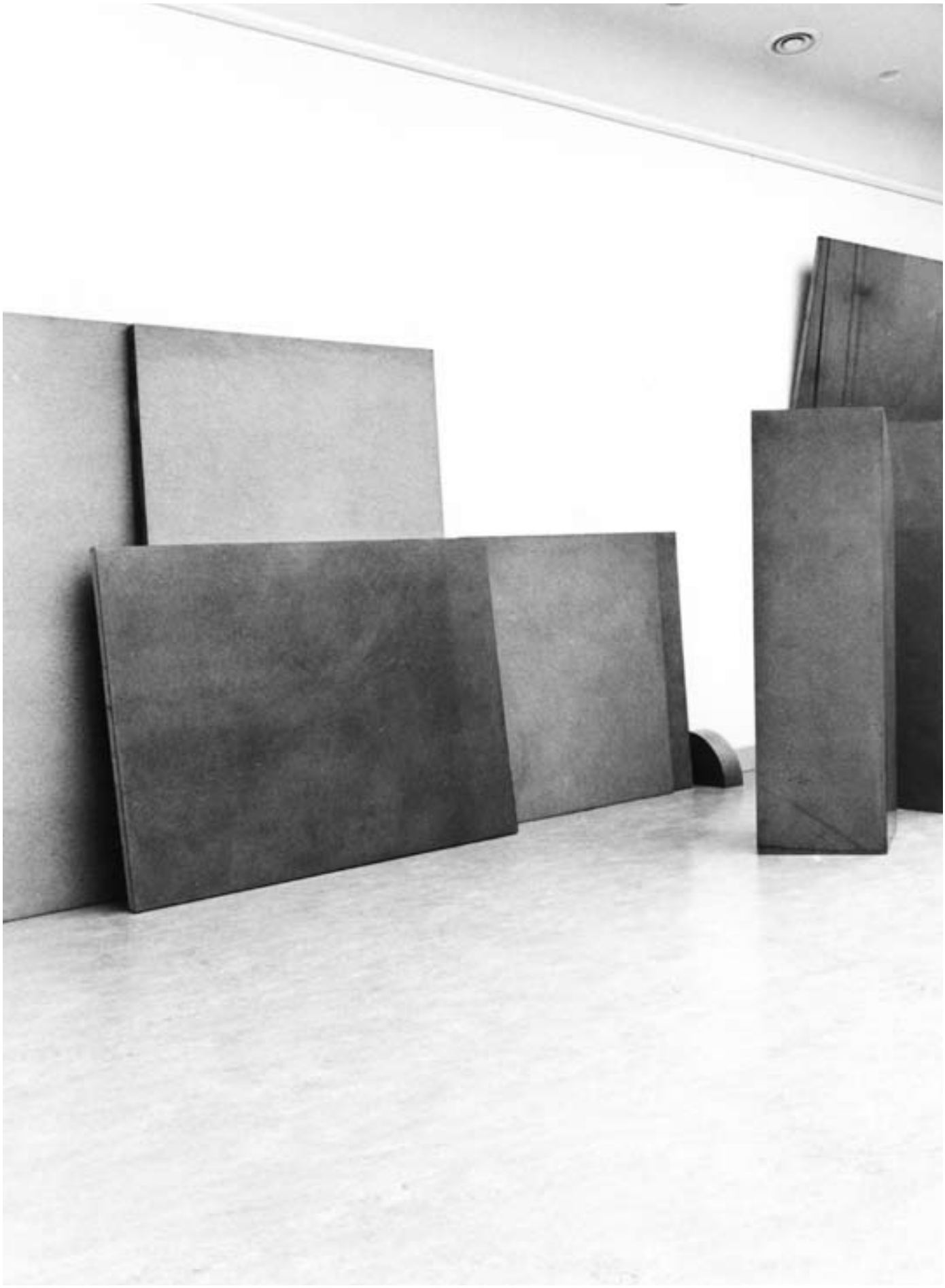
3 Cornelia Lauf, 'Beuys, Knoebel and Palermo: Changing the Guard at Dia', *Arts Magazine*, vol.62, May 1988, p.72.
4 Jean Leymarie, 'The Painting of Matisse', in Jean Leymarie, Herbert Read and William S. Lieberman (eds.), *Henri Matisse*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966, p.14.
5 John Elderfield (ed.), *Henri Matisse: A Retrospective* (exh. cat.), New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1993, p.184.
6 'There is no space between the wall and the floor,' Carl Andre objected. 'Well, there is now,' Stella allegedly replied. This anecdote is recounted in Patricia Norvell, 'Interview with Carl Andre' (1969), quoted in James Meyer, *Minimalism. Art and Polemics in the Sixties*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001, p.113.
7 In this respect the title of the show at the Henry Moore Institute, 'Imi Knoebel: Primary Structures 1966—2006', was slightly misleading since it inevitably recalled the notorious exhibition in the Jewish Museum in New York in 1966, widely regarded as one of the first major shows of the work of a group of artists that was later to become canonised as Minimalism or Minimal art.

to Minimalist installations of that same period — do not invite the viewer to enter the spaces they colonise. *Raum 19* does not explore the perceptual consequences of a particular intervention in a given site.[7] In contrast to Donald Judd's 'specific objects' — belonging to neither painting nor sculpture — the constituent parts of Knoebel's *Raum 19* do not act autonomously. They remain subordinate to the overall 'pictorial' quality of the ensemble — they belong, in other words, to both painting and sculpture. *Raum 19* is a plastic-painterly installation that negotiates with the legacy of painting, but in sculptural disguise.[8] While Matisse's *L'Atelier rouge* offers a figurative depiction of the actual studio space and its contents, Knoebel's *Raum 19* presents a mere array of plain elements and objects. They correspond little with the actual contents of the studio in 1968, but stand most abstractly for the crucial artistic development that happened within that studio — a journey from painting to sculpture and back again. We do not get a realistic portrait of the artist's studio, but an abstract representation of the work he did in there. *Raum 19* most remarkably combines a revision of the painterly tradition of the self-portrait in the studio with a personal take on the troublesome relationship between artistic practice and the post-War artist's studio.

Imi Knoebel, *Raum 19 I*, 1968, Masonite, wood, multi-part work, overall dimensions variable, c.300 × 600 × 600 cm. Installation view at the Düsseldorf Art Academy, 1968

In a 1993 interview between Knoebel and Johannes Stüttgen on 'how he became a painter', Knoebel noted how, when he was starting out at the Academy, the tradition of painting was difficult to deal with. After several experiments with painting, the making of *Raum 19* suddenly offered him a practical alternative: 'Others painted pictures, and we planed — planed and built our pictures.'[9] Facing the task 'to do something' in his studio, the activity of making the Masonite objects and wooden stretchers suddenly allowed him 'to forge a new path', as he put it. Unexpectedly, Knoebel experienced a sensation of great freedom: 'You know, suddenly you manage to produce a picture without having to paint, because, anyway, you can't. You are not a painter, but you want to paint a picture — and there you have it!'[10] During the two years before Knoebel embarked on the actual making of *Raum 19*, the artist had experimented with abstract painting, namely in the series *Linienbilder* (*Line Paintings*). Made between 1966 and 1968, the *Linienbilder* consisted of black lines of different width painted on a white background. When the lines were put closer to each other, the painting appeared almost completely black, while when they were put further away from each other, the painting appeared almost wholly white. Although the *Line Paintings* have often been read as the direct outcome of Knoebel's fascination with Malevich's quest to arrive at the degree zero of painting, the artist himself has explained it far more bluntly as the result of his artistic ineptitude and the ensuing 'pure

8 Max Wechsler, 'Expeditions in the Realm of Painting, Sculpture and Beyond', in *Imi Knoebel: Works 1968—1996* (exh. cat), Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1996, pp.11—18.
9 Imi Knoebel, 'Excerpts from a conversation with Johannes Stüttgen in Düsseldorf on April 2, 1993. Imi Knoebel talks about how he became a painter', *Imi Knoebel: Werke von 1966 bis 2006* (exh. cat.), Ludwigshafen am Rhein and Bielefeld: Wilhelm Hack Museum and Kerber Verlag, 2006, pp.57.
10 *Ibid.*, p.58.



despair [...] to put something on a sheet, on a blank surface'.[11] In an earlier interview from 1982 with Stüttgen, Knoebel even calls the *Line Paintings* mere necessity. When Stüttgen asked him how he could persist in drawing lines, Knoebel plainly replied: 'What else was I supposed to do...?'[12] Determined to become an artist, the young Knoebel indulged in compulsive action within the safe confines of his studio. *Raum 19*, however, offered the proverbial 'way out'.

Knoebel's lapidary statements don't exist in an art-historical vacuum; they are indisputably reminiscent of Bruce Nauman's equally blunt accounts of his artistic activities, most particularly in his studio. When Willoughby Sharp asked him in 1971 whom his art was for, Nauman answered that it was 'something to keep him busy'.[13] Later, Nauman put it thus: 'If you see yourself as an artist and you function in a studio and you are not a painter, if you don't start out with some canvas, you do all kinds of things — you sit in a chair or pace around. And then the question goes back to what is art? And art is what an artist does, just sitting around in his studio.'[14] In the same year that Knoebel initiated *Raum 19*, Nauman began a series of videos in which he portrayed himself doing simple and often obsessive activities, such as *Dance or Exercise on the Perimeter of a Square* (1967—68), *Bouncing Two Balls Between the Floor and Ceiling with Changing Rhythms* (1967—68), *Bouncing in the Corner* (1968) or *Stamping in the Studio* (1968). Both Nauman and Knoebel were confronted with the same problem — namely, what to do in the studio when you are 'not painting' — which they each solved in wholly different manners. Whereas Nauman tried to free himself of the compulsion to paint with witty and cynical Duchampian examinations of 'hanging around' in the studio, Knoebel hoped to find an alternative to the *Line Paintings* and the compulsive activity of painting lines, while still harbouring the hope that he would eventually bring himself to paint.[15]

With a series of works that came directly after *Raum 19*, Knoebel at last successfully discarded the canvas — but only for a little while. For the *Projektionen* (*Projections*, 1968—69) he engraved straight lines and rectangles with extreme precision on slides, which were blackened or left entirely blank. The resultant images were then projected onto a wall and photographed. As such, the line and the rectangle were radically detached from the tangible reality of painting, dematerialised and projected 'through' space onto the wall. With the *Projections* Knoebel disposed of his painterly tools and supports and radically 'spatialised' his work, colonising the space that sculpture occupies. *Raum 19* serves as an intermediary effort for this enterprise, a juncture at which Knoebel enacts a spatial turn in between the *Line Paintings* and the *Projections*, and explores the potential collision between the painterly space of the former and sculptural space of the latter. It both 'represents' and 'performs' the moment and space at which painting tumbles into sculpture and back again.

In this sense, *Raum 19* can be seen as a formal representation of the artistic transition that Knoebel performed in his studio at the Düsseldorf Art Academy, engaging in a sculptural fashion with the remains of his painterly practice. The elements that conventionally produce pictorial space — depiction, colour, paint and canvas — have been reduced to the status of mere support in *Raum 19*, and are condensed to sculptural object: stretcher, panel and volume. As a whole, these objects do not make up a spatially immersive installation, but a flat image: one that, in line with Matisse's *L'Atelier rouge*, 'pictures' the precise transition that happened within the space of the studio.

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Imi Knoebel, *Raum 19 I*, 1968, Masonite, wood, multi-part work, overall dimensions variable, c.300 × 600 × 600cm. Installation view at Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 1982. Photograph: H. Biezen

11 'I wasn't able to start like my fellow students who attended the academy because they were talented. Everybody attended the academy just because they were able to paint nicely. But Imi and I couldn't do this.' *Ibid*., p.51.

12 Imi Knoebel, quoted in Johannes Stüttgen, 'Imi Knoebel 1966—1996: A Progress Report', in *Imi Knoebel. Works 1968—1996*, *op. cit*., p.23.

13 Bruce Nauman, 'Interview with Elizabeth Béar & Willoughby Sharp', *Avalanche*, no.2, Winter 1971. Reprinted in Bruce Nauman, *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words, Writings and Interviews* (ed. Janet Kraynak), Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2005, p.153.

14 Bruce Nauman, quoted in Coosje van Bruggen, *Bruce Nauman*, New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1988, p.14. In an interview with Ian Wallace and Russel Keziere (in *Vanguard* 8, no.1, February 1979, pp.15—18, reprinted in B. Nauman, *Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words. Writings and Interviews*, *op. cit*., pp.185—96) Nauman formulates the problem in a similar manner: 'That left me alone in the studio; this in turn raises the fundamental question of what an artist does when left alone in the studio. My conclusion was that I was an artist and I was in the studio, then whatever I was doing in the studio must be art. And what I was doing in fact was drinking coffee and pacing the floor.'

15 In this context, Knoebel discarded his *Line Paintings* as a mere 'pathetic beginning'. Imi Knoebel, 'Excerpts from a conversation with Johannes Stüttgen in Düsseldorf on April 2, 1993', *op. cit*., p.51.

The recurring stagings of *Raum 19* suggest that this has not been a singular and final occurrence, but has remained an incessant concern within Knoebel's practice of the past four decades: the dialogue between pictorial and actual space, between painterly and sculptural means. The work demonstrates that the questions and problems he posed at the end of the 1960s in his studio in Düsseldorf have not yet been solved but rather are brought up over and over again, in repeated iterations of *Raum 19*, to this day. Ever since the first *Raum 19*, Knoebel's work has been marked by an aware- ness that all pictorial space needs material support, that every painting remains an object whether it hangs on the wall or leans against it. At the historical moment when artists began to abandon the studio — even ritually demolish it within the strategic demise of painting — Knoebel consciously retained it.[16] He safeguarded the studio not solely as the actual site of his work, but first and foremost, and here in line with Nauman, as its symbolic denominator. *Raum 19* is not a singular portrait of Knoebel's studio at the start of his artistic career, but a programmatic portrait of the basic elements of his artistic practice — a practice which was initiated within that studio and which, ever since, has moved from painting to sculpture and back again (and again, and again).

Imi Knoebel, *Raum 19 I*, 1968, Masonite, wood, multi-part work, overall dimensions variable, c.300 × 600 × 600 cm. Installation view at the Düsseldorf Art Academy, 1968

16 For a more elaborate critique of the post-studio discourse, see Wouter Davidts, 'The Myth of the Post-Studio Era', *Stedelijk Museum Bulletin*, no.2, 2006, pp.55—59.

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