

HOW TO VISIT A STUDIO

Don't be shy, don't talk prices, and, please, don't break anything

While admiring the images and quotes Cy Twombly had pinned up in his hillside studio north of Rome, the late Kirk Varnedoe spotted a small piece of paper jutting out from a stack of materials on a nearby worktable. On an impulse, Varnedoe, then the chief curator of painting and sculpture at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) pulled it out and discovered on it a quote from poet John Crowe Ransom—"The image cannot be dispossessed of a primordial freshness which ideas can never claim"—scrawled in the artist's distinctive hand. "Its own scrappy little existence was the proof of the idea it contained," Varnedoe said.

Varnedoe couldn't get the quote out of his mind. On his way out, as Twombly was about to lock the door, Varnedoe turned back and asked if he could take the piece of paper with him. Twombly agreed, and the curator went on to include it in the 1994 Twombly retrospective he curated at MoMA. Eventually, Twombly gave it to Varnedoe, who framed and hung it in his SoHo loft.

"Entering the studio is always a slight trespass," Varnedoe remarked to *ARTnews* last year. "With most artists, I feel I am an outsider in a private space and try to be respectful as such." The studio visit has an insider allure, a certain romance, and a venerated history. It can offer, as it did Varnedoe, the opportunity to find treasures you'd be unlikely to encounter in a gallery. And it affords a glimpse of the artist's process. Varnedoe pointed out, "There's something highly informative about seeing a work in its raw state, in the continuum of unfinished things, things put to one side, empty frames, blank canvases, empty walls." Perceptive comments from insightful visitors can inspire artists to enhance their works. After all, dropping in on each other's studios deeply influenced the art of both Matisse and Picasso.

What makes a successful visit? Some people "give good studio," as UCLA Hammer Museum director Ann Philbin puts it. "They draw the artist out, make suggestions in a positive way." But often the experience is not as rewarding—it is, after all, a dance of egos—and many art professionals and collectors would just as soon look at work when it's installed in a gallery, where they can contemplate it in peace and not feel pressure to say something brilliant or, worse, to show enthusiasm for work they don't like.

While visitors may feel put on the spot, the artist may be even more uncomfortable when the studio becomes a showcase. "Studios are funny places. When you're not working in them, they die," remarks Eric Fischl, who describes his SoHo workspace, one of two studios he maintains, as "disappointingly orderly." Many artists, like Fischl, don't enjoy the exposure. "It takes a lot to get studios going," he says. "And when that gets interrupted by groups, collectors, or even galleries coming in and wanting to see or remove work, it's traumatic." Fischl admits feeling extremely vulnerable when his paintings are exposed. He adds, "I don't show people paintings that aren't finished. I hide them or turn them to the wall."

There are many different kinds of studio visit, "from a corporate presentation to having a beer with somebody in front of a piece of art," as painter Amy Sillman says. Like dating, the visit's success depends, in part, on the ability of all involved to read one another's signals. Following certain rules of etiquette can make the experience more satisfying for both host and guest.

Many studio visit veterans counsel young artists to orchestrate the visit. "You need to be clear and direct," says painter

Eric Fischl, in his Long Island studio, says visits can be "traumatic."



Gregory Amenoff, president of New York's National Academy of Design. "This is how I've gotten to where I am now," Alexis Rockman says he keeps a finished painting out so that the unfinished ones make more sense. Chelsea dealer Brent Sikkema says he makes a point of looking for things in the studio, such as a wall of drawings, that help him understand the artist's process.

Studio visits can be less than glamorous and are sometimes downright bizarre. "I've had my share of studios that are freezing cold, with vermin," comments Thelma Golden, chief curator at the Studio Museum in Harlem. She recalls being sent by a Baltimore city grant program to an artist's basement work space. After showing Golden red paintings, the artist proceeded to open a closet filled with what he called his "materials"—vats of blood. Though she says she tried to play it cool, Golden admits thinking, "I was deep in a basement in Baltimore, and nobody knew where to find me."

For artists, too, a visit can leave a lasting and sometimes disturbing impression. Fischl recalls showing his 1984 painting *Daddy's Girl* to a group when, suddenly, an eccentric art-world denizen pointed to it with her cane and asked, "Did you mean to paint a Pekingese dog's face with the hair of that girl?" Fischl says, "And there it was! Of course, once you see it, there's no way you can get rid of that dog."

Holly Block, executive director of the New York alternative space Art in General, says that at one point she was making 355 studio visits a year. She gives workshops to emerging artists on how to prepare for such occasions. "Try to make my studio visit as easy as possible. Don't make me wait a half hour while you unpack your work, and don't put every artwork you ever made on the wall," suggests Block, who encourages artists to provide visitors with a book of images of past work. "And I don't need a three-course meal," she adds, "although a glass of seltzer would be nice, and a chair without wet paint on it."

Visitors are well advised to do research in advance. "To go into a studio cold is to leave yourself wide open for a response that may not be positive," notes Douglas Dreishpoon, senior curator of Buffalo's Albright-Knox Art Gallery. At the same time, it is important not to be afraid of potentially exposing your ignorance by posing simple questions. "I tell people to ask," says Rockman. "There's no such thing as a stupid question." But veteran studio visitors and artists warn others not to let their curiosity take them too far: you shouldn't poke around where you're not invited, open drawers, or touch work, nor should you discuss prices unless you're serious. "The worst is when people just want to talk about the market," comments artist Fred Tomaselli. "How much is your work going for, who owns it, what gallery are you with?" And while it's a no-no to think you'll ace the gallery out of a com-

mission by buying directly from the artist, the more aggressive collectors are "increasingly savvy about getting access to the studio in advance of an upcoming exhibition, pressing to secure first rights to such-and-such a piece," according to Paul Schimmel, chief curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles.

Often the studio visit is part of an ongoing conversation, and the payoff may be in the future. For the visitor, it sometimes takes years to grasp fully the artist's new work. Critic and *ARTnews* contributing editor Lilly Wei recalls visiting Brice Marden's studio early in her career. Instead of the artist's famed monochrome paintings she was expecting, Wei saw canvases with looping lines. "I was so shy, I didn't know if I should say anything," she says of the historic shift she witnessed. "I didn't want to seem totally out of it," Wei adds.

Even when a visit goes awry, there can be positive results. Artist Petah Coyne recalls a museum curator sitting for several hours in her studio, staring out the window, and sighing occasionally. "This is not going well for me," Coyne thought. "The next day, though, he phoned and offered a one-person exhibit." When the late New York dealer Richard Bellamy, founder of the Green Gallery, visited Robert Morris's studio, he fell on top of one of Morris's sculptures; Bellamy later included that sculpture in a show.

Ultimately, it's difficult to predict the direction a visit will take, though gauging the mood can be helpful. Emerging artist Danica Phelps attributes a good studio-visit track record to her experience as a waitress. "You have to be able to know if they want you to be super friendly, if they want to know all about your personal life, or if they just want coffee." ■

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Amy Sillman and Felix, her dog, in Sillman's Brooklyn studio.