

Show and Tell:

The Dos and Don'ts

of Studio Visits



Carolanna Parlato's studio in Brooklyn, New York (above). "There are collectors who are interested only in one specific body of work or one time frame," says Michelle Cooke (right). "Others want to see what's brand new."

Art-world insiders dispense advice on what you should say, how the artist ought to display the work, and which refreshments to serve, if any

BY ANN LANDI



LEFT: COURTESY THE ARTIST; RIGHT: JANIE HART



“In the heady days of 2007, I remember

Damien Hirst sending me a helicopter to his studio,” says Andrew Renton, director of Marlborough Fine Art in London. “There, it was not about the artist in a paint-spattered smock. The artist was moving from room to room, overseeing all the projects. It was so razor-sharp how he looked at what his assistants were doing.” Renton continues, “The scale of the organization was bonkers. Hirst said, ‘Oh, do you want to see my latest shark?’ And he tells a guy to go and get one. The guy goes into the freezer in a truck. That’s how big the freezer is—it’s a drive-in freezer!”

While most studio visits lack the high drama of a summons to Hirst’s operation, the ritual is familiar to those in the art world. The reasons for a visit are many and varied: a curator is trolling for an exhibition, an artist wants to show new work to a collector or a critic, a dealer is interested in representing the art, or a group of art lovers simply wants to see how an artist puts it all together. Whatever the pretext, certain elemental rules of care and courtesy can make the visit a success for both parties.

A savvy artist will figure out the expectations of his or her visitors. “If it’s people who don’t know me at all, I usually prepare a history of my work,” says Brooklyn-based painter Carolanna Parlato. “I use a slide projector for that and go back to the early ‘90s.” Others keep binders of clippings and images of earlier work on hand for the truly curious.

Still, there is such a thing as overkill, and most curators,

New York-based Barbara Rachko sees helpful criticism from visitors as a form of “tough love.”

serious collectors, and astute dealers will have done their research before showing up at the front door. “I don’t like doing visits where the artist treats himself like a dead artist,” says Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn, founder of Salon 94 in New York, “where he starts going through his history. If you’re making an effort to go to somebody’s studio, you already have a bit of background and you want to know what the present tense is rather than the past.”

“There are collectors who are interested only in one specific body of work or one time frame. Others want to see what’s brand new. Usually I ask in advance,” says Michelle Cooke, an artist based in New York and Taos, New Mexico. But it doesn’t hurt to be prepared for the intelligent snoop. “I’m curious about what’s tucked away in corners or turned to the wall or at the bottom of a drawer,” says Robert Storr, dean of the Yale University School of Art. “I rarely go to studios to see gallery-ready production.”

How much work to display during a studio

visit varies from artist to artist and depends on the interests and sophistication of the visitors. Some say they dread a salon-style hanging, with works packed chockablock on the walls. Longtime dealer Michael Findlay, a director of

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Nick Cave brings up to 50 visitors at a time into his Chicago atelier.



Acquavella Galleries, recalls a recent appointment with an established artist who's not represented by his gallery: "She had selected a small number of paintings and gave me a piece of paper with the titles. An assistant brought them out one by one. I wasn't overwhelmed, and I didn't feel I needed to come to any conclusions. I felt it was a visit between one professional and another."

The number of visitors can also determine the nature and structure of the visit. Nick Cave often takes large groups through his multiple workspaces in Chicago, as many as 50 people at a time, but he breaks them up into smaller clusters and has assistants to show them around. At the end of the tour, he ushers everyone upstairs to his serene and art-packed living area. "They get an insight into what I live with, and why I need to live with art," he says.

Mary Shaffer—who maintains studios in Taos and Marfa, Texas—says that when a "busload of collectors" comes to one of her places, she hires someone to help out, especially with pricing. "You may not know your prices by heart, so a helper can follow through," she notes. "In the early days, I was totally embarrassed to give prices and sometimes low-balled my work."

Buying directly from an artist is a particularly delicate issue. "If an artist has a contract with a gallery," says Findlay, "then he shouldn't sell work out of the studio. The purpose of a dealer is to take the responsibility of marketing and selling and collecting money off an artist's shoulders, just as much as providing a venue and a stage for the work to be shown and seen." Adds West Coast collector Dean Valentine, "I have a strict rule. If I do buy out of a studio and the artist is not represented, I spend a lot of time explaining how the market works and give her a couple of

other people to talk to who are gallerists. I don't want artists to feel they were had in some way."

How to have a conversation, especially during an initial visit, can be as perplexing as what to say on a first date. "Some artists are articulate, some aren't," says Carter Foster, curator of drawings at the Whitney Museum. "That doesn't mean an artist isn't a good artist, but it can make for a painful visit." You don't need to be mellifluous, but be prepared to have a dialogue. "What I hate is when an artist says, 'You tell me what you think first,'" says Tyler Stallings, director of the Sweeney Art Gallery at the University of California, Riverside. "What I prefer is for the artist to say some things about her work, and then I can evaluate the objects based on what the artist has established and is laying out for me."

Many professionals enjoy a certain amount of silence in which to digest the work. "When I'm looking, I don't want to be talked at, and I also don't want to answer questions or provide a running commentary myself," Storr says. "This is not a sportscast. I really just like to look and let my mind and eyes range as far as they can. Some of my best visits are generally rather quiet."

Still, it's sometimes necessary for a curator or critic to take charge of an awkward situation. "I like the challenge of an artist who isn't very articulate," says Elizabeth Armstrong, assistant director for programs and exhibitions and curator of contemporary art at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. "It's the curator's responsibility, in a way, to lead the conversation." The visitor may bring new insights to the artist, or come away with sharpened thoughts about a show. "Artists are interested in how

other people see their work," Armstrong adds. "I may see something that's not their intention but that may help me refine how I want to approach certain exhibitions."

Though most artists say they don't want to hear it, negative feedback can have its uses. New York artist Barbara Rachko was appalled when a visiting critic told her, "You're in a rut. You need a new direction." Rachko says the visit was a "horrible" experience, but in time it forced her to think anew. "I simplified my imagery and cut out a lot of background material. His comments ended up helping me." When Rachko's own dealer, H.P. Garcia, first came to her studio, "he hardly looked at the work, all he did was tear apart my frames," she recalls. "I couldn't get a word in for maybe half an hour, but after I thought about it, I realized he was right, and I switched to black frames and black mats." Rachko calls the experiences "tough love," adding that "sometimes we get so caught up in our work that we don't see it as someone else might."

Other kinds of serendipitous events can evolve from studio visits. "I did a show at the Hammer five years ago called 'Oranges and Sardines: Conversations on Abstract Painting,'" says Gary Garrels, senior curator of painting and sculpture at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. "It came out of a conversation with Mark Grotjahn, whose studio I've been visiting since 2001." They'd talked about influences, the things the artist was looking at. "I realized it was such an interesting topic that it's a question I raised with other artists I knew, and it had a great impact on my own encounters with art," says Garrels, who went on to organize the exhibition, which included Grotjahn, Amy Sillman, Charline von Heyl, Mary Heilmann, Wade Guyton, and Christopher Wool.

A visit to an artist's studio should be treated as an occasion just as worthy of respect as an introduction to someone's home. That means no texting, phone calls, or blaring

music. As for the expectation of refreshments, a host's offer of a beverage is generally welcome and in some cultures is an ingrained part of the ritual. "In China, everyone offers you tea. There's a whole ceremony attached," says Mary Sabbatino, vice president of Galerie Lelong in New York. "In Brazil, it's coffee in little cups with a glass of water on the side."

Sometimes, the hospitality can extend in

surprising and gratifying directions, for both visitor and artist. Years ago, when the late collector J. Patrick Lannan Sr. dropped in on Shaffer at her first studio in Providence, Rhode Island, he brought a whole entourage. "He complained about his big toe hurting and that none of the people with him could give him any solutions," Shaffer recalls. "I looked at his shoes, which seemed to be made of extremely expensive alligator. Then I handed him a box cutter and suggested he cut a hole in them—'Give your big toe some room.' He quickly changed the subject and invited me to his house in Palm Beach, where he said he could introduce me to people and help my career." Marella Consolini, chief operating officer of the Chinati Foundation and the former director of Knoedler Project Space, warmly remembers visiting the painter Caio Fonseca at his studio in Pietrasanta, Italy. "He's an extremely accomplished musician," she says, "and no studio visit was ever complete without his plopping down at the piano and serenading you with some beautiful piece."

"When you have a really great studio visit, it's a little bit like a great therapy session," says Armstrong. "Is the artist the therapist? Or the visitor? It's really great if the role goes back and forth. Both of you get insights into something you hadn't thought about in a certain way before. That's what art does—it gets people thinking in new ways. You go out of a conversation like that feeling energized." ■



Mary Shaffer in her workshop in Taos, New Mexico.