Virtual Studio Visits

Four London-based artists discuss the rise of the online studio visit

clockwise from top left: Karin Ruggaber, Carey Young, Anne Hardy, Alice Channer

Alice Channer, Anne Hardy, Karin Ruggaber and Carey Young reflect on the pandemic-enforced increase in online studio visits and consider the phenomenon within a wider artistic context.

Carey Young: We thought of doing this discussion after each having watched many online studio visits during lockdown. This was especially in relation to the first few months of the pandemic, where art institutions and commercial galleries were pumping out studio visit videos, and regularly emailing their enormous mailing lists with new content. It was a phenomenon, maybe a response to the shock of the pandemic and an urgency of feeling that one – in this case galleries – had to do something. What felt essential and urgent? Was art still even being made? People were thinking about what life was, or should be about, and galleries were thinking that culture – and no doubt themselves – had to be in the mix somehow. Beyond the awfulness of the virus, the terrifying death rates, economic statistics and many instances of basic failure of government, it wasn't just a simple matter of survival, was it? Millions, no doubt billions of people were unable to work. In the UK many were furloughed and stuck at home. Many people were bored and there's a lot of art-interested people around. Galleries were closed to visitors, but felt compelled to generate and circulate cultural content which reflected on the pandemic and platformed their connection to certain artists. This seemed to manifest an unstated message of 'we're keeping going, and artists are still making'.

Anne Hardy: At one point in that early lockdown period people were saying to me 'as an artist, you have this special ability during a pandemic to continue to make your artistic work. This is your unique situation'. This implied that art and artists' material conditions were somehow completely separate from the rest of the world and the experiences of this catastrophic event. Nobody really knew what the consequences were going to be at that point, whether in terms of health or economics, or something else. There was an assumption that artists would just carry on, and that they would immediately respond to the pandemic, process it and output artworks for everybody else to get to grips with. This came across on the one hand as an extraordinary faith in the power of art, but on the other, completely ignorant about how most artists function in the world and how they support themselves.

Karin Ruggaber: But you could only 'carry on' if you had your studio close by, because otherwise it was sort of illegal to travel over certain distances. It divided artists who had a studio in or near their home or that they owned, and artists who didn't.

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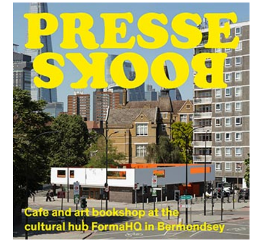

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Alice Channer: Most artists got a worse deal than commercial tenants in terms of the financial breaks they received in their rent, or the kind of help that the UK government provided to keep those businesses afloat. While there was some small state support available to artists, it was nothing in comparison with what were seen as functioning businesses were given in order to continue functioning.

Carey Young: Don't you think that it's also a kind of micro-aggression, because it was also implying that artists have got some psychopathic ability to ignore trauma. The rest of the world is going through this terrible circumstance, and everyone was in a state of shock, and yet somehow artists are like these little productive elves that are going off to their studio and happily either responding to the pandemic as if they had didn't already have work in progress, or that we were just somehow carrying on. I honestly find that insulting.

Alice Channer: The idea of artists having time to think is threatening because it might also be the point at which we decide something radical about what our conditions should be. The idea that we might just carry on and, because of that, not be able to process or draw conclusions from this pandemic experience, serves quite a few interests.

Anne Hardy: That's a really interesting point. An AI specialist once told me that with AI taking over many types of work, the biggest fear of governments was not that they wouldn't be able to give people income, but the fact that people would not have anything to do, and therefore they would have time to think. They then might decide to rethink the system that they're contained within. The pandemic threw a lot of those assumptions into sharp relief in the arts, as it has done elsewhere. For instance, while early in the pandemic some institutions and artists were putting out charming, engaging, highly produced videos about their work and life in their studios, simultaneously artists were losing their studios and maybe their homes, let alone friends or family members. At times you feel that because you're part of an artistic community, there's a politically left-leaning awareness of the socioeconomic conditions that affect living conditions, but what the pandemic revealed was that all these different fragments have no understanding of each other. I guess this is like the world in general. It became very visible.

Carey Young: The initial lockdown period gave different visibility to some artists who started online art schools during the pandemic which gave specific training and feedback, or who developed a digital platform enabling art sales. Some artists and curators became very visible on Instagram, as if they started their own mini institutions. This gave them and their work a certain currency because they developed a community around it. Is it marketing? Absolutely. I'm sure it also benefited many people. It was definitely generous. Those people took on a lot of work, no question, but it was a 'thing'. And I was thinking, wow, I'm not doing any of that. I don't have time, I have a child to look after, home schooling, an art school teaching job – but one also felt like the art world hierarchies were a little re-ordered – if only temporarily, perhaps.

Karin Ruggaber: It was hard to know how to fit into that, and whether one should even try to.

Anne Hardy: There were different levels of intimacy and engagement. It's an extension of what's been happening over the past ten years on social media, one which can empower and enrich a group of like-minded people that stretches across geographical boundaries. But where is the line between marketing and everything else? I've certainly benefited from being able to listen to the proliferation of online talks and lectures, but at the same time, as an individual speaker providing content, this is often requested as unpaid labour.

Karin Ruggaber: Art organisations needed to 'show off' the artists they were exhibiting so they could make themselves visible, and to demonstrate the idea that they could keep going.

Carey Young: Did any of you have an online studio visit since lockdown started? As well as watching many online studio visits, I had remote meetings

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with curators about projects, and did some remote talks in which I showed my work, but so far I haven't had an online studio visit as such.

Karin Ruggaber: Neither have I.

Anne Hardy: I did an online studio visit conversation with a curator, and online talks which included a studio visit element.

Alice Channer: I've done the same, and I also taught art students remotely from my studio, which became a kind of studio visit. Additionally, I made a studio visit video for the Liverpool Biennial. I staged 'images' for the camera involving materials from my work, rather than an actual view of my workspace. It's like making my work: it's completely constructed. Other artists have done that historically, such as the image of Eva Hesse which you can see behind me. This was taken by the fashion photographer Hermann Landshoff at the end of the 1960s. The images are very knowing. Hesse has a playful, but also sly look in her eye. It's artificial, strange and quite complex. She's posing with her sculptural materials, but lying on a chaise longue. I prefer such an explicitly synthetic scenario to everything that is often assumed about the authenticity of the artist's studio, which is still really seductive and has often been exploited in the studio visit videos that we're discussing.

Karin Ruggaber: The way you speak about it sounds as if you can also use these opportunities to introduce yourself artistically, to do new things that you wouldn't be able to in an offline studio visit. Rather than just orchestrating it, you can play with it in an interesting way. You are performing the studio. We're doing it in this conversation as well. We're not showing our workspaces, but are using certain images as our Zoom backgrounds that relate to what we want to discuss, and maybe to our artistic work. This would never have been possible before. For example, I chose an image of the Atelier Brancusi by the architect Renzo Piano – it's a reproduction of the exact layout of Constantin Brancusi's works as they had been displayed in his original studio. It's artist studio as historic site.

Anne Hardy: When people ask to make a video about my practice, I have to think, what is a studio? What is a working practice? This image behind me is from a crazy-looking street in East London in which people deposit waste because the area will soon be razed and developed. I spend a lot of time outside in places like this, to get inspiration for my work and to gather materials I might use in a piece. Through the process of thinking about this, I realised how do I show what I consider my studio to somebody else? Places like this street in London are actually my studio as well, because that's where I get materials from, and think about what I'm doing with my work.

Carey Young: Aside from studios, there might be many other places where artists make their work, and those places might be practically or psychologically important. I know I have some. There have been periods when I've been traveling a lot and I've had a really productive time, artistically speaking, in a train or hotel room – all I needed was my laptop. So when a curator asks for a studio visit, I always think, you are welcome to visit my office-type space at home where I make my work, but it's not going be particularly exciting in terms of the 'artistic' reveal, or even the room itself. Since my work is mostly video, photography, performance and text, we sit around a screen to discuss it, so effectively we could actually meet anywhere, as long as we can have an in-depth conversation. I think the studio visit, and the studio itself is a kind of a fetish, especially for curators and collectors. But not necessarily for artists, who may be 'post studio' and have a more digital way of making.

Karin Ruggaber: When you make something and then asked to talk about it at the same time – I can never do that. It feels really complicated, because they're actually two different hats. You're not only making work, or an exhibition, but you're also being asked to show and discuss it at the same time. It's really complicated, and this whole expectation of Zoom is a new thing. It's never enough for an artist to just make something. Apparently, people can never really just take something in, they have to be told how to take it in at the same time. They want to see behind the scenes as well as seeing the work.

Lauren Houlton on Richard Mosse's 'Incoming'

Carey Young: That's the core of this whole discussion, the idea of 'behind the scenes' and the private domain of artistic making, and what one puts into the public domain. As soon as you let people into the private stuff – that might be one's private thoughts about the work or 'here's how the work looks when it's half finished' – you bring the public domain right into your personal space. There is a tricky negotiation about what one reveals and what one doesn't, and also whether one is ready to reveal it. When it's a new artistic work, it's very hard to have insight into it in the same way as you would six months or a year later. You need to generate enough critical distance.

Anne Hardy: It's an ironic thing that you have to somehow interpret, present or reperform the content and inspiration in another way. That becomes the background, or the 'behind the scenes' of your work. But because of marketing deadlines you're often required to do that around three months before the final work is presented to the public. So, you don't really know what the finished piece is yet either, but the 'studio visit' film will come out at the same time as that show or project opens. And so, as an artist, you have to be think about what you reveal, or how you talk about something that is still in flux.

Alice Channer: In relation to this, I don't feel like there is a private, authentic space or place in my studio, or in myself, that I have to protect or that somehow can be revealed. I just accept it as all artificial. When I got to that point, it became incredibly liberating. I realised, okay, if I do these films, then I have to control them and think of them as completely artificial. My work doesn't come from the point of view of having an authentic self to express. My studio is not the point of origin for work. But there are ways that I can use my materials to speak to a digital screen for a Zoom studio visit. Then I am interested. And especially now, when lockdown and being so removed from our former lives has given us a feeling a lack of touch and a lack of reality, a lack of texture.

Carey Young: One thing we haven't talked about is the filming style used in studio visit videos. Before the pandemic, a camera crew would be hired to film artists. But in lockdown, online studio visits were almost always filmed by the artists themselves, often using a phone. That gave them a domestic, democratic, amateur quality. What does this give to the online studio visit? In my view it's something new.

Anne Hardy: If a film crew is used, they have power in numbers and professionalism, and have already decided how you and your work will be 'framed' – often without talking to you first. You have to be disciplined about taking control and directing things to suit key themes in your work by saying 'this is the way we're doing it'. Whereas when you're filming yourself with your own laptop or phone, you can construct this yourself.

Carey Young: Filming yourself gives a kind of authenticity, doesn't it? The kind of home-made aesthetic, or an equality between the artist and everyone else, rather than artists always being seen as separate and different. If an artist is filming studio visit material on their phone then it's just an Instagram mode of operating, it's selfie culture. This is actually an equaliser. I imagine that this might have helped viewers connect with the artists that they see on online studio visits.

Alice Channer: It can also be utterly alienating – an artist moving around a vast studio that's actually the size of a sports hall.

Carey Young: Yes, there is definitely a size issue. Some online studio visit videos included an aspect of peacocking – the artist wordlessly implying 'look at my resources, my wealth, my assistants' etc. The image behind me is a screengrab from an online studio visit with Jeff Koons which was created before the pandemic. Watching this video you feel like you're in the *machine*. He's in a vast warehouse space talking about several major bodies of work destined for different commissions and museums, and there's 20 assistants beavering away in the background. You immediately sense considerable cultural and economic capital.

Alice Channer: Again, it comes back to authenticity. When a studio visit film is used to suggest authenticity, but actually signifies privilege, it's obvious

straight away.

There was recently a studio visit video on a major commercial gallery website which featured a single shot moving through the artist's studio. The artist is surrounded by assistants welding huge metal sculptures. The film had a documentary style, but with a glamour which undercut any assumed authenticity. I was willing to let the artist get away with it though – I thought it was incredible. I guess it all depends who the video is aimed at: who buys into which kinds of authenticity.

Carey Young: But we're also talking about a level of construction and fiction. As an artist, you can decide what's in the background of your Zoom studio visit. It's different to how a newsreader reads the news from home: because it's lockdown, they can't travel to a TV studio, so they've arranged their lounge, and the broadcaster sent over some lights so they can light it relatively well. It's different for an artist: a case of 'do I really include all the mess of my real workspace?' In essence, do I create a fiction where my chaotic real working stuff isn't in the background of the shot, and instead there's plants and piles of books, which maybe look nicer?

In all such preparation, there's little idea of my artistic work. Even though an online talk is supposedly all about what the artist says and the images that they are going to show their work, by controlling what is in the background the artist is extending their work or creating an aura around it. You could and perhaps should create a total fiction, actually.

This is also true of Hollywood films about artists, and arts documentaries. The wider cultural image that they propagate is of the artist roaming their vast studio like some caged animal, and then occasionally throwing paint at the wall, or instructing their myriad assistants. It's the Romantic cultural trope of the artistic genius. Always a man, and most likely a 'bad boy' in one way or another.

These templates run deep in the art world as well, even if arts professionals such as curators are highly educated about the breadth of artistic identity and practice. It affects collector and journalist mindsets too – the idea of artistic success being expressed through a large studio with lots of assistants pumping out work. There is a bias. These professionals still judge you, if you have a small or domestic workspace. This may include many women artists, artists of colour, or any other demographic who historically have been excluded from gallery representation, shows and other professional opportunities to generate income and renown. They may not be able to afford a rented studio space, which often costs as much as, or more than a mortgage, or it may not be worth it for any artist who works in a 'post studio' way, such as with performance or moving image. That kind of work does not sell as much, and may have a lower sale value, so the economics are totally different to a medium like painting, which can often sell for far more, and has a much more developed and large scale market. Inherited wealth is also a factor – some artists have family assistance or an inheritance to help them exist as an artist and maintain a studio, so the large studio may simply signify that kind of privilege, rather than career success – and this is never discussed. Personally, I have used the cost savings of not paying studio rent to help fund many of my recent works, it's offered a vital kind of liberty. Not having a workspace outside my home has actually helped me create my work.

Anne Hardy: Maybe there's a feeling that if you go to the artist's studio, you will actually inhabit the nucleus of the work, that you'll be inside it somehow. That's where people want to go. I always feel like with my work, that's the kind of opposite. It only exists when it's installed, so that's when you can be inside it. If you come to my studio, you just get lots of fragments.

Alice Channer: I do think stories about how objects – and I include art within this – are made, are really interesting because generally we're quite divorced from that. If you come to my studio, you won't see anything being made there. It's rare for something to be finished there. And it's still a taboo often to discuss how an artwork is made. This is hidden a lot of the time.

Karin Ruggaber: A studio definitely doesn't tell you everything.

Carey Young: If you think about, for example, Francis Bacon, there are famous photographs of his studio, which was an incredible mess, paint everywhere on the walls and knee deep in papers and trash. In relation to the work, it doesn't matter! Looking at the work in a museum is much more important and interesting. What does the mess of his studio actually show you about or tell you about Bacon's work? I don't think it says much that you wouldn't get from looking at the work itself. The work is the thing. We can see the passion, the brilliance in the work itself. The fact he had a kitchen, a filthy studio, is beside the point.

Karin Ruggaber: Bacon's studio has been recreated piece by piece in a museum, which is another weird level of this discussion. The fakery of recreating a painter's studio. Unbelievable.

Carey Young: With all this, people try to psychoanalyse an artist through images, and now through videos of their workspace or home. It creates a narrative, an origin myth.

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