BY CAREY LOVELACE

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.

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

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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