

NYC ARTS RADIO
SEASON 1, EPISODE 2: "THE STUDIO: PART I"

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THE STUDIO: Part I -

This conversation, with the New York City based artists Pablo Jansana and Alberto Borea, focuses on the artist's studio and the process of creation.

TRANSCRIPT:

AMV (Allison Malinsky Vilalta) (**Narration in bold**):

NYC Arts Radio covers stories about what is it to BE a visual artist.

Generations of paintings and photos allow a very limited and purely visual view of the artist's studio — even still, we pour over those legendary images of studios occupied by; **Jean Arp, Francis Bacon, Balthus, Louise Bourgeois, Constantin Brancusi, Helen Frankenthaler, Alberto Giacometti, Barbara Hepworth, Eva Hesse, Donald Judd, Frida Kahlo, Agnes Martin, Henri Matisse, Joan Miró, Joan Mitchell, Alice Neel, Isamu Noguchi, Georgia O'Keeffe, Pablo Picasso, or Cy Twombly** — to name a few. Through those images we are trying to gain some knowledge of what the artists were like, their surroundings, culture, habits — really, their studio experience.

What was it like to BE there?! Public access to the sacred studio experience is limited, in NY there's Donald Judd's SoHo studio/home and Jackson Pollock's East Hampton Springs studio with the splattered floor. But, the ideal is to be invited into the studio of a contemporary artist — as a collector or curator — to be able to participate in the experience while adding your part to a new history.

This episode, the first part of STUDIO, we go inside two studios to open the lid onto the theme of what the contemporary studio experience involves. The conversation is between myself and two very different multimedia artists, Pablo Jansana and Alberto Borea. They are both transplants to NYC, this is no coincidence as this is my *RE*-inauguration show of NYC Arts Radio, since my own fairly recent move to Barcelona, Spain.

Also, considering the current conversations on immigration, I dedicate this show to my fellow artist immigrants. Throughout, in the form of an audio Commonplace Book, I'll refer to life of two of my favorite painters, from the same generation, who sought refuge in NYC, Willem de Kooning and Philip Guston. Their inclusion is an effort to show the extreme comparisons between the current situation and the good old days when NYC lofts were abundant and inexpensive.

Every artist has a different making practice. Some use studios and then there are other variations, like the 'institutional critique' of artist Daniel Buren. Buren personally rejected the use of a studio as part of his process, his work is made in the world-at-large. That way, he is able to create in the space in which the work will ultimately be shown, and therefore be closer to the ultimate "truth" of the art — which is the thesis of his 1971 essay, "The Function of the Studio."

I don't reject his thesis, but the studio is indispensable to most, a basic necessity. Quote "Adding to de Kooning's anxiety was his unfinished studio. The studio had always been his touchstone. Without one, he was essentially homeless."

However, because Buren so accurately describes the function and physical qualities of the studio, I have included those passages.

and that is where we begin:

"What is the function of the studio?

1. It is a place where the work originates. [the studio is the *unique space* of production]
2. It is generally a private place, an ivory tower perhaps.
3. It is a *stationary* place where *portable objects* are produced."

PJ (Pablo Jansana):

Hi Allison. How's it going?

That's Pablo and this is his recollection of how we met.

PJ:

I think it was like a couple of years ago, we were in an opening. We were talking with another artist - a friend of mine, Alberto Borea and he was a friend of you so he introduced us.

You will hear from Alberto in a few minutes.

PJ:

I'm Pablo Jansana, an artist, a visual artist from Chile, I am a painter and a sculptor. I got a scholarship and then I got [sic] into a grant program called ISCP. **International Studio and Curatorial Program, I.S.C.P.** That program was for one year, so after that I tried setting up everything for my career here in the States.

Pablo is originally from Santiago, Chile, though I must mention considering my new home, his surname is in fact Catalan.

We are in my studio located between Clinton Hill and Navy Yard. "Studio Hall," that is how we call it here. Or Animal House, people wrote that on the door. Everyone came here like, ok, I'm going to get my best energy to do my best work so they wrote it, "Animal House."

AMV:

I didn't see it - you're going to have to point it out.

PJ: I'm going to show you later.

AMV:

Can you describe yourself as an artist and also describe you work that you make.

PJ:

It is what I drink everyday. It is everything.

I remember since child, having a pen in my hands and drawing, making drawings everywhere. I think I was just starting making drawings before to talk. So it was really easy to me to feel it in a way — free, drawing

and then I started to paint, it was even better, so that can describe me as an artist yes, I am an artist. Because all the time I have been doing that, I can't live without this.

What I am doing with my work right now. I'm very interested in many things but if you see the work that I have here in my studio. ... I used to work with social violence, in NY on the 60s and 70s with many artists that were they were doing something with the stretchers, making these shapes and breaking down the canvases.

So right now what I am trying to be more relative with the violence is to make the boundary between violence and architecture together. The material about the architecture it is right now and the shapes that it has is very, very violent I mean it is not, I am not talking about the park but one building for example - the all the material that it has and the shape that it has...you can see it in my work too.

AMV:

I am looking at some of the pieces now, they are two canvases that are three-dimensional, they are being ripped apart. But we are wondering how they got...is there someone pushing from the inside, pulling from either side.

PJ:

It is like someone with a mega-punch behind the canvases or something like that. You can see it.

AMV:

I like that, mega-punch.

PJ:

Yeah, mega-punch on the canvas. Behind the canvas. You don't know really how they were breaking up. It is kind of painting and a sculpture are coming together and I think it is powerful when you get into and you see the dimension and the color on it and it is a flash and it's point on you it is saying something very real.

AMV:

So, we're in Animal House. Can you describe the space physically? For example in front of us is a window that's open....

PJ:

Yeah, we are very close to the highway. So, we can listen everyday the trucks, motorcycles. It's a very factory area, the dust as well is coming together with industrial and some disgusting smells around. I mean it's a big building and we are around 50 artists and another 15 factories about everything; furniture mostly. So, it's a kind of mix of oil, acid, toxic from everywhere. It's a kind of party, really toxic party.

Quoting again from Daniel Buren, who describes the archetype of the artist's studio:

“What does it look like, physically, architecturally? The studio is not just any hideaway, any room.’ Two specific types may be distinguished:

1. The European type, modelled upon the Parisian studio of the turn of the century. This type is usually rather large and is characterized primarily by its high ceilings (a minimum of 4 meters). Sometimes there is a balcony, to increase the distance between viewer and work. The door allows large works to enter and to exit. Sculptor's studios are on the ground floor, painters' on the top floor. In the latter, the lighting is natural, usually diffused by windows oriented toward the north so as to receive the most even and subdued illumination.

2. The American type, of more recent origin.” ehhhh, Let me interrupt with his own NOTE here (we are speaking of New York). OK, continuing on... “This type is rarely built according to specification, but, located as it is in reclaimed lofts, is generally much larger than its European counterpart, not necessarily higher, but longer and wider. Wall and floor space are

abundant. Natural illumination plays a negligible role, since the studio is lit by electricity both night and day if necessary.” End of passage.

In the beginning, artists often put up with deplorable studio conditions for which they pay high rental prices. Often still, studios don't have heat, they are in less desirable, sometimes dangerous neighborhoods, tiny in size, require long commutes to get to, and often have the delights of vermin or their remnants upon arrival. Or, in Pablo's case - toxic odors. We all have our limits , that happens to be mine.

If you get into my studio, the first you can see is the front window which is about all the wall, and then next wall we have a table with more materials and toxic industrial things.

This is where Pablo unjustly simplified the description of the scene. In between the window and the table were 5 impactful paintings, some finished, some into months of process, though all complex in structure. These paintings are not just one pictorial plane, they reach out into the studio space, off the wall, with volume and vibrating glossy, almost phosphorescent pigmentation. From the aggressive gestures in which this thick layered paint was applied, it was everywhere.

The painter, Amy Sillman wrote, “A painting studio is a kind of haphazard chemistry lab where nonscientists work like medieval alchemists with scant protection from treacherous materials like lead, [...] arsenic, [...] or benzene.”

AMV:

And in between all of those paintings are things, plastic covered with resin, of many colors, more little paintings, buckets filled with things, materials, and more materials.

PJ:

Yes, too many materials. I invest all my money in materials.

Most of us artists are materials freaks. From early on in Willem de Kooning's career and within his first days with Sidney Janis Gallery, quote “...Janis immediately began advancing de Kooning money for the purchase of painting supplies. [...] de Kooning might accept living on catsup, but considered it intolerable to starve his palette.”

I got ahead of myself, more on materials and sustenance in another episode....

AMV:

So, it does smell industrial in here. Maybe because the window is open, but also because of the work you are making.

You have four wet paintings. Where's the fan?!

PJ:

There it is.

AMV:

You need a bigger fan! He's pointing to a tiny fan on the wall.

PJ:

It's good, I have one there, right now it's not on. But this one is powerful.

We spend 'day in and day out' plus in the studio. The space has to be 'right' in so many ways just like any other type of real estate. So many artists are priced out of their studio spaces, to give you an idea, here is a selection of monthly rental rates from all around the city using listings from the service: listingsproject.com :

The Lower East side had the most expensive spaces I came across at 7.5\$ per square foot, 1,200\$ for a 160 sq foot space. In the financial district 4.5\$ per sq foot. Bushwick offers a lower price entry at 375\$ for a 110 sq. feet.

Split between de Kooning and another artist, their Greenwich Village studio rent in 1948 was 35\$ a month. With inflation that's about \$355, but when you add in NYC real estate variables for that space, I speculate was at least 1,000 sq ft., between the two of them, would now cost over \$8,000 a month according to current rates in Greenwich Village, that is if you could even find that kind of available space.

More variables to consider when renting a studio are: ceiling height, elevator access for heavy lifting in and out, natural light and ventilation, privacy, bathroom and hot water access, and the support of the surrounding artist community.

Pablo explains the parts of his studio that are important to him:

PJ:
The environment more than the space, I mean, if you walk around you can see all of the dust and the industrial factory and that's a really influential on all my work right now. I live with that, the space is important because you have a size, so it is the size of your work too. So it is comparative.

AMV:
Would you mind talking about the size of your work in relation to the size of your studio?

PJ:
Yeah sure. I don't know how many square feet are here, but it's not important, this is a square. And I think all my work is a square right now and has the aureal proportion. It came in my blood.

Sección aurea.

Sección Aurea is Castellano for Golden Section or (Golden Mean) defined as: “the name given to an irrational proportion, known at least since Euclid, which has often been thought to possess some aesthetic virtue in itself, some hidden harmonic proportion in tune with the universe. It is defined as a line which is divided in such a way that the smaller part is to the larger part as the larger is to the whole, *mathematically: (AB cut at C, so that CB: AC = AC: AB).*”

AMV:
If you could show in a space that was the size of your studio, would that be ideal for you?

PJ:
Yes. Yes, that would be perfect.

There are many ideals of a studio, what would also be perfect is the studio de Kooning had built, he said, “I designed it like a loft. I guess I was one of the first painters in New York to have a loft, back in 1930. Now [I] wanted this feeling of great, open space. The whole thing [was] really a workman's dream.” end quote

AMV:
The studio is becoming more than a place just to make work, it's having an influence on the work that you are making

PJ:
Yes. Yes, it is.
I don't know of where came in my colors on my work. Used to be black and white and right now are very colorful power palette. And I don't see anything right now on my environment like this. So I think I have

been having to try getting those colors from outside and this is because I live here and I don't have those colors so I think I needed to see it.

AMV:

These colors are literally the opposite of what is happening outside - everything is muted outside and dull.

PJ:

Yes, cement is very mute - it is a perfect word, and those colors are orange, blue, white, yeah green.

AMV:

They are not only bright but they are fluorescent and if white could be fluorescent that would be fluorescent white.

PJ:

Yes, of course, and together makes the power of my work. When they come next to each other.

Unlike Buren, Pablo makes his work in his studio and exhibits it elsewhere. But, since Pablo is taking not only inspiration, but context from his surrounding area and beyond to create his work, it can later be shown in a gallery that has the same surroundings, the same muted landscape, in turn — relating to the work. This may be a stretch, but I'm putting it out there.

Alberto Borea explains how we met through our mutual friend:

AB (Alberto Borea):

Hello Allison, How's it going?

We met in Ernesto Burgos' opening

AMV:

...it was his show with the couches...

AB:

In Kate Werble Gallery.

I am Alberto Borea, I'm originally from Lima Peru, I work in Brooklyn NY, I'm an artist. I work with mixed media, sculptures, paintings - well paintings I don't know, but yeah, a lot of collages and whatever comes to my mind. My work is not the same all the time, I change a lot the formats I use, the ways I present my work but I try to dialogue with the same concepts and the same kind of obsessions that I have. I work a lot with history and social and political contents.

We are in Brooklyn, NY I guess in Greenpoint, well this is my studio and my house now.

AMV:

We're sitting in one of your living rooms right now and I can actually see one of the pieces that you made, Sol. Do you want to describe that piece?

AB:

Yeah what I try to do at the LMCC was basically it was a body of works that I was thinking about the building itself and the financial district and the lower Manhattan.

LMCC is: Lower Manhattan Cultural Council where Alberto had been granted a studio residency. (I will go over studio residencies in-depth another time, but in essence it is a studio space, sometimes with room and board, given to an artists to create a specific project or simply as an award for a set amount of time.)

LMCC just moved there so you can see in that floor all the desks, a huge corporate space which now is just like a ruin or it's empty, so for me the thing was to create something who, that can dialogue with that place.

So all of the works that I developed there were talking a little bit about the history of lower Manhattan and the place I was working in.

AMV:

So it was a lot about space and place.

AB:

I think just Goldman Sachs just donated that place for LMCC which is great because we have this huge loft all the floor is for us so it was a great place to work. Kind of weird but really inspiring. I mean all my work is about context, where I am working on where am I at that moment and what are the materials that I am going to use for/ to have a dialogue.

What I did in that office space is I just removed the carpet. The place was all grey, a dead floor a dead place so the people tried to put a little bit of life in there and they brought this yellow carpet which I love the color, the color was amazing. So what I did was I removed the carpet creating the word SOL, which means sun.

AMV:

The photograph on the left is the negative space of the word SOL and the photograph on the right is the positive space of the carpet saying sol in an empty room with a grey floor.

Alberto used his then studio as the production place and home of the work, being “true” to the art. Though ultimately, he later documented the scene as an object to be exhibited later on since the work no longer exists in its true setting.

I’ll quote Daniel Buren in regards to the fate of work made in the studio:

“It is in the studio and only in the studio that it is the closest to its own reality, a reality from which it will continue to distance itself. [...]. If the work of art remains in the studio, however, it is the artist that risks death....from starvation. The work is thus totally foreign to the world into which it is welcomed [...].” - end quote.

The effect of place is significant. It is this very reality that Pablo and Alberto question in their studios and in their work, that doesn’t bring them to reject the use of a studio, it just becomes part.

About Joan Miró, quote “His temporary exile in Palma (Mallorca, Spain)...made him aware of the difference between the soft light of the island and the harsh landscape of Montroig (pronounced *Mōnroach*). He realized that the two were complementary and equally necessary to his vision. [...] There was always a connection between the external landscape and internal for Miró”

AMV:

Your work is often made in relation to the space or the place where you are located, can you describe that process?

AB:

How is my process.

Normally what I do is I love to walk around the city or around the place where I am and I think walking is a practice I normally do, it’s a practice I do everyday or I try to walk and think about anything or nothing. I just walk and I like to observe where I am and how’s the people and how’s the architecture the garbage. I am always looking at the floor and trying to find things and trying to find materials. That’s number one, I’ll say walking and looking at the floor. Number 2 is then I get interested by an object I begin to think about the object, constantly for maybe a week, maybe two weeks and if it continues for a month I bring it to my studio. That was number 2. laugh

Right?

Then number 3, when I'm obsessed with an object that I don't understand and it is already in my studio I begin to look at it, and try to understand why it's in my studio and why I brought it to my studio. I'll say it's like a cubist way of looking at the object so I try to understand the object anthropologically, like psychologically, historically and because existentially, why, how can I relate to that object and why that object is talking to me and why I am trying to talk with the object about another thing.

After that I just find a reason, me and the object, we find the reason together and so it's kind of a relationship that we are having at that time. And it's going to come through an installation or maybe a photograph of the object or maybe it's going to be just the object itself basically that's the way or that's the process with the materials and that's why it is so important for me. I'm really like a sculptor in some ways, I think I relate more with sculpture and with material, the material feeling of touching things and transforming objects.

AMV:

Usually your process actually begins outside of the studio?

We may spend exorbitant relentless hours in the studio, but we do leave and we do keep our eyes open to the gifts the world has to offer.

AB:

Oh yeah, for sure. My process is outside the studio, my process is in everyday life - it's like I'm not like a studio mouse or a studio rat like all the time in the studio. No, no, no, I like to walk around and go to events, be on the subway, travel or like just read the newspaper.

Also things happen when I am in the studio, but that's a number two or number three or number four. But number one -it's, which takes more time to being outside, it's - being outside is the longest process to find my ideas or to find why I want to work on something. Sometimes it happens when I am in the studio, that I realize something, but normally it is when I'm like walking is when I find that things are interesting for me.

In referring to de Kooning's combined loft and studio space, "One friend called it 'the tidiest, neatest place I've ever seen. In the reflected light, the floor appears gleaming and spotless. As long as he lived on Twenty-second Street, de Kooning would knock off work early on Saturdays in order to scrub down his loft. He loved a clean slate.

Back to Pablo, my fellow painter and studio rat jejej...who describes what he likes about his space. Personally, I, like de Kooning happen to love a clean, minimally filled, well-lit space to start my work.

PJ:

I was before in a basement, a big basement. That was really ugly environment because you don't have any window there.

People can love to work there because you can be really focused on your work but I really need to see outside so I found this I am here a year ago and I have a beautiful window and I don't see too many things, obviously I have air, fresh air. The most that I like is the community that we have here, mostly we are all in silence - we are really focused. What I like is because we are a big community of artists and we are going to the supermarket. You can see everyone wearing pant and shoes with paint on it, his hands are dirty, so that's the thing I really love too.

AMV:

It's typical in NY that people don't talk to their neighbors.

PJ:

I really love to talk to people. So now I avoid the situation. So I become the same guy. I don't talk with anybody.

AMV:

Now you're really part of the neighborhood. Now you're really a New Yorker.

PJ:

No, I mean I still, I pursued my goal to try to get a word, at least one hello.

Why come to NYC I asked Alberto?

AB:

Oh, it was because of residencies, it just make more sense for me to stay here because of all the friends that I have here and the dialogue with other artists and you know the art world is great here.

AMV:

Are you a solitary worker?

AB:

Yeah, I'm a solitary worker, I think I am.

Some artist's studios are known for being especially social, such as with artist Ray Smith as explained in Season 1, Episode 1 of this show.

In de Kooning's biography it reads, "By the late 1930s , the artists' informal system of dropping in on each other's studios, to say hello and chat about works in progress, was an essential part of the day. Since nobody had a phone, visitors would announce themselves by yelling up to the open windows of the studio above."

I asked Alberto who he let's into his studio:

AB:

I really enjoy like talking with some good friends or close friends about something and they can bring my ideas into another level or make me realize that I am thinking something that it is not what it is. And they are like you're - don't bullshit me man. You're not talking about that, you are talking about another thing, you know, and I was like Oh My God, yeah, you know, yeah, that's right and then you, then you know, then you understand your work better because others understand you sometimes better than yourself.

Artists can be extremely selective when it comes to studio visits. Too many external opinions aren't helpful, especially when a work isn't yet complete. And, visits from people who aren't well versed in speaking about or looking at art can be exhausting, honestly, taking up valuable studio time.

I asked the same of Pablo, who he let's into his lab.

PJ:

This is my laboratory.

I work here, I make my my work, obviously and I don't have any problem. I mean in the past I really had problem to show my process, but right now it is funny how some artists show his process on Instagram and I am starting to do the same and before we were so private with that so I really love to share the experiments and the process of my laboratory.

AMV:

So you're sharing the process?

PJ:

Yes.

AMV:

It's not a secret.

PJ:

It's not a secret and the people show layers and movement and how they change the painting that they make, so that is amazing. It is really lovely.

The process is everything, I mean you just go to the opening and you see the piece done and ok, it is beautiful - you did really well, but how you did that? I would like to have a conversation with the person who did that, what kind of book are you reading and what music are you listening to while you are working - so it is like - ah man this is life - it is not the piece done. yes

AMV:

That was perfect. That was what my show is all about. Laugh!

PJ:

Enserio? Done!

However exciting the process is, it is the finished work that is consumed. There are no rules in art, and the same goes for studio visits. They can be complete successes or complete failures. I leave you with one last point from Daniel Buren's essay.

“Nevertheless, other operations, indispensable to the functioning of galleries and museums, occur in this private place. For example, it is here that the art critic, the exhibition organizer, or the museum director or curator may calmly choose among the works presented by the artist those to be included in this or that exhibition, this or that collection, this or that gallery. The studio is thus a convenience for the organizer: he may compose his exhibition according to his own desire (and not that of the artist, although the artist is usually perfectly content to leave well enough alone, satisfied with the prospect of an exhibition). The chance is minimized, since the organizer has not only selected the artist in advance, but also selects the works he desires in the studio itself. The studio is thus also a boutique where we find ready-to-wear art.”

AMV:

Pablo, thank you so much for having me in your studio today.

PJ:

No, I am really happy and I really give you my best success for you on this show.

AMV: Thank you.

AB: Thank you, Allison

AMV: Thank you so much.

Everything moves quickly in NYC, since the recording of this show Alberto now has his studio in the Lower East Side and Pablo has just lost his studio lease. At the moment this works out for him considering the many exhibitions he has around the world with his platform Kandor 13. Kandor 13 is a networking collaborative established in 2015 for artistic production and exhibition which uses different spaces to develop diverse practices.”

I decided to do this first STUDIO show as I too look for a new studio - one that has good light and space to spread out in, outside of my home, within a community and with ventilation.

I leave you with these lines from Musa Mayer's memoir about her father, *Night Studio: A Memoir of Philip Guston*.

"Everyone carries a room about inside him," wrote Franz Kafka. "[...] my parents liked to delay our return to New York City as long as possible each fall, waiting until the cold weather outweighed their desire for quiet and privacy. [...] When I was 12 my parents decided that I could spend the summer in my father's old studio [...]. My room, the room I carry inside me, is that studio in Woodstock."

"The place had history - a raw, workmanlike smell of paint and turpentine, my father's legacy. It was more than just a room: it was a studio, a place for creative work. I took this idea very seriously." - end quote.

I do too. Thank you for listening to NYC Arts Radio.

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You can stream this and other episodes for free on our website: NYCArtsRadio.com
There, you can also submit your email, or follow us on Facebook and Twitter, or mostly anywhere else.

I referenced a few books in this episode, they are catalogued on our website for further reading.

CREDITS:

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by Brian O'Doherty

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<http://artistshomes.org>

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<https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-why-do-we-care-about-an-artist-s-studio>

Inside the Artist's Studio by Joe Fig

<http://www.cristintierney.com/exhibitions/joe-fig-inside-the-artists-studio>

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