

The Living Studio Evaluation Report

Dr Meg Peterson- 21 Artists

The Living Studio is a participatory, largely self-directed, making space in Whitechapel Gallery, an interactive response to The Artist's Studio exhibition. The Studio is comprised of two connected, open rooms with two large tables and lots of light from windows on the wall and ceiling to illuminate the space. Shelves with objects from real artists' studios cover the walls for inspiration, along with wall mounted boards which serve as provocation for visitors. Over the course of the exhibition, these boards and shelves transformed to become part of an exhibition in and of themselves as visitors left their creations for others to see and enjoy, turning The Living Studio into a living exhibition.

This evaluation report outlines more about the visitors who came to the space; what they made; what they thought; how they used the space; and recommendations for the future. Research data was gathered through informal conversations with visitors and Gallery Assistants (GA's), ethnographic research and visually through photo documentation on four days visiting the space- one weekday; one Thursday late; one Saturday and one Sunday. Data was recorded with a pen and notepad after conversations with visitors and GA's or during ethnographic research of the space. In total, about 50 people were spoken to directly while hundreds were observed as they either used or passed through the space. Intuition was used to gauge whether visitors were approached for conversation as many were deep in the making process and did not seem they wanted to be disturbed. About 15 Gallery Assistants were also informally interviewed to glean their impressions and to gain more insight from their many hours being in the space and either watching people use it or helping them to create.



The Studio was used by people of all ages, backgrounds, and genders, without much predictability as to who would stop to sit down and make something. It is difficult to assume but though some visitors were from the local area, it seemed from conversations that many were from other areas of London or the UK or tourists. In terms of how people engaged with the Studio, there were generally three categories of visitors: those who stayed to create something; those who meandered around the space looking at all the creative objects people had made; and those who walked straight through to the next exhibition. The visitors who sat down to make something usually stayed for at least 20-30 minutes, most often in groups but sometimes on their own. Despite coming on their own or coming with others, there was often shared conversation amongst visitors, something not very common in more traditional gallery arrangements. People informally sparked conversations with one another, discussing what they had made, what they liked about the space, what brought them to the Gallery, and more.

Most people were brought to The Living Studio by the exhibitions, particularly the main exhibition, The Artist's Studio, and ended up spending time making something either on their own or with the people they came with. Some came just for The Living Studio though, hearing about it through another source such as the website, because they lived locally or because they were there for another event on a different day and ended up coming back to spend more time in the Studio. One man even brought his own materials, claiming he does not have a space to make at home so wanted to come and use the space to work on some of his ideas as he is a retired art teacher. One of the GA's spoke of another few who came back multiple times just to make in the space- one a young art student without a studio of his own using it as a studio for the day and another older man who used to spend 4-5 hours there for a few weeks.

Families

On weekends there were many families who came to use the Studio, many of whom stayed for over an hour with their children. In a gallery space that is often quiet and passive, this proactive space was also one of freedom where children and their parents could have a break to sit down, relax, be noisy and play. Even something as simple as having a space to sit down was important to them in the context of a gallery where that is often lacking. It was clear from observations that it was not only a place of respite for families but also a bonding experience for parents and their children with parents and children working together to make.

Talking with one family, they mentioned that their children spending over an hour making art would not have happened at home, even though they have an art space for their children. Enticed by screens at home, it is often difficult for children to focus on making art projects while in the gallery space, they were free to make as they wished without as many distractions. There was another family where one parent stayed in the space with the children, focussing on making with them while the other went to enjoy the exhibition before the other parent came back to do the same. Their eldest son made a toy with his father then spent 30 minutes or so just playing with the toy in the Studio before leaving. The children were engaged the whole time, with the family staying there nearly two hours. There were parents who came with young children, with some women even using the space of rest to breastfeed their babies, but also parents with older children enjoyed the space too, coming with one or both carers to create in the Studio.

Groups & Twos

Groups of three, four, or more also often stopped to use the Studio, most commonly a group of friends or students who took time to make something. The largest group observed in the Studio was a large group of 10-15 college-aged art students from Hull, immediately drawn to and immersed in creating, rummaging through the available items to find something to make. Talking with their teacher, she said that they would not create so proactively even in her art class, requiring more direction and guidance, but that there was something about the accessibility and openness of the space that allowed them to feel free to guide themselves. There were also groups of 3-4 friends who sat down together to have a conversation that would most likely have been difficult to have in the quiet gallery space, sharing a laugh and a conversation around what they were making.

After families, groups of twos were the most common to sit and use the Studio- friends, family, couples, or dates- there was a wide range of those people who engaged with the Studio. There was a group of two friends who were in the space for a long time making and catching up, one friend living locally and taking his friend visiting from Denmark to The Whitechapel Gallery especially for The Living Studio without even going to the larger exhibition because it was too expensive for them. It was observed through this research as well as from multiple GA's that there was a proportionately high number of first dates who sat for awhile making in the space, benefitting perhaps from the relaxation that making art provides. However, couples young and old enjoyed the space, also enjoying the time spent connecting with one another about what they were making. There was an equal number of friends in twos as well as couples who often spent 45 minutes-1 hour in the Studio. There was a story from one of the GA's about two friends who came into the Studio, staying for hours to make work. At the end of their session, they sat and had a mock critique with one another, recorded on their phones of course, most likely for a social media post later that day.

People in their own

While there were not as many people who sat and made art on their own, there were still a handful of people who used the Studio solo. One man mentioned previously came to build upon his own practice, using Andy Warhol and Keith Haring as muses for his work and eager to share about what he was making. There was another woman who was waiting to pick up her daughter who was not intending to make anything but saw a piece of thick yarn that was intriguing so decided to make a doll using the yarn as hair. She was a teacher and talked about incorporating some of these concepts around more unstructured making into her practice and about the therapeutic benefits of art making, rather than just passive engagement like going to a gallery. Another young woman stood for nearly an hour undisturbed on her headphones immersed in the piece she was making.

The Living Studio as Exhibition

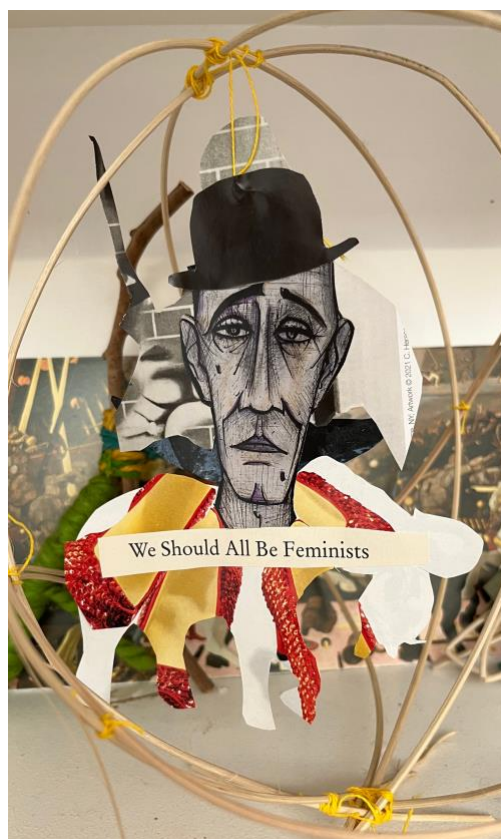
As was mentioned previously, many people did not stop to make anything in the Studio, but most people took the time not just to simply walk through but to enjoy the Studio as a living exhibition. Some visitors spent 10-15 minutes walking around the space, admiring the creations exhibited all around the two rooms. Many visitors in groups or pairs discussed the work and laughed at some of the more humorous creations, often sparking deeper conversation. Many people took out their phones to snap pictures of things they liked or found intriguing from the work that was made and left on the shelves.

It is difficult to generalise with those who did not stop at all to enjoy the space as to who they were and why they didn't stop, as the Studio was used by people of all backgrounds, and it was difficult to speak to them. However, often younger people on their own or groups of men did not stop to make in the space as other groups, but this was not always the case. Many did walk around to enjoy the living exhibition though, so still gleaning something from the Studio. Families were most likely to sit and make something, perhaps enticed by the children seeing something interesting they wanted to use to be creative.

What did they make?

Perhaps the most fascinating to observe was what people decided to make when they came to the Living Studio. Every time the Studio was visited there was a new addition, a new piece to enjoy. Generally, visitors were inspired by the materials as a starting point for making, finding a particular item, fabric or photo that then sparked what they decided to make, rather than attempting to recreate elements of or art pieces from the exhibition many of them had just seen. Most of the materials used were tactile rather than 2D materials such as markers or crayons, presumably due to the limitations of materials allowed to be used in the Studio. There was no glue (and no scissors available when GA's were not present) which was a hindrance for some but many got creative with how they managed to bind things together, using tape, string or yarn as a replacement. Though there were some 2D materials available, most people gravitated towards making sculptures or 3D objects. Another child even took the inspiration of a pink piece of fabric to make an entire outfit with the support of her father and proceeded to make full headdresses for the entire family out of other materials.

Collage was also popular and after awhile there were trends emerging in some of the pieces people were making. For example, towards the end of the exhibition, real life heads from photos were often cut out and juxtaposed on 3D bodies made or collaged with other bodies from magazines. These became increasingly popular throughout the time the exhibition went on. There were also some organic materials present which were popular to use to make sculptures with. From talking with the GA's, the materials rotated:





Another key theme that emerged over time was visitors using the space to make social and political statements or commentary using words often as part of a wider visual piece. These controversial ones normally disappeared quickly but was interesting that the Studio was also used as a platform to express opinions and ideas and that people felt free to use it for this purpose.

The original intention was for visitors to take what they had made home with them, though many felt inclined to leave their work in the Studio, contributing to a growing exhibition. As the Studio was designed to feel like an artist's studio, the work visitors made did not feel out of place by any means in the exhibition space. On the contrary, it felt as though it should be there, blending seamlessly with the works that artists donated, difficult to tell over time which were artist donations and which were creations made by visitors.

What did visitors think?

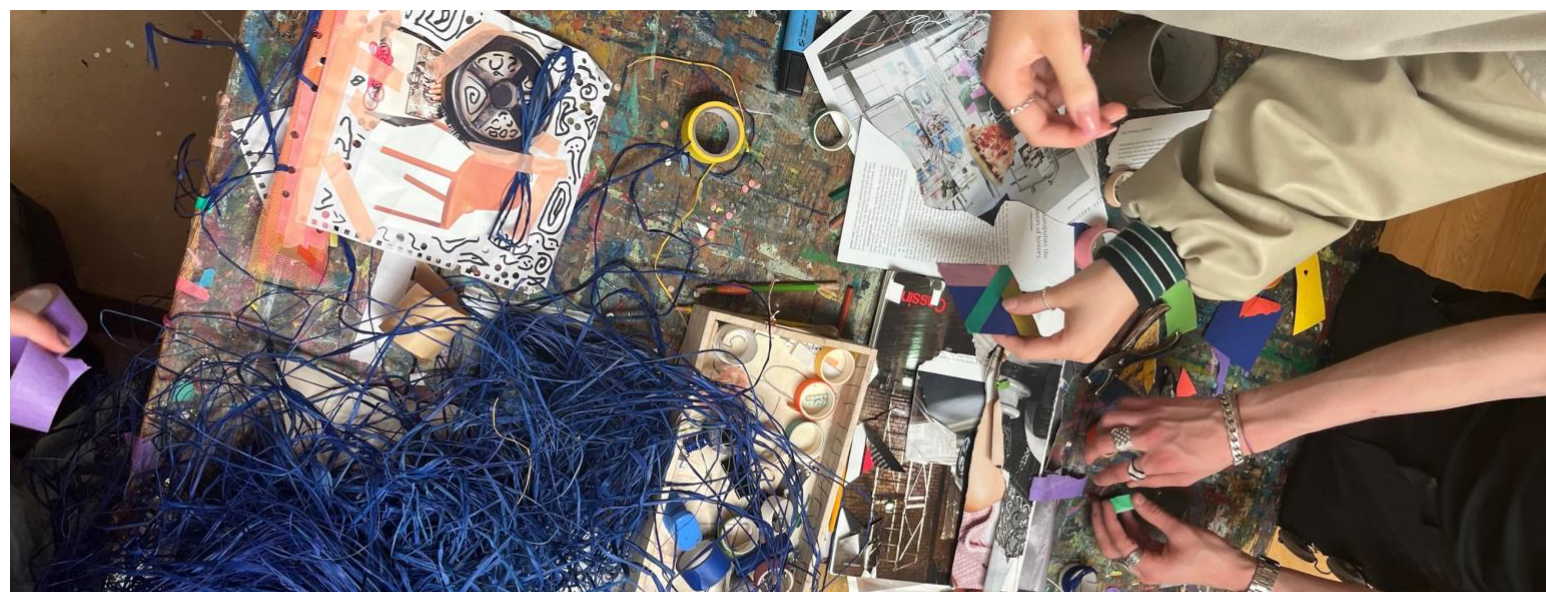
The feedback on the exhibition from visitors and GA's was overwhelmingly positive, seeing the Living Studio as a space of refuge, a radical space to create without expectations, a breath of fresh air

within the structure of museums and galleries, and a unique creative opportunity. When asked if they had experienced anything like it before, most visitors said they hadn't, with some discussing other spaces at museums like the Tate where you could leave comments or structured workshops, but nothing that was self-directed like The Living Studio. Museums and galleries are mostly passive spaces while this space turned everyone into an artist with the potential to make what they wanted and to be inspired by the materials, rather than following a prescriptive structure of what they needed to make. Perhaps most powerful was in its simplicity, with very little guidance or instruction at all, just a democratic proposition for the visitor to devise a creation as they wish. Multiple people mentioned the lack of artist studio spaces in London and how it was refreshing to have a civic making space, bridging the gap between the artist and art making and the public. Additionally, from the perspective of making memories and allowing visitors an opportunity to embed the learning from the exhibition, this space offers a powerful way to do that.

There was also something powerful in how it broke down barriers to engagement on many levels. In gallery spaces where children are most often asked to be quiet and 'behave', children here were free to be themselves, often taking the lead in deciding what they wanted to make and what materials they used. As there were no set parameters or instructions about what to make, people felt free to make what they wanted and felt proud of what they made, evident with so many people leaving their work for others to enjoy and the way they talked about it. It also broke down barriers for visitors to engage with one another. There were observations of many people who did not know each other chatting with strangers, engaging in a more casual way with those who were also visiting the space.

Structure

Many visitors liked the fact that there was no structure to what they could make but some thought that it might be fun to have prompts or guidance in some way in their making if the Gallery was going to continue using that space as a participatory space. There was signage present but as the space became fuller, it was difficult to notice so perhaps larger signage that tells people what the rules are in engaging with the Studio could be trialled in the future. For example, on multiple occasions, the typewriter was brought down and used by visitors when they were not supposed to and there was an attempt to use the paints that were high on the shelves. Some visitors thought some basic instructions or prompts could have been a useful way to get their creativity going but many liked that there was little structure to what they should make. They did enjoy the questions posted around the room as provocations for making too.



Design of the Space

The design of the space lends itself well to participatory making. The main exhibition ends by entering the Studio, so visitors are forced to at least walk through it to leave the building or go to the exhibition in the adjacent gallery space. This works to its benefit as the space is otherwise tucked away within the building. Visitors commented on how they liked that the space had so much light, a welcome contrast from the galleries that are more dimly lit. As there were no GA's on most weekdays, sometimes the space became messier without the GA's present to tidy it up, but overall the self-directed design of the space worked well. Sometimes the space was empty though at some times of the day the Studio was completely full, so if safety measures allowed, the space could benefit from having even more tables and chairs so that visitors don't lose out on having the opportunity to experience the Living Studio.

Next Steps

As mentioned in the previous section, the exhibition was received very positively and there were many requests and hopes that something like this would continue in the future. The following outlines some of these recommendations based on the data that was collected.

The suggestion to make a permanent participatory space at Whitechapel Gallery came up many times in chats with visitors and GA's. Based on how much visitors enjoyed the Studio, it is recommended that there be some sort of long-term participatory space which the Living Studio space is well-suited for. Most visitors were very taken by the Studio, and it is a radical new way to envision how museums and galleries can engage with the public. Having a more permanent making space that changes with the exhibitions that are on display in the main space will allow this to become a more well-known aspect of what the Whitechapel Gallery offers to its visitors. There would no doubt be an increase in numbers of people who visit the Gallery just to use the participatory space and would set the Whitechapel Gallery apart from other London galleries and museums. This type of activity is also in direct alignment with ACE's new 10 year strategy, Let's Create, potentially adding new possibilities to the Gallery's funding strategy.

In order to make the Studio a long-term feature, the Gallery would have to **get creative with themes and structure**. To have a more permanent making area, the ask or framing for visitors to make in the space would have to change every time according to the exhibitions on display. To do this, they could hire an artist or arts educator to help them devise the themes based on the exhibitions that were on during that period, also giving opportunities to artists. Similar to how the Yoko Ono exhibition had different constraints to how visitors engaged in making, there are many possibilities for how exercises can be framed in the Studio. This would make it fresh and interesting for visitors to come back repeatedly during the year and allow for varied materials and methods to be utilised. Without being too prescriptive as to what visitors should make, there could be more prompts and examples on display that were aligned more with the exhibition, though still giving visitors the freedom to make what they want. Having structure to making in the Studio would also prevent people from coming in purely to use the space as if it was their own artist studio, unless this is an intention of the Gallery. Aspects such as limiting materials, the types of tools present, more clear signage and the support of GA's could aid in this process but it is recommended that there is a test phase to iteratively trial how these methods can be implemented.

Many of the GA's spoken to during the research period said that they were happy to be more involved in supporting visitors in their making process so one thing to consider for future iterations of the Studio is **a more active role of GA's**. Many of them are artists themselves so they are open to being more engaged which could also help with adding more structure according to the themes of the exhibitions. This would mean that there would potentially need to be invigilation all the time but would also help in giving the GA's more work experience that could benefit them for future employment. As the role itself is not always very interesting with GA's standing in the galleries, it would also give them the opportunity to have more to do during their shifts.

As with The Living Studio, once the idea is more established, this can be a **separate, participatory funding strand** for The Gallery to support this type of work. **Future evaluations and research projects** can aid in gaining more impact and recognition for this work which will also benefit future funding. This could also tap into new sources of funding such as from research bodies like the Arts & Humanities Research Council or NESTA. This would also help to provide proof of concept to aid with legitimacy and future funding.

Once the Studio is more established within the Gallery, it is important to **spread the word about this new concept through** press and reporting which will also help to secure a precedent around this type of work and solidify the Whitechapel Gallery as an innovator in this area. As many of the visitors to the Studio seemed not to be local residents, there could also be more tailored programmes to engage the local community brought about through partnerships with local schools and organisations. No doubt some if this happens already, but if it is a long-term ambition to have the Living Studio as a permanent space, it would be useful to think about the Studio specifically in the context of the local community, perhaps also engaging with local artists around this process.

