

BULLETIN

ISSUE NO. 68

JULY 2021



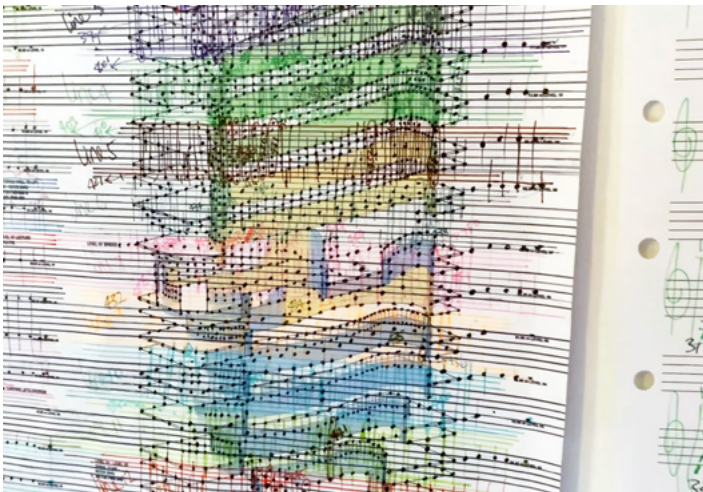
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Employing studio practices in Nina Sanadze's 'Living Room' series *Azza Zein*



Nina Sanadze, *Living Room: Mia Salsjö 2020*, stills from short film series.

The dictionary has two meanings for the word 'employ': 'to give someone work' or 'to make use of'. To be employed is to be used for a purpose, either as labour or as an instrument.

In 2020, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Melbourne experienced two lockdowns, during which people had to pause and rethink strategies to allocate their time and labour. Many felt the impact of casualisation and underpaid work. Parents suffered the overwhelming juxtaposition of the invisible labour in parenting and performing their job at home. The anxiety over keeping employment and what is valued as essential work became a household discussion.

Against this background, W.A.R. member Nina Sanadze filmed artists in their living room surrounded by their artworks' materials, inspirations and sounds. At the end of each episode, she films the artists briefly in their 'paid' job. The contrast between the artistic ecology of their living room and their jobs pinpoints how artists in Melbourne often support their life-art through precarious work, not in tune with their creative world. The series was screened on BUS TV in 2020 for nine weeks with 8–23 minutes video per artist (Mia Salsjö, Gonzalo Ceballos, Christine Fontana, Linda Gibbs, Jaime Powell & Cheralyn Lim, Tracey Lamb, Alison Kennedy, Shane Nicholas, Seth Searle and me).¹ In about two-thirds of each video, she films their living room and dedicates the rest of the video to what they consider their work to support their art.

1. Watch all episodes here:
<https://busprojects.org.au/program/living-room>

The series draws its force from the contrast between the affluent and harmonious ecology of artists' living rooms and often the precarity of their paying job. The difference is built not just through a tale of a type of employment but with a measured and staged thinking of the two different spaces' sound ecology.

As someone who participated in Sanadze's series, I can speak of her filming process. The living room is a constructed space that Sanadze choreographed to showcase my material world. I had to bring home my artworks that were lying for years in a storage unit. After the filming, she asked me to send her a selection of what I listen to, songs, music, podcasts or news. The living room series is not as such a realistic portrayal of a studio or home space. However, it draws its authenticity from the materiality and sound of each artist's environment. Each video is unique.

In this choreography of materials and tools, the artists are asked to sit frozen. When Nina asked me to do that, I first found it strange as it could signal a set with passive gaze tropes. I did it but with some discomfort. Could she have done it to monumentalise artists as she has been working with the history of monuments? I was stoic, but as a friend, I decided to un-question further and to see where this could be going.

Today when I look at the whole series, it strikes me: by freezing me, Sanadze de-employed me, de-employed us all. In this simple gesture of asking us to freeze, she activated the materiality of the space as if to shout loud: Art is not just about work. You are not working!

The director is at work: Freeze! The phone camera is on. Sanadze moves across space gracefully with her hand slowly shifting angles. We giggle before and after, but not during the camera directing time.

De-employed ~dmployed: homophones entertain, and coining words seems an essential part of a writer's work. The message is not direct but singular. In this joy of artistic practices, Sanadze dmployed us. Dmploy is to detach an object, a space, a body from the goal of employment. To dmploy then is to liberate a body from instrumentality and usefulness. To dmploy is to freeze from the living necessities of the time. To dmploy finds its etymology from the digital dm and plays on the meaning of direction.

By filming each artist separately, Sanadze perhaps adopts the dystopic contemporary nature of work and the isolationist conditions under the pandemic, where our individualistic spaces challenge human collectivity. There exists no pretence

of human togetherness as such in the series. Through the freezing action, other-than-human collectivities become visible—those of sounds and materials. The frozen body morphs into negative space; the hand-held phone camera moves around to film the space, objects and materials. The rigid pose becomes a pause.

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In a market system, wage, the value of a labour hour, is automatically tied to productivity and outcome. The *Living Room* series reminds us that this is not how art and artwork are produced or valued. Artists create within an ecology of materials and sounds. It also reminds us that an artistic scene comprises marginalised and unknown artists. The lockdown—catastrophic for many—felt like a pause of reflection, a pause in the ways of living. During these stretched breaks, online entertainment and art served as an antidote to the depressing lockdown modes or a pause from the rush to work. Nevertheless, art was not deemed essential by the state and federal governments in Australia, and the sector was not prioritised for financial support. The lockdown unpacked the layers of systemic precarity.

A pause cannot freeze time. A pause accentuates the music before and after a note. A break craves for the ecology of the surrounding notes. Similar to the image of the frozen body as negative space, a planned rupture in the edited sound creates the force of this work. We move from the beautiful, chaotic piles of scribbled notes and the frozen Mia Salsjö with the music of her composition 'The Quietude' into a dry, cold, tidy office space with multiple unoccupied desks, the dissonant sound of a vacuum cleaner and an artist at a paid job. In another, we move from the reading of Chris Fontana's published story *Yellow* into a scene with her body moving within the confines of a hospital elevator and the surrounding background noise. We see Gonzalo Ceballos shifting from a frozen position in a kitchen behind an easel with prolific painting objects all around into a standing waiting position as a bouncer with the sound of cars passing by. Sanadze's camera moves separately through the gestural work of Cheralyn Lim's paintings, followed by the detailed mark-making printing practice of Jaime Powell, both seated in an immobile position. Unlike other videos, the filming includes them briefly in a moment of art-making. Powell plays the guitar. Lim throws on the wheel a clay bowl. At the end of the video, we see them in front of their computer screen. Lim uses a set of small tools for their archival work and a microscope. Powell prepares a PowerPoint presentation. I will leave it to the reader to explore all the other episodes in their similarities and differences. Across all episodes, the differentiation in sounds accentuates the visual ruptures.

Which sequence of the film is the *living* room? Which room is alive? Is it the space where the ecology of materials is vibrant or where the artists seem active for their pay cheque?

In all these episodes, for instance, the body is not frozen while working for pay, yet it comes across as confined. The series complicates the notion of mobility and its relation to sound. How does sound confine our space as well as time? The first sequence of the films with carefully edited music or readings creates an illusion of another time that escapes the restricted reality of working to support artistic practice. The ending part often has a real sound recording of the work environment and brings the film to a seemingly unedited real-time.

The freezing gesture ties the work and perhaps emanates from Nina Sanadze's training as a musician. I focused my reading of this series on parallels among the pause in working, the frozen gesture and the rupture between sound environments. All have the potential to create vibrant ecologies through differentiation. Employing becomes a strategy to visualise the inconsistencies of artistic survival.



Nina Sanadze, *Living Room*: Gonzalo Ceballos 2020, stills from short film series.



Nina Sanadze, *Living Room*: Christine Fontana 2020, stills from short film series.