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Brian D'amato, Laura Emrick, Kenneth Goldsmit, Kirsten Mosher / Four Young New York Artists... over a couple of rounds of beer

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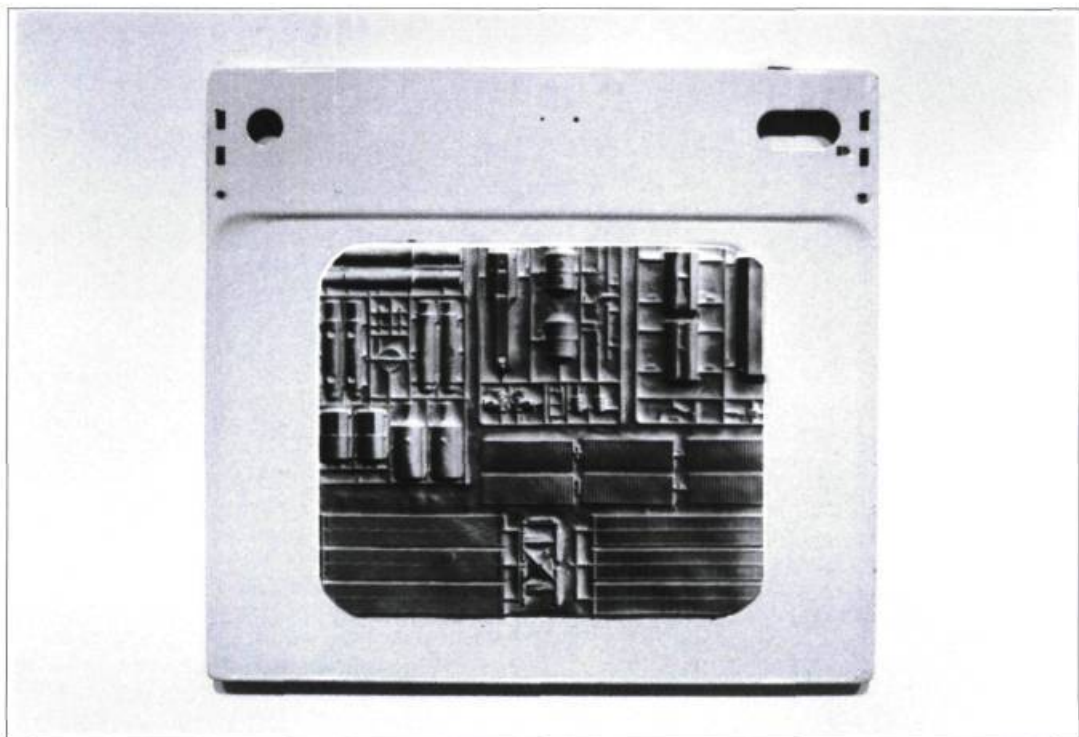
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ACTUALITÉS / EXPOSITIONS

Brian D'amato, Laura Emrick, Kenneth Goldsmith, Kirsten Mosher / Four Young New York Artists... over a couple of rounds of beer



Laura Emrick, *Ge*, 1989, cast of B.1 bomber model kit, washing machine face, sprayed enamel; 28 x 26 x 2 1/2 in

This column usually contains several reviews of New York exhibitions. In a departure from this general practice, the following is a round-table discussion between this writer and four young, unaffiliated artists who live and work in New York: Brian D'Amato, Laura Emrick, Kenneth Goldsmith and Kirsten Mosher.

All four have been active in New York for a number of years, creating their own work while engaging in related activities. Goldsmith and Emrick have fabricated work for other artists. D'Amato has worked in galleries and written for art magazines. Mosher has organized exhibitions and supervised art installations.

But it is only in the past six months to a year that their actual art work has received significant public exposure through a number of group exhibitions at the Whitney Museum Downtown, White Columns (an alternative space) and various SoHo commercial galleries, including Althea Viafora, Fernando Alcolea, Simon Watson, Loughelton, Daniel Newburg, Paula Allen, Lang O'Hara, Andrea Rosen and Colin de Land/American Fine Arts.

These artists by no means constitute a new school or movement. Their work incorporates inherently divergent concerns and different aesthetic strate-

gies. But they do share a common generation (all in their late 20s), an unaffiliated status regarding galleries, and a recent emergence into the bright light of public exhibition.

Each of them was asked to submit a list of favoured questions prior to the actual round-table discussion, which took place on July 5. And this writer, of course, had his own agenda in moderating the event. But it's hard to predict what will happen when you assemble five vocal people over a couple of rounds of beer and start talking about art. The resulting discussion was energetic, wide ranging, analytical and emotionally charged, as indicated by the abridged transcription that follows.

Steven Kaplan: Since I've mentioned you all in a group show context, what do you actually think about group shows?

Kirsten Mosher: Well, *Reconnaissance* was a group show that I organized, with Regina Joseph, and we felt it was perfect, because it held together as a project. Some group shows work, some don't.

Kenneth Goldsmith: The most successful group shows are those based on a theme or an idea. The uncured type, throwing together vast numbers of artists, just

doesn't work. When there's a theme, the curating is much better, the focus stronger. There's something to chew on.

K.M.: There have been a number of theme shows lately, like *The (Un)making of Nature* at the Whitney Downtown.

Laura Emrick: I think the big inclusive group shows, these big drawing shows, are mostly about identification.

K.G.: But they don't sell work. Nothing sells in these massive drawing shows.

K.M.: A lot of them are just about having a party.

S.K.: *Aren't they really about visibility? About having your work enter the consciousness of the art marketplace? Even if immediate sales are negligible.*

K.M.: But that's what they're trying to do—sell work. Whether they succeed or not, it's their intention.

K.G.: Kirsten completely subverted that intention in the *Reconnaissance* show — the notion of art commodities for sale. It was a group show where nothing was allowed to sell.

K.M.: All the work would get returned to its original place at the end of the show, so that the art could once again become part of the environment of the city. This idea was the most important thing. What's needed are curators who have an idea, a vision. Some do, but most don't. And that defines the success of a group show.

K.G.: What you're left with, finally, is the idea. Some things sell, some don't. The market's really bad now. We're heading into a slowdown of the economy. The boom's over. For artists emerging in the 90s, it's going to be a very different situation than ten years ago.

S.K.: *Do you see yourselves as emerging from a tradition, or as 90s artists, blazing trails into new directions unthought of and unheard of?*

Brian d'Amato: I'm tired of the 90s already, but of course I feel that I'm blazing into directions unthought of and unheard of.

K.M.: Well, I don't. I think the usual job has to be done.

S.K.: *The Reconnaissance show, where nothing was for sale, reminds me of conceptual work from the late 60s and 70s, which also wasn't for sale. And yet a lot of neo conceptual work from the 80s has positioned itself self-consciously as a commodity intended for sale even as it criticized the marketplace. How do you all fit into this continuum?*

L.E.: I think the 90s are going to be different from the 80s in that sense, although in this past season there's been a lingering trail of people trying to follow in the footsteps of Jeff Koons. The 90s will bring a big shift into certain issues of responsibility. But there are still artists who seem unwilling to let go the notion of being a celebrity artist and making a whole lot of money.

K.G.: What do you mean by responsibility? Social responsibility?

L.E.: Yes. Social responsibility, social concerns, re-entering the social sphere. In the 80s, social ideas pretty

much died. Everyone was saying "I am what I criticize". It was about buying into the marketplace even while criticizing it.

B.D.: That's what the 80s were about in general, so the work could be seen as an accurate statement of what was happening during the decade. All good work reflects its political moment.

L.E.: I'm not arguing with that. The 80s were the age of Reagan. But we hope the 90s will be different.

B.D.: Of course we hope the 90s will be different politically, but the ways in which art addresses the political are always unexpected.

K.M.: Sometimes you create work that makes sense in an American context, but doesn't translate well to other places — Europe or South America.

S.K.: *It loses its meaning if you take it out of the USA? I thought art was supposed to contain a universal message.*

K.M.: Yeah, me too. Then I realized that for those of us who appropriate images, there's a definite problem of translation. For example, in other parts of the world, they've never seen what an American police barricade looks like.

L.E.: Or the appliances that we use. In Spain, they don't have the same kinds of ironing boards, or washers and dryers.

K.G.: The question, ultimately, is who's our audience? Who are we addressing?

K.M.: Up to now, I've been addressing a New York audience, but now that I'm going to show in Europe, I'm concerned, because it's important for that new audience to understand. So I decided the solution would be to research the place where I would be showing, so I could get more in tune with the types of things they have there.

K.G.: But if Kirsten can do the research, why can't a viewer do some research as well to find out more about the art? My work is completely text-based. I've often thought about translations and working in other languages. I've made pieces using Latin and Greek. If I can bother to do the research, with information and translations available to everyone, this ties into a more global thing. But how much of ourselves are we willing to compromise in order to offer issues in their terms, their language, rather than our own?

L.E.: After all, we are American artists.

K.M.: I get so annoyed when necessary translations are not offered. Like with Rosemarie Troeckel.

B.D.: But she didn't want the work translated.

K.G.: There is something annoying about translations. I'd almost prefer not to have them.

S.K.: *Aren't they overdetermined? They offer a crutch, as if you can't understand the work without translation.*

K.M.: But sometimes you do need it. Let's face facts.

K.G.: It's not only the text. It's a whole encoded language that a lot of people don't understand. I walked around the galleries with my father last season. And he

suggested they should put little signs up next to the work in order to explain it.

K.M.: Yeah, my dad too.

K.G.: He's not initiated. He doesn't understand the language of the art world at all.

L.E.: Well, who is our audience? Let's ask that question.

S.K.: *How broadly based is your audience? What are your responsibilities to it, and its responsibilities to you?*

K.M.: The work that I'm most interested in doing is public work, and it's hard to do. The nice thing about galleries is that they're easier places to develop ideas. To get permission to do something in a public space is much harder.

S.K.: *Are there certain assumptions about the particular audience that attends galleries?*

B.D.: I think we know exactly who the art-world audience is. We know which 500 people are going to see anything we put into any gallery. And that's a problem. It would be great to reach for a wider audience without compromising all those tricky issues we want to deal with, and that we can't deal with in other media. You can put all kinds of information into the art, but I don't think that enough people are taking that information out of it.

L.E.: I don't agree. Parents can understand my art. My parents understand it. I try to make my language very accessible, although tightly controlled in formal ways that the art world can appreciate. But other people still have access to a car windshield. They understand what it is, and also that I'm making reference to paintings over the couch as well as to landscape in a broader sense.

K.M.: The worst thing you can do is underestimate your audience.

B.D.: Absolutely. I do cartoons, and I go out of my way to saturate them with information and colour.

K.G.: But your cartoons would not play well in *New York Newsday*.

B.D.: Maybe not in *Newsday*, but I'd like them to reach more people.

K.M.: Have you ever printed them in a magazine?

B.D.: They're coming out in *Balcon*, and they have been in other magazines. The ones that come out in popular magazines are going to be "dumbed down" a little bit.

K.G.: *Balcon* is an art magazine. What do you mean by popular magazines?

B.D.: Whatever my agent can get them into. But "popular" can run all the way from *The Atlantic Monthly* to the *National Enquirer*.

K.M.: I have a question for everybody. If you could pick the best place to show your art, be it the most appropriate magazine or the most appropriate space, where would it be?

S.K.: *Space? As in gallery?*

K.M.: Yes. A particular gallery, if you wish, or galleries in general.

B.D.: I'd choose movies. Movies are the cathedrals of our time. It's what people see. It gets the work out.

L.E.: I have nothing against the gallery system.

K.G.: I'm with Laura. My work is a private activity, and a gallery is an appropriate context for what I do.

L.E.: The question seems to be: Are we trying to undermine the gallery system?

K.M.: Not necessarily. But is the gallery enough, or do you want to do something else as well?

L.E.: I think public spaces are wonderful. A lot of interesting artists work in that system of the real world.

K.M.: Well, in answer to my own question, I think galleries serve a real purpose. But I wouldn't be happy just showing in a gallery. Not because I don't like them. They're perfect for a lot of my work. But I also need to make art which is public and outdoors and part of the community, rather than just part of the gallery system.

B.D.: I'm a little disturbed by the white cube of the gallery. I don't feel that this big white space with stuff in it is exactly the monument that our civilization will be proud to leave. When I look at the architecture of the past, I get a little envious. Most of the work that goes into the galleries tends to play as artificial nature to the gallery's culture. This clean white space and this blob of crud on the wall.

K.G.: Would you what your work to be shown in the great spaces of the past?

B.D.: It wouldn't be appropriate for the great spaces of the past. But there should be great spaces of the present. We should be building them. In a sense, the movie theatre is our modern equivalent. And even these aren't like the great old theatres. They're austere boxes with the screen in front being the only great space.

K.G.: Isn't that the history of modernism, though?

B.D.: I guess it is. It's come down to that rectangle of the screen.

L.E.: That addresses one of the questions I thought of: the notion of art as entertainment.

S.K.: *We must be on the same wavelength. I was just going to bring it up.*

K.M.: I think people associate entertainment with something that's light, breezy and not especially serious. If that's what you're talking about, then no, I'm no entertainer.

S.K.: *There's serious fun too. But I'm thinking of show biz and its well-oiled publicity machine. There's a similar but smaller publicity machine in the art world.*

L.E.: It's a broader question. In the 80s, artists like Koons addressed the collector level of the art world. And in the general media, in every magazine, artists were the hot new thing.

K.G.: They're never in the magazines anymore.

L.E.: All the people rushed to the galleries to see them. It got attendance up, making gallery spaces much more public.



Kenneth Goldsmith, *Crew*, altered oars and paint; 6 x 16 feet

B.D.: But the art itself was not written about as entertaining. Even with Kenny Scharf and Jean Michel Basquiat. Little attention was directed at their art. The public didn't spend much time looking at the images. It was more about the personality of the artist. Like reading an article about an actor rather than going to see his performance in the movie.

S.K.: *A cult of personality.*

L.E.: A very Warholian idea which is totally outmoded.

K.M.: We're constantly reading about these stupid movie stars. What they eat, where they exercise. And artists were treated on the same level.

S.K.: *For a couple of years, Art News had a photo of an artist on the cover of each issue. They were trying to establish the star quality of artists in order to sell the magazine. That's entertainment, no?*

K.G.: I think there's a fundamental change of attitude among everybody sitting at this table. I don't want to be a media star.

S.K.: *If someone does fascinating work, be it in art or in the movies, isn't the supposition that you'll want to know more about them, because they are world historical individuals?*

K.G.: That's an old stereotype that I'm glad to see die.

S.K.: Entertainment Tonight. Vanity Fair. *Is it really dying?*

K.G.: In my attitude to the art world, certainly. It's an old, almost misogynistic definition of what it is to be an artist. The pressure of having that kind of onus put upon you is outmoded.

L.E.: It's just a careerist game. Like basing New York nightlife on who gets the cover of a magazine.

B.D.: But isn't it nice that the public was reading about artists and not just about actors?

K.G.: Are you really interested in that kind of attention?

K.M.: Who cares about actors ?

S.K.: I'm sure if there were actors sitting here, they would also complain about the trivial type of media coverage they often receive.

K.M.: If they were serious actors or actresses, they probably would feel the same way.

S.K.: *Still, there is a notion of the publicity machine at work in the art world, and New York is the centre of that world, the most visible place to show work. You all have a lot of visibility, going to openings and parties. What you do and say, who you say it to. There is this pressure to perform in public.*

K.M.: It's just not very interesting, that aspect.

K.G.: You have to do it, but it's not the focus. Maybe it was in the 80s.

K.M.: No. Even then it was just something in the air, something about the Reagan years. There was money in the air. Now there's less money, so there's less focus on hype.

K.G.: Since the money's not there, it makes us think about art differently. It brings up issues of rebelliousness and complicity. The problem I had with so many of these 80s artists is that I was never quite sure where they stood. Was it an anti-commodity stance or was it complicit with the system. Was it critical?

K.M.: It felt like yuppie artists making art about yuppies.

B.D.: Making fun of it and capitalizing on it at the same time.

K.G.: I'm tired of contradiction. I'm interested in something a little more straight. The 80s were full of contradiction.

B.D.: But paradox is also an interesting thing for art to examine.

K.G.: The 80s were a real paradox. Nobody was taking a firm stance. This has to change.

S.K.: *Our new decade is only six months old. All of you were certainly making art in the 80s.*

L.E.: We saw ourselves as totally different, though.

K.G.: I had no part of the 80s. I didn't capitalize on them. I wasn't old enough. Everyone at this table is of the post baby-boom generation. People who were showing in the 80s are generally ten years older. They had a different approach to art because they were part of the baby boom.

S.K.: *Could you elaborate?*

K.G.: I'd like to address what it was like growing up in the 70s.

B.D.: It was hell.

K.G.: There was an entirely different attitude towards TV and the media than for people growing up in the 50s and 60s. It makes for a fundamental difference between the generations. I look at Koons, Cindy Sherman, Allan McCollum. These people are infatuated with the media. They grew up at a time when media were kind of wonderful.

B.D.: They were infatuated with media because that was the time historically when media began to infiltrate the art world.

L.E.: Actually, they were partially responsible for that infiltration.

K.G.: It was a romance with the media which I don't feel at all. Being raised on television in the 70s, just coming into consciousness during Watergate and seeing the government collapse. These were my first impressions. The energy crisis followed after that, not to mention the rotten media of the 70s. It's not a romantic situation.

S.K.: *Cindy Sherman and that crew did embrace the media, but they weren't totally positive about them. There was and still is an ambivalence.*

L.E.: They were trying to deconstruct the media.

K.G.: I don't even consider this in my work.

B.D.: Even if you don't consider them, your work exists in opposition to them. You can't get away from the media. They form the sea we all swim in.

K.G.: Of course. But rather than addressing it specifically, I take them for granted. The issues have been addressed. You can't say anything more about them.

B.D.: I think there is the sense that we have to build, to construct something. Rather than just taking things apart.

K.G.: That's a good point.

K.M.: Yes. Being productive.

B.D.: And it can be productive in a lyrical, imaginative sense as well as a social sense.

L.E.: Don't you think the state of the world is much more urgent now?

K.M.: It gets more urgent every day.

B.D.: It was always pretty urgent.

K.M.: The era of Reagan and the yuppies made it seem as if nobody cared.

L.E.: I was wondering whether artists are taking over some of the roles traditionally assigned to the media, since we can't believe anything that's told to us. One of the roles available to artists is to do some investigation,

to act more as a conscience.

K.M.: Reporters are not supposed to be a conscience. They're supposed to present the facts. Now everybody knows that it's all propaganda. What you're saying is kind of funny, though, because art is propaganda too, so it would just be someone else's propaganda.

K.G.: Well, I'd trust Laura more than I'd trust CBS.

S.K.: *That's because you know Laura. (Laughter) Even through the 70s and 80s, there was a basic distrust of the media. Especially among disaffected New York writers and artists. What makes your situation different?*

L.E.: It's interesting that you don't really have a take on the 90s.

S.K.: *At this point, does anyone know the zeitgeist of the 90s?*

K.M.: The big factor is economics. There was money in the 80s. There's no money now. Attitudes towards money have changed among artists. Once it was easy to get. Now it's not. I think lots of 80s artists had major social concerns which were sometimes subverted by the fact that they could get a lot of money.

B.D.: The money spent on art doesn't bother me, because it's so minuscule. Even at the height of the boom in 1984, the amount people were spending on art was nothing. The greatest artists in the world were making so much less than Sylvester Stallone.

K.G.: Still, they were making so much more than people all over the city.

S.K.: *Jeff Koons, who you identify as the typical 80s moneymaker, has suggested Michael Jackson as his role model.*

B.D.: And they're not even remotely in the same league financially.

L.E.: Should they be?

B.D.: I think that people should spend money on art rather than for aircraft carriers or crummy entertainment.

K.G.: But art is one of the more democratic forms of entertainment. You can go to galleries for free, without a dollar in your pocket.

K.M.: If you're willing to put up with the attitude. (Laughs)

L.E.: What if galleries charged admission, like they do at movies? You wouldn't have to sell your art.

B.D.: In the old days, that was how paintings were mainly exhibited. Big panoramas and all the work from the Hudson River school. They'd send their art around in tents, to fairs that were classier than the ones we have today. People would pay ten cents to go in and look at this magnificent painting.

S.K.: *Art could not survive that way today.*

B.D.: Definitely not.

S.K.: *Forgetting what's for sale, could an art show today have good box office? And pay for itself, maybe even turn a profit?*

K.M.: No way.



Kursten Mosher, *Campaign*, 1989, mixed media; 20 x 40 in

B.D.: Galleries are free, but you don't see many casual visitors coming in, because they're not of that world. They don't hear about it.

K.G.: It's true. I have friends in and out of the art world. Those who are not in the art world never come and see shows.

B.D.: I don't blame them. Art works are too small and dull and boring. They're not entertaining enough.

L.E.: I know people who come and see shows just because they want to understand what I'm doing.

K.G.: But if they weren't friends of yours, they wouldn't be there.

S.K.: *I assume that because art is an elitist activity, with a relatively small audience, it needs a support system. How can art be more widely seen, be made more accessible?*

K.M.: Well, shows are too short.

B.D.: The one-month schedule is not good.

K.M.: Especially for installations. Some galleries have accommodated to that, after realizing how much it costs to install the work. Like the James Turrell light pieces which I helped install at Stein Gladstone. They extended the show a month. And Barbara Flynn at Art Galaxy, who keeps shows up for two or three months.

K.G.: I'm happy that James Turrell's room at P.S. One is there permanently. It's a great piece. I always look forward to going back.

K.M.: You need to go back and meditate on it.

B.D.: That's what I meant about our civilization leaving monuments behind. That room is one of the few things created recently that makes me proud to be alive in this century. In general, the white box with a bit of crud on the walls is not.

K.M.: The white box represents an opportunity. It's really great to be able to take advantage of that. But the

time limitation is still a problem.

K.G.: The best way to experience an art work is to live with it. To lie on the couch and absolutely space into the piece. I've seen pictures of Count Panza's place, with totally minimal canvases on the wall and big, overstuffed Victorian furniture. I could imagine leaning back and easing into the subtleties of the art. I can never do that in galleries. There's something nice about living with art, which is not possible for anyone at this table. I can't even afford to buy my own work.

B.D.: The domestic situation is one of the better ways to view art, but hardly anyone can see it this way anymore. Collectors buy art and warehouse it. If they do hang it at home, they receive relatively few guests, so the work is still out of sight.

S.K.: *Don't forget the corporate collections, which are accessible only in offices and lobbies, if at all.*

B.D.: So the art that tends to get made has an initial hit time. It's very fast. It looks good in the gallery. You can walk in, get the whole show in 30 seconds, and leave. I would be far happier for people to see my stuff in their homes, at their leisure, because I work hard to make my pieces as rich as possible.

K.G.: There's actually a gallery somewhere with a bench or some chairs. A place to sit down and look at pictures.

B.D.: What? A gallery where you can sit down?

S.K.: *It's nice to have a place to sit, and most museums provide for this. But that still doesn't get to the notion of living with art. And let's face it. It's a privileged condition. Most people cannot afford to buy art and live with it. Which leads to another question. Would you all be making art if it weren't for sale?*

K.M.: If I could make art that was for public spaces and didn't have to be for sale, fine.



L.E.: My high school teacher once asked me a similar question. Would I make art if I were the only person in the world? The expected answer would be no. Art is a social thing. It's about communicating.

K.M.: You could be sitting down on Earth thinking there must be somebody out there. Maybe on Mars. (Laughter)

S.K.: *I honestly wasn't trying to get so comic. More the idea of art in society. You all have a certain bias. You chose a career in art, with the underlying assumption of making a living in that career. So the art is for sale. Would you then create it if it were in a non-sale situation?*

K.M.: What would that be? Being really rich and not having to make money? Starving to death? The government paying for the work and helping you live?

L.E.: Or you just make art and none of it ever sells. Lots of people do that.

K.G.: I think everyone here has done that. For years and years we hung around the studio, made things, trashed them, stored them, trashed them. You're approaching this group of people when things are just beginning to sell.

B.D.: It's still trivial compared to the amount of money we could make doing something else.

K.M.: Like what? Could I be a great stockbroker?

B.D.: You could be the greatest stockbroker. You could do it well enough to make a lot more money.

S.K.: *Annina Nosei once said of John Weber that he could have made a lot more money as a corporate executive, rather than running a gallery. It was a compliment to his talent. She wasn't putting him down.*

L.E.: You don't become an artist to make money.

S.K.: *I assume not. But with all the recent hype, and the high prices being paid for art?*

K.G.: But that's over. That's gone.

S.K.: *Is it really over? What about the auctions?*

B.D.: It's all blue chip stuff that's doing well at the auctions. The new stuff is getting creamed.

K.G.: Being an artist is not a comfortable situation. I could use a lot more money than I have now.

S.K.: *Let me assure you that it's no more comfortable for art critics. They make even less than artists.*

B.D.: Art has become more of a rich man's game, which is unfortunate.

L.E.: It's not about the sales. It's about communicating. Let's face it. That's what artists do.

K.G.: If the sales dropped off tomorrow, Steve, to answer your question, we would all continue to make art, in one form or another.

Steven Kaplan