

ART & AUCTION

INSIDE THE ART MARKET

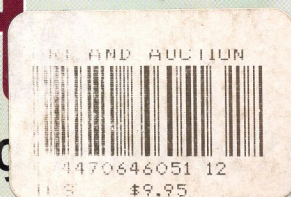
OCTOBER 2000 \$9.95

Elton John's Young Photographers
Auctioneering's Young Bloods



Art, Glamour, Real Estate

Is Contemporary Getting



The passion of Sir Elton: Sam Taylor-Wood's *Dolorosa I*

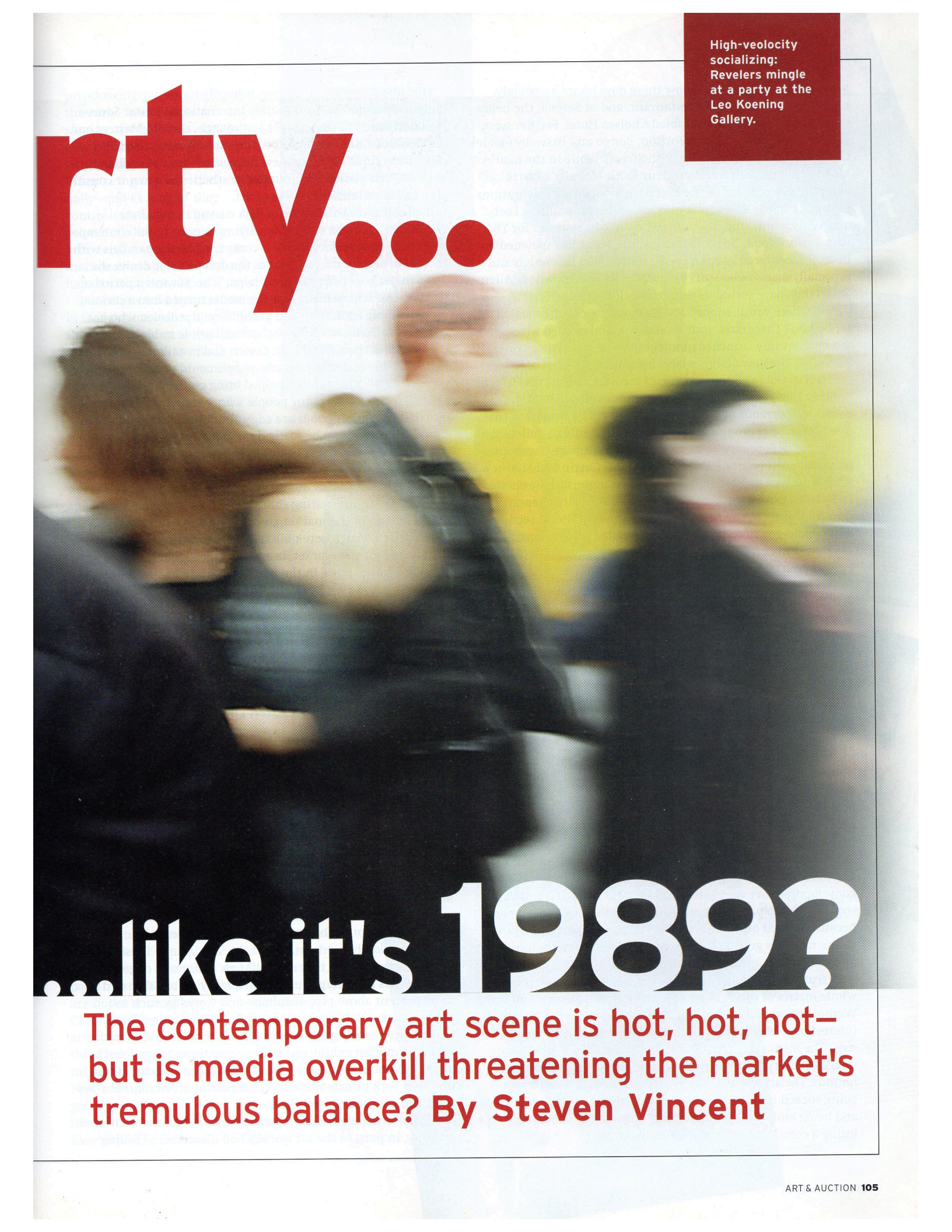
Let's Pa



STRETCHED OUT ON THE FLOOR OF A SOHO LOFT WEARING VINTAGE 1980s hip-hop pants and a gold-plated necklace reading MONEY, twentysomething painter Erik Parker refuses to take off his Comme des Garçons shirt. "I don't want to look like Damian Loeb," he shouts over the raucous beat of Brooklyn rappers Wu-Tang Clan, as performance artist Cindy Greene, magenta eyeliner matching her Roberto Cavalli dress, and painter Meredith Danluck, sporting Miguel Androver leather knee-length boots, laugh appreciatively. Curled up on a sofa behind them, artist Yearly Leonard, in an Androver shirt with a necktie, chats with Dana Hoey, who is wearing four-inch gold Fendi heels. Cameras flash, cigarettes flare, it's a photo shoot. Actually, it's a party being staged to simulate an art party for a photo spread—organized and clothed by a new art/style magazine called *Smock*—and don't you wish you were there?

Well, maybe not. But as loopy as the idea may be, the people behind *Smock*, which published its first issue in late August, are betting that there is a sizable audience in the mid-20s to mid-30s demographic that is willing to pay \$5.50 for a bimonthly magazine that, amid ads for Versace, Vivienne Tam and BMW (but not for galleries or auction houses), features photographic eye candy and frothy prose about the lifestyles of young and good-looking artists. "People want to be part of the art world, meet the artists, hang out at their parties—and we're going to take them there," says Mike Weiss, 30, *Smock's* executive editor and a New York-based private dealer and curator. Adds publisher Scott Bennett, 32, "The art scene is all about the new faces. We want to do for contemporary art what MTV did for rock music."

It's party time in the contemporary art world again. Fueled by Wall Street, Silicon Alley and the soaring U.S. economy generally, the "scene"—that mixture of art, money and media, with a large dollop of dilettantes and fashionable wannabes—is, for the first time since the late 1980s, bubbling like sparkling wine through the art precincts of lower



High-velocity
socializing:
Revelers mingle
at a party at the
Leo Koenig
Gallery.

arty...

...like it's 1989?

The contemporary art scene is hot, hot, hot—
but is media overkill threatening the market's
tremulous balance? **By Steven Vincent**

Manhattan. It's elbow-to-elbow these days (more accurately, nights) at Clay, the Nolita restaurant, and at Serena, the below-street-level club inside the fabled Chelsea Hotel. Farther west, they're packing them in at Bottino, Bongo and Passerby (dealer Gavin Brown's trendy bar on 15th Street), while in the nearby Meatpacking District, restaurateur Keith McNally's Pastis has been the site of some of the hottest after-opening celebrations in years, such as dealer Mary Boone's fêtes for painters Loeb and Will Cotton, and dealer Matthew Marks's dinner for YBA Sam Taylor-Wood. Not surprisingly, the scene has spawned an in-crowd, centered around Loeb, painter Inka Essenhigh and especially British glam-girl painter Cecily Brown, whose Allen Street digs have served as this generation's Cedar Tavern.

And where youth, money and glamour go, can the media be far behind? These days, your local newsstand is filled with a score of recently launched, photography-saturated magazines purveying the new designer-label bohemianism—sort of *Felicity* meets Nan Goldin. The mainstream media, too, is on the case. In January 1999, *New York* magazine—that reliable index of the metropolis's trends and fascinations—alerted its readers to the developing buzz around Brown, Loeb and Essenhigh, followed by *Vanity Fair* in February 2000, which ran a multipage photo spread featuring such painters as Essenhigh, John Currin and Matthew Ritchie, as well as a brooding, and now infamously bare-chested Loeb. In fact, Loeb has become a one-man publicity phenomenon, appearing in the *New York Times*'s Sunday "Styles" section and tabloid gossip columns (he briefly dated actress Gina Gershon and currently goes out with *Vogue* editor Plum Sykes). He was even on hand for the Oscars this spring, his clothes courtesy of Burberry. Together with Brown (who herself has been featured in major stories in *Vogue* and the *New York Times Magazine*), Loeb turned up recently on PBS's *Charlie Rose*. And just last month, *Harper's Bazaar* featured a two-page spread of dealer Jeffrey Deitch photographed with 24 of his artists in a tableau vivant staged by conceptualist Vanessa Beecroft, who dressed the artists in Yves Saint Laurent, Helmut Lang and Prada.

Even those toiling in the art world's back offices are getting their 15 minutes: In August, *New York* magazine ran a profile of "event planner" Melissa Feldman—her job, the magazine explained, is to give "art stars and those who support them a place to act like, well, stars." No longer is this "the somnolent years of the early nineties," the article trumpeted. "With the economy revving like the eighties, the market is also back to eighties-style extravagance, from the inflated price tags to the high-velocity socializing."

According to journalist Anthony Hayden-Guest, author of the 1996 book *True Colors*, a chronicle of the rise and fall of the contemporary art world in the 1980s, and himself hardly a stranger to the party circuit, "After the '80s crash, the media became burned out over art. Now everyone is partying again, so the media is getting interested—they see glamour, money and excitement returning to the scene."

In truth, the fizzing contemporary scene is benefiting from a whole matrix of social, economic and cultural factors. Call it the Warholization of America: Not only are people richer but their interest in celebrities and celebrityhood is seemingly all-pervasive. The media is currently filled with sexualized, glamorous images of everyone from nude athletes to designer-clad newshounds. The art world is hardly an exception. "The art scene is being sucked into the general consumerism of today's culture, and being embraced by marketing," Hayden-Guest observes. "It's losing a certain amount of its own character."

This phenomenon, of course, is hardly limited to the contemporary scene. As *Art & Auction* International Editor Souren Melikian noted in these pages last month, the Old Masters and Impressionist markets have become "loudly advertised spectacles" attracting "hordes of new buyers" whose unfamiliarity with art "has virtually eliminated aesthetics as a major consideration" in purchasing works of art.

If all this gives you a sense of déjà vu, you're not alone. Watching the media's ever-intensifying interest in the contemporary scene, dealer Mary Boone is concerned by the parallels with the 1980s, despite the fact that as the decade's star dealer she was a major beneficiary of press hype. "The '80s was a period of real creative achievement that the media turned into a caricature about big egos, flash and greed," says the dealer, who has lately revitalized her career with a mediagenic stable of artists that includes Loeb, Essenhigh, Cotton and installation artist Tom Sachs. "By the end of the decade, people could only see the cliché version of the '80s, and that helped bring on the crash."

Surprisingly, even many people whose stars have risen during the current boom are edgy about its broader implications. "The scene can be really dangerous," says up-and-coming dealer Leo Koenig, the 23-year-old son of famed German curator Kaspar König. "It represents the very crossover of media and art that led to the '80s downturn. Back then, art world parties were so interesting that they attracted people who didn't belong in the market, and who in the end ruined it." Says Chelsea dealer Derek Eller, "The media attention is ultimately bad for the market. It makes things seem more superficial and draws in the wrong people." And even Christie's worldwide head of contemporary art Philippe Ségalot, whose aggressive handling of the auction house's redefined contemporary sales have done so much to pump up prices for '80s and '90s artists, concedes that the current media spotlight on the art market can be a two-edged sword. "The buzz around contemporary art can help bring in people who buy responsibly," he says. "But it can also encourage other buyers to enter the market who spend irresponsibly. I would

"Now everyone is partying interested—they see glamour, returning to the scene."

hate to see a return to the irrational spending of the 1980s."

To be sure, no one's predicting such a dire repetition of history—at least not in the near future—and indeed, some believe today's market has strengths that the '80s lacked. These confident observers argue that even though a shortage of good material has boosted prices for top-quality material a solid 20 to 50 percent above proper values—and works by such touchstone artists as Jeff Koons, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Andy Warhol are reaching levels higher than those attained in the '80s—the market exhibits a calm, if sometimes tremulous, balance. "No one is freaking out or heading for the exits," says one New York private dealer. "As long as the stock market stays up, I don't see much trouble ahead."

Ségalot attributes what he perceives as the market's current stability, in part, to the art world's bad memories of falling



C-level work by A-level artists, or for A-level work by C-level artists.”

Photography has probably seen the most dramatic recent price spikes. Pointing to the work of Goldin, one dealer notes, “Goldin’s photographs went from \$4,000 to \$30,000 over the last year and a half—how do you explain that? Similarly, Beecroft’s photographs of her high-gloss performances have leaped in price from around \$1,500 to a high of \$15,000 in a matter of four months.” Then there are the German photographers—Andreas Gursky, Thomas Ruff and Thomas Struth—all of whom have seen their prices explode at auction. At Sotheby’s on May 17, Gursky’s 1998 *Prada III* sold for \$181,750 against an estimate of \$60,000 to \$80,000, while at Christie’s May 16 sale, Struth’s 1999 *Pantheon, Rome* reached a record \$270,000, three times over its high estimate of \$90,000. (What makes

these prices even more surprising to longtime market observers is the fact that the Gursky is one of an edition of six, while the Struth is from an edition of 10.)

“Who are these buyers?” asks Logan. “No one knows them. And when knowledgeable collectors and dealers don’t know the people who are out there doing the buying, that’s a real danger sign.” Dubrow agrees. “These new buyers are the instant millionaires, the dot-commers and stock-market tyros who don’t know a thing about art. Because of their money and the media hype, they’ve decided to become collectors—but they’ll be the first out if the market drops.” Anthony Meier, a San Francisco-based blue-chip dealer, echoes those thoughts. “Many of these new buyers have been attracted to the market because of their social activities and interest in the scene,” he says. “But their sincerity is somewhat shallow, and they’re giving the market a negative rap. So far, they’ve bolstered the market by buying a lot of mediocre works, but how soon will indigestion set in?”

Actually, malnutrition may be more like it—at least for many smaller-but-talented dealers. For even as their coffers fatten, some say they are being slowly, but steadily, deprived of a gallery’s true nutrients. “You can sell out all your shows these days, sure, but in this media-driven art scene, art itself is no longer enough to sustain a gallery,” says Chelsea dealer Daniel Silverstein. “Increasingly, what’s driving the marketplace is the ‘hot’ artist. Dealers are searching for the ‘hot’ product, or ways to create a media buzz around their artists. And as more and

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more artists become celebrities, and more and more become figures in popular culture, dealers gradually move away from connoisseurship toward considerations that are no longer aesthetically based.”

Like youth, for instance. While the focus on fresh-faced under-35-year-olds has become something of a national obsession, in the art world it has reached the level of a mania. “In order for smaller galleries to be noticed by the public, they are increasingly pushing to find artists who look good in magazine spreads,” Silverstein remarks. “It’s all about young artists—that’s the name of the game,” Wehby says. Recalls another Chelsea dealer: “Recently, a magazine editor came into my gallery and asked me who were my ‘hip-hop artists.’ When I gave him a name, he said, ‘Are you sure he’s hip? He’s got to look good in our photographs.’ What does this have to do with art? Are we coming to the point where dealers will need head shots for their artists?” A fourth Chelsea dealer merely sighs, “Do I wish my artists were better looking? Of course I do.”

To catch hold of the golden glow of youth, larger galleries have been raiding smaller ones like corsairs on the Spanish Main. “Poaching has always gone on, but it’s more shameless now, more blatant,” says Stefan Stux, the well-respected Chelsea dealer who started in the early ‘80s. Stux should know: In the last two years, he has lost two major



Artists, particularly the fresh-faced, photogenic variety, are stars again. Damian Loeb is a one-man publicity phenomenon, shown here at the *Vanity Fair* Oscars party donning a Burberry kilt and hanging out with musician Moby. Loeb also appeared on the *Charlie Rose Show* with fellow artists Cecily Brown and Shahzia Sikander, above.

artists, Essenhigh and painter Su-En Wong, to Deitch, who also recently lured installation artist Julian Laverdière away from Chelsea dealer Andrew Kreps. In turn, Boone, something of a pirate queen herself, snatched Essenhigh away from Deitch, as she did Loeb. "I always feel my artists are looking over my shoulder to more trendy, scene-oriented galleries," says one mid-level Chelsea dealer.

Like NBA scouts combing high schools for future basketball stars, dealers are now trawling art schools for new talent. Yale is a favorite hunting ground, as is New York's School of Visual Arts. "You don't dare show up late for one of SVA's student shows, or else all the young artists will be signed up," says one dealer. In Los Angeles, the situation has gotten so bad that UCLA has placed restrictions on dealers' and collectors' access to students' studio exhibitions.

But the problems posed by price run-ups and the quest for youthful artists pale in comparison to the Godzilla of all the beasts faced by many galleries, from the fledgling to the relatively well-established: Manhattan real estate. "Ten years ago, you could develop a business away from the Boones and Gagosians by getting a small gallery with cheaper rent in another part of town," one dealer says. "But those days are gone. Now to show you can compete in the scene—and persuade your younger artists not to jump to a larger dealer—you have to have that Chelsea gallery." And pay those Chelsea rents, which can reach as high as \$45 to \$50 per square foot.

And when knowledgeable people who are out there—collector Kent Logan

(It's no cheaper in the Meatpacking District.) "It's a real problem, especially for less-established dealers," says Susan B. Anthony, an independent real estate broker who specializes in galleries. "We've never had this problem before, anyway, not to this degree." In the past, when Manhattan's contemporary art scene felt hemmed in either by real estate values or a rigid gallery hierarchy, it revitalized itself by moving into less expensive neighborhoods: SoHo in the 1970s, the East Village in the '80s, Chelsea in the early '90s. But today, for all intents and purposes, it's Chelsea or nothing. "Manhattan is running out of affordable space for galleries," says art gallery specialist Anne-Brigitte Sirois of the Lerner Group, a Manhattan real estate firm. "People are trying to develop galleries in Queens, Brooklyn and Harlem," Anthony notes, "but I think it would be tough for an art scene to take root outside Manhattan." (Nonetheless, there are reports that Deitch, for one, is planning to open a space in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn.)

With no viable alternative to Chelsea, at least for now, those dealers who wish to remain competitive in the new contemporary scene often feel trapped in the pricey district. This summer, for example, Eller left his claustrophobic gallery on the fifth floor of 529 West 20th Street, where he paid around \$12.50 per square foot, for a brighter and more accessible second-floor space five blocks north, where he pays in the mid-\$20s. "I'd like to have found something less expensive, but I felt I had to stay in Chelsea," Eller says. "I just wasn't confident enough that people

would follow me if I set up somewhere else—artists want to be in a gallery where their work will be seen." Still, Eller was lucky: The list of Chelsea dealers who have closed, at least in part because of high rents, includes Tate, Stefano Basilico, Steffany Martz and Xavier LaBoulbenne. On the edge of the Meatpacking District, the landlord of prints and works on paper dealer Karen McCready recently tripled the rent on her 2,500-square-foot gallery, from \$5,000 to \$15,000. "Right now, I'm trying to decide whether to share my space with another gallery or move," McCready says. Moreover, in the next couple of years, the leases of many early renters in Chelsea are set to expire. "With the shortage of office space in Manhattan, landlords may not be as willing to rent to galleries as they once were," says Sirois. "We will probably see more galleries go out of business."

To some people, a little pruning might not be a bad result. "How can there be so many galleries in Chelsea and everyone making money?" asks Richard Polsky, a San Francisco-based art market analyst. "That's easy," he says, "they're not, no matter what they say. But many dealers didn't get involved in this business to make money, but to have a certain lifestyle." That's nothing new, of course. Still, in part because of the contemporary scene's new cachet, their numbers are increasing. "The art world has been so glamorized recently that more and more independently wealthy people have decided to become dealers," says Stux. And this is leading to an acute case of gallery glut. "Chelsea is becoming oversaturated with dealers; it's like a huge shopping mall," says contemporary art collector Mark J. Lerner, a senior partner and president of the New York investment bank Morgan, Evan & Co. "After a while your eyes begin to glaze over, and it's difficult to tell what's good from what's mediocre." To contemporary collector Dubrow, it's all just too much. "There are too many bored housewives playing at being dealers, too many untalented artists, too many shows, too many ignorant art buyers with no knowledge of what they're doing. If the market drops, half the galleries in Chelsea are going under—and some of the good ones, too."

Nonetheless, concerns about price run-ups and competitive pressures seem inconceivably far removed from today's art scene. On a warm Saturday evening early last month, people were packing the Chelsea sidewalks, sipping white wine, conversing on cell phones, air-kissing cheeks recently returned from the Hamptons. The art world was kicking off its first fall season of the 21st century, and the buzz was electric: Did you catch the flesh-colored clothing—complete with nipples and real human hair—at Deitch Projects? Or those videos of Russian women advertising themselves to Western husbands at Nikolai Fine Art? "We have to see Micha Klein at Boone, the latest P.S. 1 show and Sargent at the Met—I'm exhausted just thinking about it," said one fanny-packed man to his wife as they navigated a stroller outside the Robert Miller Gallery. And if amid the excitement of the scene, you detected notes of concern—"It's too excessive, like something out of *Satyricon!*" one downtown critic was overheard to say—they were few and far between, drowned out by the reggae blasting from a gallery on 21st Street. Who's thinking about run-ups in photography prices, escalating gallery rents or the future of the art market, anyway? That's for tomorrow. Right now, there are openings to check out, parties to attend, artists and dealers to cultivate and schmooze. Rising above the former industrial warehouses of Chelsea, and the purring crowds flowing among them, the music played far into the night.

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