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Is the Art World Too Big for Its Own Good?



Elyse Derosia, Sean Kelly, Paula Cooper and Bridget Donahue, photographed last month at The New York Times. Sean Donnola

Many of the most powerful galleries in the world today — places such as Gagosian, Hauser & Wirth and David Zwirner — got their start in the 1980s and early '90s. The art world was still fairly small then, concentrated in just a few cities (London, Zurich and Paris among them), but its philosophical and commercial center was a cluster of storefronts in downtown Manhattan. In the years since, and especially in the last decade, the art world has transformed into a global monolith: there are now galleries with hundreds of employees and branches across several continents, businesses that have grown into international corporations overseeing the flow of hundreds of millions of dollars a year (and in some cases more). The industry is now an interconnected network of money and power that includes auction houses, where sales records are broken in a practiced routine that it is both mundane and exhausting, and art fairs, a pure distillation of capitalism in which galleries of all sizes pay large sums of money — thousands for a smaller gallery, usually tens of thousands for a larger one — to operate booths and peddle their wares to collectors (there are now more than 100 big ones all over the world). Art dealers are the entryway into this system, and many of those who began with mere ambitions to discover and financially support artists now must contend with the omnipresent threat of larger galleries, which scoop up those artists once they've become commercially successful.

In May, T gathered four New York-based dealers, who represent roughly three generations of galleries, each with a different background, to discuss this state of affairs and whether the art world has grown too colossal for its own good. The roster included Paula Cooper, 80, [whose gallery](#), now in Chelsea, first

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opened in SoHo in 1968 before the neighborhood was even called that and who is one of the last of the pioneering American dealers, who, along with Richard Bellamy, Leo Castelli and Sidney Janis, helped shape the art world as we know it today; Elyse Derosia, 31, co-founder of [Bodega](#), which began in Philadelphia and moved to the Lower East Side in 2014, and who serves as the board president of the nonprofit [New Art Dealers Alliance](#); Bridget Donahue, 38, who got her start working with powerful dealers such as Barbara Gladstone and Gavin Brown, and who opened her [eponymous gallery](#) on the Bowery in 2015, going on to place many emerging and underappreciated artists in museum collections and major exhibitions; and Sean Kelly, 62, who worked as a museum curator in Britain before moving to New York and in 1991 opening [his gallery](#), now outside Hudson Yards, that represents household name artists like Marina Abramovic and Kehinde Wiley. Each art dealer has been successful in one way or another — commercially, critically or both — and all are actively engaged with the industry and its challenges.

We met at The New York Times Building (“neutral ground,” as Kelly put it) a few days after yet another week of art fairs in New York City. This time it was [Tefaf](#), which started in the Netherlands in 1988 and now holds two editions a year in New York, as well as Frieze, a London import that since 2012 has been held every May in a large tent on Randalls Island — which turned out to be underequipped to deal with an unseasonable spring heat wave.



Paula Cooper, 1983. Richard-Leslie-Shulman, courtesy of Paula Cooper Gallery, New York.

Maybe it was just the heat, but gallerists seemed pretty miserable at Frieze last week, and were talking openly about certain problems associated with doing 10 art fairs a year. It seemed as though we've reached a point where something is broken in the art world. Do you think that's true?

Paula Cooper: I think they're boring. It's the same old thing.

Elyse Derosia: People need to switch it up more. I feel like we need to say, O.K., we're going to end the way this fair is operating and start something different.

PC: How many new models can you have?

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Bridget Donahue: If I sell out a booth, my price points don't mean that I'm making that much money after I've paid my way and everything. Even if I do really well, it's never as well as the people who do *really* well.

PC: Isn't it exposure, too? Anyway, it used to be. You had to make money, and you wanted to sell work, but it was also about exposure and meeting people.

Sean Kelly: I think the question is a much bigger one. I'm really concerned with the larger ecology of the art world, on a macroeconomic scale. If we don't get that fixed, then we won't have enough galleries to sustain fairs. Where I want to start that conversation is with the collectors. The collectors are not coming to galleries anymore. And I feel very strongly that if we don't sustain galleries, with collectors — and that means getting the collectors to go to the galleries to look at art, and by that I mean the smaller galleries and the midsize galleries because it's a bottom-up system — it's like watching the Great Barrier Reef die. And I think the fairs are symptomatic of that, but they're not the only problem.

PC: Auctions. Auctions are a killer. But art is now absolutely a consumer product, and that's the huge difference. It's a whole different world. Where do people fit in who are interested in art and helping young artists and developing careers and lives? Why are the big galleries getting everything?

SK: If you go to the major art fairs, it's very clear that there is a hierarchy established over a period of time where certain galleries are given certain precedence and certain positions, and there is no level playing field there. I would like the hierarchy to be less rigidly visible, less rigidly enforced. Because the net result is that the collectors are being herded into the maw of corporation galleries worldwide by fairs.

BD: That's true.

SK: And a lot of the market is being controlled in that way. It's not collegial. We can sit around and talk about it, but I think we have to do something about it. We have power too. We have to demand changes. And we're all guilty. We're all part of this system, and we all have a responsibility to change it.

PC: But it's so much more than art fairs. P.R. has become a huge controlling factor. I remember when people didn't have P.R. firms. That would have been disgusting!

BD: To be honest, it still is.

PC: It was the '80s. [Mary Boone](#) had recently opened, and she was in every magazine, painting her toenails. P.R. really began then. It's so many things. It's not only art fairs.

BD: We're all being floated by this huge system unless we just opt out.

PC: What concerns me is that there are a few huge galleries. They are huge businesses. They have 200 people working for them. They have galleries all over the world. And it is absolutely just product that they're dealing with. And they don't understand the art — a lot of it.

SK: I have to say, I did not get involved with art and artists to make money.

PC: Nor did I.

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Sean Kelly at Frieze New York 2018.
Sebastiano Pellion di Persano, courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York.

SK: I know you didn't. When I talk about my aspirations and who I regard with respect, Paula is the person I talk about. When I started, there was no money. The world has changed enormously, but I don't have 11 galleries. And I have no interest in having 11 galleries.

PC: Me neither.

SK: I want to make shows I can make with the artist, and that is not something you just shuffle around the world in an anodyne way in different spaces. I don't think it works as a concept.

PC: It does as a business.

SK: But it's not something that's particularly attractive to me. I think where America finds itself right now in the moment of untruth under Trump, there are parallels for that in our business.

PC: I'm curious about young galleries. How do you start? Where do you start? How difficult is it now? I'm very curious about it. Because the money — how do you pay your rent, even?

BD: Well, my rent is \$6,000 a month, so it's not that much.

ED: And mine's \$2,500. That's the key: keeping really low overhead and not subscribing to the capitalist adage of "if you're not growing you're dying." Just create a solid base for the artists you work with.

PC: So it hasn't changed [*Laughs*].

BD: I love art, and I've lived in New York for 12 years actively participating in it. If you actually come up with something novel to say, then it's always interesting. It's funny, my space is a second-floor loft, and people always say it reminds them of SoHo back in the day.

PC: I'm curious about the locations of galleries now, too. You have [Anton Kern Gallery](#) on 55th Street. He's near MoMA, and that's about it. Then you have [Casey Kaplan](#) near the flower district. You have people in Harlem, and on the Lower East Side, and in Brooklyn — this part of Brooklyn, and that part of Brooklyn. So what are people thinking, and how does one get people to go to the gallery?

BD: I just looked for the biggest, cheapest, closest to the subway. I opened my search to every place on the entire map, and then found the biggest, cheapest space on a second floor. We don't need a storefront anymore. I don't need for someone to walk by, and then catch their eye and then walk in.

PC: But what about getting art up and down?

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BD: It turns out I have an extra-wide stairwell.

Paula, when you opened in SoHo in 1968, you were young and the only show in town.

PC: I was damn young [*Laughs*; Cooper was 30 at the time]. I wasn't so young when I opened my gallery, actually. I'd been working for nine years or something. But I knew New York. I knew the galleries. It was just so small.



Sean Kelly, Bridget Donahue, Elyse Derosia and Paula Cooper. Sean Donnola

Were you surprised when galleries started to cluster in SoHo?

PC: No. You know, I knew dealers who don't want anyone near them. And I'd think, Oh, how stupid. It's better if you have someone near you.

SK: I think the thing we haven't talked about so far is responsibility on the artists. Artists have a responsibility to resist the industrial complex of the corporate galleries. Certainly I think nobody has suffered at the hands of that more than Paula has. Artists have a responsibility to be as loyal to their dealers as their dealers are to them.

PC: The only thing I'll say is that I do understand if an artist would like to try something else, have a different experience. But in so many of the cases that I have suffered through, they have been chased and chased by bigger galleries. It's not because they of their own volition thought, "Oh, I'd like to have a different experience or do this or do that." They have been pursued, and stolen.

SK: I think there's something fascinating that I have been made aware of — both of my kids work at the gallery. They're 34 and 32. And when I was trying to survive as a gallerist, my generation, we were not as collegial. We were fighting on our corners and trying to make space. Building it and hoping they would come. It was a different way of thinking.

PC: I'm even before you and it was even more different then. There was plenty of space!

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SK: Bridget and Elyse's generation, my kids' generation, they're incredibly collaborative. And they are working together and building networks and building their systems. And it is totally different from how I passed through the art world at their age, and, to me, it is so much more healthy and fascinating. And of course there will be corporate raiders and pillaging going on at different levels of careers, but your generation is such a different ethos. And I'm encouraged by that.

ED: The mentorship I have experienced since moving to New York — I never worked in a professional gallery. I started in Philadelphia with an artist-run space, and moved here, and knew nothing. But I've had an incredible support network. And I don't know how anyone could do it without that.

BD: On the Lower East Side, we have a ring of emails of certain galleries where we ask things like, "Hey, does anyone know this collector?"

PC: Oh, that's amazing. Wow.

SK: I think it's an interesting comparison. When Paula was doing it, she was Paula — there wasn't anyone else.

PC: Well, and nobody was that generous.



Mark Van Yetter's show, "You can observe a lot by just watching," at Bridget Donahue, New York.
© Mark Van Yetter, courtesy of the artist and Bridget Donahue, NYC

[Leo Castelli](#) wasn't calling you up to share collectors?

PC: Leo invited me always to his parties and lunches, but Leo was not helpful. [Dick Bellamy](#) — he'd sort of pat me on the head. I can't even tell you.

What about collectors? What is the ideal relationship between a dealer and a collector? It seems like the concept of a collector has changed a lot.

SK: I don't think it has.

ED: I think it's somebody who holistically supports artists and the galleries they work with. People who are interested in an artist's entire body of work and not just their painting or whatever.

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SK: I think what has changed is that we have an investor class that is not interested in collecting, they're interested in investing. And if we have this conversation and what comes out of it is that we're a bunch of idealistic people, that would be a complete misrepresentation in many respects because we are in business. And nobody's saying they don't want to make money. I think it's about how much money you need to make, and how you make it.

ED: Yes, to be sustainable.

PC: I think the most endangered galleries are our size galleries, Sean.

Why is that?

PC: Because we're not big, big, big, big, and we're not small, small, small. And you have a reputation and you have artists who have reputations and you have to compete with these trillion-dollar businesses.

BD: Right, and you're always mentioned in the same breath as them.

PC: Yeah! There was a list somewhere and it had how many employees everybody had. [Hauser & Wirth](#) and [David Zwirner](#) and there we were, near the bottom of the list: 19.

SK: I wasn't even on the list! What are you complaining about?

PC: Finally, I don't care. I just don't. I love what I do. And I just think that's gonna get me through.

SK: I agree, Paula, but my point is I think we're all at risk. I am increasingly being spoken to by collectors who are turned off by being contacted by six or seven associates at some of the larger galleries who are trying to sell them the same thing over two days. An overpriced piece of inventory because they have quotas to make. And there is a difference between a conversation they could have with Paula and a conversation they could have with a sales associate at one of the larger galleries.

PC: Can I tell you something that really annoyed me? I got so furious. Joan Mitchell was recently stolen away from [Cheim & Read](#) by David Zwirner. And in The New York Times, it quoted the woman who is the head of the Joan Mitchell Foundation. Now number one, I know Joan Mitchell would have been very unhappy about this, but the woman very ungraciously said it's about scholarship — implying that there would be more and better scholarship found at David Zwirner. Cheim & Read actually *worked with the artist* for so many years. And they're going to get better scholarship from some gallery that's going to look things up in a book? I thought it was so insulting to Cheim & Read, who'd done such a great job for Joan Mitchell. This art world has become so uncivilized. I was more offended and more upset about this than any gallery stealing an artist from me.

SK: It's about venality. It's about greed.

PC: It's about a lack of civility. It's about ruthlessness. It's ... ugh.

SK: I said this a little earlier and perhaps it sounded a little glib, but I do think we are living in the Age of Trump. He infected everything. And affected everything. The art world, too. We're living in a moment of extreme venality.

PC: It's given people permission.

SK: I think Paula's point about who is under threat might come as a surprise to some, that the younger galleries are perhaps not under so much pressure as some of the larger ones.

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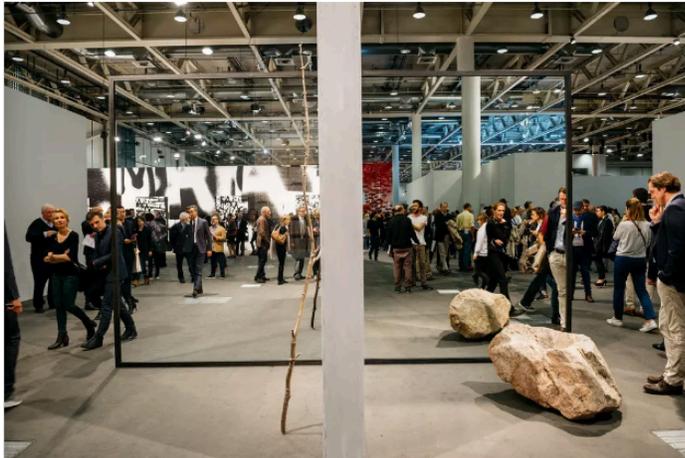
ED: We have a little more freedom to be more agile for a lot of different reasons, lower overhead ...

SK: How much of your annual budget do you think is being derived from art fairs?

BD: I lose money at the art fairs, basically. That's not a moneymaking venture for me.

SK: But not profit, turnover. What percentage do you think it would be?

BD: Well at Frieze, my booth was \$8,500 and I sold \$14,000 worth of art. Actually \$28,000. My cut was \$14,000, my artist made \$14,000.



Art Basel in Basel, Switzerland, 2016. © Art Basel

SK: Because I know some mid-tier galleries that are doing 16 art fairs a year. And if you asked them what percentage of their income is coming from an art fair, my guess is it would be 80 to 85 percent. And in a recession — which we've experienced on a number of occasions, including other things, like 9/11 — the first thing you're gonna cut are the art fairs, because they're very expensive. So if you are in that position, you're really at risk.

BD: True.

PC: For years I didn't do art fairs. I would go. I would just go to Basel for years and walk around and see people.

BD: But we're lucky because we're in New York. We don't need to do the art fairs to meet people because everyone is passing through our city. If you're in Istanbul or Singapore, the art fair is where you can finally get your little desk at that grand kind of event. And I don't need that.

SK: But I have a belief that for a mid-tier gallery, if more than 30 or 40 percent of your income is coming from art fairs, I think you're much more vulnerable in a different way. I think many of our colleagues find themselves in that position.

PC: They're doing every art fair.

BD: Like traveling salespeople.

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SK: Yeah, like a carpet salesman — taking the carpet and rolling it out. Many of the large corporate galleries are doing all of the art fairs, but the way the economy works for them is totally different, and I think it has to do with positioning in the art fair and the playing field not being as level as it should be.

PC: Well what did you think about David Zwirner's suggestion that the wealthy galleries pay more?

Don't they already pay more?

ED: It depends on the fair. I've heard that sometimes they actually pay less per square foot than the smaller galleries, but I guess the idea would be that the larger galleries would subsidize the younger sections.

BD: I thought that was a great idea. If you made those younger sections free, as a kind of prized, gifted thing, then you're going to get a more robust applicant pool and people are going to bring riskier things and you're not going to be like me, being a solid show and losing money and asking in what other industry does this happen?

PC: Does young mean riskier? I go to these fairs and I see a few things that are really out there, but not that much.

ED: That's *too* risky.

SK: But the booth cost is not the real issue. The other costs of doing the fair — shipping, hotels — that adds up to more than the booth normally. Many of the fairs actually do subsidize the smaller booths. I don't think that's the answer because then you have to means test galleries on their sales. I don't know how you do it responsibly.

BD: But you feel so concerned with this issue because you want to take your gallery to a thriving art fair? Otherwise, why do you care about solving their problems?

SK: I'm not arguing for the health of art fairs; I'm arguing for the health of galleries.

BD: I wonder about this from your perspective, Michael. That's another new thing about the world: these "What to buy now" and these shopping and lifestyle sections where art is featured. We're lucky in New York, there are a lot more outlets that actually cover our exhibitions, but where is the good reporting? Instead of the collectible, lifestyle thing of living with art. Because that's something that our audience doesn't get anymore. They equate an art fair experience with the gallery — that the gallery is just a big ole art fair booth of our own design. And it's not like that.

I think 90 percent of art journalism is propaganda, feeding the market. Everybody convincing everyone else that everything is fine and that everyone is doing fine. It's been so co-opted by the P.R. machine that the only things that get written about are the things that get sent out in an email blast in the way that a publicist wants it presented.

PC: At least six weeks in advance [*Laughter*].

SK: But you guys don't seem depressed by this. You don't seem like you're about to give up or go away. You've both opened galleries fairly recently, with different backgrounds, and you seem optimistic and positive about the future of your businesses. What right do you have to be optimistic?

PC: They're in a very different situation. I mean, they're fresh and young and have challenges.

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BD: The artists have kept all of us in a traditional brick-and-mortar scenario. They like the idea that they have a home and that there's an address that someone can go to where we're sitting and working most of the time. My hope comes from the artists.

SK: Do you think the brick-and-mortar model is still valid?

BD: Yeah, because artists want it. I mean, of course, if we could all be on our laptops at home or in our artists' studios, wouldn't we prefer it?

PC: [Gasps] No! I don't know how to use one.

BD: [Laughs] We have to be in this place because that's where the art we're showing is.

SK: You've got to stand in front of the artwork and see it. But we're now seeing the rise of galleries who do not have brick-and-mortar spaces being admitted to art fairs.

PC: Really? Yeah? And they show all kinds of art?

SK: It's an increasing trend where people who work with artists and represent artists do not have traditional brick-and-mortar spaces. And before they would not have gotten into an art fair, but lately they're being let in. And that's a direct response from the art fairs' acknowledging, in a way, that their client base is dwindling. They are thinking of other ways of reaching into the gallery world to come up with another formula.

BD: Yeah, because it's a volume business. The art fair can't do a boutique thing. It needs big numbers.

SK: But this is where I come back to my point about leveling the playing field. You cannot run an art fair with 10 clients. If you're colluding in some way and driving your audience into the maw of these corporation galleries with a hierarchical structure that's clearly understood, and you're standing there watching the art world withering, if not dying, wouldn't you think they'd be very concerned about that as a model? That model will result in diminishing return and they will have fewer clients.

BD: It already has.

SK: It already has. I'm really concerned about very credible galleries who have been in business for a long time and who are in increasing numbers deciding not to continue.

Paula, how have you stayed in business for 50 years?

PC: I'm careful. I'm very conservative when it comes to money. I love what I do so much that it has totally sustained me. There have certainly been ups and downs in life. But I see people who are so reckless with money, being the big deal art dealer, and I don't get it.

SK: If you were starting out today, knowing what you know, would you do it all over again?

PC: If I were young, I probably would. Sure. I'd try to find a \$2,500 space like Elyse.

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