

IT WAS THE MOMENT ALL ARTISTS DREAM ABOUT: a major sale of a major work, one that would pay the studio rent for months and put a breakthrough piece in the home of important collectors. But for Tony Bechara, the dream sale was followed by a nightmarish query. The purchasers had discovered that the painting was too large to fit over their sofa: "Could you cut four inches off to make it work?" inquired their secretary.

Before Bechara could compose himself, he had replied, "Why don't they cut their sofa down instead?" and hung up the phone. He was still composing his apology when the couple called back with a surprise concession: "That was a great idea! We took the legs off, and the painting fits perfectly."

Bechara's story ended happily, but many artists can recount a similar tale, a memory that causes their eyes to flash long after the original encounter. An awkward comment about the size, price, or content of a work can feel like a scalding judgment even to the most secure and self-confident artist.

Compounding the delicacy of such interactions is the fact

Your work is exactly like so-and-sos. "Do you mean I'm not original? I'm derivative?" worries the artist.

It must be fun to play all the time. When do you actually work? Ouch! This question is universally loathed. Artists understand very well that they're not coal miners, schoolteachers, or insurance adjusters. But they work very hard—and consider their work to be work, not play.

And the corollary: **What do you do for a living?** The goal of almost all artists is to make their art pay for itself, though many have to supplement their income in other ways. But making art is what they do for a living.

Do you work at home? Artists hear this question as a kind of test: answer yes and you're a hobbyist. The places artists work shouldn't define the quality of their work.

Is this finished? Just assume a work is finished—unless told otherwise. (Remember how you felt as a teenager when your mother would ask, "Is *that* what you're wearing tonight?") Similarly, inquiring about how a piece is displayed can be dangerous. "Is this *supposed* to be on the floor?" a viewer once

How to Talk to an Artist

The difference between "Iiinteresting" and "Interesting!"

that nonartists often feel equally insecure. "Many of the artists I know speak in insider jargon, even to civilians," says painter Barbara Rogers. "There might be more sales of art-work and support for artists if they could be a bit more sensitive to people who like art but don't want to feel foolish talking with them."

So how exactly do you talk to a sculptor about the bodily substances oozing from her piece; or to a painter about the

larger-than-life kittens standing guard over a peanut butter sandwich in his picture; or to

a video artist about the eternal flames perpetually licking at the protagonist in her latest work; or to a draftsman about his obsessively gridded drawings?

First, a few examples of what *not* to say:

Are you a contemporary artist? All living artists are contemporary.

What movement did you join? Movements are art-historical labels, usually applied in retrospect to artists long departed from the scene. And don't worry about being able to place an artist in a specific category. "People want to define you and say what you are and what you do," says Faith Ringgold, who works in a range of media, from quilting to painting to illustrated children's books. "That's why I like being an artist—because *I* get to define who I am and what I do."

You're an artist? Oils or acrylic? There are many forms of expression that fall outside the traditional categories of easel painting. A simple "Tell me about your work" is preferable.

Do you own your own gallery? Artists usually do not own galleries; they work in studios. The two are very different.

Do you have any extra pictures you don't want? Do you ask bankers if they have any extra money they don't want?

asked Polly Apfelbaum, an artist renowned for complex floor installations she calls fallen paintings.

Be careful raising the touchy subject of price. After several decades, painter Joyce Korothein still remembers the potential buyer who inquired about the cost of her drawings. "\$30?" the buyer huffed. "For \$30 I can buy a pocketbook!"

Similarly, stifle the urge to compare the artist's work with your own yearnings to paint or draw. "When I retire, I'm going to learn to paint" is not a remark many artists appreciate hearing. The implication is that art is a hobby—an implication that particularly rankles women. "People sometimes don't take you seriously because they think art is something women do in their spare time," says fiber artist Jean Bass.

Intonation is critical in a conversation with an artist. "Iiinteresting" can mean one thing; "Interesting!" another. And an "interesting" flung at a piece in careless afterthought can feel as disparaging as describing a blind date as having a "good personality."

Resist the urge to fixate on materials or method; while the way artists communicate their ideas is indeed important, the ideas themselves are their central concern. Just ask sculptor Haim Steinbach, who combines everyday objects in his "shelf sculptures" in order to tweak perceptions about language and cultural customs. The only question one viewer could summon was: "How did you make those plastic goblets?"

And never ask artists how long it took to make a work of art. "No matter what your response, you can't win," says Rogers. "If you admit to completing the piece in just a few hours, your questioner is filled with suspicion about your ability to explore a subject with any depth, build up a rich surface, or justify the price. If you say it took months, they worry for you because you are so slow."

BY GAIL GREGG

Remember that artists invest a great deal of themselves in their work; try to respect that effort, even if you can't admire the work itself. Installation artist Bethany Bristow was celebrating the opening of the exhibition "Greater New York" at New York's P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center when she saw a visitor kicking at one of her fragile assemblages of glass, feathers, and corn syrup, tucked into various corners of the building. "That's my work!" she shrieked. "Really?" the culprit asked. "I thought it was junk."

But false praise can feel as damning as outright criticism. Painter Rochelle Feinstein noticed that people mystified by her pictures tended to conclude studio visits with the same pronouncement: "I love your work." She eventually funneled her frustration into a series of eight large *Love Vibe* paintings on which "love your work" was scrawled backward.

SO NOW YOU'RE EVEN more nervous than ever about talking to artists. So what *do* you say? First, realize that even the experts—dealers, curators, other artists—make their own faux pas. Painter Michelle Stuart was visited a number of years ago by a dealer who "buzzed around my studio and told me, 'I have two *sensitives* already.' Then he left!" A Chelsea dealer asked Shari Mendelson during a recent visit to her sculpture studio, "So can you tell me the social, historical, and political implications of your work?" And Rick Briggs vividly recalls another artist commenting that his own work was "about ideas"—in contrast, supposedly, to Briggs's abstract paintings.

Often, being quiet in front of a work is the best response; it indicates that you're looking carefully and are thinking about what you're seeing. When you consider that it can take weeks, months—even years—to make an art object, looking hard is a respectful thing to do. "I appreciate people who have obviously been moved by my work and just want to get a sense for who I am," says painter Art Zoller-Wagner. "Sometimes they don't ask a question; they're just relating."

Open-ended questions are also welcomed: Who influences you? Why do you work at this scale? Why did you start painting patterns? are questions painter Vicki Behm likes to hear. Joanne Mattera prefers such queries as, How do you know when a series is finished? She says, "the question lets me talk about, in general, why I work in series, and, in particular, how a series developed from painting to painting and what catalyzed its completion." And Rachel Willis adds that a simple "'How did you make that?' would be fine too."

Feinstein's favorite comment came from a viewer contemplating her in-your-face "love your work" installation. "I love

your work," offered the viewer—who then caught herself and exclaimed, "Oh, no. Now I can't say that, can I?" She completely understood the intent of the pictures, Feinstein realized: "That I really appreciated."

Gallery partner Jenny Liu, of New York's The Project, notes that artists tend to fall into two camps: "creative originators who are inspired to make original and authentic sculpture/painting/drawing" and those who consider themselves "art producers along more intellectual lines." To artists of the first category, a thoughtful visitor might say, "Your work is so passionate/emotional/sad. Where does that come from?" To the second: "Your work is so rigorous/difficult/challenging.

What are you hoping to accomplish?"

Technology-based artist Patrick Lichty appreciates audiences that challenge his ideas. "Where do you get off?" is a question he likes. "I believe that learning often happens through disagreement," he says. Conceptual artist Rachel Perry Welty agrees: "The best question would be one that helps me think more deeply about the work and makes me see connections I hadn't, or puts it into a broader context. I wish someone would dare ask me, 'Why do you do what you do?'" And for some, such as installation artist Ann Hamilton, the same question can qualify as both worst and best. "What does the horsehair mean?"

is one that she has long remembered.

In an informal survey of artists, certain questions were big winners:

Can I see more?

Would we be able to acquire this piece for the Museum of Modern Art?

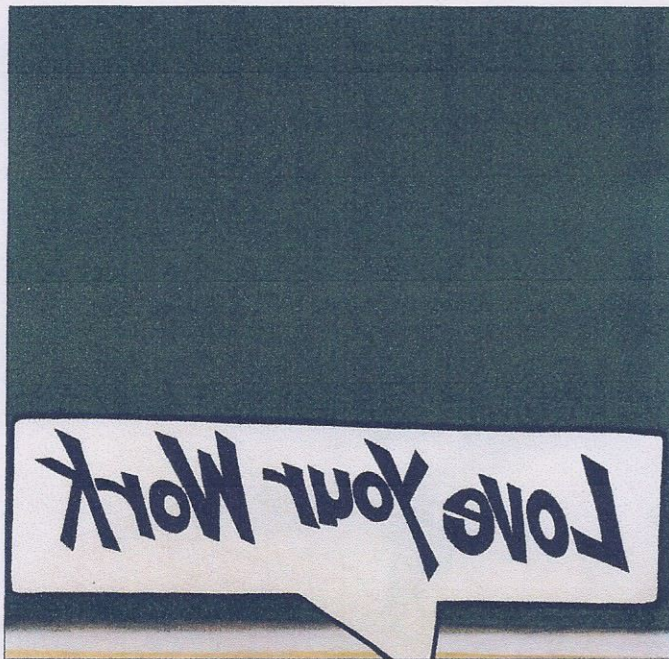
I love your work. Can I help sponsor and organize a big show for you?

Is this for sale? (Or its variant: Can I pay in cash?)

Can I be your patron (for life)?

Don't take these questions literally. What artists are saying is that they want to be viewed seriously, to have their efforts and ideas recognized, to have their work supported. It doesn't take much to indicate that: a close look at the work, an open-ended question or two. Artists are communicators first and foremost, and when communication with a viewer happens, that is its own reward. Not that paying cash wouldn't be welcome. ■

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Rochelle Feinstein's *Love Vibe* #2, 1999–2000, works the gap between what is said about a work and what is understood.