

# LIAISONS (' LE-&-zän) *noun*

1 a : a close bond or connection: **b : readings in art, literature, & philosophy**

2 a : communication for establishing and maintaining mutual understanding and cooperation b : one that establishes and maintains liaison

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**Kenney Mencher**

Liaisons

Readings in Art,  
Literature  
and Philosophy

Kennedy Mencher  
Ottawa College

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## Readings in Art, Literature and Philosophy

Kenney Mencher  
*Ohlone College*



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# Beauty

Brian D'Amato

## INTRODUCTION BY BRIAN D'AMATO

In 1990 I was working at an art gallery in SoHo owned by Leo Castelli and Larry Gagosian. There wasn't much for me to do there, so I started writing down dialogue I'd overheard in the gallery or at the many rather lavish openings and dinners one had to attend. My mother is a novelist, and thanks to a suggestion of hers some of this dialogue eventually coalesced into a book. Its narrator, Jamie, is a relatively successful artist who is much more successful in his sideline: performing unlicensed, unauthorized, and generally risky cosmetic surgery on rich stars and socialites. Tiring of contract work, he creates a masterpiece out of his girlfriend, Jaishree, but things, as they will, go horribly awry.

Jamie's dealer—who knows nothing of his meta-medical activities—is obviously based on Mary Boone. At the time I wrote the book I'd only met her a few times, although later I came to know her well. Robert Pincus-Witten, my art-history mentor, once said it was Mary, more than the painters she showed, who was the great artist of the 1980s. It seemed to me that just as much as her friend Martha Stewart—but in an entirely different way—Mary had elevated housekeeping to a high art. A visit to her gallery on West Broadway always made you feel that, even if you hadn't taken off your sandals and washed your feet, you'd been to some sort of late-Modernist Shinto temple. One could, and many did, bemoan this sort of thing, but I never felt it was all bad. A lot of thought went into the presentation of art in those days. If much of the art itself made more sense more as part of a total environment than as a stand-alone statement, was that such a disaster? and was it much different from the situation in the nineteenth-century salons, or even—one guesses from looking around Pompeii—in ancient Rome? And if a lot of the art was overpriced, wasn't it still better for rich people to subsidize artists than to invest in Raytheon or General Electric?

At the time *Beauty* was written, the art bubble was just bursting. It would be nice to say that the following crash in prices and reputations made everyone reevaluate their priorities, resolve to take more account of art history, and so forth. But I'd say that what really happened was that the center of interest shifted—toward digital media, toward film and video, or toward some form yet to be named. Maybe the leading art form of the next decades will even use manipulated DNA—making the “analogue” processes posited in *Beauty* seem quaint indeed.

# Beauty

Brian D'Amato

The scene wasn't like the old days anymore anyway, when I'd first come to the city, in the heart of the Boom. The East Village. I missed the limousines filled with European collectors cruising past the garbage on Avenue A at one A.M. to the all-night parties in the back rooms of Gracie Mansion's Gallery, the quick money and fame and excitement, kids right off the street getting fifteen thousand a pop, Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Andy, all currently dead, and now Kenny Scharf was getting old and crusty, David Wojnarowicz had died last year, Debbie Harry was hardly ever around, and Madonna was off doing her own superstar routine worlds away. New York kind of swallows history up. It's too much of the moment. You find yourself somewhere that you know was tremendously significant, and you can hardly believe it's the same place, it seems so new and soulless, even if it looks unchanged.

I pushed in the heavy glass door. There are two glass doors, but only one of them moves, and it moves in the least obvious direction. The gallery was very carefully set up to intimidate visitors as much as possible. I pushed hard on the left door. Of course, I knew by now which door worked. Anybody who didn't know would first try pulling the right door, and then pushing the right door, and then pulling the left door, and then when he finally got the left door pushed in, it was really awkward for him to usher his family or whatever in with his right hand and hold the heavy door open with his left. And usually there'd be a whole bunch of people trying to get out and inch around that door in the other direction, so it was even more tense. And then you ran right up against a white false wall, with the name of the artist on it in specially designed austere-looking press-type letters ten inches high, and you had to maneuver around that. Then when you got around the wall you came face to face with the Front Desk Boy. Except he would never look you in the face if he didn't know who you were, or if he did look at you by mistake, he'd give you a look like, "What are *you* doing in here? The Poster Originals Gallery is down the street. This gallery is for movers and shakers and Doris Saatchi, not for some dentist from Tenafly." He smiled at me, of course, because I was persona grata. There was a picture card for the current show sitting on the counter surrounding his nonobjective desk. I knew better than to try to pick it up, because they were always taped down. That way if people tried to pick them up, they'd get even more flustered.

So I smiled at Jonathan the Front Desk Person and struck off into the darkness of the main gallery. They were having a Sigmar Planck show, and there were just three of his tiny paintings in the huge space, spotlighted in a really dramatic way. I have to hand it to Karen, she knows how to display art. Even a dead fish with maggots on it

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From *Beauty* by Brian D'Amato. Copyright © 1992 by Brian D'Amato. Reprinted by permission of the author.

would look beautiful and expensive if she hung it. I didn't bother looking at the paintings. As I walked toward the back rooms, my shoes squeaked like dying mice. Karen has a perfectly sanded bleached-cherry floor and she has it waxed nearly every day, partly to make it look good but mainly so that your shoes will squeak on it and you'll feel small and intimidated. I turned the corner into the second room. There was a blank wall, a gigantic Planck, and another blank wall. The basic message was that Planck was such an incredible perfectionist genius that he only did about one painting a year, and anyway since each one was about as expensive as an Apache assault helicopter, they didn't need to show more than four. And if you were neophyte enough to actually ask the Front Desk Person what the prices of the pieces really were, he'd say, 'I'm sorry, but this show was reserved before it opened.' But of course, if you were intimidated enough by the whole presentation to insist that you wanted to buy something, anything, because otherwise you'd feel second-rate and mortified for the rest of your life, you'd get ushered into the back, and yes, it might turn out that there was *one* little Planck left in the rack because the show was too crowded, and you *might* be able to acquire it before the Kunstverein in Munich snapped it up, and before you knew it you'd be writing a check for more than your daughter's full four-year Princeton tuition for a little brown rectangle with a smaller black rectangle on it off-center, and wondering whether that purchase alone would make you socially acceptable.

I moved the brown-velvet rope aside and stepped up one level into the first of the back rooms. Some people in the gallery watched me replace the rope, and I felt kind of bad shutting them out. They looked as if they were trying not to feel rejected.

The back room was designed so that our hypothetical dentist from Tenafly, not daring to lift the rope, would get a teasing glimpse through the entrance way of the insiders' glamorous world: a Diego Giacometti table surrounded by comfy-looking Knoll International chairs, a de Kooning painting, and a long desk with an absolutely gorgeous pair of secretaries, one male, one female, one blond, the other blonde. The male one always wore a Wehrmacht-brown shirt under his Armani blazer and the general joke was that Karen had called up her boyfriend, who's a dealer in Salzburg, and said, 'Honey, when you send over the Plancks, could you throw in a real *Übermensch*-looking boy to help me intimidate my largely Jewish clientèle?' The girl, it was rumored, was just some Zoli model who'd barely learned to pretend to type and repeat a few key phrases like, 'This show was sold out before it opened.' I knew all this wasn't true, of course—they were both just Columbia kids—but it was part of the mystique.