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Art & Design

## Bye, Hornet's Nest: It's Back to New York

Jeffrey Deitch Has Big Plans Now That He's Left Los Angeles

By DEBORAH SOLOMON OCT. 2, 2014



Jeffrey Deitch at his recent book party.  
Credit Victor J. Blue for The New York Times.

The email said: “Across the street from your building/ Black Mercedes.” It was a shining Saturday morning, and Jeffrey Deitch was parked by the curb with a chauffeur. The car seemed surprisingly flashy, a throwback to the Reagan '80s. But Mr. Deitch, who resigned last year as the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, has permanently left the nonprofit realm. He is back in New York, buying and selling art again, and trying to keep up with pretty fast company.

At 62, Mr. Deitch is a diminutive, wiry man who was dressed in a purple suit and wearing his trademark goggle glasses. We had set out to look at the new fall exhibitions, and moments later were at the Mnuchin Gallery on East 78th Street in Manhattan, taking in a show of historic abstract paintings by Morris Louis: his so-called “Veils,” their overlapping browns and greens soaked into the canvas like so much glistening lake water.

“If you don't know what the price is,” Mr. Deitch told me, “it's probably \$3.5 million. Anytime I don't know what the price of a painting is, it's \$3.5 million.”

Presumably he was joking, except in this case, he happened to be dead-on about the price of the Veils. A former Citibank vice president, he has always led a bifurcated career among money people on the one hand and visual artists on the other. Of course, some visual artists double as money people, but let's not go there. Mr. Deitch says he uses the income he earns as an art adviser to underwrite his great passion, organizing shows of new art, which was very much the mission of his Deitch Projects, now defunct.

He closed that gallery in 2010 but has just published an in-depth, copiously illustrated history of it, “Live the Art: 15 Years of Deitch Projects” (Rizzoli, \$100). The book is, among other things, a striking object that requires two hands to lift. Designed by Stefan Sagmeister, it looks less like a coffee-table tome than a table itself, perhaps because it is encased in white molded plastic and comes with the added quasi-bonus of a dinner plate affixed to the cover. Continue reading the main story

In the years before the Manhattan galleries left the quaint cobblestones of SoHo and moved north like so many displaced people to the wide streets of West Chelsea, Deitch Projects was a one-of-a-kind gallery. It opened in 1996 in a garagelike space on Grand Street, and its exhibitions seemed less about the quest for masterpieces than about mashing up art with graffiti, cartooning, video, punk rock and especially performance. In 1997, the Ukrainian artist Oleg Kulik lived in the gallery for two weeks as a caged dog, wearing nothing but a studded dog collar and crawling around on all fours.

To be sure, Mr. Deitch also championed artists who favor more traditional mediums. He gave early shows to painters including Cecily Brown, Tauba Auerbach and Kristin Baker. He supported the sculptors Nari Ward, E. V. Day and Patricia Cronin, the last of whom fabricated a marble tomb for herself and her girlfriend in what was perhaps the first art show to open at Woodlawn Cemetery in the Bronx.

In June 2010, Mr. Deitch surpassed his own artists in shock value when he was named director of the Los Angeles museum. People joked that red-dot “sold” stickers would soon materialize beside the Warhols and Lichtensteins in the permanent collection.

As it turned out, Mr. Deitch’s tenure was relatively brief. He departed after three years, with two years remaining on his contract. Critics denounced him as a slick showman, an assessment he flatly rejects. “I was brought in to do my thing, and that’s what I did,” he said in a solemn voice. “I walked into a hornet’s nest.”

We were still in the car when he showed me a catalog he has just self-published: “The MOCA Index 2010-2013” is a kind of expanded annual report, listing more than 40 exhibitions held at the museum and its ancillary around-town spaces during his tenure.

Leafing through the book, I was surprised to realize how often he had been the curator or co-curator of shows at the museum. That’s not forbidden, but would inevitably have vexed the curators on the staff. It seemed that Mr. Deitch genuinely could not understand why anyone might take offense if he ran the museum as if it were the West Coast branch of his gallery.

I asked him whether he had ever been psychoanalyzed, and he replied that once, long ago, he had a girlfriend who was enamored of therapy. “Whenever she wanted to irritate me,” he recalled, “she would say: ‘You need help. You need to see someone.’”

So Mr. Deitch went. At his first session, he was asked what he did for a living. “I said I was an art critic, and the guy just completely misunderstood what an art critic does. He said, ‘Why do you want to be critical?’ I said: ‘It is not about being critical. I only write when I am enthusiastic.’” That was his last session.

Now that he is back in New York, he said he has no plans to open a new gallery. Instead, he hopes to organize occasional “super-exciting shows” in borrowed spaces. He is scouting for a suitably cavernous warehouse in which to install a survey of artists he plans to call “Overpop.” The show will include Cory Arcangel, Ryan Trecartin, Klara Liden, Kathryn Andrews, among others: a generation of mix-masters who are extending the spirit of Pop art into the digital realm.

Mr. Deitch is also organizing a smaller show, “Making Art Dance,” a binoculars-free glimpse at the costumes and set designs commissioned by the choreographer Karole Armitage for her ballets; it opens on Dec. 16, at Mana Contemporary, in Jersey City.

Mr. Deitch said he grew up in Hartford, Conn., and his mother had been an economist, working for companies like General Electric and trying to predict the type of toaster or dishwasher the public would desire 20 years later. I wondered if Mr. Deitch, too, had in some way gone into the futurology business. He earned his early reputation as the type of impresario who was always trying to spot the next art thing.

But these days, he seems more interested in revisiting the past, and his new book “Live the Art” is itself an exercise in nostalgia for a bygone New York. In an age when galleries are becoming multinational corporations with branches in Europe and Asia, he speaks with affection for what he terms “the Leo Castelli model.” It’s shorthand for that dwindling breed of gallery owners who can actually be found on the premises, available to answer questions, believing it makes all the difference in the world if “the dealer is present,” to mangle a phrase from Marina Abramovic, who titled a retrospective of her work, “The Artist Is Present.”

“If I had continued the gallery into the next decade in order to play the game the way it is played, I would have had to have a London gallery, and a Los Angeles gallery,” Mr. Deitch said, by way of explaining why he is now a private dealer. “Rather than making this massive investment, I decided to go in a different direction. I can do business with a big collector in London without having a building that cost me millions in overhead.”

In the end, Mr. Deitch might be seen as a pioneer of one of our culture’s central contradictions. He glorifies art devoted to the mash-up and smash-up, while the market that drives it remains wholly intact, thrumming beneath the shards.

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