



Jeffrey Deitch —Art Dealer & Curator

Photo by Olivia Fougierol

"Every morning when we come in, we paint the scuffs off the walls, the windows have to be nice and clean, people have to look good at the reception desk. You create this atmosphere where you give the art authority, you give the artists respect. Then, through how I write about it, how I talk about it, I express my excitement. And hopefully somebody is as excited as I am, they see how I respect this work and would like to be part of it."

Jeffrey Deitch is an art dealer and curator. His first exhibition in New York titled *Lives* (1975) featured works by Vito Acconci, Joseph Beuys, Adrian Piper, Andy Warhol, and Hannah Wilke, positioning Deitch at the heart of the art world, where he has continued to receive recognition as an art advisor, dealer, writer, artist, and curator. Deitch now operates contemporary galleries in New York and Los Angeles and continues to advise private art collectors and institutions.

TGL: How was your childhood?

JD: I was always active, and I was lucky to grow up in an entrepreneurial family with a small business. First, it was a coal delivery company. It expanded into fuel oil delivery and heating and air conditioning installation and servicing. It was such an adventure to grow up in this environment. I loved going out to the yard and sitting in the trucks, watching them come in and out, and climbing up on the piles of coal that were by the railroad siding. When I was 16, I went out and did the installations of plumbing, heating, and air conditioning work and service calls myself. It's a good counterpoint to my adult life in the art world. I learned how to do physical work, work with crews, it opened me up to people from different walks of life. Our customer base was diverse. A lot of our customers were the Jewish property owners in the Black and Puerto Rican neighborhoods. I got to know many of the residents when I went out on service calls to fix their heating. It was an important window for me on what other people thought and how they lived.

One summer I worked cleaning boilers with a rough fellow for whom even McDonald's was too upscale. We would stop for lunch at a truckers' shack called Mick's. I'm eternally grateful to him for saving my life. We were vacuuming up flakes of asbestos without any masks, we didn't realize the hazards. I thought I had shut off the power in a big furnace, and crawled in. I was about to sweep out the asbestos when my foot hit the reset on the oil burner and instantly the flame started. My partner was so alert that he pulled me out by my legs. I emerged with just some scrapes, but five seconds more, and I would be going through life with a burned face and upper body. This guy saved me. It was just a matter of seconds. Interesting experiences like that shaped my life before I went into this rarefied art world.

TGL: What was your first experience with the art world?

JD: I was always exposed to art. My family had art by prominent local Hartford, Connecticut artists in the house. One of my vivid childhood memories was going to Ralph Eno's studio. We had a synagogue art show in our community that was a big event in my childhood, it was like a low rent art fair. Some merchants would set up little booths, mainly prints and inexpensive paintings. I must have been 10 years old or so, my mother took me to the show and said I could pick out whatever I wanted. I picked out a Fernand Léger print. That was my first art purchase, it amazes me that I picked a Léger out of all the junky things that were there.

TGL: Did you like art as a child?

JD: I connected with art instantly. Even as a child, I seemed to have had a primitive version of the pattern recognition ability that allowed me to see quality in a work of art. I wanted to make art myself. I remember asking my mother to take art lessons. She thought it was more serious to take music lessons, so I have years of piano and trumpet lessons, which were a torture

TGL: How did you develop your friendships with artists like Jean-Michel Basquiat and Jeff Koons?

JD: Before I was at Citibank, I continued to be involved with the downtown art world. I met Basquiat around 1980, and I believe that I was his first collector. I was the first person to write a review about his work. We developed a relationship that continued until I unfortunately had to deliver the eulogy at his funeral.

And Jeff Koons, I remember people saying to me around 1980 or so, "You gotta meet Jeff Koons. Have you met Jeff Koons yet?" Jeff was known to work on Wall Street. He was working as a salesman in a bucket shop, different from Citibank, but people didn't really know the difference in the art world. We met at a Francesco Clemente opening at Sperone Westwater Fischer gallery. He was wearing his signature windbreaker, and he was the fully formed Jeff Koons already. We started a dialogue right then and we never stopped.

TGL: How did you make your business successful?

JD: I had helped an important client, the great collector of contemporary art Dakis Joannou, buy a small apartment next to his larger apartment in Trump Tower. I made him a proposition: a year's worth of art advisory services for use of his apartment. Instantly, I started with a prestigious office, well maybe not so prestigious today but it had a different image in 1988. I had this beautiful apartment that was my home office.

I had maintained a great dialogue with Leo Castelli, my hero, for many years. I spent a lot of time working with Leo on a business plan of how he could build on what he achieved with the gallery. Leo was fascinated, he loved talking about this, but in the end he didn't follow any of my advice except for one thing, because he didn't want the gallery to continue without him. The one thing I said that he did follow was: "Leo, you have a lot of hidden assets here." He was still operating the print gallery that had been the province of his late wife, Toiny, and it had an enormous inventory by all the Castelli artists. It was costing them a lot of money to maintain these works in a warehouse. I had the idea to sell half of the inventory. We could sell it for \$2 million. We were still in the Japanese bubble period, and I knew that we could find wealthy Japanese who would be impressed by the name Castelli. **With my friend, Ikkan Sanada, who was a great bridge between Japan and America, we cooked up the idea to syndicate the inventory of Castelli Graphics to a group of Japanese investors. Ikkan** brought this group of Japanese farmers to New York and we entertained them. I remember they rented a giant stretch limousine with a sky roof, they were going crazy driving through New York City. We introduced them to Leo Castelli, and they were dazzled and paid the \$2 million for half the inventory. This was in the first month of my independent business. My commission was 10%, and \$200,000, was a lot of money in those days. All of a sudden, I had my working capital. I had free rent, \$200,000 in the bank, and I was off and running.

TGL: When did you switch from your art advisory business to your gallery?

JD: I ran the art advisory business on my own for close to 10 years, starting in 1988. I needed an additional creative outlet and opened a project gallery, Deitch Projects in January 1996.