

THE WONDERFUL WIZARD OF ART

Pay no attention to that man in the tuxedo: Megadealer Jeffrey Deitch has dedicated himself to helping his artists realize their wildest visions—and the result, finds David Colman, is changing the future of contemporary art. *Tableau vivant* by Vanessa Beecroft
Photographed by Jason Schmidt



SPLENDOR IN THE GRASS

Jeffrey Deitch in his own tuxedo, front left, next to Yoko Ono with 24 of his artists and two members of his staff in fall eveningwear by Yves Saint Laurent Rive Gauche, Prada, and Helmut Lang, among others. Using Paul McCarthy's 1991-92 installation *The Garden*, Vanessa Beecroft in white skirt, also a Dutch artist, created this tableau vivant after Manet's *Dejeuner sur l'herbe*. See *Buyline* for details.

It was supposed to be a simple portrait of an art dealer. But in the Oz-like world of Jeffrey Deitch, nothing is simple. And that is why, on this midsummer day in Manhattan's SoHo, a forest is being forklifted and hoisted, tree by tree, into a giant gallery space, and why a 25-foot wall, which yesterday was white, is being painted a deep Emerald City green. (Repainted, actually. The first try wasn't emerald enough.) That is why, on one balcony, 30 outfits from Yves Saint Laurent, Helmut Lang, and Prada, along with three fashion stylists and a seamstress with nerves of steel, are at the ready. And on another balcony, eight hair and makeup artists are simultaneously wielding hair dryers, brushes, eyeliners, and lip liners.

All of this is for one man: the humble yet grand, shy but aggressive, charmingly odd Wizard of Art, Jeffrey Deitch. When asked to sit for a portrait for this profile, Deitch agreed, on one condition: that he share the stage with the artists with whom he has worked. Then he sent his gallery staff to round up as many of them as they could for a single day, arranging for some to fly in from other states, countries, and hemispheres. He also enlisted the Italian-born artist Vanessa Beecroft to conceptualize the picture. She did, suiting up everyone in full fall-fashion regalia and placing them in the midst of Paul McCarthy's *The Garden*, a 1991-92 installation now owned by Deitch. Suiting up everyone, that is, but one. "I haven't worn an off-the-rack suit in 20 years," Deitch says, blithely, when asked if his tuxedo came courtesy of Prada. While several artists indignantly questioned why they were being forced to don eveningwear and be made up to look dashing and chic, Deitch walked onto the set in black-tie, as calm and cool as if he were in jeans and a T-shirt.

The eccentric 48-year-old from Connecticut has actively cultivated a new and often outlandish art scene over which he now quietly presides from his four-year-old gallery, Deitch Projects, in the southern reaches of SoHo. Those who doubted that a former Citibank art adviser could cross over and make an art-world splash were proved wrong this year when five of his artists—Beecroft, Ingrid Calame, Kurt Kauper, Michal Rovner, and Ghada Amer—were selected for the 2000 Whitney Biennial.

Picture, if you will, a giant room that seems to be filled with naked bodies—and not all of them pretty. Or 30 sailors standing at attention on the deck of the aircraft carrier USS *Intrepid*, docked at a New York pier. A giant pile of trash in the middle of a gallery floor, intensely lit and casting eerie, supernatural shadows on the wall. A Park Avenue bank, its windows aglow at night with surreal video projections. A man crouched in a cage, clad in nothing more than a dog collar. All of these shows were by Deitch artists—Zhang Huan, Beecroft, Tim Noble and Sue Webster, Rovner, and Oleg Kulik, respectively.

At Deitch Projects, openings for shows like these invariably turn into young, crowded, scruffy scenes worthy of a Warhol happening. Which is unexpected: After all, this is a man who came to prominence almost 20 years ago, at the same time as '80s art heavyweights David Salle, Keith Haring, and Jeff Koons, and he has been close with all three of them. But after an era in which larger-than-life dealers like Mary Boone, Arne Glimcher, and Larry Gagosian became as well known as their superstar artists, Deitch is not only content to be the man behind the curtain at a boom time in art, he insists upon it.

Formal, courteous, and somewhat stiff, Deitch, even at his most unguarded moments—when he talks animatedly about a show or an artist—comes across as businesslike. The more time you spend with him, the more you suspect that he is what

he seems: a man whose life is art. "Dealers are dealers for lots of different reasons," says artist Jane Kaplowitz, a longtime friend. "Jeffrey is not in it for a new suit and a summer in Capri. Art is the first, the last, the only thing in his life."

"The art world is not full of nice people," says Kirk Varnedoe, chief curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. "And I've never seen someone who has such serenity in the face of difficult temperaments."

Nor does Deitch shy away from difficult art. His choices of artists have surprised many people. As a cofounder of Citibank's pioneering art advisory program in 1979, Deitch rode the art-market highs of the 1980s. His name was so closely associated with the high-stakes, blue-chip art dealing of those years, you might have expected him to become part of the Upper

East Side art firmament. But after a few years of dealing privately, just when the art world was collectively deciding that it wanted out of the shopping free-for-all that SoHo had become and was moving up to Chelsea, he opened Deitch Projects on SoHo's Grand Street. From the first show (of Beecroft), Deitch wanted it clear that his was not a normal gallery and that he was more than just a conventional dealer.

Of course, his artists approve. Take Mariko Mori, a young Japanese artist whose own fantastic installations—think Japanese teen-pop culture taken to other-planet extremes—are technically complex and difficult to execute. The working title of her latest project is *Wave UFO*, which she describes as "a device for virtual travel into the world that exists in the mind," and which, more concretely, will be like an amusement-park fun house. Deitch has taken on the roles of location scout, producer, and special-effects coordinator, among others, flying Mori to San Francisco to plan the video and computer-generated parts of the piece with Silicon Valley technology firms. He also introduced her to local collectors and potential investors, and to David Ross, the director of the San Francisco Museum > 553



ART FORUM: Deitch with Vanessa Beecroft at the opening of her USS *Intrepid* installation last April. Opposite page: Recent Deitch Projects installations have included, clockwise from top, Teresita Fernández's *Borrowed Landscape* (1998), Tom Shannon's *Serene in Suspense* (1998), and Y.Z. Kami's *Untitled* (1997).

BECKROFT: ABBEY; FASHION STYLING: JULIAN BURGESS; HAIR: WITHE CARPENTER; PETER BUTLER; TRAVIS; AND RHEANNA WHITE; MAKEUP: TODD PAINE; DEIN JONES; MATIN FOR LAURA MERCIER; AND BRYAN SMOOT FOR CLUB MONACO; THIS PAGE: LUPUS YINANG; STARELLA; DERRICK PAUL; COURTESY OF DEITCH PROJECTS.



"Art is the first, the last, and the only thing in Jeffrey's life. He's not in it for a new suit and a summer in Capri."

wanted. A full-size prototype of the coat was constructed in unbleached canvas. (Sculptural and chaste, it covers a dressmaker's dummy in the cutting room.) After Lagerfeld and Fendi approved the canvas, the shapes had to be fitted on the body. Many sample combinations of circles and squares were stitched from the dyed, shaved mink before the best was chosen. A paper pattern was made, with each piece labeled by color.

At a drafting table a woman is working with compass and ruler, drawing a new pattern, as each size requires its own. Another woman fits a circle of mink into a larger square with a special machine that sews edge-to-edge, without overlap. Every few inches she darts a metal rod the size of a crochet hook into the seam to make certain no fur catches on the inside. Farther along, a woman is shaping a pieced-together sleeve: Placing it fur-side down, she mists it with water, stretches the sleeve to shape, then pins it on a board to dry for a day or two. The shaped parts are sewn together by hand in the finishing room, the seams overlaid by patent-leather strips. The lining is then sewn in by hand.

It has taken 305 hours of highly skilled labor to realize Lagerfeld's bedtime vision. But the story does not end with the completed garment buttoned onto a dressmaker's dummy. It must now take its place in the market. Who will buy this coat?

"I never think of who will wear it," says Lagerfeld, with a certain artistic disdain. But Anna says, "We believe everything we create is to be sold. We never do a coat for the runway. We like to see it on the people." She can imagine the coat worn by "a very attractive young Roman—modern, chic, with dark hair and light skin." Whoever she is, she must have charm and character. Perhaps she'll be from the United States. "When the American woman is chic," Anna says, "she is more chic than anyone else."

How do you persuade the chic woman who happens to have \$95,000 in her clothing allowance for outerwear that this particular garment will make her the envy of her friends and assure her a place in the fashion pantheon? First you have to convince an audience of the jet-lagged and jaded that what they are seeing is the distillation of the spirit of the season. You put the coat on a model with free-flowing hair, let a luscious silk dress peek out underneath, get some gold ankle-strap high heels, and surround it with a parade of opulence. The fashion press was left gasping for adjectives when Fendi unleashed its runway show last February in Milan. Marching to the sounds of remixed '60s anthems of rebellion, models flashed gold belts, maxed-out sunglasses, green leather stiletto boots, and not a drop of restraint. "There's something happening here," the soundtrack promised. "What it is ain't exactly clear.... One thing I can tell you is you got to be free...." Free to spend it, show it off, flaunt it. In a season of fashion excess, Fendi had raised the stakes. Store buyers were biting their nails over the cost of the coat. At the same time, they knew they had to have it.

Four of the coats are going to the store on via Borgognona. Inside, salesperson Nina Ingster—a wiry cloud of dark hair on a skinny, hyperkinetic body—balls up the coat to show how it won't wrinkle. It's great over jeans, she announces, propping up the collar as her customer, Dominique Gianfrone, who

looks like Grace Kelly, watches her reflection. In rapid patter, Ingster continues her sell: It would be divine over an evening gown; it looks like velvet but lighter, softer, and more practical (water can't harm it). She pulls it tight across the rib cage so Gianfrone is practically popping out. It's cut to fit tight, "strizzato," Ingster tells her. "Even I look busty in it. It's intelligent. Something that's intelligent you can always wear. It's not too warm, for the new winters."

Nino Masso, short, balding, smiling—a quiet foil to Ingster's irrepressibility—appears with his pins. There might be a millimeter to take off the sleeve, some padding added to the back of the shoulder. Finally, though, Gianfrone decides that an unlined plaid mink shirt might be more practical for her—something to wear while ferrying her three children around.

Who will buy this coat? "You have to be very sophisticated," says Ingster, "a sophisticated woman from Hong Kong, or an Italian woman my age [early 50s]. Not the beautiful young Russian, because you don't see the money." Or maybe a "nut," she says, who loves the coat but doesn't understand its value, and a "nut boyfriend" who is too macho to back out of buying it when he learns the price.

An enterprise with one boutique in Rome could not have produced this coat. It required the backing of a billion-dollar global corporation, which is what Fendi has just joined. (Last year a 51 percent majority stake sold to Prada and luxury conglomerate LVMH.) Although the Fendis—including the third generation—are as committed as ever to working in the company, they now have the financial clout to open even more locations worldwide. The coat will journey to France, Japan, Russia, and Singapore. Four will go to the United States—one to Manhasset, one to Aspen, and two to New York.

On a brilliant day in early June, Carla, president of the board of directors, is in New York City to host a lunch and trunk show for 50 or so customers on an empty floor above the Fendi shop on Fifth Avenue. She walks the display area, seeing to every detail and memorizing the placement of each object. She turns her attention to the line of Fendi shopping bags in the greeting area. Each "goody bag" holds a book about Rome and the bag of the moment, a crescent shape made from a Fendi scarf. Retailing for \$895, the bag is a princely gift, but then Fendi has great plans for these guests.

Although a few are longtime clients, most are in their late 20s and early 30s. They are handbag addicts whom Fendi hopes to get hooked on furs. Each one is slim and beautiful. They wear jean jackets and chiffon skirts, cropped pants, summer-weight cashmere, Fendi backless high heels, and bags. Everyone knows everyone else.

Carla moves through this crowd as if on oiled wheels, greeting with cheek kisses, and in some cases bear hugs. She takes one guest, in a pink, pierced suede skirt by Fendi, directly to the coat. It settles onto the customer's body like a second skin. Carla adjusts the collar and caresses the fur over the woman's hips, smiling lovingly at the reflection. She is not a saleswoman hoping to unload a garment but rather a matchmaker who believes that coat and customer belong together.

At one o'clock the guests are guided into the dining room, where they find their first names on place cards: Blaine for

Blaine Trump, Nan for Nan Kempner. Handsome young waiters in white dinner jackets and gloves pour red and white wine and distribute plates with perfect slices of white chicken breast heaped with a salad of seedlings, an ethereal feast for hummingbird women.

The background music suddenly increases in volume and takes over the room. It's the theme of the Fendi runway show. The models saunter out. There are other shaved-mink coats in op-art designs, but none so intricate or startling as the coat in question.

At 1:40, even as the semi-freddo desserts are being served, guests rush off. As they pass again through the display area, they see the models chatting and drinking champagne, glossier versions of the guests who had been there not an hour before. A chosen few invitees descend to the store with Carla Kempner, who arrived in a hot-pink chiffon blouse appliquéd with acid-green shaved mink (from the spring collection), has been a poster child for Fendi furs since she walked into the store in Rome more than 20 years ago, lured by a painted shearling coat. There she bumped into a friend who introduced her to the sisters, and it has been love ever since.

Carla coaxes Nan into the coat. Nan obligingly vamps and swaggers. The coat, with its deep vent, makes her look young and daring, a fashion rebel to the end. But she prefers the pink with the more forgiving A-line. Brooke de Ocampo tries on the coat. Suddenly her eyes are bluer, more penetrating. Does she have the steeliness, the ferocity to carry off this mantle?

In the weeks following the trunk show, one of the guests comes in to try on the coat, then schedules another appointment to try it on again. It's not a purchase that's lightly made.

The holographic vision that seared itself into Karl Lagerfeld's brain has taken more than a year to materialize. In stores around the globe, it is being buttoned up, smoothed over hips, propped at the collar. Hands are slipping into the pockets. Heads are turning to see just how deep the vent goes in the back. Finally, only 14 will have the courage and the cash to walk away with this pivotal piece, the coat that defines the present even as it recedes into the past. ■

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of Modern Art, which agreed to finance the project. "My work involves a big production team," says Mori, "whether it's finding engineers or architects. It's amazing that [Deitch] is so devoted to helping get my vision realized, especially since it's not necessarily a commercial work."

Deitch insists that he's far more commercially minded than his public might think, adding with a confident, reserved half-smile, "Mariko sells quite well. And so does Vanessa." When it comes to crass commercialism, he has even had some fun. Eschewing the usual approach to promoting shows with small, plain-lettered announcements, he commissioned Richard Pandiscio, one of the most innovative graphic designers in New York City, to create provocative 11-by-17-inch posters to

be mailed out for almost every show. He also adopted an unabashedly precocious logo, which took its cues from the Brillo-pad insignia made famous by Andy Warhol.

Then again, if you ask Deitch about it, it's *all fun*. One balmy Sunday evening, taking a break from the gallery to have a bite at Downtown Cipriani on West Broadway, Deitch details his itinerary for the month: Tel Aviv to see the installation of a piece by Ghada Amer; then to Paris; the Basel art fair; Tours and Lyons for two more shows; London; and finally Athens. When asked how he keeps such a ragged pace, his face registers only puzzlement, as though the answer were self-evident. "I'm doing what I've always wanted."

Deitch Projects is, in fact, a neat convergence of several chapters in his life. Chapter one: At 19, in the Berkshires for the summer with his parents, Deitch admired the works of a few local artists and set up an impromptu gallery in the parlor of a hotel. Two things happened. He nearly sold out the show, and a musician who admired Deitch's spirit advised him to learn something about art. Deitch returned to Wesleyan and changed his major from economics to art history, kicking off a consuming ambition to know everything there is to know about 20th-century art. By many accounts, he has more than surpassed that goal. "I remember a time when Sotheby's and Christie's were competing for a large estate," recalls Warren Weitman, chairman of Sotheby's, "and we both had all our experts in giving presentations. Jeffrey had to go it alone. And he did as well by himself as either of us did with all our experts."

Chapter two: The day after graduation, Deitch says, he drove to New York City, marched into the Leo Castelli Gallery, and asked for a job. He was turned down. But he persisted, and it happened that there was an opening at the prestigious John Weber Gallery, and Deitch found himself where he wanted to be—in the midst of the '70s SoHo art scene. "I met the whole art world within a couple of months, right there on West Broadway," he recalls. Over the next several years he did stints as a performance artist and curator on his own, showing Laurie Anderson, Andy Warhol, and Vito Acconci in an abandoned space in Tribeca.

Chapter three: Deitch switched gears yet again, heading to Harvard for an MBA, though it was more a duty than a desire, he says. "In my family, you had three choices: Harvard Medical School, Harvard Law School, or Harvard Business School. I did the one that had the shortest time commitment." He adds, laughing, "After that my parents could say, 'Well, we did all we could for him.'"

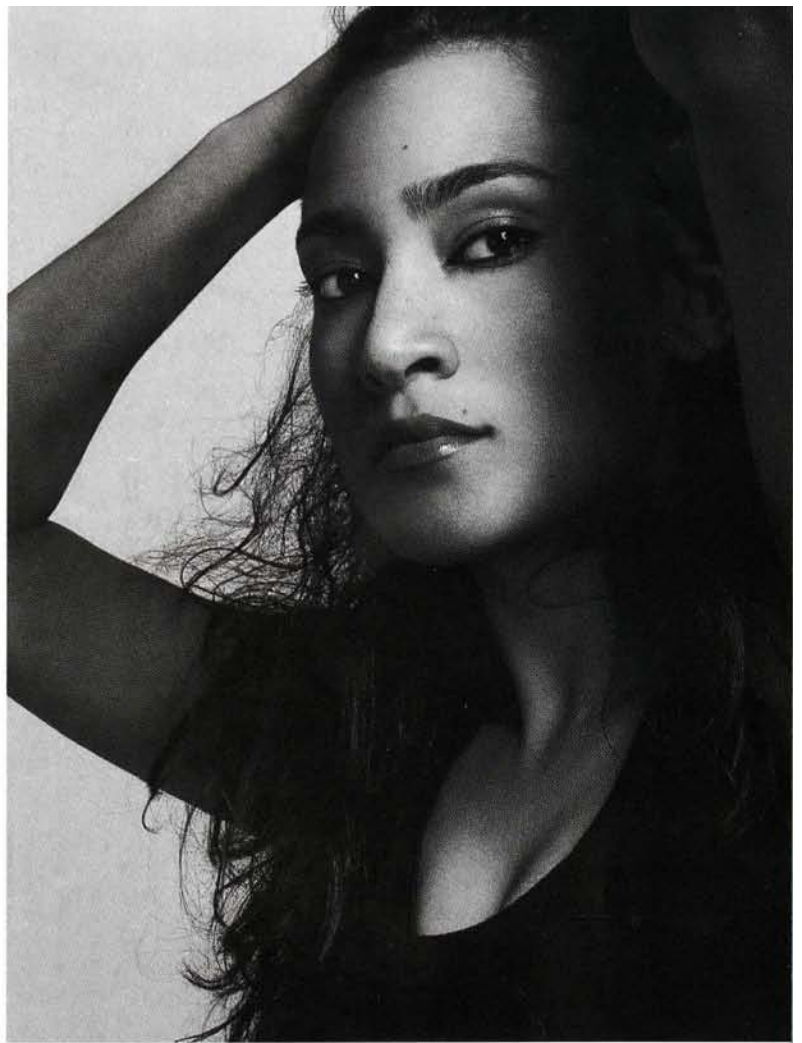
Now his passions are tied together. Through a novel arrangement with Sotheby's, for whom he does private dealings, Deitch is able to gain backing for his artists. "Jeffrey brings together strategic thinking with a lot of creative energy," says Warren Weitman. "It's a great combination that he can be both so appreciative of the past and look to the future." Deitch's own credos about the mergers of life and art (along with his own business credos about art and finance) have made him an artist in his own right, one whose medium is the art world. "It's funny," he says, mulling over the mammoth undertaking of having Beecroft create the *tableau vivant* for this article. "Vanessa comes out of the vision that I started with [my first exhibition] 'Lives' in 1975. It was life as an art medium. It's amazing to me that it's still what I'm doing." ■

Michelle Lopez

(Opposite) **Hometown:** Washington, DC. **Lives and works in:** New York City. **Claim to fame:** Everything in leather. Lopez has covered vehicles—such as a 1972 Honda—in luxurious vegetable-tanned hides, resulting in startlingly biomorphic, Dada-esque creations. **Why leather?** "It's a very sensual material. And people are fascinated by the fact that it is skin, which helps me create a kind of alternate corporeality." **Recent coup:** *Woodsonner* for the Public Art Fund in Brooklyn, a muscular, beige, leather-covered car chassis, spotlit under a red-and-white-striped awning (on view through September 2001). "I wanted it to be a cross between a *Mad Max* kind of vehicle and an Hermès bag."

Jenny Saville

(Below) **Hometown:** "All over the U.K." **Lives and works in:** London. **Claim to fame:** Enormous oil paintings of gloriously fleshy nude women (not to mention one of a dead pig's distended torso) that are frequently compared to the work of Lucian Freud. **Body politics:** "I like extreme examples of bodies. There's a sense of time, power, and disgust with a big body. And a heightened sense of humanness." **On the old school:** "I've always loved how Velázquez and Rembrandt could make something splendid out of something very ordinary." **Recent coup:** Four of her paintings were included in the group show *Ant Noises* (an anagram for *Sensation*) earlier this year at the Saatchi Gallery in London. Cashmere and silk turtleneck, about \$595, Loro Piana. Loro Piana, NYC.



Shahzia Sikander

(Above) **Hometown:** Lahore, Pakistan. **Lives and works in:** New York City. **Claim to fame:** Feminist interpretations of ancient Indian and Persian miniature paintings. **First brush:** "When I was little, I always drew portraits of friends. I still have some from second grade—I prefer them to some of the work I've done since." **Early inspiration:** "Seeing Anselm Kiefer's show in London in 1989. When I returned to Pakistan I decided to go to art school." **Manhattan transfer:** "New York has been the first place where I don't get seen through an ethnic lens." **Art idol:** "It's always someone new. It used to be Kiefer; now it's Mona Hatoum's work because it is so experiential." **Up next:** A group exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, opening February 2001. Cotton tank top, about \$30, Club Monaco. Club Monaco stores nationwide.

