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JEFFREY DEITCH, A MAN FOR ALL PARTIES

Let the music,
and art, and
fun begin BY CAROL KINO

Jeffrey Deitch at one of his
New York galleries, Deitch
Projects, on Grand Street.



Since the very first Art Basel Miami Beach, in 2002, one of the fair's hottest events has been the opening night live music performance. In 2002, the New York art band Fischerspooner entertained a select audience at the Miami Beach home of George Lindemann, Jr. Chicks on Speed, Berlin's electroclash export, appeared on the beach behind the Containers in 2003, and in 2004 it was Scissor Sisters, in the same place, in all their gender-bending glory.

For Art Basel Miami Beach 2005, the Citizens Band will take their neo-Weimar cabaret act poolside at the Raleigh Hotel on Wednesday night, November 30. (Admission is by VIP pass, exhibitor's pass, press pass or by free ticket. Space is limited; for a ticket, call Suzanne Geiss in advance at 212 343-7300.)

Who is the mystery man behind these events? That dean of calculated New York downtown craziness, the art dealer and impresario Jeffrey Deitch.

Deitch, whose New York-based gallery is called Deitch Projects, has advised some of Miami's most prominent collectors. This year, his gallery will have booth No. A6 inside the convention hall; it will also have an installation at Collins Park near Art Positions—the architect Adam Kalkin's *Push-Button House*, a shipping container that expands into a six-room, wall-less house at the push of a button.

On September 10, Deitch was in New York, leading his first Art Parade—a performance-art extravaganza. It was being filmed for another Deitch endeavor, his new reality show, *ArtStar*, which will premiere in March on Gallery HD, a channel on VOOM HD Networks (DISH). *ArtStar's* cameras caught him milling around Grand Street overseeing preparations, while the eight artists being profiled on the show cavorted around a white balloon wearing feathered headdresses, body paint and glitter. The burlesque star Julie Atlas Muz patrolled the area with a performance troupe of faux cops—all of them, boys and girls alike, sporting hotpants, torn fishnets and billy clubs. Keeping the whole gang in line were Deitch gallery employees wearing white jumpsuits.

Deitch, 53, and wearing a rumpled seersucker suit and nerdy-cool glasses, looked like someone's slightly repressed bachelor uncle. He got into his float—an ice cream truck emblazoned with the words "Mr. Kool"—and disappeared into a sea of tubas, balloons, dancing cavemen and bearded ladies. Scissor Sisters participated in the parade, too, as did the Citizens Band, which played afterward to a huge crowd at Deitch's large gallery at 18 Wooster Street. Deitch isn't just up on underground performance culture—he's responsible for quite a bit of it.

PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER SMITH

But Deitch is famously chameleonlike, and which side of him you've heard about seems to depend on the source. "The word I'm sure you've heard from a lot of people is 'impresario,'" said Jennifer Rubell, author of *Real Life Entertaining: Easy Recipes and Unconventional Wisdom*, to be published in May. "He's able to constantly be on the pulse of interesting new things."

Craig Robins, the Miami Beach developer and art collector, commends Deitch for being "much more adventurous than most people in the art world, and more willing to do things without an immediate eye on profit."

Deitch is "wise in mentoring," said Sarah Sophie Flicker of the Citizens Band. "He really trusts us, which I think is a great motivational approach—it makes me want to impress him and everybody with every show we do."

But what really makes Deitch a "triple threat," said Dennis Scholl, an art collector based in Miami Beach, are his credentials as a private art consultant. "In Miami, he's known for these performances," Scholl said. "Yet he's also regarded as one of the people who knows modernist painting of the 1950s



The Deitch-created Art Parade wends its wacky way through downtown New York City this past September.

DEITCH HAS FOCUSED INCREASINGLY ON MULTIMEDIA SPECTACLES.

and 1960s in a way that is encyclopedic. He's the consummate professional."

As Deitch tells it, he's basically a nice Jewish boy from Hartford, Connecticut, who spent his teenage years working in his father's heating and air conditioning business. ("I'm a little rusty now," he said, "but at one point I knew how to fix an oil burner.") One thing was always clear. "From age 19," Deitch said, "I wanted to be an art dealer."

During the summer between his sophomore and junior years at Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, he opened his first gallery, in the parlor of the Curtis Hotel in Lenox, Massachusetts. There he sold works by local artists, one of whom advised him to get an art education. After graduation, Deitch went to work as assistant director of the John Weber Gallery in New York City, then ground zero for conceptual art and minimalism.

In 1975, Deitch said, he mounted his first major exhibition, independent of Weber's gallery. The three-month show, called *Lives*, included participants like the seminal performance artists Vito Acconci and

Hannah Wilke. The point, Deitch said, was to focus on "artists who made the practice of art inseparable from their actual lives—a life performance."

He said, "I've maintained that interest all the way through."

Things really fell into place after 1978, once he received his M.B.A. from the Harvard Business School. While making a name for himself as a critic (he was the first American editor of *Flash Art*), Deitch quietly joined Citibank, where in 1979 he helped start the bank's art advisory service—a move that eventually made him a major force in the 1980s art market boom (as well as a Citibank vice president).

While Deitch certainly wasn't the first in the world to advise collectors, "a professional advisory service with a fee structure didn't exist yet," he said. "We actually created a mini-industry."

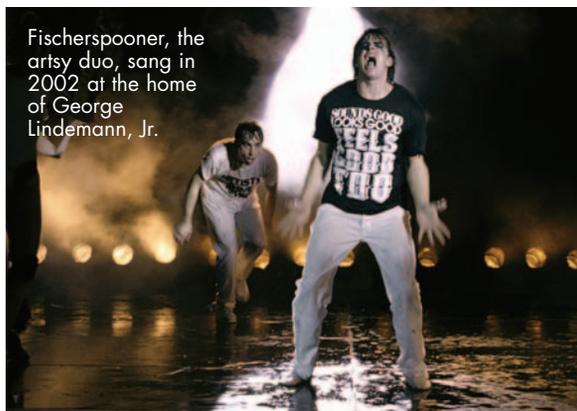
While at Citibank, Deitch began working with Norman Braman, the businessman based in Miami Beach. Along with his wife, Irma, Braman has built one of the country's greatest private art collections. "He knows quality when he sees it—that's the secret

with Jeffrey," Braman said. "He's taught us a great deal, based on the principle of always trying to acquire the best work by an artist."

One early acquisition was a group of sculptures from the David Smith estate; Deitch not only advised the couple on the purchase, he also arranged Citibank financing, Braman said.

In 1988, Deitch left Citibank and incorporated himself as an independent private consultant, Jeffrey Deitch Inc. He continued to advise the Bramans, whose collection is now rich with works by Picasso, Calder, de Kooning and other twentieth-century modern masters. "Everyone looks at Jeffrey in terms of his events," Braman said, "but he's as knowledgeable on Picasso as almost anyone."

As evidence of Deitch's breadth, Braman points to a vastly different collection Deitch helped build, that of the Greek industrialist Dakis Joannou, one of the world's leading contemporary art collectors. The Joannou collection focuses on works by artists like Jeff Koons, Maurizio Cattelan, Mariko Mori and Tim Noble and Sue Webster.



Fischerspooner, the artsy duo, sang in 2002 at the home of George Lindemann, Jr.



Chicks on Speed, the electroclash band, performed in 2003 on Miami Beach.



Scissor Sisters, the eccentric quintet, played in 2004 on Miami Beach.

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"I think it tells the story of Jeffrey Deitch," Braman said. "Two great collections that are completely opposite, in every way, shape and form."

Deitch curated several celebrated shows for Joannou, using the collection, including *Artificial Nature* and *Post-Human* (1992-1993). But his eclectic side didn't fully emerge until 1996, when he added his New York gallery, Deitch Projects, to his portfolio. "My motivation at first was to create a project room where artists could work outside of the constraints of the conventional gallery," he said. "What I like to do is to tell artists, 'Just realize the fantasy.'"

His inaugural year was certainly a sensation. Deitch Projects opened with the first New York solo exhibition of Vanessa Beecroft's lingerie-clad ladies—a hit soon followed by a show of the Japanese artist Mariko Mori's lavishly produced photography. Many artists promoted by Deitch Projects became famous almost overnight. A 1997 performance piece, in which the Russian artist Oleg Kulik transformed himself into a snarling dog for two weeks, drew television crews.

emblems of childhood, made on the artist's typically grandiose and perfectionist scale, and it brought many who funded it close to an investment catastrophe.) "It was first thought that Sotheby's would be able to help by taking it over," said Deitch, who in exchange agreed to help with the auction house's private sales of twentieth-century art and to direct Andre Emmerich Gallery, a venerated gallery the auction house had bought the year before.

Many New Yorkers regarded Deitch's sale to Sotheby's as selling his soul to the devil. "Other dealers have been very suspicious of him since then," said a source closely involved with Sotheby's. The partnership was dissolved in 2001, the year after the auction house price-fixing scandal broke.

Since that time, while still acting as a private consultant, Deitch has focused increasingly on multimedia spectacles, using his gallery spaces and a range of offsite locales for events. "Our approach is a broader, more encompassing view of what art is," he said. "In the way we function, a parade can be art." Suzanne Geiss, executive director of Deitch Projects, produces the most complex projects, like



Deitch's float, rolling along the Art Parade route.



Deitch in his element, directing the merry makers.



Citizens Band, performing after the Art Parade.

Deitch soon developed a reputation for giving many their start—and often providing an attention-getting showcase for artists other dealers had shown first—but not doing much thereafter. "There are nightmare stories about the way he treats artists," said one dealer close to several Deitch protégés. "He doesn't seem to care while the show is happening, and he sometimes doesn't seem to care much afterwards. But it's a pretty sweet launching pad."

Deitch said there were practical considerations: "It's not possible to work with everyone on an ongoing basis, but when there's someone I'm particularly interested in, and get along with very well, we work with them in a more conventional way." Artists he's continued to work with through the years include Brad Kahlhamer, the neo-Expressionist painter; Barry McGee, the neo-graffiti artist; and, more recently, Kehinde Wiley, the neo-Baroque hip-hop portraitist. ("Neo" is a favored descriptor for many of the gallery's artists.) Wiley's painting installation, *Rumors of War*, runs through December 10 at Deitch Projects' flagship gallery, located at 76 Grand Street in SoHo.

In 1997, Deitch became even more controversial when he sold 50 percent of Deitch Projects to Sotheby's—a move prompted by his involvement with the artist Jeff Koons's money-draining *Celebration* series. (It consists of paintings and sculptures of toys and other

the Art Parade and the performance of Citizens Band at Art Basel.

Not only does Deitch have a flair for promotion, his every move seems carefully orchestrated. In January, two months before the debut of *ArtStar*, he is showing work by Bec Stupak, a.k.a. Honeygunlabs—"a foremost video collage artist," as Deitch puts it, and an *ArtStar* cast member. In March, Deitch Projects will offer new work by Robert Lazzarini, whose sculptures of distorted everyday objects appeared in the 2002 Whitney Biennial. And in May, he will unveil new work by Vanessa Beecroft, which may surprise those already familiar with her work, as, he said, "it's actual sculpture."

At times Deitch might seem like an opportunist, giving artists who interest him a brief shot at stardom, only to let them fend for themselves. Yet he has also left an indelible mark on the world of contemporary art. Deitch is a puppeteer par excellence. When the lights fall, and it's his fingers tugging the strings, expect surprises. ■

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