

## In a Farewell Address, Jeffrey Deitch Voices Ambivalence

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Courtesy apexart, New York

Carlo McCormick and Jeffrey Deitch

NEW YORK— "It's not true that the 1970s were better than now," art dealer [Jeffrey Deitch](#) told a crowd at [apexart](#) last night. "It was a good time for me, but things are just as interesting now." Deitch was discussing the New York city art world, the glamorous, insider-friendly precinct that he has called home for more than three decades, and which he will soon leave to become director of the Los Angeles **Museum of Contemporary Art**. He was at the downtown nonprofit for a farewell talk about his career with curator and critic [Carlo McCormick](#).

Though most of the talk — organized by the Chicago-based curatorial group **Bad at Sports** — covered Deitch's storied history, the dealer provided some hints about his plans for MoCA, as well. He confirmed that he'll present an exhibition of photography by [Dennis Hopper](#) to be called "Art Is Life," a title that Hopper himself proposed. The choice, announced at a time when the celebrated actor and artist is severely ill, will no doubt please gallerist [Tony Shafrazi](#), who represents Hopper and showed a large exhibition of his work at his eponymous Chelsea gallery last year. "I want to do shows that aren't just for the professionals," Deitch said. For the growing numbers of people closely following street art, a trip to this year's **Whitney Biennial** may present "a language they can't access," he added.

McCormick led Deitch through his career, beginning with his arrival in mid-1970s New York as a young gallery assistant who wrote art reviews while trying to find a niche in the art world. "I was 22 years old, had no money, no position, nothing," he said. He even worked as an artist for a while, staging his own art performance pieces, which involved instigating arguments among people on the street and then photographing the resulting melee. He cheerily added that one of the best spots for these interventions was "down by Wall Street, near the stock exchange."

"The art world's a special place, where people who are serious are treated seriously," Deitch said to explain his rise from such tenuous beginnings. "I have friends who try to make movies, and they're treated like dirt." When he went to organize his first show, in 1975, he noted that big names like [Andy Warhol](#) and [Joseph Beuys](#) happily signed on, joining young artists like [Dennis Oppenheim](#), [Laurie Anderson](#), and [Scott Burton](#). "I remember my parents coming to the opening, and they were just astonished," he said.

"You got your M.F.A. next, is that right?" McCormick asked, eliciting howls of laughter from the audience. "Well, an M.B.A.," Deitch corrected him. "But an M.B.A and M.F.A. are interchangeable in today's art world." After finishing at **Harvard Business School**, he went to **Citibank** where he launched a service to advise wealthy clients on art purchases — an art/finance crossover that has become legend alongside Jeff Koons' commodities trading stint. "That's one of the curses that I leave to the art world!" Deitch said. "I created the profession of professional art advisor."

Another potential curse: letting artists borrow money against the value of their art. **Christo** was apparently the first artist to take Deitch up on the offer, gaining access to a credit line to finance his large installations. "This was my equivalent of how people work at **Goldman Sachs** for 10 years so that they can start their own hedge fund," Deitch explained. "This was my opportunity to learn connoisseurship of modern and classic contemporary art, so I was equipped to do it on my own later." He would open his own gallery, **Deitch Projects**, in 1996.

Deitch has played a starring role the art world's growth over the past three decades. He has served as **Dakis Joannou's** private curator for a number of years, and reportedly first introduced art-collecting to the **Mugrabi** family, who now corner the Warhol market. Asked if he felt any ambivalence about his role in shaping this vertiginous stratum of art buying, he said, "In art, you question everything. For example, when you see the new work of [Jeff Koons](#), you ask, 'How good is that new work of Jeff's? Is it too much about the money, or is he still Jeff?'"

The art world is less open than it was in the 1970s, Deitch admitted, when he and [Dan Flavin](#) could go to the **Locale** bar after installing a show, run into **Blinky Palermo**, and be served dinner by the popular chef [Julian Schnabel](#). He explained, "Now, when there is a [Gagosian Gallery](#) dinner, you're only invited if you're a billionaire, if you're a world-famous artist, or if you're extraordinarily good-looking." There were some nervous chuckles in the audience. "It's true," he said soberly. "I'm not even exaggerating. That's really what the deal is. It's created a lot of resentment. There's a lot of resentment against me, because I'm associated with some of that."

So is going to MoCA a Damacus moment for Deitch? "My response is to go work in the public sector," he said. "That's my reaction against a lot of this whole structure."