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
I was supposed to be a simple portrait of an art dealer. But in the O.K. like world of Jeffrey Deitch, nothing is simple. And that is why, on this blustery day in Grand Central Terminal on Fifth Avenue, the artist is being painted by a deep emerald City green. (Revisited, actually. The first try wasn't emerald enough.) That is why, on one balcony, 20 artists from Yves Saint Laurent, Helmut Lager, and Prada, along with these fashion stylists and seamstress, and their friends, are seated at the ready. And on another balcony, eight hair and makeup artists are simultaneously welding hair dryers, brushes, eyeliners, and lipsticks. 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, uniting everyone in full taffeta gowns and placing them in the midst of Paul McCartney's The Beatles, a 1991-92 installation now owned by Deitch. Suiting up everyone, that is, but one. "I haven't seen an off-the-rack suit in 20 years," Deitch says, blithely, when asked if his suitco came courtesy of Prada. While several artists indignantly questioned why they were being forced to don eveningwear and make 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 economic 30-year-old from Connecticut has actively cultivated a new and often glutinous 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 CIA agent could come over and make an art world splash were proved wrong this year when five of his artists—Beecroft, Ingrid Calame, Rota Roeser, Michael Roemer, and Ghada Amer—were selected for the 2000 Whitney Biennial.

If you walk the floor, a giant room that seems to be filled with naked bodies—and not all of them pretty—of 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 galleria, frozen fish and air and water, super- model shadows on the wall. A Park Avenue bank, its windows aglow at night with surreal video projections. A man crouched in a cage, cling in nothing more than a dog collar. All of these shows were by Deitch artists—Chang Hui, Beecroft, Tim Noble and Sue Webster, Roeser, and Oleg Brand, respectively.

At Deitch Projects, openings for shows like these invariably turn into young, crossed, scruffy scenes worthy of a Warhol happening. Which is unsurprising. As a child, this is a man who came to prominence almost 20 years ago, as 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 the more straightforward life dealers like Mary Boone, Arne Glimcher, and Larry Gagosian became as well known as their superstar artists, Deitch is now only content to be the man behind the curtain as a boom time in art, he insists upon it.

Formal, courteous, and somewhat stiff, Deitch, even at his most expressionless modes—when he talks, it is always about a show or an artist—comes across as businesslike. The more time you spend with him, the more you realize that he is who he seems a man whose life is art.

"Dealers are dealers for lots of different reasons," says artist Jane Kaplowitz, a long-time 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 Varneslee, chief curator of painting and sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. "And I've never seen someone who has such sincerity in the face of difficult temperaments."

Nor does Deitch shy away from difficult art. His choices of artists have surprised many people. As a co-founder of The Nature of Art, a pioneering art advisory program in 1979, Deitch rode the art market highs of the 1980s. His name was closely associated with the highbrow, high concept 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. Tule Masako Mori, a young Japanese artist whose own fantastic installations—ugly Japanese temple-culture to outer planet extremes—are technically complex and difficult to execute. The working title of her latest project is "2002," which she describes as "a device for virtual travel into the world that exists in the mind," and which, more completely, 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.
wanted. A full-size prototype of the coat was constructed in unbleached canvas. (Scupltural and Chase, 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 together by hand, shaped, mended, and reworked. The last decision was a final choice. A pattern was made, with each piece labeled by color.

As a drabbing woman is working with compass and ruler, drawing a new pattern, as each piece requires its own. Another woman finds a circle of cloth in a larger square with a special machine that sews edge-to-edge, without overlap. Every inch is cut, every error metal as the size of the crochet hook into the seam to mark the correct location of pieces. There might be a millimeter to take off the sleeve, some padding added at the back of the shoulder. Finally, though, Giglione decides that an unlined plaid style might be more practical for something to wear while you're catching three children around.

Who will buy this coat? "You know how to be so sophisticated," says Lagenf, 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 "maid," she says, who loves the coat but doesn't wear it in their value, and a "boyfriend" who is too much to take out of buying it when he leaves 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 51 percent majority stake sold to Prada and luxury goods firm LVMH. Although the Fendi—among the third generation of the company is committed as ever to working company, they now have the financial clout to open even more locations worldwide.

The coat will sooner arrive in Japan, Russia, and Singapore. Two will go to the United States, 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 more customers on an empty floor above the Fendi store on Fifth Avenue. She walks the display area, sitting to every detail and remembering the placement of each object. White jean jackets, her attention to the fine of shopping bags in the greenerry. Each "goodly bag," lacking of a billion-dollar global corporation, which is what Fendi has just joined. (Last year 51 percent majority stake sold to Prada and luxury goods firm LVMH. Although the Fendi—among the third generation of the company is committed as ever to working company, they now have the financial clout to open even more locations worldwide.

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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:** Woodsoner for the Public Art Fund in Brooklyn, a muscular, beige, leather-covered car chassis, spotted 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 1999. 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.