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**Oral history interview with Jeffrey Deitch, 2006
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Jeffrey Deitch on May 15, 2006. The interview took place in New York, N.Y., and was conducted by James McElhinney for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Jeffrey Deitch has reviewed the transcript. Their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JAMES MCELHINNEY: This is James McElhinney interviewing Jeffrey Deitch at Deitch Products at—

JEFFREY DEITCH: Projects.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —or Projects—I'm sorry—at 76 Grand Street in New York, New York, on the 15th of May—Monday.

Well, here we go. When and where were you born?

JEFFREY DEITCH: Hartford, Connecticut, in 1952. Should I do it in a more interesting format than this?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, we could—we could—here are the questions: Where were you born and when?

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yeah, I think I'll cover that, but should it be how I started in the art business and —

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, they want to know—they want to know, too, what your childhood, family—

JEFFREY DEITCH: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —background. Were your parents interested in art? Were you encouraged in your interest in art? Did you spend a lot of time at the Wadsworth Athenaeum [Hartford, CT] or—

JEFFREY DEITCH: Well, I can—maybe I'll get to that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Okay.

JEFFREY DEITCH: All right. I started in the New York art world in June 1974. The day after my college graduation, I drove here from Middletown, Connecticut, and parked in West Broadway. I'd been going to the galleries as a college student already, and I knew a basic amount about the gallery situation.

My goal was to get a job with Leo Castelli, so I went upstairs at 420 West Broadway, and went up

to Castelli's gallery on the second floor and asked for a job. Of course, the gallery receptionist was totally snooty and responded like I had asked the most outrageous thing in the world, like, can I have a job—you know, are you kidding?

And so that was my first encounter with a gallery reception desk. But I simply said, okay, and I went upstairs to the fourth floor where John Weber Gallery was, and—in those days not every gallery even had a reception desk, because you didn't really have to worry about theft, and there wasn't that much going on anyway that you needed a reception desk for.

And so I knocked on the door to the inner office. There was just an empty chair at the counter, and then inside was a woman who was the director of the gallery, and I said, well, I'd like to have a job. Do you have any openings? And she said, well, as a matter of fact our secretary just left, and we do need somebody. The problem is John's not here; he's at the Basel art fair, and John is not going to be happy if I hire a young man for this job; he's going to want a pretty girl. And so she said, I'm sorry, I don't think I can do anything for you.

So I made her a proposition. I said, listen, you know, how about if I just work for you for free for a week? And it will be a great experience for me, and I'd love to see what it's like, and when John Weber comes back, if he doesn't want me here, fine; I'll be happy; you don't have to pay me anything, but if I really do a good job for you this week, maybe when John Weber comes back, you'll give me a good word, and maybe he'll hire me. And she said, well, how can I say no to that? She needed somebody that week.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Who was that?

JEFFREY DEITCH: Her name is Naomi Spector. I'm still in touch with her. She's married to Stephen Antonakos, who lives in SoHo. And she's still very much around in the art world. Antonakos was one of the gallery artists.

So, of course, John Weber comes in the next week from the Basel art fair—you know, no acknowledgment of me while I'm sitting there at the typewriter, and he walks right by. And I hear a furious altercation in the office, like, who is that guy; what's that guy doing there? And Naomi Spector, as she said she would, she put in a good word for me and said, yeah, this guy is working out; you know, we should keep him. And they needed a secretary and John Weber reluctantly said, well, okay.

So I had my first job in the art world, and at that time—even though it's not that long ago; 30 years ago or so—32 years ago—the art world, from the interviewing process, was so much smaller. There were only about six serious galleries that were all concentrated around West Broadway and Wooster Street. And maybe the entire art world was a few hundred people, including artists, collectors, dealers, curators, framers. And it's not an exaggeration to say that within a couple months, sitting at the reception desk—it wasn't really a reception desk—sitting in the inner office of one of the six prominent galleries, you met virtually everybody. At that time, the artists would come and hang out, and museum directors would come there and meet them.

There was a particularly interesting circumstance at John Weber because, even though you wouldn't believe that now, the most prestigious artist of his generation is Carl Andre, and you could almost say that for—in the way, the whole museum critical— [inaudible]—because the kind of Minimal, conceptual artists had won—won out over the Greenbergians [critic Clement Greenberg] and had—who had long ago won out over the school of Paris. In a way, Carl Andre was, at that time, was the most prestigious living artist in the world, in terms of museum structures and things. Of

course, there was also Jasper Johns and Francis Bacon, but I'm talking about where the museum directors, critics, people—the one they wanted to talk to at that moment.

So Carl Andre didn't invite anyone over to his apartment. He didn't really have a studio. He had a routine that every day he would wake up at three o'clock in the afternoon and go to his post office box and get his mail, and he would go to the John Weber gallery and get whatever mail came in through the gallery and check his messages and maybe have a short meeting or two. Then he'd go to the café—I think it was the Café Reggio, one of the cafes in Greenwich Village—and have an espresso. And sometimes the person who would meet him at the gallery would go with him to continue the meeting. And this was a ritual that happened every single day, because Carl Andre was really a creature of habit.

And invariably, Carl Andre was late. So the person who had a meeting set for four o'clock in the afternoon was often waiting for an hour for Carl to show up. I was a 21-year-old, just out of college, and one of my jobs was to entertain whoever was there and keep them there until Carl showed up. And so the people coming in were the great artists of the world, you know, artists from Europe who wanted to meet with him and the great museum directors. I remember Edy De Wilde, prominent director of the Stedelijk Museum [Amsterdam] coming in and talking to him for an hour. So, particularly through this thing of helping people to cool their heels while they waited for Carl Andre, I met people at the highest level of the art world. And also, at that time, artists would like to come in to the gallery, and they would meet each other, and they would have really serious conversations, and I would try to participate in it.

So artists would be around there, talking about who they liked, the exhibitions they liked. That was an amazing education to be there. I never got an advanced degree in art. In a way, I studied with the toughest, smartest people in the art world at that time, and an especially big influence was Sol LeWitt. Sol LeWitt was represented by the gallery, would come in every few days, and was very generous in talking with people. And in the course of working there, I'd also frequently go to his studio to pick things up, and he was also very generous with his time, to have me over there and talk with me there. And I think that was the most focused, most completely articulated philosophy of conceptually related art, and so I learned from the master.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: What had you studied in college?

JEFFREY DEITCH: That's when we go back—economics and art. My first professional experience in art was—I thought it would be a fun idea to open up my own art gallery in the summer resort area of Lenox, Massachusetts, where Tanglewood Musical Festival is, the summer home of the Boston Symphony. My family had a small house nearby, and I was always intrigued by these roadside art galleries. And until I moved to New York City and got involved with John Weber Gallery, I didn't fully understand the difference between just the general world of art and this specific international institution, the community of the art world. I didn't understand that someone who did some nice paintings of clowns or nice landscapes had nothing at all to do with the real art world and the whole process of how something goes into art history.

And so at that time, to me, there was no difference really between, kind of, local art gallery with local artists. I just didn't understand that most of what is shown there will never be written about in a serious art magazine, never will be included in a museum exhibition, won't ever really have a secondary market.

So when I opened—I decided, wouldn't it be a great idea to open this gallery? So my father and I drove up, and we found this former parlor room where they used to play cards on the ground floor of

the Curtis Hotel, a grand old hotel in the center of Lenox. It's an ideal place for a small art gallery—beautiful proportions, big windows onto the main street of Lenox. And this is where everyone came through before the Tanglewood concerts, sometimes after the Tanglewood concerts. So I filled it up with this eclectic mixture of some copperware that a Portuguese craftsman made in my family's metal shop in Hartford. And then I heard there were some local artists who wanted to sell, and connected and got some works from them, bought some crafts—a completely eclectic mixture of things. But I put on a good display, got some friends of mine to help me paint it up and put up the lighting, and it looked great.

The first night, the opening of the Tanglewood season, I was just mobbed, and for me, coming from Hartford, where you didn't really meet the kind of cultured people who go to concerts, I was in awe. By the end of the evening, a substantial part of the inventory was sold, and I had all this cash in my pocket. And it went on like that for the whole summer. I was just amazed at this combination of the intellectual stimulation of talking to the people involved with art, because artists would come, and the musicians from the Boston Symphony would come, and, of course, you are dealing with objects of beauty; it's very nice to be around them during the day.

It was a fascinating social experience, meeting these people who I did not meet—and it wasn't that I had an underprivileged childhood or that I was sheltered, but I didn't meet important musicians or stylish art collectors from New York. That wasn't part of my sphere. And also interesting artists and then fun younger people who came in, and so it was amazing to be introduced into this social circle that I didn't even know existed. So there was the aesthetic, there was the intellectual, there was the social, and then on top of that it was really good and easy money. I decided this was really something to be involved with.

At the time, I didn't—at the start, I hadn't thought of it as a profession; I thought of it just as a fun thing to do in the summer and connected with my general interest in art. But somehow I stumbled upon something that really was my calling. It had a combination of things that was just perfect for me—and only one problem: I still didn't know what I was doing. And I remember the last week of the summer, there was a very serious but unsuccessful former New York artist who had—I remember him telling me he had won the Tiffany Award, like, 25 years earlier, but he was one of these kinds of, at one point, very ambitious New York artists who didn't quite make it, moved out to the country, and was slightly bitter but still doing his art. So, anyway, he had been coming in and talking to me. So he sat me down and said, I want to tell you something. He said, I see that you are good at this, but you need an art education. You don't know the first thing about this. And I listened to him, and he was right.

So when I rushed back to start my junior year of college at Wesleyan [University, Middletown, CT], where I had been an economics major, I just made it for registration by driving, like, 80 miles an hour down from Berkshires, because I was making so much money that last weekend that I didn't want to close up. I remember going back to college with my van filled with my merchandise, and I had several thousand dollars cash in my pocket, which was much more than almost any other student would make during a summer job, and that was just the weekends' proceeds.

I switched my major—well, I didn't right away switch my major, but I seriously enrolled in art history and studio art classes, and gradually switched my major to art from economics, which disappointed some of the school administrators because I had won a scholarship, an award for being the best economics student and something that carried with it some very prestigious internship with McKinsey and Company at the office of your choice. So for me to switch from economics to art wasn't accepted with enthusiasm, but I still ended up in business. And the decision to begin studying art seriously was a good one, and I loved it—had the aptitude for it, and I did both studio

and art history.

Where I went to school, Wesleyan, was a very good place to study art. Two specific things—well, three that were very unusual. One, it has one of the best print collections in any American museum, not just a university museum. It's a great print collection, and they had great print curators working there. And so I became the kind of assistant/protégé to the print curator, Dick Field [Richard S. Field]. And probably the best way to refine your eye is by studying prints, because it's all very subtle, and the difference between different media, etching or engraving, drypoint, the difference between the different states, it makes you very aware of the visual subtleties. So right away my eye was trained in the most sophisticated manner. Also we were dealing with objects; it wasn't just slides on the screen. So it was a just absolutely invaluable educational experience.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Can you share the name of the artist who sort of changed your trajectory?

JEFFREY DEITCH: Well, basically it was Old Master prints.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: No, I mean the artist who sat you down—

JEFFREY DEITCH: I don't remember this guy's name.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, okay.

JEFFREY DEITCH: I wish I did remember his name, but maybe he'll show up sometime.

And then the other thing—two things about Wesleyan was the heritage of John Cage, whose books were published by the Wesleyan University Press, and his philosophy was the foundation, the way advanced music and art were taught there. Constantly, the people were referring to John Cage and his books and—there was a great electronic musician, Alvin Lucier, who taught there—still teaches there. And he continued the aesthetic of John Cage. I studied electronic music with Alvin Lucier and re-absorbed back to the John Cage type of thinking.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How do you spell that?

JEFFREY DEITCH: What, Alvin Lucier?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

JEFFREY DEITCH: L-U-C-I-E-R.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Thank you.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yeah. And then the other aspect was a great program in ethnomusicology. It opened up right away, at that point, an understanding that music and art is not just Western music and Western art. So I studied Japanese reed flute, and even though I did not study Javanese gamelan—Wesleyan had a gamelan [Indonesian percussion orchestra], and I attended almost every gamelan performance and lots of rehearsals, and Indonesian dance and African dance. That was a very important part of my experience.

And all of this, I realize now, is very much reflected in what I do in the gallery, where we have a very global orientation. We've shown artists from more than 25 different countries, and this is what we—essential performative foundation of art is something that, very much, we are about. So it's interesting to think about how these two things still have a lot to do with my formation and that my

course was not very—now, if you ask what artist really influenced me early on, it was Vito Acconci, even though it was before I met him. So at the Wesleyan library—they had a special art library, where they had a rack where they had the current magazines, like *Artforum*. Included on this magazine rack were issues of *Avalanche*, a very important vanguard magazine of the early '70s. So the dates here, it's 1970 to '74.

And so I picked up this copy of *Avalanche*—this must have been in 1973—and there was an issue with Vito Acconci on the cover. I looked at this, and it's all about Vito's "Biting Himself" pieces and other radical body art pieces, and somehow I looked at this and said, if this is art, this is where I want to be. I was just amazed by, inspired by this kind of radical expression—extension—this counterculture idea that everyone could be an artist, that almost anything could be art, depending upon how you look at it and the attitude. That embodied that spirit for me, and reading *Avalanche*, studying the images of Vito, that really—and I remember a specific thing; that convinced me I wanted to be a part of this.

After that, I began driving down to New York and going around to galleries by myself. I remember parking my car in the parking lot at Times Square and taking the subway down, and when I saw Prince Street, getting out, because I remembered that was one of the streets that I saw in the ads for galleries in *Artforum*, and walking around and absorbing it. And so I was—as a junior in college, I was already very eager to get involved in the real thing. For me, there was absolutely no question that this was what I was going to do. The summer between junior and senior years in college, I took advantage of this fellowship to work at McKinsey and Company in Paris. It was very hard work, but I still had enough time left over to visit all the galleries, and discovered the galleries on the Left Bank, discovered the [inaudible] Gallery. That was also a very important experience for me. So I knew exactly what I wanted to do.

And so since age 19, with a few exceptions, all I ever did was work professionally as an art dealer.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You should have a look at the questions again.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yeah. Okay, so you want to get back into the boring stuff—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I think a lot of the questions here on the first page you've answered. Yeah, there's a certain curiosity; I think the Archives feel that they need to understand - so something about your early history, your childhood, parents, how you—

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yeah. Okay. Sure. Yeah. So I'm from Hartford, Connecticut, and I'm the second generation born in America, an Ashkenazic Jewish family.

The mother's side of my family was already wealthy in Europe and very well-educated. My mother's side of the family, her two uncles both graduated from Yale [University, New Haven, CT], and my grandmother was a high school graduate—didn't go to college, but apparently that was—at the time, that was a significant thing for a Jewish woman. [Laughs.] And my mother's mother's father had a garment factory outside of Warsaw, and moved to New York, reestablished a factory, but eventually decided to move to Hartford; brought his family and became the chief tailor at Sage's [Sage Allen department store], which was one of the big department stores there, which was a big job at that time, and invested in real estate in Hartford.

My mother's father came from a wealthy family. He was in the lumber trading business in Kiev, and he went to university in Russia, which was unusual for a Jewish boy. He was trained as a chemist, came to America to pursue medical studies, but because his brother had come in before and

apparently abused the charity of a relative, the same relative didn't want to pay for my grandfather to go to medical school. He ended up going to pharmaceutical school and became a pharmacist, moved to Hartford and opened up a pharmacy in the Italian neighborhood, where people couldn't afford doctors, and became the de facto doctor in the community—[laughs]—prescribing medicine to people, even though he was just a pharmacist.

My mother was a brilliant student, won the state Latin contest as a high school student, the valedictorian of her high school class, went to Smith College [Northampton, MA] and became an economist, began working for the Federal Reserve Bank in New York. But I think the social pressures of the time drew her back to Hartford, where she got married to my father and wasted 20 years taking care of me and my brother. It was sort of a detour in her skills. By the time I was in college, she had gone back to graduate school and gotten an M.A. in economics to get it current again, the new quantitative thinking, and eventually became a partner in a consulting firm called the Futures Group. It did a combination of economic and demographic forecasting. So from her, I just had an intellectual background.

My father's side of the family, they came from the Pale of Settlement between Russia and Poland. My grandfather came to America right around the time of the First World War, was immediately drafted, and came back and got married to my grandmother, whose family had a coal business in Ansonia, Connecticut. Her father was a very good businessman and established his sons or his son-in-laws to open coal businesses in cities all over Connecticut. So my grandfather and grandmother were dispatched to Hartford to open up—it's called the Kasden Fuel Company in Hartford, and that was the family business. My father sold out to his brother, but my cousins still run the company. It's still there—still running. It was fun to grow up in the family business, and I learned that business can be really fun and enjoyable. It's not like people going to a job that they dreaded; like, I loved it when I could go and work with the guys, doing servicing, oil burners, and riding with the guys in oil trucks. They switched mainly from coal to fuel oil by the time I was a kid.

And so my background, whenever I could, I was involved with doing repairs, installing ductwork in houses, installing air conditioning units. So I did this all through my teenage years, and it was a very good experience.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So did they haul you off to concerts and plays and museums?

JEFFREY DEITCH: No, no. Well, my parents were very cultured people. My mother was primarily interested—her aptitude was economics, literature, a person who could quote an entire poem from memory. That was more her side; it was really more intellectual rather than visual or musical. What I got from her, it was recognition of art and music as something important, but it's not really what my mother had aptitude for. But we had a lot of art in our home, local artists. The only really significant work of international art was a Fernand Leger print that I bought myself at the synagogue art show when I must have been about 10 years old.

It's kind of interesting for me that I went through what must have been a really low level art exhibition—the synagogue used to have these art shows and probably a thousand different pieces of junk—and somehow I picked out this Leger and said, I want to buy this. That was my first art purchase, and it's interesting for me, because it could have been anything. But I understood, even at that time with no education, that this was interesting.

So somehow I really did have aptitude for art, and I always wanted to take art lessons, but like my mother, thought it was more important to take music lessons. [Laughs.] I was not very good at all at the piano or brass instruments. I felt it was just torture. But somehow art wasn't—it was assumed

that a cultured person needed to know how to play the piano, should play an instrument, but didn't necessarily have to know how to paint or draw. I remember the absolute pleasure that I got making a small painting on my own—loving these art classes, but somehow I only took a few of them.

I remembered this one particular colored drawing that I did of a man in two dimensions; it was kind of like a Picasso. I don't know if I had ever really even seen, like, a [Cubist painting of] Dora Maar or a Picasso with two aspects of a face. But somehow I divined it, and I remember vividly this very strong drawing.

For a long time I—before I was involved in as creative work as I am now with the public gallery, when I was more a private art dealer, I was thinking of what an idiot I was not to have the self-confidence to just be an artist, but it's too late now. But, no, I'm very satisfied with a lot of the creative things that we do in the gallery. So that's fulfilled that desire.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I'm sure collectors feel that what they buy and acquire and reproduce is their creative aspirations in a way, and I'm sure the same applies to gallery owners.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Sure. And the way I run the gallery—which, I guess, we'll get into at another stage of the interview—it's done very creatively. We're not just merchants here. Maybe [at] some point I'll publish a book of my realized and unrealized artworks, when it's at a point where I can't really be embarrassed anymore. [Laughs.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Like Johnnie Myers [ph]—write that kind of memoir.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Oh, well, I'm going to do something much more serious than that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, I'm sure.

JEFFREY DEITCH: No, but we are actually doing a book on 10 years at the gallery with Rizzoli [publishers]. So that is a current project.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How did you come to call the gallery "Deitch Projects"?

JEFFREY DEITCH: Because it wasn't intended to be a conventional gallery; it was really intended to be a project room, and—because we immediately, from the beginning, connected with some very good artists who we wanted to continue working with—[inaudible]—represented, we became, slowly, a more conventional gallery, trying to continue this more temporary exhibition project aspect. Hard to balance the two, but we do it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How long have you occupied the current venue?

JEFFREY DEITCH: A little more than 10 years.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Okay.

JEFFREY DEITCH: So, that's the reason for the Rizzoli book—10-year anniversary of the gallery. It's a good time to look back and document.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Did traveling influence you at all as an emerging art dealer, as a young man?

JEFFREY DEITCH: Well, for sure. I was born in Hartford, Connecticut, and so the first three years of my life were in Hartford. Then my grandmother sort of lived in the same house. So up until junior

high school, I still spent a lot of time in Hartford. Then my family moved to West Hartford, which was a fairly conventional suburb, and where I had absorbed every last possible stimulation by the time I was 15.

There was just—there was nothing else left there for me to be involved in. I read virtually every book that was of interest to me in the local library. And, you know, it's just—explored every strange place, and there was nothing more for me there. And so I applied to some exchange programs and was very lucky, so the summer when I was 15, I lived as an exchange student in [Angers –JD], France, and all summer toured around France.

Then a little stroke of luck. Because I was so enthusiastic about this program, teachers liked me, and when the prep school, Mount Hermon School [Northfield Mount Hermon School, Mount Hermon, MA], administered this program—it was opening up their exchange student program in Japan the following year - they wanted a reliable student who they knew the hosts would appreciate and would appreciate the hosts. And so they asked me, just out of the blue, how would you like to go to Japan this coming summer? My parents were astounded. They said, I really want him—I, of course, was very enthusiastic. And I ended up the next summer going to Japan. So I had very privileged set of opportunities as a high school student, you know, one summer going to France, one summer going to Japan.

Going to Japan in 1969, living with a family, was really unusual for a young man [inaudible], and Japan, there was still a lot of traditional aspects of Japanese society then, you know, women wearing kimonos on the street and geta sandals. It was before Japan was fully absorbed into modern global culture.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Where in Japan were you staying?

JEFFREY DEITCH: In Kyoto.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: In Kyoto.

JEFFREY DEITCH: But I also traveled around [inaudible] and everywhere. So by age 18, I was actually a fairly worldly person. And I spoke French and had fully absorbed Japanese popular and some historical culture, because I was really studying hard. So this perspective, obviously, is very useful for the international outlook of an art dealer. So I'm just very naturally comfortable in Europe and in Asia, and for me it's just a matter of fact. But the people who I travel with in business are really amazed how, when I'm in most European countries, I'm so completely comfortable; it's no different than when I'm in New York.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JEFFREY DEITCH: And that I—so from a very early age, I was able to—about 18 or 16—15, 16 is not that old, but I absorbed it all in.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So did you return to Asia at any point in time? Have you had any—

JEFFREY DEITCH: Many times, many times. I've been to Asia maybe 50 times. That's what an art dealer does.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JEFFREY DEITCH: There was a gap of a few years. From 1969 till around 1980-81, I didn't go back

to Asia. But then the second stage of my career in the art world was, I began Citibank's art advisory program in 1979. That gave me the opportunity to travel everywhere that Citibank had an active private banking office, and so not just Japan but Hong Kong, Singapore, Jakarta, Manila—I was able to do a lot of traveling to Southeast Asia, Japan, Korea.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: A lot of the demographic forecasts indicate that the population of New York will soon have a heavy share of Asians. Do you see that at all influencing the direction of the art world?

JEFFREY DEITCH: Oh, for sure. It certainly will.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Has it yet?

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yes. Yes. It would be similar to the way, in the 1940s, the influence of America and freedom in America versus what was happening in Europe—the shift of the art world, the shift of the economy. It's going to be different. It's not going to be the same thing, where the art world shifted from the—the capital of the art world shifted from Paris to New York in 1940s. Will it shift to Shanghai in the next 20 years? I'm not sure because, you know, the world is a—things are more fluid, and New York really is an international city. But, for sure, the complexion of this world will change and the—

[Audio break, tape change.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —in the last 30 years.

JEFFREY DEITCH: That's right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And it seems like the idea of an art capital, a solitary point on the globe that's going to sort of carry the burden of being where all the most inventive, imaginative artists are, seems to be challenged by Berlin, and, I guess, other spots throughout the globe: London—

JEFFREY DEITCH: Well, I mean, when Paris was the capital of the art world, it was certainly a dynamic scene, and Berlin, [... –JD] Cologne, Zurich. So, there are always multiple art centers, but I actually do believe that the art world and artists will tend to converge more in one city, that there's a necessity for that that people—artists, collectors, dealers—want to be in a place that has the most energy, the most traffic. For the foreseeable future, it will be New York, but all kinds of things can change from difficulties with travel and immigration to economic strength. It's still New York, though.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, yeah. How have you seen changes in Latin America's role in the art world? It's another—

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yeah, it's still a bit of a world apart, and I'm sure it's going to be increasingly integrated. It's easy for Latin American artists who want to be part of the international art world to come here, and so there are a lot of good Latin American artists who are going to New York, who are essentially New York artists.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, there's certainly people like [Diego] Rivera. And Rufino Tamayo was here for a long time, et cetera and so forth.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yeah, yeah, but I think there's going to be an increasing trend of all the different regions of the world, where there are artists having more significant situations there, and our

infrastructure, and—it's all going to be increasingly global. It's a big change from the '70s when I started, where, basically, art came from New York and Cologne and a few German cities, and then a very limited influence from Los Angeles and a few other cities. Basically, it was a kind of—for some time it was like a New York-Cologne axis, but now it's much more wide open.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: People have often described New York as being like a modern Venice or Byzantium, kind of—

JEFFREY DEITCH: That's right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —crossroads.

JEFFREY DEITCH: The special quality of New York now is that it is a multicultural, multi-ethnic city, and so that's what you don't get, to the same extent, in other places. London is also multicultural, but the black community, the Latin community, other ethnic communities are not as integrated into the whole socio-economic structure in London as they are here.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Good point.

JEFFREY DEITCH: And so, right now, it's great that a black artist can really thrive here and be central and also find a large black community they can connect with. The whole tenor of the city is more multicultural and really works as a multicultural city.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And you've seen that increase over the years.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah. Well that's a very positive outlook, I think.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yeah. And what we do in the gallery, we try to reflect that. We try to be—reflect the multicultural quality of New York City.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you do sort of see art as being something that's not merely a kind of cloistered intellectual kind of discourse; it's a thing that's out there in the public and part of, you know—

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yeah, that's part of the direction of this gallery.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Okay.

JEFFREY DEITCH: So, there's one orientation of gallery that art is for an elite. The gallery looks very austere, it's not inviting, and it's not inviting a broad social crowd—a diverse social crowd; it's an elite orientation. That's the opposite of what we have. So we have a lot of events, performances, public projects. Virtually everyone's welcome. We try to keep the creeps out who want free drinks, but—[they laugh]—you know, we have a much more open, welcoming situation.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Eve

n your logo has got a kind of—well it's an homage to laundry detergent.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yeah, it's an appropriation of Andy Warhol's appropriation of the Brillo box. So it's an appropriation of an appropriation.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Okay. And how long have you had it as your image, as your—

JEFFREY DEITCH: Oh, well, that was from the beginning. We started 10 years ago. That was part of it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How do you feel about continuing the conversation? Do you want to continue?

JEFFREY DEITCH: It depends, you know, I—if that's okay to break it up now, we can—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's up to you. We can roll along, or we can halt at any time. It's about an hour now since we started. We can carry on for another half an hour if you want, or we can stop now. It is entirely up to you.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Okay, we can do it another time.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Okay, then we'll be concluding this installment of the interview, May 15th at Deitch Projects.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's been really interesting.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Good, thanks a lot.

[Audio break.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I have to go through the formalities in introducing.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: This is James McElhinney interviewing Jeffrey Deitch at Deitch Projects on Grand Street, New York, on May 22, 2006.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Okay.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Afternoon. I guess we ended the conversation last week with the intention of speaking today about the genesis of the venue, the gallery, and—

JEFFREY DEITCH: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —your philosophy.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Okay, very simple. I mentioned that Deitch Projects was never intended to be a conventional art gallery. We call it "Projects" because it was intended to be a project room. I'd been active in the art world for 25 years or more by the time we started Deitch Projects in 1996, and I was already representing Jeff Koons and working with other contemporary artists. I didn't call it a gallery.

While we were gearing up to produce Jeff Koons's Celebration project, where we would require a large space, this building was offered to me by Tom Jones, who's the partner of Joe Fawbush, who had the gallery before, who died. And they were friends of ours, and Tom needed some money quickly just to settle things and reestablish himself; and he offered the space to me, if I could help him out. I had always admired this space. I knew this space since the mid-'70s. I used to enjoy walking around SoHo and walked by this building many times and thought, wouldn't this be a great art gallery? It had been a workshop where the Boscarino family made curtains for the backdrops for

television shows and Broadway theater; and then this front section, where we're having the interview, used to be a luncheonette for factory workers

And after that, a woodworker built his shop in here, built a mezzanine. And then it became the Fawbush Gallery in the early '90s, and they had great shows here. They represented Kiki Smith. And when it actually became a gallery, I thought, this is the best space; it has this modest scale, but it's big enough so you can do really major works of art. It has the combination of the roughness and also very good proportions for art—excellent match, a lot of good skylights and lights streaming through in the front. It just made a great gallery even though it was never designed as a gallery. It just happens that way. A hallway is also very effective, so that there is a space between the street and the main gallery where you get oriented. You don't walk right in from the front door into the gallery, which if you look at the architecture of the best museums and galleries, there's always this intermediate space. It's much better than just walking right into the full exhibition—a sense of drama.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So, that's a way to make the visitor more comfortable.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Right. It also increases the dramatic quality of encountering a work of art. Also, we can have the receptionist and the desk apart from the gallery. We don't have the receptionist sitting in the area where the works of art are. There's no business going [on] in the actual art-viewing space, which is important.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense.

You said you were dealing art privately before you opened the space.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Right, right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I guess we spoke about your initiation into the art world with Weber, and what happened after that? How long did you stay there and then—

JEFFREY DEITCH: Oh, that was only a year. Then I—the problem is, if you work in a gallery, is that it's open the same hours as all the other galleries, and there's no time to see other works of art unless you can duck out during lunch hour.

So it was frustrating how I was in New York to connect with the art situation and meet artists and see works of art, but I was limited in my ability to actually go to the galleries. And then because I had to be there every morning at 10 o'clock, I couldn't stay out and hang out with the other artists, and the situation with the younger generations, almost nobody had a job; and so people—their time was very fluid. Some people, of course, worked freelance or something like that, but almost nobody had a nine-to-five job. And so a lot of the activity was—your best discussions were three in the morning at a club, or even if the weather was warm, three o'clock, four o'clock in the morning on a loading dock in SoHo.

I wanted to participate in all that. So I did what we used to do in those days; I arranged to get laid off and went on unemployment, and living was pretty cheap; you could live absolutely fine on your unemployment check until it ran out. So I did that, and I proposed writing a newsletter for the John Weber Gallery, which I did, and I wrote several issues of this gallery newsletter. It was bi-monthly. And I met a lot of people through the newsletter, going around interviewing people. I interviewed their art gallery artists, and we had projects printed in the newsletter. So it was like a mini-magazine. In the art world was so much smaller, and so basically everybody got this newsletter and

read it, and knew that I was writing it.

I also wanted to do my own projects, so in 1975, I put together—it was, like, the winter of '75—I put together a very ambitious exhibition called "Lives," and it was about—the topic still interests me today—of artists using their lives as an art medium—what I sometimes refer to as "persona art." And so, this was something that was of great interest during this period in the mid-'70s. So the artists who were in the show, and many others, were Hannah Wilke, Vito Acconci, Scott Burton; artists who these artists looked up to, like Joseph Beuys, Andy Warhol. Laurie Anderson was in it. So this whole generation, there were probably about 30 artists in the show—William Wegman is another one.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Who is exhibiting now at Brooklyn.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Right. And it was probably—probably more than any other exhibition at that time, it was the exhibition that articulated this tendency and was widely talked about it. It was another of the things that gave me the platform to get to know people, get people to know me. And it was also one of the first independent exhibitions of this type. It was a real exhibition that wasn't in a museum, wasn't in an art gallery. And this wasn't that long after the Artist Space was started.

So it was one of the few exhibitions like this type that was really a curated show. There were others, but it was one of the first.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How did you organize the venue?

JEFFREY DEITCH: That's a good question. The World Trade Center had emptied out Tribeca - but you know, hopefully, the same thing won't happen with the new World Trade Center - where they couldn't find any normal, commercial-rate tenants, and so the state subsidized the rents and offered these cheap rents for all the people in the commodities businesses—coffee trades [inaudible] were in Tribeca.

And so these buildings, just within a matter of a year, emptied out as the tenants moved into the World Trade Center, and some of them just went out of business because of the depression in New York in the 1970s. There was this one particularly beautiful building—it's now the building that has Nobu Restaurant—that was totally empty. All the tenants had left, and the landlord was desperate. I have this good friend, Julian Pretto, who was—he had this unique talent of connecting advanced art and advanced real estate opportunities, and worked as both a real estate agent and as an art dealer but always in a, kind of, very interesting, underground way. And he met the guy who owned the building and made him a proposition. He said, listen, if you give me this building, allow me to operate the building for the next few years, I will fill it for you with paying tenants. And it just seems unbelievable that someone would give Julian Pretto this building to do whatever he wanted with it, but the guy did. This was just—there was nothing else to do with it.

And so Julian contacted me—he was an ambitious younger guy in the art world that wanted to do projects and knew I was connected. He said, could you curate a show? I'll give you a whole floor. And I said, sure. So he gave me an entire floor of that building, and that's where the exhibition was called "Lives."

I remember the opening of "Lives" was an amazing event where virtually every downtown artist—you know, all the artists in the show and the friends of the artists, they all came. And Julian actually filled the building. He had this deal where, in return for helping him out with things, he'd give people a room where they could live. It was all illegal, but nobody really cared then. And he then rented the

second floor to Artist Space, and slowly found real art-related tenants, and had a good run with it. In gratitude, the owner of the building gave him this beautiful carriage house next door—it was attached—where Julian had his own gallery for a while. And things got prosperous there and Julian then had to be resourceful, finding something else that was still in distress.

So I did that exhibition and then I left New York and went to graduate school for a couple of years.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And where was that?

JEFFREY DEITCH: At Harvard Business School [Boston, MA]. And then I came back—it's a whole other chapter. I started an art advisory department for Citibank, and I ran that for about 10 years.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Was that overseeing their acquisition of art?

JEFFREY DEITCH: No, it was purely business.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So they were—

JEFFREY DEITCH: There's so much documentation on this, so it doesn't—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, okay, so that's already—

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yeah, there is an endless writing about this.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's not anything I am intimately acquainted with but—

JEFFREY DEITCH: No, but there's been lots of—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Is that still in operation?

JEFFREY DEITCH: It is, yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Okay, so if anyone wants to explore it further, they could.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yeah, it is written down and stuff.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, yeah, but—so when did you finally—when did start dealing artists again, after working for Citibank?

JEFFREY DEITCH: I began my own business in 1988. At first it was a private dealing business, an art advisory business, and then I took on the representation of Jeff Koons and worked with a few other artists—Peter Halley, Charles Ray, and then the problems with the Koons [project] just took all my time. When the space was offered, it was good because I was eager to do something creative rather than just being stuck in the production of the Jeff Koons project, which was advancing, but was getting more complicated each step that it advanced.

So we started in January 1996. Again, the idea was to do projects; the idea was not to represent artists but to invite ambitious, emerging artists to do something, to realize a project they really wanted to do. So, you sort of take people out of the normal routine of studio practice and you say, listen, what is it you really want to do; what is the thing you'd really like to do if you had the opportunity?

And the original deal was that I would provide up to \$25,000 for each project, and we would deduct

the production costs from the selling price and then split the rest 50/50; and if, within the year, we didn't sell it, I would just keep the project. And that was our system, and right away some terrific projects—but what began also happening quickly was that there was more to do with these artists, and then started on the next thing.

So I began kind of ongoing relationships with artists like Vanessa Beecroft, who was one of our first projects, but we still kept this orientation going as a project gallery. A number of artists who we did great projects with and introduced left our sphere because they perceived that we were not enough of a conventional gallery, so they didn't want to be—but after a few people left, I decided, well, maybe we should be more of a conventional gallery. And so we've, in the past few years, invested in an archivist, a financial manager, and a press liaison, and the other kinds of functions that you need to run a professional gallery.

But we still try to keep a more active program. So we're like a private ICA [Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston]—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I understand.

JEFFREY DEITCH: —in that we do a lot of projects that don't have any commercial potential. We just like them.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, that's a question that comes to mind. If you're changing the paradigm of exhibiting art, have you seen a new kind of collector showing up or people—

JEFFREY DEITCH: Well—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —who were attracted to your projects, you know?

JEFFREY DEITCH: I wish there were more, but no, I think that today's art market is characterized by people who get caught up in the whole auction situation and making money, who buy something in the gallery for \$15,000, and then you can sell it at auction for \$800,000 or more. A Cecily Brown painting that we sold to Charles Saatchi for something like \$8,000, he recently sold at auction for about \$900,000.

So most of the collectors are swept up in that, and the more visionary collector, art patron, someone like Virginia Dwan or Philippa de Menil, hardly exists. I think it's people who are involved in buying art, and it's hard to resist this whole thing of the auction system and the prices and the excitement. I mean, people don't start in it because of this whole money aspect; a lot of them get wrapped up in it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well maybe—

JEFFREY DEITCH: They want to buy something that will go up in value.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I see.

JEFFREY DEITCH: So, a kind of collecting orientation that I first encountered in the 1970s when I was working at John Weber with people like Virginia Dwan, who was the predecessor gallery to Weber, and the biggest customer of the gallery, Giuseppe Panza [di Biumo] and people like this, where they were collecting because they believed in it, and there probably was some financial issue, too. I know people didn't want to throw away money, but it was much more of a patronage situation. I remember when Panza would come and have a discussion with Ian Wilson, a lively

discussion—and that's it. I remember typing up the invoice and just said simply, there was a discussion, and that's it. I typed that up, and then there was an invoice for whatever it was, \$[1,000 –JD]—Giuseppe Panza.

So that kind of collector is very rare, you know, who's in it because they're inspired and just want to be involved. I wish we had some more of them now.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I guess the question is, if there are fewer collectors that show that sort of Potlatch chieftain attitude, that energy, and that courage, do you [think] that likewise there are fewer artists who are out there on the edge, or more artists—

JEFFREY DEITCH: Oh, no, no, there are a lot of artists who work without commercial consideration, and we've shown a lot of them. Sometimes it intersects with today's market; sometimes it doesn't.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So—

JEFFREY DEITCH: We've had amazing, absolutely amazing things here where nobody's interested in buying, you know. We push, and we contact many people, and nobody's interested. Then you have, like, a hot painter, and it's overwhelming; like over 200 people are there to buy one work, and the people are nuts—it's like a sale at Filene's Basement, like there's hysteria, and people behave very badly.

Yeah, so we deal with that, but I continue doing more challenging work. Luckily I've been in this a long time, so I have connections to do conventional art dealing where I'm unable to finance all this other stuff. I can maintain the program without much commercial consideration.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I think a lot of people assume that galleries represent a particular style or point of view. And you spoke earlier about your show "Lives." Do you feel that you represent a particular style—

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —or point of view?

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yes. Well, it's interesting that what captured me in 1974 or '75 is still the foundation of what we do. So a lot of what we do here has a performative basis; it comes out of performance in some way.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JEFFREY DEITCH: And we continue to work with a number of artists where the artist's life and their persona is an important part of the work. There is an aspect of the work that's social sculpture. So from the very beginning of Vanessa Beecroft and Jocelyn Taylor [ph] and Nari Ward, where his spending months going around accumulating debris from discarded material on the streets of Harlem to make the show with, it's very much a part of the work. It's not just the objects; it's that whole process. Moriki Mori, her next show was great Chinese artists who died prematurely—Chen Zhen, what he did is he went on the streets of Shanghai and bought old chamber pots from old ladies for very little money, and came back and filled the container with a few hundred old chamber pots that he'd made a sculpture with, that functioned as a kind of musical instrument.

So, many of our projects are performative in some way, and so that's an important part of it.

I also continued the spirit of downtown in the '70s and early '80s. Our program connects with some of the old punk, new-wave musicians like Suicide and Allen Vega, Arto Lindsay, and people who we've done things with. And then we're very interested in more contemporary revival of this kind of attitude, so—Dan Colen, across the street, is showing "A Revival of the Spirit," the Lower East Side artist community from the '70s and early '80s. So we keep the downtown spirit alive. That's another thing that we do. That's very connected to our point of view.

Another thing that's connected with that is art that comes out of street culture—particularly art that comes out of graffiti culture. So we represent the estate of Keith Haring, who [was –JD] a friend of mine, and that forms a kind of foundation for a lot of what we do. Here we're sitting in a Jean-Michel Basquiat show. I've had a relationship for years with Jean-Michel and then with the Basquiat estate. And Basquiat was—he was not a graffiti artist, but the work came out of the street—early work done on the street.

So that's part of our foundation. And then there is a younger generation. A number of them come from San Francisco—Barry McGee, Chris Johansen, and others who we've exhibited that connect with this tradition. We found some New York [artists, like Swoon –JD], whose work emerged on the street. So that's something that art galleries identify with.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, here we are in this former luncheonette, and it's extremely open to the street. Everybody is wandering along staring. There is a kind of interaction all the time. I have to ignore them as I speak to you, but there is a lot of that.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yeah, yeah, so it's—people all the time ask, you know, when are you going to move to Chelsea? How come you didn't move to Chelsea? And it's irritating, of course, because it's—I'm not exaggerating that it's maybe one out of three visitors who come in; they ask that question, some of them aggressively, saying, you're so inconvenient; can't you move to Chelsea? Well, I guess, businesswise, it was a mistake, but I'm rooted in this neighborhood. This is part of my history, and so I like this connection with the street, with the street life, the history of what this neighborhood represents.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, it seems—

JEFFREY DEITCH: We know that we belong here.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: After you've explained everything, it seems very clear that this is the appropriate spot for you, and like [inaudible] uptown, they're staying there because that's what they are about. So there seems to be a certain set of values that attach themselves to each neighborhood where art occurred here. And, well, I've heard a lot of people say that they find Chelsea inconvenient, that it lacks the sense of a small town that SoHo has.

JEFFREY DEITCH: What we like is that a lot of the artists I'm interested in, they live on the Lower East Side. The Lower East Side is very vibrant again. You can easily walk back and forth. And so there is still some of that aspect of SoHo 30 years ago, where you see the artists on the street.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's a community.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Well, it's accessible to the parts that are communities.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Okay.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yeah. There are very few artists of the younger generation who actually live in

SoHo anymore.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right, but you spoke about artists who started out here and whose careers then took them elsewhere, who sought more commercial opportunities and success. Is there any—

JEFFREY DEITCH: Now it's not commercial—any commercial opportunity they want, they can get from me—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JEFFREY DEITCH: —because I'm a very experienced art dealer who, for many years probably, had the record of selling the most expensive, contemporary painting, but it's all their perception.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I guess I was asking—I mean, who left?

JEFFREY DEITCH: Cecily Brown got on there.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So these were—their career is being launched and—

JEFFREY DEITCH: Cecily's career I helped to launch [inaudible] shows first. And [Ghada Amer –JD], I gave her career a good boost. It was not a career that I began. She had already begun her career in France and then came over here.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So I heard something about a TV show.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yes, there's a television show that sort of extends the philosophy of our gallery, the idea of, what's the really contemporary way to have an art gallery? And I thought the really contemporary way to have an art gallery is to have a television show. The gallery should be on TV. And so what we did as a kind of compromise—it's a semi-reality show. It was a way to get involved with this and see what it was like. And it was a really good learning experience. We learned that it's hard to make good television about just the process of an artist making work. But it's been a good experience, and hopefully, the show will be well received.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Who produced it?

JEFFREY DEITCH: Gallery HD.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: They're here also in New York?

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And where will it air?

JEFFREY DEITCH: On the DISH Network.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Okay.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Preliminarily, and then we may with something else later.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, it's an interesting idea. So were there actually cameras rolling while artists were at work?

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yes.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And what kind of role have you in all of this? Were you—

JEFFREY DEITCH: Well, I'm pretty central to it.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You mean speaking?

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yeah, we just—it's what we normally do in the gallery. It's about how we look at work, how we develop an exhibition.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So it was sort of behind the scenes?

JEFFREY DEITCH: Not really behind the scenes, but it's designed to show the process of how artists enter into the public sphere of the art world.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Very interesting.

How have you interacted over the years with the museums? How has your approach to—how has your venue and its philosophy—

JEFFREY DEITCH: Well, we do what we do here, and if museums are interested in what we do, sometimes they come and ask to pick up our projects. But we're really doing our thing, and sometimes what we do is completely ignored by museums, and some other times our projects are picked up. We are much more active in presenting contemporary art than the New York museums are. We're much quicker. We do much more. We provide a significant service to the public and people who are interested in new art.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, how does an artist find you? Or how do you find them?

JEFFREY DEITCH: Well, see, we've established our approach, what we do, the kind of artists we're interested in, and artists who think that they would fit here generally connect with us through friends and other people. Someone says to them, you should talk to Jeffrey, or someone says to me, you should meet this person. So it's very natural. It's clear what we're interested in, and artists understand that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So it comes out as a kind of dialogue that you're having—

JEFFREY DEITCH: Right. Right, it's out in the public what we do, and people come to us.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So it's not a standard kind of a review process that you—

JEFFREY DEITCH: No.

JAMES MCELHINNEY:—accept slides on Wednesday or—

JEFFREY DEITCH: No.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: It's open in that way.

JEFFREY DEITCH: It's really through a community of people that we—people suggest—and also there are dealers who I respect who are in Los Angeles or London, and they find people there and connect with us.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, what's your opinion, or your view, of the role of the critic these days?

How have you intersected with, you know, the popular journalism or the media? How do they cover your exhibitions?

JEFFREY DEITCH: See, I'm not the type to just wait—just put on a show and then just pray that the press is going to come and write it up. We're much more active, so we put a lot of effort into our graphics, into our posters, and—

[Audio break, tape change.]

—so we put out a lot of material for the public. We're not waiting for a critic to review us. And it's not my nature to just put myself into someone's hands; it's, you know, to just do my thing. It doesn't really happen until that person decides whether or not to write about us. So we have an active communication program, and because we're not covered that extensively by art critics—we tried this process and connected much more with mainstream media. So there are lots of stories about our gallery in lifestyle magazines, business magazines, kind of—these new kind of vanguard-fashion-lifestyle magazines. They're like *Self Service*, *Black Book*, or a [inaudible]. So clearly these publications do a lot on us. And so we get the word out.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Seems like with the Internet and the access to information everybody has, that a lot of the traditional boundaries between fashion, entertainment, art, have kind of blurred.

JEFFREY DEITCH: That's also one of our approaches, one of the things we're known for. I connect it back to this downtown spirit where, let's see, you look at an artist like Haring. So Keith was active with music, clubs, was a fixture of the Paradise Garage, connected with dance companies like Bill T. Jones, was active with fashion designers, where fashion designers like—Jean-Charles de Castelbajac used his designs. He connected with celebrity types like Grace Jones, and painted her body. And so he is a good example of an approach to art that opens up the boundaries and enters into broader popular culture. And we use a kind of subversive role going into a broader pop culture but still maintaining an edge. So that's something we are very interested in, and that characterizes what we do.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: There are other artists, too—you spoke earlier about Laurie Anderson. She was able to make the leap from gallery to the pop venue—

JEFFREY DEITCH: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: —to the concert venues.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Are there any other artists who—

JEFFREY DEITCH: Well, there's a whole—we are very involved with a younger generation of musicians, performance artists who are interested in a more contemporary version of that. Fischerspooner we produced—Le Tigre. We did an exhibition with J. D. Samson of Le Tigre and the circle around her. And we have been active with other music groups that come out of the art world: Chicks on Speed, from Berlin, Scissor Sisters. We helped to produce an art cabaret.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Where?

JEFFREY DEITCH: Here.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Here? Okay.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Citizens Band. We work with one of the legendary, downtown musician-performance artists, Kembra Pfahler [and her band "The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black" –JD]. So we do a lot. Yeah, we continue to do this.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Have you ever hosted events at larger venues?

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yes, we've—well, at the art fair in Miami, we have a tradition of this big opening night art performance, music party. And for a couple years we did it on the beach. One year we did in someone's house and used the house as a set.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Hmm—wow.

JEFFREY DEITCH: And we've also co-produced performances that are at big block venues in New York.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So have you had—has this experience working with television inspired you to do anything else with that?

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yeah, I have some ideas. What we do in the gallery demands so much focus.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, yeah?

JEFFREY DEITCH: You know, just like writing a press release demands tremendous concentration to get it just perfectly right in every single element. And so, you know, we have a lot to handle with our basic program. But there are some good ideas that maybe we will be able to pursue that make sense to follow up what we did with the TV show.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, as a venue, it's apparent you've got a very unique mission, but do you see the impact of the Internet and art fairs changing the way other—

JEFFREY DEITCH: It certainly—well, certainly will. The art fairs, no question, have changed the whole thing.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I mean, you know, the gallery scene in general.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yeah, it's changed it tremendously. I would say the role, the importance, of the traditional gallery exhibition has declined. So museum curators who, in years past, would have had a budget to travel from Midwest America, wherever they are, to come to New York for a week in October to just go to galleries, they don't do that anymore; they use their travel budget to go art fairs in Miami.

And what's amazing to me is that serious museum groups come, and they make their serious annual acquisitions at the art fair. And, you know, so we run with it; that's what they do, but it is amazing to me. Ah, but that's—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How long have you attended art fairs and—

JEFFREY DEITCH: Well, I have attended art fairs as a visitor and buyer for 25-plus years. But we began participating only with the advent of the Art Basel in Miami. This will be our first year in Basel.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Okay, at the Kunstmesse. That's been going on now for 30 years?

JEFFREY DEITCH: Something like that.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, yeah. And how frequently do you attend these art fairs? Were you ever at Chicago at the Navy Pier?

JEFFREY DEITCH: Well, I've been to basically every art fair over the years. But in terms of the gallery, we want to limit our participation—maybe just Art Basel Miami, and Art Basel—because I get most of my reward from doing these exhibitions, and I don't want to be spending most of the year just traveling around and operating from an art fair [booth –JD]. That's just—we really have a different kind of program.

But you have to run with it; you can't resist what happens, and so, like for Art Basel Miami, for instance, rather than just passively participate, we have been very active in shaping the whole thing that goes on there, and this sort of mixture—the party situation, the performance aspect, and the live or the outside projects—we've been the most active, more active than any other gallery, in making a lot happen. So we really helped build the whole new situation.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So do you think the impact of, you know, the net and these art fairs has made art more available to people?

JEFFREY DEITCH: Well, you know—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Is it less intensive—

JEFFREY DEITCH: It is much more accessible to people who want to buy it, who want to write about it from a lifestyle point of view. The question of whether the real art experience of changing a consciousness - a statement about the social situation in the world, art can do it - is a question of whether or not this has diluted—the whole art fair, auction situation—it probably is diluted—it is diluted. And so, yes, the Art Basel in Miami gets written about in the *New York Times*' Style section, and the *New York Times*' Style section doesn't really write about just a normal gallery opening in New York. So lots of people read about it and hear about it, and so the names of some of the artists are now widely known beyond the inner circle, but the ability of people to have this transformative experience, a work of art, they're not getting it at an art fair. So it is important to focus on venue situations that can provide to us a more transformative experience.

But I'm not one to run from the socio-economic trends. You have to run with it and remind people that you actually run in advance of it. You try to figure out a way to connect with all this, take advantage of it, but use some of the economic gains from this to support, continue our program.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hm [affirmative]. Do you think artists with whom you are in contact are more interested in being activists in some way or being part of—

JEFFREY DEITCH: Artists are all different.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

JEFFREY DEITCH: You know, there some artists who are shockingly bourgeois, that they're very serious about their art, they're professional, but, you know, they really want to have a home in the Hamptons with the billionaires. They want to ride on private jets. They want to have the most expensive Porsche or BMW, and that's really important to them.

Now, I know artists who have absolutely no—it's a hardly even awareness of this. Not only do they

not want it, they just—it's not even in their consciousness, and live a totally alternative lifestyle and life, and are politically radical. And we work with both kinds of artists. I don't have a judgment that one approach is wrong and the other is right. I respect all people of art, and someone can be completely connected into the economic system and enjoy it and its benefits and make transgressive works of art, as well.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: For you, what's the litmus test of quality? Is it something to do with conscience, or is it something to do with intention, or is it something to do with—evaluating art is—

JEFFREY DEITCH: Well, many criteria, okay? One is, I look for artists who have a unique voice, where it's not academic, where it's dealing with received ideas, already well-established concepts, and sort of putting an element of artist A together with artist B to make something that's a little different. And there are many artists who have thriving careers doing work that's essentially academic.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Mm-hm [affirmative].

JEFFREY DEITCH: A pretty good formula. You can take three influential artists of the previous generation and just figure out how to make some fusion of the work of the three of them, and you've got a career. And I know people who actually consciously worked on that formula and succeeded.

I'm generally looking for people with a more individual voice, where there's something exceptional and where they have a strong personality and the work that they do reflects their personality.

And then there's something, a lesson that I learned sitting around at the office of the John Weber Gallery. One day I remarked, sort of glib, my enthusiasm for the work of a certain artist, and Sol [LeWitt –JD] looked at me and just said, it's all surface. And, yeah, I understood what he meant, that what that artist was doing was really on the surface, that there wasn't any structural [innovation – JD].

And understanding what Sol meant by that very terse comment, it has been a great revelation for me, understanding that a successful work of art needs to have a structure, even if it's not necessarily a geometric structure. It may be a philosophical structure that underpins the work of art. And I would say that all really top-level works of art have a structure, so I look for that structure.

And then there's also something very simple, that most successful works of art create a memorable image. It doesn't have to be an image that is actually visible in the object. It can be an image that you were prompted to make in your own mind after seeing the work of art. But let's give an example and say, a Lawrence Weiner work, the best Lawrence Weiner. You read his text, and in your mind you envision something that is a great image, that's all a mental image. So that's something I look for, as well. But that's an important test. Is there a great image there? A lot of art that receives a lot of attention doesn't really have an image, is like some sort of situation you see. And even social sculpture, the best social sculpture, has an image that remains as part of the work.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Are there any historical works of art that stick in your mind?

JEFFREY DEITCH: Oh sure. Well, say, maybe my favorite 20th-century painting is Tu M' [1918] by Marcel Duchamp. [In the Société Anonyme Collection at Yale –JD].

JAMES MCELHINNEY: In [New Haven –JD].

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yes, so that is one level. It's a great retinal image; it's a really strong image, color bars. And then another point, it meshes several different realities. There's the reality of the illusionist painting; the reality of hiring something outside of art—a sign painter—[inaudible]. And then there's this other reality of the shadow that's formed by something that extends out from canvas. There's the representation, the appropriation, the reality of this illusion that's a real shadow. So there's the real and the illusion. It has all these different elements in it and, as much as any other artwork that I know, has all the ingredients to make a hundred years' worth of amazing art based on some of those innovations.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: How about earlier artwork even, you know, to go a hundred years back or—

JEFFREY DEITCH: Oh, well, everyone has favorite works of art. I certainly do. I talked with David Salle about his love for [Edouard] Manet's Bar at the Folies-Bergère [1881-82], which I also love. I love the modernity of it. I love the way that art is intercepting with the real reality of people's lives and the reality of the illusion—the issue with painting the reflection in the mirror behind her versus levels of reality. So that's a painting I really love, but there is so much art that I find interesting.

In terms of the foundation of what we do in the gallery, most of it comes from the modern era, although artists we work with reference Old Master paintings, 18th-century English portraits. [Kurt Kauper –JD] references. [Jean Auguste Dominique] Ingres, but what we do, still, it's in this modern tradition nevertheless—perhaps post-modern, because the avant-garde as an elite world that's apart from popular culture doesn't exist anymore—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JEFFREY DEITCH: —and there is such a thing as Postmodern. To me it doesn't entail revivalist styles, but this new situation where there is no longer this, kind of, avant-garde elite, where something that's the most artistically innovative and transgressive might come from a rock band that you hear on the radio as much as from something you see exhibited in Whitney Biennial.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well, I think there's some comparisons, historically, too, that a lot of people ignore. There was a writer who said that if Robert Burns were alive today, he'd have a band called "The Insane Haggis Posse" or something. But, I mean, in the context of history, their voice bends a certain kind of ways of valuing or seeing how it intersects with, you know, the moment. For instance, if George Catlin showed up with a couple hundred paintings of some Indians, would you show it?

JEFFREY DEITCH: Oh, I can answer that. To that, I'd say, yes, instantly.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: [Laughs] And that was, you know—well, yeah, he was here, too.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: And, so there's another—I think just on modernity alone, I think a lot of people are maybe confusing style with something else, you know, some kind of—

JEFFREY DEITCH: No, well, that's what I'm saying. For me, Postmodernism of having, like, the Chippendale top, you know, Philip Johnson building, that's just style. That's not really a structural change in what's modern and not modern. And, so—yeah, I'm thinking of, really, the relationship of vanguard art and the audience.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you're interested, really, in integral structural change in the way things are seen, and assumed—

JEFFREY DEITCH: Right, right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY:—and not just maquillage and appearance.

JEFFREY DEITCH: That's right.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Great. What's your own taste? Are you a collector yourself?

JEFFREY DEITCH: It's completely the same as what we show in the gallery.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Really?

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yeah, there's not a sort of a private, you know, conservative collection or something, no.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Or you don't have a pond full of koi up in Westchester [NY].

JEFFREY DEITCH: Oh, no, no, no, no. No. It's completely consistent with what we do here.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I'm just trying to imagine if we've been able to cover everything here. I think that there was question I had about—and perhaps you answered it, at least you addressed it, but how do you see the impact of changes in media of communication, the way that art's being shown and sold at art fairs and Internet. How do you think, in another 20 years, they are going to look?

JEFFREY DEITCH: Well, I think there's a basic human need to connect with the creative hand. The work that shows the hand of the artist, that magic going from the mind through the hand—and you can see the evidence in the object—you know, that's something that will always be compelling, to be part of our civilization. And similar things—no matter how good the use of a reproduction gets—you know, you can get on your stereo—it will never replace attending a live concert, because that magic of watching the pianist in front of you create this music, you know, out of nothing, that magic is amazing. Similarly, with a work of art, just that astonishment, magic you feel looking at an energetic image, a compelling image, an emotionally resonant image somebody created with their hands. There's nothing to compare to that. And art is an amazing medium because nothing—there's no comparison - where you get somebody's entire life experience, entire training—everything concentrated in one small rectangle that you perceive at once.

It's unlike a film, where it takes you two hours to go through the whole thing, or a novel that might take you a week to read. Those are great experiences, too, but there's nothing like—there's absolutely nothing else where you perceive a great painting in three seconds and take it in—the intensity of that. There's nothing to compare to it. And people who want to experience that, or creative people who want to achieve that—want to make that. That will not disappear, but artists are very quick to take on—understand how to use all these technological aids to make what they want to make.

A lot of the artists we work with—traditional painters—are using a computer in their composition, and it's no different than an artist—a French Impressionist artist who used photography, or the various artists who studied the photographs of Edward Muybridge and [Georges Méliès –JD] to understand how to create motion, how to paint a horse. So artists today are using technological means to get the proportions right in painting the same way [Albrecht] Durer used various devices,

camera obscura, to help him with perspective. So it's the same thing. Artists are very quick to pick up on all these technological innovations and incorporate them, and the result may be, in the end, using oil paint and painting it by hand with a brush, but you've worked with Photoshop to help define the composition.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You're at a unique kind of position as a gallery owner, or as a owner of a venue—you know, the Project space, and so in speaking with artists and speaking with collectors, you must find yourself in the role of being a sort of teacher, educating them a bit on how to see things or how to apprehend opportunities. Hearing you speak, you speak very clearly that—

JEFFREY DEITCH: It's, you know, we try to find clients who are interested in having these discussions. Most of them have no interest to do this. They just want know, can you get me a—you know, whoever the hot artist is. And then some of them, they'll try to do hard negotiating. That's really most of our interaction. [They laugh.]

JAMES MCELHINNEY: But apropos to that, how do you see the—what's your sense of what's happening in the art schools?

JEFFREY DEITCH: Art schools?

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah, like the training of artists now.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Well, I think that it's much more professional, much higher level right now, than it is was through the, say, '70s and '80s. There's all these one—really at least one really good art school like CalArts [California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, CA] in the early mid-'70s that had tremendous energy that extended up through the early '80s with great teachers there, great students. But a lot of the art schools were intellectual backwaters, and basically the faculty members were bitter, unsuccessful painters who had a chip on their shoulder about the real art world. And a lot of situations I encountered, the teaching was almost nonexistent, where—it's just like studios where people weren't given much guidance. And it's amazing to me that a number of artists of the current generation somehow taught themselves how to use traditional painting and sculptural techniques, because there's nobody in a number of the art schools teaching traditional figure painting and drawing.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JEFFREY DEITCH: It's amazing how a number of artists taught themselves, you know. There's now this strong revival of figuration, but—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah—

JEFFREY DEITCH: But [inaudible] the '70s, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design had great people. There's always someplace. But now I find, particularly in New York, the standards of art education are much, much higher, and the schools are not competing with each other. The Columbia [University] art department was a backwater for many years. It's not any longer. And Yale, Columbia [College, New York City], Hunter, California schools, they are all actively competing with one another, trying to raise the level of the faculty and the students.

And you go to a graduate show at Columbia or Yale, it's—a lot of it could be shown in a museum.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: High level?

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Yeah.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yeah, so it's very impressive now.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I think it's true. I saw the Pixar show ["Pixar: 20 Years of Animations," Museum of Modern Art, New York City, December 2005-February 2006], if you had a chance to see that, really kind of underscored the return of certain skills in drawing. That's an influence, too, at the moment, or appears to be.

JEFFREY DEITCH: It seems that we covered almost all of it, I think.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I think so, but I've got to ask you one more question, which is, if you were to write your own, kind of—oh, I don't want to say epitaph, but years from now, years and years from now when you've ended your career and work, how would you like people to remember you and your impact on things?

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yeah, you know, I just don't have that mentality. It's not something I really think about.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Well that's an answer.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yeah.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So you're in the moment—you're—

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yeah, yeah, very present oriented.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You know, it's an issue for people, but you'd like to be someone who was always in the moment.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Well, I mean, that's not how I answered it. It's just not something I really address. That's all.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: So it's not an issue [inaudible].

So, have you any hopes for the future? If you could influence things—well, maybe it's the same rephrasing of the question, but if you could influence things in a positive way, what would you—how would you characterize that, we'll say in the next—if you had a five-year plan, a 10-year plan for the art world?

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yeah, it's really about creating a platform for ambitious, radical works of art, with a broad definition of "art." And that's really it. You know, it's creating a platform, creating an opportunity for a community to come together.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Would you be encouraged if there were more individuals who were opening up spaces like yours and undertaking—

JEFFREY DEITCH: Oh, there are; there's a lot.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I mean, if there were more?

JEFFREY DEITCH: Yeah, there—look at the list of all the galleries that are called "projects."

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Oh, yeah.

JEFFREY DEITCH: So I think—[laughs]—that we've had some influence that way, and that's good. That's what you want to do. And often talented artists would go crazy when they see that someone, another artist, has appropriated some of their innovations in their work or lifted imagery and—no, that's really what it's about. That's the—

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Right.

JEFFREY DEITCH: —course of cultural discourse. And so it's good if people copy you. You just, you know, if you have the energy, you try to stay a few steps ahead of them.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

JEFFREY DEITCH: No, that's okay.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: You've been great. This has been really very informative.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Good.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: I really appreciate your time.

JEFFREY DEITCH: Good. Okay, thanks.

JAMES MCELHINNEY: Thank you very much.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]