



Jeffrey Deitch

Auction prices have made more of a case for some artists than a few well-argued catalogue essays

Gilda Williams: *Tell me about the exhibitions you have done with Dakis Joannou for the Deste Foundation in Athens. How do they distinguish themselves, particularly the upcoming "Artificial Nature"?*

Jeffrey Deitch: The first one, "Cultural Geometry," was about the cultural issues that are inherent in the most interesting contemporary abstract art. It was really an effort to try and understand what this so-called neo-geo movement was about, to get beyond the superficial, to show that it carried forward a lot of issues. The exhibition tried to demonstrate that this work wasn't just abstraction without any reference to life, that we could really understand a lot about the cultures that the work came from. Then there was another show that followed called "Psychological Abstraction" which again dealt with this new abstract art, this time in a way that one could view it as very emotional, expressive work not just as new abstraction. Now, the current "Artificial Nature" exhibition is also designed to reflect what is going on at the edge of new art. It tackles an issue which I think is central to art right now, and that's this new kind of artificial nature, that we find is increasingly replacing that old bastion, let's say, natural nature, that we used to take for granted. Of course, from the beginning of art there has always been an essential linkage between art and nature. The artist has tried to imitate nature, commune with nature, somehow be at one with nature. But now we have a situation where nature is not like the kind of nature that an urban person experiences today. Nature is maybe a trip to a national park where you have to stand in line and take a bus tour, or a trip to Tahiti in a Club Med village. More likely than not, because of art being completely

immersed in the electronic media nature is something that we absorb over TV. Now nature is as artificial and re-created as the works of art themselves. And there's another whole dimension to this which fascinates me, that's really very much something of this past decade, which is the notion that people can recreate themselves. Public figures like Michael Jackson who recreated himself through plastic surgery, exercise programs, and of course, what Jeff Koons is doing, his new work. This is a whole new kind of consciousness, this is a whole new definition of what we are as people and what we can make of ourselves.

Who are the artists who you have selected for this exhibition?

As in the past exhibitions there is a bit of an historical base going back to recent history. We're including a great work by Andy Warhol from 1969 called *The Rain Machine*, which is wall of holograms of daisies and in front there's an artificial rain machine. It totally expresses what we're talking about, this is Warhol's version of a landscape painting. That will be at the beginning of the show along with a very interesting work by Walter de Maria, followed by some really good works by younger artists. There's a great work by Kippenberger, a gigantic rubber shape filled with air, which I thought was very much on target. And then there are several interesting works by Ashley Bickerton, who I think of probably all the American artists has focused his work most on this kind of issue, depicting the contemporary landscape. In a way his work is the landscape painting of 1990. I think if any artist is thinking in the most parallel way to the way that I am thinking, it's Ashley Bickerton. We hope to have Jeff Koons's Michael

Jackson piece in the show, which illustrates this other aspect I talked about—recreating one's self with a new kind of artificial nature. There are some works I am very excited about by Clegg & Guttman, which are artificial composite landscapes.

How has the art market changed in the past five years, and how is the market different now with respect to the 70s?

The big changes in the market have been from the early 80s to the present, although we've certainly had a lot higher prices and more activity in the past five years. But it's really been in the 80s that we can measure the change, rather than the past five years. In the last five years specifically the biggest trend is that there is a lot more market activity in Europe. In the early 80s there was a disproportionate amount of activity in the American market place. Now Europe is perhaps even more active than America in the contemporary art market. The auctions are active, the resale market, the primary market, all aspects of it. In the early 80s there was still a sort of malaise in Europe; Europe took more time to recover from the economic recession of the mid-70s. In particular, there was a lot of fright when the Socialists won the election in France; there was a genuine flight of wealthy important business people who just took off, who left France, Germany, Italy. The people were afraid that Europe was quickly going leftward and that it was not going to be a good climate for business. Gradually things started turning around; there were victories by pro-business, conservative parties, for example in England. Also it turned out that the socialist governments in France and in Spain were very pro-business, much more than people first had expected. Then of course there

have been all the expectations of the unity of the European market. This has created an economic boom for the entrepreneurial sectors. You also have to recognize the impact of pro-art market government policies in France and in Spain in particular, in art collections, art spaces, art fairs.

How has the role of the gallery changed in light of the fact that there are more alternatives as to where to buy contemporary art, such as the auctions, private dealers, and art fairs?

Galleries, as every other kind of art-related business, benefit from increased interest and publicity.

What about a gallery which doesn't work with the established artists who get a lot of publicity?

That's a very good question, because that's a serious problem now. Artists have become more international, and there is much more of a consciousness among the art collectors about who the international artists are. The auctions have really differentiated between artists who have a secondary market and artists who don't. It's becoming tougher for the galleries who don't represent the international stars, and most importantly very tough for serious artists, really good artists, who, for whatever reason, aren't on the international top-40 list. We now have this international top-40 of artists whose names are known by every art collector and curator and writer, and then we have everybody else. There's a big difference between the system now and the system when I started out in the art business, in 1974. It was a much more democratic situation. At the John Weber Gallery, where I was gallery assistant, a big Carl Andre floor piece cost \$6000, and a work by a not-so-well-known artist in the

gallery cost \$3000. Now, a Carl Andre piece costs \$300,000 and the work by the not-so-well-known artist is *still* \$3000. It's just unbelievable what's happened. It used to be that the recognized artist was maybe twice as much, now it's 10 or 20 times as much. So you don't have the same sort of democratic collecting, where a collector would have a certain kind of vision and would buy from several well-known artists and some younger artists that weren't that well-known, or people who weren't so young but were important in the collector's mind. Fifteen years ago, people didn't expect that there was always going to be a secondary market, even for works by a great artist. If you bought a Carl Andre work you had to buy it just because you believed in it. You couldn't buy it because you thought you could resell it for a profit, or even because you thought you could get your money out of it. Very few collectors thought that way. Now there's this expectation among the art collectors that you deserve to get your money back out of everything you buy—at least. If you buy a work by an artist who is not particularly recognized but is good, the attitude is that you're just wasting your money. I'm very disturbed about that shift of consciousness which links collecting with investing, even if it's in a subtle way.

What happens when the work of an artist represented by a gallery is sold at a much higher price at auction?

All sophisticated galleries try to keep the price in the primary market below the potential price of the secondary market, to keep the interest in the work, to make it a privilege to any collector who gets offered a work on the primary market, that they're being given a gift in a way. They have the opportunity to buy something that they know it is already worth more. It's a very good way to keep up enthusiasm, to make sure everything sells quickly, and, most importantly, use that kind of leverage to place all the works of art in really good collections.

Have the auctions changed the relationship between an artist, a gallery and collector in terms of resale?

There was the traditional system, whereby collectors felt that the right thing to do was to go back to the primary market dealer who had originally sold them the work. That dealer would resell the work for them, or if they couldn't they would network with the specialists in the secondary market. That system has now been disrupted by the auction houses and very aggressive secondary market dealers. They convince the collector that they should sell to them directly and I don't think that a collector necessarily gets a higher price with this system, because the primary market dealer is probably just as aware who wants that artist's work and in a low-key way can get the correct price. I find it unfortunate that a lot of the collectors today don't respect that system.

What is the difference between the kind of collector that buys at the galleries as opposed to the auctions?

The gallery certainly is preferable for the more traditional collector, who likes the whole social element, likes to meet the artist and other people who are involved in work, likes to consider works carefully over a longer period of time, likes the opportunity to trade up with another work that might come up through the gallery system. Buying at a gallery is much more flexible. The auctions have brought in a whole new person who doesn't even know where to find the galleries.

How has the artists' role changed?

One of the things that's happened over the past decade is that the increased economic activity has given the successful artists a lot of economic power they didn't have before. A lot of these artists are so strong financially, they don't have to cower to the gallery, they are more powerful than the gallery. They can write their own ticket. A number of artists have become free agents, of a sort, negotiating advantageous deals for themselves, and maintaining their independence at the same time.

It sounds as if the gallery gets squeezed out...

Actually the good primary market galleries are now stronger than ever. Maybe they have a little less

power than they did, regarding the artists and the collectors who are more independent. But the numbers are so much bigger that even if the take maybe a little bit less percentage-wise, most of them are much better-off than they ever were.

How does the critic fit in?

The market place has become so dynamic, and the media coverage of market place is now getting so good, that the market place itself is creating the critical consensus. When you see that an artist like Artschwager, for instance, is now getting so expensive, that has more impact in terms of reevaluating his work aesthetically than a few well-argued essays that appear in an art journal saying that Artschwager has been neglected and that he is much more influential than people would have thought ten years ago. The same thing with Robert Ryman's work which now gets two million dollars at auction. That certainly makes a case for Ryman much more strongly than a beautifully-written catalogue essay in a museum show catalogue that you can't even find in a regular bookstore. You have now ten thousand people following these auction results very closely, even artists. The market-place is now communicating in a broader, more specific way than art magazines and art critics.

Another problem, that has nothing to do with the institutional structure in the art business, is simply that we don't seem to have in the English-speaking world the same kind of entrepreneurial critic of the younger generation who is out there all the time putting forward his or her aesthetic views. I'm thinking of the kind of critic that we associate with the art world of 1950s and 60s, the Clement Greenberg-type critic who built a really extraordinary social network, became friendly with many of the major artists and influenced the major collectors and dealers, and had disciples among the major museum people. Nobody has emerged in this kind of mold, to be like Clement Greenberg or Bill Rubin or Henry Geldzhaler

You don't think the situation has become too complex for one person to be so influential?

No, I don't think so. Certainly we've seen energetic entrepreneurial people in art dealing, cer-

tainly much more in Europe. You have people with tremendous influence; for example Achille Bonito Oliva, who in the early 80s had a lot of impact and really created something. He sort of puts together a sort of agenda, packages it for people; beyond that he adds a tremendous intellectual wave. In America nobody like that has emerged.

What role do the art magazines have?

I think that *Flash Art* and a few other magazines, principally European magazines, have the right kind of combination of news and critical opinion that's readable, that you can take in. America no longer has a great, influential art magazine and that's certainly a big gap in the art world here. There are a number of very good art magazines, but there's nothing with the kind of impact that *Artforum* had twenty years ago. I remember that one just couldn't wait for the first week of the month when the issue came out to see what was on the cover, what had been reviewed. It really was the Bible. For whatever reason the people behind these art magazines maybe don't want this kind of influence. Rather than shaping the agenda, they just want to reflect what's going on.

There are several big problems in the New York art world that are really quite serious, that effect that dynamism of the scene. One that's widely talked about is that although we have some pretty amazing museums here, they lack a general voice to exert leadership in new art. There are some other issues that aren't talked about so much, for instance that there is no really interesting, accessible artists bar that's in the center of things. It's important; people who are new to town get the name of the artist's bar, they just show up and meet someone who they can talk to and find out the lay of the land. I don't know what I would have done if when I came to New York 1974 there wasn't an artist's bar like the one run by Mickey Ruskin. That's how I met half the people I know. I don't know what a young artist does right now when he or she gets to New York.

Go to openings, maybe?

Yes, but the real action takes place

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means also to work very closely with the artists, and there is such a big difference between us, between the worlds we live in, and differences create so much misunderstanding. The way they think and the way I think are so far apart. Sometimes you speak the same language and you don't understand one another. I could imagine showing artists from Poland, but not because they are Polish.

How long do you think it will take for Poland and other Eastern European countries to become more synchronized with the West in terms of art and culture in general?

I think Czechoslovakia will have a different development than Poland will because there is an incredible visual culture there. I think Czechoslovakian art will change and reach Western standards pretty fast, as there has always been a close exchange with Vienna, Germany and Italy. In Poland I think the development will be different and I don't know how long it will take. But I hope that Polish artists will not start to say, "We are a great nation so let's make art from our sources," because then their art will be absolutely provincial. I also hope the development will be that they start looking at Western art in a less exotic way. American art became independent because of the influence coming from Europe. Unfortunately, this came because of WWII and Nazi Germany and the exile of a great many Jewish, German, and French intellectuals. I think without this America would never have been, at least at this point in time, that important.

Do you think Eastern Europe will have a cultural influence on the West, or will the cultural exchange be one-sided—the cultural Westernization of the East?

I do hope there is a chance for an exchange, because without it the whole idea of a future Europe will be very poor. I think the arrogance that may come about from money—that rich countries are more clever than poor countries—would be an unfavorable development.

Have you ever considered opening a gallery in Eastern Europe?
Yes, I have thought about it but in

the end did not want to be sentimental.

Today it seems that auctions have become more important. What is your opinion about them and your relationship to them?

I like auctions. I think auctions are interesting in themselves. I think they are very funny, a completely different way to be related to art. And I think they have been essential to many collections as the collectors have bought work not through galleries, but at auctions.

How do you explain collectors who buy at auction for higher prices instead of in the galleries for lower prices?

Sometimes the collectors who buy work at auction are already buying the work in the gallery, but go to the auctions to complete a certain group of work. You don't necessarily have people who are speculating just in order to raise the prices—nobody wants to pay a higher price. The idea of a collector who already has a large number of works by an artist, and who buys another at a higher price just to make the value of all the others go up, is too good to be true, and I don't believe it. But at the same time there are a few people who are buying works that nobody really cares about. For example, two years ago you could buy a major painting by Michael Heizer for 10,000 dollars, only because the interest was elsewhere. People are blind and look only at what others are buying, while other works are still ridiculously inexpensive. Some names are selling, some names are not.

What do you think about the art fairs? Do you not participate in Frankfurt because of obligations to Cologne, because of any competition between Cologne and Frankfurt?

I hate art fairs. But everybody hates art fairs and everybody still goes. I like Frankfurt, and the new hall for the art fair, but the collectors don't seem to like it because there are none there...so why should I go?

Do you think the art fairs are for selling the work or for bolstering a gallery's prestige?

I think they are for getting you in touch with people you usually don't meet. For example, we work in Cologne which is a fairly provincial city. If you were in New York

you wouldn't be obliged to go to art fairs because you have everybody coming through your gallery. I think art fairs are like temporary SoHos. To me an interesting art fair is one when, after a few days, there are still things to see. The last Cologne art fair was like this—a lot of movement, a lot of interesting work.

What do you think about the future of the gallery? At the moment, galleries seem a bit suffocated by the auctions and the fairs. What kind of role can a gallery play?

I don't agree with you. I see today more than ever the important function of the gallery, especially at a time when the market is as ruthless as it is. The gallery always works closely with the artist and the relation the artist has to the gallery is completely different from what the artist has to the auction houses. The gallery and the auction houses are on different ends of the market in the sense that the gallery has an obligation to the artist and his entire body of work, whereas the auction house is only temporarily related to an individual art work. There are a lot of artists who show but don't sell. I'm not worried about the future of the gallery.

Deitch

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after midnight, when people really start talking. That's a very important problem here, but these things have to happen naturally and somehow it's not going on. Another thing people don't really talk about is that there's no collector who does a kind of big openhouse, with a lot of generosity and style to "set the scene" and create kind of a real mixture of, let's say, movie stars and art stars and people from government, whatever. It's amazing that in New York City we don't really have some collector/art patron who just opens it all up and creates this amazing scene, like a salon. These are necessary components of an active, visual arts culture.

Do you think the artists are less important than these kinds of figures in forming new situations in art?

The artists of course always are at the base of it, but the art world is

much more removed from the artist than it was 15 of 20 years ago. It used to be that virtually everyone who bought a work by a younger artist knew that artist personally. Now, especially if you buy a work at auction, a person may never even have seen an exhibition of the artist whose work they buy.

Do you think we may see an increase of interest in prints and multiples, as people interested in buying art can't afford unique works?

Yes, I think so and I think there will be a new kind of multiple that will use new technology that make them "look like" paintings and sculpture, that will be large-scale on materials that one associates with painting, canvas for example. There will be this kind of hybrid, in between the conventional print and the big painting or sculpture. But yes, there's this vast international market in prints now. There are thousands of people who can afford ten thousand dollars or so for a print. The new kind of multiple hybrid will develop to fill this demand. The conventional painting just cannot satisfy the audience.

Do you think the Japanese market, Japanese collectors, will continue to be of importance?

We're going to be seeing some very sophisticated collectors coming from Japan, as sophisticated as any collector from Europe or America. The kind of things one tends to laugh at now, all the buying of bad Renoirs, that's going to be something of the past, the problems of an older generation. There's a special Japanese characteristic of being so thorough in one's research. If one wants to put together, let's say, an Arte Povera collection, I can see the Japanese approach of researching everything to make sure of getting absolutely the best documented pieces. Also there are numerous contemporary art museums, even corporate museums, that have been built in Japan over the past seven years and are basically empty. There's a lot of wall space! We're also going to see a much tighter involvement of Japan in the art world in general, on the part of artists, critics, magazines. I can see right around the corner an international Japanese art magazine, that has the same kind of influence as a magazine from Italy or England or America.