



Jeffrey Deitch, photographed by Isabella Vosmikova at his gallery in Hollywood, initiated a collective platform for the LA art world by emailing 65 colleagues.

# Reenvisioning the LA Arts Community

A Conversation between **Angella Nazarian**, **Jeffrey Deitch** and **Deborah McLeod**

**Angella Nazarian:** Jeffrey, in mid-May, I received an email from you announcing the formation of Gallery Association Los Angeles (GALA) and the launch of galleryplatform.la. What was the genesis of this collective?

**Jeffrey Deitch:** When I opened my Los Angeles gallery in the fall of 2018, I called Deborah and several other colleagues to ask if there was an association of LA galleries. Surprisingly, there was not. Deborah and the other gallerists I talked with were enthusiastic about the idea, but we were all very busy and did not focus on it. When we were forced to shut down in mid-March because of the virus, it felt like the right time to pursue the project. The owners of several of the more experimental galleries were worried about surviving the lockdown, and I thought that an online platform for the entire community would help to connect the various constituencies of the LA art world. I started by sending an email to 65 LA galleries, from large international galleries to small artist-run exhibition spaces. Deborah was the first person to respond. She was totally on board. Over the next week, I received a positive response from every gallery except one, but they

quickly asked to join when they realized everyone else had said yes. The online platform came together in one month, and in addition to the original galleries that I invited, more asked to join, so we are now at almost 90 in total.

**Deborah McLeod:** The response to the proposal was immediate and overwhelming. We had a captive audience—no business was being conducted in those early days of the pandemic lockdown—and the benefit of a visible coalition was clear to us all. It struck a chord. There is so much passion and creative talent on our operating committee, particularly among our young gallerists. What might have been just a platform with artwork for sale bloomed quickly into a multifaceted project with vibrant editorial content celebrating the LA art scene, past and present.

**JD:** The LA firm Folder Studio designed the platform. The most important decision was to give editorial content as much emphasis as the gallery sales rooms online. We feature video visits with artists, collectors and gallerists, and we are commissioning art historians, and occasionally gallerists, to write a monthly LA gallery history feature. In

addition, each cycle highlights a curatorial project. The first is a brilliant exploration of viral forms by LA art writer Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer. We feature only 10 galleries each week and allow them to create their own presentations. This combination of features makes our platform more engaging than other online art platforms.

**DM:** I so love the history feature! For those of us who have been at this for a few decades, it feels like a key contribution.

**AN:** We have seen a radical shift in lifestyle and perspectives during this time. People are more intentional in the way they interact with one another in private and public spaces. They are also much more strategic in the way they utilize their time and resources. Given these changes, what opportunities has the platform created?

**JD:** The platform has helped to connect and engage the LA art community. It is remarkable how the gallerists are now in continuous contact about a whole range of issues that affect artists, galleries and the art community. We have also received enthusiastic support from museums and arts organizations. For example, we had a Zoom conference with Hammer Museum patrons last week. There has been a lot of discussion among gallerists about focusing more on what is important and trying to avoid getting swept up in the whirlwind of international art fairs and events that have kept some of us on airplanes and in airports more than in our galleries or on studio and collector visits. We are brainstorming charitable and educational group initiatives. We have a shared mission—we are not in this just for business; we are committed to contributing to progressive culture and to finding ways that we can contribute to the larger LA community.

**DM:** We have all been stopped in our tracks and forced to reconsider our roles. The punishing pace of our event-driven art world screeched to a sudden halt, and gallerists have had to scramble to find new ways to present art and stay alive. We have now been confronted with a second pandemic, that of racism in America. This week we had the important opportunity to suspend the platform's commercial presentations to honor Black Lives Matter. Visitors to our site were directed to Lauren Halsey's beautiful Summaeverything Community Center which provides free organic produce to Watts and South Central. As a 30-year veteran of the LA art world, I have never witnessed so much cooperation. I have never spent this much time tending to the health of our community with fellow dealers, who are of course competitors, but who have become comrades. Our common goals of protecting the most vulnerable among us and pooling talent and resources to make a better and more interesting community have put us on a higher plane. Contributions to pay for start-up costs were voluntary, and those who could afford it were quick to contribute to the whole. It has been an honor to be involved.

**AN:** Jeffrey, you have described GALA as an ecosystem or living organism. Can you tell us a bit about this?

**JD:** We operate as a collective with consensus decision-making. The project has already been very effective in building a stronger gallery community. Our operating and editorial committees have weekly video conferences, and members of the association are working together on initiatives such as gallery reopening safety protocols and issues like sustainability in our businesses. The platform is very alive with the virtual visits with artists, collectors and gallerists, and we are always open to suggestions for editorial content. For instance, the well-known art photographer Josh White has already contributed video content and suggested people to visit.

**AN:** Deborah, you have said, "The local is the new global." What do you mean by that?

**DM:** Our breathless globe-trotting to art fairs, openings, auctions and international events was scrubbed without notice, forcing a pivot from global to local—for all art centers, not just LA. No airplanes is our new normal, and to be honest, it is a relief. It's also a matter of urgency. Our beautiful local LA arts community is imperiled, and we want all its many parts to survive and thrive. So many of our smaller local galleries, institutions, performing arts organizations—not to mention our bounty of culturally diverse restaurants—are vulnerable. We are now on the cusp of reopening, and it's a fragile time. We hope the platform's focus on celebrating and shining a light on the local galleries and more will contribute to saving our community.

**AN:** How do you envision the platform expanding in the future?

**JD:** I am especially excited about archiving all the editorial content. A year of video visits with the significant artists, collectors and gallerists in LA will provide a remarkable record of this chapter in the history of the LA art community.

**DM:** The platform is positioned to expand once we come through this crisis. We see GALA evolving into an incredible tool for gallery goers and visitors to our region. Once we are back open in numbers, we'll work on adding maps, suggested itineraries, restaurant ideas and coordination of openings and other events.

**JD:** We hope to organize talks, studio and collector visits and possibly events like a gallery weekend.

**DM:** And we intend to continue our support of community engagement projects.



Gagosian's Deborah McLeod, photographed by Joshua White, has been the director of the mega-gallery's Beverly Hills location since 2005.