Without Deitch Projects, is the Soho Gallery Scene Dead?

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The gallery earthquake of the year was undoubtedly the announcement in January that Jeffrey Deitch was closing down the two branches of his Soho gallery Deitch Projects – arguably one of the world’s greatest galleries (I would argue yes, others would violently disagree) – to become the director of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art. Deitch had its final show in May this year, and shuttered its doors. Did this mean the final nail in the coffin for the Soho gallery scene, already on its deathbed from years of gallery exodus to Chelsea and elsewhere?

Against all expectations, the answer seems to be “No,” at least for the time being. First, some background:

It was a gutsy move on LA-MoCA’s part to hire a commercial gallery owner to be in charge of a non-profit space. Deitch was tapped to bring to the museum the same eye for work by fresh, unconventional talent that he exhibited in selecting gallery artists to represent.

Los Angeles’ gain is New York’s big loss. And especially for Soho, which in the last 15 years has seen literally dozens of galleries relocate mostly to Chelsea (with its 300 galleries), to the point where Soho was down to just around 25 galleries, fewer than 10 of which were quality enterprises. Not that Soho the neighborhood is deteriorating. Quite the opposite: the galleries began leaving Soho in the 1990s because real estate prices had skyrocketed from gentrification. (Quick history lesson: the galleries arrived in Soho en masse in
the 1970s, following the arrival of artists in the 1960s to what was then — believe it or not — a dumpy, grimy, dirt-cheap-rent neighborhood with spacious lofts that were perfect for studio spaces.) The current Soho is better known for its chi-chi boutiques and high-priced furniture design stores.

Even with the galleries continuing to bleed out of Soho, there were two branches of Deitch projects reliably there to serve as a lynchpin, and that was enough to justify my leading regular gallery tours in Soho, around 5 tours a year. I figured Deitch’s disappearance would have a domino effect on the few remaining Soho galleries, and that my May 2010 Soho gallery tour may have been my last.

Well, not so fast. Quietly but steadily, it turns out that a handful MORE galleries exist in Soho now than a year or so ago, with some of the new ones showing promise. The most highly anticipated opening was, of course, “The Hole,” a brand new Soho gallery co-owned by former Deitch Projects director Kathy Grayson. Its premiere exhibit, “Not Quite Open for Business,” up through Aug. 21, is a group show curated by Taylor McKimens that is purportedly selling unfinished artworks. Other than McKimens, I didn’t recognize many of the artists in that show, so Grayson seems to be continuing the Deitch tradition of discovering and promoting artists new to the scene. Truth be told, to me the works didn’t seem any less finished than edgy works I see all the time in Chelsea and the Lower East Side — it’s not that there were blank spaces in the canvasses or anything. And the space itself was reasonably finished. I had expected major renovation in the midst of the exhibit, but it’s already in pretty good shape. Not nearly as large as the now-vacated cavernous Deitch Projects on Wooster St., but respectably sized nonetheless.

And here’s a piece of breaking news that came out today about a Soho gallery long threatening to leave: the Drawing Center has decided to stay in Soho. For years they had been negotiating new spaces, first to the cultural center at the new World Trade Center, and then when that didn’t work out, to the South Street Seaport. Either of those moves would have been disastrous. The uncensored, sometimes graphic work they show would have been completely at odds with the “patriotic” flavor of the WTC memorial, and had they moved to
the Seaport, even I wouldn't have made regular treks to see them, isolated from other galleries as they would be.

Other new galleries in Soho besides The Hole include Clifton Benevento, Fitzroy, Living With Art, Christina Ray, and Recess. It's too soon to make a judgment about which of these spaces, if any, will make a real contribution. My initial take is that Recess is showing the most promise, as evidenced by Dave Hardy and Siebren Versteeg's current work of experimental sculpture, open through Sept. 2. And the excellent and long-established Soho galleries Peter Blum, Spencer Brownstone, Team, Swiss Institute, Location One, Artists Space, and Ronald Feldman seem to be staying put.

So my Soho gallery tours will continue, for now, the next one taking place Sat. Sept. 25 at 1:00 PM. It's great not to lose as charming an art neighborhood as I've ever seen.