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Spike 85 Contributors



MARGARET LEE

began her descent into workaholism in 2009, when she opened the artist-run space 179 Canal in New York while simultaneously holding down a day job and maintaining her own artistic practice. In 2011, she founded the commercial gallery 47 Canal with a boy (Oliver Newton) she had been dating for a mere three months. Over the years, Lee came to understand she was setting a horrible example of self-exploitation and decided her freedom depended on reclaiming control over her time, the rhythm of her life, and her daily painting practice. On page 92, she and fellow ex-dealer Jeff Poe chew the breeze about life after art galleries.



MARTIN HERBERT

is a Berlin-based, British art critic and Instagram shit-talker (@martinlherbert), in which capacity he shares insider counsel like: "Artists! Keep making boring work? Consider rebranding your practice as a therapeutic oasis of radical understimulation." A long-standing editor at *ArtReview*, his books include *The Uncertainty Principle* (2014), which frankly could have used a more original title, and *Tell Them I Said No* (2016), which couldn't. His hobbies include damaging his career by blanking people at openings and avoiding art fairs. He is currently working on *You Made Me Do This*, a memoir of his teenage years, during which he was kidnapped and brainwashed. On page 64, he captures the ironic grandeur of painter Friedrich Kunath's "restorative" nostalgia.



Photo: Kerimcan Goren

ROSANNA MCLAUGHLIN

is in hiding on the south coast of England. She spends most of her time festering in her pyjamas in a freezing house while fending off her evil dog, distracting herself from the terrible meaninglessness of life by complaining about culture and writing lurid satire. Her increasingly shameless takes can be found in the pages of newspapers and magazines, and she is the author of three books: the polemical art essay *Against Morality* (2025), the dystopian novel *Sinkhole: Three Crimes* (2023), and the satirical collection of essays and short fiction *Double-Tracking: Studies in Duplicity* (2019). Sometimes, people are foolish enough to let her edit their writing, too. For this issue, she defends, mourns, and mercy-kills the great edifice of the legacy art world: the white cube. (p. 90)

One Day, You'll Have Made It to Art Basel



Jeff Poe



Margaret Lee

Not a month seems to pass these days without an eminent gallery going under. Late of 47 Canal and Blum & Poe, respectively, *Margaret Lee* and *Jeff Poe* talk shop about what art-dealing in the 2020s misses about their heydays – and whether a more "auteur" notion of representation might be the industry's fix.

By Christian Kobald

CHRISTIAN KOBALD

Both of you retired from your galleries, 47 Canal and Blum & Poe, one year and two years ago, respectively. If you think back to when you entered the art world, what actually drew you in?

JEFF POE

Wait – Margaret, how long did you do the gallery?

MARGARET LEE

I did a project space, 179 Canal, by myself from 2009 to 2010, and the gallery came in 2011. Before that, I was doing independent shows and curating. I didn't want to run a space as an artist; I wanted to be an artist.

JP Interesting. In my case, I actually had nothing else to do. The gallery I was working for had just closed, and I was thirty-three and broke. It was just a way for me to keep going forward, being supportive towards artists and ideas. There was no hope for money then – that wasn't part of the game. That's why I was wondering, Margaret. Because in 2009, the market was flatlining – meaning, it was a perfect time to jump in. As it got bigger, and I realized I could actually make money, I embraced the business part of it. We kind of became a poster child for the current madness. So, in a certain sense, I do take partial responsibility for screwing everything up.

ML I remember I was in my twenties when Art Basel arrived in Miami Beach [in 2002]. I would hear these stories from people coming back: There's champagne, there's Iggy Pop, everything's free and decadent. There seemed to be so much money.

And then the 2008 financial crisis happened, and you could just feel the taps turn off. And I guess because I'm a 90s kid, the downturn is culturally where I know how to have fun – I actually still haven't really progressed from being a no-goodnik in a parking lot in wherever city, loitering someplace. All my heroes were people who obviously had little to no ambition. Talent, but no ambition to make it "big." And between the recession and Obama being elected, this combination of optimism and everyone feeling broke was a recipe for a good time. My first event at 179 wasn't an art show; it was a dance party.

I remember liking some parts of being an art dealer and having a gallery better than others. I'm pretty sure I enjoyed doing drywall and patching holes and things like that – and throwing parties. I picked up a partner, Oliver Newton, who knew how to run a business, so I never once looked at QuickBooks – I never knew how much money we had. I also never got paid, because I preferred to shirk all my responsibilities than to be bound to that type of labor. That's how I protected myself.

I also really enjoyed the artists – the artists are always the best part. You get all the best knowledge while you're installing someone's show. It's important that it stays a back of house thing, that install doesn't double as a walkthrough for a curator or a collector. It was just us and our levels, talking about why someone wanted to show something in a particular way. I've never felt a deeper understanding of the artistic practice, more so even than being in the studio.

Jeff, how much time did you have between no one being there and then everyone being there?

JP We opened in 1994, and it was a struggle for a really long time. I did whatever I could because I was so broke, working seven days a week, basically living on debt. I was blacksmithing on the weekends for my ex-wife's hardware company. I was going to Mexico and bringing Cuban cigars over the border. We grew weed in the backyard and almost got busted. I also started writing TV commercials, and when I got really good at that, I almost left the gallery because, you know, most businesses have five-year plans, and it was our fifth year. But then things broke through in 1998 or 1999, and I was able to stop doing all that stuff and could focus on the gallery. That's also why, as soon as it was possible to make money, I ran right through that fucking door. I was tired, coming on forty, and seeing people around me getting super successful.

CK Did either of you think of your gallery as an "auteur" gallery – that is, that the gallery has a vision the art is meant to fulfill?

JP I went to film school, where the directors were more important than the actors, the writers, the set design – more important than anything. The director's stamp meant the whole deal. In the auteur formulation, the gallerist would be more important than the artist, than the support system – which is interesting to contemplate. When I was coming up in the 1980s, galleries

© Anya Gallaccio. Courtesy: the artist and BLUM Los Angeles, Tokyo, New York
Photos: above: Makenzie Goodman; below: Joshua White/JWPictures.com





"The gallery space in Santa Monica was about 7.60 x 6.00 meters. Years later, the space on La Cienega had a gallery the exact same size. Anya's *Stroke* was the first exhibition we did in September 1994 and again on the gallery's 25th anniversary. Ah, nostalgia."
Above: Anya Gallaccio, *Stroke*, 2019. Installation view, Blum & Poe Los Angeles. Below: Anya Gallaccio, *Stroke*, 1994. Installation view, Blum & Poe Santa Monica

really were organized differently. There were different spaces and dealers for Minimal art, Conceptual art, figurative painting, and so on. But that basically stopped in the early 1990s. And even then, the artists always came first.

At the same time, I do get what you mean. If we're going to pull galleries out of this place they're in, we're going to have to go back to dealers making a claim, putting down stakes, showing different ways of being. Ramiken Crucible showing works in a cave in Puerto Rico for two years [Abscess Rectum Septum Cave, 2012–14] was crazy, but it did make that claim. I don't know who wants to do that anymore, though. Everything's become professionalized, and there's just too much money to be made. It's not for me to solve anymore; we did it our own way when we started the gallery, but somebody else has to figure it out now. And whatever that is, it will be organic to them.

ML When I had my first space, I truly had no plan. But I was out all the time and in conversation with a group of people who all seemed to go to each other's shows, to go out together, who would sit and have conversations I had gotten to know studying history, but through completely different mediums. I always joked that most of us ended up here because we weren't good at anything else; somehow, a bunch of misfits who could never have normal office jobs can be successful in this industry. Which is why I've always loved it.

When we opened 47 Canal, we had our first nine shows laid out. What we told those artists was, we don't know if we're going to be a gallery, but you can have your first solo in New York with us, without any commitments,. We only had a two-year lease, which is why we never had a name, no deck, no graphic design. All we could guarantee these artists was they could have the show they wanted, without a scary person coming around and saying, I don't like this color, or can't you make that bigger, or that's not going to sell.



"The paintings made back then became the market madness we read about today, but in 1999, things were still small and simple. The room barely contained this rocket ship of a piece, which was the exhibition just before take-off – for Nara and the gallery."
Yoshitomo Nara, *Dogs from your Childhood*, 1999. Installation view, Blum & Poe Santa Monica

© Yoshitomo Nara. Courtesy: the Yoshitomo Nara Foundation and BLUM
Los Angeles, Tokyo, New York. Photo: Joshua White/JWPictures.com

JP The early years when we were building something together, Tim [Blum] and I were lucky that we could split up the difficult situations fifty-fifty; he could deal with his, and I would deal with mine. Of course, I also became close to a number of artists over the years. One of my great joys was working with young artists at the beginning of their careers, seeing museum shows happen, seeing articles printed, seeing them getting married, buying houses, having kids, going all over the



© Cecily Brown © Mark Grotjahn Studio © Estate of Yuki Katsura. Courtesy: the artists or Estates and BLUM Los Angeles, Tokyo, New York. Photo: Makenzie Goodman

"We had the winner of the Pasadena chalk festival make a mashup of three [Willlem] de Kooning women that you could stand on while considering a Cecily Brown painting. One of the reasons to have a gallery is to do shit like this."
View of "New Images of Man," curated by Alison M. Gingeras, Blum & Poe Los Angeles, 2020

world with them. A gallery can become a platform that allows all that life to happen, even if it's anything but guaranteed when you start out.

But I know for a fact that, right now, nobody has any joy in the art world. Not the artists, not the dealers, and the collectors are out. Outside forces have really fucked things up; that's always going to happen, of course. But what's distinct about it now, and I think it should be much more widely discussed, is the impact of 7 October 2023. That completely fractured the art world, in a way that had never happened before. Suddenly, you've got liberals against liberals, museums trustees against artists, *Artforum* getting kneecapped …

"In 2000, we brought our Basel Statements booth home. There were two turntables on the porch: One went forward, one went backwards, spinning Southern Rock back and forth while we sat in that rocking chair, feet up, drinking beer everyday, starting at noon. Somebody just had to activate the sculpture."
Sam Durant, *Proposal for Monument in Friendship Park, Jacksonville, Florida*, 2000. Installation view, Blum & Poe Santa Monica



© Sam Durant. Courtesy: the artist and BLUM Los Angeles, Tokyo, New York. Photo: Joshua White/JWPictures.com

I was just remembering the sausages, being in Basel and eating the sausage every day, and I had a panic attack. (ML)



© Nobuo Sekine Estate. Courtesy: the Estate and BLUM Los Angeles, Tokyo, New York Photo: Joshua White/JWPictures.com

"Curator Mika Yoshitake deserves all the credit for bringing Mono-ha to the gallery. This historical show ushered in a shift in the gallery's forward path."
Nobuo Sekine, *Phase–Mother Earth*, 1968/2012. Installation view, "Requiem for the Sun: The Art of Mono-ha," curated by Mika Yoshitake, Blum & Poe Los Angeles, 2012

We also have to face the facts about the art economy: There's a lot of great art, but there's only a finite amount of really, really good artists, and too many galleries got too big thinking they had great ones. You put all these things together in this big pot, and what's being served up now is bad stew; what we're eating is slog stew. The closures are a readjustment; that's just the way it goes.

ML How many art fairs did you do when you first opened?

JP One. The first art fair we did was the Phoenix Art Fair, which Jack Hanley organized in San Francisco with his girlfriend, Heike Kempken. She'd done a fair before that called the (UN)FAIR, which happened during the Cologne Fair in 1993, while I was working for Kim Light. If you think back to who was at Phoenix in January 1995, it was Steven Friedman, David Zwirner, neugerriemschneider …

ML And how long was it until you had to do four, six, eight fairs a year?



"Stewart Uoo's 1st solo exhibition"
View of "Stewart Uoo: Life is Juicy," 47 Canal, New York, 2013

JP By 2002, we were doing three or four. But it wasn't until 2010 that it got to dumb numbers, like six plus.

ML I remember always being told that, one day, we would get into Basel, and I'd get to go to Switzerland at the same time every summer, and that would mean that I'd made it. But then I started doing all these other fairs, and feeling like the rhythm of my life was determined by a schedule that I never signed up for.

I remember the year I realized I didn't want to be a dealer anymore. My suitcase was packed for Basel, and while I was at home with Oliver, who I married in 2015, I started to feel hysterical. What came out of me was: The food in Basel kills my microbiome! I'm a hippie who needs a gigantic kale salad, smoothies, some special oils, sunflower seeds. And I was just remembering the sausages, being there and eating the sausage every day, and I had a panic attack. And Oliver just looked at me and said, "You don't have to go." It was such a relief!

I know that deciding to watch my peonies bloom while everyone else is in Basel doesn't make me money or prestige. It also might mean that people forget who I am, and that anything I've achieved is whatever, especially because I'm not on social media. But I just took a step back from what had become so normal, because I was seeing everyone else living the same schedule, and realized that, one day, it was going to kill me.



"Martin Beck giving a lecture in 2012 at SWAT Bar, which was our after-party spot, one block away from the gallery. It was an extension of the gallery when we were at 47 Canal Street."



"Josh Kline's 1st solo exhibition"
View of "Josh Kline: Dignity and Self Respect," 47 Canal, New York, 2011

JP I had the same thing happen to me. Right before Frieze Seoul in 2022, I woke up the morning of my flight with a bad fever. The second I canceled, the fever was gone – it was completely psychosomatic. I've said this once in Spike [in Spike #80 – The State of the Arts], but I realized that I had flown three million miles, that I'd spent fourteen months of my life on a plane, and decided I just couldn't do that shit anymore. At a certain point, it becomes completely redundant: It's no longer even helping the artist, just taking care of your ego and, if you're lucky, the finances. And I decided to stop gambling.

ML I'm Korean, and when people asked why I wasn't going to the Seoul fair, I said, I'm sorry, but that's the same time as the US Open. When you'd rather be watching TV at home than at an exclusive such-and-such across the world – that's when you know.

JP Before it burned down, my house in Malibu was on thirty-seven acres, with no one around, the ocean a mile away. I kind of shacked up there and stopped

going to the gallery my last couple of years, even before the pandemic. I realized that things could change, that we could slow down, take it in a different direction, and all while we were doing well. But Tim wanted to ramp it up.

To circle back: It was a hard, hard struggle, but there was a lot of fun there. It was my job to find the spaces, deal with the business side of that, and work with the architects to design the galleries and interiors. I loved making pretty, even if what I really wanted to be was an interior desecrator – but that's never going to happen.

ML Do you remember the early days, when you'd sit around with all your friends and could still talk about things other than business, like what movies you were watching, if you'd been to the farmer's market, that kind of thing?

Courtesy: the artists and 47 Canal, New York. Photos: Joerg Lohse



"Not Trevor's first show in the gallery, but definitely one of my favorites – the videos are brilliant."
"Trevor Shimizu: Selected Video Works: 2000–2013," 47 Canal, New York, 2017

JP This is just one anecdote of many, but I remember the last night of an Armory Show in the early 2000s, Anton Kern and his wife, Nathalie, had me and Tim and Andrew Kreps over for this slapdash dinner. Nathalie cooked a great meal, and we started watching *Curb Your Enthusiasm* [1999/2000–24] or something stupid on TV. We were all drunk in this nice apartment, completely exhausted, but really happy. And then at 9pm, we all fell asleep on the living room floor. It was the cutest thing.

ML I've had some of the sweetest moments of my life with other dealers after being together in the trenches at a fair. I think a lot of us understood that, when we got into this industry, we'd be talking about culture all the time, and not just visual art. Then all of a sudden, everyone was asking about numbers.

JP I honestly think the glass [smartphones] ruined everything. The internet, the speed – people stopped touching things, and the information started flying around too quickly, totally out of context. I hate to be a fuddy duddy grandpa, but fuck, it was nice when there weren't so many galleries and there weren't so many fairs and there were only a few publications that everyone would read and everyone would talk about.

ML When magazines were more like trade publications.

JP Literally! Let's not forget that a gallery is a store. Sure, we sell ideas and art objects, but "Retail" is the box I used to check in the California tax code. And if you really want to be honest about it, if it was a real store, and only three of your sixty suppliers are selling, why aren't you just selling slam-dunk Birkin bags? It's because we don't play it that way, these are a part of people's lives on view and you have to take responsibility.

Our old saying in the gallery was "Play the game, change the rules." Some young gun somewhere is going to come in and level it out if we're going to move forward. Because right now, we're in irons, and nobody wants that. No, worse – we're sinking. —

We sell ideas and art objects, but "Retail" is the box I used to check in the California tax code. (JP)

MARGARET LEE is an artist. Born in the Bronx, she lives and works in New York City.

JEFF POE had a gallery for twenty-nine years. People do less time for murder.

CHRISTIAN KOBALD is a curator and editor of Spike.