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ARTSTAR

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On a frigid morning in late February, a line of around 300 people snaked around the block onto Wooster Street, waiting to get into Deitch Projects. Bundled in oversized parkas and ski hats, some lugging sleeping bags, they stood patiently until, every twenty minutes, the doors swung open to let a few more people into the building.

But this crowd was not hoping to get into one of Deitch's packed hipster art happenings. No, they were waiting to meet Jeffrey Deitch himself and a few of his colleagues, including David Rimanelli, a writer for *Artforum*, and Debra Singer,

the chief curator at The Kitchen (a Chelsea performance space), to find out if they have what it takes to become a star in the hyper-competitive world of contemporary art.

This was their shot to land a part in the pilot for a new reality show, *ARTSTAR*, which is being produced for Voom, a satellite cable channel network based in New York. *ARTSTAR*'s producers Abby Terkuhle, an MTV veteran, Chris Sperandio, an artist and professor at the Art Institute in Chicago, and James Fuentes, a New York-based independent curator, were visibly nervous as they watched the would-be Hirsts and Peytons from far-flung places like Montana and Georgia stream into the gallery with their work,

hoping to gain one of nine slots for contestants on the show's pilot episode. Those who make the cut will not only appear in the series, but will participate in a group show at Deitch Projects as well.

Chris Sperandio thinks that there is a potential national audience for such a show. "Look at the nationwide reaction to the Gates," referring to the recent Christo and Jean Claude extravaganza. He envisions a show that has more in common with *NOVA*-style high-browism than *The Apprentice's* lowest-common-denominator appeal. He even imagines a time when old episodes of *ARTSTAR* will be used as a teaching device in fine art schools, allowing art students to observe the making of an artist.

"Our goal is to maintain credibility and keep an open attitude," says Abby Terkuhle, who midwived animation hits like *Beavis and Butt-Head* and *Celebrity Deathmatch* for MTV. But credibility could prove difficult, since everyone agrees that the New York art world is more insular than the Freemason society. Would seasoned gallery-goers and collectors relish watching a Texas housewife explain her landscape paintings to Jeffery Deitch?

But curator James Fuentes, the young Turk among the panelists, is optimistic. "We've had a positive reaction from both the artists and the judges," notes Fuentes, who dreamed up this idea with Sperandio a few years back. "We were inspired by the open calls that Art and Technology did back in the '60s. They took out ads in the *New York Times* inviting artists to send in ideas." While those ads

drew the likes of Andy Warhol, the Deitch event lured an unknown young painter from Pennsylvania, whom Fuentes describes as "very nervous," since she would only get a couple of minutes with the judges. But things went so well that her mom, who accompanied her to the audition, immediately got out photos of her own work to show the panel.

Mother-and-daughter art stars may make for entertaining television, but does it make for good art? "I think it's a fun idea," says gallerist Zach Feuer. "But artists make themselves. It's not like what happens with pop stars." Though Deitch's machinations helped transform the electro-clash act Fischerspooner into an art world phenomenon, you can't turn someone into a good artist in a few television episodes. And unlike celebrity culture, art world success doesn't hinge on youth. Longevity is key. An art career has to grow over time if an artist is to win real fame. Will television viewers tune in year after year to follow the development of someone's slow-but-steady career?

Today's overheated art market, with its stratospheric prices and twenty-somethings enjoying sold-out shows, could make for good drama. Is it the '80s all over again? "Just think if we could have done this show with Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat," says co-producer Sperandio.

But the producers say they are looking for high art, not just high ratings. The pilot will feature young hipster artists, but there is also a retired social worker. As Fuentes explains, "We want to keep it real — and democratic." Stay tuned.