

Stuck in a Deitch: L.A. MOCA's Meltdown as an Economic Metaphor

by Ben Davis

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Eli and Edythe Broad and Jeffrey Deitch
(guestofaguest.com)

Say what you will about Jeffrey Deitch's L.A. MOCA: The guy knows how to put on a show. For the last few weeks, the MOCA Meltdown has been the best story in the land.

[Ed Ruscha](#) resigned on Monday from L.A. MOCA's board. That makes him the last of the artists on the board to quit in disgust over its direction, following fellow L.A. icons [John Baldessari](#), [Barbara Kruger](#), and Catharine Opie. All this was seemingly touched off by [the sudden dismissal](#) — or “forced resignation,” or [whatever you want to call it](#) — at the end of June of [well-liked](#) curator Paul Schimmel, alongside a spate of other terminations, as well as [months of rumors](#) of continued financial strain at the storied institution and a variety of other high-level defections.

Let's step back for a moment, though, and take a trip through time back to the hazy, barely remembered days of 2008, when the long-simmering budget woes of L.A. MOCA came shrieking into the open. The museum had been overspending for years,

borrowing out of its endowment to cover operating expenses. Then the global financial crisis set in, and all hell broke loose. Eventually, director Jeremy Strick was out, and L.A.'s bigfoot art maven Eli Broad stepped in to save the museum.

Even more than Brandeis's attempt to sell off its Rose Art Museum, the L.A. MOCA Crisis of 2008 was the emblematic art story to fit that particular moment of generalized economic turbulence. It had the elements needed to resonate: backroom financial slight-of-hand, the suggestion that a beloved American institution had been living beyond its means, last-minute cobbled-together rescues.

Time moves on. In the general economy, as many pundits have pointed out, the true problems that caused the 2008 economic collapse were never really dealt with, just papered over. Nothing was done, for instance, about the overbearing power of bankers and their gambling ways. Now you have [JPMorgan's ever-expanding losses on unsupervised speculation](#), and [the Barclays LIBOR-fixing scandal](#). Meet the new bankers, same as the old bankers.

At the same time, instead of actually learning the meaningful lessons of the crisis, the powers-that-be have used it to pursue ideological projects that really have nothing to do with it at all. I'm thinking of the rage for cutting government spending, which has now sent several parts of the world — Greece, Spain — into Depression-style tailspins, and actually made the project of putting the world economy right more difficult in the long run.

What does this have to do with MOCA? [As Christopher Knight](#) and many others have commented, the Broad rescue now appears to be an example of pursuing a solution that has nothing to do with the real problem, and is more of a pet ideological agenda of one man, Eli Broad. In 2008, the institution had a finances problem, not a curatorial problem. (In fact, one of the underreported aspects of the crisis is how savior Broad's own outsized art ambitions had contributed to L.A. MOCA's fundraising problems. [The L.A. Times speculated at the time](#) that MOCA's impulse to overspend may have been nurtured by the fact that it had a new rival for fundraising dollars in the flashy Broad-funded Broad Contemporary Art Museum at LACMA, and didn't want to be seen as "retrenching.")

Whatever the case, after engineering a rescue, Broad insisted on hiring New York dealer Jeffrey Deitch to replace Strick. Well, it turns out — [by his own admission](#) —

Deitch is a better dealer than a fundraiser. He's definitely put his stamp on the place in terms of programming, though, with his popular (though [not unproblematic](#)) street art blockbuster, and showy events like the gala where an increasingly out-of-touch [Marina Abramovic](#) served L.A.'s elite a meal of [low-paid](#) nude female dancers, with skeleton garnish. A promotional video MOCA put out to celebrate this controversial event [had Abramovic cooing](#) about the largesse of "industry," "business," and "banks."

This kind of flashy stuff apparently pleases the Jeff Koons-loving Broad — he suggests as much in [his recent Op-Ed defending his support of Deitch](#) — though it also likely contributed to the friction that led Schimmel to part ways with his longtime employer. Broad writes that the 2008 crisis made it clear to him that the institution needed a "populist" approach that would bring in the crowds, and then presumably draw donations though the association with success (since universally, donations are more important than admissions in sustaining museums). But here's the thing: This is just an amped up version of *the exact same logic* that Strick was criticized for having pursued, the idea that L.A. MOCA could "[grow out of its problems](#)" through flashy shows, something one expert compared to hoping you'd win the lottery. Meet Eli Broad's bold new plan for L.A. MOCA, same as the old plan for L.A. MOCA.

Tackling the wrong problem in the wrong way, meanwhile, has now demonstrably hurt L.A. MOCA's chances of setting itself right in the long run. Charles Young, who served as interim chief when the institution was trying to return to health, emphasized in May to the L.A. Times that what was needed was for fundraising to approach a point where L.A. MOCA's comeback became a "positive story" that could inspire further donations. This would then help vault it on towards an endowment level of \$100 million that could be long-term sustainable. This [has not happened](#), and is actually probably farther away than ever after all the recent bad press.

When Broad proposed his rescue offer in 2008, some board members were [reported](#) to be wary because, as the New York Times put it, the move would "put him in the position to control the museum or its collections if the museum is not able to complete its fundraising efforts." Now he's pretty much totally confirmed these fears — and indeed four trustees publicly rebelled, issuing [an open](#)

[letter](#) attacking Broad and Jeffrey Deitch’s “celebrity-focused program.” Not exactly the “positive story” the museum needs.

Like Deitch, Jeremy Strick was apparently not up to the challenge of fundraising. But you know who stood up for him when he was shown the door? The same artists who now are distancing themselves from the institution as fast as they can, among them [John Baldessari](#) and Kruger, who said then, “Jeremy understands the absolute centrality of art and artists in a contemporary art museum, and I think that’s rare.” In [her righteous letter of resignation](#) with Opie, on the other hand, Kruger very clearly links the new atmosphere under Deitch-Broad with the speculative predations that have ravaged our economy, connecting the museum’s present climate with “the morphing of the so-called ‘art world’ into the only speculative bubble still left floating (for the next 20 minutes).”

Last time it hit rough waters, fans actually mobilized and [wore “SAVE MOCA” armbands](#). That probably won’t happen again. Distancing the museum from the people who are most likely to rally for it — art lovers — is a solution that has made the underlying problem more intractable. And in that sense the MOCA Meltdown once again looks like a pretty apt emblem for our crisis-plagued times.

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