



JAY BY JAY
Jopling took over a former bank building on New York's Upper East Side. "He thinks like an artist, because he grew up with these artists—Tracey [Emin], Damien [Hirst]," says Anselm Kiefer.

Coming To America

Art dealer Jay Jopling is bringing his brand of British brashness to New York City with a new Upper East Side outpost of his White Cube gallery.

BY JAY CHESHES PHOTOGRAPHY BY RAHIM FORTUNE

ONE EVENING in the summer of 1985, 22-year-old Jay Jopling, then an art history student at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, found his way to Jean-Michel Basquiat's live-in studio in downtown Manhattan—determined to convince New York's most buzzed-about young artist to donate a piece for a charity auction in London.

Inspired by Bob Geldof's plans for Live Aid concerts, Jopling and a few classmates had decided to harness the power and prestige of the contemporary art world to raise funds to fight famine in East Africa. After sending a barrage of letters soliciting donations across the Atlantic, Jopling flew into New York to hit up artists and galleries directly.

"I had a few beers one July night, pluck up courage, bang on the door," he recalls. "Lights were on and someone came to the door. 'Hello?' I go, 'Hello, it's Jay Jopling; I wrote you a letter a few weeks ago.' 'A letter? Put it through the letter box.' 'No, no, I wrote you.' 'A letter? Put it through the letter box!' 'No, open the door, I'm here now, I wrote you the letter and I want to come and see you.' The door opens and there is Jean-Michel Basquiat on the doorstep in a brown terry bathrobe, open, naked. 'Come in. You want a Popsicle?'"

Basquiat was in the midst of painting, and Jopling wound up spending hours in the studio, he says. He later received a work from Basquiat, painted on a metal panel, that went on to sell for \$64,900 at his charity auction.

Jopling is now one of the world's most influential art dealers, after founding White Cube

gallery in London in 1993. The gallery helped ignite the careers of a generation of British art stars—including Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin (their work reaching for \$18.6 million and \$4.2 million, respectively, at auction). He credits that summer in New York as a catalyst for his career. "I just thought, that's the world I want to be in," he says.

Thirty-seven years later, Jopling is back in New York, preparing to launch a new gallery, White Cube's first big American location.

"I've had my eye on the building for almost 10 years," he says, touring the future home of White Cube New York, taking over an imposing bank building—originally the Fulton Trust Company—built in 1930 on Madison Avenue near the corner of 78th Street. "I was talking to Larry [Gagosian] the other day; he goes, 'You got the best building in Manhattan, you bastard,'" says Jopling of his rival, whose uptown gallery is one block away. (Gagosian doesn't remember being quite so complimentary.)

Now he's stripped out the interior, behind the building's landmarked neo-Federal exterior, ripping out the safe-deposit boxes, opening up 8,000 square feet of gallery space on three floors. Part of the old bank vault is buried under the concrete in the basement.

Attending White Cube's parties during American art fairs, from its annual blowouts at the Soho Beach House at Art Basel in Miami, to its soirees at the Chateau Marmont during Frieze in Los Angeles, you might assume it was already a major player in the U.S. But apart from an office in New York, opened in 2018, and temporary outposts in Aspen and West Palm Beach, launched earlier in the pandemic, it's never

had a location in the American market. But as American galleries opened London locations, Jopling began to ramp up his plans for a permanent spot in New York.

The new Upper East Side gallery debuts with a group show next month, 30 years after Jopling opened his first space in central London, a 13-by-13-foot white box tucked in with the Old Master dealers on Duke Street.

He scored that tiny space rent-free for the first five years, in a deal with his landlord, Christie's auction house. Many of the young British artists (among them Hirst, Emin, Sarah Lucas, and brothers Dinos and Jake Chapman) who first captured the public's imagination in the early '90s, when they were collectively dubbed the YBAs, got their first big exposure at the original White Cube.

"That generation of artists really had something to kick against; they were born out of the Thatcher era, when there was absolutely no interest in culture, no public money for the arts," says Jopling. "And it was really exhilarating to be a part of that."

Jopling, the son of a Tory politician and a product of British boarding schools, helped bridge establishment Britain with the cultural revolution that gripped London back then, befriending Emin, Hirst and their peers when they were all in their 20s and just starting out. "He thinks like an artist, because he grew up with these artists—Tracey, Damien," says German artist Anselm Kiefer, who has worked with White Cube since 2005.

The social whirl around the gallery recalled the swinging '60s in London, when the music, fashion and art worlds collided. "You would go

to a White Cube party and there would be lots of English actors, musicians; it was just very, very exciting, a sense that [Jay] was the convening table, making connections between people, places and art," says British sculptor Antony Gormley, who has shown with the gallery since 1994. Bryan Ferry, the Pet Shop Boys, Pulp and Rufus Wainwright have all played White Cube events.

Over the years Jopling, a dashing figure in Savile Row tailoring and thick-framed black glasses, has made as many headlines in Britain for his personal relationships as his high-profile art shows. Tabloids have chronicled the end of his 11-year marriage to artist-turned-movie director Sam Taylor-Wood (now Taylor-Johnson), in 2008; his friendship with Elton John, godfather to his 18-year-old daughter, Jessie (her older sister, Angelica, 26, launched her own London art space this year); his social life with his American-born second wife, Hikari Yokoyama, a co-founder of the online auction house Paddle8, with whom he has a 3-year-old daughter, Djuna Mei.

Despite how frequently he's in the press, he rarely grants interviews.

Over the past decade or so he's moved beyond the parochialism of the British art scene to become a larger player, running a sprawling enterprise with some 200 employees and four galleries and counting. White Cube, with outposts in Paris and Hong Kong and another opening in Seoul this month, now represents 60-plus artists and estates, from Americans

Julie Mehretu and Theaster Gates to Ghanaian Ibrahim Mahama and Colombian Doris Salcedo. His 60,000-square-foot flagship, which opened in 2012 in London's Bermondsey neighborhood south of the Thames, is among London's largest commercial gallery spaces. (Without a gallery in New York, White Cube has long shared some artists with American rivals. Sometimes, this includes Gagosian, which today also represents Kiefer, Gates and Hirst.)

Gates, whose politically charged work combines sculpture, painting, installation and performance, had his first major international gallery presentation at the Bermondsey gallery, *My Labor Is My Protest*, shortly after the space opened. The show explored the ongoing civil rights struggles in the U.S. His oversize Tar Paintings referenced Gates's father, who worked as a roofer in Chicago as his own form of protest during the 1968 riots and who flew in for the opening. He installed a vintage fire truck hung from the ceiling. Gates performed with his musical ensemble, the Black Monks of Mississippi.

"My first show out of the gate was this kind of larger-than-life exhibition," says Gates, who will have a solo show at the New York White Cube in January. "A lot of my confidence was because I had a person like Jay who was believing in my work pretty early on. He's been really consistent with, like, 'Make the things that are really important to you, and push yourself to make great work.'"

White Cube's growth has been slow and

steady, signing just a handful of new artists per year, like Tiona Nekkia McClodden, a conceptual artist who lives in Philadelphia, who makes her White Cube debut in the opening group show in New York next month.

"When Jay calls me about a new artist he's interested in, I take notice, and I don't say that for very many galleries," says art collector and patron Glenn Fuhrman, founder of the FLAG Art Foundation, who has been buying work from Jopling since the 1990s.

"He's had more than one of those—artists where he's made a commitment, he's stuck with that person...It's hard to know exactly what the financial benefits have been," says Richard Armstrong, former director of the Guggenheim Foundation and its museums in New York, who has followed Jopling's career since White Cube's debut. "Those kinds of relationships to me signal his character."

Jopling's new U.S. senior director, Courtney Willis Blair, a former partner at New York gallery Mitchell-Innes & Nash, is curating the opening show. Its title, *Chopped & Screwed*, is borrowed from the late hip-hop legend DJ Screw, and it will feature contributions from Mehretu, Michael Armitage, Georg Baselitz and David Hammons, among other artists in and out of the gallery's roster. Much of the work is new.

Emin, who met Jopling in a London pub in the early '90s, will have the first solo show at the New York space in November. It will be 30 years to the month after she made her debut at the original White Cube with the ironically titled *My Major Retrospective 1963-1993* (both Emin and Jopling turned 60 last summer). Of their meeting, she jokes. "I must have been the only woman in the art world at the time not to fancy Jay."

Emin, whose split with her last New York gallery, Lehmann Maupin, was announced in 2017, says she has long felt underappreciated by American audiences. "People hated my work in America before, because they didn't get it, they didn't understand it," she says. "And now after what America's been through [with] #MeToo, all of this kind of stuff, people get me a lot more and understand where I'm coming from.... So, this White Cube show will be the biggest spotlight I've ever had in America."

THOUGH JOPLING WAS RAISED on a Yorkshire farm, he frequently visited London, where he was often left to his own devices at museums near the family pied-à-terre. It was located within earshot of the vote bell in the House of Commons, where his father, Michael Jopling, spent 32 years representing the Conservative Party. "I blame my mother really," he says. "She was always quite happy dropping me off, age 11, 12, at the old Tate."

He graduated from Eton in 1981, and the year after, his father helped him line up a summer internship with a diamond dealer in New York, working out of offices at 666 Fifth Avenue, where Isamu Noguchi had installed an undulating ceiling and sculptural waterfall. Though he was just an intern, selling came easy to the charming young Brit.

In 2020, Jopling, who began representing the Noguchi estate a few years ago, helped salvage those installations from the building after it was leased to a new company, transporting them to London for a show last year. "Every day that summer I walked past the Noguchi waterfall, under the Noguchi ceiling, that last year hung in my gallery," he says.

A few years later, while at University of Edinburgh, Jopling and friends organized their charity art auction—*New Art: New World*, they called it. Jopling convinced a Rolls-Royce dealership in Mayfair to clear out its cars for a week to make way for donated work from some 60 artists, including Basquiat, Keith Haring, Julian Schnabel and Claes Oldenburg. The auction, simulcast live in New York, raised nearly three-quarters of a million dollars for charity.

Jopling used the auction catalog as a "calling card" to break into the art world. Soon, he began hearing about a provocative young artist, fresh out of art school at Goldsmiths, who'd organized his own shows with fellow classmates in warehouse spaces across London. It was Damien Hirst. At a dinner after an art opening one night, Jopling "made it my point of sitting by Damien," he says.

The conversation flowed. They'd both grown up in Yorkshire, on opposite sides of the tracks, and lived near each other in the Brixton section of south London (Jopling in a house with friends, Hirst in a public housing estate). They took the tube home together that night and then stayed up late drinking at a neighborhood bar.

Soon they were up at dawn buying fish at the Billingsgate fish market, which Hirst later displayed in formaldehyde, counterparts to his famed tiger shark piece, and brought up to Manchester for a solo show. They found a derelict hospital near Hirst's studio in Brixton. "[It] was locked up, and we managed to break in," says Jopling. They made off with the contents of discarded medicine cabinets, "with all the old test tubes, old bottles of medication," which also appeared in Hirst's work.

Jopling soon became part of Hirst's orbit, and gave most of the future YBAs a showcase after he opened his gallery in May 1993. For the first seven years of the original White Cube, he showed a single artist at a time there, 75 altogether, without ever repeating.

Christian Marclay, whose new show opens at the Mason's Yard location in London this

CUBIST STYLE

From top: Damien Hirst's 1992 installation at White Cube, *Pharmacy*; the original White Cube Duke Street sign; Theaster Gates's *Raising Goliath*, 2012; Tracey Emin stitching appliqué letters to the artwork *Hotel International*, 1993; Jopling and Antony Gormley at *Lost Subject* at White Cube Duke Street, 1994. Opposite: Jopling in his new Manhattan space.



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