

A Very Wily Believer

January 13, 2011

Michael Kimmelman

Leo and His Circle: The Life of Leo Castelli

by Annie Cohen-Solal, translated from the French by Mark Polizzotti with the author Knopf, 540 pp., \$35.00

You could almost picture Leo Castelli smiling from beyond the grave a few weeks ago, that small, canny smile of his. First an Andy Warhol, *Men in Her Life*, from 1962, sold for \$63.3 million at a Phillips auction in New York. Then at Christie's a work by Roy Lichtenstein, from 1964, *Ohhh...Alright...*, of an anxious young redhead clutching a telephone, sold for \$42.6 million.

Two pictures, exceeding \$100 million, by two artists closely associated with Castelli—but money was never the ultimate measure of success to him. He came from the Old World. Cost still implied something different from value, and even as a businessman Castelli worried, despite his own influence in driving prices sky high, about market excesses already beginning to erode the barrier between fine art and a wilder, unregulated universe of pop culture. He worried, a little anyway, albeit not too much.

From his perch in a townhouse gallery on the Upper East Side, then in a converted industrial loft at 420 West Broadway, as the virtual *maitre d'* of newly fashionable SoHo, Castelli promoted various isms that followed from Abstract Expressionism and helped turn what had been the still relatively small village of the contemporary art world into a global empire. He ushered in an era of the contemporary dealer as headliner. After the war it had been art critics like Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg who manned the barricades in America against what remained a skeptical and often hostile establishment and who slowly won grudging acceptance for American artists. Castelli, opening his first gallery in New York in 1957, capitalized on this shifting environment, cultivating associations with places like the Museum of Modern Art and the Jewish Museum, where Alan Solomon, as director during the early 1960s, organized groundbreaking contemporary exhibitions indebted to Castelli's stable. In the process of burnishing the reputations of Castelli's artists, these institutional alliances also flattered his clients and, not incidentally, inflated prices.

His imprimatur, more than any critic's, came to be what mattered by the 1970s, and in the process, his gallery became a kind of clubhouse for the leading artists and critics, as integral in its way to the New York scene as the Whitney or the Guggenheim or MoMA. Today one finds heirs to Castelli in gallerists like the excellent Marian Goodman or the globe-striding Larry Gagosian, but there is no one whose gallery plays the same role or who has shaped the conversation as he did, not because he was inimitable or a polemicist or intellectually original, but because the world he occupied has largely evaporated. Beneath the tailored suits, ingratiating manner, and womanizing reputation, he always seemed something of a mystery, as if withholding some deeper, darker past. Annie Cohen-Solal takes pains to uncover it, locating his business acumen in generations of Jewish experience. "Castelli's exceptional skill at negotiating between money and art is a long-cultivated, almost genetically based, gift forged by centuries of political and social

persecution,” she writes in her biography, which in the end never does quite unravel the mystery. Perhaps there was none.

He was born Leo Krausz, in Trieste in 1907, the middle child of a rising and powerful Hungarian banker who was married to an Italian heiress, Bianca Castelli. They were both Jewish. The family patronymic had to be Italianized in 1935, from Krausz to Castelli, on orders from Mussolini’s government. Leo’s younger brother, George Crane, has recalled how their father, Ernesto Krausz, hung two photographs in the family dining hall, one showing Jacob and Esther Weisz, Ernesto’s maternal great-grandparents, still shtetl Jews, in traditional attire with Jacob wearing sidelocks; the other showing David and Rachel Weisz, the grandparents, prosperous and now assimilated landowners in modern suit and dress.

Trieste had long welcomed Jews. On the Castelli side of Leo’s family, Giacobbe Castelli, Leo’s great-great-grandfather, had settled in the city in 1799 from Monte San Savino, in Tuscany, to escape the attacks by locals against Jews that followed Napoleon’s arrival. Aarone Castelli, Leo’s great-grandfather, Giacobbe’s son, would make a fortune in Trieste and settle into the Villa Prandi, where Leo grew up. Leo’s childhood, as Cohen-Solal describes it, was an unruffled, precious sort of existence, with family holidays looking at Titians in Venice and staying at the Hotel des Bains on the Lido. The Castellis were pro-Garibaldi but Ernesto, conservative and ambitious, was a monarchist who, for business reasons, moved the family to Vienna in 1914, where among Leo’s classmates was the young Raimund von Hofmannsthal, son of the poet. Bookish, distracted, Leo read, became adept at sports to compensate for his small build, and paid scant attention in school.

Around him, the war drove people into the streets of the Austrian capital hunting for bread and coal. But the Krausz children avoided the ration cards and corn bread, and suffered only the minor discomfort of returning to a cold house after long winter walks with their governess. By 1918, back in Trieste, Ernesto’s expanding career enhanced the family’s wealth while still never quite opening doors to the houses of the city’s aristocrats and socialites. No doubt Leo took note. He would choose to ignore his Jewish roots, to avoid talking about them, an impossibility in Italy and the German-speaking countries by the 1930s, of course, but not uncommon in New York, where he arrived in 1941, became a citizen, joined the army, and found a permanent home. His son Jean-Christophe has recounted how Jewishness remained “one of the most personal things of all for my father, therefore, one of the most difficult to access. He built his myth, he sold his myth, and rare are those who didn’t buy his myth.” A classmate of Leo’s in Trieste, Giorgio Voghera, is quoted by Cohen-Solal saying, more pointedly, that even as a teenager Leo had showed “all the gifts of a very accomplished smooth talker and no scruples whatsoever in using them to his advantage.” Either way, he was suited to life as an art dealer.

For his part Castelli imagined himself more a “Renaissance man...extremely cultured; I wanted to know everything.” His father first wanted him to get a job, and in 1932 Leo resignedly accepted one with an insurance company in Bucharest, then a hotbed of avant-gardism and also home to a young daughter of a Jewish business tycoon, further up the social ladder than the Krauszes, Ileana Shapira. Leo and Ileana married.

Transferred to Paris in 1935, the young couple strove to find acceptance in the city's creative circles, as apparently oblivious to the coming calamity as Leo had been as a child during the war in Vienna. Ileana recalled feeling "marginalized, out of place, a foreigner without a home of my own," but Leo was in touch with a network of acquaintances. After the birth of their daughter in 1937, his eye increasingly wandered. Desperate to shore up the couple's faltering marriage, Ileana's father lent money to Leo to start a Paris gallery, which opened in 1939 with a display of furniture and commissioned works by Salvador Dalí, Max Ernst, and others. It was a success but short-lived. With war approaching, the Castellis retreated to Cannes along with Ileana's parents. Cohen-Solal writes about Leo at this juncture that he was "apolitical, insulated, naïve, callow, and pampered." By 1941, with the Côte d'Azur no longer a guaranteed haven, Leo and Ileana crossed the Atlantic.

Back in Trieste, Ernesto Krausz had joined the fascists, but soon recognized the inherent precariousness of his position. During the next few years, his fortunes crumbled, and he struggled desperately to preserve almost the only thing he had left, his dignity. He and Bianca finally ended up in Budapest, living in hiding on a spoonful of tomato sauce per day, and as the war ended she drowned, fleeing across the Danube; he succumbed to a shrapnel wound shortly afterward. "Too Hungarian for the Austrians, too Austrian for the Italians, too Triestine for the Romans, too much a parvenu for Trieste's Two Hundred Families, too arrogant for his in-laws," Cohen-Solal writes about Ernesto, who was ultimately too Jewish as well. In Europe, identity was inescapable. It was malleable in America. For Castelli, life in New York became a way to erase this calamity from his past in a country turned toward the future.

It is easy to forget that Castelli was already fifty years old when he first opened his New York gallery. He converted his L-shaped living room and his daughter's bedroom at 4 East 77th Street, where he had settled with Ileana and her parents, painted the walls white, installed track lighting, affixed a copper plaque onto the façade, and hung, by all accounts with great style, various Pollocks next to Delaunays to devise a dialogue between America and Europe. The dialogue paralleled Castelli's life.

Author of a biography of Sartre, Cohen paints a humane and engaging portrait of him, rich in detail, only occasionally off-key about art world minutiae. She opens with a personal recollection. After being posted to America by the French government as a cultural adviser in 1989, she writes, she met Castelli, then eighty-two and wearing a hearing aid. He charmed her, as he charmed so many women over the years, and invited her into his circle. The charms worked wonders. The book's later chapters about his business arrangements, his alliances with colleagues, and his sometimes troubled dealings with competitors like Arne Glimcher and Joe Heller, although they should be the climax of the biography, covering the years when Castelli presided over the art scene, in many ways lack the eloquence of her earlier chapters. They seem too polite and earnest in concocting an elaborate transatlantic network of influence, which is not really how the art world works. One could imagine a less scrupulous and more theatrical writer dramatizing Castelli's reign differently.

But then how fascinating, really, are the daily machinations of an art dealer, even one who sold now-famous pictures for small fortunes? In our period of intractable

unemployment and *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, contemporary art enjoys a level of popularity based in no small measure on gaudy news about collectors supposedly paying (who can really know for sure?) ever more incredible amounts of money for works like the Warhol and the Lichtenstein. That a contemporary art dealer, distinct from his artists, should be lionized says something about this moment. But what, exactly, it does say is not a question of particular interest to Cohen-Solal.

Her question instead is how such a cipher, such an insecure, frivolous *luftmensch*, as she calls the young Castelli—well-read and fluent in various languages but fundamentally a dilettante, a middling banker and insurance salesman who relied for his comfortable, Continental life on the money his very rich father and even richer father-in-law provided—how did he suddenly come to change the art world? It's a good question. Short, trim, dapper with slicked-back hair, a man of economical movements and measured remarks, Castelli exploited his silken persona as a counterpoint to the raucousness and peculiarity of his American artists whose personal contrasts with his image made him that much more effective as their representative. "Leo had the survival instincts of an Italian diplomat" was how Joe Helman, the dealer, put it.

"The eternal Continental diplomat" was Tom Wolfe's less diplomatic phrase. Wolfe went on to mock Castelli's Louis-salon accent that is no longer Italian; rather, Continental. Every word he utters slips through a small velvet Mediterranean smile. His voice is soft, suave, and slightly humid, like a cross between Peter Lorre and the first secretary of a French embassy. Well, yes, it was. But Wolfe was playing to a public skeptical during the 1960s and 1970s about the art world, and about Castelli as its Svengali. The truth is that Castelli believed in the art he sold, believed in its urgency and relevance, and never presumed to tell his artists what to do, which separated him from many lesser dealers. He stuck by his stable even when (as with difficult, egomaniac, money-mad artists like Donald Judd) loyalty had costs. He enjoyed the most extraordinary winning streak by a dealer in modern history, enlisting Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Roy Lichtenstein, Frank Stella, Ellsworth Kelly, Richard Serra, Donald Judd, Dan Flavin, Robert Morris, Ed Ruscha, Bruce Nauman—the list went on.

And now that the art world has become so big and stars seem to come and go as swiftly as reality television characters in Hollywood, that winning streak seems almost miraculous. But his success increasingly became a self-fulfilling affair, until it wasn't. Castelli in his prime conferred credibility and in turn attracted gifted young talent. Today there are so many galleries, and the art world is driven more than ever by fashion and youth culture, so that no dealer, not even Gagosian, whose fortune derives especially from secondary market sales—the resale of blue-chip art—now enjoys the stature Castelli did during his heyday as a kingmaker of the new.

So how did he do it? It has long been said, and with reason, that he didn't in fact have a great eye. "Leo had no idea, no vision of his own," Robert Storr, the former Moma curator and present Yale Art School dean, claims. "He was a gentleman, a go-between with an exceptional gift for public relations.... Leo had both European manners and American *chutzpah*." All true, but what difference does it make that he didn't have the talents of, say, Bernard Berenson or Kenneth Clark? Art dealers, whether they're connoisseurs or not, above all need good ears, and Castelli knew how to listen. He

surrounded himself with advisers and talent scouts, first among them Ileana, the one with the great eye who turned out to be a far cannier judge than Castelli of what was really happening in the art world. Without her, Castelli would never have even gotten started.

As their marriage collapsed, their alliance and friendship bloomed. She spread the word about Castelli's American artists to a still skeptical European public with her second husband, Michael Sonnabend, through the gallery they ran in Paris; then the two of them brought a new wave of Europeans back to America when they moved into the space above Castelli's in SoHo in the early 1970s. Castelli was also able to draw on the views of Clement Greenberg, Ivan Karp, Dick Bellamy, Irving Blum, Robert Rosenblum, and Leo Steinberg—a stellar list.

Like so many students of art during the postwar years, Castelli had already found at Alfred Barr's Moma a home and a new religion, with its own liturgy. Barr's gospel, casting Modernism as a logical sequence of movements, from Post-Impressionism and Pointillism through Fauvism and Cubism to Surrealism and so on, made tendentious sense out of what had seemed, no doubt especially to émigrés more unfortunate than Castelli, an era of heartbreaking and inconsolable chaos. Moma's story led art as if inexorably from Europe to America, from Paris to New York, the path that Castelli, like those others, traveled. Barr provided for Castelli, through modern art, a fresh narrative and a useful business model, too, because from Barr, Castelli grasped the value of slotting artists into more or less identifiable movements. He used this academic device as a marketing tool, in the process carving out, by association, a historical niche for himself and clients wise and fortunate enough to acquire the works he sold.

Because not anyone could just walk into his gallery and purchase art. One had to be, in effect, approved by Castelli first. This continues to be a standard practice in the upper echelons of the art world, and it dovetails with the modernist self-image. Modernism, with its implied critique of society, depends both philosophically and financially on sustaining the notion of an inside and an outside. Art simultaneously must provoke the confusion or disapproval of outsiders while flattering insiders who (at least claim to) "get" it. An insider thereby finds fellowship in a theoretically innumerable self-selected community of like-minded cognoscenti, which in principle can include anyone. Insiders become custodians for posterity, owning, caring for, appreciating art that others reject but will eventually admire. This is not like traditional Old World society, open only to those already born into it; nor could it maintain itself, fiscally or otherwise, by admitting solely the rich. It must, or at least must appear to, be fluid, embracing different classes and backgrounds, while ultimately requiring a certain aesthetic and behavioral conformity.

And it must have layers. The velvet rope in Castelli's gallery, separating the public space from where he and his staff sat, became a kind of metaphor for the entire system, and Cohen-Solal quotes dealers and others who recall gradually winning access to his inner sanctum, to Castelli's confidence, as if they are describing some private club or shrine. Castelli shrewdly refined this culture of exclusivity, benefitting his artists immeasurably by so doing, even as he projected the image of a smooth, friendly shopkeeper whose gallery was wide open to everyone, which in the most obvious respect it was.

It's worth recalling Cohen-Solal's description of Trieste: "a spectacle, threatening, provocative, and deceptive all at once, inciting in all such spirits"—she was referring to Castelli as one of the spirits—"a desperate search for identity." And that could also serve to describe the art world that Castelli presided over: a spectacle, threatening, provocative, and deceptive to the uninitiated and wary, but a place where people—those aspiring insiders looking like Castelli for a home—went to find their identity.

Back from the war in 1946, as Cohen-Solal recounts, Castelli spent a decade searching on the margins of the New York art scene, "doing favors, brokering alliances, and supporting a series of variously successful initiatives as go-between, advisor, independent curator, collector, agent, jack-of-all-trades"—in essence, preparing the way so that when he finally did open his gallery, he already knew well the lay of the land, and knew which corner of it he planned to colonize. He set his sights on new American art, not even the art of contemporary figures like de Kooning, a friend of Castelli's, whom Ileana once insulted by announcing her preference for Pollock and whom Castelli declined to take on because de Kooning was already too established, thereby souring their friendship.

He wanted instead to sell the next generation, which he discovered one famous day in Lower Manhattan in the studio of a young, cerebral, then entirely unknown Southerner whose delicate, deadpan paintings of flags and other ordinary objects announced a certain break with the past. Castelli's feverish encounter with Jasper Johns, art's version of Paul's epiphany entering Damascus, arranged through the perhaps even more enduringly talented Robert Rauschenberg, had been long in coming, and no doubt Ileana must be given credit as a tastemaker and broker. But seeking to make a new world for himself in the New World, Castelli was also keenly prepared, perhaps more so than an American dealer, to embrace the brash Americanness, the tawdry elegance, the Pop otherness, and the refined obscurantism in Johns's work, whose timing on the scene, like Castelli's, turned out to be impeccable. A decade had passed during which Europe involuntarily ceded the baton to America, and now Jackson Pollock was dead, so the question arose, in a culture of stardom, who would succeed him.

Already steeped in nostalgia, SoHo oversaw Pop's succession by minimalism and conceptualism, and Castelli never wavered in his support for artists like Judd, Flavin, Kosuth, and Nauman even though the press trashed them and buyers were at first scarce—and even though privately, twice visiting Nauman's studio to see videos, he fell asleep. He was remarkable as a sexagenarian, then a septuagenarian for remaining so open to the new, never mind whether he himself "got" it. Only toward the end did he lose what Morgan Spangle, who managed Castelli's SoHo gallery from 1988 to 1994, calls "the antennae" that let him "surf the wave of that moment." Spangle was talking about the late 1950s, but Castelli continued to stay afloat through the 1980s and even into the 1990s.

"He was, to the last," writes Cohen-Solal, "a complex character, fascinating, mysterious, full of paradoxes: living the life of an amateur and of a "good-for-nothing" until the age of fifty...an inconstant family man, unfaithful husband, distant father...but presiding devotedly over an alternative family in the gallery, looking after staff, artists, and collectors alike; reconciling himself to his ancestry by unreflective and absolute erasure of his Jewishness, even as he must have known that his "genius" lay in a family tradition,

which he never forgot even if he never spoke of it; he was a figure happily abounding in European idiosyncrasies while becoming a sort of exemplary postwar American.”

Castelli was exceptional among dealers, but, as Cohen-Solal describes him, not alone in finding life and refuge, an identity, among the Warhols and Lichtensteins. His human story is almost typical. It's the real social history of modern art.