

BOOK REVIEWS

LIONIZING LEO BY RICHARD KALINA

Leo Castelli (1907-1999) was famously charming and famously hard to really know. Arguably one of the three most influential 20th-century U.S. dealers (Alfred Stieglitz and Sidney Janis are the other two), he brought a European elegance and grace to a profession that is all too often home to the egotistical and sharp-elbowed. In the process, he helped American art, particularly the work that followed Abstract Expressionism, to attain its central place in modern art history. That he was a kind, sensible and generous man who truly cared for his artists only adds to his luster.

In *Leo and His Circle*, Annie Cohen-Solal, a former cultural counselor at the French embassy in New York and the author of a well-received biography of Jean-Paul Sartre, sets the dealer's life and ancestry on a wide and impossibly cluttered stage. Indeed, her approach is historically conscientious to a fault. Drawing on research conducted by 23 assistants, she frequently clouds the reader's view with the kind of "look what I know" trivia that can kill a good story.

Castelli's life separates itself into three reasonably clear divisions: his early days in Europe (he was born in Trieste in northern Italy and spent his youth in Italy, Austria, Romania and France); a brief middle period in New York, from the mid-'40s (after his WWII stint as a volunteer in the American army) to the mid-'50s, when he was establishing himself with the city's

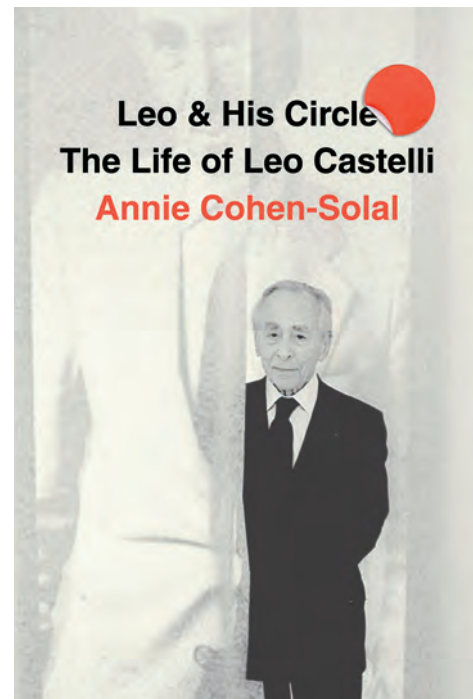


Leo Krausz (left) with his mother and siblings, Vienna, 1918. All photos, unless otherwise noted, courtesy Jean-Christophe Castelli.

avant-garde; and the era that started in 1957, when at age 50 he opened his own New York gallery. Cohen-Solal follows this general guideline, dividing her over 500-page text into three sections, titled "Europe: Persecutions, Wars, Ruptures, Displacements," "The Years of the Metamorphosis" and (with characteristic overreaching) "Absolute Leader of American Art."

Born Leo Krausz (the family was forced by Mussolini's racial laws to change its name to an Italian one—Castelli was his mother's maiden name), the future dealer came from a moderately prosperous merchant and banking family, and spent the first part of his life largely as a well-heeled ne'er-do-well. In 1933, his great good fortune was to marry Ileana Schapira, later to become the important dealer Ileana Sonnabend. This alliance quite possibly spared him the horrible fate that his parents met during the war (weakened by years of hiding and near starvation while eluding Nazi and, later, Soviet occupiers, his mother drowned while trying to escape across the Danube in Budapest, and his father died in a hospital there just weeks after the ceasefire). Ileana was the 18-year-old daughter of Mihai Schapira, an extraordinarily wealthy and indulgent Romanian industrialist, who bankrolled many of his son-in-law's activities in Europe and later in New York, and whose money and resourcefulness (along with some very lucky breaks) got the whole Schapira clan out of Europe and onto American soil in 1941—an exciting tale well told by Cohen-Solal.

Other aspects of her approach in Part I are less compelling, however. Is it really necessary to give us every single detail of Castelli's childhood that could be dug up, to explore the complete history of his immediate family, his ancestors and, as formative context, Judaism in Italy (as well as Austria and Hungary) from the Renaissance on? Isn't there a limit, in a biography, to how much we need to learn about the cities of Trieste, Vienna and, for good measure, selected Hungarian and Romanian precincts? Moreover, the



**Leo and His Circle:
The Life of Leo Castelli,**
by Annie Cohen-Solal, trans. by
Mark Polizzitti with the author,
New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2010;
540 pp. \$35.

RICHARD KALINA
is a painter who writes
about art.

author's emphasis on the collective experience of European Judaism strikes me as highly problematic, not just because much of it functions as mere filler, or because Castelli paid his Jewish heritage very little attention, but because Cohen-Solal seems to be making the case that Castelli's success as a merchant was somehow in the blood, that being Jewish predisposed him (despite her own abundant evidence to the contrary) to being good with money. She writes:

His is a family story that overlaps the history of European art and carries us back to Renaissance Tuscany, where his ancestors probably crossed paths with Piero della Francesca and Vasari. This background suggests the hypothesis that 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.

BOOK REVIEWS

The second part of the book is the most intriguing, illuminating the years during which Castelli found his calling. Having studied law in Milan without much enthusiasm and worked halfheartedly in the insurance business in Trieste, he now became the manager of his father-in-law's knitwear factory, and began to cultivate an interest in art dealing and collecting. His passion blossomed—during hours stolen from his office job—through a program of self-



Above, Castelli (right) with family and friends in Antibes, France, 1968. Courtesy Annie Cohen-Solal.

Right, Castelli presenting President John F. Kennedy with a Jasper Johns *Flag* bronze, Washington, D.C., Flag Day, June 14, 1963.

education, largely at the Museum of Modern Art. Castelli's growing involvement with art led him into the unconventional milieu of the emerging Abstract Expressionists. He and Ileana became early members of The Club—an honor rarely granted to nonartists. Castelli, by virtue of his sophistication, charm and eagerness, could move among many groups: he was at home with European émigrés, uptown society types, downtown artists, and a wide variety of dealers, curators and critics. He became a fixture on the New York art scene, not yet as a dealer but as an intermediary, a go-to guy, working with (and learning much from) Sidney Janis, serving as Nina Kandinsky's agent for her late husband's work in the U.S. and helping to organize the famous 9th Street Show in 1951, an exhibition that greatly enhanced the reputation of Abstract Expressionism. Castelli's connection to the Abstract Expressionists was strengthened by his largesse (he

didn't have much money, but he had more than they did) and the entertaining he did both in the elegant townhouse (owned by his father-in-law) where he lived at 4 East 77th Street and in his house in East Hampton. (Willem de Kooning stayed with the Castellis in the summer of 1953 and used their porch as his painting studio.) Important, too, was his rapport with John Graham, the influential and intensely charismatic Russian-American painter and theoretician. Graham, an inspiration to many younger artists, lived in the townhouse with Mihai Schapira's ex-wife, Marianne, and became, after a fashion, Castelli's second father-in-law.

In 1957, Castelli finally did what the art world had long expected—he opened

WITH ELEGANCE AND GRACE, AND MANY CRITICAL COUPS, CASTELLI HELPED AMERICAN ART ATTAIN ITS CENTRAL PLACE IN MODERN ART HISTORY.



his own gallery. It occupied a floor in the 77th Street house, and the business (or a branch of it) would remain in that building for 20 years. Castelli started out by trying to pair up European and American art, as he had done while working with Sidney Janis, but found that it was not a successful long-term strategy. Despite his links with the Abstract Expressionists, he did not represent any of the first generation, with the exception of Jack Tworkov, who joined the gallery three years after it opened. Instead, he handled a mixed lot of younger painters and sculptors: Paul Brach, Norman Bluhm, Alfred Leslie, Friedel Dzubas, Jon Schueler and Marisol among them. His

breakthrough came when Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg joined the gallery. That first Johns-Castelli meeting—occasioned by a visit to Rauschenberg, who generously took the dealer to his neighbor's studio—has been told many times, and Cohen-Solal recounts it thoroughly. Certainly something important had been set into motion: Castelli was so struck with Johns's work (an example of which he had seen a bit earlier at the Jewish Museum) that he offered the artist a show on the spot. But Cohen-Solal, in overheated, sometimes wince-inducing prose, treats the event in terms befitting a Second Coming, or maybe a First:

European gallerists, American artists, European critics, American collectors and museum directors: they were all there, ready to act and be acted upon, more or less knowingly, in the presence of that unique Castelli magic, the singular catalyst that would precipitate an unexampled chemical reaction such as these constitutive elements could not have imagined.

Although Rauschenberg ultimately did very well, Johns was the more immediate success, and his steady sales and ever increasing prices (along with those of the prolific Roy Lichtenstein) kept the gallery afloat through its troubled periods. And

many difficult times there were, since critical success and art-historical relevance did not translate into instant prosperity. Castelli's idea was to keep abreast of the evolving movements and represent their most significant practitioners—which he did, with the notable (and apparently regretted) exception of Color Field painters. Pop artists sold well for the most part, but Minimalists, Post-Minimalists and Conceptualists were much harder to push. As important as, say, Dan Flavin was, getting people to part with many thousands of dollars for a few fluorescent tubes proved to be no easy feat. Castelli's financial profile

was not improved by his willingness to provide monthly stipends to his artists and to pick up the tab, or a significant portion of it, for the fabrication of sculptures that stood little chance of being sold.

In addition, Castelli wanted the artists he represented to be seen outside New York, and he arranged for them to exhibit widely in North America, Europe and Japan. Sharing commissions with other dealers cut into his profits, but the artists themselves, of course, appreciated the broader exposure. Cohen-Solal is strangely off base in her characterization of the many dealers with whom Castelli collaborated. She presents their galleries as essentially subsidiaries—she calls them “satellites”—of the Leo Castelli Gallery,

BOOK REVIEWS

ignoring the fact that people like Margo Leavin in Los Angeles, David Mirvish in Toronto, Gian Enzo Sperone in Turin, Konrad Fischer in Düsseldorf, Rudolf Zwirner in Cologne, Bruno Bischofberger in Zurich or Akira Ikeda in Tokyo—ran successful, fully autonomous operations that dealt not just with Castelli and his artists, but many others as well.

Cohen-Solal handles Castelli's first decade as a dealer reasonably well, giving her readers a sense of the excitement that swirled around the East 77th Street gallery. As the '60s swung into gear, the place became a magnet for artists, critics, collectors and anyone interested in the new territory opening up for art. Castelli worked assiduously to get artists when they were young, inventive and enthusiastic. Within a few years, he was exhibit-

was a constant presence despite their divorce in 1959; her second husband, Michael Sonnabend, whom she married that same year; Ivan Karp, the gallery's director through the '60s; the prescient dealer Dick Bellamy of the Green Gallery; Alan Solomon, the director of the Jewish Museum; Henry Geldzahler, the young contemporary curator at the Metropolitan Museum; and even the brash, vulgar but remarkably savvy collector Robert Scull, who was Castelli's most financially reliable client as well as a demanding, annoying presence in his life.



Left to right, Barnett Newman, Robert Rauschenberg and Castelli, New York, 1950.

View of the exhibition "Young U.S. and French Painters" curated by Castelli, at Sidney Janis Gallery, New York, 1951. Courtesy Carroll Janis.



ing Lichtenstein, Rosenquist, Warhol, Stella, Poons, Twombly, Judd, Bontecou, Christo, Chamberlain, Artschwager and Morris. The excitement continued as the gallery expanded, first in 1968 to a warehouse exhibition space on West 108th Street, and next in 1971 to a large loft on West Broadway in the then barely gentrifying SoHo. By that point, Nauman, Flavin, Kosuth, Sonnier and Serra had entered the picture.

Compared to today's scene, the art world of the time was a small, interconnected place. Cohen-Solal does not neglect those around Castelli who helped shape his decisions—ex-wife Ileana, a successful dealer in her own right, who

about these figures' critical impact, and about the formal nature of their art, even less. This might be acceptable in a work that is predominantly theoretical or socio-historical in orientation, but Cohen-Solal's book is neither. In fact, the author doesn't seem to know what it is, and as a result the text alternates between the sketchy and the exhaustive, the breezy and the ponderous. Must we have, for example, the history of the 1964 Venice Biennale's prize-giving (Rauschenberg won it) laid out step-by-step with, literally, a 14-person dramatis personae, followed by Acts I-VIII, each dated by day? Must the critical reactions to Geldzahler's Metropolitan Museum show "New York Painting and

Sculpture, 1940-1970" be parsed in excruciating detail for five pages?

If the '60s and early '70s are handled unevenly (though with much fascinating information supplied), the later years are recounted—passing notice of Castelli's children, his myriad paramours, the death of his second wife and his 1995 marriage to a young third spouse notwithstanding—in a manner pretty much guaranteed to induce both misanthropy and sleep. The section abounds with art-world personalities shown in their worst light, half-compliments and insincere encomiums from people eager to take partial credit for Castelli's many coups, obsessive fact-mongering (interested in a map of Castelli's favorite restaurants?), lists and lists and lists (want to know the names of 13 gallery assistants?) and a very full accounting (among other very full accountings) of the ceremony (Elysée Palace, Paris, May 23, 1991) in which Castelli was made an officer of the Legion of Honor. Essentially, by the '80s and certainly by the '90s the art world had grown so large that Castelli, while important, was reduced to being just one more cagey player. His was a big blue-chip operation among other big blue-chip operations.

Consequently, with art given the backseat as usual, Cohen-Solal's book begins to sound like an infomercial or the in-house history of an upscale supermarket chain.

Then there are the small irritations. Why does the author engage us with people, from family members to art-world figures, only to let them disappear? And the errors, to cite just a few: it's Susan Rothenberg, not Rottenberg; Rosalind Krauss, not Krausz; Max Kozloff, not Kozlof. Ivan Karp's OK Harris gallery is on West Broadway, not Broadway, and Patterson Sims is a man, not a woman. Finally the writing: when not overly convoluted, Cohen-Solal's prose is too often marred by oversimplification, hyperbole and exclamation points.

All of this is a pity, for the story of Castelli's involvement with postwar art remains a fascinating one. Social history can be dynamic as well as informative, and there's no reason a popular study detailing the patronage structure of contemporary art should be any less valuable than a similar take on the Renaissance. What's more, biography, as a literary form, can certainly be capacious. It's all right to be discursive, to appeal to a wide audience, to dish a little dirt, to tell a good tale. But readers want to finish the text with their curiosity aroused, the connections sparking. Unfortunately this is not the case with *Leo and His Circle*. There is a sharp little book lurking in these many pages, but it remains, like the subject himself, fascinatingly elusive. ○