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Oral history interview with Leo Castelli, 1969  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Leo Castelli in July, 1969. The interview took place in New York, N.Y., and was conducted by Barbara Rose for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

In 2016, staff at the Archives of American Art reviewed this transcript to make corrections. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

## Interview

BARBARA ROSE: You said that you first became involved in art in a gallery in Paris. Could you tell me something about that gallery?

LEO CASTELLI: I started that gallery with Rene Drouins in 1939. We had just one show I believe. And the artists that we were, at the time, involved with were the Surrealists: Max Ernst, Leonor Fini, Tchelitchew, Dali and some other minor ones, or not so minor really. But, for instance, Meret Oppenheim whose fame rests chiefly on the fur cup—

BARBARA ROSE: What was your first contact with the New York art world?

LEO CASTELLI: Well, the New York art world I really contacted when I got here in 1941 after the outbreak of the war. My first contact was with Julien Levy who was handling the Surrealists.

BARBARA ROSE: Was his the most active gallery?

LEO CASTELLI: He was the gallery that was active here in that particular field. There was also - I didn't know him at the time—but Pierre Matisse was in existence. And so was Curt Valentin I believe—no, perhaps not—I don't know. Anyway he was active in that field and I would say he and—well, Peggy Guggenheim, I don't know whether she had that gallery at that time—no, it came later, in '48. But there was the gallery which handled Mondrian and—well, it will come back to me. We'll add it later on. Well, anyway, except for going to see what Julien Levy had there, I was not involved with that gallery particularly. Oh, there was also Iolas that I vaguely—I think so, I'm not quite sure. But Julien Levy certainly I remember very well. I remember a show of Dali's that he had before I got back into the Army. And one of the paintings that I recall vividly is one Bust of Voltaire which was sort of a pun kind of painting, where he was composed like an Archibaldi of various other elements and then if you sort of focused your eyes in a certain way he would turn out to be the Bust of Voltaire, the famous Bust of Voltaire.

BARBARA ROSE: Well, when you returned to New York from the Army in 1945? 1946?—1946 did you find the New York art world had changed from what you had left it as?

LEO CASTELLI: Well, I really had known the art world of just before the war in a very cursory way. I had known, as I said, Julien Levy, Peggy Guggenheim a little bit. I had an idea that Pollock existed I think. De Kooning was unknown to me. Gorky, I had a vague idea that he existed, but very vague I think. I really got to know all those people right after the war so whatever I experienced before is almost irrelevant.

BARBARA ROSE: Well, how would you describe the art world after you came back? Was it very focused or centralized? Was there a real artistic community?

LEO CASTELLI: Well, it developed rather slowly. In the beginning the people that I knew were Matta, Lam, still the outcrops of Surrealism and Europeans. After all, American painting seemed at that time—although I didn't know much about it—it seemed unimportant. Except for the few glimpses that I had had of Pollock and of Gorky I didn't know anything about it.

BARBARA ROSE: In that period, say, immediately after the war when the Surrealists returned to Europe, was there a kind of vacuum, a kind of loss of focus after the Surrealists went back to Europe?

LEO CASTELLI: Well, I really don't feel that I noticed it very much. Because, in 1946 and 1947 I followed Peggy Guggenheim's activity very, very closely and I got to know the artists through her and through Clement Greenberg. I got to know, for instance, Pollock very soon and Gorky. And right away they seemed to me quite important. So that when Matta left right after Gorky's death in 1948—well, it seemed to be a loss. He seemed to be the last semi-American exponent of the movement. But I think that the sense of loss at least as far as I'm concerned was overcome pretty rapidly. Because already quite a lively group had formed around The Club. It

started around 1949 actually. But of the Americans at the time who were partly with one foot in the European situation and were beginning already to work out in American trend was Motherwell who was a friend of Matta's, who I knew very well, by the way. And he was really my contact, my first American contact, let's say literate and articulate American contact with the art scene.

BARBARA ROSE: I have the sense that Motherwell acted as a bridge between the Europeans and the Americans. Is that the case?

LEO CASTELLI: Yes, most definitely he acted as a bridge. And I owe him really a great debt for making me, not purposely but just through being what he was and his activities. He formed some kind of school before The Club in the neighborhood there. He, Baziotes, and a few others and I think Rothko was involved in that, too. That was really the beginning of the American painters acting as a group.

BARBARA ROSE: I know that you were involved in setting up the Ninth Street show in 1951. Could you tell me something about that?

LEO CASTELLI: Well, by 1951—this Club had started in 1949 and had become a quite active affair. First of all, we saw each other very often, at least once a week, and then—

BARBARA ROSE: What were the issues?

LEO CASTELLI: Well, I think that one important issue apart from the function of the painter and all the usual stuff that is discussed among painters was the position of the American painter versus the European painter. It was not specifically discussed, but there was a clear feeling that American painting was becoming very important. And perhaps—it occurs to me now, I never thought about it in these terms, one role that I played was that I formed another kind of bridge between Europe and the American painters: I seemed to be the only European actually - although I didn't have any official position, I was just a man about town—the only European really who seems to have understood them, and not only understood them, but really they were my great enthusiasm. For me they were just the great thing happening.

BARBARA ROSE: What artists particularly?

LEO CASTELLI: Oh, especially de Kooning I would say, Pollock and de Kooning, these two, yes. These were my great—

BARBARA ROSE: Already by 1951 they had emerged as—

LEO CASTELLI: Oh, God, for me de Kooning by 195—Pollock had emerged before that for me, but de Kooning right after that *Excavation*. There was the Egan show, for instance, in 1949 I believe. It was the black—It was the first time that people actually saw a show of de Kooning's. He never showed. He worked very little, he produced very little. And I think it was in 1949 or perhaps it was 1950. Yes, 1950 maybe—and that was a show of black and white paintings of which the Museum of Modern Art has one, for instance. And that was really a great revelation. Right after that he did a painting called *Excavation*.. It is now at the Art Institute by which I was completely smitten.

BARBARA ROSE: Well, what was the conception of the American artist, of his role as opposed to that of the European artist? I mean you began saying that they felt differently about their social role, let's say, or their role versus the audience.

LEO CASTELLI: I don't think that they had any particular notion about playing a social role. On the contrary, they rather rejected society. They considered themselves as an isolated group, as a group that was functioning within its own territory and they really didn't care very much about what people thought about them. In that sense, they were very different from the Europeans. They were involved with themselves, with the group. And they started becoming—perhaps I, Motherwell, and other people encouraged them—very proud of themselves, very sure of themselves. They felt that they were accomplishing something, that they were contributing something for the first time.

BARBARA ROSE: When do you think that they began to have assurance?

LEO CASTELLI: Oh, I would say it started right away in 1949 at the beginning of The Club. The sense developed very rapidly right from the beginning of The Club days.

BARBARA ROSE: As personality types, did you find the American artists very different from the Europeans? I'm curious since obviously you had a lot of experience with European artists.

LEO CASTELLI: Yes, they were very different, but that really doesn't mean very much in the sense that I had known a group which was a very social group, a very elegant group, the Surrealists. I hadn't known Picasso or

Braque or any of those except a very superficial acquaintance; I didn't know how they functioned. And I suppose that our group here—de Kooning, Pollock and so on—were more of the nature of that early group like Leger, Picasso, Modigliani perhaps to speak of the pater modi type. So they did not surprise me as being totally different. In fact they conformed more to the image that I had of what a painter should be than the Surrealists. The Surrealists, Matta especially included, whom I knew well and was a friend, were much too elegant and too involved with the social world to correspond to the real concept I had of painters and artists.

BARBARA ROSE: Could you tell me about why the Ninth Street show was organized and how it came into being and what its consequences were? How you were involved?

LEO CASTELLI: Well, it came into being as an outgrowth precisely of the things that you've been asking constantly about: of what kind of feelings the American painters had in connection with their position toward the European painters. It was sort of an outburst of pride in their own strength. And we considered this almost as the first Salon des Independents; this is what I called it as a matter of fact. I was very proud of that aspect of it. I thought that never before anything of the kind had occurred in America. We had about ninety painters in it and they were almost exclusively I would say, because there were a few exceptions, composed of artists who were involved with The Club. Not all of them members, but at least people who gravitated around The Club and came often because also non-members were admitted there, of course. So the major figures there were: de Kooning, who had taken an important hand in the development of The Club; actually he was much more active then in, say, group activities than he is now; he has become rather solitary, as you know. De Kooning was very important. Franz Kline was very important, Marca-Relli was a good organizer; he was involved in it.

BARBARA ROSE: Was all the painting abstract?

LEO CASTELLI: It was mostly I would say all abstract, yes. Because people like Larry Rivers and Joan Mitchell, Grace Hartigan—Joan Mitchell stayed abstract—especially those two who later became figurative were abstract at that time. Their change, their shift toward figurative painting came right after that.

BARBARA ROSE: Did the show make much of a splash? Was there much public reaction to it?

LEO CASTELLI: Well, it was a great event. We had a stream right across the street. It was a very wonderful warm day. This was in an empty store—in a house that was up for demolition and we had paid, I think, \$70 to have it for two months before it got demolished. All the painters had participated in refurbishing it, in painting this place that was almost abandoned. And it was very nice and neat. There are photographs to show you how it looked. And Franz had designed the announcement which was just a sheet of paper. I think it cost twenty-five dollars. And it seemed a lot of money. I sort of footed most of the bill although I didn't have much money either. I think that I forked out as much as \$200 and that seemed a tremendous amount of money for the rent, and for this catalogue that cost \$25 the Franz designed. We hung it. We were all there for three days hanging and re-hanging the show. All kinds of painters who were dissatisfied with the way they hung, I remember. Rauschenberg was included in it, and Friedel Dzubas was included in it; Reinhardt was included in it. David Smith, poor man, had a beautiful sculpture right in the window. Pollock was included, although he did not participate too much in Club activities. But he was painting.

BARBARA ROSE: The sense of community which obviously existed at this point—

LEO CASTELLI: Oh, yes, enormously.

BARBARA ROSE:—do you think that's missing now?

LEO CASTELLI: Oh, yes, completely. It doesn't exist anymore. There are groups, of course, for instance, the group that gravitates around Frank, (Stella) say. And then there is the group, but much looser, that gravitates perhaps around Bob, (Rauschenberg), but so many other elements that have nothing to do with painting gravitate around him that one doesn't know exactly whether he functions more as a painter or as somebody who is involved in other activities—theatre, dance, etc.

BARBARA ROSE: But essentially there is not the same community of artists?

LEO CASTELLI: Oh, no, there isn't—well, there is a community but it's much looser. There is a group—well, that gravitates—without wanting to sound immodest I would say that this gallery here, for instance, my gallery, the Green Gallery and perhaps Feigen and a few others of that kind form some kind of nucleus.

BARBARA ROSE: But I get the sense that the artists had a sense of identity as an artist and as a member of a community, of a homogeneous community, or a member of a focus community which doesn't exist any longer; artists don't have this sense of identity as an artist apart from any other—

LEO CASTELLI: Not in the way that they did then. But it seems to be quite easy to explain because at that time

they were neglected. Nobody cared about them so they had to develop some kind of sense of community to survive at all. Whereas now—well, the situation we don't have to go into it—it is very different. BARBARA ROSE: Was there a rejection of Surrealism. Was there a reaction against Surrealism that set in after the Surrealists went back?

LEO CASTELLI: I think that it was never really quite expressed but I can sort of judge by my own feelings about it. [Audio break]. And my knowledge of what the other painters thought about it. Except they were a little bit derogatory about, let's say, European art in general. I suppose nobody was ever against Picasso or those but ill-humor was directed against the more fashionable trend and that was Surrealism. For instance, in the beginning everybody thought that Matta was a great man, that he had taught Gorky every trick, that he was superior to Gorky. And we felt—I felt, and the others felt, that after all, although the general public still didn't know it, Gorky was by far a superior painter to Matta. Well, it did become general knowledge, I would say, much later, in the '50s. But my own feeling about Surrealism really—well, probably I reflected the feelings of the others. We considered it as a rather chic and social movement that had nothing to do with our robust approach towards painting.

BARBARA ROSE: Do you think that the relationship of the artist to the audience in, say 1950, was different from the relationship to the audience today? Or do you think the audience is different?

LEO CASTELLI: Well, both are very different. To begin with, at that time the relation of the artist to the audience was practically nil. There was no audience. There were just a few aficionados and that was all.

BARBARA ROSE: Who were the other aficionados besides yourself?

LEO CASTELLI: Well, there was the group around—oh, you speak also about professional audiences? Because there was a professional audience and of the professional audience the two great men, professional men of the period who were deeply involved with the movement were Clem and Tom Hess. They have immense merit to have sort of kept this thing—discovered it and kept it alive and going. It cannot be stressed enough what they did for American painting.

BARBARA ROSE: In a sense it was moral support they offered.

LEO CASTELLI: Yes, moral support and everything. Yes. Then there were of course some people around Betty Parsons, a small group, but more mundane, let's say, in the Peggy Guggenheim context but Peggy left pretty soon thereafter. In fact she wasn't around for very, very long. Just a very few people. They're almost all forgotten now, you know.

BARBARA ROSE: Who else do you remember?

LEO CASTELLI: Well, offhand hardly anybody occurs to me. There were so few really.

BARBARA ROSE: It is now, of course, it is completely reversed—

LEO CASTELLI: Well, it is not really as reversed as it might seem. There still are relatively few people who really understand what's going on and are really seriously and deeply involved in whatever movement there is now. Of course, so much publicity occurs around all this that there are lots of drones and parasites who buy because they think this is the thing to do. In that sense, we are immensely better off. But seriously-involved people are still few and I think will always be in connection with serious painting.

BARBARA ROSE: Around 1950, what were the centers of power? Who were the tastemakers who had the ability, shall we say, to influence taste?

LEO CASTELLI: Well, I would say that Peggy Guggenheim certainly did a very good job with her museum, especially, not so much with her shows. She had the whole European movement plus the more recent Americans—from the early part of the century to date. And that included Cubism in various manifestations and Mondrian, Kandinsky, everything. I mean it was a very, very beautiful, very complete collection.

BARBARA ROSE: Where was this?

LEO CASTELLI: It was on 57th Street high up in some building. The thing was installed by Kiesler. It was a very interesting place. So that was certainly a center. But I think more serious centers were: Betty Parsons, Kootz, at the time; Janis very shortly thereafter, although he in the beginning did a fantastic job to promote serious European painting rather than American painting. He stepped into that much later. But it was Janis's role to promote really good and serious European painting commercially. The job was being done by Barr at the Museum but for the public at large. See, as long as things are shown in museums they seem to be a little bit remote, but when there is a dealer who sells them and there are people who buy these things then it becomes

different. And he was really extremely good. The choice of Legers, Picassos, or whatever he had, Mondrian, and so on, was very, very good.

BARBARA ROSE: Well, what were the most heated issues? What seemed to spark discussions? And who were the most discussed artists?

LEO CASTELLI: Well, obviously Pollock, Kline.

BARBARA ROSE: What was the issue about Pollock, pro and con? What was the most violent pro or con stand that one would take?

LEO CASTELLI: Well, I think that within the group we considered him always a great artist. There was a certain rivalry between him and de Kooning. And there was, of course, a group, you know, that would consider him the greater of the two. Now Greenberg, our great theoretician, felt that Pollock was much more important because he introduced an entirely new form of vision into painting; whereas he felt that de Kooning had remained traditional in his approach, that there was still a great deal of Cubism in him, plus Expressionism, the German variety. So the great issue was really in our particular world de Kooning versus Pollock. Pollock, I think, was accepted a little earlier by the public at large than de Kooning, maybe because he was perhaps a more legendary figure to begin with.

BARBARA ROSE: He had more shows.

LEO CASTELLI: Yes. And he had more shows, that's right. You're right there.

BARBARA ROSE: Do you think the role of the American dealer is different from that of the European dealer? And particularly during this period?

LEO CASTELLI: Well, during that particular period I think that there were just a few dealers who functioned more or less on the European scheme, and those were the Pierre Matisse, the Durand-Ruels, who existed still at that time. And then there were the American dealers, typical of whom were Betty Parsons and Kootz, who functioned differently.

BARBARA ROSE: In what way?

LEO CASTELLI: Well, they didn't really buy the work of the artists. They were there just to provide walls and certain amount of publicity and shows. Nobody could afford at that time really to invest money in de Kooning or Pollock. It would have been sheer madness. I mean financially unfeasible. Those people didn't have any money.

BARBARA ROSE: Well, I know that when you opened your gallery you didn't open showing Abstract Expressionism. Of course, there are a few artists that have been with the gallery who have been loosely School of New York, but did you feel at the time that you opened the gallery that there was a reaction against Abstract Expressionism?

LEO CASTELLI: Frankly I did not have many Abstract Expressionists because I was very ambitious and only the best would do. And the best was at Janis. I still believed very strongly in de Kooning and Pollock and the others. One of the reasons—one of the reasons—not all of them, was that I would have to take second best and I didn't feel like doing that. So I was biding my time and apart from the fact that I showed a few of the younger people—most of them had been my friends, like Brach and so on—I was really biding my time and trying to see what would come up where I could function ambitiously and on my own without following a movement. And there was a general feeling of fatigue in the public. There was also the epigones of Abstract Expressionism. They didn't seem to do a very good job. They were just repeating de Kooning's gesture more or less. And there was a sense of disillusionment and fatigue that—

BARBARA ROSE: When did that begin?

LEO CASTELLI: I would say that signs of decay occurred around the time I opened the gallery in 1957. It became pretty obvious to certain people that the movement had reached the point of fatigue. Then there was the death of Pollock that occurred soon thereafter.

BARBARA ROSE: It seems almost that epochs are measured by deaths of artists. Did Gorky's suicide have a great effect on the art world?

LEO CASTELLI: No, I don't think so. Gorky was at the beginning of a movement. At the beginning of the movement nobody really understood who or what Gorky was before his death. Well, and there was a certain feeling—he was really considered a Surrealist before his death. And nobody thought that he had anything to do actually with the new American painting. He was made into a hero later, after his death. So his death was really the beginning of a period. As Pollock's death was the end of a period. His and Kline's death. Perhaps it's a little

bit premature to say that Pollock's death really marked the end of an era. Perhaps in retrospect we can say that. But actually perhaps Kline's death seems to be a more significant watershed, yes. Even now.

BARBARA ROSE: Just briefly, just thinking back, I mean your involvement has been so intense—in the fifteen years or so—more than that—it's almost I guess twenty years since the war—that you've been in New York, what stands out as turning points in your mind?

LEO CASTELLI: Well, there were two turning points actually. First of all, there was the beginning of abstract—not the beginning of Abstract Expressionism, but the beginning of the understanding of the public at large of Abstract Expressionism which began I would say at that point that we saw at Gorky's death. Gorky's death and Clem Greenberg's famous article in *Horizon*. That was also in 1948 if you remember. It was the American issue of *Horizon*, a British magazine now no longer in existence. And he wrote an article about American painting at the time. That's a very important issue. You probably can find it. And there, he proclaimed that Pollock was the most important—one of the most important—no, I think the most important painter in the world. And that seemed absolutely outrageous to practically everybody. Even I felt that he was pushing it a little bit far.

BARBARA ROSE: What other turning point?

LEO CASTELLI: Well, that was one. And then I would say another one was probably the emergence of Jasper Johns. Although he really didn't do the trick by himself he seemed to sort of be a turning point, yes, to catalyze all kinds of ideas. He really sounded the death knell for the previous movement as it existed. There was a new development there and he, after all, inspired at least one important trend in painting. Then, of course, at that time there is another important trend that really occurred more gradually—but it was a very, very important thing that happened too towards the end, in the late '50s, and that was the emergence of Morris Louis. I would say that the two ambiances, let's say, mine and the Green Gallery and French & Company, which didn't last long enough, but it was very, very powerful. Behind that, of course, was Clem Greenberg. So if you have to talk about personalities in the field, some were in a position to give some continuity to whatever trend they started. I would say it was Clement Greenberg on one hand and perhaps all this “happening” situation that occurred in the late '50s, Green's Gallery and mine, that really played I think quite an important role in—

BARBARA ROSE: Actually the Hansa Gallery also.

LEO CASTELLI: Yes, Hansa. But Hansa was still not very clear what way it was moving. But certainly toward the end “happenings,” Green. This gallery and French 7 Company made it quite clear what the new things were that were occurring.

[END OF INTERVIEW]