INTERVIEW WITH: **LEO CASTELLI (LC)**

INTERVIEWER: **LYNN ZELEVANSKY (LZ)**

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BEGIN AUDIO FILE

LZ: My first question, I know that you started collecting New York School painting pretty early on; didn't you? What was your first exposure to it, and when did you begin collecting abstract expressionist painting?

LC: Well you know, practically every human being is a collector at heart. Whether it be stamps or anything that you can think of. And of course, I did that, and as a boy I also liked books, I collected books, stamps. But as far as then collecting paintings, __[0:00:50] to begin with, where you don't think that they are excessively __. You go to museums and you don't expect ever to be able to afford to buy a Rembrandt or a Titian. So then you discover after a while that, after all, there are prints that you can buy. But you are very ignorant and you see a print, say, by Dürer, at some dealer's – not great dealers – and you think that then here you've bought a Dürer print, which is absolutely worthless. You find out later,

LZ: [laughing] Yeah.

LC: That there again, you have to have expertise and knowledge before you can collect. But you learn, little by little.

LZ: Mm-hm. So, did you start out buying prints that you thought were Dürers and

LC: I occasionally bought some in that day,

LZ: [laughing] Right.

LC: That ignorant way that we all have. But I did collect when I got married, young, and I was stationed in Romania in an insurance company. I got married to Ileana Sonnabend. I've been divorced since. But anyway, we were married at that time, and what we enjoyed very much was roaming the countryside and buying antique furniture, antique objects that we found, mostly sort of at the peasants, rustic things. We collected those. It was interesting that we really collected with some kind of knowledge but no good dealer in antiques, and we became very friendly with them, so we got good advice there to __[0:02:55] us then more serious collecting __. We also went to Paris often, went to see shows, and of course we couldn't afford to buy expensive things but __ bought little watercolors of even Matisse or Vlaminck. Our taste was not very developed, and Vlaminck seemed to be an important painter then. But really serious collecting came only when I got here.

LZ: That was in the late '40s?

LC: In the early '40s. And more and more particularly after the war, after I came back from the war. I did service in the army in '46. And then I started really collecting seriously, and got to know lots of dealers, and bought some quite important things, like Mondrian, Klee, Léger. I had had a gallery in Paris for a brief period of time, in '39, and from there, after the war, I got a few things like Kandinsky, Dubuffet who was just beginning then, Pevsner. Good, serious things. And then we got involved, Ileana and I, with the abstract expressionists early on in the late '40s, with Pollock and de Kooning,

LZ: Was that through Sidney Janis that you got involved with them?

LC: No, it was before that, we really were involved with them personally. And so we did buy important paintings of Pollock, some of de Kooning, things like that. So really, we had, Ileana and I, at one point in the late '40s, early '50s, a very good collection of a variety of things. But then, all of this changed when I, first of all, there wasn't much money around. Those things didn't cost very much at the time. It was a lot of money still, but to give you an idea, I got __[0:05:40 Kline? Mondrian?] for maybe __ for $2,000, and great Klee oils for also about $2,000 apiece. Although $2,000 then meant so much more than $2,000 now, it was relatively much, and I couldn't go on affording things like this. But we bought

some great Pollocks back, that was in the early '50s, cost $3,500. We had a little money then __.[0:06:15] But when we started the gallery, then all these things went overboard. In order to keep the gallery going, we had sold the Pollocks, the Légers, and everything.

LZ: I see.

LC: Also to, generally, speaking, to keep alive. __ only __ the gallery. So then the new collection then started again when I had my own gallery. Actually, I came to decide that I really must have a gallery, must become a professional, because otherwise I could never have indulged my passion for collecting.

LZ: Right.

LC: __ necessity.

LZ: You didn't show the abstract expressionists, did you?

LC: No, I didn't, because I didn't have a gallery then.

LZ: Mm-hm. And by the time,

LC: By the time I decided to open the gallery, Sidney Janis had gotten ahold of all my friends, like de Kooning and Pollock __. There's no question of taking them away from him. I wouldn't have, even if I had been sort of sneaky, I wouldn't have even known what to do with them. Although at one point, Pollock, I remember, asked me, or de Kooning, why didn't I open a gallery? They would all come with me. But I at that time didn't feel prepared to do it. And perhaps it was all to the good anyway. Because then I would have sort of stayed with those and never gotten to begin with an entirely new generation of artists.

LZ: Right, right. When you started collecting the abstract expressionist work, were there many collectors?

LC: Well, there were very few around at that time, very few. Actually, we did, I did, with the artists at Ninth Street, a show back in '51,

LZ: You did that with them?

LC: Yes, we did that together. We were sort of together all the time, with the Club, with the Cedar bar, and all that. So that was done a little bit under my direction

and with their assistance. And it was a great surprise that Alfred Barr who came down to see the show, back in ’51, that there were so many American artists that he didn’t know. Well, he knew Pollock and de Kooning, or Kline or Rothko or David Smith, but then there was a whole second generation there that they didn’t know anything about. And I don’t think that The Museum of Modern Art, even at that time, had any Pollock in their collection, as far as I can remember.

LZ: They might have had *Shewolf*. The bought *Shewolf* in the late ‘40s, I think.

LC: What did they buy?

LZ: *Shewolf*, I think, in the late ‘40s.

LC: Maybe the late ‘40s, maybe. But anyway, they

LZ: Very little.

LC: They had very little. At that time, you know, what you did see there was __[0:09:15], Matta, the dying, Surrealism.

LZ: Right.

LC: That’s what they were involved with.

LZ: Right.

LC: Not to mention, well, all the classics: Klee, __[0:09:29]

LZ: So when did the Modern start to support the abstract expressionists?

LC: I think that the Modern really became serious about collecting the abstract expressionists in the ‘50s, not much earlier than that.

LZ: Middle ‘50s, or?

LC: I would say middle ‘50s, yes. They really got involved with American painting when they did the __[0:09:53] show that was called The New American Painting.

LZ: That was ’58.

LC: Which was ’58?

LZ: Yes.

LC: That's when they really were quite ready to defend American art anyway. In a way, The New American Painting title, they got from two sources. One was myself, and the other one was Robert Motherwell. I remember Barr calling me one day. He knew that I was very involved with all those people. [someone calls "Leo!" then tape break 0:10:30]

LZ: The title, The New American Painting, that it came from you and Motherwell.

LC: Oh yes, Barr called me about that time, '57 or '58 anyway, for the show, and he said, "Well, I am sort of looking for a title for the show that we are sending out into the world, and, do you have any suggestions?" And I said, "Well yes, I have a suggestion. I would call it The New American Painting." So it just came spontaneously. So he said, "Well, that's very curious. I was just talking to Bob Motherwell, and he said the same thing."

LZ: Oh, isn't that interesting.

LC: Yes.

LZ: The idea of American painting, of it being maybe the first generation of really sort of world-class, avant-garde, American painting.

LC: Yes.

LZ: Was that an idea that was abroad very early? Was that an idea that people talked about and that was important? Were you aware of that early?

LC: Well, there was something, a perception of that in Europe already. Back in the late '40s, right after the war, there were shows of Pollock at a gallery – the curious thing is that the son of the man called Facchetti, who had a gallery in Paris and showed Pollock, I think in '49, his son has a gallery in the East Village.

LZ: Facchetti Burke, right. [sp?]

LC: Yes, that's right.

LZ: So Europeans were open to

LC: So, the Europeans were not very open at that time. There were very few people who were interested. But people who really did understand vanguard painting, the vanguard spirit, like for instance, a man called Michel Tapié, who was

responsible for the discovery of Dubuffet and Art Brut, came to New York and just didn't get it.

LZ: He didn't?

LC: He came also later, and I would have expected him to understand and offer a view of his understanding for Alfred to understand Rauschenberg. Nothing. There was some understanding of American art in Europe, came in the early '60s, with Rauschenberg, actually, got to be known in Europe and appreciated in Europe, much earlier than he did in America.

LZ: Really?

LC: Oh yes. Rauschenberg was an idol already for the younger generation of French or European painters, way back in, I would say, in the late '50s. I did show Jasper Johns, for instance, in '59, and there was a group of young French painters at that time like Yves Klein and __[0:13:45] and some of the others, who really had a great feeling, plus of course other people, a great feeling for American painting. They admired what they were doing very much indeed and felt very, very close to them. So that happened already in the late '50s. And Ileana Sonnabend who then had a gallery then in Paris, did a great job in showing Rauschenberg and Johns, and then soon after that, the Pop artists, Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Rosenquist, __,[0:14:20] she showed them all. And they, in the early '60s, thanks to Ileana's activity, they were extremely popular there. Actually, there was sort of almost like a gap there. The abstract expressionists in the first, during that period, hadn't, for some reason – because they were relatively they weren't shown around – were not known at all until a new generation of Rauschenberg, Johns, Pop artists __,[0:14:50] better known than the abstract expressionists. So they got to be known later.

LZ: The question I just really want to know is whether the idea of a new American painting was abroad early, like in the '40s and the early '50s, and whether that was an important idea for the painters.

LC: Well, the idea of the new American painting really, I would say, gelled in the late '40s, where all these artists began – well, they had begun meeting earlier, to be very explicit – but when they began really meeting was right after the war, at the

Cedar bar and at the Club and so on. And they formed some kind of a front there, and they became highly convinced of being the chosen ones,

LZ: Right.

LC: Of being infinitely superior to any of the new French or European artists that emerged at about the same time. Nobody, of course, questioned the greatness of Picasso or the earlier group,

LZ: Right.

LC: But the younger generation,

LZ: Their generation

LC: Of post-cubists. There were exceptions. Dubuffet was sort of accepted as an important artist right away, and so was Giacometti. But they were the only two, actually. The other ones were just dismissed as being of no importance. For instance, when comparisons occurred between say Kline and Soulange, people would say, how can you compare them? There's absolutely nothing they have in common. So, there was a rejection of European post-war art, and complete confidence in their art.

LZ: When did they start making money?

LC: Well, I can tell you that the Pollocks, in the early '50s, were selling – a Pollock that would be worth maybe $4 million now, were selling then for $3,000, $3,500. I can also recall that Ben Heller, also in the early '50s, did buy *Blue Poles*, and it was $8,000. And Pollock then, so in comparison, he had asked such a high price for it that he threw in the beautiful black and white painting called *Echo*, which is now at The Museum of Modern Art, in for free, just as a bonus because he thought that $8,000 was a tremendous sum. And that happened in the early '50s here.

LZ: And Ben Heller

LC: They started to make money, I would say, when Sidney Janis took over. Because then, the collectors who until then had bought the Europeans, and had confidence in Sidney Janis's judgment, began saying that if he was handling them, then that was the wave of the future, as far as collecting is concerned. So

for instance, collectors like the Tremaines, who had beautiful things, Picasso, Braque, the *Boogie Woogie* of Mondrian __,[0:18:24] they started buying then American art like Rothko, Pollock, and then, right after that, Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns and so on.

LZ: Did Newman start selling later than the others, later than Rothko and Pollock?

LC: Newman was not understood as early as the other ones. The ones that were immediately successful were Pollock, de Kooning, Kline. Rothko a little later. Because, after all, Rothko and Newman were really more mythical. There was not the famous gesture there with __[0:19:07], there was something else there. Actually, I never really considered them expressionists, if you want to use the term. Clyfford Still came even later than that, but about the time that Barney Newman became important.

LZ: Would that be early '60s?

LC: Oh no. [0:19:30 side conversation not transcribed, tape break] I would say that the real rapid increases in prices occurred at the end of the '60s.

LZ: Mm-hm. How do you think that success, media attention, and finally selling

LC: Well, always, media attention of course, and the consequent emergence of collectors, enthusiasm of the collectors, good curators in museums, good directors in museums, that plays a very important role. Good galleries, it's this whole ensemble of things.

LZ: How did it affect the artists? How did all of that development affect the artists, do you think?

LC: Well, that's very difficult to say. They are, each one of them, individuals, and react very differently to fame and increasing prices. People like the older generation, apart from de Kooning now, did not live to see the great increase of their reputation and prices.

LZ: No? I mean, by the time that Rothko died, he was quite famous, wasn't he?

LC: Rothko was still,

LZ: Not like today.

LC: Prices hadn't reached those levels. The prices that we have now are a relatively recent phenomenon. I would say, the '70s, not earlier than that.

LZ: One can't help being struck, when you look at the lives of these people, by how many of them ended badly, unhappily. Do you think that had anything to do with – what I'm wondering is, the rhetoric that went on with the work, the ideas which were so heroic and so much the artist isolated from society,

LC: Yes.

LZ: Whether it was hard for these artists to reconcile that with the acceptance by the society?

LC: Well, you know, everything in life, no matter what you're doing, what is happening to you, is gradual. If they had suddenly, if for instance, somebody like Pollock, whose fame really had just begun and whose prices were low at his death, would come back, he would be just amazed. But as far as the other ones were concerned – and I speak now about somebody who is very much alive and whose prices have gone to tremendous highs in a brief period of time, like Jasper Johns, he doesn't seem to be affected at all, really, in a sense.

LZ: Yes, but he's a very different generation. The whole theories and feelings about art are very different.

LC: He has a place, a nice place in St. Maartens, and at first it was very modest, and then, since he had more money, he added a swimming pool and things like that. But his lifestyle didn't change very much. He's just exactly the same as he used to be. The young painters, the very young ones that have been successful so rapidly like some of the __[0:23:20], __, or some of the Germans, not to mention people like Schnabel or Salle or Basquiat or Haring, just people that are quite young, for them, really, there was a fantastic and almost immediate jump from total poverty to enormous success. That's more difficult to gauge what's going to happen to them, because it's happened in the last three or four years.

LZ: Okay. So,

LC: Now, people, let's say, like Schnabel, just live in fantastic splendor. [laughter]

LZ: So do you think that the form of the work, specifically of the abstract expressionists, whether the work changes in any way in response to the changing situation?

LC: Well, what has happened with all good painters, their work always keeps changing, otherwise it would sort of die. And there are subjects __[0:24:40] their own, of course, search, __ the search, let's say, you notice that in every painter there are all kinds – there is a period that's relatively primitive. You can see it in Lichtenstein, where the dots are done by hand, and then they're done with a grid, and then everything gets perfected technically. But they are also influenced by what's going on with the surrounding, but not only the general mood of a given moment, but also what other painters are doing. Older painters are influenced by younger painters, but younger painters, for instance, take Lichtenstein again, abstract expressionism did come about with a vengeance, I mean, the new expressionist,

LZ: Neo-expressionism, right.

LC: So that, what did Lichtenstein do, just to quote one example, he first went back to German expressionist painting, but done in his usual style.

LZ: Right.

LC: But now, he went a step further. He just invented that brushstroke which is his usual comic-strip brushstroke, but then he added real brushstrokes to the application process, so that you see his show now in November, you'll see that his work has gone very expressionist, really, in mood, now.

LZ: Do you think that critics like Rosenberg and Greenberg had much effect on the artists?

LC: They were very, very influential, yes. There is no critic nowadays that has the same influence that those two had on the artists.

LZ: Can you talk about that specifically?

LC: Well it's sort of difficult and easy. They got together, they lived together, they saw each other, they talked about their problems. Of course, the critics would comment on what they were doing, explain to them what they were doing,

because probably Pollock or de Kooning or Kline didn't really know what they were doing. And the fact that what they were doing was explained, that had a certain influence on what they were doing after that; you know?

LZ: Was there a period of time when Clement Greenberg had to like what you were doing in order for you to be shown in certain places?

LC: Well, he had influence in every possible way. Actually, at one point, he did direct the galleries, you know.

LZ: No, I didn't know.

LC: Or was an advisor to a gallery, French and Company, in the Parke-Bernet building. And he would, and still does, see the work of the artists that he follows, and comment on what they're doing, approve, or disapprove. He played a – well now, probably what he does or says has become less important, but in the heroic times of the late '40s and early '50s, the influence of those two was quite immense. Then they also, more than the present day critics, they were also political thinkers. They had a political attitude. They had been involved in the Trotskyism of the '30s and were certain philosophical attitudes of those times. So, we have nothing of the kind any more now.

LZ: Just one more question, I think, and that is, when you were collecting abstract expressionism, who were you collecting? Did you collect everybody? Did you collect Pollock, you said, and de Kooning?

LC: You mean when I was collecting?

LZ: When you were collecting.

LC: Yes, well, those were the ones that I considered important, yes. There was Kline, de Kooning, Pollock, of course. I did not particularly understand at that time Rothko or Still. I never had any painting of Rothko's or Still. But for me, the two, the three, actually, that I liked best were Pollock, de Kooning, and Kline. Those were the ones that I really loved.

LZ: Mm-hm. Okay. Were there other people collecting them? Not too much, just a little.

LC: Oh, there were other collectors around. But there were relatively few, you know.

LZ: Relatively few, in comparison to today.

LC: __[0:29:55] aware of collectors all over the place, not only in New York but also in California and other places. But there were relatively few collectors at that time. I think that all that developed to an extraordinary degree, I would say, starting in the middle ‘60s.

LZ: Mm-hm.

LC: Before that, everything was infinitely quieter.

LZ: But by the ‘50s, most of these artists were living off their work? They could live off what they sold?

LC: By the ‘50s? Well, I know that certainly, in the late ‘40s, they couldn’t.

LZ: Right.

LC: I really know it because I lived with them, and I know that there was no money. For instance, we had the Club, and the dues was ten dollars a month, I think, to pay the rent, and then some people like Kline or de Kooning often couldn’t pay their ten dollars. I mean, we got to that point. Or that I went one day to de Kooning’s studio that was on Tenth Street at that time, and it was very cold in there, it was in the winter, and I told him I could agree with a little heat in here. So he says, “Yes, if you give me a couple of dollars to buy some __; you know? [0:31:25]

LZ: Right.

LC: So they were very, very poor. When I had this famous Ninth Street show, I think that I spent something like – I was not very wealthy either – I spent something like five or six hundred dollars in order to have the place painted. You could buy the paint for nothing, really -- __[0:31:50] because the artist __ – and to publish a little announcement that Kline designed. The whole thing, I think I spent five or six hundred dollars on the whole thing, and I was considered very rich. Others made small contributions, ten or twenty dollars, or whatever it was, but to make that show in ’51 possible.

LZ: And you don’t know, you couldn’t set a date for when they began to be more comfortable.

LC: So I would say it began really with Sidney Janis, so I would say middle ‘50s.

LZ: Good.

LC: That’s when they began to make money. Yah.

LZ: Okay.

LC: Actually, they were, Sidney began to show them in the early ‘50s, yeah, that’s right, yeah. So I would say by the middle ‘50s, he had sort of got them onto the mat, yeah. So I would say until then, they were making very little money and just somehow managing to survive.

LZ: Great. I’m sorry, just one more thing. I think that the idea of not – it seems from what I’m reading that the idea of not acquiescing to anybody else’s ideas, or not pandering to any kind of taste, was very important. That it was better to not have the money than to

LC: Oh, of course, they wouldn’t. I mean, no artist who deserves that name would ever even consider pandering to anybody. Oh, they would gratefully accept advice of, well, the Rosenbergs and the Greenbergs. That was not pandering; they were a part of the group; they belonged, completely, totally. But it’s not that those people, the Greenbergs or the Rosenbergs would tell them that you have to do this or that in order to make more money. [laughing] That was never considered.

LZ: Okay, well, thank you very much for your time.

LC: Well, I hope that it will be __.

LZ: Oh I’m sure it will. [0:33:55]

END of INTERVIEW at 0:34:04