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Leo Castelli (on Rauschenberg)

First real contact was in connection with 9th Street Show in May 1951. This show came out of The Club (Kline, de Kooning, David Smith, Tworkov -- also Cage & Feldman), when members decided to use empty store front on 9th street east of 5th for group show. Eighty or ninty painters and sculptors represented, not just club members -- everything new that was going on. Castelli, the money man (he contributed about $400 out of his own pocket, was repaid with small works by Pollock, de Kooning et al which he later sold for a great deal more to start his gallery), didn't know R. at all well then, but got him to put something in the show.

Castelli saw him occasionally after that, but nothing special. First real revelation was "the great red show at the Egan Gallery, in December 1954. This was a great sensation, an astonishing event. It was like Coney Island, with umbrellas turning, lights flashing-- and it didn't seem at the time to be in any way related to anything else. It seemed altogether new and unprecedented. Now, of course, we can see that it was related to many things. It would be interesting to know how R. came by the Dada spirit then, though, because he didn't really know about Duchamp then -- no one really knew about Duchamp. Perhaps through Cage...

~~Soon after this came the incident of the erased de Kooning.~~ R.

Castelli still didn't know R. too well when he went down to his Fulton Street studio in March, 1957, to make a decision about him. C. had just opened his own gallery but didn't really know where he was going with it, hadn't found his direction. Two days before that, he had seen, at the old Jewish Museum, a painting by Jasper Johns that had stunned him. It was a green target. "I was thunderstruck. It was like the sensation you feel when you see a very pretty girl for the first time, and after five minutes you want to ask her to marry you. I had never heard of Jasper Johns, and the name itself didn't even sound right -- could someone really be called that? In any case I decided that I wanted to meet him and see what else he was doing. And then, two days later, while I was in Bob's studio looking over his pictures to decide which ones to put in a show, I found that Johns was living in the studio underneath." Castelli went right down and saw Johns' other work, and offered him a show on the spot. According to C., Johns said "All right. I don't mind if I do." So the Johns show was actually decided on before the Rauschenberg.

Both Johns and Rauschenberg had something in Castelli's group show in ~~the Spring~~ May of 1957, which he called "New Work," and which also included work by Marisol, Ortman, Morris Louis, Al Leslie, Norman Bluhm. Johns had a blue flag, R. had "Gloria," the painting with four newsfotos of Gloria Vanderbilt grinning from ear to ear over being wed for the third time -- ironic picture, now owned by major collector in Belgium. Of all the people in that show, only Johns and Rauschenberg are still with Castelli. The two most important. Like Picasso and Braque, except no collaboration. At the time, both of them were doing window decoration for Tiffany to support themselves. In spite of the red show at Egan, nobody would buy R. Nobody even knew about Johns. They were very close then; for a long time, Johns was R's only friend, the only one who gave him any encouragement at all. ~~Probably a difficult relationship now, with some rivalry, but still close.~~

Castelli gave one-man shows to both R and Johns the following winter. (Johns first January '58) Says now that his relationship with R. is much more than just as a dealer. "It is a very close friendship. I value him very much as an artist, as a man, and as a friend. It is the same with Jasper."

over

~~C. says R's first serious collector was Ileana.~~

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"I used to think that Bob didn't really know what he was doing, but very soon I realized that he knew a great deal, more or less instinctively it seemed. It's extraordinary how much he knows, particularly for one whose ~~xxzxx~~ emotional life is so rich."

Castelli feels R. has deep roots in contemporary American painting, especially deKooning, but that he also brings something new that reflects Cage, Duchamp. Where did it come from? Impossible to say.

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Ileana Sonnabend

First meeting at the 9th Street Show. She saw him come in, thought him very handsome and elegant, asked "Who is that prince?" Later, though, her first reaction to his work was strongly negative. At the Stable Annual where R. hung his "Garden," she was annoyed. R. passed her on the stairs, asked eagerly how she liked his piece, she said "I don't like it." Grateful now, because she can better understand the adverse effect his work has on others.

"The hostility and lack of understanding bothered him, though, and it still bothers him. He is so sensitive, and his paintings are like extensions of himself, like his children out there. I remember a painter, not even a very good painter, who came into Bob's first show with Leo and looked around quickly and then said, to Bob, 'Why don't you start painting, and stop all this ridiculous business? You're a good painter, you know.' Bob was crushed." *

(Note: The first visit to R's studio, when Leo was carried away by Jasper, seems to have become very painful in retrospect. Ileana says that for a long time afterward, Bob wasn't really sure how they felt about his own work, although they thought they had made it clear that they very enthusiastic). This did not keep Bob from being enormously happy over the success of Jasper's show, which preceded his).

R.'s first show at Castelli, Ileana feels, was the most brilliant of all. It had Rebus, Bed, Odalisk, etc. Bed was the shocker. People saw it as bloodied, the scene of a murder, all manner of horrors.

Ileana feels that R. is a little quieter now than then, a little less gay. "He could be so excessively gay over anything at all -- over it's being a nice day, over seeing a particular shade of red somewhere -- and by the same token, excessively sad. He doesn't believe in gravity, you know. At times he thinks he can float. After the Stockholm show, he was standing at the top of a beautiful staircase, and it seemed to him that he could just float down it, so he tried, and took a frightful fall." [When R. ~~first~~ came to Paris in 1961, we commented on the flowers – how different they looked from American flowers].

*Hostility has always bothered him, but has never deterred him in the slightest from doing what he wanted to do. Cage's idea of R.'s "naked heart," his word for love.

Cage once told Ileana, "You know, I'm always trying to teach people, but I have nothing to teach Bob. What I want to express intellectually, he lives."

R. once said, "What's outside the window paints my picture." But Ileana agrees that his control is really absolute. "He is the boss."

On MMA "combination of circumstances" for not acquiring a major R.: Barr didn't like his work. The first one there to recognize his importance was Seitz, after seeing the large collection of R's at the home of Count Panza,* near Milan (a noted collector, he has 45 Rauschenbergs, all difficult and all important; twenty Klines; fifteen Rothkos). Seitz pressed, and MMA tried to buy Magician from Ileana. She felt they should have a more important work, but was willing. They delayed so long that she finally asked for it back (it was in the MMA 16 Americans show). Barr stressed "curatorial problems," thought work might fall apart, said most R's were too big.

The first R. bought from Castelli gallery went to a woman who later confessed that she had put it in the closet because the delivery boys all laughed at it. Castelli bought it back at double the price. Count Panza now owns it.

*Conte Giuseppe PANZA di Biumo, who prefers to be called Dott. Giuseppe Panza.

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Thomas B. Hess

Spoleto: Hess chose the work, sent over R's "Bed." Giovanni Urbini, the Italian responsible for that end, objected to the whole American contribution and refused to hang it at first, because of it's being entirely abstract. Great resistance then in Europe to whole idea of American abstract art. After protests by the American chapter of the International Association of Art Critics, the show was hung -- all except Rauschenberg's "Bed" which hung in Urbini's office as the worst example of American non-art. This was the first Spoleto Festival.

Says older generation of artists liked Bob and his work both, no hostility. Everybody liked Eda's show, etc. A nice kid with a great deal of talent. ?

Sees Bob's work as being logical development of contemporary American painting, with no break at all. In addition to which, there is the element of parody: "Take that painting where he does a typically de Kooning painting and then mounts two electric fans on either side of the canvas blowing on it. Everybody in the art world knows that Bill de Kooning is always talking about the problem of drying paint -- either it dries too fast so you can't paint over it, or it dries too slowly... Or the Eisenhower picture, Factum, where he did two paintings that are almost exactly the same. That's a marvellous satiric comment on the whole idea of chance in art, isn't it?" *

(Note: Hess referred to "comment that destroyed John Cage" by Diamond, the composer, who once said he would "rather chance a choice than choose a chance.")

Hess sees R. as being completely involved in the New York art scene, and completely involved in art history. He's crazy about painting -- when he uses an object it's not because of any ideas about the object; rather, the object functions as a certain stroke of white in a painting by Manet.

"Obviously he's a limited kind of artist, with very limited goals. He's not out to hit the jackpot, by which I mean he's not out to create a masterpiece every time that will change the course of painting..." Says R's statement about working in the gap between life and art is just typical of the preoccupations of the time; deKooning and the others were doing the same thing.

* **Another example Hess didn't mention might be the early combines which enabled viewers actually to "get into the painting" by the act of opening a door attached to it.**

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Castelli file