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Karp, Ivan

A 1990 Perspective on the Sixties:

Ivan Karp and Lewis Pollock Remember Provincetown

Interview by Ann Wilson Lloyd

For one season in 1963, Ivan Karp, lately called the art market's super-dealer, opened what turned out to be the precursor of his New York OK Harris Gallery, on Commercial Street in Provincetown. It was a joint enterprise undertaken with Karp's friend, Boston attorney and collector Lewis Pollock and Pollock's wife Lynn. There they *showed* work by unknown artists of the embryonic Pop movement—the first offerings from the likes of Roy Lichtenstein, Jim Dine, Claus Oldenburg, and Tom Wesselmann, all of whom Karp had under surveillance in his wintertime role as director of the Leo Castelli Gallery in New York City—but what they *sold* was blueberry jam and water pistols.

For three summers previously, Karp was director at Nat Halper's HCE Gallery in Provincetown. There the offerings were more mainstream, artists like Robert Motherwell and Milton Avery. Commercially, however, neither OK Harris Provincetown, nor the HCE Gallery approached any kind of success, Karp and Pollock say. Even with such solid art world connections as Karp had developed, Provincetown, it seems, has always been a tough market to crack.

I interviewed Karp in his art-cluttered office at OK Harris Gallery on West Broadway in SoHo. With an ever-present lit cigar, he waxed exuberant, with frequent asides "to expunge that part," about his summer salad days in Provincetown's bohemian late 1950s and early '60s. Lewis Pollock met me in his elegant Boston law office halfway up a glass and steel highrise on State Street. There was art here as well, though it was hung with sparse decorum. He recalled Provincetown's sixties' scene, with lawyerly discretion, from the perspective of a young, equally enthusiastic collector.

— Ann Wilson Lloyd

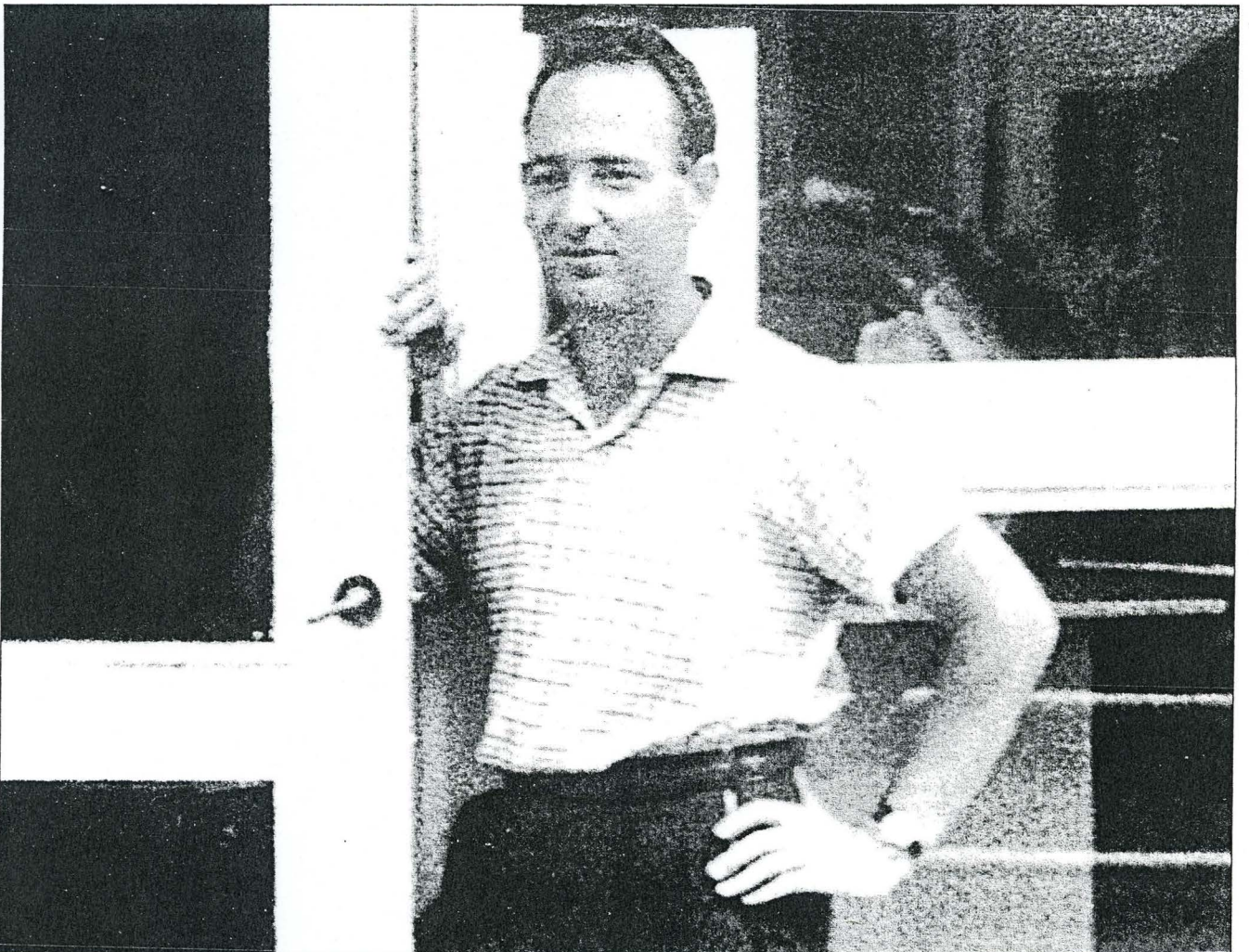
IVAN KARP

I started going to Provincetown back in 1941. I was there before I went into the army, and we spent a lot of time there in the interval. Of course I wasn't what you might call a full grown substance at that point. I had been in the art community beginning in 1955. I started working in a New York art gallery in 1956, for Martha Jackson, then I was with Leo Castelli, and during the summer months I was in Provincetown, which was a nice destination for me. I was very happy there. I knew every building on the street. I really knew the landscape. I knew who lived out in the dunes, and who lived in the back streets. Everyone wanted studio space on the bay. I bought two beautiful little cottages out near the sand dunes with my then wife. I moved from Provincetown to Truro. The de Groots occupied the other cabin. It was a very pretty piece of property, half an acre with views of the ocean. We paid \$7000 for it. I called it Karp's Kosy Kottages, and had signs up that said that. It was a much more intimate setting, the physical character of the town still had its own qualities. The piers were still intact, it was a large fishing community then, and it had a lot of rustic charm.

During the winter, I worked at the Leo Castelli Gallery here in the city, so I was already very elaborately enwrapped in the art world and I knew all of the major artists during the late '50s and early '60s. The summer of 1959, I was living in a cottage

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Ivan Karp at the HCE Gallery, Provincetown, c. 1959-60.



just off the back of Commercial Street, and Al Held asked us if he could paint in our garage. For that whole summer he painted his big bold abstract pictures in the back yard. In 1960, in the same house, or maybe even that same year, 1959, Henry Geldzelder, who had just graduated from Princeton's art or art history department, came to me and said, "You have to tell me how to function in the New York art world. I want to enter the art world. I want to be a luminary and I want to meet all the fancy people." So I gave him a list of all the people he should meet, everybody he should know, and he went back to New York and began his research. He came back in a pickup truck or a van, with John Chamberlain and Mark di Suvero, and they were headed out to visit David Smith in upstate New York.

The first time I worked in a Provincetown gallery was in 1959 or '60 at the HCE Gallery. It was operated by Nathan Halper, a rather eccentric personality. He was a chess specialist and he owned a very handsome space on Commercial Street, in the East End.

The gallery showed local artists and others as well. It showed a number of luminaries, Robert Motherwell, who lived there, and Milton Avery and a lot of artists who were not particularly well known. We did one-person shows and several group shows as well. A few paintings were sold, but it wasn't what you might call a commercially active substance; it wasn't a major fine arts enterprise. Mr. Halper was fascinated by the art scene, as he was fascinated by literature, so he interconnected with the various arts.

The abstract expressionists pretty much dominated the art scene; all of our heroes were first generation abstract expressionists, but we enjoyed variations on that, especially at Castelli, which was a very progressive gallery. Since I was in the catbird's seat in New York, people knew me in many cases better than they knew Mr. Halper. Artists traveling to Provincetown and collectors coming up were acquainted with my activity in the city. So there was a lot of dramatic activity. We did a lot of innovative exhibitions. I was mentally acclimated to showing a rich variety of things, which were also shown at the HCE Gallery. All the work was pretty professional, nothing was shown just because the artist happened to live in town, though one way or the other, almost all of them were connected to Provincetown. The work was fairly in advance of the general audience. They were

not just little seascapes and quaint Provincetown views. I was in support of every artist that Mr. Halper showed. A lot of them were sentimental favorites, friends of the family, and so forth, but it was professional.

We had a Motherwell show, of his drawings and collages, basically simple drawings and gestures which were not for a larger audience. They weren't very expensive, though Motherwell was part of the abstract expressionist momentum and he had a lot of community respect. But his work was very esoteric, you know. He was well known, but I don't think we had a

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commercial success. Even Milton Avery, who was also well known, was still selling for a couple of thousand dollars a painting, and they were not that successful. Things of course broke open for him rather dramatically in the late 1960s. The paintings in the gallery averaged a couple of thousand dollars, maybe four thousand dollars tops.

It was an enjoyable place to be. I loved Provincetown at that time, I knew any number of people in the community. I knew all the artists there. I used to attend all the events, go to these vigorous conflicts that used to take place at the Art Association, go to the openings at the other galleries down the street, where we criticized what they showed.

I worked for Halper for three seasons. I flew into town several times in 1962, but before that it was always a long arduous drive. I had my own car then, but before that somebody else drove me up. I once drove with Nat Halper, one of the most terrifying experiences in my lifetime!

Then, I think it was in '62, that Lewis

Pollock, a friend of mine, said we should open our own gallery in town. He was going to sponsor it, and he said, "Come up with a name," and I called it OK Harris, oddly enough. I still have a matchbook that says OK Harris, Provincetown. It was on the other end of Commercial Street, not a very large space. We were not locked into strictly a Provincetown format; we showed things that I had started to see in New York then; Jim Dine, Claes Oldenburg. We were probably among the first public forums for their art. It's possible Oldenburg himself appeared at the gallery, but I don't think Jim Dine ever did. I may have had a Roy Lichtenstein on the wall, maybe even an Andy Warhol, whom I had just seen at that time.

At any rate, that gallery was not commercially successful either, the work again was far in advance of the audience. It lasted just one summer. It was the precursor of my SoHo gallery in that I used the same name, but I didn't open this gallery until 1969.

The name OK Harris was plucked out of the air. Earlier, Bob Scull, a major American collector, had come to me. He wanted to open a gallery on 57th Street. He asked me and Dick Bellamy, who also spent a lot of time in Provincetown, and who was going to run this gallery for him, to come up with a name. We came up with a list of 50 names, and we decided that OK Harris would be great. It was my choice; it had a kind of an American emblematic quality about it, you

know, it was quite memorable. But it was rejected by that gallery, which eventually became the Green Gallery. That was Dick Bellamy's name for it. Bellamy's Oil and Steel was one of the names on that list we proposed, and Acme Gallery. Oh, we had names of all kinds.

So I kept OK Harris as a name in reserve, and I used it for the little gallery in Provincetown. There's hardly any documentation of it. Lewis and I operated it. We showed Lucas Samaras, and Mr. Pollock bought the first collages of Oldenburg, \$50 apiece I believe they were. He still has them; two little plaques made out of wood. He bought a couple of Jim Dines for \$50 apiece too; think of that!

Pollock used to come to Provincetown regularly at that time, and he thought it would be a nice thing to do. I imagine if the gallery had remained in operation, it would have gained a little momentum, but as I say, the work shown there was pretty offbeat stuff, the vanguard of American art. It was more exciting to do that, to show what was

considered dangerous and threatening and a little bit adventurous. I was very much stimulated by what was happening in the New York art scene outside of abstract expressionism. I thought that the cognoscenti, which was mostly the artist community, should be acquainted with it. You know—I was going to show them *my* stuff—I was going to be the one to make them educated!

We did a series of one-person shows, but mostly group shows. And that was all there was to it. I was really a very happy person there in Provincetown. I had some beautiful little cottages way out, so serene. I had a number of romances there. It was the right place for that. In the summertime, every night was a spectacular sunset. We used to know all the remote beaches and have social events out on them. They were my bohemian years!

The visual arts were dominant. Of course there was the theater and a lot of literary people as well, but we thought that the pulse of the visual arts was really the

strongest element there. The number of artists living there was myriad. I must have known nine-tenths of the community. When we had a social event there were always 50 artists in attendance. Nanno de Groot was a marvelous man. He was a movie actor type, six foot two, beautiful blond hair, handsome, always sunburned, in wonderful condition. We showed his paintings at the HCE Gallery, with some measure of success. John Grillo was a marvelous personality. Tony Vevers, Paul Resika, Jim Forsberg—hearing those names gives me a chill. I knew Kline, I visited with him, he did some good work there, and Rothko also. I saw Motherwell all the time. Myron Stout was a close friend. He showed at the first New York gallery I was associated with, the Hansa Gallery, in 1956. Dick Bellamy and I ran that gallery. We showed Myron and a few other Provincetown artists, people we used to hang out with and mostly disciples of Hofmann. Karl Knaths worked with Myron Stout on a book about the history of cubism. They worked

**On bench, left to right:
Sam Wagstaff,
Roy Lichtenstein, his child;
foreground: Julian Weber;
woman unknown;
Provincetown, 1963.**



together for 20 years on it. They used to spend days on it. Myron was a very precise individual. He only painted two pictures a year, and you would go in and see the same painting that had been on the easel for three years, and he would be adjusting it. He would change the curve a sixteenth of an inch, and for three weeks he would look at it, and then it would go back to where it had been! Incredible obsession! Incredible!!

Also Bultman, and Leo Manso and Tworkov, whom we showed at Castelli Gallery. His work was an offshoot of abstract expressionism, but a lyrical style. Then he went into these tonality pictures, which were very handsome works.

The same coteries turned up for every social event. It was a very intimate family community. Jan Muller was one of the artists we showed in the Hanso Gallery, he was a very close friend of mine and Dick Bellamy's. Bob Thompson we showed there because he was a significant disciple of Jan Muller. That whole Hansa group turned up in Provincetown also. George Segal, occasionally, Alfred Leslie, Lucas Samaras, John Chamberlain. Mary Frank and her first husband, Robert Frank the photographer. We made a movie there. Robert Frank was the cinematographer and I was the director. It was hilarious! In '64 we had a cottage in Truro, now owned by Carmen Cicero. Richard Smith was there then, a British painter. We sublet his house which had been the Truro railroad station, a wonderful little place. Smith had achieved some real momentum in Britain with his kite-like structures. He did a lot of commission work.

Larry Rivers was the last of the bohemians, one of the most vivid personalities of the set. We knew everybody's girlfriends, all the spouses, all the intrigues, all the romances, all the families breaking up and everything like that. Lichtenstein was in Provincetown with me. Our first marriages broke up the same month! We commiserated with each other. I remember walking the beach with Roy, saying, "God Almighty! This is the most stressful thing imaginable! What turmoil!" I had a son, he had two boys and his career was just getting under way. He has a very sweet personality. Tom Wesselman is the only one of that group that I still see regularly. We still show his work at OK Harris sometimes.

I used to see Hofmann all the time. He was a wonderful person, much loved, an important landmark. He had to teach to make a living, his work didn't sell all that well.

It didn't sell well until the last five years of his life. His late work is his best, his other work had a lot of academic elements. He used to paint a picture a day.

Hofmann was always spirited and always pontificating in his very nice way. We used to all go over to watch his classes, listen to his spiel, and it was true that his students could barely understand his critiques. The artists used to just pluck out phrases that would encourage them. But he was never really discouraging to anybody, he never really demeaned anybody's achievements. He always gave them some kind of positive feelings, but he was not what you might call

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easily assimilated. You just couldn't make it out, with his heavy German accent. And he was deaf besides, so you had to yell. I remember he was always there, whenever it was an arts occasion. He was very, very pleasant and everybody enjoyed his presence. He had a real glowing spirit. The image of him is really clear in my mind. He was extremely encouraging to younger artists, but he very much dominated a lot of them also. His method of teaching and his style was so vivid that artists became overwhelmed by it. In the late '60s, you saw three thousand disciples of Hans Hofmann. Everyone was using his push-pull colors. Anyone working in bright buoyant colors was a Hofmann disciple.

There were a lot of old-timers living there who worked in traditional styles, and they were fairly antagonistic to the more recent developments, so there was a lot of internal strife and stress. There used to be a lot of turmoil at the meetings at the Art Association if somebody's work came in that was contrary to somebody's convic-

tions. Phil Malicoat was a local landmark. He was a nice painter in the Gothic style. There were a lot of people like that there, amazing old-timers.

At that time the Chrysler Museum was formulated and Mr. Chrysler was usually in attendance. Chrysler actually had a very open attitude to contemporary art, he bought a few things from the HCE Gallery, but not anything from me at my little emporium. He put on some interesting shows when he was operating his museum. He showed some classics, but there were a lot of things that came into his collections that were not bona fide works of art. He showed them too and there was a lot of turmoil about it. He was considered the big force of destiny, the great tycoon who could liberate everybody from poverty. But all along he thought the main part of his collection was his glass collection!

We all lived in poverty at the edge of the world. We had to wait for a social event, an opening at a gallery, to eat. They were strenuous times, but you could live cheaply. There was always somebody giving a dinner party. Lobster was so cheap, you could always have a lobster party. I was the only one making a living, who had a job. Everyone else was an artist. I used to have to feed all my friends, the classic starving artist syndrome. The art world hadn't developed the momentum it has now, where everyone finds some level to succeed on. There were no grants, no big group shows. I remember Oldenburg lived in a basement on the lower east side in New York, Jim Dine was a slave. Oldenburg's sculptures sell for two or three million dollars now, Jim Dine's paintings for three, four hundred thousand! Unbelievable!

Everybody turned up there at least one time or another. Not of long duration, but they all showed their face there. You had to look in and see your friends there. It was the place to go, a destination of real consequence—the only one on the east coast, actually, outside the city. There was the Maine school, but they were all painting rocks and lobster traps. The Hamptons were really just beginning then. The illustrious dealers turned up too in those days. Sam Kootz, because he visited with Hofmann. I don't think Sidney Janis ever turned up, but Martha Jackson, Betty Parsons, Peggy Guggenheim, Mrs. Poindexter did, the old timers, you know. Most of them are not around any more.

The whole art scene is very political, as you know. In the old days, it was more

fragmented, there were more factions. So many proto-cubists and post-cubists and painters of various schools who had their own little coteries; schools dedicated to a particular point of view, so they attracted students with the same viewpoint. It wasn't quite congealed yet, but now it's ferocious. There's money and there're personalities. The whole second generation, the ones that I grew in with, when I was writing art criticism first and then as a dealer, these people stayed in my life, in the main current of my daily life.

LEWIS POLLOCK

My wife Lynn and I took our honeymoon in Provincetown in '54. We met Boris Margo, and his wife Jan Gelb, and they took us in and showed us their home in the dunes. We bought a Margo painting and a Margo print from them directly, and that used up a hundred of the two hundred dollars for our honeymoon. So we came home a week early. I guess we met Ivan about that time.

Art is our life. You may think I practice law, but it's just a sideline. We spent half our honeymoon money on art. We were very interested in it, but didn't understand anything, we had sort of fallen into it. Then we went off to the army in Germany. We went to Venice and saw the Peggy Guggenheim collection and when we came back in '56 we reestablished relations with Ivan. My parents had a home in Falmouth and we would go up to Provincetown, we would go to see Ivan in New York. He was introducing us and trying to tell us about contemporary art. Also I was friendly with Allan Stone, who was still at law school, and he and I practiced law together in Boston. Then he went off to New York and was also trying to teach us about contemporary American art from a totally different point of view. Those two people we have been friendly with ever since.

My wife and I and Ivan and another friend of ours became partners in the gallery in Provincetown, and the idea was that with whatever profits we would make we would

**Jan Muller and
Mary Frank in
Provincetown, 1957.**



buy the art we were showing. Well, we didn't make any profits, in fact we only sold a few paintings. Nobody cared much; we also sold locally made blueberry jam and water pistols. We located the gallery right in the Mews, which was just being built that summer, right across from the church which became the Chrysler Museum. So lots and lots of people came in. It was very, very active as far as audiences went, but nobody bought.

Ivan wanted to call the gallery OK Harris. He was still working at Castelli's as director, but he had an idea of having his own gallery even then. He didn't go on his own until '69, but in '63 we registered the name OK Harris Massachusetts. It's still registered in my name, I think. I kid Ivan about it from time to time. Ivan made up a great big rubber stamp: OK ART, it said. Henry Geldzelder, who was very friendly with Ivan, was a heavy-set kind of guy. Ivan stamped him on his tummy: OK ART. He was a living ad for us!



We were showing Lichtenstein and Kline and Lucas Samaras, whatever Ivan brought up from Castelli. Prices were very reasonable. Kline had just died in '62 and you could get a nice Kline for a thousand, fifteen hundred dollars, our highest priced stuff. The Johns' or the Lichtensteins were a lot cheaper. We had a very good time. We had very nice shows and at the end of the summer, we were able to acquire a few things, some by way of gifts, and a few by way of paying the artist a few dollars rather than just shipping the stuff back. We lost all our money, though!

The response from the public was very negative. The police raided us once because we had a really timid little picture of a lady on a horse, a watercolor, in the window on Commercial Street. I think the artist's name was Adele Weber. I mean today it could be in *Life* magazine, or anywhere. We didn't even think it was bad then, it was just a nice little drawing. But those were the good old days.

We did sell one or two Lucas Samaras' and Roz Drexlers—she became a playwright later—and a few people from Castelli. I don't think we sold any Klines or anything that

expensive. We had a show for Lucas Samaras. Ivan hung the show and Lucas didn't like it and he rehung it. Lucas babysat our gallery, too. Later, Ivan reminded him of the time he worked for us, and he said, "I never did work for you." They argued, and Lucas said, "I helped you, but I don't consider that I worked for you, 'cause you never paid me." We didn't have any money to pay him even from his own show!

It was a very enjoyable summer. It was Ivan's opinion that the gallery could have been located anywhere in Provincetown; we didn't need that much traffic. He thought if anybody was going to buy, they would buy because they knew Ivan, and not from just stumbling into the gallery. I believe he was 98% right. We might have sold one or two things to somebody else, but people came to Provincetown because they were looking for Ivan and what Ivan was doing; we could have been located in any part of town. Hirshhorn came to town and Chrysler was in town; they would buy things for a couple of hundred dollars and get major works. Nobody bought anything from us.

We used to go to the A House a lot. Reggie Cabral certainly had great works on the wall. He used to have these upside-down crates to direct the light from the ceiling. I think they were just plain open crates. Perhaps the art didn't survive the abuse it got. One night there was a fight with Norman Mailer at the A House. That probably wasn't uncommon.

Provincetown always had a lively and pleasant social scene, fairly unique, it was always nice to see that you could have a different kind of social scene, without any confrontation for the most part. People accepted each other. The kind of art we dealt in nobody ever liked. I used to bring art to my office, but my partners would make me take it away, wondering why I was so crazy when I seemed so normal otherwise. Our social friends were the same way. We were buying things from Ivan or Castelli. In 1960 we bought, I think, the first Oldenburg. He used a mackerel barrel and he made a flag hammered together; it was a wooden flag. We also bought a Jim Dine that same day, and a painting from a guy named Bob Thompson, who died a couple of years after that in Paris. We still have all three of those. They were all less than a hundred dollars and Oldenburg didn't even sign that work. I think he was working as a dishwasher. But he came to my house about ten years ago and felt that he ought to sign it, so he did—"Claes Oldenburg," and dated it 1960, which was very nice of him, because certainly nobody would think of it as a Claes

Oldenburg, though he did do some more of those flags that summer. He didn't have any money for canvas, or leather, or whatever he was going to go on to work with.

Ivan was in on that transaction. He thought Jim Dine, who was in his early 20s then, was going to be a good painter. Ivan certainly has a great eye. He thought Lucas Samaras was going to be good. We like Ivan's eye a lot. We continue to have our disputes, but he's mostly right. His batting average is probably better than anyone else in America over the long haul.

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Yes, Ivan can see the future. As a matter of fact, I took Ivan to Russia in the fall of '88 to lecture at the University of Moscow and the Ministry of Culture and to show slides. I think he was the first one to do that. It was really a stunning visual experience for many of the artists. Ivan answered questions about how the art market works in America. They were very curious about that, as they were just beginning to consider the commercialization of their works, and had very little idea about how it worked. Ivan enlightened them as only Ivan could do.

In those early days, it was always a very fragile market. When we first met Ivan, there were probably only two or three artists who could earn a living from painting in America. We tried to buy young up-and-coming artists before their prices went to the Jasper Johns level. We still do. We bought a major Lichtenstein from Ivan at Castelli for three hundred dollars in '61, and they

kept doubling the price of Lichtensteins every year. I pointed out to them that if they kept doing that, in 30 years the prices would be in the millions, and they agreed. That was what they were aiming for. And that's what happened; they were right.

Ivan never cared if something was painterly. Lichtenstein certainly wasn't painterly. That was the difference between Ivan and our friend Allan Stone. Allan insisted that an artist had to know how to draw and how to stretch a canvas. Ivan didn't care about any of that. Ivan just cared that an artist was making a powerful statement, an important statement. Allan thought a person should have an ability to paint. And they were both right. There was plenty of room for all points of view. Both of those dealers were able to identify important artists.

But it was very hard for everybody involved in the early years, not just the dealers, but the collectors too. The stuff that we were selling in Provincetown was looked at with jaundiced eyes. You had to be very eccentric to even consider putting money into something like that. We all did it because we had to, it was a passion. And we still have it. It's a guiding force. It's nice to see that someone you had faith and confidence in did grow and develop a career and we were able to be of some assistance when the artist really needed it. We got a Bob Moskowitz painting on a window shade from Ivan. I have a whole bunch of Peter Hutchinsons at home. We handled him at the gallery, some block prints, and a thing that he hammered together. It's a really big construction of wood and a piece of an automobile engine. And Tony Vevers; Lynn and I met him and really liked his stuff, and we bought a couple of paintings from him

at his home, very early in the '60s, or late '50s. I bought our first Chamberlain from Ivan and Leo in '59, even though at the time I thought it was very tough, hard to take. Now it seems mild compared to what you see today.

I wish I could tell you more about Provincetown, but it was just a moment in time, a magical moment. ■