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GALLERY**

"I've never been with a group where there's been such sustained respect and understanding for each member."
— Robert Motherwell



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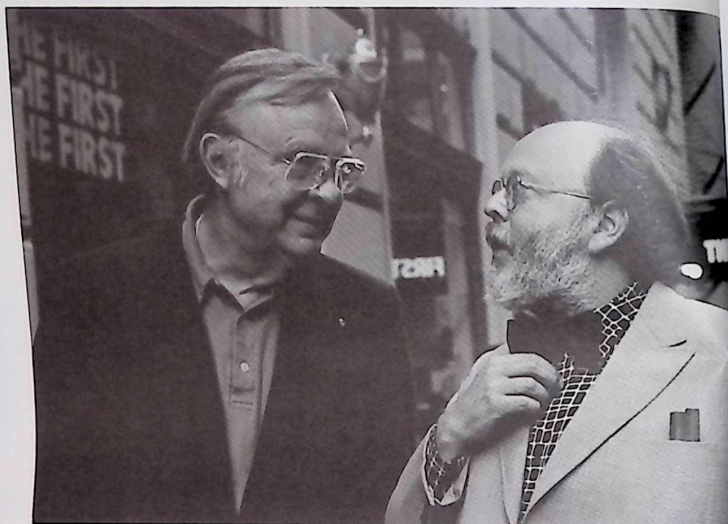
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HENRY GELDZAHLER

famous curator

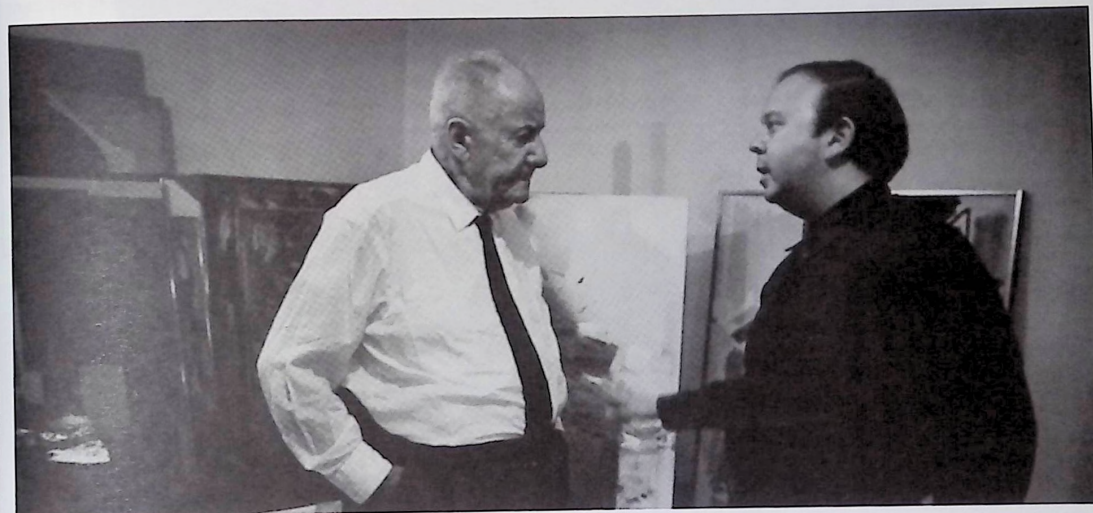


BEFORE HENRY GELDZAHLER became a famous curator, there was no such thing as a famous curator. "Famous curator!" he says, shocked less by the oxymoron than by the fact that, after 18 years of producing exhibitions of contemporary art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and winning new appreciation for the curator's role, his salary was a disastrous \$28,000. All the while Geldzahler was one of Andy Warhol's closest friends, a first-hand witness to the pop way of thinking. "Pop took the outside and put it inside, and it took the inside and put it outside," Warhol said. Pop saw that the popular media we are most saturated with, to the point where its obviousness has become banal, had become the new unconscious. In one of Warhol's films, *Henry*, Geldzahler sat on a couch and smoked a cigar for 90 minutes. While the camera ran, Warhol went off and played rock and roll. "The

film gives me away entirely," Geldzahler said, providing a minute examination of his "entire vocabulary of gestures."

Oddly, this death by tickling the ribs of boredom is related to the painstaking work of Myron Stout, a painter Geldzahler knew at the beginning of his career when he was spending his summers in Provincetown, where Stout lives yearround, quietly working on small adjustments especially to the edges of his black and white paintings. Many of the artist's few works took over 20 years to complete to his satisfaction. "We used to say about his graphic drawings and his paintings that he would 'tick' them to death." With the drawings, he almost wore through the paper."

Following his tenure at the Met, Geldzahler served as Commissioner of Cultural Affairs for the City of New York under Edward Koch. For the past five years, he has been curating a series



S. Schapiro, Life Picture Collection

of small exhibitions at the Dia Art Foundation in Bridgehampton, not far from his house in Southampton where the following interview took place. Recently at the Dia he showed early work by Stout, and two New York galleries, Kent and Flynn, participated in a dual Stout show this winter. In his essay for the exhibition catalogue, Geldzahler attributes the uncanny staying power of a Stout image to its endless adjustment, a method intended "to engage that rarely considered and more rarely discussed sense, the haptic." "By haptic," Geldzahler explained to me over the telephone, "I mean what your eye intuitively what your hand would feel if you touched what you see."

Christopher Busa: When you were 15, you saw a show of Arshile Gorky's at the Whitney. You stayed three hours, came home, threw up, slept for 18 hours, then, two years later, announced your ambition to become a curator. I'm curious about your visceral response, at that early age, to those otherworldly paintings.

Henry Geldzahler: I was dizzy and disoriented because I saw things swimming. I didn't know Matta at the time. I didn't know underwater photography. I didn't even know about his Armenian background. I knew the concept of surrealism, but I never thought to associate it with the living dream I felt. There was also an element of sickening nightmare in the sense that I was no longer standing on two legs looking at a flat surface. I felt as though

I was falling down a coal chute backwards. Maybe you are too young to remember when they used to deliver coal down a chute. My horror was always going down one of those things backwards.

CB: A coal chute dates you.

HG: Everything has to do with being five years old, I'm sure.

CB: I'm not so sure, myself.

HG: For me it does. Recovering innocent feelings: that's the basis of the way I experience art.

CB: Looking at the Gorky, you passed through a looking glass that was like an aquarium and suddenly you weren't standing on *terra firma*.

by Christopher Busa

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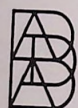
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HG: That reminds me of crossing the ocean on a boat, which we did when I was five. We left Belgium, where I was born, to come to America. Everybody was ill. My mother is very easily seasick. We used to do this terrible thing when we were little kids, standing in front of her and swaying ever so slightly. I would laugh when she began to get dizzy, but what goes around comes around. I do it to my mother, and Gorky does it to me.

CB: What other artists have made you sick?

HG: There was a particular painting by Robert Irwin called "Mint Condition," mint-colored in the background and pink in three parallel lines. It came out of Rothko, I was aware of that, and predated minimalism which didn't become a phase until two years later. It was an attempt to strip down, rather than complicate, which was the preferred abstract expressionist impulse. I was looking at a unified surface, evidently harmonious, while at the same time there was a visual struggle. The feeling I felt was not of swimming, but of floating. This color, that was me, was floating within color. I must have internalized it immediately. That's the leap. I don't understand how it happens. I'm looking at something and being it at the same time.

CB: Where did you see the painting by Irwin?

HG: In California, my first trip, in '62. At the airport, Frank Stella gave me a little drawing with an inscription that said, "The Green Hornet goes to Los Angeles." I came back and John Chamberlain met me at the airport. I was reeling when I got off the plane. He asked me what was wrong. I said that something happened in California and I won't get to the bottom of it until I can live with it. Buy it on my Met salary? Unlikely! So John called the gallery, trading a work of his own in exchange for the Irwin, which I lived with for five years until I gave it to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. It ceased to feed me and I gave it away. When a painting ceases to attract your attention, it must give up its spot on the wall.

CB: So you are a collector but you're not possessive?

HG: I was possessive until a Lichtenstein and Oldenburg were stolen. They found the Oldenburg, a big and beautiful plaster shirt, thrown away in the garbage in Brooklyn. I refused to get sick over it. Since then, I've trained myself to give things away. This year

I gave a big painting by Noland and a photo-collage by David Hockney to the Tel Aviv Museum in Israel.

CB: Sometimes keeping a collection whole is interesting, because the total collection shows the vision of the collector.

HG: I have these glimmers of leaving my collection to the town of Southampton. But I realize, having been on the boards of institutions, that they would have to keep it up. I think the best thing is to let the world re-collect it, reshaping the record of what there was.

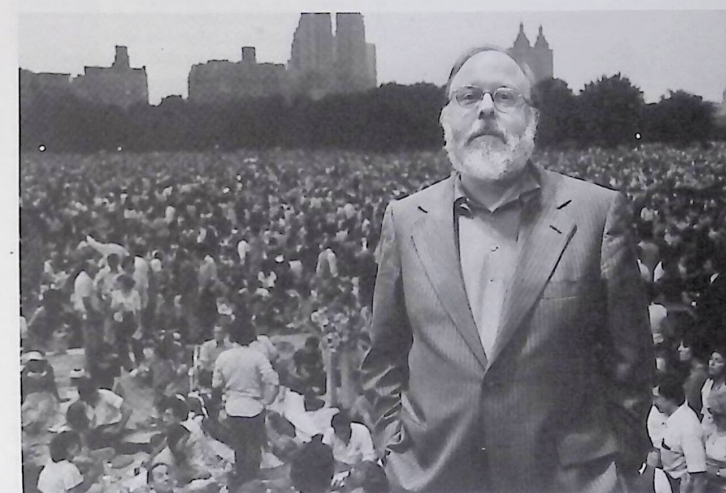
CB: What comes to you as a gift must go out somewhat blindly, like a gift.

HG: In the middle, somewhere, economic reality obtrudes and you sell something once

of the other panelists—Dore Ashton, Hilton Kramer, Peter Selz—were fulminating. Stanley Kunitz, sitting next to me, was kicking me under the table. I liked pop art, but I said that I was not there to say that pop art is dominant, just that it was art. It's not either/or, it's and/and. When I was asked to be the U.S. commissioner of the Venice Biennale in 1966, I took Ellsworth Kelly, Roy Lichtenstein, Helen Frankenthaler, and Jules Olitski. That was a rather balanced mix, if you can be balanced with four artists.

CB: The older artists I know who were formed by the values of abstract expressionism have a distinctly negative visceral reaction to pop art. They feel there is no transformation of the image. They feel the real artists are the promoters of pop art.

HG: I'm afraid that strikes me as an un-



Marianne Barcellona

in a while. That also is not a scandal. The things that I loved I've given to the Metropolitan, to Yale, to Princeton, to Israel. My name is chipped in the walls of the Met because I gave them so much stuff, even when I was a curator there making nothing. Often the artist gave it to me and I would turn around and give it to them: Reinhardt and Warhol and Kelly and Hockney.

CB: Despite this mix of names, you made your reputation as a pop art curator.

HG: By now it's an old story, but I first became well known in 1963 after the Museum of Modern Art asked me to participate in a symposium on pop art. I was to defend pop against its many outraged detractors, some on the staff of the Modern itself. Duchamp, John Cage, and Rauschenberg were in the audience. Most

provoked insult. Let me say something about that. I sit here in Southampton at my desk and think about all the artists I have known and know and have liked. I realize that in my various incarnations, all my life as a worker, I've been interpreting, being a middleman. In our society, with regard to the arts, my role is necessary. We're not an aristocratic Italian Renaissance society of 2000 people. In a democratic society, we are always trying to expand the audience and raise the level of awareness. I'm a teacher. For me, life is about learning, then sharing the knowledge, communicating it.

CB: Why did you leave Warhol out of the 1966 Venice Biennale? For six years you spoke to him every day.

HG: I had to do it. I was about to succeed Robert Hale at the Met as curator of 20th

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everybody else, including myself, if I continued on that track. Andy would have brought the Velvet Underground and Chelsea Girls, and it would have been wonderful and awful, and I wouldn't have gotten promoted. Andy, in a sense, never forgave me. I understand that too. I was pusillanimous. I was thinking of myself. Yet it's true that I was honestly thinking of remaining effective. Andy, God bless him, survived.

CB: In *Popism*, Warhol says that your real sin was not not choosing him, but rather not telling him before he read it in *The New York Times*. These conflicts bring up a basic question: should the Met have a contemporary department for living artists?

HG: When James Rorimer came to me in 1959 and offered me a job at the Met, I said I would prefer a job at the Whitney. I loved the contemporary art that was missing from the Met. He went grey with rage. A few months later he perked up and asked me to visit. I told him, "Your giant encyclopedia is missing a volume." Years ago I wrote a memo outlining the new 20th century wing at the Met. It's clear in retrospect that in the competition between Thomas Hoving and Carter Brown, it was our plan for the new wing that helped motivate the National Gallery to build the East Wing. The big enemy of the National Gallery, the Met, is also their greatest ally. We forced the National Gallery to rethink their policy about buying only artists who've been dead for 50 years. If we had not proceeded that way at the Met, other major museums of the world would not have become as eager to show the art of their own moment. I don't think I'm the most significant character in the history of museums, but it's definite that Hoving and I, by emphasizing the possibility of contemporary art being important to an encyclopedic museum, made a difference. Staying on at the Met made that possible.

CB: During the '60s some of the best work was done by artists working outside the public eye.

HG: If you went back to the '60s and tried to say who were the greatest artists, you would have to mention Picasso, David Smith, Hofmann, and others, none of whom were '60s artists. If the artists who emerged in that decade were not producing the greatest art, they were the ones who were speaking to the moment.

CB: The '60s were concluded with a huge

show you did at the Met: *New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940-1970*. After summarizing three decades, what was next for you?

HG: There was a change in the art world. There was conceptual art, minimalism, earthworks, art that did not proceed from a love of the material. If you look at everything I've supported, it's about as far as there had been a retreat from the new art. I was at a distance from the new art. I was with the School of Paris to a kind of war ambition, more regional, less ambitious. I was made curator when I was 28. Ideally a curator should not see his life with the decade he began with. I was an artist almost always does. So Ed Koch asked me to be cultural affairs commissioner for the City of New York. I no, then called him back the next day. I said I meant yes.

CB: Soon you became enthusiastic about new artists: Basquiat, Clemente, Schnabel.

HG: I remember the day I bought Basquiat. As commissioner I had a staff that was at least 50 percent black and Hispanic. I called the whole staff into my office and held it up. I said, "This is a painting I bought. It's by a black artist who's 23 years old. He's a genius, and he can change the way we look at art in this decade. Everybody looked at it with a long then went back to work."

CB: Here where we sit, hanging on the wall, is a trio of unusual Warhols.

HG: They were made in '78 when I was commissioner. I asked Andy to do posters in the subway and buses, advertising the fact that we had free opera in Central Park. I wanted summer. We took a walk to the women's house of detention used to be now a garden. I said, "Let's do some flowers." He said, "What do you like?" I pointed to some flowers.

CB: Warhol loved to say, "Henry gave me all my ideas."

HG: He made paintings of these flowers on different colored paper. In order to minimize that I framed them in dark wood in the middle and light on either side. If you look at them for a long time, you are so confused by the frame that you don't quite realize they are changing color. It's like throwing pepper in your eye. I think it works.

CB: It dizzies me.

HG: It's why your eye tickles.

CB: You like work with a lot of optical intensity.

HG: I like things that continue to tell their story. Clement Greenberg says that abstract art has narrative just as much as any other. If you think it through, that narrative is in your consciousness. When you look at something again and again, you see more and more, whether the work is abstract or realistic. The narrative is not in the way the work changes, but in the way you see it over time. It accretes, gets added to.

CB: While you were at Harvard, according to the *New Yorker* profile of you by Calvin Tomkins, you were brilliant in coffeehouse conversation, "moving with the flow" of rapidly shifting thought, without connectives. On the other hand, your lectures were overly earnest, even pedantic.

HG: In my early lectures, the voice wasn't there. I've since learned to talk and to write in a voice. I talk now on the phone like I do on the lecture platform or like I write a letter. Facing an audience is an acquired talent, and I was trying to get it right while having stage fright. Which one doesn't get anymore. I also learned how to tell jokes and anecdotes, and to twist history and contemporary mores into each other. So it's never strictly a lecture. That's what people like and I've learned how to do it. They love especially the "I was there" business.

CB: What do you remember about the seven summers you spent in Provincetown, in the late '50s and early '60s?

HG: The first three summers I was studying for my PhD orals at Harvard. Suddenly I was in the middle of something I had never known about. Mostly because it had never happened. For instance, I wandered into Red Grooms' first happening at the Sun Gallery one night. There was a whole crowd, Dody Muller, Bob Beauchamp, Tony Vevers, that I became friends with. After that I was this young brat from the Met coming down to have a good time. Tom Hoving once said to me about curators: "A good curator is always at work. If he's at the Copacabana in Rio, he sits down on the beach next to an artist or a collector." It's true. If you are obsessed, vacationing and working are the same thing. For me, the best part of being in Provincetown was meeting the artists, Motherwell, Kline, Hofmann, Frankenthaler, and so on, but also Ivan Karp, when he was working at the HCE Gallery. I got to know Molly Cook and Mary Oliver down at the bookstore. Norman Mailer was a great ally of mine at that time. We had

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apartments on the waterfront next to each other the summer of '60. We looked at each other, started laughing, and became friends immediately.

CB: You saw things eye to eye. Do you remember who was taller?

HG: Mailer, maybe by a microinch. He tried to teach me how to fight, but I told him he was the only person who ever tried to hit me. He was one of three people who trumpeted my coming to New York to the Met. It opened incredible doors for me.

CB: Irving Sandler was there at the same time. He remarks that his initial notes for his book *The Triumph of American Painting* were made in those days. Were you conscious he was recording?

HG: Sure. It was obvious he was both living it and archiving it at the same time.

CB: What is your attitude about such ethnography?

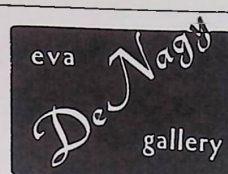
HG: I think it's incredibly important to get the bird's eye view as well as on the ground battle reports. Not only is it history, it's the raw material of future history. I love the idea that Irving lived through it and recorded it.

CB: Just as war is too important to be left to the generals, do you think that art is too important to be left to the artists?

HG: I think a more complicated discourse is more interesting. The primary source has to be the artist, but artists tend to see things from their own studios. Other points of view are as interesting. The artist has to have his feet somewhere in order to stand firmly enough to paint, whereas a curator doesn't have to have his feet anywhere. Instead, he has to reach a wide audience with the best, which exists in a multitude of positions. Even an artist with a wonderfully open mind has a fixed point of view. My responsibility is rather to prepare a menu of the best for people with different needs. Taste and need are correlated.

CB: You had an early need to look at pictures.

HG: Once, over the telephone, I asked Jim Rosenquist, "What are you doing?" He said, "I'm painting, you know, pushing minerals around on a flat surface." I am convinced that by doing this, by pushing minerals around on a flat surface, it is possible to effect a re-fashioning of our very selves. ■



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