Pierre Restany: The Letter to Leo Castelli

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- 1 At the 32nd Venice Biennale, the Museum of Modern Art which had been responsible for the American pavilion since 1948 handed it over to the United States Information Agency, which appointed Alan Salomon, then director of the Jewish Museum, to curate it. Salomon focused his choices on four artists reckoned to be typical of the 1955-1960 period, two of the artists supported by Clement Greenberg (Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland), the other two belonging to the Leo Castelli gallery (Jaspers Johns and Robert Rauschenberg).
- 2 Louis and Noland, whose canvases were larger, were shown in the American pavilion, while Johns and Rauschenberg were on view in the rooms of the American consulate. It was necessary to put up a small building beside the pavilion to show some of Rauschenberg's works, and people were starting to talk of him as a prize-winner so that he could be considered for the festival's top prize. This event marked the ushering in of a new age of modern art.
- 3 Pierre Restany had been well aware of the various leading figures for some years and, at a distance, he witnessed the discussions stirred up in the French press by this success which put the Paris art world in a state of turmoil.

- 4 He swiftly established stances and followed the various opinions being expressed. His archives included press cuttings and various texts and essays published over the ensuing months, but above all a letter dated 27 December 1964 drew up a summary of goings-on. Pierre Restany appeared in the thick of the debate. He noted the emergence of a new critic with a keen eye on the Americans in the form of Otto Hahn. He came out against Greenberg on the juries he was part of, and he contributed in other respects to enlightening the minister of culture, who consulted him. Pierre Restany's independence emphasized his perceptive clearheadedness. Throughout his correspondences, we find this resolute viewpoint, as well as a keen ear for his interlocutors, even if committed to other choices. This letter, with the hindsight of several years, takes on the interest of an additional item giving a better grasp of this period.

"Dossier Etats-Unis", PREST.XSEU 36/8 (ACA)

Paris, 27 December 1964.

My dear Leo,

I'm taking advantage of the year's end lull to write this letter to you. I wanted to write earlier, but I stayed in South America until the end of November, and since then I've had to make up for a considerable amount of lost time. You are aware of the Tella Prize results. A jury is a jury and there's no point discussing the decisions, especially when one was part of it, and lost. Clem is a hard nut in this type of meeting. His intransigence finally paid off. With other personalities less systematic in their a priori persuasions, it might have been possible to come to an understanding about the name of a candidate whose name is neither Noland or Arman, and Jasper was up there. But with Clem it was impossible. In a word, let's leave it at that: I'm very fond of our friend Clem as a person but not as a jury member!

I wanted to be able to pass through New York on my return from Buenos Ayres and Rio, but I had unfortunately run out of funds (time and money!). According to the news I've received, the season has been terrific, overpopist with some oping

around. I see Blandini has taken over from you... your motto is more and more "Quia nominor leo"!!!!

You must have followed the chain reactions in Paris since Venice. Those jackal howls summoning people to the defence of the West (Galerie de France-style) against American barbarism (you being the lion thereof) do not flatter the French capital. One or two voices, sadly too few and far between, have tried to stay within the bounds of objectivity and invite Europe to take a much-needed close look at its conscience. You've probably read my article about the Biennale in DOMUS in August, and my editorial in the magazine PLANETE 19. I'd have preferred to feel less out on a limb. But one thing does console me: "The emergence in the critical firmament of Paris" of the young Otto Hahn, who brings a new and—in my view—special element into our sad debate. Generally speaking, Michel Ragon's position has also been very dignified. Sadly, the list of winners stops there, just about!

To my great surprise, Malraux called me in last Thursday. His latest idea is to stimulate private patronage at the level of major industrial companies, asking them to set up Modern Art and Cultural Promotion Foundations, with certain economic advantages and tax breaks. A young member of the Conseil d'Etat [Council of State] will be going to America within the next few months to have a look on the spot at the way the great American foundations—Guggenheim, Carnegie, etc—work... I'm afraid that the only outcome might well be a handsome report which will come up against a veto from the Treasury accountants. The confusion, here, is at its height among all the suckers of history and instead of seeing the real issues (starting with the existence of a real but systematically unrecognized Parisian avant-garde), people prefer to consolidate the crumbling edifice of the past. There is much talk about a consortium of Paris dealers to defend the so-called "safe" postwar values, with the establishment of a common collection. Such a programme would hail, of course, from the Galerie de France, from Denise René, Jeanne Bucher and Claude Bernard, with the help of their usual customers and subsidiary clients, Ariel, Arnaud, etc... You see where we're at! Luckily there are still a few optimists around to speculate on Europe's youth. I'm one of them, in spite of everything! And on this flight of hope, let me send you, dear Leo, my warmest wishes for 1965 ;

PIERRE