

Julien Levy

surrealist author, dealer, and collector

BY CHARLES DESMARAIS

Ever since Julien Levy closed his New York art gallery in 1949, he and his wife have lived in the tiny Connecticut town of Bridgewater, first in a historic house with enough yard space to raise fighting cocks; now in a smaller converted farm outbuilding on the same land. Here Levy has lived a retirement both physically remote from Manhattan's 57th Street art market, and removed from the thoughts of all but the people who were most involved in the New York art scene of the '30s and '40s.

But though his activities had been almost forgotten and usually ignored by the photographic community (nor has the painting world treated him much better), one sees signs that other travelers have also recently found the little house—indications of a spirited compe-

Chess," for which many important artists designed chess boards and pieces at Levy's suggestion.

Levy was also very active in promoting avant-garde film, and gave early showings in his gallery of films by Bunuel, Cornell, Dali, Duchamp, Man Ray, and others. He helped to organize the Film Society, an early attempt at a non-profit, subscription viewing group which may have been the model for the film department at the Museum of Modern Art.

Levy's new book is lively and thoroughly engrossing. It is spiced with numerous anecdotes about some of the best-known figures in twentieth century art, and many of these accounts add information which may even alter our conception of history. One unflattering story concerning Lincoln Kirstein recalls the time that Kirstein enlisted Levy's help in publicizing a photomural competition for a large cash prize. Levy spread the word among

his photographer-acquaintances, and even invested some of his own money in supplies so that workers in whom he had confidence could participate. But, as he remembers it, when he visited Edward Steichen to invite him to enter, Steichen confided that he had been given advance notice of the competition, had already prepared his mural of the George Washington Bridge, and had even been assured of the prize.

Levy has loaned his immense collection of original photographs to the Art Institute of Chicago, where Assistant Curator of Photography David Travis has mounted a 136-print exhibition which will be on view until Feb. 20, and will then travel to several major museums. Accompanying the show is an attractive and well-documented catalogue (96 pp./\$6.95 spiral bound) which provides useful biographies of a number of previously obscure photographers, and some surpris-



Left, Eugene Atget, *Foto du Trone*; right, Andre Kertesz, untitled, 1929. All photographs from the Julien Levy collection courtesy the Art Institute of Chicago; Sheeler and Tabard photographs are gifts to the Art Institute from Jean and Julien Levy.

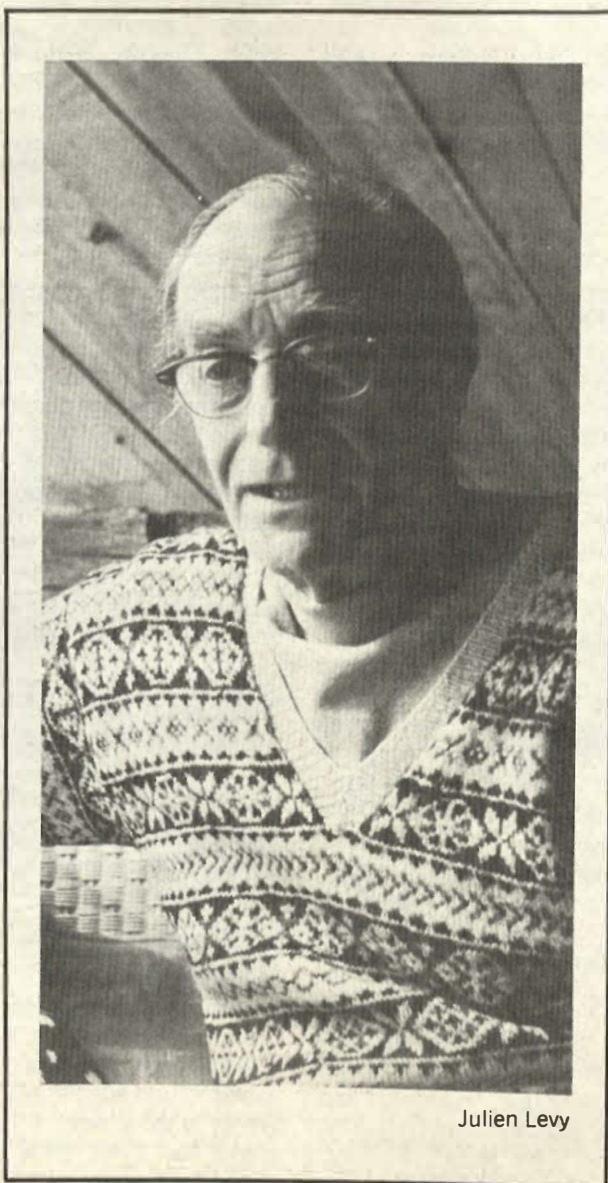
tition between two curators over the honor of first showing from Levy's incredible collection of something like 1,100 photographs; announcement of the publication of his memoirs; a mention of Levy and his new book in a *New York Times* column.

When I first approached Levy about doing an interview for *Afterimage*, I knew little about him. I had seen his monographs on Eugene Berman and Arshile Gorky. I owned the recent edition of his *Surrealism*, a book which I knew to be one of the earliest American attempts at an examination of that movement, and which included sections on photography and film. And I knew that he had run a gallery where he had shown photographs along with the Surrealist paintings to which he seemed to have been committed.

But Levy's latest book, *Memoir of an Art Gallery* (G.P. Putnam's Sons/290 pp./\$8.95), makes it clear just how important his contributions were. (The book will be released almost simultaneously with this interview.) In it, we find that when Levy opened his gallery in 1931, one of his "initial interests was to promote the recognition of photography as a form of modern art." This, of course, was especially significant in a New York left without any regular photography exhibition space since the closing of Stieglitz's 291.

A complete list of artists shown at the Julien Levy Gallery includes an impressive number of the most important photographers working at that time or before: from Man Ray and Moholy-Nagy to Walker Evans and Brett Weston. Levy gave the first American shows of the work of Nadar and Cartier-Bresson. He also helped to save the Eugene Atget collection by sending money to Berenice Abbott for her to buy it, and by persuading Erhard Weyhe to publish the first Atget book, *Photographe de Paris*, and to give the first exhibit of his pictures in the United States.

He organized the first Surrealist exhibition ever shown in this country, and in it included more photographs than may ever have been included in a show of Surrealist painting since. Among his many exhibitions of painting and sculpture was a show held in 1945, "Imagery of



Julien Levy

ing images by even the best-known workers included. *Afterimage* thanks Travis and the Art Institute for permission to reproduce some of those pictures with this article.

The following is an edited transcript of my conversation with Julien Levy, which took place on Dec. 23. When we began the tape we were talking about New York society portraitist Pirie MacDonald and the Christmas trade he enjoyed in his heyday.

Julien Levy: (Pirie MacDonald) had a fancy, red velvet little studio where very rich people came in before Christmas and had their portraits done. I didn't like his work particularly, but I had a portrait album so people could shop, and I'd get a commission if they ordered a portrait through seeing samples in my gallery. I could connect them with Strand if I thought they'd get on together, or I could connect them with MacDonald if they had the money for it, or a lot of people in between. It was one of the many ventures—I just tried to hit photography from as many angles as I could think of. Including applied photography: I tried some photographic textiles...

Question: You mention that in the book—the photographic textiles—but you suggest that no one ever picked up on it.

Julien Levy: No one ever picked up on anything.

Q: Did you ever produce them?

JL: I had them around the gallery. And I had a trash basket: I photographed the contents of a trash basket, enlarged it onto a sheet of paper this big and wrapped it around the trash basket. So you looked at it and it was rimmed with trash—torn papers and letters and wood shavings; crumpled things...

Q: Those were photographs that you made?

JL: I made some, and there was a young girl who was interested in experimenting with photography. She did a lot of them for me—I'd invent the idea and she'd make the prints.

We were going to go half and half on the venture if it went. I tried to sell it to some of the department stores. I

have a cigarette box in the other room.... You get the idea—the top of the box is a photograph of cigarettes, slightly enlarged. So in the gallery I'd have cigarettes in the cigarette box and I'd have the trash baskets around. They were also for sale—I never sold any.

I had lampshades, also. They usually carried the trick idea because that appealed to my surrealist side: you know, the cigarette box made of cigarettes; the trash basket made of trash. The lampshades were all of lights. One was a corridor of chandeliers—French, from Versailles or someplace—on a four-sided lampshade. You looked at each side and it was the same corridor of chandeliers. In other words, when you looked at the light, instead of one light you saw the whole thing. Another was just an enlarged electric light bulb, in black and white, made luminous by the light inside.

And then, as I think I said in the book, I had pillows made of rocks—photographs of rocks made into soft pillows.

Q: Did you take your own work really seriously?

JL: I never did any darkroom work. I wasn't a good technician and I didn't take it seriously enough to try. I've always done everything enough to try to understand what the problem is, and let the other guy work it out. I'd do a week's work on gum prints to find out what that kind of photography was, and when I'd made a couple of prints I had a sense of what the problem was and what the possibilities were.

days. I used to come down and go to Stieglitz's on any vacation possible and look at what he had. He became friendly and he showed me things in the back room. He talked to me a bit—of course I had to be interested to even get there to see him.

But in my fine arts courses, I became more and more of a movie buff—so did many of the men in my class. We had one fine arts teacher who—this wasn't prescribed, it was after hours—would take any students who wanted to go, down to one of the off-beat little movie houses in Boston. And if he seemed to take it seriously—and he was one of the tops in my fine arts department—I felt justified in taking it seriously.

I loved it, and I very soon decided that I wanted to be a movie director. I began to pick all my courses in college and all my studies towards that end. This was at Harvard, and they didn't have anything, but I began to think of my fine arts course as something applicable to movies. Whenever I wrote a paper or made some studies, I did it from the point of view of a movie setting, or expressions of faces, or movements, or composition.

I was thinking always in terms of the screen, rather than in terms of art history—I'd look at a Caravaggio in order to figure out the possible lighting in a movie set. I took psychology courses and directed them towards visual psychology—I'd figure out op tricks or study the length of attention span. I got the idea and tried to propose it to the psychology department to study sub-

So I went over there to do it with him.

Q: You briefly refer to Dorothy Norman in your book. Of course, we think of Norman as Stieglitz's biographer. A lot of people say that she has a very, very romanticized view of him and what he was about.

JL: Well, she idealized him, but he was a pretty romantic and idealizable figure. I think I gave him a fairly severe portrait—and my editor thought I was doing a satire on him. I hadn't meant it that way. I thought it carried through this way: no matter how hard-boiled you looked at him and tried to see through his idealism (or pseudo-idealism—some people said he was a faker), you still found plenty of poetry, meaning, and devotion to his causes. An impressive amount.

He was a romantic figure. If he was to be ridiculed at all, he was to be ridiculed about as much as Don Quixote—who was a serious character, too. He's gone down to history as meaning very well in spite of his misconceptions of reality.

I think Dorothy idealized him much more than I did. She'll be hurt by the portrait I drew, because she wouldn't admit of even a shadow of a fault in him. But on the other hand, he was worth that much idealization. Suppose he did talk at too great a length—you can't criticize that if he's trying to say something extremely interesting and important.

Q: You show Duchamp as being very contradictory—self-contradictory.



Left, Maurice Tabard, *Hand*, 1929; center, Man Ray, *Mrs. Henry Powell* (?); right, Paul Outerbridge, *42nd Street Elevated*, 1923

Rayographs I made by the dozens, ever since I was nine years old. Long before Man Ray or Moholy-Nagy did it, I'm sure lots of kids did it. I had these printing-out frames and blueprint paper that my parents gave me one Christmas. I don't know what the general idea was—it was a step after teaching me how to press flowers, or something. So, of course, I pressed flowers in the printing-out frames on blueprint paper and got silhouettes. Then I found that I could get transparent petals and I'd try to expose it enough so I'd get veins and things into it. Then I just tried putting things on—my favorite was a glass. I'd get reflections, then move the light source and double expose more reflections.

Of course, the paper wasn't beautiful like the stuff they used later was. But you didn't need darkroom technique. The point of the blueprint was that it was all water processed. You used sunlight and your printing frame, and then you just dunked it and it printed up itself, without any chemicals and washes or anything.

Q: When you started your gallery in 1931, you opened with a retrospective of American photography you organized with Steiglitz, and the first three years of the gallery were devoted largely to photographic exhibitions.

JL: I had intended to give about half and half, and see which one went ahead. I think about half the shows in the first year were photographic, and then a third of the shows in the second, and a quarter or less in the third year. I gradually showed less photography and more painting.

Q: But how did you get so interested in photography?

JL: Well, as I say, I played with printing papers and then with cameras when I was a kid.

Q: Still, there were a lot of people who played with photography when they were younger, but not that many thought of it as art—as something to be exhibited in a gallery. Stieglitz was one of the very few who beat you to it.

JL: Well, I met Stieglitz and was very impressed by him. That was after 291 but before the American Place—the Intimate Gallery. That was in my college

liminal impressions—very quick images. Now, of course, there've been a lot of studies of that. I was only doing it thinking of how short a cut you could make in a film and how it would register.

Q: You wanted to be a director of commercial films? Hollywood films?

JL: Oh, my head was in the clouds! Already coming on the horizon was avant-garde, experimental film. I was thinking in those terms. But thinking of doing it in Hollywood was pretty impractical—and I never got there.

I saw, for example, early on, the *Ballet Mechanique*—which I showed the very first year in my gallery. I'd been impressed by it when I saw it in my college days. (You know about it—it was done by Leger.)

Directly after college, I introduced myself to Dudley Murphy, who had come to America to work in Hollywood. He had a job at the Cosmopolitan studios in New York as a special effects man for Gloria Swanson. I asked him if I could get a job with him, and I became assistant prop boy for a few months. I was hardly ever in the studio—I'd have to go downtown for a couple of cookie cutters and come back and go down again and buy 10 feet of lumber and come back with that, while he built up his effects. But it kept me in the atmosphere of photography all the time.

Q: You said in the book that you tried to adopt Stieglitz as a godfather—Stieglitz and Duchamp. How did you mean that?

JL: I didn't bring them into the church. I just, in my mind, said, "I want their blessings," and I consider them my inspiration. They're the ones who gave me the most in those days—more than even my movie professor at Harvard. He didn't stay with me as long or as intensely as Duchamp and Stieglitz.

Duchamp was the one who said, "Come on, don't try to get to Hollywood, 'cause you know you can't. Come over and meet Man Ray and do a film with us in Paris on a shoestring. That's the way we do things over there. We don't do Hollywood, million-dollar or half-million-dollar *King Kongs* over there."

JL: I don't think he actually denied himself, but he camouflaged himself. He played it very cool. A good pupil of his is Andy Warhol. He believed in enigma. He didn't believe in lying, but he just was enigmatic. And he always thought there was more than one side to any case, including his own case. So he'd present one side to one person and another side to another—not necessarily contradictory or untrue.

Even when Duchamp presented himself in drag once, or signed "Rose Selavy" on some of his pictures, you could say that he was making the statement that any man of sensibility has enough of the female in him—if he would admit it—to amount to another personage.

All his little enigmatic evasions had some philosophic import. It was a little like the zen philosophers, who teach you things sometimes by a slapstick gesture or a bad joke.

Q: In the catalogue to the show of your collection in Chicago, I noticed that many of the pictures have been pretty much unknown, or are by relatively unknown photographers.

JL: They loved Lee Miller in Chicago. I thought she was entirely forgotten. I didn't know whether the pictures had any importance at all, but Chicago said, "Wow! Who is this photographer?" Have you heard Lee Miller is ready for a revival? I don't think she has any of her negatives any more.

Q: Do you think people were showing pretty much the same photographs then as we see now? Or was the photographer's taste different then from what it is now?

JL: You mean what they're digging out by the same man?

Q: Yes. For instance, Kertesz: was he showing the same work then as he now has reproduced in the many books of his work that have been published recently?

JL: I'm not familiar enough with what's going on, really. But my guess is that what the collector today considers a vintage classic that he wants in his collection is one that he's seen reproduced. That makes it famous. And the ones that were reproduced are the ones that for one reason or another were put forward by

the artist for reproduction at the time he made them. They're not necessarily his favorite photographs, but the ones that were requested then, became familiar, and then became his classics.

Q: How did you discover Manuel Alvarez Bravo? He was someone who sort of disappeared for a long time and resurfaced only a few years ago.

JL: I don't remember exactly. He came in with a Mexican painter who I also showed, named Emilio Amero. The two of them came up from Mexico City. They came in the gallery and one said, "Will you look at my friend's painting?" And the other one said, "I want you to look at my friend's photographs."

Q: How about Clarence Laughlin?

JL: I found him in New Orleans one summer. I met him when I was in New Orleans, looked at his photographs, and offered him a show. I bought a few of them.

At the same time, I met a New Orleans painter. I understand he's still living and going to have his second show—I gave him his first show. He was kind of an interim painter: he was a dentist—his name was Dr. Souchon. In between patients, the nurse would wheel away the dental table and wheel in another white enamel table with brushes and paint on it. He'd put a little canvas up and he'd say, "Nurse, hand me the chrome yellow," and he'd paint a little. "All right, nurse, the viridian green," and he'd paint a little more. After about 15 minutes between patients, he'd go back. He did naive, rather amusing paintings. I thought he was the Rousseau of New Orleans and gave him a show. And Laughlin the same year.

Q: Do you have any ideas on why these people get lost?

JL: I didn't even know whether he was lost or rediscovered. I got lost myself. Probably only being rediscovered now. I retired and did other things.

But there again, I didn't lose my interest in photography. What I'm playing with now, as you saw upstairs, is portapak video, which I think is a very interesting field for new adventures.

Q: Have you been looking at new video?

JL: I haven't seen much, no. I once went to Castelli's. I couldn't stay long enough to find out whether there was anything interesting or not. I did see some Wegmans I liked a lot, though.

Q: I noted that the original publisher of Man Ray's book, **Photographs**, was James Thrall Soby. Of course, he's always been important in painting as an author and patron, but did he do a lot else in photography?

JL: He did his own photography, and was quite good. But I don't think he pursued it assiduously—it was mostly taking pictures of his friends. But they're good pictures, and he had distinguished friends. I'm using three, I think, to illustrate my memoirs.

There's one of his in the Chicago show, but I'm sure it's not in the catalogue because it's one that David Travis failed to identify—it's just about the only one David missed, actually. When I came to the show, he said, "Who is this? This is signed 'JTS'." I said, "That's James T. Soby."

Q: You're one of the few people around that remembers having met Atget. In the book you talk about him and about his working methods: how he chose to work with a large camera to preserve detail and also because, as he said, working with a Rolleiflex like the one Man Ray loaned him was just too fast. He didn't have the time to compose or really think about what he was doing.

Your explanations of his technique seem to go along with one theory of what Atget was doing: that he was the "objective analyst." Yet there's a contrary theory: that the reason he used glass plates and outdated materials and equipment was because he was after nostalgia—that he was indescribably romantic. You know his work and you met him. I wonder if you have an impression of whether he was the recorder or....

JL: I don't know what you mean by the term romantic. I don't know whether you mean it in an insulting way or what. But at any rate, he probably was romantic. But I don't think that's any reason why he used the old materials. He used them, for one thing, because he'd become entirely familiar with them, and he wasn't in the least interested in trying to use something unfamiliar. You can't say somebody who's been painting all his life with oil paints and refuses to use acrylics is being romantic. He just hasn't the time to undertake to learn acrylics even if it's much easier than oil painting. He has a feel—a relationship with his medium formed over years.

And, secondly, he stayed with the old gold papers as long as he could—even when the new papers came in—because he couldn't get the quality he wanted out of the new material. We can't get it. When I worked with Berenice Abbott trying to do an edition of reprints, we experimented with every paper we could find. You couldn't reproduce the depths of those red-brown dark tones of his prints. You came nowhere near it—you lost the whole feeling, even with the best papers: hand-coated; platinum, double hand-coated. We ended up, finally, with a semi-gold paper made by Gevaert. Then they dropped that, in a year or two.

Q: Why do you think no one knows that you were part owner of the Atget collection and very influential in introducing Atget to the world and to America?

JL: As a matter of fact, I think Man Ray was the first. I think he suggested that I go see Atget.

I had an arrangement—proposed by me and equally accepted by Berenice—that I would be the silent partner. I didn't want the credit. I didn't have the credit, actually. I don't know whether I saw Atget before Berenice or after—she was working for Man Ray and I was visiting him. But I left Paris. She was the one who found out that Atget had died and went over to inquire what was happening to his prints. So it's all credit to her—I wasn't there.

But then she didn't have the money to buy them and she wired to me, because she knew I was interested. Every day I could, I'd buy something from Atget. He wouldn't sell more than a few. He always said, "I don't have the time to reprint them. If I don't have a complete set of prints, my inventory's lost—I won't know what I'm missing any more." So he'd just sell me five or six and go in and reprint five or six that evening. He didn't want to have the whole job of reprinting different plates. And then the next time I came he'd give me another five or



Manuel Alvarez Bravo, **Hanging Manikins**

six. So I'd come almost every day in order to get those I had from him.

I figured that if she would show the Atgets through my gallery, and if we could put them over, we'd share the proceeds. I insisted that they be sold only in a distinguished way—to a museum or someplace. Not just dispersed or sold to other collections. She agreed.

But I didn't want any of the fame, and she was a struggling photographer who was wildly in love with this collection. I had other things: I had other photographers and paintings I was also interested in. She was solely bound up with herself and her collection of Atgets. And she was sort of penniless. I thought, "Well, this will help Berenice's prestige a great deal. Give her a sideline beside her own photographs—something to lecture about and possibly promote." So I said that I'd be silent in the partnership.

I never asked for the credit until it came time for me to write my memoirs—and it's part of the memoirs. Also, when we sold the collection, it came out because the Museum of Modern Art had to pay me my share. They said, "What's Julien Levy doing in this?" So what I was doing in it was explained.

Q: What exactly was in that collection? Has it ever been announced?

JL: I have my own inventory, from the time, of just how many prints and negatives there were. But I've never been able to pry out from the museum what they got, finally. I don't know why they're mysterious about it.

There were approximately—this is memory, now—10,000 prints of about 3,000 different subjects. And originally there were maybe 2,000 negatives, but they were in varying stages of decay—it's possible that only 1,000 or even no negatives remain. I gave Berenice some money for negative preservation—to get a properly humidified, sealed cabinet to keep them in—and some money for research to find out how you could reattach the emulsion to the glass. Whether that stopped their decay or they went on decaying, I don't know. They might have all just dropped into shreds—some were beginning to peel at the corners, a few were cracking in

the middle, and others had fallen right off the glass and crumbled.

But the negatives are really only of scientific interest. They don't have the same interest the prints have, because, as I've already explained, you can't get Atget's quality from the original negative any better than you can from a copy negative. The printing out paper isn't there any more, nor is Atget's feeling. Because he very definitely made every print with the greatest love and attention. He got just the qualities he wanted to have come out of it. Sometimes it was starkness he wanted; sometimes it was mystery—and it wasn't always in the negative.

For instance, that one that the Surrealists loved of the big and little men's chairs and shoes, and the bare lightbulb overhead. It took very careful printing on Atget's part. There's a certain amount of visibility in the background, in two places in the negative, which he carefully printed out. So he got this complete void of a background, with the electric lightbulb standing free, as if it was hanging out of emptiness.

So this monumental effect, in nothingness, was what he was trying to get at. He didn't necessarily manipulate the negative, but he printed out what he didn't want.

Q: You were interested in early independent film. Did you keep that interest?

JL: Sure. It's just transferring a little bit to video. I'm just playing—trying to see what the medium is like with an open mind. I'm not interested in documentary—that's the obvious thing with the portapak. That's for the people involved with causes.

I keep a guest book going, which, as it grows, gets interesting but quite long. It's a video guest book. The camera's set up and I simply say, "Sit for a minute and say something." When they add up, one after another on the same couch with different faces, it makes an array, finally. It has a certain momentum.

I'm likely to be slightly discriminating about who I tape. I'd rather tape Norman Mailer for four or five whole minutes while he's sitting owling at me than two or three minutes of an anonymous someone. Unless it happens to be someone as interesting as my cleaning woman. She wants very much to get in on this, so she dresses up and sits down—she knows I've been doing it—and gets her two or three minutes.

It's not a snobbish thing, but I'd rather have the interesting—and most of my guests are fairly interesting.

Q: Are you going to show the tape?

JL: Some day, I guess. It's like a diary—I guess it's like Jonas Mekas's **Diary**. I've never seen his diary—have you? I imagine he's greater than I am, because he's a photographer and I'm not. I just depend on the people who come, and what they have to say.

I'm teaching—I've been teaching for about three years now.

Q: Where are you teaching?

JL: I start this spring at the State University of New York at Purchase. I taught at SUNY last summer, and last fall and the fall before at Sarah Lawrence in France—they have a French branch where I go in the summers.

I twist my class in "What is Surrealism?" into a seminar on making a surrealist film or videotape. I'm interested to see how that develops. In fact, all my video experiments I really wanted to use to get enough ideas and knowledge to hand to my students and let them carry the ball. But in order to get them to do something I have to know a little bit of the pros and cons and possibilities and non-possibilities, and have some ideas of my own. But I don't want them to do my ideas—I want them to do theirs.

And I do a few abstractions—they're not particularly good. I haven't got the kind of apparatus that does a Nam June Paik job. He's damn good, but that takes all kinds of electronics.

Q: Why do you think independent film has never really impressed itself upon the public's consciousness?

JL: I thought they were beginning to catch on. I thought, what with Andy Warhol—the Warhol films have general distribution now, beginning with **Chelsea Girls**.

You know, I saw **Chien Andalou** in a porno film house. I don't know how it slipped in there. This was quite a while

they're working in video or in film. It's a good genius primitive at work.

Q: Are they the only people who have Cornell films?

JL: Yes. And the two that I have—which I don't know what they are because I can't run them. I've never seen them.

Q: You say at one point in your book that the Film Society, started by you and others, was the nucleus for what eventually became the film library of the Museum of Modern Art. How did you mean that?

JL: I guess I meant that green with envy. I don't know whether they had had the idea before—they should have, but I don't think they did. I didn't hear any rumors that they were going to have a film collection and department.

When I had the Film Society, two of the people in the society were Iris Barry and Lincoln Kirstein. Lincoln first said, "I've been talking with Mrs. Rockefeller about having this permanently in the museum." And I said, "All right, propose me for the director." Then I took it back and said, "No, you know quite well I don't want any

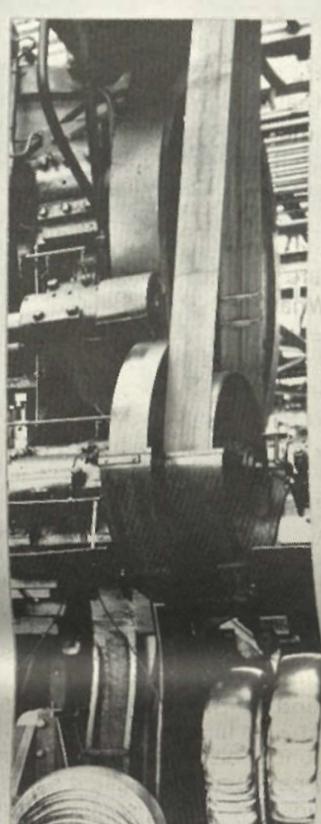
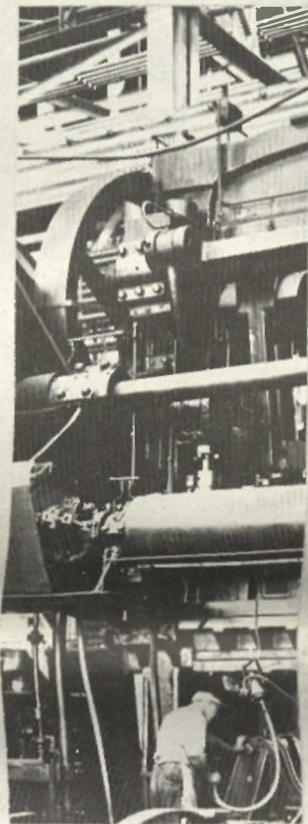
modesty—I don't think they're very good. When I make a film or when I do my video things, I'm very sloppy. All I want to do is see how the idea will work out. I use a hand held camera but I pay no attention to holding it steady. I'm not very happy with the results, but I do find out which things I'm sorry I bothered shooting and which things I wish I had shot more carefully. And that teaches me a lesson, not whether my hand moves a lot.

I don't think of myself as being an artist—I think of myself more as an exhibitor.

Q: Was part of that a feeling that there might be some conflict between being both an artist and a critic of sorts?

JL: I never thought of it. I just like to discover other people, other things, other ideas. I never paid much attention to patenting them as mine. They never were very profitable, anyhow, until so much later that it makes no difference anymore.

Like the Atget collection—there was no sign of selling it in its time. When the time came—45 years later—it didn't make much difference anymore. The fact that



Charles Sheeler, **Industry**, 1932 (design for a mural, triptych)

ago—before you had the real pornos that they have now—and some kind of sailor dive on Eighth Avenue had **Andalusian Dog** on the marquee. Apparently it was some kind of way around the law.

Q: When people were coming up and looking at Surrealist paintings in your gallery, did they express the same interest and excitement in the films that were being done by the same artists?

JL: They were interested, but it didn't go very far. I had Hearst in for one showing, but it didn't get anything out to the Hollywood circuit. He never even expressed much of an opinion—he was mainly concerned because I had invited Marion Davies and Mrs. Hearst at the same time.

Q: Did you try to promote film as collectible?

JL: That was the idea. All of these films were on standard size. I paid for a 16mm print and took it over on speculation: I would show it and I would sell limited editions. (We talked about what the limit would be and it was to be decided when we saw what kind of market there was—whether we'd limit it to five or a hundred.) I'd get them copyrighted, if possible, and I'd show them.

I wasn't going to bother renting them because I didn't know just how to set up a chain of that sort and take care of wear and tear, and getting them back. I'd simply sell outright, a collector's item—one of a limited edition of, say, a Man Ray single reel. One full reel was an hour.

Q: Did you sell any?

JL: No. I still have them. Unfortunately, it costs a fortune to do anything about them, and most of them are now in museums and so on. My copies all need to be restored—I don't dare run them through a projector. I have nothing very remarkable, except a couple of Joseph Cornells that I'm going to bring down to Mekas. He says he'll run off copies from it.

Q: For Anthology Film Archives?

JL: For the Anthology, yes. But the others—Man Rays, for instance—the Modern Museum has great copies of them now, directly from him, on new stock.

Q: Cornell's film hasn't really been seen at all, has it?

JL: You can see them at the Anthology. They're amazing. I think I'd have my students go to see them, whether

museum work of any sort."

Q: You preferred not to be in museums?

JL: Yes. Because I can't cope with trustees—I like to be my own boss. I still can't cope with trustees.

But I did feel rather slighted when I wasn't invited. I'd rather be invited and refuse. I wasn't invited, but Iris Barry was, and she became director of the new film collection at the Modern the following year. So in that way it was the nucleus—they probably would have come to it anyhow.

Q: You tell some interesting stories about Lincoln Kirstein in your book.

JL: Well, I sort of regret that. I don't know why I should have taken a swat and told on him and not on other people. My editor said, "It's all sweetness and light from beginning to end. Isn't there anyone about whom you have any kind of unpleasantness to report?" So I said, "Well, I'll go home and try to think of something." It's true, but I'm sort of sorry I put it in now.

Most people treated me pretty well.

Q: There are a lot of tantalizing references to ideas for art projects that you had for yourself. You mention having exhibited negative photostats.

JL: Oh, that was in the first Surrealist show. I did them as an example of pop American surrealism. They were collages in the **Daily Graphic**. That was a sensational tabloid at the time, and they invented the idea of phony collages recreating a murder or a rape, with cut out figures on the cover. They were surrealist enough and Americana-pop enough to already be an object. I transferred them even further by taking a photostat and using the negative in the exhibition instead of the positive. So it didn't look like the newspaper at all anymore.

But Ernst had already done negative photostats in some of his frottages in an earlier book, **Mr. Knife and Miss Fork**. He made the drawings, then photostated them, and put the negatives in the book as the final illustrations.

Q: Did you ever exhibit at all?

JL: My own things? Never thought of it, no. It isn't just

they're in a museum now and have entered the public domain is fine—that's what we wanted in the first place. However, we were asking, at the time, something like \$10,000. Never got it.

Q: Would it be too personal to ask what you finally did get for it?

JL: I'm not quite sure. But more than 10 times that.

Q: In the book, you talk about one project that you promoted—the chess exhibition. Did you do other things like that?

JL: You mean idea shows? I can't remember off hand. Although it wasn't my suggestion, the photomural show was an idea show. The applied photography that I had around the gallery was an idea show that I asked other people to contribute to.

Q: Is that something that a gallery or a dealer has more freedom to do than a museum might?

JL: Oh yes, of course. The only red tape you have is the fact that you can get into the red—and that's real red tape. The museum, at least, gets money for their things, but they have to get the money from trustees who have to have a say in what they can do and what they can't do. I could run into debt without anyone interfering with me, and then worry about it afterwards.

Q: So you commissioned the work for the chess exhibition?

JL: In those days it was much easier. When you work with artists, if they're fond of you and fond of your ideas—or of this idea—they all join in. I suggested it—I commissioned it, but not for money. I usually just said, "Do it and I'll show it, and I hope I can sell it for you. And anyhow, it's an interesting project, don't you think?" If they thought so they'd do it.

Q: Do you think people have a negative idea of the dealer?

JL: Sure have, yes. And perhaps I don't blame them. I think I've been the only dealer not to think about dollars and cents all the time. That's why I didn't last any too long. That was good luck for me, though. I'm better off

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Levy

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 7)
now, having a collection of things that have risen in value without my spending overhead on it for 20 or 30 years, than having used all my efforts, all my time, and what little money I could pull together trying to go through those hard years. It got more and more difficult, not easier.

Q: But gallery owners do make a very important contribution.

JL: I think that the gallery's very important, until another method is devised in some other kind of society. I don't know what they do in Communist countries. In our system, the concept is to give the artist enough time, free of practical worries, so that he can do his impractical work. The museum isn't going to do that—directly—because they haven't got that mobility.

Alfred Barr used to complain—in fact he was quite bitter about Julien Levy. He said, “Julien Levy's always doing what I want to do, and he's doing it two or three years before me. It's not that I didn't want to do it at the same time Julien did, but it takes me three years to get the museum machinery running, and it takes Julien three months.”

You could dispense with the dealer if the museum could function on both levels, but it can't move that fast and that experimentally. The dealer can afford to make five bum shows in a year. Five bum ones and five

But then I don't even know how a copyright in a book is protected—a couple of my books aren't paying me any royalties, and the royalties aren't big enough to afford a big lawsuit.

Q: This is the reprint of **Surrealism?**

JL: Yes, that's paying me nothing, and it should. A reputable firm has to have some responsibility to the artist.

However, there's an anecdote that Edith Halpert told me at the Downtown Gallery. She felt this way strongly years and years ago. I think this was with Ben Shahn. She sold a picture of his for so much and made such a profit on it, she felt guilty. So she called Shahn and said she wanted to give him a check, to share the profits with him. He said, “How much?” and she quoted him a figure. And he said, “Gee, you must owe me more than that, Edith. If you think you're sharing any profits, you must have sold it for an awful lot. You're so slap-happy, throwing away \$5,000 (or whatever it was), maybe you owe me 10.”

Q: Why don't people respect the contributions of dealers?

JL: Well, the middleman is presumably just a bargain-driving businessman. In a way, that's one of his functions, if he wants to be successful. I wasn't good at it, but you're supposed to be able to drive a bargain with the collector and with the artist. Get it as cheaply as you can and sell it for as high as you can. And in between he has to pay his overhead.

But if you eliminate him, the artist has no contact with

cious processes. Much more than still photography. You only get to still photography by stopping a movie and having a still. And then making the still look very beautiful in the lab.

But the dream process is one of remembering, juxtaposition, double meanings, interrupted time sequences, and so on. So the movies give you flashbacks, which correspond to memory and interrupted time sequence. They give you double exposure which corresponds to having two incompatible ideas at the same time, which is the way your mind works and a dream functions. And it gives you the possibility of illogicality and the conquest of reality. In dreams you can float, and fly without an airplane—and in a movie you can do that by trick camera. In real life you can't.

So, in that way, the movies are the closest to a surrealist medium. And then all the other things can be used: a camera, or, if you're good at painting, Dali's theory of being his own camera and painting as if he were a camera.

Music is the most intractable art for surrealism. Because it's innately surrealist already.

Q: What do you think of the incredible explosion of market values in photography?

JL: What do you think of it? It's good for the photographer, for the moment, it is not?

Anyhow, it's mostly the collectors that are working with an idea of gain, now, not the photographers. The photographers aren't doing anything much different from what they were doing. How much do the young, experimental newcomers make—not so much, compared to the old days. Nor do they sell as much.

It's the hard-to-get classics, and that's the same as the art racket. That's the way it always was. When I started trying to defend the living artist, there was no interest in him. The big money went to the old masters. Then, later on, the big money went to the Impressionists, when there was a great deal of novelty in the Surrealists. Now that the Surrealists are presumably dead—though I don't think it is a dead approach, by any means, but the old masters of Surrealism are dying off—now they fetch enormous prices. The young men are still coming along, and they don't.

A dead artist is an expensive one, usually. Luckily, now, somebody like Max Ernst or Man Ray does hit the jackpot in the last five years of his life. When he's *almost* dead, but *alive enough to enjoy it a little* at the end.

But it's the collector that makes that fancy price business, and usually for dead art. To get a collector to do something about the younger artist is hard. That's where Pop Art—and, I guess, the New York School of Abstract Expressionism—were pretty successful. They managed to get high prices in their lifetime.

Q: Isn't there something different about photography that makes it somewhat strange to collect because it's so reproducible, and because there are so many prints possible from the negative?

JL: The original artist's touch is mystical, and that question hasn't been solved yet. The signature makes no difference and that's what the collector thinks makes a great difference. But you can sign anything.

The original painting has a certain magic when it's been blessed by the artist's hand. A fake isn't quite the same—that's why fakers get detected and arrested. And the original print that was loved all the way through the hypo bath by the artist himself has a mystique to it which may or may not be valid. I think it's valid. I think there's magic in art, anyhow, and there's magic in talent or genius. And it conveys itself in the final touch that the artist gives—no matter how much of a joke that sounds like. That's Stieglitz's kind of talk.

Q: Does the gallery owner—do all gallery owners—have a responsibility to the living artist and to the advanced art of the day?

JL: It's a question I'd throw back to you: are the museums responsible? are the gallery owners responsible? or are the artists responsible for each other? I would think the general public has a responsibility toward their living artists, with or without museums or dealers.

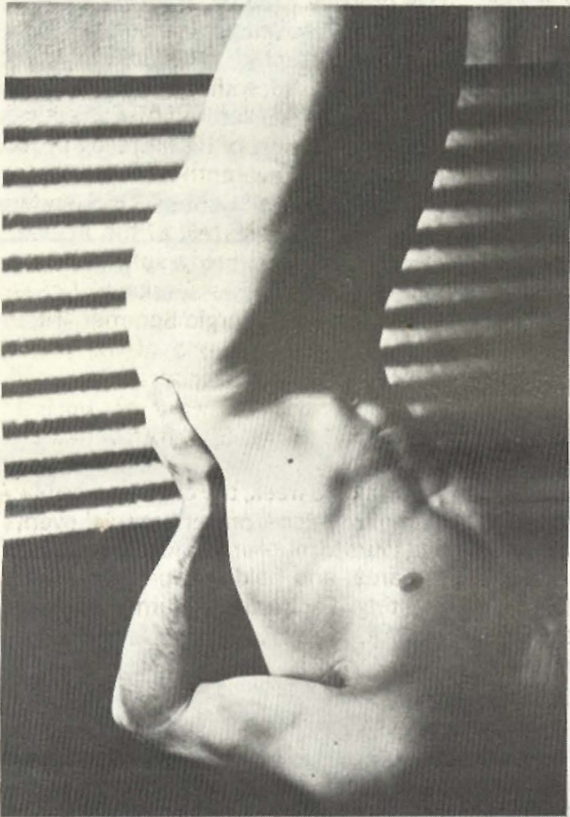
Next best to that—and this has always been so—is that artists themselves do feel responsible for each other. They're likely to both promote each other—even when they're jealous as hell—and to help each other out, because they know what the problem is.

But the general public doesn't feel a responsibility until the profit motive comes in. And that exists all around the whole circle—even including the museums, who are non-profit institutions, but who have to show results of some sort. To get their expenses paid they have to make sensational exhibits and show attendance results.

I certainly think that the contemporary, living artist is more important than the dead one to society. But who's going to judge which ones are important and which ones aren't? Usually the most important ones are the most difficult to see at first, and to understand.

Q: How does one see them? You saw them....

JL: That question's asked me all the time. I have no answer. I just don't know why more people can't see them like I can. I see them just like—like I presume you're seeing me. It never was a mystery to me. It's when other people say that they don't see it that I realize that, apparently, it is a mystery.



Left, George Platt Lynes, untitled; right, Lee Miller, untitled

successful ones is doing marvels. He's playing the odds, and he's willing to lose on half his bets if he can make a killing on one. The museum can't do that—they've got to make a killing on every one, because they're standing up as a monument. So they must let it be tested and tried first, and the gallery is the trying ground.

I used to say to the museums at the time—it never registered—that economics were so odd, the way they went up and down, that we should work together. There were times when the museum was in such a bind that they couldn't raise the money for anything—particularly for anything modern. And I would say that the dealers should cooperate with the museums in any way possible: organize shows and lend them to museums; give them gifts or enormous discounts so their modern collection could grow.

And, in reverse, there are times when business is terribly bad and the gallery can hardly live through the year because there are no sales. A museum is endowed and has money to spend, and then instead of asking for bargains and loans, that is when they should come in and rescue the dealer. Because the dealer will be needed by them again, two years from then. They should come in and say, “Well, we have a purchase fund and we're not going to dicker with you. In fact, we'll give you a little extra because we think by buying the picture and putting it in our museum the price will double by tomorrow (which is true). Not as a general rule, but this year, because this year's a bad year for the gallery and a good year for the museum.”

But this didn't go over because you can't put an idea like that across. That's not talking pragmatically—that's practically radical.

Q: What do you think of the resale clauses that some artists are putting into contracts, which require that a certain percentage of any profits made from the resale of their work go back to the artist?

JL: I think it's a great idea, if it can be worked out.

the collector.

Q: You suggest a couple of times in your book that credits that were rightfully yours were claimed by other people.

JL: Did I? I hope I didn't stress that too hard. I don't like whining. I don't know just what I was referring to, or where I said that, but I think, in general, I was setting it right in this book. I think in relation to the first Surrealist show in America—I never got any credit for that and still haven't. Until I started to insist on it, myself, because I got annoyed by being completely overlooked. And, again, with the Atget collection, as you pointed out yourself. I mention that.

But I never went out and patented things, or shouted that I was the first. The major thing was that I didn't know it was terribly important to be the first. Until people started to say to me, “So and so was the first person to do that,” and I'd have to say, “Well, I did it before he did it.” Then I began to get a little miffed that I hadn't blown my own horn harder.

I feel I suggested the idea of Sandy Calder's mobiles, but he would never admit that. And it isn't very important—he made them.

Q: There seems to be an especially strong relationship between photography and Surrealism. Do you think that's true? A lot of Surrealists used photography—that's a very obvious connection. Dali called his paintings “hand-made snapshots.” And you refer to a comment that he once made: that he wished that he had a camera that could make color photographs of the inside of his mind....

JL: Well, first of all, Surrealism doesn't apply just to painting. It began as a poetry movement and it applies to everyone of man's functions, so that includes photography.

And, number two, it has to do with putting out, into viewable form, the invisible concepts of the subconscious. Actually, if you boil it down, the movies are the closest thing possible to the rendering of the subcons-