Patterson Sims

The consummate New York art dealer, gallery owner, multifaceted connoisseur, writer, and public speaker Ivan Karp invented me. He was my first, best, and most congenial boss. He established the foundation of the many people in the visual arts who have populated my life, and for all of us he was one of the most arrestingly articulate and amusing people we knew.

In the fall of 1968, my junior year of college in New York City, I was assigned by my professor, Sam Hunter, to write a paper on a contemporary art movement or artist. Having completed, a year before, a lengthy essay on Robert Rauschenberg, I asked if I could write on my favorite gallery, Leo Castelli. Sam said, “Sure, if you really want to,” though it seemed a bit odd to him. He immediately added, “Of course, Ivan Karp will help you.” I nodded, conscious only of Leo Castelli’s darting, diminutive, and already legendary presence, glimpsed on a few of my frequent trips up those still plush, red-carpeted stairs at 4 East Seventy-Seventh Street.

On my next visit to the gallery, I asked the young woman at the desk if I might be directed to Ivan Karp. Kay Bearman—who later worked at the Metropolitan Museum of Art—inconicly pointed at the space’s center room, which I’d always considered off limits. Kay, along with her then Castelli colleagues, David Whitney and David White, would all become powerful presences in the contemporary art world. I found Ivan and nervously introduced myself. He dispelled my anxiety by immediately putting me both at ease and into a state of wonderment.

I know this may seem surprising, but Ivan was far more exotic to me than Leo Castelli. Leo’s courtly, distanced air, while decidedly European and patrician, was somehow familiar to me from growing up in genteel and gentele suburban, Social Register Philadelphia. Ivan was new territory: he had been born in the Bronx and raised in Brooklyn. Self-assured, garrulous, and overtly democratic, he was utterly down-to-earth yet possessed of a fervid intellect and curiosity and a laser capacity to quickly see and share as extraordinary what to others was ordinary or invisible. It might have been my third meeting with him when Ivan suggested I accompany him to pick out a birthday present for his wife. I was deeply touched that he’d want my company and quickly learned that Marilynn, an esteemed academic and artist, was the underpinning and love of his life.

Ivan was one of his era’s most memorable speakers on art. He participated on numerous panels and lectured internationally at more than 250 universities, museums, and
other art venues, and also appeared on The Tonight Show, among many other television programs. Whether acting as Andy Warhol’s spokesperson or regaling visitors to his gallery, Ivan fluently traversed from pop art and culture to Wallace Stevens. He expounded in long, Joycean loops of lyric detail, enthusiasm, and mirth about artists and art movements, memories of the multiple apartments of his youth, and the beauty of slip-decorated salt-glazed stoneware jugs. Ivan also had an extensive literary career and wrote until the end of his life. He was the first art critic for the Village Voice. His comic art world novel Doobie Doo was published in 1965, and his short stories appeared in the Cambridge and the Evergreen reviews.

Ivan’s life as an art dealer began in 1956–58 at the artist cooperative Hansa Gallery in New York, where he was co-director with Richard (Dick) Bellamy, his lifelong and comparably generously spirited and soulful compatriot. In 1958–59 Ivan worked at the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York. Then he became, from its opening, the associate director of the Castelli Gallery. For several summers, while the Castelli Gallery was closed, Ivan gained his initial experience as an independent art dealer in a small space in Provincetown, Massachusetts.

In the spring of 1969, a few months after we had met, I was astonished when Ivan called to tell me that he was leaving Castelli to go out on his own and asked if I would be the assistant director of his new gallery. Though I was about to go into my senior year in college, I unhesitatingly said yes, and the next six and a half years, the most fulfilling and exhilarating of my life, were spent at OK Harris.

Ivan’s naturally mayoral personality was at the center of the transformation of a deserted light-industrial neighborhood south of Houston Street, soon to be called SoHo. He and the gallery played a primary role in the district’s reincarnation, and he later joked that SoHo might therefore be renamed IvanHo. SoHo became an exemplar of how the arrival of artists and then art spaces glamorizes abandoned sections of cities. OK Harris’s main thoroughfare—a huge ground-floor space (big enough to present six one-person shows at once)—was a prototype for the supersized commercial art galleries now in Chelsea and around the world.

Ivan encouraged me to look at the slides of the artists who came into the gallery, wanting to get their work shown, when he was meeting with other hopeful artists. I soon started making multiple studio visits every week. Ivan tried to make sure that every artist felt as if they had someone with whom they could engage in a conversation about their work and a place where they could share it. His seemingly insatiable appetite for viewing new work positioned him eternally in discovery mode. He impressed on me that we should do everything we could for artists. For Ivan, artists, no less than artworks, were central; it was a lesson I happily absorbed from him. For him, being an art dealer was a calling. He sincerely enjoyed aiding and encouraging others, including his fellow dealers. Arne Glimcher of the Pace Gallery recalls in a booklet created for Ivan’s memorial service that when he “decided to open Pace in New York. . . . He [Ivan] helped me
find the location, the architect, and selflessly took me to studio after studio. . . . I would not have achieved the success I have without Ivan.”

Every day working with Ivan was an adventure. My three co-workers and I managed to get the multiple monthly shows up and down, get the word out, have all the art documented, accounted for, and stored or shipped—and laugh a lot. I cannot recall a single staff or any other kind of meeting or a business plan. In those first years, everyone passed through OK Harris’s tall doors—eminent artists from Willem de Kooning to Mick Jagger; major museum directors, curators, and art collectors from around the world; and the growing art public. We treated all visitors with the utmost respect. As Ivan declared, one can never tell who will buy a work of art, and he contended that every sale was a miracle.

Ivan’s taste and range of interests was breathtaking. He championed Warhol, John Chamberlain, Roy Lichtenstein, and so many other artists in his uptown years, and then, at OK Harris, he exhibited photorealism and an awesome array of other styles and media. All the while, he and Marilynn were deeply engaged by artifacts ranging from antiquities to wooden washboards. They relished FBI Most Wanted posters, single-blade food choppers, handmade crutches, eggbeaters, and misspelled restaurant menus no less than modern and contemporary art. In recent years they gave many pertinent objects and collections to the New-York Historical Society, the New York State Historical Association, and other museums in the United States. Under the auspices of the Anonymous Arts Recovery Society, an organization he incorporated in 1958, Ivan tirelessly rescued and preserved ornamental and figural facade elements and other carved fragments from buildings in New York City and other parts of the state. As noted in his New York Times obituary, Ivan was “a self-described ‘rubble-rouser,’ [who] accomplished his preservation mission the old-fashioned way: with bribes.” As he observed, “For anywhere between $5 to $25, they’ll take the trouble not to smash something.”

What he saved now embellishes the Eastern Parkway subway station, the back garden of the
Brooklyn Museum, and six other U.S. museum collections.

Down the road from their country house in Charlottesville, New York, where over the years they and the many friends they attracted there have acquired property, Ivan and Marilynn Karp bought and restored the former Levi Stevens's general store and the 1830–32 Methodist church as a comprehensive Museum of the History of Charlottesville and Anonymous Arts Museum, installed with a careful selection of the architectural fragments amassed by the Anonymous Arts Recovery Society. In his later years Ivan and friends laboriously cleaned up and documented twenty-five historic cemeteries and family burial plots in surrounding Schoharie County.

Ivan was a mostly self-taught intellectual and scholar, always eager to share his knowledge. His New York City background and fascination with America and Americana made him uniquely alert to pop art and the group of photorealist artists whom he identified and exhibited for others to appreciate. He derived just as much pleasure from showing and talking about art as from selling it. Ivan was known locally for regularly sweeping the street in front of his gallery. He became a powerful community and art world presence and figure, and yet one who had little attraction to power.

Like many of the several hundred others who crowded his memorial service on October 16, 2012, at the Great Hall of Cooper Union in New York City, I have come to realize that my formative and continued association with Ivan Karp was the source of many of my guiding principles and major predilections. Numerous people, as his wife observed in the memorial booklet, were “changed for having known him.” For, as she explained, “Each of us stretched to our best selves because we cared what he thought.” Ivan made us feel that artists were more important than collectors and that the experience of art and everyday objects and their exhilarating epiphanies was far more enticing than money, power, and fame. His passionate enthusiasm and prescience about art, his integrity, his ever-ready wit and optimism, and his wide-ranging friendships and contented family life are the enduring truths and lessons of his exceedingly well-lived existence.

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