

Werner Kramarsky and the Art of Collecting

by *Nora Griffin*



Christian Schneegass, James Cuno, Wynn Kramarsky and Frank Badur at the Akademie der Künste, Berlin, 1999

“Collecting is a little bit like making love. You don’t know who your perfect partner is going to be. And you really don’t make a choice that way.” These are the words of Werner (known by many as “Wynn”) Kramarsky, perhaps this country’s foremost collector of contemporary works on paper. Since his first purchase of a Jasper Johns drawing in 1958 for the then outrageous sum of \$175, Wynn has proven that there is in fact an “art” to the practice of collecting and exhibiting art.

Kramarsky’s collection comprises roughly 4,000 works organized around the loosely defined parameters of minimalism, post-minimalism and conceptual art. The eclecticism of the collection has garnered much praise from critics and artists alike. Especially notable is his preference for seeking out younger artists, endearingly referred to as “newbies,” with an equal sensitivity towards celebrated artists, whom he calls “namies.” Artists such as Sol LeWitt, Eva Hesse, Richard Serra, Robert Morris, Lawrence Weiner, Agnes Martin, Mel Bochner and Brice Marden, are given as much attention as those working through similar material and conceptual processes, such as

David Jeffrey, Eve Ascheim, Joan Waltemath, Christine Hiebert and Nancy Haynes. The breadth of Kramarsky's collection redefines what we traditionally accept as "drawing." For example, Cyrilla Mozenter's *Untitled* (1991) consists of myrtle leaves, allspice, amica and beeswax on paper. And Jessica Stockholder's *Turning Point* (1998) is an organization of orange peel, green shag carpet and wood engraving on handmade paper.

560 Broadway: A New York Drawing Collection at Work, 1991-2006 edited by Amy Eshoo and Elizabeth Finch, will be published by Yale University Press in 2008. The book provides a brief history and mission plan of the exhibition space that Kramarsky operated in SoHo for fifteen years, but also includes essays by museum curators, educators, and colleagues who've witnessed first-hand the impact of his generous gifts to traveling shows and permanent collections. It is ultimately a testament to Kramarsky's legacy as a collector, exhibitor, tireless promoter of the pure pleasures of looking at works of art, and most importantly, his profound commitment to supporting artists.

Maintaining a personal engagement with the educational and curatorial components of art exhibitions, Kramarsky has continuously redefined and challenged the conventional role of the collector. Elizabeth Finch in her introductory essay "A Place and an Idea," touches on the qualities that venerate him as a collector: "The pleasures are easy to understand, it's the responsibilities that take some explaining...for Wynn these responsibilities constitute the nature of collecting." Kramarsky understands art collecting as a practice that carries with it a moral and social responsibility. His commitment is to place the artist first and foremost, and to maintain an active relationship to the work of art—a vision realized through the creation of his gallery space at 560 Broadway. Above all, Kramarsky is concerned with the ricochet effect an artwork can have on an individual's life. There are many stories of students beginning their academic careers as art historians and curators based on a university museum's exceptional exhibition of drawings culled from his collection. James Cuno, director of the Art Institute of Chicago, explains that Kramarsky's motives for exhibiting his drawings are determined by three complimentary questions: "Will they be seen by as many people as possible? Will lesser-known artists be included together with well-known artists? And will students be involved in the production of the exhibition catalogue?"

Wynn Kramarsky is the son of a German-born art collector, and as a young child was surrounded by a mix of works by old masters and French Impressionists, including Rembrandt, Watteau, Guardi, Cézanne, Gauguin and van Gogh. Visits to artists' studios have been a big part of Wynn's life since his early days as a regular at the Cedar Tavern. However, his first real foray into professional collecting began with his enthusiastic participation in a program initiated by the Museum of Modern Art in 1951 called the Art Lending Service. The program allowed for museum members to rent for three months, at a small fee, framed works of art selected from New York galleries. The artworks, after the rental period was up, were then offered to their lucky temporary owners at drastically reduced prices. According to Patricia Whitman, the former director of MoMA's Contemporary Arts Council, "many a collection was started this way," Wynn's included. Years later, Kramarsky repaid MoMA by making a gift of eighty-one drawings to the museum, on the occasion of its 2004 re-opening. Wynn, in addition to being a long time trustee of the MoMA, is a dedicated member of its Drawing Committee, as well as a Chairman of the Board of the Andy Warhol Foundation (As he announced his retirement last year, The Wynn Kramarsky Freedom of Artistic Expression grant was created in his honor to support the work of organizations with deep-seated commitment to preserving and depending the First Amendment rights of artists. The first recipient is the Critical Art Ensemble.) and member of the Board of the UCLA Hammer Museum.

Kramarsky's notion of collecting extends to providing ongoing career support for younger artists on the verge of realizing their full potential by experimentation within their medium. Kramarsky's foundation, with a characteristic lack of pretense simply called the "Fifth Floor Foundation," provided the necessary funding for artist Allyson Strafella to further explore her typewriter-based drawings by creating a customized typewriter with a thirty-six inch carriage and individualized keys.

The 2004 exhibition *Infinite Possibilities: Serial Imagery in 20th Century Drawings*, at the Davis Museum at Wellesley College is a successful case study of how Kramarsky's drawings have generated dialogue within both the academic and public sphere. The exhibition was organized around thirty-four artists from his collection, and was divided into eight thematic groupings. The selection of artists pinpointed his own involvement in the interplay between a heavily conceptual approach to art making complimented by a wide range of materials, styles, and delectable visuals. Lawrence Weiner, an artist included in the show and a formidable presence in the roundtable discussions between

students and professors, remarked that Kramarsky was “not a philanthropist, not an altruist, but was completely sensually engaged in the work of art.”

Indeed, anyone who has had the fortune to be privy to Kramarsky's hands-on relationship to his collection has witnessed the palpable delight he finds in the physicality of artworks. During a tour of the Krannert Art Museum's exhibition *Drawings of Choice*, curators and students alike were amusingly shocked when Kramarsky removed a Louise Bourgeois drawing from behind glass to give the assembled group an impromptu demonstration of his preferred method of looking at works of art. At that moment everyone in the room would have wholeheartedly agreed with Mel Bochner when he said, "Nietzsche claimed that aesthetic pleasure can never be democratic, but as a collector and benefactor Wynn Kramarsky proves Nietzsche wrong...Wynn's extraordinary generosity is based on his belief