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Giovanni Casini, *Léonce Rosenberg's Cubism. The Gallery L'Effort Moderne in Interwar Paris*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2023. 254 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$119.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-0271094892; \$95.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9-78-0271096025.

Review by Chara Kolokytha, Independent Scholar.

Casini's study focuses on the comprehensive exploration of the life and contributions of the Jewish-French art dealer, Léonce Rosenberg, within the annals of art history. Addressing a conspicuous dearth of scholarly acknowledgment of his significance, the author underscores the catalysing role played by Christian Derouet. Derouet's exclusive access to the dealer's archives, secured with Lucienne Rosenberg's authorization in 1983, sparked scholarly interest in Rosenberg, while he made his archive available in the Kandinsky library (Centre Pompidou, Paris). His subsequent publications have significantly enriched the field, notably revealing Rosenberg's extensive correspondence and exploring his activities and position in the Parisian art scene. Building upon this foundation, Casini's research employs an archival approach, drawing from a range of both published and unpublished primary sources, supplemented by extensive references to relevant bibliography. Casini states that his aim is to provide a nuanced understanding of Rosenberg's ideas and impact, rather than to contribute to the currently prevalent quantitative approach of art market studies. This statement might be perceived as not fully acknowledging the extensive qualitative research conducted on the twentieth-century art market, even though the book builds upon this existing research. Departing from conventional linear narratives, the study adopts a historical methodology that seeks to offer an alternative perspective on the post-Picasso and Braque era of Cubism. Organized chronologically along the trajectory of Rosenberg's life, each chapter delves into specific themes, illuminating the diverse dimensions of his enduring legacy.

The narrative surrounding L'Effort Moderne (1918-1941) invites critical examination. Casini places emphasis on Rosenberg's visionary role, his disinterested passion for promoting his own--quite non-specific--version of Cubism, his aesthetic idealism, his elitism, as well as his role as a promoter of the "collective ethos" of a "rather heterogenous group of artists" (p. 4). Despite the antithetical nature of this latter statement, there is no tangible evidence of such as collective ethos apparent in the analysis. The opacity shrouding the gallery's early years raises questions about its strategies, operations, philosophy and commercial success. While it first opened in 1910, specialising in Asian and African art as well as antiquities from the Mediterranean region, the first reference to the name L'Effort Moderne appears around 1918. Rosenberg's early involvement with Cubism was primarily as a collector. We are informed that by 1914, he owned

about twenty paintings by Picasso and some works by Matisse. During the war, he continued to enhance his collection with artworks from foreign artists who were not deployed to the front lines. The dealer recounts responding enthusiastically to the collector André Level's challenge to "take on the destiny of the entire Cubist movement" (p. 35). He signed contracts with Braque, Gris, Herbin, Laurens, and Metzinger in 1916. Léger followed in 1918 and benefited from the dealer's long-lasting support. Rosenberg was involved in commercial transactions with Picasso, although no contract was ever signed between the two. Due to the absence of his stock book and correspondence in the archive, little light is shed on his commercial transactions and clientele.

The year 1918 marks, however, a turning point in both his taste and activities, while it initiates a period of extroversion. Apart from scarce references to five public sales (1918-1921) of Rosenberg's stock of antique objects and modern artworks that he acquisitioned since 1906 from Clovis Sagot and Daniel-Henri Kahnweiler, and an account of his transactions with Bernard Berenson between 1910 and 1916, Casini reduces the commercial activities of these seven years to passing references. He concentrates instead on aspects of his biography, while stressing the post-1918 gallery's anonymity and the "militaristic ethos" (pp. 2, 31)--stemming from his military service--associated with the name L'Effort Moderne, by contrasting it with the gallery named after Léonce's younger brother, Paul Rosenberg. For Casini, this distinction serves as a criterion to differentiate between the philosophies of the two dealers: Paul primarily acted as a businessman, while Léonce's activities were driven by aesthetic criteria. It is implied that Rosenberg did not merely capitalise on an opportunity presented to him by Level, while taking advantage of Kahnweiler's absence, but rather originated the gallery's vision in an effort to rebrand Cubism at any expense by adapting its principles to his own personal aesthetic and commercial agenda.

The portrayal of Rosenberg as primarily a visionary, with secondary consideration given to his commercial endeavours, warrants critical assessment. The balance between artistic vision and commercial success is a delicate one. Casini contends that the "parable of L'Effort Moderne is ultimately that of a commercial fiasco" (p. 5) yet falls short of explicating the underlying reasons coherently. The dealer's framing of Cubism as an "open and potentially inclusive concept" (p. 40) without a clear aesthetic framework suggests a failure to provide a cohesive understanding of the movement and questions his ability to articulate a definitive vision for Cubism within the gallery. Casini argues that this lack of coherence emerged from the uncertainty and fluidity of the period under examination but represents the first effort to forge a movement comprising diverse trends. However, was this diversity primarily centered on the reinventions of Cubism (Purism, Mechanism, De Stijl, Abstraction, and very partly Surrealism) up to the mid-1920s, as thoroughly examined in the historiography of the movement?

Quoting Christopher Green, the author states it was not Rosenberg's intention "to make any kind of artistic production understandable to the larger public" (p. 38). However, Green's statement applies to all the early supporters of Cubism, including Rosenberg. One reads in the third chapter that Rosenberg intended to become a taste-maker akin to Paul Durand-Ruel. He adopted ancient patronage as a model and sought to educate the public by identifying himself as *editeur* rather than *marchand*, a term unrelated to the publishing world, which the dealer devised to describe his unique role. The fact that Cubism was viewed as the embodiment of Platonic ideals and Pythagorean principles speaks to the abstract character of Rosenberg's understanding. By linking

Cubism to foundational philosophical concepts, discussed extensively in the first chapter, he sought to elevate its significance beyond the realm of visual art. Furthermore, his esoteric understanding of Cubism positioned it as a vehicle for spiritual enlightenment and adherence to wisdom. The dealer's affiliation with the French section of the Theosophical Society further underscores the esoteric underpinnings of his interpretation of Cubism, which is interestingly explored at length in the book in combination with the dealer's ambiguous ideological positioning and the implications of his Jewish identity on his aesthetic sensibilities and political perspectives.

The best way to "understand the meaning of L'Effort Moderne at its origin," according to Casini, "is as a collective elite in search of absolute truths" (p. 38). However, when it comes to practical terms of adapting these supposed absolute truths to painting, one realizes in the second chapter that Rosenberg's interpretation of Cubism may not have adhered strictly to its foundational principles ("he had not the slightest idea of what a 'ratio' or a 'proportion' was," p. 66) as evidenced by his failed attempt to author the book *Du Cubisme au Classicisme* in collaboration with the post-futurist Gino Severini, eventually written by the artist himself and published by Jacques Povolozky. Rosenberg's Cubism stands out for its loose interpretation, primarily characterized by a blend of geometric abstraction and the use of pure colours, which diverges significantly from the early experiments of the movement. Additionally, the dealer's "romantic, esoteric mysticism" (p. 70), according to Casini, rendered difficult the decision between classicism and mechanism while his version of Cubism "ended up blending abstraction and figuration somewhat awkwardly, in a way that might have offered an alternative to Surrealism" (p. 4). The complex interpretation of Rosenberg's Cubism as an amalgamation of prevailing artistic currents of his era lacks further scrutiny as it embodies a vast array of changes in the avant-garde art scene throughout the 1920s. The same holds true for the content of the *Bulletin de l'Effort Moderne* (1924-1927), which receives scant attention in the book. According to Casini, it is "impossible to find any coherence" within its pages (p. 58). A closer look into its content reveals a certain sort of anxiety to predict and direct the future of art following the lasting influence of Cubism. This is reminiscent of the content found in the review *Cahiers d'Art* (1926-1960), although Rosenberg's *Bulletin* supported the abstract geometric and mechanistic direction of Cubism in the 1920s. They both, however, aimed for its classical manifestation, each defining it differently.

The dealer's controversial involvement in the auctions of 1,500 paintings from Kahnweiler's stock as State sequestration of enemy property during the war, is interpreted by the author as an effort to draw the attention of the largest possible clientele to Cubist art. The dealer did claim that "huge and unexpected publicity in favour of the Cubist movement" (p. 92) was achieved through these public sales. In the meantime, he cynically acknowledged them as a test of the artists' intrinsic value. The four auctions caused indignation in the art world by allowing speculation and resulting in a collapse of prices. Furthermore, the so-called attention--commonly acknowledged as devaluation--that Cubist art garnered did not in fact pertain to the open and inclusive version of Cubism that the dealer branded and promoted in his gallery, given the stock included artworks produced before 1914. His motive was to eliminate Kahnweiler, Casini observes, but was that part of a strategic, long-term plan? In fact, the liquidation of his rival's property between 1921 and 1923 coincides with Rosenberg's struggles with bankruptcy in 1921 and the public sale of his own stock and collection between 1918-1921. While Casini

acknowledges a certain degree of hypocrisy in the dealer's comments on Kahnweiler, the narrative falls short in critically examining the dealer's self-presentation versus his actual role as a merchant, as well as the impact on his reputation and the consequences of his involvement in the sales of his rival's stock. Therefore, it abounds with prevailing contradictions.

Rosenberg found it unsustainable, Casini observes, to focus solely on Cubism in the early 1920s, yet his collaboration with De Chirico in the mid-1920s is not seen as a direct consequence of this. One might pause to consider whether interpreting Cubism as an amalgamation of heterogeneous trends--such as surrealism and geometric abstraction--blended with figuration, as discussed earlier, was not part of Rosenberg's strategy to break away from Cubism's monopoly and broaden his artistic enterprise, rather than to transform--or rebrand in Casini's words--Cubism into a versatile and open-ended umbrella term. Furthermore, the dealer's collaboration with international artists from England, Italy, the Netherlands, north and south America, extensively discussed in the fourth chapter, needs to be examined in the light of financial sustainability. Casini stresses the cosmopolitan nature of Cubism and its global impact, with a focus on centre-periphery dynamics, north-south/east-west rivalries, and hidden business agendas. He discusses the dealer's connections with several affluent foreign artists who held exhibitions in the gallery, but perhaps more importantly, purchased artworks from the dealer's stock. It is evident from the presentation that Rosenberg benefited from these artists' ambition to gain recognition in the Parisian art scene, a fact that dismantles commercial strategies under the guise of inclusiveness and cosmopolitanism.

The most well-articulated and comprehensive section of the book is the discussion on Rosenberg's architectural interests, along with the final chapter reconstructing the decorative ensembles from the interior of his apartment at 75 Rue Longchamp in Paris, in the late 1920s. This latter has even inspired an exhibition, recently on display at the Picasso Museum in Paris. Chapter two delves into the possibility of "bringing together different arts in relation to life," a concept pioneered by De Stijl, which caught Rosenberg's attention as "a way to make Cubist art more marketable" (pp. 48-49), according to Casini. Although the idea originated in 1916 through his discussions with Jacques Lipchitz, the dealer later envisioned "a model house in the country on which all of the De Stijl artists would be expected to collaborate" (p. 50). While this idea never materialised, the book reproduces two sketches for a private villa produced by Theo Van Doesburg in 1921, while models for "a hypothetical Maison Rosenberg" were exhibited in his gallery in 1923 (p. 130). Following the example of his competitor, Paul Guillaume, Casini informs us that Rosenberg's concept for decorating his Parisian apartment in the late 1920s was not confined to a curatorial notion of a *hôtel-musée*, but rather involved direct commissions to artists "who had been part of his stable since the founding of L'Effort Moderne with other unexpected artists" (p. 129). This serves as the only evidence of what Casini refers to as collectivist vision in the first chapter of the book, with artists contributing to the project by creating art that responds to the decorative style chosen by the dealer for each room, "ranging from Restoration and Empire to contemporary Art Deco" (p. 132) and complemented by Cubist and avant-garde artworks on the walls. The recession rendered this decorative project short-lived as the dealer had to move to a smaller apartment in 1932, and most of the paintings from 75 Rue Longchamp were stored on the ground floor of his gallery.

In the Epilogue, Casini comments on the dealer's "renovated commitment to abstraction" in the 1930s, which occurred during "a crucial period for the institutionalisation of Cubism on a transatlantic scale" (pp. 156-157). The author notes that while the dealer faced financial setbacks and "was overshadowed by Kahnweiler's pre-eminence" (p. 157), his focus remained on securing a place for Cubism "in founding narratives of modern art being written at the time" (p. 161). The book intriguingly concludes with the reconstruction of Rosenberg's life during the Occupation, as illuminated by the correspondence he exchanged with Albert Gleizes. This sheds light on interesting aspects of his biography during these challenging years. Overall, the book provides a comprehensive--albeit somewhat less critical--analysis of Rosenberg's involvement with Cubism. It exposes tensions between artistic experimentation, commercial demands, and personal biography, highlighting the complexities involved in shaping and delineating artistic movements amid the swiftly evolving artistic and cultural milieu of the early twentieth century.

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