

A Sweeper-Up After Artists

BY IRVING SANDLER

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a book review by Budd Hopkins

In the 1950s, New York's Cedar Street Tavern—"the Cedar" to its denizens—was a working man's barroom so utterly nondescript, so lacking in even a touch of visual interest, that it drew artists by the score. This might seem perverse, but the truth is that, away from their studios and in search of a club-room that sold cheap beer, visual dullness was just what the artists wanted. Paradoxically, this drab barn of a place was to become the scene of many legendary events and oft-told stories from the history of Abstract Expressionism: brutal arguments, glamorous fist-fights, seminal conversations, broken, mended, and newly-minted friendships, plus a thousand other familiar incidents, both historic and trivial. More than any other artists' hangout in the last century, the Cedar Bar has become identified with one of the greatest moments in the history of American art.

The Cedar years, the '50s, are the main subject of Irving Sandler's rather self-effacing memoir titled, unfortunately but characteristically, "A Sweeper-up After Artists." Irv, as we called him then, became part of the New York art world a few years before I did—I discovered it in 1954—and he immediately began interviewing artists and attempting to write down who said what to whom at the Cedar and the Artist's Club. When I asked a friend about him, he said he had heard that "Irv is some kind of academic who's writing a history of the Jews." Considering the marginal position of artists at the time, the public's contempt for abstract painting and the subject of Sandler's later books, my friend's remark is not without irony.

I remember Irv as being tall, serious and extremely straight—not just in the heterosexual sense, but straight in every other way: honest, courteous, humble, genuinely interested, and eager to learn. These qualities—rare at the Cedar in those days—come though admirably in his memoir.

The '50s art world, as exemplified by the regulars at the Cedar Bar, was an amazing collection of vivid personalities, ego-ridden wannabes, great, innovative artists, hopeless drunks, witty raconteurs, shy, private people, and restless satyrs constantly trolling for women. (I should add that some of these categories overlapped.) As one might expect, painting, sex and art-world politics were the main topics of conversation, with jokes as part of the leavening. At a given night in the Cedar, Franz Kline, wearing an expensive tweed sport coat and frazzled khaki pants, would be standing with friends near the door, smiling, telling stories, mak-

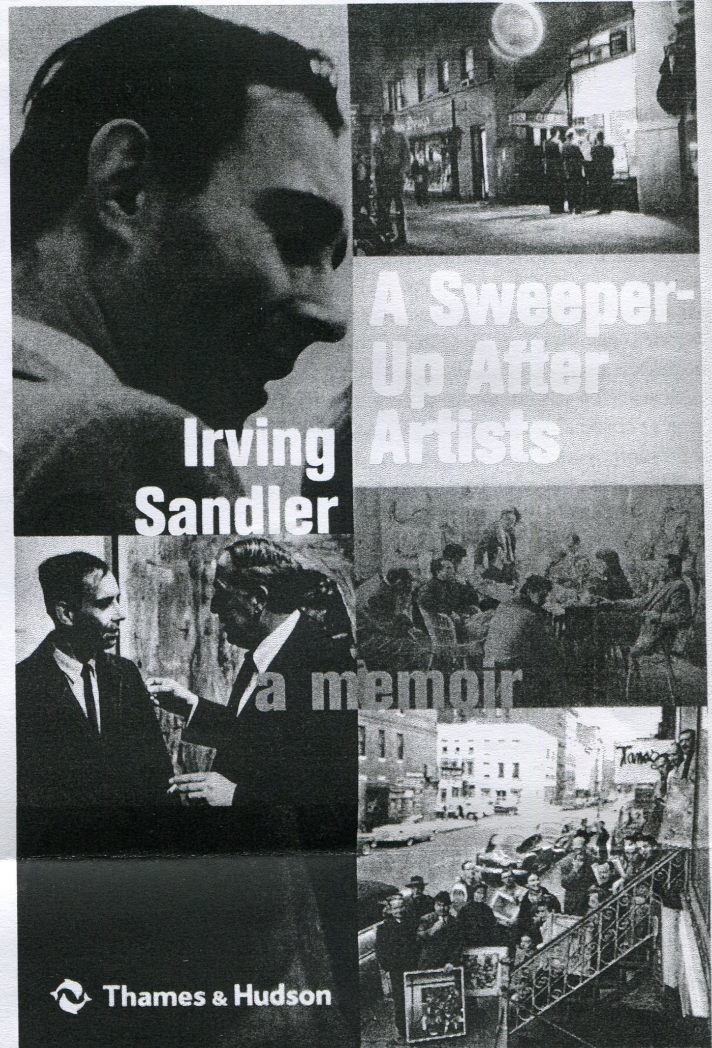
ing wisecracks, and dazzling everyone with his descriptions of, say, Rembrandt's brush and ink drawings or the velocity of Lautrec's line. De Kooning, in a knitted Dutch seamen's cap, might be seated nearby at the bar, quietly talking with a friend in his intense, cryptic and poetic way, while in a back booth Barney Newman, decked out like an aging British dandy, monocle tightly in place and his cavalry officer's mustache beautifully trimmed, would be speaking to his coterie about transcendental art and the Sistine ceiling. At the edge of this group a younger artist, one of the envious lesser-knowns who was obviously irritated by Barney's haberdashery, would coldly look him up and down and mutter, "What, no spats?" To which Barney would smile, unoffended, having succeeded in grabbing and holding the man's attention.

Back in one of the crowded booths towards the rear, Steve Pace, in his flat-crowned farmer's hat, might be gazing down into his now-empty beer glass as a friend mentioned Pierre Bonnard. "Bonnard . . ." Steve would murmur softly. "I like him. I bet he never shined his shoes." And there was Earl Kerkam, a senior, much admired figure-painter, having his dinner with a group of younger artists. He would sit with his bald pate gleaming, his hands trembling and his false teeth on the table beside him as he gummied a plate of ketchup-drenched pasta. "What about Max Beckman?" someone might ask, and Kerkam, without a moment's hesitation and with his mouth full of spaghetti, would answer, "Beckman is the greatest modern painter around who nobody likes."

And so it went. During those tense, repressive Eisenhower years, the Cedar Bar was host to every

kind of personal style, of painting, of esthetic discourse, of costume, facial hair, argumentativeness, and so on. Artists adopted social poses that were embittered, theatrical, grandiose, defeated, vicious, helpful, or condescending. And into this heady mix came Irv Sandler, ingenuous, intelligent, questioning, and wearing—almost always—a dark blue sport coat, a nice clean shirt, and often even a necktie. His straightness turned out to be a great advantage: his utter lack of ego, his possession of a notebook and pen and his desire to write everything down caused artists to take him aside and talk about their work, settling scores, making points, and presenting their well-rehearsed bon mots. They knew that if Irv—an obviously well-meaning man—wrote it all down, it just might become history. They were right, of course, as *Sweeper-Up After Artists* amply demonstrates.

As memoirs go, Sandler's book is something of an oddity. It is essentially an intellectual history of modern art in America in the '50s and '60s as seen from the perspective of a critic who befriended many of the era's most important artists: de Koon-



ing, Guston, Rothko, and Kline in particular. Though the bulk of his writing is focused on the '50s and includes his extensive dealings with critics like Tom Hess, Harold Rosenberg, and Clement Greenberg, later chapters deal briefly with artists, critics, and movements from the '70s on, as well as with Sandler's many commendable roles in academic and art-world institutions. But what we don't get from his memoir is anything much about his non-intellectual life. We learn only in passing and in no detail that his parents were working-class Jewish immigrants, that he was a Marine officer in World War II, that he is the father of two children, and that he has been married twice. Lucy, his wife of many years, is mentioned a few times, but essentially is given only a tiny cameo role in the story. Though Sandler describes many cases of intellectual disagreement with other critics and a few artists, the only personal emotions he occasionally reveals are mild anger and infrequent moments of embarrassment. It is not until the last few pages of his memoir that he gives himself permission to describe, quite eloquently and with surprising passion, his outlook on life, art, and the future of mankind. This release of feeling was, for me, important, refreshing, and long overdue.

Sandler's basic goals seem to have been the description of artworks he admired and the retelling of old esthetic battles—color-field painting versus pop art, Harold Rosenberg's existentialism versus Greenberg's formalism, "gesture" painting—Kline, de Kooning, Guston—versus the "imagists"—Rothko, Newman, and Still, and so

on. He expresses little interest in the other, more human aspects of the people he writes about. For example, I recall hearing the news, in August of 1956, of Jackson Pollock's death. It was a shocking event, and all of us were moved on a personal level even though many younger artists, like me, had not known Pollock well. Sandler deals with Pollock's death at 44 only in the context of a contentious Artist's Club "memorial" panel in which he tells us how two participants, Clement Greenberg and Willem DeKooning, insulted one another. Earlier, Sandler describes how he was initially drawn to Abstract Expressionism by Franz Kline's painting and that later they became good friends, but Kline's untimely death—a great personal loss for many of us—goes unmentioned.

Inevitably, Irving Sandler's book has something of the tone of an informal textbook by an aging, reliable, self-effacing professor who is not in the habit of expressing his emotions. Though he seems to have intended his work to be a personal account—he calls it a memoir—its only real intimacy and self-revelation appear in the epilogue. It contains very little humor, and its resolutely serious, intellectual viewpoint suggests the author's nervous hesitancy to include the subject of sex. Unfortunately, humor, mostly bawdy, and sex, also mostly bawdy, were two of the main non-art topics in Cedar Bar conversation and in the artists' lives as well—sex and humor being free, fun and available without charge to the impecunious.

Though these omissions, along with the author's characteristic lack of emotional expres-

siveness, leave gaping holes in the book's human texture, Sandler has nevertheless provided a valuable record of how we thought and art-talked and painted in those rough, creative, penniless, semi-golden years. He was there, all right, in the Cedar Bar and at the Artists' Club and at gallery openings and in the artists' studios. I was surprised, in fact, to read in his list of sources that he interviewed me in March 1958, but since I was almost a decade younger than he and had had only a single one-person show by that date, I'm not sure what wisdom I was able to add to his already formidable mass of artists' statements.

Despite the problems I've mentioned about Sandler's new book, I found that reading it stirred my old creative fires. It re-ignited long-buried, youthful anxieties and recalled all my many glowing hopes, some of which have been amply fulfilled and some, unfortunately, still just hopes. But above all the book brought back vivid memories of the rich friendships I've enjoyed with long-gone painters, great and good and not so good, and the lives we led together in an earlier, epic time. And that, I have to say, is no small feat.

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