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Abstract

Sacred Modern: An Ethnography of an Art Museum

by

Pamela G. Smart

This dissertation is an ethnographic study of the Menil Collection, a formerly private art collection in Houston, Texas opened to the public in 1987 as a museum designed by Renzo Piano. It addresses the collection as an object, and as a technology of self-fashioning, but also, in the context of modern museums, as an instrument in the formation of a public. I show how the Menil Collection participates in these processes, while pursuing a distinctive project of critique.

The 10,000 piece collection has significant holdings of surrealist work; New York School painting; Byzantine icons; African and Oceanic objects; and antiquities. In 1995 it opened a freestanding gallery solely for the permanent exhibition of the work of Cy Twombly, and this year, construction was completed on a chapel built and consecrated to house 13th century Cypriot frescoes that were bought and restored by the collection. Each of these initiatives furthers an intricate moral, political, religious and aesthetic agenda that Dominique and the late John de Menil had given early expression to in their commissioning of the Rothko Chapel in 1964. Their projects are underpinned by a critique of the pervasive disenchantments of modernity, read particularly through the French Sacred Art Movement of the 1930s and 40s and Catholic Ecumenism.
The de Menils embraced a radical religious aesthetic—a sacred modern—by which they sought to rehabilitate an engagement with the material world that at once would allow for an immediacy of experience while fostering the possibility of spiritual transcendence. Hence, I argue, the organization and the exhibitionary practices of the Menil Collection are committed to a poetic rather than a didactic experience of art and they self-consciously seek to foster uncanny traces of the unseen, offering up these realms in the form of incantations.
Acknowledgments

As I complete this project I am particularly struck by Dominique de Menil’s generosity in granting me access to the facilities of the Menil Collection, in order that I could craft this account. In her extraordinarily busy schedule she consented to a series of interviews, and was kind enough to allow me to observe her exquisite rendering of the art of installation. The more I have learned about the range and character of her engagements, the greater my respect not just for her scrupulous intelligence but the abiding generosity of her project.

I could not have pursued this research without Paul Winkler’s willingness to accommodate my extended presence at the Collection, and to entertain my questions. Given his extraordinary care with the manner in which the Menil Collection is presented and understood, I am acutely aware of the extraordinary gift that was extended to me in enabling me to proceed with my project. Bertrand Davezac was generous in his enthusiasm for my project from the outset, and I am indebted to him for his assistance in introducing me to Dominique de Menil and to the collection. I am grateful also for his rich insights into the Collection, and his interpretations of the particularly French underpinnings of the Menil project. I am most grateful for his kindness toward me.

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Before I knew my way about, Geraldine Aramanda kindly let me follow her around as she worked on the installation of the African Zion show, and she and Susan Davidson gave me insights into curatorial practices. My conversations with Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, Liz Lunning, and William Steen were extremely interesting. They afforded me an understanding of conservation practices and preoccupations, and gave me some feel for the texture of the Menil Collection's relationship to the materiality of its objects. Julie Bakke, informed me of the registrar's role, and gave me a sense of the complex movements of objects, as they circulated through conservation, exhibition, or off to other institutions on loan. Mary Kadish kindly went to the trouble of preparing collection files for me to examine. Jesse Lopez, Buck Bakke, and Bear Parnam, all generously tolerated my curiosity, as did Larry Young. Steve McConathy imparted a feeling for the building that impressed me enormously, and took the time to explain to me its technical operation. The role and imperatives of development were explained to me by Julie Gibbs, who was candid and insightful. John Harvey and John Peters both had rich and distinctive insights that they were kind enough to explain to me.

Phil Heagy helped me find my way around the library resources, and accommodated me as I labored through the extensive clippings files. Moreover, he furnished me with a context in which I was able, in the first instance, to meet and talk with members of the staff, as they came through the library from time to time.
I am most deeply indebted to Deborah Brauer, who was generous enough to share her office with me for what must have seemed to her to be an interminable time. She allowed me to work my way through the richly documented exhibitions files, from which I gained some understanding of exhibition management. From the photographic documentation of each exhibition throughout Dominique de Menil’s involvement with the installation of shows, I was able to glean something of the visual sensibility that informs Menil projects. Deborah’s rigorous interpretation of her work and of the Collection, has been invaluable. As is the friendship she extended to me.

Nabila Drooby gave me access to material on the Rothko Chapel, and was kind enough to talk with me about the chapel and its meaning for Dominique and John de Menil. Miles Glaser took the time to explain to me something of the relation between the Menil Foundation and the Collection. I am indebted also to Jeanette Dickson and her staff at the archive of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

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Chapter One
Introduction

Seven Layers of Blue

The small windowless East Temporary gallery was drenched in blue. Before an empty expanse of wall sat Dominique de Menil, framed by Paul Winkler, the Director of the Menil Collection, standing at one shoulder and Susan Davidson, Associate Curator, at the other. A pair of preparators held Paul Klee's Blick der Stille [Gaze of Silence], adjusting it slightly, half an inch this way and that, repeatedly measuring the distance from the floor and the corners of the wall. Larry, the electrical technician, prepared lights, a variety of spots and floods in various wattages, assembled on the bed of the hydraulic lift he deftly maneuvered amid artworks and people, assisted by a security guard.

The walls, a thoroughly saturated intense matte of what looked to be Prussian blue, had now received their seventh coat, each a slightly different formulation of the same Deep Marine. But the painters continued to struggle with streaking and marking. The kind of saturated matte that Dominique de Menil favors has become difficult to achieve. Increasingly strict regulations governing the toxicity of paint, Paul Winkler explained to me, have resulted in base formulae that do not give adequate stability to the pigment. They would proceed with the hanging and lighting of the show, then take the works down, leaving the fittings in place, in order to give the gallery one final coat to cover any
marks made in the course of the installation.

The color was evidently Dominique de Menil's concern, as indeed were all of the details of the installation. Ready for her arrival, all of the works had been brought into the single room in which the show was to be hung, and had been placed on pads leaning against the wall, ordered and spaced in accordance with an installation plan developed by the show's curator Susan Davidson. Titled "A Piece of the Moonworld: Paul Klee in Texas Collections," the exhibition of thirty-five works (five paintings and thirty works on paper) selected from among the sixty or so Klee's collected in Texas, had initially been conceived by Dominique de Menil some years ago, and had now been revived and materialized by Susan Davidson. Klee had only once before had a solo show in Texas, mounted some twenty years after his death by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston in 1960. That show had been spearheaded by Dominique de Menil also, in the days in which she and her late husband John de Menil were very actively engaged in the operations of that institution.

John and Dominique de Menil had begun collecting Klee's work in the mid-50s, though the noted Houston philanthropist Ima Hogg had bought two paintings and a lithograph by Klee as early as the 1930s, which she had subsequently given to the Museum of Fine Arts. Twenty of these thirty-five works included in the show belong to the Menil Collection. Davidson describes the exhibition as "an investigation into how Klee was collected in Texas." Further, she writes, "the selection provides poignant and
witty combinations and, it is hoped, establishes a cohesion which only an artist of Klee's intelligence and imagination could achieve.¹ The layout for the show is structured largely chronologically.

With *Blick der Stille* positioned to Dominique de Menil's satisfaction, it was hung and Larry proceeded to light it, instructed by Dominique de Menil on the type and intensity of bulb as well as on the way in which the light should fall on its surface. The lighting of the work was transformative, enriching the image and imbuing the space with depth and intimacy. Attention was then turned to the remaining works to be hung on that wall, their respective positions arrived at in relation to the central piece and the adjacent corner of the room. Dominique de Menil apparently did not feel bound to conform to the chronological ordering prescribed.

The frame of one of the works to be hung in an ensemble of pieces clustered together was, in the view of Dominique de Menil, inappropriate. The framer, William Steen, was called for and asked to select from among the many accumulated frames at his disposal some suitable alternatives. Attention meanwhile was turned to hanging another wall. Before long, Dominique de Menil went to the framing studio and invited me to accompany her, just as she had graciously invited me to observe the process of

¹From the leaflet accompanying the exhibition "*A Piece of the Moon World: Paul Klee in Texas Collections,*" The Menil Collection, March 9 - June 5, 1994. It was not until 1995 that the catalogue, *A Piece of the Moon World: Paul Klee in Texas Collections* (Houston: The Menil Collection), was published.
installation that day. She very quickly decided upon an elderly wooden frame from among the several that Steen had selected, one that she had bought some years before, Steen believed, and was able to confirm right away by consulting his records corresponding to the registration number on the frame. One imagines he knows the provenance of each of the frames. Steen then made some suggestions as to suitable matts. Dominique de Menil seemed a little less assured in this, until she was shown a piece of silk with a peach blush that she recognized immediately as the right one—indeed it seemed obvious to all three of us. So William went off to buy more silk, agreeing to have the piece reframed and ready for hanging early in the afternoon.

As the installation proceeded the initial arrangement was substantially disrupted. Dominique de Menil worked intuitively, by trial and error, and this was as it should be, she explained to me, since installation was all about how things looked in relation to each other and to the space they inhabited. Her method of trial and error notwithstanding, Dominique de Menil demonstrated an extraordinary command of what would work and how to achieve it. I had heard over the years of the extent to which she maintained an active interest in the minutiae of museum activities, and had imagined this to be the interfering of a somewhat overbearing patron. I had clearly been wrong. Dominique de Menil is herself a curator, and clearly a very skilled one.

In 1959 Dominique and her late husband John de Menil established an art and art history program at the University of St. Thomas, a small Catholic liberal arts college in
Houston, Texas. They provided resources for an art library, an art collection for teaching purposes, an exhibitions budget and most crucially they supported the hiring of Jerry MacAgy as the director of the program—indeed the project was formulated specifically for her. Jerry MacAgy was recognized for her extraordinary facility in curating and installing exhibitions and for her formidable energy. Dominique de Menil describes herself as having become a student of MacAgy's, learning from her not so much the organizational details of mounting an exhibition, but how to conceive of it spatially and visually. When MacAgy died suddenly in 1964 Dominique de Menil took over her position at St. Thomas. "That was when I was led to my career, the installation of shows" (Browning 1983: 198).

Throughout the installation Dominique de Menil repeatedly stressed the importance of lighting, of framing, and of the specific juxtaposition of works. The works would "sing" only under appropriate circumstances. The point of the show was not to make some art historical point, nor was it to convey a certain reading of Klee's work, but rather, I was told, to "make the paintings look good"—paintings of which Dominique de Menil is particularly fond.

The hanging proceeded, one wall at a time, putting key pieces in place and positioning others around it. In this way too the lighting was done. Once everything was hung and the lighting was completed all the works were taken down and removed from the gallery so that the final layer of blue could be applied.
Labels were not attached to the walls. As a matter of policy the Menil Collection uses spare labeling, typically giving only the title, date, and the name of the artist. It is said that Walter Hopps, the inaugural director of the Collection and now their consulting curator, would have preferred that the museum eschew labeling altogether, offering instead informational pamphlets for those who particularly wanted such material, and relieving others of the distraction. And this is the mode that Dominique de Menil proposed for this show when as the completing touches were being made to the installation she discovered that the card on which the labels had been printed was not an exact match with the final shade of the wall. The suggestion that the card simply be painted was dismissed since it would not allow for the laser printing of the text. Dominique de Menil instructed the Exhibitions Department to produce hand held texts that could be picked up in the gallery. Each work would be identified with a number printed on transparent adhesive labels. This swift decision which entailed the writing and printing of a brochure was presented not merely as a necessary solution to the problem of the mismatched card stock, but as something that was in any event preferable. Labels were distracting, and anyway, Dominique de Menil declared with implicit reference to installations Jerry MacAgy and later she herself had put together at the University of St. Thomas, this was how it used to be done.
The Collection

The Menil Collection is a collection of some 10,000 objects acquired over the last 40 years. Considered a very important collection of New York School art, and the most significant Surrealist collection in the United States, its holdings include pieces from an array of cultural and historical traditions. Objects are classified according to 7 primary categories: art of ancient cultures (including particularly Cycladic, Minoan-Mycenaean and Anatolian forms); medieval and Byzantine art; European painting, sixteenth to eighteenth century; colonial art in the New World; art of tribal cultures (most notably African and Oceanic); and twentieth century art. While the range of traditions from which the collection draws is broad, it clearly does not aspire to be comprehensive.²

At most times a full quarter of the gallery space is devoted to Surrealist works, with another quarter hung with non-Surrealist twentieth century work, from the European moderns (among them, Matisse, Picasso, Braque, Léger, Miró and Klee), through two generations of New York School painters, and others through the mid-70s. Selected icons from the Byzantine collection are also almost invariably on show, as are exhibits of African and Oceanic objects. Although the Menil Collection has occasionally presented

²A partial catalogue of the objects in the collection may be found in The Menil Collection: A Selection From the Paleolithic to the Modern Era (1987). Compiled by Menil Collection personnel for the inauguration of the Menil Collection, that is, for the transformation of the collection into a museum open to the public, it was published by the Menil Collection in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York.
exhibitions of Renaissance art, it is not represented in any of the semi-permanent installations.

The organization of objects in the Menil Collection is also distinctive, both spatially and in terms of the style of their installation. Museums might be said to conventionally fall within one or other of the opposing models characterized in Adorno's essay "Valéry Proust Museum" (1967): one, the canonical form, a series of distinct galleries, one's passage through which is structured by the arrangement of successive rooms, the framed space of each opening onto the next through open portals; the other, characterized by the vast open spaces often associated with modern museums, and resonant of the loft, the site of production.³

The Menil Collection seems to be informed by both models, acceding fully to neither one. Though the galleries are constructed as large open spaces, the largest 80'x80', very much consistent with the loft tradition, for specific shows the galleries might be transformed by the construction of temporary two-foot thick partitions that subdivide the space, and by darkly painted walls and dramatic lighting to create areas of ephemerally bounded space.

The organization of space in both models tends to dwarf or devour one, whether as a consequence of the overwhelmingly cavernous character of the space, or through the

³See also Richard Ingersoll, 1989.
relenless passage from one gallery through the next, in which one has no choice but to forge ahead or turn back. By contrast, Menil galleries are organized along a central passageway, each offering a more or less discrete space that may be reached independently of the others. What was sought in this arrangement are intimate spaces in which individual works are not inevitably subordinated to the whole.

It is not only the arrangement of architectural space, however, that is responsible for the distinction accorded to Menil exhibitions. While other museums increasingly arrange objects to illustrate a narrative that is augmented by tour guides, audio narrations, and high production photographic and textual panels, that give a semblance of context and creative intent, Menil Collection installations are, by contrast, resolutely non-didactic. There are no explanatory wall panels, no docents, and the labeling of works is notably spare. And while other museums are increasingly investing in Outreach or Education departments that are primarily directed toward socializing new audiences into art appreciation through equipping them with some knowledge of art history, the Menil Collection has no such program.

Objects are arranged in installations not as lessons but, ideally for Dominique de Menil, as "incantations," and certainly in such a way as to invite, if not demand, an

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4This term was widely circulated in press coverage of the 1961 show René Magritte, curated by Jermayne MacAgy for the Contemporary Art Association in association with the Museum of Fine Art, Houston, and has since been repeated by Dominique de Menil in numerous interviews in which she discusses the art of installation.
active engagement on the part of the viewer. It is the nature of this distinctive engagement, and the poetics that informs it, that are of central concern to this study. Objects in the context of the Menil Collection do not serve merely as signs of distinction, nor do they primarily articulate narrative arguments; rather, they seek to generate sensibilities that bind the sacred and the modern.

_The Exhibitionary Complex_

The notion that a museum might exercise suasive force on the sensibilities of its public is by no means novel. Many accounts of the formation of the modern museum address precisely this affecting character, focusing typically on the ways in which museums, like other cultural institutions, have been mobilized in the formation of a public constituted in the service of the modern state.⁵ Tony Bennett (1995) offers a particularly compelling account of this in his formulation of a distinctively modern “exhibitionary complex.” Museums, international exhibitions, and modern fairs are central to this configuration since they are each involved in exhibiting artifacts and/or persons in a manner calculated to embody and communicate specific cultural meanings and values. They are also institutions which, in being open to all-comers, have shown a similar

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⁵See, for example, Bennett, 1995; Duncan, 1995; Hooper-Greenhill, 1992; and Sherman, 1989.
concern to devise ways of regulating the conduct of their visitors, and to do so, ideally, in ways that are both unobtrusive and self-perpetuating. Finally, in their recognition of the fact that their visitor's experiences are realized via their physical movement through an Exhibitionary space, all three institutions have shared a concern to regulate the performative aspects of their visitors' conduct (Bennett 1995: 6).

Bennett's (1995) recounting of nineteenth century British cultural policy illustrates the extent to which public museums were initially understood as essentially institutions of social reform. By contrast, Daniel Sherman's (1989) account of the transformation of once private French collections in the form of civic museums, focuses particularly on their early modes of management as a means by which the state would be made visible throughout France. Both renderings, however, demonstrate the common understanding of the emergent civic museum as preeminently an instrument of state in the interests of a social order.

Whether in France or in Britain the museum represented a profound transformation in the way in which high culture was to be understood, particularly in its relation to the exercise of social and political power. Central to this realignment was the reliance of the modern state on the formation of an integrated public.

Pre-modern high cultural institutions--festivals, royal entries, theatrical performances, and so on--by contrast were, among other things, spectacles of power.
They were not a means of incorporation but of symbolic display, to which the populace was called upon to bear witness. Princely collections had a very different trajectory. Their audience was not the public, however that might be constituted, but other members of the aristocracy who were in a position to either augment or undermine the authority of whomever was in power. As Gerard Turner points out, under pre-modern forms of power that do not rely on mass consensus "it is part of the exercise and maintenance of any leader's power to ensure that his image is constantly before the people who count...the ruler's immediate supporters, the courtiers and nobility, and his rivals in other states" (Turner 1985: 214). Bennett notes:

> Transformations in the character, manners, morals, or aptitudes of the population were rarely the point at issue within such strategies of culture and power. The governmentalization of culture, by contrast, aimed precisely at more enduring and lasting effects by using culture as a resource through which those exposed to its influence would be led to ongoingly and progressively modify their thoughts, feelings and behavior (Bennett 1995: 23-24).

What this amounted to was, as Bennett describes it, a new economy of cultural power. In this emergent economy of power members of the public, by virtue of their being exposed to high cultural forms, were to be transformed into "the active bearers and practitioners of the capacity for self-improvement that culture was held to embody"
(Bennett 1995: 24). But it was recognized that museums themselves would need to be transformed in order for them to effectively fulfill this new role and achieve the desired affect. Three issues stood to the fore:

The first concerned the nature of the museum as a social space and the need to detach that space from its earlier private, restricted and socially exclusive forms of sociality. The museum had to be refashioned so that it might function as a space of emulation in which civilized forms of behavior might be learnt and thus diffused more widely through the social body.

The second concerned the nature of the museum as a space of representation. Rather than merely evoking wonder and surprise for the idly curious, the museum's representations would so arrange and display natural and cultural artifacts as to secure “the utilization of these for the increase of knowledge and for the culture and enlightenment of the people”....The third issue, by contrast, related more to the museum's visitor than to its exhibits. It concerned the need to develop the museum as a space of observation and regulation in order that the visitor's body might be taken hold of and be molded in accordance with the requirements of new norms of public conduct (Bennett 1995: 24).

In this sense museums do not simply function semiotically, but also provide "a performative environment in which new forms of conduct and behavior could be shaped
and practiced" (Bennett 1995: 33).

To the extent to which museums were designed to serve the interests of the state, they did so in part by virtue of the particular narratives that were constructed in the form of museum exhibits, but more importantly, perhaps, they did so as a function of the modes of experience that museum visitors would share as they moved through the architectural and semiotic space of the museum. The overarching trajectory of this museum experience was the formation of a public that properly understood itself in relation to the state.

Douglas Crimp characterizes the significance of the museum in constituting a public rather differently. As an institutional articulation of power and knowledge relations the museum, like the asylum, the clinic, and the prison, is an institution of confinements and exclusions, he claims (Crimp 1993: 287). While, as I have argued, the emergent public museum surely constitutes a site of regulation, Foucault's model of the "carceral archipelago" that Crimp invokes seems, as Bennett points out, a peculiarly restricting frame of reference (Bennett 1995: 59). Public museums, in marked distinction to the studiolo of seventeenth century princes and the cabinets des curieux of the aristocracy, rendered visible objects that had historically been confined to a very restricted gaze. It is not that museums liberated objects; they certainly did not render them transparent. But as Bennett argues, the trajectory that Foucault traces in Discipline and Punish is one in which formerly public displays of power were withdrawn from the
public gaze as punishment increasingly took the form of incarceration (Bennett 1995: 59-60).

By contrast, the institutions that constituted "the exhibitionary complex": were involved in the transfer of objects and bodies from the enclosed and private domains in which they had previously been displayed (but to a restricted public) into progressively more open and public arenas where, through the representations to which they were subjected, they formed vehicles for inscribing and broadcasting the messages of power (but of a different type) throughout society (Bennett 1995: 60-61).

Despite their differing trajectories the carceral archipelago and the exhibitionary complex both emerge as responses to the problem of order. But the exhibitionary complex represented a significantly different approach "in seeking to transform that problem into one of culture—a question of winning hearts and minds as well as the disciplining and training of bodies" (Bennett 1995: 62). So rather than the disciplinary thrust of containment and surveillance, the exhibitionary complex sought to render the forces and principles of order visible to the populace—transformed here into a people, a citizenry....Through the provision of object lessons in power—the power to command and arrange things and bodies for public display—they sought to allow people, and en masse rather than individually, to know rather than be known, to become the
subjects rather than the objects of knowledge (Bennett 1995: 62-63).

The exhibitionary complex, through its codes of behavior, its architecture, and through the form and content of that which is displayed "perfected a self-monitoring system of looks in which the subject and object positions can be exchanged" and by which the public regulates itself by virtue of it "interiorizing the ideal and ordered view of itself as seen from the controlling vision of power" (Bennett 1995: 69).

A museum such as the Menil Collection, now public, but still bearing the character of its formation in private hands, and still run by a board of trustees that is dominated by family members, seems to have little to do with this formulation of the modern museum. For clearly the Menil Collection can in no particularly illuminating sense be understood as an instrument of the state. What are revealed in considerations of the historical character of museums, however, are certain continuities and disjunctures between these civic institutions and the Menil Collection, that open both to further analysis.

While the narration of the modern museum as an instrument of emergent forms of liberal government can most readily be elicited in the European institutions that were state run, the private patronage that characterized the emergence of public museums in the United States also fostered the formation of an audience that was to coalesce as a mass public. By contrast, however, private philanthropy and patronage enabled the creation

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in the US of a civic vision that was not predicated on the state, and allowed for the establishment of a distinctive civic identity and public influence formulated in part through these same exhibitionary modes. But while Bennett focuses on the modern museum as an instrument of emergent forms of liberal government, wherein power is refracted through self-regulated citizens, my concern here is with a detailed analysis of these technologies mobilized in the interest of the formation of a quite differently constituted public, and at a time when the integrative project of the nation state is in disarray, challenged as it is by transnational forces.

The public to which the Menil Collection addresses itself is one that does not identify its interests in terms of the parochialisms of the nation state, but instead understands itself in a manner that is preeminently cosmopolitan. This is not to say that it is primarily concerned to attract and impress the highly mobile members of an


It is noteworthy here that "the kind of large-scale art museum that in Europe became an indispensable feature of state capitals appeared not in Washington, D.C....but in the northern cities, where business and banking elites were concentrated enough to support such...cultural enterprises" (Duncan 1995: 48-49). New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, and Chicago's Art Institute, were all founded in the 1870s. It was not until 1936 that the National Gallery was proposed for Washington, D.C., by Andrew W. Mellon, who offered his own collection as its nucleus.
increasingly transnational art world, though their success in this is of by no means incidental significance. Rather, it is to foreground Dominique de Menil's own cosmopolitan identifications, demonstrated in her enduring commitments to Catholic ecumenicism, and her particular initiatives in the domains of world peace and human rights. In this sense, Dominique de Menil is quintessentially cosmopolitan.  

While Dominique de Menil's identifications cannot properly be located in terms of national boundaries, she nevertheless has strong local commitments. Since taking up residence in Houston in 1941 she, and her late husband, have been energetically engaged in local civic affairs, particularly in domains of high culture, education, and civil rights. It is the sensibilities underlying these commitments, I will argue, that Dominique de Menil

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French philosophical formulations of the self vis-à-vis the nation, articulated in the midst of French revolutionary struggles over the meaning of the state and citizenship, offer a sense of what is at stake in this use of the term. The "philosophes," writes Liah Greenfeld in her discussion of the emergence of French nationhood, sought refuge from their "unremitting self-criticism" of France in cosmopolitanism:  

[They] were above particularistic self-content and refused to allow an accident of birth to dictate to them what their commitments should be....Abbé Raynal believed that "the patrie of a great man is the universe." Great men, explained Duclos, "men of merit, whatever the nation of their origin, form one nation among themselves. They are free of puerile national vanity. They leave it to the vulgar, to those who, having no personal glory, have to content themselves with the glory of their countrymen." (Greenfeld 1992: 156).  

A certain extravagance of expression notwithstanding, this notion of cosmopolitanism seems quite apt, since it allows of a degree of moral certitude and authority that is consistent with even ecumenical registers of faith. This form of transcendant cosmopolitanism stands in distinction to the more self-conscious, self-critical cultural relativist sense that is often associated with the notion of cosmopolitanism.
seeks to foster in the Menil Collection.

Visible and Invisible

The preceding discussion allows us to look at museums as places in which both people were rendered visible as a public and objects were rendered publicly visible. But while objects became visible, their character remained opaque. Museums, collections, and exhibitions, offer up objects framed by the terms of apprehension established by the contexts in which they are made available. These terms of apprehension render meaningful what may be viewed, mediating the relation between that which is visible and the invisible economies of meaning that underpin it. Krzysztof Pomian (1990) argues that all collections are involved in organizing an exchange between the fields of the visible and the invisible which they establish. Bennett characterizes it thus:

The visible is significant not for its own sake but because it affords a glimpse of something beyond itself: the order of nature, say, in the case of eighteenth-century natural history collections. Looked at in this light, Pomian suggests, collections can be distinguished from one another in terms of the ways in which their classification and arrangement of artifacts, the settings in which they are placed, etc., serve both to refer to a realm of significance that is invisible and absent...and to mediate the visitor's or spectator's access to that realm by making it metonymically visible and
present (Bennett 1995: 35).

It is here in the crafting of relations between the visible and the invisible that much of the project of the Menil Collection is focused. The architectural space of the museum, exhibition installation, and curatorial regimes, expressions of what has come to be regarded as "the Menil aesthetic," together serve in the management of that which may be seen and the terms by which its underpinning logics might be revealed. Mediation of these dual spheres is central to every museum, but it is the character of that mediation and the particular unseen worlds to which it invites a glimpse that distinguish the Menil Collection and are central to an analysis of its project.

The trend in civic art museums is currently to seek to reduce the opacity of their representations, or at least to apologize for it. This impulse is most powerfully expressed in the rhetoric of museum Education or Outreach departments, and in their growing budgets. Public funding is now very often closely tied to notions of community building and inclusivity such that populist sentiments seem now to dominate museum press releases. This imperative, however, masks a considerable division among professionals in civic museums, and among trustees too. The populist notion of the museum as a place of entertainment (all the better for it being of a morally uplifting sort), is asserted against what is often characterized as the more elitist agenda of art historical
education, wherein the museum takes on the authoritative voice of instruction.\textsuperscript{9}

The Menil Collection positions itself in distinction to both these approaches. In its commitment to a poetic rather than didactic experience of art it self-consciously seeks to foster uncanny traces of the unseen, offering up these realms in the form of incantations. And, moreover, the unseen worlds that the Menil Collection invokes are, by and large, very distant from those that sustain civic art museums. The management and presentation of artworks as distinctively auratic objects exemplifies both the regime of mediation between the visible and the invisible that characterizes the Menil Collection, and the character of the invisible realms within which it operates.

In the Foreword to the catalogue for \textit{Islands Beyond (1959)},\textsuperscript{10} Jermayne MacAgy's first exhibition at the University of St. Thomas, the Very Reverend Flahiff speaks of the invisible realms to which the show gives access:

\begin{quote}
The significant word is "beyond," for the pieces have been selected with a view to manifesting the power of art to evoke what lies beyond the world of the senses....The work itself is more than a material thing. It is a
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{9}Bennett poses the opposition similarly: "The options, as currently posed within the museum profession, are largely polarized between populist and statist positions--the former, envisioning the museum's future as part of the leisure industry, urging that the people should be given what they want, while the latter, retaining the view of museums as instruments of instruction, argues they should remain means for lifting the cultural and intellectual level of the population" (Bennett 1995: 105).

\textsuperscript{10}\textit{Islands Beyond} was installed at the University of St. Thomas through October 1958.
veritable "incarnation" of a glimpse of reality that the artist has caught and that he has to express not in a logical statement but only in a work of art through a material medium like sound, lines, colors or masses. It is for this reason that the deepest joy attendant upon the experience of contact with a work of art is not that of the senses or the emotions, but that of the intelligence as it grasps intuitively rather than rationally realities beyond the senses and reacts to their beauty.\footnote{Flahiff’s privileging of "intuitive" intellect over other modes of experience expresses St. Thomas’s articulation of the hierarchy of faculties, wherein intellect (not to be confused with rationality) reigns supreme. Dominique de Menil, as I will show in subsequent chapters, also subscribes to this Catholic valorization of the intellect.} For some, these realities float like distant islands on the horizon of another world: for others, they constitute but a single all-embracing realm: for all, they are, willy-nilly a part of the Reality beyond, in leading us to which, art has intrinsically an affinity with religion (Flahiff 1959: 5).

In this description of the structuring principles of Islands Beyond, Flahiff gives a characterization that maps remarkably neatly onto the central project that drives Dominique de Menil's various engagements with art.\footnote{I focus specifically on Dominique de Menil here, since while such a project was not inconsistent with John de Menil's interests, it was not such a driving principle. While his particular motivations are by no means incidental, and indeed will slip in and out of focus throughout, it is those of Dominique de Menil that I foreground since it is very much her signature that is written over the Menil Collection.} This primary association with
religion, rather than with history, also foregrounds the central divergence between the Menil Collection and civic museums.

Collections can further be distinguished not only with respect to the terms of apprehension by which, to use Bourdieu and Darbel's phrase, they "give 'the eye' to those who 'cannot see'" (Bourdieu and Darbel 1991: 67), but also in terms of the extent to which this access to the invisible is distributed throughout a public. For a viewer to negotiate these realms requires facility with "the appropriate socially coded ways of seeing which allow the objects on display to be not just seen but seen through to establish some sort of communion with the invisible to which they beckon" (Bennett 1995: 35).

Sixteenth and seventeenth century cabinets de curieux with their idiosyncratic assemblages of singular objects, may be understood as material instantiations of a conception of nature as infinitely variable and diverse. It is to this realm, Pomian argues (1990: 77-78), that the sort of undisciplined curiosity provoked by cabinets de curieux gave access. But it did so only selectively.

The cabinet of curiosities, in its design and in its social relations, reflects its role as a storehouse of a knowledge that is, at once, rare and exclusive, intelligible only to those with the time, inclination and cultural training to be able to decipher the relationship in which each object stands to the whole (Bennett 1995: 40-41).
The eighteenth century shift in the principles of exhibition, by which the exceptional and the exotic was replaced by the sample, or that which could be understood as representative of a field of like things, reflected a significant epistemological shift. But further, Bennett argues, this transformation also entailed a new concern with the general communicability of this knowledge in order, through its effective dissemination, to allow it to be put to useful effect in the productive exploitation of nature. What changed, then, was not merely the classificatory principles governing the arrangement of exhibits. There was also a changed orientation to the visitor—one which was increasingly pedagogic, aiming to render the principles of intelligibility governing the collections readily intelligible to all and sundry, as contrasted with the secretive and cultic knowledge offered by the cabinet of curiosity (Bennett 1995: 41).

This model, by which objects serve as illustrations of general laws or tendencies, as samples or specimens representative of other objects falling within the same class, has its correlate in public art museums. Here, typically, artworks illustrate the story of the progressive unfolding of history in the form of periods and styles. If a museum is very well endowed the narrative may be played out in the form of the work of one great genius
laying the ground for the innovation of the next.\textsuperscript{13} In such a way art history is rendered visible. It is also traced performatively through spatial arrangements that lead one inevitably from one period through to the next.\textsuperscript{14} It is this materialization of art history that has through the twentieth century served as the primary legitimating function of the American art museum, mirroring the pedagogic character of natural history and ethnographic museums.

With the emergence of the modern public museum, "what had been riches became enrichment, became, that is, education and consciousness" (Fisher 1991: 7). This "democratization of treasure," as Philip Fisher calls it, was augmented crucially by the Enlightenment preoccupation with

the idea of systematic ordering, which came to be applied to many princely collections; and the use of spatial display as a form of education.

Where sensory values once controlled the arrangement within a room, so that pictures, ornate frames, mirrors, furniture, tapestries, and wall coverings completed a visually pleasing total harmony, the new educational arrangement involved an instruction in history and cultures,

\textsuperscript{13}Fisher (1991) gives a rich account of the technologies by which museums stage art history.

\textsuperscript{14}Of course it is in such articulations that art history is not only represented but is constituted, though this aspect of the character of museums is almost invariably suppressed within their walls.
periods and schools, that in both order and combination was fundamentally pedagogic (Fisher 1991: 7).

This pedagogical imperative involved not only the teaching of art history, but more fundamentally it required the training of audiences to attend to art not merely for the visual pleasure it might afford, but for the realm of knowledge to which it gives access. In this sense art becomes a medium through which one may know history.

This notion of "seeing through" often drives a trajectory quite different from that which Pomian intends, referring solely to processes of demystification. In this sense, to render visible the underpinning logic by which a work might come to be imbued with an affecting presence, is to reveal the historical materialist means of its production. Steven Greenblatt's (1991) otherwise rather curious characterization of the modern art museum, can be understood as a case in point. For Greenblatt, the art museum is an institution that continues to be governed by the principle of wonder, in the manner, he contends, of curiosity cabinets:

still governed by the principle of wonder to the degree that it seeks to stop the visitor in his or her tracks by conveying a sense of the uniqueness of the work of art. In contrast with the principle of resonance which characterizes other modern collections where the viewer's attention is diverted away from the object itself and toward an implied system of relationships of which it forms a part, the modern art museum, Greenblatt
contends, is dedicated to displaying the singularity of the masterpiece
(Bennett 1995: 43-44).

This insistence on the immediacy of the experience of wonder that Greenblatt claims is fostered, and indeed achieved, in art museums arises out of the terms of the dualism he establishes between wonder and resonance. For Greenblatt, it would seem, resonance refers to the extent to which a displayed object presents itself, like a text, as a candidate for new historicist analysis. The effect of resonance, he argues, "can be achieved by awakening in the viewer a sense of the cultural and historically contingent construction of art objects, the negotiations, exchanges, swerves, and exclusions by which certain representational practices come to be set apart from other representational practices that they partially resemble" (Greenblatt 1991: 45).

Such a characterization of resonance seems to exclude from consideration the often mystified realms of signification that Pomian recognizes in his characterization of those invisible realms brought into half-light through their materialization in the form of exhibited objects. Indeed, far from rendering art objects banal, as Greenblatt fears, this "seeing through" can be understood as the very kind of looking that may allow the shimmer of some glimpsed realm, and that it is this and not the pure presence of the object that he finds arresting. While modern art museums do tend to foster an experience of "an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention" (Greenblatt 1991: 42) to artworks, such experience relies not on a childlike wonder but on a system of meaning
with which artworks resonate, whether or not the viewer is aware of this.

Museums of art are perhaps the least accessible of all public collecting institutions largely, Bennett argues, "because of their continuing commitment to display principles which entail that the order subtending the art on display remains invisible and unintelligible to those not already equipped with the appropriate cultural skills" (Bennett 1995: 10). This form of mystification is to be expected in so far as art museums collect and display art as a high cultural form. Such art circulates in what Bourdieu describes as a "field of restricted production." While popular culture tends to adjust to the level of demand, subjecting itself to appropriation more or less independent of the educational level of consumers,

works of restricted art owe their specifically cultural rarity, and thus their function as elements of social distinction, to the rarity of the instruments with which they may be deciphered. This rarity is a function of the unequal distribution of the conditions underlying the acquisition of the specifically aesthetic disposition, and of the codes indispensable to the deciphering of works belonging to the field of restricted production (Bourdieu 1993: 120).

In this sense art, if it is to be distinguished from popular culture, must necessarily mystify the terms both of its production and apprehension.
So, when Bennett comments that the failure of museums of art to render the aesthetic transparent "now seems increasingly willful as notions of access and equity come to permeate all domains of culture and to legitimate public expenditure in such domains" (Bennett 1995: 10), he is alluding to a dramatically reimagined notion of art as a medium of symbolic value. And while tendencies in museum education practices and rhetoric, and the policies of funding agencies, might pose themselves precisely against the restricted character of art that Bourdieu describes, this seems an equally willful refusal to recognize the character of the object they participate in constituting. Were art museums to genuinely seek to relieve art works and exhibitions of their esoteric character, these institutions would lose their grounds of legitimation, since it is precisely the exalted status of art that renders it worthy of collecting, conservation, and exhibition, whether as history or as aesthetics.

For Pomian, as for Flahiff and Dominique de Menil, the power and virtue of the art museum is centrally bound up with the extent to which it affords a glimpse of the unseen. In this sense, art makes possible a vision to which one might otherwise not have access. In contrast to this enabling vision is a characterization of the art museum that perceives it as primarily obfuscatory, in so far as it mystifies the processes by which the value and meaning of art is constituted as self-evident. The former dismiss the critiques of the latter, rightly on the grounds that such critiques invariably fail to take into account the point of their project. But equally appropriate is the concern of their critics, that
whatever else museums might do, they serve the interests of power most powerfully through the mystifying opacity of their representations. This latter reading of course has its intellectual roots in critical theory. It has gained a good deal of momentum and popular legitimacy, however, under the trope of "transparency" currently fashionable in the discourse of management and politics. Under such a regime, true meaning is rendered visible to all. Transparency, then, is perhaps the most obfuscatory trope of them all.

*Aura*

It is just this set of issues that is at stake in the various competing, and often deeply ambivalent, invocations of the auratic character of art. The question of the auratic character of art has, moreover, long been a locus of struggle over the meaning of modernity. Certainly Benjamin's articulation in his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1982) has become the definitive rendering among advocates of a transparency made possible by virtue of the rationalism of modernity. When Benjamin writes: "That which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art" (Benjamin 1982: 223), he is taken to celebrate the emancipation of art from its cultic origin. Russell Berman characterizes Benjamin's argument thus:

In the premodern context the work of art, initially an object of cult, always retains a residual sacred character; it has an aura that thrives on the singularity of the work of art and the isolation of the single recipient. In
contemporary modernity, culture becomes increasingly profane, while the
industrial production of art...and its mass reception displace the erstwhile
individual actors with collective agents (Berman 1989: 35).

It is not only art that is consequently emancipated, but so too, according to this
view, is its recipient. "Whereas the auratic work of art demanded a passive contemplation
that subdues the irrational individual viewer, the postauratic work permits the collective
recipient to adopt a critical rational space" (Berman 1989: 35).

While many critics of modernity cast the loss of aura as a matter for regret, for
Benjamin here its demystification exemplifies the central emancipatory virtue of
modernity. Dominique de Menil shares neither this confidence in the purported
transparency of "postauratic" art, nor in the liberatory virtue of rationality. Moreover, it
is central to Dominique de Menil's understanding of the affecting character of art that the
artwork does not speak for itself, or through its exhibitionary representation, but rather
through active engagement between objects and subjects. In this sense, aura might work
to seduce a viewer into interaction with an artwork, rather than merely acting upon a
passive subject. Indeed, for Dominique de Menil, it is precisely in the context of didactic
museums, in which artworks become merely illustrations for a narrative of art history,
that passivity in the face of authority is fostered. When this issue arose in conversation
with her, Dominique de Menil was emphatic about the political dangers of just the kind of
passive subject that is fostered equally by spectacle and by didacticism.
In Benjamin resides the ambivalence that pervades this project. In his critique of aura he reveals its character as counterfeit, but it is in his writing on aura elsewhere, wherein he allows himself to participate in its seductions, that his analysis powerfully shows how aura operates on our sensibilities.\(^\text{15}\)

In this latter mode, Benjamin characterizes aura as the perception of a "forgotten human dimension," as Hal Foster observes, with particular reference to surrealism:

For Benjamin this dimension seems to encompass at least three registers. One is natural: the aura of an empathic moment of human connection to material things, which Benjamin evokes through images of a hand that traces the line of a mountain range and a recumbent body that receives the shadow of a twig. The surrealists were sensitive to this aura of found natural objects, which they often exhibited....Another register is cultural and historical: the aura not only of cultic works of art but also of artisanal objects where the 'traces of the practiced hand' are still evident...this aura is especially active in the surrealist interest in the outmoded. Finally the third register, which invests the other two with psychic intensity, is subjective: the aura of the memory of a primal relationship to the body, to

\(^{15}\)In his essay "Between the Profane and the Redemptive: The Collector as Possessor in Walter Benjamin's Passagen-Werk," Holdengräber (1992) explores this tension between Benjamin's Frankfurt School leanings and his bourgeois sensibilities.
the *maternal* body (Foster 1993: 195-196).

For Foster this maternal body represents a longing for the return of the repressed. Dominique de Menil recasts these longings into the cosmology and telos of Roman Catholicism. Drawing on the Sacred Art Movement she frames the auratic as a preeminent technology of redemption. This is by no means solely a matter of personal redemption for Dominique de Menil, but is orchestrated in the interests of constituting a radically refigured "public." The operation of the auratic is thus integral to her project.

*Progressivism*

But perhaps as strong as Catholicism initially was an enthusiasm for the possibilities of "the new." John de Menil early on articulated his frustration with the confinements of traditional depersonalized management practices and his own desire to make his mark. Writing to Marcel Schlumberger to explain his reluctance to take up a position in the family business, he identified his own aspirations at the bank at which he worked:

There are also—and I think this is what matters most to me—the 600 people I have under me. What a wonderful adventure it would be if I succeeded in establishing friendly relations with them, breaking through their mistrust and resentment. The feeling of being one of the rare ones who approach this job with a new heart. Desire to have a part, there or
elsewhere, in the quest for a harmony cruelly absent from the life of these
great anthills (quoted in Schlumberger 1982: 120).

And as salient as these high-minded motivations are John de Menil's much
recounted enthusiasms, described here by Morton Feldman in his *Art in America* obituary
for John de Menil:

> He had a gentle radar for the unusual. A crazy idea, a beautiful idea, an
irreverent or a religious idea, as long as it had some “guts and personality”
behind it, it got immediate attention and, many times, immediate support
(Feldman 1973).

In New York, he listened to the Velvet Underground and enjoyed the company of artists
and filmmakers. And in Houston too, he and Dominique were renowned for their dinners
and parties to which were invited artists, poets, intellectuals and political activists.

These Houston occasions, however, were not merely social amusements—they
served in the development of a critical mass of people who could be called upon in the
defense of various left wing agendas, whether in the domain of art or of politics. They
also served in the construction of the de Menil's singular public profile. To their
disruptive cultural and social agendas, most notably at the time, perhaps, their
championing of modern art and civil rights, they brought the authority of European
culture and wealth. This authority was certainly furthered by John de Menil's notable
acumen in the oil business, Houston's premier industry. For many, however, the left-
wing commitments of the de Menils seemed at odds with their autocratic tendencies and with the political economy of the oil industry. But this apparent contradiction dissolves in the face of Ken Auletta's (1983b) characterization of the nature of French left wing commitments. Indeed, such a characterization lends further coherence to the de Menil project. Writing of Riboud, the former Chief Executive Officer of Schlumberger and close friend of John and Dominique de Menil, who describes himself as a socialist, Auletta suggests that his leftist politics

springs from boyhood yearnings for solidarity, for reducing issues to choices between the forces of change and the forces of reaction, between good and evil. Like many people on the French left, Riboud sees himself as having a kind of moral mission, and thus has a propensity for symbolic battles (Auletta 1983b: 54).

Indeed, Riboud himself has said "To be a socialist in France today is fundamentally to be a liberal democrat opposing the conservative forces. To be a socialist in France is to try to have some concept of the future" (quoted in Auletta 1983b: 57).

What is described here is a cultural leftism that is not confined to an identification with any particular French political party, but which speaks to a general commitment to a cosmopolitan progressivism. This kind of progressivism was central to John and

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16See Paul Rabinow's (1989) discussion of a wide-ranging French "socialist" movement, oriented towards "a science of solidarity," that emerges in the last two
Dominique de Menil's civic projects and their personal enthusiasms.

The United States, and Houston in particular, presented a rich arena in which such passions might be played out. Houston was a city in which they could make a difference. They shepherded its burgeoning interest in modern art,\(^\text{17}\) lent their financial and social capital to the civil rights movement,\(^\text{18}\) and did much to fashion Houston's cultural institutions.\(^\text{19}\)

In their pursuit of these interests John and Dominique de Menil participated in the crafting of their distinction. The particular character of this distinction, however, decades of the nineteenth century.

\(^\text{17}\)In 1964 they established Art Investments Ltd., "an experiment to combine...cultural betterment with a chance at financial gain...[whereby] investor-collectors could gain greater confidence in their judgment and greater enthusiasm for collecting," but without personal risk, since purchases would be made by managing partners John and Dominique de Menil (Business Week October 31, 1964: 30). They also instituted Art Associates, with an initial membership in 1965 of 270. It was to serve as a vehicle through which a broad membership might by encouraged in their interest in modern art. Under its auspices speakers of international stature were brought to Houston for lectures and symposia, and a newsletter focusing particularly on events generated by the University of St. Thomas art department was circulated. And the Print Club and Print Library, through which prints could be bought or borrowed respectively, allowed for remarkably easy access to original works of art selected by Dominique de Menil.

\(^\text{18}\)John de Menil's mentoring of Mickey Leeland is perhaps the most striking example of this. Leeland came to John de Menil's attention when as a student at Texas Southern University he became active in the Civil Rights movement. John de Menil took a very active role in grooming Leeland for a political career that culminated in his serving four terms as a representative in United States Congress before his untimely death.

\(^\text{19}\)Their impact on institutions of higher education and the fine arts was most striking.
transformed over the years. Ann Holmes, writing on the arts for the Houston Chronicle since the 50s, recounts and gives moral force to these shifts.

Many a handsome dinner and garden supper was held there [at their Philip Johnson designed home] in the past, to honor scholars and artists and to launch art projects....Their massive art enterprises preoccupy this attractive couple. They are now seldom, if ever, seen at parties. They entertain hardly at all. Their home, with its glass walls, its indoor jungle garden, its changing plethora of art, is like the administrative wing of a museum....Children's bedrooms now converted into business offices, curatorial dens, study areas. The garage, an airconditioned storage area for art works (Holmes 1968: 13).

There is here, and elsewhere, a growing sense of the seriousness of their project, and of the depth of John and Dominique's devotion to it. This is emphasized in this much more recent portrayal of Dominique de Menil: "For one who once loved and owned gowns by Balenciaga, Dior and her favorite, Charles James, she makes no time for clothes shopping. 'What I have is what I had, or what my daughters bring in for me to wear. I don't even find time to get them adjusted--such negligence!'" (Holmes 1991: 230). But it is the following characterization, that marks not only the extent of her preoccupation with serious concerns to the exclusion of trivial pleasures or comforts, but the increasingly pious character of this preoccupation, that reveals something of the operation by which
such distinction may be fashioned:

Perhaps the key to understanding this extraordinary woman comes with a glimpse of her bedroom.... The bed, as plain as a pallet, is covered with a blanket. Yet around it are the tomes de Menil is reading, books on profound historical and spiritual subjects. On the walls are an African crucifix and works of art--some of them complex and difficult--by artists she admires. The room's occupant clearly does not concern herself with bodily comforts. She seeks deeper truths (Holmes 1991: 228).

An extraordinary recoding is achieved here, whereby the display of art becomes the sign of piety rather than luxury, in order to depict Dominique de Menil as preeminently engaged with transcendental preoccupations.

Press coverage of Dominique de Menil's considerable efforts over recent years to secure an adequate endowment for the Menil Collection does nothing to disrupt this portrait of otherworldliness. The aura of the Menil Collection is such that its project is rendered transcendent, and Dominique de Menil's worldly labors appear as devotional ministrations.

Whatever else might be at stake, however, questions of the long-term disposition of the Collection are centrally questions concerned with the enduring integrity of Dominique de Menil's vision, and indeed of her self. The Collection is not simply a means through which she has crafted a public identity, since it is not only an expression
of her sensibilities but has a constitutive character. While the museum might be understood as an instrument in the service of the formation of a public, the collection is a technology of the self.
Chapter Two
Collecting

Archipelagos

Uncommon, though by no means singular, among United States museums are those that bear the distinctive signature of a single collector. The Menil Collection is one such museum (like the Barnes Collection, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, and the Frick Collection),\(^1\) widely understood as the embodiment of the singular vision of Dominique and the late John de Menil. While she does not resist the idea of the Collection bearing her "signature," Dominique de Menil refuses any characterization of it as a coherent object.

Bertrand Davezac, the Collection's senior curator, in his catalogue essay for La rime et la raison,\(^2\) the exhibition that first showed substantial holdings from the Menil

\(^1\)In her discussion of single donor museums, Carol Duncan (1995) reads them primarily as "donor memorials." While this might describe one aspect of the Menil Collection, it is by no means the central one.

\(^2\)La rime et la raison was an exhibition of 678 pieces from the collection of John and Dominique de Menil, along with works from the collections of their children, and of their former son-in-law and Menil Collection trustee, Francesco Pellizzi. It was hosted by the Grand Palais, Paris, at the invitation of Pontus Hultin in 1984. This was not only the first occasion on which the public was able to view the collection as an object, but it was the case for Dominique de Menil also, since prior to this exhibition works had all been housed in various residences, institutions, and warehouses in New York, Paris and Houston. The catalogue for the show, La rime et la raison: Les Collections Ménil (1984), gives a checklist of the works selected for inclusion in the exhibition. I quote here from
Collection as a collection, wrote: "Museum collections build continents, this one archipelagos." The "encyclopedic" collections of so many museums, with their aspirations to a comprehensive representation of the history of art, assert a massive whole, albeit inevitably incomplete. The Menil Collection, by contrast, makes a virtue of its fragmentary character, "the object of the islands is not to fill the sea," and hence it has no gaps, no seams, "what is not there is not missing." The collection seeks only to be "exemplary" (Davezac 1984).

Dominique de Menil has embraced this construction of the collection enthusiastically, indeed, the frequency with which she invokes it in talks and in interviews suggests that it has become for her the defining characterization of the collection as an object. In resisting the teleological thrust of projects that seek coherence, Dominique de Menil exempts herself from having to identify either a collecting policy or an overarching logic of the whole. Insofar as the Collection may cohere, Dominique de Menil insists that this is post hoc. "So many people want to know my policy of buying for the collection. My policy of buying is having no policy. There is no special theme for the permanent collection because you don't buy with ideas in your head" (Houston Post 1968: 7). Indeed, for Dominique de Menil, acquisitions should properly be informed by "instinct" and "love."

Davezac's unpublished translation of his essay.
Much has been made of the totalizing drive of collections, and the seduction of the imagined worlds they seem to represent and the gratifying stability of apparent coherence. Indeed, it is the claim to coherence that has become in the literature on collecting the key distinguishing feature of collections as opposed to mere accumulations. Dominique de Menil's insistence on the fragmentary character of the Collection, then, seems striking.

The most common version of this totalizing mode is the "encyclopedic" collection. In his reading of Flaubert's collectors Bouvard and Pécuchet, Eugene Donato portrays the pernicious seduction inherent in the idea of the encyclopedia, "assumed to be the ultimate principle of reality, [that] turns out to be a constantly elusive mirage." Encyclopedic knowledge, for Bouvard and Péchuchet, is that which "preexists and determines" the various activities in which they engage, and is also "the teleological end point which they indefatigably attempt to attain, without it ever being at any time present to them" (Donato 1979: 213).

Bouvard and Péchuchet are overwhelmed by an extraordinarily heterogeneous array of material, the makings of the Museum of Natural History rather than the Museum of Art. Art collectors in the encyclopedic model do not have to represent the world, only the already circumscribed domain constituted canonically as art history. Notwithstanding

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3 See, for example, Clifford 1988; Donato 1979; Duncan and Wallach 1980; Pomian 1990; and Stewart 1993.
the more modest ambition of the art collection it's realization is no less elusive. Duncan and Wallach (1980) describe this encyclopedic mode in terms of the "universal survey" museum wherein collection policies articulate just this notion of completion that is progressively worked toward. In such collections each object holds a space in a narrative that asserts itself as complete, though never can be. And for viewers not privy to more esoteric frames of reference this narrative of art history defines the terms of apprehension.

While art collections might be said to represent the history of art, the character of referentiality expressed here is spurious, since art history has its definition only in concert with its collection. Art collections, particularly in the form of art museums, are as much in the business of constituting and configuring art history as they are implicated in representing it.

But already here we have slipped from speaking of collecting in general terms, to art collecting in particular, and more specifically to the collection in the form of the art museum. While common underpinnings can be identified among collections and the processes of their formation, the specific character of these processes and their significance differs from one form of collection to another.

Dominique de Menil's resistance to such a characterization notwithstanding, the totalizing drive of collections seems central to our understanding of collecting practices and distinguishes them from mere accumulations. Collections, in this formulation, are
always directed toward a coherent end, and this end provides the organizing principle that informs the selection of objects and the chimera of fulfillment. To this end differences among collected objects must be characterized in terms of an overarching unity that organizes the significance of difference within it. In order to achieve this objects are unhinged from their contexts of production and circulation, and their singular distinction is subject to effacement as part of the process of resocialization in terms of a series of objects that seeks to become complete.⁴

In the literature on collecting three distinctive systems of objects are represented, though the significance of the specificity of these domains is often not acknowledged. The first, and perhaps the governing form, is exemplified by the collection of salt and pepper shakers. In such a regime selected shakers are taken out of circulation as use-value, and are revalued in relation to the taxonomic and aesthetic structure of the collection. The objects of such a collection have significance and value, as Susan Stewart notes, "only in relation to one another and to the seriality that such a relation implies" (Stewart 1993: 153).

Ethnographic collections, along with historical collections and natural history collections together constitute a second regime of collecting.⁵ It is the system of objects,

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⁴This characterization reflects a schema that in its language owes much to Philip Fisher (1991), but which in its general form is repeated throughout the literature on collecting.

⁵I am referring here to modern collections. Similar objects were to be found in seventeenth century cabinets of curiosity, but under quite a different regime, as I
and not the character of the objects themselves that is significant here, since ethnographic objects in the context of an art collection signify, as I will argue, quite differently. In this second category of collecting objects refer metonymically to their original context, despite the fantasized character of that relation. Use value is not entirely effaced here, since purported function is often central to the taxonomy of such collections. But as with the salt and pepper shakers, once acquired into a collection the object is rendered impotent, a mere trace of former powers.

Such collections, in the recontextualizations that they stage, are driven by internal logics of coherence and completeness that present themselves as in some way bearing a referential relation to the world, or some imagined realm. Clifford, drawing on Susan Stewart's account of this process, argues that the illusion of "adequate representation of a world" is achieved by first unhinging objects from "specific contexts (whether cultural, historical, or intersubjective) and making them 'stand for' abstract wholes—a 'Bambara mask,' for example, becoming an ethnographic metonym for Bambara culture." This dislocation is followed, in this process, by the elaboration of a system of classification in terms of which the object is stored and displayed "so that the reality of the collection itself, its coherent order, overrides specific histories of the object's production and appropriation" (Clifford 1988: 220).  

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mentioned in the previous chapter.
Art collections, the third system that I wish to distinguish, also operate metonymically in so far as a particular work might be called upon to stand for an art historical period; a painting by Braque representing cubism, a Magritte surrealism. But this does not seem to properly describe the operation of art works in collections. Indeed, when James A. Michener's collecting practices were described at a symposium on collecting, a storm of protest ensued. Michener was no collector. For Michener had set about putting together an art collection that from the outset was intended to be given up for public edification. He set about assembling the collection in a very systematic manner, a process that was designed in part to serve as a vehicle by which Michener himself might learn about and come to understand American art. He allocated 3 months in 1960 for library research and proceeded in strict accordance with his findings, selecting

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6 For many at the symposium Michener's rational approach rendered him ineligible as a collector. For them passion, the passion to possess, was what distinguished their practice and, moreover, was its central source of virtue. Commonly, among collectors, this desire is articulated in terms of the degree to which one is willing, or driven, to sacrifice in order to assuage it. And herein lies its virtue; it demands that one relinquish more than can be given up without regret, and thereby becomes a sign of transcendence over mere practicality. This is suggestive of Simmel's characterization of value, wherein value expresses the distance between desire and its object, and the level of sacrifice undertaken to in order to bridge it (Simmel 1978). Dominique de Menil has commented, "Everything is always too expensive. Even in those days when great paintings cost a hundredth of what they do now, it seemed especially expensive. You have to be spellbound. It has to mean so much that you are unreasonable" (de Menil quoted in Johnston 1971: 6)

7 He assembled 163 books and articles about American art, cataloguing and cross-referencing the material therein, such that he gained a fully documented sense of what every major art writer and critic had to say about all the major American artworks. He
each piece as a representative of a particular art historical moment.

A good deal of the protest was concerned with the rationalism of his approach that allowed of no passion. He desired only, it seemed, to make up the set within the time frame and budget he had allocated so he could donate it for the betterment of the state of Texas, in his view among the most culturally bereft of states. But also expressed was the sense that something was wrong with the trajectory of the project. This was all art in the service of history. A Braque should not be reduced to the function of a sample,

then proceeded to prepare lists of what he had come to consider in light of his research the top six representational painters, the top six abstractionists, and so on, with all others ranked in relation to these. He established an annual budget that constrained him from paying more than $5,000 for any individual piece. He would not, he made clear, be driven by passion. Within a decade he had assembled a 300 piece survey of American painting, with a concentration on New York School abstract painters, who were working at the time he was collecting (and whose work was still modestly priced). Less than ten years after beginning the process he had identified the University of Texas, Austin, as a culturally impoverished and therefore suitable recipient. In Michener's residences there is no art.

Ironically, given the general outrage at his being described as a collector, the symposium at which this material was presented was "The Art of Collecting Art: A Symposium in Honor of James A. Michener," sponsored by the Art Department of Swarthmore College and the William J. Cooper Foundation in collaboration with the James A. Michener Museum (a museum not of his collection, but of his personal effects). Material on Michener was presented in a paper entitled "James A. Michener as a Collector" (1993) by Bruce Katsiff, director of the James A. Michener Museum.

Fisher points out that a very powerful formulation of art as history has long been established by Clement Greenberg. In his 1967 collection of essays Art and Culture, the history of art takes precedence over the individual object: "What Greenberg provides is a way of immediately valuing an art object in terms of its potential future as part of a museum collection. The goal of the artist is to design a work that is inevitable to what the future will see as the order of the past" (Fisher 1991: 170). The sentiment expressed at the symposium had more in common with Greenberg's contemporary, Meyer Schapiro,
a Braque is something in itself. An object of aesthetic value, the value of which may well be augmented by bringing its historical significance to bear on it. As Stewart describes this operation, "the collection does not displace attention to the past; rather, the past is at the service of the collection, for whereas the souvenir lends authenticity to the past, the past lends authenticity to the collection" (Stewart 1993: 151). Stewart makes this claim for all collections, and while this certainly is in fact the operative mode of history in collections, this trajectory tends to be suppressed, in the interests of legitimating collections as history. In art museums this operation is much more ambiguous.

Authenticity

Dominique de Menil does not collect Dogon carved doors, or Maori feather boxes as metonyms for their cultures of origin, no matter how fantasized that relation must inevitably be. They are not collected as ethnographic samples, but as works of art, and in Dominique de Menil's iconography they come to represent universal values of humanity, values which she seeks through her various activities to rehabilitate.

It is their authenticity not as real fragments of specific cultures or historical moments, but as traces of a more generalized other-worldliness that such objects have force in the Menil Collection. This other-worldliness is specified precisely in terms of its

who, in posing modern art in opposition to mass production, sought to valorize its authentic singularity (see Fisher 1991; and Schapiro 1978).
authenticity. Philip Fisher characterizes this in terms of the authentic posing itself as a counter-world to the social context of mass production. He quotes Rilke's comment in 1925 that "even for our grandparents...[things were] infinitely more intimate: almost everything a vessel in which they found and stored humanity" (Fisher 1991: 164).

Invocations of undifferentiated humanity are to be found these days not in ethnographic or historical collections, but in art museums. At the time when Rilke made his observations regarding the waning of authenticity, art museums were beginning to include African, Oceanic or other so-called primitive objects in their collections. "Such objects have the greatest chance to be included as art, as 'authentic,' in so far as they have the look of the primitive, the hand-made, the magical, the sacred, or the symbol-laden" (Fisher 1991: 165-166).

Fisher surely overstates his argument when he claims that in this stage the museum "is simply an institutional expression of the usefulness of art as a counter-world to the world of the factory with its mass-produced objects" (Fisher 1991: 166, emphasis mine). Museums certainly have other meanings besides this, but Fisher does make a compelling argument for the particular framing of objects as works of art in the museum. This is particularly so for the Menil Collection, which quite self-consciously presents itself as a counter-world of authenticity, while in civic museums such a function seems significantly more submerged, if it can be said to hold convincingly at all any more. The Museum of Fine Art, Houston's practice, on occasion, of setting up its merchandising
right at the exit of the exhibition that it replicates, not even at the discrete remove of the museum store, renders such a reading difficult to sustain.

While the museum might pose itself in opposition to mass production, its framing of objects owes much to processes central to that economy, as Fisher points out. As such, the museum embodies deep tensions in its relation to the social conditions of modernity. "One of the deepest effects of mass production has been to replace the object with the series of ever improved 'models' of the object. A society driven by the 'invention of invention' recomputalizes each thing as only the latest version within a series subject to indefinite future improvement" (Fisher 1991: 166). This notion of the operation of the series within the domain of commodities is mirrored in museums wherein the series is given priority over the individual work, "defining the meaning or importance of the latter as its position within or importance to the sequence in which it occurs" (Fisher 1991: 166). The series, then, emerges not only out of the linear structure of conventional modern museum installations, but more fundamentally, perhaps, it mirrors industrial modes of production and consumption.  

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9 Elsewhere, Fisher argues that in their production of artworks essentially as candidates for admittance into the museum, artists have come to produce their works already in the form of the series. Drawing on Michael Fried's (1965) suggestion in Three American Painters, Fisher notes that "in the precise, dated series the painter rules out the surrounding chaos by supplying the context, the commentary of neighbors, for the no-longer-intelligible single work. He creates whole sections of history at once, not pictures for the whims of history to supply antecedents and descendants for" (Fisher 1991: 22-23).
This privileging of the series over the individual artwork is, Fisher maintains, one of two key pressures that museum objects are subject to. The other is what he calls the drive toward "abstractness," the final stage of which "lies in a condition of pure enigmatic presence." This abstractness "results from the effacement of specific religious, political, or personal symbolic features" (Fisher 1991: 166). The Dogon carved door and the Maori feather box have, in this sense, been effaced. In *Voices of Silence*, Malraux (1967) addresses this effacement in terms of the extent to which museums estrange objects not only from their contexts but in so doing from their original functions as well. Thus, portraits, with all the personal associations and memories they embody become merely pictures. As Fisher notes, "the museum suppresses...the practices within which any object becomes, when seen from the side of its social vitality, a tool" (1991: 12). It would, for example, "be an act of madness to enter a museum, and kneel down before a painting of the Virgin to pray for a soldier missing in battle, lighting a candle and leaving an offering on the floor near the picture before leaving" (Fisher 1991: 11). What Fisher describes here is not simply a matter of formerly sacred objects being demystified in the context of the rationalized museum. Objects are subject to reinvention "in which new

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10In an act of refusal of precisely this kind of decontextualization, objects in the Te Maori exhibition (an exhibition of Maori objects that was shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Field Museum, the M. H. de Young Memorial Museum, and the Saint Louis Art Museum, and at each of the main centers of New Zealand, between 1984 and 1987) were treated in just this way, as sacred objects still imbued with spiritual power that had actively to be honored.
characteristics come into existence by the same process that earlier features are effaced" (Fisher 1991: 17).

Within each of the various categories within the Menil Collection there are obvious moments of coherence, with pieces clustering around a particular school or historical/geographic moment, and of course bodies of work by particular artists. But between these apparently disparate domains of the collection are connections that are more or less submerged, characterized variously both by personnel within the organization and by outside commentators.

The most commonly articulated narrative of coherence is one that richly illustrates Fisher's notion of effacement, since it is a narrative that claims genealogical links between "primitive" and 20th century European art on the basis of formal qualities—between rectilinear African art and cubism, and between the curvilinear forms that characterize both Oceanic and surrealist representations. These connections were often asserted in response to my questions concerning the logic of the collection, though never by Dominique de Menil, who disavows any logic at all. And nor have they been asserted in the arrangement of objects in the museum. The African and Oceanic galleries are reached not through any of the twentieth century galleries, but through Antiquities. And while the refugee surrealists in New York "felt an immediate affinity" with the Northwest Coast, Melanesian, and Eskimo pieces they discovered there, enjoying particularly "these objects' predilection for visual puns" (Carpenter cited in Stewart 1993: 238), such
juxtapositions are seldom made in the Menil Collection, despite this observation having been made by Dominique de Menil's son-in-law Edmond Carpenter.

Certainly these are connections being made by a number of the early modern collectors in the US, long before the Museum of Modern Art's 1984 "Primitivism in Twentieth Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern." In the Arensberg Collection, given in 1954 to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, certain twentieth century trends have been foregrounded, as is the case in the Menil Collection, though Louise and Walter Arensberg began acquiring works some 40 years earlier than the de Menils. The Arensberg Collection, though notable for its holdings in Cubism and Surrealism, is also rich in works from earlier periods, including "primitive" pieces, "always with an eye to the deep interrelationships which exist between vastly separated epochs" (Kuh and Rich 1949: 5). This "taste for appropriating or redeeming otherness, for constituting non-Western arts in its own image, for discovering universal, ahistorical 'human capacities'" is, Clifford notes, a particularly modern quality, albeit a disquieting one (Clifford 1986: 193).

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11This exhibition was curated by William Rubin and Kirk Varnedoe, and was documented in the two volume catalogue of the same name edited by Rubin (1984). This exhibition and articulations of its intent became the flashpoint for a range of arguments concerning the relationship between modern and "primitive" art, and the politics of exhibition (see, for example, Bois 1985; Clifford 1985; McEvilley 1984; Nadelman 1985; and Varnedoe 1985).

12It was under the guidance of the Arensbergs that Walter Hopps, still in high school, had his first brush with modern art. It was to prove a decisive moment (see Calvin Tomkins 1991 New Yorker profile of Hopps).
It rests not only on an allegory of affinity, of the sort played out in MoMA's Primitivism show, but of ruin, in which collection becomes "an act of salvage that repeats an all-too-familiar story of death and redemption" (Clifford 1986: 202).

*Universal Humanism*

The allegory that Clifford describes, bears a striking resemblance to the characterization of the connection between modern and "native arts" given by Marie-Alain Couturier, the French Dominican priest who very centrally informed Dominique de Menil's aesthetic and moral sensibilities. Dominique de Menil and Couturier both found themselves in tension with what they considered to be the overwhelming rationalism of modernity, and sought to counter this by reinvesting the modern with spirituality; they sought a sacred modern. This was not an expression of a nostalgic longing for some fantasized premodern utopia, but it did seek to rehabilitate an engagement with the material world that at once allows of an immediacy as well as transcendence.

Couturier saw in "native arts" a "manifestation, an almost unbearable presence, of the pagan supernatural" (Couturier 1989: 72). This spirit derives from the artist, or at least is channeled by the artist, by virtue of his "atavistic instinct for the sacred and its transcendence" (Couturier 1989: 92). Couturier speaks of this in a variety of ways; here, with reference to Matisse's comment "All my life, my only strength has been my sincerity": 
Sincerity producing the whole strength of a life and its work, and thereby touching the secret recesses of the hearts of millions from one end of the earth to another... The sincerity of one lone man, if it goes deep enough in him, reaches, for all other men, a universal substratum of truth which nothing else can penetrate (Couturier 1989: 83).

The best of the modern artists, in Couturier's view, in their refusal of academicism and their uncompromising commitment to their aesthetic vision, avail themselves of the very purity of spirit that is evidenced in the "native arts," that enchants their works.

Couturier's interest in "native arts" lies not only in drawing parallels with modern art, but in elaborating what he calls a "universal humanism." This notion, as Couturier articulates it, serves both as a critique of the idea of the salvage of "pre-contact" traditions, and as an (albeit questionable) legitimation for the collection of such objects and their subsequent presentation in the aestheticized space of an art museum.

"The effort to go on forever preserving and protecting will be in vain: the world is too small. No barrier can hold" (Couturier 1989: 83). The project of preserving the distinctive styles of different peoples is not only bound to fail by virtue of this continual encroachment or contamination, but it is also misguided, he argues, since it is not specific styles that are truly at stake: "in the matter of native craftsmanship, what we must save is not such and such forms, noble and pure as they may be, but the human gifts that assure this nobility and purity and that would still assure them in entirely new forms"
Couturier’s critique of "salvage" is not to say that objects from earlier traditions should not be preserved, rather that the attempt to preserve the very traditions, denying transformations, is mistaken. Indeed, "what must be done," he argues, "is to save all that can be saved out of the past of peoples, and to give special care to all that is alive" (Couturier 1989: 72).

While "native arts" should be protected "from the tawdry products of commerce and academicism" Couturier feels no compulsion to protect them from influence. Indeed, just as African art has had a powerful impact on Western art, so might Western art have an equally enriching effect for African art. "True values and true greatness do not kill each other. They make each other grow, they enoble each other by association and exchange...and the fruitfulness springs from the indivisible unity of human nature" (Couturier 1989: 83).

The universality of aesthetic virtue lies not in the character of objects themselves, then, but in the universally human virtues of those who craft these objects. The art object is a trace of humanity, for Couturier, just as it is a means by which that very humanity may be fostered. These are qualities that missionaries in the colonial period jeopardized, if not irrevocably overwhelmed, Couturier argues. He goes on to claim, rather more extravagantly perhaps, that they are also qualities that "the pagan and naturalistic Italian Renaissance, by liquidating the Middle Ages, banished completely from the Western
Christian world" (Couturier 1989: 72).

This reaching back to medieval art has been widely embraced by commentators on modern art. But while Couturier valorizes Romanesque and Gothic forms, the Menil Collection has few such holdings. Instead, it has acquired an extraordinary collection of Byzantine icons. Dominique de Menil's interest in Byzantine art is, according to Bertrand Davezac, senior curator at the Menil Collection, stimulated by her ecumenicism. Drawing my attention to an image of St. Peter and St. Paul, he explained that it was emblematic of [Dominique de Menil's] ideas and dreams, the rapprochement of the two churches—with St. Peter representing Rome, and Paul, Constantinople, the two pillars of the church....Byzantium, for her, is the lost sheep, and her dream is for the two arms of Christianity to be reunited, and that's what having the Byzantine collection symbolizes.  

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13 The nucleus of the Byzantine collection, the 58 piece collection of the London real estate magnate Eric Bradley, was acquired at the urging of Bertrand Davezac in 1985. Davezac had heard that the collection was to be put on the market, and would likely be dispersed; "I thought it would almost be a catastrophe, because its beauty and worth as a whole would disintegrate into anonymity," Davezac explained. "Dominique de Menil had said there couldn't be any more acquisitions, but I urged her, persuaded her, to at least see the collection. She did, and she had a revelation. Only the Menil could really salvage it as an entity" (Davezac quoted in Johnson, 1988a: 17).

14 Dominique de Menil gives poetic voice to her sense of an historical moment of unity in her comments in her "Acknowledgments and Perspectives" in the first volume of The Image of the Black in Western Art (1976): "When Orient and Occident were swept by the high winds of Christianity and Islam, ideals of fraternity blossomed. There was a time when the West adopted a black knight as its patron saint, a time when artists did not neglect to include an African among the resurrected, a time when Solomon embraced a
Dominique de Menil's current endeavors to raise money for the construction of a chapel to house thirteenth century Cypriot frescoes further this desire. The frescoes, or pieces thereof, were offered to the Menil Collection on the black market. Recognizing that without her intervention the frescoes (the apse and the dome of a chapel) would be sold piecemeal, dispersed in irretrievable fragments, she resolved to buy all of it that could still be located. Specialists were brought in to adjudicate the various national claims to the frescoes that had been invited, and a conservation lab was set up in London expressly for their restoration.\textsuperscript{15} Having determined the legitimacy of claims to Cypriot provenance,\textsuperscript{16} Dominique de Menil entered into discussions with the government of Cyprus, offering the restored frescoes as a gift to the nation in return for an initial extended loan of it to the Menil Collection. A twelve year loan was agreed upon,\textsuperscript{17} and Dominique de Menil is now

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black Queen of Sheba. Reality might have followed in the footsteps of this dream: it was in the arms of the Pope that the first ambassador of the Congo died. . . . But the dream of an authentic cooperation between Europe and Africa, of a sharing of ideals and knowledge, was shattered by crimes so atrocious they left no images" (de Menil 1976: xi).
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\textsuperscript{15}The Menil Foundation is reported to have spent $900,000 in the purchase and restoration of the frescoes (Johnson 1988b).

\textsuperscript{16}It was established that the frescoes had been removed from the apse and the dome of the chapel of St. Themonianos in the village of Lysi in the district of Famagusta, at the time of the Turkish occupation in 1974.

\textsuperscript{17}This loan period has since been extended, and is now often described as indefinite. Certainly it was felt that fundraising for the chapel project could not proceed successfully without first establishing a favorable loan agreement. Whatever the formal terms of the agreement, the consensus among Menil personnel is that repatriation would be inappropriate before political stability was restored to the region.
engaged with plans to build a consecrated chapel to house it, designed by her architect son, François.¹⁸ For her, as Bertrand Davezac put it, the chapel is "the incarnation of ecumenicism, and the rapprochement of East and West."

In this project also can be read what Benjamin describes as the "struggle against dispersion," a struggle that he identifies as "perhaps the most hidden motive of one who collects" (Benjamin quoted in Holdengräber 1992: 112).¹⁹ Holdengräber suggests that

This "struggle against dispersion," perhaps, one of many possible responses to a world itself in disarray, dispersed, whereby the collector is moved to take things in for repair, provide shelter, and thereby see himself as saving the destitute things of this world, cannot, he knows, last. It is the collector's hope that if he does not find immortality, his collection will, for things so patiently assembled should remain housed under the same roof (Holdengräber 1992: 112).

It is as much for this reason, perhaps, that Dominique de Menil will have consecrated the chapel built to house the frescoes.

The acquisition of the frescoes is exemplary also, however, of "the restless desire and power of the modern West to collect the world." The conventional legitimation for

¹⁸It is now planned that the chapel will be consecrated in the Spring of 1997.

¹⁹Holdengräber takes this quotation from Benjamin's notes on the subject of collecting under the title Konvolut "H" [Der Sammler], "one of the 36 files, folders, or bundles in Benjamin's construction site that is Das Passagen-Werk" (Holdengräber 1992: 101).
such an impulse is expressed in this comment of Dominique de Menil's: "Within 20 years after these frescoes are installed in this chapel here, I expect more people will have seen them than viewed them in their little chapel in Cyprus over 700 years" (Johnson 1993: 1).

But in collecting primitive and medieval art, rescuing it from dispersion or neglect, Dominique de Menil is engaged not so much in redeeming that which is pre-modern, but in an operation whereby one's own redemption is sought through recourse to an imagined other. Indeed, for Dominique de Menil, as for Couturier, modernity itself is to be redeemed by virtue of modern art's connection with the primitive; through the rehabilitation of sensibilities that had been compromised under the dominion of academicism. So perhaps most central here is not the connection between the primitive and the modern itself, but the drawing of an affinity between Primitive, Medieval, and Modern, which all share the attribute of not bearing a resemblance to the academic realism of the Renaissance.

Dominique de Menil's commitments to a universal humanism are materialized in another of her projects, The Image of the Black in Western Art. Dominique de Menil had been shocked by what she recounts as her first exposure to sanctioned racial segregation: "I was startled once to be removed from my seat on a train between Houston and New York. I had sat in a car with blacks because it was not crowded and seemed comfortable. I did not consider the people there one way or another. The conductor ordered me to move" (Holmes 1991: 228).
This is the incident that is recounted as the provocation for The Image of the Black in Western Art, a project of extraordinary scope that the de Menils have financed since its inception in 1960. Its objective has been to undertake a scholarly survey which traces the ways in which blacks have been represented in Western works of art. Project staff initially searched out examples, from a variety of forms of representation—sculptures, frescoes, illuminated manuscripts, paintings and drawings—in archaeological sites, museums, private and public collections, churches and libraries throughout the world. Each image has been photographed, researched, and catalogued in what has become a huge archive. The project, directed specifically toward the publication of research based on the collected material, set up an office in Paris under General Editor Ladislas Bugner, with a branch in Houston, run by Karen Dalton. Published in both English and French, The Image of the Black in Western Art was initiated as a multi-volume work in 1976, with the publication of Volume I. Thirty five years after the project was undertaken three volumes have been published, with a fourth soon to be completed.20

20Volume I, From the Pharaoahs to the Fall of the Roman Empire, Jean Vercoutter, et al., 1976; Volume II, Parts 1 and 2, From the Early Christian Era to the "Age of Discovery," Jean Devisse, 1979; and Volume IV, Parts 1 and 2, From the American Revolution to World War I, Hugh Honour, 1989, are published by the Menil Foundation and distributed in English by Harvard University Press, and in French by Editions Gallimard. Volume III, Africa and Europe: Sixteenth to Eighteenth Century, is still under preparation. The project has also produced a number of other books and catalogues including The Black Saint Maurice, Gude Suckale-Redlefsen, 1987; Blacks in Ancient Cypriot Art, Vassos Karageorghis, 1988; Winslow Homer's Images of Blacks: The Civil War and Reconstruction Years, Peter H. Wood and Karen Dalton, 1988.

The archive has recently been transferred to Harvard University which will
The purpose throughout, as articulated by the project, has been "to provide a richer field of experience to the ways the Occident has thought and felt about the black African." Dominique de Menil has said of her impetus for the project that racism relies upon a failure to recognize the humanity of others, and it is her belief that through exposure to imagery that reflects that humanity, racist sentiments are rendered unsustainable. "With such a naive approach, a serious enterprise was started."

In the face of such an abundance of material one is faced, comments Dominique de Menil, with a great variety of people all "cast in roles they did not choose. They are actors in plays written by whites. Though whites are invisible their presence is felt everywhere. It is their customs, their tastes, their prejudices, their phantasms, and their romanticism that have been captured in these images....These voiceless blacks, these ghosts, have carried nevertheless one of the longings of mankind. They were a symbol of universality and of the equality of men before God. On twelfth-century enamels the apostles address themselves to a white man and a black man who signify humanity in all its variety" (de Menil 1976: ix-xi).

Instinct

As with many modern collectors, like Louise and Walter Arensberg, and Peggy assume full responsibility for it in the year 2000, in accordance with a transfer deal worked out with the Menil Foundation.
Guggenheim, for example, each of whom was guided in their acquisitions by Duchamp, the de Menil's collecting was strongly affected by personal relations with artists, notably among them René Magritte, Max Ernst, and more recently Cy Twombly. While these personal engagements have been enormously important in shaping the collection, artists were not invited to assist in formulating an acquisitions strategy for the collection as a whole, as Duchamp, for example, was for the Arensbergs. Speaking of her relationship with Ernst, Dominique de Menil commented, "we did not discuss other artists. We never tried to find out what artist we should acquire. We had no buying policy or counselor" (de Menil quoted in Brown and Johnson 1983: 38).

They were certainly open, however, to the judgments of those whose sensibilities they admired, as Dominique de Menil notes in this response to my question regarding the content of the collection:

I was very lucky, because I learned also from a great dealer, Alexander Iolas, who was a Greek from Alexandria, and he, like Jerry MacAgy, he had a great eye - and I would trust his judgment. I had to learn. When he told me "Take it, you have to have it," like the Metaphysical, by de Chirico, he just told me to take it and I trusted his eye—his judgment. Every year, he would always keep the best piece that he had, the best painting for us.
Alexander Iolas' most striking influence perhaps is his having drawn to the attention of John and Dominique de Menil the work of Magritte, paintings that they initially did not care for. When asked if her initial purchases of surrealists were due to what she saw at Iolas's gallery Dominique de Menil was quick to acknowledge his importance:

Yes, to a large extent. At first I resisted Surrealism; it was such a strange world. I felt outside of it. But Iolas kept showing us great works. He was so convincing; he was himself so convinced of the importance of what he was showing. I remember my skepticism in front of our de Chirico, Hector and Andromache. I was not taken in; I bought it on his word, on faith (Brown & Johnson 1983: 38).

But while this work may have seemed initially beyond Dominique de Menil's purview, it can now be said to embody preoccupations central to her aesthetic. For, as Hal Foster points out, de Chirico "works to depict the world as 'an immense museum of strangeness,' to reveal the 'mystery' in insignificant things. His is an aesthetic of enigma" (Foster 1993: 62).

Dominique de Menil readily acknowledges that her early take on art owed much to others: "Gradually my eyes were opened by Father Couthier, by Iolas and by Jermayne MacAgy." But her faith in the judgments of others' became tempered over the years by her increasing confidence in her own instincts, and she has, as she recently remarked,
"become more difficult to please; objects have to have something very special" (Brown & Johnson 1983: 38).

You have to like it, or trust somebody. What happens nowadays, people don't have very strong feelings—you have to have faith in life. People can finally see what is lightweight and what is heavyweight. I've played that game with people: "Which one do you dislike most, and why?"--they are always right. Many have instincts, but they don't trust them, or don't trust their dealer. Instinct is life--without it, you are a puppet.

This is the same active engagement that Dominique de Menil seeks to elicit in those who see her shows, a readiness to interrogate that which confronts one that she would wish to see generalized into other domains. The passive reception so often fostered in aesthetic realms compromises our experience of art, just as it compromises us with regard to more overtly political matters.

Russell Berman, in his elaboration of what he characterizes as Benjamin's "iconoclastic mistrust of aesthetic form," argues that the modes of behavior associated with art museums, "silence, inaction, submission," have their corollary in fascistic politics (Berman 1989:38). "They are both constructed in terms of a principled refusal to allow any intersubjective communication" (Berman 1989:39). But while Benjamin (or at least Berman's sometimes rather programmatic reading of him) and Dominique de Menil both recognize the political import of structures of reception, their responses differ markedly.
Berman attributes to Benjamin a model of "postauratic" art "that would convene a collective recipient (the 'masses') endowed with an active and critical character" (Berman 1989:39) as a corrective to this passivity, Dominique de Menil seeks by contrast to reengage the audience precisely through the seductive operation of aura.

Against his depiction of Benjamin's optimism in a "postauratic" art that overcomes the elitism of autonomous art, Berman poses his own reading of the possibilities of the avant-garde attack on aesthetic autonomy. Or rather, he addresses the outcome of the valorization of aesthetic autonomy, since of course even the high modern "art for art's sake" never did operate within a discrete sphere of value. Indeed, Berman argues, this "fetishization of cultural objects within a cult of sterile veneration" is the outcome of "the commodification of all relationships" (Berman 1989: 46). He recalls Robert Musil's biting illustration of the passive reception that is induced by this:

At home these men's works [Kant, Schiller, and Goethe] were kept in the bookcase with the green glass panes in Papa's study, and Torless knew this bookcase was never opened except to display its contents to a visitor. It was like the shrine of some divinity to which one does not readily draw nigh and which one venerates only because one is glad that thanks to its existence there are certain things one need no longer bother about (Musil quoted in Berman 1989: 46).
What is depicted here, as Berman points out, is not the success of bourgeois culture "but its failure, i.e., its inability to live up to its own program" (Berman 1989: 46).

The crisis of twentieth-century values was not, as conservatives claim, a result of avant-garde activity, but, on the contrary, the avant-garde responded to that crisis engendered by the process of capitalist development. Its attack on inherited cultural structures is dialectical in the sense that its destructive strategy is tied to the goal of emancipating an immanent content from ossified forms: the avant-garde protests against the manner in which bourgeois culture has insufficiently realized its own values, and it promises to carry out the bourgeois project in general more successfully by jettisoning one particular feature, aesthetic autonomy. The legacy of that strategy—the sublation of autonomy in the name of emancipation—includes the history of twentieth-century art as well as the major cultural-historical ramification of the avant-garde, an aestheticization of everyday life (Berman 1989: 46–47).

In this reading, the avant-garde project can be understood as an essentially conservative project that serves to reinvest art with authenticity, it reenchants art and thereby reinvigorates it as a system of value.

Dominique de Menil seems to share the avant-garde's analysis of the impoverishment of experience attendant upon the valorization of the autonomy of art.
But while the avant-garde seeks to remedy the alienation of "art for art's sake" by extending the domain of the aesthetic project to everyday life, Dominique de Menil does so by rendering art otherworldly. Her exhibitions are conceived as incantations, by which the audience might be moved. In Dominique de Menil's metaphysics art is not an end in itself but a medium of moral and spiritual redemption.

Although the trajectory of her project does not move toward the aestheticization of everyday life, in many respects Dominique de Menil's life does bear this character. I do not refer here to Berman's observation that the aestheticization of everyday life tends to foster a generalization of the sort of powerless submission that characterizes the alienated experience of high culture. I refer rather to the strikingly seamless character of her activities that yield what is often referred to as the Menil aesthetic.

Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualization of the "stylization of life"\(^{21}\) is perhaps more apt; it describes "a systematic commitment which orients and organizes the most diverse practices—the choice of a vintage or a cheese or the decoration of a holiday home in the country" (Bourdieu 1984: 56).\(^{22}\) For Bourdieu, such expressions of taste, and thereby of

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\(^{21}\) While Bourdieu attributes the term "stylization of life" to Max Weber, Bourdieu's formulation of it owes considerably more to his own project than to Weber's.

\(^{22}\) This is richly illustrated in this effort by Dominique de Menil's granddaughter, Taya Allison, to differentiate the sensibilities of her aunt and uncle, Lois and Georges de Menil, from those of other family members:

When Georges and Lois moved to Paris, they started using the de Menil family house in the country on weekends, and Lois redecorated it, in her style, which was not everyone else's style. What's the difference? Well,
distinction, operate through the demonstration of the extent to which one is free of the
constraints of necessity. Hence the bourgeois taste for "luxury." But gratuitous luxury is
not the only register in which distinction operates. Expression of detachment from
"ordinary urgencies" might equally take the form of contemplative asceticism. What is
central to such marking of distinction is that it operates in the register of the aesthetic.
Claims to authority that are asserted in the form of taste are, as Bourdieu observes,
less likely to be contested than any other, because the relation of the
"pure," "disinterested" disposition to the conditions which make it
possible, i.e., the material conditions of existence which are rarest because
most freed from economic necessity, has every chance of passing
unnoticed. The most "classifying" privilege thus has the privilege of
appearing to be the most natural one (Bourdieu 1984: 56).
The more seamlessly this stylization of life can be achieved, then, the greater its authority
as a means by which distinction might be asserted.

Signature

Dominique de Menil derives distinction from a variety of sources: her

when my grandfather was near the end of his life, he gave Georges and Lois
a Matisse cutout, and she went to Pierre Deux and found this print fabric
in the same colors and had their whole living room in New York done in it.
That’s not something my mother or Aunt Adelaide or Uncle François
would do (quoted in Colacello 1996: 199).
preoccupation with spirituality; the moral worthiness of modesty; 23 connoisseurship; humanitarian commitments; Frenchness; and wealth. These various signs of eminence have long been established through press coverage of Dominique de Menil's activities, but they have their most authoritative articulation in the form of her various public projects, which together establish a remarkably coherent expression of a unified self, often read as the Menil signature.

This stylization of life, then, can be understood not only as a means to distinction, but as a technology of self-definition. This two-fold character of the "signature" is identified by James Faubion, when he notes that the hermeneutics of the relationship between "creature and creator" that is marked by the signature "would reveal in a work or a text not, or not merely, its author's self-projections but also his, or her, exercises of self-

23Dominique de Menil’s modesty is remarked upon with a frequency that seems at first glance to be at odds with her at times rather autocratic style.

Panofsky, however, offers a provocative reading of the way in which these apparently contradictory modes might be understood. Discussing what he calls the Abbot Suger's "passionate will to self-perpetuation," Panofsky offers what seems to be an apt interpretation. He argues that "this is not the Renaissance man's thirst for fame [rather], Suger's [was a] colossal, but, in a sense, profoundly humble vanity. The great man of the Renaissance asserted his personality centripetally, so to speak: he swallowed up the world that surrounded him until his whole enviroment had been absorbed by his own self. Suger asserted his personality centrifugally: he projected his ego into the world that surrounded him until his whole self had been absorbed by his environment" (Panofsky 1979: 29-30). Suger, in a sense, became identical with the Abbey, he "divested himself, to some extent, of his existence as a private individual" (ibid.: 31). All that he does for the Abbey, far from self-denying, is as much for himself as for the church, since for Suger there was no difference between the one and the other. His work, then, became a process of self-affirmation through self-effacement.
formation" (Faubion 1993: 193).

Not all modern exercises in self-formation yield anything so coherent as a unified self, indeed such an outcome relies not only upon a sense of one's own authority, but upon resources adequate for its mobilization. A unified self is a luxury, fashioned out of the more or less disparate fragments of a life. The self becomes the organizing principle in terms of which such fragments might be rendered sensible, in much the same way as the collection organizes the meaning of disparate objects. But these are not merely analogous operations, since the latter serves powerfully in the constitution of the former.

The collection is, as James Clifford notes, a "strategy for the deployment of the possessive self," an exercise in "making the world one's own, [gathering] things around oneself tastefully, appropriately" (Clifford 1988: 218). In this process the collector is not simply a consumer of objects, but "generates a fantasy in which it becomes producer by arrangement and manipulation" (Stewart 1993: 158). While the ordering of objects within a preestablished series, the re-creation of a Victorian parlor, say, or the collection of 17th Century Italian paintings, suggests not so much production, but the reproduction of a given form, the eclectic collection bears the sign of mastery:

Each sign is placed in relation to a chain of signifiers whose ultimate referent is not the interior of the room—in itself an empty essence—but the interior of the self.
In order to construct this narrative of interiority it is necessary to obliterate the object's context of origin. In these examples eclecticism rather than pure seriality is to be admired because, if for no other reason, it marks the heterogeneous organization of the self, a self capable of transcending the accidents and dispersions of historical reality (Stewart 1993: 158).\footnote{This transcendent self is a recapitulation of the sovereign cosmopolitan who, Greenfeld (1992) points out, refuses to be constrained by accidents of birth.}

The Menil Collection is such an object; a materialization of a heterogeneous self that allows of a unified expression in the form of a signature, "the Menil aesthetic."\footnote{In discussions concerning the gendered character of processes of self constitution, a unified self is typically characterized as the prize of male privilege. It is clear, however, that such easy dichotomies do not stand up in the face of the cross-cutting privilege of class. The resources that Dominique de Menil has been able to bring to bear on her projects of self-fashioning render her gender more or less inconsequential in this regard. But this privilege is suppressed in the Menil Collection, since, as Julie Taylor put it, "Art is incandescent, and when the flame burns, it burns away difference" (pers. com.).}

But despite the force of the collection as a means of self definition and stabilization, it is also an object of deep anxiety. Just as the collection makes possible the materialization of a bounded unified self, it gives material form to its inevitably contingent character. Hence the collector's preoccupation with the enduring integrity of the collection. In this sense, as Holdengräber notes, "The collector's struggle against dispersion is also...a struggle against time where the collecting subject seeks to attain
through the collection ‘victory over transcence’” (Holdenrääber 1992: 127). Another expression, then, of the anxiety over dissolution can be seen played out in the management of dynastic relations, as will be elaborated in chapter 4.

What emerges as central to Dominique de Menil's collecting, to her accounts of her practices as a collector, and to the presentation of objects in the context of the Collection, is a pervasive privileging of the poetic over the conceptual, in marked contrast to the increasingly rationalized programs of art museums in the US. An account of these aesthetic preoccupations of Dominique de Menil reveals something of her understanding of the character of aesthetic objects and of the way in which they should be experienced. And underpinning this is a conception of the spectator that fundamentally distinguishes her project from that of other US museums.

In this may be read resonances of a distinctively French aesthetic, albeit one that bears the traces of Dominique de Menil's specific social location in France and of a distinctive reconfiguration as a consequence of Dominique and John de Menil having left France during the war, finally taking up residence in Houston in 1941.

*New World*

In Houston, John de Menil served initially as the head of Schlumberger operations

26See also, Franco Rella 1982.
in South America and the Middle East, and is widely held to have been a major force in
the emergence of Schlumberger as one of the world's largest corporations in the 1970s,
providing oil detection technology to drilling companies throughout the world, technology
that had been developed by Dominique de Menil's father, Conrad Schlumberger, and
uncle, Marcel Schlumberger. 27

Dominique de Menil’s grandfather was the son of a prosperous family of 19th
century Alsatian textile industrialists. He was, by all accounts, a man with a passion for
science that his business responsibilities prevented him from pursuing.

So when his sons Marcel and Conrad appeared to be on the verge of
developing a technique of electrical well-logging that could revolutionize
the geophysical industry, Paul Schlumberger personally and
enthusiastically subsidized the research and experimentation that led to the
invention of the "black box" or potentiometer—the instrument that placed
Schlumberger, Ltd. squarely in the center of the developing petroleum
industry (Castenada 1987: 29).

John de Menil, who formally anglicized his name when he and Dominique were

27 An account of Schlumberger is given by Dominique de Menil's sister, Anne Gruner
Schlumberger, in her book *The Schlumberger Adventure*, 1982. A more technical account
may be found in *Schlumberger: The History of a Technique*, by Louis Allaud and Maurice
Martin, 1977. But perhaps the richest narrative is to be found in Ken Auletta’s 2-part
*New Yorker* profile of Jean Riboud, former Chairman and CEO of Schlumberger (*New
granted United States citizenship in 1962, was born to a titled Catholic family in Lyons, 28 whose fortune was already dissipated a generation earlier. On leaving school at age 17 he took on a low level position in a bank. Determined both to recover the estate of his family and advance himself in the banking industry, he recognized that his progression to more rewarding positions would inevitably be hampered by his attenuated formal education, and rectified the matter as a night school student, eventually earning three degrees. 29 In 1931, when he and Dominique were married, he was in charge of investment services at one of the largest French banks, and under considerable pressure from Conrad and Marcel Schlumberger to join the family company. 30

For some eight years John de Menil resisted their urgings, until in 1939, three years after Conrad's death, he could refuse no longer and became responsible for Schlumberger's financial structure. His role was to be crucial in establishing Schlumberger

28 It is not incidental that Lyons is, as Ken Auletta notes, "the historical birthplace of the French ruling class." Auletta in his 2-part New Yorker profile of Jean Riboud, who as Chairman and CEO of Schlumberger worked closely with John de Menil, gives a rich account of a distinctive mix of political, spiritual and business commitments that were reflected in the practices of both men (1983a and 1983b).

29 It is often said that it is this experience, along with the international character of his business dealings, that informed his energetic involvement in the Institute for International Education.

30 Like her father and uncle, Dominique de Menil was a graduate engineer. I have, however, come across no indication that she was ever considered to have a future in the company as scientist, though she did briefly work on the company's in-house newsletter.
as an extraordinarily powerful player in the oil industry. Ken Auletta describes his participation in the company in this way:

During the war, de Menil successfully schemed with Marcel to free the company from potential Nazi control by shifting its base of operations from France to Trinidad. And after the war de Menil played a large part in making Schlumberger a truly international corporation, by requiring that all business be conducted in English and that the dollar be the common currency, as is now customary in the oil business. Like Conrad Schlumberger, de Menil was an idealist, and lent his financial support to political and artistic movements that challenged the status quo. And, also like Conrad, he believed that Schlumberger's ability to help others find oil was a natural extension of his political beliefs. "You were bringing to human frontiers technology that helped people," says his son George de Menil who is a professor of economics (Auletta 1983a: 69).

The de Menil's collecting began only after their move to the US, with John de Menil's 1945 return from a business trip to New York with a Cézanne water color, Montagne (ca. 1895). They proceeded to buy the work of Léger, Rcuault, Picasso and Braque, only later being introduced to the Surrealist works for which the collection has perhaps become most distinguished. While their collection was acquired only after their move to Houston, their early purchases were made in New York, in a New York art world
recently transformed by the presence of a significant body of exiled French modern artists and dealers (See Guilbaut 1983, and Sawin 1995).

In his essay, "New York 1941," Levi-Strauss characterized this moment:

New York (and this is the source of its charm and peculiar fascination) was then a city where anything seemed possible. Like the urban fabric, the social and cultural fabric was riddled with holes. All you had to do was pick one and slip through it if, like Alice, you wanted to get to the other side of the looking glass and find worlds so enchanting they seemed unreal (1985: 258-267).

John de Menil, by all accounts, found it equally beguiling, appealing to his distaste for the stifling traditionalism of France or, rather, to his enthusiasm for progressivism. More specifically it must have presented itself as a welcome relief from the grim urgencies of wartime Europe.

Their initial interest in buying art was in response to their friendship with Marie-Alain Couturier, who found himself in the United States at the outbreak of the war, consequently staying on for some five years, circulating among expatriate artists and working on the intellectual refinement of his own project concerned with the spiritual restoration of French liturgical art.

This project was developed around the design of the churches of Assy and
Audincourt, and of the chapels of Ronchamp and Vence,\textsuperscript{31} and in his negotiation of highly controversial commissions for artworks for these sanctuaries from leading modernist artists, among them Matisse, Léger, Rouault and Le Corbusier. Later, in the late 40s and until his death in 1954, he went on to elaborate an account of these initiatives as the co-editor of the Catholic review \textit{L'Art Sacré}, in which he defends his judgments in the context of arguments concerning the relation between art and spirituality or faith, in so doing elaborating a broader treatise on the character of the aesthetic.

There are a number of people who have powerfully influenced Dominique de Menil's acquisitions and shaped their subsequent representations in the context of the Collection. But the first, and surely the most foundational, was Couturier, whose judgments and their ideological underpinnings informed not only Dominique de Menil's strictly aesthetic preoccupations, but also a much broader agenda of moral and political activism.

\textit{Alchemy}

Unlike many collectors who characterize themselves as having always had a special appreciation for art, Dominique de Menil describes herself as having been awakened to it under the guidance of Couturier who, she has repeated in a variety of

\textsuperscript{31}See the account of the Vence project in the volume of collected writings on the subject, \textit{La Chapelle de Vence: Journal d'une création}, Marcel Billot, ed. Paris: Cerf/ Skira, 1993
ways, "opened her eyes," and "taught her to see." On their frequent business trips to New York John and Dominique de Menil would accompany Couturier in tours around the New York dealers Paul Rosenberg, Valentine Dudensing, Kurt Valentine, and Pierre Matisse (de Menil 1983: 36). Dominique de Menil was not immediately bowled over by the work she was being shown, and was anyway initially uncomfortable with the idea of spending significant sums of money on the purchase of art, but John de Menil had no such reservations and quickly embraced Couturier's advice. Dominique de Menil's reticence was short-lived, and she was soon very actively involved in acquiring works, and continued to do so passionately for some 15 years after her husband's death in 1974; "once you develop a taste, you only stop when you have to" (de Menil 1983: 37).

But it was not strictly on the level of taste that Couturier appealed to Dominique de Menil, since his aesthetic judgments were inevitably infused with moral adjudications. "The fervor of Couturier's words," she observed, "borne by the gravity of what he had to say, transcends the ephemeral and touches us like the mark of the absolute" (de Menil 1989: 9).

There are obvious resonances of the conversion experience in this, a repetition, perhaps, of her full embrace of her husband's Catholicism in preference to her own family's Protestant faith. Indeed, it was the austerity of her paternal Alsatian Protestant forebears that prevented her mother and grandmother from themselves buying paintings, Dominique de Menil has commented. "One did not indulge in what was considered
"luxury": no rare books, no antique furniture, nothing really expensive except perhaps some silver. Yes, one had to have silver but not paintings. Paintings were considered ostentatious" (de Menil 1983: 36).

Dominique de Menil apparently did not share her father's puritanism: "Certainly I did not inherit a tradition of patronizing the arts, but I inherited the craving, the unfulfilled craving of my mother and grandmother " (de Menil 1983: 36). A craving articulated in her oft quoted comment "What I admire I must possess" (quoted in Browning 1983: 141).

The catalogue to the Menil Collection, The Menil Collection: A Selection from the Paleolithic to the Modern Era (1987), reproduces on its frontispiece Max Ernst's Portrait of Dominique, commissioned by John and Dominique de Menil in 1934. This was the painting they had left behind wrapped in brown paper on top of a closet when they left Paris during the war, not liking it sufficiently to ship it to their new home, or leave it in the care of friends. It has become the story that is told repeatedly to conjure the extent to which the sensibilities of the de Menils were transformed—the story of their aesthetic conversion.

But the second image reproduced in the catalogue, on the page facing Dominique de Menil's Foreword is a painting by Domenico Veneziano, St. John the Baptist in the Desert, ca. 1445. It is not as a particular jewel of the Menil Collection that this work is reproduced in such a prominent position. It is not only not held by the Collection, but never will be. Once belonging to Bernard Berenson, it is now in the Kress Collection of
the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. In her Foreword, Dominique de Menil wrote this of the painting:

A lonely adolescent is disrobing in the solitude of mountains; a gray landscape with brownish green bushes and a flash of dark ruby-red—his cloak. I am so fond of this strange and miraculous little painting that I experience it as totally mine when I stand in front of it. And I think that in years ahead there will be those, unknown to be, who will take and "possess" works that I have acquired (de Menil 1987: 7).

Without imagining this intimacy of possession, no matter how fantasized, the museum becomes a site of alienation, where objects are paraded before us that can never be enlivened by the possibility of ownership. Hence, Dominique de Menil's reference to possession here speaks of the alchemy by which we might all become collectors, albeit vicariously.

In her comment, "what I admire I must possess," resides a complex aesthetic that can be read through the character of the collection as an object, and through Dominique de Menil's relationship to it and its constituent objects. The notion of the collection as a medium of deeply held sensibilities hints at the idea of the fetish, as both a catalyst and a repository for experiences of longing and desire.

William Pietz's characterization of the fetish seems suggestive of the dual character of the collection as a "detached" material signifier circulating in various regimes of
exchange, while also exerting itself as a materialization of "unfulfilled craving." This extended quote from Pietz's "The Problem of the Fetish," elaborates this usage:

The fetish is always a meaningful fixation of a singular event; it is above all a "historical" object, the enduring material form and force of an unrepeatable event...This reified, territorialized historical object is also "personalized" in the sense that beyond its status as a collective social object it evokes an intensely personal response from individuals. This intense relation to the individual's experience of his or her own living self through an impassioned response to the fetish object is always incommensurable with (whether in a way that reinforces or undercuts) the social value codes within which the fetish holds the status of a material signifier. It is in these "disavowals" and "perspectives of flight" whose possibility is opened in the clash of this incommensurable difference that the fetish might be identified as the site of both the formation and the revelation of ideology and value-consciousness (1985: 12-13).

Clifford observes that "with the emergence of 20th Century modernism and anthropology, figures formerly called 'fetishes'...became works either of 'sculpture' or of 'material culture'" (Clifford 1986: 199). It might be argued, however, that civic museums in so far as they reject the high culture status of art are increasingly rendering art as material culture, while Dominique de Menil reimagines it as a fetish.
To the extent to which Dominique de Menil's relation to the collection and to its constituent objects might be understood as fetishistic, this relationship is contingent on an aesthetic formulation elaborated by Couturier that specifies a particular notion of the art object that emerges out of his rejections of prevailing forms of sacred art and his projects directed toward its reenchantment.

Fetishized objects, Emily Apter suggests, "are revealed as provocations to desire and possession" (1993: 2). Certainly there are those art objects that had just this effect on Dominique de Menil, and in a rather vicarious manner perhaps, on Father Couturier also, as is indicated by the following story that Dominique de Menil often tells:

I remember one day after the war when [Couturier] was persuading us to buy a Rouault painting. My mother was visiting us and she said, 'They already bought a Chinese head yesterday, they'll have nothing to eat but crumbs.' And I remember Father Couturier said, 'Madame, it is better to eat crumbs and have paintings (Houston Post 1968: 7).''

Couturier, then, fostered not only Dominique de Menil's ability to "see" art, but encouraged her to buy it also. The drive to accumulate expensive luxury objects may seem at odds with a person who vigorously criticized commercialism in art (Couturier 1989: 125) and sought the restoration of the modesty and simplicity of earlier times. But this identification of material acquisitions with moral dissolution is a view more

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This theme recurs throughout Couturier's (1989) writings in Sacred Art.
consonant with Dominique de Menil's Protestant upbringing than with her adopted Catholicism.

*Objects of Devotion*

The twelfth century writings of the Abbot Suger reveal a distinctively Catholic relationship to material wealth. Describing the ornamentation of the newly renovated Abbey St. Denis, he writes:

Thus, when...the loveliness of the many-colored gems has called me away from external cares, and worthy meditation has induced me to reflect, transferring that which is material to that which is immaterial, on the diversity of the sacred virtues: then it seems to me that I see myself dwelling, as it were, in some strange region of the universe which neither exists entirely in the slime of the earth nor entirely in the purity of Heaven; and that by the grace of God, I can be transported from this inferior to that higher world in an anagogical manner (Suger 1979: 64-65).

But here, in this reliance upon the anagogical character of the operation of the aesthetic, Suger identifies what Michael Camille contends is its inevitable bad faith as a means of redemption. For Camille, the shimmer of the aesthetic only feigns freedom, anagogically "pretending to provide transcendence, all the while tightening the spectral
fetters that bind the subject in subjugation to the terrible real" (Camille 1994: 74). This observation echoes Weber's argument that in so far as art "takes over the function of a this-worldly salvation," not only does it not offer a means of true redemption, much less a means of service to God, "art begins to compete directly with salvation religion" (Weber 1958: 342). Since the domain of art is governed by aesthetic values that take precedence over moral adjudications "art becomes an 'idolatry,' a competing power, and a deceptive bedazzlement; and the images and the allegory of religious subjects appear as blasphemy" (Weber 1958: 343).

In his discussion of Suger's relation to material mediums of faith, Panofsky (1979: 25-26) offers up Suger's contemporary, the Cistercian St. Bernard of Clairvoux, as representative of the ascetic opposition to art. St. Bernard was not, however, entirely opposed to art, as David Freedberg points out, though he did express "a warning against excessive luxuriousness in the adornment of churches, and a clear moral insistence that one keep the matter of poverty and expenditure on art in proportion: in other words, that money was better spent on the poor (the living images of God) than on superfluous decoration" (1989: 301). For St. Bernard, images were both "too splendid and too irrelevant" (Freedberg 1989: 387). St. Thomas Aquinas too was uneasy, though he supported the use of art as a means for the liturgical instruction of the uneducated and as an aid to memory.

33Judith Collard also makes this point in her discussion of the function of monastic art
But concern over the allocation of resources is hardly at the core of the Church’s deeply troubled history with relation to art, tensions that can be seen crystallized in the iconoclastic struggles of eighth century Byzantium, and recapitulated in the sixteenth century.\textsuperscript{34} It is not the irrelevance of art that is at stake but, to the contrary, it is its force. And herein lies the deep paradox of iconoclasm: “We love art and hate it; we cherish it and are afraid; we know of its powers. They are powers that, when we do not destroy, we call redemptive” (Freedberg 1989: 388).

The redemptive character of art is indicated not only in the theological arguments made in defense of images in the face of iconoclastic claims, but in the long history of the use of material images as instruments of contemplation.\textsuperscript{35} In both of these domains, the central power of art is its ability to transport from the material to the immaterial, or to make present that which is ungraspable. Bonaventure’s treatise, the \textit{Journey of the Mind towards God}, characterizes the operation of objects of devotion thus: “They are examples, or rather exemplifications...set before our still unrefined and sense-oriented minds, so that by the sensible things which they see they might be transferred to the intelligible which they cannot see, as if by signs to the signified” (quoted in Freedberg (1991)).

\textsuperscript{34} An unusually rich rendering of the historiography of iconoclasm informed by his theorizing on the affecting character of images can be found in Freedberg’s \textit{The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response}, 1989. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

\textsuperscript{35} See Freedberg 1989.
Michael Camille’s mistrust of this anagogical operation expresses his view that the aesthetic functions preeminently in the service of power, “as tyrannous and tainted as any hegemonic practice” (1994: 74). Art objects cannot, in this view, provide access to transcendent realms, and to claim otherwise is at best false consciousness, at worst, bad faith. And here we see the secular version of the tight struggle over the affecting character of art; its power to affect, to engage empathy and desire, renders it dangerous.

The issue is the fear and suspicion of images on the grounds that they force upon us the mobilization of our senses. From Clement of Alexandria (with all his antipathy to images) to Bernard Berenson (with all his love of them), the eyes are the channel to the other senses. These are what is dangerous, or enlivening, or both—touch above all. Once our eyes are arrested by an image, so the argument more or less runs from Plato onward, we can no longer resist the engagement of emotion and feeling. Whether inevitable processes or merely inclinations, these are what detract from the purity of mental operations tout court. That the higher side of our beings that sets us apart from animals, the realm of the intellect and spirit, is brought down and sullied. Each time this happens, we are endangered and threatened—all because of the dominance of the senses, because we are labile, not strong enough to control their motions
and impulses (Freedberg 1989: 358).

The Council of Trent's 1563 decree on art sought to contain such weakness by closely prescribing both the subject and the style of church art. "If we must have images at all, then we must ensure not so much that they do not bring us down to the level of the senses but that they lift us to higher planes; that they assist us in proceeding from the material to the spiritual; and that they offer us mortals enwrapped in our senses the possibility of mediation—at least with the divine" (Freedberg 1989: 358).

In focusing its efforts on minimizing the danger of images, the Council of Trent evaded the thorny issues of ontology that had been worked over repeatedly with recourse to theology. Pursuing St. Thomas's "triad of edification, instruction—especially of the unlettered—and reinforcement of memory" the Council of Trent's ruling on images did no more than to insist that "the honor paid to an image passes to its prototype, and attempt to ensure that there were no images of false doctrine or ones which might furnish ordinary people...with the opportunity for error" (Freedberg 1989: 399). The weak and unschooled were thus to be protected from the danger their base sensibilities might otherwise render them vulnerable to; the Church would supervise and censor their exposure. Tridentine decrees on painting codified and canonized not only the subject matter of images but the style of their presentation, their "finish." This prescribed finish, which Cézanne described derisorily as "le fini des imbéciles," required that the image be brought "to a plane of realistic imitation in which brushwork, drawing, and other elements of the facture
were buried, [and] became a central standard of judgment in religious art” (Rubin 1961: 14).

Modernist painting, in its preoccupation with painterliness at the expense of referentiality, opened an abyss between secular art and art of the Church. In his dedication of the Vatican Pinacoteca, Pius XI spoke of modern art as “often scandalously ugly, reflecting only incapacity or impatience in general cultural preparation, and in drawing (this above all)...which lead to deformations...too much like certain figurations found in manuscripts of the darkest Middle Ages when the good antique traditions had been lost in barbaric upheavals and the new light of the Renaissance had not yet dawned” (quoted in Rubin 1961: 8).

Far from ensuring pure sensibilities, Couturier has argued, the Tridentine proscriptions served art and its audience poorly. Over time they fostered, on the one hand, bloodless academicism, and on the other, cloying sentimentalism (Rubin, 1961; and Couturier 1989). It is these symptoms that served as the fulcrum for the much more extensive critique of modernity that was articulated by Couturier and his associates under the banner of what emerged in France in the 1930s as the Sacred Art Movement.

While Couturier was instrumental in "opening the eyes" of Dominique de Menil and her husband, and afforded a philosophical underpinning that powerfully informed her aesthetic, he did not determine her taste. Couturier cared neither for the work of surrealists nor of Byzantium, and did not live to see the emergence of the New York
School painters. But despite Dominique de Menil's visual sensibilities departing on occasion from those of Couturier, they never were in contradiction with the principles he articulated. Neither the surrealists nor the Byzantine artists were compromised by academicism, and both were engaged with otherworldly preoccupations, albeit of a rather different nature.
Chapter Three
Sacred Poetics

For Couturier, as for Suger, the art object is no mere accoutrement but an instrument of devotion, and a means to experiential purity. Or at least that would be so had it not become, in the modern period, so widely compromised. Couturier reads degradation and disenchantment progressively infecting our sensibilities since the outset of the Renaissance, such that we now barely recognize our malaise:

Except for music, the natural longing for enchantment is discouraged in our culture. And what is art if it does not enchant? Art is incantation. Like Jacob's ladder, it leads to higher realities, to timelessness, to paradise. It is the fusion of the tangible and the intangible; the old hierogamy myth—the marriage of heaven and earth (Couturier quoted in de Menil 1989: 8).

Couturier's critique of this pervasive disenchantment, couched particularly in terms of sacred art, is directed primarily against academicism, and secondarily against a numbing submission to popular taste. The degradation of contemporary "sacred art" was for him, as for others identified with what became known as the Sacred Art Movement, both symptomatic of and partially responsible for a more profound malaise, of the church, and more generally of modernity.
Through a reading of Couturier insights can be made as to the character of a particular moment in French Catholicism that powerfully informed Dominique and John de Menil. It is a form that presents itself as both an expression of faith and a critique of modernity. And while Couturier focused his analysis on art, a broader critique, and one that addressed fundamental theological issues, was articulated by Yves Congar, who was to become a central architect of Vatican II. In a series of lectures presented in Paris in the 1930s, and attended by Dominique and John de Menil, Congar laid out a theological argument for an ecumenical Church. As Dominique de Menil has often reported, these arguments were decisive in crystallizing the faith and moral convictions that became central to Dominique and John de Menil's cosmology. Dominique de Menil's self-conscious invocation of Couturier and Congar serves not only to go some way to explaining the philosophical underpinnings of her project, but also to imbuing that project with spiritual authority.

Dominique de Menil has identified herself particularly closely with Marie-Alain Couturier. She has established in Paris the Archives Couturier, centered around the issues of the Sacred Art Movement in France in the 1940s and 1950s. In addition to the books Couturier authored and the journals he edited and wrote for, the archive holds and researches a significant collection of Couturier's letters and sermons, and has established photographic documentation of his chapel projects. The archive, which was given to the Menil Foundation by the Dominican Order in 1975, is housed in Dominique de Menil's
Paris residence under the direction of Marcel Billot whose primary project is "to put Couturier's writings in the public sphere" (Weber 1994: 13).¹ In addition to this Paris archive the Yale Institute of Sacred Music, Worship and the Arts holds the Couturier Collection at Yale University. The Yale collection, described in its handsomely published register as a gift from the Menil Foundation, includes a complete photocopy of the Archives Couturier as well as transcriptions, translations, and other supplementary material.² The Menil Foundation funds the annual operating costs of the archive and, from time to time, special research projects and symposia.³

Dominique de Menil had first met Couturier at the home of Jacques and Raïssa

¹Since the Archives Couturier is reported, for tax purposes, as a project of the Menil Foundation rather than as a recipient of charitable donation, it is difficult to determine from tax filings with any precision the level of support it receives. However, the director of the archive and its publications are, it seems, supported fully by the Menil Foundation.

²The archive also holds the "English Translation Papers" donated by William Granger Ryan, President Emeritus of Seton Hill College and a Menil Research Scholar in Religion at the Yale Institute, who has translated much of Couturier's writings into English.

³Despite the centrality of Couturier to Dominique de Menil's project, there is at best only peripheral awareness of Couturier among Menil Collection staff, with the exception of Dominique de Menil's very close associates Paul Winkler, Bertrand Davezac, and Walter Hopps. It is perhaps indicative of Dominique de Menil's management practices that Menil Collection staff seem to know very little about other de Menil projects, and certainly do not feel compelled to make connections between them. Indeed, there is, if anything a sense of antagonism toward other endeavors, in so far as they are seen to dilute resources that might otherwise be directed toward the Menil Collection. Certainly no one in the course of eighteen months of intermittent fieldwork saw fit to mention this resource to me.
Maritain, in Meudon outside Paris, prior to her marriage to John de Menil. As it is described in the Archival Register of the Yale collection, "a deep friendship grew between them, and in time, it extended to Mr. Jean de Menil" (Weber 1994: 12). At this time Couturier was already deeply occupied with the character of liturgical art, a concern that he was able to elaborate when in 1937 together with a fellow Dominican, Father Régamy, he assumed the responsibility of directing and writing for the new journal *L'Art Sacré* (Weber 1994: 2).

*L'Art Sacré* gave voice to a sustained critique of the disenchancements of modernity and proposed modernist art as a medium of redemption. In modern society, Couturier contends, relentless rationalism has caused us to become untethered from immediate (that is, for him, virtuous) experience of the world and of God. For Couturier academicism marks the defeat of the poetic, and the Church's endorsement of the academic ideal, codified by the Council of Trent, signaled the decadence of sacred art (Rubin 1961: 65-68). William Rubin argues that this academic style became increasingly "sterile" in the wake of the French Revolution and the subsequent crystallization of bourgeois values and religious taste. Motivated by a desire for legitimacy and a sense of continuity with the aristocracy it had replaced, the upper middle class not only embraced academicism but put it in the service of sentimentality and pietism that brought about the absolute nadir of sacred art (Rubin 1961: 8).
For Couturier this was embodied most lamentably, perhaps, in the basilicas of Lisieux, Lourdes, and Fourviere. "The fact is," Couturier writes,

that aside from exceedingly rare exceptions, nothing good comes out of the Academy. Probably the source itself is bad and the Academy should be closed....What we really ought to save for the heart and the imagination is non-knowing, ingenuousness, the candor of modesty....What is wrong with the academy is that it does away with all mystery, takes precautions against the miraculous—or, alas, organizes it (Couturier 1989: 124).

What emerges here is a sense of profound compromise, specifically of sacred art, but more fundamentally of the spirit. It was Couturier's project, through *L'Art Sacré*, to "restore the sensitivity of the eye," since in the rehabilitation of sensibilities the "reform of ideas" is not sufficient. "In matters of art one judges not by what one thinks but by what one feels. In other words, by what one is" (Couturier 1989: 14).

This underscores not only his insistence on, let us say, a poetic experience of art, but draws attention to his notion that one's aesthetic judgements are a reflection of one's soul: "What we like judges us. Secretly at first. Then, on one fine day, for all the world to see" (Couturier 1989: 61). For Couturier, this is most painfully demonstrated in what he describes as the public taste for sentimental devotional art and ornamental buildings of worship. "To begin with, there is the painful fact that Christian people have indeed become a 'public' for their art--passive or distrustful onlookers in the presence of these
sacred works" (Couturier 1989: 61).

Couturier's project within the Sacred Art Movement was to restore the integrity and thus the aura of liturgical art by engaging with modern idioms. Thoroughly implicated in this project was the rehabilitation of the human spirit.

The art object, for Couturier, is richly imbued, not merely a plastic form, nor just the conveyor of symbolic meaning; it is at once an embodiment of the artist's sensibility, a catalyst for certain modes of experience, and as such it may serve as an instrument of spiritual cleansing (though conversely it may foster the kind of moral or spiritual degradation that he saw around him). *L'Art Sacré*, under Couturier's editorship, was substantively a critique of the state of contemporary sacred art, characterized in opposition to nostalgic invocations of medieval and "primitive" art, and a defense of the architectural projects Couturier had undertaken for the church, particularly his commissions of works by radically modern masters, among them Léger, Matisse, Rouault, Lipchitz, Braque, and Chagall.

Primitive art, though "pagan," wrote Couturier within a critique of the missionaries' habit of destroying indigenous forms, "expressed the dignity of the native soul itself, the ingenuousness, the astonishing innocence of childhood, which in certain primitive races is so profound and so pure that neither moral decay nor aberration of beliefs can contaminate it" (Couturier 1989: 67).
The arts of "fetishists and witch doctors" not only express this purity of soul, but precisely by virtue of their fetishistic quality "made us realize that this is a truly sacred art."

...which, with no care for beauty or for realistic representation, the character given to forms and deformations had as its exclusive purpose the expression of the sacred mystery and its direct action upon the senses and the imagination (Couturier 1989: 72).

Similarly with medieval art. Couturier repeatedly invokes the Middle Ages as a time of virtue and purity, both spiritual and artistic, largely by virtue of the purported unity of medieval art and medieval religion in a cultural and political context that does not drive a wedge between these domains. The specialization of art production that emerged in the increasingly secularized Renaissance and the concomitant rise of academicism produced objects devoid of auratic power. Nevertheless, Couturier writes,

We are convinced that an immense and marvelous Middle Ages still survives in modest hearts, unaware of itself, rebuffed, suppressed, despairingly timid. This great treasure of dreams and inner life is wounded and wasted due to the...omnipresence and omnipotence of that prolific organization, at once academic and frightfully elementary, which is brought into being by the bureaucratism and official teaching of the Beaux-Arts (Couturier 1989: 133).
These vestigial medieval sensibilities become apparent in the work of the best modern artists, according to Couturier. Despite what he describes as the pervasive disintegration of culture...the initiatives and resources peculiar to individualism and anarchy can still be put to use, working their way through the meshes of a loose, unraveling fabric. Thus, modern art sometimes possesses the marvelous, poignant look of those tall, strange flowers that push up through the rubbish strewn in vacant lots (Couturier 1989: 133).

This reaching back to medieval models can be read as a notably French move, bypassing as it does the dominion of the Italian Renaissance, and an expression perhaps of French Catholic distaste for the increasingly centralized authority of the Vatican. But this was not exclusively a preoccupation of the French Church. Indeed, many modern artists themselves drew a connection between their own work and medieval forms. Léger wrote: "Entre Giotto et nous, je ne vois rien" [between Giotto and us (the modern painters), I see nothing] (1950: 25).

And the very influential modernist art critic, Meyer Schapiro, writing in the United States, commented on this tendency, arguing that the invocation of Medieval art was a key referent for modern artists, though for quite different reasons than those proffered by the Dominicans. While both see identities in medieval and modern image

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4This tension was to be ameliorated significantly by Vatican II.
making in terms of the subjectivities of artists, for the Dominicans it is in the purity of
gesture of the artist, whereas for Shapiro the continuity lies in the artist's subversive
individuality. As Guilbault recounts it,

Schapiro emphasized the subversive role of the medieval artist, who, he
argued, upset the original plans of the religious authorities by introducing
secular figures with no apparent connection to the church. For Schapiro,
the artist—and here he comes fairly close to positions held by
contemporary artists—is a person who transforms his social and political
independence into a critical weapon (Guilbault 1983: 199).

Schapiro's reading of medieval images was mistaken, it is claimed, indicative of his
own desire to assert some kind of independent critical space for artists (see Guilbault
1983: 199). But it was nevertheless a reading embraced by avant-garde artists, who
themselves sought to assert a critical individualism. It also laid the ground for the political
cooplation of the American avant-garde as powerfully illustrative of the individual
freedom that distinguished the US from its antagonists in the chill of the Cold War. It
also served to distance the US from the authoritarian tendencies perceived in France and
read in the art being produced in France at the time (Guilbault 1983: 200).

In marked contrast to this American interpretation of the character of the modern
connection to medieval art are Dominique de Menil's comments on Léger, which appeared
in her Foreword to a catalogue for a Léger show:
Like the Byzantine artists, he tended to transcend naturalism, to reach out for heroic dimensions. His taste was for the formal, the severe, the hieratic. This inclination must have had deep psychological roots in the cultural history of France, in its tradition of measure and restraint (de Menil 1978: 7).\textsuperscript{5}

This begins to draw attention to the distinctively French character of the Sacred Art Movement. Although it articulates its program as the reform of Catholicism in general, it stands as only a thinly veiled critique of the Vatican and Canon Law. Indeed, it was one among a number of initiatives that constitute what has been called the "New Gallicanism" that took hold during the German occupation of France, but which had its roots in the First Vatican Council's declaration of Papal infallibility, rendering bishops mere deputies of the Pope. The French anti-clerical movement, spearheaded by French Dominican clergy who found themselves under pressure from Rome due to their unorthodox teachings, the worker-priest movement, in which priests worked alongside socialist activists, and the Sacred Art Movement were all aspects of an emergent French Catholic Social Doctrine that until Vatican II pitted itself against the centralized authority

\textsuperscript{5}While this passage articulates a sensibility held dear by Dominique de Menil, the notion of freedom attached to American Expressionism that Guilbaut articulates (1983: 195-205) seemed also to capture the enthusiasms of the de Menils. American Expressionism presented a welcome relief from the somewhat authoritarian....Indeed, their taste for Medieval art owes much to it being a form that had not yet been forced to submit to the constraints of academicism
of Rome. In its dismissal of academicism the Sacred Art Movement positions itself precisely in opposition not only to the Vatican's determination of appropriate liturgical art, but to Italy. In so doing, it appeals to a distinctively French identity and aesthetic.

Much of the most heated conflict with the Vatican emerged not so much around the look of the modern works that Couturier commissioned, though that certainly was a fraught issue, but over the fact that with the exception of Rouault none of the major artists were Catholics, indeed among them were atheists like Bonnard, the Communist Léger, and the Jewish Lipchitz (Couturier 1951). Couturier admitted that this was not ideal, but that under the circumstances it "would be safer to turn to geniuses without faith than to believers without talent." He went on to argue, "Every true artist is an inspired person, prepared and predisposed by nature and temperament for spiritual intuitions: why not then for the coming of the Spirit himself, who blows, after all, where he wills?" (1951: 269). Great art then is a materialization of the sublime inspiration of the artist.

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6Pressure for reform of the French Church took an archly nationalistic and anti-revolutionary form in Charles Maurras' Action Française, founded in 1899. Action Française was to become deeply implicated in the Vichy regime. Action Catholique, which emerged between the wars, was by contrast an expression of left-wing sentiments in the form of concern for social justice, coupled with an interest in socialism.

7Couturier 1951: 269. See also Couturier 1989: 52, and for a discussion of the position of the Sacred Art Movement on the issue of the faith of artists see Rubin 1961: 68-73. Before agreeing to accept his commission Lipchitz insisted that his sculpture of the Madonna bear the inscription: "Jacob Lipchitz, Jew, faithful to the religion of his ancestors, has made his Virgin to foster understanding between men on earth that the life of the spirit may prevail" (Rubin 1961: 126-127).
Modest talents, by contrast, in the "deplorable" conditions of the day "create, as it were, a slope on which everything goes downhill,...inexorably, turns to mediocrity" (Couturier 1989: 119). Thus, while modest "primitive" talents were, in an uncontaminated milieu, able to produce properly modest work, in the present context, bereft of integrity, all that emerges is mediocre. Why? Because for those whose talents are modest, Couturier argues, there is a strong connection between the work they do and what they are, whereas for great artists, there is a "dissociation" between "creative gifts and the impulses of the heart," such that their "gifts [remain] so pure and efficacious as to assure the integrity of the work, though the heart may be desolate and life in disarray" (Couturier 1989: 118-119).⁸

Mark Rothko, as Dominique de Menil would have it, is one such artist. Henri Matisse is another. Matisse, "though he had not been religiously inclined," spent four years working on La Chapelle du Rosaire in Vence, now known as the Matisse Chapel.⁹ Commissioned for the Dominican sisters, the project was mobilized primarily by

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⁸This view is posed in opposition to the teachings of the Ateliers d'Art Sacré where Couturier trained as an artist priest. Drawing on Jacques Maritain's neo-Thomist *Art and Scholasticism* (1917) it was understood that "the maker of sacred art must first live a sacred life before picking up a paintbrush" (Weber 1994: 2). This is a point that many readers of Couturier's *L'Art Sacré* were unwilling to concede (Rubin 1961: 64-73).

⁹Marcel Billot, the director of the Archives Couturier, has crafted from archive material a book on the chapel, *La Chapelle de Vence: Histoire d'une Creation* (Paris: Cerf/Skira, 1993). It includes a preface by Dominique de Menil, drawing the connection between the Matisse Chapel and her own Rothko Chapel project.
Couturier. Matisse considered it "the crowning of his career." Fifteen years later, Rothko, also without religious convictions, created an ecumenical chapel in Houston which he considered his greatest achievement" (de Menil quoted in Barnes 1989: 7).

*Rothko Chapel*

Jermayne MacAgy, Dominique de Menil's very close friend and mentor in the domain of curating and installing exhibitions, died unexpectedly in 1964. It was, for Dominique de Menil, "as if the floor had opened up under my feet." It is such moments, she told me, that call for an act of faith. Dominique and John de Menil's resolve to build the chapel that they had been thinking of for some time was such an act. They had very much wanted to emulate the kinds of chapels that Couturier had commissioned in France.

With Matisse's Chapel in their minds, the de Menils proposed to the president of the University of St Thomas, Houston, where MacAgy was the head of the art department, that they proceed with the chapel that the Basilian fathers had wanted to build on their campus. Philip Johnson, whose design for the development of the university campus was already partially completed, would be asked to design the structure, and Mark Rothko would be asked to make a series of paintings for the interior.10 The cost would be borne by Dominique and John de Menil. Not only had Rothko been a friend of Jerry

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10Rothko was particularly interested in creating works for a single environment, and had already completed two such commissions.
MacAgy, but Dominique and John de Menil were familiar with his work, most notably the series of murals he had painted for Philip Johnson's Seagram Building. Peter Selz wrote of these paintings:

Like much of Rothko's work they really seem to ask for a place apart, a kind of sanctuary where they may perform what is essentially a sacramental function. Perhaps, like medieval altarpieces, [they] can properly be seen only in an ambience created in total keeping with their mood (Barnes 1989: 43).

John and Dominique de Menil shared this perception. So, just eight weeks after MacAgy's death Dominique de Menil visited Rothko and asked him to consider making paintings for the planned Catholic chapel. He readily accepted the commission, and soon after began an extended process of consultation and collaboration with Philip Johnson. Johnson and Rothko agreed early to an octagonal plan, and specifications for the interior dimensions were set in place almost from the outset, and remained unchanged throughout. But considerable difficulty emerged over two issues, the height of the

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11 Indeed, they already owned three of his paintings.


13 Very early in the process a full-scale mock-up of three of the chapel walls was built
building, and the manner in which it was to receive light (Barnes 1989: 81). Differences between Rothko and Johnson over these matters became intractable, and Johnson finally withdrew from the project, leaving it in the hands of Howard Barnstone and Eugene Aubry, who had worked as supervising architects on a number of Johnson projects in Texas, and had done considerable work for the de Menils. It was their task, in accordance with Dominique and John de Menil’s wishes, that they complete the building as Rothko conceived of it. All the plans, including the specifications of the materials used, were approved by Rothko. Construction had begun when Rothko died in February 1970, and was completed as he had planned it. Johnson agreed to design the chapel’s main entrance and oriented the chapel on the site. He also, together with the artist, designed the reflecting pool for Barnett Newman’s Broken Obelisk that stands on an axis with the main entrance to the chapel, on a site selected by Newman.  

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14Rothko is renowned for his concern over the future disposition of his paintings, sometimes insisting that those who hang his works, whether publicly or privately, install the works according to his directives, including particularly specifications regarding their lighting. Indeed, he was often reluctant to give up his works, and on occasion refused to.

15Accounts of the acquisition of Broken Obelisk are among the most often repeated narratives told in an effort to characterize the presence of the de Menils in Houston. In 1969 Dominique and John de Menil offered to the Houston Municipal Art Commission funds to match a grant from the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities for the purchase of a work of contemporary sculpture. The Municipal Art Commission agreed
Though aspects of the design were subject to important revision as the project developed, these modifications were minor perhaps in comparison to the institutional shifts that it underwent. When in 1969 the de Menils moved their art department from St. Thomas to Rice University, they had assumed that the chapel project for the University of St Thomas would proceed unaffected. However, just as the Basilians had found the de Menil presence finally intolerably overbearing in other university affairs, so they anticipated it to be with the chapel also. The de Menils then looked to the Institute for Religion and Human Development in Houston, on whose board John de Menil already served. The Institute for Religion is an ecumenical institution located in Houston's Texas

to their stipulation that the funds should be spent on the acquisition of *Broken Obelisk*, but agreement could not be reached over the de Menil's subsequent insistence that the sculpture be dedicated to the memory of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The matter was turned over to City Hall, and it was decided by the council that the sculpture not be accepted with the dedication to King. In response, the de Menils withdrew their support, resolving to purchase *Broken Obelisk* themselves. They subsequently brought Barnett Newman to town to help select an appropriate site for the piece, and its present location as a complement to the Rothko Chapel was settled upon. In her Foreword to the Menil Collection catalogue Dominique de Menil, perhaps to demonstrate the uncompromised character of their enthusiasms, commented that "It went exactly where Barney thought it should go. A house happened to be at this location. It was bought and pulled down without a moment's hesitation" (de Menil 1987: 8).

Some versions of this story tell of the courage and principle of the de Menils in the face of the ignorance and conservatism of City Hall. This form is heightened by the claim that John de Menil very nearly added to the dedication to King this homily directed toward the City: "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." For others, the issue of the King dedication signified rather differently. They read it as a charactistically impetuous gesture (the dedication was apparently an afterthought in the proceedings), an act of wilfulness converted into a claim for moral high ground. According to this version, the de Menils were made fully aware of the policy that prohibited City Hall from sanctioning in the interests of even-handedness (explicitly) political monuments.
Medical Center. With their acceptance of the offer, the Institute and the de Menils set about determining a site for the chapel for which the paintings had been complete since 1967. It was decided to build the chapel on its present site, on land already owned by the de Menils adjacent to the University of St. Thomas, yet not impossibly distant from the Medical Center. Thus it could be used readily by both constituencies. Although this formal association with the Institute lasted only from 1969 until late in 1972, it had a profound effect on the conceptualization of the chapel as an ecumenical place of worship. This conceptual shift was no doubt also informed by the pronouncements of Vatican II that so powerfully endorsed ecumenicism, though the chapel takes a position on ecumenicism that is more far reaching than many of its Catholic formulations, in so far as it does not support merely the unification of Christian churches. The Rothko Chapel is not simply non-denominational, rather, it is committed to a more universalizing inter-faith approach to matters of spirituality. Such a view underpins also the universal humanism that informs the de Menils' own commitments to human rights and world peace issues, that they express personally and through the operations of the Rothko Chapel.

The charter of the Rothko Chapel identifies its program thus:

to provide a place of worship, a place of meditation and prayer for people
to gather and explore spiritual bonds common to all, to discuss human
problems of worldwide interest, and also share a spiritual experience, each
loyal to his belief, each respectful of the beliefs of others (Barnes 1989:
The Rothko Chapel became, as Susan Barnes reports, "the world's first broadly ecumenical center, a holy place open to all religions and belonging to none" (Barnes 1989: 108).

If the Menil Foundation is to be understood as the organizational hearth for Dominique de Menil's many art world interests, the Rothko Chapel Foundation serves that function for those projects that come together under the rubrics of human rights, world peace, and spirituality.¹⁶ The projects of these two foundations might be distinct, but...
but their underpinnings bear a remarkable unity, an aspect of which Dominique de Menil expresses in her characterization of Rothko's work on the chapel project. As he worked, she recounts, "his colors became darker and darker, as if he were bringing us on the threshold of transcendence; the mystery of the cosmos, the tragic mystery of our perishable condition. The silence of God, the unbearable silence of God" (de Menil 1971).

In her opening address for the dedication of the Rothko Chapel in February 1971, Dominique de Menil recalled two events, the influence of which had been decisive for her and her husband.

In January 1936 Father Congar delivered eight lectures on ecumenicism which marked the beginning of his ecumenical career. I had the privilege to hear him and it marked me for life.

In the summer of 1952 we visited with Father Couturier, another Dominican, the church where Léger and Matisse, two towering artists of their time, had contributed their greatest work. We visited also the site where le Corbusier was going to build his famous Chapel at Ronchamp. We saw what a master can do for a religious building when he is given a free hand. He can exalt and uplift as no one else.
The influence of those events was lasting. If we played a part in the birth of this chapel, which indeed we did, it stems from the orientation we received those early days, through those two men.

But this chapel has deeper roots than our own involvement....It is rooted in the growing hope that communities who worship God should find in their common aspiration the possibility to dialogue with one another in a spirit of respect and love. This hope, this nostalgia, explains the Chapel, as it explains many spontaneous initiatives of brotherhood coming up all over the world today among religious people.

The rest is good will and circumstances (de Menil 1971).\(^{17}\)

Though Dominique de Menil describes her aspiration for genuine respect and dialogue among people of all faiths in terms of a "nostalgia," her project is clearly not fed by the kind of nostalgia that sustained the activities of the traditionalist *Action Catholique*. Both Couturier and Congar, in their various attempts to reconcile the Church with contemporary society, saw the future of the Church in its ability to reorient itself to contemporary conditions, rather than in the attempt to reclaim some past historical moment, and Dominique de Menil shares this view, as her enthusiastic support of John XXIII makes abundantly clear. Couturier's work was to focus primarily on freeing

\(^{17}\)This extended quote is taken from the program printed for the opening proceedings of the Rothko Chapel, February 27, 1971.
liturgical art from the confines of academicism. Congar, engaged with issues of theology and ecclesiology, argued for the application of historical method to Christian data, and for “greater attention to the experiencing subject, whose needs and concerns shift with the contours of history itself” (Nichols 1990: 250). While Dominique de Menil and Congar both deeply felt the desire for the reunification of the Church,\(^{18}\) they have sought it not through a return to orthodoxy but through a set of contemporary reconfigurations. Most particularly, through ecumenicism.

Ecumenism

Congar’s 1936 lectures on ecumenism were delivered in the basilica of Montmartre, anticipating by some 30 years the papal focus on ecumenism that was to find expression in the Second Vatican Council. Indeed, in the intervening years prior to the election of John XXIII in 1959, Congar’s views were to draw sharp rebuke from Rome. It was feared, as his biographer relates it, that the sort of emphasis he was placing on historical context “would end up by turning theology into cultural anthropology, deprived of any real hold on its divine subject-matter, revelation” (Nichols 1990: 251). There was concern regarding his ecumenism, “the Master of the Dominicans having warned him against a ‘false eirenicism’ which might be construed as indifference to

specifically Catholic doctrines” (Nichols 1990: 252). But the final straw was his article in
defense of the worker-priest movement, following which Congar was forbidden to teach
or publish.19 It was not until John XXIII’s papacy, and particularly with the Second
Vatican Council in which Congar was called upon as a central participant, that his
preoccupations were to gain legitimacy.

When John and Dominique de Menil heard him speak in 1936, "It wasn't any
particular thing he said," Dominique de Menil recounts, rather “It was like a little seed
deposited. There was some receptivity. The seed grew like the mustard seed mentioned
in the Bible" (de Menil quoted in Holmes 1991: 228). One imagines that as appealing as
his ecumenism was his enthusiasm for reform, and more particularly for reform that did
not turn its back on the present.

Dominique de Menil reports that from Congar she and her husband had learned
that:

if you want to want to love and create common bonds you have to
understand what makes the other person tick, what his faith is all about.

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19 The worker-priest movement had been an officially sanctioned post-war Dominican
initiative to ameliorate the alienation of the working class from the Church. France, in
recognition of the sharp decline in its congregation, would be treated as a “missionary
country.” By 1951, when the Holy See ordered the suspension of recruiting for this
program, around ninety young priests were working alongside factory and dock workers.
It was felt that the priests were rendered in this context unduly subject to the seductions
of the flesh and of socialism. In 1953 all worker priests were recalled, though many
refused to submit to this command, proving “by this resistance how urgently necessary
Rome’s intervention had been” (Blet 1981: 597).
You don't merely respect his religion, but you have a curiosity about it—an awareness.

It makes no sense for everybody to try to convert others to their own beliefs. Religion is part of a culture. People should not lose their culture which came to them from their ancestors and is very precious (de Menil quoted in Johnston 1977: 8).

In this can be read an expression of one of the basic tenets of Catholic social doctrine, the principle of subsidiarity.²⁰

It is a fundamental principle of social philosophy, fixed and unchangeable, that one should not withdraw from individuals and commit to the community what they can accomplish by their own enterprise and industry. So, too, it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and a disturbance of right order, to transfer to the larger and higher collectivity function that which can be performed and provided for by lesser and subordinate bodies. Inasmuch as every social activity should, by its very nature prove a help to members of the body social, it should never destroy

²⁰The modern application of subsidiarity dates form the famous papal encyclical Rerum novarum ["Of New Things" also known as "The Condition of the Working Classes"] (1891) in which Leo XIII, drawing on the writings of Thomas Aquinas, sets out the basic tenets of Catholic social doctrine. The first explicit use of the term comes in the encyclical of Pius XI, Quadragesimo anno (1931), and is later elaborated by John XXIII in Mater et Magistra (1961) and Pacem in terris (1963).
or absorb them (Pius XI 1931, quoted in Miller 1964).

The development of subsidiarity rests on a delineation of the boundary between public authority and civil society, and serves as a means for negotiating fundamental conditions for the maintenance of human rights and social justice in complex industrial societies. Further, in the broader context of transnationalism it takes a position against cultural imperialism, particularly in so far as the principle operates to promote what is called "vertical pluralism."

'Vertical' [or ideological] pluralism refers to the way in which ideologies cut through all the layers and groups of society....Different 'spiritual families,' in a common French phrase--Catholic, Protestant, Marxists, Humanists, or whoever they may be--should on the principle of 'vertical' pluralism be permitted and enabled to follow their own way of life....It reduces conflict since it allows everyone, without discrimination...to build up a set of associations which fits his own ideals. Since, in an imperfect world, some conflicts of ideals and loyalties are inevitable, the essential thing is that they should be fought out in a way that lets the truth eventually emerge and form the basis for a settlement. But this is likely to happen only if the parties in conflict hold firm, clear, views which provide a solid basis for argument, and yet are open and sensitive to the views of others....Everyone must sail 'under his own flag' or with 'banner
unfurled'...Tolerance is hardly the word for this attitude....There is in vertical pluralism a warmth of common humanity and common responsibility before God (Fogarty 1957: 42-43).

The import of subsidiarity for Dominique de Menil, can be read in its promotion of a robust civil society in which individual sovereignty is not assimilated by the state, and of a form of universal humanism in which cultural pluralism is actively engaged.

Redemption

The Menil Collection's unwillingness to produce exhibitions in response to some real or imagined public interest is often read to be indicative of an elitist disregard for "the public." While it is certainly the case that the Menil Collection does not seek to gratify "popular" taste, for Dominique de Menil this refusal is not designed to serve the maintenance of high cultural distinction. Rather it marks the regrettable condition of modernity wherein our sensibilities have been so corrupted by academicism, and by a more generalized malaise of the spirit, that our judgement (that is, popular judgement) cannot be relied upon to serve us well.

Couturier speaks of this. Responding to suggestions that his chapel projects might not be informed by the vanity of progressivism, rather than serving the interests of their respective congregations, he argues:
[since this is] precisely the time when the most confining, most crushing servitude weighs upon working people, would not the primary role of art be to create places of enchantment, poetry, deliverance?...But, the argument continues, why choose, for people who are totally unprepared for them, the most taxing and difficult "poetic" forms of our time?

To that argument our answer is this: first of all these forms were not chosen because they were the most difficult (although in their difficulty and harshness there is an almost certain power of purification and discipline that is sorely lacking in contemporary "piety"). They were chosen because these difficult forms were also the most precious....To give the best, even if it were not understood, not recognized--this...seemed to us to show more respect for those who put their confidence in us.

Furthermore, obscurity and lack of comprehension are only temporary. Pure works have a kind of radioactivity....In the semi-darkness where such things dwell, their energy builds up, and there comes a day when children and grandchildren draw life from the treasure that their fathers, to their credit, had accepted in faith (Couturier 1989: 105).

Art in the present circumstances, for Couturier as for Dominique de Menil, is not merely (nor necessarily) a source of pleasure, nor an instrument of instruction, but might best serve as a medium for spiritual remediation, and in so doing generate a more receptive
public. The Abbot Suger, in the twelfth century text inscribed on the door of the chapel of St. Romanus wrote: "The dull mind rises to truth through that which is material/ And, in seeing this light, is resurrected from its further submersion" (Suger 1979: 49).21 Writing of Matisse's chapel, Vence, Couturier notes,

It was not to be a place where stained-glass windows and paintings would describe and teach complex things that people already knew anyway, but a place which by its beauty would change their hearts--a place where souls would be purified by the purity of its forms" (Couturier 1989: 94).

While this understanding of a sacred space is powerfully mirrored in the conception and form of the Rothko Chapel, the expressly non-didactic mode of engagement advocated here is also sought in the Menil Collection. While many "will want 'explanations' to enable them to 'understand' what at first baffles and shocks them," Couturier notes,

to all these we must do our best to offer explanations, but only with the reservation that in such matters the essential is never "explained": it is never reached except through one's own intuitions--in the end, that is, through a communion wherein what the viewer sees depends on what he is, and what he receives on the degree to which he gives himself"

21This is consistent with the long tradition of theorizing on the significance of images as a medium of devotion, that forms the basis of the Christian manuals of meditation. In short, it is through the visible that the visible may be grasped. See Freedberg 1989.
Couturier recalls Matisse's comment, "I don't work on the canvas but on whomever looks at it" (Couturier 1989: 90). This notion of working on the viewer emerges frequently in Dominique de Menil's commentaries on museums and installations, her resistance to any suggestion of humanistic motivations notwithstanding. "I am not a missionary. I only want to share," she insisted rather tersely, before returning to our conversation about the political dangers of interpretive passivity, explaining at some length the ways in which Menil installations seek to foster, if not demand, an actively engaged viewer who enters into a "conversation" with an object, in a mutual act of constitution.22

Installation

The spare aesthetic of Menil Collection installations and the refusal to offer interpretive texts is often understood, and criticized, as exemplary of the elitist high modern orthodoxy that the work of art should properly stand on its own, its meaning

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22This recalls Benjamin's characterization of the auratic, as noted in Chapter One, and indicates the extent to which it intersects with Dominique de Menil's aesthetic intentions. Benjamin writes: "Experience of the aura thus rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man. The person we look at, or who feels he is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To perceive the aura of an object we look at, means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return. This experience corresponds to the data of the *memoire involontaire*" (Benjamin 1982b: 190).
contained within, unsullied by extraneous considerations (elitist, since in this view in the absence of interpretive frames of reference the works tend to baffle and intimidate those who are not already immersed in the art world).23 In Dominique de Menil's characterization, however, signification is thoroughly relational, both by virtue of the juxtapositions of objects within the context of a show, as well as in the relation between a viewer and the object. To illustrate this point, Dominique de Menil offers an analogy between an installation of works and the dynamics of a dinner party.

Its just like with guests at a dinner party; the seating and the ambience is so important. A guest may seem reticent, perhaps a little dull, in one setting, but seat him with the right person and he might really sing. Art objects too can be made to sing.

But more central, perhaps, than this formulation of the dialogical character of experience is that for Dominique de Menil it is contingent upon a specific mode of subjectivity. Far from the object "speaking for itself," it requires a viewer willing to give herself up to seeing or experiencing the object in a manner unmediated by conceptual preoccupations. This suspension of conceptual frames in the experience of art may be suggestive of Kant (as might be Couturier's comment "what we see judges us"), but far from Kant's disinterested subject Dominique de Menil seeks a thoroughly impassioned

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23Such a reading recognizes the operation of what Bourdieu calls a "restricted economy" (Bourdieu and Darbel 1991).
engagement with works that might not be considered as "ends in and of themselves," but which instead might properly be understood as instruments of devotion.

Couturier devotes an issue of L'Art Sacré "exclusively to restoring the sensitivity of the eye, even if the exposition of ideas must be set aside" (1989: 14), presenting pictures "if possible without caption or explanation, so that no exercise of reason may intrude into what should always be a simple, direct sensory intuition" (1989: 16-17). The parallels with Menil Collection labeling strategies are clear.

The Collection recently installed temporarily an exhibition of Ethiopian images and devotional objects curated and designed by another institution. As with any touring show, it arrived in crates complete with very detailed handling and installation instructions, but unlike most shows that are accepted by the Menil this one was accompanied by large textual panels and labels with lengthy descriptions of the objects. To the unconcealed chagrin of the registrar and conservator from the host institution who accompanied the show to watch over its installation, Menil personnel set about the laborious tasks of concealing the text fixed in the interior of many of the vitrines and rewriting label copy for the walls. The information panels along with the large color

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24The show, African Zion: the Sacred Art of Ethiopia, was organised by Intercultura, Fort Worth and The Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, in association with the Institute of Ethiopian Studies, Addis Ababa University, in 1993. It was shown at the Menil Collection from April 28-July 31, 1994. The Menil Collection produced a brochure, a “Guide to Galleries,” as its own supplement to the official exhibition catalogue by Marilyn Heldman (1993).
photographs purportedly depicting contemporary Ethiopian life remained in their packaging.

Menil installations articulate an aesthetic that is predicated on a certain set of understandings concerning the character of both objects and subjects. Whatever the force of the exhibitions as domains of signification, however, they must never compromise the integrity of their constituent objects. Despite a tendency among curators of modern art to create shows that treat art objects "as raw materials for exhibitions that are themselves mega-art works" (Tomkins 1991: 34), at the Menil Collection the very point of a show is to draw attention to the works, "to make each piece look good," as Dominique de Menil put it.

This is so also of the relationship between the collection and the objects that constitute it. Dominique de Menil's refusal to articulate an overarching logic for the collection is consistent with this. Insisting on the trope of "love" as the sole guiding principle for the selection of objects, Dominique de Menil in so doing ratifies the sovereignty of each object; a sovereignty conveyed in Dominique de Menil's rebuke when I asked her if she could identify pieces that were particularly central to the collection: "That is no question to ask! That is like asking a mother to choose among her children."
Chapter Four
Patronage and Civic Virtue

Houston

Dominique de Menil shares Couturier's disdain for "modest talents." In the course of establishing themselves as major patrons of the arts in Houston John and Dominique de Menil offended and alienated many other local supporters of the arts by their insistence always on "the best," on only the work of "genius." This insistence was underpinned by the assurance of their adjudications, the extent of their resources, and, not least, the extraordinary level of interest and energy that they brought to their projects. Indeed, their patronage took the form of a vocation--both a duty and a compelling desire.

Dominique de Menil, commenting on the extent and style of their engagements with Houston's cultural and social development, characterized it this way:

Yes, it is a fantastic amount of time and money and energy we spend. But Houston is becoming a great city and we must do all we can, as it grows, to help in its design, its art, and awareness. We came here, we became involved, and now we are prisoners of our own very great interests. (de Menil quoted in Holmes 1970: 35).

In the late 40s and 50s, the Houston art world was in a state of upheaval. Aline Louchheim, art critic for *The New York Times*, described the situation in 1953:
In Houston, a three-cornered situation keeps the artworld at a heated pitch.

1. There is the museum, controlled by a board whose membership...is primarily of persons of power and prestige, which had for a long time shown little interest in modern art.

2. The splinter group, the Contemporary Art Association, an ardent group of laymen, artists, and architects and designers, aggressively democratic. With the benefit of donated services...they built their own building and they put on their own ambitious and often ingenious shows (which are, in fact, usually the best shows of modern art originated in the region).

3. The schism within the CAA based on many factors: Personality clashes, fear of domination by an individual, differing philosophies of professionalism versus cooperative endeavor, European versus American art (Louchheim 1953).

Louchheim identifies John de Menil as the leader of the "minority group" in the Contemporary Art Association, promoting professionalism and internationalization in an institution that was conceived of by some as a venue for the promotion of local artists. Since it was founded in 1948 in response to the Museum of Fine Art’s lack of interest in contemporary art, the Contemporary Art Association had been run by committee decision, with exhibitions organized by volunteer board members, among them John de Menil. With Dominique’s assistance he produced a show of Van Gogh drawings and
paintings for the Contemporary Art Association in 1950, works which at the time had only been shown in New York, Chicago and Paris. He also initiated exhibitions of work by Max Ernst, Joan Miró and Alexander Calder. Not only did they bring to Houston modern art of stature that had not previously been shown here, but they brought also a full-time director to an organization that had formerly been sustained by the voluntary activities of a rather small circle of modern art enthusiasts.

Resisting the protests of several board members who resigned over the issue, and agreeing to underwrite her salary, the de Menils engineered the hiring of Jermayne MacAgy from the California Palace of the Legion of Honor, where she had the distinction of being the youngest museum director in the country, and had become known for her highly theatrical installations.¹ When she took up her position with the Contemporary Art Association in 1955 she did much to further this reputation. On a very small budget of $20,000 a year she created 29 shows during her four years as director, many of which drew national attention (Browning 1983:194-196).

While MacAgy's shows received national critical attention, as well as considerable local enthusiasm, and were largely underwritten by John and Dominique de Menil, her

¹Walter Hopps, the former director of the Menil Collection, commented in a New Yorker profile of which he was the subject, that the theatrical and thematic character of MacAgy exhibitions were distinctive in that they did not compromise a primary focus on the individual works of art: "I've known a lot of design and installation people since who do not put the art first" (Tomkins 1991: 37). This concern for the integrity of the object is voiced repeatedly throughout the discourse of the Menil Collection.
exhibitions were considered expensive and controversial. MacAgy was, according to Ann Holmes, Fine Arts Editor of the Houston Chronicle, "brilliant, visionary, but impatient with slow progress and a then prevailing amateurism" (Holmes 1970: 35). This tension, the controversial character of her shows, along with resentments over authority on the board, made it difficult to sustain funding from other sources sufficient to meet the additional operating costs of the museum. In 1959 her contract was not renewed. Holmes reported that it was understood that such an outcome was tolerated by her advocates on the board only because MacAgy was being positioned by the Modern Art Committee of the Museum of Fine Arts for a job at that institution. Indeed, Holmes suggests, that was the primary impetus for the formation of that committee, on which served Dominique de Menil and her close associate Howard Barnstone. It was formed in 1959 and sponsored just two exhibitions, Paul Klee, and From Gauguin to Gorky, both of which were curated and installed by Jermayne MacAgy (Holmes 1959a).

MacAgy did not confine herself to curating contemporary shows. In February 1959 the Museum of Fine Arts was host to a MacAgy show that Holmes indicates that the de Menils "as her angels" had sponsored (Holmes 1970: 35). Designed as the inaugural exhibition for Cullinen Hall, the new Mies van der Rohe addition to the museum, Totems Not Taboo (1959) was an exhibition of 240 pieces of "primitive art,"
though it included also five contemporary pieces. Holmes reports, "to relate these [primitive] pieces to contemporary art, though in the most unobtrusive way, showing their common simplicity, use of geometric form and their ability to powerfully convey emotions and ideas" (Holmes 1959b). Whatever its intent, it was widely considered to be the most spectacular show to have been seen in Houston (Beauchamp 1983: 21).

Ninety fifty nine was also the year in which the contract of the Museum of Fine Art's first professional director, Lee Malone, was not renewed after his having served the board since 1954. With the hiring of Malone the Museum of Fine Art, like the Contemporary Art Association, had entered a more professional era, after 25 years of shows from local or regional sources and commercial galleries. Malone mounted several large exhibitions and made a point of cultivating patrons for support. John and Dominique de Menil became quite actively involved with the museum during this period, refocusing their energies as the Contemporary Art Association became increasingly fraught. Their increasing participation in the operations of the Museum of Fine Art indicate a significant softening of the board toward modern art. John de Menil's old friend

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2 These contemporary works included Brancusi's *Chimera*, 1918; Henri Lavers' *Caryatid*, 1930; Lipchitz' *Study for Figure*, 1926; Modigliani's *Head*, 1912; and Picasso's *Femme Nue*, 1909.

3 Through its first 30 years the Museum of Fine Arts was under the part-time directorship of James Chillman Jr., a professor of architecture at Rice University.
Aaron Farfel recalled that their early overtures to the Museum of Fine Arts had been repeatedly rebuffed: "I remember John's going to the Museum of Fine Arts and begging, pleading with them to let him hang some modern art. He would have taken space anywhere; he begged them to let him have the basement even, but he was refused every single time" (Browning 1983: 194). During Malone's tenure they worked particularly on two shows—Seventy Five Years of Sculpture (including works by Brancusi, Calder, Lipchitz, Maillol, Moore, Picasso, and Rodin), and Paul Gauguin: His Place in the Meeting of East and West (Beauchamp 1983: 20)—mobilizing loans from Europe and from within the United States of a significance that no Houston institution would hitherto have contemplated.

Nineteen fifty nine began then with the directorships of both the Museum of Fine Arts and the Contemporary Art Association unfilled. It was reported that unofficially MacAgy was being made available for a position at the Museum of Fine Arts (Holmes 1959), a position that was made vacant by the decision not to extend Malone's tenure. MacAgy would be relieved of being the central focus of the divisive politics of the Contemporary Art Association, politics that were informed largely by issues of the museum's positioning of itself either as a distinctively local or regional institution, or as a professional operation participating in an international art world. By no means incidental in this polarization was the figure of John de Menil, deeply identified with Jerry MacAgy and with the project of internationalization, and with a willfulness that many found
compelling, others galling.

The struggle at the Contemporary Art Association had serious implications for the viability of the institution. While John and Dominique de Menil funded the director's salary and exhibitions, many former or potential donors became unwilling in the midst of such controversy to make the contributions necessary to sustain the basic operating expenses of the museum.

The board of the Museum of Fine Arts seemed disinclined to risk a similar controversy. MacAgy was not hired, and a search committee was established with S. I. Morris, the President of the board; Nina Cullinan, who in 1954 had given $250,000 for a major addition to the museum that was to be built by Mies van der Rohe; and John de Menil. All three had an interest in contemporary art. As Toni Beauchamp tells the story, "one year later, in June 1960, Ann Holmes, Fine Arts Editor of the Houston Chronicle, saw the wire service announcement of Sweeney's resignation [from the position of director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum] and immediately called John de Menil, who called Sweeney to offer him the directorship" (Beauchamp 1983: 24). Sweeney's reputation as an advocate of the avant-garde suited the committee well. He was one of Peggy Guggenheim's close advisors,\(^4\) and Dore Ashton described him as a

\(^4\)She dedicated her autobiographical *Out of This Century* to Sweeney, and in it described Pollock as the "spiritual offspring" of Sweeney and herself (Beauchamp 1983: 40). During the process of determining the long term disposition of her collection, Peggy Guggenheim acceded to the urgings of Alexander Iolas to seriously consider the suitability
powerful figure "well-connected with the international art world" (Beauchamp 1983: 40).

While director of the Guggenheim, he instituted the practice of circulating to museums nationwide and overseas exhibitions drawn from the permanent collection, and in so doing gained significant international recognition for the museum. Also during his tenure at the Guggenheim he had to develop ways of hanging exhibitions in the notoriously difficult space of the newly designed Frank Lloyd Wright building. This experience would stand him in good stead for the challenge of installing shows in the Mies van der Rohe designed Cullinan Hall addition to the Museum of Fine Arts. Indeed, Morris recalls that Sweeney seemed like "an answer to a prayer" (Beauchamp 1984: 40). Announcing the Sweeney appointment in January 1961, Morris declared:

The appointment of James Johnson Sweeney as director of the museum is the first step of an ambitious and energetic plan to establish Houston as a national center of the arts on an international plane...an art center of world reputation" (Morris quoted in Houston Press 1961).

It was understood that Sweeney's willingness to come to Houston was a function

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of Houston as a home for the collection. The presence in Houston of John and Dominique de Menil and of Sweeney were crucial to her interest, though of course she finally elected to give it to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

Cullinan Hall doubled the exhibition space of the museum, but with 30ft ceilings, an open space 112ft wide and 76 ft deep, and 132 ft of curving glass curtain wall, it had a vastness that was extremely difficult to show works in (Beauchamp 1983: 75).
of his friendship with John and Dominique de Menil, and with Mies van der Rohe,\textsuperscript{6} along with the opportunity to mold the image of the museum, as he had done during his tenure at the Guggenheim. John and Dominique de Menil's offer to contribute to his salary, said to have been the highest among US museum directors at the time (Tomkins 1991), was, by all accounts, also quite significant.\textsuperscript{7} It was agreed that he was to be paid $30,000 a year (though it was rumored that it actually rose to as high as $50,000), with $10,000 in travel allowance, and an apartment with an excellent address. Just two years before as the director of the Contemporary Art Association Jerry MacAgy was on a salary of $10,000.

So, in the months after John de Menil’s approach to Sweeney, the board of the Museum of Fine Arts was quietly engaged in a campaign to raise the funds required to bring him here, since in addition to his compensation package Sweeney required sufficient funds for acquisitions (including $10,000 annually for the purchase of works by living artists), and

\textsuperscript{6}When Mies van der Rohe was asked at the opening of Cullinen Hall in 1959 whom he would recommend if he could have anyone to run the museum, his immediate response was James Johnson Sweeney (Beauchamp 1983: 86).

\textsuperscript{7}Sweeney and his wife [Laura] would later be labeled ‘snobs’ for their critical remarks about Houston. Their unwillingness to make Houston their permanent home was taken as criticism by those who were actively promoting the city—an additional indication of ‘disloyalty’" (Beauchamp 1983: 76). In 1960 Houston was the seventh largest city in the United States with a population of 938,000. The following year its population exceeded 1,000,000, buoyed by the strong oil based economy. In 1963 10 new buildings opened in the downtown area, increasing office space by 41%. But luxury hotels and restaurants didn't open until after the legalization of the sale of liquor by the glass in 1971, since these sales provided the profit margin on which such businesses relied (Beauchamp 1983: 77). Sweeney, it is said, would send his shirts to New York to be laundered.
for mounting exhibitions (Beauchamp 1983: 86-87).  

Sweeney may have had a reputation for his big spending both professionally and personally, but he was perhaps even better known for his installation of exhibitions. It had likewise been Jerry MacAgy's particular facility for exhibition design that had brought her to John and Dominique de Menil's attention for the Contemporary Art Association, and later, it would be the same quality that would particularly draw Dominique de Menil to Walter Hopps for the directorship of the Menil Collection.

In a 1958 address to the Northeastern Museums Conference Sweeney outlined his approach to exhibitions:

The future of the art museum lies perhaps in the area of the bistro which serves a connoisseur's choice, rather than in that of the more democratic approach which attempts to give the greatest relative satisfaction to the greatest number.

How else can we hope to raise the public taste, which is our primary duty as museum directors and educators?...

The education of the public taste in art should be undertaken through the stimulation of interest by the quality of a work of art, rather

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8In 1961 more than 50% of the museum's budget was contributed by patrons, 30% from memberships, special events and sales, while less than 8% was allocated by Houston City (Beauchamp 1983: 87).
than by information about a work of art. To do this, concentration was necessary. One fine painting thoroughly appreciated, like one great book well read, would have more cultural effect than a world of digests or surveys. To focus the observer's attention on quality, a small museum, or an exhibition of limited scale, was most effective (Sweeney quoted in Beauchamp 1983: 93).

This characterization is strikingly similar to Dominique de Menil's own renderings, though perhaps absent the redemptive underpinnings of such an endeavor.

Sweeney was, as Edward Mayo, registrar of the museum put it, anxious to move the Museum of Fine Arts "out of the provincial ranks," and during his tenure he brought in works by Picasso, Calder, Miró, Léger, Mondrian, Braque and Tinguely, much of the funding for which was provided by John and Dominique de Menil. Sweeney's correspondence throughout his directorship indicates that the de Menils were very closely engaged with Museum of Fine Arts dealings.9

The Tinguely acquisitions were perhaps the most controversial under Sweeney's directorship. The Museum of Fine Arts accessioned thirteen Tinguely sculptures--ten

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9Sweeney's correspondence during his tenure as director of the Museum of Fine Arts is held as part of the Records of the Office of the Director, James Johnson Sweeney, Correspondence and Miscellaneous Subjects, 1961-1967. Archives, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, microfilmed by Archives of American Art Texas project, Smithsonian Institution.
were bought from the Alexander Iolas Gallery, Paris, with funds provided by the de
Menils, and Iolas and the de Menils each gave an additional piece. Tinguely would later
give the museum a thirteenth one (Beauchamp 1983: 114-115). The story of the
acquisition of the Tinguely sculptures circulates widely, at times as illustrative of John de
Menil's charismatic enthusiasm and certitude, at others as a narrative of rather cavalier
extravagance. Accounts vary, but Sweeney sets the scene this way:

In Paris last winter, I was taxiing down the Boulevard St. Germain when
throng poured into a gallery blocked our way. I hopped out and inched
my way in to find the reason for such excitement. It was Tinguely. The
show had a unity. It represented 10 years of the artist's explorations, a
cross-section of his work—not just a single expression. It was the sort of
selection a museum should offer to represent a sculptor's efforts and
achievements (Geeslin 1965).

Apparently Sweeney cabled John de Menil, whose cabled response, it is said, read: "Buy
whole show!"

This extraordinary acquisition of an entire exhibition of mechanical sculptures was
met in Houston with a very mixed response. Not only did it do nothing to convince
Sweeney's opponents of the virtue of modern art, but it alienated some of his supporters.
Indeed this purchase, which now circulates as a central story in the Houston mythology
of John de Menil, crystallized unease concerning the direction in which Sweeney was
taking the Museum of Fine Arts. Because of its exhibition and accession program the Museum of Fine Arts had become "a place embattled":

The accessions program... has brought what some feel are "so many crazy modern paintings into the collection." Others move right past the modern works, unperturbed, but flinch at the sight of the... great masks and ritual sculptures from the primitive South Sea islands or from Africa. Still others snort with derision at the pre-Columbian things (Holmes 1968).

Sweeney's stewardship of the museum came to an end after 12 years. The final straw for a board that was deeply divided over Sweeney's program for the museum was his refusal to accept the gift of a Fragonard from Sarah Campbell Blaffer, one of Houston's leading patrons and the mother of Museum of Fine Arts board member John Blaffer, asserting that it was a fake. This was, of course, merely the climax of what had become impossibly tense relations with the majority of the board. He was thought to spend too much time in New York and Paris, to spend too extravagantly, but most seriously, perhaps, to be too strongly identified with the ambitions of the de Menils.\(^\text{10}\)

While the appointment of Sweeney's successor, Philippe de Montebello, represented a continuation of the drive to professionalize and internationalize the Museum of Fine Arts, it ran counter to de Menil ambitions. Indeed, this shift marks a

\(^{10}\text{See Toni Beauchamp 1983 for a full account of the unraveling of Sweeney's position.}\)
powerful tension between, on the one hand, the bureaucratization that tends to be a corollary to professionalization and, on the other, the potency of professional "expert" care in the production of the auratic quality of art objects. The sensibilities of de Montebello tended sharply toward the bureaucratic while the de Menils were committed to a more impassioned relationship to works of art.

The Contemporary Art Association and the Museum of Fine Arts, both prior to and since active de Menil involvements, had notably differing conceptions of their commitments to Houston. The Contemporary Art Association, while concerned to bring modern art to Houston audiences, saw itself as having an important role in encouraging local artists, offering opportunities for them to show their work. The Museum of Fine Arts saw its local obligations not to artists but to donors, offering a theater for their largesse. Certainly both institutions finally found the de Menils' interests to be at odds with their own, and found their participation to be intolerably overbearing. As Jane Blaffer Owen, daughter of the aggrieved Sarah Campbell Blaffer, put it, "Well, if they thought they were going to teach us about art..." (Browning 1983: 194).

The de Menils, for their part, had no interest in supporting the exhibition of works of "modest" talent, wanting instead, according to most accounts, to offer Houstonians the opportunity for the same sort of revelatory experience they had been exposed to by Couturier. One suspects that they also had an interest in transforming Houston into a more interesting place for themselves, as is suggested in Dominique de
Menil's comment:

I would never have started collecting so much art if I had not moved to Houston....Houston was a provincial, dormant place, much like Strasbourg, Basel, Alsace. There were no galleries to speak of, no dealers worth the name, and the museum--that is why I started buying; that is why I developed the physical need to acquire (de Menil quoted in Browning 1983: 192).

While John and Dominique de Menil might through their efforts have effected a transformation of Houston that was congenial to their own tastes, they did so also with a strong sense of civic duty. This imperative is demonstrated in John de Menil's attention not only to the stewardship of Houston's cultural institutions, but to the ways in which Houston's cultural stature is represented.

Having read the story "Metropolis USA" in an in-flight magazine on Swiss Air, John de Menil wrote to the Swiss Air Gazette to point out lacunae in their treatment of Houston. The article omitted mention of the Space Center, he noted, and of the developing importance of Houston's chemical industry. But most centrally, he drew attention to the author's neglect of Houston's "remarkable cultural development." He mentioned the high caliber of the symphony and the theater,¹¹ but focused on the visual

¹¹Early in their residence in Houston John and Dominique de Menil were quite active in the establishment of a professional theater company, underwriting the hiring of Nina
arts with which he was most involved. He singled out the Museum of Fine Arts with its Mies van der Rohe designed addition, and its director James Johnson Sweeney, "one of the most famous museum directors, nationally and internationally." And also highlighted the University of St. Thomas being built by Philip Johnson, with an art history department headed by Dr. Jermayne MacAgy, whose attributes he went on to extol. "Such a two as Sweeney and MacAgy is quite exceptional and I do not believe that many cities have the like of it" (de Menil in Sweeney 1962b). A letter written just two weeks earlier to Houston Town & Country voiced similar concerns, again noting the particular distinction of Sweeney and MacAgy: "What city in this country can boast to that equivalent?" (de Menil in Sweeney 1962a).

What is striking in this is the degree to which John de Menil establishes himself as an ambassador for Houston and for his projects. But also noteworthy is his habit of asserting the distinction of the city in terms of the excellence of the people it can attract.

University of St. Thomas

The de Menils did not confine their interests to art institutions. Throughout the 50s and 60s they became increasingly involved in the University of St. Thomas, a small Catholic university founded in 1947 by the Basilian Fathers. The de Menils presented

Vance to direct the Alley Theater.
the school, struggling to gain full accreditation, with a comprehensive plan for its
development along with the funding required to put it into effect.

They bought up land around the single-building campus and proposed to donate it
to St. Thomas and to cover architect's fees as long as they could specify the architect, the
(at that time) modernist disciple of Mies van der Rohe, Philip Johnson. This was
welcomed, and Johnson produced a plan for the campus that could be built in increments,
several buildings of which were completed in the late 50s. There was also talk of building
a chapel in the spirit of Couturier's French chapel projects.

Not only did the de Menils support building projects, but they subsidized salaries
for professors in theology, economics and art history to cater to the increasing enrollment.
Indeed, when Jerry MacAgy's contract was not renewed by the Contemporary Art
Association in 1959 they saw the opportunity to install her in St. Thomas as the chair of
the art department. In this capacity MacAgy taught art history as well as curating,
installing, and producing a catalogue for a show each semester. In conjunction with John
and Dominique de Menil she also worked on developing library resources for art history,
and on putting together what became known as the Young Teaching Collection, numbering
some 500 objects by 1968.

MacAgy's first St. Thomas show was a moody, partially candle lit installation of
modern paintings by Ernst, Klee, Legér, Magritte, Rothko, Tamayo, and others,
juxtaposed with medieval ecclesiastical sculptures, very much in the spirit of Couturier's
reaching back to medieval forms as an antecedent to modern art. The exhibition cohered, according to the Foreword to the exhibition catalogue attributed to the Very Reverend G.B. Flahiff the Superior-General of the Baslian Fathers, by virtue of a "fundamental unity [that] underlies the whole and is suggested by the title Islands Beyond....The significant word is 'beyond,' for the pieces have been selected with a view to manifesting the power of art to evoke what lies beyond the world of the senses" (Flahiff 1959: 5). Echoing Couturier's characterization of the relationship between medieval and modern forms, Flahiff writes:

Modern art and medieval art are not as far apart as the centuries might lead us to believe: indeed they have a greater affinity with each other than either has with the art that went between them. The appeal of both is clearly to the spirit as well as to the eye. The pure beauty of color in the paintings of the exhibition and the limitless, enveloping space suggested by their abstract forms, far from clashing with the sculptured figures, harmonize instead with the timelessness of the spiritual realities that the religious personages are depicted as experiencing. It was the genius of medieval art in its best periods to rise above the particular and to give to the human figures it represented an ideal and, to that extent, an abstract quality. They are quite at home amid paintings that point like them to realities beyond (Flahiff 1958: 6).
Seduction

While still with the California Palace of the Legion of Honor, MacAgy wrote of her approach to installation: "To create an aura, an atmosphere belonging personally to the objects, rather than merely building an edifice against which the objects look well, is the purpose of the Museum's installation plans. And yet this is not to say that the settings should not look well...; but at all times subservient--acting with and always evoking the innateness of the things exhibited" (MacAgy 1953).12

While this passage that is concerned with the full presence of objects may seem at odds with Flahiff's characterization of their referential force, the point of both comments is to stress that the exhibition itself is not the primary object, but a means by which attention to the objects, or to what may be glimpsed through them, might be focused and refined. MacAgy's close attention to exhibition design is not then in the interest of

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12This passage was first published in the California Palace of the Legion of Honor Bulletin, Vol. 11, Nos. 1 & 2 (May - June 1953), and reprinted in the catalogue for A Life Illustrated by an Exhibition (1968), the homage to Jerry MacAgy mounted by the University of St. Thomas art department. The exhibition showed 181 pieces from Jerry MacAgy's own collection, bequeathed to the University of St. Thomas. Her collection was an eclectic mix of objects: a VI century B.C. Greek terra cotta hog; VI-VIII century Coptic tapestries; a Peruvian Madonna and Child of the colonial period; twentieth century German "good conduct" stickers; arrowheads from the Sepik River; wooden figures from the Dogon; prints by Picasso and Miro; several Joseph Cornell boxes and Clyfford Still paintings; and works by Houston artists and close associates Jim Love and Marc Moldawer. This exhibition at the University of St. Thomas was shown in conjunction with a larger exhibition, A Young Teaching Collection, at the Museum of Fine Arts in celebration of the ten year anniversary of the founding of the University of St. Thomas Art Department.
creating spectacle for its own sake, but as a technique by which the ineffable is made present. This point is worth noting since it reveals a very particular relation to art objects that resists the reduction of artworks to mere art historical artifacts, or to spectacles of surplus value. It is a view that recurs among those who the de Menils have sought out to work with them on their various projects and was fostered in the students of MacAgy, and later of Dominique de Menil. Paul Winkler, now the director of the Menil Collection, learned this lesson well under their tutelage.\textsuperscript{13}

MacAgy's explicit reference to the primacy of the curatorial task of imbuing objects with aura is distinctive. That she recognizes and acknowledges this constitutive role while most museum professionals do not is perhaps in part a function of the range of objects she admired and exhibited. Her exhibitions were not confined to artworks, but included, for example, in The Trojan Horse (1958), components of machines exhibited as objects of singular beauty; lengths of fabric in Modern Textiles and Ornamental Arts of India (1956); and exquisitely displayed shoes in Best Foot Forward (1952). Displayed not as historical artifacts but as singular objects with visual significance equivalent to works of art, the constitutive character of installation cannot be evaded by those who

\textsuperscript{13}Among other of their students is Mark Haxthausen, Chair of Art History at Williams College; and Helen Winkler, who worked very closely with both Jerry MacAgy and Dominique de Menil, and went on to collaborate with Philippa de Menil and Heiner Friedrich in establishing the Dia Foundation. Fred Hughes went from his studies in art at St. Thomas to work for the de Menil's dealer Alexander Iolas in Paris, and later went on to manage Andy Warhol's activities.
undertake the presentation of otherwise banal objects. But perhaps what is more importantly exhibited in this recognition of the importance of the construction of aura, is an understanding of signification as fundamentally relational. "No one could be expected to love art," Dominique de Menil wrote of MacAgy's approach, "unless seduced":

Jermaine MacAgy was a master at seduction. She could cast a spell on practically anything. If she decided an object should be raised to the dignity of an art object, an art object it became. Nothing was too humble, too banal or too corny to be excluded from her phantasmagorias....Her exhibitions seemed to prove Marcel Duchamp right. The spectator completes the creation. Without his cooperation, there is no work of art. Her talent insured that cooperation. Each of her installations produced an atmospheric miracle which set the work of art in such a light that it would shine and talk to anyone who would care to look and listen (de Menil 1968b: 10).

It was a huge loss to Dominique de Menil when Jerry MacAgy died suddenly in 1964. It was also a great loss to her students and associates, and to Houston's increasingly energetic art scene that she was profoundly instrumental in fostering. One of her students, Bob Raines commented in the student newspaper: "She made immeasurable contributions to the family that mourns her--and we are that family" (quoted in de Menil 1968b: 12). "Whoever accepted her leadership," Dominique de Menil wrote, "became a
new and talented person" (1968b: 12).

In many respects it can be said that Dominique de Menil had herself become subject to precisely that. She took over as head of the art department; "I finished her shows and tried to keep things going, and that was when I was led to my career, the installation of shows" (de Menil quoted in Browning, 1983: 198).

Incantations

While it may have appeared at the time that Dominique de Menil had simply adopted the incantatory modes of Jerry MacAgy, it soon became clear that while they bore strong resonances of Jerry MacAgy these newly acquired skills were recast to serve a very distinctive Catholic aesthetic and moral temperament. MacAgy's death was followed less than a decade later by the death of John de Menil, that was to be a similarly decisive moment in the extension and clarification of Dominique de Menil's project.

In addition to producing an ambitious schedule of exhibitions and guest speakers, Dominique de Menil continued to build the teaching collection, with her own donations of works but also through encouraging contributions from other collectors and from artists and dealers. In the Foreword to the catalogue for A Young Teaching Collection, an

14In her Texas Monthly article, Browning recounts yet another insult to the Blaffer family, again in the name of maintaining quality: "[Dominique de Menil's] standards for [the teaching collection] were so unbending that when Jane Blaffer Owen tried to donate a tapestry, history repeated itself. Mrs de Menil refused the gift on the grounds that it was
exhibition of 252 works from the collection shown at the Museum of Fine Arts in 1968 to mark 10 years of the St. Thomas art department, Dominique de Menil invoked Couturier to explain the importance of such a collection:

When you love a painting you want to touch it," once wrote Marie-Alain Couturier. He believed a work of art needs intimacy to be understood and loved. It is precisely this intimacy that a teaching collection provides. The student can look at a painting day after day; he can observe a sculpture from all angles, feel its weight, smell it, caress it. A work of art has invaded its territory and demands a response.

This challenge is never offered by slides and photographs. They are superb tools, indispensable tools, but they are only tools. They are remote from the original and this very remoteness leaves us emotionally distant. Scholarly judgments can be passed without involvement (de Menil 1968a).

The shows that Dominique de Menil mounted were, like MacAgy's, thematic; they did not attempt to give an art historical narrative but put together often rather unlikely objects in such a way that they would command a fresh attention. This was not of high enough quality. Mrs Owen wrote the following extraordinary response, "If a child brings a gutter flower to its mother, and tells her it is an orchid, should the mother throw the flower away because it isn't?" (Browning 1983: 200).
achieved in part through the juxtaposition of objects, and by the construction of space, concretely and through the effects of color and lighting. What Dominique de Menil sought in her installations were "incantations," provoking a visceral response that would exceed intellectual readings.

Throughout Dominique de Menil's various articulations of this insistence on a poetic experience of art can be read not only the voice of MacAgy, but of Couturier also. Writing to his co-editor of L'Art Sacré, Father Régamey, Couturier stated his position emphatically:

I insist on the primacy I will give, as far as I possibly can, to "poetry" over pedagogy. You tell me that the two are reconcilable; but you know perfectly well that concretely that is not so: poetry is always sacrificed to pedagogy. Indeed, that precisely is the sum and substance of academicism...for once it is going to be the other way round: pedagogy will be sacrificed to poetry (Couturier 1989: 10-11).

This tension between the didactic and the poetic has clearly become a governing opposition for Dominique de Menil, though such a distaste for academic approaches is perhaps difficult to reconcile with her demonstrable commitment to art education. Dominique de Menil goes some way to relieve this apparent tension by offering a rather idiosyncratic characterization of the function of the St. Thomas art department: "With the training of the eye in mind, the art department was conceived as a laboratory for visual
experiments, as much as a place for learning art history....In the training of the eye there is no substitute for the work of art" (de Menil quoted in *The Texas Herald* 1968: 3).

Consistent with this view that "it is not so important to 'know' as it is to 'see' art," art is presented at the University of St. Thomas in such a way that one is "constantly encouraged to reassess what he sees and to explore it as a challenge rather than as a fait accompli" (de Menil quoted in Holmes 1968: 13). This rather non-didactic approach notwithstanding, Dominique de Menil has always sought out "experts," academics with specialized knowledge of this or that aspect of art history, to write catalogue essays, to authenticate works, to give lectures, and so on. While this is certainly consistent with her distaste for mediocrity it seems at odds with her skepticism concerning the relevance of scholarly approaches. It is the case, however, that scholars have tended to be held at arms length, so to speak, called upon as resources but without holding significant positions of influence.

But the contradiction evaporates under the recognition that scholarship and intellect describe, for Dominique de Menil, quite different domains. The intellect, in Catholic terms, refers to the higher spiritual and cognitive power of the soul, to sensibility and judgment, rather than to knowledge. But the notion of intellect has significance also in terms of French class distinctions. It brackets off judgment as a facility with which one is blessed by birth. It is thereby rendered beyond contention and beyond acquisition by education.
Students in the art department were not taught solely by Jerry MacAgy or Dominique de Menil. A small but well regarded faculty was hired, among whom were people distinguished for their work in areas in which the de Menils were collecting. Mino Badner, a specialist in African art, is said to be largely responsible for the extraordinary quality of the African work that can be seen in the Menil Collection.\textsuperscript{15} William Camfield was hired as a recent graduate from Columbia with a special interest in Surrealism. A few years later, Bertrand Davezac’s specialist knowledge of antiquities was secured, as was Walter Hopps’ prodigious knowledge of contemporary art.

In 1969 the de Menils ended their close association with the University of St. Thomas. Father Patrick Braden, president of the college at the time, commented that "it began to look more like de Menil University than St. Thomas. The issue was really the kind of institution St. Thomas was to be—would it maintain its Catholic identity or would it become a secular college?" John de Menil had not only insisted that the board become open to lay members, but was equally insistent that his own allies be appointed to the board; all this amid rumors that he himself had his eye on the presidency. The presence of the de Menils and their coterie had become such that "it became difficult to operate without stepping on one of their toes" (Braden quoted in Glueck 1986: 66). Philippe de Montebello’s observation regarding the de Menil’s in the wake of Sweeney’s departure

\textsuperscript{15}John de Menil’s service on the board of the Primitive Art Museum, New York, presumably also gave him access to well informed advice.
from the Museum of Fine Arts might equally apply to this situation: "When they didn't control things, they stepped aside" (Glueck 1986: 46).

_Rice University_

The de Menils took their largesse and somewhat modified ambitions to Rice University, taking with them students and faculty along with most of the collection and the art library,\(^\text{16}\) which John de Menil had appraised and reappropriated in exchange for some of the land they had bought adjacent to St. Thomas and a cash settlement. After extended negotiations with the Rice University administration, which was well aware of the de Menil's reputation for forcefully asserting their own agenda, it was resolved that the de Menils would establish a center of activity under the aegis of the university, though operated under de Menil leadership. The Rice Institute for the Arts paid the salaries of art history professors who moved to Rice with them, as members of the Rice faculty in the Art department. Others, like Thomas McEvilley, who was hired to teach the history of myth, were not taken on as faculty members, but as Institute staff. The Institute enabled the de Menils to pursue their projects—lecture series, guest speakers, exhibitions, film studies, collection management—with the participation of university

\(^{16}\)Some 30,000 works were accessioned to the Rice University library, and about 15,000 retained for the collection library then housed at the de Menil residence on San Felipe, and which can now be found in the Menil Collection library.
faculty and students, but without being obliged to align these activities to the
requirements of accredited university programs. Dominique de Menil's own particular
interest in film (which she herself had studied in Berlin after completing her training in
mathematics at the Sorbonne) found expression in the form of the Media Center. Roberto
Rossellini, at that time head of the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia, Italy's national
film school, and Colin Young, head of the National Film School in London, came to Rice
to establish the program, and maintained a close relation to it, returning periodically to
work with its permanent staff James Blue, Mark McCarty, and David MacDougall.

On a far-flung corner of Rice campus they were reluctantly permitted to build
what became known as the Art Barn, a temporary structure built to house the Rice
Museum, initiated and funded by the de Menils, independently of Rice's own Sewall
Gallery.¹⁷ Designed by Eugene Aubry, who with Howard Barnstone had become more or
less in-house architects and designers for deMenil projects, the Art Barn and the adjacent
Media Center were simple yet commanding structures clad in corrugated steel. They
were designed in portable sections as a response to the immediate problem of
accommodation for a traveling exhibition that the deMenils had formerly intended to host
at St. Thomas. The building was extremely well-suited to that show, The Machine, as

¹⁷The Sewall Gallery was at that time still in the planning phase. John de Menil
appealed to the Rice administration to abandon what he felt to be an unsatisfactory
design, offering instead to make a significant contribution to the building of an art complex
for which he commissioned plans from Louis Kahn. His offer was declined.
Seen at the End of the Mechanical Age, which had been mounted by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, but it continued to prove itself with each subsequent show (see Hulten 1968).18

At Rice Dominique de Menil continued to create shows that received considerable attention, a number of which traveled to major museums internationally. Students and graduates were hired to staff the Rice Museum: they worked on much of the organizational detail of putting together and installing exhibitions; they assisted in the production of the catalogues published with each show; and did research on the Teaching Collection. And many migrated between Rice and the Menil Foundation housed in the de Menil residence on San Felipe, since the boundaries between these operations were far from distinct. They looked, for a time, even less distinct as rumors circulated that the entire de Menil collection might find its home on the Rice campus in a purpose built museum. The university, it is said, was less than wholeheartedly enthusiastic about such an outcome, particularly since such a venture would require a degree of autonomy that sat uncomfortably within the institutional structure of Rice.

Whatever Rice's role in this, it is certainly the case that after the de Menil move to Rice the long-term disposition of the collection became increasingly a concern not only to

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18The Art Barn still stands, home now to Rice's Center for Continuing Education. The Media Center continues to operate, and is the base for film, video, and photography students at the University, though it cannot be said to command anything like the presence that it had done under de Menil leadership.
Dominique de Menil, but to major museums that saw themselves as prospective recipients of the collection. The Metropolitan Museum in New York, The J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, and the Georges Pompidou Center were all rumored to be serious active contenders, and the City of Houston made its bid, suggesting that a museum be built on city owned land close to the Museum of Fine Arts. Each posed for Dominique de Menil, however, the problem of sustaining the collection as an entity in its own right that would be presented and maintained appropriately. It became increasingly obvious that this was a project that Dominique de Menil was unwilling to give up.

Arrangements for the first Rothko Chapel Colloquium, “Traditional Modes of Contemplation and Action,” July 22-30, 1973, were being finalized when just three weeks before the arrival of some 20 national and international participants, John de Menil died. Dominique de Menil was adamant that the colloquium should proceed as scheduled, for this had very much been her husband’s project too, despite his worsening health as the event took form. The colloquium addressed concerns that were dear to them both, and it would proceed as a tribute to John de Menil.

This moment punctuates, at least in retrospect, an inevitable realignment of the de Menil project. Dominique de Menil’s efforts were to become more urgently concerned with ensuring the full realization of their initiatives. Increasingly too, she became engaged with the pressing problem of the long term disposition of their projects.
Memorialization

John de Menil crafted his own memorialization in his closely detailed funeral arrangements. In this event can be read the range and scope of John and Dominique de Menil's commitments. Aware of his imminent death John de Menil sent to his children and close friends a memo detailing exactly how his funeral should be handled. His body was to be prepared by Ross Mortuary, a black funeral home in the 5th Ward, and he would lie in state in his bedroom wrapped only in a white sheet, in traditional French peasant fashion. From there he would be transported in a plain pine coffin with rope handles to an early evening mass at St. Anne's, where he and his wife regularly worshipped. The coffin, covered with a green velvet pall on which was lain a single red rose and a 17th century crucifix bearing the image of a black Christ, was carried to the church in the Volkswagen bus that had been used for years to carry de Menil art from one venue to another around Houston. Driven by Sara Cannon, an associate of the Rice Institute for the Arts, the van and the procession behind it took a circuitous route by the Rothko Chapel, in front of which it paused for a moment.

John de Menil had specified the pallbearers to carry his coffin into the church, just as he had determined who should drive the van, and indeed every other detail. State Representative Mickey Leland; Jim Love, a Houston sculptor who had long been a close

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19 John de Menil had taken a particular interest in the young student activist Mickey Leland when they met in the mid 60s. Ann Holmes gives an account of the significance of
associate of the family and worked with them and with Jerry MacAgy at Contemporary
Art Association and at St. Thomas, before moving with them to Rice; Ladislas Bugner,
the director of Image of the Black project in Paris; Dr. William Camfield, an art historian
who the de Menils hired at St. Thomas and took with them to Rice; Miles Glazer, a long
time friend of John de Menil who is the director of the Menil Foundation; Pierre-Marcel
Schlumberger, a nephew; Francois de Menil of New York, John and Dominique's second
son who had been selected to make the arrangements for the funeral; and Francesco
Pelizzi, a member of the board of the Rothko Chapel, and now of the Menil Foundation
and the Menil Collection, and former husband of their daughter Philippa.

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this association:

Knowing that one person can spark a reform, he gave Mickey the
encouragement and financial help necessary to get his education. Racial
tensions were running high at the time, remembers Richard Murray, a
political scientist at the University of Houston: "Mickey Leland was
considered the most dangerous political leader. But John taught Mickey,
and Mickey was like his son. That frightened some people who thought
the de Menils limousine liberals."

As Chandler Davidson, a sociologist at Rice University, recalls it, "The
de Menils were looked on as people who broke ranks with the city's top
society. To them, the de Menils may have seemed like traitors to their
class." Dominique de Menil counters "A lot of people stood for civil
rights and human causes--Oveta Hobby, the George and Herman Brown
families, Nina Cullinen and many others" (Holmes 1991: 230).

Mickey Leland's early association with the de Menils was in the context of The Deluxe
Show, an exhibition of works from the collection of the de Menils that was mounted in
the building of a long defunct cinema in the 5th Ward, a poor black inner city
neighborhood in Houston (see Butterfield 1971). Having been groomed by John de Menil
for a career in politics Mickey Leland served Houston as a state representative, and later
as congressman until his untimely death in 1989.
Inside St. Anne's, as one reporter described it, the church was overflowing with mourners. "In the front pews sat the family and their closest friends. Behind them sat the rich and the powerful of Houston, New York, Los Angeles, and Paris. Behind them were ranked the local members of the Black Panthers, in full uniform, holding their berets, and behind them were hundreds of friends and admirers from all over the world" (Browning 1983: 202).

Quadraphonic speakers, especially installed for the occasion, blared out Bob Dylan's "Girl From the North Country," and "Blowin' in the wind," before the rites began. The Reverend Youachim Moubarac, a Lebanese priest and Islamic scholar who was teaching at the College de Paris, crossed the Atlantic to celebrate the requiem mass. But officiating also were the Reverend William Lawson, a Baptist preacher and black civil rights leader, Rabbi Robert Kahn, and Dr. Thomas Shannon, director of the Institute for Human Development, with whom the de Menils had collaborated on the Rothko Chapel project. Several lay readers also participated.

The theater of the funeral proceedings was heightened when on leaving the church at six thirty on a summers evening the congregation found the sky black with cloud, lit suddenly by an awesome streak of lightning. Then the rain fell as heavy as anyone could remember. Roberto Rossellini, it is said, commented to his companion, "So speak the
prophets. This funeral is attended by the gods" (Browning 1983: 202).

In accordance with John de Menil's instructions, the Third Ward cemetery in which his body was laid was lit and kept open after hours so, it is said, that working class people would not be excluded from the proceedings.

I recount this meticulously crafted event since it presents itself not only as a compelling enactment of John de Menil's commitments, and a marking of a very distinctive set of distinctions, but also as a testament to his understanding of the way in which the auratic might be rendered through a highly refined and stylized performance.

Dynastic Concerns

Just as conventional notions of the collector do not fully account for Dominique de Menil's motivations, nor does the conventional model of the patron adequately describe the way in which she positions herself in the artworld. In his discussion of the Abott Suger, Panofsky invokes the definition of "patron," as one who "countenances or protects or deigns to employ a person, cause or art," against which to characterize Suger's own impulses. In the process of the extraordinarily ambitious rebuilding of the Abbey of St.-Denis, Suger finds himself unable to obtain some exceptionally long beams critical to his plan. Despite assurances that there were no such timbers to be found in any forest

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20 This recounting of the event is a distillation of many renderings, including those given in the media and those that circulate in the popular memory of Houstonians.
nearby, he set about searching for them himself, leading a party of carpenters "with the
courage of our faith, as it were, to search through the wood" (Suger 1979: 97) where of
course they successfully, though not without difficulty, tracked down what they
required. Panofsky comments:

A man who takes his carpenters into the woods in quest of beams and
personally picks the right trees, a man who sees to it that his new chevet is
properly aligned with the old nave...is still more akin to the amateur or
gentleman architect of the earlier Middle Ages—and, by the way, of
colonial America—than to the great patrons of High Gothic and
Renaissance periods who would appoint an architect-in-chief, pass
judgment on his plans and leave all technical details to him. Devoting
himself to his artistic enterprises "both with mind and body," Suger may
be said to [do so]...not so much in the capacity of one who "countenances
or protects or deigns to employ" as in the capacity of one who supervises
or directs or conducts....It would seem that very little was done without at
least his active participation (Panofsky 1979: 35-36).

This kind of involvement bears strong resemblance to Dominique de Menil’s style of
engagement with routine matters of the Menil Collection. To make too much, however,
of the parallels between Suger and Dominique de Menil would clearly be foolish, but
Suger’s writings do offer some insight into a distinctively Catholic mode of relating to the
material character of objects, whereby this attention can be understood as a form of ministry—as a vocation.

De Menil patronage is, I have argued, as an expression of John and Dominique's metaphysics—a universal humanism arising out of a particular strand of Catholic theology taken up in response to the pressing imperatives of modernity. The central core of John and Dominique de Menil's activity has been in pursuit of spiritual remediation in the face of what they have read as a pernicious and dehumanizing rationalism. While the notion of vocation is apt, this vocation of sacred modernism is, however, only a partial explanation. John and Dominique de Menil's patronage is also concerned with the collector's anxiety about the enduring integrity of her collection; the patron's concern that her projects will exceed her own involvement; and the issue for the wealthy of managing their wealth.

John and Dominique de Menil's organization of their wealth is not one that seeks to protect and consolidate the corpus generationally.21 They arranged for part of their fortune to be dispersed among their five children, and for the rest to be used to establish a foundation for the arts, the Menil Foundation, which was chartered in 1954. A number of

21This data arises out of ethnographic research on Houston elites conducted by George Marcus, and published in his essay “The Fiduciary Role in American Family Dynasties and their Institutional Legacy,” in *Elites, Ethnographic Issues*, George E. Marcus, ed. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1983. While the de Menils are not identified as subjects of his research, it is evident that it is the de Menil dynasty to whom he is referring here. I make this explicit connection between the de Menils and the fiduciary arrangement described, with the permission of the author.
trusts were set up for each of the children, which would self-destruct according to a pre-determined schedule, gradually releasing portions of their inheritance at different ages. By the age of forty-five, each of the children would have complete control over their own share of the corpus. In this way the children were given a measure of responsibility throughout, but were protected, until the age of forty-five, against the possibility of risking it all (Marcus 1983: 245-246).

While the dissolution of the corpus of wealth through this type of arrangement mitigates against dynastic formations, the Menil Foundation in contrast bears a distinctly dynastic dimension.

Such a foundation would provide the family with a patrician stature locally and nationally, it would be permanent, and it would function in a distinguished way despite possible personal failures by individual beneficiaries. For those family members who wanted it, philanthropy could offer something between a career and a hobby....A foundation for the arts, rather than, say, a hospital, university, or medical research...placed its members in elite networks of regional, national, and international scope (Marcus 1983: 246).

The management of the de Menil fortune, then, "provided for the deliberate dissolution of apparently dynastic, but in fact caretaker, trusts, but at the same time used the permanent foundation instrument to guarantee the perpetuation of the family name, independent of
the acts of the trust beneficiaries" (Marcus 1983: 250). A dynastic trajectory, then, can be introduced into a situation of uncertain dynastic intent through the use of trusts fashioned by professional fiduciaries (Marcus 1983: 250). The de Menil family would seem to be one such case.

This dynastic ambivalence is not apparent, Terri Castañeda argues, in the operations of the Menil Collection, the central beneficiary of the Menil Foundation. Here, she argues, a dynastic thrust can be very clearly read. "In building a museum to house and exhibit the collection she and her husband developed, Dominique has taken an important step toward institutionalizing not only a de Menil dynastic identity, but one that is unequivocally synonymous with art collecting and patronage" (Castañeda 1987: 38).

This character of the collection was powerfully expressed in the context of *La rime et la raison* in which not only was a selection of works collected by John and Dominique de Menil shown, but also a significant number of works from the collections of each of their children. In the exhibition catalogue dedicated to John de Menil, Walter Hopps described the family continuity achieved through their collecting:

Dominique and Jean de Menil pass on their love of art to their 5 children and their close relatives. Christophe, Adelaide, Georges, François, and Philippa have all become collectors whose diverse interests and generous loans have made a considerable contribution towards enriching the present
exhibition. Christophe de Menil’s interest lies in contemporary art and in architecture. She fervently focuses on the work of several particularly remarkable artists—whether their work involves painting, sculpture or theatrical performance—or on works whose essence revolves around space and light. Adelaide, in her book *Out of Silence*, brought the first photographic interpretation of the Indian totems of Alaska, which are in the process of disappearing. Along with Edmund Carpenter, she gathered together some exceptional collections of primitive art from the Indians of the North-West Coast of America, from Eskimos and from Oceania. For his part, François has turned his attention towards the cinema, as both director and producer, and is currently studying architecture at (the) Cooper Union in New York. The Dia Foundation—directed by Heiner Friedrich was founded by Philippa with the aim of supporting certain followers of the so-called minimal art and systemic art. The Foundation is complementary to the collection of abstract lyrical works of Lois and Georges de Menil, which represents an entire visual domain of contemporary American painting (Hopps 1984: 14, translation mine).

At the 1987 opening of the Menil Collection the presence of the children could be observed throughout the museum. Museum guards wore uniforms designed by daughter Christophe. Haida, Tlingit, and Kwakiutl pieces, collected for her parents by Adelaide, were prominently displayed at the east end of the museum's central passageway, and have since remained there. In the large west gallery an exhibit of the monumental

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22Menil guards soon ceased to be uniformed, however.
sculptures of John Chamberlain, rendered out of the crumpled bodies of wrecked cars, acknowledged the activities of their daughter Philippa. The Menil Collection tends not to identify on its labeling the source of works given or loaned to the collection,23 but for the Chamberlain show a gallery label and brochure give credit for the generous loan to the Dia Foundation, funded from 1974 to 1985 solely by Philippa de Menil Friedrich. François de Menil, the younger of John and Dominique's two sons, has served on the board of the Menil Collection, and of the Menil Foundation which, under the initial structuring of the Menil Collection, was its primary source of funding.

Whether these traces of family continuity should be read as indicative of the children's commitment to their mother's museum and matriarchal vision, or of Dominique de Menil's efforts to court her children on behalf of her own institution and dynastic concerns, is not clear. As Castañeda reports, the Menil Collection's exhibit of Northwest Coast art is a case in point. While the pieces on show had been collected by Adelaide and generously given to the Menil Foundation, Adelaide together with Ted Carpenter own an important collection of ethnographic art in their own right, and have not yet committed it as a future acquisition for the Menil Collection, though evidently it is Dominique de

23There have always been exceptions to this, consistent with the particular stipulations of donors and lenders, however, these have by and large been strenuously resisted. As the Menil Collection increasingly feels obliged to reposition itself as not solely in the role of patron but of a recipient of support, it seems more ready to accede to such requests.
Menil's wish that they do so. Castañeda reports that at the time of the museum opening Dominique de Menil and her staff were feeling "encouraged" in this matter (Castañeda 1987: 39).

The museum's exhibition of these works may achieve two purposes for Dominique de Menil. First, in presenting the collection as a distinct, but integral part of the museum, Dominique achieves an image of inter-generational family continuity that can be easily interpreted by the viewing public as institutional commitment on Adelaide's part. Second, by giving the N.W. Coast material a prominent but independent exhibit space—simultaneously representing it as a significant family contribution, but one for which she cannot take credit and she will not take over—Dominique is able to effectively court her daughter for her collection and her personal commitment.... As a woman courted for her collection by countless museums anticipating her eventual death, Dominique must certainly understand the fragile ego of the art collector, always frightened that the integrity of their own highly personal collection will be compromised, forgotten, or forever lost in the endless storerooms and galleries of the mega-museum" (Castañeda 1987: 39-40).

A Newsweek article subtitled "The Collector's Dream: Open Your own Museum," addresses the growing trend represented by "de Menil and other modern American Medicis [who] are turning away from bequests to museums to create shrines to their art--
and to themselves." The author suggests that there can be no question that Dominique de Menil can count on her children's long-term support to the Menil Collection, since "given the force of de Menil's personality, when the time comes for the children to run the museum, they will surely know what Mama would like them to do" (McGuigan 1987: 68-69). Ten years later, however, it is by no means obvious that this will happen.

*Professionalization*

Despite the rationalization of family relations through the fiduciary management of the de Menil fortune,\textsuperscript{24} the management practices of John and Dominique de Menil within the Foundation, and later in the Menil Collection, and indeed throughout their various domains of patronage, can be seen as a register of their distaste for disinterested, depersonalized modern forms of organization.

Although I have characterized professionalization as one of the de Menil's central preoccupations in their art world endeavors, it is a mode of professionalism that is not necessarily consistent with the kind of contractual autonomy and responsibility that is typically associated with professional status.

When John and Dominique de Menil pressed for the hiring of professional directors for the Museum of Fine Arts and for the Contemporary Art Association they

\textsuperscript{24}See Marcus 1983: 221-256 for a discussion of the role of fiduciaries in the organization of elite social relations.
sought for these institutions the kind of art world stature that cannot be achieved with an amateur organization. In order to negotiate significant loans of art works for exhibitions and to be able to participate in accommodating touring shows appropriate staff and facilities are essential. But engaging professional staff did not solely lend a museum art world legitimacy, and with that the ability to curate shows of some significance, but also brought a level of enthusiasm and commitment to an institution that would otherwise be all but impossible to sustain at a high level.

The de Menils have employed two approaches to the hiring of staff for various projects. The first is very like the strategy used by Conrad and Marcel Schlumberger in the development of their operations: hire the top people in the field, ensure they have the resources necessary to do their job, and take care of them very well. Their other method has been to take on young people who have revealed a potential that will be tested and trained on the job. In so far as they prove themselves suitable, they are drawn in to increasingly more central positions.

Both models foreground the specific qualities of the individuals hired, rather than being driven by an overriding imperative to fill abstractly formulated positions, or by conventional measures of professional qualification. What is centrally important is an identification with the “Menil aesthetic,” but even more crucial, though by no means unrelated, is loyalty.
Chapter Five
Museum

Architecture

When Dominique de Menil resolved in 1979 to build a museum to house the collection she called on Walter Hopps, then the senior curator for twentieth century art at the National Collection of Fine Arts. Initially, Hopps was brought in as a consultant advising on the lighting problems in the Rothko Chapel and working on shows for the Rice Museum and, when it became clear that they could work together, as director of the collection.

Hopps and Dominique de Menil together decided on Renzo Piano as the architect. In selecting Piano, Dominique de Menil made a notable decision against what Werckmeister describes as the kind of "sovereign play of creative freedom" (1991: 77), a freedom that she seems to cherish in other contexts. Describing the process of deciding on an architect, Dominique de Menil spoke highly of Piano’s propensity to collaborate with his clients. Also highly regarded, is his problem-solving approach to architecture whereby the form of a building is informed by a complex interleaving of art and technology. The Architectural Review’s issue "Architecture of Commitment" featured a cover story on Piano, giving special attention to the Menil Collection project. Its opening characterization of Piano mirrors the terms of Dominique de Menil’s enthusiasm for him:
Renzo Piano is an architect well known—and regarded in some quarters as almost puritanical—for his continuing polemical advocacy of such notions as client participation, interdisciplinarity, the mastery and *use* of technology, and an experimental 'hands-on' approach to design...For Piano these are moral issues, more important and more interesting than questions of personal style or form... [It is his] commitment to *idea* above ego—that gives his built work its distinctive gentle confidence (Farell 1987: 32).

In a manner that resonates with Dominique de Menil's own practice, Piano stresses that his advocacy of participation does not amount to a democratization of the process of architecture: "Certainly, you have to try to understand people, their needs, but you are still the architect, you still have to make the decisions, you still retain control" (Farell 1987: 33). The contribution of the client then should be "treated with respect, not submission" (Farell 1987: 34). It is perhaps also significant that it is Piano's *practice* that so distinctively bears his signature and not his buildings. The potential for tension between the signature of the architect and that of the client is thereby averted.

Dominique de Menil's primary directive to Piano was that the building "should look small on the outside and be big on the inside." She wanted the museum to sit comfortably in the residential neighborhood of small clapboard houses adjacent to the Rothko Chapel. The 400 ft. long, horizontal building is clad with wide-board swamp
cypress\textsuperscript{1} in a white steel frame, its cladding stained the same soft gray of its surrounding wooden bungalows. At first glance the building is self-effacing: it is neutral in color, non-monumental in scale, and bears no signage or inscription to identify it. But rather than accommodating to its context, it is actually the centerpiece of a carefully curated environment that is as steady a rendering of the de Menil signature as the museum's interior. The Rothko Chapel and Newman's \textit{Broken Obelisk} are on the next block, separated from the Menil Collection by treed lawns. Across the road is the Cy Twombly Gallery, designed by Piano exclusively for the permanent exhibition of Twombly’s work.\textsuperscript{2} And a block beyond that is the University of St. Thomas, which the de Menil's hired Philip Johnson to design in the late 50s. But immediately around the block on which the museum is sited are several blocks of 1920s wooden bungalows of which those belonging to the de Menils have since 1970 been painted the same white trimmed gray, all with interiors remodeled by Howard Barnstone. Bought up quietly by John and Dominique de Menil initially during their period of ambition for the University of St. Thomas, and with

\textsuperscript{1}It was on the insistence of the Menil Foundation that "valuable heart cyprus milled from South Carolina trees up to 2,000 years old" be used for exterior cladding rather than the cedar that is more conventionally used (Davey 1987: 37). As a precaution against the effects of Houston's punishing climate, screws rather than nails have been used for the cladding.

\textsuperscript{2}The Twombly Gallery, opened in 1995, is another of Dominique de Menil’s projects and is operated under the auspices of the Menil Collection. In it are installed works from the Menil Collection, in addition to works on long term loan from the Dia Foundation, and a number from Twombly’s own collection.
some vigor through the early 80s once the site was decided upon for the Menil
Collection, some of these houses are used by the Menil Collection and others serve as
the administrative base for the Menil Foundation, while many have been turned over to
various arts organizations. Others are rented out, initially to participants in the arts
community, though now drawing on a rather broader catchment. There is a sense in
which the occupants are as carefully scrutinized and managed as are the buildings and
grounds. So, as Richard Ingersoll observes,

The context hasn't been saved but invented by reassembling existing
buildings into a more coherent collection; some of the buildings that were
on the site of the museum were redistributed to the surrounding lots like
checkers on a newly set checker board....This invented "neighborhood"
provides an uncommon physical and social homogeneity that protects the
museum from the encroachment of speculative real estate and commercial
activities (Ingersoll 1987: 43-44).

Several of Dominique de Menil's children were initially chagrined by their mother's
choice of design, preferring a more monumental structure. No doubt they would have
been happier had it been possible for Louis Kahn's plans to be realized. He had been

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3By the time the museum site began to be cleared for construction, the Menil
Foundation owned virtually all of the homes, apartments, and businesses on a 22-acre, 9
block area surrounding it.
hired in 1973 as the original architect for the project, and before his sudden death the next year he had generated many drawings of a museum that would, as Ingersoll put it, "have resulted in the complete monumentalization of the neighborhood" (Ingersoll 1987: 47).

But despite its refusal of the massive authority typical of monumental buildings, the Menil Collection is not entirely anti-monumental, as Ingersoll suggests:

The profane aspects of the consumerist art experience have been removed and, consistent with the respect for spirituality, the building has been sited like a primitive temple in a temenos: it sits alone on its block, set off by a peripheral portico that rings it with a special filtered halo of light (Ingersoll 1987: 46).

Light was the other key concern, both for Dominique de Menil and for Walter Hopps. The problem was to come up with a means by which natural light could be used in the galleries without subjecting the artworks to lux levels that would harm them. This was complicated by Dominique de Menil's particular desire to have daylight in the building that would visibly change with the time and season and weather conditions. This preoccupation was surely informed by Rothko, who had battled so adamantly with Philip Johnson over just this issue in the design of the chapel.\(^4\) But also, the mode of handling

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\(^4\)Had Rothko lived to see the completion of the chapel he would no doubt have made last minute alterations to its design. As it was the building was completed strictly in accordance with his instructions, though without the benefit of his having anticipated the notably more intense and changeable light conditions in Houston from those Rothko was
natural lighting was central to the success of Kahn's Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, a building that Dominique de Menil new and liked very well. Indeed, it is the oft-cited goal of the Kimbell "to make light the theme" (Ingersoll 1987: 46).

Certainly Piano's response to the problem of light has become the defining feature of the structure. Piano developed a system of baffles that would prevent direct sunlight from entering the interior spaces, but would reflect sunlight, in its changing conditions, into these spaces. These ferro-cement baffles, or leaves as they have come to be called, attached to ductile-iron trusses, together form the roof structure. The trusses also carry ducts for return air and these air ducts go some way too to removing the solar gain that is intensified by the ultra-violet proof glazing that covers the roof above the truss structure. This roof system forms a unifying platform for the building, creating a section consistent with the loft tradition, that pulls together the galleries, internal gardens, and the internal and external walkways. If the Menil Collection can be said to have a logo, it is the elegant cross-section of the leaves.

used to in his Manhattan studio. It had continued to be the source of difficulty, with various modifications undertaken in the years following the chapel's opening. In 1976 an adequate solution was achieved with the installation of a baffle made to deflect natural light and reduce its level (see Barnes 1989).

Houston's well known architectural historian Stephen Fox pointed out to me that in the various presentations Piano has made on the Menil Collection project, he speaks almost exclusively on the ferro-cement leaves designed to filter light. Additionally he might comment on the clapboard exterior, but it is as if all other aspects of the building took care of themselves.
The very dark stained pine floors accentuate the height of the 16 ft. ceilings, though they are informed by other imperatives. Wooden floors allow for internal walls to be moved with ease, since they can be anchored to the floor with screws. But more crucially, perhaps, they have been used to carry air into the building, through the use of intermittent sections of finely slatted boards through which treated air is pumped. What might appear as a trivial detail of design takes on some significance in the Menil Collection. Not only are walls rendered readily moveable because they are not made to carry ducts or any other service technology, but their surfaces are thoroughly clean. This is of particular significance in a museum that hangs the very large works that are characteristic of the New York school painters—indeed it is an issue at all museums that show contemporary painting, much of which is made with the vast spaces of contemporary museum galleries in mind. But at the Menil Collection, close attention to the location of potential visual distractions like air ducts and thermostats takes on a particularly marked significance, since its exemplary attention to detail has come to be central in conjuring the aura that characterizes the Menil Collection. The seamlessness of its appearance is complemented by the quiet that prevails in the galleries, not so much because people feel compelled to be silent, but because Dominique de Menil went to

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considerable expense to ensure that the air conditioning would create no noise.\textsuperscript{7} A great deal of care was also expended on the walls themselves. Steve McConathy, the building manager, told me with notable satisfaction that the sheetrocked interior walls of the museum were "the truest walls in all of Houston."\textsuperscript{8} In its care with the walls upon which art works are to be hung, the Menil Collection demonstrates its commitment to the preeminence of the art object, ensuring that one's engagement with it is not compromised by extraneous utilities. But there is also a sense in which the walls themselves have value; exhibitions department staff routinely inspect them for marks and touch them up as necessary, guards are instructed not to lean against them, and, as was seen with the Klee show, a great deal of care is taken in their finish in preparation for the installation of exhibitions. They have value as part of an economy of exquisite care upon which what has come to be known as "the Menil aesthetic" is sustained.

\textsuperscript{7}The air conditioning plant is housed in a separate building some distance from the museum, but connected to it by an underground tunnel. All the building technology that might be considered a fire risk is located here, away from stored and displayed art works. A quiet environment is achieved further through the absence of docents, audio-guides, and cash registers.

\textsuperscript{8}Steve McConathy, like Larry Young, the technical specialist, came to his position at the Menil Collection through his work with one of the contractors on the construction of the building. At a time when buildings were being knocked together at an extraordinary pace to meet the demand of the boom years in Houston, many contractors appreciated the opportunity to do a job well, without feeling pressured to cut corners, McConathy told me. As he describes it, the concealed aspects of the building, like the administrative and work areas also, indicate the same level of care that is apparent in the public spaces; the wiring, he pointed out with evident pleasure, is laid in unusually straight lines.
The entrance to the building opens into a lobby, intersected by a long luminous central promenade. To the south of this axis are restricted access service areas, to the north, public galleries. In the interior layout Dominique de Menil was concerned to minimize the experience of fatigue that so often accompanies visits to museums. So instead of cavernous galleries opening one onto the next, that engulf and overwhelm, galleries can be entered one at a time off the central passageway. In this manner each of the four major galleries and a minor gallery are constructed as more or less discrete spaces that may be reached independently of each other.

The large open spaces of the galleries are themselves subdivided, some temporarily in response to the requirements of specific installations, others more or less permanently, to create more modestly proportioned spaces for some of the semi-permanent installations. What was sought in this arrangement are intimate spaces for contemplation, in which individual works are not inevitably subordinated to the whole.

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9The galleries, the largest of which is 80'x80', are designed on a 20'x40' module which echoes, Stephen Fox observed, the dimension of Dominique de Menil's living room in her Philip Johnson designed home. Another echo of Johnson can be identified, perhaps, in the expression of the steel frame on the exterior of the building, in a manner similar to that followed by Johnson at the University of St. Thomas.

10Some of these galleries have conventional ceilings to accommodate exhibitions requiring artificial lighting or significantly reduced lux levels. The higher than recommended lux levels throughout the museum are justified by Menil Collection personnel on the grounds that with only about 5% of the collection on show at any time works will be routinely rotated into dark storage conditions, thus limiting their exposure.
In this spatial organization the Menil Collection does not replicate the conventional arrangement of art museums that represents art as the inexorable unfolding of history, an historical narrative that is inevitably recapitulated by one's progress through the galleries. Describing James Stirling's celebrated design for the addition of modern and contemporary art galleries to the Staatsgalerie in Stuttgart, Crimp observes just this tendency in Stirling's reiteration of the layout of the original picture galleries, even to the extent of continuing the sequential numbering of these galleries, such that they "open on to each other en filade....The idea of art as an uninterrupted historical continuum that can be laid out in a suite of connected rooms is never for a moment interrupted" (Crimp 1993: 313).

That audiences move through museums barely pausing before the exhibited objects reflects not only this conventional architectural organization of museum experience, Philip Fisher argues, but expresses the very character of these institutions:

That we walk through a museum, walk past the art, recapitulates in our act the motion of art history itself, its restlessness, its forward motion, its power to link. Far from being a fact that shows the public's ignorance of what art is about, the rapid stroll through a museum is an act in deep harmony with the nature of art, that is, art history and the museum itself (not the individual object, which the museum itself has profoundly hidden in history)" (Fisher 1991: 9).
Consistent with this, the space of museum galleries is reduced, Fisher argues, to a "path" as one follows the images around the wall, moving from one room to the next. "In so far as the museum becomes pure path, abandoning the dense spatial rooms of what were once homes, or, of course, the highly sophisticated space of the cathedral, it becomes a more perfect image of history, or rather of the single, linear motion of history preferred since Winckelmann" (Fisher 1991: 9).11 The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, with its inclined ramp, is the ultimate expression of this. Indeed, as Fisher continues, "in the Guggenheim...the absence of rooms completes the spatial truth of the museum which throughout the nineteenth century still pretended to be a princely living space...where, along with other things, art could be found" (Fisher 1991: 9).12

11Here, Fisher refers to the classicist Winckelmann who in the mid-eighteenth century developed a linear history of Greek art, on the basis of which he systematically arranged the antiquities in the Villa Abani by subject, "placing goddesses, emperors, and tragic reliefs together" (Fisher 1991: 8).

12The Guggenheim Museum begins to take on the features of the art book that Malraux proposes, though the book goes one step further than the museum because it dematerializes the object. "In our museum without walls, picture, fresco, miniature, and stained glass window seem of one and the same family. For all alike...have become 'colorplates.' In the process they have lost their properties as objects, but, by the same token, they have gained something: the utmost significance as to style that they can possibly acquire" (Malraux 1967: 44). But as Fisher points out, no matter how important the art book has been, it has not been nearly so decisive as museums themselves in informing what art works look like. Indeed, "in terms of the art book, modern works are naive objects, unconscious of the fact that they will be produced in roughly 8" by 10" format" (Fisher 1991: 24). Certainly modern art works do not seem as preoccupied with their future as color-plates than they do with their candidacy as museum objects, scaled as they are to commandeer the vast spaces of the museum.
The Menil Collection poses itself strenuously, if understatedly, in opposition to such a rendering. Exhibitions at the Menil Collection, in the complex juxtapositions that they establish, are not conceived in linear art historical terms. And the architectural organization of the galleries mitigates against such an impulse also, since they do not unfold, one on to the next, in a sequential manner.

Like most museums, the Menil Collection shows only a small proportion of its collection at one time. Dominique de Menil was concerned that works in storage be available for viewing by arrangement. Though the imagined audience for such special viewing is said to be a scholarly one, open storage also allowed Dominique de Menil herself access to her collection for the first time. Prior to the construction of the museum the collection had never been in one place, dispersed primarily through warehouses and residences in Paris, New York, and Houston. The storage areas were on the earliest of Piano's drawings designated as the "treasure house," a characterization attributed to Dominique de Menil and still used quite unselfconsciously by Menil personnel. Located not in the basement but on the second floor "for all to see," works are stored here in optimal environmental conditions. But at least as important as the conservation virtues of the treasure house is it symbolic presence as the jewel of the building, but also as its

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13This was noted by the designers as one of the earliest specifications for the museum. See the article by members of the project design team Tom Barker, Alistair Guthrie, Neil Noble, Peter Rice (1983).
exclusive inner sanctum. Architectural critic Richard Ingersoll spoke of its seductions:

"The joy of discovering a room full of di Chiricos, Cornells, and Magrittes is inestimable, and the densely packed display walls and dark corners of these rooms convey a feeling that is unknown in the rest of the museum: intimacy. It is in these "treasuries" that one can truly commune with the works" (Ingersoll 1987: 47).

Economy of Information

Adjacent to the treasure house and to the curatorial offices that occupy the second floor is a free-standing largely glass-walled room, perhaps just two hundred feet square, access to which is much more closely controlled than it is to the rooms housing the artworks. In the center of the room horizontal cabinets hold files documenting each of the objects in the collection. The files contain correspondence pertaining to acquisition, critical and scholarly commentaries on the piece, details of its provenance and exhibition history. Some also carry conservation material, but detailed conservation information is held in a similar set of files in the conservation department. I had imagined that the key to the collection was to be found in these files, that its logic could be limned here rather than

14That Ingersoll experiences this intimacy only in the treasure house, and not in the public galleries, might be seen as a failure of the Menil Collection, since it is just such an engagement with the works that Dominique de Menil seeks to foster. But what Ingersoll seems to be describing here is the particularly intensified intimacy of "behind the scenes" access.
in the galleries or storage, for it was here more than anywhere that the collection seemed to reside as an object with readable contours. My over-reliance on textual rather than visual materializations of the collection notwithstanding, access to these files seemed of prime importance to an ethnographic project that floundered daily on the evasions and suspicions of most everyone I spoke to.\footnote{In studying the files, a pattern of preoccupations became apparent, though it is by no means clear that the material I had access to can be considered representative. Many of the files contained correspondence seeking access to a particular object for the purpose of scholarly research. That these tended to be declined, with the explanation that the Menil Collection would wish to have something published on the object first, is striking given de Menil commitments to art education through immediate hands on experience of art works. What in fact may have been at stake was the perceived caliber of the student, or perhaps the desire of the de Menils to establish the significance of the object, before others sought to do so on their own terms. This was similarly the case with letters seeking permission to reproduce images of works from the collection. Consent seemed to be contingent on the stature of the request. It should be said that the correspondence to which I refer predates the opening of the Menil Collection, and such matters have now become somewhat more routinized and access of this sort has become less difficult to achieve, presumably since with the reputation of the collection already so well established such matters are no longer considered to be of critical importance. More emphatic throughout the files, is the issue of authenticity, an issue that seemed largely to be pursued after rather than before acquisition. The authenticity of the purported 4th-5th century Head of a God, otherwise known as the Roscrea Head (Menil Collection catalogue #050), has been the subject of more or less sustained debate since its purchase in 1977, and is apparently still unresolved. It is curious that an object with such ambiguous attribution should be one of only a dozen or so pieces singled out for attention in the Menil Collection Catalogue (Ross 1987: 50-59). Conservation issues arose repeatedly also, indicating an interest in the identification of materials, and in the form of mounting initially used by the artist.}

Resistance to my reading these files was generally addressed in terms of the sensitivity of the financial details contained therein, and the logistical difficulty of
removing such material. But I was able to come to an arrangement whereby Paul Winkler would make a small selection of collection files available to me using whatever logic he saw fit, and removing any material deemed confidential. When right at the end of my fieldwork I was finally presented with these documents the extent to which I had fantasized their content became resoundingly apparent. Or perhaps it was not so much the content that I had so badly longed for but the privilege of access, promised so often but seldom realized. This is of course a common ethnographic fantasy, but it was particularly striking for a couple of reasons.

First, I was studying elites; not the vulgar wealth of the old robber barons or the new money of merchandising magnates, but elites with liberal politics and impeccable decorum, whose entire project is directed toward a rehabilitation of degraded sensibilities. To play the ingénue did not seem to be a productive strategy, nor did a knowingly critical approach. No, it seemed that to participate in a conversation with them I had to demonstrate that I was like them, that I too was in the possession of exquisitely calibrated sensibilities. But in truth this motivation was not entirely pragmatic. I wanted to be considered worthy.

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16 The stories that are told of Schlumberger and the wealth it generated are characteristic of the narratives that tend to be told of oil industry ventures. They tell of the spirit and character of its founders, of their commitment to invention and discovery, and by omission distance themselves from the operations of the industry itself.
I mention this not to confess the shortcomings of my character, but to identify the intensified longings played out under the rubric of access—it enabled me to pursue my work, and simultaneously conferred upon me, albeit momentarily, the halo of insider status. The discomfort of such contingent stature was not mine alone. Most everyone I spoke with who had pinned their professional lives on the Menil Collection was sorely aware of this contingency, some more acutely than others. There is a pervasive sense of exclusion, compounded perhaps by a contrary sense of privilege. People seem to feel very fortunate to work for the Menil Collection, sharing in its reputation for excellence and appreciating the pleasures and possibilities of working with such a fine collection and with a degree of flexibility unusual in other major museums. But at the same time deep anxieties are harbored, and these primarily are focused around status within the organization. Such concern is expressed not so much in terms of budgets, authority, or relative salary, but in terms of inclusion in the dissemination of information, opportunities to travel on behalf of the Collection, and inclusion as guests at functions associated with the Collection or the Foundation. It is not so much a matter of marking one’s relative position on a hierarchy, though this is not entirely insignificant of course, but of gauging one’s status either as an insider or outsider.

The economy of information is central. While people routinely explained to me the attenuated mode in which information circulated within the organization, and would recount stories of this or that instance in which various staff were not made privy to
information that they believed was needed to effectively carry out their responsibilities, each harbored their own exclusions personally. They felt that they specifically had been cut out of the loop, that they had been deemed unworthy of inclusion. Their own institutional analysis notwithstanding, the prevailing assumption was that others had been bestowed with privileged information from which they specifically had been excluded.

Complicity in this runs deep. What information one has been made privy to tends to be held very closely. Not, apparently, simply as a scarce resource to be expended judiciously, but in order to live up to having had this honor of bestowal, to show oneself worthy by virtue of one's discretion.

And of course this expresses the illusory character of the loop from which so many feel excluded. There is no model by which plans, policies, and decisions should properly be disseminated through the organization. People routinely operate with fragments, and in any particular instance it may be on account of oversight or design. One never knew for sure, no matter how much one vexed about it.

Anxiety

Such anxieties were intensified with the unexpected laying off of 17 people just three weeks before Christmas 1994. Among those whose positions were terminated were security guards and administrative and professional staff. Many had been working for
Dominique de Menil for many years, at the Rice Museum, or for the Foundation out of its offices in the various spare bedrooms and converted garages at the de Menil residence on San Felipe. Some had formerly worked for Schlumberger. The personal impact for those who found themselves without work was of course devastating, but it seemed all the worse to them, and to those who remained, because it had never been anticipated. Indeed, such a rationalization was unthinkable. Menil operations had never employed such a model. Its true, however, that people had, over recent years, felt a change in the institution, recognition of which was typically expressed in the form of nostalgic narratives of a more energetic and integrated organization. But the lay-offs definitively drew an end to any identifications with what had warmly been described as the familial organization of the institution.

The lay-offs were announced just weeks after the appointment of Susan Barnes, to a new position as Chief Operating Officer of the Menil Foundation. Although her role was subject to a good deal of speculation, it became clear that her primary task was to secure the long term disposition of the Menil Collection through increasing its endowment and rationalizing its practices to reduce operating costs. In this endeavor she joined Julie Gibbs, the development specialist hired just months before in conjunction with the 1994 launching of an endowment drive. Their task is an unenviable one, since they have been called, on the one hand, to overcome the widely held perception of wealth that has mitigated against the perception of need. On the other, their internal rationalizations
inevitably run counter to much that has characterized the Menil Collection.  

The Menil Foundation, and the de Menil family itself, have long been known as generous donors. While they continue to contribute to a number of projects there has, since the opening of the museum, been a significant focusing of their benefactions. But with the construction of the Menil Collection they themselves became recipients. The degree to which this is so was exacerbated by plummeting oil prices through the 1980s that seriously reduced the value of Schlumberger stock with which the Menil Foundation is endowed.

But within the Menil Collection the prerogatives of wealth are deeply imbedded in the identity and practices of the institution. And the "Menil aesthetic" and the

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17 The difficulty of this task is perhaps expressed in Susan Barnes' resignation from her position after only 10 months service. Though Dominique de Menil announced that this was due to the fact that "with our task accomplished in less time than expected, (Barnes) is eager to return to her work as an art historian" (de Menil quoted in Johnson 1995), clearly the task of stabilizing the finances of the Menil Foundation and the Collection was not yet complete. Moreover, it was widely understood that Barnes was being groomed for a more desirable position in the future—construed variously as Director of the Collection; as a replacement for Miles Glaser, the Chief Financial Officer of the Menil Foundation, who was purportedly considering retirement; or as President of the Foundation, at such time as Dominique de Menil wished no longer to carry the burden of that role. That staff were told very little about her role, though she clearly had considerable authority, provoked a wave of anxious speculation throughout the institution, anxiety which was soon to be given substance in the form of the lay-offs.

18 The construction of the Menil Collection was funded in part by the Cullen Foundation, and the Brown Foundation, each of which contributed $5 million. The Menil Foundation contributed the sum of the construction costs, which amounted to approximately $24 million in total.
maintenance of aura that is central to it is predicated on this. In the construction of the building no cost was spared to ensure the silence of the air conditioning system. The models made in the exhibitions department of each piece in the collection, so that they can be positioned in scale models of the galleries for installation planning, are not mere approximations to the original but carefully crafted miniature replicas. There are no fingerprints on the glass of vitrines. Throughout the museum this scrupulous attention to detail serves centrally in the maintenance of the aura of the Menil Collection itself, and of its objects.

In seeking contributions from potential donors Gibbs sees it as crucial to be able to demonstrate the fiscal responsibility of the institution. Under this rubric this special care is read as merely inefficient. The scrupulous attention to presentation, the expensive but prestigious guest speakers, and the value placed on the meticulous, yet slow, realization of ambitious projects all become luxuries that can no longer be sustained, despite these characteristics being sited over and over as integral to the Menil aesthetic. And the problem of impression management is not confined to the demonstration of financial discipline to potential donors. Because the Menil Collection presents itself so seamlessly, it has mitigated against the recognition of need on the part of potential donors. Their exhibitions program continues to be robust, and there are certainly no tatty labels or burnt out light builds to indicate that all is not well. This, along with the long history of de Menil patronage, and their continued generous support of a number of
projects, has made it difficult for Menil Collection personnel and for donors alike to recognize the extent to which they now find themselves in the role of recipients, anxious to secure an endowment that will sustain their activities in the long term.

When the seriousness of their financial circumstances was raised publicly by Walter Hopps, when he announced in 1989 that he would stand down as the director of the Collection, many reacted with alarm, although the situation was by no means dire. It had meant, however, that formerly rich resources for acquisitions were no longer available, and that staffing levels, always quite lean, had become even tighter with the loss of several personnel who had not been replaced. And for Hopps, it meant that as director he had increasingly found himself preoccupied with fundraising rather than with curatorial matters.

In response to this announcement, Dominique de Menil commented, “It’s a new situation for me. I’m sort of shy about it....Before, my husband and I assumed entirely whatever project we had” (Chadwick 1989: 1). But from the outset, when the decision was made to build the museum, a $20 million endowment drive was also planned, to secure sustainable operating funds. But before long the collapse in the oil price had seriously damaged Houston’s economy, and it became apparent that fundraising would be more successful if deferred until the economic climate improved. The Menil Foundation guaranteed to meet the operating costs of the museum in the interim; a commitment that ran between $2.7 and $2.9 million a year (Glueck 1989). It also funded an annual
acquisitions budget of more than $1 million. But the Foundation has significant holdings of Schlumberger Ltd. stock, the value of which dropped from a high of $87 in 1980-81 to $38.25 at the close of the decade (Chadwick 1989: 6). In 1989 the Menil Collection launched a $35 million endowment campaign, to which Dominique de Menil contributed $17.5 million. The Brown Foundation contributed $5 million in addition to the $5 million it had already contributed to the construction of the museum, and various other foundations, along with family members and corporate and private donors, contributed sufficient to achieve the endowment goal in 1992. By this time, however, annual operating expenses had increased significantly from the budgeted $3.4 million. And by 1994, when the lay-offs were announced, annual spending had reached $7.9 million (Johnson 1995). The restructuring ushered in by Susan Barnes was directed toward reducing that expenditure to $5.5 million annually, and toward broadening the base of financial support for the Collection.

Commenting on the 1995 restructuring Susie Kalil, a Houston art critic, noted that the Menil

has nurtured an almost spiritual philosophy in stimulating audiences, [and]
also stood for conviction and a steadfast belief in the power of communing with a work of art....To ensure those aspects can be received by anyone who seeks them out, Winkler knows that the Menil must reach a wider public and get them to participate not only in the Menil 'communion,' but
as funding resources as well (Kalil 1995: 31).

Financial stability is considered profoundly important to the Menil since, as Winkler puts it, the experience of the work of art the Menil seeks occurs not only through "intimate engagement," but also through a perception of "resolute permanency" (Winkler quoted in Kalil 1995: 31).

This sense of permanency is also fostered by the Menil Collection's maintenance of the unequivocal signature of Dominique de Menil. Whereas civic collections tend to be defined by their bequests, and by the shifting agendas of their various directors, the Menil Collection gives the impression always of a supervening identity, if only articulable in terms of a certain singularity of vision.

In this respect, as in others, the Menil is considerably more like a private collection than a public one. It is not forced to accommodate disparate interests of the trustees, who in civic collections must always be mollified lest they withdraw their support or dismiss the director, as so often happens. The board of trustees for the Menil Collection is largely constituted by family members and personal associates of long standing. And while the Collection certainly does accept gifts of works, most notably perhaps from artists and dealers with whom they have worked over the years, as well as from others with personal associations with the de Menil family, it feels no obligation to accept gifts that it does not consider appropriate or desirable. Moreover, donors offer pieces fully cognizant, one imagines, of the extent to which their contribution would be
subsumed by the "Menil vision"; gifts are seldom acknowledged on Menil labeling.

With the opening of the building in 1987 the transformation from a private to a public collection was officially complete, though in 1993 Paul Winkler described it as still having "the identity of a private collection" (quoted in Kalil 1993: 24). Certainly the management of the collection had been professionalized and routinized in the course of it being housed in the museum.

Management

At the Rice Museum, as at St. Thomas, the staff typically were former students of Jerry MacAgy or Dominique de Menil who, like Dominique de Menil, learned their craft on the job. Job descriptions, to the chagrin of the Rice administration, were vague and highly flexible; one simply did what was asked of one. With the shift to the new building curatorial, conservation and administrative functions became more fully professionalized and organizational imperatives were increasingly bureaucratized, exerting overwhelming pressure on a much valued familial sensibility. Still, Menil Collection positions continue to be filled without advertisement; candidates are sought through personal connections, their desirability in part a measure of their identification with the "Menil aesthetic." In 1992, Paul Winkler referred in an interview to the Menil Collection’s search for a curator for its very well regarded collection of tribal art. It was reported that “in classic Menil manner, the search proceeds at its own pace, although
such a person is needed desperately” (Johnson 1992: 12). In 1997 no appointment has yet been made. Whatever the limitations of such an approach, it is certainly the case that Menil Collection personnel demonstrate a remarkable degree of identification with the project of the museum, despite differences as to how that might best be pursued.

Deborah Brauer, the director of exhibitions, speaking of her commitment to the Menil Collection articulated a critical difference between the Menil and other public museums for which she had worked, and in so doing identified a widely held sentiment on the part of Menil Collection personnel. At the Menil Collection she recognized a distinctive commitment to the integrity of art objects while in other museums objects had become subordinated to bureaucratic imperatives, such that they were routinely called upon to serve in the maintenance of the institution. At the Menil Collection, by contrast, not only is the integrity of the object not compromised by the institution, in her view, but indeed the management of the collection is directed primarily toward the maintenance of the object and, as a corollary, to the maintenance of its auratic character. It is perhaps this that Benjamin is referring to when, in his autobiographical essay, "Unpacking my Library," he asserts the significance of the private collection: "The phenomenon of collecting loses its meaning as it loses its personal owner. Even though public collections may be less objectionable socially and more useful academically than private collections, the objects get their due only in the latter" (Benjamin 1982: 67).
Dominique de Menil's refusal to characterize the collection in terms of a unified logic notwithstanding, the Menil Collection presents itself as a coherent entity in part by virtue of sustaining this "private" idiosyncratic quality. By contrast, the instability of the logic of civic collections, like the Museum of Fine Arts, is constantly shored up by the supervening telos of art historical narrative, presenting itself most often in the form of encyclopedic aspirations. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, models itself aggressively as a civic institution in the service of "the public." Funding for such institutions tends to be justified on the basis that these institutions serve the interests of education while also, and importantly, fostering a sense of civic involvement and pride. This agenda of "inclusion" is played out in the encyclopedic model whereby the public is offered a purportedly objective and full account of the history of art.

The encyclopedic narrative of so many museum collections is, however, seldom sustained in private conversation with its proponents. It is widely understood as a technology necessary in a bureaucratized institution that for structural reasons cannot sustain the idea of a singular vision, but that requires a rationalized set of operational principles. Since civic museums like the Museum of Fine Arts acquire by far the bulk of their collections by way of gifts and bequests, and are bound to accept much of what is offered them, despite the fact that it may be inconsistent with the acquisition strategies of the curators or their board of trustees, acquisitions policies tend to be broadly drawn, articulating a rather expansive vision of the collection that would readily embrace such
gifts.

While extraordinarily loose, this logic serves to articulate a coherent rationale demanded of (though seldom sustained by) bureaucratized civic institutions. Routinized budgetary allocations to each of the departments within an institution, the management of acquisitions budgets (whether by museum professionals or by members of the board of trustees), and requests for outside funding, all inevitably appeal to this logic of the whole as a more or less unassailable, yet supple, frame of reference. The various preferences of publics, museum professionals, and increasingly powerful boards of trustees might all be mollified by such a logic.

Consistent with this purported educative obligation of civic museums is the drive to make them, and the works within them, more "accessible." A senior staff member in the thirteen-strong education department at the Museum of Fine Arts, the administrator of a six million dollar grant from the Lila Wallace-Readers Digest Foundation for "outreach" activities, explained that the funding would be devoted to making the museum more accessible to a broader public; "visiting a museum," she explained, "should not be like going to the doctor, it should be fun."

In the interests of "democratizing" these bastions of high culture, museum visitors are at every turn encouraged by the provision of interpretive assistance, in the form of volunteer docents, audio tours, and explanatory textual panels. One is told what to look out for, what the imagery means, how the work of this or that artist can be understood in
the context of art historical developments, and so on. In this way bafflement and alienation are held at bay, and a new audience and source of revenue is fostered.

The democratizing impulse of these interpretive technologies notwithstanding, it is difficult to ignore their authoritarian tone. Indeed, this is consistent with Benjamin's claim that such attempts at the "popularization of knowledge" far from being liberating serve instead to sustain extant relations of power. So long as "the object of this educational work is thought of as the public rather than as a class" then all that can be achieved is "to stimulate, to offer variety, to arouse interest." If history is to be "shaken up" only to "relieve monotony; the result [is] cultural history" (Benjamin 1979: 355-356. Italics in original).19 This cultural history, "to which Benjamin opposes historical materialism," Douglas Crimp observes, "is precisely what the [public] museum offers":

It wrests its objects from their original historical contexts not as an act of political commemoration but in order to create the illusion of universal knowledge. By displaying the products of particular histories in a reified historical continuum, the museum fetishizes them, which, as Benjamin says, "may well increase the burden of the treasures that are piled up on

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19 Benjamin articulated this argument in the context of his critique of the educational program of the Social Democratic Party at the turn of the century. Douglas Crimp made the connection between this popularization of knowledge and the current democratizing agenda of museums in his essay "This Is Not a Museum of Art," in On the Museum's Ruins, 1993. Pp. 203-204.
humanity's back. But it does not give mankind the strength to shake them off, so as to get their hands on them."...The museum constructs a cultural history by treating its objects independently both of the material conditions of their own epoch and of those of the present (Crimp 1993: 204).

Despite the politically compromised character of public museums, Benjamin does acknowledge that "public collections may be less objectionable socially and more useful academically than private collections." But more crucially for him, it would seem, and certainly for the Menil Collection, is the belief that it is only in private collections that "the objects get their due" (Benjamin 1982c: 67).

Though it is open to the public without any charge for admission, the Menil Collection presents itself as an essentially private collection to which the public has graciously been granted access. The absence of an education department or outreach program is not a function of fiscal restraint, but nor is it indicative of a lack of interest in young audiences. The Menil Collection is an enthusiastic supporter of the Writers in the Schools Program (WITS), initiated by the University of Houston's prestigious Creative Writing Program. On Mondays and Tuesdays when the museum is closed to the public the Menil is host to groups of WITS participants. These children are introduced to the galleries not by artists or art historians, but by writers. And the intention is neither to teach art history nor "art appreciation." Indeed, far from being constrained to be passive
recipients of instruction, the children are encouraged to be active interlocutors, experiencing the works they see as catalysts to their own creative imagination.

Conventional education programs in museums seek to "explain" the works that we are brought before, such that we may experience the pleasure of mastery, rather than the instability of confrontation or genuine dialogue. What is sought in the WITS program, and throughout the Menil's relationship to its audience, is a visceral engagement unmediated by conceptual frames, wherein one's territory is "invaded" by a work of art such that it "demands a response" (de Menil 1968a).

This is no mean feat for a museum, since central to the practice of museums is the alienation of objects; from use-value; from economies of exchange; and from possession. In the Menil Collection, this immediacy is sought through the operation of aura, through which subjects and objects are mutually constituted. Indeed, it is precisely through the suspension of the alienation between subjects and objects that the auratic operates.

The auratic operates not only in the manner in which objects are presented in the public spaces of the Menil Collection, but in the enthrallments of the collection's daily management practices. In this way the seamlessness of the Menil aesthetic is sustained.

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20 WITS writers have settled upon a policy of resisting the impulse to seek art historical background on the objects, for fear that this mode of understanding would inevitably leach into the way in which they would frame the objects for the children. Like Couturier, and Dominique de Menil, they suspect that given half a chance pedagogy will overwhelm poetry, and they are earnest in their efforts to avoid submitting to this.
In many public museums the lines between "behind the scenes" operations and public presentation draws a distinction between a culture of knowing cynicism among insiders and the naive suggestibility of the public. Such a distinction does not seem to obtain in the Menil Collection. It is perhaps because the Menil Collection does not feel bound to attract a mass public, as civic museums are under pressure to do, that it does not consider itself compromised by its audience. While civic museums have succumbed to a regime of crowd-pleasing blockbuster shows and corporate fundraisers, the Menil Collection has suffered no such submission. It continues to pursue its own projects that are driven primarily by the interests of Walter Hopps, Paul Winkler and Dominique de Menil, who together assume the core decision-making functions. It is understood that the public the Menil Collection seeks to engage is one that will inevitably be well served so long as the Collection continues to pursue its commitments in an "exemplary" manner. And it is not only the public but the objects that get their due in this context, as Benjamin pointed out.

Whatever labor the objects in the Menil Collection are called upon to perform, whether in the service of self-fashioning or redemption, there is a strong sense in which the operations of the institution are directed toward the requirements of the objects, rather than the objects merely serving the institutional imperatives of a museum.
Economy of Care

This primacy of the objects is played out in Menil Collection installations, as I have argued elsewhere, and it is expressed architecturally in the form of the "treasure house" in which they are stored. But it is also reiterated throughout their daily management and handling. It can be observed in the painstaking crafting of their miniatures in the exhibitions department, for use in the scale models of the galleries used for installation design. The careful installation planning, for which Walter Hopps particularly is known, mitigates against unnecessary handling of art works when exhibitions are being hung; "If I don't know where every single thing is going, within three inches, I'm not happy," Hopps has commented (quoted in Tomkins 1991: 35). But the elaborate character of the miniatures is pure excess.

The conservation department is central in this economy of care, indeed it seems central in a variety of ways. It is perhaps the best staffed of the museum's departments with two professional conservators, both of whom have excellent reputations in their areas of expertise, in painting and works on paper respectively, as well as a third conservator annually as a Mellon Fellow, a framer, and one person providing secretarial support. The Menil Collection has an unusually strong commitment to conservation, particularly since many of the newer museums, especially those specializing in contemporary art, do not have conservation departments, and contract out what little work they consider necessary. Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, the Menil Collection's chief
conservator, identifies a number of reasons for this high level of commitment. First, there is Dominique de Menil's training in science, that underpins her special appreciation of the physical life of objects. Walter Hopps too has a particular concern for the object borne out of his involvement with artists and with the Ferus Gallery (that he and Ed Kienholz opened in Los Angeles in 1957); he has, as Mancusi-Ungaro put it, "a dealer's focus on the work itself." And Paul Winkler has a personal interest in conservation procedures.

But what solidified this base of interest was, Mancusi-Ungaro suggests, the Rothko project. It had begun in 1979 when she was called on to consult on the problems with the Rothkos in the chapel, to determine what was causing the whitening of the triptychs. Advice had already been sought from a number of conservators, but Dominique de Menil had received inconclusive and often contradictory findings. Mancusi-Ungaro traveled to New York to get more specific information on Rothko's materials and practices, but found that no such resource was available. Dominique de Menil, Mancusi-Ungaro recounts, said "you do it." So, she brought Rothko's assistant with her to Houston to identify materials and processes used by Rothko, and embarked on what was to become a ten year project. They made simulations and artificially accelerated the aging process, to discover the character of the specific interactions between materials, processes, and environmental conditions. It was not until this data was analyzed that a treatment program could be developed and carried out. She has become, in the process, the authority on the care of Rothko's work, publishing on the subject and consulting for other
museums and collectors.

What is particularly notable, for Mancusi-Ungaro, is that Dominique de Menil and Hopps and Winkler are all willing to recognize that properly researched solutions to problems take time. Throughout the long Rothko project Dominique de Menil never once pressured her to hurry, Mancusi-Ungaro pointed out with evident gratitude and respect. While conservators in some museums feel compelled to simply make things look better, so that they can be rehung or loaned for an exhibition without delay, at the Menil Collection the approach is different. Works are looked at in terms of their present and future care, and in light of this, attention is focused on the condition of the work and not just its appearance, on a cure rather than merely symptomatic relief. The procedure that Mancusi-Ungaro developed for the Rothko research is repeated for all of the works that come under her care.

But attention to the long term care of works, particularly contemporary ones, raises the question of precisely in what kind of condition works should be sustained. While we accept cracks in the surface of a Rembrandt, there is no consensus as to what constitutes acceptable aging for post 1940s abstract painting. In the absence of any consensus, ad hoc decisions on treatment must continually be made. In response to this, Mancusi-Ungaro has initiated an extensive project funded by the Mellon Foundation that documents on videotape conversations between Mancusi-Ungaro and contemporary artists regarding what they consider to be acceptable aging of their own work. Artists are
invited to the Menil Collection, and speak particularly of their work that is held by the Collection, providing both a general resource for conservators, but also contributing to the collection’s own very specific documentation of its objects.

Although artists’ views on the disposition of their objects are not definitive, this kind of documentation offers conservators at least one basis on which treatment decisions might be made. But more importantly, for Mancusi-Ungaro, and for the Menil Collection, this project is primarily motivated by their commitment to the primacy of the artist and ensures that the future care of their work can be informed by their own intentions and not by the abstract assumptions and conventions of the profession.²¹

For Douglas Crimp, invoking this particular concern for the artist as a rationale for conservation practices should not be read as a mark of the Menil Collection’s distinctive regard for the artist, since it is thoroughly consistent with the modernist cult of the artist. This is, according to Crimp, a central means by which aura is recuperated in the wake of the mechanical reproduction of art and the subsequent loss of authenticity, and this recuperation is a central task for museums, since “the museum is the institution that was founded on those values [that constitute the auratic], whose job it is to sustain those

²¹This protective ness toward artists was further demonstrated in Mancusi-Ungaro’s unwillingness to allow me to see any of this documentation. The tapes are kept in cold storage in the building, and are available on request by conservators, but cannot be duplicated. That the tapes are not circulated is, Mancusi-Ungaro argued, “crucial to artists’ participation” and certainly encourages their candor.
values” (Crimp 1993: 114). This advancement of the aura of objects underpinned by the special subjectivity, the “unique vision,” of the artist, the producer of objects is, as Crimp notes, conventional in the key legitimizing practices of art history, connoisseurship, and to some extent museology. Of course museums have been central in this process, both in commissioning this connoisseurship and in promoting the “vision” of the artist, at its most powerful, perhaps, in the form of the retrospective exhibition (Crimp 1993).

Crimp’s observations are apt, but his notion of aura, that serves solely to establish the authenticity of objects, cannot encompass the kind of auratic seductions that the Menil Collection participates in. When Dominique de Menil wrote of Jerry MacAgy, “She was an alchemist...The dullest abstract painting, the most musty object from a museum closet became extraordinary when seen through her magic lantern” (de Menil 1968b: 10), she invokes a sense of the auratic that is not confined to the presence of the object but to the possibility of transport.

But also, in the Menil Collection’s attention to the artist, with regard both to the long term disposition of their artwork and the manner in which it should be mounted, it is not so much the authenticity of the object that is asserted, but its sovereignty. They cease to be objects that can freely be acted upon, and this sense of the primacy of the object recurs throughout the discourse of the Menil Collection.

The recognized stature of the conservation department also serves to further the reputation of the Menil Collection. Pragmatically, it might make the difference between
an anxious lender agreeing to loan a piece for exhibition or not. Indeed, it is not uncommon for the Collection to carry out valuable conservation work on artworks that have been loaned to them. But less instrumentally, perhaps, conservation contributes much to the economy of exquisite care. Dominique de Menil and Renzo Piano had both been interested in the idea of the public being able to look into the museum and watch people work. They wanted the museum to have the air of a place of work, “a little bit like a shop or a light industry,” as Walter Hopps suggests (quoted in Howard 1988). A glimpse through the window into the conservation lab reveals a luminous and immaculate space that shimmers with authority.

The authority of conservation, however, does not extend to a rigorous adherence in the museum to standardized conservation guidelines. This is not to suggest that Menil Collection personnel are anything less than scrupulous in their handling of objects but that, on the contrary, there is a strong sense among staff that codified guidelines are designed for other kinds of institutions. In museums in which objects have become mere instruments of the institution, and relations between the objects and the staff that manage them have become alienated, formalized regulations become necessary. By contrast, at the Menil Collection, the extraordinarily high level of staff identification with the Menil aesthetic ensures a personalized and more or less impassioned relationship with the
objects, such that one's judgment can be relied upon.\textsuperscript{22}

But even among staff who subscribe to Dominique de Menil's vision, their professional training and experience yields some quite profound tensions. Historically, Dominique de Menil has placed much store on the accessibility of objects. When she established with Jerry MacAgy the Teaching Collection at the University of St. Thomas, it was, she often said, in order that works of art could be touched and held. And her famous For Children Show at the Rice Museum, that drew around 2,000 children on every exhausting day that it was open, allowed children extraordinarily immediate access to all kinds of ingeniously installed objects, some banal, but others precious. And even now, the Menil Collection is notable for its absence of barriers and its sparing use of Plexiglas. While this does much to foster the kind of immediate engagement that Dominique de Menil seeks, it can give specialists with professional responsibilities pause.

\textit{Exhibitions}

Similarly, the kinds of thematic shows for which St. Thomas and later the Rice Museum were so well known, pose difficulties for many trained conventionally in art history. Indeed, since the opening of the Menil Collection there has been a notable shift

\textsuperscript{22}This distinction between personal ethics and rationalized regulations might be said to apply throughout the distinction between familial and more corporate organizations.
in the style of exhibitions that are mounted. Thematic shows have increasingly given way
to exhibitions that show the work of a single artist. When I asked Dominique de Menil
about this shift, she spoke first of the cost of the elaborate installations that both she and
Jerry MacAgy produced. “We were living in a fantasy,” she explained, “we did not have
to worry about the expense.” But perhaps more to the point, was her comment that with
the opening of the museum they felt compelled to do shows that were “more serious.” In
this can be read a concession to changing fashions in the conceptualization of museum
exhibitions generally, and a corollary to this is that museums seeking to mount high status
exhibitions must increasingly bring in other major museums as participants, to whom the
show will travel. Private collectors may not be willing to lend a major work for a show
that will be seen only in Houston, but one that will be hung at MOMA, the Whitney, the
Guggenheim, or the Art Institute of Chicago, is a different matter.

This practice of touring shows and thereby sharing their expense has long been
practiced by museums, but the imperative for the Menil Collection is as much a matter of
the leverage that such collaboration affords, as it is a matter of economy. But this shift
toward single artist exhibitions may also be seen as a concession to the curatorial style of
Walter Hopps. He has a strong interest in paying very close attention to bodies of work
produced by artists, rather than to single pieces, but not in such a way as to compromise
the sovereignty of each piece. His approach reveals a deep concern for the relationships
between objects, and this is demonstrated in his installations of exhibitions, but what is
also demonstrated in the manner in which he hangs works, is a concern for the relation between the object and its viewer.

Walter Hopps' facility for the installation of exhibitions is legendary in museum circles. "In a Hopps exhibition," Calvin Tomkins wrote in his New Yorker profile on Hopps, "considerations of art history and scholarship are often present, along with ideas about style and influence and social issues, but the primary emphasis is always on how the art looks on the wall, and this, surprisingly, makes Walter Hopps something of a maverick in his profession" (Tomkins 1991: 34). While such regard for the object might have suffered from a supervening preoccupation with art historical narratives in many public museums, at the Menil Collection the sovereignty of the object has always prevailed. Moreover, Hopps' sense of the central importance of establishing the conditions for a dialogue between works is thoroughly consistent with the MacAgy legacy that informed the curation of shows at the University of St. Thomas, at the Rice Museum, and that continues to be expressed in Menil Collection exhibitions.

Hopps is also renowned for his prodigious knowledge of the art world, who did what when, what it meant to them, and where it can currently be found. He is perhaps even better known for his less than orthodox work habits. Nobody has ever complained that Hopps was not adequately committed to his work, but his "imperial disregard for time" (Tomkins 1991: 35) has infuriated even his most ardent advocates, and has cost him the support of trustees in several high level museum jobs.
Hopps' first museum position had been an appointment as the first full-time curator at the Pasadena Art Museum in 1962, and he soon became its director, until his resignation in 1967, having lost the support of his board. He took up a fellowship at the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington "a liberal think tank whose founders, Marcus Raskin and Richard Barnet, were interested in having a resident fellow who could think (and write) about issues of art and public policy" (Tomkins 1991:49). While with the Institute Hopps produced an analysis of the causes of the imminent demise of the young and adventurous Washington Gallery of Modern Art (W.G.M.A.). Tomkins recounts that that document came to the attention of members of the board of trustees of that institution who asked Hopps to take over as director. Among the recommendations Hopps put forward for salvaging the gallery, whose collection had already been sold to pay off debts, was for it to merge with the Corcoran Gallery.

With the remnants of the W.G.M.A. folded into the Corcoran Hopps became the director of special projects, and the old W.G.M.A.'s exhibition space became the Corcoran's experimental Dupont Center. But the Corcoran was itself in financial straits, rendered particularly vulnerable by its seriously inadequate endowment. "As several other troubled museum boards have done since," Tomkins recounts, "the Corcoran trustees sought financial stability by hiring a chief executive officer, whose main function would be fundraising, and whose authority would be superior to the director's" (Tomkins 1991: 50). This situation became intolerable for the Corcoran's director, James Harithas,
whose resignation left Hopps in the position of acting director. He was soon confirmed as director and pursued a variety of projects that were well suited to his interest in contemporary art making. "He had the courage to show whatever he thought was good, and he went out on a limb on so many things. His allegiances were always to the artists; he would always fight for them, against the bureaucracy" (Fralin quoted in Tomkins 1991: 51). Indeed, his identification with artists and museum staff (by no means discrete categories in such 'alternative' art spaces) was to be his undoing at the Corcoran. He was dismissed for his failure to intervene against the unionization of staff, but was immediately offered a position as senior curator for twentieth century art at the National Collection of Fine Arts (N.C.F.A., now the National Museum of American Art), a branch of the Smithsonian Institution. But for all his successes at the N.C.F.A. in terms of exhibitions, his erratic habits and administrative failures were insupportable finally in such a bureaucratized institution. In the 'alternative' context of the Corcoran staff had been willing to adjust to Hopps' working hours, which are reputed to begin at around 5 p.m. and end some time after midnight. Tomkins reports Hopps' Corcoran secretary Frances Fralin's comment that "Some people couldn't put up with it, but a lot of us just did, because it was so mesmerizing" (Tomkins 1991: 51). At the Smithsonian, his colleagues tended to be less willing to make concessions for his behavior. But it was not so much the demands he made on staff, but his protracted absences and intolerance for bureaucratic obligations that brought Hopps under increasing pressure to find work.
elsewhere. He was passed up for several significant West Coast museum appointments, since he was in his habits too much like an artist than an administrator. Hopps' old friend John Coplans identified Hopps' structural problem. "An artist has to engender his own work, and be his own man. Walter was incapable of doing that. He could not work without patronage, and institutions could not provide him with the right kind of patronage. Only the rich could do that" (Coplans quoted in Tomkins 1991: 53). Dominique de Menil was just the sort of patron Hopps required, and Hopps had just the authoritative talent and singularity of vision that Dominique de Menil admires and has liked to support.

Staffing

When Dominique de Menil hired Hopps as a consultant to the Menil Foundation in 1980, he had already done some consulting work for her on the lighting problem at the Rothko Chapel and served, at her request, on the board of the Georges Pompidou Art and Culture Foundation. It is characteristic of Dominique de Menil to hire people in this way, bringing them in to work on a particular project in order to ascertain their suitability for a permanent position. "I had been forewarned that he [Hopps] was difficult—impossible, sometimes—but I also knew," Dominique de Menil told Calvin Tomkins, "that he had a very good eye and that he was extremely good at display, and I was sure that we could get along" (de Menil quoted in Tomkins 1991: 54).
In Houston Hopps joined an already established team of researchers, a registrar, and a conservator, all working out of the de Menil residence on San Felipe. He worked closely with Dominique de Menil on the conceptualization of the museum, and got to know the collection working on *La Rime et la Raison*, the Grand Palais exhibition that first showed significant holdings of the Menil Collection as a collection.

With the opening of the Menil Collection in 1987 Hopps' role was transformed into that of museum director, with the attendant administrative functions he had always found burdensome. This was exacerbated by the fact that the Menil Collection opened in the midst of plummeting oil prices that seriously weakened the value of the Schlumberger stock with which the Menil Foundation and Collection were endowed. As a consequence, Hopps found himself again the director of an institution that was inadequately endowed, and no longer able to make the kinds of acquisitions he had envisaged. In May 1989 Hopps stood down as director, and now works out of an office at the Menil Collection under the title of consulting curator.

Hopps still plays a central role, however. In fact, the Menil Collection is managed jointly by Dominique de Menil, Paul Winkler, and Walter Hopps. Winkler was appointed acting director on Hopps' resignation, and then in October the following year he was formally named director. But the three work closely together, with Dominique de Menil continuing to retain central authority. Winkler was hired at the outset of the museum construction process primarily to coordinate that project. A graduate of the de
Menil driven art programs at the University of St. Thomas and later at Rice University, Winkler worked on de Menil art projects in the early 70s before taking up a position in Santa Fe as the assistant director of the Museum of International Folk Art.\(^\text{23}\) Among its various attractions Dominique de Menil's job offer appealed not only to Winkler's feeling for the aesthetic sensibilities that were to be materialized in this project, but appealed also to his abiding interest in architecture. It also presented an extraordinary opportunity for a young man with a BA in Art History.

Directors of public art museums are these days increasingly called upon to be entrepreneurs or, at worst, mere bureaucrats. They are also the servants of highly contentious boards whose agendas are often at odds with those of an equally rancorous professional staff. The primary duty of the director has increasingly become the management of budgets and the procurement of contributions to the collection, whether in the form of bequests or grants.

The directorship of the Menil Collection does not conform to this model. While Winkler does have to attend to practical matters of administration, his activities are by no

\[^\text{23}\text{His older sister Helen had been a student of Jerry MacAgy, and one of a small coterie of students very close to her (the others included Fred Hughes who on graduating from St. Thomas worked for the de Menil's dealer Alexander Iolas, before becoming Andy Warhol's manager; Mark Haxthausen, now Chair of Art History at Williams College; and Karl Klee, who owns and runs a Houston bookstore established with de Menil support). Helen became a very close associate of Dominique de Menil, was central in putting together the De Luxe Show and, with Heiner Friedrich and Dominique de Menil's youngest daughter Philippa, conceived of the Dia Foundation (see Colacello 1996).}^\]
means confined to the acquisition and dispersal of resources. He, along with Dominique de Menil and Walter Hopps, formulates the exhibition schedule, curates exhibitions from the permanent collection, and, like his two colleagues, takes particular pleasure in the installation of shows.

Staff at the Menil Collection tend not to be hired to fill positions that have already established parameters. They have the opportunity to carve out a niche for themselves that accommodates idiosyncrasies and enables staff, in principle, to focus on what it is that they do best. But the absence of anything approaching clear job descriptions can be crippling. As one staff member put it, “Ideally, you hire someone to do a job, give them the means to do the work, and then hold them accountable.” But the informal structural character of the Menil Collection makes it all but impossible, some complain, to do their work effectively. Worse, it can breed a great deal of insecurity; “you feel like hell, because finally you only have the status of a courtier.” Access to financial resources, information, and procedural systems, under this model, becomes ultimately a matter of privilege.

This insecurity is widely felt throughout the institution, and more acutely since the lay-offs. There are those who seek its remedy in the formalization of organizational structures, whereby the vestiges of the old familial model of organization would be abandoned once and for all. Others, who oppose what they describe as “the forces of normalization,” consider the problem to lie, not in the familial model itself, but in its
imperfect realization. They read calls for routinization as vulgar, as a failure to recognize properly the sentiment that underpins the Menil signature. Indeed, they fear the progressive erosion of that signature under this rubric. They speak with nostalgia for the days when management was "really" familial.

These stories tell of staff working out of the Foundation offices on San Felipe in the 60s and 70s, where a high degree of informality and collegiality was enjoyed, working on projects that were not discretely bounded. The staff all sat down to lunch together, with John and Dominique de Menil if they were around, to eat a meal prepared by their resident cook. They were insiders, part of a hand-picked group of people working together on various projects. "It was like a family," many recount.\(^{24}\) At the Rice Museum too, people worked together in loosely defined spaces and with very fluid job descriptions. Enthusiasm around putting a show together was such that people were happy to work late into the night, figuring out idiosyncratic solutions to technical problems that might arise.

These were, by and large, not trained professional staff but a number of people who had developed their craft over the years working with Jerry MacAgy and Dominique de Menil, along with Rice University students and graduates of de Menil programs at

\(^{24}\)This model did not suit all employees, however. One staff member who did not care to blur the boundaries between work and personal time felt John de Menil's disapproval as he watched her drive off to lunch each day.
Rice and the University of St. Thomas. Work at the Rice Museum presented many with
an opportunity to enter into art world employment, with the experience of having worked
on very well regarded exhibitions and with very well connected personnel. It was, in any
event, considered a very hip place to be.

In the absence of departmental distinctions or architecturally defined divisions
among staff, there was no call for formal operational boundaries or hierarchies. But with
the opening of the Menil Collection staff found themselves working in particularly
discrete spaces. The conservators take an elevator immediately on entering the building,
to their offices on the second floor, alongside the storage areas, and board rooms. To the
left of the back entrance to the museum are the exhibitions department, with Deborah
Brauer glassed off in her mezzanine office, the staff room, and the library; to the right,
across the entrance lobby is shipping and receiving, and registration, leading through to
the conservation department. From the shipping and receiving area are stairs up to the
building manager's mezzanine office, and down to the shop in which shipping crates and
display hardware are fabricated. In this context, with only one or two people working in
each area, the camaraderie of the Rice Museum cannot be sustained. Information does not
circulate inevitably, and the informal sharing of tasks and responsibilities cannot be
sustained.

There is a sense in which the familial model seems natural for a small private
institution like the Menil Foundation, and certainly its operation now in the Menil
Collection is understood as a continuation of the way in which the collection has always been managed. But this management style is also self-consciously asserted in distinction to the bureaucratized structure of art museums like the Museum of Fine Arts. This is driven by the sense that the corporate style of the Museum of Fine Arts overwhelmingly compromises the possibility of an aesthetic experience of the artworks shown therein. At the Menil Collection the governing ethos is that work should be conducted as a vocation rather than merely as a job. Deborah Brauer gives voice to this in her narration of her decision to join the Menil Collection staff, and work again with Walter Hopps with whom she had formerly worked at the Smithsonian. She came to the Menil Collection from work in “alternative” art spaces, since after some years of working in more conventional artworld institutions she had become dismayed by the cynicism that seemed to predominate. The Menil Collection offered the opportunity to work with an extraordinary collection, to enjoy the stability of an institution that was not foundering, as alternative spaces so often are, and to participate in a project that appealed to her sensibilities.

While the standard characterization of alternative spaces depicts them as participating in a more or less radical critique of “high art,” it is a critique that seeks not to

25To describe Menil operations as familial in character is by no means wholly metaphorical. Between the various Menil projects, and within them, extensive webs of kinship through several generations can be traced.
demystify art (though it may engage in projects that seek to demystify the power relations of the artworld), but to recuperate a more pure form of it. In the language of difficulty and commitment that typifies much of the “alternative” discourse, can be read the desire for and the claim to a more virtuous, exemplary relation to art—indeed a more seamlessly mystified relation than has been sustained in the conventional sphere of artworld operations. The familial relations of the Menil Collection, along with its commitments to the auratic, render it very appealing to those who wish to recuperate an enchanted engagement with art. Yet the status of the Menil Collection is complicated for “alternative” agendas: it is, on the one hand, considered politically elitist in its refusal to accommodate to some imagined mass public but, on the other, it exudes a depth of integrity that appeals powerfully to this recuperative sensibility.
Chapter Six
Conclusion

For the first few years after the opening of the Menil Collection, the bungalow directly across the street from the southern entrance of the museum housed the offices of Dominique de Menil, Walter Hopps, his assistant Alberta Mayo, Paul Winkler, and their administrative associate Barbara Coates. Staff and visitors could be seen coming and going throughout the day, meeting with Hopps or Winkler, or attending to business with Barbara Coats. It was the first stop of the day for staff checking their mail in the mailroom that is located there also. Sentimentally and administratively, it was the heart of the Menil Collection.

When Susan Barnes was hired, the occupants of these administrative offices, with the exception of Dominique de Menil, were moved to the curatorial suite on the second floor of the museum. Susan Barnes was installed in Hopps’ office, and Julie Gibbs, the development specialist who had since her hiring some months earlier been camped in a small research office in the library, was allocated an office in that building also. A new receptionist was hired by advertisement.

The symbolic force of this was profound. Staff who have long resisted any erosion of what they refer to as the Menil way of doing things, were alarmed. Even those who sought a more rationalized organizational structure seemed disquieted by the radical displacement of authority that this reconfiguration expressed. But it was confusing too. For this was by no means a coup; it was thoroughly authorized by Dominique de Menil.
The Menil signature was being compromised, but its defenders found themselves in conflict with none other than the author of that signature, Dominique de Menil herself.

For Dominique de Menil, however, very real concerns for the long term disposition of the Collection, concerns that become more urgent as the years go by, must take precedence over sentiment. As the collector anticipates a time when she will no longer be able to hold her collection together either conceptually or financially, her priority is to formalize legal and financial arrangements that will ensure the persistence of the collection in the future. Dominique de Menil is unequivocal on this matter. The Menil signature may find itself attenuated, but sooner that than its erasure.

But the more intractable tension lies not in the nuanced identity of the collection, but in the very character of its project. The Menil Collection is a materialization of Dominique de Menil's distinctively modernist French Catholic critique of modernity, but it is precisely in its materialization that it is forced to submit to the very forces of modernity that it rejects, that is, to the modern imperatives of rationalization. To manage a large, high status public collection requires attention, if not adherence, to formalized procedures, professional specialization, the formalization and depersonalization of human relations, and the strictures of efficiency. In this manner, the contradictions of modernity become manifest.

This critique, as it was articulated by Couturier, was directed specifically against academicism in liturgical art. But it was couched in a broader critique of the malaise of the spirit, which Couturier perceived to be pervasive, and which has powerfully informed
Dominique de Menil’s project. Modern art, for Couturier and for Dominique de Menil alike, is construed as recuperative of the spirit in so far as it is not dominated or constrained by the conventions of the Renaissance that had rendered art merely academic. Like the best modern art, medieval and primitive art can be understood, in this view, as expressions of an authentic spirituality. And what can be seen as expressed through that spirituality is the foundation of a universal humanism which, along with her progressivism, is a key modernist imperative in Dominique de Menil’s apprehension. These Catholic modernist preoccupations crystallize in an aesthetic form through the operation of the auratic. My argument is that virtually every detail of the operation of the Menil Collection is underwritten by this preeminent concern with the auratic, as a vehicle for various forms of transcendence.

While this transcendence has an otherworldly character, in its contemplative and devotional form, it has a rather more worldly aspect as a technology by which a transcendent self might be crafted. And herein lies the other contradiction at the heart of the Menil Collection. The extraordinary seamlessness of the collection, as it is rendered in the Menil signature, makes possible for Dominique de Menil the materialization of a unified self, but just as it does so, it raises the spectre of dispersion. The collection is at once a means of self definition and stabilization, and an object of deep anxiety.

Some may feel compelled to adjudicate as to whether the project is primarily concerned with the worldly project of self-fashioning, or with otherworldly transcendence.
But what is traced here are various operational registers, a mixing of spheres of value that have marked Dominique de Menil’s life and that define the Menil Collection.
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