

# The Arts in Houston

Ideas and  
Schools

**A**s part of *Cite's* survey of the intellectual basis for the arts in Houston, we asked six prominent artists and critics to reflect upon the common ground which the city provides in the thinking of architects, visual/environmental/performing artists, and writers. Recently, attention has been focused upon both Houston's role in the national art scene with The Museum of Fine Arts's "Fresh Paint" exhibition, and its position as either a center of, or an anathema to, "Texas writing," if such a thing even exists. A.C. Greene's article "The Texas Literati: Whose Home Is This Range, Anyhow?" in the *New York Times Book Review* (15 September 1985) suggested that a full-scale battle was raging between Houston's (reputedly) effete, academic, urban-oriented writers and the grass-roots word-punchers of the Texas frontier myth from the rest of the state (mainly Austin). *Cite* decided to fan the flames with its own survey of opinions on what drives Houston's culture, inspires its artists, gives roots to its artistic production, and a regional distinction to its buildings. Among the questions which these diverse opinions address are the following.

■ Are there recognizable "schools" present in the culture of this city, either in the sense of a coherent regional outlook, a group or set of groups which meet regularly and share ideals and theories, or an academically based avante-garde "compound" with connections to national or international movements?

■ How does the character of Houston's environment, business outlook, or attitude toward public and private life affect the arts, artists, production of significant works of art, and consumption of those works? Are any real "regional" factors present or consequential? Has Houston indeed become an international or national cultural center with substantial influence outside its boundaries or the state of Texas?

■ How do the universities and the academic community influence the arts? Is the connection between the ivory tower and the urban village strong and vital enough?

■ What kinds of forums for exchange of ideas are open to members of the artistic community in this city (in each discipline)? Should there be more?

■ What are the mechanisms and organs of criticism and intellectual reflection available to both the public and the artist in Houston? Are they strong enough and in sufficient number to make a difference?

■ What, finally, are the most important elements which make Houston architecture, painting, photography, performance, fiction, poetry and journalism distinctive, which gives these arts a claim to national or international attention?

The editors of *Cite* hope that the responses that follow will enlighten the reader and provide a basis for continuing thought and debate over the calibre of the arts in Houston today.



Elizabeth Glassman  
Photographic historian and curator  
Glassman & Lorenzo, Cultural Planners

Photo by Paul Hester

Photography in Houston is not all of one cloth. There is no unifying "school" or aesthetic. There is, however, a vital and energetic community distinguished by diverse approaches, on the one hand, and, on the other, by a singular drive to have contemporary photographs seen and photography discussed.

The centers which currently provide the common ground of experience for art photographers in the city are the schools (University of Houston, Rice University, and the Glassell School), the museums (The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the Blaffer Gallery at the University of Houston, and the Contemporary Arts Museum), and the Houston Center for Photography. Both the professors and the programs in the universities serve to draw students to the area. The University of Houston offers a masters degree in fine arts, the terminal degree for photographers. The link between the ivory tower and the urban setting is strong. Rice University schedules courses for degree and non-degree students, and photographers use the Rice Media Center as both darkroom and meeting place. At the Glassell School, courses take advantage of the association with The Museum of Fine Arts and classes are offered in the museum print room. Beginning in the mid '70s, The Museum of Fine Arts embarked on an aggressive acquisition and exhibition program. The collection has grown steadily, and the regularly scheduled photography exhibitions focus on both modern and historical material. Visitors are welcome to see original prints by appointment.

The recent establishment of the Houston Center for Photography (HCP) has galvanized many disparate voices of photography in the city. While personal aesthetics remain as varied as ever, HCP at least has become a place where photographers can see each other and dialogues do take place. HCP serves as catalyst and forum. In the active program of exhibitions and speakers, various national trends are seen and opinions heard. Members' exhibitions give Houston-based artists the opportunity to exhibit locally. The center's quarterly publication, *Spot*, has the potential of offering a much-needed place for critical discourse.

The key element which makes photography in Houston so distinctive - that which causes people outside the city to ask "What is going on down there?" - is the large numbers of people committed to the field. The vibrant and diverse activity is a result of their energy. Photographers also experience a kind of freedom here, a willingness to explore without being hemmed-in by a single aesthetic.

Perhaps one reason for that freedom is that there is as yet little critical discourse. But, the newspapers are developing and *Spot* will continue to grow as a forum for dialogue. Another lack is the number of galleries devoted exclusively to photography. Currently, Benteler Gallery, showing largely European work, is solo in this regard. While other galleries exhibit photography from time to time, a higher awareness is needed to stimulate informed collecting. The FotoFest, a month-long celebration of photography being organized for March 1986 and to be continued on a biannual basis, offers the potential of bringing more national and international work to the city.

The climate for photography in Houston is excellent and interest is growing. Right now we are moving from regional exposure to national and international recognition. True maturity will come, however, when we move from exposure to influence.



Alison de Lima Greene  
Assistant curator, twentieth century  
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Houston does not have an Academy of Fine Arts. There is no single institution in this city that establishes a standard against which artists measure themselves, either by accepting the rules of such an establishment or by rebelling against it. Instead, like every modern city which hosts an art community, there are a number of factors that create the community and are responsible for the diversity within it.

One of the clearest indicators of the health of an art community is how much is visible. Art, as an act of communication, cannot exist only in studios: it must have an open forum - whether in museums, galleries, alternative spaces, or through public commission. Such a forum indisputably exists in Houston and is what can be called the common ground of those engaged in the arts. But this common ground, however unique it is, simply cannot be summarized as a Houston School. Even the last year, the length of my experience in this city, demonstrates this.

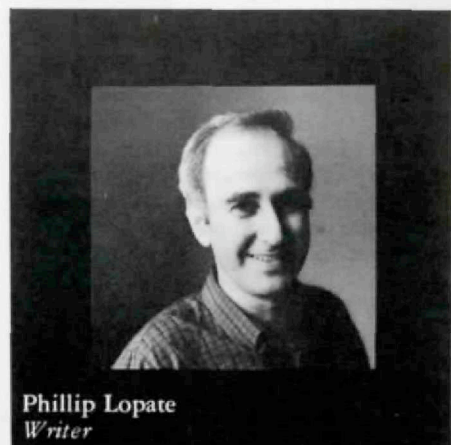
One assumption that frequently is made in discussing the existence of a Houston School is that it only includes artists living and working in and around Houston. I question this assumption. Once an artist moves away from Houston, does he or she shed his or her Houston identity? Or rather, isn't this artist Houston's ambassador to the rest of the world? Should an artist who comes here to work be viewed as an outsider? Is there a moment when such an artist ceases to be an outsider and is assimilated? Furthermore, should we view major exhibitions and commissions devoted to artists outside our community as invasions? Or does the fact that these events happen in Houston give us a proprietary right over them? I would like to take the broader view. For example, the Rothko Chapel has become an indelible part of Houston's history. More recently, Michael Heizer's *450, 900, 1800* on the Rice campus has extended some of our assumptions concerning public sculpture. Similarly, the Lillie and Hugh Roy Cullen Sculpture Garden, designed by Isamu Noguchi and now under construction, will change the fabric of the Montrose-museums area. Unique exhibitions, such as the Milton Resnick retrospective sponsored by the Contemporary Arts Museum this year, also give Houston its special character.

Conversely, is the art produced here overshadowed by these imports? In the past it has been true that Houston artists have had limited access to the public forum, particularly that of the collecting institutions. Now, however, this barrier is beginning to lift. The attention devoted to the "Fresh Paint" exhibition, both positive and negative, certainly demonstrates Houston's interest in examining and defining its parameters. With the upcoming sesquicentennial year there will be another burst of self-examination, although this time around it will be Texas rather than Houston alone that will be in the limelight.

Ultimately, however, the greatest need of the Houston art community is to be taken out from under its bell jar. While the phrase "Houston artist" is convenient in terms of promotion, I prefer more simply "artist." Within our community, we are very much aware of the biographical background of each artist - does this artist belong to a group or faction, does he or she have influence on students or show the clear markings of a certain teacher or affiliation? However, outside of Houston these distinctions break down and it is the art itself, not its attendant associations, that has the greatest impact.

I believe that Houston artists have a great deal to contribute to the national scene. Houston also is learning how to nurture its community. For this process to mature, I think we have to abdicate some of our regionalist pride. A museum biennial of local artists is not the solution. The most interesting galleries do not show Houston art exclusively, the same is true of the alternative spaces. Now that Houston artists have entered the museums, I think they should be accorded the respect of being shown in the context of national and international developments.

In lieu of an academy, the art scene as a whole must be Houston's barometer. All of us who wish to see further development in this community now have to take up the challenge of not considering ourselves a special case, deserving of particular rights. The Houston School may never exist, but there is abundant evidence that art in Houston does.



Phillip Lopate  
Writer

There is no Houston school of writing - yet. One could try to fan the embers into a regional tradition via such good neglected forebears as the late William Goyen and June Arnold, and Larry McMurtry in his Houston phase, and maybe go all the way back before O'Henry. But one would be up against the mood here, which is benignly amnesiac, ahistorical. Houston literary culture is very thin, partly because it exists in the eternal careerist present.

The thickest cultural milieu is in the visual arts, which supports talents at every developmental level, and is moreover friendly, gregarious, and solvent. One can party with painters, dealers, patrons, and architects at least three nights a week, and if the openings all resemble each other after awhile (the same faces, the same cheeks kissed), at least it's sociable. As a writer I am treated with hospitality and respect - so long as I keep up with the contemporary artists' names and don't expect anyone to talk books with me. The artists read magazines with their names in it, Colette ("sensuous"), and the *New Yorker* stable. The whole Houston intelligentsia is basically incredibly incurious about literature. Maybe it's specialization: I notice there's very little collaboration between poets and painters, musicians, or dancers. A lot of cordiality and goodwill - and avoidance of engaging with each other's work. I'm always amazed how few artists and dealers bother to come to poetry/fiction readings. The same is true for the more daring experimental film showings, like the recent Chantal Akerman series at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. People seem to take chances only on films with lots of pre-publicity or big advertising budgets.

Houstonians are ripe for hype. If some hot modern dance group or Phillip Glass-clone comes into town bearing a certain official (moneysed) avant-garde pedigree, there's a stampede to get tickets. Otherwise, forget it. The screenings of Abel Gance's *Napoleon* were jammed at the Coliseum. In the same season the MFA showed Gance's masterpiece, *La Roue* (a better film, by the way), and four people came. There's very little scholarly follow-through or retrospective interest on the part of audiences. The recent Balanchine festival was an admirable, noble attempt to focus in depth on a fruitful subject, and most people I knew stayed away - just couldn't be bothered with that sort of demand on their attention spans.

Part of the problem is that so little decent, honest, intellectually tough criticism of the arts exists here. Nor do the alternate journals and weeklies exist

that might be willing to stick their necks out (present publication excepted). Instead of healthy self-criticism we get all this silly talk about whether we are "world class" enough yet to stride the international cultural stage. Understandably, we're searching for an identity, but let's do more work first. I hate to sound so dour but we've got a long way to go. And I don't mean before we catch up to New York and Paris; I mean, before we reap the synergistic possibilities of cultural connection and cross-fertilization in our own backyard, for our own amusement.



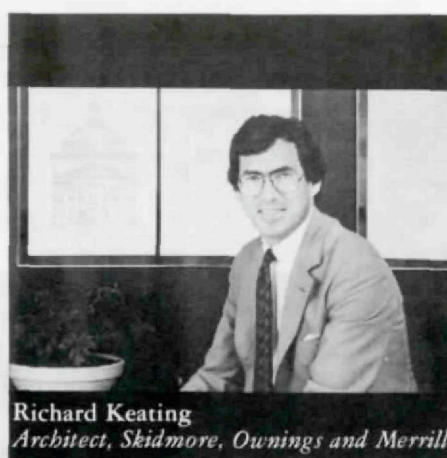
William F. Stern  
Architect, William F. Stern & Associates

Houston is unquestionably a regional cultural center, which does not necessarily mean that Houston, the place, has had a profound or even noticeable affect on the arts. The city supports museums, a multitude of galleries, alternative spaces, dance and theater companies, four universities, and critical journals, all of which are characteristic of big, wealthy cities that can attract painters, sculptors, writers, architects, symphony orchestras, and chamber groups with an equal array of directors, boards, and donors. Fifteen years ago this observation would not have applied to Houston, but, happily, the city's explosive growth has carried the arts with it. Houston has become a cultural center - in the spirit of New York and Los Angeles, and like the arts emerging from those places, the majority of work coming from Houston reflects the spirit of the times in which we live and the state of American culture in 1985.

Rather than regionalism, what really appears to mark the arts in Houston is diversity on the one hand, and the solidity of its institutions on the other. Emerging painters, for instance, can find a place in alternative galleries such as Diverse Works or the Lawndale Annex at the University of Houston, while the work of their more established counterparts is displayed at the Contemporary Arts Museum. Young writers now enter two of the best creative writing programs in the country - at Rice University and at the University of Houston - to study with their illustrative faculty of writers. The possibilities for the education of the painter, sculptor, and photographer are astonishing - the Glassell School of Art, and the art departments at the University of Houston and at Texas Southern University. The faculty of these schools are composed of superior artists in their own right.

Both the College of Architecture, University of Houston, and the School of Architecture at Rice University are nationally recognized schools of architecture and have an array of practicing professionals as their faculty. Likewise, there are many opportunities in theater, beginning with the established Alley Theatre and including Stages, Main Street Theater, Chocolate Bayou Theater, to name a few. And so it is with dance, music, and film. Recently northwest Houston became the location for one of the largest sound stages in the country, even rivaling studios in Los Angeles.

The myth of regionalism is displaced here by a more tangible and ultimately more sustaining force in the arts, a force that has to do with community, visibility, financial support, and recognition. The atmosphere is clear and open and the opportunities are seemingly without limits. The artist stays and attracts others, offering greater possibilities for Houston as an artistic mecca.



Richard Keating  
Architect, Skidmore, Owings and Merrill

Inherent in the make-up of Houstonians is the common ground for determining architecture in Houston. From the Allen brothers to the present, Houstonians have been a breed apart, particularly because so many have moved here from someplace else to further their potential for personal and professional development. Consequently, Houston is a city of singular-oriented and entrepreneurial individuals. The freedom of one's automobile, rather than a dependence upon mass transit, determines and reinforces individual choice of house and work. There are no natural barriers and few of the legal restrictions that customarily influence form in other cities.

The result in commercial architecture is that imagery and expression are market-driven to transfix the attention of observers with the impact of outdoor advertising. Locational choice for buildings typically is made in relation to view volume and market recognition. Distinction is provided by market-share and designer-label appeal. Because of this, architectural form, all too often, is superficially derived rather than intelligently distilled from the realities of site, program, structure, or circulation. In downtown Houston, another significant force at work is the small site of city blocks, on which only one major building can be developed at a time, each separated from the next by a uniform cordon of streets, sidewalks, and leftover "public space." This tends to defy the continuity and coherence of public open space as well as the development of spatial formation by building walls set in relationship to one another. (An unfortunately temporary exception to this are the two "new" open spaces created by the demolition of the Southwest Tower and the Lamar Hotel.)

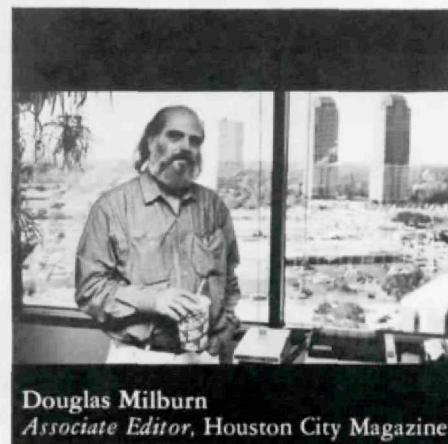
Another result is a sense of style which may best portray the personal characteristics of Houstonians. Indeed, taken as a totality, this style can be visually commanding, in that it attempts to compensate for the dramatic settings that other cities, with their bodies of water or mountain ranges, enjoy as a natural imprimatur. Unique to this Houston architecture is bold coloration, an appropriate and sensitive response to our region and climate. Towers of white, pink, green, red, silver, and grey are even more rich when seen through our moisture-laden, and somewhat filtered, light. Drexel Turner's characterization of Houston as the Emerald City of Oz is not inappropriate. Emerging robustly from an alluvial plane, carpeted in uniform green vegetation, Houston is a place of destination for the expectant and the motivated.

But beyond the rich, commercial architectural character of our downtown, the force of significant architecture in either design or theory is surprisingly limited in a city of this size. Acceptance of distinguished work in housing, retail, and public buildings is not comparable to that in the commercial sector. This tends to reinforce the perception that in Houston only market forces are at work. When it doesn't matter if a building's design is important for its marketing function, little or no "investment" in furthering the general culture seems to be expected. And unlike other cities of comparable (or smaller) size, we lack the critical media to act as watchdogs over the various activities that affect the city. In a city where no public bodies exercise authority or long-range vision, this is a fundamental deficiency.

It seems that these conditions exist in spite of numerous lecture organizations and two excellent schools of architecture.

One hopes that at least the Architects Club will provide an opportunity for designers to develop dialogues among themselves.

Although circumstances recently have forced Houston architects to develop a significant export industry in design, engineering, and construction, our city remains a grouping of sometimes beautifully designed objects held together by no binding force that might better serve the public other than that of outdoor advertisers. Since human culture and civilization are, of necessity, more than either people or objects in proximity to one another, our community must dedicate itself to distinction. It must evolve a grand and comprehensive vision that can endure the vagaries of the future to serve as an armature from which civilization - the culture of a city - can be maintained and enhanced.



Douglas Milburn  
Associate Editor, Houston City Magazine

Cultural lightning seems to strike in much the same way as the real thing: quickly, unpredictably, and with a lot of light and noise. The funny thing, though, is that to the careful observer, lightning strikes are not so unpredictable: if a certain set of conditions are present, the odds become very high that lightning will strike somewhere within a readily defined area.

When I first heard of Barbara Rose's foray into artistic meteorology ("Fresh Paint: The Houston School"), I applauded the sensitivity of her aesthetic meter-reading but felt her conclusions were premature. Now I'm not so sure. Maybe it's the way of the world. You announce what you are, then you set about becoming it. My undocumented, subjective impression is that the national and international art magazines seem to be taking Houston a bit more seriously since Fresh Paint.

So, already firmly in place on the international architecture map, Houston is now finding its place on the art map. But I still find myself thinking "premature." Much of what is being done here is good, and some is very, very good, but so little of the work has a "Houston" stamp on it.

What might characterize a real Houston school in any of the arts? Briefly, I have noticed two qualities of this city which as yet have found only limited expression by Houston artists. One is humor (Jim Love will, I believe, eventually be seen as the true pioneer of Houston art; and it was, I think, no accident that Max Apple was attracted to the city). The other is a much broader and less easily defined quality, and that is tropicality. I don't see either the climate or the geography reflected much in any of the Houston arts. (Larry McMurtry has come closer than anyone to capturing this essential aspect of the city.)

What is happening, I think, is this: a provincial city, trying to move up, first must establish its credentials in the received artistic modes. That's what Houston has been doing, and doing well. Think of the art, the architecture, the music (and musical organizations), the theater, the literature. But, planetarily, Houston is a city of the south, sited well toward the tropics, and European culture (which is the tradition we are working in) has no received, artistic tropical modes. Yet there, in that hot, humid, white-light territory lies the foundation for the true Houston School, if one is to be. ■