The Arts in Houston

As 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' "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 Literary: 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 ideas, 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?

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

Elizabeth Glazman
Photographer, Directors, Curators
Classism & Lorena, Cultural Flanerie

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 contemporaneous 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 Butler Gallery at the University of Houston, and the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston), 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 art, the area of interest 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 photography is one the Rice Media Center as workshops and meeting places. 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 expansion 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 myriad disparate voices of photography in the city. While personal aesthetic remain as varied as ever, HCP at least has become a place where photographers, writers, curators, and other interested 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. HCP, in the exhibitions given, has the potential of offering a much-needed place for critical dialogue.

The key element which makes photography in Houston so distinctive is that which causes people outside the city to say "Wow! What's 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 little critical discourse. But, the newspapers are developing and Sput will continue to grow as a forum for discussion. Another lack is the number of galleries devoted exclusively to photography. Currently, Benneuter Gallery, showing largely European work, is solo in this regard. While other galleries exhibit photographs from time to time, a heightened 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 an annual 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
Historian, curatorial director, 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 rebelling against them. 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 isolation: 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, 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 exists in the realm of living and working in and around Houston. I question this assumption. On one occasion I moved away from Houston, does he or she shed his or her Houston identity? Or does it spill over to Houston's ambassador to the rest of the world? Should an artist who comes here to work be viewed any differently than a Houstonian visiting his old city at a time when such an artist ceases to be an outsider and is part of the town?

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, although it has been a part of Houston's history. More recently, Michael Heizer's Double Negative (1970) on the Rice campus has extended some of our assumptions concerning public sculpture (sculpture without the drama and the history of the Muses). The near future will find the work of such artists as Tinguely, Lich and Roy Colt. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston has extended its reach and its influence, both positively and negatively, to the rest of the world.

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 of that the collecting institutions. Now, however, the 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 art" is merely a convenient label 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 attendence associations, that has the greatest impact.
I believe that Houston artists have a great deal to contribute to the national scene. Houston also has a real commitment to the arts and has always been an important center of local artistic activities. However, the scope and ambition of Houston's cultural institutions and the community's support for the arts have been steadily increasing in recent years. Houston has become a major arts center, and its commitment to the arts is evident in all areas of the city, from museums and galleries to theaters and concert halls. Nevertheless, there is still much to be done to ensure that the arts continue to thrive in Houston.

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 numerous and diverse venues for the arts, but it remains to be seen whether or not the arts will ever fully扎根 in Houston. The city's cultural institutions, including Symphony Hall, the Hobby Center, the Museum of Fine Arts, and the Contemporary Arts Museum, provide a variety of opportunities for artists to exhibit their work and for audiences to experience the arts. However, the arts in Houston are still struggling to establish themselves as a significant part of the city's identity. The city's cultural institutions have been slow to grow and to gain acceptance among the local population.

In the case of Houston, the arts scene is far from being a mere reflection of the city's economic and political landscape. The arts in Houston are an integral part of the city's identity and are an important contributor to the city's cultural and social life. The city's cultural institutions, including the Museum of Fine Arts, the Contemporary Arts Museum, and the Houston Grand Opera, provide a variety of opportunities for artists to exhibit their work and for audiences to experience the arts. However, the arts in Houston are still struggling to establish themselves as a significant part of the city's identity. The city's cultural institutions have been slow to grow and to gain acceptance among the local population.