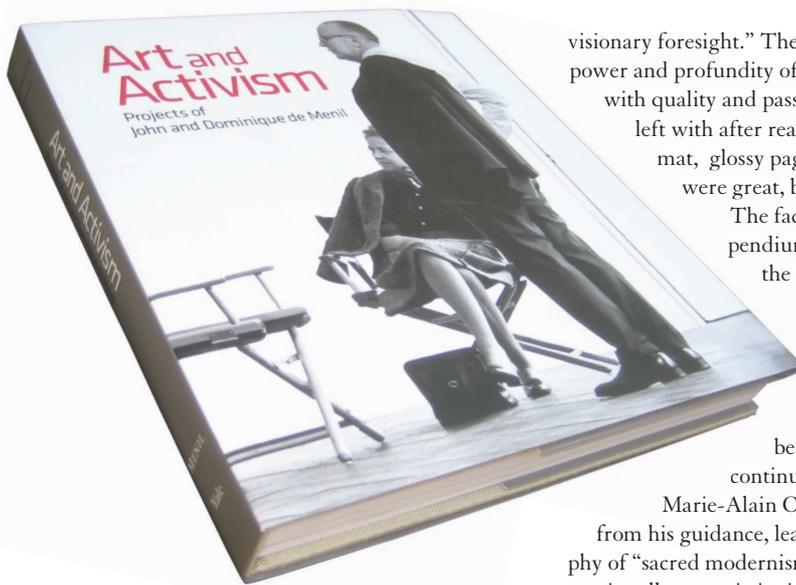


CAN WE BE CRITICAL OF THE DE MENILS NOW?

Art and Activism: Projects of John and Dominique de Menil
(edited by Josef Helfenstein and Laureen Schipsi, Yale University Press and the Menil Collection, 2010, 344 pages, \$65, hardback)

by John Pluecker



A SMALL WAVE OF BOOKS IS COMING, ALL attempting to document the historical contributions of John and Dominique de Menil. *Art and Activism: The Projects of John and Dominique de Menil* was first and subsequently followed by *Sacred Modern: Faith, Activism, and Aesthetics in the Menil Collection* by anthropologist and art historian Pamela Smart. In the coming year, Knopf/Random House is planning to publish a biography of the de Menils by journalist William Middleton and funded with almost \$400,000 from the Houston Artists Fund.

Without a doubt, these publications are a sign of a deepening interest in the histories of artistic communities of Houston. These books posit a history for Houston's strange mix of progressive arts activism and oil-fueled capitalism. *Art and Activism* also ends up being a veritable canonization of the de Menils through a series of essays by various scholars, artists and arts workers, most of them previously associated with the de Menils on some level as students, employees, or fellow travelers.

I say canonization because *Art and Activism* is an unencumbered celebration of the de Menils. In the foreword, the de Menils are said to have shown "independence and confidence, as well as

visionary foresight." They "demonstrate the power and profundity of simple ideas executed with quality and passion." The question I am left with after reading all 343 large-format, glossy pages is: yes, the de Menils were great, but perfect?

The fact that the book is a compendium of essays means that the information tends to repeat, spiraling around certain facts. The de Menils are continually arriving to Houston in the 40s with Schlumberger. The de Menils are continually meeting Father Marie-Alain Couturier and profiting from his guidance, learning from his philosophy of "sacred modernism." The Menils are continually commissioning Philip Johnson to build their home on San Felipe. This repetitiveness means that certain facts, certain judgments accrue and gain weight, building an entire mythology out of the de Menils.

As Houston moves into the end of its second century as a city, producing a new mythology is an urgent task. The book lauds the de Menils for their experimentalism, their daring, and their playfulness. This is not the old myth of the wild frontiersmen of Allen Brothers' lore. This is a myth to defeat another myth, the one most non-Texans are familiar with: the Republican politicians of Bush and Perry fame. This is a story a certain segment of Houstonians want to tell ourselves now to prove to ourselves (and the world) who we really can be. This need for a counter-narrative is understandable.

Still, is all we can do merely celebrate them and their actions? Can we criticize the de Menils while still recognizing their contributions?

I find myself drawn to texts in the book that make room for more poetry and less didacticism. Specifically, the text by Mel Chin seems to be playful in a way that other essays do not make room for. Only he, in the final essay in the book, pokes fun at Dominique de Menil, calling her "the empress of the Empire of Light and high priestess of a collection holding things divine and

surreal." He talks about her scolding him for smoking in her museum and then tells the story of nearly crashing into her car during an alcohol-fueled daydream. By the time I reach the end of the book, I am thrilled someone had taken the risk of having fun with the grande dame herself.

What would happen if we thought critically not only about their accomplishments, but also their contradictions?

The principal antagonism shared by the de Menils and Houston itself is the co-existence of extreme wealth and economic success alongside liberal politics and a sophisticated aesthetic sense. Even so, though the de Menil money flowed from oil and gas exploitation, their politics were hardly the same as those of Schlumberger, the corporation. In fact, Gerald O'Grady's essay in the book details the Menils' friendships with numerous socialist and Communist thinkers from Roberto Rossellini to Jean Malaquais and Leon Trotsky's widow to grassroots groups in Latin America. Deloyd Parker, founder of Houston's SHAPE Center, has a short article about how John de Menil funded the SHAPE Center when it was first emerging. Remarkably, this funding continued for almost 20 years and included the rent payment, the purchase of a building, a van and even Parker's first trip to Africa. Amazing work, indeed: brought to us by the oil and gas industry. The world of arts and culture in Houston is inextricably bound up in this fundamental contradiction.

It's important to remember that this move to turn the de Menils into a myth is irreducibly connected to institution-building. It's been the central dilemma of the Menil Collection (and modern projects generally): how to institutionalize a spirit and an energy of experimentation?

And yet, the result of the modern project is not only a series of institutions (MFAH, CAMH, the Menil Collection, Rothko Chapel, Rice Media Center, SHAPE, etc.) but also a wholly changed cultural space. A space within which we move. The de Menils were intent on opening up the traditions of Texas, making room for different kinds of people and different kinds of cultural expression outside of the old confines. Their success was unequivocal.

In actual fact, the community that formed around the de Menils has already been subdivided in millions of ways since the fifties and sixties. Houston is full of large institutions of art and established non-profits and autonomous projects. This contestation and contradiction is the real legacy of the de Menils. They created a space within which we could transgress. And part of that transgression should be looking back on them with an urge and a willingness to critique and question.

Further reading in the Citemag.org archives:
In Cite 82 an article on page 32 by Miah Arnold carefully chronicles the Menils' contributions to the countercultural movement of the mid-twentieth century and to the artistic and political infrastructure of the city.

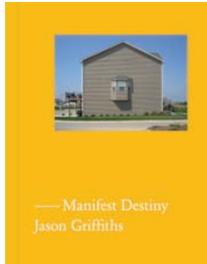
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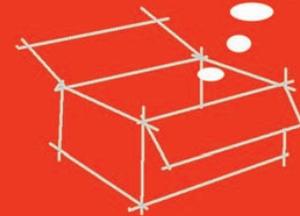
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