

## ***Art and Activism Projects of John and Dominique de Menil***

Edited by Josef Helfenstein and Laureen Schipsi

**Book is first to examine the Houston philanthropists' contributions to art, architecture, film, and the civil and human rights movements**

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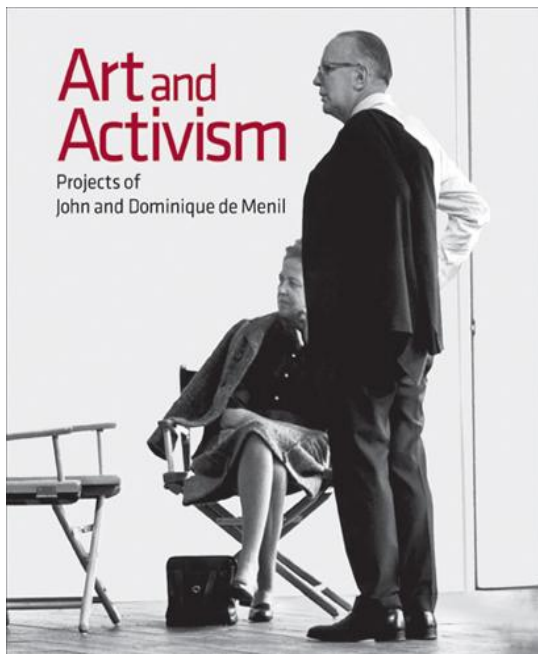
*"I'd like to say what a marvel that you exist, and that you move about in the world as you do."*

*"I personally...will and do celebrate your devotions, dedication and accomplishments."*

– Mark Rothko and Robert Rauschenberg, in letters to John and Dominique de Menil

HOUSTON, July 26, 2010 – John and Dominique de Menil, arriving in Houston from France in 1941, built one of the world's great art collections, championed modern architects and filmmakers, and became passionately involved in human-rights causes. In the process they transformed the cultural landscape of their adopted city.

The lavishly illustrated ***Art and Activism: Projects of John and Dominique de Menil*** is the first book to examine the couple's wide-ranging interests over half a century –



from art and architecture to philanthropy and politics. The de Menils established university art and media-studies departments; gave early architectural commissions to Philip Johnson and Renzo Piano; sponsored individual scholarships and funded civil-rights campaigns; built an ecumenical chapel with the painter Mark Rothko; presented one of the nation's first exhibitions of racially integrated contemporary artists; brought Michelangelo Antonioni, Jean-Luc Godard and Roberto Rossellini to town; took the Surrealist master René Magritte to a

rodeo; and introduced Max Ernst and Andy Warhol to an awed Houston.

All the while they were building the art collection that would one day be housed in the world-renowned Houston museum that bears the family name – the Menil Collection.

***Art and Activism: Projects of John and Dominique de Menil*** is a book of many voices – artists, activists, students, scholars, and family. The couple’s accomplishments – as patrons, philanthropists and political activists who lived and worked along a Paris-Houston-New York axis – is told in lively texts and remembrances by contributors such as the artist Dorothea Tanning, architect Renzo Piano, film scholar Gerald O’Grady, architectural historian Stephen Fox, curators Bertrand Davezac and Walter Hopps, and Africanist Kristina Van Dyke. Illustrated throughout with works of art from the Menil Collection and rarely seen archival photographs, the large-format book also includes private correspondence and reminiscences from artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Jasper Johns, Man Ray, Barnett Newman, Robert Rauschenberg, Mark Rothko, and Niki de Saint Phalle.

John and Dominique de Menil embraced all things modern and progressive. But as Josef Helfenstein and Laureen Schipsi write in the book’s preface, little prior to Houston indicated the direction of their interests or the fierceness of their commitment to art and activism. The Menil Collection, which anchors a green campus of museums, sculpture parks and art-filled chapels, speaks to the couple’s ecumenicism, commitment to human rights, devotion to individual artists, and prescient leadership in exploring cultural heritage issues.

John and Dominique de Menil met in 1930 – at a ball at Versailles (that neither wanted to attend) – and were married the following year. An heiress to the Schlumberger oil-field services fortune, Dominique held degrees in physics and mathematics from the Sorbonne; Jean (who would anglicize his name to John) hailed from a military family of more modest means.

Had it not been for World War II’s approach, the young couple surely would have stayed in Paris. But John, who joined Schlumberger’s Romanian office as supervisor of operations, was forced to flee Europe after aiding the Resistance. The family – there would eventually be five children – reunited in Houston, home of Schlumberger world headquarters.

Finding themselves in a new frontier, John and Dominique were determined to make a difference – and with the de Menils, making a difference began at home. To accommodate their expanding art collection and growing family, they commissioned Philip Johnson to design a modernist house. Dominique then hired the brilliant couturier Charles James to create a colorful, nearly baroque interior – the last thing you would expect to see in an otherwise severe International-style house.

Now known as Menil House, it became a laboratory for the museum – “its DNA,” said the Menil’s founding director, Walter Hopps. The de Menils saw it as a salon, the scene of lively kitchen-table dinners and debates, with many of the era’s artists and thinkers in attendance.

The rapid growth of the de Menils’ art collection was astounding, given its modest beginnings: a Max Ernst portrait of Dominique that took her years to appreciate followed by a small Cezanne watercolor that John bought for \$300 and brought home in his briefcase. After the war the couple began to acquire more European paintings and American contemporary works. The de Menils were known to buy entire shows from their favorite New York and Paris galleries, including iconic examples of Pop Art, Minimalism, and Surrealism.

John died in 1973, shortly after the dedication of the Rothko Chapel. Dominique survived him by a quarter of a century, opening the Menil –(Renzo Piano’s first U.S. commission) in 1987. Sited in a leafy residential enclave in Houston’s Museum District and bathed in natural light, the Menil presents art in a tranquil setting. Piano has described the Menil as a “portrait” of his client – “discreet, intelligent, welcoming, elegant.” Admission to the museum – and to all of its galleries, special exhibitions and programs – is always free of charge.

The institutions founded by the de Menils evolved into international forums that honor and further humanitarian causes. During her final decade, Dominique (who died in 1997) deepened her involvement in social causes, joining with former President Jimmy Carter to establish the Carter-Menil Human Rights Foundation. She created an award, sponsored by the Rothko Chapel, given to those who struggle against oppression, and established the Oscar Romero Prize in honor of the slain El Salvadoran bishop.

John and Dominique de Menil envisioned and executed a visionary program of art and activism. One of the themes that emerges from ***Art and Activism*** is the pioneering spirit with which the de Menils approached their projects. As Helfenstein and Schipsi write, “Building such a legacy required drive, determination, initiative, and a willingness to take risks... Such independence and confidence, as well as visionary foresight, is a constant theme of John and Dominique de Menil’s achievements. They set high standards for themselves and others, demonstrating the power and profundity of simple ideas executed with quality and passion. This book is a testament to the work they accomplished.”

***Art and Activism: Projects of John and Dominique de Menil***

***Edited and with a Preface by Josef Helfenstein and Laureen Schipsi***

Josef Helfenstein is director of The Menil Collection.

Laureen Schipsi is the Menil's publisher.

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The book includes a complete chronology of de Menil projects, exhibition history, a listing of the Menil film archive, and a selected bibliography.

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