

The Precarious is curated by David Breslin, John R. Eckel, Jr. Foundation Chief Curator, Menil Drawing Institute.

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PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Conversation with an Artist

Friday, January 29, 7:00 p.m.

Curator David Breslin and artist Danh Võ explore his work and that of others in *The Precarious*.

The Precarious, the Social, the Parochial

Tuesday, February 9, 7:00 p.m.

Director of the Rothko Chapel David Leslie and curator David Breslin discuss the ways art creates and reflects communities.

All public programs are free and open to the public. Menil members enjoy additional events, including a noontime talk with exhibition curator David Breslin on Friday, January 15. Visit the museum or menil.org for more information.

ARTISTS IN THE EXHIBITION

John Chamberlain (1927–2011)	Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008)
Gene Charlton (1919–1979)	Anne Ryan (1889–1954)
Sari Dienes (1898–1992)	Kurt Schwitters (1887–1948)
Ellsworth Kelly (b. 1923)	Richard Tuttle (b. 1941)
Elizabeth McFadden (1912–1986)	Cy Twombly (1928–2011)
Robert Nickle (1919–1980)	Danh Võ (b. 1975)
Claes Oldenburg (b. 1929)	

Front: Gene Charlton, *Untitled*, 1959. Printed paper, ink, paint, and crayon on board, 11¼ × 9¾ inches (29.8 × 25.1 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston. © 2015 Gene Charlton. Photo: Paul Hester

THE MENIL COLLECTION

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The Precarious

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The word “precarious” is used to describe something that isn’t entirely in one’s control, something subject to uncertainty or chance. While all artworks are, in a sense, precarious—from Kazimir Malevich paintings with their notoriously unstable surfaces to ancient stone monuments that today suffer purposeful annihilation in parts of the Middle East—collage takes the state as a foundational principle. The medium incorporates found materials, such as used cardboard, scraps of newspapers or magazines, and discarded fabric, that speak of past lives and alternative uses, of waste and wear, of reuse and reimagining. Referencing the many hands tacitly responsible for a work’s manufacture, in the 1910s the critic and poet Guillaume Apollinaire described the then novel art form as being “steeped in humanity.” This exhibition takes a focused look at works in or indebted to the collage tradition in the Menil Collection, examining a medium that embodies the joy and vulnerability that come with depending on others.

In 2009, the philosopher Judith Butler considered how dependence and fragility give shape to community. “Precariousness,” she wrote, “implies living socially, that is, the fact that one’s life is always in some sense in the hands of the other.” The lesson is not a new one; it is found in the writings of Homer and the Greek tragedies that reflect on the consequences of war, but one could argue that World War II and its attendant horrors heightened our awareness of the condition that Butler diagnoses. As the destructive capabilities of man were recognized anew and the profound power of advanced technologies became apparent, the difficulties of survival and the importance of coexistence became obvious; nations needed to be allied, refugees needed accommodation, and cities needed to be rebuilt. It is no coincidence that Butler was writing in the shadow of recent wars nor that, with two exceptions that serve as geographical and chronological bookends, the artworks included in *The Precarious* come out of post-World War II America. Beginning with the modestly scaled, tenuous collages by German artist Kurt Schwitters and ending with the cardboard construction of contemporary Vietnamese-born artist Danh Võ, the exhibition concentrates on a strain of artistic practice that foregrounds how precariousness is as much a social phenomenon as an aesthetic concern.



Danh Võ, *fiat veritas, et pereat mundus*, 2013. Gold leaf and ink on cardboard, 14 x 15½ x 10½ inches (35.6 x 39.4 x 26.7 cm). Collection of the artist. © 2015 Danh Võ

From Robert Rauschenberg’s humble, repurposed brown paper bag to Richard Tuttle’s delicate translation of would-be scrap to something closer to relic, the works on view traffic in the used, lived, and belabored. Like their Cubist, Dadaist, and Surrealist ancestors, who created the medium in the decades surrounding World War I, these later makers of collage pair aesthetic concerns with a deliberate attention to the social metaphors that attend their unstable materials. Though chastened by war and informed by material scarcity and the possibility of environmental catastrophe, the artists presented here chose to embrace the flawed world and its materials.

The very existence of the fragile artworks in *The Precarious*—not to mention the conditions that permit a future—hinges on the work and care of multiple others. Indeed, “precarious” descends from the Latin *precarius*, meaning obtained by entreaty or depending on the favor of another, the root stemming from *precem*, or prayer. And this exhibition is a prayer of sorts; it asks for empathy in our acts of looking and being. Like any entreaty, *The Precarious* hopes for a response.

—David Breslin