Art Libraries Society of North America, 33rd Annual Conference  
Hilton Americas, Houston, Texas, April 1-6, 2005

Membership Luncheon  
Monday, April 4, 11:30 AM

Co-Moderators:  
Jon Evans, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston  
Mark Pompelia, Rice University and President, ARLIS/Texas-Mexico

Speakers:  
Alison Greene, Curator, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston  
Dr. Marcia Brennan, Assistant Professor of Art History, Rice University

Recorder: Anne Simmons, Reader Services Intern, National Gallery of Art

Jon Evans called the meeting to order by introducing the speakers, Alison Green and Dr. Marcia Brennan. He commented on the appropriateness of the two-part lecture in keeping with this year’s conference theme: Beyond Borders: Collaborative and Explorative Ventures in Arts Information. It is the notion of collaboration that punctuates today’s lectures both in the collaborative efforts of Ms. Green and Dr. Brennan, and the subject matter of the lectures themselves, which explore modernism in Houston.

Alison Green:

Ms. Green’s lecture focused on the history of modernism in Houston beginning with the city’s efforts to construct a museum in the early 1900s. The spirit of reinvention and entrepreneurialism pervaded the city at the turn of the century and its citizens were faced with the challenge of building its cultural institutions from scratch. The development of the fine arts in Houston was encouraged by the Houston Public School Art League—a group of socialites that initiated the push to erect an art museum for the city. In 1921 the William Ward Watkin-designed building opened its doors—Texas’s first art museum. During its first years the Museum of Fine Arts focused on the collection of neo-Renaissance and Old Master paintings. It was a donation by prominent collector and MFA trustee Ima Hogg in 1939 that evolved the museum’s modernist program considerably. Ms. Hogg was well known in Houston for her collecting interests in traditional native art and contemporary avant-guard works by the likes of Picasso and Kandinsky. In the late 1930s and early 1940’s, however, the MFA’s exhibitions and collection practices were influenced by an overall World War II conservatism, and the museum’s modernist inclinations were restricted to the lounge area’s modern furnishings.

In the late 1940s the Houston art scene was forever changed by the emergence of modernist collectors and patrons John and Dominique de Menil. The more populist oriented Contemporary Arts Association (CAA) was also established in 1944 and challenged the traditional-leaning MFA, helping to shift Houston’s focus to contemporary fine arts and design. After some discussion of merging the two arts institutions, the CAA decided to maintain its autonomy, appointed Jermayne MacAgyand, and erected the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston in 1950.

The MFA reflected its modernist ambitions with the opening of the Mies van der Rohe-designed Cullinan Hall and the subsequent appointment of James Johnson
Sweeny as director. Considered an art world maverick, Sweeny mastered the vastness of the Cullilam Hall—taking the museum in daring new directions with acquisitions support from the de Menils. Sweeny’s appointment was the event at which Dr. Brennan began her lecture on Sweeny’s influence on modernism in Houston.

[Mark Pompelia then introduced Dr. Marcia Brennan.]

**Marcia Brennan**

Dr. Brennan prefaced her lecture by acknowledging the importance of collaboration between art historians and librarians, and the importance of that collaboration within her work. She dedicated her lecture to librarians in the spirit of collaborative ventures.

Dr. Brennan’s posited the Sweeney-curated Jean Tinguely kinetic sculpture show of 1965 as a starting point for the exploration of Sweeny’s rise and fall at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. At the time of Sweeny’s appointment in 1961, the MFA’s collection represented the erratic holdings of local collectors. With Sweeny’s selection the MFA hoped to fulfill Houston’s ambitions for a world-class arts institution.

Despite his critical success, Sweeny’s modernist agenda was often met with ambivalence from the general public. His rise as one of Houston’s cultural leaders was contrasted with his eventual downfall, a product of his strained relationship with Houston patrons and the MFA’s trustees.

Dr. Brennan remarked on the “creative innovation” and “creative destruction,” also evident in the “Tinguely Sculptures” exhibit, that characterized Sweeny’s career. Works such as Tinguely’s 1954 *Prayer Wheel* with its slow, jerking movements, or his *Sound Collage*, using multiple radio broadcasts, were whimsical and interactive, but challenged traditional notions of distance and detachment of the viewer from the museum artworks.

The Tinguely exhibit was met with mixed critical and popular responses. Anne Holmes of the *Houston Chronicle* praised the show’s opening. Museum trustees, however, dubbed it a “chamber of horrors.” The board’s reaction to the exhibition characterized its relationship with Sweeny and disagreements over the MFA’s criteria for determining artistic value. Was it fine art or ephemeral trash? These tensions finally led to Sweeny’s forced resignation. Dr. Brennan asserted that just as Tinguely’s work demanded the creative destruction of normative art/viewer boundaries, so was Sweeny’s career defined by the subversive art of self-creation and, eventually, his creative destruction.