

leaves of the ginkgo tree in the Slip's small park. The mirrored image of the conjoined stems is a reoccurring motif in the artist's work. The merging of the two parts alludes to his close relationship with Kelly, whose early use of hard-edge abstraction had a deep impact on Indiana's burgeoning fascination with text and pop culture. "Before Coenties Slip I was aesthetically at sea," the artist recalled, "With Ellsworth, my whole perspective changed. All of a sudden I was in the twentieth century."<sup>5</sup> Martin also had a close relationship with Kelly, who thought of her as "an older sister, a buddy."<sup>6</sup> For a period of more than a year they had breakfast together daily. Kelly's first sculpture was inspired by the bent lid of a coffee container from one of these mornings. Their connection is further illustrated by the small drawing Kelly made on an envelope addressed to Martin in 1959.<sup>7</sup> Tawney, the eldest artist in this group, employed Indiana as her assistant. He came across old brass stencils for labeling sails in her studio, tools that proved pivotal in shaping his work with text. *GOG*, 1960, is one of the earliest examples of the sign paintings for which he would later become known.

Located at the edge of the city, Coenties Slip was a crucible for exchange and discovery. Martin compared her time there to being in the desert of the Southwest, a place where "you feel as if you've climbed a mountain above confusion."<sup>8</sup> Set apart from the commotion of Abstract Expressionism uptown, the area was the grounds for a novel approach to abstraction that helped pave the way for movements like Minimalism and Pop Art in the decades to come.

—Michelle White, Curator

#### NOTES

1. Lenore Tawney, oral history interview with Paul Cummings, June 23, 1971, Smithsonian Archives of American Art.
2. Originally built for docking ships, the filled-in inlet (or "slip") is an area steeped in maritime history. At the beginning of *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville describes the sailors waiting to return to sea at the Coenties Slip as "mortal men fixed in ocean reveries." The romance of this literary aura still clung to the Slip's remote and alluring atmosphere in the mid-twentieth century. Among others who lived there were artists Charles Hinman, Fred Mitchell, James Rosenquist, Jesse Wilkinson, and Athos Zacharias and actress Delphine Seyrig (married to Youngerman). Cy Twombly had a short stay there in 1956. Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg lived on Pearl Street, just a block from the Slip, beginning in 1955, and John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Morton Feldman, Philip Guston, and Barnett Newman were also nearby. Chrissa is the only artist included in this exhibition that did not live in the Slip. However, she spent time there, often visiting Martin at her studio. The area was razed in the mid-1960s for development, accounting for the exodus of the artists at that time. Only 3–5 Coenties Slip still stands.
3. Yve-Alain Bois, Jack Cowart, and Alfred Pacquement, *Ellsworth Kelly: The Years in France, 1948–1954* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1992), 14.
4. Agnes Martin, *Lenore Tawney* (New York: Staten Island Museum, 1961), 32.
5. Quoted in Barbara Haskell, "Robert Indiana: The American Dream," *Robert Indiana: Beyond Love* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2013), 18.
6. Ellsworth Kelly, interview with Gwyneth Paltrow, *Interview*, Oct. 5, 2011, <http://www.interviewmagazine.com/art/ellsworth-kelly/#>, accessed Mar. 10, 2017.
7. According to Ellsworth Kelly, "When I thought of the first piece, I happened to be having breakfast with Agnes Martin in her studio. I made a model for the piece called *Pony* from the top of a coffee container we used at breakfast . . . Another piece was a sketch from an envelope. It still has her name on it. It's called *Gate*." Stephanie Barron, "Giving Art History the Slip," *Art in America* 62, no. 2 (Mar./Apr. 1974), 84. Quote originally printed in *Paintings, Sculptures, and Drawings by Ellsworth Kelly* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1964).
8. Agnes Martin, quoted in Faye Hammel, "Bohemia on the Waterfront," *Cue*, March 22, 1958: 17.

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#### PUBLIC PROGRAMS

##### Lecture and Performance

##### *Artists, Community, and the Landscape of the Coenties Slip*

Thursday, May 11, 7:00 p.m.

Suzanne Hudson, associate professor of Art History at the University of Southern California, explores the ideas that influenced artmaking around Coenties Slip in the late 1950s and early 1960s. She is subsequently joined by pianist Sarah Rothenberg in a conversation about the influence of nature on abstraction in art, and the program concludes with a performance of John Cage's "In a Landscape."

##### Lecture

##### *Finding the Grid: Agnes Martin and Abstraction*

Wednesday, May 24, 7:00 p.m.

Art historian Christina Rosenberger, author of *Drawing the Line: The Early Work of Agnes Martin* (2016), examines the arc of Agnes Martin's early career; her productive confrontations with artists such as Ellsworth Kelly, Robert Indiana, and Lenore Tawney; and the vibrant artistic networks that developed between California, New Mexico, and New York in the postwar period.

##### Film Screening

##### *Agnes Martin: With My Back to the World*

Dir. Mary Lance, 2003, 57 min.

Friday, June 2, 8:00 p.m.

Shot during the last year of Agnes Martin's life, this moving documentary consists of interviews with the artist complemented by shots of her at work in her studio in Taos, New Mexico; archival footage; and images of five decades of work. In keeping with her chosen life of solitude, Martin alone appears in the film.

*The above programs are free and open to the public. Menil members enjoy additional events, including a noontime gallery talk with exhibition curator Michelle White on Friday, May 12.*

Cover: *Untitled*, 1957. Photograph by Hans Namuth. Courtesy Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona. © 1991 Hans Namuth Estate. *Left to right*: Delphine Seyrig, Duncan Youngerman, Robert Indiana, Ellsworth Kelly, Jack Youngerman, and Agnes Martin on the roof of No. 3–5 Coenties Slip, New York City

## THE MENIL COLLECTION

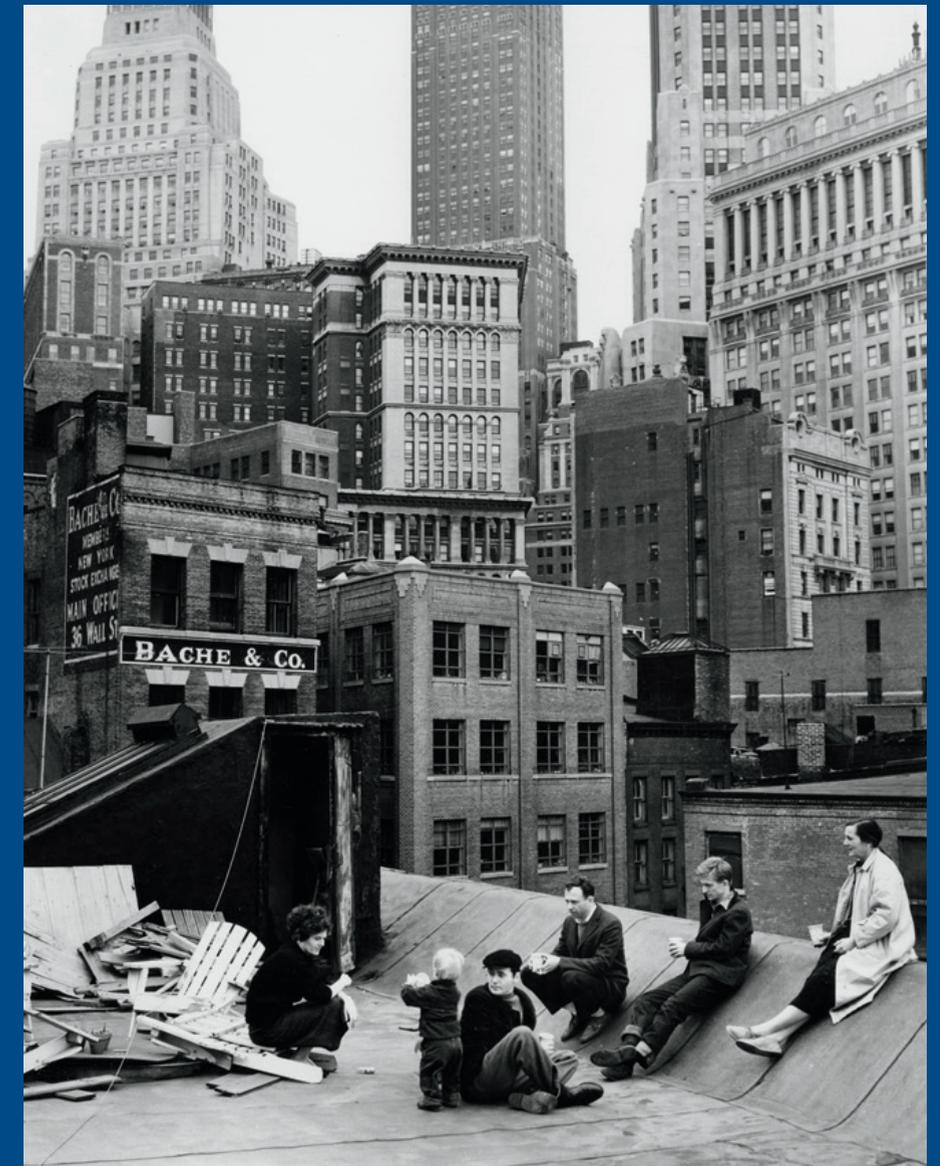
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# Between Land and Sea

## ARTISTS OF THE COENTIES SLIP



The Menil Collection  
April 14–August 6, 2017



Lenore Tawney, Coenties Slip, New York, 1958. Photograph by David Attie.  
Lenore G. Tawney Foundation

So there I was right on the river, looking at the river and the boats and the lights of Brooklyn. Behind me there was only this wall and there were all these pigeons and birds with wings flapping and outside were the gulls on the river. . . . It was as if New York was at my back. Then in the winter you saw every change of the weather down there, you were more aware of it than when you're uptown because you'd see the ice and the wind and it would come through my skylights some of it. I had a stove for heat and sometimes when the wind was blowing hard, I couldn't get the fire going and it was very cold. But it was beautiful.<sup>1</sup>

—Lenore Tawney

Chryssa (1933–2013), Robert Indiana (b. 1928), Ellsworth Kelly (1923–2015), Agnes Martin (1912–2004), Lenore Tawney (1907–2007), and Jack Youngerman (b. 1926) were among a group of artists, writers, filmmakers, and poets who lived, worked, or spent time on Coenties Slip.<sup>2</sup> The small, funnel-shaped street led to the East River in the old seaport on the lower tip of Manhattan, and it offered views of the Brooklyn Bridge, cheap rents, and distance from the bustle of the city center. The artists' studios were the defunct eighteenth-century sail-making lofts and industrial spaces facing the water. Known as "the Slip," the street's remove and its proximity to nature proved formative for its inhabitants, as did their influence on each other. The paintings, sculptures, and drawings they produced constitute an important but often overlooked facet of abstraction in postwar American art.

The artists of Coenties Slip looked to light, water, and the surrounding landscape as sources of inspiration for their works of abstraction. Some began to work in this manner even before they arrived in New York. In France, Kelly made studies of reflected sunshine rolling across the surface of the river Seine. He also began seeing "already made" abstracted subjects, such as the broken glass tiles of a factory rooftop that he depicted in *Rouleau Bleu*, 1951.<sup>3</sup> Youngerman's sweeping horizontal work *Rochetaillée*, 1953, is a meditation on flickering light. The green and blue forms correspond to shadows falling on the side of a rocky French cliff. Kelly and Youngerman studied art together in Paris on the G.I. Bill in the late 1940s and early 1950s and became key figures in establishing the new language of cool, restrained, and formally reductive abstraction when they moved to New York a few years later.

Many of the works made on the Slip evidence this deep interest in using the natural world as a touchstone for formal exploration. While Kelly lived there, he cultivated a flower garden on his roof in order to have foliage to draw, a practice he maintained throughout his career. Tawney too was drawn to the area's flora. *Seaweed*, 1961, a large, fiber work representative of her inventive open-warp technique, uses rough bits of linen and the linear qualities of pulled-smooth silk to evoke the feel of the slippery tentacles of aquatic plants. The blues and grays of *Horizon*, 1960, by Martin, conjure up a misty seascape or waves of mountains through her simple repetition of small triangles. According to the artist, her work is not a representation of the landscape but about the sensation of being in nature. In a different way, Chryssa's work also deals with the impression of natural phenomena. Based on ancient Cycladic sculptures, her rectangular baked-terracotta tablets were made by using the inside folds of a flattened cardboard box as a mold. The T shapes in the surfaces'



Agnes Martin and Ellsworth Kelly, 1958. Photograph by Hans Namuth. Courtesy Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona. © 1991 Hans Namuth Estate. Kelly's *Sculpture Model (Monsanto)*, 1957 (on view), sits on the floor to the left of Martin



Residents of Coenties Slip, New York, 1958. Photograph by Jack Youngerman. Left to right: Delphine Seyrig, Duncan Youngerman, Lenore Tawney, Jerry Matthews, Ellsworth Kelly (foreground), Robert Indiana (background), Dolores Matthews, and Agnes Martin

inflections recall the stylized faces found in the prehistoric Greek figures. Like blank pages of a book waiting to be inscribed, the pale reliefs are activated by the passing of light and shadows.

By approaching abstraction through nature, the artists of the Slip were doing something distinct from the Abstract Expressionism then reigning uptown. Reaching its peak around that time and led by artists like Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, Abstract Expressionism was characterized by bold thrusts of paint and bright colors. It was centered in the heart of New York City and stemmed from a belief that a work has the greatest impact when the painted marks, gestures, or drips have a subjective correlation to the psyche. The artists associated with it rejected the idea that art was a representation of the world around them. Those affiliated with the Slip approached abstraction with a willingness to let the natural world seep into their compositions, a quieter and more limited palette, and an interest in the emotional weight of refined lines and nuanced gestures. They were experimenting with flat and unmodulated planes of color, clean contours to delineate forms, and modular geometric shapes that came from their observations of everyday life.

Within this community of colleagues, friends, and lovers, exchanged ideas and influences can be traced. Notable are the formal similarities between Tawney's woven threads and Martin's diaphanous compositions of thin and taut marks of graphite and paint. In the only text Martin ever wrote about another artist, an introduction to the catalogue for Tawney's first show, in 1961, she describes the importance of felt line, sensitive touch, and precision, qualities that define the work of both artists.<sup>4</sup> *Ginkgo*, 1959, the small painting by Indiana on view, is derived from the shape of the