

Marcia Brennan

# Curating Consciousness

Mysticism and the Modern Museum

© 2010 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher.

MIT Press books may be purchased at special quantity discounts for business or sales promotional use. For information, please email [special\\_sales@mitpress.mit.edu](mailto:special_sales@mitpress.mit.edu) or write to Special Sales Department, The MIT Press, 55 Hayward Street, Cambridge, MA 02142.

This book was set in Berthold Walbaum and Futura by Graphic Composition, Inc. Printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Brennan, Marcia.

Curating consciousness : mysticism and the modern museum / Marcia Brennan.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-262-01378-9 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Sweeney, James Johnson, 1900–1986. 2. Mysticism and art. 3. Modernism (Aesthetics) 4. Art museums—Exhibitions. I. Title.

N72.M85B74 2010

701'.17—dc22

2009015566

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

# 1

## Modernism's Mystical Subjects: An Introduction

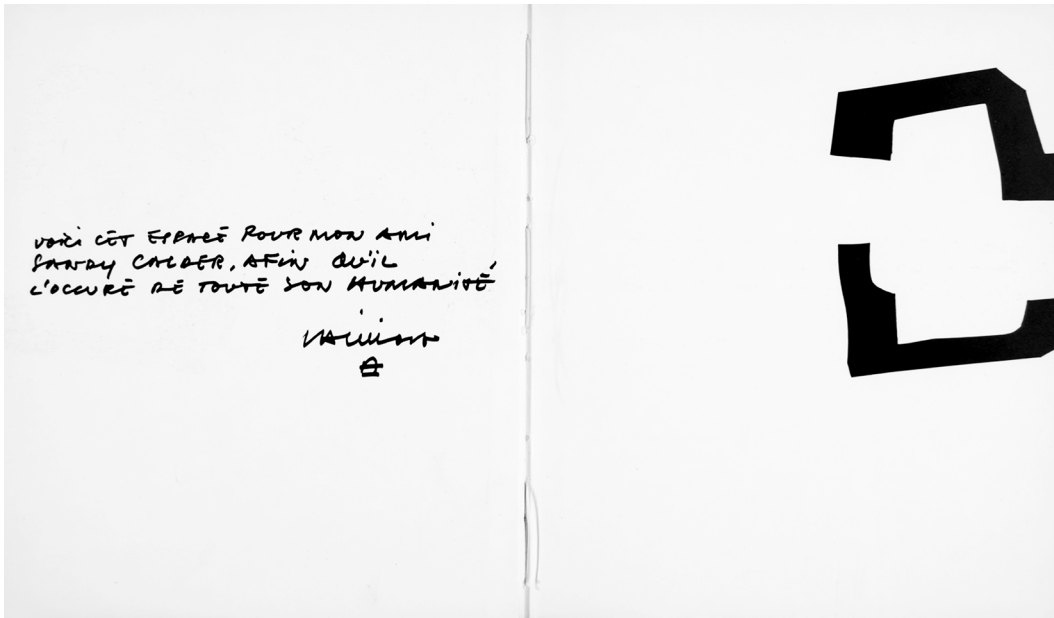
**A house whose door is closed is different  
from the same house with the door open.  
—Eduardo Chillida, “Notebook Pages”**

Despite the notable differences in the character of their work, the modernist sculptors Eduardo Chillida and Alexander Calder had much in common. For much of their careers, the two artists exhibited with the same dealer, the Galerie Maeght in Paris; they openly expressed admiration for one another and exchanged works of art; and they shared a warm personal and professional relationship, not only with one another but with their mutual friend, the author and museum director James Johnson Sweeney (1900–1986, figure 1.1). While this constellation of relationships could take a variety of forms, the patterns readily seem to lend



1.1 James Johnson Sweeney on the steps of Cullinan Hall, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, ca. 1962. Photograph by Hickey & Robertson. Museum of Fine Arts, Houston Archives.

themselves to creative graphic expressions. Thus in 1969, the Fondation Maeght assembled an exhibition of Calder's artwork with an accompanying catalogue that included original contributions by both Sweeney and Chillida (figure 1.2). As he did throughout his extensive critical writings on Calder, in this essay Sweeney emphasized the deeply interwoven relations he perceived between seemingly oppositional categories such as the "monumental" and the "miniscule," the macrocosm and the microcosm, presence and absence, gravity and levity, serious artistic accomplishment and a childlike capacity for play. Sweeney observed that



1.2 Eduardo Chillida, *Homage to Calder*, 1969. ©2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VEGAP, Madrid.

Calder's sculptures "design space rather than occupy it," just as the artist's rigorous modernist expressions arise from an essential need for play. According to Sweeney, "the entire lyrical side of Calder's art, all of his poetry, have their source in play," which imparts a sense of lightness to objects both "real or imaginary" through forms that are "monumental or miniscule."<sup>1</sup> Moreover, in a slightly earlier discussion of Calder published in the University of Notre Dame's *Review of Politics* (April 1959), Sweeney not only characterized the sculptor as "a lyricist in play," but he noted that the extended definition of play in the *Oxford English Dictionary* includes notions of imagination, pleasure, representation, and "the suggestion of 'a game' because it implies rules and further suggests a matching of contraries—of 'sides' in the common sports usage."<sup>2</sup> Thus according to Sweeney, Calder's simultaneous engagement with the real and the imaginary, the monumental and the miniscule, represents an intricate "matching of contraries," or

*coincidentia oppositorum* (coincidence of opposites), within the unified field of the artwork.

In its turn, the tribute that Chillida constructed for Calder graphically reflected these paradoxes, as it displayed—to paraphrase Elliot R. Wolfson’s poetic language—the reciprocal structures of enclosed openings and open enclosures that remained whole in their brokenness and broken in their wholeness.<sup>3</sup> Chillida’s homage to Calder consisted of an elegantly spare, monochromatic drawing inscribed with the appreciative dedication: “Voici cet espace pour mon ami Sandy Calder, afin qu’il l’oeuvre de toute son humanité. Chillida” (This space is for my friend Sandy Calder, for him to work with all of his humanity. Chillida).<sup>4</sup> Two horizontal, geometric framing elements face one another along the right side of the sheet, while Chillida’s handwritten dedication appears as a reciprocal calligraphic gesture at the left. Drawn in densely saturated black ink, the bracketed forms simultaneously evoke the broken edges of a unified frame and the unified edges of a broken frame—at once angularly rectilinear yet fluidly curvilinear, solidly grounded yet gently floating, compositionally balanced yet suggestively asymmetrical as they tilt softly at an oblique angle on the page. Chillida’s homage thus contains multiple layers of internal and external complexity; stylistically, it is readily identifiable as his own even as it exhibits many of the intricacies that characterize Calder’s work. That is, while Chillida’s drawing is not wholly either mobile or stable (*stabile*), the design simultaneously evokes aspects of both through the monumental solidity of levitating dark forms that hold the unholdable in the open embrace of their flexible frames.

Taken together, Chillida’s, Calder’s, and Sweeney’s texts and images evoke not stable categorical dichotomies but a dynamic sense of play situated within the reversible parameters of flexible frames.<sup>5</sup> As Sweeney noted, such a “matching of contraries” is visibly expressed in Calder’s and Chillida’s modernist designs, which simultaneously appear “monumental and miniscule,” open and closed, unified and broken, rounded and linear, centered and decentered, dense and weightless, stable and mobile. As in so many of Calder’s own works, Chillida’s drawing presents viewers with an opportunity to enter *and* exit a pictorial structure from multiple points simultaneously, and thus to pass through the highly stylized open doors that

flexibly frame the symbolic edifice of the artwork. Viewed metaphorically, these paradoxical structures can be envisioned as a series of interconnected passage-ways, all of which are framed by open doors that mark aesthetically distinctive points of entry and exit into the common place (*topos*) of a shared dwelling.<sup>6</sup>

Such themes as the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the microcosm and the macrocosm, and the reversible parameters of flexible frames are significant not only for Sweeney's curatorial and literary practices in particular, but for the power they hold to illuminate the deep historical and conceptual connections between modernist aesthetics, spirituality, and mysticism in general. While much has been written about the ways in which spirituality has served historically as a defining characteristic of modernist abstraction, considerably less attention has been paid to the ways in which the cultivation of spiritual and mystical experiences could operate as a primary curatorial goal within the transformative space of the museum.<sup>7</sup>

When writing for the educated, museum-going public, Sweeney's eclectic critical discourses were widely informed by a variety of philosophical and mystical sources, including the pre-Socratic philosophy of Heraclitus of Ephesus, the Taoist comparativism of the Sinologist Arthur Waley and the eidetic philosophy of the Asian art curator Ernest Fenollosa, the passionate asceticism that characterizes the ecstatic writings of the medieval and early modern mystics Julian of Norwich and St. John of the Cross,<sup>8</sup> the hermeneutical discourses on Christian mysticism produced by the Benedictine abbot Dom Cuthbert Butler, and the intricate visionary poetics of T. S. Eliot, particularly his seminal essay on "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1920) and the negative theology that threads through the later verses of the *Four Quartets* (1935–1942). These texts and many others provided Sweeney with a multifaceted means of engaging motifs of mysticism, that is, *the instrumental capacity of aesthetics to express—and potentially induce—transformational and transcendent states of being, coupled with the imaginative capacity to promote the viewer's symbolic ability to occupy multiple temporal and spatial locations simultaneously.*

Throughout his writings, Sweeney repeatedly characterized the museum as a secular temple of art, and he expressed the related belief that artworks perform

a vital spiritual service to man. Thus a museum's "basic purpose should be to stimulate the aesthetic responses of its public to a richer, spiritual life, to a fuller enjoyment of the spiritual over the material, of relationships rather than things." He also claimed that modern art and spiritual phenomena reveal "the unseen through the seen," just as works of art display the "conception of a macrocosmic unity through an assimilable microcosm."<sup>9</sup> In this, Sweeney was presenting an aesthetically oriented, modernist version of the Doctrine of Correspondences found within ancient philosophical formulations of hermetic mysticism. To cite a popular early-twentieth-century writer on mysticism, Evelyn Underhill, the Doctrine of Correspondences posited an underlying correlation "between appearance and reality, the microcosm of man and the macrocosm of the universe, the seen and the unseen worlds."<sup>10</sup>

Such conceptions of mysticism were repeatedly expressed in Sweeney's literary and curatorial projects through the themes of alchemy, androgyny, animism, corporeal transformation, pantheism, vitalism, magic, childlike wonder, and primitivism, as well as through metaphysically oriented theories of formalism and of the machine. Ideas such as the *coincidentia oppositorum* were instrumental in enabling him to situate his mystical approach, neither within purely private individual experience nor in a nebulous conception of transcendence that was devoid of content, but rather in concrete relation to the formal and conceptual structures of modernist artworks, their accompanying texts, and the museum galleries in which they were displayed. Various artists who knew Sweeney personally have affirmed that "magic" is an appropriate adjective to describe his museum installations, and that Sweeney himself was drawn to artists working in these areas.<sup>11</sup> Thus when discussing the works of modernist artists such as Calder, Marcel Duchamp, Alberto Burri, Pierre Soulages, Chillida, Jean Tinguely, and many others, Sweeney repeatedly focused on the artworks' capacity to engender visionary perspectives—and alternative modes of consciousness—in their viewers. By prominently advancing these themes over the course of four decades, Sweeney's professional career can be seen as an extended exercise in curating modernist consciousness itself.



### **Placing Modernism in a Flexible Frame: James Johnson Sweeney**

Born in Brooklyn on May 30, 1900, the son of a prominent Irish family, Sweeney received his bachelor's degree from Georgetown University (1922), completed graduate work in literature at Jesus College, Cambridge (1922–1924), and subsequently studied at the Sorbonne and at the University of Siena.<sup>12</sup> During the early thirties, he began to curate important modernist exhibitions and produce accompanying catalogues, starting with “Twentieth Century Painting and Sculpture” at the University of Chicago (1933–1934), a project discussed in chapter 2. Sweeney subsequently held the positions of lecturer at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University (1935–1940), director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture at the Museum of Modern Art (1945–1946), director of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (1952–1960), and director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (1961–1967). During the 1970s and 1980s, he served as a consultant and advisor to the National Gallery in Canberra, Australia, and to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. On the literary side, the development of Sweeney's art criticism was shaped by an early encounter with the British formalist critic Roger Fry. In addition to writing art reviews for the *New York Times*, Sweeney was also a contributing art critic to the *New Republic* (1935), associate editor of the avant-garde art and literary review *Transition* (1935–1938), advisory editor of *Partisan Review*, and vice president (1948–1957) and president (1957–1963) of the International Association of Art Critics.<sup>15</sup> In addition, he was a published poet whose verse appeared in the *Irish Statesman*, *Transition*, and *Poetry*.

Those who were directly acquainted with Sweeney describe him as being witty, formal, courtly, passionate, austere, determined, and exuding a sense of authority and self-assurance. Artists, dealers, and journalists who knew him in New York and Houston have affirmed that he genuinely admired artists, that he frequently asked for their opinions on displayed works, enjoyed spending extended time in their studios, and generously went out of his way to facilitate introductions. The painter Dick Wray elegantly summarized the situation when he noted that the artists “thought that Sweeney was another artist.”<sup>14</sup> His sense of discernment is reflected in Sweeney's work as a curator and museum director, as he repeatedly

advocated a highly selective, connoisseurial approach that emphasized artistic quality over a broader inclusiveness. While this acquisition method brought him considerable acclaim, it also repeatedly generated friction with museum officials and trustees. Thus while he organized a number of important exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art during the forties—including the monographic shows “Joan Miró” (1941), “Alexander Calder” (1943), “Stuart Davis” (1945), “Piet Mondrian” (1945), “Henry Moore” (1946), and “Marc Chagall” (1946)—subsequent shifts in administrative structures and responsibilities led to Sweeney’s departure from the museum in November of 1946.<sup>15</sup>

In 1952, Sweeney succeeded Hilla Rebay as director of the Guggenheim Museum. During his tenure he greatly expanded the museum’s permanent holdings and programming and cultivated a highly distinctive approach to modernist installation and display.<sup>16</sup> Sweeney acquired important paintings by Cézanne, Giacometti, and Miró; recent works by the American abstract expressionists Pollock, de Kooning, and Kline; and contemporary paintings by the European modernists Appel, Burri, Mathieu, Soulages, and others. In addition, Sweeney oversaw the acquisition of sculptures by Calder, Archipenko, and Brancusi, the latter of whom was the subject of an important retrospective organized by Sweeney (October 1955 to January 1956). At the Guggenheim, Sweeney also curated the focus shows “Younger European Painters” (December 1953 to May 1954); “Younger American Painters” (May to September 1954); “Three Brothers: Jacques Villon, Raymond Duchamp-Villon, Marcel Duchamp” (February to March 1957); “Piet Mondrian: The Early Years” (December 1957 to January 1958); and “Before Picasso; after Miró” (June to October 1960).<sup>17</sup> In her obituary in the *New York Times*, Grace Glueck summarized Sweeney’s considerable accomplishments and challenges at the Guggenheim:

In 1952, he was appointed director of the Guggenheim Museum, and served in that post during the construction of Frank Lloyd Wright’s then highly controversial building. He changed the museum’s narrow focus on “nonobjective” art by presenting shows and acquiring the works of pioneering modernists as well as younger European and American artists. In the words of Aline Saarinen, art critic for *The New York Times* during that period, he “symbolically as well as literally swept the place clean,” painting the walls white, taking pictures out

of what he believed were distracting frames, and replacing the second-rate with world-class works kept in storage at the museum.

But Mr. Sweeney was not a fan of the Wright building, which he believed had not been designed to show pictures to best advantage. He devised a method of hanging them on rods projecting from the walls, but could not overcome the feeling that the building was less a museum than a monument to the architect. When, in 1959, visitors began to pour in, and the museum's patron, Harry F. Guggenheim, asked for a more popular educational approach to the public, Mr. Sweeney resigned. He cited "the differences" between himself and the board of trustees over "the use of the museum and my ideals."<sup>18</sup>

An image from this period that colorfully evokes Sweeney's progressive perspective appeared in *Vogue* magazine's July 1956 spoof of "12 famous museum directors as they would look if their favourite portraitists painted them." *Vogue* asked the museum directors to identify "whom [you would] like to do your portrait, someone represented by a portrait in your museum." While the majority of his colleagues selected venerable Old Master prototypes, Sweeney chose the broken, puzzle-like forms of Stuart Davis's contemporary painting *Cliché* (1955) for his self-representation. In the accompanying caption, *Vogue* wryly noted that "Sweeney, a big, energetic man with a varied career, has brought the Guggenheim to the top level through his beautiful installations and independent taste. (Someone said: 'Jim is *more* independent than a hog on ice?')"<sup>19</sup>

Such characteristic independence notwithstanding, before the impasse over the Wright building Sweeney did acquiesce to the trustees' requests for popular educational materials. In 1957, he collaborated with the filmmaker John Hubley on a ten-minute animated film entitled *Adventures of \**. Narrated from the point of view of the eponymous asterisk, who fluidly transforms from a human being to a protean, twinkling star, this cartoon was intended to instruct viewers on how to approach modern art. The fluid slippage of abstraction and representation showcased in the film's vivid colors and highly stylized forms evokes the modernist imagery of Calder, Léger, and Miró. With accompanying music by Lionel Hampton, *Adventures of \** was a prizewinner at the Venice International Film Festival of 1957, and it was widely screened across the United States between 1958 and 1959.<sup>20</sup>

*Adventures of \** is significant because it exemplifies Sweeney's characteristic strategy of situating mystical perspectives within a *coincidentia oppositorum*,

conjoining a critique of bourgeois culture with a corresponding emphasis on the restorative powers of play in modernist aesthetics. The narrative of the film follows a classic descent/ascent pattern, in which the creative depths of the imagination are linked to a transformed vision of the rational “upper world” of the story. Imagined at first as an infant, the asterisk faces routine challenges and disappointments as he grows up which cause his luminous vision to darken and solidify, until he becomes at last an adult engaged in a monotonous business routine. At the end of the film, however, he experiences an imaginative rebirth as he views the world through the proto-visionary gaze of his son. While the child and the adult live in a world that is restricted by walls and boundaries, the established frameworks of domestic and professional containment, the restoration of the adult’s creative vision is marked by his passing through a flexible picture frame, an open portal into an imaginative world that returns him to his formerly fluid status as a radiant asterisk.

That year, Sweeney also participated in a panel discussion on “The Place of Painting in Contemporary Culture” held in conjunction with the American Federation of the Arts conference. In his opening remarks, Sweeney paired an adamant rejection of cultural conformity with an affirmation of art’s ability to promote a state of imaginative transformation that enriches everyday life. He lamented: “The leaning of our civilization is towards conformity. The broadening of [mass] communications has certainly fostered this tendency. Conformity, social or aesthetic, gradually kills the spirit.” In contrast, Sweeney vociferously advocated “a revolt from the established norm” as an effective means of keeping the creative spirit alive in mass-mediated American culture. In this way, he concluded, “the work of a painter, as the work of a poet, is not to find a formal equivalent to the emotions of everyday life, but to transform and to enrich them, in an imaginative order.”<sup>21</sup> Two years later, in his essay for the *Review of Politics*, Sweeney explicitly traced the sources of his country’s pervasive cultural limitations to the legacy of its “colonial beginnings: a culture that was essentially a moralizing and prosaic one, always suspicious of anything that might be regarded as a spiritual disorder or an undue emphasis on the esthetic—our heritage of that contemporary European culture which was brought by the colonists to these shores and which shared in almost equal parts a Puritan severity and an eighteenth-century rationalist

ideology.” According to Sweeney, the puritan inheritance provides “a hint of why the American public has been so reluctant to accept anything in which it did not recognize a predominant solemnity, which they came to confuse with dignity and respectability, in their scrupulous avoidance of the non-utilitarian.”<sup>22</sup> Throughout his literary and curatorial projects in New York, Houston, and elsewhere, Sweeney advocated aestheticized, mystical play as a powerful means to overcome these received cultural constraints, through creative encounters that induced transformational modes of vision and consciousness.

In various ways, the 1960s represented the culmination of Sweeney’s mystically oriented modernist project. This sense of fruition is exemplified by the number and quality of the modernist artistic retrospectives that he staged at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH); the uniqueness of the exhibition designs that Mies van der Rohe’s Cullinan Hall afforded him; the depth and development of Sweeney’s own literary and critical corpus; and the convergence of these elements against a backdrop of pronounced social and cultural change. He was at the apex of a long and distinguished career when he became the director of the MFAH in January of 1961, only the third person to hold this position. Given his extensive background, Sweeney was a compelling choice for the museum directorship, and the announcement of his appointment was carried in the national news media. Thus *Newsweek* reported that “in hiring the distinguished art critic and museum director [the MFAH trustees] were initiating ‘a five year plan toward building the [museum] into an art center of vitality and pioneering character . . . which will be worthy of the city’s enterprise. It is to direct this vigorous program that the board has turned to Mr. Sweeney.’” Sweeney himself was decidedly sanguine about his prospects in Houston. Regarding his priorities as museum director, Sweeney told a reporter for *Newsweek*: “It will be a great challenge. The trustees and I agree that I should keep moving and see the country. I’ll haunt the artists’ studios all over the world. They want to find younger artists who will be great tomorrow, and to explore in the older field for works of art that aren’t prohibitively overpriced. They want an exploratory business, an international and national collection, not just a regional museum. They want to reach out to the Orient and to Europe. That’s just what I like.”<sup>23</sup>

Prior to Sweeney's arrival, the MFAH's permanent collection had consisted of relatively modest and eclectic holdings whose strengths primarily reflected the tastes of local collectors. As museum director, Sweeney undertook a highly ambitious program that included key acquisitions which, to this day, represent crucial components of the permanent collection, and curating a series of sensational—and innovatively installed—exhibitions in Cullinan Hall, the MFAH's modern wing. Designed by Mies van der Rohe during the fifties, Cullinan Hall was originally conceived as a thirty-foot-high, column-free structure that contained 10,000 square feet of flexible exhibition space. Sweeney typically treated this dramatic setting like a kind of theatrical set that facilitated an interactive performance between artworks and their viewers. He elaborated on these concepts in the French art magazine *L'Oeil* (May 1963) when he characterized the architecture of Cullinan Hall as providing a kind of flexible frame for his museum installations, just as he described the open, interior volume of Mies's architectural space as itself a work of modern art.<sup>24</sup> Thus visitors encountered individual works of art that were placed within the collective work of art of Sweeney's exhibition, which was itself situated within Mies's architectural work of art. The accompanying exhibition catalogues, elegantly designed by Herbert Matter, offered additional narrative and conceptual frameworks to express Sweeney's creative vision.

Sweeney's curatorial engagement with the *coincidentia oppositorum* can also be seen in his multivalent approach to the picture frame. In 1963, he commented on the ambivalent function of the frame as a coincidence of separation and conjunction. According to Sweeney, the frame at once demarcated the edges of an artwork, establishing a sense of internal and external closure, even as it helped to achieve a sense of contextual integration between the individual artwork and its ambient surroundings. As he observed, "every painting realized as an independent unit still requires a frame to serve it in either one of these ways, either as a fence against the encroachment of its environment, or as a link to its background and surroundings." He maintained that his signature gesture of painting the gallery walls white promoted this "double function, namely as a frame for each individual picture and at the same time as a frame for the total exhibition."<sup>25</sup> By emphasizing the simultaneously bounding and bonding functions of the frame,

Sweeney conjoined seemingly antithetical categories in a *coincidentia oppositorum*: as a symbolic and material boundary demarcating the work of art from all around it, and as a powerful point of entry that connected viewers to imaginative worlds.

In short, under Sweeney's guidance the MFAH went from being a largely provincial institution to an "international force" that commanded considerable attention for its innovative programming and for the stature of its modernist and ethnographic collections.<sup>26</sup> With the acquisition of modern and contemporary paintings and sculptures by artists such as Pierre Alechinsky, Corneille Beverloo, Brancusi, Burri, Calder, Chillida, Robert Delaunay, Lucio Fontana, Paul Klee, Franz Kline, Joan Miró, Piet Mondrian, Robert Motherwell, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Niki de Saint Phalle, Soulages, Antoni Tàpies, Tinguely, and Mark Tobey, Sweeney assembled an unusual and highly relevant collection of modern European and American art.

In addition to these key acquisitions, one of Sweeney's most sensational curatorial projects was his initial identification, and subsequent supervision of the excavation, of a sixteen-ton carved basalt Olmec head from a dense portion of the Mexican jungle. He then persuaded the Mexican government to lend this national treasure to the MFAH where, in 1963, it was prominently displayed in an exhibition of Olmec cultural artifacts.<sup>27</sup> Other major undertakings include his organization of an important "Georgia O'Keeffe Exhibition" (May 28 to July 3, 1966), and his assembling of an extensive loan show featuring works by artists of pre-World War I Paris. Entitled "The Heroic Years: Paris 1908–14," this monumental exhibition opened in Houston in the autumn of 1965.<sup>28</sup> As Edward Mayo, who served as the museum's registrar during Sweeney's tenure, succinctly observed, "Sweeney brought modernism to Houston in a way that it had never been brought before."<sup>29</sup> By 1966, the journal *Art Voices* credited him with the "cultural boom" that was taking place in Houston: "The influence of James Johnson Sweeney is unquestionably one of the greatest factors in the Houston museum's excellence. Coming to the museum from the directorship of the Guggenheim in 1961, Sweeney has contributed much in the imaginative and superbly mounted exhibitions he has created in the last four years."<sup>30</sup>

At the MFAH, Sweeney cultivated relationships with key supporting patrons, especially John and Dominique de Menil; orchestrated intricate negotiations with colleagues and dealers; and secured strategic acquisitions that were integral to the building of the museum collection. Not surprisingly, his high-profile presence and progressive exhibitions elicited spirited responses from contemporary audiences. In 1963, two years into his tenure as museum director, Sweeney was the recipient of *Art in America's* Annual Award for an Outstanding Contribution to Modern Art. The citation acknowledged that Sweeney

has, through the years, consistently sought the best in advanced and often controversial art, and given the emerging artist a forum at major exhibitions. He has served the museum and the artist handsomely in inventive installations. He has traveled extensively in America and abroad to bring into international focus the varying strands of art expression. As president of the International Association of Art Critics he has worked for the spread of vital art information around the world. His own scholarly and daring writings on artists, architects and museum practices are respected and read in several languages. In taking the directorship of the Houston Museum of Fine Arts he devotes his brilliant career to the major challenge of a museum outside the New York arena.<sup>51</sup>

In turn, prominent Houstonians recognized the important, if often challenging, nature of Sweeney's modernist enterprise. The same year that he received the *Art in America* award, the Houston Chamber of Commerce boasted: "Under the brilliant guidance of its internationally famous Director James Johnson Sweeney (formerly of the Guggenheim), the Museum has become a lively and nationally admired art center."<sup>52</sup>

At the same time, the public response to his modernist project remained highly ambivalent, with both genuine admiration and pronounced resistance from contemporary viewers. This polarizing dynamic—another cultural and professional instance of the *coincidentia oppositorum*—contributed to his visible success and to his subsequent departure from his position as museum director. According to various knowledgeable individuals, Sweeney did not go out of his way to cultivate relationships with important patrons in Houston as fully as he might have. This situation was exacerbated by his frequent travel and extended absences from the city.



As a result, support eroded for his various initiatives. Ultimately, sufficient resources were lacking for the purchase of many of the artworks that Sweeney brought to Houston on approval as potential acquisitions, and there were insufficient funds to cover the expenses incurred in producing his exhibitions and catalogues. Thus in July of 1967, the museum trustees asked Sweeney to step down from his full-time post as museum director.<sup>33</sup>

Once again, these complex interrelationships lend themselves to striking visual expressions. Jack Boynton, one of the artists featured in Sweeney's "Younger American Painters" show at the Guggenheim (1954), has produced a sketch of *Sweeney, Imagined from Memory* (2008, figure 1.3) that portrays him as a person of great thoughtfulness and sensitivity, with traces of poignancy and resignation associated with the various challenges that he encountered professionally.

From a different perspective, in an image simply entitled *OUT!* (1966, figure 1.4), the Texas artist Frank Freed depicted Sweeney standing authoritatively in the MFAH gallery, on whose signature "Sweeney white walls" hang abstract paintings by Franz Kline and Adolph Gottlieb.<sup>34</sup> The museum director vigorously points to the doorway, essentially banishing a cowering young artist who has committed the error of presenting a conventional landscape for the director's consideration. Himself a figure painter, Freed might be expressing the frustrations that many Houstonians experienced over Sweeney's singularly modernist vision. Thus as much as *OUT!* is a satirical portrait of Sweeney, it can be viewed more broadly as a pointed period commentary on the cultural politics of Houston during the sixties, a subject discussed throughout this study.

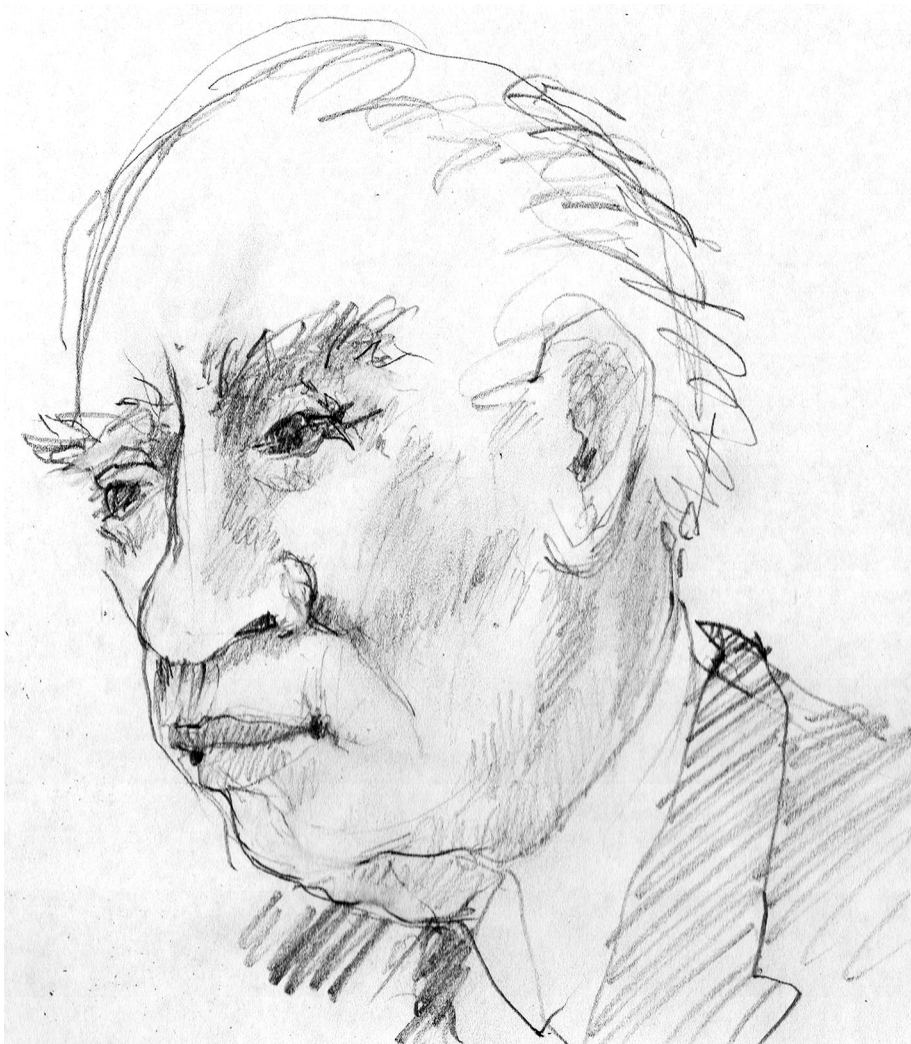
### **Mysticism in a Modernist Context**

In short, Sweeney's intellectual commitments sometimes notably conflicted with his work as a museum administrator, as his innovative if controversial curatorial approach came up against the practical reality of the art museum as a social signifier fully embedded in an *haut bourgeois* world, one in which Sweeney could form strategic alliances but never a lasting arrangement. Thus just as his modernist project was characterized by the subtlety, lightness, and fluidity of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, his intellectual and professional activities both reflected

and inverted established modernist conventions. This pattern is evident in the paradoxical dynamic of self-inscription and self-erasure of his own professional engagement, as he repeatedly positioned himself at once in and not in the museum world. Yet his curatorial and philosophical approaches can also be situated within the broader cultural engagement with mysticism, spirituality, and religion that threads through midcentury modernist thought.

Within the contemporary art community, Sweeney was certainly not alone in addressing these themes. Indeed, he shared a deep intellectual and professional engagement with them with his colleagues at the Museum of Modern Art, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and William C. Seitz.<sup>55</sup> In particular, Sweeney's commitment to the *coincidentia oppositorum* as a form of mystical aesthetics resonates strongly with the discussion of abstract expressionism that Seitz formulated in his 1955 Princeton doctoral dissertation. Seitz stated in his preface that the aesthetic goal of abstract expressionist painting reflects "the need to encompass multiple dualisms and levels of existential, rational, and mystical experience within a reciprocal unity." In a subsequent discussion of "the problem of opposites" in New York School painting, he questioned: "Is the dualistic formulation a product of our cultural pattern, or is it more deeply embedded in the human personality? Why, in the form criteria of equivocal space and flatness, confrontation of opposing stylistic poles, and emphasis on 'tension,' has duality become so intrinsic a principle of progressive painting? . . . But whatever the reasons for thinking in terms of oppositional concepts and principles may be, our psychic state is surely revealed by it."<sup>56</sup> Seitz thus identified patterns of thematic oppositions in both the formal qualities of New York School paintings and in their accompanying bases in rational and mystical thought, just as he saw these issues as being shaped by, and correspondingly revealing, larger cultural and psychic tensions.

Sweeney's writings can also be situated within this discursive context, as he repeatedly sought to engage and to transcend an aesthetics of polar opposition. Thus on the one hand, he frequently pitted conceptions of normative social and cultural repression against the liberating potential of imaginative, mystically oriented aesthetic experience. In so doing, like so many prominent modernists from Alfred Stieglitz onward, he productively leveraged an instrumental social critique to promote an avant-garde aesthetic project. Yet on the other hand, Sweeney



1.3 Jack Boynton, *James Johnson Sweeney, Imagined from Memory*, 2008.  
© Jack Boynton, 2009.



1.4 Frank Freed, *OUT!*, ca. 1966. Oil on wood panel. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Gift of the Eleanor and Frank Freed Foundation.

also repeatedly characterized the creative potentialities of modernist artworks and their corresponding museum spaces as encompassing and transcending the dualistic qualities of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, as these structures exhibited a fluidly nondual capacity for transforming into their opposites. As we shall see, these themes variously became expressed in the multivalent qualities of Duchamp's androgynes, in the interchangeability of sacrality and abjection in Burri's burlap *sacchi*, and in the "flying sparks" that Sweeney saw as uniting mass and light in Chillida's sculptures.

Notably, in March of 1948 Barr invited Sweeney to participate in "a group of 'earnest' thinkers who have been meeting two or three times a year to discuss the relations between art and religion in the contemporary world." This art seminar was a subgroup of the Conference on Science, Philosophy, and Religion. Along with Barr himself, its membership included the Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, the modernist sculptor Jacques Lipchitz, the Yale art historian George Kubler, and the scholar Louis Finkelstein of the Jewish Theological Seminary, who served as its chair. Subjects of discussion ranged from questions concerning ecclesiastical taste, to the historical and psychological issues associated with iconoclasm, to "the problem of the work of art as a religious symbol, as a dogmatic symbol, as a focus for devotion or meditation, as a presentation of legend and as a secular expression of religious feeling or faith." Barr concluded by informing Sweeney, "I proposed your name because I felt that you could speak authoritatively on behalf of the modern artists from the point of view of the Catholic layman who previously had been interested in the use of the artist by the Church."<sup>57</sup> Sweeney responded positively to Barr's invitation, thanking him and informing him that, "as to joining the group of 'earnest' thinkers you refer to, I will be very glad."<sup>58</sup> In turn, Barr remarked to Finkelstein, "I am very happy that Mr. Sweeney is willing to join us because he is one of our best scholars in the field, knows personally and intimately many of the leading artists in the world today and is moreover interested in the problem of modern religious art in general and the possibilities of the modern artist's collaboration with the churches."<sup>59</sup>

During the following decade, Sweeney also served on the board of directors of the Religious Art Center of America, Inc., a nonprofit organization chaired by the Reverend William Granger Ryan, president of Seton Hill College, a Catholic

liberal arts college in Greensburg, Pennsylvania. Although it was never instituted, the center was designed to promote and “encourage contemporary religious art.”<sup>40</sup> During the sixties Sweeney received honorary doctorates from a number of Catholic institutions, including the College of the Holy Cross (1960), the University of Notre Dame (1961), and his alma mater, Georgetown University (1963).

As all of this suggests, Sweeney’s thinking was deeply informed by his Irish Catholic background, and his colleagues repeatedly called upon him to represent this perspective within larger contemporary discussions of the relations between art, spirituality, and religious traditions. Yet Sweeney’s extensive engagement with mystical traditions was considerably more complex than this. While clearly shaped by his longstanding interest in Christian mysticism, his individually oriented conception of mystical aesthetics did not conform to the established conventions of any orthodox religious structure.<sup>41</sup> Rather, his interpretive approach corresponded to what Barr loosely termed the “modern spiritual culture” that broadly informed developments in midcentury intellectual history.<sup>42</sup>

Such privileging of subjective experience is consistent with modernist constructions of mysticism as primarily an individual, subjective, and often paradoxical phenomenon. As traced most notably in the writings of Michel de Certeau, during the premodern period conceptions of mysticism were situated more generally within Neoplatonic thought, and later within the traditional liturgical, scriptural, and doctrinal contexts of the Christian church. However, with the revolutionary developments of modernity during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, formulations of mysticism became loosened from established bases of faith and authority to function positively as comparative abstractions that could be located within independent, subjective experiences.<sup>43</sup> During the twentieth century, it should also be emphasized, the term “spiritual” similarly functioned as a modernist signifier that carried strong individualist and aesthetic associations. The conceptions of the spiritual that thread through the nineteenth-century literary genealogy of Emerson and Whitman became foundational to what the critic Van Wyck Brooks identified as a “usable past,” a literary and philosophical heritage that could productively underpin modernist cultural production.<sup>44</sup> Thus during the early decades of the twentieth century, the first American avant-garde sought to invest their abstracted modernist artworks with elevated spiritual, and

often erotically charged, associations. Such conceptions of the spiritual were disassociated from established religious traditions and institutions, performing the paradoxical task of connecting twentieth-century artists to venerable cultural precedents while simultaneously affirming the sanctified status of their progressive modernist artworks.<sup>45</sup>

Sweeney's engagement with these spiritual and mystical concepts can be seen in his contribution to a "Symposium on Music and Art" held at Bennington College in the spring of 1955. In a paper on "Recent Trends in American Painting," he advanced a conception of abstracted modernist painting as a *coincidentia oppositorum* that presented a visible microcosmic representation of larger macrocosmic unities, a paradoxical phenomenon that he associated with larger devotional purposes. Sweeney praised modern paintings for displaying "a sense of unity dominating multiplicity, a microcosme [*sic*] of the greater macrocosm—a sense of stability. And in an age such as ours—an age in which we are so conscious of the confusion of philosophical outlook which surrounds us—I often wonder if one of the reasons why so many of our artists today are so zealously paring away the peripheral interests of a painting . . . is not an unconscious desire to find in such an approach a reassurance of the essential stability of existence, and, by setting up such models and reminders, to build a causeway over which we may move through this age of decayed faith?"<sup>46</sup> Thus Sweeney conjoined a Heraclitean conception of the world as existing in a chaotic state of eternal flux with a vision (*pace* Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*) of "a quiet order" in which unity is achieved from diversity;<sup>47</sup> a powerfully ambivalent theorization of modernist aesthetics as a mystical and aesthetic *coincidentia oppositorum* that attached heightened spiritual value to the underlying structural order that he perceived within abstracted modernist forms. Thus paradoxically, Sweeney appeared to be adopting a conservative perspective that affirmed notions of unity, stability, order, and faith, just as these very ideas established a solid foundational base that supported innovative developments—and radical departures—in contemporary pictorial practice.

By adopting this interpretive approach, Sweeney's texts also resonated with the groundbreaking contemporary inquiries into the relations between mysticism and aesthetics that represented some of the most progressive currents of

mid-twentieth-century thought. In his study of the distinguished scholars of religion Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin, Steven M. Wasserstrom has followed their various responses “to the thirst for transcendence and totality” that accompanied the deep-seated sense of cultural anxiety and alienation following the Second World War. In particular, Wasserstrom has traced the intricate, and sometimes contested, ways in which each of these thinkers adopted an aesthetic approach to the study of religion that was based on “the epistemological centrality of symbols.” These symbols were positioned within a metahistorical framework that “placed as a mystery at the heart of that gnosis a *coincidentia oppositorum*, a godhead unifying opposites, transcendent but apprehensible through symbols.”<sup>48</sup> Thus just as contemporary writers formulated aesthetic approaches to the study of mysticism, Sweeney can be seen as reflecting *and* inverting this conceptual framework as he promoted a mystically oriented approach to aesthetics.

As all of this suggests, the concept of the *coincidentia oppositorum* encompasses multiple temporal and conceptual reference points simultaneously as it extends backward and forward in time, from the fragments of Heraclitus and the texts of the fifteenth-century philosopher Nicholas of Cusa to the twentieth-century writings on mystical experience by the psychologist and philosopher William James, the psychoanalytic discourses of Carl Jung, and the comparative histories of religion of Eliade, Scholem, and Corbin.<sup>49</sup> Thus the *coincidentia oppositorum* is at once an established feature of ancient mythical and religious language and of progressive modern thought. To draw on the theoretical language of Michael A. Sells, such reciprocal crystallizations and dissolutions of form and meaning, presence and absence, abstraction and figuration may aptly be conceptualized in terms of apophasis and kataphasis, or the “mystical languages of unsaying,” or “saying the unsayable.”<sup>50</sup> As Sells has observed, a complementary tension between affirmation and negation—as manifested in corresponding patterns of speaking and unsaying, appearance and disappearance, or kataphasis and apophasis—arises as mystical language attempts to name a subject that lies beyond words, inherently unnamable. As a result, apophatic discourses tend to generate radical paradoxes—such as the coincidence of opposites—as language and form turn back on themselves. Equally radical formulations concerning the envisioning of the invisible,



the saying of the unsayable, and the (dis)embodiment of gendered embodiment are expressed throughout Elliot Wolfson's writings—as are the aesthetic dimensions of these paradoxes. Applying these concepts to the visual arts, the historical construction of modernist abstractions can be viewed in part as an aesthetic expression of apophaticism, that is, a creative negation that collapses the categorical boundaries distinguishing presence and absence, subjectivism and objectivism, while promoting a movement toward a kind of radical transcendence that sometimes negates and transcends the very notion of transcendence.

### **Saying the Unsayable, Saying the Unsaid**

By engaging these themes, *Curating Consciousness* represents an extension of the scholarly project that I have pursued in my books *Painting Gender*, *Constructing Theory* and *Modernism's Masculine Subjects*. There I traced the various ways in which conceptions of gendered subjectivity historically informed the production and reception of abstracted modernist painting, just as these ideas crucially shaped period understandings of the relations between the physical and metaphysical domains of modernist aesthetics. Despite the differences among Alfred Stieglitz's, Clement Greenberg's, and James Johnson Sweeney's artistic and critical projects, each productively situated his highly influential vision of modernist aesthetics within a generative critique of American culture that vociferously rejected conceptions of conventionality, repression, materialism, and utilitarianism. These oppositional critical discourses created an opening for—and indeed, seemed inevitably to demand—innovative artistic and philosophical responses that privileged the erotic body, the heroic subject, and numinous mystical experience.

In this context, it is significant to note Robert Nelson's observations on how museums have perpetuated an inverse relation between the artistic and religious qualities of their displayed objects. As Nelson has remarked, during the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, just as religious artworks were removed from their original sacred contexts and entered secular museum collections, the increased aesthetic valuation of the pieces corresponded to the diminishment of their religious significance.<sup>51</sup> As I show throughout this study, Sweeney's critical and curatorial project functioned both in contrast and as a complement to this secularizing

trend, as he advanced an approach in which the aesthetic and spiritual qualities of artworks could meaningfully enhance one another in the secular space of the modern museum. Such interpretations became pronounced during a period when the symbol itself was deeply in crisis: a historical moment when a literal—or even symbolic—approach to traditional religious symbolism was no longer tenable for modern secularized intellectuals. In this context, aestheticized conceptions of apophysis could provide a compelling means of approaching spiritual and mystical concepts through comparative abstractions that were seen as linking ancient and modern imagery.

As this suggests, engaging Sweeney's multifaceted career is necessarily a transdisciplinary enterprise that encompasses not just modernist art history and museum studies but aesthetics, literary criticism, intellectual history, mystical philosophy, and the history of religions. Such an inquiry raises a number of suggestive questions, perhaps most notably: Within the methodologically diverse discourses of modernist art history, with their characteristic embrace of interdisciplinary modalities, why is it that the theoretical discourses of the study of religions have largely been excluded from the conversation? This question is especially striking because, while we are perfectly comfortable discussing desublimated corporeality, abjection, and excess, we remain decidedly uneasy about issues of metaphysics and spirituality.<sup>52</sup>

Commenting on these themes, Rosalind Krauss incisively noted: "In the increasingly de-sacralized space of the nineteenth century, art had become the refuge for religious emotion; it became, as it has remained, a secular form of belief. Although this condition could be discussed openly in the late nineteenth century, it is something that is inadmissible in the twentieth, so that by now we find it indescribably embarrassing to mention art and spirit in the same sentence."<sup>53</sup> Modernist thinkers such as Daniel Bell, Jacques Barzun, and Wallace Stevens have commented on the various ways in which the production of avant-garde art is associated with the quest for religious belief—that is, for formulating a site of the sacred in the secular modern world.<sup>54</sup> Yet Krauss's remarks shed light on the ways in which the complex relations between aesthetics, metaphysics, and mysticism have often been overlooked—if not altogether excluded—from rigorous critical

discussions of modern art and their corresponding museum practices. Questions of “the spiritual in art” are typically addressed as supplementary iconographic or collateral traditions that exerted a formative influence over certain key developments in late-nineteenth- and twentieth-century modernism.<sup>55</sup> Yet while spirituality and mysticism represent acknowledged aspects of the historical record, these same topics nonetheless remain decidedly uncomfortable—even, as Krauss says, “indescribably embarrassing” and thus virtually undiscussable—for many of the most rigorous critical discourses produced during the last quarter-century. It is indeed a short distance from the indescribable to the unsayable to the unsaid.

Rather than engaging with the abstract, often intangible ideals associated with the metaphysical realm, a privileged emphasis has instead been placed on formulating a more robustly materialist—and implicitly heroic—account of modernist aesthetics. The resulting narratives tend to interrogate vigorously the various cultural constructions that contributed to period formations of subjectivity and their firm embeddedness in an accompanying socially contextualized base, one largely comprised of politics, markets, ideologies, and their related cultural histories. Other theoretically sophisticated art historical discourses characteristically present desublimated—and instrumentally deconstructive—postmodernist readings of modernist artworks. Such revisionist approaches initially offered important opposition to the formalist criticism that was so prominent during the sixties and seventies, and today these discourses continue to represent valuable methodological interventions into art history’s established interpretive traditions. As a cultural extension of this philosophical critique, the museum has repeatedly been identified as a particularly contentious, ideologically charged site whose very institutional structures are seen as serving the privileged interests of an established power base.<sup>56</sup>

Yet it is also important to preserve a sense of conceptual latitude, so that we may continue to rethink received patterns of interpretation and formulate approaches that offer significant departures from established methodological modalities. Throughout this study, I trace the conceptual structures that Sweeney engaged historically—particularly in his readings of the negative theology and nondual philosophy associated with apophasis, kataphasis, and the *coincidentia*

*oppositorum*—not to advocate an art history based on negative theology or any particular religious paradigm, but to deconstruct predictable, stable, or hierarchical oppositions between the physical and metaphysical domains. Building on an underlying structure of period criticism, I examine Sweeney’s career as a compelling case study of the complex ways in which the historical base of modernist aesthetics contained powerful conceptual tools that can open up new ways to approach the unsaying, unseeing, and unforming that so deeply informed modernist art and the museum galleries in which it was showcased. I believe the time has come for a critical formulation of modernist aesthetics that can accommodate the historical and philosophical complexities—and the accompanying destabilizations—associated with the reciprocal dynamics of the *coincidentia oppositorum*, with the assertions and erasures, seeing and unseeing, saying and unsaying that unfolded within a vision of midcentury modernism that placed the numinous at its core.

To reconstruct the canonical bases underpinning these historical and philosophical developments, this study begins with a discussion of Sweeney’s engagement with two central figures in modernist art: Barr and Duchamp. In chapter 2, I examine Sweeney’s and Barr’s intellectual and professional activities during the 1930s and 1940s, and the complementary theorizations of modernism that they developed at that time. The two men were then close colleagues at the Museum of Modern Art, and they published early canonical texts that placed dialogical theorizations of modernist creativity within a larger masculine androgynous ideal. Building on these double-edged themes of ambivalence and androgyny, in chapter 3 I focus on Sweeney and Duchamp’s artistic and curatorial collaborations from the 1930s through the 1960s. As we shall see, their various exchanges reveal (and conceal) their ongoing, shared engagement with a metaphysical, and often highly transgressive, vision of modernism that hinged on a reciprocal dynamic of seeing the “not seen and/or less seen.”<sup>57</sup>

The second part of this study focuses on Sweeney’s interactions with four remarkable artists who are somewhat less familiar to American audiences: the Italian collage and mixed-media artist Alberto Burri, the French abstract painter Pierre Soulages, the Swiss motion sculptor Jean Tinguely, and the Spanish Basque

modernist sculptor and printmaker Eduardo Chillida. Chapters 4 through 7 can thus be viewed as comparative case studies in saying the unsaid and seeing the unseen through the prism of Sweeney's and the artists' mystical engagements with modernist aesthetics. These themes variously took the form of Burri's innovative reenvisioning of hermetic alchemy and the blood miracles of Christian incarnational theology; Soulages's creative transmutations of the sacred stones of Romanesque churches and ancient pagan monuments into gestural abstract paintings; Tinguely's kinetic experiments with reciprocal patterns of creation and destruction through animated sculptures that were characterized at once as agents of apocalypse and as toys from a parallel world; and Chillida's visual translations of negative theology and Heideggerian conceptions of absent presence into sculpted fields of light.

Despite the diversity of these materials, shared themes thread through this artistic work. They include Duchamp's, Burri's, and Tinguely's animated aesthetic appropriations and paradoxical redemptions of ordinary discarded materials; and Soulages's and Chillida's apophatic transformations of ancient formations of stone and light, absence and presence, into architectonic modernist compositions that recreated aspects of these familiar structures, making them anew without completely erasing their underlying reference points. Taken together, these subjects instantiate the various ways in which the physical and metaphysical, material and mystical domains were conceived historically, not as dualistically oppositional categories, but rather as distinctive aspects of a multifaceted aesthetic experience. That is, because the dense materiality of solid masses, corporeal physicality, and abject, discarded items were repeatedly imbued with mystical qualities that nonetheless remained inextricably attached to the phenomenal bases of the artworks, the resulting conceptions of aestheticized mysticism and mystical aesthetics were marked by an ongoing engagement with these categorical differences *and* with their constant overcoming. In turn, the expressive effects of these *coincidentiae oppositorum* were enhanced by the duality of modernist aesthetic structures that allowed the transcendent to emerge and recede through the making and unmaking of their accompanying frames. And in these ongoing dynamics we can locate the convergence of phenomenological and dialectical approaches that established and

sustained the curatorial arena as a space of beginnings and ends, a common place (*topos*) in which the finite is turned back toward the infinite, and vice versa.

Ultimately, the multivalent idea of “curating consciousness” turns in part on a suggestive paradox: How can modernist aesthetics be reconnected with a complex mystical tradition from which it has never been separated? The answer seems to lie in the equally paradoxical project of making the invisible visible while saying the unsayable, or saying what has, at least until now, remained unsaid within the dominant discourses of modern art.