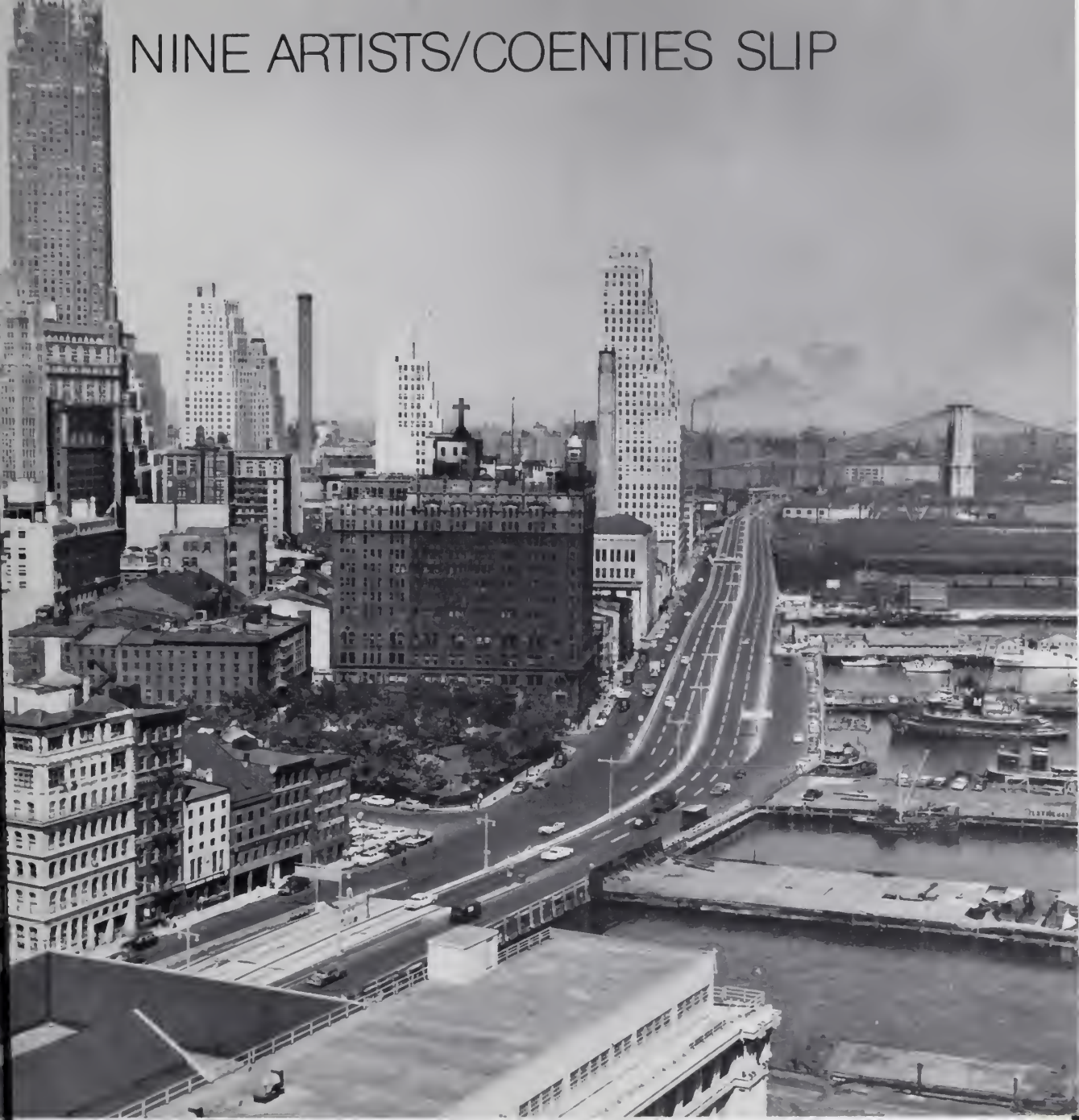


# NINE ARTISTS/COENTIES SLIP



## INTRODUCTION

Coenties Slip is a relic of the earliest days of New York. Now a street a mere block long near South Ferry on the southern tip of Manhattan, it was originally the site of the oldest, largest and busiest of Manhattan's numerous slips. The name derives from a corruption of the Dutch "Coentje," a combination of the given names of Coenach and Antje Ten Eyck, landowners in the days of Nieuw Amsterdam. Before it was filled in in the 1880's, the Slip was a body of deep water which projected inland to Front Street and served as a landing place for wooden sailing ships. Ship chandlers, warehouses and a proliferation of bars surrounded it. These continued in service to marine commerce and pleasure craft until the middle of this century, when the port facilities of New York were moved elsewhere.

In the mid 1950's, the abandoned lofts of Coenties Slip became the homes of a number of artists: painters and sculptors, writers, filmmakers, actors and actresses. They were drawn to the Slip ostensibly by the abundance of space and the economy of rents. For some of the visual artists, however, there were more subtle reasons: they came because of a self-avowed wish to separate themselves from the abstract expressionist movement which by then was well entrenched uptown. Coenties Slip, with its expansive view of the harbor and a small stand of trees known as Jeanette Park, seemed a desirable place.

Fred Mitchell was the first to arrive on Coenties Slip, locating himself at number 31 in 1954. This became Robert Indiana's loft in 1956. Simultaneous to Indiana's arrival, Ellsworth Kelly made his studio at 3-5. Shortly thereafter, Jack Youngerman and his wife Delphine Seyrig leased the building at number 27 and rented space to Lenore Tawney, Agnes Martin, and Ann Wilson. When number 27 was torn down in 1960, Wilson and Martin relocated to 3-5 and were joined there in 1960 by James Rosenquist and Charles Hinman.

All faced the inevitable problems of living in buildings not designed for residential use. Few of the lofts, for example, had hot water, heat or kitchen facilities. This problem was at least partially alleviated by the existence on Coenties Slip of the Seamen's Church Institute which operated a cafeteria and hostel with showers. Though primarily for the use of seamen, the Institute never made the artists unwelcome. An additional, more serious problem resulted from the fact that these buildings were zoned for commercial use only. Legal disputes dragged on for months at a time, with some buildings finally receiving residential zoning. Others, particularly those without fire escapes, were never rezoned.

The lofts now, for the most part, are gone—razed to

make way for the large commercial buildings which stand in their place. Jeanette Park, too, is substantially altered, and the Seamen's Church Institute has moved to a new building at Battery Park Plaza. Marine commerce has left this part of lower Manhattan, and a new commerce has taken its place.

It has been our purpose in this exhibition to bring attention to a little known era in New York art history, when a number of very productive artists lived and worked on Coenties Slip. It seemed an especially relevant subject for an exhibition, as the building which now houses the Downtown Branch of the Whitney Museum stands on the former site of several of the artists' lofts. Most of the works chosen for the show were executed on the Slip. It is a diverse body of work from a diverse group of artists who in no way constituted a movement.

Here is a brief introduction to each of the artists involved:

### CHARLES HINMAN

Born December 29, 1932.  
Syracuse University, BFA, 1955.  
Professional Baseball, Milwaukee Braves, 1954-55.  
Art Student's League, New York, 1955-56.  
United States Army, 1956-58.  
Lived at Coenties Slip, 1960-62.  
Taught at Staten Island Academy, 1960-62.  
Moved to Long Island to take teaching position at Woodmere Academy, 1962.

Charles Hinman moved to Coenties Slip at the invitation of James Rosenquist, sharing his fifty dollar a month loft at number 3-5. The loft was formerly occupied by Agnes Martin in a building which still stands. For Hinman, the Slip had a special appeal in the contrast of its small structures with the larger scaled buildings of the financial district.

Hinman has described his work of this period as experimental and transitional. It was during this time that his involvement with the shaped canvas began. While the concepts this involved, both structural and coloristic, did not reach their full resolution until 1964, the years on Coenties Slip marked the beginning of a shift toward the use of geometric color areas. *Lift*, 1965, reflects the culmination of this development with the use of brilliant acrylic colors to emphasize the structural elements of the work.

### ROBERT INDIANA

Born September 13, 1928, New Castle, Indiana.  
Joined Army Air Corps., 1946.  
Art Institute of Chicago, 1949-53.  
Received traveling fellowship, 1953; spent one year at the University of Edinburgh.

Returned to New York City, 1954.  
Met Rosanquist, Kelly and Hinman while working in art supply store, 1955.  
Moved to 31 Coenties Slip, 1956.  
Moved to 25 Coenties Slip, 1957.  
One-man show Stable Gallery, 1962.  
*Eat*, an Andy Warhol film of Indiana eating a mushroom, made at 25  
Coenties Slip, 1964.  
Moved from Coenties Slip to the Bowery, 1965.

"I came to the tip end of the island where the hard edge of the city confronts the watery part. There in that fringe of derelict warehouses that have stood since the fire of 1835, facing the harbor between Whitehall and Corlears Hook, I rented a top floor loft on Coenties Slip. Out of necessity it was a cheap accommodation and it was necessary to put in the windows myself before it was habitable, but there were six of them and they overlooked the East River, Brooklyn Heights, the abandoned piers 5, 6, 7 and 8, the sycamores . . . and the ginkgoes of the small park called Jeanette, and the far side of the Brooklyn Bridge, through whose antique cables the sun rises each morning. While at night the Titanic memorial lighthouse of the nearby seamen's hostel illuminates the skylights of my studio whether the moon shines or not."<sup>1</sup>

Indiana's move to Coenties Slip was a direct and pronounced influence on his work. Wooden beams, iron wheels and other materials found there were incorporated into his constructions. Lettered stencils he found in his loft were applied to both paintings and constructions, later becoming indispensable to his idiom. Thereafter, Indiana's work continued to be dominated by stenciled words, manifesting a relationship to road signs and commercial advertising. His is an iconography rooted deep in the American experience.

*The Melville Triptych* is evocative not only of a physical locale, but of its literature and history as well. Its iconography derives somewhat from signs and marine forms, but more specifically from a passage in *Moby Dick*:

"There now is your insular city of the Manhattoes, belted round by wharves as Indian isles by coral reefs—commerce surrounds it with her surf . . . Circumambulate the city on a dreamy Sabbath afternoon. Go from Corlear's Hook to Coenties Slip, and from thence, by Whitehall, northward. What do you see?—Posted like silent sentinels all around the town, stand thousands upon thousands of mortal men fixed in ocean reveries."

In its cartographic representation of the directions of these streets in lower Manhattan, the painting recalls

Indiana's statement: "I am an American painter of signs charting the course. I would be a people's painter as well as a painter's painter."<sup>2</sup>

## ELLSWORTH KELLY

Born May 23, 1923, Newburg, New York.  
United States Army, France, 1943-45.  
School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1946-48.  
Lived in Paris, 1948-54.  
Returned to New York, 1954.  
Moved to 3-5 Coenties Slip, 1956.  
Left Coenties Slip, 1963.

Once in New York, Kelly's work changed in significant ways. He seemed apart from the old strain of abstract expressionism and detached from his fellow New York artists as well; he developed a private vision, alone. Suddenly forms began to intrude from the edges of his paintings, forms derived from his experience of Coenties Slip and New York in general. Kelly borrowed titles from his new surroundings too: New York, Broadway, Brooklyn Bridge, Slip. He began systematically to investigate the possibilities of the curve; and after an initial reaction to New York expressed by limiting color in his paintings to black and white, he began to experiment with combinations of colors. Kelly applied the color in layer after layer of pigment, disguising all signs of his touch by refining his brushwork.

The loft at Coenties Slip was also the birthplace of Kelly's sculpture. Kelly states that fidgeting with the metal top of a coffee container while having breakfast with Agnes Martin led to his first sculpture pieces; Agnes looked at the bent container top, gently rocking before them, and said, "You ought to do that."<sup>3</sup> *Whites*, 1963, is a sculptural expression of an interesting visual fact chosen in advance by the artist, a fact that might be expressed later in paintings and drawings. (Kelly always works from a definite idea, formalized by either a drawing or a collage. He gives a lot of thought to these studies, letting them "lie around for a long time" before he transforms them into art pieces.)

Kelly's works in different mediums complement one another, because every piece explores a different way of dealing with what surrounds him. The drawings of his friends at Coenties Slip are like his well-known plant drawings in their elegance, sensitivity, and energy of line. They are also a unique part of his work; most often, the sources of Kelly's shapes are secret, subtle, private. But the inspiration for these drawings, because they are portraits, is obvious. Whereas other works by Kelly might be based on remembered motifs, recorded in photographs or sketchbooks kept by the artist, these sketches are fresh and immediate: they capture the personalities and mood

of Coenties Slip from 1957 to 1963.

## AGNES MARTIN

Born March 22, 1912, Makin, Saskatchewan, Canada.  
Came to the United States in 1932.  
Columbia University, BA and MFA.  
Became a citizen of the United States in 1940.  
Lived periodically in New York City, Oregon and New Mexico, early 40's-mid 50's.  
Taught at the University of New Mexico, late 40's.  
Taught creative activities to children in Harlem, early 50's.  
Returned to New York City settling on Coenties Slip, 1957.  
Left New York abruptly and stopped painting as well, 1967.  
Lives in Cuba, New Mexico.

"My formats are square, but the grids never are absolutely square, they are rectangles a little bit off the square, making a sort of contradiction, a dissonance, though I didn't set out to do it that way. When I cover the square surface with rectangles, it lightens the weight of the square, destroys its power."<sup>4</sup>

"I paint out of joy of experience. I paint without representational object. I paint beauty without idealism, the new real beauty that needs very much to be defined by modern philosophers. (I consider idealism, mysticism, and conventions interferences in occasions of real beauty. Other interferences are evil, pain, mental confusion and insularity.)

I do not paint scientific discoveries or philosophies. Art is not ethical, moral or even rational and not automatic. I paint analogies of belonging and sharing with everything. I paint to make friends and hope I will have as many as Mozart."<sup>5</sup>

"My paintings have neither objects, nor space, not time, not anything—no forms. They are light, lightness, about merging, about formlessness breaking down form . . . You wouldn't think of form by the ocean."<sup>6</sup>

"These paintings are about freedom from the cares of this world/from worldliness."<sup>7</sup>

## FRED MITCHELL

Born November 24, 1923, Meridian, Mississippi.  
Carnegie Institute of Technology, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1942-43.  
Studied at the University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa; Columbia University, New York City; Atelier 17, New York City, 1946-48.  
Accademia di Belle Arti, Rome, 1948-49.  
Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, 1948-56.  
Returned to the United States from Rome; moved to 26 Water Street, 1951.  
First one-man show, Tanager Gallery, New York City, 1953.  
Lived in loft at 31 Coenties Slip, 1954-67.

Fred Mitchell returned to the United States in 1951, after spending three years in Rome. Moving first to 26 Water Street, then to 128 Front Street, he fell in love with the

physicality of being able to look out to sea, at the bridges, and the dense concentration of large and small buildings. Mitchell sensed the continuity of time and space he had felt in Rome, leading him to call it "new Rome". "Down there you had the simultaneous movement of city, sky, clouds and river."<sup>8</sup> In 1954, Mitchell found a second loft at 31 Coenties Slip. Seeing its spacious studio lit by a skylight, he said to himself, "If only I could live there, I could stand New York."<sup>9</sup> Because he had a loft on Front Street at the time, he used 31 Coenties Slip as a painting school. Mitchell thus became the first of the group to take up residence on the Slip. At that time he knew none of the others except Ellsworth Kelly, his close friend.

Mitchell, who has always loved the speed with which an image is captured in pen and ink as well as watercolor, derived much of the source material for his work from the environment of lower Manhattan. He found himself involved with abstracting the space and forms of that environment and frequently allowing the figure to cut into that interaction. He could often be found walking along Coenties Slip and South Street from the Ferry House, sketching birds, buildings or views of the waterfront. His paintings, drawings and watercolors of the time reflect the attachment he felt to his "new Rome". Mitchell left the Slip reluctantly in 1967, but still remains in the lower Manhattan area.

## JAMES ROSENQUIST

Born November 29, 1933, Grand Forks, North Dakota.  
University of Minnesota, 1951-55.  
Art Students League, New York City, 1955-58.  
Painted billboards for Artcraft Strauss Company in the Times Square Area, 1957-59.  
Rented Agnes Martin's former loft at 3-5 Coenties Slip, 1960. Began doing paintings employing commercial subjects and techniques.  
First one-man show, Green Gallery, New York, 1962.  
Moved to Broome Street, New York, 1963.

It was in 1960, that James Rosenquist, out of work and just married, moved into a fifty dollar a month studio "in a beautiful area around Coenties Slip. It used to be Agnes Martin's studio and it was all cracked plaster . . . no decoration . . . very stark. I went in there ever morning and walked around and looked out the window for a few weeks, watched people go to work, go out to lunch, go back to work, and then watched them go home."<sup>10</sup> It was during this period, while painting enormous billboards above Times Square, that he began to view the commonplace things he was painting in a new perspective:

"I'm amazed and excited and fascinated about the way things are thrust at us . . . the way our minds and our senses are attacked by radio and television and visual communications through things

larger than life . . .

I think we have a free society, and the action that goes on in this free society allows encroachments, as a commercial society. So I geared myself, like an advertiser or a large company, to the visual inflation in commercial advertising which is one of the foundations of our society. Painting is probably more exciting than advertising—so why shouldn't it be done with that power and gusto, with that impact . . . My metaphor, if that is what you can call it, is my relations to the power of commercial advertising which is in turn related to our free society, the visual inflation which accompanies the money that produces box tops and space cadets . . .

When I use a combination of fragments of things, the fragments or objects or real things are caustic to one another, and the title is also caustic to the fragments . . . I only hope for a colorful shoe-horn to get the person off, to turn him on to his own feelings . . . "11

## LENORE TAWNEY

Born May 10, 1925.

Studied: University of Illinois; Institute of Design, Chicago; sculpture with

Archipenko; tapestry with Marta Tiapale, Finland.

Included in "Good Design" at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1955.

Exhibited at the Art Institute of Chicago, 1956.

Moved to Coenties Slip, 1957.

Exhibited at the World Fair, Brussels, 1958.

Moved to 27 South Street, around the corner from Coenties Slip, 1959.

One-women show, Staten Island Museum, 1962. Moved from South Street to

Thomas Street.

"Because", as Leonore Tawney explains, "my work comes out of the unknown and remains a mystery,"<sup>12</sup> it is best seen in those same terms:

"The primordial mystery of weaving and spinning has also been experienced in projection upon the Great Mother who weaves the web of life and spins the threads of fate . . . It is not by accident that we speak of the body's "tissues" for the tissue woven by the Feminine in the cosmos and in the uterus of woman is life and destiny."<sup>13</sup>

"Nothing would give up life:

Even the dirt kept breathing a small breath."

—Theodore Roethke

## ANN WILSON

Born Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1931.

Studied at Carnegie Institute of Technology.

Tyler School of Fine Arts, BFA, BSE, 1955.

Temple University, MA, Art Education, 1957.

Lived at Coenties Slip, 1957-60.

Ann Wilson was the youngest of the artists living on Coenties Slip. She was influenced strongly by Agnes Martin and Robert Indiana who "created a gestalt about a total commitment to the work and the life there. The milieu was special."<sup>14</sup>

At that time Ann Wilson worked with American quilts, as in *Moby Dick*, placing in them a series of small collages. Writing profusely throughout this period, she often incorporated excerpts into the collages. She describes these years as being "a sweet time, an innocent time, the sweet simple thing of people working there, thinking a lot, concentrating on their work with no political distraction."<sup>15</sup>

## JACK YOUNGERMAN

Born Louisville, Kentucky, 1926.

University of North Carolina, University of Missouri, 1944-47.

Ecole de Beaux Arts, Paris, 1947-48.

Traveled in Europe and the Orient, 1947-56.

First one-man show, Galerie Arnaud, Paris, 1951.

Returned to the United States, 1956.

Moved to Coenties Slip, 1957.

First one-man show in United States, Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, 1958.

Moved to South Street, 1960.

Returning to the United States in 1956 after living nine years in Paris and traveling extensively, Youngerman "felt a little bit removed from what was going on where there was a more dense concentration of artists."<sup>16</sup> He searched the downtown area of Manhattan for studio and living space, settling on a loft at 27 Coenties Slip. "I moved to Coenties Slip because I had known Ellsworth Kelly in Paris. Consciously or not, everyone who lived there was trying to live apart from the Tenth Street group. My time there was, on the whole, a kind of solitary struggle with my own work and not competition with other peoples."<sup>17</sup>

Youngerman's involvement is with forms which emerge from a visual memory. He never abstracts these forms directly from nature, but rather stores visual images and creates new forms. This indirect relationship is viewed by him as having greater strength and richness than abstraction from nature. Sensations of movement in his work stem from concentration of contour and color, and in cropping the works with edges and borders, he fosters tensions between the movement of the forms on the surface and the surface itself. Youngerman's palette, once quite painterly in application and later exhibiting more surface uniformity, is bold, with emphasis on the primaries, black and white. The interactions caused by his stark juxtapositions of color and non-color change as they are viewed at length. But the main point is the form. Youngerman's vision exists at the source of the forms.

## CATALOGUE

All dimensions given in inches unless otherwise noted.

- CHARLES HINMAN. *Lift*. 1965. Synthetic polymer on shaped canvas. 51x113x9. Whitney Museum of American Art.
- ROBERT INDIANA. *The Melville Triptych*. 1961. Oil on canvas. 60x114. Lent by the artist.  
*Mate*. 1960-62. Wood and mixed media. 41x12½x12¾. Whitney Museum of American Art. Gift of the Howard and Jean Lipman Foundation.
- ELLSWORTH KELLY. *Atlantic*. 1956. Oil on canvas. 80x114. Whitney Museum of American Art.  
*Briar*. 1963. Pencil on paper. 22 3/8x28 3/8. Whitney Museum of American Art.  
*Whites*. 1963. Painted aluminium. 1'11''x5'10½''x8'9'' . Whitney Museum of American Art. Gift of the Howard and Jean Lipman Foundation.  
Four Portraits. Pencil on paper. Lent by the artist.
- AGNES MARTIN. *The Spring*. 1957. Oil on canvas. 70x70. Lent by Dr. and Mrs. John A. Talbott.  
*The Garden*. 1958. Wood and found objects. 48x12x2. Lent by Betty Parsons.  
*Islands No. 1*. 1960. Oil and pencil on canvas. 12x12. Lent by Betty Parsons.  
*High Hopes II*. 1962. Ink on paper. 8x8. Lent by Dr. and Mrs. John A. Talbott.
- FRED MITCHELL. *South Street*. 1958. Pencil on paper. 6x9. Lent by the artist.  
*Along South Street*. 1958. Pencil on paper. 5x8. Lent by the artist.  
*Jeanette Park and Visitor*. 1961. Watercolor. 20x14. Lent by the artist.  
*Buttermilk Channel*. 1967. Oil on canvas. 65x50. Lent by the artist.
- JAMES ROSENQUIST. *Blue Feet (Look Alive)*. 1961. Oil on canvas, mirror. 67x58. Lent by the Harry N. Abrams Family Collection.  
*Morning Sun*. 1962. Oil on canvas. 66x72. Lent by the artist.
- LENORE TAWNEY. *The King I*. 1962. Polished linen. 12'1''x30'' . Lent by the artist.  
*The Queen*. 1962. Linen. 13'x28'' . Lent by the artist.  
*The Path*. 1962. Linen and 24 karat gold. 11'x28'' . Lent by the artist.  
*Motionless Dance*. 1963. Black linen and feathers. 11'x26'' . Lent by the artist.
- ANN WILSON. *Moby Dick*. 1955. Synthetic polymer on cloth on canvas. 66x84 . Whitney Museum of American Art.
- JACK YOUNGERMAN. *Dahomey*. 1961. Oil on canvas. 82x37. Lent by the artist.  
*Blue/green/umber*. 1958. Oil on canvas. 20x14. Lent by the artist.  
*Yellow/black/white*. 1958. Oil on canvas. 20x15. Lent by the artist.  
*Blue/green/white*. 1959. Oil on canvas. 21x21. Lent by the artist.  
*Blue/green/black*. 1960. Oil on canvas. 20x22. Lent by the artist.  
*Black/white*. 1961. Oil on canvas. 19½x19½. Lent by the artist.  
*Red/black/white*. 1962. Oil on canvas. 18x19. Lent by the artist.

## LENDERS TO THE EXHIBITION

Harry N. Abrams Family Collection  
Robert Indiana  
Ellsworth Kelly  
Fred Mitchell  
Betty Parsons  
James Rosenquist  
Dr. and Mrs. John A. Talbott  
Lenore Tawney  
Jack Youngerman

## PHOTOGRAPHS

Lizzie Borden  
Abe Dulberg  
Alexander Liberman  
Hans Namuth  
New York Historical Society  
Seamen's Church Institute  
Mottke Weismann  
Hall Winslow  
Jack Youngerman

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## FOOTNOTES

1. Robert Indiana as quoted by John McCoubrey, *Robert Indiana*, University of Pennsylvania, 1968, p. 14.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
3. Henry Geldzahler, *Paintings, Sculpture and Drawings by Ellsworth Kelly*, Gallery of Modern Art, Washington, O.C., 1963.
4. Agnes Martin as quoted by Lucy Lippard, "Homage to the Square," *Art in America*, July-August 1967, p. 55.
5. "A Personal Statement", from the files at Betty Parsons' Gallery. Typescript, (late 1950's).
6. Agnes Martin as quoted by Lawrence Alloway, "Formlessness Breaking Down Form: The Paintings of Agnes Martin," *Studio International*, February 1973, p. 61.
7. Agnes Martin as quoted by Hilton Kramer, "An Intimist of the Grid," *New York Times*, March 18, 1973.
8. Conversation with the artist, November 1973.
9. *Ibid.*
10. James Rosenquist as quoted by Marcia Tucker, *James Rosenquist*, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1972, p. 26.
11. James Rosenquist as quoted by Gene Swenson, "What is Pop Art?", *Art News*, February 1964.
12. Conversation with the artist, November 1973.
13. Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother*, Princeton, 1963.
14. Conversation with the artist, November 1973.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Conversation with the artist, November 1973.
17. *Ibid.*

## NINE ARTISTS/COENTIES SLIP

January 10—February 14, 1974

The exhibition was organized and installed by the following participants in the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program:

John Beardsley	Jane Kleinberg
Denise Bratton	Richard Marshall
Barbara Flynn	Judith McCandless
Nancy Karlins	

The Independent Study Program is under the auspices of the Education Department

David Hupert, Head  
Toba Tucker, Coordinator.

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We are indebted to the artists for their encouragement and their assistance in compiling the historical data. Their help has been invaluable. We would also like to acknowledge the assistance of Lizzie Borden, Robert Buecker, Suzanne Delehanty, Piri Halasz, Betty Parsons Gallery, Jesse Wilkinson, and Carlyle Windley, all of whom shared with us their knowledge and resources. Finally we owe our thanks to all those on the staff of the Whitney Museum of American Art, whose cooperation has been most appreciated.

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART  
DOWNTOWN BRANCH  
55 WATER STREET  
NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10041

(212) 483-0011

Cover photo Seamen's Church Institute

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