

SEX SOCIETY FILES

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

WOMEN'S RIGHTS BOARD

1. NINA CULLINAN (with Susan Bodin), October 1975

Archives of American Art, Interview with Nina Cullinan,  
Interview by Mrs. Susan Bodin, October 23, 1975.

Bodin: The first entry I found was in 1934, when you became a member of the board of trustees.

Cullinan: I have so little sense of date; I mean, forget that.

SB: When did you first begin to be interested, in an official way, in the museum?

NC: Always, I would say; interested in museums, always, because we were taken as children, wherever we traveled, by my father to the museums, wherever we went. So we just sort of grew up in museums. It wasn't something, you know, way out there. I don't know; I think the museum was built -- The original new museum was built around 1924, as I recall. I don't know when I was on the board; it certainly wasn't at that time, for heaven's sake. But I remember hearing a great deal of talk about it when it was proposed that they build that building, and I know that one of them that had a great thing to do with it was Mrs. Henry Fall. She was a very vigorous clubwoman here, and an extremely likable person, of the older generation to me, then. She was just a friend of a great many friends of our family and so forth. She was determined that this museum should be built, and went around knocking on doors and persuading people. Then Will Hogg got involved in it, and he -- they tell me -- was just great, because there wasn't any door that he wouldn't

knock on and then always walk in to, and just tell them what they ought to do. So it did get built, the first structure. I remember hearing so much about that, because we were living in Shadyside, just across the street. But I remember how they laughed -- affectionately -- about how nothing daunted Mrs. Fall or Will Hogg. Those are two names I remember as being, you know, most vigorously working for this thing. Of course, my father went along with the idea, as you probably know.

SB: Oh yes, I've read his name often.

NC: The Hermann estate when he bought that property to set up Shadyside -- which he set up to have a place for his own family, because he wanted that much acreage -- he had it laid out with the idea that friends had a lot, and they wanted it, and business associates, that sort. It was not set up as an open thing, at all. But at any rate, we were living there and I used to hear -- There was the talk about that. Oh, what I really was saying is that somehow in the settlement, buying the property from the Hermann estate, I had the feeling that Mr. Hermann wasn't living then. Just from what I remember hearing, but it was agreed that -- Father suggested that that prime lot would be preserved for a museum and the Hermann estate went along with it. What the actual business was, I never heard.

SB: I remember running across it, because apparently Mr.

Hermann had been approached before he died, but it had never been actually indicated. There was correspondence in the scrapbook between your father and the executors.

NC: Hermann or the executors?

SB: The executors: Mr. Selig. [unclear]

NC: See, I didn't know. It was a vague thing.

SB: It was vague. And then I guess they were finally allowed to have the land if they built something on the land, and they put a plaque. All they did was put a marker, because it was right before the war, in 1917. Or during it, I guess. And then they built it afterwards. They had to wait and build it.

NC: At least they gave a token.

SB: I thought that sounded very clever of them. After that, there was the Blaffer wing that was added.

NC: That was a great deal later, of course.

SB: That was in the forties, I guess.

NC: Let me see: Cullinan Hall was dedicated in '58, and I think it was around '56 that I told them I wanted to do this, just in passing; just to get it straight. I had had this in my will that when I was no longer here, that I had reserved a sum to be used to build, to add on to the museum as a memorial to my mother and father. But fortuitous things happened in the family. I just say that, because people think -- I occasionally hear someone suggest that someone came

to me about this; nobody ever came to me about this, entirely my own idea. I knew they needed more room. As I say, good things happened at that particular time, and I thought, "I could do it now. It would be such a joy to be able to do it now, and make the gift now." So that's still not answering your question, but that was dedicated in '58, the Cullinan Hall. And then the Blaffer's was only some eight or ten years before that, certainly, so it couldn't have been much before '48. I may be wrong, but it wasn't way back.

SB: From going through the scrapbook, it seems to me it was around --

NC: It would be about eight or ten years before the other was completed.

SB: When you gave your gift, it was during the directorship of Mr. Malone.

NC: Yes. And Malone tries to take all the credit. I'm going to get that one all straightened out, too, because I had a letter from him, more recent -- I think he's an art dealer now -- and I remember how we worked on the hall or something -- that inferred that he had sort of brought this along. That I want to get straight: my pride is too strong to have it otherwise. No one ever approached me. I was on the board. I knew the need for the room, and I had already signed up to cover that after my death, and it was a happier

circumstance that I could do it now. Now, that's for the record. I've often gotten that little thing about "Someone nudged her."

That's not the case at all. I wanted to get my one little statement about the hall in, though that's not what you asked me. I think I did do something that might be good, in that I thought to myself and then finally said to the museum, "I wanted a building that would speak to the future, not some safe thing just to go along with the old statement." Not that I don't appreciate the classic, because I do; but I wanted something built that would speak to the coming generations, you know? I guess my life experience in being an unmarried woman, where I've just heard so much conservative, "hold onto what we have" thing, that I thought, "Heavens, let's open things up and there is a new statement. If it's good, let's have it." I know I was criticized for making that recommendation, that there be a contemporary architect of reknown who was really good. I mean, that was certainly important, and it turned out that way. The committee, though, made the selection.

SB: That's what I was -- You had nothing to do with that. What committee was that? A committee that was made up of the board of trustees?

NC: Yes, that was Hugo Neuh<sup>us</sup> ~~ouse~~ and I think Jimmy Chillman was on that, because he was a

trained architect. And my nephew, Anderson Todd, who was an architect. There may have been another one. Anderson Todd can probably tell you, but I know those three for sure. There probably was one other. They finally voted to consider these various things, all the names of men who were important at that time. So that's to straighten that out.

SB: I think that's so interesting, because that's what I feel is one of the important aspects, that that Mies van der Rohe wing is so different, and yet it's so perfect for the kind of art that there is.

NC: Yes. I think for a crowded city lot it's probably a good solution.

SB: And when he made those designs, he had the same designs that have now been completed. Is that correct?

NC: Yes. What he was commissioned to do was to take care of this addition to the museum, which was to be Cullinan Hall. But in the process, he tried something -- like all great artists, he thought so big that he felt someday that the complete stage, because it would take more land -- that's the reason I think he had a mock-up. At the time he had the Cullinan Hall show, he had a mock-up -- when he sent the sketches down -- of a potential new building to continue the statement out there. But when this was planned, it was to be a unit in itself. Except, you know, the genius mind went on and had other things to say, too.

SB: They go together so well.

NC: Yes, although actually -- but it's no matter, because it's there and it's done -- the particular character and I think the excitement of Cullinan Hall is gone, now that that glass and the sense of the curve was so great, and because it was a building now, the sense of height was so great, too. I think the visual delight of walking in from the south, into Cullinan Hall, was really a beautiful aesthetic experience. Now, you don't get that now, but you do get a very handsome thing.

SB: Yes, it's a very different feeling, and now that it's open and there are people in it, and obviously it's very --

NC: Yes, it's lively, but there is no -- I mean, I think Cullinan Hall has lost its very exciting characteristic, its individuality. But it's there and it's still the same building and so forth.

SB: In looking at some of the other things that Mies van der Rohe has done, the Illinois Institute of Technology where I guess he was a professor for some time, makes me think very much of the way I remembered it, the front of it.

NC: We went up there after his death. There was a memorial service for him. We went up there, and they had the ceremony in the Institute. It is very suggestive of him, I must say. He has a charming grandson, by the way, his daughter's son; it's another name. But he's tall and beautiful

and continues a firm -- I don't think they use Mies' name in it.

SB: It's hard for me still to call him just "Mies," with all that right behind it.

NC: Well, Mies, I think it isn't like calling him by his first name.

SB: No, it's different.

NC: I don't know the distinction, but I've got a feeling -- because I'm not a first-name person, by the way; I think you establish something when you call by a first name. But "Mies" is almost like saying, "young man."

SB: [chuckles] (I had something specific I was going to ask you about that, but I can't remember.) Were you born in Texas, in Houston? Or in Pennsylvania?

NC: No, my family came from Pennsylvania.

SB: I knew your family came from Pennsylvania.

NC: Yes, I was brought up there, and then they moved to Texas, up to Corsicana, if you've heard of it.

SB: Oh, yes.

NC: That's where Father started his ventures, though he worked as a young man in the oil fields of Pennsylvania, in his teens, when he was not getting an education because he couldn't afford to have one. You know, his father died -- same old story, the American youth. You know, father died when he was twelve years old or something, he had to give up school and go out

to work, and he worked in the oil fields. Of course, he learned a lot and was such an able person anyway, and adventurous. He was on his way to San Francisco, where he worked in some capacity for Standard Oil -- and believe me, I don't mean executive -- anyway, he'd been called out because he knew something about something, to California, and he was asked to stop in Corsicana, Texas to see about some difficulties they had with water wells. Somehow, they thought he would know something about it. He came off the train. One thing led to another, and he came on people, I guess there, who he liked to work with. There was oil there, but it hadn't been developed at all, and he realized that this was a potential. So that's how they came to Corsicana. But I was born in Pennsylvania.

SB: And did you go to school here?

NC: Oh, yes. Entirely. I was five in Corsicana and then eight, I think it was, when we came to Houston.

SB: Your interest, I know, is not limited just to the museum. The Symphony is one of your interests, too, isn't it?

NC: Yes. I mean, I believe in the Symphony. I'm glad it's here. I never worked for it, because it was already nicely launched. I just love the visual arts. I love music; but it isn't a thing I can see. I care a lot about museums, I care a lot

about all the visual arts. I adore dancing. I'm mad for ballet.

SB: And that's been so successful in Houston.

NC: It's really very nice. It's getting better all the time. There's a devoted group.

SB: Amazing.

NC: Wonderful group of people. I was in a meeting yesterday, and it makes me so aware. Businessmen, you know, who are head of the Shell Oil here, and the vice president of it, and Harris Masterson, who after all, his whole life is the arts. Of course, he has the funds to go with it, but he works very much at it. You just can name any number of people who are in there for the ballet. It's great.

SB: And you say that you were with the Contemporary Arts Museum when it began.

NC: Yes. There was a little nucleus of young artists who started that idea.

SB: When was that?

NC: Heavens. I'd have to ask someone.

SB: Well, I might have it here.

NC: You know what the beginnings were when this little band got together. They had Karl Kamrath draw up this little A-frame house, like a little cabin.

SB: 1948, "by a group of independent art patrons and artists," is what it said.

NC: Well, it was primarily the artists that got the idea, and then they called on people interested in art, and I remember I was the first membership chairman. And it was such a talented group of young people really. They all pitched in and they all put on wonderful shows. I think the first show was down at the old city park, here. If it wasn't the first it was within the first two or three, was a beautiful Van Gogh show. I think Mrs. de Menil had a hand in. I think they were active in it then; they certainly were active in it later. At any rate, they got the land leased next to the park, down at the city park, from the theater. Detering's, lumber people, for some reason, approached, and agreed to let them use the land temporarily, and then Karl Kamrath designed the little A-shaped museum. But everything was put together with a minimum of funding, you see. Just enthusiasm and finding friends who'd go along. But it was such a fresh group, and so attractive. They were younger than I was then, but it wasn't limited to any one age. It was primarily, you know, the people just turning in the early twenties.

SB: When you talk of contemporary art in 1948, what were they showing when they got together? Besides Van Gogh.

NC: They had -- I don't know how to begin to tell you -- certainly painting shows. I know one show they had was contemporary design, I think in children's

furniture; that was one thing. Another time, contemporary design in household articles; kitchen things, if you will. One time they had something related to environmental -- a show that was related to the environment. I remember running water and fish. I don't know; you name it, and there would be somebody who knew how to develop it, you see. Both young men and young women, but there always was a nucleus of just plain citizens, you know, squares, you know, [both chuckle] that believed in them. I remember August Selig, and then the de Menils got into it. It was the first ten years that were beautiful years, and then it sort of petered out, because of a variety of circumstances, I believe. At one time Jerry MacAgy was the brilliant --

SB: It was Sebastian Adler, it says was the first director. Is that correct? Or was he way after?

NC: Oh, Sebastian Adler. Adler was in the entire new statement. No, he wasn't there, originally, Adler only came on the scene with this new building across from the museum.

He was no great shakes; at least, I don't think so. I always see the Contemporary Arts in two periods: definitely the beginning period, when it was very vital, run on a shoestring, pretty much; put on marvelous shows, entirely through the --

well, later on, they had professionals like Jerry MacAgy. But a long time before they got professionals, or before they got a paid director in, the artists themselves were putting on these shows. I'll tell you who can tell you something about that: a woman named Polly Marsters. She knows that very well, because she was quite active then.

SB: And you say that the de Menils at some point became very active in that association?

NC: They did, yes. As a matter of fact, almost from the first. I'm sure they were living here then. Did you say you do have the date on that?

SB: 1948 was when it was started.

NC: Yes, and they certainly were here, so they must have come here rather early on this. It seems to me when it was still down at the city park -- I know that's where they had the Van Gogh show (I don't pronounce it correctly, but it's the closest I can come). When they had that, they had something to do, I know, with getting that show here, because it was truly first-rate. They weren't really enormous canvases, but there were a great many, and they were of moderate size. Not moderate quality.

SB: And then you say it petered out after that ten years.

NC: In my version, yes, it actually sort of lost --  
When Jerry MacAgy left to go to St. Thomas, I guess it was, she was no longer there. And she wasn't

well anyway, I think. That's my term for it; it sort of petered out. I thought it lost its mettle, and just didn't have that vitality it once had. I don't think it's completely gathered again, though this is another era, and the statement would be different. They do have a building, a permanent building. I don't object to that building, actually outside; I don't think it's very good inside.

SB: I've only been to a couple of shows there. I remember the one that caused so much disturbance. The opening show. Was that Sebastian Adler?

NC: Yes, that was Adler. I'm positive. I don't want to get that wrong, but I'm positive it was.

SB: Because that caused such a furor, and that's how I heard of that.

NC: It was so contrived, you see. It didn't have any truths, true genius, true spontaneity. It was a shocker. That's why really we ought to be able to do things freshly, and to say, "All right, there are mice over there, and let's look at them in an art museum and see what they look like. Let's just get rid of the old context." All that I believe in, but it was a little silly.

SB: I guess that probably, as you say, it became silly, rather than have -- Because I guess maybe it must have been overdone. I just read about it in The New York Times at the time, I think, and lots of people were asking me what was going on in Houston

at the time. [chuckles] I had no idea.

NC: I remember there was a Contemporary Arts Museum working within the -- at least, they were showing at one time, in the big museum in Dallas.

SB: No, they joined together. There was the Contemporary Arts Museum, and then they had a separate building. Then it was absorbed into the museum, and I think they are pretty much the same now. I mean, they are the same museum, but they just have different labels as to where the paintings came from.

NC: But does Contemporary Arts have a program there?

SB: No, it's completely gone out of existence.

NC: I thought it had just been absorbed; that's what I thought.

SB: But the contemporary element in the museum in Dallas is very active, as it is here.

NC: I know Betty Marcus is so active. She called the other night; she was in town. She was here for the coordinating meeting. I remember that there was not a lot of sympathy at one time about the Contemporary elements on the board of the Museum of Fine Arts. I remember one time that the Contemporary Arts wanted to have a large show; they needed a large space. They wondered if they couldn't have some space, just for temporary use, to put their statement up at the museum. There was great doubt among the museum board members about the feasibility of that. I don't think it was done, as I recall. I remember later, when I

made my gift to the big museum, I made a special occasion that it always be made available at the convenience of the big museum director to show contemporary art things. That's before they had this latest development. When they had a show that was large, for more space, when they had the Mies Hall, they might let them have it. As a matter of fact, Jerry MacAgy put on that marvelous -- wasn't that the "Totems not Taboo" show, that was famous -- I think it was she who put it on. It was in the museum, in the Cullinan Hall, but I think it was -- I'm just wondering under what auspices. I keep thinking it should be Contemporary Arts, but she was invited to do it in the Museum. I have that catalog. I can see it.

SB: I guess after Lee Malone left, Mr. Chillman returned as the interim director, is that correct? Just a few years before Mr. Sweeney came.

NC: I've forgotten how it was. And may I say, I mean, he was a highly knowledgeable man, and really likable. He liked to -- in his mild way -- shock. He liked to take cracks about things. But he was essentially just a great man. He worked hard for the Museum. He worked on peanuts. That's what I wanted to say. The budget was so small back in those early days, that he was just there for half a day. I don't even know what was paid, because I wasn't that active in the Museum. It was very, very little.

Of course, he had his position out at Rice and was in architecture. But he gave class to our Museum, I must say, because he was a very knowledgeable man. Then Lee Malone was another breed. I'm going to see what time it is, because if you want to put a few things down -- I'll tell you what: let me give you my scrapbook, and then look at that.

SB: Thank you.

End of Interview