

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
75th Anniversary
Oral History Project

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SFMOMA 75th Anniversary

ROBERT BECHTLE

Painter

Professor of Art, San Francisco State University, 1978-1999

SFMOMA Board of Trustees, 2006-2009

Interview conducted by
Jess Rigelhaupt
in 2007

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Interview #1: October 22, 2007

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Rigelhaupt: I'd like to ask if you could describe your first visit to SFMOMA.

01-00:00:23

Bechtle: I could in general, I guess, in the sense that I started going there early on, when I was a student at California College of Arts and Crafts. I think maybe we went there as a class field trip for incoming students, freshmen. But it's all gotten mushed together with many subsequent visits all through the time in the 1950s, when I was in art school, because we had a routine, myself and various other students, just informal groups, that we would go off on Sundays to one of the museums in town, just as a cheap entertainment. Then have dinner in Chinatown afterwards or whatever. So it would roll around. One Sunday we'd go out to the Legion [California Palace of the Legion of Honor], and one Sunday we'd be at the [M. H.] de Young [Memorial Museum], and then one Sunday we'd be at SFMOMA, which of course at that time, was just called the San Francisco Museum of Art. I was there with great frequency, so that's all mushed together in terms of my thinking about a first visit.

Rigelhaupt: Well, in staying with some of your earlier visits, probably in the fifties?

01-00:02:04

Bechtle: I started in the fall of 1950 at art school, so it would be from that point on. I don't think I went [before]. I'd been to the de Young for special exhibitions a few times when I was in high school and before that, but I don't think I'd ever been to SFMOMA. So it was an eye opener going there for the first time because I was learning about modern art, along with my fellow students. I had no real background in that from before, from high school. It was all new and exciting. My sense of it was that I don't recall ever meeting Dr. [Grace L. McCann] Morley, who was the director. But I remember seeing her in the museum from time to time, realizing that she was running a really good program, a really interesting program of modern art.

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember any exhibitions or particular pieces in the permanent collection that grabbed you in the early fifties?

01-00:03:42

Bechtle: Little bit. Not so much particular exhibitions until maybe slightly later. But I do remember seeing a bunch of Frida Kahlo drawings. They were things that belonged to the museum, I think, from the time that Frida and Diego [Rivera] spent in San Francisco. A local collector, I'm sure, purchased them and gave them to the museum. She wasn't as famous then. In fact, she wasn't famous at all. But I just remember being very impressed with them. We knew that she was Rivera's wife. So when Frida-mania started a few years ago, it was that feeling of, I knew her when, in effect, because I remember being very impressed with those drawings. It's funny, I don't know why that particular thing has stuck in my memory. The rest of it becomes more of a blur. I can

remember particular works in the permanent collection. The Paul Klee, the one that's called *Nearly Hit*. Some works by local artists who were very visible at that time. What was his name, Howard? I want to say Bob Howard. Dorr Bothwell. Some artists who were working in an abstract, but certainly influenced-by-surrealism vein, that was fairly visible here in the late forties and early fifties. I suppose if I think hard, I might remember other things, but those jump out.

Rigelhaupt: In thinking about those years in the early fifties, how would you compare SFMOMA, or SF Museum of Art at the time, to the other museums—the Legion and de Young, in particular—in San Francisco, and the type of exhibitions they were putting on, and how artists were responding to the work being displayed at those museums?

01-00:06:53

Bechtle:

Well, of course, the Legion and the de Young, they were separate entities back then. The de Young actually had a fairly active program of contemporary art back then. One of the curators, a woman named Ninfa Valva, put on some really good shows. Mostly local artists, but a major [Richard] Diebenkorn, and a wonderful show by an artist named Howard Hack, who's since faded. But the San Francisco Museum of Art, the Modern, was where you went to see a real in-depth commitment to modern art and contemporary art. So as we made our little rounds of going to the museums one week at a time, at the de Young, unless there was a particular contemporary show, you went to look at the permanent collection, the old masters that they happened to have. The Legion was essentially the same thing. The Modern, the old masters were [Pablo] Picasso and [Georges] Braque. Of course at that time, they didn't seem quite so much like old masters because they were still alive at that point, and they were still working.

A big Braque painting, a Picasso painting, was a contemporary painting, it wasn't just, quote, "modern art." I don't think they were making that distinction so much at that point because modern art seemed to be almost a religion. People either hated it or were absolutely caught up in it and felt they had to proselytize and so on. The SF museum was, back in the thirties, I guess, one of the first museums of modern art in the country. Modern art was not big as a presence in most museums around the country at that point. It's been interesting to see how they have evolved, all three of the local museums. Plus the additions at Berkeley [Art Museum] and Oakland [Museum of California], which do their own programs, their own thing. They make a fairly rich mix that plays off of each other. I think the Fine Arts Museums [of San Francisco], now that the de Young is built in its wonderful new space, has probably got to figure out what its program is. It seems to be going through one of those little things that seems to happen every time a museum gets a new building. It's like it changes the game so completely from what it was before that it takes a while to figure that out. It seems like the [Museum of] Modern [Art] has moved, interestingly, from being strictly a regional

enterprise to major national, international status. It's interesting, the various associations that have been set up with the Modern in New York and with the Tate Modern in London. They seem to be playing in that league, which is terrific.

Rigelhaupt: So in the fifties, was SFMOMA more of a regional museum?

01-00:12:01

Bechtle:

I think it was regional in the sense that it was not a major player. It's hard to describe because the whole modern art enterprise was considerably smaller at that point. There were major exhibitions that came in. But certainly, touring exhibitions or joint exhibitions with other comparable institutions didn't exist at that time on the level that they do now, both in terms of the frequency and the scale of it. Now it's what happens. In many cases, it costs so much to do these exhibitions that one museum can't really do it by themselves, and they have to get partners. That goes on as a part of the field. I think in the fifties, that was not so much. I remember a big [Henri] Matisse show that came in. It was probably later in the fifties, or maybe it was even in the early sixties. But it was something that came, I think, from the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Very significant show, with a lot of major paintings. But that was unusual, I think. So when I say *regional*, I don't mean regional in terms of its collecting. I think that they aspired all along to collect on an international level, but there was a limit to what they could afford to acquire. The collector base in San Francisco is relatively small, and it certainly was fairly small at that time.

Rigelhaupt: Well, what was the relationship like between SFMOMA and artists from the area in the fifties?

01-00:14:23

Bechtle:

I have the sense that that was the artists' favorite museum, and that Dr. Morley was very sympathetic and friendly towards artists, local artists. There were ongoing exhibitions. The layout there was so weird because of the way the spaces were divided, and so you had these long corridors. The corridors were put to use, often, showing works on paper in small group shows of local artists, where they'd maybe show three artists who seemed to have some connection or some visual relationship, in the corridors. That seemed to bring a sense of participation in the museum by the local artists. Vice versa, that the museum was out there looking at what was going on locally. But there were fewer artists then. The stakes weren't as big. I think basically, it was an artist-friendly situation. It depended entirely on who was the director at the time. I think some directors were more interested in local art than others.

Rigelhaupt: I was going to ask you about all the directors. It's a question I'll come to again in different time periods, but what the balancing act was like as far as the museum's dynamics with artists from the area. Again, staying in the fifties,

did you have a sense of how SFMOMA was perceived, perhaps, through the state—maybe in L. A.—and then also how it was perceived nationally?

01-00:17:44

Bechtle:

Not really. Not really. I think I was too close to the beginning stages of becoming an artist. My sense of it was, from the standpoint of being a local person, that it seemed like an institution that had some reach outside of San Francisco and that it was recognized other places. But I have no sense of exactly how it was received, *really*.

Rigelhaupt:

Well, if we were to jump forward to the sixties, as modern art, I think, becomes more solidified.

01-00:18:43

Bechtle:

From the fifties, you mean, yeah.

Rigelhaupt:

How would you compare it then, how it was perceived by perhaps artists and collectors in New York or L. A.?

01-00:18:57

Bechtle:

Well, again, I have no idea. My consciousness of what was going on in L. A. back then was zero. It was years before I traveled to New York, before I had any connection with the New York art world. By the time I had some connection there, I think that the museum had a fairly high visibility. In some ways, until they made the move to the new building, I think that there was always a perception outside the area that it gradually had become eclipsed, in terms of stature, by museums elsewhere. Places like the Walker [Walker Art Center] in Minneapolis; in Los Angeles, the County Museum [Los Angeles County Museum of Art]. They all had new buildings. They weren't even new by the time SFMOMA built its new building. But I think there was always a sense that it was moving in the right direction. That is, it was moving towards trying to function at a national and international level. That was always, it seems to me, part of its ambition. It wasn't so much the building, although that was important because in the old building, there was just *no* space to put the permanent collection up, and the storage. All that was pretty limited. Obviously, it must have come from the board, but there was a real push to have the museum function as a more international institution. I think Jack Lane was brought in with that in mind.

01-00:21:29

The thing I was going to say about Henry Hopkins was that Henry was probably one of the most artist friendly of the directors. His vision was essentially regional. He was a big supporter of California artists, not just Bay Area but Seattle, L. A.. I think that the artists perceived that as being encouraging. I think there was a lot of good interaction that went on between the museum and artists. I can remember they'd have these little openings for a museum show that was not even a major thing—it would be maybe a one artist show or something from the permanent collection—and they would have a little boardroom opening, and they would always invite a number of artists.

Not always the same artists. That there was a sense of the artist having a social place within the museum. I remember there was a book that Henry did called—what was it?—*50 West Coast Artists*. Paperback, with portrait photographs by Mimi Jacobs. It included artists from Los Angeles and San Francisco. The museum sponsored a big book-signing party and got many of the artists to come up from Los Angeles, as well as artists from San Francisco, the ones that were in the book. It was a wonderful event, because it was a chance for you to meet artists that you'd known about for years but had never met. I think when the museum changed gears to go more international in scope, it left that folksiness behind. I think the local artist community has—It's just my perception of it, but it feels they are less a part of the museum now than they were in the old days. It wasn't just Henry. I think it goes back to Grace [McCann] Morley and a couple of the other directors.

Rigelhaupt: Well, staying with the fifties and the sixties, do you remember, in particular, having conversations with other artists about board members or collectors around the museum that were particularly influential in collecting strategies at the museum, or just active parts of the art community in San Francisco, the Bay Area?

01-00:25:16

Bechtle:

Not really. I knew a few people who were in the supporting element of collectors who were supporters of the museum. But basically not. I was a young artist trying to make my way. Somehow the pathways were—[pause] Through various—I was going to say institutions, but they weren't even institutions, they were various opportunities that young artists had, that don't exist now, but it's because the world has changed so much. I think what I'm referring to is the fact that the San Francisco Art Association, which morphed into the San Francisco Art Institute—The Art Association was the parent organization of the California School of Fine Arts. Anyway, the San Francisco Art Association would sponsor every year a large juried art exhibition to which artists could submit work and maybe have it exhibited there. There were a number of those going on all over California at that time. Probably other parts of the country. It was a major way of getting work shown and taking the pulse of what was going on locally and so on. Around here, there was one in Oakland, there was one in Richmond, which was actually a quite good one. But the one in San Francisco was always the biggie. So I knew people who were supporters of the museum, but who were also artists. Through the Art Association, through these annual exhibitions, I got to meet them a little bit. But I certainly wasn't sitting down with collectors and chatting about collecting strategies.

Rigelhaupt: Well, staying with the Art Association annuals, could you describe a little bit about the first time you were accepted in; if you remember anything about the jury process, anyone who was on the jury; and then maybe even a little description of what the opening of the exhibition was like?

01-00:28:36

Bechtle:

I can remember a little bit, because they would try different formats from one year to the next. For a while, there were two annuals. One was for works on paper, including prints and drawings and perhaps watercolors; and then one that was just for painting and sculpture. Sometimes there would be—Since the Art Association was running it, I guess the choice of the jurors would be decided by the—what? The officers of the Art Association? I can't really remember. It was always a point of contention, who the jurors were going to be. Sometimes there would be a jury of maybe five people. Usually it seems like it tended to move more and more towards having very small juries. There would be two or three people. Then in the days before they stopped doing it, there were a number where they just had one person as a juror—which I always felt was really the best way to go on that, just make one person responsible for it. That way you could rationalize it if you didn't get in. You could say, "Well, it's just that person's taste." If it was a jury of your peers and you didn't get in, then you'd start feeling more rejected. Gradually, it seemed like the idea of doing these large juried shows became less and less desirable. So by the time they actually stopped doing it, they became spread out more in time. They were held every other year instead of every year. There was one where it was done strictly as an invitational exhibition, where there was a committee from the Art Association that got together and decided, who would we like to see in San Francisco? The idea was to bring in artists from out of the area to show, which was an interesting way to do it. I think there was a point where it became a kind of—almost a student show. I mean it became so avant-garde. Sort of new stuff, cutting edge. It was held, not at the museum, but in a street space down in the Mission District. I think there was even a club down there at one time that was called "The Annual." It had evolved to that point. I think that was right about the time that the Art Institute name change came about—and in effect, the old Art Association disappeared, to be replaced by something called the Artist Committee—the annual vanished about that time as well.

Rigelhaupt:

Well, your first few times in the Art Association annuals, do you remember where your work was exhibited in the museum and what other work was around it?

01-00:32:48

Bechtle:

No. No, I can't remember any of that. I do remember one annual where I'd submitted a print, a color lithograph, and I'd gotten a rejection notice. But I went to the opening anyway, and there was my print. There was another artist in the area with the same name, spelled a slightly different way. But our paths had crossed a few times. So he had gotten the acceptance notice and, I suppose, gone looking for his work, and it wasn't there. I'd gotten the rejection notice, and I went and there was my work. But that's about the only one I can really remember because it was an oddball thing. It was a big deal, because it was definitely the most prestigious of the annuals. The Art Association had membership rules that you could become a member if you

were accepted into—I can't remember now exactly what it was, whether it was one San Francisco annual, or if you were accepted into several—like maybe two or three regional annuals. Like if you'd been accepted in Oakland two or three times, you were eligible to join the Art Association. So it was a milestone to be accepted into the annual so you could then become a member.

Rigelhaupt: Those openings for the Art Association annuals, were they well attended?

01-00:35:04

Bechtle:

They were, they were. They were quite crowded. Not like the members' openings now, where there's a line out the door. Although there were lines—because in the old building, you had to wait for the elevator to take you upstairs, and so the line would back up. It was a different world, you know? It offered what seemed to be an entrée into a professional artist's life, for those of us who were in the bottom rung, just out of art school. Or even sometimes we submitted stuff even though we were still in school. I think the absence of that now makes it harder for young artists to figure out some way to get a foot in the door. Because they are stuck with having to bring work around to galleries, try and promote projects for themselves and so on. It's just a totally different world.

Rigelhaupt: Were there other ways that the museum played a role in supporting local artists, particularly young artists, in addition to hosting the Art Association annuals?

01-00:36:42

Bechtle:

I think they did a pretty good job of keeping an eye out and having those small group shows, one-person shows. Actually, basically there would be two or three one-person shows in a row in the corridors. Those might come about because of attracting the eye of one of the curators at, perhaps, one of the annuals—I'm not quite sure how they did their snooping, but I can remember being invited to bring some work in and discuss the possibility of participating in one of the shows. Which I did twice. Once very early on, when I was doing prints that were essentially abstract, and abstract expressionist, even. I can't remember who—One of the artists that I showed with—and I think there were three, but it could have just been two of us. But one of them was an artist named Julius Wasserstein, who had worked at the museum. He was one of the preparators at the museum. They didn't have as big a staff then as they do now. He did abstract expressionist paintings and prints, and I remember the show with him. That would have been probably in the, oh, late 1950s, '57, '58, something like that, when I was still a graduate student. Then I had another one, right when I was beginning to evolve into a more figurative and slightly more precisionist way of working. That would have been in the mid-sixties. I can remember the other two people that I showed with at that point were an artist named Richard Graff, who was head of the print program at the [San Francisco] Art Institute, and Wesley Chamberlain, who taught at San Francisco State.

Rigelhaupt: Well, do you remember who the curator was in that exhibition in the late fifties?

01-00:39:43

Bechtle: I can't remember. There was a woman there named Anneliese Hoyer, who was the curator for the second one. Whether she was curator for the earlier one, I don't really remember. I think George Culler was the director at that point.

Rigelhaupt: It is right around the late fifties. I think there was a period where she [Grace McCann Morley] may have been gone, but still had the title. Well, could you describe a little bit about what it was like working with Anneliese Hoyer?

01-00:40:37

Bechtle: Well, she was European, with that nice—I don't know whether her family was from Germany or Austria. But she had that nice European smarts about art. She was very knowledgeable about prints and works on paper. But she was also very supportive. I just remember her going through the portfolio, and being interested in it and calling Culler to come in and take a look. Other than that, I don't remember. Because the museum put the show up. Basically, she said, "Well, let's do this show." So when it was time for it to be scheduled, then—and they were running on a very short run-up for something like that—then I brought stuff over and said, "Here," and they put them up. I can't remember if I cut mats for them or if they cut the mats. I'm sure they were just mats and glass; I don't think they were framed.

Rigelhaupt: So you had the final choice of the works that were going to be included in the exhibition?

01-00:42:12

Bechtle: I think not totally. I think I brought more than they actually were going to use, and I left the final selection up to them.

Rigelhaupt: So again, about the Art Association annuals, was it an important gathering place for artists to interact with one another?

01-00:42:52

Bechtle: You mean personally? No, not really, because the work is there. So it was a chance to see what other people were doing. There were various people who were the biggies, and you followed their work. There would be people you hadn't heard of, people that you found interesting. You'd follow people's careers a little bit, the beginnings of people's careers. But except at the openings, the artists weren't in evidence. So in some ways, the interaction on a personal level occurred with who you happen to know, who you would see at parties, at dinners. One of the problems of the Bay Area is the physical spread of it, and the fact that there's no central gathering place. Unlike various times in New York, where you could walk into, say, Fanelli's, and pretty much count on finding somebody there that you knew. There was no place

like that, other than maybe the parties at the Art Institute, which we always liked to go to. Because they had better parties than we had at CCAC. You'd get to know a few people that way. But no, in terms of actually talking to people, the connecting points were really the schools, I think. I was teaching at CCAC. I had gone to school there, so I had a lot of connections there, a lot of people that were students just ahead of me or just behind me. People who were teaching. Then I got involved in the mid-1960s with something called the Berkeley Gallery, which was a cooperative gallery. So I met a lot of artists who were members of it. The various openings were always very well attended by the local artists, even those outside of the gallery. So a lot of the people that I subsequently got to know professionally came into focus through that channel. Here it's always a problem. There's just no place that you can just go and meet people. Or almost none. There's an ongoing thing that exists right now and has for maybe twenty years. Those are Tom Marioni's Wednesday nights at his studio. But that didn't exist back in the fifties.

Rigelhaupt: Who else was involved in the Berkeley Gallery?

01-00:46:52

Bechtle:

It was mostly young faculty from all the Bay Area schools. So Richard McLean was one of them, Mel Henderson. Boyd Allen, from Berkeley. Patrick Tidd was at Berkeley at that time. Lee Adair. There was about maybe fifteen so I'm missing a bit. The Berkeley Gallery was on San Pablo Avenue in Berkeley. It was started by a woman named Jean Parsons who had inherited some money, family money. She lived in Berkeley. She wanted to spend it in an interesting way, so she bankrolled the gallery for a couple of years. It was supported, to some extent, by—the artists paid monthly membership dues, but it wasn't very much. We did all the physical work, including remodeling the spaces, Sheetrocking them, electricity. I learned all my construction skills, such as they are, from working at the Berkeley Gallery. But anyway, after a couple of years, then a woman named Marion Winterstein came in. She again had a little bit of family money and wanted to be a part of this. They decided that they would move the gallery to San Francisco and get a space there. It was on Sansome, just off of Broadway, in an area between North Beach and the Financial District. It was there for, I don't know, a number of years. Then finally it moved down South of Market, to Brannan Street, near South Park. Marion Winterstein's husband Jim bought a two-story building down there, and we took the second floor and yet again made a gallery out of it. That probably took it up to about 1970, I think, maybe even a little later than that. At about that time, I started getting connected with galleries in New York, and that changed the dynamic. I left the Berkeley Gallery. But it continued on for a number of years, I think, after that.

Rigelhaupt: Was that gallery primarily used to exhibit work of its members? Or did you curate shows from other artists?

01-00:50:40

Bechtle:

Mostly, what they did was generally have two one-person shows every month, of members of the gallery. They had a showing schedule worked out for a year or so. Occasionally, there were shows that were from outside, where they would invite usually just one artist to do a show. There was a show with Paul Cotton in the Sansome Street space one time. There was actually a very legendary exhibition that Bill Wiley did, the famous Slant Step show, which you may find mention of coming up every once in a while, as people still talk about it. That was also at the Berkeley Gallery on Sansome Street. That was a group show. The work was shown by just dumping it all in a corner. It was a precursor of a lot of installation art that's happened since. So when you walked into the gallery, it was like just this pile of stuff, sculpture, artifacts of one sort or another. But yeah, it was mostly one-person. Two one-person shows side by side. They didn't mix—I don't recall any group shows, as such, other than the Slant Step show, which—There were probably a few other outside artists that showed.

Rigelhaupt:

Did the exhibits in the Berkeley Gallery garner attention from SFMOMA or other museums?

01-00:52:57

Bechtle:

Oh, I don't think so. I think it took its place as one of the local commercial galleries. It wasn't really commercial. We tried to sell work, but it wasn't really functioning like a commercial gallery. But it was a small-scale space, relatively speaking. Certainly not in competitions with the museums. It was like, well, here's a bunch of artists that don't have galleries. There weren't that many galleries at that point, that artists got together and just said, "Well, let's have our own gallery." It's like Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland saying, "Let's have a show," and putting on a show in the barn, that sort of thing.

[End Audio File 1]

[Begin Audio File 2 10-22-2007.mp3]

Rigelhaupt:

I'm wondering if you could describe a little bit an exhibition you were a part of in 1976, the bicentennial exhibition that Henry Hopkins organized.

02-00:00:26

Bechtle:

Actually, Henry didn't organize that, if we are talking about the same thing. There was something for the bicentennial that was done by the Department of the Interior, that showed, as one of its venues, at SFMOMA. There was an exhibition that I think was like the fiftieth anniversary of the museum that was a different show, that Henry curated, that was back about—I'm not sure when the fiftieth anniversary was, but it was somewhere in that timeframe, I think, in the early eighties.

Rigelhaupt:

Okay. Well, what about the exhibition in '76, the one—

02-00:01:23

Bechtle:

Well, that was interesting. One of the people that put it together was a freelance curator named John Arthur. Then there was somebody in the Department of the Interior that was ostensibly the curator of record. What they did was ask a number, a fairly large number, of representational artists to make a painting for them, based on some aspect of the Department of Interior. Something that was administered by the Department of the Interior. There were a lot of choices. They paid expenses if you were going to fly up to Montana to paint some dam or something. They paid the artists a commission of \$2,000. They put together an itinerary for the show that opened in Washington at the Corcoran [Gallery of Art] and then traveled to a good number of venues. There must have been ten, it seems. Maybe not quite that much. Anyway, it came to San Francisco as part of the tour. The work then, after the completion of the tour, reverted back to the artist to be disposed of however the artist wanted. So he could sell it, in addition to having the commission. They did a nice catalogue, reproduced each work in color.

It was an interesting show. They went after a lot of the best-known American representational painters of the time, and including some who weren't necessarily known as representational painters. It had people like Nancy Graves, for example, in it. But Richard Estes. I don't think Chuck Close was in it, but he might have been. They worked with you in terms of what you might decide to do. I settled on going to Palm Springs, because I knew, through various things that I'd read, that Palm Springs was largely owned by a Native American tribe. So I could go down there and find the kind of architecture that I was interested in, the subject matter that I was interested in. I had a map that told me which—the tribe owned alternate squares on the map of Palm Springs. So I could tell which hotel was on Indian land and which hotel was on private land and so on. What I ended up doing was basically photographing the rental car that we had on the reservation outside of town. It had lots of big palm trees, Palm Canyon. But I basically just photographed the car and my family in landscape, the desert. That fit the category. Everybody did something like that. National parks, dams, bridges.

Rigelhaupt:

Staying with '76—and I think I misread my notes—it was the “Painting and Sculpture in California: The Modern Era.”

02-00:06:20

Bechtle:

That was one Henry did.

Rigelhaupt:

What do you remember about that exhibition?

02-00:06:29

Bechtle:

Not much. I remember it had everybody, which was nice to be a part of. They borrowed a large painting of mine that lives in Berkeley at the museum. There was one work by each artist. It was nice being in the company of [Wayne] Thiebaud and Diebenkorn, [Nathan] Oliveira, all the biggies. As well as the

older work they showed. So it was a very nice show. It was well selected, well curated.

Rigelhaupt: Do you think in telling a California story in that exhibition, it received attention from New York and other art communities?

02-00:07:38

Bechtle:

I have no idea. It must have, to some degree. To the degree that anybody in New York ever pays attention to what goes on in California. All of the—well, maybe not all, but a lot of the California artists that were in that show, the ones who were contemporary, anyway, a lot of them had extensive showings in New York and were well known both in the New York gallery world and also the museum world. That was true of people from Southern California as well as from the Bay Area. But there's always the local understanding here that the people back there don't particularly care what goes on here. We care more about what goes on there, because we have to, because it's the center of the art world. But they don't have to. Having said that, I think there's much more awareness of art in California now than there was twenty years ago, thirty years ago, whatever. Artists move around so much now and have studios in weird places. Bruce Nauman, is he a New Mexico artist? Is he a New York artist? Is he a California artist? Sort of like he's all of those. So I think the onus of being a California artist, I don't know if it's gone, but it's not what it was twenty or thirty years ago. So I think at the time that show happened, there had to have been *some* attention paid to it. But it would have the same regional attention that a big show in Minneapolis might have. I don't think much more than that.

Rigelhaupt: How would you describe the 1991 exhibition "Robert Bechtle: New Work" and the development of that?

02-00:10:45

Bechtle:

Well, that was one that John Caldwell curated. He had a series going called "New Work." For whatever reason, he was interested in my work. I guess Jack Lane was, as well. So he, Caldwell, approached me through Paule Anglim, my dealer here, if I would like to do one of those "New Work" shows. They were informal and a good way to—In a sense, they were a continuation of those corridor shows that I was talking about before. Except that they were much more wide ranging in what was brought in. They weren't just local artists. They'd get somebody from New York or from Europe, as well. But anyway, I had to scrape up enough work on relatively short notice. There was work that was literally new, and then other work that was borrowed from collectors, that was a few years old. I think of new work in my case as being anything that's under ten years old, because it progresses so slowly. The show was in the foyer galleries in the old building. There were two octagonal galleries, and a large foyer. There were paintings and watercolors, primarily. I think there may have been one or two drawings. They did a small—like a flier. They didn't do a catalogue, because that was basically the way they

handled those shows, low-cost, basically. But it was nice being invited to do it because it said that the museum had a certain interest in the work. Coming as it did, after the museum had really bent over backwards to internationalize and have a lot that was from Europe. I thought of myself as the token local artist.

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember other curators you worked with on that exhibition, besides John Caldwell?

02-00:14:18

Bechtle: Well, Janet [Bishop] was involved in that. She did a lot of the actual hands-on work. I saw John just once or twice in the process of doing it, selecting work, looking at slides and so on. But I don't remember anybody else. There may have been an assistant involved, but I don't remember.

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember any of the discussions about which works of yours would be included?

02-00:15:09

Bechtle: Not really. I do remember looking at slides on a light table and John moving them around. But I think at that point we knew it was going to be a problem to get enough work. So I don't think we were being overly fussy about selecting stuff.

Rigelhaupt: Working with the preparators and how it would be actually physically exhibited, do you remember?

02-00:16:07

Bechtle: I remember being involved. One of the preparators, Rico Salinas, is a friend; I remember working with him and a couple of the other people on the crew. Kent Roberts, who's the head prep, he was involved in that, obviously, at that point. But I remember Rico pounding nails and moving things around. [pause] The space always dictates. The paintings around the rotunda, as I recall, were sitting on the floor, spaced out where they might go. There wasn't too much change that went into putting them up. But in the little rooms, there were some situations where we'd take something in one room and move it to the other. Do we want these two to be next to each other? There was much more flux. That felt like working with the crew. They are all very professional.

Rigelhaupt: So it felt as though it was a collaborative process, working with the preparators and the curators in the exhibition.

02-00:18:19

Bechtle: Pretty much. Because I trust their judgments. They are professionals and they do it all the time. So when there's some need for change, usually it involved negotiations. It ends up being something that's coming from both sides. My relationship to the installing when I was showing in New York at a gallery that I was with for like thirty years was that I would always let them install it. They always did a great job. I think maybe the first time, I was wondering

how it would all go. But after that, I would walk in, the show would be up. Maybe once or twice I'd think, well, maybe we should move a couple of these things. I think of the museum people that way, as well. I'd prefer that they do as much of it as possible. But they need consultation as well, so all of the issues are negotiated.

Rigelhaupt: How would you describe the development of the 2005 retrospective?

02-00:20:24

Bechtle:

Well, that was a lot of work! A lot of fun. It was an interesting process because Janet had a really good sense of the work. We were starting with everything. Basically we had slides of work going back to the mid-sixties, the early sixties. There was three or four times what we could possibly accommodate, even if we'd wanted to. The process of narrowing it down went on over a period of months, really, just talking and looking at slides on the light table, and gradually winnowing it down to where we are looking at what they will actually look like in the space. As we went through the larger amount of slides we started just tossing things out. Sort of putting aside, on one side, things that definitely we knew would be in, and then dumping stuff that we definitely knew we didn't want. But even at that stage, there'd be things that would come up where I'd be tossing something out and Janet would say, "Wait a minute, not so fast. Let's consider that one a little longer." So it was a very interesting process.

As it got to the point where we had what we thought was a working checklist, they made scale copies of the work, mounted on cardboard, that could then be placed into a scale model of the exhibition space. Then we played with moving them around. Which ones worked together? We began to see how it would work as an exhibition. But even at that point, there were works that were in play and out of play; there were instances where I thought I really wanted to show a particular piece, but found it didn't work with anything else, so we finally decided to replace it with something else. It was a very interesting experience. Janet, she was terrific. The process continued when we were actually hanging the show. We had the works, that was definitive; the checklist was in place. But there were still works that needed to be moved. They looked different when they were actually on the wall than they did when they were on the scale model. Various paintings that just didn't talk to each other in the right way, and so certain shifts were necessary. The crew got a workout carrying pictures around. But once they start putting them on the wall, then they also have to worry about the labels and the lighting and all of that. But they start by placing them around the galleries and deciding which ones are going to go where. That's part of what the curator does. And Janet, she was great at that.

Rigelhaupt: So how did it compare to the experience in 1991?

02-00:24:57

Bechtle:

Well, they were very different because the retrospective was a much bigger deal. It was a bigger deal, it was a bigger show, with a catalogue. The museum was doing it at the top level. There weren't any corners cut. The show in '91 was what it was. It was a small show of relatively recent work. It wasn't meant to be a big show. So it was much more casual. I was very pleased to have the show, but I was also much more casual about it. It wasn't as big a thrill, let's put it that way.

Rigelhaupt:

What time period, or over what period of time were you working with Janet Bishop to develop the exhibition?

02-00:26:12

Bechtle:

Well, it was really Janet who proposed the show. Then she approached me about it through my San Francisco dealer, Paule Anglim. I guess she'd gotten it approved through the museum. That was when David Ross was director. It opened in 2005. It got postponed, or pushed back on the calendar at one point. I think it was originally going to open in 2003. So probably, we started talking about it around 2000 or 2001. So it was like five years. Four, five years.

Rigelhaupt:

What were some of the topics of discussion in the meetings over those four or five years leading up to the exhibition?

02-00:27:19

Bechtle:

The time frame spreads out because the museum is of course doing other things all along. Janet's working on several things at the same time. So it wasn't like we were meeting once a week to talk just about the retrospective. The meetings just went from very general where everything was possible, to more and more specific. Actually, another thing that Janet was involved in, in the earlier stages. Janet was trying to actually see as much of the work in person as she could. That's essentially what curators do. They don't just get a slide and assume that it's all going to work out. They have to see the actual work, see what condition it's in, physically, what it looks like, the scale of it, whether it actually looks as good as the slide does or whether the slide looks as good as the painting does or whatever. So a lot of intervening time was taken up with that. Just gradually, as we'd meet more and more frequently, coming together with decisions about the work. But then also, the catalogue was in progress at that point, so there was a lot of talk about who would write the catalogue, what material was available, what photographic material was available, what stuff from files might be of use. Stuart Rickey did a video of me working on a particular painting, so that they would have some material for the Koret [Visitors' Education] Center. That went on for, I don't know, four or five months, I guess. He would come every other week and shoot for an hour. It's not like this was constant. But that was all happening in the intervening times.

Rigelhaupt:

Well, staying right there for a moment, with mentioning the Koret Center, and maybe using your exhibition, your retrospective as a case study, what role

does SFMOMA play in arts education in the region, and as an educational institution?

02-00:30:44

Bechtle:

Well, I think they function in a major way as such. They have had some terrific education curators who have been in charge who are grounded, really, as art curators. They are not just educators. They have done some very imaginative stuff. With the Koret Center, they have got this major facility that they can use for programs; they have material available for people to pull up if they want to research stuff. I think they make a constant effort for outreach into the classroom. There are programs for people who are teaching in the public schools, trying to make some arts connection, which is increasingly difficult since the public schools can't afford anything like that anymore. It has to really come from places like the museum. So I'm certainly not aware of the details of how the program works, but my sense of it is that it's very important in the museum's mission and that it's done at a very high level. John Weber, the former curator, who is the one that I have known the best over the years, I always thought he was really on top of it, really had a very imaginative sense of what to do.

Rigelhaupt:

Well, how have you interacted with the museum as a teacher?

02-00:33:03

Bechtle:

Well, I sent my students there frequently! Sometimes, depending what the exhibition was, sometimes I would just use it as a resource, just suggest that people go see such and such an exhibition, without making a big issue about whether they actually go there. But other times, I would take classes as a group and go through it and make a commentary and be available for questions, try and get their curiosity up about whatever it was that seemed important for the exhibition. But it was always a problem with students to get them going out there. I don't know, we all like to say, "Well, when we were young, we didn't have any problem with that. *We* went to the museum all the time." I don't know, I suspect there's always a core of students who are really serious, and they do the same things we did. But the less interested students, the ones who are going through the motions—they are interested enough to take an art class, but they are not necessarily thinking of it as a profession—it's sometimes hard to get them to take the time to go downtown, go through the museum. But I used to keep at them about it. I have participated at the museum a number of times, just doing talks about my work. Both to the public, but also to some of those teachers' conferences that they have.

Rigelhaupt:

Well, the filming of you working on a piece for the 2005 retrospective, how do you imagine a range of students, perhaps from public school students to even advanced art students, interacting with that? What do you think it means that the museum puts resources into documenting you actually working, and making that accessible to students in the future?

02-00:36:06

Bechtle:

Well, I think it's great that they are doing it because it's difficult enough to have a sense of how works of art get made. So anybody that's in a position to film something that can be used by people ten years, twenty years, thirty years later, it's wonderful. I was fascinated by those kind of films—like Jackson Pollock painting. But anyway, there's of course the hokey one, where he's painting on the glass. But even so, even though you know it's staged—it has to be—there's still a sense that you see something about what goes on in the actual making of the work.

The other side of that, of course, is that the work often progresses very slowly. Seeing it all in real time can be totally tedious. The idea of standing there watching an artist work—I remember having students that would say, “Well, I'd like to come over and just watch you work.” I did do that in class sometimes, I'd work. But I always worked at a more accelerated pace to keep it going, make changes, do things to try and jazz it up to make it halfway interesting for them to watch. But filming me painting in real time, because it all moves *so* slowly, would just be like watching paint dry, literally. Stuart had an hour of me doing whatever I was doing that day. Each session was separated by a week or maybe two weeks, so it was a lot of footage that could then be collapsed, which is what they did for the thing at the Koret Center. It worked out. KQED was interested in doing something, and so they came and they filmed. But we mostly walked around the neighborhood and looked at possible painting sites and I took photographs and talked a little bit. But we didn't try and fake working, or actually work. They were able to cut in all this footage that Stuart had made. You can really see the painting progress through stages, almost like an animated thing. It really gives you a sense of how the painting is made, if not the speed at which the painting is made.

Rigelhaupt:

I want to run through a few of the directors that you have interacted with. Maybe as I throw out names, if you could talk about their interaction with Bay Area artists, how you would describe it, and maybe some of their strengths and weaknesses as directors of the museum.

02-00:40:21

Bechtle:

I can try.

Rigelhaupt:

Well, starting with George Culler.

02-00:40:27

Bechtle:

Well, my sense of him—I basically knew him only as someone who came in to look at work when I was showing my portfolio to Mrs. Hoyer. I'd see him around the museum sometimes, say hello and so on. But anyway, he seemed very low key. Very pleasant. Not particularly dynamic. My sense of it—how true it is, I don't know—my sense of it was that the museum went to sleep a bit when he was there. Morley had a real vision of it. Whatever limitations the museum had were not her limitations. They were more, I think, financial and

that sort of thing. I just got the feeling that Culler was more of a caretaker, as it turned out. Who followed Culler? Jerry Nordland, I guess.

Rigelhaupt: Yeah, could you speak a little about Gerald Nordland?

02-00:42:05

Bechtle:

I knew him hardly at all, just to say hello to. He always seemed somewhat more distant. But he was a great supporter of Diebenkorn and did the book on Diebenkorn. The Bay Area painting of that time—[Elmer] Bischoff and Nate Oliveira. So I had a lot of respect for him. I don't recall having any particular dealings with him, other than just passing the time of day in the gallery when he happened to be out in the galleries when I might be going through. I had a sense that his tenure pushed the museum forward and got it going again. It was more visible, did some important shows. I don't know how he was really perceived in the art world, I mean among the local artists, because I think the local artists on the level that I was at were not necessarily being shown in the museum very much. But I think in terms of the people that he was interested in, he was interested in major local artists.

Rigelhaupt: What would you say about Henry Hopkins?

02-00:44:02

Bechtle:

Well, Henry was very available, I think. That was my sense of it. He was a real supporter of California art. It seemed like he really cultivated connections with the local art community, with the local artists. Not just local artists but California artists in general, since he had been in Los Angeles before coming to San Francisco and so had wide connections among L. A. artists. He was an artist's director, probably more than any director. Well, that's not true. That's not true. I think David [Ross] was definitely an artist's director; and I think Neal [Benezra] is.

I remember when Jack Lane came, Bob Arneson hosted a big Saturday or Sunday afternoon party at his big studio up in Benicia to introduce Jack to the local art community. It was quite clear that everybody was playing off of Henry Hopkins' image and their expectations of what the next museum director was going to be like. Everybody expected him to be like Henry. Which, of course, he wasn't. The party was fun and Jack seemed to enjoy himself with good feelings and all of that; but it also seemed clear that he was a little taken aback by the immensity of this group of local artists who were—not necessarily expecting something—but who were used to dealing with the museum as their buddy, their territory, in a funny way. So I think that there was a lot of upset by local artists when the museum seemed to be showing all German artists. Why are they showing all these Germans? Now we can see it was a good thing that they did that, because most of them have turned out to be really major, major artists. But I think there was a certain amount of being taken aback by the change of focus and really being put off by it.

Rigelhaupt: What about David Ross?

02-00:47:44

Bechtle:

Well, David was certainly an artist's director. Very committed to a lot of really cutting-edge stuff. His bona fides in the art world, in the studio world were very good. It's unfortunate that it played out the way it did, because he was potentially a really interesting director. Because of his connections with the artists and his openness to all kinds of work. David's reputation, in terms of the work that he championed, tended to be towards media-oriented work, process work, installation, that sort of thing. So I was always surprised but pleased that he also liked my work and more traditional kinds of work.

Rigelhaupt: When you say it's unfortunate the way things worked out, could you say a little bit more about what you meant by that?

02-00:49:40

Bechtle:

Well, it's no secret. The museum got into a very precarious financial situation because David's not really a manager, in that sense. His brilliance really was curatorial. They had to let him go for that reason, and that's what I think is unfortunate. It would have been nice if either there was someone in there who could have managed effectively for him, or he were a person who could somehow manage it better, so that his potential as someone who was able to reach out and embrace a lot of these new things could be fulfilled. I think all museum directors have their strengths and weaknesses. They all have to be open-minded and deal with a range of stuff. They have to be open minded with regards to historic work and they have to be open-minded enough to look at what's out there happening right now, and be able to sort through it and find the best stuff. I think good museum directors use their curators to do that, their eyes and ears, to make sure that the institution goes into those areas.

Rigelhaupt: How would you describe Neal Benezra's tenure?

02-00:52:11

Bechtle:

Well, he's righted the sinking ship, in effect. I think he tries very hard to keep both of those things going, to be open to what's going on out there. I think he uses his curators very well. He seems very open to a lot of different kinds of stuff. I don't get a sense that he tries to micro-manage. I think he lets the different departments have their say, but he also keeps a—what do they say?—a firm hand on the tiller.

Rigelhaupt: In thinking about the directors as a whole—if that's possible, which it may not be—how do you think, overall, the directors of SFMOMA managed that balance between still doing curatorial work and managing a large institution?

02-00:53:42

Bechtle:

Well, I guess that's the challenge of the whole thing. But I think that challenge has changed. I think being a curator or being a museum director, let's say in the 1940s, where you might actually be doing hands-on curatorial work, as

well as fundraising, as well as managing the institution. But the institution was considerably smaller then. Now it's impossible. Most museum directors don't get involved in the curatorial aspect of it in a direct way. Just running the institution is such a major responsibility. I can't think of any major museum out there where the director is involved curatorially anymore. Not the Modern in New York, not the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art]. They are involved as leaders, but they don't actually do the scut work, the nuts and bolts.

[End Audio File 2]

[Begin Audio File 3 10-22-2007.mp3]

Rigelhaupt: Well, one of the other things that I have heard about the role of the director is educating the trustees about important work, collecting strategies. I'm wondering perhaps if you could speak a little bit first about your impression of that process before you were a trustee member.

03-00:00:35

Bechtle: Well, not really, because I'm not sure that I had any real sense of how it worked. I'm still not sure that I have any sense of how it works. But it seemed like the dynamic between the board and the director would set, in effect, the overall collecting policy. But then in terms of the individual things, the specifics of specific works, would come from the curators. They would propose the accession, the acquisition of certain works. It's not so simple. I think that probably there are opportunities that come up where perhaps there's a donor who's willing to bankroll something that the museum feels is really worth pursuing, even though it's very expensive. The impetus to do that would probably come originally from a curator, I would think. But certainly, the director would have to be running the show in a way that suggested that that thing would be possible, for the curator to even make an issue of it. I think there's probably work that gets donated by collectors, members of the board. That goes through the curators, in terms of whether they actually should acquire the work, even though it's a donation.

My sense of it, since I have seen it in action a little bit since I have been on the board, but clear from even before, it seemed like the whole operates in a fairly flexible way. I think it would have to, because it's the nature of the art world now, the nature of the art market, in terms of what things cost, what's available to actually purchase work, or it becomes available as potential donations, gifts to the museum and so on, it's all very complicated and constantly in flux. There's no one simple mechanism for doing all of that. I don't think I have thought about it that much. Like at one point, before I had my retrospective show there, the museum was interested in acquiring a new work of mine. The curators made a choice. There were several works that were available, and they made a choice of which one they decided to go for. Then it had to go before the acquisitions committee—which was partly the board, partly the curators, the director and so on—before they could actually

do it. So even though that wasn't something I'd thought about that much, I saw it in action. I wasn't involved in the meetings or anything like that, I wasn't on the board at that time. But I could see how it worked.

Rigelhaupt: If we switch gears a little bit to becoming a member of the board of trustees, how did that take place?

03-00:05:41

Bechtle: Good question. I don't know. Neal called up and asked if I were interested in doing it. He had proposed to the board that they have an artist member on the board. There are a number of museums that have been doing that lately. Like Chuck Close is on the board at the Whitney [Museum of American Art], and I know a couple of people— Rupert Garcia's on the board at the Fine Arts Museums [of San Francisco]. I think in England, there are various artists on the board at the Tate and so on. So he proposed that, the board decided, agreed that it should happen. I suppose he called me because I was fresh in his mind, maybe, from the retrospective. So I thought about it for a while. It's an honor to be asked, but it's also awkward in a weird way because to me, the purpose of the board is really to back the museum financially. I'm in no position to do that. I do my little donation here and there, but it's a drop in the bucket compared to what these people can do. So I'm sitting with these people who can and are expected to do this, and I'm thinking, what am I doing here? I thought about that before agreeing to do it. I told Neal that that was my one question about it. But he convinced me not to worry about that, that I wasn't expected to give \$2 million to the museum. But it's still awkward.

The people that I have met on the board have been wonderful. They have gone out of their way to make me feel welcome and be not intimidated by it. But it's still intimidating. I still wonder sometimes. Well, not only what am I doing here, but what am I *supposed* to be doing here? It's still not clear.

Rigelhaupt: Well, have you learned things about the functioning of the museum, how some of the processes take place, now having been—

03-00:08:51

Bechtle: Oh, yeah, yeah, very much. I'm much more aware of how it all fits together. My connection with the museum before was always on the curatorial level, in that I knew the people who put the shows up. I had been on a tour through the new building when they first moved in, through the shops, and saw how that all worked. But in terms of how the pieces, the different departments fit together, the process of dealing with the various issues that come up and so on, it's been a real eye opener. In a good way, not a bad way.

Rigelhaupt: Well, have you participated in discussions about acquisitions or collecting strategies?

03-00:09:54

Bechtle:

No. Not directly. The acquisitions go through the acquisitions committee, which I'm not on. Then they are presented to the full board. One of the curators does a presentation talking about the various works, and then the board votes en masse to accept. There's no particular discussion at that point. I think the discussion has all taken place in the committee, in the acquisitions committee.

Rigelhaupt:

Is it a majority vote on the full board? Or is it consensus or—

03-00:10:46

Bechtle:

It's consensus. None of the ones that I have participated in have had any opposition to it.

Rigelhaupt:

Are there other administrative or institutional issues that you have become more aware of since being on the board?

03-00:11:16

Bechtle:

Well, not exactly but—Well, yeah, actually, there are. I'm much more appreciative of how they deal with the budget, and how it gets broken down into the various categories, and how much they are keeping all of that under control. It's very transparent, all of that, which is as it should be. One of the issues which is a major issue right now as a financial issue is the insurance, which is something that as a lay person you don't even think about. Oh, of course they have insurance. But because of where the museum is, the fact that it's in San Francisco, an earthquake-prone area, considered a potential disaster zone by major insurers, doing these big exhibitions of work where big shows come internationally and nationally is just *incredibly* expensive. A premium of several million dollars just for one show. This is a big issue that they are dealing with right now trying to engage the federal government. Because the feds will help with the insurance on international loans, but not with domestic loans. They are trying to see if they can't get that changed to where the feds will indemnify for domestic loans as well. But that's stuff that as a museum goer, as an artist, as a casual person dealing with the museum, you never think about. Yet it's big bucks.

Rigelhaupt:

Have there been new fundraising initiatives or any other strategies to help—

03-00:13:47

Bechtle:

Yeah, they do stuff like that. Well, the constant is small fundraising things that helps a lot. Some of these social events that they do. The big party that they had last spring, the ball. What do they call it? The artist's ball or whatever. The Modern Ball, they call it. Anyway, that raised several million dollars. I guess next year they do the auction again. I think they alternate; one year they do an auction, then one year they do the Modern Ball. There's various stuff like that. Richard Serra getting—what do they call it?—the Bay Area Treasure Award. They do a luncheon that's really a fundraiser for the museum. I think

there are a number of those. But I'm not aware right now of any major underwriting effort, outside of those things.

Rigelhaupt: Well, you mentioned the Bay Area Treasure Award. I'm wondering if you could discuss your being awarded it in 2003.

03-00:15:31

Bechtle: Yeah, it was nice. It's a great honor to follow in the footsteps of various other artists that I have admired and respected. You do a little talk or a conversation or whatever, as part of the entertainment, and then there's a very nice lunch, and people subscribe to tables and contribute fairly substantial amounts. In fact, I'm surprised that I was chosen, because it seemed like there were other artists that were certainly ahead of me on the scale, on the track—or should have been. But I'm not complaining.

Rigelhaupt: What do you think of the building? I keep wanting to say new building, but—

03-00:16:55

Bechtle: Well, it's new compared to the old one. I actually like it. It has problems, like all buildings do. One of its problems being the lobby. But I must say, the lobby, the foyer, whatever you call it, certainly looks better with the big paintings up there now of Sol LeWitt. But I think it's a very handsome building, and it's frontage on Third Street there, particularly when you look at it from coming from Yerba Buena Gardens, it's very handsome and it's a building look that will age well. A lot of times, buildings that are more flamboyantly designed, more cutting edge, don't date very well. They don't age; they tend to look old-fashioned sooner than buildings that are a little more conservative. I think it's a very handsome façade. The spaces inside are great. Obviously, the museum's outgrown it, in terms of storage, in terms of even exhibition space. There is push, with the sculpture garden that's going on right now. Undoubtedly, there'll be some expansion of the museum, but that'll be in the future.

Rigelhaupt: Having had two serious exhibitions in both the museum on Van Ness and on Third Street, how would you talk about the exhibition spaces and the differences between the two?

03-00:19:13

Bechtle: There's something nice about the old spaces, even though it had its problems. But they are just different. It was a more traditional beaux-arts art museum space. The galleries, the big galleries in the old building were really quite handsome. Very high ceilings and very spacious, a lot of light. But it also had a lot of awkward little spaces that you could never quite figure out what to do with. Like the rotunda. Just a wonderful space, but it was useless, empty. Occasionally there would be a show. I remember a [Alberto] Giacometti show that was in there that really made that space hum. But mostly, it just sat there empty. The new museum, I think the spaces are probably much more malleable. They can change the configuration much easier and adapt to

different size exhibitions much more readily than they could with the—Because the old galleries were quite fixed. You could subdivide them, but you couldn't actually change them. Whereas I think with now, the—what is the?—the fourth floor, you can open it all up and make it one huge space, or you can have several shows. One on one side, one on the other; two on one side, two on the other, whatever. But it's very flexible. Or seems to be, anyway.

Rigelhaupt: I'd like to throw out a few names of curators, and if you just have any memories of their exhibitions or working with them. John Humphrey?

03-00:21:38

Bechtle: Well, John, yeah, I remember very well. Although I must say, he was *the* curator of painting and sculpture. I don't remember specific shows. Whatever was up during that time, obviously, was his. But it was a lot of stuff that was up. He was always a real supporter. When the museum wanted to honor him, they purchased one of my paintings to have his name on it. Which was really nice that they did. I mean nice for me, nice for John. But I remember him as being very approachable, easy to talk to. I guess he was curator when I had a couple of other shows back, I guess, in the sixties or early seventies. There were two shows. John was probably curator for one of them, at least. Maybe for both, I can't remember. I don't know how far back he goes. Who else?

Rigelhaupt: George Neubert?

03-00:23:39

Bechtle: George Neubert! That's right! I'd forgotten about him. Funny guy. He was a football player from the University of Nebraska, and somehow he knew his stuff. He knew his art. He was a sculptor himself. But his persona was that of a football player, so it always seemed strange talking art with him. That's right, there were a number of people who were—Graham Beal was another one, yeah.

Rigelhaupt: Would you say a little bit more about Graham Beal?

03-00:24:42

Bechtle: Well, I don't really have a good fix on Graham. He seemed to have an interest in a lot of, I don't know, ephemeral stuff that had to do with the rock bands and all that stuff in the sixties. I'm not sure that that's accurate.

Rigelhaupt: What about Van Deren Coke?

03-00:25:41

Bechtle: I think he was probably terrific. I never worked with him because he was in photography.

Rigelhaupt: Well, having not worked directly with him and not being a photographer, if you could summarize or say a few words about your impression of the photography collection.

03-00:26:05

Bechtle: I know the present curator of photography pretty well, Sandy Phillips. She, I suppose in a sense, was a protégé of Van Deren Coke. I think the photography collection is fantastic. I don't know what their holdings are specifically, but I think they have been acquiring for quite a while in very smart ways, and getting a lot of first rate stuff. So my sense of it is that it's a really major collection of photography. But that's just a sense, based on the shows that I have seen, the exhibitions, particularly a lot of contemporary ones. But then also just knowing Van Deren Coke by reputation, and seeing Sandy Phillips evolve over the years as an absolutely top-level curator.

Rigelhaupt: What about Suzanne Foley?

03-00:27:26

Bechtle: Suzanne, that was back in Henry's era, Henry Hopkins. I like Suzanne a lot. I worked with her a little bit, and I can't remember on what. I don't know that we actually did any specific projects. She was the person in the museum that I talked to and was most familiar with.

Rigelhaupt: What do you remember about the "Space, Time, Sound" exhibit that Suzanne Foley curated?

03-00:29:54

Bechtle: I do a little bit, yeah. I remember one piece [laughs] in particular, which was quite haunting. I can't remember the name of the artist. He's local. I want to say—[pause] But he was doing some things that had video cameras mounted in the room, and then they were feeding into the piece. They were on a time-delay thing. He's done that a number of times. That you would see yourself in the image, but yourself as you were maybe three or four minutes earlier, in a different part of the gallery. It was a rather brilliant piece. But it's funny, I don't remember specific pieces. There were a lot of interesting things in that show, but that's the only one that has stuck in my mind.

Rigelhaupt: Well, part of my asking, you had mentioned Tom Marioni. The "Space, Time, Sound" exhibit, from my understanding, certainly was—not necessarily a culmination, but at least influenced by the conceptual art going on in the Bay Area. If you could speak a little bit about your impression of how conceptual art was being received and exhibited by SFMOMA.

03-00:31:42

Bechtle: I had totally forgotten about that particular exhibition. That was obviously an attempt to get involved with it. I think there's been fairly good involvement by the museum with that over the years. Paul Kos, who's a sculptor, conceptual artist, is local, and Tom Marioni, and Howard Fried—there's a number of

people. They have I think been shown and acquired by SFMOMA over the years. Who else? I don't know. But I suspect that there's other stuff that's in the collection by other artists. I don't know whether it's a major commitment to collecting, but I think there's enough that it's definitely a presence in their collection.

Rigelhaupt: Memories of Gary Garrels's tenure as a curator?

03-00:33:23

Bechtle: Well, I never knew Gary that well, just to say hello to him. I gather it was Gary that managed to leverage that [René] Magritte into the collection, through Mrs. [Phyllis] Wattis. I think there were a number of other things that Gary was very instrumental in getting. So I'm very thankful that he did.

Rigelhaupt: What about memories of Madeleine Grynsztejn's curatorial work?

03-00:34:18

Bechtle: Well, she's still there so it's not memories, right? Madeleine's a high flyer. She's operating at the top of her profession, with lots of art-world connections. The various things that are in the museum right now, the Olafur Eliasson show, she's co-curator of that; and she did the Richard Tuttle show, which was really major. I guess she did the Matthew Barney show. This is all high visibility, major stuff. Like the Richard Tuttle show, that was a landmark retrospective, because I don't think he'd had a show of that magnitude up till that point. Yet he was a well-considered artist for years. Not exactly underground, but certainly not with a big public presence. That was a major show to put together.

Rigelhaupt: Well, speaking of Matthew Barney, from my understanding, that was one of his first, if not his first major museum exhibition. I'm wondering if you have thoughts as to why SFMOMA, you could say, was ahead of the curve in some ways.

03-00:36:24

Bechtle: Well, I don't know for sure they were. He had a big show at the [Solomon R.] Guggenheim [Museum] before that. He'd been a presence in the gallery world for quite a while. His films, the *Cremaster* series, had certainly been out there as part of the scene. I don't know if they'd been seen in San Francisco before or not. So by the time he did the show in San Francisco, I think he was already a public presence. It's not like they were the first to show him. But on the other hand, it wasn't old hat at that point. It was still something that was going to jar people. They were going to look at it and wonder what it was all about. To that extent, it's ahead of *some* curve, anyway, if not the cutting-edge curve.

Rigelhaupt: On the whole, do you think SFMOMA does a good job of balancing showing new and unorthodox artists and also international figures that are well established?

03-00:38:07

Bechtle:

I think so, for the most part. I think they are very conscientious about doing that. The one place, I think, where the museum really has a weakness is in the permanent collection, which they are working on. It's certainly improved tremendously. But they don't over-balance it with shows of Jasper Johns prints or Picasso etchings or stuff that have been around a lot and so on. It seems like when they show established figures, it's a major show like the big—what is it?—cubism in America. Lots of old favorites in there, but it was a really interesting show that had something to offer. There's been a lot of younger artists in shows, both local and international. Then these major shows that have been done, like Matthew Barney or Anselm Kiefer or Gerhard Richter—these are all shows that are by people who are very famous right now, but that you don't see all the time. Certainly not in San Francisco. But I think you don't see it all the time even in New York or London. They are major events to put these together.

Rigelhaupt:

How would you define a successful career?

03-00:40:08

Bechtle:

Pardon?

Rigelhaupt:

How would you define a successful career as an artist?

03-00:40:15

Bechtle:

Oh, [laughs] I would say any artist that's still working after the age of forty-five or whatever is successful. I mean just *doing* it. The rest of it is frosting. If you can somehow make a life for yourself as an artist, and you still are doing it because you are interested, you are enthusiastic, that making the work is what, really, it's all about, what else do you need? It's nice to get recognition, it's nice to have work sold, it's nice to be in museum collections and so on. But as a young artist, you look up and you see all that and you think, gosh, if I could just have a painting in such-and-such collection, such-and-such a museum. But by the time you get to where that actually happens, you realize that it's nice, but it's not really what it's all about. So I always feel we need to cheer on all the artists that are out there working, regardless of whether they are household names or not.

Rigelhaupt:

What role do you think museums such as SFMOMA play in shaping artists' career?

03-00:42:15

Bechtle:

Well, it can be real major, yeah. I think it's inadvertent. It depends on the institution, it depends on the curators, et cetera. Sometimes it's very conscious, where they are trying to push particular artists. But I think in general, it is inadvertent. The museum thinks, or the curators think, that a certain artist maybe is doing something interesting and needs to be shown, and they get behind that. Then it may or may not have any repercussions. In many cases it does, because of the visibility of the museum. Particularly if there is a

catalogue involved. The book goes out and it's around long after the show is over, and that can have a big effect. I know in my case, it certainly has—It's changed things. I have become much more visible in the art world than before. But I had a solid career that I was not in the least bit ashamed of, going back to when I was a student. But since the museum show, it's like it's operating in a different league. It's not *just* the museum show, it's having a different gallery in New York, which occurred before the museum show. But the result of the museum, the catalogue, the different gallery, of being seen in a different context. I get interest from places in the art world that didn't know I existed ten years ago. I'm amazed. It's interesting, because I'm in some international shows now as a old master. But I'm fascinated by the fact that it's younger people that are interested in the work. I have work in a group show in London right now at the Hayward Gallery. It's called "The Painting of Modern Life," and it's really looking at work that is to some degree photo-based and takes contemporary life as its subject matter. It has some artists that were from the late sixties and early seventies, like myself; and then it has artists whose work is from since 2000, younger artists. People like Malcolm Morley and [Andy] Warhol and Richter and Vija Celmins and David Hockney. So it's a really stellar mix. Then it has a lot of younger artists that are getting well known, and are international. Anyway, it just seems like that is probably an upshot of the museum show. The person who curated it, an American, was curator at the Wattis Institute at CCA for a few years at the time that the museum show was on.

Rigelhaupt: Well, you mentioned the permanent collection at SFMOMA. From what I have heard, it's only about 7 percent of the permanent collection that is on display at any given point. I'm wondering if you could say a few words about some of your favorite pieces in the permanent collection that may not always be out there.

03-00:48:02

Bechtle: Probably most of my favorites are usually out there. Of course, the earlier historic work is very spotty, unfortunately. The room with the surrealist pieces and so on. There's not a lot of German expressionists or cubism. There's the occasional piece, but they don't have a bunch of major Picassos, for example. Their Matisse are quite wonderful, but they are all early Matisse, for the most part. But they are adding major work by later artists. They have worked out things with various artists—[Robert] Rauschenberg, for example, who gave them a lot of early work such as some of the black paintings and that painting that he made with the rubber tire that was a long drawing of the tire tread on it. They acquired the [Willem] de Kooning drawing erased by Rauschenberg, a legendary drawing in modern American art history. That's one of my favorites. I love the Matisse one of the woman with the hat [*Femme au chapeau*], which is a really good one. The Magritte they got not too long ago, the comb leaning against the wall in the room. The great early Jackson Pollock, *Guardians of the Secret*.

Rigelhaupt: How would you describe the dynamics between museums and galleries and critics? Maybe focus on San Francisco.

03-00:50:25

Bechtle: Well, I don't know, it's complicated. Because each has a different role to play. The galleries are in it to make money themselves. But they are also altruistic, in terms of trying to bring new talent forward and keep the work of their various artists before the public. They are pushing stuff towards the museums. But the museum has to make its own judgments and not get too caught up in local galleries. So I think it's a symbiotic relationship, but it's not one in which one pushes the other. The critics, that's more of a problem here because the only critic we have is Kenneth Baker at the *Chronicle*. Essentially, there is no critical dialogue because there's nobody to talk to about it. The other papers—the *Tribune* or the *Contra Costa Times*—nobody sees them in the city. *Artweek*, nobody looks at *Artweek*, basically. So we really don't have any critics. We have Kenneth Baker, who functions sometimes well, sometimes not well. But there's nobody to challenge him. David Bonetti, when he was here, was actually a much more interesting critic. But he became a casualty of the merger of the *Chronicle* and the *Examiner*, because he was on the *Examiner* staff.

Basically, what we have is a two-way dialogue, not a three-way. The New York critics, they occasionally pay attention to what goes on out here, but not a lot. The New York music critics come out here more than the art critics do. The opera, I remember, just recently did the new Philip Glass opera, and Tomasini from the *Times* was here for the premiere of that and wrote it up the next day. He's out here, or somebody from the *Times* is out here, whenever there's a major presentation by the opera or the symphony. The art critics seem to come out much less. I think somebody must have come out for Richard Tuttle, because that was scooping the art scene. But I don't remember a *New York Times* review of the Matthew Barney show, a major show. There was of Eliasson. That was in the *Sunday Times*. They do come out, but—I'm always reminded of the famous map, the cover of the *New Yorker* that had the Saul Steinberg map on it of the world as seen from Manhattan by New Yorkers, where looking West across the Hudson, this big river; and then there's a little shore over there, and then New Jersey; and then there's one or two mountains out there, and then there's the Pacific Ocean. It's like that's it.

Rigelhaupt: I wonder if you could say a few words of how you'd summarize your perception of SFMOMA as it approaches its seventy-fifty anniversary in 2010, and perhaps a few words about where you'd like to see the museum at its hundredth anniversary?

03-00:55:32

Bechtle: I'd like to see it at its hundredth anniversary, but I don't think I'll make it. Is it really seventy-five years? It seems like it was fifty years not very long ago. Well, I think it's moving in a very good way, a very good direction. They

have become a major player in the museum world, in their field. I think they have been very conscientious about building the permanent collection internationally, as well as locally. They are not just a regional museum anymore, which I think they were for a long time. I would hope that as they approach the hundredth anniversary, that they will have evolved even further into a major player in the art world. Right now there's a handful of major museums that show contemporary art in America. There's a *lot* of them out there, but in terms of major players, there's—what? There's the Modern in New York, there's the L. A. people, there's the Walker in Minneapolis. I'm not sure what else. There's other major museums in Chicago, St. Louis. But being a museum that is devoted to modern art, contemporary art, they are up there. I'd love to see them be thought of in the same way as, say, the Tate [Modern]. They'll never be the Museum of Modern Art in New York, but then no other museum is going to be like the Louvre, either! But they are up there.

[End of Interview]

Jess Rigelhaupt is an assistant professor of history and American studies at the University of Mary Washington. At the time of this interview he was a postdoctoral research specialist in the Regional Oral History Office (ROHO) at the University of California, Berkeley. He received his Ph.D. from the Program in American Culture at the University of Michigan. His research focuses on California politics and culture. He is writing a book on mid-twentieth century progressive social movements and politics in the San Francisco Bay Area.