

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

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SFMOMA 75th Anniversary

ENRIQUE CHAGOYA

Painter, Printmaker
Director, Galleria de la Raza, SF, 1987—1990
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Interviews conducted by
Jess Rigelhaupt
in 2008

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Interview #1: April 10, 2008
 [Begin Audio File 1 04-10-2008.mp3]

Rigelhaupt: Could you describe your first visit to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art?

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Chagoya: That was in the old building on Van Ness Avenue. I think it was back in maybe 1977, when I first visited the Bay Area. I was living in Mexico City at the time, and I was with my first wife. I just came and we were having a little tour of the city, and I went to the museum. That was really a long time ago. I just remember seeing the collection, more than anything else. It was a very mixed exhibition back in the old building on Van Ness Avenue.

Rigelhaupt: Were there any pieces within the exhibitions that you saw that were particularly memorable?

01-00:01:17

Chagoya: I was interested in some local artists. There were quite a few artists that actually, I really saw for the first time, that I really liked, like Robert Arneson and Richard Shaw, among others. So that was a memorable exhibition. Also the exhibitions of photography, on and off, had been something I really followed at the museum. But those stuck in my mind. Especially the ceramics and the Robert Arneson show. That was a few years later, when I moved here, after 1979. I think that exhibition was maybe in 1980, something like that, '81. I was just settling down here.

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember any of the photographers that were exhibited that were influential?

01-00:02:33

Chagoya: [EC added in editing: "Yes, Pedro Meyer and Sebastião Salgado, among others. Plus many group shows with great photographers."] I barely remember anything. Irving Penn was among them. Just very vaguely. I don't want to say names that I don't recall for sure that I saw. It was one of those times you just really spend your time *looking* at the work. It's something that made the city attractive to me, just to know that there was a museum like the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco. It made a big difference for me.

Rigelhaupt: Thinking back to your early visits, how did SFMOMA compare with other institutions, other museums of modern art that you had visited?

01-00:03:36

Chagoya: I think it's very competitive. SFMOMA has put on some very good shows. Although it's hard for me to pinpoint what would be the main difference at SFMOMA versus other museums. It's very difficult to compete with the East Coast, I think, on the one hand. Especially MoMA New York, which has huge collections of anything. But San Francisco has its own bubble, too. Something

I think is very important for the museum is to foster contemporary local artists. I think the SECA [Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art] Award is something that I always look forward to seeing. I think perhaps the strength of the museum could be what will be unique in the Bay Area, and the museum could foster more that. Then it would be something more distinctive from other museums. When I grew up in Mexico City, I was used to major exhibitions that were traveling, usually from New York. It could have been anything from an exhibition of huge prints—there was an exhibition of really gigantic prints that was in Mexico City; it was coming out of New York on its way to Europe—or just traveling shows from the former Soviet Union, at the time that this country didn't have much of a connection with the Soviet Union. I'm talking about the seventies, even before the Cold War was cooling down. So San Francisco, from that perspective, looked a little more mellow, in terms of shows. I was sometimes puzzled why the museum wouldn't have any other major shows, like the East Coast. Some shows would not stop in the Bay Area, but would stop in Los Angeles instead. But I think MOMA today is very competitive with the rest of the country. In that sense, I think it has come a long way.

Rigelhaupt: In addition to exhibitions you've seen, have there been other events or lectures or films or things along those lines that you've seen at SFMOMA that were memorable?

01-00:06:26
Chagoya:

Yes, there were exhibitions like the Kara Walker show that was put together a few years ago. I was glad to also meet Kara Walker for the first time. Also her lectures. I attend on and off to the lectures at MOMA. Robert Storr, just about a year ago or two years ago, I think, something like that. The lecture series is something I really, really like. Sometimes I'm a guest, too. I've been speaking at the museum, as well. I think the retrospective of Robert Arneson that took place also a few years ago was something I really enjoyed. That's just from my own bias because I like artists who have social or political satire in their work. Robert Arneson used to have some sense of humor in his work, something I feel very connected to. So those have been important shows. Also other exhibitions that have edgy sides or controversial sides, like a Katarina Fritsch exhibition that was curated by Gary Garrels, which for me, she has a side that I don't quite like, but it was really interesting to see her work. It was, I think, the only time I have seen her sculptures anywhere else.

Also I'm trying to remember photographers. There was the photography of Graciela Iturbide, who's a Mexican photographer. That was in the old building. That was just a spectacular show, as well. So there's always something that the museum does that leaves some memories. I wish, the only thing, though, is that I had more time to go more often to the museum. My schedule is just really complicated and I don't go as often as I would love to.

Rigelhaupt: How do you think the museum is perceived in the Bay Area and amongst artists?

01-00:09:36

Chagoya: That's really hard for me to say, because it's really hard to talk for other artists. I think on and off, the museum could be perceived as disconnected from alternative spaces and whatever is going on with the local scene. But that could be a very subjective perception. I think the fact that the museum is making an effort to outreach communities, sometimes the kind of exhibitions they do that address different communities matters. I think very often might relate to the kind of exhibitions that take place. For instance, there was an exhibition of the Gelman Collection. It was an exhibition of Mexican modern art, a few years ago. There was outreach through the local Latino community. The same thing happened with another show. There was a Kerry James Marshall exhibition at SFMOMA, which I remember made some waves in local communities. So often the kind of shows the museum has made an impact. I think the upcoming exhibition on Frida Kahlo should be a good opportunity for the museum to really outreach, especially the Latino community, which is something very lively in the Bay Area. Especially in the Mission District. I used to work in Galería de la Raza. They have a very active program, supporting all kinds of local projects. So I think the exhibition of Frida Kahlo will be some very good way to connect to places like Galería de la Raza, which is one of the first places that ever brought any attention to Frida Kahlo in the Bay Area, back in the 1970s when nobody, or hardly anybody, knew about Frida Kahlo. This is before so many monographs on Frida were published. I will be very curious to see what happens with this upcoming exhibition. I'm glad it's being done.

Rigelhaupt: So in addition to specific exhibitions, the outreach and trying to bring in different parts of communities that make up San Francisco and the Bay Area into the museum, is the SECA Award and the support for—I don't know if it's always younger, but largely younger artists. Is that one of the ways the museum connects with artists, the community of artists in the Bay Area?

01-00:12:36

Chagoya: I think it is one. I think it could be supported a little more. If you got the support to make it more like a local biennale would be just incredible. The number of awards and the amount of the award, it's just very minimal. Nevertheless, I think the artists that participate or get nominated—and I have nominated quite a few artists during the past—get really excited, first; and then everybody gets really frustrated. You end up with more people unhappy than happy. But that, I think, is maybe with any award. If it was a little more expanded, if it was a little more participatory, it would be a good way to create a sense of what's going on with the local arts. I think that could help the museum to get a little more rooted in the local art scene, which is always very unique. San Francisco, and the Bay Area in general, I think is a very strong generator of new emerging arts, and a lot of artists end up moving to New

York or Los Angeles, just because there is not much support here. There's a point where, I think, contemporary artists just go all the rounds of the alternative spaces and galleries, and there is nowhere else to go, and they just have to move. You're lucky— Like myself, to get some action going on a lot of the time. In general, I think there's a limit where artists have just a certain amount of opportunities, and then there is some kind of stagnation. In that sense, San Francisco could be very difficult for new artists. The role of the museum in that context, could be more supportive of what's going on, just to keep some of our artists here. It will require more funding, I'm sure. I'm not familiar with what the priorities of the museum could be, but if the priorities could be shifted, I think that's something I would gladly see happening.

Rigelhaupt: Did you have a sense when you were a student at the San Francisco Art Institute, there was a similar lack of, shortage of support for emerging artists in the Bay Area? So can you date that back to when you were an art student, as well? Was there a similar feeling then, as well?

01-00:15:36

Chagoya: I think it's getting worse, in general. I think younger artists today might even have a harder time than artists in the eighties. Not so much just because of one museum, not so much because of SFMOMA. Nobody can put so much responsibility on a museum for what the local art scenes might or might not get from institutions. In the eighties, first of all, there was more public money for the arts. There was the National Endowment for the Arts that was giving a lot of grants to individual artists, regionally and nationally. Many friends of mine got awards. Personally, I benefited twice from the NEA. On top of that, there was the California Arts Council at the time that also was giving more awards. So the federal and the state support for the arts has pretty much collapsed since then. Today I think it's mostly private foundations that give awards to artists. In comparison, I don't think the support is as strong.

By the same token, I think the alternative spaces, or so-called alternative spaces, have a harder time surviving today than they were in the 1970s or the 1980s. The alternative spaces had a really vital role in the city, just opening the doors to new artists that eventually made it into a museum like SFMOMA, or other places around the country, or outside of the country. But that is something that is beyond the museum's power. What is really, to me, very interesting is that there is a lot of art going on. There are a lot of exciting artists emerging all the time, in spite of the lack of support from federal and state agencies, or the lack of agencies to support artists, basically, compared to Europe—England or Germany, or even France, where there's a lot of grants and a lot of support for artists. The US is still making a lot of waves in the world with art. I sometimes wonder what will happen even if there was just some support that will be comparable to what we had in the seventies or eighties. The Bay Area and the country as a whole would make even way more impact in the arts. I don't know how long artists could survive without

much of a support. The market only helps during a bubble, and only to a small percentage of artists.

The museum's role, I think, could be more like a PR institution for the arts. But also it's a window to arts that are happening everywhere else. In that sense, the museum has been that window where you go and see art that otherwise you will have to travel to a place far away to see. You get artists that have been in the previous biennales, like the Venice Biennale or the Whitney Biennial, at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. So in that sense, that's a good role for the museum. But again, I'm not sure how much weight should be laid on the museum's shoulders for the support for local artists. It could be just a good PR institution for more support for the local arts.

Rigelhaupt: But you have a sense that the museum has been successful in bringing in international exhibitions and exposing the artist community in the Bay Area to art from all over the world.

01-00:20:27

Chagoya:

Yes. Yes. There have been many major shows at the museum that are just amazing. Exhibitions like the Anselm Kiefer show or Matthew Barney's exhibitions, I think have been just crucial. They leave an impact in the Bay Area. The thing to me that is difficult is the context, the lack of support for the arts, that is really the context in which the museum is evolving. In that sense, not only SFMOMA, but most of the local museums might need to be aware of this situation. Otherwise, there's a sense of disconnection between local artists' interests—especially younger artists'—and expectations, versus the programs that the museum might do that might have not much to do with the local life and culture of the community.

If a museum wants to have something very unique and different than other museums, they really need to pay attention to the local arts. Especially in a place like the Bay Area that has a really vital art scene. It's not like any other places. Here, there is such a culture of open-mindedness that's really hard to find in many other places. Maybe you could find it in New York or LA a little bit, but sometimes San Francisco is even more unique than even New York or LA. If the local museums pay attention to that, there's going to be some very unique elements to the local culture that will attract people from everywhere else. Otherwise, the museums here will be not too different than when you travel, go to other museums. You see the collections, and it's usually the same generic names of artists that you see from one place to another place. You could be anywhere. Then there is no sense of uniqueness, of what is special about the place you are visiting. I know that it's important to bring international artists, international exhibitions, like the ones I just mentioned; but also it's exciting when a museum opens up its doors and does something that creates waves of new art. It doesn't have to be parochial, either. It doesn't have to be just the Bay Area.

But perhaps, what I'm talking about is the lack of a museum of contemporary art in the Bay Area, which we don't have. Sometimes [SF]MOMA fills up the gap with a contemporary artist's exhibition. Sometimes other local museums, like across the street, the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, has a little bit of a biennale with "Bay Area Now." But still, I don't think we have enough of contemporary exhibitions. Or if there was a museum just for contemporary art, it would be great. But we don't have it, and I don't know if we will have space anywhere in the city, because the space is just very difficult to get. That's the part that, when the museum takes over a little bit, creates an excitement. Unfortunately, I don't think there is enough of that in the Bay Area. Perhaps SFMOMA could try to think of strategies where that could be expanded. But again, I don't want to sound parochial, either, because it is not just about the local arts. It's more the contemporary arts, what's going on. We don't have to duplicate what the Whitney Museum does when they do their biennial. It's a good example of a museum that really fosters contemporary art. I don't know if another biennial would be necessary; maybe not. It could be more of a series of programs that are expanded throughout the year. It could be that the museum could have an experimental gallery going on all the time, have experimental arts happening all the time. That will compensate for the lack of a museum of contemporary art. I think that's basically the element that I miss in the Bay Area.

Rigelhaupt: You mentioned the Kara Walker exhibition. Are there other exhibitions of contemporary artists that have occurred at SFMOMA that were influential to you or you thought were particularly significant?

01-00:26:04

Chagoya:

Her and the William Kentridge exhibition. The screening of his animations in a specific room for a while was really, really good. On and off, it brings exhibitions—a German artist or some shows that, again, make some major waves. I think the support for local artists is there, too. Like the exhibition of Robert Bechtle, that was very important. I was very glad to see the work of Robert in retrospect, because I'd never seen an exhibition of his paintings before. That's the kind of exhibitions I'm talking about that the museum will benefit, and the community at large will benefit, for having it. Again, it's not about being parochial. Robert Bechtel now is in the Whitney Biennial, too. Robert, he's everywhere, shows a lot in New York, but he is unique from the Bay Area. His paintings are unique to the Bay Area. They just look like very Bay Area.

I don't believe in universal art. I don't think universal art really exists. Every art, from ancient art to the Renaissance or contemporary, it happens in a time and a place. Time and place make the fingerprint of art. The strength of any artistic expression could go across the world. The Bay Area always makes waves some way or another. Either with innovations in the arts, if not in technology or style of living. The first places where people stopped smoking in public places was Berkeley, ages ago. The rest of the world catches up with

the Bay Area later. But no, there have been many movements here that could be somehow absorbed by some institutions one way or another. Hopefully, not too late in time, when everybody knows about them, but at the time they are happening. Again, it could be a programmatic element of the museum, within their exhibition programs, or it could be an event that could be happening every few years. I'm not so sure what would work best for the— what's feasible for the museum. But certainly, I think there is a sense of disconnect between the contemporary and the modern. On and off, it's covered by SFMOMA. But we don't have, again, an institution dedicated to that per se. But I think it's very plausible. It will be really great for a museum like MOMA, which has a major presence in the country, to extend its support to especially emerging contemporary artists and experimental arts that happen in the Bay Area.

Rigelhaupt: Are there any exhibitions that you can recall that displayed an artist early in their career that certainly have become international names? I'm thinking, for example— from my understanding, Matthew Barney's exhibition at SFMOMA was one that played an important role in putting his work in an international context. I'm wondering if there's others that you can think of that, looking backward, you can see was really the beginning of their work becoming well known throughout the world.

01-00:30:49
Chagoya:

That's hard. By the time Kara Walker's show was taking place at MOMA, she was already well known around. But still, Kara Walker became even more important since then. Now she's like a major artist in Europe, as well. She had a major retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris. But at the time, was just— I'm trying to remember the year. I'm sorry, I don't recall the exact year. When was that? When Gary Garrels organized the exhibition of hers. I think it was in the late nineties. That was important.

Now, local artists that might have been shown at the museum that later made big news are sometimes some of the SECA Award artists, but not many that I can recall. I recall when maybe recently, people like Amy Franceschini got some work. Amy has been also in the Whitney Biennial. She has a really good exhibition record outside of this country, as well as here. Or people like Rigo, who was very much like an activist in the Mission and had all kinds of mural projects. Everybody remembers his big signs outside of the museum, with the sky and things like that. He shows a lot in Europe and he has a lot of presence in this country, too, and he's very unique to the Bay Area. I wish there were more artists like that. But again, that's thanks to SECA, which I'm glad the museum has. But there is so much more left out.

My hesitation to say much about what the museum can or cannot do is that I don't think just one institution could resolve the need for the experimental and contemporary arts. Because the Museum of Modern Art has its focus on modern art, by the name. It's not something anybody would criticize the

museum for not doing, because it's not the focus, necessarily, of the museum. But whatever museum takes over this unexplored side of the Bay Area, or unsupported side of the arts in the Bay Area, will benefit greatly with the local community. Then there could be more of a sense of ownership of the museum, which I don't think exists today. I would like to see that. It still is *the* museum where you go. The sense of belonging or being part—besides being a member of the museum, which is a different thing—but a sense where you have a place where the museum and the local life are integrated is still far away from happening. And not just SFMOMA. In general, most museums in the Bay Area are in that situation. I don't know if it's because of lack of support from funders or state funding or federal funding, but I only see sporadic efforts to support the younger, emerging, experimental arts. I hope it's an evolving situation, which I think could be improved greatly.

Rigelhaupt: The other side of that role of the museum publishing local artists and in some ways, helping their careers and expanding their work throughout the world, bringing in international exhibitions—like you mentioned Anselm Kiefer and Matthew Barney—do you recall any conversations that you had with other artists or amongst the artist community in the Bay Area about how those exhibitions—and maybe not only those two, but others as well—have impacted people's work or been influential?

01-00:36:10
Chagoya:

Mostly in the ideas. The Matthew Barney exhibition made huge waves. People were talking about his work. I teach drawing, and I love his tiny little drawings. I was very glad to see them in detail, which is something you miss when you only see the big pictures of the installations that he does. The films and so on. But yeah, that sparked some discussion and some thinking about what can you do with such traditional media as drawing. Suddenly you see it, and these incredible crafted objects in such an amazing way of using the space and the use of the plastic casting that he did was just quite spectacular. In that sense, the museum creates an impact locally, just by bringing these major exhibitions.

My point is, I wonder how much the museums need to make a balance between the international and the local, and where the local could become international, as well. Again, by going beyond the parochial idea of just supporting local artists for the sake of supporting local artists. That's not what I will support, either. No, I think there is some important developments in the arts here, and they affect other places later. Or the artists really just leave. But there have been times when— At least there was the Whitney Biennial that Larry Rinder put together a few years ago that made an impact with local artists in New York. People like Margaret Kilgallen or Chris Johanson and many other local artists were suddenly acknowledged for the first time in places like New York. So why that shouldn't happen in places like SFMOMA first, too, and then go to New York from SFMOMA, that's something that I wonder. It's not a criticism, necessarily to the museum. It could be something

to think about, in terms of programmatic elements that could make something very unique about the local museums, and in particular, SFMOMA.

Rigelhaupt: Switching gears a little bit, how would you describe how, or if, the political content in your work has been impacted by being in the climate of the Bay Area?

01-00:39:57
Chagoya:

Oh, quite a bit. Artists with humor, like I mentioned, people like Robert Arneson, were very important in the development of my work. Or even people like William Wiley. Before, people like Robert Crumb, who used to live in the Bay Area, were influential in my work. In that sense, the humor and the politics of the Bay Area, that's the part I really appreciate of the Bay Area, are really hard to find anywhere else. Eventually, really, the artists just leave. Robert Crumb became more famous when he moved to France. He was already pretty famous when he was living here, but you can see him in the *New Yorker* magazine, you can see his comic strips in mainstream publications. Whereas in the sixties or seventies, you might see him in a Janis Joplin album or in underground comics. But that was very unique to the Bay Area. Here's one artist that escaped. He's somewhere else now, in France. I wish he was somewhere here, so I could talk to him and have some crazy conversations with him, because I really love his work.

People like Robert Arneson, I'm very sad; he passed away pretty much early, a pretty much early departure. He was just really great and I really enjoyed meeting him right before he died. I think his retrospective at SFMOMA was a very important one, too. That's the kind of shows I think that the museum could work to make its own fingerprint as a museum. What's really happening here with artists that are really not happening in New York or other places? Eventually they happen, because they move over there. But yeah, those exhibitions, still, I remember them. When I was a student at the San Francisco Art Institute, when you're in your formative years as an artist, those exhibitions play important roles. That role, I think the museum still has, how it influences art students, just from any college anywhere that could go see their shows. I'm totally glad when there's an exhibition of a painter that I might like, or drawings or something, or more experimental media, where I could send my students to. In that sense, the museum also plays, directly or indirectly, an educational role in the local arts.

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember going to the museum on a regular basis when you were an art student?

01-00:43:24
Chagoya:

Oh, yeah. Yeah. Yeah, back in the Van Ness location, there was an exhibition of prints from around the world that I really loved. I studied printmaking. That was a major show. I went to the lectures. There were some artists from Japan, artists from Mexico, artists from the US. That created a major impact in my

formative years. It made me focus more on printmaking. That was really, really good. There was also the time when I discovered the local ceramic artists, because that made me study ceramics, too. I did a little bit of ceramics with people who were in the show. Richard Shaw was one of the artists that was in the exhibition. That exhibition was created, I believe, by Henry Hopkins, the former director and curator of the museum. So yes, definitely, the museum played a role in my own development as an artist. For that, I'm very thankful.

Today, it's more of a window into the arts of the world for me, more than anything else, on and off. The exhibitions that I mentioned, to me they're the ones that stuck in my mind. Ellsworth Kelly, for instance, was another show I really enjoyed. Even though I'm a figurative artist, I really like artists like Ellsworth Kelly. I just love his abstractions, his color-field paintings. Exhibitions like that are good for me to send my students to see. Especially because he's a painter, and painting seems to be an endangered species today, because a lot of the arts, contemporary arts, are very much into new media and emerging media and electronic arts and installation, performance. Painting sometimes has been killed by critics and curators that might see it like an ancient technique that has not much to do with contemporary life. It does. On and off, you see great exhibitions of paintings. Kiefer was just another one, his spectacular paintings. I really enjoyed that exhibition, as well. And Robert Bechtle. That's another painter. All of these things, I'm very glad are happening at the museum.

Rigelhaupt: Can you say more about how you try and integrate SFMOMA, but also museums in general, into your teaching? How does that work?

01-00:46:40
Chagoya:

Sometimes I organize fieldtrips when there's an exhibition that is related to my teaching. I teach painting and drawing. The thing is, too, coming from Palo Alto, from Stanford to the city, it can be a little difficult. If you organize a trip, it takes about an hour just to go from one place to another. The students sometimes have classes immediately after or before, and so it's kind of hard. I often tell my students to go to the museum when there is an exhibition that I think they will benefit from looking at. Either an exhibition of painting, drawings or installations. But the times that are more useful for teaching is when the students actually tell me about it. Because then I don't have to be the one pushing them to do something. In that sense, perhaps at school we could try to organize some collaboration with the museum, where there could be some program where students could get credit just by going to the museum. Or I was just having some meetings with somebody from the education department, just about a month ago, to do something in the summertime, some kind of collaboration between Stanford University and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Which I think will be great, to start unifying some of the educational projects between academic studies and museum studies, maybe, and have some ways in which art and life somehow connect a little

more. But still, I'm very vague in terms of specifics of that, because a lot of things will have to do with funding and who could be responsible and in charge of specific programs that will join elements of the museum exhibitions and art schools. Not only at Stanford, but in the Bay Area. There are so many colleges that we have that could benefit from such an interaction. But that could be more like a long-term project, and hopefully, that could be doable.

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember any exhibitions that your students, either at Stanford or at Cal State Hayward, came back to the classroom and talked about or were particularly influential?

01-00:50:11

Chagoya: I think that the most recent ones, because it's just what I recall right now, was the Matthew Barney show and the Anselm Kiefer, for sure. Also the artists that were influenced by Picasso—that was recent—was another. Again, mostly for my painting students and drawing students. Those are things that we talk a little bit and they leave a mark. But that's something that I wish could last a little longer than just, okay, have you seen this show? It was great to see this or that artist in person. We have a little bit of a discussion, but it doesn't go too far. That's why I think it might require extra support to have that kind of a program. Either a collaboration between institutions and the museum, or if the museum is able to get some grants and funds to invite students, art students from different places to just interact with the museum's exhibitions. It would be just fabulous.

Rigelhaupt: So in your Archives of American Art interview, you briefly discussed helping Graciela Itúrbide, during preparations for her SFMOMA exhibition. Could you elaborate a little bit more on who you worked with, the role you played, and what that experience was like?

01-00:52:15

Chagoya: First, I organized an exhibition of her work myself. I curated a show of her photographs that took place about six months before the SFMOMA show. At the time, I was the artistic director at Galería de la Raza. I met Graciela at SFMOMA, actually, because she came with her former husband, Pedro Meyer. Pedro Meyer had a show, a solo show of his photographs, also at the old building at SFMOMA, and I went to his lecture. I met Graciela Itúrbide. I was very aware of her photography, and I invited her to have a show at the Galería, and she was very happy to do it. In the same trip, she got invited by the Museum of Modern Art to have a show. But Graciela Itúrbide had been showing her works many times before in group exhibitions at Galería de la Raza. Once there was an exhibition that was organized on Mexican photography. She was among those photographers, with people like Manuel Álvarez Bravo, who was her teacher.

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02-00:00:09

Chagoya:

So we were talking about Graciela Itúrbide's exhibition. I was saying she showed a few times in the Galería de la Raza before she showed anywhere else in the Bay Area. Then I met her when her ex-husband now, Pedro Meyer, had a show at SFMOMA and he was giving a lecture. So I talked to Graciela and invited her. She was very happy to have a showing with the Galería, which was, is still, a Chicano gallery that was created by a group of Chicano artists, because they didn't have much of space to show their work. They also began to do things like bringing artists from Mexico.

Then the curator for her exhibition at SFMOMA was the then curator, or assistant curator, for photography, Diana du Pont. I invited Graciela to come to the Bay Area to do her show. Then when she came to the Galería, she wanted to do some business with her show at [SF]MOMA, which was happening right after, pretty much. So she didn't speak too much English, and my English is not perfect either, but I was glad to translate for her. I drove her and took her to talk to Diana. Diana, which she's a great friend now, we liked each other at the time, but Diana was a little upset that we were having a show of Graciela before the museum. She was wondering how come we were doing a show before her. I told her, "I'm surprised you haven't come to Galería de la Raza and seen our exhibitions before, because then you wouldn't be surprised. This is not the first time she shows with us." She got the point. She was very apologetic later. Suddenly we began to have, in all of our openings, people from SFMOMA coming to our openings at Galería de la Raza, which I thought was great. Then I became more friends with the curators of photography, and especially with Sandra Phillips.

Sandy eventually asked my advice on some exhibitions when she curated a major show of Sebastião Salgado, which was a beautiful photography show that I still remember. I also was very glad to meet Sebastião Salgado, which is one of my favorite artists from all times. At the time, I was working as a curator, I was not so focused on my art as I am today. But I thought that was a really nice way to interact between a very alternative space like Galería de la Raza and a major institution like the Museum of Modern Art, by just connecting among the curators, having something to do together. Eventually Graciela Itúrbide came back, after her show at the Museum of Modern Art. Diana du Pont was very gracious, too, with the Galería and with us. We communicated somehow. Because there was such a disconnect between institutions that the curator didn't know what was going on in the local art scene, either. I don't know if that kind of interaction keeps happening or not, but I think that kind of interaction is very vital to not only the museum, but to the local communities. When that happens, that's when you feel the museum belongs to the community. It's not just an outsider institution with an elitistic focus, but rather has more like a role to play in the local arts. That openness

should be something permanent in an institution that has so much influence in the Bay Area, like SFMOMA.

Rigelhaupt: Have you heard about similar collaborations between curators and spaces like Galería de la Raza and SFMOMA preceding the interaction that you personally had?

02-00:05:24
Chagoya:

No, unfortunately. I'm not saying they haven't happened, but no, because I quit curating exhibitions. I only did it for about three years. I decided just to focus on my own work. But there used to be meetings. What I recall, there used to be an association of local museums and alternative spaces that used to meet once every two months or so, and just share their programs and share information, and sometimes coordinate events, when some content of an exhibition affected different communities. I don't know if that keeps happening. I think it should be happening. Somebody should be still getting together with New Langton Arts, with Southern Exposure, with Galería de la Raza, with Jewish Museum. With all the local places, there should be meetings maybe once every three months or something, where at least there is an interaction between what's going on locally. I was very glad to do that at the time, because then you get to know museum administrators that otherwise, they are alien to you. That was really good, I think. But I'm talking about the late 1980s, early 1990s.

After that, I began to teach at Berkeley and Hayward, and now at Stanford, and I stopped curating shows and I stopped dealing with exhibitions and so on. If there had been a historic concern in the arts about the role of museums— There have been movements when artists declared the museums dead because they didn't play a role in the community life. People like the constructivists, who decided to look for art that was more integrated to life. From that perspective, the museum was not necessary. The museum would be more for past arts. It was such a utopian idea. I don't know if that will ever happen, where art and life are together again, like it was in ancient arts, or in the Renaissance, or in Egypt or ancient Mexico, where paintings, sculpture, architecture and religion were the same thing. Today we don't live in that world. For good or for bad. The arts and life are just different things. It's random when art and life connect. It's very random when a museum connects with the life of the local arts. But when that happens, I think there are sparks, because they create, again, a fingerprint that makes that museum unique. But I don't see it being programmatic. It happens on and off.

Rigelhaupt: Had you heard about the museum's M. I. X program, the Museum Intercommunity Exchange, that Rolando Castellón had curated in the early seventies?

02-00:09:17
Chagoya:

I was not living here then, unfortunately. I know Rolando Castellón. He was a *great* curator. Again, some other talent that escaped the Bay Area. He moved back to Costa Rica. That was a time when there were more collaborations among the museum and local institutions. Rolando Castellón was one of the founders of Galería de la Raza, as well. He was very much interesting in fostering emerging arts and emerging artists. He even was publishing poetry handouts in his own time. People like him, I thought they played a really good, healthy role in the life of the museum. Today, the museum does some educational programs that are really, really worth it. But still, again, because maybe I distanced myself from the curatorial aspects of local institutions, I'm not familiar with what's going on between the local arts organizations, that are mostly not-for-profit, and the Museum of Modern Art. I wish there was more interaction going on. Personally, I haven't seen it. I don't know if you have to be an insider to really know what's going on. If you have to be an insider, then that's not a good sign.

Rigelhaupt:

How would you describe the relationship between galleries and SFMOMA?

02-00:11:10
Chagoya:

It's complex, because galleries focus on the commercial side of the arts, and not. Artists today cannot escape the fact that their art becomes a commodity. Like it or not. Even artists who were very alienated from the commercial world, and still are, they cannot escape the fact that their art become a commodity. But I don't want to name a specific artist that may be disenchanted or not. The thing is that the commercial galleries, in their best roles, have played a little bit [the role] of the museum. What a contemporary museum, or a museum of contemporary art, can do, to bring newer artists to the scene. In that sense, even though there's the commercial aspect of the art, very often some art dealers make exhibitions or put together exhibitions of artists because they really like the artist. They take chances with the art. They don't necessarily profit from the artist, and they become like partnerships, in the best circumstances. But there is a point where if a gallery's not selling art from the artist, no matter how much they like the artist, they stop showing it. Because the gallery has to pay rent, they have to pay salaries. There is all this situation. That's when alternative spaces play a role in the arts, because they could support arts that are not easily sold. Either because of the political content of the art or because of the experimental nature of the art, it becomes very hard to market as a commodity. So the galleries have a limitation. They might like the artists that they show, but if they don't sell it, eventually they can not afford to keep showing it because they are for-profit spaces. If they are not paying their bills they will just go out of business. But they play a vital role. Personally, I'm very lucky. I feel lucky that in spite of the political content of my work, I manage to keep exhibiting in a commercial space. My dealer is savvy enough to deal with my work and sell it. But I consider myself lucky, because for the most part, arts that have political content are really hard to sell.

They are also probably really hard for a museum to show. If you have a conservative board, or a board that doesn't want to deal with political content or issues, I could see the limitations of the museum. Even a director or a curator in a museum might like a specific artist, but they will feel that they could get into serious conflicts within their institutions if they pursue that direction. I could see the limits of that, both commercially as well as institutionally. That is where, when I say that these programs are beyond the museum's hands, that I wish there were more support for the arts from places that used to come—from the federal and the state agencies that's supposed to be supporting the arts. Most artists really have to do other jobs, other kinds of activities to support their art, because just there is not enough support in grants or agencies, or exhibitions, for their art.

The commercial galleries are great, when they really do a partnership with the artists; when they're not being exploitative; when they're dealers who have principles and they treat their artists with a lot of respect. Then there is a mutual appreciation for what one does for the other. In that sense, in the best role, a commercial gallery is a partnership with the artist. It's not exploiting the artist, and the artist is not taking advantage of the gallery, either. It's just like there is a circumstantial benefit for both sides, and it could last. It's very difficult. It's not something that just happens overnight. I've seen many artists just moving out of town because they get frustrated. There are only a few commercial galleries supporting the arts. Again, there is not much or there is only so much you can do. It's just a very small amount of opportunities.

I wish there were more art criticism in the Bay Area. That's something that we lack in the Bay Area. We have one or two critics in the main newspapers, but we don't compete with the *New York Times*. We're not even close to have, I don't know, twelve critics on Fridays. San Francisco has enough resources to have a few more art critics in all the local papers. Or online, even. We have some critics online. But those critics don't get much support from the local sources, the papers or the online publishers, which might not be paying a lot, or enough, to the art critics, either. So then you have less art critics really reviewing what's going on here. So many shows go unnoticed in the Bay Area because of that. Again, all of this is a context beyond the museum. It's just something that is almost contradictory. You have great artists coming out of here, and there is little support for them. I don't want to keep repeating myself. The museum could just play a spark. Not just a PR for contemporary emerging artists. The rest is something that needs to be changed, by maybe voting, or artists complaining a little more to national and state agencies for just cutting all the supports that used to be given to the arts.

Given today's economy, we have a very uneven distribution of resources. That's the part that could be changed, hopefully. I don't know exactly how and when. But that's going to involve efforts beyond the museum, for sure. Or beyond individual artists, too. It's more a matter of a cultural change that needs to happen, hopefully sooner than later.

Rigelhaupt: You've mentioned that sometimes it can be difficult for museums to exhibit work with political content or is controversial. In your Archives of American Art interview, you mentioned the exhibition "Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation," which was organized by the Wright Gallery at UCLA, but also was exhibited at SFMOMA in 1991. You said that it was influential and amongst a group of exhibitions that were influential exhibiting Chicano art at the time. I'm wondering if you could say more about that exhibitions and others that it was a part of.

02-00:20:48

Chagoya:

I haven't seen many more exhibitions like that in the museum since then. That was kind of a surprise for me because it was like a community art exhibition. There have been recent exhibitions in similar topics by the de Young Museum. I think they just did one last year. But the topics at the time were, in a way, riskier for the museum than today. Exhibitions like the Frida Kahlo show, I'm sure, is going to make some nice waves in the local Chicano community, and across other communities, not only the Chicano community, because Frida is now a phenomenon, more than anything else. But at the time, the exhibition—"Chicano Art: Resistance and Affirmation," was important because it brought the perspective of regional California arts, as well as other artists from the Southwest that were part of the exhibition. It had a political view. Just the label *Chicano*, versus the label *Hispanic* or the label *Latino*. All of them have a different political stance. Some of them tend to be more militant, some of them tend to be more neutral. And nobody's happy, ever, with whatever label you use.

I stopped putting any labels on myself because of that. But maybe we're living in a time of post-identity art, and that's why people are not longer so militant. But back in the seventies and eighties, and still a little bit in the early nineties, there was all of these issues of identity, and arts that were very much done on identity. The so-called, now defunct, multiculturalism was major event in the eighties, as well as in the nineties. A lot of artists were doing some political statements then, either with topics of AIDS or gender issues. They were actually being addressed. Or racial discrimination. All kinds of things were very topical. Suddenly, the nineties got milder a little bit. The economy began to expand. Then we had things like the high-tech boom in the late nineties. The wave of political art kind of like went down that way. Then the following political administration changed everything. The last eight years have been so explosive, nationally and internationally. There is a new wave of political art that just goes beyond identity. Again, this context, which has been very dramatic, might have created a situation where the post-identity arts are taking places where you include or not include identity politics. You might include issues of war and cultural collisions that are taking place at a global scale. Today the world is so small that everybody shares the space with everybody—unlike the 1980s or 1990s, where things were still very compartmentalized, and you had to cross boundaries to understand each other. Today everything's so mixed.

02-00:22:25

Just to talk about something political today, like issues of immigration. That's a topic that I like to address in my own work. The topics of immigration are mixed with the economy or with the war, for instance. Somehow after 9/11, the southern border was very suspicious, more than the northern border with Canada, where actually, people cross a lot easier. I believe maybe some of the terrorists of 9/11 actually crossed from Canada. They also crossed legally. Some of them actually, like Mohamed Atta, one of the pilots of 9/11, the terrorist, he got his green card a week after he did this horrendous terror attack on the Twin Towers. A week later, he got his green card after he was dead!

Then you have people in the army, in the military, who are undocumented, from Latin American origin. Many of them, if not most of them, from Mexico. I remember one case that was in *Newsweek*, where an undocumented immigrant came back as a hero, as a soldier, and the INS didn't know what to do with him, whether to deport him to Mexico. "Thank you for fighting for us in Iraq, but we don't trust you here. Go back to Mexico." But eventually he got his residency and a chance to apply for citizenship. Those things are making a situation going beyond the identity politics, because that hits the history of this country, as well. This country was created by not just immigration, but illegal immigration. The pilgrims and the conquistadors didn't have passports. They acted against the law of the land of the local native nations. Many of them committed crimes against humanity and got away with it. From there, they created laws based on an illegal occupation. This country just blossomed out of that, basically.

Today's undocumented immigrants are mostly economic refugees. There is crime going on in the border, of course, like always. But most undocumented immigrants come and work really hard here, get exploited. They stay quiet, they're afraid. They, on top of that, get criminalized. They are attacked without having any alternatives to be legalized, because everybody could say, okay, we all would like to have these people being legal, but nobody says how. Even if somebody like George Bush comes with a plan to legalize them, they call it amnesty. Somebody could come with a plan that, okay, the only way they could get papers is if they go to the moon and back. Somebody will say, that's amnesty, too. So there is all these issues that, for me, really go beyond identity. They go, really, to the core of the history of this country and what this country's all about. That's something that is happening across ethnic groups. That's affecting a lot of the arts today, too.

I don't see the museum playing a political role, but it could play at least like a— Not necessarily to take any sides or any position on what is going on, but it could be open to whatever is going on with the arts, in that regard. Either in film or performance, traditional arts. If not in the content of their exhibitions, maybe in the interactions with community organizations that might be dealing with all kinds of political issues. I've just mentioned one topic. That was just immigration. That's just one, among others. We could talk about so many artists who are doing things about the war.

02-00:30:10

New York City had many political exhibitions in 2004. I remember last time I had a show with satirical drawings, it was right before the lost election. There were dozens of exhibitions in New York City with the topic of war. A lot of the arts were just mostly in alternative spaces. You didn't see anything in a major museum in New York. It was something a museum might not want to deal with, for whatever reasons. Because maybe it's some topical art that is going to go away very quickly. It was very happening. To the point that the *New York Times* was having pages of arts that were topical, in that sense. In that area,

I'm not clear about what the museum can do. Especially because there are so many conflicting interests that go behind a museum, to put together a museum. They have to negotiate with all kinds of political opinions. I don't see a museum being able to take any sides on any politics. If there was at least a window of openness from a museum, either, again, an experimental program, a gallery space, where something that can not even be commercial could be shown. Then the museum will be moving on to not necessarily a risky area, but moving on to be in touch with what is going on with our society today. It's not an easy job for anybody, because people will always spark controversy. But that's maybe the beauty of our society. There is suddenly many opinions about something. It's great if that could be expressed through the arts. *Vive la différence!* I don't want to live in a monocultural society or a boring place where everybody thinks the same thing.

A role of the museum in what is going on this century is going to have to be a little riskier than not. Without risking the history of the museum, either. But I would say to have at least a little window open, where there's places where the arts could have a chance to do something that not a commercial gallery could do. And [the museum] could play an interesting role with local nonprofit organizations, as well.

Rigelhaupt:

I'm wondering if we could tie that a little bit to the ways you've described your work, both in a lecture I saw for your opening at the Berkeley Art Museum now, and also in your Archives of American Art interview. You talked about this idea of reverse anthropology and reverse modernism. I'm wondering if you could say a little bit more about those ideas and how they interact in the context of a museum.

02-00:33:48

Chagoya:

When I talk about that subject I think of modern artists, like first half of the twentieth century, artists who had a strategy to appropriate arts and culture from former colonies. Very often with total appreciation for that art. People like Picasso, who had a sincere love for African sculpture, used the styles and the formal elements of African masks to develop some of his Cubist art. Paintings like *Les Femmes d'Alger* were very much influenced by that. Even people like Josef Albers, who does his *Homage to the Square*, he did some architectural designs based on Mixtec-Zapotec architecture. Or talking

about architects, people like Frank Lloyd Wright, who used Mayan architecture, or was influenced by Mayan architecture to develop his buildings in Los Angeles. Or people like Henry Moore, who used Aztec sculpture to develop his own seated figures. Or the surrealists, in general, that speak about the primitive art. They love the “primitive spirit.” It was like a child that was free, and they were kind of wishing artists in modern societies were as free as a primitive artist. All this idealization of the primitive, the former colonial art, was a strategy of modernism. That changed in postmodern times. It’s totally different now. Hardly anybody does that today. But at the time, I think that was going on.

02-00:36:03

In my own work, I thought, well, what would happen if suddenly these noble savages reversed the role? What would have happened if Europe had been conquered by the Aztecs? Instead of cathedrals over there, everybody would have pyramids. Notre Dame will have maybe like a twin pyramid as a religious center, rather than a Catholic church. So I began to play with that idea, just to show that people are the same. The world would not be better. The Aztecs were conquering other cultures around them, and doing the same thing that the Spaniards later did to them. The thing is, we are the same species. We share the same genome. But we have all these differences that sometimes are used against each other. With my idea of reverse anthropology, what I’m trying to do is just put a mirror in ourselves, a mirror in our own culture. I’m not pointing the finger at anybody. If there is racism, we are all racists. If there is biases against something, everybody has biases. I think in my art, I just try to spark some humor on that, because it’s contradictory. We usually fall into what we criticize. Because nobody’s perfect. The worst is when people divide the world between black or white. Then they fall into their own trap. Like politicians who are very—Let’s say some of them could be in a committee to protect children from abuse, end up suddenly being caught molesting children or having affairs with minors, like some senator was doing that not too long ago. Or very anti-gay politicians that eventually are caught being gay, as well. That’s, to me, the irony of the contemporary politics. When I found somebody in that situation, it’s raw material. It’s just raw material for my work.

02-00:38:41

I think if a museum decided to break borders and open up to the community, then a museum might have to look for strategies to have exhibitions outside the museum walls. That’s something that SFMOMA might think of doing. But what about inviting an artist to do projects outside the museum? Installations or site installations or community art projects, which the museum might sponsor, but they could be happening anywhere in the city. Outside the museum walls. That will be a reverse museum. That will be a museum where you don’t have to pay a ticket to go to, to see something, it’s just going on somewhere. That will spark some idea of art and life again trying to get together—which sounds almost utopian. But it will be just an interesting project to see. Especially in a time so politicized as the times we are living in right now.

Rigelhaupt: Part of the reason I was asking is I think of museums playing a role in defining civilization and barbarism. Part of what you've said in your work is that you love to cross borders of civilization and barbarism and put these ideas in conversation with one another. So I'm curious how you think museums come to define what counts as civilization, what is barbaric, and how works of art exhibited in museums then interact with all those definitions. That's a really big question.

02-00:40:43

Chagoya:

That's hard. Museums are just one mainstream institution that defines mainstream ideas that become dominant. It has the authority of any institution that is mainstream. To me, those institutions could be not just museums, could be schools. They start with the family, for sure. Family, museums, educational institutions like schools, all the way to colleges, political parties, religious institutions—all of them play a role in what we think. They all play a role in what our main ideas are of “civilization” versus something “not civilized.” Once in a while you get somebody, an artist or a social thinker, who challenges all of these institutions. That's never going to come from a museum. It's not going to come from the university, it's not going to come from one of these mainstream dominant institution. It comes from social conflicts that are happening outside. Somebody take a position about it, and somebody starts thinking about it. It could be an epidemic like AIDS, or it could be a war. But suddenly there are new ideas taking place. Very often you see them in alternative spaces, in a tiny little gallery that only emerging artists go to. It takes a few years before that moves up in the stream of ideas, until it finally gets to the museum, maybe ten years later. Or finally gets indoors and adopted by society.

Today everybody is aware of things like AIDS, and it was just a very philanthropic thing to do, if there was either exhibitions to fundraise some money for artists with AIDS or whatever. Like Visual AIDS is a program which I think has been doing very successful campaigns. In the beginning, it was just—hardly anybody wanted to talk about it. It was like a taboo. So the museums, in a way, had too much authority to be open for all these new ideas that keep happening all the time. It will take, again, maybe just a structural change on the side of an institution to be opened up a little bit to whatever's happening. But I don't see any institutions right now that have that openness. It happens somehow spontaneously. Maybe a curator in a museum is very open-minded, and that makes a big impact. It's up to the individual. It's not because there was a structure within the museum where you have something very open going on, either something of a difficult topic to talk about or something so experimental that not even commercial galleries could deal with.

That's the part that a museum could improve, erasing this idea that there is the barbaric world and the calm civilized culture that doesn't want to deal with that; but rather, realize that those are maybe two sides of the same coin. One thing affects the other, mutually. We live in that society. It's a society that has

a calm side, a relatively peaceful life, and then a very violent, very conflicted side that creates a lot of culture, as well. In spite of just being a negative, there is also always something positive coming out of the negative. These two sides are just our human experience, that institutions like universities or museums sometimes are walled; you get beautiful institutions surrounded by reality, pretty much insulated. So we live in our ivory tower. Outside everybody's killing everybody, and there's war, there's economic collapse, and you don't want to think about it. But eventually it hits your institution. Eventually it's going to affect you, in one way or another. So the most healthy thing to do is just to be opened up to changes taking place outside of the institutions. Again, if there was a way where an educational structure opens up to the community, it makes a big difference. If there was a museum program that suddenly happens outside the museum walls, it would create that bridge between life and art. Just like some colleges, some universities have programs in communities outside of the university. Like we have the Haas Center [for Public Service] at Stanford that does projects in low-income communities. The students get credit for that. It creates a major impact in the surrounding—at least the surrounding culture that the institution is part of. So that just requires maybe a different focus, as well as funding for the different focus that maybe might require extra resources. But I think it's doable. That will keep the museum or any cultural institution very much up to date with what's really going on in our lives and the world.

Rigelhaupt: Switching gears a little bit, how would you describe SFMOMA's history with Mexican artists? I know that their collection—Rivera and Kahlo, especially, was an early part of their collection. I'm wondering what your impression is of the museum's connection with Mexican artists.

02-00:48:16
Chagoya:

I've seen it just as a small element of the museum. I don't see it like something major. It's not the Mexican Museum. Unfortunately, the Mexican Museum is a different story. But I think that has more to do with a different time and place. Especially in the 1940s, Mexico was very much happening, with surrealist artists who were very much interested in Mexico. People like André Breton and Diego Rivera and Trotsky and Frida Kahlo. People like Tina Modotti, and Manuel Álvarez Bravo and all these photographers. Or people like Edward Weston. It was a magnet of things going on. The waves that Diego Rivera did, early, even, with his conflicts with Rockefeller. All of that opened up the interest of museums like the Museum of Modern Art into Mexican art.

Today we're in different times. There are some Mexican artists that are very contemporary, people like Gabriel Orozco. I've seen some of his work at the Museum of Modern Art, too, in San Francisco. That was a few years ago. I saw a group show where they had some of his pieces. A lot of artists who live in Mexico are actually making waves worldwide, not just at SFMOMA. International artists who live in Mexico City, people like Francis Alÿs, who

has been on the cover of some art magazines. They live in Mexico City. He's a Belgian artist, but he's a major conceptual artist who makes big waves, just in the same way as people like Gabriel Orozco. Or a lot of filmmakers are coming out of Mexico City. I think the museum's openness to whatever happens in the world should be very inclusive, without falling into Eurocentric or ethnocentric aesthetics.

Right now, Chinese artists are just the ones that are making big waves. For the last ten years, they've been doing that. Because, also maybe, China is so much in the news right now, with the Olympic Games and the controversy with Tibet, which was a time bomb about to happen. I hope the protest helps people in Tibet more than not. But then the arts actually absorb all of these social elements. I don't have anything to say *just* about Mexican arts being part or not part of the Museum of Modern Art. I would be more interested in a museum like the Museum of Modern Art being open to *all* this worldwide artistic cultural expressions of a very, very conflicted society, which thanks to the arts, gives us a little space to think about in a positive way. Otherwise, without the arts, this contemporary world could be very depressing, very scary. In that sense, the museum could really play a very healthy role in our society. Just a place where you have a little bit of sanity to think about the conflicts of the world, rather than just staying in a very safe place where you only have blue-chip artists that everybody agrees that they are great, and you just go see the show, have a great day. Doesn't go beyond entertainment, or randomly crosses over the border from entertainment into more of a social impact, versus a museum that gets involved in the community, that goes outside the walls of the museum and invites artists to do projects outside the walls of the museum. That is a little harder to do. I think it's necessary in today's context. I hope it will happen eventually, one way or another.

It's a matter of whether the local circumstances of a museum are open to that. I'm not familiar with what will be the internal structure of the museum. That's more of internal programming the museum needs to review and see if it fits the goals of the museum or not. I'm not sure. As an institution of cultural authority, it would be helpful if that institution placed itself against that authority, by suddenly being a little looser with their goals and with the programs that are more traditional in its role, and opened up to programs and projects that you might see sometimes in experimental spaces in New York. Some institutions are very self-assured, and then they're able to do something beyond the walls. Spaces like P.S.1, I think, are great. That's in a way, what I'm talking about. A little bit how a museum could suddenly have something very new and upcoming—a home of emerging arts, that goes really beyond the traditional role of the museum. I don't think SFMOMA needs to do a P.S.1 locally here, but it's more a matter of rethinking of what could be that action or that cultural program the museum could do that could put the museum outside its own walls. If there were sometimes maybe projects going on around that are related to MOMA. It could be with local communities, could be topical, could be with difficult issues. It will change the image of the

authoritarian voice of the mainstream art, versus just being really part of everybody's life.

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Rigelhaupt: Could you describe any of the directors of the museum that— Some of the names I'll throw out predate your time in the Bay Area, but if you had heard anything about them, their impact on SFMOMA. Starting with the first director, Grace McCann Morley.

03-00:00:27

Chagoya: Not familiar with them, sorry.

Rigelhaupt: George Culler?

03-00:00:32

Chagoya: No, either. That's probably way before my time.

Rigelhaupt: Gerry Nordland just preceded Henry Hopkins.

03-00:00:39

Chagoya: I came here, I think, when Henry Hopkins was the director. Henry Hopkins had a really positive image among the Latino community because he worked a lot with local artists. I recall some of the exhibitions the museum had when he was the director. I never really met him personally, but his name was always around in very positive ways.

Rigelhaupt: Then the director that followed him, Jack Lane.

03-00:01:20

Chagoya: Jack Lane, the same. I had a very good interaction with Jack. He was very accessible. I have many good memories of him. He worked a lot with local art schools, especially the San Francisco Art Institute. But yes, he was also very open. I met him, I think, when I was at Galería de la Raza still. So I got familiar with him for a period of years. He played a very positive role, too.

Rigelhaupt: Then the next director, David Ross.

03-00:02:20

Chagoya: David Ross, too. In spite of David's controversial side, I really like him. We got along very well. He was quite a character. Unfortunately, I think he created a lot of stress within the museum. Also the project with the San Francisco museum's rental, so-called Art Space. He wanted to expand it, and he was very demanding of the income the Rental Gallery or the Artists Gallery was bringing in to the museum. That was a little unfortunate, because the Artists Gallery had been providing a lot of support for local artists. That's actually, I'd have to say, the Artists Gallery is one of the best projects the museum has right now. Because it's one of the few places where emerging artists have a chance to exhibit their work, and consistently puts money in the

pockets of artists. That was one of the first places I ever showed my work, was at the then called Rental Gallery. It was one of the first places that I could put my work in a show. Until recently, they still sent me checks. That has been, I think, a very unique program of the museum. It's very successful, it does very good fundraising for the museum, and it does a very good service for the community. David Ross, one of the last things he did at the end, he wanted to open up another branch of the gallery, the Artists Gallery. There were some conflicts of the vision of the gallery between the director of the gallery and David. Unfortunately, it didn't go very well. There was a public confrontation, at some point. But overall, I think David had a great energy he brought into the museum. He had a very charismatic personality. Personally, I really like him. I had great conversations with him. But this was just one of those situations where maybe the personality and institution just don't quite mix at some point, and he had to leave the museum, move on to his own businesses. In any case, I have these mixed memories of David. But personally, I think he was very accessible, too.

Rigelhaupt: Just to clarify the gallery you were referencing, the Artists Gallery is the one in Fort Mason.

03-00:05:39

Chagoya:

Exactly. Marian Parmenter is the director. That gallery has, I don't know, decades of existence. When I was still a student at the Art Institute, they invited me to put some of my work, immediately after I finished my undergraduate studies. Marian Parmenter was just great. She just retired earlier this year. To me, that's one of the best programs the Museum of Modern Art has, the Artists Gallery at Fort Mason.

Rigelhaupt: And now the current director, Neal Benezra.

03-00:06:25

Chagoya:

Neal, I have some very good interactions with him. Not much, not enough. I haven't had a chance to really get to talk to him. There was a reception at Stanford University, because he's an alumni from Stanford. So that's the first time I met him and his wife, Maria Makela. I like her, too. I've had conversations with her in other places. But I think he finally got a nice mix of energies in the organization, and I hope it creates more stability for the museum, with the many controversies that were happening before. He has been managing to help great things going on for the museum. Right now I'm very glad they are putting together the Frida Kahlo exhibition, and I'm very glad it's taking place. Especially bringing people like Hayden Herrera, who have been a major role in making Frida Kahlo's work known. In spite of the phenomenon of Frida Kahlo, because one thing is the phenomenon and one thing is the artist. I think still, it's going to be a very popular show. The phenomenon of Frida Kahlo brings a lot of attention. I hope it really creates a good bridge between the museum and local Latino communities, as well, and other communities at large. It's a great exhibition for, also for women artists,

not just Latino, but in general. Also for surrealist artists, anybody who likes surrealism, and scholars that like surrealism. So I'm looking forward for that show. So that's as much as I have to say. I haven't really had interaction with Neal Benezra, as much as I would like to. But eventually that might happen. It might not. I think what matters more than anything else the long-term impact the museum directors might have, more than the personal connections.

I see a very healthy moment in SFMOMA right now. I think that's good. The fact that you are asking artists what they think of the museum, I think it's a very healthy thing to do. Because that gives space for the museum to rethink its own goals. Hopefully, to change and adapt to whatever is changing in our world today.

Rigelhaupt: Just to switch to curators, you'd mentioned working some with Sandra Phillips. Are there other curators that have stood out in your mind?

03-00:10:01
Chagoya:

Gary Garrels was another one who was very open to the local arts. Before, for a long time, I worked with Rolando Castellón, but that was a long, long time ago. In general, I don't get to know much of the staff at the museum. A former staff of mine used to work for the education department, Eduardo Pineda. He used to be a local muralist, and then he ended up working for the education department at the museum. It has been very random. Sometimes as an artist, you don't want to— How can I say? You don't want to create the impression that you are asking for favors from the curators or for something from them. In a way, sometimes I keep my distance because of that. But very spontaneously, on and off, these interactions happen. Sometimes because they're introduced by some friend of yours, or they like your work and they put your work in exhibitions. But the only ones I ever got more or less close was Gary Garrels and, until today, with Sandra Phillips, who I really like, and I really like the work she does for the photography department.

Rigelhaupt: Briefly, what are your impressions of the building South of Market? I wanted to call it the new building, but eventually I have to stop doing that.

03-00:12:08
Chagoya:

Oh, I love it. I like it. As a museum, it's very distinctive. The Italian architect. Botta? Yeah, yeah. I think he did a really great design of the museum. I think it's functional. I love the open space of the lobby. It creates its own image, very much. It's a lot like a logo, which I like. On and off, I might have heard people who don't like it, but taste is very subjective. At least it's not one of these museums that are so much of an architectural statement that they end up being not very functional for the exhibitions programs. I think the museum is gorgeous. I can't wait to see the expansion they are doing on the roof. The way they're going to work on the roof is really exciting.

Rigelhaupt: The project that this is a part of is helping to document the museum's history in honor of its seventy-fifth anniversary coming up in 2010. I'm curious where you might like to see the museum when it celebrates its hundredth anniversary, twenty-five years after that.

03-00:13:46

Chagoya: Wow, a hundred years of the museum. What I mentioned before. To me, the ideal would be if the museum moves outside of its walls a little bit. It could be a long-term goal, so if it doesn't happen in the seventy-five years, I hope in the hundredth year will be more of an institution that interacts more with the community. I sound maybe like a broken record. But I cannot emphasize how important that will be, or how much of an impact an institution like SFMOMA could do in the local arts, if it only makes some efforts to go beyond its own walls and breaks away the image of an ivory tower.

[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.