

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

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SFMOMA 75th Anniversary

MADELEINE GRYN SZTEJN

SFMOMA Staff, 2000-2008

Elise S. Haas Senior Curator of Painting and Sculpture

Interview conducted by
Lisa Rubens and Richard Cándida Smith
in 2008

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Interview #1: February 4, 2008

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Cándida Smith: I'd like to start today with when you came to this museum. When were you hired? How long was the transition? When did you start?

01-00:00:20

Grynsztejn: In 2000, I had just about finished opening the Carnegie International at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh, which after the Venice Biennale, is the longest standing regularly occurring major exhibition of international art in the world. It's been active since 1896, I believe. We should check on that date. [editor's note: this is the correct date] For the curatorial field, it's the Mount Everest of curating. Once you're invited to undertake that project, you just simply can't say no. I was very honored and happy. I found myself, at the end of three years, living in Pittsburgh and opening the Carnegie International, which was very, very well received. It was the millennial International, 1999-2000. It included forty-two artists, internationally-based. Its topic, which was relevant at that time—we're talking now eight years ago—was an increasing blurring between reality and fiction, between the real and the digital. This is now par for the course, seven years later. A number of the artists that we now see as representative of our times had among their first showings, if not their first showing in this International. Matthew Barney, who we show regularly here at the San Francisco MOMA, who is in our permanent collection, was in the show. It was Olafur Eliasson's first museum exhibition in a group show, and it provided the basis for a friendship which, seven years later, turned into his first U.S. survey show, here at SFMOMA.

Cándida Smith: First show anywhere?

01-00:02:27

Grynsztejn: First show in the U.S. First showing outside of a gallery in the United States was in the group show, the Carnegie International, which I organized. Other artists who have since gained much more attention. I think this is what got the attention of David Ross. It wasn't long after I opened the Carnegie International, which would have been November of 1999, that Gary Garrels, my predecessor, decamped for the Museum of Modern Art in New York. I think David was looking for someone with international reputation, international reach. He had known about me for many years. It's a small world, the curatorial world.

Rubens: Were you at the Whitney when he was there?

01-00:03:28

Grynsztejn: I was not, but he knew of me, because as the director of the Whitney Museum of American Art, he would have known that I was a Whitney Independent Study Program alumna. So he knew about me. We'd

actually been very friendly on the circuit, whenever I would see him. In March of 2000, he called and said that he and Lori Fogarty, who at the time was deputy director here, were coming, by coincidence, to the Carnegie Museum of Art to see the International and could I take them around? I was very happy to greet them, and I took them around. I remember in particular, Lori was very game, because there was a difficult installation by Gregor Schneider that you had to crawl under and into and around. She just was right there with me and with David. I liked her immediately. We had lunch, and then they took off.

I can't say I was utterly surprised, then, when a little while later, the call came to invite me to come out and interview for the position. It wasn't much later than that that I was offered the position. It made extraordinary sense to me. As happy as I was at the Carnegie—I was working with one of the great directors, Richard Armstrong, also my mentor and my friend. He was the one who brought me into the Whitney Independent Study Program in 1985. So I had already known him, and now know him for twenty-two years. He continues to be my mentor. At the same time, he and I both knew—and he particularly, having curated the Carnegie International himself—he and I both knew that it wasn't a good idea to do it twice in a row. The art world doesn't change enough from one International to another. More importantly, if you have done the job right in the first place, you don't change enough at your core and your passion, to do anything but go to your B list from one International to another. It would have been a lesser International.

I was the curator of contemporary art at the Carnegie at the time. I was really interested in the painting and sculpture position, because its purview began in 1900. While that wasn't my strength, I really wanted contemporary art to live in the context of modern art. I had come, if you remember, from the Art Institute of Chicago, which is one of the great encyclopedic museums in the world. I felt like the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art was the perfect midpoint between my experience at the Art Institute of Chicago, where contemporary art was really the caboose, nowhere near the engine, and the Carnegie Museum of Art, where it was *all* about contemporary art, and it didn't have the strength and the context of a larger twentieth-century tradition. I felt like SFMOMA was the perfect midpoint between the two, where it is fundamentally a museum of contemporary art that had been present for so long that it has achieved a modern art base. This is the way that I feel it best operates.

Cándida Smith: So when you started, you began assessing the collection and then—

01-00:07:01

Grynsztejn: Immediately. Immediately.

Rubens: Had you ever been here? Had you ever seen the museum?

01-00:07:05

Grynsztejn: Years ago, when it was on Van Ness Avenue. I was at the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art. I was a baby curator. I acquired a piece by an American Indian artist called James Luna, which got the attention of John Caldwell, and he put it into an exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art—I think it was called “Four Propositions”; it’s a little skinny, black exhibition catalog—and invited me to see the show. I was so honored. I was nervous, because this is John Caldwell, who had written—not faxed, not emailed; none of this stuff was happening yet. I went up and I met John Caldwell. He was a terrific adviser, very kind, very generous, very warm, and he always remained friendly towards me. The first thing I installed when I came to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and did my first rotation was the On Kawara that that artist gave in honor of John’s passing.

Cándida Smith: James Luna?

01-00:08:19

Grynsztejn: No, it was the first piece that I installed when I had my first opportunity to rotate from the collection here was the On Kawara painting which honors John’s death. Because I wanted to say, “I have these playing cards, thanks to you.” I wanted to honor his legacy very much. He was the one who put this museum on the map curatorially. Not directorially. Part of it had to do with John, part of it had to do with just the field, the fact that before that, you had artistic directors, curatorial directors. But now, as it started to professionalize itself more and more, Jack [Lane] and John were really the first team that really professionalized and separated the job of director and curator. That’s also a function of the maturation of the field in general. I was literally a hamster in a wheel for three years. I went to twenty-eight countries, and 280-plus studio visits.

Cándida Smith: So you met thousands of new artists.

01-00:09:30

Grynsztejn: I met everybody. I met every artist, every dealer, every curator. I came to San Francisco—I believe one of the advantages was coming to San Francisco with a network of information and people to draw on, for seven years. Olafur, I met through the Carnegie. Luc Tuymans, among the first museum shows was at the Carnegie. Now we’re in the process of organizing his first U.S. retrospective. His *first*. This is the best painter, after [Gerhard] Richter, living today in Europe. Doris Salcedo, I met at the Art Institute of Chicago. My hope is that I’ll be working with her in the future in Chicago.

Cándida Smith: So as you assess the SFMOMA collection as you're starting, of course, you're discovering things that you didn't know were here.

01-00:10:25

Grynsztejn: Right. That was beginning in September 2000.

Cándida Smith: Could you describe the goals that you formed as you began to look at the collection and say, "Okay, this is where the strengths are, this is where the gaps are."

01-00:10:40

Grynsztejn: As far as I can remember now. I arrived in September 2000. I have always been a contextualist, as I like to put it, which is that my curatorial activities, whether they are acquisition or exhibition oriented, are responsive to the context from which I am working. So it was critical for me to get to know the history of SFMOMA's exhibitions, and as importantly, if not more so, the SFMOMA collection, so that I would know how to enhance it, how to feed its gaps, how to feed its strengths. So the first task that I set myself was to get to know the collection. There had been an extraordinary amount done on the collection in the immediate administration prior to my arrival, thanks to Gary Garrels and Phyllis Wattis together, as well as David Ross. So there were masterpieces that changed the tenor of the collection in one fell swoop, that appeared just in the past couple of years before my arrival, [Marcel] Duchamp's urinal among them, an Ad Reinhardt—just extraordinary, extraordinary works. So I was able to look at those and think about, okay, what do you do with this collection, with its masterpieces? I wanted to share my study with the accessions committee, because the best way to move a committee's patronage forward is by educating them and getting them to agree with your story and want to make it come true.

I developed a road map that I found out later had not actually been done yet. Its time had come, and it coincided with my tenure. There hadn't been a moment yet to consolidate the thinking around this extraordinary rush of acquisitions that had happened under the previous administration. So I consolidated this extraordinary activity into a roadmap. I presented this roadmap during my entire tenure, at the top of every year, to our acquisitions committee, to get everybody on the same page. The road map consists of four lines, from 1900 to the present. They consist of known masterpieces that we all agree on; they consist of what I call concentrations. By this I mean art historical concentrations, art historical movements that are well represented, such as post-minimalism, which is a personal love of mine, or concentrations of artists, artists of whom we have more than four works. For example, [Robert] Rauschenberg being really the preeminent example of that. The third line is promised and fractional

gifts. This is the line that the majority of our public doesn't see, because these works literally live in people's homes until the bequest is completed. But they are very, very much in our minds and in my mind, as we think about what's needed for the rest of the collection. If I know that there is a Jasper Johns that is promised to the collection, that frees me to go after something else. Then I can explain why, for example, I'm not going after a Jasper Johns. What I would always say to my committee is, "A plus B plus C equals D. The masterpieces plus concentrations, plus promised and fractional gifts is the permanent collection. What's not in there is the fourth line, which is our needs." Every year, I would present to them what our needs were, based on that plan. That initial blue-sky approach of mine would then be corralled by real parameters, market opportunities. Just because I want a [Cy] Twombly doesn't mean there's going to be one there that I like. And just as importantly, fiscal limits: just because I want a Twombly doesn't mean I can afford it. So we would work within those parameters every year.

Cándida Smith: In that latter case, though, is it possible for you then to work with a trustee or a collector?

01-00:15:51

Grynsztejn:

It's understood. It's understood. We work with collectors every day on this, because you realize that our acquisitions committee is invited, *begged*, to join every year. Every *year*, we're asking people for funds. There is no endowed acquisition fund that is large enough to sustain us. So every year, actually, an average of forty-two members give us funds to go after works on behalf of the museum.

Rubens: Those are the members of the acquisitions committee?

01-00:16:28

Grynsztejn:

Yes, but in addition to that, if we come across a piece that is even more expensive than what forty-two members of an acquisitions committee can put together, yes, absolutely, I would go and ask additional patrons for funds. Oftentimes, they were very generous and gave. Phyllis Wattis preeminent among them. To this point, I knew when I came here that one of the great examples of Robert Smithson's work was still on the market. It's called *Nonsite (Essen Soil and Mirror)*. I knew about it in Pittsburgh. It was with Bob [Smithson's] estate, and co-owned with a dealer and a private collector. So I knew there was a super-high quality work of art out there on the market. I'm something of a specialist in exploiting under-recognized markets, although it's harder and harder to do so in this very heated art market. But I did for many years here. I knew that post-minimalism hadn't quite been tapped out, and that this masterpiece was out there, and that it was within range. I also wanted to have it be the first acquisition that

I proposed, because I wanted to test the waters with this museum. I wanted to put the parameters for an acquisition out there, in terms of what it looked like, and in terms of what it meant and symbolized and represented. I wanted to find out up front whether I was going to have any problems. I didn't. I very deliberately put out a difficult work and set the parameters out. I think everybody was onboard, and we have been operating out there and coming in, ever since.

Cándida Smith: Was there anything on your list that proved to be particularly difficult, that eluded you, either because of the practical issues, such as price and availability, or because the trustees didn't understand it?

01-00:18:57

Grynsztejn: Never the latter. Never the latter. The reason is, is because it's your responsibility to get those ducks in order. If your story isn't in order and if you can't convince your committee of the importance of that work, no matter how difficult, it's your problem.

Rubens: And David [Ross], as director, did you need to—?

01-00:19:16

Grynsztejn: Never. David is, as you know, among the most open-minded and supportive directors that one could hope for. So no, never.

Rubens: This was your job.

01-00:19:31

Grynsztejn: I have never been censored. It was my job.

Rubens: You didn't need to pre-screen it or—?

01-00:19:37

Grynsztejn: I always did, because that's part of the process. Part of the process is you find a work of art and you present it to, first, your director; then a very, very important partner in this, I should say, is Jill Sterrett [Director of the Collections Division]. Because if it weren't for the optimistic and positive and can-do nature of Jill and Michelle Barger and her team, I would not, in fact, be able to consider, or I would be very hobbled in considering things like the Ana Mendieta sculpture, which is made out of Ficus tree branches, that was falling apart. If it weren't for the conservation department here, that was willing to take on four corners of a decrepit house, I couldn't—

Rubens: Or Sarah Sze?

01-00:20:22

Grynsztejn: Or a Sarah Sze sculpture—I could not, in fact, go as far as I wanted.

Cándida Smith: You, of course, have a broad international knowledge of the art world. This museum had been growing in its perspective, but probably hadn't really reached a fully international perspective yet. What about educating people about what was going on in Latin America or China?

01-00:20:51

Grynsztejn: Well, not China, frankly, because unfortunately, I didn't get to China during the Carnegie. I got sick, actually, just as I was supposed to have gone to China. But I have always made it part of my purpose to educate people about Latin American art. That's why I think I feel very, very strongly and very proud of the acquisition that we made of Doris Salcedo's *Atrabiliarios* installation—which again, would not have been possible without our conservation team. But I feel very, very strongly about that. Now, I think, actually, SFMOMA was quite sophisticated and internationalized by the time I got here, and I simply continued to evolve that.

Rubens: Caldwell and Jack Lane had started it?

01-00:21:41

Grynsztejn: Caldwell was really the first. Caldwell and Lane were really the first to internationalize this museum, in terms of its perspective. Then Gary certainly proceeded to do that. Again, to the point about the collection, one of the primary reasons why it was so important for me to bring Doris Salcedo's *Atrabiliarios* here was because of the fact that there are modernist roots in this museum's history that legitimize an acquisition by a Latin American artist, in the form of the [Frida] Kahlo and [Diego] Rivera holdings that we have. That's why I made such a deep study of the collection, because I wanted to find legitimate roots out of which, like a pebble thrown in a lake, you could grow and enhance the collection conceptually and chronologically. So Felix González-Torres, that extraordinary self-portrait, which we co-acquired with the Art Institute of Chicago; Doris Salcedo—these are deliberate evolutions out of the very, very strong Latin American kernel that existed here, thanks to [Albert] Bender and [Grace McCann] Morley. I always think about the collection in that way.

With regard to Smithson, I was testing the waters, and I recognized that at that time, in 2000, post-minimalism had not been yet tapped out by the market. I went for that. It was Phyllis Wattis who helped me acquire that piece. It was particularly lovely, because the *Spiral Jetty*-Utah connection was very compelling to her, because of her own connection to Utah and to Mormonism and to having spent her honeymoon on the Hoover Dam. So she and I absolutely connected over that. One of the things that I'll never forget— By then, she was already quite elderly, she was already in her wheelchair. I was instructed that she likes to be visited at home, and so I did. Then I

would go very regularly, usually on Wednesdays, and we would talk. She came to the museum when we installed the Robert Smithson for her to see. I'll never forget, we rolled her into the gallery, and she took one look at this pile of dirt with four mirrors and she screamed, "It's *beautiful!*" I thought, this chick! I really hope I'm like her when I'm her age. She was ninety-one or something when she walked in there and said, "It's *beautiful.*" There are a lot of Phyllis souvenirs that I am so privileged to keep in my head forever.

Then the second acquisition was Gordon Matta-Clark. Again, I knew it was out there in the world. I couldn't believe it was still out there. We went for it. Again, it was Phyllis who assisted me, as well as Helen Schwab. Although we should check the credit line, whether that's public or not, because sometimes she—and we should check with her—sometimes she wants people to know that she helped, and sometimes she doesn't. But this is a masterpiece of post-minimalism, and has since been acknowledged, even more so, as such. This is the thing that makes a museum a great museum, is the knowledge that such works live at SFMOMA.

Cándida Smith: What was your thinking as you came in, about commissioning new work?

01-00:25:35

Grynsztejn:

I am *huge* on commissioning new work. I wish I had been able to undertake more of it here, to be honest. I wish that we had been less conservative, a little more brave about that. Because it's something that I very, very strongly believe in, and that has been part of my professional history since the beginning. My first job was at the now presently called San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art; at the time, it was called the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art. Its reputation was based on commissioning new works that accompanied exhibitions of the first mid-sized survey of a young artist. So from the very beginning, I worked extremely closely with artists. It was what I specialized in. So from the very beginning, I worked with Alfredo Jaar, Christo, Jeff Wall's first commission outside of Canada was my show, was with me.

Cándida Smith: In La Jolla.

01-00:26:51

Grynsztejn:

In Tijuana. We went to Tijuana to take that. I have stories about that chicken in that photograph that would make your head spin.

Rubens:

Then Wall and Jaar were in the Carnegie, as well, right, then?

01-00:27:02

Grynsztejn: Exactly. Because I'd known Jeff since 1986. The first time he left Vancouver to do a shoot was at my invitation, in Tijuana, because I recognized that what he really, at that time, was very interested in was the border culture in Vancouver, this meeting of migration and cultures. The same thing was happening in San Diego, and it just made a lot of sense. I don't know, but for whatever reason, one of my great passions is catalyzing creativity, and especially the creation of artworks on behalf of artists. So I believe in that very strongly, and I wish we'd done more.

Cándida Smith: Was the obstacle financial, or the new work is not—

01-00:27:49

Grynsztejn: New work is risky.

Cándida Smith: Not validated yet.

01-00:27:55

Grynsztejn: Even if the artist is validated, creating and subventing a commission, a new work from scratch, is always risky. I think we need to be a little riskier. That's my goodbye editorial gift to SFMOMA.

Cándida Smith: You did do some commissioning here.

01-00:28:19

Grynsztejn: Yes, I did.

Cándida Smith: Perhaps you could talk about one or two that you're particularly proud of?

01-00:28:24

Grynsztejn: Well, I think I'm particularly proud of the *One-way-colour tunnel* that Olafur Eliasson invented for us for his U.S. survey here at SFMOMA, which now graces the fifth-floor catwalk and is in our permanent collection. That, I think, is a *magnificent* example of a curator inviting an artist, who then looks at the context of a museum, identifies a location and an idea that would enhance that museum in a completely new way, and creates an artwork that is a permanent fount for joy whenever it will be put up.

Rubens: Are you thinking about, when you're developing this map, that there are places in the museum that could be more for exhibition space? Are you suggesting— or is it Eliasson's idea that that's where it will go?

01-00:29:26

Grynsztejn: No, I put it in his head to do something.

Rubens: You did. That's exactly what I meant.

01-00:29:33

Grynsztejn: *He* did. That's my job, to be guided and to guide, by the artist.

Cándida Smith: Let's talk a little bit about the development of your thinking about working with artists. You start out in New York in graduate school at a very particular, and some people would say, very privileged moment, in the early to mid-eighties. So I'd be interested to know the artists that you got to know then when you hadn't even really started working professionally yet.

01-00:30:26

Grynsztejn: It's so interesting that you bring that up, because it was a very, very heady time to be there. In retrospect, a very difficult time to be there for someone who wanted to be a curator and be in the field of ideas. The reason I say that is because the ideas were so new, so groundbreaking, so exciting. We're talking about postmodernism. But because they were new and because they were clearly groundbreaking, everybody knew that we were onto something and they were also heartily dogmatic. It took me years to get off that Kool-Aid. It took a long, long time not to hear that I'm a constructed subject with no sense of my own. That's a tough thing to be indoctrinated in. So while it was incredibly important as an education, to be trained by Craig Owens, to be in conversation with Mary Kelly—I'm not talking about graduate school, I'm talking about the Whitney Independent Study Program. It also took a long time to come into my own and say, "I actually do think these subjective emotions are real."

Cándida Smith: That's an important breakthrough.

01-00:32:03

Grynsztejn: It was an important breakthrough. I think that Olafur, for example, is the visual equivalent of that and the artistic equivalent of that, of a return to the legitimacy of emotional subjectivity, in the wake of the stranglehold that postmodernism had on thinking for a really long time—which was totally necessary.

Cándida Smith: What about your connection with feminist art?

01-00:32:31

Grynsztejn: Exactly, or post-feminist art, I guess we should say, at that point. Exactly. To your question, it was like being awoken anew. Up until that point, I had been at Columbia [University], being a very normal and conservative art historian.

Rubens: Anyone you worked with, particularly?

01-00:32:57

Grynsztejn: The reason why I went to Columbia is to work with Theodore Reff, who was a [Édouard] Manet scholar, but in the most traditional sense.

I had gone there because I had graduated in art history from Newcomb College, which no longer exists, thanks to Hurricane Katrina. I was an art history student, partly because I'd gone in as a visual art student—painter and printmaker—and found out that I was a really crappy painter and printmaker. Luckily, art history was a requirement, and I completely fell in love with it. And I was good at it. I realized that that was the prism through which I wanted to understand the world for the rest of my life. But it was a very traditional training. There was no contemporary art training. So all I knew was [Claude] Monet, Manet. All I knew was Theodore Reff was the best, and I went there. I can still tell a fake Manet drawing from a real one. But what I'm saying is that it was all about traditional connoisseurship.

At the same time, Barbara Novak was there. Great, great art historian of the American landscape painting of the nineteenth century. When I took her class, I realized that that's what I needed, because she was a contextualist. She would show you a church painting and she wouldn't necessarily talk about the composition or the colors, she'd talk about the train in the background being a symbol of Manifest Destiny and the meeting of culture and nature and all this. I realized that's what I want. I switched because that was what I wanted much more to do. She wanted me very much to stay because I uncovered some new news in the area of Luminism. Go figure. A Peruvian-born, Latin American-raised, Hungarian-Polish Jewess, living everywhere but the United States, ends up specializing in Luminism, which is *the* American discipline. I don't know if this is important, but I uncovered some connections between [Ralph Waldo] Emerson and Fitz Hugh Lane that hadn't been uncovered before. I traced Emerson's lecture circuit, and found out that Fitz Hugh Lane had actually gone to more than enough of those lectures to really feed Emersonian oversoul philosophy into Luminism. So Barbara wanted me very badly to stay for the PhD.

Cándida Smith: Very precise archival foot work, that perhaps in contemporary, you don't have to do so much.

01-00:35:42

Grynsztejn:

You do, actually. I think that's one of the reasons why my books are so respected, is because I kept that. But I was looking at six years, I would get my own carousel in the basement of Columbia University. I really felt like what I was doing is I was throwing everybody else's ideas—because these were nineteenth-century documents—into a Cuisinart and pressing blend. I wasn't coming up with my own voice. For some reason, I needed to have my own voice. I needed to be the first to say something. I came to the conclusion that the only place that could happen was in the area of something that hadn't been done yet, or that was done for the first time. *That* was why I went to

contemporary art; not because I was *moved* by contemporary art, but because I needed to say something and to be the first to say it.

Rubens: Is that the artist in you, as well?

01-00:36:38

Grynsztejn: I think so.

Cándida Smith: This issue of the revalorization of subjectivity, of emotional response—

01-00:36:47

Grynsztejn: [Richard] Tuttle is that, too.

Cándida Smith: One of the things, of course, that's happened from the seventies through the eighties and today is the repoliticization of art after the, shall we call it purification?

01-00:37:03

Grynsztejn: You're talking about the eighties, though, because the nineties and the 2000s haven't seen any of that. I think it's about as depoliticized right now as you can imagine.

Cándida Smith: I wanted to get at the issue of how you evaluate the poetic versus the ideological when you look at a piece of contemporary art that has a point of view about the border or gender, or some aspect of contemporary migration.

01-00:37:34

Grynsztejn: Was it [Winston] Churchill that said that if you're not an idealist when you're young and not conservative when you're old, you're an idiot? Something like that. When I was a younger curator, I liked certain work that was much more direct in its messaging than I do now. I like work now that is more complex and admits a certain lack of clarity in real life. I'm hyper-allergic to work that crosses the line into advertising, where the message is so monochromatic, is so one dimensional that it comes very close, if not embodies, an advertisement or messaging. What I look for in art is—I do look for work that speaks to the most urgent issues of our time, that pushes at the envelope of its respective medium, that is beautiful and truthful and necessary. I look for work that is necessary. I look for work that has an economy of means, with regard to what it's saying, and that speaks to the person that made it, as well.

Rubens: But you're saying now. This is now.

01-00:39:37

Grynsztejn: All the time, that's all the time. Those have been my ongoing criteria.

Cándida Smith: Perhaps you could talk a little bit about when you met Richard Tuttle, the development of that relationship.

01-00:39:48

Grynsztejn: I first spoke with Richard Tuttle on the phone. I think it was in 1993 or '94. The reason is that, again, I was at the Art Institute of Chicago; I wanted to set the parameters for what was tolerated, in terms of acquisitions; I wanted to set those parameters out very far. I also wanted to acquire important works of art. I have an underdog tendency, I think. Maybe in my collecting practice, but not to the point to where it's self-destructive. But I'm much less interested in the obvious stars than I am in those artists that have made important contributions, but have not had their day in the sun yet, for whatever reason. Usually, it's just marketing or some dumb reason—like Hans Haacke, like Ana Mendieta, like Richard Tuttle. I'm interested in looking at the less obvious, because the obvious is oftentimes the result of a mass mentality that I'm not interested in. So I came across a 1967 *Cloth Octagonal* at the Art Institute of Chicago. The thing that got me about this piece was that I couldn't explain it away. I just couldn't explain it. I couldn't explain it away. When you can explain something, you can explain it away. It's advertising. I couldn't make sense of this piece. This piece would not lie down and just attach itself to a single explanation for me.

Cándida Smith: This moved you.

01-00:42:07

Grynsztejn: It moved me.

Rubens: Describe it, just ever so briefly.

01-00:42:10

Grynsztejn: It's basically a cloth octagonal. It's dyed and shaped, sewn at its edges, a cloth octagonal from 1967. It just would not lie down. It just would not lie still. So I started researching, and I fell in love with the work. As part of bringing it into the collection, I called the artist to speak with him. That's the first time that I spoke with Richard—which, if you have spoken with Richard, is an experience in and of itself, because you ask a question, and about thirty-five minutes later, you still don't know where you are—which is a lot like his work. But I remained interested in the work and I followed it all the way along. When I came here, part of my conversation with David Ross was doing a Richard Tuttle retrospective. That was part of the agreement for my coming here, because I already had it in mind to do it. He was the last of the post-minimalists not to have a retrospective. SFMOMA turned out to be the perfect place. In a way, I was actually very grateful that I *didn't* start it at the Carnegie, because Sol LeWitt happened here, Eva Hesse happened here. It's very important, I think,

to SFMOMA's history that part of what it can say is that we are the archival center for some of the most important art historical exhibitions of post-minimalism done. Not the primary exhibitions, when it's still journalism, but twenty years on, the art historical exhibitions. We are one of those centers. I think that's really important.

Cándida Smith: As you're working with Tuttle, you begin to formulate your ideas about him and his work. How did that then shape the way you want to present him in the installation, in the catalog, in the education materials?

01-00:44:30

Grynsztejn: I was very clear with Richard early on, because I needed to get his buy-in or it wasn't going to happen. What I mean by that is as follows. Richard, up until that moment, had curated his own exhibitions, if you will. What I mean by that is that he belongs to a generation that was the first generation to recognize that you don't just put something up on the wall and walk away; that the impact of the piece has everything to do with the light, the wall that it's on, the situation that it finds itself in. This is something that he learned as a post-minimalist, in the wake of Tony Smith, in the wake of Mark Rothko, in the wake of Barnett Newman, and all of these artists who were really the first to recognize the importance of the context of the installation within which they're showing. Remember that Tuttle was at the Betty Parsons Gallery. He was the kid. First the backroom boy, and then the youngest in the stable of that group of people that I mentioned, including Tony Smith, who designed the gallery, Betty Parsons Gallery, that Richard had his first show in. So this is what he comes out of. He controls everything. He controls the lighting that his work shows in, the height that his work shows in, the color of the wall—everything. As a result, the history of his exhibitions is a very eccentric history. They're almost like boutique shows, if you will, one after the other after the other. So I made it very clear to him up front that what I wanted to invent with him was a retrospective, was something that was recognizably a summation exhibition, not an artist's exhibition. I wanted to invent something with him that had the imprimatur of a slight distance and an art historical perspective and a rigorous application.

Cándida Smith: Meaning that you would make decisions—

01-00:46:48

Grynsztejn: That meant that he and I would certainly make decisions together, but that we weren't going to paint the walls crimson. It was going to have the look of a museum retrospective. That's what it ended up being. That was critically important, I said to him, and he was convinced by this argument. That was, for me, critically important for him. He

needed that. He needed that to legitimize his career. Another Richard Tuttle show would have just been another Richard Tuttle show. So we made that clear up front.

I have worked with artists hand-in-hand. That's how it is. But the only way that succeeds is if you have a really honest conversation up front about what you want to accomplish and what they want to accomplish. It's the same with Olafur. It's the same with everyone I have worked with.

So we decided up front together that this would be a retrospective. Then I did what one always does when one is a good art historian; we, together, sat down and talked about every piece he'd ever made. Now, normally that would take four days or a week. Usually when you're working with a thirty-year-old artist, which was my position up until that time— This was the first time I worked on a retrospective with a senior statesman. When you're working with a thirty-year-old, you can pretty much see everything pretty quickly. Richard is maybe the most prolific artist in existence. It took months, and a total of twenty-five three-inch binders, to summarize the visuals of works that he made.

Rubens: Only months?

01-00:48:49

Grynsztejn: Picture twenty-five binders filled with Xeroxes of art objects that he made. Out of that, we selected the objects for the exhibition.

Cándida Smith: Everything was jointly selected, in this case?

01-00:49:09

Grynsztejn: Yes. Everything was jointly selected. He convinced me of some, and I convinced him of some. We created a chronology, we created a story. It's very important for me as a curator to create a story. I'm not interested in not engaging the audience.

Cándida Smith: In terms of the installation, he had been so used to installing things himself. Did he allow you the freedom—

01-00:49:34

Grynsztejn: Oh, that was the one time that we really bumped heads in a really— It was very painful. It was really painful for him, and it was really painful for me. But I learned a great lesson. We were installing together. There was a particular group of works that I wanted to hang at a particular height, and that he wanted to hang at another height. I was going to just stand my ground on this one. It was just one of those days. I went over to where he was, and he was lying on the floor, painting the side of one of his objects that had already been installed. That's how exacting he is. I sat on the floor next to him and I told him

this. We went back and forth, and Richard is not direct in his language. But in the midst of this ten-minute response, he said, “If you do that, you will kill the artwork.” That went right through me. I said, “Done. We’re done.” I said, “I can’t do that.” He was right. I learned a lot from that.

Rubens: Could you just say what you learned? What was the difference in—

01-00:51:07

Grynsztejn: I learned to respect the artist’s art again.

Rubens: And you wanted it higher for what reason?

01-00:51:15

Grynsztejn: I wanted it higher because he wanted it *very* low. What I didn’t understand was that that had a certain impact that he needed and that the art needed. I know that, but I just held my ground that day. He reminded me that the art comes first.

Cándida Smith: One of the things that we have been told is that this was a show in which Tuttle did not want much interpretation, that he wanted people to confront the art.

01-00:51:47

Grynsztejn: Just experience it.

Cándida Smith: This did cause problems with the education department and, perhaps, with members of the public.

01-00:51:56

Grynsztejn: In the end, I don’t believe so. In the end, I don’t believe so. Because in the end, we had introductory labels, introductory texts that I think were quite wonderful and said all that needed to be said, to be honest. The curator never gets enough credit for this, but the curator is the firewall and the peacemaker between the artist and the interpretive mechanisms of education and publications. Neither party, I think, sees how hard the curator works to establish that meeting ground. Everybody ends up fairly dissatisfied. But what they actually really don’t see is that they have actually reached a compromise.

Rubens: When you say story, chronology and story is so important to you, could you just say implicitly, in your mind, what the story was for the Tuttle show?

01-00:53:03

Grynsztejn: The story for the Tuttle show was his story. The story for the Tuttle show was the importance of his work within his own trajectory, within the trajectory of art history, the story of his contributions, and the story of his influence on younger artists. So I was positioning him in art

history in the way that he deserved, and the way that he hadn't had the opportunity to do yet, and that would have happened at some point anyway. But what I mean by story, I think, is that I recognize, for better or for worse, that we live in a very self-centered culture today, a very celebrity-oriented culture, and that if I didn't make it about his person as well as his art, it would fail.

Cándida Smith: That's interesting. Did he resist that?

01-00:53:53

Grynsztejn: No. Artists are fifty percent completely insecure and fifty percent utterly egomaniacal. So I think that latter half was not too unhappy about that part. They have to be that way. They have to remain utterly porous. They have to remain utterly porous and utterly arrogant, because no one else will support them in their endeavor. They have to remain open to the world in order to be relevant to the world. That's an artist.

Cándida Smith: To move to another artist with whom you have been closely associated, Doris Salcedo—very different. Emotional register is very different, problematic. And you haven't done a retrospective with her.

01-00:54:40

Grynsztejn: No, but I will. I plan to. That is something I want to take to the MCA [Museum of Contemporary Art], Chicago.

Cándida Smith: And you met her in Chicago?

01-00:54:50

Grynsztejn: No, I met her in Bogotá. I was traveling for an exhibition that I was planning. Again, this is to the point of being a rabid contextualist. When I arrived at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1992, there had been an exhibition in place that had been dormant for a long time, an exhibition series called "The American Exhibition." The last iteration was years ago; no one remembered. It had been, I believe, the seventy-fifth iteration. It hadn't been revived. Incredibly enough, there were acquisition funds attached to it that couldn't be tapped unless you did the show. Well, exactly. I went, "*Duh!*" Ignorance is bliss when you're literally twenty-nine years old and you walk into James Wood's office and say, "*Duh!*," and he doesn't kick you out. You can think of the Art Institute of Chicago, and you're sitting there, you're the third appointment. The first guy ahead of you is the Monet scholar, and he walks in and says, "Let's do a Monet show." The second guy is the preeminent [Edgar] Degas scholar, and he goes in and says, "Let's do a Degas print show." Then I go in and say, "Let's do a contemporary art exhibition!" Who do you think he's going to choose?

But happily, I was new and I was really ignorant and naïve, and he recognized the importance of reviving this exhibition. Being a contextualist and wanting to always tweak, and having come off of La Jolla and the border art show, I was very, very well trained in multiculturalism and the language of the politics around that; and particularly this usurped use of the word “American” coming out of San Diego; and very, very well indoctrinated by my friend David Avalos and others, as to the fact that American doesn’t mean the United States. I proposed to Jim Wood, and he accepted, that for the first time, we would turn the axis north/south instead of west/east, and call it the Americas exhibition, and for the first time, include artists from Canada—Jeff Wall among them—I’d worked with him already—and Latin America. It was as part of this research for this show that I traveled to Bogotá, Columbia to see this artist Doris Salcedo, whom I’d seen a little bit of work of here and there and had intrigued me enough—

Rubens: Meaning in the U.S., at a gallery or—

01-00:57:56

Grynsztejn:

Maybe it was an international exhibition. I don’t remember. But Carolyn Alexander, the dealer in New York, of Alexander and Bonin, at present, had introduced me to the work. Richard Armstrong had introduced me to the work. So I traveled there—with Richard Armstrong, by the way, who was organizing the Carnegie International of 1995 at the time, so this must have been 1993, a year into being at the Art Institute of Chicago—and Doris and I immediately, *immediately* knew that there was something between us that needed to be explored further. All these years later, we’re still finding things out about each other. Me, more about her and her work. I owe her so much for opening my eyes to the world through her vision. We were in her studio, and she was playing Arvo Pärt. Then afterwards, we went to dinner, and that began a very long friendship that continues today.

Cándida Smith: The piece I remember of hers at the AIC [Art Institute of Chicago] is a chest of draws that’s cemented in.

01-00:59:11

Grynsztejn:

Exactly, exactly. It was immediately clear to me that she had to be in this Americas exhibition, which ended up being called “About Place.” This is 1995. This is what got me the job at the Carnegie. This is like a mini-Carnegie, which— I didn’t do it for that reason, but Richard was watching. 1995. It was called “About Place: Recent art of the Americas.” It was the seventy-sixth American exhibition. She was in that show, and her contribution consisted of a room of the *Atrabiliarios*, the shoes that we ended up buying here, and the work

that you are mentioning, which is the sculptures made from doors. It was the first series; it was called *La Casa Viuda*, The Widowed House.

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02-00:00:19

Grynsztejn: When you agree to work with Doris Salcedo, you agree to work with Doris Salcedo on her terms, or you don't. That is your choice up front. After that, the choice has been made. Your job is to catalyze her work.

Cándida Smith: When you're discussing her with your peers and the museum staff, with the director, who's really your peer, too.

02-00:00:58

Grynsztejn: My boss.

Cándida Smith: Your boss, but *also* your colleague, and with the trustees. What is it that you wanted to convey to them, why she was particularly important? Perhaps what I also want to get at is, of Latin American artists, why has Doris Salcedo shot to the top, in terms of U.S. understanding?

02-00:01:25

Grynsztejn: Do you think that's the case, generally?

Cándida Smith: I think it's still very limited, but of the number of important Latin American artists I know of, she's one of the people who I can mention her name to people, and they recognize. Alfredo Jaar, who's another that I think has gotten on the radar. But there's very few that have gotten, say, to the level of recognition of [Sigmar] Polke or [Christian] Boltanski.

02-00:02:03

Grynsztejn: Doris Salcedo hits all of the criteria that I have, that I look for in a great work of art. I think that other people see that from their points of view, as well. The work is utterly visceral, physical, and beautiful when you see it. It has a physical and visceral presence that is inarguably art. It's sculpture. It is also intelligently and deeply informed by a knowledge of its field, by the larger world of art history. It is part of a generation of artists—Rachel Whiteread included, Felix González-Torres included—who infused post-minimalism with personal content. That is my generational crux, as well, so of course I will be particularly drawn to it. It is also a very unselfish art. This is something that I respond to. What I mean by that is that it goes beyond its own formal preoccupations to address urgencies, not just subjects or topics. Kerry James Marshall does this, too, for example. It addresses urgencies. I think for all these reasons, there is something that people recognize in the work; that it has a sense of necessity, a

sense of urgency. I think people feel it. I don't think you need to know anything about it to feel that when you see her work. It's urgent.

Cándida Smith: And did anybody raise the question that perhaps it was too political?

02-00:04:22

Grynsztejn: If they did think it, they didn't voice it. It was a unanimous vote from the accessions committee. We're talking about *Atrabiliarios*. I remember bringing them into the artwork when we were finished presenting. A hushed silence, a very sober silence descended on this group, which is normally very chatty on its way to seeing artworks after a long sit-down, having to listen to me. It was very sober. One of the beauties of Doris Salcedo's work is that it's not advertising. It's not direct, in fact. It's absolutely clearly political, but the message is sent through a very symbolic language. It's like poetry, it's not like advertising. For that reason, the politics of it, while no less powerful, are not mitigated, but— they're equally present, but they are not radicalized.

Cándida Smith: I'm thinking right now of another Colombian artist who's fairly well known in this country, lives in New York, and has shown at La Jolla.

02-00:06:05

Grynsztejn: Are you talking [Fernando] Botero?

Cándida Smith: Actually, I was thinking of Fernando Arias.

02-00:06:09

Grynsztejn: I don't know Arias.

Cándida Smith: He does performance art. He did a piece called *The Mules*, in which he has inserted a camera up his anus and swallowed balloons and did a performance documentation of the—

02-00:06:33

Grynsztejn: I need to track this down.

Cándida Smith: This was at the last inSite show.

02-00:06:40

Grynsztejn: So this was some comment of drug trafficking.

Cándida Smith: Right.

02-00:06:43

Grynsztejn: My God. No, I need to track this guy down. That sounds amazing. No, I'm sorry I don't know him.

Cándida Smith: It's very rough work, as you can—

02-00:06:50

Grynsztejn: I can imagine. The result is a video.

Cándida Smith: It's on video, but he also does live performances and—

02-00:06:56

Grynsztejn: The inside of it? Like what he tapes inside his body?

Cándida Smith: He does live performances while the inside video's being projected. Then there are installations and wall hangings. So it's a rather complex—

02-00:07:09

Grynsztejn: I need to check this out. Right. I need to check that out. It sounds amazing.

Cándida Smith: It's very disturbing.

02-00:07:18

Grynsztejn: I'm sure. I'm sure.

Cándida Smith: What I wanted to get at was what works here at this museum and what work someplace else.

02-00:07:35

Grynsztejn: Well, that's a very important point. That's a very important point. One of the things that I think about is what migrates well and what doesn't, from museum or region to museum and region. Some of the things that I did as part of the Border Art Project would not translate well in other places. I recognize that, for example. So no, things need to migrate well. They need to have some entrée or an introduction.

Cándida Smith: The other artist you mentioned you want to talk about that you have a good, close relationship with is Kiki Smith. Did that relationship affect the piece that you acquired?

02-00:08:19

Grynsztejn: Yes, it did, to the extent that I was able to get at it at all. It's been in her permanent collection ever since she made it.

Rubens: When did she make it?

02-00:08:34

Grynsztejn: She made it in 1994, and *Lilith* is a masterpiece. It is one of the pieces that I'm proudest having brought into the collection, because I do believe it's a masterpiece. My connection to Kiki was important in that conversation, because I don't know that she would have released it otherwise, to be honest. Kiki likes to say that I'm better than her dealer

at placing artworks in museums. Because I have acquired a work of hers for every museum I have ever worked at.

Rubens: Starting with Chicago?

02-00:09:22

Grynsztejn: No, starting with La Jolla. I acquired her first museum piece. Her first museum acquisition was mine.

Rubens: How had you seen her?

02-00:09:34

Grynsztejn: How did I see her? While I was in La Jolla, I was given a Peter Norton curator's grant. Peter Norton is a great maverick, among many other things, and he recognized—I think this is brilliant—that he wanted to establish a mechanism that would empower young curators to directly acquire works of art, and not necessarily have to go to their director or their senior curator. So for a while, for a number of years, he established a curatorial grant. I think—yes, I think I received \$25,000 to acquire works of art. One of which, by the way, was the James Luna that got the attention of John Caldwell. So with that money in hand, I went to New York and did the rounds, and I saw an extraordinary artwork at Fawbush Gallery. Joe Fawbush has since died of AIDS, and this was at the beginning of that period. This piece was by Kiki Smith. I was completely smitten by it, and I ended up acquiring this work of hers. I also acquired a work by a young unknown called Robert Gober, as well as James Luna. I don't recall, I'm sorry to say, the other works that I acquired. That's how Kiki and I got to know each other and became friendly.

When I went to the Art Institute of Chicago, Kiki was on my radar by then, and I acquired a very important work of hers there, a wax female figure. Kiki was extraordinarily important to me. This was a moment when the body in general, on cultural fronts, on biological fronts, on political fronts, was being attacked. This was the years when the National Endowment for the Arts killed off its support of artists. As a matter of fact, I was on the NEA panel the year before those grants were killed off. I was on the panel that in fact supported the Mike Kelly/Karen Finley projects that caused the ruckus. The specter of AIDS was greater and greater, and censorship was greater and greater. These were very bad times. Kiki's work spoke to that extremely strongly, and it was incredibly important to support it. Plus it was, again, as I said before as with Doris's work, visceral, important, sculptural, et cetera. So I brought a work in of hers. It was very contentiously received at the Art Institute of Chicago, and has since become a permanent fixture in their contemporary art galleries.

Rubens: No problem acquiring this *Lilith* here at—?

02-00:13:11

Grynsztejn: None at all. None at all.

Cándida Smith: Well—

02-00:13:18

Grynsztejn: At the Carnegie, I should mention, at the Carnegie, I invited her— To our point about working with artists, I knew that Kiki was becoming more and more interested in nature. Again, taking advantage always of the context, the Carnegie Museum of Art lives within a group of entities that also includes a natural history museum. I invited Kiki to come and draw from the collection of the natural history museum, and then made an exhibition of those drawings with her. She has continued to use those etchings. She's kept the plates, and she continues to use those drawings of birds, especially birds, from the natural history museum collection.

Cándida Smith: By the time when you acquire the *Lilith*, she has achieved—

02-00:14:25

Grynsztejn: She's a master. She's a senior stateswoman.

Cándida Smith: This raises, to me, an interesting question about being a contemporary art curator, the degree to which this is inevitably generationally pegged.

02-00:14:38

Grynsztejn: I couldn't agree with you more. Maybe that's why I'm becoming a director, in part. I got really great advice twenty years ago from Richard Armstrong, which I continue to give to young curators that work for me. I believe very strongly in mentoring. The advice that I got from Richard—I was in Manhattan at the time—was, "Leave New York, because if you stay, you'll just be somebody else's human Xerox machine. If you go, you can make mistakes out of the limelight, you can make *horrible* mistakes. You can trip up, you can grow, you can make successes, and you can grow up."

The second [piece of advice he gave me was], "Stick with your generation. You will know them best, you will be their voice. You will have eaten the same pizza, you will have listened to the same music. You will understand them better than you will understand anybody else. You, of course, have permission to go forward—Richard Tuttle—and to go back. But you will know your generation, necessarily, the best."

I recognized that. One of the things that I am very devoted to doing now is to mentoring the next generation of curators, and making sure that any museum I work for or lead continues to tap into today's best artists.

Cándida Smith: So in some ways, the contemporary curator is like a human Geiger counter of the marriage of emotion and intellect.

02-00:16:26

Grynsztejn: There are very few, I believe, very few curators who are able to transgress those natural parameters. John Caldwell was one of them.

[material deleted]

Cándida Smith: My personal reaction to the Gerhard Richter show was that it was really beautiful here, and I hated it at MoMA [New York].

02-00:17:48

Grynsztejn: A lot of people like shows better here than in their originating venues. Part of the reason is actually the beauty of the fourth-floor galleries. Our fourth-floor galleries have a golden triangle magic to them. They really do. The fifth floor, the second floor, the third floor do not. The other reason is, is that I really do believe that the staff is so strongly oriented to clarifying and captivating our audience, without compromising our program. I think we do it exceptionally well.

Cándida Smith: So, on the final topic, you get invited into the MLI [Museum Leadership Initiative].

02-00:18:30

Grynsztejn: No, you have to apply.

Cándida Smith: You applied to the MLI.

02-00:18:32

Grynsztejn: You're invited to apply.

Rubens: Are you invited to apply?

02-00:18:35

Grynsztejn: You're invited to apply. You can't just get in.

Cándida Smith: So at any rate, you got in.

02-00:18:39

Grynsztejn: I got in.

Cándida Smith: But you had obviously, then, made a decision this is the—

02-00:18:42

Grynsztejn: No.

Cándida Smith: No?

02-00:18:44

Grynsztejn: No. The reason I wanted to go to MLI was because I didn't know if I wanted to be a director. I thought that if I went to MLI, it would help me answer that.

Rubens: What year are we talking about?

02-00:18:57

Grynsztejn: This summer, this past summer [2007].

Rubens: You are already appointed a senior curator.

02-00:19:21

Grynsztejn: I'm the senior curator of painting and sculpture at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and I'm thinking about next steps. One of the reasons that I applied to the Getty Leadership Institute, Museum Leadership Institute, is to figure out, is to answer the question for myself as to whether or not I would be interested in becoming a museum director. Ironically, I come out of it not knowing the answer. I just—I still don't know. Because there's still a lot to be said and done in the curatorial world. I love my proximity to artists and ideas. I see some of the administrative overload of directorships. At the same time, my passions are migrating from curating exhibitions to curating institutions. At the same time, maybe coming off of Olafur Eliasson, I also see the selfish side of curating. You spend a lot of time cosseting one person, the artist. Whereas if you devote yourself to an institution, you're cosseting a vision that applies to that building and that staff and that history and that institution. So my passion started migrating towards institutional vision.

Cándida Smith: Your changing ideas about the public: I ask in part because I think the legacy of the modern-postmodern-contemporary art continuum, a lot of it's been, for the last 150 years, organized around challenging the viewer. The shock of recognition, the shock of the new. How do you view this question of developing, but also challenging publics, which are always plural?

02-00:22:03

Grynsztejn: This is super complicated, super long, super prickly. [pause] The ground is changing from under the museum's feet, and it has to acclimate to a twenty-first-century position. It is in the process of still getting out of a nineteenth-century ordinary model, which was, grossly speaking, two-pronged. Object-centered. Out of that, we have inherited a continued obsession with owning what we're showing,

acquiring. Acquiring masterpieces. Those two things are increasingly under threat, because we can afford fewer and fewer of those masterpieces. The very concept of masterpiece is also under question.

The second prong that drove the originary model at museums is a social Darwinism; that if you went to the museum, you would become a better person. So you will receive this information from on high, and you will evolve. This model has sustained, *shockingly*, up until now. I mean, a hundred years, up until the end of the eighties. It's only in the nineties, it's only really, I think, in the last fifteen years, that a new museology has begun to infiltrate and be listened to, that is demanding that the museum be more responsive to an increasingly varied public, with an increasingly varied education, and that it be less object-centered. The latter which, by the way, I disagree with.

Rubens: Latter meaning, objects?

02-00:24:25

Grynsztejn: Object centered. I think we still need to be object-centered, but I think we need to be real about how the notion of the masterpiece has changed, and what we can achieve.

Cándida Smith: But accumulating a collection remains central?

02-00:24:41

Grynsztejn: Remains very, very critical. But *how* to accumulate it needs to be revisited. Maybe we need to establish a ground-breaking model of lending libraries, the museum as a lending library. Maybe we don't need to worry so much about who owns what.

Rubens: Isn't that what's happening with these joint ownerships and fractional—

02-00:25:01

Grynsztejn: Joint acquisitions is something that I did here. David started it, with the co-acquisition of a Matthew Barney installation with the Walker [Art Center], but I did it with the Felix González-Torres acquisition. So what does the museum need to become in the twenty-first century? It needs to be a dialoguer, rather than a monologuer. It needs to be a forum, rather than a platform. It needs to be one, necessarily one, of the primary places that people go to to get information to grow into who they are, and to develop an understanding of the world they live in. It should be one of the previously called canonical sources.

Cándida Smith: So how do you view the relationship between modern art and contemporary art in this—

02-00:26:18

Grynsztejn:

They're outgrowths of each other, actually. I actually don't think that contemporary art is just an outgrowth of modern art, because I think as contemporary art goes, it revives certain aspects of modern art that were previously ignored; to wit, Richard Tuttle. So I think it's a two-way street. I think it's absolutely porous. Modern art is constantly reinvented, too. And contemporary art is constantly recontextualized by its past. I think they're absolutely critical to each other, and any attempt at dividing the two— There's almost laughable attempts at defining where contemporary art begins. Some people say 1960, some people say 1945, some people say 1970. It's useless to attempt that semantics. They're constantly flowing into each other.

Cándida Smith:

Well, sure. In theory, all art is contemporary.

02-00:27:18

Grynsztejn:

Well, this is the thing that I love about SFMOMA, and that I will miss very much, among many other things about SFMOMA, is that if it's smart, it is constitutionally built to make that point. It is constitutionally built to be a great contemporary art museum of the twentieth and twenty-first century, to re-present, to present and re-present art since 1900 in a contemporary way. It can do that. It's nimble enough size-wise that it can do that.

Rubens:

Do you think it made a mistake about the Gap collection, the [Don and Doris] Fisher collection?

02-00:28:00

Grynsztejn:

No, I don't. In fact, I think that was one of Neal's [Benezra]shining moments.

Rubens:

I also wanted to ask you about how the ground is shifting. There are two prongs to it—and you can say whether we want to develop this—and one has so much to do with the politics of identity. There's going to be the Mexican Museum and the [Contemporary] Jewish Museum. Also, there's this whole spate of books that start to come out about— And you were mentioned as quoting as Stephen Weil, *Making Museums Matter*.

02-00:28:38

Grynsztejn:

Yeah, I like that book. That's the new museology I'm talking about. That's really opened up our eyes, since the 1990s, mid-1990s. So it hasn't been that long.

Rubens:

What do you think the role of identity politics, or these special spheres of interest, community, publics— What role do they play in shifting the ground positively, but also fracturing where people go for exactly what you're saying, an experience of—

02-00:29:14
Grynsztejn:

That's a good question. I think there's room for everything and everybody, and I think that a high tide raises all boats. So for example, the Contemporary Jewish Museum, which is inaugurating later this year, I think will bring a certain angle and a certain point of view that I think will be extraordinarily important, literally katty-corner to us. I think it would be smart if SFMOMA interacted and collaborated with that museum. I think that there is room for those voices. The thing to be vigilant about is not to pretend that you, the museum, SFMOMA, is the neutral ground, because it's not. Maybe it's not clearly ethnically defined, but it is, generally speaking, upper-middle-class, white, et cetera, et cetera. The thing to do is to be really, really vigilant about the fact, and the promise to yourself that you will never be a neutral ground. But having said that, it's also your job to stake a position. It's your job to stake a position, to be partisan, passionate, and opinionated.

Rubens:

So I want to ask you about that position, vis-à-vis this question of contemporary versus modern. You're about to enter a world where, within a year, I guess sooner, Chicago's going to open, the Institute is going to open its, quote, "modern"—I don't know how contemporary—

02-00:31:07
Grynsztejn:

Modern wing, I think.

Rubens:

—they're going to be.

02-00:31:09
Grynsztejn:

I don't either.

Rubens:

Okay. Also, do you have a sense of how you're staking your position?

02-00:31:17
Grynsztejn:

I'm not worried about that. I'm not worried in the least about that, programmatically, because I don't think the Art Institute will ever do the kinds of programming that the MCA will do. I'm concerned about that in terms of collection building, because I think that not everybody is up to speed as to what I'm thinking about, in terms of the future of collection building that we were just talking about, in terms of sharing and lending—I think that there may still be a proprietary hoarding mentality that I'm hoping that we can have a conversation about.

Rubens:

Could you just comment on— Maybe you don't want to go on too much about this. But I had not heard of, until I did research on you, Ghez, runs the Renaissance Society?

02-00:32:11
Grynsztejn:

Susanne Ghez. Yes, she's one of my great models.

Rubens: I didn't know of her until—

02-00:32:17

Grynsztejn: Oh, my God! You have got to get to know about her.

Rubens: Well, I will go there. But why is she a model?

02-00:32:23

Grynsztejn: Oh, my God! How do I start to talk about Susanne Ghez?

Rubens: She goes in '74, apparently.

02-00:32:31

Grynsztejn: She just had her seventieth birthday. Susanne Ghez is who I want to be when I grow up. Susanne Ghez is *the* most influential, most passionate, kindest, and most intelligent person in the art world.

Rubens: How is this manifested?

02-00:32:57

Grynsztejn: We were talking earlier about how it is a rare feat to be a curator who can work outside of her own media generation. She can. She has, for—what?—forty-plus years, been— Her institution, the Renaissance Society, has been *the* inaugural exhibition, for going on four generations, of contemporary artists. I'm talking the first curators-slash-institution to give one-person show to Jeff Wall, Niele Torone, Daniel Buren, Kara Walker. Just look at that history. She's just surreal. It's just unbelievable. I first became aware of her in La Jolla. I was in my early twenties, early to mid-twenties. I knew enough, thanks to Richard [Armstrong?], to know that part of the way you grow is by looking at other people's great work. Through Jeff Wall, I became familiar with Susanne Ghez and the Renaissance Society. When I visited Chicago—and I don't recall why it was that I went—I asked for an appointment to meet Susanne Ghez and to look at her files. Now, I know; I believe it was, in fact, to look at her Jeff Wall files, in preparation for my own show. And given what I'd seen of the history, I had expected a tour-de-force organization. I couldn't find it. It's on the University of Chicago campus. I had to find a building, go up to the fourth or fifth floor. Literally, it's the attic. It's literally 2,500 to 5,000 square feet that this has happened in. There's one office, shared by three people, including Susanne. That is the Renaissance Society.

Rubens: Oddly named as well, don't you think?

02-00:35:35

Grynsztejn: It's what you would call an institution in the twenties. It's been around forever. So I walk in, and I expect several layers of administration before I get to this famous person. She's sitting there. There's Susanne Ghez. She opened up her files to me, and she opened up her mind to

me, and she opened up her heart to me. She is among the people that my husband and I hold most dear in the world.

Rubens: A mentor as well as a model?

02-00:36:09

Grynsztejn:

Oh, yes. Absolutely. As a person, even more than as a director. I traveled with her as part of the Carnegie International research. I asked her to be on my advisory committee. The Carnegie International, very intelligently, part of its structure involves an advisory committee. It's a terrific idea to have other people involved in your thinking. I invited Okwui Enwezor; Lars Nittve, who at that time, was director of the Tate Gallery, and he's now the director of the Moderna Museet in Stockholm. Okwui Enwezor had not yet been selected for Documenta. He had just come off the Johannesburg Biennale, which impressed me deeply enough to invite him. I had met him in Cuba, when we went to look together at the Cuba Biennial. And Susanne Ghez. It was a powerhouse team, and they taught me a lot.

[End of Interview]

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