

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art  
75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary  
Oral History Project

Regional Oral History Office  
The Bancroft Library  
University of California, Berkeley

SFMOMA 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

PIRKLE JONES  
Artist, Photographer

Interview conducted by  
Jess Rigelhaupt  
in 2007

Copyright © 2008 by San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Funding for the Oral History Project provided in part by Koret Foundation.



Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is bound with photographs and illustrative materials and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

\*\*\*\*\*

All uses of this manuscript are covered by a legal agreement between The Regents of the University of California and Pirkle Jones, dated December 23, 2007. This manuscript is made available for research purposes. All copyrights and other intellectual property rights in the manuscript, including the right to publish, are reserved to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Excerpts up to 1000 words of this manuscript may be quoted for publication without seeking permission as long as the use is non-commercial and the attribution below is included.

Requests for permission or questions should be addressed to SFMOMA Research Library and Archives, 151 Third Street, San Francisco, CA 94103 or [archives@sfmoma.org](mailto:archives@sfmoma.org) and should include identification of the specific passages to be quoted, anticipated use of the passages, and identification of the user.

It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

“SFMOMA 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary: Pirkle Jones,” conducted by Jess Rigelhaupt, 2007Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; © San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2008.

Copy no. \_\_\_\_

**Discursive Table of Contents—PIRKLE JONES**

Interview #1: October 23, 2007

[Audio File 1]

1

Recollections of first visit to SF Museum of Art while an art student in San Francisco—The SF Museum’s photography collection—Comparison of other museums to SF Museum—Working on Lange’s “Death of a Valley” show and with Ruth-Marion Baruch on “Walnut Grove: Portrait of a Tiwn”—Thoughts about “The World Around Us” [1962] at SF Museum—Changes in the value of photography in the art market—Photographing the Black Panthers with Ruth-Marion Baruch, SF Museum exhibit—Politics and art in San Francisco in the 1940s—Dorothea Lange’s influence on Bay Area photography—John Humphrey and Van Deren Coke—Sandra Phillips, SFMOMA, and the 2003 show, “Pirkle Jones and the Changing California Landscape”—David Mahoney’s patronage—Collaborating with various curators.

[Audio File 2]

11

Recollections of Dr. Grace McCann Morley, Henry Hopkins, other directors—Importance and future of photography collection at SFMOMA.



**Interview #1: October 23, 2007**

[Begin Audio File 1 10-23-2007.mp3]

Rigelhaupt: To start, I'd like to ask you if you can recall your first visit to the San Francisco Museum of Art, it would have been at that time.

01-00:00:27

Jones: Well, I can very well remember that because having a background of visiting a lot of big museums in the East—the Art Institute in Chicago, and the Cleveland Museum of Art, and the museum in Toledo [Toledo Museum of Art], and also the Phillips Museum in Washington, D.C., where I first saw modern works. This was before the Museum of Modern Art [NY] was established. I remember one of the pictures there, and it stuck with me my whole lifetime. This was in 1931. It was a beautiful masterpiece of [Auguste] Renoir's, *Luncheon of the Boating Party*. I felt very taken in with that, and I felt almost like being one of the party when I looked at it. Over the years I have seen it several times, and it's still as beautiful as when I first saw it. So that's my background of museums. I did a lot of looking in museums. I was not a historical art student of any kind, but I did look at everything in the museums when I used to go.

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember your first visit to a museum in San Francisco?

01-00:02:11

Jones: When I was going to school here, I went to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. That was one of my first things to do, because I always considered that a great pleasure, in seeing great works of art. Some of the shows that I remember is their photographic ones. Now, sometimes I slip on remembering. I remember one of the older photographers—what's his name?—that worked with [Alfred] Stieglitz.

Rigelhaupt: Well, in one of your books, the recent one from your exhibition catalogue from Santa Barbara, in an essay about your work, the author mentioned that you had seen a Paul Strand.

01-00:03:22

Jones: Exactly. That's the one I was thinking of. I was really charmed by that. It was a dynamite show, it was really fantastic. From time to time over the years, I saw a beautiful show that was curated by Van Deren Coke, a curator at one time. The exact dates on that, we'd have to check. I don't remember. Then there was another show of painting, which I was quite surprised to see one of the paintings in there by Charles Sheeler. He had been to San Francisco and visited Ansel Adams at that time. They were personal friends. Sheeler told me, he says, "Well, see this color transparency? Someday I want to make a painting of this." About twenty years passed, and I was in the museum one day looking at the Lane Collection [1983], which was a traveling show. There on the wall was one of his paintings, of this transparency that I'd seen about twenty years earlier. That was a lot of fun.

- 01-00:05:06 We had association with John Humphrey at the museum. I would give him credit as being one of the principal ones that fostered and loved photography. We used to see him in the museum and see his work, what he chose for shows. The director of the museum was [Dr.] Grace [McCann] Morley [1935-1958]. For your information, there's a lot of research that you can do through the Museum of Modern Art [NY] on the correspondence Ansel had with the director Alfred Barr. I would give Ansel the credit for really pioneering and helping establish photography at that museum. Of course, he'd been on museum boards in New York and the Museum of Modern Art in photography. But it's some very interesting correspondence that Grace Morley had with Ansel. Of course at that time, photography was treated at arm's length. We have gone a long way since then.
- 01-00:06:40 The Alfred Stieglitz show was quite beautiful. In the early times, it was quite a struggle to have photographs shown in the museum. There was just not enough interest in photography, it was not treated as a fine art, which it is today. It's quite startling to see the current news from Sotheby's on one of Edward Weston's photographs of the shell selling for \$1,100,000. I would say photography has gone to the forefront now. Even with those with a tremendous amount of money, they're diversifying and investing in photography.
- 01-00:07:42 The museum, Ruth [Ruth-Marion Baruch] and I used to go there in the evenings. It was open. It's interesting to note that when we were going there, there were no crowds, very few people. No blockbusters at that time considered. But the contrast is quite startling between now, of what is shown, and the publicity, and the interest of the public in art.
- Rigelhaupt: Well, if we stayed back when you were in art school in the forties.
- 01-00:08:26  
Jones: I was in Ansel Adams's first photography class, in 1946.
- Rigelhaupt: Well, if we stay around that time period, as you said at the beginning of the interview, you'd been to a lot of leading museums in this country. How would you compare the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art—then the San Francisco Museum of Art—and their collecting and interest in photography, in comparison to some of the other museums you visited?
- 01-00:09:05  
Jones: Well, I would say the Museum of Modern Art [NY] probably would be noted for their fine collection and promotion of photography. There's a reason for that. There was a lot of financial backing in the East, which we didn't have here. It took time for it to take hold and for people to have confidence enough to invest in photography works of art. Now it's quite different.

Rigelhaupt: If we stay in that same time period, how close of a connection was there between the museum and the California School of Fine Arts? Because they were both under the auspices of the San Francisco Art Association?

01-00:10:01

Jones: I would say that there was a remote connection. There was never any, say, work from the students or from the school in the museum. They had to earn their part to get in there. We did have some interesting photography shows, and Ruth and I had a number of shows at the San Francisco museum. If you're interested, why, I could talk about that.

Rigelhaupt: Yes, I'm going to get there. I'm going to ask a few more general questions about your impressions of the museum. Do you remember how regularly you went over there to the museum while you were in art school?

01-00:11:00

Jones: Oh, I would say Ruth and I used to go over there about once a week. It was such a pleasure to go there. The museum at that time also had a wonderful film program. They had a variety of interests in art and architecture, even back then.

Rigelhaupt: How many other students were joining you or were also going regularly to the museum? Was it lots?

01-00:11:45

Jones: I have no idea. Although there was a number that did go. I think you can divide people into two parts, those that go to the museums and those that don't. But now it's quite different, with all the hype and fanfare and everything. It's a different situation. It's much, much more costly to have a show, because of insurance and many cost factors.

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember any other events or lectures that took place at the museum that were influential while you were an art student?

01-00:12:44

Jones: Well, I remember a show of Marsden Hartley. I really hadn't seen the calendar, that it would be there. I walked into the Hartley show in a big gallery, and was blown over by his work. The Lane Collection, in later years, was a very wonderful show. There were so many shows I don't recall just the names of them. But I found visiting the museum was quite exhilarating. Necessary for us just to keep in contact with the shows that were there. We had a good relationship with John Humphrey. Although Dr. Morley was a true director, we very seldom had any conversation with her. She was a scholar. But yet I'm sure she was working behind the scenes with Ansel to try and make the possibility of showing more photography at that time.

Rigelhaupt: So if we stayed in the 1940s, do you remember, was the museum showing internationally and nationally known artists? Or was it also playing an active role with artists from the Bay Area?

01-00:14:50

Jones: Oh, they reached out, they always did. At first they were very modest in what they had to show, but very proud of it. They would show a [Henri] Matisse or what have you, but it was very, very limited as to the scope of what they had to show. And mounting big traveling shows, I don't think in the beginning there were very many, if any at all.

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember when you can recall the museum starting to have more of the internationally traveling shows?

01-00:15:34

Jones: I think that was a gradual thing. Probably, as more funds came into the budget they were able to expand. Of course, they were in touch and very conscious of what was happening in the art world. Well, you couldn't compare it to a museum like the Cleveland Museum of Art or the Art Institute in Chicago.

Rigelhaupt: Well, what made Cleveland a more significant body of work?

01-00:16:17

Jones: Well, Cleveland had more money. I remember making a trip up to Cleveland. They mounted a Vincent van Gogh show that completely filled the museum. That's the first time it was shown in the United States. It was shown in New York and then in Cleveland. The attendance was quite amazing. You could go into a gallery of his work and see maybe four or five people. It's just indicative of that time that there wasn't that rush that there is now. The demand, I think, has changed considerably.

Rigelhaupt: Again, staying in the time period when you were an art student, how did you and your fellow students perceive the museum? Did you think of it as important? Inspirational?

01-00:17:37

Jones: That's a mixed thing. Some were there and their channel of interest was mostly photography. Some, many photography students did not have any interest in the other art. It was pretty well channeled. But there were exceptions, also, that did go.

Rigelhaupt: How, again in the forties, when you were an art student, did SFMOMA compare to other museums in the Bay Area?

01-00:18:27

Jones: Well, in modern art, I think they were tops. In the more conventional work, the [California Palace of the] Legion of Honor was very active, very sedate, and very isolated, up where it is now. Very quiet. You could go up there. I don't think there were that many people that would come. Although they did

mount a very interesting show of Lisette Model's at that time. Also in later years, they showed Edward Steichen's "Family of Man" at the [California Palace of the] Legion of Honor. But the scope of what the Museum of Modern Art showed, they reached out and showed architecture, as I have said before, and landscape architecture, and film. And John Humphrey was a very vital person that pursued photography and made his name known among photographers.

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember any exhibitions or events, be it films or lectures, at SFMOMA that had an impact on the subject matter you chose to photograph?

01-00:20:19

Jones: Oh, it never did. I don't think any visits to the museum affected me that way. It was sort of by a chance of osmosis, where I would take all this information and be inspired within me, and then later, maybe five or ten years, it would build up and be sort of my background. But as far as photographing in the style of any notable photographer or anything like that, I could say that I was inspired by a number of photographers, like Steiglitz, Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, principally those three. Then of course, Dorothea Lange's work, also.

Rigelhaupt: Well, again, thinking back to when you were a student, was the museum an important institution to support students and artists working in the Bay Area?

01-00:21:53

Jones: I think they did what they could. From what I understand, I don't think it was a closer support. But I think they were more interested, probably, in the modern aspects. They tried to keep within those boundaries, whatever the requirements were. It would be hard for me to comment on.

Rigelhaupt: I'm not sure exactly when they started, but I know they were going on by the early fifties, were the Art Association annuals. Now, did they ever include photographers in their exhibitions? Or was it mostly painting and sculpture?

01-00:22:47

Jones: It was more of the classical painting and sculpture. Although there were some photographic shows of local work, like, oh, there was one show, "Perceptions" [1954]. And "Perceptions" was written about in *Aperture* magazine. It was quite a big show. Dr. Morley was director at that time. Then about that time, if I remember correctly, there was more activity and interest in photography. Then later, John Humphrey was very generous in supporting a number of shows that we had there. If you care for me, I'll talk about all that stuff.

Rigelhaupt: Please.

01-00:24:18

Jones: Well, one of the early shows, around 1960, I had worked on a project with Dorothea Lange, and it was called "Death of a Valley," and it was

commissioned by *Life* magazine, which did not use it. The rights reverted back to Dorothea and me. *Aperture* decided to run an issue of “Death of a Valley.” Then in recent years, one set of “Death of a Valley” was purchased by a benefactor for the museum collection. The first exhibition collection was in the archive, in special collections in Santa Cruz. Then later on, I was contacted to show some of the “Valley” pictures. That resulted in a historical show in Vacaville, in their historical museum. Over the years, that story has become sort of a classic. It’s repeated and it’s taken on quite a meaning in recent years. We had no idea that it would go this far. That was one of the shows. Another show was “Walnut Grove: Portrait of a Town” [1964]. That was a collaboration with Ruth-Marion Baruch, my wife. We did this documentation of a little river town. And John Humphrey showed that at the museum. It was reviewed by *Artforum*, a glowing review. Then the next issue, the same critic gave a negative review, which was quite startling. But anyway, Walnut Grove, Ruth and I curated the show, designed it, and then also dictated how it should be hung on the wall at that time. “Death of a Valley” was also printed by myself and Dorothea. We hung it on the wall. So you’d call it curating or whatever. Then there was another main show called “The World Around Us” [1962] at the museum. I don’t know whether there’s anything in the museum data on that show or not.

Rigelhaupt: Well, could you say more about that exhibition?

01-00:28:09

Jones:

It cast a wide net of the photographers in the Bay Area. It was, in some ways, considered by some as a response to Steichen’s show that he’d had originally in New York, of “The Family of Man.” There seemed to be always a see-saw of interest and style and purpose among some photographers in the Bay Area and those in New York. It’s always been that way, that West Coast photographers didn’t seem to be as important as those in New York. It might be gradually changing. But that was another big show. It was reviewed in *Aperture*, and some illustrations were in that. Ansel and Edward Weston were also included in that show. There was another show which was interesting, you might like to hear about. Ruth-Marion had done a show on a whole collection of work on Haight-Ashbury. One time we invited John to come over and look at it. He was very upset. He said, “Well, you have made these people look beautiful. They live out of garbage cans. My board of directors would not show this in the museum.” Ruth could not take no for an answer, and she wanted to go over to the [M. H.] de Young [Memorial Museum] and show it to the director there. I said, “Oh, you’re wasting your time.” She went over there and he immediately accepted it for a one-man show. Alfred Frankenstein, the art columnist, art critic for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, stated that it was one of the most important shows of the twentieth century.

Rigelhaupt: Was this series of Haight-Ashbury soon after the Summer of Love in 1967?

01-00:31:42

Jones: Yes. So that goes to show you that one person, they have their own ideas about things. Although John was very friendly, very, very supportive. He had no budget, but he worked terribly hard at the museum. I think later on, there was a little rental gallery that was named after John Humphrey.

Rigelhaupt: Now, in these early years that you're working in the fifties and in the sixties, did photographers have gallery representation, too?

01-00:33:29

Jones: Oh, no. That was unheard of! Oh, yeah! It was *unheard* of! But now there's an auction catalogue from Sotheby's, and the prices are— Well, at about that time, in 1968 or somewhere in the late sixties, I produced a portfolio. It was "Portfolio Number II." John scraped together some money to buy it. It was shown in acquisitions there. I remember it was purchased for \$150. Now it's selling for \$24,000.

Rigelhaupt: So you're saying this portfolio, which you called "Number II"—

01-00:34:45

Jones: Oh, it's original prints.

Rigelhaupt: The portfolio is like a book, yes? The original prints, you said John Humphrey bought for \$150. So those were bought to be collected in part of the collection at SFMOMA?

01-00:35:10

Jones: Yes. It's in their collection.

Rigelhaupt: Now, when you say they're selling for \$24,000—

01-00:35:17

Jones: The portfolios, yes.

Rigelhaupt: Is that common that the museum will—

01-00:35:23

Jones: Oh, the museum had nothing to do with the sales, the value.

Rigelhaupt: Could you explain how the sales worked? I'm confused, in a sense.

01-00:35:34

Jones: Well, when the portfolio was first produced, I had a pre-subscription for the portfolio, of \$135. Very, very few people were interested. After I finished it, it was \$150. Very few people—a few museums bought it—Amon Carter [Museum] has it and the Newhalls purchased one for the bank in Chicago and one for themselves. So over the years, that has appreciated to \$24,000. That's a barometer of how things—Of course, Edward Weston's work, when he was living he was lucky to sell any work at \$15 and \$25.

Rigelhaupt: Just to put on the record real quickly, Ruth-Marion Baruch's exhibition on the Haight at the de Young was October 18 to December 1, in 1967. So just after the Summer of Love, and a lot of young people showing up in San Francisco and the city leaders not necessarily being pleased with that development.

01-00:37:17

Jones: Then right after that, when we were at the museum one time, the director says to Ruth, "Well, what are you going to work on next?" Ruth said, "Oh, I'd like to photograph the Panthers, the Black Panthers. But who would show it?" The director spoke up and said, "We will." That's without seeing one photograph. He took us to a big, huge room. He says, "Well, will this do?" Then I got into the collaboration with Ruth, because I asked her if I could take my camera along one time when I took her to Oakland. She agreed, so at that moment, that afternoon, we decided to collaborate on that. So we worked throughout the summer making pictures. Then we would take stacks of prints into the director to see, prints for the Panthers. Then Ruth and I designed the show and we curated it. I had a small crew that came out to the de Young and we hung it. It was a big blockbuster. Of course, that's about the de Young. But that was a show, very political, that would not have been shown at the Museum of Modern Art. I think perhaps they have more or less shied away from the documentary art photographs, *political*. The directors and the patrons control pretty much what is shown in the museum. So that's okay. That's the way they operate their business.

Rigelhaupt: Now, why do you think the de Young was more willing to take on politically connected shows than SFMOMA?

01-00:40:14

Jones: I think probably, maybe they had a freer, less dominating board. The director was probably pretty interested in that part of photography. Although there was a great respect for Dorothea Lange's work at the Modern Museum. And later on, Sandra Phillips mounted a huge show of Dorothea Lange's work [1994]. So things sort of change over the years. You see things in the museum that you wonder why they're there. At least I do. They're opening up to all different areas. More so than before. There's a lot of things that are happening around us that would not have happened earlier. So there's opening there, which goes hand-in-hand with our culture.

Rigelhaupt: Well, could you say more about what you mean by that? Are there any specific exhibitions that come to mind that reflect that opening up?

01-00:42:02

Jones: Well, I think in art generally, the avant-garde. Quite a bit of the work is pretty far out. Big names. But you see a museum, they're not supposed to just show art, but they're supposed to be in touch with the modern culture, what's going on. A curator might show work that they personally do not care too much about, but it has to be that way. Unless it's a private financed museum, which

has a very narrow window of what they show. I think the Modern Museum is really out there and alive, and know what is going on in the field of art.

Rigelhaupt: Well, if we jump backwards again, in conjunction with your discussion of some of the politics and the way in which your work or Ruth's work had political connections, do you remember how much some of the political settings in the forties were impacting art in the Bay Area? I'm thinking of maybe the controversy over the Rincon Annex murals in 1948. If you remember anything about that.

01-00:44:14

Jones: I knew that that existed. The murals, for that matter, the Diego Rivera mural at the [San Francisco] Art Institute was considered pretty controversial at that time. Diego Rivera, if I remember correctly, the Modern Museum has a very beautiful smaller painting of his in their collection, which is fine. It's quite a handsome thing. Some of the museums now, they do now photography and now art that's almost happening daily. I think it's a great burden to the museums to keep up with it.

Rigelhaupt: I just want to ask you an open-ended question about Dorothea Lange. If you could describe her and her work in the context of the Bay Area. What kind of an impact do you think she had on artists of the Bay Area?

01-00:45:54

Jones: Who is that?

Rigelhaupt: Dorothea Lange.

01-00:45:58

Jones: Well, Dorothea Lange, first of all, she considered her work not art. Although I disagree and I think it was highly artistic. She had a background, her first husband was a painter. Then she became interested in the welfare of the human being, and in her second marriage, she was working with Dr. Paul Taylor. I think she had a revelation when she was a commercial portrait photographer of waking up to the fact of breadlines and people hungry. That brought her interest to the forefront, I think. Then in collaboration with Dr. Paul Taylor, what she did, she photographed the social context. There's always deliberation and arbitration about whether her work fitted in or not. Of course, along came "The Family of Man," Edward Steichen showing that in New York. That changed things, and the social interest probably came by that time. Although Dorothea Lange had worked on very important projects for the—Oh, what was it called? The project with—Oh, what was the name of it?

Rigelhaupt: Is it from her New Deal era?

01-00:48:34

Jones: Yeah, that type of work.

Rigelhaupt: The Farm Security [Administration], is that what you were thinking of, the Farm Security?

01-00:48:39

Jones: I remember a comment that John Humphrey made to me about Dorothea. He had found out and lamented the fact that he would have liked to have collected Dorothea Lange's work. In fact, he would have liked to have had her archive, but it just didn't work out that way. But one thing about John, there was a balance. He liked documentary work and he liked fine classical work like Edward Weston and Ansel and Minor White and so forth. So you had that balance. Then you had Van Deren Coke later on. He was very, very involved in photography. He had written a book, *The Painter and the Photographer*. He had a keen interest in showing work at the museum. Sometimes you would go there and you'd think, well, the museum, that's all they were showing was photography. So there was a revival there, an upsurge with Van Deren.

Rigelhaupt: Could you discuss how the "Death of a Valley" exhibition. Did you approach the museum, or did they approach you and Dorothea?

01-00:51:11

Jones: "Death of a Valley" was first shown in the Oakland historical museum [Oakland Museum of California]. I think John Humphrey at that time was interested in showing it at the Modern museum. I think that's the way that came about.

Rigelhaupt: Going backwards in time a little bit, the 1954 "Perceptions" exhibition which you were a part of that was a large group exhibition, do you know how the artists were chosen to be a part of that?

01-00:51:48

Jones: There was a small committee by, I think, three photographers that decided on that. It cast a wide net at that time. It was quite a large show. I think Dr. Morley was still director at that time.

Rigelhaupt: Then the 1964 exhibition, "Portrait of a Town: Walnut Grove," that you collaborated on with your wife. Did you approach the museum? How did that exhibition—

01-00:52:33

Jones: I think we told John that we had another project that we wanted him to see. At that time he was very generous in allowing us to have the show.

Rigelhaupt: Then jumping forward to 2003, the exhibition you worked on with Sandra Phillips, "Pirkle Jones and the Changing California Landscape." How did that exhibition come to be?

01-00:53:13

Jones: There was a patron. He's [on the] acquisitions committee, David Mahoney. He had seen the second set. Over the years, Merilee Page had talked to him

about acquiring it. After she died, David Mahoney decided to purchase that set for the museum. It was in honor of Merilee Page, and it was a tax incentive for him to get this and hold it, and then present it to the museum. But David wanted it shown, and he wanted me to show the work. So whatever happened behind the scenes, I don't know. But he did get his way, and Sandra Phillips curated it. That's why it was shown.

Rigelhaupt: What was it like working with Sandra Phillips?

01-00:54:59

Jones: Well, I found it difficult. I had a better relationship, I think, with the curators when it was shown in Santa Barbara, my retrospective. Everybody has their own characteristics. It's interesting that you ask that question. What prompted that?

Rigelhaupt: Oh, because part of what the project is trying to document is the relationships that artists and curators have with each other.

01-00:55:54

Jones: Well, I think it's a very, very friendly relationship. I think there's nothing wrong there. But we all have different characteristics. She's a scholar and has written a lot of work and curated the Dorothea Lange show and wrote the book. In the past, I have allowed curators to be curators and not get involved. I think with my retrospective in Santa Barbara, it was highly successful. Two curators worked on it together, Tim Wride and Karen Sinsheimer. It was one of the most beautiful shows I have ever had. It was put together beautifully. I only made, I think, one change in the selection of work for the whole show. It was over a hundred prints. So you get used to working with different people, different temperaments. Although I think Sandra has been very nice to me, there's no problem there. Frankly, I think she's a rather shy person. That's how I would think of Sandra. In later years, I think she's been very, very supportive.

[Begin Audio File 2 10-23-2007.mp3]

Rigelhaupt: If you could say something more about Dr. Morley.

02-00:00:07

Jones: Well, I think to me, Dr. Morley was very focused on her work. I'm sure she just loved her work. But she had a very studious air about her. She was not one to just talk and talk. But I had the feeling that she was an extremely serious person and deeply involved with her work. Of course, some of the other directors, you name some of them and I can mention—

Rigelhaupt: Perfect. How about George Culler? [director 1958-1965] George Culler?

02-00:01:06

Jones: When did he appear?

Rigelhaupt: He served for a few years just after Dr. Morley.

02-00:01:16

Jones: I didn't know him.

Rigelhaupt: What about Jerry Nordland? Jerry Nordland was there from I think '67 to '74 [director 1974-1986].

02-00:01:29

Jones: No.

Rigelhaupt: What about Henry Hopkins?

02-00:01:32

Jones: Yes. Yes. He was a very involved director and very friendly. He had a very close relationship to Van Deren Coke. He loved photography and nurtured it. I think the collection was built when Van Deren was curator, probably more than many other curators. I found him quite congenial. I would say in character, he's probably the opposite of Dr. Morley. She, in my mind, would be the ideal, not typical but the ideal director. Then there was another one there.

Rigelhaupt: Jack Lane [director 1987-1997] served just after Henry Hopkins.

02-00:02:42

Jones: Yes. Well, Jack Lane, I knew that he was there, but I don't remember him too well. In fact, I think he lived in Mill Valley. So there wasn't any association there. And then there was—

Rigelhaupt: Was David Ross director [1998-2001] when you had the exhibition that Sandra Phillips curated?

02-00:03:17

Jones: The present.

Rigelhaupt: Neal Benezra [director 2002—] was the—

02-00:03:19

Jones: Yes, yes. I found him very engaging and very generous. David Mahoney and Sandra and the director, we were all invited to a little dinner when I had my show there.

Rigelhaupt: Now, could you say a little bit about what you thought some of the strengths of Van Deren Coke's service as photography curator were?

02-00:03:58

Jones: I think his principal interest was in photography. He seemed to have quite a bit of interest in curating and getting the show of Alfred Stieglitz. It was beautifully done in the museum. He was able to negotiate and borrow the prints from the National Gallery for that show. So he had seen politicians and

so forth, and laid the groundwork to do that. He was extremely active, and I think he personally added a lot of photography to the collection, and I think a lot of European work.

Rigelhaupt: Other than David Mahoney, who you mentioned, do you remember any other people on the board of trustees that were particularly interested in having the museum collect photography?

02-00:05:18

Jones: No, no.

Rigelhaupt: You mentioned earlier that photographers had a more difficult time obtaining gallery representation. So in light of that, did museums play a different role for photographers than painters or sculptors, who might have been able to have gallery representation?

02-00:05:46

Jones: Oh, I think that was evident. Although photography was very much alive, and the museums were interested in it. But I don't think the times were right for them to show a lot of photography; it just didn't happen. Gradually, it grew and became more important. I think the reason for the interest in photography now is there's a considerable amount of money that people don't know what to do with. Impressionist paintings and so forth are so out of reach that I think a lot of people that are very wealthy have gone to photography to diversify.

Rigelhaupt: Could you say a few words about how some of the exhibitions that you had at SFMOMA, how you think they have impacted your career as a photographer?

02-00:07:14

Jones: Well, that's an unknown. There was considerable interest in these, but—  
[pause] That's a collective thing, and it's very difficult to assess that. Over the years, I guess the longer you live and the more help you have, that's very positive and it helps considerably. I have Jennifer, who comes; she works four days a week. She's also my executor and heading up a little foundation after I'm gone. The house is in the foundation, so it'll be for writers to come here for six months or a year. But it's hard to assess. I think you might consider them good things to put in your resume.

Rigelhaupt: Well, could you describe your perception of SFMOMA as it approaches its seventy-fifth anniversary in 2010?

02-00:09:00

Jones: No, I really, really couldn't. In later years, I was unable to go into the museum and did other things.

Rigelhaupt: Well, if you could imagine where you'd like to see the museum in twenty-five years, at its hundredth anniversary, what kind of work would you like to see it exhibiting, and its role in the community?

02-00:09:27

Jones:

Well, I think one thing, their collection should continue. The photography collection is one of the best in museums. They started early and carefully, and I think it will continue. Although our kinds of art now—performance art and all the others—would present a warehousing problem. How would you keep this? How would you preserve it? So it will entirely change. I think the masterpieces of the past will be highly respected, like the masterpieces of our time are. I think the museum, their goal is probably to show the art world of what's going on now. So it may be entirely different. There may be museums of performance art or—I think it'll go into specializing. I think with our modern technology, say in photography, it's changing drastically. The fact of an image not being stable enough to be kept over many years, like a lot of the photography is—You don't have film for it. The silver image is not practiced very much anymore. It's the digital.

Rigelhaupt:

Well, speaking of photographic images, are there a few that come to mind as amongst your favorites that are part of the collection at SFMOMA?

02-00:12:12

Jones:

Well, I think the Stieglitz collection, the Strand. Oh, there's numbers of photographs.

[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.