

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

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University of California, Berkeley

SFMOMA 75th Anniversary

LORETTA LOWREY
SECA Coordinator, 1988/9-2002

Interview conducted by
Richard Cándida Smith in 2010

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[End of Interview]

Interview 1: January 29, 2010

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Cándida Smith: We like to start with getting a little personal background of each person being interviewed, so we get a sense of where you came from.

01-00:00:22

Lowrey: How far back do you want me to go?

Cándida Smith: Well, where were you born? Where did you grow up? What did your parents do?

01-00:00:34

Lowrey: I grew up in Atlanta, Georgia, spent all my growing up years there, until about eighteen. My father was an aeronautical engineer at Lockheed, which was close by. My mother was at home. Definitely always interested in art. Some of my earliest memories were going to art classes at the High Museum. I went to college at Cornell University, but I didn't cross paths with Janet [Bishop] there. I actually didn't take a lot of art history there, but I sat in on a lot of their art history classes, which I loved. From there, I did graduate work at University of Pennsylvania. I moved out here in 1983.

Cándida Smith: Was there a particular reason why you came out to the Bay Area?

01-00:01:34

Lowrey: My husband at the time found the only job in the world he wanted out here. I was still at Penn, so I was a little bit reluctant to come, but I did. I love it here. I came out here, frankly, kicking and screaming, but I cannot imagine living anywhere else now. It's a fantastic place.

Cándida Smith: You got a job at SFMOMA, right?

01-00:02:04

Lowrey: I started to work at SFMOMA in 1988. I was here as a volunteer, working for the coordinator of the Modern Art Council, who became a very good friend over time. Her name was Jan Cohen. Ann Roth, who was the president of the Modern Art Council at that time, came in one day saying, "SECA's [Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art] looking for a coordinator, and you'd be perfect for that." I said, "I'm not really looking for a part-time job." She said, "But you have to, you have to do this." So I did go and talk to them. Charlene Tilford Tims was the SECA chair at that point. One thing led to another. I started here as the coordinator of SECA, the role that Heather [Holt] has now.

Cándida Smith: This was a part-time, paid position?

01-00:03:04

Lowrey:

Right. Then I also, when I first got here, worked on educational programming. They were between people to handle that, so that was some add-on that I did for a little while, coordinating that, as well.

Cándida Smith: Did the SECA position, your SECA responsibilities ever go full-time?

01-00:03:27

Lowrey:

No, they didn't. I'm not sure what it is now. There was a spell where it may have been full-time, but if I'm not mistaken, it's still part-time.

Cándida Smith: In 1988, you're hired as SECA coordinator. How long did you hold that position?

01-00:03:43

Lowrey:

I did that for a little over four years. I know we worked with a lot of interns to get things together, like the Art Award presentations. At the time, we had other awards. We had media awards, photography, film, video, new technology. That doesn't happen anymore. But every other year, there would be the SECA Art Award and then the media award on off years.

Cándida Smith: So in 1992, 1993, you go on—

01-00:04:18

Lowrey:

I left that position, and right away, went onto the SECA Council. Then in '95, I was asked to be the chairman. I did that for a couple of years, then chaired some of the media awards, as long as those lasted. Since then, I've just been showing up, and that's been a lot of fun, too.

Cándida Smith: So you were a staff person and a member and a leader, all over a period of time. And you're still involved with SECA.

01-00:04:52

Lowrey:

I still am. For the most part, now, I just show up. But it's been twenty-one, twenty-two years, so I've seen it go through a lot of changes.

Cándida Smith: And your responsibilities in the SECA program as the coordinator were?

01-00:05:09

Lowrey:

Really, just to keep everything organized. We would have monthly programs, so contacting the speaker, whoever that was going to be, or putting those programs together. Preparing the Art Award presentation, we would collect slides from 400 or so artists, so getting all of that organized and ready to be presented to the membership. We did end up having interns work on that, at some point. That was what made it possible to do it part-time, because we had volunteers helping out with pieces of it. Then in off years, we would collect films, from maybe

sixty to eighty artists, get all those organized to be shown over a period of three days in a screening room somewhere. Keeping on top of all of the tasks, sending out newsletters, taking reservations for any of the programs that were going on. Working with the council to do their minutes. Just be a liaison, a staff liaison, to the council.

Cándida Smith: I'd like to spend this afternoon talking about how different aspects of SECA's activities have changed over the last two decades-plus. What were the opportunities? When did they happen? What were the constraints at different times? How did those change? I think maybe one of the first areas to start with was the membership in SECA, how that has changed over time. Who got to be a member? What were the criteria? It sounded to me, from the interview with Agnes [Bourne], that when she joined, there was a limited number, a set number of members, and I guess you were elected in when a vacancy happened.

01:00:07:28

Lowrey: As far back as I can remember, it wasn't quite so selective. Right before I became the SECA coordinator, the dues were raised significantly. I think at that time, a number of people dropped out. The bylaws at the time—and I don't know if that's the case now—stated that the limit to membership was 125. I don't think, since the dues went up, that there has been a time when you had to be elected in. When I got to the museum in 1988, it was a very wealthy group of people, a selective group of people, really bright, interested in art. I've always felt like this group is one that was all about a genuine interest in the artists. Even though it was a social group, it wasn't a social climbing group or that kind of thing. That was very much the case in 1988. It was, for the most part, I'd say a lot of fairly wealthy collectors. It was self-selected; there wasn't a competition about getting in.

Cándida Smith: That, from your perspective, has remained constant since—

01:00:08:53

Lowrey: Well, no, the membership has changed a lot. I think as we go through what happened over the years, that'll become clear, why that has all happened. I think there are a number of factors. The dues went up at one point. A number of years later, it became a requirement to be a member of the museum at a certain level. Financially, the stakes were a little bit higher. There were other things that happened with the process of selecting artists for the award, that I think changed the nature of the membership significantly, over time.

Cándida Smith: Has the process of selecting the artists changed during the period that you've been involved?

01:00:09:54

Lowrey:

That has changed very significantly. When I first came, the artists were really selected by the members. In fact, there would be a selection, by the members, of thirty artists that were going to be seen. On the day of a studio visit—Now we get on a bus—we get on two buses, and one bus goes one route and one bus goes the other route. At the time, we just had members bring their cars and everybody would car pool. It was that basic a difference. It's much more organized. This was, again, a group of people who were really interested in seeing what was going on out there in the art world, with emerging artists, with the whole nature of the studio world, the artists' world in the Bay Area. We were all over the place, everywhere from Vallejo to lots of studio visits in Oakland—just really all over the place.

Cándida Smith:

I'm sure all the artists are nervous, for one reason or another; but some artists are more comfortable with talking to groups, and other artists are climbing the walls.

01:00:12:56

Lowrey:

That's very true.

Cándida Smith:

Were there ways of trying to deal with how you looked at work and how you interacted with the artists?

01:00:13:07

Lowrey:

I think one thing that's been consistent through the years is that you have to be very careful to judge the work separately from the presentation. Some artists are very articulate about their work. Some are not, and that doesn't necessarily say anything about the quality of their work.

Cándida Smith:

Would there be a select number of pieces that would be on display and you'd get to look at them and ask questions? Would there be a presentation first?

01:00:13:40

Lowrey:

Again, it's tightened up. At the time, in the early days, or my early days, there would be a person who was in charge of organizing the day. That person would say, "Do you want to say anything?" We've gone through some changes there, about who leads that process. The associate curators go in and ask everybody to gather round, either before they look at the work or after they look at the work, to give the artist a chance to talk about their work. It's more organized, not formal, really, but more structured, in a lot of ways. It had a little more of a kind of helter-skelter feeling to it then, with just a lot of people coming into the studio. The other thing that was happening then was that the artists had their own ideas about all of these people who they were showing their work to, who would be judging their work. They

definitely considered the group to be amateurs. In some cases, people had quite a background, an art history background or some educational training. In some cases, it was all about their taste. It really varied. It's a large group of people, and what they brought to that process varied a lot.

I think the most significant change over the years—and it was a very dramatic change—when we went from the place of SECA members making that choice to curators making that choice. But it definitely was something that needed to happen.

Cándida Smith: What about the process of selecting who's going to get a visit? We could call them the semi-finalists.

01:00:15:50

Lowrey:

The thirty artists who get studio visits. The way that is handled now, and has been for some time, is that the word is put out to art professionals around the Bay Area and to SECA members, asking for recommendations. All the artists who are recommended receive a letter of invitation. Any who want to, send in a set of slides, a statement about their work. Then all of that is organized so that it is viewed over a period of two to three evenings, by the SECA members, by the curators or associate curators who are going to be making the selection. It's a lot of slides. Each artist, I believe, sends up to twelve. I'm not sure exactly what the number is. In some cases, it's been 400 artists, twelve slides. It's a lot of slides to see over a very short period of time.

Cándida Smith: Now, the curators, as I understand, have always been involved in this SECA process.

01:00:17:00

Lowrey:

They have been.

Cándida Smith: So even before they became the official selectors, how important were their opinions in the process?

01:00:17:17

Lowrey:

They always had a voice. It really depended on how persuasive they were. Different curators had different amounts of impact, in terms of swaying the decision. That varied a lot.

Cándida Smith: It sounds like the SECA members were very independent-minded.

01:00:17:41

Lowrey:

Very independent-minded, in many ways. There have been a lot of little shifts that have happened over time, including budget. There was a time when the SECA budget, which was always tightly held by the SECA members, became part of the museum budget. It was like there

was going to be a mutiny. They felt like, these are our funds and we should control them. It's certainly a change that needed to happen, but it didn't happen without a struggle. It's been a very independent group.

Cándida Smith: That also suggests that with each of these struggles, somebody loses and maybe somebody is upset enough to resign?

01-00:18:24

Lowrey: Some of the members, I'd say. That's happened each time. What's happened over time is that the people who are really interested in the work of Bay Area artists and who are really supportive of the museum, which is also an important part of being a special interest group of the museum, have stayed with it. We have a lot of new members, who probably wouldn't have been members back then, that kind of wealthy, you-have-to-be-elected-in group. It's a much more diverse group of people. There's a greater range of ages, of backgrounds. It's a very interesting group of people, who bring a lot of different perspectives to the work. We still have discussions about all of the artist's studios that we visit. Even though the selection is not left to the members anymore, there's plenty of room for dialog among the members.

Cándida Smith: We should talk about the move from a juried competition to curator selection of the winners. Was this an abrupt process, a gradual process? What were the factors involved?

01-00:19:53

Lowrey: There were a number of factors. It all happened, as it turned out, around the time that the move was made to the new museum. From that perspective, it worked out very well. The SECA Art Award—which I think historically, back in its early days, had held a lot of stature—over time, there became a lot of discontent among the artists, “Who were these amateurs who were making decisions about us?” About a year and a half before the move to the new museum happened, some of the artists got together. The executive director of Southern Exposure facilitated that meeting and called us together. They invited a small number of SECA people, some of the SECA Council, and a number of very vocal artists, to get together. Their message was really, “Who are you to judge us? What’s your background? You’re a bunch of amateurs. What do you bring to the table that we should respect your judgment?”

That happened pretty close to the time that Gary Garrels came to the museum as the chief curator and we were moving to the new museum. I’m sure Jack Lane had something to do with it, too. But the decision was just made that that could not continue, that to have the kind of award that they envisioned, moving forward in the new museum, and really being representative of Bay Area work, needed to be juried by

curators. That was a difficult decision. That was another time where we did lose a certain amount of the membership.

Interestingly, the person who was chairing SECA at that point was a woman named Phyllis Kempner. She was a psychologist. It worked out really well. I can remember sitting around Agnes' living room for the council retreat, and having this decision handed to everyone, and then going, "Well, how are we going to handle this with the membership?" Phyllis called a group together, and we met over at the Design Center. It was really a chance to make that announcement and then let everyone just share their feelings, talk about how they responded to that. If I'm not mistaken, there were two of those sessions, where people could come and talk—if they were furious, if they thought it was a good idea, whatever—without reservation, just to be able to kind of talk that through.

Cándida Smith: It sounds like it was a top-down decision, rather than seeking a consensus within the SECA group.

01:00:22:52

Lowrey:

Well, it was something of a top-down decision. There certainly were, at the same time, people who felt that it was really important to make that change. I felt that it was really important to make that change. I felt that there was no future for the Art Award if the artists' feeling was that this was not something they wanted to be involved with. There was a joke at some point. I think it was Christopher Brown who said, "The SECA Art Award is the kiss of death." I think it's gone through its peaks and its valleys. Certainly, in its very early days, I think it had a lot of stature. Over time, probably some decisions were made that were not the best decisions, and so it didn't always have the best reputation.

Cándida Smith: From your perspective, were there significant distinctions between what the members seemed to be preferring and what the curators might have wanted to select?

01:00:23:57

Lowrey:

I think that depended on the curator. That changed with some frequency, over time. Some curators were able to communicate their vision and the need not only for keeping the art at a certain quality level, from their perspective, but also thinking through the mix, in the way that a curator might think to put a show together. But someone who is going, "That would look nice in my living room," is just not thinking in the same way. Sometimes, everybody left happy; sometimes everybody didn't leave happy. We did have one year—and it contributed to all of this—and was the last show at the old museum. It was not a good thing. That was a vote that had been pushed through

by some of the members. The artist [Toi Hoang], unfortunately, was probably not ready to have a show of that stature. He didn't get good reviews. It wasn't good for him, and it wasn't good for SECA. That was before Gary was here, but that was just reinforcement that something really needed to change. At the opening of that show, I'd say maybe at most, there were 200 people. By contrast, after we changed, we went to a curator-juried show, I'd say for the following show, that was the first one here, there were least a thousand people in attendance. So the attitude among the artists really shifted when that change was made.

Cándida Smith: How did the relationship between the members and the curators shift? The curators are going to make the decision. What has become the role for SECA members, then?

01:00:26:19

Lowrey: It has worked itself out beautifully. It was a little touch and go at first, to get that dynamic worked out. At first, there was a vote taken by SECA members, and that was factored into the decision. If there were two curators, the SECA vote was factored in. That's not the case anymore. It really didn't need to be. It was a transitional thing. Every time we start a selection cycle, the curators talk about the value of conversation with the SECA members and how they value the memberships' input. I think they really do listen; they may not agree. There are a range of opinions among the membership, too. You might get two members who see things in entirely different ways. That's part of the beauty of the process. You hear people thinking of things that you would never have thought of yourself.

Cándida Smith: It strikes me just by definition, when you're doing a program like this with emergent artists or emergent, about to become mature artists that there would have to be, in retrospect, less strong choices than otherwise, no matter *who's* making the selection.

01:00:27:55

Lowrey: Well, that's right. I actually think it's a good thing that more artists are included now. What you get, even if you don't get these are *the best* artists, is exposure to trends in the Bay Area, what's happening in the Bay Area. You see things change every two years, even among the slides of the artists. You'll see some years that there are lots of very intimate paintings, some years when there are very few paintings and it's all about installation. You get kind of a survey. Whether it's the best of the best, I don't know. I think good things come out of it for artists who are not selected. Often, someone who is passed up for the award itself will end up with a show at the Dia Foundation or other exposure that can be useful. Hopefully, that's the case, because they certainly do put up with a lot, having two groups of thirty to forty

people stomping through their studio on a Saturday morning. Hopefully, there's something good for them in it, too.

Cándida Smith: How much background information was provided the SECA membership on the artists selected for studio visits? How much did, and up to this time, do you all know about the people whose work you're going to go see?

01:00:29:36

Lowrey: I'd say again, that varies some. Every artist turns in an artist's statement. So that is made available to everyone the nights that the slides are being shown. On the day of the studio visits, the artist statements are included with the schedule. That information is there, as a minimum. A lot of members are very active in getting out and seeing shows that are happening around the Bay Area. They may also have some knowledge of the history of this artist, where they've shown, where their MFA is from, that kind of thing. Certainly, the curators are very good about getting out to see gallery shows and shows at artist-run spaces, so that they tend to go into a studio visit having a good bit of knowledge and understanding of the work.

Cándida Smith: What about protocols for the visits?

01:00:30:44

Lowrey: No touching.

Cándida Smith: Just like in a museum?

01:00:30:48

Lowrey: It's true. It's actually interesting to watch how difficult that is sometimes, because you get into some studios where they just have these yummy, tactile objects, and people can hardly keep their hands off them. In fact, you find people sneaking over to touch. No asking, in the studio visit, about purchasing. There are always people who are interested in collecting, on the visits. Instead of asking the artist or speaking about that that day, you call whoever represents them. Someone here can tell you who that is, if you don't happen to know.

Cándida Smith: Were these rules that developed within the group by itself, or did the museum say, hey, this would be a nicer way to handle this thing?

01:00:31:42

Lowrey: I think they go back pretty far. The shopping trip kind of thing is certainly a formal request. That request is made at the beginning of every day, by the curators. There may have been times when it was a little less formalized. I think the main thing is to be respectful. People certainly do talk, because there is a social aspect. I think for the most

part, people understand they're really there to look at the work, to visit with the artist, to hear what the artist has to say.

Cándida Smith: To what degree are the artists selected, say, already represented in the collections of one or more of the SECA members?

01:00:32:31

Lowrey: I think that varies a lot. For most people, I think this is more a day of discovery. Some SECA members have edgier collections than others, but I think this is more about finding new work and finding new things of interest.

Cándida Smith: What about lobbying by galleries or artist's representatives? How did you handle that? How *have* you handled that?

01:00:33:04

Lowrey: There was a time, galleries were not allowed to be members. The idea was that they *would* lobby for their artists, and that that was not going to be allowed. So after the Art Award selection process changed and we moved to the new museum, we did go out and talk to the gallery association, and to gallery owners specifically, and say, we'd like for you to participate; we'd like for you to be a part of this process. There are a number of galleries that are members now. They have the same ability as any member to have a conversation about their artists. Frankly, there aren't a lot of them that show up for the studio visits. But it hasn't turned out to be a problem in having them onboard, in terms of their support. Their ability to recommend artists, I think, has by far outweighed any reason to exclude them from the process. It's just made it more of a community-wide program, rather than an insular group of members who hold this thing tightly to their chest.

Cándida Smith: Are there any big debates over the selection, that you've observed in the last twenty-two years, that have stuck in your mind? Either where you agreed with the outcome or didn't agree, a debate or argument, if you will, within the group, that was particularly striking?

01:00:34:56

Lowrey: Interestingly, Toi Hoang—I remember being so convinced that he was not the right one, but I frankly can't remember who I thought the right one was. That was one that does stand out. There was a big split. If I remember that right, it was pretty close to half and half. Just having one artist was unusual. That one was a difficult one, for a lot of reasons. It was a real turning point. In the end, it turned out to be very positive. I don't know what has become of him, and I hope his career is doing well somewhere. For SECA, it was a necessary part of the process that took us where we are today.

Cándida Smith: If you could, talk a little bit about some of your favorite SECA exhibits, the exhibits that have stuck in your heart as being really wonderful experiences for you.

01:00:36:52

Lowrey: My favorite one, by far, happened to be the year that I was chairing. It was Barry McGee, D-L Alvarez, and Anne Appleby. Three different perspectives that were so distinctly different, but they came together in a way that just sang. I remember, as that show came together, John Caldwell, a previous curator who passed away, talking about how you put a show together. So yes, you've got these three favored artists, but what does that look like when it comes together into a show? That show just really worked well. Barry McGee, was new, he was fresh. This was our first year in the museum. The exhibition was on the second-story landing. He did something across the whole wall, as you come up onto that landing. It was just magnificent. Then when you went around the corner, there was this little installation he did of small pieces, which was kind of tucked around a corner. Then Anne Appleby's work is so elegant, so calm, still and elegant. D-L Alvarez was working with materials like paper, inexpensive materials—cut-outs, paint-by-number kinds of drawings. Not that he painted them. They were wonderful. It was just a wonderful mix. So by far, that one just really stood out for me. That would have been 1996.

Cándida Smith: The second year in the new building.

01:00:39:01

Lowrey: Right. The first year we had an Art Award in the new building.

Cándida Smith: How has having been a SECA coordinator and then a SECA member and leader changed the way you look at contemporary art? If it has.

01:00:39:22

Lowrey: Oh, it opens doors all the time. There's just no way that I would have otherwise had the kind of access to Bay Area work that I've had being a part of this group. That's everything from the studio visits to programs at galleries, visits to people's homes to see their collections, various speakers. It's been an ongoing education. It's a wonderfully educational program, but visually stimulating. Smart people, for the most part, are members, so a lot of interesting conversation among people about their tastes, about what's happening in the Bay Area. I do think over time, the quality of work that we've seen has gotten better and better and better. There's a lot of speculation as to why that is. Maybe with CCA [California College of the Arts] here, along with the Art Institute, people are coming and then staying here. It seems like the quality continues to get better and better, and the choices get to be more and more difficult. That's not to say that the shows are better than the ones that happened years ago, but we are seeing a wider range

of things. The exhibitions are representative of a wider range of mediums.

Cándida Smith: Is there art that you now appreciate that maybe ten years ago or twenty-two years ago, you would have said, I don't understand it or, I just don't like it?

01:00:41:12

Lowrey: One of the statements I've heard through the years is, if you love it or you hate it, you've got to pay attention. When I encounter something that really upsets me in some way, I definitely force myself to be with it and try to get a handle on what that's all about. I don't know how much focus there's been on the media program that SECA did for a number of years. That was mostly during the time when Bob Riley was here, and it ended after that, partly for budget reasons and partly because I'm not sure there was a media curator to champion it after that. In terms of the things that have really stood out, those awards, because of the way they were structured, were amazing learning experiences. We might have had sixty films to watch. I remember we went to Dolby Labs, for one of them, in a little screening room. We started on Saturday morning, spent the entire day, until around seven o'clock on Saturday, the entire day until around five o'clock on Sunday, watching films. Bob Riley would invite two other guest curators to jury that with him. Every time a film was finished, they would comment on it. After two full days of this, it was what you could have learned in a semester's worth of a course. A wonderful education. Then those would be shown in the media galleries or in the theater, depending on exactly what it was. Those were wonderful shows. I'm sorry that that has not continued.

Cándida Smith: When I interviewed Aaron Betsky, he mentioned that he did, I think, one SECA Award for design. Do you remember that?

01:00:43:33

Lowrey: I don't remember that. I don't remember that. It sounds fascinating.

Cándida Smith: I was wondering if it would be the core SECA group. Or would this have been the people in SECA who are particularly interested in architecture and design?

01:00:43:54

Lowrey: There was a lot of overlap. Especially when Aaron was here, because he was one of those very dynamic, charismatic people. Architecture and Design Forum grew considerably while he was here. There were a lot of people who were members of SECA who were also members of A&D.

Cándida Smith: I want to talk a little bit about the relationship with the curators. It seems at some point, the relationship shifted more to the associate curators. Do you remember when that happened and what the reasoning for that was?

01:00:44:35

Lowrey: That has happened fairly recently. When Gary was here, he was very much a part of it, he and Janet Bishop. Then when he left, Janet continued it. Then there was Tara McDowell] and Janet, a curator and associate curator. I think Janet had been a part of the process for so many years that she felt that there needed to be some fresh viewpoints, so that change happened with the last Art Award.

Cándida Smith: When you started in '88, Graham Beal was still the senior curator.

01:00:45:32

Lowrey: That's right. I don't think I went through an Art Award process with Graham. He had certainly worked with them before, but he left very soon after I got here and went off to—is it Omaha, where he went?

Cándida Smith: Yes, that was the first place he went.

01:00:46:00

Lowrey: So the first Art Award that I went through was with John Caldwell.

Cándida Smith: So you worked with John Caldwell, Gary Garrels, Madeleine Grynsztejn?

01:00:46:10

Lowrey: Madeleine has not been a part of it. Janet has been carrying the torch since Gary left. Now that Gary's back, I'm not sure what the future holds there.

Cándida Smith: So basically, three different curators. I wonder how you view curatorial style, curatorial preferences, aside from the fact that they now, since '96, ultimately make the choice. But how you view their personal styles and their aesthetic philosophies shaping how the SECA process works.

01:00:46:50

Lowrey: They all are very thoughtful in their approach. They have different styles. At the time that John Caldwell was working on the Art Award, SECA members voted. He was pretty persuasive. He was able to really put things in terms that I think people learned from and understood. He took on the role of educating this group from a lot of different perspectives. It's interesting to think of him in the local context, because he had such an international perspective on things. I know he loved Miami. He was very thoughtful and very compelling in his thoughts about the artists. For whatever reason, I think of John—and

maybe this is just in hindsight, because of his early death—but I think of some of the walkthroughs that he did with us and his emphasis on elegiac works. He was always fascinated by elegiac works. I think of him from his international perspective and that elegiac focus.

Gary came in with a lot of enthusiasm. I just think of Gary as being enthusiastic and so appreciative of the way different artists were working. Very curious, very inquisitive, asking very insightful questions. Definitely getting the membership to think in ways that they might not have thought on their own. Maybe because he went on to [NY] MoMA's drawing program, I think of his interest in drawing and certain things that would get him even more excited.

Janet, I think of as such a thoughtful person and very sensitive. A lot of the work that she seemed to like was, it seemed, "sensitive" is the word that comes to mind. Really noticing a lot of subtleties. Not so much a specific style that she preferred, but the details of whatever style the artist was working in.

Cándida Smith: Well, of course, when Jack Lane becomes director, there's a major turn in the nature of this institution. For some, for many, it was viewed as a turn away from the local art community. An effort to really focus on building the international profile of the institution. There *were* a lot of hurt feelings, not only among artists, but also among some collectors. But SECA remained this group whose primary focus is the local art community. I wonder how you all negotiated that tension—which is, I think, a tension in many institutions—between your responsibilities to the local community and your responsibilities to a larger global perspective of what a museum like this can do.

01:00:51:17

Lowrey:

Some of the years of the most tension were under Jack. That was probably the time when I think of the group being the feistiest. At times, maybe questioning how the museum viewed the group. There was definitely some tension there. At the same time, there was a lot of excitement about the new building, the new perspective. I loved listening to Gary talk about buying a [Mark] Rothko at auction and how he had never had that much money at his disposal before. Phyllis Wattis was sitting next to him saying, "Okay, you can go up." Those were exciting stories, too, to see the museum, its whole context growing. It was probably bittersweet. There was the tension, but maybe those were just growing pains to an institution that has more significance. Certainly, that plays out in a positive way for the artists now. The SECA Art Award now has a stature among the art community that is partly about SFMOMA having a different stature than it did when we were back over the Herbst Theater. In spite of the growing pains, I think it all worked together very well.

Cándida Smith: To what degree were you, as a group, interested in balancing different types of art, different approaches to art? Maybe also trying to respond to demands that the museum be more open to artists of color, women artists, gay and lesbian artists. As you know, there's a lot of criticism of the museum for being maybe too purist in its perspective.

01-00:53:27

Lowrey: I, frankly, don't recall discussions specifically about gender or ethnicity or persuasion or any of that. I think the kind of debates that have happened have been more around the way art mediums have merged. There was a year when [we chose] Will Rogan, a photographer. "But we can't have photography in the SECA Art Award!" "But this is more than just photography!" There were those tensions. Amy Franceschini, who was an award winner probably four to six years ago. How does her work relate to this building? How does it relate to a gallery? This is something that goes way beyond the walls of this building or any other building. The discussions have been more around breaking down those kinds of barriers. If this group is not willing to carry the torch to have those boundaries broken down, then will that happen here? It's been more around that. I'm sure that it hasn't been totally blind to the characteristics of the individual artists, but that hasn't been predominant in any of the jurying processes.

Cándida Smith: It sounds like the period under Jack Lane was the most contentious in SECA. How did things change after Jack left? Do you see some kind of calming down of the relationship, a settling into a better understanding between the administration and SECA?

01-00:55:30

Lowrey: Well, to some extent. I don't know how much of that is about the trait of the director, and how much is just the way a transition goes. Being in development myself, I understand the need to make SECA a part of the development effort, make sure everyone is a member of this museum, that the dues are set at a level that it really supports the museum, that SECA contributes—or you have an option, anyway, as a SECA member—to acquisitions. All of those things are very different from this member group that felt they were part of a whole, but separate, too, to becoming incorporated into the way this whole museum works. I'm just not sure how much of it is about the directors themselves and that relationship. I'd say Neal [Benezra] has been less of a presence than either Jack [Lane] or David [Ross], at a lot of the things, at, say, the member events for SECA. Maybe that's just as well. I can't say that the relationship with David Ross was all that smooth, either. People had a lot of different feelings about him, as I'm sure you know.

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Cándida Smith: Did SECA have— well, you had an office, I guess. Or maybe you had a desk somewhere.

02-00:00:11

Lowrey: Actually, for a while, I presented myself as the homeless person of the museum. There was a time when things were moving around in the old building, probably a period of maybe a month, when I didn't have a desk. The chairman of the board at that time was Sandra Hobson. I was just sitting in the hall working at one point, and she said, "What are you doing here?" I said, "I don't have a place right now." She took care of that pretty quickly.

Cándida Smith: I do know, at least based on what Agnes [Bourne] said, that from her perspective, the shift from the education department to development was maybe *the* most contentious transformation. Even more so—much more so, from her perspective—than the move from jury- to curator-selected shows.

02-00:01:14

Lowrey: It was, it was. I just happen to know that that is a difficult process anywhere. It was difficult to be viewing yourself as this semi-separate entity, and then all the requirements that started to come down. There was a time when all the auxiliary coordinators and chairs would get together with development to try to coordinate that whole effort. There were seven auxiliaries at the time. I think there are fewer now. People were stepping on each other's toes out there. It probably did need some oversight. It probably did need someone to look at the whole thing and say, so-and-so's already talking to them; this activity's already been done by so-and-so. Especially when it had to do with soliciting people. I think that was particularly difficult for the Modern Art Council, because so much of what they did was fund raising. There was a lot of conflict, apparently, between who they were planning to approach and who the museum was planning to approach. It had the feeling of, this is ours and you can have that. I do think that was difficult. That was a time when we did lose people. To not only have to be a member, but at this level that made it considerably more expensive to be a part of SECA.

Cándida Smith: So it wasn't being under development per se, it was all that that meant in terms of membership?

02-00:03:09

Lowrey: It affected every person in specific ways.

Cándida Smith: I understand at around the turn of the millennium, that there was an aborted effort to rename SECA?

02-00:03:24

Lowrey: There was. It was called In Site. It never took. There were other groups out there with similar names.

Cándida Smith: Who wanted to rename it?

02-00:03:44

Lowrey: I actually don't remember how that all came about. But Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art does sound a little antiquated. It was an attempt to be more modern.

One thing that I wanted to go back to, because this is oral history, going back even before. I was interested in looking at some materials that I had that said SECA was founded in 1961. I sat in on a meeting of a number of members of the original Women's Board, back when we were at the old museum. Mary Keesling was there, Phoebe Galgiani, I believe Phyllis Wattis was there. Mary Keesling got everybody together. She wanted to have a chance to get on tape, their recollections of the museum, while they were all still able. I gave this tape to Heather. I didn't listen to the whole tape when I recently found it, but my recollection of that was Phoebe Galgiani saying that SECA was a group that the Women's Board dreamed up because they were so involved with the museum that they wanted their husbands to also be involved. It was originally a men's group that they put together, and then Phoebe was the first female member because they needed a secretary. They remembered this group starting back in the fifties, at some point. I was fascinated with that, because I thought it was such an unlikely beginning. Then to change in the many ways that it has since then. It's so far from that now. I do think In Site was about sounding more modern than Society for the Encouragement of Modern Art.

Cándida Smith: Did that come from the SECA membership or from the development office? Or from leadership?

02-00:06:03

Lowrey: I believe it was leadership. I believe it was a council decision, that this might reflect the kinds of changes that were happening on a bigger scale. After we were in this museum, the stature was picking up.

Cándida Smith: What has been the relationship of SECA during your tenure, to the museum trustees? I gather sort of initially, there wasn't that much overlap, but now probably there's considerably more overlap.

02-00:06:37

Lowrey: That's another thing that's gone through different phases. The person who chaired SECA after me was a woman named Cheryl Riley. I adored her. She told you whatever she was thinking, and she was

pretty aggressive, in a very fun way. We interacted a lot with the trustees when I was chair, because we were redefining ourselves. We went through a process of looking at what we thought we were, what the trustees or the museum community thought we were, and what the bigger community thought we were, because it seemed like an important time to just take that assessment, to come up with a five-year plan. For the most part, then, they served as advisors. We would talk to them and say, "How do you view us?" I know there was one time where Elaine McKeon was very clear in saying, "I don't think you should be a fund-raising group. That's not what this group is about. We have fund-raising groups, and that's not what you all need to do." Cheryl was really good about saying to the trustees, "You need to be members of SECA." I think for a number of years, from the time that she chaired and then for a number of years after, there was a great deal of trustee involvement. I don't think there's so much right now.

Cándida Smith: And SECA members have moved onto the board? Or not so regularly?

02-00:08:21

Lowrey: I would say not so regularly. I'm not sure I know the full board right now, but I don't think of too many who have made that transition.

Cándida Smith: Did the dot-com boom affect SECA and its activities, its resources?

02-00:08:38

Lowrey: No, not really. The last media award we did was in new technology. I think that was really looking at the creative aspect of the dot-com boom and what might lie ahead. I don't think it really changed the resources. The resources are pretty straightforward. It's a membership-based group. There have definitely been years when there were fewer members, and then other times when it's really grown. Every time we've been through one of these difficult times, the group takes a hit and it gets a little bit smaller, and then expands again. I've seen enough of those things happen that I don't think of them specifically about dot-com or anything else.

Cándida Smith: The cycle. What about the work that came into SFMOMA collections as a result of SECA, the SECA acquisitions? How has that been built into the program? Has that changed?

02-00:09:56

Lowrey: There was a fund that was set up many years ago in honor of Robert Huston, a SECA chair who passed away at an early age, to acquire works by winners of the Art Award. I remember that it was rare that there was enough in that fund to be able to fully purchase a work. Well, especially once it started expanding to three artists. You really just couldn't get representation of all those artists. So separate funds were collected, and that is still an option for SECA members. There's an

appeal that goes out every year, asking for contributions to that. Some people do, some people don't. Some years it's been more aggressive than others. Probably six to eight years ago, they started a program to introduce everyone to a wish list with a presentation to SECA members saying, "Here are ten artists whose work we'd like to acquire."

Cándida Smith: The curators would develop these?

02-00:11:33

Lowrey: The curators would develop the list and show that to SECA members. Whether you're participating in the acquisitions or not, you have the benefit of seeing what they are looking for for the collection. It's generally not SECA Award winners; it's generally some local, some national, some international artists. That's been another educational component that's been very useful. I don't know so much about what specifically has been acquired from the Art Award recently. I was really thrilled to come, over the holidays, to the seventy-fifth anniversary show and see the SECA room. That Barry McGee is just fantastic.

Cándida Smith: SECA is operating in a larger environment. How do you view what SECA does in relationship to, say what other art-collecting groups, art-exhibiting groups are doing in the Bay Area? Is there some parallelism between what SECA might be doing and, say what Yerba Buena [Center for the Arts] is doing, or San José [Museum of Art] or some of Oakland's [Oakland Museum of California] programs?

02-00:13:10

Lowrey: I am not aware of any program in the Bay Area that's really like SECA. At the Oakland Museum there are guilds, and they sometimes visit studios or they take trips. There may be some that I'm not aware of, but I don't know of anything that has the kind of scope and breadth and behind-the-scenes access that SECA does, and that is so focused on work in the Bay Area. So I think it's really exceptional, in that way, extraordinary. If somebody conceived of something like this today, I think it would be very difficult to get it off the ground. It's just some mix of history and coincidence that has brought it to where it is now. I do think at this museum, SECA's current role is partly defined, as we were talking about earlier, by the national perspective and international perspective of the museum itself. There is a need for a community liaison. There's a need for some attention to be given to the community here. This is a way for that to happen that I think works well. Certainly, for the curators, because they aren't necessarily going on an individual visit to see an artist. It's more comfortable, in some ways, to be there visiting with this whole group for the first time, than it would be if it was a one-on-one visit.

Cándida Smith: You have mentioned some of the people who've been involved in SECA, but I wondered if there were any people you felt whose contribution over the last twenty years was so important that they ought to be acknowledged as an individual for whatever effort they did to sustain the group in hard times or grow the group when the opportunities came.

02-00:15:30

Lowrey: I'd say all of the curators, because they have been very closely involved. They've probably taken the brunt of a lot of the mixed feelings. Anyone who has chaired SECA—and there have been more of those people than I could say—have taken on a big job. Agnes, as I'm sure you know, chaired it twice. I remember thinking when she took that on the second time, that just that level of commitment is really exemplary.

Cándida Smith: It's a one-year chair or a two-year chair?

02-00:16:03

Lowrey: It's two-year. The coordinators do an amazing job of holding it all together, keeping people happy, giving it a feeling that it is kind of a tight-knit family group, rather than just a museum affiliate—which I think can feel very dry and separate. I think Heather's done a great job of making everybody feel really comfortable. There are many people who have been members over a period of years. We got to a point, I'd say within the last five and ten years, a huge number of those people who were members back when I first started, started to pass away or move on. It has been sad to see that transition happen, because some of those people contributed so much. The profile keeps changing, and the individual members keep changing. It's been a stream of involvement. I think every person really contributes a lot.

[End of Interview]

Richard Cándida Smith is professor of history at the University of California, Berkeley, where he has directed the Regional Oral History Office since 2001. He is the author of *Utopia and Dissent: Art, Poetry, and Politics in California*; *Mallarmé's Children: Symbolism and the Renewal of Experience*; and *Claiming Modern Culture: Artists and Their Publics in California*. He is the editor of *Art and the Performance of Memory: Sounds and Gestures of Recollection*; and *Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Feminist as Thinker: A Reader in Documents and Essays*.