

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

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

SFMOMA 75th Anniversary

ELAINE MCKEON

SFMOMA Board of Trustees, 1986-present (2009)
President, 1989-1994
Chair, 1995-2004
Chairman Emeriti

[Portions of this transcript have been sealed by SFMOMA until January 1, 2031]

Interviews conducted by
Elizabeth Castle and Lisa Rubens
in 2006-2007

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 Elaine McKeon, dated April 29, 2008.. The manuscript is thereby made available for research purposes. Portions of this transcript have been sealed by SFMOMA until January 1, 2031. 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 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 75th Anniversary, “Elaine McKeon,” conducted by Elizabeth Castle and Lisa Rubens, 2006-2007, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; © San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2008.

Discursive Table of Contents—Elaine McKeon

Interview #1: March 2, 2006

Audio File 1	1
Initial interest in modern art—arrival at museum with daughter to be introduced to Mrs. Hass—initial work with the board—working relationship with Brooks Walker—capital campaign—finding an architect and constructing the new building—thoughts on location and redevelopment of South of Market—working relationships of the board members—Jack Lane’s role in design of new facility—description of the groundbreaking ceremony—feelings upon the opening of the new museum—post-opening celebrations—description of her retirement party—comparing the responsibilities of various museum leaders—becoming chairman of the board—goals for tenure as chair—role of Phyllis Wattis in the development of the collection—description of collection and opinion on strengths—description of attending auctions with Wattis.	

Audio File 2	16
--------------	----

Defining modern and contemporary art—Museum’s strategy to purchase contemporary art while acquire donations of modern art—description of controversy surrounding Jeff Koons and the decision making process in demarcating the exhibition—controversy in art more generally—appreciating the efforts of the staff and board—selecting new members for the board of trustees—providing recognition to those that deserve it—more on working to make the board of trustees younger—visions for the 75 th anniversary in 2010 and beyond—discussion of what SF MOMA has done for the city of San Francisco and vice-versa—defining the SF MOMA’s role in her life.	
--	--

Interview #2: August 27, 2007

Audio File 3	23
Dynamics of the board—Jack Lane’s tenure—Acquisitions with the support of Phyllis Wattis—Hiring David Resnikow—And David Ross—Museum finances—The search for a new director, the hiring of Neal Benezra—Dot-com wealth and the museum—Eileen Michael joins the board—The importance of the committee on trustees—Family connections on the board—The dynamics of a large, effective board, and the extraordinary commitment of those who serve—Looking forward.	

Interview #1: March 2, 2006

Interviewed by Elizabeth Castle
 [Begin Audio File 1]

01-00:01:29

Castle: If we could begin, Elaine, could you share with me your interest in modern art. Why modern art? How did you come to get involved?

01-00:01:43

McKeon: Well, I started, really, collecting later in my life than earlier. Actually, I decided I really liked it. I thought it went well in the house. I wasn't too interested in any other kind. But one of the most important things, it was affordable. You could buy art, modern art, where you really can't buy some of the other, impressionists or things like that. The more I got involved in it, the more I liked it. Now I really, really like it.

Castle: So your connection to the museum grew out of your own collecting of what was—?

01-00:02:28

McKeon: Well, I hadn't collected that much before I became involved with the museum. I was actually involved with the Fine Arts Museum as a volunteer. My daughter [Eileen Michael] was involved in SFMOMA before I was. She knew how much I liked contemporary art and modern art, so she suggested that I come over to an exhibition and meet some of the people there, and that's what I did. And that started me.

Castle: I don't know if these memories come back to you easily, but some of the first pieces you may have collected, what were those?

McKeon: Helen Frankenthaler. I'm trying to think. That's all I can remember.

Castle: Part of what drew you to it was its accessibility?

01-00:03:24

McKeon: Affordability, accessibility. And I just *liked* it. I really did. When I went to SFMOMA and saw their collection and what they did, the more I looked at it and got immersed in it, I really, really liked it. So I do now, that's my life. The museum and the art.

Castle: So tell me about your earliest beginnings with the museum. You say your daughter brought you into it?

01-00:03:55

McKeon: I went over to see—I'll forget it; it's indelible in my mind. She brought me to see an exhibition at the old museum. It was in the rotunda. She wanted me to meet Evie Haas, at that time, who was the president of the museum. Eileen brought her over, Evie came over to me. She made such an impression on me. I tell this to a lot of people. She looked straight at you, she talked to you, her

eyes weren't wandering, she was interested in what I was doing, why I was there. She welcomed me. She was just a wonderful advocate for the museum. After I met with her and talked with her and saw the exhibition, Eileen said, "This is where you belong." I said, "You're right. This is exactly it." So I became a member. Before long, I was asked to go on the board.

01-00:04:55

Castle: So this first encounter, it was the people, as well as the art that really hooked you?

McKeon: Oh, yes.

Castle: Was it her passion, also, for the art?

01-00:05:02

McKeon: Well, yes, but if you knew Evie, she was just a wonderful, wonderful woman. She was so welcoming, so down to earth, and so nice. She just didn't say, "Oh, hello, how are you?" and walk away. She wanted to find out about you. She was a marvelous ambassador for the museum. A down-to-earth, humble woman. She's an amazing woman. We became great friends, through the years *very* close friends. I'm still close to her today.

Castle: Do you recall that first time you met her, what exhibit you were there to see?

01-00:05:50

McKeon: No, I can't. I thought about that, and I really can't remember what exhibit it was.

Castle: It's interesting because it really emphasizes the fact that part of what hooked you into this world was the power of the people.

01-00:06:04

McKeon: Yes. she made such an impression on me.

Castle: She was the president at the time?

01-00:06:613

McKeon: She was president, yes. I think Brooks [Walker, Jr.], at that time, was chairman. And so then eventually, I went on the board. Before long, in '89, Brooks asked me too be president under him.

Castle: Let's trace this out, just so I get the dates correctly. It's early eighties, when you first meet Evie?

01-00:06:46

McKeon: About '82, '83, that I started. Maybe '84, but I joined the museum [board] in '86. I became president in '89.

Castle: That's a pretty quick ascension.

McKeon: It was. They needed someone, I guess, but Brooks didn't know me very well. He took a chance, and then we worked together for so long that I had a great relationship with him. When I became chairman [1995], I said, "I'll do it, only if I can talk to you every day." We were talking every morning of our life. He was extraordinarily supportive of me when I became chairman. It was a very close relationship.

01-00:07:42
Castle: It is an interesting relationship, when you think about it, because there's not a lot of parallels. He's not your business partner, he's not someone who's paid to have a relationship with you. He's not romantically involved, he's just—

01-00:07:53
McKeon: No! None of those things! [they laugh] Believe me!

Castle: But yet, you had such a close—

McKeon: For some reason, it worked so well, the two of us.

Castle: Do you have any interpretation as to what elements worked so well in your relationship?

01-00:08:10
McKeon: Well, you know, we both thought along the same lines. We were both workers. I think that's it. He was able to give me work that I could do for him, to make his job easier. Because at the time, there was all this talk about a capital campaign and starting a new museum, and that took *all* of his time. I just picked up the rest, and we really had a good partnership.

Castle: So you recognized in each other your strengths.

01-00:08:40
McKeon: I think so, yes.

Castle: There wasn't judgment on certain tasks being less important or more important.

01-00:08:45
McKeon: Oh, no. It wasn't like that at all.

Castle: Well, let's build our way into talking about the new building, because obviously, that's in some ways, what announces SFMOMA as on the international scene, if you will.

McKeon: Yes, yes.

Castle: So you move from being introduced to becoming a member and a trustee, and then the board president. Can you tell me, in your role as trustee, what did that entail for you? What does it mean to be a trustee of a museum?

- 01-00:09:19
 McKeon: I've always felt it meant doing committee work, just not being passive. Work. And support the museum as well as you can financially. And do any job that's asked, required of you. It's the same today.
- Castle: Is it important that, as trustees, you get along?
- 01-00:09:47
 McKeon: Oh, absolutely. We have a board that's a pretty high-powered board. A lot of us think it's like a family. We do get along. You could disagree with someone, but the main thing is you have to hear them out. Maybe they can change your mind, or maybe you can change theirs. But that's all right. There's disagreements in families. All in all, they're all working for the same thing. At that time, the most exciting thing was to think about building a new museum. That had everybody there and it caused a lot of excitement for all of us. We were all determined to have that happen.
- Castle: Tell me more about when these first rumblings are happening about the new museum. What are the reasons behind needing the new space? And then how you all created a vision or a game plan to achieve that new space.
- 01-00:10:48
 McKeon: Well, the one who had the vision was Gerson Bakar. When I first went in the board, that's all I heard, rumblings of, "We have to get out of this space!" It was too small. The veterans were there, too. We just had a couple floors. It wasn't big enough. We just needed to expand and have our own space, our own museum. He, above all, was determined to find the space, find the property we could build on, or find a building. As it was, he did a magnificent job because he found us this space in the Redevelopment Agency, across from Yerba Buena. It was such a coup for us to get that.
- Castle: How—what was his role? He was a trustee?
- 01-00:11:47
 McKeon: He was a trustee, a great supporter, hard worker—which he still is today—and a visionary. He's always thinking ahead. What can we do next? He's still doing it to this day.
- Castle: That reminds me of something I heard Brooks Walker say about Gerson being the one thinking big and thinking outside the box.
- 01-00:12:10
 McKeon: Always outside the box.
- Castle: While he was thinking about the money.
- McKeon: He still is today, he's thinking outside the box. I just came from a meeting today with him. He's told us more plans. He just is an amazing man, and he's passionate and dedicated. And a worker. He loves the museum.

Castle: In the new space that eventually was settled on, what kind of journey was that? How difficult was that to get it?

01:00:12:41

McKeon: Well, it was difficult. Brooks must've told you about that, because we started thinking we could be in a building that these developers were going to build on Market Street. We were in the top of that. They were a Canadian company, and they got into financial trouble. All of those plans were pushed aside. It was the best thing that ever happened because the next thing we knew, Gerson had talked to the Redevelopment Agency. He knew the politics of the city very well. And then he found this property that we could have and build on our own. That was the exciting thing. At the time, people said, "Oh, you're going South of Market." Yerba Buena had gone their first. But having us go there and choosing that space has really opened up a whole new world for South of Market now.

Castle: What were some of the concerns at the time, do you remember? In terms of the Redevelopment Agency and moving to that new space.

01:00:13:47

McKeon: Well, some of the concerns were the area. It wasn't the area it looks like today. There were a lot of bad sections in it, but look how it's developed and built up since that time. We are really a cornerstone of that South of Market area. We're responsible for this. Bringing in the Mexican Museum that is going to be there, the Jewish Museum. We have the MoAD [Museum of the African Diaspora], the African Museum right next door to the St. Regis Hotel. It's going to be a whole museum area to go to. It's going to attract so many people when all—and it does already—but when all these museums are there, it's going to be an amazing area.

Castle: So in your opinion, it's really opened up that area.

01:00:14:41

McKeon: Oh, of course it has. The smart ones are the ones that bought a lot of that property they could pick up very cheaply around there. Because now the property is really expensive.

Castle: Well, that's one of the ongoing challenges of San Francisco.

McKeon: Oh, definitely.

Castle: How did you then end up as board president with Brooks? Brooks asked you, or—?

01:00:15:14

McKeon: Yes, Brooks asked me.

Castle: Because of your work as a trustee?

01-00:15:18

McKeon:

Oh, probably. Yes. Then when we started making the plans for the new museum, Brooks was the chair of the capital campaign, and he had to raise a lot of money. We raised it all from our board, to begin with, before we even went out to the community. But my job helping him was to do the ground breaking, make it a big ceremony. I think after the ground breaking, it was two and a half years till we finally built the museum. Then I formed a committee, and we put on sixteen events in a short period of time. We were really busy.

Castle:

You just condensed a tremendous amount of work into two sentences.

01-00:16:06

McKeon:

Absolutely. In a short period of time. I had a wonderful committee. They worked very hard. They each had their jobs, and it all happened. It was amazing.

Castle:

Are there certain committee members that you remember?

01-00:16:22

McKeon:

Oh, I remember all of them. Yes. Still all my friends today.

Castle:

Was the committee, were they trustees? Or did they come from different areas of the museum?

01-00:16:35

McKeon:

Some were trustees and some were not, but they were all involved some way in the museum.

Castle:

Once the capital campaign starts, you say most of the money was raised from the trustees [first]?

McKeon:

The trustees, yes.

Castle:

How?

01-00:16:52

McKeon:

That's the first part of the capital campaign. After they did that, then they went out to the community and the corporate world, and friends of the museum who were not trustees. People were extremely generous.

Castle:

What do you think prompted such generosity? What was the interest?

01-00:17:11

McKeon:

Well, I think the fact that we hired a wonderful architect, Mario Botta. I think that the plans of the building were spectacular. And the idea that we're building this beautiful building South of Market and what it was all going to look like and be for the city. It was contagious, it got everybody excited.

- Castle: You were involved in selecting the architect?
- 01-00:17:39
McKeon: No, I wasn't in that short, small committee. There were about six of them who decided they would fly over to Europe and visit the various architects. Mario Botta was one of the first ones. When they saw his work, they brought him over and we met.
- Castle: What do you think appealed to people about his work?
- 01-00:18:05
McKeon: It was very strong work. His architecture was very strong. It was just appropriate for us. He had never done a museum before. And the first thing he had ever done in this country. But Mario's still very close to us and comes over occasionally.
- Castle: It is interesting to trace out the reasons why he was a unanimous decision, because it seems as though—
- McKeon: He was.
- Castle: —it could be—
- McKeon: He was.
- Castle: —very difficult.
- 01-00:18:30
McKeon: Yes. But actually, when they saw what he had done. We have similarities between what he did there and our building. Remember, he didn't speak English. Which is pretty amazing. He had a great interpreter. But I always thought he understood it more than any of us thought he did. But there was no problem with that at all. And then, you know, the director at the time, Jack Lane, was very involved in it. Jack had a lot to do with designing the galleries. It was just a great team.
- Castle: I was going to ask about the director at the time and what role he played. Could you elaborate?
- 01-00:19:17
McKeon: Oh, he played a very big role in it. He really did. Especially in the design of the museum and the galleries and how the art was going to fit in, and the lighting and all of that. No, Jack had a lot to do with it.
- Castle: How do the board and the director work together? In your experience at that time, was it often full of conflict? Because it seems like there's a lot of elements going on.

01-00:19:48

McKeon:

Yes, I don't think it was *conflict*. It has to work well, or you're never going to get anything done. At that time, to build a museum, and to raise a lot of money, it worked well, with the board and Jack. And the director's very important to the whole process.

Castle:

So in your work, you've described doing a lot of the organizing for the ground breaking and the actual opening.

01-00:20:22

McKeon:

These were big events we put on.

Castle:

What year was the ground breaking?

01-00:20:29

McKeon:

The ground breaking was about two years, or two and a half years before the opening. We opened in 1995, so it was probably '93. It could've been '92. No, I think it was '93. (pause) Oh, it could've been '92 because it really took us probably two and a half years. I'm not positive, but yes.

Castle:

What did the ground breaking entail? What kind of ceremony was that? Who was there? Was it a big one?

01-00:21:00

McKeon:

It was an amazing ground breaking. I wanted so badly to have this get national attention. I thought, "What can we do to really give us national attention?" So I had heard of this group Survival Research. I talked to Jack about it, and I said, "Jack, what do you think?" He said, "Well, let's go out and visit them." He said, "I know who they are." So we went out to this place. *Way* out. I don't know where we were; it was near railroad tracks. We met this man, Mark Pauline. He was an amazing, amazing person. He did robots, all these different kinds of robots. He had been all over the world, they told me, putting on these performances. They were made of metal and tin, and they walked and they did all sorts of things. We looked all of them, and I said, "Oh, I think this is absolutely perfect! Exactly what we want!" Jack, God love him!, said, "Go ahead." And I said, "You sure?" He said, "Yes, go ahead and do it."

01-00:22:16

We signed a contract and got it all set. It was all ground, this piece of space. But I started hearing these things about Mark, and they said, "Well, you better be careful, he goes a little crazy, and he has all these groupies that follow him all over. He puts on these mad performances." Well, I decided that one of the staff—To the director of development at the time, I said, "You and I are going to stay overnight at the Marriott Hotel. We're going to stay up and watch what he does because he better not have any fires or anything like that." And he promised me, "Oh, there'll be nothing like that. We'll take care of it. But he put up a tent, and he started putting furniture in it. I was saying—I'm looking out the window—"I wonder what all that furniture is, going in there."

01-00:23:10 The day of the ground breaking, it was amazing. We had a big platform, and all of the trustees were on the committee, sitting up there. In back of us was this building—I think it was Wells Fargo at the time—all these windows, if you look at it, going all the way to the top. So then the performance. David Ireland did an art object. He dug something up and they made an art piece, because it was the opening. Then Mark put on his performance. Well, these robots were so big, and they were walking all over. Everybody was in a state of shock when they saw this. All of a sudden, then all of these, and fire, but the ground started shaking. I looked up. I didn't sit in the stage, I wanted to stay down below. I looked up, and I can see all the windows moving.

01-00:24:17 From the building! Then pretty soon, I look over. they have the tent. All of a sudden, he did something, cut something; this great big scroll came down with this odd, odd saying and picture and everything. I thought, "Oh, my heavens, what is he doing?" Then he started burning the tent and the furniture. (laughs) And I thought, "Everything I asked him not to do, he did." The cars were all around the outside, and we had barbed wire fences.

01-00:25:00 But, all these groupies, and the people who followed him were all standing on the hoods, the top of the cars. Two cars were dented in. The cameras were taking pictures of all this. Everybody was excited. They'd never seen anything like this before. We got on all the television stations all over the country. It was in the papers, it was in magazines. So even though it was—and the fire department was right next door. We had a fire station right next door. We did all of this, and it was *much* more than we expected. We got noticed.

Castle: You got the national attention.

01-00:25:47 McKeon: We got the national attention. Then we did a big dinner that night in a big tent that we erected on the property. Stanlee Gatti did the dinner, where he said he had to have a backhoe. Do you know what a backhoe looks like? It's *huge!* They brought in the backhoe in the tent that was all decorated. It was the most exciting opening. I think everybody just loved it. A couple people thought, "Oh, my gosh, what have you done?" But it was wonderful. And that started us out. It created excitement, it created buzz. And then we started on planning for the opening.

Castle: I think it's an apt story that every modern art museum needs a fire station next to it.

McKeon: Oh, yes!

Castle: You can't trust some modern artists!

McKeon: Well, you can't trust some of the artists, but —it was —I don't regret any part of it. It was just wonderful.

Castle: It sounds tremendous. Obviously, you were describing, they had some type of mechanization that pounded and shook.

01-00:26:53
McKeon: Yes, an explosion or something. Because the ground was shaking. And all of these robots, all different sizes, and big.

Castle: How tall?

01-00:27:02
McKeon: Oh, some of them were big, some of them were smaller. They were walking all over the place. And all in the same metal. They were gray metal.

Castle: It must've been very surreal.

01-00:27:16
McKeon: Oh, it was really surreal!

Castle: Are they on the stage, are they near the trustees?

McKeon: No, no, they're behind it. Everybody could turn around and look and see this when the noise started. And the robots caused all of this noise.

Castle: So were some of them were like twelve feet tall?

01-00:27:36
McKeon: Oh, I'd say some of them could've been eight feet tall. Maybe they were ten to twelve feet, I can't remember. But they were all different sizes, and they had flames around them. It was unbelievable.

Castle: And then he set the tent on fire!

01-00:27:54
McKeon: Well, they set part of it on fire. They were burning things. And I thought, "Oh, my gosh!" I'm sure it was a couple pieces of furniture that we saw that night, they were putting in the tent. So that was planned.

Castle: And then he had his groupies.

01-00:28:09
McKeon: Oh, the groupies were all over the place. But they couldn't come in to the grounds. They were in the outside, looking in. But they probably knew what to expect a lot more than we did. But even Jack Lane, he said this was terrific. Everybody did.

Castle: So you said Stanlee Gatti did the evening dinner.

McKeon: Yes, he did the evening thing, and it was absolutely fantastic.

Castle: And you mentioned a backhoe.

McKeon: A backhoe.

Castle: What was the purpose of the backhoe?

01:00:28:42

McKeon: Construction. He said, "I'll do everything around the backhoe, and we'll put the tables all around." It *was* pretty amazing, pretty amazing, when you went into this big tent, to see this huge backhoe. I had asked Tom Swift, who was our trustee at the time and he was in the [construction] business, "Can you get me a backhoe?" He said, "Where am I going to get a backhoe?" I said, "Well, your company can get a backhoe." And he said, "I'll try, I don't know." I had tried a couple different construction companies. But anyway, we got a brand new one. It was pretty amazing. They put a dummy up there as driving the backhoe, all dressed up.

01:00:29:32

Castle: So this stayed with the ground breaking; it's a space now that you're going to build on.

McKeon: Yes, that was our space we were building on.

Castle: What was the purpose of this? A kind of a thanking because at this point you'd raised a lot of money?

01:00:29:52

McKeon: Yes. They were all invited, but it was mainly to celebrate, we're finally breaking ground to build this museum. The events we had at the opening were the thank you's to everybody who contributed to it. We had all different kinds of events. Events for artists one night; all the artists came, a lot of the directors across the country came, curators. We had a patrons dinner. We had just all kinds of different levels. The family day was really spectacular because it had an enormous tent. They had *everything* in it. It was a wonderful, wonderful affair.

Castle: These are the actual opening events. Which are in 1995.

01:00:30:40

McKeon: Yes, 1995.

Castle: So throughout this period, you and Brooks are working together to raise money?

01:00:30:47

McKeon: He was the chair of it, and I was on the committee when they told me that they'd like me to try to go out and raise and—or go to different people. But I was mainly working on all these other things, too. But I was at the regular

meetings. Brooks really did a tremendous job of raising this money. He really has to be thanked.

Castle: So we're moving into the stage where the actual opening of the museum. What did you feel at that point? It's kind of hard; we always have memories and feelings over time. But here, you're—

McKeon: Oh, so excited, so excited. We're finally getting there. And then to see the museum all built. We had to close down in [the] War Memorial [Museum]. It was exciting even to see them start packing all the things in. I mean, every part of it was. We were all so thrilled. It was a wonderful time. I think all the trustees were exhilarated by it. It was something.

Castle: What did you all do for yourselves, as trustees.

McKeon: For ourselves?

Castle: How did you celebrate yourselves? In terms of the work that you had put into it. It sounds like you celebrated by taking on a greater role.

01:00:32:10

McKeon: Oh, yes, but you know, afterwards, I gave a big party at Yerba Buena, for everybody who worked on it. No matter what they did, they all came. We had a lot of fun. We all enjoyed it so much.

Castle: I was told—I actually don't know the details of it—that there was a party where there were many people there who wore a wig that was similar.

01:00:32:43

McKeon: No, that was my stepping-down party. It was an *amazing* thing. I walked in and they all had wigs that looked like me. Like my hair. That was last year [2005], in May. It was a party, unbelievable. When I walked in, and they had the lights sort of dim, I looked around. I looked at one person, and I thought—Barbara Rominski, whom you know, I looked, I said, "Barbara." I thought, "She has to do something about her hair. She can't be out to an event with curls hanging down and white hair." Then I started looking around, and I thought, "What is this?" George Schultz gets up and comes toward me, and he has this wig on. Don Fisher gets up, and they all—Gerson. I couldn't believe it. Everybody in the room had the same wig on. It was so funny. We laughed and laughed and laughed. Then they did this whole thing, imitated me, and this whole play, and things I had done when I was chairman that I thought, "Oh, this is just *awful!*" But they were great.

01:00:34:04

Castle: It was a bit of a roast?

McKeon: It was a roast, but I loved every minute of it. What a night that was! And the committee who did this, they said that they were so sorry to see it over again,

because the committee had so much fun planning it that they were laughing so hard, they said they'd never been through anything like that. That was so much fun. Who told you about the wigs?

Castle: Barbara.

01:00:34:37

McKeon: Oh, Barbara told you!

Castle: So you take over as chair in 1995?

01:00:34:49

McKeon: June of 1995.

Castle: It's been explained to me thus far, because you know, when you look back at the histories of president and chair, as people take these roles on, that Brooks said there's always been kind of an unwritten rule that if a woman holds one position, a man holds the other position. How does that work itself out?

01:00:34:13

McKeon: It really was, for a long, long time. I just never thought of it that much till you just said it. But he did mention that. That was right. Interesting.

Castle: You take over as the chair. Because from what I understood, the chair often has more responsibility than the president. There's a certain balance of power between the two. How would you describe it?

01:00:35:52

McKeon: Well, the chair really has to sign all the papers. And you speak for the museum at various times. I used to speak when I was president. I think a little more responsibility.

Castle: So when you took over as chair, what were the things that you had to adjust to? What were the new things that were going to be part of your tenure?

01:00:36:22

McKeon: I had been working with Brooks so long, it wasn't a great adjustment. It really wasn't. I was working nearly full-time then. You have a very close relationship with the director. I even had a close relationship before that. Brooks and I really had a partnership there when we did it. It was not much more work than I had before. Maybe it was more responsibility. You feel if things happen that you want to fix or are not right, you feel terrible sometimes, a big responsibility, and you want to see it done correctly and taken care of. But it's all very rewarding. It really is. And to be the chair at a time like that—

Castle: So you begin as chair with the new era?

01:00:37:21

McKeon: Yes.

Castle:

What was on your mind at that time? Did you have a new vision or goals you set for the museum?

01:00:37:31

McKeon: Well, what happened at that time—and I'm sure you've heard about this—we had a wonderful woman on our board by the name of Phyllis Wattis. She said to me, said to all of us, really, "You can't have a beautiful museum and have a second-rate collection." She was determined to buy us the art, the first-rate art to give us an A-1 collection, first-rate collection. That was her road to making this all happen, to make us respected, not only nationally, but internationally. And that's what she did. And everything, *everything* was so expensive. We're talking millions of dollars. She started out by saying, "We're going to fill in the gaps. See what you need and then we'll buy these works. But each work has to be a masterwork of the artist. It can't be a B+ or a B, it's got to be an A or A+ work."

01:00:38:38

So we were able to add to our collection. That was very exciting for us. This went on until she died in 2002. The curators would work and bring the work in, and Phyllis would talk to them and talk to the director and decide what she could do. But she did it all, and so now we're sitting with one of the best collections in the country—especially in contemporary art. I think we probably have as good a collection, if not better, than MoMA. They of course, have the modern collection, which is very hard for us, because it costs too much to buy those works. But what we also have going for us, besides Phyllis and her extraordinary generosity, we have a number of very good collectors in the Bay Area who are trustees and who themselves are collecting all of these masterworks. They've been extraordinarily generous to us. We've gotten a percentage of a lot of these works of theirs, with promised gifts to us in the future.

01:00:39:53

We have an enormous amount of tremendously important art. I had someone say to me—Well, Neal Benezra said, "All I can remember," he said, "Every time we opened the paper, San Francisco MOMA was buying another masterwork. And ahead of anybody else." And he said, "You were always buying all the top art in the country." I said, "It was always Phyllis buying it." So between Phyllis and all the collectors who have so much art—important art—we *really* have one of the biggest collections, as I said, in the country, for any museum. So that really caused excitement during that time.

01:00:40:45

Castle:

So part of it is you've got this gorgeous new building, and it's important to have art.

01:00:40:49

McKeon:

We had a second-rate collection. You want to have a first-class collection because you want to be able to get exhibitions from the other museums. To get exhibitions, you have to have loans that they would like. They will let you have a show of theirs, but you have to lend them something of yours which they can't get anyplace else. So it really helps us out. We had to have it. And for one woman to do that for us! And all these collectors are still buying all this art. It's *amazing!*

Castle:

So she's created quite a legacy.

01:00:41:41

McKeon:

Oh, a *tremendous* legacy. Tremendous.

Castle:

Do you recall any particular artist or acquisition of a masterwork that stands out to you that she worked on?

01:00:41:54

McKeon:

We did a lot by auction. Six to eight of us would sit in the room when Phyllis was bidding on it. Gosh, there are so many of them. [René] Magritte, which I love! I like *everything* she got. I have to think of all the works she bought, and of course, when she died, we got a lot of the work that was in her apartment. Yves Klein, [Andy] Warhol. So much of it.

Castle:

Was there any one piece that really stood out to you?

01:00:42:37

McKeon:

Mondrian, I thought we got excellent examples of that. The Magritte, I absolutely love, as I said before. Many of them. We got Wayne Thiebaud. And you know, the trouble is, she established a new high for Wayne Thiebaud because she had to pay so much for it. Some of these artists ended up by getting much more money [than] they would've gotten ordinarily because Phyllis went in there and bought the top one. What a legacy she left us!

Castle:

It sounds like it'd be pretty exciting and nerve wracking to be at one of the auctions.

01:00:43:28

McKeon:

Oh, it was so much fun! It was so much fun! Because, you have to know Phyllis.

Castle:

What was she like?

01:00:43:35

McKeon:

She was quite elderly at that time. She had a vision problem. She had trouble seeing a lot of things. But her mind was as sharp as a tack. She was as clear as a bell. Her body was failing; she was in a wheelchair. But what she loved was parties. So what we did, we always had set it up in the board's trustee room. There might've been six or seven of us there. There was never any more than

that. And she loved champagne, and she loved caviar. Whether we got the art or not—and we didn't get everything; we got a lot, but not everything—we always had a party afterwards. We brought out the champagne and we had the caviar. And she *loved* it. And when she got anything, when her bids won, we'd all scream, and everybody would hear us outside the door because we were all yelling so much. But she *loved* these evenings and thought it was so much fun. That was half the battle for bidding for it and having us all there rooting her on. She knew exactly what she was going to pay for something, too. Sometimes, I got nervous and we thought, "Oh, now, you don't want to go over this price." And she'd go over it. And you just think, "Oh, my Lord!" But she was always right. She was quite smart about the art. She really was.

01-00:45:15

Castle: So she really had a plan, when she went in?

McKeon: Oh, yes, she really had a plan.

Castle: So would she tell you all what she would bid for it?

McKeon: Oh, sure. But we were just a few of us in the room all the time with her; she wanted just certain people.

01-00:45:29

Castle: It almost sounds a little bit ceremonial.

McKeon: It wasn't. It was very relaxed, it wasn't really ceremonial.

Castle: A ritual. I mean.

McKeon: It was sort of a ritual. We did the same thing every time. She would do the bidding, we'd call, and we'd have our papers in front of us and know where we were. We'd have it connected with Sotheby's or Christie's in the East, so we could really hear the whole thing. We knew when these things were coming. We'd get all excited. And it was so much fun.

[Audio file 2]

02-00:00:25

Castle: We're were talking about the legacy of Phyllis Wattis and how she really brought together a collection that is competitive nationally, if not internationally. One of things that interests me, as you were describing the collections, is the definition around modern and contemporary art. Could you define for me how you distinguish between the two, and if there's a particular set of works you connect to, in terms of contemporary and modern art?

02-00:00:58

McKeon: Well—the modern art, modern goes till about '45. Then from then on, the fifties, sixties, seventies, contemporary art. We have an acquisition program;

that's what we buy today, contemporary art. Because the modern art, we just couldn't afford. Certainly, there's a lot of it in homes in San Francisco, and with our friends. Hopefully, we'll get that. That's how we'll get it, by people leaving it to us.

Castle: When they make a will, it's passed on?

02-00:01:39

McKeon: That's our hope, willing it to us. We can really be known more for our contemporary collection, which is really a fabulous one, I think.

Castle: Modern art is also often described as art that provokes—whether it's provoking controversy or just provoking thought. Do you recall any particularly exciting or controversial times where an artist or a collection that went on around museum—?

02-00:02:25

McKeon: Sure. Jeff Koons is a good example. Because that was *very* controversial at one time. We had a Jeff Koons exhibition [1992]. We were very concerned about it because the first time—no, twice, now I remember—we didn't want children to walk into it. We had to separate it and have a place for it—part of art that children wouldn't go into. We said, "No, just adults." It was when he was married to that Italian star. That Cicciolina, whatever her name was. They were in poses that it wouldn't be good for children to see. That was the main controversy I can remember. And yet, Jeff Koons today, he is just really an established artist, and his prices are going through the roof. So you never know.

02-00:03:29

Castle: And when was this?

02-00:03:31

McKeon: I'm trying to remember. I think it was in the old building. It was in [the] War Memorial, we had that Jeff Koons show. That really was the first time I had ever seen what we had to do at that time. So we're very conscious of it now.

Castle: It was the sexual nature of the photographs?

02-00:03:59

McKeon: Yes.

Castle: I wonder, does the museum, in your experience, handle it on a case-by-case—Do you have to restrict entrance to something or do you decide—?

02-00:04:13

McKeon: We think about it. We had a photography show, I was thinking in the new building—that had to be a couple years ago—where some of the photographs were of a sexual nature [*The Photographs of Reagan Louie: Sex Work in Asia*,

2003]. We had some sort of a statement that was large, so people can read it: "This is what you're going to see. Do not bring children in here." We also gave out a paper so there'd be no chance of that happening. But you know, these are important artists. And there's nothing you can do about that.

Castle: Who makes the decision about those —?

02-00:05:02

McKeon: It's a decision everybody gets involved with. The director, really, curators; the trustees, some of them do get involved in it. I was always told about it. I said, "That's fine, what you're doing." But we really watch it very closely. You don't want to get a lot of negative publicity, you don't need that.

Castle: And it's a delicate thing to balance.

02-00:05:31

McKeon: That's exactly right. Exactly right. I can think of [Robert] Mapplethorpe and others. Remember all the controversy over Mapplethorpe back East? But it's going to happen again. There's no doubt about it. But that's all right, you do what you think is right. You make it very clear to people that it's not a good idea to bring children in. But it's all art. You can't say you're not going to show any of it. That would really be silly.

Castle: You've mentioned a number of people that might be described as key players, if you will. Gerson Bakar and Brooks, Jack Lane and Evelyn Haas and Phyllis Wattis. Are there others that you might mention you think were very formative during your time, or maybe even before, to the museum?

02-00:06:33

McKeon: I think the Haases always were. Evie Haas, then Peter and Mimi Haas. And then the Schwabs [Charles and Helen]. And of course, Don and Doris Fisher were always very key. But you know, there's a lot of people in the middle, who don't have all that money, who I feel very strong about, who gave so much of their time and worked so hard for the museum, we couldn't have done it without those people, either. Because some of them were really the workers. So I could name a *lot of* people.

Castle: Do a few come to mind?

02-00:07:14

McKeon: I just don't like to name people, you know, because there's so many people I respect for—for what they do for the museum, who head the committees and—and if I say one, then I think of five others I should've said. But they've all been really wonderful for me to work with, supportive of me. I just appreciate everything they've done. Plus the fact, we've had a fantastic staff. We have a *wonderful* staff. There've been changes through the years. But the staff has had a lot to do with the success of our—of the museum. And there's some people who give all of their time and work. They can't afford to give

very much money; but you know, they give it in other ways. I think that's just as important.

02-00:08:11

Castle: It sounds like you've worked with so many people that you really respect.

McKeon:

Oh, I have, I have.

Castle:

You're really giving a lot of credit and honor and respect, or at least attention, to people who do give of time.

02-00:08:27

McKeon: Oh, I can't tell you how important I think that is.

Castle:

In what ways did you find these people? Do they just volunteer?

02-00:08:36

McKeon: They just love art. We find really good workers on our committees, and we—we bring them on the board. They're very dedicated. There are certain people I could ask to do anything, and they always say yes. Some of the hardest tasks going—but they always say yes. There's a great nucleus of people like that. But today, we are a graying board, and we are trying to get younger people on, which I think is very important, to have the next generation step up and start working. And that's happening.

Castle:

Where do they come from? I guess one of the things that's interesting to me, and others, would be, the trustees—Often, you end up in a trustee role partly because of the money you're able to donate.

02-00:09:29

McKeon: Oh, but it's more than that. It's more than the money.

Castle:

But could you explain that to me, please?

02-00:09:31

McKeon: It's more than the money. I will look at people that I think they are such workers, so dedicated. They love the art. And they've been on committees. All our committees just don't consist of trustees. We have outside workers. And then you get a good idea of what they do and what they're willing to do. You pick them from the committees, too, you know. I think they all deserve a lot of credit.

Castle:

That's a very important point I wanted to make sure. Most people think that a board just equals money.

McKeon:

No. I just would hate to think they think that. Some people do think that, and it's wrong. All they have to do is get on a board and see. Of course, you need generous people, like the ones I've mentioned. We couldn't probably exist without them. We need their expertise, their money, their dedication. And

they work, too. Very hard. Helen works, Mimi Haas works. Don is very dedicated. We've even had Chuck Schwab in our committees. Chuck says, "Don't put me on any more committees," [laughs] We keep on putting him on committees. There's so many people like that. They work just as hard as the others, if not harder. But there are a lot of people in the middle there who work very hard. They don't have the capabilities of giving a tremendous amount of money; but it's not all what it's about, the money. It's a lot more than that.

Castle: It's a much fuller picture.

02-00:11:17

McKeon: *Much* fuller picture than that. Yes. And they are so happy to be doing things, and doing it for the museum. They really are. But you have to pay attention to them, and know what they do, and give them credit. I think that's really important.

02-00:11:34

Castle: One of the things you're describing is that you read people pretty well. You obviously can tell when to comprise these different committees and to pull out the talents of people.

02-00:11:49

McKeon: I'm very close to the trustees. I'm very close to the staff. I just consider it just one big family, our board. Each one of them is important to us. And important to me. They've all been really wonderful, when I look back and think of all these years and all they've done. It's not me doing it all. Or Brooks doing it all. There's all these other people who're working very hard, and they don't get their pictures in the paper, and they don't get their names in the paper. Sometimes I often say to the photographers, "Take *their* pictures." It isn't right that just a few of us get our pictures in the paper all the time. These others should too, get recognition. So we all do try to do that.

02-00:12:412

Castle: You say you're working on bringing in a younger crowd, how are you doing that?

02-00:12:48

McKeon: We are looking around for younger people. By younger, I don't mean twenty-year-olds. I mean, some thirties, forties, who are really interested, willing to work hard. You've got to get ready for the next generation. Our generation will be dying off. You've got to have people there who can continue. There'll be other challenges they have. We're looking forward to the year 2010, which will be our 75th anniversary, and gearing up for that and what we're going to do. We have plans for a sculpture garden, we have lots of plans. Lots of visions of what we'd like this museum to become.

02-00:13:37

Castle:

Well, that leads perfectly into the question I wanted to ask about coming up to the 75th anniversary. What are some of the new visions for the museum, and the new challenges it faces, as it approaches 75?

02-00:13:52

McKeon:

Well, there's always a lot of challenges. Education is important. We've built this wonderful education center. It's one of the best in the country. Education is very important for this museum. Our outreach program, bringing in these young people and their families in, who've never been to a museum. We have a wonderful program, SFMOMA Matches, run by Kamala Harris, our district attorney. It brings these disadvantaged children all into the museum. They are mentored by one of our younger group. Each one has a mentor. And they are exposed for the first time in their lives to the museum and art and everything. And then at the last night, their families are invited, they're all given memberships to the museum. They go away with a much different picture of art and the museum. We want to expand our programs.

02-00:15:11

I know Neal Benezra, our director, would like to have a film program some day, and youth. It all takes staff, and it takes money. That's what we want to do. We're looking to build a sculpture garden. We need more gallery space. We need a lot of things. But we're looking ahead to our anniversary. And hopefully, 2010 will bring some of these dreams into fruition. I hope so.

Castle:

What would you say that SFMOMA has done for San Francisco, and vice versa?

02-00:15:49

McKeon:

I think it's done so much for San Francisco. Remember, we're a private museum. The only money we get is from the hotel tax. We're private; we have to raise all the money ourselves. We're not like the opera and the symphony and the Fine Arts [Museums of San Francisco]. They are supported by the city. We are not. Except for the hotel tax. So I think we've done a lot for this city. Willie Brown recognized it. And when he came to the museum, he always talked about it, how important we were. Gavin Newsom certainly recognizes it. The [M. H.] de Young [Memorial Museum] is another example. That building is going to do a lot for San Francisco. But to have a point that people from all over the country and the world come to San Francisco now to see some great art and to see these museums. I think it's done a lot.

02-00:16:48

I think it's also done a lot for the whole Bay Area. It's not just San Francisco. We get them from all over the Bay Area, coming in to see the museum. I think the schools, because of the money and the problems we're having, they have to get rid of some of the art programs. Well we, doing all these art programs and bringing all—busing all these children in, and every day having children there and classes there, I think has done a lot for San Francisco. I think that San Francisco has done a lot for us, because we live in this wonderful city. We're lucky to be here. And it's a destination point. Not only to come to San

Francisco, but now to come and see all the wonderful institutions we have here. We're going to have [the] California Academy of Sciences, which is going to be marvelous; we have the de Young; we are going to have the Mexican Museum; the Jewish Museum. We have now the MoAD, the African. Imagine all these museums all together.

02-00:17:55 I think it's making us a destination point. It'll do a lot for tourism, it'll bring people here. And they do come. And a lot for the young people and the families.

Castle: You've had a leadership role for quite a long time —

McKeon: Yes.

Castle: I've had a couple of people say to me that, you know, you just have these special qualities. Because you're handling men and their money. And —

McKeon: I do. (laughs)

Castle: That can be a challenge.

02-00:18:23 McKeon: Oh. I don't let them say no to me. If they say they can't give me something, I say, "Uh-huh, you can't say no to me." (laughs) The men have been wonderful.

Castle: Your experience with the board, with the trustees, and the museum in general, how has it enriched your own life? What would you say?

02-00:18:47 McKeon: It's my life now. It's my life. I just—it's enriched it *tremendously*. I've made so many good friends, different friends. I've met a lot of artists. I love the curators, I love all the staff; they're all so dedicated. And the trustees. I can't imagine my life without the museum, in some way.

Interview #2: August 27, 2007

Interviewed by Lisa Rubens, ROHO
 [Begin Audio File 3 07-27-2007.mp3]

Rubens: What made the board work so well?

03-00:01:34

McKeon: Oh, it did work very well! We're all close friends. That's what's so nice, and we still are. Don is still an officer of our board and still on the board. Very involved. Comes to all of our meetings. But when I think of those people, I think Gerson, Mimi—all of them—Brooks. Who else did I think there? And of course, with the Schwabs today. Helen was on the board for a long time, and now Chuck heading the board, which was very ambitious of him, running a company, too.

Rubens: You were on the board when Steve Oliver came on. It's my understanding that Oliver made a big push to get Chuck Collins and to diversify the board.

03-00:02:29

McKeon: No. That isn't true. Chuck Collins was very involved before Steve Oliver.

Rubens: Good. Let's get that record straight. Is there any one person, or was it all of you who were saying, "We need to get some people of color on the board"?

03-00:02:43

McKeon: Oh, I don't think we said that. No. And you don't say that about Chuck Collins. He's a very close friend of mine, he and his wife both are.

Rubens: How did he come on the board?

03-00:03:03

McKeon: How did he come on the board? Was he at Millennium Partners? Or no, he did something else. I can't remember. But he was on the board long before Steve Oliver took over as chair. He's a *great* businessman, as Paula is a *great* businesswoman. He adds a lot to the board. He was the chair of our education committee for years, and now he's going to be doing something else. But he's a great trustee, and we are very good friends. He's one of the smartest people we have on our board. Dick Greene is, also. I must tell you, he's a close friend of mine, and he was the president when I was chairman.

Rubens: Did you ask for that?

03-00:04:09

McKeon: Yes. Yes.

Rubens: Because?

03-00:04:11

McKeon: Well, my daughter knew him because they practice law together. Yes. Dick has been a marvelous president.

Rubens:

Now, which daughter is this?

03-00:04:24

McKeon: The one who's on the board of SFMOMA, Eileen. Eileen Michael. So they knew each other before. Plus the fact he's our attorney and our president, and he does everything pro bono. We are the luckiest people in the world to have someone like Dick Greene.

Rubens:

I know that Jack Lane has remained a friend of yours and you see him, but it became clear to the board, and then there was a retreat at the Silverado—Gerson was there, everyone talks about it—where you were looking for the new step. Were you there at that meeting at the Silverado?

03-00:06:03

McKeon: It was at what's his name's place up there. I can't think of his name. I would've had to be there.

Rubens:

What everyone says is that it just became clear that Jack Lane didn't have the energy or the vision to take the museum to the new level.

03-00:06:45

McKeon: Well, I don't know that I agree about the vision. Jack did a fabulous job for the museum. He was the right man at the right time. We wouldn't have the museum, or we'd have had it a lot later, if it hadn't been for Jack, who refused to come unless we were going to build a new museum. But no, I think that Jack—After you build a museum, he put his heart and soul into it. Worked long hours. He became so tired. And he was responsible for the designing of all of the galleries. That was a monumental job for Jack, and to take care of everything. But he did become tired. And Inge-Lise [Eckmann] wasn't feeling well.

Rubens:

She had been elevated before the move to being in charge of—

03-00:07:36

McKeon: Oh, yes. Yes.

Rubens:

She was the vice—

03-00:07:41

McKeon: Well, what was her title?

Rubens:

Vice deputy or deputy chair. Deputy director.

03-00:07:44
 McKeon: No, she wasn't deputy director. She was something, another title. No, she wouldn't have been deputy director, but she had a very high position.

Rubens: She was in charge—

03-00:07:57
 McKeon: And she's very good. Inge-Lise did a fabulous job. But she really was sick. It just became clear that Jack was tired, and it was probably time to move on. But it wasn't an easy decision for him to make, or for us to make.

Rubens: And then you're without someone for about nine months.

03-00:08:28
 McKeon: A year! There were two times in the museum's history. One year without Jack Lane, and I had to step in as much as I [could]. We had wonderful staff. We had Lori Fogarty, we had two great people. The last one was when David Ross left. Again, that was a year, and the museum became a full-time job for me. But we also had two great people then, too, Ruth Berson and—Was Lori then there?

Rubens: She was gone.

[interruption]

Rubens: You are acquiring art. You talked in the last interview about those wonderful parties for the—

03-00:09:40
 McKeon: Oh, with Phyllis?

Rubens: For Phyllis, the acquisition—

03-00:09:40
 McKeon: Oh, well, Phyllis, when we moved into the museum, Phyllis took a while, about a year, and then she turned around and said, "We can't be in a building like this and not have good art." That's when it started. She probably spent close to \$100 million on the art. It was all Phyllis in auctions, and Gary Garrels, curators. After Gary left, Madeleine [Grynsztjen] and a couple of us. Lori Fogarty was very close to Phyllis, as I was. She just started buying one right after the other, but they all had to be A+ pieces. So we have masterworks of some of these artists because of Phyllis Wattis.

Rubens: I think Resnicow was the name I was trying to—

03-00:10:57
 McKeon: David Resnicow.

Rubens: Resnicow, he was helping the museum with the search for the new director.

- 03-00:11:08
McKeon: No. He, with Christopher Hest worked with the search committee. David Resnicow, we hired when we were starting to do the ground breaking and the opening.
- Rubens: I see, the promotion, the rollout.
- 03-00:11:24
McKeon: The promotion and all of that. That's what he does so well. I talk to David a lot. That's what he also did for the Fine Arts Museums.
- Rubens: Did he really?
- 03-00:11:35
McKeon: Yes, yes.
- Rubens: Oh, my goodness. Weren't they lucky?
- 03-00:11:43
McKeon: Oh, yes, he worked for the Fine Arts afterwards. He does a lot of one-time projects.
- Rubens: I know that he did write a new plan when it was clear, at Silverado. Lori Fogarty says she drove back with Resnicow and they had decided that he would write it.
- 03-00:12:15
McKeon: He's a very good writer. That could be.
- Rubens: Hest was hired to be the headhunter?
- 03-00:12:25
McKeon: To help us organize and help us with the search. But who did we hire first of all? We hired David, his firm, you're absolutely right. We hired him twice, then.
- Rubens: I think so.
- 03-00:12:42
McKeon: We hired him for the opening. We did.
- Rubens: Just tell me who Hest is.
- 03-00:13:04
McKeon: I was trying to think.
- Rubens: Is he New York based?
- 03-00:13:08
McKeon: David is New York based.

Rubens: And what about Christopher Hest?

03-00:13:11

McKeon: Christopher Hest had his own firm here. They were very helpful—Fitzgerald Graves. They were very helpful in helping us do interviews and everything for this search.

[The next three minutes are sealed by SFMOMA until January 1, 2031]

03-00:13:53

McKeon: There were a few of them.

Rubens: Were you impressed with David Ross?

03-00:13:59

McKeon: Yes. Yes. And David Resnicow was really—he's the one who nearly convinced me. He knew David Ross well. Remember, at the time, the money that's coming in, the dot-com boom, and Silicon—

Rubens: And you had Phyllis Wattis.

03-00:14:19

McKeon: All this money. We were in fat-city. It was terrific, and it was really a majority opinion of the board to hire David Ross.

Rubens: You didn't need much convincing?

03-00:14:35

McKeon: No. No. We did a lot of interviewing. We interviewed a couple from London. We did a lot of it. There just weren't three people, there were a lot of people we interviewed. Yes.

Rubens: Had you gone to the Whitney?

03-00:14:54

McKeon: I talked a lot to Leonard Lauder, he's the head, the board chair there.

Rubens: And then of course, so many of the shows that David Ross had started were scheduled to come to the SFMOMA.

03-00:15:10

McKeon: So many what?

Rubens: Shows that he had organized and curated.

03-00:15:12

McKeon: Oh, yes. Yes. And then when he did come, we got that big show he brought from Intel, which was terrific. I was surprised he could transfer it so easily from the Whitney to us.

Rubens: That's what is said about David, that he could pick up the phone and get someone on the phone.

03-00:15:29
McKeon: I tell you. And a lot of them cannot do that. They just can't. But he could pick up the phone. He had an in with all of the art world. He could talk to them. And you really need that. Neal is the same. Neal knows all of them in the art world. You have to have that connection with the director. It's a thing that if you want to get a certain exhibition, you have to be able to call and make that call, the director does, and get that exhibition.

Rubens: Now, were you part of—I always say the name wrong—the Japanese bank's collection? [Fukuoka Bank]

03-00:16:13
McKeon: The ones over in Japan?

Rubens: Yes.

03-00:16:16
McKeon: No. I knew all about it.

Rubens: Yeah. But you didn't travel over there to look or—

03-00:16:20
McKeon: No, I didn't travel. We knew what it was. It was the Kellys and the rest of them.

Rubens: The Rothkos, yeah.

03-00:16:27
McKeon: David went over there.

Rubens: That's an example of just a fortuitous connection of David's

03-00:16:36
McKeon: It was more than a fortuitous connection of David's. Other people were involved in that, too.

Rubens: Oh, that's important to say.

03-00:16:44
McKeon: One man doesn't—

Rubens: Oh, you're saying that people on the board—

03-00:16:52
McKeon: Oh, yes. Yes. We had people on the board who could afford to buy the art. They had to agree to it and see it and go through all of that.

Rubens: I see your point, yes, exactly. I have the list of what some of the names were of the art. It all seems to be really just flowering with David.

03-00:17:20
McKeon: Well, when he came, it created so much excitement. He had a real worldwide perspective, which was terrific, in the art world.

Rubens: And you think that was different from what Jack Lane had?

03-00:17:39
McKeon: No, Jack had connections, but Jack did things more quietly. You didn't realize what Jack did, but he did it. But David was out there. *Out there*. And he loved every minute of it. That was fine when we had money. Things turned.

Rubens: Things turn. The dot-com.

03-00:18:02
McKeon: They turned. And David, gosh, he had so many balls in the air. He could think of so many ideas. And they were brilliant, a lot of them. But then he came and I said, "We can't do it." "Why?" "Well, we don't have the money." "Well, we'll get the money." But that wasn't up to him, to get the money. We had to get the money. It doesn't work like that. But anyway, really, David had a very external perspective on things. We had more of an internal thing, and we had the budget to balance. I had to worry about that.

Rubens: You had staff positions still that had not been filled.

03-00:18:49
McKeon: We just didn't have the money for all of David's—It didn't make him happy either, because [we were] always saying no to him. Even though I thought some of the ideas were brilliant. They really were. It just was more than we could afford.

Rubens: And so the time came. There had to have been some kind of caucus. I do know that Dick Greene was trying to work with him, was trying to meet with him and get an agenda. David and Greene both say that.

03-00:19:21
McKeon: It just didn't work. It did not work.

Rubens: And so it was time to say, "David, you need to go." Was that the executive committee that did that?

03-00:19:33
McKeon: No, a couple of us.

Rubens: Oh, just a few?

03-00:19:34
McKeon: It was, though, a decision of the whole executive committee.

Rubens: But is that your responsibility, to chair that particular meeting or make that statement?

03-00:19:44

McKeon: Yes. Yes.

Rubens: And where does that strength come from, in you?

03-00:19:48

McKeon: In me? Oh, I'm a strong person, don't think I'm not. But we left on good terms, and I'm still a friend of David's.

Rubens: David has nothing to say but goodness about everybody connected to the museum.

03-00:20:04

McKeon: Well, you know—

[The next two and a half minutes have been sealed by SFMOMA until January 1, 2031]

03-00:22:31

McKeon: There was a search.

Rubens: When this happened, was anyone proposing anyone?

03-00:22:39

McKeon: Well, people do. I can't even remember who they said. But we had a small committee this time.

Rubens: He was there just three and a half years; it wasn't very long.

03-00:22:52

McKeon: It was just three years. So what we did was call in Nancy Nichols. She's since passed away. She brought in Glenn Lowry to MoMA in New York. She did a lot of the big searches. So we thought we would work with her. We interviewed her. We interviewed a couple of people, about three people I can really—I can just see them right now, the interview. She came head and shoulders above the rest. So we used her. Then we started through the interview process. I actually think at one time, we might've had eleven candidates. I mean, you said three; *no way* just three. It was far reaching. We went all over looking.

Rubens: I meant only when it was Ross. I thought it had come down to three.

03-00:23:56

McKeon: No, no, no.

Rubens: Fine, fine.

03-00:23:58

McKeon: Oh, no, no, it was more than three. It took us a long time. I made Helen Schwab the chair of another committee, and it was a small committee. We had a number of meetings, and we ended up by choosing Neal Benezra, who was really ready for a job as a director.

Rubens:

He had now gone to Chicago? [The Art Institute of Chicago]

03-00:24:25

McKeon: Well, he was in Chicago, working for Jim Wood. But he was with [James] Demetrian in—Where was he, the Hirshhorn [Museum and Sculpture Garden]?

Rubens:

Yes.

03-00:24:36

McKeon: The Hirshhorn, a long time. He was very well respected as a curator, but he got a lot of experience as a manager working at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Rubens:

I would assume when you're looking for a director, you're looking for someone who can really work budgets and understand the limitations.

03-00:25:06

McKeon: Oh, absolutely. Understand that we have a budget to make. He understood it perfectly that we did. And yet he had as many connections. He had *many* connections in the art world. I had called a couple of my friends who were directors, and they just said, "Oh, you'd be so lucky to get him."

Rubens:

But it was a year. I didn't realize it was that long.

03-00:25:35

McKeon: It took that long. And when they're at a place, they have to give notice. His wife worked there, too. She did work for the Art Institute on the Nazis plundering art.

Rubens:

Oh, *Rape of Europa*.

03-00:25:56

McKeon: Yes, yes. She was an expert in that.

Rubens:

I didn't know that.

03-00:26:00

McKeon: She is a brilliant woman herself.

Rubens:

How good to hear. I didn't know that.

03-00:26:04

McKeon: They had to make their decision. He had to discuss it with her, and she had to agree. They had to sell their place. Plus the fact they had to find a place here.

They had a daughter to put in school. All of that takes so much time. I do believe they let her stay. They wanted to stay until she finished the whole term or something, and then come out. But anyway, he was our choice.

Rubens: Basically a unanimous choice?

03-00:26:35

McKeon: Definitely unanimous. I knew that you were coming for the interview, so I saved all the articles and everything during that time. I tell you, everybody was so happy to have Neal here. But they were just as happy to have David here; I must tell you that. He created a lot of excitement, too.

Rubens: It's a new era, when Neal comes.

03-00:27:01

McKeon: It is. It's different. Each one of them is different, but they all contributed to the life of the museum. They all, the ones who are no longer here, as I'm sure [Gerald] Nordland did, too, left quite a legacy.

Rubens: Now, you step down as chair in '04. You're of course still on the board.

03-00:27:24

McKeon: Oh, yes. Yes.

Rubens: I just can't remember when Benezra comes, but I'm pretty sure it's '01, '02?

03-00:27:31

McKeon: He must've come in '01.

Rubens: I think September '01 is when he starts. So you worked with him for two and a half years, as chair.

03-00:27:44

McKeon: Oh, yes.

Rubens: Did you have an office at the museum?

03-00:27:47

McKeon: Well, I had a little office that I used there, but I was up and down, all over the place.

Rubens: I can imagine. When I think of your tenure, it is from the highs of the highs the lows of the lows.

03-00:28:02

McKeon: But it was all wonderful!

Rubens: Why was it that—Or am I wrong? It seemed to me that the dot-com world was not really a source of board members. It's a source of money.

03-00:28:17

McKeon: Well, it involved the whole climate. I mean of everyone. It involved lots of people. It involved people like—well, you can name them all. The money just wasn't there.

Rubens:

Well, I actually mean from before the bust in about '90, before the bust at the turn of the millennium, while the dot-com is a source of money and art, younger board members aren't coming out of there. Is that right? You're not getting Steve Jobs or—

03-00:28:51

McKeon: Oh, there's no way. No way! We'd love to have Steve Jobs.

Rubens:

I bet.

03-00:28:56

McKeon: We'd love to have the Google boys. We'd like to have them all.

Rubens:

It's just not an interest of theirs, these, quote, what they think are "older institutions?"

03-00:29:05

McKeon: Oh, no. No, no, I don't think it's that at all. I think they're so busy. You don't see any of the big ones joining boards.

Rubens:

Or their wives?

03-00:29:13

McKeon: Or their wives. They just don't.

Rubens:

And they're not going to join de Young?

03-00:29:20

McKeon: No. They have a different group of people at de Young.

Rubens:

How would you characterize that? Is there a way of summarizing that, that you're comfortable with?

03-00:29:34

McKeon: Well, no, not that I'm comfortable with.

Rubens:

All right, fine, yeah. Let's do it this way. When did your daughter come on the board? That's an example of a—

03-00:29:42

McKeon: Well, she came on the board after I became chairman. But it had to be, I would say, afterwards. I don't think it's before I was chairman, when I was president. But as I told you before, they asked her to be on the board without telling me. I told you that she and Dick Greene were very close. But she is very—

- Rubens: Her name is?
- 03-00:30:10
McKeon: Eileen Michael. Very, very bright, hard worker. She's right now the chair of our committee on trustees, which is a very important committee.
- Rubens: Say what that committee does.
- 03-00:30:24
McKeon: That committee chooses future trustees.
- Rubens: Oh, well, how wonderful to have a young woman.
- 03-00:30:32
McKeon: It is a very important committee. She's done lots of development work. She's done everything there.
- Rubens: Now, Don Fisher's son is on the board, is that right?
- 03-00:30:45
McKeon: Bob Fisher.
- Rubens: Bob Fisher. So that's two examples of two new generations of people.
- 03-00:30:52
McKeon: Mimi Haas's daughter-in-law is on the board, Becka Prouda, who is married to Daniel Lurie, Mimi's son.
- Rubens: Eileen has a strategy of people she wants to go after and—
- 03-00:31:10
McKeon: Oh, no, no, it's committee-decided. They have a great committee. They bring up the names, they discuss the names and talk about the pros and cons, and who they are, and who knows these people. And yes, they are looking for younger people.
- Rubens: Is there any thought that the board will be—I don't know how this could happen, but a sixty-person board is a—
- 03-00:31:37
McKeon: It'll never be less than that.
- Rubens: And therefore, it has to have working committees.
- 03-00:31:41
McKeon: Yes. Yes, we have very important committees, yes.
- Rubens: Do you feel hopeful about younger people?

- 03-00:31:48
 McKeon: I do, I do. It's hard. They have to have a commitment, they really do. You just can't have them on there because they're bright. You have to bring more to the board than that.
- Rubens: Sure. And you're very clear about thanking board members, that if they don't bring money to purchase art, but if they have a passion for art—
- 03-00:32:13
 McKeon: But not even all of the art. It's also workers. We need *workers* on the board, people who will take over committees, do committee work, and really put the hours in. Sometimes some of that is more important than the money. We have three different things. We have people who give money; most of them do. But some can't give very much. And that's fine because they give of themselves. They work hard. Then others give art *and* they give money. Some give a lot of money.
- Rubens: Well, let me just wrap it up a little bit by asking you to talk about the future. I suppose one of the great mysteries, uncertainties, is what's going to happen to the Anderson Collection.
- 03-00:33:30
 McKeon: Well, we worked very hard, I did, with Hunk and Moo, and Dick Greene worked hard with them, and Neal had interned with them.
- Rubens: He had. He was one of the first Stanford interns. And they had that magnificent show. That was a *wonderful* show.
- 03-00:33:47
 McKeon: Well, I put that show on deliberately thinking—But who knows? You never know what the future holds. You can have a wonderful art collection, but you have to think, if you're up there in years and you don't have years and years to live, the taxes on keeping that art really can hurt the estate. So a lot of that. But we have other people with wonderful collections in San Francisco. Wonderful. And in the Bay Area.
- Rubens: With whom you have ties.
- 03-00:34:26
 McKeon: Well, the Schwabs are one.
- Rubens: Exactly.
- 03-00:34:28
 McKeon: Mimi Haas. And the Logans, Kent and Vicki Logan. Vicki's on our board. They relocated to Denver, because he retired, so they're also involved with the Denver Art Museum.
- Rubens: They were the video collection?

03-00:34:57

McKeon: No, no, that's [Kent and Vicki] Kramlich.

Rubens:

Oh, Kramlich. I've got that confused. I can't think what the Logan's collection is then.

03-00:35:03

McKeon: Well, we have a lot of it because we got a large part of their collection. In fact, we're having an exhibition, I think next year. I think it's going to be one of the Logan exhibitions. Well, they have something of everything, of everybody. And they collect in depth. They're very passionate about art. I'm very fond of them both.

Rubens:

So you've made just wonderful friends.

03-00:35:35

McKeon: Oh, yes! It's what's nice about the museum. We all are friends, and it's like a family.

Rubens:

And every once in a while there's an eruption—

03-00:35:45

McKeon: Oh, sure. But isn't there an eruption in families?

Rubens:

Absolutely. Absolutely.

03-00:35:49

McKeon: And it all blows over.

Rubens:

Someone said that about Don Fisher that he can just erupt and then he's just back with another idea.

03-00:36:06

McKeon: Don is Don.

Rubens:

Let me ask you, would you still buy a painting now and then? If you love it, do you—

03-00:36:35

McKeon: Of course.

Rubens:

Do you go to auctions or to—

03-00:36:37

McKeon: Of course. I love—

Rubens:

Not just for the museum.

03-00:36:40

McKeon:

I go to all the galleries, and I love what we show in our “New Work” show, which is wonderful. I must say before I end—because I don’t expect you to come back again—I really think we have a great future with Chuck as our chairman. He has such a vision, and we have so many plans. We’re going to expand. And our sculpture garden is going to open next year.

Rubens:

Is there a date now for it?

03-00:37:14

McKeon:

Oh, I think it’ll be probably October, November in ’08, because they’ve got all the permits now. And it’s simply gorgeous! We have a wonderful young architect. The design is just fabulous. People are just going to be so surprised to see it.

Rubens:

And then you have the building, the Chuck Schwab building. I don’t know if they’re going to call it [that], but that—

03-00:37:42

McKeon:

No, that—We’re deciding what to do now about that, and what we’re going to do.

Rubens:

For expansion.

03-00:37:49

McKeon:

Exactly. Exactly.

Rubens:

And you plan on staying on the board?

03-00:37:56

McKeon:

Oh, of course! I love it!

Rubens:

What committees do you serve on?

03-00:38:01

McKeon:

I’m on the executive committee, and I’m on other committees, a couple of development committees. And education. I’m busy.

Rubens:

I bet you’re busy. It was a full-time job for a while, I can see that.

03-00:38:22

McKeon:

Oh, it was really full-time. But I had the time. My children were raised, I was a widow. I had the time to give to it. I came to love everything about the museum. Just a wonderful, wonderful institution. They are just wonderful people, and the staff are beyond belief.

[End of Interview]

Elizabeth Castle is an Assistant Professor of American Indian Studies at the University of South Dakota and is an Academic Affiliate at the Regional Oral History Office at the University of California, Berkeley, where she previously held a position as academic specialist. Her book *Women Were the Backbone, Men Were the Jawbone: American Indian Women's Activism in the Red Power Movement* will be published by Oxford University Press. The heart of her work concerns communicating the priorities of indigenous communities to public institutions and creating transformative social change in response to colonization.

Lisa Rubens is an historian with the Regional Oral History Office. She directs projects on California Culture and the Arts, Architecture and Land Use development, University History and the History of Social Movements. Dr. Rubens earned her PhD in History, as well as a Masters in City Planning, at UC Berkeley. She has published monographs on women in California and on international exhibitions and is currently completing a book on San Francisco's 1939 Worlds Fair. Dr. Rubens created and directs ROHO's Advanced Oral History Summer Institute.