

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

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

SFMOMA 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

MARIAN PARMENTER

SFMOMA Staff, 1986 – 2007  
Director, SFMOMA Artists' Gallery

Interview conducted by  
Jess Rigelhaupt  
in 2007

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**Interview #1: June 22, 2007**

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01-00:00:06

Rigelhaupt: I'd like to begin, if I could ask you to describe your first visit, if you recall, to SFMOMA.

01-00:00:22

Parmenter: Long, long ago. My first visit was when I had the Berkeley gallery, and there was an exhibition at the museum of [Richard] Diebenkorn. I guess I hadn't been here very long. We moved here in the sixties. I was very young, had two babies, architect husband.

Rigelhaupt: Where did you move here from?

01-00:00:56

Parmenter: Boston.

Rigelhaupt: What brought you to the Bay Area?

01-00:01:01

Parmenter: I went to the Whitney [Museum of American Art], to a show, and I saw this painting by Richard Diebenkorn. They had a poster of it, actually, at the museum. It was so inspiring to me, because I was studying art in Boston, at the Boston Museum School, and thought of myself as a painter, worked in a gallery there. My husband was an architect, and all his best friends at Harvard were coming out here. We all decided sort of to come in a group. It was fun. It was very exciting to move across the country. Sort of California, in those days, was *really* California. The whole world hadn't moved here then. It was an adventure.

Rigelhaupt: What year was this?

01-00:02:00

Parmenter: I think that was in '61.

Rigelhaupt: Then you opened, you said, a Berkeley gallery.

01-00:02:10

Parmenter: Yes, and then after about five years of living in Mill Valley, in the same house I live in now, someone approached me about starting, or rather, running a gallery in Berkeley. It was an artist co-op. I did that for seven years. That was very exciting. Some of those artists are quite well known today, which is wonderful. In fact, the museum just had a show of one of our stars, Robert Bechtle [2005]. It was a very exciting time in the Bay Area for art.

Rigelhaupt: So you said you opened this about five years after you moved here?

01-00:03:00

Parmenter:

I'm trying to do my arithmetic, which I've always been terrible, terrible at arithmetic. But I guess I was about twenty-nine when we did this. We ran it from the late sixties till the mid-seventies. [pause] Or rather it was the other way; mid-sixties to '72.

Rigelhaupt:

Who else was part of the cooperative?

01-00:03:32

Parmenter:

Oh, gosh, so many people. William Allan was. We had some very famous shows with a number of artists like Bob Hudson and William Wiley, Joseph Raphael and Alvin Light, Robert Bechtle and Mel Ramos. More men than women. I look back on it with some amazement, to realize how few women there were in the gallery at that time, which I don't feel proud of at all. But at least today, in the Artists Gallery, we have just as many, if not more women than men. It was an exciting time. We had a great exhibition with R. Crumb. We did a lot of installation shows. One of them got on the cover of *Time* magazine, which was a great thrill for us. We made no money at all, and very few of the artists made very much money. In the early seventies, my husband and I separated, and I went to work for Design Research for five years and ran a furniture store for them, which taught me a great deal about business, which was very valuable as I came here to the Artists Gallery.

01-00:05:02

That began in a curious way. A very old friend of mine, who was a mentor to me—she was almost twenty years older than I—Sally Lilienthal, asked me to join her in starting this gallery as an independent gallery. Fort Mason, where we are now, was just beginning. It was very exciting. The only thing that was here was the Magic Theater and the Blue Bear School of Music. Greens Restaurant was just beginning. We took the space next to them. My husband, who was a really wonderful architect, James Wintersteen, designed the space. It took us about six months to organize clients and artists. It's so amazing to look back on. We started with sixty artists. Now we have about a thousand.

Rigelhaupt:

Let's stay with the founding.

01-00:06:06

Parmenter:

Well, the founding was interesting because when we began, we weren't going to be a part of the museum. The museum had actually had a rental gallery a long time ago. It was the first in the nation. But it was more of a— It was in a tiny space, the way they usually are in most museums. They had a party four times a year, and people went there and had lots of cocktails and went home with a painting. Our concept was quite different. We wanted to really give exposure to Bay Area artists by having a real serious gallery with an exhibition program, and rent and sell, and promote their work in a big way. So that's how we began. We drove all over Northern California and visited hundreds of artists and schools and gathered together a good group, and opened the doors in the fall.

Rigelhaupt: So then from the beginning, the focus was on Bay Area artists.

01-00:07:20

Parmenter:

It was. However, Sally Lilienthal had a huge and very important collection. She was very interested in art, period. She thought we should go to New York and Chicago and Los Angeles and Seattle. In the first ten years, we had many exhibitions from other cities, which I really enjoyed curating, and going to those cities and bringing back a show for us to put on. I think it did us a lot of good. We did two exhibitions from Texas, which was a thrill, and any number from New York and L.A. and Santa Fe. It was very interesting to see so much art in America. It did make you realize we had a certain regional bite. California art was, I think, wilder and woollier and more interesting than a lot of things I saw elsewhere. But it was exciting to do those shows from different cities. Then budgetary demands. Down the line, with various directors, they didn't really want us spending that money doing that. It was expensive to do. They wanted us to focus more directly on strictly Northern California artists. We continue to work with some of our artists who have gone to other cities, who have been wonderful parts of our history. That's good. So we have some branch out in the world.

Rigelhaupt: What do you remember about the initial conversations with Sally Lilienthal about the vision of the gallery?

01-00:09:27

Parmenter:

What I remember most is she had been a fan of my gallery, the Berkeley gallery, and she was excited that I shared with her a vision of helping artists. Because in the early days around here, artists truly really didn't make very much money. Only a few people did, like Diebenkorn. It wasn't the making of money, it was the power, it was the extension of their exposure and what would happen to their careers that we cared about. We both cared about politics. We were both very liberal and we were strong Democrats, and we shared that. We had worked together on a number of auctions for different political ideas and candidates. So we had a great bond. She was a wonderful mentor. She was a very high-powered lady, and very definite. Always said what she thought, which was quite a balancing act sometimes. But she was a *wonderful* person, and I learned a great deal from her. She was a great person to have in my life and to teach you things. I learned from her.

Rigelhaupt: As the gallery began, was it seen to filling a need? In the sense that there were, of course, galleries in San Francisco.

01-00:11:19

Parmenter:

Oh, yes.

Rigelhaupt: So how was this gallery going to be different?

01-00:11:22

Parmenter:

We were going to be different for several reasons. We were an arm of the museum, an annex, whatever one wants to call it. The fact that we weren't in the mother museum had advantages, I think, for us. Fort Mason was very lively artistically at that time. The Mexican Museum, the Italian Museum were here, and there was a wonderful folk art museum. It was a very, very thrilling place to be. The differences were, we gave more money to the artists. When we sold things, we gave them 60 percent. Most galleries give them 50. That was a help. I think we chose the art, and continue to show and choose the art, by what seems good. We weren't as interested in commercial aspects. We wanted to make money, of course, but that wasn't why we were doing it. We started with only Sally, me, and two graduate students. The gallery was only half as big as it is now, in size. We have a great many artists, and we don't have enough room. I'd love to have all of that giant building A, but we don't. I sometimes feel like the old woman who lives in a shoe and she has so many children she doesn't know what to do, because we don't have enough space. But we certainly have more space than if we'd been in the mother museum, where we would've been in the basement or the attic or down the hall somewhere. That's why, I think—that's one of the reasons why I think this gallery has been very successful, is that we have this beautiful, airy space here. People like coming down here.

Rigelhaupt:

What were the institutional connections, as it began, with the museum?

01-00:13:41

Parmenter:

Well, Henry Hopkins, who was a great friend of Sally's—she'd been on the board at the museum, or was on the board for many years—chatted with her about it all and said, "Well, why don't you come onboard and be part of the museum?" That seemed like a good idea for the artists, as well. So we joined with them. Sally paid all the bills for the first two years, which was extremely generous. It was an enormous gift, really, to the museum. She also paid for the renovation of the building. I'm sort of appalled to hear myself talking about nothing but money, but when you start something, money is very important.

01-00:14:32

After that, after two years, she left to start [the] Ploughshares [Fund], the peace foundation that I showed you down the hall. She didn't have to pay the bills anymore, because we made enough money to pay my salary and one other person. Gradually, as we have grown, our staff has grown; and we now have seven people that we employ, including a driver. We have a great big red truck that says, "Rent Art." That's good. That helps us. It's sort of a moving ad, throughout the city. It was all done in the old way, with a handshake with Henry, no paperwork. Extraordinary. Our mission statement and our idea was to give Northern California artists exposure and help them financially. The fascinating thing is, out of all these people who have gone through the gallery, I suppose we've been connected to about 5,000 artists over these thirty years. But some have remained with us. Some extremely good artists have remained with us. We really do contribute enormously to their financial well being,

because now we sell their work quite a lot. People like Willard Dixon and Gustavo Rivera and— Well, endless. There are about fifty people that really do make quite a lot of money and who we support in a big way. They usually have another gallery, as well, if not more.

Rigelhaupt: Is it typical that they'll have another gallery in other cities?

01-00:16:40

Parmenter: Or here, too. A commercial gallery. We're a nonprofit, you see, technically. We're part of the museum. So the other galleries, if we split the commission with them, allow us to have their artists. That's good, because they're the real financial backbone of the gallery.

Rigelhaupt: Well, since were talking just a little bit about money, from the early years, was there any budgetary ties with the museum?

01-00:17:19

Parmenter: Very, very little. There was a wonderful man at the museum named Saint John and he was called Saint. He was their controller. He was very sweet. I would go over and have a chat with him now and then. He would look at our figures, and he'd sort of pat me on the shoulder and say, "That's great." I'd go back to the gallery. We weren't making very much money in the early years. The check for the profit I would sign every year would be \$5,000, \$7,000. Finally, it went up to quite a lot. For us. You know, the difficulty, the really serious difficulty I can say that we have had in being connected to the museum has been that the board, especially the finance committee, would like us to make more money. It's very hard for them to really quite understand, I think, why we can't make oceans of money, as the store does. We have often been compared to the store. That is hard, because the store sells pencils with lions heads on them for ninety-nine cents, and endless books for very little, really, relatively. In a gallery, there may be a few artists who have things for as little as \$300, \$500, but most of the work is quite a lot more. It's a serious purchase for our clients. For the very rich collectors, it isn't, but for just the average Joe, it is. We do an awful lot of work with extremely nice people who are just beginning to collect. Enormous amounts of our profit are from corporations, who usually rent, sometimes build a collection and buy, but basically, they usually rent. So the strictures of making money are always with us. We're always aware of our budget and what we must achieve.

01-00:19:59

We now have at the museum a great supporter in Ikuko Satoda, who is the deputy director. She has been a wonderful person for me to work with. She was there earlier, with Jack Lane, and then she moved over to the Asian [Art] Museum. I'm very grateful that she's back in our museum because she has been really a great support for us. There have been people over the years who were not as easy to be with, work with.

Rigelhaupt: So who are the main people you work with at the museum? You mentioned someone in the position of a controller.

01-00:20:44

Parmenter: That was long ago. You see, Ikuko Satoda is the deputy director. But she is essentially that person, but more. Her job is very expanded. So I work most closely with her. And curate shows for the café, so you know the people who organize the café. We're now building a website, so two of my staff, Steve Pon and Andrea Voinot, work very closely with the web people and other departments there.

Rigelhaupt: How often do you have meetings with the deputy director?

01-00:21:26

Parmenter: Oh, monthly. Monthly. She is an extraordinary woman. Very far seeing. She does understand—which many members of the board, I feel, do not—that half of our service, if you will, that we have here is really being a community organization. We're for the community. For the community of the artists, and the community, I feel, of San Franciscans. It is a very easy way for people to become involved in art, in that they can rent, for a small amount, a wonderful painting and try it out. Or many wonderful paintings, and try them out. I love that. I love being part of a community effort. It's a very exciting feeling. We all feel that way. But mostly, what I love best is everything to do with the art and the artists. That's been my passion all my life. I've worked in many galleries and another museum in Philadelphia. It's been really a wonderful thing to see the gallery grow and make more money for all those good people that need it. They need it because, not just paying their bills, but it's part of being encouraged and going on. If this interests you, young artists can hang their art anywhere. You know, in cafés and in their cooperative galleries here and there. Older artists and mid-career artists, having a gallery is great, but it isn't always enough. It doesn't always produce enough income to make them feel, this is worthwhile, people love what I do; I'm going to keep on doing it. I think that's why we revere older artists; they're artists who continue to work. A lot of people fall by the wayside.

Rigelhaupt: From my understanding, there was an expansion of the art market in the early 1980s.

01-00:24:15

Parmenter: It was huge.

Rigelhaupt: Could you describe what you remember about that and how it affected the gallery?

01-00:24:23

Parmenter: It was fantastic. It doubled our income. We had, finally, a position in the gallery for a corporate person. She was spectacular. Her name was Sue Sproul. She did a marvelous job. We got a grant from the Gerbode Foundation

for a catalogue. We went with some architectural photographers all over the city, to our best clients, and took pictures of art in place. That was a tool that we had never had. It was *huge*, what it did, because people could visualize, then, their own spaces and how it might be a good idea to have art there. That is an aspect of the gallery that's quite neat. All these big, cool corporate spaces, all gray, white, black, must be very hard and dreary to be in all day, I think. If they have a lively piece of art next to their desk or down the hall, it's helpful for their morale. That's been really exciting, watching that grow and expand, too.

01-00:25:46

When the bubble burst, it did hit us hard. You know, the big expansion. There was a time when the Silicon Valley— Well, they say the bubble burst, and it did. We felt it financially. At that time, we invented something that stores have done forever, but we had a warehouse sale. That's a huge source of income for us every year. It's kind of a killer episode, where we are working nonstop for two straight weeks, but it produces a lot of income. For the artists, too; they love it.

Rigelhaupt:

What do you think was driving the expansion of the art market in the early 1980s?

01-00:26:43

Parmenter:

So many things. I suppose the fact that people had unprecedented amount of money. So they bought houses and art and cars, and they began to feel that this was maybe a way to invest, because they've read about serious giant collectors investing for years. Suddenly they felt, I can invest in it. We have a certain number of clients who come to us and are interested in that aspect only. We can help them there. I'm always very thrilled when we have a client who simply responds to the work, buys it because they love it and it's wonderful. Books have been written about why people invest in art. Everyone has their own particular passion. There's a very famous story of two post office delivery people in New York. This story was in the *New York Times*, on the front page, about five years ago. They started collecting minimal art, unframed. They kept it under their bed, in their one-room apartment in New York, and on the walls. They built a very, very fine minimal art collection, which is now in one of the museums in New York, donated by them. I supposed it was the Whitney. So it's very varied. You never know. Very young people sometimes collect art, which I'm very thrilled by, because I think it'll make them very happy.

Rigelhaupt:

Was there a connection with corporation expanding? In the sense you've said that some of the artists you've worked with are in office buildings.

01-00:29:02

Parmenter:

Oh, no, not the artists. Sorry. I didn't say that properly. No, what I meant was, all the people who work for giant corporations—the secretaries, the

lawyers—they go in there every day and they’re there all week long, in a little gray office. I think it’s pretty grim if they don’t have some art around them.

Rigelhaupt: But some of that art has come from your gallery.

01-00:29:32

Parmenter: Oh, yes! Oceans. There was a great law firm in our city, Brobeck, Phleger and Harrison. They collected twelve floors of art from us, which they purchased, which was a fantastic thing. That was during the great boom.

Rigelhaupt: So in the 1980s?

01-00:29:51

Parmenter: Yes. Lawyers were our very best clients. That makes sense, because they probably had the most money. But also, they were intelligent people; they knew what they were doing.

Rigelhaupt: Most of the work that comes out of your gallery that is in a corporate setting, most of that’s bought? Or is it rented?

01-00:30:15

Parmenter: It’s rented. Then we try to encourage them to build a collection. Some of them buy a painting at the end of the fiscal year; some of them don’t. Some of them buy a few paintings. It’s not quite as wonderful. We make more money now, but it’s not as easy as it was in the eighties. It was easy then.

Rigelhaupt: What were some of the challenges of starting the gallery, in 1978?

01-00:3:57

Parmenter: Well, I think the perception of a rental gallery was, oh, dear, that’s not very interesting, is it? The fact that we weren’t in the museum was harder. We didn’t get the kind of support, I don’t think, that we might have gotten, had we been there in the museum. Certainly, the trustees seldom come to the gallery. Very, very seldom. Two of our directors were *very* supportive. Henry Hopkins was wonderful. He was a real angel, and still is. He still sends artists to me from L.A. Jack Lane wasn’t supportive. He was very stern. He was very concerned with building a world-class museum, which he did. I respected him enormously. He was not crazy about the idea of our having exhibitions. He made that very clear. But eventually, he came around, I think. He came to the gallery for all the important exhibitions and events, which was wonderful. It meant a great deal to whoever the artists were. Since that time, we don’t see the directors. I suppose they’re too busy. It’s too bad, though. Some of the curators come. A lot of curators come from other museums. A lot of museums have visited us from different parts of the country, because our gallery is considered the best rental gallery in the country. That’s always nice. Sometimes they ask us to come and tell them how to do it all. So that’s fine. That’s been a help.

Rigelhaupt: What were some of the things you learned from having run the Berkeley gallery, as well as being involved in other galleries, that helped you when the gallery started in 1978?

01-00:33:40

Parmenter: Well, it was huge, you see, because I started working in galleries. I had a very odd education, at quite a few schools in different parts of the country. I started working in galleries when I was eighteen. My first one was in Philadelphia, where I was brought up. It was called the Print Club, and it was a gallery. [Henri] Matisse printed there, and all sorts of very, very famous artists, when I was just an infant, printed there. So early on, it was my education, working in these different museums and galleries. Trying to be a painter myself. Did I answer that properly?

Rigelhaupt: Well, I was curious about some of the nuts and bolts.

01-00:34:44

Parmenter: Things I actually learned. Nuts and bolts.

Rigelhaupt: Yes, the nuts and bolts.

01-00:34:47

Parmenter: I felt early on that artists were special, rarified creatures and had to be treated with great respect. It would never have occurred to me to tell them what to do or how to do it. To me, that was extremely rude. Some dealers do. I never really considered myself an art dealer until I was much, much older and had my own gallery. I liked working *with* artists, and I like working *with* clients. It's easier to tell a client what to do than it is an artist. They're very sensitive creatures. Their feelings are easily hurt. So you have to be very tactful and kind. I think the few times I wasn't, I felt badly later. Then I also learned a great deal about how to present work and the importance of having a beautiful space. Having all the installations be of museum quality. We really try to do that in the gallery, and have the proper backup, with their histories, their resumes, knowing about the provenance of their work, so that you can talk about it intelligently. My staff is really wonderful. They've all learned to do that. Those are the most important things to me.

01-00:36:54

Paying them on time. Many, many commercial galleries—and they wouldn't like my saying this, but they don't. Sometimes they don't pay them at all. That's very hard on artists, obviously; it would be hard on anybody. So we really do have a perfect record there, I have to say. A lot of that has been because when I had a lot of freedom to make decisions about staffing, I hired two accountants. I guess that was in the early eighties. They really helped me. They were fantastic guys, and taught us all a lot. The main man of that team died of AIDS, which was just really sad. Then we hired another accountant, who is no longer with us. The museum does all the accounting. But I liked that a lot professionally, having our own accountant with us in the building, because we could discuss each thing as it came up. But it works fine with the

museum doing it, too. It's okay. Things got tighter with the museum, as money became more of an issue for them. And [pause] they have to be concerned about money. Running a museum is a difficult thing. So I respect and understand that. [pause]

01-00:39:03

My only wish would be that the museum were more really interested and involved in what we do. There are a great many artists who work for the museum. Happily, they're good artists, and we have shown their work in the gallery. It has always surprised me, speaking candidly, that more people don't come from the museum when that happens. But that's the way it is. I think collectors—and basically, the board consists of very high-powered collectors and business people; there are a few others, too, but—I just think they think it's a very small, little outfit, and we're out of sight, out of mind. There was, in the early days, at the museum, a different makeup of the board, and they were very supportive. Now they're very, very busy, high-powered people. This is true all over the country, really.

Rigelhaupt:

Well, could you expand on that, and talk about some of the board members you've worked with? Early or supportive.

01-00:40:31

Parmenter:

Early on? Yes. Well, Bill Roth, who used to be chairman of the board at the old museum, was very supportive of the gallery and came often to openings, and was a friend, really. Various others did, too. But now, when you have chairmen of giant organizations like Toys "R" Us and the Gap and Charles Schwab, people like that, their lives are international and their concerns are also. It's a very different makeup. So it's understandable that things are the way they are. But I always feel that if people were more aware of us down there, that it could be very helpful to us. But they may be more aware and I don't know it, too. I usually just hear the wishes that our income were bigger and all that.

Rigelhaupt:

Has that been consistent from the early years? In the sense that you've described that early on, the board was more supportive. But was there still the hope that you would provide income?

01-00:42:33

Parmenter:

Yes. They did want us to, but they understood in the beginning that we were just beginning. They were encouraging, is what they were. But they came from time to time and would buy a little print or a photograph, or sometimes a painting. It was a very nice feeling. It made everybody happy. We're bigger, too. We went from sixty artists to a thousand. We managed to, once a year, usually, have some sort of exhibition that is community based. When Kala [Art Institute] celebrated their thirtieth, we gave them an exhibition of their most extraordinary artists. We've worked with different presses, like Trillium and [pause] a great many other organizations. Sometimes we do an exhibition around the idea of something like the environment, which we just did at

Christmas. It was in November and December. It was my favorite exhibition we ever had. It was simply phenomenal. We got a great deal of wonderful press. The art was beautiful, really astonishing. I'm excited about that kind of thing, because I think art and politics sometimes do connect. Artists feel about all those things very strongly. So do I.

Rigelhaupt: I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about the process of selecting those first sixty artists.

01-00:44:37

Parmenter:

Well, that was simply getting in a little car and driving like mad all over Northern California and visiting. We knew, between us, Sally and I, a great many artists, even then, because I'd had the Berkeley gallery, and she had had a long involvement with the [San Francisco] Art Institute and the museum. So we had a great advantage in starting a gallery, in that we really knew a lot of awfully good people to call upon, so to speak. We got suggestions from some of them on who we might check out. We have never had a lack of artists applying to the gallery. It's an unending wave. But the first exhibition, some of those people have become very well known. Chris Brown was one of the people; Bechtle was one of the people; Carl Dern, who is a well-known Bay Area sculptor; Inez Storer. There was a good beginning. [George] Moscone came with a bottle of bay water, and crashed it over a sculpture, to christen us. Then the poor man was shot, one month later. It's been very exciting, I have to say. I've really loved the whole thing, love the art and the artists. A good artist is often a very generous artist and will tell you of another person that they believe in, that I should see. So it's unending, really, how many there are. It's rather awing. I don't know what will happen to them all. I'm glad the Artists Gallery is there to support them. I think it's important. I think it's one of the most important things the museum does, because as they're quite open about this, they are interested in being a world-class museum. They are elitist, and they were interested in the work of, basically, extremely well-known artists from all over the world. Other than us, there isn't much space for them there, unless they, too, become well known all over the world.

Rigelhaupt: What do you remember about the gallery when it was in the Van Ness [Avenue] location?

01-00:47:49

Parmenter:

I remember it was in a little, tiny location. I remember those parties, because I had the Berkeley gallery then, and they would call all the galleries up and say, "Will you give us some art for our rental gallery?" We did. But it was tiny. I don't know if you've ever visited rental galleries in museums, but they're invariably pretty tragic, pretty little.

Rigelhaupt: Well, in thinking back—so this is even before you were running the gallery—did you have a sense of how much support came from Grace McCann Morley and George Culler, the directors?

01-00:48:43

Parmenter:

Well, you see, our gallery was separate, entirely. That gallery that used to be in the museum, that first one, I think it was almost a social kind of event, about four times a year, where people rushed in and met all their friends, and had a wonderful time at a party, and rented a painting and went home. I think there was little space for it in the museum, which I honestly don't remember. I really don't. I think they had some prints there, and a few small works. But you see, we have three huge rooms filled with art, upstairs in our gallery. There's just an enormous inventory of work. Obviously, it's not all there at the same time. Most of it's out in the world. But it's an awful lot of work.

Rigelhaupt:

Was there an educational component of the gallery?

01-00:50:02

Parmenter:

Well, we always hope it is. We hope and pray that all these different people that we work with in the corporations, who sometimes take as many as thirty or forty works of art, that the people who work there are getting excited about learning things. Occasionally, someone comes in and tells me that they are learning or have learned. So that's good. So I hope so. So much of learning about art, I think—although I realize this is not intellectual—but I think a lot of it is osmosis. Living with it, looking and looking and looking at it, and visiting galleries, and going to museums; and after a while, beginning to see the difference between a good painting and a bad painting, or a very commercial painting and a really, truly serious, profound painting.

Rigelhaupt:

So it sounds as though part of your audience, as it was initially conceived, was corporate—is buyers not the right word? But a corporate connection.

01-00:51:28

Parmenter:

That's why we built a whole position around it because it's a full-time job. And back to education, yes, lots of art teachers bring classes to the gallery to see the shows. Hordes of little children tromp through. Sometimes, some very cool, sophisticated classes come through. Art schools. So that's good, too. That's really good. That's usually because of a wonderful artist somewhere who's teaching somewhere, who says, "Come on, we're going to go down and do this as a field trip." I think that's a good thing to do, for a teacher.

Rigelhaupt:

Well, do you think the museum, in general, has an educational role?

01-00:52:19

Parmenter:

Yes, I do. They have a serious education department. I suppose my favorite person at the museum is Peter Samis. I hope you get a chance to interview him. He is just really extraordinary. He's been part of the curatorial team, but I think now is basically in education. He is a *profound* supporter of Bay Area artists. His partner is a *wonderful* artist. In fact, she is exhibiting in our current show that you just saw downstairs. I think once people are hooked, it's a lifelong passion. For some people, it's decoration, but we see less and less of those people who come in to get something to match the sofa, and more and

more, we see people who really want Art, with a capital A. That's really exciting. That, to me, is progress. In the beginning, it was really quite terrible how many people wanted a painting to match their sofa. Enormous work we do now is with what they call stagers and interior designers. They're really our biggest support now.

Rigelhaupt: Could you explain how that works?

01-00:54:05

Parmenter:

Well, they come in and they spend about a day. And by the time they leave, they have about eight pages of contracts, and forty pictures leave the gallery. They're taking them off to all kinds of places—restaurants, houses, perhaps they're working with a real estate company, in trying to sell something. But they're a huge, huge support. I think it's kind of neat that people don't feel they can sell a house anymore unless there are some paintings on the wall. It means it's become part of the everyday world.

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02-00:00:08

Rigelhaupt:

How would you describe the Artists Gallery as a launching pad for artists?

02-00:00:16

Parmenter:

Well, I think it's been a wonderful launching pad for a percentage of our artists. The ones who were fully formed, who had a definite style, look, were very exciting. For them, it's been quite terrific. One of our artists died tragically recently, of cancer, and she left the gallery \$20,000 because she felt we had been so important in the beginning of her career. Many, many of our artists do feel that we had everything to do with their beginning, because they were unknown, and they wouldn't necessarily been able to get into a gallery, as they all say. Many artists come to confer with me about how to get into a gallery. Where to go, who to see, who is open. There's no point in them going anywhere, unless they fit there. But most artists can't see that, because they're so involved in their own work. The more sophisticated ones can. The more sophisticated ones usually do pretty well if they've had an exhibition with us and worked with us for a while, and we've done some work with them.

Rigelhaupt:

It sounds as though you don't have a competitive relationship with any local galleries.

02-00:01:56

Parmenter:

Well, I hope that's true, but I do know some galleries have been pretty vehement about their artists, once they got rather well known, and we had their work, and then they didn't want them to continue to be with us. Some have been very difficult that way. But then some galleries are more possessive than others, and some are more— It depends on the artist, how much work they do; if they are very prolific, if they have oceans and oceans of work. Although there is one of our most famous artists, who continues to work with

us, and his gallery dealer had a complete meltdown this year, when we were going to show some of his paintings in a wonderful three-person show. He caused all kinds of terrible havoc at the very last minute. So you never know. That particular artist is too important to us for me to say his name, but he is really universally known, and he works harder than anyone I know, and has oceans of work. He has galleries all over the world. But we're right here, so *we are* a competition for some people.

Rigelhaupt: But it sounds as though it's more the exception than the rule.

02-00:03:38

Parmenter: I think so. As we have become more successful, though, it has occurred more and more. There's a wonderful gallery in San Francisco, the Paule Anglim Gallery, and she's a very old friend of mine, as well. But she has taken on many of our artists—Chris Brown, Leo Bersamina, William Allan, Enrique Chagoya. They're among her most successful artists, and we continue to work with them.

Rigelhaupt: How are the artists that are shown in your gallery located, and how do you kind of screen who's going to be a part of the gallery?

02-00:04:27

Parmenter: Well, I used to do it all myself. But then it got to be such a huge, overwhelming thing. You should see my office. Boxes and boxes of slides. There're boxes in closets that we go through. Four times a year, we have a slide review. That's sort of great, too, I feel, because it includes the whole staff. Everybody puts in their two cents. I like that because as our community aspect has grown, it seems to me that that's a very nice thing. Then we write to the ones we want, and then they phone me, and I see them and choose work for the gallery, and that begins it. Lots of people want to be exhibited, as well. But obviously, not everybody is or can be.

Rigelhaupt: Do you have an estimate, as far as the percentage that are local artists?

02-00:05:39

Parmenter: You mean in San Francisco, or the whole Bay Area?

Rigelhaupt: Just the Bay Area in general.

02-00:05:43

Parmenter: Oh, I would say it's probably 90 percent. This is what the museum wanted. There are about 10 percent that have gone off in different directions, we keep up with.

Rigelhaupt: When you say that this is what the museum wanted, is that something from the beginning that—

02-00:06:09

Parmenter:

No. No, it wasn't at all. Henry loved it. Henry Hopkins thought it was great that we went all over the place and did shows from everywhere. Jack Lane didn't mind at all that we went to Texas and went to New York. I think he liked it that we were expansive. It all ended, about our doing things like that, when one of our most successful artists moved to England, and we went to England. I went with one of my staff to England to have an exchange, English/American show. David Ross was the director at that time. He and I never really did see eye to eye, and he was furious and didn't like that. Since that time, the museum has basically said, "We want you to concentrate on Bay Area art." I say Northern California, because it's more generous and further reaching.

Rigelhaupt:

Do you have a sense of sort of the rationale behind focusing on Northern California more?

02-00:07:34

Parmenter:

Well, I think for the museum, for those at the museum who do like us very much and think we're doing a good job, it's their way— They can say, "Well, there is the Artists Gallery at Fort Mason. They're taking care of the local artists," as they put it. That's the rationale. I think it was financial, as well. It didn't cost a whole lot of money for us to go to different cities, and we usually had a very decent arrangement about the shipping, and it wasn't that expensive. But it was a way to pare down the budget. That's always very important, in every museum.

Rigelhaupt:

When did the name change from rental gallery to Artists Gallery?

02-00:08:30

Parmenter:

Oh, that was quite a wonderful thing to me, because I found the old title so clunky and long and boring and uninteresting. There was a very bright young man at the museum in the PR department who thought that, too. Somehow or another, we were having one of those meetings. He suggested it. He said, "You're doing so much more than simply renting art. You're selling it, you're exhibiting it. It ought to have a broader context as a name." The Artists Gallery is so brief and great. It's so simple to say. So I was very thrilled by the name change.

Rigelhaupt:

How did the dot-com environment—

02-00:09:33

Parmenter:

Affect us?

Rigelhaupt:

Yes.

02-00:09:36

Parmenter:

You know, it's so hard to know. I felt the dot-com was helping us in the eighties. I think when we have a web place, it will be terrific. On the whole, I don't think it's made that much difference.

Rigelhaupt: So the expansion and all the businesses that—

02-00:10:05

Parmenter: Well, that's really been us sending our catalogues, cold calls, referrals. It's just been plain hard work. There is such a thing as word of mouth, which I really believe in. Because many people walk in and say, "Oh, my friend Sam has all your art. I want to have it, too." "My office needs you." Or, "I want to have a painting." So that has really been wonderful. We have a lot of friends in the city.

Rigelhaupt: Do you think that expansion of money, with the dot-com in the late nineties, did that shape the Bay Area's arts community? Or have an impact?

02-00:11:00

Parmenter: I would say so. I would say enormously, because— I'm sure it's shaped us, in spite of my not being quite aware of it. I would say yes, enormously. Because when I had the Berkeley gallery, there were only really five decent contemporary galleries in the city. It's really true. Maybe a few hangers on. The main activity seemed, at that time, to be taking place in college and university galleries. Museum. God knows, we have plenty of museums. But there were other galleries; they just weren't very good galleries, you know? Now there're so many. There are constantly new galleries that are very exciting and very interesting. Oakland. Oakland all of a sudden has a great many galleries. So I think it's progress, of a kind. Artists certainly make more money than they used to. And completely expect to. So it's helped them individually. Most artists I know today want a website, and create one. That's great for them, too. That's been a big help to them. It has made it more competitive and more difficult for us, because you can go and look up someone on a website, and contact that person and buy art from them directly. So we noticed this year, in our warehouse sale, we made more money than we had before. But boy, was it harder. It was interesting. It just was harder. There are other things that go on, like open studios. Hunters Point has a huge number of artists out there, and they open up two or three times a year. People go out there now.

Rigelhaupt: Is that something you're hearing from other galleries, as well, that—

02-00:13:29

Parmenter: I don't know. I'll tell you about other galleries. As far as I can see, so many galleries— Some really do support the Bay Area. But many of them bring in work from elsewhere. I do think this is sort of a falling down effect from the fact that our museum is now a world-class museum. People are interested in having work by somebody who's hot in New York. A lot of galleries that used to be focused on the Bay Area have expanded in that direction. Maybe it'll be fine. I sometimes worry a little that the whole thing is financial, and if the museums of the Bay Area lose interest in working with the artists of the Bay Area, what it will mean for the art community here. Our photography situation in the Bay Area is fantastic now. That is thanks to two extraordinary curators

at the museum, Van Deren Coke, who is no longer with us, but— then Sandy Phillips. I think the work that they both did *totally* educated the entire Bay Area about photography. The museum has the most *wonderful* photography exhibitions. We do, too. I'd say when we started the gallery, we only had about two or three photographers in that first year. Now we must have many hundreds, several hundred. I think photography is a very, very exciting and very interesting medium. Affordable for people. That's another thing that's very great about it.

Rigelhaupt: What have been some personal highlights, as director?

02-00:16:02

Parmenter: In my life here? In the gallery? Well, I mentioned before, our last great show was the environmental show. Not last great show; they're all great shows, of course, but I did think that environmental show was very exciting. I thought some of the exhibitions we brought in from elsewhere were exciting. Our Texas shows, I loved. Also some of our artists who'd gone on from here to New York. I went to New York, saw how they were progressing, what they were doing, and we had shows here. We had a wonderful— [pause] Oh, dear. This is a hard question, actually, funnily enough. We did a wonderful exhibition in the Latin community. I really loved that; that was a great highlight for me. And [pause] I think, you know, I really— it's such a long tapestry of years and working with all these people. I think the highlights for me has been to see my favorite artists develop and grow and become even more wonderful. To see their success has been really wonderful.

Rigelhaupt: Well, you mentioned going to New York and other places that— some of the artists you've worked with. I'm actually wondering if you could speak generally, how you perceive the differences in the art scene in, say, the Bay Area and Los Angeles and New York, maybe Chicago, Texas.

02-00:18:02

Parmenter: Different things?

Rigelhaupt: Yeah, what are some of the— how the art communities function differently, what the scenes are like.

02-00:18:08

Parmenter: The scenes are so different to me, anyway, because New York is so cool. Everyone is so competent. It's extremely elegant. Minimalism was very important there before it was here. It's here now; it's fine. It does well. I personally love minimal art. But the scene, of course, in New Mexico was very Latin, very influenced by the desert. Indian. There are a few places in New Mexico that have very cutting-edge work, but that other aspect seemed to take over, that geographical aspect. Los Angeles, I think is edgier than the Bay Area. We're more conservative up here. We didn't used to be, but we are now. I remember, because Henry Hopkins was a good friend, that his heart was always in L.A. He loved it best. He went back there, and is now director

of the Armand Hammer Museum. But we here in the Bay Area were truly wide open and wild, in the sixties and seventies. I think one of the reasons— Although ten artists might throw their whole studio at me for saying this. But they didn't have the opportunity to really make much money, so it didn't matter. So they just went way out. They really did exactly what they wanted. That was exciting and interesting. It's definitely— this is the most interesting thing about living a long time; you just see these huge changes take place. And people here are more knowledgeable. They go to New York, they see things. They're not as insular as they used to be. They're more sophisticated. There are many more art magazines and more galleries. So it isn't that it becomes generic, but you can fly to Texas and see someone that reminds you of somebody in Sacramento. Art is sort of universal. It's quite wonderful that it is, I think. You always feel you have a home. You always recognize certain people. But [pause] I think the corporate world has made a big— It's brought a certain pressure to bear on art. I'm not so sure what I think about that.

Rigelhaupt: You might date that from the 1980s, when you said there was this expansion of the art market.

02-00:21:37

Parmenter:

Well, and the fact that there are more galleries, there're more ways for artists to be supported, too. When we began, I think there were less ways. I do. Because artists, when they're mid-career artists, are not going to descend to having a show in a restaurant. They might, but it's pretty rare. Now artists really do have a huge support system, I think, if they are willing to go out in the world and hunt for it. If they're willing to go and throw themselves on the mercy of a gallery dealer, a commercial gallery dealer here and there. Some artists are very shy and private people, and they wait for you to come to them. If they're very good, it's all right. There was an artist who had a studio in the very tip of Texas. He was very famous, and kind of a hot artist during the seventies. Paule Anglim showed him. I remember calling him up saying, "I'd like to come to your studio and see you." It was about— I have no idea how many miles. Hours and hours on the road from Dallas. He said, "Well, I'm not sure I'll be there. The door's open. You can come down, look at my work, see what you see." But as to the differences, the geographical differences, I think each city influences what goes on there, because those artists are attracted by that place, and they live there. They like the ambiance of that city, and reflect it, somehow. I suppose New York is the biggest and the most powerful place in the world; it will always be the frontrunner in the art world.

Rigelhaupt: But that phrase that you used at the beginning, "The Bay Area was wild and wooly," and that there was a fair amount of conceptual art in the seventies—

02-00:24:13

Parmenter:

Oh, yes! A *great* deal.

Rigelhaupt: But the infusion of money in the eighties. Actually, it sounds as though art became a little more conservative.

02-00:24:24

Parmenter: Well, to me, it seemed to. Maybe it was only that all my friends grew up, and I did, too. I don't know. But it did seem that people were talking in a way they never had before. They were talking about marketing, marketing themselves. This is what this whole web business, after all, is all about. There were artists who wouldn't have thought that way—or spoken that way, even if they did think that way. It changed. Also, art here in the Bay Area, for a long time, was completely irreverent. There was a lot of stuff about writing, putting your thoughts on the painting or on the photograph, whatever. And [pause] there was a lot of very irreverent work that was done. Which made it rather exciting.

Rigelhaupt: How would you define SFMOMA now, as it approaches its seventy-fifth anniversary?

02-00:25:32

Parmenter: Well, I think Jack Lane, in deciding—and he did marvelously—that it was imperative to have a building—he really pushed and pulled and gathered his forces. The generosity of the board allowed him to build that splendid building. Then he was able to attract exhibitions from all the centers of art, to come here, because it was an up-to-date building; it had the right heating and venting, air conditioning, et cetera, and security. He's done the same thing in Dallas. I read an enormous article all about it the other day and was so impressed, what he's done down there. I love it when I can go to our museum and see the photography exhibitions and a show like "Picasso in America," [Picasso and American Art, 2006] which just knocked my socks off. I was so thrilled by that. To see the influence that one very famous French painter had had on so many Americans. They were very diverse and very unusual Americans that were caught up in his net, so to speak. That's a thrill to have that in our city. To see the Richard Tuttle show [2005], which I adored—although I gather lots of people didn't. But if we didn't have that building, and all those hard workers in it, we couldn't have shows like that. I think the [M. H.] de Young [Memorial Museum] will give us a run for our money. It, too, is a splendid building. I think people love going out there, who never went before. They are quite supportive of the artists of the Bay Area, and have a rather large collection, which they show at all times, which really pleases me a lot.

Rigelhaupt: What are some of the hidden gems in SFMOMA's permanent collection?

02-00:28:10

Parmenter: Well, I don't know that they're hidden. There's some amazing things in the collection. I realize I like [Henri] Matisse and [Max] Beckmann and some of the older artists from that period. It seemed to me a very rich and glorious period. And [Arshile] Gorky. A lot of the art of today, of right now in our

time, is very important for what it reflects about our society, I think. I have less of an emotional and passionate connection with a lot of it. Like Matthew Barney, who brought in two tons of Crisco to simulate an iceberg, and had all those wonderful photographs around the room. I didn't particularly want to own any of them, but it was a fascinating thing to see what he had done. It was an exciting idea, that he did that. I think there's so many gems in the photography collection, I couldn't even begin to start. I probably don't spend enough time in the mother museum, I really don't, to answer that question really well. I'm here, or I'm on the road. When we have a major wonderful show, I go. I'm very excited to go. Always thrilled, pleased. I think they're doing a great job. I should say we; we're part of it. But I *feel* they are. That crew there is really terrific.

Rigelhaupt: Well, do you have an idea of why SFMOMA had such a large solo exhibition for Matthew Barney?

02-00:30:36

Parmenter: Well, they promoted him from the beginning. He was sort of an outrageous person, and it was interesting to them, all that climbing, all those films. It isn't my taste. But I see why they thought he was important. The Michael Jackson ceramic sculpture with the monkey is an amazing sculpture, by [Jeff] Koons. But I can't say I care about it, really. I think it's one of those sort of tour de force things that's in a museum. But museums *should* reflect their time. It's part of the charge, I think, that they have. Things you don't like— I once had a painting teacher who said, "It doesn't matter whether you like it or not; that's not the point." I think that they were right. It's how it strikes you, what it makes you think of. I wish our museum had a stronger bent toward collecting and supporting Bay Area artists. Obviously, I feel that. There were some really wonderful things that were collected by the museum, which I think are in storage—the sculptures of Alvin Light—but I never see them in the museum. I'm very sorry not to see them there. But that's a curatorial decision.

Rigelhaupt: Well, that was part of my question about the hidden gems. But I think it's a small percentage of what's in the permanent collection that is actually—

02-00:32:51

Parmenter: Absolutely.

Rigelhaupt: So are there things that maybe don't come out as often, that you—

02-00:32:58

Parmenter: Or ever. You know? Apparently. I think Jack Lane's feeling—he set the tone, in a way—was, he wasn't interested in the art that had taken place up to the sixties. Because I know that there are still a great many treasures in storage that don't see the light of day. I mentioned the Alvin Light sculptures, because he was a friend and someone I knew well, and who was in my gallery. I thought his work was quite extraordinary, and I can't believe that we can't go

there and see one. But there're are different fashions for different times, too. Especially in the museum world.

Rigelhaupt: I want to switch gears a little bit and ask you about some of the directors that you've worked with. Maybe if you could talk a little bit about maybe some of their strengths, the directions in which they tried to take the museum. It sounds as though your working relationship began with Henry Hopkins.

02-00:34:16

Parmenter: That was a wonderful relationship, because he was such a supporter, actually, of Bay Area artists, even though he always said, "I can't stay forever, I want to get back to L.A." He really did know every artist, their dogs, their cats, and the dog's name, and their children. He was really a sweetie. He was very, very supportive of what we did in the beginning, when we were very tiny. Of course, I loved and appreciated that.

Jack was more difficult, but he was a wonderful man. His hard work—and Inge-Lise [Eckmann], his wife, they both worked so hard that you were overwhelmed. You were just astonished. We would have endless meetings in the museum, and he would stand up there and talk about what progress had been made since the last meeting, and all the different people who were being so generous, that he was obviously going to see and begging them for money to build this museum. He brought in a lot of work that he cared about and felt very strongly about. John Caldwell, his curator, was very passionately interested in, I felt, a very narrow—he had a narrow vision, but it was a strong one. I liked John Caldwell very much. He curated an AIDS exhibition for us, with local artists, which was a wonderful thing. I was excited about that. That was important. It was during the time when people were dying like flies. It was really terrible. So that was an important thing.

David Ross was very arrogant, and I wasn't alone in disliking him intensely. But he didn't like me very much, either. We just didn't get along. He had a lot of charisma, I think, and he has a track record of entering museums and then exiting—to the great relief of most people, I think. Although that may not be the party line, I think it's really true, if you look into his history.

Neal Benezra seems to be a wonderful person, also very hard working. I don't know him at all.

Rigelhaupt: How would you assess the directors' collection strategies?

02-00:37:25

Parmenter: I'm not privy to that, really. I remember, because I was following it very intently then, that Jack Lane was very interested in some German artists like Sigmar Polke, and Christopher Wool, who may not be German. I don't know why I think he is, but maybe he isn't. I thought they were very interesting. I didn't think they were the *only* interesting people around, but it sort of felt as if the collection was headed in that direction, [pause] mainly, in those years. I

think David Ross had a very wide open view about art, actually. I liked that about him. He just made life difficult for me, and for the gallery. So of course, I didn't like him much. No point in pretending I did. I think the photography collection has expanded enormously under both Van Deren Coke and Sandy Phillips, and is really extraordinary. The Diane Arbus show [2003] was one of the most amazing things I've ever seen. I loved it.

Rigelhaupt: How would you discuss the way the directors you've worked with have balanced their support for Bay Area artists and art internationally?

02-00:39:22

Parmenter: Well, I may have sort of implied this earlier. I felt that Henry achieved a great balance. I really did. That's when the museum collected a great deal of art from the Bay Area, so of course, I loved that. Many, many of our artists had shows in the museum. Jack, less so, because he really did have a vision. And his vision was, as he said over and over again, to build a world-class museum. That meant New York and Europe would be predominating, I would say. I think David wanted the latest and the hottest, and the most exciting and interesting things he could find. He wanted his—both men wanted their collectors to buy those things for the museum. Some people were very, very generous and gave a great, great deal. Phyllis Wattis was extraordinary. Again, it may be because my job became denser and denser and denser, year after year, and I got so deeply involved in our gallery and what we were trying to do, and the artists. It's very big now, compared to the early years. So I have been focusing less on what the museum was doing, and more on what we were doing.

Rigelhaupt: Was there any discussion over the years about the legacy that Grace McCann Morley left, and her imprint on the museum?

02-00:41:35

Parmenter: There was in Henry's time. She was very much loved. I've read some wonderful things about her. She was an amazing woman. She really did have a great foresight and a vision. Museums in those days were very, very different, I feel. There was—I don't know this for a fact, but I gather, because also, I come from a family who have collected art, and married someone whose mother was head of the board of the Philadelphia Museum [of Art]. So I have always grown up in this world of collectors, and have collected art myself since I was quite young. Grace Morley's world, [pause] it was so much less corporate than it is now. It felt more scholarly, somehow, from what I've read. But she was before my time. There was a wonderful woman in San Francisco, at the de Young Museum, who was the curator of painting for many years, Nina Valvo. She was one of five beautiful sisters. She was a phenomenal curator, and made many people—not many, a few people very famous. Frank Lobdell, Elmer Bischoff, Alvin Light, Diebenkorn, I think David Park—she found all those people and put them on the map in a very, very real way. There've always been these wonderful people who do this kind

of thing. But the art world was smaller then, too, and very much supported by collectors in the city. I'm sure it still is.

Rigelhaupt: Could you talk a little bit about any of the associate directors or curators that have done memorable exhibitions, or you've worked with over the years at SFMOMA?

02-00:44:25

Parmenter: Well, Caldwell, as I said before. I have had a few conversations with Sandy Phillips. I guess that's about it. Peter Samis, who has always been a real true friend of our gallery and what we do. He is very beloved by artists in the Bay Area. So is Sandy Phillips. I wish I could say I'd had a closer working relationship with curators at the museum, but I have not.

Rigelhaupt: How do you think the museum is perceived today, if you were to think about it in terms of how it's perceived in the Bay Area, on the national scene, and then perhaps the international scene?

02-00:45:39

Parmenter: I think it's perceived very highly by the international scene and the New York art world. I do. I think it's been because of Jack Lane building that building. The curators have integrity and work very hard to see that it's that way. I do think that, locally, people see the museum as being interested in being a world-class museum, and they—I've had people express to me that they are disappointed that they don't do more about what goes on here. I don't think that we, the Artists Gallery, hard as we try, can fill that slot, really. We're not the museum. We are a separate space. We're part of the museum, but we're not the museum. Artists want to be exhibited in the museum. Not in the café, where I put people on a monthly basis, curate one-person shows there, but real, proper upstairs exhibitions. I really do hope that eventually, they will develop that in a bigger way.

Rigelhaupt: What do you think of the new building?

02-00:47:35

Parmenter: Well, I've never really liked the exterior so much, but I think the interior is quite splendid. I really do. I think coming into that big hallway is quite an event. It was designed to give parties in. In a way, that's a little sad; they could use that space for art. But I recognize that I'm a fiend in that direction. But I love wandering around that museum, going from floor to floor. It's fun. The walkway is exciting, at the top. That round window makes sense when you're inside. There's a whole school of architecture like that, that sometimes the outside's kind of odd, but the inside is beautiful. I sort of feel that way about our museum. But it's certainly exciting when you go down the street. Makes you stop and turn your head.

Rigelhaupt: Where would you like to see the museum when it celebrates its hundredth anniversary?

02-00:48:59

Parmenter: Oh, I think I would like to see it celebrating contemporary art from everywhere. I sort of want the whole world to be that way, though.

Rigelhaupt: Do you think it does a good job of keeping up with contemporary art?

02-00:49:23

Parmenter: I think it does a very specified job, a very specific and particular job. Yes, I do. I think of myself as a curator, but not truly a scholar. Most curators in museums are scholars, as well as curators. So they must focus very intensely in a certain direction. It's hard to be open, outward, when you have that charge. I've loved my job, because I get to be very open to a lot.

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03-00:00:00

Rigelhaupt: Well, you had mentioned before that there was—well, there has been—some tension between trustees and the Artists Gallery. I'm wondering if you could talk about how that has taken shape over the years.

03-00:00:27

Parmenter: Well, the only serious tension that I feel, and have felt, has been about finances, because the finance committee of the museum wants us always, naturally, to make more money. And—did I say this before?—it has been unfortunate that we were compared, ever, to the store, because the store just sells stuff. Some of it is very inexpensive. And books, and they're pretty relatively inexpensive. Jewelry is more. But we are selling paintings and sculpture, photography, prints. They're expensive for most people. So we are never going to be in the category where we make millions. I just don't see it that way, with living, younger—on the whole—artists. Each year we make more money. The museum, however, felt, I know, several years ago, we weren't making enough money. There was a discussion about closing the gallery. I was truly appalled to hear that, and I hope that that never happens.

We are going to be advertising for a new director/curator—my job—for the gallery, as I'm going to retire in January. I would hate to think of the gallery not going on, because I know we're a very valuable support for the artistic community. I think our exhibition program is important, too, because it is a way for Northern California artists to, in some sense, have a connection of exhibiting their work with the museum, because we are a branch of the museum. That has mattered to them a lot. I think, in that we're about to have a position on the web, it will bring a great deal of business to us. Without question, it will. I just hope that the board and the director of the museum see us as more than just money. I feel what we do is a gift to the community. It was a gift Sally Lilienthal paid for, initially, by redesigning the building and paying all the expenses for two years. But we do make our way. Each year, we seem to do a little bit better. So I think the money isn't it; it's what we're giving to the community and the artists that matter. That is really my thought.

Rigelhaupt: Have there ever been years that the gallery has not made money?

03-00:04:05

Parmenter: No, there was a big dip when the Silicon Valley burst. There was. But we weren't operating at a loss. We've always made some money. There's a graph somewhere that shows it. I could draw it in the air for you; it would be very conceptual.

Rigelhaupt: Well, in light of the fact that the gallery has always at least covered its own expenses—and it sounds as though, even turned a profit—do you have a sense as to why the finance committee or anyone on the board of trustees would be interested in closing it?

03-00:04:50

Parmenter: Well, maybe because of their lack of contact with us, in a sense. Only seeing us as figures on a spreadsheet is not the same thing as coming to Fort Mason, walking in the door; coming to an opening, seeing how many people are there—it's always jammed; the liveliness, the excitement; seeing the artists; coming upstairs, seeing the hundreds and hundreds of paintings and photographs and sculptures; meeting the staff, who are all absolutely hard working, terrific people. If you don't have a sense of that, and it is just a figure on a page, maybe you just think it's too much trouble. Or too much trouble for the museum to have to worry about it, or think about it, or have someone at the museum working on it. As I said earlier, Ikuko Satoda, the present deputy director, has been absolutely the most extraordinary support for us, and conveyed our hopes to Neal and to the board. So I hope that they will continue to feel supportive of the idea of the Artists Gallery at Fort Mason. That's my big wish for the future.

Rigelhaupt: Do you think there's been a similar trajectory with the museum as a whole, in the sense that as it has become larger, an international destination— The board of directors, in some ways, has a much larger task of managing.

03-00:06:47

Parmenter: They do.

Rigelhaupt: Has there been a disconnect between them and the artistic energy and goals of the museum itself?

03-00:06:58

Parmenter: Well, you worry about this. It isn't just our museum, it's all museums. They are under the gun to have [pauses, sighs] *money*. Let's just say it like it is. Just insuring the Picasso show was monumental. If it hadn't been for the generosity of one of the trustees, we wouldn't have had the Picasso show. So the fate of a relatively small operation, as the Artists Gallery is—which is huge to the artists, but small to the museum—perhaps is not paramount in their thoughts. I just would be very sad if they lost track of the fact that this is their city. They're in this city, these artists are of their city and the

surrounding places—the East Bay, the North Bay, the South Bay—and it matters. It matters to them very much. That’s my message.

Rigelhaupt: Well, those are largely my questions. The way I like to end is to first ask, if there anything I should’ve asked that I didn’t? Two, is there anything you’d like to add?

03-00:08:33

Parmenter: Well, I’d like to add that it’s been a huge pleasure, and fascinating years, to have run a gallery and worked with the artistic community of the Bay Area. That’s what I’d like to say.

[End of Interview]

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