

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:
PETER SAMIS

SFMOMA Staff, 1988-present (2008)
Curatorial Assistant, 1988-1994 (Painting & Sculpture, Photography, Media Arts,
Architecture & Design)
Assistant Curator of Education; Program Manager for Interactive Educational
Technologies, 1994-1997
Associate Curator of Education; Program Manager for Interactive Educational
Technologies, 1997-2005
Co-Acting Director of Education, 2004-2005
Associate Curator of Interpretation, 2006-

SFMOMA Volunteer, 1982-1985
Docent, Class of 1982-83
Curatorial Intern under Karen Tsujimoto, 1983-84
Head of Docent Education & Enrichment Committee, 1984-85

Interview conducted by
Jess Rigelhaupt
in 2008

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 Peter Samis, dated October 30, 2008. This manuscript is made available for research purposes. All copyrights and other intellectual property rights in the manuscript, including the right to publish, are reserved to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

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

Requests for permission or questions should be addressed to SFMOMA Research Library and Archives, 151 Third Street, San Francisco, CA 94103 or archives@sfmoma.org 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: Peter Samis,” conducted by Jess Rigelhaupt, 2008, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2009.

Discursive Table of Contents—Peter Samis

Interview #1: June 2, 2008

[Audio File 1] 1

First visit to SFMOMA (after growing up in New York City)—Training as a docent—Great SFMOMA exhibitions of that era—Relationship of museum to Bay Area art dealers and artists—SFMOMA as the logical West Coast venue for major traveling exhibitions, prior to the rise of LA in the art world—The international importance of SFMOMA’s photography collection from the very beginnings of the museum—Perceptions of SFMOMA in various communities—Influx of masterpieces to the SFMOMA collection, late 1990s-early 2000—Varying goals and styles of David Ross and Neal Benezra—Memories of Henry Hopkins and Jack Lane—Studying at SF State, becoming a curatorial assistant at SFMOMA—Graham Beal as interstitial figure during Hopkins-Lane transition—Lane’s hiring of dynamic new curators—Lane and Ross—Ross’s ambitious acquisitions and prescient interest in digital arts—Institutional regression upon Ross’s departure—Benezra’s emphasis on solvency after a period of excess—Reflections on changing educational mission at museum—John Weber’s transformative approach—Samis moves into multimedia, launching three new programs, including “Making Sense of Modern Art”—Instituting the Interpretive Goals process at the museum.

[Audio File 2] 15

More about the Interpretive Goals process, other initiatives of education department—Relationships with artists—Training as a docent with Susan Becker—Honoring “visitor befuddlement”—How can an education department most effectively communicate its message?—Interpretive approaches—The need for “remediation” at Richard Tuttle and Matthew Barney exhibitions—The importance of “seeing an artist wrestle with something” and the “conversation between the works”—Painting, photography, and new media—SFMOMA’s plan to focus on the permanent collection as the seventy-fifth anniversary approaches—SFMOMA video programming for a dedicated airline channel.

[Audio File 3] 31

Early Interactive Educational Technology and computers of the 1980s and 90s—Growth, change, possibilities, “upgrades”—SFMOMA’s relationship with Fred Silverman at Apple—Seminal conference and book: *On Multimedia: Technologies for the Twenty-first Century* and Samis’s ideas for multimedia at the museum—Multimedia approach to *Popul Vuh*—Samis’s work on the first CD-ROM on modern art (Neuberger Collection)—Jack Lane’s reaction to seeing Stuart Davis on the CD-ROM—“Aha” moments in early multimedia production—Development of funding for new IET program at SFMOMA—Advice from Larry Friedlander, the development of *Making Sense of Modern Art* and *Voices and Images of California Art*—SFMOMA collaborations with other organizations and multimedia developers—Volunteer input and the new multimedia programs unveiled at opening of the new SFMOMA building—Development of a mature IET department at SFMOMA, culminating with the development of Pachyderm software

Interview #1: June 2, 2008

Begin Audio File 1 06-02-2008.mp3

Rigelhaupt: To start, I would like to ask you if you could describe your first visit to SFMOMA.

01-00:00:46

Samis: Oh, boy! I had grown up in New York. At a certain point, after doing many itinerant things in my teen years and my early twenties, I decided once and for all it was time for me to settle down and find a place where I would stay put. I had previously lived in the Bay Area for my sophomore year of college, and I chose San Francisco. Shortly after arriving here, sometime in my first month, I'm sure, or month or two—this would have been in 1981, fall of '81—I went and visited the museum, and I was disappointed. I thought, this is what passes for a museum of modern art here in San Francisco? I had grown up with MoMA [NY] and the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art] and the Guggenheim [Museum] and the Whitney [Museum of American Art]—an embarrassment of riches of all cultural persuasions, especially European and American—and I came here and they had some token paintings hung in the corridor, ringing Herbst Theater on the third floor of the museum, and then some exhibitions on four. I thought, paltry. But over time, I got more interested in it. I realized, if I'm going to stay here, this is going to be—I compared the [California Palace of the] Legion of Honor and the de Young [Memorial Museum] and I still felt like SFMOMA had more vitality to it, more of the things that resonated with me.

Rigelhaupt: These early years, when you say 1981, was that while you were in college?

01-00:02:31

Samis: No. I was out of college. I was moving here once and for all, after college. I graduated college in '78.

Rigelhaupt: So in, say, the first half of the eighties, were there any particular exhibitions at SFMOMA that you recall making a strong impression on you?

01-00:02:50

Samis: Sure, because I became a docent. See, in '82, I decided it may be slim pickings, but it's the best game in town. I had gotten involved in the art world; I was working in an art gallery, at least assisting someone doing research and translations for his art gallery, the Paris Art Gallery on Sutter Street, a man named Emmanuel Navon. I thought, well, I might as well learn more about modern and contemporary art than I already know. I heard about the docent training and signed up for it. So the first exhibitions I remember are the ones that I toured. I did my valedictory docent training tour on "Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Decisive Moment," a great retrospective of Cartier-Bresson. I think we had a [Edward] Weston show later on. So photography, I was always very interested in. Also I remember Joan Mitchell, a great painting retrospective of Joan Mitchell. Then there were exhibitions like "Tokyo: Form

and Spirit,” which was organized by the Walker Art Center, and beautifully presented at SFMOMA. Then “The Human Condition,” the biennial that was produced by Henry Hopkins. Then later on “Second Sight” was the second biennial, produced by Graham Beal. So those are a few that I remember. There was an Edward Hopper show and a [Wassily] Kandinsky show, as well, I remember. I also worked as an intern under Karen Tsujimoto. I went back to school to get a masters in art history in '83 at Cal [University of California, Berkeley]. I already knew Karen from having been a docent. I asked if I could be an intern with her, and worked on the Moses Lasky exhibition of prints and drawings. But also I had already done a study paper about her Precisionism show, “Images of America.”

Rigelhaupt: In this early period of your time at the museum, how would you characterize the relationship between the museum and artists in the Bay Area?

01-00:05:13

Samis:

I would say the museum was much closer, much more intimately tied in, to at least a certain community of artists in the Bay Area. I wouldn't say to *all* artists, but that there was a prize stable of artists, many of them represented by John Berggruen and his gallery, others at Braunstein/Quay Gallery, which was both Rena Bransten and Ruth Braunstein at the time. So their work was foregrounded and privileged in the galleries. It was Nathan Oliveira, Richard Diebenkorn, William Wiley, Robert Arneson and the California clay works movement, Ken Price, Richard Shaw. A lot of their work was around all the time, it felt like. Most of these artists were unfamiliar to me, coming from the East Coast; but they were clearly identifiable as a Bay Area community of artists. Yet within that, I don't think there was a pretense to representing *all* the Bay Area artists, but these were considered the most important ones, along with Robert Hudson perhaps, and then Sam Francis, who was an L.A./Bay Area combo. Mainly guys. Historically, also Joan Brown, who died shortly after that in an accident in India, tragically.

Rigelhaupt: How would you characterize the balance that the museum was able to strike in this period between supporting local artists and at the same time, putting on exhibitions of national and international significance?

01-00:06:59

Samis:

Good question. We weren't really organizing exhibitions of national and international significance. I think the one exception, or the couple of exceptions, would be Henry's effort to start biennials, which meant to be statements that were internationally credible, as opposed to focused exhibitions on Nathan Oliveira or Wayne Thiebaud or other artists that would be foregrounded. So we became a showcase and a stopping point, and I think we had been for decades, for exhibitions organized elsewhere. Like the Kandinsky shows, which were amazing. I think three shows covering Kandinsky's career, organized by the Guggenheim, came out here. The Edward Hopper retrospective came out here. We were a logical way station.

That was beginning to change, however. What had been the case from the thirties, in Grace McCann Morley's era on, when San Francisco had been the cultural center, was less and less the case, with L.A.'s mounting prominence. LACMA [Los Angeles County Museum of Art], being such an important museum down there, became another destination, and then eventually MOCA [Museum of Contemporary Art]. So I think that we were not as reliably always getting those shows. So not every interesting show was coming here, per se; it's still the case. L.A. gets a lot of them. The shows we organized were, by and large, more regional, it feels to me, in character than—maybe not so much in photography, though. Photography was an exception. There was no media arts and there was no architecture and design. In painting and sculpture, the shows we organized were typically not of national or international ambition, I think it's probably safe to say, with the biennials and maybe a couple of others as exceptions.

Rigelhaupt: Why do you think photography was an exception?

01-00:09:04

Samis:

There were two reasons. One, we had an historic photography collection back to 1935 and the inception of the museum. Whereas most museums didn't start collecting photography until the seventies, we had been doing it from the get-go. John Humphrey, a curator I never met, but whom people like Karen Tsujimoto can tell you about, was avidly interested in photography. Then Van Deren Coke, of course, was the other major reason. Van was one of the great historians and collectors of modern photography alive, along with Beaumont Newhall. He had taught it, he had written books about it, he was a practicing photographer himself. He was a friend of photographers, he had a great collection of Eastern European and Central European photography from the modernist era in the twenties and the thirties and onward, and he merged his collection with the museum's collection for the duration of his curatorship. So he could organize shows that were not just f.64 California historically based, but had this international scope, even when SFMOMA's collection didn't. So it was incredible what could happen there. It was very exciting. After MoMA and George Eastman House, I think that we were arguably probably the third best collection in the country, aside from maybe the Center for Creative Photography. But I don't think they had anything like the exhibiting program we had.

Rigelhaupt: That's continued.

01-00:11:21

Samis:

Yeah. Oh, yeah. Has only gotten better, I think.

Rigelhaupt: How would you talk about the way SFMOMA's perceived by artists and the broader community in the Bay Area?

01-00:11:42

Samis:

This is something that's hard to ask me, as an insider to SFMOMA. I'm not an artist in the greater community. But I can project out, and I can give sense of conversations I have had. I think it's perceived as a somewhat austere resource that gives them nothing personally, in terms of their own career path, but does feed them images of what's going on elsewhere and what is deemed to be important in the art magazine-New York-Euro art world.

Rigelhaupt:

But then from broader discussions you have had, I imagine, at conferences and the various other museum professionals that you meet with, how would you talk about the way SFMOMA is then viewed nationally and internationally?

01-00:12:42

Samis:

You mean by museum professionals? Well, it's interesting because I actually exist in a rarefied sub-sector of the museum profession or world, where it's less about the shows we organize than the educational and new media things we do, because those are the colleagues that I'm interacting with, typically, at national or international conferences. In that world, we're perceived as being very progressive, really out there, experimental, tuned in to visitors, trying to do things that are innovative and inventive, and also evaluating them and reporting back to the field. So a leader in the field, from those points of view.

In terms of the exhibitions that we organize, I have a hard time knowing exactly how we're perceived. I think we're perceived as being a major player. But major player, what does that mean, exactly? There's always MoMA, at one level. There's a story that apparently is not apocryphal, that when they were organizing the galleries for MoMA, the new building, the new installation of MoMA in New York, Kynaston McShine, one of the veteran curators there—they had their little model, with all the little miniatures of all the artworks. They'd finally finished it, they'd finally put the finishing touches on, and they had all these other little artworks that were off on the side, that hadn't made the cut for the first inaugural installation for their new building. He stepped back and said, "This really is the greatest collection of modern art in the world. You know where the second greatest is?" They had just swept all the others into the drawer. He said, "In the drawer." It's a very effete, arrogant statement; but at the same time, it's probably not inaccurate, given the powers and the wealth and the circumstances that accumulated that particular collection, and its power, and its continued ability to collect at a high level. So as David Ross said later on to Glenn Lowry, the director of MoMA, when David was director of SFMOMA, "I give you the twentieth century, but the twenty-first century is up for grabs."

Rigelhaupt:

Now, has that been consistent throughout your twenty years at the museum? Or have there been moments in which there's been highs or lows among, say, exhibitions at SFMOMA?

01-00:15:39

Samis:

In terms of the way we're being perceived in the field? I think there are times when there's been a lot more attention focused on us, and times when there's been less attention focused on us. That's absolutely true. 1995, when the new building opened, that was a time of enormous focus on us. In some people's estimation, we came up lacking, in terms of the collection. Was the collection up to the height of the new building, was the question. People could say positive or negative things about the new building, but it was still clearly a showcase structure. A citadel, perhaps, a fortified jewel box, perhaps, but still a showcase structure for art. Then the question is, what are you putting in that? I think that it was in the years following, and thanks to the generosity of Phyllis Wattis and her collaboration with curators, directors and associate directors, ranging from Gary Garrels to David Ross and Elaine McKeon and Lori Fogarty—these people can all tell the story, and I'm sure have. There was an enormous influx of masterworks to the collection in the late nineties and early 2000. A lot of eyes were on San Francisco. That level of growth and endowment was not sustainable in either the ambient dot-com culture nor in the internal culture. David paid the price, the museum paid the prices, my own team paid the price. There were layoffs, there were cutbacks. Then Neal [Benezra] came in and has stabilized the ship since then. I think he's stabilized it, and I think that the museum is seen as an important player, but it's not perhaps as dynamic a center in the world perception as it might have been considered a little while back. I think that that, too, will change because I think we now have a set of curators who are very dynamic and inspiring. It just takes a few years for their concepts to become exhibitions, and to ripple through the consciousness of the world scene.

Rigelhaupt:

Well, from what you have said there, it sounds like there were different missions or goals between, say, David Ross and Neal Benezra.

01-00:18:25

Samis:

Oh, yeah.

Rigelhaupt:

I'm wondering if you could go backwards, before coming forward there, and talk about what you saw as some of the particular successes and goals of the directors that you have worked with.

01-00:18:38

Samis:

I can really go back as far as Henry, because I was a docent under Henry, though I was never on staff. If I had been on staff under Henry, I probably would not have been hired or retained under Jack Lane because there was such a complete purge at that time. Everybody I knew on staff when I was a docent, the staff people that I related to, very, very few of them remained when I was on staff, hired under Jack's tenure in 1988. Jack has talked about that in his interview, I think.

In any case, Henry's was a very shirt-sleeve, relaxed, open door environment. I think any staff member could walk into his office. He was approachable,

people could call him. I once called him about something, and he returned my call. I was shocked. I was just a docent, a grad student docent, whatever. So it felt like a very approachable world. It was very porous, in that sense.

Jack Lane, much more navy, buttoned down. He was both a PhD and an MBA; Harvard, University of Chicago. In many ways, more uptight, but also very, very focused. I don't know if you know anything about Steve Jobs, but Steve Jobs is an intensely focused individual, who really doesn't take kindly to being distracted. He doesn't take shit from anybody, in a way. If he's got a mission, he's not going to listen to you, even if you're in the room with him, because he's focused on something else. Well, Jack isn't quite that intense, but he also is very focused and deliberate in both what he says and what he does. So there's a level of just general relaxation that's not there. He's more uptight. But he's also achieved a lot more. His standards—by his own lights, his own standards, and by those of the ambient art world, I think—are very high. So he completely changed the tone of the museum. He made it clear people were unwelcome, that they didn't just have the right to be there, just because they had been there in the past. Whether these people were actually dismissed by his deputy director, Barbara Phillips, or whether they were just made to feel uncomfortable enough that they realized it was time for them to go, or whether they were just asked to supply their credentials for why they should be in that position, and justify their presence—whatever the reasons were, he was ready to clean house to make this the museum he felt it had to be. So it was change of skin and of interior, as well, frankly, that took place.

At the time, I regretted seeing people whom I had come to know leaving *en masse*, as it were. I was working at the Achenbach Foundation when Jack arrived, as the Graphic Arts Council Fellow there, organizing an exhibition of nineteenth-century French prints and bringing my Macintosh, my first-generation Macintosh, in the back of my little Mazda out to the Legion of Honor every day, using the first version of FileMaker and the first desktop publishing and all this other stuff. So I was involved with other stuff. I was head of the education enrichment committee for the docents, so I was hearing the echoes of what was going on. It wasn't till a couple years later, when I finished my thesis and taught at San Francisco State, filling in in the modern art history lecture course that Whitney Chadwick typically would teach, that I found that there were actual job openings for curatorial assistants. I read that in *AVISO*, which is the AAM [American Association of Museums] newsletter where the job postings are. It blew me away that I had to read in something coming out of D.C. about this curatorial assistant job opening at the museum that I was personally involved with and had been a docent at for four years already or whatever, or five, but that was the case. So I came in from a completely outside angle, at that point, and applied. It was Graham Beal who interviewed me. Graham was continuity between the two. Henry had hired Graham as his chief curator or head curator of painting and sculpture, and Jack kept him. Except Jack always had in mind that he was going to bring his colleague and pal, John Caldwell, to really be the curator of painting and

sculpture. So my hunch is that Jack basically saddled Graham with an unending flow of administrative responsibilities that basically precluded him from making an exhibition happen. He was in *every* meeting. That gave Graham, on the one hand, the message that he had probably explicitly told him anyway, that it was a matter of time before John Caldwell came and replaced him as curator of painting and sculpture. It also groomed Graham for being a museum director himself, which Graham has now admirably done in numerous locations, ranging from the Joslyn [Art Museum] to LACMA, which was maybe less successful, to the Detroit Institute of Arts. So Graham was this interstitial weave between those two worlds, continuity there.

Then Jack hired his own crew onboard. Great curators. He had a great eye for talent—Sandy Phillips and Paolo Polledri and Bob Riley—and started these new departments in media arts and architecture and design. So there was a really very dynamic feeling going on there, because there was the architecture search, there was the capital campaign Jack was smart enough to get before he even arrived at SFMOMA; the commitment from the trustees that Henry had been unable to get, in all his years, which was money and commitment to build the new building. He used his leverage as an outside candidate for director being seduced by the board to say, I will come if, and only if, you'll put money in the bank, one important artwork, a [Anselm] Kiefer, and start a building fund and commit to making this building happen, because it can't happen in the old building. Henry had still tried to compromise every which way but loose in trying to make it happen in the old building, and it wasn't happening. He hadn't been able to inspire the board to get to the next level. Jack did, by the time he arrived here. So that's Henry and Jack.

01-00:26:21

To move on to the difference between Jack and David, if that's what you'd like me to do. After the new building. Jack had been there for a while. He had lost his steam. He didn't have the same vision, the galvanizing vision that he had had to get us there. I think, also different board members and he had enough history that they were no longer—whatever honeymoon that might have existed early on was ending. I remember him saying about one particular trustee, "Oh, does he like us today?" Warily. Which I think any director could probably say at any given moment about certain members of their board. I think it was wearing on him. I think the board was eager for new blood, new vision, take us to the next level. That wasn't something that he actually had in him at that point. So there was a parting of the ways there. They wanted to hire the Wunderkind—no longer a Wunderkind, but the middle-aged, elegant, dashing bad boy from New York, David Ross, who was inspiring in his own right.

David was quite wonderful in many ways. A completely different vibe than Jack. A little scary, because he was like a flywheel, and he would come up with ideas every ten seconds. As someone under him in a meeting, you never knew whether he was actually assigning you those ideas or just brainstorming. Because if he was assigning you those ideas, you could be like a hamster or a

gerbil and go crazy in very short order. People did burn out under David, in time. But there was a time at first where he was very inspiring. Of course, he arrived with this incredible—not just panache, but fanfare or deck of cards that suddenly got displayed, this royal flush of artworks that were being announced, like twenty or thirty artworks. More and more. Just the [Robert] Rauschenbergs were probably about twenty. Then the Barnett Newman. This is what made everybody in New York sit up and take notice about SFMOMA. Not only was David, who was the director of the Whitney, one of their lesser but still primary museums, migrating from the capital of the art world in America to that left edge, the far edge of the California coast, but he was saying, the twenty-first century belongs to us. In the meantime, this is what we're taking from the twentieth. Look what we just got. We got, right from under your noses, MoMA, the *ur*-works of Robert Rauschenberg, arguably one of the two or three most important artists of the second half of the twentieth century, when American art came to the rise after the abstract expressionists. After that generation, Rauschenberg, the living generation, perhaps the most important artist. Here we're getting his *ur*-works, and *you* always assumed you'd get them. We're bringing them out to California, and we're announcing the beginning of a new day and a new—I don't want to say hegemony, but something along those lines. It was like New York no longer owns the past, the present, or the future, was basically, in effect, what he was saying. That's what works like the *Erased de Kooning* and the *Automobile Tire Print* and the White Paintings and the Black Paintings represented. So that was incredible.

[interruption]

01-00:30:29

Okay, so we were at David and this splash and these claims for prominence that he was asserting for San Francisco, and that were making New York sit up and take notice. Always looking in the Carol Vogel art world gossip section of the *New York Times*, and again and again, SFMOMA was coming up with some other new coup. So it was just like back in the eighties or the seventies, when the Texans started acquiring all these works that normally would have gone to the Met or the Museum of Fine Arts, and they went to the Kimbell [Art Museum] instead. That made New York disgruntled. Or in the eighties, in the Japanese bubble, when the Japanese were acquiring [Vincent] Van Goghs and [Pierre-August] Renoirs that would have normally come to America. Anyone who has a sense of entitlement gets disgruntled when someone else starts getting a piece of the pie.

David wasn't uniquely responsible, as I said, for getting all those artworks. Gary and others were very involved in that—though he might have taken full credit for it. In any case, he was also very dynamic. I have got to give him a lot of credit. Earlier in his career, David had been the first curator to appreciate video art, to think of video as an art form, to collect it. As the late nineties came around and he was in San Francisco, it was the dot-com boom. It was time to think about what digital art was going to be. He was right there.

Any other more conservative director wouldn't have been. He had curators like Aaron Betsky. Bob Riley wasn't really interested in it. That was the beginning of his falling out with Bob, I think, or that was part of his falling out with Bob. He brought Benjamin Weil in, who could measure up to this thinking about the internet as an art form and the web and those kinds of network-based artworks. Aaron was collecting websites as design examples. This was all of a piece with who David was. He was a perfect person for the time and the place, from that point of view. He gave us permission to do our most experimental educational technologies, as well. He was *very* supportive of us, and actually had what we always thought were delusional schemes for making our Pachyderm software into some kind of a capital improvement project for SFMOMA by getting venture capitalists involved in investing in it and selling it. We never really believed that was going to happen, and it ended up not happening. But he was very entrepreneurial. He was someone who could flourish in a culture of abundance, in an economy of abundance. When that imploded, then there was no ground under him. He was a *luftmensch*. There was no place to land. It was like as long as you're peddling fast enough, you'll keep it in the air, like Wiley Coyote or something. But if suddenly you have gone past the cliff and there's no support for that ever-expansive growth, then it was like the fall to earth, and the museum hit ground hard.

David left, was relieved of his duties in a very summary manner. The museum retrogressed at that point, regressed. Because there was no one to run it, there was no one with vision to run it. The board that came in had, as its responsibility, to staunch the hemorrhaging cash crisis. The only way they knew to do it was to go back to the definition of what a museum had been twenty years before. They hadn't really caught up with the vision that David was articulating of the museum of the future, and its interactions with the community, and the integration of technologies and all these other things. That was like all out here, and they were still back in the late eighties: as a museum, it collects, it exhibits. So anything that reeked of the new and of the digital was just lopped off, truncated at that time. It had just become a solid, fiscally restrained, solvent institution, it was three steps back. That was a painful time. That's in the interregnum between David and Neal. I was actually, for better and for worse, on sabbatical at that time. I was about to leave for a trip around the world, when I got news that my team was being slashed. So that's a whole other story. So there was the excess, and then there was the fall.

01-00:35:58

Then Neal came in as the person who was initially hired to right the ship and make it work at a lower—if David could only make things work at thirty-million, Neal had to make them work at twenty something. So for Neal at first, it was just about consolidating the bases and cut, cut, cut, cut. Whether it was attrition or—he would cut whatever limb seemed available within reach of his saw. That was also not great. For a while, a lot of us were not pleased with the way things were going because it didn't feel like it was informed by any vision, other than *must get to black, as opposed to red*, in the

budget column. Meanwhile, there were programs that might have been vital to the museum that were just being eviscerated or eliminated, and that would be very, very hard, and take years and years and years to rebuild. Nothing was being passed through the screen of mission. The only mission was to get into the black. Also, a lot of people left when Neal arrived, and so it took a while to reconstitute a senior staff under him.

I have to give him a lot of credit for really hiring superb senior staff—including Ikuko Satoda, who had been chief financial officer, but came back from the Asian Art Museum, where she'd gone after Jack, at the end of the Jack years, maybe, and she became our CAO, chief administrative officer. I knew things had changed when we were doing budgets one year and we were looking at the rights line item, I remember specifically, for IET, which is the interactive educational technologies team that I lead. We had \$10,000 in rights, because we had been acquiring a lot of rights for *Making Sense of Modern Art* and these online programs that we were developing under IMLS [Institute for Museum Library Services, a federal agency] grants. Then the following year, I had put down \$5,000 rights. She said, "Why five?" I said, "Well, aren't we all supposed to be tightening the belt and cutting where we can? We'll make do with the five." She said, "If you need the ten to do what you need to do, let's make it the ten." In other words, as an experienced financial analyst, she was filtering everything through mission. It was just *so* reassuring to know that the people who had the right skill sets were in the right places and that the director wasn't being asked to make these decisions that he shouldn't be making, and that he had put the right people into place, and we were getting the infrastructure to move forward together in a more coherent manner.

I'd say since then, there's been continued progress. I think that Neal is far from a David visionary, trying to constantly propel people forward and reach their best and this and that. It's taken him a number of years to even get people to start thinking, to give people permission to think expansively, in light of the seventy-fifth anniversary and the opportunity for expansion for the first time, now that we have been in the black for all these years under him. The board wants it. The board wants excitement. He's had to give himself permission to give us permission to work in this way. Now, of course, with the recession and the war dragging on and eight years of W [George W. Bush], there are a lot of conditions that are even making it so that [this] expansive moment might be hamstrung, to some extent, and not be as expansive as one might have hoped a year or two ago. But still, there's a sense of moving forward and that we're going to do exciting things. So that's my capsule history of the four directors. How's that?

Rigelhaupt: Sounds good. Two words caught my attention as you were talking: *interaction*, *interactivity*, and *mission*. I'm wondering how would you characterize the educational mission of SFMOMA?

01-00:40:40

Samis: Today?

Rigelhaupt: You could work from today backwards, or from when you first came on.

01-00:40:44

Samis: Oh, boy! I think what I'd rather do is just say what I think it is today, and then contrast that with way back when, and maybe not do the whole exhaustive chronology at this time. Right now it's a very expansive mission. Education is interpreted in a very broad and activist, in an active and activist stance. It even includes curatorial programming. We now have three curators of education. When I started out, there was no curator of education, there was a director of education. It was a service department. Now a curator, inherently, is someone who develops their own program. That program may or may not be related to—it sometimes is and sometimes isn't related to the exhibitions program. It's related to their own philosophy and their own interests, as well, and the museum's mission, and their own interpretation of the museum's mission.

So I think that with Dominic [Willsdon] as the current curator, we have taken on the film program, which was at the periphery of what media arts was doing, but they were never really focusing on it. It's become a really active part of the museum's calendrical chemistry, really, all the time. Every week, there's something going on with different film series. We have taken on live culture, which is another curatorial program of bringing people in to actually—it's not just about a lecture or a panel about the artwork on view in the gallery upstairs. It can be performance, it can be Weimar-New York cabaret cross-fertilizing New York and San Francisco cabaret artists, live film/new music performance in the atrium, or film in the theater and new music in the atrium for *The Rape of the Sabine Women*. Much more avant-garde performance can take place now, because we have got a curator who's thinking about that; that's Frank Smigiel.

There are the standard issue museum-education type programs like docents and family programs, which are now growing exponentially, compared to what they have been in the past, the family programs, in particular, with our multiplying family studios and all that stuff. But those are the kinds of things people typically think of when they think of museum education. Kids, school classes coming to the museum. That stuff all happens, and that's under Julie Charles. But then there are these spaces like the Koret Visitor Education Center, which most museums don't have at all, which are drop-in spaces as opposed to just scheduled program spaces. Then there's the whole IET, interactive educational technologies program, which is a very proactive way of reaching out and communicating the messages of modern and contemporary art to people in ways that the white cube galleries don't. So it's trying to create a supplement or a complement to the experience, or the primary experience of the artwork in the galleries, so people can restore some of the context that the white cube galleries actually strip away. They strip

away the artist, they strip away the time, which is no longer the time of creation, obviously. That's not what the galleries strip away, that's just what time strips away. But the fact that it's uprooted from the artist's studio, from the works that came before, the works that came after, the dialogues the artist might have been having with other artists, the art historical antecedents and precedents that he or she may have been having, the process that would have realized this work, all that. I have written exhaustively about this, and you have probably had to read some of it in the past week or so. But this idea that it's an unmediated experience in the gallery is nonsense. It's highly mediated, and you have to be a disembodied esthete [referring to Brian O'Doherty's ideal viewer in his seminal essay "Inside the White Cube"] to really totally get it and enjoy it on these levels that it's intended. So it's been, for me, a very important agenda, moving from curatorial into education, as I did, to use new technologies to restore some of those missing elements, missing components that form the semantic web in which the meanings of these artworks reside.

Rigelhaupt: You noted there was a transition at some point from the education department being a service department to having its own programs and its own direction. When did that happen? Why do you think that took place?

01-00:46:39

Samis:

John Weber. I will give those two words, that one name, John Weber. The reason why it took place was because Jack and Inge-Lise [Eckmann] correctly saw that there was a fundamental disconnect between the existing director of education, whom they relieved of her duties—Rozanne Stringer—and the curators, that she was more classically trained and might not be tuned into the art that the curators were showing. They weren't sharing a dialogue. So Inge-Lise and Jack decided that what they really needed was someone who was, first and foremost, proficient in and really conversant with contemporary art and its issues, and loved it. So they found John Weber, who was a contemporary art curator at the Portland Art Museum, and who, by virtue of being at the Portland Art Museum, was often put in the position of having to do education and speak to groups who might be lumberjacks! He had to be able to talk about what was important and relevant about contemporary art to people of wide-ranging backgrounds and social stripes. He was very eager to come and join this exciting team of colleagues, the curatorial group at SFMOMA, as a curator of education.

He was also, as it turned out, good for me because I'd been advocating and agitating for years and waiting for—I was about ready to quit, because I was very interested in getting involved in multimedia but I was a curatorial assistant. Because Jack, being a navy guy, had to get all the rungs in place in the pecking order, in the chain of command, before he could give any authorization for me to do the things I kept on proposing. That took a couple of years or three years of waiting, actually, for me. That's a different story. But when John came, he was very eager to do just that work. I moved over pretty quickly, and we worked together to get all this stuff started. He was a

curator. He was not a director of education, he was a curator of education and public programs. He actually co-curated exhibitions, co-organized exhibitions with the other departmental curators. They were real peers and they really had that camaraderie. He vastly expanded our programs, as a result. Not just IET, but eventually, moving up to the Koret Center, which is a whole other story, which he can tell even better than I. Then the [Leanne and George] Roberts endowment. All of that was John. The Wattis lecture series.

Rigelhaupt: I was going to ask if you could explain—and maybe start now, and if you want to contrast it with other moments during your tenure at SFMOMA—but what’s the relationship like between the education department and curators in painting and sculpture or photography? Maybe if you could walk me through the process of what it’s like planning an exhibition years ahead? How much involvement there is between education and the curators from painting and sculpture or photography, and what those dynamics are like.

01-00:50:29

Samis: I think it really varies. There are different parts of the education department. It’s not a monolithic thing. It doesn’t speak with one voice. Historically in IET, which was my team for many years, interactive educational technologies, we were pretty autonomous. We did a lot on our own. So I’m going to slightly deviate to tell that story, and then come back. IET was born in 1994. Jack finally gave us authorization. There was enough money in the bank to build the building, have an endowment. Jack finally, as he had said to me, “Peter, I want to be leading edge, not bleeding edge.” So he didn’t want to do new technologies if it was going to cost too much, and in any way hamper his focus on the prize, which was the building and the endowment. But once that was in place, he authorized us to go see if we could find anyone who hadn’t been tapped for all those campaigns, to get some money to start our program. So with Lori Fogarty and John Weber, we traveled down to L.A. and made a pitch to the James Irvine Foundation, and they supported us.

So what ended up happening was that *everybody*, all hands were on deck to get the opening exhibitions going in the new building, and I was left alone to do whatever I could do in six months or seven months, to get the initial set of IET programs going. No one had the time of day. I couldn’t ask anybody *anything*, basically, except occasionally a conversation with Sandy Phillips about a photographer we were thinking of. But everybody was completely absorbed in their own massive, overwhelming undertaking. So what ended up happening was we did all these three initial IET programs. I’m answering by way of my own seat in the movie first; then we can talk about other parts of the department. I think that’s what I’m doing. So we basically had to do it on our own resources. Luckily, I had just spent six years working as an interdepartmental curatorial assistant in painting and sculpture, and photography, and media arts, and architecture and design. So I had a pretty good sense of what the philosophical imperatives and concerns were of each of those different curators and departments, and I was able to channel them, in

a way, at that time. We did these three different multi-media programs that we opened with: *Voices and Images of California Art*, *Making Sense of Modern Art* (the first version), and the *Bay Area Artfinder*.

Then they were suddenly there for other people. Like out of Jove's brow. It was like, oh, wow! That gave us an instant street cred. That street cred gave us autonomy. So we continued to just develop our own agenda and our own resources that were independent of exhibitions at the time. They were basically permanent-collection based. They were about restoring context to artists and to artworks in the collection. That was something that curators typically didn't have time to be researching. They still don't, because they're working on their next exhibitions. Permanent collection is always the last priority, unless you have got someone whose first priority it is, a permanent-collection curator. So we were doing that work because we felt like that was the work that would be of enduring value to the institution, if we created a context for works and artists in our collection. That would *always* be there; it wouldn't be closing in two months. We'd keep building on it. So lots of autonomy. Then years later, expanding *Making Sense of Modern Art* in a broadband, Web-compatible version (2000-2003) was this big push that was entirely focused on the permanent collection. We had outside art historians and content experts, but it was really independent of the department curators, except we might interview them to make comments about specific works in the collection. We might videotape them about that. But it was largely still our own enterprise.

Now, once *Making Sense of Modern Art* was up and running, as our work became more and more exhibition focused, then if you're doing an exhibition, you're working more closely with the curators because the curators are the ones who are thinking most about that particular exhibition and they're going to be the most articulate about it. So then there's more of that. You're reading their catalogue essays and comments, because our IET features typically happen, are developed in the sixth, or fifth or fourth month—T-minus four months and counting timeframe—whereas the catalogue is developed a year in advance and six months in advance, because the galleys are going through and it has to get printed and shipped from Italy or China to the museum. So much, much longer than just getting something onto the web. So there's usually a lot of materials that we can draw from. We talk to the curators, but none of that was really formalized as much as it has become in the past year. So what's great is that in the past year, largely through Ruth Berson and Dominic Willson's efforts, we have instituted an Interpretive Goals process, where as soon as an exhibition is put on the schedule—which could be three years ahead, or two or one, depending on—more often further ahead—we sit down with the curator and we have a list of questions, including, what are the take-aways you would like a visitor to have if they were to describe the show to someone else when they leave? What is it that you'd like them to be saying?

Begin Audio File 2 06-02-2008.mp3

02-00:00:21

Samis:

We sit down with the curators—several of us, actually. Ruth Berson is involved, sometimes Chad Coerver from publications, sometimes Nancy Price from communications and marketing, and then Dominic and Stephanie Pau and myself. We review these sheets that the curators have developed that articulate already, in response to these questions, what their goals are for the exhibition, and then try to make them granular enough that we can start thinking about what kinds of interpretive resources we should be putting out there to achieve those goals. Then we brainstorm that over the course of the meeting. That's a great, great collaboration instrument. The curators have found it, I think to a one, to be a very rewarding process because when they're thinking about an exhibition that's still in the formative stage, they get to brainstorm with colleagues and they get to think about how they can communicate those ideas most forcefully and most articulately to the public.

From my point of view, it's great because in the past year and a half, two years, since Dominic's arrival, I have become charged with not just my own bailiwick of interactive educational technologies, but interpretation as a whole, analog and digital. What we find is if we are brainstorming interpretive strategies in the seed stage, then we can grow an exhibition that doesn't need so much remediation later on, through technological intervention. We can build in enough section-level texts and extended object labels, and think about podcasts and other things like that, or cell-phone tours. We have got a whole arsenal, a menu of interpretive resources we can build in. Some of them technological, but many of them not, because a lot of visitors don't want to use technology in the galleries; we have learned this over time through our own studies. So it's great to be able to circumvent that need when we can build in the context necessary for a meaningful experience of the art through other means. Crazy, simple.

So from my point of view, that's been the evolution of my relations with—first, I was working with the curators on realizing exhibitions. Then I came into education and had internalized their vision, to a great extent, and was able to work for many, many, many years independently and autonomously. Then we're working together, though I'm sometimes tapping, drawing on their expertise in talking about permanent collection works. Then after *Making Sense of Modern Art*, so I'd say around 2004, 2005, as we began focusing more on exhibitions again, working more with curators, but more as content experts. Still doing our own research in a lot of ways, in terms of thinking about multimedia, because they weren't thinking about what's the most interesting video clip, or what's the most interesting background story or document that will shed light on this? That's something that we still did on our own, entirely. Then finally, now, from the get-go, thinking about the interpretive strategy for an exhibition *early* on, and collaborating and crafting the way we present it to the public. Which I think is the best of all.

02-00:04:05

Now, other parts of the education department work differently. Like the docents work with the curators. They get walkthroughs with the curator, but that's when an exhibition's up. They do their study papers in advance. They, too, get access to the catalogue galleys in advance to write their study papers. But then they get the curatorial walkthrough, where they get the spiel, as it were, on any given artist and the key artworks in that show, and how each artwork reflects the thesis. The things that the public doesn't get at all, unless we're there to make sure the curators are actually including it in some way as part of the texture of the show, the tissue of it.

Rigelhaupt:

How much of a relationship is there with artists?

02-00:04:52

Samis:

Ah, that varies. That's interesting. The curators are the primary maintainers or holders of the baton of relationship with the artist. They're the primary interlocutor there for the institution. But what we do is, in IET we have got a very active artist video interview program, going back to people like Robert Rauschenberg and Sol LeWitt, Richard Serra. So we will sit the curator down with the artist when the artist comes to the museum—ideally, long in advance of the exhibition—and we'll interview the artist with them. Typically, the set of questions is one that's born out of a collaboration between curatorial, conservation, and education. So curatorial has their questions in philosophy or history; we have questions of interpretation and meaning. We try to put ourselves in the shoes of the public encountering these works for the first time—*always* that's what we try to do—and frame questions that will be illuminating for that seat in the movie. Then conservation is asking questions about longevity of the work and how, if this piece breaks—especially if its digital or new media or something—how do you want it repaired or replaced? When does it cease being the work as you envision it? When does it become something else? What are the parameters that make this work your work? Things like that. Process questions. We ask process questions, too, because the visitors always want to know how something was made.

Rigelhaupt:

So you said you try, in these meetings with an artist, to try and imagine yourself as the public. But you have multiple publics.

02-00:06:54

Samis:

That's absolutely true.

Rigelhaupt:

So I'm wondering if you could talk about the strategies that you have learned and are part of your work now of creating interpretive guides and education, for someone who could be a tourist to a doctoral student in art history.

02-00:07:17

Samis:

The best training I ever could have had in this was in 1982, '83, when I became a docent at SFMOMA. It was all there. Susan Becker. Hats off to Susan Becker, who has many an untold story, no doubt, about SFMOMA. She's still training docents. She trained me in '82-83. What I realized, at least

when I was designing my own—each docent designs their own tours. No one tells them what theme to use or which artworks to go to. What I realized was that in any given group of visitors, I might have an artist, a trustee/collector, and a conventioneer from Kansas City who happened to be in San Francisco and wandered into the gallery. So people who have enormous knowledge about process, people who have knowledge about art world values and a sophistication, like the trustee/collector might, and people for whom, “My kid could do that,” is the first thing that comes out of their mouth. So really, if you’re a docent, how do you keep all of those people engaged and in a fruitful dialogue with each other? Because it’s not a lecture tour, it’s an inquiry-based conversation in front of a series of artworks. I always felt like the ideas had to be provocative and sophisticated enough that I or the artist or the trustee would all be interested in them. And the language had to be simple enough and straightforward enough that the conventioneer could get involved in the act, too. I still feel that that’s the mix. You don’t want to dumb down ideas, but you want the language to be straightforward. That’s what I go for.

If you look at *Making Sense of Modern Art*, which I used to call *Making Sense of Modern Art Not So Much As To Kill It!* But we got questions like, for the *Erased de Kooning*, “What’s the big idea?” We want to honor visitor befuddlement because that’s the beginning of getting to the root of why that artwork is a radical statement. They’re getting something about how different this is from the normal way we behave in the world. That’s absolutely correct. So what *is* it about it? The question I’m always asking is, why would an artist who’s not trying to perpetrate a hoax—which is, of course, what much of the public thinks modern and contemporary art is, a series of elaborate hoaxes perpetrated on them at great financial gain—why would an artist who’s actually earnest and intelligent and creative be spending their time, their one life, painting white canvases again and again and again, in myriad different ways, as Robert Ryman does? Or monochrome canvases, like Brice Marden did? Or erasing someone else’s drawing, like Robert Rauschenberg did? Why would this be of value? Why would it be interesting? In what world does this make sense? That’s always the question. What makes it urgent to the person who’s doing it and trying to convey that world and that worldview, in effect. Because that’s the world in which this act has meaning. It’s a completely different way of conceiving of the world and behaving in the world than the average person who comes into the museum. So how do we bring that to life for the visitor?

Rigelhaupt: So if the meaning, as you’re saying, is in that act of producing, is there a different meaning when it’s hanging on the wall at SFMOMA?

02-00:11:32

Samis:

Well, often, all too often, there’s a dearth of meaning. Because there was a time in the great sublime of abstract expressionism, where it was assumed that these works, just being in their presence would communicate, in this transcendent way, to everybody who came near. And [Piet] Mondrian and

Kandinsky, who felt that this color yellow will have—for Kandinsky or Mondrian, this particular arrangement of patterns is going to have this impact on people. But a lot of people just come upon these artworks and it's like, in David Antin's words, they're wall obstructions. It's nothing enlightening that's happening when they're standing in front of it, they just don't know what to make of it. They're not giving themselves permission to experience them, in a way. Their insecurity is there. It's not just insecurity, it's like, what's the context? They don't have a semantic context to know how to approach this yet. No one is giving them Kool-aid with little drops of LSD to strip their senses bare, to experience it in the raw. No, they're coming with their cultural conditioning and they're saying, what's that? Why should I care? So you have to create a space where you clear some space for the artwork to take on its presence in the way it may have if you had visited the artist's own studio and been surrounded by other works, which inherently would have syntactically referred one to another, and you would have seen the variations and the decisions that were made in this painting versus that painting, and you start creating a language. Just like when you go to another country, you first hear people, you don't understand a thing. But after a while, you begin to hear the cross-references and certain words and patterns emerge. These are each different languages. These are individual languages.

In the twentieth century, artwork, modern artwork, contemporary artwork is a plethora of new languages that are being created all the time. Somehow they're being forced to jostle and hold each other side by side in the galleries. But they're not all operating by the same premises at all. It's like why Clyfford Still wanted all of his works to be in a gallery unto themselves and why he wanted to have a museum that would just be his work. Because he had his own cosmos, and he didn't want to have to behave next to or according to anyone else's rules. That was an insight, in effect, that he had. He was demanding to *exiger*, to exact that, that would be the *only* condition under which he would give his work to a city. Denver has finally, many decades after his death, accepted. We accepted in a small way, and the Albright-Knox [Art Gallery] accepted in a small way in the seventies, with thirty works or twenty-eight works each, in a gallery that will be inviolate, always just be his works. But by and large, to the extent a collection supports it, a museum will try to gather artworks that can talk to each other in a gallery together. But if there are gaps in the collection, then it may or may not support that. So you might have artworks that come from fundamentally different philosophies side by side. How does a naïve visitor know what the changing criteria of value and meaning are, as they move around the walls of one simple four-walled room? They're all contiguous. Yet they're coming from different universes, in some cases.

Rigelhaupt: So how can an education department most effectively communicate context?

02-00:15:50

Samis:

Yeah, that's a really good question. There's a Monty Python joke about these two English women in a laundromat in London. They're talking about existentialism, of course—as women in a laundromat would be wont to do! At one point they say, “Well, why don't we just call up Sartre?” So they drop a coin in the pay phone there in the laundromat and say, [in French], “Est-ce que Jean-Paul est là?” They say on the phone, “Oh, no, no, actually, he's not there, I'm sorry.” They say he's not there. Then they say, “Quand sera-t-il libre?” Which is a way of saying, when will he be available? But in French, it translates to, “When will he be free?” Then they respond on the other end, “Ah, he's been asking himself that question all his life.”

Well, the question you just asked me about what's the best way to get the context to people in the gallery, right in front of the artwork, is the question I have been asking myself for the past fifteen years, at least, if not longer. Probably twenty, since my first Achenbach Foundation Graphic Arts Council Fellow show, in 1985, '86, and maybe before that. Once again, it goes back to that menu. Here, I have got a multilayered response, also because there are standard affordances that we have, like wall text and object labels and audio tours, and multimedia is less standard. There are live interpreters like docents. This actually gets to the heart of what I do, so it's worth talking about a little bit.

02-00:18:10

Okay, I'm going to go to 2001, and the “Points of Departure” show, which was our best guess, when supported by a director who was visionary about things digital, and a slight budget, and working with the MIT Media Lab, and brainstorming this stuff in creative ways, and Steelcase in Michigan, that we were able to mock up what we felt was an adequate environment for people to experience contemporary art. Not just adequate, but really, what we were hoping was going to be an exciting environment for people to experience contemporary art, to really bring those meanings home.

What we did was we, (A) grouped each of the galleries by theme. So there was inherently a connection in that gallery. We addressed issues that people have difficulty with in contemporary art. So, language. Why are people making paintings of words? That's not intuitive. Why wouldn't that be poetry? Why is that visual art? I thought visual art was about representing the world out there, or maybe abstraction. Why would a word be visual art? Lawrence Weiner, Christopher Wool, Jenny Holzer, Glenn Ligon—lots of people make art with words in it now, and why is that art? Okay. Another: “Found, Recycled, Repurposed”—that was about found-object sculptures, the stuff that you'd find in a garage sale or in Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*. Why is that art? Why is that valued? A lot of Rauschenberg, and Bruce Conner and [Ed] Kienholz works were in that gallery. “Pushing Paint” was another gallery. This was basically about art that's on the threshold between figuration and abstraction, and why people would want to go past that threshold and just get into the fascination of pushing the paint, even when it's no longer

representational, and how that gets valued. What's good pushing paint? What's bad pushing paint? So these were some of the first three out of six themes. "The Grid", that was the fourth. Why do modern artists love grids so much? Whether it's Andy Warhol in his silkscreens and with his serial imagery, or Sol LeWitt making a grid of cubes or pencil marks, or Eva Hesse—there are all different kinds of grids—or Chuck Close, with his gridded portraits. Why is this of value in contemporary art? So we really wanted to address these things head on, and show some of the best works from our collection, in the process.

As John Weber said, "The show is *about* the art, but it's *for* the visitors." It was a beautiful installation. One of the things we did was, in advance—and this was a *real tight* education/curatorial collaboration. A model. We were actually involved in the selection of the works, because part of it was based on which artworks we had already developed content for in *Making Sense of Modern Art*. So in that sense, we had set an agenda through our own research and production cycles in the IET program, that some of those works were bound to be included. Then others were works we hadn't had a chance to show, new acquisitions, things like that. We went into painting storage several months in advance of the show, with a video camera. With the paintings on the racks, we had a number of curators talk about the works that were on the checklist for the show, standing in front of the work. Talking directly about the different things that made this work interesting and compelling to them. Multiple voices, multiple perspectives on each work, not just one authoritative, definitive take, right? We ended up having an hour of videotape on each theme of the six. We had six themes, and one per gallery.

Then in the IET team, we mercilessly cut that hour down to about two minutes. So it was about a sentence or two, not full paragraphs. We didn't give the normal full museumspeak paragraph, artfully wrought. It was about personality, it was about enthusiasm. Some of it was just about the humor of a curator on camera, talking about something. Conveying, in a way that no typography ever can, their own passion or curiosity about a piece. So we'd take a couple of sentences from one and then we'd have a little animation across the screen; another curator would come onboard, another couple of sentences for another. Sound Bite Central, in effect, was what this was. But each one reflected an aspect of that work or that theme that seemed insightful.

We only showed that two-minute clip in the gallery with those works, on what we called the smart table. The smart table was a piece of furniture that was basically a touch-screen kiosk. But it was not like this. [Holds hands up in front of chest.] So it did not compete in any way with the visual field of the artworks that were on the walls. It was set at like a ten or fifteen degree angle, slightly tilted up, so you could see there was something happening and flickering over there in the corner. Maybe you heard a little bit of a tiny murmur from it, but nothing more than like two people talking in another part of the gallery would be. You could pick up a sound wand and you could watch

the curators giving their insights about why these works were interesting, and why they put them together in this gallery, and why grids were important to contemporary artists. Or why language could be important and valid as a way of expression, a means of visual expression. So like in the “Language” gallery, we had the curatorial intros that were these ruthlessly pruned things that were actually punchy, as a result, and entertaining. Then we had artist videos, as we always do, from artists whose works were in the gallery. A curator never said anything in the abstract without an artwork from that gallery appearing on screen, on the table, at the moment that it—if they were talking about an abstract concept, we saw an artwork that was right around you that embodied that concept, so you could immediately anchor it. You had Velcro. It was completely unlike entering an exhibition, reading an introductory wall text before you have seen a single artwork, and trying to remember, five seconds later, what you have just read. Because you were there, and every statement they made, it was anchored in a work you could see. You get it.

02-00:25:31

Then the final, the third layer—there’s the curatorial, the artist videos, and then in several of the galleries, we had an activity that a visitor could try. So like in the Language gallery, you could bring up some kind of—we had some clip art photographs, stock photography, and there were words at the top of the screen. You could select words, drag them down, resize them on the photograph, and see how they impacted your perception of that image, and really understand the interaction between language and visuals firsthand, in a creative way.

For me, that’s still the single best model of how to get people context just in time. That triple-level smart table, access to histories, meaning, contexts, always anchored in the works, in the presence of the works right there, with you trying out the concepts. There’s nothing that beats it. We haven’t had the mandate to do that much technology in the galleries, so we have had to think in other terms since those years. So typically, we have historically settled for a kiosk with an interactive feature, that also goes on the web for people who want to see it in advance or afterwards, from home, that explores a number of dimensions of that artist’s work or that exhibition. So while people still have their questions circulating in their mind, before they have moved out and onto another floor or to the café or anywhere else, they can sit down and they can explore some of the background and context, and solidify, get some anchors for these tendrils of artworks that are floating in their brain right now, and anchor them in something that tells a coherent—that can serve as a bridge into their own life world.

02-00:27:48

We have taken on audio tours in the past couple of years, which was not initially part of my team’s bailiwick. Cell phone tours, we have experimented with. What we found with the Matthew Barney show, which was a situation where no interpretive materials were allowed to be rooted in the galleries per se, where we could only provide mobile materials because there were no

extended wall texts or anything anywhere in the galleries, and no extended object labels permitted. We did a research study with Randy Korn & Associates, and we found that on the one hand, the most frequently consulted piece of interpretation was the introductory wall text. There was one when you got to the landing of the fourth floor. Whereas we'd offered podcasts, cell phone tours, free audio tours. What else? A learning lounge with video of the artist, an IET kiosk, and books and magazines and stuff, all available on that floor. The most consulted thing was the wall text. But it was also of the least value to people.

That goes back to that same thing I mentioned before, which is you're reading a wall text before you have seen a single artwork in the show. So there's nothing for it to anchor in, there's no Velcro yet. It's very abstract. It's written by someone who has spent three years researching this topic, and is trying to get all their distilled wisdom into three paragraphs, or four. They're talking to someone who doesn't know dime one about the subject. All the sentences are floating in thin air, because they haven't experienced it yet. It should rightly be the summative text, at the end of the show. The intro text should be about, oh, what you're about to see, and why we think it's important to present it here, and it's going to be in these sections, and we'll tell you about each section when we're there, when you're in front of the work—just like the smart tables, in front of the work. Anyway, we found that on the one hand, that was the most frequently used thing, yet it was the least valuable.

The things that were most valuable were the audio tours; but only like 17 percent, if you're lucky, will take that. Where does that leave 83 percent of our visitors? So with that in mind, the technology, the kiosks, similar small number. High value, small number. But what we learned was the more interpretive resources people used, their appreciation of the show skyrocketed. This was a major finding in the field. Matthew Barney, if you walked in and didn't use any interpretive resources, or just one—let's say the introductory wall text—and you had never heard of him before, the likelihood was that you were going to leave that show disaffected, feeling ripped off. On a scale of one to seven, it was like a two. Seven being the top. If you used two or three interpretive resources, immediately, the rating went up to like three or four. So you're at least at a midpoint. You were no longer actively hostile. If you used four or five interpretive resources, you were like up at five on the seven-point scale. You were into this worldview that this artist had had the incredible imagination and audacity to create. But a gallery without the interpretive resources doesn't give you that. So often, people are left at two. So that's always the conundrum of how to get these resources and make them available. So in a world where a lot of people don't use technologies, where 17 percent might, or 20 percent might, a lot of people watched the video of the artist and loved that. But still, I'm not sure the lion's share did.

The easiest way is to use people's atavistic historic behavior, which is, well, I know how to visit a museum; I'm an educated person. I read the introductory

wall text, I read the wall text in the galleries. Even though I don't take an audio tour, I'll read an occasional object label. So even if I have seen too many people go around exhibitions spending more time on the object label than on the artwork, I understand the pitfalls that are there, as well. We still have to try and find a way to deal with people's habits and what's the low-hanging fruit, in a way, of interpretation, and try to make them worthwhile.

In some ways, I would say that the best way to reach people is to have an intro advance organizer, like I mentioned, where you don't tell them too much in advance, you just tell them why this is important and we'll tell you more as we go along. Then in each gallery, you tell them about the works in that gallery. Occasionally, if there's something that you need in order to appreciate a specific work, that's not visible in that work, you say something about that on the label. That's the most rudimentary, analog, historic, anachronistic way of doing museum interpretation, but it's something that we're still not doing well at SFMOMA. Beyond that, we can start adding other things like new technologies and smart tables, but know that not everybody's going to use them. So you have to get the baseline stuff right, and then you can add the other layers on and really enrich people's experiences from there. Does that make sense?

Rigelhaupt: When you talked about Matthew Barney not having any, did you say there were object labels, or very little signage throughout?

02-00:33:44

Samis: Well, there were object labels, but basically, they had not a sentence on them, aside from the title and the medium. So no extended commentary on any object label. But there was a cell phone number you could call.

Rigelhaupt: Now, was that at the artist's direction?

02-00:34:01

Samis: Yes.

Rigelhaupt: Has that happened in the past, for something along those lines?

02-00:34:05

Samis: It's been known to happen. The Richard Tuttle exhibition was another situation where remediation was needed to get people to begin to appreciate what were, for many of them, very curious objects on the wall.

Rigelhaupt: So when something like that happens, and the standard signage and information that typically you want to convey to viewers is not going to be made available, walk me through the process of what the IET department does.

02-00:34:36

Samis:

Basically, I think in the future, that's not going to happen so much anymore because we have got this interpretive-goals process. We will have a more active role in the definition of analog, as well as digital resources. Historically, what the IET department did, though, in those situations—and might have to do again, if there's another situation like that—is ask the questions that we think visitors would have in the presence of this work; honor the artist and the visitor, both, and their respective potential world views; try to forge an accessible bridge to the world of the artist and why the artist would choose to make objects like this, why they become important, why they are valuable, and why they are of value to us, through a combination of historical documentation, film clips, process footage. Looking at specific works and seeing how these concerns play out in the works themselves formally, in the way they're made; maybe the impact these works have had on other people, on other artists. What role they have played in the history of our understanding of modern and contemporary art; why they were seminal. Why would a toilet be seminal, a urinal be seminal? Why would it be important? Ask all those stupid questions. Then answer them in a way that says, okay, this is the way this particular universe is constellated.

Rigelhaupt:

Are there any particular examples that come to mind of difficult modern or contemporary art that you think the IET department has done a particularly good job at communicating information to the public about?

02-00:36:39

Samis:

Now, once again, communicating information to the public, I have to say caveats, because a lot of people don't know about Koret Center, a lot of people don't know about our features on the Web. So whether we're actually communicating to the people who need to know, because it's not available on a just-in-time basis when they're standing in front of the work, I don't know. But let's just say that for those people who have accessed these features, they have proven helpful. I think we're reaching a small percentage of the people who are befuddled. Having said that, I think some of our early work around Rauschenberg was exemplary. We have got a couple of screens about Rauschenberg's Black Paintings. Like what does monochrome painting mean? If someone has made a monochrome painting once, why would anyone ever need to make one again? Okay, the concept has been exemplified. What's the percentage in doing it again? Where we actually go in there and we talk about how that gesture can mean very different things in different decades, in different places. We're talking about signifiers, we're talking about semiotics here. The same thing doesn't mean the same thing all the time.

I wrote my thesis as a grad student in art history at Berkeley on Rembrandt [van Rijn], basically, as a floating signifier for successive generations of nineteenth-century French printmakers. He meant one thing in the 1830s and the 1840s; he meant something else in the fifties, and something else in the sixties, and something else in the seventies. They were drawing from the same

guy. So similarly, artworks of each decade, or the same gesture in one decade isn't what it means in another decade. So we restore context along those lines.

So we have one screen, "What Does Monochrome Painting Mean?" Another one, "Must Painting be Mark Making?" Which is the drawing part, which is absent in a monochrome painting. It traces Rauschenberg's early experiments at the limits of—he was trying to figure out how far you can push an object and still have it mean something, still have it be art. So he starts out with something all white. In a land of abstract expressionism, where everybody's being defined by marks and gestures, he doesn't want to imitate them. He wants to pay them the respect of not imitating them, in a certain way, or just being derivative; but on the other hand, he wants to create a space of his own, which is an alternative space. So he starts out with just pure white. Then he starts subdividing the white. Single canvas, two canvasses; okay, there's a line down the middle. What does that do? Then a triptych. We have got the triptych in our collection. Three. Then four, like this. Then seven. He realized he could do this forever. But that wasn't of enough interest to compel him, to hold him, so he moved on to black paintings. Then the Black Paintings had texture, and he started adhering newspapers to them and painting them black. Then sometimes there'd be brown and other things would come through. Then he started using paper. He put paper into a Plexiglas box. Does that work? Is that art? Then people didn't really like it very much, they didn't think that was art. But if you put gold leaf on a canvas, they thought, oh, that's interesting. Because that's precious, right? So Rauschenberg, being the iconoclast and the irreverent person he was, and someone who was into found objects and the value of the mundane, almost the transcendent value of the mundane, then did something with just dirt. Which, in effect, is not so different from gold, after all anyway, is it? From the earth. And John Cage loved that. Then from dirt, it was like a succession of, okay, what about if we put seeds in it start watering it? Make it growing. That didn't last very long because, of course, how long can you maintain a growing thing? Then, only then did he start getting into color and adhering all the kinds of traces of passage of the world that we come to think of as works like *Collection*, or his transfer drawings and transfer paintings of the sixties and seventies and eighties and everything else. But that wasn't his early work. It was really working at the edges of what the space called art might be, and defining parameters, and then moving in and working from there. So that's the process that we evoked in those two screens, just about "What does monochrome painting mean? Must painting be mark making?" For me, that's like tackling some of the most difficult issues in modern and contemporary art and creating a number of lessons from them. So that was effective.

Rigelhaupt: So if we stay with the idea that all of these objects and all this art requires active interpretation, that the meaning is constructed as much through viewing it as the moment it's following semiotic theory. Then part of what goes on in creating interpretive guides, and through the IET department is creating preferred meanings, you are pointing visitors in a particular direction. There's

an intermediary in the relationship between viewing whatever piece of artwork, probably for good.

02-00:42:33

Samis: We're trying not to tell them what the meanings are. That's really not the point.

Rigelhaupt: My question was, what balance do you strike?

02-00:42:43

Samis: We're trying to create a framework, which is our understanding of the space, of the conceptual space or the process space or the meaning space, in which the artist is working. We're saying, these are some of the things that were important to the artist. These are some of the things that were active and important at the time, let's say. Now look at this and see if that resonates with you and what that means to you. We're not saying, the *Erased de Kooning* means this, or that. Ideally, we let the artist talk about it. Rauschenberg talking about his *Erased de Kooning* and just telling the story is one of the most effective things that we have in our arsenal, the resources that we have created.

Rigelhaupt: Then how much do you think about—

02-00:43:47

Samis: But showing an artist also shows how seriously they take their work. That's *very* important. Seeing an artist wrestle with something. Seeing Kara Walker talk about her own uneasy relationship with her imagination and the way it gets swept into lurid romance novel, gothic, sexual, pseudo-porn scenarios that may or may not have ever happened, and saying she's not sure she's comfortable with it, either. Kind of like Rauschenberg saying, "Frankly, a lot of the artworks in these galleries scared the shit out of me," he says in one of our videos. "They kept frightening me. That was why I kept them, as proof of my courage. To keep me thinking about courage." That stuff, people need to see that in order to understand what's at stake for an artist when they do their work. More than us saying it means this or it means that.

Rigelhaupt: Then how much do you think—or how do you strike the balance of how much you offer to visitors about what other artists think about this, or how other artists have been impacted by the work?

02-00:45:12

Samis: Well, I love doing that. Because that perpetuates the conversation between the works. Where one creative spark spawns something else, to me that's really key. It's something that we haven't really done enough of yet. We have talked for years about bringing artists into the galleries with enough time. See, we always just have an hour to interview them about their work. What we'd really like is to have them have time to—but they're usually coming from somewhere else, they're here for a day and a half, they have got meetings out

the wazoo with every aspect of the museum, and they don't have the time to just wander through the galleries, much less think about what they would want to say about specific works that really strike them, and then get recorded about them. But that's our dream, is to actually, above and beyond having—Teresita Fernandez, in our interview with her just a week ago, said she would love to do that. "Ask me that," she said. "There are works in the galleries I would love to talk about." We just actually did it for the first time with Helène Aylon, who studied under Ad Reinhardt, talked about his work, who met Mark Rothko in his studio not long before Rothko committed suicide, talked about that encounter; and talked about Barnett Newman's *Zim Zum*, the sculpture on the terrace, because she's familiar with Kabbalistic lore. So she was able to talk about all three of those. She's an artist who's also in our collection, and she already talked about her own work. So that's something we want to do much more of, have these cross-fertilizations. In our *Artcasts*, we invite musicians to come in, or poets to come in and riff, very often, on what a visual artist has done. That's our podcast series.

Rigelhaupt: To go back to what you were saying about modern art, there's many different languages. So perhaps more than anything else, the IET department is helping to increase fluency, in some respects? To see how these languages interact with each other?

02-00:47:35

Samis: I'd be very comfortable with that as a definition or a goal. Very comfortable. As a matter of fact, one of the aspects of *Making Sense of Modern Art*, the program that's online and in-house, is a timeline called "Comparisons Across Time." We have got a number of artworks from our collection arrayed in little circles, and you can click on any one of them when it comes up; instead of going into the context of that work, it actually—what happens is, a bunch of other artworks from across the century constellate around it. You can bring one of these other circles, you can drag it in to compare it to the work that's in the center, and compare a Warhol with a Duchamp, let's say, or a Carolee Schneemann or something else. It's always linked by some key concept. They're not necessarily superficially visible comparisons, they might be underlying conceptual comparisons that bring these works together—an emphasis on process. Sometimes it might be something that's visibly recognizable, like a grid; but other times it might be something completely different. Those kinds of subliminal conversations that are underlying, that are not always immediately apparent, are exciting to surface. The generative principles of things.

Rigelhaupt: Well, I don't want to overly generalize, but certainly, painting has held a certain prominence in modern art. Photography has been included more and more. But I'm wondering if you could talk about some of the challenges of contemporary art, with video and new forms that have developed with technology, and how your department is seeking to introduce visitors and communicate what developments are taking place with the new mediums.

02-00:49:59

Samis:

Good question. I'm going to do a slight transition first because I had a little insight. You said the thing about painting and photography. I think in the old SFMOMA, the old building, photography had primacy. Acreage and square footage were still allocated on the fourth floor to painting and sculpture over photography, but in terms of the quality of what was being shown at any given moment, you could always rely on something that was—it was only when we came to the new building there was enough space for the painting galleries and the permanent collection to actually have primacy. Then the photography galleries were the third floor. It was scaled differently. It was just an interesting insight. In terms of the permanent collection, photography had primacy in the old building. Painting now has finally come into its own in the new building as having those second-floor galleries that really give it honor. But it wasn't even true in the old building, in that sense—at least in terms of the permanent collection.

02-00:51:16

In terms of what we do with new media or with video, typically less. Typically what we do is we just interview because these artists are typically alive, as opposed to historic. What we have done with Bill Viola—well, with Bill Viola we did a really big website because it was a survey of his career. But it was really a challenge because if anyone is committed to a high-fidelity immersive experience, with audio and saturated video and sound and installation, three-dimensional, it's Bill Viola. So how are we going to approach his work, in the early days of the web, where it wasn't even really—broadband wasn't even pervasive yet. It was like suicide. But what we did, basically, was rather than try to make some derisory, trivial little QuickTime VR or even QuickTime movie of what it would be like to be in this amazing immersive space, we worked with Bill and Kira [Perov], his wife, to create a website that used the texts they had written, simple texts that described each of the pieces. We used those texts with a visual and a little sound clip from it. So you use the infinite space of your imagination, with a jpeg and sound clip, and you can begin to imagine. Then if you wanted to, you could have a little thirty-second or twenty-second excerpt from the original footage in the installation, after you have already imagined it, rather than trying to create some simulacrum of it in the constraints of the stupid medium on the web, which in no way could compare or measure up. So that was one approach we did.

02-00:53:44

With Gary Hill, we just interviewed him and we made six or seven clips from our interview, in which he talked about things that were important to him and formative to him in specific installations. Then we always put a lot of B-roll, so it's not about a talking head. It's the same principle as "Points of Departure." If someone says something, show what they're talking about, don't just keep your camera on their head. Give people Velcro. Give people something to anchor it in. With Pipilotti Rist, same thing. We interviewed her and then we ended up using a lot of B-roll that really folded it into an experience of her installation. It's pretty manageable to do that. With Douglas

Gordon, we have done that more recently. It's pretty manageable to do that with media art. We just don't confuse ourselves with the art. We just make it clear that it's a meta-level about the art. It's a conversation about the art.

Rigelhaupt: Have there been any exhibitions or installations that have been particularly challenging for the IET department to develop information to the public?

02-00:55:08

Samis:

The Barney was challenging, just by the nature of his esoteric, hermetic universe. There's always a level of bracketing and, to quote Gary Hill, "a suspension of disbelief" that you need in order to honor the artist's project and to go there as far as you possibly can and present it. It's like a journalistic point of view. We do whatever we can to delete all superlatives. One of my tenets is not to—unlike most of the art world and unlike what happens at accessions meetings and lots of other places, often, or in the catalogues, I don't care what an artist's résumé is. I'm not going to say, has had solo exhibitions at blank, blank, blank, blank; has had group exhibitions at blank, blank, blank, blank, as if that proves a pedigree. If it's not meaningful, I don't care. We need to find the meaning, not the pedigree of how many external sources have validated it. We have got to get into the world where it actually makes us think and feel and do something that we wouldn't have done otherwise. Then it gets interesting. So I think if there's a challenge, that's often the challenge. Richard Tuttle, that was a challenge, because it wasn't artwork that we were all naturally drawn to. But if you do your work and you do it right, you get far enough in that you actually end up finding things that you really find of value. Those are the things that you talk about. Those are the worlds that you convey and the parameters that you put out there for others to appreciate. We don't say things that we can't stand behind. We're not the curators of the show so that's not always as easy as it is for the curator, whose taste this might be. But we have to find our own value in the work, and then work from there. We'll listen to everything the curator says, and the things that resonate with us end up being the things that we put out there to other people because we think that we have tested them, we have vetted them.

Rigelhaupt: It sounds as though you're describing a much more collaborative process with curators, that the interpretive guiding process starts from the beginning. Does the education department or the IET department now play a role in thinking of exhibitions that are coming in the future?

02-00:58:23

Samis:

In conceiving of the exhibitions themselves, no. The subjects of the exhibitions, we don't conceive of. Having said that, the prerogative we have always is to step back and say, what we have to focus on now is the permanent collection. As 2010 and the seventy-fifth anniversary approaches, we want to focus on it a lot. We want to draw back from being so exhibition-driven. Because you can do a ton of exhibitions and have nothing to show for it, in terms of the actual enduring intellectual infrastructure of the museum

that we're building to carry on over time. So it's time, with the seventy-fifth anniversary, to go back to the permanent collection again, like we did around 2002-2003, in that period, 1999-2003, when we were doing *Making Sense of Modern Art*, or before that, when we were doing *Voices and Images of California Art*. Both of those were permanent collection-based initiatives. That's the thing that I think is really important for us because that is stuff we can draw on and then we can repurpose in myriad ways, along with our interviews with the artists and things like that. It's stuff that we can put out. Now we're talking about alternate channels and reaching new audiences with this stuff that aren't just SFMOMA.org or people who come to the building, come to the museum, but YouTube or Virgin America, their in-flight entertainment network, having an SFMOMA channel on that for flights coming to or leaving San Francisco. So it's like this little mini-art immersion in conversations about modern and contemporary art, with the artists, with the artists talking about themselves and what's important to them. Wouldn't that be more interesting than just watching "SpongeBob SquarePants" or MTV for the nth time on your flight? Virgin America's trying to get people to feel more intelligent when they get off the plane than they were when they got on. So we're willing to play with them in that and see if that works, see if we can make that work.

Rigelhaupt: Where did that idea come from?

02-00:60:49

Samis:

It was this combination. I have got to give a lot of credit to Brettany Shannon in the development department, who was in corporate affairs in development. But initially there was the idea, at a curatorial meeting. It was a budget-relieving idea. Can we make an alliance with an airline? So much money goes out the door all the time for curatorial travel, to bring artists in, et cetera. If we could have a deal, a sponsorship with an airline, then we could save a lot of money in our annual budget. The thought was, well, process of elimination, the airline industry, everybody's going bankrupt. But there's a new airline that's opening up, and it's based in San Francisco. It flies back and forth to New York and down to L.A. They're not the only routes that people do, but they're certainly frequent routes, right? Maybe they'd be interested in having this alliance with a local modern art museum, which is a big brand. So Brettany made the contact. Sure enough, they were. They have given us a huge number of free flights that can be used for Frank Smigiel in live culture, the associate curator of public programs, to bring cabaret artists from New York, or singers and performers out for *The Sabine Women* performance, or we can bring other artists out, or curators can fly to New York or down to L.A. with that. Meanwhile, they get the branding opportunity for Thursday evenings, which is when the public programs take place. Then they're interested in having us provide content on their in-flight entertainment system, which is really more like computers than it is like video. So the only issue there is it doesn't really have a mouse, it has more of a game controller, so we can't really put our whole interactive features on yet. Though maybe at some

point in the future, we'll be able to. So I curated a set of twenty-five-minute video programs made up of short artist video segments on different topics, that we can put on their flights.

Begin Audio File 3 06-02-2008.mp3

Rigelhaupt: The concept of IET, when did that come to fruition in the museum? If you could explain how that developed.

03-00:00:23

Samis:

I should probably talk a little bit about my own background and how that evolved. When I was in grad school at Cal, the Macintosh came out in 1984, my second year. I got the first generation, first Macintosh—128K of RAM, single-sided floppy—at the student discount of price of like \$2000, \$2200 or something. They didn't even have the 512K. It was ridiculous. Anyway. Kind of knowing it was going to be time to make the transition from the electric typewriter to the computer, and I'd been debating the Kaypro, didn't want to get the IBM PC, waited for the Mac. One of the things that was true of the early Mac was it was a very creative machine. It was very visual, whereas everything else was dot-prompts. The Mac, from the get-go, had graphics and fonts and MacDraw and MacPaint. The first database that I had, I think even before FileMaker, probably, was FileVision. It had a visual interface. So one of the first things I did was create a map, like a floor plan of Morrison Library or one of these places, and imagine an exhibition on the walls of that floor plan, and click on each artwork in the exhibition, and it would bring up the wall label on the Mac. This is like '85, right? Spring of '84, because it came out in '84. I got mine around Christmas, I guess, '84.

Then when I went to the Achenbach, as I was saying, and I was the Graphic Arts Council Fellow there, they actually had to install a plug in my workstation there. Until then, it had been analog. I would bring my Macintosh out, the luggable—I still have it. Actually, it's in there. It's a little worse for wear; the plastic is discolored. In the first version of FileMaker, I would put the different entries for the different possible works in the show. Then, as I mentioned earlier, LaserWriters were developed and came out during '85, '86. Krishna Copy had LaserWriters, up at the top of University Avenue here, at Shattuck. We started doing proofs and we started doing wall labels. Then someone in the graphic designs and publications department at the Fine Arts Museums, Holly, got them to get a LaserWriter, and we produced the first exhibition with laser-printed wall labels, extended commentaries about each artwork, and laser-written masters for the catalogue—which as a result, was less expensive and easier to produce. Apple ended up giving me a citation for one of the hundred most innovative uses of their computers in their first ten years. But it wasn't about the technology, it was about how can the technology be used to make the messages available to the public, so the context can be restored to the artworks and they can appreciate the experience they're having right in front of the artwork? That was always the question.

03-00:04:07

So when I came to SFMOMA a few years later, there happened to be two, maybe three Macintoshes. There was one in curatorial, which I ended up working with; there was one in graphic design; and maybe one in registration. So I started doing the checklists. By then, the notion of upgrade had taken place in software, so there was FileMaker 2. It was like, who knew there were going to be upgrades? No one knew that. We worked with FileMaker, you worked with Word, you worked with PageMaker, whatever. Then suddenly, okay, this is how the economy is going to work now; we're going to have upgrades you have to pay for every couple of years or whatever. Anyway, so that started happening, and we started doing the checklists, Janet [Bishop] and I. Then the wall labels, we took on the wall labels, which is something that the curatorial assistants and assistant curators probably curse me for now because it's not something that anyone really wants to have to deal with, when they have got everything else to deal with. But it was fun at the time to just generate the wall labels out of the database and not have to have them all typeset individually by someone else outside, saving the museum a lot of money. So we were always looking.

Then we got the network. So instead of having to move floppy disks back and forth, sneaker-net from our place to registration, with the checklist modifications, we had a network in the building and we could be sharing the FileMaker files and we could be working on the checklists that way. HyperCard, of course, was going on, and Apple Multimedia Lab was going on in San Francisco, with Kristina Hooper Woolsey and her team of people, Mike Naimark and Brenda Laurel, people who later became friends. But multimedia was still out there and it was very experimental. The idea of having video play on one of these—a Mac SE, it wasn't real. That wasn't happening. That said, Apple did have a grant program at one point, where you could apply for a grant. When the IIFx model came out, which had a video capacity in it, video card, in effect, in it, it had RS-232 ports, so you could also run a laserdisc and things like that and play it through there. When that came out, they did have a call for nonprofit educational uses. Lori Fogarty and I put an application together. While we didn't have enough of a public venue for whatever the fruit of our labor was going to be, they gave us the consolation prize of a scanner and a IIFx, that resided in the Graphic Study room after that. It was the beginning of our relationship with Fred Silverman, who was the worldwide community affairs officer there. That would come in handy later on.

03-00:07:08

So this is all in the late eighties, early nineties. Around '91, '92—'91, I went to CAA, College Art Association. There was a panel on networked art and telematics, with Roy Ascott and Mel Alexenberg. Mel Alexenberg was this Hasidic artist who taught at Pratt [Institute] in Brooklyn. He was saying, well, maybe spirit is just energy and information is energy, especially in the realm of—fax machines were the new thing, right? Relatively speaking. So he put a fax machine on Rembrandt's etching press in Rembrandt's house in Amsterdam, and put a Rembrandt angel from an etching through the fax

machine, and sent it to a fax machine in Jerusalem. He talked about how the angel went up through the air and became pure energy and information, and then was reconstituted in Jerusalem, and then it went on to Tokyo and then it flew to L.A., and then it came back, circumnavigated the globe. He's talking about this stuff. Peter D'Agostino, they're all talking about these incredibly visionary artworks that were blowing my mind a little bit. It was very new and new ways of thinking.

I was very inspired by it. I'd been hearing about multimedia a little bit because I was tuned into this stuff because I'm a Mac—without being a geek, I was interested in what the potentials were of all these things all the time, and was following that. So when Macworld came to San Francisco, as it always does—it used to be at Brooks Hall, which is at the Civic Center, which was right next to City Hall and a block from the old museum. Of course, as is always the case with any conference that takes place in your hometown, it's virtually impossible to go to it because you have got all your commitments and you can't break away. But I got there for the last fifteen minutes of the last day. Somehow, I don't know how, my nose led me to the back aisle, where the Voyager booth was. Voyager was this small company in Santa Monica that was doing the Criterion Collection, on the one hand, on laserdisc, and on the other hand, was doing CD-ROMs. They had just begun them, excuse me. They had a book with a yellow cover called *On Multimedia: Technologies for the Twenty-first Century*. It was the proceedings of a symposium that had taken place at UCLA, with a lot of the leading innovators and luminaries in this field, including the people who had done the *Guernica* project; Robert Abel and Nicholas Negroponte from the Medialab at MIT; I don't know if Kristina Hooper Woolsey was there or someone else from Apple Multimedia Lab, no doubt was. I read through this stuff, and it was like the scales dropped from my eyes. It was like, yes! It can all happen! Yes, we can configure knowledge and create this constellation, this semantic web of knowledge. I had about fifteen or twenty different ideas for multimedia programs. Some of them about art and some of them were about completely different topics. It uncorked me. I still have the envelope, I probably have a sealed version of the envelope, which I mailed to myself, just so I could have copyright proof for ideas later on, if I ever wanted to develop these things.

03-00:11:03

So that was around '92, probably. I started talking it up at the museum and saying, this could be an incredibly powerful tool. It's about to be the fiftieth anniversary of *Guardians of the Secret*, our Pollock painting; why don't we show the [Hans] Namuth footage of Pollock at work? There are great stories that we could be telling about our collection here. But that was right around the time when Dick Siegesmund and Rozanne Stringer, who were the two rungs in the chain of command between Jack Lane and myself, were being booted out. I was going to have to wait two years before those rungs got reinserted, in the form of Inge-Lise and John Weber, and any real action could happen, any forward motion could happen at the museum. In that time, I continued. I had already maxed out on my learning curve as a curatorial

assistant. I had done a lot of great, great shows. By '91, after three years, I had had, in early '92, the Sigmar Polke and Sebastião Salgado and lots of amazing art. After a while, I was just doing time.

But what I was doing after hours was learning all about multimedia and participating with other people. There's an organization called the IICS, the International Interactive Communication Society. They would meet every month. They'd alternate between the Exploratorium one month and Apple's auditorium the next month. Kind of San Francisco and South Bay Peninsula. People would show whatever they were developing. The few people who had gotten funding to do something in this new field, which was still completely under the radar of most Americans or people, everyday people. It was before CD-ROM made the cover of *Time* mag and suddenly became the new hot thing, just the way the web would a few years later. So there was a real camaraderie, a real sharing of information. Everybody was interested in what everyone else was doing. People were trying to get out and develop projects. We had an idea for a project based on Patricia Amlin's animation of the *Popul Vuh*, and we wanted to do that as an interactive multimedia thing where we'd stop frames and get into the world of the Mayans and the Mayan calendar. No one had any funding for it, of course, but we were just trying to get it together. One of the people was a programmer, other people were the designers; we were trying to make it happen. Anyway, what ended up happening was, I was involved enough in this community that when someone came along—Bob Bell was out of San Francisco State, teaching in the film department, and he was given a mandate to develop a multimedia studies program at San Francisco State. He recruited an advisory committee, and I was on the advisory committee.

03-00:14:26

Then he heard that there were these two people, a couple who had a firm. They'd gotten the mandate and the contract to develop a multimedia CD-ROM about modern American art for the Neuberger Museum of Art at SUNY Purchase. They were looking for help and someone who knew about the art. Bob Bell referred them to me, to talk at least. Then Matthew London and Minoo Saboori, they had a new company called Eden Interactive. Their first CD-ROM had been about baseball, I think, and this was going to be their second one. Matthew was, in fact, Roy Neuberger's grandson. So it was a little bit of a sweetheart deal because they were guaranteed the contract. Of course, they had proven their chops in being able to produce a CD-ROM. They were going to do one about his grandfather's collection, which he had given to this museum at SUNY Purchase. I liked the way they were thinking about it. They, too wanted to use the Hans Namuth footage of Pollock. They identified these ideas. They wanted to privilege the artist's voice.

We saw a lot in common. Basically, they hired me and I got permission from the museum to get some release time, one day a week release time, to be the art historian/content expert on the first CD-ROM on modern art, which was called *American Visions: Twentieth Century Art from the Roy R. Neuberger*

Collection. It was produced by the Neuberger Museum of Art, and Eden Interactive was the local firm. So that was *really* intense. I was doing two jobs, two full-time jobs, basically, for the next six months or whatever it was. A lot of all-nighters. I got a little Duo laptop. The Duo was a cool laptop; you could dock it and it would have a monitor as a desktop station, or you could take it out and have it as a very thin laptop. I took it out to Mammoth Lakes with a box of books and found artist quotes about everybody and developed lots of content.

One of the artists who was well represented was Stuart Davis. Stuart Davis happened to be the artist that Jack Lane had written his PhD dissertation about. Because we were so intent on getting film footage whenever possible, Minoo was able to locate old kinescopes of Stuart Davis on “Camera Three,” which had been Sunday morning culture programming on network television in New York when I was growing up. But this was probably from the fifties, this old footage. Of course, Jack had done his research in the classic, academic model of reading the letters, visiting as many artworks as he could in private and public collections, reading the criticism, and writing his dissertation. He had never thought, as no one did back then, to look for audio or video or film materials per se. That was beyond the ken of scholars, in a way. It wasn’t their standard operating procedure. When we actually produced this CD-ROM and rolled it out in Macworld, January 2004—I think it was produced in 2003, rolled it out in January 2004, after untold crazy all-nighters and all that stuff. We were able to show—I had quoted him, as well, because it was about lots of different voices. The artists’ voices, commentary voices, et cetera. So there were some quotes from him and a catalogue he had done at the Brooklyn Museum, and then there was Stuart Davis and there were these videos. When he saw Stuart Davis talking, the penny dropped. He got it. His jaw dropped, basically. He said, “I understand Stuart Davis in a way I never did before, I never could before. I now get something about his being that I could only have guessed at before.”

So that was the green light, in effect, for us to move forward. Stuart Davis is only one of many, many artists on that CD-ROM, but I think for him, that was his “aha!” moment, like my “aha!” moment had been seeing Robert Winter’s Beethoven CD-ROM, which matched up listening to Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony on a CD, in CD quality sound—which in itself was a new thing—to comment on every measure you were listening to and every new trick that Beethoven was trying with each new motif that one instrument or another was bringing in, and the ability to pause it and isolate that motif, and then play it back, and then go on and continue on. You were going through this *incredible* journey through the piece that you could *never* have done in a book, because the book wouldn’t have been synched up with the music, and you couldn’t have done in a lecture, because the lecture would have been talking over the music. But by virtue of the fact that the audio was coming in the ears and the commentary was coming in the eyes simultaneously, you could appreciate everything at once. That was my big “aha!” for multimedia;

that there are some things this technology can do that nothing else can do. It was like taking a whole closet full of archives, magazines, letters, filing cabinets, old vinyl records, old acetate tapes, magnetic tapes, old films with a film projector, slides with a slide projector—it's like you were taking five different machines and they were all reduced to zeroes and ones, and they suddenly became the same language. You configure them to make meaningful comparisons and real relationships among them. Constellate the space, this holographic space, in which in our case, because we're an art museum, artworks live. It could be about any topic.

03-00:21:23

So that was my inspiration for doing all this. I'd been talking it up for long enough. Finally, when John Weber arrived, and Jack had raised the money necessary, with Lori Fogarty's help, we put a grant proposal together to the Irvine Foundation, went down to L.A., rented a Macintosh Tower computer from a video camera supply store on Hollywood, in Hollywood, with our rented car; drove it over to the Irvine Foundation, set it up, loaded probably the beta of the Neuberger *American Visions* CD-ROM to play it for them. Of course, it didn't function. Law of demos. Anyone who's in technology knows, knows, knows, knows that whatever can go wrong will go wrong. Especially if you're in front of a crowd or a funder, right? This is hilarious. It's not even about panicking about it; you just get relaxed about it after a while. It's just part of the game. But at that time, that was the first time, right? So it was a little bit irksome. On the phone calling back to the programmer, actually, calling back to Minoo, who called the programmer, and figuring out what to do, installing QuickTime or something that wasn't installed on the machine properly, and getting it all to work.

Then we got it going and we showed them what we wanted to show them, and it was fine, and we got the funding. It was the seed money for three years, \$250,000 over three years, to start the IET program. Then the Gap Foundation kicked in with more, and the Fleishhacker Foundation kicked in with more, and the Wallace Alexander Gerbode Foundation kicked in with more. So we had a nice little three-year speculative off-budget pool of money to get something going. I knew that it wasn't a lot by standards back then. There was a lot of money pouring into CD-ROMs by then. We were going to have to rely on local firms' largesse and desire to work with us and give us a good rate. We had really great advice from Larry Friedlander. John and I walked through the galleries with Larry Friedlander, who's a Shakespeare scholar, theater professor at Stanford, pioneer in multimedia, working at the Apple Multimedia Lab, real visionary, wonderful guy. He said, "Well, what I would recommend is rather than just doing a CD-ROM of the permanent collection, or replicating the museum space, or doing a virtual tour, think about things that you can prototype that will be interesting and meaningful to you and you can learn something from. Do more than one thing, don't put all your eggs in one basket, so you can learn different things with each project." So we did. We looked at our mission, which was, on the one hand, about international modern and contemporary art. So we thought one program would be about

what we called *Making Sense of Modern Art*. We thought that would be multiple voices. The challenge there, get out of the master narrative, get into a variety of approaches to each artwork.

03-00:25:04

Another aspect of our mission is we are California based. I had been inculcated with enough of SFMOMA's heritage to know that we had an obligation to the region and the artists here, even if that wasn't a priority for Jack per se. So that was *Voices and Images of California Art*. That actually ended up being our first CD-ROM. In that, I wanted to take a different approach. That was just primary-source material. No interpretive voice per se. We went through kilometers of microfilm from the Archives of American Art, picking out things that really revealed something. If the microfilm was the ore, we looked for the things that would be the gold in the ore that gave off light, that reflected light back at us. Insights about those artists. Those were the things. That then became the ore for the visitor, knowing that maybe not everything would connect with them, but something in there was bound, was likely to.

So we worked with Steve Gano and Kristee Rosendahl on *Making Sense of Modern Art*. They had worked at Apple's Multimedia Lab. We worked with Amy Pertschuk and Chris Krueger, who had been at an early firm called Arborecence, but then their name changed to C-Wave, Communication Wave, on *Voices and Images*. We worked with Red Dot Interactive on a third program, which was about our commitment to the local community—the grass-roots art community, the nonprofit community—not in our collection, not represented there. It was really about we're going to be on the cover of the phone book, we're the new game in town, we're the big kahuna now, with the new Mario Botta building. How can we then share some of that limelight with the nonprofit artist run spaces, and even other museums around town, and get people more aware of the whole ecosystem in which we live in and work, and that helps the arts thrive here in the Bay Area? That was the *Bay Area Art Finder*. So those are the three tiers and the three different approaches. So that was like a map-driven database of different regions all throughout the Bay Area. That's what we got started with. I was the only person on staff doing any of this! We had these three outside contractors. I knew all of their work and really respected all of their work, from my years in multimedia already in the community, and seeing what kinds of productions had been achieved already.

03-00:28:01

Then we just put out a call for volunteers, and we got twenty, twenty-five volunteers who came—the excitement of the museum being—this was the summer of '94, right? We were going to open on January 18 of '95. With the excitement of that, the building already being there and the galleries not yet being open, for some reason, a lot of volunteers wanted to come when they heard. Then the multimedia grapevine, people heard, so people who were interested in that came. So people would come after work and they would sit there with their Chinese food or whatever, and they would scan things that the

researchers had been finding in the Archives of American Art. We went to D.C. and we hired a photographer in D.C. to document all these things that I was looking at at the Archives. I went with a digital sound recorder and he recorded for us. He recorded oral histories that we had already read through and flagged, and he recorded passages. Then we had Stuart Rickey, who had been a documentary filmmaker in traditional ways and wanted to learn desktop video and digital production processes. He volunteered to work on the desktop video, and so he took the audio and we matched up all these images we were scanning, and they became the B-roll. These were our early videos for *Voices and Images of California Art*. We licensed other things wherever we found them. I had a lot of experience with that through the *American Visions* Neuberger CD-ROM. We put it all together, with all these volunteers. Then each company—I wanted to do three different companies because I didn't want them saying, it's T-minus one; which program do you want us to jettison, which one do you want us to do? I wanted each of them to just have one program to focus on, so that they wouldn't have any excuses. I said, "All we want from you is the interface and the programming, so it's bug-free. We're going to develop all the content and all the media to the specs you give us. Then you just put it in and integrate it at the end." It really did happen at the end. We were all doing it the night before, all through the night, on January 17. At around four in the morning, I knocked on one of the hotel room doors that the development department had reserved at one of the hotels nearby and crashed for two hours, before the museum was all set to open that morning. We had three programs up and running. It was some kind of miracle.

03-00:30:44

There's a model that comes out of Carnegie Mellon University, a capability-maturity model. It talks about organizations going through different phases. The first phase, the initial phase is just the start-up phase. The word they use for it is heroic. In effect, that's what everybody was doing. Everybody was extending themselves above and beyond what could reasonably have been expected of any human to make this thing happen. Then the second phase is the managed phase where expertise is one deep. If one person leaves, then the whole thing falls apart. That's what we were going to go to next. Then it moves on through other phases. In the third phase, you get systems going and you're organized and you have interchangeable parts, and you understand what you're doing. If one person can't do it, someone else can step in and do it. You have got a job description and you have got processes and you have got things in place. It wasn't until 2000, with the arrival of Susie Wise and Tim Svenonius and the development of Pachyderm, our multimedia authoring software, that we got to that stage. '95 to 2000 we were still very tenuous and just one deep, making all this happen. Then from there, the fourth phase is you get metrics and you start understanding, getting feedback about your process. The fifth phase is you actually are able to integrate those metrics and apply them to your processes, and fine tune them and optimize them. On a good day, we're doing some of that now.

[End of Interview]

Jess Rigelhaupt is an assistant professor of history and American studies at the University of Mary Washington. At the time of this interview he was a postdoctoral research specialist in the Regional Oral History Office (ROHO) at the University of California, Berkeley. He received his Ph.D. from the Program in American Culture at the University of Michigan. His research focuses on California politics and culture. He is writing a book on mid-twentieth century progressive social movements and politics in the San Francisco Bay Area.