

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

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

SFMOMA 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary:

KAREN TSUJIMOTO

SFMOMA Staff, 1973-1985  
Curatorial Assistant, 1973-75  
Assistant Curator, 1975-80  
Associate Curator, 1980-82  
Curator, 1982-85

Interview conducted by  
Jess Rigelhaupt  
in 2007

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**Interview #1: July 3, 2007**

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01-00:00:07

Rigelhaupt: To begin, I'd like to ask you if you can recall and describe your first visit to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

01-00:00:23

Tsujimoto: Well, I remember it very distinctly. That was when the museum was at Civic Center, on Van Ness and McAllister, in the War Memorial Building. I came from Salt Lake City, a relatively small community compared to San Francisco. So first, walking into the grand entryway was very impressive. Then taking the small elevator up to the third or fourth level to walk through the museum for the first time was—I had an interesting experience, where the museum was very small and cozy, with an old-style elevator. Then you walked out and explored the museum. I saw, on view for the first time, some Jasper Johns prints from his "Number" series. I was totally blown away, as a young art historian and aspiring curator, somebody that wanted to work in the art field. I remember they actually were installed in the long corridor of the gallery. Back in those days, they used what they called corridor galleries to install works on paper and graphics.

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember about what year that visit was?

01-00:01:46

Tsujimoto: I think that was probably around 1971 or '72. It was just after I had graduated, and I'd come to San Francisco looking for a job. In fact, my first job was with the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. My first visit there was to scope it out. That's, as I say, where I was walking around exploring the museum, before I went back for my first interview.

Rigelhaupt: Could you talk about the process of beginning your work at—

01-00:02:20

Tsujimoto: I actually started out as an assistant in the administrative office, because I don't have a graduate degree. I worked with the administrator there, and I also worked with the development person, for about—I can't even remember. Maybe a year-and-a-half, eighteen months or so. At the time, I just wanted to work at a museum. I felt very fortunate to find a job there. Then about eighteen months or two years later, a curatorial assistant position opened up in the art department. Because I had already been working there and had some sense of staff and working with the people, I think that helped me in terms of getting that curatorial assistant job. At the time, back in the early seventies, the museum was much smaller than it is today. I may be incorrect, but I would venture a guess that there were probably, maximum, thirty people on the staff. So when I joined the art department, there was the director, Jerry Nordland. Suzanne Foley, the curator of painting and sculpture, was my supervisor. I

also worked with John Humphrey, the curator of photography at that time. That was the extent of the curatorial department.

There was also a film program, where we had a curator of film at that time, as well—Mel Novikoff was his name. So it was a very small, tight, cozy group. As I continued to work and take on more responsibility, essentially prove myself, I was given more responsibility and promotions over the years. So contrary to what it's like now in the museum profession, I actually went through like an apprentice program. I think now, in the thirty years that I've been in the business, that's very different, obviously. Because when I joined the museum, back then it was before museums really became the exciting, visible, public, dynamic places they are now. I think I joined the museum profession just as things were turning around. It was maybe a few years after I started in the museum profession that we had major shows like Tutankhamen, the King Tut exhibition, or all of a sudden, the big Impressionism shows, where, as I say, they raised the visibility of museums, and in the process, I think, raised interest in curatorial work and the museum field.

Rigelhaupt: How would you describe your primary goals when you first began your curatorial role?

01-00:05:28

Tsujimoto:

When I first started as a curatorial assistant, my goal was just to learn. I learned by not doing big things, but being basically an assistant to my supervisors, the curators. So I started out doing things like typing object labels for the artworks, helping to type manuscripts. Over the course of time, I started to learn how to get involved in producing manuscripts and catalogues, ordering transparencies, working on major publications. At the same time, Suzanne Foley was a tremendous mentor for me, because she gave me a lot of responsibility. I think because of her great interest in connecting with artists, she made me understand that art is a living thing. It's just not an inanimate object on the wall. These art objects are records of life, energy, and creativity, and therefore, you connect with that person and that personality behind it. I think that was one of the great lessons I've learned. She really enjoyed working with contemporary artists, she did a lot of very important contemporary shows. Sometimes they were not always well received by a lot of the viewing public that wanted to see [Pablo] Picasso or [Henri] Matisse. But I really learned to admire her for that.

Then by the same token, there were other people I worked with, like Jerry Nordland or Henry Hopkins, who not only had that interest in working with living artists, but also had this deep and broad and rich respect for art history. So it was working as assistants to them that I was able to learn about Jean Arp, work on an Edward Hopper show, work on the American modernist show, like Arthur Dove. As I said, I really saw it as an apprentice program. I feel very lucky because at that time, it was a very collegial, supportive, small,

intimate environment, where we all just worked together to meet project deadlines. I think things now in a lot of institutions are very different.

01-00:08:24

The San Francisco Museum of Art back then—that’s what it was called—was, as I mentioned earlier, a small, collegial environment, where I think I profited from each person I worked with in a different way. As I mentioned, working with Suzanne Foley. Then also, I have to mention John Humphrey, who was the curator of photography and actually had been at the museum for many years. He started out as, I think, a preparator, or somebody that worked on exhibitions, installing the artwork. Then again, because he loved art and was passionate about it, he ended up being our curator of photography, and actually helped to build a very important collection over the years. I think that one thing is that back then, in the seventies and early eighties, photography wasn’t as appreciated as an art form as it is now. But I believe that because of the vision that some of these people brought to the institution, like John Humphrey and later, Van Deren Coke, who was a curator of photography, that they really started to build an incredibly important foundation for the collection in photography. So as I say, as I think about all the people I worked with, it was a pretty extraordinary team. Back then, there was also Mel Novikoff and then subsequently, Edith Kramer. They ran a film program at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art that, at that early day was pretty impressive, to consider art as a *contemporary* medium in the museum realm.

Rigelhaupt: How much collaboration was there between you and the other curators?

01-00:10:40

Tsujimoto: You’re talking now about once I worked my way up and was able to do some of my own shows?

Rigelhaupt: Well actually, if you could maybe start when you were still a curatorial assistant, and then also discuss if it changed as you became a curator.

01-00:11:00

Tsujimoto: I think what happened, as a curatorial assistant, I really was an administrative assistant, doing the typing, labeling photographs. Then gradually, as I was able to take on responsibilities, I would work on shows that we knew were coming up and predestined on the schedule. One of those was the SECA art exhibition, which was Society for Contemporary Art exhibition. This is where there was an organization of advocates and friends of the museum that would help sponsor a show of a local Bay Area talent. This was, I think back then, maybe every two years; I can’t ever remember. As a junior curator, I would work on those. So it was a way for me to work with volunteers of the museum, and also get out into the art community, meeting some of the young artists that had been active in wanting to get some recognition at the museum. Then gradually, I started taking on responsibility for some touring exhibitions. Back then there was a lot of collaboration with other institutions. Henry Hopkins encouraged taking other traveling shows from institutions. One of the

big shows that I worked on was an Edward Hopper retrospective [1981] that was organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art. I was able to go ahead and install the show. I worked with the curator of the exhibition when she came out. Gradually, as I gained responsibility, I was able to start organizing my own exhibitions. I think the first major one that I organized was around 1980, and it was a historical survey called “Precisionist Painting and American Photography” [1982]. I think it was a pretty big bite for me to take out for my first show, but I was very proud because that was when I published my first major catalogue or book, with some major research. I got some important funding, and the exhibition actually toured nationally. I still get comments from people saying that they, at that time, found that it was actually an important contribution that looked at both modernist painting and photography at the time, which was a different thing to do back then. Then I think one of the next big shows I did was on Wayne Thiebaud. I think that was the last exhibition that I organized for the museum, in 1985, before I left. Again, that was very gratifying. One, to be able to work with Wayne, work with a living artist that’s very highly regarded, and to assess his work from an art historical point of view. Which as I say, is obviously what I’m interested in—California artists. It was soon thereafter that I left the museum.

Rigelhaupt: You described taking on more traveling shows over the first few years that you were working as a curator. Why do you think the museum—it sounds as though—shifted its focus some, to take on more traveling shows?

01-00:15:04

Tsujimoto: Obviously, it had a very important history, even before I joined the staff, with [Dr.] Grace McCann Morley [director 1935-1958], the important shows that she organized. When I joined the museum, I worked with Jerry Nordland maybe for nine months, less than a year. Then he moved on to Chicago. Then Henry Hopkins was hired as the director. My tenure, basically, was with Henry Hopkins. I think when Henry came to the museum, because his major professional life has been in California, I think he saw the museum as being a wonderful place and having a wonderful opportunity to take this small institution that already had a very good collection, but it was under the radar screen and he wanted to raise it up to the next level of maturity and visibility. I think my own personal assessment is that one way he could do that was through collaboration with other institutions. I think that’s a very important thing that all institutions have to do. You have to collaborate because it makes it, often, a richer project, in the big scheme of things. Also because of costs that are involved. So that Henry would take traveling shows because, one, it was to network with colleagues across the country. It was also a way for us to get Edward Hopper exhibitions, which we couldn’t organize on our own, or [Wassily] Kandinsky retrospectives from the Guggenheim Museum, or Jean Arp exhibitions, or private collections.

I really respect him, because he was committed to his vision of raising the institution to its next level of visibility and maturity. It was by doing that, and

also by taking on, I think, some important projects that the museum generated on its own. For example, Henry organized the Philip Guston [1980] retrospective that introduced, for the first time, Philip Guston's figurative work, which at that time—and I can't remember exactly what the date was; probably around 1980, '82. That work was not well received generally by a lot of the art community. But Henry felt so committed to this project that we did it, and I thought it was an extraordinary exhibition. I think because of it, it opened a whole new respect for Philip Guston's work, which is now probably more recognized, as much as his earlier abstract expressionist work.

01-00:18:40

I know that also one of the exhibitions he did was new German expressionists from the eighties. Again, it was taking our institution and not only trying to do things for the Bay Area, organizing shows that celebrated California art, but also reaching out and trying to enrich our community through these exhibitions. He had a very rich vision. He collaborated a lot with Martin Friedman, from the Walker Art Center, who back then, I think, was really considered a very important director. Even now. He did amazing things for the Walker Art Center. Henry would collaborate with Martin Friedman on shows. There was an exhibition of Japanese design, contemporary design, that was really incredible. Henry was the one that organized the Judy Chicago exhibition, which I think was a bit controversial. But I remember we were still at the old museum, and *The Dinner Party* was staged in the rotunda [1979]. There were lines and lines of people to see it. So I think Henry had a broad reach, which I think was very important for the museum at the time. Of course, you get whacked in the press. But one of the important lessons I think I learned—and maybe it was from Henry himself—he said, “Good press or bad press, as long as you get press.” I have often thought about that. I'm not sure I believe it, but I think he was willing to take some risks, which I think is important for institutions to do occasionally. [pause]

01-00:20:50

One thing I also want to mention before you move on is that another staff person that I worked with was Van Deren Coke, curator of photography. He was hired by Henry, after John Humphrey passed away. I think again, Van has my deepest respect for his broad way of looking at art, particularly photography. Just the reach and the exhibitions that Van did, where he was supporting local photographers and collecting them avidly, but also going to Germany and researching and bringing to light some new modernist photography that people maybe fifteen or twenty years ago, were not even aware of.

Rigelhaupt:

How would you describe that balance that you're talking about, of promoting local Bay Area artists or Northern California artists, and bringing in international art at the same time?

01-00:22:03

Tsujimoto:

Well, I think Henry tried to keep a balance at the old San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Because, as I mentioned earlier, his roots, all of his

professional roots were in California. So after we went through our major renovation, the two key figures that we premiered in the spaces were Pete Voulkos and Richard Diebenkorn. [Tsujiimoto added in editing: “My memory was wrong. I think these two shows were organized by Jerry Nordland.”] Even as Henry started to be overtaken by his executive directorial responsibilities, he would still want to organize small shows. These were often of some artists from California, artists that were a bit under the radar screen. He tried to keep a balance. So often, we would sit in meetings—we’d call them work-load meetings—and there would be all the curatorial staff, and there would be maybe the head of installation. We’d talk about how to balance the schedule. How much de-installation time do we need from closing this show to opening this one? But then we’d often get into discussions of exhibition balance, where we would say, “Look, we have two international shows, but nothing representing California.” I think we always tried to keep this balance at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, by organizing shows of Robert Hudson, of William Wiley, of Wayne Thiebaud, Judy Chicago. Unfortunately, back then, we weren’t doing a lot with women. Although I know that we did some group exhibitions that included them. So trying to keep a balance of international and national, as well as media. Photography, painting, sculpture. The SECA award was always part of our focusing on the Bay Area and Northern California.

Rigelhaupt: If we stay around the mid-seventies, how many of the exhibitions were unorthodox or avant-garde? Or were they more well understood by a viewing audience?

01-00:24:58

Tsujiimoto: Ooh, that really goes back and tests my memory.

Rigelhaupt: It could just be a general impression, if you recall.

01-00:25:05

Tsujiimoto: Well, one of the shows that I worked on with Suzanne Foley, she did an important exhibition on Bay Area conceptual art, called “Space, Time and Sound,” which was a very important exhibition, documenting one of the major movements in our area [1979]. It has an active community of artists working in this conceptual mode. She was the one that really advocated for these artists, in many ways. She also organized an exhibition of Jim Melchert’s work [1975], who, even though he started out as a ceramic artist, eventually went on dealing more with conceptual art. I’m trying to think. So she, in the early seventies, was trying to open things up a little bit, so that it counterbalanced the Edward Hopper shows and the Kandinsky shows.

01-00:26:12

Then of course, during that time there was also Rolando Castellón, who was a curator of the M. I. X. Program. I think M. I. X. was an acronym for Museum Intercommunity Exchange. This was a program to also make us aware about programming work by artists of color. These days, in 2007, we’re very aware

of this, but thirty years ago, African American artists or Latino artists exhibiting in major museums was not as common, unless you were a Diego Rivera. So Rolando's program specifically was to work with the contemporary art community in bringing in these new voices and creative visions.

Rigelhaupt: Staying with M. I. X. for a moment, how do you think some of his shows in the M. I. X. exhibitions were received?

01-00:27:27

Tsujimoto: I think they were received in a mixed way. There are different communities, micro-communities, within an institution. There's a part of me, in retrospect, that thinks that it was important to do. But I think that maybe it was a little ahead of where some of our audience and supporters were ready for it. Maybe just a tad ahead of them. But Rolando did some important things.

Rigelhaupt: What support do you recall a program like M. I. X., pushing the boundaries of the what the museum was doing—Whose support did you need, to get programs like that underway?

01-00:28:44

Tsujimoto: I don't remember the history directly, but most of what happened at the museum during that time, collegial and small though it was, started at the top. By "the top," I mean with the director, and the director working with the trustees. Then there's a filter-down process that you go through, in which the director sets the long-term vision for the museum and strategy of how you're going to achieve that, and then the director has to work with the board of trustees in saying, "Okay, because you're our fiduciary support system, do you believe in this? Do you agree with this? Are you going to help me raise money for it?"

I know, for example, one of the programs that Henry wanted to initiate was an architecture and design department. This is when the museum was at its old facilities. I recall that there was a lot of discussion. Because at that time, we were working very hard just to try and meet our annual operating budget, without adding a whole new collecting department and maybe a curator, and adding additional exhibitions to the program. I think that those discussions were taking place just around the time I was about ready to leave the museum. But by the same token, you look now, twenty-five or thirty years later, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art has a very vital design and architecture department. So it's interesting to see how some things that were talked about or discussed or implemented in the old San Francisco Museum, that they either flourished or didn't flourish in the new facility. Even to take a look back at history and realize that it was during that time of Henry Hopkins's tenure that the trustees decided to change the name from San Francisco Museum of Art to San Francisco Museum of *Modern* Art. Which I think

introduces some interesting historical considerations. When does “modern” begin?

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember discussions about the name change?

01-00:31:38

Tsujimoto: I remember we were discussing it, but those were discussions that I was not privy to. They were upper management and trustee discussions. Because that really took place in the upper-echelon decision-making process.

Rigelhaupt: The upper management, the trustees and the director, how much did their interests shape the exhibitions? Maybe if we just try and break it up chronologically. Say, the mid-seventies into the eighties.

01-00:32:33

Tsujimoto: Well, I’m trying to recall because it’s been a long time. But for example, I believe that the M. I. X. Program was something that was encouraged by one of the trustees. I was not part of the discussions, but it was probably that Henry, at that time, felt that it was something reasonable to do, at that time and place at the museum. I don’t remember anything specifically. But in the back of my mind, it seems that there were occasions when there might be some discussion about, “Well, we’re not doing enough for Northern California artists. We really have to look at that.” I quite honestly don’t recall that there was any direct pressure from any trustees for us to do any specific exhibition, other than SECA. There’s long tradition for SECA. I think that was a given, because it was important for support of contemporary art, showing younger contemporary art. And SECA started out, I think, well before I joined the museum, because there was a committee of trustees and friends of the museum that thought that the museum, maybe back in the fifties or sixties, wasn’t showing enough contemporary art. They were trying to encourage that. So that’s how I believe the Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art came about. So I guess that’s one reflection of how trustees may be involved with decision making. But I wasn’t there at the time.

Rigelhaupt: I’m just going to pause for one second. So just before we paused, we were trying to get a picture of the dynamic between curators, trustees and the director. If you had trustee support for more unorthodox shows or exhibitions, did that allow you to do them in a way that wouldn’t have otherwise taken place?

01-00:35:04

Tsujimoto: I think that, if I recall correctly about those days, is that we would talk curatorially, just as I do know in my position here, where the curators bring forward exhibition ideas, and they are worked through a system of, does it balance our program? How does it contribute to our long term goals of what we want to do? How does it contribute to art history, California art history, national art history? I think with some of those shows that Sue did about conceptual art, I think because it was so current and so of-the-moment,

sometimes those things are hard to get a handle on. It's now fifteen years later that we all say, "Wow, this was really an important show to do." But that's why curators do what they do. They sometimes have to take risks, because they're the ones out in the field saying, "This is interesting, this is important to do." Now of course, you've got your directors and your trustees who can say no, but there's got to be some sense of vote of confidence that if you're on the staff, you have to feel that you have some valid contributions, that your ideas, your vision or your thought process are appreciated. My recollection is that some of the trustees had a hard time with some of these really cutting-edge shows. But I was not always directly in touch with them. Also I think what has to be said is that there's—[pause] I don't know. There's a little bit of a different mindset in the Bay Area than, say, in Los Angeles or New York or in Europe. That's why—It's a relatively small community, relatively small circle of art galleries. There's a long tradition of figuration—the old Bay Area School, the Richard Diebenkorn-like work. Therefore, when you have artists doing really cutting-edge work, it's a little harder for some audiences to take. At least here, in this smaller community, I think.

Rigelhaupt: Staying with the mid-seventies, how involved in the curatorial work was Henry Hopkins?

01-00:38:10

Tsujimoto: If I had an exhibition record, if I could look at their exhibition record, I could tell you. I think Henry was quite involved. He was the one that helped to mastermind the schedule. Particularly back there in the seventies, when I was just a junior curator, just learning as I went. I think Henry really was the one that oversaw the major schedule. John Humphrey and Sue would make suggestions, and they were incorporated into it. Then Van Deren Coke, when he came, he really just gave this huge shot of adrenalin to the photography program. Because by the time John passed away, he was probably in his, I don't know, seventies. So Van being younger, he brought in a surge of energy that was important—even though I think John Humphrey is an underappreciated contributor to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Rigelhaupt: Also trying to compare the director's role as the museum expanded and started taking on more traveling shows, did Henry have to do more administrative work, work with trustees more, and become less involved in the exhibitions?

01-00:39:57

Tsujimoto: I'm trying to look back. If I were to characterize Henry, specifically in the 1970s, he was wearing two hats, as executive director and as chief curator. So he was actively, as I mentioned, working with colleagues around the country to bring shows to the [museum]. In 1976, which was the bicentennial, the museum organized a major show, and Henry was basically the curator for this major survey of California art. Back then I was still a junior curator or executive curatorial assistant. I worked on the catalogue. It came out late because the whole project—not any fault of mine, I don't think—but the

whole project was backed up because it was a huge, huge, major show. Henry was the chief curator on that. He took great pride in that because it was all about California art. I remember we'd sit in meetings talking about what artists and art movements should be represented. I was the one that typed all the loans forms and tried to order all the photographs for the catalogue, but he was the curator for that show. Everybody was there to support him. He was very active as a curator then, doing major shows.

Rigelhaupt: So the fundraising part of a director, did that become more a part of his job in the eighties?

01-00:41:48

Tsujimoto: I think in the eighties is when we actually started having a development department. Because I'm visualizing this as I walk around the third level of the museum, in the old facility, and there was a development staff. We had a membership supervisor. I specifically remember working with somebody by the name of Jackie Nimorovski on some grants for some shows that I was working on. So the development department started out, again, very small, because back in the seventies, early eighties, we were probably forty-five people, forty people. Whereas now you go so some museums, and their development departments are bigger than the curatorial offices.

Rigelhaupt: Could we stay there for a minute? Actually, if you could describe walking around.

01-00:42:49

Tsujimoto: Oh, okay. I joined the staff in the early seventies. The museum was on the third and fourth levels of the Veterans Building. I think it was around 1974 or '73, '75, when the trustees embarked on some renovation of the spaces. That was where they freshened up the place. On the third level specifically, what used to be old, dark veterans meetings rooms, they captured as new office spaces, a new library, and I believe the conservation dept. Then also offices for the registrars and some collection storage, and also for the development department. Also on that third level, they finished the corridor walls, so that we could use those corridor spaces as exhibition space. So we would actively show graphics and photography exhibits on that third level. I don't know if you know the floor plan of the space, but you would get off the elevator and well, basically, just walk around in a big square. All the offices were off to the side, and there were corridors that you walked all the way around. We used that as exhibition space. So we were installing important photography shows, and important printmakers' works, and works on paper down there. It was additional gallery space for us to show collections.

Rigelhaupt: You mentioned a growth in staff, a small growth. I'm wondering if you could talk about when that was.

01-00:45:14

Tsujimoto:

There was small, very modest growth in staff. I also should mention some other names of colleagues that I worked with. It's not so much, I guess, growth, but change. So when I started there, I worked with John Humphrey, Suzanne Foley; there was one registrar; the curator of film; and an education department head, and controller. Then later what happened, we added a curatorial secretary. As I took on more responsibility, we need another, basically, curatorial assistant. Then at one point, I think we even had the luxury of a curatorial secretary. Van Deren Coke, after he took John Humphrey's job, got his own assistant. Henry Hopkins always had his executive assistant. Our registration department and collections department began to grow. There was a major effort that was led by Kathy Holland. In anticipation of the 1985 fiftieth anniversary of the museum Kathy took charge of a major effort to catalogue and update all the records on the museum's collection. She was also responsible for producing a major permanent catalogue. So that entailed probably adding another two or three staff, as well as working with a whole cadre of interns that would help on research and record keeping and updating records. I think the conservation department maybe started out initially with two people. By the time I left, I think there were probably four. The library always was very low in terms of staff personnel. Eugenie Candau was there. She had volunteers come in to help her. Membership and development grew a little bit, I think. By the time I left, it grew 100 percent—meaning it started out with two, and by the time I left, there were four.

Rigelhaupt:

Was there a unionization campaign?

01-00:47:57

Tsujimoto:

There was. In the early seventies, there was. That was just when I started working at museum, in the early seventies, and I believe that I was relatively new. Staff felt that they were underpaid. So the staff was unionized, and they picketed. They were outside and they were picketing. I think at that time—I can't remember if Mike McCone was the associate director, but I think he may have been involved in helping to negotiate a settlement. But it was an awkward time. I had just started out in the museum. I didn't have a lot of history, whereas a lot of the people there had been working for some time. It was very awkward.

Rigelhaupt:

But once a contract was reached, there weren't lasting ill feelings?

01-00:49:05

Tsujimoto:

No. I don't believe there were, no. No. One thing I have to say, it's pretty amazing. Because when I started out there, because it was so small, there was an incredible sense of long and warm friendship among this small circle of people. Even though many of them have passed on, we've kept in touch, more or less. So it was a very special time in my life.

Rigelhaupt: Did that small, collegial working relationship persist over the fifteen, sixteen years you were working there?

01-00:49:46

Tsujimoto: Yes. Yes. Yes. I think by the time I left, I had been at the museum for quite some time, and it was time for me to move on. I was planning to start a family, and I realized that given the demands that are made on people that work in museums, I just felt I couldn't be a good mother and a good worker at the same time. I think it's the best kept secret. I tell this to students and young people interested in getting into museum work, that it's the best kept secret, that people that work in museums work really, really hard, with hardly any compensation. Or not hardly any compensation, but compensation that is not as great as it should be. So many people work in this because it's a labor of love. They truly believe in institutions, museums, and what they can contribute to society.

Rigelhaupt: Well, maybe you could say a little bit more about that. How did you envision the role of SFMOMA, as you began your work there?

01-00:51:02

Tsujimoto: Well, as I mentioned earlier, I was so young, and I was in an apprentice program. But as I worked with my colleagues and my staff, looking to be a part of this team that was gaining energy and visibility—Because we all believed in art and what it can contribute to society, it was very exciting. I think if I were to characterize it—I've done this in the past—is that I was there at what I call a stage of maturity where it was like the toddler age. Or maybe a little bit beyond the toddler age. Then after I left, we went through a couple of new chief curators. Because there was George Neubert and Graham Beal, who were later part of the new team. They took it to another level. No, I guess maybe I was part of the adolescent phase, where you're just maturing, you see potential, you're trying to find yourself. Then when Jack Lane came in as the director [1987], I could see that that young adolescent institution, so to speak, that I was working with now stepped out into the world as this adult, so to speak, keeping the same metaphor. That [it] had gone through this phase of early growth in 1935, with Grace McCann Morley establishing its roots; moving on to the fifties, sixties and seventies and eighties; then Henry moved on and retired, and then Jack Lane, and then you reach this different level of maturity. Maturity and growth and evolution.

Rigelhaupt: Does the museum have an educational role?

01-00:53:07

Tsujimoto: I believe so. I believe that a museum has an educational role. I think it's not only through what the curators do, but what they do, hopefully, in parallel with education departments. I know that when I worked with the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, I did work very closely with Bob Whyte and the various assistants that he had in the education department. I worked with the docents. I'm still very active doing that, here at the Oakland Museum

[of California]. My own personal bias is, I think that institutions have a responsibility to do that. Particularly maybe when it comes to contemporary art, I just think it'd be somewhat hard for a novice or first-time visitor to walk into a contemporary art installation without much knowledge or background and to be able to understand a piece of string that's dangling from the ceiling.

Rigelhaupt: So part of the museum's role is to introduce the San Francisco Bay Area to modern and contemporary art from around the world, and to educate them about what's going on.

01-00:54:26

Tsujimoto: Yes, I felt that that was very much the role of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art when I was there.

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02-00:00:08

Rigelhaupt: How would you describe the exhibitions you're most proud of putting together during your time at SFMOMA?

02-00:00:19

Tsujimoto: Well, the two that I think I'm most proud of were the last two major shows that I organized. I mentioned earlier, one was "Precisionist Painting and American Photography." That was my first major exhibition, and it was a historical juxtaposition of photography and painting. I was very proud the showed toured nationally. All museum curators like to get their exhibitions out on the road and share their research and what they've done. I remember Hilton Kramer—I don't think he was writing for the *New York Times*, but he was writing for a major publication; maybe it was the *New Criterion* back then—came out and reviewed the show and just lambasted some of my writing, some of my research. It was really hard, as my first major show. But it was a good learning experience, and I still feel that what I did with that exhibition made a bit of a contribution.

Then the last major show I did was the Wayne Thiebaud retrospective, which again, I take great pride in, because that was the first major survey I did working with a living artist, and particularly a well-known California artist. I think that was important because it helped steer me to where I am now, working here at the Oakland Museum of California. I think working at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Henry and Suzanne and John and the colleagues I've worked with, we all share this passion for making sure that we paid attention to what was going on in California—organized exhibitions, produced scholarly documentation—because if we didn't do it, nobody else was going to do it. That's what I think is so important about—don't always do the cookie-cutter exhibition. How can you not only participate in lively exhibitions and create dialogue, but also making sure that you're celebrating the creative energies right within your own community, your own state, your own region? So those are the two. I think the Wayne Thiebaud certainly

helped a little bit to put the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art on the map. Again, the show toured, and I think it got really good reviews. So I feel, in some way, that contributed to raising the visibility about what that museum could achieve at that point in time.

Rigelhaupt: Other than the difficult review, how was the exhibition, the images of America received?

02-00:03:47

Tsujimoto:

I think it was pretty well received, from an anecdotal point of view. Because even now, some twenty years later, I will occasionally run into somebody or get an email complimenting me or saying, “I really enjoyed that show, it made an important contribution,” because some professors around that have worked in the Midwest or back East have said, “That was so important; I’ve used it as a textbook in some of my classes.” What I did at that time with the precisionist painting and photography show was to juxtapose modernist photography by Charles Sheeler and Berenice Abbot and Ralph Steiner with paintings by Charles Sheeler and Georgia O’Keeffe, of the city. At that point in time, interdisciplinary shows weren’t done. You either had a painting show or you had a photography show. I think part of the reason why I was able to do—or why I decided I would bite that overly large piece of meat to chew on, so to speak, is because I worked very closely with John Humphrey. I learned a lot about photography and how important it is to our total understanding of the world and to contributing to fine art. By the same token, I have a great affinity for painting and sculpture. I remember when I was talking about that exhibition, mulling it over, working it through the system. I was very encouraged by Van Deren Coke at the time, and Henry Hopkins. I think that was what was great. They were encouraging me and saying, “Go for it. A show like that really has never been done before. Go for it.” So that was very encouraging, being a young curator.

Rigelhaupt: Do you think an exhibition like that would have been possible without the collaborative relationships you just described?

02-00:06:02

Tsujimoto:

It’s interesting. I would probably highly question that. I think that one of the reasons that I was encouraged was because I think Henry was open minded, and I think Van, very definitely open minded. Van was one of the first photography curators I met that would buy photographs where artists would scribble and paint on the images. So you had this hybrid experience of painting and photography. Back then, in the late seventies, when people were hardly paying attention to Edward Weston and Imogen Cunningham, that was pretty progressive on Van’s part. So I think it was probably an environment like that that was conducive to it, because I think in other institutions—Certainly now, as museums have become larger, there tends to be a little bit more categorization and staying in your own domain.

Rigelhaupt: Staying with those two shows, the images of America and the Thiebaud retrospective, did they shape the collecting strategy of the museum?

02-00:07:30

Tsujimoto: I can't say that they did. I think that some of the works that I included in the precisionist painting and photography show were because there was a Charles Sheeler in our collection that was interesting to me, and there was some early modernist photography that I was very interested in, like Alfred Stieglitz's early images of New York. As I was working on the collection and working on the catalogue and becoming familiar with all these bodies of work, that's where I started developing this interest and forming the concept for the exhibition. I don't know necessarily that that exhibition prompted us to collect or focus our collection.

With the Wayne Thiebaud exhibition, I organized it with the blessing of Henry. Because I recall it was part of our fiftieth anniversary, and we wanted to make sure we paid attention and honored some of our artists during that year. In fact, even though we had a few prints of Wayne's in the collection, we only had one relatively small cake painting by Wayne. I remember that Allan Stone, Wayne's dealer, always thought it was a pretty weak representation of Wayne's. I wasn't involved in the acquisition. Then subsequently, with the opening of Wayne's exhibition, we started a public subscription to try and raise money to buy a cityscape by Wayne, which in fact we did. We had a donation box out saying, "Help us buy this wonderful painting by Wayne Thiebaud." Of course, we had major support from trustees and private parties to help us buy that work for our collection.

Rigelhaupt: It's interesting the way you've just described those two exhibitions, in the sense that the first one was inspired by the permanent collection, and the Thiebaud, on the other hand, led to an increase in the permanent collection. I'm wondering if that was typical of other exhibitions you worked on.

02-00:10:02

Tsujimoto: Well, generally, I think museums or curators work that way, where sometimes your collection inspires you to do more research or to delve into something you have in the collection, and then maybe in the course of time, you'll add more works to round out or enrich those holdings. Then say, for example, something like in the case of the Philip Guston exhibition, which Henry organized. This was when Philip Guston was working on his new figurative work. Henry just believed in the importance of this. I think we only had, at that point, on early abstract expressionist painting by Philip Guston. Subsequently, the museum bought a new figurative work. I would guess that by now, they probably have two or three additional Philip Guston works. Ironically, I believe the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art presented a Philip Guston exhibition of his work just three years ago [2003]. So it's an interesting phenomenon, how you see how some artists, because of their

strength or their recognition, they come around again. It's like Picasso, the impressionists, Philip Guston.

Rigelhaupt: How would you discuss the 1983 Mark Rothko exhibition that you were a part of?

02-00:11:36

Tsujimoto: That was a very special exhibition that I worked on. Henry was the lead on that, where we had on long-term loan some beautiful paintings, what I would call pre-classic Rothkos. They were on loan to us from the Mark Rothko Foundation. They were in a very small gallery, but the works were very well chosen. It was what I would call a jewel of an exhibition, where it focuses on one aspect of an artist's work, a very critical point in time, when Mark Rothko was here in the Bay Area. They represented some work right around the time he left the Bay Area, after teaching here, and he was evolving into his mature style. So these weren't the large, grandiose, deeply moving, brooding paintings for which he's known. They were smaller, and you could see that he was searching. Searching, searching, searching. I think that that's why that exhibition was so special, because it was at just that point before you actually just leap off. It was a jewel of an exhibition. I think it was important, not only because by the time I'd organized that show with Henry—and Henry, again, was the lead—that Mark Rothko was obviously very well known, but it identified his important influence here in the Bay Area, or his connection with the Bay Area. Again, that's where Henry was trying to make sure that we not only took Kandinsky shows, but also paid attention to respecting what occurred here in San Francisco.

02-00:13:39

Another thing, quite honestly, is there's a whole story about the Clyfford Still collection. I don't know if anybody's talked to you about that. Clyfford Still, who is considered a very important abstract expressionist, and again, had roots here in San Francisco, at the San Francisco Art Institute. That's when Rothko was out here for a summer or two teaching, and there was a major meeting going on with MacAgy, Douglas MacAgy, when he was director at the [California Palace of the] Legion of Honor. Clyfford Still I think had a reputation for always being withdrawn and brooding—This is only what I've read in books. Henry [was] in his office one day, and Clyfford Still walked in. I think he didn't even have an appointment, and he asked to see Henry. Fortunately, Henry was in. He said, "Well, I've been paying some attention to your museum, and I'd like to give you a gift of—" I can't remember. Fourteen paintings or—I can't remember exactly what the gift was, but it was very substantial. Totally unsolicited. I think it's because Clyfford Still had been tracking us and seeing what we were doing and probably believed in our vision, and he made this major gift of works. Then later on, we actually renovated a gallery—it was called our vault gallery—with walls to permanently show his gift. If you go to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art now, there is a designated room for Clyfford Still.

Rigelhaupt: These close ties—with Thiebaud, Clyfford Still—to Bay Area artists, was that able to be maintained throughout your tenure at SFMOMA?

02-00:16:04

Tsujimoto: Back then, in the seventies, there wasn't the proliferation of non-profits and artist spaces. There were these extremes of the communities. There were the art fairs in the Civic Center; there was the [M. H.] de Young [Memorial] Museum, showing this broad cross-section of work, and the San Francisco Museum, which was a relatively small facility, trying to keep the modern and contemporary art scene going. I think back then that was a gathering place where contemporary artists came out to see what was going on. I remember we'd have photography openings or artists openings, and we'd have them in the special boardroom. The rooms were full to overflowing, because people were out to have a glass of white wine and free cheese and French bread. But there was a real energy, because it was one of the few places where there could be some things to be seen by contemporary artists. Obviously, the Berkeley Art Museum was doing good things, and other institutions. But I think in the city, that was a gathering point. Certainly, when Rolando was there with the M. I. X. Program, that brought in a whole new community of enthusiasts. I remember an exhibition with Raymond Saunders and some other artists, which was really lively. Because of its long history, from 1935 up to its present, and what it's contributed in terms of hosting museum exhibitions, bringing other artists' work here, I think a lot of the artists community have generally felt very positive. I remember talking to Joan Brown and her saying, "I remember when I was walking through and saw this painting for the first time." In fact, Joan Brown for her third marriage got married in the rotunda of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. It shows you that special connection that some people have had.

Rigelhaupt: How would you describe the difference between the art scene in the Bay Area, Los Angeles, and New York?

02-00:19:10

Tsujimoto: Well, I think that generally, people say that because San Francisco is relatively small, there's not a lot of breadth, in terms of collecting activity. I think there's also a sense it's a little more conservative, compared to Los Angeles. Certainly, there's more people in Los Angeles. I think the width and depth of collecting activity is greater there. Then New York is just a world unto itself. It's interesting, because I talk to a lot of artists, and I'll often talk to collectors. But artists get frustrated here because they don't feel there's really the collecting support. Then they move to Los Angeles or they move to New York, and they end up thriving because there's a larger community to support them, both exhibition-wise, collecting-wise, venues to get your work seen. I've also had conversations with gallery dealers and those involved in selling art that'll say, "Wow, I just can't believe it. I've showed this artist here in San Francisco, but these collectors go to New York or to Paris to buy the same artist's work."

Rigelhaupt: Staying with galleries, how would you describe the relationship between SFMOMA and local galleries?

02-00:21:07

Tsujimoto: I guess I can't speak to that, because I've been gone from that institution for so long. I don't know. The programming that the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art does, I think, is now national and international in scope. So I would suspect that galleries that are here in the community, that are representing regional artists, or San Francisco, or Oakland or Berkeley artists, maybe feel lost in the shuffle. But I've been so far removed from it, I can't say.

Rigelhaupt: Do you think that held true at the time you were working at the museum?

02-00:21:57

Tsujimoto: The gallery scene, even though it's not large now, was even smaller back then. I think all of us tried to get out, make sure we saw shows, make sure we made studio visits. But now, with everything bigger, and traffic—I mean, these are just realities. For curators in San Francisco trying to come over to Berkeley or Oakland, when you have a full day of meetings anyway, and then there's traffic on top of that. Life is just a lot more complicated. I try to give people a bit more room to maneuver and not critique them, I guess. I think that we did try to make an effort to connect. As I say, this is where I think Sue was very good, going out and making studio visits, going out to galleries, artists would bring portfolios to the museum.

In fact, there was one point where, early in my junior days, there was something called viewing day, where once a month, any artist could bring their artwork to the museum, and the curatorial staff would view it and look at it. This is way back in the early seventies, where maybe there were some artists that we'd be interested in. That was quite a project. Because I was a junior curator, I'd have to make out the receipts. Artists would bring in their *wet* paintings, or their sculpture or their photography, or examples of it. The curatorial staff would dutifully go down there and look at it and say, "No, I don't think so." Then the artists would come up and pick up their artwork three days later. That was in the olden days.

Rigelhaupt: Well, did those viewing days ever lead to artists being included in exhibitions?

02-00:24:18

Tsujimoto: The only one that I recall—and I don't know if my memory really serves me well—but there was a photographer by the name of Jim Goldberg, who I believe submitted some photographs. At that time, he was photographing right around Third and Mission, before Yerba Buena Center was built. There were a lot of homeless people and people of less fortune. He would photograph them in a documentary way. Then he would have them write text under the photograph. They were very moving and powerful photographs. I believe that

it was through that viewing process that Van Deren Coke became attracted to his work. Subsequently, I think Jim Goldberg has gone on to some reputation, and greater visibility and success.

Rigelhaupt: Maybe this is a good time for you to talk about the photography curators you worked with. If you can describe their curatorial interests, some of the strengths of John Humphrey and Van Deren Coke.

02-00:25:39

Tsujimoto: John Humphrey, as I mentioned, was a curator of photography for many years. He actually started out first as a preparator. Then I believe he worked on painting and photography shows, and then eventually started focusing just on photography. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, I believe, had rudimentary beginnings of a photography collection, maybe as early as 1938 or '39, when we got a major bequest of some Albert Bender photographs that included Ansel Adams. But John did some important shows in the seventies that really, I think, helped move our collection on, and also helped bring photography to light in the Bay Area. I think we really have a strong photography community in the Bay Area. Certainly, there was a major Ansel Adams exhibition. Well, actually, I take this back. There was a small Ansel Adams exhibition, but it was done when Ansel Adams was alive. Ansel came and we worked with him. He wanted to have his gallery painted a certain gray-scale gray. We produced a catalogue for Ansel. There was a show called "Twenty-four Los Angeles Photographers" that John organized in the seventies. This was with a lot of very important contemporary photographers in Los Angeles doing experimental work at that time—Robert Heineken. Oh, gosh, I can't remember. Anyway, they were photographers that were going beyond Ansel Adams' work. He also organized a photography show on California pictorialism, with Marjory Mann, who was a very highly regarded photography historian that taught at the San Francisco Art Institute. It was a movement that's been under the radar screen. I think that was a very important show. He collected important work. For example, he was the first curator to organize a show of John Gutmann's photography work, who was a German immigrant. Gutmann did a lot of documentary photography, which is now, I think, pretty highly regarded and collected, and considered important work from the teens, twenties, thirties. There was a project by Larry Sultan and Mike Mandel, of found photographs, which John organized, where they went out to scientific laboratories and industrial sites and gathered found photographs. It was probably one of the first conceptual photography projects that I'd ever worked on. John had the wherewithal to support that. Jack Welpott, John Worth were some of the others. He did some important shows, and collected as well.

Rigelhaupt: You talked about Suzanne Foley's "Space, Time, Sound" exhibition. Was that representative or atypical of her curatorial interests?

02-00:29:27

Tsujimoto:

I think it was more typical of Sue. She was really interested in contemporary things. She had an inquisitive mind. She was inquisitive and willing to take these risks in saying these shows were important to do. The “Space, Time, Sound” show, back in 19-whenever-it-was—Was it 1974? Maybe it was a little later. Was it a little bit later?

Rigelhaupt:

I think. Say '78 or '79.

02-00:30:21

Tsujimoto:

Well, conceptual art was still not that old at that point in time. The people that she included in this were the important movers and shakers, so to speak, that were making important contributions here in Northern California. You know, sometimes when you're in the forest, you can't distinguish it. I'm trying to think what other shows she did. Oh, I know. There was a series of opening shows for the new spaces, and she worked on an exhibition of ceramic work from a private collection in Seattle, the Monson Collection. Subsequently, she became very interested in ceramic art. She organized an exhibition of the work of Robert Hudson and Richard Shaw, showing ceramics, non-functional ceramics, as a very creative art form. Then she went on and worked with the Whitney Museum—I think it was with Richard Marshall, probably in the eighties—on a major show of ceramic art that included I guess maybe a half-dozen important figures. The exhibition was shown here and also at the Whitney Museum of American Art, introducing major California ceramic artists. I think included Robert Arneson, Pete Voulkos, Ken Price, David Gilhooly, maybe one or two other people—John Mason—in the world of California art, and specifically ceramic art. At a time when people thought ceramics was craft, Sue was organizing shows that presented ceramic art in a totally different way, and trying to respect them for their contributions outside of the traditional crafts community.

Rigelhaupt:

Were those shows pretty well received?

02-00:32:38

Tsujimoto:

I think certainly here at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, it was well received. I recall when the show went back to the Whitney Museum. I don't know that it was received well critically. But it just shows my bias, that even the East Coast and New York City can be a little parochial when they think that clay is only for crafts.

Rigelhaupt:

What do you remember about Suzanne Foley's departure—in the late seventies, is that right?

02-00:33:15

Tsujimoto:

I don't remember specifically. You may correct me because you may [have] knowledge from other people's conversations. There may have been a gradual parting of the ways between Henry and Sue because maybe their visions didn't mesh. Quite honestly, I don't recall. Sue left, and then we got a new

senior or chief curator. I believe it was either Graham Beal or George Neubert. I can't remember in which order. Maybe it was George Neubert and then Graham Beal, working with Henry Hopkins. I actually worked with two other chief curators prior to my retiring.

Rigelhaupt: Well, maybe you could talk a little bit about the visions of Graham Beal and—

02-00:34:29

Tsujimoto: George Neubert?

Rigelhaupt: Yes.

02-00:34:29

Tsujimoto: Well, not recalling in what order they came in, but George Neubert actually used to be the chief curator for the Oakland Museum of California. So he came to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art at its old facility with a strong passion for California artists and supporting them. He was a very positive, energetic curator, a lot of enthusiasm. I'm trying to think. He organized an exhibition of Tom Marioni's work, one of the conceptual artists. I can't remember his shows. I think he did a show on Richard Diebenkorn, a collection-focus show. He encouraged what we called the Resource Response Program, which were small-scale exhibitions, were drawing on the museum's resources and highlighting, say, for example, a Richard Diebenkorn collection. Then there was the Response exhibition, which meant going out to the community and doing small-scale shows, responsive to the art community. So we would have simple brochures, but he was trying to balance collection and contemporary art. I think he organized a contemporary painting show of Bay Area painters. I remember that. I think my memory is vague because I was transitioning out about that time.

02-00:36:10

When Graham Beal came on, Graham, I think, helped to bring in a little bit more of an international perspective. George obviously had that national/international perspective, but I think a lot of the acquisitions that Graham brought in were by some international artists. My memory fails me as to the shows that he worked on.

Rigelhaupt: Well, a question about acquisitions. What were some of the most exciting or important acquisitions during your time at SFMOMA?

02-00:36:48

Tsujimoto: Oh, gosh. Certainly, the Clyfford Still was. I have to admit, I think my memory is probably vague then, because in those many years when I was working the curatorial staff, I was not that involved in acquisitions. It was more senior level activity. Well, the Wayne Thiebaud cityscape, a major piece by Robert Arneson that we acquired. There was a major piece by Paul Kos, a conceptual artist, a large-scale conceptual art piece. I'm trying to think. We also acquired a major collection by Paul Klee. Certainly, Van brought in some

very important photographs and really built up a collection of European modernist photographs from the thirties, German modernist photography. Van really extended the breadth of our collection, as well as the depth. He was very experimental, in terms of the kinds of photography he would collect and exhibit.

02-00:38:07 Rolando, I think, helped us acquire, during that period, some work by artists not previously represented in the collection. I think maybe during Rolando's tenure, we acquired work by Raymond Saunders. I think we showed Rupert García who's an important Latino artist in the community. I can't recall a lot. [pause] I have to say also that we didn't have a lot of money for acquisitions.

Rigelhaupt: Well, where did the money for acquisitions come from? I mean, what you did have.

02-00:39:00 Tsujimoto: There were donations, from friends. We deaccessioned if there was a work that was not appropriate for our collection, maybe some deaccession money. I wasn't actually involved that much with that. Henry, Van, John, and Sue were really more involved. By the time I left, I still wasn't senior enough or part of the senior management, to be that involved. Sue built up the print collection. She was very devoted to prints. In fact, I think she started out as curator of prints and drawings and eventually worked her way up to curator of painting and photography, general chief curator or senior curator. As I say, back then it was a relatively small staff, so people did a little of this and a little of that.

Rigelhaupt: Do you remember any trustees that were particularly active, as far as either collecting, making donations, or just in general in the museum?

02-00:40:15 Tsujimoto: I have to say, one of the trustees that I, to this day, have the fondest memory of is Evie Haas. The Haas family, obviously, has been a great supporter of the museum, and continues to be. When I started out working at the museum, Evie was on the board. Later, I think she moved on to become chair of the board. I guess because I was relatively young, even to this day, it amazes me that there could be somebody, a trustee, coming from such a wealthy, important background, and yet she was such a thoughtful and sweet person. Just incredible. Just thoughtful. No airs, just a kind, kind person. It was encouraging for me as a young person to realize that there are people out there in the world that can make a big difference for institutions. Sometimes they can be a little rough around the edges. But there was a whole community of people like Evie that really are pretty extraordinary.

Rigelhaupt: Well, another board member and donor was Moses Lasky.

02-00:42:00 Tsujimoto: Moses Lasky was a very gentle spirit. In fact, I worked on an exhibition of his. He was one of the early movers and shakers behind the Society for the

Encouragement of Contemporary Art. That happened before my time. But he was also a very avid collector of prints. He was on the board for a long time. I believe he was an attorney. But I actually organized an exhibition of his prints [1985] after, I think, he'd rotated off the board. I think it was a gesture to acknowledge his support of the museum, to showcase his collection. He was a very extraordinary person, as well. Very thoughtful and supportive. Open minded.

Rigelhaupt: How did the curators work with the research and collections department? What was that working relationship like? Especially as it relates to the catalogue project on the fiftieth anniversary.

02-00:43:04

Tsujimoto: I have the highest regard for Kathy Holland and the team that she established. But it was actually quite curatorially separated. We were physically on opposite sides of the building. I would go over to where they were working, because they had all the records for the permanent collection. So if I were going to install a print show or a works on paper show, or wanted to re-hang some paintings for the gallery, I'd go over there, do some research, talk to Kathy and the staff and say, "Okay, I'd like to include these works in the show." So there was a real wonderful collegiality, although I myself was not involved with any of the research for the permanent collection. Kathy had a team, where she was the head. I believe there was Laura Sueoka, Diana DuPont, Garna Muller, and maybe one or two other key people that did all of the research on the works in the collection. It was Kathy and Henry that worked as a team to decide on which were the works that they wanted to feature with full-color reproductions. That was a major undertaking, to produce a catalogue that big. I think, one, at that time, we wanted to celebrate our fiftieth anniversary. But also it's interesting, because at that time, there was a big movement underfoot with all museums around the country to produce catalogues of your permanent collection. Because that was a way not only to showcase what you had, but also be able to have a resource where you could share it among curators. So if you wanted to do research on Philip Guston or Robert Arneson, you had these resources available. Obviously, things have changed now, with internet access and putting collections online.

Rigelhaupt: What's your impression of Henry Hopkins and his departure?

02-00:45:20

Tsujimoto: I think Henry maybe left two years after I quit. I think I quit right after the Wayne Thiebaud exhibition opened. In fact, now that I think about it, Graham Beal started around that time because I remember Graham came to one of the fiftieth anniversary openings. I think I overlapped with Graham maybe six months or nine months. That's probably why I don't remember many of the exhibitions he organized because we actually didn't work together. I think one of the continuing struggles for any organization is budget. Fundraising. I don't know whether this factored in—I don't know the details of Henry's departure.

But I think as the museum went on, our budget was growing, because exhibitions were more expensive, and we were trying to do more ambitious things, I think.

Rigelhaupt: So were you still there when Jack Lane came on?

02-00:46:44

Tsujimoto: No. I didn't overlap with Jack at all. I left, as I say, eighteen months to two years before Henry, and so I didn't work with Jack or any of his new staff.

Rigelhaupt: I gather there was a pretty large turnover in some of the staff and curators, with the transition from Hopkins to Lane.

02-00:47:12

Tsujimoto: I think what happens any time you get a new director—and particularly when it's a private organization, as opposed to a public institution, where there are civil servants involved—inevitably there's some turnover, because a director comes in with a new management style. Often, he may come in with a new vision for an institution, which maybe is fulfilled better by other people.

Rigelhaupt: What year did you come on here at the Oakland Museum?

02-00:48:08

Tsujimoto: I think I came here about 1992 or so. I took about five, six years off. I continued to do some independent freelance work. I wanted to keep my professional contacts going because I knew that I eventually wanted to get back into the field. Fortunately, when I was ready to step back into the work force, this position opened up at the Oakland Museum, which I think was a good match. Because over the years I worked at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, I realized—as I mentioned earlier, I was focusing where I wanted to put my curatorial energies. Because this museum focuses on California art history and natural sciences, it complements me well.

Rigelhaupt: Now, by the early nineties, SFMOMA had clearly shifted its focus to national and international art. I'm wondering what your impressions were about that. Also perhaps part of the question is how you viewed the museum, once the new space opened and it very much expanded.

02-00:49:37

Tsujimoto: Yes, they obviously went for a major national and international focus. I think they were very fortunate, they have been very fortunate to have great friends and supporters like Phyllis Wattis and other trustees that are there to really, for lack of a better word, put their money where their mouth is—"We want to make this a top-notch, internationally regarded museum." I think that even back in the old facility, they wanted that. There were projects that Phyllis Wattis supported, like a major Sam Francis mural that I don't know if anybody mentioned to you, but it was a major commission by Sam Francis. She supported it because Henry felt that was an important project to do.

Phyllis, bless her soul, and other people like the Haases and other long time trustees, have just continued to say, “This is an important cultural institution, and we’re going to support you in all ways.” Thirty years ago, things were confined, now people are traveling, internet. Traveling to Europe is not a big thing, traveling to China to look at art. I think what’s going on with Chinese contemporary art is just indicative of that. Or with all these international biennials, that art has all of a sudden become this big global village phenomenon. I think that the growth of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art probably reflects that.

Rigelhaupt: What do you think of the new building and the new space?

02-00:52:00

Tsujimoto: Because I have such a long early history with the museum, on one hand, I am very proud of it, because I see where it started out, on the second and third floor [correction: third and fourth floors] of the Veterans Memorial Building. I think that they do a tremendous job. I think their exhibition program is very dynamic and very exciting. The initial feel when you walk in is interesting. But I realize that that’s a tendency among big museums now, whether you’re looking at the de Young, or the new Museum of Modern Art [NY], or the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, or some of these institutions where, because they’ve grown, when you walk in, they have huge, voluminous entryways, where sometimes you’re not quite sure whether you’re in a corporate headquarters or an IBM campus building. But that’s just the nature of how museums are changing, I think.

Rigelhaupt: How would you define the museum right now, as we approach the seventy-fifth anniversary?

02-00:53:47

Tsujimoto: I think they’re doing some great things. Because I’m in the museum profession as a curator, I look at things two ways. I look at them from a distance, looking at their programming, and I look at them as an advocate and a visitor. So when I go in and see those galleries crowded with people, and young people and old people, and that they’re engaged and they’re curious—and I think they’ve gradually started bringing audiences of color—that’s what you want to see with an institution. You want to see people engaged and people coming to your place. From a distance, looking at it from a curatorial point of view—and I understand—[pause] There’s some things I might comment about, like having back-to-back pop art shows or—I think they’re doing good things, in terms of contemporary art. They are contributing to scholarship. I think where I feel a little badly is because I believe there are not many shows celebrating California artists. California artists, particularly those in the Bay Area, feel disenfranchised from an institution that early on, was a real gathering point for them. But those are just things I hear when I sometimes go out for studio visits and talk with artists.

Rigelhaupt: Well, what are some hidden gems in the permanent collection? I think it's a very small percentage of the permanent collection that's actually exhibited at any given point. So what do you think are some—

02-00:56:13

Tsujimoto: The collection has grown tremendously over the years. Well, in fact, we're talking about collections, one of the other major collections we received during my tenure there—and it had nothing to do with me—but it was an extraordinary collection of Paul Klee works, from a collector down the peninsula. So it's very encouraging to see, when people come in and will give you whole collections. Clyfford Stills. However many, forty or fifty Paul Klees. I have lost touch with that institution so I don't know what the gems are. I think they continue to collect extraordinary work. I think it's amazing, some of the pieces they're collecting. That they can install granite slabs this big, twelve of them on a wall, and seeming to do it so seamlessly. Or to be able to install a Matthew Barney exhibition. I don't know if you read about it, but huge, complicated pieces. My hat's off to them, they can do these things. For me, being interested in contemporary and modern art, it's very exciting to see that there's an organization here in the Bay Area that can do that, that has the vision and the financial and emotion wherewithal to say, "We're going to do this."

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03-00:00:06

Rigelhaupt: We were talking about accessions. What were some of the risky accessions that were made during your tenure?

03-00:00:15

Tsujimoto: Well quite honestly, I don't think we took a lot of risks. I know that Sue acquired some major conceptual art pieces, a couple of which I think I've seen at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art over the last several years. I think that we had, back then, such a small pot of money to deal with that works that we acquired were very thoughtfully assessed. Although it's very interesting, because I know we'd have curatorial discussions back then about, can you really acquire work now, knowing it's going to have meaning and importance historically, twenty or fifty years down? So sometimes I'd be in curatorial discussions with Van Deren Coke and George Neubert. Some people have what they call a shotgun strategy, where you say, "Just take these twenty artists, buy these twenty artists, and just know that maybe two or three of them are going to rise to [the] top over time." Whereas I think other—When I looked at Henry, he was sometimes very methodical about some of the acquisitions he made, because they filled holes in our collection. Sue, I think, helped acquire some major ceramic pieces for the collection because at that time, ceramic art was not as professionally acknowledged or curatorially acknowledged, I think she was really taking some risks there. But I think generally speaking, any time we acquired work back there, there was thoughtfulness behind it.

Rigelhaupt: Were there any that were acquired that, maybe in a curatorial meeting, there was some apprehension, but have turned out to be a really important work?

03-00:02:51

Tsujimoto: I think that there were. Quite honestly, I don't remember. I'll have to say that again, because I was not that involved, in my junior curatorial days, in accessions, that I can't really say. The accessions committee, the way it was handled, if I remember correctly, it was basically Henry and the board. Perhaps Suzanne or John would make a proposal, go in and make a presentation. In fact, that's what it was. The staff would come in, now that I think about it, and they would make presentations. Then there would be discussion among the board about, was there funds? Which funds would we pay for it from? If we had the funds of Mr. and Mrs. John Doe, would this be an appropriate work to purchase with their fund? So there were discussions like that. If I recall, the few meetings that I attended—and they were in what we called the old board room—I think there was very thoughtful discussion, even among the board members, about acquisitions that we were making at that time. Now, gifts. There's a difference between purchasing work, and then also accepting works that are gifted to you. I think a lot of museums really struggle with, when do you say no to a donor or patron that wants to donate a work to you, even though you already have X number of works by that artist? Or maybe this artwork by this artist isn't the best example. I think all institutions struggle with that.

Rigelhaupt: Was part of the director's role to educate the board about what to collect? Even if it wasn't going to be purchased in the museum immediately, that if they acquired it, collected it, that it one day might be gifted.

03-00:05:01

Tsujimoto: One of the things that Henry started in the eighties was something he called Collectors Forum [est.1977]. There was an associate of mine, Garna Muller, who was the staff person that worked with Henry on that. What it was, was I think as Henry began envisioning a richer program for the museum, that he actually organized this group. They would begin traveling nationally, and then internationally, to go see major exhibitions, visit important collectors, and attend art fairs. As most museum directors and staff know, it's a way to, one, get your members and supporters out to see a lot, to have an educational opportunity to see what's going on. Also, there's this sense of camaraderie when you go out and have an adventure together. Of course, I think that all museum directors try to nurture this. Say if you wanted a Mark Rothko painting, you take your donors and patrons out and say, "Boy, I sure would like a Mark Rothko painting for our collection." It's part of the nurturing and the educational experience, which is vital for institutions. Because particularly in private institutions—well, all museums—we rely so much on the largesse of friends to help us with our education programs, our exhibitions, our acquisitions.

Rigelhaupt: You mentioned Matthew Barney. It seems as though SFMOMA did a solo exhibition of him early in his career. It was ahead of the curve, in some ways. Were there other exhibitions you remember during your tenure, where—

03-00:07:17

Tsujimoto: First, I would say that I really respect the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art for doing the exhibition on Matthew Barney. I thought it was tremendous. I don't know, necessarily, that they are always ahead of the curve as many might think, because there's such an emphasis on collaboration. My perception is, particularly in the contemporary art world, that there are a lot of curators that travel nationally and internationally and are in contact with each other, and they share certain interests, so they often collaborate. For example, the Walker Art Center and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art collaborated on acquiring together some of Matthew Barney's work, because neither of the institutions could afford, on their own, work by the artist. So I give them a lot of credit, because it's that sense of collaboration and networking, where together, we can do something stronger, that benefits both of our institutions. But talking about the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, were we ahead of the curve on anything? [pause] I like to think we did some very important things. I think the Philip Guston exhibition, as I mentioned earlier, really opened the door for a greater appreciation of him. I think the ceramic shows that Suzanne Foley did, and her building up our ceramics collection, helped somewhat to knock down the barriers between ceramics and fine arts. I really think it started with some of the programs the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art did. I have to say, even with the M. I. X. Program, regardless of what some people may have commented about it, it was ahead of the curve there—to consider opening its doors a little wider. So in broad ways, big ways, I think that we did some important things back then.

Rigelhaupt: So if you had to characterize the museum, does it lean more towards the establishment? Or is a little more unorthodox?

03-00:10:02

Tsujimoto: Back when I was working there, they were more establishment. I don't think that an institution back then, being a private institution, and relying on private monies, could get by solely with contemporary art exhibitions of cutting edge work. That's one of the things I think any institution tries to balance, is to service a wide range of audiences, whether they're the ones interested in impressionism, or Edward Hopper, or a pile of dirt in the middle of the floor. Because as I stop and think about it, we had contemporary German sculpture of major artists like Joseph Beuys in our collection, all the way to classics like Edward Hopper and Kandinsky. So because it's a major modern art museum in the area, I think there was a big menu to fill.

Rigelhaupt: While you were there, there was also a Bill Viola exhibition?

03-00:12:04

Tsujimoto: Yes, that was organized by Beau Takahara. I can't remember the year. Was it in late seventies, early eighties? Anyway, yes, there was an early Bill Viola exhibition. It was in what we called the octagonal galleries. They were relatively small spaces. Beau, who was in the education department at that time, but also had a really strong interest in art, proposed doing this exhibition. It shows you how small and collegial we were, that she made the proposal and it worked its way onto the exhibition program. That was maybe late seventies, the early exhibition of Bill Viola's work in the Bay Area.

Rigelhaupt: But then the commitment to film, also.

03-00:13:08

Tsujimoto: Yes, even before I was there—probably in the forties, maybe, when Grace McCann Morley was there—they had what they called an Art in Film program in the major rotunda. On Friday nights it was the Art in Film night. There were all these chairs set up, and they would show films. They were classics back then. When I started off, Mel Novikoff was running the program. I think they were considered art films. They weren't major movie run films. It's a little bit along the lines of what the Pacific Film Archive was doing. That continued on. There was Mel Novikoff, then Edith Kramer. For a while, Ken De Roux, who was an assistant, oversaw the program. Then I don't know exactly when, but it disappeared.

Rigelhaupt: Well, you mentioned Grace McCann Morley. I'm wondering if you could describe how she was talked about, and the legacy she left on SFMOMA.

03-00:14:29

Tsujimoto: Grace McCann Morley was always talked about with great respect for what she did for the San Francisco Museum of Art in its early days. One, I have to say from a personal point of view, the fact that she was a female director back then, is pretty amazing. Two, I understand she was very strong. I think you'd have to be. Three, I think she had a great sense of openness and possibility. I think she had a national, if not an international vision, but I think also supported local artists. I think that was her legacy that was carried on with trying to keep that balance. But she was off in India well, well before I arrived at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Rigelhaupt: Where would you like to see the museum at its hundredth anniversary, in a little over twenty-five years?

03-00:16:22

Tsujimoto: Oh, gosh! I'm not good at being a visionary. [pause] I think what they're doing is great. Maybe because I work in the institution that I do, and I work in the community that I do, and I see how California demographics are changing—I don't know if I know where I would like the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art to be in the next twenty-five or fifty years. But I wonder whether they're bearing in mind that we don't teach art in public

schools, our demographics are changing, and how are all of our institutions going to survive, as our communities change?

Rigelhaupt: Those were largely my questions.

03-00:18:00

Tsujimoto: Okay! Well, that was a nice way to end.

Rigelhaupt: But the only thing I was going to add is, the way I usually end is I ask if there's anything I didn't ask that I should have, or if there's anything you'd like to add.

03-00:18:16

Tsujimoto: No, I guess I would just end by reiterating something I said earlier. I think that the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, because it's been such a pivotal institution in the Bay Area, specifically, the San Francisco area, I think that there is a huge circle of friends and supporters that have just cheered them on through trials and tribulations. Despite whatever criticisms or reservations I might have expressed in this interview, I just think it's very exciting to see where our institution was when I used to work there, and where it is now.

[End of Interview]

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