

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

John Weber
SFMOMA Staff, 1993-2004
Curator of Education and Public Programs, 1993-1996
The Leanne and George Roberts Curator of Education and Public Programs, 1995-2004

[Portions of this transcript have been sealed until January 1, 2030]

Interview conducted by
Richard Cándida Smith (with Peter Samis and Jill Sterrett)
in 2009

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[End of interview]

Interview 1: July 22, 2009

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Cándida Smith: I would like to start with some basic information about when and where you were born.

01-00:00:40

Weber: I was born in Corvallis, Oregon, November 20, 1955. Benton County.

Cándida Smith: That's a university town, right?

01-00:00:50

Weber: Yes, exactly. Oregon State University. The Beavers.

Cándida Smith: What did your parents do?

01-00:00:59

Weber: My father was on the faculty there. He taught electrical engineering. He grew up in Portland, Oregon, and my mother grew up in Corvallis. She was a homemaker, and then she became an artist.

Cándida Smith: She got an MFA?

01-00:01:28

Weber: She got another BA. She was doing printmaking. She still is an artist. She was the one that got us going to museums.

Cándida Smith: Which museums would you go to?

01-00:02:17

Weber: Well, the first museum I went to was the Horner Museum at Gill Coliseum at Oregon State. But then when I was a kid, my father had a sabbatical, and we went to Europe and we went to the Rijksmuseum, which made a particular impression on me. The [Vincent] van Goghs were in the modern art museum or the Stedelijk [Museum]. Seeing late van Gogh as a kid, and seeing Rembrandt and [Johannes] Vermeer as a kid, as an early teenager, really made a big impression. Especially the late van Gogh. I came back and started reading art books after that.

Cándida Smith: So when you were twelve, thirteen, something like that?

01-00:03:43

Weber: I would have been fourteen then. I'd also been making stuff as a kid.

Cándida Smith: So art was part of your family life.

01-00:03:58

Weber: Yes.

Cándida Smith: You come back, and you're reading about art. Are you thinking about being an artist, exploring that?

01-00:04:10

Weber: I don't know. It's hard to say, exactly. I started doing photography in high school. I built a darkroom in the basement, probably as a junior in high school. I was taking that pretty seriously. By the end of my freshman year in college, I had basically decided I wanted to major in art and photography at that point.

Cándida Smith: You went to—?

01-00:05:06

Weber: I went to Reed College in Portland, which had a really tiny studio art program, tiny art history program. Very good, but very small. Not many people doing it. It was more of a science school and English, humanities.

Cándida Smith: This is mid-seventies?

01-00:05:52

Weber: Yes.

Cándida Smith: You're a studio art major. But it's really photography that you're studying. Was it art photography, documentary photography?

01-00:06:05

Weber: I was studying art history more than photography. I'd spent my sophomore year in Munich. I'd had classes in the Bavarian National Museum, on Gothic German sculpture. I'd spent the entire vacation traveling around Europe, going to museums, either alone or with friends. I'd spent a tremendous amount of time, by the time I was a junior, in front of real works of art from Munich, Paris, London, the National Gallery and places like that. I was interested in all of it, actually. Very interested in Dutch painting, very interested in Max Beckmann. I'd seen Robert Frank's *The Americans* while I was still in high school and it made a deep impression on me. I was able to visit more museums and shop for a grad school.

Cándida Smith: I noticed that you did some work with Charles Rhyne when you were at Reed. The stuff that he's done on web publication, by definition, has to have occurred long after you left, but was he working on things that could be considered precursors?

01-00:08:37

Weber: Actually, he was. He was in charge of the slide library, where I worked for a while. I had my first art history class from him, too, which was not a traditional 101 survey; it was really a methodological class.

Charles would be showing us slides and say, “This is an *original* slide.” What he meant is that he would make his own photographs, he would bring his own lights. He was using Kodachrome film, not Ektachrome, because it had better color balance and it was permanent. We shot all the slides for the slide library in Kodachrome, too, which was *really* rare, very unusual. Charles really insisted on that. Albeit every photograph is a step away from reality, Charles made an attempt in these second-generation reproductions to be as accurate as possible. He was very interested in the difference between the original and the reproduction, but committed to good reproductions. He would show four different slides of the same piece, all with different color, just so you always knew that this is *not* the real thing; you’re looking at a facsimile of the real thing.

Cándida Smith: What about the arts communities in Oregon at this time. What’s going on?

01-00:12:18

Weber: In the seventies?

Cándida Smith: In the seventies. What’s going on and what was of particular interest to you?

01-00:12:26

Weber: Well, that’s a funny question. I went to the Portland Art Museum off and on. I became a member as a freshman, but then mostly spent my time on campus. Charles was running a gallery on campus, the Faculty Office Building Gallery. He brought the William Eggleston show from MoMA. [John] Szarkowski actually came and spoke.

Elmer Bischoff came through and did a lecture that was quite interesting. Downtown, the Portland Center for the Visual Arts was happening. It was one of the earlier, larger alternative spaces, created by three artists—Mel Katz, Jay Backstrand and Michele Russo. Mel was a guy from Brooklyn who got a job teaching at Portland State and was missing all the New York work, so he figured out a way to bring it out west. According to Mel, Leo Castelli had all this work he couldn’t sell in the mid-1970s, and so he was totally happy to show it. Donald Judd, Robert Morris and, oh, a lot of the minimalists, Carl Andre, Mary Miss. Chris Burden came and did a show, from L.A., and he got into a fistfight with somebody. Portland talked about that for quite a long time.

There was another younger alternative space, Northwest Artists Workshop, and then Blue Sky Gallery, and that was run by Terry Toedtemeier, who just passed away this last year, Chris Rauschenberg, Craig Hickman, and a couple others whose names I’m forgetting. So

there was this really interesting alternative space scene, and a photography space. There was one commercial gallery of merit.

Cándida Smith: Were you reading any contemporary art or photography journals? *Artforum* or anything like that?

01-00:15:35

Weber: Every now and then, not too much.

Cándida Smith: *October*?

01-00:15:38

Weber: No, not *October* at that point. By '78, I was starting to read a lot. I had read *On Photography*, by Susan Sontag, as soon as it came out. That was very influential. My girlfriend was reading a lot of poststructural criticism. She was reading [Jacques] Derrida in French, Paul de Man, Louis Maran, people like that. I was getting a lot of that stuff secondhand. I was reading Walter Benjamin in German, because I had learned German from my year there. Either around that time or a little bit later, before grad school, I started reading various Frankfurt School folks.

Cándida Smith: Maybe you could reconstruct your thinking about going on to grad school. What your options were and where you decided to go, and why.

01-00:17:37

Weber: After graduating I'd done these two workshops at the Visual Studies Workshop. One with Nathan Lyons and one with Allan Sekula. Allan suggested looking at UC San Diego because I said, "I want to be a writer and I want to be an artist, and I'm interested in art and politics."

I ended up applying to UC San Diego. I got in, got a fellowship. The people there were David and Eleanor Antin, Manny Farber, Jean-Pierre Gorin, Moira Roth, Phil Steinmetz, Fred Lonidier, Babette Mangolte, Allan Kaprow, the Cohens...it was a good place, if a bit contentious at times.

Cándida Smith: What was your MFA thesis?

01-00:20:40

Weber: It was a series of handmade photographic books. Very much in the shadow of Phil's work. They were stories. There was two volumes called *A Success Story*, which was the story of a friend of mine who had gone from sociology at Haverford College to do computer work for Morgan Stanley.

Then there were four other large books, of various topics. They were shown as big book installations, and they were in some shows. They

were in a show at the Portland Art Museum and the Seattle Art Museum. But the thing is, museums don't want anybody to touch anything. Which, of course, is a huge problem if it's a book and you actually want people to read the whole book.

This is the same time when Carrie Mae Weems and Lorna Simpson were at UC San Diego, too, so a lot of people there were thinking about word-image work, photo-text works.

Cándida Smith: Then you spent six months in Germany, then, on your DAAD [Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst] fellowship?

01-00:24:41

Weber: I went in August of '83. I came back in March of '84. I learned a fair amount about what was going on there.

Cándida Smith: It was primarily painting that you were looking into?

01-00:27:01

Weber: Yes.

Cándida Smith: Not photography?

01-00:27:03

Weber: No. I was using the grant time, really, to learn what happened between 1945 and when I was there, in German contemporary art overall, as a way to understand the background of the newer painting. Wolfgang Max Faust, the critic, had a seminar that I sat in on. I would go to a lot of openings and talk to artists and meet people, see what was going on. I read a lot of interviews. I went around and interviewed various of the artists who were still in town and some of the people who'd been involved in crucial early shows of new German painting.

Berlin painters are really a very specific group. Rainer Fetting, Bernd Zimmer, Helmut Middendorf, and Salomé; they were showing by then at Mary Boone [Gallery], at a point early in her career. She told me herself she essentially couldn't get access, when her gallery was young, to people like [Gerhard] Richter and [Anselm] Kiefer, who had more established careers. Even by the early eighties, they were very established in Germany. Particularly people like Richter, from the mid-sixties on. Those established artists weren't so interested in showing at a gallery they'd never heard of, in New York, of course they ended up with Marian Goodman. But Boone was able to show these younger artists, the so-called *Heftige Malerei* group, the violent painters, *die neuen Wilden*, the new savages, or whatever you want to call them. My grant project was to go and look at some of the claims that people like Wolfgang Max Faust had made for that work as reflecting contemporary Berlin realities, and trying to understand how

that assertion felt inside the city, whether people inside the city saw that painting the same way. I did end up curating a show for the Portland Art Museum. It was my first big curatorial project. It was an international show of new work, painting from Berlin.

Cándida Smith: Jack Lane had this special interest in contemporary German painting. Gary Garrels, same thing, contemporary German painting, photography. Did your interests align with theirs. Were you talking the same language, pretty much?

01-00:30:00

Weber:

Pretty much. It was definitely one of the reasons I was interested in coming here. When Jack and Inge-Lise [Eckmann Lane] began talking to me—and really, Bob Riley was the initial connection—about coming here, I realized what they were interested in doing with new German art, I knew that *Osiris and Isis* was here, Kiefer's great painting. I was really interested in that because there was no way that the Portland Art Museum, where I was the contemporary curator, was getting access to material like that. We were feeding a couple tiers lower on the contemporary menu. I realized that I made a lot of sense for SFMOMA, given what they were doing and my background.

Cándida Smith: Is there a— How to phrase this? I'm thinking one's in the early, mid-eighties and there's a strong interest in art in Germany. But is there a particular feel for contemporary art and the story of modern/contemporary art that develops if you have got this strong interest in German art, as opposed to, say, an interest in the East Village or an interest in what's going on in L.A. or an interest in what's going on in Mexico City?

01-00:32:54

Weber:

I was certainly aware, coming from the Pacific Northwest, of how different areas and places have very much their own art histories, even if they're in dialog with other art histories. I'm an Oregonian. I spent nine years in Portland immediately before coming to San Francisco, and I was very much a part of that art community.

So I could see, on the one hand, that it's odd for an institution in Northern California to be as involved in new German art as SFMOMA seemed to be. It's a bit eccentric, in some ways. Why do that? On the other hand, I liked the work a lot, too. And as a side note, it is interesting to note that in the sixties and seventies, (West) Germany as a contemporary art arena was in a situation in some ways similar to, say, Portland, very outside the New York power center and very provincial. So that polarity between New York and everywhere else was something that I was aware of in more than one way.

I also felt that institutions, wherever they are, should pay attention to their regions, to their cities, and to the artists that are there. But there can be a limit to how much you can do. You can't *only* do that because you can't be a slave to the local situations. You can't merely reflect that local scene because you have to put pressure on it. That pressure comes from the outside.

If you're doing a good job as a museum, then you're reflecting the tensions that are there that are not going to go away, and you're going to have somebody upset with you. One could even argue that if you're doing a good enough job, you're going to have, to one degree or another, *everybody* upset with you, for slightly different reasons. So as a museum, you're stuck with that tension between the local and the national/international. You have to just live with it, I think. I don't think you can escape it.

Cándida Smith: Did you spend any time in Düsseldorf or Köln?

01-00:37:45

Weber: A little bit. Especially Köln later on. Less so in Düsseldorf, other than just visiting museums.

Cándida Smith: I did want to ask you if you could talk a little bit more about what was going on in your mind about this relationship of art and politics at this time as a grad student studying German art. Obviously, art and politics and its relationship meant a lot of different things in the seventies and eighties. So what did it mean for you? What seemed sensible to you, in terms of what that was about, given that it was clearly an interest of yours?

01-00:39:46

Weber: San Diego had been a very politicized campus. Herbert Marcuse had been there, Fredric Jameson had been there. A student set himself on fire in Revelle Plaza, in protest of the Vietnam War, in about 1974 or '73 maybe. UC San Diego had quieted down from that period by the time I arrived. Martha Rosler and Allan Sekula had gone through the MFA program.

By the time I came to San Diego I was already a member of the Citizens Party. I joined them in Portland during Barry Commoner's campaign, which was in that fall, the election [1980], when I was just starting grad school. So I was doing "politics politics," not just art politics. There was a bookstore collective at UCSD, a leftwing bookstore, Groundwork Books, and I was a member of that collective.

As a grad student I was looking at all sorts of models for how art and politics could interact, from the Dada period and John Heartfield on. Here, some of the German models were of great interest. In another

way, I was curious about surrealism and the surrealist interactions with politics, and reading a lot about the 1930s.

I was curious about the new Berlin painting because critics were saying that it was, in some sense, a reflection of the social world, and an artifact of the odd political situation that Berlin was in during the Cold War.

So, politically, and art-politically, I had a lot of questions, and not many answers at that time. One of the things that was very clear is that if you're measuring your artwork, your individual artwork, against notions of really changing the world in any way, your work generally was going to come up short. So I was very aware of the cognitive dissonance that that creates for artists who are interested in politics.

Cándida Smith: But consciousness changing.

01-00:44:47

Weber:

Well, I still thought that raising questions could be valuable. I was still very interested in work that simply wasn't— Formalist was the worst thing you could call anybody in those days, in 1980 and '84. "Oh, that work is just formalist." That was like just saying—

Cándida Smith: Who did that mean?

01-00:45:07

Weber:

That could mean any work that was all abstract—Frank Stella, Donald Judd, whatever.

At UCSD we had a number of artists with very different notions of how to engage the social. Newton and Helen [Mayer] Harrison, for example, engaged the social in very interesting ways. I thought what they were doing was really interesting.

Allan Kaprow, too, was another artist who had a politics, in a way, but what some of my better friends at the time would have thought of as a very un-political politics. There were notions of repressive tolerance, friendly fascism. There were several other catch phrases that were going around at the time, some of them having to do with corporations and corporate control. But a lot of the work I was interested in subsequently was work that engaged the social in varying ways. I loosened up on that after grad school a bit more.

Cándida Smith: Well, we'll get into that, but I also wanted to ask you about conceptual art, since UC San Diego, the department is often pigeonholed as one of the epicenters of conceptual art. Is that how you experienced it? What would you think conceptual art is and is not?

01-00:48:21

Weber:

I think UC San Diego was definitely one of the real centers of conceptual art. There was a very strong emphasis on idea and a very strong emphasis on understanding art in relationship to audiences, understanding art as discourse. I remember David Antin talking about that. As soon as everybody arrived there, he says, "We're interested in discourse. We're interested in art as a discourse." In other words, you're not just object makers or craftspeople. You're making ideas.

There were also traditional painters there. Manny Farber and Patricia Patterson were both painters.

What I got from UCSD, though, was not so much conceptual art as a mode of making, but rather an emphasis on "the conceptual" in a broader sense, and on knowing the ideas in your work.

Cándida Smith:

What about ideas like death of the subject, death of the author, negation of the sublime?

01-00:51:31

Weber:

We read, I think, "Death of the Author," probably for one of David's seminars, although he was skeptical of everybody. I'm sure he was equally skeptical of [Michel] Foucault, in some ways. And Roland Barthes. We were reading a lot of those things. J.P. (Jean-Pierre Gorin) was having us read *Mille Plateaux—A Thousand Plateaus*, [Gilles] Deleuze and [Félix] Guattari.

A lot of the students weren't as interested in criticism. I came in being explicitly interested in criticism and in art making, so I was up for reading a lot, even if I didn't understand it particularly well.

Cándida Smith:

Well, so 1984, you have MFA in hand.

01-00:53:10

Weber:

I finished in '83, did my thesis show and defended it. I was given the MFA in '84 because they had to keep me on the payroll while I went to Berlin because they gave me some travel money to supplement the DAAD money, so the degree was officially awarded in 1984.

Cándida Smith:

So what happens to you next? I know you go back to Oregon at some point.

01-00:53:53

Weber:

Six months in Berlin, one semester in San Diego, teaching and writing sociological abstracts, which is probably not on my resume anymore. Then I go back and I get a job at Oregon School of Design, which is a little architecture school founded by some students of Michael Graves

from Princeton [University] and a few people from Columbia [University]. I taught for a year there.

Then I got a job, partway through that year, as executive director of Northwest Artists Workshop, which was a half-time job. Then I picked up what was about a fifth-time job running the Vollum Gallery (the forerunner of the Cooley Gallery) at Reed College and doing shows. I had a darkroom in a friend's house. I was doing a lot of photography. I had three different jobs.

Cándida Smith: You had time to do photography?

01-00:55:52

Weber: I was just doing it whenever I wasn't doing other things. I was making work.

Cándida Smith: Any particular subject matter? Or approach?

01-00:56:03

Weber: I made one other book and a couple other pieces, including a piece called *Love In Motels*. That was shown at LACE [Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions], and it was published in Portland in *Mississippi Mud*.

The work I did that I liked the best was with a homemade camera that took sixteen-by-twenty-inch pinhole photographs that I contact-printed. I still really like those a lot. When I left town, Terry Toedtemeier asked for some of those to put in the photo collection in the Portland Art Museum. They were shown in a history of Oregon photography exhibition, so that was my high point as an artist.

Cándida Smith: Have you continued doing artwork at all since you came here?

01-00:59:25

Weber: I kept doing some more pieces in San Francisco, a few of which were shown at Blue Sky in an anniversary show. But then I really pretty much stopped. I haven't been making art for the last decade.

Cándida Smith: Was this like a split-personality thing? Or was there some integration between your curator self and your artist self?

01-01:00:16

Weber: In a way, I stopped having art-making ideas I wanted to follow up on. I always felt that the world had plenty of artists. We didn't need another artist. So unless you really need to make art, you shouldn't make art. I felt, if I need to make art again I'll start making it again.

That urge to make something certainly didn't leave me; it transferred itself into the curatorial work, in some ways. Doing the education center at SFMOMA was huge for me, too. In a certain sense, I feel that together with the architects, who should get most of the credit, and the staff of the education department, we really made this together. It's a physical thing that you can walk into. I feel the tremendous pride of "makership" for that facility.

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Cándida Smith: So the Portland Art Museum, that is, I suppose, the first full-time job?

02-00:00:10

Weber: Yes, my first full-time job as a museum person. I was the first person at the Portland Art Museum who had the title of curator of contemporary art.

Cándida Smith: Your responsibilities were?

02-00:01:34

Weber: Both national and regional. PCVA had closed. The board of the Portland Center for the Visual Arts had merged with what was then called the Oregon Art Institute, which was the Portland Art Museum, the Northwest Film Study Center, and the Pacific Northwest College of Art. They were all one organization.

Cándida Smith: So we're talking about 1990, approximately?

02-00:02:27

Weber: That was about 1990, exactly. PCVA shut down. They merged with the museum, with the condition that the museum would hire a contemporary art curator and create a contemporary art series and a performance series. So I was hired to do that. It was called "Art on the Edge."

Cándida Smith: That you would largely borrow?

02-00:04:18

Weber: We borrowed a couple of shows, but not much; mostly I organized them myself—using works borrowed from artists, collectors, and galleries, if that's what you mean. I did a show of Lorna Simpson that built on a show that Larry Rinder organized at UC Berkeley, to which I added new work. It was, to my knowledge, her first civic museum show.

We did a show in 1992, with Simon Watson as guest curator, that was called "Dissent, Difference, and the Body Politic"—a lot of work about the body, race, and gay issues. Lorna was in that, too, along with

Nayland Blake, Lutz Bacher, Kiki Smith, Gary Simmons, Michael Jenkins—he was an artist in those days, now he’s Jenkins of Sikkema Jenkins & Co. gallery. It was a good show, very much along the lines of the ’93 Whitney Biennial. Smaller, but a similar approach. We did a wonderful project with Barbara Kruger with a billboard and bus placards all over town and matchbooks in bars.

Cándida Smith: So it sounds like a lot of art and politics.

02-00:05:59

Weber: Yes, definitely.

Cándida Smith: Refined through identity politics.

02-00:06:03

Weber: Yes, taking on the identity politics of the time. Jimmie Durham and Donald Moffett were in it, and there was a very vicious anti-gay initiative that was on the Oregon state-wide ballot at the time, and it went down in flames in the election that fall. We were very happy about that. The Kruger billboard was prominent downtown, and it said: “Fear and Hate make you small, bitter, and mean. Do to others as you would have them do to you.” The same piece by her was on sixty buses all over town, too.

Cándida Smith: Were the artists you were exhibiting reflecting your own personal priorities, your own personal preferences for what was going on in contemporary art?

02-00:06:58

Weber: I suppose it depends on what you mean by personal; I’m not gay or female, and I’m white. That aside, I thought that the work we were showing was the most interesting and vital work that was happening then, but Simon played the key role in selecting the artists. He and I were both very interested in the urge to join art and politics. There were a lot of very productive and interesting ways to do that and artists were exploring them energetically. Felix González-Torres was in that show, with some wonderful pieces. It was very exciting to me, the work happening in the later eighties.

Cándida Smith: Now, Portland Art Museum was a general art history museum? So how big were you in relationship to everything else that was going on in the museum?

02-00:07:43

Weber: Nothing was very big in Portland at the time. My program was not particularly big, but I was extremely energetic.

Cándida Smith: Did you have to fight for your bailiwick? Did you have to fight to get enough space, enough whatever, enough respect from your own institution?

02-00:09:37

Weber: It didn't feel that way. It felt more like they kept asking me to do new things and I just kept doing them. I hadn't set out to become a curator. I wasn't on a mission to conquer an empire. I was just doing things one thing at a time. If they wanted me to do this German show, I thought, well, that could be interesting. I basically became a curator because it gave me a great reason to talk to artists and to write about art, which I enjoyed. Eventually, the museum hired me full time. I got mad occasionally about things when budgets would get cut. But there were no big fights.

Cándida Smith: Did you have an approach to how to present the art? Just how to hang it or how to physically place it in galleries?

02-00:11:14

Weber: I always did that myself. We didn't have a designer. Doing shows was intrinsic to my artist background. I could not have imagined not hanging a show myself. I'd work with an installer, but I always had a great interest in that hands-on work, being an artist myself. I always worked very closely, when I could, with the artists on that, and I would really pay a lot of attention to their sensibilities, and move things two inches if that would make it look better.

Cándida Smith: Were you getting to know collectors at the time at all? Maybe there weren't many collectors in Portland.

02-00:12:15

Weber: There weren't many collectors in Portland, but I was running the Contemporary Art Council there for the museum. We did trips to New York and to L.A., so I met collectors there through dealers that I was working with. In Portland there was Ed Cauduro, who I knew and worked with on a show.

Cándida Smith: I'd like you to get into the development of your thinking and what you learned in Oregon about how to present art, oftentimes art that's either opaque for people who don't know anything about contemporary art, or offensive, or just all-around difficult, for one reason or another.

02-00:13:17

Weber: I think one thing I appreciated growing up in Corvallis, Oregon, and working in Portland, is that there are a lot of people who don't understand contemporary art because there isn't very much of it around. At the Portland Art Museum, I was responsible for the last five years of art, let's say, or maybe the last ten, with some purview back to

about 1960. I was, of course, very aware, working with the docents there and with the public, that most of our visitors would not have any familiarity with the work I was showing, or would have very little familiarity with it. I always presented it with that point of view, knowing that we couldn't rely on an inside audience.

I actually was very interested in that challenge and very interested in the skepticism of a museum visitor saying, well, "I just don't get it. Why would a serious person do this?" I still take that seriously. I think it's an interesting challenge to explain to somebody who thinks something is stupid, why a serious person would devote their life to making things like that. If you're not willing to take that challenge seriously, you certainly shouldn't be in art education, in museum education, and I question whether you should really even be a contemporary curator.

Cándida Smith: So getting beyond the PCVA, what other kinds of audiences were you trying to reach in the Oregon, greater Portland community?

02-00:17:26

Weber:

A very ill-defined, amorphous general museum community audience. Oregon and Portland were not ethnically diverse, to speak of, so there wasn't the sense of the accessibility of a larger, more diverse audience. Although, that said, in bringing artists like Lorna to town and having her do talks in the section of the city that had a historical black community, there was definitely an outreach component to what I was doing. I was definitely very interested in the increasing diversity of the contemporary art world.

Portland had a big gay and lesbian community, and still does, and that was also part of the interest in doing "Dissent, Difference and the Body Politic." I had started thinking about gay politics a lot in Berlin, looking at Salomé's work, who is a very out gay artist, gay painter, and has done a lot of very radical performance pieces that linked to feminist issues in many ways.

My girlfriend and later wife was working in a clinic that did abortions in Portland, at a feminist clinic that had nearly been blown up around that same time, with a bomb. There were in fact four bombs that were sent to various clinics. Leila (Whittemore) was the "minister of defense" at their clinic and had been the one who said, "No, that's wrong. That box looks wrong. We're not opening it. We're going to call the police." Sure enough, it was a box with napalm in it, set to explode on opening. Anyway, that's a whole other story. So the political climate at the time in Portland, that's what it was....

Cándida Smith: That's a story that makes certain things very real for you.

02-00:20:13

Weber:

Very real. I definitely saw the art as fighting that battle for the right to speak and the right to have a voice and the right to be in public, and the right to be heard and seen at the museum. That was a big deal. In essence, Simon and I were implicitly addressing that walk-in audience that was going to vote in the next election, with the hope that they would vote this way, not that way. You hope that if they end up on a jury (about, say, a hate crime), that they're going to say, "Well, I think they have got a legitimate complaint." That's probably the best way I can answer that.

Cándida Smith:

If you assume in a museum like that, most of the people are going there to see the Old Masters or the Egyptian mummies or whatever—

02-00:21:23

Weber:

Well, the Native, the Northwest Coast Indian work. There's a few European Old Masters there, too.

Cándida Smith:

Then they're going to wander into the contemporary exhibits, and you hope to attract them.

02-00:21:35

Weber:

Definitely. Then your hope is that they're going to look at the world a little bit differently and look at the people around them out on the street a little bit differently, based on seeing some of that work, and that the experience will change some minds.

We did the Krzysztof Wodiczko *Homeless Vehicle Project* there, from Exit Art. There was a huge homeless population in Portland, and homelessness was a very big issue. Krzysztof came and also showed his *Tompkins Square* piece, which also deals with homelessness in projections on the wall. That was another show where I was definitely addressing the local political realities. As he put it, the work is not for the homeless, the work is for the home-full, those of us who have homes. It's about trying to get the home-full to think about the situations in which the homeless exist. There was definitely a political agenda to the way that I was curating and thinking, and I loved the work as art.

Cándida Smith:

At this time, more and more curators are art historians with Ph.D.'s. You're an artist, rather than an art historian, even though you might be teaching art history. But your formation, your identity professionally seems quite different. I wonder if you have given any thought to that aspect of, in some ways, your own position is increasingly an anomaly within the professionalized museum world, where the Ph.D. is part of the certification, in addition to the energy and the perspective.

02-00:23:45

Weber:

I definitely considered myself an artist. Although, I also considered myself in a mode that was the artist/critic, a mode that goes a long ways back, namely artists who write about other artists' work and think about other artists' work a lot. But that's very different from the art historical model, for sure.

For people who are working with contemporary art, I don't think it's a *bad* idea to have a Ph.D., but I think it's a bad idea to limit the curatorial ranks to people with Ph.D.'s because I think something you often don't get when you have that background is an understanding of process and how artists make decisions. You have to be very comfortable walking out on limbs, and understanding maybe when *not* to walk out on limbs. More often, though, that's not the issue. More often, the issue is being willing to roll the dice with an artist who's going to make work that you haven't seen yet and then understand how to advocate for that within your institution and how to maybe, in many cases, calm your director down or your finance administrator, and also calm your artist down. I think people who started out making art are possibly a little more comfortable with some pieces of that puzzle.

The feedback I have had from artists who have worked with people like me—and I know a number of other people like me—is that they like working with curators who started out as artists because some things just seem to go better. Maybe they say that to the art historians in a different way, I don't know.

Cándida Smith:

Of course, you're a curator with a social perspective bent. But you're not a sociologist, you're not a political theorist, you're not a commentator in the way, say, David Brooks is, or somebody of that ilk. What is it that people can learn from art about society, about their lives, that they can't learn from the social critics, the social theorists, the political theorists?

02-00:27:26

Weber:

I'm not sure I'd pose it that way. It's not maybe that they can't learn it in some other way; it's more maybe that they *wouldn't* learn it in some other way. I think that perhaps they might learn it in a slightly more personal way from an artist than they might from a social theorist. But they could learn it in that same way, probably, from a good biographer or autobiographer. What I think is important, rather, is that those questions, those perspectives are raised within the museum environment and within the art environment and the art world, and that art isn't seen as something that's separate from the social world, but can express it, express who we are in some way, and where we come from.

Let's face it, art is not only about art. The notion of "art for art's sake" was very important at a certain point in time. But it's very much the exception and not the rule for why artists have made art over the course of history.

As I said earlier, it can be very frustrating if your main impetus is political and you're making art. I think you have to want to make art. Then depending on what urge you have, what need you have to express and contest your social identity, your gender identity, the way you think the world should be organized politically, that may lead to really interesting art. If you think, fundamentally I'm interested in politics and maybe I can use art to further it, I suspect the work won't really be very interesting, and you should just stick to a more direct form of politics if that is your fundamental passion. I think in art, your fundamental passion has to be art. Then your social identity takes you to where you need to go.

Cándida Smith: In 1993, you come to SFMOMA. I understand that Bob Riley was the one who suggested you to the museum and suggested the museum to you.

02-00:31:00

Weber: Indeed.

Cándida Smith: Maybe we should backtrack and discover how you came to know Bob Riley.

02-00:31:07

Weber: Well, Jerry [Gerald] Bolas, who had been the director of the Portland Art Museum around the time of the "Art on the Edge" program, and we were hunting for shows, and he saw *The Terrible Uncertainty of the Thing Described*, by Doug Hall. Jerry suggested we do that piece, and I was the one who was working with Doug in installing it, and with the museum in borrowing it from Bob here. As part of that, we brought Bob and Doug to Portland, in probably about '91, to do a talk on the piece. Doug did a talk on the piece and Bob did a talk on this history of video art. We hung out together for a couple of days and really had a good time, really enjoyed each other's company. Bob and I kept in touch. Then not too long after that John Caldwell passed away, and I called Bob to offer my condolences, because I knew that they were friends and colleagues. That's when he mentioned that this education position was open. My immediate response was, "Oh, well, that's not me. That's not what I want to do." He was going, "No, no, no, John, it's really interesting. We want somebody different. You'd be really part of the curatorial staff and it'll really be a different kind of education position." I still thought, "Oh, no, that's not me." But he

faxed me the information. After a lot of back and forth, I decided to do it.

Cándida Smith: What opportunities did you see for yourself?

02-00:34:48

Weber:

Well, I was burning out on curating, in a way. I'd been doing lots of shows in Portland. There'd just been tremendous upheaval in the museum there. I just was not optimistic about the place getting its act together. My wife was at Columbia in grad school by then, in New York. I started thinking about the new building and what San Francisco was doing, and thinking about the fact that I really enjoyed the educational part of it and I enjoyed the challenge of presenting the ideas, and I enjoyed getting to know the artists, but I didn't necessarily enjoy talking about how much it would cost to ship the thing from Switzerland. The idea of being part of a building project and being part of a bigger team, and, well, actually, being able to travel more, to keep up with what was going on, and be involved in some way with new technologies, because I'd been very curious about that since the mid-eighties...that all sounded great. I was also very curious as to where digital technology was going to take art. All of that seemed like it would be very easy to be involved in at SFMOMA. It just seemed like a fantastic opportunity, in being part of the new building, coming in in advance of it. They had this German work that I was still really interested in. *Osiris and Isis* was here, which I thought was just a great painting. I like photography. San Francisco had been historically one of the major museums for photography, and that was something good, too. So SFMOMA seemed like just an incredible, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Cándida Smith: Now, part of the reason it might be once-in-a-lifetime is you don't seem to have the traditional profile of an art education person. I know that they consciously made a decision that they didn't want an art educator or someone who had gone through more traditional art education. So how did they explain what they wanted the position to be, to you? Is this Inge-Lise [Eckmann Lane], or is it Jack Lane?

02-00:38:31

Weber:

It was more Inge-Lise than Jack. But Jack impressed me in certain ways. It was clear that Jack ran a very tight ship, in a good way, and I was working for this institution in Portland that was not well run. This was another thing that I really liked, the idea that this guy's got his act together, and the people he's hiring have got *their* act together.

Inge-Lise was the one who, as deputy director, was talking to me during the hiring process. I liked her a lot. The way they explained it is, "Well, we do definitely want someone who's oriented towards our

audiences and towards conveying the work; but we do want you to be participating in the curatorial staff. We appreciate that you're a writer. We want you to write. We want you to work on our initial show, 'Public Information.'"

I thought that sounded fine. I was always very much involved in the education part in Portland. I worked with docents a lot, enjoyed that. My dad taught at Oregon State University, so the whole notion of teaching and education was in my background. And I'd been teaching the whole time I was working at the Portland Art Museum, both adult education and for the BFA program at PNCA [Pacific Northwest College of Art]. So the notion of being an educator was not scary to me. In some senses, it fit what I had always seen myself doing, career-wise, maybe more than being a curator did.

Cándida Smith: But they wanted somebody who thought like a curator, clearly. Artist focused, probably.

02-00:41:37

Weber: That was also second-nature to me. What I was realizing in Portland is that I wasn't as interested in buying art and courting collectors. That was another plus for the SFMOMA job. There were other people whose job is to court the collectors and whose job it was to buy the art.

Cándida Smith: Did it worry you that you didn't know who the P&S curator was going to be when you came? Or when you were thinking about coming.

02-00:42:16

Weber: It didn't worry me. Jack had actually called to say, "We're talking with Gary [Garrels]," around the time when I was still talking to them. I wasn't that worried about it. I felt like I could get along with most people. I knew they were going to get somebody who was going to, in some sense, carry on a lot of what John Caldwell had done. I also looked at who was on the board of trustees and who was on the education committee, to get a sense of how seriously they take education. The people on the education committee—Doris Fisher and a lot of folks like that—I felt like this is a strong committee. A lot of the names that are on the collection committee are there and some executive committee people are there, so it's not going to be a weak committee. It made intuitive sense that they wanted to build education up for the new building.

Cándida Smith: If I think about one distinction, you have a strong art and politics, art in society perspective. I don't think the key people at this institution—certainly, Jack didn't and John Caldwell hadn't. It wasn't part of the institutional culture here.

02-00:43:49

Weber:

No, I knew about that part of it. Maybe, I don't know, in some ways, coming from Oregon, I probably underestimated the depth of the rancor in certain areas. I don't know, maybe I was a little naïve about some of those things having to do with it. The Bay Area's much more contentious culturally than the environment that I was coming from. I was probably just a little optimistic about options. I also felt that the museum had some obligations to its community that maybe education could help do a better job with those, and maybe I could be a part of moving it forward in a good way.

Cándida Smith: When you arrive, what's your assessment of the education department programs and the staff that you're going to be working with? What do you start thinking to yourself about, okay, this is where we need to go.

02-00:45:30

Weber:

I suppose probably like most curators, exhibition curators, I arrived thinking that the staff was pretty big, because there were five people on it. I was coming from an institution with about twenty-five to thirty staff members and one educator, and with a part-time helper. I thought, gee, this is pretty big. What I realized very quickly is how labor intensive education work is.

My first impression was that there was a pretty good staff, people working really hard, but certainly, existing at a bit of a distance from the curatorial staff, in many respects, and not part of meetings. There'd been this distance between the previous curator and the educators that I was aware of. The early days were trying to figure out how to bring people closer together.

Cándida Smith: Not just you and the curators, but the actual staff of the department.

02-00:47:13

Weber:

In a way, yes. On the one hand, we were working on shows a lot. Because you're always meeting lots of deadlines and a lot of it's just about deadlines and getting the publications and trying to figure out what we would do. But on the other hand, we were thinking a lot about the new building and what are we going to do? Some of the priorities were, I wanted to work more with teachers because I didn't see how we could ever see enough school kids to make an impact, given how many people we were. We also, while we were still in the old building, we asked Sacramento for a list of all the languages spoken in the Bay Area. There's an unbelievable number of languages spoken here. There's something like fifty-one. We sat around one day in the education department and tried to figure out what those languages would be. We were doing a project with Balboa High School, and there were twenty-two languages there. We just tried to list as many languages as we could, based on the ethnic communities we knew. We

got to about fourteen or fifteen languages and we just didn't know what the others would be. Then we'd looked at the list, and there were languages where we didn't even know what continent the language was on. We realized, okay, there're kids speaking that language that are in the public schools. So, we have got our work cut out for us. If we can teach teachers, then every teacher we teach can teach this many students and there's a multiplier effect. The education staff was already doing teacher programs, but we were thinking more about that, and also about ways to reach more teenagers. That's a tough audience. We created a whole teen docent group – docents trained to work specifically with teen audiences. Sometimes they'd be adult docents and then there were some children's docents. We had been doing a lot with "Look, Learn, Create" tours for younger kids, and then adult tours.

Cándida Smith: And nothing in between?

02-00:49:24

Weber:

Well, there was, but it wasn't as much of a focus or a specialty. It was harder for high schools to come because of the way their day is split up, with students moving from teacher to teacher over the course of a day. It's easier to get the young kids, because they are with one teacher all day. When they get into middle school and high school, it gets harder to get students because of the way that their day is fragmented.

As I came in, I'm trying to get to know the museum and trying to think about what the heck does an education curator do? The museum had been pretty hostile to extended labels and to gallery text. I was very much wanting us to do more with that, and have handouts. Willing to go with the artists preferences, which is always a big issue, but wanting to provide information.

Jack was mostly in the background, but he took me to lunch one day at the State Café there, the cafeteria where everybody used to go for lunch in Civic Center, basically to say he wanted me to do an audio guide. I said, "Fine. We'll do an audio guide. Give me money, I'll do an audio guide." I think the Fishers wanted an audio guide. I think they actually were behind, if I have understood it correctly, some of the push for more education, because they were very committed to education, in their way. Jack's thought was, okay, I can't get away with not having more education, so I'm going to do it in a way that's going to make sense. He was very skeptical of the traditional museum education field; he didn't feel that it had really amounted to much.

Cándida Smith: He does say in his interview that, basically, he hates any labels that say anything other than name of artist, name of piece, date, the medium.

02-00:52:03

Weber:

Jack is a really practical guy. He knew that that wasn't going to fly. He knew that he had to do it differently, or it wasn't going to work. So he said, "Okay, well, if I have got to take my medicine, I'm going to at least try to like it, or try to get it in a form that'll work." See, I was coming at it from the artist's point of view. I understood it from the artist's point of view, too. A lot of artists really hate labels and the museum education world. They just want you to walk in and look at the work cold, and get it. I'm not hostile to that point of view, I don't think it's evil or selfish. I don't even think it's particularly elitist. I think it's idealistic. It may be misguided, but not necessarily for bad reasons. It's that you want to believe that people can get the art directly, and you want to believe that they can just mainline your consciousness that's in the work. Audiences can't, most of the time, but it's not bad to wish that they could.

So I was okay with coming at it from that point of view while still providing a lot more information for the public, and I wanted us to do as good a job as we could and add a number of components to the museum's approach and really be more "full service," educationally. And just to be clear, myself, I like extended labels—I just want them to be really, really thoughtful and well-written!

I was also very interested in the new technologies part early on, and that was one of the big things that I wanted to add. We went to the Irvine Foundation for that. I was working with Gini Ruben and with Lori Fogarty on that program.

Peter [Samis] was still a curatorial assistant and wanting to figure out ways to do this. We met each other, and I realized, well, here's the guy who could do the new technologies education work, if we can just get him a job, get him a salary. We were working with John Noble from Irvine Foundation. We wrote a grant proposal for a \$325,000 grant, a big grant to get the program going. This is when we were still in the old building. I think Lori and I were meeting with John down in Southern California. He goes, "Well, this sounds great, this position you're going to create, this curatorial position, which is both education and new technologies and curatorial, and it's got to have all these skills. But where are you going to find somebody to do that?" I said, "Well, he's on our staff. We have got the guy. We know he's the right guy. We just need the salary." That was Peter's position. But John was right in saying, I think, this is somebody who has to speak education, he has to speak curatorial, and he has to speak digital technology. What are your chances of finding somebody who's got all three of them? But Peter had started out as a docent here. He was very much committed to that. He'd been doing new technologies stuff in any way

or shape that he could. He'd worked on shows here as a curatorial assistant for a number of years.

Cándida Smith: Of course, from a funding agency's point of view, the bigger question might be not whether *you* have that particular individual, but whether that combination of skills is generalizable, so that the programs that you develop here could be replicated elsewhere.

02-00:55:53

Weber: That's still probably a question, I think to this day. Peter's unique.

Cándida Smith: How hands on were you in, say reshaping the docent program or in writing the wall text, or designing the audio tours, or setting up the new technology program?

02-00:56:49

Weber: I'd say real hands on in all of it, in various ways. I wrote a lot of the labels that are probably still out there. We had a team of me, Susan Spero, Janet Bishop, and I think another curatorial assistant who was working on labels for the new building. I was very involved with Peter on shaping the nature of the new programs. Lori and I, we came up with the notion for *Voices and Images of California Art*, actually, at a funding call with one of the local foundations that does local work. He was saying, "Oh, we wouldn't fund you because you don't do enough with local things." On the way back to the car afterwards— We were at Moose's, I remember, and he picked up the bill. Tom Layden. We're going back out there to the car and I'm saying, "Were going to get money out of them. We're going to do *Voices and Images of California Art*, and he's going to fund it." Who was that that funded the first version of *Voices and Images*?

Samis: Well, there was [Mort] Fleishhacker, and [Wallace Alexander] Gerbode, who did the *ArtFinder* [program].

02-00:58:24

Weber: I think it might have been Fleishhacker then. Or it could have been Gerbode.

Samis: It was Gerbode. They didn't want to give anything to the museum, but we were doing the grassroots thing. It was Gerbode.

02-00:58:36

Weber: Right, right, and the program was *Bay Area Artfinder*. At any rate, I was very involved at that point with Peter, figuring out the direction, where we were going to go. Also just looking at stuff as it was coming in, and responding to it, and going to video shoots.

Cándida Smith: What do you mean by "stuff"? What stuff?

02-00:59:01

Weber:

Well, the programs, as we were looking at things that the programmers would do, deciding what we liked, what we didn't like. Looking at raw footage. Thinking about who to interview. Really, all that. We only had one staff member at the time. It was Peter and— What was it Scott Sayre used to joke, or maybe Steve Dietz, "Stop telling everybody you can do this on \$50,000 a year!" And we'd say, "It's Peter and nineteen interns," who were downstairs in the old education center.

With the docents, I was teaching for the docent training program and was very much involved day to day with the docent council in thinking about it and coming up with programs that we would do and working with folks. That was, again, something I enjoyed. They were people who were very committed to the educational mission and had very interesting lives that they brought to the museum. That was something that I enjoyed a lot --a lot of talks and walkthroughs and executive council meetings, and I worked very closely with the docent council presidents and vice presidents on projects.

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Cándida Smith: When you arrived, what was the state of planning for education in the building? Was it adequate for what you wanted to do in the new building?

03-00:00:25

Weber:

Boy. I'm trying to think exactly where we were on that.

Cándida Smith: Probably, your predecessor had done some of the previous plan.

03-00:00:38

Weber:

She'd been gone more than a year. A long time. There was the education center downstairs that existed, and a notion of using it for the launching of the "Look, Learn, Create" tours and for family programs. It had a way to be divided in two. Then there was an idea that there would be a set of benches with computers, with something on them. Nobody knew exactly what would be on them or how it would be created, but there was this notion that it would be used in that way, as a walk-in.

What we realized is that the public computer lab idea wasn't going to work—and I'm not exactly answering the question, but I'll wind back around to it—because we weren't going to have security, and people couldn't be in there unless the room was staffed in some way. That's a good example of the state things were in. We had some program facilities that were planned that were certainly an upgrade from what existed, but no one had really fleshed out how it was all going to fit

together. Docents were beginning to think about the touring in the new building, trying to work out the logistics of that.

Things really weren't very far along, in some ways, at the level of specifics. But it was a good sixteen months out. In the education world, that's an awfully long ways away; you're usually working six to twelve months out. I actually felt pretty good coming in that far in advance of the opening of the building. It didn't feel that rushed, it just felt like we had a lot of work to do, and we had some time to work on it. It felt about right, even though it felt like we had a lot of work to do.

We wanted to try out a bunch of things, essentially throw a number of eggs up into the air, juggle them, and, if we drop one of them, see what happens. Then we'll do assessment at an indistinct point a few years in, and then decide if we want to keep doing those things. Most of the staff seemed to be pretty happy with that notion and just really excited about getting into the new building.

One of the last questions you asked before Peter came in was about the creating of programs. I'd mentioned label writing and the docent program. I was actually the one who was working on the audio tour, directly with Antenna.

Cándida Smith: It was the audio tour for the opening shows or the permanent collection?

03-00:05:27

Weber: We had the permanent collection only. We weren't doing changing exhibits initially.

Cándida Smith: Did you select the work that was going to be talked about in the audio tour? Or was that a collective decision?

03-00:06:29

Weber: That would have been collective, with each one of the curators. I asked them to list things they wanted in, and I made some nominations, too. Janet Bishop, from painting and sculpture, worked on it. Then we worked with Doug Nickel and Sandy Phillips on photography. Paolo Polledri was already gone. I think Inge-Lise had hired somebody to do an installation of a lot of the chairs and things that Paolo had collected, for that.

We always wanted to have the curatorial departments involved. That was true of most of the things that we did. We tried to have curators involved in the program, so that when they saw it they wouldn't be surprised and dislike it. That's such a problem at so many museums, where education retreats into its enclave and does programs, and even has its own gallery. Then curatorial looks down their noses at

education. The curators say, “You don’t know the art,” and the educators say, “You don’t know our public.” We really tried very hard not to do that.

I also insisted—in a way, maybe more than I should have—to say that our job in education is not, as a department, to present art and to curate shows. It is to decide, together with our colleagues who are curating for the collection or exhibitions, how to do education most effectively for our audiences and to advocate for that. The last thing I wanted was to have a little curatorial program of my own that was the education curatorial program because that, to me, would have been perpetuating the state of a education ghetto that I felt the whole point of this position had been to get rid of.

Cándida Smith: I’d like to talk about the daily nuts and bolts, preparing for different kinds of programming, for the problems that an audience is going to have. What is it that they need in order to get what they’re going to get out of it? That could range from Robert Ryman, who has one set of problems—

03-00:10:18

Weber: Yes, “Why are they all white? Why are the paintings white?”

Cándida Smith: I don’t know if you did Lorna Simpson, but to somebody whose work is more challenging politically.

03-00:10:32

Weber: We bought a piece, actually. I helped buy a piece by Lorna for the permanent collection.

Cándida Smith: There’s a range of challenges that exist for audiences. Then there’s also how do you present the modern classics that you have got, which might seem more accessible, but maybe aren’t, really?

03-00:10:56

Weber: So the question is, in some sense, how did we decide what to do?

Cándida Smith: I thought we could talk about shows that you were involved in as a co-curator; or we could talk about individual works that you recall, or exhibitions that you recall posing. Tough problems, one way or another.

03-00:11:26

Weber: What we did in thinking of the permanent collection, second floor, on the one hand, was to ask what are the most important objects? Then also thinking about what are the hardest objects. What questions do people have? The way I try to approach it, and I would encourage people to approach it when we’re writing and thinking about these is

take away what you know about it and think, what's the most obvious question? What's the first question that's there? It may not be the most interesting or the best question, but it's the question that you have to get around before you can get to other stuff.

We could think, for example, about a monochromatic painting. This jumps ahead a bit in the history of the museum, but when we did the "Points of Departure" shows, we had a section which was called "One Color, No Color." That came out of visitor feedback. One of the things that would come up [to the question] "What did you like least about your visit?", would be the answer: "One-color paintings." In other words, *not* "monochromatic" paintings, because that's a word you don't know unless you're a member of the mandarin class of post-war art. That's not a word that comes up. People who don't like monochromatic paintings don't call them monochromatic paintings. They call them paintings with only one color.

So for "Points of Departure" we created a section which we called "One Color, No Color," which was looking at why a serious person would make a painting with only one color. In some of them, such as the white paintings of Robert Rauschenberg, the point was that there was no color there. It wasn't that it was white, it was an attempt to get rid of color on the painting, such that it could reflect other colors across its surface in the most subtle ways.

So we would read visitor surveys to figure out what's bugging people, what they complain about, what they like, what they don't like, and use those as the basis for programming of various sorts. It's not that we did a *lot* of that data gathering, but we did a fair amount of it.

Sticking very closely to docents is another good way to find out what people don't get, because the docents are on the front line. They collectively spend more hours talking to the public than any other body of people involved with the museum, and they talk to all different kinds of publics, too. Well, one caveat: they talk to all different kinds of publics who like talking to docents.

One of the things we knew in education was that there are people who like audio guides, there are people who like extended labels, there are people who like handouts, there are people who like docent tours, and there are people who like none of the above. You can't get someone who really hates docent tours to do a docent tour because they just won't do it. If they start it, they won't stick with you and they'll be gone. You can't get somebody who hates reading labels to read labels. You want to reach them with your ideas, and you want to reach out to them in some way as an institution and convey that you care about

their understanding of the work. Which is a lot of what all educational work is doing.

Museum education is sometimes, I think, less about specific information and more about conveying to your audience that we really want you to understand this. We're not trying to hide the meaning. We're not trying to hit you over the head with how important it is. We really think it's interesting and valuable, and we'd love it if you would, too. A lot of the programs you're doing are meant to convey that, in and of itself. Sometimes putting a bench in the galleries is a way to do that, too. We want you to be comfortable here, so you'll spend more time. Hence, these seats here. You can come to the museum and if, halfway through, you're just pooped out, you can come to the Koret Visitor Education Center and you can even doze off for a little bit and nobody's going to chase you out. At least we didn't when I was here.

All of that is a way of telling people you care about their experience. All the range of programs is a way to say, well, we'll try to talk to you in a way that will make sense to you. That said, I do wish we could have done more with multiple languages. We did periodically. The cost of an effective multi-lingual approach in the Bay Area, where there's not even a majority—there's no culture in San Francisco with more than 50 percent of the people—becomes daunting when you ask, well, where do we draw the line about what languages not to do? We could talk about a Chinese contemporary art show where that was a huge, fascinating issue.

At any rate, so as we're planning for the new building, we're trying to learn how to approach these issues. Once we got here, we began doing experiments. One of the things that happened with the new technologies program is we talked to a friend of Peter's, Larry Friedlander from Stanford,. He said that the technology's going to shift all the time, so you don't want to put all your eggs in one basket. What you want to do is to learn things that you can transfer to your next program. Do a variety of different things, take what works and move on. That's one reason why we did three different programs when we launched, *Bay Area ArtFinder*, *Voices and Images of California Art*, and *Making Sense of Modern Art*.

I thought, ah-ha, well, that's a good way to think about the whole education program. Be aware that you're trying to learn methodologies and techniques with each program you do. The program may or may not need to live forever and you might want to change it, but you want to learn something with each one that you did, about something that works, something that didn't work, about how to deliver it, how to advertise it, et cetera, et cetera. I think that other staff shared this same feeling because it was the feeling in the new building: we're going to

experiment a lot and see what happens. I mentioned “Points of Departure” and “One Color, No Color” because those, too, were experiments, and those (two) shows were really one of the most exciting groups of programs that we did.

Cándida Smith: What did you learn from “One Color, No Color,” the work that you did with that show? Do you think you made any breakthroughs with viewers? If so, what’s your evidence?

03-00:18:35

Weber:

We did quite a bit of evaluation of that show. We did visitor tracking, we did about 125 surveys. We did pretty legitimate research on that show. The shows were very popular; people liked them a lot. One of the things it reinforced was that people liked them for their own reasons. There were people who went through and seemed to not have even read a single title. People would go, “What? What title?” They didn’t see them. They looked at the works one at a time and didn’t read a thing.

We had handheld computers—first use of handheld video in a museum, at least in an art museum. Some people loved those. We heard a guy at one corporate evening saying, “You have got to come over here and see what this crazy guys says about this drawing he erased.” It was the Rauschenberg [*Erased de Kooning Drawing*]. They also loved watching Chuck Close paint. Part of what we found out is just that different people are going to come to the museum for different kinds of information, different experiences. To a certain extent, you have to go with that flow and try to give them as many options as they can for engaging with the work and liking it.

I played on a soccer team in the East Bay for much of the time that I was here, about eight, nine years or so. At one point, I was talking to one of the guys on the team— I’d been playing on the team for five or six years at this point. It was not long after we had “Points of Departure” up, so it would have been about 2001, 2002 maybe. This guy’s a typical guy on our team. He was a cabinet maker or something, but he had a masters degree in sociology or anthropology from UC Berkeley. He found out what I did. He said, “Oh, that museum’s great! It’s so educational! There’s stuff all over it. I love it!” That was great. Just a guy on the soccer team, living in the East Bay, and he had seen the “Points of Departure” show and could describe a bunch of the stuff in it and really, really enjoyed it.

Cándida Smith: That was a show, you were one of the curators on that. It was you and Janet?

03-00:21:15

Weber: Janet.

Cándida Smith: Maybe you could just briefly summarize what the two of you were up to with that show. You're working in it as a curator, are you thinking about it as an educator or as a curator?

03-00:21:35

Weber: Yes, I would say. Yes—both, as an educator and a curator. That show came out of two things. On the one hand, it came out of the “010101” period. When originally we were working on “010101: Art in Technological Times,” David [Ross] got us all involved in that. I had written a position paper for the idea of the show early on. It sketched out the contemporary art show, but also using the collection with new technologies, and using this as a moment to examine “the museum in technological times.”

So we had decided as an institution early on, to do that: art in technological times, and the museum in technological times. There was a large group of five curators who worked on the contemporary, non-collection-based show. Then there were a number of curatorial meetings, led by Lori Fogarty, where we tried to talk about the other part of it. It just wasn't working and wasn't working and wasn't working, because photography was thinking about one thing and A&D was thinking about another thing.

So Lori finally comes to me and Janet, and she says, “Okay, you two just do the show. I know you can do the show. Just do it.” We had already worked together on “Making Art Histories: On the Trail of David Park,” and we had a lot of fun doing that and got along great. So we took it on with the understanding that we were going to be working very closely with Peter on it, because one of the functions of the show was to think about what a museum would be in technological times and how it would communicate with its people.

The “010101” show was, how does technology affect artists? How are they living in this new sea? How do they work in this new environment, where there's different possibilities? Where they have reached the point that the video camera is a new pencil, as John Baldessari predicted.

“Points of Departure” was the museum/collection half of the technology equation. We'd also written a big Lila Wallace grant some years back that we didn't quite get. It sketched out about five different shows, with some different kinds of possibilities and components that we might do. We took some of those ideas for the permanent

collection that we'd come up with at the time, and then refitted them and added a few more.

We knew we wanted to do a thematic presentation of the collection, and we were asking ourselves, what are some of the interesting categories that you could use to group art works? I was very interested in narrative categories and in descriptive categories and how you could make art histories that weren't based on notions of school or period or movement, but other kinds of categories—possibly categories that artists use, or categories that would draw on how artists think about their work.

Some of the themes were from visitors' ideas. The grouping, "One Color, No Color," was created really to address a specific question that we knew visitors had and to show some work that we just loved—Yves Klein paintings, Robert Rauschenberg paintings, things like that. It was a way to say, well, this is why we love them, this is why somebody would invest his or her life in making something of that nature.

I'd wanted to do a show for a long time on found objects and the tradition of the found, which is very strong in the Bay Area, both in the Beat era and later. We called that section "Found, Recycled, Repurposed." I had written on Bruce Conner and on his wonderful *Looking Glass* piece that's in the collection here. I was also aware of a series of shows that were done by Ann Ayers and other people in Southern California, also about Wallace Berman, George Herms, and the whole tradition of assemblage. "Found, Recycled, Repurposed" was a way to look at that tradition, and look at art that doesn't come *ex nihilo* out of a color tube. It really comes from an artist picking something up in the world and saying, "I can do something with that. I can add it to this." This is a long tradition in twentieth-century art, a very important tradition. It's a different way of thinking about art than a lot of the public might bring in, which is that you go into the studio, you're alone, you make something, and then you show it. This is a different engagement with the world. So we wanted to do that theme. It also gave us the chance to show Bruce Conner. The *Erased de Kooning Drawing* was in that section. There were a number of *really great* pieces in the collection it allowed us to show.

We had another thematic grouping on the grid and pose the question, why do artists like grids? There's all this work that's got grids in it. What can we do with that? We selected a number of themes like that. One on "Painting/Photography?"

So we had themes, and the idea was to use technology as much as we could to unpack the theme and the work. We knew people loved our

videos of artists; how could we put audiences right in front of the work with the video? We had these Smart Tables, we called them. Peter had made an alliance with MIT that allowed us to produce these tables. We were thinking of trying to do a video tour that would be spatially aware, place aware, as you walked up to an object. We did some other experiments with things—Peter may have talked about this—with little video cameras on glasses that would recognize the art object and then offer you the chance to learn about it. That didn't end up working. We were working with a grad student at MIT, and it just didn't end up working.

Cándida Smith: The technology wouldn't—

03-00:28:02

Weber:

It was a combination of technology and the person. It was just a little too much to pull off, but in the end MIT came through with a lot of good help.

We did two of the thematic installation of the collection, two iterations. We did a second one after Madeleine [Grynsztejn] came. Madeleine, Janet, and I worked on that one. They were both really wonderful and really interesting, and some of the most intriguing experiments that we did.

Janet and I were really pumped when the first one opened because this was five years or so after we opened, and it was amazing to realize that we could do such intriguing thematic explorations out of the collection—many of the things had not been in our collection when we opened—it was incredible. We did call in a number of partial gifts. We used a magnificent Cy Twombly painting that was also co-owned with the Fisher Collection. That was in a section on line. We had the new Eva Hesse piece in a grid section, and a fantastic Sol LeWitt and Chuck Close.

The shows were just beautiful. They just looked great! There was a lot of complaining in the press around this time—Dave Hickey and Roberta Smith—complaining about these educationally narrative-driven shows that are too didactic, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. “Points of Departure” was, in some sense, both our participation in that debate and our answer to it, which was that you may be thinking educationally, but you're curating visually. You *can* marry the two. You *can* make a beautiful, exquisite show visually, *and* you can have that theme, that narrative. You can respect the intelligence of the art, and you can respect the intelligence of the public if you just work at it hard enough.

Cándida Smith: Were you designing these shows so that your whole staff would be participating in the thinking through of what the show was going to do? Or was it your personal expression? Along with Janet's, of course.

03-00:39:38

Weber: There was dialog, probably more with Peter and his team than anybody else, because we were constructing those themes all along. I do remember talking about the themes with others periodically. And definitely, as I'm doing the curating, I am thinking about, how are we going to tour this with the docents. How would we walk through with somebody from the general public? How would it work with teen programs? How is it going to play out in all these different kinds of scenarios? What speaking program can we have with it? So part of that is a bit my curatorial expression. Part of that curatorial expression is drawing on what I have learned from all the programs that we have done and thinking about it on behalf of others.

Cándida Smith: So you did a number of, I guess I could call them, experimental shows.

03-00:31:48

Weber: They were. They were experiments.

Cándida Smith: But then starting with Alexander Calder in 1998, you had a number of blockbuster shows. How did you feel about the problems posed by doing a blockbuster show, where the whole point is people want to see it because they think they know they like the artist. I don't know if you were still here when the Marc Chagall—

03-00:32:24

Weber: I was here for Chagall. You bet.

Cándida Smith: That might be another example of the particular challenge for the education department with blockbuster shows. Maybe we could start with the Calder because that's this institution's first.

03-00:32:47

Weber: I would say the first blockbuster was probably the show with a lot of Frida Kahlo, the Gilman Collection, I think. The Calder was bigger.

They were an interesting challenge. A lot of it was logistics, going to a lot of meetings about how are we going to handle these things? People coming through, and thinking about the school tours are going to fill up, and how can we get more school tours in? How can we feed more demand? I would work with Julie Charles in the docent program a lot on those, about the logistical challenges that arise when you have an excess of desire for tours, visits.

But in some ways, the museum was almost bizarrely popular from the day we opened it. So the blockbusters were more of that, but it wasn't so much more that it seemed totally out of whack with the museum's whole history at its new location. I remember one of the first things I did when I came here was a meeting about marketing that Jack Lane was at. He said, "Right now, we have 200,000 to 250,000 visitors a year, in the old building. We're projecting 400,000 visitors in the new building." He looks around the room and says, "Does anybody know if we're going to make it? Why do we think we're going to make it? Why do we think we're going to get 400,000? That's twice as many as we usually get. Are we really going to make it? How do we know it's not going to be, what, 300,000?" Then we ended up with as many 700,000; we way overshot 400,000. We were used to lines and crowds and people wanting to get in. The museum being full and being noisy was not at all unusual.

The Calder was like that. We knew it'd be very popular. It's funny because I think in some ways, people on the staff weren't as enthusiastic about a lot of those shows as we were planning for them, but once the work was here, the thing that it taught us was that any artist who's that beloved, there's a reason for it. He's really good. I think people just fell in love with early Calder, in particular. I know I did. I had a jaded, "Calder, so what?" attitude. Looking at the work and understanding more about his time really turned me into a total fan. The work is terrific. I had a similar attitude towards Chagall: "Not my favorite artist." But in the end I thought it was a great show for us to do. I think it's a good thing to do a show that you're going to have a lot of people love. The question is, okay, what can you learn from that show? How can you find pieces of that biography and works that explain to you why the work became as popular as it did? Because it's just not an accident that the work became popular. I enjoyed them, really.

Cándida Smith: How much of the educational material comes along with the show, whoever organizes it?

03-00:36:14

Weber: A few things came with Calder, and we had movies, so there was a lot to coast on. That's okay, too. Do you have dates on the Calder show, when that was?

Cándida Smith: That was 1998.

03-00:36:39

Weber: '98, this [the Koret Visitor Education Center] didn't exist then. We would have been using the theater downstairs. Ditto for the Gilman show and the others, the smaller education center. Once the Koret

Visitor Education Center opened, then we had the additional interesting challenge of thinking about what we would do here and how we would use the small theater in some of the programs we were creating. I don't have memories particularly pro or con for the blockbusters. It was always great when they worked, though, because you knew you needed the attendance. The last thing you wanted to do was do a blockbuster and then not get the audience.

Cándida Smith: To what degree the narrative, or the narratives, that you're trying to tell, are you drawing them from the existing literature? Are you rethinking the narratives yourself? How do you pick and choose from the content, the universal content that's out there, particularly for any well-known artist?

03-00:37:58

Weber:

In some ways, this goes back to Charles Rhyne: "Look at the work." It's about getting people to look at the work. It's not about turning them into art historians, it's not about giving them an overview of the literature. It's about having them standing in front of the object and having a better experience of the object and a deeper experience, and maybe seeing something and relating it to something else that they can see over here that makes them go, "Ah! Now I get it!" It's about an equation of "zero plus zero plus zero." You're standing in front of something, not getting it; you're standing in front of something, not getting it; you're standing in front of something, not getting it, i.e. understanding or perceiving "zero." But something is still going on in your brain all the same, and if you keep looking, those zeros eventually may add up to ten! Because your brain is perceiving patterns in the work and seeing things. It's processing things that you don't even know it's processing. At a certain point, your brain can see the pattern, and *then* the thing makes sense. I think this is true visually, I think it's true in almost any area of activity. The brain is a pattern-seeking organ. Our consciousness has access to only a certain amount of that activity.

A lot of these programs, whether it's for the blockbusters or others, are about getting people to spend more time with their eyes in front of the work so that they just can see more, so that the brain and eye can do their work. That was part of the educational philosophy. It's a bit like the Hippocratic Oath or something: Do no harm. Whatever else you do, don't scare people away. Whatever else you do, make their visit a good enough one such that they will want to come back and maybe bring a friend. Because that will mean they spend more time looking at art. The more time they spend looking at art, the more chances they have to accumulate pieces of experience that allow it to be knit together into some meaningful thing.

If you have brought people to that point where they want to do that—come back again and again and look more—where they’re giving you the benefit of a doubt, giving the art the benefit of a doubt, then the chance that they’re learning something increases exponentially. If, as an institution, you scare them away, you discourage them, you don’t allow them the luxury to go at their own pace, you don’t give them the opportunity to use the resources that they’re most interested in using, whether it’s reading, whether it’s tour, audio, docent, what have you, then they’re that much less likely to come back, and you have defeated your purpose. A lot of the philosophy is about trying to make sure that you don’t scare people off and that they do know that you want them to care. I’d say with the blockbusters, it’s the same thing.

Cándida Smith: Were you still here when the Richard Tuttle show was put up?

03-00:42:00

Weber:

I was gone. We were working on it when I left, but I was gone. It opened maybe more than a year after I left. I was involved with initial planning, but not a whole lot. He’s a classic case of an artist who’s very hard to understand. That’s a good case of an artist— I love the work, but it’s like going down the rapids almost without an oar, in your kayak. It’s tough work.

Cándida Smith: What about curatorial perceptions of what education is about and what it should be doing? Did the curators you worked with more or less share the perspectives that you have just been articulating? Or did you have to educate them, as well?

03-00:43:09

Weber:

I’m not totally sure. I don’t know. I don’t think they would have been able to articulate, for example, what I was just saying, because they just weren’t thinking about it. I got the impression they liked most of the things that we did, that the department did when I was here, and I enjoyed that respect. There were sometimes complaints about this thing or that thing. Bob [Riley] used to fulminate about various things at times. Gary [Garrels] was a sociologist, so he shared a perspective of wanting to embrace the public, but he also was very aware of the artist’s perspective and the need to be very hands-off at times. Madeleine [Grynsztejn] very much liked to control everything. We worked well together, but she could be very challenging. Some of it had to do less with people’s differences in philosophies than just personalities, quite frankly.

There were occasional times when my colleagues would complain about things, or I would hear complaints about docents sometimes. “Oh, they’re giving bad information out.”

But my attitude was in part that people forget. They only remember 7 percent of what you tell them; but they remember 80 percent of what they say. That's an education nugget. If you can get them to say something, their likelihood of remembering their experience or remembering the work increases tremendously. Whereas if you just jabber at them, they won't remember most of that. So you shouldn't be too worried about that, although it's very hard to get a curator not to worry about misinformation. And in some sense, I agree. The information should be correct: "it wasn't surrealism, it was dada." But at the end of the day, it's not a crime; it's not even a misdemeanor. It's just a hiccup, so get over it.

Cándida Smith: Well, you don't have art history graduate students doing the docent tours, like they do in museums in France.

03-00:46:52

Weber: Bob was probably the grouchiest one. But that was just Bob.

Cándida Smith: New media does, I would imagine, pose a whole set of special problems, because you have to convince somebody that it's worth their while to spend the ten minutes or the half an hour or the three hours to take in a whole piece, which is going to be, probably, a tough task to achieve.

03-00:47:21

Weber: Can be. People are running around. It's hard to get people to slow down. I think that's also the artist's job. If the artist makes a good piece, I think people watch it. People had no trouble sitting through *Video Quartet*, by Christian Marclay. No problem at all. I don't think people had very much trouble spending enough time with Pipilotti Rist, when we did that show.

I think one of the brilliant things that was true of the Bill Viola show was that even with, whatever it was, fourteen or sixteen video installations here, he really figured out a way to give as much time to the work as you had and still have the work exist. You didn't need to see all of it ever, hardly. He had a pretty good, for a while, at least, perfect pitch for how to do video installation works. That was a great show to be part of, too, the Bill Viola show.

Cándida Smith: Were there approaches you tried that didn't work, and didn't work in a way that allowed you to learn something positive from the experience?

03-00:48:44

Weber: The *Looking at Art with Artists* classes that we did. We had a whole slew of them, with a little mini-catalog of them. They worked great for the audience that got to participate in them, but we had to turn away too many people, and we could only get the artists to do them once or

maybe twice. What I learned from that, though, is that if your institution is sufficiently big and you're creating programs that are sufficiently small, that are very resource intensive, in terms of time and money, you may be moving off mission. What people liked was the artist's voice and hearing from the artist and being able to see through the artist's eyes. Because in those classes the artist would go into the collection and look at other artists' work and talk about it.

What the success and limitations of those classes did was to make me put renewed emphasis on the video interviews that we were doing through the new technologies and bringing the artist's voice to people in that way. Pushing, in a sense, with Peter and his crew and saying, we don't have to have a huge, giant program. If we have great artist videos, we don't want to bury them too deep in, say, *Making Sense of Modern Art*, the interactive program. We want to find ways to get people directly to those voices, because this is one of the things our visitors are telling us means the most to them. They're much more interested in what artists say, for example, than what curators say. An artist talk almost always gets a good audience. Curator's talk, not so much. Patterson Sims once said to me, even before I came to San Francisco when he was at the Seattle Art Museum as chief curator there, "Even the most famous curators are not even nearly as famous as a second-rate artist." It's true.

We also tried to make small programs with docents, linking up a docent tour of a single work in a gallery with a video of the artist talking here in the education center; that was another way we responded to the problematic aspect of "Looking at Art with Artists."

Cándida Smith: Let's go back to the audio tours. What the records say is that they started in 1995, so with the opening of the new building. So this institution didn't have an institutional history of doing audio tours. Had you done any work previously with audio tours?

03-00:51:38

Weber: No. None.

Cándida Smith: So you had to figure out what you liked and the approach you wanted them to have. So how did you go about that? What did you learn, and what did you decide?

03-00:51:51

Weber: I basically thought about two companies, Acoustiguide and Antenna Audio. At the time, Acoustiguide was the big guy on the block, by far dominant, and Antenna was the interesting local option. I really didn't think about it for very long. I heard about Antenna and I met with them, and I heard about their approach. I listened to some of their

work and I listened to some of the work that Acoustiguide had done. I decided I liked Antenna's approach a lot more. The fact that Antenna interviewed people and then collaged things together made perfect sense to me, and that they didn't script things, and that they weren't particularly relying on celebrity narrators or that kind of thing. Also, I perceived of them as an artist-based operation that was based in this really interesting theater company, taking that skill and transferring it to a museum environment.

We liked working with them a lot. They were smart and fun and easy to work with. Their approach to tours was based on an artist's way of thinking about them.

Cándida Smith: Now, you did have Spanish-language tours in 2002. Was that a difficult thing to get accomplished?

03-00:53:34

Weber:

Actually, the person who was doing our audio tours was of Mexican American background and spoke fluent Spanish. Deborah Lawrence was her name. Her mother is Mexican and her father was from the States, and so she had grown up with both languages. We had hired Deborah in about 1996 or so to do a number of things, including the audio tours. Actually, it was fun for her to get to do that.

The bigger challenge was when we were working on the "New Chinese Art" show, we were thinking of doing an audio tour. We kept meeting with people in Chinatown, the Chinese Culture Center. We thought we could only afford to do one language, so Mandarin or Cantonese. They kept going back and forth. People would say, "Well, it should really be Mandarin, because that's the language of the educated Chinese and everybody speaks Mandarin." But actually, most of the people in San Francisco speak Cantonese. It's their native language. We just didn't have budget for both.

Finally I said, "Well, what we're going to do is we're going to do a written translation of the tour into Chinese, because the characters are the same and so everybody can read it." That was a bit of a copout in a way, but it was really interesting hitting your head against the wall of economics, and even with community advisors, not always being able to come up with a consensus that you feel comfortable with moving forward with.

Cándida Smith: In '96, there's *SFMOMA Matches*, you start working with schools. Maybe you had been working with high schools previously, but it's—

03-00:55:57

Weber:

We had. We actually began working with Balboa High School while we were still in the old building. We wanted to create an alliance with

one school. Part of Eduardo's [Eduardo Piñeda] philosophy was to give life-changing experience to kids, rather than the "fairy dust, sprinkle a little bit on the kids and hope something happens" approach. So we had a long-term alliance with Balboa that we'd been doing, and we absorbed them into the *Matches* program.

Matches came very much out of Kamala Harris's advocacy and interest in a mentoring program. She really forced the museum to do that program. We ended up doing it and feeling that it was a good program. My concern had been, actually, did we have a young professional membership that would actually share Kamala's interest in this, who would want to do this and make it a serious thing, and make it more than a token activity? We did. It took a while. It wasn't always easy. She worked very hard on it in the early years, and then less so as her political career really began to take off. She's a very brilliant and forceful personality and she got a lot of people involved. I think it was a good program. It was a very hard program to do, and not a beloved program of the staff because of the logistical difficulties of doing it and executing it effectively and making it work out well. But it was a good program.

George Lee, a teacher from Balboa who worked with us on *Matches*, said something once that I have never forgotten—that the kids would come in and they're from families that have, in many cases, no contact with the Caucasian community. Not all, but many of the young professionals working on this mentoring program were white. He was saying it was an amazing thing for some of these kids because the only white people they knew might be shopkeepers, who'd be very suspicious of them when they walked into the store and be watching them all the time. Or they might be police or teachers. In other words, authority figures. These are high school kids. They have never had a white person just be nice to them, given the community that they live in, ask them a question and listen to the answer and talk to them. That was amazing to hear, and discouraging.... So it was a challenging program.

We also had another teen after-school program that Tana Johnson was working on, too, that was an art-making program. The point was that we offered different levels of activity. As a teenager you might have a teen tour with your school, you might be in *Matches*, and then you might go from *Matches* to the after-school program and spend even more time with us. We would try to think of it in this way.

I thought of a lot of our programming in this way, that there were levels for somebody who comes only once, then maybe they might become a member or be involved in a program, and on and on and on, and maybe someday end up working here. We wanted to have

programs—whether they were adult programs, school programs, kids programs, family programs—that would allow increasing levels of engagement. So *Matches* was seen as a middle level of engagement. I remember one *Matches* kid from Oakland, he started coming to it when he was about, I don't know, under five feet high; and by the time he'd finished, he was taller than I was. It was pretty cool to watch that happen. I'd love to know what that kid is doing today.

Cándida Smith: From a bird's eye view, it would seem like this is a museum that's not terribly interested in reaching out to the broad range of diverse communities that exist in the Bay Area, except for your department, the department you were leading. So it would seem like it was a set of anomalous programs, that you were the "diversity" person, in some ways.

03-01:01:07

Weber:

In some ways, you could say that. That was frustrating. I didn't love that. On the other hand, I felt like at least somebody was doing it. We liked doing it. We got a lot of satisfaction out of seeing a more diverse community in the museum. I also felt the Bay Area was getting more diverse all the time and the communities were getting more educated all the time. The difference between the audience you saw in the old building or in the very first days of the new building and the audience you saw by the time I left was notable. Notably younger and notably more diverse. I felt like we were on the right side of history as far as that went.

Contemporary and modern art museums follow the artists. The artists were getting more diverse all the time. So I felt, the museum will follow; it's just going to take a while. The collecting class is far older, very much less diverse; the curating class a little younger than them, but on average, older than the artists, a lot of the artists, folks who were between twenty-two and thirty-five, just out of college. In that sense, too, a lot of the issues have less to do with ethnicity in particular than with income or with education, and with how evenly distributed is an educational privilege that is probably tied more closely with modern-art-museum going than any other single form of identity. More so than race, more so than gender or sexual orientation. Economics, class in the sense of economics, is obviously important and not unallied to education in terms of determining who comes to museums today, but if you could pick one factor, it would be some form of education, sociologically.

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Cándida Smith: This does, in very intense ways, come back to who you were at La Jolla and Portland, and the way in which you conceptualized what art

should be. I'm wondering, were the voices within the museum saying, well, maybe we should be doing some programs that reach out to different kinds of communities? Even if what you're talking about is reaching out to the educated people in particular communities.

04-00:00:43

Weber:

Which wasn't only what we did, but in terms of your adult audience, that was the one place to find people. With kids, you could go to families. One of the things that Eduardo would always say is, if you want to get the Latino community, you have got to go to the family because it's all about family. So schools are fine, but in the end, you're only going to get so far. One of the biggest markers of whether people visit museums as adults is whether they went with their families. I doubt there's any rigorous statistics that really apply an effective matrix of class and ethnicity to that, or at least I just don't think there are any. To make a study like that with a control group would be very, very hard.

Cándida Smith: You'd have to factor in upward-mobility issues.

04-00:01:36

Weber:

Someone should do that, but I don't think anybody's done it yet. You get an almost self-fulfilling prophecy there, in some ways.

Cándida Smith: Within the museum, was there inherent interest in African American art, Latin American or Latino art, Asian? What kinds of shows might have or did come out of discussions?

04-00:02:33

Weber:

The painting and sculpture department thought the most about the diversity of the shows that they were doing, or talked about it more and in different ways. I know Gary definitely, absolutely thought about it. If you looked at his track record, looking at shows that he'd done, it did absolutely encompass Latin America, as well as looking at African American artists. One of the shows he'd done at the Walker [Art Center] just before coming was the Hélio Oiticica show, from Brazil. He brought a certain commitment to that with him, which I always valued. Other curators, I think, thought about it a bit, but maybe a little less. They didn't worry about it as much. They just weren't as concerned with it. They were following what they wanted to curate and not wanting to have to engage in bean counting, and they could at times be somewhat dismissive of that. Jack certainly could be. One of the tough things about working with Jack, in a way, was just his impulse to think about that less, and a tendency to be somewhat dismissive of claims on the public space of the museum, on behalf of different communities. So as much I liked working for him, that was not one of the things that I liked about working for him. There were

times when he would cave to political reality and say, “Okay, we have got to have certain amount of this.”

But one of the reasons people gravitate towards education work is they’re interested in other people, and that’s a primary thing that they’re interested in. They want to talk to other people. They’re the first ones who will talk at a meeting. Or the curator will. The curator’s talking first because he wants to control the discourse. [The educators] are talking because they want to be involved in it and involve everybody in it. The preparators don’t want to talk. They just want to put the art up.

So certainly, the education department was always very happy whenever we saw signs that the collection was getting more diverse. When we did shows that were going to allow us to look at other points of view, it was always great and people just jumped right in. It’s not that we didn’t like *all* the shows in some way, but we always wanted SFMOMA to be on the side of the angels in this. Honestly, there were times when we felt like we (the museum as a whole) weren’t doing a very good job, diversity-wise, and then there were some other days when we felt like, hey, we’re getting a little bit of traction. Maybe not as much as we’d like, but we’re getting closer to reflecting the society that we live in, and that’s great. It’s tough in the Bay Area, too, because the Bay Area is so, so diverse. There are times when you can forget, if you spend most of your life here, that many other parts of the United States are much less diverse. You get really impatient when you’re here, if the part of the Bay Area you’re inhabiting professionally reflects maybe more the whole country than your immediate neighborhood.

Cándida Smith: There have been plenty of studies about this—most museum goers are, indeed, college-educated people; the more people go to college, the more people go to museums. It’s not just here, in other countries, as well. So was it, then, a task of your department to think about, well, how do we reach the people who might have an education deficit, as far as an art museum is concerned? Is it your task to try to interest them in what the museum is doing, or to explain it to them? Or are you thinking then, well, maybe the average college B.A. is our clientele, and that’s who I should be speaking to.

04-00:07:29

Weber:

The way that I thought about it as head of the department was that we wanted to give as many people as possible the opportunity to turn us down, or take us up on the offer to explore modern and contemporary art, new art. We wanted it not to be a given fact of your economic and ethnic destiny that you would never consider coming to a modern art museum. So we were doing what we could do through school and

family programs to widen the opportunity there for people—any and all people—to have the idea as a kid that art could be interesting, art from my time could be interesting, modern art from my own culture could be something that I want to participate in, whether as an artist or a teacher or just a viewer.

If they had that opportunity and decided they weren't that interested, I also thought that was fine. I do want them to at least have had the chance to decide for themselves. That's how I would think about it. What they want to do, though, as adults is really what they want to do as adults. There is some degree of privilege about having time, energy, and money to come to a museum. Money-wise, though, museums are not as expensive as a lot of things people do with discretionary income. The economic barrier is a real one, but it can be gotten around. The barrier is more a cultural one that combines questions of class, privilege, and education, more than just sheer economics. There's always a free day, for example. And we made it a point to do special programming on free days that would try to introduce people to the museum. If people would come on free day, we would really try to engage them. I thought about it in those terms.

Cándida Smith: There have been a number of initiatives that you were involved with. Like *Making Sense of Modern Art*, which had started before you got here? No. You started it.

04-00:10:29

Weber:

That was definitely something that came out of the IET [Interactive Educational Technologies] program that Peter [Samis] started. That program didn't exist before I came, before the new building. Peter really did the program, but I gave him the opportunity to do the program by hunting for the money, by creating that job, and by conceptualizing what that job was going to be. He really did, with his team, the work to create *Making Sense of Modern Art*. I was involved in it more in some ways than other ways, coming up with some of the language for it, some of the names for things. Sort of pushing and nudging. I found the money to save the program when the board wanted to kill it. They wanted to shut it down when Peter was on sabbatical. I spearheaded and personally wrote the IMLS [Institute of Museum and Library Services] grant that ultimately kept it going, a half-million dollars.

But *Making Sense of Modern Art* definitely emerged from the era of the creating of the new building. It was one of the programs we launched on opening day in the new building. We were foolish: we wanted not one program, but three programs: *Making Sense of Modern Art*; *Bay Area ArtFinder*; and *Voices and Images of California Art*. Peter even had a T-shirt made that had them all on it. I still have the T-

shirt, and I wear it when I'm gardening. It was crazy to do that many things all at once. Larry Friedlander (from Stanford University) was the one who said, "Don't put all your eggs in one basket. Do different programs, and you'll learn different things from each one."

Jack really loved that stuff. Jack was literally playing video games at night. He was really into computers. He would come by, and every once in a while, he'd say, "Are we going to have *product*?" That was the word he'd use. I said, "Jack, don't worry. We'll have product for opening day."

Cándida Smith: Your NEH [National Endowment for the Humanities] Challenge Grant for digital initiatives, 2001.

04-00:13:18

Weber: That was a big one, but it was not really for us.

Cándida Smith: Then there's a Getty [Foundation] grant.

04-00:13:36

Weber: We had so many grants. It's hard to keep them all straight. The NEH one was a grant that the education programs were a poster child for, but we didn't really get any money. It was really money for collections information and access. SFMOMA wanted to do a lot of work on the database for the collection, on collections records, access, and a lot of things that were more back end for *Making Sense of Modern Art*. So *Making Sense of Modern Art* was a part of that grant, in a way. The assumption in the budget for that grant was that we would find other ways to fund that component of work that needed to be done. My department didn't get any new money, we just had to keep doing what we were doing. Peter [Samis] and Jill [Sterrett] really wrote that grant, more than I did. They have more details at the tip of their tongue, as to what that was. There may have been some teacher programs that were linked to that, too. The Getty grant, on the other hand, went into *Making Sense of Modern Art*. That was a chunk of money (\$100,000?). A lot of those things, though, the programs were up and running, and they were all feeding into making bits and pieces of them.

Cándida Smith: Then, of course, there was the big effort to create the Koret Visitor Education Center. Where we're sitting now is not where the education program was domiciled.

04-00:15:22

Weber: That's a long story.... We were on the first floor, where the store is. The store hooks around. It's on Third Street, and then it goes basically up Minna. That area where it goes up Minna, not the entire area, but if you trace the area on Third and just went straight back and stopped,

that's where the store stopped; the original education center went down the Minna side of the building from there.

Irma [Zigas], the head of the store, had made a comment in an interview about the store thinking about expanding it into the education center. Being a reasonably calm person most of the time, although not all the time, I didn't hit the ceiling. I did ask a few sharp questions to whomever, I don't know. I remember Steve Oliver, president of the board, more or less saying, "Yes, we are thinking about doing that, but what we want you to do is to write an architectural program that would make it worth losing that space and make it worth losing the daylight there."

I had always said one of the great things about the commitment to education the new museum showed was that we had daylight and that we weren't in the basement. Every other education center in the world was in the basement. The Cantor Center at the [Solomon R.] Guggenheim [Museum], the Kraft Education Center at the Art Institute of Chicago, they were all in the basement. We weren't in the basement, so whatever anybody wants to say about Jack and his commitment to education, damn it, he didn't put us in the basement. We got good space. We got daylight, right off the atrium.

So I went back to the education staff and I said, "Well, let's ask for everything we ever wanted and write a program we want enough to do *this*. If they actually could deliver that to us, it would be worth going." We knew by then that the first-floor space, as nice as it was when we opened, had a lot of deficits. It had light, but it wasn't great. So we wrote this great architectural program: it was going to be 7,000 square feet, and what we had at the time was maybe 2,400 square feet. I thought, wow, they'll never do that. But basically, the board said, okay, well, let's see if we can do this.

The first question was, where would we put it? The board was talking about putting it in the basement.

Lori Fogarty said, "We haven't really talked to anybody else about this. Shouldn't we be talking to some experts about whether we're thinking about it in the right way?" She was thinking, well, how do I know that John and his crew have thought of everything that needs to be thought of? Shouldn't we do some due diligence? I said, "Fine. Great. Let's do a charrette." I'd taught in an architecture school, and my wife is an architectural historian, so thinking about architecture and plans, building footprints, etc., is not a hard thing for me to do, and enjoyable. I said, "Let's get some architects in, let's get a couple of education directors from other places in, and spend a whole day looking at the

program, thinking about where we think we want to put it, down in the basement, and what that's going to mean."

At the time, we were thinking about using the parking garage as the new education space. I was going to be the most hated person in the museum, because I would have been the one who basically meant that nobody got parking in the building because we were going to take over the whole parking garage for this big education center at the end of a long hall, far away from everything. For the charrette we invited folks in from the Art Institute of Chicago, Connie Wolf from the Jewish Museum, and some others. Several architects from around town came in. One of them was Cathy Simon, a very smart architect who Chuck Collins knew. Then architects who were going to work on it, supposedly, were from HOK [Hellmuth, Obata + Kassabaum] and had taken it up to this certain point. At one point, Cathy Simon says, "You're calling it the education center. But you're not putting it in the *center*. You're putting it as far away as you could possibly put it from the center." That was an "ah-ha moment."

Everybody in the room, all the educators were all saying, well, if you do it this way that HOK is talking about, it's going to be a fine facility, but you're not going to reach your regular walk-in audience. You're going to reach people for whom your programs are an end destination. If you care about your big audience, your everyday audience, your walk-in viewer, families, whoever they are, adults, you're not going to get to most of that audience if you put it down there in the basement. You're only going to get the people who are going to come in to a specific program, because the center will be too far away.

So everybody's thinking about this. The HOK architects have totally gone down in flames by saying, well, at the end of the day, architecture can only do so much. There's a lot of issues that we can't really solve. We on the education staff had already been very concerned that they didn't have enough vision to do a good job on the new center, and they just completely defeated themselves.

We began looking for a different architect and settled on Marsha Maytum and Leddy Maytum Stacy. They were recommended highly by a number of people, Bonnie Pitman among others.

We got the second floor site because of Art Gensler, an architect and trustee. He was apparently thinking, well, we're talking about moving staff offsite already. We're going to get rid of our parking, blast a new grand stairway into the atrium to bring audiences downstairs. It's going to cost \$7 million, a ton of money, and totally disrupt the atrium for months. That was going to be huge, and it was going to cost a ton.... Gensler said, "What about just clearing out the second floor and

putting education spaces there? You'll move a few more staff offsite, but you already have staff all over the place offsite. It's going to cost you millions of dollars less than going downstairs. "

Lori told me about this idea. We were on the way to some meeting or something. She says, "John, I know I shouldn't even tell you this, but Art Gensler came up with this idea the other day about having the education center on the second floor." I just heard that and thought, "Ah-ha! Wow! That would be so great!"

David [Ross] was still here at the time. At one point we were at a meeting with all the trustees who worked on real estate and architecture issues, and David's there, to try to decide where to put the education center. We were talking about spending a lot of money on it, wherever it goes. A lot more money if it goes downstairs. I was saying, "Okay, well, I'm a team player. I think we can make it work wherever we go. Certainly, to have those facilities downstairs would be great. That stairway, I think, would get people down. Maybe we could commission some art that makes people want to go down there, like the Chicago airport thing or something. We're talking about making a major investment in our audiences with this education center. The education center's about the audience's understanding, conveying that to people, wanting everybody to come and everybody to benefit from that. We're telling, also our funders that we care about our audience's experience and we want to invest in them. We want foundations and donors to invest in them, too, and invest in their understanding and their commitment to this great collection that we have been creating." I'm laying it on pretty thick here. "So let's imagine a scenario where we're going for a million-dollar grant with a foundation program officer and a couple of the foundation's trustees. We have just been telling them how much we love education. Then we go down and we walk in the basement and we walk down this long hallway, and then we walk into these rooms with no natural light, far away from the collection. Now let's imagine another scenario where we walk past the *Femme au chapeau* in the permanent collection, and we can see the education center right from there. We just walk right in. In which scenario do we get the grant?"

I could see David thinking, turning this scenario over in his head, knowing we get the money in the second scenario. I thought, "I have got it. We're going to be upstairs." Because putting the center here, close to the public and close to the art, is the best decision. It's going to work better, it's going to cost less money. We can build a great center. It's what we're going to do.

It's what we did. The trustees understood it, and David understood it. If we're going to do this, let's just do it right and put it where it needs to be.

Cándida Smith: This was all office space?

04-00:25:12

Weber: 100 percent. Development was over there, education was there, HR was there. There were bathrooms in the middle.

Cándida Smith: You had your office up here.

04-00:25:31

Weber: I was in the far corner, right back there. We lost a lot of offices. Peter had an office; I had an office; Gail Indvik, public programs, had an office; the docent coordinator had an office; Eduardo had an office. When we moved over, one of the things we gave up is that I was the only one who still had an office; everybody else had cubicles after that. Of course, we didn't know that we were only going to get cubicles, but we gave up quite a bit.

We had a *very* experienced and very smart staff when we were designing the center. We worked really closely with Marsha Maytum, Leddy Maytum Stacy. It was very much a collective set of decisions about how to use the spaces, how to make them, how to create enough flexibility.

We also brought in some outside people to give us advice on that, too. They noted that we didn't have enough square footage to have a room for every single program. You can't think of it in terms of spatial zoning—here's the zone where the teen program is, here's the zone where the docent program is. You have to think about it in calendar terms and what times of the day, week, month do certain audiences need to be there. There's certain times when adults are mostly there; there's certain times when there are no families in the museum; there's certain times when you're going to have a certain public program. So think about your spaces as multifunctional, that can be reconfigured according to that temporal flow of your programming since you can't dedicate them.

That was very smart. Kristina Hooper Woolsey was the one who said that, a friend of Peter's. And now a friend of mine, too, but who I didn't really know that well at the time. Larry Friedlander came in and had some good advice for us.

But really, the staff as a whole thought a lot about it and worked with the plan. Marsha and her colleague Tom had some great ideas for ways to do things with projection and room divider screens. They had the

idea of the wall-door that moves up and down to divide the central classroom and Learning Lounge. During the Richter show, at the end of the run of the show, we had 100 to 125 people sitting out here every single day to see the film where he makes those big squeegee paintings, and having that moveable wall allowed that kind of program to happen easily.

So there are times when that functionality's just been incredibly useful. We'd have *Matches* going full steam in the back, and we'd have the general public out here, not worrying about what's going on. It's worked out really great. There's really not much we would change. I worried about the sound and people coming in and down, but the acoustics people said, "Don't worry; it'll stay quiet." They were right. It's no problem.

Cándida Smith: Could you review the different administrative periods during your stay here, the character of leadership, the character of interaction. You have talked somewhat about Jack [Lane], a little bit. But one of the things that's been repeated over and over again is that really, at the time that you all moved into the new building, his ability to function as an effective director was already sufficiently undermined that he wasn't able to give the leadership that he had previously. So for you, did things change in your relationship with the director after the move?

04-00:29:37

Weber: Not really. Those sorts of issues related, to a certain extent, to the board's willfulness, and Jack had hired a set of very strong curators, who had their own ideas. That was actually something I liked about him. He didn't meddle in the education programs at all, which is why I liked working for him. Also you pretty much knew where he stood on things. He didn't try to pretend that he liked something if he didn't like it. You knew what he didn't like. He was actually very easy to work for, for me. Things functioned economically.

Cándida Smith: Your budget was adequate for what you wanted to do?

04-00:30:30

Weber: Yes. He even, at a certain point, said, "I think you need more help," maybe a half year, a year after we opened. He was basically saying, "John, Peter, you guys are doing a great job, but I don't think there's enough of you." So we hired Deborah Lawrence, in '96, I think.

Cándida Smith: That's nice.

04-00:30:54

Weber: No kidding. Like I say, he was supportive.

Cándida Smith: Did you have much interaction with the board? You as the director of education or curator for education.

04-00:31:07

Weber: There were a number of board people who were on the education committee. It was quite a powerful committee. It became more powerful the longer we existed. Trustees on it included Helen Schwab, Doris Fisher, Judy Webb, with Chuck Collins as the chair...it was a strong committee, with more than one generation of trustee participation.

It's always a challenge keeping those committees busy, trying to figure out what to do, what they want to do. I was trying to get them to move more towards advocacy and fundraising. One or two people left around that time. They said, "Well, that's not what I want to do, so no hard feelings, but I'm going to leave." That was okay.

In terms of education and the committee, Jack functioned in the background in a lot of ways. I know at a certain point, he felt like the board stopped listening to him. He told that to me himself at one point. This is after he had been away for some time. The board was known as very, very willful and hard on directors.

Cándida Smith: That's in its history from the beginning.

04-00:32:44

Weber: But on the other hand, personally, I don't feel that Jack ever got enough credit for making the new building happen and getting it built. I always felt like they should name something after him here, maybe the conference room right next to the director's office.

Cándida Smith: Acquisitions then kicks in, particularly after you move to the new building. Were the new acquisitions discussed in curatorial meetings? Did you have an input into the priorities that were set?

04-00:35:21

Weber: I remember discussions about Eva Hesse, and a bit later on, what are we going to buy with the money from the Claude Monet [sale]. What can you possibly buy that won't enrage people? What about a great [Mark] Rothko? In the case of Lorna Simpson, I knew her and had shown her, so I worked on that acquisition personally. So there were some times like that, where I was involved.

That said, I should say one of the reasons I took my job as education curator is that chasing after art to buy was never what I was really too interested in. I didn't want to have to think about that and try to decide whether it was going to be worth \$50,000 or \$80,000 or \$100,000 or \$150,000. It just wasn't what I was interested in. I really liked working

with colleagues who brought in great accessions that were fun to have here. I thought Gary brought in great pieces, and Sandy [Phillips] was always bringing in wonderful photographs. I thought Madeleine made brilliant accessions. I thought the string of post-minimalist works that she brought in were simply stunning. The [Robert] Smithson and the [Gordon] Matta-Clark. It was incredible, to get those pieces.

Cándida Smith: So was it different when David [Ross] became director? How did things change for you?

04-00:37:28

Weber: Whiplash. Every time we got a new director was whiplash. And Neal [Benzra] is as different from David as anyone could be.

Cándida Smith: Did things change for the education department, in terms of the support you thought you were getting, or in terms of budget?

04-00:37:54

Weber: If anything, it was even easier. It was certainly not hard with Jack, but it was even easier with David. Because David and I were politically and philosophically on a similar wave length. If you had an idea, he would try to help it happen, with money or talking to people. He also really embraced the notion of the museum as a site for “the contest of values,” one of his phrases. That was just music to *our* ears in education. He loved technology, even more than Jack.

I always felt that in terms of why I worked here and what I hoped [the museum] could become someday, what I was interested in was very much what was driving David, too. That was very exciting. I have sometimes told people, “If David was still here, I think *I’d* still be here, too,” because the things that he was enthusiastic about lined up pretty perfectly with the things that I was enthusiastic about. Among other issues, he totally embraced the notion of education curators being involved in exhibition planning and curatorial affairs as a whole. Jack got that ball rolling, but David speeded it up even more.

I still think the museum world misses David Ross, in terms of his willingness to walk out on shaky but arguably important limbs and see if the institution could stand on them. I think it was a big loss when he was no longer here.

Cándida Smith: Was it a surprise to you when he was forced to leave?

[Here a portion of the interview is sealed until 2030]

Cándida Smith: I had noticed, and I was going to ask you, what had seemed like— at least from the records, I could see that “Points of Departure” was your

last co-curated show. You had been co-curating regularly, and then suddenly it stops.

04-00:57:57

Weber:

Actually, it didn't. The records are wrong. I co-curated the Phyllis Wattis memorial show with Madeleine. Although she did more of the curating, and I did the packaging, educationally. I looked at where she put everything and explained why she did it. I basically did labels. Then I did a small thing—four galleries on the fourth floor—from the permanent collection, of New German art, right before I left. I don't know if that made it onto my résumé. It was essentially an installation of the permanent collection, four rooms. It was half the fourth floor, so it was a reasonable size, and I think that Janet and I might have done that together. So my curating didn't stop entirely and even picked up right at the end there, because I think the German thing was up just as I was leaving. But it had still fallen off and the education job did feel much more traditional than it had when I came to SFMOMA.

Cándida Smith: Skidmore [College] offered you an opportunity to do what, that you couldn't do if you stayed here?

04-00:59:30

Weber:

Well, first of all, they offered us two jobs. They offered my wife a teaching position in her field, and they offered me the directorship. She had not been working here. She was still trying to finish her dissertation. For me, I saw the Tang Museum [The Francis Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery] as a really interesting chance to continue occasional curatorial work, while still managing a team, which I'd enjoyed doing here, and being able to teach as part of my regular position.

I'd also been a contemporary art person who'd never lived in New York City or close to New York. Being able to pick up a *New York Times* and see a review and go to New York on the train and see that show was a huge pull. More of Leila's professional network was in the East. We both have very close friends in Europe.

I felt that my work at SFMOMA had become more exclusively administrative, and the Tang position might shift the balance back to a better blend of creative and intellectual work along with the administration. The Tang is an exceptionally interesting institution, and for a college museum, it is well funded. The Tang had worked with a lot of the artists that we worked with here. I looked at who they were showing—Nayland Blake, Kara Walker, Jim Hodges—all people that we'd done stuff with at SFMOMA. It sounded good, and it has been good. In terms of my interest in education, my interest in

museums, my interest in teaching, it's pretty close to a perfect job for me.

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05-00:00:03

Weber: The Bay Area's really expensive to live in. We were living here on one salary. We were living paycheck to paycheck. I just thought, the Tang is a great job; and Skidmore's offering a job for Leila; and we're economically spinning our wheels in San Francisco. We don't want to relocate, but we have to take this.

Cándida Smith: It's the classic San Francisco story.

05-00:01:12

Weber: It is. It absolutely is.

Cándida Smith: Have your experiences, what you learned while you were working here, have they influenced the director you are at the Tang Museum?

05-00:02:27

Weber: I'm sure they have. It's different being the director of an institution in many way, but on the other hand, in some ways it's analogous to being head of education here. If you're a college museum director, you're basically like a department or division head, e.g. head of education at a museum. But finances in universities and colleges are radically different than they are in museums. Museums are very hierarchical. You have a director, the board hires a director, and decisions go down.

In colleges and universities, you have the academic administration and you have the fiscal administration. They're very, very different in a lot of respects, and they don't always talk to each other very effectively. They don't always get along. I report directly to the senior academic officer of the college, and I have an excellent relationship with her. But she doesn't precisely set the budget; that's quasi done somewhere else, on the financial side of the structure. They talk back and forth, and there's negotiation.

In terms of influence, some things apply and some things don't. We work here with a lot of artists that are of interest to a place like SFMOMA, and so that applies. And our audience includes mostly people for whom the art work we show is very new, and that applies to both institutions. The Tang does school tours, public programs, teacher and family events, so that all applies....

Cándida Smith: Why don't we spend some time talking about the things that you want to talk about. You have probably given some thought before you came here to what you wanted to cover.

05-00:06:29

Weber:

Maybe other people have talked about this. It's not incidental that the museum opens in 1995, which is in some sense, the beginning of the internet era. In 1995 or late 1994, there's one web browser that exists—Mosaic. Netscape doesn't really exist when the staff moved over here, I don't think. There's just the one browser that comes out of Marc Andreessen and those people from Michigan.

Man:

Navigator?

05-00:07:17

Weber:

Well, Netscape was Navigator, but Mosaic, Mosaic Navigator, and then Netscape Navigator were based on similar code. Regardless, 1995 is the very beginning of the internet era. It's such a different world, in a way. In some ways, a lot of the first early high period of SFMOMA is precisely contingent with that rise. Then when SFMOMA has to catch its breath and rethink itself is right when that crashes.

'95 to 2001, that six-year period. It was completely fascinating to be here, for anybody who was here during that time period, because it was such a fast-paced period. The city's growing like crazy. When I moved here in 1993, they were literally giving away a free month in big apartment buildings because rents are down, post-Loma Prieta [earthquake]. AIDS is still very much ravaging the city. San Francisco is still trying to pull itself up by its bootstraps from those things. Then there's this incredible period of technological and industrial growth that catapulted the region into a different status quo.

It's interesting to me to think about SFMOMA as part and parcel of that technological and economic moment. I think we really felt like we were trying to create an institution that wasn't on the model of MoMA, but that was going to chart the art that was coming in a way that could make sense of it. And San Francisco wasn't a crazy place to do that, even though it wasn't anywhere near as big as New York and didn't have as much of an art infrastructure or market. So there was a hubris that was going on at that period.

It was an amazing time period and just a fascinating thing to be part of. So for me personally, I think part of leaving had to do a little bit with the let down after it was clear that life and work were just going to be a lot more slow and steady for a while, because that was the economics of it. From all I can tell, Neal [Benezra] has been a very good director for that period, and he has been building in a slow and steady way. But it wasn't slow and steady until 2001.

Cándida Smith:

When you come here, it's one of those periodic blossoming periods in San Francisco art, or Bay Area art. So you're in on the ground floor of

that. Of course, it doesn't seem like the museum's too terribly interested in it. But maybe it was.

05-00:11:33

Weber: I don't know. Just living here then, it felt like being part of the new gold rush. I mean, it *was* a new gold rush.

Cándida Smith: Were you working with Bob and then Rudolf [Frieling], in terms of thinking about maybe getting new media out of the museum?

05-00:12:46

Weber: Rudolf wasn't here yet. Bob and Benjamin, Benjamin Weil was here.

There was a electronic space, e.space was going to be the online space. We did some things for "010101," and we were thinking about doing some commissioning. Aaron [Betsky] was collecting websites. We had some fascinating discussions about what's it going to mean? How do you collect websites? Should we even be doing it? Should we be collecting screens, i.e. computer monitors? At the time, typical computer screens might be 480 by 640 pixels and so you had a website that filled the screen; then what happens later when the monitor is really big and the site's only this big? Does that change fundamentally the perception of the site?

I don't think those questions have been answered yet. I think they're still very much out there. But it was very interesting to be at an institution that was in a meaningful place to confront those questions and engage other institutions in dialog about where that might go.

Cándida Smith: It strikes me that despite all the discussion about the death of the object, say in the seventies, contemporary art remains very object-focused, for all sorts of very practical reasons. Regardless of where contemporary art is, museums tend to be focused on the object and on the original object.

05-00:14:22

Weber: Yes, they are.

Cándida Smith: The digital revolution doesn't just challenge both of those things, it really calls into question why those should even be the rules of the game.

05-00:14:39

Weber: It might be that institutions need to evolve that remember those digital entities and practices collectively for us. Museums are fundamentally here to remember art objects—things with a physical presence—and help people remember them, experience them. Museums may not be the right way to remember those highly fluid, often fleeting digital

entities, but there needs to be some way to remember them because forgetting isn't a good idea.

Interview 2: July 23, 2009

Continue Audiofile 5

Cándida Smith: A couple of follow-up questions. A couple of people have said that Lori Fogarty was critical for getting the Koret Center going, and probably a couple of other of the education programs. But what about Dick Greene? Was he important for the Koret Center?

05-00:17:23

Weber: Dick was involved with the Koret Foundation, and he was, certainly, at the trustee level one of the people who was very involved in brokering the initial agreement. It's important to remember that we had a Koret Center downstairs before we did the Koret Visitor Education Center upstairs. There were two incarnations of the Koret Education room, if you will. I can't remember if we called the downstairs a center or not. We probably did, but it didn't have the presence of a center because it was basically a large classroom. When we were planning on moving, Dick was one of the people who was working with the foundation to discuss what that would mean and some of the naming issues that were involved. They got central credit, of course, but still, there were other names involved inside the space itself.

Cándida Smith: I also felt like we slid past the education committee just a little too quickly.

05-00:18:31

Weber: We should talk about Lori, too, I think, some more.

Cándida Smith: So in terms of your relationship with Lori and her participation in moving the education program—

05-00:18:40

Weber: Well, Lori, for the entire time she was at SFMOMA, both when she was in development and when she moved into the deputy director's chair, she was very important. She was very involved in a lot of the grants that we got. She was central to the Irvine Foundation grant that we worked on together, also bringing Peter in, even before he was on the education staff, to strategize how we would do that. We made calls to the foundation together, too, the three of us. She was a *big* supporter of education really early on, and she had a very good relationship with the curatorial staff as a whole, too. When we were working on the center, she was one of the people who was really charged operationally with executing the strategy at the executive level. Absolutely, she was involved. She was the one who suggested the charrette that we talked about, bringing people in. She was the one who had talked to Art Gensler, who had proposed the idea of going to the second floor rather than down to the basement. In general, she worked very closely with things.

Gerson Bakar was also important in getting the center built. He was very much a partisan of HOK, which was not the firm that we ended up working with. After we did the charette, he essentially agreed that we needed to consider other firms, and he was supportive along the way. Steve Oliver was very important as one of the trustees involved in construction and contracting. He worked very closely with the building committee and with the contractors. When we were coming to the end and running out of money, I remember talking with Steve, in particular, about the treatment for the windows and could we still afford that, and him working with the contractors and with the architects to find a way to achieve that scrim look and other things that we very much wanted. I remember David asking a question about the doors going up and down, David Ross, saying, "Are you really going to use those?" I said, "We're going to use them all the time. We really need that door."

Cándida Smith: The education committee, I thought you might mention some of the chairs who were important. What were their concerns? What were their enthusiasms? Concerns, I don't mean in a negative sense, but what were they really concerned about?

05-00:21:36

Weber:

Well, the first chair was Fred Rodriguez, when I came. He was very involved in wanting the museum to have an education role that was more forefront in the new building. That was very important to him, and he was one of the trustees pushing that. Fred was also very concerned that the museum diversify its audience and also its support and trustee base, too. Then he stepped down after a while, and Chuck Collins came. He was the chair that I worked with for the rest of the time. I can't remember exactly what year the changeover happened. Chuck and I worked very closely together for the whole latter period, probably three-quarters of the time that I was there. That was a great relationship, working with Chuck and thinking about the center and how that was going to happen. He was also very enthusiastic about the interactive programs. He felt that that was very much part of the future of the museum, and he was very committed to the docents and to the school programs. Chuck really became a friend, as well as a colleague. Then when he took on the role of president of the San Francisco Art Institute, that absorbed a lot more of his time. In some sense, we were already thinking about grooming new leadership. I knew Diana Nelson, and she came onto the committee before I left. I think she's still the chair now. She was a very welcome addition.

Cándida Smith: You mentioned yesterday that Eduardo Pineda had said, "You have got to reach families." All you have to do is ride in the elevator and see the focus on families. How did you go about developing a program to

reach families? How do you get past schools and institutional connections? How do you actually get families to come?

05-00:23:49

Weber:

Well, that was a very specific comment, but yes, we did want to reach all sorts of families. We were talking about some of the shows in the Latino community, and Eduardo was saying, “If you want to get the Latino audience in, you have got to get the kids in, because it’s going to be about families coming.” Speaking broadly, the Family Days were one of the main family strategies that we had. We had a series of different sizes of them. We had some I think we were calling “Family Festivals,” which were bigger. They were really museum-wide. The docents got very involved in those, and we had volunteers coming in. We did some advertising in community newspapers, in particular. Eduardo did a number of visits to community art centers, really going out and talking to people. “Family Sundays” were smaller than “Family Festivals” and were based in the Koret Center/s, with tours of shows, too, but without music groups in the theater and hands on activities in the boardroom space across the atrium.

Earlier on – even at the old building – we had tried various other strategies that didn’t seem to work. We tried handing out free tickets to kids through the schools, and we never saw any of them come back. I think they ended up in the bottom of backpacks, so we stopped doing that after a while. More personal outreach and community newspaper ads, and sometimes fliers seemed to work.

The big family events were really fun. They were some of the most fun days. The family opening we had for the new building was spectacular. I think we had 8,000 people come that day. It was actually on Super Bowl Sunday, which is even more remarkable. In fact, the 49ers were in the Super Bowl that day. So it was scary to imagine how many would have come if the 49ers weren’t in the Super Bowl that day. The quarterback then was Steve Young, and they just creamed the Chargers. Just obliterated them. Everybody who cared taped it and watched it later.

We had a tent for activities and food that was covering the parking lot where the W Hotel is today. It was just full throttle. The line went clear around the block. Really, all the way down Howard and back to New Montgomery from where the museum was. It was a great way to start the new family program off.

We continued doing those big, museum-wide family events. We would do a certain number per year. Then in between that, we had family activities on Sunday that were confined to either the education center or to the event space, depending on the scale of them. This was part of

Eduardo's philosophy. You need to have a continual presence, you need to have continual programming, something that's there that people can rely on, that they can count on. Then they get in the habit of coming and they'll come back. Again, it's all about continuity. It's all about not having it be just a one time thing, but developing longer term relationships.

The education center, when we moved upstairs, was very useful for that, too. We had a bigger and better studio in the back, very good for hands-on. The idea, too is that families would come with kids, and it wouldn't be a drop off center. It wouldn't be "art baby sitting." We wanted the parents to get involved. The docents would figure out specific kinds of tours they could do together. They would have activities that were linked to the shows, and those activities would have a relationship with what was going on in either the big event space downstairs or in the studio. So it was very much about getting the kids' eyes, as well as the parents, in front of the art itself and then doing hands-on activities that would create links between what you were seeing and what you were making.

Cándida Smith: When you're planning the kids' education, are you thinking about the academic or pedagogical programs that have developed in the schools or that the Getty was doing with discipline-based art?

05-00:27:37

Weber:

We weren't very interested in discipline-based art, per se. We were very interested in hands on and learning through making, and feeling that the research on cognitive development, for a lot of the target ages that we were looking at, supported that very strongly, that kids need to be making something. Even at a certain point, talking is good, but it's not as good as making. If you can get talking *and* making, then you're even further along.

I think, actually, that works for adults, too. The adults had a lot of fun with the programs. We would occasionally have people coming in down the hallway in KVEC, and they could look through the corner windows. Which was a deliberate strategy in the education center: you could see into that hands-on space. The outer perimeter of the Koret Center functioned as a gallery space where we could display work made by kids, or made by teens in the teen programs, so that kids and families would come in and see that work there. Then they could look through and if there was an activity going on, they could look into the space and see it happening. Even if they weren't going to join that day, they would remember it. Sometimes we would have adults who would come in and see what was going on and they'd say, "I don't have a kid, but could I come in and do that, too?" We would say, "That's great. Of course you can."

That was one of the nice things about the new center, too because in the older Koret downstairs, it was behind this hallway. You wouldn't really see it, except from the outside. The window was near the administrative entrance, on the way to the expensive parking. The new center gave us this fish-bowl effect, which I think was very beneficial for those programs. Then we also created a family space, a kids space, that was on the south side of the center. And using a combination of rugs and books and furniture, I tried to signal that this is a space particularly for smaller kids. Because during the school day, you would have very small kids with parents, but you wouldn't have school-age kids in the museum during week days. We had a space where, if you had a four-year-old that needed a little time out, you could go and feel comfortable. There were books to look at, picture books, things to play with, architectural blocks and things like that. We tried to have the Koret Center function for different generations in different ways and at different times of the day, and of the week, too.

Cándida Smith: We're going to move into discussing the pieces that you selected, each of which involved an interesting way of thinking about education. Janet Bishop had said that she had learned—say, with the Jeff Koons exhibit—but it happened in several other exhibits—that the things that they, the curators, thought viewers would have trouble with proved not to be at all an issue, but there were other things. With Jeff Koons, the curators were concerned about the pornographic content, but viewers were blasé about that. What seemed to puzzle them or get some people upset was the fact that his works were not hand-fabricated. This was before you arrived. But that the materials the curators and education had developed didn't emphasize the right issues. So how do you go about learning in process?

05-00:31:36

Weber:

Well, learning your audience, in a way, and where their choke points or gag points are. It's different for different audiences. Certainly, nudity was always an issue with schools, and so was sex. Definitely, we learned to signal the teachers that this is a show you need to preview if it had either of those in it. Depending on how your principal and your parent community functions, you may or may not be able to tour it. That was very school-specific, and district-specific in some cases.

The primary thing is giving parents, as well as schools, information about what's going to happen so they can make an informed decision. The problem is, teachers don't always do their research. They'll just walk into something. This is another thing you learn: just because you put a sign up doesn't mean anybody's going to read it. We can't change that. The only thing you can do is stop them on their way in and ask them. That becomes a personnel issue of needing to have

guards do that or staff do that. It's an issue that I think most museums deal with, certainly those that show contemporary art.

San Francisco's a community that is used to a lot of different sexual orientations, so that issue—sex and nudity in general—was maybe not what it would have been in some communities. But it's still there. Sometimes it *is* hard to predict what people are going to think. Getting back to Janet's comment, there is a sense that many people have, that if the artist didn't make it, it's somehow not fair and that's cheating somehow. Taking your clothes off is merely morally suspect, but it's not cheating. It's not "unfair." You learn all kinds of interesting things if you're listening to what people say.

Cándida Smith: That was part of your job, to figure out, keep track of how people responded.

05-00:33:46

Weber:

I used to read the comment cards. I was an avid reader of those and of the visitor surveys we did. I especially liked the little comment cards, too because they were more narrative, not so much check boxes. A couple times, we did focus groups. I would go to those and sit behind the glass window and listen to what people would say. I remember being with Jay Finney, who was the head of marketing and PR, once when we had the Keith Haring show up. We had posters all over town for the Keith Haring show. Some guy was saying, "You know, I didn't even know about that Keith Haring show. They ought to put up some posters or something." Jay was sitting next to me, and he was just foaming at the mouth. You never know what people are going to see.

For the "Points of Departure" show we did more serious visitor response research, including interviews, tracking, and observation of more than 100 visitors. That was the most consistent formal evaluation we conducted of a single show.

[interruption]

[Weber's tour of selected works from the SFMOMA collection begins here]

Cándida Smith: There are two reasons for discussing the art. One is we're asking all the curators to help us see what *they* see in a work of art when *they* look at it with their years of experience, that it's not necessarily self-evident to everybody that *you* see the same things other people see. Then the other issue is the specific kinds of issues, questions you had to handle with specific artists, specific pieces of work, as you worked with those artists in the education program. So it's a double task. The other curators had it easy because they just talked about what they see.

So you have got four photographs here. Of course, you have been a photographer. Once a photographer, always a photographer.

05-00:36:06

Weber: True.

Cándida Smith: The collection must have been of particular interest to you when you arrived.

05-00:36:16

Weber: Definitely. I was never a photography curator, but I was always a photographer. I was always interested in how photographs convey meaning. The [Dorothea] Lange show was one of the ones we did very shortly after I came. It was one of my baptisms for doing public programs, in particular. Then Lange became a very important part of the *Voices and Images of California Art* digital program that we did, so we spent a lot of time with Lange.

Lange was fascinating to do. On the one hand, the *Migrant Mother* is one of the most well-known photographs of the twentieth century. If you think of Depression-era America, it's likely to be *the* iconic photograph. It's an amazing piece for that reason. It's also interesting for SFMOMA and for anyone living in the Bay Area, because she was essentially a local photographer. When one gets into the whole discussion of local artist versus regional artist, photography was an area in which the big artists were local artists, Ansel Adams, Lange, [Edward] Weston, Imogen Cunningham, and others. They're Bay Area artists. That was exciting. That also meant that people who had known Lange, and relatives, were accessible to us. One of the early public programs we did when we were still at the old building is still one of my favorite ones, when I look back. It was one with her two sons and then two assistants who'd worked with her—one more of a field assistant, and one more of a lab assistant. They came and did a an oral history onstage of what Lange was like. The fascinating thing about that evening is that they didn't agree at all; we got very different versions of Lange from each one of them.

The sons, in particular, disagreed probably more strongly than anyone else, in their discussion of her politics and what her work meant to her and why she did it and her social engagement. One of them was much more comfortable with that than the other one was. It was as if they were, on the one hand, drawing from her life things that they had taken, and projecting back onto her. The exciting part, too, was her studio assistants and talking with them about how they interacted with her, how she dealt with her subjects, and realizing how many different voices you need to bring to bear on work historically to begin to get any a picture. If you're only hearing from one voice, even if it's the

artist, who in this case, had passed away, you're going to get a very particular point of view.

I thought about that a lot in conjunction with the digital programs that we did later on, in that we always wanted to have multiple voices. That was a key aspect of it and really, one that fed into the education department as a whole. It had to do with why we went with Antenna Audio, not with Acoustiguide, because at Antenna they were interested in multiple voices and multiple interviews, not with just a narrative, scripted audio presentation. It had to do with how we brought people together for public programs, although certainly, we privileged the artist's voice.

In *Voices and Images of California Art*, we were able to locate some early 1960s audio footage of Lange talking about her work. That was one of the most exciting bits of that program and one of the bits that certainly energized users of the program and exemplified the importance of doing your research. Even if the artist is no longer alive, can you locate any video? Can you locate any film? Can you locate any audio? Even if it wasn't produced to be in this format, it could be collaged together with still images and turned into something that was magical. As soon as the music came up and we heard Lange's voice, people were hooked. That's part of what I was interested in with Lange.

Also, as a photographer of the Depression and a photographer of a lot of the demonstrations that were going on, Lange documented the importance of the union movements in San Francisco. Working in the East Bay was another important part of her photographic record of the transformation of the work force, with workers, particularly black workers, coming from Texas to Richmond. All of that was contained in her story.

For the Lange event we had Rosie the Riveter come and talk, supposedly, *the* Rosie the Riveter. I went to pick her up in her apartment, up above the old building there, up near, I don't know, Octavia Street or something. That was just amazing stuff. The Lange show was a lot of fun.

Cándida Smith: The other Lange photograph you chose, I guess of a San Francisco strike, what is it about that photo that is particularly compelling to you personally?

05-00:42:10

Weber:

It's *everything*. The way it's functioning compositionally. The way you have the rhythm of all these hats, all echoing the line of the architecture behind. The focus on the hands and the anxiety that's in

those hands. The fact that the most important thing that a photograph of a human being shows us is not being shown in this photograph, which is the eyes. What we see is the anxiety conveyed in those mouths and in the hands. The simplicity of the composition, all the dark areas, the black areas, all take our eye to those places. The way they're holding their lips, their faces. They're listening.

But it's what's not in the photograph and that's signaled by the photograph that is the power of it: the anxiety of the strike. It's the anxiety of not having a job and the anxiety of not probably having an income or knowing where it's going to be coming from. It's a psychologically loaded photograph. It's also a photograph that, compositionally, is working just beautifully. The center figure is this guy, the man in black there. He's wearing a hat, he's wearing a tie. He's not necessarily a man of means. He might be a man down on his luck. But he's worried. That really comes through in it. It's an amazing photograph, in all different dimensions.

[interruption]

05-00:44:21

Weber:

I want to talk a bit more about the digital programs and what we did with Lange. This is a good place to talk about it.

Lange's most important photograph, *Migrant Mother*, looks like it's just this moment that's captured. You can't imagine the photographer being in front of this woman because the woman is taking no cognizance of the photographer and seems completely lost in thought, completely absorbed. It's hard to imagine a woman with a very large camera getting this photograph. It's an amazing photograph in that way. The fact that we see her eyes, her mouth, her hand, and we see her kids, but we can't see their faces, is significant. It all looks very unplanned in some ways, but almost too good to be true in other ways.

When we did the *Voices and Images of California Art* program, one of the things we wanted to have in the program was a scrapbook that would have everything interesting that we could find that wouldn't fit in the gallery or in the other sections that were there. Images of the artist, for example.

We said, "Well, anything interesting we find is going to be in the scrapbook."

In Lange's scrapbook, we had some of her proof sheets. What you can see clearly from her proof sheets is that there's a thumb coming around that edge right there. But in this print she's basically figured out a way to eliminate the thumb. You can see a thumbnail right there. Although

she's making it look easy, she's working very hard to focus your attention on the face and to make the photograph work in a formal way and in terms of the subject matter. That was fascinating. It was fascinating to see the other images of this woman, looking really almost like a different woman and not looking nearly as poised and lost in thought.

That was a graphic lesson in how photographers work—they pick out exactly the right moment, knowing where to stand, when to release the shutter, as has been said—and then editing is a great part of what photography is, more than people realize. This was a nice way to show people that, with an image that they knew.

We had some other great things in the Lange scrapbook. This image has been copied and borrowed. There was a Black Panther magazine, and then there was a Spanish-language thing, I think from South America, and a whole series of places where this photograph has been used as the basis for drawings and prints and other graphic material.

We had some of the most intense things that we ever dug up for any of the digital programs in the Lange section, notes from friends of hers, from Lewis Mumford, from John Steinbeck, towards the end of her life when she knows she's dying. Steinbeck, in particular, knows that she's dying, and he writes her this letter on yellow legal paper instead of stationery, and he stamps it with a little stamp that just says "John Steinbeck" on it, that's askew. It's this incredibly poignant letter to her that he writes, as he knows that she won't be around much longer. It still brings chills to me when I think about that. It's amazing to see this letter from him, on his home-made stationery, on the computer screen in this digital facsimile, with the yellow color and the lines of the paper. It's a thing that researchers would see, but the general public would never get to see. It wouldn't normally even be published in that form in a catalog. It could be, but it's just that hasn't been the mode. But because the marginal cost of adding space in the digital world is fairly small, we were able to publish those things—I think many of them for the very first time ever—and make them available.

One of the reasons that we wanted to do that is that we were seeing the program as something that would be used by teachers as raw material. We wanted to give them raw material that they could send their students to, to then decide what they would think, and listen to or read all those different voices, whether they were voices on paper or voices on audio or video, and then the students would have to come up with their own conclusions. That was the idea. There isn't any of our writing in *Voices and Images of California Art*. At the very end, based on teacher recommendations, we added some bios that we compiled, but other than that, it was all directly from whatever the source was. It

was all original source material. The notion was, organize it in such a way that it does have a number of different stories latent in it, but that visitors, students, teachers, university faculty, could draw their own conclusions from that material. It was carefully edited, it was carefully selected, just like her negatives were, to mean something. But it wasn't predigested in that encyclopedic/overview/intro way. That's still a model that I love and it's a model that, in some ways, owed a certain amount to that first program, getting her family and getting her assistants in.

Cándida Smith: Shall we move on to Carleton Watkins?

05-00:50:15

Weber: Oh, Carleton Watkins. Where to begin with Carleton Watkins?

Cándida Smith: Did you know about him before you came here?

05-00:50:22

Weber: Yes, I definitely did. I had been interested in the history of American expedition photography, landscape photography, and Watkins got grouped with the expedition photographers, people like [Andrew J.] Russell. although he wasn't actually one of them. I had a couple of books that had Watkins's work in them. I had a friend, Terry Toedtemeier, from Portland, who was a great Watkins collector from early on and a photographer who owes a tremendous amount to Watkins himself. I knew a lot about Watkins. When Doug Nickel began talking about doing a Watkins show, I said, "Carleton Watkins is God where photography's concerned." He's just the guy. Nothing I have seen since has changed my mind about that. There are a few other candidates, maybe, but Watkins is amazing. San Francisco [SFMOMA] had the curious, sad fate of having had a complete Watkins *Mammoth* portfolio, and selling it to finance a purchase of other photographs. Van Deren Coke, who accomplished many great things here, also accomplished that, which was a less great thing. But history takes twists and turns.

Doug wanted to do the show. I didn't really have much to do with it, other than saying hurray when he proposed it. We did do a fair amount with stereographic photographs and created a very nice digital program to look at the stereographs in the gallery that was exploring some new technology and working with some, at the time, very fancy computers and adding bells and whistles to them.

Here, too, as with Lange, Watkins is a local photographer. His studio was just a few blocks away from where the museum now exists, his studio and showroom. He's known, of course, as the photographer, along with [Charles L.] Weed, who first photographed in Yosemite.

His photographs of Yosemite, such as this one right here, I think are arguably still really the most satisfying photographs of Yosemite that have ever been done. The essay that was published, Doug Nickel's essay in the catalog for the show, really sums up a lot of the fascination of Watkins and a lot of the formal innovations, such as creating a picture where you almost can't tell what the real space is, although he's in a profoundly realist medium, because of how he's focused on, and also how he's printed, the reflection of the waterfall. Those kinds of things are very exciting to modern eyes. But as Doug points out, he wasn't ahead of his time; he was absolutely *of* his time. He was a photographer who was working much of the time on commission or for a sales market. If he'd been too far ahead of his time, he wouldn't really have been able to work. We have to revise our understanding of the nineteenth century and nineteenth-century vision if we look at Watkins.

A photograph like this one here, taken in the Columbia Gorge of Mount Hood—and there, you can see Mount Hood in the background there—is a great example of that and of what's fascinating about photography. A couple things in this photograph really strike me. One is that nothing much is happening in it. It's a very mundane photograph. The main event is a pathway with a gate that leads to nowhere in particular—probably up to that farm there—but that does take your eye up to Mount Hood, which is barely visible through the haze. The other main thing is a tree stump. Possibly, the tree itself was cut down at some point, but it looks to me like it actually caught fire and was taken down later. Then you see a few stumps there. It's jutting up right in the middle of the frame, in a way that would be very unusual for someone painting a picture.

At the time, one does see effects like this coming into painting and there are debates about whether the photographers or the painters really get credit for them. One school of thought thinks the painters started using those innovations before the photographers did. Others say the photographers did it and the painters copied them. I don't really care. They're both happening. Watkins is doing it.

What all of this does make us think about is the framing of the image, and that the fundamental act of making a photograph is framing. You have to decide what part of the world you want to cut away and what you want left over that people are going to look at, and then when you want to release the shutter. That's what making a photograph is. There's no way to overemphasize the importance of that, that way in which photography is editing, both in the camera and after you have the negative.

You can see the same thing in this photograph [of Yosemite]. It's a traditional photograph in some respects, in that he's using the tree to create an arc or arbor, and the falls are beautifully framed by that. The image is bisected across the middle, and then you're given this reflection on this side. It's almost hard to figure out what you're seeing here. Is this a bush that you're looking through? Is it somehow a reflection? Really, it has to be a bush that's protruding up into the frame, the same way the stump is protruding up into there. But it's quite strangely abstract, the way that it comes in and juts into the frame. The darkness of that, the shadow, the "negative space" effect of that against the brightness of the reflection, is disconcerting and a little bit strange, but also echoes the silhouette effect that you're getting back there in the upper part of the photograph. Incredible!

It's also really amazing to think, from a twentieth-century perspective, that these are contact prints. They're made with glass negatives that are the same size as the images. Watkins had a camera made, specially to order, that took these mammoth glass-plate negatives. He had to coat them with the sensitizing fluid in the field, shortly before making the images. The work involved, the labor involved, in getting these images are inconceivable to anybody who has a digital camera today. We can't imagine the amount of trouble it took to get these. And Yosemite, he had to get there on horse and buggy. You couldn't drive there. The mind reels... get these things back home without breaking the negatives? To us it has to seem nearly impossible.

Samis:

I have a follow-up question. It's easy to understand how something like Yosemite, which was already known, to some extent, and was becoming more known as a destination, and the falls, there would be interest in having photographs of that for the commercial market. But in terms of all the process that you just described—the wet plate and spreading the collodion and lugging the glass and everything else—what do you think Watkins had in mind in framing that image there? It's not a digital picture. It's not something that's just an easy one-off.

05-00:58:31

Weber:

A couple things are going on. Watkins is very good friends with the "Big Four," the railroad guys—[Collis] Huntington, [Mark] Hopkins, [Leland] Stanford and the other one, [Charles] Crocker. Huntington gives him a railroad pass. The railroad is going up and down the Columbia Gorge at this point, so it's one of the areas that he can get to via train, up to a certain point. It's a very rich area in terms of the orchards and the agriculture that's there. Mount Hood is a spectacular site. I think this could be the notion of the view, although the photograph argues against that, but the river itself is huge. It's the largest, longest river on the West Coast. That in itself makes it a viewable site.

All the same, I think it is a somewhat puzzling photograph, because of the mundane, everyday character of it. I can argue for the notion of it as a view of the West, a different spectacular view of a great mountain and a great river, but then we have got that pole sticking up right in front of us. We can't get our eye off that pole....

The photograph is a puzzle. This is what's interesting about Watkins to contemporary viewers. It's hard to explain him in any way, other than having a really interesting eye and doing some things with it that seem a little bit peculiar, given everything else he was doing.

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Weber: I was going to go out on a limb and say something.

Cándida Smith: Go out on a limb.

06-00:00:43

Weber: You can make a case that Watkins is the most original American artist of the nineteenth century. You could make it on any number of grounds. You could make it aesthetically. Certainly, technologically, he's way out in front. The Hudson River School painters are superb artists, but Watkins is arguably more original in terms of how he looks at the land and what he does with it and how he chooses to talk about it. We have some Hudson River School painters up in the Tang Museum right now, too, so I have actually been looking at them. You know, they're pretty good! But Watkins is arguably more original, more revolutionary.

Cándida Smith: So tell us about this piece. What's going on here?

06-00:01:46

Weber: This is *me*. This is a piece by Karin Sander. She's a German artist who was in "010101: Art in Technological Times." The title of the piece is *One to Ten, John Weber [John Weber 1:10]*. It was shown in the exhibition. It was part of a series of a hundred of these pieces that she did, using a full-body scanning machine in Kaiserslautern, Germany, and then what we would now call instant prototyping printers. It's printed with a plastic, basically a liquid polymer, by a machine.

To do this, Karin asked if I would be part of this piece, this series, after we asked her to be in the "010101" show. We'd seen work in D'Amelio Terras Gallery in New York, a few of these pieces, and we were just enchanted with them. She found out I was going to be going to Germany—I was the curator who was charged with finding German artists for the show—and so I made a trip to Germany to meet with people in Cologne, Berlin, Frankfurt, and Düsseldorf.

I went without her to Kaiserslautern, Germany, stood in the scanner, which has twenty cameras that scan slowly down the length of your body. Then the computers immediately create a wire-frame version of you that you could look at, and then working with the technicians there, decide whether you liked the view. They had to spray my shoes, which were black, with some shaving cream powder or something—and I think my hair, too—because black didn't come out very well. I was wearing green pants, come to think of it, not black pants, but they were jeans. We did a couple of scans. It took about a minute or two to do the scan, so you had to adopt a pose that you could hold. You had to stand in a way that was typical of the way you normally stand. This is a way that I stand a lot. So when I look at it, it does feel a lot like me. When my wife saw an image of it on the computer, she let out a scream.

The Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art] has some of these in their photo collection. I think that's very interesting, because fundamentally, it's a photographic process and it's a print process. Karin Sander has only chosen to make one print, but it's based on what you could call a digital negative, and she could easily have printed out many of these, if she wanted to. As I said, she made a hundred sculptures in the series, and she made one of each. Many of them were people she knew, friends.

Sterrett: Do you want to stand it up here?

06-00:04:49

Weber: I'd love to. That would be great.

Sterrett: I was thinking that you could stand the same way.

06-00:04:52

Weber: Yeah, I'll stand like that.

Samis: It shouldn't be hard for you to do.

06-00:05:08

Weber: No, it's pretty easy, actually.

Samis: You even wore the right color jacket and shirt.

06-00:05:15

Weber: I don't change much! The work was originally done for a show called "Small Sculpture." Karin's work is very much based on trying to make visible things that are already there. She likes to adjust things slightly, as little as possible. She was thinking about, well, how do I make sculpture which is small? Small is a relative term. It has to be smaller than something, otherwise it's not small; otherwise it just has dimensions that aren't particularly large. But small is relative. So I will

make people. We know how big people are, and if you see a person, then you know that it's a small person not a big person.

She also wanted the work process to be very hands-off, because her work tends to be fairly hands-off. She doesn't even see these until they're finished. She would get you the appointment at the scanning laboratory, you'd have it done, it would go to the printing place—it took about forty hours to print these, to output them—and then it would go to an artist who would spray paint them, based on snapshots made at the time the scan was done. Only then would she see it and decide if she liked it. If she liked it enough, it would become part of the series. I don't know if she ever threw any of them away, but that's how it went. So they're small people.

Samis: Spray paint as in—

06-00:06:49
Weber:

Airbrush. It was done with an airbrush.

These are one to ten. She tried out two other sizes. She tried out one to five, and those were too big. There was too much detail. They were too literal. Then she tried out one to twenty, and those were too small. There wasn't enough detail in those, so she settled on one to ten. That had the right amount. It's enough that it really looks like the person, feels like the person, but it's not too much. It doesn't seem too literal.

Something that I find interesting about this work is that I think it tells us how much we understand about who people are based on gravity and based on posture, and by implication, based on movement, too. Because this is how we move our bodies, and she's frozen that. One might think, well, photographs do that, too. But curiously, when you see one of these, you realize that photographs don't do it very well. These sculptures do it extremely well. There's something that's going on between the eye and the body in this that is profound—I suspect it's mirror neurons.

Mirror neurons are in the brain. When we see motion of the body, for example, in film and video, the same neurons in our brain are firing that would be firing if we ourselves were doing those motions. Our brain is looking at bodies that are in motion and triggering as if our own bodies were moving. I suspect that if brain scans were done, if MRI scans were done on the brain, that photographs would not trigger mirror neurons as strongly as these little sculptures would. We're seeing how the body feels when it is standing, and our brain is responding to that quite intensely. It's uncanny.

It's important that this piece was done digitally. It was part of this large show, "010101: Art in Technological Times," that was done at the turn of the millennium. It was essentially our new millennium show. It was originated by David Ross, who was friends with Andy Grove from Intel, and he got a grant of a million dollars to do it. David had the idea of doing a digital show and came to the curatorial staff and suggested, or asked that we do one. We ended up with five curators working on the show. One curator left partway through, and one curator came. Adrienne Gagnon left, and Benjamin Weil came.

The idea was to look at how the digital environment, new technologies, and the explosion of video had affected art and artists.

The Karin Sander work felt like the perfect pieces for the show because she's not a technology artist. Some of her most famous early works were done by polishing sections of white wall with progressively finer grades of sandpaper until they actually reflect light. If you looked at them straight on, you might not even see them. If you looked at them from the side, it would be like a pane of glass on matte. She's a very conceptual artist who wanted to bring out what was there. She heard about the new technology, this instant prototyping, and thought, "Ah-ha! that's the way I can make it. I don't have to use my hands. I can have someone else make it. It's not about my personal expression. It's about the nature of what's already there." In this case, the technology developed for the fashion industry, among other things: get your body scanned and then your jeans will fit perfectly.

Sterrett: John, do you remember how this sculpture, or the couple that were on display—and to expand that question, how the show was received by the public?

06-00:10:37
Weber:

It was an extremely popular show. It was crowded most of the time. I think we had more reviews of that show than just about anything, except Aaron Betsky's shoe show, the sneaker show.

We also did a huge website for the show. It launched January 1, 2001, and then the gallery show came on a little bit later than that. It was really a fun show. There was a lot of stuff that moved and a lot of video. It was quite varied. *Time* magazine reviewed it. That doesn't happen very often at art museums at all.

It was a hard show to work on, actually. It was, I think, the hardest project I have ever worked on. Painful at times, because nobody was in charge of it. I think we all thought David would be in charge of it, but David really wanted us to make it. So we had five curators, and nobody who had really veto power over anything. Everybody was

given a certain domain to work in. Aaron had architecture and design, and he also went to Asia. Janet and Adrienne went to Brazil and Argentina. I went to Germany. It was really crazy in the days coming up to the opening. I was in charge of the website, working with our web developers.

Samis: Perimeter.

06-00:12:22

Weber:

Perimeter Design was doing the website, and we had a consultant named Sherry Miller, who was coming in and helping to coordinate all that work. The web design was extremely controversial. People kind of hated it. Web designers hated it because it was very hard to use, they thought. It really was an architecture, and it was a different version of how the web could be imagined. The web is very boring now. Everything just looks the same and acts the same. This site did not act the same. You really had to figure out how to get into it and how to use it. It was made in early Flash; and it was very flashy. It moved around.

We had a number of innovative things we tried to do with the web site, some of which worked and some of which didn't work quite as well. We actually did something that was never registered very well, that I was extremely proud of at the time; we did online audio interviews with the web artists, and as you listened to them, your web browser would automatically open a navigable window of the program you were hearing about. There were URL links that were embedded in the audio track. It was a way to do a slide talk on the internet, virtually. I have still never seen anyone really do that. I haven't any idea if anybody really looked at it, either, because we didn't get any feedback on it and we didn't have very good web tracking statistics. But it was a cool way to extend the notion of the artist's slide talk to the virtual realm.

I still think the "010101" website was a fascinating experiment. The point of the show was to experiment like that and to get artists to do new things. We had one project that would crash your web browser. At the last moment, we had some real concerns about the legality of that. I think we put a disclaimer there. It was supposed to take over your computer and make it look like it was shaking and stuttering and doing all these things. I think that was the Thompson & Craighead piece called *Ghost* or something like that.

It was a fun show. But it was tough getting it curated. It made me more accepting of hierarchies, and to a certain degree, of centralized authority to get projects done.

Cándida Smith: Okay, Janet Cardiff. You were going to talk about the piece that you commissioned from her, *The Telephone Call*.

06-00:16:05

Weber:

The Telephone Call. If there was a consensus most popular piece in the show, certainly, critically, it was Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's *The Telephone Call*. It was a video walk, for which you would get a small Canon handheld video player with a tilt-up screen. You would follow the image on the screen; she had photographed walking around the museum. You would follow the image around the museum, listening to a soundtrack that combined audio from the museum and then audio that she added. Then on the screen periodically, other images would show up. So you followed the image on the video player around.

It was a fourteen- or sixteen-minute piece. It took you clear through the building. You picked it up in the atrium, walked up the staircase, up to the second floor, into the gallery, looked out over the atrium, turned back around, walked up a service stairway on the second floor, and then up to the fourth floor, and then walked out. She stopped you, actually, inside the service stairway that said, "staff only, don't enter." You would walk through that with the camera and you'd be all alone in this weird stairway. Then she stopped you on the stairway and the screen went blank and you heard these footsteps coming up behind you. It really felt exactly like somebody was coming up after you. You'd look around, and nobody would be there. The steps would walk past you and go on up. Then she'd say to keep going, and you'd walk out the door. It was really scary, and it was really fun and really fascinating. Then you continue on up to the top, fifth floor, over the bridge. There was an amazing gospel singer that she brought in to sing, filling the sound around you. Then you'd finish off looking out from the fifth floor out to Twin Peaks, peeking out through the curtain. Then she would basically say, it's done, go back in the elevator and take your video player back. You felt like you were inside Janet's head the whole time. She was using a technology called binaural audio, which is created using a dummy head—so like a head off of a dummy, a manikin—with very powerful microphones, right where the ears would be, that she would hold. The microphones would pick up the spatial nature of sound.

The thing that was surprising about this piece is that it was the equivalent of photorealistic sound. What we don't realize is that our ears understand a lot about space based on sound and what sound's doing, but we don't think about it. We don't really notice it. What Janet's piece did, picking up on a tradition of binaural audio—Janet and George didn't invent binaural audio by the way; it was around for quite some time—they realized that if you record sound that way, you

trick the brain into feeling like the sound is coming from inside your head, not from outside, because it's the way the ears hear it. So the soundtrack on her piece felt like it was in your head, not coming at you in stereo. That just made it very, very, very spooky and powerful and magical.

Janet also has a very sexy voice and she's very good at using it. You kept wondering if something was going to happen. Am I going to meet somebody? Is she going to meet somebody and then I'm going to listen in?

The thing that was peculiar, too is the way that the entire experience of the piece mixes your actual lived experience, which fits in very well with the video and what's going on there, and then other stuff. She was very good, in making these pieces, at predicting things would happen. "Watch out, somebody's going to walk past you," and then you'd see somebody walk past you and you'd think, well, how did she know that? Maybe that person's actually part of the piece. Maybe this whole thing is a setup and I'm going to get mugged in the stairway. As ludicrous as any of those ideas would be, you'd find yourself entertaining them when you were doing the piece. It was just a complete kick in the pants, and a super popular piece. People would get done with it, and they would feel like they'd had a mind meld with Janet.

They wanted to talk to her and they wanted to send email to her. We ended up creating these comment books that people could write in, and immediately filled up three of them. People would write *pages*—well, a page and a half, two pages—about what an amazing, powerful experience it was: "The best work of art I have ever seen in my life"; "It's incredible, it's your best piece"; "I have been seeing your pieces everywhere, and this is the best one you have ever done." They felt like they knew her and they wanted to talk to her.

Bill Viola came and wrote a nice note. She got really excited about that. It was an incredible, incredible piece, a really a fun piece.

Some of the reviews of "010101" said, if this is where technology's taking us, let a thousand flowers bloom. Because doing the piece didn't seem like it was the "technology," which is the amazing thing, even with the little screen. Counter-intuitively, you just got totally immersed in *The Telephone Call* because of the sound.

The piece also raised some very interesting questions about conservation and what would happen to the work's technology in the future. We talked with Janet about that, and we thought a lot about, well, what happens when the technology breaks? Can it be on different kinds of players? What needs to happen? What if the building changes?

She did design the piece such that it was tied very tightly to the central circulation architecture. On the sound track she also would say periodically something like, “Things change. Don’t worry,” as a blanket way to make the piece more future-proof. When we talked about ways the piece could be shown with future technologies, I don’t recall if a final conclusion was reached. But one of the things that came out was that it would need to be something that has a screen and a capacity to record images.

Today, with the new iPhone, which does video, you could conceivably do that. You’d need to have binaural capacity and hear it. But you could imagine holding it, moving around, and I think it would work pretty much just the same way the original video camera worked and would give you that same sense. You’d feel like you were filming, again. So there are ways that you can imagine this being shown in the future. At the time, I suppose we weren’t really predicting or seeing—I suppose we were predicting, somebody was predicting—movies on phones. This was 2001, 2000, when they were working on it, but it could easily be a phone piece in the future. That would make it almost more appropriate to this notion of listening, too.

Samis: *The Telephone Call.*

06-00:24:09

Weber: Yeah, *The Telephone Call.*

Sterrett: I have been thinking about it with Sandy Phillipps’s show coming up.

Samis: Oh, the voyeurs.

Sterrett: Some of the stuff that sticks out for me is how you’re hearing stuff you wouldn’t normally hear. There’s a Peeping-Tom quality to that piece.

Samis: I think what you alluded to is that intimacy of Janet’s voice in your head. The other thing that binaural audio does is that—it’s like the Karin Sander—it’s this holographic, three-dimensional experience of the museum space that our body doesn’t know it’s going through all the time. So everything that happens is seamless with your moving through the museum, because it’s the same acoustic environment that we’re in, that we’re hearing in our ears. So it’s completely seamless.

06-00:24:54

Weber: Exactly. It’s still great. I have tried to show that piece in class when I’m teaching. I took slides of it. But you can’t convey that work to anybody who doesn’t do it. It’s very frustrating. You can show it. I remember teaching at the Art Institute here and showing it as a video, getting a copy from here and showing it just projected. But it doesn’t

work. It's a way to *mis*represent the piece, not a way to represent the piece.

This is a real issue for video art in general, and for installation works: how do you represent them in such a way that they can be adequately remembered? How can other artists learn from them, if they don't get a chance to see them in person. I think it's a real problem right now for the training of artists. A lot of the most compelling works of the last thirty years exist in electronic form in space. It's very hard to represent that work second hand (i.e. in teaching situations) in a manner that give people a sense of what it does. That was another reason, though, that I felt it was important for SFMOMA education to be involved in new technologies. Then, at least you had the capacity to show motion and sound, to move *into* things, which you couldn't do publishing a catalog. I felt that if you're going to document your collection and teach your collection, you had to have a digital capacity to do that for real time work. Otherwise you were going to be cutting off everything that was moving image, that exists fundamentally in architectural space, three-dimensional space, not the planar space of the gallery wall, but the cubic space of the museum. You couldn't represent that effectively in a book. You can represent that, in some way, on a computer. It's maybe not *quite* adequate, but it's a lot more adequate than a photograph, a flat photograph in a book.

[interruption]

06-00:27:17

Weber:

I had *that* [Richard Diebenkorn, *Cityscape*] in my office in the old building. So it was pretty early on. I knew about Diebenkorn before, and I didn't know that much about [David] Park when I came to the Bay Area.

Cándida Smith:

Let's start with Diebenkorn, since it has a personal connection to you.

06-00:27:38

Weber:

I guess the personal story first. When I came into SFMOMA, we were still in the old building. One of the privileges staff had in the old building was that we got to pick out works of art from the collection and have them in our offices. I had a very big office overlooking City Hall, with arched windows. There was a lot of wall space. I was asked by somebody, I don't know who, "What would you like? What art would you like for your office?" I thought, well, what do I get to pick from? Can I pick anything I want? She said, "Go ahead, pick what you want." I said, "Okay, well, I want the Diebenkorn *Cityscape*." I already knew I was going to be writing about it for the opening catalog, so my excuse is, well, I'm going to write about it for the catalog, so I need to look at it a lot. They also had a painting by Carl Morris, a

painter from Oregon, who was in the collection, an artist that Grace McCann Morley loved. I had one of Carl's paintings and this Diebenkorn in my office, sitting right across from my desk there.

I still think it's a tremendous painting, a fascinating painting, very much about light, very much about sun. Some of the most important parts of the painting are the shadows of the buildings as they're crossing the street. A couple of key pieces in the painting are this little sliver of color here, and then the color here that comes out. It's hard to see what it is at first, but as you think about, you realize that's the sun spilling through there and across the pavement and onto the green, which is deep where it's in shadow. Where the sun's hitting it, it's really coming out. The same thing is happening there and then happening here. So this drama of a sun out there that's casting these very, very long shadows across the relatively empty field on that side is one of the many central dramas of it. The contrast between the built-up side here and the bay windows that are so typical of the Bay Area, versus the fields on the other side of the street is also part of the central drama.

The painting, if I cover this whole section, this becomes very, very abstract on that side, very related to the work that he did after he moved to Southern California, the *Ocean Park* paintings. This is almost like an *Ocean Park* painting ready to happen, on that side. Over here, we have this much more abstracted urban cityscape that's going on. It's a gorgeous painting. Very high horizon line there, which creates this abstraction of the ground almost folding up. Like the ground plane is here, and he's folding it up by putting the horizon line so high. It's very abstract and fun, if you get in close anywhere. It looks very much like a landscape as you move back away from it.

When we got the computer lab up, we had Photoshop on the computers. We were scanning a lot of things from the collection for some of the programs we were working on. As a former photographer, I was very interested in Photoshop, and I decided I was going to play around with this painting a little bit. One of the things that I did was I made a version of it where I got rid of that red piece right there, just to see what it would look like without that red. It's not that it falls apart, but it really loses something. There's a little bit of red here, too, but this is the part that pops out. Looking at the two versions side by side was instructive, about that one little piece of color, which he seems to have mostly painted over. It seems like the red continues under there, at least up to a certain point, and then he's painted a lot of it black, but then left that one little part that punches right out. That, along with this splotch of light there, are playing with one another in a way that is really key to the piece.

It's imbalanced in some ways, too. You could argue if it's really balanced or really imbalanced. But there's so much activity over here, and then it really softens up a lot down here. He's deliberately vacated it in order to keep that punchiness going, that staccato of all those pieces of color and those pieces of architecture there against the softness of the land. You could argue that that's appropriate to the nature of the material, too, in terms of what a human being might be interested in is maybe more over here, more denser activity than out in the field. I don't know about that. Anyway, it's a great-looking piece.

We have another painting that's in the collection, it's a *Berkeley* painting. It's an abstract painting from the period before this. It has a composition which maps very, very closely to this piece. Not the whole thing, but certain elements of the way that he's constructed the composition in the *Berkeley* painting are very, very reminiscent. We showed those two together in one of the "Points of Departure" shows. Either we had that one piece in or we had both of them in together. But that was interesting, in the sense that he had these compositions in his head that he was working through. He could work them out abstractly, possibly looking at the land, or not. Or he had them in his head, and then when he painted a landscape or a cityscape, he was moving towards the same use of space and deployment of color.

Sterrett: John, I think we paid \$6,000 for this piece.

06-00:35:40

Weber: Good price.

Sterrett: It's a really good price. There's correspondence from John Humphrey. I think [the painting] was on display. It was on display, and [Humphrey] had borrowed the work to muster the support from a committee to purchase it. It turned out to be a real successful—a *real* successful move.

06-00:36:07

Weber: They're beautiful paintings. They're just very straightforward, beautiful paintings. Both of these two. I want to switch to the David Park, and then talk a little bit more about Bay Area figurative in the museum a little bit. The Park painting, did Hunk and Moo [Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson] give this one? That's what I was thinking. It wasn't part of that group gift that they gave?

Woman: I don't think so.

06-00:36:52

Weber: David Park, *Man in a T-Shirt*. He was one of the artists that I really came to appreciate more after I came, although there was a piece that was in the Portland Art Museum's collection that was co-owned by a

Bay Area collector. Park was the first of the Bay Area figurative painters. He's the one who really got it going. He abandoned abstraction. He had been somewhat in the circle around Clyfford Still—maybe not exactly a member, but Clyfford Still cast a very wide shadow at the San Francisco Art Institute in the forties, when he was there, and painting abstractly was something that a lot of the Bay Area painters were experimenting with. Park tried to paint abstractly, and it apparently just didn't work out for him. He'd had a WPA [Works Progress Administration] period, then he'd had a period very much influenced by [Pablo] Picasso. There's one piece in the museum's collection from that Picasso period, which is intriguing. Then he tried to paint abstractly, and it just wasn't working. At a certain point, he gave it up. The legend is that he put his paintings in the back of his car and took them to the dump and never looked back. In fact, no one's ever really found an abstract Park painting. There's one that's abstract-ish, so he likely did destroy them all or paint over them. I always thought, why didn't he paint over them? Because he was so broke at the time he surely would have needed the stretchers and canvas. Who knows?

At any rate, this is a great example of Park at a high point, after he's really gotten momentum. The earliest figurative paintings are more genre scenes—orchestras, or *Kids on Bikes*, one of the first ones that was shown in a San Francisco Annual. At a certain point, he gains more momentum, and the paintings become, in some sense, more abstract, if you will, not as much detail. Arguably, they become more existential, to use a characterization that the David Park scholar Nancy Boas applied to the work.

This piece is a great example of how he creates form by shadow. He's created the chin by a shadow under the chin and created the face by a shadow on the side of the face. This arm is created, fundamentally, by two shadows, under here and under here. When he's drawing, you can see this even more. He would often draw with a very wet brush. Since the paper was white, he wouldn't need to put anything down. He would draw the shadow, and then the arm would appear.

Drawing is something that was going on with him and some of his friends. He was practicing with Elmer Bischoff and Richard Diebenkorn in a garage, apparently, I think down the [San Francisco Bay] Peninsula, maybe. They would hire a model and do these drawing sessions. Well before Diebenkorn went back to figurative work, there were these drawing sessions that were instigated by Park and the three of them. Through that dialog, the notion of Bay Area figurative emerged—it's not really Bay Area figurative painting, it's normally called just Bay Area figurative.

Park, unfortunately, dies at a very early age. He has pancreatic cancer. He finds out that he is ill, and within a very short time, a very few months, he's gone. It's very sad because his career was finally taking off at that point. He had had a show in New York; work had been purchased by a number of museums and collections. He had the satisfaction of knowing that he'd achieved that success, but throughout the whole period of the forties and fifties, it's very tough for Park. He has what he calls a Lydia Park scholarship, which is his wife's job. He, at a certain point, gives up teaching simply to devote himself to painting.

When I look at the work, I notice the formal confidence of it, in the way that it joins the brushwork of abstract expressionism with a fundamentally figurative impulse. It doesn't exactly describe things as much as it signals them. The eye and the nose aren't really depicted, they're signaled by those dark blotches of paint. The background is very indistinct. Is it a sky? Is it real at all? That could be a field, where it's green and dark. It's a very stormy-feeling image. It's a very troubled image. This is a time, as Nancy Boas pointed out, when there's a lot of anxiety. There's a sense of a nuclear shadow over the world, and a possible nuclear war is there. A lot of these images, especially of the later ones, do seem to have a certain amount of anxiety in them. Others have quite a bit of joy in them. A great love of the human form and the figure.

Some of the later pieces have beautiful nudes, but this is just a guy in a T-shirt. It's about as mundane an image, as anti-heroic an image as you could come up with, in terms of the subject matter. But he has painted it in a way that has pathos and heroism to it. It's suspending those two impulses in a wonderful place, balancing them: the abstract with the figurative; the monumental with the anti-monumental; the figure and landscape (an old tradition), with this question of, is it really anything at all, or is it just paint?

Is this one of those abstract paintings that he took to the dump that's living there in the margins of the figure? We'll never know.

The colors are sometimes really tough. He's fearless with color. They're not pretty colors. The greenish-yellow in the T-shirt, what about that? It's a T-shirt; it's supposed to be white. That's about the only white that's there. Just a very few pieces that are there. What the white is doing is reflecting the world back, something that he certainly was very aware of. They're not particularly happy or ingratiating colors, the way he's using them together.

Sterrett:

The legs. I'm always looking at the legs in this painting. Talk about the use of paint to create shadows. They're lumbering.

06-00:44:09

Weber: Absolutely. They're these big logs, but it's like *whick-whick-whick-whick*.

Cándida Smith: It's not just a T-shirt. He's obviously got shorts on. So he's probably at a basketball game or a tennis game, because in the 1950s, guys didn't wear shorts. There's a specific place that he's at.

06-00:44:42

Weber: There's an occasion. Here's *Berkeley*. It's all there. The line up that side, the horizon line, the green. It's all there, you know? The same stuff that [is] formally part of *Cityscape II*.

Cándida Smith: The other painting you wanted to talk about was *Osiris and Isis*. How many parts are there to this painting? Three?

06-00:46:09

Weber: Three? I thought just two.

Cándida Smith: Are they all the same size, or—

Sterrett: The other part is in another storage unit altogether. I don't have that, unfortunately.

06-00:46:22

Weber: So it's just the two.

Woman: The other piece—

06-00:46:25

Weber: Goes right down there. There's something that hooks it all together.

Cándida Smith: When you were in Germany, [Anselm] Kiefer was already quite a phenomenon, wasn't he?

06-00:47:12

Weber: Oh, yeah, totally.

Cándida Smith: Did you see any of his work while you were there?

06-00:47:20

Weber: In Germany? I might not have. I'd certainly seen it in the United States before I went. The Guggenheim had a piece up.

Cándida Smith: For Jack [Lane], this painting and the Sigmar Polke work were signal acquisitions, signaling this place was at a whole new space.

06-00:47:44

Weber: Absolutely.

Cándida Smith: What was your engagement with this painting?

06-00:47:54

Weber:

I had seen the painting when it was shown in Documenta 1987. It was shown together with the companion piece, which I believe is called *Brennstange*, or *Fuel Rods*. There were some books that were shown with it, one or two of which might have actually come to San Francisco. I was really impressed with it. I thought these were the best paintings I'd seen by Kiefer yet. This piece in particular. I remember reading the label and seeing that it was San Francisco, and being quite surprised and impressed, in a sense of that's not what I had really expected from SFMOMA, collecting this work. I knew the institution in a different way. So that got me curious. When I first started talking to the museum about coming, one of the things I thought about is, "Wow, they have *Osiris and Isis*! They're building this new building, and they're going to have a space where they can really show that piece, which is an incredible work."

I'm less interested in some of the work that Kiefer did later and when he was thinking about other things, but when I see this piece, I still think it's a tremendous painting and an amazing painting. I love seeing it and thinking about it. The way that it was framed, when you walked into the fifth floor when the museum opened, was really great. It was inspiring having it. We had it on view one or two other times, and it was always exciting to have it up on the wall.

It's funny.... It's a very melodramatic piece, with the pyramid, the ziggurat-like pyramid that comes up, and the high horizon, the stormy sky dominating. It's a very somber piece. But if you start unpacking the iconography, it gets even more puzzling because a lot of the iconography suggests a number of strange twists to it, almost very humorous ones. I don't know... Kiefer isn't known for making funny work, but he has a lot of pieces that have odd things in them that almost seem like peculiar jokes.

This is a good example of that because the top piece, which is up on the top of the pyramid, is a circuit board for something like a TV. I believe the legend is that it's a TV circuit board. But whether it's a TV, whether it's a hi-fi, or whether it's something else like that, the fact is that you have this electronic thing connected to all the copper wires that are connected to the broken plumbing fixture. Supposedly, according to the legend, these plumbing shards represent all of the body parts of Osiris, the brother and husband of Isis, and she's trying to put them all back together, as the legend or the myth goes. She reassembles his entire body, but she can't locate his penis. That's the one piece that isn't put together. So it's very ironic that the material

that his body is made out of plumbing fixtures, and the one piece that she can't reassemble is this plumbing fixture of the male anatomy.

The copper wires, which conduct energy, electricity, are all going up to the electronic circuit board. That's either the thing that's connecting up this only partly recreated Eros-less being, sexless being, or simultaneously, it's the thing that we worship. It's very, very funny, odd iconography.

I like that about *Osiris and Isis*. I like the fact that it's a conundrum and that it suggests a number of simultaneous ideas: we can't put together that which is broken; the essential thing is, in some sense, this life drive to couple with others; the plumbing of our body is what keeps us going; the modern fate, the post-Duchampian fate, the postmodern fate is to worship the electronic god. All those things are there simultaneously in this piece. Even if you don't get that, you get the mood of the piece, which is a dark mood. It's a very somber mood. If this is what he's saying, it's hard to argue that he's happy about it or that he actually thinks it's funny. And it's not funny, really. It's strange and sad.

In terms of the museum's engagement with German art, this was a real prize piece. Supposedly, Jack went to Marian Goodman, who's Kiefer's dealer, and said, "I'm going to San Francisco, and I want the next great Kiefer. I'm leaving the Carnegie Museum [of Art], and I want it. We're going to buy the next great Kiefer."

At this point, mid-1980s, Kiefer is the most famous Western painter in the world. He's being discussed by critics in frighteningly glowing terms, as the one who redeems painting, and [his work is] being collected avidly here in San Francisco. The Fishers [Donald and Doris] have a number of supremely good works by Kiefer, and they helped to purchase this piece, too. For San Francisco Museum of Modern Art to get this piece was therefore a major statement and a signal of what the museum was aiming at with bringing Jack Lane to the museum and with the decision to build a new building. The piece really says that in capital letters. Subsequent acquisitions that happened with Sigmar Polke and the cycle of Polke paintings followed through on that.

Sterrett: Say more about that, John, this museum's engagement with German art at the time.

06-00:54:51

Weber:

We talked a fair amount about it. I don't know if we got very much under the surface of it, really. The people who would tell that story most effectively would be Jack or Gary. John Caldwell's not alive anymore. Possibly, a couple of the trustees or something. I witnessed it

from the edges. I was very interested in it because I had spent time in Germany and spoke German. I think the museum felt at the time that some of the best painting in the world and some of the best art in the world was coming out of Germany. West Germany at that point, although some of the artists had been East German and had gone over the border in the fifties. That's why the director and curators wanted to get it. I think they thought that was the good work and the most important new work to get, and there were collectors in town who were supporting that work. I don't know which came first, honestly.

Cándida Smith: One of the things that's interesting to me is if I were to compare this museum's profile 1990 with, say MOCA [Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles], much of the classic work is similar; but then when you get to the more contemporary work, there's really major divergences, where MOCA will have [Christian] Boltanski, will have Jonathan Borofsky and Mark Tansey, work that seems to be completely absent from this collection. It's not one is better or worse, but clearly, there's a different take on what's going on, a different set of preferences. The eye of the lens is focused on a different part of the body of contemporary art.

06-00:56:40

Weber:

That's probably true. SFMOMA didn't go very much for Boltanski. There's one piece. I don't think they went after Tansey. I don't think we have a Tansey piece that I can think of. Maybe there's a drawing or something.

Sterrett:

I think you're right.

06-00:56:59

Weber:

We might have followed some German artists who worked out maybe not quite as well and then some that worked out pretty well. An interesting call early on was Martin Kippenberger. John Caldwell went after Martin Kippenberger earlier than just about anybody. That's ended up looking really good, especially in the last five years. Kippenberger looks better all the time. That was interesting to me, too because I'd been interested in Kippenberger early on, as a guy with an *amazing* sense of humor and the anti-Kiefer. It's strange, the call, actually, even on German art, because Kippenberger is a real joker and very playful. Kiefer is anything but. Kiefer is high seriousness and history painting.

Cándida Smith: One name that hasn't really popped up in any of the interviews is Hans Haacke. That's a curious gap. He's probably in the collection.

Sterrett: But only recently, because *Blue Sail* came in under Madeleine [Grynsztejn] and *News* just came in two years ago. Maybe even one year ago.

Cándida Smith: These are choices that people make. They're not just accidental, but they're not necessarily thought through.

06-00:58:21

Weber:

Well, there, maybe some of Jack's political conservatism might have come through with Haacke. I think some of the pieces, too, you could say are interesting as ideas and somewhat less interesting as objects. Some of the earlier Haacke works, the really environmental pieces from the sixties, I think are more interesting as objects than a lot of the work he was doing for a while there, which seemed very thought out, in a way. Despite my interest in art and politics—and I would teach Haacke—I found a lot of the pieces, as idea/aesthetic experiences, just less compelling. Just too dry somehow. Whereas I don't find this [Kiefer] at all dry. It may be melodramatic, it may be over-dramatic, but it's not dry. I think, also that it looks really good. It's fun to look at.

In 1988, one of the things that everybody had to do if they were interested in contemporary painting was go see the Kiefer show, wherever it happened. It was traveling around. It didn't come to SFMOMA because it was probably planned before that and Kiefer really limited the number of cities it would go to. It went to L.A. MOCA. So I made a trip down the coast to see that and other things. The Boltanski show was at L.A. MOCA at the same time Kiefer was up.

Mel Katz, this artist friend from Portland comes back from seeing Kiefer. He says to me, "I can't figure out how he makes them. When you're standing close enough to paint them, you can't see the space. I can't figure out how he decides where to put this glob of muck versus that glob of muck, because it's so abstract, that close to the surface." It's true. He probably just sketches them in from a long ways away. You can see some lines and things that might suggest that. But still, they're just very goopy from right up close.

I'm struggling between the urge to talk more about that and getting into Joseph Beuys. Actually, still feeling like there's more to be said about the Bay Area figurative because there's this tension between different eras of the museum. When Henry Hopkins was at the museum, I think there was much more focus on local work, at least some of it. But when the museum opened in this new building, one of the criticisms was that there wasn't enough work on view by the local artists, there wasn't enough Bay Area figurative painting on view. I think arguably, you could say that that was true.

There were debates in the curatorial staff of how to show that work. Should we show it in its own area? Should we mix it in with other work? How to do that? I think that's a debate that's probably still going on. What is the best way? How much is enough? How much do you want to say, SFMOMA's job is not to show as much local work; it's to show work from outside to the local area and feed the art community in that way. All answers are right and all answers are wrong. But still, I was always really happy when we put up some of the great old Bay Area figurative paintings.

When we did the David Park, "Making Art Histories: On The Trail of David Park" show, one of the things that we wanted to do was show and share that whole process of how a museum tells stories of history and what were some of the arguments that happened historically in this region?

The show had four components. The first component was the Bay Area art world of Park's time. It began with Diego Rivera and the mural movement, and it moved around to Hassel Smith, a painting after the death of Park. It had a number of artists who were in the collection, who weren't shown that often. The point of the first gallery was to say that this is the art world that Park knew; these are some of the artists that were there; it wasn't very unified; and it was definitely not the way we remember it. The catalogs were these tiny, little black-and-white things. The publication armature that existed was almost nonexistent, as compared to the color catalogs that we have now. It was a very modest art world, very much in dialog with the mural movement, very much in dialog with the WPA. Glimmerings of dialog with New York, but not so very much, actually. That was the first room.

The second room was the fifties, or rather, how we remember it. So one side, we had the home team—Bischoff, Diebenkorn, Park, a couple others—on the other side, we had the New York team, so we had abstract expressionism. The problem is we don't really have the New York team here. We don't have a great abstract expressionist [Jackson] Pollock. There's *Guardians of the Secret*, but that was not exactly what you thought of. But we still had a few wonderful abstract examples that were New York abstract expressionism. That—Bay Area Figurative vs. Abstract Expressionism—was the iconic version.

Then—and this was the most fun; the first and the third galleries were the most fun—we had in the third gallery what the museum actually collected in the fifties. So there were all these other things that are there. There was a small Park that was in there, and all these artists whose names we don't really remember. Because the museum had no money at all in the fifties.

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Cándida Smith: If you look at major art magazines from the 1950s, one of the surprising things is the names that they are continuously foregrounding in the articles and who's being advertised. It's a very different universe than the way we remember it. The artists that were well known at that time have largely disappeared from our current view. Maybe they'll be resurrected by the next generation or two, for whatever reason.

07-00:00:34

Weber:

I had a similar realization when we were working, I think on Pollock, and realizing that Byron Browne was one of the most famous artists in the 1940s. And Byron Browne, who's Byron Browne? He was a "school of Picasso" guy. Anyway, it was really fun to see what the museum had from the 1950s. Museums don't know in advance what's going to happen. They don't know at the time, always, what's happening that later on, they will wish they had collected. That's something we used to talk about, too, in accessions meetings. If you buy ten things, and in fifty years, one of them you still want to show, you're actually doing pretty well. This was an interesting way to think about that. We also hung that gallery salon-style, such that it would be more like on the racks, really filling things up. So you had a real rude shock because you went from this more sparse, white cube gallery of the iconic fifties, into something that feels a lot more like the room we're in right now.

Then the last room of the Park show was a vest pocket history of David Park's work that went from the earliest WPA period up to the last period of works, where he's working on paper with felt pens that his daughters are bringing him when he's dying, and doing a beautiful series of small felt drawings. We borrowed a number of paintings for that gallery. We borrowed one painting from the [Sterling and Francine] Clark Art Institute, a beautiful painting of women by the river, and some other things that were in town here. That show wasn't relying only on our collection.

Those four galleries together were about this whole question of histories and art histories and how they're always being revised, and the fact that artworks come out of art worlds. There isn't just one big art world that everybody lived in that's the same one that we remember now. It's much different than that. That was always one of my favorite shows. It was a collection installation.

It was also a show that we thought would be great for the docents to tour because it will help people understand the nature of how museums think and how they make choices. It'll demystify the choices and demonstrate that they're always being revised, and encourage [viewers]

to think of the rest of the museum as also somewhat provisional. It's the view of the current curators that even *they* will revise in coming years, and even they will rethink their choices. You should approach it in the same way. Sometimes you get the feeling visitors to museums want to look at all the shows and the works and think of them as really "The Truth." This is Art, capital A. This is "the good art." Then they get mad because they don't like it. The Park show was designed with the hope that it would help visitors get a more realistic sense of how complex the dance between museums and unfolding art histories really is.

Cándida Smith: I'll ask a provocative question. Once you set the task of, we're going to show the best contemporary art, or the best modern and contemporary art, instead of, we're going to show a range of things of what's going on, then once you have adopted that position, that you have to make quality decisions.

07-00:04:33

Weber: You *are* making quality decisions.

Cándida Smith: *You* are making quality decisions. For instance, at the Musée d'Orsay, more than showing the best of nineteenth century art done in France, the goal is to show the variety of schools that were at work and contending with each other. Each of which has some very nice examples, and each of which has a lot of crap attached to it, too.

07-00:05:02

Weber: I think you make quality decisions regardless of whether you define your program as "the best contemporary and modern art" or "a range of everything going on." I think either way, you have to make choices, because you can't show everyone and everything. And even if you say you are showing what you think of as "the best," in fact you rarely can get your hands on all of that "best" that you would ideally like to have.

To a certain extent, I think every museum feels like it's probably making choices in some of these ways, but some are more comfortable with acknowledging the fact that they may want to revise those contemporary choices at a later moment. That's why I was saying that you figure if 10 percent of your choices end up being historically good picks, you feel you're doing okay.

Of course, you're still always showing work you think is good, otherwise you wouldn't take up time doing it. You think it's of quality. On the other hand, you also recognize that you can't show everything, and not even everything you want to show. Then there are other things that other people like that you don't like—take the case of L.A. MOCA showing Mark Tansey and SFMOMA really paying him little

attention. You're not showing that work because you can't be an institution or a curator that you are not, you can't pretend to like it, even if you realize the market likes and some colleagues like it. Museums, the best they can do is reflect some of the better work and some of the contradictions that are there. You have to make value judgments. Otherwise you wouldn't be making any choices.

[interruption]

07-00:06:47

Weber:

Felix González-Torres was the last artist that we added to the lineup of artists for the "Public Information: Desire, Disaster, Document" show, which was a show that we opened the fourth floor of the new building with. It was a "statement show" about some of the things the museum thought were very significant about art in 1995, particularly the influence of photography and lens-based art on thinking about art as a whole. The fourth floor was organized by all the curatorial departments working together, except, I think, architecture and design. Paolo Polledri had left, and we didn't have a curator of that area. It was painting and sculpture, photography, media arts, and education. I was part of the curatorial team for that show.

I had arrived in October 1993, and went to a number of meetings about the show. I suggested we add Felix to the show, and others agreed. Gary began working with Andrea Rosen, Felix's dealer, to get work, including something we could purchase. Felix was still alive at this point. We had four stack pieces which were on view when we opened, including this stack piece here, called *Untitled*, like all of his work, and this entered the collection.

It's a good example of González-Torres in his elegiac and very romantic mode. It's a lone bird in a sky, a vast sky. It's impossible not to think about religious overtones, the death of his lover Ross [Laycock] from AIDS. Felix himself died not so very long after the museum opened, 1996.

The stack pieces are amazing in terms of how they play with structures of ownership and publicness, because the owners of the piece have to agree to give them away when they put them on view. With his concession, we suspended that briefly during the opening, or we would have run through the whole print run of, I don't know, 100,000 objects within a few days. He was not happy with it, but we did, for a few days, keep people from taking them away because we had so many visitors when we opened. Then we allowed people to take them after that.

So the idea is that if you own the piece, you have to give it to other people. All the stacks have an ideal height, which could be anywhere from about this high (say, eight inches) up to— I think the biggest ones I have seen are about this high (say, about 24 inches). They can fluctuate a little bit. As owner, you agree to keep printing more of the sheets. Then when you put them out, people can take one off, roll it off and go away with it.

That changes, really, the notion of whether or not you can own an artwork. It's an *idea* that moves through space. It's also an *object*. But it raises the question: is the piece I'm holding, this individual *thing*, which I actually get to touch, because it's one of Felix's pieces, but I wouldn't if it were a drawing or a print by someone else...is this one leaf of the piece? Or is the piece the stack when it's seen in the museum, whole, in some way? But in fact, it's not whole because the point is that everybody's taken parts of it away. There are all these other flakes of the piece which have blown off, and they're off in the world with other people.

Then you could ask, is the piece actually not really any of those physical things? It's the idea and the image that's there, and that's been able to move through the world. In this sense, the piece is both presenting its own content, which has to do with his autobiography, a romance, a history, and loss. It's also this idea of sharing that, sending that around. The fact that, okay, I'll give you the privilege of owning it, and you can pay a lot of money for it, or however much it's going for. But as soon as you do that, you have to then give it away. You can't keep it just for yourself.

That's what was so brilliant about these pieces. He wasn't trying to get rid of the capitalist economic market that was there. He was saying, what I'm going to do is I'm going to reach inside it and pull it inside-out and make it do the opposite of what it seems to want to do. And the market was ultimately happy to do that, yet I don't think that's a defeat for the work. I think it's a testimony to his intellect and his idea and how strong his idea was for a way to get his thoughts out into the world.

Some of the pieces are much less personal. There's one that's about a riot at a Trump casino. There's another one that I think we had on view, which was about corruption. It was saying that you're much more likely to be sent to jail for stealing a six pack than for stealing millions of dollars because nobody can comprehend, somehow, the mechanisms that allow white-collar criminals to get away with hundreds of thousands, millions, billions of dollars of theft through fraud, so they're not likely to go to jail. But everybody can imagine going in and sticking up a convenience store and running out with a

pack of beer, so that guy's much more likely to end up in jail. That text was just a little newspaper clipping about this big, which was sitting right in the middle of this expanse of white paper. So the different pieces would have different content, just depending on what he was thinking about.

Felix came and gave a wonderful talk at SFMOMA, one of our public programs. One of very few talks he gave. We did audiotape it. He said a number of great things about his work. One of the things he said about the stack pieces was that when he was coming up as a young artist in the 1980s, painting was going on, early to mid-eighties. Everybody wanted the wall. Everybody was chasing after Kiefer or whatever, and nobody wanted the floor. So he thought, "Okay, what can I do with the floor? The floor would be great." Because he didn't want to compete for space on the wall. So he started making the stack pieces. Of course, they relate to minimalism. He was trained as a photographer, but these pieces certainly relate to people like Donald Judd, Richard Serra, Carl André, and a lot of that work. What González-Torres did was figure out ways to inject social comment into those structures, and then change the ownership structure, too.

Sterrett: One of the things that I have liked about this work, too, is that you can actually have them on display in as many venues as you want at one time as long as the idea of the show is in keeping with what the work is about. It takes that notion of authenticity and uniqueness and turns it on its head.

07-00:15:15

Weber:

He had an amazing mind. There's no way around it. It was always very simple, very direct. But his thought wasn't simple. What he did is he figured out the most direct way to get from his intention and what he wanted to convey in a thing or an object. Just completely simple, but absolutely brilliant. Having two mirrors placed side by side. One of my favorite pieces is called *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*. It's two wall clocks. The idea is that you put a battery in each one, a new battery, you turn them on at the same time, and you let them go until both of the batteries stop, and they won't stop at the same time; in essence, one dies first. Then you redo it again. Wow! They're amazing pieces, and often very sad. How much time do we have before the battery runs out?

He showed some pieces that I didn't understand. They were these pieces where he would take a photograph and bring it to a photography store, and you could get puzzles made out of them. They'd make little puzzles. There's a bunch of these pieces, and they'd be shown in little plastic bags and just pinned up to the wall. I was thinking, "Well, I wonder what those pieces are about? What are they doing?" He said,

“I had some photographs, and sometimes they might be a newspaper article blown up. They were things that I just didn’t understand. They were puzzles. So I just made them into puzzles.”

That’s so perfect! I’m thinking, “Duh, why didn’t I understand that?” That’s what was great about his work.

He had a completely generous way to work that respects the intelligence of the viewer, but also is reticent and keeps things quiet. He’s dealing with the most personal things, and he’s dealing with them in a way where you won’t even notice or get what he’s talking about unless you care enough to inquire. If you do care enough to inquire, the mechanisms that are going to take care of the work’s distribution and everything else will provide answers to you—galleries, museums, art history classes. If you don’t inquire, you don’t have to learn about his emotional life, you don’t have to learn about his politics, you don’t have to learn about any of that. There’s respect, too. He’s a very political artist, but he wasn’t going to impose his politics on you. I think that was an interesting choice.

[End of Interview]