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SFMOMA 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary

NEAL BENEZRA  
SFMOMA Director, 2002 – present (2009)

Interviews conducted by  
Richard Cándida Smith and Lisa Rubens, ROHO

in 2007-2008

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Interview #1: December, 21, 2007  
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Cándida Smith: We like to start off with basic background questions: when you were born; where you were raised, what your parents did.

01-00:00:25

Benezra: My parents were both native New Yorkers. Grew up in New York. Both moved separately, with their families, to Los Angeles. My father had quite an interesting background in World War II, in that he always had a facility with languages. When he went in the army, there was a moment before we invaded Europe, when consideration given to invading Europe through Spain, rather than France. He was sent to school to study Spanish. He was sent to the University of Illinois, where he studied Spanish. He spent a good bit of the war, actually, in Mexico because he was going to be one of those people that was dropped behind the lines. Of course, none of this ever happened, but that was his experience of World War II, pretty terrific for him, I suppose. My mother went to school at Hunter College in New York and then UCLA. They met in L. A., after the war. Then my father came up here to go to school after the war, on the GI Bill. He went to what was then called CCAC, California College of Arts and Crafts, studied painting and sculpture, and then became a high school teacher in the East Bay. He taught art at De Anza High School in Richmond. My mother got a degree at UCLA in political science, but never worked after the family began. I was born in Oakland, at Kaiser Hospital in Oakland. I really grew up in a town called Pinole, which at that time, was a very small suburb; now it's a little bit larger suburb, north of Berkeley.

Cándida Smith: Did your father exhibit as a painter? Did he have a reputation, minor or—?

01-00:02:40

Benezra: I would say minor. He was of a generation a little younger than, let's say, Richard Diebenkorn, but he was a painter in that vein, in the sense that in his work, he'd combine abstract expressionism and a figurative expressionism. He was more a teacher than an exhibiting artist. A very *good* teacher, actually, with *quite* a reputation as a teacher. I think had a lot of impact on a lot of young artists.

Cándida Smith: So did you grow up, in a sense, within the Bay Area painting community?

01-00:03:22

Benezra: Well, not just the painting community. In those days, there was the San Francisco Museum of Art. We hadn't added the word *modern* to the title yet. I came to the museum constantly, regularly. I probably saw every show for many, many years because my parents brought me. But there were other institutions, too. There was the museum at Berkeley [Art Museum] that I visited regularly. There was the Richmond Art Center, which had a *very* important reputation and a *big* impact in the Bay Area. I was there quite a lot, too.

Cándida Smith: As a teenager?

01-00:04:05

Benezra: Younger than that, I would say.

Rubens: Were you painting or drawing?

01-00:04:10

Benezra: No, no, I was never an artist at all.

Rubens: Never.

01-00:04:12

Benezra: Not a bit.

Rubens: He didn't encourage you?

01-00:04:14

Benezra: No manual skills whatsoever. No, there was no encouragement to do that. I was more interested in political science. I was actually a political science major at Berkeley, with every intention of going to law school.

Cándida Smith: Did you take any history of art classes?

01-00:04:38

Benezra: I took a lot of art history classes. The story, basically, is that I, like a lot of pre-law political science majors—and there were thousands of them at Berkeley, to be sure—

Rubens: What year? When did you start?

01-00:04:52

Benezra: I started in '71. I graduated high school in '71. I spent five years there, because what I did was, I did a political science major and was, one night, sitting in one of those law school admission test review courses. Something came over me, like a flash, and I realized that I just couldn't do this. Not because I wasn't interested in law and political science. I really was, but I just realized that it wasn't my professional direction. I went home and told my parents that I was going to finish my political science degree, but if they would keep paying the tuition, I wanted to stay another year, a fifth year, and do a second major in art history. So that's what I did. I graduated with two majors.

Cándida Smith: Who did you study art history with at that time?

01-00:05:56

Benezra: Principally two people. I took courses from all the art historians there, but principally two people, Herschel Chipp and Peter Selz, who were the two modernists, of course, there at that time.

Rubens: Was [Alfred] Frankenstein offering any courses at the time?

01-00:06:12

Benezra: I had a couple classes from him. I think he must have been an adjunct professor at that point. I must have had an American art class from him somewhere along the way, but I didn't really know him at all.

Cándida Smith: Is it fair to say that Chipp and Selz provide you with your first working ground map of contemporary art?

01-00:06:35

Benezra: Well, modern art, especially. You really didn't study contemporary art there. Peter taught up through abstract expressionism or Pop art. Chipp was more the modernist, and Peter was a little more contemporary.

Rubens: Was there anything besides that the exam was painful, was there conversely a point where you just starting loving the art history and going to museums?

01-00:07:06

Benezra: I'd been taking art history classes right along, and I had really grown up visually in this museum, when we were over in the Civic Center building. My visual sensibility was probably pretty well developed for a kid of that age.

Cándida Smith: Given the collection that they had at the time.

01-00:07:32

Benezra: This was something that my family did.

Rubens: Did you, by the way, go to L. A. as a family and look at museums?

01-00:07:40

Benezra: New York, L. A. Sure. New York, maybe once or twice, not often. But one didn't travel in those days the way one does now.

Rubens: But if you traveled, you would go to see the museums.

01-00:07:51

Benezra: Art was the topic of conversation in our house. Not unexpectedly. I suppose you could say I was always a visual person, from a very young age.

Cándida Smith: In the seventies, did you have your own ideas about where art was going?

01-00:08:16

Benezra: No, that would be giving me too much credit. I was just keenly interested. I loved to look at things.

Rubens: Were you looking at movies and video, too, at the same time?

01-00:08:26

Benezra: Not video so much; that was early for video. But I saw a *lot* of films.

Rubens: At the Film Center?

01-00:08:33

Benezra: I just went to a lot of films. One of the things I remember when I was a kid, high school or in college, the museum was not just a visual resource. You went and saw exhibitions and paintings and so forth; it was a social place, too. You'd take your dates there on a Thursday night. What a cool thing to do, go to the museum on a Thursday night. I remember one night being with a girlfriend and meeting Joan Brown and Manuel Neri. It was an exciting place to come.

Cándida Smith: For you, was art sensual pleasure, ideas, provocation? All of the above?

01-00:09:26

Benezra: I think probably all of the above. I think I always had a very strong visual sense. I have always done a lot of looking at things. I think, probably like a lot of museum people, I have, I think, a pretty excellent memory for what I have seen. I would say as time went on, I became more interested in what art means in society and how it's evolved through the years. This is where the political science and the art history come together, I suppose. I'm keenly interested in politics and social things.

Rubens: Why don't we say one more thing about that, the Berkeley campus and the Bay Area in the early seventies.

01-00:10:35

Benezra: There were courses being cancelled because there'd be a strike on campus. I was, I remember, coming with my father to anti-Vietnam marches here in the city. The political life of the Bay Area was quite strong.

Rubens: The museum was beginning to show anti-war posters and art?

01-00:11:01

Benezra: I don't remember that so much, but I'm sure that's true.

Cándida Smith: '68, they showed the Kienholz *Portable War Memorial*.

01-00:11:10

Benezra: Is that right?

Cándida Smith: It received a lot of publicity at the time, but in '68, you were probably—

01-00:11:22

Benezra: Fifteen. Fifteen. Well, but I was quite aware in those days. One of the things I remember was Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*. I remember that evening *very* well, coming to that opening. I was probably in graduate school then. There were a lot of people in the building.

Cándida Smith: So you decide you're going to get a PhD.



01-00:12:23

Benezra:

Did I *decide* that? Or did this just happen? What happened was that having come fairly late to art history, academically—I didn't come late to art, I came late to art history—I needed to get a little additional academic background. I ended up going to UC Davis for two years. To fill in my background, basically. That was a great thing to do because Davis, of course, had one of the great art departments in the country, probably along with Yale [University], in those days. Maybe *the* best studio art department in the country. I always say this to people and they look at me like I'm crazy, but I think it's true. With Wayne Thiebaud, Robert Arneson, William Wiley, Manuel Neri—it was quite a formidable lineup. It was great to study art history in the context of all these great artists. It was pretty wonderful. For someone interested in contemporary, in particular. If you were studying Asian art or something, it wouldn't have mattered, but for me, it was fantastic.

Rubens:

So you were already shaped by interest in the contemporary.

01-00:13:33

Benezra:

Because for me, growing up with art, art was a living thing. It was not an academic enterprise. It was not an academic pursuit at all, it was about artists and museums and galleries.

Rubens:

Your father continued to paint?

01-00:13:49

Benezra:

He ended up getting another masters degree, I think at San Francisco State, and he became a photographer. He dabbled in a lot of different things, a lot of different media, not just painting. So where were we, Davis?

Cándida Smith:

When you were at Davis.

01-00:14:16

Benezra:

I stumbled into art history. I wouldn't say this was terribly knowing on my part.

Cándida Smith:

Well, you had taken a lot of art history classes. You obviously liked it.

01-00:14:37

Benezra:

But like a lot of young people, I didn't really think about the implications of the decision I was making, professionally. I got an MA at Davis. I was there '76 to '78. I spent two years there. I studied principally with a man named Lynn Matteson, who was their modernist.

Cándida Smith:

Were you beginning to become aware of the ferment in the contemporary art world of the seventies?

01-00:15:32

Benezra:

Yes, but not in a conscious way. I was just part of this whole world.

Cándida Smith: Was conceptual art on your horizon?

01-00:15:47

Benezra: Not any more than modern art was. I would say I wasn't that focused yet.

Cándida Smith: The people at the Davis school, that's a very much object-oriented set of artists, wouldn't you say?

01-00:16:09

Benezra: In their way. In their very unusual and, you might even say, unique way, that's true. But this was the moment of funk art. I remember the funk art show that Peter Selz did at Berkeley, which I can't recall the exact year, but it must have been in the seventies.

Cándida Smith: I thought it was '66.

01-00:16:32

Benezra: So it was earlier than that. That was a really prescient show. This was very much in the air, more than conceptual art, I would say, in Northern California. Especially Davis. It was a different world than it is now. I had been to New York maybe once or twice. There wasn't the information that one has now as a young person. Then, you needed to travel to see things; now the internet does a lot more for you. Many more publications. Everything's much more accessible than it was then.

Cándida Smith: Why did you decide to go to Stanford to get your doctorate?

01-00:17:26

Benezra: I wanted to stay in the Bay Area. I had a social life here that I wanted to maintain. I think I probably applied to both Berkeley and Stanford. I got into Stanford, and Stanford was a wonderful program. It was small and they really supported you, they gave you money. Berkeley didn't. To be able to go to Stanford and have your tuition paid, that was a pretty great thing.

Cándida Smith: At Stanford, you begin to focus on early twentieth-century modernism? Is that fair to say?

01-00:18:42

Benezra: Well, the whole twentieth century. Then I really began to focus more on contemporary art. The big opportunity I had, I was studying with Al Elsen—who was, of course, the great Rodin specialist, but he taught contemporary, too—was that through Al, I was able to go work for Hunk [Harry W.] Anderson. I was one of the first Stanford graduate students [to work for Anderson]. First of many. I worked for Hunk for three, four years. That was great, because I never would have been a great academic art historian. I never would have been one of these people who published a lot of books and did a lot of library research. I was always too much of an activist for the library art history approach to art. It always troubled me a little bit that academic art history turned art into just another academic enterprise, and that

it tended to see works of art as documents of a social situation and social context. My whole experience growing up had been one of knowing artists and being part of a world outside the library, going to museums and knowing artists and visiting studios. It was more of an active life. Al Elsen fostered that. He appreciated that because that was the sort of art historian he was. When I went to work for Hunk, that just did it, because I was meeting the artists that Hunk was collecting and I got involved in the business of art. I spent an entire year updating the insurance appraisals on the Anderson Collection. Well, this was quite an experience. You study art history, you don't get that exposure to the commercial art world at all. I was calling dealers and auction houses—the business of art.

Rubens: Who would be telling you what to do?

01-00:21:36

Benezra: Hunk did. I worked directly for Hunk. It would be too generous to say that I was his curator; he didn't have a curator. He was his own curator. But I was his chief assistant. We hung the collection, and I gave tours of the collection. We organized a lecture series for the staff there, and I'd call Wayne Thiebaud and invite him to come down and speak to the staff at Saga.

Cándida Smith: Were there particular works that really blew your socks off?

01-00:22:11

Benezra: Well—[pause] Hunk, at that time, was in the process of, I think, parting with certain modern pieces in his collection to continue to build the contemporary collection. Of course, the painting that one loved and still loves in that collection is the great [Jackson] Pollock that he has, *Lucifer*. It may be the greatest Pollock in private hands in the world today. It was just a *dazzling* presence. I remember it in his dining room.

It was a lot of fun. I remember once going to New York with Hunk and Moo [Mary Margaret], and going to Frank Stella's studio, and helping them pick out a painting that they were going to get. This was exciting stuff. It's not the thing that my colleagues in the art history program at Stanford were getting to do; they were sitting in the library writing term papers—which I probably should have been spending a little *more* time doing.

Cándida Smith: Well, you turned out okay.

01-00:23:59

Benezra: Well, I turned out different.

Cándida Smith: So you're with Hunk and Moo at Frank Stella's studio. In that process, are you beginning to learn how to differentiate between the different Stellas that might be there?

01-00:24:16

Benezra: No, no, I was fairly sophisticated at that point. I knew my contemporary art.

Rubens:

You knew the values, you knew the exhibits.

01-00:24:24

Benezra: Hunk and Moo's collection is principally an American collection. And so what one thought of as great contemporary art in those days was very different than what it is today. Today, we're much more attuned not just to Europe, which came in the seventies and eighties, but now, of course, to the *whole* world. We're thinking about China and Africa, and South America, certainly. In those days, it was very much New York, still. There was not the awareness of Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke. At least for me.

Cándida Smith: What I would actually like to spend a little bit more time on—and Stella may not be the right example—as you go into an artist's studio, how you began to form an idea of, this is the painting we should be collecting, rather than this other painting over there. Do you get the drift of what I'm asking?

01-00:25:28

Benezra: Yeah. I'm not sure I can articulate it to you. I had a fair amount of art history at this point. I certainly had a fair amount of background in looking at contemporary art and knowing what at least I thought a particular artist's strong period was, and maybe there was a less strong period. But a lot of it also is, you develop a visual instinct about what you're seeing. You do a lot of looking, and you walk into a studio or a gallery or whatever it is. At a certain point, you develop a visual acuity and a confidence in your eye, that you trust yourself.

Cándida Smith: It's a gut reaction.

01-00:26:19

Benezra: It's a gut reaction. But the art history supports it. It informs your eye. But finally, it's your eye and your gut.

Cándida Smith: Was Anderson interested in what critics were writing at the time about modern, postmodern, contemporary art?

01-00:26:50

Benezra: I think that for the most part, collectors aren't so interested in that. I think for collectors, it's more of a personal decision. I think collectors—and Hunk and Moo are this way—they really care a lot about what museums do. If there's an exhibition of a particular artist, and which pieces get selected for that exhibition, which museums it tours to. That's more important, perhaps, than what a critic might say. Then of course, there's always—for any collector, and certainly for Hunk—there's the market to deal with. There are market decisions, too, not just aesthetic ones. What's happened to someone's prices over time? If you're collecting contemporary art, you follow a young artist, they have a couple of good shows; how early do you buy work? Do you want

to buy something when it's really new, when the artist is really young and you're taking a shot at something that's new and exciting and less expensive? Or do you wait three or four more shows, pay a premium, and take not as many risks? So that's a consideration that enters into it, too. It's not so much the more theoretical approach of a particular critic that's an influence.

Rubens: Is he having a goal to have a show at the museum? They're on the SFMOMA Board by then?

01-00:28:34

Benezra: Hunk was never on the SFMOMA Board. He and I talked about this, actually; I remember him talking about it. He never really wanted to come on the Board. He supported the museum by making gifts. He had made these two great gifts, of the [Jasper] Johns and the [Robert] Rauschenberg. The Rauschenberg, to this day, is one of the five most important works in this collection, I would say. Actually; it may be one of the top *three* works in the collection. It's really one of the great masterpieces of SFMOMA. He never wanted to sit on the Board; he supported the museum through that giving, which one could hardly complain about.

Cándida Smith: Were there other collectors that you have worked with over the years?

01-00:29:19

Benezra: Oh, absolutely. It's something I have done a lot of.

Cándida Smith: In that way?

01-00:29:24

Benezra: Not in that way. That experience with Hunk, that was an experience that had a great impact on my approach to working in museums as a curator. When I finished graduate school and I went into museum work in a formal way, I have *always* spent a lot of time with collectors.

Rubens: How did you pick [Josef] Albers to write on?

01-00:29:53

Benezra: What happened there was, I was studying with Al Elsen, who was the great [Auguste] Rodin specialist. Most of the graduate students—not all, but most of his grad students ended up working on Rodin in one way or another. I decided I didn't want to do that. I wanted to have a slight declaration of independence there. At that time there was this work then on the Stanford campus called the Albers Wall. Josef Albers had made a design for a freestanding sculpture to be installed on the Stanford campus. It was quite controversial because it was a wall, a two-sided wall. with characteristic graphic designs by Albers on either side. There was a *tremendous* amount of controversy about the placement of this sculpture on the Stanford campus. Al was right in the middle of this, as was Hunk; Hunk was involved with it, too. There was a lot of contact, at that time, between the university and the

museum, and Hunk, Al Elsen, and Josef Albers. I got right in the middle of that, and I fell into that as a doctoral topic. It was perfect for me. Albers had done about twenty of these sculptures and murals around the world, and it was a perfect topic for me because it wasn't something that you could study in a library archive. It meant that I was going around interviewing architects and patrons, visiting these pieces, and writing case studies of each one of them. It was not a terribly academic dissertation I wrote—which was perfect for me, quite frankly.

Rubens: Did you publish that?

01-00:31:52

Benezra: It was published in a couple of different forms. It found its way into various Albers catalogs. My dissertation got published, like everybody's dissertation gets published. It's appeared in a couple of contexts having to do with Albers. There was a big retrospective at the Guggenheim that my essay got published in, and so forth.

Rubens: So the Albers is done, and you have been with the Anderson Collection. Have you made up your mind you're going to go into the museum world or the gallery world?

01-00:33:17

Benezra: What happened was that it was very clear to me that if I was going to pursue teaching art history, I was going to have a short-lived career. I would have been one of those people that never got tenure. Al knew that I was headed toward museum work, which was perfect, because one of the things that was great about Stanford was, of all the art history programs in the country, Stanford probably trained more great museum art historians. So the people in my background there were people like Kirk Varnedoe, who was seven, eight years ahead of me; Steve Nash, who was maybe five years ahead of me. These were my models. I didn't know either of them, but they were my models. It seemed like a natural thing to go into museum work. Al and Hunk were very good about this. I remember one day sitting down in Hunk's office, when I was just finishing my dissertation, just about ready to go out into the world. He, of course, supported this. He didn't really have too much use for academic art history, either. He loved museum people, because he'd been working with them all his collecting career. He picked up the phone on my behalf—I'm sitting in his office—and started to call people like William Rubin and Martin Friedman. William Rubin then was at the Museum of Modern Art [NY], of course; Martin Friedman was the director of the Walker [Art] Center. These are two of the great figures of the modern/contemporary art world, the museum world, at that time. Calling and saying, "I have got this young kid who really knows his stuff, and I really like him."

One of the people he called was Jim Demetrion, who was extremely well respected—he was director of the Des Moines Art Center. I'd never been

anywhere near the Des Moines Art Center. Jim got interested in me, and I ended up going out for an interview on—I remember it very well—a very cold Iowa winter day. I ended up going to work there. It's a small museum, but with a great collection. Nice acquisition budget. Jim was *extremely* well regarded, especially for his acquisitions. He bought really wonderful things for that museum. He had been the director of the Pasadena Art Museum. Worked with Walter Hopps. I drove off in my Volkswagen and spent two years in Des Moines.

Rubens: Were you married at the time?

01-00:36:25

Benezra: I was not *quite* married. My wife-to-be—girlfriend at that time—had started the art history program at Stanford a couple years after me. She studied German art. Thus began a complicated commuting relationship between us. We got married in Des Moines, though.

I should say that one of the things that we haven't talked about is the fact that working here in the Bay Area, living here in the Bay Area, experiencing this museum under Henry Hopkins, and then working for Hunk Anderson, I developed a real interest in and appreciation for California art and Bay Area art, that I probably wouldn't have had otherwise. So that was something that I shared with Hunk and Al. When I went to Des Moines, it was shared with Jim, because Jim had spent a lot of time in California, too, and he really knew his California art very, very well. So when I was there, we realized that there had never been, really, a great Robert Arneson show. I didn't really know Bob from my time at Davis, but I certainly knew of him very, very well. So I took that on. That was really my first show when I was there, Bob Arneson's work.

What happened in the meantime was that then Jim became the director of the Hirshhorn Museum [and Sculpture Garden]. I'm still in Des Moines. The exhibition began in Des Moines and it came out to the Oakland Museum [of California], and then it also went to the Hirshhorn. It was a nice tour and a *great* experience.

Cándida Smith: This was your first curatorial experience?

01-00:38:52

Benezra: I did some other curatorial work in Des Moines, but this was, I would say, my first touring exhibition. I did an exhibition of a Des Moines painter named Jules Kirschenbaum, who was a very interesting—I don't know how to characterize him—social realist painter, in a certain sense. Wonderful artist. But Arneson was my first big project.

When you're a young curator, you're so eager for exciting projects. I have always had rather catholic tastes. The same person who could do Robert Arneson could also be very interested in Bruce Nauman. That's one of the things that I have always loved. It's another reason why I didn't want to teach

art history, because art historians who teach tend to be focused rather narrowly on a particular set of research interests. You're interested in Rodin, and you make Rodin your career. I always found that idea rather limiting. I loved the idea—what was so great for me about being a curator was that you'd take on Robert Arneson for a couple of years, and then you'd move on to Martin Puryear, or Ed Paschke, or Bruce Nauman, or anyone else—Juan Muñoz, later. You live, in a certain sense, vicariously, through the artists you study. You get *very* engaged with them. You learn a lot from them. That's a wonderful thing. You don't spend forty years on one artist, or one period, or one movement, or one moment.

Rubens: What was important about Arneson at the time, that you liked?

01-00:41:00

Benezra:

Well, I think Bob—I love the freedom that he brought to his work. He was schooled in this tradition of ceramics being an art of making vessels, and craft, and that he had managed through his work to cross a line, so that ceramics became a material of sculpture. It wasn't an endeavour in its own right, the way ceramicists had thrown pots. He found that terrifically limiting, he wanted to think of clay as a material of sculpture, just like bronze or stone or wax or plaster or anything else. He wanted to be a sculptor. He just happened to use clay. He challenged all the conventional wisdom about the history of ceramics. I thought that was pretty great. He had a lot of fun because he had this wonderful wit. He poked holes in all the conventional wisdom that he could. He loved the idea that [Marcel] Duchamp had made *Fountain*, the urinal, and of course, urinals, toilets are made out of ceramics. So this was a wonderful area for him to fuss with and have some fun with. Then of course, as he gets a little older—he had terrible, difficult personal challenges, personal family issues. Then he became ill. He had this utterly transformative moment of the Moscone Memorial, where he was commissioned to make this bust of Moscone and having it not be accepted by the city. That transformed him and his work. He realized he had to take his public role much more seriously than he had in the past. It's a remarkable story of his life and his career.

Rubens: There's a cartoon aspect to his work, too, in the sense that he's poking political—

01-00:43:42

Benezra:

Yes. But the work gets very serious. It's *seriously* funny. You know? For me, this tied together my background and my future at the same time. This is a real great opportunity. I had California roots. I felt really good making a case for great California artists on a national stage.

Rubens: But San Francisco didn't take it as an exhibit.

01-00:44:52

Benezra:

San Francisco did not take it. I don't really remember. We must have offered it. I can't really remember the history of that. But Oakland certainly was



happy to have it. We tried *very* hard to get that show into a New York museum and couldn't. Tried very, very hard.

Cándida Smith: Why couldn't you?

01-00:45:14

Benezra: Well, I think there's always been a sense that—especially in those days—what happened in California was regional activity, and maybe not fit for a New York audience.

Cándida Smith: Or a world audience, therefore.

01-00:45:32

Benezra: Not to mention. Not to mention.

Rubens: Any other exhibits you want to mention at Des Moines?

01-00:45:49

Benezra: No, that's the main thing.

Rubens: Fine. About Demetrian? He left also while you were there.

01-00:45:55

Benezra: He left while I was there. We didn't really work together all that long, maybe a year-and-a-half.

Rubens: Did you connect with him?

01-00:46:01

Benezra: We're still *very*, *very* close. We're *very* close friends.

Rubens: So nothing else particularly to say about Des Moines?

01-00:46:10

Benezra: Well, no, except that it's a great community. Iowa's a really interesting place, and Des Moines's a *terrifically* interesting place. We see this every four years, with the caucuses. A lot of very intelligent people in Des Moines, and some wonderful collectors. It was a very interesting place for a young curator to get his legs, his sea legs, as it were. I started to work with collectors on a modest basis. A smaller scale, but some *very* good collecting went on there.

Cándida Smith: What would you do with the collectors?

01-00:46:46

Benezra: Well, you developed relationships on behalf of the museum. It's the same thing you do anywhere. It was great, because you'd be surprised the quality of the works of art that were in that community.

Rubens: So how do you get to Chicago?

01-00:47:20

Benezra:

At this point, I'm a young curator, I'm in my early thirties. Jim had left to go to the Hirshhorn. I, one day, get a call from a man named Jim Speyer, who was the quite remarkable curator of modern art at the Art Institute of Chicago since the sixties. He had, I'm sure, been in touch with Jim Demetrian, who had recommended me. What they were looking for was a junior curator of contemporary art. I filled the bill. I had a good academic background, enough work experience that it made sense.

Rubens:

You'd been seasoned in the Midwest.

01-00:48:13

Benezra:

The Art Institute of Chicago. When you're in Des Moines, you drive to Chicago for the weekend. So I'd been going to that museum, but I'd never been to Chicago before moving to the Midwest. Chicago has a great tradition of engaging with contemporary art and modern art. I love to tell the story. I had two predecessors in that job at the Art Institute, as the contemporary curator, under Jim Speyer. One was Anne d'Harnoncourt, who at this point, was already the director of the Philadelphia museum, and whose father had been the director of the Museum of Modern Art in the fifties, René d'Harnoncourt. Very distinguished man. Anne was extremely distinguished herself. Then a woman named Anne Rorimer, who was a curator really engaged with contemporary art, and especially conceptual art. Her father had been the director of the Metropolitan Museum, James Rorimer. My father, of course, had been a high school art teacher here in the Bay Area. A story I love to tell. An "only in America" thing.

Cándida Smith:

When did you arrive at Chicago.

01-00:49: 45

Benezra:

1985.

Cándida Smith:

Okay, it's the mid-eighties. The art market has really exploded again in the early eighties, and you have the emergence of the East Village scene in the late seventies.

01-00:50:18

Benezra:

The seventies had been a period dominated nationally, internationally, by conceptual art and a lot of artists who weren't making objects but rather earth works, conceptual art, artists like Lawrence Weiner, Joseph Kosuth. Not a big period for painting. In the early eighties, for the first time in a decade or so—and this is a bit of a simplification, but I think there's some truth to it—painting begins to come back. With it, the art market begins to come back. So you have painters like Susan Rothenberg or Elizabeth Murray or Jennifer Bartlett emerging in New York. You also had, for the first time in a larger sense, an awareness of painters in Europe—so Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke; and then a slightly younger group, Anselm Kiefer and so forth. In New York, the Julian Schnabels and the David Salles. Painting is coming back with

a rush. The art market comes back with it, because finally these dealers have something to sell. I think dealers had a tough time in the seventies, because there wasn't a lot of object making. The art world becomes expansive, with a lot of collecting. Chicago was full of ambitious collectors. Very fine collectors. There's a lot of activity. A *lot* of excitement. A lot of awareness, a lot of travel. People going back and forth to New York a lot, going to Europe a lot.

Cándida Smith: So what are your ambitions when you arrive at Chicago? What is it that you want to do? What mark do you want to make?

01-00:52:29

Benezra: Well, keep in mind, now, I have gone from my experience out here in California, I go to work at the Des Moines Art Center. Small city, small community. A lot of wonderful activity, but not a big profile job. I go to the Art Institute of Chicago, where I'm one of probably thirty curators. I'm probably the youngest one in the whole bunch. This is a museum that, of course, for many, many years, its principal reputation had been for making great Impressionist shows, great [Claude] Monet shows, [Paul] Gauguin shows. This was the bread and butter of that museum. I'm the number two curator in the modern art department. So I didn't have a lot of air time at first. It wasn't so much what I wanted to do, it was what I *could* do. I was there six years. My first couple of years, I really couldn't do very much, quite honestly. I oversaw the collection, installed the collection, took care of a lot of the business of the department. One of the great things was that we had such a great collection and we were constantly lending pictures to exhibitions all over the world. A lot of times, these pictures needed a courier. Because I was one of the junior people on the staff, I became a professional courier for a good couple years. Which was great because—

Cándida Smith: So this would be anything from the modern collection?

01-00:54:02

Benezra: Anything. Well, anything at all. I could transport, I could accompany a Monet or a Gauguin or a Renaissance painting, as well as it could have been a [Pablo] Picasso, to exhibitions, really, all around the world. It was great. You know, "Join the Art Institute and see the world." This was a great opportunity for me to go to see a lot of museums. I met a *lot* of museum people this way. I got to London and Paris and all the Swiss museums, Spain, Italy, and Japan. It was great, because really, I began to see a larger world and meet colleagues in other museums. It was very much a broadening experience. It became another formative aspect for me. Toward the end of my time there, Jim Speyer, who was ill for many years with cancer, passed away. A *wonderful* man. Much beloved in Chicago. I was still very young. So what happened was, a very smart curator named Charles Stuckey came in as the head of the department, and I became the curator of contemporary art. I got a promotion and became the curator, the contemporary curator. At that time, we took on a couple of

shows of Chicago artists, which was a big thing for the Art Institute to do. Martin Puryear and Ed Paschke, arguably the best painter and the best sculptor in Chicago in many, many years. Ed Paschke, wonderful Imagist painter. I did a big show of a wonderful private collector there named Gerry Elliott. I did a big book, and he gave a number of works to the museum. Those were the three big projects I did in maybe my last four, five years there at the Art Institute.

Cándida Smith: Puryear, of course, has developed a real national, and maybe international reputation. Paschke it seems to me, while he's known, has still remained more regionally defined.

01-00:56:40

Benezra: I suppose. I would say that Martin already had a national reputation.

Rubens: At that point?

01-00:56:44

Benezra: At that point. Evidence of that is the fact that the show that we did went to the Museum of Contemporary Art in L. A., it went to the Hirshhorn Museum, and it went to the Philadelphia [Art] Museum. So he had a big national reputation. But the Paschke show is interesting. Ed's an acquired taste for a lot of people. He had a big following in Europe. Maybe more so than in this country. Our show went to the [Centre Georges] Pompidou, which was *quite* a big moment. For a Chicago artist to have a retrospective at the national museum of modern art in France was quite a moment. Interestingly, Ed has become quite influential now. I think a lot of artists, a lot of painters look at his work now. More so than was the case then, it seems to me.

Cándida Smith: As you're putting together these shows, in Des Moines and in Chicago, what are you learning about what works and what doesn't work in making a successful major show?

01-00:58:08

Benezra: Making an exhibition is an art form. You really have to get a lot of things right. You have to pick an artist at the right moment. Each project's very different. You don't curate every show the same way. How one works with an artist varies from artist to artist, and you have to be very sensitive to all the dynamics of that artist's career. I think one of the things you learn is that you don't bring a set of preconceptions about how you work to an exhibition; it's got to be very specific to that artist or that topic. So you curate a show of Martin Puryear's work very differently than you curate a show of Robert Arneson's work. Not just because the work is different, but because the career is different, their engagement with you differs, their trust in you. What's *very* key in all this is having a really strong personal and trusting relationship with the artist. I also learned that art dealers can be your best friends in this process. I think sometimes they're underestimated, in terms of how much knowledge they have. Not just about the art market, but about art. I have spent

a lot of time talking to dealers through the years, and it's really helped me. They have a really privileged relationship with an artist over time. They understand a lot that you may not pick up. If you go to work with an artist for two or three years in a very intense way, you learn a lot. But a dealer, of course, works with an artist, oftentimes, over ten or twenty years. So they have seen more. You want to understand and take advantage of and learn from that relationship. I have always felt that the relationships I have had with art dealers have been very important.

Cándida Smith: They might suggest works that are in private collections?

01-00:60:30

Benezra: They know all of that, but it's just a level of engagement that you want to tap into. Very important. One shouldn't look askance at an art dealer because they're part of the commercial art world. The commercial art world is part of the world that we work in, and you'd be foolish to deny that, it seems to me.

Cándida Smith: In their interviews, artists often say—and I have seen this literally dozens of times—“Well, I had a show, and the curators never have any concern about what I think is important.”

01-00:61:06

Benezra: Well, it's very important. It's a very big difference to curate a show of a deceased artist and a living artist. You can't lose sight of that. People who come to museums really have no idea how difficult it is to be an artist. Artists, more often than not, spend a tremendous amount of time alone with their work. Then you make a big exhibition of their work, and suddenly this is a moment where they bare themselves. They expose themselves—not just their work, but themselves—to the world, after years of working, to some degree, in some isolation. You better be ready for all the sensitivities that they're going to bring to that exposure. It's terrifically important. If you're going to be a good curator, you have to care passionately about what the artists feel, and be, not just sensitive to it, but respectful of what an artist needs and wants, and what they care about, what they're concerned about, what they're afraid of. It's a terrifically important relationship.

[End Audio File 1]

[Begin Audio File 2 12-21-2007.mp3]

Rubens: Richard had asked, what are you looking at, thinking about, that makes a good show? Is there anything that now is a different scale for you?

02-00:00:19

Benezra: I think that the other thing about exhibition making—and keep in mind, I have worked for, now, Jim Demetrian, who's a great connoisseur, a curator and museum director of the old school—Henry Hopkins, Martin Friedman, William Rubin, Jim Demetrian—that generation of museum curators and

museum directors cared passionately about making an exhibition and getting the best objects. This object is better than that object, this is the one we put in the exhibition. This is the one we give the color illustration to. This is the one we put on the cover. It was about quality. That had to do with a philosophy that these men had—and they were men, for the most part—about quality and about how you build a collection. It's about connoisseurship. Connoisseurship has become a little bit of a dirty word in the art world. You don't hear that word. You don't hear the Q-word, quality, so much any more; but it was *the* word in those days. It had to do with making distinctions between this work and that work. If you were making an exhibition of fifty works, you had to get the fifty best works by that artist or on that topic. *Very important*. You were making real qualitative distinctions. I grew up in that tradition. I have worked for a collector, after all, who cared about quality in what he bought. This was what museums, not just in this country, but I think in Europe, too, this was the value. This was the most important thing. Everything else paled in importance, in comparison.

Cándida Smith: Might it not also be what the museum-going public prefers, as well?

02-00:02:23

Benezra: Well, probably. I'm not sure the museum-going public makes those kinds of distinctions to the extent that the professional does. But you'd like them to. This is certainly what you wanted them to do. You wanted your public to think that the professionals in charge of that institution were making distinctions, and this is what we think's important and great.

Rubens: Well, I thought that was also part of the mission of museums in general to educate.

02-00:02:56

Benezra: But this has changed in the intervening years.

Cándida Smith: Are you one of the people changing it?

02-00:03:05

Benezra: I'm a transitional figure, I suppose, because I understand the arguments that younger curators make. I don't always agree with them. And educators make. I don't always agree with them, but the world has changed and it keeps changing. In some ways, it seems to me, my job is to uphold those older values, while still being open to new thinking about art and what's important. The questions that curators now ask, they ask what's great, but they also ask what's important. You define importance in many different ways, beyond aesthetics. It's an interesting debate that we have.

Cándida Smith: So quality was important to you in your exhibits?

02-00:03:53

Benezra: It was the most important thing. This was in my background.

Cándida Smith: And beauty?

02-00:03:59

Benezra: Yes. We can discuss beauty because I did a show on the subject, as you know. It was a big obsession of mine for a number of years, what constituted beauty at the end of the twentieth century.

Rubens: You talk about quality. When we're asking what you have to have in mind, it's also money. The money is going up, to put on these shows, to print the color catalogues. Were you dealing more with boards now than you did?

02-00:04:32

Benezra: Well, I would say by the time I got to Chicago, I was. The reason for that was that, again, this is a very big institution. It's a big, big organization, with many, many curators and many trustees. There's a board of trustees, but then in the modern and contemporary department, we had our own board. We had a committee on modern and contemporary art. Or in those days, it was called twentieth-century painting and sculpture. We changed that later to be more all encompassing. But we had our own board that we reported to. If we had an acquisition we wanted to make, we didn't send it to the board of trustees, we sent it to our committee, which was run, in those days, by a *wonderful* man named Jim Alsdorf. Great collector. Wonderful man. This was in the mid-eighties. What that meant was we had a committee of twenty-five or thirty collectors in Chicago, and they were our board. We related to them, and we had to begin to advocate for what it is we wanted to do to them. It was another phase in your maturation as a curator, in that you now had trustees who you were working with in a very direct way—which is very important training for becoming a museum director, eventually.

Rubens: Are you feeling competitive with the [Museum of] Contemporary [Art] in Chicago? You feeling you're going to have to get in and get some of this stuff before they do?

02-00:06:01

Benezra: There was a healthy, very healthy competition between the two museums.

Rubens: They were small at the time.

02-00:06:06

Benezra: Totally different institutions. They were very small, we were very large. They move very quickly, we move slowly. We had the tradition, they were trying to establish a tradition for themselves. It was a very positive situation.

Cándida Smith: In terms of acquisitions in Chicago, were there one or two pieces that you were particularly proud of having gotten?

02-00:06:34

Benezra: Gosh, when I was there, we acquired works by Gerhard Richter, and we acquired works by Anselm Kiefer, Martin Puryear. We didn't have a lot of

money to buy art with. Most of the works that had come into that collection, contemporary works, had come in by way of gift, quite frankly, and so we were working very hard on gifts, as much as purchases.

Cándida Smith: Which seems like that's a continuing responsibility that you're going to have.

02-00:07:10

Benezra: Yes.

Cándida Smith: Perhaps not at the Hirshhorn so much.

02-00:07:12

Benezra: At the Hirshhorn, we had more money to buy art with. We had an endowment there. We received some gifts, but not so many. There, it was really about buying. We made a lot of purchases there. Many more than in Chicago.

Cándida Smith: How are your ideas about hanging or exhibition developing? How do you want to present the work? What are the options in that universe?

02-00:08:08

Benezra: Well, the options were interesting, because this man Jim Speyer, who I mentioned, who had been the curator of modern art there [Art Institute of Chicago] for many, many years—since, I think, the early sixties—was a *dazzling* installer of art. He was an architect. He took *incredible* liberties in his installations. Nothing was impossible. Wall colors. He'd hang paintings from the ceiling, not even on the wall. Wonderful, extravagant installations. He was celebrated for these installations. So on the one hand, one understood that there was an absolutely straight-ahead way of installing paintings, in a clear, understandable, modern way; but then there was always this other approach to installation that I'd picked up from Jim Speyer along the way, that was also a wonderful tool in my toolbox; that you could feel free to hang things in a more liberated way.

Cándida Smith: Which means?

02-00:09:24

Benezra: Well, for example, I remember installing a Gerhard Richter show in Chicago, and he painted this great series of paintings of planes. I remember hanging them almost Victorian style, up high—they were planes, after all. Or I remember installing works by Alexander Calder, and how *do* you install a Calder? It's not so obvious. I remember installing a piece, it was a Calder fish, and installing it literally almost on the floor. It's a fish! You don't hang a fish up high. You could have some fun installing art. It was okay. You didn't have to feel constrained by the tradition of hanging art. Anything you could do to make that experience for the public vivid was in play.

Cándida Smith: So when you reinstall the modern collection, you are, of course, retelling the story of modern art, in so doing.



02-00:10:23

Benezra: Well, now, let's not give me too much credit here, because Charlie Stuckey really installed the modern collection. I worked with him. I installed the contemporary things.

Cándida Smith: Which at that time meant post-1950? 1960?

02-00:10:35

Benezra: Even more recent than that. But here's another approach. So I had Jim Speyer, a very aesthetic approach, in my mental makeup. But Charlie Stuckey, who has much more of a historian's approach to installing art, what he wanted to do with the modern collection was something that I think—I don't know anyone else who's ever done this—was totally un-aesthetic. What he wanted to do was to install in an absolutely chronological manner. So you'd walk into a gallery, and there was 1922. It could have been a very late Monet hanging next to a post-World War I Picasso, next to a surrealist picture. It made no aesthetic sense at all. It argued for a very un-aesthetic understanding of the history of art. After all, as Charlie would say, all these things were going on at the same time.

Cándida Smith: But not in the same room.

02-00:11:41

Benezra: But it was a cross-section of what was happening in art. He was totally liberated in his thinking about this.

Cándida Smith: Did you like that idea?

02-00:11:51

Benezra: When it worked, it was brilliant. When it didn't work, it was a disaster.

Rubens: And why wouldn't it work?

02-00:11:59

Benezra: Well, it wouldn't work because you'd put two things next to each other that made it hard to look at them. You were so off-put by the relationship that he'd created that you just couldn't stand it. It caused you not to spend time with the pictures. But when it worked, it was *fabulous*. It was very unpopular with the public, who probably were terribly confused by it, who didn't have the art historical background.

[End of Interview]

**Interview #2: February 28, 2008**

[Begin Audio File 3 02-28-2008.mp3]

03-00:00:00

Benezra: I had a couple different titles, as I recall, while I was there [the Hirshhorn]. I can't remember them all. I ended up being assistant director.

Rubens: It says "associate director of art and public programming."

Cándida Smith: When you go there, 1991, that's—

03-00:00:17

Benezra: I think what happened was that I was appointed chief curator but soon I assumed this larger role. I took over education and some other departments, too.

Cándida Smith: This is your first executive position, or managerial position, would you say?

03-00:00:45

Benezra: Of any consequence, yes. I'd supervised some people in Chicago, but not very many. I think I had about twenty people reporting to me at the Hirshhorn, something like that. Indirectly or directly.

Cándida Smith: You're independently developing programming?

03-00:01:00

Benezra: I was in charge of the program.

Cándida Smith: This is paralleling the interview that we had with Madeleine, so I'm looking at some big topics: how your thinking about exhibitions, collection development, and the museum public has changed as your career developed at the Hirshhorn, you go back to the Art Institute, and then you come out here as the director. I wonder if you could identify one or two exhibitions that were particularly important to you for learning what would make a really successful exhibition in *your* terms, not necessarily in the terms of, say, somebody like Charles Stuckey, who you had previously worked for. Your own terms, your own sense of what works.

03-00:02:25

Benezra: Well, it seems to me that there are many different kinds of exhibitions that fulfill many different kinds of purpose or need. I have always believed that one size doesn't fit all. That's an approach to museums in general, it seems to me. Furthermore—and I think this has become more on my mind as I have acquired more responsibility in my various jobs—is that a good, healthy institution really ought to have range in its program. It shouldn't be one-dimensional, otherwise it's not meeting the whole variety of different needs. When you begin as a young curator and you're eager to make exhibitions, and only later you become more inclined toward collection work. But that only

comes, I think, with maturity. What you want as a young curator is to make exhibitions that have catalogues, that tour to other museums, that are exciting and interesting in one way or another. But there are different kinds of shows for different sorts of needs, and curators tend to think—young curators, in particular—tend to think, if I could just have that one exhibition that would go to other major museums, that makes a successful exhibition. It's not so much about the audience, it's about your professional needs, your personal and professional needs.

Cándida Smith: Your peers.

03-00:04:22

Benezra: It's about your peers. It's about résumé building. I think that's often times the case. It's something that one sees with younger curators. They really want to have that opportunity. Understandably so. But as you develop and mature, you start to think about, well, what really makes a good exhibition? Some exhibitions are about important ideas, some are about important artists. You begin to want to vary your résumé, as it were, and vary the exhibitions that you present to your public.

Rubens: Is someone telling you this, though? Is this something that's evolving as you're moving from Chicago to the Hirshhorn, back to Chicago?

03-00:05:07

Benezra: Well, is someone telling you this? No. If you're smart, you're certainly a student of what other people are doing. You see what you want to emulate and what you want to avoid. You test a variety of different models, and you start to think about who makes the great exhibitions and who doesn't, and what comes to characterize them. It, in my case, was the result of lots and lots of conversations through the years with Jim Demetron, who was really the first, and certainly, the most important mentor I had. He had very particular ideas about what made a great exhibition. I didn't always subscribe to all of them, but I certainly learned a lot about how to work within the model that he favored. I went on to do other things as I went along. In my case, the first few exhibitions I did were monographic exhibitions. They're, in some ways, the easiest exhibitions to do. Let's not say they're easy, but they're *easier*, certainly.

Cándida Smith: Such as Bob Arneson?

03-00:06:21

Benezra: Bob Arneson, or Martin Puryear, or I did a show of Ed Paschke's work. These were rather straightforward exhibitions because there was a body of work, the artist was alive, you worked in partnership with that artist. There were certainly dealers who could help you locate work and help you obtain loans, in some cases. You write a monographic essay, you bring in a guest essayist. It's pretty straightforward. I really came to believe, that when you did a monographic show of an artist, you really had to go out and borrow the most

important pieces. That had to do with quality, however one defined that. Judgments having to do with quality were coming into question about this time. But Jim felt, and I think I still feel, that there are great works that you have got to have if you're going to make a great exhibition of a particular artist.

Cándida Smith: Well, given the critique of quality, given the critique of subjectivity that's going on in the eighties and nineties, and the postmodern deconstruction of what art is supposed to be, how were you redefining in your mind what is quality? How do I know that this William Kentridge work is going to be more impressive to the public than this other William Kentridge work?

03-00:07:54

Benezra: Well, I think where I would deviate from Jim Demetrian's model, he would define it in terms of quality, aesthetic quality; this work was better than that work. I began to expand upon that. When you're thinking, for example, of Bob Arneson—Bob's a very good example of this, but Bruce Nauman is an even better example. I'm sure we'll come to that in a moment. Bob Arneson made some works that were better than others. One could say that. But he also made some works that were more *important* than others, historically. Might not have been the most refined work aesthetically, but it had such an important seminal role in the development of his career that you needed to represent it. It seems to me that an exhibition needs to not just identify the best works, but it also needs to give a real sense of an artist's career—how it developed, why it developed that way, what the landmark moments were. It may be because—and we spoke about this in our previous conversation—I was a political science major as well as an art history major, that I do have a strong sense of history in the development of an artist's career and body of work; that there are moments that one needs to be thinking about, not just the best moments, creatively.

Rubens: I think you also indicated that you were aware of the great political changes that were taking place in the country.

03-00:09:27

Benezra: In a case like Bob Arneson, he had *real* moments of importance as an artist, but his [San Francisco Mayor George] Moscone experience here in San Francisco transformed his career. One could argue that the Moscone bust that he made, commissioned for the Moscone Center here, may not have been the best work of art he ever made, but it might very well have been the most important. Let me say that again. Might not have been aesthetically the best, in terms of quality, that he ever made; but it was, without question, the most important, historically. It had the most important impact on his subsequent career. So you had to represent that, if you possibly could.

Cándida Smith: Let's apply this to Bruce Nauman, who several people from very different places have said, "Oh, that's one of the most important shows that's ever been done."

03-00:10:21

Benezra: This was a very interesting experience, and probably the most important, and in some ways, complex and interesting curatorial experience I had in making exhibitions. Bruce was a very important artist, but a very complicated artist. Not all of his best works were the most aesthetically impressive works. He worked with ideas. He was always willing to put an idea out in the world and test it and see. That idea became a work. It didn't require the aesthetic finish that works of art have traditionally had. The great beauty of this project was that I had an opportunity to work with a co-curator. I have always enjoyed working with co-curators, frankly.

I worked with an individual who I really didn't know very well at the time. But we came together because we represented two very good museums, the Art Institute of Chicago and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. That was Kathy Halbreich. We didn't really know each other until we met, but we brought these two institutions—interestingly, not two museums of modern, not to mention not contemporary art, but two historical art museums, two of the great historical museums in the country, if not the world—to do this show. Coming from perhaps a more traditional background, we wanted to make sure that we made a great monographic show. After all, this was going to be *the* great Bruce Nauman show that everyone had been waiting not only to see but to do. Curators had been waiting for decades to do this show. So we had to have the great works there. But Kathy, coming from a very different point of view, wanted to make sure that Bruce's most important ideas were represented. So you had this wonderful partnership where we respected one another, we each understood why what the other one cared about was important, but we countered one another. She would be insistent upon our having certain works of art that barely qualified as works of art. They were ideas, in some cases, that Nauman had conceived of but never executed in any form whatsoever. We made those part of the show. Bruce loved us because here he had this very unusual team of curators, who obviously liked and respected each other very much, but who were going to represent the complexity and the range and the complication of his work.

Cándida Smith: From your point of view, are you trying to pull him back from an anti-aesthetic interpretation? No?

03-00:13:13

Benezra: No, no, not at all. Kathy would never deny that he made great, certifiable masterpieces. This is what was so remarkable about Nauman, still is remarkable; he made great works that were also great ideas. Fantastic opportunity. So we had a tremendously good time doing this. It was wonderful.

Rubens: Where did the idea originate for the exhibit?

03-00:13:40

Benezra: Well, Nauman had had a big early retrospective—retrospective, it was really a survey show—very early in his career, in the late sixties, when he was perhaps too young to be accorded such an honor, frankly. He then had shied away from making an exhibition of any real consequence for a number of years, and *many* curators had lined up, trying to do this. I think Bruce was intrigued because we represented these two historical museums. I think he could see that this was going to be no ordinary show. We were really committed to it. One of the things that I think was important in all of this was that we said we'd like to do a catalogue raisonné at the same time.

Rubens: The catalogue and the exhibit won prizes.

03-00:14:35

Benezra: Won a lot of prizes. He's just one of the great artists. But it's not obvious how you do an exhibition of an artist who's a conceptual artist. How do you do a catalogue raisonné of a conceptual artist? When does an idea become a work of art? Wonderful!

Cándida Smith: Does it need to be a work of art?

03-00:14:55

Benezra: Well, we redefined it, and frankly, we put works in the catalogue raisonné that had never actually existed physically. We created works in the show that Bruce had never actually produced. He'd made, for example, a proposal for a show, a sculpture show, but the work had never been made. He had developed a drawing or a text, and we made it into a work of art. He had drafted, for example, a text having to do with a dancer in gallery making a certain series of movements through the gallery. Never been realized. So we actually, at each venue, hired someone to come in and act out what the text that Bruce had written twenty-five years earlier called for. Wonderful! That's the heart of what his work is about.

Cándida Smith: In terms of the shows that you have done, how many of them have come from your decision, "*I want to do this,*" as opposed to doing shows that have been put in the hopper.

03-00:16:10

Benezra: Well, all kinds of ways. For example, I was a young curator at the Art Institute of Chicago, a big institution with lots of curators and only so much gallery space. You really had to wait your turn to get an opportunity to make a show. I *really* wanted to make a show. I felt myself just spinning my wheels a lot of the time. So I remember very well, one day, Jim Wood, the director there, who's a wonderful man, I remember him coming to me and saying, "I want you to do a show of Martin Puryear's work." So after I picked my jaw up off the table, I got to work. What a great thing that turned out to be for me. I think

for Martin, too. But a much more traditional show, in the sense that Martin has made a very focused body of work, and you go out and borrow the best pieces, and create a great catalogue, work very closely with the artist. Bruce Nauman was my personal desire, and I had to work very hard to get it on the schedule at the Art Institute of Chicago and keep it on the schedule. It was very hard because it was an expensive proposition and it was probably going to have a limited audience. In a big general museum like that, it was a real struggle.

Cándida Smith: Did it have a limited audience?

03-00:17:36

Benezra: Well, what ended up happening was that neither of our two museums, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, or the Art Institute of Chicago, were terribly committed to this show. As much as I love Jim Wood, I don't think he ever really particularly understood Nauman's work, at least at that time. So when Kathy left to become the director of the Walker Art Center and I went to become the chief curator at the Hirshhorn, in effect, the show came with us. It never was seen in Boston or Chicago, as a result.

Cándida Smith: So it opened in places that could be considered more appropriate for the subject.

03-00:18:17

Benezra: Well, part of it also is the fact that we worked for years making this show. It was almost inevitable, in some ways, that as our careers developed, that we would change jobs. It happens. There's no criticism of anybody, it's just this is the nature of exhibition, I think.

Cándida Smith: When you arrived here, what were your thoughts about the kinds of exhibitions you wanted to see developed as you took over this museum?

03-00:18:51

Benezra: Again, institutions are different in any given city at any different time. Here, one of the things I found when I arrived was that, as someone who'd been watching this museum for many, many years. I *grew up* in this museum and loved it and knew the collection well. I had noticed when I was either in Washington or Chicago that you'd oftentimes pick up the *New York Times*. One of the first things that people in the art world do is they turn to page two of their "Arts" section on Friday morning to read the news in the Carol Vogel column. Invariably, I would open up the Friday *New York Times* and go to Carol Vogel, and find a listing of some new, wonderful work of art that this museum had acquired. This went on for years. It made you very envious of what was happening out here. Then I'd come out here, because my family was still living here and San Francisco was still my home in a lot of ways. I'd come to the museum and I wouldn't see any of these things. The museum was full of special exhibitions.

Rubens: Are you talking about the old building?

03-00:20:16

Benezra: No, in the new building.

Rubens: Even at the new building.

03-00:20:17

Benezra: After 1995, now.

Rubens: When it opened here.

03-00:20:20

Benezra: The collection was growing quantitatively and qualitatively, but you just didn't see these great works of art on view very much. You saw lots of special exhibitions. Like a lot of museums, it had become exhibition-happy. I remember coming to work at SFMOMA and one of the first things I did was to ask Kent Roberts [Exhibition Design Manager], who really has been responsible for many, many years, for installing this collection, to run some figures for me, do some checking, and tell me what the relative balance between collections and exhibitions in the galleries at that moment when I arrived here was. He told me, not to my surprise, but to my shock and horror, that 70 percent of the gallery space was used for special exhibitions, and 30 percent for collections. I thought this was all wrong. It was all wrong on a number of different levels. Here the museum was struggling to balance its budget, and yet we were making one exhibition after another. So, fiscally, it didn't make a lot of sense.

Creatively, it didn't make a lot of sense because, as I said, the collection had grown so brilliantly and wonderfully. The sign, to me, of a great and mature museum is that it is dedicated to its collection. For every reason, we just had to put more effort into the collection, and put more of it on view. Soon after I arrived, I remember speaking to Madeleine Grynsztejn [Senior Curator, Painting and Sculpture] about this. She told me that the staff had not really ever had the time or taken the time to reinstall the collection. Wouldn't it be great if she and Janet Bishop [Curator, Painting and Sculpture] could really take it seriously and not just replace a painting here or there when it went on loan or came back from loan, but to really do a serious examination of the collection and reinstall it from beginning to end. That finally happened. They did a wonderful job.

Cándida Smith: When your curators are discussing programming and they propose a possible exhibition, what are the kinds of questions that you as the director, with aesthetic interests and a business model and administrative concerns in mind, what questions are you likely to pose to them before you decide whether you're going to support that idea or not?



03-00:23:16

Benezra:

Well, it's not so much posing questions to them, it's a conversation that we have. A lot of it, for me, has to do with balance, what balance you're creating in the institution at any given time. If there's a Picasso show, that makes it possible to have an [Olafur] Eliasson show. You balance the modern and the contemporary, which I think is very important for us. I saw this when I came here. Not just creatively, but fiscally, that we had to have not just a balance between collection and exhibition, but we had to have a balance between modern and contemporary. That is to say, if we were a small contemporary art museum with a small membership and a relatively small audience, a small operating budget, a small staff, we could afford to offer a steady diet of contemporary art all the time. That would be, in some ways, a very wonderful thing. All the many museums of contemporary art in the United States do that, and there's nothing wrong with it. But we're a rather larger institution. We're not a modern museum on the scale of MoMA, but we're also not a small contemporary institution. We have 40,000 members, and we like to have 600,000 visitors. To maintain our equilibrium, you need to have a balanced program.

Cándida Smith: Because the broader public prefers the classics?

03-00:24:59

Benezra:

I think for the most part, that's true, although we just concluded a wonderful group of shows from Joseph Cornell to Jeff Wall to Olafur Eliasson. We had great attendance, especially for the Eliasson show. He is, I think, the rare exception that disproves the rule, because so many people, from all points of view and age groups and aesthetic inclinations, came to see that show. But for the most part, we'll have a more general, larger general audience for the modern shows, and a slightly more particular audience, contemporary-minded audience, and generally a little younger, for more contemporary work. I think we need to have both.

Cándida Smith: In your collective discussions, all of you are tossing out ideas about what the possibilities are?

03-00:25:57

Benezra:

The way I have run things here, for better and worse, probably, is that we don't have big curatorial meetings to discuss the program. I feel as though I have got to keep a handle on this, and I cannot be as democratic as I might like. I have got to be the "decider," to quote our president. I have got to have the final word on the program because there's so much riding on the decisions that we make and it can't be decided by too many people. However, I sit down with the curators in a given department and try very, very hard to let them do the shows they want to do. They may not always be able to do them when they want to do them, because I have got to keep this balance. But I think if you ask the curators here, they would tell you that they'd have a hard time naming a show that they really wanted to do that they were not able to do. It's just a matter of when we can schedule things.

Cándida Smith: You're also keeping your ears and eyes open for shows that have been curated elsewhere that you could bring here?

03-00:27:13

Benezra: This is something I really put myself into, because our curators are generally contemporary curators. For the most part, they have not proposed shows of their own making that are modern shows. So one of my principal tasks, frankly, in the last few years, has been to go out and identify and bring to the museum shows that have had more general, broader historical interest.

Cándida Smith: Like "Picasso and American Art."

03-00:27:43

Benezra: Picasso, or "Matisse Sculpture." Shows like that might not have come here unless I said, "Look, we have got to have this show."

Cándida Smith: If we take a department like Architecture and Design, are there special considerations that you bring to bear when you think about the exhibits that those curators propose?

03-00:28:05

Benezra: Well, I have to say I know a lot more about the history of modern and contemporary art than I know about the history of architecture and design. We have two departments here that are much larger than the others, Painting and Sculpture, and Photography. Certainly, there's no question they receive most of the gallery space, most of the air time. But we do have a lively community and a lively staff interest in architecture and design. It is a challenge to keep that modern and contemporary balance in place, and the monographic versus the thematic because the profession doesn't produce the number of architecture and design shows that it might. They tend not to travel very often. They tend to be specific shows for a particular museum.

Rubens: Were you looking at that at all in Chicago or at the Hirshhorn? At architecture and design?

03-00:29:03

Benezra: No. Again, keep in mind I was a junior curator of painting and sculpture. I had nothing to do with [other areas]. I was not responsible for the overall programming.

Cándida Smith: So it's a little bit more difficult for you to evaluate architecture and design proposals, but you do evaluate.

03-00:29:53

Benezra: Well, I think your job is to hire the best people you can and trust them as well as you can. It depends on where someone is in his or her career and what it is they want to produce. Every curator brings a different point of view to things. The negotiations that one has with a curator are very complicated. Some of the best fun you have is working with your curators. For example, just yesterday,

Ruth Berson, my deputy director, who's really responsible for the program, Sandy Phillips, and Corey Keller, we sat down for a meeting that we have every several months where we really go through the photography program. Sandy will come in with a list of a dozen shows that she'd like to do. We try to figure out how to do them all, in what order, what the needs are, what the balance is, what the curators need, and what books we can produce. There are many factors that you take into account. Budgets, obviously. What can you raise money for?

Cándida Smith: And raising money is primarily from patrons, or primarily from NEH and—?

03-00:31:16

Benezra: Depends on the project, depends on the show, depends on the curator. Sometimes from foundations, sometimes from corporations, sometimes from individuals. It depends on the field. One of the things I love about this profession is that no two projects are alike. You put together one team of people to work on one project in one case, and then you have to start all over the next time because the dynamics change constantly.

Cándida Smith: Are you still curating yourself, from time to time?

03-00:31:50

Benezra: From time to time, I guess I would say, but only in a very limited way. I co-curated, at least nominally, the Jeff Wall show that we organized with the Museum of Modern Art. But really, Peter Galassi was the lead curator.

Cándida Smith: Did you hang it?

03-00:32:04

Benezra: I installed it here, yes.

Cándida Smith: You were in charge of the installation?

03-00:32:08

Benezra: I was in charge of it here, no question. But the hanging of a show is the easy part of it. That's the fun.

Rubens: We had an interesting conversation the last time about how you thought that the Picasso should be hung differently.

03-00:32:27

Benezra: We can talk about that some more.

Rubens: We didn't really talk about the substance of what it was that you wanted to express.

03-00:32:33

Benezra: In the Picasso show?

Rubens: That had not been expressed in the way that it was hung before.

03-00:32:39

Benezra: To install a show for the first time somewhere is one thing, but then you can learn from whatever mistakes or whatever successes that another curator had, when it comes to your museum. It was Madeleine Grynsztejn's show to install, the Picasso show, and we both agreed that there were some things that we would do differently when it came to SFMOMA. We edited some things out, we used some different wall colors.

Cándida Smith: Did you rearrange things at all?

03-00:33:20

Benezra: I wouldn't say we *rearranged* things, but we emphasized certain things and deemphasized other things. It was really Madeleine's doing, but she and I agreed about what needed to be done.

Rubens: The question in the last interview was, were you trying to tell a different story about modern art than what had been told.

03-00:33:42

Benezra: No, because that was a show that told a very specific story. I feel that if you contract with another museum and another curator to take a show, you need to be respectful of that. You don't tell a different story.

Rubens: Since we probably won't see you after the Puryear comes, is there something particular about the Puryear?

03-00:34:12

Benezra: The Puryear show is the first big retrospective. They naturally came to us because they knew I was interested in Puryear.

Rubens: Are you going to redo it in some way? Have you gotten to that point yet?

03-00:34:29

Benezra: First of all, it's the curator's show, not mine. I think they'll probably get me involved a little bit, but I'm going to do my very best to stay out of it, frankly.

Cándida Smith: If we shift from exhibitions to the collection, which you have emphasized a couple of times as being very important to you, I presume that it's really only when you arrive here as director that you get a full sense of what's in the collection. Were there any secret treasures that you hadn't known about?

03-00:35:09

Benezra: Since I have been here, I would say I have been more involved with the exhibition program than the collection. I give the curators a tremendous amount of autonomy in terms of what they acquire. I get involved when there's something complicated or expensive. There are all kinds of interesting and difficult things that one has to do these days to collect art. It's not such a

straightforward thing as it was once. I'm an advocate for the collection, with the curators. I'm always eager for them to do more with the collection than they're doing at any given time. I think what happens is that, as I said earlier, a curator starts his or her career, and they're very engaged with exhibitions. They tend not to be that involved with collecting art, or with the collection until they get a little older and they don't need the spotlight that shines on one when you make exhibitions. When you work with a collection, that's a quieter form of work in a museum. You're out of the public spotlight sometimes, and you're just working quietly to do the work, the hard work that one does with a collection.

Rubens: Surely, one of the great sorrows was that the Anderson Collection didn't come here. Of course when the museum hired you, they knew that you had been, and presumably, remained friends with the Andersons.

03-00:37:03

Benezra: Very friendly.

Rubens: Was that hope behind the hire? As well as your skills, of course.

03-00:37:11

[Paragraph deleted by NB in editing]

Benezra: Curators and directors spend a lot of time with collectors. As much as we possibly can. It's great fun. But for example, one of the things that Madeleine and I found—we found this in the last five years, I would say—is that at one time, if you were a collecting curator, you went to New York and you shopped. You went to galleries and you did the work that you do. Now, not only has the art market changed so dramatically structurally, so that it's not just New York, but there're all these other cities that one needs to be conversant with. We now have the emergence of art fairs and auctions to such a great extent. It used to be, even ten years ago, that you could go to the Basel art fair, the great art fair in the world, and really be a player as a museum person. You could really look and shop. Dealers were eager to sell things to museums, so they'd hold things long enough that you could bring it back and show it to your board, study it, do the work that was needed, and then could perhaps buy it. Now, because of not just the prices, but the onslaught of collecting activity is so profound that you go to the Basel art fair or the Miami art fair, or any of the art fairs, and we're just bit players. What we're really doing is advising collectors on what *they* should buy.

Cándida Smith: With the hopes that it'll then be—

03-00:41:01

Benezra: With the hopes.

Cándida Smith: What about fractional gifts, your involvement with fractional gifts?

03-00:41:07

Benezra:

Well, this museum—and this predates my arrival, but it’s something that I certainly loved to find when I arrived here—this museum has been one of the leaders, if not *the* institutional leader, in the acquisition of fractional gifts. We have been very aggressive about this, and I think, done a wonderful job. We actually have—at one time; I think we still have—more fractional gifts than any museum in the country. Over 800.

Rubens:

Though the tax law’s changed.

03-00:41:37

Benezra:

It was a wonderful thing. It was wonderful because as prices went up, it meant that museums and collectors could really work together to see that things came into the community, and eventually to the museum. So that a collector could buy something, make a fractional gift. That gives them access to works that they might not have had access to, highly desirable works. The museum receives a fractional gift, doesn’t have to spend its own money; knows, if the gift was not just fractional, but promised as well, that someday, somehow, that work would come into the collection. You could collect around that. That was a hole in the collection you didn’t need to fill, because you knew that a collector had made it possible. It was *wonderful!* The other thing that was wonderful about it for collectors was that if a work of art appreciated, they could receive benefit out of appreciation with their subsequent fractional gifts; that was *tremendous* encouragement for them to engage in this practice. Because it made not just aesthetic sense, but tax sense as well. If there was ever something that wasn’t broken and didn’t need to be fixed, this was it. Unfortunately, Congress fixed it. I’d have to check the statistics, but in the first year after fractional giving was phased out, our giving went down precipitously. I don’t think Congress had any idea this was going to happen. I don’t think it was the intention. They were trying to do away with what they perceived to be abuse, which I never experienced. I *honestly* never experienced. But there it is. So it’s really harmed our, and I have to believe other museums’, giving and acquisition programs, as a result.

Cándida Smith:

I want to go into Madeleine’s roadmap, which I presume has analogs with the other, in the other departments.

03-00:43:50

Benezra:

Not quite the same. She took that in a very particular way that the others haven’t done, exactly. They have it a little more informally, I guess I would say.

Cándida Smith:

As you looked at that every year and heard her presentation, what seemed realistic to you? Could you identify, okay, I think this year we can work on this or that?

03-00:44:13

Benezra:

Well, the roadmap was a really useful tool. It focused not only the curators, it focused the collectors, in terms of what we needed. It kept them educated, not only to what we felt was important, but what we could use, what we really value and what we would like to have in the collection. But collecting is, in so many ways, opportunistic. It's not something that you can say, "This year we're going to go out and get an Andy Warhol painting," because it just might not happen. The market changes, things are available, and you have to be opportunistic and ready to jump at an opportunity if it comes your way. It always made me a little bit nervous that we were being so specific about what it was we needed. Madeleine will tell you the same thing, that we knew full well that there were other things we needed too, and if something came along, we had to be ready to go. But it was a *very* useful tool, no question about it. And Madeleine did a great job with the acquisitions committee.

Cándida Smith:

So in your tenure here, have acquisitions been largely fortuitous, then? In terms of the bigger-scale things.

03-00:45:26

Benezra:

No, I wouldn't say they have been fortuitous, but you have to realize that there have only been so many big-scale things. The market is against us in every conceivable way. We have gotten some wonderful pieces, but they tend to have been pieces by a mid-career artist like William Kentridge or Rachel Whiteread, or we could name some others. There have been a couple of occasions where we have gone out and gotten something that was maybe a little grander. It's hard to describe a Vija Celmins painting—which is maybe my favorite work that we have acquired since I have been here—as grand, because it's a very small picture, very intimate and wonderful. But it was an expensive acquisition, and major in every way.

Rubens:

The Kiki Smith?

03-00:46:08

Benezra:

Again, another mid-career artist. Vija Celmins, a more senior artist.

Cándida Smith:

It was the strategy of this museum, probably for the first four or five decades, to go out and buy a whole bunch of young artists, for very little money, 95 percent of whom will probably not turn out to be what you hoped.

03-00:46:33

Benezra:

There's the famous statement from Alfred Barr that all museum people always quote when they want to justify buying a lot of contemporary work. Barr said that "If 10 percent of the works that I acquire stand the test of time, then I will have been a success." It's true. But I do think there is an absence of collecting skills among curators these days. There are a lot of reasons for this. I think museums tend to acquire too much, and they would be better served acquiring fewer, better pieces, if they possibly can. Again, the market's against you. But

I wouldn't want the market to be an excuse for a lack of judgment, which I think is sometimes the case.

Cándida Smith: But it sounds, then, that your inclination is to slow down the pace of acquisition and work for the more significant pieces that would flesh out the collection.

03-00:47:45

Benezra: If I had my druthers, I would. But there are also exceptions. Sandy Phillips, who is a marvelous collector and has had great impact on this collection, the photography collection, is a great believer in vernacular photography. Now, it's very hard to describe quality, when you speak about vernacular photography. Now, I would not go to her at this point in her career and say, "Sandy, do we really have to acquire all these things?" Because in some ways, it's one of the pillars on which her career has been predicated. So it's an interesting challenge.

Rubens: You have a new photography storehouse with the [M. H.] de Young [Memorial Museum].

03-00:48:50

Benezra: You're speaking of the Sack Trust, the Sack Photographic Trust. Paul Sack is one of our great photography collectors, and he's one of the senior members of our board, just a passionate collector of photography for many, many years. He was, I believe, the first chair of our photo accessions committee. He has worked very closely with Sandy for many, many years, and he is just a wonderful man. What Paul did was to establish, with the museum, something called the Sack Photographic Trust. So that when Paul acquires a work of art, eventually it goes into that trust, and the trust is held for the museum. On Paul's death, the entire collection will become ours.

Rubens: I thought it was to be shared.

03-00:49:38

Benezra: This was established several years ago, and it's been working beautifully for a long time. We have works on view from the Sack Photographic Trust, at all times. Paul is such an enthusiast for photography, that when the de Young was opening their new building out in the park a couple of years ago, Paul saw an opportunity to see more photographs on the wall than we can show. So he said, "Isn't there something we could do with the de Young?" So what we did, with Harry Parker, was to sit down and work out a deal. We're still the beneficiaries of the trust, but we act as a library, a lending library to the de Young. They come to us and they say, "Here's twenty-five photographs we'd like to borrow for a period of time." Unless we have some reason why they shouldn't—either we need them for our galleries or there's a conservation reason why they shouldn't be loaned—we lend them to them. No problem. There are *plenty* of photographs to go around. It works beautifully. I would say it not just works beautifully, it is, to my way of thinking, maybe



unprecedented that a private collector in a particular form gives his collection to a museum, creates a trust for us, and then that museum turns around and says, “We’re going to share it. We’re willing to share it with a museum in our city.” I don’t know that that’s ever happened before.

Cándida Smith: Did the distinctive profiles of the museums play at all into the agreement? Like there are certain things that they’re supposed to focus on?

03-00:51:20

Benezra: No. No. They have access to whatever they want, as long as we don’t have a prior need.

Rubens: In the same vein, the other innovative collaborative role that you have played is with the Tate [Museum] and the Modern [MoMA, NY].

03-00:51:37

Benezra: New Art Trust. It seems to me that—and it’s very much in the spirit of this museum, it seems to me—that we need to find, given all the things we have been talking about moving in that direction—the market, in particular, and the availability of great works of art, the unaffordability of things these days—that we have got to all find different ways to make acquisitions and build collections and work with collectors, and work with the art market in innovative ways.

Rubens: Now, I had one last question regarding the collection. Speaking of the first few years of the mission of the museum—I’m talking about ’35 into the forties—the emphasis on Latin America and on Asia. I wondered if you had a comment on that, because certainly, that’s not a direction that the museum has really emphasized in the last several decades.

03-00:52:28

Benezra: Not to the same extent. Sandy’s been very much a pioneer in looking at Asian photography—Japanese in particular, but recently Chinese. Part of the problem is, frankly, it’s a big world and our travel budgets are only so large. We only have so many curators and they can only cover so much territory, chronological and geographical. I think our curators would love to travel more and know more and acquire more and exhibit more, internationally. We’re quite international, but can I tell you that we have our curatorial boots on the ground in Asia and Africa and South America? Not really.

Rubens: I would think the fragmentation of museums into identity museums, whether it’s the Asian [Art Museum of San Francisco]—I don’t know how modern they go—or certainly, the Mexican American, does that figure into what we’re going to focus on?

03-00:53:18

Benezra: No, it really has to do with the fact that we all recognize that contemporary art, as it’s practiced today and as it’s understood today, is not this neat axis

from North America to Western Europe. There are a lot of other axes that we need to be mindful of. We really care about contemporary art in South America. Absolutely. But it's hard to get people down there often enough to make themselves knowledgeable enough for us to do quality work.

Cándida Smith: It seems, then, to some degree, you have relied on the connections that you and your curators or previous directors had made, say with Doris Salcedo, for example.

03-00:54:03

Benezra: Salcedo is an artist who I had acquired work by and shown in my curatorial life, and Madeleine was very friendly with and had done the same with, and our predecessors had acquired work of Salcedo's. So that was a logical place for this museum to build some real strength, which we did.

Cándida Smith: Though it is curious that you have real strength with Salcedo, but probably not so much with other contemporary Latin American or Mexican art, for example.

03-00:54:35

Benezra: I think probably more Doris Salcedo than others, that's right. Not for lack of interest or desire. I'd love for us to have Francis Alÿs in our collection, who lives in Mexico. I mean, there's so many. Guillermo Kuitca lives in Buenos Aires. We're not un-knowledgeable, but it's just not possible to do everything. We just don't have the means.

Cándida Smith: To what degree is that a factor of patron interest, trustee interest that allows you to focus in on certain areas. Do you need to convince them that, yes, *this* is important?

03-00:55:19

Benezra: To make exhibitions? No, not really. I think sometimes we create taste with our exhibitions, like some museums do. Obviously, it helps if there's support for something in the community, because it helps with the funding. It helps with the availability of the works. I mean it's not a bad thing. But in terms of deciding what programs and acquisitions to make, it's really not that much of a factor. But to have an enthusiastic supporter in our community is a great thing, I won't deny.

Cándida Smith: A lot of this has to do with education.

03-00:55:59

Benezra: Exposure and education. We have to be missionaries for certain causes, it seems to me, certain artists. Build enthusiasm.

Cándida Smith: Do you have priorities now for what you personally would want to see this museum acquire over the next five to ten years? Assuming the market and opportunity—

03-00:56:21

Benezra: The worst thing about this market is in some ways, it has *kept* us from dreaming as much as we would like. It's very hard to dream of getting that great particular painting, because it's *very*, very hard. So much of what you're doing now is a negotiation with artists, with dealers, with collectors. You don't have the independence that you once had, because the market simply doesn't allow it.

Cándida Smith: If I think about this museum from '95 to 2001, it seemed to be that all dreams were possible.

03-00:57:05

Benezra: Anything was possible, seemingly.

Cándida Smith: So that's a major cultural shift.

03-00:57:10

Benezra: Well, that was in the heyday of Phyllis Wattis.

Rubens: And then the opportunity with the Japanese. That great gift of the [Ellsworth] Kellys. The bank.

Cándida Smith: The Fukuoka.

03-00:57:22

Benezra: That was no gift. That was a purchase. But there's a case where we worked—and it has happened on many occasions here—where a team formed by our private patrons and the museum working together have been able to bring a body of work into this community. Ellsworth Kelly was a great case, the *best* case in point, perhaps.

Cándida Smith: It strikes me that the museum is becoming, *has* become, very classic oriented. It's a modern/contemporary, but it's contemporary classics.

03-00:58:02

Benezra: In terms of the acquisition program?

Cándida Smith: The acquisitions, maybe even the exhibitions.

03-00:58:06

Benezra: No, I would say maybe in terms of the exhibition program, it's become a little more modern, there's more of a balance, perhaps, between modern and contemporary.

Cándida Smith: I was actually thinking, [Richard] Tuttle, Brice Marden, Olafur. These are not new names, these are, in fact, quite substantial figures.

03-00:58:26

Benezra: Well, we gave Olafur Eliasson his first touring show. You can argue this one way or the other. A lot of it, again, has to do with the opportunities you have. I

think in terms of the acquisition program, it's become more contemporary, to tell you the truth. Younger, to be sure.

Cándida Smith: I'd like to, in the remaining time we have, switch to your understanding, your vision of the museum publics, the publics for this museum. You came out of two different kinds of institutions, one a federal institution, the other an encyclopedia museum that spoke to everybody. You have a much more defined mission with SFMOMA. But you also came at a time when the bubble had burst, the dreams were in trouble. I don't know that the institution was truly damaged, but it was bruised. Part of your job was to heal it, it seems to me.

03-00:59:47

Benezra: Well, I think there was maybe a little loss of confidence.

Cándida Smith: Okay, loss of confidence. So part of your job was to help the staff get reoriented, re-enthused, work with the trustees to restore their confidence in what could be done. Maybe you could talk a bit about landing here and beginning to reorient the museum in the direction that you thought it needed to go.

03-00:60:17

Benezra: Well, it was an interesting thing for me. I probably didn't understand it fully when I came, to tell you the truth, because here we faced enormous challenges. Financial challenges, first and foremost. We had to get the ship righted, and we had to be able to pay our bills. I was a curator. I didn't have an MBA, and not a lot of management experience, and I had to come in and just make sure we got things stabilized. But we had to do it in a certain way. If someone had come in here and eliminated special exhibitions that we were doing, cancelled out on obligations to other museums, with other institutions with which we had contracted for special exhibitions, laid off staff—it would have been terrible! It could have destroyed this place. So what we really tried very hard to do was to make sure we got to a balanced budget as quickly as we could—and it took some time—without laying anyone off, without canceling any shows, and—let me put it this way—without appearing in the newspaper. I mean that in a certain way. I don't mean that it wasn't about the press; it's just we wanted to gracefully and quietly solve the challenges that we faced. If headlines had appeared in the paper that SFMOMA had cancelled a show that they were taking from the Museum of Modern Art or had laid off twenty staff, it wouldn't have been good for the institution. We wanted to move forward in a positive way. So we did that fairly quickly. It was not easy, and it was not painless. It was a complicated thing.

Rubens: Who's "we?" Who are you working most closely with?

03-00:62:13

Benezra: Well, a senior team of people and the board. The board understood this and supported this. They were great. They were patient, I would say.

Cándida Smith: Given that your board consists of some of the most prominent business people in the world, not just the region, to what degree did they involve themselves?

[End Audio File 3]

[Begin Audio File 4 02-28-2008.mp3]

Cándida Smith: So to what degree was the board, which involves very prominent business people, able to guide you in the nitty-gritty of the business decisions?

04-00:00:22

Benezra: I would say it wasn't so much guidance, it was—I think they understood what a challenge was facing us all, and I think they understood that it was not just my challenge, it was all of our challenge. They shared it. It's not so much that they said, "Try this. Try that." Although there were some occasions when they did, and they were very helpful. But finally, I had to set certain kinds of priorities. I'm the professional, and I'm the one who needs to know what'll work and what won't work, in a museum context. It's very different to make business decisions in a non-profit—*business* decisions in a non-profit—than in a for-profit, I feel. It's not the same thing at all. Because whereas a business has perhaps one, and maybe two bottom lines—customer satisfaction and the bottom line—in our case, a lot of the measurements of our success are intangible. We need to balance our budget, but if you balance your budget at a certain cost, you really can damage the institution. Success is a much more complicated thing. I *believe* this to be the case.

Cándida Smith: So membership, in and of itself, is not an absolute. Membership numbers.

04-00:01:40

Benezra: Well, membership numbers are an important measure. Attendance is an important measure. Balancing your budget at the end of the year, is a means to an end, it's not an end in itself. That's what I kept saying. "Sure, we can balance our budget, but at what cost? What will be left after we're done? Is that the institution that we want? That you have built, and that we want to sustain?" We want to be a great museum. Let me put it this way. Nobody's going to remember this museum if all we do is balance our budget for the next ten years. We're not going to be making any history by doing that. That's a means to an end. We have got to do that, we have got to achieve that; but it's not enough. That was understood. I think that one of the things I realized, because these are tremendous business people in our community, is that I could win—I'm speaking honestly now—I could win a lot of freedom for this institution and its staff, if I could balance the budget every year. If I couldn't balance the budget, if we couldn't balance the budget every year, I was going to have all sorts of scrutiny on the program that we were producing. So by the most simple, basic measure, we have got to balance the budget. Get that done, get that solved, get that out of the way as fast as you can. It's a struggle every year to do it. But *God*, then you can have some fun. If you can make that

work, if you can make the numbers work, then you can go out and really try to be creative.

Rubens: So for you, the factors in making that work, I think you have said that it was collecting a little less.

04-00:03:21

Benezra: Well, no, because those are different funds. That's not operating-budget money. That has nothing to do with balancing the budget. When I said earlier that we reduced the number of exhibitions, it was for creative reasons, but it was also for financial reasons.

Rubens: Reducing the number of exhibitions.

04-00:03:39

Benezra: You reduce the number of exhibitions, you reduce the exhibition budget every year. That's one of the biggest variables in your budget. There are a lot of things in your budget you can't do much about. A huge percentage of a museum's budget is in the form of salaries and benefits. One of the real variables from year to year is the exhibition budget. How many shows you do and how expensive they are, how much revenue you can generate from them.

Cándida Smith: Did you want to shrink the staff a little bit? Not by layoffs, but through attrition?

04-00:04:11

Benezra: I suppose the staff might have gotten a little bit smaller by attrition, but not much. I have worked in small museums, and I have worked in big museums. One of the things I love about SFMOMA is that I think we are big enough to do great things. We have great conservation, we have marvelous curators—and a museum is only as good as its curators—we have marvelous educators, conservators, editors, designers, we have great business people, store—the people that run the store are fantastic. So we're big enough to do great things, but we're also small enough to be able to turn on a dime. We're not bureaucratic. We can make decisions *very* quickly. That's a nice size to be. If we were a little smaller and had a smaller budget, we would have more independence, in terms of the program we could produce. But we might not have the strength in the staff that we have now.

Cándida Smith: In terms of the constituencies that you see the museum serving, how would you define those?

04-00:05:31

Benezra: The constituencies in terms of the audience?

Cándida Smith: Well, audience, yes. Publics. I don't necessarily mean people who come and buy tickets, only.

04-00:05:42

Benezra:

I believe—and it may be because I'm older than some of the staff here—that our constituency is not just the constituency that cares about contemporary exclusively. I really believe that if you do a “Picasso in American Art” show, or a Matisse sculpture show, or shows of that sort, it brings people to the museum. That will encourage them, hopefully, to come back for something that might be more out of the ordinary to them, perhaps a little more challenging in terms of what their knowledge of modern/contemporary is.

Rubens:

Also, they see something in the next room.

04-00:06:26

Benezra:

Right, no question. Keep in mind that I worked at the Art Institute of Chicago, which has a huge membership and huge visitorship, does a big, broad-ranging program. Then even more specifically, at the Hirshhorn, which was free. It's so important. The Hirshhorn Museum is located there on the Mall. It's next door to the National Air and Space Museum, which is the best-attended museum in the world, ten million people a year. We could get one million people into the Hirshhorn Museum annually, not paying admission. We presented ourselves as a national museum of modern and contemporary art, especially in terms of international visitors who gravitate to New York and Washington. Americans go to Washington. As unpopular as Washington can be from time to time, people still go.

Rubens:

It's free!

04-00:07:40

Benezra:

It's free, and people would wander in just to see what was there. On many occasions, you'd walk through the galleries and you'd see people, and you were just sure by the way they were behaving that they had never been, perhaps, even in an art museum at all. And they surely had never been in a museum of contemporary art. This was such a wonderful thing, a wonderful opportunity.

Rubens:

Could you say one more word about the behavior, just to identify it?

04-00:08:11

Benezra:

Well, I saw all kinds of behavior that, on the one hand, would horrify you, because people didn't know how to interact sometimes with contemporary art that didn't hang neatly on the wall or sit on a platform or a pedestal. It might sit on the floor or might not be readily identified, by someone who didn't know better, that it was art at all. You could see they were sometimes just baffled by this, so they didn't know how to interact with it. Do you touch it? Do you step on a Carl Andre? Why can you step on a Carl Andre, and not step on something else? These are real questions. We in the contemporary art world take them for granted, and we're a little arrogant, I think, in not recognizing what your visitors do not understand. I'm a *big* advocate of education in museums because I feel as though, especially with contemporary

art, you've *really* got to extend a hand to people and try to help them, without being patronizing about it, or doing or saying things about works of art that artists wouldn't want you to do or say. But I feel it's our obligation to make this work as accessible as we reasonably can.

Cándida Smith: Without sacrificing—

04-00:09:28

Benezra: The integrity of the work.

04-00:09:37

Benezra: I have always believed that curators need to write in an accessible way about contemporary art. We should not write in jargon about contemporary art, that only your colleagues can understand. Sometimes curators write for their colleagues and for their profession. I *hate* that.

Cándida Smith: So you're not interested in the death of the subject or—?

04-00:09:56

Benezra: Well, I'm interested in the ideas, but I just want staff to speak clearly to the public. Who are we writing these books for?

Cándida Smith: When you arrive here, with a very definite experience and a very definite philosophy, how does the staff respond to it?

04-00:10:15

Benezra: I suppose, for better or worse, I'm a museum director who doesn't impose all my values and my philosophy on everybody all the time. I think I set a general tone. Sometimes I feel as though I'm in the back, steering. I really believe that a museum is only as good as its curators. That means you have got to give curators a lot of independence. I'm smart enough to know that I'm not going to shape everybody's attitude about everything. But I can move us in a particular direction. I really believe in change as being evolutionary. One director doesn't come in and say, "Okay, now we're going to do it this way," and then the next director comes in, "No, no, we're going to do it this way." I really believe in long tenures for museum people, so they build real relationships with their communities and their patrons. You want to see, after ten or twenty years, that the museum has had an impact that is sustained.

Cándida Smith: That, of course, is like a university but not like most modern corporations, where, as one executive has put it to me, ventilation at the top is very important.

04-00:11:39

Benezra: That's because their measure of success is different. It's a very different enterprise to run a corporation, I believe, than it is to run a museum.

Cándida Smith: I'd like to pose the same question about the ideas that the trustees had as you arrive, the ideas that the trustees had about the potential publics. Do some



trustees think it should really be people who are only interested in contemporary art, others want to see the whole community involved?

04-00:12:27

Benezra:

Trustees are not a monolith. I think we tend to think of trustees of a museum as a monolith, and they're not. You have many different points of view. We have sixty trustees. I *assure* you they all have different ideas about this. Some want us to be very contemporary and refined and elite, appeal to a smaller, but dedicated audience. Others really believe in the public mission of the museum and want to serve as many people as they can, in as broad a way as we can. Some really care about art, some really care about education. Very different points of view.

Cándida Smith: In terms of your job, how do you respond to these different inputs? How do you try to help them arrive at some consensus about where the museum should be going?

04-00:13:23

Benezra:

I'm not sure there's an answer for that, honestly. I think you work with each trustee and each curator individually. Some people need coaxing in certain ways, and some people you need to listen to in different ways. There's no one size fits all, frankly, there. It's not a very good answer, I realize.

Rubens:

At the Hirshhorn, did you have an advisory committee?

04-00:13:56

Benezra:

We had a very unorthodox situation there. The director of the Hirshhorn, or any of the art museums in the Smithsonian, reported to the Secretary of the Smithsonian, not to a board of trustees. We had a board of trustees, but their only formal responsibility was for the collection of the Hirshhorn. So when we had a board meeting, the board meeting would be pretty exclusively about presenting works of art for accession or deaccession there.

Cándida Smith: I think, to get back to the question about the different opinions on the board of trustees, I think particularly probably when you arrive—because there'd been a year interregnum, and because to some degree, the difficult circumstances of David Ross's leaving—one of your responsibilities, it seems to me, would have had to be to get people on the same page again, which is part of restoring confidence.

04-00:15:08

Benezra:

Well, to some extent, yes. I think the museum was due, at that point, for a period of stability. I think one can say that museum trustees tend, when they hire a director, to hire a person with the opposite characteristics of the predecessor. So it seems to me that my first few years at the museum was about placing SFMOMA on a steady course, that we were balancing our budget, everything was going well. We were making good shows, making good acquisitions—smooth sailing. Now, it seems to me, the challenge for me

is to lead, with the board and with the staff, a new period of growth, if we can. The sculpture garden that we are building is really a first moment in that process. This building's now really too small for us. We need places not just to show modern and contemporary sculpture, but we need more room for all of our departments, and certainly, more room for education here at the museum. We're at a moment of potential transition and growth, if we can find it in ourselves.

Cándida Smith: So your capital campaign begins again?

04-00:16:35

Benezra: We're beginning to think about this. Charles Schwab's become our new chair. He's not interested in treading water. It's a great moment for him to come on board because I think we're ready to now think some new thoughts. It's not about sustenance anymore, because I think we have proved that we can manage our affairs and do good work.

Cándida Smith: What's the vision that you want to impart to people who will be donating to an expansion campaign? What will they get? Twenty years down the road, what will they have gotten?

04-00:17:10

Benezra: One of the things I want to encourage here in the next few years—there are many things, but one of them is that we went through this incredible period of growth of the collection in the nineties. It was a golden age for the growth of this collection, quantitatively and qualitatively. Walk through the museum and you see the fruits of all that work. There are marvelous collections of contemporary art in this community. History will not judge us well if we do not make a real effort to build this collection. If we can win for this museum, our share of the great works in this community, this could truly become one of the great contemporary museums in the world. But we have got to make that happen. That's a job for the board and the staff to do together. We have an opportunity that most communities don't have, in that regard.

Rubens: You handled the Gap situation, you have put it as a win-win situation. Surely, it's got to be a personal loss.

04-00:18:23

Benezra: I don't look at it as a personal loss, because—

Rubens: I didn't mean personal as much as institutional.

04-00:18:26

Benezra: The art world has become so big and so complicated and so expensive, and the issues involved—tax issues, all the issues—are *so* complicated that whereas when I was a young kid coming to this museum, or as a young curator, you could reasonably expect that a great private collector in your community, affiliated with your museum and a donor to your museum, would

naturally, in time, give that collection to the museum. It's just not the case anymore. What Don and Doris [Fisher] have decided to do is not even unusual anymore, this founding of their own institution. It's not. It would have been more unusual if they'd decided to give the collection to SFMOMA. It's just, it's in the nature of the world that we live in. So I don't think we should beat ourselves up about it.

Rubens: Would you call that collection a bit more modern?

04-00:19:31

Benezra: Don and Doris have one of the great collections, whether you characterize it as modern or contemporary art, in the world. What's great about it is that they have collected certain great artists in real depth. There's not many places where you can go and look at Richard Serra, Agnes Martin, Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, Brice Marden, Andy Warhol, Alexander Calder in the depth that they have got them, and the quality that they have got them. It's fantastic.

Rubens: But you have the opportunity to be more contemporary. This museum has the opportunity to be more contemporary.

04-00:20:08

Benezra: Well, again, I don't think of it that way. I just think that there's great material here. If it's here, we'd like to see it come here and keep it in the Bay Area. Of course, we'd like to own *everything*. You know? I mean, we're as ambitious that way as anyone.

Rubens: Is board development also part of your vision or goal?

04-00:20:33

Benezra: There's a committee on trustees that's very involved with that aspect. One of the things that we're working very hard on now is, some of the families that have supported this museum so magnificently for the last twenty years, they need now to be replenished. Another generation has to come in. Some of these people are, of course, already here. But we need to bring in the next generation of leadership here. It's *very* important.

Cándida Smith: You have done a nice job, in terms of beginning to describe the vision that you're going to project. This building, in many respects, depended on Jack Lane being able to talk credibly about the internationalization of this museum, its profile, its presence, its collection. Starting with I think it was the Sigmar Polke acquisitions.

04-00:21:29

Benezra: Anselm Kiefer.

Cándida Smith: For you, what might be the parallel thing? What kinds of acquisitions might be the signifiers of this vision?

04-00:21:42

Benezra:

But again, in those days, Jack could say, “Look, we have got to get an Anselm Kiefer painting. I want a new building. We have got to commit to a new building and an Anselm Kiefer painting,” as something that would be symbolic of the international ambitions of the museum. But you could buy that painting for \$100,000. It’s a different world now. It’s not about what we can go out and buy, it’s about the partnerships we can make and how creative we can be in working with the collectors. The art is here. My vision for this campaign that we’re going to go on for the collection is, I don’t think we need a thousand new works of art. It’s not about quantity. It’s about visiting with the collector and saying, “Look, you have something that would transform this museum. You may have a hundred pictures; we really only need one or two. These are the ones we need really badly to take the next step.”

Cándida Smith:

So this would be, in a sense, a jewel box museum, then?

04-00:22:41

Benezra:

No, I’m not trying to describe a jewel box, but I am describing a collection that has destination works of art. A jewel box has all kinds of connotations that I’m not fond of. But I want this museum to be not just like any other modern and contemporary museum. It needs to have special qualities and characteristics and strengths.

Cándida Smith:

Then you need a space in which these works can be properly exhibited.

04-00:23:24

Benezra:

Which we don’t have enough of right now. We have 52,000 square feet of gallery space. You can do the math, and you’ll find out that we’re very small now. It’s a very small facility.

Cándida Smith:

How much gallery space do you think you need?

04-00:23:41

Benezra:

It would be *marvelous* if we could double that. 100,000 square feet would still be smaller than most of the great modern museums in the world. Smaller than the Tate, smaller than the Modern. But for us to be growing, for us to be building for the next twenty-five years, that’s probably what we need.

Cándida Smith:

Do you see another signature building? Or could it be something like what MOCA did with the Geffen?

04-00:24:12

Benezra:

It’s probably too soon to talk about specific characteristics. One thing I can say is the Mario Botta building is a marvelous building. I have come to love it. It shows modern art very, very beautifully. What I mean by that is, it shows works by Philip Guston or Brice Marden gorgeously. Beautifully. Anything that hangs on the wall looks fantastic here. The scale of the walls, the quality of the light, it’s great. What it’s not quite so good at, and perhaps Botta was not asked to do, is to display more contemporary work, work that doesn’t

hang neatly on the wall or sit demurely on a platform or a base. We need to be able to deal with works of art that occupy space, or involve sound or lighting conditions, have a little more flexibility. It needs to be a little rougher and a little more flexible. We all recognize that. Trustees recognize it, too. We don't need more formality. It's a very formal building, Mario Botta's building. We need something that's a little less formal and a little more rough and tumble.

Cándida Smith: Does it need to be adjacent to this building?

04-00:25:33

Benezra: I think the history of museums building on secondary sites is very mixed, decidedly mixed. I feel you want to stay centralized, stay in one location. I would not want to send one medium or one period of our history off to another site, because people are going to always come here to Third Street. So if we can add space here that is adjacent, that would be the best.

Cándida Smith: Is this a ten-year program? Or a fifteen, or—?

04-00:26:08

Benezra: Oh, I hope not fifteen! We're working hard. One of the things that our board brings is a real determination to move forward. That's great. So we're contemplating this right now, to see what's possible.

Rubens: Well, that's what part of this project is, the 2010—

04-00:26:34

Benezra: What we're hoping to have is a great show of recent gifts and promises of gifts, in 2010. But if we're able to build a building, that's certainly going to take longer.

[End of Interview]

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