SFMOMA 75th Anniversary

RUTH BRAUNSTEIN
Gallery Owner, Braunstein/Quay Gallery

Interviewed by Jess Rigelhaupt, ROHO
in 2007

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Recollections of first visit to SF MOMA—artistic and educational background—exhibitions from the 1960s and the artists she represented participating—her perception of a shift in the SF MOMA’s focus related to local artists—attempting to balance local artists with international and national artists—Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art—similarity of American museums of modern art—lack of attention for California ceramics—Peter Voulkos—relationship between the SF MOMA and Bay Area artists—Jack Lane’s connection to local artists—impressions of past SF MOMA presidents: Grace McCann Morley, George Culler, Gerald Nordland, Henry Hopkins, Jack Lane, David Ross—changes in the practice of opening night museum exhibition celebrations—impressions on the influence of directors and trustees on the development of collections—tension between Frances Bowes and David Ross—comparing the collecting patterns of the SF MOMA to other museums—opinion on how the museum should collect.

Characterizing the relationship of the SF MOMA to Bay Area art galleries—San Francisco Art Dealers Association—difference between New York and San Francisco art galleries—discussion of some of the collectors in the Bay Area—characterizing the Bay Area’s artistic community—characterizing California ceramics—artists, clusters in San Francisco neighborhoods—discussion of the prevalence of women gallery owners in San Francisco—discussion of curators worked with at SF MOMA—Suzanne Foley, John Humphrey, Art for the Collector exhibitions in the early 1960s—defining the SF MOMA today—favorite pieces in the SF MOMA collection—where she would like to see the SF MOMA at its 100th anniversary—addition of the restaurant and gift shop.
Interview #1: June 12, 2007
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Rigelhaupt: To begin, I’d like to ask you if could describe your first visit to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

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Braunstein: It was in 1961, before a lot of you were born. It was located on Van Ness and McAlister Street. I went there to see—I can’t remember the show I saw, but that was probably the first time I had been. I arrived in California 1960, and saw the museum as a visitor. But in ’61, when I opened my gallery in Tiburon—and that’s where the name Quay comes from, because Tiburon is a quay—I got involved with the museum at that time. It was a very, very different experience than it is now. The director of the museum was a man named George Culler, who to keep himself afloat, was part-time director at the museum, and also taught at the University of California in Berkeley. Art history, I think he taught.

Rigelhaupt: And what were your impressions?

01-00:01:51
Braunstein: They had some really interesting stuff there that I had never even heard about or seen before. My background is not in art, so I’ve never taken an art history course, and I’ve only trained myself in art. I’m an ex-dancer. The two art forms are pretty closely related, as far as I’m concerned, and so you’re always eager to look at work and see it, probably, in different eyes. I probably was doing that when I went back there the first time, after I opened the gallery. So it was a sweet little museum. It was not very big. Considering that it was not built to the scale of what these people wanted, they did a very good job with it, and they did some very interesting shows there over the period of time. I think that the attitude was different. It was more neighborly, I should say. Also, more involved with the galleries. Especially when people like Gerry Nordland and Henry Hopkins came onboard. That was the period of time when I was most active with the museum, when they were there. Also, it was run by a lot of volunteers. The volunteers were really very active. Sally Lilienthal—Sally Heller was her name at that time—started the rental gallery, and everybody who worked in the rental gallery were all volunteers. So it was a very different attitude going on, and there’s been a tremendous change in the attitude of museums now, compared to what it was forty, forty-five years ago. It’s become big business, frankly. People are taking on huge responsibilities and they’re building. It takes away a little bit from the spontaneity, and the energy is different now. But it’s not only in San Francisco, it’s all over the world like that, in the art world. So that’s my experience at the old museum, as I still call it.

Rigelhaupt: Do any exhibitions from, say, the 1960s stand out in your mind at that museum?
Braunstein: Well, of course, they would be ones that I was involved in. One was John Altoon. Behind you is a John Altoon. He had a show in 1967 at the San Francisco museum. Of course in that old space, these shows that stick out in my head are the ones that had artists that I represented. He’s one of them. We showed Peter Voulkos in 1975 or ’76, and we showed Ed and Nancy Kienholz in the early eighties. Then they moved over to the new space. In the new space, none of my artists have had a show there yet. I say, “yet,” still always wishing and hoping that the museum would pay more attention to the local scene. But they set up the rules, not me.

Rigelhaupt: Well, when you say that about the local scene, could you talk about your impressions of what you think the role of SFMOMA has been?

Braunstein: The role of SFMOMA—the role, I think, of any museum—is to bring the best art there is from all around the world. And that’s a very simplistic statement, you would think that would be their goal, and I’m sure it is. They have been, at one time, more cognizant of what was going on here locally, than they’re doing now. I think that since they moved over to Third Street, they haven’t done more than maybe, that I can think of—and I don’t want to give a number—but not many numbers of local people here. It’s great to see, for us who are interested in the arts, to see work of other people coming in, which is great. But the museum has become big business, frankly, as far as I can see, and they have a huge, huge overhead to raise, and attendance is very important to them on many levels. In other words, both the money level, but also for setting up prestige of how well their museum is used and so on, et cetera. And sadly to see, some of the shows they bring of artists that are of the current generation are not as well attended as they would be—When you’re sitting in a hotbed of good artists, like there is in the Bay Area here, you have a lot to compare it to, when they bring in artists from New York or from Los Angeles or anywhere else in the world. You can’t help, especially if you’re in the businesses, to compare these things to each other. So I think that the last show, of Picasso was tremendously well attended. But very few people went to see the Brice Marden show. I thought that was a magnificent show, but it doesn’t have the attraction that somebody like—People who like to look at art like to be able to relate to it. They can relate to Picasso and all those guys. They have a harder time relating to somebody like Brice Marden, which means attendance is low. But that was a beautiful show. I give accolades to the San Francisco museum for bringing in stuff like that, because it was a great opportunity to see this guy in depth, which you don’t see, even when you go to New York, in their own—but I notice that New York is beginning to show more local people, too. So you know, what I’m saying is not absolutely crazy. And well, the current show of Richard Serra, he’s a California boy. So it’s nice to see the success that he’s had there.
Rigelhaupt: Do you think SFMOMA has done a good job balancing bringing international artists and world-renowned artists and maintaining a relationship with local artists?

Braunstein: I don’t think they maintain a big relationship with local artists, that I know of, anyway. I know when the San Francisco museum, when I started the gallery, artists, whoever showed at the Museum of Modern Art, were given a lifelong pass. Now, I don’t know if they still honor that. Probably no one has ever heard of this before, including the director of the museum. [laughs] But they would get a lifelong pass, so they could come in for free to the museum. I think the museums have not done much to make—There is not category for artists, that they could pay less, I don’t think. Even to start getting in there. As far as getting artists showing there from the local scene, they do the SECA Award every couple years. That, I think, needs work on it, because I think the show last time was very weak. And the choices of artists—They have it run by one curator, and then a bunch of people who are interested in art—I don’t know if you’d call them amateurs—making choices. But that different departments are more—The photography department shows more local people than the painting and sculpture departments, that I can see, anyway. It’s a balancing act. It’s also a business act. When you put the two together, you have to find a way that—The director’s job is to make this all balance and come out even, and not put the museum into debt. As far as the acquisition committee it’s one other thing; that this is the responsibility of the museum people. And you have to go with the flow and who at the time is on the board to select these things. It’s all very political. [pause] Did I answer your question?

Rigelhaupt: Yes. And staying with the 1960s, in your impression, was the museum perceived as unorthodox? Or was it seen as part of the establishment?

Braunstein: Well, I wouldn’t know; I had never really been part of a museum before, so it was the only way I knew it. That there was a lot of volunteers working there. I volunteered. I was on the members committee and a couple other things that I worked on there. They got the whole community involved. They don’t do that anymore. They do it only on a level. It all has to do with what money do you pay to belong to the museum? That decides at what level you can work for them at. Does that make sense? That it isn’t an open thing, where they put out a call, “We’re doing a big membership drive,” or, “We’re doing a big fundraiser; we need people to help us out doing it.” That’s what they used to do. It was much more—You saw people at the museum all the time that you knew, and it was much more friendly that way, because more people were involved. But as I say, my experience with museums was pretty small. Just as a looker-oner. Onlooker, that’s a better word, sounds better. I lived in Washington, D.C., and went to a lot of museums, and also Minneapolis,
Minnesota. But I wasn’t participating in any of them, or have an interest like I had when I got involved with the San Francisco museum.

We started, a group of us, in 1965, started SECA, Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art, which made sense. We were all laymen. Even I was a layman, when it came to the idea of getting involved with a museum. But you can only belong to SECA if you pay X number of dollars. It all has to do with money. That’s the difference that there was then and now, one of the biggest differences. I think that their goals are pretty much the same about bringing good contemporary art to the community. They had a children’s program going on there too, at that time. So things haven’t—the format has been expanded to some extent, because they have much more space now, et cetera. I mean, and education, they had a very good education program going there at that time. But they’ve taken advantage of all the new facilities and new equipment that’s around, [which] allows them to do these things. So basically, between now and then, to go backwards, I’m sure that there are special things going on that I’m not aware of, you know. Their budget is huge just—I remember when they first brought Botta in to talk. He said they had to raise $600,000. Well, they were so wrong. Henry Hopkins was the director at that time and the cost of doing things just skyrocketed for them, which they didn’t expect. So it’s very expensive to run a museum now. They have a huge staff. You know, in the olden days, I think they had three or four paid workers, and that was it. Everybody else volunteered. So it was really more of a community-oriented situation than it is now. It’s big business now. Museums all over the world is big business, it’s not just in San Francisco.

Rigelhaupt: Over the years, have you seen SFMOMA stand out as different from other museums of modern art? Or has it gotten more similar to other museums of modern art that you’ve visited?

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Braunstein: They’re all pretty much the same. I think the Association of Museums has written up a formula. [laughs] And that’s what I’m thinking, that maybe that’s why they’re all so much the same. There’re certain things that—like New York, as far as I’m concerned, the modern museum in New York is just absolutely—One of the greatest things they’ve ever done was that film library they’ve got. And they’ve been doing it forever and ever, and it’s been such a strong, important part of the museum, that they have their own theater now, which is just a beautiful little theater, much bigger than the other one was before. They still are doing these crazy things, film-wise. Now, Berkeley picked up on that. Everybody learns from each other. You know, when the Berkeley Museum started, they got a big film library going. Back in the sixties. Maybe San Francisco thought they didn’t need that because this town is much smaller than New York.
But on the whole, I think that one thing that San Francisco has sort of fallen down upon a little bit is to look at what is the most important thing going on in San Francisco, Bay Area, as far as art is concerned? And one of the things that’s gone on, and is still going on, is the ceramics. California will be known amongst a group of people who collect ceramics as having very, very avant-garde ceramics. San Francisco museum has never shown that show in depth. I know they’ve had—they did a Richard Shaw show and Bob Hudson show, a collaborative show, in 1971. And it’s considered so important. It started people collaborating, when no one ever thought about this before. We’re picking it up again, that—They were invited to go to Andover, New Hampshire, to do a collaborative show there with the students, which they did. We’re going to get this documented, in a way, in another traveling show. But San Francisco has never really sat down and looked at what’s going on here, clay-wise. Especially from the sixties on. Things are sort of at a plateau now, but between ’55 and ’60 and when Peter [Voulkos] came over here, to maybe the eighties or ninties, all of California, every place else in the world, the clay movement is thought of as strictly California clay movement. And people are looking at it that way. Not in California, not in San Francisco, [chuckles] where it’s all located. It’s interesting, no museum here has picked up and had a group show of all the different kinds of clay that’s being made in this town. It’s a phenomenon, in a way. Maybe it’s too local, I don’t know. Maybe they think it’s a craft, it’s not an art form anymore. It’s never become—it’s just that there’s not only good pottery going on here, but there’s good ceramic sculpture going on here. That’s something that I think the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art should look at. But you know, it’s right in their own backyard and I guess it’s too close to home, I don’t know. Sometimes your right hand doesn’t know what your left hand is doing. But that’s just one thing that I—There’s a lot of print shops here, but there’s a lot of print going on all over the world. But with clay, it’s not. It’s a phenomenon here, all the good clay people that started their work here in California. Because there’s a freedom. See, that’s the deal, is that New York dictates, and there’s a freedom of working here that people like. I think that that has tightened up, too, that there’s a dictation going on of what should be done. And the breaking down of departments, from photography to painting and sculpture and whatever else goes down. Well, San Francisco, evidently, the museum doesn’t include clay as sculpture, because they’ve never done a real, just a clay—they’ve done a Peter Voulkos show, and they’ve done {inaudible}

Rigelhaupt: So you were saying that SFMOMA’s shown Peter Voulkos.

Braunstein: They showed him in 1976; it’s forty years ago, almost, thirty-five years ago, yes. And it traveled. It went to New York. You know, and he’s been shown all over the world. But there’s other people. I don’t think [Robert] Arneson’s ever had a show there. I might be wrong, I don’t know. But on the whole—besides, these are the first generation; but there’s a lot of people out there working in clay. And there is a mass movement here going on. It should be recognized.
think that’s the museum’s job. You know, I think it would make as much money as a lot of other things would do, too. So who knows? It’s just, as I repeat again, it’s changed in the forty years, forty-five years, forty-seven years that I’ve been in business.

Rigelhaupt: So if we follow along those lines, how would you describe the connection between SFMOMA and Bay Area artists, broadly conceived?

Braunstein: Right now, I don’t think it’s very tight. You know, it used to be. You used to see a lot more artists going into museums, or talking about them, anyway. And I don’t know, it’s hard to say when you—I don’t know if they break down their categories of what people do some way or other, in their membership drives. But they haven’t made it easy. As I say, the old San Francisco museum, they handled that. Because I’m sure this question probably came up when that started too, you know what I mean? This is not a new question. Why are museums the last ones to take care of the artists who make the museum go? But I do remember the old one, if you had a show in the museum, if you showed—I don’t know if it went down if it was a group show or just a one-person show—you automatically became a life member of the museum. Which I thought was a very nice gesture. But they had an artists category, like they have a student. I guess they have a student category, ticket-wise. Is it cheaper now than it was before? I mean, cheaper than a regular, student? Yes. And having more things going on for the artists in the community. As I say, I have very little to do with this museum. I’m three blocks away, and I have shows here that I think should be seen by the museum. They don’t come over. I mean you get on the telephone and Neal Benezra, who I’ve known since he’s been a little boy, when he was a Stanford student. And, “Ruthie, I’m too busy.” You know, all he has to do is get out there raising money to keep himself going. Which is terrible. I don’t know about the curators. Very often, they just—they have a lot of Richard Shaws in their collection; they weren’t even curious to come to see what the new work is about. You know what I mean? So I mean, they don’t do their homework, frankly. That’s part of their job. If an artist’s work is in the collection, they should come and address it a little bit, and see what’s happening. Just if not to give themselves a pat on the back, say, “Listen, we did a good job,” or, “We should’ve never put the guy’s work in the show,” I don’t know. This whole new group of people who are running the museum, I don’t think I’ve seen them—I’ve been in this space for eight years, and there’s two galleries here. You know, it isn’t like just coming out. We’re three blocks away. [chuckles] We’re closer than you going to what I call the gallery ghetto where all the other galleries are. And it’s been a cry of all the dealers; they do not get around very much. Who was the one before David?

Rigelhaupt: Jack Lane?
Braunstein: Jack Lane. Every Saturday, he went out and looked at art. You practically saw him every month that your show was up, he came in. Maybe he skipped a month. Say in twelve months, he was around at least six times. This makes a dealer feel good, and it makes good public relations amongst the art galleries. And this new group does not work like that at all. This is what I’m saying, there’s very little to do with the local community, art community. We’re all functioning, there’s no getting away from it. But somehow or other, that’s not number one on their list of importance. So it’s just very sad, yeah. I have a very fascinating show up right now, this guy named Charles Ross, which has to do with science as well as art. It’s a wonderful mix there, what he’s done with this. He just so happened to have gone to school at the University of California, Berkeley, and showed here for about five or six years, with the Dilexi Gallery, back in the sixties, before he went to New York. I mean, he’s done this sculpture, this earth sculpture, starting twenty-five years ago. He’s working on it for twenty-five years. It’s on a mesa outside of Santa Fe, New Mexico. And it has to do with the relationship of the stars to—Is Polaris a star? I think so, I don’t know. Of how you stand—There’s one star, it’s always within the vicinity of this piece. And it’s a beautiful piece of sculpture. I’ll show you a picture of it later. But you know, not a soul from the San Francisco museum has come in to look at this. They still have two weeks to go, I know. But, they’re in Basel, they’re in Venice. You know, they’re out there mixing with all the big shots, and that’s what has to keep their—They don’t see what’s going on in their own backyard, you know? So it’s good to have the museum there, it’s important, because it does have a stature. It has a reputation that was started at the beginning of it. It’s got a beautiful facility to work in, and there’s been some good shows here, there’s no getting away from it; but there’s not been a lot of—for me, anyway; I can only speak for myself. But there’s not been a lot of—what’s the word?—between me and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. You know, not many—not run-ins, at all, but what’s the—Not confrontations, that’s the wrong word. My age is showing. I can’t think of words as easily as I used to, so you have to be patient with that. But communication with each other as there used to be in the olden days.

Rigelhaupt: I wanted to throw out some of the names of the directors, and if you could talk about your impressions, if you have a sense of their priorities, their ideals, their strengths, the directions they tried to take the museum. And Grace McCann Morley was before your time, but—

Braunstein: Well, I knew a lot about her because one of my artists, Nell Sinton, was a very, very old friend of hers, and Nell talked to me about here a lot. When you’re starting a museum, and there was tremendous controversy going on here. Grace Morley, for anything better than nothing, will be remembered for having purchased this artist’s work named Jackson Pollock. And she was the first one. She went to New York and she saw his work, and brought him here
to San Francisco. Now, nowadays, that would be unheard of, that she would take an unknown artist who’d been working maybe—this was 1948 or ’47, in that neighborhood—had only been working for a few years, bring him here. Brought this piece for $500. It’s become one of the most sought after pieces to be seen. That’s what people remember Grace Morley about. That’s how I remember her. But she did have a lot to do with—She was a one-woman organization, I’m told, you know. She also had a limited budget to work on. So there was those problems. I think for what she had, she did a damn good job, you know. Go on to the next one, who I know better.

Rigelhaupt: George Culler.

01-00:33:25

Braunstein: George Culler. George Culler was a sweet man, and had a good heart. I didn’t know him too well, because I was sort of in awe of—I’m a little gallery dealer. You know, I’ll never forget that—Mary {Keesling?}, who used to come to my gallery in Tiburon—that’s, as I said, where I started. She used to come to visit me. She evidently was so turned on with what I was doing—I was doing a show of artists who worked with Hans Hofmann. I picked up work from New York and here. There happened to be a couple artists here in San Francisco, Mason Wells and Frank Hamilton, who used to every summer go to New York, to Provincetown, and work with Hans Hofmann. You know, take classes with him there. They knew a bunch of stuff there. Mary brought George Culler to see this show, because she had come to see it, and she was so impressed with this. You’ve got to realize, I have no training—at that time—no training in art at all. I mean, I just was pretty creative, I guess, in some respects. But I just used everybody’s knowledge who told me about these people in New York and in Los Angeles who worked with Hans Hofmann. I called them all up and they were very cooperative. George Culler came to see this show. He was a very shy guy, in a way. I don’t know very much about him, of how he ran the museum, except that I knew he had a women’s board that was very strong. They really made the big decisions. They raised the money, they did everything. They were the membership, they were the rental gallery. That was a way of working that continued for many years. I think all the time that they were at 401 Van Ness. So I can’t say too much about—He was a nice guy. But I didn’t really know him very well, because I was involved at other levels of the museum, but not at the director’s level. So, next.

Rigelhaupt: Gerald Nordland.

01-00:35:50

Braunstein: Well, Gerald Nordland was the one I got to know very well, in all the years that he was here. He was a big, big supporter of the local art scene. I think part of it had to do that there was no budget to bring in many artists from New York or Europe. At that time, they weren’t bringing artists in from Europe
very much. But he picked up on all the local scene here. That’s when I really—A lot of my artists were showing there with him, when he was there.

The University of California, Berkeley had a very interesting program, where they invited artists from all over Europe to come and teach. David Hockney was here. Oh, my goodness, who else? They started with Hans Hofmann, in ’33. Now, you know the story on Hans; I don’t have to go through that. Well he came here in 1933, and then the war broke out. His wife was not Jewish, and he was Jewish. And his wife who was not Jewish says, “Don’t come back. Stay where you are. I will come over there. There’s crazy things going on here, and you’re not going to be allowed to paint, you’re not going to be allowed to do anything.” So he was forever grateful to the University of California at Berkeley, and he taught there from ’33 to ’38, something like that. Then he went on to New York, and she joined him there later. But there was a lot of good people came. The museums picked up on some of those shows, too. Especially work that was done here, that was done in California. But Gerry still keeps in touch with—You know, he’s written the book on Diebenkorn. The book. He’s been working on it forever and ever. He was very, very reachable. I mean, you really could communicate with him. And very, very helpful. He’s still a good friend of mine; I’m going to his eightieth birthday in July, you know. His family still lives out here. His kids do, you know. He lives in Chicago now. So he was very supportive of the local scene here.

Rigelhaupt: What about Henry Hopkins?

01-00:38:22
Braunstein: Henry Hopkins was also a big supporter of the local scene and the Los Angeles scene. He came from Los Angeles, up here. Of course, he got involved in the midst of them wanting to raise money to build a building. He was not a fundraiser. He was much more of an educator. He is an educator and not a fundraiser. He still insisted on bringing local people here. He also insisted on, when he took that job—because he loved to curate. When he took that job, he was allowed to curate one show a year. [chuckles] And that’s where his happiest moments here—Asking people for money was hard for him, and he wasn’t—And this is why they brought on the other guy, the next guy.

Rigelhaupt: Jack Lane.

01-00:39:20
Braunstein: Jack Lane. Because Jack Lane had an MBA, as well as an art history background. So he was cognizant of money and knew what it needed, et cetera. That’s when they set this big goal of raising, and decided with Botta. He was very, very instrumental in bringing the building through to fruition. But he was, as I said before, he absolutely was very much in touch with the local scene. And he was smart. He made his contribution in that way, frankly.
Rigelhaupt: What about David Ross?

Braunstein: Well, David Ross, [laughs] was Peck’s Bad Boy. Did you ever hear about Peck’s Bad Boy? It’s an old, old story, but it’s too long to tell, it’s not worth it. Somebody who’s tremendously talented, but is out there just to scare the balls out of everybody. He started out here. He ran the Pacific Film Archive when the Berkeley Museum opened up. Did a good job and then went to Boston and did the ICA program. I just saw the new building, this last week. But he absolutely didn’t want any—He set the pattern there; no collecting. It’s an institute of contemporary art. “We’re an educational place where we show art,” and so forth, a place to meet, et cetera. But when they built this new building, they rewrote all the laws that he had set up, you know. And they are collecting now. But it’s a beautiful building, located right on the water. This guy, I forget his name, who designed it, was very cognizant of the space around him, and really used that beautifully.

The funny thing, when Botta came and presented the first plans to the art community at the old museum, he had—around where that circle is?—he had trees growing up there. Everybody says, “Who’s going to pick up the leaves?” Completely unaware of the weather pattern in California, you know what I mean? But this guy here was very simpatico to the water.

David was always the artist’s friend. Especially the way he was working. He didn’t have to worry about buying art. When he came to California and they had this big accessions committee going on, and these huge bucks going on, he just went crazy. He brought wonderful things here. I mean the museum should be forever grateful for some of the pieces he brought here. But you know, he didn’t know how to communicate with the artists of getting better prices for—He thought artists should get what they ask for. And if he had a smart business sense, he probably could’ve gotten a lot of work, and not put the museum in the debt that they’re in because of him. It must be like a little boy who sits on the outside and doesn’t know what’s going on, and thinks what’s going on, he could do better. And this is the way in a way, that David operated. He ate lunch every day at a very, very fancy place around the corner, called Hawthorne Lane. I was downstairs there for seven months. Every time I would go in there, there he was. And she said, “Oh, he’s a regular. He eats here everyday.” Well and this is a business expense. So he evidently had no respect for the monies of the museum. But he brought in some really lively things here.

And poor little Benezra has to clean it up. He has done a good job. Of course, this is why I’m saying this is big business. When you’re spending $2 or $3 million for a living artist, that’s a lot of money. In the olden days, these artists would be thrilled just to give you the material, at one time, when they all started out. But they all learned that. Some gave. Sol LeWitt, I think, gave them that piece. I don’t know exactly, but you know the red stripes? All they
had to do was pay the kids who were painting it. He didn’t ask for a commission. But that’s an old fashioned way of working, and he was still an old fashioned boy. Benezra has a very low profile in San Francisco, as far as I know, anyway. He’s not around much. I think he does a lot of moving around, and he was hired to clean up this debt. He’s got himself two very strong curators. I think they were there when David was there, weren’t they, Grynsztejn and Bishop? I think so. I don’t think he brought them along. Lots of times, directors will bring along curators with them. But I think these guys were here first. And the place is kept clean. [laughs]

They’re trying hard to keep it activated, by having these big Thursday night openings and Thursday night parties. But this is a pattern that’s going all over the United States. So that’s why I say, I think the association of American museums puts out, “How to run a museum.” I was over at the Asian Art Museum to see this show there this last Thursday, because they’re open Thursday nights. They had a big salon going on. They were playing music. I mean, there was dancing and drinking, and it was just filled with young kids. Nobody was looking at the art. Oh, a few were, you know what I mean? But on the whole, the people who were looking at this magnificent show were people like me, who came after work to look at the show. It had gotten a great review in the paper that Thursday. But it was just funny, because I think the Thursday openings at San Francisco museum are run the same way, and the same way at the de Young Museum. They have Friday night openings. They were smart enough not to piggy-back; it’s too far away. But I’ve gone to the Friday night openings; I’m the only one in the gallery, and everybody is downstairs watching the tango or making things there. Well it’s using the space for the right purposes, up to a point.

Rigelhaupt: What’s your impression of how much the directors have an influence on what art is being collected? Or do you have an impression that the trustees and accessions committee had more influence than the directors?

01-00:48:12 Braunstein: It’s hard to say. I know that the accessions committee, which is made up of the Board of Directors and it depends how much money you’ve got, because if you’re on the accessions committee, I understand you have to be willing to help pay for something if they need you. I mean, I can only talk about where I was more involved with the museum through that period of Hopkins, Nordland. What’s his name, the one after Nordland?

Rigelhaupt: Hopkins, and then Jack Lane.

01-00:48:57 Braunstein: Jack Lane. I had very little to do with David or with Benezra. But at that time, there was a lot of education going on with these people at the museum, learning about art. And that started that whole business of people going to look at art museums and art galleries around the world, and looking at artists,
et cetera. At the San Francisco museum, they’ve got this new artist program. I don’t think I’ve seen a local person purchased by them. That has had a show on that little show on the fifth floor, back there. I don’t think so. I think it’s all been from all over. Which is fine. But sometimes you have to look in your own backyard. But the accessions committee, if they’re educated, frankly, it saves the directors—I don’t want to use that word, A. Directors having to have final choice, you know what I mean? But it seems to be the same group, with a few additions. And some of the old timers they’re trying to get back, like Byron Meyer and Bowes. What’s her name? Frances Bowes, who had a big fight with David—What’s his name?

Rigelhaupt: Ross.

Braunstein: Ross. And just walked away from the board. But you would hope that they would have more of a choice, but I don’t think they do. It’s what you collect. If they’ve got something that they bought, and the museum will want it, then that artist’s work was purchased with the idea that the museum would eventually get it. And if that’s the choice of the director, that’s a good deal, because eventually it will come there.

Rigelhaupt: Do you recall what the tension was between Frances Bowes and David Ross?

Braunstein: No, not really, I just heard this. I’m sure it had to do with money. I mean, that was the big contention of everybody with him. He just absolutely had no regard for money, and just thought there was—when you come from nothing, frankly speaking, coming from working with boards whose money is endless, they don’t have to raise money for purchases. Like the ICA, wherever he was before. You come into a situation like here, and you’re sitting with people like the Schwabs and Andersons, and you just go down the list there of people in this town who have money and are looking for recognition of some sort. They don’t come in the galleries to buy. They give their money, which is fine. It’s great. If they do buy, they go to New York. They don’t buy locally here. They might buy, if there’s a local scene. I think a couple of trustees bought, [when] Bob Bechtle had a show, bought a piece.

Rigelhaupt: Do you have a sense that SFMOMA is collecting many of the same artists that other modern art museums around the world are collecting? Or are they doing more unorthodox collecting?

Braunstein: I don’t think they’re doing much unorthodox collecting. I haven’t seen it around. They’re sort of following the trend. They’re looking at some dealers. Jack Hanley evidently has his finger on somebody in there. But he’s the exson-in-law of Frances Bowes, okay? He’s gotten some of the young artists’ stuff into the community. See, I’m an old fashioned girl, and I think art museums are the treasure troves for people who have proved themselves in the
art, and not some young person. I say everybody’s trying to be a Grace Morley by finding the $500 purchase of a Jackson Pollock. And that isn’t, to me, what the museum’s about. That’s the job of a dealer. The museum people are supposed to come here and look at my artists’ work, or all art dealers’ work, and think about, “Well, where is this person going to go? Where’s that person going to go?” And then think about it and watch them carefully. But that doesn’t happen anymore. They’re buying stuff there that is just so trendy that it’s not what a museum is about. That’s the sad part about it, that they’re spending a lot of money—I mean, it’s gone as far as—I’ll give you an example—is that CCAC is having its hundredth anniversary. One of the deals is that they’ve taken a hundred graduates from CCAC, or teachers, and are having a big show at the Oakland Museum. One of my artists is Mary Snowden, who’s been teaching at CCAC for forty years. She’s not on this list. Why? I got a letter from this guy. Because she’s not trendy. There was a committee who made these choices. They were artists. They were students at school. So it’s been brought down to that level, that students are now selecting works for museums. This is a student of Larry Rinder’s, it was one of his students, and he’s the chairman of this. He chose five students to make the selection. She wasn’t chosen. Because a lot of her students were in there, but she wasn’t chosen because she wasn’t up there with the rest of the stuff. Which they don’t even understand, she’s so honest. She’s doing political art now. You know what I mean? But it’s not what the kids look at.

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02-00:00:10
Rigelhaupt: Just before we changed tapes, we were talking about the role of galleries in relationship to the role of the museum in collecting. I’m wondering if you could characterize the relationship between Bay Area galleries and SFMOMA.

02-00:00:31
Braunstein: Well, I can talk to that on two levels. You know, my own personal level, I’ve talked about a lot, and my relationship, involvement, with the museum. I mean, it’s always been a positive one. They love me there. But as far as the museum now, since I’ve been in this space here, I don’t see that much of the people anymore. I think that the role of a museum person is to be in touch. I go to see their shows; why don’t they come and see our shows? You see what I’m talking about? There’s many, many galleries in this town. If they would ever go to every one of the galleries, they wouldn’t have much time to do—it’d be a great job. But they’ve been bogged down with lots of paperwork and stuff like that going on, that they have to fulfill. What’s the other part of the question?

Rigelhaupt: Well, just the relationship between—
Braunstein: The relationship, for me, has changed. There’s also an Art Dealers Association in this town, made up of thirty, thirty-five dealers. There’s very little to do with them, too. There used to be. When we first started out, we were very active with them. In fact, we raised money for them. It really had nothing to do with the money. That’s the sad part about it.

You know, the San Francisco museum, I just had this brilliant idea right now, that if they would have—we had a program called “Introductions,” where we all introduced a young, new artist who had never shown with us before. Everyone had their own choices of what they were going to show. If the San Francisco museum would have taken $500 or they only raised money for them to—we had a party after the opening, of introductions, and we charged for it. Whatever we made, we gave to the museum. because we’re not a not-for-profit organization; we couldn’t keep the money. Well, if they had taken that money and bought a piece, and started a collection from the Art Dealers Association—you know what I mean? “Introductions,” it would’ve been an interesting way for them to pick up new people, young people.

Which is the Grace Morley thing. Because these are people who have never shown in San Francisco before. Start a program going like that, that over the years, they could’ve maybe by now, because the organization is thirty years old, could’ve been built up to something really very, very interesting, as far as the collection is concerned. But since those days, which are at least going back fifteen, twenty years—twenty-five years—there’s been no communication with the Art Dealers Association anymore, either. That represents thirty or thirty-five dealers in this city. You know, and they don’t get in just because they open a gallery; they have to pass a test of their peers to be invited to join this organization. So they have very little to do with the local art scene here.

I think the dealers in New York see them more often than we do. Or the European dealers. You know, they move around. The only good thing is that we do have the Oakland Museum here, who only buys California art. So you’ve got more of a chance of showing in there and selling work to them, than you do to San Francisco museum. I haven’t sold a piece of art to San Francisco museum in—Oh, about ten years ago, I sold a Peter Voulkos piece, because during the earthquake in 1989, one of the pieces of art that they lost was Peter Voulkos. See, John Cauldwell, the two Johns, they really got involved in the local scene here. John Lane and John Cauldwell, who was a curator. They really got involved in the local scene. I don’t think since then, it’s about ten years since I’ve sold them anything. They got this huge amount of money, because I told them what it was worth. They were able to buy a beautiful big piece of his to replace the one. But so they don’t have that much to do with the local scene, that I can see, anyway, unless they’re going through a different avenue.
But you know, there’s a lot more organizations going on in this town now than there were. They have this Open Studio stuff. I’ve gone to see those shows, thinking you’re going to find—because one of my fun things about this gallery is, I like to find young people who’ve never shown before. I still find that more challenging than keeping showing the same old people I’ve shown for years. Like, I’ve shown John Altoon since 1962. And showed Voulkos since 1966. And Richard Shaw since 1969. Mary Snowden, I took on in ’68. So I have a whole group of old-timers who’ve been with me. But then it’s fun to find someone like here, who—She’s mid-career, about seventy-some, you know. And then young people, like that girl right there on the ironing board. And this guy right here. He’s out of school just a couple years, a ceramist. His name is Aaron Toole. You know, and she’s just graduated a year ago from the San Francisco Art Institute masters program. Her name is Ana Teresa Fernandez. She’ll be my next show. So I still find it fun to find new young artists. And so when the museum would come in a gallery like this—And I’m just an example of it, there’s a dozen of us, thirty or forty of us or more, in this town that are doing some really exciting things. But it’s just, there is very little communication between all of us.

Rigelhaupt: Do the galleries help influence and shape what SFMOMA exhibits and collects?

02-00:07:48
Braunstein: I don’t think so. I mean, I think that—The galleries around the world, you mean?

Rigelhaupt: Well, maybe a comparative, both locally, nationally, and internationally.

02-00:08:00
Braunstein: Well, they’re buying a lot of work around the world. Some of it is—With this age of communication now, everybody knows what everybody else is doing. And you see the same thing going on here in California that’s going on in New York. Or vice versa. Same thing going in Europe. People are influenced a lot by each other. They might not know it, but subconsciously, it comes through that way. So I think that, the new stuff—Every once in a while, there’ll be a few new pieces up that they’ve just purchased, and I sort of shrug my shoulders and walk on to the next one. [chuckles] Charity begins at home, and check it out first, because you spend all that—before you make a decision.

But that’s really not the goal of the San Francisco museum. They consider themselves a international museum. That they just don’t show California artists, or even United States artists, American artists. So that’s why they’re all off to Basel and Venice. And then psychologically, they have to keep their face out there. You know, so I repeat, I keep on going, back to business. Like, I mean, I have to go to New York a couple times a year, otherwise they think I’m dead, if I don’t show my face. I think if you’re an art museum in a small town like this and have big-town ambitions, you still have to do it more.
Because the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art thinks of themselves as some of the top forties, shall we say? Or whatever they do with songs. I think they do, don’t you? So they have to work harder at it than you do if you’re the Modern museum in New York, or even the Brooklyn Museum—

You know, it’s still a small town. When you consider that there’s only 752,000 people. It hasn’t changed. That’s what it was when I first moved here, forty-five years ago. It’s hardly changed. In this town of San Francisco. And only two-and-a-half- to three-million people on the whole peninsula, starting in San Jose and going up to Marin. This is a small, little town. When you think of L.A., has got eight-million. New York has, what?, twenty-million? You know, how many people can you get stuff from? How much money is there around that allows you to run this kind of a museum? It’s difficult when you’ve got your goals set at this, like these people have. They have to check it out. But they should give the local people a chance, too. But go fight city hall.

Riegelhaupt: In your interview that you did with Art Table, you mentioned that you felt like San Francisco galleries had more freedom than in New York City. I’m wondering if you could explain a little bit more what you meant.

Braunstein: The artists, the people who choose to live here in California are a different breed than the people who choose to go to New York. Also, a lot of them come here because they get jobs. They’re teachers. So they’ve got an income coming. When they’ve got an income coming, they can do what they want to do, because they don’t have to worry about selling. So when I say this, it all has to do with money. If you look outside of New York, and wherever there’s a very good university art system going on, is where you’ll see all the—they’re the ones who get the teachers. The good artists who go there to teach and have an income, go there because there is that freedom of doing what they want to do. That’s what I’m talking about there. So they’re able to develop on a very different level.

You know, if Peter Voulkos had gone to New York, or any artist—The whole attitude—When I first started this gallery in 1961, and went to New York for the first time, I brought people like Bruce Conner. I wasn’t even showing Peter Voulkos. Manuel Neri. Who else did I bring with me? Sam Tchakalian. I brought these very strong—my “heavies,” quote/unquote. And they loved this work.

“But where are the artists?”

I said, “They live in California.”

“Well, if they move here, let me know and then we’ll look at them again.”
But to be in New York. All these guys taught. So they had the security of a paycheck. If they had a show, they showed you what they wanted to show, and if people bought them, it was extra money. Richard Shaw, which is the show we just had, he’s working at the University of California, Berkeley. He makes $60,000 or $70,000 a year, at least, as a teacher. We sold fourteen pieces, so he thinks he’s the richest man in the world. But he can also do what he wants to do, art-wise. So that’s what I meant by the freedom of it. There’s no one looking over their backs to do it, to say, “Hey, that’s not going to sell.” You know what I mean? They don’t care. So that’s the freedom.

Rigelhaupt: Who were some of the collectors in the area over the years?

Braunstein: Well, there was Hunk and Moo Anderson. They’re from Saga Foods, down on the Peninsula. At the beginning, they bought a lot of local people. Then a curator got ahold of them. You know, they hired a curator. Then the curator talked them into work from the—They’re from Atherton. That’s where Benezra worked from. He was the curator of their collection when he was a student at Stanford. I lived in Palo Alto, I know them all. He bought practically, at that time, everybody in this gallery. One of each or two of each. You know, Altoon, Voulkos. Just name them all, the old timers that I had back then. Then when he went—The big names. This new curator, or his new adviser, talked him into concentrating on a period of the sixties to the eighties. They went to New York, and they bought good people. They bought a lot of really interesting sculpture, Giacometti and Lipchitz. They bought some Hans Hofmanns. because that was a tie-in with California and local at that time, and very supportive of the young people.

Mary Keesling, Sally Lilienthal, Sally Heller were big collectors. One of my artists had a beautiful collection, Nell Sinton. She had a beautiful local collection. There was a real support group for the local scene here, when I start thinking about it. I hadn’t thought about it before. Who else were around? George Sachs, George and Dotty Sachs came around with craft. They really helped raise craft out of the craft movement into the fine arts. A lot of works. I sold them their Peter Voulkos for $20,000. They died. They’d never spent that much money on art. Well, they got this beautiful, big stack, which is worth $200,000 now. But they were supportive of the local scene here, and then they started going national, too. They’ve given their collection to the de Young Museum. What other collectors were around? Rene di Rosa, who just came in and picked up all these young people. I mean, he had the sharpest eye of all, and then put it into a direction where it had to be just Bay Area. I mean, he made it so specific. It still is that way. He was around all the time. Frank Hamilton and Mason Wells, they’re both dead. Well, no, Frank Hamilton’s still alive, but Mason died. They were both painters, who were very supportive of the local art scene. How many more do you want? [laughs] I could go on and on. I’m trying to remember. You want the early ones, right?
Rigelhaupt: Well, just who had been really big collectors that you might’ve had association, that you saw as important.

02-00:18:38 Braunstein: Well, all of these people were involved with the museum. All these guys that I’m talking about were all involved with the museum. We all were involved with the museum. That doesn’t happen anymore. I’ve never sold to the Schwabs, I’ve never sold to Steve Oliver. Who else? I mean, there’s a whole group. I’ve never sold to Mimi Haas. Because, you see, the San Francisco museum was looking for some of this work from New York. They had a lot of local people, I guess, and they wanted to broaden themselves. They started this little group, the collector’s circle, and took people around. You had to be a giver at a certain level to become part of this. Then they took these trips. And these are the ones that educated these people to help buy this work. The Schlesingers were big collectors. Norma Schlesinger and her husband, the Swigs were my collectors, too. I had my share of all these people at my beck and call; they purchased from me. But you didn’t have to go after them, they just came in automatically. You don’t hardly see them anymore. Your collection reaches a saturation point, too. But the group that follows the museum people around now are very different, and I don’t really hardly know who they are. Of the old timers, Frances Bowes used to buy a lot of stuff from me, but I’ve concentrated mostly on California art. And frankly, I haven’t been wrong, because there’s a lot of good people around here that are being picked up by other people. You don’t have to live in [New York] anymore, go to New York. That has changed since I started this business.

But as I say, I don’t have much to do with the San Francisco museum scene anymore. There were collectors from Oakland, too, a bunch of guys that come over. Not too many from Marin or the peninsula. There’s a couple on the peninsula that are collecting, but they’re all involved with the San José museum. The San José museum’s latched onto them to get that work that they’re buying that goes in their collection. And is advising them. Museums all follow the same pattern. Because we get groups here from Denver, we get groups here from Oregon. People come from Arkansas. If there’s a lively museum [or] center for art, they will always come to California. If they’re coming to California, they’ll do Los Angeles and San Francisco. You know, if they’re coming on the West Coast. They’d be going up to Seattle, because they’re getting curious about Seattle. But you know, there’s a lot more people involved in the art world, more than there used to be. Which is great. And there’s a lot more artists. I mean, when the San Francisco Art Institute graduates ninety-five masters this year, and CCAC graduated, like, fifty or sixty—The University of California only had six. But you’ve got two hundred artists roaming around trying to get their work in and selling their work, getting it into galleries. It’s just crazy. There’s so many artists out there.

My theory is, well, I pacify myself. I say, “Well, listen. They’re going to find out in a couple of years.” I won’t even show anybody unless they’ve been out
of school at least two years. Because it’s hard to break into the market. When you’re in school, you’re living in a protected area. And you have your buddies. It must be very lonely to be an artist because you’re out there by yourself working. I can call my colleagues up if I have a problem. When you’re in school, you can knock on the door next door to you, the artist who’s working there, and say, “Help me with this little color deal,” you know what I mean? But after that? I always say they’ll be great collectors. [laughs] Let them get a job, let them go work for Apple or one of the places like that. Then they’ll make money, and they’ll buy art. Wishful thinking. I haven’t found anybody else who’s done it. One guy did; I take it back. He was very cute. He came and bought a piece of art of his favorite teacher. Which I thought was very sweet. When he made some money. So there you are.

Rigelhaupt: How would you characterize the Bay Area’s artist community?

Braunstein: Well, it seems to be very lively. There’s lots of things going on, and there’s a lot more little galleries opening up, and alternative spaces. I mean, bars are selling art now. There’s a bar down here on Minna Street. They’ve got some gal there who curates the shows, puts them up on the walls, and has these opening parties, and people come and buy. People have gotten creative.

We are stodgy art galleries[laughs] that are trying to be traditional. Like this guy says, “Mary Snowden is too traditional to be in this show.” Those groups getting together for the Open Studios, but, see, the Art Dealers Association is trying to set standards of what good art should be. In the open studios, anybody who wants to rent a space can show their art. So the sad part about it is that these guys are selling to people who should be coming to galleries to look for good art. There’s a lot of things going on for decorator art and offices. When you’re working with a person who’s a curator or a consultant who is doing stuff for an office you have to have a different kind of eye. They’re not going to show stuff like that, you know what I mean? They’re going to show stuff like this. At least I can say [I’ve got] a group of artists who know what they’re doing, they’re dedicated to their work. Like this guy out here who’s buying. There’s very few collectors; it’s mostly consultants. But that’s all right. At least they’re getting something that’s been “approved by an art gallery,” quote/unquote, plus the consultant, you know what I mean? So they’re not going to the open studios, where it’s just a hodgepodge of a million things. So standards are being set, very slowly. And not buying from the guy on the street, you know what I mean? Which sounds snobby, but art is a snobby thing. [laughs]

Rigelhaupt: How would [you] describe California ceramic artists?

Braunstein: California clay is probably the freest art movement in the country. They can do what they want to do. This awful word, funk, has identified it. It is
absolutely not funk, to what I know funk to be. Look at the work there of Aaron Toole, who’s been out of school one year. It’s not funky. It’s elegant and it’s meaningful, because it has to do with the war. So they’re working in many, many ways. But it definitely differs than the art in the East Coast. I just came back from the art in the East Coast, and looked at clay. So there is a freedom here, which I talked about before, that the ceramic people have found. It’s accepted here by the collectors and the museum people. This is why I think that if the San Francisco museum would do a show of California artists—if the show was going on here, the world will see that there is—it’s not funky. It’s not dated, it’s not traditional. It’s using clay as sculpture. And you know, that’s what I’m interested in, anyway.

I think the majority of artists—you can say this guy is functional, because—He keeps telling me, “You can drink out of these.” [chuckles] But you wouldn’t want to drink out of it. This is all about the Marines. So these guys are thoughtful, but they have the freedom to work here this way. So I think that this is the greatest thing that’s come out of California, is the clay movement. I think that’s what people—and you know, you look at Peter Voulkos; he never left the pot shape. He did a plate, a pot, and a stack. OK? All done on the wheel. But it’s how he treated that piece of clay after it came off the wheel. And that’s Abstract Expressionist art. And this is where everybody else is going from around here. There’s not been a lot coming out the last ten years, but before that from the fifties to the nineties, this place was just buzzing with ideas that you saw no place else except in California. And look at that guy there. He calls that the alphabets. That’s made out of clay. But if Peter Voulkos hadn’t started using the anagama kiln, which is an old form of baking, firing, that comes out of Japan, he never would’ve put that in an anagama kiln, because he didn’t know where to find one. You know what I mean? But they’ve become very proficient; they’re all around the United States now. And it’s all [coming from] Peter Voulkos. That’s one thing everybody will take away from this area is the contribution that Voulkos and ceramicists have made to the art world all over the United States, all over the world. I mean, you go to Europe, you see all these things that are related to what Richard Shaw is doing. Because they’re more interested in having traditional kind of objects, the trompe l’oeil kind of stuff. All of this stuff’s coming out of Europe now. So it’s spreading. And quietly. There’s no big hurrah about it. But I hate that word funky. Funk, to me, means something that’s very spontaneous, and this is very well thought out. Did I answer your question?

Rigelhaupt: Yes. To follow up, I wanted to ask a question about artist clusters in neighbourhoods, and what you’ve heard about the Monkey Block, when you started.

Braunstein: The Monkey Block, that was the one down in North Beach, right?
Rigelhaupt: Yeah, on Montgomery.

Braunstein: Montgomery Street. It was by the Black Cat. It was an old building that was there. All of it has to do with money. I mean, they were able to get a hold of that building very cheaply, and shared it and lived [there]. Artists are very creative people on all levels, you know. And they’ve chosen a way of living. So I guess in some respects, from what I understand, it was one of the first places in the country to do that. And then you had this Black Cat bar to show them in. But they started the whole movement in Emeryville, the artists did. Look how many years those buildings stayed empty, until a group of artists talked the city into letting them take a building over and see what we can do. “We’ll show you what we can do with this.” They’re getting kicked out of there now, because people are coming in and saw these beautiful lots and the way they’ve been set up, and so they can’t afford to stay there anymore. So they have to go look for another place.

Rigelhaupt: Is that happening South of Market, as well?

Braunstein: Well, definitely so. 871 Fine Arts was right over here on Folsom. There’s very few artists living up here now; they can’t afford it anymore, South of Market. That whole little network that used to be down by the water the Embarcadero? And the chicken coop. Did you ever hear about the chicken coop? The chicken coop was on Battery Street. And that’s where they used to bring all the live chickens there and kill them there and so forth. Then they moved out, closer to South San Francisco. And [chuckles] artists came and took those places over, till they now became—then they closed them down and what you have there is all the—There seems to be a pattern. Business goes someplace else. The artists come in. Then comes the fashion people, you know; and then comes in the dot-commers which are there now, you know? [chuckles] But they need a place to work, they need space. And they’re willing to do a little labor in there and getting it going to the way it want it to be. But it’s a pattern all over the world. I mean I’ve been to many, many cities, and have been taken to the little networks that the artists have set up for themselves. So it’s a matter of cooperation, I guess.

Rigelhaupt: Could you discuss the prevalence of women gallery directors and owners in San Francisco?

Braunstein: They’re mothers. What do you think we do? We sit and take care of artists. They’re such an extension of our inner souls. How that? Mothering. Think about that. Huh? It’s strictly what it is. I didn’t think of going in the gallery business to show my tenderness for people. [laughs] It was something to do where it kept me very active, and I didn’t have to make a living off of it. If you look at the artists going back—I’m not talking about the last ten, fifteen or twenty years—the majority of the women who were in business didn’t have
to make a living of it, and the men who were in business had money. You have to have a lot of money around to run a gallery. Now for instance, the show that I have out here, maybe I’ll sell two or three pieces. I have X number of dollars a month to break even, just to pay my salary and rent. If I don’t do that, then I can’t be in it because I don’t have a lot of money. But you think of the men in the business here in San Francisco. People like Berggruen, who came out from a lot of money, Jim Newman came from a lot of money. I’m talking about the old timers. There’s a lot of gallery dealers now, men, who saved up money to open a gallery, and are keeping going on that. Have gone to work in galleries, and after they’ve got enough money and enough moxie, and know how to do it, they open up their own gallery. You know, they’ve saved a few thousand bucks. Then there’s a lot of people backing other dealers. People who have money, who like to be around artists and like the art world.

There’s many ways that you can get their money back by taking up discounts, buying work. Like the first twelve years that I was in business, everybody who worked for me took it out in trade. I paid no salaries for twelve years, until one gal who came to work for me. She was very rich, and she had to have a job. She said, “I can’t work for you for nothing. I have to get paid.” That had to do with her income extra. And she didn’t get paid a lot of money, but she had to show that she got paid every month. And so it opened a whole new world for me. I had to pay Social Security, I had to pay state employment taxes, all these expenses. I mean, it added another expense to my little business that was going on. And we bought the art. We were doing a good favor to the artists. And [customers] could buy it cheap. This one woman who was with me the longest, she bought a Peter Voulkos from his show in 1966, $300. I sold it about two years ago for $10,000. Well she experienced a situation that never expected to. It shows how the art world goes. So the reason for women is a lot to do with the— We can communicate better with men, with men and women. A lot of times, men have a hard time with women, with artists. It takes a lot of patience.

Rigelhaupt: To go back to the museum, I wanted to ask you about any of the curators you’ve worked with that you recall. I think Suzanne Foley was one.

Braunstein: Yeah, yeah. She just died. In fact, I’m going to call the museum. I don’t think they even know it. This group wouldn’t even know who she is. You know, they might have read some material on her. But she was a big champion for clay. She was the one who was instrumental in showing the six—And I take some credit for that. I started a gallery in New York in 1975 to ’80, for about five years there. I brought all these artists there. They had never seen Richard Shaw. They’d never seen Ron Nagle. Because nobody there would show them. They saw Peter Voulkos. The last time they saw Peter Voulkos was 1961, when Peter Selz, who at that time, was curator at the Museum of Modern Art, saw his art and got him a show there. He was smart enough to
never tell any of us where that show was. The show was in the cafeteria of the Museum of Modern Art. They had it. Some people picked up on that, and that’s what started his career. So she and I, and a guy named Peter Marshall, who was a curator at the Whitney, got together. I told Susan, I said, “Susan, come in here and see if you can get—The Whitney is sort of half interested. And this guy comes and sees all the clay, you know? Maybe see what you can do.” I said, “It can’t come from me, it just doesn’t work.” So to make a long story short, they did a show in ’83, six artists from California, and brought it to the Whitney. Now, what happened, the first thing that happened, which was for the benefit of the whole art world was, when the Whitney did this show, then other artists started showing ceramics. If the Whitney said it’s okay—and some of them are still showing ceramics. There’s a guy name Andrew Lorrey, was showed by the Blum Hellman Gallery. Max Protech is showing DeVore, I forget his first name—Richard DeVore—and some lady sculptor. So a few commercial galleries are still showing clay in New York, besides people who just do collect. There’s only one gallery in New York that shows only clay, or two galleries, Nancy Margolis, and Garth Clark. But you know, up until 1983, they wouldn’t touch this. They wouldn’t touch it. Until God spoke, and God was the Whitney Museum. And even the Metropolitan Museum had a show of clay recently. So they’re beginning to recognize it. It all started in California. Let’s face it. I mean, people in New York are still doing the same pots. They’ll do a pot and they’ll put little breasts on it and they’ll put hair. But they’re not very—it’s interesting, the tightness there. I think it has to do with the freedom of living in California. What was the question? I forgot it already.

Rigelhaupt: Oh, are there other curators you’ve worked with or you have memories about besides—

02-00:42:28 Braunstein: In San Francisco here? John Humphrey. You know, they’re all the old timers. The new timers coming here—I had a dialogue going with John Cauldwell. You know. They all died. Isn’t that wild? And guy who’s the head of the Hammer Museum now in Los Angeles [Gary Garrels], I had a dialogue with him. I’ve had very little to do with Bishop or Grynsztejn, the new generation here.

Rigelhaupt: I wanted to ask you if you remember, or if you could discuss the Katherine Kuh Art for the Collector exhibitions in the early 1960s.

02-00:43:19 Braunstein: That was the Museum of Modern Art. My only time with her was spent in 1975, when she came to San Francisco to buy for—At that time, she was a curator for a collection. She was buying art for some big corporation who had offices here in San Francisco. I’ll never forget this. This woman comes in, and I don’t recognize her. I didn’t know anything about her. I knew of her, but I never knew her when I started the gallery. She paid very little attention to
California, like everybody else. No one paid attention to California. They were very nice to us dealers, but we never saw museum people coming out here looking for art, you know? A couple dealers did this, and that sort of expressed a little interest in people like Diebenkorn. See, all the guys in New York who made it now, like Diebenkorn, and Sam Francis, and Voulkos chose to stay in California. If they had gone to New York, their careers probably would have developed much faster. But they made this choice. And they all died in California. So you never saw the curators and the directors around. I never met any of these guys from the Museum of Modern Art. Maybe in the mid-sixties, but Katherine Kuh was gone already. But she was just unbelievable instrumental at having a woman into the art world, I mean on the museum level. The same way with Suzanne Foley. Even coming to San Francisco.

That was unusual, to have a woman curator. Women really were ostracized in the arts, there’s no getting away from it. I was a woman in the arts, and this is why dealers, people open up galleries, because at least they had some say. They were taking on the expenses of it. But you just didn’t see women running museums. Not till much later. And never in New York. I can’t think of a woman, because she never got to be a director did she, Katherine Kuh. No. No. She strictly was a curator. But she came here, and she was dressed like a— this is one of the lessons I teach people who are working in the gallery business, is that you never know who’s coming in; you’ve got to talk to everybody, OK? She came in with another guy, who I knew. A collector. I can’t remember his name. She put a hold on a Voulkos. I was having a Voulkos show. She knew Voulkos’s name, about 1973, this was—she knew Voulkos’s name, because he had had work in New York, so she recognized it. Anyway, she comes in, she puts a hold on the piece. Then she calls me on the telephone, about five o’clock that night. “This is Katherine Kuh, and I’m looking for some California artists. Can I come and talk to you?” She walks in, and it’s a woman who—She thinks I know who Katherine Kuh is? I didn’t know who Katherine Kuh was, until she told me herself. [chuckles] Then when I heard her—She never told me her name. She says, “I’ll put a hold and I’ll come in before five o’clock.” She doesn’t say, “My name is Katherine Kuh,” she just put a hold. But I recognized this guy, so I put it under his name, you know what I mean? Because he was somebody who bought art from me. She comes in that following day, and she picks about five or six or seven pieces from me. All clay, because we had a clay, ceramics gallery around the other side. She really went for the clay. She said to me, “I’m looking for paintings now.” I give her some names and, “Where are they?” she says, “They’re over at the Hansen Fuller Gallery.” Which is down the street from me. She says, “I’m not buying anything from them.” “What do you mean?” She says, “I went in there. I could buy—” She was looking for Roy De Forest. “I can buy Roy De Forest from New York.” Because he was showing with Frumkin Gallery at that time. I said, “Why won’t you buy here?” They didn’t even talk to me. They ignored me completely. I was going to say, “The way
you were dressed, luckily I didn’t ignore you.” My story is that you never know who comes in this gallery.

But I got to be friends with her after this. I opened a gallery in New York in ’75, and I saw her a couple times there. She would come to visit me down in the Village. We were one of the first people down in SoHo, in ’75. She would come down to SoHo. She told Bill Lieberman, who was director at that time, or chief curator, I don’t know, at the Museum of Modern Art. He came to California. But he would never come to see me down in SoHo, because it was too far away. I says, “How could come you come out to California to see me, but you won’t come a subway ride?” He said, “I only go places I can walk to.”

Rigelhaupt: I wanted to ask you how you would define SFMOMA now, as the museum approaches its seventy-fifth anniversary.

Braunstein: Well, I find that they have an unbelievable stick-to-itiveness. They have proved to be a very important facility in the community. They’ve set the standards of how museums should look physically. You know, they have made a niche in the world, by having some very outstanding examples. They have brought in some really interesting shows for the community. Have not started many shows that have gone very far. Why? I don’t know why. But on the whole, they’re a big fish in a little pond here. But in the New York scene or the European scene, they’re a little fish in a big pond. You can’t expect more from the size of this city. People who live in towns that have museums are very loyal. I don’t think you see many museum trustees from outside of their town. I know that the Whitney has a group of trustees, had broken that ground many years ago, where they had a group of people from different—I know Byron Meyer is on that committee, and so [was] Francis Bowes. But what they’re after, frankly speaking, part of their job, I bet you—and this is just my surmisal—is that they want—There are some collectors here who really have great works. The museum would like some of those pieces, hoping that people from their town will help influence the collectors who have them. Or even these people who choose to be on their committee have very broad collections, and very important collections, and they’re hoping the Whitney will get them. Since they do only concentrate on American art. I’m just reading. But on the whole, I think that wherever I go and I say I’m from California, San Francisco, they always have nice things to say about the museum. So I think they’ve done a good job. And you know, the interplay with the local people is one thing; the important thing is what the nation and the world will think of them. On the whole, they’ve been, I think, very successful.

Rigelhaupt: Are there some hidden gems? Or do you have favorite pieces that are part of SFMOMA’s permanent collection?
Braunstein: Well, believe it or not, I still go look at the blue hat. The Matisse. Otherwise the permanent collection doesn’t get as much attention as it should. I don’t know, I think the majority of museums are scared. They have to have blockbuster shows to keep themselves going, they say. That’s why I say they’re “in business.” They can’t really concentrate on gathering just the best of everything. So when you’re forced to make choices that you think are going to become blockbusters, then spending money, what they’re charging now for art, the monies that these museums raise is spent before it’s even earned or collected.

It’s the wish list. I don’t think they get many works now donated, of any level, unless they arrange—The museum will grow as people die off, because then these things that they’ve been living with, that they have helped select, will come to the museum. But it’ll be interesting to see that Mary Keesling, who just died, and there’s this big fight between who’s going to get what. Ruth Nash gave all of her work to the Oakland Museum. It was basically mostly California. Mary spread around. I don’t know how many she gave to San Francisco. It’s a game that everybody plays with these collectors. Especially if people have been open and let people in to see their collection. I bet you there’s a lot of collectors around here that no one has ever seen. Nobody from the museum has ever asked to come to see my collection. I bet you there’s a lot of collectors around here that no one has ever seen. Nobody from the museum has ever asked to come to see my collection, and it’s pretty broad. [chuckles] It’s forty-five years of collecting. Whether you like it or not. That’s a lot of time. But I think that they’ve done a good job, for a city of this size. And I wish them another seventy-five years.

Rigelhaupt: Well, speaking of which, where would you like to see the museum at its hundredth anniversary?

Braunstein: I would like them to go over the first seventy-five years, and pick up things that are missing from the collection that really belong there, and stop this business of nickel and dime-ing. Buying work from SECA people. I think it’s great for the SECA people who are chosen; but their selection method is strange. That should be changed. They should just fill in the old masters, the contemporary masters that they don’t have, and use the money in a different way. I don’t think it’s how many you have, it’s the choices that you make.

Rigelhaupt: Well, to close, the way I like to end is to ask you, is there anything I should’ve asked that I didn’t? Or is there anything you’d like to add?

Braunstein: No, I think that—No, no. I think the addition of the restaurant was marvelous, and they have a great gift shop. Really welcome additions to the community, have given revenues to many young designers who have crafted these things, and served a very important—You know, my daughter just started to make jewelry. She’s never approached a museum before, and she said, “Well, do you think I’m ready to show?” I said, “You know, the gift shop has to have
art, has to have things for sale at all levels. If someone comes in a museum and can only spend $20 or $30, this is perfect, what you’re doing.” So it gives people an opportunity to show their wares, that maybe never would have it before, or didn’t go to the museum. It adds a certain plus that the San Francisco museum is taking it on, you know what I mean? So I think that they’ve served a lot of purposes. I think that they’re bringing people, they’re opening it up to different organizations to come and use it. Which will I’m sure, eventually, show some kind of opportunity that somebody will have made some contributions to it. A city of this size, especially when there’re so many artists around it, [they] have to have a place to show. It’s just, I wish they would find a different way to show more local people. I don’t know how it is you would do it, but I know that Neal says we should get together and talk about SECA and so forth. I said, “Well, call me!” He didn’t say, “Ruthie, call me and set up a date.” Because he might’ve been just doing it to be nice to me. But it’s just the SECA program, in my opinion, has gotten weaker every year. But you know, it tracks a certain—Maybe it should go in a different direction. I think that you’ve asked some very good questions, that have more to do with the overall experience of my time at the museum. That’s what it was all about. It’s just one person’s viewpoint. I feel very pleased that I was selected by the museum to have you interview me. I guess I’m right that I was selected by the museum to have me interviewed, and I feel honored with that. I think that’s very nice.

Rigelhaupt: I think that’s a nice place to end. Thank you.

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