

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
75th Anniversary
Oral History Project

Regional Oral History Office
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University of California, Berkeley

SFMOMA 75th Anniversary

DON FISHER

SFMOMA Board of Trustees, 1983-2009
Treasurer, 1992-1995
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Interview conducted by
Lisa Rubens
in 2007

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Don Fisher**Interviewed by Lisa Rubens, ROHO****Interview #1: July 25, 2007**

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Rubens: I wanted to start by asking you about the—well, let me make a statement. I got off the elevator, and it was just thrilling. I find a kind of pleasure, a thrill, in seeing some of these classic, modern, and contemporary art pieces. I was wondering if you could tell us just about the[Richard] Diebenkorn that's behind us.

01-00:02:19

Fisher: Well, the Diebenkorn behind us, I bought at auction. It was being sold by George Roberts, which I later found out. He could have probably sold it to me directly; it would have saved me some money.

Rubens: When did you get it?

01-00:02:34

Fisher: Oh, probably six, seven years ago.

Rubens: Oh, it's fairly recent. But it's part of the Ocean Park series, isn't it?

01-00:02:40

Fisher: Yes, it is.

Rubens: Then what is this on the ground?

01-00:02:43

Fisher: That's Richard Long. Cornish slate, it's made out of it.

Rubens: Does it have a name?

01-00:02:50

Fisher: It does, but I don't know what it is. [laughs]

Rubens: And finally, there's a—

01-00:02:55

Fisher: The [Roy] Lichtenstein? *Tire*. We bought that probably five years ago, too. A part of that's owned by the New York MoMA. I gave ten percent to New York MoMA, for Kirk Varnedoe. In his honor. Doris loved Kirk Varnedoe.

Rubens: I've actually just begun reading his first book, his earlier one. How interesting. Well, I want to ask you, what does the art mean to you? I know that you say in your autobiography that you started, it was really—

01-00:03:28

Fisher: Peggy.

Rubens: Brooks Walker's wife.

01-00:03:30

Fisher: Right, Peggy Walker.

[interruption]

Rubens: Well, we were getting into the meaning of the art for you.

01-00:03:55

Fisher: Oh, the meaning of art to me? Well, basically, I'm much more of a visual person than I am a hearing person. I started out after school as a building contractor and building homes and so forth. Architecture, I think, is art. There are a lot of things that are art. In fact, I've had a big question that I've asked the people of San Francisco MOMA, please describe what art is. I think it's very difficult. There're all kinds of things. Anything that's done creatively by people, that is visual, I think is art. Maybe there's more than just that. If you invent things, it's art. But I've been a visual person, and I naturally got into art. Then got into the clothing business, which is also visual, which I look at as an

artist, creativity in creating some of our clothes. Or maybe all of our clothes.

Rubens: So the art did come before? Even while you were in building?

01-00:05:08

Fisher: No, the art basically started in the early seventies, and I started The Gap in 1969.

Rubens: So kind of simultaneous.

01-00:05:17

Fisher: Pretty close to it. Well, the point that I got involved in art was when I could afford to buy it. I couldn't afford to buy anything before that. Then we started collecting prints, which is really the best way to start collecting, because you really had good artists and good visual pieces, at very low prices compared to buying the real art. So we started collecting prints. Then we collected sets of prints. Then we started collecting real art. As our financial assets grew, we started buying more. As I look back right now, I should have bought more. I think we bought pretty wisely, and we bought in depth. The artists that we liked. We really didn't buy artists we didn't like. One of my philosophies was that we would always buy something that we could sell at auction. That was sort of deciding who the artist might be. It was easy to like certain artists. The ones that we have liked, we've bought over the years in real depth.

Rubens: So you speak about it a little bit as an investment. But the fact seems that there's something that's drawn to you about the works.

01-00:06:36

Fisher: Well, I look at it as an investment, not because I sell it. But there's a psychic enjoyment knowing you did something right and it's worth more than what you paid for it.

Rubens: Well, I like that. I like that a lot. I don't know if it's kosher for me to mention this, but what was so interesting to me in your autobiography was about how hands-on you were with the construction of the buildings. That you wanted the office cubicles, you wanted it to look a certain way. You go through floors and move things.

01-00:07:04

Fisher: Well, I'm very hands-on in everything that I do.

Rubens: But it's visual.

01-00:07:08

Fisher: Yes, it is visual. I walk through a store and I see a piece of paper on the floor, and I pick it up. Little tiny details that nobody else would look at seem to be of interest to me. I notice architectural details. I notice all kinds of different things. But that's just—everybody has their own little mantra, the way that they're built. I'm a Virgo, born in September. Virgos are neat.

Rubens: Do you just say that? Or is there a little bit of—

01-00:07:40

Fisher: No, that's true. [laughs]

Rubens: You believe that. Well, is there a cut-off point to contemporary art? When you bought prints, were you buying prints from—Is it Capricorn? She would have Diebenkorn—

01-00:07:57

Fisher: No, I don't know where I bought them from. I bought them from dealers, mainly. We bought Lichtenstein, we bought [Frank] Stella.

Rubens: Are those [Andy] Warhol prints?

01-00:08:07

Fisher: Those are Warhol. There's a whole set of Warhol *Mick Jagger* prints on the other side there. We have some [Pablo] Picasso prints, the bull prints, the bull series, which is right opposite the bull series of Lichtenstein. We have David Salle prints. Mostly, we've got a lot of Lichtenstein. We have Jasper Johns.

Rubens: Prints?

01-00:08:30

Fisher: Yes. *0 Through 9*, the numbered numerals he did. We've got the *Weather* series.

Rubens: What was it about these contemporary—?

01-00:08:43

Fisher: We liked them. We just bought what we liked. We did not buy, speculating. We really didn't buy as an investment. In fact, my wife looks at everything as an expense. I don't look at it as an expense. I also don't look at it as something that's an asset that you can turn around and sell. But I know that I could. That's why I said if it's worth more, I get some kind of a psychic enjoyment, thinking that I did the right thing.

Rubens: I understand that. I understand that well. Is there also some psychic enjoyment by looking at some of these things?

01-00:09:17

Fisher: Well, I love looking at what we have. I like to put it together, the way that it's mounted. I do that all myself. We don't have a curator. Doris and I—

Rubens: Really? These walls are just knockouts.

01-00:09:28

Fisher: Doris and I picked out everything that we own. We use a lady by the name of Jane Richards, who used to be Jack Lane's wife. When they got divorced, she went to New York. We use her as a consultant, to ask her advice on certain things. She doesn't find very much for us, if anything.

Rubens: But you had not had a consultant before that?

01-00:09:53

Fisher: Not had what?

Rubens: A consultant.

01-00:09:55

Fisher: No, we've never had a consultant, basically.

Rubens: Just a parenthesis. In growing up in San Francisco, did you go to the museum?

01-00:10:03

Fisher: No very much, no.

Rubens: It was not called [the Museum of] Modern Art then.

01-00:10:05

Fisher: I never went to the museum.

Rubens: Your mother wasn't on the board?

01-00:10:07

Fisher: There was no art in our family. Basically, none in Doris's, either.

Rubens: The Levi Strauss, the Haas family, of course, has a long, deep history in art. But right about the time, I think—I may have this wrong; help me—when you're starting to first work with them, or bring The Gap into them, they have a dealer named Daniel Weinberg.

01-00:10:35

Fisher: Yeah. Yeah, I bought something from him.

Rubens: Then apparently, [Henry] Hopkins says—I get this through Hopkins’s oral history—that he did a show of the Haas collection that says it’s not ready yet as a collection. It was something in transition. Then I guess Weinberg went off to be a dealer in L.A.

01-00:10:55

Fisher: Right. We bought a [Dan] Flavin from him.

Rubens: So again, it’s not that you’re seeing a model of what someone else is doing. You’re exercising—

01-00:11:10

Fisher: Strange as it seems, we bought the artists that we liked. Again, I think one of the criteria was that you could sell it at auction. Because Henry Hopkins told me something that I remember from the time I went on the board. Of course, a \$5,000 picture or sculpture, the time I went on the board—which you say in 1984—is probably at least \$50,000 today. Henry said, “If you buy \$5,000 art, you’re going to have a whole basement full of \$5,000 art. So I thought I might as well buy something that I’m going to like, that maybe has some longevity to it. I guess I was right, as it relates to that. It’s easy to like different things; but that was one of my criteria, that I could sell it at auction. I’ve only sold maybe four or five things ever, since we’ve started our collecting.

Rubens: Really? You are so known, and have done so much as a civic participant, as a civic leader—SFSOS [San Francisco SOS], all the educational work, the contributions to the university. But you do go on the board of SFMOMA.

01-00:12:28

Fisher: Well, I went on the board. The first board I think I went on was the Columbia Park Boys and Girls Club. It actually was called the Columbia Park Boys Club at the time.

Rubens: Is that a local—?

01-00:12:38

Fisher: Yeah, that's local. Then ultimately, it merged about six years ago with the San Francisco Boys and Girls Club, to be called the Boys and Girls Clubs of San Francisco. I've been on that probably for thirty-five or forty years.

Rubens: That was your first board?

01-00:12:51

Fisher: That was the first board. Then when we started collecting, with Doris's really good friend Peggy Walker, who was Brooks's first wife—passed away, I think, in 1980. She got us started.

Rubens: What did she collect?

01-00:13:07

Fisher: Well, it's not so much what she collected; she was sort of an art adviser. She majored in art at Stanford [University]. Because she was Doris's best friend, she'd help us pick things out and figure some artists that we thought we should get involved with. That's how we started. Then it's an avocation, as well. It's a hobby. It's really a great thing. You go into any city, you go the museums, or you go see people you know, people you've met while you're traveling around; you take trips. You get to places that you wouldn't get normally, because you're with a group from a museum. We're members of a lot of different museum groups. We just took a trip to Minneapolis with the Metropolitan [Museum of Art] in New York. We're going to Seattle

with the National Gallery. We took a trip to India with New York MoMA. We take trips to the San Francisco Museum, as well.

Rubens: I see so strongly, the link between your business acumen in terms of organization and finance. Also the art of it. Styling. And you began to travel quite a bit for that. I know it's not until the nineties, I think, that you're in the Middle East and East Asia. Or late nineties. But did traveling also, and seeing museums, reinforce your interest?

01-00:14:42

Fisher: Well, I don't think traveling encouraged us to get more involved in buying art. It sort of grew on itself. Once we started buying—People get infected by the idea of the game, purchasing, looking around. We got to know dealers. Whenever we went to New York, we'd spend time going to the dealers, we'd go to the museums. Over time, you start understanding what an artist is all about. You go to enough retrospectives of Sam Francis or Lichtenstein, you know what you like, you know the things that you think are the best. I think we've done a pretty good job of selecting what we thought were the best periods. I don't think you could put the collection together that we have today, because, number one, the art isn't available. It's not as much just being able to pay for it—which in itself is staggering today, what's happened to the art prices—but the art itself, the really good art is not available. It's either in museums' hands or in private collectors' that aren't selling it.

Rubens: Well, that's what I want to get to. Hopkins leaves pretty soon after you are on the board. But he had started the art cultures forum.

01-00:16:03

Fisher: Collectors' Forum, which Peggy Walker started.

Rubens: Peggy Walker started it. That's absolutely right. Thank you. He expanded it. So I assumed you would have attended some of that?

01-00:16:13

Fisher: Well, Peggy being Doris's best friend, we went to all of the Collectors' Forums. We were involved in the beginning.

Rubens: Then two things Hopkins says. This is in his published oral history. He says, "By the end of the eighties, the dealers—" He blames the dealers. I've talked to other dealers, and they say it isn't the dealers that are driving up the prices, and it's getting very difficult. He also says L.A. begins to rise as a market. So he goes to L.A. I don't know that we need to comment on that, particularly. What I wanted to get to is Jack Lane comes in.

01-00:16:48

Fisher: Well, Brooks Walker and I hired Jack Lane. I'll never forget going out to lunch with Brooks and Jack. And Jack Lane said, "Well, if I come to the museum, I want to buy a [Anselm] Kiefer." I said, "Okay, we'll buy a Kiefer."

Rubens: Did you know Kiefer?

01-00:17:07

Fisher: I knew who Kiefer was. I obviously knew him as an artist.

Rubens: That's what I mean.

01-00:17:12

Fisher: "Okay, we'll buy a Kiefer." Then he says, "I want to have \$500,000 a year to acquire art with, and acquisitions." I said, "Okay, we'll get you \$500,000 a year to buy art with. Is there anything else?" He says, "No, that's all I want." I said, "Well, then, we can hire you to run the museum." That's how it turned out. That's the story that happened. So what I did was form an accessions committee, and try to get twenty people on the accessions committee, each giving \$25,000 a year to accessions, which was the \$500,000. It's still continuing. I don't know if they've raised the rate; I don't think they have, since Jack came. I

think it's still \$25,000 on the accessions committee. They have more members of it today.

Rubens: Does that mean you chaired that committee?

01-00:18:00

Fisher: I did to start with. I chaired it.

Rubens: How did you find Jack as an educator? He also then brought in [John] Caldwell.

01-00:18:09

Fisher: John Caldwell was really good as a curator. John Caldwell got us interested in a number of the artists that we've been collecting. Sigmar Polke, [Gerhard] Richter, those are the two that really come to mind that he—we have an enormous Richter collection. We have several Polke's, but not to the same extent. John was really terrific. They were a team. I think Jack did a good job of getting people started collecting in San Francisco Bay Area. I do believe today that the Bay Area is probably as good as any other area in the United States as far as collectors are concerned. Essentially, between Jack Lane and John Caldwell, I think that's where the whole thing started.

Rubens: Began to take off? But it sounds like you were ready for it.

01-00:18:59

Fisher: Well, we'd been collecting a little bit.

Rubens: But did he internationalize? My question was premature when I asked about your traveling. He's bringing in these German postwar painters.

01-00:19:12

Fisher: He had an interest in [Georg] Baselitz and Richter and [Markus] Lupertz and some of the German artists, Polke. We did take travels. We traveled over to Europe, to Germany to Cologne. We went to the

art fairs. Maybe I was more aggressive than anybody else in this Bay Area, in collecting at the time. Hunk [Harry] Anderson, who has a marvelous collection, started collecting before we did. We missed some artists that were really quite good because I thought they were too expensive at the time for us to buy. I'm not too sure I thought they were too expensive for what they were, but they were too expensive for us.

Rubens: Can you give an example?

01-00:19:50

Fisher: Well, we didn't get much of Diebenkorn when we started, we didn't get [Willem] de Kooning. We didn't buy [Mark] Rothko, and we didn't buy [Robert] Rauschenberg. Those are the main ones.

Rubens: That Rauschenberg now?

01-00:20:03

Fisher: We have out there one Rauschenberg, and we have one Rothko that we bought within the last several years. But we did miss some of those, and you're going to miss some.

Rubens: Were you part of that group that went to look at a couple of model museums? Not model, but with Gerson Bakar.

01-00:20:28

Fisher: I don't think Gerson was with us. It was John and Frances Bowes; Doris and myself; Mimi Haas; Jack Lane; Joe Esherick, the architect; and Jim Woods, who was the director of the Chicago Art Institute, or the Art Institute of Chicago. That was the group that took the trip. That was an interesting trip. The rest of the people on the committee were going to—well, the main reason for that trip was to look at what Mario Botta had done. Well, actually, we did look at [Frank] Gehry, too. We went down to Los Angeles and looked at Gehry. We went to Chicago

and looked at a man by the name of [Tom] Beebe, who had done the Chicago Library. We looked at his work—Pardon?

Rubens: The library?

01-00:21:27

Fisher: There was a new library in Chicago that he'd done. Then the other two architects that we didn't look at, one was [Tadeo] Ando, and the other was—Oh, I forget.

Rubens: Was there one in Cleveland?

01-00:21:44

Fisher: Well, Beebe was from Chicago. Ando is Japanese. Then the other was another, the man that that did the Los Angeles MOCA. Then I think [Bill] Turnbull was another one. There were five architects.

Rubens: Turnbull's from here.

01-00:22:11

Fisher: There was Beebe, Botta, Gehry, Ando. Maybe Turnbull was not one of them. Maybe there were six, but I think there were just five. So we decided to look at three of them. It was Beebe, Gehry, and Botta. So there were a lot of stories that went into the whole thing, but we did take a trip over to Switzerland. We all loved Botta.

Rubens: You were a part of that.

01-00:22:40

Fisher: I was part of that.

Rubens: It just settled it.

01-00:22:42

Fisher: Right.

Rubens: By then, having seen many museums, having begun to collect, did you have a vision of what the—?

01-00:22:52

Fisher: What the museum should look like? No.

Rubens: Not look like, so much, but *be*. Really *represent*.

01-00:22:57

Fisher: Well, we all grew up on Van Ness Avenue, which was a museum of—

Rubens: Beaux-Arts.

01-00:23:05

Fisher: And the facilities were really not very good. It was an upstairs museum. So we wanted to build a first-class museum. There really weren't that many around at the time. New York MoMA has changed dramatically. It was not much of a museum. The Art Institute included a lot of other art besides the contemporary art. Los Angeles didn't have very much. So we knew we wanted a contemporary building, and we thought that what Botta had done was quite good. In fact, we all liked Botta. It was pretty much unanimous that we would get him. So that was the decision that we all made, and I think he's done a marvelous job. I think the building is still quite good.

Rubens: But then there's the difficult time. I was wondering if you were at the meeting. There's the retreat at the Silverado, and [David] Resnicow and the executive committee—

01-00:24:09

Fisher: That's digging pretty deep, but go ahead. That's fine. It's interesting that you got that information.

Rubens: Well, it's in the records. Jack was very articulate about it and made it public. He said, "We had this meeting, and we're talking about what

comes next.” He said, “I was to go.” He said, “I knew that I didn’t have it.” I was surprised. I said, “I’m surprised that you—”

01-00:24:31

Fisher: You mean Jack decided that he wanted to leave after that meeting?

Rubens: Not that he wanted to leave. He wasn’t saying that he wanted to leave, but he was saying he didn’t a vision about what the next step would be. I said, “Well, of course, it was to build the collection.”

01-00:24:42

Fisher: That’s right.

Rubens: He said, “I know, but there was nothing.”

01-00:24:45

Fisher: Well, there was also a lot of discussion down there—I’ll never forget this. There was a lot of discussion about what kind of shows we should have, and the type of audience, and how the museum should be judged. As whether a year was successful or not. I never forget this, because I’m in the retail business. Unless we have comparable store gains, which is sales each year at an existing store better than the year before, we’re going to go in the wrong direction, and it’s going to be because our expenses are going to go up. We’re not going to be able to survive if we don’t have that. So I made that suggestion, and Jack Lane was violently against that as a method of judging whether they were successful or not. I said, “Well, whether you like it or not, your audience and your income has to go up every year or you can’t raise people’s salaries and so forth. Things do cost more.” So I don’t know whether that particular conversation had any influence on him. I have no way of knowing whether it did or it didn’t.

Rubens: Was it a general discussion of the board?

01-00:25:55

Fisher: It was general discussion of the people that went. It wasn't the whole board that went there, it was a group of us, maybe ten or twelve people that went down there. It was Rancho San Carlos, it was not Silverado.

Rubens: Oh, really? Okay.

01-00:26:10

Fisher: You know where that is?

Rubens: No, I don't.

01-00:26:11

Fisher: It's in Carmel Valley.

Rubens: And Jack left, basically.

01-00:26:24

Fisher: Well, I don't know when he left. I mean, he didn't leave right then. He didn't leave for five, seven years after that.

Rubens: Oh, no. From the opening of the building?

01-00:26:31

Fisher: No, no. Well, from the opening of the building, he must have been there—

Rubens: I think he was gone within two years, less than two years.

01-00:26:35

Fisher: No, no, no. Because David Ross was next. Well, I don't think David—I mean, Jack had to be there for five years, at least. I think after the building was built, he was there.

Rubens: You think so. Okay.

01-00:26:54

Fisher: But I could be wrong.

Rubens: Well, I'll tell you who also talks about this is Fogarty, Lori Fogarty. Because she was running development, she was moving up into a management position. She was saying, "We now had to take in these big-box shows."

01-00:27:19

Fisher: Blockbuster.

Rubens: Blockbusters. Blockbuster shows. It took many more years of arranging, and then there were issues of acquisition and all of that. So Jack seems not to have had it. David Ross does come in.

01-00:27:33

Fisher: Well, I'm not going to admit Jack didn't have it. Jack might not have thought he had it. I think Jack did a good job. Now, Jack may have run out of ideas, which is possible. Anybody that's around for ten years, you can't keep coming up with new ideas. Even in this business, you have to keep freshening up what you've got. Then David Ross came. I happen to think David Ross did a really good job at the museum.

Rubens: I think they brought in several to look at.

01-00:28:11

Fisher: Well, that was a long story, as to how we ended up getting David Ross. But I think David did a very good job in the museum.

Rubens: Had you by then known him at the Whitney [Museum of American Art]?

01-00:28:20

Fisher: I knew him before. He was in the ICA [Institute of Contemporary Art] in Boston.

Rubens: You did?

01-00:28:25

Fisher: I'd known him for a long time. David had a lot of energy and a lot of creativity. I think he made a major contribution, with Gary Garrels, in acquiring art, most of which was probably paid for by Phyllis Wattis. But the museum acquired a whole set of older Ellsworth Kelly pictures. They bought a beautiful Rothko that Phyllis bought for them. They bought a Donald Judd that he got. They also bought a large number of old Rauschenberg pictures, as well.

Rubens: Kind of filling in, in a way.

01-00:29:19

Fisher: Well, not only filling in. I mean, they got a lot of history when they bought Rauschenberg, and when they bought Kelly. They bought Kelly from '59 through '81 or something like that. Pictures that you just wouldn't find. They were more historical than maybe they were beautiful; they were more historical than what people would normally buy and probably put on their walls.

Rubens: Do you think they were more American?

01-00:29:44

Fisher: Well, they were American. Well, they were American, Rauschenberg and Kelly. And Rothko was American.

Rubens: Judd?

01-00:29:49

Fisher: Pardon?

Rubens: Is Judd American?

01-00:29:52

Fisher: But Phyllis was—when you look back, the collection, our museum's collection is okay. But it lacks depth. It lacks the ability to buy, because we didn't have enough money that we were spending on

accessions. Raising \$500,000. Now, in today's world, that's even less than it was then. Today, we're probably raising a million dollars, which is not enough to buy. You're going to have to keep speculating on buying young artists. What happens is, you don't have the ability to buy in depth. The great museums in this county are great because of the collections that were given to them by collectors. I still think that's the case. I don't think that that many collections have been given to San Francisco MOMA. They've been given pieces by people over time, but they have not been given major collections as a group.

Rubens: Well, it brings us almost contemporary with missing a lot of things. But of course, there is always the great hope the [Harry and Margaret] Anderson collection will come. There's the great hope the [John and Frances] Bowes collection will come. I don't know at what point you're ready to talk about what your interests are, or what you—

01-00:31:26

Fisher: I'm not ready to talk about it now.

Rubens: Why do you think it is that San Francisco hasn't been given those collections?

01-00:31:43

Fisher: Well, I think the best collectors haven't died yet.

Rubens: Well, there we are.

01-00:31:49

Fisher: I think that's a very important aspect of it.

Rubens: The original Haas—

01-00:31:56

Fisher: Elise Haas, she had some really beautiful pictures. But the collectors that started collecting when Jack and John Caldwell were around were

relatively young at the time. I mean, I started collecting when we were in our forties. So gosh only knows what happens at the end of people's lives, whether they—Today, with the price of art, I think you've basically got to give it away when you die. But I'm not seeing that many major art collections being given to museums. The one that I see the most, or I have recently seen, is what Jack Lane has done down in Dallas [Dallas Museum of Art]. He's gotten four or five collectors to agree that they're going to give their collections. They're promised gifts, I believe.

Rubens: In ten years—

01-00:32:53

Fisher: I don't know what our museum has as promised gifts from people.

Rubens: It must have affected things when the law was changed.

01-00:33:05

Fisher: The tax law was changed. That is going to have a big impact. It's really stupid.

Rubens: I was pretty shocked just to learn that Jack said he's going to leave at the end of the year. I had a wonderful week in Dallas, talking to him. I was just knocked out.

01-00:33:24

Fisher: Well, he's pretty proud. I think he's done a good job getting those people to—

Rubens: He's gotten young people on the board, he's gotten them to contribute. Then they're sitting right next to the Nasher [Museum of Art]. I thought the contemporary in Fort Worth was an amazing building. But you're right. The issue is cost, and the issue is partnership.

01-00:33:51

Fisher: I do believe that museums today have got to work out partnerships with collectors. We did a unique thing when the [Charles and Helen] Schwabs and the [Don and Doris] Fishers bought the old Ellsworth Kelly pictures for the museum, basically. At this point, Schwab owns a third, we own a third, and the museum owns a third. The museum gets use of them any time they want them. But when the museum isn't using them, we use them. It's a fair way to do something like that, instead of putting it in the basement.

Rubens: Then I understand that partnership worked out between the Fine Arts Museums and SFMOMA over—

01-00:34:45

Fisher: On Paul Sack's?

Rubens: A photography—

01-00:34:47

Fisher: Paul Sack's photography. That's a good way to do things. What happens is, our museum owns it. SFMOMA owns it. But the Fine Arts Museum has a right to a certain number of pictures at all times.

Rubens: Jerry Nordland was telling the story that in fact, there had been a move to build a building called San Francisco Museum of Art; to put it in Golden Gate Park, but that it would be owned by the Fine Arts, and that they would lose their name. He said, "I'm not doing this."

01-00:35:21

Fisher: I don't know about that. That could be.

Rubens: I had never heard of that. Then it's Hopkins who puts the name *modern* into it, and that's what's remained. Partnerships. Of course, then there's the issue of corporations sponsoring exhibits.

01-00:35:40

Fisher: Well, corporations sponsor them, but they don't really collect. There are few corporations that have collected. I tell every group that comes through here that this is not a Gap art collection. Well, today, it would have been a good investment; but ten years ago, it would have been a terrible investment, because the price of art was—a lot of the pieces were worth 50 percent of what I paid for them.

Rubens: They were falling?

01-00:36:09

Fisher: They'd fallen in 1989 to 1991.

Rubens: What affected that? That's not the dot-com bust.

01-00:36:19

Fisher: Well, no, but it was a recession that we had in the country.

Rubens: Oh, sure, the real estate recession.

01-00:36:26

Fisher: People did not buy as much. As I say, a lot of what we bought was worth about half. At that point, you look at it and say, "Well, what is a company that sells clothes buying art for?" I didn't want people to think that we spent our money that way.

Rubens: I understand. So can you talk about what an ideal museum would be for you, though? Is there something that—

01-00:36:52

Fisher: Well, I think an ideal museum would be a museum with a good permanent collection, and with the ability and open-mindedness to have shows that are of real interest to a bigger constituency than what our museum is presently showing. To some extent, I think museums are elitist. I don't think they should be. Because again, what's art? Are we the people who should define what art is to the population? Or

people's own mind of what art is? They should have the right to make their own decisions. You can certainly form people's points of view, and there's nothing wrong with that. Some of the museums are doing that today. I mean, they're doing what their curators and their directors think they should be doing. It may not be that they're doing what the board of directors even wants. Your ability as a board to influence the kind of shows that are being had in your museum is not very big. The director and the curators basically do what they want to do, and they have total license to do that. I think most of the boards act that way and appreciate that.

Rubens: So when you think of museums, do you have something in mind that are more democratic or are appealing to a broader spectrum?

01-00:38:30

Fisher: Well, I think New York MoMA's stepping out a lot more than a lot of the other museums I've seen. I don't know what shows—

Rubens: Did you go to the opening of the [Richard] Serra?

01-00:38:37

Fisher: Yeah, I did.

Rubens: Was that fun?

01-00:38:40

Fisher: Well, we have a lot of Serras of our own, and I loved it. Any museum would be delighted to be able to show that Serra show, because he's probably the leading sculptor in the world today. He's just an amazing guy, as to what he's ended up doing and how he's grown.

Rubens: So the MoMA's reaching out. Are there other—?

01-00:39:04

Fisher: Well, I think they are. It's hard for me to say. I don't know. There are not that many museums that I would classify in the same class as SFMOMA. You look around the United States; there's the Art Institute—If we're talking about contemporary art, you're talking about MoMA New York, you're talking about the Walker [Art Center], and then there's Los Angeles MOCA.

Rubens: There's MOCA, but they don't collect.

01-00:39:39

Fisher: They do. They do. They try to collect, but there's not much that they can do. They just haven't bought enough. Then there's Philadelphia, and there's the Art Institute, and there's L.A. County, and there's Dallas and Fort Worth and Minneapolis. Those museums are a collection—There's the [M. H.] de Young [Memorial Museum], that has a collection of all different kinds, a much larger spread in time than our museum, which is mostly the twentieth century and the twenty-first century. The de Young just had a show of Nan Kempner's clothes. I don't think that's something that our museum would have done.

Rubens: Hopkins brought Issey Miyake.

01-00:40:31

Fisher: Yes, Miyake. That's some time ago. I could be wrong about it because I'm not the curator, I'm not the director. Then they had that Vivienne Westwood show, as well. I do believe that museums have to have broader thinking than they do today, to be relevant. Among other things, it is enormously expensive to bring big shows into San Francisco. Among other things, the earthquake insurance is enormous. That may be fixable. But bringing shows in is really, really expensive. So you've got to figure out something else that's going to bring people

in who are going to pay for it, unless you expect the patrons of the museum to pick up all the expenses.

Rubens: Few do that. Amon Carter [Museum], D.C. One thing we've left out that I want to make sure we mention, you brought in a marketing person, she was hired to run the store of the museum.

01-00:41:35

Fisher: When we started Banana Republic, we had a travel bookstore. And Irma Zigas was running the travel bookstore. Then there was a point when we decided we were going to close the bookstore. So I suggested to Jack Lane that Irma Zigas run our bookstore there. That was a real fight, for him to hire her. He thought I was delivering a stiff. I said, "Jack, I'm not going to give you somebody that I didn't think was good. She's *very* good; we're just not going to run a bookstore anymore. You ought to hire her." I said, "Hire her." So he hired her.

Rubens: She revolutionized what museum stores were.

01-00:42:20

Fisher: That's right. She did a marvelous job. Irma Zigas.

Rubens: Then did she go on to do something?

01-00:42:28

Fisher: No, she retired from that.

Rubens: Because I don't think even the Metropolitan had a store like that.

01-00:42:34

Fisher: No, well, she started doing it. Well, she learned a lot of stuff from us, because she learned about private label and printing. The book business was not a very high-margin business, and so she tried to figure out how she could get more margin out of that store.

Rubens: Bags and scarves.

01-00:42:51

Fisher: That's right, all those kinds of things.

Rubens: Jewelry. Your role on the board today at SFMOMA? You're still a trustee.

01-00:43:05

Fisher: I'm on the executive committee, I'm a trustee.

Rubens: You have chaired the accessions committee, and have I missed any other big roles that you played?

01-00:43:13

Fisher: No, I haven't tried to play too big a role. It would be hard for me to run a museum with a forty-people board. It just is not my nature to do that. I've not really been the head of any major nonprofits, for that reason.

Rubens: The other question I wanted to get, talking about museums having to re-conceive their audience and what's going to attract and what else is going to sell, what effect do you think it's had that there is such a plethora of the MOAD [Museum of the African Diaspora] and the [Contemporary] Jewish Museum and the Mexican Museum? I mean, is that a fragmentation?

01-00:44:04

Fisher: Well, it's an interesting question. These are special single-interest groups that decide that they would like to have an exhibition that they can control, the MOAD and the Jewish Museum. Although the Jewish Museum's going to be showing art of all different kinds, it's not necessarily going to be Jewish history. But I think that's part of the reason. You see these civic museums around the country, and they are focused.

Rubens: Here, at least, they're all in one area. It's kind of a brilliant development—

01-00:44:41

Fisher: They're all down there, South of Market, right. Photography, there's the Ansel Adams [Gallery] down there. One of the problems with a large collection, you give it to the museum, it's going to stay in the basement. People that spend a lot of time collecting don't want to see their art sitting in the basement. So what do you do about it? You've got to try to figure out how you can do something where it's on display and people can see it. Either that, or you turn around and sell it. The museums have an unbelievable appetite for wanting your art. But they will not guarantee you that they will show it.

Rubens: It's just too costly to keep buying more buildings?

01-00:45:32

Fisher: Well, they have to operate them, too. The capital expenses are one thing, but then you've got to operate them forever.

Rubens: So we'll stay tuned, then. You do say at the end of the book you're thinking about maybe doing something. But I thought you had set it in Golden Gate Park, that's why I brought up that story about the—

01-00:45:53

Fisher: No, but I've been thinking about what I'm going to do. Some day you'll know. Maybe sooner than later.

Rubens: Anything else you think you should be telling me that would be good for scholars who would look at how boards operate, how management's structured, limitations on—

01-00:46:19

Fisher: Well, one of the things that you run into, but the problem with museum boards in general is that it's made up more of people that can

afford their collecting. It's not as democratic as it should be. Yet we do think about making it democratic. It's not that everybody is wealthy and is a collector, but you want to make sure that the people that are on the board are interested in art. I think our board is pretty democratic. But it also tends to get old. One of the problems with most boards like that is that it doesn't get refreshed, because you don't let people leave the board. Now, most of them don't want to leave.

Rubens: I was going to say. But dot-com-ers weren't brought in?

01-00:47:20

Fisher: Pardon now, what?

Rubens: Dot-com-ers weren't brought in? When you think about—

01-00:47:22

Fisher: Well, they have some of them.

Rubens: Your son.

01-00:47:27

Fisher: Well, my son [Robert Fisher] is on the board now, and he's the head of development. He's a major photography collector.

Rubens: Oh, is he? Didn't know that. McKeon's daughter is on the board. McKeon's daughter, Elaine's daughter [Eileen Michael].

01-00:47:41

Fisher: McKeon's daughter is on the board. But there's a lot of incest there. My son and—

Rubens: I didn't mean it as incest, they're just young people.

01-00:47:54

Fisher: Well, I understand that, but it's connected to the same family.

Rubens: Well, the Haases, of course.

01-00:47:59

Fisher: The Haases. When you look over the list, when their term comes up—because they're on a three-year term. Their term comes up, you look at the list and you say, "Oh, they're major contributors to the museum. We don't want to insult them. We're not going to take them off the board." Consequently, there's not as much energy. It's much better when you start a board from scratch. I think that the de Young has done a much better job because they were pretty much out of business for a long time and they've brought in a lot of younger people that bring a lot more energy. That's the problem with all these boards. I ran into the same problem with the Columbia Park Boys Club board. The people who were giving the money, Ben Swig and Stanley Langendorf and Ted Rosenberg, and some of these older people—some of them are dead today.

Rubens: I don't know Ted Rosenberg.

01-00:48:55

Fisher: Well, he started American Building Maintenance. They'd sit around and raise all the money for the Boys and Girls Club. But the board just kept getting older and older and older. It was somewhat embarrassing. I was very young when I went on the board, and I couldn't afford to spend the money that they were spending. Their major interest is in whatever business they're in, and it isn't in building that board up. Consequently, boards get old and they get tired.

Rubens: So why do you think the Fine Arts was able to turn it around?

01-00:49:32

Fisher: Well, because they'd been out of business for five years.

Rubens: They had a new building. Of course, a lot of money. I wanted to ask you just about in terms of any national presence. You've got a state

presence, in terms of education and business, labor, environment, corporate. But in terms of art, are you—

01-00:49:59

Fisher: We've joined groups at New York MoMA.

Rubens: You had said that before.

01-00:50:07

Fisher: The International Council, it's called, and they take lots of trips. We go to their opening parties and so forth. We're involved in the Collectors' Committee at the National Gallery in Washington. We're involved with—it's called the Bryant Fellows at the Metropolitan. Doris is a member of various museums, the Art Institute of Chicago, and Los Angeles County and all that stuff. We've gotten to know the directors of those museums, and most of the curators, over a period of time.

Rubens: You've contributed such magnificent art to Mission Bay here as public art, but you're not part of the San Francisco Commission on Art.

01-00:50:55

Fisher: Well, I haven't been asked. But I wouldn't do it anyway, I don't think. But we did give the bow and arrow, the [Claus] Oldenburg out there, Doris and I did. We commissioned that. We haven't given too much other public art that I can think of.

Rubens: I was wondering if you were interested in that or—

01-00:51:12

Fisher: The one, the major piece that we have is the *Charlie Brown* in the lobby here, the Richard Serra piece, which does not belong to us, because there's no way to get it out the front door. I made a deal with Richard that he was going to do something for us in the building. But I wanted to make sure it went out the front door. I signed a contract with

him to that extent, and then this is what he designed. It weighs about 115 tons, it's sixty-feet tall, and is welded to the I-beams. It will never go out of this building. But it was so great that we bought it. So the company bought that.

Rubens: It's a gorgeous building. Who designed it?

01-00:51:56

Fisher: Robert Stern designed the building.

Rubens: Oh, he did? All right. So anything else that you think we ought to get in here for the record? You're going to stay on the board, as far as you know, for now?

01-00:52:09

Fisher: Sure, unless they kick me off.

Rubens: And Benezra?

01-00:52:14

Fisher: Is doing a nice job. Everybody likes him, and he was—The thing with David Ross was sort of unfortunate. But he wasn't a really good manager. Consequently, people were upset. On the other hand, I don't think people recognize what he did for the museum. Because if he didn't get the art that he was able to acquire, that museum would really have a mediocre collection. Trouble is right now, you can't even tell how good that collection is, because most of it's in the basement.

[material deleted]

Rubens: Can you say you have a favorite? Or is it sort of like your children?

01-00:56:12

Fisher: Favorite building, or—?

Rubens: Artist.

01-00:56:15

Fisher: It's hard to say.

Rubens: I bet.

01-00:56:20

Fisher: Actually, I love Chuck Close. Among other things, because of him. He's a paraplegic. He's done an amazing job. But otherwise, it's hard. I don't have a preference.

[End of Interview]

Lisa Rubens is an historian with the Regional Oral History Office who directs projects on university history and the history of social movements. She has a Masters in City Planning and a Ph.D. in History, both from the University of California, Berkeley. Before coming to ROHO in 1987, she taught United States, Women's and California History in the Peralta Community College district for sixteen years. Her own research and writing is on women in California history and the Golden Gate International Exhibition.