

SFMOMA curator put photography in new perspective

By Charles Desmarais

For an entire generation of Bay Area artists, collectors and enthusiasts of photography, there has always been but one top curator, Sandra Phillips.

Phillips assumed responsibility for the region's most important collection of photographs, at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, in 1987; as the department grew, she was appointed senior curator in 1999. During her tenure, the museum has presented nearly 200 exhibitions and added, through gifts and purchases she initiated or

» **Inside:** Sandra Phillips' picks from SFMOMA photography collection. **E2**

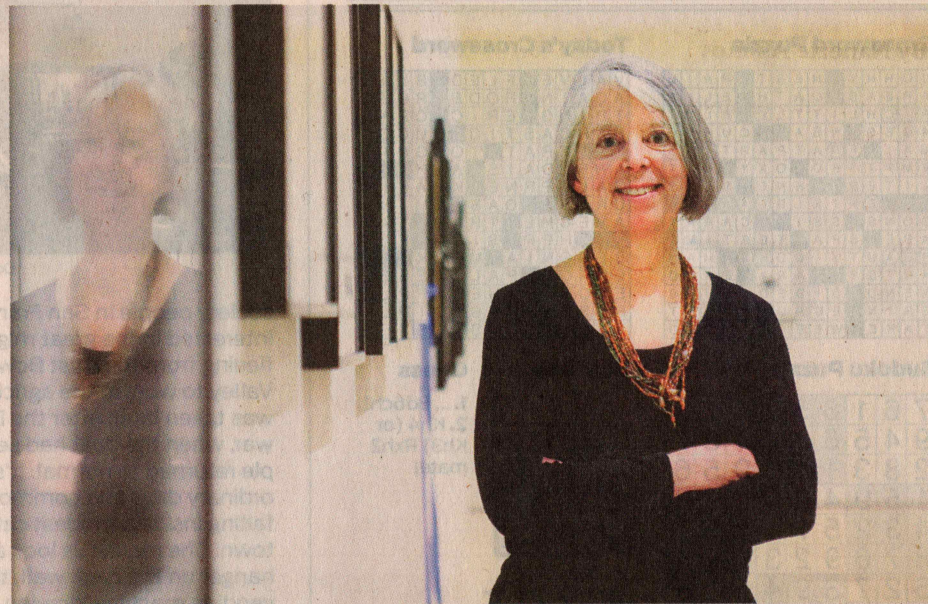
approved, more than 11,000 new works. In the process, she developed an already excellent program into one of the top 10 art museum departments of photography in the United States.

That era ends June 30, when Phillips retires just as SFMOMA re-opens after a three-year, \$305 million remake. "It's a very new building, and a new museum. And photography has changed," she told me when we met in her

office this month. "I think photography deserves somebody new — newer and younger."

That must be a hard thing to say, and it must have been a very hard conclusion to reach. It is certainly difficult for us, the museum's audience, to imagine the department without her. With a quiet and generous manner, Phillips (who is pleased to be called Sandy by acquaintances as well as friends) has built a circle of devoted supporters — people who have given works of art worth many millions of dollars, and exhibition funding to match.

Phillips continues on E2



Gabrielle Lurie / Special to The Chronicle

Sandra Phillips is retiring after 29 years as a curator at SFMOMA.

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Phillips elevated photography at SFMOMA

Phillips from page E1

She won't take credit for courting John and Lisa Pritzker, who are the lead donors behind an eponymously named center for photography that will be a museum within the museum — the largest such space in any American institution. Trustees who knew the Pritzkers much better did that. But, of course, if she had not guided the museum to its position of worldwide prominence, there would have been nothing to put in the new space, and the opportunity to help it grow — and put their name on it — would not have been as exciting or attractive.

It is hard to appreciate, from the vantage point of a time that has come to appreciate photography's central role in art since its inception in the mid-19th century, how primitive our understanding of the medium was just a few decades ago. Certainly, all art of the past hundred years has, in some way, been influenced by the camera — whether aided by it or as a self-conscious reaction to or rejection of it. But the direct product of the camera was thought to be, at best, note-taking for the Real Thing.

SFMOMA was one of a few institutions that had gingerly touched upon the medium — photographs were shown and collected there from its inception in 1935 — before an international explosion of interest in the mid-1970s. There were several reasons for that, chief among them the broad view of founding director Grace McCann Morley, and the early involvement of Ansel Adams, Edward Weston and other towering figures of the medium who lived in the region.

In 1979 Van Deren Coke, an art historian who had written the influential book "The Painter and the Photograph," was hired as curator of photography, and the department was founded the following year. According to a 2010 interview with Phillips in The Chronicle, it was Coke who tapped her for his job when he decided to retire.

Looking over Phillips' record of exhibitions and accompanying publications (every big show was the occasion for a major new book), we see not only individual shows and catalogs, but the history of photography itself, as it was being written. Her earliest major project, the 1985 "André Kertész: Of Paris and New York," drew upon her doctoral dissertation at the City University of New York. It was organized by the Art Institute of Chicago and shown at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in collaboration with the respective curators of those museums even before she came to SFMOMA.

She acknowledges that she is more interested in the art history of photography — including the recent history — than in the cutting edge of contemporary work, and that scholarly focus has made her name the field. Her early work on such artists as Helen Levitt, John Gutmann, Wright Morris and Daido Moriyama helped secure their place in the pantheon, even if they were not "discovered" by her (discovery of artists being an overvalued curatorial skill — rarely if ever appropriately ascribed, in any case). Her 2005 article in the magazine Art in America on the filial artistic relationship of Ansel Adams to Alfred Stieglitz is a masterwork of erudition.

But for all her fine work with such great and famous artists, it has been Phillips' embrace of photography in the vernacular that has been her unique contribution. Perhaps such work fits her obvious and natural democratic tendencies. One of her first shows to demonstrate those values was "Crossing the Frontier" (1996), a selection mostly of what would once have been called "documentary" pictures of the American West. Without the guideposts of a prewritten history of many of the artists included, she selected extraordinary works that might otherwise have languished for many more years. It is a real-life demonstration of what we mean when we say a curator has a "good eye."

For me, the most stunning experience of that aesthetic acuity, coupled with her embrace of unsung picture makers along with the celebrated, came on a visit to the museum in 2010, even before I moved to San Francisco. "Exposed: Voyeurism, Surveillance, and the Camera Since 1870" shockingly exhibited in the same galleries high-intensity images of extreme violence and titillating eroticism along with the high art of the medium. The interaction teased out some fascinating, if disturbing, correspondences.

"The museum needs somebody new," Phillips says. Of course, that would have been true at some point, even if she had not chosen this moment. But regardless of what skills and background that new person brings to the job, Sandra Phillips will have forever left her mark on SFMOMA, and on we who have come to understand the art of photography through her work, and seen the world through her eyes.

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Photographs that stay with us

Sandra Phillips will retire from her job as curator of photography at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art on June 30. We asked her to share with Chronicle readers a selection of works among the 11,000 that have entered the SFMOMA collection during her tenure, her thoughts on the pictures and what led to their acquisition.

— Charles Desmarais



David Goldblatt

David Goldblatt, "Meeting of the Worker-Management Committee of the Colgate-Palmolive Company" (1980): "A picture made in South Africa during a time of high social and political anxiety, this is a moment at a meeting of an organization

created to alleviate racial and economic tension. The intention is benign, of course, and the man to the right believes he is being helpful, but running through the photograph from top to bottom is a long line that separates the two men, putting them almost on different planets while giving them equal weight. Clearly the black African man is deeply uncomfortable. Seeing this picture also reminds me of the many older men in our own culture, comfortable and secure, who have thought themselves open-minded and helpful on all kinds of personal subjects when talking to a younger woman. Except that the woman would disagree."



Larry Sultan

Larry Sultan, "My Mother Posing for Me" (1984): "I find this an especially kind and thoughtful picture. First, it's a visual description of a kind of household: You see accoutrements of high suburbia in Southern California. Then there is his dad watching the ballgame on TV, back to us (and to the photographer), and his mother, dressed girlishly, presenting herself as a person younger than her body tells us she is. Her whole attention is focused on her son making the picture. She has clearly posed this way many times before, but for her husband years before the moment recorded here. What I find so wonderful is that the photographer understands all this — the true age of his mother, and the way she lives — and sees it all with real understanding and love."



Robert Adams

Robert Adams, "Longmont, Colorado" (1973): "It took me a long time to understand Robert Adams' work — it looks so deceptively normal, so uninflected. Here he has photographed a young suburban mother in the local Grand Union or Safeway in Colorado. Her baby, neatly packaged up in

his carrying case, is fast asleep in the shopping cart. It seems completely normal, what we see every time we step into a big store ourselves. But as you continue to look, you see her expression, which is perhaps lost, or confused — perhaps trapped is too strong. The fluorescent lighting is normal but also unsettling, the stacks of goods on the shelves all bottled and packaged — nothing green or irregular or natural there; there is no living thing except the two people in the picture. Even the cart is a kind of cage. When we walk into supermarkets, we are confronted by pictures of beautiful women who are smiling as they lift out sparking glassware from their dish racks or feed their puppies, but the real consumer here seems in need of what is not in the supermarket: sunshine and the pleasures of a cool breeze."



Dorothea Lange

Dorothea Lange, "Café Near Pinole, California" (1956):

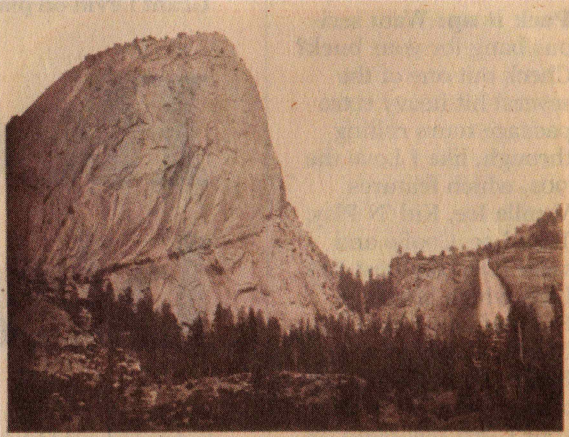
"What a loving picture! Lange lived in Berkeley and in her youth was a famous portraitist of

society people in San Francisco, before she became interested in the great migration of poor farmers fleeing from the Dust Bowl and coming to the Central Valley to work in the agriculture industry. This picture was taken later, after the Depression and after the war, when the dust had settled and the lives of people returned to normal. It's a quiet celebration of ordinary days and commonplace events: light quietly falling inside a modest cafe in a modest Bay Area town. She makes us look at the details: the wire coat hanger on the back wall, the electric fan sitting on a vending machine glowing radiantly, and the cowboy resting from his labors in comfort in this ordinary and peaceful community cafe."



Cecil Stoughton

Cecil Stoughton, "Lyndon Johnson, Flanked by Lady Bird Johnson and Jacqueline Kennedy, Aboard Air Force One" (1963): "I think this must be one of the most poignant pictures ever made. We bought this picture when we organized a show about photography's special ability to make voyeuristic and invasive images. This photograph describes a moment of extraordinary emotionality, a moment when the people in it reveal their inner selves in an extreme situation. While it is certainly invasive and makes us uncomfortable to look at it, I am grateful for the humanness and special insight you can see here. This picture was made on Air Force One just hours after John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. It was made either shortly after or just before Lyndon Johnson was sworn in as president, as these people were flying from Dallas back to Washington, D.C., with the body of the dead president also on the plane. You can feel how traumatized Jackie is, how gently Lady Bird Johnson tries to engage her, how reassuring Lyndon Johnson tries to be, and how hopelessly alone the former first lady is."



Carleton Watkins

Carleton Watkins, "Mt. Broderick, Nevada Fall, 700 ft., Yo Semite" (1861): "This picture represented a new step for our department. Before I came to SFMOMA, the administration decided that it was a modern museum, and therefore needed to divest itself of all non-modern art. The museum decided to deaccession — that is, to sell — 19th century photographs. But when the new museum building was built — the Botta building — we reversed that decision, and this picture was included in the opening show of the new museum of that time. It was made by Carleton Watkins, arguably the best 19th century American artist of the American West. It is startlingly modern: The blank sky — so justly placed, so intrinsic to the success of the picture — is a cloudless abstraction. It accentuates the beautiful form of the bare rock and the tiny, cascading river to the right. The utter simplicity and directness of the composition show why we needed to reconsider that earlier rash decision, and to consider photography as a continuum from its beginnings, a modern form of expression since its inception."



Henry Wessel

Henry Wessel, "Southern California" (1985): "Isn't this how most of us think of Southern California? Self-indulgent, well-fed, well-tanned, hanging out at Ocean Sands and thinking only, or at least chiefly, of himself? He is cute, too. The photograph is straightforward: It shows this young guy in his element. It makes no judgment of him. It also makes us a relish the sunny warmth, the beauty of the crisp shadows, and the culture that for all its ostentation acknowledges these simplicities."



Daido Moriyama

Daido Moriyama, "Yokosuka" (1970):

"Moriyama is best known for his grainy pictures of what he sees on the streets — photographs that are marked by a sense of foreboding and executed with immediacy. This picture was made in a city near Tokyo that housed a large American base, a troubling presence to many Japanese, especially for the women. It was made in a split second — the girl was probably soliciting soldiers and is running from authorities, so quickly she has lost her shoes. It must have been unbearably uncomfortable to leap all over the trash as she makes her escape. It's a picture about eroticism; certainly her dress is short and revealing. It is also, thankfully, made without judgment."

Crossword Puzzle

C	O	R	N	E	S	T	R	A	I	D
A	R	E	A	S	O	A	T	H	E	L
R	O	C	H	L	I	T	T	L	E	B
A	G	E	S	N	B	A	C	U	R	V
M	A	I	C	O	A	T	P	A	R	T
E	M	P	T	I	E	D	O	X	Y	S
L	I	T	E	S	E	N	E	S	E	T
			S	H	I	E	L	D	L	A
C	O	N	S	S	S	I	C	A	R	A
A	P	E	S	P	A	T	E	E	T	I
O	C	A	U	T	I	C	O	N	S	M
A	N	T	S	E	A	R	T	E	S	T
R	E	N	O	S	I	D	E	I	S	H
E	R	I	N	E	C	R	U	S	P	O
T	A	K	E	W	E	E	P	I	N	T

Today's Crossword

V	A	L	V	E	F	L	E	D	B	L	A	B
A	G	A	I	N	R	O	D	E	R	U	B	E
T	H	I	N	G	E	R	I	C	O	R	A	L
S	A	R	C	A	S	T	I	C	G	U	C	C
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A	W	E	D	A	I	S	A	S	H			
G	A	L	E	R	N	E	K	H	A	K	I	S
U	R	T	S	G	A	B	M	I	N	A		
A	M	E	C	H	E	T	R	A	P	T	I	M
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E	U	R	O	S	P	A	L	A	V	E	R	E
E	B	O	N	P	I	N	E	A	P	P	L	E
P	I	P	E	T	I	N	N	S	D	I	M	L
S	E	E	R	E	G	O	S	E	S	S	E	S

Sudoku Puzzle

7	6	1	8	5	9	4	2	3
9	4	5	6	3	2	1	8	7
2	8	3	1	4	7	9	5	6
1	5	9	4	8	6	7	3	2
4	3	2	5	7	1	8	6	9
8	7	6	9	2	3	5	4	1
5	2	7	3	9	4	6	1	8
6	9	8	2	1	5	3	7	4
3	1	4	7	6	8	2	9	5

Challenger

9	3	3	3	13
3	9	3	4	19
3	4	9	3	19
3	3	3	9	18
18	19	18	19	36

Chess

1... Bd6ch!
2. Kh4 (or Kh3) Rxh2 mate!

PUZZLE ANSWERS