



Lea Suzuki / The Chronicle

Staircases to SFMOMA's new upper-floor galleries are reflected in glass as a security officer looks out a window.

Truly grand reopening

Expanded SFMOMA a treasure, but it remains a work in progress

A great modern city needs a great institution dedicated to modern and contemporary art.

That is the premise behind the rebuilding of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, which reopens to the public May 14 amid international acclaim and weeks of celebration. The three-year, \$305 million redesign is a triumph.

But as we enter a new era for art in the Bay Area, I have been weighing the value of SFMOMA — of any such mu-

seum — and returning to the basic questions: Who needs it, and why should we care?

The new, supercharged museum is a powerful magnet for superlatives: By some measures, it's the largest museum of modern art in the United States; the fourth floor alone, of seven floors of galleries, encompasses more viewing space than the entire museum had before the renovation.

The community booster in *SFMOMA continues on A11*



Michael Macor / The Chronicle

"Geometric Apple Core" by Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen at the newly refurbished SFMOMA.

FROM THE COVER



Connor Radnovich / The Chronicle

Lawrence LaBianca has a lofty workplace as he assists the installation of an Alexander Calder mobile at the remodeled San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Museum's renovation is truly grand

From page ASFMOMA

me could wax bureaucratic about the “new” SFMOMA’s potential to attract tourism (high) and to encourage a resurgence of what had become a sluggish gallery scene (it already has). A reopened museum surely will be much better for the neighborhood — for the hotels, restaurants, Yerba Buena Gardens park — than a shuttered one. And it’s a bold, handsome addition to a city center that pretty much lost its sense of adventure with the wane of the Art Deco era.

Just to briefly orient myself to the opening exhibition, breezing by most of its 1,900 works took me five hours; my smartphone health app clocked 4.3 miles of walking. With sizable spaces devoted to career surveys of work by several individual artists (Alexander Calder, Ellsworth Kelly, Agnes Martin, Chuck Close, Richard Serra and others), the place might have been renamed the San Francisco Museums of Modern Art. Other pieces of the collection could form a nice Museum of Contemporary German Art and a world-class Museum of Photography.

And the art itself? While any collection of rare and unique objects is, by definition, limited, the museum is graced with extraordinary examples of the works of key artists, primarily of the 20th century, from Diego Rivera to Henri Matisse, Alfred Stieglitz to Bernd and Hilla Becher, Andy Warhol to Mark Bradford. And as an educational resource, SFMOMA positions San Francisco among the top four U.S. cities for access to, and information about, the art of our time.

By any standard, SFMOMA is a treasure for the Bay Area — and the nation.

Curating success

The new wing of the museum’s expanded building is, from the look of it, less a solid addition than a veiled container — an “inflatable” bulging out of the solid brick original structure. I love the reference to the fog and waves of the nearby ocean and bay, but there is, at the same time, an unmistakable swolleness about it. Inside, much of the collection is beautifully hung — the Fisher Collection and, in particular, the Calder gallery (for some reason called a “lab” by the museum) benefit from exacting curatorial attention. The seventh-floor contemporary galleries, however, are

SFMOMA

Hours and info: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. daily (Thursdays until 9 p.m.) beginning May 14. \$19-\$25 (free, 18 years and under). 151 Third St., S.F. (415) 357-4000. www.sfmoma.org/tickets

Reopening: The museum officially opens to the public on May 14, but tickets for that day are already oversubscribed. Advance tickets (online only until May 14) for later days are highly recommended.

Member preview days, April 30-May 9. Membership is available online (\$100 individual, \$150 dual), simultaneously allowing members to reserve timed preview day tickets for themselves plus one guest.

where the swelling is localized.

Museum leaders are justly proud of the success of their Campaign for Art, an effort to attract donations to the collection to celebrate the expanded building. More than 200 donors stepped up, promising some 3,000 works. Many of these are hung around the building, either integrated into parts of the collection, or in exhibitions devoted to new gifts.

Some of these work better than others, but the contemporary show of 90 works — the inaugural installation’s primary exhibition of art of the past 25 years — is a bit of a mess. It is drawn entirely from new and promised gifts and, as we begin to peel back the layers, that is its main problem. More important than the strength of any single exhibition, however, are the issues that lie beneath the surface, and the note of caution that they sound.

All American museums depend upon gifts from wealthy patrons to build their institutional collections, an inherent class bias that curators address in various ways. They try to shape and diversify their holdings by enlisting a mix of different sponsors and private collectors; they help to guide collectors’ choices (knowing an object acquired privately might one day come to the museum as a gift) through lectures, tours and individual advice; they encourage institutional loyalty and healthy competition to buy and give the best, through committees (clubs, really) devoted to the growth of museum departments. Very importantly, they purchase and borrow works strategically from outside the museum to broaden the picture.

SFMOMA has employed all

these strategies over many years. Nonetheless, the emphasis of the entire opening installation is on the taste of private collectors. In the case of the Fisher Collection, the show is selected from a fabulous grouping of terrific objects, assembled by just two people, primarily for their personal pleasure. (Before coming to the museum, many works were shared with employees and visitors at the headquarters of Gap Inc., the company founded by Doris and Donald Fisher and the source of their wealth.)

Collection lacks diversity

The Fishers chose extremely well, but as private individuals they could ignore the responsibility a public museum would and should feel, for example, to racial and gender diversity (by my count, fewer than 16 percent of the artists currently shown are women, and maybe 6 percent are people of color; if we figured percentages by number of works — some artists get entire rooms, some are represented by a single object — the disparity is far greater). The Fishers could also decide (as they did) to include British sculpture and post-1960 German art, but pretty much ignore the rest of Europe and all of Asia, Africa and South America.

It takes nothing away from the Fisher family to point out these personal preferences, but it is the museum’s job to account for them — which it could not do in this exhibition, given an agreement to show the Fisher material together for a year (and as a unit once every 10 years in the future). As a result, viewers are left to mentally fill in the gaps.

In effect, the problem of curation by donation is even worse with respect to the seventh-floor exhibition, “The Campaign for Art: Contemporary.” Of course the curators wanted to celebrate the growth of the collection. Of course they made sure to thank the people who made that possible, by organizing this show and publishing an attractive catalog. But this means that SFMOMA’s largest and most prominent analysis of contemporary art in its opening months is based on no more compelling theme than donor largesse.

These are more than quibbles, yet in the grand scheme they will matter less as the museum gets past its donor recognition responsibilities and begins to fill out the program. But they do get us back to the essential question: What

Upcoming coverage

► **Critical eyes:** Look for Charles Desmarais’ review of the opening exhibitions and John King’s observations on the architecture of the new SFMOMA in The Chronicle on May 8.

does it really mean to a city and its metropolitan region to have a contemporary art museum in its midst?

We take pride in our storehouse of rare and extraordinary objects. (And yes, they are *ours*, in both a moral and a legal sense, as a public trust.) We see the value of giving busloads of kids opportunities to learn about art, or an hour of respite to a beleaguered businessperson or caretaker.

But as important as these and other benefits may be, they are really byproducts of a way of thinking and the kind of community energy that led to the creation of SFMOMA in the first place, and have prompted its growth.

There was a day when the idea of a public intellectual had some validity, when a few individuals in a community or a nation could set the agenda for critical thought and analysis. Media and communication have atomized, and with them the authority of those voices. Our hopes for leadership coming from the traditional spheres — religion, politics, business, the academy — have faded, and their institutions grow ever more insular. Artists have inherited a new and larger role, the best of them bringing to the world an understanding that comes of close looking and an openness to what they find.

Driving the conversation

Over its history, SFMOMA has performed a central task as a portal to other cultures (its early years helped shape international acceptance of the work of Mexican radical artists); as a design catalyst (the years of curator Aaron Betsky were heady ones); as the seat of major international movements based here (Bay Area Figurative, Conceptual, etc.). It has been not just a place where people go to see things, but also an instigator for community-wide conversation around cultural areas as diverse as German contemporary culture and the history of photography.

To be a great contemporary museum is to be both a symbol of free inquiry and expression, and an active participant — a leader — in its community. It

has been only three years since the museum closed for construction, and it tried to stay visible during that time by forging partnerships with regional institutions. But the Bay Area is a different place on its reopening.

Where art meets politics

The political tumult around income disparity and the deep economic unease revealed by the presidential primaries is in stark relief against the background of the region’s richest cultural institution.

The Museum of the African Diaspora, the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts and, soon, the Mexican Museum — substantial institutions in SFMOMA’s own neighborhood — now portray themselves as politically engaged and focused as never before on diversity. Design means something totally different in the context of heightened debate about acute housing shortages and fights over what can be developed where. Artists and art galleries continue to face major financial and space challenges, notwithstanding some recent relief. Art education at the professional level is in need of comprehensive change.

And I have asked this question before: Even as the new collections and spaces will deliver to us the best imported art and ideas, can we continue to be, as we have been for more than a century, *generators* of culture?

A vital contemporary museum, while not empowered to fix these stubborn problems, can play a central role as a convener of conversation and debate. It can be an idea producer, a challenger of the status quo, a supporter of diversity, a bridge to the larger world. It can be not only an arbiter but a center: a rallying point for artists and designers and their audiences and supporters. Just as it upholds the highest standards for the art it will exhibit and acquire, it can demand excellence of the city it serves.

Through its history and with this latest spectacular step, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art has positioned itself for greatness. The moment we celebrate on May 14 is not the culmination of something, but the beginning. The new building is a gleaming, gorgeous new tool; the test will be in how it is used.

Charles Desmarais is The San Francisco Chronicle’s art critic. Email: cdesmarais@sfgchronicle.com Twitter: @Artguy1