

Mexican Museum still figuring out who will curate it

Who doesn't wish all the best for the Mexican Museum? For more than 40 years, it has made only halting progress toward maturity as an institution celebrating Mexican and Mexican American art — lately broadened to encompass Latino and Hispanic culture internationally.

A new space for the museum, designed by the prominent Mexican architect **Enrique Norten** and under construction at Mis-

sion and Third streets in San Francisco, is a major step in that direction. But there has been little encouraging news from the art side of the organization in quite some time, and there are currently no staff members with curatorial experience or ex-

pertise.

That's why I took note of an email I received last week with the subject line "New Curatorial Team at the Mexican Museum." It

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CHARLES
DESMARAIS

Art



Ten Arquitectos

An exterior rendering of the new Mexican Museum: The building is coming together, but it's not clear who will take charge.

Leadership in flux at Mexican Museum

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pains me to report, however, that the news is mixed. Rather than hiring an in-house team of professionals, or even one, the museum has selected **Sari Bermúdez** — who served from 2000 to 2006 as president of the National Council for Culture and the Arts of Mexico — and the Mexico City firm Estudio Museográfico “to serve as an independent consultant for curatorial programming and exhibit design.”

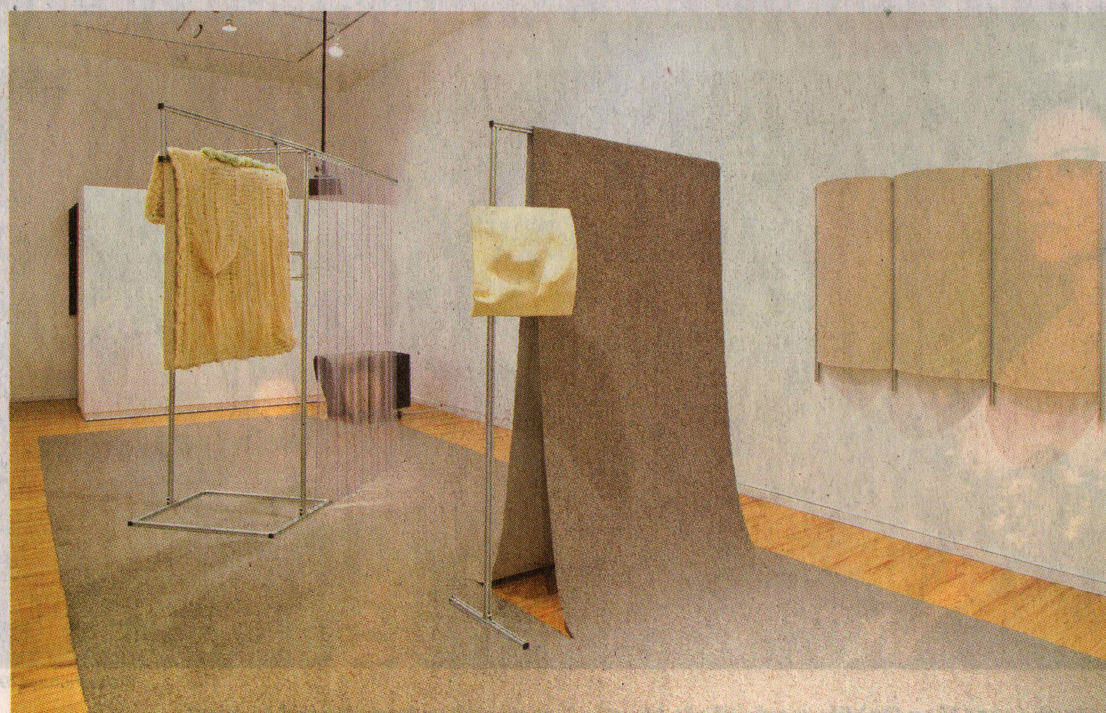
The use of consultants in the museum world is very common, particularly for an institution undergoing major change. In a phone interview, Chairman **Andrew M. Kluger** said the institution is seeking advice on the quality of a collection that totals 17,000 works, plus several thousand more being offered by various donors.

Although seeking advice is laudable, that analysis would ordinarily be done, if not by the museum’s curatorial professionals, then in consultation with them. Bermúdez, said Kluger, is “basically taking on that role for the next two years, and then she will help us do a search for a permanent curator.”

“We had a number of people that we did hire before as curators,” Kluger said. “The problem was they were very weak, in terms of their background. And no curator of real substance was going to come into the museum at this time, where it was still in the fundraising and development phase, without any clear guarantee that they had jobs for the next three to four to five years.”

So what is the background of the consultants brought on for the job? The website of Estudio Museográfico describes a firm oriented to design and presentation more than to scholarship. By phone from Mexico City, Bermúdez said that her experience is in the Mexican political realm. She’s been a translator, a television producer and reporter, and a government cultural policy wonk. But she readily admits that she is not an art historian.

She made much of the team of experts with whom she would work, and Kluger said, “It’s more the team than her, herself.” But when I asked the museum for biographies of key team members, a public relations person responded after several days, “The Mexican Museum is finalizing the team roster



Maegan Hill-Carroll

Jacqueline Kiyomi Gordon, “A Space for Looking Is a Space for Listening” (2016), installed at Western Front in Vancouver. Gordon will develop a new work at the Lab through Oct. 31.



Bitforms Gallery, New York

Claudia Hart, “Digital Death” (2013), part of Bitform Gallery’s show at Minnesota Street Project.

on this project and is not ready to release the names. Once we have the names we will make sure you are the first to know.”

Modernism on the move:

Martin Muller, the San Francisco gallerist who pioneered art in the SoMa neighborhood in 1979, then moved to the Monadnock Building in 1986, has long presented a lively program of droll realism and high abstraction. Sometime in November (depending on the construction), he will open the newest iteration of Modernism Inc. at 724 Ellis St., just within the Uptown Tenderloin Historic District.

The neighborhood has been experiencing a rapid renaissance, with trendy restaurants, bars and shops opening regularly. One of the city’s most carefully watched contemporary art galleries, Jessica Silverman, runs two spaces on opposite

corners of the 400 block of Ellis, and the influential art publisher and producer the Thing is also in the area.

The new Modernism space shows greater architectural ambition than these, with a top-to-bottom renovation of a 5,000-square-foot building. The work is being orchestrated by Aidlin Darling Design, an award-winning firm best known locally for In Situ restaurant at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and Stanford University’s Windhover Contemplative Center.

The first exhibition in the new space celebrates the gallery’s 37th anniversary with a solo exhibition of works by a gallery stalwart, the iconoclastic **Gottfried Helnwein**.

Breaking the gallery: Dena Beard is talking about the nonprofit organization she runs, and the radically free-form policies at the heart of



Bitforms Gallery, New York

Quayola, “Iconographies #82-1, Madonna After Raphael.”

a new series of exhibitions, installations and performances that will launch there in October. Earlier, she had emailed me, “The Lab is finally launching our commissioning program. For these we give each artist-in-residence \$25-\$70K, unrestricted, and allow them complete license to transform the space, our website, operating systems for up to 10 weeks.”

I ask what she means by “operating systems.” “Everything,” she says, “from accounting to security to all the ways we handle the operations of the place.” An artist had just required the removal of window security bars, which changed the way the light entered the space but also communicates something about vulnerability and access at the Mission District space, a half-block from the 16th Street Mission BART Station. Beard allows that the alteration ups the ante on safety, “but it’s also a sign of

gentrification — it’s an ambivalent gesture.”

But what if something an artist wants is a real danger to the organization? What if they break it? “I’d rather the Lab to break as a result of art,” she says, “than from something we did administratively.”

The series begins with an installation to be developed Saturday, Oct. 1, through Oct. 31 by **Jacqueline Gordon**, a San Franciscan known for creating sound works. “Inside You Is Me” is planned as a sculptural and sonic environment with movable walls and a multichannel sound composition. Gordon will work with nine other artists as the piece changes and develops day by day; visitors not only will move around the space, but can also reconfigure it, moving walls and other elements. A series of music and dance performances will add yet another layer. For schedule and details, go to www.thelab.org/projects/2016/10/1/jacqueline-gordon.

Bitforms comes west

(temporarily): The Minnesota Street Project continues to challenge galleries in the Bay Area, and even its own long-term tenants, with innovative imports presented in space reserved for temporary shows. Some of the pop-up exhibitions are created by regional galleries with under-resourced but vigorous programs (Capital last April, Eli Ridgway presenting **Amy Ellingson** Saturday, Oct. 1, through Oct. 29), some by imports from New York or elsewhere.

New York’s Bitforms Gallery is a media and digital arts space, venerable at 15 years old. Like an oldster looking to add some spice to life, the gallery will celebrate its anniversary, not just at home, but out of town in a hip new place: San Francisco. The show will include “currently represented artists as well as those who have shaped the gallery’s identity over the years, demonstrating the program’s continued engagement with technologically informed practices.” It will be on view Nov. 5-Dec. 29.

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