The Monolith

Norwegian architecture firm Snøhetta designed the skin of the addition to evoke the city's fog and the water currents of the bay.

(1 of 8)
I’m not sure when it hit me. Maybe it was on the sixth floor when I came upon Gerhard Richter’s *Janus*, a glorious symphony of vivid colors that felt like a cross between a Coltrane improvisation and the world’s most beautiful algorithm. Maybe it was wandering through the third-floor gallery filled with Calder mobiles, those wondrous dangling miniature universes that never fail to provoke an inner smile. Maybe it was looking through one of the east-facing windows that unexpectedly reveal the labyrinth of the city, portals in a huge fortress built only for play. Maybe it was discovering the Agnes Martin room on the fourth floor, an eight-sided chapel filled with works so silent and inward-looking that they automatically switch off the buzzing transistor radio of your habitual mind.

Somewhere in there, I began to understand what the new and dramatically improved San Francisco Museum of Modern Art has given the Bay Area: not just an inheritance,
but a windfall, the cultural equivalent of a Powerball jackpot that art lovers from Northern California and around the world will be drawing down for generations.

The long-awaited reopening of the museum, which has been shuttered for the past three years, can be viewed in a lot of different ways. You can see it as a blockbuster free-agent signing, like the Warriors nabbing Kevin Durant—a huge upgrade in the city’s already estimable collection of aesthetic trophies. You can see it as another example of the long and admirable tradition of San Francisco philanthropy, the givers in this case being not just Gap founders Don and Doris Fisher, whose 1,100-work donation forms the heart of the museum’s new collection, but also hundreds of other donors who pledged their treasures or handed over their money. You can see it as a prime—or obscene—example of the cultural contradictions of late-capitalist society in general, and San Francisco in particular: a blue-chip civic institution raising $610 million from corporations and wealthy individuals to build and endow a temple dedicated to preserving fetishized commodities (avant-garde ones, yet!) in a city too expensive for real artists to live in.

All of these perspectives are legitimate. But for me, the new SFMOMA is simply about the appearance of a number of strange, beautiful, and challenging things that were not here before—that Richter, and that Calder, and that Agnes Martin, and those windows revealing a hitherto-unknown city. On May 14, when the new museum opens its doors, those things will become a permanent part of San Francisco’s inner landscape, as essential to the city’s collective identity as the fog and the hills. When the gala opening and the speeches are finished, and the opening-month crowds dissipate (if they dissipate), what will remain are the individual encounters that countless people of all ages and backgrounds will have with the art for many, many years. The new SFMOMA is one big-ass gift. But it’s really a million gifts, a million tiny encounters—each one different, each one unknown.

To say that the new SFMOMA is vast doesn’t quite do the word justice. Overwhelming is more like it. Indeed, the superlatives pile up like layers on a Wayne Thiebaud cake (which happens to be on display on the second floor): It is one of the
largest modern and contemporary art museums in the United States, with 145,000 square feet of interior gallery space, 20,000 feet more than New York’s Museum of Modern Art (at least until that MoMA, too, completes an expansion, in 2019–2020). It has seven floors of exhibition space, and the fourth floor alone is almost as large as the entire original five-story museum. Its new, 15,000-square-foot Pritzker Center for Photography, which occupies almost the entire third floor, is the largest museum space dedicated to photography in the country.

The first time I got a tour of the museum this March, I found it hard to take it all in: The surge of new stimuli blew out my critical circuits. The sheer size of the new, freestanding building designed by the Norwegian firm Snøhetta (known for the dazzling Oslo Opera House and the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Alexandria, among other projects), to say nothing of the bewildering profusion of new art being displayed, left me feeling as over-revved as a nine-year-old left unmonitored with a quart of Mitchell’s ice cream. I definitely had an “if it’s Tuesday, this must be Diebenkorn” feeling. But eventually, the aesthetic sugar rush wore off, and my inner eye opened up. It took three visits in the company of members of the SFMOMA staff—the first to the Snøhetta wing, the second to the old galleries in the 1995 Mario Botta building, and the third to the Snøhetta again—before I finally started to feel like I got the place. Only then did a quieter, more comfortable relationship with the new museum—both the building and the art—begin to form.

When you first see the Snøhetta addition, it looks a little like a huge cruise ship draped by Christo, its sinuous, gleaming white mass towering above the neighboring buildings. Actually, there are not that many places from which the 10-story building is fully visible: It’s squeezed into the middle of a SoMa block amid structures that obscure most of its lower floors. The best view, the one that shows some of the facade’s undulating, elegantly creased, fabric-like surface, is from Natoma Street. But as I got to know the building better, I started to think it was just as well that its full mass was not visible. It’s an intriguing case of less turning out to be more.
For such a monolithic structure, the building is full of intimate, intricate engagements with the city that surrounds it. Unexpected east-facing windows offer views of the magnificent Timothy Pflueger phone company building on New Montgomery. Terraces overlook the labyrinth of nearby South of Market streets. A visible interior seam elegantly distinguishes the old western wing from the new eastern one. The majestic living wall on the third floor lets you orient yourself to both the sky and the street. None of these non-art features of the building are incidental to the overall mission of the place—they’re actually crucial. Because you have such frequent opportunities to pull yourself out of hypnotic art prayer/stupor and back to the outside world, you don’t feel claustrophobic and can repeatedly recharge, making it possible to spend even more time in a trancelike state in this tabernacle-like place.

“The building was designed to give you glimpses of the city, and places to sit and contemplate the dense urban fabric that it’s been inserted into,” says SFMOMA’s deputy director of curatorial affairs, Ruth Berson, who with museum director Neal Benezra worked closely with Snøhetta in designing the new addition. The architects pay homage to San Francisco not just with a profusion of High Line–like “magic windows onto the street,” as Berson puts it, but with narrow stairs inspired by legendary byways like the Filbert Steps and with the building’s unique skin, its ambiguous patterns evoking both fog and the water currents of the bay.

At the same time that I was trying to process the space, I was also struggling to take in the art. First and foremost, there are the 260 new pieces on display from the Fisher Collection, the main reason the new SFMOMA was built. The Fisher Collection is justifiably famous for both its breadth and depth: Peter Selz, the first director of the Berkeley Art Museum and a seminal curator of 20th-century modern art, says that its addition instantly makes SFMOMA “one of the best collections of modern and contemporary art in the country, along with the Museum of Modern Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and the Art Institute of Chicago.” There are also hundreds of pieces from the 3,000-plus new works gained in an acquisitions drive called the Campaign for Art. The entire photo exhibition California and the West, in the Pritzker
Center for Photography on the third floor, is made up of pieces from the Campaign for Art.

To put all this new art in a meaningful context, I needed to go back and look at the old standbys in the Botta-building galleries. Trying to do all this really fast, and with my mental transistor radio turned off—“I paint with my back to the world,” Agnes Martin said, and the words apply to seeing art, too—was like listening to the delicate French composer Erik Satie while balancing a checkbook. The first two visits, I stumbled from Guston to Sam Francis to Twombly to LeWitt, and then in the Botta galleries from Matisse to Still to Cornell to Rauschenberg, like a nerd in a speed-dating session.

But eventually I started to slow down and actually see the work—and my, what amazing work it is. Calder’s *Big Crinkly* takes pride of place on the third-floor sculpture terrace, whimsically nodding at well-chosen companions by Mark di Suvero, George Segal, and Barnett Newman. On the fourth floor, which along with the fifth and sixth is almost entirely devoted to the Fisher Collection, there’s a wealth of Ellsworth Kelly, including the memorable oil-on-wood *Cité*, an exercise in controlled chance whose black-and-white austerity contrasts sharply with his brilliantly colored work in the next gallery. Joan Mitchell’s huge *Harm’s Way*, its brushstrokes like exploding flowers, shouts with life and joy even seen in passing. And in the Martin gallery, one of Doris Fisher’s favorite paintings, the deep-blue, inscrutable *Night Sea*, is a meditation in the form of a masterpiece. The fifth floor has a Rauschenberg, a rich selection of Warhol and Lichtenstein, and painted sculptures by Frank Stella. A gallery in the Botta building has been opened up with two west-facing windows, from which you can see Sutro Tower, an angular complement to pieces by British sculptors Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth.

But for me, perhaps the biggest revelation came on the sixth floor, dedicated to contemporary German artists. SFMOMA has long had a strong collection of that country’s remarkable painters, and the addition of new works by Richter, Anselm Kiefer, Georg Baselitz, and Sigmar Polke makes this floor simply stunning.

I walked out of the museum after my third visit feeling exhilarated about what I’d seen,
and eager to immerse myself more deeply. I knew some of these pieces would become lifelong friends, as Arthur Dove’s *Silver Ball No. 2* had been in the Veterans Building. It was difficult to see what one could possibly complain about here; but of course, there’s always something.

**The reborn SFMOMA** may be a sumptuous gift, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t have its shortcomings—or its critics. The grievances start, as so many often do, with money. Its all-in $610 million price tag, in a city suffering from extreme income inequality, sticks in the craw of some. One SFMOMA member who asked to remain anonymous was disturbed by the fact that the institution so quickly and so cavalierly tore up the 18-year-old Botta building, and found the $305 million cost of the new one (most of the remaining $305 million went into the museum’s endowment) a questionable allocation of resources. (The fact that all the money was privately raised softened my friend’s annoyance some.)

A more biting critique is that the museum has always slighted local artists, and will likely continue to do so. One veteran local painter with a national reputation and New York gallery representation pointedly asks, “How many contemporary Bay Area artists will be on display?” Jonathon Keats, a writer and conceptual artist whose witty, philosophical installations have appeared at San Francisco’s Modernism Gallery, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and elsewhere, tells me that “SFMOMA has always had an atmosphere of small-town insecurity, a provincial need to prove its cultural legitimacy by focusing on blue-chip art from New York and beyond. There’s been far too little risk-taking, especially with emerging local artists working outside established genres.” Keats says the Fisher contribution means “there’s no more need to be institutionally insecure.” He hopes, but does not completely believe, that the relaunch will allow SFMOMA to do more than just exhibit art history. “The new museum can actively generate culture, and can do so with at least as much vigor as the Whitney and MoMA,” he says.

Others defend the museum’s efforts. Julia Bryan-Wilson, a professor of art history at UC Berkeley, says SFMOMA has done a creditable job of highlighting local artists with its
almost 50-year-old SECA Art Awards, and has been particularly strong in spotlighting new media and performance. And director Benezra says that the museum will remain committed to acquiring and showing works from local artists, and adds that the new space will allow the museum, for the first time, to dedicate galleries entirely to Bay Area and California artists. Whether this mollifies the dissenters or not, only time will tell.

But beyond its cost and its alleged provincialism, SFMOMA, like all museums of modern art, must contend with a set of paradoxes and questions built into its very identity. It’s an institution that sincerely aspires to play a democratic civic role, but it’s the high altar of an art form whose dominant modern modes—whether abstraction, minimalism, pop, or the kind of figurative work that makes it into museums—have never actually been popular. Its work, as opposed to its mission, is mandarin to the core. It’s an institution that from its founding in 1935 has been dedicated to progressive ideas and ideals, but whose raison d’être, like that of all art museums, is to display objects that have become our society’s ultimate fetishized commodities. And the most subversive thought of all is whether all those objects even deserve to be worshipped. Why is one minimalist painting canonized while another virtually identical one, neither of them evincing anything that could remotely be called craft, is not? A cynic taking this thought to extremes might decide that the entire $610 million enterprise is a shell game run by a small group of insiders—dealers, auction houses, collectors, critics, curators—who create a closed, hermetic alternate reality that we’re all forced to inhabit.

There’s just enough of a grain of truth in this conspiratorial vision to keep things uncomfortable—and interesting. The art economy, using “economy” in its universal sense, is profoundly unsettling: Ask any working artist. And museums, much as they would like to believe they stand above that economy, are inextricably bound up with it. So, as with all modern art museums, there’s a little surrealism built into SFMOMA—and it ain’t just Magritte’s *Personal Values* (which hangs in one of the old galleries). But it’s not the whole story, or even most of it. If you toss out the most intellectual conceptual and minimalist art, where the received value of the work may be almost completely dependent on the artist’s writing ability, connections, or biography rather than anything...
so vulgar as its physical characteristics, most of the work in SFMOMA has made it there because, well, it’s good. (OK, there’s a Jeff Koons piece there, but nobody’s perfect.) And in the end, even the presence of work whose greatness is not objectively verifiable is OK, too. Because any place that provides an opportunity to revere the world as distilled into one object—which is what art museums do—is serving a valuable function. Museums may be graduate seminars, but they’re also secular churches, offering something even nonbelievers can believe in.

**Seen in that light,** what might seem off-puttingly elitist about SFMOMA suddenly becomes charmingly implausible, almost bizarre: a topflight civic organization dedicated to celebrating and popularizing a consummately strange, exacting, and idiosyncratic form of creative expression. It’s as if the St. John Coltrane Church took over a skyscraper, or multimillion-dollar buildings were dedicated to disseminating the work of John Cage or Jacques Derrida. It’s amazing that such a sublimely gratuitous institution even exists.

The people who run SFMOMA, like the principals of all modern art museums, are acutely aware of these paradoxes. On the one hand, they want to appeal to the cognoscenti, acquire the most coveted trading cards, and generally burnish their role as custodians of high culture. But they also want to collapse the distinction between high and low culture. They want their mighty temple of advanced art to attract everybody—schoolkids and seniors, baristas and techies—not just connoisseurs. They want their vistas to be democratic ones.

The museum has taken several major steps toward that goal. First, it has made the entire first and much of the second floor admission-free. The entrances on the passage off Howard Street lead to inviting Roman steps that overlook a monumental Richard Serra sculpture. Anyone can walk in, hang out, and use the free Wi-Fi, and there will always be three major works on these two floors that can be seen without charge. Second, it has taken the commendable step of making the museum free for anyone 18 and under (most
museums, like the old SFMOMA, are only free for children 12 and under).

Director Benezra is justifiably proud of the fact that his museum’s collection now rivals those of the MoMA or London’s Tate Modern. “For the 40-year period from, say, 1960 to 2000, we’re really as fine a museum of contemporary art as there is in the world,” he says. “For a modest-sized city like San Francisco to be able to rank ourselves with museums in New York and London and Paris is pretty special.” But Benezra claims that isn’t what excites him the most about his museum’s reopening. “I think if I had to pick out the one thing I’m most thrilled about, it’s to be able to provide so much free access, especially for kids 18 and under. This is all for the public good. We’re not just doing this for ourselves, they’re not just trophies that we hang on the wall and admire for their own sake, they’re there for the world that we hope will come to the museum. That’s what has driven everything we’ve done.

Of course, you wouldn’t expect the director of a major cultural institution that just raised over half a billion dollars for the purposes of displaying the most recondite aesthetic objects on our cultural shelf to say, “We’re doing this for the 372 people who love minimalism.” But the theme of opening the museum to the community, lowering the threshold to access, and making art “mean more to more people,” in Benezra’s mantra, recurs so often in conversations with the museum’s key players, and is so deeply embedded in the museum’s programs and practices, that it’s clearly more than just a sound bite. SFMOMA is deeply invested in education, in two-way communications with the public, in bringing in underserved audiences, and generally in trying to make high visual culture of all kinds—painting and sculpture, multimedia, film, and performance—an essential part of ordinary life.

And that is the biggest and most intriguing challenge the new SFMOMA, like every other modern art museum, faces. For the obvious truth is that much modern and contemporary art is not easily accessible. Much of it is highly intellectual, self-referential, and austere—impenetrable in every sense of the term. Still trickier is the fact that much contemporary art does not really have an interpretive key: It depends as
much on what the viewer brings to it as it does on what the artist has created. In one sense this gives the viewer carte blanche, but it leaves many people dumbfounded, irritably exclaiming, “Why is that art? I could make that!”

The challenges of trying to create a bridge to high culture in a society driven by forces antithetical to it are indeed daunting. If the museum is to truly succeed as a public institution, it can’t just talk the talk about reviving the arts in San Francisco, opening lines of communication with actual working people, and inspiring a new generation of artists—it needs to walk the walk. The goal is to create a 21st-century agora. After all, without the citizens arguing and laughing in the square below, even the Acropolis would have just been a pretty, empty temple.

**SFMOMA’s first home**, in the Veterans Building, was intimate and charmingly low-key, but it was always cramped. After 60 years on Van Ness, in 1995 the museum moved to the new $60 million Botta building on Third Street. It took only 18 years for it to outgrow that space. During the almost three years the museum was closed while the Snøhetta addition was being built, SFMOMA made an important decision, one that continues to guide its practice today. It decided to launch its On the Go program, partnering with 21 organizations to put on 19 exhibitions around the Bay Area and the state. The move was pragmatic—it developed new audiences—but it also reflected a kind of institutional humility.

“They could have shipped all their Matisses to Japan and made money, but they opted not to do that,” says Nancy Troy, a professor of art history at Stanford. Instead, SFMOMA approached various organizations across the state, asked if they would like to use the museum’s resources, and encouraged them to take part in planning the programs. One such program was an exhibition of pieces from SFMOMA’s permanent collection that Troy helped organize at Stanford’s Cantor Museum. “That was an unparalleled opportunity for people in Silicon Valley, and also on campus,” she says. “Students were involved as well as faculty. It was really fantastic. And some of the other On the Go programs were also unusual in the way that they were selected. They weren’t
all run by curators of SFMOMA.”

The 19 programs attracted 2.4 million visitors between 2012 and today, numbers that “exceeded our expectations,” Benezra says. “A lot of these folks had not been exposed to this kind of art before. We sent exhibitions of photography to underserved communities in the Central Valley, places that maybe had art centers but not museums. It was very meaningful for us that we could have impacts beyond the traditional idea of what a museum does for its community.”

The museum is determined to keep the On the Go spirit alive when it opens the doors to its new home. One of the staffers charged with educating and collaborating with various communities is the museum’s curator of education and public practice, Dominic Willsdon. Willsdon plays a hybrid role that includes both curating and pedagogy. The educational part of his job entails working closely with schools, in particular the San Francisco Unified School District, as well as with public libraries and other institutions. The museum’s goal is to triple the number of annual student visits from 18,000 to 55,000. Equally important, the museum is working extensively inside the classroom, letting teachers take the lead. “We focus on having teachers essentially create the program from the museum that they need,” Willsdon says. The museum has four dedicated employees working with the SFUSD, and the equivalent of three more in part-time hours—no small allocation of resources.

Willsdon also oversees a public dialogue department that involves three facets: night classes for adults, a partnership with the public libraries, and a series of commissioned works in which artists explore themes of public collaboration, knowledge, and research. One such project, titled Let’s Talk About Art, the brainchild of associate curator for public dialogue Deena Chalabi, was organized around a public walk from one WPA shrine, Rincon Annex, to another, the Maritime Museum at Aquatic Park. Dozens of San Franciscans possessing all types of knowledge were invited to stand at locations along the route and talk to the walkers about everything from the radical tradition in North Beach to homelessness. It was an example of how the new SFMOMA is trying to do
something one doesn’t necessarily associate with august cultural institutions: get down in the street and listen.

Of course, the museum also has to speak—and SFMOMA speaks in many different tongues. This may help explain why Chad Coerver, who is responsible for what the museum communicates to the public about its art, bears a title that evokes the first dot-com boom: chief content officer. Coerver’s job is to demystify artspeak, using every platform known to mankind, or at least to the tech brainiacs who constantly stream past the museum. In a classic example of when-in-Rome, Coerver has decided to go all in on geekdom. “Maybe more than any other city in the world, San Francisco is a city full of people who are geeking out on something that they love,” he says. “People imagine SFMOMA as this all-black-wearing, chain-smoking factory of coolness, when in fact we’re much goofier than that.”

To help viewers geek out, Coerver draws on a wide range of sources, from the artists themselves to their children to anyone who may be able to illuminate some aspects of their work. Coerver says that the museum doesn’t always attempt to provide the “right” way to look at or think about an artwork. “Sometimes we’re just trying to show how contemporary art plugs in to all sorts of universal experiences that we don’t typically associate with it.”

Coerver hastens to point out that the museum made a conscious decision to prioritize what he calls “the temple experience” of viewing the artwork. “Everything we do is eventually supposed to get you to a one-to-one encounter with an artwork in person. It’s to make you look more closely, not to give you a distraction machine.” All of which rings true. But you need a whole lot of time to look closely at this much art.

The opening of the new SFMOMA is only the most dramatic manifestation of what Benezra calls “a renaissance moment for visual arts in the Bay Area.” In January, the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive opened its new building in downtown Berkeley. In 2014, Stanford opened a new building to house the Anderson Collection. The Asian Art Museum just announced a 12,000-square-foot expansion. Top San
Francisco gallery John Berggruen and international juggernaut Gagosian will be opening new galleries across the street from SFMOMA this month, with the Mexican Museum set to open nearby in 2018. And Minnesota Street Project, a privately funded gallery and studio center, just opened in Dogpatch in March.

There’s a synergy here that fits nicely into SFMOMA’s rising-tide ethos. “We love the fact that the Cantor is strong, that the Anderson is there, that the de Young has a strong program,” says Berson. “We want San Francisco to be the cultural hub of the world, and to the extent that we can make that happen, we’re all for it.”

While echoing that enthusiasm, UC Berkeley’s Bryan-Wilson notes the painful irony that at the same time that these high-priced temples of high culture are thriving, the artists who create the work that they are built to display are disappearing. “I don’t want to be completely celebratory, because along with all of these great projects, we’re losing a lot of artists because of the crisis of housing and the increase in rents,” Bryan-Wilson says. “It’s a huge loss for the creative community of the Bay Area.”

Benezra is only too aware that while museums are feasting, artists are starving. “I wouldn’t want your readers to think that we’re not mindful of the fact that San Francisco needs to be a great place for artists,” he says. “Obviously, there are real challenges there. I wish I could say that I have a solution.”

There’s solace in knowing that the next generation of Bay Area artists can at least find creative sustenance—if not affordable rent—in this place. And, of course, there are the rest of us.

When I think about the museums that have touched my life, I think not only about individual works of art but about rooms. No one who visited the old iterations of SFMOMA, whether on Van Ness or on Third Street, could forget the cloisters filled with those mighty lightning-bolt-riven Clyfford Stills, or the room with Mark Rothko’s magisterial No. 14, 1960, or the one with Jackson Pollock’s totemic Guardians of the Secret. In those rooms, the mystery and power of modern art shot like a jolt of electricity
through countless visitors, giving them new ways of thinking about and seeing the world.

Now new rooms are coming to San Francisco—rooms filled with magnificent Mitchells, and Kiefers, and Martins, and so many others. In those rooms, new generations will experience the latest manifestations of a human instinct that goes back to the cave paintings at Lascaux. And they, too, will feel that life-affirming, life-changing jolt. The new San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is a complicated and contradictory institution, but above all, it is a keeper of the human flame, that Promethean fire that never goes out. That is its enduring gift.

*Originally published in the May issue of San Francisco*

*Have feedback? Email us at letterssf@sanfranmag.com*
*Email Gary Kamiya at gkamiya@modernluxury.com*
*Follow us on Twitter @sanfranmag*