

**AFTER NEARLY TWO DECADES OF LEADERSHIP,
NEAL BENEZRA TO TRANSITION AS SFMOMA DIRECTOR**

MUSEUM ACTIVATES SUCCESSION PLAN AND BEGINS SEARCH FOR NEW DIRECTOR



SAN FRANCISCO, CA (February 9, 2021)—After nearly 20 years leading the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), Neal Benezra, the Helen and Charles Schwab Director, today announced that he will begin the transition from this role and assist the museum with its succession plan and international search for a new director. Benezra will continue to lead the day-to-day operations of the museum and the extensive DEI and long-term strategic initiatives currently underway, and work closely with the museum’s Board of Trustees to provide continuity until the museum has hired a new director. Spring priorities at SFMOMA include safely reopening the museum to the public when authorized by City agencies, debuting the exclusive United States presentation of the retrospective *Nam June Paik* and moving Diego Rivera’s monumental mural, *The Marriage of the Artistic Expression of the North and of the South on the Continent* (1940), for display at SFMOMA on loan from City College of San Francisco.

SFMOMA’s Board of Trustees will immediately establish a formal search committee to seek a new director. Guided by SFMOMA’s mission: to share the art of our time with passion and purpose, the international search will prioritize equitable hiring practices and be anchored in SFMOMA’s core values, including empathy, inclusivity, passion and braveness. The search committee, with input from staff and the museum’s community, will focus on identifying a diverse pool of candidates who share the goal of becoming a human-centered, community-driven museum. As one of the world’s most important museums of modern and contemporary art, SFMOMA holds a collection of over 50,000 objects across curatorial departments of Painting and Sculpture, Architecture + Design, Photography, Contemporary Art and Media Arts, and employs a dedicated staff of nearly 400. Its award-winning building and expansion designed by internationally acclaimed architects Mario Botta and Snøhetta, respectively, is recognized as a Bay Area landmark.

“It has been the honor of my life to serve as SFMOMA’s director,” said Neal Benezra. “I’m so proud of all that we have accomplished, and I am equally grateful for the collaboration and passion that the staff, the Board, our artists and community have shown during my time here. I am inspired by them every day; their love and expansive knowledge of the arts is deeply felt by our visitors and present in the exceptional work they do. While the pandemic has brought many challenges to our field this year, I am confident that our staff will join the new director in forging a new and exciting future. I will continue to advise and lead to ensure that the daily and future-focused work of SFMOMA continues without pause, and do my part to make certain the new director will be able to implement their fresh vision to guide SFMOMA forward.”

“The Board of Trustees joins the staff and the entire arts community in thanking Neal for his nearly two decades of service,” said Bob Fisher, Chairman of SFMOMA’s Board of Trustees. “Neal has led SFMOMA through both groundbreaking and challenging times with poise and grace. I have worked with him for over 10 years and have witnessed his commitment to SFMOMA firsthand. Whether it was galvanizing our community to support the campaign for our new building, securing the funds to stabilize our endowment for the future, ensuring that all of our young visitors could visit SFMOMA for free or presenting a world class portfolio of exhibitions and programs, he has invested his passion, intelligence and creativity in our museum. Neal has been a terrific partner and a wonderful friend. Now it is time to plan for succession and our search committee will begin a values-driven, comprehensive search for a new leader. The next director will take SFMOMA into the future and continue to affirm our role in making the art of our time matter to our communities.”

A 20-YEAR LEGACY AT SFMOMA

Neal Benezra will leave behind a strong history of achievement and collaboration from his years at SFMOMA. A Bay Area native whose childhood visits to SFMOMA inspired his career in museums, Benezra began his role as Helen and Charles Schwab Director at SFMOMA in 2002, a tenure as director only exceeded by the museum’s founding director, Grace McCann Morley, who held the role for 23 years.

During his nearly 20 years as director, he oversaw tremendous growth of the collection and the museum’s endowment; developed long-standing relationships with artists and collectors to add major acquisitions and gifts to the collection enhancing the stories the museum could tell; presented award-winning exhibitions that advanced art historical scholarship and increased attendance to the museum; spearheaded *SFMOMA On the Go*, a program presenting nearly 20 exhibitions in partnership with other arts institutions in the Bay Area and the world while the museum was closed for three years during construction; commissioned important site-specific artwork including *HOWL, eon* (I, II), Julie Mehretu’s monumental work that greets visitors at the museum; and oversaw a major transformation of the museum’s physical space with its expansion that opened in 2016.

Highlights under Benezra’s leadership include a transformative capital campaign that raised \$610 million from 1,200 donors, including debt-free financing for the construction of the museum’s major expansion, \$245 million in new endowment funding and the endowment of free admission for all visitors age 18 and younger. He also initiated The Campaign for Art that brought to SFMOMA more than 3,000 outright and promised gifts including works by Joseph Beuys, Vija Celmins, Jasper Johns, Agnes Martin, Julie Mehretu, Jackson Pollock and many others. The 2016 SFMOMA expansion project created a 235,000 square-foot LEED Gold-certified building designed in collaboration with the international architecture firm Snøhetta that tripled the museum’s gallery space and included 45,000 square feet of free, art-filled spaces for the public. The expanded museum also houses the Pritzker Center for Photography, the largest space at a US art museum permanently devoted to the display, study and interpretation of photography, and the Koret Education Center that welcomes nearly 50,000 school children to the museum each year.

Benezra conceived an innovative approach to the museum’s three-year building closure during its expansion, launching an extensive off-site programming initiative—*SFMOMA On the Go*—featuring 19 exhibitions, as well as

numerous public art installations and educational programs developed with museums and cultural partners throughout the Bay Area, California and Paris. These included: *Janet Cardiff: The Forty Part Motet* (2015) with Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture; *Portraits and Other Likenesses from SFMOMA* (2015) with the Museum of the African Diaspora; *Photography in Mexico* (2015) with the Sonoma County Museum; *Gorgeous* (2014) with the Asian Art Museum; *Fertile Ground: Art and Community in California* (2014–15) with the Oakland Museum of California; *Project Los Altos: SFMOMA in Silicon Valley* (2013–14) with the City of Los Altos, California; *Mark di Suvero at Crissy Field* (2012–14) with the National Park Service and the Golden Gate National Park Conservancy; and *American Icons: Masterworks from SFMOMA and the Fisher Collection* (2015) with the Grand Palais, Paris.

Benezra's unique partnership with the family of Doris and Donald Fisher brought to the museum more than 1,000 works from one of the great private collections of modern and contemporary art in an unprecedented 100-year partnership including notable presentations of Louise Bourgeois, Ellsworth Kelly, Anselm Kiefer, Agnes Martin, Martin Puryear, Cy Twombly, Sol LeWitt and many others.

Under Benezra's leadership, the museum made important strides to diversify its collection and expand the stories it tells in its galleries. With the deaccession and sale of Mark Rothko's *Untitled* (1960) in 2019, the museum used the proceeds to create the Peggy Guggenheim Fund, with the goal of purchasing works by artists of color, women, LGBTQ and other artists currently underrepresented in the collection. To date, the museum has purchased more than 144 works through this initiative including pieces by artists such as Frank Bowling, Lygia Clark, Sam Gilliam, Luchita Hurtado, Kay Sage, Alma Thomas and Mickalene Thomas.

Benezra's collaborative approach has significantly extended the museum's programming and collection, as well as its role in the local and international community. SFMOMA has made pioneering joint acquisitions with other museums, including *The Refusal of Time*, a William Kentridge work with the Metropolitan Museum of Art; *The Visitors*, a Ragnar Kjartansson media work with the Museum of Modern Art; and *Untitled, 1995*, a Félix González-Torres installation with the Art Institute of Chicago and Guggenheim Museum. Long term partnerships with the San Francisco Unified School District and the San Francisco Public Library resulted in collaborations such as creation of the inaugural department of architecture and design at Ruth Asawa School of the Arts, and *Night of Ideas*, an annual evening at the SF Main Library of debate, discussion and culture offered free to the public and attended by thousands. During his tenure, the museum also partnered with Bank of America to offer a paid internship program for diverse college students providing a first step towards potential careers at museums.

Benezra has championed deeper collaborations with artists, increasing seats on the Board of Trustees for artists such as Robert Bechtle, Rosana Castrillo Díaz, Hung Liu, Julie Mehretu, Ed Ruscha, Larry Sultan and Jeff Wall; providing free lifetime memberships to all living artists with work in the collection, currently numbering more than 3,000; and launching the museum's Artist Initiative, supported by a \$1.75 million grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, to bring artists' voices to the center of conservation and collections work.

Under Benezra's leadership, SFMOMA's exceptional curatorial team organized and presented groundbreaking exhibitions that advanced scholarship and publication, and introduced the public to innovative new artists including: *Take Your Time* (2007–10), Olafur Eliasson's first major survey exhibition; *Matthew Barney: Drawing Restraint* (2006), the only US venue for this complex installation; *Diane Arbus Revelations* (2006), the most complete survey of the artist's work ever assembled; *Shomei Tomatsu: Skin of the Nation* (2006–07), the first comprehensive retrospective of the pre-eminent postwar Japanese photographer outside of Japan; *The Art of Richard Tuttle* (2005), winner of the Best US Monographic Museum Show Award from the Association of International Art Critics; *Rineke Dijkstra: A Retrospective* (2012), the artist's first major retrospective in the US; *The Steins Collect: Matisse, Picasso and the Parisian Avant Garde* (2011–12), the landmark exhibition reuniting the collections of Gertrude, Leo, Michael and Sarah Stein; *Vija Celmins: To Fix the Image in Memory* (2018–19), the artist's first retrospective in more than 25 years; *Bruce Conner: It's All True* (2016–17), the first retrospective of this pivotal American artist's work; and *How Wine Became Modern: Design + Wine 1976 to Now* (2010–11), exploring

the visual culture of wine and its transformation over three decades. Presented in 2008, the exhibition *Frida Kahlo* garnered the highest attendance in the museum's history.

While at SFMOMA, Neal Benezra personally curated or co-curated exhibitions including *JR: The Chronicles of San Francisco* (2019); *Mark di Suvero at Crissy Field* (2013); *Jeff Wall* (2007, MoMA and SFMOMA); and *Pop! From San Francisco Collections* (2004).

He has written extensively on artists such as Josef Albers, Jasper Johns, Thomas Schütte, Clyfford Still and Franz West, among others.

Benezra currently serves on the Board of the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD); the New Art Trust; as a member of the Bizot Group; on the International Advisory Boards of the Istanbul Modern and Mori Art Museum, Tokyo; and as an advisor to the estate of Juan Muñoz.

Throughout his career, Benezra has served on professional panels and advisory committees, including the Pew Fellowships in the Arts; as a Museum Program Panelist for the National Endowment for the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Humanities; the Art Advisory Panel of the Internal Revenue Service; the Smithsonian Institution Council; the International Advisory Committee for the 21st Century Museum in Kanazawa, Japan; and CIMAM (Comité international pour les musées et les collections d'art modern); and the Acquisition Committee for the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi.

2021 CONTINUITY PLANS

In 2021, Benezra will prioritize stabilizing the museum from the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and reopening to the public when it is safe to do so.

In May, the museum will present the retrospective *Nam June Paik*, the only United States venue for this important exhibition. This spring, SFMOMA will embark upon one of its most ambitious projects yet: moving Diego Rivera's monumental mural, *The Marriage of the Artistic Expression of the North and of the South on this Continent* (also known as *Pan American Unity*), from City College of San Francisco to the museum for display in its free, street level gallery. An exhibition, *Diego Rivera's America*, will debut in 2022 to accompany the mural. This fall, SFMOMA will present the landmark exhibition *Joan Mitchell*, that kicks off a year of programming highlighting women artists with exhibitions exploring the work of Tauba Auerbach, Tatiana Bilbao, Diana Markosian and Neri Oxman.

In addition, Benezra will continue to lead projects already underway: a refresh of the museum's 2018 strategic plan, and the advancement of the focus on diversity, equity and inclusion across all aspects of the museum via a comprehensive Diversity Action Plan. Crafted by a team of staff and Trustees, the plan will debut this spring. Highlights of the museum's DEI activities to date are available on [the website](#).

EARLY CAREER + EDUCATION

Neal Benezra formerly served as Deputy Director and Frances and Thomas Dittmer Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Art Institute of Chicago, a dual position he assumed in 2000. Previously, he spent eight years at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., where he was Assistant Director for Art and Public Programs (1996–99) and Chief Curator (1991–96). From 1985 to 1991, Benezra was Curator in the Department of 20th Century Painting and Sculpture at the Art Institute of Chicago. He was Curator at the Des Moines Art Center from 1983 to 1985, and before that served as the first curator of the Anderson Collection in the Bay Area.

Exhibitions curated or co-curated by Benezra before 2002 include *William Kentridge* (2001, Hirshhorn Museum); *Juan Muñoz* (2001, Hirshhorn Museum); *Edward Ruscha: Paintings* (2000, Hirshhorn Museum); *Regarding Beauty* (1999, Hirshhorn Museum); *Bruce Nauman* (1994, Hirshhorn Museum and Walker Art Center); *Martin Puryear* (1991, The Art Institute of Chicago); and *Robert Arneson* (1986, Des Moines Art Center).

Benezra holds both PhD and MA degrees in the history of art from Stanford University; an MA in the history of art from the University of California, Davis; and a BA with honors in the history of art and political science from the University of California, Berkeley.

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

151 Third Street
San Francisco, CA 94103

The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is one of the largest museums of modern and contemporary art in the United States and a thriving cultural center for the Bay Area. Our remarkable collection of painting, sculpture, photography, architecture, design and media arts is housed in an LEED Gold-certified building designed by the global architects Snøhetta and Mario Botta. In addition to our seven gallery floors, SFMOMA offers 45,000 square feet of free, art-filled public space open to all.

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Media Contacts

Jill Lynch, jilynych@sfmoma.org, 415.357.4172

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Neal Benezra at Crissy Field; photo: Karl Nielsen