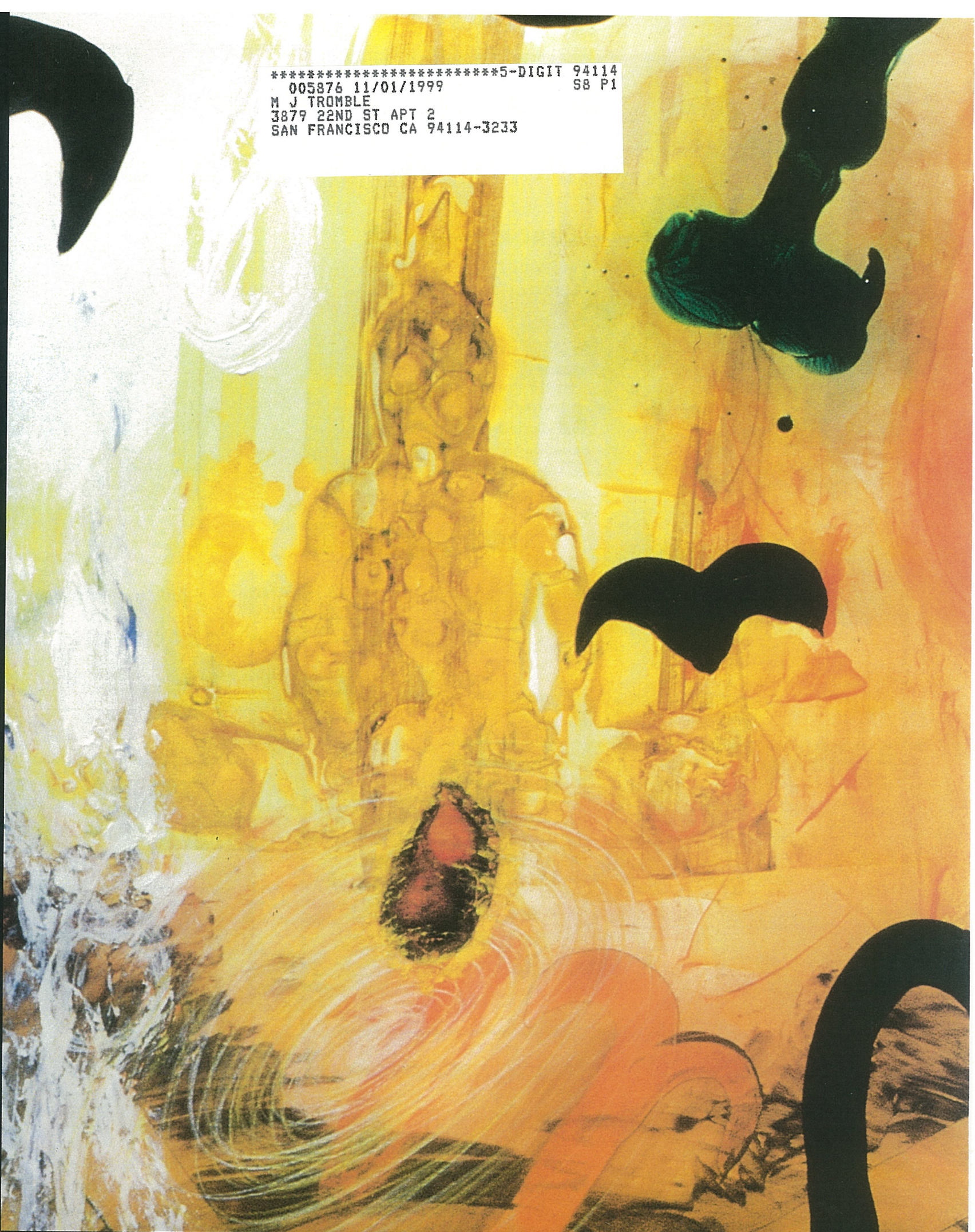


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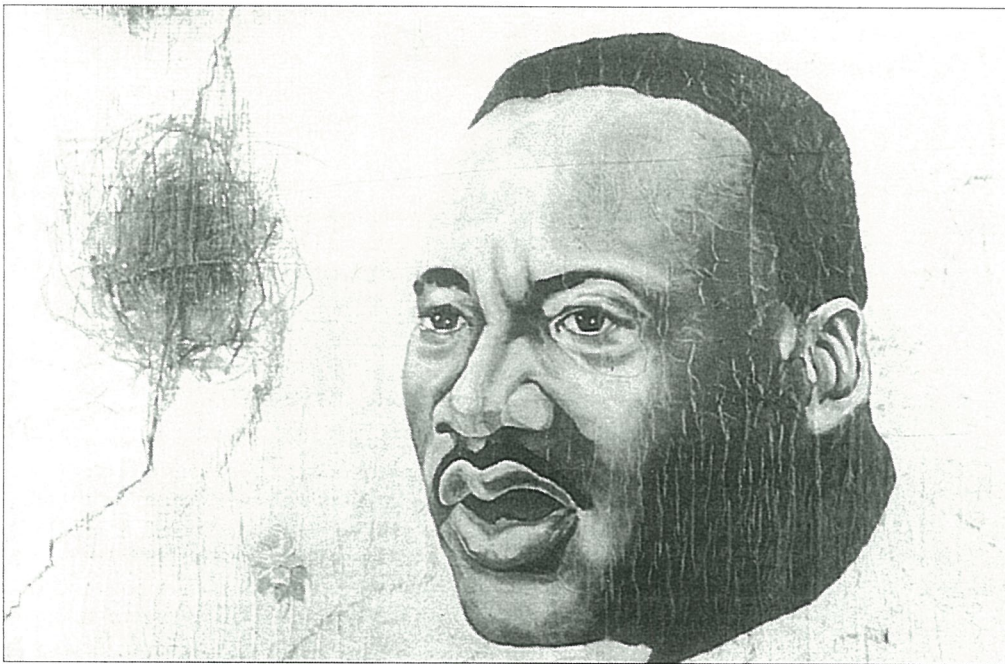
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Notes on Class

By Meredith Tromble

Turn to the fee schedule on page 4," said the leader of a city housing workshop. And there, in black and white, was a measure of my class. I'm officially low income, I thought with a small shock. Twenty years ago, in my student days, there were a few months when I handed the grocery checker food stamps instead of cash. But I've been eating decently on art-related jobs for a number of years now. As I looked around the room, I thought, "I don't belong here." And yet, I was staring at an unambiguous set of numbers that said yes, you do belong here, with the man who works at a bagel shop and supports his disabled mother, with the woman who brought three tiny kids with her, presumably for lack of a babysitter, with the truck driver who dressed in a suit for this seminar.

Just a few days earlier, I'd been sitting on a Corbusier sofa in a mini-museum of a home, munching a chocolate croissant and discussing the travel plans of my hosts. If I'd stopped to think about it, my inner comment would have been "I'd like to belong here," an attitude no doubt characteristic of the struggling middle class into which I was born. Courtesy of the art world escalator, I was tripping between the floors of our class system. If, at the housing seminar, it dumped me in the basement with a lurch, there were also times when I rode to the penthouse. In the art world, people of differing economic class, status and power mingle to an unusual degree. Involvement in art being an effective but imperfect social lubricant, the relationships between artists wielding the power of production, collectors wielding the power of patronage and art professionals wielding the power of status are subject to many tensions.

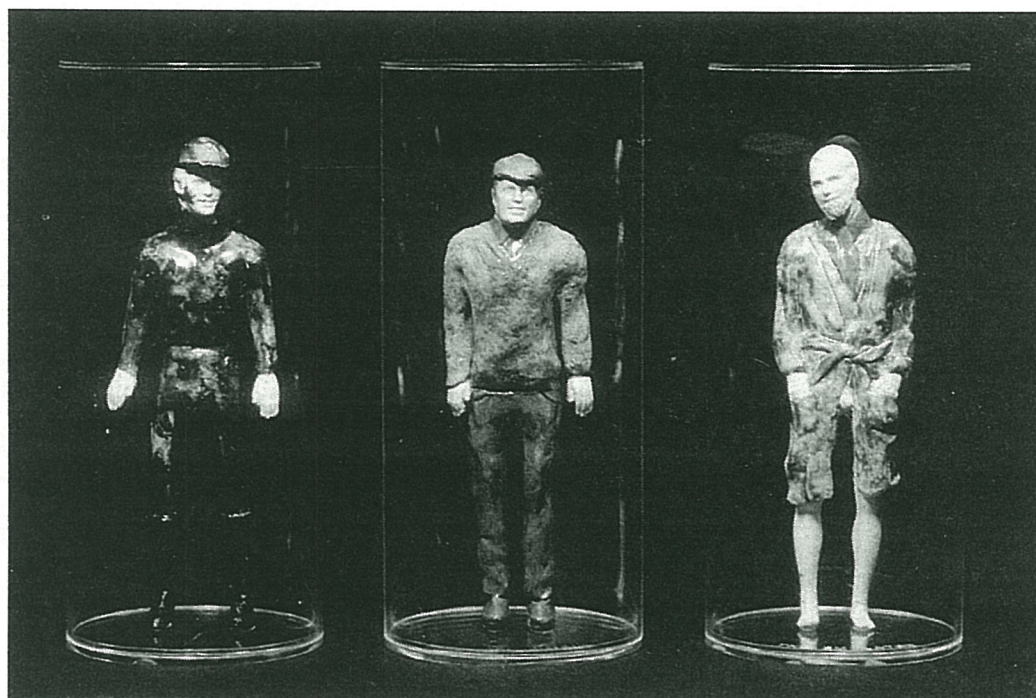
The tension between artists and the gatekeepers of exhibitions is pervasive; but collectors and art professionals suffer anxieties of competition and hierarchy, too. Some artists can confer status on collectors. A Los Angeles couple told me they'd invited Chris Burden to inspect their home and collection in an attempt to demonstrate to him that they deserved to buy the sculpture he had in progress. Collectors may also court—or go to great time and expense to circumvent—dealers who control in-demand bodies of work. The infighting among institutional patrons can be vicious—read *Odd Man In*, Suzanne Muchnic's new biography of Norton Simon (published by University of California Press), for an entertaining if sometimes appalling account of the rivalries that shaped Southern California's museums. If it is painfully difficult for an impoverished artist to make his/her way, it can be devilishly difficult for an artist who was born into the patron class to gain serious consideration, subject as they are to the suspicion that their opportunities stem from the appeal of their money rather than the appeal of their work. Hierarchies of class, hierarchies of cash and hierarchies of expertise interact in complex ways, sometimes all in the same person, as when an artist of middle-class origins like Jean-Michel

Basquiat assumes the persona of a street kid to appeal to the upper class of collectors and becomes so hot they're begging him for work.

It's not uncommon to hear artists revile the "art world," the social space where these transactions of power take place. An artist with a confirmed distaste for the art world's myriad negotiations of social position can retreat to a more homogenous social circle of peers, as, in fact, can a patron. Structurally, the responsibility for linking the different layers of the art world falls to dealers and museum professionals, in their respective profit and nonprofit spheres.

David Ross, director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, calls museums "social instruments." Perhaps a fundamental use of these instruments is to bring the different classes into relationship. If this seems too sweeping a statement, ask why anyone who controlled works of art would care about exposing them to the public. Even if an institutional founding father like Rockefeller expected the Museum of Modern Art to win him the regard of the masses, even if the masses were supposed to be awed and impressed, even if top-down power relationships were consciously and unconsciously

Johanna Poethig, (right) *Trophy wife #4, Conspicuous Consumption* (Photo: Don Myer.); (below) *Thoroughbred, Gentrified, The Emulator*, from *The Untouchables*, 1997. (Photo: Erin Jaeb.)



enforced in the institution, the making of a public institution at all is an effort to establish a relationship. The fact that large sections of the public ignore museums shows that forcing the relationship is beyond the power of any patron, however wealthy; the move to broaden the museums' social base which began as multiculturalism in the 1980s shows a welcome stirring of the power of the masses.

If museums are the place where different classes mix, photographs are the medium through which viewers examine class realities. Social caution may keep one from staring at a derelict or a debutante on the street, but the popularity of photographs of the "exotic" class extremes, such as Jim Goldberg's series *Rich and Poor*, shows that our curiosity about each other is lively. In recent years, organizations such as the Sixth Street Photography Workshop in the Bay Area, which provide cameras, film and developing to street people, have extended the class range of American photographers.

Despite my moment of truth at the housing seminar, the chances are excellent that I will avoid being one of Sixth Street's clients. Like many artists, my own class position is complex. Finances are only one aspect of class; as some writers have pointed out the confidence to risk an artist's lifestyle is in itself an emotion characteristic of the middle class. Not quite fitting into the available social categories seems a common enough experience among artists; indeed it is a

cliché of artistic biography. The chaotic arena of the art world offers a socially mobile space, a space where sincere human connections can sometimes be made, a space where a considerations of power and status occasionally take a backseat to an impulse towards the greater good—or are even marshaled towards the achievement of a greater good. If it offers no better, the fault lies less in the participants than in the limitations of human nature.

Meredith Tromble is the editor-in-chief of *Artweek*.

POWER, STATUS & CLASS

A conversation with David Ross, director of SFMOMA

By Meredith Tromble

David Ross became the director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in June 1998, filling the vacancy left when John Lane stepped down the previous fall. Supporters of the museum welcomed him with a parade of gifts for the permanent collection, including fourteen works by Robert Rauschenberg, and museum news since that time has included many major gifts—the most recent a Picasso donated by the Sara Lee Corporation. With this auspicious start, Ross looks in a fair way to better his impressive acquisitions record at his former institution, the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. As director of the Whitney, Ross led the institution in developing its first photography collection, acquiring more than 700 prints in four years, in addition to enhancing the museum's holdings of painting and sculpture. While at the Whitney, Ross led an expansion program which added 30 percent more exhibition space to the museum, with a campaign that nearly doubled the museum's endowment. He also co-curated *Bill Viola: A 25-Year Survey*, which will be seen at SFMOMA this year, with opera and theater director Peter Sellars. He is currently at work on an exhibition of Korean-American artists.

Prior to joining the Whitney in 1991, Ross spent nine years as director of the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. He was the assistant director for collections and programs and chief curator of the University Art Museum in Berkeley from 1977 to 1981, and from 1974 to 1977 was deputy director for programs at the Long Beach Museum of Art. He lists John Graham, Nam Jun Paik and Yoko Ono among the artists who have been great teachers for him.

Artweek *What's the most difficult curatorial decision you've ever faced?*

David Ross I don't know. It's not a matter of just one decision—as a museum director you're always trying to think about complete forms and how they interact, like creating a symphonic score. If you bring in a wind section or a string section, will they be in harmony or dissonance? How can you make it work within the constraints of the institution? It's an interesting calculus. The museum is more than its exhibitions. It's all of its programs, its entire presence within a range of interlocking communities. A great museum should have a presence in a wide range of communities simultaneously. The messages it sends should play off of one another and also be consistent—you shouldn't be sending mixed messages for the sake of an illusion of peace and harmony.

You're aiming for a harmonic state in the institution and to achieve that takes time. When you achieve it, it is sometimes very brief but it's a beautiful thing. You appreciate that, but what you really have to appreciate is the way there and the way back. If those rare moments were the only thing that satisfied you, you'd be pretty grumpy most of the time—it's mistaking the menu for the food, in a way. The process is beautiful. Even when there are disagreeable moments, when you have hostility or aggression, or moments of confusion, it's still quite beautiful—at least in a Cageian sense. I try to be somewhat nonhierarchical in my appreciation of experience. On the other hand, I'd rather be eating in Masa's than having dental work.

AW *What kind of power do you have as a museum director?*

DR Oh, fantastic power. It's unbelievable. I have to sleep in lead, otherwise my poor wife would be fried to a crisp by morning. Actually, it's sad, but museum directors don't have any power. When you're sitting in my chair and someone says you're powerful, you feel, wow, do they not know. My role is symbolic—I have an important leadership role to play in crystallizing and articulating a shared vision but it's not just my vision. I'm just part of a community of people who believe that a museum can make a difference and that it has a significant role to play. It's a social instrument, a site for a contest of values and ideas, and a source of enormous pleasure in the lives of people.

AW *Which values would you say are being contested as you look at the museum now?*

DR You name it. There's no value that's presented in an art museum that goes uncontested. If you start with my simplified definition of the museum as a social instrument, then you have to agree that on some level the museum is doing something. It's affecting the social order, it's affecting the quality of life in our cities, hopefully with the best interests of the communities that constitute the museum's family in mind. The museum post-'68 has transformed itself into a far more democratic institution. We have

become enormously aware of the impediment of class difference and the ease with which class warfare can be emphasized or even intensified by forces within the society such as the Christian Right.

During the culture wars the strategy of the Christian Right was to use the ever-present potential of class warfare to create a rift between artists, who they painted as a group of out-of-touch upper-class snobs, and working people. It was a gross simplification for the purpose of the demonization of art and culture. But the culture wars were not really fought about art, in my opinion. They were fought about who gets to control women's bodies. Those people could care less about the future or present condition of the art world—their campaign was really about trying to gather more steam for the engine of anti-abortion influences. If you strip away the layers of rhetoric what they're getting at is that the secular universe where artists like

Mapplethorpe or Serrano are allowed to survive is the same world that supports access to abortion. The quality of museums, the quality of our cultural life and the extent to which creativity should play a role in the national self-image had nothing to do with it. In fact, as soon as you raise those kinds of issues, the entire argument behind the culture wars collapses, because everybody agrees about the critical role of creativity in the lives of children and in the competitive stance and ability to problem solve of our nation.

AW *So class antagonisms have made the art world vulnerable?*

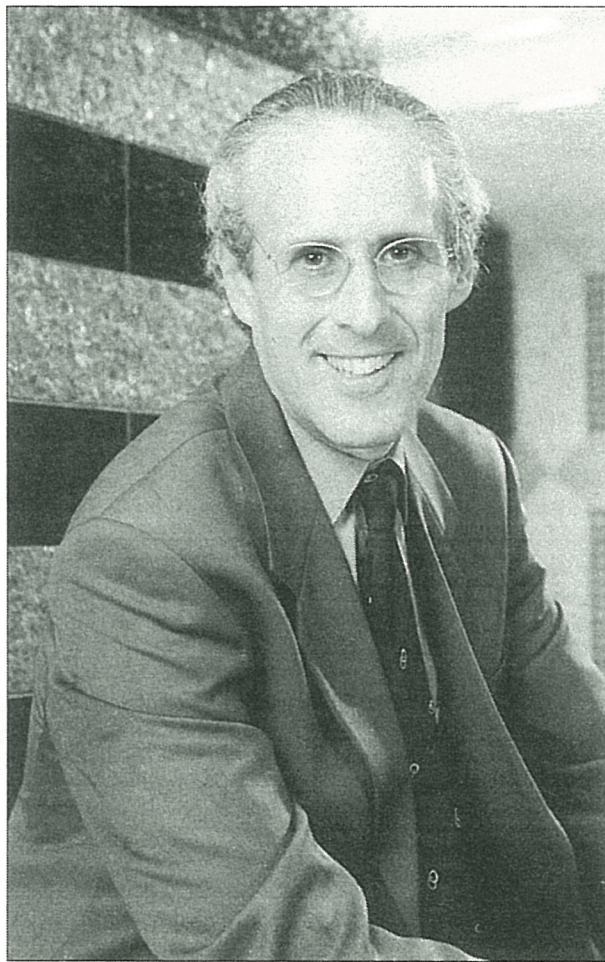
DR Class antagonism is part of late capitalism. It's not like you can go somewhere else and escape those factors in society. They're everywhere. The museum is just another site existing within the space defined by late capitalism, a system which is having a glorious

resurgence with the collapse of the alternative, but still has many of the contradictory elements. We have enormous growth in the gross national product and at the same time, an increasing gap between the haves and the have-nots—and we're creating a new underclass of technological have-nots, the communication disenfranchised. It's a painful complication of capitalism that can never be resolved except by the continued goodwill of people and attention to a certain level of sensitivity that is sometimes demeaned as "political correctness." That's a term I'm glad to see has more or less disappeared, because I don't know what the opposite was. Political incorrectness? Political insensitivity? Not giving a shit? Even if an effort sounds or feels rather empty if you're on the receiving end, the reality is that as we can do very little more than move towards structures that have the potential to be more inclusive.

AW *What experiences in your personal history have made you sensitive to these questions?*

DR I recently had a wonderful talk with a man named Brian Lurie, who was a rabbi at the Temple Emanu-el. Now he's deeply involved in the new Jewish museum that's going to open around the corner from SFMOMA. I'm Jewish, although I'm not very observant, and we got into a conversation

about the meaning of the word "rabbi." I knew that it meant "teacher," but he said originally the goal was for every Jew to be a rabbi, that everyone had responsibility for being a teacher. The distinctions between teacher and student are false ones—they relate to some other kind of societal structure that we've come to accept as natural, the idea that we have to have these hierarchies. We think that either you're a teacher or a student rather than realizing that at any point in your life you're both. In our conversation right here, I learn from what you're saying and you learn from what I'm saying. One of the things we need to do in museums is ask questions, and lead other people to asking questions. Who's the teacher? Why do we place responsibility in the hands of some people, then seemingly walk away from that responsibility for ourselves, rather than sharing it? We're all teachers and all students, and that can take place in a place like an art museum.



David Ross, director, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. (Photo: Terrence McCarthy.)