



CITY REPORT - 27 MAY 2016

Boom Town

BY EVAN MOFFITT

SFMOMA opens in a San Francisco transformed

I used to imagine that, long ago, the US tipped over, and all of the country's misfits tumbled from its eastern shore across the Great Plains to San Francisco. John D'Emilio once described the city as a kind of Rome for gay men and lesbians. Not long before, in her 1967 essay 'Slouching Towards Bethlehem', Joan Didion called it a site of 'social hemorrhaging'. But if the latter description is still true, it's certainly not as Didion intended. Today's San Francisco bears little resemblance to the hotbed of deviance and counterculture that it once was. Surging dot com wealth has transformed it into a glittering capitol of 21st century industry, a technological utopia high on New Age spiritualism scrubbed of its radical zeal. Now social haemorrhaging occurs at the city's physical margins, where its native communities have been forced by surging rents in the country's most unaffordable real estate market.



Snøhetta expansion of the new SFMOMA, 2016. Courtesy: SFMOMA; photograph: © Henrik Kam

If San Francisco is a city transformed, its newly expanded Museum of Modern Art is already an outdated affair. Designed by Norwegian architecture firm Snøhetta, the towering, pleated pearl-white extension was funded by barons of retail and finance. Three of its elongated floors house the extensive Doris and Donald Fisher collection, amassed by the founders of the Gap – old money, in American terms. (According to the bequest, three-quarters of all works in the new building must come from the Fisher collection, and the museum must mount a Fisher-exclusive show once every ten years.) The new building’s cleanly functional, if repetitively linear galleries are pleasant spaces for viewing the major new Fisher acquisitions, from Gerhard Richter’s greatest paintings to rooms of stunning Ellsworth Kelly works. But conventional arrangement of the inaugural exhibitions presents a stale vision for a rejuvenated museum. On the sixth floor an all-male, all-white lineup of similarly aged, mostly German artists eschews broad art-historical narratives for a slice of the Fishers’ 1980s and ‘90s blue chip taste: witness a procession of exemplary Gerhard Richters followed by Georg Baselitzes, Sigmar Polkes, Anselm Kiefers, Thomas Struths and Andreas Gurskys. Even on lower floors, where a greater temporal range might permit other forms of diversity, abstract expressionist, pop and minimalist artworks testify to art history’s reigning patriarchy. A cramped, octagonal room crammed with Agnes Martin paintings – their chromatic subtlety bleached by harsh fluorescence, their insistent grids clashing with a scalloped ceiling – seems to say, tucked discreetly in a corner, that women have been

brought along for the ride yet consigned to the back of the bus. The museum has also hung their permanent collection to mirror the Fishers', so lesser works by the same artists appear in the same order; I left wondering what SFMOMA owns from other places and periods – to say nothing of Californian art. What's more, Snøhetta has attempted to preserve the museum's original Mario Botta building – a stripey marble and granite fortress completed in 1995 – by removing the central atrium's zig-zagging staircase, leaving behind a spineless architectural skin. Now effectively deboned, the much-beloved Botta feels like an awkward annex to the new building, its spatial logic incompatible with Snøhetta's rectangular galleries.



'Approaching American Abstraction: The Fisher Collection', 2016, exhibition view at SFMOMA. Courtesy: SFMOMA; photograph: © Henrik Kam

The city became world-renowned for a counterculture that flourished in geographic and cultural isolation from the older, Eastern coast. Now its appeal to global capital relies on the accumulation of the same high-cultural signifiers one might find in London, Dallas or Dubai. Although the Fisher collection was initially amassed in San Francisco, its presence in a new modern building – the largest modern art museum in America – designed by a Scandinavian architecture firm only heightens the impression that the city is no longer content to run on local pride. San Francisco wants the world on its doorstep.

And the world is now happy to oblige. A number of New York galleries have recently opened outposts there, to a flurry of outsider interest. Gagosian's inaugural show in its newest space – a sampling of disparate, though impressive, works by marquee artists, from Pablo Picasso to Bruce Nauman, with only one Bay Area artist (David Ireland) included – feels baldly commercial across the street from SFMOMA. Pace's new showroom, with a single James Turrell 'Wide Glass' installation on view, is located in the upper-crust suburb of Palo Alto, known for its competitive preparatory schools where the children of tech scions are groomed for postgraduate education at nearby Stanford. What could be a more transparent appeal to America's new class of Silicon Valley billionaires? The surge of commercial interest in the San Francisco art scene has little to do with the art of the Bay Area, and more to do with the region's shift from a place where art is made to a place where it is bought.



'German Art after 1960: The Fisher Collection', 2016, exhibition view at SFMOMA. Courtesy: SFMOMA; photograph: © Iwan Baan

San Francisco's newest scions camouflage their corporatism by coopting the language of the artistic avant-garde, singing a 'gospel of disruption' that transforms radical politics into a string of meaningless buzzwords. But despite their insistence on 'creativity' in the workplace, the tech crowd appears relatively uninvested in art. Will Mark Zuckerberg start buying Light and Space art? Will Sergei Bryn fund museum education programs? In order to fundraise effectively, SFMOMA must appeal to the Silicon Valley crowd, just as Gagosian and Pace hope to do. Recently, the museum announced that mobile phones will be at 'the

forefront of its engagement strategy', through an interactive app that will 'break down the boundaries between art, entertainment and learning'. At their best, such strategies can engage visitors with little prior interest in art beyond Instagram; at their worst, they exacerbate digital distraction by promoting mediated viewership, rather than first-hand observation.

A number of long-running local institutions have decided to ignore the tides altogether and continue producing top-notch programs. In her new show at the Wattis Institute, California College of the Arts's *kunsthalle*-style exhibition space and study centre, Laura Owens has covered the gallery walls with an intricate screenprint collage that combines motifs from earlier paintings – checkerboard patterns and colourful strokes from a digital paintbrush – along with fragments of spam emails from online horoscope generators and self-help guides. Floating through the checked patterns like faintly discernible data in a sea of vibrating pixels, the emails prophesy good and bad fortune in the language of Bay Area yoga cults. Two speakers amplify disembodied voices' stilted answers to questions texted by gallery visitors to a mysterious number, adding a foreboding layer of technological omniscience to the show. I sent the service a number of questions about surveillance – such as 'Are you watching me?' and 'Do you have access to my personal data?' – that received predictably cagey responses (though the voice did confirm it will vote for Hillary Clinton in the upcoming presidential election).

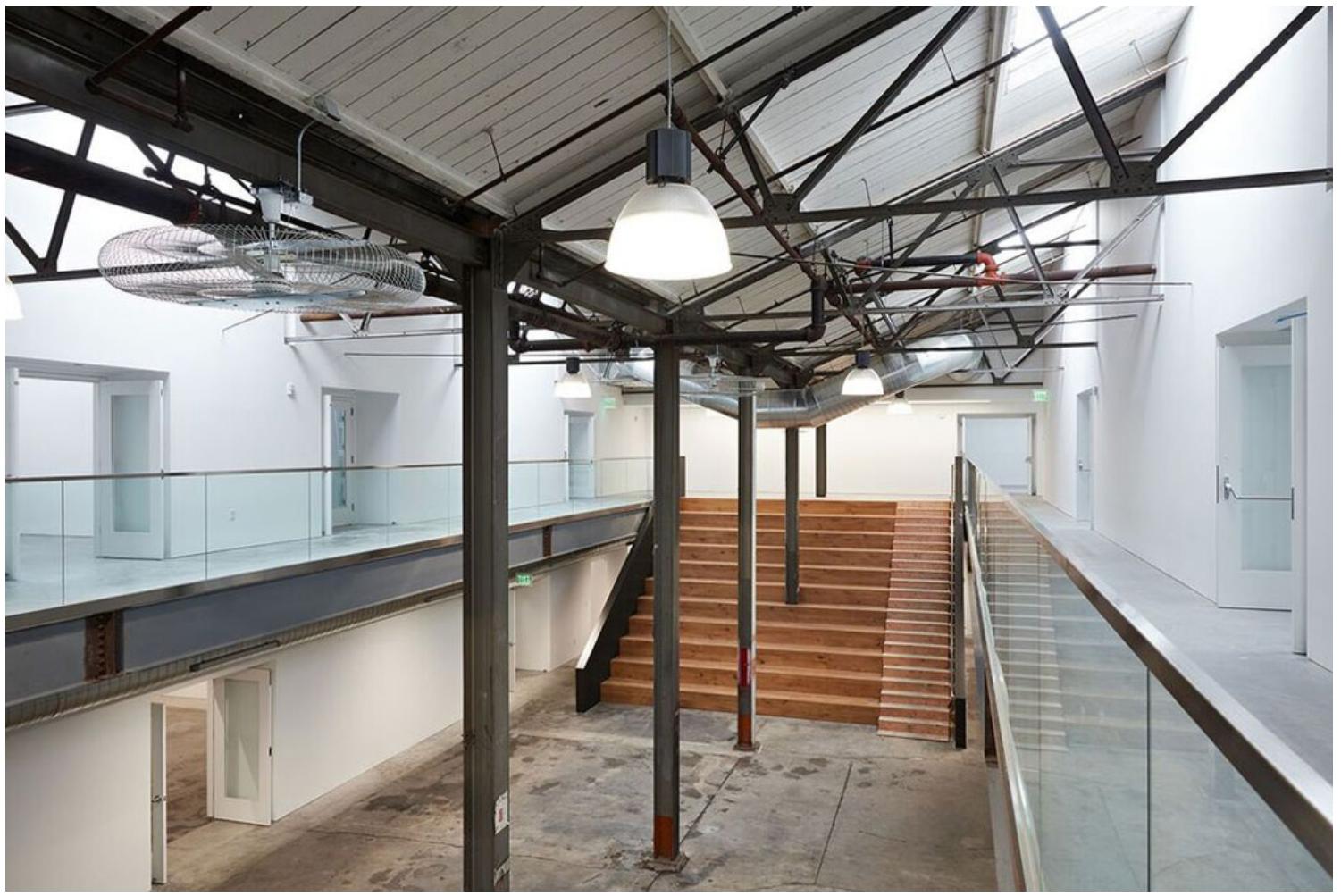


David Ireland House; upstairs hallway with *Broom Collection with Boom*, 1978-88, untitled chair and wallpaper patties, 1978. Courtesy: 500 Capp Street Foundation; photograph: Henrik Kam

If Marcel Broodthaers and Joseph Beuys had shared a vacation home in the Mission District, it might have been at 500 Capp Street, the longtime residence of artist David Ireland, where I found myself one morning breakfasting under a pair of wall-mounted antelope horns. During the three decades that Ireland lived there, he continuously lacquered the walls until they turned the tawny colour of over-steeped tea and as shiny as polished glass. The modest rooms were filled with curious sculptural objects: piles of painted sardine tins, transistor radios tuned to static, a swinging blowtorch chandelier. Quotidian accidents that left scrapes or dents in the walls and floorboards were commemorated with brass plaques. In the artist's bedroom lay a small shrine to the house's prior owner, an accordion maker: cutlery stubbornly jabbed in cement lumps excavated from the building's foundations, and a slice of 40-year old birthday cake in a

sealed glass jar, unrecognizably brown with mold. After Ireland's death in 2009, collector Carlie Williams saved the house from imminent demolition and established the 500 Capp Street Foundation, dedicated to the preservation and study of Ireland's work, much of which is housed onsite in a brand-new basement-level archive. The house fiercely guards its whimsy, hard to come by in today's San Francisco of luxury condos and Soul Cycles.

Just as the city today is a case study in gentrification, it has also prompted productive solutions to such problems. A dozen younger and more established galleries have moved shop to the Minnesota Street Projects, a newly renovated warehouse in the Dogpatch district, where pristine white spaces ring a central atrium complete with a high-tech welcome desk, like a museum or a shopping mall. Collective offices, a kitchen and restrooms free up square footage for art in the galleries. Older players such as Anglim Gilbert have joined artist-run spaces including Capital and Et Al, giving the project much-needed variety, though its uniform architecture tends to flatten one's approach to the work on display. (New York galleries Andrew Kreps and Anton Kern have also teamed up with a collaborative group show in a temporary space here.) Minnesota Street Projects is a fundamentally philanthropic venture, and its tenants rent their spaces at significantly below market rate; some of their artists will soon occupy studios across the street. Though laudable for fashioning a viable alternative model for galleries threatened by skyrocketing rents, Minnesota Street Projects is a somewhat archaic response to a figurative and literal invasion. The dramatic retrenchment of a dozen galleries from far-flung neighbourhoods to a single building trades a physically and geographically diverse scene, capable of engaging directly with different public audiences, for a one-stop shop. It remains to be seen what kind of crowds the project will draw, and whether its economic model can be successfully reproduced in other rapidly gentrifying cities.



Minnesota Street Project. Photograph: Mariko Reed

It's unclear how SFMOMA will grow into its new building, or how San Francisco's new galleries will fare in the local market. But one thing is clear: these recent developments aren't aimed at longtime locals, who will struggle to pay steep \$25 museum entrance fees, atop dramatic rent spikes. (The costly privatization of public spaces extends from museum to street: the San Francisco Department of Parks and Recreation notably declared last week that it would begin accepting paid reservations - for as much as \$260 - for patches of grass on the public lawns of much-beloved Dolores Park.) In a city marred by acrimonious battles over rising inequality, San Francisco's new public and private galleries are riding the tidal wave of wealth that threatens to washing away local culture - a development hardly offset by noble efforts like 500 Capp Street or the Minnesota Street Projects. If the Bay Area's class of collectors and museum donors grows to include tech scions, its unclear whether institutional power structures will change for the better or worse; in the meantime, the economic gulf will likely widen. In her 1967 essay, Didion proclaimed that 'the centre is not holding'. If it ever did in San Francisco, it has long since fallen out. Then again, perhaps the centre was always an illusion in that boom and bust town, now the seat of a new Gilded Age.

EVAN MOFFITT

Evan Moffitt is assistant editor of *frieze*, based in New York, USA.