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ART & DESIGN

Private Collection Becomes Very Public

By CAROL KINO JUNE 2, 2010



Gerhard Richter's "256 Colors" at the Gap headquarters in San Francisco is prepared for its move to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Winni Wintermeyer for The New York Times

SAN FRANCISCO

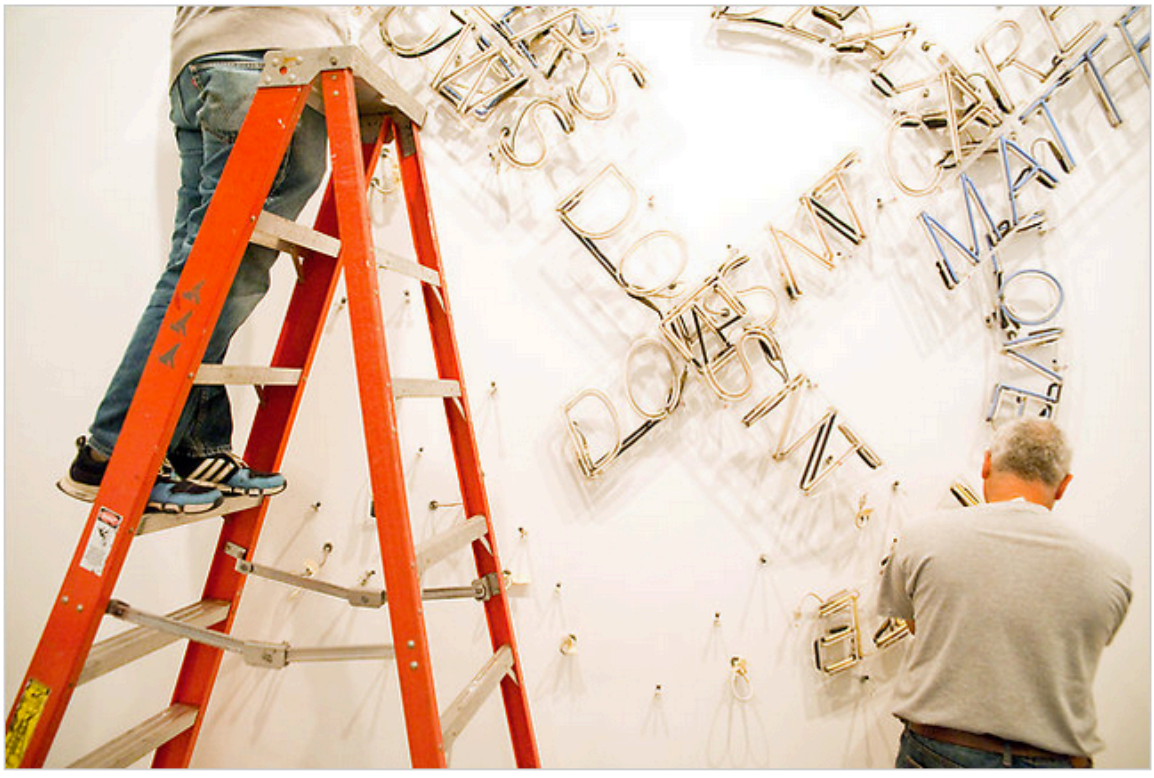
ON a recent morning at the Gap's corporate headquarters here, a group of children in the building for Take Our Sons and Daughters to Work Day burst into the art gallery on the ground floor. Screaming with delight, they scampered through the unguarded spaces, past a 1963 "Triple Elvis" by Andy Warhol, through a roomful of portraits by Chuck Close and on into a gallery hung with abstract paintings by Ellsworth Kelly. Laura Satersmoen, the curator, who was leading a group of visitors through the collection, yelled after them. "You guys have got to be careful not to touch the artwork!"

It was just another day at the Gap, the clothing chain, where for many years much of the extraordinary art collection of the company's founders, Don and Doris Fisher, has been hidden away in these ground-floor rooms. Although the collection includes more than 1,100 works, mostly from the 1960s on, they have been seen by relatively few people: Gap employees, the occasional museum tour group and those in the upper echelons of the art world who have the right connections.

News media coverage has always been tightly restricted, and Mr. Fisher, who directed the Gap for more than 40 years until his death at 81 last September, refused to give interviews about his holdings for most of that time.

It's a striking contrast to the kind of conspicuous accumulation that has become common among art world megacollectors like the Miami developers Don and Mera Rubell, who recently announced plans to build a small museum in Washington as the linchpin of a hotel complex, or the billionaire philanthropist Eli Broad, who wields his enormous art holdings (and fortune) like a carrot, dangling them and snatching them back, to persuade the museum boards of Los Angeles to do his bidding.

As Allan Schwartzman, a veteran Manhattan art adviser and curator, observed, many major collectors these days are "thinking about immortality." The Fishers' art, which he has seen often, is "one of the great collections assembled in our time," he added, but the couple "always wanted to maintain their privacy."



Bruce Nauman's neon sculpture "Life Death, Knows Doesn't Know." Winni Wintermeyer for The New York Times

Robert Fisher, their eldest son, added that their silence was also motivated by the idea that "there was no real benefit to the company or anybody else for my parents to talk much about it publicly." Soon, however, the collection will emerge from hiding. On June 25 about 160 pieces from it will go on view at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, in "Calder to Warhol: Introducing the Fisher Collection." Organized by Gary Garrels, the museum's chief curator of painting and sculpture, the exhibition will showcase the collection's depth, with 16 of the Fishers' 21 Warhols, 9 of their 23 Gerhard Richters, 10 of their 24 Sol LeWitts and 10 of their 45 Calders.

But this show is only a teaser for the main event: the moment when stewardship of the entire Fisher collection will be turned over to the museum. That's currently scheduled to take place in the fall of 2016, when it plans to open a wing largely dedicated to the new holdings. Neal Benezra, the museum's director, has already raised more than $250 million to finance the building and double the museum's endowment from the board's leadership.

For the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, known for its jazzy Mario Botta building and its uneven collection, the moment is expected to be a game changer. With the addition of the Fishers' holdings, rich in work by Anselm Kiefer, Agnes Martin and Richard Serra, among others, it should become "the second most important modern museum in America," just behind the Museum of Modern Art," said Arne Glimcher, founder of the Pace Gallery in New York, and also "in the Top 10 among modern museums in the world."

Mr. Benezra said, "From our board to our staff to our membership to the general public, there is a palpable sense of excitement about the future."

Meanwhile, back at the Gap, where the deinstallation of the collection has been proceeding for over a month, the mood is a bit less ebullient. Although the collection was privately owned by the Fishers, it's a deep part of the company's sense of itself, starting with the Gap's unofficial mascot, Art — otherwise known as "Man with Ladder," a 1995 super-realist sculpture of a handyman by Duane Hanson.

When Julie Alonso, a marketing executive, began working at the Gap, Art was installed near an elevator, and she, like many other new employees, spent weeks wondering why he never did any work. Being able to share anecdotes like that with co-workers, she said — not to mention being surrounded by great artwork — is "wildly inspiring and incredibly fun."



Left to right, Charles Schwab, chairman of the museum's board; Robert Fisher; and Neal Benezra, the museum's director.
Winni Wintermeyer for The New York Times

Although Art will remain at the Gap for the time being, many other equally beloved pieces will not. David Smyton, who manages the company's travel, events and food services, is planning a party for the departure of "Geometric Apple Core," an eight-foot-high sculpture by Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen from 1991 that sits at the entrance to the company cafeteria. Although it may be replaced by a group of 1968 Warhol "Brillo Box" sculptures, "it's not quite the same," Mr. Smyton said.

Robert Fisher said his father "just loved the fact that they were able to share with a company so dependent on creativity something so creative." But the origins of the collection were less lofty. When the couple began buying, a few years after they opened their first store in San Francisco in 1969, their aim was merely to brighten up the office, then located in suburban Burlingame, and their acquisitions were limited to prints — although they were good ones, by the likes of Robert Motherwell, Louise Nevelson and David Hockney. But by the time the company went public in 1976, the Fishers had been bitten by the collecting bug, and their ambitions grew in tandem with their fortunes.

"They made very careful selections on their own," said Mr. Glimcher, who began working with them early on, when contemporary-art collectors were rare. And when the Fishers got hooked on an artist, he added, they usually collected the full range of an oeuvre, which "makes the collection unique."

Unlike many collectors, who often serve on a range of museum boards, Mr. Fisher's sole allegiance was to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and to San Francisco, his birthplace. So it made sense that in 2006, as he neared 80, he began talking to Mr. Benezra about bequeathing the collection to the museum.

But in August 2007, once both sides saw that "the stars were not aligned," Mr. Benezra said, Mr. Fisher announced that he wanted to build his own museum in the Presidio, the 19th-century Army base that is now a national park. The project encountered strong community resistance. After nearly two years of public hearings, at which Mr. Benezra often spoke on his behalf ("The main thing was that the collection stay in the city," he said), Mr. Fisher withdrew his bid.

"I could tell his enthusiasm was waning big time," said the brokerage magnate Charles Schwab, who was a friend of Mr. Fisher's and had just become chairman of the museum's board. "That was the moment to strike."



"Apple Core," by Claes Oldenburg and Coosje van Bruggen, will be moved from the Gap headquarters in San Francisco to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.
Winni Wintermeyer for The New York Times

He and Mr. Benezra, already planning a more modest expansion, swiftly explored the possibility of acquiring more space and reopened negotiations. Meanwhile another board member, the architect Art Gensler, set his firm to work creating drawings to suggest what the new galleries might look like. As soon as Mr. Fisher saw them, Mr. Schwab and Mr.

Benezra sensed a done deal. “Don started saying, ‘Oh, we can put this sculpture there,’ ” Mr. Schwab said, laughing. “He started to get engaged.”

After that, things moved quickly, in part because Mr. Fisher, who had had cancer for years, was in declining health. By late September they had arrived at a handshake deal: the collection would be transferred to a foundation directed by the Fisher family but stored, conserved, managed and organized into shows by the museum, as if it were part of the permanent collection.

“I convinced Don that if it was in a trust, it could remain together in perpetuity,” Mr. Schwab said. In exchange the museum asked Mr. Fisher to “help us out in a financial sense, so we can do that.” The board approved the deal on Sept. 24, and Mr. Fisher died three days later.

The final contract, worked out with Robert Fisher, who is on the boards of both the Gap and the museum, stipulates that the collection will be on loan to the museum for 100 years, renewable for another 25; what happens next will be determined by the Fishers’ descendants. It also stipulates a 75 percent to 25 percent ratio of Fisher to non-Fisher work for the new galleries; that the most important works must be shown at least once every five years; and that work can be deaccessioned only to upgrade the collection and in consultation with the museum, which has veto power over certain pieces.

“For some time now,” Mr. Benezra said, “we’ve needed to find a third way for museums and collectors to work together. Hopefully, this might be it.”

Certainly, the agreement seems likely to give Don Fisher a good shot at immortality. And when the new wing is complete, Mr. Schwab said, “It’ll be an art paradise.”

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