

Open Space - San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's blog



An interview between **Kate Feld** and **Suzanne Stein**, Head of Community Engagement at SFMOMA in California



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*When is a museum blog not a blog? When it's the online manifestation of an active and deeply engaged cultural community. **Kate Feld**, contributing editor at Creative Tourist and director of the Blog North Awards spoke with **Suzanne Stein**, Head of Community Engagement at SFMOMA in California about [Open Space](#), the museum's innovative and wildly successful blog that points the way to a more meaningful use of the format by arts organisations.*

KF: Were you at SFMOMA when the idea for the blog was conceived?

SS: I was hired in part to conceive of and implement something that would be like a blog; it wasn't clear exactly what at the start what we would do. That was at the end of 2007. Open Space launched in April 2008.

KF: What were your aims in setting up the site?

SS: To provide a more open place for the museum to talk to its local constituency and have our local art and art-interested community in the Bay Area talk back to us; a place where the local community and SFMOMA community (the staff and curators) would be visible to each other and in dialogue with each other.



KF: How did this project evolve on a practical level?

SS: When it started we were a somewhat more traditional museum blog. Well, actually that's not quite true because even our first post was an interview with someone who had done a kind of intervention in the SFMOMA galleries. So even from the very first we were looking beyond the museum's own programming. We weren't so interested in talking about how great SFMOMA is. We were interested in talking about and looking at what our community was doing and thinking.

In the very beginning I was the sole editor, producer and publisher of everything that went through Open Space; I would write posts, interview people, and work with SFMOMA curators and staff to produce posts of their own. A couple of months in, I started commissioning texts from people in the community on SFMOMA exhibitions. By the end of 2008 I knew I wanted to implement a new strategy, which was to bring in external columnists, people who were living, working and writing in the Bay Area cultural community and give them the keys to Open Space, letting them write and publish whatever they wanted without any editorial oversight from me or SFMOMA.

In early 2009 we got started with our first group of 5 columnists. I trained them on how to use the technology if they needed training, we talked together about what best practices might be (respond to commenters, comment on each other's writings), and then I gave them the keys and said 'Go.' I said Open Space is an open platform, yours, and do whatever you wish. The only thing I asked them not to do was to write "reviews" of local exhibitions or shows. (They immediately ignored me on that count, pretty much.) Something I did ask them to do was to write about what was going on in the Bay Area. I said they never had to write about SFMOMA, but they could if they wished. And if they were going to write about the museum, they didn't have to write about it in glowing terms but could approach it however they wished to think about it.

I think that's when Open Space became very interesting; when we started really handing over the possibilities and letting our community use Open Space as a highly visual platform to talk to us and to each other about what was happening here in the Bay Area. This was a major shift, and one that's been pretty successful, although we've certainly changed it up over the years. We had rotating cohorts of columnists writing in this 'editorial free zone' seasonally for about three years. Now, how often I invite new columnists in has changed. Sometimes I have three people on for six months, sometimes we rotate writers in and out with overlapping tenures. I started working with guest editors in the summer of 2011, adding even another layer of editorial-free zone. I invite a guest editor who will then commission a bunch of writing from people I don't necessarily know. And I'll see their work when it appears, published, on Open Space like the rest of the public.

KF: Wow, that's amazing. When you initially 'handed the keys' to these writers what was the response like from people reading the blog?

SS: Oh, they loved it. We had a fantastic team of writers, a great first group. We invited poet and novelist Kevin Killian, who has been writing about art in the local community for 30+/- years, Julian Myers, a younger art historian with a highly critical viewpoint, and a recent art school graduate who had been studying visual criticism (Adrienne Skye Roberts), as well as a young curator (Anuradha Vikram) and a well-known local designer (Eric Heiman). They were all people who weren't afraid to say what needed to be said or to take advantage of the opportunity of this very visible platform. I think everyone was excited to be involved in this new thing, and they all found ways to push at what SFMOMA's boundaries would be. I think the community appreciated our open support of the writers and what they wanted to do, and also appreciated being able to talk to each other, or talk back to us about what we were doing.

KF: When I talk to arts organisations about being really open with their blogs and not having to constantly be a cheerleader for their organisation and publish only ‘good news’ posts, many people are wary. There is a lot of desire to control the message that they’re putting out there. Has there ever been any attempt by the folks upstairs to clamp down on Open Space and project a more careful image as it relates to SFMOMA, or has everyone there seen it as a healthy thing from the get go?

SS: I would say overall the museum has been really supportive. I’ve fought a lot of battles, for sure, especially early on, to make sure I could protect what was happening, keep it going and prove its value. We had many difficult moments. One of our first columnists wrote a very critical piece about a programme upcoming at the museum. The programme hadn’t even happened yet; the writer was responding to the press materials about it. At the time, for a lot of us at the museum, especially the curator responsible for the programme, there was some anxiety and frustration and a feeling of, *well, this is my own venue why should I/we be criticized on our own vehicle*— and we had many heated conversations about that. But the writer’s post sparked an incredibly intelligent, rich and dynamic conversation in the comment box, the sort of dialogue that usually happens at bars or dinner tables long after people have left the museum. And I will say that very much to the curator’s credit, in the end, in a difficult situation, he rolled with it, and has often since been a great champion of what Open Space does.

I think overall we’ve all been able to see that outside writers’ content and SFMOMA-generated content (curators and staff are also often contributors to Open Space) placed side-by-side in the same place has been a mutually beneficial situation; it brings visibility to both parties. People out in the community have given us a lot of positive feedback saying they do see Open Space as a place for rich dialogue, where they can have meaningful discussion or argument about crucial art and social issues here (and elsewhere in the world). That has been most important overall, that people see Open Space as a place for conversation about issues of art and culture. The benefits of that dialogue, and the perception that these conversations are possible, have far outweighed any little bumps on the road that were mainly about discomfort with this new, much more open approach. I can’t think of any one case where even a discussion highly inflected with negativity ultimately reflected poorly on the institution or its aims.

KF: The standard of content on Open Space is really high, easily magazine-quality writing. Do you pay your contributors or is it all done on a voluntary basis?

We pay our contributors. I made a point from the very beginning that if we were going to be engaging outside writers they had to get paid. I think it’s really important. We treat the writers as artists, really, because they are. I consider all of our writers and contributors artists.

KF: Are your rates comparable to freelance writing?

SS: It's not a dollar a word – we give a flat honorarium for a post and I give word count suggestions when commissioning a single piece. Columnists get an honorarium for the duration of their tenure (usually four months), and then they have a specific minimum number of posts they must produce, but what kind of material they write is up to them. I have heard that our honoraria are comparable to, or in some cases more generous than, other publications' fees.

KF: As a freelance journalist I find that very easy to believe.

SS: Yeah, I think it's really important and hope we will be able to continue to support our writers as much as we can – support for writers helps make for better writing. I appreciate very much your compliment about the quality of the writing on Open Space. It's very important to me that we can support and foster good, interesting, creative and inventive writing around art. That people have the freedom to try new things out with their writing is really important.

KF: Their excitement and engagement with the art really comes through in the writing. I think that's one of the reasons it feels unusually dynamic, because the writers are allowed to pursue their own interests.

SS: I don't assign anything. We do a [One on One](#) series where I ask people to write about something in our collection, but they choose what to write about and how to write about it. I think it's important to give people a place to explore their own interests – we get more interesting writing that way. Though sometimes, because of this very open approach, Open Space can veer in many different directions – sometimes that's perceived as problematic.

KF: How do you plan your content? How far ahead do you commission things?

SS: For the last couple of years I've been thinking about seasons on Open Space as fall, spring and summer – I try to plan a season several months out. I look at what the museum is doing and if there are particular projects we can run alongside. But I also try to leave space for things that come up in the community. Our running series include the aforementioned One on Ones, and our [Collection Rotation](#) series, which is endlessly popular. We ask an individual to organise a 'mini-exhibition' from the museum's collection online. We publish one or two of those a month, so we try to commission them several months ahead of time so we can be sure to get permissions for all the images – which is sometimes a major undertaking.

KF: Do you edit their copy at all?

SS: After the columnists or guest editors' work is published we proofread it. Sometimes if there's a factual issue then one of us will write to the writer to clarify. It is true that we have all different kinds of writers but mostly they're very good, experienced writers – that's why we choose them. When we commission single pieces of writing, like the One on Ones, the

Collection Rotations, or other special-project pieces, we do work with those writers in a more straightforward editor-writer relationship.

KF: I wanted to ask about the series of posts on [defining the contemporary](#). It's quite an ambitious thing for a blog to be undertaking. How did that come about?

SS: The editor who organised that series, Brandon Brown, is one of our columnists, who came in during our second year. Lately, I've been inviting former columnists back to guest edit a series. He suggested doing this thing on the contemporary, and I was interested in what would come out of it. He's a poet and he does write about art but also has ties to a number of different writing and cultural communities here and internationally and I thought he'd bring a different angle of view to what the art community might normally address as 'the contemporary'. He showed me what his call to the writers would be and told me which writers he was thinking about asking, but other than that I'm watching it unfold as you are. The series is already getting a ton of traffic and getting shared a lot. I'd say too that the aim of the short series is less "define the contemporary" and more about asking a range of (mostly younger) writers and artists what "the contemporary" means to them, now.

KF: It sounds like you guys have a pretty good grasp on what content is performing well and what isn't.

SS: We have a decent grasp. Nobody's completely sure why some things are performing well or others less so. Sometimes it's just about that accident of where it gets shared and when. I can tell you we're averaging around 35,000 visits a month. About half our readership is dedicated local readers who return several times a month. The rest is a national/international readership, largely art-interested.

KF: How many people do you have working on Open Space for SFMOMA?

SS: At the beginning of this year I was able to hire someone – now Open Space has a dedicated staff of two, which, after six years of going it alone, is wonderful for me. To say I've been going it alone is deceptive, though, because I've had a lot of help. There's a giant network of people working to support Open Space. Someone in another department helps us with image rights, and currently part of our publications team does our proofreading. I have a copyeditor out of house who I send a lot of the single commissioned texts to rather than editing them myself. We have an in-house design team who help us with lots of things. We also have an out-of-house developer who built the thing (on Wordpress) and does maintenance and fixes for us. And many SFMOMA staff have participated in both back-end production work, as well as writing or producing content for us. Not to mention our many external writers and contributors.

KF: Could you tell me a bit about your approach to multimedia content?

SS: I actually think we're multimedia-light; we don't have enough audio and video content, in my opinion. I would like to work more with our media-producing team to make content specifically for Open Space, but this has always been partly a bandwidth issue. I just haven't

been able to do as much video production as I'd like. Starting in November we're working with two external contributors (Open Space 'artists in residence'; our first ever) who will be producing video and audio content. I'm thinking that might be one direction we might go in future – asking external contributors who would produce media projects for Open Space.

KF: What are your plans for Open Space?

SS: We're in the process of really rethinking Open Space. SFMOMA is closed for expansion until 2016, so we have a little opportunity to carefully consider this. Open Space is five and a half years old, which is a dinosaur in blog terms, and a lot of things we've done and done well don't need to be done in the same way in the community as they once did – they've had a lasting impact. How we'll change exactly it's too early to say, but two things we'll certainly be holding on to are fostering a place for conversation and great writing. Although I do like our current design, I think there are some organisation issues we can address, and we will need to freshen up again before the museum reopens. But I don't think the fundamental things that make Open Space what it is are really going to change much.

KF: How do you use other social media to support Open Space? Do you also run the museum's Twitter feed?

SS: It's a different team, actually, in a different division. Our social media is run out of the marketing and PR department and our excellent digital engagement associate Willa Köerner manages all of the museum's [social media](#), which includes the main SFMOMA Twitter account, as well as Tumblr, Instagram, and Facebook. We work with her closely. We also just built a little baby Open Space Twitter account because I think it will be useful for us to have a separate channel. We have a different audience, and a different tone, than @SFMOMA, so we're going to try to separate that out and see how it works for us. But we do work together a lot, and Willa and I have collaborated on several projects, trying to figure out how to put her broad audience and my deeply engaged audience in contact with each other.

KF: It looks like you're posting a couple times a week at least?

SS: In the fall we tend post more, in the summer less... it depends on how active our columnists are on any given week. Once we've invited a columnist to contribute, part of our agreement with them is that they retain the keys to Open Space after their official four-month tenure is over so they can post there anytime in the future. Columnists who wrote for us three years ago occasionally will put something up. It's wonderful – for me it feels like an old friend has just dropped by the house to say hello, and I hope that "keeping the keys" helps us all feel that we hold this thing in common. I think we've had more than 400 contributors at this point and something like 45 to 50 columnists and guest editors.

KF: You must be really proud of that.

SS: I'm pleased and I'm grateful, because everyone's smart and interesting, and they've all given it a lot of effort and care. I've been lucky to work with all these people.

KF: Do you have any advice for people starting out on this journey themselves, running a blog associated with a museum?

SS: You know that thing about being willing to fail? I think that's really important. It's also *really* painful, to fail in public, and you will definitely fail, so be prepared for that. And I think if you care about it other people are going to care about it; if you think it's important and are willing to take risks, other people, at least some, will think it's important and take that risk with you.

Be fearless or dumb. It does help to try to not know what you think is the right or wrong thing to do. I actually *didn't* know what were the "wrong" things to do. In many cases I'd say, 'But why *can't* we do that? Let's just do it.' If you don't have that kind of naiveté for real, like I did, it's good to sort of invest yourself with some fake naiveté. And ask yourself: what have you got to lose? What has anybody really got to lose, actually? What's really at stake?