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[Frieze Week](#) [Russia-Ukraine war](#) [Art market](#) [Museums & heritage](#) [Exhibitions](#) [Books](#) [Podcasts](#) [C](#)

Museums
Archive

Contemporary art worth \$5 million donated to MoMA

The gift was made by New York millionairess Elaine Dannheisser, who says her collection contains “a lot of tough art”

Jason Edward Kaufman

31 May 1996

The Museum of Modern Art has long been a magnet for magnanimous donations of hugely valuable classic modern art. But with a gift of seventy-five contemporary works from Elaine Dannheisser and her Dannheisser Foundation, the museum has set about extending that tradition into more recent decades.

Valued at more than \$5 million, the transcontinental mix is heavy in late Conceptual and Minimal art of a type scarce in the museum’s collection. Curator Rob Storr notes that although the Paine Webber Collection and individuals such as MoMA chairman Agnes Gund have consistently donated contemporary art “this is edgier and deeper per artist than anything we’ve received before. It is rather aggressive art,” he adds, “not only some difficult artists, but difficult pieces by difficult artists. To get them in a large group like this sets a benchmark for collectors

and for what the museum will accept.”

Ten Bruce Naumans include an early neon titled “Perfect Door Perfect Odor Perfect Rodo” and the noisy video installation “Learned Helplessness in Rats” (1988). There are six Polkes (1971-92) and a vitrine by Beuys. Among four pieces by Jeff Koons is his high-kitsch ceramic classic, the Pink Panther embracing a pinup girl. One of the four photographs by Cindy Sherman portrays a sexual tableau involving sausages. The six pieces by Felix Gonzalez-Torres include a billboard he designed for a 1992 MoMA “Projects” exhibition, and there are nine works by Robert Gober. The gift makes MoMA the world’s largest public repository of works by Gober, Gonzalez-Torres, and Sherman.

“They’re not all just pretty pictures”, says Ms. Dannheisser, calling her collection “a lot of tough art...that I believe is a reflection of our time”. Somewhat less confrontational are two Robert Rymans, early and late, a Richard Serra steel prop piece from 1987, a Richard Long stone circle, and two Brice Mardens, including the museum’s first “web-work.”

The balance of the twenty-eight-artist roster embraces André, Artschwager, Matthew Barney, Bernd & Hilla Becher, Bourgeois, Clemente, Cragg, Gilbert & George, Dan Graham, Andreas Gursky, Georg Herold, Holzer, Kawara, Kiefer, Koons, Long, Prince, Susanna Solana, Michelle Stuart, and Weiner.

Speaking to The Art Newspaper, Ms. Dannheisser recounted spending several decades acquiring her collection, often buying before the artists’ careers had driven up their prices. In the 1970s and 1980s she was associated with the Guggenheim Museum, to which she gave works by Rothko, Rauschenberg, and Agnes Martin.

But after falling out with the then new director Thomas Krens, she left and joined MoMA’s Committee on Painting and Sculpture and its International Council. She was elected a trustee shortly before the announcement of her gift, which she says was motivated by her close relationship with Ms. Gund, and precipitated by the sale of the Duane Street home of the eponymous not-for-profit foundation she established in 1975 with her late husband, engraving machine manufacturer Werner Dannheisser.

She allowed curators to choose whichever works they wanted, then decided to sell some of the leftovers at Christie’s New York. In the 7 May Contemporary sale she sold a 1986 sculpture by Tony Cragg for \$20,000 (estimate \$40,000-60,000) and “Three Urinals” (1988) by Gober for \$130,000 (estimate \$120,000-180,000). The following day a Reinhold Mucha photo-lithographic

diptych (1990) went for \$15,000 (estimate \$15,000-20,000) and a Rebecca Horn painting machine (1988) for \$30,000 (estimate \$30,000-40,000), but works by Carl André and Cady Noland failed to sell.

For her Upper East Side apartment Ms. Dannheisser retained works by Picasso, Polke, Marden, Koons, and Scott Burton, and says she will not be selling much more. She even plans to add to her collection, through “smaller things”, with the intention of donating the balance to MoMA in future years. The museum has planned an exhibition of the works which is scheduled for 1997.

Originally appeared in The Art Newspaper as *'Deep, edgy stuff in \$5 million gift to MoMA'*

Museums	Contemporary art	Museum of Modern Art New York	New York City	Patronage
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