

# The New Criterion

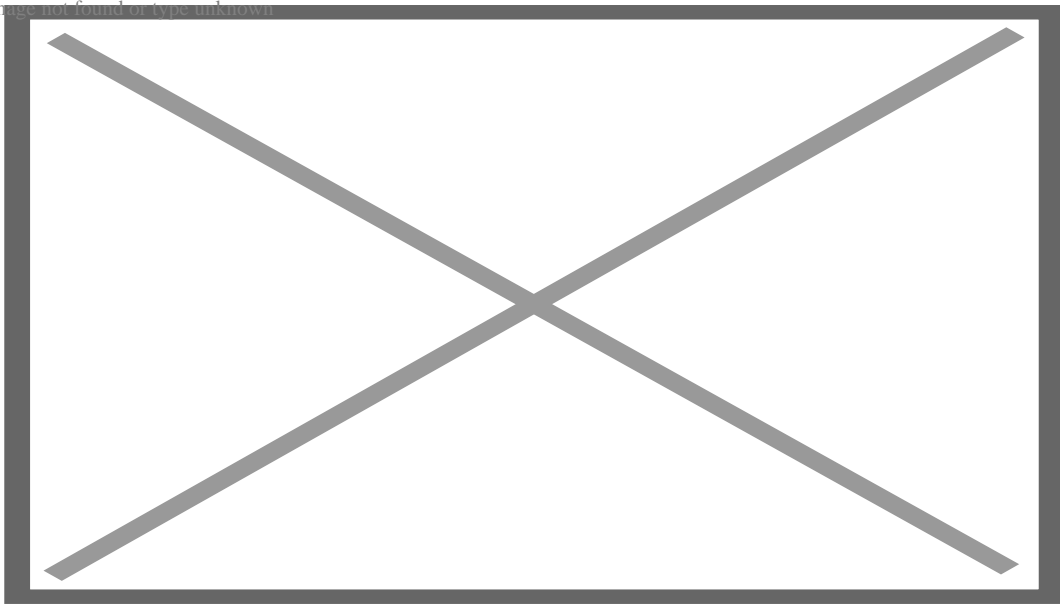
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## Bursting the Hirshhorn's bubble

by Bruce Cole

*The folly of Richard Koshalek and the dire financial situation of the Hirshhorn museum*

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*Rendering of the proposed Hirshhorn bubble; image by Diller Scofidio Renfro*

**A**da Louise Huxtable called it “born-dead, neo-penitentiary modern,” so it’s hard to believe that anyone would try to make the Hirshhorn Museum even uglier, but give Richard Koshalek credit for trying.

The Hirshhorn, the Smithsonian’s museum of modern art on the National Mall in Washington, was designed by Gordon Bunshaft to house the collection of the rags-to-riches stock market and mining magnate Joseph Hirshhorn. It opened in 1974 to much controversy over its design and the naming of a national museum after a living donor, a practice that the Smithsonian now regularly embraces.

The Hirshhorn, like so many of Washington’s authoritarian and mind-numbing federal behemoths of the Great Society, is now a relic of a decade noted for its lapse of taste. But unlike those rectangular monoliths, it is infamous for its enormous circular shape that squats on a series of

stunted piers—Huxtable christened it “the largest doughnut in the world.” The atrium forming the building’s hollow center is a blunt arrangement of glass and aggregate concrete that would feel at home in Mussolini’s Rome.

Now the Hirshhorn is once again attracting national attention—perhaps notoriety would be a more accurate word—thanks to Richard Koshalek, who was hired as its director in 2009 after two of his predecessors left in short order.

Before landing at the Hirshhorn, Koshalek, like many high-profile museum directors, had worked his way up the career ladder to increasingly better positions. He started off as a registrar at the Walker Art Center, had a stint at the National Endowment for the Arts, and was the director of the Fort Worth and Hudson River Museums before joining the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 1980 as deputy director.

By all accounts Koshalek, who became MOCA’s second director three years after his arrival, put the fledgling institution on Los Angeles’ cultural map, acquiring many works of art—including a controversial purchase of a collection from a member of his board—and attracting mega-rich Hollywood donors. He told *The Wall Street Journal*, “The kind of money we have to raise now puts pressure on me to be around wealthy people every single day. You have to be one of them.”

Maybe it was all that pressure to be “one of them” that motivated Koshalek to take a month-long sabbatical in 1993 to travel with the NFL’s San Francisco 49ers. He described the experience “like running away to join the circus.” When asked how MOCA was doing without its director, he said, “I have no idea. I have no idea what they are doing. I should call.” He also said, bizarrely, that he wouldn’t be asking the team or its owners to join his board or make donations to the museum, as if that weren’t something museum directors ask wealthy people to do. His time with the team, he said, “was just for me.”

Like many of those directors, Koshalek made his splash by what he built. He collaborated with architect Frank Gehry to convert a warehouse into a MOCA exhibition space—he also chaired the committee that awarded Gehry the commission for the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles—and he oversaw the construction of the museum’s headquarters designed by Arata Isozaki.

In 1999, after nineteen years at MOCA, Koshalek left, telling the *Los Angeles Times* that he wanted to stay in the city as “a cultural advocate and facilitator for downtown Los Angeles.”

But his plan to become an “advocate and facilitator” was not to be, for in the same year he was appointed president of the prestigious Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. Although there was grumbling about Koshalek’s managerial style, the major issue of his tenure was his plan to build a \$50 million library and design studio by Frank Gehry. This was met by a flurry of criticism, much of it coming from the students and faculty who complained that Koshalek was diverting

money and energy from the primary educational mission of the institution into a flashy and expensive building.

A student petition listing over 1,500 names, a spike in the school's tuition of about 6 percent per annum, the resignation of the Center's respected chief academic officer, and negative comments from some high-placed alumni led to Koshalek's resignation after the Art Center's trustees refused to renew his contract in 2008.

All this was music to the ears of Wayne Clough, the secretary of the Smithsonian, who enthusiastically hailed the sixty-seven-year-old Koshalek's appointment as director of the Hirshhorn in 2009: "His creativity brought modern and contemporary art to bear on issues of the day and will help the museum and the Institution reach broad audiences in technologically and aesthetically exciting new ways."

J. Tomilson Hill, then-chairman of the Hirshhorn board, was just as thrilled. He told the *Los Angeles Times* that the reasons for Koshalek's firing at Pasadena were seen as a plus: "Those attributes . . . looking externally and being involved in growth, that's what we were looking for." He added that past and present trustees at the Art Center had told the Hirshhorn that it was just a difference in direction and not Koshalek's management that got him fired. Maybe Mr. Hill should have asked the students and faculty what they thought.

Soon after Koshalek's arrival at the Hirshhorn, he was the subject of a *Washington Post* article in which he was called "a wild man," "awesome, amazing, and brilliant." In the article, he fondly recalled a MOCA exhibition that "came so close to blasphemy it had local Catholics marching on the museum." Koshalek was eager to show how edgy he was, but now he was in staid Washington, not hipster Hollywood, and a director of a taxpayer-funded museum on the National Mall to boot.

Koshalek told the *Los Angeles Times* that he accepted the Hirshhorn job because of the "sense of energy and opportunity emanating from the capital because of the ascendancy of Barack Obama," and that he envisioned himself cultivating international ties, reaching out to think tanks, and commissioning curators around the world to do research on the museum's holdings to be published in something to be called "The Hirshhorn Papers." In other words, he was planning to do everything *but* the museum's core mission to preserve, curate, and exhibit its objects—exactly the sort of extracurricular activity that got him booted in Pasadena.

For example, he proposed to use half a million dollars of Hirshhorn acquisition money, funds reserved for the purchase of art, to "acquire" a new bookstore designed by the L.A. artist Doug Aitken, a plan one journalist called creative accounting at its "Enronest." Koshalek had done something similar years before at the Hudson River Museum where he "acquired" a bookstore by the artist Red Grooms.

*The Washington Post* described Aitken's design as a "vertiginous, kaleidoscopic experience"; Koshalek called it, seemingly without irony, the Hirshhorn's "Peacock Room," referring to Whistler's masterpiece of interior decoration now in the Freer Gallery. He bragged that it would "go beyond the experience at Amazon.com—and it could be a model for a lot of other bookstores." But one will never know for sure, because plans for the structure seem not to have been approved by the Hirshhorn board. Instead, Aitken was then hired to create a music video—he had already done one for Pittsburgh's Carnegie Museum—entitled SONG1, which was finally projected on the blankness of the museum's exterior in March 2012 after two years of discussion and planning.

Perhaps momentarily forgetting that his museum was located in Washington, Koshalek called SONG1, "the beginning of ten big things." "We're going to land them," he said, "here at the Hirshhorn like planes at LAX."

Another Koshalek "big thing" was a 2010 plan to create additional gallery space by excavating under the Hirshhorn's sculpture garden, the museum's only attractive space, but this turned out to be another flash in the pan that never got off the drawing board.

But Koshalek's biggest folly, and his undoing at the Hirshhorn, was fast approaching. "Washington is a city that needs a jolt," he declared. His remedy for the lethargy of the nation's capital was—wait for it—a giant inflatable bubble!

**B**ecause of strict building regulations on the Mall, he couldn't commission someone like Gehry to rebuild or substantially modify the Hirshhorn; instead he needed to find some other sort of glitzy, attention-getting structure.

So Koshalek commissioned the architectural firm of Diller, Scofidio+Renfro to design a colossal inflatable bubble—variously called the Seasonable Inflatable Structure, the Bulbous Membrane, or the Bloomberg Balloon, after a \$1 million pledge by Bloomberg LP, which didn't like "Bubble" for obvious reasons.

This blue-green confection of semi-transparent silicone-coated glass fiber, intended to protrude out of the doughnut hole to a height of fifteen stories and then ooze out beneath it, was to be periodically inflated and then stowed away.

This excretion fit Koshalek's attention-getting bill perfectly. It also let him give vent to the sort of plush, meaningless Koshalekian rhetoric accompanying all of his schemes. Indeed, *The Washington Post* quotes him as saying that the Bubble had "to be controversial and highly experimental, otherwise it wouldn't represent the reality of contemporary art and culture."

Gehry said that the Bubble was "like a separate work of art collaborating with the building." In a flight of postmodern grandiloquence, Elizabeth Diller, of Diller, Scofidio+Renfro, proclaimed, "The Bubble is an anti-monument. The ideals of participatory democracy are represented through

suppleness rather than rigidity. Art and politics occupy an ambiguous site outside the museum walls, but inside of the museum's core, blending its air with the democratic air of the Mall." Indeed.

Koshalek told *The Wall Street Journal* that museums "have to curate the public spaces and educational programs as well as exhibitions," and that the Bubble would become a cultural think tank hosting invitation-only four-week-long events about "contemporary art and culture" for "schoolchildren, college students, professors and leaders of industry."

Koshalek didn't say exactly which of Washington's public spaces could be "curated," but he acknowledged that the city already has "500 think tanks doing deep research." True, but there are also scores of NGOs, museums, institutes, and universities that also do a lot of thinking about arts and culture, perhaps too much. But none of this mattered to Koshalek, who boasted, incredibly, that the Hirshhorn's would be the "first think tank that deals with arts and culture."

How exactly the Bubble related to the Hirshhorn's core mission was unclear. Nevertheless, to bone up on what his think tank might actually do, Koshalek traveled the world from Doha to the Jackson Hole Economic Symposium in search of big ideas. The Smithsonian Institution promised \$4 million over ten years for programming.

One of the ideas Koshalek hatched for the Bubble was the creation of forums which would explore, for example, "new applications of cultural dialogue and diplomacy" and "art and destruction." He dropped high profile names—Daniel Barenboim, Kathryn Bigelow, and Luiz Lula da Silva, the former president of Brazil—as participants.

He made no small claims for his think tank in the Bubble: "If we can develop an educational program that's national and global in outlook, we can have an impact on cultural policy in the U.S."

**B**ut it would take more than Koshalek's clichéd hot air to get the Bubble inflated. In 2009, its price tag was estimated at \$5 million for construction and \$2.5–5 million for installation and programming (repeated inquiries to the Hirshhorn about specific budget numbers were never answered). It was set to open in 2012.

In 2010, the Smithsonian's secretary Wayne Clough announced that it would be unlikely that the Smithsonian would contribute any funds towards the Bubble's construction. The director, he said, was on his own: "Richard Koshalek has a lot of contacts, that's why we hired him." From Clough's initial enthusiasm, one would have thought that it was his "creativity" and his "ability to reach broad audiences in technologically and aesthetically exciting new ways" that got Koshalek hired and not his Rolodex.

In 2012, a Hirshhorn spokesman said \$8 million had been raised, including the Bloomberg money and the funds pledged by the Smithsonian for programming, but by then the estimated construction costs for the Bubble had soared to over \$15 million.

The wheels started to come off when, in October 2012, J. Tomilson Hill, the chairman of the Hirshhorn's board of trustees for eight years, resigned. "In a difficult economy," Tomlinson said, "museums must never put their core mission in harm's way by overextending financially," a clear reference to the Bubble's irrelevancy. The board's vice-chairman, Constance Caplan, a collector of contemporary art, replaced Hill.

By May 2013, three more trustees had resigned and the museum's staff was growing restless: A recent government survey had ranked the Hirshhorn as the second worst place to work among the forty-one Smithsonian institutions. On May 14, 2013, the *Washington Post* published a leaked Smithsonian report that calculated that the Bubble would have an operating loss of \$1.4 million a year.

The end was in sight. Faced with a hopelessly divided Hirshhorn board and terrible financial numbers, Koshalek's bubble burst. He resigned shortly before Clough canceled the project. The *Washington City Paper* claimed that the museum would lose about \$8 million from donors.

Shortly after Koshalek left, Constance Caplan, the new board chairman and a Bubble fan, quit after serving for less than a year. Her barbed letter of resignation, which never mentions the Bubble, lists a litany of complaints, including "the contentious manner and lack of inclusiveness with which a number of trustees and staff associated with the Hirshhorn and Smithsonian have behaved over the past year," and claims that the museum "is taking, with both overt and tacit approval by the Smithsonian: a regression to programming that imitates a predictable pattern at many other modern and contemporary museums." In other words, this would be the fate of the Hirshhorn without the Bubble and the visionary Koshalek.

So, where does the Hirshhorn stand a mere four years since the Secretary hailed Koshalek's appointment? It now has no director, two of its board chairmen have resigned, as have a total of five board members and several curators hired by Koshalek.

The Hirshhorn has squandered much energy, good will, and taxpayer money. It is now a rudderless, troubled museum in need of much rebuilding. In the wake of the Koshalek years, its ability to attract excellent leadership and major donors who are willing to invest in its uncertain future is severely weakened.

Of course, much of the train wreck at the Hirshhorn, and the resulting hit to its reputation as a serious institution, could have been avoided if the powers that be in the Smithsonian hierarchy and the Hirshhorn board had made a wiser and more considered choice of directors. Instead, they fell for someone who, as his record proved, was out to serve himself rather than the institution he was

entrusted to lead, and who was incapable of understanding that Washington was not Los Angeles.

But Koshalek is not alone in elevating ego over institution. He, and a number of his colleagues, are celebrity directors. He, like them, needs high-profile, controversial projects to maintain his star status. The humdrum work of actually running a museum and seriously improving its collection and exhibitions doesn't fit into this equation.

Such directors, bereft of intellectual heft and seriousness of purpose, like so much of the contemporary art scene, are egged on by trustees eager to be associated with trendy stunts like the Bubble. Unfortunately, these are exactly the sorts of directors some museum boards hire as a way to heighten their profile and improve their fundraising. But at the Hirshhorn it didn't exactly work out that way.

Now after the debacles of the Pasadena Art Center and the Hirshhorn, Koshalek has returned whence he came. But now back in California, he doesn't seem to have learned much from his Washington flop. His next big idea, he told the *Los Angeles Times*, is a pup tent version of the Bubble called a "Tech Tent." Still promoting his fantasy, and himself, Koshalek says he's been working with university presidents to develop these tents to foster public dialogue within the academic setting. Koshalek neglects to say how all this is going to be financed. Maybe it's finally time to look up his old 49ers friends.

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