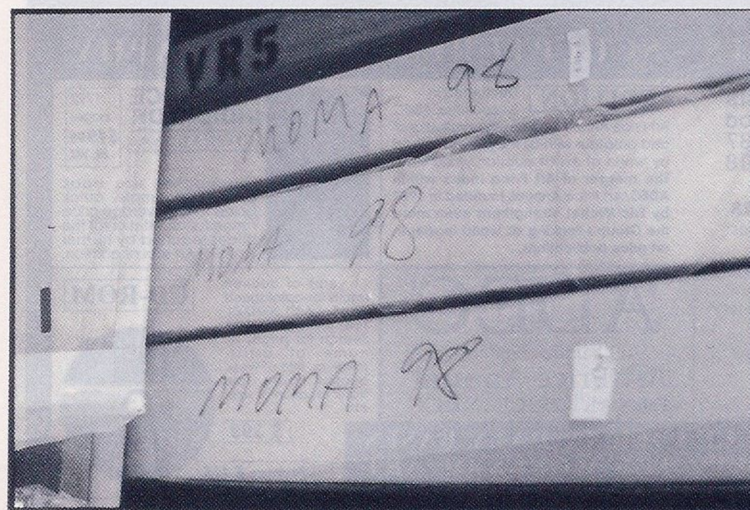
The Making of a Retrospective

A show at a major museum may be every artist's dream. But as Chuck Close discovered, the journey from announcement to opening night can involve tension, surprises, and too much time away from the studio • By Gail Gregg • Photographs by Jason Schmidt

The atmosphere in the top-floor galleries of the Museum of Modern Art was charged. Nine-foot-tall canvas mug shots propped casually against the wall faced down viewers entering the space—the paintings' huge black-and-white countenances both revealing and inscrutable. Unfazed by the looming presence of these silent giants, a small army was hard at work, dismantling packing crates; snapping out metal measuring tapes; poring over each painting under high-intensity lights like dermatologists; donning white cotton gloves to shift the works from one wall to another.



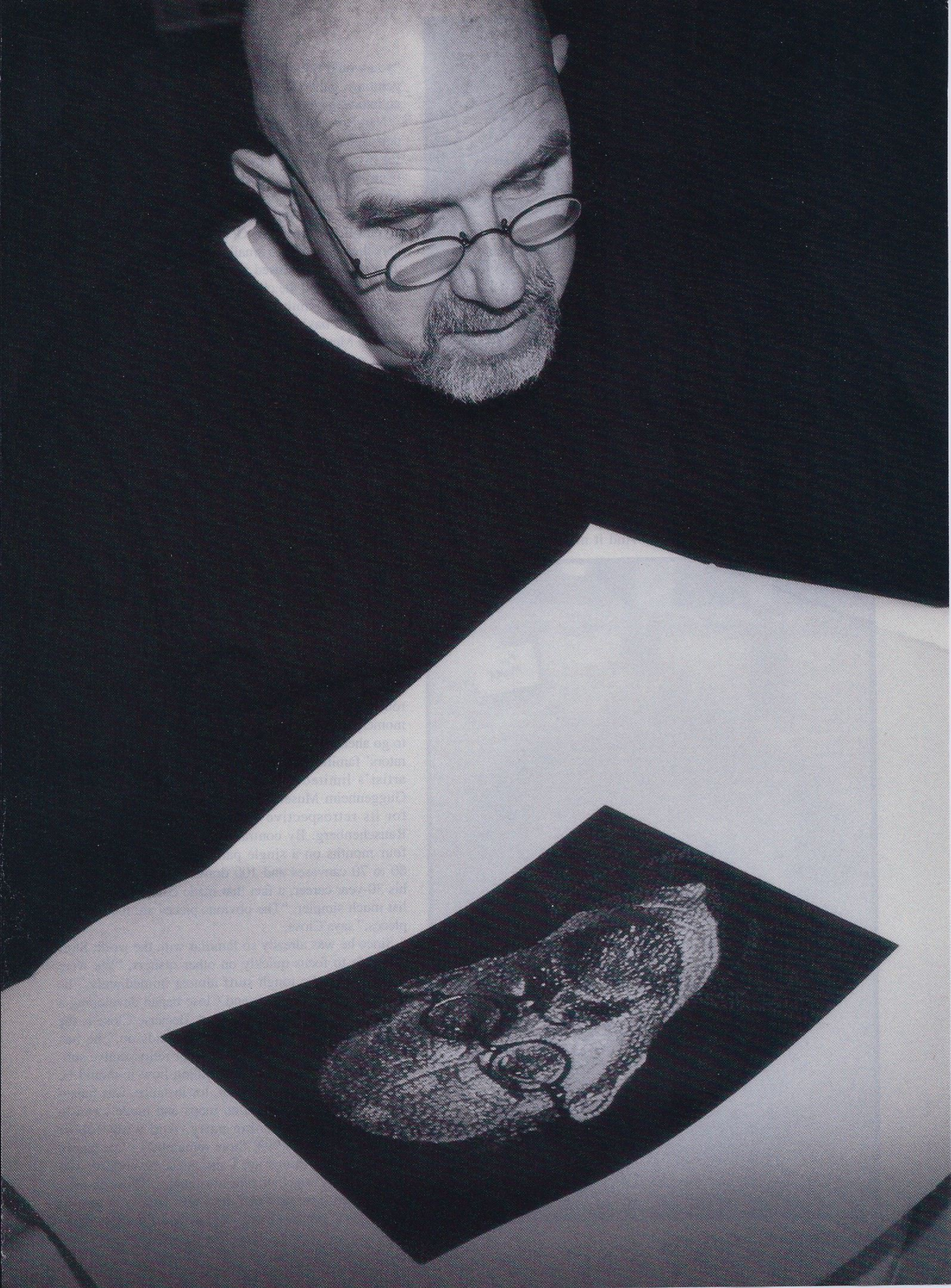
ABOVE Paintings packed and labeled ready for transfer from Close's studio to the Museum of Modern Art. RIGHT The artist face-to-face with his likeness in a print.

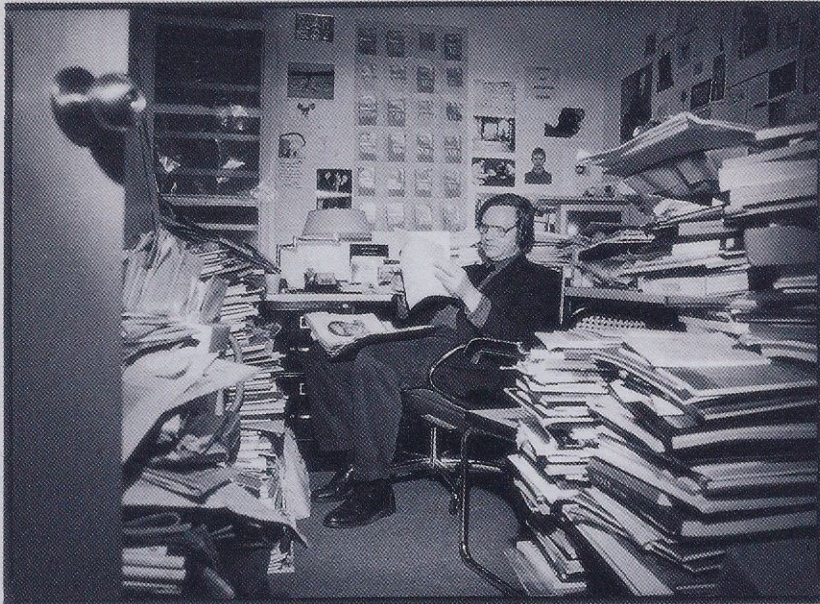
Presiding over this bustle were two men: painter Chuck Close and Robert Storr, a curator in the museum's department of painting and sculpture. To the beat of the Rolling Stones, the two were winding up nearly ten days of installing Close's retrospective—and the several years of negotiating, planning, and politicking required to make it a reality. "All my babies came back," laughed Close, examining his reassembled family of portraits, some of which he had not seen for years.

FOR THREE DECADES, CLOSE HAS PURSUED WHAT STORR calls the artist's "tortoise, not hare" investigation of representation, answering the photograph's implicit challenge to painting with an ironic counterpunch of hyperrealism and billboard size. After graduating from Yale University School of Art in 1964, Close began searching for a way to make art outside the minimalist, predominantly abstract idioms of his contemporaries. His first response was *Big Nude* (1967), a 21-foot-long painting of a reclining woman, his earliest attempt to grapple with the human form on a heroic scale. But it was *Big Self-Portrait* (1967–68), in which Close stares at viewers through black-framed glasses, cigarette smoke wafting from his lips, that set him on a course that continues today—monumental translations of Polaroids of his friends and family into another medium. Initially, Close airbrushed his images, their giant, glassy surfaces revealing his subjects' every vein, wrinkle, and hair. But in the early 1970s, he began exposing the paintings' underlying grid structure, composing his portraits out of rows of colored marks, using brush strokes, paper pulp, or even his own fingerprints. Along the way, Close has played with notions of perception, scale, structure, realism, and abstraction. And at some point, it appears that he fell in love with paint itself. In the work of the last decade, each square in the mosaic of a face became an independent abstract painting in miniature, its rigid borders filled with licks and curls of richly colored oil paint.

By 1992, the 57-year-old artist was sitting on top of the art world. Major museums owned his work; a top New York gallery, PaceWildenstein, represented him; and he had triumphed over (although not recovered from) a collapsed spinal artery that partially paralyzed him in 1988, threatening to end his career. And both the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art were courting him for a retrospective.

Had the art world been placing bets on which of the two the artist would choose, the odds would have been on the Modern. The year before, Close had collaborated with Kirk Varnedoe, chief curator of its department of painting and sculpture, to organize "Artist's Choice—Chuck Close: Head-On/the Modern Portrait," an exhibition drawn from the museum's collection. And in 1987, while a free-lance critic (he joined the museum in 1990),





ABOVE Curator Robert Storr in his office at work on the catalogue. **BELOW** A self-portrait bubble-wrapped for shipping.

Storr had co-authored a book on Close with independent curator Lisa Lyons.

But Close chose the Met, unable, he says, to resist the opportunity of showing his work in its skylit Beaux Arts galleries. Arranged so that each room opens onto the next, the galleries would provide long views of his portraits, which read differently depending on the viewer's distance from them. And it meant, as he puts it, that "you would fall out of the exhibition into the European paintings galleries. I thought that would have provided an interesting context in which to see the work."

Nan Rosenthal, curatorial consultant to the museum's department of 20th-century art, had worked on the show for two-and-a-half years, receiving verbal commitments from lenders for the most important works. But just before Christmas 1995, the project unraveled. According to Close, the Met moved the retrospective to the second-floor Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Galleries, which he believed were too small. Met officials, denying that they had ever promised a specific location for the exhibition, defended the choice on the grounds of the Cantor galleries' proximity to the 20th-century galleries. Deciding that having no show was better than having the one the Met was now offering him, Close withdrew.

As soon as news about the cancellation began to circulate, Varnedoe telephoned and again invited Close to the Modern. This time he accepted. "I feel extremely fortunate to have been able to resurrect this project," Close says. "There are not many times in your life when you have a chance to get something back." Close's second chance even came with a bonus: the show would be mounted in the third-floor permanent-collection galleries, which offered nearly 12,000 square feet of space, as opposed to the Met's 9,000. Moreover, Deborah Wye, chief curator of the department of prints and illustrated books—and a former student of Close's at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, in the mid-1960s—would stage a separate exhibition of the artist's works on paper. "It was sort of like coming home again," Close says of the team assigned to do the show.

The Modern scheduled the exhibition for February 1998, six months after the Met's would have opened. This gave Storr just two short years for a project that routinely takes three or more. "Chuck already had the momentum going," says Storr. "It was much better just to go ahead and do it." Given the short deadline, the curators' familiarity with Close's work helped, as did the artist's limited oeuvre. Last year the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum needed three separate locations for its retrospective of the highly prolific Robert Rauschenberg. By contrast, Close, who spends about four months on a single painting, has produced only 60 to 70 canvases and 100 drawings and prints during his 30-year career, a fact that made compiling a checklist much simpler. "The obvious pieces are the obvious pieces," says Close.

Since he was already so familiar with the work, Storr was able to focus quickly on other matters. "We were dealing with the tough stuff almost immediately," he says. For example, Storr and Close began developing a wish list of works to be included. Because Close is the kind of artist Storr describes as "hands-on," he has played a more central role than other retrospective subjects in selecting work and deciding how it should be hung. In 1995 Bruce Nauman, for instance, was happy just to be mailed installation maps and models and to show up for the opening party. And with Robert Ryman's show in 1993, Storr remembers, "we barely talked. We put things up, I shrugged, he nodded. We were working together like musicians." Close pushed for including more work than was finally selected. "Chuck is a 'more is more' person, and I'm more mini-

mal," says Storr. Though he describes the collaboration with Close as very friendly, Storr believes his rigorous "editing" was critical to a successful retrospective. "The function of a good curator is to read [the artists'] lives back to them in an interesting way."

Once a checklist was negotiated, lenders had to be tracked down and courted. Because 75 percent of Close's work is in public collections, securing loans was somewhat easier than it is with artists whose work is mainly in private hands. Even so, temporary trades had to be arranged—our Picasso for your Close, as it were—and both public and private lenders had to be persuaded to honor the year-and-a-half traveling schedule. Close confesses that the shipping also makes him nervous. "You have visions of a plane going down with all the work on it," he says. "But if the work isn't seen, it doesn't live."

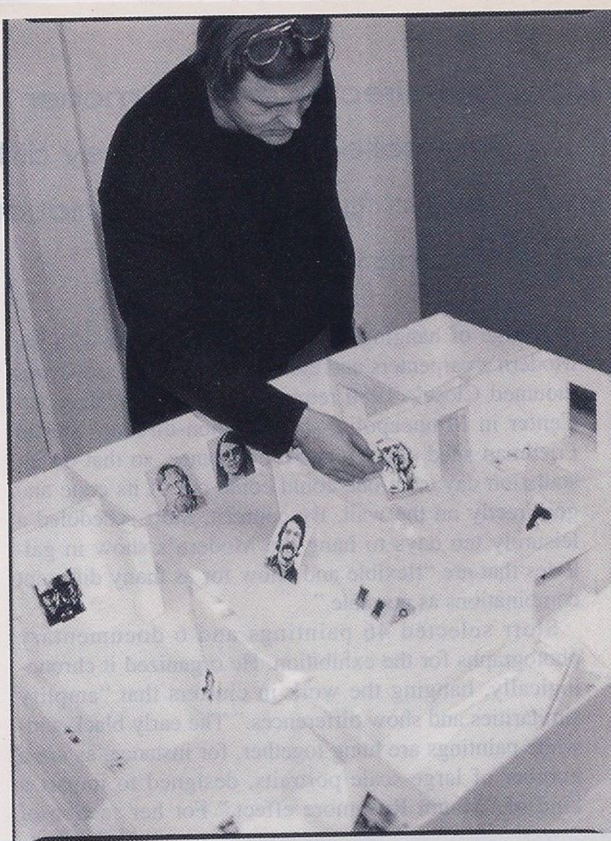
Sometimes Arne Glimcher, Close's dealer at PaceWildenstein, was pressed into service, occasionally swaying reluctant lenders with loans from his personal collection; one collector will be living with a Roy Lichtenstein while his Close travels. Glimcher also warned balky collectors that if they didn't lend, in future he might not offer them the best paintings. "My responsibility is to the artist and to the work," he says. Finally, Close himself was called on to persuade a few collectors. "It can get very nerve-racking," Storr admits. One collector, whom Storr would not identify, failed to return repeated phone calls and letters. The Modern later saw his collection sold at auction—including the Close it had requested. The picture never made it into the show.

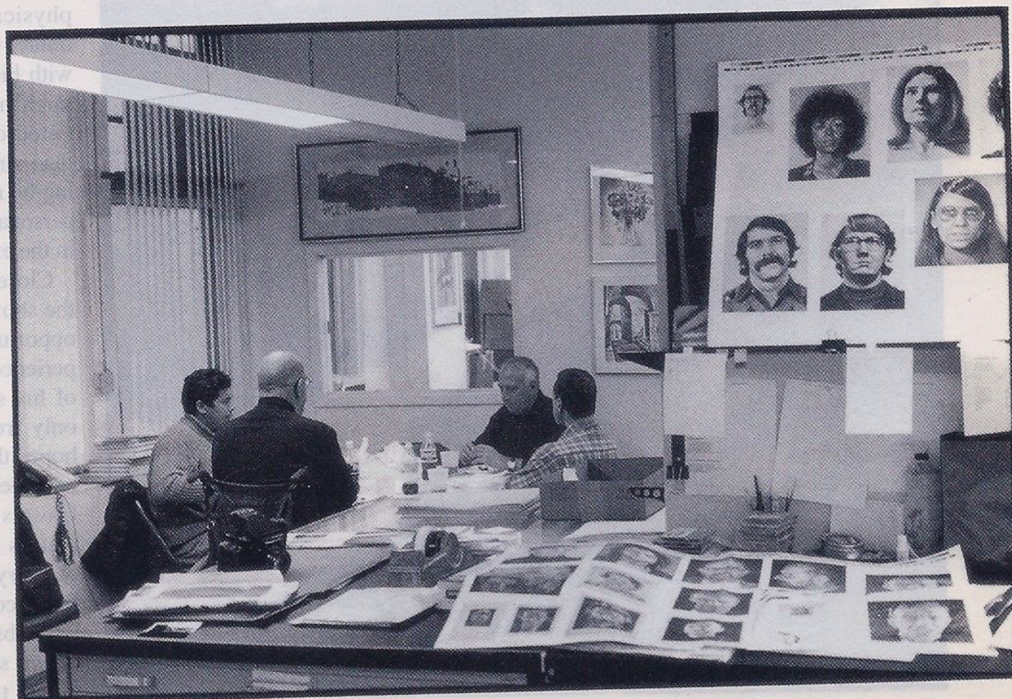
When a major retrospective is announced, other museums quickly begin lobbying for a place on the show's itinerary. "Three or four institutions called to ask if I would use my influence to have it come there," says Glimcher. In this case, Close and Storr visited the venues that, by summer 1997, had "won"—the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, the Seattle Art Museum, and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C.—to ensure that their gallery spaces would be suitable and that schedules would jibe. Finally, contracts and fees had to be negotiated. "The stars have to be just right for a show to come to your institution," says Neal Benezra, the Hirshhorn's assistant director of art and public programs.

Even as the work was being solicited and venues weighed, Storr and Close began their collaboration on the catalogue—securing transparencies, deciding on printing techniques, and putting together a biography and a chronology of the artist's career. Last summer, Storr and Wye wrote their essays (and Storr edited his interview with the artist) for a fall printing deadline, and Varnedoe, whose participation in the show was canceled due to health problems, contributed an appreciation. "A good catalogue is almost like a second exhibition," Storr says. "If a catalogue is not well conceived, it can do harm to the exhibition."

In addition, myriad nuts-and-bolts details demanded attention: fund-raising (spearheaded in this case by Modern trustee and Close collector Michael Ovitz), merchandising, educational materials, an audioguide conversation between Storr and Close, the development of press materials, and opening parties and dinners—these last with their countless social and political implications.

In mid-1997, Storr began roughing out his installation of the show, using a foam-core model to simulate the space. A onetime art handler who enjoys what he describes as the "partly architectural, partly curatorial"





ABOVE Storr with the model he used to rough out the installation. **BELOW** Close (with back to camera) and colleagues take a break during work on the catalogue.

PaceWildenstein director Arne Glimcher warned unwilling collectors that if they didn't lend to the show, in future he might not offer them the best paintings

challenge of hanging a show, Storr consulted with the Modern's carpenters and electricians. When Lisa Lyons mounted Close's 1980 retrospective at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, she and then-director Martin Friedman sited every picture in advance, so that on installation day each one could come out of its crate and go directly on the wall. By contrast, Storr scheduled a leisurely ten days to hang the Modern's show in galleries that are "flexible and allow for as many different combinations as possible."

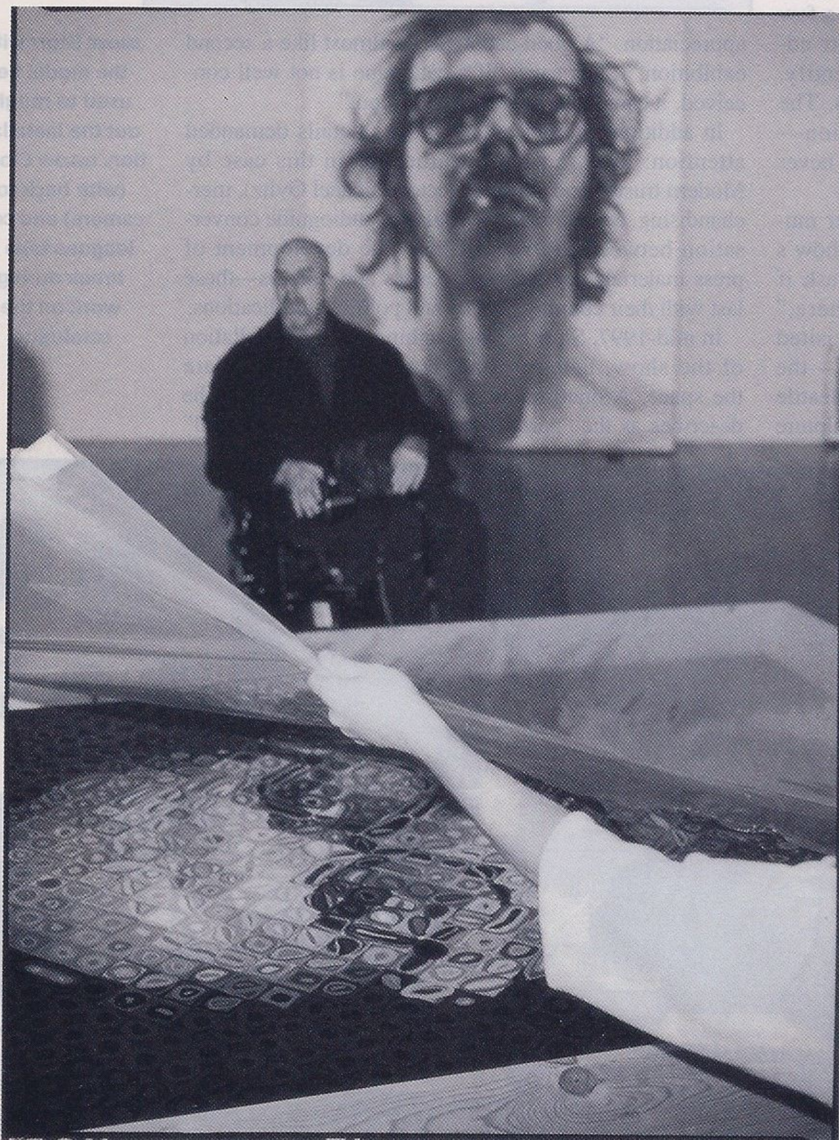
Storr selected 46 paintings and 6 documentary photographs for the exhibition. He organized it chronologically, hanging the work in clusters that "amplify similarities and show differences." The early black-and-white paintings are hung together, for instance, as are a number of large-scale portraits, designed to impart a kind of "Mount Rushmore effect." For her section of the show, Wye arranged 37 works on paper around 6 subjects—Alex Katz, Philip Glass, Close's wife, Leslie, and daughter, Georgia, sculptor Keith Hollingworth, and Lucas Samaras—to highlight Close's techniques and work strategies. Storr's immersion in the last decade's work convinced him that the artist was "reconnecting with gestural painting" in a new way. "The later work is more rigorous than many people think, but there is room for more flourishes than there was before," he says.

For both Close and Storr, it was important that the final gallery leave some "loose ends" exposed. They accomplished this goal by including four new paintings that haven't been exhibited before: a self-portrait and likenesses of painters Mark Greenwald, Paul Cadmus, and Rauschenberg. Cropped in tightly with the grid turned on a 45-degree angle—appropriate, Close says, for the diagonal lines of the middle-aged face—the new paintings are intense and commanding, even unnerving, with what the artist describes as their "coarser, more complicated sets of marks." Close believes that by concluding a retrospective with avenues that have yet to be fully explored, an artist can avoid the post-opening realization that "This is the first day of the rest of your life. Now what?" As New Museum of Contemporary Art director Marcia Tucker notes, "A retrospective can be deadening to an artist. It implies evolution or progress, both of which are antithetical to the way artists think." For this reason, Storr has chosen not to use the term "retrospective" in the title of the show. "Here, we're watching an artist in mid-flight," he maintains.

THAT CLOSE REMAINS IN "MID-FLIGHT" after the debilitating effects of his injury is an achievement in itself. The painter spent months at Manhattan's Rusk Institute of Rehabilitation enduring eight hours a day of physical therapy—treatments that continue today. Close's wife, Leslie, "had a lot to do with his comeback," says painter Robert Cottingham, one of Close's best friends. "She insisted on his getting a studio at Rusk, rather than simply stringing beads." The first painting he made there, *Alex II*, remains in Close's personal collection and has a prominent place in the exhibition.

Close says he is particularly delighted that the show will allow thousands of viewers the opportunity to see his work in person, to experience its "physicality" and scale. Because of his slender output, many people know it only from reproductions. For his part, Storr hopes that his installation will allow viewers to understand "the whys and wherefores" of Close's work without wall text. He believes that its figurative character provides a "point of entry" for the general public "to grasp a lot of concepts they wouldn't be sympathetic to in abstract work."

The show will also be an opportunity for Close to reacquaint himself with his own



With the pivotal *Big Self-Portrait*, 1967–68, in the background, Close oversees the unpacking of a more recent self-portrait.

paintings. "There are some that I will not have seen since I painted them. It's like a family reunion," he says. (For that very reason, though, he worries that sitters whose portraits aren't included—or those who have been photographed but not yet painted—will feel excluded.) Spending time with his work in the galleries before opening hours—as Jasper Johns did during his 1996 retrospective at the Modern—"gives me a chance to see it fresh." At his 1994 retrospective in Baden-Baden, Germany, Close remembers that the circular design of the galleries allowed him to stand in one spot and see the earliest and the latest paintings simultaneously. "I was frankly concerned about whether it would look like the same guy was making the work," he confesses. "But I was pleased. I thought, 'This looks reasonable. This looks like a career.'" Seeing his pictures hanging together for the first time at the Modern provides additional insights: to his satisfaction, Close found that the black-and-white paintings in the first gallery looked "new" and "very confrontational."

Still, this latest overview came with significant costs. Not only did its five-plus years of preparation distract him from studio work, they bred a peculiar kind of narcissism that he says he had to resist. "It's very nice to have people tell you your work matters to them," he says. "But you get tired of me, me, I, I." Close also bemoans the "prerecorded answers" he finds himself resorting to after innumerable interviews.

And while the opening may seem to outsiders like the conclusion of a long and challenging project, both Storr and Close are aware that it is merely the beginning of another period of planning and installing as the show travels to its other venues. "Chuck and I are already exchanging information," says Lucinda Barnes, co-head of the curatorial department at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art. Close plans to be as involved with the installation at other museums as he was at the Modern. "I was very surprised last time at how different the work looked at each venue," he says of his 1980 Walker Art Center exhibition and tour.

"This certainly has been fraught with excitement, misery, disappointments, retrievals," Glimcher says. "It wreaks havoc on the artist's mind." Former Walker director Friedman believes that Close is better equipped than most artists to survive the ravages of a retrospective. "He's going to do just fine," Friedman says. "He has a personal equilibrium that matches the equilibrium in his work."

After closing in New York on May 26, "Chuck Close" opens at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, on June 20; the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., on October 15; and the Seattle Art Museum on February 18, 1999. ■

Gail Gregg is a New York–based writer and painter.

ABOVE Unlike some curators who determine the location of every work in advance, Storr kept moving things around during the ten days it took to install the show. BELOW Close spent time alone with his work in the galleries, eager for the "chance to see it fresh."