

## LAUNCHING A CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM

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*Los Angeles Times (1923-Current File)*; Sep 7, 1980;

ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Los Angeles Times (1881-1988)

pg. 01

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BY BARBARA ISENBERG

Over at the National Oil Building downtown, in an unmarked office on the sixth floor, Laurie Albert is researching, answering phones and waiting for something to happen. The young art historian took a "flunky" job with the proposed Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), she says. "because there may be no guarantees, but it's a fantastic opportunity."

Nurturing that fantastic opportunity are people like arts advocate Marcia Weisman, building executive Eli Broad, federal appellate judge William Norris, philanthropist Max Palevsky and prominent local ar-

tists determined to create a world-renowned museum of post-World War II art. The museum's very start is being compared by its backers to the launching of New York's famed Museum of Modern Art.

Never mind that ground-breaking on Bunker Hill may still be two years away. Never mind that the only collection in hand thus far consists of four paintings donated by real estate investor Robert Rowan. Since the appointment last month of internationally heralded museum executive Pontus Hulten as director, few people now doubt the museum will happen.

Just the dream of a tiny committee

working out of Mayor Tom Bradley's office 15 months ago, the private facility already has secured promises of housing, leadership and money. The museum's concerns these days, in fact, appear less in attracting money and talent than in deciding when and how to announce all the money and talent it's attracting.

Hulten, currently founding director of Paris' Musee National d'Art Moderne of the Centre Georges Pompidou (Beaubourg), will visit Los Angeles regularly until his Paris contract expires in September, 1981. Newly named deputy director

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# LAUNCHING L.A.'S NEW ART MUSEUM

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Richard Koshalek, currently director of the Hudson River Museum in New York's Westchester County, will arrive on Dec. 1. An architect should be selected by the end of next month and museum chairman Eli Broad is expected to announce a new trustee from the corporate community during an address to Town Hall on Tuesday.

Still to be announced, adds director of development Andrea Van de Kamp, is \$2.6 million in gifts, including two \$1-million gifts from corporations and two smaller gifts from individuals. Earlier, Broad, Palevsky and the Atlantic Richfield Foundation each donated \$1 million to the new museum—making a total of \$5.6-million—and Broad hopes to raise the rest of the required \$10 million endowment six months ahead of time.

Even Broad is staggered by its progress: "If someone had told me a year ago that today we'd have the commitment of the building, more than half our endowment goal, support from the downtown business community and a director like Pontus Hulten, I would have had trouble believing it."

It is, say many people, about time. Institutional interest in contemporary art has only recently begun keeping pace with Los Angeles' emergence as a top practicing art center. Artists, dealers, collectors and critics have long complained that we miss important traveling exhibitions, lack major facilities to mount continual contemporary shows and are losing important collections because of inadequate local housing for them.

The County Museum of Art last year received a \$3-million matching gift from Atlantic Richfield Co. toward a new contemporary art building, and there are modern art institutions in such neighboring cities as Newport Beach. Yet six years after the Pasadena Museum of Modern Art changed hands and emphasis, Los Angeles remains one of few major U.S. cities with no separate museum collection highlighting art of our time.

So it should come as no surprise that an Artists Advisory Committee, keenly attuned to the problem and excited by MOCA's potential, has been meeting weekly for nearly a year. Artists sit on most trustee committees, and artist Sam Francis says artist involvement is one of the reasons his friend Hulten was attracted to the directorship.

"Our position is very simple," explains artist Robert Irwin, one of the museum's seven founding trustees. "This may be the last real opportunity we have for a contemporary art museum in a city which has the second largest population of contemporary artists in the world."

Many people have tried to start and sustain such a museum but few have tried harder and longer than Marcia Weisman. Weisman, sister of industrialist Norton Simon, was called the "inspiration" behind the whole MOCA project by MOCA President Norris.

She and her husband Frederick have tried to establish a private art museum here since the mid-'60s. They helped set up a short-lived facility in a Beverly Hills office building and launch both the

County Museum of Art's Contemporary Art Council and the Fellows of the Pasadena Museum of Modern Art. Their plans to set up an art complex in Venice in 1978 to house their collection were denied approval by the California Coastal Commission.

When Mayor Bradley expressed interest last year in encouraging a private modern art museum, offering his office and backing, Mrs. Weisman raced through town amassing support from artists, dealers and civic leaders. By the time the Mayor's Museum Advisory Committee held its second meeting on May 23, 1979, she had a stack of 38 letters and telegrams from not just the local art community but such people as Gov. Jerry Brown, Washington arts leader Joan Mondale, and Music Center Chairman Mrs. Norman Chandler.

In a stroke of good timing, the mayor's committee came to the attention of the city's Community Redevelopment Agency just as it was about to send its last chunk of Bunker Hill redevelopment out for bidding. A few meetings later, the CRA and museum group decided Bunker Hill was a fine place for a museum, and developers of the 11.2-acre site were required to include a museum of at least 100,000 square feet in their proposals.

CRA senior deputy administrator Don Cosgrove confirms that both Bunker Hill Associates and Maguire Partners, Inc., the two finalists in the competition, signed additional agreements with the museum prior to the award. Cadillac Fairview/California, Inc.; Goldrich, Kest and Associates and Shapell Government Housing, Inc., the three firms comprising eventual bid-winner Bunker Hill Associ-

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—ARTIST ROBERT IRWIN

ates, agreed in their contract to provide \$16 million for construction costs.

Whether the consortium also will contribute additional funds for operating costs—estimated at about \$2 million annually—is apparently still being negotiated, and Cadillac Fairview/California president Martin Seaton refused to discuss the matter altogether. Shapell president Elliott Maltzman said he didn't know of any definite commitments toward operating costs, but noted "They're hard negotiators. They negotiated with us hard and long before the final award."

The eight-page agreement also calls for a free-standing structure (not provided in the original Bunker Hill Associates proposal) and the museum's selection of its own architect to work with Arthur Erickson, the developer's coordinating architect. Building committee head Palevsky says the competition is now down to three architects from the East Coast, one from Japan and one from England. He expects an architect to be selected by the end of October.

The museum's selection of an architect—and that architect's work—must please not just Erickson but the CRA. Says CRA executive Cosgrove: "We want to make sure that everyone continues to recognize that this is not an isolated building

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William Norris

located out in a cornfield."

Rather, it is located downtown, an area now undergoing a renaissance. There reportedly has been more than \$1 billion of new construction downtown the past 12 years, and downtown's working population is estimated at more than 200,000.

The museum will both contribute to and profit from downtown's cultural resurgence as well. The Bunker Hill redevelopment also calls for a dance gallery and movie theaters, and the Music Center is itself considering the addition of new

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Marcia Weisman

Max Palevsky

museum hopes to locate and set up a joint office/exhibition space sometime early next year.

Hulten and Koshalek also have had experience in running museums under construction. For example, during the 2½ years the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis was being rebuilt on its old site, Koshalek and Martin Friedman ran what they called a "guerrilla museum." They did shows around the city, setting up large scale sculptures in department store auditoriums, gas station parking lots, vacant lots, even abandoned buildings, recalls Koshalek.

Noting that his friend Hulten also was a museum "orphan"—at both Stockholm's Moderna Museet and Paris' Beaubourg—Koshalek implies that Hulten would agree with his feelings that a museum "must not build a wall around itself but reach out and be accessible to the public." The Hudson River Museum, he notes, not only schedules its lectures—by such people as Germaine Greer and Thomas Hoving—in shopping centers and commercial theaters but broadcasts them live on prime time radio to reach wider audiences.

Koshalek, who MOCA's Norris says he feels is as qualified to be director as de-

buildings. Michael Newton, president of the Music Center's Performing Arts Council, considers the proximity of MOCA a "chance to create a real cultural center for this city."

An estimated 200 to 500 visual artists already live downtown, and commercial art galleries have begun either moving to or opening in the central city. More should follow the museum: A New Yorker profile of Paris' Beaubourg Museum and director Hulten noted that not only did art galleries, boutiques and cafes emerge around that Parisian museum, but also that a nearby butcher shop became the Boucherie du Musee.

Yet until it opens in 1983 or 1984 the museum will be an institution without a building downtown or anywhere else. That provides Hulten and Koshalek not only with the chance of participating in the facility's design and construction but in building the audiences to fill it.

Reached in Paris and Yonkers, respectively, Hulten and Koshalek each spoke of the possibility of using temporary exhibition space before the museum's opening. Both men indicate any such temporary space would also be in the downtown area, and MOCA administrative officer Sherri Geldin says the



Eli Broad



Robert A. Rowan

puty director, indicates new equally creative on art programs. Back in 1978, the Hudson River Museum commissioned New York artist Red Grooms to create its bookstore. Because it became part of the permanent collection, notes Koshalek, the bookstore was able to get grant money otherwise unavailable for capital improvements. And, he says with a chuckle, it received national attention.

**M**OCA has only until next July to come up with \$10 million in endowment money, or, explains Norris, "the developer is under no obligation to proceed. And I think that makes sense. I don't think we should expect the developer to invest \$16 million or more in a museum if the community isn't prepared to support it."

Neither Norris nor anyone else associated with the museum expects any trouble raising the money, however, and Broad figures they may even meet the requirement by year-end. Asked if it's difficult raising money in the middle of a recession, Norris simply shrugs his shoulders. "It hasn't mattered so far."

Attorney Richard Sherwood, chairman of the County Museum of Art, feels the greater problem may be raising additional funds to pay operating costs once the museum opens. "We know from our own experience that maintenance is very expensive," says Sherwood. "We will get more than \$4 million from the county this year for operations and maintenance, and that's at least \$2 million short of our needs. The private sector has to supplement our operating costs as well as generate all the money for acquisitions."

Sherwood is not concerned, however, about intermuseum rivalry for funds. He says that when people worry about competition for money, they forget how, in the '60s, money was raised for KCET, the Music Center and the County Museum here at about the same time. "Each was a resounding success," says Sherwood, "and the fund raising then was with both a smaller base of contributors and an uncharted sea."

County Museum of Art executives seem pleased that the new museum will specialize in post-World War II art—"It puts both our programs in perspective," says director Earl Powell—and former museum chairman Dr. Franklin Murphy concedes there's a limit to what the County Museum can take on in terms of

art being made today. The new museum, adds Murphy, "will extend the spectrum of the museum establishment in Los Angeles."

L.A. based artists will like that. Artist Alexis Smith says that serious, ambitious artists have long had to choose between continuing their work here and opting for New York's more extensive support structure of museums, galleries, art press and public interest.

"There have been reasons for us to stay here, but it's not an easy decision," says Smith, a member of the Artists Advisory Committee. "A lot of people gave up a lot of goodies, in terms of both recognition and support, to stay here."

While trustees indicate it will be up to Hulten and Koshalek to set policy for museum exhibitions, collections and emphasis, most people expect there will be attention paid to California artists. Trustee Marcia Weisman notes Californians have been prevalent in both public and private European collections, while chairman Broad says, "You can't talk about contemporary art without talking about California. Even if your museum is located in Chicago or Dusseldorf."

**T**alks with MOCA trustees indicate that the collection itself will be the last piece to fall in place. "That doesn't mean the art isn't important," says Norris, "but in terms of priorities, we've been focusing on the building, endowment, and director. And our thinking is that if we have the building, the endowment and this terrific director and deputy director, and we begin to realize the promise of this museum, it attracts the art."

If nothing else, the promise of the museum should at least check the flow of art away from Los Angeles. New York art dealer Irving Blum notes both the Arensberg and Hirschhorn collections were lost to Los Angeles because of the lack of museum facilities, and many people have been worried that other important contemporary collections would follow suit. Both Robert Rowan and Marcia Weisman have served on the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art board—Weisman still does—and begun donating art to that institution.

As the Weisman collection has often been spoken of as central to MOCA's future collections, many observers have expressed concern that the Weismans reportedly are getting a divorce. Trust-

tees say both Weismans have continued to be supportive of the museum, and Norris says, "It continues to be my expectation that they'll give their collection to this museum."

While not confirming Norris' expectation, neither Weisman challenged him either. Industrialist Frederick Weisman said, "Los Angeles is my home and Marcia's home. I think that I would like to see our collection remain intact and like to see it remaining in Los Angeles. If this museum materializes, it would be the greatest thing that could happen to Los Angeles." Marcia Weisman, interviewed separately, said "I agree with his sentiments 100%."

Trustee Robert Rowan meanwhile confirms that he has given the museum title to four major paintings—very large canvases by Morris Louis, Frank Stella, Ron Davis and Jules Olitski—and added a codicil to his will granting "a large part of my artwork" to the museum. A former chairman of the Pasadena Museum of Modern Art's board of trustees, 70-year-old Rowan generally was considered the primary donor to that institution prior to its takeover by Norton Simon and Simon's subsequent emphasis on the great masters, impressionists and other artworks.

No other collector queried has yet made any formal commitment to donate art to the new museum, and many say they feel donations at this time would be premature. But most leave the door open. Dealer Blum, for example, says he's prepared "to make quite an extraordinary gift once I see real signs that there's a community-supported program."

When talking of possible gifts to the permanent collections, trustees and artists alike speak of the East Coast connections that Kolashek has made and, more significantly, the international network that Hulten has built. Says trustee Dr. Leon Banks, a pediatrician and civic leader: "The appointment of Hulten immediately puts us in the international art ballgame."

Besides, says Broad, "there are a large number of Eastern and Midwestern collectors who can't find wall-space available in Eastern and Midwestern collections."

"The museum can also profit from loans of artworks, adds collector Gifford Phillips, another pivotal figure at the old Pasadena Museum of Modern Art. Reached by phone in Santa Fe, Phillips says he and wife Joann are talking about loaning MOCA part of their collection: "If the museum is successful in mounting an exhibition program, and successful in borrowing, I think it should be able to acquire, through both purchases and gifts, an important collection."

So does Pontus Hulten: "If we were going back to Cubism and wanted a good collection of Matisse, Picasso, Braque or Leger, it would be almost impossible," says Hulten. "But we're talking about art of the last 30 years."

Yet even contemporary art is relatively expensive. "One Jasper Johns painting today is being speculated about in New York at \$800,000," says dealer Blum, "and that's by a living artist. A Morris Louis can run upwards of \$250,000. How do you put together 50 paintings that are at that level or higher?"

Hulten says putting together any art collection is difficult. Henry Hopkins, director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, says that "having the money to acquire works of art in a sufficient amount to be meaningful is the biggest

problem of West Coast museums. We all have to rely more heavily on gifts than purchases."

While interest on Arco's \$1-million endowment gift to the museum here is earmarked for art acquisitions, trustees at MOCA indicate they, too, will be concentrating initially on gifts. And, suggests Hopkins, because of its concentration in art of its time, MOCA may stimulate current collecting which can eventually turn into gifts.

Contemporary art already is well-represented in many local collections, and both dealers and artists expect the new museum will simultaneously encourage existing collectors to surface and stimulate new collectors. "It shouldn't be tough to get art if the museum becomes a real swinging place," observes local dealer Herbert Palmer, "and donating to it becomes the 'in' thing to do."

That's what they're all hoping for. Many people see MOCA as a second chance to rekindle the spirit of the old Pasadena museum, but with a debt-free building, a more central location and greater public interest. Phillips notes that Mayor Bradley's support gives MOCA status as a community museum, while Rowan says, "What was next to impossible then is less difficult now. Everything has changed, including the public's attitude toward contemporary art."

**N**egotiations are continuing between Bunker Hill developers and the CRA toward a final agreement, a process which is expected to take six months, but nobody connected with the urban renewal project expects it to fall through. And unless the museum fails to reach its \$10 million endowment goal, the museum should go ahead as planned.

The museum, meanwhile, is expanding its founding board, and Broad's Town Hall address this week should reveal the name of the newest MOCA trustee, "the chairman of a major downtown-based California corporation." Several other new trustees will be elected at their Sept. 24 meeting, adds Broad, who expects to have a board of 25 by next spring.

Asked what comes next, Broad speaks of launching a membership drive, soliciting art for the permanent collection and organizing "all the hundreds of people who want to be involved as volunteers and donors." And, he says, he's already working on ways business can be involved in sponsoring major exhibitions or extra museum hours as they have at other museums.

There also is the potential for cooperative programs between museums. San Francisco's Henry Hopkins talks, for example, of the possibility of developing and sharing exhibitions between the two institutions. And here at home, County Museum director Powell calls it an exciting time for Los Angeles, noting that the city "is going to have two facilities that are complementary but differently programmed."

There are, adds County Museum chairman Sherwood, at least 20 cities here and abroad "that have general museums with important modern programs and separate museums devoted to modern art. If Minneapolis, Chicago, Boston, Stockholm and London can do it, so can we. Los Angeles ought to be able to both walk and chew gum at the same time." □