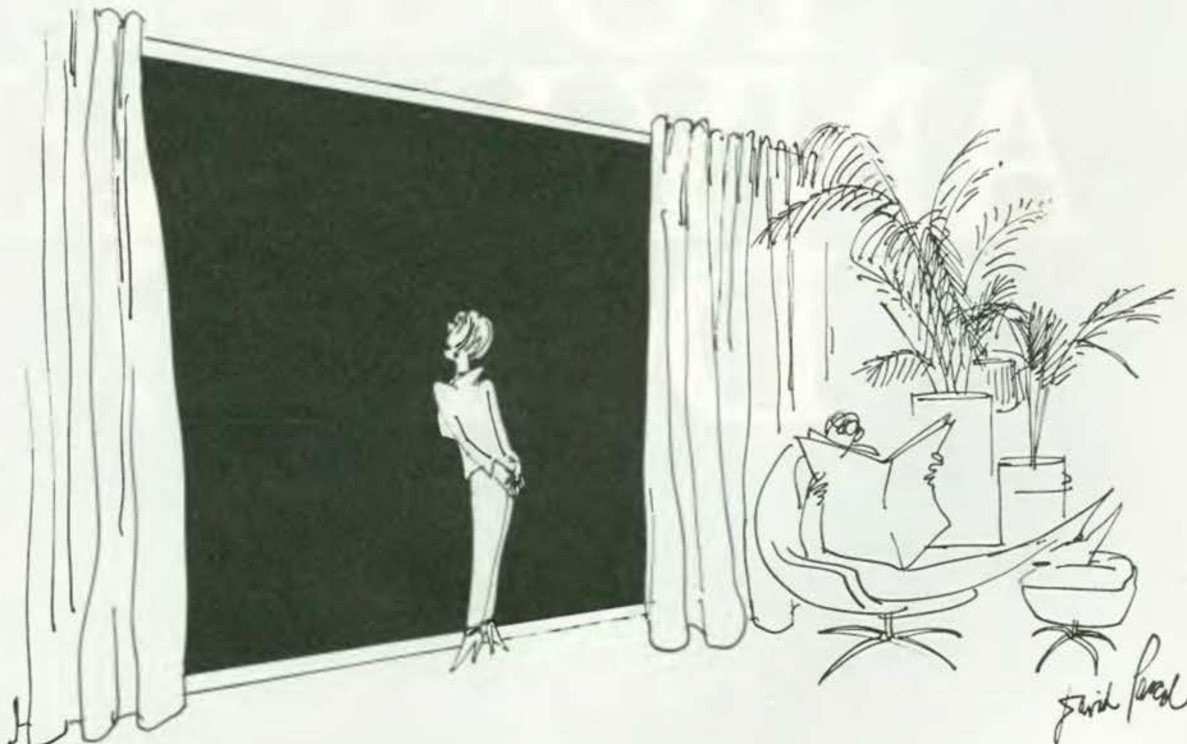
THE ART WORLD

The Camel in the Tent

LOS ANGELES has been on the verge of becoming a major contemporary-art center for as long as anybody there can remember, or about twenty-five years. The nation's third-largest city has, or has had at one time or another, the four basic ingredients for eminence in this field: (1) An ambitious community of artists—the largest outside New York, in fact. (2) A growing number of wealthy collectors. (3) Several energetic and resourceful galleries. And (4) a local museum willing to devote considerable attention to (1) and (2). For a brief period in the nineteen-sixties, a lot of people in New York thought that the West Coast breakthrough had actually occurred. Both the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Pasadena Art Museum (later the Pasadena Museum of Modern Art) were putting on important contemporary shows. Two dealers, Irving Blum and Nicholas Wilder, were making valiant efforts to dent the conservative armor of California collectors, and several New York galleries were giving serious thought to opening Los Angeles branches. A glossy, highbrow magazine called *Artforum*, which moved from San Francisco to Los Angeles in 1965, provided what some analysts consider a fifth requirement for a true art scene, although the effects of glossy, highbrow criticism on contemporary art are debatable. The California artists, at any rate, had begun to feel that nirvana was near, and this made their disappointment all the keener when several of the ingredients evaporated. In 1967, *Artforum* moved to New York. Irving Blum closed up shop a few years later. The Los Angeles County Museum, after firing its director and losing two key curators in the late sixties, ceased to devote much attention to contemporary art, and the Pasadena Museum, faced with bankruptcy, turned for fiscal salvation to Norton Simon, the millionaire collector, who during the next few years relegated its modern works to the basement (many had been donated by Los Angeles artists), hung his own Old Masters and Impressionists on the walls, and changed the institution's name to the Norton Simon Museum of Art. The loss of the Pasadena Museum came as an especially heavy blow to the local artists. Museum support is crucial, of course, because museums give courage to collectors, and vice versa. New York has three museums that concentrate largely on modern art. San Francisco, a small town compared with New York or Los Angeles, boasts an excellent, well-run modern museum, and outposts such as La Jolla and Long Beach have established their own. In view of past disappointments and frustrations, then, a recently announced plan to build a twenty-million-dollar Museum of Contemporary Art in downtown Los Angeles has excited a great deal of interest. The museum, which is already being referred to as MOCA, promises to be unusual in several respects, not the least of which is that it may be the first museum whose development has been influenced at every stage—some say dominated—by artists.

The initial push for a new museum came from Marcia Weisman, whose brother is Norton Simon. Some friends detect a strain of sibling rivalry in Mrs. Weisman's devotion to postwar American art; her brother's preference for Impressionism and earlier periods is well known. In any case, after the Pasadena Museum became the Norton Simon Museum, Marcia Weisman and her husband, Frederick Weisman, made a number of efforts to start something in its place. Mrs. Weisman helped to find rent-free space for the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, or LAICA—a sort of informal arena for activities by younger artists, which opened in 1974 and is still in business. LAICA did not fill the museum gap, though, and two other Weisman-sponsored museum ventures failed to take hold. One night in 1978, Marcia Weisman found herself seated next to the mayor of Los Angeles, Tom Bradley, at a political dinner party. "Don't you think it's time we had a museum of modern art in this town?" she asked him, and then, as she recalls it, she just started "dreaming off" about such an institution and what it could mean to the city's cultural well-being; she let it be understood that the Weismans' collection of contemporary art, generally considered one of the West Coast's finest, might become a prime asset of the museum. Like most successful politicians, Bradley had no public record as an art lover. He must have been impressed, however, for he called Mrs. Weisman a week or so later to talk more about the idea. Bradley's good



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friend William A. Norris, a Los Angeles lawyer whose wife is a private art consultant, also came to his office at about this time to discuss the city's need for a museum of modern art. The upshot was that in the spring of 1979 Bradley appointed a Mayor's Museum Advisory Committee to look into the matter and to investigate possible sites. This ten-member committee, organized by Norris, included Mrs. Weisman; Betye Monell Burton, a former trustee of the Pasadena Museum; and Gary Familian, a real-estate executive and a collector—all of whom later became members of the museum's board of trustees. The Weismans invited several artists to a meeting at their house in Beverly Hills to discuss the museum project while the Mayor's Committee was being set up. Norris, who was also there, remembers that Robert Irwin, a fifty-two-year-old artist who has lived in Los Angeles all his life, stood at the back of the room and asked all the right questions.

An article on the Mayor's Museum Advisory Committee appeared in the Los Angeles *Times* on June 9, 1979. A few days later, Norris got a letter from the Community Redevelopment Agency of the City of Los Angeles expressing support for the museum project and offering to help find a suitable building site in the downtown business district. As the administrative agency for a series of downtown urban-renewal projects, the C.R.A. was then preparing to take bids for the development of nearly nine acres in the sector known as Bunker Hill—a blighted area that had been undergoing sporadic redevelopment for about twenty years. The development pace in the downtown business district had quickened when the Hyatt Regency hotel went up in the mid-seventies, followed by the Atlantic Richfield Company's twin office towers and a spate of apartment buildings. Just to the north of Bunker Hill, the Music Center of Los Angeles County had been demonstrating since it opened, in 1964, that downtown was an actual place, nestled cozily in the shadows of three freeways. Was it possible that Los Angeles, often referred to as a hundred suburbs in search of a city, was finally going to acquire a real, throbbing downtown heart—just as other American cities were losing theirs?

The C.R.A. had certain stipulations for commercial developers, one of which was that one and a half per cent of the construction budget for each

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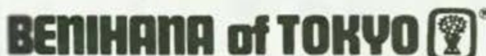

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new building be set aside for a work or works of art. The Bunker Hill plot (which had been redrawn so that it comprised a little more than eleven acres) was being offered as a single package for residential and commercial development. The total budget would run over a billion dollars. When the C.R.A. administrators saw the *Times* article on the Mayor's Museum Advisory Committee, they came up, entirely on their own, with a new idea. Instead of spending one and a half per cent of each building's budget on art, why not take one and a half per cent of the entire project budget and use it to build a museum of contemporary art? The C.R.A. people wrote to Norris. "That's why this museum is happening today," Norris told me recently. The deal worked out in negotiations over the next six months was that the project developer, who had yet to be selected, must agree to put up a museum building with approximately a hundred thousand square feet of interior space (roughly the equivalent of the Whitney Museum's); adjoining land was to be reserved for a sculpture garden. The total cost of museum and garden, to be absorbed mainly by the developer, was estimated at twenty million dollars. The museum's trustees, for their part, agreed to raise a permanent endowment of at least ten million dollars. The endowment was expected to generate from thirty-five to forty per cent of the annual operating expenses, with the rest coming from paid admissions, government and foundation grants, and other sources. No city or county funds would be sought—not after Proposition 13. The museum would be a privately owned, nonprofit institution, answerable only to its own board of trustees.

Museum boards in this country are usually made up of businessmen, lawyers, financiers, and other heavy-duty citizens. To a good many museum trustees, asking an artist to serve on the board might seem like inviting the camel into the tent. MOCA's board may have one or two members who feel that way, but, if so, they are keeping it to themselves. The seven members of the founding board, announced last April, were Eli Broad, the chairman, a real-estate and insurance executive and a collector, who inaugurated the endowment drive by pledging a million dollars to the museum; Max Palevsky, an industrialist and a film producer, who also pledged a million; Marcia Weisman; Robert Rowan, an important collector and a former presi-

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dent of the Pasadena Museum of Modern Art; William Norris, who was soon to become a federal judge; Leon O. Banks, a black pediatrician and collector; and Robert Irwin, artist.

By this time, Irwin represented a sizable and highly motivated constituency. Soon after the meeting at the Weismans' house during which Irwin asked the right questions, DeWain Valentine, another well-regarded Los Angeles artist, had organized a meeting of about a hundred and fifty artists in a friend's screening room in Venice to discuss the museum idea. There had been a lot of shouting and a lot of pulling in different directions. Valentine had called another meeting, of about seventy-five artists, a week later, and somehow, against all expectations, a measure of coherent action had been hammered out. This meeting had given birth to the Artists Advisory Council, a group whose number eventually stabilized at about fifteen men and women. "We sat down, buried our axes, and decided what we would have to do," Irwin recalls. Some axes did not stay buried long. Four of the artists on the council came out strongly for a plan whereby the museum itself would be a work of art, with various artists contributing their skills and imagination to its construction. When this idea was shelved, its proponents went home. Irwin nearly quit, too; it seemed highly unlikely to him that the artists would be able to agree on anything. Instead, an hour or so after the meeting broke up he telephoned every member of the council. If the artists wanted to have a say in planning the museum, they had better present a united front, he told them, or they would have only themselves to blame. The fact that they *have* maintained a united front ever since is an indication of how much the museum means to the Los Angeles artists. For the last year and a half, the council has met every Monday night, and it has studied in detail most of the questions involved in planning the museum. In areas where its members felt that their own knowledge was insufficient—architecture and design, museum administration, and fund-raising, among others—they have solicited, and even paid for, professional advice. As a result of this extensive homework, the council has been able to develop specific, thoroughly researched, and cogently summarized recommendations on virtually all the important issues.

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that the artists have taken over the museum, their united-front tactics have certainly had an effect. From the beginning, the artists pressed for a contemporary museum—a museum whose primary focus would be on the most recent aesthetic developments, in the context of art since 1945. Although Irwin and his fellow-artists obviously hoped to see the museum give due recognition to California work, they did not intend to fall into the trap of regionalism. Art is international, and they were determined that the museum be international as well. Last July, the trustees dropped Los Angeles Museum of Modern Art as their working title in favor of the Museum of Contemporary Art—not the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art but the Museum of Contemporary Art. Nobody seems to have decided yet whether it will go on and on being contemporary, and, if so, what will be done about the current period as it fades into history.

Questions of this sort will be decided by the directors, everyone agrees. Early on, the artists on the council decided that what the museum required was two directors—a superstar, widely known in the museum world; and a young, energetic, "grass roots" co-director, who would work closely with the Los Angeles art community. By a strange coincidence, the trustees' search committee for a director, on which several artists, including Irwin, Valentine, and Sam Francis, served, also came to the conclusion that there should be two directors, both curatorial, and the two names they came up with happened to be the two names that topped the council's list: Pontus Hulten, the Swedish-born director of the Centre Pompidou museum, in Paris (Beaubourg), one of the best-known and certainly one of the most controversial museum directors of our day; and Richard Koshalek, the young (thirty-eight) and brilliantly innovative director of the Hudson River Museum, in Yonkers. Both are highly unorthodox museum men, known for taking risks, for putting on exhibitions that challenge existing opinions, and for viewing art in its social, political, and moral context. Both are also known to believe that museums exist, or should exist, primarily for the benefit of contemporary artists.

Sam Francis was delegated by the trustees to sound out Hulten. Francis, an Abstract Expressionist painter whose reputation was established in the nineteen-fifties, when he lived

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mainly in Paris, is one of the two most highly respected California artists of the older generation. (The other, Richard Diebenkorn, has remained aloof from the museum project.) He was one of the four dissidents who more or less withdrew from the Artists Advisory Council when their museum plan was shelved, but by this time he was again closely involved with the project. Francis went to Paris last spring to see Hulten—they are close friends—and found him immediately receptive to the idea of moving to Los Angeles. After nearly eight years at Beaubourg, Hulten felt ready for a change. His contract was up for renewal in 1981. "I like Los Angeles very much," he explained to me recently. "There is something about the spirit there, the way things are not so worn down into tradition. There is also a very nice ocean." Hulten flew to Los Angeles in July for talks with the trustees. Favorable impressions proliferated. Broad, the chairman, asked Hulten about his views on private museums—he had said on at least one occasion that he was profoundly opposed to them. Hulten replied that after eight years at the government-funded Centre Pompidou his views had changed.

Irwin sounded out Richard Koshalek, and found him similarly receptive. After the board had seen and approved of him, the only remaining question was whether Hulten and Koshalek could work together. A meeting between them was arranged in New York for July 23rd. They had lunch at the Sky Club restaurant, on top of the Pan Am building, where Sam Francis joined them. The two museum men found themselves in "total agreement," according to Hulten. From the restaurant, Francis put in a call to Los Angeles, where the board of trustees was meeting at that moment. He conveyed Hulten's and Koshalek's readiness to work together, and the trustees voted on the spot to engage them both—Hulten as director, Koshalek as deputy director and chief curator.

The choice of a museum architect came about in somewhat the same way. Bunker Hill Associates, a consortium of a Canadian firm and two local firms chosen by the C.R.A. to be the developer of the over-all project, had submitted a plan that struck the artists as giving short shrift to the museum. Limitations on the building's height and lateral expansion presented a number of thorny design problems,

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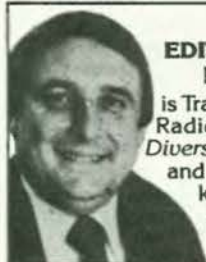

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which would require great ingenuity to solve. In their Monday-night deliberations, the artists agreed that the architect should have three main qualifications: flexibility (meaning that he would be willing to let them share in the design process); a large architectural vocabulary (the absence of a pronounced personal style, or "signature"); and proved skill at solving difficult site problems.

The board's architectural committee consisted of Palevsky, Irwin, Francis (who became the second artist member of the board in October, 1980), and Coy Howard, a local architect, whom the Artists Advisory Council had hired as its consultant. Arthur Erickson, the architect in charge of the whole Bunker Hill project, was also invited to sit in, and, after July 23rd, so were Hulten and Koshalek. The committee drew up a list of about thirty candidates and gradually winnowed it to six. Palevsky favored Richard Meier, one of the currently celebrated young members of an affinity group known as the New York Five. The other candidates were England's James Stirling; Edward Larrabee Barnes, designer of the much admired Walker Art Center, in Minneapolis; Frank Gehry, the local (Los Angeles) hero; the firm of Kevin Roche and John Dinkeloo, designers of the recent additions to the Metropolitan Museum; and Arata Isozaki, a Japanese architect who had never done a building in this country. All six came to Los Angeles to make their presentations. Irwin, Francis, and Howard—and, through them, the Artists Advisory Council—concluded that Isozaki was more open and flexible, had a larger vocabulary, and showed more skill at problem-solving, on the basis of his past work, than any of the others; Palevsky and the rest of the board were similarly impressed. In January, the board announced that Isozaki was their man.

The optimism of the moment has not blinded the Los Angeles artists to the difficulties that remain. Fund-raising is going swimmingly, with seven and a half million dollars of the projected ten-million-dollar endowment already pledged. But will Los Angeles continue to support a contemporary museum whose directors promise a radical program? Hulten and Koshalek are planning an early exhibition devoted to the automobile and its influence on life, culture, and art in Southern California. They have in mind a similar exhibition on the

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The Los Angeles County Museum, meanwhile, has come alive again, under a new director, Earl A. Powell III. Last October, the County Museum, whose municipal support shrank drastically as a result of Proposition 13, launched a capital campaign to raise twenty-seven and a half million dollars. Roughly ten million dollars of this, Powell says, will go to endow a wing for twentieth-century art, which is being built with a three-and-a-half-million-dollar gift from the Atlantic Richfield Company. (The company has pledged a million dollars to MOCA, and its new president, William Kieschnick, has just joined MOCA's board of trustees.) Although the County Museum covers all periods in art, Powell clearly intends to pay closer attention to the contemporary field than his predecessor did, and the two museums will therefore be competing for exhibitions, for works of art, and for money. Irwin and others think that the competition will be good for both.

The question of MOCA's permanent collection is up in the air at present. Marcia and Frederick Weisman are in the process of getting a divorce, and the gift of their collection has become, as they say in museum circles, somewhat problematical. Hulten has been to see Norton Simon. They discussed the possibility of future loans from Pasadena's modern collection, but Simon, who recently confused everyone by rehanging a number of the banished modern paintings in the museum, was in no mood to make promises; he is reported to be very angry about legal proceedings that have been brought against him by Robert Rowan and two other ex-trustees of the Pasadena Museum, who discovered that Simon was planning to sell some modern works from the collection (including paintings by Sam Francis and Richard Diebenkorn) and went to court to stop him. A large permanent collection, in any case, is not what Hulten and Koshalek have in mind at the moment. Although Broad has said repeatedly that MOCA will seek "primacy in the

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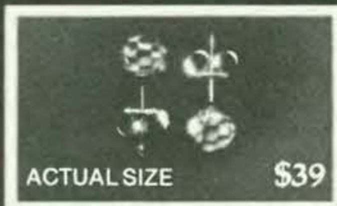

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art of the last four decades," Hulten and Koshalek speak in terms of building a small, highly selective collection of key works. "My feeling is that we have to deal with the most recent, to focus on that," Koshalek told me. Irwin and Francis have been in close touch with the Artists Advisory Council on the future program. What they are doing is rethinking the idea of a modern museum in all its aspects—curatorial, educational, social, and political. Their conclusions could provoke the first significant disputes between the artists, on one side, and the (non-artist) trustees, on the other.

The board was augmented in January by four new trustees, whose names are well known in the international art world: Dominique de Menil, a major benefactress of the Beaubourg and other museums, and an art scholar whose exhibitions at the Rice University Institute for the Arts, in Houston, have attracted wide praise; Dr. Peter Ludwig, the leading West German collector of contemporary art, who has made vast donations and loans to several European museums; Count Giuseppe Panza di Biumo, Italy's preëminent collector of advanced (mostly American) art; and Seiji Tsutsumi, a Japanese industrialist, art collector, novelist, and poet. It is hoped that these glittering names will make MOCA more alluring to conservative Los Angeles money. It is also hoped—by the artists—that the new trustees' sophisticated knowledge of contemporary art will work to counter any spasms of philistine anxiety on the part of other board members once the program gets going.

The artists, at any rate, have gained a very definite sense of their own power, and they are determined to exercise that power with the developer, with the C.R.A., and, if necessary, with the trustees. They continue to meet every Monday night. It is no secret that they are preparing to push for a third seat on the board. (DeWain Valentine, who was instrumental in approaching Atlantic Richfield and whose personal fund-raising efforts have brought in half a million dollars, is the obvious candidate.) There have also been rumors that if the negotiations with the developer prove unsatisfactory, the artists might just pull out altogether, and, with the momentum that has been generated, start their own museum somewhere else. Neither Koshalek, who has been on the job full time since last December, nor Hulten, who will be commuting be-

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tween Paris and Los Angeles until he leaves Beaubourg for good in September, anticipates problems in dealing with the aroused artist power bloc. "An artist can be just as objective, as fair, and as intelligent as a businessman," says Koshalek. The traditional intransigence of the artist, however, will almost surely become a factor sooner or later in a complex and protracted urban power game involving a great deal of money, with consequences that will be edifying to observe. The taste of power could conceivably have its effect on the art-making process as well. Sam Francis has been so busy with the museum project that he hasn't painted in eight months. For Irwin, who worked his way out of painting and sculpture some years ago and now does large-scale installations that involve the viewer's total perception of a site, the urban power game may be simply an art work on a larger scale.

So far, the artists have managed with amazing success to curb their natural intransigence, and to meet the business community more than half-way. "We've done things artists have never done before," as DeWain Valentine puts it. Before the first meeting of the founding board of trustees, for example, Irwin consulted with Sam Francis and decided to go out and buy a suit—the first one he had owned since he was a child. When he arrived at the meeting, Max Palevsky shook his hand and said, affably, that he would have expected the artist member to show up in some sort of costume. "You don't understand," Irwin said. "This *is* a costume."

—CALVIN TOMKINS

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If the tone of the day was dire, the evening's was not. At the elegant Swedish Embassy, with its elegant ambassador and countess presiding, laureates, diplomats, scientists and members of Congress mingled beneath the crystal chandeliers, lifting crackers off the trays of gloved waiters who darted along the tapestried walls. —*Washington Post.*

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On Tuesday, residents were still enjoying mild weather and bare ground with a forecast of more of the same to come. Spring can't be too far away, at least according to Frankfort's Dave Curtis. On his way to work Monday; he was a robin in Ted Watt's apple tree on Forest Avenue. —*Benzie County (Mich.) Record-Patriot.*

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