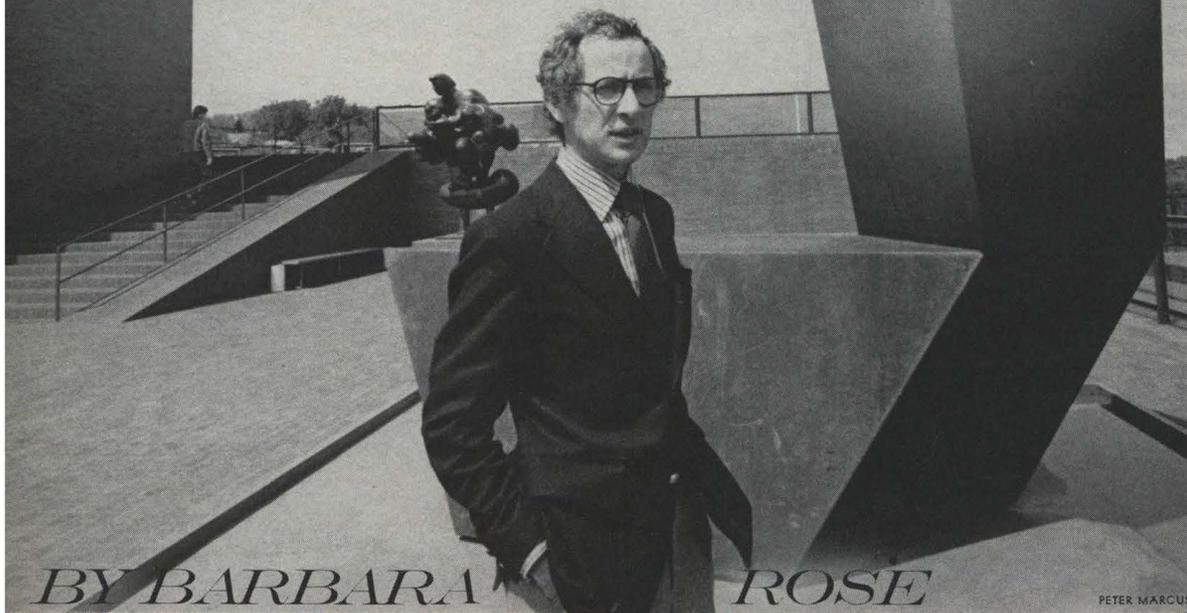


PEOPLE ARE TALKING ABOUT...

NEW ART ACTION IN MINNEAPOLIS



BY BARBARA ROSE

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On one of the sculpture roofs of the new Walker Art Center, Martin Friedman, the Minneapolis Museum's director, stands in front of sculptures by Jacques Lipchitz (left) and Tony Smith.

If the art world grapevine is to be believed, the action today is not in New York or even Los Angeles but, of all places, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, where the Walker Art Center reopened in May in its elegant spacious new quarters designed by Edward Larrabee Barnes. While art activity elsewhere declines into predictable trend-setting or simply atrophies for lack of direction, the Walker, under the energetic leadership of its brilliant director Martin Friedman, is launching a series of programs focused on serving the diverse needs of a plurality of publics, from grammar-school students to city planners, from film buffs to dance and theater amateurs.

The Walker succeeds where others falter largely because of the flexible personalities of men like architect Barnes and curator Fried-

man from its classically elegant, understated façade to its seven tiers of beautifully proportioned galleries gracefully flowing from a central core—a building designed on a human scale for people to move through at a leisurely pace and for artists to show works in without having to compete with the architecture. Because many of the details were worked out in long planning sessions between Barnes and Friedman, who also solicited suggestions from artists and critics, the Walker is one of the few new museums genuinely adequate to current needs. The Walker represents a unique situation. Barnes's willingness to serve Friedman's vision is equalled by Friedman's own responsiveness to the needs of artists and of the public. Friedman in turn is probably the only curator in America to speak warmly of his trustees and the support they have given his innovative plans. Among Friedman's dedicated young staff, there is a trusting camaraderie and *esprit de corps*; even the guards, dressed informally in turtlenecks and clocks

ty and philosophy. He believes the museum must take an active role, reaching out into the city and the university and designing programs to educate an audience to have a genuine understanding of modern art. Museum curators are not especially known for their willingness to take risks; but Friedman, committed to experimentation, is brave enough to suffer the unavoidable failures as well as the successes of such an approach. An example of the trial and error method, the Walker's opening show naturally had its share of triumphs and disasters. Responsive to artists working with situations, environments, and ephemeral materials as opposed to the traditional static objects, Friedman commissioned nineteen artists plus the Pulsa group to create works especially for the show. Some were such well-known art stars as Robert Rauschenberg, Donald Judd, and Dan Flavin; others were such upcoming talents as Laddie John Dill, Dorothea Rockburne, and Sam Gilliam. Four of the group were, significantly, local Minnesota art-

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in many respects was a community effort. (Dan Flavin's stunning piece—a corridor tinted in sunset hues by a complex overhead grid of fluorescent tubes—was signed by the electricians who installed it without charge as well as by Flavin.) Other works also stood out: Lynda Benglis's series of menacing archetypal forms of poured plastic was striking in its dramatically original antediluvian imagery; Larry Bell's fragile glass walls drew the viewer successfully into their poetic world of dissolving and refracting mirror images; and Minneapolis sculptor Siah Armajani's folded metal sheet, ingeniously suspended in midair with a powerful magnet, compelled attention. But the most arresting work, both visually and conceptually, was surely Robert Irwin's elusive light environment, a mysterious mirage suggesting a view into the infinite. Stretching a screen of nearly transparent scrim diagonally from floor to ceiling across an entire gallery wall, Irwin used a high intensity light hidden from view to illuminate the space, creating an illusion of a translucent volume of light. Through the simplest means, an enigmatic illusion of great subtlety was created. Ed Moses's delicate lines sensitively etched in plastic, Richard Serra's powerfully expressive raw steel planks precariously resting against one another, and Mark Di Suvero's gargantuan red construction outside the museum also looked especially fresh at a moment when so much looks stale.

All in all, the exhibition was fit to inaugurate what is obviously now the most exciting museum in America from the point of view of contemporary art. Located far from the marketplace and the mainstream, the Walker is free of the political, social, and psychological pressures racking New York's beleaguered museums. The excitement its new programs are generating may point perhaps to a general decentralization of the art scene. Appropriately, this new historical moment begins at a museum that grew from the first public art gallery in the Midwest, opened in 1879 by the art-loving timberman T. B. Walker in his own home. Almost a century later, eighty-five members of the