

# Walker Art Center's New Executive Director

*An interview with Mary Ceruti*



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**T**ELL US a bit about yourself, Mary. Where are you from originally, and where did you study? What do you like to do for fun?

I was born in Cleveland, Ohio as one of five children. My parents are children of immigrants. My father's family is Italian, while my mother is Polish. My father is an architect and my mother is an artist. The arts were always part of my life, including music. My parents took us to the opera and other musical events.

After completing school in Philadelphia we spent 10 years in San Francisco. Then New York called, so we spent the next 20 years there. And now we live in the Twin Cities. We have a 12 year old daughter who is very excited about the move. She goes to Wayzata West.

**What attracted you to the Walker and the Twin Cities? Leaving New York for Minneapolis is not a small step.**

The Walker is one of the exemplary institutions, if not the best, for one who works in contemporary art. It was a huge honor and opportunity to be asked to apply for this position. The Walker is renowned for its outstanding collection and the Sculpture Garden far beyond Minnesota.

Minneapolis is known to be open-minded and embracing of art. The very existence of so many arts institutions reflects well on the city and its citizens. All of that made it very appealing for an art professional to move here.

**You transformed New York's SculptureCenter into a force in contemporary art. How does the SculptureCenter compare to the Walker or differ from it?**

What they share in common is a real commitment to artists. Both have a deep understanding of how artists work. Both institutions respond to artists and their needs, rather than merely collect art and figure out how to display it. Both share a great openness to new ideas.

SculptureCenter is quite small both in staff and space. They host one or two Exhibitions each year. They do not have a permanent collection. The advantage of this is you can be nimble and innovative and do things inexpensively.

The Walker is a totally different scope and scale. The collection is super interesting. I am slowly getting to know the collection and have been thinking about how to tell its story. The collection provides a great context for new artists to see and present their work during special exhibitions.

BY JOHAN M.J. VAN PARYS, PH.D.



PHOTO/RACHEL JOYCE

I am also very impressed with the cross departmental approach bringing different disciplines under the same roof. I look forward to an amazing future for the Walker.

I often refer to the Walker as a temple to contemporary art. I do that because I believe the Walker is on some level a sacred repository for contemporary art. I also do it because people often have the impression that only those who are initiated are welcome.

Artists are challenging all of us, even those of us who are passionate about contemporary art. Don't think that when you don't respond to a work of art you are not part of a secret club. It is probably because the art has challenged you and for some that is an interesting experience, for others not so much.

If artists were just decorators then all art should be nice and pleasing to everyone. But artists have a bigger role in society. Their task is to reframe the question. Think about how something comes to have meaning to you. Meaning evolves over time, as if it were revealed bit by bit. That's why you have to continue to be open and curious. In the end you will be rewarded for that curiosity.

From our end, we may not have done a good job of introducing art to people. We may have created a new, more permeable and welcoming entrance, but are we really welcoming? The Sculpture Garden is a great way for people to encounter contem-

porary art in a relaxed way. It is where the city and art connect. The Walker is mere steps away. How can we invite people in?

We have created so many silos: art, education, religion, politics. They all used to converge in the market square. Is there any way we can recreate that experience and much-needed dialogue today?

**In Queens you were very involved in the community, beyond the world of art. Are you planning on doing the same in the Twin Cities?**

Absolutely. Citizenship is important. I see it as our institutional and my personal responsibility to engage with the larger community and to get involved in the life of the city. You can only get as much out of democracy as you are willing to put into it. Democracy is both a right and a responsibility.

**What do you think constitutes a good work of art, a masterpiece?**

A great work of art operates in the aesthetic realm and opens you up to a layered experience. This experience is intellectual, but it is also visceral and even spiritual; and maybe not all of these at the same time. But you always want to go back to it because you know it has more to say.

**You are quoted saying: "You can get to something through art that you might not be able to get to through science or other scientific**

**methods." I am very interested in this since religion seems to try to do the same thing.**

First off, I believe that we learn in all kinds of ways. There is learning through logical, problem solving experience. There is also the aesthetic experience, the non-verbal experience when all our senses help us to become more who we are, more fully ourselves.

Though artists can be logical and set out to solve a specific problem, they operate in the aesthetic realm. If you can explain a work of art completely in an essay then it is not a good work of art. It is just an essay. Good art can never be completely explained. Good art continues to frame questions anew.

Artists are also engaged in some kind of research, they explore. They try to understand how materials function, how our environments affect us. Their works of art offer a hypothesis, a way of framing a questions.

**Do you have any thoughts on the relationship, or lack thereof, between religion and art?**

Absolutely. Art can touch on all aspects of life. Religion is one of them, especially when taking religion in a broader sense. True art also has to demand its own freedom. It can't exist in service of someone or something. Otherwise it is propaganda. At the same time it touches on all aspects of life. Art has the ability to create a context for a spiritual or a social experience.

**We are neighbors. Do you see any opportunities for us to collaborate in the future?**

I am really excited to be here, in Minneapolis, in this neighborhood. And I look forward to getting to know the different communities and identifying opportunities to collaborate. Everyone has been so welcoming and supportive. Everyone I have met seems to want our institutions to thrive; they believe in them. ✚

*Johan M.J. van Parys has been The Basilica's director of liturgy and sacred arts since 1995.*