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'Total Immersion' in Contemporary Art : An Instant Collection

By David Galloway

HAMBURG— Until recently, this Hanseatic port city held few and, at best, sporadic attractions for aficionados of contemporary art. The dominant mood was one of wait-and-see conservatism that peered somewhat askance at the avant-garde excesses of cities like Berlin and Cologne. That mood began to shift in the 1980s with the renovation of the so-called Deichtorhallen — a handsome pair of former market halls now used for temporary exhibitions. A spacious new wing for the Kunsthalle, designed by Oswald Matthias Ungers, is devoted exclusively to art of our time, and the local Kunstverein mounts cutting-edge shows.

Augmenting that progressive shift, and perhaps defining it better than any public institution could do, is the Falckenberg Collection, open by appointment, (49-40) 540-005-23. This eclectic, exuberant ensemble consists of more than 500 works in all media, focusing on recent German, American and British art. It is the creation of a 47-year-old lawyer and businessman, Harald Falckenberg, who has assembled this collection in less than seven years.

CNN recently broadcast a mini-feature on the Falckenberg Collection, and ARTnews in New York has voted the enthusiast one of the world's 200 leading collectors. It was a local artist friend, Petrus Wandrey, who first suggested that collecting might be a better way to relax than playing golf, and Falckenberg took up the challenge almost as a lark. The first works he acquired were by the Americans Bill Beckley, Keith Haring and Kenny Scharf, and from there he plunged into a learn-by-doing process that he describes as "total immersion."

Without knowing that Beckley had taught semantics at the School of Visual Arts in New York or that Haring and Scharf were among his most gifted students, Falckenberg sensed their comradeship. And the works appealed to his fascination with visual and syntactic codes. As an assistant for Roman law at Freiburg University, he had learned Babylonian-Assyrian hieroglyphs in order to translate papyrus scrolls — an experience he describes today as "great fun." Typical of his semantic proclivity is his enthusiasm for the "joke" paintings of Richard Prince. One of them lent its title to last year's exhibition of the collection at the Leipzig Museum of Fine Arts: "my name (I didn't have a penny to me name, so I changed my name . . .)."

From the start, Falckenberg was eager to share his new-found enthusiasm with friends and art-world acquaintances. "I would never have started collecting to enjoy my treasures all alone," he observes. "Thinking and reflecting, I find, function better when one exchanges ideas with others." But his apartment soon proved too small and the collection expanded into a bizarre structure near

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the Hamburg airport. The 18th-century building, originally a farmhouse, had once been expanded into a country inn, eventually became a factory, then was a down-at-heels storage facility.

When Falckenberg moved his works into two ground-floor rooms of the building, it was being used by a construction firm designing an autobahn tunnel, and visitors had to thread their way past canary-yellow safety helmets to reach the spaces Falckenberg had created. With the tunnel complete, the collector has taken over the entire building and, with minimal intervention, created an environment ideally suited to the diversity and directness of the collection. But the building is scheduled for demolition at the end of the year, and Falckenberg is negotiating with the city for permanent quarters.

Plainly, Falckenberg will eventually need more space for his rapidly expanding holdings, yet it is hard to believe they could be more ideally presented. While Nam June Paik's "TV Buddha" serenely contemplates his own likeness, Martin Kippenberger's "Gondola" seems to float above a brightly lacquered floor. The two works suggest the extremes Falckenberg now systematically cultivates, setting the reflective works of Gerhard Richter, Joseph Beuys and Rainer Ruthenbeck against the extroverted statement of Robert Longo, Paul McCarthy and Mike Kelly, then spicing the brew with such "old masters" as Rauschenberg, Warhol and Stella.

The works reflect their owner's wide-ranging professional life and interests. In addition to managing a family business that supplies equipment for the petroleum industry, he is a constitutional judge, a producer of the Hamburg version of "The Buddy Holly Story" and chairman of the board of the Kunstverein. As for the rest, "You can best learn about me from the collection," he says, "which probably reveals more than I'd like to reveal."

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