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Redressing history

Partners and the Friedrich Christian Flick Collection

Two recent exhibitions in Germany raise different yet related sets of questions about the role of site specificity in constructing meaning. They are exhibitions from two world renowned collections of contemporary art, one owned by a Canadian, born in Germany; the other owned by a German who has lived in Zurich since the mid-1970s. Partners was a selection from the collection of Ydessa Hendeles shown at the Haus der Kunst in Munich, from November 7, 2002 to February 15, 2003. The first installment of The Friedrich Christian Flick Collection was presented at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin from September 24, 2004 until March 28, 2005. Both exhibitions use the public display of art to redress the physical and cultural genocide of Germany’s National Socialist past, a past inextricable from the personal lives of the collectors and the formation of their collections as well as the cities where the exhibitions took place. At the same time as these exhibitions invoke considerations about history and memory, they also work to produce new identities for all concerned. As such, Partners and The Friedrich Christian Flick Collection can be characterized as reparative exhibitions. In each instance, the venue is as instrumental as the collector in constructing the political significance of two very different site-specific exhibition events.

I have used two terms to describe Partners and The Friedrich Christian Flick Collection: redress and repair. Redress, despite a set of meanings linked to compensation and righting a wrong also connotes fashion and appearance. Repair connotes making amends and mending rather than covering or recovering. Repair has deeper psychic overtones whereas redress often is simply legalistic. Both are operative in analyses of these exhibitions and their sites, to greater or lesser degrees.

The collectors: Hendeles and Flick

Ydessa Hendeles was born in a displaced persons camp in 1948 in Marburg, Germany, to Polish Jewish parents who had survived the Holocaust. Hendeles’ family moved to Toronto in 1950 where her father made a fortune in real estate. In the 1980s, Hendeles operated an art gallery in Toronto where she exhibited and sold avant-garde contemporary Canadian art by artists such as Jana Sterbak and Jeff Wall. In 1988, she opened the Ydessa Hendeles Art Foundation in a converted uniform factory and devoted herself to building a collection of international avant-garde art and curating exhibitions from her collection. As early as 1993, Art news named Hendeles one of the fifty most important people in the contemporary art world. Hendeles’ role, a collector-curator-artist, is rare and her approach to display, audience and narrative in the thirty highly personal exhibitions at her Foundation is distinctive.¹

Hendeles’ first exhibition was a solo show of Christian Boltanski’s installations for which she commissioned a site-specific work called Canada by the artist in

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honor of his first exhibition in that country. Tellingly, »Kanada« was the name given by prisoners to the room at the Auschwitz concentration camp that served as a sorting and storage depot for the property of inmates and where Hendeles’ mother had worked. Boltanski is known for his installations that produce what Ernst Van Alphen has identified as a »Holocaust effect«: in Canada, the masses of clothing Boltanski piled against the walls at Hendeles’ Foundation evoked the absent bodies of their owners and, through association with similar practices in »Kanada«, the Holocaust is reenacted. With their themes of history, violence and loss, all of Hendeles’ exhibitions at her Foundation prior to 2004 evoked the Holocaust. Until Partners, Hendeles had never exhibited her collection or curated outside her Foundation. Nor for that matter had the Haus der Kunst, an exhibition hall built by Hitler, exhibited a collection of avant-garde art owned by a Jew or displayed art that addressed its National Socialist past so directly in an art exhibition.

Like Hendeles, Friedrich Christian Flick inherited his money. He was born in 1944 in Sulzbach-Rosenberg into a family notorious for its close connections to the Nazi regime. His grandfather, Friedrich Flick, was one of Germany’s richest men during the National Socialist period, accused and convicted in 1947 as a war criminal for employing thousands of slave laborers at his munitions factories and supporting the war effort so intensely. Flick’s grandfather served a prison sentence of three years, remade his fortune in the 1950s with the Mercedes Company, and died as one of the five wealthiest Germans in 1972. Many believe that like others in post-war Germany, Friedrich Flick was able to amass so much wealth as a result of connections to rehabilitated Nazis who were in power after the war. According to Flick’s website portrait, »in 1972 [he] became a partner in Friedrich Flick’s limited partnership company, where he assumed a managerial role.« Flick sold his interest in 1975 and used the funds as the basis for building his own fortune. In a move reminiscent of his uncle Friedrich Karl Flick who moved to Vienna to avoid paying German taxes, Mick Flick, as he is called, moved to tax free Zurich at the time he sold his stake in the family concern.

Flick began collecting historic Western art in the 1980s but changed his focus to contemporary avant-garde in the 1990s. Under the guidance of dealer Ivan Wirth, one of the premier gallerists in the contemporary art market, Flick amassed a world-class collection of over 2,500 works by 150 artists. One of the criticisms leveled at Flick is that he uses his vast fortune to assemble his collection as a financial investment rather than from a genuine commitment to art. Flick, former playboy and jet setter, whose collection is owned by Contemporary Art Limited in tax free Guernsey, has worked hard to establish his credentials as a bona fide collector with a passion for art rather than a sharp investor or someone going through a mid-life crisis.

Like Hendeles, Flick asserts that the art he buys is meant to be an extension of his interests. Hendeles states that she is not concerned with the pre-ordained masterpiece, that she »buys [artworks] because they hold my attention in some critical, crucial emotional way«. Flick is interested in art »which relates to the present, to life and its problems in today’s world«. He describes the art in his collection as »difficult« and »hard«. Critics find much of it unadventurous and canonical, or aggressive and sexual. In 1997, in a personal letter to his uncle Friedrich Karl, Flick wrote that the art collection »will offer my children and descendents a constructive,
meaningful way to identify with our name« and »give the name Flick a new, and permanently positive, association«. According to the most recent version of Flick’s website (July 2005) Flick acknowledges: »my collection has also become a statement – precisely as a result of its conceptual, political orientation – about my family history.«

The exhibition sites: the Hamburger Bahnhof and the Haus der Kunst

In 2001, Flick began the process of donating his collection and a building to be designed by trend setting Dutch architect Rem Koolhaus to Zurich, but protests about Flick’s family history, the allegedly tainted source of the money used to purchase the collection, and Flick’s refusal to pay into the Forced and Slave Labor Compensation Fund, known as Remembrance, Responsibility and Future, established by the German government, caused Flick to retract his offer. Simultaneous and subsequent attempts to exhibit or donate his collection in New York, London, Strasburg, Dresden and Munich at the Haus der Kunst failed. Until the arrangement with the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin to loan his collection for seven years and provide funds for renovating the adjacent Rieckhallen to house it, no other institution or city wanted to confront the ethical and historical issues posed by exhibiting a collection owned by the heir of such a prominent Nazi, especially one who seemed so resistant to demonstrating what was deemed appropriate as penitence and compensation.

Thomas Flierl, Berlin Senator for Culture, identified an ethical imperative in the choice of Berlin as the site for presenting the collection. In a newspaper article, he asserted that because »the Berlin Republic nurses a higher than average susceptibility to national conservative thought [...] Berlin [...] has become the place in which to face up to the history of the collection, of the collector and the controversy surrounding the collection’s representation in public.« Flick, though, preferred to rationalize the choice of Berlin aesthetically: »Berlin is still whirling; it is yet to settle. In this sense, the art that I collect is on a par with the city. It is torn, scarred, and less beautiful than it is interesting; it is full of contradictions, yet exceedingly intense.«

While the same complaints made about Flick and his collection in Zurich were raised about the Berlin arrangement, there was also a series of questions about the appropriateness of sanctioning and partially funding the exhibition by the German State and the capital city of the nation, especially as the art was just a loan and exhibited without contextualizing it in relation to the Flick family or the ongoing controversy. Flick’s desire to use his art collection as a vehicle for building a new and more positive identification with his family name coincided with Berlin’s desire to construct a new identity for itself as Germany’s new/old capital and the recently reunified nation’s desire to construct a future-oriented identity rather than one mired in the recent past. In order to build these new identities, Flick, Berlin and Germany preferred to sever National Socialist histories from the present rather than interweave the two as Hendeles did at the Haus der Kunst in Munich. Both exhibitions were post-war/post-wall exhibitions, but Flick’s focus was post-Wall whereas Hendeles’ was post-War.

In order to better understand how these exhibitions function in relation to history, I want to identify four key moments in German museum and exhibition history.
with regard to contemporary art. The first of these comes with the founding of the Museuminsel in central Berlin in 1835, after Karl Friedrich Schinkel built the Altes Museum on that site between 1823 and 1830. The museums there, especially the Pergamon Museum and the Bode Museum, were models of museum architecture and museological practice. Right from its inception in 1876, a mere five years after the establishment of the Second Reich, what is now known as the Alte Nationalgalerie collected and displayed what was then contemporary, primarily German, art.

The second historical moment in this mini-version of German museum history is the National Socialist era or Third Reich between 1933 and 1945 where once again German museums and displays of contemporary art were intricately linked to German nationalist politics, albeit of a different kind. Hitler’s first cultural project after being elected Chancellor in 1933 was to build the Haus der deutschen Kunst in Munich, using the neo-classical architectural vocabulary of Schinkel to construct a German lineage for his very different aesthetic and political nationalist program. Beginning with the building’s inauguration in 1937, Hitler used the Haus der deutschen Kunst for an annual Great German art exhibition of contemporary art, in styles and with content he endorsed. As is well known, Hitler paired the first, elegantly installed Great German art exhibition with Degenerate art, a didactic, touring exhibition designed to demonstrate, through its content and haphazard hanging, contemporary art that was unacceptable.15

After World War II, exhibitions of the modernist contemporary art denigrated by Hitler became a vehicle used by German art institutions to rehabilitate their recent cultural history. The most prominent instance was documenta, an international exhibition of contemporary avant-garde art instituted in 1955 in Kassel. This city was recovering from being extensively bombed by the Allies because it was a centre for munitions production during the war. Significantly, Kassel was also the location of Germany’s first purpose-built museum constructed between 1769 and 1776 to house the collection of Count Friedrich of Hessen, and choosing it as the site of documenta was symbolic of Germany’s past and future greatness in pioneering acceptable art traditions.

If documenta represented the desire for new institutions and an international reach, rehabilitating or normalizing Nazi monuments for local audiences was the more common approach given the finances of post-war Germany. For example, the Haus der deutschen Kunst became the Haus der Kunst in 1949, its interior was turned into what Brian O’Doherty identified as the white cube exhibition space so prominent after the war,16 trees were planted to soften the façade, and its exhibition program featured avant-garde modernist and contemporary art that would never have been shown in the building under Hitler.17

The fourth moment in this mini-history of German museums coincides with the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, the reunification of Germany and the move of the German capital from Bonn to Berlin. The resulting massive reconstruction of Berlin’s museums involves the controversial relocation of collections from former West Berlin to museums on the Museuminsel and the creation of new ones, including a museum for contemporary art, an important absence in a city symbolizing the now and in a nation where contemporary art played such important roles.

In 1996, the Hamburger Bahnhof, built in 1847 as a railway station, was renovated by Peter Kleihues to serve as the Museum for the Present, a name echoing the
1919 Museum of the Present founded by the great museum director, Ludwig Justi. As a new branch of Germany’s National Gallery, the Museum for the Present had no collection and operated showing temporary exhibitions and two long-term loan collections, notably the Erich Marx Collection with its very strong holdings in post-war American art of the 1960s. According to the museum, the seven-year loan of the Flick Collection allowed it to exhibit art not usually seen in Berlin.

The symbolic importance of the Flick Collection for Germany was emphasized by Chancellor Gerhard Schröder at the opening of the inaugural exhibition. In his speech, Schröder signaled a political desire to normalize and overcome the past by separating then and now. While Schröder’s position can be seen as a fatigue-response to the years of seemingly endless German discussion about World War II and the equally seemingly endless cultural-political arguments in Berlin over the erection, form and content of Daniel Libeskind’s Jewish Museum (2001), and Peter Eisenman’s Monument to the murdered Jews of Europe (2005), the separation of aesthetics and ethics and past and present with regard to displaying the Flick Collection in a national museum marks a different phase in the debates rather than a desired end-point.

Unlike the Hamburger Bahnhof, the Haus der Kunst is an exhibition hall with no permanent collection and different requirements in its courtship of collectors and politicians. When Chris Dercon, former Director at the Boymans-van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam, was appointed Haus der Kunst Director, he invited Hendeles to enlarge her 2002 exhibition, Same difference, as the first exhibition of his tenure. Same difference included German family photographs of Nazi soldiers and Maurizio Catalan’s Him (2001), a mannequin-like sculpture of a kneeling Hitler in short pants. For Dercon, Partners was a fitting beginning to mark his plans for removing the design changes that had camouflaged Hitler’s building so that the interior would become a visible and ongoing reference to the inextricability of the past and the present. Dercon knew that Hendeles’ exhibition would interweave aesthetic and ethical considerations to create an experience calling both into question. Scheduling Utopia station: poster project to coincide with Partners and hosting Paul McCarthy’s pointedly critical Lala land parodie paradies (June 12 to August 28, 2005) are further indications of Dercon’s desire to repoliticize the Haus der Kunst and the Munich artworld.

Munich was in the process of undergoing a re-evaluation and acknowledgement of its role as Hitler’s power base through the inclusion of that history in its municipal museum; an exhibition, Restitutionspolitik, by Maria Eichhorn based on research into the provenance of paintings in the Lenbach Haus collection; and the construction of a centrally located, Jewish Centre destined to be the largest in Europe. These projects challenged Munich’s post-War identity as the benign, backward, beloved of kitsch, beer drinking capital of Bavaria. One of the most important elements of Hendeles’ exhibition was her archival artwork, Partners (The Teddy Bear Project) with over 2,000 found photographs of people and their teddy bears: at the time of the exhibition, lederhosen clad teddy bears were used as the marketing symbol of Munich.
Hendeles had considered and rejected other offers from institutions to exhibit her collection. Given her background, Hendeles understood that creating an exhibition for the Haus der Kunst was an extraordinary opportunity to address the dual, inter-related traumas of the German and Jewish past, where individuals could, in her words, »search for new insights and reflections of themselves – particularly how their identities are formed, by virtue of their personal histories and those they inherit.«

Partners, Hendeles’ largest and most complex exhibition to date, used the size and the site-specificity of its Munich location to amplify the theme of violence at the heart of the exhibition’s premise. Through works such as Maurizio Catalan’s Him, Bruce Nauman’s screaming Thank you (1992), James Coleman’s strobic, assaultive Box (1977), Paul McCarthy’s Saloon (1995/6) which filled the exhibition hall with gunshots, and photojournalist images of executions and self immolations in Asian counties, Partners became a meditation on the ongoing, senseless, masculine urge for power, embracing other countries and other wars in addition to the pivotal treatment of Germany and World War II.

The site of Partners allowed Hendeles to combine her exhibition explorations into »the latent content of a cultural condition or an aspect of human nature or a historical phenomenon, that, though past, is relevant now« with the specifics of personal and national histories.

Aside from discrete wall labels in Hendeles’ exhibitions, there is usually no accompanying information for visitors. Hendeles says, »if someone misses the experience of seeing the show, they have missed the movie. They’re not going to get the movie by reading the review.« Unlike museum displays of contemporary art that emphasize neutrality, historical knowledge and the didactic, Hendeles promotes par-
ticipatory knowledge, the corporeal and what Daniel Goleman calls »emotional in-
telligence«. Even with the Haus der Kunst’s institutional textual apparatus of press
releases, publicity and a catalogue, where Hendeles writes about her practice for the
first time, the primary experience for those who saw Partners was an event under-
stood corporeally.

For Partners, Hendeles divided the tripartite space of the Haus der Kunst into
three dead end passages, so that in order to move on or out viewers had to retrace
their steps, seeing the art they had encountered in a different sequence and in a
changed set of relationships. This going back and then going back to the beginning is
a feature of Hendeles’ curating. She uses the temporal and spatial qualities of her in-
stallations as devices to instill a mind set in her viewers that encourages contempla-
tion and a return to ideas encountered earlier. In Partners, the most violent images
were placed in the dead end spaces. Each of the three passages began with an image
of a woman, the woman in Jeff Wall’s The stumbling block, the twins of Giovanni
Paolini’s Mimesi, and, notably, the pregnant Diane Arbus’ Self-portrait with camera
(February 1945) taken by photographing into a mirror. In her catalogue notes, Hen-
deles connects the Arbus photograph to Anne Frank who, like Hendeles, was a Ger-
man-Jewish woman, with an, albeit very different, history determined by the war.23

This photograph, a surrogate portrait of Hendeles, who, in her words, »is part
of a generation that wasn’t supposed to exist«, marks both the beginning and the end
of the exhibition. It alludes to another of the underlying theme of Partners, unex-
pected reversals of power, seen more clearly in the signature piece of the exhibition,
a Spanish toy, Minnie Mouse carrying Felix in cages (1926–1936) (fig. 1). Located
in the space behind the wall on which the Arbus hung and placed on the publicity
posters for the exhibition running the length of building’s façade, the triumphant
capture of a man by a woman reads as an ironic comment of Hendeles’ occupation
of Hitler’s Haus der deutschen Kunst.

The inaugural exhibition The Friedrich Christian Flick Collection was larger
and less coordinated. Four hundred works by forty artists were dispersed through the
scattered and unconnected spaces of the Hamburger Bahnhof and the Rieckhallen.
Eugen Blume, Director of the museum, insisted on being the curator to ensure the
appearance of an arm’s length relationship with the collector. He chose works rep-
resentative of art forms absent from the two other Hamburger Bahnhof collections –
iinstallations, video, photography, multi-media work – which were arranged into
eighteen >Chapters<. Despite allusion to a narrative, the links between the sections
seemed arbitrary, partially due to the fragmented nature of the spaces, partially be-
cause of a large curatorial team with each group having its own focus, and partially
due to Flick’s interventions.24 Blume was reluctant to reveal an overall curatorial vi-
vision beyond insisting, in very general terms, that the presentation »must be scientifi-
cally grounded« and, echoing Justi, that »the most important task of the museum is
the socialization of the body of works in art history.«25

Following traditional museological models, Blume was equally insistent that
text in the exhibition refer only to the art. Not long before the opening of the exhibi-
tion, however, the museum decided to make a free newspaper available inside the
lobby containing an interview between Flick and Blume as well as a selection of re-
printed articles about the controversy. Some, especially the agit-prop artist team Re-
nata Stih and Friedrich Schnock, saw the gesture as a sop and continued to protest.
The museum also sponsored debates about the relationship of collectors to museums and the Flick Collection. The press and academics continued to criticize. Blume's position was that there is no need to include non-art related material in the exhibition: its absence is a key element in keeping the debate alive. It is too early to tell what the discussion about The Friedrich Christian Flick Collection generated. One repercussion may be that Flick finally did pay five million Euros into the Slave Labour Compensation Fund in April 2005. Another may have been preventing Flick selling work to the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

Despite his words, I like to think that Blume may have constructed a narrative commenting on the situation of the museum and German history in the three chapters of the exhibition for which he was responsible. Blume placed five Jason Rhodes' pieces combined into an ensemble renamed Creation myth by the artist in the large, open, entrance hall of the Hamburger Bahnhof (fig. 2). This chaotic, ramshackle, bric-à-brac work with moving images and parts looked like a work in progress. To underscore a Garden of Eden/Loss of Innocence interpretation, Blume positioned Paul McCarthy's Apple heads, two highly sexed Adam and Eve figures, behind Rhodes's work. The age-old patriarchal notion that creative and sexual energies fuse was underscored by placing Picabia's raunchy paintings of female nudes under the arches and McCarthy's lascivious Saloon theatre video installation behind Adam and Eve. My reading of this room is that, in addition to being a contemporary ver-
sion of the Garden of Eden, *Creation myth* is a reference to both Flick and Germany struggling to be reborn. The second chapter’s title was also taken from artworks, Bruce Nauman’s *Partial truth* and *Raw material*, and applied to rooms of Nauman’s art containing neon works like *Five men marching* and *Sex and death* which are almost too easy to read in relation to Flick and German history. In the third chapter, *Big spirits*, a room was given to Thomas Schütte’s 1996 series of ghostly, 250 cm high, aluminum, morphed monsters of the same name and documentary photos of the process of the statues being made. Here, Blume may well have been making a meta-commentary on the recent morphing of German national monster-museums and their ‘big spirits’. But then, my interpretation may be only redressing as a compensatory response in an effort to repair a deeply problematic vision of site and State.

**Zusammenfassung**

Notes

My thanks to Shelley Hornstein, York University, for inviting me to present a first version of this essay to her students at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, in March 2005 and to Axel Lapp and Vanessa Ohrura, Berlin, for their generous help with my research there.

5 http://www.friedrichchristianflick-collection.com, accessed July 12, 2005. Unless stated otherwise, all quotes from F.C. Flick are taken from his website.
6 For a recent study of the Flick family finances, see Thomas Range: Die Flicks: eine deutsche Familiengeschichte über Geld, Macht und Politik. Frankfurt am Main and New York 2004.
7 Unless otherwise stated all quotes from Hendeles come from interviews and e-mails with the author between 1999 and 2004.
11 Flick's detractors believe that he established his Foundation against Xenophobia, Racism and Intolerance in Potsdam with five million Euros in 2001 as a public relations ploy, that he could afford to pay into both his foundation and the government fund, and that five million Euros was too little money for one so rich, the heir of crimes so great, and owner of a 125 million Euro art collection.
20 http://www.juedisches-museum.muenchen.de/jmm2/jmm2_1.html.
21 Ydessa Hendeles: Notes on the exhibition.


23 Hendeles (as note 21), p. 209.


28 Werneburg (as note 24).

Photo credits

Fig. 1: Chris Dercon and Thomas Weski (eds.): Partners. Cologne 2004, catalogue cover.
Fig. 2: Reesa Greenberg.