

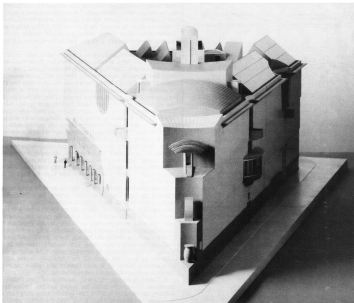
From Bankfurt to Frankfurt:

Postwar victim of the rapacity of land speculators and businessmen, Frankfurt is now attempting—via a flurry of museum-building, an infusion of municipal arts funds, and the outright wooing of other cities' artists and galleries—to counteract its reputation for crass commercialism. The bottom line: Can an art capital simply be legislated into existence?

BY DAVID GALLOWAY

“I move through this city as though it were not chaotic, uninhospitable as the moon, as though it were sincere, honest, upright.” These words from Kaiser Maria Fasshinder’s infernal drama, *Frank, the City and Death*, are spoken by a real-estate speculator who razes historic houses to make way for high-yield, high-rise anonymity. The rules of the game, he insists, are not of his own making; indeed, greed and exploitation are the norm in Fasshinder’s play. Peopled by pimps, petty criminals, whores, dwarfs, cripples and transvestites, the unnamed city is plainly Frankfurt on the Main—West Germany’s affluent banking capital.

First published by the renowned Scherzamp Verlag in 1976, *Frank, the City and Death* identifies its real-estate speculator only by the unfortunate epithet, “The Rich Jew.” The play consequently provoked such shrill charges of anti-Semitism that the entire edition was swiftly withdrawn from the bookshops. Outraged, Fasshinder himself resigned as director of Frankfurt’s experimental Theater am Turm, but stipulated that the world premiere of his controversial work could only be held in Frankfurt or New York. (Earlier this year,



Heinz Hollein's model for new Museum of Contemporary Art, Frankfurt. Photo G. Riba.



ing, philosophy, broadcasting and journalism. But despite the Städt Museum and an excellent Kunstverein, the fine arts have been more honored in the breach than the observance. Artists, critics and dealers repeatedly stress that the city lacks a sensitized, educated public. So finally, perhaps the strongest argument for the future of the Frankfurt art scene lies in the vitality and ingenuity of local grass-roots initiatives.

Fr Frankfurt's newest gallery, for example, Werth, is also its smallest, but its director has just inaugurated an ambitious summer program of video presentations, only a short walk from the Kunst-halle. Meanwhile, as an alternative approach to art exhibition, the "waschSalon" knows few equals in the entire country. Located in an unpromising suburb and reached by way of a labyrinth of one-way streets, it is a willfully low-profile operation. Once through the garden gate and down a flight of concrete stairs, visitors find themselves in the former laundry of a private home, functional

If, as one curator observes, Frankfurt may soon have more museums than artists, it is perhaps the grass-roots initiatives that best reflect the city's art scene.

washing machine still at the ready.

The proprietor, Katja Jedermann-Harth, offers accommodations to artists installing shows in the four low-ceilinged rooms, and she draws opening-night crowds that many of her colleagues might envy. She is especially adept at attracting, in her words, young collectors "poised for the plunge from signed posters to originals," even if most of the work she shows is not, by its site-specific nature, particularly salable. Most recently, the washSalon was occupied by Marcel Hundung, current recipient of the coveted Folkwang Prize for younger artists. Hundung makes concrete castings of discarded architectural fragments and machines (including, coincidentally, washing machines), which he skillfully combines with wood and found objects to form provocative assemblages. *East-West*, for example, consisted of a concrete door-frame with unseparable bell, attached wooden pylons and lamps that give an light—an eloquent monument to a divided Germany.

Like Katja Jedermann-Harth, many of Frankfurt's established dealers have been forced to follow unconventional routes in order to survive. Some—Herbert Meyer-Ellinger and Prestel, for example—have financed exhibitions of younger artists through the sale of classic moderns. Others, such as Dorothea Löhr, whose dedication to Minimalism is virtually heroic, have been more single-minded in their pursuits—and have had a commensurately more difficult time of it. Meanwhile, in an attempt to create a broader base for his own activities, Meyer-Ellinger began to curate on-site exhibitions for the Heescht Corporation in 1971. The first shows were restricted to

graphics, but the size and quality of the exhibitions quickly assumed museumlike dimensions. Next season, Heescht's "Century Hall" will accommodate exhibitions of work by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Henry Moore.

Such enterprises may well say as much about Frankfurt's future as its tested museum mile. But for grass-roots initiatives, none is so improbable or so impossibly successful as the work of Father Friedhelm Mennekes. The Jesuit priest is a passionate convert to "the spiritual values inherent in contemporary art," and believes that every cleric must be "a good performance artist." In 1979 he opened his first group exhibition in a suburban parish church, after personally sawing apart two confessionals to provide hanging space. The second exhibition, with works by Josef Albers, was inaugurated by Hilmar Hoffmann, who made his remarks from the pulpit. Prominent among the 70 shows that followed were works by Joseph Beuys, Georg Baselitz and Helmut Middendorf.

When Father Mennekes left his parish to join the faculty of Frankfurt's Theological Seminary, he immediately looked for a new exhibition space. The search ended at the Frankfurt train station, where, in a former waiting room, he opened a show of Arnulf Rainer's overpainted "Christ Faces" in the spring of 1986. Subsequent shows have included Beuys, Hultine and Arp. Father Mennekes now has a new parish church in Cologne, where he recently took his oath before an altar for which Markus Lüpertz had painted a triptych. The train-station experiment, however, remains dear to the priest's heart, and he will continue to direct its exhibition program. There is something touchingly childlike in the priest's passion for art, but more passion and less backsterism are clearly required if Frankfurt is to enjoy its hoped-for cultural renaissance. □

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Installation view of Marcel Hundung's *East-West*, 1987, at the washSalon, Frankfurt. Photo Alfred Harth.



Ulrich Diekmann *Bakewell*, 1986; in far room, Michael Götz, *Quitted*, 1987, at the Harth Gallery.