

## **"We used to be nameless"<sup>1</sup>**

### **– BUILDING DWELLING THINKING with the Sammlung Hoffmann**

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"In the middle of Berlin's Spandauer Vorstadt neighbourhood lies what is likely the most private of all publicly accessible collections in the city. Since as early as 1997, it has been possible for those interested in art to visit annually changing 'installations' in the living and office spaces of the Hoffmanns."<sup>2</sup> Writing in the expanded 2019 reprint edition of her travel guide featuring ninety privately-run exhibition spaces for contemporary and modern art in German-speaking areas, the cultural journalist Skadi Heckmüller used these words to begin her introduction to the collection venue that the collector couple Erika and Rolf Hoffmann began developing in central Berlin in the mid-1990s. In the first edition, published about eight years previously, a slightly different version read: "In the middle of Berlin's Scheunenviertel [barn district], lies what is likely the most private publicly accessible collection of the city. Since as early as 1997, it has been possible for those interested in art to visit annually changing exhibitions in the living and office spaces of the Hoffmanns."<sup>3</sup>

Not only does this encapsulate the conceptual orientation of the Sammlung Hoffmann, distinguishing it from the art spaces of other private collectors that are showcased in the guidebook, what also comes to the fore when comparing the two quotations is the changeful history of the neighbourhood in which the collection was established, and with it a role that the Hoffmanns' project is often said to have played in the socioeconomic structural shifts that took place in the neighbourhood during the 1990s. The fact that the art guide was reprinted within just a few years attests as much to a growing interest in these art venues as to an almost exponential increase in the number of such establishments founded since the turn of the millennium, many of which were short-lived. The art historian and cul-

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<sup>1</sup> Erika Hoffmann-Koenige in conversation with the author, Berlin, 12 Oct. 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Heckmüller 2019, p. 124.

<sup>3</sup> Heckmüller 2011, p. 104.

tural manager Gerda Ridler, in what is likely the most extensive study of the phenomenon thus far, even goes so far as to speak of a situation “that is new and singular in the approximately 200-year history of the institution of the museum: never before have so many exhibition spaces been founded by private individuals.”<sup>4</sup> The phenomenon has been referred to as a “wave of newly established private museums”<sup>5</sup> or a “boom of private museums”<sup>6</sup> in the past twenty years, mostly in the arts sections of newspapers and comparable media products, where it has certainly counted among the most frequently or at least very prominently discussed topics.<sup>7</sup> Written with the inflections of cultural criticism, the growth of privately-run art spaces which are nevertheless open to the public has repeatedly been presented in these outlets as a prime example of how museums are once more finding themselves in crisis. With the rising influence of the market on the process of value creation as well as a broadened interest in contemporary tendencies, the significance of private collectors and art owners had also increased in the course of the twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> The private collections rendered public are often invoked in this context as signs of the atrophy of the authoritative status and sovereignty of the actual publicly-run museums and, more fundamentally still, are interpreted as a symptomatic attack on the democratic stronghold of the idea of the “public museum”. Mention has often been made of tax benefits which are available in Germany in connection with art and cultural assets that are made public and donated, just as there has been talk of a neoliberal cultural politics – particularly in the 1980s and following reunification – that has supposedly attempted to completely detach the financial and ideational support of the arts from the public purse, seeking to put it under the aegis of the private sector. For

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<sup>4</sup> Ridler 2012, p. 10. As early as 2010, the International Committee for Museums and Collections of Modern Art (CIMAM) at its annual conference established that privately-run museums significantly outnumber publicly-funded museums internationally, cf. Watson 2010. For a list of private museums and private exhibition spaces in the German-speaking world since the beginning of the twentieth century, cf. Ridler 2012; Heckmüller 2011, 2019. For a selection of further, international, private museums and exhibition spaces see Larry’s List Ltd. and AMMA 2016; BMW Group and Independent Collectors 2018; Bechtler and Imhof 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Liebs 2009, p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> Voss 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. for ex. Kuhn 2001; Liebs 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. for ex. Moulin and Costa 1992; White and White 1993.

the Chief Art Editor of the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* Niklas Maak, these internationalized “private museums” of collector giants such as François Pinault and Wiktor Pintschuk even resemble “one-man cartels”<sup>9</sup>, since they, after all, are embedded in owner-operated value creation chains consisting of funding initiatives, collaborations between public institutions and commercial galleries as well as – in the case of Pinault – the auction house Christie’s. For Maak, but also for others, such collecting activities become a symbol – and a cautionary one at that – of a creeping degeneration from a cultural landscape informed by educated middle class values to a neo-feudal representational system of the super-rich in the world at large and within the borders of Germany as well. Approximately four decades after Bourdieu’s study of “the fine differences”,<sup>10</sup> private collectors, after artists and curators, are largely considered to be the “new stars of the art business”.<sup>11</sup> Some say they share their art holdings with the public only out of a desire for a self-representation that can either be pure or else spurred on by economic speculation.<sup>12</sup> In any case, the times seem long gone when a museum director such as Cologne’s Gerd von der Osten, speaking at the occasion of an extensive loan from the holdings of the Aachen collector couple Irene and Peter Ludwig in the late 1960s, was able to announce in a relatively innocent manner: “The collector leads the way.”<sup>13</sup> At the occasion of the integration of the collection holdings of Heinz Berggruen and Erich Marx into the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin and the contemporaneous realization of the Sammlung Hoffmann venue in 1996, the art critic and author Peter Herbstreuth wrote, “Private collectors are gaining ground.” Here, the collectors and their inventory did not appear to him – the way they likely still did for von der Osten – as museum-supporting organizations which, in keeping with Pomian, help the museum “follow the changes in taste and [...] move forward into the future.”<sup>14</sup> Rather, he was addressing the aggressive presence of a new generation of collectors who in this country, at the latest with the activities of the Ludwigs, “define the cultural archive among themselves, [...] [establish] what is given

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<sup>9</sup> Maak 2011, here p. 51.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Bourdieu 2016 [French edition 1979].

<sup>11</sup> Ullrich 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Zillig 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Osten 1969.

<sup>14</sup> Pomian 1993 [French original ed. 1988], also Wolff-Thomsen and Kuhrau 2011.

museum consecration and [...] [have] capital [at their disposal] which sifts out that which is to be remembered.”<sup>15</sup> This has become the widely accepted perception of the public action taken by a contemporary body of collectors. On one side of the coin, there is a museum representative like Peter-Klaus Schuster, who, when looking back at his time in office as the Director General of the Berlin museums – nearly ten years, beginning in 1999 – characterized his work with the leitmotif, “we collect collectors.”<sup>16</sup> In this way, he was ultimately declaring not collected objects but the figures behind them to be the cultural asset. And on the other side of the coin, we find numerous owners of private “Kunstkammers”, who prefer to create their own set of rules for how their agglomerations will be handled than to enter into lengthy negotiations with the public.<sup>17</sup> Between these two sides, there is the whole range of opinions that are reflected in the media, describing by turns how “public private collections” have led to an enrichment and diversification or else to an impoverishment and monotonization of the museum landscape and art reception. This debate moves in waves, is resumed again and again and often in a heated manner, and it shapes these private enterprises in the public perception: while they differ considerably from one another in terms of their conceptualization and organization, they are characterized as the same, are identified as a uniform phenomenon of the same origin.

The “Sammlung Hoffmann” opened its doors in September of 1997 in a factory and residential complex built in the last third of the nineteenth century between Sophienstrasse and Gipsstrasse in the east of Berlin.<sup>18</sup> Though this happened before any trend could be diagnosed,<sup>19</sup> the conversion project, just like the move of the Hoffmanns, who were textile entrepreneurs from the Rhineland, to Berlin – once again the capital city for all of Germany – has been taken to exemplify the same socioeconomic dynamic that has driven the discussion about privately-run

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<sup>15</sup> Herbstreuth 1994, here p. 420.

<sup>16</sup> Kuhn 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. for ex. Falckenberg 2002.

<sup>18</sup> The complex was built to house the sewing machine and later bicycle chain factory of H. Mehlich. After the Second World War, the factory was used for the production and servicing of technical medical devices, until 1993.

<sup>19</sup> At this time, only Ingvild Goetz in Munich offered a systematic public showing of privately-owned contemporary art holdings in Germany. In 1993, she had her own exhibition hall built in the garden of her private villa in Munich by the now famous architects Herzog & de Meuron. Cf. Wimmer 2009.

art venues, a discussion that has really only gained momentum since the turn of the last century. Incidentally, this dynamic – the privatization of the public space – has been ongoing since the early modern period.<sup>20</sup> With a narrower gaze on the vanishing line between Cologne and Berlin, the relocation of the Hoffmanns often serves as an example of an increasingly eastward orientation of the art market/art world in reunited Germany in particular<sup>21</sup> as well as of a gold-rush mood arising from investment opportunities in “New Berlin”<sup>22</sup> in general. In the above-quoted article by Herbstreuth, he recapitulates a conversation with Rolf Hoffmann, who by his own account quickly put to rest his ideas of an exhibition hall in Cologne’s Rheinauhafen (an area of urban regeneration) because relations within the city “according to Hoffmann’s generalizing statement [were] too sluggish.”<sup>23</sup> And – as the author himself presumed – the field in question in the Rhineland cultural landscape had already been thoroughly ploughed and tilled.<sup>24</sup> In an even more constricted view of the location chosen by the collector couple for their art exhibition, the venue christened as the “Sophie-Gips-Höfe” (“Sophie-Gips Courtyards”), commentators generally speak about a gentrification of the proletarian residential area, its development into a trendy neighbourhood in the 1990s and early 2000s. In the version of her introduction that was published first and uses the term “Scheunenviertel” for the location of the Sammlung Hoffmann in the western part of the Spandauer Vorstadt neighbourhood, Heckmüller, without being aware of it we must presume, makes use of a strategy employed by the National Socialists. The regime expanded the definition of the east-end “Scheunenviertel” around today’s Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, which in the early twentieth century had fallen into disrepute due to crime and poverty, using it to refer to the entire Spandauer Vorstadt so as to vilify the predominantly Jewish milieu to the west. Since the 1990s, the two designations have often been used synonymously for the newly developing “creative centre” in the city<sup>25</sup> that seemed to be finding expression above all in the

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<sup>20</sup> For a selection of theoretical primary literature that consistently plays a central role in the discussion in this context, cf. Habermas 2015 [original ed. 1962]; Arendt 1994 [original ed. 1958] Sennett 2013 [original ed. 1977]; Rössler 2001.

<sup>21</sup> Rozell Hopkins 1997.

<sup>22</sup> van Parys 1999.

<sup>23</sup> Herbstreuth 1994, here p. 420.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

“Sophie-Gips-Höfe” with their “mixed-use concept”, where dwelling, working and exhibiting all happen in the same spaces.

Not long after the inauguration in February 1998, a statement in the daily *Berliner Tageszeitung* read, “This is not a typical Berlin town square with a Zillean atmosphere”.<sup>26</sup> But nor was it a tourist magnet created by a giant publicity machine, a pure investment property like the large-scale Hackesche Höfe nearby. By their own account, the Hoffmanns in 1994 were awarded the bid for the property, which was managed by the Treuhand agency,<sup>27</sup> mainly because they, unlike their competitors, wanted to inhabit the industrial building themselves, which was located in the middle of the property and stood empty at the time of the invitation to tender.<sup>28</sup> During the renovation, they were able to find tenants for the remaining available space in the building, most of whom were active in the cultural sector in the widest sense of the word. As early as mid 1996, before the arrival of the Hoffmanns, the first business people Nicole Hackert and Bruno Brunnet of the Charlottenburg gallery Contemporary Fine Arts (CFA in the following) moved their presentation spaces into the ground floor of the building. Following soon after were such enterprises as the American-inspired Barcomi's, a combination of snack bar and café, a jazz radio station, and the stage and film agency Players which is still located there today; already back then it represented young stars like Nina Hoss, Til Schweiger and Moritz Bleibtreu. As a further element of the Hoffmanns' concept for the space, a live-in artist studio was set up and made available free of charge to emerging young artists. Also, a side room accessible from the inner courtyard was made available to different parties as an open space for projects and exhibitions, and it continues to be used in this way today. “It was an interesting biotope and a first in Germany”, recalls Brunnet, who expanded his

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Geisel 1981; Steglich and Kratz 1993; Becker et al. 2008; Feyerabend et al. 2016; Thon 2006.

<sup>26</sup> Gerdes 1998, here p. 47. T.N. A reference to the Berlin draughtsman Heinrich Zille, who depicted colourful, usually working-class scenes that expressed both local patriotism and social criticism.

<sup>27</sup> The *Treuhandanstalt* (usually abbreviated to Treuhand) was founded toward the end of the GDR and was a public-law institution in Germany charged with the complex task of privatizing or shutting down the publicly-owned enterprises of the GDR in accordance with the principles of the social market economy. Sales to mostly West German investors, deals within industries, and mass lay-offs characterized the Treuhand's crisis-fraught business practice in the same measure as outraged protests, political controversies and public scandals about, for example, misuse of subsidies and economic crime. Cf. Böick 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Erika Hoffmann-Koenige in Pfeffer 2012, p. 12.

gallery spaces on the property multiple times until moving them in 2006. He also ended up living there with his family for a number of years. Brunnet describes how, because encounters happened each and every day, an amicable and cooperative relationship emerged between many tenants all of whom were at the outset of their careers, and thus opportunities arose for joint undertakings. For example, the film producer Claus Boje, who, like them, lived there, cast the CFA artist Jonathan Meese, who also lived in one of the wings, in the hit film *Sonnenallee* (1999). For his part, Meese caused a sensation in 1998 during the Berlin Biennale with his performance in the neighbouring former postal service building on Oranienburger Strasse. Hackert agreed with Brunnet, saying "many things simply happened spontaneously and because of people's paths crossing in the courtyards while they were working or busy with something, and in the nearby Auguststrasse as well." He added, "relevant places like the gallery Eigen + Art or Kunst-Werke existed there before us after all." Brunnet's view is that "The Hoffmanns didn't influence all of this very much [...] but they did make a profound impression: here we had big players arriving from the Rhineland and choosing of all places this spot in the dilapidated and neglected east district to establish themselves. It was really amazing, whether art was involved or not."<sup>29</sup>

Moved by the experience of the fall of the wall and expecting a public discussion "about the base values of our two societies in the east and west"<sup>30</sup>, the Hoffmanns wanted to participate actively in the approaching shifts and structural changes: "We believed [...] that it was not necessary to orient our life on plans we had made in the past or else on fortuities, but rather that we could decide for ourselves what would happen next."<sup>31</sup> From this understanding quickly grew the idea of a "Kunsthalle for Dresden" through which, instead of "an antithesis of art and commerce, as most German museums command [...], the economy [was to] become visible precisely as a basis and as a part of culture."<sup>32</sup> The planned new building, which was to be designed by the artist Frank Stella and erected on a plot provided

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<sup>29</sup> Bruno Brunnet and Nicole Hackert in conversation with the author, Berlin, 23 Oct. 2020.

<sup>30</sup> Erika Hoffmann-Koenige in Pfeffer 2012, p. 16.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Erika Hoffmann-Koenige in Hoffmann and Förderverein Kunsthalle Dresden 1996, here p. 16.

by the public sector, was to be host to economically self-sufficient exhibition activity – much as was actually the case with the project realized in Berlin just a little later. This was the long-term plan, which involved the leasing of integrated commercial floor space and the promise of loans from an international “pool of private collections”. Although the realization was ratified on 29 October 1992 by the Dresden city council, the ministerial bureaucracy voiced resistance, particularly to the expressive formal language of the architecture. In the middle of 1993, the Hoffmanns withdrew from the project, turning their sights to Berlin instead, where they acted with the same attitude and motivation but this time autonomously, organizing the project entirely on their own.<sup>33</sup>

For more than twenty years now, the Hoffmanns’ art endeavours taking place in two of the upper floors have been resting on the foundation – both financially and structurally – of the lower floors with their commercial activity. In the semantically broad field of the private, we can also truly say, as Heckmüller did, that this is “likely the most private of all publicly accessible collections” because, having opened every Saturday since it was established, this art ensemble also serves as the Hoffmanns’ living and working spaces. They themselves speak of a “lived-in collection” – something that, as the art historian Eugen Blume has correctly noted, “far beyond the arranged installation, suggests a social-spiritual dimension which understands art as the means by which we live.”<sup>34</sup> Its purpose is not to be “exhibited” for representative purposes. Once every year, the couple “make themselves at home”, engaging not in a refurnishing but certainly in a complete reconfiguration of the spaces, delving into and exploring their holdings. Through the invitation to participate, which is extended to all equally, this “dialogue *with* art” seems to expand, becoming a polyphonic “exchange *through* and *via* art”. Erika Hoffmann-Koenige has continued to uphold this principle, even after the death of Rolf Hoffmann in 2001. Amid the constant change in the collection’s urban and social environment, the spatial parameters and conditions that were put in place when the Hoffmanns moved in – and which have applied to every installation shown here since – have remained largely unchanged. Thus, it would appear that the Sammlung Hoffmann has been countering the feared “privatization of the public

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Hoffmann and Förderverein Kunsthalle Dresden 1996.

<sup>34</sup> Blume 2016, here p. 5.



space” with an “opening of the private space”, which has been sustained consistently for more than two decades:

“Today the centre of the city is so developed that many artists and galleries have moved on to other quarters. Unlike those nomads, I as a citizen feel responsible for the place we settled in. I try to maintain the private yet open character of both the courtyards and the collection, for both the art community and the broader public.”<sup>35</sup>

The retrospective view provided here of the Hoffmanns’ exhibition activity in the Sophie-Gips-Höfe is occasioned by the 2018 donation of a large part of the Sammlung Hoffmann to the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden as well as by the approaching closure of the Berlin spaces to the public in 2022. In the following, I will no more than borrow from the title of Martin Heidegger’s legendary 1951 lecture when investigating the *BUILDING*, *DWELLING* and *THINKING* involved in the Sammlung Hoffmann, rather than carrying out an existentialist or perhaps etymological examination.<sup>36</sup> In three sections guided by these key terms, I will examine the successive development of the collection concept. Beginning with the observation that the public display of the holdings not only took place here in the early days, but also continued at this location almost exclusively until the donation to Dresden,<sup>37</sup> I will consider the interplay of “dwelling” and “exhibiting” as identity-building factors for a certain sum of art objects present in the spatial setting of the Sophie-Gips-Höfe as they developed and took shape as the “Sammlung Hoffmann”. While the couple was well-connected due to their diverse engagement in the art world even before the opening in 1997, and known to a wide public

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<sup>35</sup> Erika Hoffmann-Koenige in Blumenstein 2011, here p. 57.

<sup>36</sup> Heidegger 1994.

<sup>37</sup> Besides smaller presentations at exhibition booths, the Sammlung Hoffmann in its entirety was only shown in other locations twice until the donation to Dresden was made. Titled *Mit dem Fahrrad zur Milchstraße. Zeitgenössische Kunst aus der Sammlung Hoffmann, Berlin*, it was presented at the *Kunsthalle im Lipsiusbau*, Dresden from 20 Jun. – 20 Sep. 2009, and, titled *Erika Hoffmann-Koenige: Meine Auswahl für Atlas Sztuki aus der Sammlung Hoffmann*, it was shown in the exhibition space of the *ATLAS-GRUPPE Atlas Sztuki*, Łódź (Poland) from 15 Apr. – 05 Jun. 2016. Both exhibitions were curated by Erika Hoffmann-Koenige and for each a catalogue was published, cf. Hoffmann-Koenige and Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden 2009; Atlas Sztuki 2016.

through the well-publicized Kunsthalle project in the Saxon state capital, the collection itself and what it included was at best, as Herbstreuth put it years later, “a rumour”.<sup>38</sup>

### Building

The conversion and renovation of the Sophie-Gips-Höfe emerged from an iterative, object-related planning process and not from a list of requirements fleshed out at the drawing board. It was only after giving up on the idea for Dresden that the Hoffmanns decided to move to Berlin, art in tow, and thus it was rather on the spur of the moment that they, as experienced building owners who had overseen the refurbishment of historic building fabric before, began to take all the steps necessary for the realization. It was not until their purchase of the property in 1994 that they sought recommendations for potential architects and, after hearing the endorsement of their friend Kristin Feireiss, promptly chose the young architecture firm Becker Gewers Kühn & Kühn, which had just been founded in Berlin.<sup>39</sup> With Swantje Kühn as project manager, the vision for the project, which was not defined more closely than “life with art”, began to take architectural shape in an entirely step-by-step manner and with the constant input of the collector couple. When the planning began, all that was known was that the tenement house bordering Sophienstrasse was to remain intact. On the wishes of the city government, a further tenement with a storefront and underground car park was to be built on a gap site on Gipsstrasse, across from the first building. The Hoffmanns themselves wanted to move with their art exhibition into the upper floors of the manufacturing plant, which was located in the middle of the property. The necessary conversion of industrial architecture into residential spaces would prompt the

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<sup>38</sup> Peter Herbstreuth in Pfeffer 2012, p. 15.

<sup>39</sup> The firm *Becker Gewers Kühn & Kühn* was founded in Berlin in 1991, after the architects Eike Becker, Georg Gewers as well as Oliver and Swantje Kühn got to know each other when they were working for the London offices *Norman Foster Associates* and *Richard Rogers Partnership*. The firm would become well-known when they received two first prizes in major contests for project realization, once in 1992 (*Hauptverwaltung der Verbundnetz Gas AG* in Leipzig) and again in 1995 (*Hauptverwaltung der Berliner Volksbank eG* in Berlin). Kristin Feireiss (b. 1942) is a German curator and co-founder of the architectural forum *Aedes*, which was established in Berlin in 1980. From 1995 to 2006, *Aedes* ran the exhibition space *Aedes East* in the *Hackesche Höfe*, in which the architectural projects of *Becker Gewers Kühn & Kühn* were presented under the title *Mix\_t* from 10 Oct. – 08 Nov. 1995. Erika Hoffmann-Koenige gave the opening talk for this exhibition. Cf. *Aedes East* 1995.

greatest number of design considerations and interventions. For about two weeks, the planning team set up shop in the empty rooms and as a first step established a main entrance at the east end of the innermost courtyard, with the aim of defining and developing all further areas from this starting point.<sup>40</sup> It appears that for the design of both the interior and exterior space, the prevailing strategy was to respond to and integrate the pre-existing fabric rather than overwriting it with a new formal language.<sup>41</sup> The façade, for example, was merely cleaned, and the windows, some of which dated back to the Wilhelmine period and could be distinguished from East German fenestration due to their grilles, were only replaced when the originals were too greatly damaged and could not be preserved. But likely one of the most impressive examples communicating the atmospheric impact of a preservation and accentuation of industrial surroundings for exhibited art is the former boiler room, which was converted into an entrance hall. Framed by “smoke-stained” wall surfaces and cement flooring polished to a sheen, Richard Serra’s rusting metal curve *Niederrhein* (Lower Rhine, 1983), positioned under an unclad Prussian vaulted ceiling, forms the centre of the room, opening with a testimony to the topographical origins of the collection (fig. 1).<sup>42</sup>

Oliver Kühn has summarized the Hoffmanns’ instructions, which his office implemented, as “threefold: keep what is good, only remove what is truly disruptive, and make additions where absolutely necessary.”<sup>43</sup> This was a way of going about things that was economical in every respect and had financial advantages in addition to the effect it achieved for the space: as Frank Drewes wrote praisingly in the magazine *Deutsche BauZeitschrift*, “Using an approach that sought to pare down and clear, it was possible to convert the existing building fabric for 1000 German marks per square metre.”<sup>44</sup> He found that this approach to planning reflected the originally very improvised character of the work-life symbiosis that

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<sup>40</sup> Swantje and Oliver Kühn in conversation with the author, Berlin, 04 Nov. 2020.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. also Drewes 1999.

<sup>42</sup> The sculpture *Niederrhein* (1983) was originally completed by the artist Richard Serra to be installed in the garden of the Hoffmanns’ house in Mönchengladbach in the Lower Rhine region, where they lived until they sold their fashion company *Van Laack* and moved to Cologne in 1988.

<sup>43</sup> Oliver Kühn in conversation with the author, Berlin, 04 Nov. 2020.

<sup>44</sup> Drewes 1999, here p. 52.

took shape in disused industrial spaces in the context of economic necessity during the pre-war period, particularly in the British Isles and North America. Only in the last third of the twentieth century did this practice develop into a “loft lifestyle” that involved expensive renovation and was synonymous with the fashionable, deliberately chosen way of life of the creative and successful. Thus, it appears that the Hoffmanns were practising understatement rather than ostentatious self-presentation with their instructions for a cautious renovation of the third and fourth floors, “where bumps were not smoothed over, cracks were not hidden and everything that was functional was preserved”<sup>45</sup>. This is a mindset that according to Drewes extends to the aesthetics of the formal and material vocabulary of the enclosure in brushed aluminium and glass that was built on top of these “loft floors” for the purpose of evening out the formerly heterogenous roofscape (fig. II): “The details are reduced to a minimum and never obtrude. The shell is cool, sober and elegant, forming something of a frame for the art and for the ‘views of the capital’”.<sup>46</sup> While for Drewes, the architectural language, whose reduction and transparency was shaped by Richard Rogers and Norman Foster in the London office, always expresses a primary concern of the collectors – here the intention above all to provide space for artistic creation – Birgit Sonna from the newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung* recognized in the building’s glazed top storey nothing more than the characteristics of an exclusive “penthouse”. For her, the cubature seems to be mainly about the appropriation – consummated in the neo-feudal gesture of superiority – of a formerly alternative concept of dwelling<sup>47</sup>: “While in the lower floors, cafés, galleries, shops and offices ensure the Hoffmanns’ commercial success, the [couple] live like lords of the manor in the two floors above.”<sup>48</sup> Even for Sonna though, this form of dwelling indicates the most substantial difference between this collection and collections that are made accessible in other ways, although the conclusions she draws from this regarding the Hoffmanns’ intentions still stand to be questioned: “While egomaniacal collectors often care first and

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Bentmann and Müller 1992 [original ed. 1970], here especially the section “Trabantenstadt und Penthaus (Exkurs)”, p. 152ff. Graham 2016.

<sup>48</sup> Sonna 1998.

foremost about having a monument erected for themselves in the form of a museum, the Hoffmanns seem to be wanting to get comfortable with their art."<sup>49</sup>

The "Sophie-Gips-Höfe" proves to be a place where disjuncts, without hierarchizations, including moral ones, (can) stand side by side on equal footing and spark discussion for precisely this reason. This quality is also expressed spatially and structurally in the newly created connection between Sophienstrasse and Gipsstrasse. Pedestrians can enter the grounds through gateways on either side and pass through, something that suspends the classic division of "house and courtyard" as the private domain, and "street and square" as public space<sup>50</sup> and which eschews the identification of "show sides". In the exterior space in particular it is the exhibited art that has a defining role in creating these connections. Thus, for example, Gunda Förster's glowing blue, red and yellow neon installation *5 DURCHGÄNGE* (5 PASSAGES, 1996–97) illuminates the passageways, marking them as such (fig. III). And Thomas Locher's *Wunsch und Wille/(Entweder/Oder)* (Wish and Will/(Either/Or), 1996), featuring "contrastive" word pairs painted on an exterior wall, prompts visitors to pause, and keeps open the direction and conclusion of a possible conversation, eluding a determination as either "binding or non-committal", "privileged or disadvantaged", "without conscience or taking responsibility", "sensible or senseless" (fig. IV).

### Dwelling

In many respects, using private spaces as exhibition spaces, and thus designing them for this purpose, seems especially appealing. For the organizer, there are numerous reasons why opening up locations that are not commonly accessible and that are considered unusual for the contemplation of art is attractive, just as there are many different reasons to visit such locations. Because of the depth of meaning attached to "the private", the organizational, formal and ideational pos-

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> On the continuation of this principle, a shaping element of Berlin's construction activity in the 1990s, by Hans Stimmann, Senate Building Director in the Senate Offices for Building and Housing and, for some time State Secretary of Planning at the Senate Department for Urban Development, Environment and Technology (1991–2006), cf. Stimmann and Albers 2009; Düwel and Mönninger 2011.

sibilities of defining such exhibition spaces prove to be just as diverse. They usually only become comprehensible when they are contrasted to institutionalized forms or professionalized structures of exhibiting during a given exhibition event. The street or else spaces that pursue a different, "experimental" self-understanding are often seen as "off-spaces" that seek to distance themselves from the routine forms and content of exhibitions.<sup>51</sup> "Private" art spaces are also created in the context of social systems in which a politically motivated art doctrine predominates, and in which these counter-current examples can only be shown in a setting that is either largely protected from direct intervention from an administrative office or else is concealed.<sup>52</sup> There may be both monetary and time-saving advantages, not only for commercial galleries, in presenting an artistic programme in the organizers' dwelling. As a display strategy, a private ambience and domestic surroundings are also found in established places of exhibition such as museums. Often modelled on the interiors of noble or upper-class art collectors, the "period room" offers a genre-spanning presentation of artistic objects in an interior whose decoration more or less matches the art's time of origin, thus promising visitors an experience in social-historical reception conditions that are as authentic as possible, or appear to be.<sup>53</sup> Besides this, the increasing number of exhibitions that have been mounted in the houses and flats of private individuals in recent times also seems in itself to bespeak the particular appeal of such locations.<sup>54</sup> The "home" that is "opened" in this way not only generates extensive referential possibilities for art, it also seems to express a possible exhibitionist desire on the part of its residents as well as a voyeuristic intention on the part of its visitors.<sup>55</sup>

The "Sammlung Hoffmann" in its hybrid character as a residential and exhibition space appears to bring together many aspects of these presentational modes and concepts, and yet it does not seem to conform to any one of them entirely. For

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<sup>51</sup> Cf. Möntmann 2002.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. for ex. Fiedler 2013.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Martin et al. 2006; Schneemann and Biedermann 2019; Söll 2019.

<sup>54</sup> For repeatedly cited examples for the second half of the twentieth century, cf. Phillips and Kaiser 2018; Hoet 1995. For a summarizing description of various early forms and prototypes of the "private exhibition" and an analysis of contemporary variations of the same in most recent times, cf. Larisch 2019.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Funke 2006; Selle 1999.

example, the annually changing installation can certainly be understood in terms of a temporary exhibition format, albeit one that stretches the idea of “temporary”. With respect to the duration and considering that all exhibition items come from in-house holdings, these exhibitions most closely resemble a medium-term collection display in a museum.<sup>56</sup> But unlike in a museum, there has always been a complete foregoing of didactic elements such as labels or a chronological and thematic description of the selection criteria, for example in the form of wall texts or headings with a specific topic. The rooms that are awash in daylight, where artworks are shown without cordons or display cases, appear to be following not the standards of public conservation efforts but the standards of usage as a right that comes with private ownership.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, the visual impression that visitors frequently receive from the interior spaces corresponds not so much to conventionalized ideas of traditional dwellings as to the idea of a gallery space in a museum that is largely cleared of everyday objects and everyday functions, concentrating instead on the pure contemplation of art.<sup>58</sup> With only the addition of seating here and there, what meets the eye in the approximately 1,500 square metres of exhibition space is one thing above all: art. While unlike the bedroom, the kitchen is visible, both are located beyond the collection circuit. But integrated in the sequence of rooms are employee desks, the collector’s office, a freestanding “library box” whose exterior walls serve as additional hanging space, and two relatively small darkened rooms designed for the presentation of video works, one of which was turned into an installation by the artist Pipilotti Rist in the year the Hoffmanns moved in. It is this room, which reflects not so much the usual, daily activities but speaks of interaction with art and was indeed created from out of this interaction, that makes many guests somewhat doubtful.<sup>59</sup> With regard to the hole that Rist was allowed to cut with a router in the newly laid floorboards for her work *Selbstlos im Lavabad* (Selfless In The Bath Of Lava, 1994) even before the living quarters cum exhibition space opened, the journalist Patricia Parsow voiced a cer-

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<sup>56</sup> Cf. Habsburg-Lothringen 2012.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Rössler 2001.

<sup>58</sup> For the likely most famous criticism of such a staging principle, cf. Kemp 1996.

<sup>59</sup> One of the most frequently asked questions that I noted down when going on tours of the collection was whether Erika Hoffmann-Koenige truly lived on site.

tain distrust back in 1998, which appears to have stubbornly endured to the present day: "A faint doubt remains, however: you're supposed to be able to live here? Can you imagine putting up with a hole in the floor?"<sup>60</sup>

In the extensive literature on the phenomenology of dwelling, the point has often been made that a "minimalist chic", which one may see reflected in the Sammlung Hoffmann with its whitewashed walls and reduced furnishings, comes from an image of residential architecture that – shaped by the avant-garde architects of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – confronts an aesthetics of power found in the opulently outfitted interior spaces of previous centuries with the new ideal of a room that is standardized and reduced to the essentials of its functionality.<sup>61</sup> Here, it is especially the spaciousness – amplified by reduction – of interior volumes, which since the beginning of industrial urbanization have needed to accommodate more and more people, that still today betokens "true" luxury. Just recently, Christian Demand elaborated on the effects that unfold for residents when "artworks" – which by definition are elevated objects, distinct from ordinary objects – are introduced into such "emptied" ascetic spatial contexts as additional enhancers of an "ennoblement programme of staged material abstinence and a pathos of exquisiteness",<sup>62</sup> provided that the interior is read – as has been common since modernism – as a sign of individuated subjectivity, that is as an interior in which the individual takes shape and is reflected, by which the individual is determined and which he or she also uses as a refuge from the outside world.<sup>63</sup> In the Sammlung Hoffmann, the two-storey "hall" that visitors enter at the end of each of the tours through the collection is the space that is best described by this account (fig. V). Here, newspapers and magazines that lie in piles by the fireplace may be read as signs of day-to-day activity. The long table in the middle could be seen to indicate the room's usage as a representative dining room or parlour, and in conjunction with the very high ceilings and the exhibited art could be interpreted as signalling an aesthetic (sense of) loftiness on the part of the

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<sup>60</sup> Parsow 1998, here p. 18.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. for ex. Häußermann and Siebel 2000; Döllmann 2002.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Demand 2020.

<sup>63</sup> For the interpretive contexts of the development of human "inwardness" using the example of pictorial representations of the interior since the early modern period, cf. Söntgen and Lajer-Burcharth 2016.



residents. But what is astonishing about the Sammlung Hoffmann is that the opposite is the case: it is not the great extent to which the members of the Hoffmann family represent themselves through and by means of the interior, how they place themselves in a context with the art, that is astonishing; rather, it is the great extent to which they take a back seat to the exhibited art. And this is in no way carried out with a patronizing gesture of self-sacrifice or even self-denial.

Precedence is given at the Sammlung Hoffmann not so much to the affects and effects of exhibiting art in domestic surroundings but to social interaction as prompted by the artistic object. Recalling professionalized exhibition activities, the operation and systematic accessibility of the venue do not serve to elevate the collection to the level of a museum, even if the compulsory donning of carpet slippers over one's own footwear before the space is entered recalls the protective measures of cultural architectural monuments such as palaces and castles. The collector's idea behind the slippers is to prevent too much haste, promoting instead an alert and mindful attitude toward the art.<sup>64</sup> In this strict regulation, the controlling element of the private comes significantly to the fore, but instead of developing forms of privileged visual instruction, it seems that what is emphasized is the proposal-like nature of the subjective conception that can be experienced here. Those wishing to visit the Sammlung Hoffmann must have a confirmed reservation and ring the buzzer to be let in. Upon entering, all visitors are asked to sign a guest book, which not only divests them of their anonymity but also compels them – at least symbolically – to follow the house rules. The rooms may not be entered individually but rather there are 90-minute tours in small groups that begin every half an hour between 11 am and 4 pm. They are accompanied by a so-called "docent", who is not so much to act as a tour guide but to stimulate discussion as a moderator. Though of course no one is compelled to do so, participants are invited to express their thoughts and observations about the art, to ask questions and to take a position.<sup>65</sup> Further, the collector Erika Hoffmann-Koenige has since 1997 made a point of being home every Saturday, making herself available with very few exceptions. She meets most groups at the end of their tour, offering a glass of water and engaging in a discussion with them.<sup>66</sup> In this way, she assumes

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<sup>64</sup> Erika Hoffmann-Koenige in Grimm 2019.

<sup>65</sup> These expectations are pointed out on the website, cf. <https://sammlung-hoffmann.de/index.php?p=besuch>, accessed 11 Dec. 2020.

responsibility for what people have observed, for what they ideally have had an animated discussion about, and this in turn opens a potential for direct criticism. Even if in all of this the prerogatives of the hostess continue to hold sway and even if in the vast majority of cases, one can count on the deference and affability of an art-loving audience – whose members, having left their names in the guestbook, will maintain a polite distance – the opening of this private space on Saturdays means something other than “getting comfortable” with the art, as Sonna assumed. At these times, the Sammlung Hoffmann relinquishes its domestic status as a quiet place of refuge and allows uncertainty to enter. It is precisely this fact and the moment described above that reflects the attitude and concerns of the Hoffmanns, more than any interior object or work of art. Consistently, this is also an appeal to visitors, a specific demand that consumerist behaviour be abandoned: “Against comfort in thinking and the illusion of permanence art must be a thorn.”<sup>67</sup>

### Thinking

Sometimes mutating into cultural-political controversy, it is not only the morally-charged debate about the public presentation of private art holdings that demonstrates the depth and breadth of the value-generating network in which collections are generally enmeshed, a network in which they gain their own meaning and in which they likewise create meaning. The “collection form” also fundamentally contributes to the generation and determination of the collection’s economic, cultural and ideational status – and equally to the respective validity of objects in western capitalist societies – just as it draws its own value from this status and influences further processes of value creation.<sup>68</sup> In ever different ways, variable techniques of accumulation and organization have furthermore brought forth knowledge of objects, have inferred knowledge from them, and have shaped or

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<sup>66</sup> The “docents” are encouraged to integrate a conversation with the collector into each tour, but it is always up to them if and when they do so, and how they do so. Erika Hoffmann-Koenige in conversation with the author, Berlin, 12 Oct. 2020. Naturally, this information and approach applies to the time before the coronavirus pandemic. Even though Erika Hoffmann-Koenige has not been meeting with groups since the first lockdown, she has continued to be present every Saturday to the extent that the collection can be opened amidst restrictions.

<sup>67</sup> Erika Hoffmann-Koenige in Brors and Schreiber 2020.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Boltanski and Esquerre 03/04 2016.

determined this knowledge. Understood in this way, the synoptic notion of “collecting” can be said to describe above all the variable relationships between people and the world of things: how these relationships have taken shape at different times in the past and present depending on the social and political conditions, to which ends they have been used, and in which ways they have been experienced. Like dwelling in the sense of “making oneself at home with the things in the world”, collecting, too, creates and affirms identities and can thus function as commentary “on other ways of dealing with both objects and persons.”<sup>69</sup> Here it is always the performative act of exhibiting, the way in which a collection is opened and communicated to the public, that fully brings these meaningful potentialities of collecting to fruition and makes them apparent. It is only when the perceptible work of amassing, ordering, structuring and other means of narrating about objects has been carried out that a mass of things achieves the unity of a collection. Some of these constitutive processes which played a role in the development of the “Sammlung Hoffmann” have been examined here with regard to spatial-structural factors above all. Another fruitful approach for future research would be to hone in on the mutual influences of exhibiting and collecting practice, because after all it appears that priorities have definitively shifted in this respect for Erika Hoffmann-Koenige: “I increasingly have an imaginary public in mind. I try to communicate to others why I put together this or that, and the context at this point is usually more important to me than a specific artwork.”<sup>70</sup> It speaks to the special character of the Sammlung Hoffmann – as has hopefully come to light in this essay – that it has never sought to define matters with finality, especially not the artworks it contains. Although it carries more meaning than most other products of human activity, the Sammlung Hoffmann exhibits works without tying them down in an interpretive act or tying itself to them, creating in this way space for the changeable position of all and any significance: “The collection was never intended as a monument but instead is alive, and stays alive in this form for as long as we live.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Cf. Macdonald 2006, here p. 96.

<sup>70</sup> Erika Hoffmann-Koenige in Praschl and Runge 2015, here p. 177

<sup>71</sup> Erika Hoffmann-Koenige in Rohde 2010, p. 92.

Translated from the German by Logan Kennedy and Leonhard Unglaub



fig. I: Richard Serra, "Niederrhein", 1983, corten steel  
foto: Andrea Stappert; courtesy Sammlung Hoffmann, Berlin



fig II: installation I (hall), 1997/1998 A.R. Penck, "Standart Modell (RPM 40)", 1968, aluminium foil; Jean-Michel Basquiat, "Levétation", 1987, acrylic, china marker and oil stick on paper, mounted on canvas; Jean-Michel Basquiat, "untitled", 1987, acrylic on wood crate; Frank Stella, "Of Whales in Paint; in Teeth; in Wood; in Sheet-Iron; in Stone; in Mountains; in Stars (Moby Dick Series chap. 57)", 1990, aluminium, painted courtesy Sammlung Hoffmann, Berlin



fiig III: Gunda Förster, "Fünf Durchgänge (Lichträume in den Durchgängen der Sophie-Gips-Höfe)", 1997 courtesy Sammlung Hoffmann, Berlin





fig IV: Thomas Locher, "Wunsch und Wille / (Entweder/Oder)", 1996  
courtesy Sammlung Hoffmann, Berlin



Ffg V: installation XVI (hall), 2012/13, Katharina Grosse, "Sie trocknen ihre Knie mit einem Kissen", 2012, acrylic spray paint on wall; Katharina Grosse, "ohne Titel", 2011, acrylic on canvas foto: Jens Ziehe; courtesy Sammlung Hoffmann, Berlin



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