

In mid-June, a small contingent made up of dealers, artists and curators boarded a private jet, flying from Art Basel to Hamburg to attend an art event in a parallel dimension: the opening of an exposition devoted to Otto Mühl. The Vienna Actionist never had a real market, turned his back on art altogether in 1971 to lead a commune that grew to hundreds of people, and two decades later, at age 66, started serving seven years in an Austrian prison for statutory rape involving one of the commune's adolescent girls. Now shrunk by osteoporosis and trembling from Parkinson's, Mühl attended the opening, along with his two female companions and some of the commune's young men and women, who played music amateurishly in honour of their leader's 80th birthday.

The very presence of Mühl disquieted many in attendance, and the show itself, displaying the charismatic Mühl at the height of his powers, required strong nerves and an iron stomach. While most exhibits involving the Vienna Actionists have relied on photo stills, this one features 18 films running on large screens and replaying a wide range of the 'actions' Mühl masterminded. Generally shot in documentary style and roughly edited, the videos show a bewildering range of actions including bodies being smeared with paint, foodstuffs and blood; fellatio, cunnilingus, sexual intercourse; S&M both light and heavy; ritualistic beatings; and Mühl inserting a rifle muzzle through a woman's legs and into the foreskin of an acolyte. In arguably the most disturbing sequence, Mühl and a woman Actionist both attempt sexual congress with a goose, before a butcher kills the bird on-camera.

Even for the man who mounted this exhibition, Hamburg collector Harald Falckenberg, this last piece was too much. 'I'm not a lover of Mühl's art,' he admits, 'but this exhibition was so interesting to prepare. I've always liked to show artists who were wrongly "forgotten" by the market, like Öyvind Fahlström, Hanne Darboven, or Klaus Staeck. When you consider Paul McCarthy's work, you must trace backwards through Vito Acconci and Chris Burden to Mühl and the Vienna Actionists, who made important first steps for performance and body art. They wanted to destroy art, the first movement in Europe doing this.'

Ironically, McCarthy's first major retrospective had opened at Munich's Haus Der Kunst only five days before the Mühl show, with several jetloads of art-world insiders airlifted in from the Venice Biennale by galleries Luhring Augustine and Hauser & Wirth. A major McCarthy collector, Falckenberg nonetheless points out that while doing his research for the Mühl show, he discovered that the Californian bad boy once applied to participate with the Vienna Actionists and was refused. Falckenberg hesitates a moment, a smile slowly spreading the corners of his mouth. Then he jabs: 'So I could almost say, "Don't go to Munich. Come to Hamburg and see the original!"' And then the collector laughs, releasing a nearly convulsive explosion of mirth. ▶



**Left:** Harald Falckenberg  
**Right:** Erik Parker, *Come As You Are*, 2000, mixed media on canvas, 42 x 183cm, in the storage depot at the Phoenix Art Foundation Sammlung Falckenberg, Hamburg. In the background, Günther Förg, *Untitled*, 1990, acrylic and lead on wood, 280 x 160cm



# TOUGH DECISIONS

Harald Falckenberg has only been collecting for a decade, but he's already developed a voracious appetite for the most difficult and uncompromising art around. **Marc Spiegler** visited him in Hamburg. Photography by **Ed Reeve**



◀ It's a classic Falckenberg moment, the sort of eruption that has made him notorious on the European scene, where for almost a decade he has been a ferocious buyer of works and an ardent supporter of cultural institutions. His idiosyncratic views – he commonly proclaims 'good markets bring bad art' and compares today's young art phenoms to football stars – have made him infamous (and beloved) in the usually discreet environs of the European art world.

The collector entered the milieu only a decade ago, in a self-confessed state of mid-life crisis, yet he has accumulated a collection that easily ranks among Europe's most unremittingly hard-edged. He buys and promotes artists often classed by the mainstream art world as outrageous, macho, over-the-top or just plain bad – none of which bothers him much. 'The world of art has different types of territories and islands,' Falckenberg explains. 'If you only visit New York or the Côte d'Azur, you always see the same things. To detect something interesting, you have to go to strange and foreign places.'

Over time, Falckenberg's adventuring has earned him respect among other collectors admired for their individualism, including France's Antoine de Galbert and Ingild Goetz of Munich's Sammlung Goetz. 'Harald has a very personal concept of collecting and curating, coming up with crazy ideas and then realising them in shows,' Goetz says. 'He will jump into tough art and exhibit pieces that confront the viewers, shocking them in ways that a normal museum would not.'

Indeed, the collection tends towards artists that challenge and

deride the mores of the art world and society at large. Three groups of artists function as its foundation: the German painters Martin Kippenberger, Albert Oehlen, Georg Herold and Werner Büttner; the Americans Mike Kelley, Richard Prince, John Baldessari and McCarthy, notorious for their constant pushing of art's limits; and a third, more playful contingent: Dieter Roth, Franz West and Fahlström. He only started adding rough-edged younger artists such as Jonathan Meese and Bjarne Melgaard five years ago, having previously felt under-educated about contemporary work.

This November, veteran German curator Zdenek Felix will do a curatorial re-mix, melding Falckenberg's collection with the subtler stuff from Goetz's holdings for a show at the Phoenix Art Foundation Sammlung Falckenberg, a huge set of halls inside a still-functioning factory complex that the collector converted four years ago. The location is hardly high-end: Harburg, a working-class neighbourhood teeming with Turkish kebab stands, video-game arcades and Chinese takeaways. The entrance to the collection is a steep set of industrial-grey concrete stairs. Yet compared to the Pump Haus, Falckenberg's exhibition space from 1996 to 2001, it's Tate Modern. 'That was a horrible factory converted from an 18th-century farmhouse, with the strangest corners and rooms,' he recalls, with another generous laugh. 'I was blocked there, so I felt happy when that place was torn down.'

Buried deep within the 60,000-square-foot Phoenix building space is a massive room, big as an airport loading dock, filled with crates. This room functions as the oesophagus that processes Falckenberg's voracious appetite for art – a hunger barely sated by buying at a rate of nearly one piece every two days since he started collecting. When I visit, a newly purchased Dieter Roth piece leans against one crate, delicately balanced and looking like a conservator's nightmare. He would buy a major Mike Kelley and three significant Richard Princes in the coming days, ostensibly blowing his annual budget. 'Harald is one of the few collectors who spends almost everything he has on art,' ▶

**'The world of art has different territories. To detect something interesting, you have to go to strange and foreign places'**

**Left:** John Bock, *Artemisia Soglod-Meechwimper lummerig*, 2000, wooden construction, three levels, dimensions variable

**Right:** Thomas Hirschhorn *Bernsteinzimmer*, 1998–99, mixed media, approx. 400 x 400 x 900cm



**This page:** Harald Falckenberg's private home, Hamburg. Peter Kogler, *Untitled*, 1998, printed paper on wall, approx. 300 x 100 x 230cm; Paul McCarthy, *Masks, front and side view (Pig)*, 1998, Cibachrome print mounted on sintra, 76 x 112cm **Opposite page:** Horst Hellinger, *Arbeitsjacke*, 1981, jacket on hanger with mirror fragments, 107.2 x 65 x 13cm





## **'I conceive of art collecting as a way to find your own identity. It involves putting questions to yourself'**

◀ says Berlin dealer Matthias Arndt. 'He has no yacht, no country house, drives an Audi. Maybe other collections are bigger and have more "museum-quality" work. But other collectors seek works that confirm them publicly; Harald wants the toughest, most controversial pieces, art that calls everything about him into question.'

Art students working as guides at Falckenberg's collection once nicknamed him 'Hannibal Collector' for his intense style – and perhaps also for his gastronomic and oenophilic passions. Long before he started collecting art, he distinguished himself as a man who does nothing by half-measures. Top of his law class in Freiburg and Berlin, he went on to found a series of private law schools. Once a penalty shooter for the Hamburg field hockey team, he also ranked among the city's top tennis-players as a teen and was a 3-handicap golfer until he started collecting art. Today, he runs his family's petroleum-industry-parts business alongside his cultural exploits. 'For the last 10 years, art has taken most of my free time,' he explains. 'For relationships with my friends, it has sometimes been a tough test. But this is my personality: a compulsive mixture of ambition and curiosity and sense of play. I wrote in a recent essay about the infantilism of artists, and I must say to a certain degree most collectors are also infantile.'

Functionally, Falckenberg runs totally counter to his collector cohort, which streamed speculatively into the market during the mid-1990s. For one, he disdains buzz. 'If you always want the newest and the latest, like so many collectors, you are guided by the market,' he explains. 'But you can see the whole development of art from Expressionism onwards – Abstract Expressionism, Actionism, Minimalism, Conceptual Art, Pop art – as a history of artists trying to achieve liberation from the market. So it's sad for collectors to make themselves slaves of the market. I see it as betraying the history of the avant-garde.' Falckenberg happily attends fairs, but does not sprint through during the opening minutes, shopping list in hand. The only time he ever attended the opening of Art Basel, in fact, he vowed he would not buy until the third day.

Nonetheless, Art Basel director Samuel Keller ranks among Falckenberg's fervent fans. 'Harald is truly an original – a leading collector, but with no followers,' says Keller. 'He is highly impulsive, yet he also reflects and writes intensively. He developed new ideas about collecting and is not shy about expressing them. In that way, he has transformed his collecting from just being at the end of the art world's food chain to actually playing an intellectual role within it.' During the prelude to our interviews, he emailed me his text from the Otto Mühl catalogue. I expected the sort of pithy introduction collectors commonly provide to catalogues, but the text was more than 14,000 words long, with sources ranging from Freud to Artaud to Greil Marcus's *Lipstick Traces*. To Falckenberg, this obsessive research and writing on art, trying to crack its codes, echoes his past as a legal scholar, when he studied ancient Babylonian legal documents, first learning cuneiform and then investigating the historical and social context surrounding the texts.



Yet for all the time devoted to analysing his collecting, Falckenberg freely admits that its distinguishing characteristic was a matter of happenstance. Needing money during a divorce, Büttner offered to sell him paintings amassed by trading with fellow artists. Over time Falckenberg bought significant numbers of Kippenbergers and many by Oehlen and Herold. 'The artists always traded the best works, so the quality was high,' Falckenberg recalls. 'Afterwards I realised, "These are really great, tough artists. There are already so many mild positions in the art-collecting world, so why don't I go for more hard works?" So I started reading a lot about this type of art – like the essays of Mike Kelley, who led me to Fahlström. And then I started collecting it. But it was not a strategic choice.'

When selecting works today, Falckenberg is less driven by his emotions or tastes than by their potential context in his collection. 'The best works that I have lead me in my buying,' the collector explains. 'If I acquire a young artist – John Bock, Jonathan Meese and Christian Jankowski are good examples – they must be strong enough to co-exist with Kippenberger and Prince.' Describing the process, he seems less the ruler of his domain than the instrument of a self-inflicted *deus ex collectio* – his hand almost forced, like a novelist whose characters suddenly start 'dictating' their own fates. I float the notion. Falckenberg chuckles. Certainly, he concedes, the decade of collecting has taken him to unexpected and unplanned places.

'I conceive of art collecting as way to find your own identity,' he says. 'Art trains your eyes to see things you never saw before, and your brain to think things you never thought before. Collecting involves putting questions to yourself, but it also means gaining a certain degree of freedom. And you can't gain that freedom theoretically. You have to take the step of buying. Only then do you see whether you were right or made a mistake.'