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## 101 Questions

By Jill Winder

*The following is a slightly revised version of my final presentation delivered at the Members and Trustees of the Institute of Current World Affairs, Monmouth University, June 2, 2006 in West Long Branch, NJ.*

AUGUST 2006

BERLIN—What on earth does it mean to be “German” anyway? Can the Germans themselves answer that question? Well, in March of this year, the federal state of Hesse, in west-central Germany, released a test that would-be immigrants would have to pass to attain German citizenship. It consists of 100 questions covering German politics, history, geography and culture. This “citizenship test,” which was considered for nationwide use, ignited a heated discussion in Germany. Chancellor Angela Merkel and Germany’s main conservative parties supported the measure. However, most people on the left, a good many average citizens, and professionals who work with immigrants and study integration policy found the very idea objectionable. Some of the questions in Hesse’s proposed test were basic, but others were indisputably obscure. In fact, people wondered openly if German university students could pass the test, let alone immigrants.

When the test was released, my term as an Institute of Current World Affairs fellow was drawing to a close. I’ve lived in Germany for a little over three years now, two as an ICWA fellow—long enough to experience the surprises, perils and joys of living in a foreign country. And I’ve learned the language, which seems to be about the only thing politicians and the public agree should be required of foreigners living in Germany. Yet the controversy and its echo in the heated immigration debate happening here in the United States made me wonder: Can the extent of one’s immersion and integration in a country and its culture be measured objectively? Isn’t this impossible to ascertain based on a person’s responses to 100 questions? Eventually, I set my reservations aside for the sake of experimentation. With the Institute’s goal of cultural immersion for its fellows in mind, I decided to take the test to see how I fared.

I got a “B”—managing to answer 81 out of the 100 questions. The ambitious student still hiding inside me feels compelled to add that I almost never get “B’s.” I did not know, for example, that the National Assembly convened in 1848 in the Frankfurt Paulskirche (question #10) or that in 1938 Otto Hahn was the first scientist to recognize that the uranium atom split when bombarded by neutrons (question #96). And I was not aware that human dignity and inalienable human rights are protected by Article I of the German constitution (question #35).

This evening I’d like to reflect on my time as an Institute fellow in Germany by taking the liberty to answer a few of the questions from the citizenship test in my own way. I will touch upon some of the most pressing issues the country is grappling with and try to share with the Institute community where I’ve been and what I’ve learned over the past two years.

I’ll begin with question number one on the “citizenship test”: “What is the population of Germany?” This is a deceptively simple query that has tremendous consequences for the nation. The straightforward response is 82.5 million. Yet the

demographic realities behind this figure are a source of grave concern to politicians, and the statistics relating to the German population are in a sense what the “citizenship test” is really all about. Across Europe, countries are facing the enormous challenge of integrating their immigrant populations and Germany is no exception. Many people fear that Germany’s cities are next in line after Madrid, Amsterdam and London to suffer some kind of terrorist violence or unrest at the hands of their disgruntled and alienated Muslim immigrant populations. The country is home to 7.3 million foreigners and until reforms in 2005, Germany had the dubious distinction of having one of the weakest and most unsuccessful integration policies in Europe. Germany is also home to a Muslim population of 3 million, including the majority of the 2.3 million inhabitants of Turkish origin, the legacy of a West German “guest worker” program in the 1950s and 1960s. The German government’s preposterous belief that immigrants would automatically assimilate after a certain period of time in the country is only now being recognized as the rosy illusion it always was. Third-generation immigrants are likely to be more religious than their parents, and a handful of radical imams have been preaching their own brand of fiery jihad in mosques from Berlin to Frankfurt.

My own neighborhood of Kreuzberg has one of the highest populations of Turkish immigrants in Berlin. A few blocks south of my apartment on Liegnitzerstrasse is the city’s largest outdoor Turkish market. A few blocks west, a large mosque and shopping center has been going up on a prominent corner, proudly announcing the beliefs of a large part of the neighborhood. I’ve seen firsthand how Turkish immigrants struggle to carve out a life in Germany. At the same time, I’ve lived among, but fundamentally separate, from my neighbors, as many Germans do. Every day I brush shoulders with as many Germans as I do veiled Turkish women pushing strollers, or rowdy Turkish teenagers who, for someone like me, struggling to master the language, converse in a fascinating mixture of German and Turkish, an idiom all their own that speaks volumes about their position between two worlds. Indeed, it is these worlds that the government and society are trying to merge. Despite the obvious challenges, in my experience there is more tolerance and exchange in everyday life than many people assume.

One aim of the “citizenship test” is to assess prospective immigrants’ acculturation and acceptance of the rule of law. Of course, such a test offers no protection against the possibility that lack of acceptance and gainful employment can turn a wayward youth into a violent militant, nor can it protect women from forced marriage or honor killings. These things do take place in Germany. Yet this is not just an immigrant problem: recently far-right public demonstrations and neo-Nazi violence have significantly increased. Politicians are terrified that neo-Nazis will show their faces during this summer’s soccer (or as it’s known in Europe, football)

World Cup, destroying the tolerant, cosmopolitan image of Germany that they’ve been aggressively promoting.

Nevertheless, the daunting task of addressing the needs of its immigrant population and preventing radicalization is perhaps not even Germany’s most pressing concern when it comes to population. Rather it is the fact that Germans as a people are dying out. According to the Federal Statistical Office of Germany, by the year 2050 half of the German population will be over 48 and a full third will be over the age of 60. Germany’s birthrate has plummeted to its lowest level since the end of World War II. And 25 percent of the births in Germany last year were to foreign mothers; by contrast, a full 40 percent of female German academics born after 1960 remain childless. Furthermore, German births have decreased significantly in the eastern regions of the country since 1989. And population will decline in the long term despite the assumed rates of immigration from abroad. The Merkel administration is attempting to respond to the coming population crisis with measures like increasing government payments to parents (so-called *Elterngeld* and *Kindergeld*). But the topic is a political minefield, especially when the government is seen as promoting parenthood for the “right” kind of people—in other words, for ethnic Germans. Yet associating “Germanness” with blood and ethnic German ancestry is still very much part of the mainstream notion of the country’s identity, despite its associations with Hitler and National Socialism. The decline in population and birth rates and the potential increase in the immigrant population call into question the very cultural, religious, political, and intellectual identity of Germany. Though we cannot agree on what it means to be “German,” it is safe to say that defining it will require a fundamental change in attitudes.

Again, my personal experience differs somewhat from the statistics. I turned 30 during my fellowship and many of my friends are the same age. I watched in awe as the time-worn clichés about growing up and settling down at 30 began to ring true. One friend got married—by no means a cultural necessity in Germany. Two career-oriented friends with good jobs became pregnant. Another engagement and pregnancy followed. My friends represent exactly what the government wants for the country: educated, loving parents expecting children that they planned for and await with excitement. In my circle of friends, at least, Germany is experiencing a baby boomlet.

Allow me to take up another question, the easy one, question number 4: “What is the capital of the Federal Republic of Germany?” It is Berlin, of course, and it is where I have chosen to spend the bulk of my time as a fellow. But, to quote the title of Walter Abish’s 1980 novel, “How German is it?” Comparisons between Berlin and New York City have often come to mind during my time in Germany. To me, the two cities are utterly distinct locales, with populations, histories and dynamics that are not found anywhere else in their respective

countries. In Berlin as in New York, immigrants from all over the world have added to the local population, helping to shape the multifaceted character of urban life that made these cities famous. It has been said that New York is not part of the United States. Alternatively we could say that its distinctness is what makes it quintessentially American. In the same vein, Berlin is both essentially German and profoundly un-German.

The majority of the public agrees that foreigners living in Germany should be able to speak the language, but by this measure Berlin isn't particularly "German." My German-Swedish friend Fredrik and I have a game we like to play. On warm evenings when we have dinner outside at a small Vietnamese café on Torstrasse, a main thoroughfare in Mitte, we tally how much German we hear being spoken by passers-by. Some nights, the only German we come across is the lovely, accented variety spoken by our Vietnamese waitress. Over the course of an hour, we usually hear more English, Spanish, French, Turkish, Polish and Russian than German.

This leads me to yet another question about Berlin: "Which 'German' is it?" In the case of Berlin, which was a divided island in a divided country for nearly half of the last century, this is not so easily answered. Berlin is a chaotic mixture of east and west, one-time capital of the Weimar Republic, the would-be capital of Hitler's thousand-year Third Reich, the former capital of East Germany, and the symbolic heart of German reunification. Question number 30 on the "citizenship test" gets to the heart of the matter. It states: "November 9<sup>th</sup> has a particular meaning in German history. Which events took place on that date in 1938 and 1989?" The first answer is *Kristallnacht*, when German citizens savagely attacked Jews all over the country. They were murdered, raped, beaten and arrested and Jewish-owned stores, synagogues, schools and other property were looted and burned. On November 9, 1989, of course, the Berlin Wall came down.

These two events are central to the Germans' agonizing attempts to atone, to come to terms with the Holocaust and the repercussions of the Second World War. Some of you may have noticed that I've written a lot about architecture in my newsletters. This is because the battle over history and identity is discernible in the architecture and monuments of the city to a degree that I think is unique and significant. And I've come to believe that these controversies provide a kind of proxy public forum for the debates about history and representation that can be so loaded and awkward when faced head on. This is a kind of ersatz discussion, and some of its outcomes are more enlightened than others. A Monument to the Murdered Jews of Europe now stands prominently next to the Brandenburg Gate, bearing witness to the horrors of a dictatorship that announced its arrival by torching the nearby Reichstag. By contrast, the former East German Palace of the People, the Palast der Republik is being torn down and an imperial palace, damaged

in World War II, will rise in its place. Instead of retaining a Communist monument as a symbol of Germany's reunification, the government has chosen, essentially, to erase the period bookmarked by those two events in 1938 and 1989. This is a dubious attempt at creating a seamless narrative that leads from German imperial prowess directly to German reunification. To put it another way, the capital has no idea what kind of "German" it is.

Berlin's complex and painful history is a source of fascination, inspiration and material for contemporary artists. Yet the city is not known for the "Germanness" of its contemporary art, but for the number of artists, many foreign-born, who have made it their home, especially since 1989. Some non-German artists move to Berlin for its cultural offerings, its hundreds of galleries and museums, or the city's energy and active art community. But I'll be honest, those benefits pale in comparison to Berlin's most appealing feature: it is curiously, unbelievably affordable. Compared to the traditional art centers of New York and London, artists can live like royalty in Berlin, the cheapest capital city in Western Europe. Anja Marck, a young German photographer I know, once told me her own slightly cynical theory about why non-German artists flock to the city: "There's no other city where you can live on almost nothing and have a wealth of tragic history that's not your own to draw from," she said. "Artists are suckers for catastrophe, and in Berlin it can be had for bargain prices."

In terms of space available, Berlin is also one of the emptiest European capitals. The economic and real estate boom anticipated by German investors during the early and mid-nineties never really materialized in the city. Especially in the eastern districts, vast industrial spaces, left to decay after 1989 or even earlier, now provide almost unlimited square-footage for artists' studios, architecture firms, fashion design ateliers and the like. Artists can rent a large studio for as little as \$150 per month. And it's not just raw industrial spaces that are affordable: a spacious, lovely pre-war apartment can be rented for as little as \$350 per month. On this subject, I've learned that the topic of affordable housing must be handled with care: When friends from New York and Los Angeles came to visit me and saw the 15-foot ceilings, glossy wooden floors, and turn-of-the-century moldings in my flat, they became positively homicidal when I told them how little I pay in rent.

But what is it that artists do once they get here? How are the complexities of German history, the search for identity and coming to terms with the past reflected in their work, if at all? This was the main focus of my exploration as an Institute Fellow. Luckily, the "citizenship test" includes something for everyone. Believe it or not, question number 84 asks: "One of the most famous works by the German painter Caspar-David Friedrich shows a landscape on the Baltic island of Ruegen. What is the painting's central motif?" Now even for an art lover, this is not a straightforward question. Does it refer

to Friedrich's masterpiece "Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog" from 1818, which depicts a man with his back facing the viewer, looking over a dark and stormy seascape? Or rather the equally famous "Chalk Cliffs on Ruegen" from 1818-1819, in which three figures look out onto the sea and the white cliffs? No matter what the answer, the question does lead me to ask another, more contemporary one: Is there such a thing as quintessentially "German" contemporary art?

In the case of the famous Berlin art scene, the answer is no. I would suggest that there is no distinct body of work or genre that is representative of "German art" in the city—rather what makes the Berlin scene distinctive is its essential cosmopolitanism. The best evidence of this is that many of the most well-known artists working in Berlin are not German. Take Olafur Eliasson, from Iceland, the Italian Monica Bonvicini, young Albanian artist Anri Sala, Sean Snyder, an American who has lived in Berlin for a decade, British artist Tacita Dean, or Finnish artist Laura Horelli, to name but a few. Berlin's contemporary art scene enjoys its reputation as one of the most interesting in the world not because of German artists per se, but because of the city and what it has to offer people engaged in creative, artistic pursuits and because thousands of contemporary artists call it home. So in a sense, the only quintessentially "German" thing about the Berlin scene is that it is in Germany.

When artists, both foreign and German-born, make work that touches upon German history, identity, and reunification, they very often use Berlin as a muse and metaphor. I'm thinking, for example, of famous British artist Tacita Dean, who made a film in the restaurant atop the TV Tower, an East Berlin landmark. During communist times, the restaurant was an exclusive place that had a kind of socialist modern elegance. It rotated once an hour, providing stunning views of the city and a peek at West Berlin in the distance. After 1989, the décor of the restaurant remained basically the same, almost like in a time capsule, but the rotation was sped up to 30 minutes. What an incredible metaphor for the abrupt disappearance of East Germany, and for the accelerated pace of reunification, which literally sped up the universe that was the GDR and dragged its people into the orbit of the West.



*Tacita Dean, Fernsehturm (TV Tower), 2001, film still. copyright Tacita Dean*

Countless East Germans could not and have not kept up.

I am most fascinated by the ways that young German artists (ages 20-45) address the division of East and West and the results of German reunification in their work, and the Institute provided me with a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. I was delighted to find myself close to a city that everyone in the art world is talking about today. I'm referring to the eastern city of Leipzig and its artists. Some of the most exhilarating experiences and discoveries of my fellowship took place in Leipzig's Spinnerei cultural complex, or in the city's paint-splattered studios and smoky bars. If there is such a thing as "German" contemporary art at the moment, the work of the Leipzig School painters embodies it. And when I talk about Leipzig artists, I suppose I am also venturing an answer to another of the citizenship test's questions, the loaded number 23: "What does [the] GDR mean?"

At 46, Neo Rauch is the grandfather and best-known arbiter of Leipzig painting in its contemporary form. Born and raised in Leipzig, he was finishing his studies at the famous Academy of Visual Arts in the city when the Wall came down. Rauch was taught his craft by professors who were masters of figurative painting. The dictates of Stalin's "socialist realism" forced these painters to renounce modernism and abstraction—the very forms that were dominant in America and elsewhere. The fact that the most famous German painters today are proponents of this quote-unquote "communist" style of realism is one of the most surprising and ironic inheritances of East German artistic censorship.

If Caspar-David Friedrich's landscapes were the epitome of German Romantic painting in the nineteenth century, Rauch is the master of a genre I will brazenly call "post-1989 landscape." Most of Rauch's large-scale paintings remind me of a scene from a nightmare, as if the split second before disaster strikes was frozen in time. In paintings entitled "*Haus des Lehrers*" (Teacher's House), "*Harmlos*" (Harmless) and "*Acker*" (Field), ochre reds, midnight blues, moldy greens and chalky greys dominate the landscapes—and if that sounds lovely, it is not. Abandoned factories, barren fields, and houses in desolate landscapes are framed by foreboding skies. The figures in his paintings, even when together, seem achingly isolated from one another. The people who populate Rauch's paintings look like the heroic workers depicted in Soviet propaganda, yet they are vulnerable and alone, menaced by ambiguous and threatening environs. These figures, lost in a world that is at once nostalgic and futuristic, can be seen as metaphors for the current political, social and economic ills that plague eastern Germany. Rauch shows us the abandoned parts of his native Leipzig, those people and places who have been left behind in the new Germany, in the literal as well as psychological senses.

The younger generation of Leipzig School painters, Tim Eitel, David Schnell, and Matthias Weischer, all born in the early seventies, are closer to my age. In contrast to Rauch, who experienced the GDR as a citizen, these artists were born and grew up in the west. Yet they reflect on life in east-

*Continued on page 7*





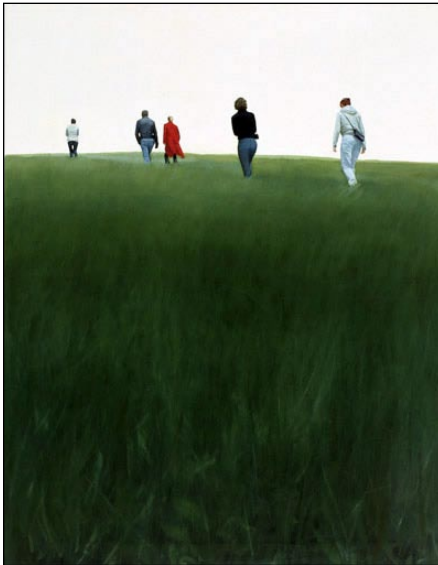
(Above, left) Neo Rauch, *Haus des Lehrers (Teacher's House)*, 2003, oil on canvas, Courtesy: Gallery EIGEN + Art, Leipzig/Berlin. (Above, right) Neo Rauch, *Harmlos (Harmless)*, 2002, oil on linen, Courtesy: Gallery EIGEN + Art, Leipzig/Berlin. (Below) Neo Rauch, *Acker (Field)*, 2002, oil on linen, Courtesy: Gallery EIGEN + Art, Leipzig/Berlin.







Tim Eitel, *Boygroup*, 2003, oil on canvas, Ovitz Family Collection, Courtesy: Gallery EIGEN + Art, Leipzig/Berlin. (Below) Tim Eitel, *Ausflug (Outing)*, 2003, oil on canvas, Courtesy: Gallery EIGEN



Tim Eitel, *Leerer Raum (Empty Room)*, 2004, oil on canvas, Rubell Collection (Right) Tim Eitel, *Graue Waende (Grey Walls)*, 2005, oil on canvas, Courtesy (both images): Gallery EIGEN + Art, Leipzig/Berlin



(Above) Matthias Weischer, *Fernsehturm (TV Tower)*, 2004, oil on canvas, Courtesy: Gallery EIGEN + Art, Leipzig/Berlin. (Right) Matthias Weischer, *Untitled*, 2003, oil on canvas, Courtesy: Gallery EIGEN + Art, Leipzig/Berlin



(Left) David Schnell, *Spielplatz (Playground)*, 2005, oil on canvas, Courtesy: Gallery EIGEN + Art, Leipzig/Berlin. (Right) David Schnell, *Aussicht (View)*, 2005, oil on canvas, Courtesy: Gallery EIGEN + Art, Leipzig/Berlin

ern Germany—the catastrophic unemployment rates, especially among the young, and the deserted corners of eastern Germany’s shrinking cities with a gaze not so much political as it is documentary. In Eitel’s paintings, stylish 20-somethings stand in flat, empty landscapes, as if in some forgotten corner of the planet. These are hip but wayward youths, simultaneously world-weary and sophisticated, jaded and resigned, with nothing to do but pass the time. In Matthias Weischer’s melancholy paintings of empty rooms, I see the thousands of vacant socialist high-rise apartments that are found all over eastern Germany. David Schnell’s landscapes somehow manage to be both bucolic and desolate, where green forests are home to abandoned summer cottages, fields lay fallow, and factories rot among fields of flowers.

As I’ve mentioned in my newsletters, the Leipzig School painters have already been canonized by the contemporary art world. Rauch’s paintings are in the Museum of Modern Art’s collection in New York. And when famous American collectors Don and Mera Rubell went to Leipzig last year, they made headlines by raving about what they had found. “We’ve never, ever, found four new artists that we were so excited about in one trip,” they gushed in an interview. The Rubell Collection now includes over 20 paintings and 40 drawings by the Leipzig School painters. And the market is heating up, or rather, boiling over. Artists and collectors were shocked last year when a painting by Matthias Weischer, which could be had for as little as \$4,000 a few years ago, sold at a Christie’s auction for \$370,000, ten times its high estimate. Gallery EIGEN + Art owner Gerd Harry Lybke, who represents all of the Leipzig artists I’ve mentioned, recently proclaimed, “At the moment we are at the center of the art world.” But it is a fickle and punishing world, and although I think the quality of many of these works will stand the test of time, people are wondering about the next big thing. Even Tim Eitel, whose recent works show the blasé art crowd hanging out in white cube galleries, seems to be a bit sick of the hype.

If you’ll permit me to present an insider tip, I’d like to venture a guess at which group of artists may be the next to emerge and exemplify a kind of “German” art in their own way.

These are the young photographers in Professor Tim Rauter’s post-graduate *Meisterklasse* at the Academy of Visual Arts in Leipzig. Younger than the Leipzig School painters, they provide yet another kind of vision and reflection on contemporary Germany. Look out for the work of Ulrich Gebert, Adrian Sauer, Tobias Zielony and Riccarda Rogan. But my favorite of the group is Sven Johne, who was born in 1976 on the eastern island of Ruegen, the setting for many of Caspar-David Friedrich’s landscapes. With a camera, Johne makes landscapes of his own, reflections on the unmet promises of utopian ideas and the harsh reality of social and political life. In 2004, on the occasion of the fifteenth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, he took a five-

week road trip across eastern Germany to document the state of affairs, photographing abandoned development projects, the demolition of socialist high rises, and the people he met. Johne’s 2004 series “East German Landscapes” juxtaposes images of the east German countryside with quotations from people he interviewed about the GDR past. Imagine a photograph of a green field with an abandoned factory in the distance juxtaposed with a quote from the former foreman of an East German factory who worked there for 30 years and angrily talks about the frustrations of ten years of unemployment and his lost career.

If there is such a thing as “German” art, I believe



Sven Johne, *Landschaft bei Helbra (Helbra Landscape)* from the series “*Ostdeutsche Landschaften*” (*East German Landscapes*), 2005, Courtesy the artist and Amerika Galerie, Berlin

that the artists who confront the country’s reality, engage with its history, and share their own concerns, disappointments, and confusion through their work have earned such a label. These artists make up a small but influential minority. They are astute observers, diagnosing and representing the beauties and disasters of modern Germany.

Let’s return to the “citizenship test” and the unanswerable question of what it means to be German. In early May, representatives of Germany’s 16 federal states finally came to an agreement on the requirements for German citizenship and the citizenship test is out. That’s a good thing because there are thousands of questions that go unasked in the test. Because, after all, a test can never measure a person’s experience or what moves them to want to adopt a new home. So I’ll take some liberties and add question 101 to the test: “Is there anything you’d like to add?” Time will only permit me to mention a few of the things that I have grown to love during my time in Germany: how Germans seem to feel it is their god-given right to eat breakfast with fresh rolls from the corner bakery every morning; the glorious pink color of the sunsets over Berlin in the summer; the way that everyone, from the postman to the academic, seems to regularly attend the theater; the biting sarcasm and darkness of Berliner humor; the fact that most Germans

wouldn't consider going a day without reading at least one newspaper.

And there are the people who have made my time in Germany so compelling and rich and taught me much of what I know about the country—the friends who have taken me to their eastern German home towns and shared their memories and feelings about the GDR, and those who introduced me to Berlin, welcoming me into their lives and putting up with my endless questions; the artists who have opened their studios and apartments to me to share their work and talk about beauty, creativity, their influences and passions; the young Turkish women in my German language class who gave me insight into the lives of the Turkish immigrants in the city and the difficult position of women in their communities; and many others. As for my level of integration in German life, I think I've been pretty successful. But there is one badge of integration that I stubbornly refuse to wear: Much to some friends' dismay, I have remained resolutely uninterested in football.

So thank you Peter, for making it possible to spend my last fellowship month far away from the FIFA World Cup mania that is descending on Germany as I speak. Of course, I owe Peter thanks for much more than that. First and foremost, I want to thank you for your unwavering support and encouragement. I've learned a lot from your editorial expertise, elegantly phrased criticisms and patience. And I'd like to thank Peter and Lu for spending a week with me in Germany. Your unbelievable energy, curiosity and intelligence inspired me to think about things anew. Thanks also to Ellen and Brent for all your help. My sincere thanks also goes to David Hapgood, Richard Nolte and Chandler Rosenberger for their engagement, constructive criticisms and suggestions. And I thank all of you in the Institute community who took the time to contact me to share ideas, experiences and good wishes. I would also like to sincerely thank the Institute for the opportunity to spend two years in one of the most compelling corners of the art world. It was a most

incredible opportunity that has changed my life and I will never forget it.

And although they are across the ocean, I owe an immense debt of gratitude to my friends in Germany, who have adopted me with open arms. Even if I can't tell you what it means to be German, I know that because of them I feel I've found a second home. □

Institute Fellows are chosen on the basis of character, previous experience and promise. They are young professionals funded to spend a minimum of two years carrying out self-designed programs of study and writing outside the United States. The Fellows are required to report their findings and experiences from the field once a month. They can write on any subject, as formally or informally as they wish. The result is a unique form of reporting, analysis and periodic assessment of international events and issues.

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