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The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

JW-3
GERMANY

Jill Winder is a Donors' Fellow of the Institute studying post-reunification Germany through the work and attitudes of its artists.

What's in a Name? The Friedrich Christian Flick Collection and the Story of One German Family

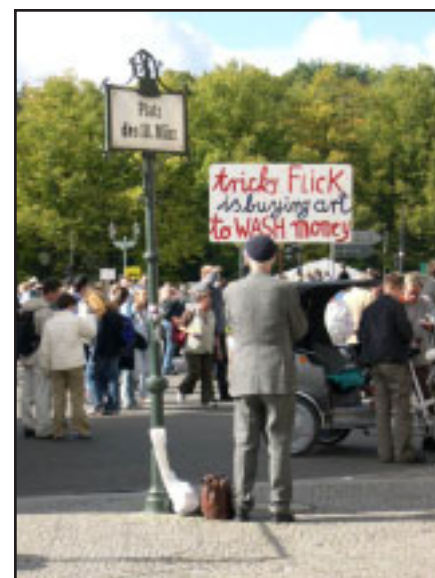
By Jill Winder

OCTOBER 30, 2004

BERLIN—One can be sure that autumn has begun in Berlin when a faint, earthy smell can be detected in the air as inhabitants of the city's pre-WWII buildings start stoking up their coal ovens, leaves flutter down from the trees, and there are so many contemporary art exhibitions and events that even the most dedicated art lover can see but a fraction of what is on view. So it has been this September and October.

To begin, a blockbuster exhibition of over 200 modern and contemporary masterpieces from the Museum of Modern Art in New York was on view in the Mies van der Rohe-designed Neue Nationalgalerie. The MOMA show attracted an estimated 1.2 million visitors, making it the most-seen art exhibition in Europe ever. Committed viewers queued and waited up to ten hours for a chance to see the works. The exhibition was so popular that even mainstream radio stations such as Radio Eins regularly broadcast the current waiting times at the museum along with top-20 hits. The long line of people outside the Neue Nationalgalerie almost became more of a symbol of the show than the works inside. Trendy culture magazine *Monopol* made news by styling a fashion shoot in front of the museum, using both the iconic building and the temporarily iconic queue as equally aesthetic backdrops for the latest fashions. And just as the MOMA show closed on September 18, Art Forum Berlin, an art fair featuring over 200 international contemporary art galleries opened for a four-day run, attracting curators, artists, dealers and collectors from across the globe.

Despite these and other high-profile cultural events, the opening of the Friedrich Christian Flick Collection at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin on September 22 was the most talked-about happening this season. F.C. Flick, grandson of a notorious Nazi industrialist, agreed to loan the Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin's state museum for contemporary art, his extensive collection for seven years. The inaugural exhibition opened amid widespread debate and public protest over everything from the roots of the collector's fortune, inherited guilt, compensation for former forced laborers during the Nazi period, tax evasion, the links between private collectors and public museums, and — last but



Protester near Brandenburger Tor September 24 with a sign that reads (in both German and English): "Tricky Flick is buying art to wash money"

not least — to the quality of the collection itself.

Has this controversy created a real public discussion about how Germans articulate and confront their country's recent history, or is the Flick name being turned into a convenient scapegoat for myriad unresolved traumas and unanswered questions in German society? Ingo Arend wrote in an article for *Freitag* entitled "One Family's Shadow," that "Flick's life story is paradigmatic of the trauma of German history and its management: escape into business; escape to spotlessly neutral Switzerland; escape into art." Others, such as Salomon Korn, Vice President of Germany's Central Jewish Council, have made far more personal accusations. In a series of enraged public letters, Korn accused F.C. Flick of "the moral whitewashing of blood money in the socially acceptable form of art collecting." What follows is an attempt to unravel the various facets of the story and the debate it has engendered.

* * *

Friedrich Flick (1883—1972) and his Two Empires

The family legacy begins with Friedrich Christian Flick's grandfather Friedrich Flick. By the time the Nazis came to power in 1933, Flick was already one of the most prominent businessmen in Germany. He had expanded his coal-and-steel empire through speculation on the stock exchange and aggressive corporate take-overs, and by the mid-1930s he controlled most of the heavy industry in the country's most important mining region, the Ruhr area (*Ruhrgebiet*) in western Germany. Flick had

a long history of cultivating relationships with parties, politicians and military figures, often using bribes, pay-offs and tax loopholes to ensure his position in key markets. Enemies and admirers alike referred to him as "the vulture," "genius of silent movements" and "Friedrich Flick the Great."



Friedrich Flick (1883-1972), portrait from the 1960s, courtesy Prenzlauer Berg Museum

Although Flick was initially hesitant to align himself with the Nazi Party, his wavering came to an end in early 1933 with Hitler's clear rise to power, and he went on to develop deep business and personal relationships with key figures in the party, most notably Hermann Göring, chief of the Luftwaffe and second to Hitler in the Nazi hierarchy. According to Thomas Ramge, a historian and journalist whose book *The Flicks. A German Family Story about Money, Power and Politics* outlines the activities of Friedrich Flick during the Third Reich, Flick's close friendship with Göring began in early 1933 when Flick, along with other prominent German businessmen, was invited to an exclusive dinner held at Göring's private apartment. Just a few days after this meeting, Flick transferred his first contribution of 240,000 Reichmark into the party coffers. The head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler, personally picked up the cash in Flick's office. Over the next twelve years Flick would contribute a total of 7.65 million Reichmark to the Nazi Party.

Throughout the Nazis' rise to power and during the Second World War, Friedrich Flick was rewarded for his loyalty with everything from exclusive weapons-production contracts to privileged access to forced laborers. He strategically maintained close relations with Göring, who was responsible for issuing weapons contracts, by transferring money to Göring's private accounts and presenting him with a number of rare paintings by Dutch Old Masters as birthday gifts.

Beginning in 1935, Flick profited enormously from the Nazi's "Aryanization" program that involved the forced acquisition of Jewish-owned businesses by German companies. His most notorious take-over, personally arranged and overseen by Göring, was that of the Czech mining conglomerate, the Peschek Firm, in 1937. The company, worth an estimated 24 million Reichmark, was officially purchased for 11.72 million, although Flick paid only 4.75 million to the Peschek family, then in exile in the United States.

Many of Flick's companies were located in the



eastern part of the expanding Third Reich, and starting in 1938, he used his political connections to undertake a systematic program of looting in the occupied territories. He paid bribes to army generals to gain privileged access to information on what factories might be suitable for looting, and single-handedly took over most Soviet heavy industry on the Dnieper River by 1941.

Because of his solid party connections and reliable production of critical weapons and fuel for the war effort, Flick was also given access to unusually high numbers of forced laborers to use in his factories. Beginning in 1939, Flick began to “employ” such prisoners. He was privy to internal military documents that assessed the health of various convoys of prisoners, and he regularly bribed lower-level Nazi officials who arranged the transports to send him the most fit and youngest individuals. According to the Foundation for Public Documentation of Forced Labor, in April 1944 the total number of forced laborers working in the Flick factories was between 40-60,000. A majority of those were Russian prisoners of war and concentration camp

prisoners from Buchenwald, Dachau and Auschwitz.

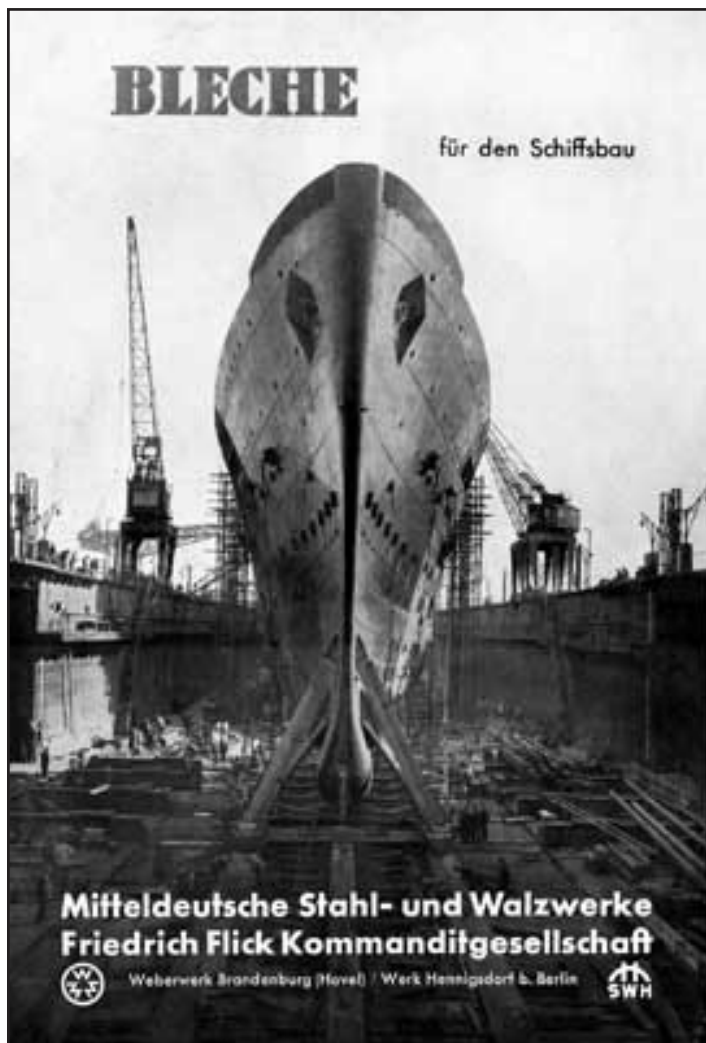
While the treatment of forced laborers in factories during the Third Reich was dismal overall, Thomas Ramage notes in his book that the treatment of forced laborers in the Flick factories was considered exceptionally inhumane. “It was public knowledge, even at the time, that slave laborers in the Flick factories were unusually badly treated,” Ramage writes, “In many cases the housing conditions were miserable, the working hours inhumanly long, corporeal punishment was regular and violent, diseases such as typhus went untreated, and all manner of physical and emotional abuses occurred on a daily basis.” Conditions were so poor that a number of internal memos from Nazi doctors repeatedly requested that Flick improve sanitation in forced laborers’ living quarters, fearing outbreaks of typhus and other infectious diseases.

By the end of the war, not only was Flick the most important producer of weapons for the Third Reich, but he also had a near-total monopoly on coal mining and steel production in the Reich territories. Though he was the wealthiest businessman in Germany, his empire was quickly dismantled when the Nazis capitulated. Three quarters of Flick’s businesses were located in the eastern part of the Third Reich and were immediately confiscated by the Soviets. Wanted as one of the key figures in Nazi industrial production, Flick managed to hide for a few months in a Berlin apartment until Allied Forces arrested him in late-1945.

In December 1947 Friedrich Flick was sentenced to seven years in prison at the Nuremberg Trials for his participation in Nazi crimes, specifically for being an “initiator” and “participant” in expropriating Jewish businesses without compensation and for the use of forced labor. In his testimony Flick said, “I protest against the fact that as a German industrialist I am being tried before the world as a looter of slaves and a robber. No one that I know and who knows those I worked with would charge that we have committed crimes against humanity, and not one of them would call us criminals.” Despite having served less than half his sentence, Flick was released from prison in February 1950.

While in prison, Flick was already planning to reconstruct and expand his corporate empire. Unbelievably, after being released from prison Flick managed to rebuild a colossal business conglomerate within ten years, quickly becoming the richest businessman in Germany for a second time. In post-war Western Germany, where former Nazis were employed in many fields, a conviction at the Nuremberg Trials was not considered particularly problematic and Flick easily gained access to key allies and individuals in the reconstruction era.

In the early 1960s, a group of Hungarian forced laborers filed a lawsuit demanding reparations of 5



Flick Company advertisement from the 1940s, promoting the production of tin for war-time ship building activities, courtesy: Prenzlauer Berg Museum.

million Deutsche Marks (DM) from the Flick firms. Until his death, however, Flick refused to acknowledge the misuse of forced laborers during the Third Reich, or to pay them any compensation, claiming that he had neither a legal nor moral obligation to do so. In an interview, Friedrich Christian Flick said of his grandfather, "I loved and admired him. He was an incredible personality with an exceptional mind. I never discussed politics with my grandfather. He always felt that the sentencing at Nuremberg was unjust and naturally no one in the family contradicted him."

At the time of Friedrich Flick's death in 1972, he was the fifth-richest man in the world. His private fortune was estimated at several hundred million Deutsche Marks and his conglomerate included over one hundred companies including Daimler-Benz and Dynamit Nobel.

* * *

Friedrich Christian Flick (born 1944): The Grandson's Inheritance and the Grandfather's Debts

When Friedrich Flick died, his surviving son Karl Friedrich (K.F.) inherited a majority share of the Flick conglomerate. His three grandchildren by son Otto were also left shares in the company. In 1972, Friedrich Christian Flick (F.C.), age 28, inherited a 12-percent stake in the Flick corporation. A lawyer by training, he actively contributed to the management of the company for the next few years.



Friedrich Christian Flick, courtesy: www.zdf.de

In 1975, in part due to conflicts between F.C. and uncle K.F. over the running of the Flick conglomerate, F.C., his brother Gert-Rudolf, and sister Dagmar sold their stakes in the company to their uncle, each inheriting about 300 million DM. At the time, F.C. was 31. When the Flick conglomerate was sold to Deutsche Bank in the late 1980s, F.C. and his siblings inherited another 225 million DM each.

In 1975, Friedrich Christian Flick left Germany for a number of years of traveling abroad to England and the United States, wanting to "start a new phase of life outside of the business world." He settled in Switzerland when he acquired his inheritance, thereby (legally) avoiding paying an estimated 125 million Euro (US \$162.5 million) in West-German estate taxes. Shortly after his move, F.C. Flick said that he had "learned much from my grandfather's creative accounting and business strategies" in an interview with a Zürich tabloid. During those years, the young, rich and charming F.C. (nicknamed "Mick Flick") was a well-known playboy and prominent figure among the jet set in Monaco and the Riviera, and a

regular fixture in the German tabloids. He initially invested his fortune in everything from vintage cars and lavish parties to Old Master paintings and Greek sculpture. Flick was also a shrewd businessman in his own right, successfully investing in the stock market and adding to his fortune.

In an article in the *Neue Züricher Zeitung* in April 2001, F.C. Flick described how he came to begin collecting contemporary art around 1990: "I bought Greek vases and Roman sculptures, but also paintings, especially 17th-century Dutch works...After a while, though, I was unsatisfied collecting these things, because the really good works weren't available any more, and I didn't want to settle for second-rate—and I was also eager to have contact with the artists." In the beginning, F.C. Flick dabbled in purchasing contemporary art, initially focusing on classical works of modern art by well-known artists such as Alberto Giacometti, Kurt Schwitters, Marcel Duchamp, Piet Mondriaan and Francis Picabia.

Flick's most significant contact with a contemporary artist during his early years of collecting was with American Bruce Nauman, whose drawings and sculptures (many made with neon light) deal with relationships between money, sex and power as well as the individual's search for meaning in contemporary society. Flick explained his interest in Nauman by saying, "When I find an artist important, I'd like to represent him in his entirety. I soon discovered Bruce Nauman, who I consider to be the greatest artist of the second half of the twentieth century...I also think he is a supremely moral artist in the subjects he depicts." With the enormous capital at his disposal, F.C. Flick soon purchased over 50 pieces by the artist; the largest collection of Nauman works in private hands.

By 1995 F.C. Flick, aligned with the prominent Zürich dealer Ivan Wirth, of Galerie Hauser & Wirth, who became his closest advisor, began to buy contemporary works at a rapid rate, amassing a collection of over 2,500 pieces by 2003. That amounts to a purchase rate of one piece of art per day since he began collecting. When Mattias Frehner of the *Neue Züricher Zeitung* asked F.C. if he could be accused of speculating in contemporary art, he replied, "It's obvious that, in terms of upgrading, certain works have been resold or traded. But those few sales stand in contrast to the many hundreds of purchases I've made. The claim that I'm pursuing commercial interests is ludicrous. We don't just buy art, we look after and research works of art. Those are 'intellectual' achievements. It's grotesque wanting to associate me with commerce. The collection costs me a lot of money."

In 1997, F.C. wrote to Uncle K.F., outlining plans to build a private museum for his growing collection in Zürich, where he had been living for over 20 years. In the letter, F.C. explained his reasoning for showing the collection publicly; noting that he hoped it would lead to a "constructive and meaningful possibility for building



Friedrich Christian Flick in front of paintings by German artist Martin Kippenberger from his collection.
Photo: ddp

a new identification with the Flick name, so that it can have a new and long-term positive connotation." By late 2000, F.C. had commissioned Rem Koolhaas, one of the most prominent contemporary architects, to design the museum and his plans were made public. There was an immediate and virulent reaction from artists and cultural organizations in Zürich. Many accused F.C. of building his art collection on money made by exploiting forced labor in the Second World War and demanded that he pay reparations to the German Economy Foundation Initiative, more commonly known as the Slave and Forced Labor Fund. The fund's aim is to pay reparations to former forced laborers, most of whom are in their eighties and living in terrible poverty in the former Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries. F.C.'s critics were incensed that he had repeatedly refused to pay into the fund.

Adding fuel to the Zürich controversy, the German government made an unusual request to members of the Flick family in early 2001: in addition to the considerable amount already paid into the fund by the Flick companies, Flick family members were asked to consider paying an "adequate contribution" as private individuals in an attempt to decrease a deficit in the fund. Dagmar Ottmann, F.C.'s sister, complied with a payment of 5 million Euro (\$6.4 million). Eventually, their brother Gert-Rudolf Flick also paid into the fund.

In April 2001 F.C. Flick responded to his critics in an extensive interview in the *Neue Züricher Zeitung*: "I don't believe that you can inherit guilt. But I do believe you can inherit responsibility...My grandfather's business dealings have nothing to do with my collection—Art should not be responsible for history. As for paying into the fund, as founding members of the foundation some of the former Flick enterprises have paid over-proportionately into the Slave and Forced Labor Fund, and as a private individual I would not like to contribute any more. And there are good reasons not to. In the first place, the forced laborers would not receive a penny more; every additional sum paid in only serves to reduce the compensation payments of the Deutsche Bank. Second, I think I can use my money in a more meaningful way than the Foundation Initiative would...Finally, I didn't just want to take the easiest path and ease my conscience by paying up: That's not my style."

In June 2001, discouraged and shocked by public reaction, F.C. Flick cancelled his preparations for the museum in Zürich. Reeling from the controversy but already

considering alternative locations for his collection, F.C. began making contacts with prominent Berlin politicians and established a foundation in Potsdam, Germany called the F.C. Flick Foundation against Xenophobia, Racism and Intolerance (<http://stiftung-toleranz.de>). He publicly stated that he considered the Foundation to be a more effective and future-oriented use for his money than paying into the Slave and Forced Labor Fund. "I've made 10 million marks available to my own Foundation against Racism, Xenophobia and Intolerance in the former East German states," Flick explained, "This is a very tangible sum for me which can be expressed in a percentage of my assets, and not in a fraction of a thousandth like with the payments made into the Slave and Forced Labor Fund by German enterprises."

When initial plans for exhibiting the collection in Berlin were underway, F.C. revealed a slightly less altruistic reason for establishing his own foundation. In a letter to State Minister of Culture Christina Weiss that outlined the problems he had run into in Zürich he noted, "I also think that the foundation will produce its first successful results before the exhibition is opened—I can imagine that this might put my critics in a more generous mood." F.C. continues to maintain his decision not to pay into the Slave and Forced Labor Fund, commenting that he has chosen his own path for coming to terms with his family's past. In an interview in *Der Tagespiegel* this May, he reiterated his position: "I have always said that I don't want to deny the crimes of my grandfather or to forget what happened. Nonetheless, I think especially with my work and my Foundation Against Intolerance, that as a private individual I am trying to do what the German state has done in the last 50 years...that is, to be better and to learn from the past."

* * *

The Flick Collection and the Road to Berlin

Shortly after he announced his decision to cancel plans for a museum in Zürich, F.C. Flick began exploring the possibility of showing the collection in Berlin. In February 2002, he met with Klaus-Dieter Lehmann, president of Berlin's Foundation for Prussian Cultural Heritage, and Peter-Klaus Schuster, director of the State Museums of Berlin. Soon, key figures in Berlin's government and cultural foundations went to work behind the scenes, gaining support from many of Berlin's significant political and cultural figures for a Flick exhibition, including German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder. One of the most critical sources of support was Heinz Berggruen, a prominent Jewish collector. Berggruen, who was forced to emigrate in the 1930s, returned to Berlin and sold part of his collection to the city's museums for what is referred to as a "symbolic" sum of 250 million DM (approximately \$125 million) in the early 1990s. For the members of the Foundation for Prussian Cultural Heritage and many politicians, Berggruen was considered the critical moral authority on this topic, and he publicly supported the

exhibition of Flick's collection from the early planning stages, beginning in fall 2002.

Another significant and early supporter of a Flick exhibition in Berlin was State Minister for Culture Christina Weiss. In an interview with Claudia Wahjudi in *Zitty* magazine shortly before the opening of the exhibition, Weiss was asked to explain her support and reaction to the public controversy surrounding the Flick family history. "I have always strongly supported the exhibition of the F.C. Flick Collection. The debate about the Flick family is representative of the condition of our society's self-consciousness and processing of the past, but it is also an important debate about the history of West German industry after 1945, especially the part that was rooted in the National Socialist period. However, the extraordinary art that F.C. Flick has collected makes its own debates and claims about the 20th century. I also think that F.C. Flick's way of collecting work has a relationship to his personal history." When asked why there could not have been a moratorium on the exhibition until a more public debate about the collection could have taken place, Weiss replied, "There was a lot of time for a public discussion, and I would not want to prevent this from happening. I think that one should not keep the art from public view based on these questions. Instead, I hope that within the context of the collection being shown a new debate will emerge, especially about collectors and their relationship to public museums."

A contract was signed for a seven-year loan of the Flick Collection in December 2003 between the Foundation for Prussian Cultural Heritage and Flick Kunstverwaltung Ltd., a F.C. Flick company registered in Guernsey, a tax haven in the English Channel. The collection was to be exhibited in Berlin's state museum of contemporary art, the Hamburger Bahnhof. The contract stipulates that F.C. Flick can withdraw or sell any work in the collection at any time during the contract period. F.C. agreed to pay 7.5 million Euro (U.S.\$9.75 million) for the reconstruction of the Rieck Halle, an industrial building adjacent to the Hamburger Bahnhof, to house the collection during the loan period. The Berlin State Museums agreed to pay for maintenance and exhibition of the collection, at a total cost of roughly 7 million Euro (U.S.\$9 million).

A fair amount of public debate went back and forth about the collection before the exhibition opened, but organizers went to great lengths to avoid the kind of public-relations debacle that happened in Switzerland by gathering powerful allies around the plan. Although Paul Spiegel, chairman of the German Central Council of Jews, said "the exhibition does not concern Jewish issues," the vice-president of the Council, Salomon Korn, publicly denounced the exhibition in numerous public letters, accusing F.C. Flick of trying to "whitewash blood money" and claiming that "these art works carry the bloody fingerprints of history." Another public controversy arose in August when F.C.'s sister Dagmar Ottmann wrote a



*Entrance Sign for F.C. Flick Collection
at Hamburger Bahnhof*

public letter published in *Die Zeit* in which she demanded that the name of the collection be changed from the "Flick Collection" (as it was known until shortly before the exhibition opened) to the "F.C. Flick Collection" to distance herself and other family members from the endeavor. She called for a postponement of the exhibition until the Flick family's history (and in particular, their grandfather's activities during the Second World War) could be adequately addressed.

From artistic circles, responses were mixed. *Die Zeit* published an article in the week following Dagmar Ottmann's open letter in which prominent artists (many of whom had works in the F.C. Flick Collection) were asked to respond to the debate. Gerhard Richter, considered to be the most important post-war German painter and someone whose work has long addressed the National Socialist period, responded with a rather general criticism of contemporary collectors: "I have no interest in discussing the connection between art and history. I can only say that the collection shows just how quickly and easily almost any person with money can build a contemporary art collection." Luc Tuymans, a significant Belgian painter, also pointed to the larger questions that were arising in the public discussion: "The real problem here is the German state, which wants to decorate itself with art at any price, thereby totally forgetting to ask questions about the past. This only shows that it is too complex for politicians to deal systematically and on a fun-

damental level with Germany's recent history." Marcel Oldenbach, one of Germany's most well-respected video artists who has long refused to sell any of his works to F.C. Flick, turned his critique to the artists: "What I find incredible in this debate is the silence of the artists... Artists are responsible for how their works are used and exhibited." Thomas Schütte, a German sculptor, provided this exasperated and slightly ironic response: "Now can we please talk about art?? In truth, every one of us has a Nazi grandfather or uncle or father somewhere in our family history."

On the local level, Berlin-based artists Renate Stih and Frieder Schnock, in collaboration with the Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst (NGBK), a Berlin art space, created a billboard work that was shown near the entrance of the Hamburger Bahnhof museum. Their work was accompanied by a publication called "The Art of Collecting" that critically outlined the Flick family history and the exhibition. The artists also organized a podium discussion shortly after the opening where historians, other collectors, and Berlin politicians debated the merits of the collection and the problematic history of the Flick family.

* * *

September 22: The F.C. Flick Collection opens at Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin

By the time the "F.C. Flick Collection at Hamburger Bahnhof" opened on September 22, the museum had done a great deal to minimize public criticism and to frame the debate in its own terms. The Hamburger Bahnhof published a free newspaper that included over two dozen newspaper articles about Flick and the collection written from various viewpoints, the open letter from Dagmar Ottmann, and an extensive interview between curator Eugen Blume and F.C. Flick in which Flick reiterated his position towards this grandfather's past: "As I have said many times before, I am not trying to redeem or forget the crimes of my grandfather through this exhibition. I will not instrumentalize art in such a way. But it



Billboard by artists Renate Stih and Frieder Schnock, located on Invalidenstrasse, adjacent to Hamburger Bahnhof. The text reads (left panel): "We demand free entrance for former forced laborers" and (right panel): "Tax Eoaders: Show your treasures."



Posters advertising the F.C. Flick Collection were plastered all over Berlin's metro stations when the exhibition opened in September. The use of Bruce Nauman's sculpture in the advertisement, which includes the words "No, No" in flashing neon signage, is a clever and perhaps sardonic choice on the part of Hamburger Bahnhof to promote this controversial exhibition.

has to be possible for us Germans to, with full consciousness and awareness of our history, find a constructive way to move forward in the future. This is necessary not only for our children but also for our sense of German identity." Peter-Klaus Schuster, General Director of the Foundation for Prussian Cultural Heritage, told journalists that he welcomed constructive debate but that it should not be focused on one individual: "The entire group of Flick enterprises and the rebuilding of the company after the war is a part of Germany's 'economic miracle' and the story of West German industry. One should ask: 'where should we begin and end this discussion?'... The Flick name is a symbol for many things in this debate, which are part of our collective history." He added, "We have commissioned research into the activities of the Flick enterprises during the National Socialist period, which F.C. Flick will fund. This research will be conducted by the Institute for Contemporary History in Munich."

As if to highlight the exhibition's support at the highest levels, Chancellor Gerhard Schröder made the unusual gesture of giving an official speech during the opening in which he seemed to make his own and his government's position on the matter clear: "In 1945 when his grandfather was arrested, Friedrich Christian Flick was only nine months old. He personally had nothing to do with the activities of his family during the war... Visitors who come to this exhibition should have the chance to encounter art works by Bruce Nauman or Martin Kippenberger without having to have studied the history of the Flick family... Every work in the exhibition has its own value and aura which is not connected to the family story of the collector."

The exhibition, curated by Eugen Blume of the Ham-

burger Bahnhof, filled the entire museum and the newly renovated Rieck Halle and included 450 works in all (about one-fifth of F.C. Flick's collection). It was divided into thematic sections highlighting the work of specific artists such as: "Creation Myth" (Paul McCarthy and Jason Rhodes); "Bodily Inscriptions" (Larry Clark, Cindy Sherman, Dan Graham); "Service Area" (Martin Kippenberger and Franz West); "Be Satisfied Here and Now" (Fischli & Weiss, Wolfgang Tillmans, Thomas Struth) and "Raw Material" featuring nearly 50 works by Bruce Nauman. When I attended the exhibition on the opening day, I was struck by the works on view, not because of their quality but because on hand were all the "usual suspects" in contemporary art — but no surprises or particularly risky or interesting choices on the part of the collector. Although F.C. Flick owns some excellent works by well-known artists, he owns many more minor works by major figures and the sheer size of the exhibition only highlighted the discrepancies between quality and quantity in the collection.

Indeed, the opening of the exhibition finally provided a significant test of the entire undertaking because it was the public's first opportunity to actually see what was in this reportedly "extraordinary" collection of contemporary art. Up until the opening, when people criticized F.C. Flick's family history or the source of his wealth, supporters like State Minister of Culture Christina Weiss regularly responded by saying that the remarkable quality of the collection made the importance of its public display beyond dispute. But the actual contents of the collection were basically unknown, even to the political figures who unrelentingly supported the exhibition.

In a scathing review that appeared in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on September 19 after the press preview, Peter Richter wrote, "Although almost no one really knew the contents of the collection, everyone was completely convinced that it was extraordinary. If the hype is even half-true, one could reasonably expect that in addition to some nice contemporary works, F.C. Flick has a few unknown Vermeers or something else equally electrifying hidden in his vaults.... As it turns out, Friedrich Christian Flick's contemporary art collection

contains exactly the same artists that nearly every other collector or museum has acquired in the last ten years." Richter continued, "The disappointment is that when one visits the opening exhibition of F.C. Flick's collection, it is like listening to a private radio show playing the hits of the 80s and 90s. For example, works by Thomas Struth, a famous second-generation Becher school photographer, are as common in contemporary art museums today as a coat-check lady and a toilet, as are works by Bruce Nauman, Franz West, Pipilotti Rist, Jason Rhodes and Luc Tuymans... and this is the problem with the collection. There is nothing on loan to the Hamburger Bahnhof that is not famous enough that it could not have been seen in one museum or another in the past seven years."

* * *

In the Aftermath: Unanswered Questions and On-going Debates

Shortly after the opening of the exhibition, I attended a number of very different panel discussions that touched upon various aspects of the Flick controversy. Each in its own way attempted to address the gnawing questions underlying the debate: Had politicians and Berlin's pub-



(Above) Installation view of Bruce Nauman's works in Hamburger Bahnhof including sculpture Model for indoor/outdoor Seating Arrangement (1999) and video work Raw Material with Continuous Shift (1991). All works from the F.C. Flick Collection. (Right) stone sculpture, Partial Truth, hand-carved black granite (1997) by Bruce Nauman, part of the F.C. Flick Collection.





Former forced laborers in the Flick-owned companies during WWII, from right to left: Elisabeth Szenes, Lili Viragh, Eva Fahidi-Putzai.
Photo: Henryk M. Broder, Der Spiegel.

lic museums compromised the public trust by agreeing to exhibit the F.C. Flick Collection? And if the quality of the collection was not all it was cracked up to be, had they taken too great a risk for too little return? Far worse, was the government responsible for supporting a kind of normalization of Nazi crimes?

On September 22 a public panel discussion took place at the Free University, Berlin, organized by the Otto Suhr Institute in conjunction with an exhibition at the Prenzlauer Berg Museum entitled, "Forced Labor in Berlin 1938-1945 and the Flick Example." Three former forced laborers in the Flick businesses during World War II (Elisabeth Szenes, Lilli Viragh, Eva Fahidi-Putzai) discussed their feelings about the Flick Collection in Berlin and their experiences in the Flick companies. The women, all in their eighties, were forced to work in arms factories after they were deported from Hungary. None of the women were embittered or personally angry with F.C. Flick, nor did they blame him for his grandfather's actions. They insisted, however, that there was an irreparable connection between F.C. Flick's fortune and slave labor during the Second World War. When asked what she thought of the Flick exhibition, Eva Fahidi-Putzai had only one request: "There should be a sign installed next to the exhibition which reads, 'Thousands of people were forced to work as slave laborers in inhumane conditions to bring you this exhibition.'" Fahidi-Putzai's comments echoed the general public sentiment that could be found in many newspaper articles and letters to the editor in the weeks leading up to the exhibition. The concerns were not only related to the Flick family history, but also to the responsibility of German politicians and Berlin's cultural establishment to ethically deal with the Flick debate and to bring a level of transparency and openness to the topic.

In a very different discussion, organized by the Hamburger Bahnhof, museum directors from all over the

world were invited to speak on the topic of "The Power of the Collector and the Responsibility of the Museum." I found that the most interesting comments came from Glenn Lowry, Director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Lowry said that he considered the most significant aspect of the discussion to be a debate about "public trust": "The more general question at stake here," Lowry noted, "is what are the acceptable mechanisms of transferring private wealth to the public trust and what are the moral questions at play?... This is a test for Mr. Flick's generation, a test as to whether they can have a productive debate about National Socialism. I think that the public nature of this debate has courageously been encouraged by Flick himself and that this is part of a crucial, broad social process."

But had the public debate indeed gone that far? In my opinion, it has not. While the controversy has (perhaps not surprisingly) centered on F.C. Flick's grandfather and the source of his wealth, I think that there are two other significant aspects of the controversy that warrant further discussion. Surely there is more to be learned about the activities of Friedrich Flick during the Second World War, but I find his miraculous rise to wealth and prominence in post-war West Germany an equally pressing and problematic moral issue. In the panel discussion at the Hamburger Bahnhof, Thomas Flierl, Senator for Culture in Berlin summed up



Glenn Lowry, Director of MOMA, New York and Peter-Klaus Schuster, General Director of the Berlin State Museums at the panel discussion, "The Power of the Collector and the Responsibility of the Museum," Hamburger Bahnhof, September 22.

this aspect of the question succinctly: "All of West Germany profited from the integration of ex-Nazis into every area of economic and political life, not only Flick. The question is how we should come to terms with this part of our history." The second issue relates to Friedrich Christian Flick's evasion of paying estate tax to the West-German government in the 1970s. Although F.C. Flick's move to Switzerland and subsequent tax relief were not against the law in any strict sense, I find it very problematic that he has now found a home for his collection in a public institution, an institution whose very existence is dependent on taxpayers' money and public funding. Critics of the exhibition have noted without any irony that the estimated worth of the F.C. Flick Collection is roughly equal to the amount that F.C. Flick denied the German state by moving to Switzerland.

In a third panel discussion I attended, organized by artists Renate Stih and Frieder Schnock, art critic Hans-Joachim Müller tied the most significant aspects of this unfinished debate together, and to conclude I quote him here at length: "There is no better family portrait of the early days of West Germany than the Flick family. This is the real shock and controversy. This only brings to light the continuity between the National Socialists and the West German state, where Nazis instantly became democrats in the post-war period and were allowed to become successful businessmen and upstanding members of society. When a Social Democrat Chancellor [Schröder], who should be committed to social justice, rolls out the red carpet for Germany's most prominent tax evader this is only a continuation of post-war West German politics, where democratic development is incorrigibly mixed with questionable histories, fortunes and convenient and pragmatic forgetting. This is about power, and F.C. Flick's attempt to show his family's name in a good light. Neither of these aspects should come as a surprise to us. What is deeply problematic is that the Chancellor and a public institution have opened their arms to Flick and enabled this to occur."

* * *

Postscript — Palast der Republik and Tempelhof Update:

In my first ICWA letter, I reported about the planned demolition of the Palast der Republik and the cultural activities that were taking place in the shell of the building this fall, under the title "Volkspalast". I'm pleased to report that due in part to the success and popularity of the Volkspalast, State Culture Minister Christina Weiss and Berlin's Senator for Culture Thomas Flierl announced last month that the Palast der Republik can be used for cultural activities until summer 2005 (demolition was slated to begin February 2005), but emphasized that the decision to eventually tear down the building is a final one. As for Tempelhof Airport, airlines have been busy moving operations to Berlin's other two airports, and the aviation facilities in the building will be officially closed on October 31, as required by a vote in the Berlin Senate this summer. □

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Phone: (603) 643-5548
Fax: (603) 643-9599
E-Mail: icwa@valley.net
Web address: www.icwa.org

Executive Director:
Peter Bird Martin
Program Administrator:
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