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“YOU DON'T POSSESS ART, ART POSSESSES YOU”
-FRIEDRICH E RENTSCHLER

**MEERA MUKHERJEE &
HER GERMAN CONNECTION**

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THE FER COLLECTION & THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PRIVATE COLLECTORS

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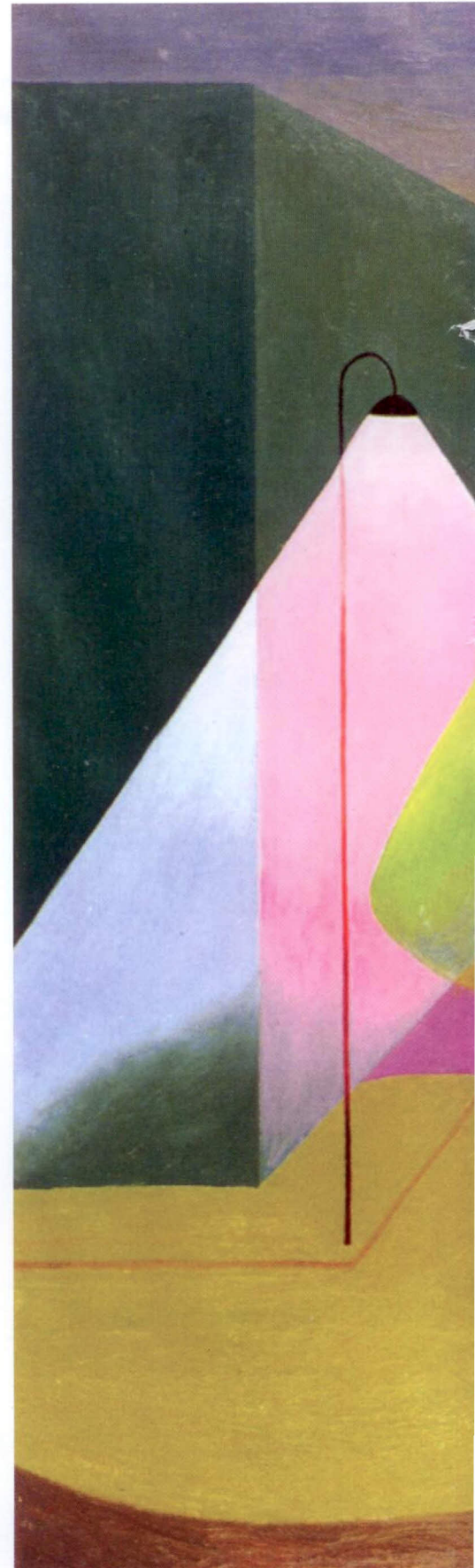
Lydia Rea Hartl spoke to **Friedrich E. Rentschler** in Germany who is one of the most important private collectors of international contemporary art in that country and one who supports interesting artistic and philosophical positions.

THE FER COLLECTION & THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PRIVATE COLLECTORS

The private art collector is a phenomenon that developed during the European Renaissance – starting with aristocrats like the Medici family or the Hapsburg rulers. The two worlds of art and money have always been intertwined; each basking in the other's reflected lustre. Today's collectors are not very different from the former dukes, popes and merchants. In Europe's modern age, more and more money flowed from business ventures and art collection became a status symbol and the "private" art collectors were born.

Their motives to buy art springs from their lust for status or profit. The bottom line of many a great collection is the creation of a museum, which can benefit society for generations, like the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, the Museo del Prado in Madrid, or the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Never before in the European and American history have so many new art museums been opened than during the last 30 years, and never before have there been so many private collectors of contemporary art who are sought after by galleries, auction houses and museums. In the increasingly globalised art business, and especially in the contemporary art market with its extraordinary prices, private collectors attract the attention of the top ranked art fairs and hold a key position, facilitating the growth of the art market, and also enabling and supporting the production of art.





Above: *Untitled* by Salvatore Mangione, 1980



One of the most impressive solitaires is Friedrich Erwin Rentschler who owns a collection of contemporary art of rare quality. When the ZKM Museum Karlsruhe opened in 1999 as a German art collectors' museum concentrating on the major artistic developments from 1960 onward, Rentschler who started collecting in 1960, participated as a founder member, giving substantial loans, acting as a speaker of the collectors.

Internationally, word has spread that in Germany many new private collections have been generated. The majority seek permanent collaboration with state-run museums to create a win-win-situation: the collectors gaining public reputation, and the museums compensating their tight purchase budget. Some collectors, however, focus on the costly option of having their own, quite often spectacular, exhibition rooms.

But who are these modern Medicis? Today's collectors come in all shapes as well as sizes, from enthusiastic amateurs to true aficionados, from hedge fund kings to beneficiary heirs. Their motives are as different as the ways in which they treat their collections. There is a wide scope of tastes, passions, recognition, and self-portrayal; they include hobby, patronage, investment, or professionalism. We buy what we like, say some. Others want to come close to what they do not understand immediately which can include seeking advice, getting to know artists personally. Some buy iconic art, cocooned in privacy, others buy publicly, and in bulk, aiming to shape and move markets, and the taste of another group moulds museums. Recently, art hype, star cult, price rises, and manipulation have also attracted speculators. Despite the financial crisis, or because of it, art serves as an apparently sound investment and a stylish setting for the rich and the beautiful.

Not all of these collectors have unerring eyes for quality or are open to new ideas. Therefore, the traditional European art world tends to eye the growing influence of private collectors with mistrust, fearing for the quality of the museum standards. They complain about the price rigging for the already canonical part of contemporary art that excludes public museums from bidding. Art museums could never manage without collectors. Nowadays, however, collectors even co-determine what museums present to the public. It is their economic power that enables them to influence the definition of what is understood as contemporary art. This imposes, at least in theory, an enormous obligation – far beyond personal or subjective criteria for collecting art.

In the absence of significant public collections of contemporary art, private collections and galleries in India are increasingly becoming the spaces where the public is confronted with new local and transcultural developments. Therefore their role might be even more important and complex than in Europe, where the public museum still represents the gold standard for what is defined as "pathbreaking". Disparate patterns of collecting art, as indicated by many private collections, picture the highly opaque and centrifugal development of contemporary art on one hand, but also stand for the diversity of individual taste and enthusiasm. Transforming a private collection into a showroom or even museum changes the level of the collector's responsibility dramatically.

Collectors who are aware of their responsibility beyond market speculations are seldom found anywhere. One of the most impressive solitaires is Friedrich Erwin Rentschler who owns a collection of contemporary art of rare quality. When the ZKM Museum Karlsruhe opened in 1999 as a German art collectors' museum concentrating on the major artistic developments from 1960 onward, Rentschler who started collecting in 1960, participated as a founder member,



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giving substantial loans, acting as a speaker of the collectors. He decided to present his collection in exhibition rooms, in a former industrial building right in the centre of Ulm, a city in South Germany. At first glance, Ulm seems to be a bit off the beaten track – why not Berlin or Munich? Taking a closer look, however, one finds out that the area has a substantial cultural tradition, also being a region with a stable and innovative economy.

In 2009, the FER collection, a private collection of international contemporary art (www.fer-collection.de), opened the doors to an interested public, consisting of international museum curators, art collectors, art lovers, curious newcomers, including many young people. Like most private museums, it can be visited only by appointment, but if you are lucky, the collector in person will be your guide, and the way he explains what his collection is all about is so exciting and moving that it can give you the goose bumps.

FER, the initials of Rentschler, represent the collector's identity, they are, as an acronym, abstract enough to distract the attention from him as a private person. Rentschler is a German entrepreneur who spent his business life transforming a family run pharmaceutical firm, based not far from Ulm, into one of the leading innovative biotech companies. Against all odds he had focused on developing the world's first market approval for Interferon, a substance for treating immune diseases, and succeeded in 1983. The motto of his enterprise "We know what we're doing" could as well be the motto of his art collection. Vision, and old-fashioned virtues like knowledge, experience, reliability, and continuity, count for his success in both fields.

A major art magazine once called Rentschler the Columbus of contemporary art. Although he is somewhat labelled as a collector of stunning conceptual and minimal art, the passionate discoverer of new and exciting trends of contemporary art is not fixed to any artistic movement. On the contrary, he is open to whatever links art with philosophy, or reflects what it means to be a human being. "Art is an essential sensuality, but even more important, an exploration of the human condition. Art expresses imagination and insight with other means than language, it provides a range of forms, symbols and ideas with meanings that are able to change one's perception of existence", he states. For him, collecting art is not only pleasure, but a vocation in life; "Art feeds my spirit and my senses", he adds. His wife, Maria Schlumberger, who herself is a collector of extraordinary and rare **Quilts**, calls him lovingly "a missionary" when it comes to art.

"The passion for art is, as for believers, very religious, as its message is of common humanity. It may be a banality, but you don't possess art, art possesses you" he says. In today's society, art ensures a culture beyond the commercial mainstream and offers many ways to learn and experience new things. Creativity is, after all, the most important raw material of the 21st century, and never before have so many people been drawn to museums as they are today. Rentschler's answer: "The closer things and forms come to experience, the more they influence us, animate us to experiment, to investigate ourselves in other,

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unaccustomed contexts, and thus to get to know ourselves better so we can act with responsibility and ethics.”

Regarding his role and the role of art audience in general, he quotes Marcel Duchamp who had emphasised that the creative act is not performed by the artist alone, but also by the spectator who brings the artwork into contact with the external world by deciphering and

interpreting its inner qualifications. Thus, a collector has to create an ensemble that stands for the same high quality as the artworks themselves. And like many European thinkers he states: "I am interested in ideas that come to vision via art. And I agree with Thomas S. Kuhn, that we experience a paradigm shift, not only in science, but also in art: the criteria we apply to judge and perceive art are influenced by individual, social, and historical mindsets that change periodically. Seen like this, masterpieces of art help us to understand ourselves and the world. And this is what I want to share with others." Therefore, his collection gathers essential philosophical ideas translated into form, from artists like Joseph Kosuth, who question the nature of art and its ubiquitous and general meaning beyond cultural traditions.

Being not under public obligation, he as a private collector can provide long-term support to interesting philosophical and artistic positions. Generally, the future of private collections is more open, less determinable than of museums, and, most importantly for him, never controlled by politics. As a result, the collection as a whole is even greater than the sum of its parts, as it represents a specific and pathbreaking cosmos of timeless ideas and reflection. If he were given a wish, he would wish to know what people will think of his collection after two centuries. All in all, the chances are good that the FER collection is more than just a fine collection; it may also represent one of the best private collections of tomorrow ■