



# Sammlung Hoffmann

## Mitte's Hidden Jewelbox

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It's amazing how you can walk down the same street a hundred times and still not really know it; unaware of the dramas that have transpired, the secrets hiding just behind the familiar facades. I was reminded of this the other day, when I discovered just a fraction of the surprises tucked behind the walls leading through my favorite Sophienstrasse passage, housing Sammlung Hoffmann, an extensive private collection of contemporary art.

Walking around and through in Berlin is a unique experience. There are houses here that take up half a block, and from the sidewalk look like solid impervious structures dense, deep and impenetrable. Frequently an Alt Bau (old building) will have a front doorway, wide enough for a horse drawn carriage or antique car to enter which leads to a shaded inner courtyard. Often the passage continues, leading even further into a labyrinthine succession of back houses and courtyards, linked together through a common walkway. The promise of discovering what lays just beyond the next doorway lures you deeper into the maze of ancient, ivy lined Hinterhöfe (back houses) wondering "who lived here? What stories can these walls tell me?" With so much history having transpired in Berlin, one cannot help but project visions inspired by films and history books onto the massive old buildings that dot the city.

Many times these complexes of conjoined buildings straddle a city block, creating a hidden passage between two streets that the public can access if they know where to find it. Sometimes, as in the case of the famous Hackesche Höfe, they become popular tourist destinations filled with little boutiques, cafes and the sneakered masses milling about toting their video

cameras and slack jaws. Fanny packed pensioners toodle though in waves, following the guide's yellow umbrella – seeking out the obviously fantastic next to the well-worn spectacles of the freshly gentrified East.

Just down Sophienstrasse, the side street that the Hackesche Höfe maze spits into stands another complex of buildings called Sophie-Gips-Höfe. This collection of houses cuts across to Gipstrasse, depositing me one block closer to my apartment. Ever since moving to Mitte I have enjoyed this picturesque shortcut home, sending me past wide windowed galleries, the uniquely friendly NY deli called Café Barcomi's and a layered history of architecture overgrown with vines.

Over the years I have heard about a private art collection also housed along Sophienstrasse that's open for viewings by appointment only. Being a spontaneous kind of girl myself, I had never bothered thinking far enough in advance to search out the place, make an appointment and check it out. So, when a pal called, inviting me along to his appointment to see the collection, I jumped at the chance. Finally I would get the opportunity to peek inside the elusive, mythic Mitte jewel box. Little did I know that all this time the Hoffmann collection was parked upstairs in the same Höfe complex that provides my NY style bagels and shortcut home!

In 1995 Erika and Rolf Hoffmann came to Berlin, eager to be in the East amid the creative energy of Germany's reunification. It had been their dream to create a space in which to live with their art, while providing an environment where the public could also view the collection. Looking for a location generous enough to accommodate their burgeoning contemporary art collection, boasting over 80 international artists, the couple bought an old sewing machine factory and turned it into what is now Sophie-Gips-Höfe. After 2 years of



renovating and remodeling the space was finished in 1997. Since September of that year their living quarters, which occupy 2 floors of the elaborate complex, have been open for public viewing by appointment every Saturday afternoon.

Reflecting the Hoffmann's personal tastes instead of market trends, the artwork varies from that of world-renowned blue chip artists like Frank Stella and Christian Boltanski to young or obscure artists who are just beginning to make their professional mark. Every summer, Erika Hoffmann curates a new selection from the larger pool of choices, revealing fresh relationships and contrasts through the juxtaposition of different pieces, generations and styles. This year's installation looks pointedly at geometry, whether expressed through bold graphic paintings like Sarah Morris' "Pools - SansSouci (Miami)", 2002 or the eclectic constellations of Richard Tuttle's found object collages titled "Snow", 1984, deliberately hung at subtly disconcerting angles. The changing combinations of the collection are intended to explore the philosophical and aesthetic comparisons between artistic periods and agendas. One moves from room to room discovering new conceptual relationships that are further informed by the normal, everyday stuff one lives with, like old record collections or piles of magazines.

As we made our way through the maze of rooms we delighted in this collapse of art and the mundane. "World Receivers", a collection of cement blocks in the shape of different radios complete with telescopic antennae, by Berlin based artist Isa Genzken, had been placed along side a stereo and media cart housing a personal assortment of videos and recordings. An unidentifiable but warmly earthy scent lured us deeper still, until we found a room filled with Ernesto Neto's piece "Paff! Paff Paff Puff, Puff, Puff...", 1998 consisting of bags of different spices, constructed from what looked like assorted shapes and sizes of pantyhose. Clove, curry and other scents permeated the air of the

entire second floor with an avant-garde potpourri of homey flavors. Meanwhile the dust from the powders sat in colorful rings that had wafted out from the fabric forms. How lovely it must be to have a scented sculpture infusing your home with rich, heady spice!

Other rooms housed gigantic, singular sculptures like the crowd pleaser by Berlin based Japanese artist Chiharu Shiota. In her meticulous construction "Second Skin", 2001, a white dress lays suspended within an elaborate cobweb netting of black wool yarn, woven around a simple rectangular frame. The ambiguity of the situation begs various readings on femininity and stasis while formal considerations imply a delicate, spider-like craftsmanship – cocooning the (wedding?) dress in contrasting cords of control.

Shuffling along in our oversized, protective felt slippers my group of gawkers and I eventually bumped up against a sublime reminder that, while the space may have a clean gallery-like feel to it, we were most definitely in a private home. Turning the corner past the Morris painting we discovered a little red room lined with original cubist works from the early 20'th century, including an untitled 1915 Rodchenko delicacy. In the center of the room stood a simple wooden table laid with a still life featuring the elegant remnants of someone's lunch. Hearty dark bread, a generous chunk of blue cheese and some tiny lady apples lay strewn amid thoughtfully placed breadcrumbs creating a setting as beautiful as any of the pieces on the walls. So artful, in fact that my friends and I figured the set was a part of the collection. It wasn't until the end of the tour, when our guide picked up the tray of lunchtime leftovers, whisking it off to a hidden corner of the house that we realized the arrangement was an organic outcropping of daily life.

Despite the welcoming, open doors, it's hard not to be curious about the more private rooms we were not allowed to view. What works fill those spaces? How do other aspects of normal life interweave with the artworks? Who's painting hangs above the night stand and yesterday's socks, peeled off just before slipping into bed? Much like ambling through the collection of Sophie-Gips Höfe buildings, strung together with low slung passages – one's mind wanders to the secrets hidden on the other side of the interior walls – imagining the dramas, the laughter, the concealed bits that could reveal too much. Like the German's themselves, if (after making an appointment) you knock carefully on those solid, imposing doors, they just might give way to slowly reveal hidden riches, tucked away in a succession of fragile jewel boxes. No matter how deep you go, there is always another turn to make and a further chamber to uncover. Obscured from view, perhaps, though they have been waiting there all along.

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