



## MUSEOLOGY AND CULTURAL POLITICS LADISLAV KESNER

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Ladislav Kesner was the Curator of Chinese art, head of the Asian Art Department and Deputy General Director of the National Gallery in Prague. He is currently Associate Professor of Art History at Masaryk University Brno and Managing Director of Cultropa, a museum planning and consulting company. He was a Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of California Berkeley (1989–90) and a Smithsonian Postdoctoral Fellow at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery and Freer Gallery (1993–94), a Visiting Scholar in the Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and Humanities in 2002 and a Senior Fellow at the Internationales Forschungszentrum Kulturwissenschaften in Vienna (2006–07). In 1995, the College Art Association of America awarded him the Arthur Kingsley Porter Prize. He is the author of three books and numerous studies. Current interests include the methodology of art history, museology, histories of vision and the intersection between cognitive science and arts. – Address: Department of Art History, Masaryk University Brno, Arne Nováka 1, 618 00 Brno, Czech Republic.

Driving to Berlin on a sunny day early in June, I was trying to anticipate the seven weeks ahead of me, to which my three-month guest-fellow appointment at Wiko were reduced due to an unexpected ailment. Coming to the city that has been a frequent destination for me over the past 25 years, I felt that this time in Berlin I would confine myself entirely to the ivory tower in Grunewald, fully concentrated on my project. I was soon to realize how wrong such an assumption was. At my first common dinner, I was welcomed by one of the Fellows with a slightly ironic remark: “You are starting when we start to prepare for the end.” But there was hardly time, or indeed a reason, to ponder how well one fits into a

close-knit community that has lived together for some eight months or how to accommodate to life in Berlin. What other Fellows in their reports described as their “transforming” or “liberating Wiko experience” was, in my case, crammed into a short but extremely intensive sojourn. I could not have helped but wonder whether the masterminds behind Wiko have deliberately devised and implemented their vision of the “Wiko experience” or whether it evolved spontaneously over the years. At any rate, to me these seven weeks in Berlin will indeed epitomize a unique Wiko experience, its most salient feature being the peculiar combination of opportunity for a deep solitary absorption and undisturbed concentration, free of the usual distractions, punctuated by equally intense social contacts – informal talks with other Fellows, guests and Wiko staff – during colloquia, events and lunches.

Relishing the luxury of having any publication arriving almost on my table, I spent many hours just ordering books, perusing and printing journal articles from the on-line database and reading – stocking myself with a reading material for work that lies well ahead of me. It proved indeed difficult to find the time for both reading and writing, but in the end I have written more than I had expected: a long chapter on scientific and medical images for a volume on visual culture, an essay on *Reconsidering the Behodler's Share*, which should form a chapter in my Wiko project on patterns in visual hermeneutics and artistic and scientific images and a draft version of another essay/chapter.

Despite my original intent to stay confined to a writing desk, a need to escape a daily routine of writing and reading soon prompted me to leave Grunewald to go view exhibitions and museums, many of which I already know very well. It was later on that I came to realize the unique synergy between the institution of Wiko and its location, or rather the fact that a substantial part of what the Kolleg is and has to offer is determined by its location in the city of Berlin. I can only guess how this particular synergy works for scholars in other areas, but for someone who has spent the greater part of his professional life working in or for museums and involved in issues of exhibition development, museum management and cultural planning and policy, the Berlin museum and culture world offers an endless fare of intellectually stimulating experience.

Before I knew it, I was taking notes and thinking intensely inside museums or upon leaving them. I realized that what was meant as a respite from hours hunched over the computer in my study turned out to be another, parallel track of work, related to the second part of my professional interests, not directly related to my project at Wiko – issues of museology and cultural politics. As an author and curator of a major exhibition project on

*Images of Mind/Mind of Images*, which will try to create a composite portrait of the mind by juxtaposing different kinds of artistic and scientific images, I was intrigued by two major exhibition projects that juxtapose very diverse exhibits around a particular topic, trying to analyze and understand why one of them – (*Schmerz* at Hamburger Bahnhof) – fails, while the other (*Das abc der Bilder* in the Pergamon Museum) succeeds. The newly reconstructed Bode Museum and new displays in the Altes Museum offered ample opportunity for studying modes of display and strategies of presentation.

To anyone involved in museums and history, contemporary Berlin offers a unique opportunity to study the politics and pragmatics of the representation of history in the museum and how the medium of exhibition is used to represent recent history and to stimulate discourse on public memory. I was particularly intrigued by the bold attempt to create a classic historical narrative exhibition, spanning the entirety of German history, in the new permanent exhibition in the Deutsches Historisches Museum; and having left the museum after three hours, totally exhausted, I decided to reserve judgment for repeated visits. Of particular interest to me were the new exhibitions on the recent past. Having first come to (East) Berlin in 1982 and having returned countless times both before and after 1989, I realized I am a tiny part of living memory of Berlin's recent past. Observing and closely comparing different attempts to represent and recreate this past and especially the phenomenon of the GDR was enormously rewarding and instructive professionally, but also enriching personally. The newly opened GDR museum mostly confirmed what could have been expected – an experiential tour for mass tourism, mildly amusing and, given the genre, working surprisingly well. Looking forward to see the exhibition on *Parteidiktatur in der DDR*, I was profoundly disappointed by the overambitious, incoherent show that, trying to encompass everything, failed to deliver any substantial message about the substance of Party dictatorship or the nature of the East German regime. But that was more than compensated when, driving home on my last day, I stopped in a former Stasi headquarter – turned museum – in Berlin Lichtenberg. The *genius loci* of the compound, combined with the simplicity of the seemingly old-fashioned, almost amateurish display of mostly documents and photographs revived the spectre of the East German regime in an almost hallucinatory vividness.

The ongoing developments in museums and monuments in Berlin offer countless opportunities to engage specific problems of representing the past – issues of museology, presentation and historical interpretation. But as someone who was involved in museum management and culture planning, I was forced to ponder yet again the broader significance

of the lesson that developments in Berlin culture infrastructure provide. More than before, I came to realize the profundity of the gap between the way Germans on different levels – from state-sponsored museums to local foundations and citizen groups – systematically explore different ways of portraying and re-presenting their recent past (and thus coming to terms with it), on the one hand, and the sustained mismanagement of cultural capital and almost total absence of any concentrated effort to represent the communist past in my own country, on the other hand. In the end, I value the result of my interactions with Berlin museums and monuments – although for the time being scattered in notes and drafts for a volume on museums and monuments in postcommunist Czechoslovakia – as much as a work on my “official” Wiko project.

The true significance and privilege of being able to spend some time at the Wiko fully appears only as the experience itself turns into memories, against the reality of one’s usual routine and duties. One key aspect that makes the Wiko experience so unique and memorable, however, has become apparent to me only after a few weeks: the efficient professionalism of all *Mitarbeiter* coupled with their friendliness. The way they managed to dismantle any notion of barrier between the personnel of the host institution and the visiting scholars, while always being able to respond quickly and efficiently to any request or question, I found truly remarkable. To them, ultimately, I am most grateful for making my brief stay at Wiko so memorable and rewarding.