



METAMORPHOSIS: HOW DID I BECOME AN ACADEMIC?

TOMASZ KIZNY

Tomasz Kizny, born in Poland in 1958, is a photographer working in the fields of documentary photography and visual arts. In 1982, he was the founding member of the independent photo agency “Dementi”, an underground organization of independent photographers established following the implementation of martial law in Poland and working till 1991. In 1986–2003, he carried out a long-term photographic project devoted to the Gulags in the USSR. The main themes of this work were published in the book *Gulag*, preface: Norman Davies, Siergiei Kovaliov and Jorge Semprun (Paris 2003, Hamburg, Milan, Barcelona, New York 2004, Moscow 2007). Tomasz Kizny’s project “The Passengers”, completed in 1998–2002, is a relevant gallery of people, inhabitants of metropolises at the turn of the millennium, and consists of an extensive series of portraits of underground passengers in Moscow, Warsaw, Berlin, Paris and New York. His works have been presented at numerous individual and group exhibitions. Tomasz Kizny lives and works in Wrocław, Poland. – Address: ul. Wieckowskiego 25 m. 19, 50-431 Wrocław, Poland.

At the beginning there were doubts and fears – what am I doing here, an outsider, an artist with no academic experience? Did they make a mistake inviting me? Am I going to be shamed?

I came to Wissenschaftskolleg with a pretty straightforward project to complete – the photo documentary book *The Great Terror in the USSR 1936–1938* – and to prepare a follow-up photographic exhibition.

Then discussions started. The Image Science Focus Group was an eye-opener for me. Although the group disintegrated, informal talks with Ulrich Keller and Lisa Parks went

on. In the process, my project assumed an almost entirely different face. The historical photographic material will stay the core part of the book/exhibition, but now my project is going to explore new aspects of the problem: the relationship between construction of collective memory and photographic image, the problems of photo documentary objectivity, potentials and limitations of photography, a deeper exploration of historical context. These discussions and very good feedback after my Tuesday Colloquium, both from Fellows and Wiko staff, solidified my belief that emotional empathy is one of the principal gates to memory. In other words, photographic evidence adds to the existing oral-history projects and scholarly research the kind of visual dimension that can impart a factor of concreteness and emotional strength to memory efforts.

In a way, my experience has been a Wiko dream come true. Cooperation with colleagues has changed the shape of my work. Discussions with Ulrich Keller convinced me to undertake a new stage of the project: to supplement the historical picture material with present-day photographs of my own. My intention is to create an extensive portrait series of eyewitnesses or “heirs” of the Great Terror, mainly the children of the victims, as well as present-day photographs of the secret killing fields and mass graves in Russia. I actually used this method in my previous book, *Gulag*. Discussions with Horst Bredekamp furthered my understanding of theoretical issues concerning the image, visual documentation and related questions. Discussions with Lisa Parks resulted in thematizing problems of witnessing, memory and trauma.

And so these wonderful colleagues are to be blamed for the fact that the book is not finished. The new book, in progress, will reflect this collaboration. Ulrich Keller agreed to join up with me to write the introductory essay, as well as to cooperate through the duration of the next stage of my project.

In the spirit of mutations, which we elected as a leitmotif of our year, my Wiko colleagues have conspired to make me (almost) into an academic. Lisa Parks even made me a subject of her forthcoming essay, “In the Wake of the Gulags: Worlds of Forced Labor and the Photography of Tomasz Kizny” for a *Moving Testimonies* volume edited by Janet Walker.

In addition to my unexpected transformation, I have also prepared the Russian-language revised edition of the *Gulag*, published October 2007, Rosspen, Moscow, and I have exhibited at Wiko “The Passengers”, a series of portraits of subway travelers in Moscow, Warsaw, Berlin, Paris and New York, thanks to Corina Pertschi who had the idea and organized the exhibition.

The luxury of time offered by Wiko allowed me to realize a long-cherished dream. Together with my friends from the former “Dementi” Independent Photographic Agency, which worked for seven years in the underground in Poland (1982–89) documenting “Solidarity” strikes, demonstrations, social resistance and then the collapse of communist systems in Central Europe, we have established this year a Foundation “Dementi”, devoted to carrying out documentary photography projects and exhibitions in my city Wrocław in Poland.

I can hardly find words to express my gratitude to the Wissenschaftskolleg and its staff for offering me so fruitful a time.