



DAS ZWISCHENJAHR
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I came with a hunch: that medieval art was a presence, a field of reference, for modern and contemporary art. I was not after allusions to specific medieval artifacts, but instead wanted to understand how pre-modern modes of art-making and ways of thinking became relevant once more in the twentieth century. Why did Brecht see *Verfremdungseffekte* in Brueghel? Why did Eisenstein see the principle of montage in El Greco? Why does the logic of the readymade come so close to that of the relic? Why did the debates about conceptual art share so many points in common with medieval debates over iconoclasm? Now, at the end of the year, it is more than a hunch – I see a whole field. It feels like a project too big for me alone, and I now understand that my contribution will be nothing more than to give a powerful sense of that fact. I am looking at a stack of paper of about 200 pages, pages with complete sentences, more or less in the right order, and I feel that I have completed the arc of work I set out to do, which was to start this project and find its basic range and shape. I have a manuscript.

I came here with a desire: to think new thoughts, to become a student again. The timing could not have been better. Last August I sent off the manuscript of a book I had been researching and writing for ten years. This year I wanted to forget about Renaissance art and the Reformation. I didn't – there was some more work to do (I focused my colloquium on it) and it turned out to be a new direction for the old manuscript! But by the end of the Fall I was fully submerged in a field that was new to me, which is a good way to force oneself to think new thoughts. Moreover, I left my previous job last August. Before the Wiko year I was at the University of Toronto – that was one life. After this year I will be at New York University – another life. This was the *Zwischenjahr*. To be between homes, between positions, in what is at present the most fluid and mobile of European cities: for most of this year it felt like my feet were barely touching the ground.

I think I would have felt *too* unmoored if not for the large surrogate family I developed at Wiko. At first I thought that lunch every day was truly overkill, but around November I realized that with forty Fellows, the odd interesting guest, not to mention the staff, you really need that many lunches to get to know the people here. I remember, around December, looking over the dining room after a Thursday dinner and realizing that I had developed real affection for my co-Fellows. There are intangible things that one receives from the institutional contact with the Fellows; several colloquia, I am sure, affected me in ways that I am not entirely aware of. But I also found that it was good to reserve a table and talk to one Fellow about specific issues in depth. Salman Bashier, Horst Bredekamp, Rüdiger Campe, Michael Fried, Luca Giuliani, Heiner Goebbels, Miriam Hansen, Antjie Krog, Bernie Levinson, Ruth Leys, Fosca Mariani (the wife of Denis Thouard), Alva Noë, Raphael Rosenberg, Peter Schäfer, and Gunther Teubner responded directly and substantially to my work. They told me things that changed what I was writing. I also realized, fairly soon, how important it is to be involved in activities that go beyond the official ones. Extended contact of a fairly casual sort gets you inside the heads of your Fellows! I learned several valuable things as a result of the time spent with Miriam Hansen co-organizing the Fellow Film Series.

I came with the goal of becoming fluent in German by the end of the year. This goal I have failed to attain! I certainly crossed a threshold and can now talk with friends and handle all practical things (bank, doctors, arguing with the BVG people) in German. But I still cannot speak in *paragraphs*. Maybe next time. However, I am proud of one related achievement. Around February, people in public situations started addressing me in German. This was not due to my linguistic skills, as I had yet to open my mouth. I took that

to mean that I had lost the open and somewhat blank facial expression common to my North American tribe and had developed a good *Berliner Schnauze*. I consider this a significant accomplishment.

I came with one clear local commitment: to get to know the city. For the first six weeks I did little else but apply myself to the German *Intensivkurs* (placing myself in the capable hands of Eva von Kügelgen) and ride my bicycle around town, a kind of Berlin-*Intensivkurs*. For the first few days I had my trusty Falkplan with me, but then I realized it was interrupting my experience to have to stop and consult it. So I developed a new strategy: get lost and keep riding until I find my way again. It is a very big city but it is also supremely accessible by bicycle, and so its extent, its texture, and its many seams fairly soon came within grasp. I was happy I did that in my first month here, as it increased my range throughout the year. For personal reasons I got an apartment outside the Wiko area, in Kreuzberg, and that meant that my year was spent continually traversing the city.

I made arrangements to move my residence to a private apartment on, I think, a Tuesday afternoon. By Wednesday morning at 9:00 every staff member I ran into wanted to congratulate me on having found an apartment, wishing me all the best there! At the Thursday dinner I was taken into custody by several Fellows, forced to drink several glasses of wine, and subjected to a grueling interrogation. Here is a partial transcript:

Q: How did you negotiate establishing residence outside of Wiko?

A: I explained to Andrea Bergmann why I needed to live in my own place.

Q: Was it difficult? Were they unhappy?

A: No, people understood my reasons perfectly and were very supportive.

Q: How did you find an apartment?

A: I went on websites and I asked friends. Something eventually turned up.

Q: Where is your apartment?

A: Kreuzberg.

Q: What's life like *on the outside*?

What I did not expect was that the city should become such an important part of my research project. One of the most vital phases in the history of the city – the time of the Weimar Republic – was also a period when modernist experimentation intersected in highly productive ways with thinking about medieval art and architecture. The newly formed Bauhaus put a Gothic Cathedral, symbol of collective production and artisanal integration, on their very first program of 1919. In the 1920s Kurt Schwitters, seeing that the world

needed to be reconstructed in the wake of the war, started making a private *Kathedrale* out of his own home, an ongoing work of installation filled with shrines and relics. In the months of January and February I spent a great deal of time in the Bauhaus Archiv and in the Kunstbibliothek consulting original materials. I had read secondary literature in German, of course, but this was my first experience doing primary research in the language. Reading the socialist critic Adolf Behne's *Die Wiederkehr der Kunst* (1919) about the return of art to the communal modes of the Middle Ages; or "Künstlerische Zeitfragen", the 1921 essay of Wilhelm Worringer, in which the medieval-art historian and guru of the Expressionist generation leaves Expressionism behind; or Worringer's 1924 *Die Anfänge der Tafelmalerei*, which tells the story of the beginnings of the easel picture in the late Middle Ages, a story that offers the perfect mirror image of the much-discussed dismantling of the easel picture in his own day; or Behne's 1925 *Von Kunst zur Gestaltung*, read side-by-side with László Moholy-Nagy's *Malerei, Photographie, Film*, also from 1925; or original copies of Kurt Schwitters' serial Dada publication *Merz* – these were some of the most satisfying moments of my time in Berlin, not least of all because so many of these were Berlin texts and Berlin debates.

My immersion in the earlier great period of the avant-garde in Berlin has brought me back continually to what is happening now. All the conditions for a major development in this city – something like Berlin in the 1920s – are in place right now: a great city undergoing a new era of renovation, pullulating with cultural activities and yet fantastically cheap to live in, it is possibly the last outpost of real bohemia. It has endless galleries, Kunstvereine, and experimental spaces, and the very precedent of a great avant-garde tradition associated with the city: Expressionism, Dada, Bauhaus, Benjamin, Brecht, Otto Dix, etc. The city has a past mythology and a highly vibrant life right now. And then there is the recent world-historical drama: the fall of the Wall, *die Wende*, the sense of possibility, the real experience of sudden archeology and reconstruction, a new world of buildings and spaces being put to new uses. And now the pilgrimage effect, as artists stream to the city from all over the world.

So where is the stuff? Why is there no Berlin "school", no movement, not even an identifiable quality or powerful mood in the art coming out of this city? Why is it so remarkably identity-free? It is clear enough, by now, that the situation here has not turned out to be Paris in 1910, or New York in 1960. This is not Berlin in the 1920s. In recent years we have seen a Düsseldorf school, a Leipzig school, but no one would claim there is a Berlin school. There are no human force-fields like Picasso or Matisse, Johns and Cage, Brecht

and Dix. Yes, there are famous artists who live here – and some who just keep a studio here – but there is no sense that artistic energies are shaping themselves around them.

And yet I see no reason to be disappointed. It may just be that we are past the time of the “artistic center”. The artists who come here are extremely mobile: they work here some months, they sublet their place, they take time elsewhere. Some European artists live half the week here and half the week in Paris or Copenhagen. Berlin is a node, a highly active node, in a newly distributed world of artistic practice. Artists in Berlin are not particularly interested in making something happen *here*. They make things here and take them elsewhere. They are not particularly interested in the mythology of the city. For them Berlin is above all open space, a space where things are possible, where you can move about freely. And that is what it has been for me, in my *Zwischenjahr*.

Finally, some unplanned developments. I was an insomniac before Berlin. Now I’m not. I stopped eating meat in January. And I fell in love at the end of the year. That part of the Berlin experience I am taking home with me.