



PLACE  
PIPPA SKOTNES

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Pippa Skotnes was born in Johannesburg and attended school at the Convent of the Holy Family. This experience provided a wellspring of ideas, some of which materialised in her continuing artwork, the *Book of Iterations* (2001–2014). She was educated at the University of Cape Town, where she studied Fine Art and Archaeology and received her M.F.A and D.Litt. degrees. After she had published her artist's book *Sound From the Thinking Strings* (1991), she became deeply interested in the nature of the book, producing several volumes inscribed on the bones of horses, an eland, a leopard and seven blue cranes. She has also published a number of other books, including *Claim to the Country* (2007) and *Unconquerable Spirit* (2008) and exhibited artwork widely. She is currently Michaelis Professor of Fine Art and Director of the Centre for Curating the Archive at the University of Cape Town, where she has been working on a project about landscape and holes in the ground, as well as the historical capture and expatriation of African animals. – Address: Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town, 31–37 Orange Street, Gardens, 8001, Cape Town, South Africa. E-mail: [pippa.skotnes@uct.ac.za](mailto:pippa.skotnes@uct.ac.za)

I am in my office at the University of Cape Town as I write this report. All around me are the things I have accumulated over the past twenty-five years: on a shelf are penguin skeletons and below them the skulls of many varieties of African wild pigs. One cabinet displays silver Catholic votive reliefs from Italy, another a collection of plastic Madonna bottles with water from Lourdes. On the walls are watercolours, woodcut prints, engravings and etchings, and in boxes are hundreds of old postcards sent to my mother from all over the world. On one shelf, a lithographic portrait of Jesus of the Sacred Heart appears

to gaze across the room at the beautiful face of Keith Carradine on the cover of the LP “I’m Easy”. Below him nestle the study skins of several species of woodpecker. Two giant beetles found in the Congo are mounted in a wooden box, and several vintage typewriters compete for space on a table that also supports a pile of old photograph albums. There are dozens of pairs of Chinese baby booties in soft boxes, items of marquetry from Mauritius, cloth from Timbuktu, baskets and fossilised whale vertebrae, shelves of books and a large portrait of Robert Redford and Paul Newman as they hunkered down before the final scene in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. Out of my window I look through the trees to the imposing edifice of Table Mountain blurred by a pale breath of cloud, and above it, a deep blue winter sky. The sounds are of Hadedah ibises and Egyptian geese, and the smells – today at least – are of fresh rain and a hint of cinnamon from the potpourri of the perfumery of Santa Maria Novella in Florence. This is the environment I left (with not insignificant feelings of separation anxiety) to take up my fellowship at the Wissenschaftskolleg in Berlin.

By contrast, my studio in the Villa Jaffé was airy, light, white-walled and empty. It was a beautiful room with lovely proportions, tall windows and a wide balcony, but my initial sense of delight and pleasure soon gave way to a feeling of vague panic. I am the kind of artist who collects things and who derives comfort from being surrounded by the mess of *stuff*. I like to have at hand those objects I can organise and arrange, sort through, touch and feel. I am fascinated by the way things move around the world and by how so many have landed as neighbours in my workroom. They constantly give me pause for thought. Side by side, what do they make of each other? How do they change each other, and what can I make of them? At Wiko, at first, I felt rather alone, imagining this absence of clutter could well be liberating, but not entirely sure I could make this true. I spent days organising the tables, gazing out the window, sniffing the air. I tried to imagine the absent objects, the things that might once have filled the room, the people who had lived in it and the lives that must have given the space another presence altogether. I soon discovered that the building was once owned by Georg and Emmy Braun (commemorated in the Stolpersteine outside), from whom it was appropriated for Hermann Göring’s Reich Hunting Association and the offices of the Reich Hunting Museum. Later it was used for a button factory and then a hospital and today the descendants of the Braun family occupy the top floor, creating the comforting sounds of life continuing above the ceiling of my temporary studio. I began to feel I could, if nothing else, assemble a spectral collection and somehow make sense of it in the project I was to embark on.

To be sure, I did not arrive at the Villa Jaffé entirely empty-handed, since as part of my project I had brought with me the skeletons of two giraffes that had lived in South Africa, and whose bones a local taxidermist had prepared for me. My project at the Wiko was threefold. In the first place, I planned to study and transcribe the archival holdings relating to the Special Mission of Magistrate Louis Anthing who, at the request of the colonial government at the Cape in the 1860s, travelled to the borders of the colony in the north and reported on the hostile interactions between Dutch settlers, Khoi herders (and others) and the Ixam or Cape San. Anthing's correspondence details the destruction of the San by the farmers (both Dutch and others), including rare interviews with Ixam survivors of the genocide, along with the refusal of the British to act in any way to halt the killings. In the second place, I wanted to think about the ways the horrors of colonial exterminations and cruelties have contemporary echoes in the establishment of game farms in the northern Cape, and the invitation to European, American, Eastern and local hunters to kill African animals for pleasure. Both my giraffes had been caught up in the circulation of animals from zoos to game farms (and post-mortem to Berlin), having travelled from a zoo in the north of the country to the south, and both had died of starvation as a result of inadequate nutrition. The fate of the giraffes offered me a contemporary example of the ways in which forms of colonization continue today. Thirdly, I wanted to continue a long-term interest of mine in the nature of academic publication and to interrogate the ontology of the book. These three interests came together, literally, in writing the Anthing texts on the surface of the bones. In this I resolved to mimic the monk-like life of the monastic scribes of illuminated manuscripts, working long hours with ink and blade, glue-size and gold leaf (interrupted only by the lavish three-course lunch to which I looked forward each morning).

During my stay at the Wiko, I was able to transcribe the archive and read extensively, developing ideas in several related areas. One was the late 19th-century movement of both animals and people out of Africa and into Europe and beyond for colonial shows, circuses and zoos. One of the major traffickers for these shows was the German Carl Hagenbeck, to whom the modern zoo owes its general layout and existence. Hagenbeck provided detailed information on the capture and transportation of animals in Africa and on the travails of providing conditions that would help ensure the survival of animals trekking across both desert and sea to reach Europe. I reencountered the writing of Kafka and my fellow countryman J. M. Coetzee, and I was provoked by the latter's contentious suggestions (in the comments of Elizabeth Costello) that we should not separate our

blindness to forms of animal cruelty from a blindness that has, in the past, allowed human genocide and extermination. I browsed the bookshelves in the room beneath me and was delighted to finger through the books that had come from the very hands of their authors, some of whom had shaped my own thinking when I started out as a much younger academic and artist. And I savoured the gradual sloughing off of the suffocating skin of administration that often smothered my life at the University of Cape Town. But it was in my fellow Fellows, the staff at Wiko and the city of Berlin itself that I found the richest rewards.

By an enormous stroke of luck, my beautiful studio faced the apartment and office of a scholar of gladiatorial Rome, Kathleen Coleman. Feeling the same brimming anticipation of the small pleasures of the day, we quickly fell into a routine of morning coffee, the brisk stroll to lunch together and an evening drink after a film screening or lecture. We initiated an informal visual seminar together and ended up taking a trip to Sicily to look at Roman mosaics, particularly those that pictured the capturing of animals in Africa and their transportation to the amphitheatres of the Roman Empire. There is a future book in these mutual interests, and we hope to work on it over the next year.

Another of the benefits of this year in Berlin was exposure to the memorials and the astonishing museums of the city. My husband, David Brown (also an artist) and I would spend each weekend exploring the public sites in the city and not infrequently wandering into the graveyards, and abandoned or deserted places, too. No city anywhere can lay claim to a richer diversity of architectural and artist-generated memorials, museums, displays, temporary and permanent exhibitions, as well as places that express the transitions of its history. Berlin is a city of war, of walls, of division and of tragic and traumatic histories. Everywhere are the traces of the destruction of the city at the end of World War II, with walls spattered with gunshot and with the broken spire of the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church as a constant visible reminder. By contrast, today reconstruction and rebuilding takes place in both east and west. It is an injured, but simultaneously thriving city that does not hide its wounds. Beneath one's feet and in multiple architectural and sculptural reminders are the small and the substantial memorials to the people carted off to concentration camps or murdered in the streets. These people were, of course, the Jews for the most part, but the prejudice and discrimination of the Nazi period seemed to know few boundaries. The wall that subsequently divided the city remains in fragments in places and the miseries of this division are recorded in multiple ways and sites.

Museums are, perhaps, one of the most startling and moving places where these traumas come to rest. The complex history of the city is folded into the institutions in ways

that make the collections in museums – no matter from where – survivors of war, conflict, theft, appropriation, and partial destruction. These objects become the magnificent, poignant, affective way to read a history: full of valence, expressing longing and giving presence to the violent conflicts that caused a global circulation (and devastation) of objects, of people and of things. All of this, and much more, has, for me, implications for understanding the ways South Africans celebrate and commemorate the past and the ways we could or should or need to.

Much as the city displays its trauma, it also seems to nurture a secret life. So many times we wandered through corridors that opened up into wonderful courtyards impossible to imagine from the street. David, on his daily bike rides through the Grunewald forest came upon groups of wild boar, piles of unexploded shells, naked bathers in the lake, a British wirecutter. One sunny Sunday while walking towards the Martin-Gropius-Bau Museum, a fox ran past us with a small grey rabbit in its mouth – long soft ears flapping as he trotted along – and I was only subsequently introduced to the story of the no-man’s-land rabbits, who had been trapped in blissful peace in the no-man’s land on East Berlin’s side of the Wall that divided it from West Berlin.

One cannot possibly end a report on a fellowship such as this without echoing the comments of many previous Fellows and heaping thanks upon Luca (with whom I was delighted to share a slow dance at our last Wiko dinner) and the incomparable staff. For so many reasons, and not least the freedom to think and read, to write and make, the Wiko is, as others have characterised it, a paradise, and we who dwelt within it were, for that time, charmed, implausibly glorious beings. I loved my fellow Fellows, took pleasure in their ideas and relished their companionship. I hope to see many of them again. For now, I am back in my studio and the clutter within it, but with all the objects somehow transformed, changed in ways that will rouse me for years to come.