



## A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN CLÉMENTINE DELISS

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Dr. Clémentine Deliss is a curator and cultural historian. She studied contemporary art and social anthropology in Vienna, Paris, and London and holds a Ph.D. from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Between 2015 and 2016, Deliss was Senior Curator of IDEa Foundation in Armenia, where she curated the “Dilijan Arts Observatory”, an international creative think-tank in the historical town of Dilijan. She is currently working as a consultant for the Goethe Institute and as a co-curator of the forthcoming exhibition at the Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart in Berlin (“Globale Resonanzen”, opening November 2017). She is a board member of the Scientific Council of the Musée du quai Branly in Paris. Between 2010 and 2015, she directed the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt, developing a new methodology for research and exhibitions based on historical collections. From 2002 to 2009 she ran the transdisciplinary research lab “Future Academy” with research cells in London, Edinburgh, Dakar, Mumbai, Bangalore, Melbourne, Tokyo, and Yamaguchi. She was the editor and publisher of the itinerant artists’ and writers’ organ “Metronome” (1996–2007), which was presented at Documenta X and Documenta 12 in Kassel. Deliss has held guest professorships at the Städelschule in Frankfurt, the Academy of the Arts in Oslo, and Edinburgh College of Art. She has been a consultant for the European Union and is a member of Theatrum Mundi, the urban lab directed by Richard Sennett. She lives in Berlin.

“I was airlifted into the Wissenschaftskolleg.” This may be an exaggeration, but that is how I felt in the late summer of 2015. I had left Frankfurt for good, packed up my life’s belongings, and after a short trip to Istanbul flew into Berlin to discover the luxury of the

“Remise”, a bungalow in the leafy gardens of the White Villa. There, awaiting me, was an excellent bottle of Bordeaux, select food in the fridge and a warm and welcoming environment. I will never forget the sense of recognition and trust conveyed to me by this invitation. As a curator, I had organised many residencies and think tanks since 1998. This was the first time that I could benefit from one of these retreats myself. During the next six months I was to write a book about the methodology I had implemented over five years as director of the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt.

On the advice of a friend from Paris, I began reading Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, drawing up plans for the book to be written over the course of the next six months. In the first pages of this remarkable extended essay, Woolf writes, “At any rate, when a subject is highly controversial – and any question about sex is that [please read ethnography here, CD] – one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold.” That was my objective: to write about the subjectivity of ethnographic research, its relation to advanced art practice and the controversies surrounding current museology.

As those memorable days in early autumn passed by, I adapted to the structure of the Wissenschaftskolleg with its weekly seminars, lunches and raucous Thursday dinners. I built a framework for myself, characterised by physical discipline and intellectual freedom. I enjoyed the Tuesday seminars, avidly waiting for those moments when the speaker’s content impacted on the construction of my own thoughts.

We were a highly heterogeneous group, consisting of historians, biologists, philosophers, psychologists, composers and writers. From the first presentation, I was fascinated by the modalities of address employed by those different and brilliant minds from the sciences and the humanities. The question always came back to how best to engineer communication *between* our fields. Could we engage with a form of signal scrambling and create synthetic alliances? What would it take to recognise the limits of our independence as thinkers or researchers and would this process help us to collaborate more successfully? Would researchers be able to travel beyond the specialisms of their own professional discourse and speak to one another? How many of us would be actually willing to exchange ideas, formulae and even unfinished blueprints? The potential for interdisciplinary experimentation at the Wissenschaftskolleg was huge, but would it be embarked upon?

As I listened to the biologists speak about animal behaviour, the historians analyse 19th-century Russian law and the linguists deconstruct the minutiae of communication, I

wondered whether this dialogical platform might not require a specific *mise-en-scène*. I began to note the differing registers of rhetorical presentation. Sometimes it was possible to penetrate an alien discourse, other times it would remain lodged in a parallel, distant code. Did the problem of cross-pollination lie in speech forms (or polemically speaking, jargon), in the specificity of individual thematics or might it be that differences in methodologies of research were rarely used as departure points from which to articulate a new, hybrid conversation?

I believe that to engage in an interdisciplinary situation, one has to problematize the actual tropes of dialogical encounter and open up the gates to what remains vulnerable and unresolved. A historian who reproduces a lecture written for the university context may lose the potential for heterodoxy if he or she is not willing to manipulate a form of intermediary language. What is needed is a revelatory technique, something that successfully transmits the subjectivity contained within each person's research and, through this tangent, communicates different know-hows.

Between these moments of reflection, I came back to my book-writing. I used my notes written during the five years of my directorship of the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt to reconstruct a diary, to remember initial thoughts and tap into side lines that had nurtured the development of this new methodology. Bicephalous is a strange term perhaps, but it corresponds to my background, educated both in contemporary art practice and social anthropology. In effect, I had fought to connect the two for many years, eventually abandoning anthropology because of its predominantly text-based representation and returning to work with artists. Through this book I wanted to come to terms with this dual education, unearthing parts of my Ph.D. research from the mid-1980s in which I had sought to connect the experimentation of a wild group of proto-anthropologists in Paris in the 1920s with the dissident surrealist crowd that fuelled artistic discourse at the time. This same attempt to marry ethnographic concerns with research in advanced art practice was the foundation of my work in Frankfurt between 2010 and 2015. I decided that the book to be written at the Wissenschaftskolleg would be a work on detail that tried to capture decisions made and dialogues engendered, from how to re-think the anthropological library in the museum, to setting up residencies in museums, opening studios and seminar spaces in areas usually used for exhibitions and, above all, instituting a laboratory for interdisciplinary investigations.

Whilst I wrote hard and long, I was not able to complete the book in six months. I tried to cover all the ground, but needed to secure my future and embark on a new curatorial

project in Armenia that began right after the residency in Grunewald. I will always remember the Wissenschaftskolleg for providing conditions in which I was able to recharge my psyche after the traumatic experience I received in Frankfurt's political environment. The book will be finished soon, and shorter elements have already appeared in Documenta 14's *South* publication, written with the mix of diligence and pleasure that characterised the remarkable residency at the Wissenschaftskolleg.