



MY DREAM YEAR AT WIKO FRÉDÉRIC BRENNER

Frédéric Brenner was born in 1959. He studied and graduated in social anthropology. Brenner is an acclaimed photographer, best known for the creation of monumental international art projects that explore questions of longing, belonging, and exclusion. His opus, *Diaspora*, was the result of a 25-year search in 40 countries to create a visual record of the Jewish people at the end of the twentieth century. This chronicle portrays the survival of a people with a portable identity and the multiplicity of its dissonant expressions. His most recent project, *This Place*, explores Israel and the West Bank, as place and metaphor, through the eyes of twelve major artists, including Jeff Wall, Thomas Struth, Wendy Ewald, Josef Koudelka, and Brenner himself. Their highly individual work combines to create not a single monolithic vision, but rather a diverse and fragmented portrait, alive to all the rifts and paradoxes of this important and much contested place. *This Place* consists of an international travelling exhibition and 12 books. Brenner has also had solo exhibitions in New York, Mexico City, Paris, Amsterdam, and Buenos Aires. Winner of Prix de Rome (1993), he has published seven books, including *Diaspora: Homelands in Exile* (2003) and *An Archeology of Fear and Desire* (2014). – Address: Amsteldijk 85 B, 1074 JB Amsterdam, Netherlands.
E-mail: fredericbrenner24@gmail.com.

While so many of my partner Fellows had heard about Wiko and dreamt of one day being invited to this luxurious residency, I had never heard of Wiko and, when I was invited, I didn't want to go. My only residency experience was 25 years ago at the French Academy in Rome (Villa Medici), and I thought nothing could ever equal one of the most important

years in my creative and personal life. I am therefore forever grateful to Stephen Greenblatt, who insisted I reconsider my decision.

Wiko put a red carpet in front of us, the Fellows, and we danced on it all year long. Were we dreaming? It was a royal experience. Will I ever be that spoiled again?

Wiko enabled me to implement what I had long contemplated but had not yet been able to enact in my creative process: *surrender*, the antidote to my oppressive propensity to master. Never before did I truly succeed in trusting and letting things simply come to me. I was caught in my will and the need for validation. Wiko enabled me to be willing to risk failure and to envision an alternative beyond the dichotomy of success or failure. I had been working toward this change long before, but had I not come to Wiko, I would have missed this transformative opportunity. The few photographs I took are a testimony to this, and this is the true blessing of this year.

The spectrum of perspectives I was exposed to was an overwhelming and humbling immersion in uncharted territories and stretched my field of consciousness. The Tuesday Colloquium became a ritual one didn't want to miss, as much for the presentation as for the questions that followed. Every time, there were fireworks of ideas and creativity that not only unveiled ideas and perspectives I had never thought of, but also the stimulation created a kind of "appel d'air" (vacuum) that, strangely enough, enabled me to articulate and narrow down the specificity of my quest and the terms of my own working hypothesis.

When all narratives seem to be collapsing and leave us very little to hold on to, the simultaneous crisis of meaning and of images obliges me to articulate questions to redefine my responsibility as an artist today. Wiko has certainly provided me with more tools to decipher an array of fictions and imagined orders and to understand the specificity of who I am and, more importantly, who I am not and the questions at the very heart of my journey. The marvelous spirit that prevailed among the Fellows this year provided the best conditions for an ongoing and fertile conversation that took each of us beyond our own obsessions.

While for long years otherness and redemption have been the leitmotif of my work, Berlin seems to have provided me with an ideal stage to deal with these same questions from a different vantage point. Today, difference is a problem of global scale. I look at Berlin today as "mundus in gutta" or "theatrum mundi", a way of examining otherness anywhere and everywhere.

But my residency in Berlin wouldn't have been the dream it has been without the attention, the sensitivity, and the grace of the entire staff of Wiko, who simply spoiled us

from beginning to end, exemplified in the fine food and the floral decoration. The German lessons enabled me to embrace and later fall in love with the German language – despite a deep, historically rooted family injunction that until now prevented me from learning the language – thanks to two teachers, Eva and Ursula, whose pedagogy, sensitive intelligence, and patience are exceptional.

Last but not least, the *point d'orgue* of this year in Berlin has been music. Music has always been a big part of my life, but this will remain its most musical year. From opera to chamber and contemporary music, music punctuated my residency in the most joyous and fertile way.

I know that it is far too early to make sense of this experience, but I know that this experience is already making sense of me, and rather than working at deciphering this journey and connecting the dots, I believe and I trust that these dots have already started connecting me.