



NOTES ON EVOLVING @ WIKO
PLUS METAPHOR
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Two visual artists at the Wissenschaftskolleg, we arrived on a sunny, hot day in August, having just crossed the Atlantic Ocean by plane. A taxi whisked us, bleary in mid-morning, in a flash from Tegel airport to Villa Walther. And there we were in the apartment that would serve as our abode for the coming eleven months. Blinking in the sun streaming through the windows, we attended to the new skin the walls provided our bodies and to how our organic skins were accommodating to the unfamiliar air.

A few days later, on a Monday morning, we went to our first German class. We were both beginners, and our shared adventure into the language was full of fireworks. We sat at tables in Villa Jaffé with a few other souls, suddenly naked in the face of our incapacity. Our German teacher began speaking to us slowly in German – no English. I was reacquainted with my younger self, accepting of my ignorance, my ears wide open, straining to interpret the sounds floating around me. My brain gathering visual facial cues, arm

waving, and the myriad sound patterns that occasionally resonated with English and the little French I know. Time flowed differently for three weeks; all of us learning German together, gathered from many places. I'm remembering France, Hungary, Kenya, Turkey, and the US. Sociologists, novelists, evolutionary biologists, a historian, and we two artists came together as we imbibed a little bit of Germany. In the wake of those three intense weeks, I continued to study German right till the end. Busy with so many endeavors, I wasn't a particularly good student; nevertheless, engaging the German language was a highlight of the residency. The slow and steady linear accretion of my linguistic capacity was grounding as it accompanied the cacophonous intersection of dialogues generated by the varied contours of the myriad disciplines represented by the Wiko Fellows.

I found it useful listening to how the large array of disciplines brought together in our cohort generated conversation outside of their normal bounds, revealing both stark and blurry lines at the junctures of their overlapping.

The work of the evolutionary biologists was particularly engaging. Their attention and questions, like my own, are often focused on how to conceptualize edges and frames. How do we think about the autonomy of organisms, such as ourselves, which encompass many other microorganisms, each with distinct DNA? Which datasets are embraced when considering the social relations between individuals? These kinds of questions parallel my own interest in exploring the relationship of art objects to context, in relation to their physicality, and in relation to meaning.

During my year in residence, I was invited to write a catalogue essay for the painter Bernard Frize's exhibition at the Pompidou Center in Paris. It gave me great pleasure to be able to reference the work of one of my Co-Fellows:

On October 9, 2018, evolutionary biologist Michael J. Wade gave a lecture at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin titled "Nature, Nurture, and the Nurturers: The Evolutionary Genetics of Interaction". His talk was underlined with this thought: "Everything we know is in relation to covariance." Covariance is a measure of how changes in one variable are associated with changes in a second variable. It measures the degree to which two variables are linearly associated. The principle asserts that all of our knowledge is gathered in relationship to association between things, events, or substances. This measure of how knowledge is gained resonates with Frize's paintings as meaning shakes out between various pairs in tension with one another: color / no color, simple / complex, orchestrated / randomness, flatness / illusion, beauty / irrelevance, feeling / detachment, workmanlike / zen.

As a visual artist at Wiko I sometimes felt like a fish out of water. Though, given the complexity of intersection between disciplines embraced in this community, I imagine many others may have been given to similar feelings.

One evening, walking from my studio in Villa Jaffé to the main Wiko building for a Thursday night dinner, I gave myself a talking to. “That chip on your shoulder,” I said, “perhaps it’s time for it to go! You are as much a part of this diverse collection of practitioners as anyone else. You are just one of many, not odd, not different, not unique. You have much to contribute and gain from mingling with this friendly group of bright and bubbly thinkers.” Joining the revelers in the clubroom, prosecco in hand, I engaged a guest, a former Wiko Fellow, there for the evening; perhaps he was a biologist, and he repeated what by now had become a familiar piece of small talk: “Oh, there aren’t often artists here! That is so unusual . . .,” he said. My heart fell a little. It seemed that it wasn’t all my imagination; the chip wasn’t only on my shoulder.

That said, though I endured a repetition of that particular conversation with many Fellows, over time the novelty of my particular discipline fell mostly to the background, and on many occasions, I enjoyed substantive encounters that served to illuminate the contours of my thinking.

I was productive, working towards an exhibition at the Centraal Museum in Utrecht and the installation of a temporary public work in the Graben in Vienna, titled respectively: *Stuff Matters* and *Slip Slidn’ Away*. A small group of Wiko staff, Fellows, and partners traveled to my opening in Utrecht just before Easter. It was particularly moving and lovely to share my work with these travelers. In the wake of the opening one afternoon back in Berlin, where I shared images and thoughts about the exhibition, I was also touched by the size of the group and the enthusiasm that they brought to bear.

Over the winter, a pair of swans living on the lake outside of Villa Walter carried with them the promise of baby swans come spring. Walking along the lake I watched them begin to build a nest. One day in early spring evidence of a dead swan was reported seen outside the main Wiko building. Sadness. And then I observed more than one new swan visitor to the lake. A week or so later, a pair of swans building a new nest a short distance from the first. Low and behold, cygnets hatched – I heard of seven – six I saw – then five – and at the time of this writing, two . . . The perils of being alive played starkly outside my window. Swans are so picture-perfect to look at. The contrast between the romance of my gaze and the reality of the swans’ being seems analogous to the coexistence of the disembodied intellectual life mingled with the intense physicality of the transplanted and temporary nature of our lives at Wiko.

The size of the community is unique; not small and not overwhelmingly large; it enables a group of acquainted interlocutors to form an unusually intimate audience for the colloquium presentations throughout the year. It is wonderful that Wiko embraces partners, who often contribute unexpected richness and expand the community as their contributions to the developing dialogue are welcomed.

This community of staff and Fellows brought great generosity to bear as we all together fostered the institution of the Wissenschaftskolleg. It was a unique experience, one that I feel privileged to have been treated to.