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Questionnaire

You have been Director of the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz, Max-Planck-Insitut for six years now. Could you sketch a rough outline of the structure and aims of the institute. What has been for you the most challenging aspect of the directorate of the MPI until today?

The KHI was founded in 1897 by a group of German scholars who wanted to be close to the original works of art they were studying, following the example of the German Archaeological Institutes abroad. The most modern research tools, a good library and a collection of photographs, were also part of the project. Today the KHI owns circa 310.000 books which come near to 360.000 volumes if the Journals are included. Moreover, the Photographic Library has grown to about 610.000 images. After having been taken over by the German Ministry of Education and of the Scientific Research, finally the KHI became part of the Max-Planck-Society in 2002.

One of the central aims of the Institute is to provide the international community with the most sophisticated instruments for the study of art history from Late Antiquity to the Present Day in a transcultural and multidisciplinary context. Furthermore, with our research projects we are trying to combine the local and the global with a special attention to the art of the Mediterranean World where the Italian peninsula played and still plays a major role geographically as well as culturally.

The most challenging aspect has been and still is the enormous administrative burden, at all levels: the restoration and modernization of the buildings, fundraising, politics and trade unions. But I am positive that our readers are not interested in these prosaic issues. From an intellectual point of view, Gerhard Wolf and I have found an internationally acclaimed community which, however, was withdrawn in its ivory tower. The relationship with the Florentine Museums was indeed excellent, but, for example,

I was surprised to learn that outstanding international scholars who had published major essays in our journal, the *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes*, had never met personally the members of our staff. The greatest challenge, therefore, was to open the doors of the Institute to an international and younger community—from Canada to Argentina, from Australia to Japan, from Norway to Turkey, from Georgia to India—, and I think that we have been successful.

You have been fellow of many famous institutes for advanced studies. What were the most positive and the negative experiences for you here regarding the idea of networking and intellectual exchange?

Networking has for me a negative connotation, it means something superficial. The intellectual exchange is instead of fundamental importance for the growth of any discipline. I had the good fortune to spend two wonderful years at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton where I greatly enjoyed the exchange not only with the art historians and other humanists, but also with the scientists. The mathematicians around Enrico Bombieri asked very different questions, and it was challenging to come to terms with their sense of the sacred when I was illustrating during a dinner party my project on the Holy Mountains: very different perspectives, but rewarding and unusual discussions. Three years ago, when I was invited by Horst Bredekamp to join for three months the group grown around the *Bildakt und Verkörperung* project at the Humboldt University in Berlin, I experienced the same reinvigorating atmosphere, the exchange with younger scholars who look at works of art from different perspectives: not only art history, but also philosophy, literature, history of science, theory of rhetoric and so on.

The only negative aspect of such institutions is their physical isolation. Certainly not those located in Berlin, but Princeton and the Getty, for example, are like private citadels or fortresses separated from the rest of the world, the real world. One may feel imprisoned in a "golden jail" at Princeton. Therefore, I like that the KHI is located in the centre of Florence, in close reach of the works of art.

How much of an intellectual "community" do you think is necessary for the production of knowledge? How confrontational and controversial should the academic discourse be?

I do not think that it depends on the numbers, but on the quality of the people. Personally, I prefer small "think tanks" so that scholars can know each other well and work together with great intensity. There is a German motto which is expressed in Latin: "Tres faciunt collegium." I like that. Three are enough to create a critical mass, a critical core. Simplifying overtly, even to the risk of being ridiculed by our readers, I take this to mean "thesis", "antithesis", and "synthesis": you need at least three different positions to generate discourse, which brings me to your second question.

Of course the academic dispute must be controversial and confrontational, but it must not be personal, never. Politeness and academic respect for the adversary is fundamental: it is not so much a question of being "nice" to other people, it is a question of behaviour, also intellectual behaviour, of civility which creates civilization as a concept.

Italian cultural politics are in deep crisis at the moment because of the devastating years under the government of Silvio Berlusconi. What is the challenge for an academic—especially an art historian—today to think about the Italian cultural heritage?

Berlusconi was devastating for the country not only because his government has reduced further the already very small resources devoted to our cultural heritage, but above all because television has created a new public which lives in its own world of consumerism completely detached from the country's intellectual history and tradition. Television is not a bad instrument *per se*. When I was a child, my family set every Monday in front of the television to see films by Ingmar Bergman, Alfred Hitchcock, Roberto Rossellini, and even Michelangelo Antonioni, if I remember well. It was just another facet of a good education. Berlusconi's television has destroyed this culture.

What can we do? It is vital to understand that art is not separated from its territory and landscape. It makes little sense to restore with the most sophisticated technologies the Cappella degli Scrovegni frescoed by Giotto in Padua, if you then build an ugly skyscraper next to it. The paintings of Piero della Francesca will not be the same, if you destroy systematically the landscapes on which they were based. We must therefore operate on two levels. On the one hand, we have to denounce all abuses against the national cultural property and territory. On this level, we are excellently placed thanks to some extraordinary colleagues. I think at the numerous articles written by a young art historian, Tomaso Montanari, who teaches at the University of Naples. He has repeatedly denounced the sack of the Biblioteca dei Girolamini until the person responsible for this disaster had to step down. Salvatore Settis, the former Director of the prestigious Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa, began a few years ago his fight against the spoliation of the Italian landscape. His last book is called: *Paesaggio, costituzione, cemento. La battaglia per l'ambiente contro il degrado civile* (Turin 2010). The two colleagues quote often the Constitution, and indeed if we want to organize our resistance against the rape of the countryside and our cultural heritage, we must only follow what is written in that wonderful document, the Italian constitution.

On the other hand, we have also to re-educate, above all visually, the Italian people, and this is a much more difficult task. It will take decades to eliminate the dross of the Berlusconi era, but I am optimistic.

You have been and are still member of numerous committees deciding about fellowships and research programs. Considering the critique of the DFG-Gutachtersystem in 2011, what are for you personally the advantages and what are the disadvantages of "transparency" in these specific decision making structures?

This is a very controversial subject. In principle, "transparency" is always a good thing, the best way to deal with these issues. However, it is probable that if the peer-reviews were not anonymous,

many colleagues would refuse to write them. You cannot force a scholar to write an evaluation of another scholar's project, and the DFG has already problems in finding experts who are willing to "serve" the academic community *pro gloria et amore Dei*. The present system is certainly not perfect, but it seems to me that it is the best possible system. Of course I will be glad to change my mind if you or someone else can prove me wrong.

I must add something. Of course a committee can make a mistake, but in all these years I have been really struck by the fairness of the procedures and the professionalism of colleagues who could devote more time to their own research instead of investing their energies in establishing high academic standards for their own discipline. Nobody is perfect, however, and errors of evaluation are made.

The quest for broad research projects and original topics has been strengthened in the last years. As you have been directing a quantity of research projects at the MPI but also before what are the advantages of this kind of joint research?

I think that each of us is an individual with her/his own passions, obsessions, and goals. This is to say that each of us wants to be an author and likes to work alone. However, the enormous increase in knowledge provided by the information technology has changed many premises of our research. Who can read all that is published today, let us say, on Italian Renaissance art? Each year appear hundreds of articles and books devoted to Leonardo, Raphael, and Michelangelo, not to mention much more interesting transversal topics and many other artists. Nobody can master all this material alone. I suppose that this is the reason why the fashion and industry of multi-authorial workshops and volumes has increased exponentially over the last three decades. This fragmentation is a sign of our times and I am afraid that we, for better or for worse, have to accept it, even if it is not easy to come to terms with this kaleidoscopic world.

A way of trying to master all this information without running the risk of drowning into a sea of confusion is to work with others, and a teacher has the wonderful opportunity to work together with her/his students. I think that I have given much to them in our common projects, but I have also received an enormous amount in terms of knowledge, generosity, and competence. I can see only advantages and no drawbacks, if everybody behaves ethically. If you meet the right people, it is a great pleasure to cooperate: you can check your results with other informed scholars, you can test your ideas to the limits before publishing them, you can exchange information about publications and other sources. It is likely that this form of oral communication will become increasingly vital if the multiplication of written texts does not abate.

How illusory is the idea of an "international community"? How did the experience of different international academia influence your own work? How much network does the humanistic community need?

The first and third questions are easy to answer. The idea of an "international community" is not a wild fancy, even if some colleagues tend to ignore what is written in a language different from their own. Professional art historians meet every four years at the CIHA conference, and the intellectual exchange with scholars in other countries flourish. Furthermore, a humanistic community must be international by definition.

The second question is much more complicated. Being born in Italy, I felt suffocated by a certain parochial attitude in the field of art history, even if my teachers at the State University of Milan were very open and up-to-date. Many Italian colleagues, however, seriously thought that they could better understand Italian art because they were born here, a foolish idea. Intellectually, I was instead attracted more by British scholars such as my mentor, John Shearman, or Michael Hirst, Michael Baxandall, Francis Haskell, and many others. I liked their approach to put all art in context: patrons, techniques, function(s) of works of art, perception, reception, conservation were all part of a complex art historical discourse. Furthermore, I liked the language. Only later I

realized how different my English texts are if they are compared to my Italian essays, and only later I understood, perhaps rather naively late, how much the academic languages determine how we think and the questions we ask to the material. There are national academic discourses, there are different rhetorical strategies, and there are national languages which determine how we think and write, but a synthesis of all these approaches is possible.

As you have mentioned, I have been shaped by many different academic traditions. Of course, you should not take my words at their face-value, and clearly, each country or cultural area is characterized by a plurality of methods. But if I am allowed to speak with a certain degree of approximation, I think that my Italian education was essential to develop my qualities as a *connoisseur*, which I consider essential for an art historian, and to learn to embed works of art in their geographical and cultural context.

Connoisseurship is central also for the English academic discourse as well, but in the late 70s and early 80s I was intellectually seduced not only by Shearman and Baxandall, but also by T.J. Clark. We can call it a social history of art, even if this term is inadequate to describe the very different approaches of these scholars.

When I moved to California to teach at Stanford I became exposed to the theories of the French/European thinkers which were then circulating in the Departments of History, Italian Studies, and Comparative Literature: not only those of Barthes, Foucault, Deleuze, Baudrillard, De Certeau, but also their art historical offshoots like Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson.

Finally, in Germany I met a generation of younger scholars deeply influenced by the local philosophical tradition. The German language is extremely rich and often difficult to translate. It certainly conveys specific ways of thinking and arguing. I have the impression that some of my essays written in German have a different impact and quality if they are translated into English or into Italian.

Therefore, to return to your question, my life in different academic circles has certainly "influenced" my scholarship and my writing. Others have to say whether this has been a good or an insane thing.

I myself feel definitively enriched, and I hope that these different experiences can be traced in my academic work.

However, one point needs perhaps to be stressed, i.e. the different speed and stratification of the cross-fertilization. Ideas and themes circulate, but at different speeds. What is new and exciting in one place may be despised in another; ten years later, what was new and exciting has become stale in the place of origin and has become the last cry in the place where before it was despised. After ten more years, the new idea enriched by the nuances of the second place moves somewhere else or even returns, transformed, to its place of origin. This creates a spiral movement in the dissemination of knowledge and interpretation that it is difficult to disentangle and conceptualize in a few words. It would be probably easier to explain this dynamic scheme through an empirical example such as the growth and expansion of the so-called "gender studies", but this would need a sustained and profound analysis.

Do you have a vision for 2020 for the KHI in general, or regarding international cooperation and studies specifically?

Of course, institutes like the KHI must have a "vision", but expressions like "agenda 2020" are somehow chilling (think of Gerhard Schröder's "agenda 2010"), also because more often than not they turn out to be wrong.

As far as the academic debate is concerned, I do not think that we will change our course over the next eight years. The object in its materiality, and even in its afterlife of stratification and restoration, will remain at the centre of our enterprise; the *Kunstliteratur* and theoretical issues will be further investigated and pursued; the connection with other disciplines, like anthropology, archaeology, sociology etc. will be reinforced. The vision lays more in the transformation of our laboratories. The photographic collection must be transformed into a photographic archive for the history of the image related to the documentation of the works of art, from the early, historical photographs of the 19th century to the present digital images. The biggest challenge, however, will

be the reorganization of the library. I do not think for a moment that books as three-dimensional, economic, and efficient objects will disappear, also because all material published after 1923 is under the protection of the copyright law, at least in the United States. It is however a fact that with the passage of time more and more books will be available (for free?) in the clouds. My vision is therefore a new form of library: not so much a place where one can find everything that has been published on mediterranean art, but a space for an international community where the readers can find, so to speak, the "right" books as three-dimensional objects. The more texts will be digitized in the future, the more each of us will "publish" her/his pitiful and embarrassing "first novel" in the internet because it costs almost nothing, the more we will need "sanctuaries" where one can find the "real" important books, a sort of decantation of the trivial. I dream of a library where I will not find all that has been written, say, on the followers of Leonardo da Vinci, also because the days of a complete open-shelve library are numbered, but I dream of a harmonious and flexible instrument, where I will find possibly all the "classics" which have shaped a specific discourse. Certainly but not only in the history of art. Take contemporary architecture. I am not an expert in this field, but a good library must have these three books: *La sfera e il labirinto: avanguardie e architettura da Piranesi agli anni '70*, *Learning from Las Vegas*, *Delirious New York*. Only the first one is in our Library. I dream of a place where we have some (not all of the) works by Thomas Bernhard, Borges, Carlo Emilio Gadda, Pasolini or Orhan Pamuk (*My name is red* for the pages on Islamic miniature, western portraiture, Venetian art, the relationship between Venice and the Orient). Of course, our Library cannot acquire all the world theatre, but why not have the classics by Stanislavski, Brecht, and Artaud to document the three principal theatrical trends of the 20th century, put next to, say, Frances Yates's essays? And of course, comparative literature, philosophy, anthropology, even mathematics.

One could say that we all have these books or most of these books at home. One could add that an art historical library has another function. I do not agree. The more journals and art historical texts

will be available digitally, the more we will need to have "real" places where scholars can meet and discuss face to face, and what would be better than to have the "right" books at hand? I do not know if this is a vision, but it is certainly a viable and in the end not very expensive project for the next future.