



SUMMER IN BERLIN 2008
MILENA BARTLOVÁ

Milena Bartlová was born in 1958 in Prague, Czechoslovakia. She studied art history at Prague's Charles University while also working at the National Gallery in Prague. She later served in a curatorial position there (1983–91, 1996–97) and then began teaching in the Department of History of the Faculty of Education at Charles University (1998–2005). She was simultaneously able to pursue her specialization in Medieval Studies after being recruited to the Art History Department of Masaryk University in Brno in the same year of 1998. Her habilitation was approved there in 2000, and in 2005 she received her professorship in Medieval Art history, thus becoming the Czech Republic's first female Art History professor. Her main fields of interest are Bohemian art and that of neighboring central European countries in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, especially this art's relationship to the pre-Reformation Hussite movement; the theory of medieval imagery and iconoclasm; and the history and methodologies of art history as well as the concepts of national art histories. – Address: Institute of Art History, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, Arne Nováka 1, 66088 Brno, Czech Republic. E-Mail: bartlova@mail.muni.cz

It is not easy to begin writing a text when one can be fairly certain in advance that it will likely contain few if any original ideas; that is, to praise that intellectual haven, the *Wissenschaftskolleg*, in such a way that one doesn't merely repeat what many have written before and will surely write in the future. Instead, following the intellectual traditions of my own field of medieval art history, I might do better to recall a certain literary authority. On my arrival I was reminded of the recipe from the *Glasperlenspiel* by Hermann Hesse – take forty professors from any country and any field, place together, and shake but do not

stir (or perhaps the literary authority was Ian Fleming). The fact that there is hardly a single TV set to be found in all the villas and that, upon first entering my apartment, the perfect armchair complete with a woolen plaid was positioned precisely where it should have been positioned, immediately revealed to me that this was a place where any intellectual would be most happy.

I understood very early on, however, that the comparison to Hesse's secluded monastery/castle is incorrect. Political topics form an important part of the intellectual agenda here. For me, this was just as inspiring and refreshing as the debates of the Dienstagskolloquien and at our group meals in the restaurant. Berlin is only four hours by train from my hometown of Prague, but it is light-years away from that country, which for decades was forcefully closed off from the intellectual debates taking part in the rest of Europe, in America, and the free world. On arriving in Berlin I found myself in an environment which can be best characterized as *open*. It may be hard for a Czech medieval art historian to accept being described as hailing from the *new Europe* by an American politician (the quality and quantity of cultural production emanating my home country during the Middle Ages being anything but negligible); on the other hand, although almost twenty years have passed since the Iron Curtain was finally raised, the years spent in cultural and ideological isolation are still strongly felt back home. It was not only the rich resources of the Berlin libraries – made so beautifully accessible by the fabulous Wiko library staff! – that opened up new vistas for me, but during my stay I was also imbued with the basic conviction that public topics deserve the serious attention of an intellectual élite. This was an attitude inherent to our dissident past but one that we have let slip away during the past two decades, to be appropriated by the professional politicians.

My own project fit the general situation quite well. My aim was to compose the first draft of a book dealing with medieval art, and more specifically medieval *image*, from the point of view, and in the language of, contemporary intellectual discourse. I arrived with hordes of excerpts and preliminary glosses, and already equipped with a title: *Medieval Image between the Icon and Virtual Reality*. The intensive concentration that can only really be achieved by leaving all everyday cares and worries behind (for a mother of two, the tasty cooking provided by the Wiko kitchen is not the least of the conveniences here!) and this coupled with the almost unlimited access to information sources and the inspiring atmosphere among the Fellows made it possible to fulfill my work plan. As Alex Nagel remarked over lunch one day: while one is here, it is important to spin out ideas; all the rest can be done later at home; but inspiration is the one thing that is native to this place, ac-

quired in contemplative walks among the Grunewald greenery. I had great opportunity to discuss my project with knowledgeable colleagues. In fact, Alex Nagel and I discovered that our projects share the same basic approach – even if the eventual results will differ in terms of strict methodology, content and elaboration. There remains one profound difference, however: my book will appear only in Czech and thus be accessible to a significantly smaller readership than something published in English or German. It will sit on the bookshelves of the Wiko Fellows library and will hardly if ever be looked at because of its exotic language. (Yes, it is certainly theoretically possible to publish the book in one of the internationally accessible languages, but the realities of today’s publishing industry in the Czech Republic and in Germany, England, or the United States makes this a highly improbable feat, irrespective of any possible quality the book might have.) It is hard to forget, even at such an open-minded venue as Wiko, that as an Eastern European you are still an *outsider*. It seems to me that, subliminally at least, this is a feeling shared with certain of the Fellows, say, from Argentina, the Middle East, or India. They may disagree – I do not wish to speak for them – and I hope not to appear oversensitive, but it was precisely this notion of a tension between the self-confident intellectual life in the core countries of the European democratic tradition, and that on the outskirts of the *first world*, that provided much of the inspiration and insight derived from my stay here.

As a Mellon stipendium holder, I was only at Wiko for the last three months of its academic year. Because of that, my participation in the work group Image Science could not have been other than marginal. Nevertheless, the discussions that took place there were crucial in developing certain ideas that form the basis of my book project. Summing this up in just a few sentences, I am employing a consciously hybrid method so as to understand medieval images, always taking into account both current theoretical inquiry as well as the practical uses to which these images were put in their own day. I am also not only employing post-modern conceptual apparatus to talk about these images, but am elaborating the idea (proposed by David Freedberg) that the story of medieval image, above all the iconoclasm discourse, is in fact the story of all images throughout history. I have tried to approach the key topic of representation as the *real presence* of images within the framework of the image’s participation in “the Other” through mimesis of the visible, on the one hand, and on the other, the eucharist that does the very same thing by means of metamorphosis of the essence, not of the visible species. The two concepts converge in the communal experience of embodiment. Iconoclasm, running contrary to this need and proclaiming a disembodied purity of and direct approach to the spirit, can thus be seen as the ineluctable flip

side of any real image experience. In this confrontation, however, the embodied visual mediation of images seems to be always the winner.

Berlin is a wonderful location for a scholarly institution like Wiko, not only because of its great libraries, rich cultural life and pleasant living conditions, but were there to be a site where a common European historical memory could surface, it would certainly be here. I knew Berlin, from the Eastern side, in the 1970s and 1980s, and I recall very well the palpable feeling of menace that I had when the S-Bahn arrived at the Friedrichstraße station, last stop before freedom in the West, and the DDR border police, with guns at the ready, made quite sure that everyone got off. In 1992, I stumbled over a hole in the ground in the middle of nowhere, where a simple flight of stairs led to an austere U-Bahnhof called “Potsdamer Platz”. This year, I was witness to the demolition of the Communist “Palast der Republik”, and the next time I come a neo-Neo-Baroque replica of the Prussian royal palace will be standing in its place. If any kind of European spirit should indeed exist, it is surely in Berlin, where it will come to recognize itself.

The three months spent at the Wiko between May and July 2008 will remain a strong presence in both my personal and scholarly life. I hope the book that will be its fruit may bring the same openness and high intellectual standards I encountered here back to my homeland, the Czech Republic.