

# The *Contentance* Principle. Taking Leave of Hans-Jörg Heusser

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*Andreas Beyer delivered the following Eulogy at the Gala Farewell on 20 August 2010.*

While it is a great honour, ladies and gentlemen, to be entrusted with the responsibility of delivering a eulogy here today, it does also place me in a rather tricky situation: because one does not need to know Hans-Jörg Heusser very well to understand that there is probably nothing that makes him feel less comfortable than having praise heaped publicly upon him.

I am sure this has something to do with the delightful modesty that is cultivated in these parts. But it is all too easy to seem guilty of stereotyping, and anyway this does no justice to the distinctive character of a man who has, indeed, perfected the art of self-effacement.

Besides, many words have already been spoken about the man now leaving the post of SIK-ISEA's Managing Director, and about his well-tempered nature. This must, however, be placed in context with the things he has achieved during his life, and then we may be all the more amazed by the energy that must have been driving this work and yet which comes across as so composed and unobtrusive.

His office reflects this in symbolic form. Anyone who has visited him in Villa Bleuler has surely had the same experience as me. Although I have to confess that I have never in my life seen such a tidy desk. And this is a man over whose desk an endless number of transactions pass each day – as he coordinates archive and documentation projects, and *catalogue raisonnés* too, and makes sure the financing is in place and stays in touch with the Institute's outside contacts, and the sites and the staff, on top of all that having continually to hone and develop SIK-ISEA's academic profile by giving interviews thick and fast and reading vast quantities of literature. In the face of this *ordo ab chaos*, I soon realised that someone with so many irons in the fire who nevertheless manages to keep his desk so free of clutter must surely be a man of great resourcefulness. What I am trying to say is: no one personifies SIK-ISEA so completely as Hans-Jörg Heusser.

His association with the Institute dates back to 1976, first as Head of the "Documentation Centre for Contemporary Art" which he built up, then as part of the Institute's management, later as Deputy and Co-Director and, after the retirement of the unforgettable Hans A. Lüthy, as sole Managing Director. That is a period of more than thirty years, and during that time he not only succeeded in expanding the Institute physically and siting it in such a grand location, but managed with no less effect to shape the contours of its academic profile. What he now leaves in the hands of his successor, the building and every-

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thing in it, is literally art history in abundance. SIK-ISEA can with every justification be called one of the leading research undertakings in Switzerland.

And an undertaking it is. It is a busy, enterprising place; but it is also a production site, complete with an organisational structure (not least commercial), for which Hans-Jörg Heusser always maintained a particular talent, even though he relinquished his original studies of Law and Economics at an early point to devote himself to art history.

He stands out with important contributions of his own, notably to Swiss art in the twentieth century and the present day. But perhaps what distinguishes his work more than anything else is the fact that he has never seen research in isolation from its institutional and structural matrix. It was not so much the fabrication of special prints that promised Hans-Jörg Heusser fulfilment, as developing research that is widely perceived to bear social responsibility, fostering what is contemporary and activating what is traditional. The accomplishments of these last decades – in research projects, in monographs, in *catalogues raisonnés*, in inventories, at seminars and congresses, right down to the services in art technology – are all part of the singular exploration of an artistic landscape, and they have, indeed, redefined Switzerland as a European centre of the arts. This is not just about the art landscape that is reflected in those “artistic monuments of Switzerland”, visible from afar, but rather an accumulation of discoveries, a bringing together of what was once

dispersed, attributions of authenticity, regrouped ensembles, a blend of things remote and things close by, things forgotten and things topical – Villa Bleuler has – under your leadership, my dear Mr Heusser, become a true “artistic household”.

Obviously, this art history, which deploys substantial volumes of data and material, and which likewise operates in the virtual sphere, could no longer function today without the help of information technology. Hans-Jörg Heusser was an early champion of their use, perhaps one of the first. It was 1985 when he and Hans A. Lüthy edited their bulletin “Automation Takes Command: Art History in the Age of Computers”. Nowadays, SIKART’s online lexicon, together with its databases, ranks among the most efficient and most frequently emulated of its kind, and here we cannot praise Hans-Jörg Heusser enough for his pioneering work.

Apart from this pertinent and applied research, Hans-Jörg Heusser conducted a policy that sought to move the system itself in new directions. He brought very different responsibilities and temperaments together in his Institute, and above all he involved the universities and the museums to equal degrees. And this evening event here in your Kunsthhaus, Mr Becker, is the finest proof that he was able, from the third corner, from the research centre, to play a balancing and integrating role in the all too often adversarial relationship between academia and museums.

Hans-Jörg Heusser – and in this respect he was born for this job – was not concerned only about his own scholarship and career, but much more about the scientific community of art history as a whole, and this far beyond the borders of Switzerland. If it is my pleasure to address you here this evening, then because the German Art History Forum in Paris, over which I have recently presided, is part of a worldwide research organisation that now embraces 27 establishments across the globe, the Association of Research Institutes in the History of Art (RIHA), founded in 1998, where Hans-Jörg Heusser was not merely the *spiritus rector* but also, for two terms of office, its first President. The institutes brought together in RIHA have evolved into a hugely effective, indeed punchy association, that provides an international network for art history research, promotes transcontinental, and in particular transatlantic exchange, and is also active in the field of scientific policy. This, too, is the work of Hans-Jörg Heusser – and the presence here tonight of the current President of RIHA (as you will be aware, he is also the Director of the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte in Munich), Wolf Tegethoff, pays tribute to that commitment.

Swiss art history is itself international in complexion, by the very nature of its languages and subject-matter. But Hans-Jörg Heusser has contributed to internationalising Swiss art history in another way, insofar as he has attracted the gaze of the outside world to art in Switzerland and, with SIK-ISEA, has given researchers here – and not only those who speak German, may I recall the *Antenne romande* – a platform that is much respected in the world.

It is only logical that SIK-ISEA is now embarking on its future as an Institute for Advanced Study – and this momentous readjustment is also due to Mr Heusser, with the encouragement and strong support of the Trustees. This will allow SIK-ISEA, like other RIHA members, to assert its own cultural and academic identity and at the same time think and act in supranational terms. And it ensures that the resources that have been gathered here will not merely continue expanding, but will be the subject of ongoing negotiation in a multilingual field of intellectual tension.

The role, the function, that Hans-Jörg Heusser fulfilled in all these years – indeed, which in some respects he was the first to define – is one of the genuine challenges of the research sector. It calls for a cross between the researcher and the intermediary, the politician and

the administrator, and – you might say – the coach and the playmaker; it requires an unconditional willingness to bring others into the game without relinquishing one's own position, and in this it calls as much for self-restraint as for initiative, for constant presence and yet humility, a place behind the scenes and a place in the limelight. And above all, often enough, it means standing back and helping others to take their laurels.

This self-effacement should by no means be mistaken for simple altruism, or selflessness. No, it is a programme, a policy, and it is essential. In Germany, they have what they call the “Harnack principle”. It works exactly the way it sounds. Named after the theologian Adolf von Harnack, it describes the organisational approach of, in particular, the Max Planck Institutes in the natural sciences. They do not focus on a topic, a question or an idea, but on a person, and the institute is then set up around the person – and when that person leaves it can be closed down again. What makes sense for the natural sciences will not work in the humanities. Here it is the ideas and topics, the questions that by nature have no conclusive answers, which inject life into research establishments and which outlive those who take it in turns to generate ideas.

That is why it is so vital that an institution like SIK-ISEA is run by a person who knows how to stand back modestly, without failing to set his own stamp on the proceedings, and who is conscious of being part of a continuum, building and nurturing it. This principle I have named after the more embracing French expression, which is more appropriate: the principle of *contenance*. The notion of *contenance* refers not only to holding capacity, but at the same time to bearing, composure: the content and the attitude. And you, my dear Mr Heusser, have applied this principle splendidly. Ultimately this is the bearing that Gustave Flaubert claimed for himself and his work: he was, the French writer said, like God in the world – invisible and yet omnipresent.

If that is the case, then a successor will naturally wonder how it is possible to work out if someone who has taken his hat has really gone. Have no fear, my dear Roger Fayet, for a man who holds two farewell cocktails in succession means business. But I hope it is also true, my dear Mr Heusser, that in leaving you will not be leaving us alone. For not only SIK-ISEA and Swiss art history, but all the other institutes around the world that you have brought together and held together so effectively, wish to continue profiting, in a spirit of cooperation, from your good advice and great experience. So thank you for the many things you have already done, but also for what remains to come.