

Danièle Perrier, President AICA Germany

The 52nd AICA International Congress *Art Criticism in Times of Populism and Nationalism* addresses the consequences of the political shift to the right and the nationalism which goes hand in hand with this everywhere, and which has been able to spread rapidly through the dissemination of populist information in numerous media all over the world, thus also influencing art and art criticism. A glance at the newspapers or a minute of television or radio news, not to mention social media, makes this all too clear. In our increasingly fast-changing society, daily life is inundated with rapid tweets and slogan-like short messages, which – the more sensational the better – also provide a corresponding environment for advertising. Their pithy messages are all the easier to remember because they are short and concise, which is why even Western heads of state are increasingly turning to this means of communication to reach the people directly. In this way, they shrewdly bypass the filter of potentially critical reporting by conventional media. Whether fact or fake, the readers alone make the judgement, often with more emotion than expertise, and they in turn spread arbitrary opinions instead of well-founded arguments.

It is no wonder then, that the activists of the most diverse social interest groups also use very similar methods quite successfully for their debates, in disputes about their identity and uniqueness. Here it is the same, whether it is about #MeToo, Black Lives Matter, gender, or questions of sexual orientation or cultural origin; or whether it is about the question of nationality. Populist tendencies, regardless of their stripe, shape the landscape of media debates and thus also art and cultural criticism.

And art, which is a lively and topical part of social life, is not spared. Its hitherto assumed autonomy is being called into question anew, especially where it takes up ethnic themes or gender issues. I am by no means questioning the legitimacy of these needs, which are so often driven by emotions, but I do notice that these questions and debates inevitably have a strong impact on art and how it is dealt with.

Is it legitimate to cancel an exhibition by Balthus because his paintings might possibly give free rein to an unacceptable desire? Is this an inherent problem of art and thus the responsibility of the artist, or could it be due to the fact that the viewer, lacking knowledge, purely subjectively condemns the image being debated under the impression of current social issues?

How can we as art critics make a decision in the ambivalence between defending the autonomy of art, on the one hand, and its social inclusion on the other? What are the criteria we can – or even must – consider for making such judgements? Do art historians such as Clare Gannaway have the right to take down a historical painting such as *Hylas and the Nymphs*, painted by John William Waterhouse in 1896, at the Manchester Art Gallery, simply because nymphs evoke the *femme fatale*? Fortunately, the decision provoked heavy criticism, so that the painting now hangs once again in its original place. History reveals that such decisions to remove works of art from exhibitions are driven by purely emotional sensitivities. It is astonishing that, in the end, the museum, obviously ill at ease due to the fierce criticism, camouflaged the whole action as an artistic performance, as if the decision of an art critic were an artistic act!

A further example: Why are ethical evaluation criteria invoked when a *white* artist paints a scene from the funeral of the Black American Emmett Till, who was murdered in 1955? Could the tragic, historical case, which unfortunately has lost none of its topicality – because Black youths in the United States continue to be shot arbitrarily by *white* police officers – not be seen as an homage? Or is it possibly because the image, in its abstracting manner, has turned out to be too inconsequential to be seen as a tribute to the victim? And what about the controversial filmmakers Woody Allen and Roman Polanski – is the value of art not independent of the artist who makes it?

We are thus confronted with the fundamental question: when and where is it legitimate to curtail artistic freedom of expression?

Art is always a reflection of our society with all its tensions and confusions. It reflects current discussions, today (as previously mentioned) especially with regard to the gender issue, the climate, racism and post-colonialism, at times provocatively and at other times affirmatively. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century the art scene has certainly become accustomed to political activism: for example, Christoph Schlingensiefel with his action *Bitte liebt Österreich* (Please Love Austria), better known as *Ausländer raus!* (Foreigners Out!), then there is the Occupy movement, and more recently the Centre for Political Beauty with the Holocaust Memorial in Bornhagen, and the artist group Peng!, who, with *Fake ID*, ask visitors how far they would be willing to share their identity in order to help a refugee gain access to Europe. Such actions call for very serious reflection and engagement. They are designed to be provocative and are certainly perceived in this way by society – whether positively or negatively. In this respect, one can compare them with the climate activist Greta Thunberg. She too calls out, in a highly emotional way, demanding that politicians must finally act, and thus makes herself heard, more so than art actions on the border of legality which call for civil disobedience. One might attest to their use of populist methods *avant la lettre*.

Yet, strangely enough, it is not these boundary-breaking activists, who demand a new ethical guideline for society and propose models for thinking about it, who are the focus of contemporary art criticism, but rather pictures that ostensibly or quite actually violate ethical values. In the turmoil of identity formation, ethical demands are suddenly being made – rightly or wrongly – of historical and contemporary works of art. A revised reading of even older works that have long been part of the fixed canon of art history is demanded, as if we are about to experience a new iconoclasm, or compile a new index of forbidden works. In his acceptance speech on receiving the Joseph-Breitbach-Prize,¹ Thomas Hettche quoted Harald Welzer as follows: »Each individual work [is] no longer primarily considered for its artistic quality [...], but rather for the emotional possibility of injury and irritation that might lie within it.« The list of arguments that pit the suffering of the world against the autonomy of art is long.

1 The awarding of the Joseph-Breitbach-Prize to Thomas Hettche took place in Koblenz on 20 September 2019.

What influence does it have on art criticism, when moral values that create a sense of purpose flow into the assessment which, per se, limit the autonomy of art? How should it be weighed within the amalgamation of conflicting evaluation criteria? What is the status of the long-fought-for freedom of art (which is – quite wonderfully – enshrined in the Basic Law of the Federal Republic of Germany) when various sides call for the removal of works of art from collections and even their destruction? Is it possible that art criticism itself plays a part in populist decisions with regard to art by occasionally failing to precisely define the evaluation criteria for protecting works that lie, for example, in the context of their historical creation?

How about following the advice of Frederic Bussmann, General Director of the Kunstsammlungen Chemnitz, who succinctly formulates »[t]he work of the art historian: fade out the context, deal with the works themselves, ask what you see, what you have in front of you«,² and perhaps reassert with Thomas Hettche that »only truthfulness in perception leads to quality«?³ One should ask self-critically whether art criticism still dares to offer differentiated reference points for orientation.

The tremendous breakthrough of social media has had serious consequences for the profession of the art critic. Readers around the world have become all too accustomed to short, up-to-date texts that can be consumed quickly. As a result, publishers – in all sectors – are placing less and less value on demanding feature articles and critical cultural reports, with the result that cultural journalism has been struggling for sheer survival for years. Only a few journalists today still have the privilege of a secure and permanent salaried position as a guarantor of freedom of expression. The freelancers are forced to teach at academies or to work as curators or authors for museum catalogues. This, in turn, very significantly impairs free, critical reporting.

AICA is also affected by this development. There are only a few genuine cultural editors left in our ranks. It is therefore our task to initiate dialogue together, to emphatically define the issues, and to fight for free art criticism. This is exactly what we strive to accomplish with our congress. A wide variety of voices will have their say, some of them of a very contradictory nature.

We hope that the discussions of the coming days will be characterised by curiosity and conducted with respect for the differences of opinion – true to oneself and open-minded towards the others – in order to explore possibilities of understanding without prejudice, in recognition and acceptance of differences.

In other words: we wish to set out on the path of encounter in the spirit of François Jullien,⁴ who attempts to span the bridge between French philosophy and Chinese thought. We wish to invent another form of the universal, since its humanistic interpretation is obviously considered too Eurocentric for parts of the wider world and has thus lost its value.

2 Frederick Bussman zitiert in: Lennart Laberenz, »DDR-Kunst. Über die Renaissance der DDR-Kunst und die aktuelle Neubewertung der ostdeutschen Moderne«, in: *Monopol*, September 2019, S. 49 [translated].

3 see note 1 [translated].

4 See: François Jullien, *Es gibt keine kulturelle Identität. Wir verteidigen die Ressourcen einer Kultur* [Edition *Suhrkamp*, no. 2718], trans. Erwin Landrichter (Berlin 2017).

Approaches to reassessment seem to be emerging, at least here in Germany. In this context, it is gratifying that *Monopol* magazine devoted an editorial⁵ to the reassessment of East German art, which – thirty years after reunification – is still not recognised accordingly in the West.

AICA is also reviewing the situation of the art critics' association at the time of reunification with its opening lecture by Jacques Leenhardt, which might also merit a reassessment from today's perspective.

I would like to conclude my reflections with the projection of an ephemeral installation by Thomas Sterna: it is a prayer by the artist to the curator, who, on the basis of the Christian 'Our Father', describes relationships of dependency with both humour and sarcasm. It was projected onto the glass façade of the Museion in Bolzano in a cloak-and-dagger action, just long enough to immortalise it as an image:

*»Our curator,
who art in the jury,
hallowed be thy name,
thy documenta come,
thy selection persist,
at biennials as it is in the museums.
Give us this day our scholarship,
and forgive us our doubts about thee,
as we forgive thee thine doubts about us.
And lead us not to the art fairs,
but deliver us from the greed of the collectors.
For thine is the art and the power,
and the attention,
now and forever.
Amen.«⁶*

This can easily be applied to the critic who reviews the documenta, biennials, and fairs. I hope that all art critics have enough humour and composure to bear this side blow from an artist.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all those who contributed to the success of the congress and this publication, first and foremost the authors for their enriching contributions, and the moderators for the support they gave us in producing this publication. Thanks also to the editors who contributed decisively to the readability of the discussions; the translators, and likewise the photographers who immortalised the most beautiful moments of our encounters.

5 Lennart Laberenz, »DDR-Kunst. Über die Renaissance der DDR-Kunst und die aktuelle Neubewertung der ostdeutschen Moderne«, in: *Monopol*, September 2019, pp.46ff.

6 Thomas Sterna, *Kurator Unser*, 2014 [translated].

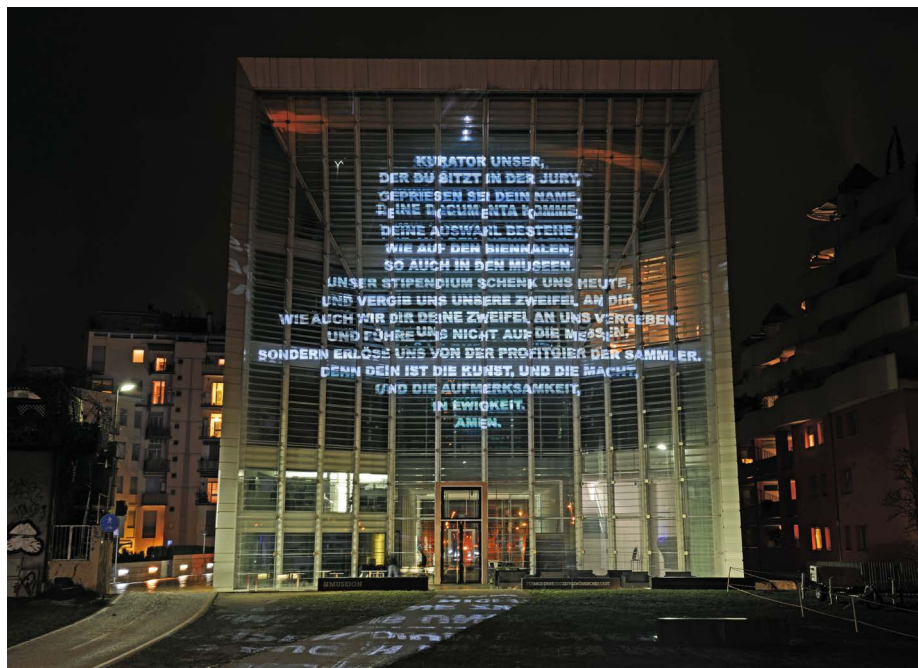


Fig.1: Thomas Sterna, *Our Curator*, 2014

We are also grateful to Lisbeth Rebollo, President of AICA International, and the colleagues who helped us to realise the congress. It is a special honour that the German Commission for UNESCO has assumed the patronage of the 52nd International AICA Congress, exactly seventy years after we were granted NGO status by the UNESCO.

Special thanks go to all our cooperation partners, especially the Federal Cultural Foundation, without whose generous support the realisation of our congress and this publication would not have been possible. We sincerely thank the Federal Agency for Civic Education, the Kai 10 | Arthena Foundation in Düsseldorf, and all the institutions that granted us their hospitality in Cologne and Berlin, as well as the galleries of the capital that hospitably opened their doors to us during the post-congress.