

Klara Kemp-Welch

Art and Criticism in Times of Crisis.

Report from AICA Congress 2011, Asuncion, Paraguay (17th-19th October)

This was my first experience of an AICA Congress, and it was an exhilarating one. In addition to being impressively international in its reach, the Congress in Asuncion was in tune with many of today's pressing global concerns. Three themes for discussion were proposed in particular:

1. 'The Axes of Crisis': political and ethical, social and economic, cultural and artistic, art criticism and the media.
2. 'Spaces of Interaction' and 'Fields of Tension': cultural institutions, press and other media, public debates, alternative forms of interaction.
3. 'Art and Criticism in Virtual Spaces': new languages, new tools and new kinds of behaviours.

Taking his cue from Gramsci's historic observation that 'crisis consists precisely of the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born', Marek Bartelik opened with a paper proposing crisis as an opportunity for art critics and professionals to redefine their role in society and to become more assertive in opposing systems of power. These reflections of a theoretical nature found an interesting counterpoint in Suely Rolnik's psychoanalytic account of the desires driving different regimes of what she called 'archive mania'. Rolnik argued that one of the most urgent responsibilities for criticism in Latin America today is to develop more adequate means for actively recuperating the legacies of 1960s and 70s experimental practices, so as engage collective memory, interpolate the body of the spectator, and find ways for these historic strategies to resonate in the turmoil of the present.

There were more than 25 papers delivered over the course of the three days, leaving less time for discussion and questions than I would have liked. But I did enjoy the fiery debate between Chuz Martines (Spain/ Germany) and Paul Ardenne (France) about criticality, biennialisation and the rise and rise of the curator – with Ardenne scathingly claiming that curators are always in the pockets of sponsors and institutions (proposing academia is the last refuge of criticism), and Martines insisting on the criticality of her current Documenta project, designed, among others, to harness the creative power of nonsense. No agreement was reached but the argument helped to air a variety of approaches to the challenge of moving beyond the Adornian Culture Industry, echoed in other papers.

Nilofur Farrukh (Pakistan) gave an excellent paper on works by contemporary artists reflecting critically on the development and impact of Islamic fundamentalism in relation to the US's role in supporting international Jihad as part of the late Cold War anti-Communism mission. Among others, she discussed a series of works based on school primers used in Madrasahs by Khadim Ali, and a moving installation by Durriya Kazi of a prone life-sized figure of unfired clay clutching a child by the side of the road. Another good contribution was a bold paper by David Mateo (Cuba) criticising Cuban cultural policy in no uncertain terms. Liam Kelly (Ireland) offered an interesting series of reflections on Phillip Napier's recent decommissioning of his work relating to Bobby Sands and the issue of a British apology for Bloody Sunday. And Aloyse Ndiaye (Senegal) gave an inspiring presentation on what he called the 'new humanist vindication' – examples of Truth, Justice and Reconciliation in Africa and how these processes have been materialised by cultural means, drawing on long-standing traditions and practices such as dance.

The most powerful paper, though, was far less upbeat: Hiroshi Minamishima (Japan), 'Art in the Post 3.11 World'. Minamishima showed extraordinary images of boats stranded on top of buildings in the aftermath of the recent tsunami, and of the Fukushima nuclear plant. As the surreal images appeared on the screen, he said, poignantly: "this is not an artwork". Showing people struggling to survive in temporary accommodation, seven months after the events, he questioned whether culture is really so very essential to survival. Noting that artists have yet to find ways to approach the chaos of the events of 3.11, he discussed, instead, art relating to the Chernobyl disaster. The paper challenged the ability of contemporary art ever to be adequate to a catastrophe of this magnitude.

The final presentation was surprising. Rather than delivering the planned paper on her 'International Immigrant Movement', Tania Bruguera (Cuba) suddenly abandoned her script and shared with the audience a religious experience she had had on her way to the Congress. She recounted how, at the airport, John Paul II had appeared to her in white robes, telling her that Jesus not only spoke, but - crucially - acted, and that when He turned the moneylenders out of the temple, He was accompanied by a 200 strong crowd. As Bruguera speculated aloud about the links between her vision and the Occupy Wall Street Movement, and admitted that she was considering abandoning art altogether, we were afforded a clear example of how welded together the various dimensions of crisis we had been discussing over the past few days could become. While some members of the audience were offended

by this outpouring (the artist insisted that it was 'not a performance'), my own feeling was that this final intervention was a strong demonstration of how viscerally art and criticism might yet be transformed as our current political situation plays out.

In addition to the academic sessions, the Paraguayan section organised a fantastic programme of evening visits to cultural spaces in Asuncion. These ranged from drinks at the home of an important local collector, to a great tour of the Centro de Artes Visuales / Museo del Barro, and a visit to Galería Monocromo, an apartment gallery high up in a run-down bloc housing Dominique Dubosc's video installation about Palestinian life in the "Territorios ocupados". The idea of occupation also had a local inflection for me, by then, having seen the exhibition "Shared Spaces" at the Instituto Cultural Paraguay Alemán. The German institution was showing a series of video performances by Paraguayan Erika Meza and Cuban Javier Lopez, scripted to raise awareness of the issues of discrimination, poverty, and exclusion affecting indigenous peoples across Paraguay. Talking to the artists about the ongoing violence of Paraguayan politics, and hearing how the military in various parts of the country are repressing rural people protesting against the confiscation of their land for government sale to multinationals, I had a renewed sense of the urgency of the AICA Congress. In the absence of international political solidarity, the sort of cultural solidarity promoted by this sort of international meetings, and the relatively open discussions among journalists and cultural actors they afford, are clearly extremely important for local morale. And I would venture that cultural morale may be low, in a context where the Centro Cultural de la República El Cabildo is an isolated, heavily guarded colonial structure, isolated in a sea of slum dwellings along the sprawling banks of the river, scheduled for imminent clearance.