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Antje Kramer-Mallordy

Translator: Simon Pleasance

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/19188>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.19188

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupe d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 4 November 2015

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Antje Kramer-Mallordy, « *The Archives of the International Association of Art Critics, a forward-looking history of globalization?* », *Critique d'art* [Online], 45 | 2015, Online since 04 November 2016, connection on 01 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/19188> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.19188

This text was automatically generated on 1 May 2019.

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The Archives of the International Association of Art Critics, a forward-looking history of globalization?

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- 1 If the Archives de la critique d'art are a trove of valuable resources, they also encompass and underwrite research to do with contemporary art criticism, in close collaboration with Rennes 2 University and other scientific and cultural institutions, in France and abroad. The brief of a new research programme, launched in 2015 for a three-year period, is to liaise these two tasks, by going back to the origins of the history of one of the founding partners of the Archives: the International Association of Art Critics (AICA), created in 1949.
- 2 Backed by the Fondation de France, the multidisciplinary *PRISME* research programme: *Contemporary Society Through the Prism of Art Criticism (1948-2003)* sees art criticism, over and above just the aesthetic discourse, as a dynamic turf for discussion about the society which is contemporary with it. It is based on the scientific and documentary treatment of the AICA's archival collections covering the period 1948-2003, as well as on its overlap with the archival collections of individual critics, also held in Rennes. By grasping art criticism as an epistemological prism, analysis of these archives, thanks to their online accessibility, makes it possible to examine trans-national and multidisciplinary issues which, in the sense of a horizontal reading, take into account the circulation and exchanges of ideas in shifting geopolitical contexts. Backed up by its 45 linear metres [150 feet] of archives, the AICA collection acts as a central matrix for the programme, on both the chronological and geographical levels. It represents an extremely rich store, still largely unpublished, which has not given rise to any overall historicization, apart from a few analyses¹ devoted to conferences and to individual representatives of the association.

Fonds de l'AICA. Collection INHA-Archives de la critique d'art. Badge of Raymond Cogniat (vice president, France), Conference of the AICA, Venice, 1950 © AICA

- 3 While the Cold War context led to a clear-cut tracing of boundaries, the conferences and general meetings organized annually by the AICA since 1948 attest to a “globalized” mapping ahead of its time. To give just a handful of examples, they were held in 1954 in Istanbul, in 1956 in Dubrovnik, in 1962 in Mexico City, in 1963 in Tel Aviv, in 1966 in Prague and in Bratislava, in 1973 in Kinshasa, and in 1974 in Dresden and East Berlin. The documents about these trips, visits and conferences confirm the need to re-think the narratives of history and the history of art in favour of a horizontal contemporary history,² in order to get beyond the doxa of a world split into two homogeneous and watertight blocs until 1989. The openings created, in recent years, by trans-national approaches and ‘global studies’ have made it possible to attract attention to the circulation and the concomitant developments of “several histories”, such as they have already been written, becoming part of the AICA’s activities.
- 4 In 1999, at the conference organized to mark the 50th anniversary of the AICA, Abraham Marie Hammacher, one of the association’s oldest members, wound up his report about the past half-century with a most meaningful sentence: “There is never an outside without an inside!”.³ We might rephrase it by saying: “There is never a periphery without a centre!”. Over and above the challenges that have been posited—and are still being posited—with regard to art criticism, since the end of the 20th century, by globalization, the definitions of an outside and an inside, and a periphery and a centre are applicable just as much to the actual content of art critics’ activities, to their work topics and goals and to their own professional status. These questions were already raised during discussions at the first Conference held in 1948 at UNESCO headquarters, located at 19 avenue Kléber, in Paris, which foreshadowed the founding of the association in the following year, at the second Conference.

- 5 The authorship of the idea of creating an international association of art critics falls to Mojmir Vaněk, in charge of the Fine Arts section of UNESCO's Preparatory Commission, itself founded in November 1945. AICA, a Czechoslovakian invention? In that postwar period, it can be said that everyone felt "outside". It became vital, in order to remake links and rediscover prewar internationalism, to refocus forces in the form of organizations envisaging the future and responding to the needs of reconstruction. The AICA's founding coincided closely with the creation of the International Council of Museums (ICOM). In a handwritten report, Vaněk returned to the genesis of his idea in the winter of 1946-47: "After the first general UNESCO Conference, [I] had the idea of bringing together major art critics from all over the world in a conference in order to lay out for them the details of these different projects, to ask them for advice and recommendations, and to group them, when needed, in an international association which would not only be responsible for defending the professional interests of critics and artists, thus becoming a kind of International Syndicate of Art Critics (and perhaps of artists as well), but one which would above all collaborate with UNESCO, as an organization of specialists."⁴

Fonds de l'AICA. Collection INHA-Archives de la critique d'art. Conference of the AICA, unidentified © AICA

Fonds de l'AICA. Collection INHA-Archives de la critique d'art. From left to right : Giulio Carlo Argan, Simone Gille-Delafon, Lionello Venturi, Palma Bucarelli, General meeting of the AICA, Venice, 1950 © AICA

- 6 For lack of financial wherewithal on the part of UNESCO, at the end of his mandate Vaněk had to entrust his project to Raymond Cogniat, then President of the French Syndicate of Art Press Professionals. He was supported by Jean Cassou, director of the National Museum of Modern Art, open since 1947, by Simone Gille-Delafon, future secretary general of the AICA, and by the art dealer Georges Wildenstein, who assumed the secretaryship in his office as well as the costs of sending out *communiqués* and invitations.
- 7 The First International Conference of art Critics was held from 21 to 28 June in the presence of critics hailing from 30 countries (including Morocco, Egypt, China, Australia and South Africa), chaired by the Belgian Paul Fierens. As is shown by the list of guests, starting with the five session chairmen, the different professional bodies were not really separated, and corresponded rather to what was at the time called an “art writer”. At it were art historians such as Fierens and the Italian Lionello Venturi, theoreticians like the Englishman Herbert Read (introduced as a “poet and sociologist”)⁵, and museum directors such as Jean Cassou, the American James Johnson Sweeney, and the Czechoslovak Venceslas Nebesky. This latter in the end replaced Vaněk, whose name still appeared on the early documents. To no one’s great surprise, Germany and the USSR were conspicuously absent from that conference. Although there had been premonitions about him, and fairly and squarely, (“6th day: USSR”), the sixth session chairman was never found, in such a way that the Soviet participation was reduced to a paper presented by a theoretician of Russian origin,⁶ living in Paris, but who had indicated on her registration form the status of a stateless person, just like the German art critic Herta Wescher, with no nationality, and listed in the documents among the Swiss guests (she had gone into exile in Switzerland during the war).

Fonds de l'AICA. Collection INHA-Archives de la critique d'art. Lionello Venturi, review, *untitled*, 1st Conference of the AICA, 1948 © AICA

- 8 Each day was devoted to a particular theme, thrashing out practical and logistical issues ("International relations and means of information"; "Publications, translations, royalties"; "Living conditions of artists and critics in various countries"; "Art on radio and television"), just like more theoretical debates ("Problems of aesthetics – Realism and abstraction"; "Art trends in each country"; "Consequences of reconstruction in architecture and city-planning"). The vow to perpetuate exchanges in the form of an association was the object of a motion voted on during the Friday session. Reading the reports and the different papers, one nevertheless realizes that addresses were not necessarily interested in "contemporary art" and "present-day works", as was nonetheless stipulated by one of the first *communiqués*.⁷ There was above all a need to point out gaps in information, and the difficulties associated with royalties and reproduction rights of pictures, to question the educational challenges of art and the way museums operated, and, above all, to define the very role of the art critic. When it was a matter of, in particular, discussing "Art and Society" (Friday)—an echo implicit in the controversial book *Art and Society* published in 1945 by Read—, the discussions focussed mainly on the place of the critic within society. At the inaugural session, Fierens set the tone: "The primary duty of the critic is to tell the truth and be sincere with himself, without taking fashions into account, or being influenced by his passions. He must have a clear and rigorous idea of his duty and courageously and frankly express his own opinion. The freedom of the critic is less a right than a duty, and it is not a passive duty. By proscribing art criticism, the Fascist and Nazi regimes inflicted damage on art which it is still suffering from: herein lies a proof that art criticism is opposed to Nazism."⁸
- 9 He then had a motion voted on in which the art critics recognized not only "their solemn attachment to freedom of opinion and expression" and "their rights and their duties with

regard to society”, but also, in a more disconcerting manner, “their loyalty to beauty and truth, their admiration for France, and their gratitude to the City of Paris for its reception extended to them”.⁹

Fonds de l'AICA. Collection INHA-Archives de la critique d'art. The translator, review, *untitled*, 1st Conference of the AICA, 1948 © AICA

- 10 Anyone who at that time expected the conference to produce virulent discussions had to return home disappointed. The mission which the conference attendees had taken upon themselves was probably too important to be spoiled from the outset through bitter controversies. While the Wednesday discussions dealt with the contrast between abstraction and figuration, commentaries about socialist realism were few and far between¹⁰, and there was total silence about the latest Parisian trends, as had been illustrated, in particular, by the exhibition *H.W.P.S.M.T.B.* with Colette Allendy in May. Even when the Italian Guido Lodovico Luzzatto, in his paper with the emblematic title “Faith in Criticism”, dared to criticize the congress underway, whose predominant critical judgment tallied, according to him, above all with a “judgment of Paris”, Cassou hastened to smooth over the rebuke: “The chairman is keen to offer the assurance that Paris does not muddle universalism and imperialism; the Paris School has, incidentally, shown this by being wide open to all contributions from abroad.”¹¹ Similarly, if the rivalry between Paris and New York was starting to show through, it was defused by the excessively diplomatic Sweeney, who promoted the American tendencies and their debt to European artists: “During the war, the United States took in 15 to 20 European painters who had a wholesome influence on young American painters. The emulation of their method and the abandonment of ready-made and phony ideas promised new forms of expression. The result was an eclipse of chauvinism.”¹² In the end the conciliatory and solemn climate seemed to systematically steer the various discussions in which at times overtly conservative, not to say reactionary speakers alternated with shy, progressive contributions. As was shown the following year by the Second Conference, again held in Paris, Vaněk, Cogniat and Cassou had nevertheless won their bet, by offering “an inside” to art criticism. Even if this “inside” first of all looked very much like a “gentlemen’s

club”,¹³ it made it possible to anchor the professional activity of critic within a prospect of inter- and trans-national exchanges, challenges that are, more than ever, topical.

Fonds de l'AICA. Collection INHA-Archives de la critique d'art. Simone Gille-Delafon, « Paul Fierens, président de l'association internationale des critiques d'art », *Arts*, 8 juillet 1949 © Simone Gille-Delafon

NOTES

1. Among these studies: Bennett, Ciaran, “James Johnson Sweeney et la liminalité”, *Critique d'art*, n°36, autumn 2010, p. 116-119; Meyric-Hughes, Henry, “Pierre Restany, l'AICA et l'aventure est-européenne”, in : *Le Demi-siècle de Pierre Restany* (edited by Richard Leeman), Paris : INHA ; Ed. des Cendres, 2009, p. 387-402. The only global approach to the association's activity from its creation up to 2002, the book published by the AICA to mark its 50 years of activity represents an effort at auto-historicization, which will have to be included in the corpus as a primary source: *Histories of 50 Years of International Association of Art Critics/AICA* (edited by Ramon Tio Bellido), Paris : Aica press, 2002.
2. We are referring here to the works of Piotr Piotrowski, including *In the Shadow of Yalta: Art and the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), part and parcel of a *Horizontal Turn* in a history of art which critically challenges the development of art during and after the Cold War.
3. Hammacher, Abraham Marie, “Témoins du passé, enjeux de l'avenir”, *Histories of 50 Years of International Association of Art Critics/AICA*, op. cit., p. 27

4. Vaněk, Mojmír, “Rapport sur les relations internationales et les moyens d’information dans le domaine des Beaux-Arts (des Arts Plastiques et de l’Architecture)”, handwritten, p. 2-3. Unless stated otherwise, all the archival documents come from the AICA-Archives de la critique d’art collection [Dossier 1948].
5. Report of the fourth meeting, Wednesday 23 June 1948, typewritten, p. 21
6. Involved here was Lydie Krestovsky, whose paper focussed on ugliness in art.
7. “Du 21 au 28 juin aura lieu à Paris le Premier Congrès International des Critiques d’Art”, typed *communiqué* with the number MUS D.887.
8. Report of the first meeting, Monday 21 June 1948, typed, p. 3. In her very comprehensive recontextualization of the first AICA conferences, Hélène Lassalle inadvertently ascribes these words to Raymond Cogniat. Lassalle, Hélène, “Fondation de l’Association Internationale des Critiques d’Art” in *Histories of 50 Years of International Association of Art Critics/AICA*, *op. cit.*, p. 101.
9. *Ibid.*
10. With the exception in the paper presented by Herbert Read, “The Problem of Realism and Abstraction in Modern Art”, in which he wrote (p. 2): “In the Soviet Union there is, of course, the very good reason that realism is enforced, with extinction as an artist as the alternative. I do not think this prejudice in favour of socialist realism is quite so stupid as the Russians themselves make it seem.”
11. Report of the sixth meeting, Friday 25 June 1948, typescript, p. 23
12. Report of the fifth meeting, Thursday 24 June 1948, typescript, p. 21
13. We refer to the article by Henry Meyric-Hughes, “L’AICA à l’ère de la globalisation : du club de gentlemen à la collégialité universelle”, in *Mémoires croisées, dérives archivistiques* (edited by Jean-Marc Poinot), Paris : INHA, 2015, p. 29-35.