

XXXVIII AICA CONGRESS
Taipei (Taiwan) – December 1st, 2004
The President's Report

Dear Colleagues and Friends,

This has been a year of unusually intense activity, and I will start my report with a brief account of two or three of the most important international events with which I have been privileged to be involved.

On 11 June, we organised a Round Table discussion in Donostia-San Sebastian, to coincide with the special preview of Manifesta 5, for press and professionals. This debate, which took as its theme the work on view in San Sebastian and its socio-political context, was organised in collaboration with the International Foundation Manifesta, in Amsterdam and the local organisers, with the support of the European Commission's Culture 2000 Programme. The discussion, in Spanish and English, was moderated by Ramon Tio Bellido and included AICA members and speakers from Tallinn, Istanbul, Nicosia and, of course, Spain and the Basque Region. Funds permitting, we shall produce a small bilingual publication, of the kind which was published after Manifesta 4, in Frankfurt.

It is a very long time since we have been able to become actively involved with the Sections in Latin America, where we have numerous members, and where the contemporary art scene is exceptionally lively, but where regional connections are notoriously difficult to sustain. We were delighted, therefore, that Lisbeth Rebollo Gonçalves and her colleagues in AICA Brazil (ABCA) should have been able to organise a three-day seminar for art critics, curators and students, on 'Art, Criticism and Globalisation', to coincide with the opening of the São Paulo Bienal. This three-day event, to which Jacques Leenhardt and I, from Europe, were invited to contribute papers, was primarily conducted in Portuguese and Spanish. It brought together delegates from all over Brazil itself, in addition to speakers from neighbouring countries, such as Uruguay and Paraguay, and attracted an overall attendance of 150 people. There are plans for publishing an edited version of the proceedings in the New Year.

At the beginning of June, I was fortunate to be invited to contribute to an international Round Table discussion at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Thessaloniki, on the theme of 'Balkan Realities and the Role of the Curator', organised by the Hellenic Culture Organisation, in collaboration with the Goethe Institut and AICA-Hellas. This event, which coincided with an exhibition of contemporary art from the region, was conceived as a critical take on a number of current, and recent, high profile exhibitions of contemporary art from South-Eastern Europe. It will lead to a publication in the New Year. Our colleagues, Efi Strousa, the President of AICA-Hellas and Magda Carneci, from the Rumanian section of AICA, were instrumental in securing AICA's prominent participation in this international event, which took place under the auspices of the Greek Cultural Olympiad, and themselves made valuable contributions to the proceedings.

To continue, for a moment, with the theme of Eastern Europe (or, as I should prefer to refer to it as, the new Europe), at the time of writing I am just preparing to set out for a two-day Franco-Polish seminar on 'L'artiste dans le champ social: réalités problématiques et modes d'approche critique', organised by Christophe Domino and his colleagues in AICA France and Poland, respectively, at the Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers and the Centre Georges Pompidou.

I am also writing this virtually on the eve of my departure, with Angelica Bäumer, for Karachi, to take part in a large international symposium, organised by the recently re-established Section there, with twenty-four speakers from no fewer than 10 different countries on the theme of

'Mapping Changes'. We are particularly excited by the revival of activity in this region, which so often seems only to make a negative impact in the media these days – the more so, since the explicit aim of the event is to provide an international forum for local critics who have been working in isolation for so long, and who are anxious to explore the common ground with colleagues from the region, and farther afield.

Prior to this, I have accepted an invitation from AICA Turkey to launch a new annual art prize established by that Section, to celebrate the 50th anniversary of AICA International in Turkey. Other activities I have been involved with in part, through my Association with AICA include co-authoring on report on the National Gallery of Modern Art in Namibia, on behalf of UNESCO, last May and chairing the international jury of the Gwangju Biennial in September.

There is never adequate space, or time, to do more than hint at the excellent work undertaken by many of the National Sections, and descriptions of much of this is now readily accessible to us in the relevant parts of our website. However, it seems to me as important to emphasise the value of this as it is valuable to stress the importance of the international links that bind us together. This year, I should like to single out symbolically, for your attention, the exemplary pocket series of art historical studies initiated by Walter Vitt, the President of AICA-Germany, in 1993 and now celebrating its fourteenth issue, with a number by Wieland Schmied, on 'Das Rätsel de Chirico'. Would that we had the resources to translate publications such as this into other languages!

Lest any of you are tempted to think that AICA's affairs are irremediably divorced from those of the world at large, I have only to remind you of the appallingly difficult circumstances in which our colleagues in many parts of the world are condemned to work. The problems of economic collapse and social and political disruption are all too familiar to need expiating on, in general (Cote D'Ivoire and Argentina are among recent examples). Sometimes we are asked to speak out against censorship, in the many forms that it takes, as we were able to do, most recently, in support of our colleagues in Hong Kong, as recently as May this year; and sometimes events take a still more brutal and devastating turn, as when the offices of our colleagues in Haiti were invaded by so-called 'rebel forces' and religious fundamentalists in March, staff were brutalised and around hundred works by many of the country's leading contemporary artists were destroyed. In cases such as these, we have a duty to speak out. We hope we do so, with the knowledge of your support and in full consciousness of our global commitment.

The process of change in the way that we run our affairs continues unabated. Tied in with our ever-expanding use of e-mail and the Internet is the growing pace of administrative reform. Standardising procedures and updating documents is unglamorous work, but is central to our purpose and has not been undertaken for a good many years. We have jumped the main hurdle – the first major overhaul of the Statutes for twenty-five years – and are well on the way over the second – a thorough revision of the Regulations. Now, thanks in part to the contributions which many of you have made, we have also been able completely to overhaul a whole batch of documents which had been rendered virtually obsolete over the years, starting with the 'Rough Guide to the Organisation of AICA Congresses', which has been virtually re-written, with help from Christian Chambert and the Swedish Section, and going on to include revised arrangements for the payment of annual subscriptions, a Users' Guide to editing documents on the website, by Olivier Henry, draft Statutes for a National Section, updated Annual Activity Report Forms, a new Biographical Form, and so on. Where relevant, these documents have now been placed on the Association's Website, where they can be instantly accessed and downloaded. Not before time, we have also squared up to the Data Protection laws and included appropriate caveats in all relevant material on the website. It was a matter of some pride for us, therefore, when we received an accolade from our former President and apostle of the electronic media, René Berger, in his recent

message to us: 'Bravo pour la modernisation informatique et tous mes voeux pour le prochain congrès!'

Lest anyone should suspect us of complacency, we are perfectly aware of the magnitude of the tasks that still face us, and we need the close co-operation of all of you, if we are to succeed in our programme of reform. First priority of all, it will be necessary for us, further to underpin the financial basis of the Association, for which are more dependent than ever on members' subscriptions, and on your ability to pay these over to us, promptly and conscientiously at the start of the financial year. I need scarcely remind you that we are solely dependent on our four thousand members' subscriptions to fund the basic costs of maintaining an office in Paris and paying for the services of our single, hard-working, paid member of staff. (The rest of us – you, too - provide our services free!). Ever since the withdrawal of UNESCO funding a decade ago, we have had nowhere else to go, for core funding, and all programme activity has to be funded from other sources. However, we have taken a firm decision, to dispense with the imagined need for ghost Sections or ghost presences in those Sections. For this reason, we have introduced a series of measures to ensure that membership cards and stickers will, in future, only be offered to individuals who are up-to-date with their dues and that Sections and individuals may expect us to take a much firmer line with defaulters than ever in the past. On the other side of the coin, the updating and liberalising of the Statutes, associated with the introduction of a single category of ordinary membership and devolution of greater responsibilities and freedoms onto the National Sections opens up the prospect of greatly expanding the geographical and demographic range of our membership, with particular emphasis on young people everywhere, professionals in many areas related to our work and, above all, colleagues in large areas of the globe who have hitherto felt marginalised by the Eurocentric orientation of our concerns. There is, therefore, an urgent need for AICA, not only to reposition itself globally, but to change current perceptions of its role. The recruitment of new members must be added to and fundraising and diversification, at the top of our current list of priorities.

I am writing this in advance of our Annual Congress, of course, and will have other opportunities there for thanking all those who have been involved with planning the event and raising the funds for it. However, I cannot let slip the occasion to comment on the appropriateness of this year's theme (to paraphrase): 'The Regionalisation of Art Criticism and its Global Positioning'. This neatly encapsulates many of the themes which I have alluded to earlier, and with which we are currently concerned – namely, the expanding role of art criticism, as we have chosen most recently to define it, and repositioning our Association, in the face of the irresistible drive to global expansion.

I will end, by thanking all of you on the Administrative Committee, including the Chairs and members of the various Commissions, for your support and dedication, over the last year. I also wish, in particular, to thank my three indefatigable colleagues in the Executive Bureau, Ramon, Angelica and Anne-Claude, and a fluctuating team of helpers, for their hard work and the unfailing good humour that offers them a shield against daily adversity. This is a team that really works, and knows how to work, though we must leave it to you, to judge the results!

Thank you for your attention. I wish you a thoroughly rewarding and enjoyable Congress in Taiwan and now give the floor to Ramon.

Henry Meyric Hughes. November 2004.