

## 2019 AICA Congress proposal

Jamie Keesling, AICA-USA

“All efforts to restore art by giving it a social function—of which art is itself uncertain and by which it expresses its own uncertainty—are doomed”

- Theodor Adorno, 1969, *Aesthetic Theory*

“...[T]he productive contradiction of art’s relationship to social change [is] characterized precisely by that tension between faith in art’s autonomy and belief in art as inextricably bound to the promise of a better world to come.”

- Claire Bishop, 2006, “The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents”

The art of the past 15 years is characterized by a wavering between irony and sincerity. A work’s success can be evaluated based on whether and how it tolerates its own ambivalence. This paper will present a history of the conditions that have contributed to the current situation of art in the United States, particularly the development of art’s antagonistic relationship with a viewing public and subsequent attempts to compensate for this tension.

Art of the late 20th century, especially during the so-called culture wars of the 1980s and 90s, came up against a public that was skeptical of its right to exist. Art had been seen alternately as irreverent, indulgent, esoteric, and immoral. During this time the campaign against the arts as superfluous at best, morally corrupting at worst, won out through decreases in federal funding and an increasing insularity of contemporary art in general. In the 90s, artists began to realize that this conservative rampage against art contained a kernel of truth: In a society where individuals struggle to exist, anything claiming social or political significance should reasonably be expected to work on the world in some measurable way. Contemporary art’s unreasonableness became harder to swallow. Social practice emerged in part as a response to this problem, and to the increasingly sour taste a wealth-determined exhibition power structure left in the mouths of creative practitioners. However, dematerialization and anti-art art proved incapable of getting to the heart of the matter. Today, a conservative public need not concern itself with protesting the immorality, superfluity, or hypocrisy of contemporary art and the institutions that mediate its existence. Art will do this to itself. Contemporary art resents its own privilege.

**Jamie Keesling** is a Brooklyn-based writer. She is a faculty member in Art History at the School of Visual Arts.

**Statement on the congress topic:** Populism as it’s used in the congress topic description seems to mean in part the way artists, writers, curators, and other art professionals compete for access to the market under the guise of political engagement and critique.