

52nd International AICA Congress Germany 2019 Art Criticism in Times of Populism and Nationalism

AICA Congress Paper Proposal on the (possible) topic/s:

The tension between freedom of expression and political correctness

OR

Interaction and conflicts between ethical and aesthetic approaches in art and art criticism

Sent in by:

Prof. Karen Von Veh,
HOD Visual Art Department
University of Johannesburg
karenv@uj.ac.za
Tel: +27 11 5591113
Mobile: +27 824566099

Short Bio:

Karen von Veh is Professor of Art History and currently serving as Head of the Visual Art Department in the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture at the University of Johannesburg. Her PhD was awarded by Rhodes University and she received Honours and Masters degrees (with distinction) in Art History from the University of the Witwatersrand. She has taught art history for over 20 years at both undergraduate and postgraduate level at the University of Johannesburg. Her teaching includes Honours, Masters and PhD supervision. Her research interests are in contemporary South African women's art, gender studies, postcolonial (post-apartheid) responses in artmaking and transgressive religious iconography in contemporary art. She has contributed articles on these topics to academic art historical journals and books, the most recent publications being: "Feminism as Activism in Contemporary South African Art." In M. Buszek and H. Robinson (Eds.), *A Companion to Feminist Art*. Wiley Blackwell. 2019; "The Pain of Martyrdom: Diane Victor's Femicides" *IKON 12: Journal of Iconographic Studies*. Vol.12. 2019; "The Politics of Memory in South African Art." *De Arte*, 54.1. 2019; "Revisiting Religion: Iconoclasm as renewal in post-apartheid South Africa." *IKON 11: Journal of Iconographic Studies*. Vol.11. 2018; "Unsanctioned: The Inner City Interventions of Julie Lovelace" In K. Miller and B. Schmahmann (Eds.), *Public Art in South Africa: Bronze Warriors and Plastic Presidents*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 2017; "Textual Textiles: Gender and Political Parodies in the work of Lawrence Lemaoana.", *Textile: Cloth and Culture* 15 (4). 2017. Karen has also co-authored two books on contemporary South African artist, Diane Victor: *Taxi-013: Diane Victor* and *Diane Victor: Burning the Candle at Both Ends*, both published by David Krut.

Statement on congress topic:

South African activist Artist, Zanele Muholi, was at the centre of a public debate about homosexuality in South Africa when the Minister of Culture refused to open an exhibition including her works, declaring them immoral; my paper contextualises this media frenzy and discusses the necessity for such art as a form of redress, aimed at giving a voice to those still marginalised in our society.

PAPER PROPOSAL/ ABSTRACT:

Activism, Criticism and Censorship in South Africa: Black Lesbianism and the work of Zanele Muholi

In August 2009 Zanele Muholi and nine other South African women artists took part in an art exhibition, *Innovative Women*, supported by the Department of Arts and Culture. The minister of Arts and Culture, Lulu Xingwana, was due to open the exhibition. Instead she walked out before her opening speech, reportedly calling the exhibition “immoral” because she deemed Zanele Muholi’s images of black women holding each other in bed offensive and sexually explicit. The debate that arose in the media around this event raises the very issues that Muholi is aiming to address. She calls herself a visual activist and her ‘cause’ is the invisibility of black South African lesbians, particularly those who come from poverty-stricken areas and are therefore doubly marginalised.

The bill of rights enshrined in the South African constitution includes a clause on the equality of all its peoples:

The state may not unfairly discriminate directly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth. (Constitution of the Republic of S.A. Act, N0108 of 1996. ss. 9.3).

The reality is, however, that paper proclamations do not always manifest in lived experience. Despite constitutional guarantees, women (particularly in rural areas), children, emigrants and the gay community face ongoing unjust infringements of their rights and freedoms including distressing levels of violence and intolerance such as that expressed by Xingwana.

Xingwana subsequently denied homophobic claims, but her response points to the perception identified in a recent social survey, that homosexuality is not the norm in African society and is often categorised as a “European import”. A black lesbian is thus identified as ‘abnormal’ both because she rejects men and because she is identified as ‘un-African’. In my paper I engage with the fraught debate around homosexuality in South Africa and discuss the steps taken by Muholi to raise this issue through her art as a form of redress or ‘activism’ aimed at giving a voice to those still marginalised in our society.