

The Carnival of Popularity

- wresting the popular from populism

Paul O’Kane



Shetland Islanders' *Old Norse Kings Festival*, 1927

Still image courtesy of the British Film Institute, taken from archival movie footage (<https://tinyurl.com/yb854etk>)

STATEMENT ON THE 2019 AICA CONGRESS TOPIC

Critical evaluation of art may have progressive intent but can contribute to class and cultural division, however this year's congress theme allows me to air ideas (aided by Jacques Rancière and Mikhail Bakhtin) that seek to 'wrest the popular from populism' by displacing the notion of a 'middle class backbone' (Macron) to our democracy and cultivating a more holistic, less striated vision of art, culture and society, wherein art's evaluation might strive towards a 'carnavalesque' accommodation aiming to assuage the ascendant, 'highly visible' sense of imbalance, injustice, conflict and complaint currently hindering and overshadowing the development of our increasingly complex and diverse society.

ABSTRACT OF MY PAPER

This paper (previously given to undergraduate students at Central Saint Martins College and Chelsea College of Art London) includes a 2-minute video clip and sets forth historical examples concerning the ‘right’ place of popularity in and in relation to contemporary fine art and art criticism. The examples, gleaned from artists, critics and theorists, help explore perceived distinctions between (on one hand) artists and (on the other) untrained but nevertheless creative others, ‘ordinary people’ who take pains and use particular ways and means to make comparably extraordinary objects, images, ideas and events. Given today’s new level of access and visibility via social media it is not difficult to locate many people who might not be considered ‘artists’ but nevertheless energetically use forms of creativity, skill, wit, innovation and observation that they justifiably feel are both of value and of their very own. These activities might be connected with the local (a vernacular), with tradition (a carnival or pageant), or with a personal obsession connected with, e.g, cultures of pop music, sport, fashion, movies or TV, Fan Fiction etc. Making reference to Mikhail Bakhtin’s affirmation of the premodern ‘carnavalesque’, my paper encourages imaginative and generous interpretation of the potential political potency of popular forms of art and culture as ways of ‘doing politics by other means’. It also draws inspiration from Jacques Rancière’s radical and inventive attempts to adjust perceived distinctions and hierarchical representations of the working classes *by* and from the middle class, professional realm. The paper goes so far as to take the risk of interpreting our current climate of fear and turmoil as a moment of opportunity when it might be possible for the arts, guided by bold, impassioned, innovative, creative and perhaps even ‘carnavalesque’ criticism, to mitigate and

ameliorate the manifold antagonistic splits and stratifications emerging in our potentially (and ideally) more holistic, shared, tolerant and inclusive society. Ultimately, the paper suggests that, together, as 21st century artists and critics we might *detourne* populism or ‘wrest the popular from populism’ while radically and fearlessly expanding given perceptions of the field of art and culture.

BIO

Paul O’Kane is a writer, artist and lecturer. As a UK representative and occasionally International Member of AICA he written reports for AICA International congresses and acted as mediator for congress panels. Paul gave his own paper at the AICA Paris Congress in 2017. This was based on the part he played translating the writings of Korean critic Lee Yil, published in the AICA Series *Art Critics of the World*. Based in London, Paul completed his PhD in History at Goldsmiths College in 2009. He writes for various leading art and referee journals, including *Art Monthly* and *Third Text*. Experimenting with the role of the online cultural critic Paul blogged for two years under the name ‘ONLY YOU’. He is also a founder member of ‘*eeodo*’, an artists’ publisher with whom he has written, designed and published four of his own books. These blur distinctions between the artist’s book and an essay collection. His most prominent publication is the two-part *Technologies of Romance*, which has spawned a series of symposia and other launch events at prestigious London institutions -including Whitechapel Gallery, Matts Gallery, South London Gallery and Science Museum London. *Technologies of Romance* is also the name of Paul O’Kane’s long-running undergraduate seminar at Central Saint Martins College, London where he is Lecturer in Fine Art, Critical Studies. Paul’s photographic, video and other art practices, as well as other examples of his many experiments in art writing, can be found at www.okpaul.com

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PORTRAIT



Photo courtesy of David Kilburn

