

Sara Hegenbart about the background of her proposition:

I would be thrilled to join you at the AICA Deutschland conference since my current book project *Diagnosing post-truth politics: Dialogical art and black aesthetics* closely aligns with the conference topic. In my research, I am analysing the societal symptom of 'post-truth politics' as an indicator of a failure to engage with a multiplicity of perspectives (especially those emerging from the Global South) that challenge the predominant narrative of Western superiority

Please find attached my abstract, statement and biography as well as a portrait for the AICA Deutschland-conference. I am happy to provide a German translation of the material, too, but was not certain whether this is necessary at this stage. Could you kindly let me know? The copyright holder of my portrait photos is the photographer Isabel Muehlhaus.

My abstract falls in the remit of the following themes.

- Begriff und Geschichte des Populismus, insbesondere im kulturellen Bereich
Kunstkritik als Reaktion auf populistische Tendenzen in der (Kultur-)Politik
- Zusammenspiel und Konflikte zwischen ethischen und ästhetischen Ansätzen in der Kunst
und Kunstkritik

Art as Criticism:

Meleko Mokgosi's *Democratic Intuition* and its challenges to populist tendencies in arts and politics

(Dr. Sarah Hegenbart, Munich)

Populism involves a depletion and simplification of complex and nuanced sets of aesthetic, ethical and political values. In the arts, populism is exemplified by the recent phenomenon of zombie formalism, a type of art designed specifically to cater to the demands of the market. Zombie formalist paintings characteristically employ a type of abstraction (hence the formalism) that requires art theorising in order to accrue meaning. The necessity for the zombie-like return of omnipotent art critics (hence the zombie) in the manner of Clement Greenberg hints towards a dilemma art critics all currently face: Their criticality (respectively lack of criticality) is constitutive for conferring the label 'art' onto an object that may actually only fulfil the criteria of a commodity.

Therefore, there is an increasing need for art critics (and artists) to exercise a degree of responsibility that safeguards them from not becoming easily complicit with the art market. However, the phenomenon of zombie formalism poses the question whether (certain) artists and art critics might have already contributed to the re-emergence of populism in contemporary politics. One could argue, for example, that the replacement of aesthetic values by financial values, as illustrated by zombie formalism, bears resemblances to the depletion of democratic values, e.g. dialogism, tolerance and the willingness to find compromises between opposing viewpoints, in politics. Have artists and art critics possibly even paved the way for populism in politics, e.g. a form of politics that is mainly driven by financial considerations?

In my paper, I will argue that genuine artworks, e.g. artworks that possess autonomy from economic systems, entail a type of inherent criticism. It is precisely this component that allows us to differentiate artworks that target criticality from those aiming at populist infiltration. Focusing on Meleko Mokgosi's *Democratic Intuition* as a case study, I will analyse how artworks can foster a form of democratic criticality by highlighting ambivalences. Mokgosi's practice is strongly driven by his engagement with contemporary political philosophy and the socio-political context of South Africa as a nation that struggles to implement democratic structures. In this case, art operates as a form of criticism in its own right. Viewed against the backdrop of the oral tradition many African countries, one may ask whether art criticism needs to be verbal. Could criticism possibly be formulated through the visual itself?

Statement: Having researched the historical manifestations of populism in my doctorate at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London, I am now working on my habilitation titled *Diagnosing post-truth politics: Dialogical art and black aesthetics* in Munich. My current research analyses the societal symptom of 'post-truth politics' as an indicator of a failure to engage with a multiplicity of perspectives (especially those emerging from the Global South) that challenge the predominant narrative of Western superiority. In addition to having taught numerous seminars on populism in contemporary arts and politics, I am currently co-editing (together with Mara Kölmel) the volume *Dada Data: Contemporary art practice in the era of post-truth politics* that explores the trajectory between the Dada avant-gardes attack on aesthetic value and the depletion of value in contemporary politics.