



Fig. 1: Małgorzata Kazmierczak. Photo: Paweł Zakrajewski

INTERNATIONAL/INTERVIEW

AICA ON POLAND'S CULTURAL SCENE

LISBETH REBOLLO GONÇALVES
ABCA/SÃO PAULO

The importance of the AICA Congress to be held in Poland in November this year is the topic of conversation between Lisbeth Rebollo Gonçalves and Polish critic Malgorzata Kazmierczak.

LISBETH REBOLLO GONÇALVES - What is the importance for the Polish Cultural Scenario of this AICA Congress that will take place in November?

MALGORZATA KAZMIERCZAK - AICA in Poland is a recognizable brand name. Polish art critics and cultural workers have always had connected it with its heroic past before the fall of the iron curtain in 1989. So far, we hosted Congresses in 1960, 1975 and 1999. Each of them was memorable. The last Congress - in 1999 - happened when we were still struggling after the neoliberal “shock therapy”. To understand the significance of the presence of the international art community in Poland in 2023, however, we need to go back to 2015, when the populist “Law and Justice” party took power. I think a lot of what is happening in Poland, happened also in Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro. Since 2015, we have observed a systematic takeover of art institutions by politically established managers - usually people without institutional experience. The freedom of expression

has also been challenged, which is not a new phenomenon, but the number of cases of so-called “blasphemy law” or “insulting religious feelings” which is penalized by up to 2 years in jail, has raised dramatically. In 2020 itself there were 29 cases that were taken up by courts, 8 people were declared guilty, out of whom 4 received imprisonment sentences. Let me notice that judges are nominated by the State Council of Judges which is under the control of the Minister of Justice, so this trend is not a coincidence.

Our government runs anti-LGBT and anti-abortion campaigns, it also chases so called “anti-polonism” which prosecutes anyone who would say that Polish citizens had anything to do with the crimes of the Holocaust. The ruling party became terribly sensitive towards LGBT issues and symbols, reproductive laws and even referring to the protests that happened especially in 2019 (against the prosecution of the LGBT community) and in 2020 (against the tightening of the anti-abortion law). Artworks on these topics or even roughly relating

to them have been removed from exhibitions. The same happens with artworks that might have anything to do with the refugees - that became an issue after the outbreak of the humanitarian crisis on our Belarusian border. Of course, I do not have to mention the economical censorship - so total lack of funding for projects which are not in tune with the government’s ideology, including no funding for the AICA Congress in Kraków.

There is also something that I call the “appropriation of the term censorship”. As early as 2016, the Deputy Minister of Culture, Wanda Zwinogrodzka, articulated the cultural agenda of the state: “The aim of this new policy should not be [...] a will to reconstruct an inherited tradition according to a pattern of contemporary political correctness that re-educates backward Poles for postmodernity.” It is clear, that for the right-wing ideologists, writers, and curators “the freedom of expression” is freedom of hate speech and the freedom to claim anti-scientific opinions in the public domain. In

art institutions we see exhibitions such as *Political Art* curated by Piotr Bernatowicz and Jon Eirik Lundberg, to which they invited artists such as Dan Park, who was sentenced multiple times for hate speech in his native Sweden. According to the organizers, this exhibition proves that there is freedom of speech in Poland, even though it is constantly being threatened by the “new political order” of the left (who have around 5% of seats in the Polish parliament). I think it is important to inform the international community about the complexity of the situation, and we will take the opportunity to discuss this during a special panel about the situation in Poland.

At the same time, when I travel around the world, I have a feeling that art in Poland is doing well, and Polish artists deserve to gain more visibility in the international art scene. I think what AICA colleagues can give us is the moral support that we constantly need in order not to lose the spirit. The Congress can also have practical results - noticing artists who pay much higher price to

keep working than their colleagues from Western Europe.

LISBETH REBOLLO GONÇALVES – Could you talk about the theme of the Congress? What are the perspectives that the theme of this congress can rise in the field of art criticism?

MALGORZATA KAZMIERCZAK – The last two or three decades in our region of Eastern Europe were the time of intensive infrastructure development. At the same time - in the whole world we have heard voices, that modern institutions are unable to respond to the current cultural or political disputes, and even more - the long-term economic and ecological crises that shake the very foundations of modernity. The occupy museum movement paid attention to the horrible working conditions of employees in institutions which often claim to promote socially engaged art. We also started to discuss the (lack of) sustainability of museums, which consume enormous amounts of power and produce large amounts of non-recyclable and toxic waste.

This frequently happens even during exhibitions about the climatic crisis, which is pretty ironic. We recently faced the specific types of protests of ecologists attacking artworks, which caused discussions about the involvement of fossil fuel companies in the art sector. A big issue is also the decolonization of art museums. In countries in which populist governments started taking over institutions, we needed to rethink the modes of resistance and self-organization. When the Covid-19 pandemic started, we started to question the role of art institutions altogether. In our region, the important context is also the Russian aggression on Ukraine, which also means the destruction of cultural institutions. Here, the discussion started about the values that will define the trajectory of institutional reconstruction. In the call for papers, we encouraged our colleagues to provide examples of critical and curatorial approaches to those new challenges, and I am sure we will experience fascinating discussions.

LISBETH REBOLLO GONÇALVES - What are the main points the congress will discuss concerning the proposal focused on “Art Criticism and the Institutionalization of Art”?

MALGORZATA KAZMIERCZAK - Currently, we are evaluating the proposals, but from what I already see, most of them treat about the decolonization of museums and the alternative approaches to curating and self-organizing. Some also include the role of AI and some add a post-humanist perspective. We have many proposals from our region, which inevitably will provoke a discussion about auto-colonialism of the post-Soviet countries. This perspective can also be transferred to other areas affected by colonialism.

LISBETH REBOLLO GONÇALVES - Could you tell us about the post-congress activities in Romania?

MALGORZATA KAZMIERCZAK - There are two cities on the program - Bucharest - the capital, where the highlight will be a great retrospective of Brâncuși,

and Timișoara, which is a European Capital of Culture this year. We will spend one intensive day in each of these cities, and we'll meet cultural workers and curators. Timișoara is a town where the revolution of 1989 started in Romania, and I think, especially for foreigners, it will be fascinating to see the exhibition entitled “(r)evolution? lived histories 1945-1989-2022” at the headquarters of the Revolution Memorial Association. We need to remember, that in Romania the regime was one of the most atrocious in the region. The 1989 revolution, unlike in other Eastern Bloc countries, where we went through the so-called “Velvet Revolution”, brought 1104 victims in Timișoara and Bucharest. Romania under Nicolae Ceaușescu was tightly isolated and destitute, even for Eastern Europe standards, because of the monumental investments he made, and the draconian plan to pay back the country's debt. All sorts of protests were suppressed by the *Securitate* - one of the most brutal special services in the Eastern Bloc, which hired the highest number of

secret agents. They were responsible for the imprisonment of hundreds of thousands, and the torture and death of thousands of people. The exhibition will be a mixture of historical documents with artistic interventions. There will also be a large mixed media exhibition entitled “after SCULPTURE / SCULPTURE after”, which the curators announce as a “kaleidoscopic presentation of the evolution of Romanian sculpture”. I'm sure it will be very intriguing for everyone, as Romanian art has not yet gained as much attention as it should.

LISBETH REBOLLO GONÇALVES - In addition to the Congress, what are the projects being developed by AICA Poland?

MALGORZATA KAZMIERCZAK - AICA Poland has been a quite active actor in the cultural scene in Poland. Our biggest recent project is realized together with AICA Slovakia, AICA Czech Republic and AICA Hungary as part of the Visegrád Fund Grant that we received for the publishing of an

“Anthology of Art Criticism Published After 1989”. We are co-operating in a team comprising Vlasta Noshirova (AICA Czech Republic), Jana Gerzova, Lydia Pribisova, Maria Hlavajova (AICA Slovakia), Kata Balazs and Július Huth (AICA Hungary) and Magdalena Ujma (AICA Poland). I am coordinating the project. In our team, we organized two webinars devoted to art criticism after 1989 thanks to AICA International grant, and we are planning at least two more. We are pretty active in the media - radio and television, and comment both on current issues connected with the cultural policy, and the exhibitions and events. We also developed a program called “AICA on tour” in which the Board organizes presentations and panel discussions in the galleries which need our support because of censorship or other form of political pressure. Finally, we have a column in an online magazine *Czas Kultury* called “metacritique”. The new president, Arkadiusz Półtorak, would also like to start a residency program for art critics. The essays written during those residencies could be published

as a series. We would also like to make a professional report about the state of Polish art criticism. It would be a starting point for a discussion on how to improve it. We aspire to become not only an organization of experts, but also an NGO, which would be able to defend the rights of our members.

MALGORZATA KAZMIERCZAK

Ph.D. in History. Since 2004 an independent curator of art projects in

Poland and USA, especially performance art events. Researcher and author of many essays and reviews. Between 2011-2014 - editor and translator of <http://livinggallery.info>; 2006-2012 - president of the Foundation for the Promotion of Performance Art “Keshet” in Kraków, Poland; 2012-2014 - managing editor of the Art and Documentation journal; 2014-2016 - director of the City Art Gallery of Kalisz, Poland. Between 2016-2017 - editor-in-chief of the Publishing House and Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Painting and New Media of the Art Academy of Szczecin, Poland. Currently an Assistant Professor at the Pedagogical University of Krakow. Since 2020, vice-president of AICA Poland and AICA International.

LISBETH REBOLLO GONÇALVES

Lisbeth Rebollo Gonçalves holds a degree in Social Sciences from the University of São Paulo (1970), a Master's in Sociology from the University of São Paulo (1978) and a PhD in Sociology from the University of São Paulo (1985). She is a professor at the School of Communications and Arts at the University of São Paulo. Works in the following areas: Brazilian art, contemporary art, international art and art criticism. She served as director of the Museum of Contemporary Art at the University of São Paulo from 1994 to 1998 and from 2006 to 2010. She was president

of the Brazilian Association of Art Critics, ABCA, from 2000 to 2006 and from 2010 to 2016; Vice President of the International Association of Art Critics AICA, from 2006 to 2008 and from 2010 to 2012; Professor of the Interunit Graduate Program in Aesthetics and Art History - PGEHA USP and Coordinator of the Graduate Program in Latin American Integration - Prolam/USP. Since November 2017, she has been President of the International Association of Art Critics - AICA (re-elected for the 2020-2023 term).

Source: Curriculum Lattes.