

Art criticism and eco-socially engaged practices (Rennes, 13–15 Oct 26)

Rennes, France, Oct 13–15, 2026

Deadline: Feb 16, 2026

Marie TCHERNIA-BLANCHARD

“Art criticism and eco-socially engaged practices: new writing, new challenges?”

On the occasion of the 58th Congress of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA), to be held in Rennes from 12 to 16 October 2026, Rennes 2 University, the French National Institute for Art History (INHA) and AICA, the three founding members of the Archives of Art Criticism, are organising an international event dedicated to art criticism and its renewal in response to the challenges posed by eco-socially engaged artistic practices.

In light of the evolving relationships between art, society, and politics since the 2000s - shaped by new forms of artistic engagement, institutional debate and collaborative practices - this congress seeks to explore the social, cultural and political functions of contemporary art criticism.

Art criticism is understood here as a body of discourse that contributes to an evaluation of contemporary art, serving as an instrument of legitimisation attentive to the aesthetic and socio-political contexts from which artworks emerge, and receptive to their broader placement within historical practices and their own historicity. In doing so, it shapes literary practices which, in turn, play a prescriptive role within the field of visual practices.

This reflection builds on several key milestones in recent critical history.

On the one hand, Claire Bishop's work and her debate with Grant H. Kester (2006) initiated a renewed critical perspective on participatory and collaborative artistic practices. By insisting on the need to evaluate such works not only in terms of the effects they produce and responses they elicit within society - whether through audience reception or the evaluation of cultural policies - but also by taking their aesthetic forms into account, Bishop argues that ‘the social turn in contemporary art has led to an ethical turn in art criticism’. This shift directly raises the question of how art criticism itself can engage with practices in which social interaction becomes the material of the artwork. Her work has also helped foster new discourse on the relationship between art, politics and criticism within an increasingly antagonistic context (Marchart 2019). At the turn of the millennium, the contradictions shaping the relationships between museum and/or curatorial institutions and activist practices - amid transformations in the frameworks of production and exhibition - emerged as one of the most visible manifestations of this, as notably evidenced by New Institutionalism and Jacques Rancière's notion of the ‘emancipated spectator’. These tensions have contributed, in particular, to intensifying the blurring of roles between art critics and curators.

On the other hand, in a Europe encouraged to decentralise, or even to be 'provincialised' (Chakrabarty 2000), an event such as Documenta 15 (2022), curated by the Indonesian collective Ruangrupa, illustrated a contemporary art tendency to become deeply rooted in the social world, its forms of organisation and its struggles, thus unsettling the expectations of the international art world regarding such types of events. By foregrounding collaborative, non-hierarchical, community-based practices that often challenge established powers and counter Western hegemonies over contemporary art, this edition brought to light a widespread crisis in dominant curatorial models, as well as in traditional forms of art criticism, its modes of expression, theoretical assumptions and legitimising function. In an art world still governed by the imperatives of a globalised market, which produces homogeneous perceptions, Documenta 15 attests to a heterogeneity in ways of thinking and making art that calls for a renewal of critical writing. It also highlights the growing consideration given to ecological imperatives through artistic approaches which, by reflecting on the tools of production and on materials themselves, advocate for ecosocially engaged art in practice.

With this in mind, the congress aims to explore a range of issues at the intersection of critical theory, art history and the social sciences:

- How does the critical community respond to new models of artistic and curatorial production that are often collective, community-based, or activist?
- Does the recognition of new forms of marginal, local or activist expression (ZAD, ecological struggles, independent collectives, autonomist practices, etc.) lead to new narratives?
- By implicitly or explicitly reshaping art institutions, the logic of symbolic validation, and even market dynamics, what effects do these practices have on art criticism? What forms of critical writing emerge from these alternative experiences?
- When faced with these diverse artistic objects - sometimes processual or ephemeral - what is the new 'time' of criticism? What timelines, positions, tools or media do these event-driven forms bring about?
- Which historical models are being revived or identified as precursors by artists and art critics involved in these contemporary practices?
- Finally, beyond the controversies – most notably those sparked by accusations of anti-Semitism at Documenta 15 – how do these tensions compel us to rethink the political role of art criticism today?

The Symposium will take place in Rennes from 13 to 15 October 2026, in the frame of the 58th Congress of the International Association of Art Critics (AICA), in both French and English. It is intended for researchers in the arts, art history, philosophy, the humanities and social sciences, as well as for artists, critics, curators, and all those in the contemporary art world who, over the past three decades, have been involved in reflecting on the forms of engagement and the social responsibilities of criticism.

Proposals for papers, written in either English or French, should be submitted in PDF format (approximately 2,500 characters, including spaces). They should clearly present a research question, a theoretical and methodological framework, and the main lines of analysis envisaged. Each proposal should include a short bio-bibliographical note.

Proposals should be sent to aca-direction@univ-rennes2.fr by February 16, 2026 at the latest.

They will be reviewed in a double-blind process by the scientific committee.

They may fall under the themes outlined above. The congress will also be open to non-academic forms of communication, such as readings, performances or action-oriented lectures, in order to foster dialogue between critical, artistic and theoretical practices.

Scientific committee : Lotte Arndt (université Paris 1), Baptiste Brun (Université Rennes 2), Clélia Barbut (Université Paris 8), Damien Delille (INHA), T.J. Demos (UC Santa Cruz), Gabriel Ferreira Zacarias (Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Sao Paulo), Véronique Goudinoux (Université de Lille), Samuel Hernandez Dominicis (AICA Cuba - Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico), Émeline Jaret (Université Rennes 2), Jesus Pedro Lorente (AICA International - University of Zaragoza), Ceren Ozpinar (University of Brighton), Camille Paulhan (AICA France), Sonia Recasens (AICA International), Dorothee Richter (University of Reading), Fabien Simode (AICA France), Marie Tchernia-Blanchard (Université Rennes 2), Elvan Zabunyan (université Paris 1).

Bibliography : Alonso Gómez S., Piniella Grillet I. J., Radwan N., Rosauero E. (s.l.d.), *NO Rhetoric(s) – Versions and Subversions of Resistance in Contemporary Global Art*, Berlin, Éd. Diaphanes, 2023 ; Billing J., Lind M., Nilsson L. (dir.), *Taking the matter into common Hands, On contemporary Art and collaborative practices*, Londres, Black Dog Publishing, 2007 ; Bishop C., 'The Social Turn: Collaborations and its Discontents', *Artforum*, vol. 44, n°6, February, 2006 and *Artificial Hells, Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, London, Verso, 2012 ; Bruyne P. de, Gielen P. (dir.), *Community Art. The Politics of Trespassing*, Amsterdam, Valiz, 2011 ; Chakrabarty D., *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000 ; Demos T. J., *Decolonizing Nature – Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*, London, Sternberg Press, 2016 ; Jonas Ekeberg J. (s.l.d.), *New Institutionalism Verksted #1*, Oslo, Office for Contemporary Art Norway, 2003 ; Haylock B., Patty M., *Art Writing in Crisis*, Berlin, Sternberg Press, 2021 ; Kester G. H., *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2004 ; Marchart O., *Conflictual Aesthetics – Artistic Activism and the Public Sphere*, London, Sternberg Press, 2019 ; 'Documenta fifteen – Aspects of Commoning in Curatorial and Artistic Practices', *On Curating*, n°54, November 2022 [online] ; Rancière J., *The Emancipated Spectator*, Paris, La Fabrique, 2008 ; Thompson N. (ed.), *Living as Form. Socially Engaged Art from 1991-2011*, Cambridge/London, The MIT Press, 2017 ; Von Bismarck B., Stoller D. et Wuggenig U. (s.l.d.), *Games, Fights, Collaborations. Das Spiel von Grenze und Überschreitung. Kunst und Cultural Studies in den 90er Jahren / The Game of Boundary and Transgression: Art and Culture Studies in the 90ies*, Berlin, Hatje Cantz, 1996 ; Zhong Mengual E., *Art in common – Reinventing collective forms in a democratic context*, Dijon, Les Presses du réel, 2019.

Reference:

CFP: Art criticism and eco-socially engaged practices (Rennes, 13-15 Oct 26). In: ArtHist.net, Jan 13, 2026 (accessed Feb 15, 2026), <<https://arthist.net/archive/51471>>.