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## Report on the XIXth International Congress of Aesthetics

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## Report on the XIXth International Congress of Aesthetics

*Michael Ranta and Jale Erzen*

***"Aesthetics in Action"***  
**Jagiellonian University**  
**Kraków, Poland**  
**21-27 July 2013**

The XIXth International Congress of Aesthetics, the centenary jubilee of this major triennial event of philosophical aesthetics, took place at the Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland.[1] For exactly one century now, international congresses of aesthetics have been held all over the world: Europe, Asia, and North and South America, the first one taking place in Berlin 1913. Numerous congresses in recent memory (*e.g.* in Tokyo 2001, Ankara 2007, and Beijing 2010) were well-organized and characterized by an open-minded (while academically strong), inspiring, international atmosphere.[2] These led to high expectations for this jubilee congress, expectations that, indeed, were to a considerable extent fulfilled.

Sponsored by the International Association of Aesthetics (IAA), the congress was organized by the Polish Society of Aesthetics through an organizing committee led by Professor Krystyna Wilkoszewska. In addition, honorary patronages were provided by the Mayor of Kraków, the Minister of Science and Education, and the Ministry of Cultural and National Heritage. The main venue was the Auditorium Maximum of the university, built in 2005, with modern, functional session rooms providing state-of-the-art audio-visual equipment.



Auditorium Maximum exterior



Auditorium Maximum interior

Some sessions took also place at other, smaller premises a fifteen minute walk away (which perhaps was somewhat inconvenient). The registration procedure worked smoothly through the friendly helpfulness of volunteers, and provided all participants with a strong cloth bag containing the programme, a book with abstracts (easy to find), and general materials about the city of Kraków.

As is the practice, a number of main topics were suggested:

- Aesthetics – visions and revisions
- Changes in Art; past and present
- Aesthetics in Practice: the aesthetic factor in religion, ethics, education, politics, law, economy, trade, fashion, sport, everyday life etc.
- Aesthetics and Nature: evolutionism, ecology, posthumanism
- Body Aesthetics: soma and senses
- Art and Science
- Technologies and Bio-technologies in aesthetics and art
- Architecture and Urban Space
- Cultural and Intercultural Studies in Aesthetics
- The Sphere of Transition: transections, transformations, transfigurations in culture, aesthetics, and the arts.

The presentations, all in English, were organized into plenary panel sessions, in place of plenary speakers, and more or less coherent thematic paper sections. About 460 speakers from forty-eight countries participated, including, as it seemed to us, an unusual number from China and Southeast Asia (unusual except for the Beijing congress, of course). The academic discourse of philosophical aesthetics, as encouraged by the IAA, thus seems to have become increasingly internationalized, which is only to be welcomed. However, participants from the African continent were still largely missing, which hopefully will change in the future. Not surprisingly, a large proportion of the presentations came from East European participants, which gave the international community a valuable opportunity to become acquainted with current aesthetic discourse in this part of the world.

An overview of all presentations is provided by the so-called "word clouds" below (Illustrations 1-3). The size of a word in each of these visualizations is proportional to the number of times the word appears in the input text, in this case the most common nouns and predicates in the titles of all presentations. In cloud 2 we have filtered out 'aesthetics,' 'aesthetic,' and 'art.' In cloud 3 we have filtered out 'contemporary,' 'architecture,' 'philosophy,' and 'beauty.' These word clouds can easily be compared with those in the report from the Beijing congress.[\[3\]](#)

Cloud 1 (click image to enlarge)

Cloud 2 (click image to enlarge)

Cloud 3 (click image to enlarge)

Looking back at this congress, we must certainly mention the urban environment where it took place: the city of Kraków, its atmosphere, the people we met and their friendly mood, the places where we listened to and became engaged in discussions of art and aesthetics. Kraków is one of the oldest cities in Poland and Polish people sometimes refer to it as the country's cultural capital. The Old Town of Kraków has been included in UNESCO's World Heritage List since 1978 and provides many impressive examples of Renaissance, Baroque and Gothic architecture. An abundance of restaurants with Polish cuisine at reasonable prices, as well as the lively streets and market places (with numerous performance artists) contributed to an enjoyable atmosphere.[\[4\]](#)



Market Square

This larger context could indeed be regarded as the *aisthēsis* of the whole event. The congress itself exemplified its theme, "Aesthetics in Action," for it seemed to be open to all aspects of aesthetic and artistic thought and practice in our day. Indeed, this theme of "Aesthetics in Action" could be found in the design of its logo (three intersecting, rotating circles), the topics of the plenary panels (aesthetic engagement, aesthetics beyond aesthetics, somaesthetics, aesthetics and politics) and many individual papers, to the concert at the conclusion of the first day. This concert, performed in the Krakow Philharmonic Hall by the Beethoven Academy Orchestra conducted by Jacek

Kasprzyk, consisted of a symphonic work written on the occasion of the congress by the young Polish composer Karol Nepelski. Its harmonic and melodic materials were based on a motif encrypted in the words 'aisthesis' and 'aesthetics,' and both the music and performance exemplified "aesthetics in action."

The program covered a host of subjects, from nature, ecology, environment, architecture, ornament, the city, politics, bio-aesthetics, and bio-art to ethics, conservation, and many more. Looking at the International Congresses over the last twenty years, one notices an increase in the subjects that relate to aesthetic experience of all kinds rather than to philosophical aesthetics. This indicates an opening up of disciplinary fields and an increase in interdisciplinary studies, as well as a recognition of the limitations or weakening of discourses within philosophical aesthetics. As one may easily observe in many international journals of aesthetics, such discourses are often related to analytical aesthetics and revolve around linguistic concerns, which seem to form an impasse in philosophical aesthetics.

Some panels and presentations are worth discussing from the perspective of these issues in aesthetic thought. The panel on 'Aesthetics beyond Aesthetics," chaired by Wolfgang Welsch, was actually a quest to transcend the supposed limitations of human cognition. Welsch, a well-known veteran in the field of postmodern aesthetics, has for years tried to widen the discourse within philosophical aesthetics and to investigate alternatives in the non-human, non-cognitive realms, working recently in the animal and biological spheres. Eduardo Kac, who described his biological experiments with rabbits and other interventions into the realms of fauna and flora, brought to mind questions about alternative possibilities for human perceptual awareness. The panel on aesthetic engagement was organized by Arnold Berleant, who has been developing the concept for many years. It was introduced by an amplified recording he made of a piano composition by the contemporary Finnish composer Einojuhani Rautavaara that filled the hall with the intent of encouraging aesthetic engagement. The panelists developed the concept of engagement in different contexts, such as politics, sensory perception, environmental qualities, music, and the city.

Joseph Margolis and Noël Carroll, well-known American philosophers, both dealt with the theme of interpretation in their panels. Margolis opened the issue in several perspectives, including memory, through Armen Marsoobian's talk on the history of an Armenian family in Turkey in the early century. Carroll's panel dealt with his new theories concerning meaning and what he calls "moderate intentionalism" in art. The panel on Polish aesthetics introduced some unknown aspects of Stefan Morawski's philosophy. An important contribution to aesthetic thought came from the panel on "Rediscovering Susanne Langer's Relevance for Contemporary Aesthetics and Theory of Art." Albert van der Schoot's paper comparing Peter Kivy's and Langer's theories of expression was a succinct analysis and a welcome reminder of how much we can still learn from Langer.

Other panels were of unusual interest. One entitled

"Artification" and chaired by Yrjö Sepänmaa dealt with recent artistic developments that fuse art and non-art or where non-artistic events are viewed aesthetically, while another on "Aesthetics and Landscape" chaired by Yuko Nakama offered interesting ideas and images. In the latter panel, Zoltan Somhegyi's paper about the aesthetics of ruins made the interesting point that modern cities will never become ruins in the ways we experience old Greek or Roman cities. Barbara Sandrisser and İnci Kansu's joint paper on the plight of some island landscapes, such as Okinawa and Cyprus, was heartbreaking. Chinese, Japanese, and Taiwanese participants organized interesting panels and papers on East Asian aesthetics. Work in Asian aesthetics is always refreshing, for there is so much poetic and emotional content, and Yuedi Liu's and Eva Man's presentations on the influence of globalization and everyday aesthetics in China, as well as Peng Feng's paper on 'transhuman' aesthetics, were thought-provoking contributions.

Panels and individual papers concerning politics are more and more prominent today when many political manifestations are liable to turn into aesthetic events (see Allan Sekula on Occupy[5]) such as the recent Istanbul uprisings. Hiroshi Yoshioka's paper on 'Art after Fukushima' could also be included here because of the controversies in Japan about nuclear energy. Two very interesting and related papers by Renée van de Vall and Carolyn Korsmeyer concerned the conservation of works of art or objects of national and world heritage. Van de Vall's paper on the conservation and restoration of works of art in museums revealed many problems of copyright, authorship, and knowledge of the artist's work methods, while Korsmeyer's paper dealt with problems concerning wear and tear, age value, and people's preference for an unrecognizable original to an almost identical copy because of the value placed on its physical closeness to the artist.

One of the panel sessions entitled "The Artful Species: Aesthetics, Art, and Evolution" gave rise to some controversy. The aim of this session was to discuss Stephen Davies' new book, *The Artful Species*. Most of the panel speakers seemed, despite some critical remarks, to have a quite benevolent attitude towards his work, but one of them, in a way which many listeners experienced as rather hostile and academically inappropriate, put forward an utterly harsh criticism of Davies' approach.[6]

Despite the numerous and notable presentations, there was a blemish in what seemed to be an unusually large number of cancellations (around 50 participants cancelled their attendance). Whereas the program promised sessions with, for example, four speakers, in some cases only two or even one actually appeared. This was unfortunate for the remaining speakers as well as for the listeners. Some sessions had to be shortened and the time schedule could not be followed, although the chairpersons tried their best. It seems that some participants had committed themselves to the congress without paying their registration fee and the program had been fixed and printed on the basis of that commitment. This created a dilemma for the organizers, who had to prepare the program on the insubstantial basis of a verbal commitment. It

would be well to try to avoid this problem in future congresses.

Many cultural events accompanied the congress. In addition to the concert in Kraków Philharmonic Hall, an informative guided tour and reception took place at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Kraków (MOC AK), an afternoon tour to the UNESCO-listed Wieliczka Salt Mine was arranged, and on the main market square the artist Krzysztof Wodiczko presented an audiovisual installation entitled "The War Veteran Projection," just to mention some examples. As to culinary aesthetic needs, throughout the congress an abundance of, Polish delicacies were enjoyed during the lunches, the coffee breaks, the Mayor's reception, and at the closing banquet.



Mayor's Reception



Polish Delicacies at the Mayor's Reception

All in all, the congress should certainly be regarded as a success: well-organized, with a friendly atmosphere, and intellectually inspiring. There is every reason to congratulate and thank the organizers for a work splendidly done. The next International Congress of Aesthetics with the theme of "Aesthetics and Mass-Culture" will take place in Seoul, South Korea in 2016.

To see additional images of the Congress, please follow this link:

[https://plus.google.com/photos/"113530099896696876582/albums/5910849984744575841](https://plus.google.com/photos/)

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[1] Website of the congress: <http://www.ica2013.pl/>

[2] For a report on the Beijing congress in 2010 see Michael Ranta, "Report: The XVIIIth International Congress of Aesthetics- "Diversities in Aesthetics" (Peking University, Beijing, China, 9-13 August 2010)", *Contemporary Aesthetics* 8, 2010. <http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=604&searchstr=ranta>

[3] See note 2.

[4] For an example of a lively street performance (and indeed 'Aesthetics in Action'), see this link:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LQp3LOOJg0U&feature=youtu.be>

[5] Waiting for Tear Gas 1999-2000 by American artist Allan Sekula.

<http://enculturation.gmu.edu/6.2/armstrong>

[6] For Stephen Davies' own view on this event, see his post:

<http://artfulspecies.wordpress.com/2013/08/01/the-artful-species-roasted/>