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Report on the XXth International Congress of Aesthetics "Aesthetics and Mass Culture" Seoul National University, Seoul, South Korea, 24-29 July 2016

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Michael Ranta & Jale Erzen

The XXth International Congress of Aesthetics took place at Seoul National University in South Korea, continuing the tradition of international congresses of aesthetics that have been held for more than a century (the first took place in Berlin in 1913).^[1] Like the most recent congresses in Ankara (2007), Beijing (2010), and Kraków (2013), this latest one was well-structured, open-minded in spirit, and academically inspiring.^[2]

The congress was hosted by the Korean Society of Aesthetics in cooperation with the International Association of Aesthetics (IAA) through an organizing committee led by Prof. Chong-hwan Oh. Seoul National University provided an excellent site for the congress. The main venue was conveniently located and the session rooms were modern and functional, being equipped with air conditioning (which was certainly appreciated with outside temperatures of about 90 °F/35 °C).



There were several restaurants nearby, and park areas invited relaxing strolls. Seoul itself, with about 10 million inhabitants, is a

buzzing metropolis, and the calm campus area felt like a retreat within this urban environment. Attendees with free time to spend in the city appreciated the efficiency of the large underground system, which has 18 different lines and 311 stations. The city contains several important museums, such as the National Museum of Korea, the Leeum Samsung Museum of Art designed by architects such as Jean Nouvel, Mario Botta, and Rem Koolhaas, as well as the Dongdaemun Design Plaza (designed by Zaha Hadid).

The online registration procedure and assistance worked efficiently, which was also the case at the congress venue through the kind helpfulness of student volunteers, who provided all participants with all relevant information, including the programme, a book of abstracts, and general materials about the campus and the city.



The topics for this congress included:

1. Issues of Art Theories in the Era of Mass Culture
2. New Media, Design, and Aesthetics
3. The Aesthetics of Body and Sports
4. Reflections on the History of Aesthetics
5. Values of Art: Cognitive, Moral, and Political
6. Scientific Perspectives on Aesthetics
7. Imagination and Emotion
8. Aesthetics of the Environment and Ecology
9. Aesthetics and Theory of Individual Artistic Genres
10. Aesthetics and Art Theories in Asian Traditions

The presentations, most of them in English, were organized into plenary round tables and (more or less coherent) general sessions. About 340 speakers from 37 countries participated, including (not surprisingly) numerous ones from China, Japan, and, of course, Korea. However, no speakers from the African continent or the Middle East participated, which certainly is regrettable. This may partly be explained by difficulties in receiving sufficient economic funding. For future congresses, the IAA and the host organizers might consider finding means of providing financial support to talented scholars from economically less prosperous regions, who otherwise wouldn't be able to



[Click on the image to enlarge](#)

In cloud 3, we have filtered out "contemporary," "Chinese," "Korean," "modern," and "theory."

These word clouds can easily be compared with those in the reports from the Beijing and Kraków congresses.[\[3\]](#)

The main theme of the congress, "Aesthetics and Mass Culture," proved to be a very fruitful topic, addressing issues that traditional aesthetics seems to have neglected in comparison with extensive discussions regarding the nature and value of the fine arts. Still, mass-produced art works and activities in all kinds of media are undoubtedly that segment of art production that, at least in quantitative terms, affects and engages most people compared with the relatively small quantity of artworks preserved and exhibited in art museums and galleries. The program covered a number of subjects, from architecture, theater, film, computer games, digital and internet media, political and cultural theory, music, everyday environments and landscape, folk art, and kitsch to discussions of Asian art (especially Korean, Chinese, Japanese), and many more.

Some of the topics addressed during the congress were outlined by Noël Carroll (USA) in the first plenary paper entitled "Affective Engagement and Mass Art: Reflexes, Emotions and Moods, Positive and Negative." By referring to numerous examples of mass art, Carroll argued that the broad attractiveness of some art forms to a considerable extent could be explained by taking audiences' intersubjective, moral interests (such as fairness, group loyalty, civility, etc.) and their artistic manifestations into account. Professor Ken-ichi Sasaki's plenary speech "On the Front: Aesthetics versus the Popular Arts and Mass Culture" (the title, itself, had thought-provoking implications) outlined some transformations of culture and art in the twentieth century. Being an aesthetic scholar in the Japanese tradition, with Zen-Buddhist inclinations, his subtle comparisons of Western and Japanese popular culture, especially from the Edo period, offered new perspectives. During the next plenary session, "Aesthetic Agency in Mass Culture," Dominic Lopes (Canada) argued that contemporary mass culture supports socially-situated agents in forming larger cooperative networks through which they pursue aesthetic projects that are not especially introspective compared to the contemplative appreciation seemingly required by the so-called highbrow arts. Elie During's (France) plenary talk on "What Speculative Aesthetics Can Be" led one to ask whether all aesthetic or evaluative thinking is not always in one way or other 'speculative.'

The concept of kitsch, i.e. "low-brow" style of mass-produced art, usually used in a pejorative sense, was discussed in a number of

presentations. In her paper, "Kitsch Products On The Rise," Marcela Ganea (Romania) took a somewhat rigid stance against kitsch, describing it as emotionally and aesthetically banal and dismissible. She claimed that this should be countered by educational systems in order to "preserve the standards in art and culture." Another presentation concerning so-called low-brow art by Norihide Mori (Japan) with the title, "Aesthetic Value of Bad Art: From the Point of View of The Evaluative Approach to Aesthetic Experience," had a more nuanced approach. The speaker argued that aesthetically bad art (and kitsch) does not necessarily lack artistic or cognitive qualities. Damien Hirst's installation *Mother and Child (Divided)* was mentioned as an example, as well as works from the Museum of Bad Art.[4]

One of the younger contributors from the US, Emily Parker, gave an interesting new insight into current ecological concerns with her presentation on "Anthropocene." In her paper, "Aesthetics of Body Deformation," Krystyna Wilkoszewska (Poland), who had arranged the previous IAA congress in Kraków, presented and discussed numerous forms of body modifications and deformations in the arts as well as in daily life, many of them rather grotesque and clearly deviating from traditional Western norms.



One interesting round table concerned phenomenology where Aarto Happala (Finland) and Gerald Cipriani (Ireland) contributed to our knowledge of the field, each from his perspective. Happala proceeded analytically and Cipriani in a more poetic fashion with insertions of beautifully spoken French terms. Daily life, or everyday environments, was the theme of the round table session entitled "Extending Everyday Aesthetics." Arto Haapala, in his contribution "Longing for the Everyday in Everyday Aesthetics," promoted the aesthetically appealing aspects of the ordinary and the positive feelings of familiarity with everyday environments and activities, rather than the extraordinary, which aesthetics usually has tried to explore. During the same session, Kalle Puolakka's (Finland) paper, "Getting Excited about Familiar Things," directly addressed and countered Haapala's proposal by questioning the aesthetic status of such feelings of familiarity. Despite any possible objections towards either of their stances, the dialogical interaction between them proved to be very fruitful, also giving rise to a lively discussion in the audience.

To sum up, the Seoul congress afforded an abundant, inspiring buffet of academic positions and thought-provoking issues. Last minute cancellations did occur within the various sessions and round tables, but they were relatively infrequent. As customary

with all congresses, two Executive Meetings were held, (dinner and lunch were sponsored by the Korean organizers), which introduced new delegates from Spain and Brazil and which approved the addition of a new regional aesthetic society from Russia, represented by Boris Orlov.

As usual, several cultural events accompanied the congress. A well-appreciated bus tour, with guides and many opportunities for informal discussion, took place one afternoon. This was to an exhibition at the Gallery White Block in Paju, about 24 miles/39 km north of Seoul, and familiarized participants with the Korean landscape around Seoul and provided a view to North Korea across the river bay. Afterwards, the excursion continued to the famous Changdeokgung Palace from the Joseon Dynasty and the Jongmyo Shrine, both of them UNESCO-listed.^[5] Korea is famous for its performing arts and musical and dance performances, examples of which were offered during the congress. A concert performed by the Rageum Orchestra and Dong-Rak Traditional Performing Arts Group during the opening ceremony was impressive, as was a jazz performance by the Lim Mi-sung and Heo Seong-woo Korean Jazz Project some days later.^[6]



Culinary aesthetic needs were also met where Korean cuisine could be enjoyed during the lunches (including black hamburgers, colored with squid ink), the coffee breaks, and the welcome & farewell dinners. All in all, the congress was clearly a most successful event; it was well-organized, friendly, and intellectually

inspiring. The organizers deserve much credit and many thanks. The next International Congress of Aesthetics will take place in Belgrade, Serbia in 2019.

To see additional images of the Congress, please follow this link:
<https://goo.gl/photos/6XV8YSBPyMm5wzrQ9>

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Endnotes

[1] Website of the congress:
<http://www.ica2016.org/main/main.php>

[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>

For a report on the Kraków congress in 2013, see Michael Ranta and Jale Erzen, "Report: The XVIIIth International Congress of Aesthetics - Aesthetics in Action" (Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland, 21-27 July 2013), *Contemporary Aesthetics* 11, 2013.

<http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=677&searchstr=ranta>

[3] See footnote 2.

[4] For numerous 'noteworthy' (?) examples of 'bad' art, see their website: <http://www.museumofbadart.org/>

[5] For two video clips from the bus tour, while passing through Seoul, see these links:

<https://youtu.be/n5F51T2ZXdU>

<https://youtu.be/cgl2nsyvk6s>

[6] For a video clip from the traditional concert, see this link:

<https://youtu.be/ucAU8mmK3nI>

For a video clip from the jazz concert, see this link:

<https://youtu.be/06phMXc2t5s>