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*It seems an auspicious day to begin this Congress. The opening of the XXXI AICA Congress in Belfast today coincides with the start of the peace talks here. Perhaps it is not stretching things to say that the theme of this Congress, 'Art and Centres of Conflict: Inner and Outer Realities,' has both site-specific and universal relevance.*[QL]

*Or perhaps it is overstepping the limits of art to think that the work of artists and critics is relevant at all to urgent social issues. No matter how socially concerned, how involved with the issues, how critically astute, or how aesthetically powerful, art never quite manages to change the world. Neither does art criticism. But art and criticism do make a subtle difference. They can reflect, refract, condense, encapsulate, and sometimes predict the inchoate stirrings and deep unconscious yearnings, hopes, and horrors of a culture, a place, and a time. Art, and sometimes criticism, have the ability to coagulate the unarticulated impulses of a culture or a period wafting through the ether. They can merge the culturally specific and the universally human.*[QL]

*The City as a Locus for Conflict. Art as Itinerary. And Art and Melancholia. These three interrelated main topics that this Congress will consider explore the various ways esthetic endeavors relate to issues of location, dislocation, and drift, and to manifestations of civil strife. These topics may be local but they are also global. Melancholia may be specific to a place. But it may also be specific to a time, to the end of a supposedly modern century and the end of an era of modernization whose dreams of progress and universality have unraveled to leave us disillusioned, disoriented, and increasingly divided into smaller and smaller units by which we define identity. History has moments when everything seems propelled by some*

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centripetal force, when populaces are somehow compelled, whether by will or by force, to adhere to some cohesive larger unit, some greater social or political entity, some centralized core. At other moments the center no longer holds, and then the impetus is for things to fly apart, toward decentralization and fragmentation. We live in a centrifugal time. A moment defined not by stability but by drift, with shifting populations, mass migrations, diasporas, and uprooted guest workers, and disintegrating nation-states. The sites of power have become unstable, destabilized. [QL]

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The world of art, no matter how hard it tries or how concerned it is, is never quite the real world. It cannot solve the problems of the real world. However perhaps it can in metaphoric or symbolic ways somehow clarify or focus them. Art has an inextricable, subtle, and indirect relation with questions of social or political power. All art, whether the artist knows it or not, is political. Art, whether abstract or representational, issue-oriented or autonomous, is permeated by the political climate, it is infused with decisions, indecisions, or denials involving sites of power. It is seeped in contradictions involving the universal and the particular. Art has intimate knowledge of the politics of identity and the esthetics of identity. And Art can help reveal that identity is often composed--or rather, constructed--in equal or unequal parts of simulation, imitation, conformity, pretense, conviction, and rebelliousness. Identity is never simple or unitary. Neither is it a fixed and static thing. Identity is fluid, unstable, composite, multiple, and often contradictory, if not artificial, composed[MD]as the African American feminist writer bell hooks has noted, of interlocking systems of domination. Interlocking systems of sex, race, class, nationality, and ethnicity.[QL]

We can only hope that our sessions and discussions of art in relation to

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urban spaces, conflicted places, and itinerant agendas, will coincide with fortuitous developments in the larger world. We can only hope that these days will auger a less conflicted, less nostalgic, less melancholy, and less divisive future. We can only be optimistic.[QL]

I want to close with two quotes. One is from the first draft of a thesis (her subject is the subtleties of identity) a student of mine who is Jamaican, paraphrasing or quoting Stuart Hall (I didn't have a chance to ask or look it up). It describes ``Identity as the unstable point where 'unspeakable' stories of subjectivity meet the narrative of history.'' The other is from a recent article about Frank Gehry's amazing new edifice in Bilbao, by architectural critic Herbert Muschamp, who wrote: ``The Myth of the Next Reality, also known as Utopia, is that there is a place where differences and commonalities, unity and diversity, can be seen as the poles around which beauty revolves. The axis between these poles is called empathy.'' [QL]

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ART AND CENTRES OF CONFLICT[QL]

the city as a locus of conflict [QL]

art as itinerary[QL]

art and melancholia[QL]

[QL]

revolutionary politics and conservative religion[QL]

stalemate[QL]

signs and symbols within the conflict[QL]

[QL]

Papers:[QL]

Outer realities. The papers at this congress will revolve around issues of

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urban angst. As Documenta X made lugubriously clear, the city is a political site. In much the same way, they will consider landscape as a political space.[QL]

And to turn to inner realities, memory as a political act.[QL]

Melancholy and nostalgia as politicized as well as spiritual states.[QL]

The imagination as a seat of power.[QL]

And language as an act of resistance.[QL]

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independence and power[QL]

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