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Art needs freedom – Democracy needs art

Statement by federal artists' associations in Germany: Deutscher Künstlerbund, BBK Bundesverband, IKG – Internationales Künstlergremium, Internationale Gesellschaft der Bildenden Künste (IGBK), Verband der Gemeinschaften der Künstlerinnen und Kunstfördernden (GEDOK)

As artists' associations, we jointly reaffirm the fundamental principles of artistic freedom and cultural funding in the Federal Republic of Germany.

This statement is prompted by the current election platform of the AfD political party in Saxony-Anhalt for the upcoming state elections. Among other things, the program speaks of wanting to “cure” an alleged “identity crisis” through a “new, patriotic cultural policy.” In our view, this and other positions in the program pose a serious threat to fundamental democratic values, as well as to artistic freedom and diversity in Germany.

In light of these (cultural) political positions, we feel compelled to take a clear stand at both the federal and international level.

The Basic Law in Germany protects both artistic creation and the impact of art

The starting point for any assessment of cultural policy in Germany is the Basic Law (“Grundgesetz”). Article 5, paragraph 3 of the German Grundgesetz guarantees freedom of art. It protects both the realms of artistic creation (Werkbereich) and of artistic impact (Wirkbereich). This encompasses themes, production, presentation, and mediation of art alike. This freedom is constitutive for an open, democratic society and is, in principle, beyond the reach of state control over content.

Contextualization, critical assessment, and public debate

Art fulfills its societal function especially where it provokes, contradicts, or questions existing frameworks of interpretation. Handling controversial or historically sensitive content in a democratic society is not achieved through restriction or exclusion, but through contextualization, critical analysis, and public debate.

The inviolability of human dignity under Article 1 of the German Grundgesetz also sets a binding limit for artistic creation. Racism, anti-Semitism, and exclusion are incompatible with this principle and are firmly rejected by us.

The Arms-Length Principle in Cultural Funding

For decades, public cultural funding in Germany has enabled high-quality artistic production while adhering to the arms-length principle. Funding decisions are typically made by independent juries, which evaluate based on artistic, aesthetic, and professional criteria. This ensures that neither political expediency nor ideological proximity or distance influence the allocation of public funds.

Cultural policy approaches, that make a stronger substantive or ideological orientation of art and culture the criterion for funding—for example, in line with political agendas—, are incompatible with our constitution. Demanding a uniform orientation of culture toward concepts of identity or tradition carries the risk of indirect and long-term restriction on artistic freedom.

Even introducing funding criteria that go beyond compliance with general laws and imply political loyalty, ideology, or thematic conformity, constitutes a limitation of artistic freedom and can lead to anticipatory self-censorship. Artists and institutions might also—out of concern for access to funding—avoid certain forms of expression, which would sustainably affect the diversity of cultural life and the open development of future cultural practices.

Equally critical are procedures that target cultural practitioners or institutions for generalized scrutiny by security authorities. Measures of this kind violate the principle of proportionality and create a climate of general suspicion incompatible with artistic freedom and the self-understanding of a democratic state governed by the rule of law.

As associations representing artists in Germany, we therefore demand:

- The freedom of art must be guaranteed without restriction and must not be compromised by cultural policy instruments.
- The arms-length principle in public cultural funding and the independence of professional juries are key safeguards and must be preserved.
- Public cultural institutions are spaces for open, pluralistic discourse that helps foster democratic coexistence; they must not be subjected to political influence.
- An open democratic society is characterized by its ability to tolerate contradictions and address grievances through public discourse and democratic processes.

On behalf of artists in Germany and our members, we advocate for these fundamental principles: Art needs freedom – Democracy needs art.

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