

Käthe Kollwitz Prize of the Akademie der Künste suspended for 2025

Letters from Fareed Armaly and Akademie President Manos Tsangaris

Letter from Fareed Armaly to Akademie President Manos Tsangaris on 7 August 2024

Subject: Awarding of the Käthe Kollwitz Prize 2025

Dear Prof. Manos Tsangaris,

I am writing in response to your letter informing me that I have been awarded the 2025 Käthe Kollwitz Prize, an accolade I am honored to receive.

This recognition is particularly significant to me for several reasons. As it is named after the respected German artist, the prize embodies a legacy that encourages a comprehensive understanding of what constitutes the work of an artist. Fittingly, it acknowledges the sustained effort and evolution of an artist's work over time, which I value. The fact that the Käthe Kollwitz Prize is awarded through the Akademie der Künste in Berlin, one of the oldest institutions of its kind in Europe dedicated to the arts and artists, adds another layer of significance for me.

My selection is made particularly meaningful to me by the award jury comprised of artists Ayse Erkmen, Mona Hatoum, and Eran Schaerf, with the latter two adding insights as former prize recipients. Having all three artists as jurors for such a prestigious German award strongly resonates with my generational experience of transforming European cultural and artistic fields, which I entered in the late 1980s in (West) Germany. At that time, while rigidly controlled borders continued to define nations and geopolitics, the field of contemporary art emerged as a space for modeling open and dialogical transnational exchanges. In my experience, this exchange generated crossborder networks shaped by artists and younger galleries, drawing from various fields and disciplines through a critical dialogue with institutions. These networks embodied collections of meeting points in which to encounter difference within the space of art, even as definitions of identities, nations, and geopolitical boundaries were being disruptively reconfigured on the ground. In Germany (as well as in Europe at large), I was an American artist, where my Arab name signified the difference at work—the play of hyphenated identity through which my practice would be generated. I was interested in a contemporary art context that felt historically integrated into social and cultural spheres. My attention was drawn to the ways European cultural institutions as well as societal discourses were shaped by instabilities, faultlines, and historical disjunctions — notably postwar and post-'68 currents—intensified by the post-'89 new and complex mix of subjectivities, histories, and cultures emerging into a new version of Germany. These institutions are always in transition, thereby producing historical gaps through which my artistic practice entered, generating the contemporary forums, frameworks, and new

spaces within them (even holding official roles, such as curator or artistic director). I focused on the question of artistic practice intertwined with an open definition of art, informed by a politics of culture, nation, identity, and representation. Thus, I situated my projects in dialogue with institutional frameworks, articulating epistemic fields at the intersection of postcolonial and diasporic practices and theories through architectures, media and archaeologies.

Today, I am being awarded the Käthe Kollwitz Prize at a historically precarious moment, marked by a disturbing trend of censorship in Germany. For several years now, there has been a highly politicized, reactionary shift in official cultural policies, aimed at silencing advocates for Palestinian rights under international law. This shift has led to a growing list of official cancellations—honors, book awards, exhibitions, teaching contracts, panel and lecture invitations—for an array of scholars and artists with diverse solidarities and affiliations, becoming normalized. Despite numerous open letters of opposition signed by scholars from all backgrounds, unified in argument against these forms of censorship as intolerable interferences and means of silencing voices, these practices persist. The spectre of litmus tests and loyalty oaths, combined with anti-intellectual arts and culture media voices, targets critical discourses and studies and contributes to structural racism. In such a context of intimidation, liberal cultural institutions appear to adopt complacency and self-censorship. All this, consciously or unconsciously, structurally performs the ongoing dehumanization of Palestinians by obscuring and abstracting their agency and voice.

Käthe Kollwitz's century-old oeuvre and biography reveal a complex understanding of how the personal and political merge with themes of art, justice, and the social domain. While her artworks focused on invoking empathy for those rendered voiceless and powerless—historically, materially, and structurally—her actions activated the role of the artist with a sense of agency. The accumulation of recognitions, refusals and removals associated with her, serves as a reminder that liberal cultural and art institutions constitute identities that are not established in isolation, but in how they interpret their correspondences with their national, and government frameworks. And in turn, how the artist speaks through this.

I once again wish to express my deep respect for the institution of the Käthe Kollwitz prize, the Akademie der Künste, and the jury for awarding me this honor as a recognition of my work. There have been numerous periods during my productivity as an artist in Germany that I would have gladly accepted this honor. However, at this historical juncture, I am unable to align myself with any institution operating under the current cultural policy framework of the German government. To maintain my voice as an artist and speak meaningfully through your act of recognition, I must decline this award.

Respectfully,
Fareed Armaly

Letter from Akademie President Manos Tsangaris to Fareed Armaly on 27 August 2024

Dear Fareed Armaly,

Thank you for your letter of 7 August this year, letting us know that you will be declining the Käthe Kollwitz Prize awarded by the Akademie der Künste in Berlin. We note your decision with respect and deep regret.

To avoid any misunderstandings, I would like to clarify that the jury's decision to grant you the award was made independently. I was informed only after the jury had decided, and in my capacity as President, I notified you of the award.

Since you are addressing me in this capacity, please allow me to offer a few comments in response.

The Akademie der Künste is not an "institution dedicated to the arts and artists," as you stated, but rather a free association of artists who are bound only by their own conscience. The Academy's legal status as an autonomous entity means that it is accountable to no one outside its membership, least of all to the federal government. The statute establishing the Akademie der Künste states: "...its purpose is to promote the arts and advocate for the cause of art in society. The Akademie der Künste speaks with independent responsibility." In other words, it is the artists themselves who govern their affairs. This law binds every level of the state. Any attempt to interfere with the Akademie der Künste's right to self-determination would be unlawful. The reason for this is clear: an institution that defends the freedom of art requires protection - including from the state itself.

You have also declined the award on the grounds that the Academy, as an institution, is funded by taxpayers' money. That is of course your right, but public funding for essential services, which in Germany fortunately also include culture, is a major achievement of democratic societies. It allows individuals and institutions to operate independently of the whims of private and political interests.

My colleague Anh-Linh Ngo and I were elected to the offices of President and Vice-President about thirteen weeks ago. One of the reasons we ran for these positions was that in an increasingly polarised political environment, we recognise the risk that spaces for discourse are being eroded by dogmatism, self-righteousness and lack of empathy. As the executive committee of an artists' association, we see it as our task to contribute to mutual understanding by opening up spaces for dialogue and debate, where everything can be freely discussed.

It is in this spirit that we actively oppose all forms of censorship and self-censorship, including cancel culture, calls for boycotts and political influence. We are currently working hard at various political levels to push back against attempts by certain political factions to establish an ideological vetting process for the allocation of funding through a proposed resolution of the German Bundestag, as well as through statutory regulations and clauses. It is becoming increasingly clear in public discourse that such considerations would be unconstitutional and therefore must not gain a foothold in German politics and society.

You write, "In such a context of intimidation, liberal cultural institutions appear to adopt complacency and self-censorship." This statement does not apply to the Akademie der Künste. We are an artists' association that also sees it as its task as being to offer criticism. The Academy, its members and its sections do not allow themselves to be intimidated or censored, and as far as I can see, are not practising self-censorship. Such actions would never be tolerated by us or by our membership. In the short time since taking office, we have been actively engaging with politics (I will spare you the list of meetings, events, discussions, texts...) in order to fight against political interference.

Starting in September, several public talks at the Academy will address the issue of artistic freedom and the impending dangers of its restriction from various perspectives. When the Bundestag resumes its work after the summer break, we will be publishing an article on the subject of artistic freedom.

Of course, I respect the serious reasons for your decision and I am grateful to you for going into them in such detail. However, I hope you will allow me – and not consider me self-righteous – to offer a different view of the Akademie der Künste and its current role in German and European society. The Academy and its members are conducting internal debates on a range of topics, including Palestine and Israel. I am sure I do not need to explain to you the specifically German issues relating to this debate, or their historical origins. I think that part of the democratic process of forming opinions should include making these debates visible to the outside world. The artists disagree with one another. As they always have - and as they should.

However, I would ask you not to doubt the fundamental integrity of our many dedicated members.

The Käthe Kollwitz Prize offers artists the opportunity to share their perspectives with a broad public. We had hoped you would want to take up this opportunity and accept the invitation. In my view, the award ceremony and the associated exhibition would have provided the space for a free discussion of your views. I regret that this dialogue will not take place.

My thanks for your time.

Kind regards,

Prof. Manos Tsangaris