



**Speech by German Ambassador Andreas Michaelis
at the Opening of the Villa Aurora Thomas Mann House Conference
“Arts in the Times of Crises – The Role of Artists in Weakened Democracies”
The Political Significance of Cultural Activities for the German-U.S. Relationship
November 15, 2023, Los Angeles, CA**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for the warm welcome in Los Angeles.

It's a thrill to be in this global cultural metropolis, and sister city of Berlin, inside CalArts' REDCAT theater within Frank Gehry's iconic Disney Concert Hall.

I can hardly imagine a better place for a conference that asks about the socio-political role of art.

For 20 years now, Frank Gehry's architecture has been unfolding its transformative power here, as a work of art and for an entire city.

I thank Villa Aurora and Thomas Mann House for organizing this conference on the political role of art. The topic is highly topical.

In times of wars, great social tensions and polarization in a digitalized world, the question of the relationship between art and politics is being posed anew.

How free is art today? How political must it be in order to do justice to the legitimate claim to the socio-political role and responsibility of the artist in modern democracies?

It is obvious that the question of the relationship between art and politics can be posed particularly well by cultural institutions such as the Thomas Mann House and the Villa Aurora. The German exiles in California had fled from the Nazis.

One can therefore argue that political persecution of art and the ban on free art by the Nazis as well as the acceptance of the German exile by free America are the starting point for the existence of the Thomas Mann House and the Villa Aurora in Los Angeles today.

Both houses are not only places for intellectuals and artists, but also places of free artistic and intellectual development, as well as places of free German-American exchange in the arts.

In addition, both houses are supported not only financially but also conceptually by the Federal Republic of Germany and its foreign cultural policy.

After the experiences of the suppression and eradication of free art during the Nazi era, politicians in the still young Federal Republic of Germany saw free art as a particularly valuable asset.

This was also shaped by the suppression of free art and the politicization of art that took place in parallel in the GDR.

Anna Seghers, Gerhard Richter and, of course, Berthold Brecht - to name but a few - fled the GDR because it suppressed free art.

On the other hand, Theodor Heuss, the first President of the Federal Republic of Germany, emphasized in his speech “Powers and limits of a cultural policy” that culture had its own world and its own laws, which could not simply be subordinated to the interests of politics.

Nevertheless, he could imagine a political role for art within limits as he said: “You can't make culture with politics ... maybe you can make politics with culture.”

It is obvious: our digitally networked times of extremes of war, violence, political polarization and social crises are pushing for politicization.

The pressure on intellectuals and artists to use the power of their voice or art politically and thus live up to their special political responsibility is also increasing.

To name just a few examples: an installation in front of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art today draws attention to the suffering of Israeli hostages.

In Ukraine, painters, actors, dancers and singers are being released by their commanders to use their art to strengthen the morale and resilience of Ukrainians and promote their countries' cause abroad.

And in Germany, over 70 intellectuals and writers called a year ago for even greater support for Ukraine in the form of donations, aid and arms.

Our culture and society is shaped by intellectuals, writers and artists. That is why they are also important players in the cultural exchange between Germany and the USA, such as the one taking place at this conference today.

Your exchange today is, of course, first and foremost simply an exchange of ideas.

But this conference is also part of a cultural exchange that is important in terms of foreign policy and deepens transatlantic relations.

Especially today, when the transatlantic reflex is waning in the USA, particularly among the younger generation and in right-wing populist circles, intellectual and cultural exchange with the USA becomes increasingly politically important.

In closing, thank you for the opportunity to share these thoughts with you today.

I wish you a stimulating and fruitful exchange of ideas. I am looking forward to the outcome of this conference to further improve our understanding of the relationship of culture and politics and encourage a dynamic German-U.S. relationship.

Thank you.