

DFG RESEARCH TRAINING GROUP 2477 "AESTHETIC PRACTICE"

(MERIAM BOUSSELMI, SONJA DINTER)

IN COOPERATION WITH

UNESCO CHAIR IN CULTURAL POLICIES FOR THE ARTS AND TRANSFORMATION

(JULIUS HEINICKE, DANIEL GAD)

# (UN)FAIR PRACTICES:

## CULTURAL POLICY BETWEEN ARTISTIC FREEDOM AND POLITICAL CONTROL?

### Conference

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2024

**Section 1:** Unpacking Power Dynamics: Artistic Practices, Intersectional Justice, BIPoC Representation, and Cultural Equity

**Section 2:** Reclaiming Narratives: Exile and Institutional Accountability

**Section 3:** Tailor-Made Freedom: Cultural Practices Shaped by Political Agendas

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[www.uni-hildesheim.de/unfairpractices](http://www.uni-hildesheim.de/unfairpractices)

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**MERIAM BOUSSELMI**

**THE MIDDLE BEAST: THE IMPACT OF GERMAN CULTURAL PRACTICES ON ARABIC-SPEAKING CULTURES, CULTURAL WORKERS, AND ARTISTS**

This presentation critically examines the metaphor of the “Middle Beast” to question the deep-seated prejudices that shape German perceptions of Arabic-speaking cultures, exposing the pejorative and dehumanizing tropes often imposed within frameworks of white supremacy. The figure of the “beast” can be perceived in two ways: either it does not exist, leading to its erasure from representation and denial of a stage, or it emerges as a threatening object of fantasy. This duality is reflected in the experiences of Arabic-speaking artists and cultural workers in Germany and in international exchanges with German institutional partners. As Berlin-based Syrian writer Yassin al-Haj Saleh argues in his essay *Gaza in Berlin* (2024), the “othering machine” is running at full speed, reinforcing stereotypes, distortion, censorship, and exploitation.

Drawing on concrete case studies and testimonies, this paper explores how German cultural institutions, despite promoting equality, operate within hierarchical structures, using selective engagement to weaponize cultural representations and reduce vibrant identities to oversimplified labels. Furthermore, the paper discusses how these institutional policies restrict artistic freedom and systematically marginalize Arabic-speaking artists and cultural workers, treating them as commodities at the service of shifting political agendas. By exposing these dynamics, the talk highlights the necessity for a critical reassessment of unfair cultural practices, acknowledging Arab artists and cultural workers as essential contributors to cultural dialogue and affirming their agency in shaping emancipated narratives and representations without fear of being delegitimized, exoticized, or demonized.

Meriam Bousselmi is a research associate in the DFG Research Training Group “Aesthetic Practice” at the University of Hildesheim. Her PhD project explores the (mis-)representations of justice on contemporary transcultural stages. She holds a Master’s degree in law and political science from the University of Tunis-Carthage and has been a licensed lawyer with the Tunisian Order of Lawyers since 2010. In parallel, she is a writer and theatre director whose work has received international recognition. Her work fosters multilingual and transdisciplinary connections, critically examining power dynamics and focusing on themes such as the critique of hegemony and discursive manipulation within dominant transcultural narratives.

**(IN)VISIBLE ACTS OF POWER: IN SEARCH OF INTERSECTIONAL JUSTICE**

The presentation will build on the findings of the research project “Diversification Processes in Children’s and Youth Theatre Festival Scene”, commissioned by ASSITEJ Germany to reveal the overlapping patterns of structural inequality in children’s and youth theatre in Germany. It first outlines the forms of knowledge, expertise, positions, narratives, aesthetics and languages that are undervalued and overlooked in the children’s and youth theatre festival scene, which purports to be committed to supporting diversity. Drawing on the theoretical underpinnings of intersectionality, the inquiry then explores the necessity of ‘intersectional justice’ rather than mere fairness, with the aim of inviting discussion on the implications of intersectional justice and the possibilities for anti-discriminatory and anti-racist artistic practices. Finally, the presentation will address the responsibilities of cultural policies in confronting inequalities and the power dynamics that perpetuate them, working towards intersectional justice and cultivating anti-discriminatory and anti-racist knowledge formation in the cultural field.

Dr. Özlem Canyürek is a sociologist working at the intersection of cultural policy, politics and education. She holds a PhD from the University of Hildesheim, Institute for Cultural Policy. Her research centres on marginalised knowledges, narratives and aesthetics in the German cultural field. Her dissertation *Cultural Diversity in Motion. Rethinking Cultural Policy and Performing Arts in an Intercultural Society* was funded by the European Open Science Cloud for open access publication. She has examined diversification processes in the performing arts for the German Performing Arts Fund (2021) and in children’s and youth theatre for ASSITEJ Germany (2023), focusing on practice-informed pluriversal approaches to cultural policy.

**LEONARD A. CRUZ**

**DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION: UNFAIR PRACTICES IN DANCE ASSOCIATIONS, ORGANIZATIONS, AND FOUNDATIONS IN GERMANY**

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) must become essential pillars in dance associations, organizations, and foundations in Germany. After living in Germany for the past 30 years, I am fatigued by the fact that these dance associations, organizations, and foundations still struggle to learn, understand, and create spaces that reflect the diverse bodies and broad spectrum of the human dance experience. As a DEI expert of Color and a Social Justice Arts Activist, I have long sought and continue to seek change to ensure that all people, regardless of their race, abilities, or background, have equal opportunities to participate, contribute, and be represented in the arts, especially in the dance scene. Unfair practices in dance associations, organizations, and foundations undermine the integrity, inclusivity, and sustainability of the diverse dance scene that exists in Germany. These practices often involve issues related to representation, funding, access, labor, and intellectual property.

Prof. Dr. Leonard A. Cruz (PhD in Urban Education with a focus on Performing and Creative Arts) was born in Pampanga, Philippines, and grew up in San Antonio, Texas (USA). He began dancing at the age of four, learning Filipino and Hawaiian folk dances. In 2013, he successfully defended his doctoral thesis on “Laban Movement Analysis as a Methodology for Promoting Creativity and the Arts Across the Curriculum” at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Cruz received his first dance contract in Germany through Pina Bausch, where he was a guest with the Wuppertal Tanztheater and a member of the Folkwang Tanzstudio in Essen-Werden. From 1994 to 2001, he was a soloist at the Bremen Stadt Theater under the direction of Susanne Linke and Urs Dietrich. Leonard specializes in civic and community engagement through creative and expressive arts and believes in lifelong performing and learning. Prof. Dr. Cruz is currently the Chair of Dance and Theater in Social Fields at the HKS-Ottersberg and is also the Co-Director of the Institute for Artistic Therapies and Research.

**STAGE OF APPROPRIATION: PERFORMING EXILE AND POLITICAL AESTHETICS**

This paper investigates the intricate dynamics of cultural appropriation within the context of exile, drawing upon Edward Said's conception of exile as a condition of ongoing displacement and marginalization. Focusing on the performing arts in Germany since 2022, the paper critically examines how the identity and narrative of exile are co-opted within cultural policies, serving as a tool for either legitimizing othering or fostering inclusion. It explores how national identity, symbolized by the passport, is employed to dictate the visibility or invisibility of exiled individuals on the cultural stage. By delving into the intersection of political aesthetics and the performance of exile, the study seeks to uncover how these cultural policies either integrate or alienate exiled individuals, ultimately shaping their presence – or absence – in the national cultural discourse. The paper aims to distinguish between mere representation and authentic participation in the cultural landscape, highlighting the impact of appropriated exile narratives on the aesthetic and political dimensions of performance in Germany.

Prof. Dr. Azadeh Ganjeh is a performer, performance artist-activist, dramaturge, and professor of Performative Künste im Sozialen (HKS-Ottersberg) born in Tehran-Iran. She holds a Master's degree in Theater Directing from Tehran Art University. In 2017, she completed her Doctorate in Philosophy-Theatre Studies at Bern University. Remaining connected to her homeland through creating theatre and performances, Azadeh Ganjeh returned to Tehran and assumed a professorship at the School of Performing Arts, Tehran University. Alongside her teaching commitments, she initiated structural reforms and guided the curriculum review for Directing and Acting. Since leaving Iran in April 2022 as an artist and scholar in exile, she has been a researcher and lecturer at the University of Hildesheim, Institut für Medien, Theater und Populäre Kultur. She also lectures in sessions or seasonally at various higher education institutions while maintaining the artistic career of her performance collective. Azadeh Ganjeh specializes in creating spaces of appearance through performing arts, participatory performances, performative interventions in urban public spaces, immersive theater productions, and community theater for social-political empowerment. Her research interests encompass the performativity of the body in public events, politics of space and aesthetics of performativity, emancipation through performing arts, and activism in performance art.

## **JULIUS HEINICKE**

### **BEFORE AND AFTER LIFE, WE ARE ALL EQUAL AND FREE: FREEDOM AND EQUALITY AS FUNDAMENTAL MOMENTS OF ART AND AESTHETICS**

The simplest but probably most effective cultural-political assumption, which lays the foundation for artistic action, is that people can only really experience that which lies between birth and death. Apriori and posthumous remain in the realm of speculation, assumptions and fantasy and are therefore the subject matter not only of religious but also of artistic expression. Apriori and posthumous are aesthetically modelled in many cultures around the world because they elude the experience of everyday life.

This cultural-political assumption, which ascribes a politically effective relevance to art and culture, as the spaces of the a priori and posthumous have always been instrumentalized by religious, feudal and political elites, conceals great social potential. On the one hand, it points to the equality of people before and after life, which can connect different cultural traditions, ideas and values and promote mutual empathy. Secondly, it illustrates how crucial aesthetic and artistic spaces are for dealing with the ignorance and uncertainty of what happens beyond real experience. The ability to speculate about what was before life and what will be after it justifies the necessity of the freedom of artistic and aesthetic creation and is at the same time the founding moment of cultural policy, which creates the framework conditions to make this possible.

The paper will examine these basic moments in their recent and historical “unfair settings” and consider what role they can play for a cultural policy of “fair practices” in the future.

Prof. Dr. Julius Heinicke is Professor of Cultural Policy and holds the UNESCO Chair in Cultural Policies for the Arts and Transformation at the University of Hildesheim and Visiting Professorships at the University of Toronto in Canada and the University of Arts in Belgrade, Serbia. He is currently leading several work packages in Horizon Europe research projects (IN SITU, D@rts, Intracomp) and, together with Wolfgang Schröer, the BMBF project “Kulturelle Selbstversorgung: The right of young people to cultural (self-)education”. From 2017 to 2020, he was Professor of Applied Cultural Studies at Coburg University of Applied Sciences and Head of the Science and Culture Centre. Prior to that, he researched and taught at the Institute for Theatre Studies at the Freie Universität in Berlin. After studying cultural and theatre studies / cultural communication, he completed his doctorate at the Humboldt University of Berlin on theatre, art and politics in Zimbabwe with a scholarship from the Heinrich Böll Foundation.

**SAMI KHATIB**

## **WHO IS AFRAID OF PALESTINE? ASSESSING (UN)FAIR PRACTICES IN GERMANY'S CULTURAL POLICY**

The Palestinian question, in its persistent return, serves as a critical lens that exposes the limitations of international law and the hypocrisy embedded within Human Rights Discourse (HRD). While often articulated in humanitarian terms, the Palestinian question reveals a breaking point within the ideology of humanitarianism and politics of 'conflict management'. The language of HRD, while ostensibly concerned with humanitarian crises, often depoliticizes political conflict and silences antagonistic voices. As a result, positions and experiences incompatible with dominant (state) narratives are often repressed or underrepresented.

Cultural policies and practices play a pivotal role in shaping the narratives surrounding the Palestinian question, at times criticizing, reflecting or reinforcing the biases inherent in HRD. Aesthetic practices, in particular, become vital sites where artistic freedom and political control intersect, leading to the systematic marginalization or co-optation of political expressions of the Palestinian diaspora, particularly in Germany. As state-sponsored institutions navigate these objective political tensions, they often reinforce the biases of the prevailing discourse.

Drawing on Robert Meister's critique in *After Evil: A Politics of Human Rights* (2011) and Walter Benjamin's conception of the 'state of exception' (1940), this presentation will examine how aesthetic practices and cultural policies perpetuate structural injustices while obscuring the realities of Palestinian experiences. Ultimately, it will argue for a reevaluation of aesthetic practices as essential for resisting dominant narratives, fostering a politics based on global justice and exposing systemic injustice against Palestinians in Germany and beyond.

Dr. Sami Khatib is a research associate at the Orient-Institut Beirut and a founding member of the Beirut Institute for Critical Analysis and Research (BICAR). His publications include a co-editorship of the volume *Critique: The Stakes of Form* (2020) and authorship of the book "Teleologie ohne Endzweck": Walter Benjamins Ent-stellung des Messianischen' ["Teleology without End." Walter Benjamin's Dislocation of the Messianic] (2013). Recent publications can be accessed at <https://fu-berlin.academia.edu/SamiKhatib>



**GRIT KÖPPEN**

**STRUCTURAL, EPISTEMOLOGICAL AND AESTHETIC DIFFERENCES FOR PERFORMING ARTISTS IN INTERNATIONAL THEATRE FESTIVALS**

The production conditions for performing artists in the global North and the global South are very different. Due to asymmetrical power relations as an economic and political reality of the actual postcolonial situation, artists' rehearsal and production processes differ greatly. However, for international theater festivals, aesthetic approaches play an almost exclusively decisive role. How do aesthetic differences manifest themselves? What aesthetic approaches are currently being implemented by francophone West African artists? How do artists refer to genuine aesthetic and epistemological differences in their performances and stage plays? How is the curatorial framing of their stage productions? Moreover, what are possible structural measures used to increase the visibility of these works in international theatre festivals? This involves questions of agency, the self-organization and establishment of theatre festivals in African and European metropolises, strategic collaborations, the politics of guest performances and publications of plays as well as the professional dealing of festival curators with specific aesthetics. In my talk I will illustrate and discuss these aspects using studies from the international theatre festivals like *Recréatrices*, *Africologne* and *Transkontinentale* as well as stage productions created by DeLaVallet Bidiefono/Dieudonné Niangouna and Aristide Tarnagda.

Prof. Dr. Grit Köppen is a visiting professor for theory and history of theatre and a lecturer for scenic writing at the University of the Arts, Berlin. Previously, she was a postdoctoral fellow at the graduate school "Knowledge of the Arts" at the University of the Arts, Berlin and junior fellow at the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies.

**ELAD LAPIDOT**

**ANTI-ANTI-SEMITISM AS CULTURAL-POLITICAL PRACTICE: CURRENT DEBATES**

The talk will reflect on the current function of the discourse concerning the fight against anti-Semitism, which I call “anti-anti-Semitism,” as a guiding principle in shaping state politics, cultural policy, and in deployment of state power and state violence. I will draw on current declarations, statements, and policy documents, such as the new draft resolution of the German federal parliament “Nie wieder ist jetzt: Jüdisches Leben in Deutschland schützen, bewahren und stärken,” as well as on various existing definitions of anti-Semitism, such as the IHRA (International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance) and the JDA (Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism) definition. The talk will engage with the debates concerning the meaning and problems of the contemporary political function of anti-anti-Semitism from various points of view, especially in relation to its impact on artistic freedom, cultural expression, and the declared goal of preventing anti-Semitism. By exploring how these discourses intersect with political control over cultural practices, the talk seeks to contribute to the broader discussion on (un)fair practices in cultural policy.

Prof. Dr. Elad Lapidot is Professor for Jewish Thought at the University of Lille, France. Holding a PhD in philosophy from the Paris Sorbonne university, he has taught philosophy, Jewish thought, and Talmud at many universities, such as the University of Bern, Switzerland, and the Humboldt Universität and Freie Universität in Berlin. His work is guided by questions concerning the relation between knowledge and politics. Among his publications: *State of Others. Levinas and Decolonial Israel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, forthcoming 2025), *Politics of Not Speaking* (Albany: SUNY Press, forthcoming 2025), *Jews Out of the Question. A Critique of Anti-Anti-Semitism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2020), Hebrew translation with introduction and commentary (with R. Bar) of Hegel’s *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, Vol. 1 (Tel Aviv: Resling Publishing, 2020), *Heidegger and Jewish Thought. Difficult Others*, edited with M. Brumlik (London/New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), and *Etre sans mot dire : La logique de ‘Sein und Zeit’* (Bucarest: Zeta Books, 2010).

**MYROPI MARGARITA TSOMOU**

**ON THE “IMPLICATED SUBJECT” OF CULTURAL WORK: BETWEEN COMPULSORY CONTROL, NECESSARY ADAPTATION, AND STRATEGIC SUBVERSION**

In debates about the examination of war crimes, genocide, and systemic or colonial dominance, Michael Rothberg reflects on the position of the “implicated subject” alongside the roles of perpetrator and victim. This concept centres on the responsibility of those not directly involved, who may not create injustice but allow it to occur, contribute to its normalization, or reproduce the conditions that enable it. Being embedded in historically violent contexts implicitly makes us complicit and simultaneously heightens the “vicarious responsibility for things we have not done” (Hannah Arendt). This contribution reflects on the position of the “implicated subject” and the related questions of responsibility and agency in the context of experiences within institutional cultural work in increasingly shrinking spaces of free of speech.

Prof. Dr. Myropi Margarita Tsomou is a Greek cultural studies scholar, working as an author, dramaturg, moderator, and curator. She is the curator for theory and discourse at HAU Hebbel am Ufer in Berlin, a founding and editorial team member of the pop-feminist magazine Missy Magazine, and a professor of Contemporary Theater Practice at the University of Applied Sciences Osnabrück. Her curatorial projects include the series Burning Futures: On Ecologies of Existence, the conference Feminisms Reclaiming Life: An Internationalist Gathering at HAU, and the event series of the Apatride Society within the discursive program of Paul B. Preciado at Documenta 14.

**MARIANN YAR**

## **WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF STRUCTURAL DISCRIMINATION OF BIPOC ARTISTS IN PERFORMING ARTS IN GERMANY?**

I will have a look on current issues around stereotypes, narratives, tokenism, representation and power structures based on my experiences as a BIPOC artist, my voluntary work for a network of BIPOC artists in Film and theatre that is called “Stabiler Rücken e.V.” and my own artistic work on transgenerational trauma and reflections on diasporic life. Another important point of view in this presentation is my role as a collective member in artistic direction at Berliner Ringtheater.

As an actress that was trained at the UdK Berlin and works in Stadt- and Staatstheater as well as the free scene for several years, I can provide an important perspective on the injustices regarding marginalized performers. On the other hand I have insights on leading a small venue that is trying to challenge the rigid structures of performing arts institutions.

The realisation of my Solo-Performance LANDSFRAU هموطن will serve as an example on counternarratives and Empowerment within BIPOC communities in this case especially for Afghan woman.

Mariann Yar is a German/Afghan artist and has been working for several years at the intersection of acting and power-critical theater organization. Her work as an actress takes place both at state theater level and in the independent performing arts scene in Germany. Her projects are united by a strong political approach ranging from anti-racism to intersectional empowerment. She studied acting at the University of the Arts Berlin from 2015 to 2019 and then became part of the artistic management collective at Berlin's Ringtheater, where she runs an own venue with around 10 other young artists. Her responsibilities include both curatorial and organizational tasks. The focus is on supporting young theater makers. Mariann Yar is politically active in the association Stabiler Rücken e.V., which she co-founded to fight against racism and antisemitism in the film and theater scene. Her work stands for a new generation of theater professionals, who demand creative participation across genre boundaries and thus contribute to the artistic and political added value of contemporary performing arts.

## PANEL DISCUSSION

### (UN)FAIR PRACTICES: CULTURAL POLICY BETWEEN ARTISTIC FREEDOM AND POLITICAL CONTROL? GERMAN, EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

#### MODERATION: JULIUS HEINICKE

- **DeLovie Kwagala**, Photographer, Visual Artist
- **Antonija Letinić**, Kultura Nova Foundation, Croatia
- **Prof. Dr. Myropi Margarita Tsomou**, Theatre Artist and Scholar, University of Applied Sciences Osnabrück, Curator, HAU Hebbel am Ufer
- **Gitte Zschoch**, Secretary General Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen (ifa)

In recent years, cultural institutions, policy actors and artists have increasingly had to defend the freedom of art, as this has been questioned or at least scrutinised by various political groups. In Germany, the debate about so-called contractual 'clauses', which are intended to exclude anti-Semitic and racist ideas from artistic works in advance, is in full swing. Art scenes across Europe are discussing whether artistic performances can be restricted or even censored by politicians. On the other hand, it is discussed nowadays how cultural policy should and can support the diversity of artistic and cultural groups.

The panel aims to counter this impression of increasing political control and present different perspectives and experiences of artists and cultural policymakers working within the German and European contexts. In addition, the panel will discuss which cultural policy strategies are necessary to protect artistic freedom and promote artistic scenes that accept the diversity of approaches, but can be critical and, despite artistic freedom, are sensitive to tactics of exclusion and degradation.