

**European Alliance of Academies****The Power of Art: Defending a Transnational Understanding of European Culture****Welcome address by Akademie President Prof. Jeanine Meerapfel****2 December 2021 at 6 pm, live from the Círculo de Bellas Artes de Madrid**

Minister Miquel Iceta

Juan Miguel Hernández León

All those present and absent

What kind of Europe do we want to live in?

Do we want peace, the rule of law, rights of democratic co-determination, diversity of opinion and artistic freedom? Or do we want dictatorial conditions within the confines of nation states?

Do we want to engage with the complexity of our realities and exchange our differing points of view? Or do we want to isolate ourselves and be satisfied with simplistic populist explanations?

In Germany, history has shown the devastating effects of the National Socialists' narrowly aligned cultural policy – if one can even call it that.

We can learn lessons from this over and over again: the task of cultural policy – national or European – must not be to define art and culture. Its task must be limited to providing the necessary conditions so that artists can work freely.

We live in an age when fake news and negative emotions are rapidly disseminated by the so-called social media, when voters of certain right-wing populist parties react to howls of rage and malicious denunciations instead of engaging with theoretical arguments and scientifically grounded facts.

This is a dangerous trend against which we must stand together.

In September of this year, with a party of Berlin schoolgirls, we embarked on a long journey organised by the Cultural Education Programme of the Akademie der Künste and the Walter Benjamin Archive. By train, we retraced the route taken by the philosopher Walter Benjamin to France and on to Portbou in Spain, where Benjamin

took his own life in the night of 26-27 September 1940 while fleeing from Germany's National Socialists.

Walter Benjamin did not manage to leave Europe in time – its cultural riches, the treasures in the Paris National Library, research material for his work on his Arcades project, held him back – this is how the religious historian Gershom Scholem put it in his recollections of Walter Benjamin.

(In: *Begegnungen mit Walter Benjamin*, edited by Erdmut Wizisla):

“His preoccupation with these issues determined in one way or other the entire last period of his life from 1927 onwards. It also played an extraordinary part, for example, in his failure to ever realise the plan that he was very often very close to realising, i.e. that of coming to Palestine, where he might have stayed if this had happened in later years, and he might have survived as a result. At any rate, his desire to complete this project in the envisaged manner always prevented him from doing so. I sometimes received a telegram from him: ‘I’m coming to Palestine by ship on 1 December this year.’ He never did.”

In September of this year, we were able to cross the borders between Germany, France and Spain unhindered – this was not possible in Benjamin's time; these borders marked the end of many bids for exile during the period of National Socialist occupation. The Berlin schoolgirls were aware of the freedom they enjoyed; there were no borders stopping them. But they were also aware that this freedom can be lost again if we do not deliberately defend it for the whole of Europe. The young women also thought of the many who leave their countries in search of security and opportunities to start anew, of the many who are turned away on the shores of Europe.

I would like Europe to become an open continent whose cultural treasures can be shared by anyone who wishes to.

Let us not forget those who are desperately struggling for survival on Europe's borders. My thoughts turn to the drama that is unfolding on the border between Belarus and Poland – but also to the many local Afghan aid workers who were denied help when the Taliban came to power.

That's outside Europe, you will say.

But it concerns us, because it is the European governments – our governments – that are causing these injustices and inequalities. So it is our business.

So many more examples could be named, as you yourselves know.

Our primary and most important objectives are solidarity and the defence of the freedom of art. For this, we require mutual support from one another. This is the *raison d'être* of the European Alliance of Academies, that we have founded in Berlin in October 2020. I thought of it since I was elected president of the Berlin Academy of Arts in 2015. Today, the European Alliance of Academies brings together 65 academies. Thanks to the *Círculo de Bellas Artes*, this alliance is meeting today in Madrid and can be seen on digital screens. I'm very thankful.

We shall continue to pursue the principle of the European Alliance of Academies gathering locally in the various European countries. At the end of October, for example, we met in Budapest (our host there was the Society of Hungarian Authors), and in April next year we will be in Kraków (at Villa Decius) – while also cultivating our alliance in the digital space on a long-term basis.

An important part of our work is the promotion of transnational art projects. And that's precisely where we are now. Because with our work we can dream of Europe as it ought to be. We can develop a plurality of visions and spaces of possibility, which in a second step can be transformed into reality (or realities) with concrete actions.

To bring about this united and at the same time open Europe that we dream of, we need the arts, because the arts are the memory of humanity. They preserve the past ("sublate" the past, in the dialectical sense), shape the present and give us a vision of the future that we will make compatible.

Keeping Europe alive as a transnational peace project is a constant challenge. This Europe is an unfinished project, a dream of democracy and justice that we are already working towards.

Thank you for listening.