

Bucerius Lecture at the University of Haifa on October 27, 2025

Drawing the Line: Navigating between Academic Freedom and Responsibility, Based on the Example of a German Art University

Dear professors, dear students,

Esteemed audience,

I thank you sincerely for the invitation to the University of Haifa, which is an extraordinary honor for me.

I speak to you today from the perspective of the president of a German art university, the Hochschule für bildende Künste in Hamburg, which I have been leading since 2002. This art university has repeatedly, and increasingly since 2022, been confronted with the tension between artistic freedom, social responsibility, and political expectations. This is what I would like to talk about today, and for this reason, I have chosen the title “Drawing the Line: Navigating between Academic Freedom and Responsibility, Based on the Example of a German Art University” for my lecture.

Specifically, I will address a conflict between freedom and responsibility that presented itself at my university in a completely new and different way than ever before, starting in October 2022: It began with the invitation of two members of the artistic direction collective of the international art exhibition Documenta Fifteen to Hamburg as visiting professors. Documenta Fifteen took place over 100 days from June to September 2022 in Kassel. To finance the subsequent one-year visiting professorship, we had submitted an application to the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) in advance of Documenta Fifteen, which was approved in March 2022. Our motivation for submitting the application was to enable our art students and faculty to engage with the novel artistic concept of Documenta, whose ambition is to offer a comprehensive overview every five years of the most important trends in contemporary art around the world. With the start of the visiting professorship in October 2022, however, the university did not find itself, as hoped, in a productive academic debate about the curatorial concept of the Ruangrupa collective, which fundamentally challenged the Western understanding of art. Instead, the university found itself at the center of a fiercely debated controversy surrounding Documenta Fifteen: the controversy over exhibited artworks that contained antisemitic motifs. Consequently, the question of drawing a line and of taking a position presented itself in a completely new way for the university’s students and faculty, as well as for its leadership.

In your eyes and ears, esteemed audience, today and here in Haifa, this conflict over an art exhibition in Germany from three years ago may seem banal and insignificant. I am, of course, aware that following the despicable terrorist attack by Hamas on the Israeli population on October 7th, and the resulting escalation of violence of an unforeseen and

painful magnitude, we find ourselves in a radical crisis. Its presence and bloody reality fundamentally confront our coexistence, our sense of shared humanity in a globalized world, with the question of our own responsibility and stance—especially in Israel and in Germany. In comparison, our debates at the HFBK in Hamburg, which I wish to address in my lecture, were in a sense still “innocent”—to quote my friend Natan Sznajder—since a separation between the spheres of politics and art was still possible, and the different levels of perception and reality could be kept distinct and reflected upon at an academic level. If I now attempt to retrace this debate, and if you would follow me on this path, I do so with the hope that, in the end, we can together ask ourselves what standards we want to set for teaching and learning at a university—be it in Haifa or in Hamburg.

Before I come to the main part, let me say first that my lecture is accompanied by a fundamental sense of unease. For one thing, I have never taught or given lectures in English before. I am therefore not practiced in the academic use of the language, especially when it comes to complex, sensitive topics. For this, I ask for your forbearance in advance.

For another, my unease concerns the topic itself: the connection between artistic freedom and social responsibility—especially when it involves antisemitism in the field of art. The memory of the crimes of National Socialism, and above all the Holocaust, is—as you know—an essential component of historical education in Germany. It is linked to the pedagogical ambition to learn from the past and to be sufficiently schooled for a “Never Again.” Since the 1990s at the latest, the reunified country has fully integrated this memory into its historical consciousness and is even considered an international model for coming to terms with its Nazi past—and now this culture of remembrance¹ is also coming under increasing scrutiny. But what does that mean? Yet the question remains how, alongside all the state-sponsored symbolic politics and rhetoric, resistance to fascism and antisemitism can actually be lived out in daily life, and what mission this implies for every single descendant of the perpetrators.

Against this backdrop, I find it difficult to be speaking here today in Israel, as a German, in what might seem like an explanatory role—especially about freedom and responsibility in art and academia when it comes to topics like antisemitism and the culture of remembrance. I take on this lecturing role with humility and in critical reflection of my historically determined standpoint, well aware that individual aspects of my talk may be understood and experienced very differently here in Haifa. All the more, then, I hope for a personal dialogue with you afterward.

¹ For example, the American philosopher Susan Neiman titled a work on the approach to the culture of remembrance in the United States “Learning from the Germans.” See Susan Neiman, *Learning from the Germans: Confronting Race and the Memory of Evil*, 2019.

Esteemed audience, it is with this unease that I begin my lecture. It is important to me to disclose this background, as it shapes my perspective and my tone.

I. Freedom in the Arts and Sciences as a Fundamental Prerequisite for Excellence

During my tenure as president of the HFBK in Hamburg, which began in 2002, the concept of freedom has always been a central one for me. I have often given speeches in which I tied the conditions for excellent teaching to artistic freedom as a guiding principle. My efforts to uphold artistic freedom over the past twenty years were primarily aimed at curbing bureaucratic measures and fending off political intentions that would require universities to demonstrate their artistic and scientific success with quantifiable metrics: for instance, through evaluations of how many graduates complete their degrees within the standard period of study, how much third-party funding is acquired per professorship, how many exhibitions or publications the university can show per faculty member, et cetera. My aim was to use the appeal to artistic and scientific freedom to prevent an ideological orientation of the universities in which success is defined according to the criteria of economic efficiency. I wanted to counter such a definition of "success" for university institutions with a different notion of quality, one that instead connects to Humboldt's concept of *Bildung*, or education. According to this concept, education is an end in itself and should be oriented toward the individual developmental process of the whole person. This can be described qualitatively, but can only be quantified to a limited extent. This could be the subject of a longer discussion.

Today, in 2025, in view of the current political developments in education and culture—not only in the United States, China, Russia, and in European countries like Hungary and Italy, but also in some German federal states where the far-right party Alternative for Germany is attempting to raise its profile through a veritable culture war—the demand for the freedom and independence of universities must not only be emphasized, but defended on a daily basis. It is necessary to keep entirely new political forces at bay that want to influence teaching and research. I am sure that such developments are not unfamiliar to you.

It goes without saying that we are all horrified by the massive, politically motivated interventions in academic and cultural institutions in the United States, which are seen not as places of independent thought, but as bastions of the one-sided, intolerant thinking of a leftist, liberal elite. The goal of this influence is to redefine academic and cultural spaces, transforming them from sites of pluralistic discourse into places of one-dimensional national or nationalistic identity formation.

In Germany, too, artistic freedom is coming under increasing political pressure. The term *Leitkultur* (leading culture) for Germany in the election platform of the conservative governing party, the Christian Democratic Union, sounds deceptively harmless. Ultimately, however, it means a prefabricated understanding of culture that is clearly politically defined and prescribed as a guiding principle, instead of being allowed to

develop continuously in an open society. But culture cannot be a static element in a society; otherwise, it would be dead. Rather, culture emerges from a living process that should be neither politically defined nor directed.

To give a second example from Germany: In 2024, the aforementioned Alternative for Germany, or AfD for short, being the second-strongest party in the state parliament of Saxony-Anhalt, attempted to politically defame the cultural heritage of the Bauhaus in Weimar, Dessau, and Berlin—even though the main center of the Bauhaus movement, Dessau—the creative home of Walter Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, Lyonel Feininger, Oskar Schlemmer, Wassily Kandinsky, Anni Albers, and Paul Klee—is located in that very state of Saxony-Anhalt. In a motion, the AfD described the Bauhaus as a “wrong turn of modernism” and accused it of being cold, unattractive, and inhuman. The AfD representative Hans-Thomas Tillschneider went so far as to claim that the Bauhaus had “masterfully raped the human need for comfort”.² The AfD’s goal was to critically reinterpret the cosmopolitan, innovative Bauhaus movement as a symbol of a supposedly de-individualizing modernism.

The attempts at censorship and the political instrumentalization of the arts and sciences, even in a democratic country like Germany, are obvious. This perhaps explains why art schools and universities in general react with an almost allergic sensitivity to attempts at external influence, vehemently invoking the freedom of the arts and sciences enshrined in the German Basic Law.

Article 5, Paragraph 3 of the Basic Law explicitly and unconditionally guarantees the freedom of the arts and sciences, research and teaching. This wording sets it apart from other fundamental rights, which are usually subject to general statutory provisos. Historically, this protection derives from the experience with censorship and political *Gleichschaltung*, or enforced conformity, during the Nazi era: After 1945, the framers of the constitution wanted to ensure that the arts and sciences could never again be directed or suppressed by state ideology.

In an international comparison, this provision stands out because few constitutions codify the freedom of the arts and sciences so clearly and unconditionally. While other democracies, such as the United States, tend to argue on the basis of general freedom of opinion and speech, the Basic Law’s Article 5, Paragraph 3 creates a specific and particularly strong guarantee, one that the Federal Constitutional Court has repeatedly emphasized as a cornerstone of the free and democratic basic order.

Nevertheless, it must be stated that the freedom of the arts and sciences has been and continues to be overused as a shield against any form of quality assurance, accountability, or even ethical standards—for instance, when researchers insist that their work is covered by Article 5, Paragraph 3 of the Basic Law (GG), even when it is

² *Deutschlandfunk Kultur*, 25 October 2024, report on the controversial AfD debate in the state parliament of Saxony-Anhalt.

methodologically questionable, affects the fundamental rights of third parties, or when freedom of research is confused with scholarly integrity. A classic tension can be seen, for example, in third-party funded research of dubious provenance, animal testing, or research with security-relevant (dual-use) aspects. Here, the concept of academic freedom is sometimes stretched very far to fend off external regulation or critical oversight.

Artists, too, occasionally invoke Article 5, Paragraph 3 of the Basic Law to deflect criticism of their artistic works, even when it concerns issues of funding, criminal law boundaries, or the violation of other fundamental rights. A well-known example is the case of the artist and HFBK alumnus Jonathan Meese, who a few years ago stood trial for repeatedly performing the Nazi salute in the context of his performance entitled *Dictatorship of Art*. Here, the court deliberated on the tension between whether a provocative symbol like the Nazi salute is covered by artistic freedom or whether it should be subject to criminal penalties. The Kassel District Court reached a comprehensible decision: Because the gesture was used in the context of an artistic performance, it is covered by artistic freedom.

Whether in science or in art, it is not uncommon, however, for Article 5, Paragraph 3 of the Basic Law to be misused as a kind of “super-fundamental right” to ward off legitimate criticism of academic or artistic projects, in order to avoid having to submit to mundane funding decisions or house rules, or to simply fulfill one’s own social responsibility.

Nonetheless, it remains important—as I firmly believe—to defend the unconditional freedom of the arts and sciences. A central point of reference for this is the remarkable lecture by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida titled “The Unconditional University,”³ which he delivered in 1998 at the University of Frankfurt at the invitation of Jürgen Habermas.

According to the lecture, Derrida understands the “unconditional freedom” of the university as a principle that lies beyond all external interests and constraints. Research and teaching must not be bound by political, economic, or religious dictates, but must have the right to ask any question and to publicly discuss any topic, even if it is considered useless, dangerous, or offensive. For Derrida, this radical openness of questioning, as well as of the horizon of inquiry, is the true foundation of the university, because it enables thought in its full scope. However, “unconditional” does not mean “without responsibility”: Derrida is nevertheless aware that universities are always embedded in concrete dependencies—for instance, through state funding or societal expectations.

The idea of unconditional freedom is therefore a normative ideal. It is clear that in reality it can never be fully realized. It is precisely in this tension that the ideal of unconditional

³ *L’Université sans condition*, 1998.

freedom remains indispensable for keeping the university's critical mission alive. I am, of course, aware that this concept of unconditional freedom is not only a normative ideal but also an ideal for societies that are at peace and have neither internal nor external mortal enemies. In a society surrounded by such enemies, it is difficult to uphold these radical democratic fundamental values. Here, too, my lecture is an example of the simultaneity of the non-simultaneous.

And with that, I now come to the specific case of Documenta Fifteen in Germany, which I would like to discuss in more detail.

II. Freedom and Responsibility amid the Tensions of Contemporary Visual Art

The Indonesian collective Ruangrupa based its artistic direction of Documenta Fifteen on the leitmotif of *lumbung*, which refers to a collective practice that envisions the sharing of resources and common goods. This consciously non-hierarchical approach, which shared interpretive authority as well as financial resources in an egalitarian manner and was also sensitive to postcolonial issues, fundamentally challenged a Western-influenced understanding of art as well as the structure and self-conception of Documenta, which is regarded as a national institution.

Furthermore, objections had been raised even before Documenta Fifteen opened: some of the groups and artists who were subsequently invited were said to have ties to the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) campaign, and there were even fears of anti-Israel positions and Israel-related antisemitism. These fears became manifest not least on the opening weekend with the speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier: On June 18, 2022, in Kassel, he spoke with unusual clarity about the limits of what can be said and the responsibility toward Jewish life—a tone that stripped the ceremony of its innocence and marked the political temperature in the room. I quote:

“I want to say quite openly: I would have wished that the discussion about antisemitic tendencies, where it seemed necessary, had been conducted earlier. I would have wished that those in charge had been more attentive. . . . There are limits—and for all the freedom of art, the conscious transgression of these limits remains problematic.”⁴ [End quote.]

This quote is so significant because it marks the moment when the debate about artistic freedom and legitimate criticism of antisemitism in art moved out of the curatorial space and into the realm of public discourse for which the state is responsible. By speaking of “limits”—with unusual directness—at the opening of the most important art exhibition in Germany, the German head of state sent a normative signal that resonated through subsequent committee meetings, parliamentary debates, Bundestag resolutions, and university and museum regulations.

⁴ From Frank-Walter Steinmeier's speech on Documenta Fifteen, 18 June 2022.

In retrospect, it becomes clear: Frank-Walter Steinmeier's speech shifted the framework of the discourse. The question was no longer just what art is allowed to do, but also what the democratic state can and should tolerate when it funds art. This normative shift reverberated far beyond Documenta Fifteen—it marked the beginning of what would unfold in the coming years at universities and exhibition halls across the country as a highly conflict-ridden and polarizing issue: the challenge of balancing freedom and responsibility in such a way that neither antisemitism and racism nor authoritarian censorship of art gain ground, and that the free spaces for conducting social discourse are preserved.

The trigger for the escalating spiral was the large banner titled *People's Justice* (from the year 2000) by the Indonesian collective Taring Padi, displayed in the center of Kassel on Friedrichsplatz. On it were two clearly antisemitic caricatures: one figure marked as a member of the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad with a pig's nose and a Star of David, and another figure with a bowler hat and sidelocks, as well as sharp, fang-like teeth, a prominent nose, and SS runes. The banner used the simplest means of street art to address the fight against the Suharto regime in Indonesia and its associated mass murder. It was intended to depict this struggle as a Manichaeian confrontation between good and evil: the exploited people of the Global South versus the imperial great powers that supported the Indonesian dictatorship. However, due to repairs, the banner was only hung up the day after the Documenta opening, so its public visibility was delayed. On that same day, Documenta's artistic direction team, Ruangrupa, advocated for the immediate removal of the banner. However, Ruangrupa was denied this requested removal by Documenta's German management. Only after external pressure was the banner first provisionally covered with black fabric the next day, and then finally completely removed two days later. Ruangrupa publicly apologized for the "pain and fear" that the banner's depictions had caused, but subsequently found itself in the crossfire of criticism.

Federal politics intervened visibly and audibly: Chancellor Olaf Scholz demonstratively canceled his visit to Documenta Fifteen; the Minister of State for Culture, Claudia Roth, and the Federal Government Commissioner for Antisemitism, Felix Klein, became entangled in a public debate about consequences and responsibilities; the supervisory board and shareholders of Documenta—the state of Hesse and the city of Kassel—urgently demanded action. In the media coverage, populist headlines set the tone, speaking of the "Art Show of Shame" (*Jüdische Allgemeine*), "Welcome to Antisemitia 15" (*Spiegel*), and "an antisemitic fireworks display" (*Welt*)⁵—and generated enormous pressure for swift interventions, hasty position statements, and attributions of responsibility.

The institutional consequence was a rare intervention in curatorial autonomy: Sabine Schormann, the Director General of Documenta Fifteen, was visibly overwhelmed. She

⁵ Volker Beck, President of the Deutsch-Israelische Gesellschaft, in: *Die Welt*, 16 July 2022.

hastily requested Meron Mendel, the director of the Anne Frank Educational Center in Frankfurt and a graduate of the University of Haifa, as an external consultant, only to then give him the cold shoulder, effectively ghosting him, so that he withdrew after a short time (rightly so, I might add), citing a lack of willingness to address the issues. Soon after, the Director General disappeared completely and was unreachable for both the public and the curators until she resigned on July 16, 2022. Meanwhile, evidence mounted of three other artworks at Documenta Fifteen containing antisemitic codes. The supervisory board subsequently appointed a nine-member external committee for scholarly review, in which, however, only one art historian was represented and from which the two postcolonial representatives resigned. This committee was tasked with examining the controversial works and formulating governance rules.

The committee's final report of February 2, 2023,⁶ identified four works from among the contributions of 1,500 artists at Documenta Fifteen which "reference antisemitic visual codes or convey statements that can be interpreted as antisemitic"—with *People's Justice* being the only unambiguous case. Furthermore, the external committee noted a total systemic failure: a diffusion of responsibility between the artistic direction and the management, a lack of procedures for handling conflicts and complaints, and belated and insufficient contextualizations. It recommended, among other things, formalized standards for dealing with antisemitism and discrimination, without reducing artistic freedom to the scope of criminal law. Thus, Documenta Fifteen had become not just a cultural event, but one at the intersection of law and culture, which raised the question: How much state and public responsibility must a major exhibition, supported by the principle of artistic freedom, assume? And in what form?

This mix of circumstances—media (pre)judgment, public outrage, political pressure, and organizational uncertainty—shaped the climate from October 2022 onward, with the appointment of the two Documenta curators Reza Afisina and Iswanto Hartono as visiting professors at the HFBK in Hamburg.

III. Taking a Stance amid the Conflict

As mentioned, the decision to apply for funding for two members of Ruangrupa to become DAAD visiting professors at the HFBK was made well in advance of Documenta Fifteen and had been approved by a DAAD expert jury. When the two curators took up their professorship in Hamburg in October 2022, the outrage in the heated public and media atmosphere was immense. The accusation was that the university was not respecting the sensitivities of Jewish people, as it was "rewarding" the controversial curators with a professorship. And this was despite their responsibility for inviting artists who had displayed an artwork with antisemitic codes at Documenta Fifteen. As a result, representatives of Hamburg's Jewish community demonstrated in front of the

⁶ Cf. https://documenta.de/media/pages/files/e59a0a888a-1675696303/230202_Abschlussbericht.pdf.

university's main entrance, newspapers and television stations reported on the events, the Central Council of Jews in Germany protested, and the Israeli ambassador in Berlin intervened. Heated political debates followed, in which both the Hamburg Minister for Science and Research and I, in my role as President of the HFBK, came under immense pressure. For instance, I was accused of helping to "legitimize antisemitism" by upholding the visiting professorship.⁷

The university responded with a dialogue offensive by the Executive Board, together with the two curators, directed both internally and externally, as well as with further training opportunities on the topic of antisemitism for university members. Numerous conversations with journalists and politicians followed. The board members and the rabbi of Hamburg's Jewish community, however, could not envision such a conversation. In the end, only Dr. Sonja Lahnstein-Kandel was prepared to speak with me, something for which I am still deeply grateful to her today—fully aware of her very understandable inner resistance. This was followed by months of difficult, extremely emotional, and indeed, emotionally draining conversations. Today we are friends, if I may say so, my dear Sonja.

At the same time, Meron Mendel became an important political advisor and an expert point of contact for me in the tense political situation facing the university, a situation that was unfolding not just at the local level, but at the federal level as well. In early 2023, Natan Sznajder joined as an important third corrective, assuming the role of a defining intellectual voice for constructive academic discourse at the HFBK.

However, I will not hide the fact that, in the face of enormous political and media pressure, we on the Executive Board initially wavered when faced with the question of what to do: Dismiss the two curators as quickly as possible, as many were demanding, just to restore calm and be able to sit back and relax? From a purely formal standpoint, however, the DAAD saw no reason—despite the controversy surrounding Documenta Fifteen—to rescind its decision to fund the visiting professorship. Consequently, we as a university had no legal grounds for a potential termination of the contract. The remaining option would have been to release the visiting professors from their teaching duties while continuing to pay their salaries—but what would that have been other than mere window dressing for the public and a hollow evasive maneuver?

It seemed far more appropriate to us, though infinitely more arduous, to seek a path for constructive academic discourse that would allow for a reflection on both the general artistic aims of Documenta Fifteen and the art featuring antisemitic codes. It goes without saying that we saw the situation as a question of our fundamental stance. The

⁷ Statement by the Hamburg Antisemitism Commissioner in an interview with *ZEIT online*, from 16 January 2023; available at <https://www.zeit.de/hamburg/2023-01/stefan-hensel-antisemitismus-ruangrupa-kunst>.

political and academic stance of the HFBK Executive Board, as it sought the right approach around the turn of the year 2022 to 2023, can be described as follows:

In the summer of 2022, Documenta Fifteen shook up not only the art world but all of German society, because individual artworks with antisemitic content and content critical of Israel were shown. The resulting debate, however, still surprised us with its vehemence and extremely polarizing tendency. Talking to one another about what had happened at this major international art exhibition soon seemed to be an impossibility. What was and is clear, however, is this: extremely contentious issues in the field of art became virulent here, issues that concern us all but have remained largely unresolved.

We therefore planned a two-day symposium for early February 2023 that would address this void, because we see the university as a natural venue for artistically and socially relevant debates. This is especially true since we at my university adhere to an educational philosophy whereby all personal, and therefore artistic, development is based on mutual learning from one another, which explicitly includes learning from mistakes and from failure. Against this backdrop, addressing the controversy surrounding Documenta Fifteen within the framework of a symposium seemed to us to be nothing less than imperative.

At its core, the symposium was intended to address the antisemitism that is virulent not only at the last Documenta but in the art world in general, and to analyze and uncover its possible causes. This also included a discourse analysis: which debates play into this, what historical continuities are discernible, which political and cultural contexts must be considered, and what interferences has the public media discourse caused?

The premise for this symposium was: It is not acceptable to grant a place to artworks with antisemitic codes in an art exhibition. And yet, this is precisely what happened at the most important platform for contemporary art in Germany. Some of the four artworks in question can be understood through their historical context, others only to a limited extent. The fact that they were criticized by the public, Jewish communities, the art world, politicians, and the press was absolutely necessary.

The HFBK Executive Board was clear that over these two days, we would be undertaking a precarious tightrope walk, since any attempt to describe the circumstances of the presentation and creation of the artworks in question with elucidations, contextualizations, and explanations could be interpreted as relativizing and downplaying antisemitic iconography.

At the same time, as an academic institution, we faced conflicting questions: On the one hand, how can we begin to analyze, differentiate, and gain insights into what we have seen? And how can we begin to generate insights, to understand developments and events that have shocked us? Is there a "red line" in this process, a boundary that blurs because the desire to understand might lead to actual sympathy? Are we giving sufficient consideration to the personal hurt experienced by Jewish people? Are we in

fact rewarding those responsible by including them in these critical, analytical processes of reflection at the university?

These questions were not easy to answer. Yet from the HFBK's perspective, there was no way around having this debate. We needed a dialogue between different perspectives, one that would also allow room for nuance and differentiation, in order to move from what might otherwise be a simplistic judgment to a well-informed analysis. We wanted to allow for and endure attempts at contextualization, because doing so is an essential feature of a liberal democratic society that builds and preserves social cohesion.

"Where, if not here?" was the question raised in the discussions of the Academic Senate and the Executive Board. Where, if not here, in an artistic and academic institution whose legal mandate is the further development of the fine arts, should we confront the controversy surrounding Documenta Fifteen?

In the end, the Executive Board's position was unequivocal: We must not shy away from the controversy. Rather, given the visiting professorship for two of the curators, we must address and analyze the themes explored in the context of Documenta Fifteen—and do so in an appropriate academic format.

IV. Debate on Documenta Fifteen at the HFBK Hamburg

However, the symposium "Controversy over Documenta Fifteen," conceived with the support of Meron Mendel and our HFBK professor Nora Sternfeld, already provoked massive rejection and hostility in advance, during which we as a university were denied the legitimacy to conduct such an academic format. The accusations were in part groundless, as the participating academics—and especially the Jewish ones among them—were sometimes discredited, for instance with the comment from Hamburg's Commissioner for Antisemitism that they were acting [quote] "far removed from our Jewish reality and Jewish institutions."⁸ [End quote.]

We were able to secure Professor Natan Sznajder for the symposium's keynote. In retrospect, I must say that in this heated atmosphere, his keynote was the very thing that opened up the hoped-for academic space to publicly discuss the backgrounds, contextualizations, and analyses of Documenta Fifteen. In an absolutely polarizing debate, his plea for tolerance of ambiguity felt like an intellectual liberation. Natan Sznajder described tolerance of ambiguity, drawing on the concept of the Jewish psychologist Else Frenkel-Brunswick, who emigrated to the United States in 1938, as the ability to endure contradictions instead of resolving them prematurely, and as a prerequisite for open, non-authoritarian thinking—especially in conflict-ridden interpretive spaces like the Documenta debate.

⁸ Stefan Hensel, "Dialog? Nur ohne Juden, bitte," in: *Jüdische Allgemeine*, 19 January 2023.

In the subsequent panel discussions, the first task was to explicitly name antisemitism in the art world, to examine the history of Documenta in this regard, and to address the blind spots in the art establishment, for instance regarding a particularly pronounced critical stance toward Israel. Furthermore, a key focal point of the controversy was the debate surrounding German culture of remembrance, which spans the experience of the Holocaust and Germany's colonial atrocities. These issues were also addressed during the symposium.

Last but not least, however, we also aimed to recognize what went beyond this at Documenta Fifteen: namely, the new artistic themes that were almost completely overshadowed by the discussions about antisemitic codes. In a final panel, an attempt was made to examine the most recent Documenta exhibition for its artistic potential and to describe a paradigm shift—one that calls into question the concept of art common in the Western world, a concept of art that was previously closely tied to autonomy.

Documenta Fifteen revealed an artistic practice that engages much more strongly with processes of societal self-assurance and self-assertion than we have previously known from artistic productions, particularly in the Western world. It is based on the idea of collaborative network structures that link knowledge and resources, rely on "commons," focus on building social relationships, and question power structures.

At the same time, however, the question of curatorial responsibility—closely linked to the implementation of a non-hierarchical collectivity in the conception of Documenta Fifteen—was also addressed. In other words, questions were asked about the risks that Ruangrupa took with its concept of renouncing curatorial power and the associated delegation of responsibility.

Undoubtedly, Documenta Fifteen offered a forum for 1,500 artists—five to seven times as many as in any previous Documenta and often linked in collectives—who, in numerous artistic works, formulated relevant questions for our crisis-ridden times and, in doing so, sketched out surprisingly optimistic possibilities for a global future for all people: a future built on community and sustainability. Like almost no Documenta before it, Documenta Fifteen critically examined the present by artistically pointing toward such a future of greater solidarity.

In summary, the symposium enjoyed great public support, and there were passionate discussions—both among the experts and with the audience—without arriving at any unifying statements or syntheses in the end. All participants expressed a great sense of relief at having spoken with one another for the very first time about this difficult complex of issues associated with Documenta Fifteen in Germany, and at having heard so many perspectives and so much factual expertise on the subject. (We have compiled the discussions from the symposium in a volume of proceedings, the English edition of which I have brought with me for those who would like to read in detail what was said.)

However, the takeaway for the university and its students was also this: The symposium was just *one* important building block in the HFBK's effort to foster a culture of critical

engagement that does not aim for polarization and simplification. It was clear to everyone: The conflicts have not been resolved, the world would not be turning into a paradise, and art schools are simply not places of artistic production detached from the world.

Rather, the studios address societal fault lines. Artworks and the discussions about them reflect current discussions in the outside world—often more radically and in a less standardized way. I do not need to emphasize again that under Article 5, Paragraph 3 of the German Basic Law, it is not only the work that is protected, but also the process, the provocation, or the irritation. But I do want to emphasize this: This freedom is not arbitrary. In pluralistic societies, responsibility begins where artistic expression systematically excludes, injures, or dehumanizes others. In this context, responsibility does not mean obedience to political or moral principles, but rather the conscious reflection on impact.

Artistic thinking at a university must therefore not end where it becomes uncomfortable—that is precisely where it begins. It must be guided by neither ideological imperatives nor institutional opportunism. But this freedom is never an end in itself. It demands a willingness to put one's own positions up for discussion, to question one's own assumptions—even where it hurts.

In this respect, art schools are not neutral places either. They are not repositories of standardized knowledge; they do not offer an architecture of objectivity. Instead, they are spaces where questions are asked, images are produced, bodies are exhibited, and interpretations are exchanged. And this takes place under conditions that are unique in the German educational landscape in their social, political, and aesthetic density.

V. The HFBK's Self-Conception as Reflected by Its Students

Half of the nearly 1,000 students at the HFBK Hamburg do not hold German citizenship. Young artists from Israel and Iran, Ukraine and Russia, China and the United States—in short, from every continent—encounter one another here. They bring with them not only different languages and life stories, but also different cultures of remembrance, traumas, forms of protest, political attitudes, and, of course, distinct art-historical backgrounds.

What is a symbol of terror for an Israeli student may be an image of anti-imperial resistance for a South African. What is celebrated in Hamburg as postcolonial deconstruction may be perceived in Haifa as a relativization of Germany's historical responsibility. These tensions are not disruptions, but rather consequences of a pluralized, globalized art world—and simultaneously the price and the promise of artistic education today.

Unlike in many academic disciplines, artistic teaching at the HFBK Hamburg takes place in spatial and social proximity: the studio, the workshop, individual and group critiques in the colloquium—everything is direct, visible, and often emotional. Faculty and students

work closely together over extended periods. Feedback is immediate and frequently public. Examination works are hung in exhibitions, performances are shown live, and drafts are shared on social media. This also means that art schools generate public visibility not just after graduation, but as part of the education itself.

This proximity and visibility also means vulnerability. Misunderstandings, attributions, and cultural frictions arise quickly—especially when symbols, languages, or narratives are transferred from one cultural context to another. Where studio practice intertwines with engaged contemporary citizenship, activism related to the politics of memory, and a formal language of agitprop, there is a need for explanation, contextualization, and critical reflection—not just on a meta level, but in the day-to-day reality of teaching.

Art schools exist in a dual tension: They defend—with good reason—the unconditional freedom of art. And, with equally good reason, they bear responsibility for the well-being and dignity of all who teach and learn within them. This means that art schools must take seriously the protection of their members and guests from antisemitism, racism, queerphobia, sexism, ableism, and classism, as well as all other forms of discrimination, without resorting to a premature or politically instrumentalized logic of prohibition. The question is not whether everything may be said, shown, criticized, or exhibited, but rather the conditions under which this occurs in a responsible and professionally facilitated manner: Who is speaking? Who is affected? What contexts are missing? Where might blind spots exist?

In recent years, experience has shown that the greatest tensions arise not at the margins, but in the spaces in between: between the desire for open debate and the fear of causing hurt; between the longing for transcultural dialogue and the fear of cultural appropriation or devaluation; between the obligation to take a political stance and the right to ambiguity, to not knowing, to not understanding, to speaking tentatively.

These tensions cannot be fully resolved by rules, as necessary as they are. Yes, there is a need for procedures, grievance channels, safeguarding policies, and—possibly—clear “red lines.” But the ultimately decisive factor is trust: The trust that conflicts do not automatically lead to exclusion. The trust that criticism is possible without being stigmatized. The trust that one’s own story will be heard, even if it contradicts that of the other person. Such trust, however, is not based on naive good faith. It emerges as a result of clear procedures, transparent communication, and practiced responsibility. And it arises only where contradiction is possible—not only toward others, but also toward oneself.

If one takes this seriously, then the art school is neither a refuge from the political events of the world, nor is it an agent for applying political moral codes, such as those manifested in parliamentary resolutions. Art schools are spaces where plurality is real—not as a buzzword, but as a lived social reality in daily interaction. Spaces where conflicts are managed not through power, but through dialogue and procedure. Spaces where freedom is not an empty promise and responsibility is not a tool of censorship.

In this very sense, the HFBK sees itself as a place of “unconditional freedom,” as a place of responsible unconditionality. It aims to permit what other institutions cannot withstand. And it must withstand what it itself makes possible. Students and faculty of the HFBK show me that an art school can offer this space, but only because it succeeds in combining clear positions with openness and trust.

In this, the HFBK follows an ethic of ambiguity: a stance that understands contradiction not as a disruption, but as a form of insight. A stance that does not retreat when criticism is painful, but also does not remain silent when boundaries are crossed. After all, freedom without responsibility degenerates into arbitrariness—just as the reverse is also true: responsibility without freedom degenerates into mere disciplining.

As an art school, we want to withstand conflict, acknowledge vulnerability, and not turn difference into a reproach—but rather into a precondition for learning together. The future lies in the ability to shape this openness: with courage, with criticism—and, of course, with respect.

In Germany, this happens not least against the backdrop of the Shoah. In Israel, it happens in the face of the consequences of the Shoah. Day after day.

VI. Conclusion and Outlook

I will now come to the final part of my lecture:

The unimaginable terrorist attack by Hamas on the Israeli population on October 7, 2023, also represented a profound turning point for Germany and was perceived as a shocking event by many people around me. At this point, I can and wish to speak only about the effects on my immediate professional environment. I witnessed many colleagues and students in a state of paralysis. A way to express empathy was seldom found. Words, it seemed, were lacking. Others said it was the will that was lacking. At the same time, there were numerous clumsy attempts to explain how things could have come to this. And every utterance, as well as every failure to speak out, about the terrorist attack and the resulting escalation of violence—which we must endure to this day—risked being interpreted as a political declaration.

The HFBK’s efforts to foster a fact-based debate on antisemitism in art in the wake of Documenta Fifteen underwent a radical shift after October 7, 2023: Suddenly, the entire German art and university landscape found itself under scrutiny regarding its stance on the Israel-Palestine conflict. Artists and academics, students and teachers, presidents and directors of museums and universities suddenly became both the initiators and the recipients of petitions, demonstrations, and calls for boycotts. What had previously been trialed at Documenta Fifteen—taking down artworks, cancellations, resignations, the appointment of inquiry committees and panels—now returned as a repertoire of reactions at universities and museums: from disinvitations and the clearing of occupied

spaces to interventions in hiring decisions and programming choices, citing security, the institution's right to control its premises, and its institutional reputation.

Legally speaking, a dual track emerged: On the one hand, courts had already reiterated the scope of Article 5 of the Basic Law even before the Documenta controversy—for instance, the Federal Administrative Court ruled against the imposition of blanket bans on providing spaces for groups affiliated with BDS.⁹ On the other hand, practice showed that parliamentary expressions of opinion, despite having no legally binding character, could de facto serve as a basis for decisions by public authorities—with chilling effects on the freedom of the arts and sciences.

This tension escalated again when the Bundestag passed the resolution “Never Again Is Now: Protecting, Preserving, and Strengthening Jewish Life in Germany” in November 2023 and also debated another university resolution against antisemitism: The German Rectors' Conference urgently warned against state control of academic discourse, while legal scholars criticized the tendency to translate political resolutions into legal prohibitions.

For many teachers and students, especially at the HFBK with the experience of the Documenta debate in mind, this intensified the feeling that the constitutionally protected freedom of the arts and sciences was coming under general suspicion and was now only valid to a limited extent. Torn between the political demand for an unconditional commitment to Germany's *Staatsräson* (its core “reason of state,” particularly regarding Israel's security) and the “correct” definition of antisemitism on one hand, and the demand for *unconditional* solidarity with the correct side in light of the daily news of unimaginable suffering in Palestine and Israel on the other, neither direct discourse nor artistic engagement seemed possible. Polarization and the pressure for unambiguous positions threatened to take the place of dialogue and nuance.

At the same time, as president—like so many heads of art and academic institutions along with me—I was once again confronted with outside politicians and administrators suddenly wanting to define who could be invited to my university as a guest, which artistic actions could take place and which had to be sanctioned, and precisely where the “red lines” are drawn between harsh criticism, threats, and incitement to hatred in art.

Allow me to bring this lecture full circle: At its core was the insight that “unconditional freedom” in the arts and sciences is not a mere slogan, but must be lived in practice—in the spirit of a holistic education. I am speaking of a freedom that does not need to be demarcated by “red lines,” but one that has procedures and methods for openly identifying transgressions and justifying them with reasoned arguments. A university freedom that accepts responsibility and proves its maturity precisely when faced with contradiction. For where ambiguities are tolerated, what arises is not arbitrariness, but

⁹ Federal Administrative Court, Munich case, 20 January 2022.

insight; where criticism is possible without stigmatization, trust grows; where rules are transparent, freedom becomes resilient.

In this, I am thinking not least of my visit to the University of Haifa in March 2023. There, I experienced what a pluralistic university is capable of achieving: In the studios and in conversations with master's students, I saw how questions of identity are negotiated artistically and how bridges are built—between biographies, languages, memories, and cultural role models. That is why the cooperation with the School of Arts, Culture and Hermeneutics at the University of Haifa, which began in April 2024, is a great asset for the HFBK Hamburg.

When universities take “unconditional freedom” seriously without shying away from responsibility; when they do not smooth over differences but make them heard; when they do not moralize conflicts but work through them, then the “drawing of lines” takes place in a collective process of negotiation, and these lines become a shared contour. Along this contour, learning, criticism, and empathy can all take place at the same time.

Understood in this way, the demanding task for me as president of the HFBK consists of a triad: securing freedom, acknowledging vulnerability, and strengthening procedures—while maintaining the courage that is visible every day in Haifa, where difference is not turned into a reproach, but is made a precondition for learning together. It is in this spirit that I wish to conclude: with confidence that we will carry this attitude forward—in our institutions, in our debates, and above all, with our students.

Thank you for your attention.