Opening Address by Jeanine Meerapfel
Founding Conference of the European Alliance of Academies
08 October 2020

Dear Mr. Ambassador Pedro Villagra Delgado,
Dear Robert Menasse, dear A.L. Kennedy (*digital*), dear Basil Kerski,
Dear Alliance participants,
Dear Academy members,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Thanks to the AoA Impro group: Almut Kühne (voice) from Germany, Helena Kakagliagou (french horn) from Austria and Greece, Antonio Borghini (acoustic Bass) from Italy, Dag Magnus Narvesen (drums) from Norway, Floros Floridis (soprano saxofon, bass clarinet) from Greece. The members know each other musically for years in different musical formats. This ensemble with the name of AoA Impro was created especially for this occasion.
The abstract music language has the advantage that people from different countries, and different ages, can communicate and understand each other. Let's hope that the nations in Europe with all their differences can find a common language.

Thanks also to the whole team of the Academy of Arts, which I cannot name in detail, that has designed and organized this meeting over months. It was not an easy task. Thanks to Sigi Paul and his people for the technical support.

"Can Europe still be saved?" is a handwritten note by Heiner Müller for his text "Bautzen or Babylon", the call for the foundation of a European Society, which the writer and theater director, president of the Academy of Arts, Berlin (East) from 1990 to 1993, wrote in 1991. I quote from it:

> "After the end of ideologies, the necessary dialogue must be conducted on the ground of facts. Works of art are the memory of humanity, memory presupposes the survival of the genre. The species is up for disposal, the liquidation of the planet is in progress. As a crossroads between East and West, Berlin is a place where decisions are made that are not only relevant for Europe. Therefore the idea of a European Society in Berlin, which is not Eurocentric in its thinking – Europe, which cannot exclude the USA and the Soviet Union, has a debt to pay off, historically and in the present – , a workshop for the arts, which must abandon the dialogue of the academies' with the dead, in order to move towards the winds of the present, a workshop for public thinking, against disaster scenarios designed by fashion or economy, for a possible future without selection. We need your help."

My personal view of Europe was initially one of an outside perspective. When I was a child, in Argentina, Europe was a smell: the smell of my mother's clothes, the things she carefully stored in boxes over the winter (perhaps it was the smell of mothballs). In a suburb of Buenos Aires, where I grew up, I heard mysterious German words like "Spätzle" (from my father) or soft sung French sounds like "Au clair de la lune, mon ami Pierrot — Prête-moi ta plume, pour écrire un mot …". (my mother). Without knowing it, I was already European. Later, as a teenager, it was the poems that Jorge Luis Borges wrote about European cities or languages. It was a very vague idea of a place to which we belonged and yet did not belong.

… Then, when I attended the School of Journalism and was already a convinced Latin American, I was against Europe. Europe had colonized us, had imposed its culture on Latin America with the Bible and the sword.
And afterwards, in the most difficult time of the persecution of the dissenting people by the Argentine military dictatorship in the 1970ies, Europe and especially the Federal Republic of Germany closed its eyes, sold weapons to the generals and did not even care about the kidnapped citizens of German nationality.
And we (the "we" was a clear feeling at the time) – we Argentineans needed badly the solidarity of other nations, other people. This was how I felt at that time, as did the generation of young people who were fighting injustice.
I had made my way to Europe before the Argentine military dictatorship began. I was able to go to Europe because I had chosen to study in Germany – the country from which my family had been expelled because of their Jewish origins.

Why am I telling you all this?
Because each of us has a different biographical and/or political reference to Europe.
Because it explains why I can only dream of Europe today as an Open Continent. As a continent that does not shut itself off from the rest of the world, that takes responsibility for the devastating effects and destruction of the colonial wars of conquest, and that takes responsibility for contributing to an equal coexistence worldwide.

The historian, philosopher and writer Yuval Harari wrote on 20 March 2020 in the *Financial Times*:

> „In this time of crisis, we face two particularly important choices. The first is between totalitarian surveillance and citizen empowerment. The second is between nationalist isolation and global solidarity. "

We are here together because we choose solidarity.

In the Treaty of Lisbon (amending the Treaty of the European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community), signed on 13 December 2007, the following Article 1a was inserted:

> *The Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of persons belonging to minorities. These values are common to all Member States in a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail.*

To make Europe into the place described in this article, milestones have yet to be passed. The politicians alone will not be able to achieve this.

You are all aware of the current developments in Europe, the strengthening of undemocratic tendencies, national egoisms and the erection of borders, the acceptance of inhuman procedures at the borders of Europe to preserve one's own "comfort zone".
With the strengthening of the right-wing party AfD, Germany, too, is moving in a dangerous direction. I think of the attack of the Jewish synagogue in Halle in Jom Kippur, 9th of October

one year ago. All this seems to take us back a century, in times when the Berlin Academy of Arts and its members also played a shameful role.
Between 1933 and 1938, 41 Academy members were expelled for political or anti-Semitic reasons (you can read the names of the expelled and resigned members on our façade). Even today we still ask ourselves the question: what would have happened if a major institution like the Akademie der Künste in Berlin had resisted and not submitted to the Nazi regime in a pre-emptive manner?

But what can an institution like the Academy of Arts do against undemocratic and nationalist forces in Europe?
This question has been on my mind since I took office as President of the Academy a good 5 years ago.

The Academy of Arts regularly speaks out in defense of persecuted artists. We participate in the Martin-Roth-Initiative and offer a scholarship that specifically addresses young artists who are persecuted or threatened in their home countries. We make sure that the literary estate of our former president György Konrad is available for free research, we defend ourselves against the instrumentalization of the memory of Walter Benjamin by the French Right… Exhibitions and events focus on Europe: in the Academy of Arts on Hanseatenweg the architecture exhibition “urbainable – stadthaltig. Positions on the european city for the 21st century “(until 22.11.) and here at Pariser Platz “CONTINENT – In search of Europe” of the OSTKREUZ – Agentur der Fotografen (until 10.1.2021), the latter as part of the European Month of Photography (EMOP).

No doubt you – each of you – have many examples of how you already contribute in the daily work of your institutions to the safeguarding of common democratic values and of mutual support.

I am thinking, for example, of the declaration of solidarity of the Senates of the Austrian Universities of the Arts with the University of Theater and Film Arts Budapest, published in early September – after the right-wing national government of Viktor Orbán had taken measures to abolish the autonomy of the university.

I am also thinking of the open letter by Portuguese artists* and intellectuals against racism, which followed the murder of the black theater actor Bruno Candé in July this year.

I am thinking of the efforts and activities of so many friends here in Berlin: Nele Hertling’s initiative “A Soul for Europe”, or Esra Kücük’s Call for Projects in the context of “The art of bringing Europe together”.

I am thinking of the achievements of the Solidarnosc movement in Poland, which emerged 40 years ago from a strike movement and whose members stood up for human rights with solidarity and courage. I am therefore very pleased that this evening we have Basil Kerski as our guest, the director of the European Solidarity Center in Gdansk. A center that still today is defending democracy and the rule of law in Poland.

I could give many more examples. But that alone is not enough. (If it were, we would not be here today)

There are already many manifestos. Ulrike Guérot and Robert Menasse, for example, wrote 2013 in their manifesto for the foundation of a European Republic:

> “No one knows today how the avant-garde project, namely post-national European democracy, will ultimately be concretely institutionally structured. To discuss this, with all the creativity that this continent is capable of, is the goal we are now facing”.

I am very grateful to you, Robert Menasse, that you have become such a valuable partner for me in the preparation of this European Alliance of Academies and that you are with us this evening.

There are already national and international alliances, in both the cultural and scientific fields: alliances which, like us, demand freedom of art and science, as stipulated in Article 13 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2012).

And yet: It is my great hope that we can achieve even more together. We may disagree on details, and our interests and perspectives may vary. But my hope is that we learn from each other, that we approach each other with an open mind and curiosity and that we can find ways of cooperation.

I am very pleased that so many representatives of various art and cultural institutions accepted our invitation. With our different visions, dreams and convictions, we can explore common possibilities for action and create the basis for a solidarity-based partnership.

Due to the travel restrictions caused by Corona, many participants had to cancel their planned journey at short notice. This is very regrettable. All the more reason for me to be pleased that we can at least meet through digital technology.

We – that is many people, but not all of us. The invitation has initially been extended only to the EU member states. But there is more to Europe than that. Of course, I am also quite willing to open up further, provided we can agree on it.

The conference is supported by the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media within the framework of the German EU Council Presidency.
In Germany we are in the rather comfortable situation of having the autonomy of art officially recognized at political level.

In her speech on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Germany in May last year, Minister of State for Culture Monika Grütters – who will address us tomorrow morning – emphasized the high value of artistic freedom and freedom of the press for democracy (I quote):

> “Every authoritarian rule begins with the literal silencing of intellectuals, creative people and artists. That is why the Parliamentary Council, in Article 5, raised the freedom of art and the press to constitutional rank 70 years ago, and with good reason. In the long run artistic diversity is stronger than populist simple-mindedness”.

In a talk at the plenary session of our General Assembly in November 2016 – it was a few months after the Brexit Referendum and before the election of Donald Trump as President of

the United States – A.L. Kennedy told us three stories – stories about the change, or even the darkening of the cultural climate in Great Britain, stories of FALLING: “We cannot fly. We are falling,” she wrote in her introduction. And yet, at the end of her talk, she also opened our eyes to the beautiful moments, to peaceful scenes of togetherness from Central Park, which we must fight to preserve. She concluded – and I quote – “And in the dark times we must make sure that we are singing – and singing about much more than the dark times.”
I am very pleased that she is also present this evening, with her sharp social criticism, her poetic art and her deeply human attitude.

That is (all) we need:
solidarity, democracy, learning from each other, humanity.

Our manifesto might not be immediately effective with loud drums and trumpets, but it will demonstrate our will to stand together to make Europe what it promised to be: a transnational peace project.