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For a culture of conflict

A plea for a cultural policy of conflict, diversity and difference

Cultural policy at a glance

Cultural policy is controversial in many respects, ranging from the understandings of art and culture that may underlie it to the goals and purposes of public cultural funding. On one hand, this essay aims to provide cultural policy stakeholders in cultural administration, politics, cultural institutions and associations with theoretical knowledge about current conflicts concerning the significance of culture. On the other hand, it offers a concrete tool for unpacking and thus better understanding the nuances of cultural policy conflicts by means of the so-called »Conflict Consensus Matrix« (CoCoMax). In light of (potentially new) struggles over the socio-political relevance of the arts and culture, this essay advocates a conflict-oriented approach to conflicts in the cultural field that is sensitive to power inequalities and intersectional issues.

Taking stock: conflicts in, around and beyond culture

First, the good news: conflicts are not a problem in themselves, not for everyone in the same way, not forever and

not everywhere. In other words, conflicts are highly context-dependent and influenced by numerous factors, such as time, space, resources, (pre)history and positionality. Conflicts move along various spectra, such as temporality (between short- and long-term), intensity (between what we might call manifest-eruptive and latent-smouldering), functionality (between solution-oriented and open-ended), subject matter (between specific and general), relationality (between separating and connecting factors), perception (between shared and differing perceptions or recognition that there even is a conflict), scope and scale (between concrete/local and abstract/global), and emotionality (between hard and soft). Conflicts often arise when perceptions of (in)justice are not the same for all actors. But who in fact defines whether there is a conflict at all? Put differently, who participates in conflicts — and who do not? Who may let conflicts escalate and at what or whose cost? Who has what capacities to act in time-consuming and resource-intensive processes of conflict resolution?

The German cultural policy landscape is currently undergoing a number of paradigm shifts. This includes drastic and sometimes abrupt cuts or the withdrawal of public funding. In such cases, a shift may be observed in the way upon first mention cultural policy (Ahearne 2009). Such *explicit* policies alter the formal conditions and/or material, tangible

Conflict as democratic negotiation

Conflicts are part of democracy. Political theorist Chantal Mouffe (2013) refers to democratic conflict negotiation as agonism, that is, a »tamed« or democratically mediated conflict negotiation in which the other is conceptualised not as direct enemy, but rather a legitimate adversary in competition. Agonism contrasts with antagonism, which can be characterised as a harsh confrontation often aimed at exclusion, oppression or destruction. An agonistic approach to conflict, however, enables constructive and productive negotiation processes, which also play an important role in the field of cultural policy. When cultural administrations, funding institutions and artists, for example, face each other with different values regarding definitions of art or priorities for arts funding, agonistic stakeholders can nevertheless reach a temporary consensus on the distribution of resources despite value-related differences. Thus, the democratic and creative power of conflict as a medium of cultural policy transformation comes to the fore.

While agonism can be productive, it is not stable and may morph into heated or aggressive conflict. Conflict

scholar Cora Bieß (2025) therefore emphasises how important it is to pursue a proactive culture of conflict rather than merely reacting to conflicts: »The early prevention of conflicts within a spiral of escalation – before physical or symbolical violence is used – increases the possibility of a sustainable conflict solution, which is in the interests of all parties involved. Prevention is therefore of central importance.«

In the research project AGONART – Agonistic Cultural Policy (2020–2022, situated at the University of Vienna), my colleagues and I investigated how local cultural actors engage in conflictual cultural policy processes, dealing with a variety of conflicts over space, democratic participation and decision-making, and forming cultural policy alliances in response. What we framed as antagonisation suggests that conflicts can intensify or weaken depending on the context. For example, when conflicts are not recognised as such, or when already marginalised groups are systematically excluded from conflict negotiations, existing conflicts can be re-antagonised (Landau-Donnelly et al. 2023b).

resources of cultural production: cuts hit both operational and structural funding for institutions such as theatres and museums, artist- and community-run centres, which subsequently lose long-term planning security, but also individual artist grants. Explicit cultural policy structures govern and open up possibilities and opportunities for socio-political change through art and culture, but they can also impose restrictions and prohibitions. As early as during the Covid-19 pandemic, Dieter Haselbach et al. (2020: 4; author's translation), with reference to their controversial 2012 book *Kulturinfarkt – Von Allem zu viel und überall das Gleiche. Eine Polemik über Kulturpolitik, Kulturstaat, Kultursubvention* (Cultural infarction – too much of everything and the same everywhere. A polemic about cultural policy, the cultural state and cultural subsidies), argued for another such infarction: »Cultural policy must allow, even encourage, the competitive interplay of forces. Otherwise, in the interests of those defending the status quo, it will block the very change that culture is.« In the course of the debate on »systemic relevance« during the period of the pandemic it became clear how contested art and culture's socio-political position is. In other words, the once widely shared consensus that culture is indispensable for democracies and so should be publicly funded seems to be crumbling. Current budget cuts, controversial personnel decisions and a changing political climate (see below) point towards a neo-liberal trend that deprioritises community-centric cultural practices and funding logics. To put it even more dramatically, a new type of culture war might be looming, and if this is the case, the cultural policy field needs to accumulate more concerted knowledge, skills and sensitivity for conflict management.

Implicit and explicit cultural policy: conflicts over values and resources

There is no dedicated federal ministry of culture in Germany (but rather a State Minister of Culture and Media), and provincial cultural policy is often steered under the aegis of non-cultural ministerial departments, such as education and research, or social cohesion, family, the elderly and sports. Cultural policy properly speaking thus may be handled very differently depending on the regional regulations of individual *Bundesländer*. It is therefore important also to consider the influence of *implicit* cultural policies, which are less regulated and/or visible, measurable and identifiable at different levels. Unspoken assumptions or expectations regarding cultural policy are important in the classification of conflicts, especially in our current conflict-ridden times, in which illiberal and/or autocratically governed democracies are on the rise. In other words, *implicit* ideas, desires, beliefs and assumptions have a tremendous impact on cultural policy actions – or the lack thereof – and can cause profound rifts in the cultural field. Attitudes and emotions such as anger, annoyance, hurt, outrage, shame or shock, as well as a sense of being overwhelmed influence the scope for cultural policy without being the obvious or formal object of cultural policy measures and legal frameworks. In sum, the influence of implicit cultural policies significantly shapes the contours of explicit cultural policies, and vice versa.

In view of current tensions regarding the changing leeway available to art and cultural projects, venues and initiatives to engage in socio-political criticism through their practice,

Seeing, understanding and dealing with conflicts

Conflicts cannot always be resolved through »compromise«, as Klaus Eidenschink (2023) emphasises. The term »compromise« itself might downplay, cover up or even exacerbate underlying power asymmetries. Instead of focusing on quick or ultimate reconciliation, Eidenschink suggests practicing the 'art of conflict' (*Kunst des Konflikts*): seeing, observing and talking about conflicts while listening carefully to who is affected, who is speaking, who is being heard — and who is not. This practice of conflict culture is more than a method, it is an attitude. It requires a commitment to ambivalence (not just »tolerance« of ambivalence), multilingualism in how conflicts are discussed, and a sensitivity to differences and distinctions. Conflict management may not ultimately lead to

reconciliation, but can consist of making differences visible, audible and understandable – and sometimes even celebrating them.

A more equitable conflict culture requires consciously unlearning dominant conflict standards, such as Eurocentric norms, as formulated in the United Networks (2025) handbook. It requires new forms of speech, new spaces for dialogue, and what Göker and Çelik (2021) call »agonistic listening«: attentive, non-appropriative listening in conflictual negotiations. This conflict culture recognises that there is not just one language of conflict, but many, and that fair conflict management must always be context- and power-sensitive.

one might then ask what implicit and explicit value differences underlie cultural policy discussions. How are value- and resource-related conflicts interrelated? What types of conflict do contemporary art interventions and cultural organisations create, and what conflicts do they palliate or even eliminate? What is the overlap or dissonance between explicit statements, laws, funding and administrative guidelines for the arts, on one hand, and implicit assumptions, norms, limitations or expectations regarding cultural policy on the other? How can transitions from implicit constructions of normalcy or »truth« into explicit regulations and norms be identified, and more importantly, problematised? Where do cultural policy conflicts begin, and where do they end? How does the cultural field deal with current (explicit) interventions such as the withdrawal of already-approved funding, the revocation of invitations, and imposed or suggested behavioural management by means of codes of conduct, or even the involvement of the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Verfassungsschutz*) in monitoring funded cultural projects?

Facing tensions: identifying and negotiating conflicts proactively

It is becoming increasingly evident that a number of deep-seated assumptions and values are no longer shared in the cultural sector. For example, those who – perhaps naïvely – thought that social democratic and/or welfare state-oriented public cultural funding in Germany was based on an unchallenged consensus about the meaning and purpose of art or artistic freedom are now having to rethink their position. Current debates about art events and exhibitions on topics such as diversity and feminism are sometimes accused of being »unacceptable« (Schönherr 2024). Art events that call for the preservation of de-

mocracy are interrupted by the police, their materials confiscated (Tagesspiegel 2025). On the subject of antisemitism, exhibitions that show Jewish artists who are critical of the state of Israel and its war activities are cancelled because their attitudes toward Israel »do not fit into the German corridor of opinion« (Buhr 2023). In the digital space, too, artistic content is sometimes blocked, censored or subject to negative comments. Given the immense complexity of political sensitivity and solidarity in conflict-ridden times, it should have become clear that the assumption of a *universal* consensus was never good, unproblematic or helpful in the first place. On the contrary, the lack of a discussion of the fact that art and culture should not be taken for granted¹ has come to haunt cultural policy, notably certain cultural workers, curators and theorists more than others. As is so often the case, this is a question of privilege and positionality.

Beyond the scope of *documenta 15*, which took place in Kassel in summer 2022 and gave rise to repeated accusations and incidents of antisemitism (for example, Hutter 2025), it has become clear how divided the German cultural policy field is.² Especially since the Hamas massacre against Israelis on 7 October 2023, the cultural sphere in Germany, as well as internationally, has been characterised by cancellations, postponements, boycotts or closures of exhibitions, as well as what some call »disruptions« or protests at exhibition openings, biennials, panel discussions and readings. Artistic statements are becoming more contested and, at the same time, more tense with regard to the ambivalence inherent in the protection of artistic freedom.

Klaus Eidenschink writes in *Die Kunst des Konflikts* (The Art of Conflict, 2023: 79; author's translation): »Many latent

¹ While publicly-financed cultural funding seems to reach its limits in times of multiple welfare state crises, a systematic and/or long-term shift from public towards private sources of cultural funding (such as private foundations, collectors, philanthropy) has not (yet) taken place. Accordingly, to date there has been no assessment of the multiple costs and benefits of such privatisation/diversification of funding.

² Regarding the applicability of different definitions of antisemitism, see, for example, Holz (2024).

Caring for conflicts

Conflicts are never neutral. They always have to be dealt with in spaces already infused with power. This is precisely why an intersectional conflict culture requires care in dealing with conflicts, whether it be for those affected, for spaces or for processes. Queer theorist Antke Antek Engel, together with Ferdiansyah Thajib and Francis Seek (2020), refers to this as caring for conflict — a caring practice that does not seek to pacify or »resolve« conflicts, but rather takes them seriously as an expression of social inequality, nurtures them and cares about and for them. Caring for conflicts requires resources such as attention, time, self-reflection and sensitivity to forms of structural discrimination, such as racism, sexism, classism or ageism.

This also means that those who moderate, mediate or intervene in conflicts bear the responsibility of holding space for conflict. The »do no harm« principle, prominently established in peace and conflict studies, reveals itself to be relevant in cultural policy contexts because it is not enough to avoid negative side effects; power relations must be actively considered in any constellation in and around conflicts. Third parties in conflict mediation are never objective but need to act in power- and discrimination-sensitive ways (Bieß 2023).

Conflicts can act as social flashpoints, or triggers of »inflammation«, as Mau, Lux and Westheuser put it

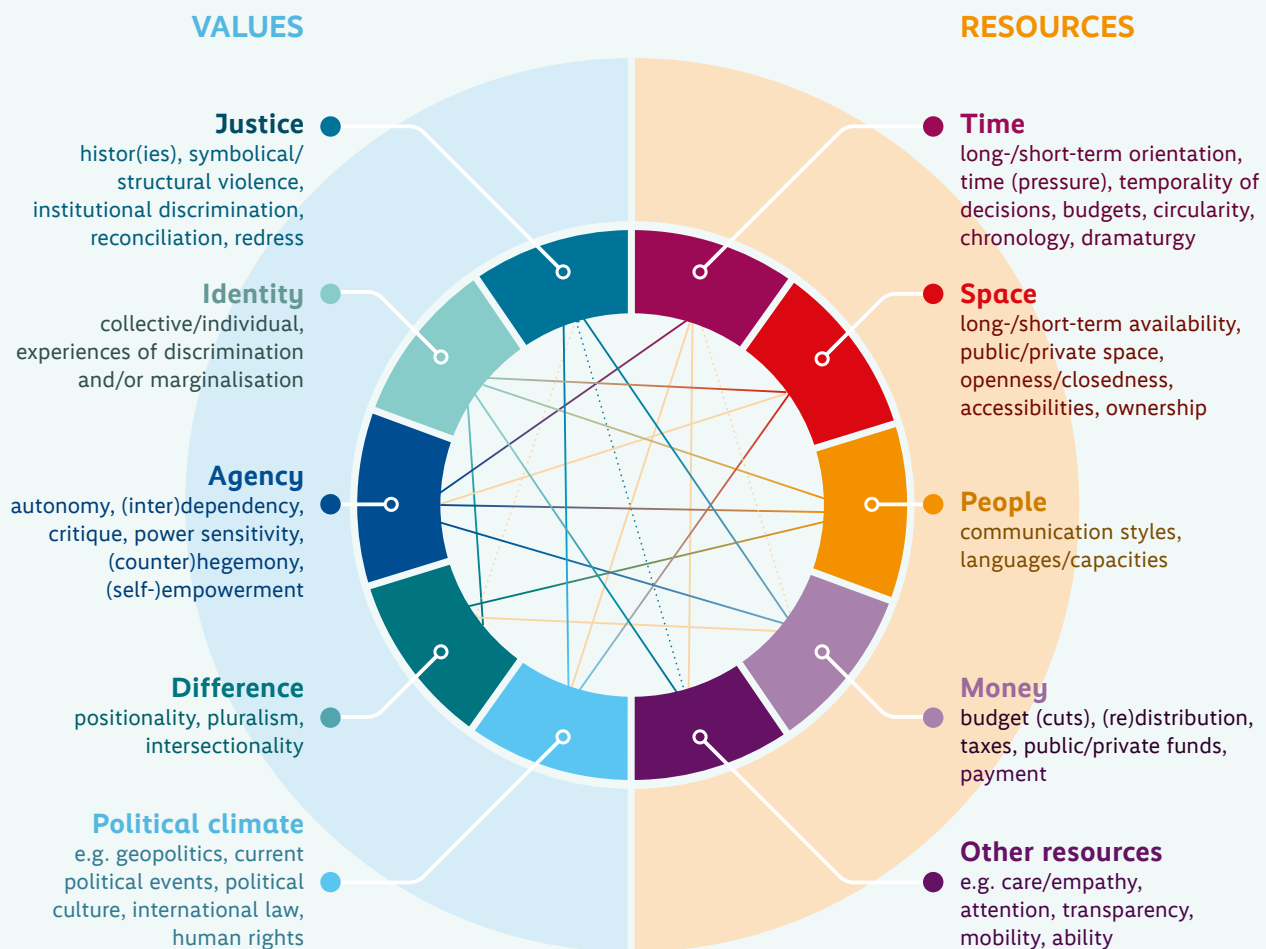
(2024, p. 407). A justice-oriented cultural policy proactively addresses these ever-present tensions with an agonistic attitude (see Info Box 1) and takes up conflicts not only when they escalate. Such an attitude is required at the very outset in cultural policy design processes: Who is to be invited? Who shall speak? Who will be listening? Who may feel safe, heard, represented – and who will not? Safer spaces, fair discussion formats and power-sensitive moderation are not merely »nice to have« but crucial requirements for conflict-attuned cultural policy (Plattform Zivile Konfliktbearbeitung 2023).

Emotional and affective dimensions are also part of an agonistic understanding of cultural policy. »You have to learn to endure fear, anger, and exhaustion«, Jagoda Marinic writes (2024, p. 148; author's translation), reflecting on how to actively overcome such feelings, if possible and necessary. Often, already marginalised actors have to bear the brunt of emotional labour in conflictual negotiations, which is neither sustainable nor just. A sustainable, equitable cultural policy of conflict requires a commitment to put up with historical and present conflicts and contradictions, on one hand, but also to care about and for them as a practice of healing, redress and restoration, on the other. Recognising that conflicts over identity, belonging and participation exist in the first place can sometimes be a first step towards greater justice and care for those directly affected.

conflicts or outdated patterns of order can be dissolved and reorganised only if one party decisively rebels and contradicts — regardless of the arguments put forward by the other side.« In the cultural sector, protests and discussions with politicians have already had an effect: budget cuts have been partially reversed and budgets renegotiated. The controversial »Anti-Discrimination Clause«, proposed by then Berlin Senator for Culture and Social Cohesion, Joe Chialo (who resigned by May 2025), which sought to require that cultural workers sign up to a mandatory stance against antisemitism in publicly funded cultural projects, was withdrawn after public protests from diverse artistic scenes (Senate Department for Culture and Social Cohesion Berlin 2024). It is becoming evident that the conditions of support for the arts are becoming contested. Furthermore, art and culture are not equally relevant (let alone enjoyable) for everyone, and never have been. But today, conflicts tend to escalate (more?) quickly and sharply. This makes it all the more urgent to find new ways to negotiate conflicts in the cultural sector in power-sensitive, caring and constructive ways.

Social norms are shifting in the current cultural policy discourse, giving rise to conflicts that previously were implicit, intentionally suppressed or a bit of both. In view of the currently heated atmosphere, appeals for »neutrality« in or of

the arts are no longer tenable. Neutrality is at odds with the popular concept of *Haltung*, that is, »attitude« or »posture« in the cultural context (with some scepticism towards the essay's tone, see Greven 2019). Neutrality is *not* an attitude; attitudes are *never* neutral. Given the broken latency of neutrality and consensus, we currently find ourselves in a situation in which emotional states are accompanied by surprise at certain opinions and actions in the cultural field or other emotions such as consternation, dismay and even being openly overwhelmed in the face of erupting conflicts. Some conflicts, marginalisations or inequalities are played off against each other — almost in a kind of *triage* of conflicts — while other conflicts are generalised and thus become a problem for »everyone«. In short, some conflicts — such as dealing with antisemitism — persist in the media, which keeps them on the boil. Other conflicts — which again are not to be compared directly with the former — such as fair pay for artists, the systematic lack of cultural funding for artists with disabilities, online censorship and hate directed towards marginalised artists, not to mention effective action against accusations of sexism in the art world, have been smouldering for a long time. To conclude, some conflicts seem to have lost their strategic significance for public debate or negotiation, or might never have had much traction in the first place.



Source: Author's design.

As Steffen Mau, Thomas Lux and Linus Westheuser argue in their book *Triggerpunkte: Konsens und Konflikt in der Gegenwartsgesellschaft* (Trigger points: conflict and consensus in contemporary society; 2024: 393; author's translation): »Social conflicts are never simply there; they are socially constructed: they become ignited, fuelled, triggered. From this perspective, politicisation does not appear to be a *consequence* of polarised attitudes in society, but, on the contrary, their *generator*.« Eidenschink describes conflicts as »uncertainty absorbers and structure formers« (2023: 25; author's translation). In view of their complex potential, we should ask ourselves how conflicts can be identified and discussed in the field of cultural policy, and what and how cultural policy actors can learn from them.

Conflictual Consensus Matrix (CoCoMax)

In recent years, I have worked with colleagues to examine and theorise political decision-making and governance practices in the cultural sector under the heading »Conflictual Cultural Policy« (Landau-Donnelly et al. 2023a, 2023b; Schad-Spindler et al. 2023). In line with this conflict-oriented perspective on cultural policy, I would like to expand on

the analytical framework of the »Conflictual Consensus Matrix« (CoCoMax) (Landau 2019: 170). This matrix, which I conceptualised inductively on the basis of empirical material in my doctoral thesis, draws on the concept of »conflictual consensus«, initially proposed by Belgian political philosopher Chantal Mouffe.

According to Mouffe (2005: 31), conflictual consensus entails negotiating a consensus that respects the ethical and political values of freedom and equality for »all«. These values are constitutive of democracy, »but there will always be disagreement concerning their meaning and the way they should be implemented«. (Furthermore, these [admittedly liberal] values are themselves contested!) In a pluralistic democracy, however, such differences of opinion are »not only legitimate, but also necessary« (ibid.). Mouffe describes these rules of the game as the »stuff of democratic politics« (ibid.).

Figure 1 differentiates various levels of conflict in the field of cultural policy. Value-related conflicts are always intertwined with resource-related conflicts – the two dimensions must be understood in relation to each other.

Accordingly, levels of conflict are connected to each other, interlocking and spinning connecting threads *between* resources and values. Specifically, CoCoMax can be used to better understand resource-related conflicts; for example, as they relate to the availability of space: By relating values and resources to one another, it is easier to understand the extent to which a dispute over the long-term rental of rehearsal rooms is not only about space as a resource, but also about a sense of justice (in other words, a value-related conflict). Also, highly inflammatory issues such as (value-based) anti-discrimination within the framework of historical reparation/compensation can be exacerbated by decisions such as budget cuts (resource-related). The multi-layered aspects of conflictual consensus are represented schematically in Figure 1.

For a culture of conflict: recommendations for action

This essay advocates not only the temporary endurance and »tolerance« of differences and conflicts, but also a conscious culture *for* conflict in the sense of a cultural policy of conflict. This is not merely a rhetorical shift in emphasis but requires a change in cultural policy attitudes and postures, and thus a shift in priorities and resources toward more agonistic conflict action. This calls for new concepts, skills and alliances between diverse positions. Gabriele Dietze (2008) speaks of hegemonic (self-)criticism, that is, the ability to reflect self-critically on one's own position in discourses and discussions about power (see Byroum-Wand 2025). Dietze (2008: 31; author's translation) also draws attention to the fact that »simultaneity, i.e., the co-presence of different forms of marginalisation, their interconnectedness, and their complexity«, are important features of intersectional political practice. Instead of hierarchising these different forms of marginalisation in terms of cultural policy, it is important to recognise their interdependencies.

In order to bring this understanding of conflict for culture into cultural professional and policy practice, I offer the following six recommendations for action:

1. **Distinguish between questions/conflicts of values and of resources:** discuss the meaning, purpose and scope of cultural (funding) policy, considering many perspectives.

Recommendation for cultural policy and funding:

In funding policy processes, it is necessary to highlight clearly that even seemingly technical or strategic decisions about resources such as time, space, audience and personnel are by no means neutral, but are always interwoven with value-based prioritisations and exclusions.

2. **Operationalising conflicts:** With the help of tools such as the »Conflict Consensus Matrix«, conflicts can be broken down into tangible, somewhat manageable components, creating space for discussion about which points of conflict can be negotiated and which ones cannot.

Recommendation for cultural policy and funding:

Invest in participatory and agonistic-dialogical participation formats with artistic stakeholders in order to distinguish jointly between value- and resource-related conflicts and, whatever differences there might be, jointly shape cultural policies, be they explicit and implicit.

3. **Strengthen agonistic listening:** Strengthen the willingness to listen more as an institution, especially to positions from marginalised perspectives. Agonistic listening does not immediately shut down in the event of potential differences of opinion or difficult conversations but remains open to finding temporary conflictual consensus – if the rules of the game of liberty and equality for »all« are respected.

Recommendation for cultural policy and funding:

Make the possibilities as well as the limitations of agonistic listening transparent through pro-active institutional self-positioning such as codes of conduct that are developed bottom-up, rather than clauses and prohibitions that are imposed top-down.

4. **Cultivate a desire for complexity:** This competence is closely linked to multilingualism and multi-centric, self-reflective perspectives on one's own perception of, and investment in, conflict.

Recommendation for cultural policy and funding:

Cultural funding should prioritise awareness-raising, as well as conflict and mediation training that should be covered/reimbursable in operational and programming grants.

5. **Train your conflict mediation skills like a muscle:** Enduring conflict can be learned and trained!

Recommendation for cultural policy and funding:

Enable conflict management skills in cultural policy at the interface with democratic and political education, as implemented, for example, by the Berlin-based initiative *Radikale Töchter* (2025) via political art and democratic education training.

6. **Affective, empathetic attitude towards conflict:**

What do I feel in this situation? What human needs shape my sense of conflict? How human is the conflict within me and within the other, and where is the humanity we share to be found in the conflict?

Recommendation for cultural policy and funding:

Promotion of the global exchange of people, content, ideas, programmes and cultural policy expertise in the spirit of the hegemonic self-criticism described above, in order to gain perspectives on art, artists and cultural policy beyond Western conceptions (see Lettau and Canyürek 2025; Plattform Zivile Konfliktbearbeitung 2023).

Hopefully, this essay can contribute some seeds for further thought and action towards an equity- and justice-oriented approach to conflict in cultural policy and funding. In times of new and diversifying culture wars, we need such a culture of conflict in order to maintain and strengthen diversity-sensitive democracies in which art and culture have a crucial place in shaping democratic expression and debate.

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