

“To maintain my voice as an artist ... I must decline this award”: Arab-American artist Fareed Armaly declines prestigious German art prize over censorship of pro-Palestinian voices

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Fareed Armaly, an artist of Lebanese-Palestinian heritage born in the US, has declined the 2025 Käthe Kollwitz Prize, a German art award. Armaly, who has worked both in the US and Germany, rejected the honor in protest against the German government's suppression of opposition to Israel's Gaza genocide and the overall "silencing [of] advocates for Palestinian rights under international law."

The award is named for the left-wing German artist Käthe Kollwitz (1867-1945). It is handed out by the Academy of Arts, Berlin, a government arts institution. The prestigious prize is awarded annually by a jury whose members are chosen anew each year to a visual artist living and working in Germany, honored either for a single work or his or her entire body of work.

The prize has been given out since 1960 and was most recently endowed with €12,000 (\$12,400). Among the recent recipients have been Candida Höfer, Sandra Vásquez de la Horra, Nan Goldin, Maria Eichhorn and Timm Ulrichs.

Armaly is an inter-disciplinary artist whose work includes the production of video, soundworks, architectural interventions, design, sculpture and large-scale installations.

According to his website, the artist, born in 1957,

has exhibited extensively in international institutions and distinguished platforms, including Documenta 11 (*From/To*). His artistic practice encompasses: music/culture publications *Terminal Zone* and *R.O.O.M.* (1987-89); engagement with roles and institutional positions, such as in the formation of Galerie Nagel (1989-94), artist and advisory in *Project Unité* (1993), co-curation and artist production (? in *NowHere*, Louisiana Museum, 1995-96); Artistic Director "haus.0" program (1999-2002) for Künstlerhaus Stuttgart, and Visiting Fellow, Center for Research Architecture, Goldsmiths (2011-13); selected commissions and projects: *Shar(e)d Domains*, Musée d'art et d'histoire,

Geneva (2006-07); *Empty Fields*, SALT, Istanbul (2016), *The (re) Orient* (1989/2021) mumok, Vienna. Collections include most recently, mumok, Vienna.

In his 1999 work, *From/To*, an exhibition about the history and identity of Palestine, a commentator explained, Armaly

collected a large number of visual and audio documents about the history of Palestine—from the nineteenth century, the British presence in the Middle East, to the time since 1948 when Israel declared its independence. Maps, diagrams, old postcards, documentary and fictional films, tape recordings, faxes and specially created webpages provide further information. The show is a goldmine for cultural historians—and certainly one of the first instances (if not the first) of such a comprehensive compilation of a dispossessed nation's memory.

Armaly received news of his selection for the Kollwitz Prize last July. On August 7, 2024 he replied to the Academy, declining the award. It was only recently, however, that the institution issued a press release, reporting Armaly's decision. Officials acknowledged "with respect and deep regret" his decision.

The German news agency DPA commented that in his response to Armaly, Academy President Manos Tsangaris told Armaly that he respected the artist's decision to turn down the prize.

At the same time, Tsangaris "contended that the Academy, as a community of artists from Germany and abroad, independently represents the interests of art in society and is opposed to any kind of censorship, self-censorship or political influence."

The artist explained on his website that the Academy's statement did not "reflect the central reasoning behind my stance." As a result, now that the prize and his response had entered the

public record, Armaly had decided to share his full letter, “for reference, as it provides the full context and considerations behind my decision.”

The general background to Armaly’s entirely legitimate protest is the vicious, anti-democratic campaign waged by the German government, media and political establishment against opposition to the mass murder in Gaza. The Bundestag (parliament), for example, passed a reactionary “antisemitism” resolution last November, solidarizing itself with the Israeli war criminals, after 13 months of non-stop bombings and killings:

We call on the government to continue to actively advocate for the existence and legitimate security interests of the state of Israel as a central principle of German foreign and security policy.

As the WSWS commented at the time, the resolution

once again underlines the fact that the German ruling class supports genocide and has never truly broken with fascism. The resolution has nothing to do with the fight against antisemitism or the protection of Jewish life. It is an extreme right-wing text aimed at defending Israel’s genocide against the Palestinians.

The Berlin state government has played its own filthy role in covering up for and defending the murder of tens of thousands of Palestinians, defaming the powerful film exposure of Zionist operations on the West Bank, *No Other Land*, as “antisemitic.”

In his letter, Armaly first affirms that the Kollwitz Prize is “an accolade I am honored to receive.” He notes that as it is

named after the respected German artist, the prize embodies a legacy that encourages a comprehensive understanding of what constitutes the work of an artist. Fittingly, it acknowledges the sustained effort and evolution of an artist’s work over time, which I value.

However, he goes on,

I am being awarded the Käthe Kollwitz Prize at a historically precarious moment, marked by a disturbing trend of censorship in Germany. For several years now, there has been a highly politicized, reactionary shift in official cultural policies, aimed at silencing advocates for Palestinian rights under international law. The shift has led to a growing list of official cancellations—honors, book awards, exhibitions, teaching contracts, panel and lecture invitations—for an array of scholars and artists with diverse

solidarities and affiliations, becoming normalized. Despite numerous open letters of opposition signed by scholars from all backgrounds, unified in argument against these forms of censorship as intolerable interference and means of silencing voices, these practices persist.

Armaly continues,

In such a context of intimidation, liberal cultural institutions appear to adopt complacency and self-censorship. All this, consciously or unconsciously, structurally performs the ongoing dehumanization of Palestinians by obscuring and abstracting their agency and voice.

Käthe Kollwitz’s century-old oeuvre and biography reveal a complex understanding of how the personal and political merge with themes of art, justice, and the social domain. While her artworks focused on invoking empathy for those rendered voiceless and powerless—historically, materially, and structurally—her actions activated the role of the artist with a sense of agency.

Armaly concludes by pointing out that there had been numerous periods during his career as an artist when he would have gladly accepted the honor.

However, at this historical juncture, I am unable to align myself with any institution operating under the current cultural policy framework of the German government. To maintain my voice as an artist and speak meaningfully through your act of recognition, I must decline this award.



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