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Anajara Laisa Amarante, Robson Savoldi

Resisting Silence: An Anti-Ableist Perspective on Recent Austerity Measures in the Berlin Cultural Budget

Abstract

This article examines the impact of recent cuts to the cultural budget in Berlin from an anti-ableist and intersectional perspective on marginalized artists, particularly those who are disabled. We argue that these austerity measures align with a broader political shift towards far-right discourses that disregard intersectional characteristics and their implications for inclusion. We criticize a policy that undermines accessibility in the arts, restricts international cooperation, and pushes cultural workers into precarity. We warn of the long-term consequences of this policy for democracy, diversity, and human rights in the German cultural sector. We discuss how anti-ableist art serves as a tool of intersectional resistance against exclusionary ideologies.

Keywords: disability studies, art, intersectionality, protests

Dem Schweigen widerstehen: Eine anti-ableistische Perspektive auf die jüngsten Sparmaßnahmen im Berliner Kulturhaushalt

Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag untersucht die Auswirkungen der jüngsten Kürzungen im Berliner Kulturhaushalt aus einer anti-ableistischen und intersektionalen Perspektive auf marginalisierte Künstler*innen, insbesondere auf solche mit Behinderungen und mit Migrationsgeschichte. Wir argumentieren, dass diese Sparmaßnahmen mit einer breiteren politischen Verschiebung hin zu rechtsextremen Diskursen einhergehen, die intersektionale Merkmale und deren Auswirkungen auf die Inklusion missachtet. Wir kritisieren eine Politik, die die Zugänglichkeit in der Kunst untergräbt, die internationale Zusammenarbeit einschränkt und Kulturschaffende in die Prekarität drängt. Wir warnen vor den langfristigen Folgen dieser Politik für Demokratie, Vielfalt und Menschenrechte im deutschen Kultursektor. Wir erörtern, wie anti-ableistische Kunst als Werkzeug des intersektionalen Widerstands gegen ausgrenzende Ideologien dient.

Schlüsselwörter: Disability Studies, Kunst, Intersektionalität, Protest

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1. The Exclusion of Disabled Artists in Berlin

Recent developments in Berlin's arts sector reveal a troubling pattern: neoliberal cultural policies disproportionately affect marginalized artists, especially disabled artists. Cuts to the cultural budget have reduced funding for access, inclusion initiatives, and employment opportunities (Brehme, 2025). This directly impacts studios, residencies, and programs supporting disabled cultural workers (Shaw, 2024). The €130 million cuts—in a sector already receiving only 2.1% of the city budget—will abolish entire programs, some with 100% reductions (BKJ, 2024). According to the University of the Arts, cuts to education, science, youth work, and family support will further delay accessibility measures (UDK, 2025).

Projects dedicated to inclusion are particularly affected, with some losing all funding (Brehme 2025). Although laws such as the Berlin State Act on Equal Rights for Persons with Disabilities (LGBG),[1] the German Disability Equality Act (BGG)[2] and the Federal Participation Act (BTHG)[3] formally guarantee equality, disabled artists still face systemic ableism—discrimination rooted in assumptions of bodily and cognitive inferiority (Campbell, 2009). Ableism intersects with racism, xenophobia, class inequality, queerphobia, and sexism, producing layered marginalization (Gesser et al., 2020).

In Germany's cultural sphere, disabled artists encounter both structural and attitudinal barriers (Brehme, 2024). These barriers take on four main forms: physical (inaccessible buildings, stages, museums); communicational (lack of sign language interpretation or accessible descriptions); content related (no accessible formats); and attitudinal (infantilization, stereotyping, exclusion from decision making). Austerity intensifies this landscape: disabled artists face both the precarity of the cultural sector and cuts to essential supports such as interpreters, transportation, and equipment (Hadley, 2019). Statements from cultural institutions confirm severe and widening consequences. Artists with intersecting marginalizations—disabled migrants, racialized artists, and those from working class backgrounds—experience these effects most acutely. Their vulnerability connects to Sawaia's (2001) concept of "ethical political suffering," the lived experience of being rendered inferior or disposable.

Ableist narratives persist in Germany, especially the medical model that frames disability as individual deficit rather than a product of social barriers (Waldschmidt, 2024). Social and human rights-based models, by contrast, conceptualize disability as resulting from interactions between individuals and structural obstacles, recognizing disabled people as rightsholders and cultural agents (Gesser et al., 2020). As Brehme (2025) notes, the erosion of inclusion in Berlin raises fundamental questions: Who benefits when accessibility is sacrificed? Exclusion consolidates cultural hierarchies and weakens democratic participation—more homogeneous publics are easier to manage politically.

These cuts must be understood not as isolated financial measures but as part of a broader political shift prioritizing militarization and nationalism over culture and social inclusion (Brehme, 2025). This trend aligns with the rise of the far-right Alternative for Germany (German-language acronym: AfD), whose anti-immigration, anti-LGBTQ+, and anti-diversity positions have shifted public discourse rightward (Riebe, 2024). Thus, austerity under Berlin's CDU–SPD coalition government, the Senate, resonates with ongoing culture war politics and intensifying hostility toward marginalized communities.

2. Austerity, Nationalism, and the Struggle for Inclusion

The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD), ratified by Germany in 2009,[4] marked a key milestone in recognizing disabled people as rightsholders. Article 30 guarantees cultural participation as a fundamental human right. Disability movements emerged in opposition to medical and charity models, reframing disability as a political and social issue rather than an individual deficit (Gesser et al., 2020).

In 2023, the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities acknowledged Germany's progress on accessibility and voting rights but highlighted persistent concerns: the continued influence of the medical

model in policy, insufficient accessibility in health, housing, transportation, and information systems, regional inequalities, lack of effective deinstitutionalization, and insufficient consultation with disabled people's organizations.[5] These barriers also restrict access to cultural life.

Inclusion cannot be understood without considering its opposite: exclusion. Historically, exclusion in Germany spans from eugenic policies to postwar segregation and, later, independent living movements seeking autonomy and accessibility. Yet disabled people—especially those with intersecting marginalizations—remain underrepresented and often tokenized in political and cultural decision-making. During the 2025 Global Disability Summit in Berlin, governments reaffirmed that „Nothing about us without us" must be translated into real participation and stronger accountability mechanisms (Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development et al., 2024). Still, disability representation in parliament remains limited and largely concentrated among a few committed members (Fabry et al., 2025).

Many intersectional studies still marginalize disability, treating it as peripheral despite its entanglement with race, migration, gender, and class (Abay & Soldatić, 2024). This results in "exclusion by omission," a form of symbolic inclusion that avoids challenging power structures—what Sawaia (2001) calls "perverse inclusion."

Austerity further reinforces this dynamic. Neoliberal policies risk reversing achieved rights, strengthening segregation, and reinforcing the medical model (Gesser et al., 2020). "Necropolitics," as theorized by Mbembe (2003), describes the power to determine whose lives are valued and who are rendered precarious. In migration governance, this appears in practices that force "voluntary" departures (Hänsel et al., 2019). When immigrant artists lose access to work, healthcare, or housing, their departure becomes structurally coerced (Pisani et al., 2016).

The Berlin budget cuts illustrate this logic. As curator Noa Winter (2024) argues, many projects central to inclusion and diversity face drastic reductions, threatening years of accessibility work. History shows that authoritarian tendencies often emerge gradually normalizing exclusion through policy rather than abrupt rupture (Eley, 2021). The current austerity landscape must therefore be read as part of a broader restructuring of cultural life aligned with nationalist and exclusionary agendas.

3. The Danger of Repeating History

Inclusion means ensuring disabled people have a full range of options available to them, regarding participating in social, economic, and working life. Yet the AfD openly rejects this principle: its politicians argue that inclusion is an "ideological project" that weakens educational standards (Riebe, 2024, p. 32). Historically, eugenicist, racist, and ableist discourses have been used to define who belongs to the nation and who is considered burdensome or "disposable" (Erevelles & Abay, 2024, p. 26). Such logics reappear whenever states police citizenship and justify segregation.

Artist Zuzanna Czebatul (2025) warns that once art is treated merely as a luxury rather than a public good, it becomes vulnerable to eradication—as demonstrated by the current cultural cuts. She notes that funding is not disappearing but being redirected toward policing and security. Berlin's 2026 budget, for instance, includes a substantial increase for police infrastructure, reinforcing the state's repressive apparatus (Salzmann, 2025). Thus, resisting cultural cuts is not only about safeguarding resources but defending diversity, inclusion, and human rights in public cultural life (Brehme, 2025).

These developments occur within a broader political climate shaped by far-right narratives and neoliberal austerity, both of which reduce the state's commitment to social rights. Authoritarian regimes historically weaken marginalized groups by portraying them as economically unproductive or as threatening to the social order (Aguiló, 2022). Riebe's (2024) analysis of AfD discourse shows how disability is weaponized within a rightwing extremist worldview: for figures like Björn Höcke, "healthy schools" exclude disabled students,

denying the core principles of equality and diversity established in the CRPD. The AfD proposes no actual measures for enabling disabled people's participation.

The AfD's recent classification by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*, which als functions as the domestic intelligence agency) as a rightwing extremist organization underscores the severity of its ethnonationalist agenda (Brady, 2025). Within this narrative, the AfD and other far-right protagonists frame inclusion as a "leftwing ideology," even a threat to national purity (Riebe, 2024, pp. 33–34, 39–41).

Historical memory plays an essential role here. *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* [literally: "overcoming the past"], the commitment to confront the legacy of Nazi crimes, has been central to postwar German identity (Rutschmann, 2011). Yet current cultural cuts and growing hostility toward disability rights (Riebe, 2024) risk eroding this memory. Practices such as sheltered workplaces primarily or exclusively for people with disabilities, where disabled workers earn below minimum wage and remain segregated from the labor market, already contravene the CRPD (Heyer, 2025). Persisting or expanding such structures would repeat historical patterns of institutionalized segregation under new, technocratic forms.

Berlin's CDU-led state executive has taken budget choices that must therefore be read as political decisions aligning at least indirectly with far-right cultural agendas (Brehme, 2025). The AfD's culture war normalizes hostility toward critical arts, diversity, and marginalized voices. Systematically weakening disabled, immigrant, and precarious cultural workers has long been a defining feature of authoritarian regimes, which depict these groups as expendable or costly (Stichweh, 2016). The convergence of austerity, nationalism, and anti-diversity politics in Berlin today raises pressing concerns about the erosion of democratic inclusivity.

4. Anti-Ableist Art as a Form of Resisting Silencing

Cultural cuts presented as technical budgetary adjustments are, in fact, political decisions with ideological consequences. While many marginalized artists are affected, able-bodied creators often retain some access to institutions, whereas disabled artists—especially those who are poor, migrants, or racialized—face compounded exclusion. As McRuer (2006) argues, capitalism and ableism mutually reinforce ideas of who is considered valuable and productive.

Art functions as a critical mode of resistance by challenging dominant narratives and countering historical patterns of exclusion. Artistic practices that foreground disability destabilize normative assumptions about embodiment and participation (Johnson, 2022). The link between anti-ableist and antifascist art is historically grounded: Twentieth-century fascist regimes persecuted and attempted to eliminate disabled people, making contemporary disability-centered artistic expression inherently political, rooted in memory and resistance.

The fight against ableism is, therefore, inseparable from the fight against authoritarian and exclusionary ideologies. Antifascist art has long employed visual, performative, and interventionist strategies to disrupt hegemonic narratives and build solidarities across oppressed groups (Dimitrakaki & Weeks, 2019). Disabled artists expand this lineage by deploying aesthetics and performance forms shaped by lived experience: adaptive techniques, embodied performance, comedy, and direct audience engagement. These practices highlight the social construction of disability and contest normative expectations of art and artists (Hadley, 2019).

Several contemporary initiatives illustrate how anti-ableist art resists silencing:

Sins Invalid, a US based collective led by disabled, queer, and BIPOC artists, uses performance and storytelling to reclaim disabled identities, confront shame, and expose the legacy of eugenics and medicalization (Kafai 2021).

"Queering the Crip, Cripping the Queer," the first major international exhibition of its kind, brought together queer disabled artists in Berlin for the run of the exhibition from September 2022-May 2023 (Schwules Museum, n.d.). It challenged orthodoxies around gender, sexuality, and embodiment while attracting diverse audiences and demonstrating the transformative potential of intersectional cultural work.

Making a Difference Berlin (n.d.), a network founded in 2018, prioritizes leadership by disabled and chronically ill artists in dance. It provides accessible training and co-production opportunities, ensuring that expertise remains rooted in lived experience.

Berlin Mondiale (2025) fosters transcultural and participatory projects at the intersections of migration, art, and accessibility. Its anti-ableist orientation challenges notions of disability as inherent to the individual and instead highlights structural barriers. With reduced public funding, many of its collaborations and community-based formats are now threatened.

Berlinklusion (n.d.), a collective at the intersection of art and accessibility, centers the social model of disability in curating, consulting, training, and community work. The group emphasizes that access is a prerequisite for meaningful inclusion and warns that recent cuts jeopardize years of progress in reducing barriers created by racism, classism, sexism, ageism, and ableism.

Artistic responses to ableism take many forms: rejecting pity, creating pluralist representations, and using symbolic or performative actions that foreground systemic injustice (Hadley, 2019). These interventions challenge both institutional norms and societal narratives that naturalize exclusion.

Finally, disability futurism—particularly as articulated by Piepzna-Samarasinha (2022)—imagines futures shaped by disabled, queer, and racialized communities. This vision centers survival, care, collective knowledge, and equitable structures rather than productivity and normativity. Given the current political climate, such futurist frameworks are urgently needed to counter intersecting oppressions and defend the rights enshrined in the CRPD. The struggle over Berlin's cultural budget will shape not only artistic ecosystems but also the broader capacity of German society to embrace disabled people as cultural agents and leaders.

Endnotes

[1] Landesgleichberechtigungsgesetz Berlin (LGBG), in der Fassung vom 27. September 2021.

[2] Behindertengleichstellungsgesetz (BGG), in der Fassung vom 23. Mai 2022.

[3] Bundesteilhabegesetz (BTHG), in der Fassung vom 02. Juni 2021.

[4] Gesetz zu dem Übereinkommen der Vereinten Nationen vom 13. Dezember 2006 über die Rechte von Menschen mit Behinderungen sowie zu dem Fakultativprotokoll vom 13. Dezember 2006 zum Übereinkommen der Vereinten Nationen über die Rechte von Menschen mit Behinderungen vom 21. Dezember 2008.

[5] CRPD Committee, Concluding observations on the combined second and third periodic reports of Germany, CRPD/C/DEU/CO/2-3, adopted at 684th and 685th meetings held 5–6 September 2023.

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Authors

Anajara Laisa Amarante is a chronically ill, queer Brazilian artist whose work bridges the personal and political, focusing on dissident bodies, marginalized communities, and intersectional art practices. Based in Berlin and primarily active in performing arts, they also explore writing and visual media. With academic backgrounds in Biology and Communication, Amarante's work examines immigrant identities, post-colonialism, and identity construction, amplifying voices often overlooked in artistic and academic spaces.

E-Mail: asanactoflove@gmail.com; Homepage: https://www.anajaralaisa.com/

Robson Savoldi holds a PhD in Cognitive Psychology and is Professor of Development, Assessment and Inclusion of People with Disabilities at the Faculty of Health Sciences of Trairi, Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN), Brazil. He also conducts studies at the Experimental and Cultural Epistemology Nucleus of the Federal University of Pernambuco (UFPE), Brazil. Previously, he worked as a Social Psychologist at the Specialized Reference Center for Social Assistance (CREAS), focusing on addressing human rights violations within the framework of Brazil's Social Assistance public policies. Robson is a person with a disability and has recently been exploring a decolonial perspective in his studies on consciousness and disability.

E-Mail: rjspes@yahoo.com.br