

Kurt Eisner, “The Socialist Nation and the Artist” (1919)

Abstract

The Munich journalist and writer Kurt Eisner was a leading member of the USPD in Bavaria and acted as the leader of the revolutionary protests that also reached Bavaria in November 1918. On November 8, he proclaimed the “Free State of Bavaria” in Munich and was elected its Prime Minister. In Bavaria’s subsequent state election the USPD was unable to win sufficient support for its new government, however. Before Eisner could announce his resignation, he was murdered by an anti-republican assassin in February 1919. His thoughts on the relationship between artists and the state in post-revolutionary Germany, excerpts from which are reproduced here, were published by the politically progressive expressionist artists’ association “Novembergruppe.”

Source

It is among German peculiarities that politics is something completely apart, that governing is in reality a juridical activity. I think it was Bismarck who believed that governing was an art, and I think, in my case: governing is as much an art as painting pictures or composing string quartets. The object of this political art, the material with which this political art is supposed to work, is society, the state, humanity. Therefore I would like to think that a true statesman's, a true government's strongest inner affinity should be to no one more than to artists, their professional comrades. [...]

And now the question, what can the state do for art and what can it do for artists? If the relationship between the state and art is such as I have just indicated, then the state has above all the responsibility—the government of the state, I mean—to be itself the embodiment of all culture that is united in the present era. A government that in this sense is itself the embodiment of culture thereby advances art in and of itself. [...]

Art can only flourish in total freedom. In an artists’ assembly I recently stated: The artist must, as an artist, be an anarchist and as a member of society, as a citizen dependent on the bourgeoisie for the necessities of life, a socialist. The state can give the artist no other advice than that he freely and independently follow his innermost impulses, and that is the best the state can do to encourage art: that it gives the artist complete freedom of his artistic action. Its concern, and its justified concern, is that the artist be able to live, that he be able to exist as an economic entity. [...]

Art demands a total life, great art even demands the renunciation of life. The great artist is possessed, he is a martyr to his art. I have stated that the visual artist should create only in the leisure hours of his inspiration, he should not make a commodity of art under the pressure of economic necessity. He should, for example, not have to eternally repeat himself just to toss goods on the market. [...] I have therefore taken up the question whether the visual artist should not proceed directly from his own handwork or if he should not base his economic existence on his handwork—the sculptor, for example, as stonemason—and only in the leisure hours of his inspiration create works of art that he then does not make in haste in twenty-four weeks in order to live, but on which he often could work on for years. I believe that this thought is not at all utopian, but that it is a return to earlier, healthy artistic conditions. The suggestion is an effort to solve the problem of how the visual artist can live today without living from art. He should live for art.

What we can do is to promote art by seeing that the state itself is composed of artists, that it allows freedom; and I do not understand why the state should not give artists in the most diverse fields their

freedom of action through economic support [...].

But the state could assure recognized artists of a livelihood, that it could pay them a salary just as it would pay some examining magistrate, that seems to me to be entirely possible.

The state can do still more for art. It can, for example, to speak of literature, eliminate the kitsch from school-books and promote contemporary artistic production through school texts. That serves not only then the education of the younger generation but is also useful to the artist, the visual artist as well as the designer or the writer. Those are a few things, according to my view, in which the state could beneficially intervene.

[...]

Source: Rose-Carol Washton Long, ed., *German Expressionism, Documents from the End of the Wilhelmine Empire to the Rise of National Socialism*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1993, pp. 179–81.

Source of original German text: Kurt Eisner, “Der sozialistische Staat und der Künstler,” in [Die Novembergruppe], *An Alle Künstler!*, Berlin: Kunstanstalt Willi Simon, 1919, pp. 25–6.

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