

# WHAT IS POLITICS?



A CONFERENCE ON  
HANNAH ARENDT



VILLA AURORA

**November 9th and 10th, 2013**  
at Villa Aurora & Skirball Cultural Center

Organized by Villa Aurora in cooperation with  
The Hannah Arendt Center at Bard College, Annandale on Hudson

THE TIME IS  
OUT OF JOINT,  
OH CURSED SPITE,  
THAT EVER  
I WAS BORN  
TO SET IT RIGHT.

- William Shakespeare

The German-Jewish-American thinker Hannah Arendt, born in Hannover, exiled to Paris and later to New York, dedicated her work to the reinvention of the public realm and to freedom in political action. When she died in 1975, *The New Yorker* wrote in its obituary: "Some days ago Hannah Arendt died, at the age of sixty-nine. We felt a tremor, as if some counterweight to all the world's unreason and corruption had been removed."

Arendt, who had learned to think with Martin Heidegger, Plato, Kurt Blumenfeld, Rosa Luxemburg, Immanuel Kant, Rahel Varnhagen, Karl Jaspers and Walter Benjamin was expelled from Germany in 1933 and from Europe in 1940. She found her way into the Anglo-American world through her dialog with thinkers and poets like Henry David Thoreau, Thomas Jefferson, Emily Dickinson and W.H. Auden.

The early experience of worldlessness that totalitarian movements press upon every human being threatened her and later formed her work; it also underlies the specific urgency of her question: Can we succeed in reconstituting a world that is "out of joint," is it possible "to set it right," and might we find new ways of human involvement in the unfolding of the world?

Arendt's work confronted race violence, discrimination, the experience of revolution, of town councils, and other forms of direct political representation. For Arendt, civil disobedience sustains democracy by interrupting the automatism of state authorities. To empower the right of citizens to dissent from civil government and to join together in collective acts of civil disobedience, she even suggested including the right to civil disobedience as a constitutional amendment.

Today, as in the 1960s, the ideas of this woman philosopher inspire theoretical debates as well as civil political initiatives. There is no claim of a Judeo-European-American symbiosis, but the conference in Villa Aurora will explore the influence of her European-American experience and the particular importance of transcultural exchange in Arendt's theory of political action.

November 9th, 2013, 10:00 a.m. @ Villa Aurora

**10:00 a.m.**

WELCOME Annette Rupp

OPENING REMARKS Marie Luise Knott

**10:30 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.**

Chair: **Roger Berkowitz**

THE ORIGINS OF TOTALITARIANISM IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Lecture & Q&A

**Anson Rabinbach**

REVOLUTIONARY DECLARATIONS AND THE STATUS OF HUMAN RIGHTS

Lecture & Q&A

**Peg Birmingham**

**The Aesthetics of Arendt's Politics**

EQUALITY, PLURALITY, AND THE ENTHUSIASM OF THE SPECTATORS

Lecture & Q&A

**Martín Plot**

**1:00 p.m. – 2:30 p.m.** LUNCH BREAK

**2:30 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.**

Chair: **Peg Birmingham**

HANNAH ARENDT: THE PRIMACY OF APPEARANCE

Lecture & Q&A

**Robert Harrison**

WHO IS CAPABLE OF PERFORMING ACTION?

SOME THOUGHTS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSONALITY

Lecture & Q&A

**Wolfgang Heuer**

**5:00 p.m.** RECEPTION AT VILLA AURORA

November 10th, 2013, 11:00 a.m. @ Skirball Cultural Center

**11:00 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.**

#### JEWISH VOICES IN THE EICHMANN-CONTROVERSY

A Lecture by **Roger Berkowitz**

The controversy over Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* has always been charged by implications of anti-Semitism. Some called Arendt a self-hating Jew. Her friends decried the attacks on her as a pogrom. The truth, however, is that Arendt's book exposed important faultlines in the Jewish community. To ask about the Jewish responses to Arendt's book is to broaden our understanding of Jewish intellectual attempts to address the horror of the Final Solution.

**11:30 a.m. – 1:30 p.m.**

#### HANNAH ARENDT – SCREENING OF THE FILM BY MARGARETHE VON TROTTA

In her film, Margarethe von Trotta deliberately focuses on a brief but central period in Hannah Arendt's life: The time of her Eichmann-Report. Starting with the capture of Adolf Eichmann in 1960 it ends in 1963 with a lecture in New York after the fading of the controversy. The film covers the vivid intellectual life in the US, as well as Arendt's visits to Israel and the harsh critics of her reports by the Jewish establishment. It not only raises important questions about the very nature of totalitarianism and about Arendt's making of the term "banality of evil". Given the quality of Hannah Arendt as an eminent political thinker of her time the film has set itself the imminent task to set in stage nothing less but the question: What is thinking? Or: What makes us think?

**Margarethe von Trotta**, the prominent German film director - *Marianne and Juliane* (1981), *Rosa Luxemburg* (1986), *The Promise* (1995), *Rosenstraße* (2003) *Hildegard von Bingen* (2009) et al. – has been working with Barbara Sukowa for more than 20 years. Barbara Sukowa's powerful performance as Hannah Arendt won her the 2013 LOLA German Film Award for best actress in a leading role.



## Biographies

**Roger Berkowitz** is Associate Professor of Politics, Philosophy, and Human Rights at Bard College, where he is also Academic Director of the Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities. He is author of *The Gift of Science: Leibniz and the Modern Legal Tradition* (Harvard UP, 2005) and co-editor of many volumes including *Thinking in Dark Times: Hannah Arendt on Ethics and Politics*. He edits *HA: The Journal of the Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities*, and is editor of the Arendt Center blog.

**Peg Birmingham** is Professor of Philosophy at DePaul University. She is the author of *Hannah Arendt and Human Rights: The Predicament of Common Responsibility* (Indian UP, 2006), co-editor (with Philippe van Haute), *Dissensus Communis: Between Ethics and Politics* (Koros, 1996), and co-editor (with Anna Yeatman), *Aporia of Rights: Citizenship in the Era of Human Rights* (forthcoming, Bloomsbury, 2014). She is currently finishing a manuscript titled, *Hannah Arendt and Political Glory: Bearing the Unbearable*.

**Robert Harrison** is the Rosina Pierotti Professor of Italian Literature at Stanford University and the author of five books, among them *The Dominion of the Dead* (University of Chicago Press, 2003) and *Gardens: An Essay on the Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 2008). He is member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and contributes regularly to the *New York Review of Books*. He also hosts a literary-philosophical radio program called "Entitled Opinions".

**Wolfgang Heuer** is "Privatdozent" at the Otto Suhr-Institute for Political Science, Free University of Berlin, managing editor of the online journal *HannahArendt.net*, research on Hannah Arendt, civic courage and European federalism. Recent publication *Hannah Arendt Handbuch* (co-editor).

**Martín Plot** is Associate Professor of Aesthetics & Politics at the School of Critical Studies, California Institute of the Arts. He is the author of *Indivisible* (2011), *La Carne de lo Social* (2008), and *El Kitsch Político* (2003). He has also edited and co-edited several books, most recently *Claude Lefort. Thinker of the Political* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) and *Critical Theory and Democracy* (Routledge, 2012, with Enrique Peruzzotti) and published in *Continental Philosophy Review*, *Constellations*, *Theory and Event*, *Umbrals*, *International Journal of Communication*, *Le monde diplomatique*, *Punto de vista*, among other journals and reviews.

**Anson Rabinbach** is Professor of History at Princeton University. He is the author of *The Crisis of Austrian Socialism: From Red Vienna to Civil War 1927-1934* (The University of Chicago Press, 1983); *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue and the Origins of Modernity* (Basic Books, 1990); *In the Shadow of Catastrophe* (The University of California Press, 1997); *Begriffe aus dem Kalten Krieg: Totalitarismus, Antifaschismus, Genozid* (Wallstein Verlag, 2009) and he is co-editor (With Sander Gilman) of *The Third Reich Sourcebook* (The University of California Press, 2013). He is also co-founder and editor of *New German Critique*.

**Marie Luise Knott** is a freelance author, journalist and translator, based in Berlin. She is the author of *Verlernen. Denkwege bei Hannah Arendt* (Matthes und Seitz Verlag, Berlin 2011), *Unlearning with Hannah Arendt*, Other Press, New York, 2014) that was nominated for the Leipziger Buchpreis and the Traktatus Preis in Graz; she edited the Correspondance between Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem (Suhrkamp 2010, Chicago Press 2014) and lately co-edited and translated poetic writings of John Cage: *Empty mind* (Suhrkamp 2012).



The conference is organized by  
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Concept: **Marie Luise Knott**



Supported by the  
**German Federal Foreign Office**

and the



**German Federal Government  
Commissioner for Culture and the Media**



## Locations

### Villa Aurora

520 Paseo Miramar  
Pacific Palisades, CA 90272  
Phone: + 1 310 454 42 31  
[infola@villa-aurora.org](mailto:infola@villa-aurora.org)

### Skirball Cultural Center

2701 N. Sepulveda Boulevard  
Los Angeles, CA 90049  
Phone: +1 310 440 45 00  
[www.skirball.org](http://www.skirball.org)

The event at Villa Aurora on November 9th, 2013 is free of charge.

**RSVPs are required** at 310 454 42 31 or [infola@villa-aurora.org](mailto:infola@villa-aurora.org)

#### Location:

Villa Aurora  
520 Paseo Miramar  
Los Angeles, CA 90272

**Street parking** is available on Los Liones Drive. Shuttle service starts at 9:00 a.m. from Los Liones Drive, off Sunset Boulevard two blocks North-East of Pacific Coast Highway.

Please do not park on the Topanga State Park Lot!

**For information** on the event at Skirball Cultural Center on November 10th, 2013 at 11:00 a.m. please check: [www.skirball.org/programs/hannah-arendt](http://www.skirball.org/programs/hannah-arendt)