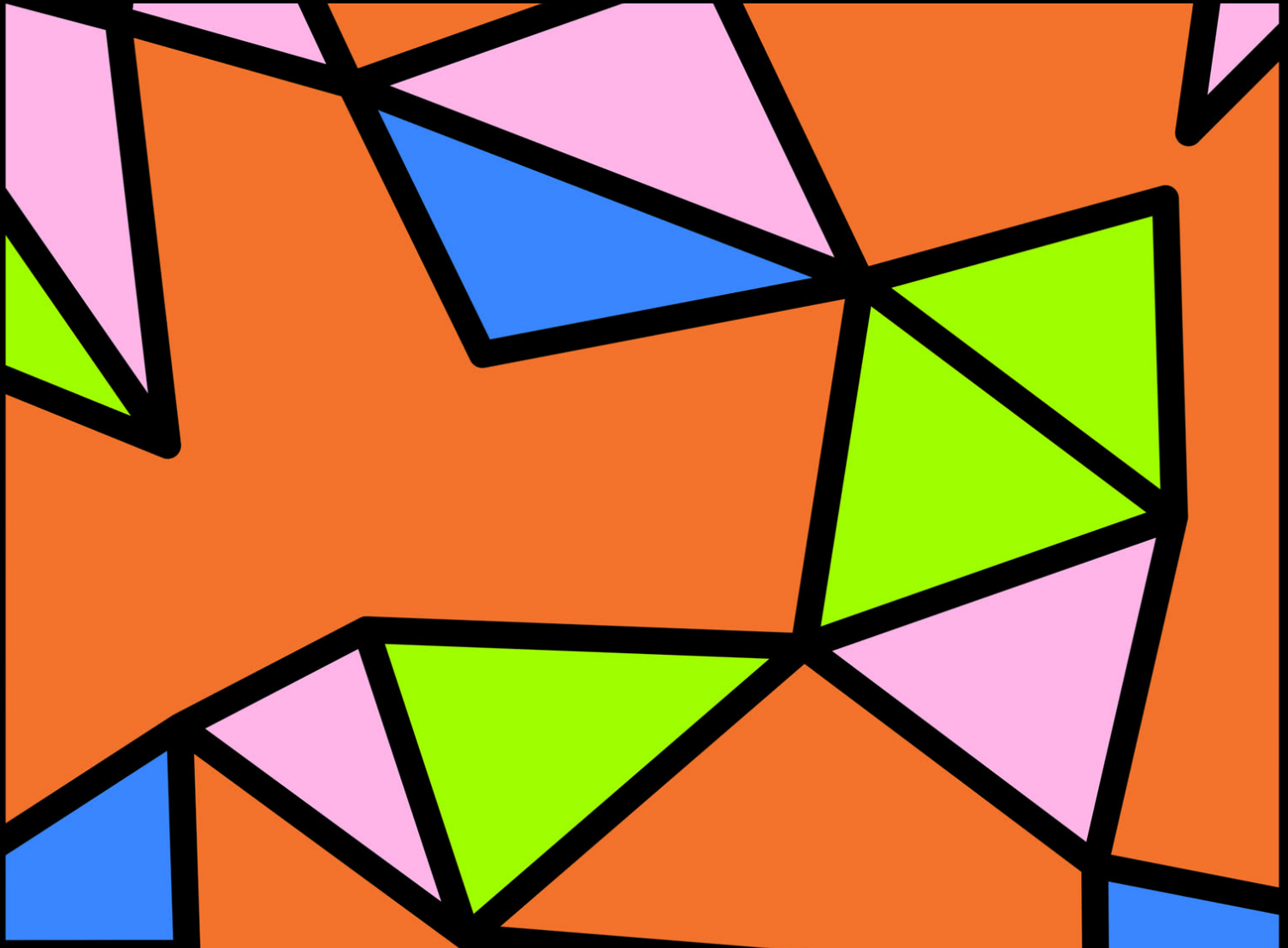




THE REAL CRISIS LIES DEEPER

THE DOUBLE BREAK IN THE CHAIN OF ARTISTS

A structural problem

TOBIAS POST

Artist · Digital Light Art · Painting · Curatorial Projects

CUBE4ARTS.COM

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WAR, INSTITUTIONALISATION AND THE CRISIS OF GENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION

The present crisis of many artists' associations, artists' federations and cultural institutions is often described as a problem of new blood, a problem of funding or a consequence of digital change. These explanations fall short.

The real crisis lies deeper.

It concerns the question of how artistic experience, responsibility and cultural positions are passed on between generations.

The central thesis of this text is this: the German art system is currently experiencing a second historical break in a chain of artists that was already damaged in the twentieth century.

Art does not develop through works, institutions or funding programmes alone. It develops through generational continuity. Every generation of artists builds on positions developed before it. It takes over experiences, extends questions, contradicts its predecessors and creates new forms. Culture arises where this passing-on works.

This connection will be called the chain of artists here.

The chain of artists is not a romantic notion of harmonious continuity. Conflict, contradiction and aesthetic change are part of its nature. Nevertheless, every living development of art rests on a simple principle: the preceding generation strengthens the one that follows, while the following generation takes up, transforms or overcomes the achievements of its predecessors. The precondition for this is respect, curiosity and the willingness to pass things on.

It is exactly this connection that was deeply damaged in Germany in the twentieth century.

National Socialism, war, persecution, exile and the destruction of cultural milieus led not only to the loss of artists and works. They destroyed established forms of generational continuity. The first break in the chain of artists did not consist in an aesthetic change but in the violent interruption of cultural transmission.

After 1945, the post-war generation faced a historic task. It had to rebuild cultural infrastructure where cultural continuity had been lost. Museums, academies, art associations, artists' federations and funding systems were founded or rebuilt. This achievement can hardly be overestimated. The German art system owes a considerable part of its present stability to it.

This, however, is exactly where the structural problem begins.

The post-war generation solved the problem of institutional reconstruction more successfully than the problem of cultural succession.

The institution became the bearer of cultural continuity. Museums, academies, juries, art associations and funding structures took over functions that had previously been carried more strongly by relationships between generations. From this development a momentous myth arose: the notion that institutional continuity is the same as cultural continuity.

But institutions do not produce a chain of artists.

They can provide spaces, create visibility and organise resources. They cannot replace the passing-on of artistic experience between generations.

This is precisely where the weakness of many artists' associations and federations shows today. For decades, institutions were reproduced successfully. Reproducing their cultural succession succeeded far less.

The consequence is visible today. Between established older generations of artists and young emerging positions, whole age groups are missing in many regions. It is not only new blood that is missing. What is missing is a generational middle tier. Several generations of artists were integrated, accompanied and brought into responsibility only insufficiently.

The real crisis of many artists' associations therefore does not consist in ageing. Ageing is merely its most visible symptom.

The real crisis consists in a structure of transmission weakened over decades.

Paradoxically, this is currently giving rise to a second break.

Where younger artists gain access to visibility today, this increasingly happens through funding logic, project structures, curatorial programmes, digital publics and social media. These systems do partly correct the rigidity of older structures, but they often do not replace the missing generational continuity.

The logic of scarcity remains. It merely changes direction.

Where older generations used to control access, cultural visibility is now increasingly decided by eligibility for funding, relevance criteria, project character and public attention. The older generation is partly excluded, while the younger generation is at the same time under constant pressure to be current and visible.

This does not produce a counter-model to the crisis of the chain of artists.

It produces its mirror image.

The first break destroyed the chain of artists.

The second break arises from the belief that institutions, funding logic and economies of visibility could replace it.

In many places the older generation did not build up its succession sufficiently. The younger generation runs the risk of replacing cultural continuity with project-based production of relevance. The two developments differ in form but may lead to the same result: a further weakening of generational transmission.

The real crisis of the German art system is therefore neither a crisis of funding nor a crisis of digitalisation.

It is a crisis of cultural continuity. The decisive question is not how existing institutions can be preserved. The decisive question is how generations of artists can learn again to take responsibility for one another. For in the long run, culture does not live from institutions. It lives from one generation bringing forth the next.

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