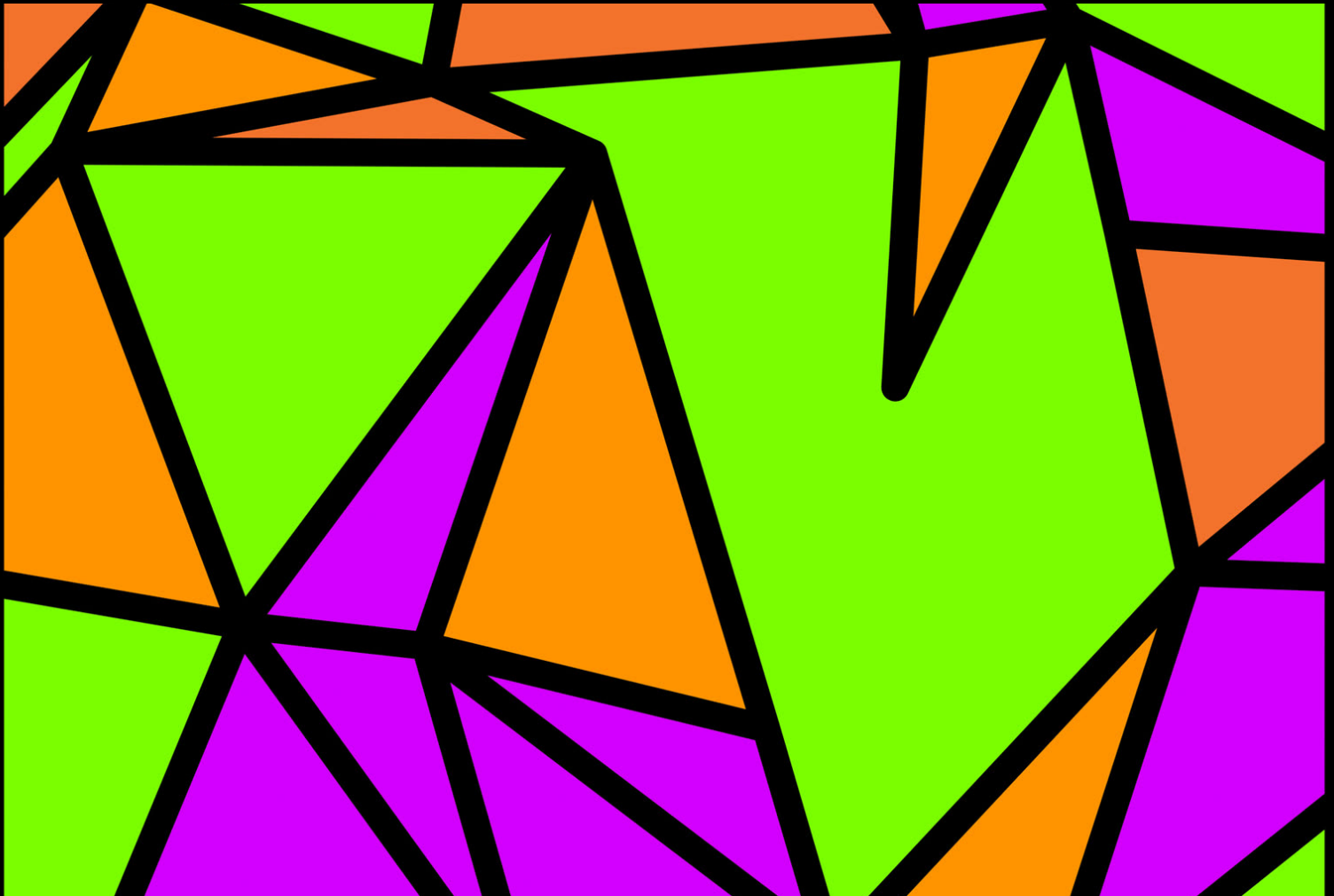




A CRISIS OF MORAL CREDIBILITY

THE CULTURAL FAIRNESS MODEL

Institutions do not act—people do

TOBIAS POST

Artist · Digital Light Art · Painting · Curatorial Projects

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ON POWER, AUTONOMY AND THE CRISIS OF MORAL CREDIBILITY OF CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

The cultural sector claims a special moral standing for itself. Hardly any other area of society reflects so intensively on power, justice, participation, diversity and social responsibility. Museums, art associations, cultural centres, funding programmes and cultural networks see themselves not only as producers and mediators of culture but also as places where society enlightens itself. They analyse power relations, criticise exclusions and formulate demands for openness, fairness and cultural freedom.

All the more remarkable is a blind spot that is only rarely the subject of systematic scrutiny within the cultural sector itself. While power relations in society are examined constantly, the power relations of the cultural sector are surprisingly often exempted from the same analysis. The institution observes society, but it only rarely observes itself.

Yet there is no convincing reason to assume that the basic mechanisms of human behaviour should be suspended in the cultural sector of all places. People strive for recognition. They secure positions. They defend influence. They develop loyalties, networks and affiliations. These dynamics are found in companies, parties, universities and associations. Why should they disappear where reputation, visibility and the authority to interpret culture are at stake?

In fact, much suggests the opposite. While economic organisations compete mainly for financial resources, cultural organisations compete for symbolic resources. Attention, prestige, recognition and cultural legitimacy are harder to measure than money, but no less effective. Precisely because they elude simple quantification, the mechanisms by which they are distributed often remain invisible. The result is a form of cultural power that is rarely spoken about and, for that very reason, works particularly effectively.

The real crisis of the cultural sector is therefore not primarily financial. It is a crisis of moral credibility.

It begins where cultural institutions confuse their own existence with their cultural mission.

Every organisation develops an instinct for self-preservation over time. That is neither surprising nor morally problematic. It only becomes problematic when securing its own significance gradually becomes more important than the

original purpose the organisation was founded to fulfil. Promoting culture turns into promoting the institution. Developing artists turns into developing organisational visibility. A means becomes an end.

This is exactly where the crisis of moral credibility of cultural institutions begins.

Most problematic structures do not arise from bad intentions. They arise from self-deception. Hardly any board deliberately decides to keep independent artists small. Hardly any curator deliberately decides to distribute visibility unfairly. Hardly any cultural manager deliberately decides to put self-interest above the cultural mission. Instead, justifications arise. One supports those with whom collaboration is easier. One recommends those one knows. One trusts those who are already part of one's own network. One tells oneself that this happens for reasons of quality. In fact, proximity, familiarity and loyalty often weigh more than quality. Precisely because these mechanisms are rarely conscious, they remain particularly effective.

There is a further, seldom named contradiction. Independent artists and institutional cultural workers often move in fundamentally different realities. The independent artist has to act like an entrepreneur. They bear the risks, build their own networks, are responsible for their own visibility and must legitimise their position again and again. Their autonomy is not a philosophical category but a precondition of their survival. The institution, by contrast, generates stability. It offers structures, budgets, responsibilities and organisational continuity. From this arise different ideas of success. While growing independence is often the real goal for the independent artist, the same independence can appear, within institutional logic, as a loss of attachment, influence or significance.

The real test for cultural institutions therefore does not begin with support. Support is comparatively easy. The real challenge begins where support has succeeded.

How does an institution react to people who become strong? How does it react to people who become independent? How does it react to people who no longer need to draw their legitimacy from the institution's recognition? How does it react to people who one day no longer need it?

At this point the rhetoric ends and the diagnosis begins.

For the maturity of a cultural institution is shown not by how it deals with dependence but by how it reacts to independence.

The immature institution experiences independence as a loss. It has invested and, consciously or unconsciously, expects a symbolic return. The success of the individual is ultimately meant to confirm the institution's significance. The more mature institution recognises in the same development the fulfilment of its actual mission. It measures its success not by the strength of its ties but by its ability to bring forth people who will one day no longer need those ties.

From this observation follows the Cultural Fairness Model.

It assesses cultural institutions not by their activity but by their relationship to the autonomy of others. Its yardstick is neither the number of projects nor the amount of funding nor the reach of public attention. Its yardstick is an institution's ability to bring forth cultural independence without subsequently appropriating it.

MATURITY LEVEL 0 – SELF-LEGITIMATION

At the lowest level, the institution needs culture above all to justify its own existence. Artists, projects and cultural achievements supply legitimacy, visibility and significance. The institution accumulates symbolic capital without bringing forth cultural independence to a comparable degree. Years later, people remember the house, the project or the platform, but hardly the people whose work formed the basis of this visibility. The institution grows. Those involved remain interchangeable.

MATURITY LEVEL 1 – CONTROLLED SUPPORT

The institution does genuinely support. It opens up opportunities, provides resources and fosters development. At the same time, this support remains tied to the existing order. Autonomy is supported as long as it does not call the institution's centrality into question. The artist may grow, but not too far. The individual's success is welcomed as long as it can be integrated into the institution's story. The institution fosters development but still expects symbolic belonging.

MATURITY LEVEL 2 – ACCEPTED INDEPENDENCE

The institution accepts independent developments. It no longer automatically experiences artists breaking away as a loss. Nevertheless, the wish remains to stay part of their story. Independence is respected but not yet actively pursued. The institution begins to allow autonomy but has not yet fully put its own significance into perspective.

MATURITY LEVEL 3 – GENERATIVE SUPPORT

At this level, the institution measures its success by the development of others. It no longer sees itself as the centre of cultural development but as temporary infrastructure. Its aim is not to preserve ties but to bring forth abilities. People are meant to become stronger than the structure that supports them. The institution accepts that its greatest success lies in the emergence of actors who will one day no longer need it.

MATURITY LEVEL 4 – CULTURAL SOVEREIGNTY

The highest form of cultural maturity begins where the institution has put its own significance into perspective. It no longer needs a symbolic return. It supports development even when no visibility whatsoever arises from it for itself. It helps not in order to preserve significance but because development is its actual mission. The institution does not regard itself as the owner of cultural achievements, nor as the centre of cultural processes. It sees itself as a tool that may be used and is meant to become superfluous.

The real edge of this model, however, lies in the fact that it does not only assess institutions.

For institutions do not act. People do.

Every decision about visibility, support, recommendation, exclusion or recognition is made by particular people. The institution often serves merely as a projection surface onto which individual responsibility is offloaded. Anyone who demands institutional fairness must therefore be prepared to put the same questions to themselves.

The moral quality of cultural work is not decided by how consistently someone criticises power in others. It is decided by how they handle power as soon as they have it themselves. The true test of cultural integrity lies not in demanding support but in supporting others when no advantage arises from it for oneself.

What matters is not one's attitude towards those who are weaker, but one's attitude towards people who become more successful, more visible or more independent than oneself.

Here lies perhaps the most uncomfortable insight of the entire model. Many people see themselves as victims of institutional structures as long as they themselves have little influence. But as soon as they have resources, attention, contacts or decision-making power, they often reproduce exactly those mechanisms they previously criticised. The line therefore does not run between institution and artist, not between board and member, not between curator and exhibitor. The line runs within each individual.

Every board faces this question. Every curator. Every cultural manager. Every artist. Every jury member. Every funder. Every person who has resources, attention or access at their disposal.

The real challenge is not to recognise power in others. The real challenge is to recognise one's own interests when they disguise themselves as support, commitment, responsibility or cultural mission.

Ultimately, the entire model can be reduced to a single question:

How do I react to the success of a person whom I will one day no longer be able to control, influence or use for my own significance?

Where this question can be answered honestly, cultural fairness begins. Where it is avoided, the work on it begins.

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