Through the Generations (Aberdeen, 28 May 25)

Aberdeen / Scotland, May 28, 2025
Deadline: Mar 31, 2025

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Art History and its Disconformities. This workshop aims to reassess the notion of “generations” and their relevance for systematizing and structuring the production and reception of modern and contemporary art.

In public discourse, the notion of “generations” as a critical category or characteristic is acute (Filby 2023). More than ever before, micro-units of generational belonging (Gen Z / Gen Alpha and Beta) are shaping individual perceptions of cultural identity. With people living longer lives, intergenerational cooperation between boomers, Gen X and Millennials are predicted to become ever more prevalent. The “three generations” rule (or myth) of memory and inheritance is undergoing expansion. Self-fulfilling prophecies around ageism (in both directions) are rampant and concerning.

Such currency of ageing and (inter-)generational awareness has been strangely underplayed in recent art historical discourse. In 1924, art historian Wilhelm Pinder published an influential essay on the “Problem of Generations in the History of European Art”. Here, he argued that the history of art is not merely an independent development of styles, but structured and shaped by coherent age cohorts – generations – that bring about innovation and change. His hypotheses, inspired by the work of sociologist Karl Mannheim, clearly resonated with his own time with German history marked by a series of seismic generational ruptures. Pinder’s association with Nazi politics surely had its share in discrediting the concept. Meanwhile, in avant-garde art-making, the parental generation was viewed with increased suspicion, leading to an overthrowing of perceived convention and tradition.

The notion of a “generational identity” has been critiqued for constructing (and stereotyping) demographic subgroups, at the cost of an analysis of broader societal factors that govern the life of a whole population (Costanza 2023). “Generations” were dismissed as suggesting an “archetypal cycle” of history that follows the “rhythm of biological reproduction” (Williams 2009). In doing so, the concept subscribes to a language of development and linearity (Jaeger 1985) – patterns of thought that are anathema to many art historians today, who regard them as remnants of a colonialist and heteronormative politics of time. Indeed, since 1996 feminist art historian Griselda Pollock, among others, has been calling for a de-hierarchising of the discipline through the more topographic, levelling effects of generations and geographies.

This workshop aims to reappraise the relevance and operational power of generation as an analytical category. We aim to explore how the concept of “generations” allows renewed, structural

reflections on career trajectories – for example mid-career moment – in their intersectional complexities, and experiences.

Possible topics and themes to address include:
- Reflections on career trajectories, for example the “mid-career moment” or “retrospective” gallery convention in its gendered complexities.
- Migration and memory, for example “second” and “third generation” descendent experiences.
- Genealogies, bloodlines and their discontents.
- Statistical analysis of “mass data” and artistic production within broader sociological analyses of culture.
- Notions of artistic legacy, estates and inheritance.

Please send abstracts of 250 words and biographies of 100 words to Dr Hans Hönes, Dr Barbara Barreiro Léon and Dr Catriona McAra (University of Aberdeen) by 31 March 2025 with the e-mail title ‘Through the Generations’: catriona.mcara@abdn.ac.uk

The George Washington Wilson Centre for Art and Visual Culture aims to offer a modest contribution towards travel and accommodation expenses for selected external speakers.

Select Reference List

David P. Costanza, Cort W. Rudolph, Hannes Zacher, Are generations a useful concept?, Acta Psychologica, 241 (November 2023): https://doi.org/10.1016/j.actpsy.2023.104059

Eliza Filby, Generation Shift: How Generational Evolution is Changing the Way We Think, Work and Live. London: Publish Nation, 2023.

Marius Hentea, “The Problem of Literary Generations: Origins and Limitations.” Comparative Literature Studies 50: 4 (2013): 567–88. https://doi.org/10.5325/complitstudies.50.4.0567.

Hans Jaeger, “Generations in History,” History and Theory 24:3 (October 1985): 273-292. https://doi.org/10.2307/2505170

Griselda Pollock ed., Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings. London and New York: Routledge, 1996.

Jeffrey J. Williams, “The Rise of the Theory Journal,” New Literary History, 40: 4, Tribute to Ralph Cohen (Autumn 2009): 683-702.

Reference:

CFP: Through the Generations (Aberdeen, 28 May 25). In: ArtHist.net, Feb 15, 2025 (accessed Nov 14, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/43956>.