

What comes after destruction?

Reconstruction. That's the obvious answer.

But between the two, something happens that we tend to overlook. Before the first wall is rebuilt and a new plan is drawn, the future has already been decided.

Who can return? Who still has a claim to the land? What will be remembered? Whose vision of the future will prevail?

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In his book “On the Natural History of Destruction”, W. G. Sebald examined how photographs of German cities in the aftermath of the Second World War helped shape a cultural narrative.

Before. After.

Destruction. Reconstruction.

Sebald observes that, in these images, the ruins no longer appear as “the horrifying end of a collective aberration”, but rather as “something more like the first stage of a brave new world”.

A sequence emerges:

Guilt. Destruction. Reconstruction. Progress.

Bombs are architects' best friends, they say.

A tabula rasa. A fresh start. A chance for radical utopias.

But destruction does not erase what came before. There is no zero hour.

Metaxy insists on the possibility of a future. But it rejects the notion that the future begins by erasing the past.

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Metaxy:

The ancient Greek word for ‘between’ or ‘in-between’.

In this exhibition, Metaxy describes a state in which the old order has broken down but the new one has not yet taken its place.

Reconstruction begins long before construction. It starts with decisions about who can return, who can claim a place and which aspects of the past will enter the future.

The exhibition explores these questions through three dimensions:

Houses. Soils. Times.

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In houses, people eat, argue, sleep, love, die.

Destroying a house means destroying more than just walls; social relations and ways of life disappear with them. Rebuilding the walls alone cannot restore what was lost.

And what about soil?

Soil is never just the ground beneath our feet. It is part of an ecological system and contested territory.

Who owns the land? Who lived there? Who was displaced?

A destroyed place is not an empty site. The idea of a tabula rasa is a fiction.

And what about time?

After destruction, not everyone lives in the same time. While some are already planning for the future, others are still searching for missing relatives and friends.

The past, present and future overlap. The exhibition makes this overlap spatially visible in the walls that now run through the Akademie der Künste.

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This was once the site of residential buildings along the former Brückenallee. People lived here, including Jewish residents and property owners. The Nazis dispossessed, deported and murdered them.

After the war, the ruins were cleared away. Werner Düttmann's Akademie der Künste was then built on the same site.

The Hansaviertel became a symbol of democratic West Berlin, and the Akademie der Künste a place dedicated to artistic freedom. But this new beginning has a history, too. The past was literally underneath.

This is why the exhibition begins with the Akademie der Künste itself. Before examining destruction elsewhere, we consider the ground on which we stand.

For Metaxy, the walls of the former residential buildings have been reconstructed and superimposed onto Düttmann's architecture.

This palimpsest embodies the exhibition's spatial thesis: histories can coexist without erasing each other or dissolving into one another.

One history does not have to disappear for another to be seen.

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This may sound self-evident. In Germany today, however, it is not.

Since the Hamas terrorist attack on 7 October and the subsequent war in Gaza, we have found ourselves caught in a troubling logic, as if acknowledging Palestinian suffering in Gaza somehow diminishes the horror of 7 October. Or as if remembering the victims of 7 October required us to look away from Gaza.

We can acknowledge different experiences without confusing facts or blurring responsibility.

This is where our responsibility as the Akademie der Künste begins.

Art does not ask which suffering counts more. It does not calculate a tolerable middle ground.

It can reveal what political arguments often reduce to mere positions. Art allows us to perceive. To differentiate. To listen.

However, political decisions are not for art to make. They must emerge through political negotiation about how we live together.

For that, we need freedom: The freedom to speak. The freedom to disagree. To recognise differences and reconsider our own judgements.

Metaxy is also about defending a democratic space in which conflicts can remain political.

Maintaining an open space does not mean that anything goes. It requires us to distinguish between criticism and hatred, disagreement and discrimination, and between exhibiting a work and endorsing the views of its creator.

Openness itself is a stance, particularly at a time when authoritarian forces are once again attempting to equate culture with national identity and decide who belongs and who does not.

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The works in this exhibition come from twelve countries and regions. We are not comparing these conflicts. Their causes, histories and responsibilities are all fundamentally different.

What connects them here are the questions that arise in the aftermath of destruction:

What can justice mean when what has been lost cannot be restored?

Which knowledge and ways of life should we carry forward?

And how can we rebuild without destroying the cultural and ecological foundations on which that future depends?

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So what is Metaxy?

Not the middle. Not compromise. Not reconciliation.

It's the space we keep open for each other.

Metaxy.

The in-between.

*Anh-Linh Ngo, Vice-President of the Akademie der Künste, at the opening of the exhibition "Metaxy : Between Destruction and Reconstruction" on September 9, 2026, at the Akademie der Künste on Hanseatenweg.*