

# Institutions as Semantic Forms

## Examples of Self-Organized Practices in Switzerland

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*With reference to different examples of self-organized Swiss art projects, this article highlights how the ‘institution’—especially Kunsthallen—can be a (literal) infrastructure for running a project. As such, institutions act more as semantic forms. However, this does not mean that they are merely simulated or faked, but rather that these semantic forms serve as vessels for artistic ends of social connections and imagination of production, which ultimately create something concerned with institutional imagination.*

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“As everything exists.”<sup>1</sup> With regard to Swiss artist duo Haus am Gern, art critic Annelise Zwez highlights a crucial aspect (Zwez 2001): roles and attitudes of contemporary artists have become diverse and convoluted to such a degree that conventional ideas of identity and authorship are in constant transgression. Everything exists. As, for example, Haus am Gern is not only two individual artists (Rudolf Steiner and Barbara Meyer Cesta) working with diverse media, but also a label, a publisher, a former ‘bed and breakfast,’<sup>2</sup> and from 1997 until 2000 they ran *kunsthale roggwil-wynau*. The latter, a self-organized project space situated in a former kiosk, led to over 20 site-specific performances, installations and lectures by national and international artists. Kunsthale was located in a former industrial area in a rural no man’s land near a small town in Swiss canton Berne, where the artists have also resided in their former manager’s villa. Not only that, the project had neither long-term public funding, nor corporate structure

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1 — The original German quote reads: “Denn alles gibt es.” Translation by the author.

2 — The bed and breakfast was actually the precursor of the kunsthale.

or official mandates, while the spelling error in particular—Kunsthalle is usually written with double ‘l’—points out how the whole endeavor is characterized by an infidelity towards usual institutional parameters.

Still, this is a striking example of how the notion of an institution can also be outlined: it’s a vessel for agency. Extending their activity beyond conventional media and at *Kunsthale* also enacting roles as “hosts, curators, even directors” helped Haus am Gern to avoid hierarchical structures, “which would allow certain things and deny others.” One could argue that such projects are just claims, brands or show-offs, but Haus am Gern retrospectively admit that their attitude was not about making fun of established institutions, it was more about their self-empowered demarcation and highlighting their notion of immediate producing: “Here we are and these are the possibilities that we have and generate” (Haus am Gern, 2018).

The notion of an institution is thus not to be conceived as a privilege of an existing politically or publicly assigned site, but more as a vessel of self-determined production for artists and cultural producers in their respective self-organized practices.

### **Institutions as a form of infrastructure**

To elaborate more on this idea of empowerment and self-determination, I want to introduce a twist concerning the notion of infrastructure. As they provide staff, and technical and financial support, classical art institutions (Museums, Kunsthallen, Kunstvereine, etc.) are usually associated as being equipped with infrastructural resources. But phrased literally, ‘infra-structure’ is what links together at its base various elements, forces and people. ‘Infra’ comes from the Latin ‘below’ and a ‘structure’ is something that joins together. My argument is that institutions are not only equipped with infrastructure but that their semantic appearance—the sign ‘Kunsthalle’ e.g.—is an infrastructure; that is, something that joins together.

This links to psychoanalytic thoughts about an *Eigenname* (proper name). As individuals (or, in our case, self-organized art projects) are always reverberated by their own indefiniteness (as art projects don’t have a service mandate), they look for stability and orientation through directing them to a “privileged Other,” where a stable and reliable *Eigenname* comes

into play (Widmer, 2016, p. 101)<sup>3</sup>—or, in our case, the art institution. To refer to an art institution is a means to creating a fundament of self-empowered activity and embodying a project. It is a glue to work together. Haus am Gern stressed they “just wanted to live like that, work like that and have events like that” and to realize things in accordance with their own sensation. Thus, this idea of the institution as infrastructure sets it apart from the sociological definition of an institution as a pre-existing hegemonial force that creates order and rather highlights the capacity of agents or individuals to form and create their own manifestations. But what does this idea of institution as self-determined infrastructure mean exactly and which content—or, in the words of philosopher Ernst Cassirer, which “mental energies” (Cassirer, 1923, p. 79)<sup>4</sup>—is linked to the sign ‘institution’ when it is to be understood as a vessel of agency?

### **Social connections and community**

Appropriation and usage of the sign ‘institution’ was already executed by a ‘first wave’ of institutional critique. For example, Swiss conceptual artist H.R. Fricker hung 1971 posters—consisting of an empty square—in the public space, declaring this to be a “fictitious Kunsthalle,” in order to highlight the rather unsatisfying cultural–political situation for young artists (Landert, 2012, p. 16). Three years earlier, Marcel Broodthaers famously opened his fictitious *Musée d’Art Moderne, Département des Aigles* in Brussels and showcased the institution’s normative power in terms of separating valuable objects from the profane. In contrast, the ‘second wave’ of institutional critique in the 1990s and positions like those of Andrea Fraser, Fred Wilson or Renée Green are often seen as offering a much more “differentiated analysis of institutional structures,” as they not only use

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3 — The original German quote reads: “ein privilegierter Anderer.” Translation by the author.

4 — The original German quote reads: „Unter einer ‚symbolischen Form‘ soll jede Energie des Geistes verstanden werden, durch welche ein geistiger Bedeutungsgehalt an ein konkretes sinnliches Zeichen geknüpft und diesem Zeichen innerlich zugeeignet wird.” Translation by the author.

the semantics of the institution but profoundly probe and intervene into organizational institutional settings (Möntmann, 2017, p. 72).

The example from Haus am Gern (not necessarily intentionally) refers back to strategies of the first wave of institutional critique, as it is not concerned with organizational analysis but more with semantic usages of the sign. In contrast to the first wave, these institutional infrastructures are not primarily about critique or subversion, but more about what potential the sign ‘institution’ can have. Therefore, the idea of ‘institution as semantic form’ is about creating self-determined content for the sign ‘institution’: creating new semantics of what ‘institution’ can mean. In the case of Haus am Gern, it was to create social connections—or as Haus am Gern articulate it, “We didn’t have an art scene, we had a circle of friends” (Haus am Gern, 2018). The publicity of the *Kunsthale* was thus linked to a special condition: people attending the openings were highly selective as one was only allowed to view shows by invitation. In addition, when invited one was also asked to bring along a friend. This system was continued during the next openings, where all the names of those invited were printed respectively on the invitation card. Therefore, the institution as an infrastructure is more a social kit, a constitution of “complicity” (Haus am Gern, 2018). Although they classified their guests—‘A-guests’ encompassed people who were artistically active at *Kunsthale*; ‘B-guests’ were curatorial collaborators; ‘C-guests’ were “consuming” people; and ‘D-guests’ were “wild” and just onlookers (Haus am Gern, 1997)—Haus am Gern stressed their attitude of solidarity. Additionally, they noted all the people ever present as guests on invitation cards and had entries in a guestbook, which can be interpreted as the creation of an ‘imaginative community.’<sup>5</sup>

### Social energetic situation

A very recent example of a similar semantic appearance is *Kunsthalle Tropical*. From 2012 onwards, this project was a geographical spot in the

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5 — ‘Imagined community’ served anthropologist Benedict Anderson as a tool to describe how a socially constructed group perceives itself as a coherent and bound entity. See Anderson 1983.



FIG. 1  
Signpost on the trail up to Piz Uter.  
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northeast of Iceland located-precisely at 65.33786° N 15.85229° W. At the end of September 2018 it was re-initiated at Piz Uter, a 2905-meter-high mountain peak in the Swiss Alps of Engadine. The endeavor played with the imagination, as neither places had architectural infrastructures to showcase classical art pieces. During the first phase the project resulted in various ephemeral interventions and a series of postcards by different artist and non-artists. Its founder, Swiss artist Marcel Meury, admits that his working method transcends classical roles and occasionally he is an artist, an organizer, a mediator, almost “everything” (Meury, 2018), but in a similar manner as Haus am Gern, it is not about staging his single authorship, but more about the creation of a social space by means of a Kunsthalle.

This social space is constituted by several material framings. A telescope was placed in Zuoz (a small town in the valley) pointing directly to the peak, and official signposts were installed on the hiking trail. Nevertheless, Meury stresses that his main goal is being in exchange with different people and thereby activating energies—of creation and creativity. For example, hiking to the peak on September 30, 2018 was an integral part of the whole project; it would not have been sufficient merely to declare the peak a Kunsthalle. The effort, the sweat, and one hiker not being able to continue, were crucial in his understanding of what a Kunsthalle can be. These social and energetic efforts create a base and possibilities for future artistic productions, within which the invited artists can relate and refer to, as well as situating their work in. It is a socially induced imagining of what a production can be.<sup>6</sup>

### **A Twitter account and a boxing fight**

The notion of the institution as something that enacts a certain sociality is similar to contemporary strategies of the ‘real’ Kunsthallen,

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6 — This emphasis on a mutual physicality and a radically open production mode that is linked to a social context adds an interesting supplement to the notion of relational aesthetics proposed by Nicolas Bourriaud where production is ultimately likened to human relations and their social context.



FIG. 2  
Kunsthalle Tropical-hike up to Piz Uter in  
September 2018.  
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loosening classical ways of presenting material art pieces and stressing performative or discursive character. For example, *European Kunsthalle* has existed since 2002, mostly without definite architectural settings. Rather than pursuing a local, political anchoring, the *European Kunsthalle* strives mostly for a “performative presence” that “exists wherever its projects take place” and thereby tests adequate engagement in social debates (European Kunsthalle, 2018). Another example is Kunsthalle Zürich—led by Daniel Baumann since 2015—which shows an increased interest in knowledge exchange and local involvement, evidenced by the implementation of the Zurich-based reading group *Theory Tuesdays*<sup>7</sup>

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7 — *Theory Tuesdays* is a participatory reading group that is led by the principle of ‘Each One, Teach One.’ It is run by Zurich-based American artist Philip Matesic. <http://theorytuesdays.com>.

(2017–2018) or the collaboration with *openki.net*,<sup>8</sup> and is proof of where Kunsthallen premises are transformed into a place for non-hierarchical learning.

But what *Kunsthalle Tropical*—as an artistic endeavor—distinguishes is that there is no clear hierarchy in terms of medium: the Kunsthalle is a hike, a plan to artificially trigger an avalanche, but also a very selectively curated twitter account or a boxing fight.<sup>9</sup> There is also no clear public guidance, and Meury’s intention is not to mediate a clearly outlined content. This opaque character is—for him—a vessel to imagine what is not yet defined, or in the utopian words of a twitter post by Kunsthalle Tropical: “In 10 years there will be no more studios and exhibitions, there will be only fluid artsy landscape” (Kunsthalle Tropical, 2018). Conceiving the institution as infrastructure opens up the understanding that institutions can work as self-determined forms in the service of social connecting and an open imagination of production.

These effects—a self-determination that fosters social connections and creates new ways of imagination with regard to production—were also true for *Polstergruppe* (1986–1996), consisting of M.S. Bastian, Michael Hertig and Lorenzo Meyer, which later became *Kunstmuseum* and *Kunstmauseum* (accompanied by Edi Aschwanden and Urs Dickerhof). To them, the lack of a proper institution in the Swiss city Biel was the motivation to run their own project and seek opportunities to articulate their proper artistic production. Bastian, Hertig and Meyer were graphic design students but working only on applied graphic design was not enough for them, so they wanted a place to imagine their artistic production anew. In the context of their project they would freely experiment with cheap materials, reference Dada notions of ‘Anti-Kunst’ and integrate an untypical comic style. At the same time, all these activities were experienced as solidary, as “older people” were also taken seriously and could show their

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8 — *Openki.net* is a platform that enables anybody to offer a course, teach a method or initiate a discussion round. <https://openki.net>.

9 — Meury was fighting against Kunsthalle 3000 in Vienna on June 27, 2016. Kunsthalle Tropical is mostly privately financed, whereas he cross-subsidises his artistic activity through a technical post in a Swiss Museum.



work. A letter from a collaborating artist outlines how “the term trust is taken very seriously. It is to be experienced: Togetherness leads to success. Not to money but to satisfaction and joy.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Institutional contingency**

Obviously, these dimensions of practice—the existence of an Eigenname, the fostering of social contacts and the imagination of production—are not only limited to the semantic articulations of institutions, but basically a characteristic of self-organized working methods, per se. Self-organized projects need an eigenname-horizon which enables them to act. For example, Berne based project *transform* (since 2012) worked at different places as an ‘interim use’ project and applied a strict interdisciplinary approach to elaborate on interventionist working methods, which aimed at constantly transforming physical and social spaces. The Eigenname as transformation—‘transform’—thus became the main impression in the project, as theater dramaturg Nicolette Kretz remarked in an essay about the project: “The temporary *transform* never falls into a daily routine, it represents always a rupture” (Kretz, 2015, p. 34).

In addition, self-organized projects are generally often realized alongside a lot of social exchange that can even advance moments of exclusiveness, as Kretz remarks: “Later in the evening the entry door got closed and one could only party on if already inside. [...] One did want to make use of the gained privilege and didn’t embark right of to the next party” (Kretz, 2015, p. 35). Being at a self-organized project is linked to being socially involved. It is definitely not something that is strictly and only positive. *Kunsthale roggwil-wynau* was criticized because of its socially exclusive mode,<sup>11</sup> as projects with a high social proximity can have contentious moments with regard to public funding because their socially

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10 — The original German quote reads: «Das Wort: Vertrauen wird sehr ernst genommen. So ist zu erfahren: Miteinander führt zu Erfolg. Nicht zu Geld, aber zu Zufriedenheit.» Letter printed in M.S. Bastian/Isabelle L. 2018, p. 97.

11 — They took up the criticism in a self-written art critique in *Kunstbulletin*, stating the project failed due to their “rigorous regime” (Haus am Gern 2000).

proximate character is read as private and therefore not worth being supported by public money.<sup>12</sup>

### Questioning institutional ends

I would like to stress that the social proximity and even more so the intentions and imagination of the production of self-organized semantic institutions is crucial when it comes to questioning ideas of institutions—something Portuguese anthropologist João de Pina-Cabral called “Institutional finality.” De Pina-Cabral concluded that all different notions of the term ‘institutions’ always implied that institutions have a certain purpose: they “serve a finality, and exist because of that finality” (de Pina-Cabral, 2011, p. 481). For classical art institutions, this might be the presentation of a period in art history or showcasing contemporary art.

An example where such questioning became very pivotal is the first<sup>13</sup> *Kunsthalle Luzern* (1989 to 1993). It was initiated by artist and art historian Stefan Banz, and co-realized with artists Stephan Wittmer, Erwin Hofstetter and Bruno Müller-Meyer. Internally they had a clear structure (Banz was the [paid] curator, Hofstetter acted as president, and Müller-Meyer dealt with finances), but they didn’t enact prescribed, professional roles. Instead, they embodied an informal proximity and stayed in constant reflection; a rather challenging task, as “each company would have had supervisors, we were just more or less close friends” (Hofstetter, 2018). Being public to them was a venture. They were highly exposed. Banz and Hofstetter admit that some people were “resisting” (Banz, 1998) or even “hostile” (Hofstetter, 2018) towards their endeavor. The proclamation of a *Kunsthalle* was an ambitious task.

The crucial thing is that establishing a ‘proper’ institution with political representation and a mandate was, according to Hofstetter, not their

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12 — For example, in the early 2000s, Basel cultural funding agents neglected the application for the financial support of some local projects as, to them, they were too private. See documents in the archive of the ministry of education of Basel-Stadt.

13 — The existing *Kunsthalle* is the ‘second’ *Kunsthalle* and was established in 1996 by the union “Luzerner Ausstellungsraum.”

priority; rather, they wanted to highlight debates about curating and the (financial) condition of exhibitions. This circle of friends thus pursued explicit intentions to “de-hierarchize the context” (Banz, 1998), realizing shows revolving around the role of the curator and exhibition making as art. For example, “Der Anbau des Museums (Cultivating the Museum)” from 1992, integrated persons and things of different order besides established curators like Harald Szeemann, theoreticians like Jaques Derrida or art critics like Theo Kneubühler, and a real garden by gardener Wada Jossen. Additionally, as official supporters (e.g. Kanton Lucerne) were rather reserved concerning structural subsidies—they saw existing museums as “Leitinstitut” (Kramis, 1993)—Kunsthalle tested alternative ways of financing through partnerships with donors, selling painted portraits of donors or partnerships with companies (insurance or SWATCH<sup>14</sup>).

Again the elements already mentioned at other self-organized projects—a close social proximity and the imagination of production, or in this case what curating and production of exhibitions means—were also prevalent. Additionally, it is this second, imaginative aspect that even serves as a means to unravel classical purposes of institutions. Through their open character—their necessity of an ‘Eigenname’—they are precisely placed to shed light on the contingent character of institutions. For in the case of Kunsthalle Luzern, the imaginative capacities revolved around not only debates of curating and exhibition making, but also a very general aspect of institutional purposes: the degree of locality.

Although Jean-Christophe Ammann ran the local museum from 1968 to 1977 through a vivid engagement with local artists, his successor, Martin Kunz, did not follow the same orientation. So the first action in the prelude of a new Kunsthalle was an explicit protest against Kunz, as he offended local artists with a statement during an annual local exhibition (‘Weihnachtsausstellung’) claiming that a serious local art scene didn’t exist in Lucerne. As Erwin Hofstetter today recalls, Müller-Meyer and Wittmer

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14 — Although in discussion with management, this partnership was not realized. SWATCH estimated the surplus of an exhibition context as too limited. For example Kunsthalle Bern was initiated in 1908 by GSMBA Section Berne, the local artists’ union.

then published a manifesto (“69 title for culture putsch”) and a public letter in a “juvenile-brisk” manner (Hofstetter, 2018). Their demand was that “professional and high-quality” exhibitions were realized, and would include local artists. To explicitly use the semantic sign of an institution was essential in order to valorize their own position. Founding a Kunsthalle was their standard, and they explicitly didn’t want to be ‘just’ an art space or an artist’s initiative.

## Opening up

Although the institutional end of locality is not something completely new, it is precisely the fact that no political mandate or structure covered this circle of friends and thus the literal exposition of (subjective) intentions were prevailing, which enables the imaginative potential of new institutional finalities to open up. This is a horizon of what an institution can be, which mostly vanishes over time, as “institutions, when established, try to erase their [...] misty core and build monuments to themselves in the form of solid spaces, rules of behaviour and protocols” (Bojana Kunst, 2017).

So although self-organized semantic forms of institutions are not constituted by political mandates, it is exactly this self-determining character, the infrastructural effect and thus this imaginative character that highlights the contingency of existing institutional purposes and keeps alternatives possible. Interestingly, after the end of *Kunsthalle Luzern*, public discussions wanted the project to be continued insofar as new museum director, Martin Schwander, might integrate the “knowledge and network” of the four Kunsthalle founders “from time to time” into his official programming. In particular, their ability to raise money on their own and realize well-received exhibitions on a low budget (Kramis, 1993) was seen as a relevant achievement. Considering the fact that Kunsthallen historically were initiated by artists in the late nineteenth century/early twentieth century for their needs and became over time highly institutionalized through the respective councils, I would conclude that the notion of institutions as semantic forms is an empowering tool of re-appropriation and opening up to what they were already striving for historically: self-determined ways of dealing with art. \*

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