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A RECESS OF WATER IN THE LAKE
The Activities of the first Kunsthalle Lucerne: An Overview[1]

The first Kunsthalle in Lucerne, Switzerland, was founded in June 1989 by Bruno Müller-Meyer, Erwin Hofstetter, Stephan Wittmer, and myself. We were a group of young artists who wanted to create a forum where artistic concepts could be visualized in the way we thought appropriate. Founding a non-commercial institution of this sort was, of course, bound up with many difficulties. We did not belong, for example, to any established art lobby and had none of the usual financial backers. In addition to this, the local bureaucracy attempted to block our project from the very beginning by consistently refusing all our requests for financial support. Even part of the local press (the "Luzerner Zeitung," formerly "Vaterland") joined in this well-oiled establishment routine. But the unshaken conviction that quality is not dependent upon established credentials and public poses, but in dedicated conviction and effective action, inspired our enthusiasm and encouraged us to dare the impossible. The first Kunsthalle in Lucerne came to be. In a certain sense, it was comparable to a chamber play. It operates with a simple, functional, but relatively large space, is supported by a wide and diverse patronage, and is led by the initiative of a small crew who are intensely interested in international as well as regional artistic developments. Upon this basis we attempted to bring together many different levels, to exhibit young as well as established artists, and to develop new concepts and forms of exhibition. Especially interesting in this context was the question of the interdependence of artist, art theorist, and curator. What significance must be given to the "staging" of works of art in an exhibition? How important is the publication of texts about art? It is our conviction that new artistic ideas are not the sole product of the artist as he or she is classically defined, but much rather the outcome of many different components that blend together.

The first Kunsthalle Lucerne was officially opened on March 1, 1990 in a temporary space on the Bürgenstrasse 9. The first exhibition was *Die Milchstrasse* (The Milkyway) by Theo Kneubühler (*1945) and Rolf Winnewisser (*1949). This cooperative effort became a key for our activities. It began with an idea that I presented to Theo Kneubühler for an exhibition in which the question of the relation between word and image was to be thematized. Neither word nor image were to be given a subordinate role

in the sense that either language would comment upon the image or the image would merely illustrate language, text, or word. Theo Kneubühler is a sculptor, an art critic, and theoretician of perception and visual awareness. As response, he wrote *"Präsenz der Zeugen"* (Presence of the Witnesses), which was a kind of plastic construction in language. Kneubühler took everyday things out of their normal perceptual dimension, their embeddedness in reality and transformed them into sequences of linguistic images that could then be reconstructed into imaginative, musical word-constructions. Thus were created oral word-statues that could encounter each other in the form of thought-pictures in the open roomlessness of the blank paper.

Kneubühler sent his work to Paris, to the painter Rolf Winnewisser in order to inspire his friend to create a visual work of poetry. Winnewisser attempted to closely follow the inner tones and sounds of Kneubühler's texts and to respond to them with image-poems and word-drawings. There arose between the two artists an ongoing word-image-dialogue, which became each time more intense and autonomous. Thus uncountable texts, drawings, fragments of words and images came into being. These then created the basis for the publication *"Die Milchstrasse"* (The Milky Way) as well as for the spatializing of word and image as exhibition together with all the accompanying detours, additions, subtractions, and displacing.

The drawings of the words and the wording of the pictures on the walls, the roof, and the floor of the Kunsthalle were not only a movement in space, but a movement of space itself; namely, a movement of space back into our perception and our thinking, into the undetermined gaps and breaks that stimulate consciousness. A line at the edge of the picture, at the edge of the word, a significant moment. An edge-like image of the line, a word in the image of the sign. Two unities branched into the one another. And all of us who saw it and read it, who stood there and felt the tension became witnesses to this "paradictic" pictorialness of reading and inscription of seeing.

Another important exhibition was *Autoritratto del Blu in Prussia* (Self-Portrait of Blue in Prussia) that took place one year later, from April 6 to May 18, 1991, in our new location on the Bruchstrasse 14–16. The exhibition was organized by Johannes Gachnang. For a long time, we had been concerned with the current and also delicate question of how to deal with the concept of "avant-garde" and those works of art that are given that name. The artistic avant-garde, up to its alleged end some years ago, had always attempted to make a certain point, a special line of visual knowledge manifest in order

to discover a unique and heretofore unknown potentiality of seeing and thinking. In opposition to this programmatic stance we have today a more open point of view. In the 60's we tended to believe that works of art could only communicate with enter into relation with similar works. Today, we are ready to accept the fact that a heretofore inconceivable encounter or confrontation between widely different works of art can discover unsuspected aspects and features. Of course, this has enormous consequences for the task and the self-understanding of the curator. It was precisely these questions that we wanted to explicitly thematize with our first exhibition in our new location. For this reason, we were very lucky to have Johannes Gachnang (1939–2005), the former curator of the Kunsthalle in Bern to act as visiting curator in Lucerne. The exhibition *Bilderstreit* that Gachnang, together with Sigfried Gohr (*1949), set up in the convention center of Cologne, Germany, in 1989 had already thematized this explosive issue. Gachnang and Gohr brought together works from very different contexts whose only common denominator was that they were all created at the same time. This made the exhibition especially controversial and challenging. Three fourths of the exhibited works came from artists of the later avant-garde who in the recent past and even into the present have struggled against each other for the dominance of their individual artistic conceptions and programs. Gachnang's dialogues and polylogues were in view of this situation controversial, challenging, and rebellious confrontations of different artistic concepts. His arrangements appealed to the actual seeing, sensing, and felling of the visitors and less to historically determined agreement. Cerebral and retinal works faced each other without mediation and together challenged the viewer to perceive art differently.

This was also the idea behind Gachnang's exhibition in the new Kunsthalle Lucerne, *Autoritratto del Blu in Prussia*. He thematized these issues by means of a selection of drawings, pastels, watercolors, and graphic works from the circle around Georg Baselitz (*1938), Markus Lüpertz (*1941), Eugen Schönebeck (*1936), Antonius Höckelmann (1937–2000), and others that reflected the intellectual mood in Berlin during the 60's. Gachnang himself had witnessed the creation of many of these works and they made up important stages in the realization of his own exhibition plans at the Kunsthalle in Bern from 1974 to 1982. In Lucerne, he juxtaposed these works with those of Stanley Brouwn (1935–2017), Donald Judd (1928–94), and On Kawara (1932–2014), that is, with the works of artists who were not painters and who worked with entirely different ideas such as conceptual art and minimal art. Also represented was Günter Brus (*1938), a former

leader of the so-called *Wiener Aktionismus* (Viennese action art). In the center of the exhibition, however, he placed the editions and multiples of Marcel Broodthaers (1924–76). For Gachnang, Broodthaers was the spiritual father of this generation of artists on account of his artistic intensity and his extraordinary power of integrating the two major conflicting camps in art, the Dionysian and Apollonian. For this reason, *Autoritratto del Blu in Prussia* was a concentrated and idealized form of *Bilderstreit*, that is, a simplified version of the much larger exhibition in Cologne. For the most part, it was limited to works in smaller format. But it was nonetheless an event that at once bundled together and at the same time disseminated in a dynamic and suspenseful encounter the different aesthetic concepts of the last thirty years. Walking through the hall, one had the feeling that what one previously saw and understood was constantly being displaced. Not only uncertainty was the result, but much rather a more careful, balanced, and differentiated way of thinking and seeing arose. For the newly discovered associated itself with what had previously been repressed. The classical avant-garde was roughly thrust into the present and supposedly unshakable judgments were subjected with uncontrollable inevitability to a kind of baroque dissolution.

In the first two years we also presented important artistic positions as solo exhibitions. For example, we exhibited the painters Jean-Frederic Schnyder (*1945), Niele Toroni (*1937), and Michael Reiter (*1952); the sculptor and draughtsman Leo Walz (*1945); and the two object artists Hannes Brunner (*1956) and Urs Frei(*1958). The latter, Urs Frei, who lives in Zürich, created an installation especially for the space of the Kunsthalle. The exhibition consisted for the most part of sixteen free-standing columns. Each one was made of plastic bottles that had been fit into one another. They were weighed down with cement, sprayed and smeared with paint, and placed in three rows to create a spatial ensemble that filled the entire room with light and color. This airy, seemingly dematerializing installation reminded one, among other things, of test tubes, licorice, brush handles or dildos. It was the attempt to thematize painting from a different perceptual structure and to at once crystalize it and dissolve it again into space by means of sculpture. Urs Frei's installation which was shown from June 1 to July 6, 1991, questioned the very position, the place of painting. Or, in other words, it pointed to the fact that painting is basically nothing more than a bundle of different traces and references, and that we finally cannot assign it any definite place or locate it in any clearly outlined historical tradition, since

its realization constantly displaces and changes its meaning. The very moment that it achieves significance and meaning and expressive power in a certain context it inexorably loses something of that which constitutes it, that which essentially belongs to it.

Upon the occasion of the Urs Frei exhibition we published a book with the title, *Texts on a Work of Art by Urs Frei*. It consists of articles by six different authors on one single work by the artist, which is reproduced in color on the cover. This little book was an attempt to raise two different questions at the same time. First, we were concerned with the question of the creativity and autonomy of a text "about" a work of art. And secondly, we were interested in the question of the viability of a work of art the moment when it is entirely left to itself without any discoverable point of reference.

The work of Urs Frei—a colored "cushion" hung on the wall—does not find itself, despite its solitary appearing on the wall, in a relationless vacuum. The authors, of course, knew not only this one work of the artist. They were acquainted with the artist's development and they knew the context in which the work arose. Still more, they knew how to create references themselves by means of historical, psychological or philosophical approaches to the work. And as soon as these texts accompany the "cushion," they become part of its existence. Singularity, or the absence of references, is therefore only apparent, for a work of art always has an environment and can only be perceived and transport contents, impressions, or feelings when it is embedded in a system of order or knowledge. In addition to this, a work of art even in its uniqueness is always already a product that arises only in the coming-together in the hands of the artist of what has happened, been experience, been used, been reflected upon etc.

But what then distinguishes, for example, Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919) from a text that is about a work of art? The fact that Duchamp's altered readymade depends on something that is already considered art (Leonardo da Vinci's famous painting *Mona Lisa*) points to the difficulty of any hierarchy between art and reflective, theoretical reception. They are both immediately dependent upon each other. Text about, or for art are for this reason often art texts which one must grant the same value as the work of art itself, at least to the extent that they have arisen from a creative act of the will. The supposedly secondary or derivative nature that one usually ascribes such texts affects every work of art from the very beginning. No artifact, if it is at all able to activate a receptive process, can escape the play of these forces of appropriation.

As already said, the first Kunsthalle Lucerne came from an artist's initiative and relies upon private financing, since it is not supported by the city or the canton of Lucerne. Our efforts to find sponsors have shown us that when it is a matter of larger sums of money, private businesses are more concerned with public appeal than artistic quality, which is something that can be measured in the radicality of an artistic intention. For these reasons, we were from the very beginning interested in basing our financial support upon a wide segment of the interested public. This seemed feasible because our yearly budget of about three hundred thousand Swiss Francs (including infrastructure) which might seem at first glance a stately sum, is in fact extremely modest in comparison to similar institutions.

Bruno Müller-Meyer was highly influential from the very beginning of the first Kunsthalle in developing innovative and unconventional financing activities. In 1989, for example, he gathered together one hundred supporters who were each willing to give one thousand Swiss Francs in order to finance the exhibition program for that year. Each of the supporters received a multiple by the Swiss artist Hugo Suter (1943–2013) and all were invited to a special benefit party. In two weeks, Müller-Meyer raised one hundred thousand Swiss Francs. In a similar action for the following year, Müller-Meyer, who is himself an accomplished painter, sought out one hundred people who pledged money to the Kunsthalle in return for sitting for a portrait (acrylic on canvas, 40 x 30 cm). The project was an immense effort, for Müller-Meyer had to paint one portrait almost every three days throughout the entire year! One portrait cost three thousand Swiss Francs, two thousand of which went to the Kunsthalle. Müller-Meyer made all the personal contacts himself and arranged with every single person a live-sitting. Almost all the persons bought the portrait and it was thereby taken up into the series Portraits of Supporters of the Kunsthalle which was publicly exhibited in November 1991.
With this second financing activity, Bruno Müller-Meyer and the Kunsthalle not only financed the yearly program of the Kunsthalle and contributed to the income of the artist himself, but also mede the social effectiveness of art apparent to all. For the portraits brought together under one roof people from the most divers political and social backgrounds. These were people who demonstrated their solidarity with art while at the same time showing how little binding fixed categories are. They pledged their solidarity with their faces, their personalities, and their vanity. But the action also demonstrated the extent to which mentalities and ideologies can be displaced by

reactivating a tradition, namely, the tradition of portrait painting. Art thus showed what it can really do. It can bring people together in the awareness of a radical tolerance.

Our third exhibition year was financed again with the helf of an unusual activity, a raffle: *Tombola – 300 Werke für 300 Gönner*. For this action, we got one hundred artists to each donate three works to the Kunsthalle which were exhibited from November 21 to December 6, 1992. Three hundred numbered tickets were sold for one thousand Swiss Francs each. At the opening, lots were drawn and the works were given away. In this third year, we extended and intensified our original program. From December 12, 1991 to January 12, 1992, in an exhibition entitled *In the Cold*, we showed five artists who work contextually in very different media, Remy Markowitsch (*1957), Christoph Draeger (*1965), Barbara Mühlefluh (*1962), Simone Rüssli (*1961), and Anselmo Fox (*1964). From January 25 to February 22, we continued the discussion on the "place" of painting with large format paintings by Markus Döbeli (*1958). And from April 4 to May 18 we presented perhaps the most important and most unusual exhibition to date, namely, *Der Anbau des Museums* (Cultivating the Museum). It consisted of a large-scale group-installation with constitutive contributions from the philosopher Jacques Derrida (1930–2004), the gardener Wada Jossen (*1955), the art critic and theoretician Theo Kneubühler (*1945) and the curator Harald Szeemann (1933–2005). This exhibition was a very unusual experiment about which I will write in detail in an additional essay.[2]

From the May 30 to July 4, and in collaboration with Jean-Christophe Ammann (1939–2015) and Günther Förg (1952–2013), we presented an overview of the photographic work by Larry Clark (*1943). Larry Clark is one of the most important chroniclers of American youth culture in the 60's and 70's. Clark's work, which is located precisely in an area inbetween documentary and art photography, shows in an explicitly brutal directness how the naive, impulsive, and thoughtless dealing with drugs and sex immediately implies degeneration and death.

Two exhibitions in the Fall and Winter of 1992 thematized the newest tendencies in post-humanist art. The common denominator in the works of Abigail Lane (*1967), Cathy de Monchaux (*1960), Vincent Shine (*1962), Markus Käch (*1962), Cornelia Mattich (*1962), Claude Sandoz (*1946), Rebecca Schmid (*1968), and Urs Lehmann (1966–2017) could be seen in the return to the classical notion of the work and the intention to confront the viewer with specific themes. The works of these artists, which are no

longer instrumental, but "reactive," are concerned with concrete social, ecological, psychological, and societal problems. They formulate their concerns in terms drawn from pictorial worlds of an everyday, trivial, artificial, or illusionary nature. The work of Vincent Shine, for example, brings together in a new way the relation between nature and culture. His interest in nature is archeological. Similar to the way in which endangered plants are presented and preserved in a natural history museum, he casts mushrooms, for example, in artificial, plastic materials, reconstructs them, copies them, and fixes them on white, wooden bases. The artificial and duplicated entity, because it is postulated as a work of art and related to the white cube receives thereby a new reality, which, as paradox as it may sound, can again be conceived of as nature, that is, in the sense of nature as art.

Our fourth year began with the exhibition of an installation by Heimo Zobernig (*1958), from January 14 to February 21, 1993. Zobernig's work arises mostly from a minimalist-conceptualist stance and functions on the one hand as sculpture or space related intervention and on the other hand as metaphor of the conditions of art itself. His installation in the Kunsthalle takes off from an already existing temporary dividing wall. He closed the entrance in the middle and made the wall into an art object separating the space. This was at once a practical limitation of the size of the room and also the creation of an imaginary and mysterious space closed off to the viewer but open to the ceiling. In addition to this, in the open exhibition space he placed two equal crates, one filled with (white) canvases and one (empty), with the inside painted white. By means of this laconic and at the same time pragmatic double or even tipple play, he made the spatial interfaces and openings of different vessels into a work of art and—*like a recess of water in the lake*—into being an interface between the eye and the imagination and between production, installation, and reception.

Translated from the German by David J. Krieger

Notes
[1] This overview over the activities of the first Kunsthalle Lucerne was initially entitled "Eine Aussparung von Wasser im See," and was written for the monthly edition of *Artis, Zeitschrift für neue Kunst,* Bern, Winter 1991/92 and published in no. 3/92, pp. 28–32. The version presented here is based on the second, extended version, which appeared in 1993 in the

German original version and in an English translation in Stefan Banz (ed.), *Kunsthalle Lucerne* (Lucerne: Verlag der Kunsthalle Luzern, 1993), pp. 4–28, under the title "Opening the Water." This version, however, was stylistically revised by the author on April 21, 2019, and the following by the translator on April 25, 2019.

[2] Stefan Banz, "*Der Anbau des Museums*. Jacques Derrida, Wada Jossen, Theo Kneubühler, Harald Szeemann", appeared first in the German original version in *Artis, Zeitschrift für neue Kunst,* Bern 5/92, pp. 15–23; followingly in the German original version and in an English translation in *Kunsthalle Lucerne*, op. cit. pp. 30–50; and finally in the German original version in Stefan Banz, *Komplexes System Kunst, Texte und Interviews*, edited by Hermann Korte (Münster, Hamburg, London: LIT Verlag, 2001), pp. 116–121. Since April 20, 2019 there exists a slightly revised and extended version by the author which is available online on his website under: https://banz.tv/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/banz-der-anbau-des-museums-cultivating-the-museum-e.pdf (visited on April 25, 2019).