

TRY-OUT INSTITUTION

WHAT IS IT?

The institution is a civic body, a representation with performative power, that can create what it speaks of. Some of the most basic **performative acts**¹ (Austin 1972) are institutional in nature (marriage, inheritance, etcetera). The institution, as a body of law, embodies and reproduces normative social frames and defines actions of individuals, of groups, and of societies (Mohren/Herbordt 2017, Bernstorff 2020, Bernstorff 2018: 220). The institution is built around the performative act of speaking in the name of (in the name of the institution or what it represents, for example ‘the people’). The institution does not necessarily have closed spatial borders, it is not always clear where it ends or begins. To stabilise and perpetuate itself, the institution relies on other institutions.

Founding an institution is an act of legitimi-

sation and representation: It often embodies a claim for a specific right and interest to be performed by and within the institution. Researching institutions and their conditions means investigating the social, cultural, and political norms and processes that govern them. As an artistic gesture, an alternative *Try-out Institution* performatively enacts protocols different from those of established institutions. At the same time, it looks critically at existing institutions from a different perspective, questioning the processes and conditions that govern them. Within the PhD programmes *Assemblies and Participation*^I and *Performing Citizenship*^{II}, some research projects used the act of instituting to try out alternative legitimisations, representations and protocols for action: *The Last Judgement II – An Extrajudicial Hearing*^{III} (Bernstorff, 2014), *Young Institute for Future Research*^{IV} (Plischke, 2013), *The School of Girls I – Urban Experts*^V (Gunsilius, 2016), *The Archive of the Institute for Falsification*^{VI} (Jungen, 2016) and *KAPUTT – The Academy of Destruction*^{VII} (FUNDUS THEATER/Theatre of Research, 2017) All these were *Try-out Institutions*, “hybrid bodies in themselves, in which all members constantly experienced what it means to speak on behalf of different bodies and to switch between them” (Peters forthcoming).

CORPUS

I **Assemblies and Participation (2012-2014):**

The postgraduate program *Assemblies and Participation* (2012-2014): *Urban Publics and Performance* was asking what role performance and media-based arts can play in the context of new urban movements of democratisation. By initiating transdisciplinary research processes between art, academia and society the postgraduate programme discussed and rehearsed from 2012-2015 new forms of assemblies and participation in an experimental conjunction of theoretical and artistic approaches. How can artistic and academic practices be combined in a way that the research process itself opens up for more social participation?

II **Performing Citizenship (2015-2017):**

From 2015-2017 the postgraduate program *Performing Citizenship* aimed to analyse new forms of citizenship and its inherent performative turn. Since artistic practices play an important role in this context, the postgraduate program was conceived methodologically as an artistic academic cooperation. The three-year programme qualified doctoral

CONTEXT

1 **Performative practices:** The performativity of practice refers to the ability of ritualised and continuous actions to constitute reality. The term follows the linguistic concept by John L. Austin reformulated by Judith Butler, that understands language and movement not only as descriptive or assumptive but as having the potential to create reality. Through continuous use, acts and actions can shape bodies, perspectives, and the subjectively perceived world (Butler 1993).



candidates both artistically and academically period.

III The Last Judgment II – An Extrajudicial Hearing (2014): The performative research project with primary school students from Hamburg centred around the act of instituting and investigated the form and characteristics of the court in relation to court cases that were at the edges of the legal system. The cases of troublemakers, losers of lawsuits or plaintiffs who could not bring their case forward in legal courts were negotiated in an alternative court run by children.

Elise von Bernstorff, *The Last Judgment II – An Extrajudicial Hearing*, 2014, Hamburg

IV Young Institute for Future Research (2013): Eva Plischke's research project *Young Institute for Future Research* asks 'what if children were involved into the practice of future research. Children and adults specialised in the development of future scenarios, explored their potentials for research and in doing so aimed to turn around the hierarchy of cultural education projects.

Eva Plischke, *Young Institute for Future Research*, 2013, Hamburg

V The School of Girls I – Urban Experts (2016): To investigate living together in postmigrant Hamburg, Maike Gunsilius founded *The School of Girls* with twelve female students from Schule auf der Veddel, a secondary school in the Veddel quarter Hamburg. With artistic interventions and in video and live tutorials, they explored their everyday practices such as baking, brewing tea, putting on a hijab, playing football, etcetera as urban expertise and as citizen practices. During the research process, the students position and agency within the research set-up and the power relations and practices between girls and adult women came into focus. This aspect was explored further and presented later within a lecture performance.

Maike Gunsilius, *The School of Girls I – Urban Experts*, 2016, Hamburg

VI The Archive of the Institute of Falsification (2016): *The Institute for Falsification/Thari Jungen (IFF)* opened its doors to present selected fakes from its archive. Artefacts of all kinds had been faked in Los Angeles and Hamburg as part of the Institute's operations. The IFF invited citizens and non-citizens to its archive to discuss the legitimacy and value of knowledge produced through falsified products. Through the process of falsification, the Institute had researched how migration is regulated, how exclusion works, which boundaries

WHAT IS RESEARCHED?

Some of these *Try-out Institutions* did research on other established institutions, such as the court (*The Last Judgement*) or the public school (*The School of Girls I and II*). In *The Last Judgment – A Staged Tour of the Civil Justice Building*, students investigated the court as a civic institution; its rooms, its protocols, its bureaucracy, its performativity. Later, the kids formed an alternative court of students that was concerned with what it referred to as 'lost cases', cases that were not authorised by the official court, but that were nevertheless real cases brought to the court by real people. Hence, they investigated the performativity of the established institutions and their protocols and instituted an alternative framing to try out other acts of legitimisation and representation, as well as alternative protocols. *Try-out Institutions* might be the format of choice when it comes to research regarding a right to be claimed (in the sense of the "right to have rights" [Arendt 1951]), or when research is meant to focus on given institutional procedures and effects and aims to suggest a specific alternative scenario.

Similar strategies were employed by investigating alternative future research in the *Young Institute for Future Research*, or the act of falsification as a social and artistic practice in relation to citizenship concepts² and struggles (*The Archive of the Institute for Falsification*). All of these projects can be understood as explorations into different what-ifs: What if children were empowered to administer justice?

2 Citizenship: Changing patterns of mobility and connectivity, migration and transnational cultural interconnections all challenge the legal and political boundaries of sovereign nation-states, their legitimacy and capacity to organize and provide citizenship (Benhabib 2006; Shachar 2009). At the same time, new alliances, networks and collectives of citizens emerge and assume roles and responsibilities formerly attributed to the

ARTISTIC MEANS

The performativity of the institution – the ability of institutions to create the reality they speak of – is slightly twisted in a *Try-out Institution*. Here, the act of instituting takes its power partially from the performativity of art, which can call something into being. By making use of this capacity, the *Try-out Institution* becomes a hybrid body that is situated in between reality and fiction. Producing a *Try-out Institution* is a delicate and not entirely controllable act of balance that can also fail. As such, it undermines and highlights the construction of hegemonial rules.

The performing arts are particularly qualified to engage with the manifold performative aspects of established institutions, to intervene into them and to subvert them. Theatre and performance provide the expertise of fabricating the ‘as if’ that can be used by researchers, co-researchers and participants to invent new institutions and their protocols and to perform them.

should be pushed and how doors could be opened.

Thari Jungen/Institute for Falsification (IFF), *The Archive of the Institute of Falsification*, 2016, Los Angeles and Hamburg

VII KAPUTT – The Academy of Destruction (2017): KAPUTT asked if we can see destruction in a different way if we look at it through the lens of live art. Destruction is not only about violence, hatred and rage, but can be a cultural strategy that is marvelous, manifold, careful and mindful. A transgenerational team of six children and six adult artists working as equal members experimented with their practices, experiences and concepts of destruction in six public sessions at Tate Exchange. Visitors to KAPUTT were invited to take a trip through the Academy’s facilities: from its reception to its library, on to its assembly hall where they watched the members of the Academy in action, and finally to the common room where they created a research assignment and received their very own KAPUTT diploma.

FUNDUS THEATER/Theatre of Research, KAPUTT – *The Academy of Destruction*, London 2017

To create a *Try-out Institution* is comparatively simple, which is why it has grown to be an established format within the contexts of live art and performance. The process often consists of putting up a website, writing letters and emails in the name of the institution, and designing logos, letterheads, name tags, accessories and uniforms. It also includes the design of procedures and protocols and their performance.

Furthermore, the institution as such suggests thinking of the people involved as either members of the administration, other kinds of members (members of a club, for instance), or clients, which use services provided by the institution. Performing *Try-out Institutions* might include, on the one hand, all kinds of one-on-one interactions, service encounters, etcetera, and, on the other hand, events in which the institution comes to live in a more complete and public scenario, involving assemblies and presentations, and possibly instances of collective decision-making. Performing a *Try-out Institution* is mostly a longer process including a variety of formats, in which presentation and research process go hand in hand and evolve together, rather than leaving the presentation until the very end of the research process.

Try-out Institutions are well equipped for collective and inclusive research, because

state as an institutional body and as representation of the people. Given these developments, citizenship today is at the same time associated with old and ineffective protocols, which continue to produce exclusion, and yet is also ‘in the making’, moving beyond established concepts. Citizenship is simultaneously in withdrawal and in the process of becoming. At its best, this ambivalent performance of citizenship has the capacity to rearticulate or reinvent citizenship, to link old and new figurations of citizenship – often, if not necessarily, across given thresholds of legal and political institutions, social conventions, disciplinary competencies and discourses, ascriptions and attributions of race, class, culture and gender (Hildebrandt/Peters 2018: 3).

they translate theoretical assumptions about the institution in question and the alternative scenario that is tried out into actions to be experienced, roles to be embodied, and protocols to be performed. By asking “what if?”, they can address and empower people as experts and researchers and help to define their roles within this collaborative process³: To be considered a member of an institution and to be given the authority to speak in its name is empowering⁴ all members of the research group and allows them to address each other as equals and in light of the common cause represented by the institution. Individuals can claim the power to speak in its name where they would not have been heard otherwise, just by the authority of the *Try-out Institution*. The *Young Institute for Future Research* constituted itself through its practice. Having a name for the institution, a costume, a logo, and knowing the role they had within it, the children and Eva Plischke started their research by asking around the neighbourhood what questions people had concerning the future. Acting in the name of the institution, performing their roles, gave the children the authority to, for example, walk into stores or to talk to politicians. A main moment of performing the institution was the public presentation in which the act of instituting, the practice, the roles within and the results of the research were presented in front of an invited public.

Founding an institution and speaking and acting in its name is empowering for its members. Being a client, in turn, and experiencing a new kind of service may confront people involved with their desires, fears, needs, and expectations.

POTENTIALS, PROBLEMS AND OUTCOMES

Try-out Institutions have a potential for collective research because research questions can partially be translated into objectives for the institution in question.

Therefore, the research process can be broken down – on its most accessible and inclusive level – into questions about whether the *Try-out Institution* has reached its goals or not. These questions can and should be answered by everyone involved, by members and clients of the *Try-out Institution*, by researchers, co-researchers and participants⁵ of the specific research project, as a heterogeneous collective. *Try-out Institutions* can be forums for citizens’ research. However, there also might be another level of research and observation established be-

3 Collaborative process: PABR projects always lead to collaborative processes between diverse participants. They value heterogenous constellations, while recognising all disciplines equally and critically self-reflecting each discipline’s habitus (Ziemer 2015: 171). While investigating a specific topic, all PABR projects entail an exploration of the limits and potentials of collaborative processes as such.

4 Empowerment: Participatory settings and strategies can empower people. Actors in education, social work, politics, and the arts aim to enlarge the autonomy and self-determination of individuals and communities, citizens and non-citizens. The concept is criticized for an underlying diagnosis of deficiencies, which is answered by an accentuation of potentials. Empowering qualities are ascribed to the arts in particular. However, the arts should not be forced into a context of promising or guaranteeing empowerment within structures of increasing powerlessness (Gunsilius 2019).

5 Researchers/co-researchers/participants: Researchers within PABR are those who are involved in the whole research process from beginning to end and are responsible for the shape and progression of the process.

Co-researchers are invited to collaborate and join the research process for shorter or longer periods of time.

Participants are invited to join the research only at certain points, for instance during its public presentation, and are involved in different ways. In order to organise participation on equal terms, it is crucial to recognise and acknowledge the different questions, interests, responsibilities, capacities and availabilities of the different co-researchers and participants and to define their role within the process.

side the *Try-out Institution* itself. The *Try-out Institution* could be an experiment⁶ within a more complex research design⁷ that might include researching institutional practices within an academic approach.

Try-out Institutions can be created and designed by heterogeneous research collectives. More often, though, the design and set-up of the *Try-out Institution* is done by a head researcher or head research collective. In these cases, the founder(s) of the institution make a strong statement before other people get involved and have to hope that participants will take the opportunity and find the alternative scenario proposed in the research set-up appealing and worthy of embodiment and enactment. Whether this happens or not will then already be a big part of the experimental outcome.

Another important measure of the outcome of a *Try-out Institution* will be whether the alternative scenario stays true to its implicit promise: Is the alternative reality created by the institution actually desirable? Does the reality brought about by the try-out indicate certain unexpected problems? Where and when does the alternative reality created by the try-out collide with given protocols of power and practice in unforeseen ways? Many of the results from this kind of research will take the form of answers to those questions. *Try-out Institutions* therefore should always be conceived with a specific method of archiving in mind, of documentation and memory, to render these answers available for future evaluation.

Try-out Institutions are fictions that try to become real in every step of their performance. In this process, the founders and head researchers of a *Try-out Institution* can find themselves in situations where the institution, in its attempt to become as real as possible, creates unexpected pressure on professional and on personal resources.

The latin term *instituere* also means beginning, starting, setting up (Plischke 2020: 132). The set-up, the act of instituting is often the most clearly projectable and most impactful aspect of building a *Try-out Institution*. Keeping a *Try-out Institution* going will in many cases prove to be more challenging than creating it. And it seems to be even more difficult to make a successful *Try-out Institution* sustainable, to make it last and spread. *Try-out Institutions* can eventually tour through different cities – just like theatre productions, but when it comes to real implementation, it seems that, as of now, there is no funding instrument or social/cultural context ready to take the outcomes of this kind of research serious enough to establish something like *The Last Judgement* on a wider societal basis. As long as this situation lasts, *Try-out Institutions* can create insights and experiences, but they will necessarily make proposals and claims for the beginning of social or political processes that then cannot be seen through.

6 Experiment: Within PABR, we differentiate between experiment and exploration. Explorations enter an unknown area of interest without a concrete line of inquiry, whereas the experiment needs a controlled space to build a research set-up that enables concrete outcomes or solutions to questions, such as new artistic or performative techniques, practices or formats. To experiment is understood as a act of invention, discovery, and creation. In its continued repetition, however, productive differences are uncovered. (Berg 2009, Rickli 2015, Hinz/Kranixfeld 2018)

7 Research design: The original projects our research formats are based on were developed in the frame of the two postgraduate programmes, where methodologies had to be considered within a research design that fulfils academic standards. However, our formats are also intended to be applicable outside of an academic context, in art projects, education, or activist action. Researchers are invited to pick, choose, mix and further develop the proposed research formats within a bigger research design or within a single PABR project. Within a wider research design, several research formats can interlink, modify and support each other.



This can create friction between founders, members and clients of the institution, between researchers, co-researchers, participants and users of the research. Some of them might expect continuity as a part of the wider institutional claim that then cannot be guaranteed.

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