

- MUSEUM WHY?

CIVICIZE INSTITUTIONS

Or how to nurture a public-spirited place?

A short, overdue summary of a long story that will be continued
by Matylda Krzykowski

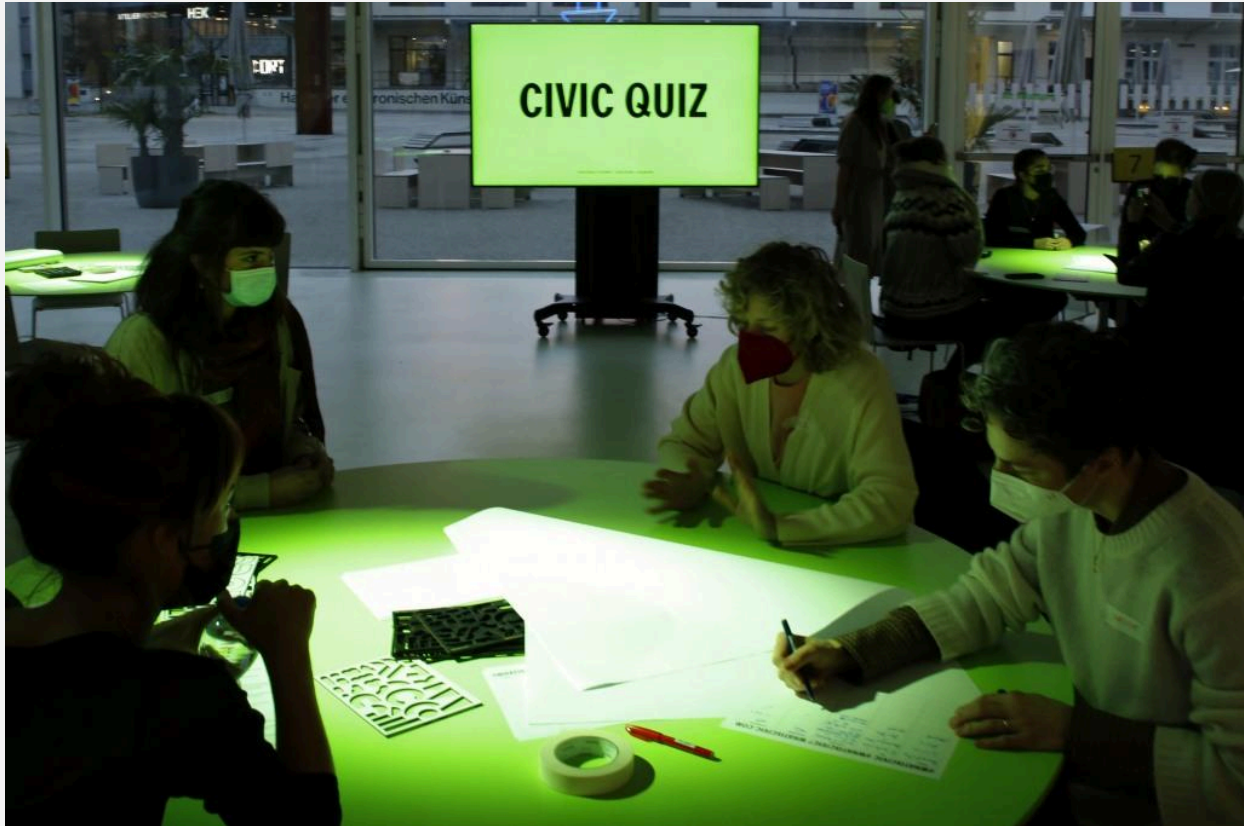
In 2021 I co-curated the exhibition *Institution Building* at CIVA, an architecture and culture museum in Brussels. The exhibition was not ready when we opened, instead it grew over the course of eight weeks. We first started with an empty exhibition space and each Thursday added exhibits around a specific theme: Hospitality, Format, Collection, Audience, Agency, Pedagogy, Emancipation, Environment, Preservation, and Idiom. For each opening we invited a handful of people—most of them practitioners, some of them citizens, many of whom we got to know in these eight weeks—to speak about projects or works that were being exhibited. Or also about ideas that were still a work in progress. *Institution Building* was wild and sincere, quite detached from a classic curatorial process in which exhibits and programming are usually planned ahead of time. Instead we responded and hosted as the weeks went by. Many people came through the space, and many people continued to come by and became a part of the community at CIVA. It was perceived as a success, because it grew from a culture of working with people, instead for people.



Exhibition view Institution Building at CIVA, 27.8 – 7.11.2021 Curators: Nikolaus Hirsch, Matylda Krzykowski, Cédric Libert

Image by Matylda Krzykowski

Since January 2022 I am the artistic lead of CIVIC, the former foyer of the Academy of Art and Design in Basel. I decided to begin CIVIC with a public process, a CIVIC Quiz, similar to a pub(lic) quiz. Some of the ten questions I proposed were: What is civic (for you)? What spatial infrastructure is needed at CIVIC? What formats do you want at CIVIC? What is CIVIC? Or what could CIVIC be? The participants were students, employees, and guests, some of them with no direct connection to the academy. The answers were a demand for a place of encounter, for self-determination and for a space of softness and colour. People also compiled their own CIVIC logos from a set of stencils that we provided. That's why CIVIC does not have one logo, but rather 73 different ones, a visual testament to the multiple voices that make up the CIVIC community. Towards the end of the quiz the following stuck with everyone: CIVIC is what you make of it!



CIVIC Quiz, 21 January 2022, hosted by Matylda Krzykowski. Image: students and employees of Basel Academy of Art and Design, and guests from and around Basel Alice Wilke (Kunstmuseum Basel Gegenwart), Chrissie Muhr (Experimental, Berlin). Image by Jenni Schmitt

CIVIC has become an experimental and educational environment. Once a white cube-like hall to walk through that was associated with a dentist office or hospital entrance, the 400m² space with large windows all around is furnished with non-rectangular liquid shaped tables and seats designed by students, a kiosk that occasionally turns into a bar, a 4 x 4-meter exhibiting house for pop up installations, a series of large green and purple carpets, and plants that have the size of trees. Formats that were conducted range from food stands, markets, exhibitions, to readings, fashion shows and live TV. CIVIC initiates little, instead CIVIC reacts and responds, motivates, activates and strengthens, fosters and enables. CIVIC is mutual learning.



CIVIC View: Messy Kiosk by collective Constructlab. Graphic design by student Elena Palumbo. "Exchange is the most precious thing we have" an ongoing project by students Lea Bongni, Jasmine Noemi Jetzer and Marina Klein-Hietpas. Image by Pati Grabowicz

The former foyer at Basel Academy of Art and Design is not neutral or empty anymore. It attracts various people, students and the public alike, to take the opportunity to participate, contribute, and exchange. CIVIC has gained and developed its own character thanks to the trust and time of everyone who participates. It grows a culture with and for people that show concern, and actively carry out for the condition and affairs of the CIVICcommunity. In order to establish a user-centric place, you need to take care of the users and visitors' needs and ideas more than wanting to direct, dictate and to design yourself. Civicizing institutions is less a matter of artistic direction and more a culture of listening, hosting and making things possible.



Group image, workshops at CIVIC “We are foreign and we are everywhere” by Foreign Legion, with students of Basel Academy of Art and Design and guests: James Taylor Foster, Ananda Jade, Maria Ines Plaza Lazo, April 2024

www.whatiscivic.ch

<https://civa.brussels/en/exhibitions-events/institution-building>