

# Lets Talk About Another Concept by WochenKlausur

The artists of WochenKlausur intervene in the social-political sector to effect long-term improvements in our coexistence. In setting feasible tasks, our group tries to establish sustainable alternatives with and for diverse communities. We elaborate possible ways of problem solving with cooperating communities on-site and negotiate with public authorities, companies, and potential project contributors. Invited by art institutions, we try to reach our goals within four to twelve weeks, depending on our different tasks.

Some years ago, when our artist group worked at the *Neue Galerie im Höhmannhaus* (municipal gallery in Augsburg, Germany), one visitor dropped in several times. He watched us working, took pictures of our weekly working scheduled pinned on the wall, and always repeated the same questions:

*"What is the aim of your activities; who are the people you are always talking to on the phone; what do you do at the gallery if there are no visitors; what is left to exhibit when you are gone; what are you really doing here and, first of all, why don't supplies placed on your desks more office-like?"*

Our answers never seemed to satisfy his curiosity: *"We want to connect the locally based competences for water protection with international development cooperation organizations for a long-term collaboration. Therefore we are calling potential supporters to request meetings. Even if there are no visitors present, we of course continue with our tasks and will hopefully leave a structure behind that exists for a longer period."* But - to be honest - we had no idea how to answer his question concerning our failed arrangement of office supplies.

Since we set up our temporary offices in the exhibition spaces of museums or art institutions, we get in touch with the public. It has been intended as one of our working principles to meet the audience during the project phase whenever possible. One of us always finds time to talk with interested visitors, and, in very few cases, it happened that we have involved a visitor in our project. Meanwhile, we also schedule and announce specific times for public meetings during our residencies.

Back to the curious visitor mentioned above. After more visits and lots of talks it finally turned out that he thought we were pretending or rather performing office work. Our real office and supplies were seen as a stage and stage props, as if our real phone calls were just feigned as well as our computer work or the meetings. So when we thought back to our answers, we finally understood his confusion. We did not discern the core of the questions. If not performing, if not leaving an art object - why should it be art? If actually dealing with reality - why then should it be art?



Augsburg office

This was in 2007, fourteen years and twenty-five projects after WochenKlausur. Those 21 years we took part in many panels, seminars, workshops, and other kinds of public programmes. But – just as other artists and collectives who work in similar fields - we are still confronted with this central aspect of our work. Until today people are highly interested in the question; why do we insist in declaring our work as art?

In the first years of our group, considerable skepticism towards our concept of art: how to agree with an art without the least reference to aesthetics, how to classify it within the discourse related to art, how to review it, how to appraise its value?

The first project started 1993 when the artist Wolfgang Zinggl - who also worked as an art critic for a weekly newspaper - criticized an exhibition at the Viennese contemporary art institution *Secession*. Some objects of the show claimed to address "social issues," and Zinggl asked if art could not also work as a tool the capability of which lies in improving certain circumstances in society. In response to this, the director of the *Secession* offered to demonstrate his idea through an example at his institution. Zinggl built a team of eight artists; the group turned the exhibition space into an office and decided to work on a local problem. Through this first WochenKlausur project a basic system was set up to provide homeless people in Vienna with medical care out of a mobile clinic. It was possible to get a van through sponsoring and to refurbish it into a medical office. The artist group obtained the commitment of a relief organization to take over the maintenance of the van and the costs for the drivers. A covenant from the city councilor for health to pay for the doctor's salaries was needed but arduous to negotiate. Asking a befriended journalist to pretend to write an article about this project, the group succeeded in pushing the authorities into their responsibility. The city councilor – eager to avoid bad press - told the journalist he would agree to employ the doctors. The article was never published, but the service remains on duty to the present day. The mobile clinic has become a permanent institution in the city and the doctors treat more than 700 people each month.



Wien '93 bus

The “effrontery” to call such projects art has set a discourse within the local art scene, which vehemently defended the convention of art as a once-and-for-all determined concept with no option of such a change. In the early nineties, art institutions that offered public programmes to debate movements and theories in art were much more the exception than the standard like it is nowadays. But nevertheless some started to react by inviting WochenKlausur for lectures and public panels to question our intentions and the role of artists. Of course, we also have discussed the criticism within our group to challenge our own statements and to review our identity as artists.

Although conventional art history wants to conceive of us to the contrary - from the moment the term “art” (ars) emerged it has been used to describe so many different concepts, meanings, capabilities, and objects that it is not possible to find a common denominator featuring “Art.”

Strictly speaking, the single word “art” was used until the 15th century without any reference to aesthetics. Proven through a complaint written in a letter, Leonardo da Vinci himself was not allowed to label himself as an artist. Scientists, philosophers, or musicians, as we call them today, had to study the seven “artes liberales” based on written methodologies. They were allowed to use the title artist and had therefore a relatively high position in society. Not so for the painters - as handymen or craftspeople trained in craft guilds, their social status was not comparable to that of artists.

Since the systems that have determined what is art and who is an artist has itself been culturally constructed, it is nearly a truism to say that the concepts of art and artworks have been as various as the cultures of their origins and as diverse as the changing centuries and decades.

Art has had different meanings and fulfilled many functions. It has served as an instrument to demonstrate power, it has satisfied allures and satiated the hunger for knowledge as well as for possession. It can define identity and can serve as an object of financial speculation or as a mirror for society. It can transmit feelings

and can create different realities. And it can also work as an instrument to improve certain circumstances in everyday life without any “aesthetic bonus.”

In 1997, WochenKlausur was invited by a regional art festival in Upper Austria to work on an eight-week project in the small town of Ottensheim. We decided to devote our project to the topic of community development.

Ottensheim has some 4,000 residents. In order to familiarize ourselves with the residents’ concerns and wishes for their communities, we initially sent out questionnaires to all households and talked to the people in the local taverns and on the main square. We did the same with the town councilors and the mayor. Conversations with them were recorded to support later demands, so that specific measures could be taken.

We developed a framework for public participation, and together with the interested we founded three interest groups: one for revitalizing the town’s historic centre, one for promoting the social integration of older residents, and a third representing the interests of youths between the ages of ten and fourteen.

The young people, for example, told us that they had already tried for a long time to get permission to erect a skateboard ramp but without success. So, together with the new Youth Interest Group, we built a ramp - the materials required were sponsored by local businesses - and positioned it right in the middle of town. The moment the ramp was finished and placed on the main square, the mayor promised a long-term permit only if we agreed to remove it to another place selected in concert with the youngsters.

A total of fifteen interest group meetings were organized, and we invited architects, urban planners, landscape planners, and social workers to contribute ideas, information and professional experience. At the project’s conclusion, WochenKlausur presented the town council with a catalog of development measures intended to serve as a basis for discussion regarding the community’s future. The interest groups continued to meet, discuss and realize their wishes for the community. Even a new political party called *Pro-Ottensheim* established itself during the project. In each election since, this party has put the mayor in office.



Ottensheim skater ramp construction



When we talked with the people who came as interested art festival visitors, some asked for an outcome of our project they learned to identify as an artwork. Mostly their main interest was not so much in our project's goal and in the methods or strategies we had chosen to pursue, but in searching for the result: an object, a video, a performance. At the end, some decided that the skater ramp formed the artistic outcome of our intervention – as an artwork made by the teenage kids of Ottensheim. By trying to clarify this misinterpretation, our work was again misunderstood. A vocabulary relevant for this kind of art had not yet been established, so the response to our project was: "It might be social work."

Sure. For many special tasks there are specialists: surgeons to perform surgeries, firefighters to extinguish fires, social workers to help those in need. But in some cases, tasks can be achieved more easily in a more unorthodox way by people who are not part of the respective system. Like artists who could – just by acting as artists – more easily skip hurdles of bureaucratic systems than the concerned professional staff. Through this strategy, they of course do not turn into social workers per se but could create new jobs for them.

Two years ago the Protestant parish in Kassel (Germany) asked us to help them deal with struggles at the square in front of their church. For years, the place has been taken over by a drug and alcohol scene because it has been relatively secure and close to all the relevant medical and social facilities. This community had a bad reputation, especially due to the local press that simply fueled unjustified fears. Nevertheless, the neighborhood as well as the parish members felt threatened and wanted to banish the drug scene from the square.

In a first step we conducted more than ninety interviews with representatives of all conflict parties: the police, the office of public order, the parish members, the neighbourhood, the city council and administration, the medical and social institutions, and of course the drug users.

In accordance with the results of the interviews, we suggested creating a position for two social workers, who would act as multiply aligned mediators. Our intention was to institute a long-term position for these two social workers. This was only possible through convincing the city councilors and the church to employ them. To attract the interest of the residents and public, WochenKlausur built a small but eye-catching garden house right in the centre of Lutherplatz and invited representatives of the church, the drug scene, the social facilities, the resident cultural initiative, the police, and the city government for a series of talks.

In the end, the city of Kassel and the Protestant church agreed to employ the intermediate social worker together, who has been on duty since spring 2013.

Not for a single project has WochenKlausur taken over the duties of social work. But if we intend to work in the social field, we always make sure to involve social workers in the project's process; if we work with schools, we integrate students, parents, pedagogues, and teachers, but will not take their jobs. At one point we might decide to work for better food, yet we will not turn into chefs. Promised.

While the confusion between the features of socially engaged artists and social workers has been in the process of sorting itself out, a new criticism has jumped in to rescue art from being "downgraded to ordinariness": the neoliberal aspect of art was finally identified in community or socially engaged art.



Kassel cabin

Artists engaged in the social field who are teaming up with civil society are often suspected of undermining the welfare state in overtaking the social agendas of the public sector and replacing them through art projects. “The good ones became the bad because of beautifying capitalism” – so an accusation.

What are the social agendas of the public sector, what should a civil society care for, and what social improvements could be put into effect by artists?

Social agendas are laid down by the respective constitutions, even though the welfare states more and more circumvent their principles at the costs of social justice. What civil society could do is not only protest but also take action, and artists could equally use the capital of art to set social improvements in motion.

Of course, socially engaged artists often are supposed to be instrumentalized. Sure, some do not really care about the implications their work provokes. However, most of the community art practitioners or socially engaged artists plan and design their efforts and undertakings very consciously: their collaborations with the public sector and other partners, the contextual conditions, and the long-term impacts of their results.

If there is no chance to urge the public sector to overtake the complete financial support for our initiated projects, we try to find alternatives and cooperate with already existing organizations from the private sector or take money from private sponsors. Is this pacifying the consciousness of exploiting capitalists?

In 1999, WochenKlausur was invited to the *Venice Biennale*. We there wanted to make use of the numerous visitors. We wanted to get as much attention as possible, and we collected money for school classes we aimed to establish for Kosovo Albanian teenage refugees. These children found shelter in a few towns in Macedonia but had no access to schooling since the war. School furniture was provided by the Vienna City School Board. Publishers in Italy assisted with teaching materials, the University of Vienna sponsored twenty computers, and for transports we were able to win over Caritas, the relief organization.

Nevertheless we also had to raise money for teachers' Therefore, we asked different organizations, companies, and private individuals for donations. They contributed a total of almost 50,000 Euros, and we were able to increase this sum significantly by holding a raffle in the Austrian pavilion: for twenty Euros visitors could choose from an array of surprise bags containing prizes sponsored by a variety of Austrian and Italian companies.

Language courses were eventually organized and administered in cooperation with the Macedonian civil rights organization ADI (Association for Democratic Initiatives). One of their staff members was provided with a van by the Austrian film production company PPM to visit all of the schools regularly and deliver the necessary materials. ADI also hired the teachers, who offered courses in English, German, Italian, and French. Additionally, Biennale visitor Jeannette Armer, a teacher from Cambridge, spontaneously agreed to teach on a volunteer basis for an entire year.

Upon completing a course, each participant received an official diploma. As a civil rights organization involved in training for NGOs, ADI was allowed by government authorities to award these certificates.

Funding was sufficient to operate the language schools for three years. At the end of 2000, the classes in Macedonia were discontinued, because the refugee families had returned to Kosovo. Four classes were transferred to Kosovo and ran there for another year.



Venice bags

The bigger share of financial support came from the private sector. Did we therefore promote capitalism? Sure, we would have much more appreciated that the European Union had taken care of this "side effect" of the war. But everyone knows the endless bureaucratic ways of applying for EU funding. Even for clever artists such hurdles are too high. At least to some of their officials we had sent all the information about the project.

In any case, public responsibility for social affairs has never meant to discharge individuals from socially engaging themselves.

In a way, WochenKlausur and the educational turn grew up together; both are in their early twenties now. And in a certain way we see our work as fitting quite well into the development of curatorial practices of the past two decades.

Although we were never asked to develop an event for a public program explicitly, we were invited to participate in artists talks, workshops, or similar events quite often. And actually we see an educational aspect in each of our projects. The encounters with the visitors do not only foster an exchange of knowledge. As a step to achieve the tasks we set ourselves, we always invite people from diverse institutions, organizations, and public authorities to our temporary offices situated within the inviting museums or galleries to talk with them, to learn more about local backgrounds and from their knowledge. In return, they get involved not only in debates about social or environmental issues but also in an art discourse. Of course, most of those meetings are not public, but these discussions engage people in a discourse with which they would usually not get in touch.

However, in some cases we left the space that we were temporarily given by the inviting art institution to others. We wanted to give them an opportunity to share their knowledge or their interests with the public.

The Dunkers Kulturhus in Helsingborg, Sweden, invited WochenKlausur to participate in the exhibition *The Bourgeois Show – Social Structures in Urban Space* with an intervention. This show focused on the dominance of the bourgeoisie in Helsingborg's cultural life, which leaves few opportunities for the wide diversity of cultural trends outside of the bourgeois norm to interact with the public.

In order to increase awareness of this issue and to give neglected interest groups in the region a chance to attract public attention, WochenKlausur erected a house using euro-pallets in front of the Kulturhus as a presentation and platform for debate. We then invited a wide variety of groups, ranging from sport clubs to animal rights activists. They were asked to use this public platform for a week to present themselves, discuss their agendas with visitors, and attract new members. Each week began with a press evening, at which the organizations and groups discussed their intentions with guests from politics, culture, and the media.

Examples:

- *Curious about UFOs?* The organization UFO Sweden is working on the world's largest archive of observation reports involving unexplained, extraordinary phenomena. More than 500 people per year report such experiences. The association UFO Sweden processes the reports critically while refraining from any interpretation.
- *Skatehus in Helsingborg:* The skater organization Hjukultur presented films and provided information about the organization and its effort to create a skater house in Helsingborg.
- *How come the girls put all their energy into soccer?* The successful Helsingborg women's soccer team Statten IF presented its athletic achievements and its ambitious social projects involving work with girls and women.

Although the intervention was temporary, in the course of the events new cooperations were arranged between some of the groups and Dunkers Kulturhus. Thus the Kulturhus also benefited from the series and learned more about new segments of the public.





Helsingborg europallett house

Meanwhile, we have implemented thirty-nine projects. Some of the facilities or services we initiated are still in operation, others were running for some years and discontinued because they were not needed any more, or were stopped because the funding was canceled.

[www.wochenklausur.at](http://www.wochenklausur.at)

*Since 1993 and on invitation from different art institutions, the artist group **WochenKlausur** develops concrete proposals aimed at small, but nevertheless effective improvements to socio-political deficiencies.*

*Executing projects in a restricted time-frame – from four up to twelve weeks - the group has so far completed 39 projects, in collaboration with renowned institutions such as the Secession/Vienna, Smart Museum/Chicago, The Israeli Center for Digital Art/Holon and CCA/Glasgow. Notable projects include the creation of a mobile medical care clinic for homeless people in Vienna, Secession 1993; founding an agency for hands-on learning projects in Japanese schools, Museum City Project, Fukuoka 2000; bringing residents of the native community of Kivalina together with international experts to develop and implement solutions for site-specific environmental and economic problems, Alaska Design Forum, Kivalina 2012.*

*For further information see: [www.wochenklausur.at](http://www.wochenklausur.at)*