

## SAM DURANT AND WOCHENKLAUSUR

**Sam Durant:** The subject of intention is interesting for me in relation to WochenKlausur's practice as I imagine Intension is quite a multivalent thing in your process. I especially wonder about it as you begin a new project. You are often invited by an institution or a group of people to work with a particular issue or problem. I wonder how you deal with your own intensions in relation to the expectations of those who invited you?

**WochenKlausur:** We are totally free to choose which issues we want to address. Occasionally the topic of an exhibition provides a frame while in other projects the inviting institution approaches us with a specific request, having already detected a social imbalance and asking us to suggest a project to deal with it. This was the case for instance in Zurich, where WochenKlausur was asked to work out and implement a project in regard to the problems of drugs. But it is always the whole group that decides on what will be done, based on research results, conversations with experts and concerned people. If our concept is not accepted by the commissioners we will not take part.

As we always start a project with thorough research and accordingly develop a concept, it is important for us to discuss issues with our commissioners who usually live and work on-site. It is a mixture of information from both inside and outside perspectives that very often helps us see the "missing links" and make the necessary connections in order to create an intended change. Our intention therefore is to show that it is possible to make a real impact and change something on-site that has a sustainable effect. In practice we can say that our intentions are met with those of our commissioners.

In one case<sup>1</sup> the commissioners did not support the groups intention. Although they presented themselves as supportive of our results in a video, they cancelled everything the group had launched the moment we left the ground. We can only guess why this happened and suppose that they themselves were dependent on sponsors who did not like the idea of bringing established inhabitants and newcomers together within a gentrified quarter of the city.

**SD:** It does sound like the concept of intention operates on many levels in your work. It functions on the meta-level where you say for instance that, "our intention... is to show that it is possible to make a real impact and change something on-site that has a sustainable effect." This idea is what you hope all of your work will do, to show others that art practice can produce meaningful change, and, importantly in an ongoing way. This may sound obvious but I think it bears repeating these days. It often seems to me that the idea that art can change minds and change social relations has become almost taboo, at least in the

1: See "Intervention to Overcome Social Barriers," (<http://www.wochenklausur.at/projekt.php?lang=en&id=2>)

present US art world. Your publications and particularly the website has a large component of what Adrian Piper would call "Meta Art", your own writings about the meanings and intentions of your work and how you see it functioning, both historically and in relation to the specific situation in which each project takes place.

Another intention seems to be an insistence on transparency; your mentioning the project in Leeds belies this. Both its failure to continue as you envisioned it and the lack of transparency as to the reasons for this, deepen our understanding of WK practice, while maddeningly, the potential of the project in Leeds is lost.

You also clarify how you operate in the beginning stages of a project. The idea that you decide what should be done in a particular place is actually, only in relation to your commissioners. In other words you do not impose your own intentions on your constituents (or collaborators) - you generally work in collaboration with them to formulate the parameters of what will be done. In a sense then, any of your projects come to represent the shared intentions of WK, the commissioners and the collaborators or constituents. That is not to imply a monolithic structure, as it seems that antagonisms are also welcomed within many of the frameworks you set up. I wonder how you feel about the recent debates around social/collaborative/dialogical practices particularly with the contestation around the idea of "democracy"?

**WK:** We believe there is a need to further discuss your last paragraph. The decision regarding what we are going to do is taken by the group, but it is most important for us to include institutions or people who work in the addressed field as well as concerned people from the very beginning, even while we carry out our research.

The decision of what we are going to propose is made in relation to these research results, they are the most relevant aspect of our concept. The commissioner is involved in this process and can say yes or no to our final proposals, but we also discuss our ideas with "concerned people" or institutions to find out what they think about it, and to adapt it - if necessary - according to their wishes.

Our "intention" is, if you like, the reflection of a need. We want to show that certain human living conditions do not necessarily have to be the way they are. There are problems everywhere that could be solved, if people (for example artists) care about them. By doing a WochenKlausur project, we aim to use our creativity and skills as artists as well as the power of the "art system" to realize a suggested solution. By doing so we want to create a meaningful change within society.

For us it is not important if people call it a social, a collaborative, or a dialogical practice. We do it and it is the duty of analysts to define categories and develop systems to describe what is going on.

What we definitely support is every debate. "Democracy" needs to be discussed constantly and within this discussion it is important to find ways to see behind established structures and to give people a voice to those who usually do not have a lobby or a platform to make themselves heard and to participate.

**SD:** The question of what it is that WochenKlausur does is perhaps more important in the United States. We may have more hardened concepts of what is and is not "art". I am part

of a collective called Transforma Projects. We formed in response to a call from artists in New Orleans after the collapse of social services in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. We spent five years working in New Orleans and we were asked hundreds of times what Transforma was. People were just baffled because we didn't make things or paint murals or make videos, but organized big and small convenings, neighborhood events and other "social" forms. After a while we decided to try and make some definitions, to analyze and suggest names for what we did, in a sense to historicize the project because there seemed to be no way for people to understand it as cultural production. And when I say "people" I mean everyone from the people in the neighborhoods with zero experience of contemporary art to other artists and art world people. We looked at what WochenKlausur and others have done to document their practices using the web. So perhaps in spite of your intentions you are influencing how other artists define what they do when it does not involve conventional forms of visual art production.

One of the important early missions of Transforma was to remain working in New Orleans as long as we were wanted and needed by the communities we worked with, which turned out to be five years. That became hard to sustain at certain points. On our next project we will be having a clearly defined short term involvement. Has WochenKlausur ever undertaken a project that did not have a time limit or that is ongoing over a long period?

**WK:** We are very interested in you work with Transforma and we all would love to learn more about it, especially as we know how challenging it can be to work in a social-political context as artists. Your engagement with Transforma is inspiring for us as well as for everyone who works in the social-political field.

The question "Is it art?" has been addressed to WochenKlausur a million times, especially back in the early 90's when the group was just beginning. To be honest this big discussion also helped establish WochenKlausur. Of course all these questions also led us to historicize what we do and WochenKlausur is aware of the context in which we are working. Meanwhile the questions have changed slightly to: "Isn't it social work?". We seldom experience a talk, discussion, or working field where this question does not come up. There are many ways (historically and theoretically) to undermine our work as art. What counts most for us is that the participating artists consciously decide to do their work as part of their art practice and as an art work. Almost all our invitations come from art institutions and the projects are implemented within the art context as part of an exhibition or by using the exhibition space as an office. Therefore our work constantly shows evidence of having been "blessed" by the art world.

It is part of our method to work within a limited time frame, although it can happen that part of the work needs further attention – for example the project we did in Porto in the summer of 2010<sup>2</sup>, where we developed a project for the exhibition "When Guests become Host" by activating one of the many vacant buildings in Porto for students: A couple of students were commissioned by the city to do modest renovations in one of the empty houses as well as to keep the estate in good repair and in return got the permission to live and work there for some years without paying any rent.

The most important steps were taken within the three weeks we spent on-site. However, it

was necessary that the students involved in the project to found an association and sign a contract. This needed time. Therefore we were in close contact with the students, the city and some other project partners even after our time in Porto. Meanwhile the students have started the renovation work and our communication is not so regular anymore. Nevertheless they know that we are there for them whenever they need us.

Almost all our projects were intended to be sustainable and to live on after our intervention on-site. Our aim is to do everything that is necessary for a project to live on. Some of the projects WochenKlausur has initiated over the years are still alive (for example the mobile clinic, which was the result of our very first project, is still working), some others are not (the house for women sex-workers in Zurich for example had to close down after seven years as the city stopped its contribution; the language schools in Macedonia closed when the refugees left the camps) and some have changed over the time (the "Workstation" in Berlin for example is still active but with a slightly different aim). We believe that it is necessary after a while to take our hands off a project and let it develop on its own, as the people directly involved know best how to proceed.

**SD:** The fact that you do projects that are meant to create a lasting organization or service is really remarkable, and somewhat unique in the field. This might lead some to link you more to "social service" than to an art practice. Although we probably agree that there is nothing wrong with that, many in the art world associate the idea of social work as illegitimate if it enters into the aesthetic realm. There is a sense that social service is, or should be, a state of bureaucratic enterprise, carrying with it a pejorative sense. This negative cast to social work comes from a liberalist ideology that much of the art world (usually unconsciously) operates within.

In my own case, the Transforma group had hoped that local actors would take over the project and turn it into whatever seemed necessary for them. For a variety of reasons this did not happen and we eventually realized that, in fact the project did not need to go on.

When we lectured or presented our work to an art world audience we also had the reaction that we were doing social work and not art, and to a certain degree we embraced that. Our last efforts involved the commissioning of two essays that undertook a critical examination of everything we did. One essayist came from the art world and looked at our project from the discipline of social practice, the other essayist came from the field of urban studies and looked at it in terms of its concrete social and economic effects. We focused on putting together a website<sup>3</sup> and a book which contain the essays and documentation of our work in New Orleans.

**WK:** With WochenKlausur we still want to use the art world and all its connotations to implement changes in the social realm. As you said: there is an ideology within the field and we want to force the art scene to become aware of the world around it – also by using media attention. Journalists report less about the most exciting social work than about the duller cultural events.

With our work we want to leave the field of solely symbolic representation or simulation of social reality. We want to make real contributions!