

## **Concrete Social Interventions**

Interview with Pascale Jeannèe of the artists' group WochenKlausur

*We first met Pascale Jeannèe in 2001 when she visited Glasgow with two other members of WochenKlausur to be interviewed for a commission within the Reputations public art programme that we have been developing for The Castlemilk Environmental Trust.*

*Pascale had been our main contact at WochenKlausur during the e-mail and telephone conversations regarding the group's possible involvement in the project. After a remarkable presentation of their previous projects WochenKlausur were appointed. We spent a couple of days together making site visits and discussing many of the issues covered in the following interview.*

*Pascale and the two other members returned to Glasgow to undertake further research, hold strategic meetings and conceive of their project. Pascale was central to the development of this project and was extraordinarily dedicated to the collective aims of WochenKlausur, to the expansion of the dynamics of art in the public realm and the aims of Reputations itself. Throughout our dialogues she revealed her intellectual rigour and capacity for generosity and fun on many occasions.*

*Earlier this year we learned from WochenKlausur that Pascale Jeannèe had suddenly died of heart failure at an incredibly young age. Her loss has marked WochenKlausur as extraordinarily as did her presence. This interview is now published in memory of a remarkable artist whom we must now miss professionally and personally.*

*Jason E. Bowman and Rachel Bradley (Co-Curators of Reputations) and Matthew Finkle (Project Manager, The Castlemilk Environmental Trust)*

Variant: Could you describe WochenKlausur, the way you work and the work you do?

Pascale Jeannèe: Today many artists are devoting their efforts to the challenge of setting processes in motion instead of leaving objects behind. WochenKlausur are such a group of artists who commit themselves to addressing identifiable social problems.

WochenKlausur has been carrying out social interventionist projects at the invitation of art institutions since 1993. WochenKlausur roughly translates as "weeks of closure", 'Klausur' being related to the English words 'enclosure', 'seclusion' and 'cloister'. The group's projects are collective efforts that take place within a few weeks in the concentrated atmosphere of a closed-session working situation. A strictly limited timeframe gives rise to an unusual concentration of the participants' energies, allowing the interventions to be realized quickly. The inviting institution's exhibition space has served as an office for WochenKlausur during this period.

For the Vienna Secession in 1992, WochenKlausur was invited to work on

addressing a local situation. Karlsplatz, the plaza outside the exhibition building, was a heavily frequented meeting place for homeless people. Within the duration of an exhibition, the group worked in closed session to develop and realize a small but concrete measure to improve conditions for these people. WochenKlausur created a mobile clinic. Since then healthcare has been provided free of charge to more than 700 patients monthly.

Since 1993, WochenKlausur has realized 14 projects, including a shelter for drug-addicted women in Zurich, at the invitation of the Venice Biennial the group set up eight language schools for refugees in Kosovo, and in 2000 an agency for bringing project teaching to schools in Fukuoka, Japan, was established.

V: Does working by the invitation of arts institutions place limitations on WochenKlausur's practice, yet perhaps provide access to funding and resources that might not otherwise be available?

PJ: There are two areas of independent decision: You can choose the subject you deal with and you can choose to work with, or reject, the institutions that offer you co-operation.

Art is awarded its status through its recognition, such sanctioning comes about within institutional mechanisms. Art institutions can reaffirm a traditional, object-orientated understanding of practice or can participate in its transformation.

Understanding of what can constitute art changes when the term is used less to subsume fetishistic characteristics and mercantile aspects, and instead designates immaterial works that contribute to the transformation and improvement of ecological, political and social conditions. If WochenKlausur works at the invitation of art institutions, the institutions are acting to anchor Activist art practice in human consciousness.

WochenKlausur's intention is in two ways a political one. On the one hand, each project is a small, concrete contribution to the improvement of our co-existence and the living circumstances of fringe groups. On the other hand, the interventions are intended to demonstrate the opportunities art has to selectively intervene in real life, i.e. in social, political or economic conditions.

Beyond establishing projects and ensuring a basis for their support politically, providing for their financing has always been an important part of WochenKlausur's work. The funding of a project sometimes requires WochenKlausur employing canny strategies. Our experience from the completed projects shows that in many fields an unorthodox approach often opens doors and offers usable solutions that would not have been achievable through conventional methods and institutions. As such, the art institutions' 'cultural capital' has been useful when seeking to circumvent bureaucratic hierarchies and mobilize decision-makers from politics, civil administration and the media.

V: How do you sufficiently inform yourselves in readiness for a project, who do you consult and what roles will they have in the project?

PJ: The focus of our research depends on the recommendations of artists and different kinds of experts living in the city, on what was being discussed in the local media during the last months, and last but not least on the ideas that arise discussing strategies for the intervention.

V: WochenKlausur's projects have set time-frames within which they are to be realised. This deadline may reflect a very real sense of urgency about the conditions that your projects, in part, attempt to deal with. But, does a strictly limited time-frame for the interventions allow for sufficient development of the project through interaction with those who you are working on behalf of?

PJ: The subjects we deal with are very widespread. For this reason we have to define very strict boundaries for what we intend to change. If we do not define a concrete goal we will not succeed in bringing about any real change. Sometimes it is difficult to solve a problem within a strictly limited time-frame but on the other hand it sometimes gives rise to an unusual concentration of the participants' energies, allowing the planned interventions to be realized very quickly.

There are different aspects to the projects at different times. Some are based on the participation of the people with whom we are concerned but with others such an integration would not be effective for the project's success. Some problems can only be solved through political negotiations.

V: What are your criticisms of increasingly fashionable interventionist projects which have a cathartic function, such as the representational 'Homeless' art you refer to on your web site?

PJ: WochenKlausur believes that art has got its big chance to take part in the shaping of society and of course there are different opinions of how this can work. There are artists and critics who see interventionist art as a mirror that shows us problems and relationships, others see interventionist art as a kind of depiction of an utopian world where everything is better, and still others want to see it as a way of healing the human condition by changing its formal environment.

WochenKlausur prefers the approach which accepts the boundaries of what can be accomplished. This means not setting the hurdles too low or too high. If artists set them too low, what they do is trivial. If they set them too high, they always want to change everything but finally wind up not changing anything. Thus in the art of intervention we prefer an approach which is effective. One where clear goals are defined on starting and which ends with concrete results.

Effectiveness does not have to be a criteria for art in general. Nevertheless intervention without results is not really an intervention. It is only the attempt at an intervention or it is just a show.

WochenKlausur is sceptical against fashionable trends that disappear as quickly as they come up. We do not criticise the fact that art institutions invite artists to take part at an exhibition that follows a specific topic, but rather the fact that artists tend to show their work under the heading of an exhibition without any adaptation to its content. Such homogenization of different approaches and methodologies provokes misunderstandings concerning the intended message of the artists and of the exhibition makers as well.

The concept of interventionist art has undergone an inflationary trend in recent years. In the tradition of many artists who understood how to actively take part in the shaping of society, WochenKlausur develop concrete solutions for problems that are solvable. We are very strict with the use of the word 'intervention' and we would never change its meaning according to what has become trendy.

V: Could you respond further to the question on your web site: "Does not WochenKlausur encourage the trend in government towards abandoning responsibility for social issues?", as you also state that: "The criticism that WochenKlausur's efforts could be merely treating and hiding the symptoms - where the state should have acted to bring about fundamental improvements - is justified?"

PJ: In society, we are used to delegating certain tasks to certain experts, but there are tasks that cannot be delegated to politicians, social workers or experts. Artists go in for other tasks than they used to do, and it could also be their responsibility to find solutions to problems in our society.

If an artist has an idea of how to decrease poverty in their area, should they first become a politician to realize their vision, or should they drop the idea because it's apparently not up to them to deal with these sorts of issues? WochenKlausur believes that every human being has responsibilities.

V: Is the sustainability of a project a concern when planning it, and what is your relationship to them on completion?

PJ: All of our interventions are intended to be sustainable, which means that their continuing functioning can be guaranteed. Still, one of our projects nearly failed under these terms: Some months after we had opened a shelter for drug addicted women in Zurich, we were informed that it had to close again because of massive pressure in the neighbourhood. In 1995 (one year after our intervention) an altered form of the WochenKlausur group came together again with the goal to bring the project to an effective close, in which we finally succeeded. But still it's true: The more projects WochenKlausur has realized the more difficult it gets to keep in touch with their co-ordinators.

V: WochenKlausur have been developing a project for Castlemilk, Glasgow, could you describe your intended project and what you hope to achieve?

PJ: We were invited to present our projects to The Castlemilk Environment Trust by Jason E. Bowman and Rachel Bradley who are curating a programme of public art commissions on behalf of the Trust.

In April 2001, having been selected, WochenKlausur undertook a period of research in Castlemilk. From this we were able to define the area of intervention well in advance of the project starting. This was an interesting opportunity to develop our practice, being able to define the intervention before the working period of the project.

In Castlemilk there is a lack of facilities for teenage girls to come together. They have the feeling that there is nothing to do. WochenKlausur's research demonstrated that these young people want more opportunities to meet, socialise and make new friends beyond existing boundaries. For young people, leisure facilities are a crucial aspect of community life. They provide a public meeting place for friends outside the home which retains a certain intimacy and is not as controlled as school.

Our proposal for Castlemilk is to establish an indoor facility that would be used as a meeting point and creative space for teenage girls.

We'd like to open up a space where girls between the ages of 13 and 17 can meet in privacy. The project seeks to improve the availability of convenient social facilities for girls. The building would be divided into several units made available to small groups. What the participants actually do with their units would be completely up to them; they just have to use their space actively. To the greatest possible extent, the facility should be self-managed and autonomous.

Small groups (a minimum of three girls) will take over responsibility for a certain portion of the space which they can use for any reasonable purpose they choose. Within this frame, what they do there is completely up to them. Some of them might use their space for talking with friends, sharing music, whatever. They can use the space as long as they want for free, with the only stipulation being that they continue to actively use and maintain it.

WochenKlausur  
Gumpendorferstrasse 20  
A-1060 Vienna  
Austria  
<http://wochenklausur.t0.or.at>