Interview with the Artists

When did you begin your work? How was the idea or group formed?

WochenKlausur

WochenKlauser was formed in 1992.

Back in 1992 Wolfgang Zinggl, the founder of WochenKlausur worked as an art critic. One of his texts was critizing an exhibition in the Viennese Secession which claimed to address „social issues" though nothing could be found besides aesthetic objects referring to specific situations. In his article Zinggl asked the question, if art can It be a much stronger tool whose power lies beyond being a point of reference. In response to his text Wolfgang Zinggl got the opportunity to use the Viennese Secession to show what else art might be able to do.

Wolfgang Zinggl invited eight artists to work on solving a localized problem and to use therefore the exhibition space of the Vienna Secession as an office for 11 weeks - the usual time span of an exhibition. The group decided to work in closed session to develop and realize a small but concrete measure to improve conditions for homeless people. This first project succeeded in making medical care available to this group. Since then, a mobile clinic has treated more than six hundred homeless people per month free of charge. An invitation from the Zurich Shedhalle followed, where WochenKlausur - in a new line-up – developed a pension for drug-addicted women. A year later, the group established a social center with bocce court for the older residents of the Italian community Civitella d'Agliano and in the Austrian city Graz, seven immigrants were assisted in obtaining legal,residency in Austria. Interventions in Salzburg, Berlin, Venice Fukuoka, Chicago and other cities followed. In the meantime 36 projects have been successfully conducted by alternating teams that have involved a total of over fifty artists.

Center for Urban Pedagogy

CUP has existed as a collaborative project since 1997, it was incorporated as an official nonprofit organization in 2002.

CUP was formed by a diverse group of participants who wanted to use art and design to investigate the basic workings of New York City's infrastructure and bureaucracy.

CUP was founded by Damon Rich, Jason Anderson, AJ Blandford, Josh Breitbart, Stella Bugbee, Sarah Dadush, Althea Wasow, and Rosten Woo, who drew on their backgrounds in art, architecture, history, public policy, political theory, and graphic design to collaborate on projects investigating how the city works.

They made publications, videos, and exhibits on topics like urban renewal, housing subsidies, and the history of public housing. Over time, they brought more and more collaborators, from more varied backgrounds, into their projects.

System Ali

System Ali has been around for six years. Its members met at the Jaffa Youth Center—a place for gathering

and creation for the youth of Jaffa and southern Tel Aviv, envisioned by the Sadaka-Reut association, and operating out of a public basement- shelter in Jaffa's Ajami neighborhood. The center includes several ,tracks, including street theater, creative writing, martial arts and cinema. One of the main creative frameworks the centeris involved with is music, which includes lessons, jams, and collaborative writing sessions. These sessions included young people from Jaffa's various communities as well as instructors.

This active coming-together of languages, identities, personal stories, political narratives, and various sources of artistic inspiration all merged together into a single, creative core, based on the shared understanding that everyone has a lot to learn from everyone else. Following a year of joint fermentation, against the background of a strengthening struggle against house demolitionsin Jaffa and southern Tel Aviv, the need arose to let System Ali's voice out of the shelter. The band consists of nine male and female members, including Arabs from Jaffa, Jews from Tel Aviv, Ramat Hasharon, Givat Haim, Bat Yam and Herzlia, an Uzbekistani immigrant, and a female Arab from Nazareth. System Ali saw several lineup changes, including the positions of drummer and bassist, and the joining of guitarist and singer Luna a few years back. Other than that, the majority of the lineup remained the same since its formation.

Two years ago, several band members, joined by other artists and social activists, established Beit System Ali (the "System Ali House") association, which as of today is working with dozens of young people in Jaffa, Bat Yam, and southern Tel Aviv. Its projects include educational and political activities, together with non-compromising artistic creation in the fields of music, theater cinema, writing, and dance.

Fritz Haeg

My community has always been of artists but my professional academic background was of architecture. And my work had slowly migrated away from the kind of architecture I was originally doing and also the kind of art I was originally doing. So I had this kind of strange split that really started to come together when I moved to LA, and I began to garden, and to teach more seriously, I began to host events in my house. So strangely those three activities became the foundation of my mature art practice. The event in my house started at 2000 and that was the exact year I started doing the community gardens at the school where I were teaching.

Edible estate grew very directly out of the 2004 presidential elections. When George bush was re-elected I was really feeling confused about the country. And wanting to get my work out this kind of narrow insular dialogue that comprise the art and architecture communities mostly in the east and west coast. And I really consciously wanted to make a decision to do a project for a broader general public and specifically go to the center of the country. And symbolically to start it in the geographic center of the untied states in Texas.

Is it accurate to say that as artists your choice was to use your talent to create solutions or infrastructure rather than objects?

WochenKlauser

Yes

CUP

We create tools that are, first and foremost, for popular education, advocacy, and community organizing. They are also appreciated, exhibited, and purchased as art/design objects. We believe in the capacity of good

design to help break down complex issues, but the work is equally driven by design and need.

YoH a

Art' for us is the construction of conceptual images that allow' those engaging with them to reflect on the current conditions that surround the art work, its component parts and it's process. In this way our art can simultaneously exist as a pedagogy, campaign,intellectual enquiry, software, hardware, art object, network. If the process of the artwork involves acquiring a second world war database of forced labour from the Deutschen Waffen und Munitionsfabriken A.G. as in 'Lungs, slave labour' then that negotiation would reflect the current conditions of the artwork and the conceptual image could be seen as the negotiation of how the company can avoid too much liability for the data and how much pseudo anonymity YoHa can accept. The art at that moment is the space of negotiation.

D o u g l a s P a u l s o n

Not really, while I don't generally create objects, any infrastructure that I create is a by-product of the larger goals of the project.

F r i t z H a e g

Yes. Again the way that my work goes out into the world and the fact that it doesn't involve typically making object that can be bought or sold or hold value. That wasn't necessarily a conscious decision against the market or against the way the art wold works conventionally it was just a product of how i was working. But I have to say that as my work evolves and progresses i'm more and more and more grateful that my work exist out of that commercial market. It something I have no interest in and I can see how it is really compromised a huge part of the art world, I think the money that's floating around the art world right now is problematic.

Do you see your practice as connected to a certain artistic transition?

W o c h e n K l a u s e r

Since the advent of Modernism art has been an especially fertile domain for querying irrational taboos and inherited value standards and for correcting social imbalances. This function was first put into practice by the Russian Constructivists who introduced an art which for the first time sought to directly influence the people's consciousness and living conditions through agitation and activism.

"Following the Second World War, "socially engaged art experienced several high points. "First of all we think the world must be changed," stands at the beginning of the Situationist Manifesto. The Artist Placement Group tried to push the art out of the gallery by "placing" artists in businesses or public authorities and Joseph Beuys redefined the position of art in society with the concept of the Social Plastic. WochenKlausur follows their paths.

C U P

We are influenced by tools for popular education and art in the social justice vein: the infographics of Otto Neurath and Gerd Arntz, the silkscreens of Sister Corita, and the playful urbanism of people like Archigram, to name a few.

S y s t e m A l i

System Ali is working within the (very broad) tradition of Hip-Hop culture, which developed in the Bronx, New York in the 1970s. We connect with that tradition not only in terms of musical style but first and foremost in terms of the communal nature of the artistic work: a music that emerges out of- and that is for the community in which it operates. In artistic-musical terms, each member of the band brings with him or her different traditions on which they grew up, ranging from classical Arabic music, through Israeli folk songs and military entertainment bands, all the way to blues and reggae.

D o u g l a s P a u l s o n

Absolutely.

Do you think there's a difference or a distinction between your activity and the classic perception of artistic activity? Is it important for you to define your activity as art or activism or as belonging to any other field?

W o c h e n K l a u s e r

Actually there have always been a variety of perceptions of art (and therefore of artistic activities) and not only one.

WochenKlausurs has just added one more perception where artistic activity is not seen as a formal act but as an intervention into society.

C U P

Our work exists in a number of different contexts, from schools to organizer meetings to art institutions to subway platforms. We are invested in creating projects that meet the specific needs of our community partners, but also place a high value on design that is thoughtful and innovative. When we are working on a project, we don't think "This is going to be exhibited in a museum." That doesn't drive our work, but we do think about whether the design is working for the audience it is intended for. On the flip side, the goal of our work is to achieve greater social justice; we are explicit about that, but we are not the organizers on the ground, doing the work of getting this information to communities. Our projects are tools that increase their capacity to do their work. We are the convener and translator between these fields, but we do not do the work of those fields.

D o u g l a s P a u l s o n

I see these labels as triggers to suggest a specific form of analysis by the viewer or institution. I think my work is successful when it compelling enough that others want to participate in it. When describing my work or engaging a possible participant, I'll shift between the languages or frameworks of a ,different traditions - art, activism, architecture, oral history etc., to make that initial connection or impression. I'm also happiest with my work when it can be described and understood as being part of many "fields".

YoH a

Our work is about enquiry that researches, reflects on, explores through actions, observes, theorizes and provokes computational culture and it's antecedence.

S y s t e m A l i

In our view there's no difference between them. These are two activities that have to be aligned, without compromising the quality of either.

A r t e a m , I n t e r − d i s c i p l i n a r y A r t

We've never dealt with this question. Our starting point was neither activist nor communal, but the desire to connect artistic and public thinking. We just happened to reach the target audience of foreigner communities.

What is the importance of exhibiting your projects in a gallery space?

How do you choose to present your projects in exhibitions/gallery spaces?

W o c h e n K l a u s e r

WochenKlausur works consciously within the art system.

If the art system is to change, then the rules of the game that determine it must at first be recognized. The rules of the game cannot be radically changed, only in small steps. Radical changes disturb the continuity with previous notions of art, and thus inhibit the use of a common conception of art. Using the word art with a changed meaning and yet in a way that is understandable to a large number of people is a prerequisite for admitting any. shift in the conception of art. A transformation of the possibilities open to artistic activity is the real political goal of WochenKlausur and much other activist interventionist - and littoralist art today. If the conception of -art changes, then the art business will also change. Polemics and criticism alone will not alter the art business.

Unlike in our early work, we don't focus on placing our work in galleries. When we are invited to do so, we are pleased to have the opportunity to share the work with more people, to have more people understand the complex issues we work on and raise awareness for our community partners, to give our student collaborators a chance to see their work exhibited publicly, to raise the profile of the artists and designers we partner with and to draw the attention of more people who might become collaborators on future projects.

Referring to the idea of art (or any field) as being a structure for analysis, showing work in art spaces allows for expanded readings of the work. I think 'art' as the ability to have meaning that's bigger than itself, because art viewers are generally willing to give themselves the freedom to imagine those meanings.

Art galleries, museums and festivals are useful to an enquiry when you wish to present a proposition, assemblage, physical diagram of a set of relations in a reflective environment. At the same time art spaces are not particularly useful for enquiries into live media systems that are live, say in governance, health care etc. Then we need to create other methods outside of the art space. If the proposition of the art is to create an experimental space between some technical object and particular cultural forms then this should be done live, say in a telephone exchange, network,electricity supply or workplace.

Our music is the only channel through which we are able, both individually and as an ensemble, to convey our messages. If we could have done it otherwise we would have.

in "Edible Estates" the making of a garden is actually the simplest part. A lot of my work involves then telling of the story of what happened. And how it develops over the first season. The gallery is the place where the project becomes contextualized within the dialogue of art. Where you can think about not just the small kind of topical issue of the moment but the big chain of human history and how this moment of human urbanism is a part of that. Art is one of these rare places in our culture where we can step outside ourselves for a moment and see ourselves objectively maybe or see ourselves in a way we are not able to in the middle of our daily lives. I'm very interested in the capacity of art to be both of its time and also outside of its time if that makes sense. Also, when I do these garden the question of success has to be re evaluated too. If these gardens were a commercial project or purely and advocacy project success would be based entirely on how well the garden did and how many other people did them, I suppose. In these gardens that's not the case at all i'm actually looking for trouble. Looking for problems looking for conflicts. I'm looking To place the gardens where they might cause confusion.

They may be not terribly welcomed either. The garden is being put in a place where gardens are not even welcomed. And questions like is our air polluted? Do we have time to garden?

All the different problems that come up with human survival and food in the city.

I'm interested in those conflicts.

How do you start a new project? How are you approached and by whom?

WochenKlauser

WochenKlausur always works upon invitations from art and cultural institutions.

CUP

We divide our work into two categories, Community, Education and Youth Education. All of our projects start with topics that are currently impacting the communities we work with.

For our Community Education programs have created open calls for topics so that organizations can come to us with the issues they are working on and that are directly impacting their communities. We usually convene a jury of leaders in the design and advocacy fields to help us select project partners. We want to create opportunities for advocacy organizations to reach their constituencies better through design and for designers to engage social issues without sacrificing experimentation. Our Youth Education programs usually begin with a school or other educational partner. We work with them to find a topic that is relevant to the communities where the students live. We hire a teaching artists and train them in our methodology and then they work with the students to investigate a key question about the city. Where does our water come from? Where does our garbage go? Who owns the Internet? To find answers, students go beyond standard classroom learning and engage in rigorous field research: visiting real sites and interviewing decision-makers and stakeholders. Students research the issue and collaborate with the teaching artist to produce a final product that teaches others what they learned. These products are sometimes used by community organizations in their own advocacy work.

DouglasPaulson

I regard everyone I meet as a possible participant.

YoHa

Sometimes it is about what needs to be depicted, revealed, opened up, provoked to create a conversation around some aspect of what makes us who we are today. Sometimes someone else, a curator, public health official, friend, artist will ask us to think about something they noticed.

Do you work together with local partners? What is their role and is it crucial to the success of the project?

Local partners are tremendously important for WochenKlausur. First in terms of research to get the insider perspective and to hear what's running fine but also to learn what's not working

appropriate.

Second: The implemented project is usually meant to be long-term. Therefore its necessary to found an organization or to hand it over to an already existing local institution.

We always work with local partners. We do not have an projects that are done without local, community-based partners. That is a core component of all of our work. We believe that our projects are impactful because they meet specific needs, are created in partnership with the people that need and will use them, and are created with the distribution strategy in mind from the outset. These partnerships are absolutely crucial to the effectiveness of our work. The community partners define the issue, provide feedback and direction on how well the project is communicating the issue, provide knowledge of the issue and the challenges around it, provide access to community members who can give us feedback on the project during development, and finally, the use the project and distribute it in their work.

If the project is new then we always work with local partners in whatever shape whether enterprise, groups or individuals – if we are exhibiting in a gallery then it may only go as far as the administrators of the space.

I think understanding "community" as something defined by local political boundaries or geography is the least apt way to understand community. I prefer to see communities as self-organizing around shared affinity, and therefore feel I never leave my community - rather, it expands around me as I meet new collaborators and participants. Geographic areas are full of communities that exist simultaneously. Individuals are part of many parallel communities and many communities never intersect - the way you might not know your neighbor.

I extremely depend upon locals who know what they're doing because i just don't know how to grow food in their climate. Even if i gardened in LA for 12 years and the climate might be slightly similar to Tel Aviv (Jessy Cohen) it's still not very helpful.

Do you have a specific work method, a "formula" or guidelines you go by?

The fact that the collective members are artists and therefore coming from outside the systems WochenKlausur is usually intervening in is the basic strategy.

Another method is that the group's projects are collective efforts that take place in the concentrated atmosphere of a closed- session working situation. A limited timeframe – between three up to twelve weeks - gives rise to an unusual concentration of the participants' energies, allowing the planned interventions to be realized very quickly.

This is our formula, everything else can change dependent on the needs of the situations.

C U P

Each of our programs has its own methodologies that we are constantly working to improve.

D o u g l a s P a u l s o n

Regard everyone as a possible participant. Never say "no".

Allow the experience to inform the direction of the work. I also always trust that I or we can make something from nothing, and make it work.

A r t e a m , I n t e r – d i s c i p l i n a r y A r t

Yes, both at the level of the work of the association and that of the management of the library. Each month Eyal distributes a comprehensive report on the state of the library, the events, financial recruitment, volunteers, visitors, etc.

How flexible is your working process?

W o c h e n K l a u s e r

As flexible as it needs to be, there is no self-set rule that can be changed in order to achieve the task the group set itself.

C U P

Very. It needs to be. We are working with underfunded, overburdened community partners, we have small

budgets, and we are creating unusual collaborations that can be quite confusing for our partners. We try to create a stable framework, but we are always ready to shift as the conditions around us change.

D o u g l a s P a u l s o n

Very flexible. I try to let the people I meet and context I'm working in guide me. I never want to force a result or force participation. I think the ideas, conversations, and ways to represent and reveal them are out there - they just need to be found, and this often means expanding or re-imagining the idea ofwhat the project should look like.

A r t e a m , I n t e r - d i s c i p l i n a r y A r t

Depending on my manager's personality (and mine)...

F r i t z H a e g

There is a basic agenda to the project that is very clear, very fixed and completely inflexible which has to do with very simple cheap inexpensive gardens for typical households that are public and visible as possible. those are the critical things beyond that it is extremely flexible. The plan for the garden is developed usually sitting in the place itself with the family with papers and pens just there. We are drawing that together. As a matter of fact I really really like making decisions the morning of the planting.So every one are watching the decisions get made. So it seems very transparent the whole process.

Are there any projects that you think didn't succeed or weren't effective?

C U P

Yes!

S y s t e m A l i

Looking back we made many mistakes. As a result of countless bad, shocking, and disappointing experiences we learned invaluable professional and creative lessons. But the place where we learned we could really fail had nothing to do with the quality of the sound system, the stage, or the size ofthe audience. It had to do with how our work is being used and presented. We learned that the more we play and sing the more effective System Ali becomes. Our strength is in our music, not in talking about music. In those places where they brought System Ali not for its music but in order to represent this or that idea nd there were many such cases —we learned that even with the most sophisticated sound systems, it's very hard to generate a successful "performance".

Some of the events are low profile, like the marking of the Nepalese community's New Year. The annual Shavuot event Immigrant Holiday is always a sweeping one. The question also needs to be examined in light of political events. For example, there were several initiatives around the deportation, such as an invitation for a talk about refugee civil and political rights vis-à-vis the state, in which about fifty people attended. Whether it was a success or a failure, an effective event or not—I have no idea.

Absolutely, each project has its successes and failures, of course, and the ones with the biggest failures are the ones you learn the most from. Of work that I've done, the projects that don't succeed are ones that didn't adapt enough to the context, people, or place.

Do you feel like the experience you gained working on one project was relevant to other project as well?

Definitely though at the same time it is very important not to become to routinely. It needs both aspects!

Yes. Our projects really inform each other, even across the different programs. We are always learning more about collaboration, for example.

Every time.

Most of us started at System Ali when we were very young when we first met. In this sense you might say we grew up together, and that working in the band accompanied each of us in our personal and professional development. Both for those for whom System Ali was their first musical and stage experience, and for those who arrived with rich musical background, the experience we gained and are still gaining in our joint work in the band greatly affects the way we approach work in other areas as well—whether it is the different artistic fields some of the members deal with (theater, martial arts, writing), or in education.