

“We’re infiltrating society in little but important ways.”

Interviews with SMC participants at the Amerika Gedenkbibliothek
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Interviews by Nicholas Potter

Julia & Johannes, ages unknown, Berlin

What are you expecting from your first Social Muscle Club?

Julia: Inspiration – for everyday life. Through a performative workshop, I hope we can find new, peaceful ways of living that can be applied to our day-to-day routines.

What did you give in the first round?

Julia: An adventure plan. We're always working so much, so perhaps we need a little adventure in between. What this plan will consist of exactly still hinges on what I come up with. But in return, I have received a Social Muscle Club T-shirt, an English lesson over a coffee and a trip to a lake in Brandenburg.

Johannes: I offered advice. Without bigging myself up too much, I think I'm good at giving advice. I wouldn't say I'm a life coach though. There's still a high potential of failure when following my advice – but that's a part of it, in a way.

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Eva, 66, Berlin

“I've never heard of the Social Muscle Club before, I'm just here because I read about peace talks online. When it comes to the topic of peace, you always have to start small: by getting rid of envy and becoming fairer and more just in your way of dealing with people, be they friends, neighbours, family or strangers. I hope that the world can finally live in peace but so far this seems impossible. There's always some war or other because everything's always about profit and power. Over the last 1000 years, people haven't managed to grasp the fact that our values as humans are completely different ones to this shit. It's about empathy, compassion and understanding. I'm curious to see what I'll get out of these peace talks. Through dialogue, you notice quickly if you're on the same wavelength as someone or not.”

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Maria, 31, Berlin

What are you drawing?

I've just gotten started and then we'll see what happens. It's just really nice to do something without thinking about it. My drawing looks a bit like a flower that's growing and growing. We're all very peaceful and concentrated here at the drawing table.

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Claus Erbskorn, musician and school teacher, 51, Berlin

What are you drawing?

I'm not sure, I've just started but the keyword is peace. We're supposed to draw peace. I can't tell you exactly why I'm drawing some sort of arches and filling them with different colours though.

It certainly is colourful. Does that represent diversity?

Diversity is certainly part of it. To be honest, I find it incredibly peaceful just to draw something without any particular plan. I wouldn't usually do this. I'm a musician and I don't really just play for the sake of it anymore. And that goes for drawing too.

Can art save the world?

I don't know about that but it's making me calm and calm people are less inclined to beat up other people. Drawing is a good strategy against violence. It's not without reason that many prisons offer art therapy. Perhaps we should offer that more widely. I'm also a school teacher and art and music are always neglected as everything else is more important – but I think it should be the other way around.

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Shelby Hofer, moderator, 50, Atlanta

You're a moderator on one of the tables. How is your group getting along?

It's really just been an exercise in how to figure out what you want, and what you want to say you want, and what you want to give, and what you want to say you want to give. It's very hard. It's a challenge for people to come up with something they really want and also something that they really want to give. It took a minute for people to get into it and, at first, it was a little bit silly and then it got serious. The format is hard to explain unless you experience it for the first time. It's even hard during the first round but then you get into the swing of it.

Do you feel as though you've trained your social muscles today?

Absolutely. We're here as part of the Atlanta contingent that came to participate in all four Social Muscle Clubs during the Peace Talks and we've just hosted our first clubs in Atlanta. We're really hoping to glean some more of the international aspects of the club so that we can take them back home.

Are there any differences between Social Muscle Clubs in Atlanta and Berlin?

I've been coming to Berlin for 10 years now and there is a totally different psychology here. Berliners are somehow more used to exercising this muscle than we are. But in Atlanta they drink it up, they love it. Immediately, people are just somehow ready. We're primed for it.

From solidarity kitchens to refugee support networks to gardening collectives, there's a lot of voluntary, non-commercial projects in Berlin – everyday examples of social muscles in action.

Exactly, so it's very nice to be here and it works in a completely different way. We've learnt a lot.

What do peace talks mean to you?

This is a form of social justice, just in and of itself. I feel like we're infiltrating society in little but important ways.

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Celia C. Peters, filmmaker, USA, claims she's 12 or 78**Is this your first Social Muscle Club? What were you expecting today?**

This is my first Social Muscle Club. I didn't have any expectations because everyone was purposely vague about what it is, so I really didn't know. I figured it would be positive, constructive and interactive though, as well as liberating. And I knew that there were a lot of artists coming.

What have you taken away from the club?

I'm a filmmaker, so I'm used to being behind the camera and I feel like I was pushed to put myself in front and perform myself, which was good for me. As an artist, that's your wish, to free yourself.

Did you find it easier to give or receive?

I was very clear on the things that I wanted: a paid screenwriting job, contact to a gallery that is accepting new artists and agent contacts. But giving was also really easy, once I started thinking about what would work in this context, given the language difference. One thing I offered was copyediting of an English document, another was helping someone writing a story to work out the structure.

Have you had any luck in fulfilling your wishes so far?

Well, I was put in contact with a gallery already. We'll have to see about the screenwriting but you never know!

What do peace talks mean to you?

Peace talks mean communication with the goal of peace in mind. Inherently, it means that you're trying to be productive and move in a positive direction – and that's super important. I'm an American and I can't tell you how liberating it is to be here, not only to be out of the United States but also to be involved with something where peace talks are a central theme, because what we're experiencing is quite the opposite at home. So I've really been enjoying this on many levels.

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Eva Wolfsberg, masters student, 31, Vienna**What drew you to the Social Muscle Club?**

My first SMC experience was a few years ago in Vienna. I simply found it fascinating how such a simple format can bring complete strangers together and give them the courage to start doing something by helping people.

Has participating in Social Muscle Clubs changed you as a person?

It's definitely helped me to reflect on how we often hesitate to help people in real life, even if we know we're able to do something in a situation. But then we think, oh we don't know the person, maybe it would come across as intrusive to offer help. This format makes it so simple, but it also applies a bit of peer pressure. You think: lots of people have already given something and I'm just taking.

You're writing your masters thesis on the Social Muscle Club. What's your take?

Above all, I'm interested in how these formats work within an artistic framing to draw on social practices. One of the main questions I'm asking is to what extent this performative, artistic context supports this act of exchange.

Do you see the Social Muscle Club within a certain theoretical tradition?

Yes, it reminds me of Claire Bishop, who described a "social turn" in performance in her analysis of socially engaged art forms that bring this social aspect, as opposed to a purely aesthetic aspect, to the fore. This is the theoretical perspective I'm coming from, but I'm also looking at the history of the format and how it's contextualised today.

What did you exchange today?

I got a Chinese palm reading, which I'm excited about, and I offered to send a postcard from Vienna, as I don't live in Berlin.