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The Self-Organized Art School and Sustainability: A Meditation on the Copenhagen Free University

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Introduction[1]

In many ways, the history of self-organized art schools has yet to be written. Recent and, it must be said, singular attempts to document and assess that history notwithstanding,[2] the countless self-organized, artist-run, more or less short-lived initiatives that have popped up in the last two decades have usually acted as their own archives, the dominant trace of their operations now residing in the pamphlets, announcements, abandoned blogs, and sundry curricula left behind and now digitized. More often than not, it seems, the precarious nature of these projects further augments the risk of documentary obscurity, as the disbandment of a school or collective entails the dispersion of a sort of human archive of shared experience. In an important sense, then, the archive is irremediably incomplete, and any scholar wishing to undertake an analysis of a bygone movement is sometimes left to parse oral histories, and in the absence thereof, retain a necessarily speculative element in their work. Moreover, the sheer variety of forms these projects have taken and continue to take (reading groups, activist collectives, among other yet more amorphous formations) precludes an easy gloss of their common characteristics.

Nonetheless, these "schools" provide powerful models for those who would venture to think otherwise about self-organized education and the purpose of the academy. This is especially true

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[1]With regard to the choice of topic for this project: I couldn't help but make the connection with my own past. Having been raised (K-12) within a community of self-organizing adults who committed to educating their children through a non-hierarchical network of familial and communal relations (what we called "homeschooling" or "unschooling"), I naturally became fascinated with the history of self-organized art schools referred to in this study. On the other hand, the relation to my own artistic practice I am content with elucidating on the level of the obvious: I am an art student, and have a stake in the field within which the struggles of the CFU played out.

[2] Cf. Sam Thorne, *School: A Recent History of Self-Organised Art Schools.*

of the more DIY, off-space-adjacent projects of late,[3] a few of which sought to enact a sort of "exodus" from economies of knowledge, capital, and affect perceived as corrupting or, more pointedly, untenably oppressive. This paper will focus on one such school in particular, the Copenhagen Free University. Founded in 2001, and operational only for a brief period of 6 years, the CFU, as a model of an artist-run, non-accredited "institution" of artistic research and learning, is for a few reasons a fitting subject for a case study. Not only did the CFU have a well-documented and clearly articulated ideological philosophical framework (easily accessible via the university's website), but in its capacity as a publishing platform and library it also offers an operational history, a history of texts and interventions, on the basis of which to assess its project.[4] Finally, the CFU, for the reasons outlined above, has had an outsize influence on the self-organized schools appearing in its wake, having attained a degree of visibility shared by few similar small-scale initiatives organizing under the banner of non-hierarchical self-determination and alternative art education.[5]

The aim of the present essay is twofold: first, to give an account of the structure of the CFU and examine how it functioned as the site of artistic research, conceived in this case as an array of emancipatory and counter-hegemonic social practices based on a model of open and equal participation in the social production of knowledge. This provides a context within which to situate my central research question, which concerns the *relation of the CFU to sustainability*. How did the CFU theorize about itself as a precarious educational project? How did its founders approach the idea of sustainability—explicitly or through the actions of the university? And how

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[3] Examples include the Mountain School of Arts and the Sundown Salon in Los Angeles, as well as Jan de Cock's Brussels Art Institute in Brussels, Belgium.

[4] This is not to say that such a study is justified, or even seriously feasible: to claim to base the following investigation on the existence of a proper "archive," or even sufficient documentation—especially in light of the constraints of a 4,000-word *speelruimte*—would belie the theoretical and speculative aims of this paper.

[5] This is not in small part due to the prolificness of its co-founder, Jakob Jakobsen, who has written extensively and across various platforms on the subject of self-organization and political action. Other figures associated with the university, such as Anthony Davies, have written and curated around the activities of the CFU and the imperative of self-organization.

did this relate to the university's vision of emancipation through the social production of knowledge?

University of the Everyday

From 2001 to 2007, the CFU operated out of Heise and Jakobsen's flat, hosting screenings, presentations, readings, a book and 'zine shop, and a guest residency. In addition to inviting practicing artists and/or theorists to participate in research, which might then be reinserted into the circuits of knowledge production within the university in the form of presentations and discussions, the CFU organized activities that included interventions in public space involving "propaganda," performances, and the creation of a media-based research arm, FreeUtvResearch, which produced experimental TV-programs and broadcasted them to a potential audience of 1.7 million via a local, artist-run TV-network.[6] It also created and maintained an online library and blog (the *Free U Log*). Listing Black Mountain College, the New Experimental College, Drakabygget, the Spontaneous University, and the London Anti-University (among others) as apparent influences, the CFU situated itself in a long line of self-organized initiatives that ranged from academy-adjacent experimental schools to expressly radical/socialist collectives. On its website (which is still operational), the university describes itself as "an artist run institution dedicated to the production of critical consciousness and poetic language," claiming to "work with forms of knowledge that are fleeting, fluid, schizophrenic, uncompromising subjective, uneconomic, acapitalist, produced in the kitchen, produced when asleep or arisen on a social excursion – collectively" ("ABZ").[7]

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[6] "At the Copenhagen Free University we have established FreeUtvResearch that is an unit engaging in the investigation of and experimentation with television as a public sphere. FreeUtvResearch is a node in the tv-tv network" (*Free U Log,* Sunday 6 Mar 2005).

[7] The decision to open the CFU must also, of course, be considered in the light of the progressive neoliberalization of the academy in the last quarter of the twentieth century, the quantification and standardization of education (e.g. the so-called Bologna Agreement of 1999 in the European context) and the explosive emergence, in the U.S. especially, of a student debt crisis. Pascal Gielen and Paul De Bruyne, commenting on this development, ask: "isn't education today also regarded as one big catering business? Academies and universities are after all expected to deliver knowledge that is made-to-measure and meets the demands of its clients or potential students" (Gielen and De Bruyne 3).

There appears to be no record of the amount of people involved throughout the university's lifetime; given the intimacy of its premise, as well as the spatial limitations of its location (a photograph from the archive depicts the "meeting fascilities" [sic], a cramped living room containing a standing and sitting crowd), it is unlikely that those affiliated ever numbered over 100 at any given time; yet the defined purpose of the CFU required that, at the beginning at least, the operation remain small scale. The CFU was unique in the extent to which it dismantled the divide between life and study, between specialized knowledge economies and "a wide array of personal, improvised and politicised forms of knowledge embedded in social practises around us" ("ABZ").[8] "Our work is usually closely connected to the daily life we live," wrote its founders in a kind of manifesto. "The Copenhagen Free University is, in fact, situated and functions within the framework of our flat and household economy" ("ABZ"). It wasn't so much the case that a university was merely superimposed upon an existing domestic structure, but that the latter was envisioned as a site of productive conflict, a realm within which discourses normally kept apart (and relegated to the spaces outside the academy) were allowed to collide and mix with the volatile desires, "fluctuating passions and affective instabilities" that characterized daily life ("WE HAVE WON!"). Reflecting its non-hierarchical organizational structure, a non-hierarchical organization of knowledges and knowledge-forms:[9] baking bread in the morning could become as urgent a subject for intellectual discussion as the legacy of the Scandinavian Internationalists.[10] At the same time, the physical articulation of the university, embodied in its architecture, disciplines, and performances, was displaced from the space of the academy and reinscribed upon domestic objects: "We took power by using the available means: a mattress became a residency, the bedroom a cinema, the living room a meeting space, the

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[8] A few other important early self-organized art schools were similarly run out of the founders' homes: these were the Bruguera's Cátedra Arte de Conducta in Havana and Haeg's Sundown Salon in Los Angeles (Thorne 51).

[9] "In that sense the self-institution of the Copenhagen Free University is also an experiment in a situation because a situation, in the terms of the Situationist International, is supposed to enable us to bring all facets of experience into the situation; there's no hierarchy of valid experiences" (Howard Slater, "COPENHAGEN FREE UNIVERSITY, 18TH MARCH, 2002").

[10] "COPENHAGEN FREE UNIVERSITY, 18TH MARCH, 2002."

workroom an archive, our flat became a university. Opening our private space turned it into a public institution. The Copenhagen Free University was a real collective phantom, hovering" ("WE HAVE WON!"). Part contestation of the legitimacy of the academy, part performative self-institutionalization, the creation of the CFU did not, in fact, transform a private space into a public instution, but rather erased the binary separating the two: the distinction, in the space of the free university, ceases to make logical sense.

At heart, the CFU was an attempt to regain control of the means of production of the immaterial labor which forms the basis of our present-day knowledge economies.[11] The success of its project depended therefore on the restoration of the products of that knowledge to its producers—the restoration of the commons. It located that struggle within a tradition of aesthetic and political resistance stretching back to the Situationist International, and the kinds of artistic research conducted within its organization retained the spirit of counter-hegemonic and critical practice that characterized the Situationists' stance towards modern society. Self-institutionalization as a university was the specific form this project happened to take, for reasons that will be explained shortly.

Self-institutionalization

So why did the founders of the CFU decide to appropriate the structure of the academy? At first, it doesn't seem like we are supposed to take the title of "university" seriously. After all, the CFU was dedicated to eviscerating the ethos of the neoliberal art academy. If semi-serious satire was the root justification, why not just stick with the less institutional labels—student union, art society, book club? Yet, as Sam Thorne has convincingly argued, beneath the veneer of tongue-in-cheek mimicry, there was a serious commitment to the potential of the university model, or at

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[11] Hardt and Negri, in *Multitude,* have traced the ascendance of immaterial labor as the hegemonic labor-form of the current capitalist order: "In the final decades of the twentieth century, industrial labor lost its hegemony and in its stead emerged 'immaterial labor,' that is, labor that creates immaterial products, such as knowledge, information, communication, a relationship, or an emotional response" (Hardt and Negri 2004).

least the ideal it embodied. Speaking of the "new wave" of self-organized art schools that emerged around the turn of the century, Thorne contends that "[t]his self-institutionalizing impulse is way of claiming legitimacy and, by extension, calling into question that of existing institutions" (Thorne 49). To call yourself a university is not only to hint at the failure of the traditional university model. For the founders of the CFU, it was also an opportunity to undermine the value-hierarchy shaped by decades of privatization and standardization in the sphere of (art) education and to reassert, instead, a value-system that prioritized the open distribution of, and free access to, knowledge:

> By reclaiming one of society's central means of knowledge production, the machinery of the university, it was actually possible to create spaces that were not based on capitalist valorisation. For us 'free' means gratis and liberated. Everybody can open their own university, it is a simple action. By self-organising universities people can, in a very practical way, counter the free market restructuring of the official universities by re-appropriating the concept of the university as a place for the sharing of knowledge among students (as the first universities were defined) ("WE HAVE WON!").

Self-institutionalization might be conceived, then, as a kind of "subversive speech act" which disturbs the symbolic order within which certain institutions claim legitimacy as places of higher learning, to follow a line of argumentation already delineated by Odis Babski. Yet there is a contradiction at the core of this very act: how does one reconcile non-representation with the idea of a stable and sustainable institution? An institution, almost by its very definition, traditionally exceeds the sum of the social relations which constitute it; to ward against the ever-present threat of precarity, it summons myth, legacy, and, on the material side, props ranging from symbolic architecture to government subsidies. The CFU, by contrast, "has not got any marble columns or any spectacular architecture, but has all the mess and irregularities of a place where people live" ("ABZ"). The CFU's tactic of self-institutionalization was, in this sense, both performative (in the sense of *effecting* something through a speech act) and strategic: it appropriated, parasitically, the legitimacy of the institution while simultaneously reducing the institution to a specter, a hollow designation evacuated of real significance:[12] "The Copenhagen

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[12] Gregory Sholette, in discussing what he terms "mockstitutions," describes a strategy by which informally structured art agencies mimic larger institutions (in name as well as in function) as a way of "gaining surreptitious entry into media visibility itself" (OnCurating).

Free University was a real collective phantom, hovering" ("WE HAVE WON!"). This, in turn, meant that anyone could start a university: the concept, turned on its head (a movement represented by the superimposition of the organizational scheme of the academy onto the domestic sphere of the home), becomes an unstable signifier, easily adapted to one's own needs and purposes. And, indeed, this was the explicit imperative of the CFU: "instead of dreaming of the Copenhagen Free University or London Anti-University or the Free University of New York or the Spontaneous University, go where you live and establish your own university drawing on the knowledge in your networks" ("ABZ"). As Marco Scotini has argued, the CFU was never intended to provide any kind of model; "[t]he aim of the Copenhagen Free University was rather that of providing a voice for the proliferation of decentralized initiatives, each valid in its own right and opening up the possibility for anyone to establish their own education" (Scotini 186). While remaining resolutely local, it promulgated, in virtual and physical space, an emancipatory call: organize yourselves!

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Exodus

In "There is No Alternative: The Future is Self-Organized," Stephan Dillemuth, Anthony Davies, Jakob Jakobsen write,

> we offer no contribution, no critique, no pathway to reform, no way in or out. We choose to define ourselves in relation to the social forms that we participate in and not the leaden institutional programmes laid out before us… There is no need for us to storm the Winter Palace, because most institutions are melting away in the heat of global capital anyway. We will provide no alternative.

Although it would be a mistake to read this provocative document as a statement of the foundational principles of the CFU, there are clear reasons to link this text to the activities (participated in by at least two of the authors of the above text) surrounding the CFU and its founding. From the start, the CFU was envisioned as a non-representative institution: its power and organizational structure flowed from the commons, the shared access to local knowledge economies and to constantly fluctuating network of social relations that underpinned them. Thus, we can see in the CFU a type of organization dedicated to the principles outlined in the

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aforementioned text: “transparency, accountability, equality and open participation” (“There is No Alternative”). Reanimating these pillars of social citizenship and democracy, which in the scramble for neoliberal reform have been not only abandoned but discredited by cultural and educational institutions, becomes part of a strategy of “exodus,” a withdrawing of stakes—and thus cultural, financial, etc. investment—from cultural institutions and representative bodies. As the authors of “There is No Alternative,” speaking of the imperative to “deregulate ourselves” and create lines of flight away from exploitative/oppressive knowledge economies, put it: “we feel that any further critical contribution to institutional programmes will further reinforce the relations that keep these obsolete structures in place” (“There is No Alternative”). This sentiment is echoed on the website of the CFU, where one can find, under a section titled “Exodus,” the following proclamation of dissent: “The active refusal of the present social relations of capitalism, an evacuation of it's means of support and the construction of an alternative. Not a direct opposition or negation, but the immediate evacuation” (“ABZ”). This strategy resembles what Scotini terms disobedience, which recalls the defiant stance of the subject who refuses to be interpellated by the hail of the dominant ideology:

> disobedience is not only (and not so much) opposition to repetitive norms or unambiguous rules that, by now, have no validation in the absence of any determinate ‘environment.’ Disobedience is the not the deliberate violation of the law, not even merely as a social context of opposition. Rather, it is an autonomous process of creating alternative subjectivities and of independent, innovative organization, which are no more than the same requisites on which current production activities are based (Scotini 191).

Exodus, evacuation, or disobedience is in a sense the key to understanding the emphasis on non-representation as a realization of democracy and as a tactic of assembly. Hardt and Negri, in their book, *Multitude,* crystallize the relation of democracy to representation, in the process offering a powerful critique and genealogy of the former term. “[D]emocracy and representation stand at odds with one another. When our power is transferred to a group of rulers, then we all no longer rule, we are separated from power and government” (Hardt and Negri 2004).[13] This contradiction

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[13] Hardt and Negri also acknowledge the gradual intertwining of the two notions of democracy and representation, which has resulted in their conflation to this day: “Despite this contradiction […] already in the early nineteenth century representation came to define modern democracy to such an extent that

in turn provides a justification for exodus as a political tactic: if critiquing, reforming, or being integrated into existing institutions ultimately cannot guarantee the involvement those whose interests and representation are at stake (the workers, anyone who contributes their immaterial labor to the processes of production), then self-organization appears as the only means to self-determination. Only by withdrawing from those institutions deemed rigid and corrupted may actual democracy, in the sense of equal and open participation, be reasonably striven for.

Not incidentally, Hardt and Negri also provide in *Multitude* a framework for understanding the *political* project of the CFU. In that text, they elucidate what they perceived as the revolutionary political potential of the collective subjectivities—disparate in space and status—produced by, and underpinning, the current hegemony of immaterial labor. This potential they called the "multitude," whose very existence they predicated on the tendency of immaterial production to lead to the drastic expansion of a linguistic, informational, and affective commons (since circuits of immaterial production tend to multiply and augment themselves as a result of the creation of new subjectivities)[14] (Hardt and Negri 2004). A facile reading of Hardt and Negri's theoretical project might link the self-organization of the multitude, which is systematically deprived of the fruits of its labor, to the realization of true, non-representational democracy.[15] On one level, the CFU could be seen as an attempt to atomize this trajectory, to realize the promise of non-representational democracy on a small scale and allow it to invade the public sphere in the form of constantly multiplying formations of self-organized subjectivities (see the CFU's "starburst" strategy).

Sustainability

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since then it has become practically impossible to think democracy without also thinking some form of representation" (Hardt and Negri 2004).

[14] "Subjectivity, in other words, is produced through cooperation and communication and, in turn, this produced subjectivity itself produces new forms of cooperation and communication, which in turn produce new subjectivity, and so forth. In this spiral each successive movement from the production of subjectivity to the production of the common is an innovation that results in a richer reality" (Hardt and Negri 2004).

[15] This remains merely a gloss of, and derivation from, arguments articulated in the book.

Approaching questions of sustainability, it seems reasonable to begin by admitting that self-organization, in our present political and economic climate, is an inherently risky venture and in the worst cases prone to swift and quiet failure. Sustainability becomes a chimera, its most challenging riddle being the problem of how to sustain something that requires time and money but isn't necessarily remunerative in either of those departments. Yet what if sustainability is not the object in the first place? In the course of our analysis it has become clear that the two major characteristics of the CFU discussed above—performative self-institutionalization on the hand, and non-representation on the other—don't exactly promote the prolongation of the university's activities; in fact, both the instability of a non-representation organization and the institutional weakness by the mainly performative nature of self-institutionalization (corresponding to a lack of the durable accoutrements of the institution) produce a tendency towards precarity. So the question becomes: how does the CFU position itself in relation to the idea of sustainability in light of its precarity?

An answer might be found in the "failure" of the CFU itself; the fact that, to begin with, the CFU was never intended to endure as an institution. In one place, its founders declared, "The Copenhagen Free University is a temporary self-institution that for a period of time gather and formalise a community of individuals and groups around a certain struggle" ("ABZ"). It might be more accurate to say that the sustainability which it sought was not institutional but *social*, a kind of afterlife residing in the informal and outwardly expanding social networks emanating from the university. Josephine Berry, participating in an "exchange-situation" with Jakob Jakobsen, Henriette Heise and Howard Slater, situated this question within a larger discussion of the university's physical organization and location:

> One of the things I wanted to ask was about the sustainability of this kind of a project and in a sense that kind of answers it. Because if you see it as an energy, a collectieve assemblage, that is operative already, then the sustainability is within the social relation. It is ongoing... If institutions materialise and dematerialise then institutions kind of continue, but they can be appropriated and reformulated by others. But I'm just wondering about sustainability and the way that the onus is not just on this place necessarily here and now to sustain something ("COPENHAGEN FREE UNIVERSITY, 18TH MARCH, 2002").

This materialization and subsequent dematerialization was part of the CFU's "starburst strategy," which incorporated self-abolition as a safeguard against reintegration into the capitalist system. I argue, however, that in addition to realizing "the intention of the formation of more informal networks and a redistribution of power" in the service of a "power that refuses to become government" ("ABZ"), the starburst tactic can also be read as a strategic response to the instability generated by the university's organizational structure.

It is important here to highlight the role of intellectual (and not just intellectual) emancipation as ensuring stability through proliferation of social networks. If the CFU lacked institutional props such as a proprietary research archive (access to which might be commodified and used as a source of income), it is because of its commitment to the commons:

> Truth is always the truth of the masters, the proprietary knowledge is always the knowledge that separates people into those who posses and those who don't. […] Knowledge is at the same time about empowerment, making people able to understand and act closer to existence and despite the distortion of the spectacle. The research projects we initiated worked as invitations to share rather than drives to accumulate. There have been no singular end products; of importance were all the various experiences and conclusions that people carried into their own lives and networks after taking part in the activities at the CFU. This is why we haven't published papers or dissertations to wrap up the research projects that we have worked with. We found that the research and the knowledge spun at the CFU did not need a closure. But the institution did" ("WE HAVE WON!").

Finally, the material realities of pursuing a strategy of exodus must be set against the actual possibility of escape. Sam Thorne, referring to recent self-organized art schools in general, has pointed out that "they are often embedded in the same economics and systems that they are notionally opposing" (Thorne 49). To what extent might this have been true of the CFU? After all, the domestic economy of Jakobsen's and Heise's flat was still connected to the economies which produced the various sources of income that sustained it (even though it seems pointless to bring up this fact). This tension is further highlighted in "There is No Alternative," where the authors acknowledge the cost of rejecting existing institutions wholesale: "All we need is their cash in order to pay our way out of capitalism and take this opportunity to make clear our intention to supervise and mediate our own social capital, knowledge and networks" ("There is No Alternative"). The price for self-determination is high, and it is difficult to avoid compromise

and contradiction along the way. In fact, the price may be higher than even the authors of "There is No Alternative" imagined. While discussing the relation of democracy to representation, Hardt and Negri issue a warning to those who might misjudge the stakes of opting out: "Democracy today takes the form of a subtraction, a flight, an exodus from sovereignty, but, as we know well from the Bible story, the pharaoh does not let the Jews flee in peace" (Hard and Negri 2004). Exodus is never without its attendant forms of violence. Indeed, it seems we have always known that opting out was never a simple matter of turning the other way. We might contemplate this warning, and the questions it raises, in light of the urgency of the imperative to self-organize today.

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