

Desire, and a kind of playfulness

An edited transcription of an 'exchange-situation'
at the Copenhagen Free University, 18th March 2002

Josephine Berry: We are sitting in a top floor flat in Copenhagen, we're surrounded by kids' toys, cutlery, crockery, very homely things, yet this is a university, a free university. How did this come about?

Henriette Heise: Initially our desire was to create small institutions where we could work with presentations of art and whatever. After coming back from London and living here again, we thought this is where our primary practice is materialising. We had this spare room close to the stairwell with its own door and, more than a year ago, we came up with the Copenhagen Free University (CFU). Here we can work with people and we can learn.

JB: If you compare it to the Info Centre you did in London—which was another space inside a domestic space, a public/private space—has it called into being something quite different?

Jakob Jakobsen: There were many discussions about the social relations created around an art project like the Info Centre. By changing the emphasis from an 'information centre' to a 'university' it was more an investigation of what actually went on in and around those social relations created in these institutions. At the CFU there is more emphasis on the exchange between people, with the Info Centre the information may have been more specific and non-negotiable than this sort of social situation.

JB: So it's a shift from the dissemination of information to the social relations that produce knowledge?

Howard Slater: If knowledge is created through the social relations then the proprietorship of that knowledge alters. Knowledge becomes more a matter of the general intellect or a communal construction through social relations, rather than specific individuals imparting a pre-formed knowledge.

JJ: What we have been discussing is the relationship between knowledge and life. Instead of just seeing knowledge as some abstracted generalised entity or objectified thing, knowledge is, of course, related to the context and to the social relations in and around it. We are trying to make this university now, here where we live, in our flat, and we are trying to discuss and experiment with the relationship between knowledge and life.

JB: Do you see the CFU as a prototype—if you can abandon the idea that a prototype can be perfectly reproduced—more as a catalyst than a space that can fulfil a lot of those objectives in and of itself?

I'm also wondering about the usability of the space for visitors and what they encounter? How can people have a lasting engagement in the free university, because it's your home? How do people come into this space and what do you think their experiences are with it, how does knowledge get negotiated within that?

HH: Just by saying this is the CFU in our flat in the Northern part of Copenhagen people already start to visualise and imagine what it could be. This initial step must make some people ask themselves what is going on here?

We have visitors coming around where we present whatever is going on at the time, and that creates this situation where visitors give back knowledge of their own. Then we have a very engaged aspect of the CFU where friends and people come and live here in the room that we have made for whatever we can call something like exhibitions—peo-

ple staying here and working here with us and presenting and sharing their knowledge.

HS: As a self-institution, the walls of the CFU are porous, it's a domestic space as well. So if the university is seen as an investigation into knowledge and everyday life (Asger Jorn describes culture as learning by experience) there's an experiential aspect here isn't there? People are staying, visiting... they're coming to a different form of institution where the experience of learning and discussing is as valuable as the subject-matter of what is discussed. That would be an experience of the social relations that are being established here in that there are no seminars as such, there's nothing organised along the lines of an academy. So there's not only this leakage between being in the university and outside the university, but from that, because experience doesn't stop, an experiential knowledge becomes possible. We maybe have to play this against the normal education establishment and see that the experiences that can be appreciated here and worked with or taken away, the imaginative expectations of what people are going to experience here, are different from the normalising academy where it's perhaps our very experiences that are jettisoned. So the wall there is impervious, you have to almost leave your desires with your coat in the cloakroom. In that sense the self-institution of the CFU 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.

JB: Also, the idea would be to create or allow new desires to emerge?

HS: Or make certain desires that are low in the hierarchy come to an equal footing. We've been talking about Charles Fourier recently and it's the same sort of thing; you cultivate the manias, cultivate the passions because that, in many ways, is what makes experience valid!

JB: I don't see that as a contradiction, but a bit of a problem with the CFU in that it's easier to share passions between friends, having jokes that lead to serious things and serious things that turn into jokes, the kind of freedom that goes with friendship and passionate attachment. I was thinking about the conversation we had with the students that came from the Art Academy in Malmo, and how shocked most of them looked, they were probably caught between expectation on the one hand and shyness on the other, and were, I suppose, 'disorientated'. How do desires and the kind of playfulness that is so central to what we're talking about—and to the university and to knowledge and to experiment and to art—get communicated or released with people coming as complete strangers?

HS: The shock might have been the simplicity. To play Josie's comments about passion and inclusiv-

ity back onto the institution the students came from, that institution was in part responsible for the shock.

JJ: We are trying to set up institutions which aren't just playing along with the rational understanding of the public sphere as a neutral and common ground. The idea raised about the council communists was a discussion coming out of the extra-parliamentary ways of organising.

As a point of departure it might have been a shock to the visiting students but I think it was very much due to their expectations, because they believed they were going to an art project in Copenhagen and they came here and it was quite chaotic. But I hope we were able to put the strands together in a good way. I learnt something from the discussion and that's important as well. It's a more situation-based way to gain experience—instead of just representing knowledge, representing art, it's important to take part.

HH: Usually people feel quite comfortable about being here maybe because it is a home where people live—people felt freer compared to official spaces like auditoriums and galleries. The discussions went on in an informal way and people were able to stay with their everyday language when speaking. I don't see the informality as a problem; I see it as a power.

JJ: People enter through the display room that's a kind of buffer zone between the public space and the private space of our flat. But those borders aren't heavily demarcated and people end up in our living room and the discussions go on and we make tea and stuff. I think those encounters, with strangers or not, have been the most intensive—the situations we've gained most from. On the other hand we are keen not to make the university into just a talking shop. We are keen on presenting ideas, research material and art works—to establish a situation that is introducing other knowledges into the equation so the discussions do not just become a therapeutic exchange.

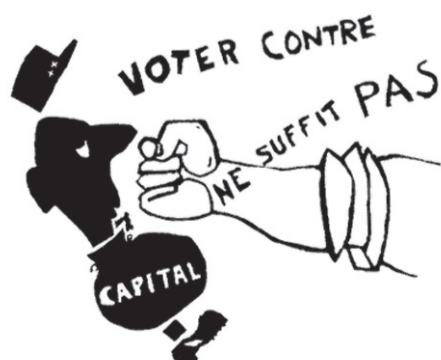
HH: We don't like having structures that necessarily have to be followed. So, if people don't want to say anything, if they don't want to have discussions, it's fine. You can come here and look at the stuff we have.

HS: It's not a matter of taking power as such as becoming acclimatised to being able to create a sense of power amongst ourselves. That it's something like knowledge, like university, like institution, that needs to be questioned. It can be used.

The self-institution thing is about recreating a public sphere or it raises the question 'has there ever been a public sphere?' There's a power in that because there's automatically a conflict or opposition. All these things get opened-up simply by having a Free University, and that's the power to question which is denied people in the education system because you can't question if your experience is left behind at the doorway. From what point can you then question? From what point can you feel a sense of power if your experience is severed from the knowledge that's going to be imparted to you? The conventional institution is very disempowering.

JJ: Making the university was based on the fact that the economy is nowadays very often

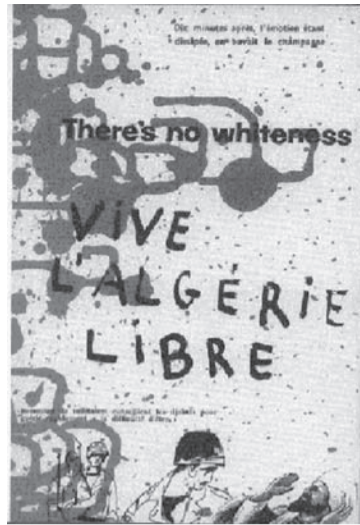
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described as a knowledge economy, and we can see knowledge becoming an order of capitalist production. This knowledge that is being spoken about is productive knowledge within that system. We thought "ok—if we're living in a knowledge economy we would like to open a university which could valorise other kinds of knowledge that wouldn't fit into that system, knowledges that are excluded from that system." The knowledge going into knowledge economies has to be an alienated knowledge; lone detached from a life outside capital. So that was our question: was it possible to valorise other kinds of knowledge? We're still negotiating these kinds of discussion, because it's not clear what kind of knowledge the knowledge economy is actually chasing after. So, we are trying to discuss knowledge in that landscape. You can see how other universities and educational institutions are trying to live up to the demands of the knowledge economy and producing the right kinds of knowledge-worker ready to enter this kind of economy. And I find the set of passions on offer in that economy quite limited. So, it's a playful or polemical statement to say "ok, we will make a university and we would like to valorise knowledge like other universities do." Establishing this institution is to enter a struggle about knowledge and life.

HS: That points to why I brought up the historical example of the workers councils. If knowledge is used as a component of 'labour-power' then really we've got a parallel problem to the Marxist problem of how to define 'free labour' or 'living labour' in terms of knowledge. The Soviet, Workers Council form could have been an experiment in redefining work outside of the capitalist economy: "what is it necessary to produce, what is 'living labour', how can labour be socially useful...?" These sorts of questions rather than having labour dictated-to by capitalistic needs. Similarly there's this interesting parallel, that, in a knowledge economy, with labour-power more explicitly informed by knowledge, a Free University becomes almost a revolutionary organisation. That might be to open a "ski-slope between passion and logic" as Jorn said, but I'm quite interested in this, because it seems then there's another means to rhetoricise around a Free University, that such institutions can be modes of revolutionary organisation. There doesn't have to be four people around a table, it could be twenty, thirty or they could open-up to replace the party political form. It's perhaps useful to use these analogies between an industrial working class form of organisation and the proletarianisation of knowledge workers in a knowledge economy. Perhaps a good thing would be very local free university initiatives to side-step constituted institutions and yet, in the same movement, reinvigorate the constituting dynamic of institutions.

JJ: I believe in 'mass', in lots of self-institutions. I subscribe to the idea of the 'multitude'. Those kinds of institutions can generate a power by being many, and I think if you see similar institutions to the one you're occupied with around you, it is possible for you to push the work you are doing a little further, because then there's a language that is being developed and produced, and a language which can give form to the passions that you're struggling to find form for. It's not offered to you. You have to develop these kinds of languages. So,



the ultimate experience of the free university would be for the people who come here to go home and do it themselves. But Henriette does not agree: people should liberate themselves.

HH: I'm fine with self-institutionalisation all over the field, but I have problems with trying to set up a model for others.

HS: In the ABZ of The Copenhagen Free University it says: "It is our hope that you, instead of dreaming of the Copenhagen Free University or London Anti-University or Free University of New York or the Spontaneous University, go where you live and establish your university drawing upon the knowledges in your own networks." Do you think that's too much of a command that implies a model?

HH: Yes, a bit.

HS: Picking up on what Jakob said about giving form to passions. That's where the aesthetics comes in because there's always a struggle with articulation for many people. Maybe artists and writers are amongst the privileged in that they can work to get access to a means of expression or articulation. An initiative like this gives space to many forms of articulation and practice because the aesthetic element, redefined, could help us approach our own desires rather than having the desires or passions made for us. This is really what occurs in capitalist society, that the desires and passions—obviously advertising and branding are a key example—are manu-

factured for you. It becomes a kind of vicious loop in the sense that if you're not partaking in those passions that are circulated for profit, or can be harnessed for profit, then somehow you're abnormal and the whole issue of anti-psychiatric institutions comes again into play, overlapping with educative initiatives, because we've got this barrier to desire in that giving forms to passion is seen as perversion, not normal. Where the aesthetics comes in is in that boost it gives to an articulation of passion and desire.

JB: How do we find this means to collectively identify desires without imposing them or without lapsing into a kind of solipsism of narcissistic desire alone?

HS: That is the misnomer of desire under capitalist society, because desire is stratified with bourgeois individuality. Its individualistic form is rife, say, in terms of going into a little room and putting your 'X' on the ballot paper and also in the coinage that says "I promise to pay the bearer..." It's always an individualistic relation that is encouraged when really desire is in the social structures.

In a way, capitalist society does create mass desires. Maybe it's a way to detourne this creation of mass desires because if we all watch the adverts we all 'plug-in' and that desire is being created as a collective desire, an individualised collective desire, the desire for being 'English' or 'Danish', these are collectively manufactured desires.

The issue of the aesthetic aspect as sort of being downgraded into an access to the means of production is a presupposition of an access to your own desires. For me you explore desires with a material, with a means of expression that you've got to struggle with. And then I think from that you

begin to enter into a sort of situation of the 'general intellect' where you come 'through' individuality to a sensation of all these links... different people coming to things at different times, different paces, with different vocabularies. And it reveals desire as collective and knowledge as collectively generated passion.

Perhaps self-institutions can give form to desire so it's not so much a matter of imposing desires on others as encouraging what Deleuze & Guattari call 'collective assemblages of enunciation' and being inspired by the wealth of the passions of others. 'New desires' can be 'desires that are new to me' and their forms, the differences between self-institutional initiatives, resist the idea of 'models'. The thing about self-institution is that singularities, the nuances of desire, aren't repressed, but are used as a material.

JJ: Instead of being anti-institutional we're saying "we are building an institution", in this way we aren't maintaining the romantic notion of an outside of institutions. The DIY strategy of setting up 'grand' institutions, like a university, according to your own passions, are productive, and we try to engage in this in both a serious and a playful way.

That's the great thing about the CFU: being able to generate a field of discussion. That is the university: these kinds of situations and these investments.

Instead of just understanding it as a closed-circuit, it is open-ended, open for other passions being invested in it—people who would like to invest in the discussions are a part of it. This mushrooming is in itself another set of social relations, instead of just trying to sit on your own knowledge and promote it in the most...

HS: ... corporate way.

That almost answers the question about self-institutional sustainability. What's the most sustainable thing we know? Perversions and passions? If perversion is compulsion then it's almost the same thing to say perversion and sustainability. On the issue of sustainability, there's a means of expression dimension that Giorgio Agamben has written about: what spurs us to communicate is what is 'unsayable'. We're all struggling with language here, now, trying to express ourselves and that's a form of sustainability. Ok, it can degenerate into a talking shop, but in this instance this has been structured, we've decided to do it at this time, this day. And that struggle with the means of expression, again linking back to aesthetics as a way of getting access to a means of expression, is to give form to the passions and also to find new areas that are 'unsayable'. The 'unsayable' or the unknown—what you don't know or what you haven't experienced—if that's always ahead of you it means you're always struggling, always trying to get somewhere. It might not be forward it might be back. You might be struggling to get back, to a memory, to bring a memory of an experience into articulation. That's a kind of sustainability. The struggle with the means of expression helps a project become sustainable.

JJ: That's the central struggle as far as I see it: the struggle with language. The struggle to produce a space where you can express yourself. That's really a struggle. To come back to life in the knowledge economy, there are no means for those kinds of passionate expressions, those kind of perversions. You have to invent them again.

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