VICTORY! THE BEGINNING, THE LIFE AND THE END OF THE FREE UNIVERSITY OF COPENHAGEN
Agata Pyzik talks to Jakob Jakobsen

AGATA PYZIK: Jakob, could you tell me about the tradition of free education in Denmark? I guess that the Copenhagen Free University partly emerges from it.

JAKOB JAKOBSEN: The Copenhagen Free University emerges from at least three traditions: the first one is the civil rights movement and free speech movement in the US; the second one is the anti-psychiatry movement in the UK – in particular, their critique of the institution; and the third one was the people's high schools in Denmark from the 19th century, a sort of peasant educational movement. But the main thing that made us found the CFU was the need to facilitate the production and sharing of critical knowledge in our present social and economic context. So we acknowledged the tradition, but the CFU emerged out of the feeling of alienation – and anger – in relation to how knowledge was used and valorized in capitalist production around the turn of the millennium. This made us set up the free university. It was based on the analysis how the mode of production has been changing within the last 20 – 30 years, from manual, physical labor toward a mode where knowledge, mental processes and subjectivity were becoming the main means of production.

Not that manual production is disappearing, but the western world has been moving away from it, and this has influenced our everyday. We could see how the shift in production had also had an impact on the understanding of knowledge in society. We saw how the universities were much more focused on producing knowledge that had an economic perspective. And we could see how the universities were adjusted structurally to fit into this new political knowledge economy. Thus, the universities were moving away from people. We decided to set up an institution and, in that way, to take power of the means of knowledge production. We wanted to create an environment that could develop and socialize the knowledge that was increasingly being excluded or not being dealt with in the capitalist restructuring. To underline our intentions, we started with the statement: "All Power to the Copenhagen Free University." So we wanted to take power away from this utilitarian understanding of knowledge. We made the university in our flat where we were living and it became a university of the everyday – not only during the day, but also during the night…

Of course, it was a provocation when we opened the CFU like we did, claiming to be "free." The reference to "freedom" was also a question directed toward ourselves. On the practical level everything in our system was for free, with no money involved. But we were also looking at what emancipation in relation to knowledge could mean. This developed into a quite improvised institution, so people came, visited us and stayed with us, slept on mattresses.

What is your background, who were the other people who founded the CFU?

We were a group discussing the immaterial production. We opened the CFU in a flat where I lived with my partner, so we had the keys. But we were working very closely with three of our friends, Anthony Davies, Emma Hedditch and Howard Slater, whom I met in London, where we were living for six years before we came back to Copenhagen and founded the CFU. They were very important parts of this idea. Setting up an institution is strange; we reflected quite a lot on that as a strategy. Instead of many other projects at that time that were anti-institutional in their critique, we wanted to build an institution. We didn't want to place ourselves in an alternative position, because in that position you easily end up mirroring the power system that you are criticizing. So we decided to work with the term self-institution, instead of "anti-", and we turned our home into a university. To claim to be a university is a quite powerful thing, because the conventions around the university as an institution in society are quite settled and extremely normative. At the beginning people were asking us whether it was legal, or "Can you do this?"

Just by saying we have a university in our flat, we were placing ourselves in a position of authority. If someone hears "university," one thinks of a certain architecture and certain sets of identities. We were, of course, interested in playing with this architecture and these identities; we wanted to play with the power of the university. But, on the other hand, we wanted to make sure that we would produce knowledge people could use. We didn't want

to instrumentalize the knowledge production in the same way that official universities were increasingly doing. Over the course of the six years of existence, we had five quite extensive research projects that we followed through. We're still working on some of them to make sure that we actually have done a proper piece of research – in our own measure.

It was our ambition to develop our research projects in accordance with our policies of collectivity and sharing. When we had decided on a certain field of research, the first thing we did was an open call. Normally research is a very individualized and protectionist institution – I guess to make sure that no one is running away with your ideas before you publish your paper. We didn't want this isolation, so our method was a kind of socialized collective research. Everyone who took part was adding to the research in one way or another.

When we were meeting, we had always an agenda, even when we were watching a film. We didn't believe in a totally open form – you have to have a focus, a starting point. So this kind of opening up of the research process in an inclusive way, combined with a clear focus, made it easier for people to join. So people who had a specific, particular knowledge, people who knew how to organize material, as well as people who were just interested, came by.

Even though we published small booklets, 14 of them, with texts and images from the research process, our main way of distributing the knowledge catalyzed, was through the people who were attending and taking part in our meetings. They could then carry the knowledge and the experience from the CFU into their own environments and share it in their own networks. So, it was an oral way of distributing knowledge through the individuals taking part. We didn't produce any final or concluding papers from the research; it was more about dispersing the knowledge directly, socially.

Who was attending it and how was the information about your existence and particular research projects distributed?

The university was run within our household economy. So we didn't apply for any project funds. But, on the other hand, we didn't pay anyone, so it was no cost activity. Anyone who participated did it out of their free will and desire. The booklets we did as print on demand. So it was a minimal economy or no economy at all. Of course, we had to earn money in other ways, but we had to pay the rent, etc., anyway. To establish the university was just saying: "This is a university," and then we had a university. That is why, we called the initiation of the university a speech act. We didn't have to build any spectacular architecture or anything like that.

Like a performative by Austin, someone is saying: "This is the free university," and it happens, we gather there under this spell.

Exactly. And it works as a construction because we said it was a construction, and, of course, we couldn't have the normal appearance of a university, like huge stairwells, columns, lecture theaters or anything like that. It was just a normal home. But lots of people were staying there. We were always intending to keep a level of intimacy at our university, an intimacy official institutions don't want. We were actually playing a lot with architecture, moving the walls, making cinema and archive spaces, so we could have an archive and do screenings. But it was basically a speech act.

Sometimes we were really slow and spent a year on some stupid question, and we were not very active. That was also a part of it. We had this project on the idea of flight, of escape, that we handled in a very practical way. For almost a year we had a bright yellow escape rope hanging from our window. This was mainly the project. You have the right to remain silent, not to produce anything but silence. We didn't announce the project to anyone; the rope was just hanging there. Of course, people on the street were asking, "What is this?" or "Who's escaped?" But it was in this way also an intervention or a discussion about flight and escape. So we were also working like this, through practical experimentation.

Were there any times your other lives were badly affected by the university, like someone got unemployed, etc.? What was the biggest influence from the life outside the university?

We tried to keep it real, so all the things from the everyday became a part of the free university. We had this notion of the "unhappy consciousness" as a kind of motor of the project, the negativity or friction we met in our everyday. We didn't try to make an ideal world. The frustrations of the everyday were a part of it. There were times when people turned up at our door and we

had to say: "Sorry, we can't do anything, the free university is not open today." That was also a part of the project and we tried to reflect on that kind of unproductivity as well. Actually we had a small secret project about dust. Dust as the residue of the daily life. Dust is somehow like dreams. It is something you want to get rid of. It is irrational somehow. We were quite obsessed with dust, in its many forms, many meanings. We made a slideshow about it.

How could people take part in the Copenhagen Free University?

When people were coming and saying: "I want to be a part of the free university," we were saying: "It's not something you can be a part of. It's something that you make." Shortly after we opened, we had sister free universities in Vienna and in London, inspired by us somehow. Because these institutions were based on individual dreams and desires of small groups, it was interesting to observe how people were structuring these self-organized universities. Because it's a construction you could make as you wished. It wasn't an official university where you have to reproduce certain hierarchies and have to reproduce a certain knowledge. If you're asking yourself what my dream or an ideal university should look like, there are many answers to that question and many options. Universities don't have to be organized in one way. Against such a background, it became clear how the mainstream universities were becoming increasingly homogenized, not due to people's wishes, but due to the interests of the state and the capital. The mainstream universities are becoming a strict regime of evaluation, quantification and control. This development triggered a whole movement of self-organized and free universities.

If you could name the conditions making this development possible? Free will?

I think it is repression that makes people react. I don't see free will capable of doing that. Free will is a luxury – only rich people can afford it, like when they go shopping, they are deliberating.

It is more a construct.

It's more like you have a mission every day, and you struggle somehow to cope with it – there's not much free will in that. Then the conditions from which the free university emerged were the experience of the lack of space, of room. So exchange, improvisation and collaboration were important somehow to cope and these things developed into the CFU. The point of departure was more unhappiness, difficulties, anger, hatred that, as Karl Marx said, is driving history. It was not based on any specific interest, but it was more: we'd better do it and use it as a weapon to fight. It came out of repression, but we were not obsessed with the enemy. We tried to work on and develop our institution as an indirect critique of what was happening elsewhere. But the departure point was the unhappy consciousness.

So what does this "free" element in the name mean? If freedom is always a construct, is it always freedom "from" something?

We did it as a speech act – we wanted to say "free," because we didn't feel free. So, the questions were: what freedom could mean in our context and how it could be produced. We looked into it. At the same time, neoliberals are obsessed with the term "freedom," as well as "choice" and "democracy." You put some people to prisons in order to secure their freedom. So it was an attempt to reclaim this term, to reflect on what it could mean in the everyday. Our desire was to get involved in the political knowledge economy, to throw a spanner in the works, to develop a different mode of counter-production within the knowledge economy, to disturb it as far as we could. This created a platform for freedom.

What were the reasons for the closing of the university?

If the idea of self-institution shall make sense, the Free University should be a temporary project. So from the beginning it was clear that it was not going to be a permanent identity. We didn't want our non-aligned institution to become as normative as all the other normal intuitions. We could keep that going for a while and then we would probably be sucked in a normal institutional network. It was then obvious that if the project is to remain politically meaningful, it had to be temporary. We wanted to play with power, and the best way to play with power is to abolish it ultimately – as we did. Initially we wanted to take power – "All power to the Copenhagen Free University", as our first statement said. Many people asked us: "Why are you closing down? You could have an amazing career within the art scene." But it was a political decision to close down, so that was it. It was quite a pleasure

to destroy our institution, and we did it claiming that "we have won," as our last statement was called. It was a victory. I enjoy not having the university now, even though I carry on doing similar projects, like this workshop here in Warsaw, on Flying Universities, but it's nice to work without this framework of the CFU.

So it's a continuation on different assertions.

You're taking the framework away. And it was a collective project. We created the experience and the knowledge together. All the people can use the knowledge we produced. We didn't want to instrumentalize it, or capitalize on collective work. After the closing we are still collaborating with many of the people who were involved. Antony Davies, for example, is doing a lot of research on alternative education in London, and we are meant to do it together.

Describe very briefly your research on Flying Universities in Poland.

Five years ago I got to know about them, the 19th century one and this one from the 1970s, but it was really hard to find any documents on it. When Kuba Szreder asked me if I wanted to do something in Warsaw, I responded immediately that I would like to do some research on the Flying University. We didn't have a program when we started the workshop, but it developed during my stay in Warsaw. As a youngster, I followed the Solidarity movement in 1980-81 quite closely. But I was especially moved by what happened after the falling of the Wall – all the values from before were just flushed away during the transformation, with the senseless neoliberal free market ideology that came into power. This upsets me, but I didn't know that much about the details and the differences between the situation in the various post-communist countries. That is why, it's interesting to come here and hear people like Professor Kowalik reflect on what happened during and after the transition. From the outside, it was just upsetting.

The Flying University embodies important values.

Yes, there will always be, as Kowalik said, the need for flying universities – they show the necessity of critical and autonomous knowledge that is accessible to all in society.