

All power to the free universities of the future

The Copenhagen Free University was an attempt to reinvigorate the emancipatory aspect of research and learning, in the midst of an ongoing economisation of all knowledge production in society. Seeing how education and research were being subsumed into an industry structured by a corporate way of thinking, we intended to bring the idea of the university back to life. By life, we mean the messy life people live within the contradictions of capitalism. We wanted to reconnect knowledge production, learning and skill sharing to the everyday within a self-organised institutional framework of a free university. Our intention was multi-layered and was of course partly utopian, but also practical and experimental. We turned our flat in Copenhagen into a university by the very simple act of declaring 'this is a university'. By this transformative speech act the domestic setting of our flat became a university. It didn't take any alterations to the architecture other than the small things needed in terms of having people in your home staying over, presenting thoughts, researching archival material, screening films, presenting documents and works of art. Our home became a public institution dedicated to the production process of communal knowledge and fluctuating desires.

The ethos of the CFU was critical and opinionated about the ideological nature of knowledge, which meant that we did not try to cover the institution in a cloud of dispassionate neutrality and transcendence as universities traditionally do. The Copenhagen Free University became a site of socialised and politicised research, developing knowledge and debate around certain fields of social practice. During its six years of existence, the CFU entered into five fields of research: feminist organisation, art and economy, escape subjectivity, television/media activism and art history. The projects were initiated with the experience of the normative nature of mainstream knowledge production and research, allowing us to see how certain areas of critical practice were being excluded. Since we didn't want to replicate the structure of the formal universities, the way we developed the research was based on open calls to people who found interest in our fields or interest in our perspective on knowledge production. Slowly the research projects were collectively constructed through the display of material, presentations, meetings, and spending time together. The nature of the process was sharing and mutual empowerment, not focusing on a final product or paper, but rather on the process of communisation and redistribution of facts and feelings. Parallel to the development of the CFU, we started to see self-organised universities sprouting up everywhere. Over this time, the basic question we were constantly asking ourselves was, what kind of university do we need in relation to our everyday? This question could only be answered in the concrete material conditions of our lives. The multiplicity of self-organised universities that were starting in various places, and which took all kinds of structures and directions, reflected the diversity of these material conditions. This showed that the neoliberal university model was only one model among many models; the only one given as a model to the students of capital.

As the strategy of self-institution focused on taking power and not accepting the dualism between the mainstream and the alternative, this in itself carried some contradictions. The CFU had for us become a too fixed identifier of a certain discourse relating to emancipatory education within academia and the art scene. Thus we decided to shut down the CFU in the winter of 2007 as a way of withdrawing the CFU from the landscape. We did this with the statement 'We Have Won' and shut the door of the CFU just before the New Year. During the six years of the CFU's existence, the knowledge economy had rapidly, and aggressively, become the norm around us in Copenhagen and in northern Europe. The rise of social networking, lifestyle and intellectual property as engines of valorisation meant that the knowledge economy was expanding into the tiniest pores of our lives and social relations. The state had turned to a wholesale privatisation of former public educational institutions, converting them into mines of raw material for industry in the shape of ideas, desires and human beings. But this normalising process was somehow not powerful enough to silence all forms of critique and dissent; other measures were required.

In December 2010 we received a formal letter from the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation telling us that a new law had passed in the parliament that outlawed the existence of the Copenhagen Free University together with all other self-organised and free universities. The letter stated that they were fully aware of the fact that we do not exist any more, but just to make sure they wished to notify us that "In case the Copenhagen Free University should resume its educational activities it would be included under the prohibition in the university law §33". In 2010 the university law in Denmark was changed, and the term 'university' could only be used by institutions authorised by the state. We were told that this was to protect 'the students from being disappointed'. As we know numerous people who are disappointed by the structural changes to the educational sector in recent years, we have decided to contest this new clampdown by opening a new free university in Copenhagen. This forms part of our insistence that the emancipatory perspective of education should still be on the map. We demand the law be scrapped or altered, allowing self-organised and free universities to be a part of a critical debate around the production of knowledge now and in the society of the future.

We call for everybody to establish their own free universities in their homes or in the workplace, in the square or in the wilderness. All power to the free universities of the future.

The Free U Resistance Committee of June 18 2011.

Practicalities in Denmark: Please send a mail to the Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation declaring your university (min@vtu.dk) and cc. to the The Danish Agency of Universities (ubst@ubst.dk)