

This is a collection of ideas presented in a much longer essay called *The 'Alternative' Learning Space: Art, Autonomy and the Institution. What is the Legitimacy of the Learning environments formed by the Free University Movement In regards to Knowledge Production?* If you would like a copy of the full version please contact [paulstewart.art@gmail.com](mailto:paulstewart.art@gmail.com) to request a PDF.

Below is the abstract followed by a selection of paragraphs from the paper.

## **ABSTRACT**

*This paper concentrates on the creation of the 'alternative' learning space from the free university movement. The rationale is to question if the 'alternative' offers a legitimate concept that can supplement formal modes of learning focusing on four case studies, The Alternative Art College, the Copenhagen Free University, Manoa Free University and the Social Science Centre Lincoln. It will discuss if the spaces in the free university movement can function autonomously, with definitions from Castoriadis and Adorno. To balance the placement of the 'alternative' in the world, it will be compared with the current UK HE sector and gallery and museum education. From this it will also discuss how the institution(s) (HE university, gallery and museums) function through writings from Gerard Raunig and Eileen Hooper–Greenhill. Alongside this the essay will reference Jacques Rancière and Paulo Freire for their interpretations of pedagogical practices. There will also be an element of practice based research due to the inclusion of my own art practice, the AAC. Finally this essay is not aiming to create a blueprint for a future HE sector but will argue the legitimacy of informal learning put forward by the free university movement.*

*"Our practical conclusion is the following: we are abandoning all efforts at pedagogical action and moving toward experimental activity" <sup>1</sup> Asger Jorn: 'Notes on the Formation of the Imaginist Bauhaus,' 1957.*

## **THE FREE UNIVERSITY MOVEMENT: AUTONOMOUS 'ALTERNATIVES'?**

### **THE INSTITUTION, RECUPERATION AND THE TERM 'ALTERNATIVE'**

...The Institution, by this essay, is not critiqued in the same way Hans Haacke, Daniel Buren, Robert Smithson and others approached it in the late 60s and early 70s, it will take into account past critiques but not adopt them directly. Extending from Gerald Raunig's book of essays 'Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique' this essay will discuss institutional critique from an understanding that it is in a *new phase* which has a different set of political and social conditions in relation

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<sup>1</sup>Cddc.vt.edu (1919) *Situationist International Online*. [online] Available at: <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/presitu/bauhaus.html> [Accessed: 29 Aug 2012].

to what has already been seen.<sup>2</sup> This *new phase* of assessment takes into account the canonisation of institutional critique in to art history, and from this different methodologies emerge that do not focus on subjectivity and formation devised by those of the second phase in the 1980s such as Philipp Müller, Fred Wilson and Andrea Fraser.<sup>3</sup>

This tendency towards activist and instituent practices is one direction in which practitioners and theorists are actively attempting to renew and reinvent institutional critique under difficult contemporary conditions.<sup>4</sup>

The activist approach to instructional critique is one way of seeing the free university movement. The ‘alternative’ learning spaces provide an activist approach that institutes a more direct critique rather than theoretical. The ‘alternative’ environment takes advantage of its position to function both inside and outside of the institution to find ways to discuss knowledge production rather than focusing on the domination of institutions, it is because of the institution itself that the spaces in the free university movement have to quantify themselves as ‘alternative’.

The reason the term ‘alternative’ has been written, throughout this essay, in inverted commas is firstly because the language itself is tied up and it is difficult to find other ways to compute what the art-education projects are. When in conversation with Mike Neary he mentioned That the “...SSC and other spaces like it are not alternative but if one was to quantify one’s self it would be ludicrously difficult to suggest otherwise. This is as the language is bound up and difficult to surpass, similar with autonomy.”<sup>5</sup> As well as the restrictions of language the term ‘alternative’ is easily normalised and can be turned into what it was once critiquing. Examples of this in relation to the free university movement would be the Southbank Centre offering a ‘Wide Open University’ that will function as a summer school with highly acclaimed (commercial) artists. This process of ‘normalisation’ is a way of removing both the activist and the radical aspects from the item, in this instance the existence of an inter-changeable free university. ‘Alternative’ is used not as a proposal for a whole new HE system but merely to critique characteristics of

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<sup>2</sup> Raunig, G., & Ray, G. (2009). *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*. London, MayFlyBooks. p3

<sup>3</sup> Ibid p.xv

<sup>4</sup> Ibid p.xv

<sup>5</sup> Neary, M. (2012) *Interview on The Social Science Centre and Student as Producer*. Interviewed by Paul Stewart [in person] University of Lincoln, 6/08/2012.

the current educational system, so when galleries and institutions like Southbank use it, does it affect the critique? The issue here is the level of 'recuperation' of an 'alternative' by the institution as it is not possible to suggest that every instance has the same outcome.

The process of recouping to the point of removing all validity and contaminating with its own perceived social norms could be a way of defending itself (the HE, gallery and museum institutions) from becoming obsolete. Castoriadis, when critiquing Hobbes, suggests that the institution's main form of fear is that of death, not the fear of murder but that everything it is justified to be would dissolve.<sup>6</sup> This essay is not objecting to the HE institution per se but highlighting the possibility of how recuperation is at the benefit of the institution. When discussing the possibility of recuperation with Neary he stated that the SSC to some degree is a critique of the recouping of *Student as Producer* which is now co-opted with the University of Lincoln. Neary states that a way to avoid recoup is to keep radicalising so it's not an automatic process.

<sup>7</sup> The aim is to function with an anti-pedagogy: creation of critical knowledge against teaching and learning and against education.<sup>8</sup>

In relation to recuperation, what makes the MFU different to the approaches of the AAC, CFU and SSC is that it actually never had a 'real' physicality. Obviously the events that happened were held in buildings and environments that were physical but Manoa is a metaphorical place, it was the collective way of looking for a new 'island' of education and learning.<sup>9</sup>

The MFU is a ship with eight sails and fifty canons. Sometimes a fleet, divided about the course, a swarm of subjects on a nautical exploration.<sup>10</sup>

In this scenario is the recouping process even possible? The MFU has no designated form, granted the idea itself could be seized but the fictitious element allows the concept to adapt to its surroundings

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<sup>6</sup> Tovar-Restrepo, M. (2012). *Castoriadis, Foucault, and Autonomy: new Approaches to Subjectivity, Society, and Social Change*. London, Continuum. p1.

<sup>7</sup> Neary, M. (2012) Interview on The Social Science Centre and Student as Producer. Interviewed by Paul Stewart [in person] University of Lincoln, 6/08/2012.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> ManoaFreeUniversity.org (2003) [online] Available at: <http://www.manoafreeuniversity.org/about.html> [Accessed: 29 Aug 2012].

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

constantly. In reference to Neary's point the MFU had the perfect form to keep radicalising to avoid the recouping process, if there ever was a threat of it.

In terms of the 'alternative' learning spaces, they have been reproduced and many exist in similar forms. There appears to be a tacit consensus towards their manifestos and form but this is due to the institutional surroundings rather than a copycat-like approach that said it is not a coincidence that all of the spaces have similarities. The instigation of the work allows for an autonomous moment to develop, in terms of Adorno in 'Commitment',

This is not a time for political art, but politics has migrated into autonomous art, and nowhere more so than where it seems to be politically dead.<sup>11</sup>

In terms of the political 'death' of the institution, Rancière's definition of where education is situated in terms of politics and the state of policing, offers a position to suggest a benefit to an 'alternative' space as an art practice. It is possible to identify that spaces such as the AAC function autonomously as an art practice because of their political agenda in a politically reduced field....

## **POLITICS, POLICING AND THE SHIFT FROM EDUCATION TO LEARNING**

...As discussed above it is possible to identify that spaces such as the AAC function autonomously as an art practice because of their political agenda in a politically reduced field. To expand on this further this essay will now look at Rancière's 'Ignorant School Master' and its approach to where education is situated in political terms. Rancière situates education as not a direct political act in its continuous state. For Rancière politics is rarely politics but primarily policing, in his terms politics can only happen when a group gain a voice and a form of equality. In this light it is impossible for this to happen within the institution because of the calculated participatory norms.<sup>12</sup> It is possible to spot that the definition between education and schooling clearly categorises the former to be situated in policing.

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid. p79

<sup>12</sup>Bingham, C. W., Biesta, G., & Rancière, J. (2010). *Jacques Rancière: Education, Truth, Emancipation*. London, Continuum. pp 22-23

“Just as politics as we know it is most often dependent upon a similar absence in true politics.

Education is, for the most part, part of the police rather than part of the politics.”<sup>13</sup>

In terms of the autonomous spaces from an art context, it is a site where the political act can have an opportunity to re-emerge outside the constraint of current institutions. Rancière’s definition of education in an institution as a policing process emphasises how the process of recouping the ‘alternative’ can have a dismissive effect. What is meant here is that the political element offered by the ‘alternative space’ when outside the HE institution is hindered in the recouping process. In other words once the ‘alternative’ is brought into the HE or gallery and museum institution, in some instances it can become a moment of policing and no longer has the ability to function politically. The answer is not to end all institutions but to supplement what is produced by the institution with the informal learning and critique offered by spaces involved in the free university movement.

There has been a shift in museum and gallery education towards a focus on learning rather than education. Museum education has become aware over the last century and specifically the previous two decades that the site of the museum is obviously a significant site for knowledge production.<sup>14</sup> This is clearly apparent, however the reason for this stipulation is due to an interesting point made by Eilean Hooper- Greenhill. In an essay written for ‘Museum Philosophy for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century’ Hooper-Greenhill points out that critiques written from outside of the museum sector have discussed knowledge production from the perspective of the museum as a sole instigator and not taking in to account the visitors (students) position to negotiate how knowledge production is perceived.<sup>15</sup> In short this essay will take in to account the role of the visitor (student) when discussing the (gallery and museum) institutions learning environments in comparison with that of the free university movement.

This is where it also becomes clear how the HE sector and Museum and Gallery education policies connect. This shift from education to an emphasis on resource based learning mirrors that of the national curriculum and that of the vocational coursework offered by the creative departments within the HE sector. It is clear that the change from direct teaching to informal investigative classes’ support Hooper-

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p23

<sup>14</sup> Genoways, H. H. (2006). *Museum Philosophy for the Twenty-first Century*. Lanham, MD, Altamira Press. p235

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p235

Greenhill's statement of how knowledge production within the sector is focused more on a collaborative conversation rather than the rigid form it once was. In museum terms learning is equated with a non-education slant as it is suggested that learning in a museum or gallery setting is seductive and unlike that of school or university.<sup>16</sup> It is possible to suggest it is different to that of a school space but as suggested above the HE sector has a similar approach to its learning space, it offers a similar seduction. This is not the physicality of an archive but a similar approach that appears to prescribe a common ground for both teacher and student to investigate in collaboration.

All of these points are well made and do hold poignancy but authority is lost when looking at the current policy offered by the Museums, Libraries and Archive Council. The site has a guide to 'generic learning outcomes' (GLO) that contradict the co-operative and investigative learning offered by Hooper-Greenhill because the outcomes of the learning process are already defined and measurable, thus removing the collaborative rhetoric that has been previously suggested.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore it highlights that the learning still remains formal even though attempts have been made to open up the structures. Like the HE sector "knowledge is well understood as the commodity museums offer."<sup>18</sup> Knowledge production in a museum or gallery can be categorised in the same sector as HE as it is a commodity to be acquired, whether it is termed as education or investigative learning.

In comparison to some of the environments in the free university movement, especially those in an art setting, it clarifies their existence as spaces for experimenting with learning and learning to experiment. Take for example the AAC and its informal approach to learning processes, it is this supplementation of learning that the 'alternative' offers. It is not a replacement but a beneficial space to experience learning or knowledge production in a different and informal format, away from the institution...

## **ACRONYMS AS UNIVERSITIES: AAC, CFU, MFU, VWXYZ**

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p238

<sup>17</sup> Inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk (2008) *Museums, Libraries and Archives - Learning - Generic Learning Outcomes*. [online] Available at: [www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk/toolstemplates/genericlearning/](http://www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk/toolstemplates/genericlearning/) [Accessed: 29 Aug 2012].

<sup>18</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, E. (1992). *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*. London, Routledge. p2

...The AAC mainly functions as a blog to discuss and disseminate education critiques as its original physicality no longer exists. The AAC was created to discuss how to resist the consumerist style towards knowledge production. What gives pertinence to the AAC's existence is its original functionality and how it spoke from both within and outside the institution. It was created as an Art practice whilst I completed my Undergraduate degree at the University of Lincoln. The purpose was to communicate personal frustration whilst being inside the institution alongside a process of using an art practice for educational experiment. The AAC functioned from the living rooms of multiple student houses (figure 7) for 3 months offering lectures, seminars workshops with artists, professors and students (figure 8 and figure 9).<sup>19</sup> This process of holding all events outside of the institution was a conscious decision to see if finding a neutralised space would directly affect the learning process. The AAC's main success came from not the actual happening of the events but the positioning it had within the institution. As mentioned before once something is accepted or recouped by the institution its ability to function politically is dissolved but in this instance the recouping never happened, it was accepted merely as an art product thus allowing it to continue to function in its original state. As it was labelled as an art practice, a student art practice, it developed a different form of legitimacy.

What the art element has allowed is the creation of a forum for discussion which can contradict and purposefully position itself differently dependent on its current space. As mentioned above, the original process was to hold all events outside of the institution whereas the last event in May 2012 took place within the walls of Goldsmiths. This is a massive contradiction in terms of the AAC's definition of inside and outside, from one that says change only happens on the outside followed by the latter suggesting there is no outside. This is due to the positioning of the AAC, as an art practice it has the ability to mould to the surroundings it is situated in. The creation of it directly as an art practice was to function as a political catalyst to provoke reaction and conversation. The AAC's arrival, which suggests there is no outside, mirrors Professor Neary's position regarding autonomous functionality both inside and outside of the institution.

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<sup>19</sup> The AAC at its peak was spread out over 5 'campuses' (Student Houses across Lincoln) as an attempt to avoid stagnation.

Within the institution subversion works, it is not by confrontation but taking the content of the main stream and using it against themselves. I think there are no autonomous spaces as we are all part of the process; it is an imminent critique. It is from being inside the process to undermine the process.<sup>20</sup>

For the AAC there is only an importance to define an inside or an outside if it is relevant to the context. In short the AAC functions neither on the inside or the outside but in whatever form is appropriate to its present moment.

The CFU locates itself in an art space that is nearly identical to the AAC, the principle difference being that it does not suggest it is an art practice. Both the CFU and the AAC formed in near exact scenarios as both initiated their discussions from the living rooms of private houses. What this offers is a clear example of a context that runs parallel in educational critiques from different scenarios, it suggests that even though the spaces when formed were unaware of each other there social and political surroundings created visible similarities. Looking back at Raunig's interpretation of the *new phase* of institutional critique, this similarity is not a coincidence but simply due to the similar activist and artistic approaches taken by the two entities.<sup>21</sup>

The CFU was formed by Henriette Heise and Jakob Jakobsen in May 2001 and 'existed' until 2007.<sup>22</sup>

The university was in a way based on the fact that the economy is nowadays very often described as a knowledge economy [...] 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.<sup>23</sup>

In 2010 the CFU received a letter from the Danish government legislating that the term university was no longer applicable in their context as it legislated for only universities registered by the state. This automatically puts a question mark over the term 'university',

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<sup>20</sup> Neary, M. (2012) *Interview on The Social Science Centre and Student as Producer*. Interviewed by Paul Stewart [in person] University of Lincoln, 6/08/2012.

<sup>21</sup> Raunig, G., & Ray, G. (2009). *Art and Contemporary Critical Practice: Reinventing Institutional Critique*. London, MayFlyBooks. p3

<sup>22</sup> It is important that the term 'existed' is used in a loose sense as their web presence and concepts are still prominent after their demise.

<sup>23</sup> Jakobsen, J. (2002) *Copenhagen Free University, 18<sup>th</sup> March, 2002*. Interviewed by Henriette Heise. Copenhagen Free University, 18/03/2002.



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.<sup>24</sup>

The CFU produced a series of events, lectures and residencies that all had an imperative focus on the emancipation of education and knowledge from the suggested slavery of the institution. From this they developed debates around the conditions of the current knowledge economy and how aesthetics are treated as a social practice only for the public health.

The CFU's focus was not to directly attack the HE sector but use its processes to create an anti-institution that functioned from their home. The private space became a haven for knowledge and learning that was not deemed economically sustainable specifically in Denmark. The CFU's production of knowledge was never recuperated by an institution (HE, gallery and museum) if anything it was rejected. The Danish government abolished the CFU's name because of its form and focus, it was not deemed a university because it did not offer the same physical and social norms offered by the institutions that already function as a university. This eradication is not directly negative as the CFU had created something that challenged the Government to question its position what the word university represented and what learning processes are.

## CONCLUSION

This essay set out to discuss the creation of autonomous learning spaces, specifically those created in or from an art space. The principle was to analyse the approaches taken and how they offer a different format of learning in comparison to the current HE and Art and Gallery education systems. Through theoretical analysis from Ranciere and Freire this essay has been able to show the legitimacy of the

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<sup>24</sup> Copenhagenfreeuniversity.dk (2007) *All power to the Free Universities of the Future!* [online] Available at: <http://www.copenhagenfreeuniversity.dk/> [Accessed: 29 Aug 2012].

learning environments presented by the ‘alternative’ learning space specifically in an art context. The learning environments presented from the free university movement are non-committal and from this are able to present politically engaged learning from perspectives unattainable by the HE sector due to education being situated away from true politics.<sup>25</sup> In short the *problem posing* approach of spaces such as the AAC, CFU and the MFU create environments that can debate both what is being learnt as well as how it is being learnt critically. Take for example the CFU who state that they would not like to see the CFU as a template for a direct reproduction but as a utility to develop another space in a form relevant to the group or individual.<sup>26</sup>

The ‘alternative’ space offers a supplementation that critiques the current HE structure from both inside and outside. As this essay has evaluated the individuals and collectives involved in the free university movement are able to function both on the inside and the outside of this HE structure to attempt this critique. An example is John Hutnyk, who said,

I joined the University system in order to maim it. Of course even this position is now totally in complicity with its afterlife – i.e., a life after its already tragic-yet-welcomed demise.<sup>27</sup>

This in itself epitomises the institution and how the debate from inside and outside are always set to have a time limit and an already formed demise. When in conversation with John Reardon, a Lecturer and Artist at Goldsmiths as well as a convenor of Art School UK<sup>28</sup> he mentioned that,

Some teachers need to constantly complain about the institution, not because they want it to change but because they need to be in opposition to the institution in order to survive it and their own mediocrity.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Bingham, C. W., Biesta, G., & Rancière, J. (2010). Jacques Rancière: Education, Truth, Emancipation. London, Continuum. pp 22-23

<sup>26</sup> Jakobsen, J. (2002) *Copenhagen Free University, 18<sup>th</sup> March, 2002*. Interviewed by Henriette Heise. Copenhagen Free University, 18/03/2002.

<sup>27</sup> Hutnyk.wordpress.com (2012) *Alternative Art College Questions Answered*. « *trinketization*. [online] Available at: <http://hutnyk.wordpress.com/2012/07/31/alternative-art-college-questions-answered/> [Accessed: 29 Aug 2012].

<sup>28</sup> Art SchoolUK.org

<sup>29</sup> Reardon, J. (2012) *On Education, Learning and the Institution*. Interviewed by Paul Stewart [in person] Goldsmiths, University of London., 20/7/2012.

This process of justification is a way of accepting the contradictories that exist between one's individual ideologies and that of the HE institution. This quote when compared with Hutnyk's response above demonstrates Hutnyk's attempt to change the HE system from the inside, which fundamentally, was his demise as he was recouped by the HE system.

What this essay intended to make apparent was the legitimate concept of an 'alternative' learning space. The research aim was to focus on understanding the relevance of the creation of an 'alternative' learning space and how the contradictories that arise influence their outcome. The analysis has attempted to show that the 'alternative' learning space can function autonomously in both political and art terms, looking at Adorno, Castoriadis and Benjamin. The autonomous function of the free university movement in reference to Castoriadis is important to employ social change. This social change is depicted in this essay as the supplementation of formal modes of learning with those that offer informal approaches with an artistic and activist element. It is clear that compared to the HE, gallery and museum systems, the spaces in the free university movement are volatile and temporal but that is the unquestionable importance of them. Without this element of internal combustion the spaces would become a mirror image of the current HE, gallery and museum systems through recuperation.

Looking specifically at the case studies focused on (AAC, CFU, MFU and the SSC), each holds a mandate to justify an autonomous position from which they discuss the topic of knowledge production. From this it is also possible to infer that the inclusion of an art practice or influence from an art space can produce a non-committal and contradictory scenario that this essay suggests is beneficial. This is due to the way this process can distort participatory norms and develop a context that can be malleable; this is the overriding importance of these spaces. It is not that they should replace the current HE, Gallery and Museum systems but they should be taken seriously as a positive shift towards knowledge production which does not rely on, historical, architectural or economical forms. It is as Vidokle says in his essay 'From Exhibition to School,'

What is remarkable is not what these programs propose, but that they should exist simultaneously.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Madoff, S. H. (2009). *Art School: (Propositions for the 21st Century)*. Cambridge, Mass, MIT Press. p195