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# Teach Yourself Institutions

By various authors

A *Mute* survey of self-instituted educational projects

The Latin root of the word 'educate' is 'educere' which means 'to lead out' or draw forth. It seems more than a coincidence then that there have long been renegade educational initiatives that splinter off or lead out from conventional education. Such initiatives often recognise that what is lacking from the official culture of education is the active engagement of the students in shaping the institutions they inhabit. What is ventured by them, is an attempt to draw out student's or participant's powers to creatively engage with the shaping of the alternative or 'self-institution' they inhabit. Since we are inescapably moulded by the institutions we inhabit, our only recourse is to create and model our own institutions with our desires, our needs and our imaginations. In this respect such initiatives echo an earlier understanding of education in which 'knowledge' isn't imposed as a template from without, but slowly arrived at through the reciprocity between what is already known, newly learnt, and newly perceived as knowledge.

## **Manoa Free University**

Founded: 2003, Vienna, Austria

URL: <http://manoafreeuniversity.org>

Contact: contact AT manoafreeuniversity.org

The MFU was founded in 2003 in Vienna. Inspired by talks with Jakob Jakobsen and Henriette Heise at the Copenhagen Free University we hoped such a self-institution could enable us to progress with collaborative practices in the field of political art. Our old group, with its focus on radical collective authorship, crumbled with stagnation... The MFU should become an open flux of knowledge production, archiving and exchange.

Obviously the notion of a Free University today is an antagonism to the ongoing total subordination of education and science to neoliberal imperatives.

We do not equate 'university' with 'professors', 'students' or 'empirical objectivity'. Instead, we use it as a place holder for the construction of subjects and collective knowledge production in post-fordist times. If there are any students they're perennial.

So where's Manoa?

That we don't know... but it's the native name for (El) Dorado, the mystic Golden City. This name reflects our insecurities and hopes and our restless wanderings to find a better place. As Foucault remarks in 'On Other Places', the ship carries both economisation and the quest for New Worlds. The MFU is such a heterotopia, it exists at the same time here and now and in our imaginations, both as exuberant discussions and the dry economy of funding applications.

We don't know yet what we are looking for or if, in the end, such a place exists – but then we like travelling anyway. And our quirks are as diverse as ever: emancipative forms of organisation, anarchitectures, soundings, tomorrow something new.

## **LASER**

Founded: 1990, Rome, Italy  
URL: <http://www.e-laser.org>  
Contact: pwd9148 AT inventati.org

LASER means Laboratorio Autonomo di Scienza, Epistemologia e Ricerca (Autonomous Laboratory of Science, Epistemology and Research). It was born in Rome where, during the '70s, scientists joined the wider social struggles through their criticisms of the role of science and technology within society, and denunciations of their 'non-neutrality'.

We have been trying to do roughly the same, in a new socio-economic context and in various forms, initially as a real collective group composed of squatters and members of other grassroots movements who met at university. Nowadays, since most of us have been scattered across the globe (from Australia to the US to Brazil), LASER has become a virtual public space. In our website, our copyleft books (freely available on our website) and our radio-activity (an audio-streaming project in collaboration with Amisnet.org), one finds an on-going project of counter-vulgarisation of science and research. Instead of making discoveries (we are NOT a left-wing Discovery Channel), an open network of scientists, students and activists explain where discoveries come from: what powers and interests make research successful, under which social conditions, and what alternatives are possible.

After having published books and articles and promoted political and cultural initiatives on such themes, we are now dealing more with the problem of setting science free from intellectual property (IP). We believe that, in a knowledge-based economy, IP is a crucial way of controlling the workforce and limiting its freedom to create new needs and goods under new conditions. The example of computer science already shows that proprietary IP rights are no longer necessary to ensure scientific and technological innovation. We are trying to extend this open culture to other areas of innovation. We are also involved in the current struggles over the social rights of scientists, and intellectual workers in general: casualisation of work is another whip in the hand of economic and political power against the social autonomy of brains-at-work.

### **Mobilised Investigation**

Founded: 2002  
URL: <http://manifestor.org/mi>  
Email List: mi AT manifestor.org

Mobilised Investigation (MI), a research-activism network established in 2002, offers a platform for the exchange and development of research which confronts power.

Whereas activist-research covers many fields, MI is a network for research in the field of social movements. It brings together social researchers from autonomous and academic spheres with the explicit aim of transforming social relations, to bring about societies free of oppression and inequality.

MI is a virtual tool, consisting of a website and an email list, in the hands of researchers who want to share and develop views on social movements and social change. It seeks to develop alternatives to conventional ideas about the relationship between activism and (academic) research. Disregarding mutual suspicion that exists between social movements and researchers (as well as universities), these alternatives recognise that one cannot be 'neutral' as a researcher.

Further objectives of MI are: to create an overview of like-minded groups and individuals, research spaces and available finances. It also intends to make resources for the study of social movements more accessible; to circulate studies done from the perspective of mobilised investigation; and to share general problems, insights and dilemmas specific to this perspective.

The MI network is also a platform that helps the mobilisation and organisation of conferences and encounters for activist-researchers. Alongside the virtual part of the network, some small-scale physical encounters have taken place to discuss the aims of the network. At the beginning of 2004 a conference was held in Barcelona that shared the objectives of MI. This 'International Conference on Social Movements and Research' (Jornades Internacionals Moviments Social i Recerca, [<http://www.investigaccio.org>]), was organised by a local network and drew two-hundred participants.

## **Monochrom**

Founded: 1993, Vienna, Austria

URL: <http://www.monochrom.at>

Contact: [moral@monochrom.at](mailto:moral@monochrom.at) or [flagrant@monochrom.at](mailto:flagrant@monochrom.at)

Monochrom is an art-technology-philosophy group of basket weaving enthusiasts and theory do-it-yourselfers in Vienna and Zeta Draconis. monochrom is the super-affirmation of the globalisation trap. monochrom has existed in this (and every other) form since 1993.

Monochrom is an unpeccable mixture of proto-aesthetic fringe work, pop attitude, subcultural science and political activism. monochrom publishes a book by the same name in addition to its activity in other areas. monochrom is an open field of experimentation: international art scene, panel discussion event technology, souls bought and sold, game and shame shows, readings of the dreariest sort, theory cocooning, film short processing, website squatters' consultancy, alternative space travel projects, do-it-yourself surveillance courses, riddle ralleys, ecumenical field services, overhead projector comics, circumstantiation, Power Point fairytales, layouting and decomposition, propagandistic summer camps, monumental puppet theatre, aesthetic pregnancy counselling, producing, promoting and destroying music, party service, expressional dance, Biennial brawls, GDR rock, DJ events and lots more...

Monochrom's mission, its passion and quasi-ontological vocation, is primarily the collection, grouping, registration and querying (liberation?) of the scar tissue represented by everyday cultural artifacts. This mission is conducted everywhere, but first and foremost in culture-archaeological digs into the seats (and pockets) of ideology and entertainment.

## **University of Openess**

Founded: 2002, London, UK

URL: <http://twentiethcentury.com/uo>

Email List: [uo AT twentiethcentury.com](mailto:uo AT twentiethcentury.com)

The University of Openess (UO): is a user led facility of learning and research with its first campus at Limehouse Town Hall, London and its first online presence at: <http://uo.twentiethcentury.com>. The UO:

- – runs a core curriculum and regular classes, and at present has several faculties which include: Faculty of Unix (runs a free weekly class), Faculty of Cartography (put on the Cartographic Congress, May-June 2003), Physical Education (bi-weekly/ish) urban exploration and training), Faculty of Education (runs the Arted mailing list) and the Faculty of Collaborative Research (keeps a log of inter-faculty conflicts).
- – is open to solicitation for prospective classes, faculties, symposia and more than you can possibly imagine.
- Other regular events include; HackLab, Wednesdays & Tuesdays, 2-6pm, at Freedom Books, London; Anti-Systemic Library, Wednesdays & Thursdays 1-9pm, Sundays 2-6pm at – London

Action Resource Centre, London; The Apocalypse Project, monthly discussions and film screenings on the Future History of the End of the World.

- In response to a question from Mute about this section on self-institutions and an invitation to write a collective statement defining the UO, a debate was triggered on the UO mailing list. Excerpts follow here:

‘self-instituted’ ? isn’t all education self-instituted????  
wot else institutes it?

so this differentiation strikes me as odd to say the least. presumably u are differentiating from ‘state’ education or ‘private’ education (the aristocracy from the bourgeoisie?) this axis of complicity introduced by positing the self as an institution, can only lead to the question: WHAT IS OPENNESS?  
asim Thu, 8 Apr 2004 11:38:01 GMT

I agree with the questioning of the term ‘self-instituted’. Which self does this refer to? Did the institution institute itself? Or was it instituted (organised, established) by some people? I find it disturbing to personify the institute, to personify groups of people and treat them as a single person...  
Robert C. Atwood Thu, 8 Apr 2004 17:41:14 0100

I don’t understand this confusion about the term self-instituted. I thought it worked in a similar way to terms like self-employed. My understanding is that it just means that the institution is set up and run by its participants; i.e. they act as their own authority rather than looking to some ‘higher’ authority (the state, a boss, etc, etc).  
Derek A. Lewis Thu, 08 Apr 2004 20:34:14 0100

The term self-institution refers to the writings of Cornelius Castoriadis. [...] In [his essay] ‘Done And To Be Done’, he says, ‘I have defined the object of politics as follows: Create the institutions which, by being internalised by individuals, most facilitate their accession to their individual autonomy and their effective participation in all forms of explicit power existing in society.’  
Armin Medosch Thu, 8 Apr 2004 21:37:39 0100

I don’t think the uo is extra-institutional, or self-institutional, or just plain institutional – it fluctuates between many organisational models depending on who is speaking and who is listening – it’s a game of ‘it’. Sometimes I’m it and I tag you then you’re it – then someone changes the rules.  
Saul Albert Fri, 9 Apr 2004 21:50:12 0100

## **Precarias a la Deriva**

Founded: 2002, Madrid, Spain  
URL: <http://www.sindominio.net/karakola>  
Contact: karakola AT sindominio.net

Precarias a la Deriva is an initiative somewhere between research and activism which arose from the feminist social centre La Eskalera Karakola in Madrid, initially as a response to the general strike in Spain in June of 2002. This mobilisation in no way represented the kind of fragmented, informal, invisible work that we do; our jobs were neither taken into consideration by the unions that called the strike nor affected by the legislation that provoked it. A group of women decided to spend the day of the strike wandering the city together, transforming the classic picket line into a picket survey; talking to women about their work and their days. Are you striking? Why? Under what conditions do you work? What kind of tools do you have to confront situations that seem unjust to you?

From this first tentative experience came the impulse to organise an ongoing research project. It is clear that we needed tools for talking about and intervening in new kinds of work – this terrain of labour which often doesn't even have a name – so we set out to map the territory, with one eye fixed on the possibility of conflict. This is a bid for survival arising out of our own needs: networks to break solitude, words to talk about what is happening to us.

### **L'Université Tangente**

Founded: 2001, Strasbourg, France

URL: <http://utangente.free.fr>

Contact: utangente AT free.fr

L'UT is a zero university. It constitutes a rupture within scientific research and the production and transmission of knowledges, cultural and artistic practices domesticated by the state or the market.

To this end, L'UT creates and proposes its own forms of life, of exchange, of knowledges and pleasures. Tangential, it manifests, produces and diffuses human knowledge that is singular, autonomous and multidisciplinary – expressions of existence, forms of action and micro-group organisation with results in the real world.

L'UT works to create and sustain alterities, for the free circulation of people, for the development of South-South relations, for the deployment of autonomy and the development of free exchange.

In creating the L'UT we want to think of a place without exams, in principle open to all. A place for social deconditioning in which the participants are co-producers of the university.

### **Free University of Los Angeles**

Founded: 2003, Los Angeles, USA

URL: <http://www.florycanto.org/freeuni.htm>

Contact: freeuniversityofla AT yahoo.com

The point of the university is to provide a space for various non-authoritarian people living in LA to explain/share/discuss the roots of their inspirations; and then explain how some of those sources are being applied to their existing ideas and actions. A series of talks is intended for learning about some of the most significant instances, movements, theories, and languages of liberation. Most importantly, the participants try to discuss how they are applying these lessons to their own actions toward liberation.

Currently, we are as ghettoised as our city! It was time for us to come together and introduce ourselves to one another. In addition to being educational, the talks series is intended to give the speakers and members of our community the much needed opportunity to get to know one another, build links, participate in mutual aid, and fight against the ghettoisation of our city.

We do not have much of a structure, we don't need any money, and the only commitment that we ask for is for people giving presentations to show up when they said they will. Everything else is up to them. They decide how to interact with the rest of us, where to hold the presentations or how to promote the event.

All of this makes the project extremely flexible, easy, and free. One of the major problems, however, is that it is not based on popular education – it is largely speaker-driven rather than being structured by the participants themselves. However, since the information is introductory, it is actually enlightening

to give the speakers so much control. This way we really find out who they are and where their ideas have taken them.

Our hope is that at some point the participants will start coming together and figuring out for themselves what they want to learn (or learn more about) and how. So far no such activity has taken place... but we have only had six presentations so far.

### **Plus-tôt Te Laat**

Founded: 1996, Brussels, Belgium

URL: <http://www.pttl.be>

Contact: pttl AT netcourrier.com

There are still too many cows in the meadow being painted, only now you cannot recognise them so easily because they are abstract. There is nothing to see except the social decipherment of language and forms.

Put oil paint in the hinges. Be your own daily producers and fire question marks at all the institutions that try to control our lives. Collectively or individually.

PTTL started up a base in the unemployment office at Sint-Joost in 1998. It is a place for interventions by temporary and strategic workgroups that split up. Pioneering or not. This is the Ministry of Visits. Their numbers are uncertain.

In March 1998 the municipal social affairs department of Saint-Josse issued a pamphlet to the unemployed, artists in particular, calling on them to decorate the assistance bureau. Little by little the idea spread among the artists to form an unemployed collective in order to really work in this bureau. The Plus Tôt Te Laat collective declares the bureau, which they are occupying on a permanent basis, to be public space. This collective produces and freely distributes posters, pamphlets and texts. In this way the bureau becomes a site for expression and reflection on unemployment and labour. 'Our presence is an daily affirmation of another conception of competence. We oppose to instrumentalized relations another global approach nourished by personal experience and the search for multi-dimensional development. The work is subterranean, its aim is the invention of a process of creation. This apparent tautology expresses the desire to renew social practices, to legitimise popular experiences that are marginal and resist formalisation. We declare this bureau to be public space. We are working for the widening of public spaces, according to the emergence of non-predetermined needs. We are idly curious. We archive displacements, use values, appropriations, détournements. We track down that fear of the void that only exists in the eye of power. The tools are administrative: photocopies, stamps, stencils. It appears that our action leads to the production and free distribution of posters, pamphlets and texts.' (Plus Tôt Te Laat, 2 December 1999).

[IMAGE]