Autonomous Research within and/or Beneath the Ruins; Or, We are Finally Getting our Feet Wet

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The beginning portion of this text was originally written as a glossary entry on "autonomous institutions and education" for an unrealized project. Included here is a slightly adapted version.

Also included is a revised and expanded piece I wrote exploring an experimental collective research project I was involved with in graduate school along with several peers. The editors and I found that these previously distinct texts add a certain depth to one another and thus publish them here as one.

For purposes of clarity, I've framed the different histories and traditions of "autonomous institutions and education" in four ways. In no particular order I will refer to them as: Activist initiated education; Infrastructural experiments; Free Schools, and finally Free Universities.

Activist initiated education is typically derived directly from political struggles and often have a clear political purpose. Examples here might include: the Highlander Folk School, founded in Tennessee (US) in 1932 to help educate and organize labor and union activists; the highly influential praxis of Paulo Freire and his work with Brazilian illiterate poor;[1] and Sojourner Truth Organization's (US) now infamous How to Think: Dialectical Materialism course, developed in the 1970s as a week-long intensive on Marxist theory.[2] Importantly STO's 'classes' were not run by academics, but STO members who were directly involved in organizing workers toward revolutionary ends. More recently we can look at projects like the IWW's Work People's College, which seeks to build the skills of union organizers and help educate fellow workers on the historic and contemporary class struggle.[3]

Infrastructural experiments are platforms to help facilitate self and co-education projects. They often use networked forms to connect individuals with shared interests of inquiry and usually function through the establishment of a website or other common site of exchange, enabling those interested to find each other.

Perhaps most visible here is the arrival of listservs, wikis, discussion boards, and other online sites of exchange. While the quality and political leanings of these efforts vary greatly, perhaps two of the more productive examples and concerted efforts are the discussion-based listservs Nettime and Edu-Factory in their initial form. While both projects have now become closer to an announcement list, originally they were structured as rigorous critical exchanges between intellectuals across the globe. Nettime, inaugurated in 1995, was primarily focused on the emerging technologies around the web and its corresponding sociopolitical conditions; importantly this also led to a high degree of self-reflexivity on the form of the archived listserv itself. Following a similar form, Edu-Factory initiated their study in 2007 focused on "university transformations, knowledge production and forms of conflict, in which nearly 500 activists, students and researchers the world over have taken part."[4] While these two examples make deliberate use of the global reach of the network and remain self-reflexive about their form, the listserv has become a ubiquitous site of critical exchange and self-education for all kinds of activists and intellectuals.

A quite different use of similar technology can be found with the Public School, started in Los Angeles (US) as a web platform in which one could suggest a course.[5] Courses proposed would provide a description, where the individual was located, and any other relevant information. Those interested in participating in a given course could make that known by simply clicking a button, and when enough people have expressed interest, the participants exchange info and self-organize how they want to proceed. This particular web platform has now been exported and adapted to various cities across the world.

Notably these projects bear a striking resemblance to the ideas of Ivan Illich's concept of 'learning webs,' articulated in his book *Deschooling Society* (1971) in which he calls for a peer-matching communication network very much like the Public School provides, in order to connect those with similar interests outside of state-sponsored educational environments.

Free Schools are most closely associated with anarchist pedagogy and can be traced back to the Modern Schools of the early 20th century. The first *Escuela Moderna* was started in Spain by Francisco Ferrer in 1901 as a counter-educational program influenced by anarchist philosophy. Not long after Ferrer's inaugural efforts in 1909 the infamous Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, with many others, started a Modern School in New York City.[6] Importantly, the Modern School movement primarily emphasized working with children as an alternative to state-sponsored

schooling. This tradition has continued and transformed into what is now often termed 'unschooling' and 'deschooling' movements.[7]

Today Free Schools typically take the form of volunteer initiated workshops and classes, often around ideas related to anti-capitalism but certainly not exclusively so. Projects like the Experimental College of the Twin Cities (EXCO) (US) for example takes the form of the Free School but does not necessarily remain adhered to its anarchist roots in the courses it offers.[8] EXCO mixes the use of a connecting platform and a free community educational space in which community members offer free classes.

Free Schools have also proven influential to various artist-initiated and experimental projects like the Free/Slow University of Warsaw, Universidad Nómada in Spain or the now defunct Copenhagen Free University.[9] While each of these projects has a distinct character, they all share a commitment to experimental research as well as non-traditional ways of expanding public engagement with knowledge production and their respective communities.

One can see that we've quickly overlapped into what I'm calling the **Free University**. I use the term Free University because of its rhetorical associations with a high level of intellectual rigor found in upper-level academia and because these projects tend to be distinct from the anarchist histories of Free Schools as well as public self-education projects like EXCO. For better or worse, participants that are highly educated through the academic system often initiate many of the projects in this paradigm.

At their foundation and what sets free universities apart from the previous categories I've suggested, is their commitment to advance a theoretical and/or analytical engagement with contemporary struggles, geopolitical configurations, or other leftist and anti-capitalist concerns. 16 Beaver and Edu-Factory are perhaps the most visible examples. With many free university projects the form or self-organization is important due to the realization that the ways we produce knowledge also generates ways of knowing and being.

From the outside, free universities might look indistinguishable from any self-organized seminar, reading group, or study club. They often take the form of intensive multi-day workshops on a given topic with many participants, or longer-term investigations with a smaller number of participants. Many of these projects have taken particular inspiration from Colectivo Situaciones' theorization of 'militant research' or the Autonomist inspired 'co-research.'[10] In particular, there has been significant theorizing around this collective process of knowledge production with an emphasis on the theoretical and political questions that surround *autonomy*.[11]

Brian Holmes comments on autonomy and the influential research project Continental Drift:

…There is no possibility of generating a critical counter-power—or counter-public, or counter-public sphere—when there is no more search for relative autonomy, or when the collective self (autos) no longer even asks the question of how to make its own law (nomos). So the importance of this kind of project is to use it as a moment of experimentation, not just in the quest for the perfect theory of the perfect procedure, but cosmologically, to rearrange the stars above your head. Such events don't often happen, the only solution is to do-it-yourself.[12]
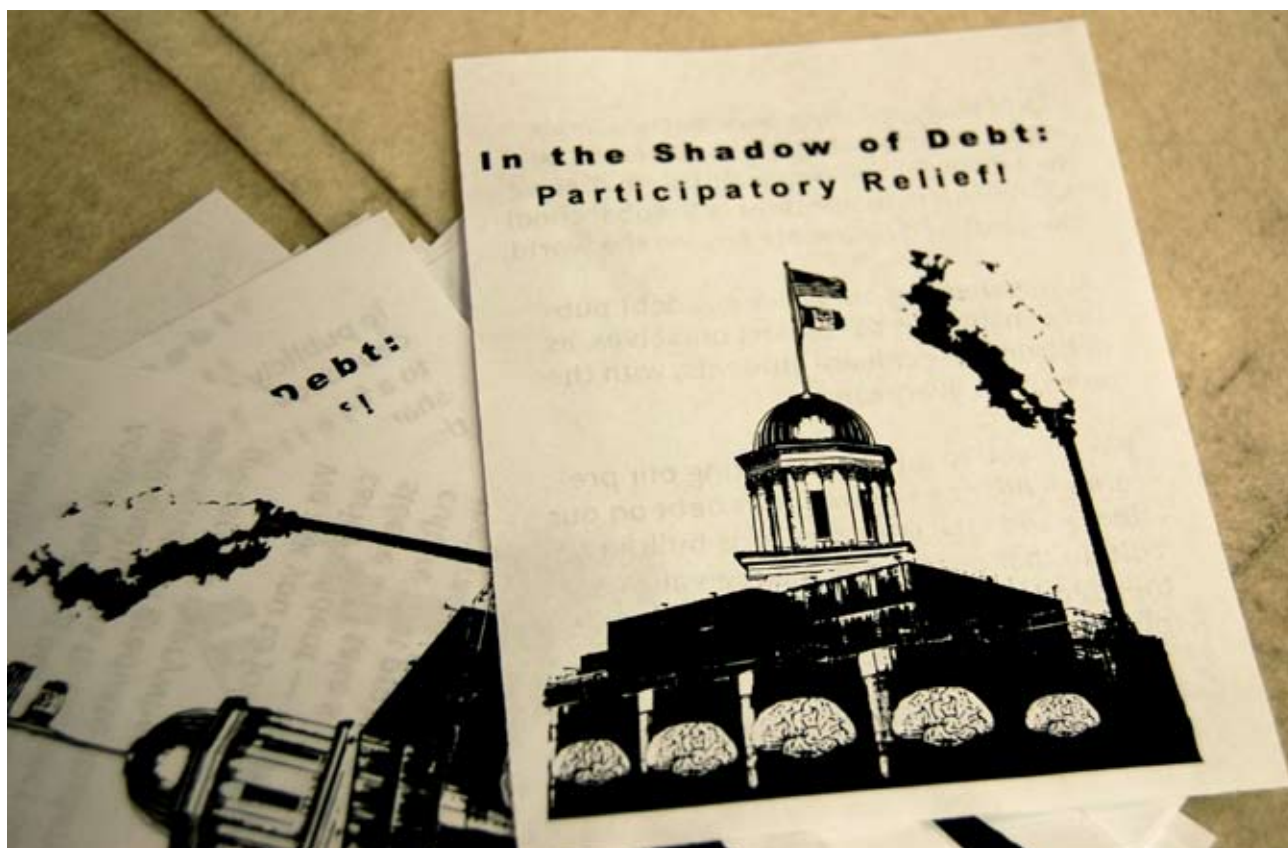
Related to the question of autonomy, this experimental trajectory often looks to notions of the 'common,' as a concept that may provide a line of flight from the privatizing nature of capitalism. Edu-Factory Collective writes:

…The common is, from a class point of view, the escape route from the crisis of the public/private dialectic [...] When we speak of the common, far from existing in nature, is therefore produced: it is always at stake in constituent processes, capable of destroying relations of exploitation and liberating the power of living labor.[13]

Here the problems and possibilities of autonomy and common converge, and the *forms*—ways of being and collaborating—of collective research become important. In short, we cannot overcome capitalism if we do not also find new ways of producing knowledge collectively that reject logics of strictly individualized study, competition, and the privatization of knowledge, i.e. the logics of capitalism in both form and content.

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The following is a text written in August 2011 as an introduction to a now defunct project called Self-Organized Seminar (SOS).[14] Along with several of my peers, we began this endeavor in order to establish a collective way of working and studying in the fraught space of our shared MFA program. The text below was written at the beginning of our efforts and lacks several lessons we learned by working together for the remaining two years of our graduate program, but I believe it remains a useful resource to frame an experiment that attempts to thwart the professionalizing and individualizing tendencies so present in creative graduate programs. The glossary above helps situate our project; most significantly, we took several cues from free university experiments.

Collective members of Self-Organized Seminar were: Brendan Baylor, Kristen Degree, Kelly Gallagher, Josh Hoeks, Christopher Pickett, Heidi Ratanavanich, Corinne Teed, and myself. I would like to thank them here—this text would be impossible without their wonderful minds and hearts.
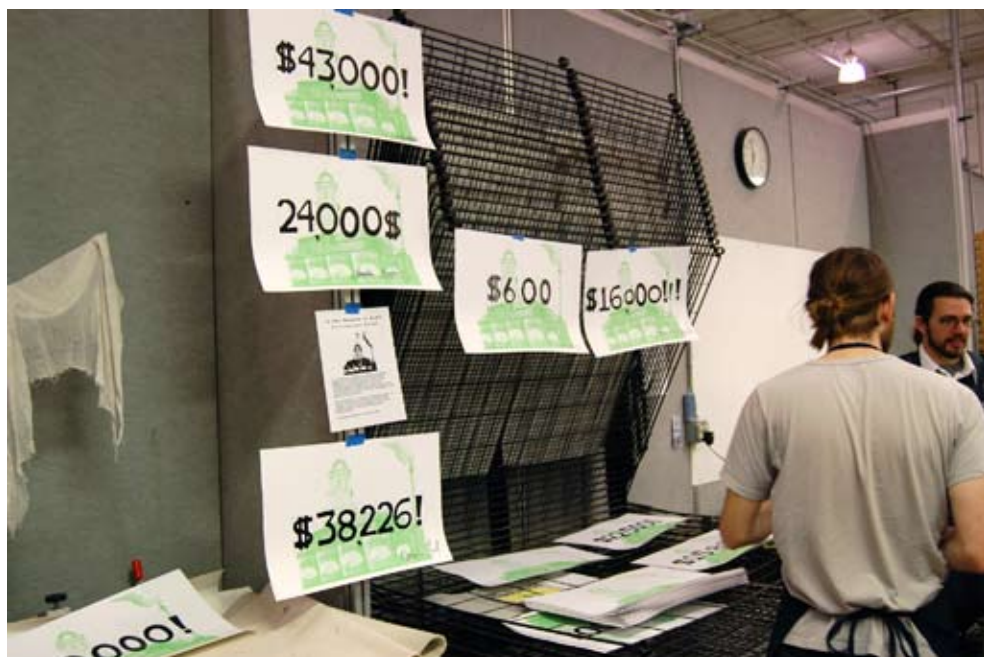
Following images: Self-Organized Seminar (SOS), In the Shadow of Debt: Participatory Relief!, workshop at the University of Iowa, 2012

Over the course of our first year or two while working toward studio arts MFAs at a large research university, a few friends and I began an on-going informal conversation about our frustrations with our respective programs, the neoliberal university, our classes, and various other problems.

We felt that our art programs were failing us, unable to provide a theoretical and political footwork for what we wanted to do in our practices. Our programs were beholden to the confines of art disciplines and we were pushed into PhD seminars, looking for a deeper and more textured understanding of our varying political interests. In turn, we found ourselves frustrated by those seminars. While initially interesting, they usually struck us as only concerned with the discipline specific paradigms and quickly meandered into irrelevant and apolitical academic indulgence, excusing itself (and thus students) from any real political possibilities of worldly relevance or responsibility.

In the hallways between classes or at night during studio sessions, over beers and coffee, we found ourselves arriving at something of a critique of the surely common problems listed above. But we also found that we didn't know how to move forward, how to make critical work in such a structurally problematic environment.

We realized we spent all of our time trying to explain ourselves to our peers—
"What is wrong with getting an MFA? If you hate it so much, why are you here?
What is wrong with Critique sessions? What is wrong with the University?"—Le-
gitimate questions that we still can only sort of answer.

We came up with not so much an answer to our problems or a deeply sophisticated
critique, but rather an idea for an experiment among friends with common interests
in twisting away from the normative and cowed paradigms of university Art pro-
duction. And so we arrive at our not-so-creatively named project—"self-organized

seminar."[15] Shorthand we've taken to calling the experiment SOS; perhaps tellingly, if inadvertently, suggesting a double meaning—*Help! Save our souls!* But no longer do we look to anyone but ourselves.

In large part the project looks like a reading group, an autonomous research project, or maybe militant research. Basically, the plan is this: we take classes that are not especially time-intensive—no seminars, but instead primarily workshops where we can focus on "our" work (a privilege of art programs). This extra time and energy is re-directed into this self-organized research project, reading self-selected texts and meeting once a week to discuss and figure out our next steps. It is a long way of saying that we divert our energies away from our schoolwork and toward a collective project, toward developing our political interests through experimentation and communal support.

We want to deepen our friendships, our ability to collaborate and to comprehend. We want to learn how to resist and build a new way of working in an environment that feels overbearing, normalizing, and paralyzing: to borrow from one inspiration for the project—to begin to occupy and/or evacuate.[16] We desire a double-movement of pushing back while twisting away.
We decided we would start with two brief and wonderful texts: Brian Holmes' "Continental Drift: Activist Research, From Geopolitics to Geopoetics" and Marto Malo de Molina's "Common Notions Part 2: Institutional Analysis, Participatory Action-Research, Militant Research."[17]

From Molina we learn the beginnings of radical critiques of institutionalized practices, that the purported neutrality of an institution "is a trap: one is always compromised." Molina offers us much insight from theorist, political militant, and radical psychoanalyst Felix Guattari, especially his vehement condemnation of the normative practices of psychoanalysis. But we also learn roots of activist research projects—from feminist consciousness-raising to Brazilian pedagogical theorist and activist Paulo Freire's poverty centered and empowering 'action-research,' designed primarily to educate illiterate peasants. Molina also provides notes on the (at times) heady practice of militant research.[18] Militant research is important in its materialist inspiration, she notes, where content and power flows through the body, simultaneously inscribing it. We learn that the gestures we make, the art we produce, inside and through the institution are swallowed and digested into its belly—always growing, always making itself stronger. Militant Research always begins with the concrete, with our own experiences as subjects. Politics and resistance can't be separated from the micro-gestures we make, the ways in which we inhabit and use our bodies as well as the spaces in which they exist. Thus we find ourselves discussing some kind of exit route, or Guattari's 'lines of flight.' *SOS!* We'll try and slip out the back door on company time, returning only when we have to.

The co-production of critical knowledge generates rebellious bodies. Thinking about rebellious practices provides/gives value and potency to those same practices. Collective thinking engenders common practice. Therefore, the process of knowledge production is inseparable from the process of subject production or subjectification and vice versa.[19]

Until finally our new rebellious bodies can stand on their own with affinities, deterritorialized from its original body and becoming something new with others, something capable of resistance, communalism, and struggle.
But first we must remake ourselves and re-chart our territories. Another inspiration for SOS, Brian Holmes, who has with many collaborators been in the forefront of experimental and very committed research projects,[20] states this clearly in our pre-school reading:
[…] disciplines have to be overcome, dissolved into experimentation. Autonomous inquiry demands a rupture from the dominant cartographies. Both compass and coordinates must be reinvented if you really want to transform the dynamics of a changing world-system. Only by disorienting the self and uprooting epistemic certainties can anyone hope to inject a positive difference into the unconscious dynamics of the geopolitical order."[21]
And so we have something of an exit plan, something of a compass, pointing us toward each other.

I'm writing now three years later after the slow and probably natural death of the SOS in early 2014 due to our eventual graduating and busy-ness. It is difficult to describe such a collective process in retrospect. It was very much about our move-

ments together, struggling to learn and grow in ways that oppose, in practice, the competitive logic of the art world and academic environments, and in a broader context, capitalism. We were right to look to Marto Malo de Molina and Colectivo Situaciones as signposts with their emphasis on both an embodied and intellectual collective struggle in efforts to constitute a common space. I wouldn't know how to gauge the success of our project; I can only say that it was immensely helpful for me, and I think for my collaborators, to think carefully about collectively politicizing our praxis against the professionalizing logic of our MFA programs. In isolation, our efforts may seem insignificant, selfish even, divorced from on-the-ground struggles (indeed, we constantly circled around this question), but when viewed alongside dozens of other autonomous and experimental anti-capitalist research efforts like 16 Beaver (NYC) and Slow-Motion Action/Research Collective (Chicago), perhaps one can begin to see an extremely significant pattern of reimagining how intellectual and creative activity can function outside, against, or even within our oppressive institutions.

SOS and similar projects are resistant to easy packaging. It was messy, as all experiments are. The lessons we learned, or perhaps the questions we learned to ask better, are too complicated to unpack in this brief essay. Here what I want to avoid is summarizing SOS as an art collective that did periodic projects and events, even though we were art students involved in a collective process that sometimes involved projects and events. It sounds silly to make the distinction, but it is an important one that marks the possibility of locating a new collective way of working (to occupy and/or evacuate) in a relentlessly capitalist environment.

While I am hesitant to sum up SOS as simply creating a handful of projects, there were a few moments when we came out of our collective shell in an attempt to reach out to our peers. Notably we facilitated two events: the first a seminar on institutional critique,[22] and the second a collaborative print workshop we called *In the Shadow of Debt: Participatory Relief!* With both events we attempted to bridge the gap between our anti-capitalist experiments and the more mainstream liberal tendencies of many of our peers. Because the institutional critique seminar is relatively self-explanatory, I'd like to briefly describe our printmaking workshop.

In the Shadow of Debt took place at a printmaking conference held at University of Iowa (US), where we were all students. We wanted to problematize the uncritical embrace of the prestigious degree (UI is a highly-ranked Printmaking program) as well as the conference's largely apolitical programming. We found the conference to be paradigmatic of many of the problems we were exploring as a group, namely the celebration of hermetic academic/artistic culture that systematically denies its complacency in the neoliberal university that serves capitalism so well. The conference itself was not especially egregious, and yet its banality struck us as a good spot for a gentle intervention. We wanted to insist that conference attendees recognize the unsustainable and problematic ways in which labor is exploited in the university while students accrue debt that will prove near impossible to pay off in any sustainable way. Even more we wanted to suggest debt as a global *condition*, and draw connections between debt, precarity, and political movements across around the world. In a rather simple and arguably timid gesture, we asked conference attendees—our friends, peers, and strangers—to print their cumulative debt on a screen-printed image of a our university as a brain-factory. The result was dozens of printed posters with dollar amounts ranging from $0 to $160,000 or so (had we currently been at a private school that number would've surely been even higher). We also took photographs of each participant, each holding up their poster, their burden. Formally the photographs recalled both a mug shot—convicts holding their name and number for the State to keep track of them—as well as a student who joyfully holds up his award for the camera. "This is my college degree, it cost $160,000," a caption could say. We all sort of laughed together at the high dollar amounts with a certain exasperation and thinly veiled sadness. We knew one another's exorbitant debt was shared but still distributed unevenly. We cheered with happiness (and probably jealousy) at the few who had printed "$1,000" or even one participant's "$0.00!" I sheepishly printed my own: "$600." I was embarrassed to admit to my peers that I have been luckier than they have. Others coyly printed "TOO MUCH!!!" or simply "∞," not willing to go along with our requests entirely.

We did all this while a haphazardly curated soundtrack played off our iPods. The only criteria for inclusion: songs about money. I remember Wu-Tang Clan's C.R.E.A.M. (Cash Rules Everything Around Me), Dire Straits' "Money For Nothing," Notorious B.I.G.'s "Mo' Money Mo' Problems," Patty Smith's "Free Money." And on and on. The paradoxes and ambivalences of money present in our cultural

relics audibly lingered over us, blurring together, drowning out, lightening the mood.

In the flier we made inviting people to participate, we stated: "To publicly state our personal debt declares our vulnerability to a financial and political system that we share with millions. […] Acknowledging our academic debt enables us to connect ourselves, as debt-ridden graduate students, with the precarious everywhere […]. We ask that you join us in making our precarity evident—to wear our debt on our sleeve and *gesture* toward a larger movement."

I think it is a mistake to characterize SOS as an art collective. To do so would be to remain stagnant in precisely the way artists too often are: content with this 'gesture.' Part of what was meaningful, for me at least, in working with SOS was that it was decidedly *not* a gesture, but a real attempt at remaking how we could work together while recognizing all of the ambivalences and contradictions inherent in our lives as subjects and students in a capitalist world. It was a small attempt maybe, but one that continues to look for connections in the constellation of others like us around the world. Just like our debt, our struggles and experiments are yours, too.

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Endnotes

1 Freire's major theoretical contribution is of course Pedagogy of the Oppressed, [1968] New York: Continuum, 2000.; See also Education for Critical Consciousness, New York: Continuum, 2005, in which much of his pedagogical methodology is discussed.

2 Description and course materials available here: http://www.sojournertruth.net/htt.html. Accessed May 2014.

3 http://workpeoplescollege.org. Accessed May 2014.

4 Edu-Factory Collective, "Introduction: All Power to Self-Education!" in Toward a Global Autonomous University: Cognitive Labor, The Production of Knowledge, and Exodus from the Education Factory, eds. Edu-Factory Collective. New York: Autonomedia, 2009. p 0.

5 http://thepublicschool.org.

6 For this history of anarchist education see Paul Avrich's The Modern School Movement: Anarchism and Education in the United States, Oakland: AK Press, 2005.

7 For more on this see Everywhere All the Time: A New Deschooling Reader, ed. Matt Hern, Oakland: AK Press, 2008.

8 http://www.excotc.org/. Accessed May 2014.

9 Free / Slow University of Warsaw: http://www.wuw-warsaw.pl/wuw.php?lang=eng; Universidad Nómada: http://www.universidadnomada.net; Copenhagen Free University: http://www.copenhagenfreeuniversity.dk. Accessed May 2014.

10 See Colectivo Situaciones "On the Researcher-Militant" available at: http://eipcp.net/transversal/0406/colectivosituaciones/en. On co-research see Marta Malo de Molina "Common Notions, part 1: Workers-inquiry, Co-research, Consciousness-raising" available at: http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0406/malo/en. Accessed May 2014.

11 For a working definition of autonomy, see 16 Beaver's glossary developed in 2008: http://www.16beavergroup.org/drift/glossary2008.htm. Accessed May 2014.

12 Brian Holmes, "Articulating the Cracks in World Power," available online at: www.16beavergroup. org/drift/readings/16b_bh_articulatingcracks.pdf.

13 Edu-Factory Collective, "Introduction: All Power to Self-Education!," p 11.

14 An archive of our work can be viewed at selforganizedseminar.wordpress.com.

15 An archive of our projects as well as an extensive digital library is available at selforganizedseminar. wordpress.com.

16 http://occupyeverything.org/. Accessed May 2014.

17 Brian Holmes, "Continental Drift: Activist Research, From Geopolitics to Geopoetics," available at: http://www.ephemerajournal.org/sites/default/files/5-Xholmes.pdf. Marto Malo de Molina's "Common Notions Part 2: Institutional Analysis, Participatory Action-Research, Militant Research," available at: http://eipcp.net/transversal/0707/malo/en. Accessed May 2014.

18 "Militant Research," while summarized by Molina, is typically attributed to the Argentinian group Colectivo Situaciones. Theoretical footwork for militant research can be found in their text "On the Researcher-Militant," available at: http://eipcp.net/transversal/0406/colectivosituaciones/en. Accessed May 2014.

19 Molina, "Common Notions Part 2."

20 See especially "Continental Drift," (16beavergroup.org/drift/) an on-going project in collaboration with 16 Beaver and several others. For more of Holmes' writing see his blog brianholmes.wordpress. com. Accessed May 2014.

21 Holmes, "Continental Drift."

22 Readings from the seminar can be found here: http://selforganizedseminar.wordpress.com/institutional-critique.