VOILÀ, IT'S NOT FLOATING AND IT'S NOT A UNIVERSITY!
A conversation between members of a non-institution, edited by Gilly Karjevsky

…"The opaque is not the obscure.. it is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence"…

…"We clamour for the right to opacity for everyone".

Édouart Glissant

Members of the Floating University are often asked to describe this multifaceted venture. The answer starts with an exhale and a pause, and then the description of a shared experience as seen from a set of highly individualized viewpoints. That the Floating University allows for this level of complex communication about itself, the fact that there is no corporate script, that it is a deeply opaque infrastructure for each visitor to project onto, is the political essence of the project.

The Floating University requires a new language of practice and perhaps a new practice all together. A practice that negates the institutional way of doing things, challenges the need for unified transparencies of meaning, elaborates on processes of making and thinking together and frees spaces in the city to do so collectively.

And so, the text before you provides glimpses into the personal interpretations of the makers of Floating University and its main protagonists during 2018, its inaugural year. This conversation took place at a time when common ways of making and managing the Floating University were being sought and installed both organisationally and on site. These days, we are setting up the Floating University e.V., creating different recurring programs for the site and learning how to work on this seasonal site with neighbors, volunteers and guests, as well as the plants and animals we encounter daily.

Gathered around the table at the raumlabor office were Markus Bader, Benjamin Foerster-Baldenius, Dorothee Halbrock, Gilly Karjevsky, Carla Kienz, Anna Kokalanova, Joanne Pouzenc, Florian Stirnemann, Stefan Shankland (via Skype), Marko Salapura and Rosario Talevi.

GILLY: I want to open with the institutional question, or questions about institutionalism that the Floating University raises. I think what resonated from Joanne's propositions (see page 10) was this idea of an "almost institution". Being constantly on the verge of institutionalizing, but never really crossing the line. Whether intentionally or not, whether not intentionally to begin with and now, one year later more intentionally, or the other way around, and playing on the aspects of temporality and the institutional in relation to one another.

ROSARIO: I would like to pick up on that, because you were referring to inside and outside, to an "almost institution" and I brought this definition here for another relevant term by Michael Serres: "If institutions are organisational systems based on an inside/outside framework … extitutions are designed as areas where a multitude of agents can spontaneously assemble."

To clarify, it's not to say that things from outside need to happen on the inside, because that would make the Floating University an institution, it would determine that some people belong and other people do not. But if we could try to develop an *ex-titution* — a place where people can spontaneously assemble — then it would connect to the notion of freeing ourselves from a dependenc on rules.

MARKUS: One of the intentions of Floating [University] was to allow for open procedures and also open ways of working. We were describing it as a place of retreat and focus, but I felt like it was an enormous place of distraction! There was a fascinating rhythm of being fast, being slow, being super crowded, being completely empty, being hot or not, ducks flying around behind the lecturer. So one of the qualities that I really enjoyed was this coincidentalist quality and how things happened in parallel, without a full understanding of what the programe is. Maybe it became a condenser of common aspiration or desires. There is something much bigger in the air now. An interesting term for it is "emergence". We bring in our procedures as we know them and then we let things happen, because the Floating University was never planned in a complete sense.

FLORIAN: People really loved this place and they really took care of it. But for us it was always a political act to open this site to the public and to think about the future of this place together. My feeling was that the citizens in the neighborhood didn't understand that this was a political project. I think this is the big question — what kind of city do we want to have? — and what can happen on the site of Floating University — does only the city as an owner decide what will happen there or is this something that we can influence through this project? By exposing this hidden place to its neighbors, who didn't even know about it, and making it public, and through this action, of course, changing it. I think it is our responsibility to play a role in this game somehow.

BENNI: When we found this beautiful and seductive piece of the city we wanted to highlight how places like this one have intrinsic value beyond the economic value of the land it's on. We were struggling for a long time with the question how do we tackle this piece of land, how do we invade it. What was always in our discussions was that it has to be part of a political movement to protect it from other forces that exist in this city, forces that are mostly connected to exploiting the city's land for economic turnover. We set ourselves this challenge. Raised the question, what do you fight for? Do you fight for the dragonflies and the bats and the ducks that spend their life in the dirty water? Or do you fight for allotment gardeners that spend their weekends in the sunny gardens and who love the quietness of the place? Which argument for keeping this place open will win over a larger part of the civil society?

DORO: Our agendas were multiple and changed over time. This was not a strategy to tell different stories, but happened because of the nature of the Floating University and the site, and the actors involved from within and without. We all had different stories to tell. The story of temporary use was one story and this also changed over the course of time. In the beginning we had no intention of staying and then we saw how people responded to the place. So there is not one permanent story here.

GILLY: Can you expand a bit on the political potential of the project or the political intention of the project and its undefinability?

ROSARIO: I'd also like to maybe add to the idea of fragility, opposing the idea of forces at work, or complementing these forces. How can we nurture that fragility? We don't need to become a force, but can we keep this place as a place for fragility? We don't need to endure or become stronger in order to conform to a political landscape in Berlin, but instead say, "It's okay, we are fragile and let's see where that takes us".

STEFAN: Let us return to the first impression, that it's not a political agenda, but maybe it can become one, I'm not sure. I can recall my first impression on arriving there in May last year, and it was a contradictory set of impressions. On the one hand it felt like coming to a completely specific, unique, incredibly located new place, that corresponds to the idea of being an offshore campus as opposed to it being completely foreign. It is very specific to the space. On the other hand it is so universal — and I think that is a form of political agenda — it has a strong echo with another project that Benni and some of you have been working on, TRANS305, and what was at stake in all of the different formats the project took. Three principles emerged in TRANS305 that I deeply recognized when arriving at Floating University. First, the principle of context: a site and a situationally specific project. As opposed to a project based in an institution of some kind. Second, the deeply experimental. A project founded upon the principle of testing out something new, taking chances, working incrementally in order to produce new conditions for art and architecture; new conditions for interacting with the world and with people. The principal of freedom is fundamental in this form of experiment. And third, the principle of acting "with": with others, different from us, from our circles, with many, with difficulties, with joy, with the possibility to meet and exchange with others.

ANNA: There was always a kind of fragility in the programe that was not defined, like the breakfast moments that we had with people who were actually interested in the site and interested in a conversation with us. And at the same time there was this programme that was written on paper. It was somehow an organic moment.

DORO: But I think this was fluid because we evolved. We let ourselves evolve over time. We evolved from one open weeks to the next open weeks by embedding what we learned into the next program. While at the same time still looking for our roles within it. We had roles somewhat defined and we had titles — I was "head of programe" — but the site and the people occupying it always demanded things from you which were outside of your own prescribed role. And these demands, these needs, ended up being more important.

GILLY: We described the different actors involved though their different intensities on the site, not their hierarchy, but intensity. And that the programe intensity was not the strongest or the most important one. But the fact that it wasn't the strongest intensity allowed for a lot of freedom to happen within the programme so that "emergence" could happen and experiment with the relationship between how the programe makes the site and how the site makes the programe.

MARKUS: But I also like the term "intensity" in relation to programe. It was carefully tied to the design of the program, there was relaxed time when there were only one or two groups working on site, as opposed to the open weeks, when there was a lot of activity. In order to facilitate coincidental activities and not just a rigidly crafted programe. There was an intended interaction but much more was allowed to happen.

JOANNE: Actually something that I really like about the Floating University was that to understand what was going on, you needed to be active, curiously active, because if you weren't and if you were passive, you get nothing. There were some traces of activities that happened that you could see and question, but mostly there were not. So you have to go and talk to people to actually understand what they were doing.

ANNA: This created the exchange on site; every visitor would start by knowing nothing, figure it out slowly, maybe be told what to do and then would become an expert for the person coming after them, by giving the how-to-explanation to the person behind them in the dishwashing line, for example. There were these different moments of being active, of learning and then teaching on the same visit. You had to be curiously active at the Floating University and for me this was also political.

ROSARIO: In the same sense, other objects and non-human, non-verbal signifiers, replaced talking and asking about how things work. The rubber boots just lying around everywhere worked really well. The rubber boots didn't have any signs or explanations and people would just wear them and then jump into the water, it was self-explanatory. It required another form of being curiously active and embodying the site through your own tacit experiences.

BENNI: And when the signs started showing up every-where to try and avoid some of the repeating questions, it was an interesting moment. Connecting to Stefan's point about being "deeply experimental", for me the question is: Will we or even how can we stay deeply experimental over time? The signs that appeared after a period of having to explain and talk, they showed that we were getting tired. So the signs showed up to help describe the rules, and then rules started developing everywhere on the site. It is normal in a way but works directly against our needs to not institutionalise ourselves. So the question is: If we go on for another couple of years, will we just become another boring institution?

MARKUS: This is also a political question. Do we refer to a set of rules or do we right the Floating University operational manual which would be a total fiction or do we write an abstract text? Floating University is actually the opposite, it's the absence of a book of rules and more of an ongoing oral history. And I think, this is also raumlabor. We also have very few manuals in a way. There's a lot about trying to induce situations where one person talks to the other, and then this Chinese whisper in the course of 20-something years emerges.

DORO: Does the person that the information is trans-mitted to also have to follow the rules, and pass them on? What if the team changes and we don't have the same people transmitting protocols. I would like to see different people do the oral transmittance so that we can see the differences evolve over time, see the responsibilities evolve over time.

JOANNE: Those kinds of responsibilitis and who is feeling active, who is entitled to tell what kind of story, who is feeling involved, are very personal. There are just three aspects to an institution: to be established, to have rules and to be long-term oriented. For me the rules are there, like the rules to be free and to have no rules. For me not having rules is a rule. This is a way of function-ing. The only aspect that can be questioned really, is the aspect of time, the being long-term oriented.

BENNI: Don't we have to change the parameters of the mode of existence of the Floating University to avoid us falling into some kind of the lethargy of a permanent rhythm? What do we have to do to prevent this? Change the space or take away the rubber boots at least for a couple of months? What kind of homeopathic doze is the right one to actually make things feel different for every-one so that this situation of permanent, deep experimen-tation stay with us?

JOANNE: For me it's a really political question, and a systemic one. What are the rules that allow the largest amount of freedom to evolve? Or allow regular changes and flexibility? What is the system that allows for that?

ROSARIO: But what do those values need to be? Flexibility? Freedom? Experimentation?

JOANNE: Or fluidity? I mean, just by naming it *Floating University* you propose an idea that doesn't really exist – voilà, it's not floating and it's not a university!

CONVERSATION EDITED BY GILLY KARJEVSKY