

## **The Pirate Academy – Alive to the passions of this precious gathering**

Brandon LaBelle (May 2023)

“I must interrupt to say that ‘X’ is what exists inside me. ‘X’ – I bathe in that this. It’s unpronounceable. All I do not know is in ‘X’.” – Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva*

As we returned to presencal teaching in the fall of 2021 at the Bergen Art Academy, I felt compelled to try something different, to bring energy to inventing a new framework or way of approaching the work of teaching, one that would stimulate new forms of learning as well as to celebrate the fact of being together again. The Pirate Academy was conceptualized along these lines. From the start, its very naming was grounded in a pedagogical imaginary, suggesting a type of parallel structure or clandestine world smuggled into the institution. Launching the Pirate Academy was literally to embark on an adventure, provoking an alternative position for both teachers and students, and in terms of what learning could be. To confess, as a teacher I have always understood the framework of education as one of adventure: an adventure in doing and thinking, of engaging with topics and issues, and each other, where the grasping of knowledge forms the basis for *something more* – this *more* which I would like to designate under the term or figure of X.

X marks the pedagogical or educational scene as one of experimentation, an eXperimental undertaking that opens itself to individual, localized desires, struggles and curiosity, alongside that of worldly realities and issues. In doing so, the educational scene is embraced as that which excites the imagination, opening itself to contamination, transformation. As such, X names (without naming) a position of radical hospitality, one that invites or aims for a polylogical intrusion in which notions of critical consciousness are grounded (or let loose) by the fact of heterogeneity and the fact of embodied life. X is therefore always on the side of bodiliness and excess – this X that “exists inside me” and which Clarice Lispector further describes as what “vibrates without melody.” Such vibrational, polylogical Xing figures the educational scene as one of productive exhaustion, where thinking never stops, doing never completes itself, and ideas circulate along a course of ceaseless proliferation: a germination, a spreading, where resting or doing nothing equally contribute. As such, X also signals (as well as celebrates) the fact of not defining beforehand a final outcome (it may in fact signal a no-man’s land, a foggy site, as well as a do-not-X warding off forms of institutionalized instrumentalization). Experimentality as an educational attitude puts policy on hold, staggering curriculum with adventurous undertaking, a festivity that *funkifies* the critical (and crucial) mix that is knowledge.

Between September 2021 and November 2022 a series of eleven sessions of The Pirate Academy were organized, which moved across the themes of Party Studies, Second Culture, The Night, Common Space, Love, Dance, Conviviality, the Unfinished, Animism, Listening and Savage Thought. The sessions invited the participation of a range of guests as well,

including Kim Hankyul, Nayara Leite, Dóra Ísleifsdóttir, Sara Gebran, Karen Werner, Emilie Wright, Audrey Hurd, Marianna Dobkowska, Kristoffer Jul-Larsen, Gentian Meikleham, Adam Kraft, Anäis Florin, Mark Fell & Jan Hendrickse, Joy Forum and Eamon O’Kane, and finally Danja Burchard, Negar Tahsili, and Daniela Ramos Arias. In addition, the artist Sveinung Unneland contributed an ongoing addition by way of his Kitchen Sculpture, a mobile kitchen that became integral to nurturing a social and convivial atmosphere throughout the gatherings.



Each session of The Pirate Academy operated as an open yet focused framework onto the given topics, moving across presentational and performative formats, as well as creative exercises and group activities, not to mention just hanging out and talking. It was important to mobilize a conceptual path, a discursive-material-thinking around a set of critical-creative terms, so as to capture a range of perspectives that could encourage diverse approaches to artistic practices and ways of thinking. In this regard, a concerted effort was made to create a more horizontal environment so as to enrich the experience of learning, and to enliven a sense for creative work and methods. Within such a framework, it was important to search for moments where everyone who gathered could engage in more open forms of sharing, where views could be explored, emotions and feelings articulated, and conversations could follow a free course, unfolding by way of a process of discovering along the way.

In posing The Pirate Academy as an eXucational scene, I was additionally interested to emphasize what we understand as artistic research as a generative, polyvalent proposition in itself, making it more accessible to students across the BA and MA levels by putting it *on the move*, posing research more as a sensibility than a project or set of terms. This took shape through an *embodied positionality*, a type of dance-form in which ideas are embraced as partners, leading to a type of *dancing-with-discourse* that is less performative and more conductive in terms of setting things in motion and keeping them going. Rather than position artistic research as a statement of intent, even a concerted action or set of questions, it was instead understood as a passion, a curiosity. This may be akin to notions of gesture as posed by Giorgio Agamben, where gesture acts to subvert or withdraw from the operative force of productive work. In opposition to the directive of projects, as what puts one to work and aligns one with a quantifiable, instrumental output, as well as systems of capital accumulation (the hoarding of a certain “cultural capital” often shaping artistic activity), gesture relishes itself as pure means (which I’d further highlight as a *giving away*).

A pirate methodology or pedagogy is envisioned as one of pure means, a gestural mode shaped by festivity, the celebratory pleasure of nothing but itself and what may arise from within the educational scene. This is not to say that a pirate approach does not search for connections beyond itself, rather, through an intensification of its own gestural mode or dance it necessarily destabilizes itself; dancing-with vibrates the scene with a joyous energy that is contagious, invitational, at times despairing, turning the eXucational scene into a party in which the unexpected and the unpredictable – and the strange – are welcome. Such figures come to operate as a limit to the familiar, and within the context of pirate methodologies, acts as a horizon of celebration – that is, the strange is always already posed as a collaborator, a guide and a potential dance-partner. In fact, pirate methodologies aim for a position of estrangement and generosity, to perpetually differentiate or dispossess itself and what it understands itself to be.

This found a type of expression by organizing each session of the Pirate Academy as a research festival held over multiple evenings and structured around the particular topics. By conceiving the sessions as research festivals or parties, as sXenes of delirium as well as care, the act of gathering became the basis for understanding research as something one does not do, but rather, *undergoes*, or goes through. From listening and drinking, talking in the dark or cooking together, to moving in a space and lying on the floor, sharing thoughts and discussing issues, research-eXucation is cast along the lines of a positive-negativity, one that upsets (or *shimmers* as Anastasia A Khodyreva might say) socialization and symbolic ordering in favor of expenditure, joy, a giving, a bodying.

Here, research is understood as a poetic movement, a material or embodied undergoing that is no less involved in thinking and imagining, pulling language into itself and intervening onto or withdrawing from given regimes of discourse – a storying that goes where it must. The



research festival as a construct thus captures a sense for knowledge production as a production against itself, as a non-productive thing, a knowing too much and too little at the same time. In this sense, research is a question of the body: of bodies as material and psychic





agents, as emotional carriers, where knowing is suffused with not-knowing, with the generative and interruptive force of unconscious drives and the (erotic) commingling of the thoughts-feelings of each other. Xing the field of research is to finally bring knowledge production back in touch with the repressed, the silences that speak otherwise and that allow



for creative monsters to enter the room, these things that find their way, via artistic research, back into what counts as the work of logic and that allows for keeping close to what matters. Am I going too far? – I hope so. Going too far is precisely where artistic research may start, because it takes liberties with what counts as science, having been given the tools to run amok in the house of the master. Pirates? Absolutely.

It was important from the start that The Pirate Academy sessions act as journeys, because something happens when we gather together, and gather again the next night, and the next; something happens at festivals, at parties, a kind of durational suspension or concert unfolds, where each is invited and asked to participate fully, to carry the energy over the course of days and nights, and in doing so, to figure the event into a form of inhabitation, a way of living, a home. We live together over the course of the festival, temporally figuring (or prefiguring) a world that also requires maintenance, care, responsibility, a hanging out that is equally a hanging on. Here, The Pirate Academy conceived itself as an act of squatting: a squatting of the institution through an imaginative-material occupation of its spaces, acting as a zone of eXperimental doing – a jamming one contributes to and undergoes with – that also



squats the terms of knowledge production, an undergoing that exceeds itself precisely as a way of fulfilling what artistic research suggests, that of *funkifying* science, dubbing and overdubbing its terms and methods by way of an exhausted criticality – a poetics that never stops, that is already elsewhere, along its course of deep imagining. To pirate knowledge is to exceed production in favor of living otherwise, by way of a law of connection, a manner of

style that always finds ways of undergoing something more, Xing the forms and formats, methods and media by which work is posed and pursued.



From experimenting with party habits as the basis for prolonging the joys of an erotic togetherness, or discussing histories of squatting in the city of Bergen, to dancing as a way of rhythmizing a relation to the surrounding institution and its systems, or occupying the night as a time-space of occluded and eclipsed subjectivity, a trance-based knowing of things and ways of reading, piracy emerged as the basis for Xing education and funkifying the arts – that is, breaking the beat that puts one into certain grooves so as to prolong disobedience as the art of art.

While pirate methodologies may usurp the institutional context of education, finding traction by way of squatting the terms of dominant discourse, it does so through deepening a general ethos of care. Here, it's important to appreciate the ways in which eXperimentality entails bringing thoughtfulness to the scene; pirate pedagogy is a craft, one that remains responsive to the emergent thoughts-feelings of those involved, those who contribute much to turning the situation into a resonant form. In this regard, I want to end by acknowledging the softness, the quiet, even the hesitant as vital elements, these small gestures or inner worlds that are always present in the room, alongside the more pronounced expressions. I take pirate pedagogy as a funk-work that is always grounded and maintained through listening, by the soft-spoken and the quiet revolutions – all these things that move in and then out of the room, the research we carry with us, back into the day.

