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Alternative art education in Southeast Asia

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Exterior view of GUDSKUL, Jakarta, 2020. Courtesy Gudskul and documenta fifteen, Kassel.

From Germany's Bauhaus, which placed equal value on craft, industrial design, and fine arts, to India's Santiniketan, where an anticolonial, transnational perspective was promulgated, the radical art schools of the early 20th century catalyzed the modernist movements in today's art-history textbooks. In the postwar era, alternative pedagogical initiatives took a more informal stance by disavowing degrees altogether. These unaccredited programs include Black Mountain College, which launched in the 1930s in the United States and encouraged self-directed education and community responsibility, as well as Joseph Beuys's Free International University, an interdisciplinary forum conceived in the early 1970s for charting the future of society, through which the artist sought to counter the effects of war, violence, and disenchantment.

Whether accredited or otherwise, these pioneering education models not only redefined what and how artists learn, but continue to provoke closer inspection of art education's capacities, including in emancipatory political processes. Within the decolonizing and often fitfully democratizing contexts of Southeast Asia today, innovative approaches to education remains urgent, with a recent proliferation of initiatives posing questions around how we can unlearn inherited conceptual boundaries and models, and what it truly means to be a free thinker.

Among these latest enterprises, Gudskul was established in Jakarta in 2018 by three artist collectives, each with fluid memberships: 22-year-old ruangrupa are known for their social commentaries and for establishing varied channels for distributing contemporary art in Indonesia; young artists embarking on professional careers started Serrum (share room) in 2006; and the ten-year-old Grafis Huru Hara comprises printmakers. The collaboration between these groups

was an organic by-product of the 2015 Jakarta Biennale, for which a series of warehouses were fitted out. After the biennial's conclusion, the groups moved into the vacated space, known as the Gudang Sarinah Ekosistem, and began uncovering mutual concerns, including their dissatisfactions with formal art education. In 2018, they converted a disused indoor football field into Gudskul's campus.

"Emancipation" is likely too big a word for the founders, who instead center the informal act of *nongkrong* (hanging out) within Gudskul, which offers around two dozen non-degree-granting short courses and one-year intensive programs in subjects including curating, art history, architecture, as well as aesthetics, ethics, and politics—all examined in relation to collectivity. Course coordinators and students are themselves deemed a collective and spend time together as "study partners," developing projects ranging from communal kitchens and urban farms to more traditional exhibitions. Instead of final outputs, emphasis is placed on participation and process. In a video for documenta fifteen, which Gudskul is contributing to as part of the "lambung network" (named after the Indonesian collective rice barn), the school's general manager, Marcellina Dwi Kencana Putri, explains the curriculum's foundation: "We just really like to *nongkrong* with various different people and essentially this program is a sophisticated and designated *nongkrong*." Ruangrupa member Farid Rakun adds: "*Nongkrong* can sometimes be counterproductive and conversations happening in *nongkrong* can be time-consuming but it is necessary because it is where you build trust and empathy with your friends and partners . . . This is the essence of our projects and pedagogical methods."

As simple and innocent as hanging out sounds, in

Indonesia, it gained significance as a response to the 31-year Suharto regime when big gatherings, particularly of young people, were heavily policed, leading the youth to seek out private spaces to meet and chat. Concurrently, hanging out was a means of preserving a community-centric culture amid the alienating and disruptive dynamics of industrialization and urbanization in the late 1980s and early '90s. When Suharto stepped down in 1998, these casual group discussions continued to be an important part of the “democratization of every level of society,” in Putri’s words, and the nurturing of freedom of speech. A result was the nationwide boom of artist collectives that started in the 2000s, including the establishment of Gudskul’s three founding groups.

In its open-ended approach and egalitarian relationships between teachers and pupils, Gudskul perhaps recalls Black Mountain College, where students decided themselves when they were ready to graduate. More importantly, by placing *nongkrong* and its organic processes at its heart, Gudskul side-steps prescription, which lends itself to the perpetuation of hegemonic structures, as Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire argues in the chapter “Fear of Freedom,” in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), a seminal text in the field of critical pedagogy. Freire describes the difficulty that oppressed peoples experience in breaking from the rhetoric and modes of thinking of their oppressors, such as when, to use a personal example, protesters retaliated against verbal police brutality by calling members of the forces equally dehumanizing names during Hong Kong’s 2019 pro-democracy demonstrations. Elaborating on the impacts of prescription, he writes: “The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility . . . The central problem is this: How can the oppressed, as divided, unauthentic beings, participate in developing the pedagogy of their liberation?”

Echoing Freire’s proposal that the subjugated take the reflective and critical transformation of societal structures into their own hands, Gudskul emphasizes collaborative learning and its empowering potentials: “The collective is a model as well as a place for the exchange of knowledge,” said Rakun, who also describes this arrangement as an ecosystem where each individual is nourished and sustained by these exchanges. In this context, the thinking is, “If you do well, I will do well too,” a radical departure from the

Installation view of **GUDSKUL’s Speculative Collective**, 2019, a knowledge-exchange forum, at Sharjah Biennial 14, 2019. Courtesy Sharjah Art Foundation.



prevalent view of the world as competition for finite resources. Composed of connections, rather than discrete disciplines, the model is also necessarily responsive to internal and external factors, as is reflected in Gudskul’s projects during the pandemic, including the production of affordable food and face shields for the Jakarta community when supply chains were severed. “Art cannot be in isolation from other fields of knowledge, and artists need to take their roles in the construction of many discourses and social practices on the level of community and state,” Rakun affirms.

Prioritizing knowledge circulation over extraction, Gudskul’s approach finds echoes in the Forest Curriculum, an amorphous collective founded in 2019, whose participants are distributed across Bangkok, Yogyakarta, Manila, Seoul, Berlin, and Santa Barbara. Initiated by curator Abhijan Toto and scholar Pujita Guha, the Forest Curriculum seeks refuge outside the confines of academic disciplines, and instead creates discursive spaces for solidarity and the collective examination of unfinished, speculative ideas in itinerant workshops and lectures. To date, these inquiries have touched on topics from decolonizing built and natural environments to shamanism. A central question of their practice is: “What is it that we can all collectively do together that allows for a space of things to unfold?”

In its form and ideas, the Forest Curriculum is based heavily on Zomia, a heuristic coined by anthropologist Willem van Schendel that refers to the transnational forest belt broadly encompassing the remote highlands of Southeast Asia, and that is examined by anthropologist James C. Scott as the home to numerous minority groups and refugees evading state laws. For the Forest Curriculum, Zomia serves as an embodiment of the tensions between statehood and fugitivity, and a place of becoming, where, under the cloak of the forest, individuals create alternative identities. As such, it is an apt base for the “indisciplinary,” or that which works against the “discipline formation” of Western academia and nation-states. The notion of mutability is equally important: “Even the very nature of what would be a collective actually shape-shifts all the time, and is very much tethered to the different kinds of discussions we can have,” Toto said in a 2021 talk for the Monash University Museum of Art, explaining that collaborators are invited to throw out ideas, and depending on the focus, various respondents will join. This fluidity opens up ways to approach identity politics beyond those in the Global North, where it is often “about creating boundaries about who can speak for whom,” Toto continues. Rather, “the more important question is, how do we speak together? How do we speak with and not for or against?”

The act of speaking together, including with interlocutors within fugitive spaces of the Global North, connects Forest Curriculum as well as Gudskul with what is perhaps Freire’s most radical idea: “The oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both.” Knowledge should not be a divisive, reactionary project that reaffirms the dichotomies of colonizer and colonized, or deepens the differences between the Global North and South, but “emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.”