

Abstract

Literally translated, the Indonesian word *nongkrong* approximates “squatting by the side of the road with a cigarette” or “sitting around because you’re not doing any work”. Though it is tempting to judge such activity as a waste of time, the process of *nongkrong* (essentially, non-productive social time) actually serves a very important role in building social relationships in Indonesia. It describes the act of hanging out, of bodies leaning into space together, of social, mutual space and slow time. *Nongkrong* is the hum of relationships, an activity that through its ubiquity, especially in Java, acts as social “glue”.

Within the contemporary arts circuit in Yogyakarta, Java, an incredible proliferation of artist collectives and collaborations support the vast number of young and emerging artists. For many of Yogya’s artists, *nongkrong* is an essential aspect of how both their art practices and communities function and flourish. In the words of one such artist, “*Nongkrong* is our school”. Its looseness allows for an open and generous exchange of ideas and information, a casual knowledge-sharing that many artists claim is more influential on their development than their educations in school. Rather than focusing on end-product productivity, *nongkrong* offers a holistic view of art as a long-term social process.

Taking the Indonesian concept of *nongkrong* as its pivot point, this paper extends the idea outwards from its specific locality to think through the importance of such non-productive social time in the broader contemporary arts. I draw on the work of a number of scholars and theorists, most particularly Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, who conceptualise “study” as an informal social process and collective intellectual practice. I contend that the casual hanging out entailed in *nongkrong* supports collaboration and defines what is at once a representative thread of contemporaneity in art worldwide at this historical moment, and a peculiarly and vibrantly Indonesian form of collective practice.

Nongkrong and Non-Productive Time in Yogyakarta's Contemporary Arts

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Introduction: The What/Why/How of Nongkrong

“Nongkrong is an existential process.”¹

This statement, delivered both playfully and seriously by an acquaintance of mine in Yogyakarta’s art scene, has become something of a beacon in navigating and understanding the social process of *nongkrong*.² At surface level *nongkrong*—an Indonesian term meaning, essentially, “hanging out”—seems an unlikely activity to spark philosophical mining of the depths of human existence. I’ve been told that in literal translation the word *nongkrong* approximates “squatting by the side of the road with a cigarette” or “sitting around because you’re not doing any work”. In this unexpected equation of existential philosophy and hanging out, intellect appears easily embodied, almost shrugged on. In such a situation, questions about the unfathomable nature of being itself could arise slowly, mysteriously, and hover in the mind for the duration of a cigarette, maybe two, then dissipate like smoke. As my friend went on to explain, if you are feeling deeply and existentially alone, you can always *nongkrong* with friends to lift your spirits.

For many of Yogyakarta’s artists, *nongkrong* is an essential aspect of how both their art practices and communities function and flourish. In the city’s many art spaces groups of friends cluster amoeba-like, around overflowing ashtrays, coffee cups, and plates of fried snacks. They sit, lean, or lounge at various angles, getting up to wander about and return in a fluid orbit. Yogyakarta’s inexpensive rents and relaxed pace of life make such collectivism possible on a practical level, and distinguishes its

contemporary arts scene from those of other prominent centres for the arts in Indonesia, such as Bandung and Jakarta. Known as “the city of students”, Yogyakarta is both a nucleus for creative and intellectual pursuits and a syncretic hub for a hybrid mix of traditional Javanese culture and contemporary popular culture. Yet for all its diversity, Yogyakarta upholds its reputation as Java’s quintessential “slow city”.

Coming, as I do, from an American context, I am trained to speak about time in market terms. “Time is Money”, as we say, something that can be spent or wasted, but above all should be productive. This hyper-capitalist valuation of time muddles an understanding of how *nongkrong* functions. At surface level this constant hanging around may appear incredibly unproductive. However, I have come to understand that *nongkrong* as it is practised among Yogyakarta’s artists, intellectuals and activists is actually a profoundly productive and creative practice that functions without overt regard to the capitalist model. Thus, I have come to think of it as more akin to “*non*-productive time”—neither overtly goal-driven, nor unproductive in the capitalist sense. Rather than focusing on end-product productivity, *nongkrong* offers a holistic view of art as a long-term social process. It is a site of *potential* action, a social space that is all about the pleasures of sharing time with friends.

Through many *nongkrong* sessions with Yogyakarta’s artists, curators, gallerists, intellectuals and researchers, I have come to recognise that what marks the city’s distinctive personality within Indonesia’s contemporary arts is exactly this emphasis on the relational and intersub-

1. From an informal conversation with Idaman Andarmosoko at IVAA (Indonesian Visual Arts Archive) in March 2014.

2. Yogyakarta is a city located in Central Java. The name is pronounced and spelled in its more informal form as Jogjakarta. Also referred to most frequently in short form as Yogya or Jogja.

3. From an informal conversation with Gintani Nur Apresia Swastika at Acehouse Collective in March 2014.

jective sociality at the heart of artists' practices there. The social phenomenon of hanging out without the explicit aim of being productive in any particular fashion supports collaboration in Yogya and exemplifies what is, I believe, at once a representative thread of contemporaneity in art worldwide at this historical moment, and a specifically Indonesian form of collective practice. This paper explores various aspects of the lived and philosophical experiences of *nongkrong* and also extends it conceptually outwards from its specific locality to think through the importance of such non-productive social time in the broader worldwide contemporary arts and cultures.

A Temporary Landing Place

In terms of etymology, the word *nongkrong* itself has multiple meanings and functions. It is related to a body position (squatting), a social act (hanging out with a group of people), and a particularly transient relationship to time. The term *angkring*, like *nongkrong*, also correlates with a body position—that of a seated person with one leg drawn up on the bench and an arm slung over their bent knee. *Angkring* itself means “a temporary landing place”, like birds on a wire who alight for a while, then move on again. This is the root word for *angkringan*, the ubiquitous mobile food and coffee vendors who roll their carts out every morning and evening across Yogyakarta, find a good spot to set up then unfold the tarpaulin roofs, set out benches and fire up their gas-powered stove on which water for coffee and tea are boiled. These temporary landing places themselves then play host to any number of clients throughout the day and night who wish to come, take a spot on the bench, have a snack, some coffee, and chat with whoever happens to be there. While today there are also cafes and malls and convenience stores that all play host to friends in need of a hangout, the *angkringan* are the historically favoured *tongkrongan* (locations for *nongkrong*). They continue to proliferate in Yogyakarta as they are simultaneously being forced out of style in other major cities such as Jakarta, where the government's

“normalisation” programme has declared *angkringan* and other street-side vending to be interruptions to the city's constantly thwarted attempts at streamlining and modernising.

In early 2014, the recently minted artist collective Acehouse launched the opening of its new headquarters with a huge party. At the opening, several of its members admitted to me that while they obtained the building so that they could host exhibits and other projects, the primary reasoning to rent a house lay in their desire to have a more permanent space for all-hours *nongkrong*. A number of practitioners in Yogya have explained to me that in order to become a “serious” collective, a group of friends must obtain a house to headquarter in. But in the case of Acehouse, something sentimental was sacrificed in this move. One of their members, Gintani, told me the story of their origins. Like so many other collective efforts, Acehouse began as a group of friends who regularly spent time hanging out together. Every afternoon whoever was free would gather at the *angkringan* set up purposely in front of the home of one of their primary members. They would drink sweet coffee, eat some fried snacks or *nasi kucing*, and chat about the current goings-on in the art scene. Every afternoon they would spend at least a couple of hours engaged in these *nongkrong* sessions, then break for their afternoon showers and re-congregate at whatever openings or events were happening that evening. The next day, while engaged in *nongkrong*, they would share their impressions of the previous evening's events. In this way they gradually decided to make a collaboration themselves, planning it out casually during their hangout sessions at the *angkringan*. After they had made a name for themselves, and their collaborative project, *Realis Tekno Museum* (itself basically an ode to hanging out) had made an appearance in the 2013 Jakarta Biennale, they decided it was time to “get serious” and rent a house. Gintani recalled their *angkringan* days wistfully and with some regret that their new space meant an abandonment of their favorite *angkringan* guy, who was now forced to seek out a new location and new clientele.³

Both nongkrong and angkring offer relationships to time typified by such spontaneous, open-ended, temporary encounters as those enjoyed by Acehouse at both their current *tongkrongan*/headquarters and at their old favourite angkringan. These kinds of encounters glue the Yogyakarta art scene together in many fundamental ways. They allow for the exchange of both conversations and those interactions that are more subtle, based upon energy and feeling between people. In artist nongkrongs especially, this indescribable essence of the hangout is also a locus of potential creative energy from which ideas and projects may—or may not—flow.

A Gift Economy of Time

In the Indonesian language there is a term used for spending time that serves as an analogy for this. *Makan waktu* literally translates as “eating time”. Extending the metaphor, if we are eating time with a large group of friends this creates a feast situation. To feast on time offers a pleasurable foil to the ever-concerning notion of wasting time or being unproductive. A feast situation feeds and sustains, nourishes and relaxes. Similar to caloric intake, a feast of time can provide very life-sustaining energy for the work yet to be done. It is time that functions through generosity and affection.

In his visionary book, *The Gift*, Lewis Hyde maintains that art, as an agent of transformation, operates within a gift economy. He describes such economy in this way: “Unlike the sale of a commodity, the giving of a gift tends to establish a relationship between the

parties involved. When gifts circulate within a group, their commerce leaves a series of interconnected relationships in its wake, and a kind of decentralized cohesiveness emerges.”⁴ Hyde’s emphasis on generosity in the making and circulation of art places creative work in an economy based upon relationships and non-market exchange. Essentially, he equates creativity with generosity. If we are to follow this train of thought, then the *ways* in which art is made and creative relationships are sustained must ideally support and derive from such generosity. Hyde cautions that if we nonetheless allow our ideas and the relationships that foster them to operate as commodities, this establishes a boundary, “so that the idea cannot move from person to person without a toll or fee.”⁵ The gift essence must be kept in motion, kept alive and shared in order to avoid such a fate.

Within Yogyakarta’s contemporary arts a parallel tension exists between economies of time based upon personal professionalisation and collaboration. In a 2015 round-table discussion about their international research project Made in Commons, members of KUNCI Cultural Studies Collective met with members of several other Indonesian and European collectives. During the conversation KUNCI’s members spoke at length about the process of creating and sustaining their collective and the role of interdependence and democratic sharing of tasks therein. Syafiatudina (Dina) addressed both the importance of such inter-reliance and ways in which she perceives such social dynamics are shifting in Yogya:

One of the changes in the arts and cultural landscape in Yogya is that it

4. Hyde, Lewis. *The Gift: Creativity and the artist in the modern world*. New York, NY: Vintage, 1979. p. xx.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

6. Syafiatudina, as quoted in “KUNCI. Toilet tissue and other formless organization matters”. *Open engagement in conversation: Place and revolution*. See <http://openengagement.info/tag/kunci/> (Accessed 2015-08-06.)

7. From an interview with Syafiatudina at Kedai Kebun Forum, 3 March 2014.

8. From an informal conversation with Bayu Widodo at Survive Garage, February 2014.

9. Juliastuti, Nuraini, “After the house has gone”. In Agung Nugroho Widhi (ed.) *Stories of a space*. Yogyakarta: Indo Art Now. 2015. pp. 260-272.

is becoming more and more professionalised and the professionalism can overturn friendship, it is becoming more competitive... This kind of competition can make you feel quite excluded or lonely, so [I keep thinking] who is my ally and who can I work with? The nature of friendship is also changing amongst most cultural practitioners in Yogya, so for me to have more KUNCI members is to have more allies... a working network.⁶

In conversation with me in 2014, Dina described some of the challenges KUNCI had been facing as its members were travelling for research, study, and residency programmes more frequently. She missed the old days when they always used to hang out together in their collective house, working and talking and sharing space. According to Dina, nongkrong is an important process through which both trust and affection are built among a group of people. By hanging out together people can get a feel for each other and how they relate both socially and professionally.⁷

Bayu Widodo, founder of Survive Garage, Yogya's alternative art space focused specifically on supporting young and emerging artists, expressed similar concerns to me about the effect of boom times in the art market. He told me he worries that when the art market is strong, or there is too much focus on selling artwork (as he feels there is now), that the variety and quality of artists' work will suffer as well. People try only to make work that is trendy or sellable.

Responding to such concerns, Bayu created a system of expectations for the young artists who show there, including regular conversations in the form of nongkrong through which they learn to talk about their work, their ideas, and the reasons they choose to do what they do in their projects. These nongkrong sessions set up a mentorship relationship, a web of support. Accordingly, many people drop in to chat at Survive Garage, so Bayu's schedule is filled with a lot of spontaneous nongkrong. When

people stop by to hang out he feels obliged to drop what he's doing and spend the time with them, describing this as a role of hospitality and something he finds pleasurable in spite of the interruptions to his own work.⁸ Such spirit of generosity with personal time is indeed one of the most compelling and pervasive characteristics that ties together Yogya's sprawling arts communities.

On Being Alternative

The particularly *non*-productive time that characterises artist nongkrongs in Yogya also distinguishes them from the ultra-productive, CV-loading and so-called "professionalised" track that highly capitalist systems encourage from artists. Of course, this does not mean the two are mutually exclusive, as Dina's testimony shows. It is tempting nonetheless to understand nongkrong as an alternative site for shared creative practice functioning outside such received notions of productivity and capitalist time. However, I feel that this idea needs complicating.

The question of what constitutes *alternative* is a hot topic in Yogya these days as artists become more and more self-aware of how their natural proclivity towards nongkrong and togetherness bears a relationship with larger trends in the contemporary arts dealing with relationality and social practices. Nuraini Juliastuti, another core member of KUNCI, notes that alternative spaces played a significant and special role in the development of art during *Reformasi*, the period of national democracy-building following Suharto's fall from power in 1998. During the late 1990s and early 2000s artists banded together into groups, creating alternatives to the formerly repressive system and opening up the possibilities of cultural production in unprecedented ways.⁹ This included much socially engaged and politically charged work. On some levels, one might characterise this burst of artistic togetherness as a contemporary and politicised inheritance from the long history of collectivism in the arts, pre-Suharto.

Historically, young aspiring artists would often join a *sanggar*, a common workshop headed by a master who served as mentor. Together they would develop the skills of their particular art form, support each other, and form a tightly bonded creative community. During Suharto's rule, many of these *sanggar* and other arts organisations were targeted as subversive, labelled as communist and essentially forced (often by violent means) to disband. So there is a historic precedent to understanding today's proliferation of art collectives and artist-run spaces in Yogyakarta as belonging to this lineage, at least in part.

In spite of Yogyakarta's continually growing ranks of artist-run initiatives, the globalised pressures of individualism, material gain and professionalism don't skirt their contemporary arts scene. The global commercialised art market and biennale circuit both churn along hungrily, with notably increasing appetite for South East Asian contemporary art. The 2008 art boom has gone down in lore as the time when huge quantities of young Indonesian artists, even those not yet graduated from art school, were being sought out and their art bought up by collectors looking for new investments. This boom left marked imprints on Yogyakarta's artists and has in many cases rearranged their Reformasi-era grittiness and experimentalism towards a more commercial outlook. Farah Wardani, a long-time Yogyakarta curator and director of the Indonesian Visual Arts Archive, has referred to the gross overpricing and selling of Indonesian art since the boom as "scary".¹⁰ Nuraini Juliastuti has also commented on the increasing focus of producing sellable work among

Yogyakarta's artists. She particularly questions the meaning of the oft-used descriptor "alternative space" in Yogyakarta, when so many members of art collectives are being drawn into profit-making motives and the advancement of their individual careers.¹¹ Now, her colleague Brigitta Isabella says a bit wryly, "The word 'alternative' might have been overused and reproduced... giving the impression of heroism and romanticism, but it also gives the impression of being obsolete because there have not been enough efforts to actually be 'alternative'."¹²

Given all these odds, I wonder if alternative constitutes more of a state of mind or ideology than a thing that is consistently and recognisably put into practice? I have observed again and again how Yogyakarta's collectives and artist-run spaces appear to operate in a similarly nebulous and nongkrong-fuelled manner with artists managing to simultaneously pursue both their individual and collaborative projects while still maintaining some semblance of collective identity for the group. Though I also recognise that this is sometimes a surface illusion of harmony disguising the degrees of subtle tensions that inevitably animate group dynamics, clearly Yogyakarta's artists value and *need* their togetherness. While many artists are indeed actively cultivating their own commercial success, they claim their requisite nongkrong sessions with friends are still the "soul" that animates their practices. Rather than cultivating separateness within their individual gains, many artists make an effort to maintain their connectivity through nongkrong and the collaborative projects and discussions that grow from it.

10. Wardani, Farah, as quoted in Vatikiotis, Michael. "Riding Indonesia's Art Boom". *Griffith Review*. n.d. See <https://griffithreview.com/articles/riding-indonesias-art-boom/> (Accessed 2016-07-13.)

11. Nuraini, op.cit.

12. Isabella, Brigitta. "Stories of a Space and Those Who Live in It". In *Stories of a space*, op.cit., pp. 240-259.

13. Wardani, Farah, as quoted in Vatikiotis, op. cit.

14. From an informal conversation with Farah Wardani at Indonesian Visual Art Archive, 24 September 2013.

15. For more information see: <http://kunci.or.id/tag/made-in-commons/> (Accessed 2016-12-07.)

Nongkrong and Theory

Suharto's fall from power and the ensuing "opening up" of Indonesia's markets, media and bookshelves to once-dangerous ideas and influences undoubtedly also contributed to a greater influx of art theory from beyond the borders. Farah Wardani observes that "What Reformasi actually gave Indonesians was access to intellectual thinking."¹³ After years of taking their politically charged nongkrong sessions off-campus to the *angkringan* for fear of repercussions, university students and artists alike could now fuel their nongkrong dialogues with theories and ideas formerly inaccessible. In spite of this energetic phase, many cultural producers and curators such as Wardani still feel that on a systemic level, Indonesia's art education is "behind" and needs to offer more critical theory.¹⁴ Others I have spoken with, however, feel theory is not, and never has been a significant aspect of how art is made in Indonesia, and are suspicious of its often Western origins. In spite of varying opinions, I observed in 2012-2014 how often titles such as Claire Bishop's *Artificial Hells*, and Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* were circulating in conversations. Artists in Yogyakarta are clearly curious about their own tendencies towards participatory and collaborative practices, about what theorists have to say about these things, and use nongkrong to create their own frameworks in which to explore topics not offered in their art school curriculum.

It is my personal observation that as socially engaged art becomes increasingly institutionalised and recognised in the United States, for example, the artists practising it are increasingly self-aware and armed with a variety of radically-minded theories to explain their work. It's interesting to note some of the similar ways in which Yogyakarta artists are also beginning to "institutionalise" their own tendencies towards social engagement. There are increasing numbers of discussions, exhibitions and projects aimed at pursuing questions about collectivity in Yogyakarta. KUNCI Cultural Studies Collective is spearheading much of this dialogue through programmes

such as their ongoing international collaboration, *Made in Commons*, a forum for exploring the concept and practice of commons across cultures.¹⁵ One very clear characteristic that continues to distinguish the collectivism in Yogyakarta from other centres for the arts is its nongkrong fuelled relationship to time. All socially based projects, whether it be the creation of an art collective or a participatory project launched by artists within a given local community, *must* revolve around the time for non-productive, non-goal-oriented nongkrong. It is the most important and effective means for building and sustaining trust.

Interestingly, I perceive that for many non-Indonesian socially engaged artists, there is a desire for such connective and relaxed social time. This spawns the curious situation of experiments with fabricated zones of nongkrong: a sleepover in a gallery, a tea party in a foyer, a pop-up reading room and discussion space, dinner cooked and served in a museum. All of this activity is also being buoyed by an increasingly lengthy reading list of books, articles, and theoretical terminology attempting to wrangle this sprawling discipline into something understandable.

Nicolas Bourriaud, the French curator most known for coining the terms "relational aesthetics" and "Altermodern", was invited to present his work in a lecture for the 2015 Jogja Biennale Forum. This invitation sparked curiosity among local artists and researchers wondering what the theorist might have to say about the already quite relational art scene in Yogyakarta. During the panel discussion following his lecture, Antariksa of KUNCI pressed Bourriaud for his assertion that "new language" is being developed for relationality in the world, signalling a new age in art based upon translation and dialogue across cultures—what he has termed the *Altermodern*. "I'm a little bit concerned that this penetration of 'new' Western political, philosophical or theoretical ideas is a new kind of colonisation. For example, this idea of the relational—it's already a part of our [Indonesian] lives, but it's being theorised or perhaps even over-theorised because of work such as yours. We, in Asia, are looking at ourselves through

your theory.”¹⁶ Alia Swastika, director and curator of Ark Galeri, also pressed Bourriaud to consider more deeply the political ripples of how such theory moves through the world, and its affects outside of its intended centre.¹⁷

It is important to consider these questions deeply, as they point to some of the potentially problematic side effects of theorising the relational. Theory does have the ability to contextualise and empower contemporary actions, but equally bears the potential of stiffening and institutionalising social relationships. And, as Swastika pointed out, it is necessary to question contexts, especially when uneven dynamics of power, access and representation might be in play.

In Yogyakarta’s particular context, the nongkrong-as-creative-practice lifestyle adopted by many of the city’s cultural producers is one of the linchpins in understanding how collaboration and collective practice functions *outside* the overarching umbrella of Western theories and academically defined boundaries. The kinship that binds Yogyakarta’s groups together borders on the familial, which makes for deep commitment, often complicated organisational processes, and a slipperiness that evades formalisation or clear identification.

The School of Nongkrong

In Yogyakarta, such long-term relationships form a system of mutual support for the city’s artists that, while informal, clearly affect the circulation of ideas within the larger community. As people move around between different art spaces and cafes, hanging out and discussing

current exhibits and projects, the network of collective investment in the larger community grows. The temporariness and circulation of all these nongkrongs helps facilitate such relationship building, providing an elastic space for creative thought. Elia Nurvita, a Yogya artist whose work centres around the sharing of food, told me with enthusiasm: “Nongkrong is our school!” As she explained it to me, nongkrong’s looseness allows for an open and generous exchange of ideas and information, a casual knowledge-share that many artists, herself included, claim is more influential on their development than their education in actual schools. In her words, “Nongkrong is a place where we can learn from our friends. You can get lots of information from your friends, especially those who study and work with different ideas and topics than you. Friends share ideas and information in a more open way than schools allow.”¹⁸ Nongkrong, as an ever-fluctuating, organic time and space for informal modes of study, provides room for learning based upon casual conversations and group dynamics.

Social theorists Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, themselves long-term collaborators in the United States, have put forth related conceptualisations of the term and action of “study”. They are committed to the idea that study is, at heart, a social process; it is something you do with other people. Moten explains it like this:

It’s talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice. The notion

16. Antarkisa in conversation with Nicolas Bourriaud during the panel discussion of his public lecture at Jogja Biennale Forum, Taman Budaya Yogyakarta, 17 November 2015.

17. Swastika, *ibid.*

18. From an informal conversation with Elia Nurvita at Kedai Kebun Forum, March 2014.

19. Harney, Stefano and Moten, Fred, *The Undercommons: Fugitive planning & black study*. New York NY: Minor Compositions. 2013. p. 110.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

21. Swastika, Alia. “The Growth of an Art Scene”. *Pipeline: Nurture*. No. 45. 2014. pp. 22-39.

of a rehearsal—being in a kind of workshop, playing in a band, in a jam session, or old men sitting on a porch, or people working together in a factory—there are these various modes of activity. The point of calling it “study” is to mark that the incessant and irreversible intellectuality of these activities is already present... To do these things is to be involved in a kind of common intellectual practice.¹⁹

This conceptualisation of study as social activity speaks in prescient ways to nongkrong’s significance for collective art making in Yogya. Nongkrong is exactly the sort of action Moten and Harney are talking about. It is the hum of relationships and action-in-formation. Indeed, at the core of their equation of study with social interactions is the conviction that collectively shared space of any kind is a situation in which action occurs. Or, put differently: non-productive action carries the seed of action or thought that is actually profoundly productive. Extending this to the process of collaboration more generally, Harney muses:

What’s interesting to me is that the conversations themselves can be discarded, forgotten, but there’s something that goes beyond the conversations which turns out to be the actual project... it’s not the thing that you do; it’s the thing that happens when you’re doing it that becomes important, and the work itself is some combination of the two modes of being.²⁰

In artistic work as well as more academically framed processes of study, it is common practice to approach projects from a standpoint of striving, a drive to “make something happen”. This is a goal-oriented or hypothesis-driven process, regardless how intuitively it may occur. The aim is to ultimately make something—a final output of some sort, be it a work of art or a research paper. This mindset confuses an understanding of how nongkrong or the other casual social processes of “study” that Harney and Moten have proposed function, instead reinforcing the binary

valuation of productive versus unproductive activity. Informal social practices like nongkrong actually behave more fluidly. They meander, transform, dead-end, get lost and re-found through an often untraceable and spontaneous cartography. This time for unfocused exploration is actually one of the key ways in which a great number of Yogya’s artist groups “get things done” together. If there is no nongkrong, I’m told, there is essentially no collaboration.

Alia Swastika acknowledges that the open system of Yogya’s art scene enables a non-hierarchical space in which easy personal relationships between bureaucrats, artists, curators, collectors, and artisans are fostered. While she admits her desire that Yogya create its own more formal structure or system, she also testifies to how the looseness of her own education benefited her:

In our art system, where many of us complain about the quality of education in the country, providing a space of informal and free learning is second nature for many established artists and activists. There is always a need for them to encounter, and to be mentors for, a younger generation of artists. I am myself a product of this kind of informal learning. Most of my knowledge was gathered from discussions with senior curators, senior artists and other art practitioners.²¹

The knowledge produced in such informal channels of study is myriad and sometimes difficult to either qualify or quantify. And nongkrong itself doesn’t always produce something recognisable, something that bears witness to the common intellectual practice Moten and Harney point to. In her thinking through alternativity in Yogya’s arts, Nuraini Juliastuti also questions what knowledge actually is, and how it is created. According to her, “Knowledge has no fixed meaning. It is related to our memory and our vision. It is a kind of capital and a tool of cultural exchange. It puts one in a situation where ‘to read and to be read’ is in a continuum and creates possibilities of creating

new maps of production and distribution.”²² I think this idea of reading and being read serves as an apt metaphor for how nongkrong, at its best, allows artists to interact and share their own expertise and experiences outside of more formal structures such as school and the commercial art market. Harking back to Moten and Harney, a good nongkrong can be conceptualised as minds at work while bodies are at ease.

When Nongkrong Fails

Of course, there are politics of inclusion and exclusion in any social group—an in-crowd and its peripheries. For all that I have been arguing thus far to conceptualise nongkrong as a model practice for non-hierarchical, non-productive creative and intellectual time, in actual practice it naturally has imperfections. At Kedai Kebun Forum, a cafe and arts space and one of the favoured artist nongkrong spots, there is a huge mural depicting caricatures of a great number of Yogya’s well-known artists and musicians. I have overheard a couple of people whose faces are not featured on the mural expressing a feeling of being “left out” or not being “in enough”. A few collectives in Yogya also do not mix because their ideologies don’t match and the members have developed a quiet rivalry.

Yogyakarta’s artist nongkrongs often suffer from a noticeable gender imbalance as well. Historically a male activity due to the differing zones of sociality between men and women—men generally having greater access to and presence in the public sphere—nongkrong in the arts scene still often excludes women as equal

players. A number of Yogya’s groups have long operated as “boys’ clubs” with generally all-male membership. Artists operating spaces outside of the centralised and popularised arts neighbourhood just south of the Sultan’s palace sometimes express such comments as “It’s just exhausting” regarding the goings on at the collectives in the centre. While the in-crowds always seem to welcome a great diversity of visitors for their openings and events, I have the impression that their nongkrong circles are sometimes rather clearly defined. Not everyone always feels welcome to nongkrong at every place, or even inclined to join. There are certainly different personalities to each nongkrong-hosting group or space. Far from the “ideal type” of collective practice that it might otherwise appear to be, nongkrong in practice is, like any microcosm of a larger cultural or social habitus, fraught with the forms of inequality that pervade its social life. Nongkrong is, after all, a living organism, subject to both internal and external stresses.

Sometimes external factors such as architecture even cause a collapse of healthy nongkrong. As an example of this, MES 56, Yogya’s well-established and respected contemporary photography collective, was suffering a crisis of sorts during my first research period in 2012–2014. The issue was that their building at the time did not support good nongkrong. The former house they had shared for many years with KUNCI was universally remembered as a beloved and ideal nongkrong spot. It was an older Javanese house, which opened first into a large public room—used then as gallery and project space—and became increasingly more intimate as one progressed through the house. At

22. Nuraini, *op. cit.*, p. 268.

23. As described to me during interview with Syafiatudina at Kedai Kebun Forum, 3 March 2014.

24. Hyde, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

25. Crosby, Alexandra. *Festivals in Java: Localising cultural activism and environmental politics, 2005–2010*. PhD in International Studies. Sydney: University of Technology, 2013.

the back was an open courtyard where people were constantly gathering, hanging out, chatting, taking smoke breaks, and partying nearly every night. Several rooms branched off this central courtyard, which allowed for a freedom of movement and choice in how people interacted with both the space and the social gatherings. Someone could retreat into one of the rooms to get some work done, but leave the door open so as to remain connected to the conversations and activity outside.²³

Their house in 2012-2014 was a rather severe two-storyed rectangle, with the gallery space on the ground floor and the social space on the first floor. Because of this fragmentation and the closed-in feeling, MES's younger members said nongkrong in that space felt obligatory, it didn't allow for fluidity in how people interacted with each other and the space. The architecture was, in effect, killing the nongkrong. And this was ultimately harming the cohesiveness of the organisation. It is interesting to consider that a practice so based upon temporary encounters and non-permanence, nonetheless does require a kind of permanence or groundedness in the built environment; it requires space that will reliably accommodate flow.

So, when nongkrong "fails", how can it be repaired, and what are the larger ramifications? For those non-Indonesian social practice artists trying to remedy their perceived lack of hangout culture, it may also be relevant to ask whether it is actually possible to *create* nongkrong where it never existed. Is it a thing that can be consciously "made"?

Conclusion: The Privilege of Participation

While at root a relatively simple human interaction free of the theoretical baggage that attends larger discussions about contemporary art, nongkrong can indeed be an ideal playground for social experimentation. Its flexibility and informality produce networks of interactions that scheduled, formalised

social time don't tend to accommodate. But in my study of it, I am occasionally nagged by the self-defeating question of whether it is also possible to "kill" nongkrong by over-analysing it. As a student of nongkrong I do take this question seriously. I can't help but recall Lewis Hyde's caution that "the gift is lost in self-consciousness. To count, measure, reckon value, or seek the cause of a thing is to step outside the circle, to cease being 'all of a piece' with the flow of gifts and become, instead, one part of the whole reflecting upon another part."²⁴

Alexandra Crosby, an Australian researcher whose thesis focused on cultural and environmental activism in Java in the period 2005-2010, has also acknowledged that nongkrong is a sensitive organism. But she points out that nongkrong *can* be learnt, and in fact, for foreigners such as ourselves, *must* be learned in order to assimilate well into creative Indonesian communities.

*For a non-Indonesian researching these activist circles, participating in this kind of communication, and particularly the kind of listening it involves, is essential for understanding group dynamics in a way that may not emerge in one-on-one interviews. A methodology that builds on nongkrong is one that acknowledges the kind of collective thinking that occurs in such spaces.*²⁵

My own welcome into so many of Yogya's creative nongkrong circles is likewise a privilege to which I owe a debt of gratitude. It is through nongkrong that I have learnt to listen in new ways, making me receptive to forms of embodied social wisdom that might otherwise have been obscured to me. And, as I have tried to show, to understand the workings of creative practice in Yogyakarta specifically, requires a recognition of collaborative process as a living manifestation of artists' relationships to each other. At their best, art nongkrongs are the social group equivalent of a *pamong*, a mentor figure or facilitator, one who creates room for you to select your tools and then figure out how to use them.