

# Exhibition as School, School as Exhibition

## Modes of Display and Reception of Educational Platforms Initiated by Artists, Curators and Collectives in Art Institutions

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### Introduction

The last twenty years have witnessed the proliferation of educational platforms initiated by contemporary artists and curators. The growing inclusion of knowledge-based practices, alongside the typical object-making and display activity associated with these professions, has been part of a gradual shift that has to some extent modified the idea of the role of artists and cultural practitioners in the wider cultural and social fields. Pedagogy, in particular, has in many instances become a specific feature of artistic and curatorial practice, especially for what concerns socially engaged initiatives, being dedicated not only to the production of objects and discourses, but also the creation of a sense of mutual understanding, belonging and community with their publics.<sup>[1]</sup>

Such growing attention from the art sphere towards other forms of knowledge production and new institutions of learning many of which have been looking at experiments in radical pedagogy can be traced back to a moment at which the term “educational turn” started to circulate in the cultural field. This was the case in the year 2006, when the transnational project “ACADEMY” took place, and when the 6th edition of Manifesta, the European nomadic biennial, whose programme of activities was conceived as a temporary school for the city of Nicosia, Cyprus, was cancelled.<sup>[2]</sup>

Theorised by several scholars and cultural practitioners, such as Irit Rogoff (2008), as well as Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson (2010), the educational turn describes a trend in contemporary art that has seen the appearance of different educational forms and structures, methods and programmes in curatorial and artistic practices. The initiatives related to it generally revolve around the notion of education, artistic and curatorial research, acquisition, production, and dissemination of knowledge. The emphasis is not on the work of art as an object but

on its process and the use of pedagogical methods and discursive techniques within and outside exhibition contexts.

Influenced by this “turn” but influencing it too, especially in its initial conceptualisation<sup>[3]</sup> artists and curators have progressively become involved in “projects that appropriate the tropes of education as both a method and a form”, starting to create their own educational platforms, consisting, for example, of reading groups, night schools, residencies, research centres, public learning spaces, miniature art schools and salons.<sup>[4]</sup> From an art historical perspective, such a constellation of initiatives in contemporary art can be considered an extension of relational practices that characterised the 1990s, especially in attempts to provide conviviality with content as a strategy to intervene in the social sphere in a concrete manner, emphasising the dematerialisation and post-medium condition of art in reshaping shared experiences and encounters.

In addition, the turn to educational formats can be described as a response to the changing relationship between art and the academy, which resulted in the progressive transformation of art educational institutions as central nodes in the art market. Due to the growing influence of neoliberal policies on the traditional education system, art schools and universities have in the last two decades experienced a major shift from experimentation towards bureaucratisation and standardisation of knowledge-based production of which the Bologna Process, launched in 1999, has represented one of the most critical examples because of its aim to unify university programmes and evaluative measures across the European Union.

Indeed, higher education has undergone a process of change driven by commercial logics that respond to the interests of private capital, applying normative standards of evaluation, which restrain the autonomous space of each individual university or academy, making their programmes comparable, “benchmarked” and structured according to the interests of big corporate employers.<sup>[5]</sup> All of this has resulted in an approach that trains students towards finding a place in the job market, preventing them from developing a certain kind of critical thinking. Even the arts and humanities departments, which are the areas where a certain degree of freedom can still be performed to embrace radical thinking in teaching and learning process, suffer from this situation. Such widespread conditions point at the great difficulty that universities and academies face in organising democratic and civil space, as highlighted by sociologist Pascal Gielen.<sup>[6]</sup>

Prompted largely by these dynamics, the educational turn offered “a critique of the idea of education as one-directional knowledge transfer and training, and the framing of education as a commercialised industry, reduced to the utilitarianism of training for working life.”<sup>[7]</sup> In many cases, the experiments in alternative education that can be traced back to this conceptual framework result from a self-organising impulse and a critical engagement from within, conceived as an endeavour to challenge pre-existing modes of knowledge production and dissemination and create practical and viable alternatives.<sup>[8]</sup> Nevertheless, some educational platforms have also opted to be absorbed and enacted within institutional contexts, being included in the programming of established host institutions, such as museums, cultural institutions or biennials.

In this regard, much critique arose around the co-optation and instrumentalisation of these “alternative” modalities of artistic and curatorial endeavours linked to these experiments in non-academic knowledge production. Referencing the expansion of the “educational turn”, curator and cultural researcher Marion von Osten suggested that “we must be somewhat skeptical with regard to the ‘educational turn’ [...] in terms of [...] displacing the real questions of knowledge economies and cognitive capitalism.”<sup>[9]</sup> On another note, art mediator and curator Nora Sternfeld pointed out that, while this turn in education can be recognised as an attempt to widen the horizons of artistic production and curating, increasingly conceived as expanded practices, it may also

overshadow the unglamorous task of the educational in art institutions, which proceeds in quieter and non-spectacular forms.<sup>[10]</sup>

Other authors, such as Sven Lütticken and Suhail Malik, problematise the role and proximity of arts institutions in relation to alternative arts education.<sup>[11]</sup> Some focus instead on the paradoxes of the educational turn identified as the romanticisation of historical models of arts education, such as Dieter Lesage referencing “the Black Mountain College Syndrome”.<sup>[12]</sup> In addition, a stream of contributors to the debate highlighted the problems inherent to the aestheticisation of education and the academicisation of contemporary art.<sup>[13]</sup> Taking into consideration this ongoing debate and the intrinsic tensions related to expanded learning initiatives, this present contribution aims to examine the modes of reception and display of these kinds of projects in artistic and cultural institutional settings. Three case studies of educational platforms are presented here with the aim of understanding the underlying goals of the host institutions as well as the guest projects, and the means and diverse strategies that have been put into action for their exhibition. The case studies considered are Clémentine Deliss’s “Metabolic Museum–University (MM–U)”, hosted in 2015 by the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in Kiev and in 2019 by Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts; the “Tree School”, a nomadic educational platform initiated by members of Campus in Camps and Brazilian-based art collective Contrafilé, which has been welcomed by various institutions across the globe in recent years; and “Knowledge Market: Speculative Collective”, a project presented by GUDSKUL a public learning space established by the three Jakarta-based art collectives Grafis Huru Hara, ruangrupa and Serrum on the occasion of the 2019 edition of the Sharjah Biennial.

## The Metabolic Museum–University

The “Metabolic Museum–University (MM–U)” is a long-term project initiated by curator, art publisher and cultural historian Clémentine Deliss. She started to think through the idea of a museum–university in 2013, when she was director of the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt (2010–15), where she managed to institute a new research lab to remediate collections within a post-ethnological context. In her “Manifesto for the Post–Ethnographic Museum”, she describes the Museum–University as

unequivocally collection-centered / working outward from actual exhibits / deconstructing earlier archives / and histories of ethnographic museums / introducing external impulses, / an epistemological generalism / a democratic intellect / a non-standardised education / as independent as possible / providing a new platform for professional development / connecting the next generation of global cultural protagonists / from curatorial studies, cultural studies, postcolonial studies, contemporary art, design, performance, art history, anthropology, creative writing, law, ecology, mathematics, and more, breaking open the disciplines of the past and their collections.<sup>[14]</sup>

Deliss developed this concept to stretch the limits and challenge the exclusivity of the institutions that play a civic role in the arts, namely, the art school, the museum and the university.<sup>[15]</sup> Despite being considered the freest of the three, the art school in particular has become progressively controlled by external mechanisms such as the standardisation process ignited by the controversial Bologna Process which resulted in a drive for hyper-professionalisation of artists to the detriment of the possibility to experiment. Instead, the university has become increasingly gated, denying in many cases access to those who are not affiliated with it. The admission process is often overly bureaucratic, leaving little room for applicants of any level students, but also lecturers and researchers who do not fully comply with the standard requirements. Such boundaries reflect broader social

and economic concerns that limit access to university institutions.

The museum, on the other hand, is still often bound by its normativity, which is visible in many aspects from the display of artworks to the periodisation of installing and the modes in which visitors can engage with the collections. Such a normative stance of the institution constitutes an obstacle for the actualisation of a democratic potential within the museum. Thus, what Deliss proposes is to join these different institutions together with a process of transformation aimed at remediation, in which the university is introduced into the museum context as an additional interlocutor. The metabolic component of this project comes out of the intrinsic activity and background of the curator. Indeed, the editorial project *Metronome* (1997-2006) was conceived by Deliss as an organ in reference to the independent publishing initiatives of the early twentieth century: “for me the term indicates that this is something essential, vital, not cosmetic, not just there to produce small readerships or to make money. It’s utterly contingent on relationships and on the moment. When it no longer has that kind of functional necessity, then one changes the platform and experiments with another organ or medium of transformation.”<sup>[16]</sup> This reasoning is also applied to art institutions, which are considered as bodies in which the visible components the public face or the epidermis interact with the invisible ones the backstage activities that are generally hidden from the outer gaze. The museum, as a subjective and socially determined entity, is thus approached as a metabolic system, “[a] system of interdependencies, of humours, of different functionalities ranging from high visibility to expulsion, but also regeneration.”<sup>[17]</sup>

By shifting the focus towards the metabolic functions of the museum, the goal is to examine how each organ participates in the overall mechanism of the institution, opening up possibilities for analysis and remediation of its collection, and thus the potential to create new meanings and narratives. Deliss points out how it is therefore fundamental to create a contemporary infrastructure, a complex space for students and researchers all over world in which to engage in multidisciplinary enquiry at a university level based directly on the collections, which she sees as “reservoirs of memories waiting for emancipation”.<sup>[18]</sup> To engage with collections in this way implies a redefinition of the contours of what museums are, creating the conditions for a transition towards more inclusive, accessible and participative modes of interaction that make the institutional space an explicitly public space.



School of Remediation: A two-day micro-institution based on ergonomics and deceleration, National Museum of the History of Ukraine, Kiev, 2015. Photo: Clémentine Deliss



After her Frankfurt experience, Deliss tested different models of a museum-university. The first experiment took place at the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in Kiev, in advance of the 2015 biennial, under the title “School of Remediation: A two-day micro-institution based on ergonomics and deceleration”. Deliss invited participants of the school and members of the public visiting the museum to gather around tables and chairs retrieved from the disused café area of the building and engage in a conversation session. These tables were positioned at the front of the museum where a set of contested objects was placed. These objects, defined by Deliss as “artifacts that generate complex meanings, that operate on the edge of controversy or ambivalence, whatever their period or materiality”, were collected by the participants themselves the day before from a flea market with the aim to be discussed collectively.<sup>[19]</sup> The new setting was signalled by a small pin-board presenting a few keywords and inviting visitors to attend the seminary session. A heterogeneous group of people took part in the conversation, including artists, historians, linguists, students and staff members of the history museum. Participants discussed national and common knowledge, especially with respect to issues related to migration and the museum collections, problematising the experience of the general public in reference to the social and historical narrative proposed by the institution.



School of Remediation: A two-day micro-institution based on ergonomics and deceleration, National Museum of the History of Ukraine, Kiev, 2015. Photo: Clémentine Deliss

The second iteration of the Metabolic Museum-University was realised four years later, during the summer of 2019, in the context of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts. Together with her students from the University of Arts and Design in Karlsruhe, Deliss temporarily squatted the exhibitions of the biennial, as well as the city’s major museums, including the National Gallery of Slovenia, the Contemporary Art Museum, the Natural History Museum and the Centre for Slovenian Culture. The activities of the MM-U were organised across a week, during which each day was associated with a particular organ: Lung day, Tongue day, Eye day, Brain day, Skin day, Liver day, and Heart day. During the week, the MM-U faculty an interdisciplinary group of researchers, artists, scientists, historians and students delivered a discursive programme of events, lectures, performances, rehearsals and artistic interventions, transforming the venues from vertical and controlled consumption sites into co-working spaces. For the occasion, the MM-U team at the Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design built furniture that was positioned in the exhibition space for members of the public so they could sit down and have a table in front of them, as well as a computer and projector. These pieces of furniture, called “metabolic chairs”, enabled the people occupying them to “spam the hang” by projecting their own visual references among the

exhibits and filling the voids created by exhibition displays. The metabolic system produced by the interaction between the museum-university, the furniture and the thematic focus on organs facilitated the circulation of ideas, which were generated through the process of visual thinking and ergonomic engagement. By coupling theoretical with tactile and other sensory stimuli, the MM-U created the conditions for an unconventional experience of the exhibition sites, in which human bodies, as well as emotions and corporeal sensibilities were not only taken into account, but actually triggered through transcultural and transdisciplinary methodologies. This is part of what Deliss calls a process of “transvesting”, actively modifying how visitors can view and interact with the museum space and its collection to produce a transformation in the institution.



The Metabolic Museum-University, 33rd Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts, 2019. Photo: Urška Boljkovac



The Metabolic Museum-University, 33rd Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts, 2019. Photo: Nejc Ketiš

Welcoming visitors as fellow students, the MM-U established an open and inclusive environment for them to engage dynamically with the architectural and cultural narratives of the space. In this process, the MM-U did not intervene with the curatorial plan or with the artists' vision on installation, but rather broke with chronologies by injecting a polyphony of cross-cultural stimuli and new visual thinking processes. The objective of this

methodology was aimed at testing out which dynamics can arise in the civic space of a museum when it is used for higher education activities that are both formal and informal. Such an approach refers back to what Deliss calls concept-work, a type of work that “encourages an indeterminate and unforeseeable process of poetic and ideational thought by working with assemblages, be these situations, artefacts, or artworks.”<sup>[20]</sup> Concept-work is connected to the notion of risk, since it pushes conceptual thinking to new horizons, but also to recursivity, because the model is structured to correct itself as it unfolds, and to remediation, seeking to heal and transform multi-layered and complex materials, as well as their interpretation. This is the reason why, even in the context of a biennial an exhibition model revolving around the temporary display of artworks this methodology can still be applied, generating possibilities to interact and create meaning otherwise. In Deliss’s words:

my original concept for a museum-university, and the one that I still strive for, is carried by a new architectonic structure that enables people to study different subjects based around historical collections. The Metabolic Museum-University in its formulation in Ljubljana doesn’t work so much with collections. Instead, it says, hey, after six weeks, what is left of this biennial? It’s not fresh anymore. So maybe we can use visual thinking and the different senses to take over the void space surrounding a sculpture or a painting.<sup>[21]</sup>



The Metabolic Museum-University, 33rd Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts, 2019. Photo: Urška Boljkovac

## The Tree School

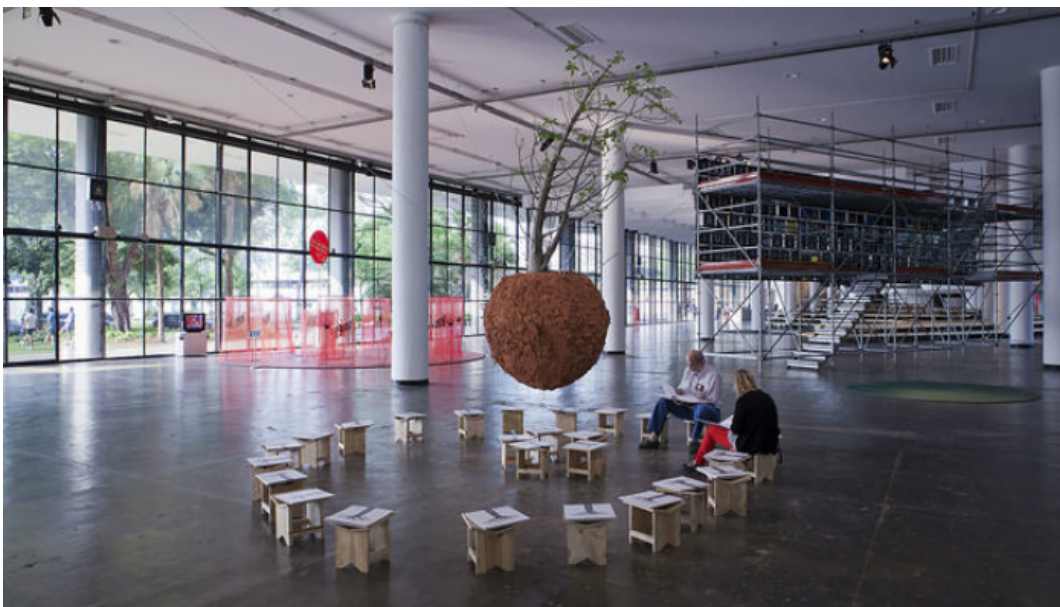
The Tree School was established on occasion of the 31<sup>st</sup> Biennial of São Paulo in 2014 by two collectives, Contrafilé a Brazilian-based art collective – and Campus in Camps – an experimental educational program based in Palestine –, as a space for communal learning where new forms of knowledge production are made possible. The two collectives did not know each other before the invitation to the biennial, coming from very different experiences and geographical contexts Contrafilé from the city of São Paulo and Campus in Camps from Bethlehem’s Dheisheh refugee camp. However, they are bound by a common interest in decolonising knowledge and in building bridges between regions of the world that rarely speak to each other but that share similar urgencies. The biennial put them into contact, inviting the team of Campus in Camps, initiated by architects Sandi Hilal and Alessandro Petti, to travel to São Paulo some months before the inauguration of the event.



Throughout the process of getting acquainted with each other's practice, the collectives realised it was impossible for them to actively collaborate in the chaotic environment of São Paulo, which led them to subvert the dialectic relationship between host and guest by moving altogether and becoming guests together for a period of time to southern Bahia, in the north-eastern region of the country. It was here in Bahia that the first Tree School was formed from the dialogue between thinkers, artists and activists from the *quilombola* movement, and from the Landless Workers' Movement (LWM) and Palestinian refugees. The aim was "to activate community-based discussions around exile, right of return, identity construction and subjectivity building", by reflecting upon and recognising the role of education as an emancipatory and democratising tool.<sup>[22]</sup>

In particular, the groups identified strong parallels between two exceptional places linked to their own history the Brazilian *quilombos* and the Palestinian refugee camps. The *quilombos* are communities created by enslaved Africans and Afro descendants who escaped their oppressors as an active form of resistance, which later also became spaces of refuge for other groups of people. The Palestinian refugee camps, instead, were founded in 1948 to provide shelter for the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who were exiled from their homes in what today is Israel. After more than seventy years, they have turned into semi-autonomous dense urban environments that cannot be considered solely recipients of humanitarian aid, but rather are active political spaces.

The groups explored these commonalities through fieldwork in southern Bahia, where important *quilombola* communities were historically established and where, today, new communities are experimenting with different forms of life and knowledge production. By entering into dialogue with the *quilombola* leader, the collectives realised that the symbol expressing the right to return to Africa for this community was the baobab tree, from which the name Tree School emerged. The tree, a living being with its specific characteristics and history, was understood by the collectives as "the device that creates a physical and metaphorical common territory where ideas and actions can emerge through critical, free and independent discussion among participants."<sup>[23]</sup>



The Tree School in Brazil, 31st Sao Paulo Biennial. Courtesy: Sandi Hilal, Alessandro Petti and Contrafilè



The Tree School in Brazil, 31st Sao Paulo Biennial. Courtesy: Sandi Hilal, Alessandro Petti and Contrafile

They reference architect Louis Khan's take on education to articulate the *raison d'être* of the initiative, according to which "schools began with a person under a tree who did not know he was a teacher, sharing their realisations with others who did not know they were students."<sup>[24]</sup> At the Tree School there are no preassigned roles, no one is teacher or a student, all people are learners and teachers at the same time. The educational platform "reclaims a different way of learning, one that cuts across conventional disciplines of knowledge and welcomes marginalised forms", adapting each time to the participants' interests, as well as to different contexts and temporalities.<sup>[25]</sup> Indeed, departing from the experience in Brazil, the Tree School has been exhibited and activated in many other places, such as Mexico, Portugal, United Arab Emirates and The Netherlands. In Mexico City, a six-day workshop, led by Hilal and Petti in collaboration with Alumnos47, was organised in 2015, with the aim to explore the Arab concept of "mujarawa" or "neighbourliness". In the same year, the school was set up in the context of the Serralves Museum of Oporto, on the occasion of the symposium "On Education Art and Participatory Education", the goal of which was to analyse the set of strategies employed in the education and mediation programme of the 31<sup>st</sup> São Paulo Biennial as a point of departure to tackle wider arts education issues. In 2018, the Tree School was presented at the NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery within the exhibition "Permanent Temporariness", dedicated to the practice of Hilal and Petti, and then at the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, within the exhibition project "Positions #4", which put into dialogue the work of four artists Gluklya, Naeem Mohaiemen and the duo Hilal and Petti.



The Tree School, Serralves Museum, Oporto. Courtesy: Sandi Hilal, Alessandro Petti



The Tree School, Vanabbemuseum, Eindhoven. Courtesy: Sandi Hilal, Alessandro Petti

Several ramifications of the Tree School are considered by the team of Campus in Camps the more adequate legacy of their two-year experimental education programme developed inside the Dheisheh refugee camp in Palestine, which they initiated in 2012. Through the experience in Bahia, the knowledge produced in Palestine was hybridised and transformed by the alliance with Contrafilè, which resulted into the formation of the Tree School and the germination of new learning platforms. Now, after years of experimentation, the important aspect for Hilal and Petti consists in the creation of a frame, an initial methodology of communal learning and unlearning, which does not require their presence to be activated, but can be used as a tool by other people and entities interested in sharing and producing knowledge. Currently, the Tree School approach is being carried out by local organisations in different places, such as Hong Kong (Asian Art Archive) and Melbourne (Monash University).

## Knowledge Market: Speculative Collective

On the occasion of the 14<sup>th</sup> Sharjah Biennial, the Jakarta-based collective GUDSKUL presented the project



“Knowledge Market: Speculative Collective” (2019), the latest iteration of a knowledge-sharing and mapping module that was conceived as a tool to explore forms of collectivising know-how through direct practice. The project was an extension of activities carried out in Jakarta, where in 2015 three art collectives ruangrupa, Serrum and Graphis Huru Hara came together under the name GUDSKUL and established their own ecosystem, a large-scale art hub located in a former warehouse in the southern part of the city. For the Sharjah Biennial “the collective of collectives” proposed an experiment already tested in Indonesia, the knowledge market, which was enacted in the form of workshops in three different places Sharjah, Al Madam and Khorfakkan in the central and eastern regions of the emirate. The idea of the knowledge market consists of an open invitation to strangers who meet and share their different sets of knowledge, spanning across multiple domains for instance, how to be a single parent, how to fish, how to deal with the banking system, etc. while performing simultaneously the roles of teachers and students in a fast-paced environment. In this case, the new component was the fact that the sixteen participants attending every session were required to form temporary collectives, each composed of four people. In the time span of approximately two hours, participants were invited to establish a new collective entity, which implied deciding on a name, a mission and, more importantly, to exercise and rehearse collective dynamics together.

The focus on collectivity arises from the experience of GUDSKUL itself, which has been active in building an ecosystem of collectives developed from a non-profit model, aimed at upholding their activity in a sustainable manner within a context marked by a lack of infrastructural support and opportunities for contemporary art practice and discourse. Driven by the pragmatic need to share resources of space and equipment, as well as by the urge to democratise artistic and social participation through the engagement with broad communities, students and young artists, the collective follows the guiding principle of *lumbung*. The practice of *lumbung* the Indonesian term for “rice barn” refers to a specific working model based on the communal surplus-grain warehouse intended for shared future use which is distributed according to jointly determined criteria. Following this notion, GUDSKUL has developed a specific methodology aimed at putting into practice propositions based on collectivity, resource building and equal sharing.<sup>[26]</sup>

The collaboration between GUDSKUL and the curatorial team of the biennial has been crucial in being able to engage with participants in the various venues, with the collective taking care of the spatial set-up for each session. Working in tandem with the curatorial team has also been fundamental for the continuation of the project throughout the entire duration of the biennial. Indeed, GUDSKUL could oversee only some of the sessions, leaving the lead of the rest of the modules to the curatorial team in the hope that they could change it and adapt it to different contexts. This procedure is in line with the contribution asked from the collective, which has been invited to produce “toolkits” for Sharjah audiences aimed to challenge the practice and product of art, engaging critically with the underlying socially engaged motivations for the creation of collective value and meaning and, at the same time, paying homage to the agency of artists in their role as catalysts for the transmission of cultural knowledge.

It is also worth mentioning that another form of collaboration took place during the initiative that between the collective and the participants. Indeed, GUDSKUL designed a “tool” to enable participants to record the collective instituting process for themselves and the notes produced on paper during the sessions were used to complete the collective’s visual presentation for the biennial, creating an organic correspondence out of their cooperation. The specific *modus operandi* of GUDSKUL in these contexts, as well as the propositions put into place by the biennial team, raise important questions regarding the kinds of knowledge that can emerge from these initiatives, their formalisation a small publication realised during this process was made available during the biennial and replicability in other contexts.

The issue of reproducibility is particularly poignant for the collective, who set in motion an intentional open-ended process in which external contributors can intervene and change according to specific times, places and purposes. Such flexible and indeterminate structures make it possible to stretch the modular approach by applying it to other work environments. The sessions realised during the biennial showed how participants responded in multiple ways to the possibility of sharing any kind of knowledge within a small amount of time. While the majority opted for a discursive intervention, some people employed more traditional techniques in their teaching session such as, for instance, calligraphy<sup>[27]</sup> by eliciting the narrative behind the relevance of these practices.

The idea of the knowledge market is not something entirely new in contemporary art. A well-known example is the project “Mobile Academy: Blackmarket for Useful Knowledge and Non-Knowledge”, initiated by curator and dramaturge Hannah Hurtzig in 2005, in which participants were invited to pair with experts scientists, artists, philosophers, craftsmen, etc. at a set of individual tables for thirty minutes, with the aim of transferring knowledge in a communicative and performative act. However, other than the scale of the event Blackmarket comprised anything from 12 to 100 tables for each iteration the main difference of GUDSKUL with this kind of approach appears to consist in the idea of gathering knowledges and experiences in the form of a temporary collective body. The specific focus on collectivity unfolds the possibility for participants to rehearse novel forms of cooperation and participation, sharing their own material and immaterial resources, in a speculative movement of communal becoming.

## Conclusions

Despite their differences in terms of aims, structure and methodologies, the three case studies presented show some analogies that contribute to the discussion around expanded practices in contemporary arts and their exhibition. Firstly, the different sets of specialisations of the various initiators artists, architects, transdisciplinary collectives and curators of the educational projects analysed underline a continuation of a trend in the field. Despite their specific backgrounds, all of them have adopted discursivity to produce and share knowledge between participants, rather than merely focusing on artistic production or exhibition-making. As we have seen already, the implementation of discursive practices as a method and format in contemporary art is not something new. It can be traced back to the second half of the 1990s, when debates around the social function of art became more prominent and frequent, and when dematerialised mediums such as lectures, talks, symposia, workshops started to be initiated by artists, curators and cultural practitioners as projects in their own right.

In the cases considered, however, discursivity found its counterpart in the aesthetics of the spatial arrangements for the conversation sessions to take place. The realisation of particular objects or graphic symbols such as the chairs and furniture for the MM-U in Ljubljana, the baobab hanging over the seats at each Tree School, and the series of visuals rendered in the form of drawings, murals, stickers on the walls by GUDKSUL in Sharjah specifically connoted and signified the staging of the collective discussions between participants. In all cases, the curators and the artists perform similar tasks they initiate durational projects, facilitate occasions of dialogue and encounter, build temporary communities and use similar working methods: rather than engaging solely in object-based practices, they prioritise performative and immaterial mediums, allowing for more flexible and cooperative strategies.

Furthermore, the outlined projects demonstrate similar objectives, with strong affiliations to issues of inclusivity, commonality, decolonisation and emancipation, which were developed within an educational framework



presented in art institutional settings. Other aspects that function as a common thread between these experiences are their focus on self-organisation, their itinerant status and the attempt to make their methodologies reproducible in different geographical and organisational contexts. The analysed educational platforms also all emerged from a bottom-up approach, which found its basis in self-organisation to provide alternative approaches to social reproduction and the “communing” of tools, technologies, and knowledge.





The generative, collective and practice-based endeavour carried out by GUDSKUL in Indonesia, to test and rehearse new notions of instituting, for instance, also gained resonance outside the country when it was presented in a foreign established institution, such as the Sharjah Biennial. Indeed, the collective adapted a project organised initially in Jakarta, leaving space for modification by the biennial’s team throughout the manifestation. The emphasis posed by the group on the reimagination of protocols, collective decision-making processes, forms of care, working ethos and financial structures matched the institutional intention to create a series of “toolkits” to challenge the current notion of art and its products. The collective’s focus on the decentralisation of the assumption of what is knowledgeable through the unleashing of the participants’ take on this key issue found a fertile ground in the framework envisaged by the curators of the manifestation, which allowed for the reproduction of the project.

The same reasoning applies to Deliss’s MM-U. After the end of her institutional mandate at the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt in 2015, she worked on different models for the museum-university, which she managed to bring into the National Museum of the History of Ukraine in Kiev and later the Ljubljana’s Biennial of Graphic Arts. While she built temporary communities around the main event in both cases, in Ljubljana she had the opportunity to set up a dense one-week programme of activities through the active involvement of professionals, independent researchers and her students at the University of Arts and Design in Karlsruhe, where she was Professor of Curatorial Theory and Dramaturgical Practice. Deliss’s role in weaving connections between different realities and institutions was fundamental for the realisation of the project. The collaboration between her, the invited guest speakers, the students, the biennial’s team, and the public created the possibility to transform and re-signify the event’s experience and create an inclusive and open environment for the development of transdisciplinary knowledge. Today the project continues in another context, at the KW Institute of Contemporary Art of Berlin, where Deliss is undertaking a three-year reiteration of the MM-U, focusing this time on private and public collections of the city.



The Metabolic Museum–University, 33rd Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts, 2019. Photo: Urška Boljkovac

<p><b>Welcome to the Metabolic Museum–University (MM-U)</b></p> <p>We invite you to participate and become a student of the MM-U.</p> <p><b>MM</b> Please feel free to sit on one of our Metabolic Chairs.</p> <p><b>MM</b> Relax, read, write, listen to talks and debate with us.</p> <p><b>MM</b> Link your phone or laptop to the mini-projector.</p> <p><b>MM</b> Beam your choice of images onto the walls between artworks.</p> <p><b>MM</b> A bag is attached to your chair in which you will find texts and information.</p> <p><b>MM</b> Please always take the microphone if you wish to speak during a session.</p>	<p><b>Dobrodošli v metabolični muzej–univerzo (MM-U)</b></p> <p>Vabimo vas, da sodelujete in postanete študent MM-U.</p> <p><b>MM</b> Prosimo, sedite na enega naših metaboličnih stolov, če želite.</p> <p><b>MM</b> Sprostite se, berite, pišite, poslušajte govore in razpravljajte z nami.</p> <p><b>MM</b> Svoj telefon ali prenosnik priključite na mini projektor.</p> <p><b>MM</b> Podobe po svoji izbiri projicirajte na stene, med umetnine.</p> <p><b>MM</b> Na vaš stol je pritrjena torba, v kateri boste našli besedila in podatke.</p> <p><b>MM</b> Če želite med uro govoriti, prosimo vedno vzemite mikrofoni.</p>
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The Metabolic Museum–University, 33rd Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts, 2019. Graphic Design by Cécile Kobel

The Three School results from two collectives coming together Campus in Camps founded in Palestine, and Contrafilè, born in Brazil. After its inception in Brazil, the school travelled to a range of different cities and places, providing occasions to re-enact the same format in other contexts. The focus on this specific reproducibility feature can be considered a third step in the trajectory of Hilal and Petti's Campus in Camps. At the beginning, the collective was interested in decolonising knowledge in the place where they were operating, Palestine. Then, after the encounter with Contrafilè, the emphasis was shifted towards the creation of transnational alliances, and, in more recent times, through the partnerships with the Monash University in Melbourne or the Asian Art Archive in Hong Kong, the collective started to explore ways to share their methodologies for communal unlearning developed over the years in a way that does not require their intervention to be activated. In general, the open-ended processes of these initiatives highlight the desire, and also the urgency of bringing the projects to other people and entities that share similar missions and objectives to those identified by their initiators.



The Tree School, NYU Abu Dhabi. Ph: Vargese Ulleri

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that all the examples considered participated in biennial programming, and this is not by chance. The biennial model is legitimised as an important node for the “local” to meet with the “global”, connecting art with larger publics, composed of residents, travellers, industry professionals and non-specialists. Despite being used as a neoliberal tool by policymakers to boost cultural travel, urban refurbishments and local tourism from a city-branding perspective, it must be acknowledged that the biennial has also become “the vehicle through which much art is validated and acquires value on the international art circuit.”<sup>[28]</sup> As political theorist Oliver Marchart points out, referring to the phenomenon of worldwide biennialisation as a contributing factor for the decentralisation of the West, biennials not only assist in the accumulation of capital but also facilitate in building up local, national and translocal identities, serving their role of “hegemonic machines which link the local to the global within the field of symbolic struggles for legitimisation.”<sup>[29]</sup> In this sense, biennialisation cannot just be interpreted as an ideological reflex to economic globalisation, but also as part of decolonisation struggles, as we have seen in the case of the Tree School, which originated as an alliance of two groups within the institutional context of the São Paulo biennial. The support system offered by the organisation and the possibility to reach out to wider audiences through the visibility given by the “big event” platform are relevant factors for nurturing these types of practice.

Again, discursivity is an integral part of these large-scale initiatives, which rely on it to spark, expand and reformulate discussions around specific themes: “this striking expansion goes in tandem with curatorial discourses that increasingly distinguish the biennial or mega exhibition as larger than the mere presentation of artworks; they are understood as vehicles for the production of knowledge and intellectual debate.”<sup>[30]</sup> The radical propositions put forward by Deliss, Tree School and GUDKSUL found a distinguished stage to resonate at and contribute to current discourses around contemporary art and culture. The issues that they brought up around the urgency for remediation, decolonisation of knowledge and collectivisation thus converge in an arena of wider visibility, laying the foundation for a redefinition of the boundaries of what is considered common and relevant in our cultural paradigm. Therefore, the participation of these projects in biennials can be seen as a strategic move to legitimise their voices and the meanings they convey within the broader perspective of creating counter-hegemonic narratives.

However, the criticality of such endeavours in the domain of established art institutions and the risk of instrumentalisation of alternative education by biennials must also be acknowledged. As noted by Suhail Malik, “publicly funded institutions and the internationally oriented biennial circuit in particular provide willing host sites for such educational endeavours, their ambitions chiming well with their aim (usually set by the public-corporate body funding these large-scale organisations) to provide a public good through ‘creative’ activity, or the affirmation of creativity as public good.”<sup>[31]</sup> The point raised here is that contemporary art, which operates in as exclusive a terrain as formal art schools do, cannot be interpreted as a site for democratising education, and thus to unfold its political potential, but rather as a space where a kind of “sentimental” education takes place.<sup>[32]</sup>

In addition, artist Dean Kenning outlines the paradoxical nature of these phenomena by claiming that the absorption of these experimental educational models into institutional structures both elicits art’s turning outwards to “the social terrain of education”, but only insofar such education becomes “recuperated and turned back into art, appropriated, mimicked, aestheticised”.<sup>[33]</sup> All of this results, according to the author, in the risk of being ineffective in relation to their aims: “alternative art school models and education forms and events taking place in art contexts are in danger of becoming a pseudo-critical pose [...] unless they are capable of confronting real conditions on the level of the social space in which they are carried out.”<sup>[34]</sup> How to navigate these tensions while producing alternative knowledge in such loaded art contexts? How to use the wider visibility offered by these international showcases without falling into the trap of instrumentalisation? How to balance the

idea of biennials as vehicles for knowledge production and intellectual debate with their “hegemonic machine” status in attempts of providing a counter-rhetoric narrative to state and public culture?

If, on the one hand, the very act of turning authorial voices like those of the various initiators examined into multilayered, polyphonic voices shows a commitment to extending the spaces of possibility for concrete action and the manifestation of a counter-narrative through both direct and symbolic interventions, allows for artists, curators and collectives to become agents not only in reshaping the discourse around contemporary art and culture, but also in creating a more inclusive space for people to practise forms of emancipation, they can unleash the social and political potential of such educational platforms.<sup>[35]</sup> On the other hand, there is always the danger of being trapped in the neoliberal push to produce a spectacle of self-improvement, reducing the actual impact that these moments of encounter can have on those who take part in it. One strategy to avoid this could be to slightly de-escalate the rhetoric on the political connotations of such experiments taking place in international arenas, making them more modest by recognising what these educational platforms are and how they function, and by having a clear understanding of the specific terrain in which they operate.

Exhibiting education, in its immaterial, ephemeral and processual form, offers a lens for looking at exhibitions as sites of research and learning, which allow for the micro-narratives of the participants to contaminate themselves with otherness. Such spaces of exchange and confrontation can be very profound and meaningful for the people taking part, which clearly differs from context to context. In general, by placing emphasis on both participation and spectatorship these educational platforms disclose their “double ontology”, which allows them to go beyond the purely artistic field and trespass into a wider sphere: that of social relations and their reproduction.<sup>[36]</sup> This latter sphere is particularly crucial if the objective is to “redistribute the sensible” through innovative forms of education in the cultural paradigm, performed within nomadic and temporary structures in the contemporary art context.<sup>[37]</sup>

However, the analysis on the reproduction of social mechanisms among groups of people who have shared an educational experience is difficult to perform and, on certain levels, also risks encapsulating the experience within the set of requirements and standards put forth by dominant neoliberal policies and political agendas. In these entanglements, one possible strategy could be avoiding the hyper-visible level provided by established institutions and looking for more opaque spaces of action or “grey zones”, an open-ended and yet to be defined domain of “civil space” that is protected from the logic of the spectacle and allows the reframing and reorganisation of ideas, thoughts and people, and in which artistic imagination can play a crucial role because of its prefigurative capacities. The search for these specific “grey zones” could be essential for fully grasping the potential of these educational platforms and should be considered and deepened as a line of enquiry when looking at these experiments and their enactment in institutional contexts.

## Footnotes

1. Helguera, Pablo. *Education for Socially Engaged Art. A Materials and Techniques Handbook*. New York, NY: Jorge Pinto Books. 2011.
2. Manifesta 6, a school modeled on pedagogical experiments such as Bauhaus and Black Mountain College, was cancelled because of the increasing friction between the three curators and Nicosia for Art,

the city-run non-profit organisation supporting the exhibition. The reason, according to an official statement by the mayor of Nicosia, was that the curatorial board insisted on establishing and operating an essential part of the school in the occupied part of Nicosia, ruled by Turkish Cypriot forces. After the cancellation of the event, Anton Vidokle—one of the three curators of the event, together with Mai Abu ElDahab and Florian Waldvogel—set up unitednationsplaza, an independent project in Berlin, consisting of a twelve-month discursive and performative programme involving over a hundred artists, writers, philosophers and diverse audiences.

3. Paul O'Neill and Mick Wilson have articulated their position on the use of the term "turn" as follows: "Arguably, the 'turn' as a rhetorical device for positing a particular moment of re-alignment is hackneyed, somewhat superficial and all too easily commodified. On the other hand, the term is useful for suggesting a logic of development that can be both autonomous and heteronomous; it can name a process of change that can be intrinsic or extrinsic or both; it can name an evolving process without inevitably constructing a radical or over-blown discontinuity; and this verbal noun can usefully posit a processual dynamic rather than a fixed condition or stable state. With this rhetoric, there is also an invocation of flux and the shifting of territories, stabilities and normative positions." See O'Neill, Paul and Wilson, Mick (eds.). *Curating and the Educational Turn*. London/Amsterdam: Open Editions/de Appel. 2010. p. 15.
4. Bishop, Claire. *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London: Verso. 2012. p. 241.
5. Dragičević Šešić, M. & Jestrovic, S. "The University as a Public and Autonomous Sphere: Between Enlightenment Ideas and Market Demands". In *International Performance Research Pedagogies. Towards an Unconditional Discipline?* Edited by S. Bala, M. Gluhovic, H. Korsberg, K. Röttger. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 2017. p. 71.
6. The author draws upon the work of philosopher Michel De Certeau to mark a distinction between civic and civil space, which highlights the fluid and open nature of the latter, as opposed to the regulated and controlled one of the first: "the civic place is a place that is established or has taken root in policies, education programmes, regulations or laws. By contrast, the civil space, in the Certeausian sense, is a space that remains fluid; a place where positions still have to be taken up or created." See Gielen, Pascal. "Artistic Constitutions of the Civil Domain: On Art, Education and Democracy". *International Journal of Art & Design Education*. Vol. 36. No. 2. 2017. pp. 134-140.
7. Graham, Janna, Graziano, Valeria, Kelly, Susan. "The Educational Turn in Art: Rewriting the Hidden Curriculum". *Performance Research*. Vol. 21. No. 6. 2016. p. 29.
8. Thorne, Sam. *School: A Recent History of Self-Organized Art Education*. Berlin: Sternberg. 2017. p. 48.
9. Egermann, Eva and Von Osten, Marion. "Twist and Shout: On Free Universities, Educational Reforms and Twists and Turns Inside and Outside the Art World". In O'Neill and Wilson, *Curating and the Educational Turn*, p. 281.
10. Sternfeld, Nora. "Unglamorous Tasks: What Can Education Learn from its Political Traditions?". *e-flux journal*. No. 14. 2010.
11. See Lütticken, Sven. "Social Media: Practices of (In)Visibility in Contemporary Art". *Afterall*. No. 40. 2015. pp. 4-19; Malik, Suhail. "Educations Sentimental and Unsentimental: Repositioning the Politics of Art and Education". *Red Hook Journal of Curatorial Studies*. No. 1. 2011.
12. Lesage, Dieter. "Black Mountain Syndrome". Black Mountain—Educational Turn and the Avant-Garde lecture, Hamburger Bahnhof, Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin, 26 September 2015.
13. See, for example, Kenning, Dean. "Refusing Conformity and Exclusion in Art Education". *Mute*. 22 March 2021. Available at <https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/refusing-conformity-and-exclusion-art-education> (accessed 2021-10-12); Phillips, Andrea. "Education Aesthetics". In O'Neill and Wilson, *Curating*

- and the Educational Turn*, pp. 83–69.
14. Deliss, Clémentine. *The Metabolic Museum*. Berlin: Hatje Cantz. 2020. p. 13.
  15. Veneri, Daniela. “Clémentine Deliss and the Metabolic Museum–University”. *Rondò Pilot*. 2 August 2019.
  16. *Ibid.*
  17. *Ibid.*
  18. Deliss, *The Metabolic Museum*, p. 106.
  19. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
  20. Veneri, “Clémentine Deliss and the Metabolic Museum–University”.
  21. *Ibid.*
  22. Hilal, Sandi and Petti, Alessandro. *Permanent Temporariness*. Stockholm: Art and Theory Publishing and the Royal Institute of Art. 2018. p. 323.
  23. *Ibid.*, p. 307.
  24. *Ibid.*
  25. *Ibid.*
  26. The notion of *lumbung* also informs the curatorial concept of ruangrupa—one of GUDSKUL’s founding collectives—for the upcoming documenta 15 in Kassel, for which the collective has been appointed artistic directors. In this case, their approach is based on the creation of an international network of local, community-based organisations from art and other cultural contexts, to promote local commitment and participation.
  27. “Interview with Farid Rakun about GUDSKUL’s project for Sharjah Biennial 14”, Universes in Universe, available at <https://universes.art/en/sharjah-biennial/2019/arts-square/collections-building/gudskul-2> (accessed 2021-10-13).
  28. O’Neill, Paul. “The curatorial turn: from practice to discourse”. In *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance*. Edited by Judith Rugg and Michèle Sedgwick. Bristol: Intellect Books. 2007. p.17.
  29. Marchart, Oliver. “The Biennialization of art and the ‘Biennials of Resistance’. A History of the Biennials from thePeriphery”. *Cumma Papers*. No. 7. 2014. p. 2.
  30. Filipovic, Elena. “The Global White Cube”. In *The Manifesta Decade: Debates on Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Biennials in Post-Wall Europe*. Edited by Elena Filipovic and Barbara Vanderlinden. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. 2005. p. 66.
  31. Malik, “Educations Sentimental and Unsentimental”.
  32. The author articulates the choice of using the notion of sentimentality: “sentimental because in its evasion of the terms and conditions imposed on art education by prevailing state-corporate power, expanded art-learning wishes to pursue a politics according to art’s democratic imperative even though, as seen, its democratic credentials and operation are in fact at best tendentious if not specious.” *Ibid.*
  33. Kenning, “Refusing Conformity and Exclusion”.
  34. *Ibid.*
  35. In the words of scholar Henry Giroux with reference to the role of the educator artist as a public intellectual: “At stake here is the need for artists, educators, and others to create pedagogical practices that create militant dreamers, people capable of envisioning a more just and democratic world and are willing to struggle for it. In this instance, pedagogy becomes not only central to politics but also a practice dedicated to creating a sense of belonging, community, empathy, and practices that address changing the way people think and navigate conflicts emotionally—practices that awaken passion and energise forms of identification that speak to the conditions in which people find themselves”. See Giroux, Henry A. “Educated Hope in Dark Times: The Challenge of the Educator–Artist as a Public Intellectual”. *Throughout*. 6 June 2018.
  36. Bishop, *Artificial Hells*.

37. Rancière, Jacques. *The Politics of Aesthetics. The Distribution of the Sensible*. New York, NY: Continuum Publishing Group. 2006.