

Art and Activism: Artists amid social, environmental, and cultural crises

Suwarno

Fine Art Department, Faculty of Visual Arts and Design, ISI Yogyakarta, Indonesia

suwarno.wisetrotromo@gmail.com
Tel: +62811251037

Abstract

Social, environmental, and cultural crises are no longer an issue but a worrying reality. In macro phenomena, it manifests as a crisis of ethics-morality, radicalism, intolerance, and rejection of diversity. This situation requires extra handling in all spaces, lines, and professions. During an extreme situation, artists and art education, along with works of art, crafts, and design, are not enough to dwell in the aesthetic, artistic, and esoteric area, let alone just for economic interests but must participate actively, concretely, build networks to carry out adaptive-innovative collaboration, to be able to be part of the solution.

Keywords: Art activism; social and cultural crisis; environmental crisis; adaptive collaboration

eISSN: 2398-4287 © 2024. The Authors. Published for AMER and cE-Bs by e-International Publishing House, Ltd., UK. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>). Peer-review under responsibility of AMER (Association of Malaysian Environment-Behaviour Researchers) and cE-Bs (Centre for Environment-Behaviour Studies), College of Built Environment, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21834/e-bpj.v9iSI23.6349>

1.0 Introduction

Art, crafts, and design, in their diverse forms of thought and practice, have the potential to serve as a powerful medium for driving community participation. They can effectively respond to various social, political, economic, and cultural problems. Various arts, crafts, and design practices create opportunities to engage different segments of society. Participatory art and design models (Aspinall, 2012; Moelyono, 1997; Yangni, 2012), as demonstrated by individuals (artists) and communities, have the power to inspire others to join in efforts for improvement and change. The spirit of activism that underpins art and design practices, rooted in real and contextual issues, is particularly potent when it aligns with the interests of society.

Therefore, building a shared understanding involving many parties related to such issues amid increasingly boisterous and individual life dynamics is not always easy. It is essential to take a specific, enlightening, and fun approach, one of which is through thinking and art-craft-design activities. Art/practice of art and design provides a playground and a space to build a form that is assumed to be engineered to form a harmonious structure (object, work).

The playroom accommodates the essential human character as *homo ludens*, as the player's creature that plays the game (Johan Huizinga; 1938). Huizinga argues that play is a natural phenomenon that animates culture (journal.unpar.ac.id; upload on 20 September 2024, jam 13.15). Playing activities also contain assumptions or dreams of the perpetrator (the player) of something – form or value – that has joy, unity, and harmony. Meanwhile, in everyday reality, life is a drama of sorrow and joy; daily life is also a whole of plans, calculations, profit and loss, and others; and harmony is limited to ideals because reality often shows the opposite (Disharmony).

eISSN: 2398-4287 © 2024. The Authors. Published for AMER and cE-Bs by e-International Publishing House, Ltd., UK. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>). Peer-review under responsibility of AMER (Association of Malaysian Environment-Behaviour Researchers), and cE-Bs (Centre for Environment-Behaviour Studies), College of Built Environment, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Malaysia.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21834/e-bpj.v9iSI23.6349>

However, play and games are two forms of media that simulate life; there is a game and reality. In this regard, art and design need to be used more as a media for activism, a medium to mobilise many parties interested in making changes for a better life together. Perspective and critical attitude are essential. Participation and emancipation became models of approach, as Adorno and Horkheimer argued that art had lost its emancipatory power. For these two critical thinkers, Adorno and Horkheimer, as concluded by Saras Dewi, art is not only about artistic satisfaction but can also be essential to reality (Dewi, 2022).

The practice of fine arts, crafts, and design that departs from the surrounding reality, awareness of using materials that aim to take care of the environment, maintain sustainability, have potential economic value, independence, and organic, will encourage the creation of a systemic ecosystem. The end of achievement is a positive identity that is the citizens' pride. Pride in being independent and contributing to creativity and the universe's safety.

2.0 Literature Review

Related actual and contextual issues: (1) Social crises, for example, the emergence of extreme polarisation in society due to political practices, manifested in the form of persecution, intolerance, and the like, exacerbated by social media. The collapse of expertise has plagued educational institutions amid such rapid and disruptive development of science, art, and technology; (2) Environmental crises afflicting nature (deteriorating water, soil, ecology, food, health, air, and others). Development in all sectors by ignoring environmental processes and safety is a trigger for an increasingly severe crisis; (3) Cultural crises can be seen and experienced in the form of crises of values/morals, ethics, manners, and the like in daily life practices (social, political, economic, community). Observing such aspects is essential to understanding the practices of art, crafts, and design that go through the process of research, collective work, and collaboration, including cross-disciplinary work (Hyphen – Ratna Mufida, Pitra Hutomo, Grace Samboh, Rachel K. Surijata; Editor, 2023; Kent, 2024).

3.0 Methodology

This research relies on the philosophy of qualitative research, using interpretative methods on how the practice of fine arts, crafts, and design can be used (potentially) as part of the solution to social, environmental, and cultural crises. The solution can be participatory-emancipatory art practices, which move crowds, communities, or societies.

Qualitative methods are practised through observing the subjective experiences and ideologies of fine arts artists, crafts, and designers who work by involving society, citizens, or communities. Of course, art education institutions are part of what is observed, primarily through the curriculum and the classes. This research wants to show how art/artworks, crafts, and design have the opportunity to respond to social, environmental, and cultural crises in the form of being part of the solution.

Close observation was carried out on three (three) works/events of art, crafts, and design: Harvest Apa Today (PAHI) by Anang Saptoto; IBU (Imah Seni Cegondewah) by Tisna Sanjaya and the Yogyakarta Cultural Festival (FKY) organised by the Yogyakarta Special Regional Government (DIY) through the DIY Cultural Office (Kundha Kabudayan). The three research subjects were presented with data through photographs of works and photos of event documentation.

4.0 Findings

4.1 What Harvest Today

The art project, or precisely the Harvest What Today (PAHI) art activity, is used as a case study of how art is part of the solution to the social crisis. Starting from the impact of the state project to build the Yogyakarta International Airport (YIA) around the southern coast of Kulonprogo Regency, there was turmoil among farmers who lost their agricultural land. The next problem is the COVID-19 pandemic from March 2019 to 2022, causing a crisis in farmers' lives. Farmers who can still cultivate the land originally became suppliers of food ingredients for the culinary industry (restaurants, hotels, cafes), including supplying shops, losing customers. Crops cannot be distributed to regular consumers.

This condition aroused Anang Saptoto, an artist and photographer active in the photography collective Mes 56 Yogyakarta, to take the initiative to help farmers directly distribute crops in the form of vegetables, bananas, mango, cassava, and the like to households. Anang Saptoto made digital advertising posters, distributed them to his colleagues, offered crops, and delivered them directly to his home (Wisetrotomo, Pradani Ratna, 2022)—a touching humanitarian philanthropic movement.

The posters were humorously designed and titled What Harvest Today (*Panen Apa Hari Ini*-PAHI). The poster was designed by processing photos by Anang Saptoto. The first poster combines a half-body figure, from the face to the waist, and pictures of agricultural or livestock products (such as eggs, fruits, vegetables, etc.). This poster informs that the faces in the poster are producers (farmers, ranchers), like the photos connected to the lower part of their bodies. The second type of poster combines the product with the lower body. This poster shows the figures of users (customers, shown without faces) of the farmers' products. The third type of poster is a product advertisement that uses unique names on each product along with prices (units, kilos, bundles, and the like). For example, *Bawang merah lubang tambang semakin parah; Bawang putih hatiku bersih; Singkong ketan mbok yang toleran; Tomat buruan tobat, etc.*)

Such an approach creates a unique relationship between farmers, customers, and distributors (in this case, Anang Saptoto), creating excitement. Photographed and then printed, even in the form of widely circulated posters, it was a unique experience never imagined

by farmers, including customers. Using social media, the unique advertisement is spread to potential customers, customers order the desired products, and the ordered goods are quickly delivered to the customer's home. Social restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic opened up unexpected business opportunities. Another side effect was that the posters were gifted to "farmers" and sold to anyone interested in collecting.

4.2 *Imah Budaya (IBU) Cegondewah*

IBU (Imah Budaya) Cegondewah is an example of a case of art practice model as part of the solution to the environmental and cultural crisis. Tisna Sanjaya is an artist, social, political, and environmental activist working in art with a multi-dimensional perspective regarding ideas and forms of expression. He uses a piece of land on the edge of the Cigondewah River for experiments on environmental art practices and social activation. Initially, residents or other residents used the land for garbage disposal. With his efforts, Tisna Sanjaya bought the land, slowly cleaned it, built a simple house, and planted various barrier trees. Not stopping there, Tisna Sanjaya and several artists often use the dirty Cigondewah River to do art and perform art while carrying out a campaign to clean the river of garbage. The environment becomes shady. Residents were then involved not in disposing of garbage but in processing (sorting, selecting) waste. It did not stop there; it was developed for residents and early childhood education (*PAUD*) activities.

Tisna was triggered by three things about the situation in Cigondewah before it was made into an art project, namely: 1) Plastic waste, 2) The water condition of the Cigondewah river, and 3) Changes in the socio-cultural conditions of the local community (Sanjaya, 2014). Therefore, he started his activities by targeting three problems: processing plastic waste, cleaning the Cigondewah River, and activating spaces built as art-cultural activities involving the surrounding community. All activities use art-making practices: recycling plastics, performing art in the river, painting, and drawing with children and residents. In the same area, it is used as a space to work and display works of art (paintings and three-dimensional objects). Mothers and children of residents use it for health counselling activities, dialogue activities between residents, and playgrounds for children. The next step, in collaboration with technocrats from ITB, Tisna Sanjaya, in partnership with Prof. Ir. I Gede Wenten, PhD (from the Faculty of Industrial Technology, ITB), realised the idea of making a windmill driven by water power, which functions to distil river water until it has clean quality and can be drunk directly without cooking first. *IBU* Cigondewah is now a space that inspires many people, or Tisna calls it the Cegondewah Cultural Center.

4.3 *Yogyakarta Cultural Festival (Festival Kesenian Yogyakarta-FKY)*

This is an example of how cultural events in the form of festivals are part of the solution to the cultural crisis. The cultural values in question are all activities of individuals, community members, and communities, in various forms of skills, traditional ceremonies, cooperation, culinary, and others, as part of maintaining the continuity of their lives and the actualisation of themselves or their communities. The Yogyakarta Cultural Festival was initially called the Yogyakarta Arts Festival. This name change was made by the Decree of the Governor of Yogyakarta (2019), and *FKY* is an annual event. Since 2023, *FKY* has been held to process sequential themes, namely "Food Sovereignty", and in 2024, to process the theme "Objects".

The theme of *FKY* was formulated by the Board of Curators based on the visions and missions of the Governor of Yogyakarta as a direction and guideline for development in Yogyakarta. The name change implies that culture gains its meaning broadly, covering a variety of work practices and skills related to people's lives, for example, qualified skills of iron pande craftsmen (makers of household and agricultural tools), weaving skills, carpentry skills, agricultural cultivation skills; Master Keris, Tembang Expert (Macapat), Culinary Expert, and others, who are classified as cultural actors. *FKY* is a space to celebrate the achievements of every individual, community, group, or society within the framework of artistic work. The participants and the community learn together to understand the meaning of culture and its practices in daily life.

5.0 Discussion

Art and activism are ideological. From the beginning, through in-depth observation and research, artists determine the direction of their artistic work, namely partiality, defence, and movement. Artists will be in the middle of problems, in the midst of society, and together, they will have conversations, dialogues, and 'work'. Of course, flexibly, artists feel part of themselves (participants; society), even though artists are in a position as initiators, directors, and leaders. This kind of work method can be called participatory as well as emancipatory.

The risk that must be realised immediately in choosing this method is anonymity, that is, the melting of individuals in a group or community. A person cannot necessarily claim that a work, art project, or art event is his work. But it is a joint work. Similarly, according to the emancipatory principle, art aims to empower and liberate human beings from limitations (perhaps also constraints to speak, express opinions, and get out of social, economic, political, and other pressures). The participatory and emancipatory approach has the opportunity to have a driving force (whoever is involved) to become more transparent about the purpose and function of the art project.

Artists who choose "activism" in their artistic thought and practice are conscious of connecting (intersecting) with critical socio-society, politics, environment, and cultural issues. In addition, the development process resulted in changes in spatial layout, including political, social-community, economic, environmental, and cultural spaces. Therefore, the practice of art activism has the opportunity to be contrary to the country's political policy. The political space is experiencing dynamics that are often too violent.

Art education institutions should come out and abandon normative and outdated ideas, let alone be insensitive to the reality of the crisis around them. Art education institutions should focus on social, environmental, and cultural crises to foster critical awareness of everyday existence. How? Of course, not only through conversations and appeals. But starting with the most essential thing, namely seeing and evaluating the curriculum, correcting, and voicing to the community. Immediately formulate courses that are relevant to

critical issues, for example, courses on art-design religiosity, art-design and society, art-design and local wisdom, craftsmanship and vernacular design, art-design and environmental conservation-restoration, and others of the kind, cognate or cross-clump.

Art education institutions no longer need to provide a significant portion to study the world's art and design issues. It is necessary to expand and intensify building an international network to see the development of thought and the creation of fine arts and design, which is pursued through research cooperation. Knowledge can be gained by studying textbooks about them. They are urging more frequent adaptive collaborations based on innovation (Tobing, 2024). Art education institutions need to look at the community's wisdom, skills, and values. The village is essential to be the focus of attention because of independence in all aspects, such as growing, living, and developing in the town. In the end, students in the fields of fine arts, crafts, and design are trained to have the ability to be problem solvers, not someone who is entangled in a complicator (an obstacle to problem-solving) (Tobing, 2024).

The art practice (a collaboration between farmers, photography, and design) that Anang Saptoto works on shows an attitude of partiality, defence, and movement. Farmers who experienced an economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic found a way out of Anang Saptoto's active role. More than just finding a way out, Anang Saptoto has succeeded in creating joy for farmers and consumers through photos composed into photo-based and design-based artworks.

Tisna Sanjaya's art practice through the Cegondewah Cultural Imah (IBU) institution is in the same spirit: moving and transforming the waste disposal area into a waste processing area and a centre for residents' activities. Tisna also expanded cooperation with technocrats to create (engineer) a water distillation wheel from the Cegondewah River. His efforts are to produce clean water ready to be consumed by the surrounding community. Tisna calls the water treatment/distillation project the Urine Art project.

The Yogyakarta Cultural Festival (FKY) is a "new awareness" of the Yogyakarta provincial government that expands the meaning/understanding of culture beyond just conversations related to art. The "new awareness" was initiated by the Governor of Yogyakarta, Sri Sultan Hamengku Buwono X, by encouraging the change of the institution of the Arts Council to the Cultural Council. This institution is a group of experts who function/are tasked with providing input and consideration of cultural development, whether requested or not. Next, the Governor of Yogyakarta encouraged the change of the Yogyakarta Arts Festival, which held an art festival event, to the Yogyakarta Cultural Festival. This name change indicates the expansion of the festival's agenda to provide a place for "cultural actors" in the public space.

6.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Art and design practices within the framework of activism can be both answers and solutions to various crises (in the context of this conversation, social, environmental, and cultural crises). This art practice is within the framework of participatory and emancipatory activities.

Social, environmental, and cultural crises are urgent for anyone to respond to. Fine arts artists, artisans, and designers are present as pioneers in doing artwork collaboratively and become part of the solution (*problem solver*).

Art education institutions should reorient through critical evaluation of the curriculum, adding or replacing it with various courses that can trigger students' crucial awareness as part of the solution to the crisis.

Acknowledgement

We wish to extend our gratitude to ISI Yogyakarta and the Faculty of Visual Arts and Design for their resources and support, which enabled the completion of this research.

Paper Contribution to Related Field of Study

This contribution encourages artists and art education, along with works of art, crafts, and design through the aesthetic, artistic, and esoteric areas, to participate and build networks to carry out adaptive-innovative collaboration in social, environmental, and cultural crisis solutions.

References

Aspinall, EdwardBdrup, T (2012). Relational Aesthetics as a New Approach for Designing Spatial Aesthetic Expressions in Participatory Design, in Israsena, P. Tangsantikul, J. and Durling, D (eds), *Research: Uncertainty Contradiction Value-DRS International Conference* (2012, 1-4 July, Bangkok, Thailand). <https://dl.designresearchsociety.org/drs-conference-papers/drs2012/researchpapers/33>.

Dewi, Saras (2022). *Sembahyang Bhuvana – Renungan Filosofis tentang Tubuh, Seni, dan Lingkungan*, Yogyakarta: Pojok Cerpen dan Tanda Baca.

Hyphen – (Mufida, Ratna; Pitra Hutomo; Grace Samboh; Rachel K. Surijata; Penyunting) (2023). *Masakan Sepanjang Zaman: Bunga Rampai Seni Rupa Baru 1975-1989*, Depok: Komunitas Bambu.

Kent, Elly (2024). *Seniman dan Masyarakat: Ideologi-Ideologi Seni Rupa di Indonesia*, Jakarta: Gang Kabel.

Moelyono (1997). *Seni Rupa Penyadaran*, Yogyakarta: Yayasan Bentang Budaya.

Sanjaya, Tisna (2014). "Imah Budaya (IBU) Cegondewah – Revitalisasi Budaya dan Pemberdayaan Masyarakat Melalui Karya Seni Lingkungan" dalam *Extension Course Filsafat (ECF)* Universitas Parahiyangan, Bandung,

Tobing, Elwin, "Transformasi Pemerintahan, Agenda Presiden Orabowo" dalam *Kompas*, Rabu, 23 September 2024.