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The Artivism (Art Activism) of Taring Padi at Documenta Fifteen 2022 through The Cardboard Puppet Workshop

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ABSTRACT

Taring Padi's *wayang kardus* (cardboard puppets) is one of its most iconic works. Its participatory practices and massive presentation of artworks based on collective solidarity had created a distinguished effect for the international contemporary art ecosystem, particularly at the Documenta Fifteen exhibition. The urgency of analyzing Taring Padi's activism through its *wayang kardus* artworks lies in its role as a medium of critical awareness, examining the interconnection between artistic production and collective solidarity. This practice-based research was conducted using participatory observation methods. The findings show that the citizens around are already aware of issues in their immediate environment, leading to the intergenerational distribution of knowledge and experience. This awareness highlights the importance of providing a platform for expressing social messages through accessible, adaptable, and replicable artworks, such as through the *wayang kardus* workshop. To make it eternal, emerging societal issues will continue to serve as a foundation for the struggle of collective solidarity through art activism.

Keywords: art activism, collective solidarity, cardboard puppet, Taring Padi

ABSTRAK

Artivisme (Aktivisme Seni) Taring Padi di Documenta Fifteen 2022 melalui Bengkel Wayang Kardus. Wayang kardus Taring Padi merupakan salah satu karya yang ikonik. Praktik kerja secara partisipatoris dan presentasi karya secara massif dengan berbasis solidaritas kolektif merupakan sebuah fenomena yang memberikan efek kejut pada ekosistem seni kontemporer internasional, yakni dalam pameran Documenta Fifteen. Kepentingan untuk membaca praktik aktivisme Taring Padi melalui karya seni wayang kardus menjadi krusial untuk terus menjadi kritik penyadaran dengan melihat kelindan antara produksi artistik dengan solidaritas kolektif. Penelitian ini berbasis praktik, dilakukan dengan metode observasi partisipatoris. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa masyarakat sudah memiliki kesadaran akan permasalahan yang terjadi di lingkungan terdekat dan terjadinya distribusi pengetahuan dan pengalaman lintas generasi. Kesadaran tersebut menegaskan pentingnya memberikan wadah bagi suara aspirasi pesan-pesan sosial melalui karya seni yang bisa diakses, diadaptasi, dan diduplikasikan oleh masyarakat, salah satunya dengan melalui workshop wayang kardus. Perkembangan zaman akan terus beriringan dengan ragam permasalahan yang dapat menjadi landasan dasar perjuangan solidaritas kolektif melalui aktivisme seni.

Kata kunci: aktivisme seni; solidaritas kolektif; wayang kardus; Taring Padi



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1. Introduction

Artivism has been the foundation of Taring Padi throughout its 25 years of existence. Established in 1998, Taring Padi began as a movement, initiated by ASRI (Akademi Seni Rupa Indonesia or Indonesian Visual Art Academy) fine arts students and was driven by anti-Suharto demonstrations and the post-Suharto era (Heron & Kim, 2023). Taring Padi implemented the struggle by utilizing artwork as a medium to teach and learn politics and to build consciousness around various social issues (Sinaga, 2011). Thus, Taring Padi voices social realities through artistic media and activism, rooted in the ideology of learning and working together. Over the past 25 years, Taring Padi has fostered solidarity with various societal elements through diverse activities. The *turun ke bawah* (*turba*) movement is implemented through the *live-in* method—living within communities—to apply the principles of learning and working together while sharing knowledge and experiences. Taring Padi's artistic activities are often carried out through solidarity-driven initiatives such as *wayang kardus* (cardboard puppet) workshops, woodcut printmaking workshops, murals, and performances. On the other hand, Taring Padi also builds solidarity within the global art scene through alternative spaces and art collectives. Since 1998, Taring Padi has consistently used art as a path for activism, continuously voicing the spirit of solidarity and struggle, grounded in its commitment to the people.

In 2022, Taring Padi participated in the world's most prestigious contemporary art exhibition, Documenta Fifteen (D15) in Kassel, Germany. For the first time in Documenta's history, an Indonesian art collective was appointed as the Artistic Director, it was *ruangrupa* (*ruru*) from Jakarta, Indonesia. *Ruangrupa* adopted the *lumbung* working method as both an artistic and managerial approach. *Lumbung*, literally meaning a communal rice barn, was interpreted in the context of D15 as a form of communalism and collectivity (Yalçinkaya, C. T., 2024). This concept aligns closely with the spirit of activism. Taring Padi approached its participation in D15 as an opportunity for consolidation by presenting its works in the spirit of solidarity. One of its key activities was a series of *wayang kardus* (cardboard puppet) workshops held in various locations and in collaboration with different communities.

This practice-based research aims to analyze Taring Padi's artistic work and its intersections with artivism. The data findings from this study are expected to extend messages of solidarity by contributing to the discourse on artistic practices, grassroots movement solidarity, and the boundless entanglement of activism. Beyond tactical actions such as *turba* (grassroots engagement) or demonstrations, this research highlights the strategic role of archiving and documenting *wayang kardus* workshops as a crucial effort in distributing knowledge across time and generations. It examines how art, through *wayang kardus* workshops, can navigate the complexities of social issues and serve as an educational and artistic expression platform, as well as an accessible medium for amplifying community voices.

2. Literature Review

In the context of activism, art takes an important role in conveying messages through creative expression. Various artistic activism methods are implied, by conducting demonstrations involving mass mobilization to digital activism via social media. The form of activism through art and culture should be recognized as an integral part of social reality. Artistic activism is compelling due to its artistic elements, incorporating imagination, a certain openness to utopian projects, unconventionality, creativity, and the use of artistic procedures such as defamiliarization, irony, and satire (Janez, 2021).

On the other hand, activism can take the form of social initiatives, such as Taring Padi's art programs organized with children during the post-earthquake recovery in Yogyakarta in 2006 (White, 2011). Taring Padi's activism, expressed through visual artworks, serves as both a medium of critique and a platform for collective learning. Artistic activism is managed organically, embracing solidarity across different societal elements as a grassroots movement while addressing issues of injustice. The visual representations

in these artworks can be straightforward or enigmatic, often rich with satire and irony, portraying social realism. Realist artworks are understood as reflections of tangible realities rather than abstract, idealized visions, which are often difficult for the general public to appreciate (Novitasari & Utama, 2020). One example of an art medium utilized in activism is *wayang kardus* (cardboard puppets).

Wayang kardus (cardboard puppet) art creates the essence of activism by reflecting the use of inexpensive and easily accessible materials, making it available to people from all social backgrounds. Unlike traditional *wayang* (shadow puppetry), *wayang kardus* does not adhere to the classical aesthetic of intricately carved puppets or conventional *wayang* performances. The choice of cardboard as a medium is also a deliberate effort to ensure that the artwork can be easily reproduced, allowing its activist message to be widely distributed. Additionally, *wayang kardus* has been applied as a creative learning model in academic fields. Research in early childhood education has shown that storytelling using *wayang kardus* enhances children's storytelling abilities (Muthohharoh et al., 2021). The spontaneity and simplicity of *wayang kardus* creation add to its unique appeal, leaving a lasting impression on both audiences and participating artists (Mochammad, 2024). Despite utilizing low-cost materials, *wayang kardus* does not compromise on aesthetic value. This is evident in the works of Taring Padi, which maintain strong visual appeal while addressing critical socio-political issues. The themes presented in *wayang kardus* artworks revolve around activism, conveyed in both implicit and explicit forms. As Karl Marx suggested (Morawski, Stefan, 1970), the evolution of art generates hidden meanings related to the progression of human civilization, the far-reaching consequences of class antagonism, and the relentless human desire for emancipation from tyranny, injustice, and hunger.

An art collective can be translated as a community or an association. Historically, another term used to describe such groups is *sanggar* (art studios). Whether referred to as a collective, community, association, or *sanggar*, these communal spaces share a spirit of collaboration, learning, and working together, often built upon a common interest that forms their foundation. Records indicate that the presence of such spaces has been influenced by the nationalist movement Taman Siswa, which emphasized egalitarian principles and implemented a flexible and open educational structure (Lusandiana, 2020). Yogyakarta, home to Indonesia's oldest art institution, has long served as a fertile ground for the growth and evolution of art collectives over generations.

Art collectives continue to emerge in Yogyakarta, ranging from newly-created groups to those that persist through multiple governmental periods. Many of these collectives were initiated by students from ISI (Indonesian Institute of the Arts), initially formed as peer groups for mutual artistic growth or as communities founded on shared artistic ideologies (Tunnikmah & Irawanto, 2023). Historically, as noted by Suryajaya et al. (2023), the rise of modern art collectives is often narrated within the context of the fall of the New Order, marked by trends of openness and transformation. The emergence of these collectives can also be seen as a form of resistance to the art ecosystem, which has traditionally been dominated by institutional and market-driven forces. Many young artists turn to collectives due to the limited opportunities in commercial galleries and as a strategic means to navigate around the bureaucratic hurdles of public art institutions (Hujatnika & Zainsjah, 2020).

As an art collective, Taring Padi has undergone shifts in its membership structure without altering its core spirit of working and learning together. Over time, its solidarity networks have continued to expand. The informal social spaces it fosters, the trust built among members, global collaborations, and a strong commitment to collectivism have strengthened Taring Padi, allowing it to develop networks that embrace diversity (Crosby, 2011). The sustainability of its collective spirit and solidarity is deeply rooted in the Indonesian cultural philosophy of *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation), a principle emphasized by Bung Karno in his speech "The Birth of Pancasila" during the BPUPKI session on June 1, 1945 (Tim Fixer, 2021). The concept of *gotong royong* centers on collectivity, consensus, and cooperation as ideological foundations governing everyday social interactions, making it an integral part of Indonesia's cultural and philosophical identity (Salima Hakim, 2021).

One of the key manifestations of collective solidarity is environmental activism. This issue has been consistently championed by communities in the Kendeng mountain region, who have actively opposed extensive mining activities. The broader impacts of climate change threaten biodiversity, and environmental degradation is increasingly recognized as a form of violence against both nature and humanity. Thus, collectives and solidarity are deeply intertwined, forming an inseparable connection between art and activism.

3. Methods

This research was conducted during the implementation period of the Documenta Fifteen exhibition, from 2021 to 2022. The study applies a qualitative research method aimed at analyzing the production process of *wayang kardus* through a database of its production in the studio as well as through community workshops. The observation timeline was carried out directly during the data collection period, from the production phase to the finalization of the data. This research describes the *wayang kardus* production method as an integral part of art activism.

The data sources in this study are divided into two categories: primary data and secondary data. Primary data was obtained through participatory observation, involving direct interaction with the material objects under study. The researcher is a member of the Taring Padi collective and served as the Project Manager for the Documenta Fifteen exhibition, thus experiencing various events during the project period firsthand. This direct involvement significantly influenced the depth and intensity of the data findings. Meanwhile, secondary data was collected from archival records, including correspondence documents, photographs, videos, and social media sources.

The collected data was analyzed through a process of data reduction and verification, which was conducted internally within the collective during the finalization phase. Through the data reduction process, the most relevant information for the research was identified and streamlined. The observations included analyzing documentation in the form of photographs of *wayang kardus* production activities, correspondence letters, Taring Padi's social media content, and informal, unstructured interviews through project discussions with fellow collective members.

4. Results

4.1. Production of Cardboard Puppets Studio and Workshop

Table 1: Theme Classification and Number of Wayang Kardus Produced in Yogyakarta Studio

Theme of <i>Wayang</i>	Amount
Militerism	27
Gender	8
Corruption	29
Environment	36
Race	20
1965	28
Education	15
Freedom of Religion	13
Human Rights	28
Pandemic	8
Palestine dan Myanmar	11
Refugee	16
Universal	77

Source: Taring Padi Document, 2022

Table 2: Theme Classification and Number of Wayang Kardus Produced in Yogyakarta Studio

Date	Location	Community Partner
26th August 2021	Yogyakarta	Omah Buku Kreatif - Sanggar Anak Kampoeng Indonesia (SAKI)
29th August 2021	Yogyakarta	Survive Garage!
1st September 2021	Jember	Museum Huruf
5th September 2021	Malang	Pena Hitam Malang, Titik Dua Kolektif
7th September 2021	Surabaya	Serikat Mural Surabaya
25th September 2021	Pati	Omah Kendeng, Wiji Kendeng
26th September 2021	Kayen	Rumah Merdeka, Roemah Goegah
28-29th September 2021	Blora	Pendopo Pengayoman Samin Surosentiko
5th December 2021	Yogyakarta	Juanga Culture
December	Wadas	Solidaritas with Gempadewa
12th December 2021	Yogyakarta	Kelola Art Fest
Periodically	Germany	Malso 13, Soy Division, Environment in Justice 'KAUM' Performance and film festival, Karma Kulturgarten, Street fest, "Umwelt und Nachhaltigkeitfest, Gebewo Verbundwohnen für Frauen, PSR Üfer, Alte Fabrik", "Kunst und Demokratie", Barbarossa Schule, Berliner Familie, Montessori Biberkor Schule, Kolorcubes, Street Bolzer, Sander Haus, Rurukids
Periodically	Amsterdam	Framer Framed
Periodically	Australia	Lismore Regional Gallery
Periodically	United States of America	Markertview Art Gallery, York College of Pennsylvania

Source: Taring Padi Document, 2022

The table above represents data collected periodically. This is because both the production of *Wayang Kardus* at the Yogyakarta studio and the implementation of workshops are ongoing activities within a close timeframe. The data compilation was carried out collectively by reviewing correspondence records and photo and video documentation owned by each member of Taring Padi. The implementation of *Wayang Kardus* workshops outside Indonesia, involving local communities, was coordinated by Taring Padi members residing in those countries

4.2. Cardboard Puppet Visuals According to Theme Classification



Figure 1: Visual representation of *Wayang Kardus* produced in the studio for each theme
(Source: Taring Padi Document, 2022)

Table 3: Theme Classification and Number of Wayang Kardus Produced in Yogyakarta Studio

No	Amount
1	Militarism: <i>Rakus Tanah dan Darah</i> . Acrylic on cardboard. 2021
2	Gender: <i>Menolak Stigma</i> . Acrylic on cardboard. 2021
3	Environment: <i>Tolak Pabrik Semen</i> . Acrylic on cardboard. 2021
4	Race: <i>Semua Bersaudara</i>
5	Corruption: <i>Hancurkan Budaya Korupsi</i> . Acrylic on cardboard. 2021
6	Freedom of Religion: <i>Perdamaian Antar Umat Beragama</i>
7	Human Rights: <i>Melawan Impunitas, Melawan Lupa</i>
8	PANDEMIC: <i>Rakyat Bantu Rakyat</i>
9	PMR: No More Victims, Free Palestine
10	Refugee: No Human is Illegal
11	Universal: Oligarki Musuh Rakyat
12	1965: <i>Nyanyian Bisu</i>
13	Education: <i>Belajar Bersama</i>

Source: Taring Padi Document, 2022



Figure 2: Examples of Wayang Kardus outcomes from workshops (Source: Taring Padi Document, 2022)



Figure 3: Production to presentation of cardboard puppets (Source: Taring Padi Document, 2022)



Figure 4: Cardboard puppet workshop at the Museum of Letters and Pendopo Pengayoman Samin Suro Sentiko (Source: Taring Padi Document, 2022)

5. Discussions

5.1. Art Activism: Wayang Kardus as a Medium of Expression and Education

Taring Padi responded to the invitation to exhibit at Documenta Fifteen (D15) as an act of solidarity with great optimism by presenting 1,000 life-size *Wayang Kardus* (1:1 scale) as a symbolic “replacement” for the masses. The themes for these *Wayang Kardus* were determined collectively through a series of discussions. Despite the ambitious goal of producing 1,000 figures, the process was carried out organically, without setting a fixed target for each theme or during workshops. The decision on the number of *Wayang* per theme was based on dialogue and discussion among members. Taring Padi engaged in extensive discussions and digital research to strengthen the visualization of each theme. Among the 13 selected themes, only the “Pandemic” theme was newly introduced, while the other 12 had already been central topics in Taring Padi’s previous works. To ensure visual diversity, Taring Padi revisited archival materials dating back to 1998, drawing inspiration from past artworks and contextualizing them to reflect current social realities. The learning process was further enriched by direct engagement with *Wayang Kardus* workshop collaborators. Technically, the figures were created by suspending cardboard vertically against walls. Throughout the production process, Taring Padi experimented with different techniques. For instance, in the *Wayang Kardus* pieces addressing militarism, members divided tasks into specific roles: sketching, applying a green base color, and finalizing the details.

Both the *Wayang Kardus* created by Taring Padi members and those made by workshop participants showcased distinct characteristics, with no fixed aesthetic standard. As seen in the table above, many of the figures incorporated text to clarify their intended messages. One of the key issues highlighted was environmental concerns, particularly voiced by communities in the Kendeng mountains. Various texts inscribed on the *Wayang* figures, such as “*Reject the Cement Factory*”, “*Kendeng Stays Green*”, and “*There Are Many Ways to Make Money, But Not by Destroying Kendeng*”, aimed to educate both local communities and the wider public on the importance of coexisting with nature. This sentiment aligns with the beliefs of the Kendeng Community, reflected in the lyrics: “*Ibu Bumi wis maringi, Ibu Bumi dilarani, Ibu Bumi kang ngadili*”. (*Mother Earth has given, Mother Earth is harmed, Mother Earth will judge.*)

By conducting workshops within various communities, Taring Padi created spaces for direct engagement and learning about the diverse efforts of local activists who continue to fight for their voices to be heard. For instance, in the *Wayang Kardus* visuals produced in the studio with the Environmental theme, one figure was adapted from a real event in 2016, when female farmers staged a protest against a cement factory by cementing their feet in place. By 2021, when this *Wayang Kardus* was created, the same imagery was still being used, demonstrating that the issue remained relevant as an educational tool to raise awareness about environmental protection for future generations.

The various themes explored in *Wayang Kardus* carry messages aimed at dismantling stigmas, opposing violence, challenging greed, advocating for peace, and demanding recognition of human rights violations and environmental crimes. These cardboard puppets, inscribed with solidarity messages against injustice, were exhibited in front of the *People’s Justice* banner. Hundreds of *Wayang* figures stood in a row, resembling a protest march, each carrying its own message of solidarity and call for justice. As a medium of expression and education, the visual representation and narratives of *Wayang Kardus* created in workshops were highly diverse. Workshop participants came from all age groups, with many children actively involved. The visuals often emerged from imagination, favorite cartoon characters, or children’s aspirations. Taring Padi members facilitated the workshops by selecting language that was accessible and easy to understand, providing encouragement, guiding participants to feel confident in drawing on cardboard, and acting as both listeners and storytelling companions. Given the unpredictable attention span and interests of children, *Wayang Kardus* workshops with young participants were often conducted in groups, fostering collaboration and teamwork among them.

5.2. Sustaining Solidarity Networks: Organizing as an Ongoing Effort

Since its formation in 1998, Taring Padi's works, ideas, and networks have continuously expanded over its 25 years of existence. This network has spread like wildfire, it is growing organically through word-of-mouth recommendations and widening connections. This collective process is driven by individuals within Taring Padi who firmly believe in the spirit of working and learning together. The commitment to sustaining the collective has led Taring Padi to maintain strong relationships with its network, engaging them as collaborators in *Wayang Kardus* workshops. Taring Padi builds and nurtures these networks organically, grounded in shared concerns and collective interests. Support is reciprocated across different communities, strengthening mutual engagement in each other's activities. The production of *Wayang Kardus* workshops is coordinated by a dedicated Taring Padi member, who, alongside the Project Manager, oversees the inventory of correspondence data and maintains communication with community collaborators. As previously mentioned, ruangrupa, as the curator of *Documenta Fifteen*, entrusted each artist with managing their respective *lumbung* (collective resource-sharing). For Taring Padi, managing their *lumbung* was a means of fostering solidarity and strengthening ties with community networks that remain steadfast in their commitment to activism through art.

Unlike the more structured and consistent pace of *Wayang Kardus* production in the studio, the *Wayang Kardus* workshops required a different, more flexible approach. Each workshop site had its own dynamics, necessitating adaptability. Before starting a workshop, Taring Padi introduced participants to the final *Wayang Kardus* presentation planned for *Documenta Fifteen*. In some cases, the workshops concluded with parades or performances, further amplifying the messages embedded in the artwork. Getting along with that, Taring Padi emphasized the significance of these workshops as a platform for gathering community voices. The community networks involved in these workshops remain well-maintained and include youth-led art collectives such as *Pena Hitam Malang* and *Juanga Culture*, as well as environmental preservation groups like *Sedulur Sikep* at *Pendopo Pengayoman H. Samin Suro Sentiko*. Through the *Wayang Kardus* workshops, the focus extends beyond aesthetics; the essence lies in the ongoing dialogue that accompanies the process.

...Part of Taring Padi's contribution to documenta fifteen is the sharing of skills needed to make movable puppets in a series of collaborative workshops with committed communities both inside and outside Indonesia, and during the documenta fifteen festival itself. The creation of more than thousands of life-size cardboard puppets created in these workshops will give voice to the diverse range of social justice and environmental issues of importance to workshop participants and will be presented on the streets of Kassel during the festival. Storytelling through puppetry is a traditional element of Indonesian culture. Taring Padi uses cardboard puppets as a pragmatic and interactive medium to support activist groups in their struggles for social justice in their communities. In effect, they are deconstructing the highbrow art form of the Indonesian shadow puppet to a grassroots level and bringing its communicative and entertainment qualities to street action. A further advantage of cardboard puppets as a medium is that the material is recycled, easy to get, light, and cheap – all key factors in making this form of activism broadly accessible. (Taring Padi: 2022)

The quote above is a caption from the *Wayang Kardus* artwork exhibited at *Documenta Fifteen*. The meticulous preparation for the exhibition, including the production of *Wayang Kardus* and other works, took two years. Each member contributed according to their skills. The organic organizing approach typical of collectives was maintained by forming teams and assigning responsibilities. Specifically, the *Wayang Kardus* production in the studio took 66 days, totaling 2,241 working hours by 16 people in rotation. Meanwhile, *Wayang Kardus* workshops conducted outside Taring Padi's studio in Yogyakarta took place throughout the preparation period for *Documenta Fifteen*, spanning from 2021 to 2022.

6. Conclusions

A key finding of this research is that solidarity can manifest as a form of activism. In this case, Taring Padi embodies it through the medium of art, using the *Wayang Kardus* workshop method. As time progresses, evolving societal issues continue to serve as the foundation for collective solidarity efforts through artistic activities. Altogether with workshop collaborator communities, Taring Padi upholds this spirit through *Wayang Kardus* figures. Beyond achieving a mass production of over 1,000 pieces, *Wayang Kardus* has become a symbol of struggle. These artworks appear in various locations, each carrying its own message while being unified by the spirit of solidarity.

Art and activism represent both a quiet and noisy pursuit. For 25 years, Taring Padi has remained steadfast in creating works that align with the people's struggles. This sustained existence is a testament to the commitment of its members to fostering a culture of learning and working together. More than just a slogan, the D15 exhibition and its program activations served as a means of both internal and external consolidation. This research contributes to the discourse on art activism, emphasizing its ongoing relevance within the broader trajectory of art history. The process of knowledge and experience-sharing through Taring Padi's *Wayang Kardus* workshops offers an accessible and applicable alternative for arts education. Thus, *Wayang Kardus* remains a living art form—technically easy to replicate and contextually relevant as a medium for voicing social messages.

The *Wayang Kardus* workshop process can be likened to the life cycle of a plant: sowing good seeds, nurturing networks, and harvesting solidarity through an inclusive artistic production process that extends beyond aesthetics.

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