



Reading the Taring Padi Cardboard Puppet Workshop in the Documenta Fifteen for the 2021-2022 Period Through the Perspective of Pablo Helguera

Rio Aji Nusantara Putra S*
Muhammad Kholid Arif R**
Rr Vegasari Adya Ratna***

Department of Art Management,
Yogyakarta Institute of Arts
Indonesia, Jl. Parangtritis Km. 6.5,
Sewon, Yogyakarta, 55188,
Indonesia.

rioajiwork69@gmail.com*
kholid_rozaq@isi.ac.id**
vegasariadya@isi.ac.id***

ABSTRACT

Participatory art has grown significantly as a response to the sense of alienation experienced by society within contemporary art practices. In Indonesia, this phenomenon emerges in various forms, one of which is the Wayang Kardus workshop initiated by the art collective Taring Padi. This research aims to analyze the management of the Wayang Kardus workshop through the perspective of participatory art as developed by Pablo Helguera (socially engaged art). A qualitative descriptive approach is employed to explore the dynamics of the workshop's management, focusing on Helguera's six principles: collaboration, transpedagogy, performativity, documentation, deskilling, and social situations. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and documentation studies. The findings indicate that Taring Padi's management practices reflect all six of Helguera's principles within the Indonesian local context. Collaboration is manifested through collective work and equitable role distribution; transpedagogy is evident in the reciprocal learning process between facilitators and participants; performativity is realized through creative actions in public spaces; documentation functions as a form of critical archive; deskilling enables the inclusion of non-artist participants; and social situations encourage art practices that are contextually grounded and relevant to community conditions. In conclusion, the management of Taring Padi's Wayang Kardus workshop represents an art practice rooted in social engagement, emphasizing equitable power distribution, sensitivity to community contexts, and the sustainability of relationships between artists and participants.

Keywords: Taring Padi, Participatory Art, Pablo Helguera, Cardboard Puppet.

INTRODUCTION

Taring Padi has long occupied a significant position within Indonesia's sociopolitical art landscape through its commitment to collectivism, political advocacy, and community-based cultural practices. Since its founding in 1998, the collective has developed a repertoire of aesthetic and pedagogical strategies aimed at mobilizing public participation and amplifying grassroots struggles. Among its most persistent methods is the wayang kardus workshop, a participatory format that combines accessible materials, collaborative image-making, and

political education. This workshop model has circulated widely across numerous communities, especially those confronting environmental, agrarian, and human rights issues.

The international circulation of Taring Padi's practices reached an important milestone during Documenta Fifteen (2022), where ruangrupa's curatorial framework, *lumbung*, foregrounded collectivity, resource sharing, and socially engaged art. Within this context, Taring Padi facilitated a series of wayang kardus workshops between 2021 and 2022 across several

localities, including Wadas, Kendeng, and Pakel. These workshops were not merely artistic activities but functioned as social processes in which community members articulated lived experiences of conflict, resistance, and solidarity. The activities emphasized education, collective reflection, and co-authorship, positioning the workshop as both an artistic methodology and a form of participatory political practice.

Existing literature on participatory art in Indonesia largely discusses community engagement in broad terms, often emphasizing collaboration or social critique while leaving the methodological structures of participation underexamined. Only a limited number of studies critically assess how artists or collectives organize learning processes, negotiate power relations within participatory settings, or structure interactions between facilitators and participants. Studies on Taring Padi typically focus on political iconography, historical activism, or collective labor, but rarely examine the operational dynamics of their workshops as cultural pedagogy. As a result, there remains a gap in understanding how their participatory strategies are systematically constructed, enacted, and received within specific socio-cultural contexts.

To address this gap, this study examines Taring Padi's cardboard puppet workshops in the Documenta Fifteen program (2021–2022) through Pablo Helguera's framework of participatory art. Helguera offers six analytical principles, collaboration, transpedagogy, performativity, documentation, deskilling, and social situations, that enable a structured assessment of participatory practices from conceptual, pedagogical, and social perspectives. Although Helguera's framework has been applied globally, it has seldom been used to analyze Indonesian socially engaged art, and it has never been applied to Taring Padi's workshop model. Therefore, this research aims to fill this methodological and contextual gap by positioning the workshops as pedagogical events and socio-cultural encounters rather than as supplementary activities within an institutional program.

Therefore, this study aims to analyze the structure, process, and participatory dynamics of Taring Padi's cardboard puppet workshops in Documenta Fifteen by applying Pablo Helguera's participatory art principles to understand how collaboration, learning, and social relations are constructed within the workshops.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative descriptive approach using a case study design. A case study is understood as an in-depth investigation of a specific phenomenon within a defined context, program, event, process, institution, or social group, conducted within a particular timeframe through multiple data-collection

strategies.

1. Data Sources

a. Primary Data

Primary data were obtained directly through in-depth interviews with selected informants. The researcher collected and documented these data independently.

The primary data came from interviews with:

- Alexander Supartono – art historian and member of Taring Padi
- Ladija Triana Dewi – manager of Taring Padi
- Bayu Widodo – artist and member of Taring Padi

These interviews focused on workshop processes, participatory strategies, organizational dynamics, and reflections on Documenta fifteen (2021–2022).

b. Secondary Data

Secondary data consist of materials gathered through reading and documentation of previous research. These include:

- Written documents (reports, articles, archives, announcements)
- Visual documents (photographs, posters, workshop documentation, exhibition materials)
- Audio materials (recordings, voice notes, discussions)

Secondary data were used to support primary findings and to contextualize the analysis within broader discussions on participatory art, community practices, and Taring Padi's history.

2. Data Collection Techniques

a. Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted, allowing the researcher to begin with prepared questions while developing additional questions based on the conversation's flow.

Interviews were carried out in person and online due to geographical limitations of several informants.

b. Documentation

Documentation involved collecting photographs, workshop archives, exhibition records, posters, and textual materials relating to Taring Padi's cardboard puppet workshops during Documenta fifteen.

These materials served as both historical

evidence and analytical sources for interpreting participatory processes.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Wayang Kardus

Wayang kardus workshops exemplify Taring Padi's model of socially engaged art, blending creative production with political education. Founded in 1998 by progressive art students, Yogyakarta's Taring Padi has long rooted its practice in socio-political solidarity and cultural action. Its signature media—banners, woodcuts, music and life-sized wayang kardus—are explicitly created for protest and community organizing.

In Indonesian tradition, puppetry is a vehicle for public storytelling, and Taring Padi's cardboard puppets "bring Javanese highbrow art to a grassroots level" while mobilizing communities. These large recycled figures are designed to be cheap and lightweight—advantages that allow mass participation—but they are also intentionally fragile, underscoring their ephemeral activist role. For example, during street protests these life-sized puppets voice collective demands, lift morale, and even shield demonstrators (from sun or police).

In practice, a Wayang Kardus workshop is an open, hands-on session where facilitators and participants co-create such puppets. The emphasis is on learning-by-making: as Bayu Widodo notes, "participants develop designs and create large-scale cardboard puppets inspired by the puppets Taring Padi uses as tools for protest and activism". The workshop is thus both art-making and education: people with little prior experience jointly learn craft skills and discuss social issues. This socially engaged method builds on Taring Padi's decades of working "with diverse communities" urban, migrant, fishing-farm groups, schools, etc. So that the art is produced with the community rather than merely shown to it. In short, the Wayang Kardus workshop is a participatory cultural action that organizes, educates, and agitate, cementing its status as socially engaged art.



Figure 1. Results of the cardboard puppet workshop in Kendeng. Doc: Taring Padi, 2021

2. Documenta Fifteen Context

The Wayang Kardus workshops were embedded in documenta 15 (Kassel, 18 June–25 Sept 2022), which was itself framed by ruangrupa's Indonesian-inspired *lumbung* concept of shared resources and collective curation. As a *lumbung* artist, Taring Padi was invited to extend its communal ethos to Kassel. In the year leading

up to and during doc15, Taring Padi held Wayang Kardus workshops in multiple countries (Germany, Indonesia, the Netherlands, Australia) with various groups. These global workshops culminated in Taring Padi contributing roughly 1,000 cardboard puppets, large-scale banners, murals and a carnival parade to doc15.

Their exhibition (at Hallenbad Ost) presented 100+ artifacts from 22 years of practice. Notably, the project was explicitly framed under "Bara Solidaritas" (Flame of Solidarity) with the tagline "Sekarang Mereka, Besok Kita" ("First they came for them, then they came for us"), signaling transnational empathy and political urgency. Documenta's format—dynamic, evolving venues and events, suited Taring Padi's style: their puppets were distributed across the city center and activated in performances and street actions. The official documenta calendar also lists three open Wayang Kardus workshops in Kassel (8–10 June 2022), confirming this integration. Overall, doc15 provided a collaborative platform for Taring Padi to scale its Wayang practice: workshop participants from Kassel learned puppet-making and then contributed their creations to the exhibition. This both amplified Indonesian struggles internationally and built new solidarity networks.

3. Analysis via Helguera's Principles

To analyze this data, we applied Helguera's six key principles of socially engaged art: Collaboration, Transpedagogy, Performativity, Documentation, Deskilling, and Social Environment. Table 1 below summarizes how each principle manifested in the Wayang Kardus project.

Principle	Helguera's Idea	Manifestation in Wayang Kardus Workshop
Collaboration	Joint creation with others; working with communities or other fields; attaching art to broader social issues.	Taring Padi co-led puppet-making with local groups (urban, migrant, students). Participants and artists co-designed puppets, reflecting collective narratives. The project's <i>lumbung</i> budget and network ensured artists from different countries worked together as peers.
Transpedagogy	Blending education and art-making in non-conventional ways.	The workshop was explicitly educational: facilitators taught painting and sculpting techniques on cardboard, while participants simultaneously learned about social issues. This "learning through doing"

Principle	Helguera's Idea	Manifestation in Wayang Kardus Workshop	Principle	Helguera's Idea	Manifestation in Wayang Kardus Workshop
Performativity	Art as action or event; involving bodies, movement, and public engagement.	(transpedagogy) approach echoes Helguera's call to embed art in pedagogical processes. Participants internalized activist messages as they crafted puppets together.	Deskilling	Demystifying art expertise; enabling novices to produce meaningful art.	archives for communal memory.
		Making and parading puppets is inherently performative. Workshop outputs were not static: the puppets were carried in demonstrations and a public carnival in Kassel. The act of marching with them (and creating them in real time) functioned as a collective performance that brought visibility to causes. Moreover, the workshop itself unfolded as a mini-performance (with storytelling, music and social interaction).			Taring Padi downplays "expert only" skill. The workshop encouraged anyone (with or without art background) to participate. Tools and techniques were simplified (recycling cardboard, using acrylic paint) so people could jump in. This reflects Helguera's idea of <i>deschooling</i> : facilitators share knowledge while not positioning themselves as gatekeepers. As one co-founder noted, "everyone is an artist, everyone is an expert" in such collectives, meaning the process is open to community expertise and co-learning.
Documentation	Emphasizing the recording of process and outcomes as part of the artwork.	While Helguera stresses documentation, here it was both literal and symbolic. Photos and videos of workshops and puppet actions documented local concerns, and the final display at Hallenbad Ost served as an archive of the project. Taring Padi also had participants record narratives, making the puppets themselves "documents" of solidarity: each puppet embodied a specific issue (from anti-militarism to climate justice). Thus the workshop generated tangible	Social Environment	Informed by context; addressing local problems, beliefs, and needs.	The project was deeply rooted in social context. Taring Padi investigated community issues (e.g. labor rights, ecological concerns, human rights) and let these drive puppet design. Workshops took place in communities or cultural spaces, and facilitators actively learned from local participants about their aspirations. In Helguera's terms, the artists "inform themselves about a social environment" and let it shape the art. For instance, Indonesian political iconography (pigs, rats symbolizing corrupt generals) was explained by local facilitators to

Principle	Helguera's Idea	Manifestation in Wayang Kardus Workshop
		German participants, though it later proved controversial abroad. In sum, the artwork emerged directly from the lived environment of each community.



Figure 2. The “community gathering” approach when starting a workshop
Doc: Taring Padi, 2021

As shown in Table 1, every principle is recognizable in Taring Padi’s approach. Collaboration is evident: instead of singular authorship, art-making was a collective effort across cultures (echoing Helguera’s idea of attaching to wider concerns). Transpedagogy appears as hands-on teaching – the workshop functioned as an alternative classroom blending art skills with political dialogue. Performativity infused the entire project: the puppets were danced, paraded, and played, turning static images into live social theater. Documentation took the form of the archive of artifacts and media from the workshops, preserving local stories. In terms of deskilling, Taring Padi deliberately used accessible methods so participants could lead; as one observer noted of Indonesian collectives, the value that “everyone is an artist” and co-creation is intergenerational shows how expertise was shared. Finally, engagement with the social environment was constant: the designers asked about community struggles and shaped their symbols accordingly (as Helguera would advise).

4. Strengths and Challenges

The Wayang Kardus model proved strongly generative. Its strengths include high public engagement and adaptability. Participants report feeling empowered by the hands-on, communal process – a strength underlined by Taring Padi’s 20+ years of practice learning from communities. The project also built a wide solidarity network: Taring Padi leveraged doc15’s platform to campaign for diversity and tolerance on a global stage. Logistically, the workshop’s low-cost materials (recycled cardboard, simple paints) meant it could be staged widely and inclusively, embodying Helguera’s equitable ethos.

However, challenges emerged. The fragility of the

medium was one issue: as noted by Taring Padi, the cardboard puppets “are not resistant to water and heat”. Their ephemeral nature suits protest but requires care (e.g. working indoors or under cover). Other practical challenges included limited time and space – each open workshop had roughly 20 attendees, and the need for facilitators to constantly adapt to diverse skill levels. In Helguera’s terms, these are trade-offs of authentic engagement: openness and inclusivity (deskilling) can make outcomes unpredictable. Despite these challenges, feedback indicates that the collaborative learning environment and joyous, creative atmosphere were major assets of the project.



Figure 3. Workshop process with participants
Doc: Taring Padi

5. Conceptual Reflection

Using Helguera’s framework as an analytic tool proved illuminating but also highlighted cultural differences. Helguera’s six principles mapped neatly onto Taring Padi’s practice, validating key dimensions (e.g. seeing the workshop as a pedagogical, performative collaboration). Yet Indonesian social art often embodies these ideas by default. For example, Indonesian collectives emphasize that “everyone is an artist” and practice co-creation across generations; such collectivist values permeate projects even without invoking Western theory. Thus, while Helguera’s lens helped articulate the workshop’s structure, it underestimates how deeply communal norms (gotong royong or Bhinneka Tunggal Ika – unity in diversity) infuse Indonesian social art. Conceptually, the findings suggest that Helguera’s model is a useful scaffold for analyzing the Wayang Kardus workshop, but it should be applied with cultural sensitivity. In an Indonesian context, principles like collaboration and education are not just methods but ingrained communal ethos, and deskilling is a natural consequence of democratic values (everyone contributes). Recognizing this, we conclude that Helguera’s framework works well for description and critique, provided one also appreciates the local collectivist worldview that makes such participatory art possible.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that the Wayang Kardus workshop developed by Taring Padi functions as a socially engaged art practice closely aligned with Pablo

Helguera's six principles. Its collaborative structure, emphasis on mutual learning, and responsiveness to local socio-political realities reveal how artistic processes can serve simultaneously as cultural education, community building, and collective expression. Within the setting of documenta fifteen, the workshop expanded into a transnational platform that enabled participants from diverse cultural backgrounds to co-create visual narratives and engage in broader conversations on solidarity, resistance, and shared social concerns.

The analysis also indicates that although the workshop model possesses significant strengths such as accessibility, inclusivity, and the ability to mobilize communities, it faces challenges including material limitations, cross-cultural interpretation gaps, and the practical complexities of facilitation. These dynamics highlight the adaptive and process-oriented nature of participatory art. Ultimately, Helguera's framework proves effective for understanding the workshop's operational logic, yet the findings underscore the necessity of situating such practices within Indonesia's collectivist traditions, where collaboration and public participation are deeply embedded in everyday cultural life.

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