

A Whole New World: Art Students' Experience In Promoting Rivers' Environmental Problems Through Environmental Art Activity

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Abstract

Urban river environments in Yogyakarta have continually been in a deteriorating state for the last three decades. As it is getting worse many elements of society are trying to raise awareness on of the destruction of river environments. Artists are one of those elements who are involved in environmental activities. Despite their capacity to attract much attention, artists' involvements in the environmental art campaign are still limited to a handful of top artists. To promote environmental awareness among future artists, a workshop was designed to increase art students' awareness towards river environmental problems. This research aimed to describe students' experience and their involvement in environmental art activity and its impact on their environmental awareness on river environment. Twenty students from three departments, Fine Art, Craft, and the Design Department were recruited to join the program. They were given an introductory course on river environments and its problems. At the end of the course they were asked to create an art installation based on their basic knowledge of the problems with river environments in Yogyakarta, and their art. In depth interviews were conducted after the workshop and the art exhibition to reflect their experiences during the program. Using interpretative phenomenological analysis as a research method, the data were analyzed through three steps: 1) initial coding and finding the themes, 2) connecting the themes, and 3) comparing with other themes. The results showed three main themes as their interpretative experiences. These themes are: the river as a new medium of expression, the river as new knowledge, and the river as a memory of the past. The way students framed problems for creating the environmental art were influenced by their Art training. Students from the Design Department were focused on tackling the real problem of the rivers whilst the students from the Fine Art and Craft department were more focused on the symbolic problem of the rivers.

Keywords: *art students, river environments, environmental art*

INTRODUCTION

Rivers in Yogyakarta had cultural and economical values in the past. They served as natural boundaries between two political entities and even between kingdoms. They also had spiritual values as places where spirits lived or occupied the areas

around the rivers. Because of their importance rivers were treated with great care and respect.

Nowadays rivers have lost their value and meaning. People seem to ignore their existence and treat them as giant sewers in the cities. They channel their domestic waste directly to the rivers and throw their garbage into their waters. Rivers becomes synonymous with slums and squatters because most of the river banks in Yogyakarta are high density settlements with bad sanitation and poor environmental hygiene.

Community members from many social backgrounds such as engineers, religious leaders and artists have tried to raise awareness about this environmental problem. Even ordinary people turn into environmental activists after realizing that the river environment in which they live is in great danger.

As one of the cultural centers and heritage cities in Indonesia, Yogyakarta has many great artists and art students. Some of these artists have turned their attention to river environmental problems. However, despite its capacity to attract public attention, artists who are involved in environmental activity are very limited. Artists have a potency to be environmental campaigners; their ability to transform society in various ways is highlighted by Reed in his book (Reed, 2005). He argues that one of the functions of art is to inform society about social issues.

To increase artists' and future artists' participation in tackling environmental problems, Institut Seni Indonesia (ISI) Yogyakarta held an art event concerning river environments. The event was held on 5 December 2016 on the Bedog riverbank. Ten to twelve students from each department in the Visual Art Faculty were invited to present their artwork in the river environment.

Until recently environmental education for art students was limited to small portion of the curriculum. This can affect students' awareness toward environmental problems since environmental knowledge can increase pro-behavior of the students. (Latif, Omar, Bidin, & Awang, 2013)

Studies on environmental awareness among students are not new; Fu et.al (Fu, Zhang, Xiong, & Bai, 2018) studied pro-environmental behavior and behaviors on campus in Tianjin, China. The result showed that promoting a pro-environmental cultural atmosphere and a consistent sustainability policy might significantly increase pro-environmental behaviors on university campuses.

Amaral et.al (do Amaral, de Araujo Vieira Santos, & de Melo, 2014) studied the role of students' environmental education in changing their perceptions and attitudes toward the coral reefs in Brazil. This research focused on before and after environmental education intervention of students. The result showed that their knowledge on coral reefs shifted from an economic perspective to an environmental perspective after the intervention.

Tezel et.al (Tezel, Ugural, & Giritli, 2018) studied pro-environmental behavior of university students based on cultural differences. As the environmental concerns failed to predict pro environmental behavior, the researcher relied on cultural biases to explain this phenomenon. This research tried to deepen the understanding on how cultural biases shape the pro environmental behavior.

Osman et.al (Osman, Jusoh, Amlus, & Khotob, 2014) explored the relationship between environmental knowledge and environmental attitudes toward pro-environmental behavior from the perspective of business students in Malaysia. Business students are the future managers therefore it is important to study their environmental knowledge and behaviors to protect the environment because they are most likely to implement policies that will affect the environment. The research suggested that environmental knowledge has significant impact on pro-environmental behavior.

Although a study on students' environmental knowledge and pro-environmental behavior suggested that environmental education is very important, its impact on art students and on their art has never been explored and studied. This research aimed to discover how art students made sense of their experience by including environmental knowledge into their art.

METHODS

Research Design

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to gain insight into how students made sense of their experiences when conceptualizing and installing art work into river environments. IPA was chosen because of its capability to give perspective from the participants' point of view in understanding the phenomenon of creating art work for the environment, and how they see the environmental problems through their art.

Data were collected with semi structured interviews. Two members of each department were chosen to be respondents. Each department consists of ten to twelve students, in total ten students were selected as respondents.

Data Analysis was conducted with interpretative analysis in three steps. The analyses involved an initial coding of data. After initial coding data were categorized based on similar theme and broken down into sub topic. The final step was to dialogue the theme's findings and compare them with other themes (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: A new challenge for creating art

Students who were involved in the event stated that the experience in creating art installations on the river banks was something new for them. Previously most of the students had been involved in many art projects, however to create art for the river was something that they never have tried before. One of the students said: “We have an annual outdoor art installation in the Craft Department called green garden...”

Other students from the Fine Art Department even have a special course in Experimental Art which deals with outdoor art installations. However they had never done this in the water, only on the ground or in the garden; the river was something new for them in terms of a place for creating art work.

Students from the Art Management were an exception in this case. They are usually not involved in creating art work since their main education purpose is to manage art events or exhibitions. They were hesitant at first and were not sure about their capability to produce a work of art for the event. However they felt that the opportunity was very exciting so they tried their best to participate in campaigning to protect rivers environments. One student recalled:

“We don’t create art..... We are trained to manage art events...we knew only the basic design as elementary course because we are not ...artists...so this is something new for us “

New experiences were not only the good and fun part in the program but they also presented difficulties and danger. The difficulty to display the art work was something they had not anticipated before. It was one thing to think about what kind of art work was to be placed in the river and was another thing was to set it in the real setting with the stream and difficult terrain. Even for experienced students such as those from the Fine Art Department, experienced difficulty setting up their art work.

Students from Art Management said that their art work was destroyed after two days because of heavy rain. Although it seemed natural that heavy rain would wipe out all obstacles in the water stream, the experience to lose an art work in an art exhibition somehow felt funny for them.

“ We don’t receive any comments for our art work...the teacher congratulated us for our effort and after two days it was gone in heavy rain....that was it...bye...bye”

Theme 2: A new understanding of the river

Before they create their art work, students were given a short course on river environment and environmental art. According to the students this course was very useful and expanded their understanding of river environments. Although some of

the students used to play in the river when they were children, not all of them understood how rivers can be so unpredictable. One of the students said:

“When I observed the three above the river I saw a piece of cloth stuck in the trunk...I thought about who was putting the laundry so high that it would be so difficult to collect....but then someone told me that the flood was so heavy that the water level reached to that point...I was so shocked to learn about that...”

Their contact with rivers in the past made them realize that rivers today are dirtier than before. The students used to bathe and swim with their friends but today it is almost impossible to imagine that kinds of activity let alone to do it again. One of the students recalled:

“River in the back of my house used to be clean and we played together in that river. Today I will not touch the water....it is very dirty”

When we asked about their experiences as children and their relationship with rivers, most of them felt nostalgic and had a good memory with it. It seemed that rivers were part of the good old day's experiences and something that we should let it go. They have shifted their interests to what matters in their lives now, that is the ground they live on. They know that rivers are very important in life and should be treated with care but most of them did not understand how their contributions affect the rivers.

Environmental problems with rivers seemed so far away from them and they did not feel the urgency to save river environments. We asked them whether they will do such an environmental activity related to rivers again and their answer was not clear but reluctantly they said maybe they will do it again if the location is more visible for wider viewers. However they said that they need another challenge for their art. One student stated that:

“That activity was good and we were OK with it ... but if we have to do it again...emm...emm ...I'd rather to do something different...”

Theme 3: Symbolism versus function

Two main category of artwork can be identified in this art event. The first one was artwork from the Fine Art Department that focused in creating symbolism on the rivers' problems. Their art is purely aesthetical without any function. This is in line with their education background and their previous experiences. During the installation, their art was redesigned and improvised because it did not fit with the river condition. It seemed normal for them to just improvise in the setting. Their drawing was not a rigid plan for their art it was more like guidance and could be adjusted whenever it was needed. One of the students explained:

“We made sketches for our artwork first...and we made adjustment when we installed the artwork into the river...basically it was just technical adjustment not the conceptual adjustment”

The students from Design Department were more functional in their art. They want to “help” the environment with their art. For Design students, creating environmental art was something new let alone environmental art in the rivers. Their art was based on environmental problems and they decided to tackle the problem with “art”. One of the design students explained:

“We observed the environment then we made assessment about what the people around the river need....we came up with the idea of flood siren to warn people when the flood is coming...”

The artwork of craft students was a combination between symbolism and function. Their art has meaning but can also be used as a functional item. They want to say something with their art but they also want to make something useful out of their art. One of them explained:

“We think of something that can attract people attention to river but in the same time we also think that this art should be useful for people too...”

DISCUSSION

The idea to hold environmental art for the rivers was perceived as a new opportunity and experience for art students. Although they knew that the event was not intended as a fully fledged environmental campaign they appreciated the effort to make a little change for the environment. New medium for an artist is always fascinating and challenging: artists are always looking for new frontiers and pushing the boundaries of their art.

Involvement in environmental art for the river demanded the students learn a new skill and develop new knowledge. Their knowledge made their understanding towards the river environment wider. However, this knowledge did not make them more concerned about the river environment. Environmental Values as a mediator could be the intermediate factor that makes individuals becomes more pro-environmental and the fact that their environmental knowledge is increased (Latif, Omar, Bidin, & Awang, 2013). In Indonesia the environmental values of river environments are considered less valuable compared to mountains or farming areas therefore people are less concerned about the rivers.

Students felt that rivers are different from any other areas in term of preference and playing destination. Although they were quite familiar with rivers when they were young they were considered hazardous areas especially for those who cannot swim. Familiarity with the environment is one of the key factors in learning Environmental Art they said, and that to create art means to know the place where it should be placed. In term of generating ideas students were not always in a democratic atmosphere, fine art students trusted their concept formulation to the most experienced member and followed his guidance to create an artwork.

Design students treated river problems as a design program. They started by collecting information about the surrounding area and tried to determine the problem based on the previous course and the real setting environment. They were more democratic in term of generating ideas and concept. Based on a basic idea they developed it by adjusting the concept in order to fit with the time, budget and setting. They also thought about their technical ability to produce the art. They avoided difficult technical problems so that they would not consume their energy and resources. Although in the real setting their artwork still needed many adjustments, they began by setting a standard that they could achieved.

Educational background provided them with different approaches to solve the problem. Students from three departments of Visual Arts provided a good comparison in dealing with environmental problems. It was not their intention to tackle the river environmental problems; they were not trained to solve environmental issues. However their advantages as attention grabber could benefit the environmentalist and activist in the future.

CONCLUSION

For art students participating in environmental art for the river was a new and exciting challenge. They encountered many unexpected things and gained new knowledge about river environments. Even though they were not so sure with their role in the bigger scheme of rescuing river environments, they felt that their contribution was a good start. In the future they probably will join similar programs but for the moment they do not plan to become environmentalists or activists.

They remembered rivers as beautiful places and often played with their friends when they were a young age. Rivers were associated positively when related to the past and perceived negatively in present time. It becomes something like a romantic environmental element that has gone after they forget to visit, or to pay attention to it.

The artworks were loaded with ideas to save the river environments. Students transformed their environmental knowledge into environmental arts using two strategies, symbolism and function. Both of these strategies derived from students' creative drive. Those who belonged to the Design Department tended to solve the problem through their artworks and those who belonged to the Fine Art Department were apt to use symbolism. The Craft Department used both strategies in their art.

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