

Art, the Ancient Spirit of ‘Gotong Royong’, and The Global Pandemic Village

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Abstract

According to the World Giving Index, a study done by the Charities Aid Foundation that provides insights into the global trends of generosity, Indonesia has taken top position of the chart and was named 2020’s most charitable country in the world. The notion of communality, consensus and collectivity, also known in Javanese as *gotong royong* or mutual assistance, a prominent characteristic associated with the traditional village life, appeared to also transpire within the global village. As we are universally connected through the digital world and are collectively experiencing a global pandemic where all art activities came to a halt, it is important to look further into how art adapted to these sudden changes and limitations of circumstances. Using a cultural studies approach and virtual ethnography data collecting, this paper will seek to examine how several online art initiatives tries to embody the spirit of collectivity, using artworks as a tool of activism to help others survive the pandemic, and at the same time re-imagining the notion of *gotong royong* that can persist in the digital village that function as a form of collectively belonging to the concept of a nation.

Keywords: global village, collectivity, art activism, pandemic

Aktivitas Seni sebagai Medium Gotong Royong di Era Pandemi

Abstrak

Menurut World Giving Index, sebuah studi yang dilakukan oleh the Charities Aid Foundation yang memberikan wawasan tentang tren global kedermawanan, Indonesia menempati posisi teratas dan dinobatkan sebagai negara paling dermawan tahun 2020 di dunia. Gagasan komunalitas, konsensus dan kolektivitas, yang juga dikenal dalam bahasa Jawa sebagai gotong royong, karakteristik yang diasosiasikan dengan tradisi dan kehidupan wilayah desa, tampak juga terjadi di dalam desa virtual. Karena kita terhubung secara universal melalui dunia digital dan secara kolektif sedang mengalami pandemi global di mana semua kegiatan seni terhenti, penting untuk melihat lebih jauh bagaimana seni beradaptasi dengan perubahan dan keterbatasan keadaan yang terjadi. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kajian budaya dan pengumpulan data etnografi virtual, makalah ini akan mencoba mengkaji bagaimana beberapa inisiatif seni daring mencoba untuk mewujudkan semangat kolektivitas, menggunakan karya seni sebagai alat aktivisme yang dapat membantu orang lain dalam kondisi pandemi, dan di saat yang sama kembali membayangkan gagasan gotong royong di desa digital sebagai usaha untuk menjadi bagian dari konsep sebuah bangsa.

Kata kunci: desa global, kolektivitas, aktivisme seni, pandemi

INTRODUCTION

The global pandemic due to Covid 19 that began in the first quarter of 2020 has had a tremendously profound impact on every aspect of human life, including all forms and activities relating to the art world. Movie theatres and museums were forced to close, art performances and theatre plays postponed, music concerts and art exhibitions around the world were cancelled, and everything came to a halt. The pandemic has devastated the financial and economic aspects of the entire art world. More importantly, isolation abolished the fundamental connection that humans get from collectively experiencing any art forms. As humans are navigating through these unprecedented times of isolation and confinement, art is of critical importance now more than ever on multiple levels. Changes and transformations in the context of art production, consumption and distribution are inevitable and necessary to adapt to the sudden changes and limitations of circumstances. As humans are confined within the safety of our homes, we depend solely on virtual connections through the internet, online platforms and applications, online education and entertainment, trying to collectively manoeuvre through the pandemic as what McLuhan (1962) referred to as the global village (Georgiadou, 2015). We are forced to substitute music concerts with online home concerts and virtual collaborations, social events with web seminars and podcasts, the movie theatre with online streaming platforms and art events with virtual museums and exhibitions.

Communities worldwide appear to come together and offer mutual assistance to others in getting through the pandemic. Interestingly, during the pandemic, Indonesia was named the most charitable country in the world for two years in a row. According to the World Giving Index published in 2021, a study done by the Charities Aid Foundation provides insights into the global trends of generosity. More than eight in ten Indonesians donated money in 2020, and the rate of volunteering is three times higher than the global average of any other country (Heslop, 2021).

The title of the most generous country perhaps can be justified by exploring the concept of *gotong royong*, familiar to all Indonesians. *Gotong royong* is a Javanese word that can be translated into mutual assistance or working together, which previously had a close association with the lives of traditional Indonesian rural areas or villages. The notion of *gotong royong* centred on collectivity, consensus and cooperation as an ideological base that governs daily societal activities and is constructed to be an integral part of Indonesian culture and philosophy of life (Bowen, 1986). The historical background of *gotong royong* has had its share of political interference from its origins to gather extra help for the peak of the harvest season in villages located in the rural area. It has been used as a hegemonic power play between the king and his servants in pre-colonial times. It

further developed into an extension of state power in the Old and New Order government regime (Bowen, 1986).

Tracing back to its hegemonic origins, the concept of *gotong royong* has since developed and understood as a distinctive characteristic of Indonesia as a nation. Referring to what Anderson (1991) said about imagined communities, that a nation is a community socially constructed and imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of a group (Anderson, 2006), *gotong royong* serves as one of the key elements that strengthen the image of becoming a part of Indonesia as a nation. Thus, the understanding of serving out of free will, voluntarily and free labour for the good of the community are ingrained as a consciousness, an awareness of all Indonesians, because these values provide the idea of belonging to an Indonesian framework.

The concept of zakat might also have contributed to the title given to Indonesia as the most generous country for two consecutive years in a row. Being one of the highest Muslim populated countries globally, Indonesia is accustomed to practising an act of charity known as zakat or alms. People donate money and gather proceeds to distribute it to the people in need. According to the World Giving Index report, research about Islamic philanthropy suggested that in response to the pandemic in 2020, Indonesia's Zakat payments were high in numbers (Heslop, 2021). Some reports stated that people were called to pay Zakat by Indonesian religious authorities as a way of collectively helping carry the economic burden of those who were hit the hardest by the pandemic.

After nearly two years into the pandemic, many initiatives offer various ways to donate to help each other get through any hardships. Art initiatives can also be observed as one form of embodiment of the spirit of *gotong royong*, where artists and art workers offer services or sell works to then donate the proceeds to those deemed in need. This paper will further observe, discuss, and analyze how art is used as a form of mutual assistance to survive collectively and cope with all the struggles caused by the pandemic.

METHOD

This research is qualitative research that uses a cultural studies paradigm with virtual ethnographic methods for data collection. According to Hine (2000), virtual ethnography can be defined as ethnography in, about and through virtual space (Carter, 2018). In practice, conventional ethnography is generally carried out with several stages such as participation, observation and interviews, which are also extended in the practice of virtual ethnography (Uzun & Aydin, 2012). In this study, observations were made virtually to collect art activities initiated by artists and art workers in Indonesia during the pandemic from mid-2020 to 2021. Art activities

that were closely observed were initiatives that offer custom made artworks for purchases and donate the proceeds to individuals, groups or any other specific communities in need.

The first phase of data collection began by doing online participatory observations of several visual artists and art workers' Instagram accounts, who published art initiatives within the pandemic period, which happens to be in close proximity and are connected to similar social circles with the author. Furthermore, data regarding forms of art initiatives are also collected by opening hashtags with keywords such as #opendonation #illustrasidonasi #artforcovid19 #opendonationcovid19 #arttodonate #artforpandemic #projectsenidonasi #opencomissiondonation and several other hashtag keywords to collect data of other art initiatives outside the author's familiar social circle. After identifying and collecting data of several art initiative forms that emerged during the pandemic on Instagram, the study further observed these findings of art initiatives and activities as text and analyzed its relation to the underlying value of *gotong royong* that appear to be a necessity or even mandatory as a part of collectively belonging to the idea of a nation in a turmoil of the pandemic.

RESULTS

Virtual observations reveal various social and artistic initiatives that help people impacted by the pandemic, which carries along with the spirit of collectivity. Since early 2020, there have been forms of initiatives that have emerged in social media. For example, Instagram feeds posts or stories that invite (through images and or illustrations) people to donate directly to a specific institution or crowdfunding platforms. Another example is lending a hand to distribute information (repost information) of specific individuals or communities who needed assistance. Other acts include giving free promotions to homemade merchandise or products, creative workers who offered free promotional services such as free photography, logo design and product branding to help increase the commercial value of home industry products. The research finds several creative workers, visual artists, and art collectives that contribute by selling original or making custom artworks to donate the proceeds for necessary causes, which will focus on this paper.

One example is the open donation art project initiated by Ika Vantiani, a female visual artist, curator, feminist, activist and creative worker from Jakarta. Ika is a collage artist and has been intertwining her creative endeavours with activism, specifically focusing on women's rights and gender equality. Using Twitter and Instagram as distribution platforms, she initiated an art project responding to Puan Bantu Puan's pandemic, translating into women helping women. The project started

around March of 2020 and offered several options for people to help transgender communities experiencing economic difficulties due to the limitation of income sources caused by the pandemic. One activity was to help promote home-cooked food products made by transgender friends and communities and post them online.

In the Puan Bantu Puan project, almsgiver can contribute by ordering Ika's collage artwork, tailor-made for each individual. People can send prints of their chosen photographs to then be turned into handmade and customized collage artwork, as shown in Figure 1. There were a total of four batches of the Puan Bantu Puan art donation project, stretching from March to November 2020, with each batch limited to a total of five collage pieces due to the fact that it is a custom handmade artwork that requires a lot of time and craftsmanship to produce. The Puan Bantu Puan project donated 85% of each artwork to Sanggar Seroja, a creative space for transgender communities and groups to channel their artistic talents, located in Kampung Duri, Jakarta, formed in 2016 (Irham, 2018) and also to several other transgender communities in Yogyakarta.



Figure 1. Custom made collage artwork from Puan Bantu Puan art initiative
(Source: Ika Vantiani's *Instagram* page https://www.instagram.com/p/B-qcTdcJnEF/?utm_medium=copy_link)

The study also found other examples of art initiative projects that emerged within the context of the covid 19 pandemic, for example, the open donation project initiated by Irene Riyanto, a graphic designer, illustrator and videographer based in Tangerang. In March 2020, using Instagram as a distribution platform, she initiated an open commission for donation project to help provide masks, hygiene kits and protective gears for health workers working in the frontline of the pandemic, which was given the title *Ilustrasi Donasi* (illustration for donation). Irene offered to make custom illustrations from photos selected and sent by the almsgiver and opened the

first batch to receive orders for ten illustrations. She illustrates by giving outlines of the figures from the photographs and leaving the faces blank. This visual style presents quite an interesting approach that can be related to the concept of donation and anonymity. The artworks for ilustrasi donasi can be seen here in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Custom illustration from Ilustrasi Donasi art initiative
(Source: Irene Riyanto's *Instagram* page https://www.instagram.com/p/CQ5j-UysQ9XAV-18UDRY1Z9_VnTaeuergGKssk0/?utm_medium=copy_link)

All proceeds from the commissioned work was donated through *kitabisa.com*, an Indonesian online fundraising platform to help provide protective gears for frontline health workers. Irene then reported back to the almsgiver in an *Instagram* post detailing the amount of donation as well as the receipt from *kitabisa.com*, shown here in Figure 3.

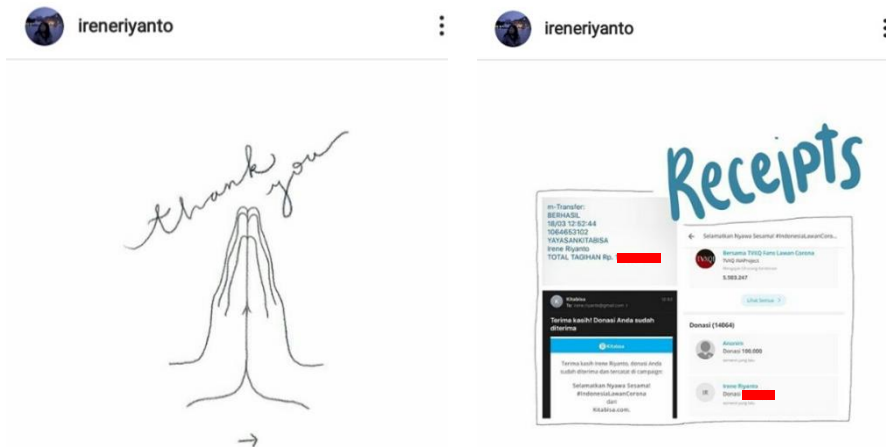


Figure 3. Donation Receipt from Ilustrasi Donasi for almsgiver.
(Source: Irene Riyanto's *Instagram* page https://www.instagram.com/p/CQ5j-UysQ9XAV-18UDRY1Z9_VnTaeuergGKssk0/?utm_medium=copy_link)

In Juli 2021, Irene published the second batch of Ilustrasi Donasi as a response to the second surge of the Covid-19 pandemic in Indonesia. The overall procedure of open commission is similar to the first batch, but used a slightly different visual approach, style and content of illustration from the initial form. In the second batch, Irene still invites people to donate by ordering illustration works based on photographs, which can also be accompanied by a written message to send to friends, family, health workers or anyone who needs encouragement and moral support. The second spike of the pandemic in Indonesia, which occurred in June to July 2021, with death cases reaching more than 1000 people per day, certainly had a very big impact on the mental condition of everyone in the country. This second batch of Ilustrasi Donasi invites people to donate by giving money and emotional support by sending messages of kindness and encouragement attached to the artwork, as shown in Figure 4..



Figure 4. Second Batch of Ilustrasi Donasi announced in July 2021
(Source: Irene Riyanto's *Instagram* page https://www.instagram.com/p/CQ5j-UysQ9XAV-18UDRY1Z9_VnTaeurgGKssk0/?utm_medium=copy_link)

The observation also came across an art charity initiative organized by Forum Sudut Pandang, a non-profit organization managed by interdisciplinary arts activists based in the city of Palu, Central Sulawesi. Forum Sudut Pandang programs revolved around workshops, exhibitions, film screenings, music performances and alternative markets that centers on contextual social issues and actively assembled recovery programs for communities affected by the tsunami that stroked Palu back in 2018. Forum Sudut Pandang has various kinds of social activity: an open commission art project titled Kongsu Gambar Serrupa was released in August 2021 to solidarity through commissioned artworks that involved several visual artists residing in Palu. Other regions outside Java and Bali also experienced a high spike in the second quarter of 2021 and central Sulawesi is one of the areas with the highest number of infections recorded from July to August. As a response to these circumstance which were also heightened by the collapsing health system in

Palu, they initiated a The Kongsi Gambar Serrupa as way to contribute in helping those affected by the situation. There are nine artists involved and almsgiver can commission an artwork, drawing or illustrations based on their requested image or photographs, as shown in Figure 5. The proceeds from the Gambar Kongsi Serrupa project is then used for cross-subsidies where 50% of the income is donated to aid medicine and vitamins for Covid-19 survivors and the other 50% is given to artists as a financial support during the pandemic.



Figure 5. The second Batch of Ilustrasi Donasi was announced in July 2021
(Source: Forum Sudut Pandang's Instagram page
https://www.instagram.com/p/CSIU5uWnR8o/?utm_medium=copy_link
Forum sudut pandang)

DISCUSSION

The existence of social media has had a major influence on civil rights movements, activists, and non-governmental organizations to question and attempt to challenge traditional power structures in various regions of Southeast Asia (Corpuz, 2021). It has significantly transformed how social movements are activated and the magnitude of how a movement can impact people globally. In the midst of the pandemic since 2020, more people seem to be paying attention and getting involved in activism to support a social or political cause in specific regions such as Indonesia, Philippines, Malaysia, Thailand, and Myanmar (Corpuz, 2021). In Indonesia specifically, visual artists, musicians, performance artists and other creative workers are also taking part in generating social movement and activism by utilizing both the social media platforms and their artistic competence as a response to the pandemic. Due to several proposed reasons, art as a medium of activism became a significant option in the pandemic era.

The first reason proposed in this paper acknowledges that as we are globally linked through the internet, social media and online streaming platforms as a

gargantuan global village, the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole became logical consequences that arises out of this interconnectedness (O'Byrne & Hensby, 2011). In reference to Anderson (1991) as nation-states are imagined communities rather than solid and substantial, we imagine as being a part of a community and therefore construct collective identity through the screen of social media. *Gotong royong* or mutual assistance, a constructed value shared by most members of the society, appears to be ingrained as a collective identity of being Indonesians. The act of collectively serving and helping carry the burden of others, can be understood as a consciousness that motivates artists and creative workers to use their artistic abilities and art as tools of activism to help others survive through the global pandemic, for this value provide an image or an idea of belonging to an Indonesian framework. In relation to all social restrictions and limitations due to the pandemic, the idea of belonging and sharing collective experiences becomes of great importance and serves as an important means of survival.

The notion of *gotong royong* then conjointly moves along with the rising awareness and enthusiasm of public engagement towards social and political activities that flourished within the global crisis. Amnesty International recorded similarities of the method of nonviolent action, mostly done by youth that emerged during the global pandemic in several regions of Southeast Asian countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand (Corpuz, 2021). By assembling art charity activities, visual artists and creative workers utilize the concept of mutual assistance or *gotong royong* as an extension of youth power that is imbued with political awareness for social purposes. Another possibility that might also play a significant role in the emergence of these art charity initiatives is perhaps the lack of or even the absence of the state in managing the crisis of the pandemic in Indonesia. The relation between the lack of state's involvement in providing economic assistance with these art charity initiatives have not been investigated thoroughly in this paper and requires further research to identify any possible connections.

Art charity initiatives that emerge as a response to pandemics can also be analyzed by revisiting the core essence of art itself and how it functions for both collective and individual spheres, particularly in a nation dealing with a global pandemic. The pandemic has devastated the financial and economic aspects of the entire art world. More importantly, isolating the fundamental connection that humans get from collectively experiencing any art form. As humans are trying to navigate through these unprecedented times of isolation and confinement, art on multiple levels is of critical importance for it offers solace, keeping humans collectively connected and helping to stay in touch with thoughts and feelings perhaps necessary in hardship and times of struggle.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study points out the fact that the global digital village, as advanced as it appears to be at its core, is a village. Traditional values are inherited and constructed as an image of being Indonesian; specifically, the notion of collectivity through the act of mutual assistance or *gotong royong*, is prevalent and predominant in the 'Instagram village'. *Gotong royong* becomes even more significant in the pandemic, which serves as an underlying ideology for many art initiatives that emerge on social platforms, binding the artist, the recipient, and the almsgiver within the imagery of being a part of a community. The notion of *gotong royong* is also expanding further from its origin and initial form, in sync with the rising awareness and enthusiasm of public engagement towards social and political activities of Indonesian youth. The use of art as a tool of helping others in difficult times becomes important not only for the recipient but also for the almsgiver as well as the artist for it sustained the idea of belonging which is essential in humanity, maintained the social connection with people and at the same time sharing a collective experience as a mean of surviving uncertain circumstances in a global pandemic village.

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