Art activist: nature, culture, and art-based environmental movement

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Abstract. This article aimed to discuss how the environmental movement is carried out by art activists. Environmental movement is essential given the increasingly massive and worrying ecological crisis. Environmental damage triggered by the pace of industry is increasingly eroding the natural ecosystem. Ecological spaces that should support life in general are turned into economic spaces on a large scale which in the process creates a lot of environmental degradation. Likewise, the ecological chain that is broken due to industry and the replacement of natural product use with synthetic materials have contributed to the destruction of nature. Without us realizing it, most environmental problems also stem from our lifestyle, our political choices, and our role as consumers. In this condition, art actors and designers take a cultural role to be involved in the environmental movement. This cultural role becomes important considering that environmental issues are close and, even at a certain point, intertwined with cultural issues. The cultural roles of these art activists can be the starting point for responding to environmental problems by offering creative solutions. Creative solutions can open up a space for joint discussion regarding the environmental movement.

1. Introduction

Environmental issues become a worrying issue, an emergency, as well as a paradox because everyone is involved in it. Natural damage due to pollution, global warming, and holes in the atmosphere bear impact on the quality of the living environment. The quality of life is getting worse and more visible right before our eyes. Likewise, the extraordinary acceleration of the decline in biodiversity and the extinction of thousands of species due to uncontrolled forest land conversion have also accelerated the rate of environmental damage. These problems are exacerbated by the problems of economic injustice and unbalanced natural exploitation opportunities between the industrial world powers and the third world countries.

All citizens of the world are affected by the increasingly severe natural damage. Everyone is blaming each other. The first accusation is directed at the pace of industry as an extension of commercial development. Ecological spaces that should support life are turned into economic spaces on a large scale which in the process creates a lot of environmental degradation. Likewise, the ecological chain that is broken due to industry and the replacement of the use of natural products with synthetic materials have contributed to severe environmental damage. But without us realizing it, most
Environmental problems also stem from our lifestyle, our political choices, and our role as consumers. In this position we contribute to environmental issues.

Environmental issues have become a large-scale and global problem. Many people are now concerned about ecological issues and they are involved in the environmental movement. Many pro-environmental parties, pro-environmental institutions, and industries with environmentally friendly concepts have sprung up. People are involved in environmental movements on a local, national, and global scale that call for a more environmentally friendly lifestyle and consider a better and fairer world order. However, the ecological crisis is still ongoing. In that condition, artists are beginning to take a cultural role to be involved in minimizing the ecological crisis.

This paper aims to discuss the role of artists through their artistic activities in overcoming environmental problems through a cultural approach. The cultural approach is to revisit human relations with the environment and become a starting point in constructing knowledge that is used in addressing environmental issues. In particular, this article examines art activism in Indonesia, particularly the involvement of artists in art projects that put art as an instrument for change, transformation, concern, and real action in environmental issues. The works of art that the artists create are directed at advocacy, defending the community, and participatory actions against the problems they find. They insisted that art should contain visions for the betterment of the society [1].

2. Methods
This article is based on a qualitative research with a cultural study approach, particularly the ethnographic approach. The research used a qualitative method with a focus on the meaning of culture by revealing various interests such as power relations in the practice of art activism and the struggles made by art activists related to art practices in environmental issues. Ethnography was used to follow the experiences of the art activists and to express the artist's ideas, negotiations, and strategies in interpreting their works in the socio-cultural context behind the artwork. Ethnography was also used to describe narratives, the daily practices of artists, and the events being researched [2].

3. Results and discussion
3.1. Art activism and the environmental movement
Art activism is an activity involving artists (art workers) in socio-cultural movements by linking the domains of aesthetics, politics, strategy, and creative aspects in the art world. The involvement of artists in this socio-cultural movement is by using art activities as a medium for generating critical awareness and action for change [3]. Here, works of art are no longer devoted to beauty, but art becomes a method or strategy for artists to engage directly in the real problems of the society and at the same time work for the community [4].

This art activism movement is important because art activism is a medium and a method for artists to participate and be actively involved in solving socio-cultural problems in the society. Artists are aware that they can influence others, protest, resist, subvert, and encourage change through their artistic competence. Artwork can be a trigger for social movements and cultural movements. Through art, artistic expression, and the cultural movements it produces, art activism continues to rebuild the world.

In Indonesia, many art activism movements are concerned with environmental issues. Artists involved in art activism are involved in art projects by placing art as an instrument for change and concern for environmental issues. Art that deals with environmental issues is known as environmental art. Environmental art is an activity carried out by artists to produce works of art with the message of speaking, criticizing, and supporting the relationship between humans, nature, and the environment in a balanced way. The final result of this art can be in the form of a work process or a work of art [5].

One example of Environmental art is the Cigondewah art project that Tisna Sanjaya has been working on since the mid-2000s. Tisna Sanjaya treats environmental issues on a local scale in North Cigondewah village, Bandung. The issues that he deals with include garbage accumulation, river,
water and soil conservation, as well as community empowerment to solve the environmental problems. Tisna Sanjaya went directly to the village communities around the Cigondewah River to give an understanding on the problem of industrial waste that pollutes the river, especially plastic. Tisna encourages people to recycle plastic waste into useful objects. Tisna does environmental art in a concrete way by building and assembling plastic waste recycling machines, forming creative working groups, training community art sensibility, and building art studios. The Cigondewah art project has succeeded in linking art activism with village problems to find common solutions to environmental problems [6].

What Tisna Sanjaya has done with his art projects shows how artists take over the role of activists and become a direct part of the socio-cultural changes in their environment. Art practices carried out by artists through activism are an attempt to directly deal with situations in front of them. The role of works of art is no longer to merely form an imaginary and utopian reality but to become a way of life and a form of direct action in everyday life [7]. This art practice also encourages the growth of artistic work for the community. This practice also facilitates and awakens the artistic practice of the community as a mode of creating a shared cultural imagination space. This cultural image space will bring the community back to the source of their livelihood.

This work pattern also opens the landscape of shared creativity between artists and the community and eliminates the boundaries between artists and society. This pattern of art activism opens new relationships in art production by making the society an inseparable part of the process of creating or producing art. This practice then gave rise to the concept that an artist that is no longer seen as a ‘creator’, but as an organizer who works in the community. From here, we can see how artists are not only concerned with their artwork in the form of physical objects. They also provide a kind of awareness or campaign against the polluted environment. A work of art that is close to social work and useful for a wide audience.

Artist movement through art activism is an opening for artists to develop their artistic concepts and practices to be closer to the community. The art activism that an artist develops becomes a meeting point between artists, society, and cultural activists that eventually manifests as a community. The practice of art activism as a resistance can be seen in the Kendeng residents’ protest against the presence of a cement factory in Central Java. This protest was publicly discussed as an action by a group of women farmers who fight for the environment. Their protest came in various performativity variants. One of them took the form of Gejog Lesung art. Gejok Lesung is a musical art produced by hitting the lesung, a wooden mortar that is usually used to separate rice from its peel. Gejog Lesung was performed together with the Kendeng peasant folk dance in their traditional daily clothes (kebaya and caping). This artistic activity opened up a dialectical space between tradition and contemporary social issues. The mortar is a symbol of traditional tools as opposed to cement as a modern material which in its manufacturing process destroys the nature. This protest was displayed in front of the State Palace in February 2018.

The practice of art activism in protecting the environment by artists is supported by the work pattern of independent organizations. This pattern of work opens up the possibility for collaborative work between artists and other elements of the society outside such as socio-cultural activists, academicians, non-governmental organizations, and those engaged in mass media to produce concrete actions. Through collaborative work, we can open other gaps outside the realm of art and expand work beyond the realm of aesthetics by offering art practices within a social framework that is oriented towards public awareness.

This art activism-based environmental movement is dynamic because the center of its existence and its main driving force are artists who have access to intellectual and cultural production. In this context, art workers become a social group that is equipped with resources to symbolically reclaim cultural spaces dominated by economic forces that destroy the environment. Artists devote their talents to the production of symbols that are very important in the environmental movement. They have the awareness to manage the arts in an inclusive manner and build networks at both local and global levels.
to voice environmental issues that are detrimental to the community. They develop a creative landscape that opens up the possibilities of creating art to express actual environmental problems.

Artists involved in environmental art projects develop, implement, and evaluate ideas and design activities. This makes them art creators as well as social activists. The practice of art activism can ignite cultural dialogue and raise public awareness, namely restoring the community's right to express meaning through art. The dialogue here is to unlock the potential of using art in spreading critical knowledge, fostering empathy, and becoming a medium for activism in socio-cultural movements.

3.2. Nature, culture and art-based environmental movement

The following is a case study of how art activism is used to address environmental movements. This paper takes the case of an art activity initiated by the Green Laboratory (GreenLab) of the Faculty of Art and Design, Universitas Sebelas Maret. GreenLab itself is a think tank laboratory that facilitates the exchange of knowledge about art and environmental issues. GreenLab is a meeting room for multidisciplinary artistic activities that encourage interaction among art practitioners to address environmental issues. Such a space can foster creative energy that opens up new possibilities in answering environmental problems.

In 2019, GreenLab initiated a festival entitled POSTFES 2019, Dystopia: Plastic Hypnosis, an ecological festival in urban environments that addresses plastic waste. This activity offered the idea of a festival based on research and experimentation by promoting the strengths of three main pillars: individual artists/designers, institutions, and creative communities. The meeting of the three main pillars was to come up with creative solutions in responding to environmental issues and encourage a real environmental movement. The series of festival events accommodated various activities in managing creativity based on ecology, social networks, and local cultural resilience to protect the shared living spaces and nature. The festival also opened a space for joint discussion and invited the public, as consumers, to rethink their use of plastic.

The choice of the plastic theme is based on the concerns about the impact of using plastic in everyday life which is getting uncontrollable. Plastic as a product that is versatile, flexible, lightweight, strong, moisture resistant, and cheap has caused the whole world to use it in a variety of products in large quantities. Plastic is gradually replacing other raw materials that humans used to use, especially for wrapping and packaging. Without people realizing it, the basic character of plastic which is durable and not easily decomposed by nature, and the large quantities of plastic products that are not environmentally friendly cause serious environmental problems.

The serious threat is in the form of plastic waste. According to the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), between 22 percent and 43 percent of plastic used worldwide is thrown into the trash as a wasted resource. Thousands of hectares of land are used for landfills where most of it is plastic waste. The negative impact of plastic waste not only damages human health and kills animals, but also systematically damages the environment. Environmental damage not only happens in urban areas but also in the oceans. Millions of tons of plastic waste pollute the oceans every year. Trillions of plastic particles float in the ocean and kill hundreds of thousands of marine mammals every year, as well as millions of birds and fish. A bigger loss than plastic waste is the destruction of marine ecosystems.

To prepare a work on plastic waste, GreenLab conducted field research at the Putri Cempo Final Disposal Site (TPA), Solo, and garbage disposal sites at the Solo traditional markets (Figure 1). This pre-work research is important because art work is no longer just an art that is far from social space. Art stands and comes from concrete situations in common life. The research was carried out using surveys, interviews, recording activities in landfills with photography and video, and making ethnographic notes in the field.
From the surveys and ethnographic records, it was revealed that waste is not just a discarded object, rejected object, or useless junk, but also a reflection of history, political economy, archeology, environmental impacts, and material relations between humans and the wasted object. Garbage leaves a long trail of unsolvable human problems. Landfills (TPA) also show the stark contrast between slums and urban order. TPA is a place to accommodate city problems. In an interview with the Solo Environment Agency, it was revealed that every day one resident of Solo produces half a kilogram of waste, and this doubles in the afternoon. For plastic waste itself, according to Solo Pos records, on March 5, 2019, a million crackers circulated in Solo a day. A million crackers, most of which ended up being plastic waste, piled up in the Putri Cempo TPA.

People who live near garbage dumps and incineration feel the price they have to pay for plastic waste. Plastic leaves its toxic footprint on nature and on the human body. Mounting plastic waste is no longer resolved even though it is recycled and burned. Recycling is not the main solution in reducing plastic waste. More than 90% of the plastic ever produced has not been recycled. Most of the plastic is still allowed to pollute the environment. Even some of it is eaten by animals both on land and at sea. Plastic that is recycled will continue to experience downcycling which results in lower quality materials than the original material, until finally further recycling cannot be carried out again and will eventually become waste that accumulates.

To communicate the problem of plastic waste, GreenLab creates multi-media works (fashion, video, photography, performance, music) entitled “Distopia: Plastic Hypnosis”, as shown in Figure 2. It creates multimedia works by processing plastic waste into visual works that are no longer oriented to neat aesthetics but to a display visuals that strike and terrorize the eye. Plastic waste is processed into costumes that display figures that are rough, chaotic, asymmetrical, damaged, and distracting to the eye. These figures are an option to convey the problem of plastic waste which is increasingly getting out of control. This work offers visual images that lead to a dystopia, in a bleak future that is drowned in a pile of plastic waste problems. Plastic waste has hypnotized humans and without us realizing it, it has become a killer monster that will injure and eliminate humans.

To strengthen the work, the research findings in the field were also displayed in the form of notes and photo documentation. The notes obtained in the field were displayed so that the audience could read the data. Ethnographic notes and subjective notes related to findings from the field research provide direct views, closer look at the problem of plastic waste, and firsthand feel of the piles of plastic waste that emit unpleasant odors, waste textures, and disgust of the rotting waste.

The field data was processed into fashion drawings, sketches, photography, graphic info, and video art. The data processing in this work was to provide an overview of factual problems and also to
persuade the audience to be emotionally involved in the issues raised. The strong persuasion to the audience can be seen in the video art displayed in the middle of the display. The videos were played to terrorize the audience through the visual sensation of a pile of plastic waste that is repeated over and over again. The video displays the recorded results in the form of image pieces and the results of field documentation. Editing was done to assemble the images into a dramatic visual narrative that provided opportunities for interpretations of the issues raised.

GreenLab uses the art potential to raise environmental issues. Art works become a medium to build critical awareness of the community. What GreenLab practiced through art activism for the environment became the field practice of a concept called by Barker as cultural action for liberation and social transformation [8]. What art activists do represents cultural and artistic phenomena in spreading discourses of community empowerment, cultural production, and resistance.

![Figure 2](image.jpg)

**Figure 2.** Performance art performed by GreenLab by bringing the problem of plastic waste into public spaces. Here the public is challenged to see the real problem of plastic waste in the city which is a common problem. Photo GreenLab, 2019

### 4. Conclusion

Art activism provides creative solutions to environmental issues. Art gives a different point of view on environmental problems which is expressed through a variety of symbolic and artistic works. However, what appears to be aesthetic and symbolic does not appear for the benefit of the art world, but rather an ideological representation and language of resistance to environmental problems. Through artistic activities, artists take roles and move at the level of cultural production. Their work area stretches, not only producing artistic works, but also making themselves agents of socio-cultural change in the surrounding community. They, the art activists, create spaces for cultural production that are critically oriented to social movements targeting real action.

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