



New Trends and Issues Proceedings on Humanities and Social Sciences



Volume 4, Issue 11, (2017) 291-296

ISSN : 2547-881

www.prosoc.eu

Selected Paper of 6th World Conference on Design and Arts (WCDA 2017), 29 June – 01 July 2017, University of Zagreb, Zagreb – Croatia.

Mapping Strategy of Practicing Visual Art for Academic Purpose: a Perspective from Indonesia

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Suggested Citation:

Murwanti, A. (2017). Mapping strategy of practicing visual art for academic purpose: a perspective from Indonesia. *New Trends and Issues Proceedings on Humanities and Social Sciences*. [Online]. 4(11), 291-296. Available from: www.prosoc.eu

Selection and peer review under responsibility of Prof. Dr. Ayse Cakir Ilhan, Ankara University, Turkey.

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Abstract

Practice-based research was formally introduced in western academic institutions after the emergence of PhD visual art practice in early 1980 in Australia. This practice-based research approach became an alternative for artists to claim equality of art practice as research for academic purposes. Utilising Graeme Sullivan's framework, 'Art Practice as Research', this paper maps visual art practice perceived as research in Indonesia. Interviews and focus group discussions from a total of 27 participants were analysed to map the symptoms of practice-based research approach in Indonesian visual art practice. This paper gives the strengths and weaknesses in the way participants (artists, curator, lecturer, undergraduate and postgraduate students as well as art manager) in Indonesia approach the practice of visual art in the academic context. Through this research, traces on how visual art is practiced in the academic context reveal the distinct Indonesian visual art practice at the higher education institution level.

Keywords: Practice-based research, visual art practice, academic.

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1. Introduction

This research was motivated by the opportunity to explore the controversial theory 'Art Practice as Research', written by Graeme Sullivan and published in 2005. There is a lack of publication of practice-based research in Indonesia in the visual art academic context. The author's observation from 2006 to August 2016 reveals very few publications in Indonesia that focused on the visual art practice methodology. Most publications refer to the general visual art methodology, such as art history, art critic, sociology and anthropology approach and some to the social science methodology. Only six publications focused on visual art research. Existing publications in Indonesia focus on the way to explore art as 'artefact of knowledge' rather than seeing art practice as the 'heart of knowledge production'.

This phenomenon contrasts with the way artistic practice research is appreciated – and is debated in western countries, especially in the Australian and British education system. Using the framework of art practice as research, doctoral degrees labelled as 'Doctor of Creative Arts' or 'Doctor of Philosophy in Creative Practice' are not a rare finding in Australia. The basic differentiation between artistic research and social research lies clearly seen in the visual art practice. The parameter set by Graeme Sullivan in regard to taking art practice as research could be used in the Indonesian context or the Southeast Asian context in general, to find issues that can be improved for practicing visual art for academic purposes. Through conducting this research, the stories, motivations and processes behind their visual art practice are explored. The system and methodology that participants expect in practicing art in academic context is also traced in this research.

2. Practice-based Research

In artistic research and art practice research, the practice of visual art became the heart of research. This refers to its process as well as the result of research (Borgdorff, 2011). Art practice has a fundamental role in visual art practice research. Practice is not only considered as a tool, instrument or the way artefact is made, but also has a robust role as the producer of new knowledge. The process and empiric experience of seeing, knowing and thinking in the artistic practice context is related to the human's intellectual capacity (Sullivan, 2011). Through the act of creative practice, mind, mental and physical acts are activated in the cognitive process (Sullivan, 2011). Thus, the creative and critical convergence that took place in visual art practice can legitimate art practice to stand as one of academic disciplines that can contribute to society. Nowadays, the discussion of visual art practice goes beyond technique and process, but further on contextualising concept and turning mind matter into concrete activity through the act of practice.

Moreover, in explaining the art and knowledge mutualism symbiosis relationship, the Indonesian art professor Rohidi (2011) mentions an inseparable interconnection between science and art. He refers to Leo Tolstoy's statement, which underlines that art has emotional infectiousness power that can shift truth from the perception area to the emotional area. The analogy of this sifting illustrates that art and science are both organs in the same body that influencing each other's impact. Thus, Rohidi (2011) stressed the importance to highlight the platform and equality between art and science.

The research used a method that is suitable with the goals that ensure that the research findings are well documented and disseminated in the right way (Borgdorff, 2011). Creative activities and creative artwork can also be admitted as a form of research (Scrivener dan Chapman in Marley, 2012; Smith & Dean, 2009; Sullivan, 2005, 2006). It is important to note that in art practice research, the understanding of explicit and tacit dimensions become an important aspect to maximise potential knowledge production in a research project (Marley, 2012). Hence, Hedberg and Hannula state that 'Artistic research means that the artist produces an art work and researches the creative process, thus adding to the accumulation of knowledge' (Kjorup, 2011, p. 26).

3. Visual Art and Research in Indonesia

The intention to integrate art and research in Indonesia begins from the ‘Proses 85’ exhibition in year 1985. Through exploring environment and social concern, this exhibition became the first exhibition conducted through facilitating cooperation between artists and non-governmental organisations (Harsono, 2013). The Proses 85 exhibition became an important archive for establishing a relationship between research and art practice to respond to social and environmental issues in Indonesia. Prior to this time, Indonesia visual art was dominated by decorative and exclusive practices that detach art practice from research activities and its social context.

An initiative of conducting proper research to support visual art practice needs to be appreciated, however artists – especially those who engage with the academic context must remember there is more to offer rather than a sole reliance on research. In this regard, the Indonesian curator Ade Darmawan highlights that ‘Art isn’t about artistic production only. It is about building relationships and creating dialogues’ (Naidu-Silverman, 2015, p. 38). Later in 2012 to 2017, research-based art practice blossomed in Indonesia but the art practice production was seen as instrumentalist elements rather than a fundamental core of the research.

4. Research Methodology

This research uses the qualitative methodology that engages depth interview and focus group discussion (FGD) to collect data. There are 27 respondents who work in the art field between 2–40 years of experience. The respondents are artists, academic, curators, art manager and bureaucrats in the art department of higher education institutions. The education background of the respondents also varies from undergraduate, masters to the doctoral level. One respondent is a professor of art who also wrote books on visual art methodology in Indonesia. The data were processed with NVivo software to get keywords that represent the Indonesian visual art practice.

5. Research Participant Background

There are various backgrounds of participants in this research, with most of them visual artists. Thirteen participants are artists with an educational background in visual art (46%), eight participants are lecturers (29%), four students (14%), two curators (7%) and one art manager (4%). This variety of background represents the stakeholders in visual art practice in the context of higher education.

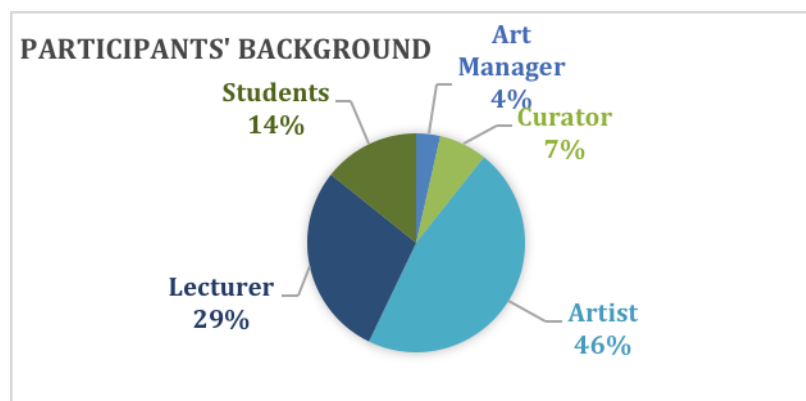


Figure 1. Participants' background. Source: Murwanti (2016)

Participants taken from various ages ensure the coverage of perspective in this research. Ranging from 20–60-years old, the participants are engaged in depth interviews and FGD.

A majority of the participants are millenials at 20–29-years old (63%), followed by 30–39-years old (22%), 40–49-years old (4%), 50–59 years old (7%) and 60–69 years old (4%). Using this wide range of participants, the objectivities of this research are expected to be achieved. The participants were given the same questions in regard to the visual art practice approach.

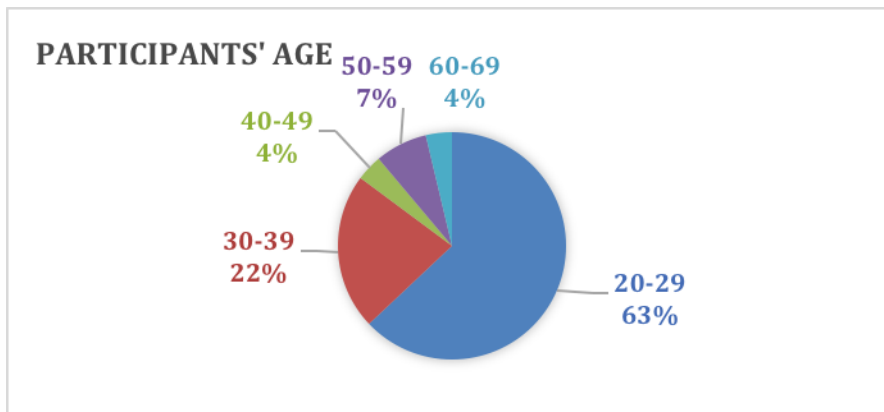


Figure 2. Participants' age. Source: Murwanti (2016)

6. Results

Analysing the qualitative data gathered in this research shows many keywords in visual art practice that is frequently mentioned by the participants. The keywords drawn with NVivo are manually selected and categorised into four groups: internal, external, system and result. The group of keywords that relate with the internal aspects and considered important for conducting visual art practice by participants are consciousness, honesty, trust, happiness, concept, perspective, intuition and feelings.

Table 1. Internal aspects in practicing visual art

Internal aspects			
Consciousness	Honesty	Trust	Happiness
Concept	Perspective	Intuition	Feelings

Beside the internal aspects, external aspects are considered important in visual art practice by participants. These external aspects are reference, role model, mentor, community and issue.

Table 2. External aspects in practicing visual art

External aspects				
Reference	Role model	Mentor	Community	Issue

This research also reveals approaches that were expected to be conducted for visual art practice in the academic context. This approach is:

1. Having empiric experience in regard to the issue and technical aspect explored in visual art practice
2. Expected to open possible interdisciplinary practices
3. Visual art practice supposed to be open for interdisciplinary practices
4. The practice has to be flexible and not rigid
5. Community can help and support to shape the art practice scene
6. The practice has to be iterative and plural
7. System in visual art practice needs to be easily adjusted for different visual art disciplines
8. Most of the participants see the studio as an important system in visual art practice
9. Documentation of ideas and process are crucial to locate the visual art practice in the academic context
10. Discussion is recognised as one of important systems in the academic visual art practice
11. Visual art practice system has to offer room for further exploration

Table 3. Keywords of systems in practicing visual art

Systems			
Experience	Interdisciplinary	Flexible	Community
Iterative	Plural	Adjustable	Studio
Documentation of ideas	Documentation of process	Discussion	Exploratory

Besides producing the artefact of practice, the participants in this research are expected to produce new knowledge and foster new ideas through their visual art practice.

Table 4. Results expected in visual art practice

Results	
New knowledge	Ideas

Through connecting keywords in the framework of art practice as research mentioned by Sullivan (2010, p. 99), there are two similarities between Sullivan’s framework and the keywords that are found in the Indonesian visual art practice:

1. Flexible methodology is ideal for art practice towards academic purposes
2. Interdisciplinary practice (multi and hybrid) is needed to open the possibility to investigate the research
3. Flexibility and multidisciplinary practice started became the platform that strengthened the visual art position, which gave important information or new knowledge for visual art practices.

Meanwhile, some important aspects regarding the framework of art practice as research were less to none, mentioned in participants’ answer and discussions. These aspects are:

1. Criticism in creative process regarding self-critic or critics for other artists’ work
2. Interconnection between theory and practice and vice versa to answer research question through art
3. Framework that offers possibilities that visual art practice can be explained or translated in another form of research publication, and make the art practice and its outcome to be interdisciplinary communicated.

These three findings are the reasons for the way art practice is seen unequal to research in Indonesia. By designing a framework of visual art practice methodology that minimises the weaknesses of Indonesian visual art practice, there is hope that the practice will have better positioning in the research or academic context.

7. Conclusion

Sullivan's theory and framework of seeing art practice as research is useful to map the strengths and weaknesses of art practice for academic purposes. Three weaknesses that are recognised in Indonesian art practice towards the academic purpose is responded by the author by offering an alternative framework where the artist can moderate their practice in responding to urgencies, theories, preference and reference. A further question that might be explored in the future research is the details of moderation that are needed to strengthen the artist's position in the research context, without intervening in the creative process in art practice.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the Indonesia Ministry of Research, Technology and Higher Education and supported by Universitas Negeri Jakarta.

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