

The Art of Planting Rice as a Meditative Practice: Sensemaking and Equanimity about Societal Disruption through Performance Art

种植水稻艺术作为一种冥想练习：通过行为艺术来理解和平静应对社会动荡

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Abstract

The impact of COVID-19 on Bali, Indonesia, decimated a significant part of the economy, resulting in unemployment and underemployment, which increased economic difficulties and related anxiety. Many people returned to small-holder farming to sustain their families. Away from farming, meditation is widely recognized as a means for equanimity and coping better with anxiety. In solidarity with the return to farming in Bali, the lead author of this paper created a performance art experience involving the planting of rice as a meditative practice. This paper summarizes the process and what was learned during the experience, using elements of qualitative research. The analysis affirms the role of artistic expression in supporting people's sensemaking about societal disruption, with implications for social learning and mental well-being.

Keywords: performance art, rice, farming, agriculture, meditation, deep adaptation, resilience

摘要

COVID-19 对印度尼西亚巴厘岛的影响摧毁了经济的很大一部分，导致失业和就业不足，这增加了经济困难和相关的焦虑。许多人为了养家糊口而返回小农耕地。除了农活之外，冥想被广泛认为是平静和更好地应对焦虑的一种手段。随着巴厘岛回归农业，本文的主要作者创造了一种行为艺术体验，涉及种植水稻作为一种冥想实践。本文使用定性研究的元素总结了该过程以及在体验中学到的东西。该分析肯定了艺术表达在支持人们对社会动荡的理解方面的作用，这对社会学习和心理健康有影响。

关键词: 表演艺术, 大米, 农耕, 农业, 冥想, 深度适应, 复原力

Introduction

Stress is a negative reaction caused by excessive difficulties over time. It often afflicts people in various walks of life, including people who are employed and stressed due to overwork, heavy responsibilities, and deadlines. For instance, a survey conducted at the Northwestern National company showed that 7 out of 10 employees stated that

work-related stress had caused health problems and resulted in less productive work (Mustika Suci, 2018).

Meanwhile, in many countries, workers were faced with losing their jobs during the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic and related policies. It had an impact on Bali's economy, which relies on the tourism sector, causing the Balinese economy to decrease by -7.67% in 2020 alone. The suspension of tourist entry access reduced the number of visitors to Bali by 99% from the initial 552,403 foreign tourists in December 2019 to only 22 people in August 2020 (Indonesian Republic Finance Ministry, 2021). It directly impacted entrepreneurs in the tourism sector, which then impacted workers who experienced reduced working hours and even layoffs.

These realities understandably caused stress both due to the excessive workload of those who retained their jobs and those who were laid off. If not addressed, such stress can have a negative impact on both work and health. Economic demands, daily family expenses, and lack of social life due to various restrictions are all contributors to stress. In that context, the authors of this paper considered that both artistic creativity and meditation could be useful in helping people to manage that stress. Integrating the creative and meditative in response to this urgent need to support mental health is the focus of the activities presented in this article.

The lead author of this paper is not a farmer, but is an artist and scholar, who was also affected by the economic disruption during COVID-19. Anecdotally, many of the people returning to farming told the authors they felt positive experiences from working the land. They reported that although they initially thought of it as going backward, more people experienced it as a rebalancing of their lives and communities by restoring aspects of life that had been deprioritized during periods of rapid economic growth. Discussions with Balinese farm-returners helped the lead author realize that rice planting can be experienced in a meditative way, just as with many repetitive practices, and many physical activities, as well as many forms of immersion in the environment. That meditative effect did not depend on people choosing to approach the planting of rice as a meditative practice. However, the question arose for the lead author as to whether rice planting could be approached with a clear intention of being a meditative experience. It is with this question and in solidarity with the farm-returners that an artwork was conceived.

This article, and the performance art it outlines, is a development of ideas discussed by the colleagues of the lead author, including Martinus Dwi Marianto and Yos Suprpto. The artwork also resonates with how I Made Jodog previously planted rice in bamboo pots every day for a hundred days as an installation. I Made Jodog's research was the basis for developing this research, which focused on the artistic performance of growing rice as a meditative process (Jodog, 2017).

According to Sujana (2014), it is the experience of artists that meditative states can occur during the process of creating works of art, especially when using repetitive techniques with full concentration. Therefore, one aspect of this research is exploring the way that artistic creativity in the form of performance art might be considered as a meditative practice. Another aspect of this research is exploring how artistic creativity

can address contemporary problems in society. For instance, it is apparent that people would benefit from greater equanimity in the face of societal disruption (Bendell, 2021), and it is our hypothesis that performance art could be involved in sensemaking about such needs and trends. However, the full power and potential of artistic expression is neither within the artists' experience while producing it or from the artists' own intended communication goals. Rather, the power and potential of art lie on how it can stimulate myriad emotional and intellectual responses that enable people to make sense of their lives and evolving situations in their own ways. If, through that process, art helps people to find shared understandings of their lives and evolving situations, then art might serve an additional function of enabling social cohesion. Therefore, although the performance art that will be described in this paper could be experienced in multiple ways and with multiple implications, currently unknown to the authors, some effects that were witnessed and some that are hoped for by the authors will be discussed below.

Literature Review

Connections among Meditation, Spirituality, Creativity, and Farming

There are many types of meditative practices from many different traditions. In general, meditation can help reduce the impacts of mental stress caused by various difficulties experienced by a person (Basso et al., 2019). One form of meditation is a process to achieve equanimity, so that individuals can reduce worries, fears, and anxiety by observing their breath, focusing their thoughts, and sometimes by giving positive suggestions for their minds (Adiputra & Budisetyani, 2018). Another form of meditation, Vipassana, invites analysis of one's experience, emotions, and thoughts. Both forms of meditation typically involve some sort of sitting practice. However, walking meditation is widely practiced in monasteries around the world and offers a means of bringing meditative awareness (or "mindfulness") to our bodily movement. That is useful if people aim to bring more meditative awareness to their everyday life. There is potential, therefore, for many physical activities to be approached as an opportunity for entering into meditative states—including rice planting.

Rice farming is widely understood in Bali to be closely related to the spiritual life of the Balinese people (Pedersen & Dharmiasih, 2015). The majority of the people on the island are Hindu and worship the goddess of rice, Sri Dewi. This goddess is regarded as a divine expression of Lord Vishnu by Balinese Hindus. Various agricultural activities ranging from seeding to harvesting are conducted in a number of religious ceremonies done individually or organized by the *Subak* organization. *Subak* is a group that coordinates the irrigation water in Bali. *Subak* is not only limited to water management, but is also closely involved in food production, irrigated rice field ecosystems, and religious rituals related to rice cultivation (Aryawan et al., 2013). Since the 1980s, rice cultivation in Bali is typically mechanized and uses large amounts of agrochemicals. Organic farming exists, and research has looked at increasing the quality of local rice varieties using organic methods (Ariati et al., 2018; Witariadi et al., 2015).

Performance Arts and the Spirituality and Landscapes of Bali

The mainstream perspective on performance art is that it is a development of modern art. Trends in France were key to its development: As the center of the development of the world's fine arts, the city of Paris hosted exhibitions visited by many people such as the Salon des Independents in Paris (Mukhametzyanov et al., 2018). Works were more likely to be personal expressions than consciously or explicitly engaging social issues. In the 1960s, artists connected with counter-cultural rebels and began to see museums as enforcers of the prevailing order of the establishment. Artists sought ways to create art beyond the reach of existing institutions. Therefore, there was an explosion of different kinds of art outside the exhibition halls and museums, including the Land Art Project by Michael Heizer and a massive excavation in the Nevada Desert (Lucie-Smith, 2002). The emergence of performance art can also be regarded as a form of resistance to the establishment where art could only be consumed by wealthy people. This awareness and motivation meant that artists tried to break the boundaries of existing art form conventions with their performance art (Mukhametzyanov et al., 2018).

In Indonesia, performance art has developed since the 1990s (Marianto, 2019). According to Saidi (2008), some of Indonesia's leading artists present a combination of installation and performance works, such as Tisna Sanjaya, Arahmaiani, Heri Dono, and others. The concepts of spirituality in performance art have attracted many artists. A number of contemporary Balinese artists have created installations and performances based on spiritual themes, such as Nyoman Erawan with the *Ngaben* concept (Sembiring, 2011), I Wayan Karja, who explores the spiritual colors of the *Pangider Bhuana* (Paia Contemporary Gallery, n.d.), and I Wayan Sujana with his bamboo *burung garuda* as the unifying spirit of the Indonesian nation (BatuBelah Art Space, 2011). In many cases, artists are inspired by the traditional Balinese Kecak dance as they create new forms of performance art. Therefore, in Bali, there is some clear cross-over between the two fields of "performing arts" and "performance art" (Sugar & Cream, 2019). Performing artists typically belong to the acting, dancing, and music worlds, using traditional performance spaces. Instead, as described above, performance art has its origins in social justice-inspired rebellions in the world of fine arts and can take place in many types of location (Mukhametzyanov et al., 2018). In Bali, the performing arts are closely related to religious activities and community sociality (Swasthi Widjaja Bandem, 2006). Given the mixing of the two different types of art, it is natural for performance art in Bali to relate to the traditions of artistic expression, such as those related to rice cultivation.

The physical space of both performing arts and performance art is key to the experience of a performer and the audience. Moving outside into landscapes can present many opportunities for creative expression. The Balinese paddy fields are a cultural landscape, where culture and beliefs create the landscape and vice-versa, and so that provides a particular set of opportunities as a form of "venue" for performance art.

Methodology

The artistic process reflected the stages of the creation of craft art described by S. P. Gustami (2007). The first is the exploration stage, where important conclusions are

reached about achieving any theoretical aims of the creativity, prior to the execution stage, when the performance occurs. Often the exploration stage can be quite long, as it was in this instance. The exploration stage was divided into two, with the first being an analysis of the practicalities of rice farming, especially in the *Subak* Patekan area, in Ubud (Gianyar, Bali). The research for this stage was qualitative, including data collection techniques as follows:

- Observation. Data were obtained by direct observation of the process of rice farming in *Subak* Patekan, *Banjar* Penestankaja, Sayan Village, Ubud District, Gianyar Regency, Bali. This included observations of the method of rice farming, the stages of the rice farming process, the seeding process, up to the process of planting the rice seedlings.
- Interviews. Key people in the *Pekaseh Subak* Patekan (head of Patekan Subak Organization) were interviewed, including I Wayan Musna, to generate insight on rice planting patterns in the *Subak* Patekan area, as well as the belief systems and extent of farming in the wider area.
- Documentation. Books and research papers relating to agriculture, performance art, and meditation were identified through a literature search. In addition, paintings and pictures related to rice cultivation were available to the researchers due to their living and working situations. In addition, internet searches also produced various content related to art, meditation, and agriculture.

Based on this exploration, a plan was developed, which required a re-clarification of the theme, the design of the performance, and then an assessment of time and finances required.

The next step of the exploration was in preparing the “venue” for the performance, which was a rice paddy field. The *Luanan* area was chosen, due to there being an existing shrine for Dewi Sri. Various preparation activities were required, starting from hoeing the land to make it loose and muddy, the preparation of rice seeds, and the growing of seedlings. Rice seeds soaked and sown take two weeks to be ready for planting. All these processes required the typical tools and machines of rice farming, and a farmer named I Made Rawa provided assistance. We categorize these essential preparatory activities as “methodology” and “exploration” as they are not experienced by an audience for the performance art. However, by the time of collaboration with the farmers in preparing the land and growing the seeds, it not only felt like preparation but that the artistic expression was already underway.

Other elements to the methodology were short interviews with participants and audience to the performance, as well as self-observation by the lead author of this paper of his inner mind state, as he undertook the performance.

The Performance

The next stage was the execution of the performance of rice planting as a meditative practice. Before the planting of rice, the performers were rubbed with a white-colored rice flour liquid, as a reminder that the fruit of the whole process is a rice harvest



FIGURE 1 | Belief in God in this manifestation as Dewi Sri, the goddess of rice, is part of the performance of rice planting. I Made Jodog in preparation (left) and praying as part of an art performance (right). Photographed by Rini Widariyanti.

(Figure 1). The performance was undertaken with prayer and continued with prayer-related performance movement while planting the rice seedlings. Rice seedlings were planted with performance movements that modulated breathing, with the mind praying to Dewi Sri, particularly at the moment of placing the seedlings in the ground (Figure 2). On average, rice seedlings are planted in a span of 3 to 5 seconds and are carried out repeatedly with an average number of three stems. Through the simple repetition of physical movements that were synchronized with breathing, this work was experienced as a meditative process. Then the movements and all sensations involved in the process were observed more closely by the planters to bring a greater meditative quality to the experience.

By combining a rice-based body rub, with the practice of rice planting, prayer, and meditative concentration, there was an attempt at offering a coherence of concept with visual cues. In closing the performance, gratitude was expressed to Dewi Sri and the “divine creative energy” for the experience involved in the planting process as well as all the processes that led to the creating of this performance art. This gratitude was an opportunity for the audience to participate in the performance art at the close.

An open space with natural watery rice fields, a temple, and surrounding lush forests is widely experienced as beautiful, as reflected by the vast number of images of such paddy fields in photography, film, and paintings. The artist’s idea was that such beauty could be accentuated by bringing more conscious awareness to both



FIGURE 2 | Performance of planting rice. Photograph by Rini Widariyanti.

the cultural aspect of the landscape and the sensory experience of being within the landscape. To begin to explore this matter, after the performance, short interviews were conducted with I Made Rawa, Rini Widariyanti, who was involved in the preparation, and a number of spectators, focusing on what arose for them as they observed the performance. Although this question of impact was not a research focus, sharing some of the feedback may help to convey the intent of the performance. I Made Rawa thought that growing rice as a meditative work had the potential to be shared as an idea among farmers, but with positive and negative aspects to it. On the positive side, planting rice more mindfully and with prayer could bring a greater joy to the process. On the negative side, it might slow down the process, which already generates physical stress on the waist, from bending down, and does not pay well. Artist Rini Widariyanti, along with some spectators, viewed this creation as an inspiring invitation to reflect on the practice and meaning of rice cultivation, work, meditation, spirituality, and art.

Discussion

This piece of performance art gains its meaning through the cultural landscape of paddy fields. Balinese farmers experience the rice planting process as a spiritual process, so that, at every stage, there are religious ceremonies that accompany it. This important cultural characteristic in Bali was a key issue in the spirit of the creation of

this artwork. Serious attention was given to honoring those traditions. The specific movements of planting were emphasized for their meditative potential and prayers made during the process. The costumes of the performers referred to Dewi Sri's involvement in the process of the performers planting rice. The atmosphere of the rice fields as a performance location supported this process.

The idea of performing the planting of rice as a form of art emphasizes the creative process that is working with nature to grow food. Although it may not be regarded as skilled as in the actions of performance artists who offer beautiful dance and music, for instance, there is a power and beauty in this very widespread and essential farming activity. Beauty is ascribed through culture as much as it is emanating from nature. One can appreciate the beauty of a performer's motion as well as the space and atmosphere of the meditative process of planting rice.

The performance art provided a frame for further performances, further exploration of the key themes, and further development of creativity. Form and content were united in this performance art. Therefore, the lead author opened an esthetic, meditative, and analyzed experience for potential future development.

Questions arise as to how might such art be experienced in the future. In particular, how this art form relate might relate to the challenges facing Bali and the world in a post-pandemic era of social and economic disruption. As mentioned at the start of this paper, the power and potential of art are not something that can be determined by the artists themselves. There is an emergent quality to the experiencing of art and the meanings that derive from it. Before concluding, here are some initial ideas on the power and potential of this art.

- First, this performance art was meditative and an invitation for the participant and collaborators to reflect on the various types and aspects of meditation. That is brought into consideration, particularly so, by offering an extension of the concept and practice of walking meditation to the work of farming.
- Second, developing and implementing this performance art was experienced as emotionally healing by a tertiary sector worker who has experienced pandemic-related disruption. This emotional healing of the lead author was due to many factors, including the symbolism and reconnection with nature, traditions, and the divine. Therefore, by returning to the practical worship of Dewi Sri, through "ceremonialized" rice planting, it was discovered that a worker in the tertiary sector of the economy (art, tourism, and education) can experience a reconciliation of the ancient and modern. The art involved a remembering of the fundamentals of all life and of the society that the authors are part of.
- Third, the artwork offers potential for societal sensemaking about societal disruptions. It embodied a celebration of the practice of rice farming at a time when many people in Bali were forced to return to farming, due to economic disruption. It honored the farm-returners and the noble work they were doing. It honored the bounty of the environment in Bali that was there to help people cope with disruptions to their lives. It honored the potential of opportunities that arise from disruption—after all, it is unlikely that either people would be benefiting

from farming or that this artwork would have been created if not for the pandemic-related disruptions. Therefore, this artwork might support people with collective sensemaking about the economic changes that occurred and might occur again and often.

- Fourth, the performance art may offer a potential therapeutic experience or healing practice for people who lose their former employment, or no longer anticipate a particular career, or have had to drop their previous economic expectations. The performance art of planting rice as a meditative practice could be a participatory experience for people to mark their reuniting with the environment and helping to rebalance the economy of Bali. It does not mean that they will become rice farmers, but that they can ritualize the change in their circumstances.

Although the authors did not analyze the therapeutic impact of the artwork on personal or collective resilience, this is something which could be explored in future. The concept of human “resilience” is used at two very different levels in scholarship, policy, and practice—that is the personal and the collective. For either level, resilience can be understood as the capability to cope with, or recover and evolve from, significant difficulties. Four dimensions are typically identified at the personal level, including mental, physical, emotional and spiritual. In addition, the relational or social aspect of personal resilience can be considered (McCraty & Childre, 2010). At the collective level, such as a community or national level, a variety of dimensions of resilience of a society have been identified, including social, economic, infrastructural, environmental and institutional (Assarkhaniki et al., 2020). If regarded positively, rather than as an indication of failure, the widespread return to farming during the economic devastation from the pandemic-related policies, could be appreciated for how it both revealed the personal and collective resilience of Balinese people.

At the personal level, a return to rice cultivation offered potential benefit in the following ways. Physically, it is a more active form of work than what people were doing before (e.g., taxi driving). Mentally, it used different cognitive abilities and reconnected people with what they had known about in their youth. Emotionally, when regarded with some pride, the practice could be calming in a number of ways—the physical activity, the time in nature, and the reminder of potential safety and abundance. Spiritually, due to the connection of rice cultivation to the religion of the Balinese, the practice could be regarded as a form of prayer and ritualized, belonging in a culture where personal ancestors form part of the spiritual story and identity. Socially, the practice of rice farming could involve different kinds of interactions than when working in tourism, and much more so than being unemployed. By inviting reflection on all these potential aspects of returning to rice cultivation and promoting a mindful approach to the work itself, discussions about this artwork might encourage the development of personal resilience.

At the collective level of resilience, the social benefit is apparent for the reasons already stated. This also relates to a potential institutional and infrastructural benefit. By returning to work on the land, Balinese with skills and ideas developed within

the service sector could become more connected to the traditional organizations that manage the island-wide irrigation systems, as well as the farming policies of the local government associations (Banjars). More economic resilience could arise from communities developing less reliance on the market economy for basic nutrition, as well as creating alternative sources of income through the sale or swapping of agricultural products. The environmental implications of returning to rice cultivation are not clear. However, invitations to more mindful and sacred approaches to rice cultivation such as that embodied in the artwork described in this paper, might encourage more attention to matters of conservation and pollution. Future research could explore these issues, as well as what impacts last as tourism increases again in Bali.

In the future, the theme and frame established by the lead author could be further developed beyond the act of rice planting to consider the rice cultivation process more generally. What might a meditative approach to the whole process of rice cultivation involve? What might a more consciously integrated spiritual approach to the whole approach to rice cultivation involve? Could it involve fuller attention to the relations with all life in that process, such as impacts on biodiversity, climate, soils, toxicity, and human health through the use of agrochemicals and machines? The established philosophy of Tri Hita Karana in Bali indicates that such an exploration would have cultural resonance. “Hita” means happiness and “Karana” means cause; thus, Tri Hita Karana means “the three causes of the generation of happiness.” The three causes identified by Tri Hita Karana are the three key relationships in human life—relationships with fellow humans, relationships with the environment, and relationships with the divine. Beyond Bali, this performance art approach may have relevance for how it invites reflection on a respect for and reconnection with traditional practices that are made necessary due to economic disruptions. There is growing awareness worldwide that the fundamental structures supporting industrial consumer societies are becoming more fragile, due to environmental and political changes. In that context, the concept of how people can adapt positively to a future of greater disruption and even breakdown of normal life, is spreading. Therefore, this performance art could be regarded as an instance of art for “deep adaptation” to societal disturbances (Bendell & Read, 2021, p. 3). In particular, given the psychological difficulties that can arise from aggressive reactions to such changes or threats of change, an emphasis on the transformation of difficulties, on cultivating personal equanimity, on increasing local sufficiency, and on finding creative beauty in the process could help reduce maladaptive responses (Bendell, 2021).

Conclusion

Societal challenges and periods of disruption are reminders that there can be a role for art in contributing to personal and social well-being. In Bali, where rice farming plays a central role in the economy, culture, and spirituality of people, perhaps it was natural for performance art to invite reflection on the many people returning to farming because of economic disruption due to COVID-19. A powerful experience resulted, with discovery of the meditative potential of rice planting and the potential for healing the

disconnect between people and nature that has increased due to economic development. A new frame and esthetic were created through the performance art of planting rice as a meditative practice. In the Balinese context, this offers a possible participatory ritual with therapeutic benefit for people who have experienced anxiety related to economic disruption. The wider power and potential of this frame is only beginning to emerge and may have implications beyond Bali, in aiding deep adaptation as other communities and individuals process the implications of disruption to their previous way of life.

About the Authors

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