

A Provocation to Contemporary Art as Place-Making: Some Observations after Documenta 15

RAQS MEDIA COLLECTIVE

1.

Since the beginning of this century a search for new ways of gathering has been underway. Documenta 11 signified that the poetics of equality and multiple wills to globality are important grounds on which to gather and listen to the world. This was also evident in the processes that led to the various World Social Forums from 2003 onward. These gatherings, and even the gatherings that came together in dissent against these gatherings, were fragile occasions to test dialects of togetherness for tone, for scale. Sometimes they failed, being too stridently “political” for some; at other times they failed by being too “cultural”—not “political” enough for some. What matters is not that they failed but that even by failing they evoked something that everyone desires but no one seems to know how to achieve.

This desire—which comes from the experience of knowing what one does not have—plugs in to the achievement of feasting. In Delhi we experienced this taut dynamic between hunger and nourishment in mass kitchens during the 2019 protest movements around claims to citizenship led by Muslim women and in the 2021 farmers’ siege of the highway to the capital—events that foregrounded, ever more sharply, the relationship between land, crops, food, bread, and life. You cannot conceive a feast of solidarity if you do not understand hunger.¹

2.

In the *Documenta 14 Reader* (2017), a section titled “What Color Is Hunger? What Color Paper?,” compiled by Quinn Latimer, brings together drawings, prints, photographs, documents, baked goods, and words that are sometimes enigmas, sometimes poems, to ask questions about famine and food.² The portrait of an agronomist from India in the Mexican Revolution is one circuit that arcs between the ways people separated by continents find a way to swim through an ocean of wheat fields to cross the gulf from visceral hunger to a calm that can only come from shared nourishment. There are other circuits: artists moved by human-caused famines to sear the human form made supine by hunger into the mind’s eye, to think of books made

from bread, the word made food, food made thought.

Lumbung, the central metaphor of gathering resources for feasting, for celebration, that animated Documenta 15 (2022) makes more sense if you have a history of trying to think about hunger. And that is why an artifact like “What Color Is Hunger?” is important. It can also point to the fact that a long history stretches across several Documentas in which processes of gathering that occurred in the shadow of the exhibition made significant new openings in the relationships that tie art to life. A redrawing of this history will be crucial to the emergence of a contesting sensibility.³

3.

One way of understanding the strain of feasting and celebration that marked the *lumbung* process in Documenta 15 is to see in it strands of gathering, conviviality, and the sharing of space and resources that have been part of artistic life in many regions of the world. The *lumbung* process foregrounds what has lain hidden in the background of art milieus. This is expressed most in Indonesia and parts of East Asia. Histories of gathering that do not claim an avant-gardist modus have not found a way to write themselves. If at all noticed, they have remained within a frame of “prehistory” to artistic trends and biographies. The feast of the *lumbung* has many antecedents, many shadows, within the history of art—as tendencies that were unmanifest until they became manifest with Documenta 15.⁴

4.

The world is made from interlaced minor histories of capital. Collisions of these minor histories bring about large historical shifts, where intersections and the travel of goods, people, ideas, and wealth, investment, disruptions, and renewed relationships take place and condense in different sites. Complex, violent, seductive, delirious, phantasmagoric images of the world merge and emerge in various locations with distinct texture and taste. To know all the intricacies of the weaves of minor histories of capital—with their linkages, movements, confusion, and amplification of one another—is an impossibility but is also the probable reality that contemporary art calls in with it and stages for the world. Documenta 15 was no exception. Settled habits anchored in historical arrogance and ignorance colluded to force into dormancy curiosities sharpened by the unpacking of historical archives and the uncertain tenures of minor histories as they crisscrossed and cohabited with one another in unruly ways. These curiosities invite an unravelling of that which is signified as social, seemingly a category understandable to all.

5.

Social as a category is now amid us in a maligned, reified, and instrumentalized way. A few decades of intense firefighting by millions to keep themselves afloat within the onslaught of an

antisocial economic *zeitgeist* has made the word *social* oscillate between a formation that borders on majoritarian common sense and a disaggregation that is without end. The *social* as a terrain of experiment and the creation of contingent arenas in which to engage and dispute is where art comes in. It wends its way from the binary of meritocratic individualism and anomic disenchantment toward propositional and deliberative procedures. Documenta 15 invited the possibilities of such a move. Its expansive practice of invitation allowed an avenue for thinking the potent possibilities of *art as a place*.

6.

In 2013 we proposed a formulation, following a long moment of conjunction with more than one hundred artists and practitioners, that place-making could be art-making.⁵ Art creates a place through an intense inhabitation, with durational ease that is open and plural and cuts through barriers of art and nonart, professional and amateur, processual and finished, finesse and trash, documentation and the intangible, individual and collective, insider and outsider. These propositions, instances of which are being made all over the world, are a countercurrent to the meritocratic disdain for life that demands everything and everyone to be merely a service industry for the winners—or those who think they could be winners. Documenta 15 turned the gaze inward and looked to multiple flows that could shape other ways of making place.

7.

The Sarvastivadin branch of early Buddhism prominent in Kashmir and North India—whose name derives from its doctrine, *all things exist*—proposes that at the threshold of the perceptual and the cognitive is the *unconstituted*.⁶ We can nudge ahead from here to ask: Is this not the edge of how art attempts to valiantly animate the world? To keep alive the sensibility of a potentiality that is at odds with and at times a threat to the enumerative and transactable hypnotism of governance through commodity, hierarchical obdurances, and policed order.

Notes

1. See Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez, Corina Oprea, and Monica Narula, “Where Are We Going?—Degrowth and Arts Ecosystem,” *L’internationale*, 15 February 2021, https://www.internationaleonline.org/research/politics_of_life_and_death/158_where_are_we_going_and_ndash_degrowth_and_arts_ecosystem/; Sarover Zaidi, “The Gift of Food,” *e-flux Architecture*, August 2021, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/survivance/412221/the-gift-of-food/>; and Santhosh S., “Politics as Pedagogy,” *e-flux Architecture*, March 2020, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/education/322666/politics-as-pedagogy/>.

2. Quinn Latimer, ed., “What Color Is Hunger? What Color Paper?,” in *Documenta 14 Reader*, ed. Quinn Latimer and Adam Szymczyk (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2017), 57–79.

3. Successive Documentas, particularly the tenth and eleventh editions, standing astride the transition between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, were able to accommodate and amplify many diverse currents that were claiming place and attention within the canopy of contemporary art of the time. Email list-serves, like Nettime, which created a new mode of discursivity, found a new momentum and a place at a table on a forgotten edge of Documenta 10. The No One Is Illegal campaign that aimed to restore dignity to immigrants in Europe was also founded in July 1997 at that same table at Documenta 10. We remember from our own time leading up to, and at, Documenta 11 the various kinds and occasions of discursivity that were staged in different ways. They included: (a) the energy around the second of Documenta 11’s five “platforms,” the discursive platform “Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation,” which unfolded at the Habitat Centre in New Delhi, between May 7 and 21, 2001, as a prelude to the opening of the main exhibition (Platform 5, in Kassel). The Sarai Reader List, an electronic mailing list that we administered as part of our work at the Sarai Programme at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, in Delhi, reflected on this. See the comments on Platform 2 in Delhi by the artistic director of Documenta 11, Okwui Enwezor, “Re: Documenta11’s New Delhi,” Sarai Reader List, 30 May 2001, https://works.raqsmediacollective.net/reader-list/reader-list_mail.sarai.net/2001-May/000115.html. (b) The convivial and conversational context sustained by the “canteen” (located at the bottom of the steps of the Documenta Halle in the days leading up to the opening of Platform 5 of Documenta 11), which functioned as a space for exchanges, bonding, and the formation of new friendships and solidarities over lunch between artists, technicians, curatorial team members, and writers. (c) The focused but informal symposium around the idea of a digital commons that we convened in the Documenta Halle in Kassel between July 18 and 20, 2002, that involved as participants the media theorists Ravi Sundaram and Geert Lovink, the curator and critic Nancy Adajania, the legal theorist and researcher Lawrence Liang, and ourselves.

4. Histories of gathering within art will be a crucial area to think with—maybe as, if not more significant than, exhibition histories. One of the striking realities of contemporary art from Indonesia is its ability to create spaces, protocols, and ethics of coinhabitation for people and practices. This milieu, *with this capacity*, was invited to Documenta 15 along with ruangrupa. This is not to argue that ruangrupa is not a unique constellation but instead that their confidence to venture into remarkable world-making comes from deep within a milieu that shaped and nourished them.

5. “Art as a Place,” in *Sarai Reader 09: Projections* (Delhi: CSDS, 2013), <https://works.raqsmediacollective.net/index.php/2014/11/08/art-as-place-a-proposition/>.

6. Kanai Lal Hazra, *The Rise and Decline of Buddhism in India* (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publications, 1995).