

Gudskul. Installation view, Documenta 15, Kassel, 2022.

Missed Encounters: Introduction to Documenta 15 Dossier

ERIC C.H. DE BRUYN

Last summer, Documenta 15 (the latest installment of the quinquennial exhibition of contemporary art in Kassel, Germany) was roiled by a particularly vehement reception in the German press, with various accusations of antisemitism being fielded against participants in the exhibition. What happened was more than a local art-world skirmish: it was symptomatic of persistent and unresolved tensions within the German public media sphere, as well as indicative of certain antinomies underlying a globalized system of art production and dissemination. The purpose of this dossier is not to rehearse the details of the controversy in the German press but to address the broader failure—with some notable exceptions—to conduct an actual analysis of the propositions forwarded by Documenta 15, which for the first time was curated by an artist collective of the Global South.¹ However, since the repercussions for the German art world are potentially dire, we commissioned Dirk Moses to weigh in on the aftermath of Documenta 15 and its fallout within the cultural politics of Germany. All other contributions have thereby been freed to engage with the actual phenomenon of Documenta 15 (its curatorial premises and/or exhibited works) in order to foster a much-needed critical discussion of this in many ways exceptional exhibition. To disentangle the media controversy completely from the curatorial premises of Documenta 15 is of course not possible—not so much because of its thematics but because of its underlying structural causes. What we witnessed over the summer, above all, was the clash of two discourses that did not (despite the best efforts of *ruangrupa*) translate well into mutual intelligibility. That is, two imaginaries of the public sphere stood at an angle to each other. A brief assessment of this missed encounter between *ruangrupa* and its local publics is thus a worthwhile place to begin—however, it should not be taken as an analysis of the success or failure of the whole enterprise of Documenta 15.²

In the German *feuilleton* culture (a remainder of the quaint old bourgeois public sphere, which has survived longer in Germany than elsewhere) accusations of antisemitism were fielded against several participating artist groups.³ The ensuing scandal did not come as a total surprise, since tension had been building in the months leading up to the opening with, for instance, members of the organizing artist collective *ruangrupa* (based in Jakarta, Indonesia) being linked to the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement. In response to BDS, which was

organized in support of Palestinian rights, a broad alliance of political parties in the German Bundestag passed a controversial resolution in 2019 labeling the movement as antisemitic and urging state-funded cultural institutions not to support an organization that, according to the parliamentarians, “questions the right to existence of the Israeli state.”⁴ This decision set a dangerous precedent for state intervention in the cultural field and, as Moses outlines in his contribution to this dossier, has cast a long shadow into the present. In this sense, Documenta 15 wrought, at least locally, the opposite of what was envisioned by ruangrupa (the first Southeast Asian collective curator of the Documenta); namely, to foster an egalitarian counterpublic sphere, a commons for the gathering of self-organized artist collectives who stem mostly if not exclusively from the Global South and have emerged out of decolonial, social, and environmental struggles. As ruangrupa stated in its first Documenta press release on February 22, 2019, “Our curatorial approach aims at a different community-oriented model of resource usage— If documenta was launched in 1955 to heal war wounds, why shouldn’t we focus documenta fifteen on today’s injuries, especially ones rooted in colonialism, capitalism, or patriarchal structures.”⁵ Whereas ruangrupa consistently promotes a collective, activist approach to art-making based on the values of friendship, generosity, and solidarity, the German public sphere became infected with the antithetical values of distrust, suspicion, and animosity.

To some extent, the scandal-mongering that accompanied Documenta 15 can be seen as a symptom of the Documenta series’ increasingly uncertain grounds of legitimation. Originally established to “repair” the cultural breach between the Weimar Republic and the postwar Western Bundesrepublik, Documenta was intended as a contribution to the constitution of a newly assertive, democratic space of social consensus and civic virtue during the reconstruction period. Retrospectively, it has to be understood in its first editions to have catered to a repression of the past rather than a “healing” of German civic society (whatever the latter might actually mean). Indeed, the governance of Documenta itself was implicit within the failed postwar process of denazification: Arnold Bode’s cocurator, Werner Haftmann—who subsequently would rise within the institutional ranks to become the first director of the Neue Nationalgalerie in Berlin—has recently been exposed as a war criminal.⁶ From its function within the postwar restoration of a West German *Öffentlichkeit*, Documenta gradually recalibrated its place within the global world system, assuming a dominant role among those competing platforms of contemporary art that, since the 1960s, have seen themselves as catering more to a cosmopolitan than to a national art audience—a transformation consolidated with Harald Szeeman’s Documenta 5 (1972), which established the phenomenon of the visionary star curator who brings thematic order to an otherwise pluriform realm of the visual arts. Situated in Kassel (strategically

located near what was then the East German border), Documenta was to fashion itself not only as a bellwether of the most recent developments in art but also as a showcase of Western cultural liberalism. Yet with Documenta 11 (if not before) this position became ever more untenable. Okwui Enwezor and a team of cocurators situated that exhibition within a postcolonial framework in an effort to “provincialize” Europe and thus raise the question to whose public sphere, exactly, the Documenta space belonged.

Enwezor’s Documenta gave rise to vigorous debate, but nothing as vehement as that which surrounded Documenta 15. One could sense an almost perverse sense of relief among the German critics, even in such bastions of liberal opinion as the *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, when the controversy broke. Relief, that is, produced by an awareness that public debate (it seemed) could afford to ignore the possible challenges that Documenta 15 posed to conventional Western narratives of art. Insofar as it was true that Documenta 15 shifted the overall perspective of Documenta toward the Global South—a viewpoint that is slightly reductive—the former “enlightened” public media sphere, set up as an arbiter of national opinion, clearly was not well equipped to address the complex set of conjunctions between modernity and coloniality, the local and the global, that were placed on view. Thus, the ritual of dissension continued to be played out on old turf, following a distinctly German playbook of cultural politics. Without doubt, as Eyal Weizman notes in a critique of the German media frenzy, Taring Padi’s agit-prop *People’s Justice* was, to say the least, “not a subtle piece of art.”⁷ No one would disagree that it should never have been exhibited—which is not true of the other targets alleged to be examples of artistic antisemitism by the German media, as Moses observes in his contribution to this issue. Rather than adjudicating the truth of these accusations, however, or the sufficiency of the apologies by the artists and curators involved, it is far more crucial to comprehend how these complaints were wielded to impugn the curatorial principles of the exhibition as a whole. As Weizman notes, the German press and politicians “have used the controversy as an opportunity to tell Palestinians and critical Jewish Israelis, as well as artists from the global south, that they have no right to speak out.” Indeed, several media pundits seized the moment to declare the failure of the postcolonial project as such, with German president Frank-Walter Steinmeier weighing in to declare that Documenta 15 proved that artistic freedom was not without limit. Apparently, Steinmeier did not consider how paradoxical such a statement might sound in the context of a German debate about antisemitism in the arts. Not that anyone should be given a free pass: Weizman concedes that in certain anti-imperialist milieus a critique of the Israeli government in support of Palestinian rights has become confused with antisemitic tropes—yet he asserts as well that “the state-sponsored and openly Islamophobic persecution of artists and intellectuals in Germany

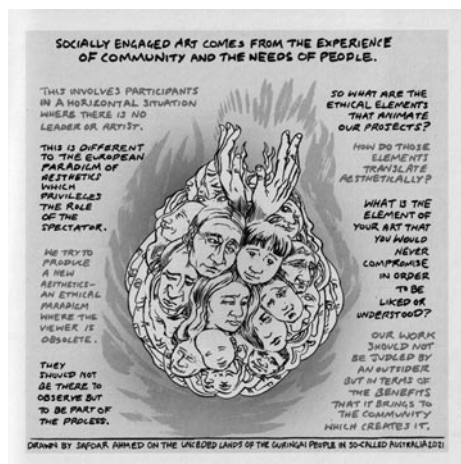
falsely separates the entangled histories of racism and anti-semitism, placing them in opposition to each other.” He attests to this from personal experience, because even his own collective practice, Forensic Architecture, has become a victim of self-censorship by German institutions afraid of the repercussions of the Documenta 15 controversy.⁸

But what, then, was so provocative about ruangrupa’s curatorial objectives that they solicited so much disbelief and suspicion in the German media? How did their imaginary of the public space differ so strongly from the imaginary of the German public—in all its inner contradictions—to the point of seeming alien? In the first place, we must grasp ruangrupa’s understanding of the historical context of its own origin. The cooperative was founded in 2000 during Indonesia’s *Reformasi*—a period of social unrest that precipitated and followed the fall of Suharto’s repressive New Order regime in 1998. The public protests initiated by the Asian monetary crisis of 1997 gave rise to several self-organized artist collectives that coordinated with the broader social uprising. As most political assemblies had been outlawed under Suharto (starting with his brutal suppression of the communist movement in the 1960s), communal activities were identified with the value of freedom during the *Reformasi*.⁹ Furthermore, these collectives stepped in to fill the absence of a cultural infrastructure for the support, production, and presentation of visual arts.¹⁰ The communal ethics of these Indonesian artists, therefore, was forged both as a defensive strategy to resist state censorship (and shield individual artists from persecution) and as a grassroots effort to construct a support system for art in the absence of financial and governmental systems of assistance. This historical background explains to a large extent how ruangrupa’s own understanding of the public sphere, as produced under (post)revolutionary circumstances, was at odds with the German situation.

Indonesian collectives like ruangrupa are governed by a strong affective investment in mutual relationships shaped by the values of friendship, collaboration, and solidarity, or what they refer to as *nonkrong*, an Indonesian slang word for “hanging out.” Asked what happens if a member of the collective disagrees, one ruangrupa member simply replied that this had not happened in its twenty-two years of existence.¹¹ Within the Indonesian field of collectives, artistic practice thus figures not only as an agit-prop extension of street protests (as in the case of Taring Padi) but, ideally, as a *Spielraum* for the invention of alternative forms of life. Thus, in a recent appraisal of Indonesian art collectives written from the standpoint of the scene itself, we read that “an art collective is a social experiment of living together: an art collective is a laboratory of social life.”¹² That such local, self-organized communities, based on face-to-face relationships, seem anxious to avoid a macropolitical scale of organization may not be surprising; that is, the cooperatives have no desire to accede to the level of postcolonial constructions of nationhood, the “imagined communities” that Benedict

Anderson studied during the late 1970s (based in part on the Indonesian situation). In a strange twist of fate, the German public sphere continued to play out such imaginaries of nationhood in the margins of Documenta 15, but not the participants in the exhibition itself. Nevertheless, we should also acknowledge how *ruangrupa*'s ethos of community also involves its own imaginaries, limits, and forms of sovereignty.¹³

For all its emphasis on direct modes of action and participation and its denial of “ideological” formations, *ruangrupa* promotes a distinctly anthropological image of its own structure and operations. Their handbook to Documenta 15, for instance, constantly invokes preindustrial, agricultural metaphors: harvesting, composting, seeding, and so on. These terms are meant not only to convey an environmental consciousness focused on processes of sustainability but also to imply a direct connection between collective art practices in the present and ancestral traditions of communal celebration.¹⁴ Thus, *ruangrupa* and other collectives in its vicinity can assume on occasion a rather self-



Safdar Ahmed.
Harvest Drawing, 2021.
 From *Documenta Fifteen Handbook* (2022).

congratulatory tone, claiming that the old avant-garde problem of the dichotomy between art and life does not apply to them. What we do not find in this particular strand of collective self-representation is the equivalent of those reappropriations of colonial and capitalist relationships of power, such as creolization or anthropophagism, that stem from an earlier period of decolonization and operate simultaneously on micro- and macropolitical scales of resistance.¹⁵

Unless, that is, one understands the central anthropological metaphor of Documenta 15—*lumbung*—as a *détournement* of Western figures of public institutions. *Lumbung*, as we learn from the Documenta 15 handbook, is an Indonesian word for the building “where a village community stores their harvest together, to be managed collectively, as a way to face an unpredictable future.” As such, *lumbung* constitutes the model of a commons structured on intimate relations of exchange and opposes the Enlightenment ideal of the public museum as the repository of national heritage. Indeed, the curatorial concept of *ruangrupa* was to avoid precisely such hierarchical institutions

by following a principle of *delegated responsibility* and soliciting other collectives to invite their own guests. Thus, the invited artists and collectives were each to become part of a collective curatorial process that was developed by means of various assemblies, or *majelis*, sharing a communal financial pot, with funds allocated according to a fixed system of distribution. This horizontal *lumbung* organizational system can therefore be understood not only as a *détournement* of the museum complex but also, by “putting financial resources in a central account to be managed together,” as a *détournement* of the financial institution known as the central bank.¹⁶

As a fraternity of collectives, Documenta 15 was intended to constitute an egalitarian *ekosistem* that would be physically limited by a system of direct democracy.¹⁷ In effect, this particular imaginary of collectivism worked to foreclose any profound reflection on a critical dialectic between collective art practice and the existing institutional system of art. As ruangrupa states in their handbook, “instead of integrating ourselves into the long-established documenta system . . . we invited documenta back, asking it to be part of our journey. We refuse to be exploited by European, institutional agendas that are not ours to begin with.”¹⁸ Joined to this rejection of an art concept that ruangrupa views as inextricably bound to “Westernism” and its institutional and commercial system of the arts is another set of tropes. First, ruangrupa celebrates the “informality” of participatory forms of art, a celebration perhaps most clearly on display in the Gudskul space at the Fridericianum. This has often undergirded the more positive (mostly English-language) reception of Documenta 15, celebrating its “festive” and “convivial” atmosphere. In Weizman’s appraisal, “the whole arrangement was irreverent, non-hierarchical, a much needed corrective to the rigid museological style of previous ‘editions’”; he also lauds the exhibition for its “mock[ing]” attitude toward the art world’s systems of corporate sponsorship and commercial art fairs.¹⁹ Second, ruangrupa touts its refusal to define artistic practice in terms of the creation of “autonomous” objects destined for the market and private ownership and manifested a strong reluctance to engage in discursive modes of reflection, preferring instead the exploration of a kind of “tacit” knowledge among participants. As Monica Juneja and Jo Ziebritzki comment in this issue, the members of ruangrupa deliberately “positioned themselves against discursive exchange, castigating ‘theory’ as a mechanism of an oppressive ‘Western’ episteme”—even though such a rejection of a “critical mode of reflecting on one’s own history and positionality became a barrier in many ways.” Finally, ruangrupa tends to privilege a kind of illegibility or opacity of artistic practice (in terms of Western aesthetic categories), imagining works that are “not (yet) visible, as they do not fit the existing model of the global art world(s).” Art, in their view, can form only a series of propaedeutic “exercises for reshaping and sow seeds for more changes in the future.”²⁰ How this avowed desire for an art that

is yet without name connects to ruangrupa's anthropological imaginary of an integration between art and life is not difficult to understand. Yet such an imaginary was already present within the Western history of the (neo-)avant-garde, which ruangrupa tends to disavow. The avant-garde project was always on the lookout for those seemingly nameless, parentless, "specific objects" that appeared to have no past.

With this cursory overview of the missed encounter that was Documenta 15, we may now begin to ask, with Juneja and Ziebritzki, "to what extent was the transcultural process—in other words, the dynamic of encounter and transformation—which such a potent intervention in an established global institution was expected to set into motion, effectively realized? And what was lost to it?" Some contributors to this dossier, such as Raqs Media Collective (who were present at Documenta 11), situate ruangrupa's ethos of assembly within a longer, postcolonial genealogy of artistic and political practice, noting that "since the beginning of this century it is as if there has been a search for new ways of gathering," whereas Gatari Surya Kusuma excavates the Indonesian setting of ruangrupa's anthropological model of gathering and collective learning in more depth.²¹ The issue of a general lack, even conscious refusal of reflexivity, on the part of ruangrupa is extensively explored by Marina Vishmidt, who argues that, whereas this lack can be understood as a critical deficit of Documenta 15, it may also be necessary to recognize alternative modes of opposition that do not rely on an avant-gardist model of reflexivity. Finally, T.J. Demos engages with the observation made by several commentators that Documenta 15 was prone to a fetishization of organizational aesthetics. In this regard, Demos asks to what extent ruangrupa's rhetoric of communal healing or repair is appropriate. Not only because one may seriously question whether the original project of Documenta sought to heal Germany's traumatic relation to a fascist past but also because, "while there's much to support in [ruangrupa's] statement, it's hard to reconcile its emancipatory promise with the actual sociopolitical circumstances in places like Rojava, Haiti, and Gaza." What is left to repair if such regions are experiencing an "ongoingness of disaster"? Any such effort is premature at best and inappropriate at worst. Which, as Demos is careful to emphasize, is not to dismiss the practices on display at Documenta 15 but to take ruangrupa's "political claims for aesthetics seriously" and to ask for "strategic consideration of how cultural practices might contribute to actual transformation." In the hope of spurring a more serious analysis of Documenta 15 and perhaps "repairing" to some extent the missed encounter between its participants and its publics, we hope that the reflections, critiques, and speculations contained in this dossier will help us to begin to grasp the degree to which this exhibition articulated any challenge at all to the ordinary business of art history and its exhibitionary apparatus—if only in a highly informal and improvised manner.

Notes

1. Among the more interesting English-language critiques of Documenta 15 are J.J. Charlesworth, “Documenta 15 Review: Who Really Holds Power in the Artworld?,” *ArtReview*, 17 June 2022, <https://artreview.com/documenta-15-review-who-really-holds-power-in-the-artworld-ruangrupa>; Ben Davis, “Documenta 15’s Focus on Populist Art Opens the Door to Art Worlds You Don’t Otherwise See—and May Not Always Want To,” *Artnet*, 6 July 2022, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/documenta-15-review-2140149>; David Joselit, “History in Pieces,” *Artforum*, September 2022, <https://www.artforum.com/print/202207/david-joselit-on-documenta-15-and-the-59th-venice-biennale-88912>; and Gregory Sholette, “A Short and Incomplete History of ‘Bad’ Curating as Collective Resistance,” *Art Agenda*, 21 September 2022, <https://www.art-agenda.com/criticism/491800/a-shortand-incomplete-history-of-bad-curating-as-collective-resistance>.

2. The curatorial premises of ruangrupa as recorded in, for instance, the *Documenta Fifteen Handbook*, do not necessarily represent the standpoint of all participating artists. Furthermore, because ruangrupa, as curators, chose a position of delegated responsibility, one can at best point to certain *organizational* procedures according to which the Documenta was structured. The question of a collectivist *imaginary* that I discuss here can be ascribed only to ruangrupa itself, even if it may be shared by other groups in its Indonesian milieu.

3. After the opening on June 18, the public furor started with the discovery of two unmistakably antisemitic caricatures on the banner *People’s Justice* by the Indonesian collective Taring Padi. Following a long tradition of revolutionary murals, the banner depicts both the perpetrators and victims of violence carried out by the Suharto regime. Members of Taring Padi had been involved in the popular uprising of 1998 that brought about Suharto’s fall after much bloodshed. *People’s Justice* was painted in 2002 to commemorate this recent history. For more information, see Eyal Weizman, “In Kassel,” *London Review of Books* 44, no. 15 (4 August 2022), <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v44/n15/eyal-weizman/in-kassel>. For more on the complicated political alliances of those opposing the Documenta in Germany, see also Ana Teixeira Pinto, “This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things!,” *JVC Magazine*, 4 October 2022, <https://www.journalofvisualculture.org/this-is-why-we-cant-have-nice-things/>.

4. Thus, the Bundestag resolution (“Der BDS-Bewegung entschlossen entgegenzutreten—Antisemitismus bekämpfen,” BT-Drucksache 19/10191, 17 May 2019) states, “Die Argumentationsmuster und Methoden der BDS-Bewegung sind antisemitisch. Die Aufrufe der Kampagne zum Boykott israelischer Künstlerinnen und Künstler . . . erinnern zudem an die schrecklichste Phase der deutschen Geschichte.” (The pattern of argumentation and methods of the BDS movement are antisemitic. Furthermore, the call by the campaign to boycott Israeli artists recalls the darkest moment in German history.) Although the resolution was not legally binding, it has led to a de facto exclusion of certain figures, including, paradoxically, Weizman, from certain German cultural venues. For a brilliant response to the Bundestag resolution by one of the “Israeli artists” for whom the Bundestag politicians presumed to speak, see Eran Schaerf, “Verblendet beim Erinnern der Gegenwart? Frag Franz,” *Merkur-Blog*, 3 January 2021, <https://www.merkur-zeitschrift.de/2021/01/03/verblendet-beim-erinnern-der-gegenwart-frag-franz/>.

5. “Ruangrupa Selected as Artistic Direction of Documenta Fifteen,” press release, Documenta 15, Kassel, 22 February 2019, <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/press-releases/ruangrupa-selected-as-artistic-direction-of-documenta-fifteen/>.

6. On Haftmann’s Nazi Party membership and wartime role combating partisans of the Italian resistance, see, among others, the contribution of Julia Voss to *Documenta: Politics and Art*, exh. cat. (Berlin: Deutsches Historisches

Museum; Munich: Prestel, 2021).

7. Weizman, "In Kassel."

8. Weizman, "In Kassel."

9. Lisa Berins, "Farid Rakun von Ruangrupa: 'Überzeugungen sind nicht schnell zu ändern,'" *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 5 September 22, <https://www.fr.de/kultur/gesellschaft/farid-rakun-von-ruangrupa-ueberzeugungen-sind-nicht-schnell-zu-aendern-91769210.html>.

10. For an account of contemporary art in Indonesia told from the standpoint of art collectives, see Ninus Andarnuswari, ed., *Articulating Fixer 2021: An Appraisal of Indonesian Art Collectives in the Last Decade* (Jakarta: Yayasan Gudskul Studi Kolektif, 2021).

11. Katherina Rustler, interview with Iswanto Harono, "Documenta-Kuratoren Ruangrupa: 'Viele Vorwürfe waren nicht gerecht,'" *Der Standard*, 12 October 2022, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/2000139885416/documenta-kurator-viele-vorwuerfe-waren-nicht-gerecht>.

12. Berto Tukan, "A Different Season on the Same Soil and Water: On the Emergence of Art Collectives," in *Articulating Fixer 2021*, 25–26.

13. "In an anthropological spirit," Benedict Anderson writes, "I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign." He adds that "true" communities cannot simply be juxtaposed to nations: "In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. . . . Javanese villagers have always known that they are connected to people they have never seen, but these ties were once imagined particularistically—as indefinitely stretchable nets of kinship and clientship. Until quite recently, the Javanese language had no word meaning the abstraction 'society.'" Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 6–7.

14. For an attempt to establish the "ancestral" genealogy of Indonesian collectives, see Gesyada Siregar, "As If Looking at the Weaving of Ampang: In Search of Art within Art Collective Practice in Indonesia," in *Articulating Fixer 2021*, 68–93.

15. One of the so-called platforms leading up to Documenta 11, for instance, was dedicated to "Créolité and Creolization." Okwui Enwezor, "Platform3: Créolité and Creolization," https://www.documenta-platform6.de/platform3_documenta11_broschuere/. On the engagement of the postcolonial strategy of anthropophagy within the biennial system, see Lisette Lagnado et al., *Cultural Anthropophagy: The 24th Bienal de São Paulo 1998* (London: Afterall Books, 2015).

16. *Documenta Fifteen Handbook* (Berlin: Hajte Cantz, 2022), 12.

17. An example of such an *ekosistem* is, among others, Gudskul, the educational platform established by ruangrupa with two other collectives, Serrum and Grafis Huru Hara, in 2018 and which they refer to as a "collective of collectives." Another is the Arts Collaboratory, a translocal organization of community-based art collectives that is funded by Dutch foundations.

18. *Documenta Fifteen Handbook*, 12.

19. Weizman, "In Kassel."

20. *Documenta Fifteen Handbook*, 17.

21. On this crucial point, see also Sven Lütticken, "Organizational Aesthetics: On Certain Practices and Genealogies," *October*, no. 183 (Winter 2023): 17–49.