

documenta fifteen – Art and Socio-Political Concerns:

How Do These Fit Together?

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When the selection committee decided to entrust the artistic direction of *documenta fifteen* to the Indonesian artist collective Ruangrupa, it was clear that their art is aimed at bringing about socio-political change. What was meant by this was certainly difficult to grasp until the opening of the exhibition. We were thus all surprised and encouraged to rethink our views.

Who is behind Ruangrupa? Where do they come from, and to what extent has this shaped their artistic practice?

Bernhard Schulz presented the history and development of the *documenta* and, above all, discussed in detail the scandal caused by the accusation of anti-Semitism.

I would like to place *documenta fifteen* in the context of the history of the Indonesian homeland of the artist collective Ruangrupa and the impact it has had on their understanding of art. What strategy did they use in Kassel and to what end? What was particularly successful and what ultimately went wrong?

History:

Artists from Jakarta founded Ruangrupa in 1998. At the time, there were massive protests against the military dictator Suharto, who had come to power in 1963 after suppressing an attempted coup. After seizing power, he had the communists murdered. One speaks of one million dead. Despite these atrocities, Suharto enjoyed the support of the West. In 1998, when the economic crisis reached its peak, Suharto was forced to step down. The first free elections and numerous reforms followed in 1999.

Indonesia is the largest Muslim state in Southeast Asia and, as the most populous state in the region, sees itself as the leader of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) founded in 1967. However, freedom of the press is still restricted, and corruption is far from being eradicated. Over the past twenty years, the country has been hit by a series of natural disasters – tsunamis, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions – which have claimed human lives and devastated entire regions, with corresponding economic consequences.

Art as a Palliative:

It is no wonder, then, that Ruangrupa, a collective of nine artists founded in Jakarta in 1998 – at the same time, incidentally, as the agitprop group Taring Padi in Yogyakarta – has developed an art form that seeks to counteract the lack of infrastructure and state support for art and

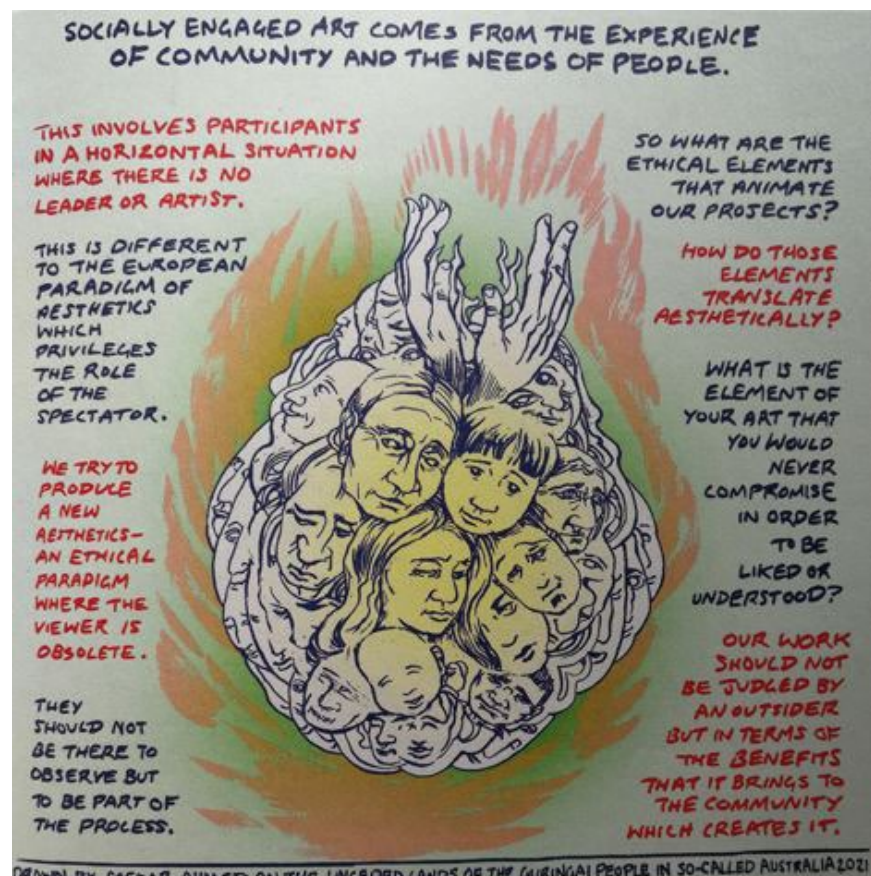
culture. It is about rethinking institutions to ensure the economic survival of artists and their autonomy. As Bernhard Schulz has explained in detail, its principle is based on the *Lumbung*.

Applied to art, this means first forming a community that grows by inviting like-minded collectives, who in turn invite their friends, so that the community multiplies in a snowball system. For *documenta fifteen*, the community grew to some 1,500 artists. The invited collectives come from the most diverse countries. They have experienced wars, colonialism, racism, migration, sexism, and represent minorities who are given a forum here – including, incidentally, climate activists. Never before has the diversity of lifestyles and cultures been as pronounced at a *documenta* as it had at this past edition. Never before has so much attention been paid to initiatives of resistance. One can justifiably claim that this *documenta* strove to be something of a gathering place for all those in the world who are overlooked.

Ruangrupa's Concept of Art

Ruangrupa's concept of art is intrinsically paired with social commitment. Art and life merge. What we are dealing with here are visions of a better world for the future. Ruangrupa shares this concern with various European tendencies that see art as a lever to break down encrusted structures. One thinks of the Letterist under the leadership of Isidore Isou and the more politically oriented Situationists with Guy Debord at their head, and later of Fluxus, led by George Maciunas, where it was no longer the work of art but the creative idea that mattered. In 1982, Beuys carried out the first activist initiative with the planting of 7,000 oak trees at *documenta 7* in Kassel and set the course for a new consciousness for the preservation of nature, which, in our time, broke away from art and led to Fridays for Future.

What is decidedly different about Ruangrupa is the principled primacy of the collective over the individual. The drawing *Harvest* by Safdar Ahmed shows how this is to be understood (fig. 1).¹



¹ Safdar Ahmed, *Harvest* drawing, 2021, in: *documenta fifteen* handbook, p. 29

¹ Illustrations without mention are from the author.

In the middle, we see a circle with many heads: the community. From its centre, two hands rise up, opening towards the sky: a symbol of collective production. All around are small flames that can be interpreted as collective creative thoughts. Above all this is written: **Socially engaged art comes from the experience of community and the needs of people.** 'The needs of the people': To the ears of a liberal European, this sounds dangerously close to the dictatorships that gave so much prominence to nationalism in Europe in the twentieth century, which ultimately led to the exclusion of the entire avant-garde as degenerate art in Nazi Germany.

It is also about equal participation by all and thus the rejection of the principle of accountability, or even the authority of any one artist. The relationship between artist (or artist collective) and viewer is abolished, since the latter becomes part of the process and thus co-producer. The last sentence at the bottom right is essential: **'Our work should not be judged by an outsider but in terms of the benefits that it brings to the community which creates it.'** This sentence clearly expresses that a judgement made by people who have a different opinion is precluded from the outset and that communication outside one's own nucleus is de facto impossible or undesirable. This would seem to explain why Ruangrupa reacted with such blatant unwillingness to the accusations of anti-Semitism, apart from paying lip service to them.

What is the task of political art as propagated by Ruangrupa?

Another statement from Ruangrupa clearly expresses their aspirations. They state: **We are not the guest of documenta, documenta fifteen is the guest of Lumbung One.** In accordance with this, they officially reject any dependence whatsoever on any local or even federal institutions – except, of course, for accepting the budget made available to them – and they set their own rules in Kassel.

Lumbung and the Ekosistem in Kassel

Lumbung means collective decision-making and a fair distribution of resources among the contributors – a very commendable approach. Ruangrupa goes even further: For its many guests in Kassel, it has created its own 'ekosistem' that guarantees their economic autonomy. In other words, they are not dependent on our usual economic system. In real terms, this means not only that the invited collectives each have an equal share financially, but also that trading within the collective is done with their own Lumbung currency, that there is a Lumbung gallery, a Lumbung kiosk, a Lumbung space – the Ruruhaus as the heart of the documenta and meeting place. In addition, there is a Lumbung press, composed of freelance publishers in the Documenta Hall, which can immediately put the ideas that arise there to paper. Although Ruangrupa rejects the conventional art market, it is said that no other documenta has sold as much as this one.

Seen in this way, Lumbung has infiltrated the city of Kassel, created its own organisation, something like a state within a state, the structures of which are mutable and can adapt flexibly to the circumstances and necessities of the environment; a state that, on the other

hand, knows no boundaries. On the contrary, Lumbung expands like an octopus, whose tentacles reach out in all directions.

The social character and the inclusion of all participants: this sounds like Marxism in the best sense. 'Make friends, not art' is the motto. One of the tactics of 'making friends' – as well as of gaining the attention of the audience – is an old tradition that has been completely forgotten in our country, that of oral lore, which includes storytelling.

The Importance of the Narrative

The importance of the narrative was made clear by the humorously sarcastic performance of Agus Nur Amal Pmtoh at the press conference (fig. 2), who spoke there as a news presenter behind a handmade television screen and who later filled the objects bundled into arrangements in the *Grimmwelt* with life – a successful presentation.



2 Agus Nur Amal Pmtoh, Performance of at the Press conference, Auestadion, Kassel, 2022, photo Nicolas Wefers

The Narrative plays an important role in many installations, such as in *Gudskul* where Lumbung member start a narrative, which is interpreted by visitors who get involved as co-creator. Subsequent visitors build their own interpretation based both on the narrator's understanding and on the interplay between their interpretations and those of previous visitors. They are engaged in a never-ending creative process. I would like to remind you that at the press conference Ruangrupa pointed out that *documenta fifteen* is not about an exhibition, but rather about the constant change of the works presented, which, as part of the creative process, would continue to develop in the course of the 100 days, without the conclusion of the documenta necessarily meaning the conclusion of the works. In this respect as well, the documenta is only to be understood as one stage in its constantly developing Lumbung principle, the possibility, so to speak, of informing the wider world about it and winning it over to it. Their intention: to offer an alternative to the Western view

of art, to commerce, to the authority of the artist. They come as 'conquistadores' with an at times rather aggressive claim to establish their point of view with us.

What do the works and their display tell us? What concept of art do they stand for? Or should we ask, with Ruangrupa, 'where is the art?'

One of the strengths of this documenta is the keen sense for the staging of the installations in the context of the city. Ruangrupa is obviously aware of this, because they devote space to the localities in the catalogue, which is otherwise so sparse with information. Due to time constraints, I will only mention a few of the particularly successful installations:



3 The Nest Collective, *Return to Sender*, Karlsaue, Kassel, 2022

The installation *Return to Sender* by The Nest Collective from East Africa (fig.3) in front of the Orangery is downright ingenious. The plastic-wrapped bales of old clothes are piled up as a makeshift dwelling, inside which a video explains how a relief action leads to the paralysis of their own textile industry and unemployment.

Particularly convincing is the presentation of the Haitian collective Atis Rezistans I Ghetto Biennale in the Church of St Cunigunde in Bettenhausen. (fig. 4). The dynamic iron sculptures with skeletons and voodoo relics, the dry point etchings on blue glass, as well as the *Floating Ghetto* – a three-dimensional plan of the artists' district in Port-au-Prince – hanging from the ceiling enter into a symbiosis with the Christian framework, all the more so as both religions are closely interwoven in Haiti.



4 Atis Rezistans, *Ghetto Biennale*, Church of St Cunigunde, Kassel, 2022, photo: Frank Sperling

The Hallenbad Ost (East Indoor Swimming Pool), a place where crowds of people gather on hot days, provides the ideal setting for Taring Padi's agitprop panels (fig. 5), which were, of course, aptly placed on Friedrichsplatz, the main square.



5 Taring Padi, *Sekarang Mereka, Besok Kita* (Today They Come for Them, Tomorrow They Come for Us), 2021, Hallenbad Ost, Kassel, 2022, photo: Frank Sperling

Here, one senses a special sensitivity for the interplay of work and place. I would be inclined to classify the entire *documenta fifteen* as the work of Ruangrupa, similar to how Zurich's *Manifesta* bore the artistic signature of Christian Jankowski.

Is socially engaged, political art necessarily art? Ruangrupa itself asks this question, and it must be answered in a differentiated way. There are obviously completely different concepts of art at this *documenta fifteen*.

The *documenta* Hall featured three artistically outstanding works, all of which correspond to our concept of art: INSTAR, the Instituto de Artivismo Hannah Arendt founded by Tania Brughera in 2015, presented a breath-taking installation: the mural newspaper of the protest



6 Tania Brughera, INSTAR (Instituto de Artivismo Hannah Arendt), *documenta* Halle, Kassel, 2022

against the Cuban regime and against the participation in the 14th Havana Biennial with stunning and touching drawings depicting the resistance and repression in an almost photographer-realistic way (fig. 6). At the last installation, one could hear the deafening noise of the pneumatic hammer used to tear up the concrete floor. What remains is furious destruction, emptiness, and death – perhaps an illustration of Brughera’s statement: ‘In a dictatorship, there can be no apolitical art... Art must make the pain visible. For it has the power to transform.’

With Britto Arts Trust from Bangladesh, all the installations revolve around food and nutrition policy: they recreated a small-town food bazaar, where all the food and containers are made of ceramics, metal, and embroidery. The inscriptions refer to the lie of purported nutritional values that are altered by chemical processes and the commercialism that has led to false eating habits even in remote mountain villages. (figs. 7 - 8)



7 Britto Arts Trust, bazaar, documenta hall, Kassel 2022



8 Britto Arts Trust, bazaar (detail), documenta Halle, Kassel 2022

The no-budget film – *200 Euros!* – by Wakaliga Uganda (fig.), which was shot in backyards of Kampala and packs such serious topics as organ trafficking and contract killings into an entertaining action thriller, also deserves great respect. Viewers hold their breath as one kung fu scene follows another. The action ultimately turns out to be a test of courage and ends with a birthday party.



9 *Wakaliga Uganda, film still from 200 Euros!*, presented in the documenta Halle, Kassel, 2022, still:
Wakaliwoodnewwebsite.jpg

These works and many others can be defined by our Western criteria of art. In addition, not all artist collectives function in the same way. INSTAR, for example, is a collective of artists who pursue common political goals, but whose members realise works under their own names and take responsibility as individuals for their artistic and political attitudes, an attitude that is opposed to that of Ruangrupa. Likewise, Atis Rezistans I Ghetto Biennale from Haiti, which incidentally does not shy away from accepting international artists with a very different formal language into their collective. Here, one has the impression that the individual artistic personalities enrich each other.

For our Western eyes, other works belong more to the realm of folk art. If one looks at the wall with marionettes by Yaya Coulibaly (fig. 10) and at *Tribute to the Mandé Hunters* by Abdoulaye Konaté (fig. 11), both Malian members of the Fondation Festival sur le Niger and presented on the former premises of the Hübner company, these works exert all their magic on the viewer and possess the attraction of the exotic of foreign cultures. It is precisely here that the operating of the puppets, their animation through narration, is missing. Displayed in this way, they look as if they have been stolen from an ethnographic museum. Incidentally, the Hübner Areal is that venue of *documenta fifteen* where the impression of a bazaar, of the exhibition of foreign customs and cultures, is most likely to arise – and this without the political background coming to the fore.² It can, however, also be understood as a sign of an expanded concept of art, as Adam Szymczyk had already demanded at the last *documenta* with the inclusion of Sami culture and long before him Jean-Hubert Martin with *Les magiciens de la terre* 1989 im Centre Pompidou.

² Exceptions to this include the factory cafeteria by Boloho from Guangzhou on the second floor, the installation by Amol K. Patil in the basement, and the controversial films by Tokyo Reels.



10 Yaya Coulibaly (*Fondation Festival sur le Niger*), puppets, Hübner Areal, Kassel, 2022, photo: Maya Wirkus



11 Abdoulaye Konaté (*Fondation Festival sur le Niger*), Tribute to the Mandé Hunters, Hübner Areal, Kassel, 2022

What is by no means acceptable is the contribution of Project Art Works, which put people with neurodivergent disabilities on display. When, as in the Fridericianum, autistic people draw scribbles on the floor and others, who are confined to a wheelchair and have difficulty articulating themselves, are only able to put their painterly ideas on paper with the help of a caregiver, then this has nothing to do with art and everything to do with therapy. As much as inclusion is appreciated, in my opinion this has no place at the documenta.

With so many interesting projects that artistically open our eyes to the consequences of repression and colonialism and invite us to stand up for more justice, here as well, it is regrettable that Ruangrupa was not sensitive enough to make a differentiated selection of exhibits and contextualise problematic works. Ruangrupa clearly has little concern with the history of European culture and its wounds – especially in Germany.

I do not wish to discuss the works that provoked accusations of anti-Semitism, since Bernhard Schulz has given a very vivid account of them.

Conclusions:

Ruangrupa has expanded our view of other cultures, primarily of hitherto overlooked minorities, and set itself the objective of a radical change in the concept of art: the authority of the individual artist should give way to the experience of the collective. Solidarity applies not only in the economic sphere, but also in terms of knowledge and experience. The flip side of this generous principle is the wilful abolition of the artist's responsibility or even authority.

Especially the endless discussions regarding the question of anti-Semitism and hostility towards Israel have shown how important it is for every artist/person to assume the authorship of his/her decisions with his/her own name – both artistically and politically. This can also be done within a collective if it is founded by artist personalities, such as INSTAR.

The blind spot of this documenta is the ambivalent attitude of Ruangrupa, which ultimately polarises more than it unites: the collective versus the authorship of a single artist, the Global South versus the Global North, Lumbung – sharing, spreading, making friends to the exclusion of a country that is portrayed from various sides as a scapegoat.

One could get the impression that the communication so often mentioned by Ruangrupa only goes in one direction, namely from them. Discussions in the sense of debates with those who think differently also fell by the wayside.

Here, one would have wished that, as Kader Attia puts it, a new vocabulary would have been invented that would have made a common future possible, in which wounds and their scars could be shown and ways of healing or at least alleviation sought. Instead, *documenta fifteen* will go down in history – deserved or undeserved – as anti-Semitic.

I presented this essay at the 54th International AICA Congress in Valparaiso, Chile in November 2023

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Fig. 12 Agus Nur Amal Pmtoh, Performance of at the Press conference, Auestadion, Kassel, 2022, copyright documenta archive/photo Nicolas Wefers, photographer Nicolas Wefers, credit documenta archive / photo Nicolas Wefers

Fig. 13 Atis Rezistans, *Ghetto Biennale*, Church of St Cunigunde, Kassel, 2022, copyright documenta archive/photo: Frank Sperling, photographer Frank Sperling, credit documenta archive / photo Frank Sperling

Fig.14 Taring Padi, *Sekarang Mereka, Besok Kita* (Today They Come for Them, Tomorrow They Come for Us), 2021, Hallenbad Ost, Kassel, 2022, photo: Frank Sperling, copyright documenta archive/photo: Frank Sperling, photographer Frank Sperling, credit documenta archive / photo Frank Sperling

Fig. 15 Yaya Coulibaly (Fondation Festival sur le Niger), puppets, Hübner Areal, Kassel, 2022, photo: Maya Wirkus, , copyright documenta archive/photo: Maya Wirkus, photographer Maya Wirkus, credit documenta archive / photo Maya Wirkus

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