Lumbung will Continue (Somewhere Else): Documenta Fifteen and the Fault Lines of Context and Translation

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documenta fifteen, Kassel, Germany, 18 June – 25 September 2022

If I have learned one thing in the process of writing this commentary on documenta fifteen, it is how very situated meaning and matter are, how social realities inform words and works, authors and artists. I write these introductory lines at the end of a day that impressed upon me the complex entanglements of the discourse surrounding this latest documenta. In mid-November 2022, eight weeks after the exhibition closed, bags were searched and IDs were checked upon entry to a panel discussion at the House of Indonesian Cultures in Berlin with members of the curatorial collective ruangrupa and the artists' collective Taring Padi. On the opposite side of the street, separated by a police unit, a small group of demonstrators had gathered, defaming documenta fifteen as a 'large-scale antisemitic spectacle' and demanding the resignation of the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and Media, Claudia Roth – as I glean from a leaflet issued by a magazine of the Anti-German movement. The previous night, four shots were fired at the rabbi's house at the Old Synagogue in Essen, Germany, presumably linked to an attack with a Molotov cocktail on a synagogue in Bochum the day before. Meanwhile, Benjamin Netanyahu had been in coalition negotiations with far-right politicians and religious fundamentalists in Israel whose line of government is expected to override democratic values, restrict the rule of law and promote anti-Arab discrimination. The walls of the public bathrooms of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, where I am writing this, are smeared with slogans such as 'End Settler-Colonial-Apartheid in Palestine', crossed out and overwritten with 'Against all forms of Antisemitism!!!', followed by accusations of racism and insults. As I write this paragraph, I realise that I have learnt another lesson, about distance and proximity, and how they correlate but never conflate the convoluted afterlives of colonialism, the connections between antisemitism and racism, and the solidarity communities opposing them.

In an incisive article in the German weekly *Die Zeit*, Hito Steyerl unfolded a critique of documenta fifteen around the joke: 'Question: Why were the canvases of the American abstract expressionists so disproportionately large at the first documentas? Answer: Because there was so

much to hide!'[1] Steyerl alludes to the Nazi past of some of the key figures involved in the foundation of documenta, particularly the long-praised art historian and author of *Painting in the 20th Century*, Werner Haftmann. As a meticulously researched and revealing exhibition at the Deutsches Historisches Museum in 2021 showed, this same acclaimed champion of the modern avant-gardes had joined the NSDAP (the National Socialist German Workers' Party) in 1937 and led a military division in Italy during the war that was deployed to fight partisans and is said to have tortured prisoners during interrogations. Throughout his life, Haftmann never spoke about this past and he developed a historical model that sought to quickly overcome the defamation of modernism as 'Entartete Kunst' under the Nazi regime. Accordingly, in the exhibition catalogue of the first documenta in 1955, he portrayed the Third Reich as a short-lived state of emergency that did 'great injustice'[2] to artists, but 'whose damage in the field of art could be repaired'.[3] Thus, from its inception, documenta was conceived as a cultural rehabilitation project for Germany that seized the autonomy of art 'as a way to exorcize the spectres of the past',[4] premised on covering up a murderous history and evading confrontation with complicity and a responsibility for that past.

documenta fifteen: *Timeline,* harvest drawing by Daniella F Praptono, Kassel, 23 June 2022, photo by the author

[1] Hito Steyerl, 'Kontext ist König, außer der deutsche', *Zeit Online*, 3 June 2022, quote translated from the German by the author, www.zeit.de/kultur/kunst/2022-06/documenta-15-postkoloniale-theorien-kunst-kontextualisierung, last visited 18 November 2022

[2] Werner Haftmann, as quoted in Julia Voss, 'Das Werner-Haftmann-Modell: Wie die documenta zur Bühne der Erinnerungspolitik wurde', in Raphael Gross et al, eds, *documenta: Politik und Kunst*, exhibition catalogue, Deutsches Historisches Museum, Prestel, Munich, London and New York, 2021, p 72; quote translated from the German by the author

[3] Werner Haftmann, as paraphrased by Julia Voss in ibid; quote translated from the German by the author

[4] 'Anselm Franke on the Future of documenta: "We're witnessing old structures not wanting to die"', Philipp Hindahl interviews Anselm Franke in *e-flux Notes*, 26 September 2022 www.e-flux.com/notes/493372/anselm-franke-on-the-future-of-documenta-we-re-witnessing-old-structures-not-wanting-to-die, last visited 18 November 2022

At the time of their appointment in February 2019, ruangrupa aligned their curatorial concept with the ambitions of the founding of documenta: '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] Founded in 2000, two years after the collapse of Suharto's New Order regime in Indonesia, the collective sought to counteract authoritarian and hegemonic structures with partnership-based and community-oriented models for a sustainable and cooperative use of resources – not only in financial and economic terms but in ecological, scientific, creative, epistemic, affective, and imaginative ones, too. In this sense, and true to its name – which loosely translates to 'a space for art' or 'a space form' – ruangrupa set out to build an interdisciplinary and collaborative platform whose ripple effects should extend beyond the 100-day exhibition period of documenta.

Rarely have I encountered such a coherent and radical translation of artistic practices on view to working procedures and organisational fabrics behind the scenes. Rather than a curatorial concept, ruangrupa's is a curatorial practice of collaboration and exchange that profoundly interfered with the structural frameworks and administrative processes of the institution of documenta. At the heart of the collective's vision for documenta fifteen is the notion of 'lumbung', a rural Indonesian tradition of a communal rice barn where framers share harvest surplus that they can draw upon in times of agricultural shortages and economic precariousness. To build their lumbung, ruangrupa assembled a core of fourteen collectives, to be known as lumbung members, who were then asked to invite other artists, who in turn invited yet others, like a virtuous pyramid scheme. Depending on their time zone – such are the requisites of the Zoom age – lumbung members and artists were sorted into ten working groups who would gather in 'majelises'. As the Arabic root of the word suggests, these assemblies would manage their own budget of 220,000 euro each and participate in the collaborative curatorial process and the wider documenta ecosystem, 'or documenta lumbung'.[6] From these majelises emerged various platforms oriented towards durable and sustainable outcomes – such as lumbung Press, a collectively run offset print shop; lumbung Radio, an online community radio station; lumbung Land, an initiative experimenting with land development initiatives; lumbung.space, an artist-run online space that functions as a social and publishing tool; and lumbung Gallery, a collectively governed, non-speculative and regenerative gallery model. As around 95 per cent of the artists participating in documenta fifteen are without gallery representation, ruangrupa endeavoured to establish a system through which works on show could be bought at transparent pricing based on basic needs. These various platforms coalesced into a holistic response to the many struggles for sustainability, equity and empowerment amidst which ruangrupa were appointed curators of documenta fifteen in 2019, and which acquired renewed purpose and urgency during the

[5] 'ruangrupa selected as artistic direction of documenta fifteen', documenta fifteen press release, 22 February 2019, http://documenta-fifteen.de/en/press-releases/ruangrupa-selected-as-artistic-direction-of-documenta-fifteen/, last visited 18 November 2022

[6] ruangrupa & Artistic Team, 'From *mini* to *akbar*: "We are not in documenta fifteen, we are in lumbung one"', *documenta fifteen Handbook*, 2022, p 24

Covid-19 pandemic and the changing dynamics of social movements and senses of community. In effect, the Indonesian agrarian tradition of lumbung was applied to all dimensions of documenta fifteen so much so that the institution itself became undone.

documenta fifteen: Fridskul Common Library, Fridericianum, Kassel, 17 June 2022, photo by Victoria Tomaschko

So the Fridericianum, an institutional museum from the eighteenth century and conventionally the centre of documenta exhibitions, was turned into FRIDSKUL, a warm and vigorous space for collectives and artists to probe and present different models of horizontal education. Hosted by the Gudskul collective from Indonesia, of which ruangrupa is a founding member, the school comprised workshops, seminars and karaoke nights; a library installed in the central rotunda; a dormitory and kitchen on the ground floor providing accommodation for participating students; and RURUKIDS, an initiative launched by ruangrupa in 2010 for working with kids and teenagers. The ground floor of the Fridericianum resembled a playground erected amidst a construction site, where expansive installations and intimate oases were constantly being assembled and reassembled. By the time the scaffolding and craft tables gave way to more sedate presentations of civil archival projects on the first floor, it began to dawn on me that what ruangrupa were instantiating in the school-like veneer of FRIDSKUL was a rigorous interrogation of the conditions of knowledge production and dissemination. By reconfiguring epistemic structures, architectures and practices, ruangrupa and their assembly of collectives and artists were offering tools for understanding anew.

Instead of collaborating to make art, ruangrupa propagates the art of collaboration. In the resulting exhibition, aesthetics was by no means absent but born out of social realities and social ties that inform means of expression and relation. Non-representational in the true sense,

documenta fifteen was evocative and constitutive, a rich well of lived experiences and embodied knowledges. Process- rather than product-oriented, ruangrupa's curatorial concept convoked a remarkable gathering of civic potentialities, a careful alignment of subversive particles and a sensual patchwork, all at once. Rooted in a radical practice of hospitality and generosity, the rhizomatic structure in which ruangrupa enmeshed collectives and artists in Kassel defied notions of individual authorship, hierarchical authority, monetary value and neoliberal consumption and, instead, promoted the core principles of lumbung: generosity, humour, independence, regeneration, transparency, sufficiency and local anchoring.[7]

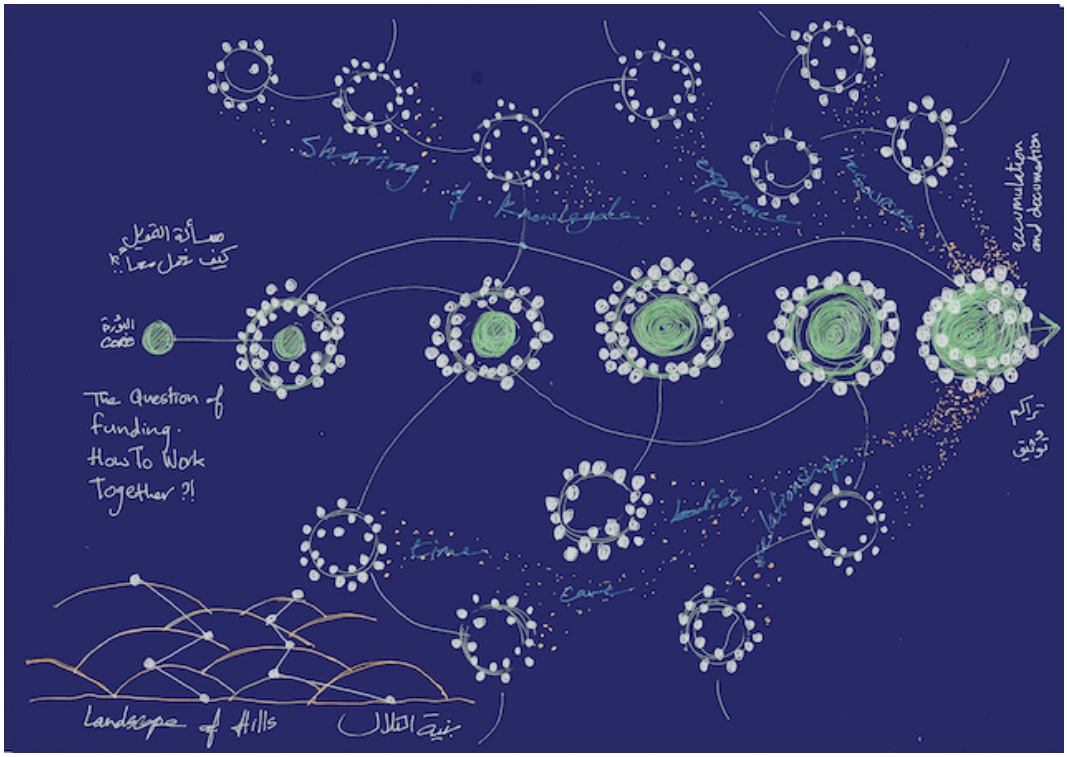
Considering that 'local anchoring' is one of the basic elements of ruangrupa's curatorial concept, I cannot help but be apprehensive that an exhibition so deeply concerned with bringing and sharing contexts from elsewhere also failed to take seriously the context where it was bringing all of that to. This is even more confounding as 'translation' is defined as one of the core principles and practices of documenta fifteen in the accompanying handbook, an 'alternative logic to commissioning', inviting artists 'to keep doing what they are doing while translating their practice to Kassel and back'.[8] But, in effect, it could be said that the 2022 edition displayed an insensitivity towards the history of documenta and the politically and ideologically charged atmosphere in Germany. This leaves a bitter aftertaste, as it is not the first time that the context of this exhibition is neglected – and in the case of Werner Haftmann even strategically omitted. Illustrated by modernist avant-gardes, the first editions of documenta invoked the global as abstractly as possible to compensate for the lack of engagement with Germany's past and present. This was convenient, as Hito Steyerl asserts, 'because Germany seemed like a neutral territory, a tabula rasa on which the rest of the world could be culturally negotiated – a perspective that certainly suited German soft-power ambitions'.[9] Having said this, I certainly do not want to justify the extremely harmful impact of the Germancentric discourse around documenta fifteen, or to suggest any Eurocentric superiority as a form of disciplining, taming or managing. But if, as ruangrupa stated in the aforementioned panel discussion, art ought to be considered as a carrier of social realities, relations, values and principles, and as a means to facilitate dialogue, to demonstrate care and to show affection, the context in which artistic practices are placed cannot be overlooked.

The case of The Question of Funding group reveals both the severe consequences of the negligence of and the potential of a sensitive alignment with lived contexts. This Palestinian collective has developed Dayra, a currency based on blockchain technology to activate non-monetary resources, such as material, physical and intellectual. In this way, Dayra not only bypasses traditional funding models but also ensures a resilient supplementary economy that crisis-affected communities lacking financial capital can draw upon. The currency's subversive potential becomes most evident in the context of the restrictive funding policies and donor-

7 'Glossary', *documenta fifteen Handbook*, 2022

8 Ibid

9 Steyerl, 'Kontext ist König, außer der deutsche', op cit; quote translated from the German by the author



The Question of Funding, *The Question of Funding*, 2020, courtesy of the artists

oriented cultural infrastructures in Palestine, as exemplified by the Gaza-based group Eltiqa'. Founded by artists Mohammed Al Hawajri, Mohammed Abusal, Dina Matar, Rauf Alajouri, Raed Issa, Mohammed Dabous and Sohail Salem, Eltiqa' demonstrates how unstable funding sources, transnational solidarity initiatives and everyday struggles for subsistence constrain and condition creative practices. This is an instance of lumbung in action: one Palestinian collective originally formed in the West Bank invited another collective of artists in Gaza to exhibit their work and working history at documenta fifteen. A meeting, let alone a collaboration, of the two collectives would be impossible in the context of Palestine due to the prohibition of movement between these two areas; however, they could partner up for this joint project in Kassel. The exhibition in Kassel included a selection of Eltiqa's artworks and an extensive annotated timeline that detailed through anecdotes and commentaries how the collective's artistic output correlates with political, social, economic and personal unrest. The extent to which such working conditions impinge on aesthetics is manifested in Mohammad Al Hawajri's painting *Animals* (2012), which had to be split into four sections, none exceeding 100x100 cm, in order to move it across borders from Gaza City to Kassel. As an affirmative action to confront the culture of conditional international funding and perpetual financial lack, Eltiqa' has established an artist-run space with a gallery, library, workshops and work studios to support emergent artists in Gaza city.

However, the case of The Question of Funding not only demonstrates the collective resilience and creative innovativeness of cultural practices in Palestine but also the hostility and adversity that necessitate such strategies of resistance in the first place. At the end of May 2022, only weeks before the exhibition opening, the collective was anonymously assailed by a blog under the name of 'Alliance Against Anti-Semitism Kassel' over links between the group and the Boycott,

Divestment and Sanction (BDS) movement.[10] The online ambush was followed by physical vandalism against The Question of Funding's exhibition venue, an attack that included what may have been coded threats of future violence against the collective. The exhibition space, known as WH22, was spray-painted with the phrases '187' and 'Peralta'. The former is believed to refer to the California Penal Code that defines murder, the latter was possibly an allusion to the name of Isabel Peralta, who is considered the leader of an extreme right-wing youth organisation in Spain. Against a background of an increasingly hostile atmosphere and heated debate over accusations of antisemitism, documenta filed a criminal complaint and alerted security authorities in response to what must be considered a politically motivated offence.

None of the works by artists who had been unjustly accused and racially attacked in the run-up to the exhibition were in fact found to contain any antisemitic content (although an apology to those affected is still outstanding). Instead, antisemitism caught up with documenta fifteen from an oblique direction, in the shape of two derogatory and clearly antisemitic figures found on a large banner with the title *People's Justice* by members of the Indonesian artist collective Taring Padi. This collaborative work was produced in Yogyakarta in 2002 and depicts a people's court for judging Suharto's authoritarian New Order regime that ruled Indonesia from 1966 until 1998. There is a clear distinction on the banner between good and evil, between the people on the right-hand side and their enemies on the left-hand side, with judges at the top and figures standing for the Western states supporting the New Order regime below. The latter can be distinguished by satirical features such as skulls, guns, rat's faces, dollar signs and gold jewellery, indicating corruption, exploitation and death. Among these figures are a soldier with a pig's face wearing a scarf with a Star of David and a helmet inscribed with 'Mossad', as well as a man with temple curls depicted with SS runes on his hat. As Taring Padi explain in a public statement, the imagery of *People's Justice* tries to capture the complex historical circumstances and foreign interferences that backed and aided Suharto's military dictatorship through financial investment,

[10] In May 2019, the German parliament declared the BDS movement, which advocates an economic and cultural boycott of Israel over its occupation of Palestine, to be explicitly 'antisemitic'. The government resolution argues that the radical nature of the all-encompassing call for boycott would lead to the stigmatisation of Israeli Jews as a whole and, in consequence, would undermine Israel's right to exist. Against the background of Angela Merkel's proclamation of Israel's security as a reason of state, no events or projects organised by or in alliance with the BDS movement should receive either institutional support or government funding. The resolution draws on the working definition of antisemitism developed by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) which was expanded for implementation in Germany with an amendment that considers the state of Israel as a Jewish collective. While the IHRA definition demarcates antisemitism in a non-exclusionary way and allows for the possibility to consider Israel and Jewish self-determination separately rather than necessarily conflated, the German interpretation takes an exclusionary form, and where the IHRA speaks of the right of Jews to self-determination instead asserts 'the right of the Jewish and democratic state of Israel to exist'. In effect, any criticism of the state of Israel can readily be interpreted as antisemitic. Only recently, the originator of this definition, Kenneth Stern, publicly warned that its misinterpretation had enabled right-wing organisations to turn it into a 'weapon' not only against the Palestinians but against 'scientific freedom and freedom of expression' (see Kenneth Stern, 'I drafted the definition of antisemitism. Rightwing Jews are weaponizing it', *The Guardian*, 13 December 2019). In the three years since the resolution came into effect, artists, writers and scholars in support of or associated with the BDS movement have been stripped of awards, disinvited from events and publicly denounced as antisemites. In contrast to the IHRA definition, the Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism (JDA) clearly differentiates between antisemitism and anti-Zionism. The JDA definition has as its principle that the fight against antisemitism is inseparable from the larger fight against other forms of racism and discrimination. The first guideline emphasises this preamble by stating: 'It is racist to essentialise (treat a character trait as innate) or to make sweeping negative generalisations about a particular population. What applies to racism in general applies to antisemitism in particular.' See 'The Jerusalem Declaration On Antisemitism', 25 March 2021, last visited 18 November 2022, www.jerusalemdeclaration.org.

intelligence services and weapons supplies from Western democracies in the Cold War era, including the United States, Australia, Israel, the Netherlands and Germany. The collective has insisted that the imagery 'that we use is never intended as hatred directed at a particular ethnic or religious group, but as a critique of militarism and state violence'.[11] However, contextualisation is neither an excuse nor an explanation, and the fact remains that the two aforementioned figures invoke pejorative stereotypes that clearly draw on a visual vocabulary of antisemitism.

Founded in the wake of the riots that brought down Suharto's regime in 1998, the name Taring Padi can be translated as 'fangs of rice', referring to 'the sharp tips of unhusked rice',[12] and relating to Indonesia's farmers and working class whose interests the collective aims to serve as well as to a sense of vigilance with which to question reformation policies. Taring Padi's practice is centred around workshops with community groups to express socio-political messages through creative means and mobilised in protests, strikes, carnivals and musical performances. At documenta fifteen, the collective displayed a mural, several large-scale banners and hundreds of cardboard shadow puppets around Kassel's city centre, as well as archival materials and artefacts from the past twenty-two years of their practice. Overall, Taring Padi was one of the most widely featured collectives at documenta fifteen, with their *People's Justice* banner installed prominently in Friedrichsplatz in front of the Fridericianum, a curatorial choice aimed at confronting the public directly with the theme of reparations for colonial violence and capitalist extraction.

In many ways, ruangrupa succeeded in doing just that – the banner facilitates a prismatic view on the enduring after-effects of imperial expansion and exploitation. In the case of Indonesia, as Jeffrey Hadler ascertains, antisemitism is exclusively European in origin and was imported during the Japanese occupation from 1942 to 1945.[13] And, as Ade Darmawan from ruangrupa noted in his speech to the German Bundestag, Indonesia's colonial history resulted in a mixture of anti-Jewish and anti-Chinese racism that was expressed by applying 'originally European antisemitic ideas and images to portray Chinese in the way Europeans have portrayed Jews'.[14] Eyal Weizman invokes the metaphor of the boomerang that Hannah Arendt and Aimé Césaire used to explain the relationship between antisemitism and colonialism.[15] They argue that European fascism, Nazi totalitarianism and the Holocaust were the homecoming of the violence and racism that Western empires had unleashed across the colonial frontier. However, as Weizman asserts, the boomerang

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[11] Taring Padi, 'Statement by Taring Padi on Dismantling "People's Justice"', documenta fifteen press release, 24 June 2022, http://documenta-fifteen.de/en/news/statement-by-taring-padi-on-dismantling-peoples-justice/, last visited 18 November 2022

[12] Wong Binghao, 'Taring Padi', *documenta fifteen Handbook*, 2022, p 193

[13] See Jeffrey Hadler, 'Translations of antisemitism: Jews, the Chinese, and violence in colonial and post-colonial Indonesia', *Indonesia and the Malay World*, vol 32, no 94, 2006, pp 291–313

[14] See 'Speech by Ade Darmawan (ruangrupa) in the Committee on Culture and Media, German Bundestag', 6 July 2022, http://documenta-fifteen.de/en/news/speech-by-ade-darmawan-ruangrupa-in-the-committee-on-culture-and-media-german-bundestag-july-6-2022/, last visited 18 November 2022

[15] See Eyal Weizman, 'In Kassel', *London Review of Books*, vol 44, no 15, 4 August 2022; see also Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Penguin Modern Classics: London, 2017 [1951]; and Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 2001 [1950]

that hit documenta had another trajectory: 'having travelled across continents and generations, European antisemitism had returned home in the altered guise of an anti-colonial work of art'.[16]

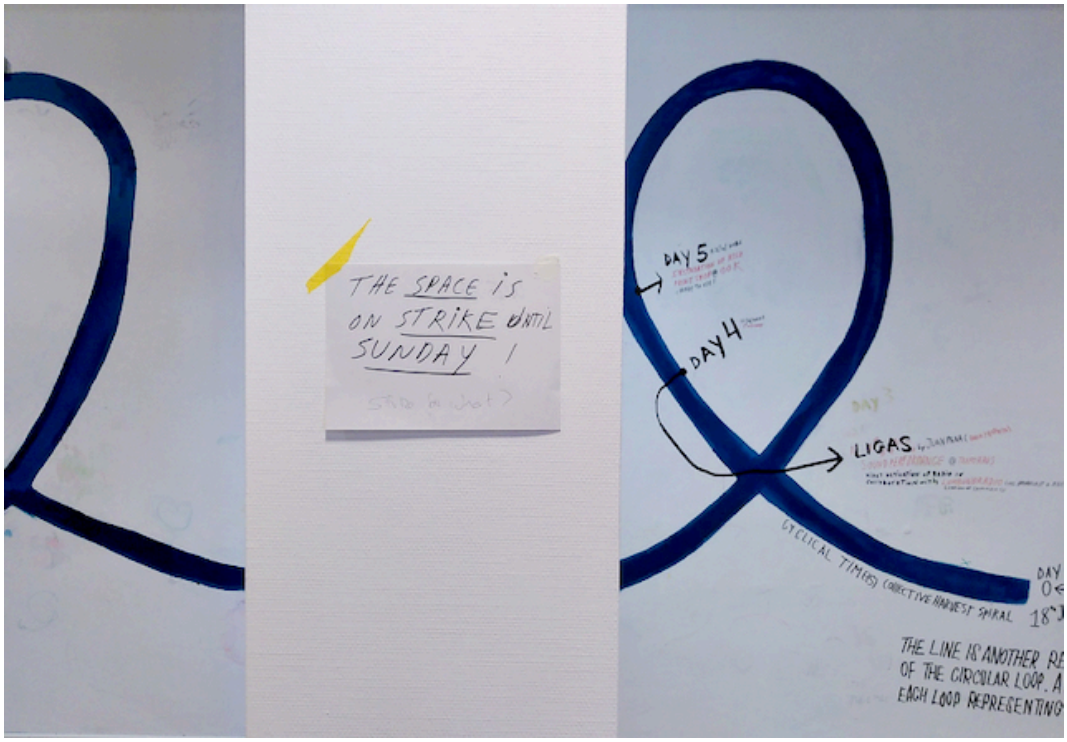
With unintended but undeniable ferocity, Taring Padi's *People's Justice* banner did indeed confront documenta fifteen visitors with colonial violence and capitalist extraction – even in its absence. Upon my visit, one week after the exhibition's opening, the banner had just been removed, leaving a bare scaffolding that marked a salient void on Friedrichsplatz (although the two antisemitic figures from the banner have been firmly etched in public memory through their relentless reproduction and circulation in the media). The entire public programme for the next seven days had also just been suspended, officially due to the spread of Covid-19 in Kassel – a flimsy excuse that no one even pretended to believe. Similarly, a handwritten note blatantly claimed that the screening room at Hübner-Areal, where Subversive Film's *Tokyo Reels* film programme was to be shown, was out of order due to technical problems. This film programme was curated by Reem Shilleh and Mohanad Yaqubi from the Subversive Film research collective that seeks to retrace and restore the seized and silenced archive of militant cinema related to the Palestinian cause and its broader transnational solidarity movement that gained traction in the long 1960s. Central to Subversive Film's presentation at documenta fifteen was a collection of 16mm films and cinematic paraphernalia, considered to be lost in the Lebanese civil war but safeguarded by a Japanese solidarity group in Tokyo. This film programme soon superseded Taring Padi's *People's Justice* on the line of attack with accusations of antisemitism.[17] Further into the 100-day exhibition period, parts of the archival display of Archives des luttes des femmes en Algérie were also removed from the exhibition at Fridericianum to be vetted for antisemitic content, and the works of Hito Steyerl, in the framework of INLAND collective's installation and of Raul Balai and Brian Elstak as part of a display by The Black Archives, were withdrawn (for different reasons, however).[18] So documenta fifteen was riddled with gaps, leaks, voids and cover-

[16] Weizman, op cit

[17] As I did not have access to the films during my visit, I could not form my own opinion on these accusations. The media criticism was based partly on the fact that the films were from an archive held by the film director Masao Adachi, a former member of the Japanese Red Army, which carried out a series of terrorist attacks, including on the airport in Tel Aviv in 1972, and that was in close contact with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, and partly on the lack of critical discussion and distancing from the propagandistic film footage in the voice-over conversation between the two curators. The scientific advisory panel, which was appointed by the shareholders of documenta gGmbH in August 2022, concluded on 10 September 2022 that screenings of *Tokyo Reels* should be stopped immediately. See 'Press release from the scientific advisory panel of documenta fifteen,' 10 September 2022, https://www.documenta.de/en/press#press/3046-press-release-from-the-scientific-advisory-panel-of-documenta-fifteen, last visited 18 November 2022. However, there are substantial objections to the establishment of this scientific advisory panel and its research method due to a lack of 'scientific proof, academic references, rigorous argumentation and integrity'. See 'We are angry, we are sad, we are tired, we are united: Letter from lumbung community', in *e-flux Notes*, 10 September 2022, https://www.e-flux.com/notes/489580/we-are-angry-we-are-sad-we-are-tired-we-are-united-letter-from-lumbung-community, last visited 18 November 2022.

[18] Hito Steyerl withdrew her video installation invited by the artist collective INLAND on 7 July 2022, following Meron Mendel, the director of the Anne Frank Educational Institution in Frankfurt, stepping down from his position as a consultant for documenta fifteen. Steyerl cites the documenta management's handling of antisemitism allegations as one of the reasons for her withdrawal and the 'repeated refusal to facilitate a sustained and structurally anchored inclusive debate around the show as well as the de facto refusal to accept mediation' in addition to 'the unsafe and underpaid working conditions' some staff have endured. See Benjamin Sutton, 'Hito Steyerl withdraws from Documenta 15 amid antisemitism scandal', *The Art Newspaper*, 8 July 2022. On 17 September 2022, in protest against the scientific advisory panel and in solidarity with lumbung members, artists Raul Balai and Brian Elstak replaced their painting *Black Jesus aka Fuck Cracker Christ* with a statement piece as part of the installation *Interwoven Histories of Solidarity: Documenting Black Pasts & Presents* of the

ups that punctuate the sore points and guilty alibis in German history, remembrance and conscience. These blind spots, partly institutionally imposed and partly curatorially conceptualised, condition any form of critical engagement with documenta fifteen, including, no doubt, the text at hand.



documenta fifteen: room on strike, ruruHaus, Kassel, 25 June 2022, photo by the author

Critics were quick to conflate the allegations of antisemitic sentiments at documenta fifteen with ruangrupa's anticolonial approach that manifested itself in both the collectivised infrastructure and the curatorial concept. This train of thought has forerunners in Germany, most prominently evinced in the controversy around Achille Mbembe's invitation as the opening speaker at the Ruhrtriennale in 2020.[19] The extent to which the dangerous conflation of antisemitism, postcolonialism and ruangrupa's curatorial approach has entered public opinion was reflected in German Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier's opening speech for documenta fifteen, where he criticised 'the gaps in the postcolonial discourse here in this country'.[20] In a more strident tone, the journalist Andreas Fanizadeh demanded that '[Claudia] Roth must now indeed take resolute countermeasures if postcolonial populism is not to further undermine the anti-fascist constitution of the Federal Republic in cultural, educational and art

collective The Black Archives. See @the_blackarchives, #BlackJesusHasLeftTheBuilding, *Instagram*, 18 September 2022, www.instagram.com/p/CipaxVsoET7, last visited 18 November 2022.

[19] Achille Mbembe's proximity to the BDS movement, and accusations made about him of relativising the Holocaust and comparing Israel to the Apartheid regime of South Africa, were cited as reasons. Ultimately, the controversy dissolved as the Ruhrtriennale 2020 had to be cancelled due to the Covid-19 pandemic; see Patrick Bahners, 'Woran erkennt man wissenschaftlichen Antisemitismus? Der Fall Achille Mbembe', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 23 April 2020; and Achille Mbembe, 'Die Welt reparieren', *Zeit Online*, 25 April 2020, last visited 18 November 2022, www.zeit.de/2020/18/antisemitismus-achille-mbembe-vorwuerfe-holocaust-rechtsextremisus-rassismus.

[20] See Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, 'Opening of documenta fifteen', opening speech, 18 June 2022

institutions'.[21] There has even been talk that the German cultural sector should undergo a 'self-cleansing process'.[22]

This dynamic of media reporting followed its own logic and became completely untethered to documenta fifteen itself. The fabricated scandal was instrumentalised to discredit voices of Muslim communities and the so-called Global South across the board and to emphasise a moral superiority. That many of the attacks on documenta fifteen were motivated by outright revisionism was ultimately demonstrated in an appeal by the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), Germany's populist right-wing party, to stop funding postcolonial studies and to return to a 'balanced' presentation of colonial history that also highlights the 'positive' aspects of German colonialism.[23] As Hanno Hauenstein aptly analyses, the polemical extension of historical responsibility presents a German-German reversible figure, much like the rabbit-duck illusion, which 'repeatedly places non-whites, Jews, and even Holocaust survivors under general suspicion' of antisemitic sentiments in a paradox but prevailing form of 'historical exoneration'.[24] Accordingly, ruangrupa have condemned the media campaign as an attempt 'to smear individual Palestinian artists as antisemites, either directly or by way of "guilt by association"'.[25] Against this background, so ruangrupa have said, the scandal around the alleged antisemitism at documenta fifteen must, rather, be understood as a failed attempt of 'projecting onto and transposing German guilt and history into the Palestinian and other anti-colonial struggles'.[26] Or, as the historian Jürgen Zimmerer puts it, '[f]ighting the antisemitism of the "others" is always easier than fighting one's own'.[27]

Without denying the reality of persistent antisemitism, including in Indonesia, the syncretic background of the antisemitic imagery could present an opportunity to contextualise and condemn the Nazi crimes in Germany's wider history of colonial and racist violence. Rather than undermining the singularity of the Holocaust, such a perspective would allow for not only affirming the question of 'if' but also for considering the question of 'how' this singularity is constituted. This way, so Hanno Hauenstein suggests, more recent antisemitic and racist attacks, such as those in Halle, Hanau and the neo-Nazi network National Socialist Underground (NSU),

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[21] Andreas Fanizadeh, 'Größenwahn und Niedertracht: Antisemitismus auf der documenta fifteen', *taz*, 25 June 2022; quote translated from the German by the author

[22] Daniel Botmann, as quoted in Hanno Hauenstein, 'Claudia Roth: "Menschen aus globalem Süden sind nicht notwendig antisemitisch"', *Berliner Zeitung*, 7 July 2022; quote translated from the German by the author

[23] Götz Hausding / Irina Steinhauer / Alexander Weinlein, 'Debatte über Antisemitismus-Skandal bei der Documenta', *Bundestag Dokumente*, 7 July 2022, last visited 18 November 2022, www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2022/kw27-de-documenta-900546; quote translated from the German by the author

[24] Hanno Hauenstein, 'Erinnerungskultur: Den germano-zentrischen Blick überwinden lernen', *Berliner Zeitung*, 30 August 2021, last visited 18 November 2022, www.berliner-zeitung.de/wochenende/eine-neue-erinnerungskultur-wider-den-germano-zentrischen-blick-li.176050; quote translated from the German by the author

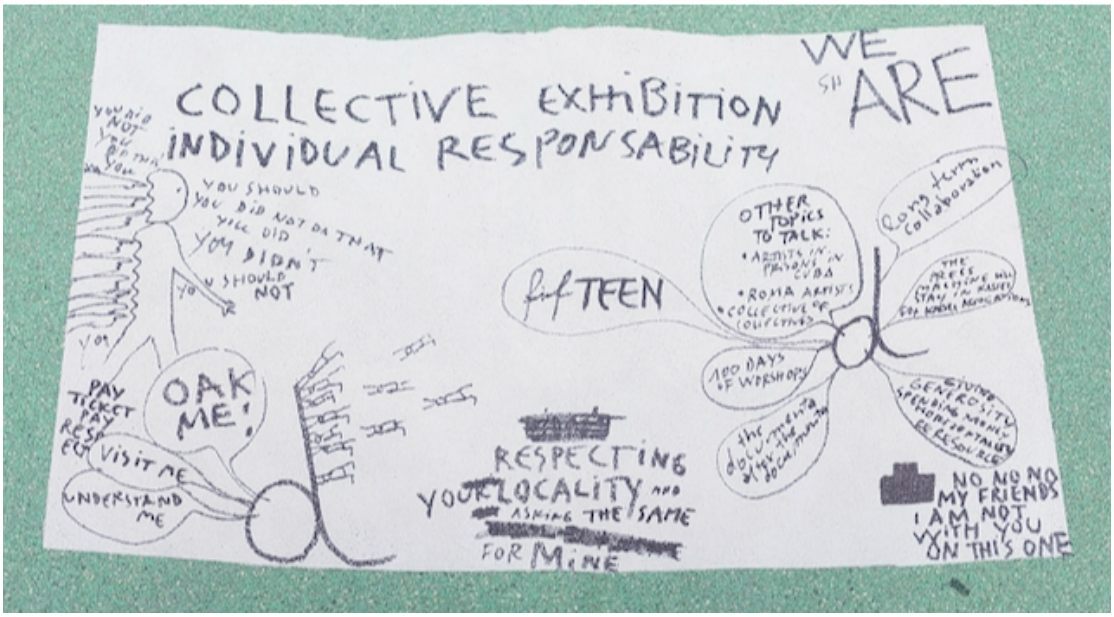
[25] ruangrupa, 'Anti-Semitism Accusations against documenta: A Scandal about a Rumor', *e-flux Notes*, 7 May 2022, last visited 18 November 2022, www.e-flux.com/notes/467337/diversity-as-a-threat-a-scandal-about-a-rumor

[26] ruangrupa, 'We are angry, we are sad, we are tired, we are united: Letter from lumbung community', op cit

[27] Jürgen Zimmerer, 'Humboldt-Forum und Documenta: Wir sollten aufhören mit zweierlei Maß zu messen', *Berliner Zeitung*, 3 August 2022; quote translated from the German by the author

would no longer be clouded as unaccountable anomalies as if they had nothing to do with the continuation of antisemitic and racist violence from the Nazi era until today.[28] Ultimately, the discourse surrounding documenta fifteen could have facilitated a multidirectional and critical consideration of intersecting colonial, ethnic and religious ideologies. But, instead, the growing tendency of anti-antisemitism in Germany reinforces the supposedly irreconcilable differences between antisemitism and racism and uses the notion of 'competition of victims' to pit Jewish, Muslim and migrant voices against each other. As such, according to the philosopher Elad Lapidot, in its identitarian and ideological logic, anti-antisemitism seems to be closer to antisemitism itself than to the Jewish culture it claims to protect.[29]

When antisemitic imagery was detected in the *People's Justice* banner, calls for consequences for the responsible authority and increased institutional control were quickly raised.[30] Both ruangrupa and Taring Padi publicly apologised, denounced the display of the banner as a grave mistake and reaffirmed their condemnation of antisemitism and racism in all their forms.[31] A sense of distributed responsibility is part and parcel of ruangrupa's curatorial approach, as Ade Darmawan explained in front of the German Bundestag: 'a political endeavour where



documenta fifteen: Dan Perjovschi, *Horizontal Newspaper (work in progress),* detail, 2022, installation view, Rainer-Dierichs-Platz, Kassel, 24 June 2022, photo by the author

[28] See Forensic Architecture's investigation into The Murder of Halit Yozgat by the NSU in Kassel in 2006: www.forensic-architecture.org/investigation/the-murder-of-halit-yozgat

[29] See Elad Lapidot, *Jews Out of the Question: A Critique of Anti-Anti-Semitism*, SUNY Press, New York, 2020

[30] The general director of documenta fifteen, Sabine Schormann, resigned from her post on 16 July 2022 following widespread criticism of her handling and investigation of Taring Padi's antisemitic imagery as well as her lack of mediation and responsibility over allegations of antisemitism against ruangrupa and individual artists that arose in the run-up to the documenta

[31] See Taring Padi, 'Statement by Taring Padi on dismantling "People's Justice"', documenta fifteen press release, 24 June 2022, www.documenta-fifteen.de/en/news/statement-by-taring-padi-on-dismantling-peoples-justice, last visited 18 November 2022; and 'Speech by Ade Darmawan (ruangrupa) in the Committee on Culture and Media, German Bundestag', op cit

collective agency, decision making and governance presents an alternative to forms of authoritarianism'.[32] But the principle of trust that ruangrupa instituted will already be repealed in the next edition of the quintennial. The five-point plan of the Federal Commissioner for Culture and Media, Claudia Roth, provides for a fundamental structural reform of documenta in which state authorities will be substantially involved as a precondition for federal funding.[33] It is deeply troubling that ruangrupa have therefore had to conclude that the pernicious discourse and hostile atmosphere 'threaten to make international cultural cooperation in Germany impossible'.[34]

The conduct of the documenta management and the German authorities in this respect is indicative, displaying a paternalistic attitude lacking support and neglecting safeguarding. The discursive format *We need to talk!*, initiated to address Germany's particular historic responsibility as well as forms of erasure and blank spots in the debate surrounding antisemitism and racism, was suspended following criticism by the Central Council of Jews in Germany. In another public discussion organised by Meron Mendel, director of the Bildungsstätte Anne Frank and consultant for the exhibition until his withdrawal in July 2022, ruangrupa were prevented from participating by the documenta management so as not to be 'overwhelmed'.[35] Mendel thus attested that the documenta management had 'a neo-colonial attitude towards ruangrupa', paternalising the curators and rendering a constructive dialogue, however conflictual it may be, impossible.[36] I dare say that it is not only Hito Steyerl who has lost 'faith in the organisation's ability to mediate and translate complexity'.[37] The documenta management's repeated refusal to facilitate a sustained and structurally anchored debate, and its policies of silencing, excluding and erasing, are testimony to an ultimately destructive discourse on antisemitism and racism

To make documenta fifteen regenerative rather than extractive, ruangrupa sought to create pathways along which the artists' contributions would 'cycle back to each of the artists' local context and ekosistems'.[38] Instead of integrating themselves into the long-established institutional system and agenda of documenta, the collective 'invited documenta back, asking it to be part of *our* journey'.[39] As such, ruangrupa's candidacy must be considered a lumbung in itself, the initial lumbung, a process of sharing resources between the collective and, in this case, the German arts sector – and the latter has not lived up to its end of the bargain. Rather than sloganeering and scapegoating, what those of us who, raised in Germany, could have

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[32] Ibid

[33] '5-Punkte-Plan der Kulturstaatsministerin Claudia Roth für die documenta', press release, 23 June 2022, last visited 18 November 2022, www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/roth-menschenwuerde-unverrueckbar--2055528

[34] ruangrupa, 'Anti-Semitism Accusations against documenta: A Scandal about a Rumor', op cit

[35] See Jörg Häntzschel, 'Meron Mendel zur documenta: "Verletzte Gefühle sind nicht der Maßstab"', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 10 July 2022

[36] See Hanno Hauenstein, 'Meron Mendel, "Die Documenta-Leitung hat eine neokoloniale Haltung"', *Berliner Zeitung*, 9 July 2022

[37] Hito Steyerl quoted in Benjamin Sutton, 'Hito Steyerl withdraws from Documenta 15 amid antisemitism scandal', op cit

[38] ruangrupa & Artistic Team, '"Keep on doing what you're doing…"', *documenta fifteen Handbook*, 2022, p 30

[39] ruangrupa & Artistic Team, 'About the lumbung processes and how the guest becomes the host', *documenta fifteen Handbook*, 2022, p 12

contributed in an effort to come to terms with our particular historical responsibility is an open and constructive dialogue about the roots, symptoms and consequences of antisemitism. At an international art exhibition that programmatically sought a dialogue with formerly colonised and marginalised cultures, the institutional authorities and media outlets in Germany have dealt a sweeping rebuke to the assembled collectives, turning the intention of documenta fifteen into its opposite.[40] Thus was ruangrupa's radical practice of hospitality dismissed and, yet again, the role of the listener has become that of the lecturer.[41]

Considering that the discourse surrounding documenta fifteen unfolded along the main axis of responsibility, and especially Germany's particular historical responsibility, the underlying understanding of 'responsibility' remained remarkably vague in critical accounts. Recognition for the transgenerational responsibility for the protection of Jewish life is at the core of German historical consciousness. Since this mandate to protect, arising from Germany's genocidal past, led to the founding of the state of Israel, and, in its wake, the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians, why should this transgenerational responsibility not also entail the protection of Palestinian life? Even more so since Germany is now home to some of the largest Jewish and Palestinian communities in Europe. As the discourse around documenta fifteen has demonstrated, anti-Muslim racism is a form of racism that German society must confront, along with xenophobia, transphobia, ableism, and anti-queer, anti-Roma, anti-Black manifestations, as well as antisemitism. Hollowing out the charge of antisemitism, as it was done through the dangerous conflations of antisemitism and postcolonialism in the allegations against ruangrupa and their assembled collectives and artists, trivialises and undermines the fight against it and, ultimately, nullifies Germany's historical responsibility – a symptom of what might be called a particularly German trait of white fragility.[42]

There is another form of responsibility that this discourse has also neglected – in Kelly Oliver's words, 'a responsibility to response-ability, to the ability to respond'.[43] It entails not only an obligation to respond but also 'to respond in a way that opens up rather than closes off the possibility of response by others'.[44] In many ways, lumbung members and artists formulated a good response to a bad question, drawing on a renewed sense of collectivity and demonstrating a profound practice of solidarity. So could Taring Padi's cardboard shadow puppets be found scattered throughout documenta fifteen, adopted by individual artists and collectives and integrated into their respective installations, such as by Gudskul, The Question of Funding and Fehras Publishing Practices. This practice seems not only to echo the long history of transnational

[40] Mi You, 'What Politics? What Aesthetics?: Reflections on documenta fifteen', *e-flux Journal* 131, November 2022, last visited 18 November 2022, www.e-flux.com/journal/131/501112/what-politics-what-aesthetics-reflections-on-documenta-fifteen

[41] 'Who's Exploiting Who? ruangrupa on documenta fifteen', Mark Rappolt and J J Charlesworth interview Farid Rakun and Ade Darmawan in *ArtReview*, 26 September 2022, www.artreview.com/who-is-exploiting-who-ruangrupa-on-documenta-fifteen, last visited 18 November 2022

[42] See Emily Dische-Becker, Sami Khatib and Jumana Manna, 'Palestine, Antisemitism, and Germany's "Peaceful Crusade"', *Protocols*, no 8, 13 December 2020, last visited 18 November 2022, www.prtcls.com/article/berlin-art-and-palestine-conversation

[43] Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2001, pp 18–19

[44] Ibid

solidarity between anticolonial struggles, including that of the Palestinian people, but also to act as a form of safeguarding. For months, collectives and artists at documenta fifteen have been subjected to 'smearing attacks, humiliations, vandalism, and threats in major media outlets, as well as in the streets and in our spaces', but '[w]hat is even scarier is the normalized dismissal of these actions'.[45] In response, and responsibility, the lumbung members and artists 'refuse the intentional political maneuver that aims at separating struggles and dividing them from each other – dividing us from each other… They know, like we know, that safety is something that we build together, that safety… can only be created in community with others.'[46] Tragically, maybe even fatefully, Taring Padi's overall project at documenta fifteen is called *Bara Solidaritas: Sekarang Mereka, Besok Kita* [Flame of Solidarity: First they came for them, then they came for us], a reference to pastor Martin Niemöller's confession that recalls the persecution of different communities and population groups under the Nazi regime, his own complicity therein, and the importance of solidarity beyond the dividing lines of ideology and identity. [47]

documenta fifteen: solidarity with Taring Padi, Hafenstrasse 76, Kassel, 23 June 2022, photo by the author

In this sense, there is another history to be told, another genealogy to be traced unravelling, perhaps more covertly but persistently, wherever genealogies of guilt and violence claim their place: a genealogy of solidarity. Buried under Germany's provincial and defensive discourse, documenta fifteen unfolds a cartography of anti-colonial, counter-hegemonic and liberation struggles that intertwine local social and economic justice battles across the globe. There is Alice Yard, a contemporary network and arts space in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago, who set up an outpost in Kassel to provide a residency and studio space for nine invited artists: Shannon Alonzo, Bruce Cayonne, Blue Curry, Nicole Delgado, Michelle Eistrup, Versia Harris, Amanda Hernandez, Ada M Patterson and Luis Vazquez La Roche. The Instituto de Artivismo Hannah

[45] ruangrupa, 'We are angry, we are sad, we are tired, we are united: Letter from lumbung community', op cit

[46] Ibid

[47] See Martin Niemöller, 'First they came…', *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, 1946/22 July 2022, https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/martin-niemoeller-first-they-came-for-the-socialists, last visited 18 November 2022

Arendt (INSTAR) hosted ten successive exhibitions, each presenting a specific project or practice that aims to give justice to artists and intellectuals censored by the Cuban government. OFF-Biennale Budapest collaborated with the European Roma Institute for Arts and Culture for RomaMoMA in an attempt to showcase the uncanonised cultural heritage and contemporary art by artists of Roma origin in an institutional exhibition setting. Sa Sa Art Projects is an artist-run initiative that used documenta fifteen funds to set up a community studio in their hometown of Phnom Penh, Cambodia, in order to practically address the lack of accessible working spaces for local artists and to facilitate exchange and collaboration with lumbung members and artists. At the same time, in Kassel, Sa Sa installed an architectural infrastructure to host community events and public programmes as well as a hostel for international guests. The New Delhi-based artist-run initiative Party Office instated, as its name suggests, a party and office space for inclusive and intersectional, anti-racist, trans-feminist and queer-crip celebrations. However, their extensive public programme was cancelled only one day after documenta fifteen's opening due to repeated incidents of racism and transphobic harassment – demonstrating how disability and deviance have not only been excluded from social participation but endangered by a lack of safeguarding and support.

As lumbung members and artists stated in their last open letter (to date), '[w]e are angry, we are sad, we are tired, we are united… We understand the ways that our different anti-colonial struggles intersect. And that these struggles are faced in everyday life in society at large.'[48] Consequentially, they 'will be practicing our withdrawal from documenta, and building on the lumbung'.[49] While Germany will be missing their input and inspiration, documenta fifteen will act as a reference point for anticolonial cultural practices, a harbour of hope for institutional fatigue, and a resource for subversive engagement. Indeed, its ripple effects will extend beyond the 100-day exhibition period across a wide, transnational network of solidarity, composed of collectives and artists committed to sociopolitical struggles, and of communities who could not imagine pursuing their struggles without them. Forcefully, documenta fifteen underscored the urgency of transgenerational and transnational collaboration and demonstrated the full potential of ruangrupa's credo: 'Make friends not art!'[50]

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[48] ruangrupa, 'We are angry, we are sad, we are tired, we are united: Letter from lumbung community', op cit

[49] Ibid

[50] ruangrupa & Artistic Team, 'Introduction', in *documenta fifteen Handbook*, 2022, p 9