

The Collective Model: documenta fifteen

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

This year's documenta only survived forty-eight hours before being engulfed in controversy, but before attending to the claims of anti-semitism being levelled at the artists and organisers, it is important to discuss the exhibition as it was designed and realised in Kassel. I had the privilege to see this exhibition for four days before the government began making demands for the removal of artworks, when the project was emerging and nascent, and there is no question that the exhibition was the result of an original proposal and structure of organisation that aimed to empower participants to generate the event that they wanted to be a part of.

Ruangrupa, the Jakarta-based artist collective that was given the task of organising this version, brought together fourteen 'lumbung members' and fifty-three 'lumbung artists' (more on this below) as co-organisers, and they provided the selected artists – most of whom are themselves in collectives – with a budget to realise their own presentations. Many of these came to fruition as mini-exhibitions of works by a variety of artists, but others were more unified installations or video presentations. Therefore, the total number of participants was far greater than the comparatively short list of selected artists, and most were not selected by the 'curators' themselves.

This decentralised process was as unique as the selection of **ruangrupa** to realise this high-profile international quintennial exhibition. While previous curators of documenta have come from outside of Germany, and many curatorial teams, particularly that of documenta 11 in 2002, have brought in curators from the Global South, documenta has never been turned over to an artist, let alone an artist collective from a formerly colonised country. Given the canonical status of documenta in the artworld, the art market and the power structure that reigns there, this was a provocative decision. Nevertheless, this selection rhymes with documenta's history as a progressive institution that challenges the status quo, as well as recent efforts on the part of German museums to explore the legacy of colonialism in the arts in Germany,¹ and to restitute

¹ Magnus Elias Rosengarten, 'Whose Expression? The Brücke Artists and Colonialism', *Artforum* (online edition), March 2022, accessed 6 July 2022, www.artforum.com/print/reviews/202203/whose-expression-the-bruecke-artists-and-colonialism-87895

objects of African art acquired under colonial rule.² **Ruangrupa** selected the process of ‘lumbung’ to organise their activities, which they explain is not a ‘theme’ so much as a collective model. ‘Lumbung’ means ‘rice barn’ in *Bahasa Indonesia*, and the idea is that this exhibition is a storehouse for the community to make deposits, but also to draw upon, as a commons.

To conceive of documenta as a lumbung is to shift the mechanism that usually reigns in biennials. When curators select artworks to display in an exhibition, they are making executive choices that demonstrate their power to shape a narrative that will be delivered through the exhibition mechanism to the public. Lumbung inverts the power dynamic, giving the artists involved the agency to shape their own contributions, instead of having a curator select or commission specific works – but it also gives the participants an active public role in shaping the value of the project. It is as if the curators of this iteration of documenta were saying: ‘Here – we have built this storehouse to share with you, for your benefit.’ This generous and decentralised approach has yielded mixed results, as might be expected, but by and large the projects on view made an important contribution to our ongoing conversations on art, its relationship to a changing world, and the global connections which draw us all together. Its most important contribution, in my view, is to present something like an encyclopaedia of alternatives that can be achieved through collective practices. There are so many models of collectivity on view at documenta that one can discover a network of already-existing alternatives to the way that art is made and consumed as well as the way we all live in the world. Buried histories are unearthed, translocal practices are developed, and a different economic model is proposed.

Atis Rezistans/Ghetto Biennale took over St Kunigundis church in a working-class neighbourhood of Kassel and rendered an incredibly vibrant installation of sculptures and wall pieces that was, during the week of the opening, energised daily with performances and rituals. A series of quasi-figurative sculptures employing machine parts, carved wood and animal



Atis Rezistans/Ghetto Biennale, wall mural representing Toussaint L'Ouverture in St Kunigundis church, Kassel, documenta fifteen, 2022, photo courtesy of the author

² Alex Marshall, ‘Germany Begins Return of Benin Bronzes to Nigeria’, *The New York Times* (online edition), 1 July 2022, accessed 6 July 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/07/01/arts/design/germany-benin-bronzes-nigeria.html

bones were distributed throughout the choir of the church, the pews having been removed. These works were certainly channelling spirits as Vodou figures do, or power figures from Kongo culture. Other artworks were mounted on the side walls, including an over-lifesize stylised blue portrait of Toussaint L'Ouverture. When I entered the space, it was in the middle of a dance performance in which a white woman and a black youth were performing a beautiful duet without losing touch of each other. In a later movement, men entered the scene, young and middle aged, and they distributed the energy around the space, sat and offered libations. The cold hard looks of the men in the piece reminded witnesses of the realities of Haiti today, a country that is certainly one of the most difficult places on earth by any measure. After the performance, when the dancer/actors came out for a bow, it was a relief to see the coldness was a mask and later one of the dancers offered me a cold beer from an ice bucket as the ritual began, which involved sand painting, lighting of candles, electronic music and processing through a sanctified aisle in the middle of the church. The ritual had a lightening effect, reminding us all that amidst desperation, one can generate life and hope through communion with others, particularly strangers and spirits.



Atis Rezistans/Ghetto Biennale, *Ghetto Gucci*, performance, St Kunigundis church, Kassel, documenta fifteen, 17 June 2022, photo courtesy of Frank Sperling

Nearer to the centre, on Friedrichsplatz, the Ottoneum Museum for natural sciences hosted two projects by collectives from South Korea and Spain: ikkibawiKrrr and Inland. These two projects shared the ground floor and both took up two rooms with a central video installation. These were two of the most effective video projects in this documenta, and video work appeared to be the most popular medium overall. Many were didactic, while others aimed to

exhibit social dynamics or provide evidence of lost histories. These pieces were more authorial, offering a rich interpretive dynamic that expanded their relevance to the current moment. IkkibawiKrrr's piece was a two-channel meditation on Okinawa, with still images and text and set to music. The island, off Japan's southern coast, has been a site of military conquest and installations, first by the Japanese and then by the Americans. Words, in Korean and English, appeared juxtaposed to photographs of natural and man-made features of the island. A history of extraction and violence emerge from the rubble and the monuments left behind; mute plants and machine parts, carved funeral stones and port traffic tell another story about this island known primarily in history as the launching point of military invasions. Inland's video focuses on 'animal spirits' in the world, in the market and in the online sphere, now so often called the metaverse. John Maynard Keynes's idea of the irrational behaviour of market actors during times of uncertainty, such as the Great Depression, is here translated into a humorous reality TV mockup featuring a shepherd from the Spanish mountains who becomes an internet sensation and a faux cryptocurrency that is manifested as coins made of cheese. This disjointed mockumentary was a popular and amusing sendup of various contemporary obsessions. Both of these projects are successful in that they reposition our consciousness and allow viewers to perceive anew the world they thought they knew.

In other projects, collectives have worked to transmit their own domains into the world of the international biennial. The fact that **ruangrupa** has invited mostly collectives from the Global South means that a certain displacement is necessary to transform this comfortable mid-size German city into, for example, an informal settlement in Nairobi, or even a Roma-infused Europe that resides in the margins. Documenta Halle is a large, postmodern space designed for the expanding ambitions of the show's curators, who long ago outgrew the main venue of the Fridericianum.



The Wajukuu Collective, installation in Documenta Halle, Kassel, documenta fifteen, 2022, photo courtesy of the author

Yet the entry to this building has been extended by a Maasai-inspired passage made in shantytown style, and as participants pass through it they hear the sounds of the informal settlement, Lunga Lunga, where the artists live and work. While the paintings and sculptures of the Wajukuu Collective do occupy the exhibition space allotted to them, they have also chosen to reanimate their section with corrugated steel along the walls to bring their own locality to the exhibition. This effect undermines the supposed neutrality of the white-walled gallery space, but these spaces were never neutral in the first place. These artists have never shown in this sort of venue before – in fact, it is their first international exhibition – so why not adapt the space? One of the amazing dimensions of this documenta is how much it calls on its visitors to explore new discoveries, whether it be artistic expressions that have not been shown in the West, or artists who have not become accustomed to navigating the institutional structures of a country like Germany. While this produces some wonderful surprises, like this installation, or the mock shop downstairs organised by the Britto Arts Trust from Bangladesh – which attacks organic food as ‘100% lies’ – all of this can mean that viewers are made a little uncomfortable.

This is definitely the intention in Selma Selman’s installation, part of the RomaMoma organised by the collective OFF-Biennale Budapest. In a tower in the Fridericianum that brings to mind Rapunzel (Kassel is where the Brothers Grimm were from), this Bosnian Roma artist has made portraits on car hoods. A video installed on a monitor in the space shows her, with her father and others who work in his auto shop, tearing apart dead cars with machine tools and more old school equipment, like sledgehammers. The noise from the video is a potent antidote to romantic imaginings and something of an attack on our own perceptual frameworks. Other pieces in this installation are distributed throughout the building, but a series of tapestries by Małgorzata Mirga-Tas hung in the main hall piece together a vanished history of Roma peoples of Europe, and another painting, by Damian Le Bas, demonstrates the profusion of Roma peoples throughout Europe in 1938, just before the mass killings that were perpetrated against the Roma by the Nazis.

The presence of a series of historical films, videos and archives demonstrates that many groups were interested in bringing to life a series of episodes that have disappeared from memory, or which were perhaps never recorded by global media. One of the major accomplishments of this documenta is to present the results of artistic research into social and political issues affecting the various groups’ home countries. Sada [regroup], Archives des luttes des femmes en Algérie, Siwa Plateforme, The Question of Funding, The Black Archives and Trampoline House, among others, presented artistic research that has led to presentations, many anchored by video reportage, that seek to explore neglected or invisible dimensions of either current social issues or historical events that have been neglected in official histories. These collectives are focused on research: exploring and exposing, in works that are part investigative journalism, part academic study and part personal memoir. The testimonies they offer collectively about the world we live in taught me more than reading the news for a year ever could.



Damian Le Bas, *Back to the Future! Safe European Home 1938, 2013*, mixed media on map, exhibited in documenta fifteen, 2022, photo courtesy of the author

Another dimension of the project were its programmes. In these manifestations, collectives provided opportunities to connect to performers in an intimate space or to participate in collective life for a brief period. In a sense, the programmes were the fourth dimension of the exhibition, adding the element of time to the project and extending the works on view into the world of the visitor, like a hand reaching out from a video screen. This reviewer spent time in programmes organised by Black Quantum Futurism, Fondation Festival dur le Niger and Subversive Film, as well as others. During these events, it was possible to perceive the collective as an interface, a space where the goals of the collective are tested on an audience that provides its own response and articulation of the issues involved. It is polite to simply witness such events and express appreciation through applause or whatever. But the goal of these programmes was to extend the work into our immediate perceptions and to provide new means to grasp the other experiences available from the exhibition. The everyday lives of these artists intersect with those of the visitor, and the impacts are long-lasting. For example, I sat under a tent in a postindustrial building and listened to a Malian kora player, and we were eventually joined by some notable visitors, including the artist members of the Fondation Festival sur le Niger. Although I have never been to Mali, I perceive the role of art differently after being hosted with

tea and kora music under their tent. The performance allowed the artists to invite the public into their world, and for the audience, it provided another context for the appreciation of these contemporary African artworks on view.



Black Quantum Futurism, Watch Night Service with Irreversible Entanglements and Black Quantum Futurism, 19 June 2022, documenta fifteen, Rondell, Kassel, photo courtesy of Nils Klinger

The day I was leaving Kassel, Monday 20 June, pictures of details from a mural by the Indonesian artist collective Taring Padi began to circulate online with the accusation that this was anti-semitic content and calling for the removal of the work. Taring Padi issued an apology and covered the mural, but that did not end the controversy and a variety of calls have been made from government figures, such as the mayor of Kassel and the German Culture Minister, to remove the work and evaluate every other object in the show. Documenta and **ruangrupa** have also issued apologies, but it has done little to contain the accusations.³ While the work was removed, this did not bring an end to the demands. A call for the removal of documenta's director, Sabine Schormann, was also issued and she has since stepped down.⁴ In an Open Letter published on *e-flux.com* on 27 July,⁵ the 'lumbung community' responded to many accusations and made a few of their own. Taring Padi explained that the mural, *People's Justice*,

³ Siddhartha Mitter, 'Documenta Was a Whole Vibe. Then a Scandal Killed the Buzz.', *The New York Times* (online version), 24 June 2022, accessed 6 July 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/06/24/arts/design/documenta-review.html

⁴ Alex Marshall, 'Head of Documenta Resigns Amid Antisemitism Scandal', *The New York Times* (online version), 16 July 2022, accessed 19 July 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/07/16/arts/design/documenta-resignation.html

⁵ See www.e-flux.com/notes/481665/censorship-must-be-refused-letter-from-lumbung-community

painted in 2002, represents the democracy movement in Indonesia that drove the dictator Suharto from office in 1998 and apologised if it offended a German audience.

The figures that have been labelled as anti-semitic caricatures are part of a monumental mural that was installed in the central plaza of the city, near the main venues of the exhibition. One of these figures is in a line of military forces, like others helmeted and depicted as a pig with 'Mossad' written on the helmet and a Star of David on its scarf. The other is in a section of the mural devoted to demons. This figure has a bowler hat and a cigar hanging out of a mouth filled with teeth. Although the figure's brown complexion and black hair corresponds to the inhabitants of Southeast Asia, forelocks are visible on both sides of the face. What is more, there is an image of the SS (the Nazi's special police forces) emblazoned on the bowler. These figures are caricatures, and while, according to the artists, they seek to lampoon cultural figures in Suharto's Indonesia, they nevertheless draw on a rich image history from Germany and elsewhere, including depicting police/military forces as pigs (cf the 1920 Dada exhibition in Berlin), depicting capitalists with cigars and bowlers (Georg Grosz, John Heartfield), and depicting Jews as craven monsters (National Socialist propaganda). Creating a demon/capitalist/Jew reads to anyone who knows much about European history as anti-semitic to be sure, but it must be stated that the image is a hybrid that has morphed into something that is not so easy to interpret based on the multiple conflicting images here. The rituals of handwringing that it has provoked was foretold by accusations of anti-semitism in advance of the exhibition's opening that were not based on any artworks whatsoever, but the inclusion of a Palestinian collective, The Question of Funding, among the list of *lumbung* artists.

The effect that this is having on *documenta* undermines the integrity of the exhibition, and the alternatives it hopes to offer. While **ruangrupa** designed and built a decentralised exhibition that empowered artists to contribute and work with other artists to share resources, the German government, which funds the programme, has demanded accountability. The questions that hover are: how is it possible that this was allowed to happen; or, who is responsible for this? While all of this has forced the artists, curators and organisers to do some soul-searching, and now to review every single work in the exhibition for anti-semitic content, it points to the problem of the *lumbung*. Every commons is both a utopian possibility and a source of meaning from those who use it. If you do not want to control artists in their presentation of their work or viewers in their interpretation of it, the situation is prone to be manipulated by those who define their self-interests narrowly. The alternatives, as presented at *documenta* fifteen, are multitudinous and beautiful but they are not hard to corrupt.

More pointedly, this exhibition and the German establishment's response to it begs the question whether it is possible for artists from the Global South to represent themselves in a global context and not be denigrated as second-rate or uninformed. For a nation that killed six million Jews, anti-semitism will always be a political weak spot and Germany is right to be careful that such discourse does not creep back, especially given the countless racist and xenophobic responses to refugees that have come to Germany in Europe in 2015, and after.

Most of the artists who participated in this exhibition, following the instructions of **ruangrupa**, brought their own local practices to Kassel and kept them going in a different form there. They connected with the disenfranchised and found ways to empower them, whether by opening an art studio that welcomed gay refugees (Sandershaus), planting a garden of Vietnamese plants for the Vietnamese residents of Kassel (Nhà Sàn Collective), or partnering with existing collectives in Kassel (reinaart vanhoe) for their documenta presentation. These translocal practices bring one locality to another. They do not manifest the capitalist intensive version of globalisation (a set of norms determined by business practices embraced by all nations for their mutual financial benefit) but proffer a way that the people of Vietnam or Indonesia or Tunisia might connect with the people of Kassel. If they did, what might come out of that? Perhaps the results, as with most biennials, will be intangible: nothing more than a fleeting memory of a few days of experiences. But perhaps there is the seed of something more here, some alternatives that the world needs might be deposited in this lumbung for anyone to harvest when the need arises.

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