

# Germany's *Documenta 15* art exhibition: An inspiring display sullied by malicious accusations of anti-Semitism

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On September 25, Documenta 15 came to an end in the German city of Kassel. The exhibition, lasting 100 days, was overshadowed by repeated smears of alleged anti-Semitism on the part of curators, artists and organisers.

Following the conclusion of one of the world's most renowned exhibitions of contemporary art, the smear campaign only intensified. *Der Spiegel* magazine, which during the exhibition had referred to its organisers and some artists as "anti-Semites," went on to declare the entire Documenta 15 a disaster. *Spiegel* author Dietmar Pieper went so far as to associate the Documenta with the type of notorious ethnological shows held at the end of the 19th century.

The toxic debate revolving accusations of "anti-Semitism" levelled at the Indonesian curatorial team Ruangrupa continues unabated. It has now been widened to include the guest professorship of Ruangrupa members Reza Afisina and Iswanto Hartono in Kassel and the University of the Arts in Hamburg. Once again politicians, anti-Semitism commissioners and Jewish community officials and defenders of the Israeli government's policies are behind the protests. Up until now the university has been able to resist the pressure placed on it.

Despite the malicious coverage, some 738,000 visitors took the opportunity to see the works and projects exhibited at Documenta 15. That was only slightly less than the number of visitors attending the last edition in 2017.

On July 16, the general director of Documenta 15, Sabine Schormann, resigned following the chorus of allegations. Her successor, Alexander Farenholtz, explained in his summary, "In view of the accompanying anti-Semitism debate, this Documenta did not have an easy time expressing its artistic concerns. In retrospect I wish the exhibition could be seen in a manner corresponding to the perception of many visitors: namely, an artistic endeavour that addresses important questions of our time."

Those who immersed themselves in the great diversity of projects on show from all over the world and who had not just come to look for images critical of Israel were in the main enthusiastic. This Documenta was so exciting precisely because the curators took a very different approach to that adopted by previous exhibitions, which were more or less concerned with individual works and individual artists. In contrast to the hostile public campaign, many visitors identified the works and projects on display to be distinctly "community-building"—and highly stimulating, both artistically and in terms of bringing about positive changes to social and economic life.

## The concept of the curators

The concept of the curators, the aforementioned Indonesian artist collective Ruangrupa, was directed against colonialism, capitalism, racism, exploitation, oppression by dictatorial regimes and censorship. The aim of the collective was to give a voice to various art collectives in

the global South and create opportunities for international networking and exchange. They propagated the "Lumbung" principle of the Indonesian rice barn, where farmers bring their surplus harvest, which is then shared out collectively.

The overall approach of Ruangrupa was an attempt to reach out and involve people and places not usually regarded as the traditional audiences and locales for art. Ruangrupa's mission was to showcase the artistic undertakings of collectives, mostly from Southern and former colonial countries, seeking ways out of misery and oppression and/or tackling global problems such as climate change through practical artistic initiatives.

Criticism of such concepts, for example, of so-called post-colonialist art projects, is both possible and necessary. The present situation is not about the exploited global South and rich North. The world's biggest problems in both North and South, racism, exploitation, climate catastrophes and wars, have a common root cause – world capitalism and the conflict between socialised production and the profit interests of big corporations and the financial elite, as well as the conflict between the global economy and the nation-state system.

The Lumbung principle propagated by Ruangrupa has some merit but cannot reconcile the interests of peasant communities with capitalism, as is evident from the fact that in Indonesia in particular, levels of social inequality are vast and the country's rainforests are being ruthlessly cut down and turned into coconut plantations.

In their search for alternatives, the artist collectives of Documenta 15 often looked back at pre-industrialised living conditions, where technology is primarily presented and perceived as hostile and destructive. The strong focus on what is local also makes global, international perspectives and politics difficult to achieve. In many instances, the projects and works displayed anti-modernist, folkloristic and anti-scientific traits.

Despite these failings, what made this Documenta so intriguing was the break with the traditional dichotomy between art and its audience, raising fundamental questions: what is art? Who is allowed/able to make art? What can art achieve? How can art become part of everyday life? Whose stories are to be heard? And what does the world look like beyond Europe and North America?

Many of the works simply showed – almost "apolitically," so to speak – the lives of marginalised or remote communities and their cultural practices. It was fascinating to observe that in the communities shown, art is much more integrated into or interwoven with often arduous everyday life. One could therefore learn about worlds that otherwise remain invisible. Many visitors found this approach to be inspiring.

To name just a few projects:

"Return to Sender": On show in the field adjoining the exhibition halls

were giant packages of used clothing that had been sent to Africa from Europe, clothing that had been previously produced by low-wage labour in countries such as Bangladesh and then sold, worn and disposed of in Europe.

Objects exhibited by the Wajukuu collective from a slum in Nairobi (Kenya) showed considerable artistic sophistication and a high level of social commitment. The collective not only creates works of art out of corrugated iron and straw, but also fights to ensure that local children, who are hardly offered any educational opportunities, can learn to read, write and make art.

Due to their precarious social and economic situation, many of the collectives displayed works made with the means available to them locally. They understand art and artistic activities as both individual expression and social participation and not as elitist decoration or academic gimmickry. The art market as we know it, especially in the West, is increasingly a place and instrument of exclusion and hardly accessible to broad layers of the population.

This issue also found expression in the concept of RuruKids. Normally, children “disturb” the peace and security expected in art exhibitions. Here, instead, they were given their own space where the participating artists offered them workshops etc.

Project Art Works from Hastings, UK, was also remarkable. Neurodiverse artists and their carers show how cognitively or physically impaired people, with appropriate support, can become artistically active through painting and in the process alleviate or even overcome their traumas in various ways.

What also made Documenta 15 special was that its exhibition venues and interventions extended far beyond the centre of Kassel to the periphery. They criss-crossed the entire city and involved areas out of range of the institutions where culture usually takes place, i.e., in especially “disadvantaged urban areas.”

In order to establish new lines of connection, Ruangrupa worked with “artists and collectives whose activity moves outside of art and cultural spaces.” [1] In total, more than 1,500 people were involved in the design.

This Documenta thereby made a connection with a desire by sections of the population to experience art and community in a meaningful fashion, especially at a time of war, extreme exploitation and the impoverishment of broad layers. The fact that the living conditions of many people are visibly deteriorating makes it increasingly difficult for them to participate in social life generally, never mind the cultural sphere in particular.

Overall, the Documenta did not focus on finished works of art, but on diverse, open, expanding processes. It was thus not an exhibition in the classical/traditional sense. Therefore, artistic as well as cultural and even social activities such as workshops, discussions, networking, exchange and happenings were important components.

The artistic means were no longer limited to just paint, stone or photography, but included cultivation, food and its preparation, radio, oral narratives and diverse everyday materials and conversations. The audience was no longer merely a passive recipient or “consumer” and was included in the artistic process.

Ruangrupa's Lumbung principle is, in the words of collective member Iwanto Hartonos, “political, in that politics was one of the components of its content, along with economics and culture, especially in this day and age when there is a growing need for a system that is the opposite of the capitalism.”

#### **Anti-Semitism accusations raised even prior to the opening**

The art exhibition was subjected to accusations of spreading anti-Semitism or providing a forum for the anti-Zionist BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) campaign in January 2022, i.e., months before its June opening. At that time, no one had any idea what would feature in the exhibition. It was merely known that Palestinian artist collectives, among many others, had been invited.

Many artists, including Jewish artists, have joined the BDS campaign, which is critical of Israeli politics and numerous cultural workers opposed the decision of the German parliament in 2020 to deny funding or public spaces for BDS-related artists and events. They warned of the danger of censorship and the suppression of freedom of expression. The Documenta has now revealed just how justified these warnings were.

When an oversized banner by the collective Taring Padi appeared shortly after the opening of Documenta in June, it was immediately pounced upon by pro-Israeli politicians and the media.

The large piece entitled “The People's Justice,” painted 20 years ago, had been created as part of the ongoing campaign against the legacy of the bloody Suharto dictatorship, which had only been brought down in 1998 by mass protests. The banner, which was first taken down and then removed completely from the Documenta, contained over a hundred caricatured figures. Of these, one strongly resembled Nazi depictions of Jews. Another, a soldier with a pig's head and SS runes, the inscription “Mossad” on his helmet and a neckerchief with a Star of David, was intended, according to the artists, to remind people of the Israeli secret service's support for the Suharto regime.

The artists' collective immediately apologised, recognising that these depictions had obviously injured feelings in Germany due to the crimes of the Holocaust. However, Taring Padi and the curators Ruangrupa firmly reject the accusations of anti-Semitism.

Taring Padi showed a retrospective at the Hallenbad Ost, in which it presented its extensive oeuvre of the last 22 years. There, one could see very clearly the issues dealt with by the artists. But the media refused to consider the retrospective in any detail. The motif of the pig, for example, appeared as a representation of various oppressors. The artists work with caricatures, exaggerations, even with recurring stereotypes in the style of agit-prop. It can also be seen that several caricatures of rich potentates clearly bear features of Indonesian oligarchs or landlords and are by no means reminiscent of Jews.

#### **“Guernica Gaza”**

The images of Mohammed Al Hawajri's collage series “Guernica Gaza” also provoked angry comment. The artist combined images of attacks by the Israeli army on Palestinian territory with classical motifs by Millet, Delacroix, Chagall and van Gogh, and the title of his work recalls Picasso's famous 1937 painting.

The fact that Al Hawajri compared the destruction of the Spanish city of Guernica in 1937 by the Nazi-organised “Condor Legion” air force with air raids carried out by the Israeli army on Gaza was denounced as illegitimate. One can only wonder what the reaction would have been if artists had shown such images entitled “Guernica Odessa” or “Guernica Kharkiv”?

In the course of the exhibition, further “evidence” of the Documenta organisers' alleged “hatred of Jews” came to light.

For example, a brochure of the “Archives des luttes des femmes en Algérie” (“Archives of Women's Struggles in Algeria”) featured drawings from 1988 of violent attacks by Israeli soldiers on Palestinian children and women. Among the drawings was a picture of an Israeli robot-like soldier with a Star of David attacking a child and another of a woman attacking an Israeli soldier with a grotesque hooked nose and a Star of David.

These objectionable drawings are part of a freely accessible archive and must be understood as historical material based on political and social confrontations from that time. The collective has been collecting and digitising “written, photographic and other material produced both in Algeria itself and the diaspora since independence,” according to the Documenta website.

The media coverage hardly addressed the historical context of this work, referring instead to the anti-Semitic propaganda of the murderers of Jewish children. It was the director of the Einstein Forum Potsdam, Susan Neiman, who drew attention to the fact that 67 children were killed by

Israeli bombs in Gaza last year in her critique of the “instrumentalisation of the accusation of anti-Semitism.” [2] The collective responded to the accusations with a detailed report on contextualisation and positioning. [3]

#### **Expert panel confirms 'anti-Semitism'**

A panel of scientific experts, appointed to thoroughly screen the entire exhibition for further “anti-Semitic” depictions, also found something.

The panel called for the screening of the pro-Palestinian “Tokyo Reels,” videos from the 1970s to be halted. The videos declared that Israel was committing “genocide” against the Palestinians, equating it with Nazi Germany and the Holocaust. The panel stated that a screening of the films would only be possible “if they were contextualised in a way that clarified their propagandist nature, clearly identified their anti-Semitic elements and corrected historical misrepresentations.”

Thus, the accusations of anti-Semitism did not abate throughout the period of the exhibition but became increasingly venomous. There were even demands that the authorities close the exhibition immediately, cut off its funding and allow the state in future to have a say in its organisation, i.e., that politicians call the tune and not artists and curators. This would amount to politically censoring every art event in the future.

Even supposedly liberal newspapers such as *Die Zeit* and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* refrained from distancing themselves from the accusations of anti-Semitism, but instead poured more fuel on the fire. The mainstream media hardly dealt with the diverse and interesting artworks and projects featured in 32 different locations in Kassel, some of which could be seen free of charge. Only a handful of media outlets such as *Arte*, the *Berliner Zeitung*, the magazines *Art* and *Kunstforum*, as well as the online *Monopol* magazine, published isolated positive contributions and somewhat balanced criticism.

One of the most perfidious accusations against the Documenta artists and organisers was that they were guilty of reversing the roles of perpetrator/victim. In this case, all Israelis, including their government, are considered victims of anti-Semitism, while the Palestinians and everyone who defends them are identified as perpetrators.

Andreas Fanizadeh claimed in the *taz* newspaper (close to the Green Party) that BDS had “hijacked” the Documenta. “Solidarity with freaked-out, artistically insignificant Israel-haters—who also do not represent the Palestinians—became the community-building bond,” he wrote.

Many artists and collectives, including Tanja Bruguera from Cuba, on the other hand, felt that it was not BDS that had hijacked Documenta, but rather that the Documenta had been hijacked by those accusing it of anti-Semitism: “Suddenly we all had to fear being labelled anti-Semitic because we were in this exhibition,” she explained in an interview with *Monopol* magazine.

Ruangrupa perceived the repeated accusations as forms of censorship and racism. “We are angry, we are sad, we are tired, we are united. ... For months we have been repeatedly confronted with slander, humiliation, vandalism and threats in the media, on the streets and in our spaces,” read their September 10 statement, signed by many other Documenta participants.

Ruangrupa’s Open Letter continues, “In this hostile environment, actors with a coordinated agenda were determined to detect any hint of anticipated ‘guilt’ by twisting every critical detail into a simplistic anti-Semitic reading and repeating the same accusation over and over until it was accepted as fact.”

#### **Anti-Semitism accusations levelled against critical art works**

Documenta 15 has been subjected to such hostility because it raised issues of inequality, oppression and war, and often took an uncompromising stand.

Increasingly, the accusation of anti-Semitism is used to silence all critical voices in journalism, art and culture. Numerous examples from recent years bear witness to this process: Ruhrtriennale, the Jewish Museum in Berlin, and the cases of Kamila Shamsie, Nemi Al Hasan and

Roger Waters, to name but a few.

There is no doubt that anti-Semitism exists in Germany, but it almost invariably comes from the right. Although the German state is notoriously “blind in its right eye,” official statistics confirm that the vast majority of identified perpetrators come from the camp of the far right. It has also been proven that there are close links between the *Bundeswehr* [German military], the police, the secret service and far-right networks. In contrast, it is official policy to denounce and censor anyone who dares to criticise Israel’s occupation policy. This mainly serves to advance a right-wing agenda rather than combating anti-Semitism.

The same politicians and media who never tire of shouting anti-Semitism when it comes to art or left-wing criticisms of Israel are collaborating with outright right-wing, pro-fascist forces in Ukraine, such as Ukrainian ex-ambassador Andriy Melnyk, who praise Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera and the anti-Semitic murder organisation, the OUN (Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists). The red carpet has been rolled out in the Bundestag for the far-right Alternative for Germany (AfD), while the party’s immigration programme has been put into practice by the governing parties.

It is also well known that the Israeli government maintains good relations with far-right individuals and forces who are among the main propagandists of accusations of anti-Semitism. In the recent Israeli parliamentary election, the fascist Religious Zionist Party became the third strongest party. Its spokesman Itamar Ben-Gvir, a vehement racist, is being considered as police minister under Benjamin Netanyahu.

Susan Neiman points out that the Bundestag resolution against the BDS campaign passed by the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU), Social Democratic Party (SDP), Greens and the Free Democratic Party (FDP) in 2020 is largely due to the initiative of the AfD, whose ranks are full of far-right extremists, anti-Semites and racists. Calls have now been made to use the force of law to criminalise all criticism of Israel’s policies. As a next step, this would then probably also apply to criticism of the German government’s war policy.

Thus, the campaign against Documenta 15 shows how major attacks on freedom of expression and art are gaining ground in German politics and media under the false flag of fighting anti-Semitism. Growing militarism and warmongering together with extreme levels of social inequality can no longer tolerate open criticism, democratic rights and a free art.

#### Notes

1) *Kunstforum*, Volume 283, Special volume on Documenta 15.

2) *Kunstforum*, vol. 284, p. 196ff

3) <https://documenta-fifteen.de/lumbung-memberkuenstlerinnen/archives-des-luttes-des-femmes-en-algerie/>



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