

# Government and media threaten Documenta art exhibition with cancellation

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While outright genocide is taking place against the Palestinian population in the Gaza Strip, leaving millions of people around the world stunned and taking to the streets, Germany's official cultural policy is turning into a shameless instrument of war policy.

Cultural functionaries, journalists and establishment politicians seek to outdo each other with their bizarre distortions and lies in order to present the mass murder of children, old people and women, the bombing of hospitals, the cutting off of electricity, the water supply and food for 2.3 million people as Israeli "self-defence." In a grotesque verbal perversion, they use the accusation of "antisemitism" to subject culture and art to aggressive German great power politics and justify war crimes.

Most recently, this repulsive campaign has once again been directed against the Documenta in Kassel, which was already subject to attack last year. This most important international exhibition of contemporary art is now even threatened with cancellation. The thoroughly reactionary Commissioner for Culture and the Media Claudia Roth (Green Party) has threatened to halt the funding of the exhibition.

In the second week of November, the media, led by the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (SZ), mounted a shrill smear campaign against the renowned Indian author and cultural scholar Ranjit Hoskote, who was part of a six-member committee to find a new artistic director for the next exhibition in 2027, the 16th Documenta. The previous director, Sabine Schormann, resigned during Documenta 15 last year after right-wing Zionist circles attacked the Indonesian curatorial team Ruangrupa as "antisemitic." Her successor was Andreas Hoffmann.

After an article by Nele Pollatschek in the SZ on November 9 sparked renewed debate, the newspaper's cultural correspondent in New York, Jörg Häntzschel, stoked the fire. Accordingly, Ranjit Hoskote was accused of having signed an "antisemitic" appeal in August 2019, protesting a discussion hosted by the Consulate General of Israel in Mumbai on "Zionism and Hindutva [extremist Hindu nationalism]," which was also supported by representatives of the BDS (Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions) campaign against Israel. It was "antisemitic," Häntzschel avers, to describe Zionism as a "racist ideology" which "calls for a settler colonial and apartheid state in which non-Jews have unequal rights, and which in practice has been based on the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians for seven decades."

Immediately after the article appeared, other media outlets raged

against the Documenta exhibition and called for its end. The Green Party's in-house newspaper, *taz*, ran with the headline "The only thing that will help now is to stop funding" and accused Hoskote of "Jew-hatred." It was a scandal, according to these reactionaries, that even the new Documenta management had not succeeded in "changing anything about the organised irresponsibility of this event. The promise to no longer allow hatred of Jews was just lip service." News weekly *Der Spiegel* accused Documenta of "ignorance," and the notoriously right-wing Jürgen Kaube asked in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*: "When will Claudia Roth take action?"

For her part, the deplorable Roth declared that the statement signed by Hoskote was "clearly anti-Semitic and bristling with anti-Israel conspiracy theories." She threatened: "There will only be a financial contribution from the federal government for the next Documenta if there is a joint plan and visible reform steps towards clear responsibilities, a genuine opportunity for the federal government to participate and standards to prevent anti-Semitism and discrimination. I do not yet see a basis for this."

Ranjit Hoskote then announced his resignation from the selection committee, followed by the Israeli artist, philosopher, psychoanalyst and theorist Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger. A few days later, the other four members of the commission, Simon Njami, Gong Yan, Kathrin Rhomberg and María Inés Rodríguez, also resigned. In their letter of resignation, they explain: "If art is to take account of the complex cultural, political and social realities of our present day, it needs suitable conditions that allow for its diverse perspectives, perceptions and discourses."

They defend Hoskote and go on to write that "the dynamics of the last few days, with the unchallenged media and public discrediting of our colleague Ranjit Hoskote, which forced him to resign from the selection committee, make us very doubtful as to whether this prerequisite for an upcoming edition of Documenta in Germany is currently in place. ...We do not believe that under the current circumstances in Germany there is room for an open exchange of ideas and the development of complex and nuanced artistic approaches that Documenta artists and curators deserve."

These words are clear: the active participation of the German bourgeoisie in the war against the Palestinians is destroying both democracy and artistic freedom!

Ettinger, 75, had vainly asked that the decision on the 2027 Documenta directorship be postponed in view of the situation in the Middle East. She felt it was necessary to allow time for

reflection and pause. In view of the events in Israel and Palestine, she did not feel able to continue in her role. “Innocent civilians suffered and died, and my heart weeps for every dead person on all sides. Every life is precious,” reads her letter of resignation.

And she continues: “The art world as we imagined it has collapsed and fragmented. ... What can art contribute in our dark times?” And adds: “The question of the meaning of being human is closely linked to the meaning of art. Artists are not there to be decorative accessories for politics.” Managing Director Hoffmann, however, refused to postpone the decision-making process “for procedural reasons.”

Hoskoté justified his resignation from the selection committee on November 12 with moving and remarkable words, which we would like to reproduce here in detail:

Dear Andreas, the last few days have been some of the most deeply upsetting days of my life. The outrageous accusation of antisemitism was levelled against my name in Germany, a country that I regard with love and admiration and to whose cultural institutions and intellectual life I have contributed for several decades as a writer, curator, and cultural theorist. German reporters, who do not know my life and work, have condemned, denounced, and stigmatised me on the basis of a single signature on a petition that was taken out of context and not approached in a spirit of reason. I have been written about with harshness and condescension, and none of my detractors have thought it important to ask me my point of view. I have a strong feeling that I have been subjected to a kangaroo court.

Hoskoté complains that he is being asked to accept “a sweeping and untenable definition of antisemitism that lumps the Jewish people together with the Israeli state and accordingly casts any expression of sympathy for the Palestinian people as support for Hamas.” Like many Jewish intellectuals, he rejects any “equation of anti-Zionism with antisemitism.”

He emphasises: “A system that insists on such a definition and such restrictions—and that chooses to ignore both criticism and compassion—is a system that has lost its moral compass.”

He ends his letter with a sober enumeration of facts that should make the blustering propagandists of the Greens and the official media blush.

Firstly, he said he wants to emphasise “that I hold the Jewish people in the highest esteem and have always felt the deepest sympathy for their historical suffering and admiration for their glorious cultural achievements.” He refers to his own biography: “I grew up in a pluralistic family that was proud of India’s diversity, including the centuries-long presence of three different Jewish communities among us—the Bene Israel, the Cochini Jews and the Baghdadi Jews.”

His first mentor and friend was the Indian poet and art critic Nissim Ezekiel, a member of the Bene Israel community. One of his great-aunts, Kitty Shiva Rao, was “born Kitty Verständig in a

Jewish family in Vienna.” He adds, “I’m no stranger to the Shoah; it’s one of the strands of my own family history.”

Secondly, he is against the positions of the BDS boycott campaign because it “will further weaken and isolate our liberal, progressive, critical and inclusive colleagues in Israel. ... My sympathies are with both the Jewish and Palestinian people who have endured more than seven decades of uninterrupted fighting in West Asia.”

He also lamented the deaths of innocent people as a result of the Hamas attack on October 7, but he could not ignore “the brutal programme of extermination that the Israeli government has launched in retaliation against the Palestinian civilian population.” Now, “more than ever, it is necessary to bring the communities of Israel and Palestine together.”

In relation to the third point, Hoskoté refers to a fact that is particularly significant in the current German debate: the invitation to the 2019 event in Mumbai on “Zionism and Hindutva,” which he protested against, featured a portrait of Theodor Herzl, the founding figure of Zionism, next to a portrait of V.D. Savarkar, a founding figure of the nationalist Hindutva. “I found this highly ironic as Savarkar was known to be an admirer of Hitler and openly expressed his admiration for Nazi ideology and methods.”

Savarkar, who was among the killers of Mahatma Gandhi, considered the Nazi methods as a model for India to suppress the religious minorities. “None of the German commentators who denounced me wondered why the Israeli Consulate General even thought it appropriate to equate Zionism with Hindutva.”

In the end, Hoskoté emphasises that he has “dedicated his life to resisting authoritarian forces and discriminatory ideologies.” For him, this commitment remains “the cornerstone of my life.”

The clamour of the media and politicians in Germany against this serious Indian artist and scholar ultimately exposes them: It is not the statement that Zionism is racist that is “antisemitic” and can be compared to Nazi ideology. On the contrary, the ethnic cleansing and extermination of the Palestinian population, which is currently taking place in Gaza, places Zionism in the locus of Nazi fascism, which is so admired by Hindu nationalists. It is also directed against the Jewish population and their democratic rights.

The aggressive smear campaign against the important international Documenta art exhibition makes it painfully clear how the German ruling class is simultaneously mobilising intellectually and culturally in its renewed attempts to act militarily as a Great Power. This recalls its traditions in the 20th century—the fatal “appeal to the cultural world” during the First World War, which celebrated the destruction, hostage shootings and massacres of civilians in invaded Belgium as a German cultural achievement, and the self-imposed conformity, book burning and expulsion of Jewish and left-wing artists under the Nazis.



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