

2023

# Norsk kunstårbok

Tema: Undergrunnens motstandskraft – Skeivt kulturår – Documenta 15 – Bergen Assembly – The Sámi Pavilion  
Barents Spektakel – Bypuls dokumenterer kunståret 2022: Trondheim, Stavanger, Tromsø, Oslo, Kristiansand, Bergen





brance was weaponised against the decolonial agenda and criticism of the state of Israel. The outcome of the charge of anti-Semitism was a fierce rejection of the 'provincialisation' of the avant-garde and politicised contemporary art.

In the view of many critics, *Documenta 15* was a political and artistic failure. It is not difficult to see this fierce reaction as an effect of ruangrupa's subdued and friendly disregard of the history of Euromodernity's autonomic art, with the institution being put to an alternative use. It is after all vital to preserve all the old institutions, since they act as roadblocks to any radical change.

As Ana Teixeira Pinto has written, the charge of anti-Semitism goes hand in glove with the suspicion and exclusion of socially constructed others and the dismissal of any decolonialising critique of continued white hegemony. And in a German context, the 'exceptionalising' of the Nazi extermination of Europe's Jews, and also of the disabled, communists and gypsies, complicates the necessary critique of neo-colonialism and racial-colonial violence.

ruangrupa's *Documenta* was a missed opportunity. Unfortunately, the reception to it demonstrated how difficult it is to wrest an exhibition like *Documenta* from a national democratic public for whom exhibitions are supposed to represent a western idea of freedom. Today, this public is part of a neoliberal art institution for which mass tourism and spectacular art go hand in hand. This attempt to use the institution for alternative means met with massive resistance. But the work of creating a post-disaster society based on collaboration – not property and separate identities (artist, viewer, activist, writer, politician, voter, etc.) – continues. The national democracies, the political parties and the art institution are on the verge of becoming void, while the rice barn is being quietly restocked.

## Literature

Anonymous: *Manifest conspirationniste* (Paris: Seuil, 2021).

Franco 'Bifo' Berardi: *Dopo il futuro. Dal futurismo al cyberpunk* (Rom: DeriveApprodi, 2013).

Jacques Camatte: *Capital et Gemeinwesen* (Paris: Spartacus, 1976).

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Déborah Danowski: *Há mundo por vir? Ensaio sobre os medos e os fins* (São Paulo: Instituto Socioambiental, 2015).

Guy Debord: *Det spektakulære samfund [La société du spectacle, 1967]*, translated by Louise Bundgaard and Gustav Hoder (Antipyrine, 2020).

Mark Fisher: *Kapitalistisk realisme. Er der et alternativ? [Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative, 2009]*, translated by Mathias Ruthner (Aarhus: Antipyrine, 2021).

Fredric Jameson: *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

Carsten Juhl: 'Documenta 15 inviteret ind i runagrups globalæstetiske beredskab', in: *K&K*, nr. 134–135, 2023, pp. 357–380.

Anneleen Kenis: 'A Race Against the Clock? On the Paradoxes of Acting "Now" in the Climate Struggle', in: *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, vol. 122, nr. 1, 2023, pp. 192–202.

Ana Teixeira Pinto: 'This is why we can't have nice things!', in: *Journal of Visual Culture*, November 2022, <https://www.journalofvisualculture.org/this-is-why-we-cant-have-nice-things/>

Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams: *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work* (London & New York: Verso, 2016).

## On Documenta 15, or, What's up, Germany?

Annette Weisser

Half a year after *Documenta 15* closed its exhibition spaces in Kassel, it may seem like everything has been said about the show that had been overshadowed by allegations of antisemitism from its inception. From February 2022 on, it had been a steady, agonizing downward spiral. The allegations against ruangrupa, the Indonesian collective who served as creative directors, first emerged locally on a dubious website and were quickly picked up by the national press largely unchecked. Next, the living and working quarters of Palestinian collective "A question of funding" were vandalized and smeared with unclear messages, possibly threats. In April, a series of conversations under the title "We need to talk!" was announced by ruangrupa with the aim to discuss "the role of art and artistic freedom in the face of rising antisemitism, racism, and Islamophobia."<sup>1</sup> In early May the talks were cancelled. That was the moment when it became obvious that something went very wrong.

I teach at Art Academy Kassel, and the school traditionally cooperates closely with *documenta*. *Documenta* artists hold workshops or use our production facilities, and *documenta* curators are often invited as guest lecturers. Our students work for the event as technicians, wards, at the ticket office or as visitor guides. At *Documenta 15*, many were directly involved in numerous local initiatives. In my conversations over the summer with students, the trajectory from excitement, to confusion, to consternation and dismay was truly heartbreaking. Many of the guides, or "soba-sobas" as they were dubbed, called in sick after the first waves of agitated visitors washed over them. With yet another statement released every other day, the international press coverage plus the heated debates that took place locally, it was difficult for anyone to keep up with the events, and even more difficult for the soba-sobas. Instead of conversing with visitors about the artworks on display, they were forced into a position of defending the curatorial concept against mas-



ave critique from all sides of the political spectrum.

Even the German parliament had called for a live-streamed debate during which Ade Darmawan, representing *ruangrupa*, gave a statement in Indonesian – and thus offered an experience to those in attendance not unlike the experience of the exhibition itself: The experience of listening without already knowing what's been said, of leaning in towards another way of being in the world instead of expecting the world to bend towards us, the German hosts.<sup>2</sup>

Unwittingly, I would like to assume, *ruangrupa* had exploded a kettle that was simmering for quite a while. There had been previous instances of alleged antisemitism, and artists, writers and curators had been asked to publicly distance themselves from the BDS (Boycott, Divest, Sanction) campaign. Most prominently, Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe had been disinvited to deliver the opening speech at Ruhrtriennale in 2020. The debate whether public funding should go into events in which Palestinian artists, but no Israeli artists, take part, is driven by a heterogeneous alliance of political players. Among them is Germany's extremist right-wing party AfD: Shamelessly pretending to take a stance against antisemitism, their main objective is to attack the open society and to defund contemporary art. In AfD's ruthless logic, to be strategically for Israel is to be against Muslims, which, in light of several Islamic-fundamentalist attacks in recent years, secures the support of their voter base. At the other end of the political spectrum, Claudia Roth, of the Green party, represents a generation of politicians for whom solidarity with Israel is a historic obligation and non-negotiable. In her capacity as Germany's Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and Media, Roth headed the parliamentary investigation into Documenta 15.

It's no exaggeration to say that the very public controversy that culminated in the hasty removal of Taring Padi's banner "People's Justice" touched on core beliefs of Germany's post-war, post-reunification national identity. As a consequence, unprecedented political interventions into the freedom of art and culture were called for, such as the withdrawal of federal funding for future editions of Documenta and stricter political oversight of the curatorial board. The allegations of antisemitism

against some of the hundreds of Documenta 15 artists, but also against the curatorial collective, happened at a moment when a younger generation of German Jews challenges what author and playwright Max Czollek has dubbed *Versöhnungstheater* (atonement theatre). What he is referring to, in short, are the hollowed-out rituals of Holocaust commemoration, and the way they serve as a crucial part of Germany's reascent nationalism after 1989. Connected to this is another aspect: Under pressure from international scholars and victim organizations, Germany is just about to begin to face its colonial past. For those who would rather not reexamine the genocide of the Herero and the Nama people or reckon with the stolen treasures that have been on proud display in German museums for nearly a century, to accuse representatives of the global south of antisemitism is a way to fend off the impositions of postcolonial theory.

In Kassel, reckoning with the past also happened on a local level. In parallel to Documenta 15, *documenta Institute* together with TRACES hosted a series of talks under the header "Poisoned Relations – Talks on Contemporary Art". *documenta Institute*, a research institution with links to both Kassel University, Kassel Art Academy and *documenta* archive (which is, for now, in the hands of *documenta* management) and TRACES, a research group at Kassel University, had set out to critically examine the foundation myth of *documenta*. This myth, which is largely responsible for the huge popularity of the *documenta* exhibitions in Germany, goes like this: After the destruction of our cities and the moral bankruptcy that the Nazis had brought over Germany, modern art arose from the ruins (literally, look at the photographs of the first *documenta* exhibition in 1955) and lifted us up again, to rejoin the family of Western nations.

But considering recent research, this narrative of a clean break doesn't hold up. The continuities with the NS-regime were plenty, personified in chief curator and art historian Werner Haftmann, responsible, together with Arnold Bode, for the first three *documenta* editions. Contrary to the claim of reconciling postwar Germany with international modernism after twelve years of racial indoctrination, there were no German-Jewish artists present in the first exhibition, or artists that had been prosecuted and murdered by the NS-regime

for their political beliefs. Instead, German-Danish painter Emil Nolde was given prominent exposure, whose work in fact had been included in the infamous "Degenerated Art" show, but who had been a supporter of the NS-regime and vocal antisemite, nonetheless. German institutions like Hamburger Bahnhof, Brücke-Museum and German Historical Museum are only now beginning to reexamine the problematic legacy of German modernist art.

This new perspective on *documenta*'s early years doesn't sit well with *documenta* management and the city of Kassel, for whom the five-yearly event is a major economic boost. The allegation against *ruangrupa* of purposefully omitting Jewish artists from Documenta 15 must be considered in light of these ongoing German debates: To point out the absence of Jewish-identifying artists in 2022 (there were Israeli artists involved who preferred not to be labelled as Jewish) is to be reminded of the absence of German-Jewish artists in 1955.

I attended most of the "Poisoned Relations" talks. They were held outside, in the yard of a makeshift modernist pavilion on Lutherplatz in Kassel, next to a protestant church. The talks were well attended by scholars related to the university, by students from the university and the art academy, and by international guests who were in town for Documenta 15, and by Kassel citizens. A good part of the local public, to which everything *documenta*-related is of vital interest, believed the antisemitism debate had been forced upon the show to damage the curatorial concept. These summer evenings were not only very informative but also exemplary exercises in civil public discourse. Smartly curated to cover a wide range of topics to bring into focus the immediate postwar era in Germany, these lively debates reliably led up to the controversy over Documenta 15. The talks, albeit in German, are documented on the websites of TRACES and *documenta Institute*.<sup>3</sup>

In early July, about a month into the 100 days of run-time, a panel organized by Anne Frank education center in Frankfurt together with *documenta* management took place in Kassel at a neutral location. This was the first public debate hosted by *documenta* officials since the tumultuous opening days and it was prominently casted. The panelists were Nikita Dhawan, professor of political theory and the history of ideas



In Dresden, Doron Kiesel, scientific director of the education department of the Central Council of the German Jews, Meron Mendel, director of the Anne Frank education center and co-organizer of the event, Adam Szymczyk, artistic director of Documenta 14, and Hortensia Völckers, artistic director of the German Federal Cultural Foundation. I managed to squeeze into the crowded auditorium; hundreds followed the live stream. Apparently to not further antagonize the Central Council, no member of *ruangrupa* had been invited to speak. At the beginning of the evening Ade Darmawan raised from his seat in the audience, and everyone held their breath. But instead of voicing his indignation over their exclusion, he offered, this time in English, a conciliatory note.

The debate is available online<sup>1</sup>, and I will pick out only two instances that stood out for me. I'm sure this is old news for scholars of the field, but I must admit that before the debates of last summer, I wasn't aware of the extent antisemitism is pitted against colonial racism in scholarly discourse. I was stirred when Giesel, addressing Dhawan, who represented postcolonial theory on the panel, plainly stated that every discussion that starts with postcolonial studies ends with delegitimizing the State of Israel. He went as far as to cut off any further discussion on the subject. Given that it was seen as a success to have a representative of the Central Council on the panel at all, this was quite sobering. Here, the position of the Central Council paradoxically meets with that of AfD, who has also clamored for defunding postcolonial studies at German universities, using antisemitism as a pretext to stymie research on e.g., critical whiteness.

The second instance occurred when Adam Szymczyk, who had been a calming voice in the discussion, turned to Giesel and assured him that we – we, as in the good people of Europe? We, as in the international artworld? – will stand with the Jews. In a debate of high-flying arguments, the earnestness and the simplicity of his pledge moved me, even though it would be easy to dismiss it as presumptuous. I am, after all, a person who wondered what she would do when SS-officers knock on her neighbor's door since she was nine.

The day after the removal of Taring Padi's banner, I found myself in the classroom with about twenty students. Some had witnessed the removal firsthand, and they were troubled, confused,

angry. We dismissed what had been on the agenda for that day and instead did a close reading of the incriminated artwork from snapshots on our phones and photos on the internet. We identified the two figures representing antisemitic stereotypes, and we researched the origins of this imagery back into European Middle Ages. It was, in a certain sense, an exemplary art-historical image analysis. We pieced together the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We read up on the modern history of Indonesia because we really had no clue in what political climate the banner had been created more than twenty years ago. Even though I gave a passionate plea for the founding of the state of Israel in the aftermath of World War 2, I found most of my students firmly siding with Palestine. Some students with Muslim backgrounds shared experiences of everyday racism; for them as German citizens, the dismissal of Palestinian suffering by German officials is very difficult to understand. After two hours we hadn't reached a conclusion because there was none, and that, I understood, was the real lesson to learn.

Natan Sznajder, Israeli sociologist and guest speaker at "Poisoned Relations", introduced the term *Ambiguitätstoleranz* (Tolerance of Ambiguity) to the debate. In his keynote for the conference "Controversy over Documenta 15" (February 2023, Art Academy Hamburg) he extrapolated his thoughts.<sup>2</sup> According to Sznajder, in a world lacking any unifying moral concept, we are condemned to always hold two or more contradictory positions simultaneously without giving in to the urge to resolve them. This is exactly my personal resumé of the debates over Documenta 15. It's hard, and perhaps especially hard for us Germans. We like to go to the bottom of things and return with a clean-cut solution, sometimes a deadly, final one. It's our curse and our strength, in equal measure.

As an educator, I feel it is my responsibility to train this tolerance of ambiguity at every opportunity. The discussions I had with students last summer seem to indicate that for the generation of twenty-somethings in Germany, the Shoah is no longer the kind of abyss, the singular event around which their identity is organized as it has been for my generation and the generation of my parents. As bright young people often do, they sympathize with the underdog; for them, it's the refugees from the zones of destruction around the world were first-world nations, including Israel,

fight the wars of the 21. Century. It's the many victims, often people of color or Muslims, of everyday racism in Germany. That includes, of course, the victims of antisemitism. But there's a refusal to regard victims of antisemitism as more tragical, more *grievable* – to use Judith Butler's term – than other victims of racism around the world. As I see it, any meaningful engagement with Jewish-German history will have to include other perspectives, like the ones offered by postcolonial theory, because the moral obligation to "stand with the Jews", as Szymczyk has put it, is apparently no longer absolutely binding for this generation. Germany's political establishment would be well advised to take this into account. I see this as a national duty of utmost importance, because otherwise we're left with *atonement theatre*.

I learned a lot over the course of last summer. The Documenta 15 controversy offered, among other insights, a glimpse into contemporary Jewish life in Germany that I wouldn't have got to know otherwise. For that I am grateful. I learned that the Jewish community in Germany is about as united as the German left. I learned that German-Jewish citizens constantly take the political temperature to determine when it's time to leave. "Israel is the emergency solution of the Jewish question" (*Notlösung der Judenfrage*) as journalist Nele Pollatschek put it her essay "The price to pay for living in Germany as a Jew"<sup>3</sup> and her chilling pun stays with me. I'm ashamed to admit that I didn't bother to know that the Central Council of German Jews is the democratically elected political representation of the 104 Jewish communities in Germany. And while one may disagree with their often-conservative positions, as many liberal German Jews habitually do, the Central Council is the authority on all things Jewish in Germany.

I learned that art still has the power to explode things. Now it's up to us to pick up the pieces.

1 Quote from the website.

2 English translation of the speech given in Indonesian: <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/news/speech-by-ade-darmawan-ruangrupa-in-the-committee-on-culture-and-media-german-bundestag-july-6-2022/>

3 <https://www.traces-ausstellungstudien.de/en/veranstaltungsreihen-2022/vergiftete-verhaeltnisse>

4 <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCHmY2ICLPDn0Msn6xVe7wA>

5 <https://www.hfbk-hamburg.de/de/aktuelles/mitschnitt-keynote-von-prof-natan-sznajder/>

6 <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/documenta-antisemitismus-deutschland-kunst-1.5612196?reduced=true>