

# On Documenta 15

T.J. DEMOS

In an early statement on their approach to Documenta 15, the artistic collective ruangrupa announced the exhibition's framework:

The concept ruangrupa has prepared for documenta fifteen is "Lumbung." A lumbung—or rice barn—is a place to store communally-produced rice as a common resource for future use. If Documenta was launched with the noble intention to heal European war wounds, this concept will expand that motive in order to heal today's injuries, especially ones rooted in colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchal structures.<sup>1</sup>

While there is much to support in this statement, its emancipatory promise is hard to reconcile with the actual sociopolitical circumstances in places like Rojava, Haiti, and Gaza—three areas (specifically corresponding to the inclusions of the Rojava Film Commune, Atis Rezistans, and the Eltiqa collective) among the many from the Global South that ruangrupa centered in their exhibition's artistic practices, which foregrounded the categories of archival, educational, socially engaged, and documentary aesthetics.

The language of healing is, however, irksome, because it suggests, against all evidence to the contrary, that we are living in the aftermath of disaster rather than in the midst of its still unfolding conditions—including those rooted in colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchal structures. Without foregrounding, or worse, by suppressing, the ongoingness of disaster, talk of healing may itself be violent.

If so, this would be far from the first time inflated claims were made for an art exhibition. Indeed, ruangrupa's promise recalls the boastful feints of avant-garde political aesthetics, wherein desired goals are confused with actual outcomes in magical acts of wish fulfillment.<sup>2</sup> In reality, we confront a poly-crisis of enduring racial and colonial capitalism, where the exploitation and expropriation of land and resources, aided by military and paramilitary violence and the cannibalization of politics, continue to drive migration disasters and environmental catastrophes in ways that connect to a centuries-long history of past apocalypses and threatened near-future ones.<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, ruangrupa's rhetoric of healing has been uncritically amplified in art criticism—from the *New York Times* to *Hyperallergic*—which repeats the desiderata of many art practices dedicated to environmental restoration without mentioning, let alone proposing ways to address, the causality behind the ever-worsening disasters of climate breakdown, mass extinction, and related sociopolitical crises.<sup>4</sup>

While many of Documenta 15's inclusions have valiantly attempted to push imagination into realization through the hard work of building new, better worlds, the recontextualization of such practices as marketed consumables within the Kassel exhibition's cultural economy—which might best be likened to a logic of counterinsurgency, countervailing the project's otherwise radical claims—leaves us with an additional challenge. With Documenta 15, the language, performance, and representation of resistance and healing met the spectacular conditions of the mega-art exhibition, sponsored by such funders as Volkswagen and catering to well-resourced international visitors.

Not that this is anything new, either. Twenty years ago, Documenta 11 was the object of similar objections, notwithstanding its many positive achievements in expanding the inclusion of practices from the Global South, much as ruangrupa has done, to what was previously a largely Eurocentric exhibition of limited internationalism. In reconfiguring resistance as aesthetics and in prioritizing identitarian micropolitics over class struggle, Documenta 11 staged “the recapitulation of even socially engaged art as spectacle.”<sup>5</sup>

Against this backdrop, one might identify the recent iteration's difference in its distributive, collectivist, artist-led models, which foregrounded the pedagogical, discursive, and participative, all clearly opposed to the luxury commodity objects (still) favored by the dominant art market, its commercial galleries, privileged exhibition spaces, and auction houses (with which Documenta 11 was all too continuous).

But, just as the market has proven its flexibility in inventing technofixes to master the seeming anarchic threat of digitization, the blockchain, and artificial intelligence, now captured by the new asset class of nonfungible tokens (NFTs), there should be no illusion that the aesthetic forms of collectivism, DIY, and cooperative social engagement cannot equally be commodified, institutionalized, and packaged—and this on the heels of the decades-old institutionalization of Fluxus, happenings, conceptual art, and relational aesthetics (and before that, dadaist and surrealist experiences and ephemera).

Not surprisingly, then, some critics have identified the process by which the “motifs of collectivity and self-organisation become fetishized—as they are [in Documenta 15]—if we don't at least remind ourselves of the unequal balance of power in the vast network of the global artworld, how it intersects with the machinery of geopolitical power, and who, in the end, still holds the purse-strings.”<sup>6</sup> As such, Documenta's inclusions came to resemble “the accepted aesthetic preferences of international NGO culture, which values tangible deliverables and loves to produce texts with the word ‘community’ in them.”<sup>7</sup>

Yet, responding from a good-faith leftist position, I find that these critiques do not go far enough, the point being *not* to return to the dead end of self-reflexive institutional critique but to advance transformation at a time of world-threatening

urgency. If Documenta 15 offered multiple sites of convergence between aesthetics and politics in its modeling of activist art—at its most expansive, meaning art that carries the ambition of transforming social reality—what would it mean to not simply acknowledge “the machinery of geopolitical power” and the cynical rhetoric of “international NGO culture” but to actually prioritize winning the world we want by introducing strategic thinking within this large-scale project? What if the goal was to build collective power, not just to imagine alternatives or to work toward them on localist scales or through informal sociability—what ruangrupa tried to cultivate as friendship, casual togetherness, and hanging out, to invoke their chosen rhetoric?<sup>8</sup>

As Angela Dimitrakaki asked twenty years ago about Okwui Enwezor’s eleventh edition,

what is it that prevents the emergence of a truly global project that would recast the condition of contemporary art? Why, as argued by Jean Fisher in the exhibition catalogue, is “the romantic idea of global resistance now untenable”? Why is it deemed to be “romantic” in the first place?<sup>9</sup>

This account of early twenty-first-century history may well itself be incomplete—major global resistance movements were afoot around that time, including the anticorporate alter-globalization movement, on which current anticapitalist, racial justice, and decolonial struggles continue to build (even if interrupted by the War on Terror return-to-order occasioned by the events of 9/11). Nonetheless, the question is worth reformulating to ask why those and recent movements have largely failed, or failed to achieve more, including ruangrupa’s Documenta. Moving beyond the “romantic idea” of global resistance, the collective spoke the language of healing today’s injuries, but how did their exhibition advance this cause?

“Our approach to art is more cosmological, and includes the environmental, the climate crisis, and how to think about both problems,” explains ruangrupa member Reza Afisina. “It’s not merely about circulation on the agricultural level, but also in the spirit of knowledge and how this knowledge and network, which are already embedded within the structures we have, could be self-sufficient and distributed.”<sup>10</sup> This question of environmentalist problems is worth following up on, given that this, too, is an unfolding disaster requiring our full attention.

Recent analyses of environmentalism observe that, after decades of struggle, our movements are losing. Environmentalists are numerically inadequate and tend to be guided by the interests of the professional managerial class, typically lacking clear antagonism to fossil capitalism, as they rally around a degrowth lifestyle politics motivated by liberal carbon guilt and ethical consumerism, or worse: market-based mechanisms and false technofixes like geoengineering. Disconnected from working-class labor militancy (itself long abandoned by centrist political parties), current activist environmentalism fetishizes

nonviolence, blind to the fact that climate change is class war and requires aggressive tactics. To win will require building a majoritarian class-based movement, one demanding *more*—more social provisions, free healthcare, affordable housing, public transportation, and education, in addition to decarbonized infrastructure and energy—not *less*, according to degrowth programs, which reads as prolonged austerity for the already impoverished.<sup>11</sup>

At Documenta 15, any strategic consideration of how cultural practices might contribute to actual transformation, according to what theory of change, and how transformative energies might be internationally and durably networked was strikingly absent. Such an observation is not to reduce art to activism unfairly but rather to take ruangrupa's political claims for aesthetics seriously.

While many of the included practices variously called for the radical abolition of colonialism, capitalism, and patriarchal structures, their recontextualization within Documenta ended up shedding whatever local insurgent energy they might otherwise possess. Subjected to the consumerist logics of the mega-exhibition, practices appeared temporary and abstract, as if in a liberal supermarket of false freedoms. Cut off from communities of participation (most literally so by ticket prices), aesthetic experience delinked from political antagonism, except as discourse or, at most, the sensuality of ideas.

In other words, organization appeared for the sake of organization, leading another critic to ask, “Does the organizational [at Documenta 15] become an end in itself, a kind of institutional self-actualization of the artists, curators, and community organizers? Are we entering an era in which artistic curatorial practices are merged into organizational development, or even entrepreneurship?”<sup>12</sup> Going further, the problem was the absence of a clear antisystemic politics to guide and coordinate such organization, not the organizational as such.

Anything that did pose a threat to the ruling order—for example, moving toward a necessary international politics of anti-imperialism—was promptly shut down, displaying the limits of Documenta's repressive tolerance. More accurately, by participating in the German exceptionalist delegitimization of any and all opposition to Israel's violent colonization of Palestine by relegating that opposition to antisemitism—including via the cancelation of public discussions that would have potentially addressed this complex subject—we witnessed the maddening toleration of repression, serving the interests of, rather than healing, ongoing violence and dispossession.

Considered over many iterations, Documenta may well be “exhausted” for its consistent failure to bring German politics into the discussion of postcolonialism (or better: anticolonialism), with critical discussions of the local supplanted by the exhibition's dedication to an abstract internationalism, thereby abetting Germany's reactionary tendencies, as Hito Steyerl recently observed.<sup>13</sup> A further impasse is that the exhibition,

once again, ran up against the central contradictions of the neoliberal cultural economy, happy to stage political art as long as it remained at a mediated distance, while sacrificing meaningful strategic thinking about collectivization, organizing, tactics, and strategy. As a result, art's political claims were largely stripped of impact beyond servicing the art market and its liberal but limited diversity priorities. Sharing Germany's cultural largesse with Global South practitioners was the most that could be hoped for. Consequently, the rule—and, importantly, the ongoing violence—of colonial racial capitalism went unchallenged, even as the show desired, reassuringly but inexplicably, to heal today's injuries.

## Notes

1. "Documenta fifteen," ruangrupa, <https://ruangrupa.id/en/documenta-fifteen/>.
2. See Jacques Rancière, circa 2002: "Aesthetic art promises a political accomplishment that it cannot satisfy, and thrives on that ambiguity. That is why those who want to isolate it from politics are somewhat beside the point. It is also why those who want it to fulfill its political promise are condemned to a certain melancholy." Jacques Rancière, "The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes," *New Left Review*, n.s., no. 14 (March–April 2002): 151, <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii14/articles/jacques-ranciere-the-aesthetic-revolution-and-its-outcomes.pdf>. Rancière fails to consider a nonmelancholic route to fulfilling art's political promise: *organizing*.
3. Among the arguments I am thinking of is Nancy Fraser, *Cannibal Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2022); Jackie Wang, *Carceral Capitalism* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2018); and the Red Nation, <https://therednation.org/about/>. See also, Susan Koshy, Lisa Marie Cacho, Jodi A. Byrd, and Brian Jordan Jefferson, eds., *Colonial Racial Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022).
4. Hakan Topal, "Beyond the Controversies, Documenta Is a Remarkable Gathering of Voices," *Hyperallergic*, 28 June 2022, <https://hyperallergic.com/744018/beyond-the-controversies-documenta-is-a-remarkable-gathering-of-voices/>; and Samanth Subramanian, "A Radical Collective Takes Over One of the World's Biggest Art Shows," *New York Times Magazine*, 9 June 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/09/magazine/ruangrupa-documenta.html>.
5. Angela Dimitrakaki, "Art and Politics Continued: Avant-garde, Resistance and the Multitude in Documenta 11," *Historical Materialism* 11, no. 3 (2003): 174.
6. J.J. Charlesworth, "Documenta 15 Review: Who Really Holds Power in the Artworld?," *ArtReview*, 17 June 2022, <https://artreview.com/documenta-15-review-who-really-holds-power-in-the-artworld-ruangrupa/>.
7. Ben Davis, "Documenta 15's Focus on Populist Art Opens the Door to Art Worlds You Don't Otherwise See—and May Not Always Want To," *Artnet*, 6 July 2022, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/documenta-15-review-2140149>.
8. For example, *nongkrong* is "an Indonesian slang term from Jakarta and means 'hanging out together.' Casual conversation and togetherness, but also the sharing of time, ideas or food are anchored in this term." "Glossary," Documenta Fifteen, <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/glossary/>.
9. Dimitrakaki, 164.
10. Cited in Mi You, "Ruangrupa: A Sustainable Model for Documenta Fifteen, and After," *Ocula*, 25 May 2022, <https://ocula.com/magazine/conversations/ruangrupa-sustainability-and-documenta-fifteen/>.
11. See Matthew T. Huber, *Climate Change as Class War: Building Socialism on a Warming Planet* (New York: Verso, 2022); and Andreas Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline: Learning to Fight in a World on Fire* (London: Verso Books, 2021).
12. Mi You, "What Politics? What Aesthetics? Reflections on documenta fifteen," *e-flux Journal*, no. 131 (November 2022), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/131/501112/what-politics-what-aesthetics-reflections-on-documenta-fifteen/>.
13. Hito Steyerl, "Kontext ist König, außer der deutsche," *Zeit Online*, 3 June 2022, <https://www.zeit.de/kultur/kunst/2022-06/documenta-15-postkoloniale-theorien-kunst-kontextualisierung>: "how is the documenta's postwar model, which by now seems rather exhausted, supposed to hold its own in a world that is severely deglobalizing, encircling, agitating, warming up, and has been at constant war for decades?"