

Reflections on documenta 15, in panel of the same title, organized by the Institute of Visual Identities in Art and Design, University of Johannesburg, 23 Nov 2022

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Hello Johannesburg, Hello Everyone.

Thank you VIAD for organizing this panel. I also thank Sa Sa Art Project for facilitating my presentation from Phnom Penh where I am currently located. I am in Phnom Penh, Cambodia to attend a workshop entitled "Scenarios for Collectivizing Care" facilitated by Kunci Study Forum and Collective of Jogjakarta, Indonesia. You can think of this as an extension of lumbung, the keyword popularized by documenta 15 as Riason Naidoo introduced just now. I am also visiting several collectives here in Cambodia, all part of the lumbung-sphere, you could say.

"documenta 15" and "lumbung 1" are both designations referring to the documenta event in Kassel, Germany this year, which closed in late September. I visited documenta during its opening week in June. I was at first a little agitated, I have to say. In the documenta handbook it was stated, "the viewer is obsolete" (p 29); but when my two-day pass became obsolete, I had to contemplate paying 45 euros for another two days, and I had a total of 32 venues to visit - an impossible task, let alone the high cost of air travel and hotel accommodation to be in Kassel. I felt that there were two classes of participants in Kassel, those invited and paid for, and those of us who thought we were attending a biennale and wanted to see completed works with our limited time and budget. We then learned that everything was a process, in progress, and it was all about conversations and engagement. And to do all that in two days?

I volunteered to do a short stint as an unofficial obok ("friend") or docent of sorts, which were normally taken up by Kassel residents, and I ended up hosting a Kassel resident instead (at the Weserstrasse OOK venue). It was

an unusual experience in a biennale, having in the past attended dozens of them including the last few documentas. The obok-encounter did provide something refreshing instead of the usual art talk. I was pleased that the term “socially engaged art” didn’t come up at all in the conversation as I didn't want to go the way of art theory. I realized later on that this obok encounter was the cue to get to the point of documenta 15. I also spoke with many artists in Kassel, but being in Phnom Penh currently, to see documenta or lumbung from a Global South homeground closed the loop of my comprehension of documenta 15 / lumbung one.

Let me explain this further. Speaking with artists who participated in documenta 15 here in Phnom Penh, I realized their challenges, constraints, and resourcefulness in running collectives that need to be very flexible moving in and out of parallel art circles, locally and globally, aesthetically, discursively and organically. The “works” that the collectives present in Kassel are not quite the same as works evolved in the Global South homeground. This is because the documenta participants must negotiate the exhibitionary frame of documenta as a mega art event. Everyone of these words, “exhibition,” “art,” and “event,” which we take for granted in the art world that we know, takes on new flexibility in the homeground, as art, culture, tradition, contexts merge in ways that provide life-lines and constant learning for the collectives. So when we say that in lumbung, art and everyday life merge in a seamless way, I believe what this notion really emphasizes is that there is no need to forge a hard line in definition.

This is a rather different, and in many ways a more dynamic terrain than that of a mega art event’s exhibitionary framework. The idea of a display-type exhibition emerged from the beginnings of the public museum, which was set up as an extension of private princely collections that were shared with the general public as a viewing experience. Apart from stating that the viewer was obsolete, ruangrupa in the documenta handbook stated that “when we started (to plan for documenta), we realized that making a 'showcase' of collective practices, done by many already in many art centers, would be a trap”(p 30). I read in this line the greatest incompatibility of documenta and lumbung. With a budget of 42.2 million

euros, documenta in appointing ruangrupa must have been constrained by its own difficulty of needing to recuperate or at least to supplement through ticket sales and merchandise. This is totally understandable. But the experience of paid visitors would result in some frustration as I initially encountered. And underpinning it all is the incompatibility of a mega art exhibitionary platform, adapted presentations on the part of the collectives, and probably lots of mis-steps in communications along the way. The controversy of antisemitic imagery further complicated the pact.

In a co-authored review on documenta 15 (*Documenta fifteen: A question of contexts*, Art Plural), Shirlene Noordin and I have noted that much is dependent on the contexts of the event type, it's own genealogy, nature of participation, discursive and cultural contexts of the artwork, even of the same work in different locality. To be sure, the images concerned in Taring Padi's *People's Justice*, which was created 20 years ago, are antisemitic. We have also noted that the work, a critique of Suharto's military dictatorship and the genocide in 1965, must also be read in the context of Indonesian history. Historian Michael Rothberg noted that the work should be taken as a critique of militarism. "The Star of David is likely less a symbol of Jewish identity than of Israel's aiding of the Suharto regime" (cited in Minh Nguyen, *Friendship and Antagonism: Documenta 15*, Art in America). Context, of course, cuts many ways.

Looking at documenta's own legacy and trajectory of being in the forefront of the cutting edge in contemporary art, how the documenta series arrived at lumbung in 2022 is itself a logical evolvement from Catherine David, the first female artistic director's more comprehensively global documenta 10, Okwui Enwezor, the first non-European artistic director's documenta 11 highlighting the "post-colonial constellation" sphere of discursive domains and artistic circuits, as well as expanded curatorial and research collaboration, to ruangrupa, the first Asian collective's overseeing of documenta 15. I see this internal trajectory of documenta as a natural and logical development, only to be confronted, in documenta 15, by the very incompatibility between documenta's own exhibitionary platform and lumbung.

This situation led to many readings of documenta 15 as incongruence of Global North and Global South artistic cultures. There is certainly some truth in this, but as a recent review by Mi You (*What Politics? What Aesthetics?: Reflections on documenta fifteen*, e-flux) has underpinned, we should also do a more nuanced consideration of this binary. My take here in Phnom Penh also confirms this broader landscape and how the collectives are sophisticated in negotiating the ecosystem from the lumbung to the art market, while foregrounding the communal and the pedagogical.

In the preparation of this VIAD panel, Riason showed the panelists the draft write-up on the theme of the panel for our comments. Still sorting through how I would articulate the distinction between art and life then, I suggested that the “communal sharing” be stated more specifically as the characteristics of practices of the art collectives in the Global South. Disagreeing, Riason who is from Durban and Cape Town, insisted that the communal sharing of solidarity, of equity, of art activism was generic to communities in the Global South, not just the art community. Point taken.

In Johannesburg there was the lumbung.jozi event recently, just as lumbung was continued to be looked at in a recent conference organized by the Monash University of Melbourne, Australia during which ruangrupa presented “After lumbung one.” Ade Darmawan of ruangrupa reflected that the scale was an issue that we could now be looking at, and suggested that the lumbung could now be “collectives of dots with dash lines,” rather than a global sphere.

During the “Let There Be Lumbung” forum held in Kassel near the closing period of documenta 15, Nuraini Juliastuti reminded that while lumbung referred to a communal rice barn, rice was not necessarily the staple in some areas in Indonesia. Lumbung was also the food sustainability policy that could have caused the disruption of agricultural diversity in some communities in Indonesia. Hence even the very term “lumbung” should also

be subjected to continual critical assessment. This criticality could itself be the spirit of lumbung as foregrounded by documenta 15.

Philippe Pirotte remarked in the same forum, that it was a nice change to have a non-English term for circulation in art related discussions. I would also like to add how much I like it that this word doesn't end with an "ism." That forum also took a meta critique on nation state and western epistemology. We can pick this up for discussion later. In the meantime, the kind of questions I would like to ask is, on the documenta side, what would documenta 16 look like after having presented the lumbung? On the lumbung side, in that question of scale, and related issue of funding, if not for the historic alliance of documenta and lumbung, will we see another funding to the scale of 42.2 million euros or is that not significant? How should we think of the sustainability of lumbung on the global scale and its relation to mega art events, the museums, and the art market? Or is that not important.