

FEATURES / ART

Documenta 15: Collective Continuum

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documenta fifteen: Agus Nur Amal PMTOH, Tritangtu, 2022, installation view, Grimmwelt, Kassel, June 14, 2022, photo: Nils Klingner



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The art world is a work-in-progress. And indeed, art is inseparable from life. Which brings us nicely onto Documenta – the major quinquennial contemporary art exhibition held in Kassel (Germany). The curator's aim for this year's edition was: learning, care, and sustainability. In spite of this, though, it stirred significant controversy soon after it opened, due to the inclusion of some dubious imagery in one of the artworks. With egg on their collective face, [ruangrupa](#) admitted that they had failed to spot a figure displaying stereotypical antisemitic characteristics. And scrutiny of this aspect of Documenta 15 did not end there.

Appointed as artistic director, art collective [ruangrupa](#) curated [Documenta 15](#), the first ever collective to have been allocated the role. In early June, however, public attention was drawn to antisemitic imagery contained in a mural-sized painting by a participating collective, [Taring Padi](#). The piece was removed and ruangrupa issued a [statement of apology](#). "This imagery, as we now fully understand, connects seamlessly to the most horrific episode of German history in which Jewish people were targeted and murdered on an unprecedented scale. It comes as a shock not only, but specifically to the Jewish community in Kassel and in all of Germany which we consider as our allies and which still live under the trauma of the past and the continued presence of discrimination, prejudice and marginalisation. It also is a shock to our friends, neighbours, and colleagues for whom the struggle against all forms of oppression and racism is an existential element of their political, social, and artistic vision."

[Chương-Đài VÕ](#), who participated in Documenta 15 as a researcher with the non-profit [Asia Art Archive](#), pointed us to an article called '[Learning and Unlearning with Taring Padi: Reflections on Documenta](#)' by Michael Rothberg, professor of Holocaust Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, who suggests potential avenues for discussion of the issues that the Taring Padi painting raises, and advocates further discourse on "antisemitism and its relation to colonialism and other racisms." It was in the back of my mind as I interviewed Martin Heller – art consultant and organiser, and Lara Khaldi – curator, writer and teacher, about their work, as part of their efforts to create a collectively governed, sustainable gallery at Documenta. After all, how we live, learn, and work together; how we handle grave mistakes, crises, horrors, and history; how we understand and support ourselves and each other; and how we imagine the political, social, and artistic future are all intrinsically interconnected.



documenta fifteen: Agus Nur Amal PMTOH, Tritangtu, 2022, installation view, Grimmwelt, Kassel, June 14, 2022, photo: Nils Klinger

Marcus Civin: A fully functioning gallery as part of a major art exhibition – that's somewhat unusual. Can you tell us how this started?

Lara Khaldi: We don't think of Lumbung Gallery as a commercial gallery. It's a not-for-profit, a form of the commons that refers to a pre-colonial practice in Indonesia in which rice is shared from a rice barn called a *lumbung*. What's important is the cosmology around it, the relationships that are formed, and how to make decisions about common use. The idea here is if the village has surplus rice, then it's not only shared by the people of the village but also with other villages or for crises in the region. One of the main concerns of Lumbung Gallery and its members – because many of them are collectives and many others are artist-led institutions or organisations of different forms – is the question of sustainability beyond Documenta 15, and the whole issue of biennials in general being extractive. We first started by thinking through the *lumbung* of everything, but mainly the economy. The budget is the curatorial project. We distributed the budget equally to all the artists. The main resource of Documenta is, of course, symbolic capital, but also the resource of money.

We decided to start what we call a 'common pot'. The artists were grouped into something we call *majelis*. This comes from the Arabic word for assembly. People would share their knowledge and any resources they had. Some artists said their resource was, for example, problems, so they would put this in the pot. They would constantly have discussions. Each *majelis* decided on a rhythm of meeting, with the idea of making common projects. Various working groups came out of these discussions – there was one called the 'economy working group'. Other working groups came out of that group. One of those was the 'kios and gallery working group' [kios being the Indonesian word for kiosk]. This, in turn, split into two other working groups. Besides Lumbung Gallery, the 'kios' sells merchandise designed by artists. *Lumbung* is a way of sharing that is not based on a capitalist economy. The meaning is to bring-in money from the capitalist economy and then when it enters the *lumbung*, it changes. This was how Lumbung Gallery came about. We began meeting-up almost a year ago. Everyone spoke about their relationship to the commercial art market, the problem with that, how there could be a cooperative gallery, and how this would run. We invited people who had similar experiences, such as Martin Heller and TheArtists platform. We had decided on this common pot from returns. TheArtists were doing something very similar, where 5% of the sales of a selection of artists would go into a common pot. So we asked them to come and talk about this, and from there, we started to collaborate.

Martin Heller: Over the last 20 years, artists have been objectified. Artists have suddenly become part of a system. They have agency over what they produce but they're dominated by other factors. I loved the notion of just getting everything on track again so that the artist is at the centre. This is, by the way, why we called the platform *TheArtists*. Artists should not be treated like people who produce some little fetishes or decorate something nicely. The capitalistic market pretends a lot of players are so important, but it's the artists who are doing the producing. Like [curator and art dealer] [Seth Siegelaub](#) said, "There is no art without you." That's very simple, and this is what I liked. Artists can define their own economy and how they want to work together. Lumbung Gallery was a challenge. Nobody really knew how the whole bunch of ideas, theories, and experiences could be put into practice in the framework of Documenta.

LK: I want to mention the [Jatiwangi art Factory \(JaF\)](#) as an example of how we think about the Lumbung Gallery. JaF is a massive group of people from the village of Jatiwangi in Indonesia. They occupy a former brick factory. Their village is very quickly industrialising, and they would like to buy land as a way of going back to agriculture, to preserve the village. They want to own the land collectively. One of the ways this can be done is through the Lumbung Gallery, which sells bricks for 400 euros. To finance the piece of land along with an agricultural project on that land, this is how it works. This is where the money goes.



documenta fifteen: Jatiwangi art Factory, Terracotta Embassy, 2021–ongoing, installation view (detail), Hübner-Areal, Kassel, June 13, 2022, photo: Frank Sperling

MH: It's great that you mention Jatiwangi because they also sell works and installations. In addition, they perform a tile orchestra, where they use tiles and wooden sticks to make music. And not only does Jatiwangi make music, which alone would be wonderful. But they go somewhere and invite people to train along with them, teaching them why they are doing what they do. Our job as a gallery is to figure out how we can organise this. What would it be like? What would it mean for the community? How do we price it because it's obvious that the money is going back to the community so that they can go on with their practices. And it's not only about selling. That's not the main thing. Another group, Inland, from Spain, which is also very much connected with land, would very much appreciate somebody helping them. I loved one of their works but I thought: "that's pretty pricey because it's a very special work." They said, "Well, you can come with your dog to Inland and take care of the sheep we have." So, there are multiple ways of being engaged. I'm currently negotiating with a museum. We sent them a price list, and today I received an email from the director, saying he's surprised that we haven't applied the usual 20% museum discount. I explained that we cannot reduce someone's profit, so there will be no discount. The pricing system reflects what is needed by the community. I am very strict about this. Surprise is not bad. If someone says they are surprised, then I will help them overcome their surprise and help them understand what causes it.

LK: About the pricing, we had a yearlong conversation with the *Lumbung* artists. It was quite difficult to figure out. We also made it difficult for Martin. One of the issues, of course, was speculation in the market. This is something everyone was always discussing. We decided to base the pricing on actual need, and there was also a long discussion about not commodifying artworks. We wanted to think of the price as the basic wage for two years for one person. We have different categories for individual artists or collectives. There was a huge discussion about whether to base it on the artist's labour, but this would also commodify the object. We based it on the future. What will the basic needs be? In the end, we kept it to a formula. It might be in our future to review the pricing again because this has been a challenge, to look at basic wages for two years and take into account whether the artist is a single parent, the caretaker of a family, etc. — to factor-in those kinds of variables.

MC: The amount set aside from sales is 30%, for the common pot — has it been decided what that money will be used for?

LK: The common pot is being discussed by all the members and artists. There hasn't been a decision.

MH: Right now, we are just trying to fill the pot.



documenta fifteen: Britto Arts Trust, ছায়িছব (Chayachobi), 2022, installation view, Documenta Halle, Kassel, June 12, 2022, Photo: Nicolas Wefers

MC: Will the Lumbung Gallery continue?

LK: From the beginning, the idea was that we would kind of piggyback on the Documenta 15 infrastructure. Documenta contributed a seed budget to start the project. The notion was to continue for one year. We plan to go on further. After Documenta 15 closes, the works will be presented online, so enquiries can be made. We are also planning online editorial content.

MH: More and more, we have conversations with people who like the concept and would like to implement it somewhere else. There's a gentleman from Mail who I'm meeting later today. He founded a centre for young artists there and would like to see how to implement the Lumbung Gallery concept. This is also how Lumbung Gallery can live on. In German law, in the Middle Ages, there were certain lawns everyone could use, or mountains from which everyone could take wood. Lumbung Gallery can have lots of sisters and brothers all over the world. This is a sustainable way to keep it alive.

LK: We also harvest the whole process. So the intention is to publish a book at the end of the exhibition, because we also call it an experimental artistic process, which doesn't mean it doesn't last or that it's inconsistent, but that we share the knowledge that comes out of this. We can't keep criticising the art market and not come up with an alternative. This is a way to start to do this, a kind of affirmative critique. We need to share this experience and help spread it.

MC: It seems there is a dimension of care in this work. I wonder what you think about care?

LK: Yes, I think *Lumbung* is all about care. Documenta has extracted parts of this care from us and has exhausted the team and artists to a certain extent. You could call sustainability a form of care. A lot of the work on exhibition-making has to do with an end date. You exhaust each other. Often the institution tries to care, but thinking about the long haul, how can we survive by doing this? Looking further into the future is a dimension of care. We keep saying it's about trust in *Lumbung*. We've spent so much time together now that we can trust each other. We take what we need and give what we can.



documenta fifteen: Wajukuu Art Project, Ngugi Waweru, Kahiu kogi gatemaga mwene, 2022, Installationsansicht, documenta Halle, Kassel, June 13, 2022, photo: Nicolas Wefers

MC: Do you think of Lumbung Gallery as an educational project?

LK: The working-group structure has been a learning experience. We exchange knowledge. I've learned a lot from TheArtists because they have done this before. The form of the working group, I think, has been a great learning experience. It's always horizontal.

MH: Education might allude to patronising, telling someone what to think. When we talk to artists and collectors, we need to practise patience, curiosity, and openness. People just want to understand, and you can open doors and invite them to learn. I think this is a super generous invitation.

LK: Everyone has something to learn from each other.

MH: When I was teaching, my experience was that I got as much out of it as I hoped the people I was teaching were getting from me. When it felt good, it was always mutual.

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The son of an inventor and a history teacher, Marcus Civin has lived and worked in Brooklyn, Las Vegas, Baltimore, Providence, San Francisco, and Los Angeles.

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