

## **Roundtable: Quo vadis Documenta fifteen? Between accusations of anti-Semitism, politics, German and Indonesian understanding of art – Where should the boundaries of art lie?**

German Association for Asian Studies (DGA) Discussion Forum Online  
4. November 2022

### **Report by Patrick Keilbart**

This roundtable was organized by the DGA working group Southeast Asia (AK Südostasien).

Moderation: Prof. Dr. Arndt Graf (Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main)

Roundtable:

Prof. Dr. Martina Padmanabhan (Universität Passau)

Dr. Amanda Rath (Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main)

Dr. Susanne Rodemeier (Philipps-Universität Marburg)

Dr. Alexander Supartono (Taring Padi; Edinburgh Napier University)

Reza Aifisina (Ruang Rupa)

Even at the end of Documenta fifteen, criticism of the Indonesian curatorial team Ruangrupa had not abated. Artists, organizers, and those responsible were criticized, but also the expert commission that was appointed to examine the allegations of anti-Semitism.

Against this background, we considered it important for Southeast Asian scholars to take a clear stand against anti-Semitic works and statements on the one hand, but at the same time to seek and facilitate the open dialogue that was and is called for on many sides. To this end, a virtual roundtable discussion was organized within the framework of the “DGA-Diskussionsforum online” on the topic: “Quo vadis Documenta fifteen? Between accusations of anti-Semitism, politics, German and Indonesian understanding of art - Where should the boundaries of art lie?”

On behalf of the German Association for Asian Studies (DGA), Margot Schüller represented the host of the roundtable discussion and opened the online event with warm words of welcome, before she handed over to the moderator of the discussion, Prof. Dr. Arndt Graf.

In his introductory remarks, Professor Graf referred to the recently concluded exhibition Documenta fifteen as a historical event that now required academic research and analysis, and emphasized that the collegial and cooperative spirit within Southeast Asian studies in Germany provided a fruitful ground for this endeavour. In this regard, Arndt Graf also drew attention to the very recent publication by “Stiftung Asienhaus” (<https://www.asienhaus.de/aktuelles/indonesien-auf-der->

documenta-fifteen-von-der-kunst-in-dialog-zu-treten/) and to the fact that the roundtable discussion would follow up and expand on the thoughts and ideas raised by the colleagues from Bonn. After introducing all panelists, Professor Graf started the round of initial statements by the panelists with Professor Padmanabhan.

Martina Padmanabhan started by recalling the student excursion to Documenta fifteen (in August 2022) that enabled students from Passau to “meet Indonesia in Kassel” and reflect on artistic practice in participatory (sustainability) research or artist-led research in the frame of the exhibition. Based on her experiences at Documenta fifteen, Padmanabhan suggested three topics for discussion: (mis-)communication, also in terms of intercultural clashes and different cultures of communication, conflict and public discourse, including how the conflict on Taring Padi’s and other pieces of art has been communicated or debated – on which platforms, by whose voices and by which means, plus the aspect of the collective and the commons, challenging European notions of the individual artist who is responsible for his or her piece of art and practice, but also emphasizing shared space and dealing with conflict in creative ways. In addition, Prof. Padmanabhan reflected on her visit of Documenta fifteen as a painful and emotional experience related to the debate on anti-Semitism that triggered deeply felt emotions of shame, guilt, and accusation, which led her to the question of what role art can play in dealing with injustice but also the ability to mourn (e.g. in the context of the Nazi genocide).

Amanda Rath took up Prof. Padmanabhan’s concerns and added her perspective on the collective and the commons, on communication, and how ideas travel or transform and take different meanings as they travel, with sedimented layers of meaning – especially in the context of conflict. Dr. Rath added the question of how far we can take the concept of *lumbung*<sup>1</sup> and how has it translated; plus, how have processes and practices that are associated with *lumbung* been practiced elsewhere in the world, maybe under different terminologies that are specific to their locations? This was also important because words that are being used in one local context can be misinterpreted in another one, and this misinterpretation can be part of the transformation of ideas, she emphasized. Reflecting on different notions of a collective and friendship, Dr. Rath underlined the importance to take into account different meanings in German, English, Indonesian, asf. and reminded everyone that the art collectives Ruang Rupa and Taring Padi both had a history of around 20 years, and that the sense of urgency out of which they had emerged transformed into thinking about consistency and sustainability (– again interesting concepts with different meanings). Referring back to the affective dimension of the conflict and

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<sup>1</sup> *Lumbung* is the Indonesian term for a communal rice barn where the surplus harvest is stored for the benefit of the community; as a motto or model for Documenta fifteen, *lumbung* is to be understood as a kind of collective resource fund based on the principle of communality. It gathers ideas, human work potential, time and other resources that can be shared. More information on the concept of *lumbung* and its applications at Documenta fifteen can be found at <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/easy-lumbung/>.

the inability to mourn or reconcile, Dr. Rath pointed to Wulan Durgantoro's work on trauma.

Susanne Rodemeier then shared some insights and ideas from her perspective as an experienced Indonesianist and curator of the exhibition on current Jewish life organized by the Museum of Religions in Marburg in the summer of 2022 (in parallel to Documenta fifteen). Recalling an experience at the Goethe Institute in Bandung in the late 1990s, where students from the ITB University collectively painted – and in the process repeatedly changed – a picture, she wondered why Taring Padi could not change their much criticized work “Peoples Justice” or, if it was finalized and not to be changed, what were the reasons for this? Furthermore, Dr. Rodemeier drew from her research experience in Eastern Indonesia, where artistic practice is essentially tied to religious practice and, although producing works of art is often a collective endeavour, there is usually one “author” who is responsible for it. This potential difference to Java and Ruang Rupa or Taring Padi was brought up as a point for discussion. One further point that Dr. Rodemeier took up and emphasized again was the concept of *lumbung*; she compared it to the *gudang* as a creative space that allows people to get out of the confines and social control of their community (within a neighbourhood or village in the countryside). She asked whether, in contrast, art and artistic practice today were more relevant in bigger cities in Java and Bali.

Alexander Supartono directly responded to the questions raised about *lumbung* and recalled a discussion within Taring Padi about the cultivation system in Indonesia between the 1830s and 1870s. He emphasized that the only chance to survive for Indonesians who had to cultivate export-oriented crops was to rely on *lumbung* – not only as a storage place but as a working communal concept where people share and support those in need. So *lumbung* became a symbol and strategy for artists and collectives to survive under the military dictatorship of Suharto, without state support and without any markets. For Taring Padi, *lumbung* thus became the very simple principle of everybody sharing what they can spare, according to their ability, and according to peoples' needs as Dr. Supartono explained. This at least was Taring Padi's understanding of the concept of *lumbung* introduced by Ruang Rupa as the working principle for Documenta fifteen. Therefore, *lumbung* could be implemented to the struggles and undoubtedly difficult times we are in now globally, on a planetary scale. “That's the principle of Documenta fifteen: to create a space, a platform, where the dialogue between different struggles in the Global South can take place, in ‘the West’!” In addition, Dr. Supartono underlined that both Ruang Rupa and Taring Padi had moved beyond ideas of “East and West” since everybody today was living under more or less the same circumstances, i.e. neoliberalism. In conclusion, the whole conflict, also about Taring Padi's work “Peoples Justice”, was a clash between operational systems, as Dr. Supartono explained, which implied that there was not miscommunication but that communication was not possible at all, unfortunately.

Reza Aifisina followed up directly on the issue of communication and emphasized dialogue and having conversations as the “daily bread” of Ruang Rupa since many years. This included aspects such as trust and friendship, as a basis for open and honest dialogue but also as a resource, meaning a model of sharing and mutual support – even including non-human beings, the natural environment, as a basis for social, economic, and ecological sustainability. This ultimately led to an understanding of Documenta fifteen as a particular resource that needed to be shared. As an art collective, the essential endeavour and struggle was how to communicate certain ideas and understandings of, for example, an ecosystem or implications of the Covid19 pandemic. Reflecting on the framework of Documenta fifteen in Kassel, Reza Aifisina emphasized hope and togetherness and feeling at home as aspects of *lumbung* – which was also experienced by Ruang Rupa in Kassel, despite conflict – but at the same time feeling the constant urge to justify or establish oneself as an equal partner in conversation. As an art collective, Ruang Rupa had much experience with this, also back in Jakarta and Indonesia, and the strategy was simply to introduce and present themselves and their ideas again and again, which they had done in Kassel, too, as Reza Aifisina concluded.

After the first round of individual statements and remarks, Arndt Graf reminded everyone of the fact that the recording of this particular roundtable discussion, together with other recordings of DGA roundtable discussions, was a historical document and a library item, which could be analyzed, combined and compared with other sources as part of future research projects.

For anybody who is interested in how the discussion continued, the recording is available on the website of the DGA: <http://asienforschung.de/dga-diskussionsforum-online-quo-vadis-documenta/>.

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