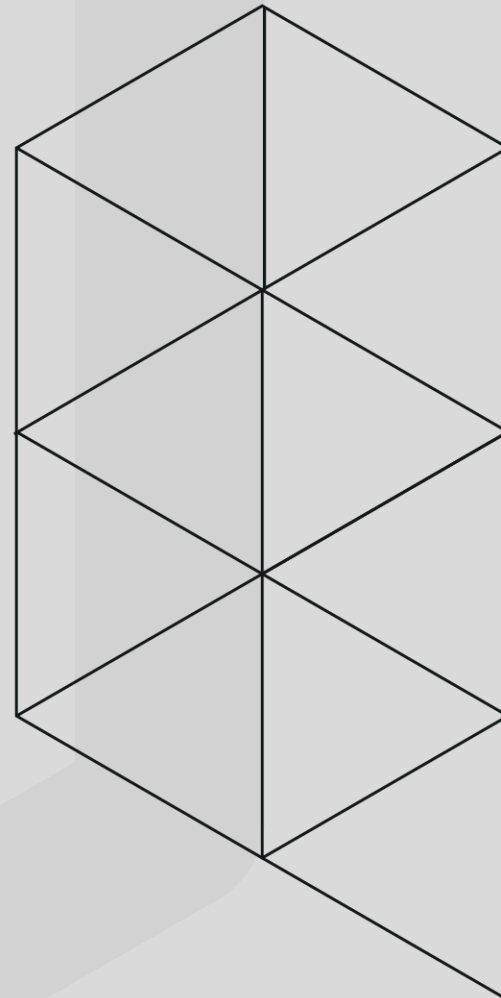


Instituting Interconnecting Cosmologies: Documenta History, German History, and Art History in the Wake of Aby Warburg, Joseph Beuys and ruangrupa

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Documenta began as a fringe event to the 1955 West German Flower Show, which pioneered the gardening innovation that on thinly covered heaps of rubble, flowers could blossom particularly brightly. At the time, Kassel and its inhabitants needed to grapple not only with the city's destruction (it had housed ammunition production), but also on its inability to continue depending on traffic passing through. Despite its central position in Europe, Kassel now had to attract visitors directly: in 1961, the Iron Curtain was built as a wall that severed roads and train tracks, families and business relations. In less than an hour's drive East, one stood in front of a concrete wall with strips of mines and shooting devices. Behind it, I was born. Even though Kassel was on the wall's privileged Western side, its marginal location caused brain drain, disinvestment and isolation. From the beginning, documenta was thus tasked with answering the question: how can art flower on rubble? Answering this question was something that had to be done comparatively, in relation to both recent history as well as the occluded, near-by, Eastern Bloc.

Arnold Bode was an artist in many genres, whose vision of documenta was focused on connections between art and design, between people, societal needs and affordances. That the past was at the beginning thinly covered is a matter of historical fact. The Nazi past of art historian Werner Haftmann's, for example, remained unknown to the general public for too long. It should have been revealed sooner and preferably by documenta itself, considering his contribution to documenta's founding. But this involvement, which continued through iterations 2 and 3, should not make documenta as an institution suddenly appear any more contaminated than the

traditional institution of the museum or the traditional concept of art itself, both of which have originated as tools of colonial modernity.

In the following columns, I have three aims: I want to show that documenta has become, over time, a means to reconsider art as a force to connect cosmologies; in particular, in relation to human rights questions and the traumas left by dictatorial regimes. In this context documenta fifteen, I argue, flowers on rubble that had been well prepared for it by documenta history, and does precisely what is needed in the world today: facing the returning and rising importance of collective challenges, including the climate emergency (I will focus a little on Joseph Beuys). Documenta's location in history and geography make it a suitable vehicle and tool for comparative analysis, a project to honour and mourn those killed in the Shoah – and addressing the lived experiences of others, such as Palestinians. Documenta fifteen goes, I think, quite far in demanding (with Achille Mbembe and echoing Derrida) that Europe finally does what it always said it was standing for.¹

Secondly, I want to take issue with the way in which art history is not consulted (maybe because of Haftmann-like precedents) within the debate surrounding the question of whether and how documenta fifteen may be anti-Semitic. What is asked of art history, it seems, is only to provide a one-dimensional iconographic identification of images. My point of reference for another art history in this article is Aby Warburg.

Lastly, I will return to the comparative and connecting impetus of documenta, to what was in the aftermath of WWII an obvious necessity: vigilance towards discrimination and othering. As expressed for example in Martin Niemöller's famous statement and paraphrased in a Taring Padi banner (*Sekarang Mereka, Besok Kita: Today they've come for them, tomorrow they come for us*, 2021), this makes the establishment of common grounds particularly necessary:

First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out – because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out – because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the [Jews](#), and I didn't speak out – because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak for me!²

Early documentas are generally seen as a “catching up” exercise for Germans, bridging the “gap” of the Nazi reign and the War years. It worked for public acceptance of Modernism, democratisation and re-education of the Western zones: indeed, establishing a connection between this art and Western Bloc values, one that did not exclude turncoats, or even those who might have jumped on the bandwagon of this democratisation, in order for it to fail - non-performativity, as Sara Ahmed would call it. Whatever the case early on, documenta 5 changed the game and gave documenta a new direction, a unique selling point among art events. Harald Szeemann imposed an overall, and not uncontested, curatorial vision, showing the neo-avant garde, but also science fiction and the art of neurodiverse people, i.e. those who a generation earlier had been sent to extermination camps.

Joseph Beuys' ideas of an expanded concept of art had inspired Szeemann. Beuys installed an office in documenta 5, an initiative to turn political organising into a grassroots affair. It was 1972, the time of a grand coalition in Germany, experienced by many as stifling, and countered by student movements and extra-parliamentary opposition. Fascist remnants in German society were targeted, and documenta seemed a perfect tool to “do politics”, where few other equally visible fora existed. In 1977, for 100 days, Beuys took up discussions with visitors onto a new level under the aegis of his Free International University for Interdisciplinary Research (FIU), foregrounding issues of the so-called periphery and aiding the Green movement. Documentas 6 and 7 arguably hold a special role in the foundational process of the West German Greens, now in Government. Beuys became the *documenta* artist.

Between documentas 5 and 6, he had made “friends not art” (as documenta fifteen formulates it) in Northern Ireland, where the “Troubles” raged and where civil rights activism was often renamed as “violence”. Here, Beuys found basalt columns that, when crystalising, intricately interlock and have both five and six sides: as such, they form symbols of Christianity and Judaism. Neolithic monuments of death and afterlife, in combination with the still-colonial violence in Northern Ireland, joined forces with Beuys' own reading of James Joyce's trans-historically constructed works. The result was the conviction that one should see the Holocaust and the “Troubles” as being connected to larger historical lines and to many places: as the capability of human beings to commit genocide. Beuys' message to people in Northern Ireland was to keep

communicating across divides. The “Periphery workshop” at documenta 7 and planned FIU location in Derry reveal how the FIU’s actors went about socially sculpting institutions, major and new ones, that would prove capable of lifting a local issue onto a larger stage: the Northern Ireland Assembly, the new Ulster University (with its education department and the art academy), the SDLP, the Green movement (Heinrich Böll Foundation), and through an application for funding also the EEC (i.e. the EU) itself – as well as the institution documenta. Here, the Northern Irish friends reported on their collectives and DIY initiatives. In addition, artists debated how they could insert themselves and art into governments, universities and industry – and real-world actors of considerable standing were invited to take the FIU’s ethos into their contexts. As a brick and mortar institution, the FIU never came about and can be considered a “failure”. Arguably and humbly, however, its actors have effected real change in many instances – and the FIU has established documenta as a privileged site of collective, basis democratic “state-crafting” from the margins, thus instantiating an expanded concept of art that makes it quite impossible after 1977 in Kassel to ask “where is the art?”.

Documenta 7 and 8 saw the beginning and completion of Beuys’ mega project of *7000 Oaks* (city forestation instead of city administration): a further turn towards collectivity and ecological questions – in action. It came (still comes) with a collective for maintenance and local political work. The big basalt heap in front of the Fridericianum did not just look to Kassel’s air quality in the future, but also to Germany’s past: this section of the Friedrichsplatz is where people had brought their loved ones’ charred remains after bomb nights. This work, to which Richard Bell’s *Aboriginal Embassy* is standing in relation now, is a project of mourning, integral to what documenta became and is. In so many ways, all documentas have addressed – and had to address – the reasons for and the reality of the destroyed city and the divided world. Not all have said as clearly as Joseph Beuys that both Blocs needed to be overcome.

The comparative principle that I am tracing is particularly evident in Documenta X, 1997, which issued a book beginning historically with Germany 1945 (Primo Levi and Hannah Arendt), linking to Hiroshima and postcolonial struggles, to 1989 and particularly the Levant, where curator Catherine David had been based. She featured works by

critical Israelis Sigalit Landau and Ariella Azoulay, as well as collaboration with Birzeit university and a Palestinian film programme.

The decolonial focus of Documenta11 has often been mentioned in relation to the current iteration. The global platforms preceding Documenta11 and its Kassel exhibition focused on comparative human experiences in many of the world's trouble spots. It also enabled an analysis of e.g. Israeli settler activity and the absence of media attention in the polarised wake of 9/11.

Documenta 12 found with its "migration of forms" theme a tool for the by then well-established comparative interest. It reached into the past (with historical works) and – for the first time – also reached out to Western Europe's cut-off neighbours in Central and Eastern Europe. In their previous isolation, they had often pioneered an expanded concept of art and evidenced, in 1989, the extent of what grassroots collective organising for peace and civil rights can achieve.

Documenta 13 continued to move within a comparative line of work, showing Lee Miller's photo of Hitler's bathtub and dissident strategies from the Prague Spring together in the "brain". By extension, the two poles of reference were the Kassel region's sites of Nazi crimes, to which all artists undertook an excursion (many, such as Willie Doherty from Northern Ireland, making Shoah-related work as a response), as well as Kabul as a second venue. The theme of "collapse and recovery" connected trans-historical and trans-regional memories, again not in line with categorical Holocaust exceptionalism. Art(istic) research became a new way of speaking about the thread of learning and unlearning established throughout documenta history by projects such as the FIU. Documenta 14, through Maria Eichhorn's work, then functioned as a tool for both research and action in aid of the restitution of property still withheld from Holocaust survivors and their families in Germany – just as art, art(istic) research and theory underpinning decolonial movements (the journal *Third Text*) were also exhibited. A general culture of vigilance pervaded the show: both with regard to the Levant as with insufficiently prosecuted Neo-Nazi crimes within Germany (Forensic Architecture's work). In *The Reader*, documents of Empire / documents of decoloniality traced civil rights struggles. W.E.B. Du Bois' text

"The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto" there reprinted states
We are facing war, [...] hate and cowardice and particularly
increasing division of aim and opinion in our own groups. [...]

Du Bois calls to] reformulate the problems of our day, whose solution belongs to no one group: the stopping of war [, better education and] the right to think, talk, study, without fear of starvation or jail.³

The Athens exhibition decentered documenta 14 and enabled its artistic direction to treat its infrastructure and budget as part of what was to be used (or socially sculpted). Olu Oguibe's *Monument for Strangers and Refugees* – which appropriates colonial instruments such as monumental sculpture and the Bible – takes Kassel, Europe, the West up on its values, claiming that “we” are, indeed, doing what we're saying.

On all these fronts, documenta fifteen has continued the work of previous iterations. It is instituting, as in the project RomaMoma which claims the status of Museum of Modern Art of the Roma community – and even delivers on its name's promise. The Question of Funding are claiming European Modernism as a meaningful tool for conveying the experience of Palestinians today. Documenta had, after all, been founded to inculcate the appreciation of such art. The strategy is similar to the Van Abbemuseum's collaboration with the International Academy of Art Palestine (IAAP) in Ramallah: 'Picasso in Palestine'. The *Head of a Woman* had been painted during German occupation in Paris, and for Palestinians to see this original Picasso, many back-room discussions about money, insurance and jurisdiction were necessary, mirroring the real-life concerns that The Question of Funding itemise on cards beside their images. Art's close entanglement with real life is shown. To compare strategies globally, to deal with these entanglements is what documenta fifteen excels at.

It is no surprise then that documenta began with tree-planting: this environmentally performative gesture of commemoration and future promise. As a response to the Shoah, Theodor Adorno's preference was for negative representation, an approach exemplified by Samuel Beckett, who had witnessed the rise of Fascism in Kassel. Trauma is not representable. An absence will mark it respectfully – unless that gets commodified. Documentation, research, and action; organising, restituting, planting and all interventions that remain temporary - such as exhibitions, rather than monuments - will need to be our ever-changing strategies in bearing out vigilance for equality and justice. As I hope to have shown, the exhibition history of Documenta has seen many instances, in fact a groundswell of positions, against the

exceptionalism of one group of victims (or perpetrators) over all others. Of course, the Shoah was unique, but it is not without genealogy, nor is its experience without comparison. This comparative necessity inscribed in the location of Kassel was in many documentas, and increasingly among them, taken up as an opening for affective global connecting with those at the margins.

A motif that had a resonance of anti-Semitic iconography has offended in Kassel. It has been removed and its absence, alongside the closing of documenta fifteen after 100 days, may hopefully continue to make space for discussion. A large part of the ongoing discussion however, has failed to hear art history. Engaging in a visual literacy exercise of offending iconography (something that should have stood at the beginning) seems now to be almost superfluous. To sever connections, to insist on stable iconographic identification and clear, ever-lasting victim or perpetrator roles is to learn neither from art nor from (art) history. German art historian Aby Warburg, who died in 1929, developed a historical psychology of images able to determine which society or historical moment was more or less inclined to believe that a certain group of “others” was the source of all evil befalling a community. Such scape-goat thinking is the beginning of a process of dehumanisation that can lead to genocide. In Botticelli’s work *La Primavera* (1477/78), Warburg noted a certain irrationality or lack of connection when a personification of wind blows very hard but doesn’t have any effect, even on the lightest drapery in its path.

Documenta fifteen has unsurprisingly used Warburgian motifs and ideas, such as the ellipse as non-binary thought form or the idea of a migration of images. Warburg contends it is not enough to engage in iconographic identification; we also need the contextual and emotive charge and the agendas in the changes that images undergo when travelling from one time and place to another (iconology, as he called it). As a historical psychology, Warburg determined through its art the degree of a society’s safety from anti-Semitism or other victimisation.⁴ Warburg, who came from an orthodox Jewish background, believed that someone wanted to kill his family. To overcome his anxiety, he worked on the symbol of fear – the snake – concluding that venom in small doses is medicine and can conjure a sign of hope. Images don’t stably mean one thing: they change, while communicating comparable human, psychological states. That is not

relativism, but a pointer to the usefulness of art as a tool for societal analysis.

Like Aby Warburg, and differently in method, Aimé Césaire and Hannah Arendt also compared structures of dehumanisation during the first half of the twentieth century. They all researched and retraced the paths that can lead to genocide, not in order to exculpate perpetrators, as the 1980s *Historikerstreit* would have it, but rather as an attempt to understand the dynamics of hatred and to be vigilant to the possibilities of the repetition of genocide. The tools are there. A sustained commitment to honing and presenting them, while broadening conceptions of art to enable this, has been one of the chief merits of documentas since the 1970s.

So, why forget documenta history? We know that wind is having an impact on our drapery, that floods are covering one third of Pakistan. We know that humans can only survive when we feel the interconnectedness of our being with that of others, even those we may not know, or immediately consider “grievable”, as Judith Butler puts it in *The Force of Non-Violence*.⁵ We know it, but refuse to acknowledge, or act accordingly. It is a knowledge that disrupts the stories customarily told, our rights to privileges we have imagined. The justice minister of the Netherlands has recently identified a new threat to democracy, alongside terrorism: vigilance against discrimination (“woke-ism”).⁶ Maybe quoting Niemöller is a danger now, too?

Two weeks ago in Kassel, Ann Laura Stoler analysed this phenomenon. “colonial aphasia” [...is her term for] both loss of access and active dissociation. In aphasia, an occlusion of knowledge is the issue. It is not a matter of ignorance or absence. Aphasia is a dismembering, a difficulty speaking, a difficulty generating a vocabulary that associates appropriate words and concepts with appropriate things. [...] a difficulty comprehending what is spoken.⁷

Aphasia becomes a useful vocabulary to corroborate and deepen the reflection by Aleida Assmann last year on what she believed to be absurd distortions in German debates, where allegations of antisemitism target the wrong opponents. She identified a “separation mania” as underlying all forms of hatred and a choice between

“polarising” and “solidarising” running through new anti-Semitism debates – clearly evident now in relation to documenta fifteen.⁸

Art can make connectedness felt. It can research entanglements above and beyond academic disciplinary knowledge, it can institute and “state-craft”. In its humble efficacy documenta fifteen is presenting – for those who choose to see it – “a movement of movements”, to borrow a phrase from T.J. Demos. Ruangrupa’s version, “collective of collectives”, stresses the steady, egalitarian, hospitable experience of attending to what is necessary in the world: of surviving. What is at stake is not iconography, or an individual artist’s masterpiece, it is art – documenta – enabling learning through comparing methods of civil rights struggles, match-making between actors and unexpected empathic alliances – just like in 1977. Ruangrupa’s practice, with its decolonial, economic (lumbung), ecological and non-violent aims, can be considered as well-prepared and supported by Documenta history. It is necessary in the context of both German and global histories of civil rights struggles – and fitting well within expanded notions of art and art history. Documenta fifteen may – possibly even through the heated debates – usher in a necessary new flowering on the rubble of Kassel. While ruangrupa’s garden did not start to be planted at or with documenta, it will continue growing through its seeds, carried further and further by the wind.

Notes

- 1) Mbembe, Achille, *Out of the Dark Night: Essays on Decolonization*, New York: Columbia University Press 2021; Aleida Assmann, “A Spectre is Haunting Germany: The Mbembe Debate and the New Antisemitism”, *Journal of Genocide Research*, 23:3 (2021), 400-411, online at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14623528.2020.1847861>
- 2) <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/martin-niemoeller-first-they-came-for-the-socialists#the-quote-0>
- 3) W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Negro and the Warsaw Ghetto”, Quinn Latimer, Adam Szymczyk (eds), *The documenta 14 Reader* Kassel, Munich et al: documenta, Prestel 2017, pp. 561-570, here p. 570.

- 4) Christa-Maria Lerm, "Das Jüdische Erbe in Aby Warburg's Leben und Werk". In: *Menora 5: Jahrbuch für Deutsch-Jüdische Geschichte* 1994. Julius H. Schoeps (ed.) Munich, Zurich: Piper 1994, pp. 141-169.
- 5) Judith Butler, *The Force of Non-Violence: An Ethico-Political Bind*. London, New York: Verso 2021.
- 6) See: Tristan Theirlynck, "Woke is niet langer een geuzennaam maar een scheldwoord", *NRC.nl* 14 September 2022.
- 7) Ann Stoler, "Colonial Aphasia: Race and Disabled Histories in France", *Public Culture* 23:1 (2011), pp.121-126, here p. 125.
- 8) Assmann (as above) acknowledges the importance of multi-directional memory, Michael Rothberg's contribution.

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