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The First Exhibition of the Twenty-First Century–*Lumbung 1* (*documenta fifteen*), What Happened, and What It Might Mean Two Years On

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It is obviously a little dramatic to claim *Lumbung 1* (*documenta fifteen*) as the first exhibition of the twenty-first century. This milestone is drawn from the Western Christian calendar and as such it is completely arbitrary and culturally specific. Still, art history and other fields have a track record of using the turn of a century to signify a break with the past and the start of a new lineage.¹ As a provocation then, I wish to suggest that *Lumbung 1* in Kassel challenged a paradigm of contemporary art that was built on modernism. It pointed instead towards a different horizon, not only for the forms of art it presented but also for its institutional frameworks. In doing so, it sought to shift the conceptual and experiential basis of relations between artworks and the diversity of visitors that might see an exhibition.

Lumbung was a tumultuous and discordant exhibition that has still not settled in the collective imagination. Even its name is disputed with some insisting on *documenta fifteen* in honour of its past, while its curators and supporters often refer to *Lumbung 1* to bypass precisely those demands that the traditions of contemporary art loaded onto it from before runagrupa arrived on the scene. The lack of consensus does not mean that the exhibition has passed quietly into history. Indeed, writing twenty months later it seems much more pertinent to see it as foreshadowing cultural life in Germany, where censorship and the exclusion of artistic and intellectual voices not in full agreement with the German state's unquestioning support of the Israeli government are rising at an alarming rate.

My contention here is that *Lumbung 1* created the conditions in which a profound conflict arose between a hardened, incurious Western European (and

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especially German) understanding of twentieth century European history (the absolute exceptionalism of 1933–1945). This is an understanding that has been sanctified by the German state itself—and the dynamic, shifting, and uninstitutionalised reflections of artists and curators in the wider ruangrupa community about racism, colonialism, extractivism, and other forms of white European exploitation. The collective thinking of ruangrupa and their friends does not pivot around a singular, unquestioned narrative of the past. Nonetheless, Europe’s (and Germany’s) apparent desire is to fix the meaning of the twentieth century around a single horrific event (the Holocaust) for which the existence of the state of Israel offers continual redemption. In this way, the twentieth century is effectively closed, ironically, to maintain the fiction of 1933–1945 exceptionalism. Europe (and especially Germany) is also condemned to never leave this temporal closure. In this closed loop, the colonial and dictatorial pasts of Southeast Asia, for instance, are just one element of many that are ignored or at best marginalised as incomprehensible externalities that are not Europe’s concern. Ruangrupa’s observation of this mental construction, combined with previous experiences of Europe’s unself-critical mindset, undoubtedly meant that the German hosts’ assertion of their open and democratic culture was met with scepticism in Jakarta, with the claim that documenta’s Directors are given artistic autonomy within Germany’s legal limits eventually proving very hollow indeed.² It is worth adding here that both the rigidity of the German position towards recent history and the scepticism of ruangrupa towards European claims of artistic autonomy grew throughout the project, aided by the growing distance from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the stiffness of an inefficient political bureaucracy. Ultimately, the irreconcilability of these positions needs to be brought into relation through a different kind of positionality on both sides; though as a white, European male it feels like my people have much more work to do than vice versa.

In this analysis, I have not used the word *decolonial* yet to describe ruangrupa’s position because they rarely use the term themselves. However, for me this conflict does have all the hallmarks of a decolonial struggle, in which Europeans are required to decentre themselves and their epistemologies to create the conditions for a relational world. A world in which many worlds fit. This is another way of speaking about the relativisation that is so often refused in Germany but remains the question of each sides’ capacity to stay with the cultural tension and remain in some kind of relation with the other. In the time that has since passed since *Lumbung 1*’s closure, it seems at least in Germany, the maintenance of exceptionalism and the refusal of relation has won. Yet this might be, optimistically, only a predictable first step of denial in a process of mourning and letting go of the central myths of the post-1945 German state’s formation in the wake of unconditional surrender. Beyond Germany, the mourning is arguably less intense but still shapes most states that were engaged in the Second World War. The challenge *Lumbung* offers European society could enable itself to let go of its own assumed cultural hegemony, usually linked to white supremacy, and adjust to a position as one culture amongst others—cultures that are present not only across the world but also

in Europe itself. This is why I would claim *Lumbung 1* as the first show of an optimistic view of the twenty-first century. One in which, by hook or by crook, a variegated, plural, divided, and related international cultural understanding emerges in and beyond Europe. That relational, decolonising culture then builds a basis to replace the old hierarchies with forms and poetics that inspire care for life on this planet in ways that are yet to take form. My optimism is undoubtedly tempered by my despair at the failure to embrace the opportunities that *Lumbung 1* opened, but I can also see it as evidence of the morbid survival of the twentieth-century in the European mentality that time itself will solve. In this spirit, this text is dedicated to the hope of transitions that are less violent, and a rekindling of Europe and its colonial legacies of the curiosity, desire, and capacity to build a better world rather than to defend the world as it is.

To return more directly to the speech I made at the closing of *Lumbung 1* in 2022, I want to explain what specific aspects of the exhibition signify the presence of a twenty-first-century discourse. In that light, it is interesting to think about major artistic shifts in the previous two centuries that might help to contextualise my claim.

The term *realism* was introduced in the *Mercure français du XIXe siècle* in 1826 to describe an artistic doctrine based not upon imitating past artistic achievements but instead the visually accurate depiction of the models that nature and contemporary life offered to the artist. In 1942, Peggy Guggenheim opened the Art of This Century in New York City looking to define—with the help of the designer Friedrich Kiesler—a new language for art. The gallery sought to shift the perspective of the viewer towards an immersive, expanded, and abstract artistic language. These two movements, realism and modernism, went on to define the radical edges of art for their respective centuries. They influenced art's formal, political, and institutional forms and initiated what are now established traditions. Though their legacies extend far beyond a single century, they developed in response to certain timely social and political conditions that marked their beginning.

Given these precedents, it does not feel unreasonable to search for an artistic response to the world that emerged in the wake of the transition away from the long conflict that had its origins in the 1914–1918 European war or World War I. That response will not be found in a deviant version of modernism (whether post-, alter-, or meta-) but rather in another break, one that more profoundly touches the formal, political, and institutional forms that govern art's relation with the public and the communal. In my understanding, *Lumbung 1* represents a break as profound as realism or avant-garde modernism did in their centuries. The question is what the nature of this break is, and what is the challenge it lays down to those working in the arts across the world.

Lumbung 1 was both an exhibition and a projection of a system of artist-led thinking about mutuality, interdependence, and collectivity. As such, it came from a very different place than the one of individual self-expression or 'individual mythologies' as defined by Harald Szeemann during his tenure as director of documenta 5. In its metonymical framing as a shared rice barn in which the excess of

a harvest is put aside to be shared in times of scarcity, art as a *lumbung* becomes an act that sustains at least as much as it expresses; it seeks to manage risk rather than increase it, and it turns a part of what is a singular capacity into something plural and distributed. All these aspects break with the provocative traditions of the modern avant-garde or realism.

In practice, what *lumbung* means is a repurposing of a part of the considerable resources made available to the exhibition for building up the resilience of the invited *Lumbung 1* partners in their home bases. In doing so, ruangrupa partially switched the responsibility from themselves as curators making a world exhibition in Germany to the documenta gGmbH's responsibility for compensating the communities whose creativity they were inevitably going to extract in order to present them in Kassel. The line between this approach and the demand for restitution and re-existence articulated by decolonial theory is a short one. It anticipates what decolonial scholars critique and seeks to already address the imbalance in power and resources between the colonising and colonised worlds before any engagement is initiated.

As I have said, this discourse was never named *decolonial* by ruangrupa—perhaps to avoid such a trigger word for the political right; perhaps to refuse an intellectual framework they had not shaped. But the decolonial as I understand it is written all over their project. The challenge or even paradigm shift that *lumbung* does represent to the Western art institutional system is to decolonise itself of its modes of extraction and cultural superiority. Even more crucially, it offers forms of self-management and models of financial sustainability that would compete with the economic system of commercial galleries and auction houses. This varies from asking Western museums and art institutions to concern themselves with the long-term health of invited art and activist communities, to the way it invented a self-managed art sales and distribution system through the proposal of the *lumbung* Gallery as a profit-recycling, artist-managed gallery structure.³ If artists were to adopt it on a large scale, this collective model would potentially threaten the market control of a few major commercial players. It prefigures a model for the art world that rejects the extreme individual competition of the current system for one in which economy and knowledge are shared. In doing so, it doesn't prize innovation, originality, and maximum reward as much as a steady state of modest sustainability in which life can be lived well rather than endlessly improved.

As Director of the Van Abbemuseum responsible for a collection of 'high quality' artworks, such a shift is profound, bringing new issues to the discussion of purchasing art and inviting a new interrogation of conservation, acquisition, and ongoing relationship building that goes beyond the focus on an art object and its survival. By default, it also extends to questions of wider international relations and not only at the cultural level. Rules that have been shaped in the past century are threatened by these new criteria, and the question remains unanswered as to how European and colonial legacy art institutions elsewhere are going to respond.

A further challenge to the status quo lies in the way the exhibition contextualises the histories that formed not only Germany but also post-1945 Europe. In

Lumbung 1, the violent, dreadful history of the twentieth century is very present but not in the ossified ways that Central Europeans are used to consuming their guilt and shame, as I have tried to outline above. Following a chronology in the address of the exhibited works, a visitor would find in The Black Archives held within the Fridericianum a clear account of the racist exclusions and destruction of the enslaving colonial system and its long aftermath.⁴ They would find the Roma people through their artists speaking about their culture and its exclusion from European society, including artists who directly suffered because of the Nazi Holocaust against Roma, Sinti, Jewish, and other Central European groups. It is notable, though remarkably undiscussed, that it was the first documenta in which Roma artists were included. The history of the last seventy years is also present through collective, artistic reactions to the manipulations of European and US governments in the initial process of decolonisation and in the dictatorships that followed in many newly liberated states. If the overthrow of a dictator (Suharto in 1998) represents the possibility that runagrupa might exist at all, his demise as a tyrant is not a singular experience but one that most of the south of the world shares. Though most of the artist groups invited were not explicitly looking back at the twentieth century, their gaze falls very differently to the traditional way in which an exhibition like documenta has read that history. In simply making their work, the artists rewrite what the earlier period might mean today and in a way that heralds more disputed categorisations of perpetrator and victim or even cause and effect. Such a different form of coming-to-terms-with-the-past (*Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) is inevitably controversial in Germany, which has done so much to make of the Nazi Holocaust a unique, unrepeatable, and largely inexplicable event.

This brings me back to the specific German reaction to *Lumbung 1* and the widespread accusation of antisemitism against artists, curators, and many involved in the project.⁵ If one proposes that there is a different time, then consequences are likely to occur. By reshaping and to some extent undermining the basis of a people's historical myths, a backlash was always likely to follow, especially when people from multiple locations beyond what the right calls the 'Judeo-Christian cultural tradition' might take centre stage. Additionally, there has been a new hardening of German political consensus against migration and diversity. If the curators of a German cultural flagship like documenta must come from a Muslim majority state then, according to this same rightist discourse, they must be made to answer to German prejudice against Muslims in general. This was the basis of the earliest accusations of antisemitism against *Lumbung 1* that started well before the exhibition opened. They were taken from marginal websites and magnified by the mainstream media, especially the Axel Springer SE press. The latter's agenda for some years has been to place Nazi ideology on the left of the political spectrum to free the space for a revived right—something they are close to achieving. Unaware of these internal machinations, runagrupa first treated the accusations with incomprehension and then with shock, but the lines had been laid.

It is also worth remembering that preparations for this documenta were severely curtailed by the COVID-19 pandemic. ruangrupa's presence in Kassel was much less frequent than had been planned, and it was only in July 2021 that the final decision was taken to proceed with the exhibition, less than a year before it opened. This is not an excuse however, because the accusations of antisemitism had already begun long before the little caricature of an antisemitic figure was found in the now infamous banner by Taring Padi. Unfortunately, I do not have space to explore the basis of Islamophobia and the way German understanding of its horrifically violent history has been normalised and processed. Such accounts are very valuable and do exist.⁶ What I will do, however, is point out how much the mediascape and the hysteria around antisemitism has changed in Germany, even since documenta 14 in 2017, by means of one example.

In 2016, the late Okwui Enwezor organised a very important exhibition called *Postwar* at the Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany. In the extensive catalogue, he wrote these words:

The Holocaust and the camps were natural consequences of the extensive development and deployment of the technologies of race, bureaucracy, and violence. As Hannah Arendt pointed out, these instruments were already developed within the institutions of the colonial state, where early prototypes of concentration camps and mass killings were first conceived and tested. The acknowledgement of the dialectical relationship between colonialism and violence complicates any sense of the uniqueness of the Holocaust.⁷

That statement was published without complaint, and even more surprisingly, was underwritten by the patron of the exhibition and the current president of Germany, Franz-Walter Steinmeier. In the foreword to the book, he writes:

Postwar makes possible a change of vantage points and introduces us to things of which we were previously unaware. Both are urgent necessities because—in politics but also elsewhere—to insist that one is in possession of the absolute truth only leads to deadlocks and conflicts. If we want peaceful global development to have a chance, we must all strive to acquaint ourselves with different perceptions of the same reality. Only if we succeed in accepting different viewpoints and then uniting them in dialogue will we succeed in true mutual understanding. In a world that seems to be coming apart at the seams, cultural politics has a decisive role to play in this process. Both inside and outside our country, we must learn to see the whole picture.⁸

Those words are almost unbelievable today. They are written—or at least signed by—the same President of Germany who later opened *Lumbung 1* by stating his reluctance to be present and refusing to thank or even name the artists, curators, or organisers in any way. Apparently, his desire to 'acquaint himself with different perceptions of the same reality' had utterly dried up and he had

become a different person with a radically more limited view of culture and its potential.

As a participant in *Lumbung 1*, his position makes me angry and disgusted that a president of a country with his history can be so ignorant and intolerant towards his guest—especially those guests of colour that he so openly insulted. As a commentator, however, I understand a little of the field on which he must play. That field is one that even between 2016 and 2022 has become far more polarised and instantly judgemental. The reserves of social resilience and the desire to listen and learn the whole picture were simply consumed by the poison of big media, probably combined with the pandemic and its isolating lockdowns. While we might be a world society in recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, polarisation has not even been properly diagnosed. Perhaps more so in the cosseted west of Europe than anywhere else, the sense of precarity and vulnerability for people that hardly felt it before produces the inhospitable, angry, self-obsessed response to *Lumbung 1* and much else besides. This is as true for so-called Western intellectual discourse as for the self-righteous anger that greets even mild statements on social media.

The accusations began early in the case of documenta—indeed before COVID-19. There was doubt about the capacity of ruangrupa to deliver the exhibition both outside and inside the organisation, which can be read in the first reactions of the German press to their visits to Jakarta and the team.⁹ Perhaps much of this might be expected, though the unholy alliance of new radical right and old conservative left critics that emerged to try to close *Lumbung 1* and dismiss ruangrupa was new. Still, most documentas are disparaged at the time of their opening. However, the racism and confusion (rather than critique) that accompanied the first documenta curated by people not educated in Europe or the United States was new and seemed to have been compounded by the nature of the exhibition itself and its relation to European art and aesthetics.

On these terms, *Lumbung 1* offers another understanding of why it represents the first exhibition of the twenty-first century. In its best moments, of which there were many, it was indeed neither realist nor avant-garde. The artists in both those movements saw themselves and their work as correctives to the contemporary artistic expression in which they were surrounded. In Kassel in 2022, there was very little in the way of correction and little finger-pointing at the faults of previous documentas or older art in general. It never presented the world as a problem to be solved, a crime to be decried, or a campaign to be won. Instead, *Lumbung 1* saw the world as an inevitability to be dealt with and lived joyfully despite harsh and difficult conditions.

Take works that addressed in different ways the climate catastrophe that is already upon us. Where realism would depict and critique the grimness of the situation with the hope of soliciting a mitigating action, the avant-garde would instead demand action and protest against the generators of carbon dioxide, or attempt to portray a universal, utopian, revolutionary solution. It seems to me that in many cases works in the exhibition adopted a more sanguine approach. The

catastrophe of climate change simply joins the catastrophe that was and is colonialism and coloniality, the catastrophe that was and is modernity, and the catastrophe of so many already committed and sanctioned genocides across the world. It is despite these crimes and aggression that many of the artists and participants choose to act here. I can give numerous examples, from the Wajukuu Art Project working in the suburbs of Nairobi, to the Komina Film a Rojava, to Project Art Works, to Jatiwangi art Factory in rural Java and so on. They are doing what in Bahasa Indonesian one might call *maju kena, mundur kena* or in English, ‘moving neither forward nor back’. They are simply acting in the present to try to live well and live together. This is not defeatist or cynical but is about making practical, grounded propositions: how best to act and how to live ethically in a world where the actions of the capitalist system cause pain to other humans and devastation to the planet. Again, this indirectly addresses the theories of decoloniality and re-existence rather than modernist solutionism. As Rolando Vazquez, one of the most important decolonial scholars of our time, asks: ‘can we live an ethical life in a world in which our well-being and sense of self is implicated on the suffering of human and non-human others and the extraction of Earth?’¹⁰ He doesn’t answer his own question but leaves it hanging. The artists of *Lumbung 1* do not provide a single answer of course, but in many cases, they show a way that life might take shape in the shadow of this question. They open the case for a world in which a reasonable objective might be to go out of the world in as good of a state as a person came into it—without changing anything. That ambition played out on the fields of a society so discontented with itself and its place in the world. This seems to be one of the triggers for the unconscionable reactions and one of my reasons for claiming this as the first show of this century.

The failure of the German critical reaction to find a way to broaden its vision and understanding the proposals of *Lumbung 1* is a measure of the gap we might name as a refusal to let go of the paradigm of the twentieth century. I still cannot quite believe the extent to which the strong presence of Roma artists was utterly ignored by those accusing the curators and artists of antisemitism, but anger spills out beyond any measure when emotions are touched in the way *Lumbung 1* did. The reaction also betrays in passing the rigid nature into which contemporary visual art has fallen, and arguably Western European culture in general. Instead of this collective rejection, I see the exhibition as the first that addresses the questions that must become key to the twenty-first century if art is going to perform a role other than celebrating Eurocentric nostalgia. It does so pluralistically. Answering it in many ways fit for different places across the world, it does so poetically, artistically, aesthetically, socially, and politically. It does so without the arrogance to believe that one faith—modernity—can answer everyone’s situation as long as that everyone become as much like Western Europeans as possible.

I have personally considered what to harvest from the bounty of *Lumbung 1* and how to recycle the seeds to create sustainable possibilities. *Lumbung* offers us a more ethically focused, more positioned, more collaborative, and more meaningful way of working. This is the potential *Lumbung 1* has to offer. As the late

decolonial scholar Maria Lugones said, the modern man of purity 'shuns impurity, ambiguity, multiplicity as they threaten his own fiction. The enormity of the threat keeps him from understanding it. So, the lover of purity remains ignorant of his own impurity'.¹¹ *Lumbung* embraces the impurities and tries to become a part of a world in which many impure worlds fit.

Leaving documenta for the last time, after my talk, I suddenly realised what I had missed or not understood. Opposite the imposing classical walls of the rebuilt Fridericianum sat Richard Bell's Aboriginal Tent Embassy, a squat tent recalling the first tents put up by four Aboriginal activists in 1972 on the lawns of Old Parliament House in Canberra. The tent was established to protest the refusal to recognise Aboriginal land rights in a land called 'Australia', which white British settlers had appropriated nearly two-hundred years earlier. Construction of the Fridericianum in 1789 began the year after Governor Arthur Phillip's First Fleet arrived as part of the British occupation of Australia. The building and the coloniser share the same roots and the same ambition. They want to be universal and totalising, claiming a final say in what is worthy and unworthy in art, science, and in life.

Times have indeed changed since then, but maybe not so much. As I looked at the embassy, I thought about what that institution implies. An embassy is a site from which another (often rival) position can be articulated on a territory that is not its own. It is by nature a guest-host relationship that can mitigate tensions and potentially build empathy and understanding for difference. In placing the embassy so prominently, ruangrupa with Richard Bell were trying to articulate something. They came to Kassel as ambassadors from beyond the borders of what Germany understood as contemporary art and as honourable guests with something to offer the host. Sadly, for them and for all of us, they were received as guest workers (*Gastarbeiter*), who had come to perform a function determined and controlled by the host down to the smallest detail. ruangrupa did not deserve to be treated that way, and the fact that it seems to be the default position of Germans (and other Europeans) in relation to others, that hardly bodes well for the future. Nevertheless, *Lumbung 1* opened a path to something different. It pleased neither right nor left. It crossed between north and south without labouring the point. It wasn't trying to convince anyone it had questions or answers, but that it wanted to make good use of resources available. It anticipated a *Lumbung 2*, rather than a documenta 16. For all that, it is the first exhibition of the twenty-first century. To paraphrase the great decolonial thinker Walter D. Mignolo, we are no longer living through an era of changes but the change of an era.¹² If we survive, that change will characterise the twenty-first century. I want to take this opportunity to thank ruangrupa for giving me a first taste of what the art of the rest of the century might look like.

Notes

1. For instance, the Peggy Guggenheim-funded gallery Art of This Century was open from 1942–

1947 in New York, featuring designs by Kiesler and artworks by Picasso, Leger, and Carrington together with east coast artists from the United States such as Pollock and Rothko.

2. It is important to note here that nothing shown in *Lumbung 1* was held to be against German law and indeed, when asked, most judges considered everything to be within the bounds of free artistic expression. See Mark-Christian von Busse, 'Bundesverfassungsrichter a.D. Papier: documenta 15 war "rechtlich nicht zu beanstanden"', *HNA*, 16 March 2023, <https://www.hna.de/kassel/der-ehemalige-bundesverfassungsrichter-hans-juergen-papier-ueber-die-documenta-die-kunstfreiheit-und-ihre-grenzen-92150126.html>.
3. See <https://www.lumbunggallery.theartists.net/> for more information on this initiative.
4. For more information about The Black Archives see <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/lumbung-members-artists/the-black-archives/>.
5. Here I must state my own complicity, having served on the Finding Committee of documenta fifteen with seven colleagues (Ute Meta Bauer, Amar Kanwar, Frances Morris, Gabi Ngcobo, Elvira Dyangani Ose, Philippe Pirtte, Jochen Volz). We collectively appointed ruangrupa and were informally retained on an unpaid basis to support the collective through the process.
6. One of the best is a podcast by Emily Dische-Becker to be found on The Dig Radio, <https://thedigradio.com/podcast/the-german-question-w-emily-dische-becker/>.
7. See Okwui Enwezor, Katy Siegel, Ulrich Wilmes, *Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945–1965* (Munich: Prestel, 2016), 25.
8. See Okwui Enwezor, Katy Siegel, Ulrich Wilmes, *Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945–1965* (Munich: Prestel, 2016), 7.
9. See for instance Marco Stahlhut, 'Pläne planen', *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, 11 July 2019, <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/kunst-und-architektur/kuenstlerkollektiv-ruangrupa-stellt-in-jakarta-documentaplaene-vor-16276545.html>.
10. See <https://www.uu.nl/staff/RDVazquezMelken> for reference to Vazquez's work.
11. Take from Maria Lugones, 'Purity, Impurity and Separation', *Signs* 19, no. 2 (Winter: 1994): 467–468, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3174808>.
12. See Walter D. Mignolo, 'The Logic of the In-Visible: Decolonial Reflections on the Change of Epoch', *Theory, Culture & Society* 37, no. 7/8 (2020): 205–218, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276420957741>.