

THE RECEPTION OF PARTICIPATORY ART. THE CASE OF DOCUMENTA FIFTEEN

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ABSTRACT. Documenta fifteen in 2022 was par excellence the space for participatory art, so this edition can be seen as a touchstone for it. The research of the phenomenon of participatory art is based in this text on the one hand on the curatorial texts of ruangrupa, the collective that ensured the artistic direction of this edition of the documenta, and on the personal experience of the author as a visitor of the exhibition. Among the many issues raised by participatory art, the present text focuses on the aspect of reception of art in the case of the projects presented at documenta fifteen, and by extension, reflects on the experience of the receiver and the artistic value of participatory art projects.

Keywords: participatory art, documenta fifteen, lumbung, reception of art, evaluation of participatory art

1. Participatory art – a short introduction

Participatory art is a type of art created through a participatory process. In his article on participatory art in the *Encyclopaedia of Aesthetics*, Tom Finkelpearl notes that the terminology for this relatively recent phenomenon is still fluid, with several competing terms: “interactive, relational, cooperative, activist, dialogical, and community-based art”¹. Hence, “[d]iscussion of participatory art seems to be in its infancy.”²

In a 2006 article, Claire Bishop, one of the most distinguished researchers of the phenomenon, lists the various relational practices, which are also part of the

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¹ Tom Finkelpearl, ‘Participatory Art’, in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

² Finkelpearl.



corpus of participatory art: “socially engaged art, community-based art, experimental communities, dialogic art, littoral art, participatory art, interventionist art, research-based art, collaborative art.”³

This art form distances itself in all aspects from the modern paradigm of art – along the lines of the author, the artwork, and its reception.

The author: In the case of participatory art, it is often difficult to determine who the author is. The primary author willingly shares the role of the “creator” with other participants. The original author (artist) usually develops a concept, which in order to come to life needs the co-participation of others. In this new context, it is difficult to decide what qualities are necessary for someone to be an artist. It seems that originality is still a requirement, although it seems to have lost the central role it had until now in art. At the same time, qualities traditionally associated with being an artist, such as dexterity in drawing, colouring, composition, etc., do not seem to be important. According to Kant, the specific quality of artistic genius is to create the aesthetic idea (which is more than we can express through the conceptual apparatus). It is difficult to determine whether this “aesthetic idea” is found in participatory art projects. According to Grant Kester, the artist is characterized not by the ability to elaborate the aesthetic idea, but by openness and the ability to listen to others: “a dialogical aesthetic suggests a very different image of the artist; one defined in terms of open-ness, of listening and a willingness to accept dependence and intersubjective vulnerability”.⁴

Collaborative projects by several artists (e.g. Andy Warhol and Michel Basquiat) are not considered participatory art; “[i]n participatory art people referred to as citizens, regular folks, community members, or non-artists interact with professional artists to create the works”⁵.

The artwork. Perhaps here we find the clearest departure of participatory art from the modern paradigm of art. In the case of participatory art, instead of the “artwork” (thought of as an object: painting, sculpture, installation, etc.), we find a “project”. Claire Bishop, one of the leading theorists on the subject, describes this trend as follows:

“[a] project in the sense I am identifying as crucial to art after 1989 aspires to replace the work of art as a finite object with an open-ended, post-studio, research-based, social process, extending over time and mutable in form.”⁶

³ Claire Bishop, ‘THE SOCIAL TURN: COLLABORATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS’, *Artforum*, 44.6 (2006) <<https://www.artforum.com/print/200602/the-social-turn-collaboration-and-its-discontents-10274>> [accessed 30 April 2022].

⁴ Grant H. Kester, ‘Conversation Pieces: The Role of Dialogue in Socially Engaged Art’, in *Theory in Contemporary Art Since 1985*, ed. by Z. Kocur and S. Leung (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 76–100.

⁵ Finkelpearl.

⁶ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London; New York: Verso Books, 2012), p. 194.

If the spatial and temporal dimensions of an artwork are easy to determine, the dimensions of a project are much more unstable. The artwork often has no temporal dimension (e.g. paintings or sculptures), but a project necessarily unfolds over time. If preparing a painting is not part of the work, preparing a project often is.

The forms of participatory art are varied and greatly differ from the classical artwork. "Since the 1990s, the project has become an umbrella term for many types of art: collective practice, self-organised activist groups, transdisciplinary research, participatory and socially engaged art, and experimental curating."⁷

The artwork itself appears as difficult to pinpoint, "a work whose identity is wilfully unstable"⁸. For example, during the two years of preparation of documenta fifteen, the curators and the other collectives had many discussions, and took many decisions together. The conclusions of the discussions were expressed graphically through "harvests" by the participating artists, and these "harvests" were published in the documenta handbook. So, are these "harvests" – infographics, texts, drawings – part of the artwork or not?

The artwork's reception: If the reception of a painting or sculpture seems to require a kind of contemplation in front of an accomplished object that this contemplation does not physically change, in the case of participatory art the "consumer" of art is invited to actively participate in the production of art. Participatory art requires presence in the time and space of the work or project. Art viewers who are not present can at best contemplate the documentation of the process, which raises serious questions about the reception of this type of art and its meaning for non-participants. In what follows I will focus precisely on the reception aspect of participatory art.

2. The concept of documenta fifteen

Documenta is an art event held every 4-5 years in Kassel, Germany. Documenta fifteen is a premiere from the point of view of the artistic direction of the event. Among the curators of the documenta we find such big names as Harald Szeemann, Okwui Enwezor, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Adam Szymczyk, under whose leadership the documenta has become a kind of perennial vanguard of art. As art critic Jerry Saltz wryly noted, "[i]ts curators are often super-brainy mandarin globe-trotting movers-and-shakers"⁹. Thus, documenta has been seen as a concentrated

⁷ Bishop, *Artificial Hells*, p. 194.

⁸ Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', *October*, 110 (2004), 51–79 (p. 53) <<https://doi.org/10.1162/0162287042379810>>.

⁹ Jerry Saltz, 'Jerry Saltz: Eleven Things That Struck, Irked, or Awed Me at Documenta 13', *Vulture*, 2012 <<https://www.vulture.com/2012/06/saltz-notes-on-documenta-13.html>> [accessed 8 August 2022].

vision of what is innovative, relevant in contemporary art, no doubt primarily through the lens of Western culture. At its last few editions, documenta opened up to aspects that at the time had not yet been exploited by the art market, but which subsequently became trends: outsider art, feminism, post-colonialism, etc. As their website puts it, “documenta increasingly became a seismograph of developments in contemporary art”.¹⁰

In 2017 the International Finding Committee decided that the 15th edition of the documenta will be curated by the Indonesian art collective ruangrupa. The decision has created an unprecedented situation: it is the first time that the artistic direction is entrusted not to an individual but to a collective, and this collective is not European but Asian.

Ruangrupa in turn invited other artistic collectives, so that on the one hand the number of participating artists amounted to about 1500, on the other hand authorship has become quite difficult to identify. One of the most well-known projects – due to the accusation of anti-Semitism and the fierce debate that followed – is the *People’s Justice* mural by Taring Padi, who is not an artist, but an artistic collective, whose members are not identified and individualized in any way.

The central concept of documenta fifteen is that of the *lumbung* – in Indonesian culture, a barn where a community gathers its surplus harvest, which can be used as needed by the community. A description of the *lumbung* is also found on the cover page of the documenta fifteen handbook:

“LUMBUNG: Word for a communal rice barn in rural Indonesia. A place where farmers share harvest surplus. Only the surplus! If they have nothing, they don’t need to put anything there. A way of relating to each other. Sharing and building together. We don’t have standards for that: we trust people to know what they need for themselves, and what they can give.”¹¹

The whole organisation of the documenta followed this principle of collective sharing: decisions were taken collectively, considering the interests and views of the collectives. Many meetings have been organised – mostly online due to COVID-19. The essence of the discussions was drawn up graphically by the participants – these graphics, drawings being the “harvest”, the results of the discussions provided in graphic form. We encounter these “harvests” (artistic recordings of discussions and meetings) in many forms, including on the pages of the handbook.

¹⁰ Documenta, ‘About - Documenta’

<https://www.documenta.de/en/about#16_documenta_ggmbh> [accessed 18 July 2022].

¹¹ Ruangrupa and others, *Documenta Fifteen Handbook*, ed. by Ruangrupa (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2022).

In the Glossary printed on the cover of the handbook we also find the lumbung values around which the event was organised: “the basic principles of lumbung and of the practice of lumbung members. These include: Generosity, Humor, Local Anchoring, Independence, Regeneration, Transparency and Sufficiency.”¹²

The concept developed by ruangrupa was consistently implemented in Kassel on several levels.

One of the principles followed by ruangrupa was that of **local action**. Thus, what we see “exhibited” in Kassel is just a kind of *aide-mémoire*. The invited collectives attempted a translation of their work: “translation of their local practices to Kassel”¹³. Ruangrupa motivates this strategy by the very specificity of the work of the collectives present at the documenta, by the inextricable unity between life and art in these projects:

“Art is rooted in life. The ensuing objects and methods help in thinking through the issues at hand and in finding solutions that are useful to the community. In this way it is impossible to separate art and life, and it is meaningless to exhibit the objects in Kassel without finding translations of the processes that give rise to them.”¹⁴

In many cases we find reference to the fact that a particular project links the city of Kassel to the region from which the artists or collectives originate, and part of the activities take place in these ex-Kassel territories. Thus, through Dan Perjovschi’s mediation Kassel was connected with Sibiu (Romania), where part of the funding obtained by the artist was channelled towards the operation of the Visual Arts Platform during the Sibiu International Theatre Festival in various locations in the city. The installation in front of the train station in Kassel, “decorated” with Perjovschi’s drawings, is thus seen as a “translation” of the horizontal newspaper in Sibiu.

A central concept of ruangrupa is the **ekosistem**, by which the authors refer to a practice of local collaboration. In Kassel the curatorial group was not interested in the historical or cultural significance of the documenta, which every five years makes the small German city the centre of the art world. Ruangrupa saw Kassel as a small German town, not too detached from the surrounding countryside. Hence, they sought connections with local producers, craft groups, and identified specific issues such as the importance of the river Fulda in the life of the town, bees, or the Brothers Grimm. We could find these themes in several of the documenta’s projects.

Another goal of the ruangrupa collective was **to erase the concept of individual authorship**. It is precisely for this reason that they have primarily invited artistic collectives, and not individual artists to participate at the documenta.

¹² Ruangrupa and others.

¹³ Ruangrupa and others, p. 9.

¹⁴ Ruangrupa and others, p. 30.

In the case of individual artists, what mattered was their experience in projects involving the community. Thus, from Romania, they invited Dan Perjovschi, renowned for his involvement in social projects (e.g. Roşia Montană), cultural projects (Pata Rât) and taking a stand on current issues (e.g. anti-COVID vaccine campaign, or the war in Ukraine).

In the case of collectives, we do not necessarily know the names of the participating artists: the notes accompanying the artworks often only give the names of the collective, not the individual artists. The exception are those collectives which in turn invited individual artists. Thus, the OFF Biennale collective from Hungary offered the RomaMoma project, which exhibited paintings by Roma artists (e.g. Mara (Omara) Oláh, Ceija Stojka, Tamás Péli, Małgorzata Mirga-Tas) in a space and in a way reminiscent of the practice of the white cube. In the Bootsverleih Ahoi space on the banks of the river Fulda, they exhibited the floating gardens of the artist Ilona Németh, the relaxation space designed by Eva Kořátková, the unusual objects of Ádám Kokesch, as well as the space for the powerful video installation of *Randomroutines* (Tamás Kaszás & Krisztián Kristóf).

In the case of other collectives, we don't know who the individual artists are who create under the name of the group. For example, as regards The Black Archive from the Netherlands, if we search the internet, we can find out who the initiators are, namely that The Black Archive is organised by the New Urban Collective. This collective does not define itself as a collective of artists, or even as an art-making collective: they want to promote a multicultural society and help young people with diverse cultural backgrounds.

“New Urban Collective is a network initiated by students, young people and young professionals with a heart for the multicultural society. (...). We organize activities, projects and advise organisations and individuals in the fields of education, labour market, diversity and human rights.”¹⁵

The New Zealand FAFSWAG Collective, which celebrates the “gender fluidity” of Pacific people, presents itself in the documenta handbook as a collective whose composition varies, currently having 12 members. El Warcha in Tunisia produces temporary urban furniture and art installations with residents (especially unemployed youth). At the same time, it also operates as an enterprise that manufactures pieces of furniture at the request of residents. The project now has branches in London, Lisbon, and Davis, California. It does not have a stable composition, just two managers, but one cannot find any record of artists who

¹⁵ ‘The Black Archives’, *The Black Archives* <<https://www.theblackarchives.nl/about-us.html>> [accessed 10 August 2022].

would be part of the collective. Taring Padi is an Indonesian collective that has been active for more than 20 years, originally formed by art students, that aims to defend the interests of peasants and workers. The group had an overflowing presence at documenta fifteen. Their works, primarily large murals, posters, cardboard cut-out dolls with anti-capitalist messages, and banners were used at protests and festivals. In Kassel, they filled the space in Hallenbad Ost, decorated the facade of the C&A building in the city centre, stood in front of the Fridericianum until, following accusations of anti-Semitism, the organisers decided to revoke the artwork. We do not know who is part of the group: in the photo accompanying the presentation of the group in the documenta handbook one can count more than 20 people and some huge cardboard cutout dolls. Statements are always made on behalf of the group; individual names do not appear.

Ruangrupa from Jakarta is also an organization of artists which always acts as a group. If we access the organisation's website (<https://ruangrupa.id/tentang/>) we will find portraits of ten people, presumably the founders and members of the collective.

The intention of the ruangrupa collective, the curatorial collective of the exhibition, is clear: ownership of art – both in the form of buying and owning works of art, and also in the form of authorship, or claiming authorship (as the work of someone, of the individual who conceived and created it) – must be overcome, because it is part of a social organization that the collective considers unjust, based on negative values (competitiveness, greed, exploitation, and extraction):

“different ways of producing art will create different works, which, in turn, will ask for other ways of being read and understood; artworks that are functioning in real lives in their respective contexts, no longer pursuing mere individual expression, no longer needing to be exhibited as standalone objects or sold to individual collectors and hegemonic state-funded museums. Other ways are possible. In this way, we are resisting the domestication or taming of these different practices.”¹⁶

At the time of writing the handbook of the documenta, the concern for this reversal of the situation appears in the form of a question about the success of the approach: “Will the much-needed dissolution of ownership and authorship happen in documenta fifteen?”¹⁷ The question is still open.

The focus on **sustainability** is also visible. One of the convictions of the ruangrupa is that everything must work locally, from small to medium size, because large sizes produce the undesirable effects we see in the globalism of capitalism.

¹⁶ Ruangrupa and others, p. 17.

¹⁷ Ruangrupa and others, p. 17.

Large scale development has proved unsustainable – it is time to try smaller sizes. Also, for the purpose of sustainability, it is important to return to a closer relationship with nature, to natural and reusable materials. These aspects are in a tense relationship with the aesthetics and design requirements. The place of white walls, tables, and elegant showcases was taken by plastic crates, usually used for transporting and storing goods, especially agricultural products, and barrels, which functioned as display stands, tables, chairs, etc. This solution was ingenious and also worked aesthetically, with its surprising, rudimentary, rough aesthetics, and in complete harmony with the overall concept of the exhibition. The look and feel of many of the sites has been more studio than exhibition, emphasising the notion that art is not about objects but rather about processes. The documenta handbook, information notes, map, and exhibition booklet are all printed on recycled paper. As for the handbook, this aspect does not detract from the quality of the volume, but in the case of the information notes on the walls of the exhibition, the aspect of sustainability has led to a text that is difficult to read, in small print, crowded against a dark background, and often located in places that are difficult to access (sometimes at knee level). The concern for sustainability and ecological balance has been intertwined with an indictment of the capitalist mode of production and the policies of developed countries that export their problems, metaphorically and literally, as the garbage produced in the “global south”, as in the installation created by The Nest Collective, called *Return to Sender*.

Since what we have is participatory art, it is to be expected that there will be a concern with social issues: economically disadvantaged groups, disadvantaged ethnic groups, groups with different sexual preferences, etc. For example, the collective Project Art Works from the UK brought to Kassel a corpus created under the motto of “neurodiversity” – in fact, a very interesting material, and an oasis for those thirsty for visual experiences, a rare treat at documenta fifteen. The social aspect is quite hard to separate from the political stance, and many of the projects have embraced **political messages**. Left-wing positions exposing exploitation and tension between the poor and the rich or the cruelty of political and military power are characteristic of the Taring Padi group. The cardboard puppets carried messages such as: *No human is illegal, No state without corruption, Law not for sale, Women’s rights are human rights*, etc., as well as many messages in Indonesian, (presumably) indecipherable to the average European visitor. In fact, the artifacts produced by Taring Padi are not art objects in the first place, but propaganda materials used at demonstrations and festivals. Similarly, the *Archives des luttes de femmes en Algérie* project, although it does not produce material for the ideological struggle, digitizes such material produced by activists and archives it. Algerian women artists in recent decades have produced material used in demonstrations: posters, texts, photographic material. In this case, the (woman) artist and the (woman) activist is

indistinguishable, although individualized: the personal archives of three artists/activists are presented, as well as interviews with them. Last but not least, Denmark's Trampoline House collective has embraced the refugee issue, criticising the Danish state's unfriendly stance on migration and refugees.

From the point of view of criticism of the way the art world works, however, we must give ruangrupa credit for a rather important change: more than 1500 artists, mostly from the "global south", were involved in the current edition of the documenta, invited by the collectives invited in turn by ruangrupa. Many more artists benefited from the opportunity to be exhibited in one of the most important artistic events, many of them with no previous connection to the artistic centre of the world, than in any of the previous editions. Is it a lot, is it still too few? Will this experiment change the way the art world works? We shall see.

From the visitors' point of view, documenta has certainly not become more accessible. The entrance fee is double that charged at the Venice Biennale, the geographical spread of the works and their number makes it impossible to cover them in two days, the informative materials are difficult to locate, and the visitor is often perplexed by unfamiliar phenomena, to which he is not helped to find his or her way.

Although one of the values explicitly promoted by the organisers was **humour**, the truth is that I didn't seem to encounter any more humour than in other similar exhibitions. Of course, the work of Dan Perjovschi, who dominated my first contact with the 15th edition of the documenta, by using the Fridericianum columns as a backdrop for his drawings was, as always, witty, ironic, with a lot of good quality humour. The documenta's visual appearance, with its bright colours and playful design, gave a cheerful, boisterous tone to the space. The works of the Paring Tari collective also bring cartoon humour, satire, and incisive irony. A complex experiment which does not lack humor was studio Wakaliga Uganda's film, *Football Kommando*.

3. The experience of the documenta fifteen

Documenta fifteen is an experiment. An art collective with a very different conception of how art is made and exhibited, even opposite to the understanding dominant in the Western/Northern art world, invited other collectives to "translate" their local art practice in Kassel. The general concept (lumbung), the values pursued, the mode of cooperation have been, in my opinion, achieved in an exemplary, particularly consistent manner. The most problematic aspect of documenta fifteen, however, and perhaps of participatory art in general, is the issue of reception. The ruangrupa project changes not only the way art is created, but, as a necessary consequence, also the behaviour expected of the viewer. Basically, the visitor to the exhibition is expected to become a co-participant.

Having had the opportunity to visit documenta fifteen, I will attempt an assessment of the event from the perspective of the visitor, the art recipient. Beyond the ethical appreciation of the *lumbung* concept (particularly topical and generous) and the curatorial coherence of the exhibition (which is remarkable), as a visitor who did not attend the opening events but visited documenta fifteen during the week, three weeks after the opening, the most overwhelming feeling was of a certain lack. In what follows I will try to articulate this sense of something missing.

The lack of aesthetic pleasure

In the modern paradigm of art, a central element is the disinterested aesthetic pleasure aroused in the subject by the encounter with beauty. Of course, one might object that since Kant there have been radical changes in art: beauty is no longer at the centre of artistic concerns (perhaps since Picasso's *The Maidens of Avignon*), and aesthetics itself is no longer necessarily a requirement for art (perhaps since Duchamp's *Fountain*). My conviction is, however, that the specificity of art is the ability to express the idea in a sensitive form, to embody the idea. The idea is immaterial, but art is able to embody it. This body of the idea can be seen, heard, etc. – and when we perceive the artistic body of the idea, we are enchanted not primarily by the idea itself, but by the form of the body. I think this is how I would translate disinterested aesthetic pleasure, the object of which would thus be a much broadened notion of “beauty”. Modern art has moved far away from the concept of “fine (or beautiful) art”, one could even say that on the agenda of modern art has been the goal of transcending its own boundaries as fine art. In a process described by Clement Greenberg, art (painting) left aside everything that proved non-essential: resemblance to nature, perspective, figurativeness, subject matter, etc. As I see it, participatory art goes one step further and tries to eliminate the moment of reception as well. It is an art form without a viewer (recipient of art). An art not concerned with form, nor with the aesthetic effect on the viewer. The desired effect is rather an ethical one. The viewer should become an active participant (activist?). But how can this transfiguration take place, if not through the effect of aesthetic experience?

I am not saying that aesthetics was absent from documenta fifteen. A kind of exotic, noisy, and vibrant aesthetic was certainly present; something we could call the “warehouse” aesthetic, created by recycled packaging, wrapping, and transporting materials: plastic crates, rusty tin walls, barrels, reused cardboard and such. But what I am saying is that in most of the spaces, obviously intended for activities that take place from time to time, what could be experienced were the leftovers of the actual “feast”, the lifeless toys. The aesthetic effect on the viewer does not seem to be a goal for most of these projects. Participatory art seems to be an art ***without any recipient, without a viewer.***

The lack of participation

The aspects mentioned above were probably determined by the fact that when I visited documenta fifteen, I did not catch any ongoing activity. In the El Warcha workshop we were greeted by the “do not use” message displayed on the tools with which we could have assembled urban furniture. At Eva Kořátková’s installation we were warned not to use the exhibits (which basically would have functioned as a kind of sack jumpsuits providing comfort – soft touch, warmth, protection, etc. – when worn). We saw Cuban artist Tania Bruguera preparing a reading in her space in the Halle, but we didn’t catch it, nor the possible discussions it may have sparked. We went to the ook_visitor centrum, where theoretically many collectives had programs. When we arrived, in the courtyard of the building they have been packing a lot of shoes that have been exhibited, as in a flea market, on a low wall – but we did not recognize the purpose of the action. We found flyers on the tables about past events, and some people – apparently organizers – were talking amongst themselves. Our group sat down on a bench, and we prepared ourselves for the journey back to the city centre, leaving the centre without realising how “knowledge is produced and changed”¹⁸ in this space, which was quite frustrating.

The documenta handbook boasts that “Fridskul turns the Fridericianum from a museum into a living space”¹⁹. But what we encountered at the Fridericianum, at least in the Fridskul space, was neither museum nor living space. There was no activity going on and visitors could at best imagine what it would be like if something just happened. It would probably have been beneficial if the design and organisation of the whole event had been more visitor/receiver centred. In our experience, what we encountered at the documenta fifteen was ***participatory art without participation***, which was all the more annoying because participation is the essence of this form of art.

The lack of universality (the sense of exclusion)

Within the modern paradigm of art, the work of art is unique, but its meanings are universal. In principle, anyone who comes into contact with the works of Edvard Munch can decipher the “message” of his paintings. In this sense, his work has a sense of universality: in principle, it has a message for everyone, from every culture, now and in the future.

¹⁸ Ruangrupa and others, p. 162.

¹⁹ Ruangrupa and others, p. 36.

Of course, in reality, things are different. Not everyone is able to contemplate a Munch – some do not have the financial means to go to a museum or to pay the entrance fee, others have not benefited from an education that would have aroused their interest, or do not have the knowledge of art history that would make it easier for them to appreciate it, still others belong to another culture and find it difficult to digest this kind of art, etc. But in principle no one is excluded and theoretically the artist addresses everyone and anyone.

By contrast, I have had the feeling with many Documenta projects that they are made for the local group with which the collective interacts, or for the collective itself, for whom these artistic projects bring real value. The problem is precisely the difficulty of communicating this type of art to those who are not part of the collective. If it's art, it has to be communicated – and *how* it is communicated is at least as important as the message itself. Documenta is, after all, an exhibition – this is not denied by the curators of the 15th edition – and being an exhibition, it is aimed at a visiting public, the recipients of art. There are many interesting points in the exhibition, where aesthetic, artistic experiences are born – for example, the installation of the MADEYOULOOK collective from South Africa in a hotel ballroom, rethought in an aesthetically uncomfortable space, in order to make us rethink the way we want to inhabit the world. In my opinion, it was a wise decision not to attempt a “translation” of this Johannesburg activity for Kassel, but to design an installation that would present the outsider in a sensorial form with the concerns of the collective. Such moments were, however, an exception. There have been many projects that were born in a specific socio-geographical area – e.g. Asian, rural, in an economy of scarcity, within disadvantaged groups, etc. These projects are undoubtedly valuable in their intention to promote marginality, pluralism of values, equity, etc., and no doubt many of them have had, and are having, a positive effect on the communities directly involved. Being “exhibited” in an exhibition, perhaps their role should have been to mediate between the visitor – usually European, usually in an economic position that allows her or him to travel to Kassel and pay the 45-euro entrance fee, usually a city dweller accustomed to museums and galleries – and the specific problems of the original communities of artists' collectives. However, I had the feeling that this mediation failed. Everywhere we read about how these projects link the artists' hometown or region to Kassel – i.e. one local level to another local level, one particular to another particular. But the problem is that the visitor probably doesn't belong to any of these particulars. In order to have access to the meaning of the projects, however, they should probably have risen to a more universal level, as a point of mediation between the various particularities. Without this effort to communicate to everyone, the visitor often feels excluded, passively (“how does this project concern me?!”) or actively (“I'm part of the culture criticised as exploitative, extractive, greedy, destroying the local

areas that these projects are about”). Reading the documenta fifteen handbook (“We refuse to be exploited by European, institutional agenda that are not ours to begin with”) ²⁰, as “Europeans”, it is difficult to identify with the curators’ position, but on the other hand the sense of belonging to European culture is also stirred. Thus, Michaela Schabel’s opinion is in line with what we experienced in Kassel: “For an exhibition like the documenta with global aspirations, this collective activist approach seems far too one-sided, too monotonous and deeply excluding, because art from the other hemisphere is completely absent” ²¹.

Participatory art is an engaged art that works for the benefit of the community, and thus fights against the exclusivist elitism of the art world. For this reason, to experience as a visitor the feeling of exclusion was disturbing, and it went against the very essence of this type of art. The important question arises: how can the participation of the potential recipient, who is not a member of the original community of the project, be included? In my opinion, documenta fifteen has failed to address this issue in a viable way.

Conclusions

Assuming that everything we encounter at the documenta fifteen is art (thus without getting into the controversy about the art quality of these projects), what has become apparent is the deficit of reception of participatory art among those non-professionals who do not participate. Does the thesis of the necessity of artistic experience, of direct contact with the work, still hold or not in the case of participatory art? Was it a mistake to travel to Kassel, given the curators’ aim to promote local art – and so perhaps it would have been sufficient for us to travel to Sibiu? Is everything we need on the internet anyway, and should we have just read the information and watched the discussions on YouTube? And if this is the case, we would still have grounds to call these projects “art”? I still believe that art, with few exceptions, must be experienced and must address the receiver – visitor, viewer, participant, or whatever we may call him or her.

Can an artistic value of these projects can be discerned, beyond their social relevance? If yes, is this related to an aesthetic experience of the receiver? How can the supposed artistic value of these projects be conveyed to people other than those directly involved in the artistic project? Can these projects be relevant for

²⁰ Ruangrupa and others, p. 12.

²¹ Michaela Schabel, ‘Kassel - “Documenta 15” - a Missed Opportunity - Schabel Culture Blog’, 2022 <<https://schabel-kultur-blog.de/ausstellung/kassel-documenta-15-eine-verpasste-chance/>> [accessed 15 August 2022].

posterity? These questions were not answered in Kassel but remained as unsettling as before the documenta fifteen experience.

The more or less serious slogan of document fifteen was: MAKE FRIENDS, NOT ART! Of course, by this the curators do not mean that what they do is not art, but a kind of overturning of values: the most important thing is not art, but harmonious relationships between people.

The aim of ruangrupa was extremely ambitious: the values they promote (Generosity, Humor, Local Anchoring, Independence, Regeneration, Transparency and Sufficiency) are central to today's society. At the same time, this edition of the documenta attempts to create a new art space – without excessive (physical, financial, etc.) dimensions, without elitism, without individual ownership of art, without competitiveness, and without greed: a local, sustainable space, by and for collectives. The concept is consistently implemented, despite its – in my opinion – utopian character. The large-scale experiment character is recognised by the curatorial team:

“we are still curious to see whether the 100 days of documenta fifteen will only result in pragmatic exercises – a temporary ‘time-off’ for artists and initiatives to learn from – only to swing back to the old system of doing things, relapsing to state funding and/or free art-market system, or even the biennial circuits.”²²

The bigger issue, however, is the question of the reception of this kind of art – or of the lack of the receiver, the visitor, the viewer from the agenda of the curators. During a 100-day exhibition, projects can't run all the time, and artists can't always be present. Thus, the visitor cannot truly become a participant and an activist – which would have been one of the essential purposes of this documenta. We can accept the argument that “different ways of producing art will create different works, which, in turn, will ask for other ways of being read and understood”²³. The problem is that these new ways of “reading and understanding” artworks have not been convincingly developed, even though documenta fifteen abounds with texts. The critic Adrian Searle exclaims: “Words, words, words. So many words everywhere in Documenta 15; it is a wonder anyone has time for anything else.”²⁴. These texts are ultimately not very useful, and perhaps precisely because there are so many of them. The viewer is urged to participate, but it is not clear what

²² Ruangrupa and others, p. 17.

²³ Ruangrupa and others, p. 17.

²⁴ Adrian Searle, ‘Welcome to the Fun House! Sharks, Skaters and Smelters Liven up Documenta 15’, *The Guardian*, 23 June 2022, section Art and design <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/jun/23/fun-house-sharks-skaters-smelters-documenta-15-kassel>> [accessed 15 August 2022].

participation means. The Britto Arts Trust collective from Bangladesh is concerned about food issues and has brought a complex project to Kassel, including a family kitchen where they invite immigrants to prepare food, share stories, and organise events. Does the visitor, who is not an immigrant, become a participant by tasting the food? If he or she enters the space, sits at a table, and listens (in what language?) to the stories? If (s)he takes a few pictures and posts them on Instagram? Ultimately, what do you have to do, to go from visitor/viewer to participant?

The tensions related to the reception of art are sensed by ruangrupa, but the Gordian knot of reception is abruptly cut by simply negating the viewer and the reception: “We try to produce a new aesthetics – an ethical paradigm where the viewer is obsolete.” The viewer’s presence is not justified at this documenta: “they should not be there to observe but to be part of the process”. Moreover, the viewer, who hitherto was in a position to make an aesthetic or artistic value judgement, should now refrain from judging works: “our work should not be judged by an outsider but in terms of the benefits that it brings to the community which creates it”²⁵. This is how a local art is born here, for the participants, which can only be experienced and judged by the participants themselves. Fortunately, we can hear the so long reprimed voice of Global South – but unfortunately, we could not hear the voice of Nord, so, we do not experience a dialog, only a monolog.

The major question is whether these defects related to reception (lack of aesthetic experience, lack of participation and lack of inclusion) are only accidental or they are structurally built into the fabric of participatory art?

Certainly, those who participated directly in the creation of the projects presented had the opportunity to work together, to experience the *lumbung*, the unparalleled feeling of community that comes from co-participation in a common project. I doubt, however, that the average visitor had the opportunity to make friends during the few days of feverish searching for various spots in Kassel. Thus, without the opportunity to make friends, the visitor was left with only the hope that he or she would still be able to experience the liberating and motivating effects of art at documenta fifteen in Kassel from time to time.

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²⁵ Ruangrupa and others, p. 29.

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