

DOC

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Press Release
Kassel, July 12, 2022

DOCUMENTA GENERAL DIRECTOR: DOCUMENTA HAS TAKEN APPROPRIATE MEASURES FOLLOWING ALLEGATIONS

General Director of documenta and Museum Fridericianum gGmbH, Dr. Sabine Schormann, explains:

Recent weeks have seen sustained public criticism of documenta's handling of the accusations of anti-Semitism directed at it; in particular, it has been claimed we have taken too few measures.

We have focused on educating and acting in the spirit of documenta fifteen. This can only be achieved together with the Artistic Direction and the artists. Here the allocation of roles must be taken into account: The Artistic Direction is responsible for all artistic content and implementation, the management for the organizational and financial framework.

Hanging of the *People's Justice* banner and subsequent actions of documenta

It is enormously painful – and I would like to express my deepest regret once again – that the *People's Justice* banner from Taring Padi featuring anti-Semitic imagery was installed at all. This has also shocked me deeply. The multiple internal and public explanations of how this could have happened, as well as the sincere apologies from ruangrupa and Taring Padi, were therefore extremely important.

Once the anti-Semitic images on the Taring Padi banner became known, I acted immediately and decided, in consultation with the Artistic Direction and members of Taring Padi, to cover over the banner immediately. Removing the work from the exhibition against the will of the Artistic Direction and the artists would have been, as a last resort, a significant interference in artistic freedom. Therefore, immediate consultation with the Supervisory Board was required, which gave the move its backing, even if it might lead to parts of the artistic community leaving the exhibition due to accusations of censorship, something already in the air at the time. ruangrupa and Taring Padi, however, supported the de-installation of the banner. They have taken responsibility.

Since it did not seem inconceivable following this incident that there might be further misjudgments or cases of unacceptable content going undetected in the process, I took further steps. The goal was and is – coordinated by the documenta archiv – to check in cooperation and within the responsibility of the curators and artists whether further anti-Semitic content is present and to exclude any new content, since the show actively changes in line with its concept with activations thereby taking place.

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In order to provide the best possible support, the documenta archiv has built up and continues to develop a network of external advisors from various academic fields to assist the curators and artists. These include renowned scholars who, as is customary in academia, carry out their work primarily outside the public eye. Accompanying this, results and in-depth issues will be discussed on further panels.

In the spirit of the overall documenta fifteen concept, which Ade Darmawan of ruangrupa explained in detail to the Cultural Committee of the German Bundestag, the procedure is designed to be cooperative: Curators are invited to call in expertise from this advisory network if they themselves cannot conclusively assess whether a work intended for exhibition uses imagery that is anti-Semitic. This cooperative procedure was clearly communicated to the requested experts, as was the working method.

For the works thus far coming into public focus, a review has already taken place with the aid of the art historians from the documenta archiv and specialist expertise from the network. Criminal law statements by recognized experts, also on *People's Justice*, have already been made or commissioned. Within the framework of customary legal caution, they come to the conclusion that no criminal liability is present. The conclusion is that one can argue about the works, but that no further measures are required beyond accompanying mediation.

Dialog with the public continued on June 29, 2022 with the holding of the panel discussion on *Antisemitism in the Arts*, which will be followed by a series of in-depth public discussions. Furthermore, together with actors from civil society, opportunities for encounters and information are being set up at a central location where visitors as well as artists can enter into a dialog on anti-Semitism and racism issues. Further cooperation projects are also in planning.

Looking back: anti-Semitism allegations since January 2022

Since January 10, 2022, initially sweeping accusations of anti-Semitism against documenta fifteen and the Artistic Direction ruangrupa were made on the basis of a blog post: Individual participants were the focus of attention due to their origin or (alleged) BDS affiliation. Various accusations were picked up on in the ensuing media debate, in part without being critically questioned, elevating the topic to the culture sections of the press and (cultural) political debates.

As a result, the management of documenta und Museum Fridericianum gGmbH immediately initiated the following steps in January 2022:

There were a number of discussions with ruangrupa and artists to clarify and address the accusations in line with the artistic working method of documenta fifteen described by Ade Darmawan. These tied in with the Artistic Direction's existing preoccupation with the history of Kassel and Germany.

On the communicative level, several counterstatements and declarations by all parties involved followed.

In the talks in January, the federal government (Federal Commissioner for Cultural and Media Affairs – BKM) and the state (Hessian Ministry for Science and the Arts – HMWK) also recommended that external expertise be sought. For this purpose, a five-member team of advisors was appointed to support the Artistic Direction, the artists, and the gGmbH, rather than a fixed committee attached to the Supervisory Board. On the recommendation of the BKM, among others, and in consultation with the artistic team, author and curator Emily Dische-Becker took on the role of coordinator. The tasks: comprehensive consultation on (also media) issues related to anti-Semitism and the Israeli-Palestinian relationship as well as comprehensive support in the planning, implementation, and organization of the planned expert forums. The other members of the team – including Dr. Anselm Franke (then Head of Visual Arts and Film, Haus der Kulturen der Welt (House of World Cultures), from August 1, 2022 Professor of Curatorial Studies at the Zurich University of the Arts) and Dr. Ofer Waldmann (author, speaker and consultant on German and European-Israeli issues, respectively) – were added by Ms. Dische-Becker. This was accompanied by media law support.

Over the ensuing period, continued discussions were held with various stakeholders, including the Supervisory Board and the Minister of State for Culture Claudia Roth. In the exchange with Ms. Roth, members of *ruangrupa* and artists reported extensively on their work.

The recommendation of the BKM, KSB and HMWK to enter into further dialog was also taken up. To this end, the Artistic Direction prepared expert forums under the heading *We Need to Talk*, which were to be multi-perspective and staffed by experts in their field rather than institutional representatives. These included Professor Meron Mendel and Hito Steyerl, who were involved in the development of the series at a very early stage. The BKM and the HMWK were consulted on the make-up of the panels.

Furthermore, in this context, on the initiative of the management, an almost two-hour digital meeting with the Central Council of Jews, namely with Mr. Daniel Botmann, took place on March 4, 2022, in which the concept of the exhibition and the planned expert forums were explained. Here it was made clear that the Artistic Direction of these forums was concerned with the multi-perspectivity of viewpoints, but not with having representatives from institutions speak. After the public presentation of the series, the Central Council of Jews reacted with a letter to Ms. Roth, Minister of State for Culture, which was partially reported in the press. As a result, several participants in the series, which began the following Sunday, voiced concerns about whether they would be able to freely represent their position. The series was suspended against this backdrop but was to be resumed.

External expert panel and other current developments

Despite all the necessary measures, one thing must not be forgotten: The Artistic Direction and the now 1,500 artists already feared censorship in January after the anti-Semitism allegations arose and therefore rejected an external expert panel. They saw themselves under general suspicion and defamed and partly threatened because of their origin, skin color, religion, or sexual orientation. In this respect, there was already a clear resistance to interventions in art in January.

Against this background, the renewed demand in parts of the media and political sphere to have the exhibition reviewed by an external expert committee with decision-making powers has not only led to disagreements with Prof. Meron Mendel, his personal withdrawal from the consultation and the subsequent withdrawal of the artist Hito Steyerl, invited by the participating artists' collective INLAND, but has also put enormous strain on the relationship of trust with ruangrupa and the artists.

In this context, I would like to point out that various statements made by Prof. Mendel recently in various interviews – including in *Der Spiegel* – are hard for us to comprehend. For instance, the statements that there had been no contact over a period of two weeks, that the task had not been clear, and that ruangrupa had only attended the panel *Antisemitism in the Arts* at his insistence. Since the renewed contact with Prof. Mendel regarding a consultation of the Artistic Direction and the artists in June by the management together with the director of the documenta archiv, the documenta has consistently had contact with him. Within the allocated remits it was the director of the documenta archiv who was authorized to discuss all questions with Prof. Mendel on behalf of the management. In this context, Prof. Mendel's planned tasks were communicated to him in the week beginning June 20, 2022. Neither I myself nor other members of documenta wanted to prevent ruangrupa's invitation to the panel discussion – quite the opposite: we issued this invitation ourselves of our own free will and ruangrupa also complied with it immediately.

Against the background of statements – such as those in the HNA interview with Prof. Mendel on June 27, 2022, where his response to the question “In a worst-case scenario, will the works be removed?” he replied “Exactly. This is an instrument that we reserve the right to use. It is also possible to disinvite artists.” – the Artistic Direction, though especially the artists, now also understand the independent review by members of ruangrupa, the Artistic Team and the artists concerned, in which internal and external expertise can be consulted for support, as (self-)censorship.

In addition, incidents featuring discriminatory content, including racist and transphobic background, have created the impression of individuals not being welcome or even threatened in Kassel and Germany. The need for security is high and documenta und Museum Fridericianum gGmbH has therefore taken extensive measures to meet this need for security, including appointing an additional security coordinator, commissioning additional security staff and holding talks with the police.

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FIFTEEN**documenta fifteen ticket sales and perspectives for documenta**

Revenue from ticket sales to the end of June 2022 was higher than for the two previous editions of documenta. This is gratifying despite the ongoing anti-Semitism debate and the Covid situation, which has worsened again in recent weeks, making it almost impossible for visitors from Asia, who are traditionally strongly represented, to travel to the event. A positive trend can also be observed during the course of the exhibition so far: Last Saturday, July 9, 2022 saw a new record number of visitors registered on a Saturday for the fourth time in a row. The events of the first Meydan weekend also went down well posting several thousand visitors.

documenta is not a show of nations or art. It presents forward-looking concepts not only in the field of art, but also on social issues. This is possible because for decades the artistic freedom of the respective Artistic Directors and the participating artists has been guaranteed. This is the basis of documenta's reputation as the most important art exhibition in the world. The artistic freedom is guaranteed by the structure described above, which has been in place for decades and provides for a balanced interplay of shareholders, Supervisory Board, international Finding Commission, Artistic Direction and management with a clear distribution of tasks. After documenta 14, the current management began to modernize this successful, but organizationally outdated structure, not least in terms of its spatial and personnel basis. This process has not yet been completed. Now, however, the first task is to join forces to bring documenta fifteen to a successful conclusion: with fairness, solidarity, and trust – especially in the artistic management and the artists.

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documenta fifteen is organized under the auspices of documenta und Museum Fridericianum gGmbH with the City of Kassel and the State of Hessen in their capacity as shareholders.

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