**Between recolonisation and decolonisation: Documenta 15 and the political decontextualisation of art**

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***Abstract:***

Documenta 15, a global exhibition of contemporary art that took place in 2022 in Germany, over a period of 100 days, stands out for two reasons: 1) for the first time documenta was under artistic directorship of an art collective, and 2) it was scandalised for displaying allegedly antisemitic art, mainly blaming Taring Padi (TP), a group of progressive artists and activists from Indonesia. In this paper we argue that the political decontextualisation of TP’s work and the virality of its scapegoating led to the recolonisation of art that reinforced existing power hierarchies and denied space for dialogue and education. In a second part, we change the scene and provide insight into TP’s work in Indonesia, as one of the creative forces leading to the end of the authoritarian Suharto regime in 1998 and evolving in the ensuing reformation era. Only through continuous political and cultural contextualisation can the art work, and its symbolism, be understood as a way to come to terms with a violent past. In a third part, we discuss possible ways forward and how ‘the scandal’ can actually create productive dialogues and begin an unprecedented process of decolonizing art exhibitions and museums.

Keywords: recolonisation; decolonisation; documenta; hegemony; art; Taring Padi; Indonesia

# Part 1: Documenta 15 goes viral

Documenta is a global exhibition of contemporary art that takes place every 5 years over a period of 100 days in the German town of Kassel. Since Documenta 11 in 2002, under the artistic directorship of Okwui Enwezor (1963-2019), who was the first non-European art director, the institution experienced major shifts: it radicalised its exhibition strategies employed counter-canonisation and decentering of the West, promoted radical theorisation and prioritised educational emphasis (Marchart, 2022: 11-12). As a consequence, political art practices entered the center stage and the perspective (and critique) of Western colonial history often featured in subsequent Documenta editions. Its 2022 version, documenta 15, was marked through a ‘scandal’ for displaying allegedly antisemitic art. The main scapegoat was Taring Padi (TP), a group of progressive artists and activists from Indonesia. In this paper we argue that the political decontextualisation of TP’s work and the virality of its scapegoating led to the recolonisation of art that reinforced existing power hierarchies and denied space for dialogue and education. We start with a brief overview of how the antisemitism accusations came about and of the exchange of blows between those behind the accusations and the artists. Then we will try to take a step back and look into underlying notions of coloniality, hegemony and attributions of blame, which requires the contextualization of TP’s political art work. We end with some reflections on lessons learned for decolonizing international art spaces and how to move forward.

## lumbung

In 2022, documenta for the first time was curated by an arts collective, an Indonesian group called ruangrupa (lit. visual space or artspace). Ruangrupa’s approach diverges hugely from other top-down curatorial approaches. It is cooperative, community-oriented, participatory, inclusive and experimental. Two main concepts reflect that approach: one is *nongkrong*, an Indonesian word for hanging-out together, and *lumbung*, an Indonesian word for a rice storage to which all community members contribute, and from which all get their share according to need (e.g., Documenta Fifteen, n.d.) Lumbung is a symbol of community, sharing and survival in difficult times. In the world of art, the notion of lumbung explains how artists can survive despite oppressive politics, such as long-term dictatorship in Indonesia, through the art of sharing, caring and trust. At documenta, lumbung was meant to open up space for dialogue and solidarity between different struggles in the global south, thus also going beyond dichotomies such as ‘the West’ versus the rest. The decentralized structure of decision-making and the notion of shared resources and shared responsibilities also presented challenges in the context of the heightened tension of Germany’s own confrontation with contemporary Islamophobia and the historical burdens of the Holocaust (Dirgantoro and Kent, 2022, translated by BB).

## Documenta and a dichotomized discourse

Underestimating those challenges (Brown, 2022), ruangrupa was not prepared for what had already surfaced long before documenta 15 opened its doors to the public. Since early 2022 ruangrupa has been accused of officially supporting the Palestinian-led movement Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS). This movement was classified as antisemitic in a non-binding 2019 Bundestag decision. Ruangrupa had invited two Palestinian art collectives (*The Question of Funding* and Ramallah-based *Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center*) and The Alliance Against Anti-Semitism Kassel began propagating multiple inaccuracies in a press release that was happily picked up by mainstream media and went viral in social media (Greenberger, 2022; Rothberg, 2022). Misinformation about who was working with ruangrupa, that no Jewish nor Israeli artists were invited and the Jewish art collective from Brasil (Casa de Povo) was disinvited (Casa de Povo, 2022; Hauenstein, 2022), fueled the accusations and led to the vandalisation of a venue of a Palestinian collective. “Ruangrupa and the show’s artists […] felt singled out, under general suspicion, and attacked” (Brown, 2022), as targets of racism and Islamophobia.

Two days after the show opened, viewers noted two characters in an art work by TP. The piece is called ‘Peoples’ Justice.’ This large scale banner measures 8x12 sqm and includes 274 human, animal, and zoomorphic figures and was made for the Adelaide Festival in Australia in 2002. It is divided into three sections: on the right side, depictions of resistance and actions by oppressed people in rural areas; in the centre, the massacre taking place in Indonesia in 1965/66 in black and white, under a people’s tribunal; and on the left side the ‘evils’, actors who were behind the massacre and other forms of violence and exploitation in Indonesia. Among these figures are a soldier with a pig face, wearing a scarf with a star of David and a helmet with the word ‘Mossad’, standing in a line of soldiers wearing other secret service signs. The other one is a Jewish man with fangs and a hat with the runes ‘SS’. Whereas the latter seems to be clearly antisemitic, the former can be interpreted as referring to the Israeli state (Rothberg, 2022). From then on, the entire banner was reduced to these two characters. TP apologized repeatedly for this detrimental affront and agreed to cover up the whole banner in black. Two days later, it was completely removed.

As TP explains, the

imagery of ‘People’s Justice’ presents […] internal and external powers in a pictorial scene and tries to capture the complex historical circumstances through a visual language that is at once as disturbing as the reality of the violence itself. ‘People’s Justice’ was painted almost twenty years ago now, and expresses our disappointment, frustration and anger as politicised art students who had also lost many of our friends in the street fighting of the 1998 popular uprising that finally led to the disposal of the dictator. The imagery that we use is never intended as hatred directed at a particular ethnic or religious group, but as a critique of militarism and state violence. We depicted a possible involvement of the government of the state of Israel in the wrong way. Anti-semitism does not have a place in our hearts and minds. We deeply regret the extent to which the imagery of our work ‘People`s Justice’ has offended so many people. We apologize to all viewers and the team of documenta fifteen, the public in Germany and especially the Jewish community. (2022)

Following their working philosophy, TP reached out to the local Jewish community and entered into dialogue to learn, and jointly move forward. However, doors for dialogue and learning, key pillars of ruangrupa’s curatorial approach, seemed to close quickly. Israel’s embassy in Germany tweeted on 20 June 2022 that documenta promotes Goebbels-style propaganda (Botschaft Israel @IsraelinGermany, 2022, translated by BB) and the President of the Jewish Community of Munich and Upper Bavaria said how she is appalled by “the sheer hatred of Jews shown in the painting by Taring Padi” (ZEIT ONLINE, 2022, translated by BB).

## Scientific review committee

In response to these accusations, the supervisory board and shareholders of documenta und Museum Fridericianum gGmbH set up a committee at the end of July 2022 to provide scientific support for documenta 15. The 133-pages-report confirms the accusations and assigns responsibility by conjoining critique of the state of Israel with hatred toward Jews. (Documenta und Museum Fridericianum gGmbH, 2023: 14). In addition to making it impossible to separate between the two, the report ignores the fact that TP joined documenta to express its solidarity with struggles against oppression around the world, clearly not based on any shared religion or ethnicity.

The report emphasizes the importance of context for a better understanding of the dynamics at stake, but then focuses only on those contexts, where the depictions under investigation are problematic (Documenta und Museum Fridericianum gGmbH, 2023. 23: 20). It acknowledges that the collective nature of TP’s work makes the origin and the intended meaning of the two characters unclear (2023: 31, 37, 46). It also recognizes the need for a separate task force to research potential racism involved in the accusations and the relationship between antisemitism and postcolonial critique (2023: 11), and the report acknowledges that Jews themselves have very different perspectives towards the discussed visuals (2023: 84). The main discussion, however, centres around the global context of antisemitic and antizionist imagery, and the comission confirms that the visuals on TP’s banner are of a clear antisemitic nature, thus solidifying the threat to the Jewish communities in Germany (2023: 71, translated by BB). The report concludes that ruangrupa have ultimately failed to live up to their own ‘de-colonial’ claim: to sharpen the view of the world’s untold micro-histories and to approach their complexity through open collective structures multiplied as if by snowballing (Documenta und Museum Fridericianum gGmbH, 2023: 100, translated by BB)

The report contributes itself to what it called echo chamber for Israel-related anti-Semitism (Documenta und Museum Fridericianum gGmbH, 2023: 71, translated by BB) without considering the ‘micro history’ of TP, and without looking into how this echo chamber was produced by (social) media virality. Rather than opening up space for dialogue, the report solidified divisions by enforcing the state’s ‘epistemological violence’ through selective contextualization (Michaels 2023) ruangrupa dismisses the report as another attempt to label and deligitimise the artists on allegedly ‘scientific’ grounds (Trebing, 2022). As they share on e-flux:

This report represents a new line crossed, and we categorically refuse it: This line marks a racist drift in a pernicious structure of censorship [...] **We are outraged, we are exhausted, but our struggle will continue […]** We refuse the intentional political maneuver that aims at separating struggles and dividing them from each other-dividing us from each other. We stand together, unconditionally and without hesitation, with our Jewish comrades and communities that have been the most outspoken … Resistance to the State of Israel is resistance to settler colonialism, which uses apartheid, ethnic cleansing, and occupation, as forms of oppression […] We do not give permission to be defined, inspected, re-colonised by yet another institution. (Lumbung Community, 2022, emphasis in the original.)

# Part 2: Contextualising the ‘scandal’: Indonesia

When trying to understand how Indonesian artists react towards hegemonic attempts of control, we do need to look into the past and the context, where the art collective, its political stance and its visual and textual rhetoric emerged: Indonesia. In the documenta debate, that context is usually reduced to one sentence in which the Indonesian peoples’ struggle against its former authoritarian regime is acknowledged, without reference to ongoing struggles and the deeply political nature of arts in Indonesia more generally (e.g., Bräuchler, 2022c).

## Arts in Indonesia

Arts and a heavily censored media landscape have played important roles in Indonesian nation-building (Lindsay, 2008; Sen and Hill, 2000). In independent Indonesia, culture and arts became an important tool to ‘domesticate’ and integrate Indonesia’s diverse regions into the nation-state, attract tourism and foster economic development. Artistic expressions were strategically selected from the regions, decontextualized and manipulated in a way that they matched the government’s moral, aesthetic, language and content requirements (Yampolsky, 1995: 704-705). Drawing on Amrih Widodo’s work in rural Blora (1995). Febriansyah calls such strategic integration of traditional art within elite politics “rites of hegemonization” (2008: 9). This isolates what the government frames as ‘culture’ and alienates art from its source of meaning and from a community’s encompassing moral order and lifeworld (Acciaioli, 1985: 152, 161). As long as art lets itself be co-opted by the Indonesian culture ‘language’, artists were free to practice their art (see e.g., Aragon, 2012; Bräuchler, 2014; Glazebrook 2004: 10). Issues such as regional languages, inter-ethnic, religious, or racial tensions, and critique of the New Order’s development doctrine, interpretation of history, corruption or nepotism, or the military’s power were taboo (Lindsay, 2008). Artists who violated such taboos were persecuted, as happened with prominent Papuan artist Arnold Ap in the 1980s. In such contexts, culture and arts, or even banal things like eating Papuan food, become non-violent strategies of resistance (Glazebrook, 2004; MacLeod, 2011; Webb-Gannon, 2011).

In that political setting, Indonesian artists developed sophisticated means to still express their critique, through ‘common vocabulary and symbols they could use in creative protest’ as well as subversive symbolism ‘that the authorities usually did not understand’ (Lindsay, 2008). ‘Art can make the unimaginable happen’, as the curator of the Jatiwangi art Factory (JaF) in West Java said (Manggiasih, 2020: 10). Throughout Indonesia, art has become an important outlet for community aspirations and socioeconomicdevelopment, involving both traditional and emerging art forms. In both Aceh and Maluku, music and arts played important roles to restore social relations and morale after mass violence, help overcome trauma and develop a peaceful vision for the future (Bräuchler, 2022a; Kartomi, 2009, 2014). Other projects seek to reposition communities within the Indonesian nation by, for instance, establishing cultural hubs and artspaces that attract inter/national attention (Adams 1998, 2006; Eka et al., 2018).

In the reform era after Suharto, press freedom was officially established, but the current government still uses newly passed laws on media technologies and blasphemy to track down activists, who denounce the government’s human rights abuses, and ban art works or events, in particular those related to the anti-communist mass killings in 1965/66 marking the beginning of the New Order. What is interesting, however, is that the main threat today are certain civil society and right-wing Islamist groups aiming to enforce public morality, e.g. by lobbying for an anti-pornography law in 2006 or banning films like Garin Nugroho’s ‘Memories of my Body’ (2018) about a male dancer exploring his sexuality and gender identity (Dirgantoro, 2018; Harsono, 2019; Lindsay, 2008), or by raiding Taring Padi’s headquarters (Supartono, 2011: 11).

Indonesia is part of a worldwide trend, in which arts and other kinds of media provide important channels to express non-violent protest and resistance across media (Bräuchler, 2022b; Eka et al., 2018; Hallward, 2015; Werbner et al., 2014). Often, activists use a combination of protest arts and media for better mobilisation. An intriguing example is Taman 65 or the 65 Park, inaugurated by Balinese youth in 2005, to open up space for commemorating victims of the 1965/66 massacres that the Indonesian state still refuses to acknowledge (Wardana and Hutabarat, 2012). Projects like Taman 65 aim to contribute to the deconstruction of a unified collective memory, built by the New Order regime and unchallenged by school education (Leksana, 2009). What is common to such artistic engagement is that it is participatory and integral part of life, for both the artist and the audience, and a means to cope with crisis and initiate change (Eka et al., 2018; Manggiasih, 2020). The artists of the ‘revolutionary generation (1930s – 1945) and New Order period (1965 – 1998) created art that attempted to represent or critique the sociopolitical situation’, but artists today engage directly with the subjects they depict who become integral part of their artistic production (Bruhn, 2015: 2f.). Taring Padi is a prominent example for that.

## Taring Padi

TP started to form in 1997, when the Indonesian people were fighting to end more than three decades of authoritarian rule in their country. The group squatted the former Indonesian Institute of Arts campus, and in December 1998 they proclaimed themselves as Taring Padi and ‘pledged to fight against the authority, and defend the oppressed’ (Sinaga, 2011: 22). According to Alexander Supartono, one of the founders of TP, the shared ideology and friendship that mutually inform each other was key. They organise events, hold discussions, build libraries, and collectively produce art as a political instrument. Hanging-out together (*nongkrong*) allows for informality, spontaneity, mobilization, inclusion, and participation, but, of course, also implies a lack of control and creates challenges for international collaborations such as documenta. *Nongkrong* was also key to ruangrupas approach in Kassel, with two of its members deciding to live there a year prior to documenta to engage in local social dynamics.

TP’s art is collective, thus ‘challenging individualistic, market-oriented creativity’ (Garrido Castellano, 2021: 163). It is fluid and meant to convey clear and easy to read messages to both elites and the oppressed people they work with. Their art is meant to be used during protests, in public spaces. It does not carry the signature of an individual artist, but is stamped with the TP insignia: a sprig of rice, red star and cogwheel (Arbuckle, 2007). ‘Taring Padi’ is the term used for the sharp tip of the rice plant:

rice is essential to Indonesians but the tips of the plant can scratch and cause people to itch. Contemplating Taring Padi’s art and its underlying message is meant to be uncomfortable. Sometimes it can be painful and difficult to endure (Keller, 2012).

This way, TP wants to translate “radical positionings […] into socially meaningful action” (Garrido Castellano, 2021: 163).

With puppets, banners, posters, drawings, oil paintings, woodcut art, and murals, TP criticizes the silence about the anti-communist massacre in 1965/66, the continuing stigmatization of communists, ongoing human rights violations such as in Papua, militarism, and the dispossession of farmers by mining operations and large scale plantations. They denounce internal and external neoliberal forces and fight for the rights of women, the LGBTQ+ community, environmental justice, and for a peaceful co-existence in places where communal violence took place after the step-down of Suharto (Sinaga et al., 2011). They thus promote both unity of the people (against those forces) and at the same time diversity, for instance in the form of religion and ethnicity. To do so, they often use stereotypical depictions of rural life, farmers, idealized womanhood, elites or religious figures. In their engagement with the popular tradition of shadow puppets (*wayang kulit*), they use traditional and modern bodily features to depict conflicting class relations. These visuals draw on an old Indonesian tradition of dehumanization, where demons, authoritarian, and oppressive figures have animal-like features, with the pig commonly symbolizing greed, the dog brutality, and the rat corruption (e.g., Dirgantoro and Kent, 2022; Kiswondo, 2011a). In this, “Taring Padi’s radicalism in terms of ideas and visualization still incorporates elements of the very dominant ideologies that they have been striving to subvert”[[1]](#footnote-1) (Supartono, 2011: 13).

TP’s project at documenta 15 was called ‘Flame of Solidarity: First they came for them, then they came for us’. The first part implies that documenta is used as a platform for campaigning for the oppressed, and the second part references [Martin Niemöller’s](https://watchindonesia.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=1edd03a078038ad1cc713d368&id=418b13071e&e=8e4f2cc708) [poem](https://watchindonesia.us5.list-manage.com/track/click?u=1edd03a078038ad1cc713d368&id=418b13071e&e=8e4f2cc708) on the Holocaust and connects it to a global struggle against neoliberal and capitalist systems. Parts of the visuals of this collective presentation go back to old wayang traditions that clearly predate antisemitism, such as the red eyes, fangs, animalistic figures, but as the banner was done by many people, over a longer time period, it is impossible to track who added the offending elements: the star of David and the SS runes. The military figure (of Mossad) is easier to understand. TP wanted to visualize the involvement of the Western state apparatus in supporting the military dictatorship of Suharto (Brown, 2022). It is a critique of the Israel state, and how they aggressively expand their national project, not of Jewish people.[[2]](#footnote-2) This is in line with how antisemitic symbols are used in Indonesia more generally, not as a signifier for Jewish people, but powerful external forces that aim to dominate the world (Sirry, 2023). Members of TP readily acknowledged that they should have known better and took full responsibility, but they also insisted that their intention was not antisemitic, as pointed out earlier, which goes against everything they believe in and which also defies the fact that TP has also been victim of Islamic fundamentalist attacks.

Clearly, the use of stereotypes and the division of the world into good and evil, oppressor and oppressed, can easily backfire. But to understand that strategy, we need to consider the broader struggle TP engages in. It is a struggle against neocolonisation and exploitation of Indonesian people, often farmers and indigenous people, by the Indonesian government that exploits their land for resources and does not acknowledge their human rights. TP knows that rural life is now part of the global system and that raising awareness around it requires clear language and strong images. Protest movements for indigenous rights in Indonesia provide one example. Despite decades of destructive policy towards indigenous people, to be acknowledged, indigenous groups have to fulfill certain criteria and provide evidence that their culture and their traditional structures are still in place (e.g., Bräuchler 2010, 2021), effectively creating ‘caricatures’ of themselves. In that sense, the essence of the ‘antisemitic’ visuals is not antisemitism, but a symbol of what TP is fighting: greedy capitalists and (neo-)colonisation. So essentialisation, or, in Spivak’s words, strategic essentialism (Pande, 2017), is a part of their struggle. However, it is not meant to reinforce the divide, but, as Vanessa von Gliszczynski argued in a recent round table on the documenta 15 (Gliszczynski, 2023), it is meant to open up a discourse about the best possible options how to move forward, to foster transformation and social justice. All this might not be obvious to the uninformed viewer. At documenta, a few details depicting antisemitic stereotypes were completely taken out of context. This imagery can only be understood in that context and in conversation with the other elements on that banner. Symbolism only works in context, has to be learned (including the taboos involved in it) and it needs dialogue to do so.

# Part 3: The arts, hegemony and decolonisation

The particularities of context and location “urge us to redefine the conceptual apparatus designed to measure the aesthetic and social relevance of artistic creativity” and to “conceive[s] of socially engaged art projects as a set of located, frequently transgressive actions seeking to challenge visible and not-so-visible forms of coloniality” (Garrido Castellano, 2021: 3f.). Garrido Castellano prompts us ‘to look anew at coloniality as a central factor shaping many of the obstacles that socially engaged and activist art have faced in the past and continue to face’ and describes socially engaged artists as ‘active practitioners of decolonization’ (2021: 1f.) – among them is TP. So what happens when those active practitioners of decolonization meet internationally established art structures such as biennials?

Building on Gramsci and understanding hegemony as “an unstable balance between social forces struggling for dominance,” Marchert (2022: 10, 17) argues that the arts field is an important terrain where these struggles take place. He conceptualizes biennales such as the documenta as machines to generate consensus and voluntary consent and thus work as political instruments of hegemony (2022: 25). At the same time, these art events can also work towards the transformation of hegemonial structures and support counter-hegemonic projects (Marchart, 2022: 34). At documenta 15, ruangrupa ultimately tried to undermine this machine by rejecting a top-down curatorial approach and putting networking, collaborative artistic practice, sharing and redistribution of resources, and solidarity at centre stage. However, one could also argue that ruangrupa tried to establish its own hegemony as they “guide and educate the population to consent to […] [its] hegemony” (Marchart, 2022: 25), and make use of documenta’s financial and organizational resources. They radically altered a general philosophy of the documenta by putting practice and relational knowledge production centre stage, thus challenging colonial knowledge production (Marchart, 2022: 85f.).

At the same time, the state’s (or the media’s) hegemony was reinforced by scandalizing the exhibition through the imposition of a one-sided discourse that cast the two figures “part of a global visual vocabulary of antisemitism” (Marchart, 2022: 148). Again, the only way forward here is dialogue and education, which is a main pillar of Indonesian art collectives such as ruangrupa and TP. As Marchert quotes ruangrupa:

We consider education, or knowledge production and dissemination, to be embedded within, not outside of, the collaborators we are working with to imagine and realize Documenta 15. Education should not be a plug-in to an exhibition, or an afterthought only to be taken care of after the framing of the exhibition is decided. In order to warm visitors up to this idea, we are playing with the idea of treating Fridericianum, want many consider to be the central venue of every edition of Documenta, as a school – again, for lack of a better word. We want to challenge the museum’s architecture by turning it into something more dynamic where interaction, domestic lives, and storing knowledge can be facilitated. (2022: 87)

Unfortunately the public debate was “fed by denunciations and rumors” (Casa de Povo, 2022). Media, politicians, Jewish organisations (not Jews in general!) and the scientific review committee kept on decontextualizing the problematic images, reducing the banner to an antisemitism that the art collective has evidently and historically nothing to do with. As Michael Rothberg put it, they instrumentalise the accusation and confirm their own prejudices about the so-called global South and “postcolonialism” – arguably one of the vaguest and most distorted epithets in Germany today (2022, translated by BB). The effect was to “delegitimize the whole exhibition, attack a decolonial agenda, and oppose critical thinking” (Casa de Povo, 2022). Casa de Povo sees “a dangerous inversion of anti-Semitic violence in a very worrying way. The same strategies that sustained anti-Semitism for decades are being used in public debate to condemn ruangrupa” (2022). Putting antisemitism above all ignores that fact that it is highly interlinked with other important issues that concern us all: racism, colonialism, genocide, and, of course, art, and propaganda (Rothberg, 2022).

For Rothberg, the only way forward is to have public, honest and open discussions in Germany and elsewhere on these issues. This would require a closer look at the unresolved issue of racism disguised as art, at the complexities of TP’s art work, its historical, sociopolitical and ‘syncretistic’ dimensions, and at the role of Germany and other Western governments in the Indonesian genocide in 1965, largely unknown in Germany (Barth, 2022). It would require a genuine interest in the lifeworlds of the so-called ‘global south’, including Indonesia and Palestine, and acknowledgment of shared responsibilities (Moses, 2022). As Hauenstein, Rothberg, Menasse and others suggest, we need to challenge the idea that antisemitism is only a problem of ‘the other’ (in particular Muslim other) (Menasse, 2022), and discuss shared suffering, instead of invoking a ‘victimhood competition’ (Opferkonkurrenzen) (Hauenstein, 2022, translated by BB). We need to ‘unlearn’ (*verlernen*) what we have taken for granted (Rothberg, 2022, translated by BB). The many antisemitic art works still to be found in museums, churches, and other public spaces in Germany itself also beg the question, where antisemitic art is allowed and who decides so.

# Part 4: Decolonising art space/practice

On 24 June 2023, Taring Padi opened its solo exhibition in Amsterdam, titled in Indonesian *Tanah Merdeka*, which literally means ‘land of freedom’ or ‘liberated land’, thus reflecting one of TP’s most persistent topics. It showcases the political works they have done with peasant and indigenous communities in Indonesia in the past 25 years: the struggles to defend and reclaim their land, to restore ancestral relationship with the land, to fight for the equal right for all living entities to inhabit the land, and to nurture well-being and prosperity of the mother land (*ibu pertiwi*). Metaphorically, the *Tanah Merdeka* title embodies the collective struggle, against the backdrop of decades of military dictatorship, to reclaim space where conversation and free expression can take place: a liberated space. This space, as recent experience has shown, requires continuous struggle to guard its existence as land of freedom.

This is the second exhibition of TP in Europe after documenta 15 in Kassel a year earlier. As we unpack the process of making the exhibition *Tanah Merdeka*,[[3]](#footnote-3) we argue that the failure to have a public, honest and open dialogue over the contoversy concerning the People’s Justice banner at documenta 15, opened up space for dialogue elsewhere, which simultaneously revives the historical ‘non-alllign’ nations movement from the 1955 Asia-Africa Conference in Bandung, Indonesia. The Bandung conference aimed to build solidarity among nations that shared experiences of decolonization and were not alligned with either US-led capitalist or Soviet-backed communist nations. In the past decades, artists and scholars have been using the legacy of the decolonial spirit from the Bandung conference as a framework and platform for solidarity against neo-liberal globalisation (Ayas et al., 2012; Chakrabarty, 2011). In 2019, for example, Tate Modern London organised a landmark conference ‘Axis of Solidarity: Landmark, Platforms, Futures’ to reflect on the international art movements during the process of decolonization in the second half of the twentieth century. In this light, the *Tanah Merdeka* exhibition, as explained in the following, put into practice the decolonizing process of contemporary art practices and ecosystem.

The *Tanah Merdeka* exhibition was hosted and presented by Framer Framed in partnership with Casa do Povo (the People’s House) and Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST). Framer Framed is an Amsterdam-based platform for contemporary art, visual culture as well as critical theory and practice. Casa do Povo is a progressive Jewish cultural center, based in Sao Paolo, Brazil. MST is the Brazilian landless workers’ movement with more than 1.5 million members. The exhibition featured large-scale banners, woodcut prints and cardboard puppets with a focus on land. Reaching back more than two decades, the body of works on display, continues TP’s methods of storytelling and co-creation with communities and activist groups, locally and globally. The imagery engages with resource extraction, state violence and corporate exploitation of the environment in artistic expression, which renders the collective part of the communities’ struggle for their land.

Figure 1: Taring Padi, Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra, Casa do Povo, and Framer Framed, *Retomar Nossa Terra (Reclaim Our Land), 2023,* acrylic on canvas, 480x600 cm.

The center piece of the Tanah Merdeka exhibition is a new banner entitled *Retomar Nossa Terra* (Portuguese for Reclaim Our Land and *Rebut Tanah Kita* in Indonesian) which is also known as People’s Justice # 2. The banner was signed by TP, Casa do Povo, MST and Framer Framed as co-creators.

Taking the shape of the People’s Justice banner, but smaller in size (4,8x6 sqm), the newly co-created banner encapsulates TP’s and MST’s solidarity and joint struggles against the exploitation, extraction, and commodification of land. *Samauma*, the mother of all trees from Amzonia, with its distinctive roots takes the center stage, adorned with the Portuguese inscription: ‘Retomar Nossa Terra’. The Indonesian translation of the title, ‘Rebut Tanah Kita’ snakes at the feet of the marching masses at the bottom. Samauma symbolises the biodiversity in both Brazil and Indonesia as well as the power source to fight for the stolen colonised land. This fight is represented by the monument on the right side of Samauma. Resembling burnt cashew trees, the monument commemorates the Eldorado do Carajás massacre, when landless farmers were killed by the military police in 1996. Each dead tree represents a life that was taken, with the MST flag flying from one of the trees. To the right of the monument are images of extractive industries, including agroindustry. The octopus-shaped machineis a typical visualisation of imperialism and its capitalist system, which spreads its tentacles in all directions, ‘choking’ the land. One tentacle softly rests on the shoulder of a zoomorphic figure of a cow dressed in a suit, which represents a Brazilian beef baron, the quintessential figure of the capitalist agroindustry responsible for deforestation in the Amazon and the displacement of indigenous communities. The figure mimics the hand gesture commonly used by the former neo-fascist president Jair Bolsonaro, whose followers were often symbolised as cows because of their mindless obedience to his leadership.

Marching on the left side are figure well-known in the global people’s struggle for justice. Standing in the middle with her right hand rised is Olga Benario Prestes (1908-1942), a German Jewish communist who was sent to Brazil as part of the communist international movement. She was arrested, brought back to Germany in 1936 and killed in a concentration camp in 1942 (Smallman, 1999). Benario symbolises feminist resistance, persistence of the socialist struggle and the internationalization of the fight against oppression. Standing next to her is Seu Luis, bricklayer and a popular figure within the movement. He was brutally murdered on July 18th, 2019, while participating in a peaceful protest demanding access to water. Next to him is Raoni Metuktire (b. 1932), the leader of the Caiapó people and a prominent indigeneous political leader in Brazil. ‘Retomar’ (taking back) stems from his movement (Retomada) for the rights of indigeneous communities to their land and is used for the title of the collaborative banner. Standing under Raoni is the LGBTQIA+, socialist and favelada activist Marielle Franco (1979-2018), holding a bouquet of roses. She was assassinated by the Rio de Janeiro extreme right militia in Brazil as a warning to anyone who threatens to shake the prevailing orders of capitalism, militarism and authoritarianism. ‘Marielle presente’ and ‘Marielle Vive’ have become slogans at many of the movement’s mass gatherings. Behind her is Indonesian left novelist Pramodya Ananta Toer (1925-2006) who is holding a red book with the inscription ‘People’s Justice’ and whose work and ideas are compulsory reading for TP’s members. The leader of the Javanese peasant anti-colonial movement Samin Surontiko (1859-1914) is standing behind Pramoedya in his iconic peasant outfit with headcloth.

To close the cricle, the collaboration between TP, Framer Framed, Casa do Povo and MST took place almost organically following the series of events in documenta 15. Tensions between artists, collectives and artistic directorship with management and scientific committee on the one hand and German right-wing media on the other were intensified as false allegations of antisemitism were amplified across social media. Things culminated when 111 artists and collectives participating in documenta 15 published an open statement addressed at the Mayor of the City of Kassel, Christian Geselle, State Minister for Higher Education, Research, Science and the Arts, Angela Dorn, the Head of the Cultural Department of the City of Kassel, Susanne Völker, Federal Governement Commissioner for Culture and the Media, Claudia Roth, the Supervisory Board and the Shareholders of documenta on 10 September 2022. Entitled ‘We are angry, we are sad, we are tired, we are united,’ the open letter gave expression to the chaos, hostility, racism and cencorship that had engulfed the art event and refused to accept the report of the above mentioned scientific advisory panel (111 artists and collectives of documenta 15, 2022). As a result of the enormous tensions, solidarity among participants strengthened and towards the end of documenta 15 they declared that ‘Lumbung Continues’.

Within TP itself, one outcome of the collective autocritique process following the People’s Justice banner controversy was the acknowledgement of their lack of understanding of the complex issue of antisemitism, i.e the intricate relationship between Jews, Judaism and the state of Israel and, as a consequence, the conflated iconographies of anti-Israel, anti-zionism, anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism. TP’s knowledge of antisemitism prior to documenta 15 was minimal given limited school education on the topic in Indonesia. TP’s autocritique recommended to reach out to progressive elements within the Jewish community to learn from their mistakes and revisit, for example, the use of stereotypical Jewish depictions among the left in the campaigns against Israel’s invasion of Palestine in the 1960s and 1970s that carried antisemitic motives (Tabarovsky, 2022).

The invitation to participate in documenta 15 in Kassel in 2022 presented itself as an opportunity to use this high-profile global art event as a platform to further TP’s solidarity work. The extensive display of woodcut prints, drawings, paintings, collectively produced banners, cardboard puppets and pamphlets at Hallenbad Ost in Kassel specifically referenced the anti-capitalist struggles of Global South communities. The controversy surrounding the display of the anti-imperialist banner People’s Justice (2002), which was created, among others, as a critique of Western democracies that supported the Suharto regime, revealed the closed interlinkage of artistic forms, ideology, class, and historical processes, and how the meaning of art works changes when de- and re-contextualised. This is an important lesson to be learned from documenta 15 for all parties involved.

TP’s collaboration with Casa de Povo is part of ongoing reconciliation process and evidence that controversy can open up space for dialogue and decolonisation. A new collaborative network that includes MST and the Brazilian branch of The Tricontinental Institute for Social Research has just been established. The aim of this alliance is to raise public awareness about colonial legacies and state authoritarianism to produce new work that can challenge them on all fronts. This process was set in motion with the *Retomar Nossa* *Terra* banner and the Tanah Merdeka exhibition, to which individuals, communities, and collectives of Moluccan, Papuan, Indonesian, and Indonesian-Jewish backgrounds will actively contribute by co-creating other new works, during the exhibition and in TP’s future activities. Framer Framed provided a unique cultural platform that supported cultural dialogue and strongly resonated with TP’s inclusive notion of *Tanah Merdeka*, a liberated land where all are welcome to participate and find their voice. The challenges of maintaining a free space for dialogue and growth at documenta 15 have created productive dialogues elsewhere, noticeably beyond Europe, and opened new avenues for decolonizing art exhibitions and museums. This is one of many possiblities of moving forward from the ‘scandal’ around the *People’s Justice* banner.

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1. See also Dirgantoro, 2011: 126-127, and Kiswondo, 2011b: 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It goes beyond the scope of this paper to analyse the history of antisemitism in Indonesia and how that is relevant in the documenta 15 discourse. See, for example, the contributions by Timo Duile and Martin von Bruinessen to the Webinar ‘Colonialism, Antisemitism and Dictatorship in Indonesia’, 11.1.2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This part of the paper is largely based on one of the author’s (AS) participation in and interpretation of this process. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)