

Nothing to See Here: On the Bracketing of the Spectator in a Hyperrelational Exhibition

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With Documenta 15 in our rearview mirror, what seems important at this stage is to understand the connections among the politics of exhibition, organization, and spectatorship. Only then does the significance of its propositions come into focus. These connections are also imbricated in, if not overdetermined by, the charged mediation of Documenta 15, particularly in German-language media. Focusing on spectatorship requires, first of all, that we begin to unpick its plural modes of operation; for example, differentiating, on the one hand, the experience of visiting the exhibition and engaging with the various art projects (on site and online, in short and extended time frames), and, on the other hand, browsing the exhibition on social media. To explore the latter mode of spectatorship is, above all, to consume the *discourse* about the exhibition, although this difference between spectatorial modalities would be decisive only if access through social media were the sole mode of experiencing the exhibition.

I maintain that the moment of spectatorship is key to our understanding of Documenta 15. I find this to be crucial not due to some abstract, postconceptual notion that the visitor “completes” the work (a condition that may characterize much of the work on display at Documenta 15 but is not *specific* to it). Rather, I am struck by the altered role of the spectator that results from the hyperrelational principle of this exhibition, which is microcosmic in its participating projects and collectives. The spectator’s role is either undefined or defined away; that is, there are no spectators, only participants. The spectator as a “vanishing mediator,” then, is the premise I pursue here, with the aim of avoiding a reified conception of what happened in Documenta 15. That is, I am concerned to hold on to Documenta 15’s relational concept as a diffractive rather than reproductive approach to the global institution of art.¹ The curatorial principle of Documenta 15, which was decisively anticonsumerist and anticontemplative, cannot separate the mode of engagement it posits for the spectator from its general mode of address (i.e., the voice of the exhibition). If a pursuit of this other, diffractive form of relationality is one of the accomplishments of Documenta 15, the exhibition was nevertheless incapable of doing more than staging the contradictions of undefining the spectator. That is, Documenta 15 was characterized by a *junction* of material

abundance and curatorial reticence, social surplus and critical aporetics, which in turn became situated in the *conjuncture* of political overdetermination and media scandal that contingently radicalized and unified something dispersive and ambivalent. The result of this unexpected conjuncture was to undermine two forms of authority: the exhibition complex that platformed these gestures and the cultural authority of the Documenta tradition as a benign symbol of European national liberalism. The conjuncture undermined the exhibition as a form, Documenta as a platform, and Germany as a cosmopolitan liberal space of cultural *Bildung*. Not bad as an outcome, one might muse, even if it was not wholly intentional. Still, the outcome was far from being embedded in a reflexive, curatorial method. And yet, if we want to avoid hastily gluing back together the disparate elements of the tendencies listed above, the question of reflexivity that emerges out of the exhibition as an aspiration or a demand is hardly a transparent one. Reflexivity is often understood in a globalized Western art context as a discursive rather than structural proposition. The counter offered by Documenta 15, however, was precisely a concentration on the structural, albeit articulated more through practice and its inevitable temporalities and opacities. Thus, any mode of reflexivity in the discursive sense of the word remained implicit, as has been recounted elsewhere in this dossier.²

At least two salient modes of reflexivity should concern us here. First is the reflexive relation of the exhibition to its own material conditions, consisting foremost of the institutional apparatus of Documenta, such as the financing that ruangrupa distributed in several tiers of delegation among networked collectives. Second is the reflexive approach of Documenta 15 to its curatorial principles and exhibitionary strategies, where the spectatorial conditions of a mass exhibition could not but interfere with its participatory intentions. Already the scale of such an exhibition seems poised to defeat both types of reflexivity even before we take into account the symptomatic media flare-ups. An emblem of the first type of reflexivity—or, more precisely, of its absence—generally emerges as a dissonance between curatorial rhetoric and the working conditions of its personnel. The latter form of reflexivity was militated against by ruangrupa’s curatorial premise of *lumbung*—a premise that was specifically interested not in any form of reflexivity but rather in collaboration and delegation as its structuring principles. Ruangrupa’s procedure was a way of casting some redundancy over the evaluative mechanisms of the exhibition from the inside as well as from the outside. The main thrust of the *lumbung* concept was to push in the direction of resource appropriation, as exemplified by the plan wherein the fourteen interlocal members (collectives directly invited by ruangrupa) received the most substantive budgets, all identical, plus a much smaller amount in immediate costs up front, while the artists and collectives invited by this first tier received half of this amount for production costs and proportionally smaller

upfront costs for collectives, halved in the case of individuals.³ Here was the kind of pragmatics formulated by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, a work frequently referenced by curators in the field of contemporary art. Consider, for instance, the passage where they quote Shakespeare: “To the university I’ll steal, and there I’ll steal.”⁴ This is the first line of the chapter “The Only Possible Relationship to the University Today Is a Criminal One,” and it points to one way out of the demand for reflexivity, which is cast as a form of responsibility, reproductive or negative, vis-à-vis the institution and its constituencies. Alternatively, this reallocation of responsibility and purloining of resources might be described as a displacement of reflexivity to a more expansive register—from the institution to its conditions of possibility, or infrastructure.⁵

Tempting as such a deviant strategy might sound, this remains a tenuous suggestion, insofar as it can end up sidelining the experience of the viewer. How can the codified behaviors of audiences to massive exhibitions (in time as well as space) possibly give rise to an appreciation of this form of critique? How could viewers take it on as a problematic that immediately concerns them or connects to forms of criticality that might matter to them, because those forms were part of their education as Western art subjects? Here Documenta 15, with its multiple temporalities and avenues for participation, was in danger of boiling down to merely an ethics of encounter. Luckily, things worked out better in the end. The exhibition included important moments of reflexivity, moments when projects did more than convey information or stir unease, which can be considered the bare minimum required for recuperating a social justice project as an aesthetic object. Among such projects was one about Trampoline House, a social center in Copenhagen, that invoked the policing of the European border experienced by the exhibition’s curators and participants, who were predominantly from the Global South. The inclusion of the Trampoline House through documentary videos, posters, and ephemera addressed issues of migrant support and advocacy that have been placed under imminent threat by the extreme ethnonationalist migration policies of a predominantly white country that likes to bill itself as a friendly and hospitable place. However, the simple fact of including in the exhibition large swathes of practices from artists and communities based in places from which objects can leave far more readily than people also testified to the inequality of the global art system—and did so much more sharply under the curatorial principle of delegated responsibility than would have been the case with a more conventional way of organizing the exhibition. At Documenta 15, in contrast to former editions, objects and practices did not come to represent some overarching curatorial argument but instead ended up in the exhibition through the contingency of social networks, thus representing the processes that mediated them into occupying that site.

Such an approach to curating, to presentation, and to production should not be decontextualized from its conditions of possibility (and necessity) in the emergence of artist collectives such as ruangrupa in the postdictatorship milieu of early 2000s Jakarta. Crucially, this resulted in a very different set of affordances for what it might mean to self-organize or “steal” from institutions, although arguably the former must have molded the tactics of the latter once ruangrupa had arrived at the point where they were invited by Documenta to stage its fifteenth edition.

The very concept of mediation at work here may actually be relevant. How can the relationship between extractive exhibition-making and the containment of travelers with the wrong ethnicity/passport/class be mediated for a random (and in this instance, mostly European) visitor? Perhaps it cannot (and it might also be true that the construct of a “random visitor” is at fault). But by focusing on projects such as the Trampoline House, the Algerian Women’s Archive (AWA), the Black Cultural Archives, the contributions and writings of Richard Bell and the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, and Wakalika Uganda, I will try to outline what modes of reflexivity could have been at play in the exhibition, which ones were missing, and how the relation between these helps us to think about what an evaluative approach to this “hyperrelational” object could be. I want to ask what forms of reflexivity these practices demand as well as demur—without, at the same time, fetishizing the very act of reflexivity as a way of “restoring order” in the exhibitionary complex: order, again, that is conceived as a certain notion of responsibility. At Documenta 15 “responsibility,” with its contemporary analog, “accountability,” was putatively enacted horizontally within the exhibition, among the groups and participants—which became aporetic for the spectator, since the enactment may not have had any impact on their experience of the exhibition. Thus the question of reflexivity merged with the question of infrastructure: both were hyperrenounced at the level of communication and possibly in the enactment of those who were close to or involved in the show. Yet the question also remained open, left for the time-limited viewer to ponder, consume, or even disregard. That is, the question of reflexivity is none other than a question of how to evaluate the impact of a curatorial proposition on the exhibitionary complex it tangles with. In the case of Documenta 15, it is also a question that soon became occluded by all too many other things.

The presentation of the AWA, along with its neighbor, the Black Cultural Archives from Amsterdam, followed a long-conventional logic of large-scale or global exhibitions: the recontextualization of political archives for a public that may not be their habitual or intended interlocutor (although many might find an affinity for and excitement in discovering this material). How such archives obtain their aesthetic or curatorial inscription might thus be the first kind of question to ask a curatorial collective concerning the reflexivity of its work, but the answer will always be deferred since curatorial sovereignty

will be assumed to be limited in such cases. The question, therefore, might not be the most interesting one to ask. And yet any possible question of accountability was, in the case of the AWA, immediately foreclosed by the confected media storm (see the contribution of A. Dirk Moses to this dossier). The selection principle was apparently purely pragmatic; that is, Documenta was taken as a platform to inform: to communicate histories and practices that have had little visibility (especially in Anglophone contexts). Anything more was deliberately left undefined. This logic of presentation clearly owes as much to the quotidian experience of social media, with its serendipities and folksonomies and tag clouds, as it does to the curatorial narrative of collective “harvesting” or stocking a rice barn. For sure, most of the collectives contributing to Documenta 15 (which were often entwined with broader social movements) assumed the task of providing visibility to localized struggles for social and environmental justice. Thus the presentation of archives documenting such marginalized struggles (which are little known in the West) was a spine of the exhibition, and the archival format recurred again and again. Likewise, the work of the Aboriginal artist and activist Richard Bell—including a painting series (2021–2022), an LED counter on the Fridericianum that counts up the spiraling debt owed by Australia’s settler government to First Nations (*Pay the Rent*, 2022), and the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, which acted as a kind of prism of the basic modus operandi of Documenta 15—not only documented specific historical protests and movements but created a gathering space and offered, in the case of the paintings, protest images as ironic commodities. Bell’s trenchant essay “Bell’s Theorem (Reductio ad Infinitum): Contemporary Art—It’s a White Thing!,” which was commissioned for another exhibition but published shortly before Documenta’s opening, also configures key propositions—key in that they can be extended to the exhibition as a whole—about the relationships between art from marginalized communities, its appropriation as market value by a global exhibitionary complex, and the knotted links between pragmatism and reflexivity in those circumstances:

The Western hold on Art and cultural critique is not just a problem for art, it is a problem for the way we can think about culture as a space of survival, imaginative thinking, and responsibility. Museums are loot rooms to colonial patriarchy and white welfare nationalism, and yet when we take a serious look at their cultural power they are also very naked. We may engage with them or walk away from them, but they are some of the last semi-public spaces where cultural practices and debates are not entirely under corporate control, or entirely subjected to entertainment principles. . . . We can use words like “decolonization,” “demodernization,” “rematerialization,” “feminism,” and so on to describe a position or practice. But only a genuinely nonaligned art movement defecting from the status

quo can deal with these things systematically, genuinely, and cooperatively as very unevenly shared problems.⁶

This veteran artist and activist sums up the problem faced by the exhibition and its participating collectives more succinctly than any of ruangrupa's communications. Bell points both to the enduring possibility of emancipatory gestures and to infrastructural dead ends that are historical and political as well as epistemic and aesthetic in nature. His skepticism about gestures at the level of representation within art institutions is not vitiated when the infrastructure of the exhibition enters the frame of representation, as it did with this Documenta—although it certainly makes the whole problem richer and more ambivalent, its limitations less familiar.

Another side to the experience of the visitor, one that may act as a shortcut to the aporetics so well outlined by Bell, can be found in Wakalika Uganda/Ramon Film Productions, a screening and installation of a community-based amateur action filmmaking studio in a poorer neighborhood of Kampala. Described on the Documenta 15 website as “not only a movie factory, but also an artistic and social experiment,” Wakalika Uganda is a resilient, long-lived operation that appropriates Nollywood as well as Hollywood cinema tropes, parlaying them into hugely popular, low-budget productions that rely on a dogged mission focus, pirated software, and the enthusiastic involvement of local volunteers of all ages. Wakalika Uganda is a cinema powerhouse boosted by advantages such as international film festival distribution and a Documenta commission, which allowed studio head Isaac Godfrey Geoffrey Nabwana to hire an American indie director to play a German soccer player in *Football Kommando*, a wild and woolly missing-child story and one of two films in the installation. The films were screened in a purpose-built cocoon, while a documentary about the project was accessed on a smaller monitor in the main space. This project's appearance in Documenta 15 is almost wholly affirmative; it was one of several such works in the exhibition, including an installation by the Kurdish Rojava Film Commune, which was described on a wall text in the Fridericianum as “a collective of grassroots filmmakers whose work methods are rooted in the larger political project of the formation of a stateless democracy.” Their film installation provided a testimonial to independent and resourceful creativity in the “Global South,” whereby the exhibition acts as just another platform for finding viewers under conditions a bit more luxurious than YouTube and on their own negotiated terms. The presentation of films at the Kassel exhibition (as in countless other cases) was no more than an afterthought (though Wakalika Uganda choreographed its space very deliberately). For the viewer, this contingency may have come across as yet another instance of the missing dimension of reflexivity running through the show.

The viewer passed through this exhibition like a ghost—which is also fine. But little about the specificity of this show,

its combinatorial principle, its temporalities, or its far-flung, contingent, and clashing worldviews accommodated viewership. Why? Simply because the encounter with the artwork, along with the coherent narrative that could foster such an encounter, was programmatically eliminated. The formal principle was participation, even when it was only viewing that happened. The double bind of spectatorship faded away at the level of the curatorial idea, but the problem returned at the level of the exhibition, the institution, the city—which, like the spectator, had to occupy both sides of an inside/outside binary when it came to mediating the exhibition and reproducing its conditions, regardless of such a binary being programmatically abolished from Documenta 15's principles. From this viewpoint, the opportunity for a reflexive (i.e., infrastructural) critique does not have to fall for the transcendental illusions of aestheticization (which requires adherence to a discursive code that was minted in and disseminated as part of a colonial relation).⁷ At the same time, a truly effective reflexive/infrastructural critique may also need to avoid taking the equally formalist step of critique-avoidance. That way, a curatorial proposition such as ruangrupa's for Documenta 15 might be able to extend its phlegmatic attitude toward the established structures just a little further, to show us how they can really cease to matter.

Notes

1. Within this dual construct, the pole of the “reproductive” mode is occupied by “relational aesthetics.”

2. See Monica Juneja and Jo Ziebritzki, “Learning with Documenta 15: Principles, Practices, Problems,” in this issue of *Grey Room*.

3. *Documenta Fifteen Handbook* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2022), 21. Intriguing here is how solo artistic practice is (pragmatically) disincentivized with smaller budgets, which raises the question of authorship, since an individual artist may have ended up working in a collective context in which finances became (once more) opaque.

4. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe, UK: Minor Compositions, 2013), 26.

5. See, for instance, Marina Vishmidt, “Beneath the Atelier, the Desert: Critique, Institutional and Infrastructural,” in *Marion von Osten: Once We Were Artists*, ed. Tom Holert and Maria Hlavajova (Utrecht: BAK, 2017).

6. Richard Bell, “Bell’s Theorem (Reductio ad Infinitum): Contemporary Art—It’s a White Thing!,” *e-flux Journal*, no. 129 (September 2022), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/129/486788/bell-s-theorem-reductio-ad-infinitum-contemporary-art-it-s-a-white-thing/>.

7. I am drawing here on David Marriott, “On Crystallization,” *Critical Times* 4, no. 2 (2021): 187–232, <https://doi.org/10.1215/26410478-9092290>.