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Edited by Vítor Moura and Connell Vaughan



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Democratic and Aesthetic Participation as Imposition: On the Aesthetics of the Collective

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ABSTRACT. The global art exhibition *documenta fifteen* (2022) drew attention to a distinctive approach in curatorial and artistic practice: aesthetic collaboration as part of a collective. While *documenta fifteen* has been broadly discussed with regard to its political agenda, the aesthetic strategies involved in collective curatorial and artistic practice received less attention. This paper will explore the philosophical and aesthetic implications of collective work and targets to work towards an aesthetic account of the collective. In order to do so, I will transfer the political concept of a ‘democracy of imposition’, which the political scientist Felix Heidenreich introduced in his *Demokratie als Zumutung: Für eine andere Bürgerlichkeit* (2022), to the realm of aesthetics. The idea of ‘democracy of imposition’ emphasises the necessity to exercise active citizenship and to participate in democratic processes in order to guarantee a functioning democracy. I will argue that approaching the practice of collectives against the backdrop of the concept of ‘participation as imposition’ is necessary for giving a full account of their aesthetic potential.

1. Introduction

In 2022, the global exhibition *documenta fifteen* drew attention to a distinctive approach in curatorial and artistic practice: aesthetic collaboration as part of a collective.¹⁹⁵ While *documenta fifteen* has been broadly discussed with regard to its political agenda, the aesthetic

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¹⁹⁵ I would like to acknowledge my gratitude to the German Academic Exchange Service, whose generous conference grant enabled me to participate in the European Society for Aesthetics Annual Conference in Budapest in 2023. This research paper builds on previous work published in German as ‘Partizipation als Zumutung: Zur Ästhetik des Kollektivs’, in *Kunstchronik*, February 2023, pp. 63-75.

strategies involved in collective curatorial and artistic practice have received less attention.¹⁹⁶ This paper explores the philosophical and aesthetic implications of collective work and targets in order to delineate an aesthetic account of the collective. A central question concerns how visitors to *documenta fifteen* responded to exhibits of the collectives. Rather than interacting and participating in the collective practice, the majority approached these exhibits as if they were autonomous artworks merely to be viewed. This objectifying tendency among art audiences has not yet been sufficiently explored. In order to give a full account of the aesthetic potential of collective practice, I argue that approaching the practice of collectives requires ‘participation as imposition’, a concept I have adapted from Felix Heidenreich’s concept of ‘democracy as imposition’ (German: ‘Demokratie als Zumutung’).¹⁹⁷ My contention is that we miss the genuine nature of the aesthetics of collectives if we evaluate their practice only with regard to their socio-political impacts, as the case study of *documenta fifteen* revealed. In order to work towards an aesthetic account of collective practice, I first compare different approaches to the collective and propose a working definition of collectives. Second, I analyse the recipients’ responses to collective practice and attempt to show that audiences need to open themselves to ‘participation as imposition’ in order to do justice to the distinctive aesthetic nature of collective practice.

2. The collective: a working definition

Recent exhibitions focusing on art collectives, e.g. *Group Dynamics: Collectives of the Modernist Period* (19 October 2021 – 12 June 2022) at Lenbachhaus, *documenta fifteen* (18 June 2022 – 25 September 2022) at various locations in Kassel, and *Collaborations* (2 July – 6 November 2022) at mumok in Vienna, brought out different nuances of the collective. While the Lenbachhaus curatorial team subsumed a wide range of groups such as Grupa ‘a. r.’ (Łódź), the Nsukka School and Casablanca School under the label of the collective, they refused to define the term collective and stated the following reason for their decision:

¹⁹⁶ Notable exceptions form Nora Sternfeld’s approach, which she outlined, for example, in an interview with Anne Seidel, ‘Gemeinsam die Welt verändern – Kuratorin Nora Sternfeld über Kunst im Kollektiv’, *Deutschlandfunk*, 11. September 2022, <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/gemeinsam-die-welt-veraendern-kuratorin-nora-sternfeld-ueber-kunst-im-kollektiv-dlf-ae3cebd5-100.html> (7.10.2023) and Monica Juneja and Jo Ziebritzki’s, ‘Learning with Documenta 15: Principles, Practices, Problems’, *Grey Room* 2023; (92), pp. 94–105.

¹⁹⁷ Translations from the German are my own if not otherwise noted.

In our study of the phenomenon of “group dynamics”, we realised that there can be no binding definition of the art collective. A group thrives on association and disruption, its dynamics are unpredictable: joint work, conversations, conviviality, rivalry, friendship, openness, inclusion, demarcation, fatigue, argument, love, polemics and enthusiasm are its hallmarks.¹⁹⁸

Taking these dynamics into account, I will, however, propose a working definition of the collective, since I consider this as foundational in order to work towards an aesthetic account of collectives. In my understanding, the collective consists of a group formed by a number of individuals, whose collective work is characterised by the desire to transform social conditions. In the case of *documenta fifteen*, the joint goals were to establish community-based practice as aesthetic alternative to the capitalist functioning of the art market, to raise awareness of communities and their political contexts in the Global South and to advocate for climate justice. These and related utopian aims are, often, distinct from the political situation and social contexts with which the collective is confronted.

Historically, the concept of the collective is closely linked to socialism, where it is associated with forms of communal work. Work brigades in the former GDR, for example, refer to labourers who conceive of their joint work practice as happening within a collective.¹⁹⁹ While this socialist understanding stands in contrast to the capitalist logic of the contemporary art market, it is not surprising that the collective art practice at the centre of *documenta fifteen* caused misgivings within the art world. As Monica Juneja and Jo Ziebritzk argue in ‘Learning with Documenta 15: Principles, Practices, Problems’ (2023), *documenta fifteen* turned the focus on individual authorship in the arts upside down:

¹⁹⁸ While there is an English translation of the exhibition catalogue, the English catalogue substantially differs from the German original and does not contain all texts. This is why I translated this quote from Sarah Louisa Henn and Dierk Höhne, ‘Subjects of Solidarity’, in *Gruppendynamik. Kollektive der Moderne*. Ausstellungskatalog, edited by Lenbachhaus. Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2021, pp. 62-69, p. 62.

¹⁹⁹ See „Brigade“, *DDR-Geschichte*, private history project supervised by Dana Schieck, http://www.ddr-geschichte.de/Wirtschaft/sozialist_Arbeit/Brigadebewegung/brigadebewegung.html (8.11.2022); Markus Würz, ‘Brigaden der sozialistischen Arbeit, in: Lebendiges Museum Online’, *Stiftung Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, <http://www.hdg.de/lemo/kapitel/geteiltes-deutschland-gruenderjahre/wirtschaft-und-gesellschaft-im-osten/brigaden-der-sozialistischen-arbeit.html> (08.11.2022).

The simple fact that we continue to speak of “Beuys’s oaks” reveals the valorizing habitus of the art world. It foregrounds the artist’s initiative [...], whereas the participation of innumerable collaborators—community workers, politicians, administrators, staff members of Documenta—who did the actual work of planting the trees has not found its way into recollections.²⁰⁰

In addition to deviating from the art world’s consensus about the relevance of individual artistic authorship, the focus on collectives at *documenta fifteen* shifted attention from the ‘autonomous artwork’ to the process of art creation within communities predominantly located in the Global South.²⁰¹ So far, the reception of collective and collaborative art practice within aesthetics and art theory has remained entrenched in Eurocentric epistemic categories, as e.g. Rachel Mader’s essay in the catalogue ‘The Art History of Collaboration’ outlining the history of collaborative art practices since the 1960s confirms. Especially with regard to the cultivation of relationships, which she understands as a central characteristic of ‘microcosms [...] of collaborative interactions’, it appears necessary to expand on art historiographies by taking epistemologies from the Global South into account.²⁰²

If one considers the role of collectives within the historical context of Indonesia, the home base of *documenta fifteen*’s curatorial collective ruangrupa, the collectives’ central role in operating as a form of resistance against the undemocratic and repressive Suharto regime (1967-1998) becomes obvious. Claudia König argues in her essay ‘Understanding Indonesian Collectivity’, published in February 2022, that this historical context is relevant to an understanding of ruangrupa’s modus operandi, which has been ‘integrated into a network of like-minded collective efforts in the Global South since the beginning of their practice’.²⁰³ In Indonesia, the collective facilitated art practice in the first place. As Christina Schott describes it:

²⁰⁰ Monica Juneja, Jo Ziebritzki, ‘Learning with Documenta 15: Principles, Practices, Problems’, *Grey Room* 2023; (92): pp. 94–10, here p. 92.

²⁰¹ Monica Juneja, Jo Ziebritzki: ‘Learning with Documenta 15: Principles, Practices, Problems’, *Grey Room* 2023; (92): pp. 94–10, here p. 100.

²⁰² Rachel Mader, ‘Die Kunstgeschichte der Kollaboration’, in *Kollaborationen*, Exhibition catalogue edited by Heike Eipeldauer and Franz Thalmair. Cologne: König, 2022, pp. 8-16, here: p. 15.

²⁰³ Claudia König, ‘Das Verständnis indonesischer Kollektivität’, *Südostasien: Zeitschrift für Politik, Kultur, Dialog*, 21 February 2022, <https://suedostasien.net/das-verstaendnis-indonesischer-kollektivitaet/> (7.10.2022).

In Europe, where art is often state-funded, artists can act individually and create “art for art’s sake”. In many other countries, however, especially in the Southern hemisphere, contemporary art would not be possible without collective collaboration. In Indonesia, for example, many art students can only keep their heads above water by sharing rooms for living, sleeping and working. Often, these modest dwellings also serve as exhibition spaces, or vice versa.²⁰⁴

To understand the political significance of the collective, it is important to be aware of state oppression and persecution by undemocratic governments, which numerous artists in Southeast Asia faced during the anti-colonial liberation struggles. In 1988, the Malaysian government, for example, ordered the demolition of Anak Alam’s studio complex.²⁰⁵ An awareness of the political role of collectives in the Global South is lacking in Eurocentric, apolitical definitions of the collective. While the cultural scientist Klaus P. Hansen develops his take on collectives in his book *Kultur, Kollektiv, Nation* (2009) from a Eurocentric perspective, the neologism of ‘multicollectivity’ he introduced in order to refer to ‘the existence of an unmanageable number of collectives’ is still applicable to collective practice in the Global South.²⁰⁶ He goes on to claim that ‘this diversity functions only because the individual is simultaneously located in many collectives’.²⁰⁷

The idea of partaking in multiple collectives at the same time was central to the exercise of *lumbung*, *ruangrupa*’s curatorial concept for *documenta fifteen*. The Indonesian term *lumbung*, translated as ‘rice barn’, is linked with an artistic approach of sharing communal resources between multiple collectives and communities. According to *ruangrupa*, the practice of *lumbung* stems from Indigenous Indonesian communities, who store their surplus harvest in communal rice barns to then share it with regard to commonly developed criteria in the best interests of the community.²⁰⁸ Referencing an interview with Judith Schlehe, former director of the institute for ethnology at the University of Freiburg, Jan von Brevern argues, however,

²⁰⁴ Christina Schott, ‘Kunst und Leben sind nicht voneinander zu trennen’, *Südostasien: Zeitschrift für Politik, Kultur, Dialog*, 21 February 2022, <https://suedostasien.net/kunst-und-leben-sind-nicht-voneinander-zu-trennen/> (7.10.2022).

²⁰⁵ Sarah Louisa Henn and Dierk Höhne, ‘Subjects of Solidarity’, in *Gruppendynamik. Kollektive der Moderne*. Exhibition catalogue, edited by Lenbachhaus. Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2021, pp. 62-69, here p. 69.

²⁰⁶ Hansen, Klaus P., *Kultur, Kollektiv, Nation*. Passau: Verlag Karl Stutz, 2009, p. 20.

²⁰⁷ Hansen, Klaus P. *Kultur, Kollektiv, Nation*. Passau: Verlag Karl Stutz, 2009, p. 20.

²⁰⁸ See <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/> (2.10.2023)

that rice barns in contemporary Indonesia predominantly belong to the elites. If ruangrupa refers to the historical rural rice barns called ‘lumbung desa’, they ignore that those were part of Indonesia’s colonial heritage since they were introduced by Indonesian colonialists to prevent the starvation of the population.²⁰⁹

If we reduce the lumbung principle to its usage in Indonesia, we are, however, in danger of exoticising it, since corresponding experiences such as those of the ‘commons, cooperative, cooperative’ also exist in the Global North, according to Schott.²¹⁰ Elinor Ostrom spelled out the concept of the commons, for example, in her monograph *Governing the Commons. The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (1990). According to ruangrupa, lumbung is happening within an ekosistem, which refers to but is ‘not synonymous with’ the ecological ecosystem.²¹¹ The ekosistem signifies a network through which lumbung members share their resources with each other. These network structures are ‘inter-lokal’, as they disseminate the local resources and practices of the fourteen lumbung members, whom ruangrupa invited to participate in *documenta fifteen*, through an international network.²¹² Ruangrupa shared their curatorial privileges with the invited lumbung members and granted them the freedom to invite further artists. While the lumbung members are long-term collaborators, with whom ruangrupa collaborates prior to and beyond *documenta*, the so-called lumbung artists (a misleading title as the majority were also art collectives rather than individual artists) were only invited to develop work specifically for *documenta fifteen*. Given that lumbung members as well as lumbung artists could approach further artists and collectives to participate in *documenta fifteen*, it is quite likely that even the official artistic directors of *documenta fifteen*, namely ruangrupa, no longer had an overview of everyone involved in the global art exhibition. Rather than operating as curatorial gatekeepers, ruangrupa de-institutionalised curatorial practice and outsourced their decision-making power to so-called majelis, communal meetings for joint discussions, exhibition-planning and decision-making. Due to the pandemic, the majelis happened predominantly online and were partly documented as video call recordings on the

²⁰⁹ Jan von Brevern, “‘Lumbung’ – die Rückkehr der Scheune”, *Merkur* 75, October 2021, pp. 59-65, p. 60.

²¹⁰ Christina Schott, ‘Kunst und Leben sind nicht voneinander zu trennen’, *Südostasien: Zeitschrift für Politik, Kultur, Dialog*, 21 February 2022, <https://suedostasien.net/kunst-und-leben-sind-nicht-voneinander-zu-trennen/> (7.10.2022).

²¹¹ See <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/> (2.10.2023)

²¹² See <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/> (2.10.2023)

documenta website. The attribution of the participating collectives and artists with regard to their time zones mirrored the working structures of the lumbung practice and indicated a move away from categorising artists with regard to their nationalities.

In their first official publication of their concept for *documenta fifteen* in the regionally published street newspaper *Asphalt Magazine*, ruangrupa refer to their digital preparatory meetings with the collectives participating in documenta as a ‘lumbung assembly’.²¹³ This compound term highlights the radical nature of this approach, as it not only questions the structures of an art system tailored to the competition (e.g. on the art market, for exhibitions and grants) and individual stars, but instead seeks to establish an economy of art based on collectivity and care. The idea of coming together and joining forces within a collective is reminiscent of the concept of assembly as ‘meant to grasp the power of coming together and acting politically in concert’ most recently employed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri in their *Assembly* (2017).²¹⁴ Hardt and Negri emphasise the political resilience and power that derives from assembling. For their analysis, they make use of the principle of so-called ‘calls and responses’, which ‘should speak back and forth in an open dialogue’.²¹⁵ This open field of tension requires both those who call and those who respond to constantly engage in new exchanges and to allow themselves to engage in these negotiation processes again and again. The discursiveness of the assembly is similarly adopted by the singers of the ‘Jeju Arirang’ from the Korean island of Haenyeo, whose *Seaweed Story* (2022) is transferred to Kassel through a looped video and models of simply built rectangular houses arranged on an island formed by sand. The community of Haenyeo consists of mainly older women who identify themselves as companions ensuring each other’s survival in the midst of the sea. The houses depicted exhibited at *documenta fifteen* primarily fulfil the function of changing rooms and storage spaces for the equipment for diving. At the same time, they operate as discursive spaces and thus stand in the tradition of the bulteok, a fireplace made of stones that traditionally served as a place of assembly.

Ruangrupa’s sharing of resources, such as the exhibition budget and the outsourcing of

²¹³ The concept of lumbung featured centrally in the press release ruangrupa published in the street newspaper *Asphalt* on 4 October 2021. https://documenta-fifteen.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Asphalt_Ausgabe_1.pdf; (7.10.2022).

²¹⁴ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri: *Assembly*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, xxi.

²¹⁵ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri: *Assembly*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, xxi.

curatorial authorship to the multiplicity of collectives, indicated a break with the confinements of large institutions, such as documenta's administrative structures and their embeddedness within local and federal politics (documenta is mainly funded through public sources, namely the City of Kassel, the state of Hesse, and the German Federal Cultural Foundation), and thus opened up novel perspectives on curatorial practice.²¹⁶ Yet scenarios such as Taring Padi's poster featuring anti-Semitic imagery also hinted at the downsides of outsourcing curatorial authorship and responsibility, since collective curating makes it difficult to identify individual authors and hence to take on responsibility, e.g. for the anti-Semitic depiction of Jews. As a disclaimer, I will not deal here with the charges of anti-Semitism at *documenta fifteen*, as these have already been discussed intensively and need to be investigated in by experts in the field of anti-Semitism research.²¹⁷

3. Collectives and their audiences

While the broad swathe of the press reception brought out the problems of collective curating, e.g. the difficulty of allocating responsibility for curatorial fallacies, such as the inclusion of Taring Padi's anti-Semitic poster, less attention was paid to the ways in which visitors engaged with the exhibits of collectives. In what follows, I will show that the practice of *nongkrong*, which played a key role for *ruangrupa*, was not taken up by the majority of visitors to *documenta fifteen*. My contention is that an engagement with the practice of collectives requires different appreciative virtues from the audience than the appreciation of individual artworks in order to fully function. I will, therefore, argue that 'participation as imposition' is necessary to allow audiences to engage with the practice of collectives.

One central curatorial strategy pursued by *ruangrupa* was the facilitation of *nongkrong*, the practice of 'hanging out together'. This practice opens up new opportunities for lingering over the exhibits and discussing them together with others, which includes visitors as well as participating collectives and artists. Once visitors had entered the Fridericianum through a column that had become columns (the Romanian artist Dan Perjovschi's word play is based

²¹⁶ See also Hubertus Locher: *Kunsttheorie. Von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*. München: C.H. Beck, 2023, p. 440.

²¹⁷ A very good summary of this complex topic can be found on the website of the Bildungsstätte Anne Frank; <https://www.bs-anne-frank.de/events/kalender/zum-antisemitismusskandal-auf-der-documenta-fifteen;> 3.11.2022.

on his ‘Horizontal Newspaper’, which he continues on the antique columns Fridericianum), they arrived directly at FRIDSKUL, a space displaying numerous working materials and resembled the creative common space of a start-up. FRIDSKUL could be viewed as ruangrupa’s Kassel version of GUDSKUL, a public venue the collectives ruangrupa, Serrum, and Grafis Huru Hara established in Jakarta in 2018 as a platform to share resources and knowledge. If one compares FRIDSKUL with GUDSKUL, it quickly becomes obvious that it lacks something, namely public access. If FRIDSKUL is only accessible to those who can afford documenta’s high entrance fees, it can no longer operate as a platform, where resources are shared equally. Accordingly, these spaces seem deserted; at least on the three different days I visited *documenta fifteen* myself. Rather than participating in FRIDSKUL, the few visitors I observed examined the working materials as exhibits of an installation, but did not interact with them. Only one visitor made himself comfortable in a hammock. There was no dialogue, no nongkrong. Although participatory formats, also known under the label of socially engaged art, have been canonised in art historiography since Claire Bishop’s ‘social turn’ in 2006, *documenta fifteen* revealed more than an unwillingness to engage in dialogue on the part of the curators. Critics, such as Jörg Heiser, criticised the lack of contextualisation of the exhibits.²¹⁸ However, this criticism could also be continued at the level of the recipients. It is possible that the lack of aesthetic virtues, such as patient viewing and entering into dialogue with the artworks, also contributed to a reduced understanding of the collective aesthetic proposed at *documenta fifteen*.

At this point, I ought to mention that the concept of ‘aesthetic virtues’ might initially sound antiquated to a reader unfamiliar with an approach in philosophy called virtue aesthetics. Virtue aesthetics is a relatively new approach in philosophical aesthetics and was fundamentally shaped by Peter Goldie, Matthew Kieran and Dominic McIver Lopes.²¹⁹ It applies the framework of virtue ethics, the Ancient idea that the exercise of one’s virtue is crucial for one’s flourishing, to the realm of aesthetics. The idea behind it is that only ‘virtuous’

²¹⁸ Jörg Heiser, “‘Contested Histories’: on Documenta 15”, *Art-Agenda Reports*, 29 June 2022, <https://www.art-agenda.com/criticism/477463/contested-histories-on-documenta-15> (7.10.2022)

²¹⁹ Nancy E. Snow, ‘Virtue Aesthetics, Art and Ethics’, in *The Oxford handbook of ethics and art*, edited by James Harold. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023, pp. 250-266, p. 250, e-book: <https://academic.oup.com/edited-volume/46863/chapter/414148640> (21.10.2023).

forms of art appreciation, e.g. patient appreciation that focuses on various nuances of the work, allow us to appreciate art fully. As Peter Goldie argues, the idea of aesthetic virtues highlights a ‘kind of demandingness’, namely ‘the demand to care about what one is engaged in’.²²⁰ If we apply virtue aesthetics to an analysis of participatory and collective art practice, as I have done elsewhere, this will ‘allow us to take the important role the audience has in the construction of the value of a participatory artwork into account’.²²¹

If the audience, such as the visitors of *documenta fifteen*, did not exercise their aesthetic virtues by dedicating themselves to the collective work in the mode of nongkrong, they could not get an in-depth and nuanced understanding of the exhibits. Naturally, there were several barriers to nongkrong preventing it from happening as planned. Juneja and Ziebritzki mention some:

Not only did the incompatibility of cultural codes make encounters difficult but so, too, did the very languages spoken by the artists and visitors. The call to “make friends not art” could cut both ways. Many visitors experienced the conviviality they observed in the social hubs as a closed group of “friends” to which they could not find a ready entry point—an experience often recounted by German visitors. Any form of community that uses friendship as a key category also operates, by definition (“friends only”), as a selective mode, enacting its own inclusions and exclusions. As the polemics of the antisemitism scandal acquired shrill tones, the lines between “friends” and “others” were inevitably drawn.²²²

In addition, the public charges against *documenta fifteen* led to the fact that many participating artists and collectives withdrew from engaging in the practice of nongkrong. If an understanding of the collective practices at *documenta fifteen* necessitated engaging in nongkrong, many critics and visitors would have failed to apply aesthetic (and democratic) virtues for art appreciation. Therefore, I suggest to take the demandingness linked with an account of the aesthetic virtuous and virtuous appreciation seriously as this puts emphasis on

²²⁰ Peter Goldie and Dominic McIver Lopes: ‘Virtues of Art’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume LXXXII* (2008), 179-211, p. 187.

²²¹ Hegenbart, Sarah, ‘The Participatory Art Museum: Approached from a Philosophical Perspective’, in *Philosophy and Museums: Ethics, Aesthetics and Ontology*. Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement, Vol. 79. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp. 319-339, p. 334.

²²² Juneja and Jo Ziebritzki, ‘Learning with Documenta 15: Principles, Practices, Problems’, Grey Room 2023; (92), p. 102.

participation as imposition. This means that recipients ought to have engaged in the collective work in order to gain an in-depth understanding of it.

In order to foster our understanding of the political force of the work of an aesthetically operating collective properly, I transfer the political concept of ‘democracy of imposition’, which the political scientist Felix Heidenreich introduced in his *Demokratie als Zumutung. Für eine andere Bürgerlichkeit* (2022) (Democracy as Imposition: Towards another kind of citizenship), to the realm of aesthetics. The idea of ‘democracy of imposition’ emphasises the need to exercise active citizenship and to participate in democratic processes in order to guarantee a functioning democracy. It adopts a concept the political philosopher Christoph Möllers sketched out in his *Demokratie – Zumutungen und Versprechen* (2008) (Democracy: Impositions and Promises) and develops this further. Heidenreich outlines this as follows:

If one understands democracy as a relationship of reciprocation between citizens on the one hand and political leaders on the other, this relationship must then be thought of as a dialogue, which is by no means unidirectional. The refusal to listen is not only a consequence of those political elites who do not cultivate a culture of listening; it can also be observed among citizens who believe that they owe nothing to the political community. Democracy, however, is a form of government that not only allows us to formulate our demands, but also imposes demands on us. With reference to Christoph Möllers’ political philosophy, democracy not only formulates promises, but also imposes something on us.²²³

If we transfer this plea for an understanding of democracy as imposition to the analysis of the aesthetics of the collective, we can argue that the aesthetics of the collective requires participation (and in particular the participation of viewers and other aesthetic audiences) ‘as imposition’. This concerns, for example, the imposition that visitors enter into dialogue with artistic projects that are designed to be long-term. An in-depth understanding of the works of

²²³ Felix Heidenreich, *Demokratie als Zumutung. Für eine andere Bürgerlichkeit*. Klett-Cotta, 2022, 21-22. The German original states: “Versteht man Demokratie als ein Resonanzverhältnis zwischen Bürgerinnen und Bürgern einerseits und politischen Verantwortungsträgern andererseits, so muss dieses Verhältnis als ein Dialog gedacht werden, in dem keineswegs nur die eine Seite auf die andere zu hören hat. Resonanzverweigerung findet nicht nur durch jene politischen Eliten statt, die keine Kultur des Zuhörens pflegen; sie kann auch bei Bürgerinnen und Bürgern beobachtet werden, die glauben, dem politischen Gemeinwesen nichts zu schulden, ihm voller Rechte aber ohne Pflichten gegenüberzustehen. Demokratie ist jedoch eine Regierungsform, die uns nicht nur erlaubt, unsere Ansprüche zu formulieren, sondern die uns auch *in Anspruch nimmt*. Sie formuliert – mit Christoph Möllers gesprochen – nicht nur Versprechen, sondern auch Zumutungen.”

collectives goes beyond a singular encounter with their practice, but it imposes participation in the practice of the collectives comparable to the operation of the assembly. Given that many visitors to *documenta fifteen* refused to enter into a dialogue with the collectives, whose artistic projects were based on participatory engagement and interaction, they failed to exercise their aesthetic virtues necessary for the aesthetics of the collective to fully function. In other words, if the ‘impository’ mode of reception is not realised, the full potential of collective curating will not be fully realised. These considerations can also be applied to the modes of reception of related art forms such as participatory art and socially engaged art.

Applying Heidenreich’s approach to democracy as imposition to the reception conditions of the works of collectives, as represented at *documenta fifteen*, involves a willingness to abandon aesthetic distance in order to take the demands that the works make on us seriously. This did not happen, though, if one examines the above-mentioned central example of the FRIDSKUL. Impatient observers, whose aesthetic vice of impatience, prevents them from a full engagement with artworks have a tradition that goes long beyond *documenta*. Julius Meier-Graefe exemplified this in a birthday letter to Wilhelm Lehmbruck published on 5 January 1932, where he recalled his first reaction to *Die Kniende* (1911) (‘The Knealing’) twenty years ago:

It cut the air like a steep reef and forced the viewer to either sink down or walk away. I preferred the second [...] Of course, I soon returned [...] *The Kneeling* is something to strive for.²²⁴

Die Kniende was a key work at the first *documenta* in 1955, where it was prominently exhibited in the Rotunda. In 2022, the Rotunda was transformed into a meeting room set up by the *foundationClass* collective, which invites for mutual exchange. Founded at the Weißensee Kunsthochschule, the *foundationClass* collective self-defines as a ‘dissident-minded art education platform and resistance toolkit to facilitate access to art academia for migrant communities.’²²⁵ A colourful fountain made of plastic bowls and Tupperware pieces formed

²²⁴ Quoted from Dietrich Schubert, ‘Wilhelm Lehmbruck im Blick von Meier-Graefe’, originally published in *Anzeiger des Germanischen Nationalmuseums* 2015 (2017), pp. 147-166, hier p. 154, https://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/artdok/6643/1/Schubert_Wilhelm_Lehmbruck_im_Blick_von_Meier_Graefe_2017.pdf (7.10.2022)

²²⁵ Övül Ö. Durmuşoğlu, ‘*FOUNDATIONCLASS*COLLECTIVE’, in *Documenta fifteen Handbuch*, hrsg. von ruangrupa and Artistic Team. Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2022, p. 47.

the centre of architecture ideally suited to participate in an assembly. However, the visitors were neither interacting nor participating when I visited. Instead, the posters and banners reminiscent of relics from a demonstration stretched across the assembly room. The banners could be read as symbols of book pages, which were meant to illustrate the institution-critical teaching practised in the *foundationClass* collective. It is just as symbolic that this very institutional critique is now at the heart of one of Europe's oldest public museums.

The grassroots movement OFF-Biennale Budapest, who are mainly active in Hungary, pose related questions about the institutional and societal power structures that enable inclusion and exclusion. The OFF-Biennale Budapest invited one of its collaborators, namely the European Roma Institute of Arts and Culture (ERIAC), to imagine the '(im)possibilities' of a transnational 'RomaMoMA' together with them.²²⁶ (As a side remark: The ways in which network members were allowed to invite further artists not only points towards the lack of clarity with regard to participating actors, but reveals power structures even within the lumbung community, namely between those who were allowed to invite and those who were invited). As part of the RomaMoMA, the Polish-Romani artist Małgorzata Mirga-Tas, whose works were also displayed in the Polish Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, writes a visual art history of the Roma in her tapestries. Based on Jacques Callot's historical iconographic depiction of the Roma in his etchings *The Life of the Egyptians* (ca. 1633), Mirga-Tas gives women, who in historical depictions are subject not only to the male but also to the colonial gaze, a new form of agency. The self-confident gaze of a woman riding a blue horse with an oversized green hat, which almost looks like a halo due to its round shape, marks her out as an actor in her own history. Her garment is an ornamentally decorated carpet with golden fringes. In no way does this rider appear like an impoverished refugee, which is not only expressed materially, but also in the network of bonds with her children and the other figures depicted. Pink fabric panels with red dots together with blue striped, red and flower decorated fabric panels form the ground over which she rides. This playful use of colour lends the black and white engravings a modern colourfulness that could at the same time be transposed to a picture book for children. Possibly the generation whose view of history is less exclusively shaped and could be characterised by an openness to diasporic life. The designation Egyptians, which stands out both in Callot's title

²²⁶Krzysztof Kościuczuk, 'OFFBiennale Budapest', *Documenta fifteen Handbuch*, edited by ruangrupa and Artistic Team. Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2022, p. 159.

and in Mirga-Ta's designation of her series as *Out of Egypt*, refers to the Roma and their understanding of origin from 'Little Egypt', which is why they were called Egyptians in French-speaking regions and the Netherlands.²²⁷ As Timea Junghaus explains:

The later names Gypsy, Gitano and Gitane all derive from words for Egyptian. In reality, Little Egypt was an area under Venetian rule in the Peloponnese, where Sinti and Roma had settled for a while before continuing their journey into the interior of Europe - presumably under pressure from Ottoman invasions.²²⁸

In an age of mass migration, the work also has a very shocking presence, as though news' images have been turned into art. In general, *documenta fifteen* illustrates more clearly than almost any other world exhibition since *documenta 11*, curated by Okwui Enwezor in 2002, that art can also be directly linked to securing living conditions. The extent to which solidarity as an aesthetic principle overrides the classification of art according to nation states also becomes clear in the systematisation of the works by time zones (instead of national country borders). These were formative for the network formation within the framework of the *documenta* preparations, which were mainly organised via video conferences during the pandemic. If one plans to organise a meeting, it is practical if the cooperating collectives are always awake at about the same time. Nigeria, Libya and Chad, which are in the same time zone, are, thus, much closer to Germany than the USA or Australia. Speaking of Australia, here, too, the question of territories and the forced displacement of the Indigenous population arises. Richard Bell not only thematises the desolate living conditions of Indigenous people in Australia within the Fridericianum on the upper floor, but we also encounter his *Aboriginal Tent Embassy* (original 1972/here 2022) on Friedrichsplatz, where it seemed strangely out of place amidst the withered grass. The *Aboriginal Tent Embassy*, which turned fifty in 2022, originally functioned as sunshade for protesters for Indigenous rights. The tent has since established itself as an iconic statement in the centre of Australia's capital, Canberra. Although

²²⁷ Timea Junghaus, 'Auf dem Weg zu einer neuen Kunstgeschichte Das Bild der Sinti und Roma in der westlichen Kunst', *RomArchive*, <https://www.romarchive.eu/de/visual-arts/roma-in-art-history/towards-a-new-art-history/> (7.10.2022).

²²⁸ Timea Junghaus, 'Auf dem Weg zu einer neuen Kunstgeschichte Das Bild der Sinti und Roma in der westlichen Kunst', *RomArchive*, <https://www.romarchive.eu/de/visual-arts/roma-in-art-history/towards-a-new-art-history/> (7.10.2022).

the embassy is far from being a regular visa facility, it fulfils a discursive role at least and has promoted debates about the land that was forcibly taken from Indigenous people. Bell's paintings at the Fridericianum also feature a strikingly clear message. In the background of a protest picture, on which mainly People of Colour express their demand 'What We Want Landrights' with posters, an oversized Aboriginal flag with its black and red colour fields, in the centre of which a yellow circle (exactly: the sun!) can be seen. At this point, documenta once again seems to be operating as an assembly.

Political messages also continue on the archival level. The Amsterdam-based collective *The Black Archives* not only deals with the history of Black Dutch people, but also with the paradoxes of reparation payments. While neither the descendants of enslaved people nor the Indigenous population in Australia, to which Bell draws attention, were financially compensated, *The Black Archives* shows that the Dutch Ministry of Colonies paid compensation to slaveholders after the banning of slavery in Surinam and the Netherlands Antilles in 1863. Another exhibit, a book published by the Mainz Academy of Sciences and Literature, documents the correspondence between Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Samuel Thomas von Soemmerring in the years 1784-1828. It deals with the presence of scientific racism in Kassel, which was encouraged by Frederick of Hesse-Kassel, who settled Black people in Wilhelmshöhe, among others, for anthropological and medical studies.

If we leave the Fridericianum and enter the documenta Halle through a tunnel-like architecture of corrugated iron lit only by a kind of oil lamp, one of our first associations might be that we are entering a mine. The walls of the foyer of the documenta Halle were also clad in corrugated iron by the Kenyan Wajukuu collective. Rather than alluding to the mine as central symbol for the extraction of resources on the African continent, the Wajukuu collective references the blending of architectural forms of the Maasai and the informal and ephemeral architecture in Mukuru Kwa Njenga, a township in the east of Kenya's capital Nairobi. The Wajukuu Art Project addresses young local people, who are searching for resources to sustain their own survival in the neighbouring rubbish dump. In doing so, they do not only endanger their own health, but their poverty also makes them vulnerable to drug dealing, prostitution or other criminal activities. Art functions here as an element of meaning-making or, as the Wajukuu collective puts it, to promote 'resilience' and the 'human' capacity to transform

suffering into beauty'.²²⁹ In the arte povera tradition, the collective builds a self-titled 'readymade' (why is a European art term used here?) sculpture out of old knives and exhibits paintings of an African Madonna and Child. However, the aesthetics of a film documenting the work of Wajukuu reveals problematic connections to the field of development aid. While the film introduces the Wajukuu artists, it highlights at the same time that these artists could only realise many community projects thanks to the funding by documenta. This aligns with the principle of *documenta fifteen* as explained in the catalogue. The funding is now only supposed to finance the exhibits themselves, but the so-called 'seed money' is also supposed to cover the foundations of those exhibits in the work that precedes them.²³⁰

Through the emphatic expression of gratitude, the documentary film perpetuates a problematic (neo)colonial asymmetry of power. However, it also makes clear how reality-shaping and relevant this monetary support is perceived locally. This power asymmetry provides another explanation for why finding forms for equal participation in collective work was impeded.

The sound of clacking skateboards attracts visitors to the lower floor of the documenta Halle, where the Thai-based artist initiative Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture has installed a skateboard ramp behind which shadow plays are shown. The idea is to activate the oral knowledge available in communities and, above all, to enter into dialogue with neighbours. Unfortunately, this only works to a limited extent. While a sign in Kassel promised free admission to the hall for skateboarders, this hardly worked out in practice. So, it was mainly white middle-class teenagers, who were waiting in front of the ramp. The dialogue with the collective is reduced to a timid enquiry as to whether they are allowed to enter the artwork.

This illustrates the greatest challenge of a global art exhibition in process. The lumbung concept is designed for nongkrong over an extended period and not a short flying visit. It also presupposes that both participating artists and visitors are willing to enter into dialogue. However, this did not seem to be the case, so that most exhibits remained reduced to installations that are looked at reverently. Perhaps what is needed most at this point is audience

²²⁹ Documenta fifteen, „Wajukuu“, <https://documenta-fifteen.de/lumbung-member-kuenstlerinnen/wajukuu-art-project/> (7.10.2022)

²³⁰ Ruangrupa, 'Lumbung', in *Documenta fifteen Handbuch*, edited by ruangrupa and Artistic Team. Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2022, p. 21.

criticism. Because the constant criticism of those responsible (i.e. the curatorial collective ruangrupa) is somewhat reminiscent of the passive attitude that we know all too well from politician bashing, when ‘politics’ is criticised in general terms, thereby lumping the entire party spectrum together. On the other hand, citizens have a personal responsibility to shape politics.

4. Conclusion: Democratic and aesthetic participation as imposition

If we apply Felix Heidenreich’s plea for an understanding of democracy as an imposition to the reception conditions of *documenta fifteen*, we can derive a plea for dealing with art as an imposition. This means accepting the demands that the works of art make on us. In other words, to enter into dialogue. To inquire. To reflect. To think critically. To throw habits of seeing overboard. And above all, to enter into a relationship. While the curatorial team formulated numerous offers to enter into a relationship, these were only been accepted to a limited extent by the visitors. One exception is the project *A Landscape: Local Knowledge Kassel East*, which happened in Kassel East beyond the exhibition spaces of *documenta fifteen*, where it introduced local residents and their community projects through a walking tour.

If individual art appreciation requires aesthetic virtues, e.g. attentiveness, the appreciation of collective art requires additional dialogical virtues, e.g. interacting with conflicting perspectives, *documenta fifteen*, as I have argued, was characterised by flawed virtues of dialogicality. I have shown here that transferring the concept of democracy as imposition to the realm of aesthetics could be fruitful for giving a full picture of the aesthetics of the collective.

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